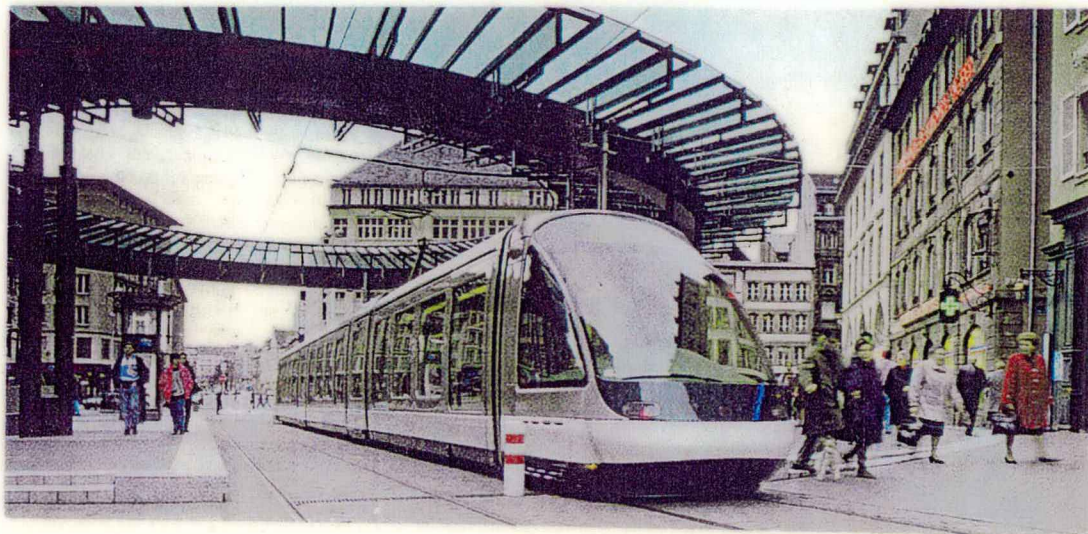




Virus
Rodeo (c) 2014

by
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About 138,242 words
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Fall, Early Nineties

Once more, as he'd done since he discovered Revanne's nom de screen six months ago, the slight, quiet man eavesdropped on her on-line "chatting" and stored the data on his hard drive. She was up and chatting early this morning. While eavesdropping in real-time on his monitor, he looked at his TV playing a tape of her news reports, including a recent one of a Duke football game tailgate party. He videotaped her local news reports and played them repeatedly. Stills of her hung all over the walls of the little dim room, his fantasy palace.

This tape, one of his favorites, showed the tailgate party with Revanne dressed in tight designer jeans, tank top, and two-inch pumps. He became excited as the camera zoomed in on her showgirl legs' muscles teasing through her tight jeans. The video changed to another reporting situation, the camera

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panning her from the side—once more highlighting her legs as she sat cross-legged in a very short miniskirt. He salivated to the point of [REDACTED]

Having set automatic rewind with replay, the videotape was in its third replay when Revanne's computer networking ended, leaving him thwarted.

* * * * *

Mercedes lay awake in the early morning light, looking toward where she thought her restive husband slept. Groggy, she paused and listened to the crickets. In the distance she heard the dull throb of a northbound freight toiling its way up Southern Pines' railroad gradient, one of the steepest east of the Mississippi. Around the shades, light began to filter into the large upstairs bedroom of their Victorian house.

She stirred and reached for him, moved by instinct rather than conscious desire. Moving her hand about, groping for him, she suddenly realized he wasn't there. Mercedes raised her head and looked for him, squinting her eyes in the dim light. Alarmed, her breathing accelerated to quick gasps.

Getting hold of herself, she focused her thoughts and realized it was Simon again. Mercedes knew by now the cycle of vivid nightmares and sleepless nights which Bennie had endured periodically, especially at the anniversary of their infant son's death.

She sat up.

"He's at his computer terminal," she thought. "Why can't he make his peace with Simon's death?" She demanded aloud, getting the attention of one of their cats who had been sleeping peacefully at the foot of the bed.

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Mercedes remembered vividly how in the mid-sixties she and Bennie, newly married and awaiting their first baby, had been reassigned to the new RF-4C reconnaissance aircraft by the Air Force from Britain to the United States. Bitterly, she thought how the advertising brochures and real estate brokers had convinced them that their new home was a perfect picture of the American Dream. Then Simon was born, a great joy to the new parents. But their dream home had turned out to be a death trap.

They had been justifiably proud of Simon, born so healthy and intelligent—so beautiful. Little did Bennie and Mercedes Alza realize, when they bought their home that they were sitting on a sinister ecological time bomb, ticking right under where Simon crawled toward his first attempt to walk, only to find it harder as he weakened.

Once more, as if torn by a riptide, Mercedes was stricken by the memory of Simon's agony. Twenty-seven years ago, they had watched helplessly as Simon wasted away from leukemia caused by chemical wastes buried throughout their suburban neighborhood, and even under their own home. She pulled out a Kleenex to wipe the swelling tears streaming from her eyes.

When little Simon began to show signs of listlessness, the Alzas imagined they were just overreacting with their first-born. But the abrupt onset of swollen glands and bleeding discharges made them fear for him, and they took him to the medics. Test after test confirmed the unimaginable final verdict: acute lymphatic leukemia, no more than six months to live. Their son never reached his first birthday.

Months passed before Bennie and Mercedes could talk of Simon's death.

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When they grew able to discuss the loss with sympathetic neighbors, they discovered a high incidence in the neighborhood of such afflictions. Children and young adults had fallen victim to leukemia and other cancers. Further investigation revealed that the development had been built over a lethal chemical dump which had been filled in and "forgotten." But they found out too late to save Simon. Over the years, Bennie and Mercedes had concluded in no uncertain terms that pollution was like a giant claw insidiously closing over the entire planet.

Bennie's distress had festered over the years but he had remained away from TV publicity. He felt a pervading sense of pointlessness in the TV interviews of other families with similar tragedies, the too personal questions, and the callous zeal with which the reporters filmed the weeping parents . . . all this not expressing sensitivity to the parents' anguish, but just exploitation to generate ratings and/or sales.

* * * * *

Mercedes rose rapidly, pulled on her bathrobe, nudged her feet into her slippers, and reached for her glasses. Then like a cat, she shot down the stairs to find Bennie. Once more, she would try and talk him out of it.

She reached the closed door to Bennie's large model railroad room and peered through the small window, past the cloth Bart Simpson doll hanging on the window by suction cups.

Bart Simpson's T-shirt said it all: "No Way Man!"

Hesitating before opening the door, she let her eyes sweep around the

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room to become accustomed to the eerie glow of the computer screen, the only light by which the slim man feverishly networked with a friend, a most attractive lady friend—Revanne Grossman—a reporter for Durham's major network affiliate. Bennie and Revanne were avidly communicating about something. Mercedes had a wrenching gut feeling about the topic. She felt ill, Bennie and Revanne were still at it. They weren't giving up. Mercedes took a deep breath and prepared to reason with Bennie.

Quietly she entered the energized room and scanned the HO gauge model railroad medieval villages which surrounded the computer console and work station. She slithered toward and stood behind him. Mercedes looked at the screen. Bennie and Revanne were analyzing the implications of a recent Wall Street Journal article about the restlessness in the United States' military community brought about by the post Cold War drawdown and lack of commensurate jobs in the civilian sector. The agitation was also believed to be contributing to the increase in domestic violence being experienced by the military community.

Additionally, many military types were motivated more by ideals than money, which exacerbated the disillusionment of entering the civilian community where money seemed to be all that mattered. Many felt betrayed because they were part of the all-volunteer force, as opposed to World War II draftees, who were only too happy to muster out in 1945.

Bennie closed by remarking that he understood the implications of this article, particularly for political agitation. It would provide recruits for organizations. He kept his commentary very general in case they were being monitored.

Of course Revanne understood the hidden meaning of his closing state-

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ment and agreed to meet him 90 yards down the 8th fairway at the Pinehurst Golf Course at 11 A.M. today, to review the fertile potential for highly skilled recruits for their project.

Mercedes was aghast. In a panic she thought, "Has it come to this? Am I going to have to turn them in to the FBI? Is the environment that far gone to justify these means to save it? Save it for what? I must talk him out of it. Overthrowing the U.S. is immoral. I can't let them do it. People won't accept this. It's too unsettling. Surely they aren't amoral."

Mercedes turned on the soft lamp next to the computer console and cradled Bennie's head in her arms. While stroking his short, graying hair, she looked at his gallery of heroes hanging on the north wall past the pictures of castles and cathedrals. Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, Lech Walesa, Pope John Paul II, and Milton Friedman, among others, accompanied personal tributes to his father, receiving a Medal of Freedom from Dwight Eisenhower, on pictures from F.D.R., Charles de Gaulle, and Winston Churchill.

Bennie took off his glasses and turned his head toward her, his earnest brown eyes under dark eyebrows rapidly cataloguing the sensitivity and kindness being emitted from her large black eyes.

He raised his arms, found her hands, gave them an appreciative squeeze.

He thought, "I just don't know how to shake this."

He closed his eyes and tried to relax. The well-known frames of his nightmare were still running in his mind as he bathed in Mercedes' comfort and let his head fall back on her chest. Images came to him repeatedly but had no clear significance: tall, vital oak trees, their massive branches flexing in the crisp fall wind; the joy of children playing among acres and acres of wilderness in the Berkshires, his extended family's home. Bennie

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would then see, through his own eyes as a child, himself playing with his brothers and sisters in the forest among the birches and maples. He never saw his siblings, he could only hear their encouraging shouts and playful taunts. Suddenly their calls turned to sobs of terror as the air filled with overpowering sounds and the ground shook beneath his feet. He was left standing alone in a wasteland among stumps and ravaged earth, an acrid stench in his nostrils, and no sound save for a terrible, desolate whimpering, the pitiful cry of Simon in his final hours.

Consciously, he thought, "I sit here wide-awake--all sorts of images flash through my head as throughout the night, everything interspersed--my childhood--clear cutting of Mount Owen at the peak of its autumn glory--Simon's agonizing death--I see the oil well fires in Kuwait, their black smoke and Simon melting into the black Vietnam Memorial in DC. Is this the kind of life we fought for?"

Mercedes looked down at the picture of Simon on the computer console. Bennie had surrounded the picture with a silver and pearl rosary.

He sighed deeply and, as a feeling of great weariness overtook him, he felt Mercedes' hands in his hair and around his face. She pulled him to her again and he became calm. She was well acquainted with the details of his visions, and dreams, and shared the hollow feeling of loss the years had done nothing to diminish.

"It all seems to prod me," he said.

He reached to caress her jet black hair. Her round eyes, framed by imperceptible wrinkles, were encouraging him to share his troubles out loud.

"I'm starting to believe it's like my brother says--omens and portents--something beyond me--a yearly command to do something about all the waste.

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I owe it to Simon." He continued to look into Mercedes' eyes, his own radiating determination and valiancy.

"Don't think I'm crazy but it's like he wants me to do something—and not just some small gesture, but something big—a real change. But what can I do now? Other than what Revanne and I are considering?"

"You could write a book about what happened. Rachel Carson raised our consciousness." Mercedes hoped to encourage him. She looked at the bookshelves above the computer console, filled with volumes on ecology, history, electric railroads, economics, and geopolitics.

He shook his head.

"Yes, but by and large—even today—things don't seem to have changed much since we were duped into buying that house back in Simon's time. Sure, people are more aware, but it's mostly lip service—not doing anything real, and still special interest politics as usual in Washington and Raleigh."

The dawn continued to light up the eastern sky, one of their cats clawed the door. "Margot, I bet," Bennie said.

Mercedes smiled and stepped back.

"I guess she wants to go out," she said.

Not wanting to hurt the cat, Bennie got up and opened the door slowly. As he started towards the side entrance, Margot rushed ahead, nearly causing him to trip over her in the dim light. Upon opening the door, he heard the first timid chirps from the trees. They would become more assertive when joined by the blue jays, he knew. He watched Margot's sleek gray shape as she took up her regular position under a bush near the bird feeder.

"Margot," he said, "they're too fast for you; you never catch anything."

Bennie decided to finish last night's dishes and watch CNN's Headline

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News. After checking the Weather Channel and local radar summary, he went back upstairs to find Mercedes who had gone back to bed.

"Well, Margot is happy now," he said as he sat down on the side of the bed, nudging Mercedes to pay attention.

"I've got lots of ideas for changes, but they're so radical—things would really have to be bad for the people to accept them—I mean, a real bucket of shit."

"Oh Bennie, do we have to? Now?" she whined, and shook her head.

"Look Honey—I've got to talk about this. I've held back long enough. You have to know now." He nudged her shoulder annoyingly until he was sure she wouldn't drift back to sleep.

Then, with her usual kindness, she rose to participate in order to play devil's advocate, hoping to get him to reconsider.

He began quietly, rapidly. "If we delay action, it'll be too late—the limits to sustain the Earth's interdependent biodiverse life-support system will have been irreversibly broken. Look at what man has done to parrots in the tropics. Soon, there won't be any." Bennie stretched out his long, lean length. He looked toward Mercedes to see her reaction.

Mercedes' eyes indicated that she was interested. She propped herself up and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I hear you talking," she said. "Most people don't understand what we've learned about biodiversity—that all living things are bound together like a finely woven rug, depending on their environment and each other. I've thought about it too. People can't absorb it until something happens to drive it home, like Simon did for us. It'll take something like a Pearl Harbor to convince people to change drastically."

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"Pearl Harbor—I like that—that's a good way of putting it!" Bennie said, pleased at his wife's succinct response.

She looked back at him and smiled.

"That's what we need—a surrogate ecological Pearl Harbor," he said. "We have to generate a massive event covertly that rattles people's cages so they understand the need to alter their behavior. Yet we don't want to screw things up worse than they are now. In '41 we went from being die-hard isolationists to embracing global war in an instant. F.D.R. made good use of our natural gut reaction towards violence when we feel threatened. Territorial Imperative, they call it. That basic instinct can be harnessed toward positive public policy objectives."

Bennie's imagination shifted to full power, his bright observant eyes dancing with delight. "We've got to convince people that an ecological Pearl Harbor has occurred and catastrophe is on the horizon."

"Yes, but with education like AIDS, and connected to the environment so people will learn to practice safe ecology, hopefully better than they are learning to practice safe sex," rejoined Mercedes as she looked at him, hoping he would reconsider the project with Revanne. She rose to open the curtains.

"It has to happen in time to alter behavior in an orderly, logical manner—that's the problem. We haven't much time," Bennie concluded, then moved on to his next concern.

"We can't be callous about jobs, though. We can't be anti-business. Jobs just have to fit in the total system—as a farmer plants in the spring, harvests in the fall—livelihoods can't inadvertently compromise the integrative life-support system of the planet."

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"Boy, Bennie! That's a mouthful of ten-dollar words—even for a profes-
sor!" she said.

"Damn it, Mercedes—this is serious stuff!"

"Maybe so, but if people can't understand what you're talking about, how will they relate?"

He paused, then tried to make his thoughts more user friendly.

"We use mechanical instead of human energy in modern societies—right? I mean, motors instead of muscles. So fuels and resulting economic activities, like production and waste disposal, have to be subordinated to the life-support system—not the other way around, as currently."

"I'm with you. If we continue to use dirty fossil fuels we'll destroy what sustains life."

"Exactly!" He paused to look at her. "So we need clean fuels, and economic activity which is sustainable. In terms of wastes, they must be recycled without long-term harm to the balance of life."

"Well, makes sense!" She took off her nightgown and reached for her bra.

Bennie let his gaze dwell on her full breasts and thought how well she had carried her figure into her mid-fifties. Their eyes met. She shrugged off her bra. Bennie's eyes followed with thankfulness that he had married a good-looking woman who had retained her shapely body without any apparent effort other than drinking red wine, eating vegetables with meat, and walking instead of driving.

"Eggs or cereal for breakfast?" she asked as she pulled on a snug pair of jeans.

"You!" He said, as he got up and pulled off his pyjamas. She looked

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at him approvingly as he advanced toward her and reached to fondle her. They stood in front of the full length mirror of their bedroom. "Look, home porno!" He said as he gently fondled her breasts. He slowly reached into her jeans and began stroking her. . . .

* * * * *

Bennie groped for his trousers and UNC-Chapel Hill basketball sweatshirt. He decided Mercedes' Spanish-style coffee would do him some good and followed her down to the kitchen.

Mercedes' black eyes were hot with determination as she looked sternly at Bennie.

"Who thought up the idea that we have to destroy to gain economic wealth?" she demanded. "People are too lazy to clean up after they take. The logger can feed his family, spotted owls can feed theirs; there's plenty of room for everyone if done right." She poured boiling water over the coffee grounds and the scent made them hungry, reinforced by the sight of her homemade croissants, with an aroma like that of a Parisian bakery.

He paused. "It can be done, you know. We just need leadership and will." His determined eyes narrowed as if for combat.

"Hey, I'm on your side," she laughed, and held her hands protectively over her face.

He made a playful swipe at her.

She set the steaming coffee mug in front of him, sat down opposite across the table, and reached for some banana muffins, pausing to peel burnt spots off some of them. They sat in silence, enjoying their coffee, muffins, and

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croissants.

After breakfast, they moved to the large living room where Mercedes stood at the window watching Margot stalk a squirrel. The cat leapt and chased the squirrel up one of the magnolia trees gracing their front yard.

Bennie took her hand to get her attention. She looked into his eyes, acknowledging his conviction.

"If our habitat isn't viable, if we can't breathe, drink the water, or sustain agriculture—well then, what good are jobs and corporate wealth?" he said. "Besides, we can enhance efficiency and lower costs for business if we make better use of resources. An economic gain would naturally result from an environmental gain," he concluded.

"If it's so obvious, why is there so much resistance?"

"Because a lot is invested in our present systems. Look, if I told you that we had to spend \$30,000 on an electric car in the next six months, and we had just spent \$18,000 on a gasoline car, now worthless, you'd resist—big time!"

"I would, I most certainly would," she smiled.

"That's why the change has to evolve over time, so reasonable adjustments can take place. But democracies aren't known for this kind of long-term strategic vision. God, Mercedes, do we have time to make the changes that need to be made?"

The immensity of the task sank in; he looked at her entreatingly. "The change from present fuels to non-fossil fuel electricity has to start its phase-over, and soon. . . ."

"How soon? . . ." she asked.

"We need to start immediately," he replied earnestly. "For it'll take

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decades for the economy to adapt in an orderly manner, minimizing joblessness and social unrest. I don't believe democracy would even react before a real ecological Pearl Harbor. But after that, it'll be too late—the damage will be irreversible. So, we're going to have to act."

"Bennie, are you proposing what you and Revanne have been working on?"

"Yes. I think an authoritarian system—with the right person or group at the helm—is the only way. We'll be the leaders." Bennie looked at Mercedes with unwavering eyes as he made this jolting statement.

"I knew it. I know what you've been researching, and with Revanne no less." She shook her head. "But Bennie, Communist regimes and dissolution of the Soviet Union have all shown authoritarianism is a bankrupt form of government. You know what I went through during the Spanish Revolution."

Bennie knew Mercedes was getting edgy. She turned away from him and looked out the window, perhaps at the squirrels. Then she turned back to him and said, "There has to be some other alternative." Her normally calm eyes betrayed fear. "Is there no other way? Is there really no way with democracy? After all, isn't it sweeping the old Soviet Empire with a resounding repudiation of authoritarianism? . . ."

He tilted his head to the side and raised his eyebrows. "Yes and no," he went on. "One can already begin to see special interest politics and bitter ethnic strife creeping into their systems. . . ."

He rationalized. "Preserving the planetary life-support system—our environment—can't take place with constant local concessions, made to constituencies afraid of losing out in the effort to clean up the environment. As Tip O'Neill said, all politics are local. Only dread will convert the global problem of the life-support system into a local issue."

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He pounded his fist into his palm and said, "Man's wastes are overwhelming nature's ability to recycle them; they're building up dangerously. We're losing diversity of life by the slaughter of so many species. It adds up to the probable unraveling of the life-support tapestry. It has become almost that simple, Mercedes—not quite, but almost! Saving life-support has to be priority one. Otherwise, we've no habitat for us to be around to carry out our economic activities."

Mercedes thought a moment, then replied, "It all sounds logical, Bennie. You may convince your students with that argument, but try and sell that to the majority—many of whom can't even balance their checkbooks—or your daily commuter who'll sit for hours in traffic gridlock, then goes out and does the same thing the next day and the next—even in DC with their nice Metro!"

"I think it can be done with less pain-and-suffering than the conversion of the former Soviet economy to free market forces," he tried to be hopeful.

"Yeah, right." She gave him a skeptical frown.

"Look," he pleaded. "Just as with the Russian economy, the longer we wait to implement change, the greater the conversion shock will be. Look at us converting to the metric system, for example. . . ."

"Oh Bennie, it's true, but get real!"

"No, Mercedes, hear me out. All that society takes for granted means nothing on a dead planet. The public has to be enlightened to understand this reality. It's a global problem—has to be approached with global perspective. Legislators tend to be focused on purely local issues and the here and now—as their constituents. Life is strategic and global—local options aren't relevant. I'm afraid there isn't any room for much flexibility in

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maintaining the Earth's life-support system. Biology, physics, and chemistry aren't responsive to the weasel worded spin control of politicians."

Mercedes nodded in assent.

Bennie was absolutely convinced. He could feel his pulse pounding. He tried to project his tensions to his extremities. He began with each toe. One at a time. Then each finger tip. One by one. He felt the tension gradually dissipate.

Calmly, he visualized his anxieties. He saw with clarity that time was running out. As a university educator himself, the retired military officer could appreciate Hans Oeschger's studies at the University of Bern, which had proved beyond doubt that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was building up to perilous levels. Oeschger's ice core reconstruction of the past 160,000 years' atmospheric history had been measured with Swiss precision: man was pushing top limits at 350 parts per million, but no one except Greenpeace seemed to care.

Bennie knew that, coupled to this, man continued his mindless destruction of species which make up the tapestry of the life-support system, without any thought of consequences. Literally millions of plant, animal, insect, and other species would be annihilated over the next few decades, threatening to unravel the delicate balance of interdependence between all living things.

It was like pulling a thread from a tightly-woven Persian rug—an individual thread (species) didn't seem important to the total structure—yet pulling one thread (destroying a species) could begin unraveling the whole pattern of the rug (the planet's life-support system). The problem was that, one-thread-at-a-time, the route to catastrophe seemed so normal. Not until the fabric was well into unraveling, would most people see the path they

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had chosen. The processes at work were so insidious that only a few could make the necessary leap in imagination required to foresee what lay ahead.

Bennie studied his wife's face. She remained skeptical. Since she had come to the United States, she had been a proud defender of its democratic system. "Even with all its flaws," she liked to say. "It's still better than the alternatives—and I should know."

Bennie knew he would have to work hard to persuade her to consider his alternative. "Democracy works through consensus. Politicians constantly have to make concessions to various groups so they can stay in power. And people have time myopia—they want immediate benefits but want costs pushed into the future. Each group wants others to bear the burdens. Politicians work around this by favoring focused pressure groups who make big contributions in gratitude—like tobacco, guns—and screw ordinary unorganized clusters—like users of Amtrak." He took her hand and squeezed it.

Mercedes took a deep breath. She wasn't ready to concede. She looked at Bennie intensely.

"Bennie, look at the corruption we've already got in this system. Politicians caving in to pressure from oil and automobile lobbies, redefining wetlands to give developers more breaks—and the frauds of the savings and loan crooks! Think of the ways politicians have used the recession to mislead the public, creating the conflict of jobs versus the environment. The poor spotted owl is just the latest focus of that special interest disinformation. I could go on and on. Still, it's the best system I know of." Her eyes searched his.

"But the reason all these powerful interest groups get their way is because they point out very visible current costs, like job losses in timber,

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for example. They argue that people's jobs are more important than a bunch of trees and owls. It's all very effective when addressed to the masses, particularly out of context. . . . Time myopia at work," he inferred.

"Still, Bennie, compare that with the track record of any dictator. That breed does not, historically, show very much respect for the long-term welfare of their people. How do you propose to do better . . . dear?" She placed her hands on her hips, challenging him, and waited for his answer.

Bennie appreciated her challenges. Without those, he felt he would make a serious miscalculation.

"I just don't know right now—there's got to be a way. All I know is we can't have a government whose sole purpose is to line the pockets of the well-connected few. The looting has to stop," he blurted out, looking up suddenly and meeting her eyes. Mercedes' large black eyes still demanded more.

"We should be electrifying and upgrading the railroads," Bennie said. "But we still spend billions on highways. It's true, Texas is talking high-speed trains, but what they're doing is nothing compared to the Europeans and what we're investing in oil and highways."

Mercedes sat motionless, her face attentive but without an expression he could read. Her eyes seemed to acknowledge his earnestness.

"The handwriting's on the wall," he said. "It's way passed the time to end our dependence on fossil fuels once and for all, and go totally clean electric."

Mercedes' look bore into him. "And how do we manage that?" she asked.

"Research and implementation of an electric economy with a combination of clean fusion for central generation and super conductors for grid distribu-

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tion. It'd be supplemented by soft paths—like solar and wind—for local areas and individual residences. It's long overdue; we'll just have to see to it, that's all."

She was silent for a moment, then asked, "How?"

"We'll have a coup." Bennie's intense look pierced her to the bone. There, he had said it, almost casually, as if a coup d'état was an everyday thing.

Mercedes mocked the idea. "A coup! Sure. What are you and Revanne sniffing, anyway? Look at what happened in the Soviet Union last August. Yeah—sure!" She sat up, her raven hair an inky void in the soft light.

"There's no other way." He took both her hands and held them tightly.

Once again, Mercedes' black eyes narrowed with resolve.

"We mustn't give up," she said. "Maybe, there's another way. It's not necessary to destroy to gain economic wealth. Look at Fort Bragg—loggers harvest timber regularly yet there's enough forest left for soldiers to maneuver in and deer to roam. It's not like upstate New York or the Pacific Northwest, where paper interests and loggers destroy by clear cutting."

"Bragg is an exception," Bennie said. "Polluters, local government officials, real estate brokers, developers, and Washington all are in bed together—damn shitheads. But you're right, all sectors can be responsible—look at this article."

He released her hands and reached for a clipping about the Collins Almannor Forest in northeastern California and handed it to her.

She scanned the article, "Collins Pine Company is privately held," she read. "It has practiced sustained-yield selective harvest management for 50 years. Loggers and spotted owls can coexist indefinitely. See? It can

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be done if there's the will. But we need leadership towards that end!"

"So what have I been telling you!" Bennie looked at Mercedes vindicated. "We need better leaders with the right vision—not myopic. That's exactly what I'm saying. Us!" Bennie pounded the table.

Mercedes was losing momentum. She winced defensively as she realized that Bennie might be right.

Seeing her soften to his idea, he proceeded with confidence. "Look at Switzerland. They're going to put trucks on rail cars by the end of the century. The European Community is really pissed, but the Swiss have the Alpine passes! And Austria. There you have economic wealth and a rational environmental policy—we don't need extremism on either side. Livings have to be earned, but government has to establish and enforce the basic rules evenly, like refs in a basketball game."

He looked directly at her.

"This is where we've failed miserably," he said noticing she was backing off.

Feeling that he was on a roll, he pressed for the kill.

"Sweetheart deals between polluters and government are business as usual. We have to put a stop to key officials available at-a-price to special interests—letting polluters write environmental legislation. Shit! That's like letting the Mafia write anti-crime legislation. Most politicians seem to put power and private gain before genuine public service. They make special exceptions for powerful constituencies in their districts over and over."

Mercedes nodded her head. "So you think special interests will devour the nation with their greed, corruption, and short-term vision. And it's all reinforced by democratic agencies and officials. You're not saying

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anything new, Bennie. Sir Winston Churchill drew the same conclusions on the fatal flaw of democracy. What can you offer that's better? I'm listening."

Bennie got up, kissed his wife. "I've got to think about this—I'm going out to the DZ." He grabbed his windbreaker and headed for the front door.

Mercedes watched him walk down the front steps to his 24-year-old V.W. Beetle, which he'd modified with an electric motor. He needed to be alone to formulate some answers.

* * * * *

Southern Pines was exploding in beauty. Interspersed into the green were maples, dogwoods, and others, gloriously crimson, purple, orange, and yellow in a kaleidoscope of intense hues under a Carolina Blue sky. Passing by horse farms on the way to the Holland Drop Zone in the Fort Bragg military reservation, Bennie marveled at the majestic bay and chestnut horses prancing about, reflecting the fall sunshine like polished mirrors. Such communion with the tangible was his way of coming to terms with the infinity of the Cosmos.

Drop zones, or DZs, were extensive open areas surrounded by open forest for military airdrop exercises. When not in use they were like giant cathedrals, ominously silent and majestic. The Holland DZ was the closest to Southern Pines, some eight miles out on the lonely serene Manchester Road to Pope Air Force Base. Upon reaching the DZ, Bennie pulled off the road, bounced along on the sand, and found a peaceful spot to park. He got out

Chase-22-Virus Rodeo

and walked toward the edge to a spot bordered by magnificent trees. He sat down to collect his thoughts. He remained transfixed for several hours, meditating in the twilight of consciousness.

He raised his head and looked around. A warm breeze off the sand caressed his face. Hawks soared gracefully, taking advantage of updrafts emanating from sand heated by the blazing sun. Suddenly, Bennie had an inspiration.

"Yes, that's it, I know. . . ." He spoke aloud as if conversing with the trees. "Yeah. Natural selection is just genetic engineering over time. It weeds out the undesirable so as not to pollute gene pools. We have perverted the natural system by preëmpting its quality control with our short-term horizons. That's it, but what to do? . . ."

Bennie seemed, as in a Wagnerian opera, to be having communion with the gods. Suddenly, from Fort Bragg's distant McPhearson impact area, a major artillery exercise exploded with loud blasts and bright flashes, harking him psychically back to the Saigon "lullaby" of yesteryear—his 1965 days in Vietnam and the constant artillery barrages and B-52 raids protecting the outer perimeter of Saigon—a beguiling apparition, the spirits of the Götterdämmerung back into the mists of war. Vividly, the future flashed in his mind: airlessness, blackened skies, infertile sand in which nothing could take seed, and a surf next to which thousands of fish lay gasping.

The Gods had spoken.

He picked himself off the sand, brushed off his trousers, and prepared to return home to discuss his rationales with Mercedes once more. First, however, he had to meet Revanne. He had to be sure. Many might die. A coup could fail and plunge the world into global nuclear war and extinction.

Chase-23-Virus Rodeo

of our own species—exactly the opposite of his goal.

On the other hand, the current abuse of the environment was sure to lead to extinction, a coup only might. Bennie found the galactic odds in favor of a coup. He would have to convince other nations, the former Soviet republics in particular, that his motives were in their best interest as well. He would have to show that he was no threat to them in a territorial way, that everyone would gain by getting rid of fossil fuels and deforestation. They would see that it was imperative to do so almost immediately. Time was running out—crunch time was at hand!

* * * * *

Revanne waited at the rendezvous spot off the 8th fairway. As the area was isolated, she decided to sun herself while waiting for Bennie. She turned the golf cart into the sun, sat back and propped her legs up on the dash.

About a hundred yards away hidden in the forest, a man watched with bated breath as Revanne stretched out. His heart hammering, he focused his powerful binoculars on Revanne's thighs, now exposed as the wind whipped her pleated miniskirt above her gleaming white stretch lace bikini panties. He became aroused as Revanne parted her legs slightly and exposed the dark mound of her pubic hair under the semitransparent stretch lace. He could hear the pounding of his heart as she unbuttoned her sleeveless silk shirt letting it fall to the side, baring her lace demi bra swollen with its contents. She shifted to make herself more comfortable, taking an occasional deep breath as she drifted into a semiconscious state. His mouth went dry as the Arabian desert while he reached inside his trousers.

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He decided against self-gratification and silently made his way toward the golf cart. Today, he'd actualize his fantasies of the past six months. He stopped in a clump of trees and bushes barely ten yards from Revanne and feasted on her with his powerful binoculars. The 36-year-old New Yorker was far more succulent than she'd ever looked on TV. He slithered toward the rear of the golf cart and quickly pounced, placing one hand on her mouth while the other groped up her muscular inner thigh toward her lace bikini. She panted heavily in panic as he moved his hand up, and inserted it inside her bra to linger on her voluptuous flesh.

He moved his head next to hers and said, "I want to release your mouth and not hurt you. You're much too beautiful to hurt. I don't want to hurt you. I just want to touch you."

She felt his heavy breath against her ear. It sent chills of disgust down her spine.

"I know what he and you are up to. I'll let your mouth go if you promise not to scream. Remember, I don't want to hurt you. Just nod your head and don't look back."

Revanne nodded her head, terrified.

He released her mouth, unzipped his fly, and exposed his penis. He tried to insert both his hands inside her tight bra. He released it and her freed breasts sprung out in the open. He violated her breasts savagely, then reached inside her bikini seeking her secret entrance. He started smiling, baring his teeth. He was about to place one of her hands on his penis when he heard Bennie's golf cart pulling up in the distance. He released Revanne and ran off in the bush.

Stunned, Revanne just lay there motionless.

Chase-25-Virus Rodeo

Bennie, who had been enjoying the aroma of the freshly cut grass as he pulled up, couldn't believe it was happening, yet there she was, the busty, petite woman in disarray. His wiry facial muscles tightened into swirls while his resolute eyes shone with anger.

He looked her over for blood to determine if she was wounded or even alive. He stood there debating whether to leave her alone, not disturb the evidence, and call the police. After a moment he determined that she was indeed breathing and didn't look seriously hurt. He walked to Revanne with determined steps and covered her breasts with the loose bra and buttoned her blouse. His tender care broke the trance and she moaned and mumbled incoherently.

Bennie went back to his golf cart and got a water bottle and handed it to Revanne.

"Thanks," she said meekly, and took a few sips. She looked at him with sincere gratitude, making Bennie think of refugees reaching safety at last.

"My God, what happened?" Bennie asked, taking her hand. "Are you all right, Revanne?"

She sobbed convulsively as Bennie sat next to her and hugged her protectively. After what seemed an eternity, she became coherent. Brooklyn-born Revanne looked at Bennie and fury swiftly flashed across her steely blue eyes before being concealed by lowered eyelids.

"All he did was fondle me. He would've done worse if you hadn't come. That bastard."

"Oh Bennie, what's it come to?" She sobbed again and shook her head.

Bennie kissed her tenderly on the cheek and hugged her again.

Chase-26-Virus Rodeo

They sat in silence and slowly the color started to come back to her cheeks.

Suddenly, Revanne gave a start.

"Oh God, Bennie. He knows."

"Knows what?"

"About us." She looked at him with alarm.

"You and I? Or the project? What did he say, exactly?"

"Something like I know what he and you are up to."

"Well that could mean anything from an affair to the coup. Did he use my name?"

"No, he didn't use your name or mine, for that matter."

"If he's tapped into your bulletin board, then he knows our nom de screen anyway, I would say." Bennie paused to think and then he winced with concern.

"Oh boy. He's probably stored all our messages on his hard drive. Good thing we've kept our messages general. But FBI analysts putting them together might guess what we're planning. We've got to find out who he is, what his motives are, and see if this has spread beyond him."

Revanne nodded assent.

"You know what this means, Kid?"

Revanne shook her head.

"We're going to have to use you as bait to draw out our friend so we can determine what he's up to."

"Do I have to? . . ."

"I see no other way. We're going to play cyber sex and lure him out. And, you'll have to pleasure him."

Chase-27-Virus Rodeo

Revanne looked at Bennie with disgust. "No way!"

"Look, Kid, you'll have to put on a show and excite him. Then I'm sure he'll want to fondle you again."

"Bennie, that's disgusting. I won't do it. I'm not a whore."

"Look, he knows something and we can't have him loose out there. He could really screw us up. We might even have to have Joe Dab put a contract out on him."

"For what he did to me is good enough reason. The courts won't do a fucking thing." The rage returned to her steely blue eyes.

"You're right about that." He nudged her.

"We must find out if he's just a stalker," Bennie said. "Or if there's more to it and he's told anyone else about what ever he knows."

Bennie paused to think, then said, "He's a dumb shit, though."

"What do you mean, Bennie?" Revanne cocked her head and looked at Bennie inquiringly.

"He tried to psych you out and gave away the fact that he's tapped into your computer. We know something that's very important. This wasn't a random event. He's picked you out for some reason. Why? That's the biggie!"

Bennie paused again and looked intently at Revanne, her sexuality and clothes. He then thought about how he was aroused during her TV reports and how he enjoyed her showgirl legs. He also remembered how Katarina Witt, the East German Gold Medalist, had been stalked.

"I've got it, Kid! Those dynamite legs of yours on TV. That classy slut look of yours. Oh shit!"

"What?"

"That probably means he's been taping you. Must have a whole library

Chase-28-Virus Rodeo

on you. Not only does he know your nom de screen, but your real name as well. Probably plays the tapes over and over to play with himself."

"Hon, you're disgusting."

"Look, the way you come across on TV, any real guy would wet his pants over you. I sure could!"

"Oh Bennie." Revanne looked at him uncertainly, as her lips parted slightly. "Really?" She adjusted her hair as her self-esteem began to regain ground.

"Oh yeah!"

Slyly, she placed his hand on her inner thigh.

He let it linger and looked intently at her.

She looked down at his hand, tightened her leg muscles with periodic ripples of energy and then looked back at Bennie tentatively, wondering if he would respond or think she was tainted.

Suddenly, she twinkled up to him and planted a wet open-mouth kiss on his surprised lips, swirling her tongue inside his mouth.

After her emotional release, she sheepishly looked at him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Oh, no trouble at all!"

Unconsciously, he groped upwards, enraptured by the thigh's firmness and feel, then quickly pulled back his hand, like an embarrassed schoolboy.

She looked at him coyly. New Yorkers recover quickly.

"Look, like I said. You turn me on when I see you on TV." He ran his hand up perilously close to her bikini. "I must confess that I've thought how nice it would be to jump in the sack with you and wrap those legs around my neck." His hand stopped against her bikini, sensing its moist warmth.

Chase-29-Virus Rodeo

"Oh, Bennie." Revanne pressed her lips to his ear, her tongue darting.

"Oh, do I do that to you?" She blew into his ear.

He felt her spurts of warm breath against the side of his face increase in velocity with excitement.

"You're putting me on," she teased, coy innocence written all over her face.

Bennie felt that he was sitting on a nuclear weapon which was about to go off. His heart rate increased. He felt a rush.

She edged closer to him and bumped his side with hers deliberately. She forcefully grabbed his head and planted another long very wet open-mouthed kiss, and augured her tongue deeply into his mouth. She suddenly was seized by the urge to be cleansed by being ravished by someone she admired and loved. That would cleanse her, she thought. The exorcist would have to be illicit, not her husband. She unbuttoned her blouse, her bra was still unclasped.

"Look out, Revanne! I've just so much . . . resistance." Bennie's tone betrayed his intense desire for her.

He fondled her vigorously, urgently.

Revanne stood up next to the golf cart, took off her blouse and bra. She casually tossed them into the air. She turned around slowly so Bennie would get a good and complete look at her. She raised her skirt and turned around again. Then she sat as close to Bennie as she could. She lowered her hand to his groin, and found that he was tumescent. She unbuckled his belt and her fingers clasped him eagerly.

He bit her neck gently. His passion increased as he fondled her with increasing desire.

Revanne pushed Bennie away and wriggled out of her bikini, lashed her

Chase-30-Virus Rodeo

tongue on it and bit it playfully.

"Now's your chance to wrap my legs around your neck. Come on Bennie, tongue me."

She handed the moist bikini to Bennie.

He took it passionately, and worked it with his mouth while their eyes locked on each other.

Revanne pulled away from him and motioned him to lie down in order for her to sit on his face.

He rose to do so, but then they heard golfers approaching in the distance.

They looked at each other, sorry and glad at the same time, that the golfers had saved them from being overcome by raw passion and compromising their marriages.

She quickly put her blouse on, and put her bra in her purse.

Bennie stood and hid his embarrassment as best he could.

In the distance, the stalker watched through his powerful binoculars and felt thwarted once more. As he left, he was more determined than ever to penetrate Revanne.

Revanne looked at Bennie with pleasure. "I needed that."

They dwelled on each other, overcome with the implications of their near consummation.

"Oh God, Revanne, what have we done?" Bennie said later.

"I won't tell, if you don't," she said playfully. "I'm going to enjoy working on this project. You're great Bennie—in a perverted sort of way. It's added spice with you planning to overthrow the government."

He leaned over and kissed her lips gently.

Chase-31-Virus Rodeo

"You're going to have to be the bait to draw him out. Once we know the score, then we deal with him. Fester 'll know how."

"Shit!"

"I see no other way. You and I'll have to put on a show to excite him. I'm sure he's hooked."

"Bennie, you helped me, I needed to be exorcised. But I don't want to be touched again by that man. As for you, that's another matter."

Their eyes met intensely. Both sensed that they were on an unavoidable collision course. And yet, how could they betray their spouses whom they both loved and revered?

Bennie got up, went to his golf cart and reached for his bag phone. He punched his programmed home number and pushed send.

"Mercedes, I'll be late. Something's happened to Revanne. Tell you about it when I get home. I'm going to take her home. Bye."

* * * * *

After turning in the golf carts, Bennie drove Revanne home. She had walked to the golf course. They pulled up in her driveway. Bennie got out and opened the door for her.

Revanne was limp with guilt as Bennie helped her out of the car. They slowly made their way to the door. She fumbled around with her keys. Once inside, she sat down heavily in a large armchair.

Prior to military retirement, Bennie had been assigned to Pope Air Force

Chase-32-Virus Rodeo

Base near Fort Bragg. His squadron had worked with the JFK Special Forces on Special Air Warfare operations in conjunction with AC-130 gunships out of Hurlburt Field in Florida.

Colonel Lester (Fester) Grossman, Revanne's husband, had been a specialist in psychological operations (PSYOPS), and had been Army liaison with Air Force Special Air Warfare. Together, Bennie and Fester had flown many covert missions in the Middle East, Africa, and Central America.

"Fester" had most recently been in Operation Desert Storm. He'd also been in Delta Force before retirement. Delta Force came into being after Bennie's retirement from the Air Force, so Bennie had never been on one of their missions.

Fester had also built up quite a reputation for his piano playing in the Officers' Club Casual Bar on Friday nights.

"Hey, Fester," Bennie hollered urgently.

In a minute, a roaring bear exploded into the room. One look at Revanne was all he needed to know something grievous had happened.

They related the events, other than their near liaison.

Fester hastened towards Revanne and held her tenderly.

"He didn't, did he?" her stocky husband asked, anxiety written all over his face.

"No, he just fondled me. Bennie arrived just in time to prevent worse."

"Thank God for that." Fester's anxiety evaporated as he looked at Bennie gratefully.

Suddenly Bennie felt guilty and self-conscious.

Bennie advanced his thoughts on the intruder's motivation.

Chase-33-Virus Rodeo

Fester rubbed his chin and said, "I think your theory makes sense, Bennie. Does he know anything about the project? Is our goose cooked?"

"Right now, I've no way of knowing. All I know is that Revanne and I never talked specifics on the computer. We knew it wasn't secure. We just talked generalities more in ways related to her reporting job."

"Hmm," Fester mused.

"Now," Bennie continued. "If the FBI had reason to believe that we were up to something, counter intelligence experts could possibly make some dangerous educated guesses."

"We have no choice," Fester said. "We've got to find out who he is and what he knows. And if he knows too much and hasn't spread it, we'll have to blow him away. Otherwise, we may have to abort the project."

Bennie and Revanne winced.

Fester thought for a while.

"After what that fucker did to Revanne, I wouldn't feel bad about blowing him away. Not at all."

"Blowing him away might be the easy part. It's what comes after that's the bitch," Bennie said.

"Well sure, we don't want to get caught," Fester acknowledged.

"No. What I mean is that killing is easy. But making him disappear, especially if he's got an ordinary household . . ."

"Oh, you mean mail, utility bills, family? . . ." Revanne said.

"Exactly, Doctor Watson."

"Oh shit," Revanne said. "But if we've got to blow him away, how about faking a drive-by shooting? . . ."

"Too dramatic," replied Fester. "Won't give us a chance to sanitize

Chase-34-Virus Rodeo

his house. If the cops find tapes or hard copy on Bennie and you—we're fucked, baby."

Bennie and Revanne winced again.

"No," Fester said, and faced Bennie. "We'd have to lure him out to a DZ. Holland would be good. And I'd have to throttle him while you and Revanne distract him. I hate to use her as bait. I don't know what else to do, though. . . ."

Fester looked at Revanne with resignation.

He thought some more and then said, "We could leave his car at the Raleigh Airport in one of the parking areas. I've left mine for several weeks at Terminal C."

"Right," Revanne said. "That'd give us time to sanitize his house, crash his hard disc, and collect all videos of me. He flew away and never came back, right? . . ."

"Well, something along those lines," Fester agreed.

"What about his mail? . . ." Bennie asked.

"Many forget to stop their mail," Fester replied.

"I guess you're right. Still, people will start asking questions."

"I hope it won't come to that," Fester said. "But I have a sick feeling that we'll have to do it. . . ."

"Now to the trap," Fester said. "I'd feel better if you all did a voyeur charade, Bennie."

Fester faced Revanne, "Wouldn't you rather have Bennie fondle you, dear?"

"Oh yeah!" Revanne almost gave herself away.

"You sure you want to go that route? What if Revanne and I go all the

Chase-35-Virus Rodeo

way? . . ."

"Well, I know you don't have AIDS. I can live with you and her having sex. It won't keep me from loving her. You'd be doing it for the cause. That other guy, I'll kill him before I let him touch her again."

"Well, I'm going to have to give him at least a tickle and a squeeze, Fester." Revanne reminded him. "We have to bring him out believing that he'll get into my pants, otherwise, he won't come. He's tasted me already, and Honey, you know how good I am." She threw a quick, concealed wink at Bennie before passionately kissing Fester.

"Shit, I guess you're right."

"Hey guys, I've got to roll." Bennie became uncomfortable and felt a need to get away. He couldn't handle it anymore at this time.

Fester turned away from Revanne and walked Bennie to the door.

"Thanks for taking care of her," he said giving Bennie a nudge.

* * * * *

"So, what happened to Revanne?" Mercedes said, scowling at Bennie.

Bennie related events, an edited version, and added, "I hope this is a private fetish thing over an attractive TV reporter and that he's not sharing it with anyone. We might even have to blow him away."

Mercedes looked at Bennie sternly and thought, "I'd be a fool to think Bennie would be different. He'll be a Hitler. How long can I wait before I pull the plug on this thing?"

She said, "See what I mean about dictatorships? You're already talking about killing people."

"Look, Honey. Look at it like we're avenging Revanne. The courts aren't going to do anything about it. He'd be back loose on the streets in hours. You know that."

She paused and then looked at Bennie, fire in her eyes.

"So you volunteered to sacrifice yourself to have an affair with Revanne to draw him out. How noble of you Bennie. Such dedication." Mercedes glared at him.

"Now wait one, that was Fester's idea," he said, lowering his eyes.

"He'd rather have me have sex with Revanne than some stranger. It's going to be like in the movies. Strictly a professional relationship."

"Come on, Bennie, give me a break and cut the bullshit. And get that shit-eating look off your face. I've watched you wet your pants over that slut."

One could tell that Mercedes only saw a cover story that wasn't worth the time of the day.

Bennie decided to be quiet and let the storm blow over.

"Oh, how convenient for you, Bennie. I'm sure you're going to hate every moment. I know how you drool when she comes on TV. I've seen you."

Mercedes' eyes flashed darts at Bennie. Her normal serenity was replaced by transient ire.

"Look, I admit I find her attractive. Yeah, very attractive. But that wasn't on my mind when I left this morning. It all kind of happened. Really."

"Sure."

Mercedes glowered with poison at Bennie.

Bennie moved desperately to change the topic.

Chase-37-Virus Rodeo

"It was lovely out there, really lovely—the leaves, horses. Any interesting mail? . . ." he ventured.

She looked at him with disdain.

"The usual junk, nothing really."

Mercedes resigned herself to the inevitable and led the way to the living room, sat down on the Queen Anne sofa. She asked, "Want something to eat or drink?"

"Not now, I'll get something later. We still need to do some talking," Bennie said. He was not fond of small talk and leapt right in. "While sitting out there, I had a sudden inspiration. We're going to have to fast-forward the process of natural selection—through genetic engineering somehow. We'll have to change our DNA or control it somehow so we, as a species, can evolve beyond the rapine scumbags we are, destroying other life as if it was meaningless! How to do that without creating evil and mischief, that's the predicament."

She looked at him intently.

"Are you sure you didn't play with Revanne yourself, and make up this assault thing? I know she likes you. . . ."

"OK, you've got us. We made it all up so we'd have a perfect cover story and can go out and fuck like minks all day."

"Don't be gross, Bennie. You just don't seem all that sorry about this. You men are such animals."

"Are we going to talk about Revanne and me or get on with the project?"

Bennie resumed his monologue, "With our technology, we've substituted mechanical for human energy to increase our productivity and economic wealth.

Chase-38-Virus Rodeo

There's nothing wrong with that in itself, but we've failed to factor in consequences of our wastes and development on the rest of the species with which we share the earth. We've looked at other species as being expendable and saw ourselves as endowed with some form of supernatural license by a divinity we call God. Unfortunately, we're destroying the planet. . . ."

"All over now, there are hazardous chemicals, leaking landfills, improperly packaged nuclear wastes, and plastics. Add to this the oil and nuclear mess in the former Soviet Union. What this adds up to is that the balance of life is upset from the ozone layer down to its very basic particles, DNA. When we mess with the basics, like phytoplankton, we're playing ecological roulette. Too much UV-B compromises the phytoplankton's ability to reproduce, thus reducing the food for the krill. Then the whales and seals go hungry and have massive die offs. Food we eat is affected the same way—we're tempting fate—it affects the balance of the entire life and food chain up to and including ourselves. . . ."

"Bennie, we've been through this before. What are you trying to convince me of now?"

"Now, more than ever, I feel the need to take action, to do something, far beyond just mobilizing the neighborhood to protest when Simon died. We've got to induce a change soon, but with our long history of pork-barrel politics and economic corruption, I see only one way," he lamented.

"Oh, we're back to that. Well, unless you can prevent abuse, there's no reason to overthrow the democratic process. I don't want to see you turn into a dictator, Bennie. We'd end up substituting a set of abusive leaders for a set of crooks." Mercedes looked at Bennie without blinking.

Bennie paused for a moment in the face of his wife's doubts, then

Chase-39-Virus Rodeo

continued the argument he had formulated under the trees.

"Mercedes, hear me out. Gasoline automobiles are the final insult. They spread our poisons to the far corners of the earth. They're the narcotic which keeps the mindless consumption economy going. If people don't buy them, we have a recession—like now—perhaps even a depression, creating armies of unemployed workers and social unrest. Economic recoveries then come back with increased car sales and additional bulldozing of land for ever more development. There must be a way to have a vibrant economy without destroying everything. Look, statistically, every individual spends over 300 grand, in his lifetime, on cars—300 grand on rust!"

"Rust? . . ." Mercedes cocked her head inquiringly.

"That's what happens to old cars in junkyards. Rust. And CFCs from corroding old air conditioners. Our country spends tens of billions a year on imported cars, then more tens of billions on imported oil to feed the damn things—which becomes carbon dioxide to contribute to the Greenhouse Effect. All these huge sums leaving our country and destroying Earth's life-support system. In fact, our huge negative trade balance is mainly a result of motorcars, oil, and even cocaine! Isn't that ridiculous?"

"I'm not denying there's a problem and a huge one, but still—" Mercedes began.

Bennie interrupted. "We've become so dependent on the economy of the automobile that a powerful array of political interests maintains we should have cheap gas and more roads. Labor and management, conservatives and liberals: no one seriously questions the mobility and convenience of the motorcar, yet go on 183 or 114 in Dallas at rush hour, you immediately see the absurdity of road-based urban transport. I've even heard some church

Chase-40-Virus Rodeo

congregations go out in parking lots and have priests bless their cars."

"Oh Bennie, really. It makes sense and it doesn't, just like you and Revanne this morning."

"No, seriously. Let's leave her out of this for now. Let's separate these issues, OK? . . ."

"Yeah, sure."

"And here's why we have to act now. As Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Third World try to jump start their economies, gasoline cars will become their narcotic as well. Concrete arteries are showing up there already. It started with us and spread to Western Europe and Japan. The new capitalists won't question it any harder than we have. Henry Ford turned a plague loose upon our world and we'll have to reverse it. The current government won't want to phase them out—too many jobs depend on them and recurring threats of recession prevent drastic action. People aren't afraid of environmental desecration—without fear, there's no impetus for change."

Mercedes looked at him and said, "There you go, Bennie, already talking like a dictator. Are you going to scare people into change? How?"

"Only fear will work, as with AIDS. But it's got to be worse and total, for many ignore AIDS today because they think they're not vulnerable. I agree—we've got to prevent abuse, but we've got to change the whole governing system. The system is corrupt. I know this is your concern—I haven't been ignoring it—how do we and our associates do this without becoming corrupt as well? I've been thinking that we'll need the efficiency of Hitler's mid-thirties," Bennie saw Mercedes' eyes go wide, and hastened to add, "without his abuse and brutality. I want to help the world by changing people, not exterminating them," he vowed.

Chase-41-Virus Rodeo

Mercedes looked at Bennie with uncertainty. "I can't believe he's gone nuts," she thought. "It must be Simon and Revanne."

She said, "How will the American people accept an authoritarian leader when the Soviet Coup failed? . . ."

He paused for a moment, reflecting, groping for an answer. "I've got it. It's inevitable that with perceptions of disappearing career jobs, a runaway crime situation, and growing net foreign debt, that Americans will fear a much lower standard of living. These all lead to corrosive uncertainty on a social scale. Public order and social norms have already broken down. Between the NRA arming criminals to the teeth and courts turning them loose, I'm afraid the social contract has collapsed."

"I'm afraid you might be right."

"Actually, my reference to Hitler was more appropriate than I realized," he said. "We're in a Northeim Syndrome of middle class malaise, like that which settled on Germany as a result of the thirties' depression and hyperinflation of the twenties."

"Northeim Syndrome, what's that?" Mercedes asked.

"It's a label that characterizes what happens to a country's middle class when it feels disenfranchised by perceived economic and social decay. The middle class is the backbone of modern societies and family values."

"The term resulted from studies of impacts on the town of Northeim, Germany, by Professor William S. Allen, of its experiences in the twenties and early thirties resulting from hyperinflation and the Depression. It was this malaise that led to their acceptance of Hitler in 1933."

"You can see early symptoms here in the U.S. resulting from loss of upward mobility by many. People are angry at the system. The middle class

Chase-42-Virus Rodeo

prefers economic and social stability to political latitude—that's the lesson of the Northeim Syndrome. Here, I'll show you an economic aspect, it's readily obvious."

Bennie went upstairs to get an economics textbook and a German stamp album. Back at the table, he opened the textbook and pointed out a schedule.

"See here, in January, 1913, the price index was one—which means say, a loaf of bread costs one dollar. By January 1921, it was 14, which means that now you pay 14 bucks for that loaf. By January 1922, 37. In 1923, \$2,785! By August 1923, you would pay \$944,000 for that one loaf! By November, that year, \$750 billion for that loaf. . . ."

"I know it's unbelievable, but look at these stamps." Bennie fumbled through pages of his German album and pulled out some stamps in sequence. "See this one, 500 marks. At that time, they could still print the number as they printed the stamp. Now this one, one million; here they had to strike over the numbers because the inflation got so rapid. Look at this one, 5 milliarden, that's billion in German. Five billion to mail a bloody postcard across the damn street. By then postal rates were changing every ten minutes until collapse. Added to the humiliation of World War I, the hyperinflation laid a subconscious foundation to middle class anxiety which manifested itself in acceptance of the Nazis in the thirties, even in Northeim. Interestingly, Northeim had a recovery of sorts in the late twenties, being a big junction for the state railroads. The Depression didn't impact the middle class much—relatively speaking—most were civil servants who only suffered salary cuts—not job losses. But around them, they saw the misery of unemployed private sector workers—and that's what made Northeim's middle class anxious—they feared their future as they could see themselves in the soup kitchens."

Chase-43-Virus Rodeo

"Even with low unemployment here, the unemployed and homeless are highly visible, especially on TV--this gives our middle class an increasing level of anxiety. They wonder if they're next? That and violence in the streets."

"The middle class perceives they might get hurt by economic and social corrosion," she ratified with vigor. "People like us whose savings might get wiped out. Look at our IRA—I know how I'd feel if we lost it all in a few months--I'd be ready to kill someone."

He could see her lips tighten.

"That's appalling, Bennie. So that's the Norheim Syndrome."

EURO

"And we're setting ourselves up for the very same thing with the decline of status jobs and our growing foreign debt. Our debts are denominated in dollars as the German World War I reparations were in marks and they paid them off with inflated funny money. We'll end up doing the same thing with our foreign debt—in fact we're doing it already. When the Germans lent us a dollar in 1985, they had to give up 3.10 marks; today when we pay them back that dollar, they only get 1.57 marks—we've cheated them out of 1.53 marks already! In a few years, we've cut the real value of our debt in half without paying a cent, just through inflation. As long as the debt is dollar denominated, the government can reduce its real liabilities by doing what amounts to legal counterfeiting. We, the people, get screwed—without enjoying it—of course! I wish we could pay off our mortgage that way."

"Right now, since our economy is so big and most people don't understand economics and foreign currency dealings, the decay is barely perceptible. Only GIs in Germany and Japan feel what's happening as the old dollar goes down the tubes for cars and oil. One day, it'll bite us in the ass. Maybe, like Mexico. Like the dollar decay, the life-support system is decaying.

Chase-44-Virus Rodeo

At first, you barely notice—then—BOOM—it's all over baby. I can remember when I got four marks to the dollar—as Inspector Clouseau would say—not anymore! Perhaps, we can survive the decay of the dollar—as a Third World power, but I know man can't survive the catastrophic failure of the life-support system!"

He looked at her, detecting a hint that she might be ready to agree.

She looked back with intense, but silent interest.

"Eventually, though, our economy might just implode as the Soviet's did—that'll be crunch-time. What keeps the public off balance is distraction by rock videos, 900-numbers, and talk shows—the old Roman idea of distraction from reality through the Circus Maximus. The dynamic is the same as the warlords' opium in the Far East of olden days. And it works. Left-wing talk shows brainwash people into being nonjudgmental, so when people are on juries, they don't convict. Right-wing talk shows brainwash them into becoming intolerant and hating, arming themselves, and having paranoid delusions about a totalitarian federal government."

"Oh Bennie, be serious."

"That guy who shot up that restaurant in Fayetteville, got out of the death penalty on an abuse defense. Look at these gun magazines—guys playing army in weekend militias. What bullshit. You tell me, Mercedes. . . ."

"I can't, Bennie. But I agree that people feel uneasy about our economic future. They feel their future is disappearing. They feel in their bones that something fundamental has changed. . . ."

Mercedes thought for a minute and then said, "But won't that make them want to hold onto their consumption lifestyles more desperately? The last gasp of the good life? So, wouldn't they resist even more? . . ."

Chase-45-Virus Rodeo

"Exactly my dear. Exactly why we have to get their attention with a dramatic event, for here we now sit—fat, dumb, and happy—even though our planet may be uninhabitable in 100 years."

He added, "And it could happen, because the destruction's insidious, like termites eating away your two-by-fours. You think all is fine until one day—surprise, surprise—the whole house collapses."

Bennie detected that Mercedes seemed to be wavering.

He sat motionless for a moment. Then pressed on, determined.

"Despite automobiles, Switzerland is where electric trains are the order of the day. I'd like to have America become a scaled-up Switzerland. And their money, it's the best! We can live without cars if we have a train system like Europe's. We could also use a hybrid-type bus trolley like Germany's. It's a diesel bus in sparse rural areas which becomes an electric trolley in denser urban areas, one vehicle combining advantages of road flexibility and rail speed/cleanliness."

"All automobiles could be fitted with code devices, like aircraft transponders or bar codes, so road embedded sensors could be used to tax people for their use of roads and parking lots. That way they'd pay the true cost of private personal transport. Think how much parking space could be returned to forests and urban renewal. Besides, we can have little electric cars for local forays like going to movies or restaurants. Who can have Pontiac excitement at 55 MPH anyway?" He laughed out loud and Mercedes joined in the sarcasm.

"You know, Mercedes, by 2015, Europe will have in place an intercontinental 180 MPH transit system running on electricity from fission or fusion power."

Chase-46-Virus Rodeo.

"Yes, western Europeans have managed their fission power well so far, thank God. France in particular," Mercedes said leaning forward to emphasize her point. "But people remember Chernobyl and Three-Mile Island. Sure, they were caused by human error, not nuclear technology problems, but people still fear nuclear energy because humans operate the systems."

"True," Bennie conceded. "I think fission power used properly isn't a problem. Long-term waste storage in ceramic units is OK. It takes up little room, relatively speaking."

"It's the human factor. Lax management like Bhopal. . . ."

"You're right. The problem in most cases is people. Both labor and management are sometimes inattentive, drunk, untrained, and so on. We could keep present plants and monitor individuals in key positions and transfer problem ones to non-critical locations. But, with the promise of solar, fusion, wind, additional efficiency from superconductors, and geothermal being what it is, I believe we may be able to bypass fission altogether. Actually, I've an open mind."

"Geothermal, I like that." Mercedes smiled. "Heat of the Earth—like a giant Yellowstone Old Faithful—good idea."

Bennie paused briefly to sip his drink, then began again. "Europeans have already invested over 100 billion dollars in high-speed electric trains. These work like an urban metro; you take a blue line to London, a red line to Madrid, and a green line to Paris—it's awesome! And what are we doing?" he asked in disgust. "We're spending tens of billions covering for the savings and loan deceit, and more billions to pave what's left of our country" His eyes glared.

"Ah, Mercedes—there's so much to be done, but you're right to doubt.

Chase-47-Virus Rodeo

How could we and our associates keep honest if we held authoritarian power? Dictatorships don't have a good track record—Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Saddam Hussein," he said wryly. "It's not very encouraging."

"Well, at least he's thinking morals," Mercedes thought, reassured. "I can give him and Revanne a little time yet. BUT, I mustn't let this get out of hand. He's making a good case, though. Is this the ONE time when the end justifies the means? Damn, I can't betray them because I'm pissed at Revanne. But WHO are they to impose their will on the world? Why would they be different than Hitler?" Mercedes' thoughts tore her with agony.

Bennie sipped some more, reached for honey roasted peanuts, and offered some to Mercedes. He crunched a few, immediately attracting the attention of their dog, a 15-year old black terrier mutt.

"You like these, don't you, Oliver?" Bennie threw a couple peanuts on the floor towards Oliver and petted him as he scrambled to lick them up.

"Isn't there a way to change without using force?" Mercedes sighed. "I hate to make people do things they don't want to. You know how it was for me and look at the corruption of Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union."

"I know," Bennie replied, and put his hand on her arm, giving a gentle squeeze. "It'd be nice if we could educate everyone to make rational decisions, but look how hard it is to educate people to stop smoking, driving drunk, taking drugs, and even common sense safeguards against AIDS. Why do you think we'd have better luck dealing with deforestation and the Greenhouse Effect, where people would have to give up some cherished and tangible benefits for obscure future benefits? People look out their windows—the sky is still blue, trees are still green where most people live—most don't go up mountains where large segments of forests are vanishing

Chase-48-Virus Rodeo

in baths of acid fog and acid rain. And there's the problem of time myopia; they only want current benefits and hope to get out of paying in the future. Destruction of the life-support system is already under way—we have little time left. . . ."

"Maybe next year's election will bring about a change. . . ."

"I don't think so," he said. "People don't generally vote for upfront sacrifice to achieve future benefits, and the integrity of the environment is perceived as a very obscure benefit. In fact, there's a significant backlash against what few and mild environmental rules we've got. So the fossil fuel combustion economy, with all its known benefits and conveniences will remain intact. Unless something happens to scare the hell out of people sometime soon, short-term economics will rule as in the past. You and I know that fossil fuels have to go—to be replaced by the electric economy with its unknowns."

"Hmm . . ." Mercedes said. "I remember the oil crises of '73-'74 and '79 when the U.S. was on its knees. . . ."

"That's right," Bennie said. "Europe, with its existing network of excellent 120 MPH railways, prohibited personal driving without much fuss. People didn't feel imprisoned. What good is gasoline auto freedom if we can't breathe, eat, or drink the water? That freedom is fictitious anyway. People are subjugated to payments, gridlock, speed-cops, and carjackers."

In Bennie's mind, only an authoritarian government could save man from irreversibly poisoning his planet. Much as he tried, he could see no other way.

"We'll have to use force. We'll have to find leaders who aren't corrupt," he said with resolve.

Chase-49-Virus Rodeo

Mercedes reached to stroke his forehead gently and then massaged the back of his neck.

"I know the track record isn't encouraging. Man's the biggest scumbag on the planet. Thoughtless filth, corruption, and excesses come from man and yet I expect you to believe I'll be different." He looked up sheepishly. "Well, are you convinced?"

Mercedes looked at him impassively and thought, "Shit, I'm more confused than ever. God, I'm glad I don't have to decide this today. It looks like they're taking their time. Thank God for small favors. I'm going to have to find someone to talk to. But who?"

Bennie sat back and stared at the ceiling as if his mind had suddenly been erased. For a long time he said nothing. He got up and walked toward the kitchen.

"Want a sandwich?" he asked.

"Yeah—this is going to be a long afternoon." She looked at him piercingly. "Bennie, you've convinced me we have to do something soon. Education isn't the answer, but does it have to be so drastic? . . ."

Bennie munched on a few more peanuts. "Only an ecological Pearl Harbor will impress the public, but by then it'll be too late. We'll have to create a surrogate Pearl Harbor—come up with a convincing horror show that looks like the end of the world, yet isn't associated with us in any way. It's got to be an unimaginable series of events which appears random and grave enough so people will be predisposed to making sacrifices. Then we take over leadership, because it'll take time to convert the economy and give it time to adjust. People have to earn a living, pay those bills. I wish Oeschger was wrong. God, I wish he was. . . ."

Chase-50-Virus Rodeo

"Do you really think that you can take over? Many could die—we could die. I remember Alicante only too well during the revolution when we lost and ended up like those Kurdish refugees we watched on CNN." Mercedes had experienced the Spanish Revolution first hand and knew what being on the losing side meant: she thought of the long, cold, convulsive trek across the Pyrenees to France after her father's side lost; the concentration camp in France; being herded into a tramp steamer like cattle; the seasickness. Then exile in French Morocco, a totally new culture, language, and alphabet. Then her father's violent death.

"Bennie, it was brutal. People slaughtered each other. Settling scores and bitterness were the driving forces. I just don't know," his wife said. "You could be some kind of Hitler. I just don't know. . . ."

She looked at him entreatingly. "What right have you got? Really, Bennie, this is too much. Where's the morality in it? . . ."

"Mercedes, I think preserving life is the highest morality," Bennie answered quickly, looking directly into her searching eyes. "Not only human life, but other species as well. As it is, man has made a mess of things on this earth. Man, supposedly a creation of God, bulldozes vegetation and animal habitats without any thought about his activities and the total life-support system."

"Damn him and his arguments," she thought. "He's so cogent. That bastard, he'll have me at the barricades if I don't watch out. Overthrowing the U.S. Government isn't laudable, that's all there's to it. Why me, God? Why has the fate of the world been dumped on my lap?"

He took her hand, but she looked away. He reached over and gently turned her head to look his way. Mercedes' dark eyes were shining like marble

Chase-51-Virus Rodeo

spheres and Bennie knew that she was more troubled than he had suspected.

"Mercedes," he began, in a softened voice. "We have the power to destroy all life forms—with the possible exception of cockroaches, crickets, and no doubt, rats." He hoped she might smile, but he saw only the barest twitch at the corner of her mouth. "I saw Europe after World War II; that mess was nothing compared to a real ecological Pearl Harbor."

Still no overt reaction.

"Remember riding around Paris that one night on one of those river sightseeing boats, admiring those lovely, irreplaceable buildings? Think how close all of it came to being destroyed. Thank God that German general defied Hitler and saved Paris."

She turned and looked directly into his eyes.

"So Mercedes, what led up to that situation in the first place?"

She looked at him intensely.

"Complacency, just like our attitude now with fossil fuels. Look at all that's already been destroyed by strip mines, oil spills, acid fog, and rain. And all the massive filth and destruction of oil exploitation."

"I need a time-out," Mercedes thought. "He's rolling over me."

"Our very existence is at stake. Wait. I want to defy the fossil fuel God in time to save this Earth and all its beautiful forms of life."

Mercedes said nothing in response, but her expression softened. The tightness around her mouth relaxed, but he didn't know whether he'd begun to ease her doubts or had overwhelmed her. Tactically, he was tempted just to crush her like Desert Storm tanks over Iraqis, but deep in his heart, he knew that would be no good—just a cheap underhanded shot. This issue had to be settled on logical merits, not intellectual violence against his

loving and dedicated wife.

Bennie got up, went to her chair, sat down, and hugged his wife tenderly.

"Well, I don't think of myself as Hitler, but as that general who defied him," he said, stroking her hair.

But questions arose in his thoughts. "How can I keep myself and our associates from going over the deep end after we gain power? Absolute power corrupts absolutely. How can we trust ourselves? That's the predicament."

* * * * *

After dinner and the news, Bennie continued to wrangle with his and Revanne's project.

"You know," he looked at Mercedes with hope, "we could always abort our coup if the democratic process got its act together in regard to the environment. There's a gleam of hope—the National Audubon Society's renovated Manhattan headquarters is an example for integrated economic and ecologic common sense in buildings. It gives today's comfort levels at half the cost. But very few operate with an eye to the long-term. At least not in peacetime, that's the problem. Few realize that we're at war for the very existence of the planet. The threat is here but isn't perceived by the public, so there's no constituency for drastic action at this time."

"I know," she said. "People don't see the threat until it's full in their faces. The threat to the U.S. from the Axis Powers was the same on December 6, 1941, as it was on the eighth. But if F.D.R. had asked for mobilization on the sixth, they would've laughed him out of Congress and the public would perhaps have demanded his impeachment—yeah, I'm exaggerating

Chase-53-Virus Rodeo

a little—but I see your point now."

Bennie responded positively with a vigorous slap at her hand. "Look. After Pearl Harbor, F.D.R. had no problem getting most to go along. That scary dramatic event focused our gut attention and made the difference."

"That may be true, but what right have you and Revanne got to overthrow the government?"

Bennie emphasized again motorcars had to go. "Already, we can see a trend back toward the excesses of the fifties and sixties, performance cars are back in favor. But we can't afford them anymore, our ability to breathe is at stake. People hang onto their cars as smokers hang onto cigarettes. There are documented cases of smokers giving up their meager rations at Auschwitz for just one more cigarette."

"Come on, Bennie, surely that's not true," Mercedes insisted.

"I kid you not," Bennie replied. "When we were in Berlin after the war and I was an occupation brat, I stole some PX cigarettes Mom and Pop kept for diplomatic functions and sold them on the black market at the Tiergarten. I got street wise quickly! I met all kinds of neat people there, including Soviet occupation brats. In fact, one of them has moved up quite well in the Russian military. We were pretty good friends then. I wonder if Yuri would remember me. Those were my juvenile delinquency days, I guess. . . ." He laughed.

"Phillip Morris and Lucky Strikes were the most sought after, Luckies in particular—in fact Yuri's old man was one of my better customers. People sold anything for just one cigarette. Rare art pieces could be had for a pack. People really humiliate themselves for drugs. Germans used to follow Americans, pick up discarded butts, and then smoke them to the last draw."

Chase-54-Virus Rodeo

"Now we destroy our cities for one more parking lot, one more mall, or one more beltline. Chapel Hill is talking about tearing down lovely old neighborhoods for ring roads. If Chapel Hill is willing to do this, you can figure only force will deprogram man away from his gasoline cars. We may even need to go to war to save the environment, perhaps joint US/Russian operations."

"Joint US/Russian operations—that would be nice!"

"Unfortunately, they've got big problems, but I'm very hopeful. Pollution and species extermination are global problems, worse than nuclear weapons. We'll all have to work together. We'll have to lead since we have the military muscle to impose our will on the rest of the world."

"I don't think I can handle this by myself," Mercedes thought. "Who can I talk to?"

* * * * *

E-Mail Message, Leggy to*

Big Trainman

"Big Trainman, I've got to have a luxuriant locomotive in the tunnel, slow and easy as it backs out and enters again, and again. However, I only get this high when I've been violated. How can we get hold of Mr. X so he can fondle me and then you rescue me, like the last time? Do you think Mr. X would want to role play with us? Catch my next reports."

xxxx

Leggy

2

Mr. X eagerly awaited the local TV news that lovely Saturday afternoon. At six o'clock he was ready with beer and remote VCR control in hand. It was a slow news day, not even a convenience store hold up. In fact, for a change, there were no crime stories at all. He sat back, ready to push the record button, as the feature story came on, NC State's Homecoming Game against Florida State, the number one football team in the nation.

Revanne was to cover the tailgate party in Carter Finley Stadium's huge parking lot with pep band, cheerleaders, and all. The big pre-game pep rally was well under way when Revanne's turn came up.

He salivated as he watched Revanne prancing about from car to car. Mr. X pushed the record button as he watched her outdo the cheerleaders and drum majorettes—most seventeen years her junior—in her two-inch pumps, tight designer jeans, and V-neck/hang-out crop top. He quickly became aroused when Revanne leaned over, interviewing reveling fans in their pickup trucks and lawn chairs. Her crop top ballooned downwards, leaving little to the

Chase-56-Virus Rodeo

imagination, as the camera panned the swells around her demi bra. While all the eager Wolfpack fans were hoping for the upset of the year, he remembered that recent morning at the 8th fairway.

* * * * *

E-Mail Message, Big
Trainman to Leggy

"The weather's going to be nice Tuesday. Let's meet at the 8th fairway and maybe you can imagine Mr. X violating you. Give it a try. We'll have fun experimenting. Maybe you'll come up with a new kind of high—a flashback violation."

* * * * *

Mr. X felt a rush as he copied the message. Revanne would not need a flashback violation. He would be there to perform one in real time.

* * * * *

Tuesday Morning at The 8th Fairway

Fester took a concealed position by the 8th tee with a commanding view of the fairway and tree line near the area where Bennie and Revanne were to meet. He hoped to catch sight of Mr. X. Revanne set herself up in the golf cart again and awaited events.

Chase-57-Virus Rodeo

Mr. X was expecting and saw her. He looked around to see if anyone was near, and slithered toward her.

Unfortunately for Fester, Mr. X's hiding place was behind the same tree line as Revanne's, so he never saw him go toward her and waited in vain.

Once more, Mr. X pounced. Once more he covered her mouth with his left hand and reached for her bikini with his right. A pleasant surprise—she wasn't wearing one—his hand was squarely on her mons veneris. He released her mouth.

She noticed a large scar on the inside of his lower right arm.

"Look," she pleaded. "I get a kick out of this, but it's going to take time getting used to it, so don't take me just yet. Can you role play the beast so my lover can save me? . . ."

He thought, "I'll . . . do anything . . . you want, you beautiful bitch, anything. . . ."

He unbuttoned her blouse. She wasn't wearing a bra either. Immediately both his hands cupped her breasts.

Revanne raised the ante. She said, "Take off your pants and let me jerk you off. . . ."

Surprised by such boldness, he hesitated.

"Let me see your manhood. . . ."

Swept up by excitement, he leaped in front of her and dropped his trousers. While pretending astonishment, Revanne coolly took mental notes.

"At least he showers and isn't scruffy," she thought. "In fact he's delicate and gentle, really."

Calmly, she reached down to her inner thigh, and started fondling herself. Distracting him in this manner gave her a chance to page Bennie.

Chase-58-Virus Rodeo

Mr. X heard Bennie's approaching golf cart. He disappeared awkwardly, his pants around his ankles causing him to trip and stumble.

He finished by self-gratification, watching Bennie and Revanne consummate themselves with abandon.

* * * * *

When Bennie and Revanne drove up, Fester was waiting for them.

"Did he show?" Fester asked.

"Yep," Revanne replied. "And I think I've got him under control."

"Control? . . ." Fester looked at her, perplexed.

"I think he's just a lonely guy. A nerdy type. He's not an ugly guy," Revanne added. "I've seen worse looking guys with quite cute girls."

"You're not feeling sorry for him, are you?" Fester looked at his wife sternly. "Let me see this guy."

"Oh shit. I forgot to turn on the minicam." Revanne left abruptly and went to her desk and wrote down all she could remember, scar and all.

Fester faced Bennie and said, "Damn her. Why are women so kind?"

"Don't worry about it, man. I'm sure she's just relieved this guy doesn't seem violent, that she's going to be able to control the pace, not get beat up, or killed. Nothing wrong with that!"

"You're right, Bennie. We did put her on the line, didn't we?"

Fester went to Revanne's desk. "I'm sorry, Honey, for being such a jerk. This thing's got me jumping through my ass."

He put his hands on her shoulders and caressed her. She reached up and squeezed his hands.

Chase-59-Virus Rodeo

* * * * *

Columbus Day Weekend
Pinellas County, Florida

After getting off Amtrak's Silver Star in Tampa which brought them down from Southern Pines, the Alzas picked up their rental car and made their way across the bay on the Interstate 275 causeway toward Saint Petersburg. Their destination was Treasure Island where they and two other couples had rented a cottage next to 'Bad Basc' and 'Schatze' Freischtat's cottage on the beach, the Freischtats being good friends of all. They planned to spend the weekend together.

"Well, Bennie, am I better or Revanne?" Mercedes asked as she stretched in the car.

"Overall, you are." He looked her way and saw she wasn't convinced.

"You're just saying that. She's younger than I am."

"If you were overweight, like so many our age, then I'd say youth would be a factor. Revanne's great, but we've got so much more together."

As the traffic inched forward, he decided to let things be and concentrate on driving. Traffic crept toward the Treasure Island Causeway.

"Hey, we're moving. We'll probably get nosebleed at this high speed," he said, and Mercedes smiled.

"They said to turn left on Gulf Boulevard. It's the street with the Thunderbird Motel—I think I see it up there." Bennie looked down at the speedometer. "Wow, all of 15 miles an hour!" He glanced over at Mercedes

Chase-60-Virus Rodeo

and said, "What did they say—ease right toward the beach road?"

"Yeah, that's it. Now on to 84th Avenue. I think it's that house over there," Mercedes stretched her neck to scan a row of dignified older houses. "The dishwater-white house next to that yellow one. That's it, it's got a green door and there's Basc's old VW van." She pointed out the house with a beachfront porch. "There's Schatze waving us in!"

"I see her," Bennie said as he pulled into 83rd to turn around. Bad Basc came out, as did the Bill Dardens—iced drinks in hand—to stand by the driveway to greet the Alzas as they pulled up.

"Hey, guys!" Bennie hailed them excitedly.

"Hey, Bennie, Mercedes!" The others chorused, except for Bill, who greeted them in his usual impassive manner.

Bennie first knew Bascomb as Bad Basc in 1967, as a member of the Tactical Air Reconnaissance Center's Test Squadron at Shaw AFB in South Carolina and Eglin AFB in Florida. Bennie had been a test project evaluations engineer for new reconnaissance and high-precision navigation systems tested on RB-66B two-engined reconnaissance bombers, and RF-4C reconnaissance fighter aircraft.

Bad Basc had flown with Bennie, testing the Loran C/D Precision Navigation System designed for circular error probabilities of less than ten meters. Basc had been promoted all the way up to Deputy Air Force Chief of Staff. Now grayer and slightly heavier, he and his joyful wife, Marlene, or Schatze, as she was fondly called by her friends, were retired near Tampa.

William (Bill) Darden had been Bennie's roommate at College Park's University of Maryland. Like Bennie, Bill was a diplomatic brat, although in the Latin American sphere, San José, Costa Rica. After Maryland, he'd gone

Chase-61-Virus Rodeo

into the Foreign Service and risen to top ranks in the career track at State. He knew its inner workings well and was fluent in Spanish. Retired in Miami, he had a wealth of contacts in the Cuban and Nicaraguan communities, including some operatives of the ill-fated Bay of Pigs operation, for which he had been a Kennedy covert contact. Anne, Bill's wife, was a genuine Southern belle.

"Nice trip?" Bad Basc asked, taking the luggage from Mercedes.

"Very nice," she replied.

"This must have been heaven before all this mindless development," Mercedes sighed.

"We loved it here when we bought it, now I think we'll sell! When we first moved in, egrets nested all around us. And to think I sometimes complained about their calls keeping me awake. I miss them so much now, they don't come around anymore. Who can blame them?" Schatze lamented. Her blond hair was pulled tight into a bun and her green eyes radiated energy and sorrow.

Putting a sun-browned arm around Mercedes, Schatze directed them to a smaller twin of their own house. "Here's your cottage, complete with towels, sheets, and a solar-powered shower!"

Mercedes nudged Bennie forward. "We'll change and be out in a minute," she said.

"Cactus" Jack DeChico appeared from the doorway.

"Hey, you old bastard!" Cactus yelled, looking at Bennie. "How's it hanging?" he asked, causing his wife, Maria, some embarrassment.

Cactus had also come up from Miami, accompanied by his buxom olive-skinned spouse. Cactus had been Bennie's colleague at the Test Squadron's

Chase-62-Virus Rodeo

movement sensor analysis, which consisted of dropping sensors from high-speed aircraft and photographing the precise drop area with exact geographical annotation. In actual operations, these sensors became excited by movement, and sent exact location information back to ground stations so battle staff could exploit tactical situations as required. Cactus had gone to the CIA after the Test Squadron and risen to the top.

After enjoying cold boiled shrimps and small sandwiches, they sat in the living room looking out over the Gulf of Mexico, Basc gently rocking his antique rocking chair.

"At least the beach is still nice," Bennie said, looking at Basc. Getting no response, he turned toward his brooding old friend. Earlier, as the conversation had progressed from children—to education—to the environment, Bad Basc had grown progressively withdrawn and was now bordering on being uncommunicative. "What's with him, anyway? . . ." Bennie looked at Schatze.

"Don't mind him," Schatze advised. "Lately, Basc has done nothing but sulk. Now that he's retired, he has too much time to think about the state of the world. He wants to be a young man again and set things right."

Bennie said, "Don't we all? . . ."

The others acknowledged with knowing glances.

Bennie wondered how turned off Basc was. Bad Basc could be useful to the project. "So tell me," he said, looking directly into Basc's eyes. "What's on your mind, mate?"

"It's true, Bennie," Basc faced his friend squarely. "I just see so many things going wrong that could be easily set right." Basc took a deep

Chase-63-Virus Rodeo

breath and sighed. "A case in point: after the Test Squadron, I went to NASA where we invented and patented efficient electrical devices."

"Is that so? . . ." Bennie feigned nonchalance.

Basc continued, "Yet, instead of selling patents to individual American firms so they can invest without fear of Taiwan underpricing, NASA puts patents in the public domain to be fair. But it's too risky for U.S. firms to market the products, so Asian firms have taken the jobs away."

"So? . . ." Bennie said.

"That's just part of the problem with the way our government manages our economy. U.S. inventions end up being marketed by foreign firms and our firms get robbed of the temporary monopoly those patents could give them to recoup their initial investment risk."

"Don't consumers benefit with lower prices?" Bill asked.

"Possibly, until they lose their jobs," Basc replied, sitting up straighter. "NASA and other agencies could sell or license their patents to U.S. firms, enabling them to manage their risks and provide long term jobs to U.S. workers. This way we'd benefit from our own science. Government would recoup taxpayer investment and technology would go to our private sector, not to other countries whose governments subsidize their acquisition of our advanced technologies."

"It sounds logical; but why is this getting you so down?" Bill Darden asked.

"As an electrical engineer, I put a lot of work into negative resistance conductors and . . ."

"Go on," Bennie said, now very much interested.

"That and power factor controllers. These devices enable us to use

Chase-64-Virus Rodeo

far less electricity to do a particular job—maybe even a 50% reduction! If the U.S. could commercialize this technology, we'd reduce our dependence on oil and generate U.S. jobs, just like that!"

"You mean one can double efficiency, just like that!" Bennie was delighted and could hardly restrain himself.

"Yeah," Bad Basc nodded emphatically, reaching for his drink. "Absolutely!" Then his voice lost some of its enthusiasm. "But with patents in the public domain, it's too risky for U.S. firms to market these things. They'd be immediately undercut by government-subsidized Asian firms." Bad Basc was starting to get upset. "We cut our own throats! We need to have a government business partnership—like Asians and Europeans—so we can exploit our own strategic technologies. Shit, we invented the damn things, for Christ sakes!" He took a long swallow from his gin and tonic and directed his eyes out to sea.

"Government helps farmers," Bill said. "Why don't they get with this program?"

"I'm sure fossil fuel lobbies, oil in particular, pay off legislators to do nothing," Basc said matter-of-factly.

"Surely, it isn't that bad," Bill insisted.

"Get real, man. Look at Rostenkowsky. All have their hands in the till," Basc concluded.

Bennie sat back taking it all in, and said, "There's merit to industrial policy in some fields. Something like this in particular—clean electricity is our salvation."

"More drinks?" Schatze asked.

All held up their near empty glasses.

Chase-65-Virus Rodeo

"You think that's bad, listen to this." Basc had decided to spill it all. "We're backing the wrong horse on fusion, deuterium-tritium, a hydrogen based process instead of helium-3, a much cleaner process in terms of radiation and neutron emissions. Neutrons can weaken reactor walls and cause meltdowns. Helium-3 can be mined from surface gravel on the moon. A 25-ton space-shuttle load would supply us with one year's worth of our energy needs. We need to diversify our research." He shook his head in dismay. "Fusion is a major step towards unlimited clean energy—so we don't have any more shit like Kuwait oil fires and oil spills. We wouldn't need oil at all. Europe might break through before we do, and they have electric trains."

"Are you saying you're concerned about the planet's life-support system, Basc?" Bennie asked his friend.

"You bet!"

"I've got an idea, Basc." Bennie slid his gaze towards Mercedes indicating he was glad to hear it from Basc. "Let's play a role playing game to see what we would do about all this if we were at the helm."

"Oh boy," Mercedes thought. "This should be good!"

"Bennie," Bad Basc thrust forward. "I get so frustrated with this—sometimes I wish for drastic measures . . ."

"Like . . ." Bennie leaned forward.

"I know this sounds ridiculous, but well—I've seen movies, like The Dirty Dozen, where groups of people get together to accomplish tasks outside normal channels. I've got time to think about it now. I've even got an idea for an organization."

"That'll get us started in our game."

"Well I'd form a nucleus through personal contact among military and

Chase-66-Virus Rodeo

civilian retirees. Once in place, they'd cross over to the active duty friends—that way covert influence over ideas would be a meticulous inside job over a period of time. We'd influence key agencies—NASA, NIH, DOD, and so on."

"Are you sure this is just a game?" Maria DeChico asked, eyes anxious. "This sounds more like a CIA destabilizing operation."

Mercedes and Maria exchanged glances of apprehension.

"No sweat, Maria. Basc's ideas makes sense," Bennie said as he sipped his drink and tried to constrain his delight. "Personal friends would reduce odds of compromise and betrayal." He and Basc exchanged knowing glances.

"How would you go about it?" Bill Darden asked.

"There are lots of retiree clusters around. Like here, for example." Bad Basc perked up as he replied. "We have bridge clubs, golf foursomes, bowling leagues, and so on. Many of us retirees have maintained friendships with some active duty people we worked with prior to retirement."

"I see," Bennie said, looking at Bad Basc with keen interest. "Definitely a viable network of personal friends in key places. In fact it works out as an extension of our Annual Stoneybrook Steeplechase Reunion's 17 families, our little group of 34." Bennie took a hard drink. "I like it! I like it very much!"

Schatze raised her right hand thrusting a thumbs up gesture.

"Right on!" the normally shy Anne shouted.

"I've got something that'll interest you," Cactus Jack said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Schatze put a Rolling Stone tape on the stereo as Basc handed more drinks and snacks to his companions. Although at low volume, the music still pro-

Chase-67-Virus Rodeo

vided an energetic background to the game.

"We could infiltrate the military command structure using personal contacts between retirees and active duty officers and NCOs." Cactus Jack reinforced Bad Basc's concept. "Seriously, we could do the same with civilian agencies. The Pensioned Officers' Alliance, similar retiree organizations for NCOs and civil servants could be used and . . ."

"Aren't those primarily lobbies for retiree benefits—and social clubs for golf?" Maria asked skeptically. "Look at us," she continued, "who'd believe you once flew airplanes and were fit for combat? The Sun City Vigilantes—that's what we are now. The elder terrors. . ."

"I think Cactus spent too much time in the CIA," Bill said.

"Now wait just one cotton-picking minute," Schatze protested. "We're a bit slower, heavier around the middle—yeah—but we've got experience, specialized knowledge, talent, and maturity. We know how to get things done in the practical world and understand cost accounting."

"Give us the set up, CIA man?" Bennie asked, and looked at Cactus.

Cactus detailed the logic. "Cells could be set up in a network matrix. There are so many clusters of retirees like here, San Antonio, Pinehurst, and so on." He posited, "A golf foursome could become a cell and extend to actives."

"I like your basis for organization—really like it. Covert influence has its advantages, but I feel we'll need something more." Bennie looked at his friends with cold steel in his eyes. "All agencies have to be infiltrated—IRS, CIA, FBI, DOD, and so on. At the same time, we link up with police associations of urban areas like New York. Then we stage a Pearl Harbor-type shock to establish our moral authority to lead. We'll need

Chase-68-Virus Rodeo

control and the only way to have it is to overthrow the present system and come in with a new one."

"Hey, wait a minute," Bill exhorted. "I mean, you're talking treason, Bennie."

"Game or no game, let's talk this out," Bennie pressed.

The three couples, to a person, gasped and looked at Bennie with astonishment.

Basc recovered first and said, "All we need is to control something critical to our society--something vital."

"Like computers! . . ." Bennie blurted out purposely.

Stunned, the others said nothing for several beats.

"Through software--maybe--software viruses?" Bad Basc said.

"The Achilles Heel of our high-tech economy," Bennie said energetically. "That'd do it. That and the new governing system. . . ."

"Bennie, you and Basc are going too far," Bill said. "You'd seriously contemplate overthrowing our democracy just for electrical energy. . . ."

Mercedes and Bill exchanged glances and she lip-synched, "Oh yes!"

"Not just electrical energy," Bennie replied. "But definitely to maintain the life-support system of the planet. What good is democracy if we all become extinct? . . ."

"Are we at that stage? . . ." Anne asked.

"Could very well be," Bennie asserted. "In my personal opinion, we're there. But, let's just game for now. . . ."

"This puts a different light on things," Anne decided to throw her lot with Bennie.

"Let's go out on the porch," Schatze said, turning off the stereo, taking

Chase-69-Virus Rodeo

out its tapes, and opening the screen door. She placed a tape in the porch's stereo and adjusted its volume.

Bad Basc lined chairs to optimize the view of the Gulf of Mexico, brilliant in extraordinary hues as the sun descended toward the western horizon. Reflected sunlight danced on the ceiling of the porch as the eight settled back in comfortable beach and rocking chairs, iced drinks in hand. The splashing surf completed the idyllic ambience.

Maria's eyes expressed reservations. "Do we have to overthrow the government? There's no other way? . . ." Her large black eyes seared Bennie.

"We sure don't want to become a banana republic!" Bill added.

"I see no other way," Bennie said ruefully. "The clock is running on the life-support system. Implications are so obscure that normal governing procedures don't cut it. Democracies opt for short-term economic solutions over everything else unless threats are clear, like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor."

"He's right about that," Mercedes silently agreed.

"You're not taking this game too seriously, are you Bennie? . . ." Maria became uneasy.

Cactus spoke. "I suggest using my organizational concept as follows. Set up a personal contact network extending to all applicable retired communities. Do it slowly and methodically, to ensure absolute discipline, security, and compartmentalization. Then infiltrate active-duty corresponding structures and agencies by personal contact of retired personnel to actives. It'll take a few years to place the basic core but then we methodically go into the field. Our 17 families could be the principals heading major agenda sub-systems like carbon budgets, transport, covert operatives, finance, and

Chase-70-Virus Rodeo

so on."

"Hey," Bill said. "I know this is more than a game with you guys. What you're discussing is treason . . . treason."

"In a technical sense, yes," Bennie said, looking at Bill in a resolute manner. "But not in a cosmic sense, if we take over the government to save the life-support system and not for our own personal gain."

"How would you know? . . ."

"If we're ever to do this for real, we'd have to know and that's the dilemma," Bennie acknowledged. "Many start out with good intentions and become corrupt along the way. We sure wouldn't want to do that."

"You got that right, at least," Mercedes thought and then she said, "It has to be purely to save life with a clean new energy, not control people or lives."

"Do you realize what we could unleash downstream?" Maria spoke up again. "Right now we have a smooth, orderly way of changing personnel by voting and observing rules. Despite nasty political campaigns, losers gracefully accept verdicts and mostly cooperate in transitions. If we remove constitutional restraints, we may lose more than we gain. With all the ethnic and pressure groups we have, we could easily become a super Yugoslavia."

"The biggest loss," Bennie said heavily. "Would be if we, knowing better and having a viable alternative, allow life to become extinct on Earth for man's greed and ignorance. The bottom line is, I say, that to preserve life on Earth—THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS."

However they may have wanted to, none could disagree with that. Mercedes felt trapped.

"Is there any chance we could promote reforms by getting our own people

Chase-71-Virus Rodeo

elected and running a campaign to let the voters decide?" Schatze asked. "Maybe a third party?"

"Well," Bennie said. "Throughout history politicians have been corrupt. To raise campaign funds to get elected, they sell themselves to the highest bidder. It seems to be getting worse instead of better. Third parties would be subject to the same temptations."

"Let's pursue our authoritarian idea," Basc said. "After all, it's only a game. . . ."

"Are you sure? . . ." Maria asked, doubts flashing all over her face.

Then Cactus' eyes lit up with sudden inspiration. "I have a great idea for how to handle communications without tipping anyone off. We program a large model railroad layout and link the principals by computer to the layout for communications. Different model railroad activities can serve as codes to represent various coup activities. That way we can communicate in the open without arousing suspicions of hackers or government security agencies."

Bennie and Basc could not restrain their fascination at how carefully he had worked this out. "Fantastic, Cactus!" Bennie said.

"As moles infiltrate into specific activities," Cactus proudly continued. "We place applicable freight or passenger cars in designated yards and parking areas. When an activity is successfully completed, applicable loads are placed into these cars."

Bennie and the Basc looked at each other in awe.

Cactus continued. "Computer on-line files would be updated and hackers would think it was just a routine model railroad club exchanging routine dispatches by e-mail! Different towns would represent different regions

Chase-72-Virus Rodeo

or agendas—for instance, Sanford—San Francisco. Once retired policemen are infiltrated, a police car is parked next to the train station. If there's a problem, the car is placed upside-down as a simulated wreck. Once active police are infiltrated, that car is moved to the police station. All activities would be coded and represented by applicable model railroad activities on the layout which, in turn, would be updated into on-line computer files. Only the 17 families would have basic code sheets; other communications would be effected as required through individual meetings, mail, or other means. We could have a general review of the layout at each Stoneybrook reunion."

"I love it! I love it!" Bennie got up and slapped Cactus on the back.

"In most cases by using such a layout," Cactus said, "we can represent our activities by actual symbols, making it easy for everyone to relate and understand them, but not arouse suspicions from outsiders."

Schatze flipped over the tape. Anne nodded her head with the beat as did Bennie. Basc tapped his right foot.

"I think," Bennie declared, "we've reached a milestone. If we're going to overthrow the Constitution—even in a game—we must be sure that it's justified, ethical, and moral."

"It's about time you technical guys looked at morals," Bill said. "And who are we to even pretend we're better than anyone else to do this?"

"I heartily second that," Mercedes said.

"Yeah," Bad Basc agreed. "How do we know if we are or not? What unambiguous litmus test do we have? We must be sure. We must not be tree-hugger anti-business. We must preserve market mechanisms—actually create opportunities for business, agriculture, and medicine to create profits within constraints of natural harmony and sustainability. Conceptually, it sure looks

Chase-73-Virus Rodeo

like we could pull it off—but how do we remain objective? Is it even rational to think this way? . . ."

"Hey, look at that formation of pelicans! Wow!" Bennie stood up with intense interest and leaned over the railing to follow the flight. "Much better than we did in C-130s!"

"They've had a few more million years of practice," Bill pointed out.

Hearty laughs followed Bill's comment.

"You all ready for refills?" Schatze solicited empty glasses.

"I'll have another go, please," Bennie asked.

"That goes for me, too." Basc handed her his glass and reached over for Bennie's.

"I still think we need an honest third party," Schatze said, as she returned with filled glasses.

"Historically, third parties don't do well and besides—who's going to contribute funds for major pain and suffering?" Cactus asked trying not to ridicule Schatze personally.

"Let's take over in this game and see what happens," Bennie said to reinforce the argument. "We need a policy which integrates pollution control and economic wealth. People need to earn a living and need mechanical energy to create economic wealth; all we need is a new fuel, one that's clean. As we've seen in the past, oil is dirty and subjects us to blackmail. Japan and Europe, who hold our markets and have viable electrical public transport systems, could outbid us for remaining oil, holding our economy hostage. That and our huge budget deficits reduce options."

"Regardless of which party runs the government, the American Dream is vanishing in an orgy of inflation. Ours is the first generation whose statis-

Chase-74-Virus Rodeo

tical standard of living will be lower than that of our parents, our kids' will be lower than ours. People already feel this, the Northeim Syndrome is alive and well. Perceived economic distress among many blue-collar, lower white-collar types—these are all well-armed—increases the search for scape-goats as they feel their status is under siege. There's a strong undertow of Fascism here, like Germany in the early thirties. People want meaningful change. Next year's election could be the last chance for the system as presently constituted. Do you really think politicians will change?" Bennie asked, looking around at each of his companions.

"Well, I'll concede that you have a point," Maria said, her voice laden with regret.

"I'll concede that as well," Bill agreed.

Mercedes nodded assent.

Anne said. "We can't allow the world to be paved over. Economic expediency forecloses options by a normal government, even if it wanted to. The perceived desperate immediate need for jobs, and the speed and visibility of road building jobs, obscure the need to get going with a clean new fuel."

"Clean electricity will do it, some centralized and the rest of it local and autonomous, particularly for the Third World," Bennie continued. "But it'll take time beyond normal political attention spans. A clean new fuel and ending deforestation is all we're about. We won't micromanage people's lives."

"Wouldn't changeover be vehemently resisted by the general public and fossil fuel special interests, labor, and capital? . . ." Bill asked.

"Well," Bennie said. "Look at this place. If we accept the premise that the life-support system is in grave danger—then the message is clear,

Chase-75-Virus Rodeo

fossil fuels must go—we've no choice. Just the consumption of the developed world has already been destroying the life-support system. Think what'll happen if the Third World has the chance to consume as we do—it'll be curtains for sure. How can we tell them not to when we're having a fossil fuel orgy ourselves? No," he looked solemnly at his companions. "There's no way out, we have to take over."

Bill winced.

"Oh, God," Mercedes thought. "Don't tell me he's right. Damn. Is this the only alternative? Please, God? Help me. Please, dear God? Help me."

"Just like that? . . ." Maria said uneasily.

"Yes," Bennie said. "It's moral because democratic processes don't have the ability to maintain balance between ecological and economic needs; democracy, by its short-term operating nature, forces governments to prioritize economics over ecology—at all costs—giving in to special interests, and pollution continues to accumulate."

"How can I argue with that?" Mercedes said openly.

"God, Bennie, it's so frightening, such responsibility." Anne said, reflecting the feelings of everyone present.

"I think we can all agree on one thing," Basc said calmly. "Our project needs a 30-year minimum phase-over from fossil fuels to clean electric fuels and infrastructures. Coordinated super-conductors, fusion power plants, southwestern solar-thermal farms, home solar-photovoltaics, fuel cell autonomous electric generators, wind machine farms—all of these require an effort of magnitude comparable to World War II."

"Well," Bennie added. "Aren't we really at war to preserve life on our

Chase-76-Virus Rodeo

planet? Such a peacetime undertaking is completely alien to our current political modus operandi of deceiving the public to believe it can have current cost free benefits. Candidates who speak of sacrifice might garner 20% of the vote—significant, but obviously not enough to win."

"Maybe not to win, but a good working core to reinforce the latent Northheim Syndrome after the shock," Cactus said.

"Makes sense, doesn't it, guys?" Bennie faced his friends. "We've already got a great feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty resulting from the perceived threat to middle class status—the classic Northheim Syndrome."

"Even I have to admit that," Bill said. "From time to time there will be economic gains which tend to distract people, but social corrosion continues to accelerate. That's what gives people tight jaws!"

"Precisely," Cactus said. "This'll make people putty in our hands after a credible shock."

"I think we should stop this game," Maria said. "It's beginning to sound like you all mean it."

"How much more time before I must decide?" Mercedes asked herself. "He's getting through to the others, even Bill and Maria. Pretty soon, I won't be able to stop this thing, even if I want to. It could get violent. He could even kill me. No he won't. Come on, Mercedes. Don't exaggerate. Who would be with me if I went to the FBI?"

Bennie cast a glance Mercedes' way. He started wondering what she was brooding upon.

"Let's push the game to the end," Basc said. "Come on, Maria. We're only fantasizing."

"Yes," Anne drawled. "Twenty percent with serious commitment to sacri-

Chase-77-Virus Rodeo

face gives us a very good working margin. Y'all, if the shock works as Pearl Harbor did, and we have a good act, that'll give us enough of a base to push us over the top with the general population."

"Our program has to be absolutely clear-cut," Schatze said. "The people will only go along if dissenters can't shoot us down with real substance. And we'll have to have a reliable safety net. We don't need bad publicity or TV tearjerking images. Sure, there'll be some bullshit dissent, but we can counter with substance if we've done our homework properly and the truth ends up really being: we're the only alternative to the death of the Earth."

"Schatze," Bennie said. "I swear to you, all of you in fact, we'll go only if the alternative is death of the Earth, period!"

"I can live with that," Mercedes thought, relieved. "Thank God Bennie is at least reasonable."

"That has to be our go/no-go litmus test," Bennie stressed. "We go only if we have an 85% probability the alternative is a dead planet." Bennie glanced around his circle of friends looking for their assent. "There can never be absolute certainty. They tried that with CFCs and may have waited too long, even though the evidence was substantial by the mid-seventies. They waited till the late eighties to start the phase out and ozone quantities are running below the most pessimistic computer projections. We can't fall in the same trap. Then it's agreed we press forward, and April's Stoneybrook will begin to pinpoint parameters of our game. What shall we call it?"

"Well, since we use software viruses to seize control," Basc said. "Why not Operation Virus Rodeo. Agreed? . . ."

All stood up and raised their glasses. "Agreed!"

"We'll proceed as if on go," Bennie concluded. "And hold onto the abort

Chase-78-Virus Rodeo

option as close to the end as possible. The primary phase has to focus on research and modeling teams which come up with justifications, phase-over schedules, and random events' contingency strategies. Once we go on-line, we can inform and guide the world."

"I'm going to draw up a plan," Bill offered, "and network to infiltrate the State Department's global bureaucracy."

"Wow, Bill," Basc said as he looked at Bill with surprise. "Why the sudden shift?"

"As long as it's a game, I see no harm in research. We might even learn something useful. If it won't be used by the sitting government, then Bennie might be correct in saying there's no other way than a coup." Bill's eyes showed his discomfort at the discovery of this truth.

Cactus Jack became enthusiastic. "I think we'll be ready to go in the late nineties with reliability . . . let's say 1997--by then we'll either be committed or have aborted. That gives us the '96 presidential election to see if a new administration comes up with a strategic plan to phase out fossil fuels."

"My guess is they won't--not without the kind of ecological Pearl Harbor you talked about," Basc said. "That's an apt comparison, by the way."

"There's no justification for them to act," Bennie said. "That's why we have to stage the surrogate ecological Pearl Harbor and take power."

Cactus rose and went to the bar to pour himself another.

A balmy breeze wafted off the Gulf. The sun was so low the Gulf looked consumed by fire. Bright orange and red streaks reflected on the porch's ceiling.

Alarmed by their plunge into the whirlpool of their game, they paused

Chase-79-Virus Rodeo

and looked at each other, some wondering whether it was really a game.

To Bill and Maria, in particular, the descent from a game to a possible actual coup was very disturbing, reinforced by how quickly Cactus had come up with very sophisticated concepts. Mercedes looked at them, ratifying their apprehension.

Basc rocked on his porch rocking chair. Anne climbed into a macramé hammock. On his way back to his seat, Cactus gave Anne a gentle nudge for her to rock lazily in the breeze.

Schatze said uneasily, "It's scary, isn't it? . . ."

"We have little margin for error," Basc agreed.

Anne said. "We have to control the media. . . ."

Schatze and Bennie looked at each other and smiled.

Schatze added, "Facts seem pretty clear. There are lots of people who claim there's no proven cause-and-effect relationship between global warming and fossil fuels, CFCs and the ozone layer, ad infinitum. And they're right, it's not proven. Unfortunately, the only way to prove it is to wait until it actually happens. Prior to the fact, we can only deduce from correlations. They're there. Fair minded people can't ignore devastating pollution in Eastern Europe as well as our experiences with surface ozone, acid fog and rain. The high-altitude ozone layer has been disappearing, and I read recently that in experiments at NC State, they've proven increased surface ozone destroys plants and can make people more vulnerable to viruses."

"Exactly," Bennie said. "We're measuring increased levels of carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere—nothing can be ignored. Large portions, comprising of diverse species, of the higher altitude forests along the Blue Ridge are devastated, and I don't mean a

Chase-80-Virus Rodeo

few trees here and there—we're talking about over 70 percent. Czechoslovakia, Germany, Scandinavia show similar effects. Average visibilities have declined by 80% in the last 40 years as well. We don't have much time, so unless the government begins to implement a changeover from fossil fuels to clean electricity now, which seems unlikely, we'll have to overthrow it as soon as possible—hopefully with minimum violence."

Schatze looked towards Bill and Maria. Mercedes remained quiet.

Basc's face lit up with sudden recall. "Hey, Bennie! Remember Red Bielski in that test we did involving microwave relaying of laser and infrared imagery from RF-4C sensor aircraft to an orbiting relay aircraft to a ground station. Red was the project engineer from the corporation that had innovated the microwave relay technology."

"Yeah, Red was a real conscientious, sharp guy. Some of us still see him on occasion."

"Well, Red has been working toward being Chief of the Microwave Engineering Division," Basc continued. "Why don't we match him up with Harlo Sheppard on the software virus; it'll be Harlo's Virus."

Bad Basc's organizational skills complemented his technical ones. "Software viruses can be infiltrated covertly and remain dormant for years, hidden in multitudes of lines of instruction which make up typical computer programs. We can call them up at will."

"Can they really do this, Basc? . . ." Anne was impressed.

Maria was frightened. She felt they were going too far. "Look guys, you all seem to be getting carried away. What makes you think we're any better than others who've taken over governments. I don't like this game."

"Look, Maria. We're only playing now," Bennie said. "But what if?"

Chase-81-Virus Rodeo

What if we could actually do some good? We've got the talent. Our 34 may have the connections. Cactus' organization is sure a dynamite way to go. None of us have had our hands in the till, not even questionable loans."

"As far as we know . . ." Bill said.

"Let Basc tell us more about software," Anne insisted.

"We can pretty well take over the entire computer network with a few well placed viruses. Although the fact that we've gone from mainframes to individual PCs for many jobs complicates the problem." Then Basc added, "Information highways, which link PCs, will enable us to simplify dissemination of our viruses and achieve reliability. That's a project that will keep us engineers off the streets!" He chuckled and the others joined in.

"What you guys are saying is we can really pull off Virus Rodeo—we'll really be able to do it? . . ." Anne's enthusiasm was growing.

Seeing Anne embrace the idea gnawed on Mercedes. She got up and poured herself a double rum and Coke, and returned and sat down quietly.

"We can embed viruses into programs of all major computers, networks, and relevant PCs, on a global scale including those of the National Command Authority," Bad Basc continued. "We'll be able to pull-the-plug, taking the nation by complete surprise. We can paralyze power plants, traffic lights, local water supplies, telephone networks—whatever. With disinformation viruses, we can insert fiction which serves our purposes into intelligence files and/or media releases. We can go much further than the FBI legally can to infiltrate potential enemies, like right-wing militias—for example, and compile sophisticated dossiers on all members of the NRA."

"Boy, Basc," Bennie looked at him with respect. "Looks like you've hit the jackpot with this idea."

Chase-82-Virus Rodeo

"You're correct, Bennie," Basc agreed. "We can also control the thousands of nuclear warheads. They have electronic permissive action links—electronic locks which have to be opened before the weapons can be used—which allows us to insert software viruses to control them. There's no margin for error here—any unknown factor could cause a miscalculation or misunderstanding with former Soviet republics. They're awfully nervous after disintegration of Soviet control and attempts to convert to market economies. All we need to lock us in, are moles at the NSA."

"The National Security Agency, I'm sure Harlo's got those," Bennie said.

Mercedes became outwardly nervous. She got up and poured herself another drink.

Bad Basc's logic impressed his fellows. "While not in use, viruses remain harmlessly inert and invisible. Since our country is becoming more dependent and enmeshed into computers, it'll be rather easy to control the entire country by manipulating them and their networks. Just gridlocking selected telephone systems could wreak havoc on a massive scale."

"Basc, you must be a genius." Bennie said. "You need to get with Harlo. We might even be able to control ex-Soviet, Chinese, French, and Brit nukes with our software viruses. . . ."

"Awesome!" Anne boomed. The others smiled at her outburst, but Maria, Mercedes, and Bill didn't share her excitement.

"I think Red could also coordinate industry sympathizers—perhaps through personal contacts in trade associations—so the industrial component of the old mythical Military-Industrial-Complex can really be put to work developing new technologies for our new clean electric economy." Bad Basc looked pleased, then he paused and brushed his thinning hair back with his hand.

Chase-83-Virus Rodeo

Virus Rodeo was evolving into a real possibility. Feeling he was on a roll, he proposed, "This can be accomplished through a coordinating body similar to the Pentagon's DARPA—you know the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. DARPA has had an enviable track record as being one of the few government agencies which generates, rather than absorbs wealth."

Maria looked intently at Basc. She began to understand that it was already beyond a game.

Bill shrugged his shoulders in resignation.

Mercedes understood how he could feel so helpless. That's exactly how she felt.

Basc's piercing eyes swept his associates. He went to the kitchen where he filled another bucket with ice cubes from the freezer. The beautiful sunset had passed and darkness enveloped the ocean. The moon was rising in the east. Basc turned on colored lights which shone through wicker shades on the porch.

Wiping his hands with his T-shirt, he sat down. "The end of the Cold War has made lots of defense engineers and facilities redundant. Red can restructure them to develop sinews of a new electric age to enhance the United States' international competitive position."

"That's a great idea, Basc. Don't you all agree? . . ." Bennie looked at his friends.

"I really like this proposal," Cactus Jack agreed.

"Right on, Basc!" Schatze got up and gave him a high five.

"We're really rolling," Anne was delighted.

Bill, Maria, and Mercedes remained silent.

"I've had enough of this coup plotting," Maria said. "Let's go out

Chase-84-Virus Rodeo

and walk along the beach."

"Y'all just look at that moon, will you?" Anne joined in.

"Looks like it's going to be full in a few days," Maria said as she leaned off the porch to look at the near disk shining on the water.

"Let's have breakfast at La Croisette," Schatze proposed, "It's just south of here in Saint Petersburg Beach. The owners are really a trip, and the food is delicious." She took off her sandals, threw them on the porch, and ran toward the sea.

The rest of the party followed Schatze. They spent the evening just walking aimlessly about, pausing to sit and listen to the thundering surf. They came to a sand dune which obscured them from the built up area.

Anne asked, "Are y'all thinking what I'm thinking?" She eyed her comrades mischievously. "Let's go skinny dipping!" Before they could answer, she quickly pulled off her T-shirt, wiggled out of her shorts, and threw them high in the air toward the beach. Her alabaster body gleamed in the moonlight as she ran toward the ocean. After a moment of hesitation and mild embarrassment, the others followed suit like a bunch of kids, running and splashing into the surf.

* * * * *

The 8th Fairway, Pinehurst

Revanne lay on her golf cart awaiting him, wearing only a white body-suit, with a low scooped neckline, and button-loop closures. She left the closures unfastened. She suddenly felt him appear.

Chase-85-Virus Rodeo

"I was wondering if you lost your nerve. What's your name, anyway?" she asked.

"Ken," he blurted out spontaneously.

"I like it when you surprise me—that really wets my pants. Now go. Let me be and surprise me."

Ken went back into the bush. He looked at her with his binoculars and worked himself up to a frenzy. He really enjoyed this game with Revanne. He couldn't believe his good fortune at having found such a playmate. Never, in his wildest fantasies did he dare expect such pleasure.

Knowing he was somewhere in the bush gave Revanne a rush. She was beginning to enjoy this game immensely. She was really going to lay it on for Ken today. Reaching into her bodysuit, she caressed her breasts one at a time. On occasion, she would pull the flap aside first exposing one breast, then the other, and gently pulled on her nipples, causing them to harden. She was genuinely excited and felt a need for more. She parted her legs, and fondled inside her bodysuit, repeating with more intensity each time. She forgot herself and went at it with complete abandon.

At this time, Ken pounced on her from behind and ran his hands inside her bodysuit over her breasts. He roughly pulled its flaps aside, pulling the top of the suit down her arms, exposing her breasts and loosely binding her arms behind her at the elbows.

Oh how Revanne enjoyed this, having orgasm as he vigorously fondled her while caressing her breasts. Working her arms loose and forgetting who he was, she thrust his head violently between her powerful thighs—he took advantage—which drove her insane with rapture and she nearly passed out.

"Ken, I'm going to let you have me," Revanne promised. "But, it has

Chase-86-Virus Rodeo

to be at the Holland Drop Zone. Next time, we meet there. My lover and I will do a love dance. Once he's into me, you attack us like a predator, push him aside, he'll pretend he's knocked out, and then you can fuck me all you want. And again and again."

"I want to fuck you now." A twisted look crossed his face.

She pressed the concealed summon button for the page.

Fester teed off the 8th tee, purposely slicing his ball 100 yards into the tree line where he thought they were.

Revanne's heart pumped hard, her mouth was parched.

"I've gone too far," she thought, petrified.

Ken lunged at Revanne and ripped off her bodysuit.

"I can't stand it any more. I have to fuck now."

Revanne felt him about to penetrate. She heard Fester stomping around in the bushes. Her heart pumped beyond maximum. She panted like a 100-meter sprint athlete who has just set a new world's record.

Ken froze in terror, got off Revanne, and pulled up his trousers. An agonized look crossed his face as in his haste, he pinched his erected penis with the fly's zipper.

Revanne relished that, and knowing she was saved, didn't scream.

She looked at Ken and said softly. "I promise you, at the Holland Drop Zone like I said. Now go."

Ken went off and walked right into Fester.

"Excuse me, sir," Ken said, and limped off.

Fester had to use all the self-control he could muster to continue look-

Chase-87-Virus Rodeo

ing for his golf ball, and pretend he didn't know what was going on. He surreptitiously used his mini-videocam to photograph Ken, although he would never forget that face. He followed Ken for as long as he dared.

In the meantime, Bennie's page had malfunctioned. He never got the cue. So after some anxious moments, he decided to find Revanne. He found her, totally nude with a big smirk on her face.

"Oh Bennie . . . Was this a close one! I'm all pumped up. Take me now . . . Oh yeah . . . Oh Yeah! . . ."

She felt him deep inside and sensed they were melting into each other. The whole world seemed to stop. Revanne felt wave after wave of intense fire submerge her into near unconsciousness, as he varied his thrusts. She didn't want to stop, ever.

"I think you're enjoying this too much, Revanne. . . ."

"This is the end baby. He lost control today. Almost took me. I creamed so many times--out of terror and delight. It was awesome! Fester saved my ass. What perfect timing. Ken's coming to the Holland DZ."

"Ken?"

"That's his name. We talked some today. He's just a rejected nerd. This is a secret fantasy he's realizing. He's told nobody and has no other motive than kinky sex."

"Revanne, you're the kinky one. I'm enjoying myself a lot too, but we'd better blow this guy away before we go too far. He may have a firearm. He could really hurt you."

"Let's not blow him away yet. I've discovered this slut streak I never

Chase-88-Virus Rodeo

knew I had. I don't want to stop, Bennie. I'm really enjoying this. I must be a nympho."

"Me too. Every time I see you, Revanne, I want you. Even in long dresses—you're a sex machine. A class act."

He reached for her and pulled her violently to him. He caught her mouth, she felt her back arched back by the pressure of his mouth against hers, driven by remorseless desire. Revanne urgently responded, varying the intensity as she darted her tongue around in his mouth, groaning with pleasure. She hung onto his shoulders, her legs wrapping around him as the pressure mounted.

She tore her mouth away forcefully and pleaded, panting like an animal seized by desperation, "Bennie, ball me rough, till it hurts." Her pelvic thrusts became exigent and delirious.

"Hard, Bennie. Oh please . . . hard . . ." Breathing deeply and rapidly, she started to hyperventilate. Her nails clawed deeply up and down his back drawing blood—lots of blood. Revanne lost herself completely in unadulterated lust.

He, inspired into remarkable new levels of sexual endurance, further reinforced her craving to the edge of reason.

Eventually spent, they looked at each other in disbelief at their mutual ferocity, acknowledging a higher level never before attained by either, and most probably never to be realized again.

"You know we have to stop. I don't want to leave Mercedes."

"I know. I don't want to leave Fester either. It wouldn't be the same if we left our spouses. It wouldn't be illicit. . . ."

3

Halloween, Early Nineties

"Hi, Mrs. Dracula." Revanne said, squeezing Mercedes' shoulder as she climbed into the rear seat of Bennie's car. She was followed by Fester, who despite his girth and some water jugs he had brought along, sat down gracefully.

Mercedes leaned over the back of her seat, and greeted them without exhibiting hostility.

Bennie started the car, turned on the lights, and got the windshield wipers going before backing onto the street. "Off we go, Ghouls!"

"Damn these fangs," Mercedes said. "I'm taking them out until we get to the Cataniesh."

"The Catanis always have a good spread," said Fester, smacking his lips with eager anticipation.

"It should be fun," Bennie said, as they threaded their way in the fog

Chase-90-Virus Rodeo

through Pinehurst, toward Highway 15-501 for Durham.

"How did the Florida game go, Bennie?" Revanne asked.

"Other than Bill and Maria, they were eager to play."

"Albalisa's got a great idea for it."

"Oh, yeah?" Bennie frowned as he squinted through the fogged windshield, then reached down to turn on the defroster.

Mercedes looked again toward the back seat at Fester.

"I like your square-head prosthesis," Mercedes said. "Green face cream, neck bolts, and all—awesome!"

Fester looked at the Alzas. "You all really look like the Draculas!"

"Thanks Frankenstein," Mercedes said, pointedly ignoring Revanne.

"It's kind of cold in here," Revanne said sweetly. "Can you turn the heat up a bit, Hon?"

Bennie understood and nudged Mercedes discreetly and whispered. "Come on, Sweetheart. Take it out on me, not her."

Mercedes looked at Bennie, shrugged her shoulders, and pouted.

Bennie decided on some positive reinforcement.

"Wow, Revanne! You look like those trolls we used to win at the fair—I like your masquerade!" Bennie said sincerely.

She tapped his shoulder gently and gave a squeeze.

"Boy, that fuschia hair is lurid! How did you get to do that?" Fester took up the refrain.

Revanne patted her troll hair. "You like? The color is supposed to wash out but I used so much hair spray. I think I may have laminated it on." Revanne noticed surprise by the Alzas. "Oh, the hair spray, it's a green product, or so they say.

Chase-91-Virus Rodeo

"I hope that's for real," Bennie said. "There's so much BS around, I've become cynical."

"You? Really!" Revanne laughed and tapped Bennie's head.

Mercedes looked at Revanne with distaste, thinking, "That slut."

"Do you still feel good about the game?" Bennie asked.

"Yes," Revanne was first to answer. "The public has to know, without doubt, we're not in this for personal gain."

"We'll need a sustained shock," Fester said. He reached to smooth his hair before he remembered the Frankenstein head. Without missing a beat, he elaborated. "Our objective's to induce people to be receptive to the change. Fear can do wonders. Look at AIDS, many are still scared of it."

"You say we need something like AIDS?" Mercedes turned around to look at Fester, anxiety crossing her eyes.

"We have to orchestrate a realization the life-support system is in mortal danger and present methods aren't coping."

"The Catanis said they've got that covered and . . . shit! That bastard almost hit us!" Bennie exclaimed. He had swerved to avoid an oncoming car, which had crossed the center line.

Mercedes instinctively looked at her watch. "Kind of early for drunks!"

Bennie stared through the windshield, wary of more near misses in the increasing fog.

"A train would have been nice, tonight," Mercedes said.

"Good thing Mario's keeping us," Bennie said. "I'd hate to drive back 70 miles after our party."

"That's one reason we'll need a shock," Fester said. "People won't give up cars voluntarily. Some have no choice, but many want them because

Chase-92-Virus Rodeo

they portray sex, power, style, prestige—all reinforced by advertising. Marketing's the biggest PSYOPS going. People look at cars and see comfort, reliability, convenience, and security—despite traffic gridlock and carjacking. Ironic, isn't it?" He adjusted Revanne's collar and she smiled when he lightly squeezed her shoulder.

"Think of fuel wasted at red lights waiting," Revanne agreed. "What a waste!"

"My brother pays \$28-a-month for an unlimited pass on San Francisco's public transport," Bennie added. "He goes anywhere he wants. In Boston, people pay \$178 a month just to park."

"My sister, in DC, has never owned a car in her life—just stocks and bonds!" Fester shook his head with disdain.

Bennie turned the heat down as the car was getting stuffy.

"People are in more danger in cars than in public transport," Fester said. "That threat isn't readily seen like ominous loungers or panhandlers in bus terminals, and rare gunmen in commuter trains. People think threats aren't in cars—hence the preference for their perceived security. It's all an illusion, but a treasured personal space—in some ways, like dogs in cars." Fester shook his head and placed his hand on Revanne's thigh. She grinned at him.

Straining to see through the misty fog, Bennie could just make out the lights of Carthage.

"We've been brainwashed to invest our personalities in the damn things and it works! The automobile lifestyle's the biggest con ever." Revanne paused a moment, listening. "Ha! Listen to the radio—Til Her Daddy Takes Her T-Bird Away—talk about timing! Look at middle-aged guys in hairpieces

Chase-93-Virus Rodeo

zipping around in sports cars feeling virile and important. We need Madison Avenue to make electric vehicles and public transport sexy."

"That won't be easy," Mercedes said. "Public transport exposes us to society's ills, something we'd rather ignore. That makes people uncomfortable at close quarters. I've seen guys grabbing their crotches in bus terminals. It's scary. We see bums, rambunctious teenagers, but forget how we were when we were fifteen!" She patted Bennie on the thigh. "Private cars lead us to pretend no such problems exist."

"Well, bums and such could be policed," Fester said. "You sure see contradictions of poverty in bus terminals, panhandling bums chain-smoking, and wearing \$175 sneakers. People have no idea of main causes of poverty in modern countries--lack of self-control. It's not politically correct to acknowledge this, and cars insulate us."

"Come, Fester, aren't sneakers worn by drug dealers? I'm sure there's more to poverty than lack of self-control," Revanne said.

"I'm serious. I was in Worcester recently. Bums, not drug dealers, were hanging out at the terminal--and when were you last in a bus, dear?" Fester turned to face his wife.

"Well, I haven't for a long time. Probably back in New York as a teenager. Trains and buses reeked of urine in the summer. Yes, I'm one of those hiding in my car. Poor people are entitled to dignity and civil rights, but so are taxpayers. There has to be policing. Public transport has to offer an attractive alternative or people aren't going to use it. I remember my New York days, the stench in hot weather, loonies getting into my face, and lawsuits for crooks falling off subway platforms while running away from cops."

Chase-94-Virus Rodeo

After a moment, Fester said, "There has to be gun controls to reduce odds of incidents like that guy killing a bunch of people on the Long Island Railroad last December."

"Gun controls aren't necessarily confiscation," Bennie said. "Only reduces odds of loonies getting weapons. It works in all modern societies."

"Tell the NRA!" Fester laughed.

Revanne and Mercedes nodded agreement.

Revanne pointed her finger at the radio. "How about some blues?" She reached into her purse. "Here, try this Muddy Waters tape. I almost forgot I brought it."

Mercedes inserted the tape. "Ummm, that's a good one—I'm a Man. Isn't that what they play when Al Bundy asserts himself?"

"You guys watch the Bundys?" Revanne snickered. "So do I."

"Al is my role model." Bennie said.

"They're so awful, but fun—like Monty Python's horrible family. I really love them," Mercedes admitted.

"That's what we're faced with," Revanne said. "Getting people like the Bundys—and Rush Limbaugh's audience—to give up their cars!"

"Good luck on the puritanical ones," Fester rejoined. "And, what's Pumpkin going to do without back seats of cars?"

"Oh, Honey, be serious."

"Hey, look!" Bennie said, as he slowed for the Pittsboro traffic circle. After looking in all directions, he started out slowly.

"Sorry to interrupt, but look at the nice vampires in that store display over there. See them hanging against the castle background with lights emphasizing blood dripping from their teeth."

Chase-95-Virus Rodeo

"Where?" Revanne stretched her neck to see.

"Over there. Just to the right of the traffic light, see."

"Oh yeah. Neat—look, dear." Revanne nudged Fester. "Complete with agonizing maidens and all."

Bennie slowed to avoid a small beagle trotting along the roadside as though it had an errand to complete.

"Watch out for that deer, Bennie!" Mercedes cried suddenly and pointed ahead to the right.

"Where? Ah, I've got him, thanks!"

"Look, guys—" Fester pulled a bottle of industrial carbon granules out of his pocket and shook a few out. He reached for a jug and filled a cup with water.

"Hey! Neat," Mercedes said. "What other Halloween tricks do you do, Frankenstein?"

"I was hoping you'd ask. I've got a trick for you guys!"

He plopped the granules in the cup and they started to bubble. "Porous carbon's molecular structure makes it possible to store hydrogen cheaply and practically. Look . . ."

"You're missing all the fun, Bennie!" said Revanne, as she gave Bennie a gentle squeeze on his shoulder.

Mercedes spotted it, but decided to ignore it for now.

"But Fester, what's it for?" asked Mercedes.

"This," he said, "is how we can fuel electric cars. Here's how it works. Cool hydrogen can be pumped into roof tanks filled with specially treated carbons to last 300 miles. A guy named Dr. James Schwarz—I read about this in the Wall Street Journal--is director of Syracuse University's Laboratory

Chase-96-Virus Rodeo

for Advanced Storage Systems for Hydrogen. They use smectite clay from Wyoming, which, at molecular level, is layered sort of like an Oreo cookie. They use chemicals to knock out sodium ions and replace them with tall aluminum ions."

Mercedes held up the cup for Bennie to see while he was stopped at a red light. "Awesome!" he said, thrusting his fist in a victory gesture.

"Then what?" Mercedes asked. "Don't drink this stuff; it's the one with the cap on it!" She placed it in a holder.

"That's where hydrogen will be stored to be used as fuel."

Fester put other granules back in the bottle and said, "After years of experimenting to make carbon more homogenous through molecular engineering, they've been able to store more hydrogen in porous carbon mixed with clay to be treated with an organic polymer and baked. Hydrogen powers a fuel cell which drives electric motors and presto—you have a nonpolluting electric car. The Germans and Japanese are already experimenting with these devices. I hope Detroit gets off its ass!"

"We'll get this technology going along with high-speed trains." Bennie showed his pleasure by giving Mercedes an enthusiastic nudge, as he stopped for another red light. "I hope you'll repeat the trick at Mario's," he said, as he eased right towards Durham.

Mercedes changed the cassette from Muddy Waters to Little Richard playing fifties' favorites like Lucille. She leaned over toward Bennie, and when a passing car's lights caught her make up, she really looked like an ancient vampire.

"OK," Revanne said, as she arranged notes she had prepared. "If it's show and tell time, I'll tell you about my plan. It has several main goals:

Chase-97-Virus Rodeo

"One, global zoning of our habitat.

"Two, development of clean electricity.

"Three, phasing out fossil fuels by 2025.

"Four, achieving balance ASAP so free market incentives work as they did for the most part in the fossil fuel state."

She adjusted her costume, pausing briefly to allow the main points to sink in. Revanne scanned her notes and began giving some details.

"Global zoning requires we order priorities so other species can live and pursue their survival as we do. Preserving other species ensures we maintain overall balance essential for our own survival. Without them, we die. If ultra-violet B from CFCs destroys the ability of plants to reproduce, we'll be in deep doo doo. Why destroy ourselves just for old car air conditioners corroding?"

"Biodiversity is absolutely necessary to ensure a balance of forces and gene pools. We can't be complacent. We'll start in our country by limiting development to areas already spoiled. No more virgin wilderness will be cut while we still have vast areas going to waste--like our central urban areas. People will bitch about property rights, but our new government, together with private groups, like the Nature Conservancy, can buy back the land."

"That's absolutely essential, Revanne," Bennie said. "People can't be denied their property rights--within reason--that is."

She paused to clear her throat. "We'll remove subsidies from agriculture, allowing inefficient units to fail. Growing rice in an arid area like Sacramento is misuse of scarce water resources, and can't sustain itself without current subsidies. Resulting surplus land will return to nature.

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Then in places like Brazil, we can speak with moral authority about slash-and-burn farming methods in rain forests. We'll have to blackmail Europeans and Japanese to stop subsidizing their farmers—but as we're still the biggest market economy—we have the clout to succeed!"

"In urban areas," she continued, "it just doesn't make sense to bulldoze outward while central cores decay. Look at Bridgeport, the South Bronx, and others. These all have lots of formerly viable developed land being wasted. Now they're drug hell-holes--absorbing taxes rather than paying—full of huge pockets of disenfranchised, unemployed, and despairing populations." She sat back and dropped her hands in her lap.

"Yes. Economic processes have to be shaped to comply with the workings of nature. I just haven't yet thought out details." Bennie said.

Revanne flipped to the next page of her notes. "How about this? To replace fossil fuels, intensify research and development of clean electricity sources. Do this by funding projects on the magnitude of the Manhattan and Apollo lunar landing projects. Develop superconductors for efficient storage, and conduits to make the following practical and economic:

"One, self-sufficient home solar energy through autonomous photovoltaic cells.

"Two, solar thermal, geothermal, and wind power central energy sources to supplement private homes, as required, and to support commercial and urban concentrations of moderate size. Use superconductor pipelines to feed urban hubs.

"Three, rely on central energy generated by helium fusion for large urban areas, industrial processes, and high-speed electric trains like Europeans already have and are expanding.

Chase-99-Virus Rodeo

"And four, fossil fuels remain for military, construction, emergency, farm, buses, and other vehicles which require autonomy, power, and flexibility. Also, of course, for aircraft, space vehicles, and ships."

"You've been busy!" Bennie said.

"I've got good people helping me. At Stoneybrook, we'll give a detailed briefing."

"If we do this, it must be done methodically for pain and suffering to be minimal and survivable," Fester said.

"True," Revanne replied. "But we can't delay until the real environmental Pearl Harbor. The trauma would be catastrophic. After all, we haven't made nature's rules—we just work here!"

They all laughed and Fester gave Revanne an enthusiastic nudge.

"It's just a matter of phasing out fossil fuels," Revanne added. "We do it gradually as new infrastructures rise and integrate themselves into the economy, like when automobiles replaced horse and buggies in the old days. We tax fossil fuel transport out of the mass market. We don't really want subsidies. We'll see after running our computer simulations."

"Boy, Revanne, you take no prisoners!" Bennie teased. "How will people enjoy nature if you take away their recreational vehicles?"

"You started all this, Bennie!" Mercedes said, pretending to threaten him.

"People will enjoy nature by continuing to be alive," Revanne said.

"I'm not being evasive—just hear me out." The others were shaking their heads.

"Most of you are familiar with Switzerland's transport system, right? The Blue Ridge Parkway will be replaced by a Glacier Express, Jungfrau joch,

Chase-100-Virus Rodeo

or MOB-type electric trains. These have intermediate stops with hiking trails and other amenities. Our scenic areas would be reached in this manner instead of bumper-to-bumper in fume-belching cars. It's cheaper to stay at nice chalets occasionally than have \$75,000 RVs sitting in driveways rusting most of the time—right, Bennie?"

"Yep. Our society can't afford to be complacent and err the same way it's been," Bennie summed up as they turned onto the Catanis' street. "It could very well mean extermination of all life."

"Watch out for those kids!" Mercedes pointed out three little goblins scurrying about trick or treating.

"I got 'em, thanks. On the other hand, if we err on our side, we'll have a clean world, a new technology, and make America a long term world leader. In context, it means a relatively small change in life style for payment."

"Sounds good, Bennie. Look at their costumes! Living death skeletons—perfect for a couple of molecular biologists!" Fester chuckled at the Catanis, who had come out on their front door stoop to welcome their guests.

Bennie pulled into the Catanis' driveway.

"Boy, are you scary!" Albalisa Catani exclaimed as the four began to climb out of the car. Turning to her husband, she asked, "Do you think we should let these ghouls in, Mario?"

"Shit!" Bennie exclaimed as he slammed the car door. "Ripped my damn costume!" He said through the window to Mercedes, who was putting her fangs back in her mouth. He had caught his Dracula cape in the door.

Mercedes leaned over to Bennie's window. She lisped through her artificial fangs, "Ashk Albalisa for shafety pins and we'll fix it."

Chase-101-Virus Rodeo

Turning to face Albalisa, Bennie asked, "Do you have any safety pins? I ripped my cape in the damn door."

"Sure, Hon."

After hugging the others, she took safety pins off the man-shirt top of her costume. It parted enough to give Bennie a good look inside.

Their eyes met—sparks flew. She hugged Bennie and handed him the pins. Twisting a lock of her long, jet-black hair around her finger, she added, "Hold these and I'll fix you here in the light."

"Come on in, guys." Mario held the door open.

"Trick or treat?" Mercedes sang out.

"Yeah, oooooh!" Revanne scowled as her blue eyes sparkled.

Bennie and Albalisa lingered outside as the others went in.

As she took each pin out his hand, she gave a soft squeeze. She looked at him and curled her tongue salaciously to moisten her lips. She righted the tear, erotically running her hands over Bennie. He studied the sensual Italian, feasting on the ripe swells swaying freely inside her shirt. Her erected nipples conveyed she was aroused like he was.

"There, good as new." She took a deep breath. "You like?"

"Very much." Bennie raised one hand. Albalisa took it and placed it inside her shirt. His fingers roamed gently.

She winked, ran her hand below his waist, paused, gave a gentle grasp, and motioned Bennie toward the front door.

Mario had served in Vietnam with Bennie, as the squadron's flight surgeon in the mid-sixties. Upon returning home, he'd started a private practice which led to his and Albalisa's laboratory, the Sandhills Research Foundation

Chase-102-Virus Rodeo

in Raleigh's Research Triangle Park. The Catanis were currently involved with the Human Genome Initiative, a project to construct maps of all genes in human chromosomes—in other words, DNA codes for all characteristics of the human species. Their lab had been chosen by NIH (National Institute of Health) to develop technology for computer-scanning tens of millions of DNA characters a second in order to decipher the 12 million genetic bases which account for individual variations between humans.

Under NIH auspices, the controversial Human Genome Initiative project had started on 1 October 1990; Mario and Albalisa had been among the 800 biologists who had jammed the hotel ballroom in San Diego in the fall of 1989's Human Genome I preliminary project briefing. Together with Department of Energy genome centers and other labs, the Catanis would be on the cutting edge of determining DNA fingerprints of human traits, diseases and, if one desired, behavior propensities.

"Drinks?" Mario called from behind the bar.

"I'll have a Bourbon and seven, please," Revanne replied.

"Ummm—cream sherry, please." Mercedes handed Mario a glass.

"Yes, please," Albalisa added as she sat down on the arm of a blue sofa. She still had one pin, and loosely secured her shirt.

"How are the kids doing?" Albalisa asked.

Mercedes answered first, "Ours just finished. Now one's unemployed and the others are waiting tables. How's that for graduate degrees! I'm glad it's over—it cost us an arm and two legs."

"I know what you mean." Albalisa said. "Ours have many, many years left before we're faced with that."

Chase-103-Virus Rodeo

"Thank God our Su Su isn't in college yet," Revanne said.

"Do you have Scotch?" Bennie asked.

"Yeah," Mario replied.

"OK, Scotch and water, please."

"What about you, Fester?" Mario asked, as he fixed the other drinks.

"Bourbon on the rocks, please."

"Speaking of medicine, Albalisa, tell us about your fiendish behavior-propensity model." Bennie looked directly at the 29-year old.

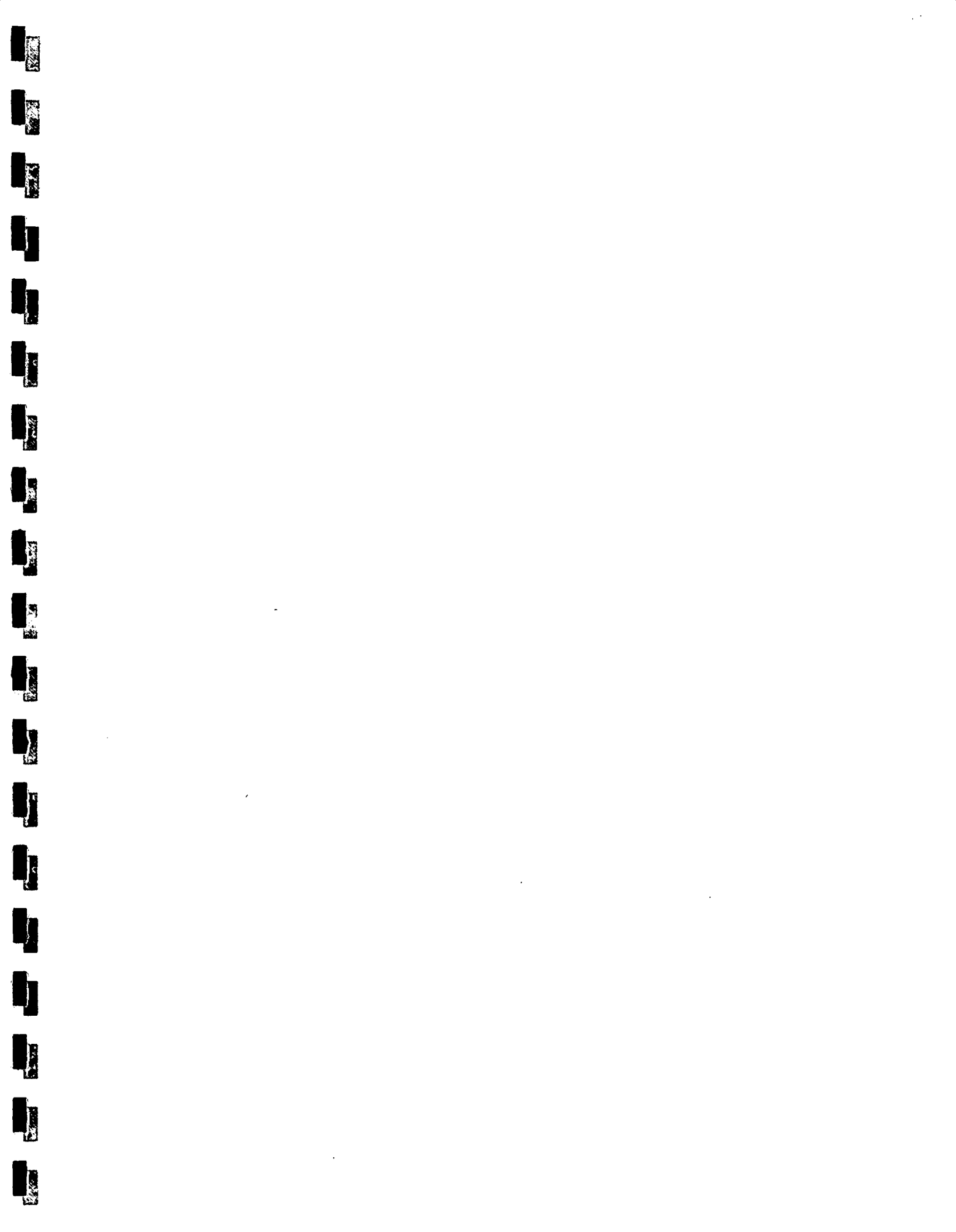
"Ah," she said. "You want to get to it, huh?" She seemed to address only Bennie. Then she turned to the group.

"We're making a gene map of our species in order to determine the basis of physical defects and propensities toward illnesses. We're already reaping a mind boggling harvest in treating disease. Medicine will be revolutionized by this technology."

"Unlike most, I believe intelligence and behavior propensities are also determined by our genes. It's like a computer. Parameters of its circuitry determine potential. All environment or software can do is realize potential, but potential is limited by constraints of its circuits. If potential isn't there, then no matter how enriched the environment, an individual won't be able to data process it. You can't put a software program or data for supercomputers in a handheld calculator, can you?"

"Makes sense," Bennie agreed, as he nodded. "Certainly from my teaching experience, I can tell you only few understood sophisticated concepts, most had vacant looks in their eyes—even when I spent hours with them in one-on-one sessions."

"Behaviorists would like to believe man is self-perfectible," Fester



Chase-104-Virus Rodeo

added. "That's a nice way to see the world, but unfortunately doesn't work. That's why educators have blown it and most prison reform fails. It's hard to accept some people are worthless and should be written off."

"It's that deterministic then?" Revanne asked, as she heaved a deep sigh of resignation.

"Every time I think I might go along," Mercedes thought. "They start on an even more unsettling path. Is there really no other way?"

"I'm afraid so," Albalisa said, as she looked at Revanne gravely. "So, I've extended our end of the Human Genome Initiative covertly. I'm using regression analysis to explore possibilities of determining DNA codes for behavior propensities. I've catalogued initial data and it looks very exciting. One of our reservations for the coup was that claiming the kind of power we aim to take might entice us toward corruption." Sensing Mercedes' discomfort, Albalisa glanced reassuringly at Mercedes. "We wanted to develop safeguards against that. I think we've got our solution. We made trial runs on ourselves just for the hell of it. I'm convinced we can make it work to certify ourselves as reasonable leaders. We'll check subordinates in key positions, key field operatives, to remove anyone in the chain who exhibits codes linked with propensities toward corruption. We want to reduce probabilities of HUD- and S&L-type looting to zero, if possible."

"Ooh Albalisa," countered Mercedes. "That sounds awfully deterministic."

"Yeah, it's kind of scary." Revanne agreed, looking intently at Albalisa.

"I don't like this at all," Mercedes continued, "Can we really be programmed? . . . Like robots? . . ."

"Not programmed; we don't change people. We find out what they're really like. My theory is our brains are wired a specific way, like computers. Evolution has genetically engineered a design standard for our species over time, so it's as if we're examining an electronic blueprint to determine what functions a unit is capable of. We look at the human design and use it to determine behavior profiles, aberrations, and so on. Once cataloged in supercomputers, we'll be able to predict behavioral outcomes with near certainty from blood samples, hair follicles, or whatever."

"God, this is exciting!" Fester shouted, standing. "Do you know what this means for psychological operations? Absolute control of outcomes! This is awesome—our operation could succeed at will by definition. All we'd have to do is properly identify and analyze our targets!"

"Exactly," Albalisa agreed, waiting impatiently for Fester to sit. "With parallel supercomputer banks, we'll eventually be able to produce a DNA gene map of our brain circuits, and individual characteristics to determine propensities towards traits such as loyalty, honesty, betrayal, and so on. . . ."

"What you're telling me," Bennie wanted to recap to be sure he understood Albalisa. "Is once you're operational, we'll have at our disposal—in advance—information on behavioral outcomes of individuals and groups related to specific cues. That we'll be able to manipulate them at will with these cues. This is the final solution to the marketing problem."

Albalisa nodded, but Revanne and Mercedes were deeply troubled.

"This is dangerous stuff," Mercedes put forth. "Much evil could come of this if it ever got in the wrong hands?" She hesitated. "We could be the wrong hands! And who are we to set ourselves up as judges of . . ."

Chase-106-Virus Rodeo

The doorbell interrupted. "I'll get it," Albalisa said as she left the room. Neighborhood trick or treaters were rewarded with various goodies.

Mercedes looked pleadingly at the others.

"We'll give them a good trick soon," Fester said. "Little do they or anyone else know. . . ." Fester got up, raised his arms in front of him and started walking stiffly, swaying from side to side like the Frankenstein monster.

Albalisa laughed as she came back in the room.

"What you've got here, Albalisa, is just astonishing--absolutely incredible," Fester said.

Mercedes shuddered as she asked, "Are we setting ourselves up as judges of whose hands are clean? Should we have this power? Why, it's the power of gods!"

Albalisa faced Mercedes and the others, and her black eyes narrowed. "You think this is bad, wait till Mario tells you what he and Harlo have been up to. . . ." The radio began to play Wagner's Overture to The Flying Dutchman.

"Talk about a portent from the gods," Bennie commented. They felt chills radiating on the backs of their necks and sat in silence as the candles flickered, sending grotesque shadows dancing on the walls. Their costumes seemed to grow more menacing as they all sat motionless listening to the music mount to the climax.

As the last note sounded, they each took a deep breath, and as though on command, refocused their attention to Albalisa. "The probability of failure will be remote," she said finally.

"This still makes me nervous, Albalisa," Bennie said. "I wonder if

the spirit of Halloween has perverted us. Do the secrets of DNA give us the power of gods? . . . What a night to be talking about this. . . . Is this then the ultimate technology for social control?"

Suddenly he changed the nuance. "It's a good thing the Soviets went down the tubes. What if they'd discovered this first? Absolute manipulative power—what Goebbels could have done with this makes nukes look like kid stuff. If we're talking about it, maybe someone else is too?"

"At least I'll say this for Bennie," Mercedes thought. "He's really not taking the down sides lightly, thank God." She heaved a sigh of relief.

"It's like Soviet tactical nukes during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy and his staff didn't know about them. Our troops could have been vaporized in an invasion attempt, plunging the world into the nuclear abyss. What if someone is ahead of us with this and uses it for evil deeds, or is already using it without anyone being the wiser?"

"Bennie, who's to say we're not using this for evil deeds?" Mercedes chided.

The others looked at Bennie with concern, then Albalisa spoke first. "Definitely, others might have it, and we shouldn't rule it out. We've carefully scanned journals and done computer searches to see if anything similar was out there—nothing so far. . . . We do have the advantage of an integrative team of varied disciplines to bring our plan to fruition. I think we can pull it off in a proper manner, Bennie—I really do."

Bennie shivered slightly as the dimensions sank in, "Wait a minute! DNA maps give us power and restraints!" He took Albalisa's hands and kissed them gently.

"That's right," Albalisa said. "That's what I'm saying. We'll use

Chase-108-Virus Rodeo

DNA fingerprinting of behavior propensities to screen leaders of our cabal itself, subordinates, and key operatives to reduce odds of corruption and abusive behavior, characteristics which have plagued autocracies in the past. Our moles within the medical community will secretly analyze DNA fingerprints from blood samples and compare DNA signatures to those known to be the less ethical and the more ethical people of the world. In this way, they'll discover codes which identify desirable behavior propensities. . . . We'll use these to ensure our order isn't comprised of corrupt leaders with tendencies to abuse power. We have an enormous responsibility, for I'm sure all of us feel the world has seen enough abuse of its people and environment."

"Let's eat, guys." Fester suggested, trying to break the tension, but Bennie thought he seemed a little more disturbed by their discovery than he let on.

While the others drifted toward the dining room, Bennie joined Albalisa in the kitchen, "That's an awesome idea, Alba, just super. . . ."

He couldn't help notice her cool sensuality once more. Her costume shirt's one pin hardly concealed what Bennie knew were its delicious contents. His eyes locked on her heavy breathing, which accentuated the full swells pressing against her shirt.

Her eyes followed his—she stuck her tongue out at him playfully. "Bring the veggies, will you please?"

He picked up the platter and obediently followed her to the dining room.

Mario was waiting by the Hepplewhite sideboard, ready to pour the wine, and any expression in his eyes was concealed by the glare off his glasses.

Bennie sheepishly assisted Mercedes in taking her seat and glanced at the others to see if they had noticed him with Albalisa. She cast a glance

Chase-109-Virus Rodeo

his way offhandedly, then was distracted by one of her cats who flashed by on his way to hide beneath the sideboard.

"Must be more kids, at the back door this time," Albalisa noted as she choreographed herself beyond Bennie's field of view.

"Wine, anybody?" Mario served the ladies first.

The women talked about the food while the men bantered about the upcoming ACC basketball season.

"Is Duke going all the way again?" Bennie asked enviously. He was a Carolina fan.

"We're going to fry Carolina!" Mario added with relish.

"Oh yeah!" Albalisa and Mario, both avid Duke fans chorused.

"Good luck!" Bennie said raising his fist.

"Albalisa, this chicken and veal picata is delicious, just delicious," Fester dug in. "Wine, please."

"You can always open a restaurant if we don't go through with our plan," Bennie teased. "Please pass the salad, Revanne. Anyone else for salad? Here you go, Mercedes."

He turned to face Mario. "So, Mario, what have you and that rascal, Harlo, come up with? I'm sure that it's going to be a dandy. I can feel it. He has a gangbuster imagination—I'm all ears! . . ."

"The double virus, V.R.X.X. That's our cipher. Virus Rodeo X.X. X.X. is whenever we go ahead with Virus Rodeo. Our takeover—in conjunction with Volant Rodeo at Pope AFB—will enable us to play with a stacked deck."

Mercedes looked at Mario attentively.

"More bread?" Albalisa passed the bread around.

"Harlo came up with this double virus idea," Mario continued quietly,

Chase-110-Virus Rodeo

"after Fester told him how we needed a brutal psychological shock to precondition people to our new order, and Basc briefed him about your Florida game. Virus one is a binary, genetically engineered for the conditioning shock to occur prior to the coup. It'll cause limited and controllable loss of life. . . ."

"Oh my God—oh my God," Mercedes thought, betraying apprehension overtly.

"By what standard?" Revanne asked, feeling the vibes from Mercedes.

"Looking at history," Mario replied. "We see in most wars loss of life has been great—outright butchery. All we might need to kill is a few thousand, and most of these, hopefully, would be deserving, for example, rampant exploiters of rain forests—hate group types in temperate zones."

"Oh, my God," Mercedes thought.

"Umm," Revanne said. "Well, go on."

"Virus two are all-encompassing software viruses to gridlock global computer systems as required at H-Hours."

The others grimaced.

"The end justifies the means, eh?" Revanne stated tersely. Her blue eyes had turned to ice.

"We're getting in deep." Mercedes was uneasy. "Let's not mess up our nice meal. We've plenty of time after dinner."

"OK, OK," Bennie said, wanting to avoid tension.

Although the conversation turned lightheartedly back to basketball, Mercedes and some of the others did not taste the rest of their meal.

"Let's help you take this to the kitchen," Revanne volunteered afterward. "Come on Fester, give a hand. You too, Bennie!"

Chase-111-Virus Rodeo

Meanwhile, Mario went over his project notes like a doctor studying medical charts. Bennie came into the kitchen with a handful of dishes and Albalisa brushed against him as she went toward the sink. He felt the distinctive firmness of her breasts against his arm. Fester placed a tray full of glasses on the counter. Mercedes brought in flatware and went back to look for more. Bennie helped Albalisa load up the dishwasher. As she leaned over, her shirt ballooned downward and she lingered for Bennie's visual pleasure. After seeing they were momentarily alone--she rapidly stole a kiss. Bennie dropped a glass and it shattered.

"Shit!" he said. She winked mischievously. Revanne called them in for Mario's presentation.

Mario focused the group saying. "If the fate of the life-support system wasn't at stake, we'd not be probing our imaginations for remedies with least social and economic costs. Stakes here are--make no mistake about it--the very continued existence of life on our planet. All life--all life!"

"If any of you have no stomach for this," Bennie added. "Now's the time to bail out. I've had serious misgivings about this project myself, but I see no other way. We have to come up with a really grisly surrogate ecological Pearl Harbor to rattle people's cages. People have to radically alter their energy and economic behavior--on a global scale." Bennie stared his colleagues down to their bone marrow. "Fester's right, without a monster shock, people won't change. It's got to scare . . ."

Fester sneezed. "Sorry."

"Bless you," Revanne said.

". . . the hell out of them!" Bennie finished up.

"This will--if it works," Mario assured them. "Are you ready for this?"

Chase-112-Virus Rodeo

He looked at his colleagues with sinister eyes. "TRFIS—Tropical Rain Forest Infection Syndrome—a genetically-engineered binary virus used as a weapons system to make people believe wanton deforestation and routine use of fossil fuels has lead to a catastrophic disease—hopefully deterring future deforestation and relatively voluntary acquiescence to phasing out fossil fuels before the Earth is lost. This global psychological operation has to be brutal enough to modify behavior drastically. Rain forests are critical to the life-support system and biodiversity. Removal of fossil fuels equally so. Established tree farms are sufficient for the world's lumber needs, and we have a surplus of agricultural land as it is. Use of electric trains and non-lead-battery electric cars can provide acceptable transport alternatives to oil-based road transport. A milder offshoot of TRFIS can be used to merely disable people so armies and civilians can be rendered impotent during military operations, minimizing overall casualties."

Mercedes did all she could not to tremble visibly while she thought. "What evil are they proposing now? Have I run out of time? Is this really the only way?"

"You're mad, Mario—mad as hell!" Revanne glared at him, her eyes narrowing. She took a deep breath and continued shaking her head.

"This is lunatic! We won't pass our own DNA test—have you no morals?" Mercedes shook her head vigorously.

"I love it—just love it!" A big smile crossed Fester's face. "Isn't it great, Bennie?"

"I'm stunned. . . ." Bennie looked at the molecular biologist with incredulity. "Not since '45, when we were the only ones with the bomb, has so much potential power been in the hands of so few. The Cold War is over

Chase-113-Virus Rodeo

and we managed not to blow ourselves up—even as close as it was with Cuba in '62. I was on cockpit alert then, sitting on a one-megaton device at engine-start checklist, ten minutes from launch. Will we do as well?"

"I'm designing a fail-safe, self-destruct branch alternative into it," Mario said. "It'll work like a series of yes/no decisions, like in software program flowcharts. My moles at CDC in Atlanta have given me Ebola's DNA and RNA codes. We'll use an Ebola mutant for TRFIS."

"Wow!" Bennie said.

"Ebola first drew attention in 1976. Viruses have certain properties which make them ideal for what we want. Viruses are parasites and can't replicate themselves unless they've found a host. They have proteins on their envelopes to mesh precisely with other proteins or receptors—which accept hormones or other substances vital to proper functions of host cells. They're very choosy on what cells they dock and adapt to changes by mutating. Their fast mutating capability is stored in their RNA. Several strains of Ebola have already been detected. We'll engineer a new one triggered by ultrasonic commands and/or high levels of surface ozone—whichever is required. It'll become known as TRFIS."

The others, save for Albalisa, just looked at Mario in disbelief.

"Integrated with Albalisa's DNA behavior profiles," Mario said. "We can pick our targets precisely. We're going to target TRFIS at individuals who tend to join hate groups, exploit nature in harmful ways, and have criminal tendencies. Once triggered, TRFIS would interrogate the target individual's DNA code to see if he/she meets the criteria. If yes, it goes to the next interrogation and so on until the profile is sufficiently reinforced so we're sure the target is indeed what we want to kill. If so, TRFIS does

Chase-114-Virus Rodeo

its thing—just like rabies, when it finds the precise brain cell it needs after entering through a leg muscle dog bite, for example."

"I don't believe this!" Revanne said.

"Well," Mario said. "The tiny brains of monarch butterflies contain complete celestial and inertial platform navigation systems with star and sun data bases programmed in over thousands—if not millions of years—for precise location of their migration destinations. Our mutant Ebola will have a simpler program to operate."

"My God. This is for real," Fester said.

Mario continued. "If one NO shows up in the interrogation chain, it self destructs. Although we want to promote the illusion that it spreads randomly, the decision chain will prevent that as well as random mutations which would cause TRFIS to go out of control. To reinforce our out-of-control safeguards, we'll program the critical aspects of our mutant in its DNA, rather than its RNA. DNA is less subject to quick mutation than RNA. TRFIS will thus have a double safety fail-safe system built into it."

"Wow!" Bennie said again.

"Harlo suggested I make this a binary. The organic binary—harmless on its own—will be laced in target area food supplies, flea, and duck populations by human moles. These will be the vectors. The virus reservoirs will be represented as being in plants, unrecognizable in organic binary form. This 'll enable us to spread credible disinformation that wanton destruction of plants have unleashed this new virus which is looking for new hosts, since its previous ones are disappearing with rain and temperate zone forests—either cut down or destroyed by acid fog and acid rain. Humans are its new host—that's the bottom line for our medical and media moles."

Chase-115-Virus Rodeo

"Mario," Revanne said. "This is absolutely unreal."

"Air pollution, particularly, surface ozone—has caused lesions in lungs of people living in areas like L.A. and Mexico City, for example. Young adults are particularly vulnerable—they've spent their whole lives in that shit. Hard scientific facts predict that children of the sixties and beyond will be subject to serious lung diseases. All we're doing with TRFIS is accelerating the process. The lung lesions will lead to the same catastrophic bleeding that Ebola has had with the eyes, ears, and nose. Our target profiles tend to be young adults, a perfect match for our basis, that rapid urbanization, brought about by the urban sprawl of the automobile, has encroached on TRFIS' plant reservoirs, forced it to find a new host and human lungs, injured by surface ozone, are the most easily accessed in the new environment of urban sprawl."

The others just looked at Mario in stunned silence.

"The electronic actuating binary will be an ultrasonic command embedded into normal TV and radio transmissions, like religious, the BBC, CNN, and MTV for global reach as required. Without the coded electronic trigger, the weapon won't work and no residual effects will show up. Ultrasonic commands will complete the DNA code of the organism's organic binary into an Ebola mutant so that without it, it's just an incomplete organism which self-destructs after a month. Computer assisted design will be a big help."

"Just us few can dictate to the whole world—the whole fucking world!" Fester said.

"Oh my God," Mercedes thought, looking at Fester.

"Easy, Fester." Mario smiled, "Or you're number one for Alba's behavior propensity test!"

Chase-116-Virus Rodeo

"You're just sick! God help us all," Mercedes groaned.

Mercedes couldn't restrain herself anymore. "Is this really the only alternative we have?"

"I do sincerely believe so," Mario concluded.

"He's right, Honey," Bennie added. "It's getting down to this, unfortunately. We selectively kill some people—hopefully the victims will be the targeted ones as much as possible—or we accept the Earth becomes devoid of life—including our own species."

"Who do we think we are, Bennie? Who has given us the right to make such decisions? . . ."

"Come on, Mercedes, think about it." Bennie said in a gentle voice.

"This is too much—just too much. . . ."

Bennie could tell his wife was trying not to cry.

"Is this what we're going to do, exterminate people to save the world—save it for what? Is this a rerun of Vietnam? Where we destroyed villages to save them. You all learned nothing there. . . ." Mercedes shook with anger. "This has to be stopped," she thought desperately.

"It makes sense in a twisted way," Revanne said. "If it's a choice of few dying, or all—we must do it. But we have to be selfless—no personal gain. All species must benefit. Perhaps they're right—maybe this is the only way to convince the public that crunch time is at hand, that we have to start a radical new approach."

"She's got a point, damn," Mercedes thought. "Who can help me make the right decision?"

"That's it, Revanne," Fester said. "A few thousand dying from time to time in devastated rain forest areas, reinforced by random deaths in urban

Chase-117-Virus Rodeo

areas like L.A. ozone pollution days—linking motorcar use to TRFIS, just might do the trick. Nobody seems to care anymore about starvation or disease in Third World areas because they're so far away. But, as AIDS has shown, once people feel vulnerable, they pay attention. As long as gays, minorities, and druggies seemed to be the only victims, nobody gave a shit—but as soon as straights started getting it from blood, and their own lovers, people felt threatened and started paying attention. Once Ebola-Zaire '95 ran its course, the public went back to its wasteful ways. To induce people to give up their gas powered cars with minimum rebellion, we'll need that big shock, and I must confess Mario and Harlo have come up with a doozy." Fester's eyes radiated how impressed he was with V.R.X.X..

"Alba's models should give us size dimensions," Mario said. "We may have to keep escalating until critical mass is achieved and panic starts to set in. We'll have to control the degree of panic to prevent anarchy. And we'll manipulate the media to fine tune cues. We'll have to infiltrate moles into the system . . . this is going to be the mother of all psychological operations. Actually, we might not have to kill too many. As we've seen with Third World natural outbreaks, all it takes are First World medical personnel in bubble suits, a few grisly casualties, a scary disease with no known cure, and sustained media attention."

"You got that right, Mario," Fester said.

"All this, just for an electric economy. Are you sure it's worth it?" Mercedes asked, looking at Bennie solemnly. "I've heard about disease resulting from electromagnetic fields produced by alternating current. We still have risks if we go all-electric. . . ."

"At the risk of sounding cavalier," Bennie replied, "current studies

Chase-118-Virus Rodeo

indicate only individuals working around a great deal of electrical power might be affected, if at all, and even then it's relatively benign. The American Physical Society has found no evidence that magnetic fields from power lines cause cancer. Nothing like black lung or the present carnage on highways. We're going to have to accept some risks, risks which may adversely affect some individuals--like penicillin does--but isn't a risk to the general population, or the biodiversity of the world. Evidence so far indicates we can accept risks of an all-electric economy as being benign and certainly not anywhere near the disaster fossil fuels wrought upon us and the life-support system."

"I read we could dump iron in oceans to fortify and expand marine algae, which then would soak up carbon dioxide." Mercedes desperately sought alternatives.

"It's an interesting idea," Mario replied, eager to bring her into the fold. "It might be useful to remove excess carbon dioxide once our program is in place, but if you factor in increasing use of fossil fuels in the Third World, and add that to ours, which is already overwhelming the world's ability to absorb it, then you suspect that this may not work to balance the system. Not if we allow continuation of fossil fuels."

"I agree," Fester said. "Just China's recent economic growth has turned it into an environmental cesspool. Their continued growth could put us over the edge, that is if we're not over it now. Imagine, over a billion people burning fossil fuels on our scale--then there's India. . . ."

Mario added, "There are also risks of allowing carbon to deposit as sediment on the bottom of the ocean, as well as unknown risks to the food chain. Such a one-dimensional approach to preserve our fossil fuel habit

Chase-119-Virus Rodeo

might set off a whole new chain of negative events. I don't feel it's worth the risk since we have a clean alternative. Unfortunately, there's only one way—fossil fuels have to go and we may as well resign ourselves to this and get cracking on the new system. We have to alter our economic mechanical fuel in an evolutionary manner before we find ourselves with our backs to the wall. . . ."

"What if fusion doesn't work? What'll you do then?" Mercedes asked.

"Well, it depends on which is most cost effective for a particular region," Mario replied, placing his hand on Mercedes' shoulder. "But given we can develop the superconductors Revanne proposes for storage and conduits, we'll set up massive solar thermal farms in the Southwest and pipe electricity to where it's needed. Or we'll use geothermal sources and pipe it likewise. We'll convert interstate highways to rail and superconductor corridors, and use retired oil and natural gas pipeline corridors as needed."

"All these alternatives have to be modeled, but there's no escaping the grimmer aspects of the task ahead," Bennie acknowledged regretfully. "We're going to have to have the stomach for some unpleasant actions—that's part of what leadership is all about. There's no nice way to do this, guys—no nice way. . . ."

"At least," Albalisa said looking at Fester dressed as Frankenstein. "We're good people, not power mad lunatics. . . ." She laughed and pointed to the bolts sticking out of Fester's neck.

"So here we are, getting ready to clean up the world with V.R.X.X., saying we're not lunatics," Bennie said. "And look at us!"

They all laughed heartily as they looked at each other's fangs, bolts, and dripping blood.

* * * * *

Later, in Pinehurst,
NC, at Fester's

Revanne was uneasy and had sent their daughter away to some friends so she could deal openly with Bennie and Fester. She said, "I believe Ken knows more than he lets on."

"Oh, shit," Bennie said as he looked gravely at Fester. "Is Su Su around?"

"No."

"What makes you think that, Revanne?" Bennie asked.

"He hints at big things going on. That I must stay with him."

"Yeah, you're right. I think the time has come to blow Ken away."

"Must we? . . ." Revanne asked.

"I'm afraid so," Fester said. "We may have played this game too long already."

"Look," Bennie said, "He's like a time bomb out there. If he gets pissed at you, no telling what he might do. Sure, he could be bluffing. But then, he might have really figured it out—and we can't ask him—can we? . . . He might blow the whistle and we can't take that chance. Then there's the personal risk. Remember Katarina Witt—the East German Gold Medalist? She was stalked for years and cops did nothing, nothing until it really got ugly. Two years in jail and he's back out. And then there's Monica Celes. Yeah, he's got to go."

Chase-121-Virus Rodeo

"Let's see," Fester agreed. "We've got to lure him to a DZ, knock him off, dispose of his body, sanitize his house, leave his car at Raleigh Airport, board a plane with tickets in his name, and come back unobtrusively."

"How are we going to pay for his ticket?" Bennie asked. "We sure can't use our credit cards. If we use cash, ticket agents will report us and the Feds will nail our asses, thinking we're drug dealers. We don't have his checking account. Nothing really. . . ."

"We'll need forgeries of some sort," Revanne thought aloud. "There are stolen airline tickets available on the street, usually. . . ."

"What great murderers we are," Bennie said. "We're stuck already!"

"Getting stuff on the street leaves a trail," Fester said. "Let's keep it simple. Let's not get other parties involved. We can leave his car at the airport with no problem. Let the cops figure out whether he went anywhere or not."

"We can leave his car at Terminal C in Raleigh," Bennie said. "I pull in at the gate, the machine gives me a card, and I park—all without other people being involved. I'll go in at the departure deck, mill around the terminal, and go downstairs and wait for one of you to pick me up at the arrival deck."

"For now," Fester agreed. "That sounds like the way to go. So, let's see:

"One, we lure him to the Holland DZ.

"Two, you and Revanne do your thing.

"Three, Ken begins to move toward you on cue.

"Four, I throttle him with piano wire before he moves out in the open.

"Five, we put him in a body bag and dispose of him.

Chase-122-Virus Rodeo

"Six, Revanne drives his car to the Pinecrest Mall.

"Seven, I pick her up at Belks, then we meet you here Bennie.

"Eight, We give you his keys. You walk to his place here in town and crash his computer disk, get his videos on Revanne and others, check around for hard copy and diaries. I'm sure we'll think of other stuff."

"Nine, Bennie walks to the Pinehurst Country Club. Revanne picks him up in his car, goes back to Pinecrest Mall and drops him off at Food Lion.

"After buying something, Bennie goes to Ken's car, drives to Raleigh and Revanne picks you up at Terminal C." Fester looked at Bennie as he finished enumerating the plan.

"Then we sweat," Bennie said, shaking his head.

The others nodded.

* * * * *

The Holland Drop Zone

An Unusually Warm November Day

Wind swept across the DZ as Bennie and Revanne walked out in silence. For now, there didn't seem to be any activity there by soldiers. They reached the tree line at the southeast corner.

Fester was in place.

Ken was in place.

Revanne slowly peeled off her garments until all that remained was a white cotton-spandex cropped top and scoop-front bikini.

Chase-123-Virus Rodeo

Bennie stripped completely.

Bennie hesitated, then seized Revanne and planted an intense, open-mouth kiss on her liquescent lips. She responded, urgently slashing his tongue with hers, slavering Bennie's mouth with sweet sensual nectar. As the world seemed to spin, their locked bodies swayed and fell to the ground as they lost their balance. Frantically, he pulled off her remaining garments and then only goosebumps separated their throbbing entwinement.

Ken watched the fury of Revanne's sudden burst into the open drop zone, her firm breasts stirring, rising and falling to the choreography of her seeming flight. She was a tanned elegance emblazoned against the alabaster sands of the drop zone, her arms raised in pure delight, as she twisted and flexed in some sort of voodoo release. She turned to face her pursuer. In hypnotic silence, Ken observed this ritual of amatory ballet as now, the tanned one stooped, sensually tendering her loins and buttocks to her white complement, who approached her with ardent urgency. She leapt onto him, tongue lashing about his lips, mouth, and neck in the frenzy of a vampire seeking the jugular; he holding her firm posterior to him as he slid into her.

That was Ken's cue. He was about to leap out when they all heard the familiar chop-chop of approaching helicopters. Ken turned around and ran toward his car and left the DZ area. Fester followed him covertly.

Bennie quickly released Revanne, and they ran back toward the tree line, unfortunately not before the lead helicopter caught sight of them and made a very low pass. Reaching the tree line, Bennie and Revanne could hear the soldiers laughing inside the helicopter, which had landed quickly. As they frantically dressed, Revanne realized that she'd left her cropped top and

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bikini out in the open.

"What the hell? . . ." Bennie said, as he grabbed Revanne and planted a big kiss on her.

At first she resisted, but then caught on, so grabbed his butt just as the lead troopers approached.

"Forget something, Ma'am? . . ." A burly sergeant asked, handing the embarrassed Revanne her lingerie.

Momentarily stunned, Revanne froze, then noticed some of the troopers looking at her as if trying to figure out where they might have seen her before. Faking embarrassment, the TV reporter quickly raised her hands to hide her face.

"Hey, you two," a husky three-striper yelled. "What a show! . . . How about an encore? . . ."

Bennie pulled her to him and kissed her passionately.

"Carry on, Sir!" The three-striper said.

"Love to guys," Bennie said, as he gently fondled her breasts. "But as you can see, she's shy. We got to go and finish in bed. . . ."

The troopers laughed.

Bennie and Revanne made their way back to Manchester Road while the soldiers got on with their exercise.

In Bennie's car, hidden from view, they drove off to another location.

Revanne took off her blouse and said, "Bennie, let's find a place and finish."

"You bet," Bennie said as he ran his hand up her inner thigh and lingered.

* * * * *

Weekend Before Christmas

Washington, DC

The Alzas, having just arrived on Amtrak, made their way past the gate to the main concourse of Union Station. They walked past travelers and shoppers until they reached the first class lounge to check their luggage. Arriving at its controlled access door, Bennie pushed the buzzer and the door clicked. Once inside, Bennie showed the attendant his tickets and they turned right toward the baggage enclosure.

"Let's leave our coats here and have some orange juice before we go back out," Bennie said to Mercedes.

"Good idea," she replied as she led the way to the lounge and complimentary snacks counter.

Refreshed by their juice, the Alzas headed for the shops. Bennie stopped at the Great Train Store while Mercedes went to Anne Taylor's.

Union Station, since its renovation, had become one of the places to go in Washington. Very elegant weddings had been held there as well as concerts by world-class classical and popular artists.

Bennie picked up a few enamel, baked-on-steel, railroad logo plaques. Mercedes decided to do some last minute Christmas shopping, and bought a few sweaters for their daughters. Bennie then stopped at Hoffritz to buy another pair of Italian scissors that he didn't need. Bennie had a fascination for scissors, especially solid well-made Italian ones. Festive shoppers bustled about from shop to shop, each shop brilliant in holiday decora-

Chase-126-Virus Rodeo

tions.

"Your program makes sense, I must concede," Mercedes said. "Here's a good example of retail centers with convenient electric train access to all the stores and . . ."

"That's it," Bennie said. "Interplay of people creates viable economic activity. It beats fighting traffic in conventional automobile malls. That's the kind of infrastructure we must provide, on a national scale, to induce new relationships and products away from cars, and their oil-associated infrastructure."

They paused to enjoy the activity.

"Look at the people. You know," Mercedes reflected, "people can be quite beautiful and vibrant. We've really been cheated by packaging ourselves in cars. This interaction gives me a sense of community. . . . I believe cars are a main source of social alienation and breakdown of community."

"I agree," Bennie said, as he stretched. "Cars have pre-packaged us into hostile self-centered beings. Cars, easy guns, and too-forgiving courts, are the chief foundation for the collapse of the social contract."

"Why do we have to blow Ken away?" Mercedes looked directly into his eyes.

"I've told you before, he knows too much. There's no way of finding out what he knows without giving the game away."

"Hmmm."

"Then, there's the personal risk to Revanne."

"So?"

"Come on, Mercedes. Be reasonable."

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"Well, it's time to go," Bennie said, guiding Mercedes back toward the Metropolitan Lounge to collect their baggage.

"Wait, let me get a few lottery tickets. Maybe we'll get lucky this time," Mercedes said. She veered to the right toward the liquor store, a lottery outlet, and placed five bets.

"Just so you leave us some luck for Virus Rodeo! . . ." Bennie pretended to be worried. They collected their baggage and made their way to the Metro.

They rode the escalator down, bought fare cards and went to train level. The platform was overcrowded, but luckily the next train stopped so a door was right in front of them. They squeezed onto the car, but Mercedes wasn't quite in so the door sensor reopened the door as it had "felt" her still in doorway. Finally they accelerated forward, Bennie shifting his weight to maintain his balance. Mercedes snuggled her purse tightly while Bennie straddled their baggage. This moment made him appreciate they'd learned to travel lightly long ago. The gentle motion of the Washington Metro swayed them side to side until the train slowed for the next stop. The cadence repeated until they reached Metro Center and changed to the Orange Line for Arlington. After checking into their hotel in Rosslyn, the Alzas returned to continue on the Metro.

As the escalator slid up to just below ground level at the Orange Line's Clarendon Station, the Alzas stopped to insert their fare cards. Bennie fumbled his, causing it to jam, and the queue of tired commuters backed up behind him.

"Thanks a lot, Bud," called one irate soul whose face Bennie couldn't see.

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A few hard looks humbled Bennie. "Sorry," he meekly called toward the voice as the line began to move. "And Season's Greetings!"

Crisp air buffeted their faces as they walked up and out of the station into Little Vietnam, and turned west on Fairfax Drive toward 13th and Lynnbrook for Wanda's new town house. They had never been there before but recognized the two-story, tan, brick town house with blue shutters from her description. Wanda opened the door right away. At her feet, a jet-black Persian cat with burning orange eyes stared directly up at them.

"This is Soufrier—Souffie for short," Wanda introduced her cat. She turned to lead them into the house and called. "They're here, guys!"

The foyer was graced by a Mister Nobody Delft figurine set on an Elizabethan dark oak accent table, over which hung a Grayson painting of orioles enjoying coffee beans. After the Alzas hung up their coats, they slipped past a Queen Anne highboy flanked by two Gauguin masterpieces. One caught Bennie's attention, the Gauguin self portrait with its yellow Christ in the background. He studied it for a moment, then suddenly, Mercedes' dangling gold trefoil earrings reflected the low-angle sunlight and illuminated the yellow Christ with agitated pencil beams as she swiveled her head, looking at different paintings.

Wanda (the Witch) Zupnick, a graying, strong-jawed attorney, had joined the Department of Justice after coordinating defense contracts at TARC (Tactical Air Reconnaissance Center). She had dealt with protocol and contracts with Aeronautical Systems Development at Wright Patterson, and at the then Headquarters Tactical Air Command, now called the Air Combat Command. Upon completion of tests, reports would be submitted up the line to Wanda's office. There had been times when recommendations by the testing authority would

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be overruled by certain Congresspersons because recommended alternative systems weren't to be procured in that individual's district. And, on occasion, weapons systems which had failed field tests would be the ones purchased because of a powerful Congressperson's intervention. Ironically enough, there were even incidents when these same individuals would go on the TV news and chastise the Air Force for cost overruns and/or buying weapons which didn't work. Such experiences had reinforced Wanda's feelings of disgust toward corrupt influence-peddling business-as-usual congressional processes.

"Hey, Bennie, Mercedes," Sid welcomed his guests and shook their hands. He was now a senior FBI managing executive after having spent many years in the "trenches" at the agency's counter-intelligence division.

"So you conspirators have come to surrender?" Sid asked his friends as he handed them drinks. "Wanda 'll have you guys locked up for sure!" He laughed heartily.

"I'll prosecute them—send them to Leavenworth and throw the key away," Wanda said, raising her eyebrows and smiling.

"It's cold out there!" Bobbie Sheppard was still shivering and reluctant to surrender her coat.

"It ain't Florida, that's for sure," Mercedes said.

They all stood around for a moment, warming themselves by the fire. The aroma of hickory from the fireplace was particularly pleasing. Sid offered each an eggnog heavily spiked with Johnnie Walker Black Scotch.

Then, after all were cozy, Bennie reported on the progress achieved over Halloween in Durham, and Florida earlier.

"We do have a big problem, though," Bennie finished up. "This guy has been stalking Revanne and we'll have to blow him away."

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"Blow him away?" Wanda and Bobbie chorused simultaneously.

Bennie updated them on the details and they agreed they didn't have other options.

Sid said, "Maybe you should let Joe Dab and the mob handle this. Their body shredders would get rid of Ken. I don't like having him buried on the DZ. Random animals or soldiers could find him. Maggots will place the time. The mob can pick up the car in Raleigh and dispose of it."

"Sounds good, Sid," Bennie agreed.

"Oh no, even the mob," Mercedes thought, gagging at its rancidity. "How much of this can I take?"

"I'd also have Ken's house fire-bombed a few weeks after the job. Joe Dab's motorcycle gang members are pretty good at it and we could be pretty sure that it'd be a no fingerprint job. It'd look like an ordinary heater fire occurring after the owner left on vacation. They would probably put ordinary ash in the flue, blocking it and causing an ordinary chimney back-flow fire."

"Joe's guys are good," Bobbie said.

"I'm sure Fester and Revanne will go for it," Bennie said.

He turned to Harlo, "Harlo, Albalisa and Mario have told me about your work. Really cool, man."

Harlo proceeded to update them on his activities. "Red, Mario, and I are rolling along. Mario has perfected his Ebola mutant's ability to use DNA transposition properties from one species to another—to transpose from plants to humans when the ultrasonic command is given. Red plans to propagate the coded DNA pulsed commands by microwave relay in the ultrasonic format. Initial computer simulations indicate it'll work that way. A lot of our

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old contacts at TARC have signed on." Harlo showed his satisfaction by doing one of his nutty Jackie Gleason dance routines.

Bennie looked at his friends to review the current status of the project:

"One," his gaze wandered towards Wanda. "We've got an organization basis—clusters of retirees to bring in friends who are still in various government agencies until infiltration is sufficient for control at zero hour."

Looking at Harlo, "Two, we've got your virus to control computers at will as required.

"Three, we've got Mario's virus to create the surrogate Pearl Harbor.

"Four," he said-looking directly at Bobbie. "We've got Revanne's program for public dissemination and control.

"Five, we still need to talk about our integrative multi-discipline teams to come up with corrective actions and schedules of implementation. Wanda?"

Wanda motioned to him, and Bennie yielded the floor. She seated herself on the arm of a deep wine-colored leather couch and looked over the group. "Easy Ed, Joe Dab, and Goatroper have organized the dirty tricks—a special operations program. Ed's expertise in PSYOPS and his anti-terrorist forays make him particularly suitable for dirty tricks." She paused to pick up Souffie who had been meowing up beseechingly at her.

"I agree, Wanda; both Fester and I have worked with him in the past in Lebanon hostage gigs." Bennie was happy to have Easy Ed on board. Ed was a bashful, balding man who had retired from the Civil Service after a stint in Special Operations with Bennie and Fester. He had particular expertise in disinformation and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS). One of

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his British SAS contacts was now Chief of Music Program selection for the BBC World Service on short-wave.

Wanda continued. "Ed's BBC contact suggested having a few key rock numbers broadcast in predetermined combinations at selected times. Our moles will have Grundig Yachtboy receivers and GPS hand-held units. Field operatives will hear this code, dictating what actions should occur as the coup unfolds. Ed also plans to manipulate the media and population by staging certain events. These will be implemented through Joe Dab Babbalucci, whose father was in the Mafia during the J.F.K. years. We have to set up an ambient situation within the United States where the population will support, or at least be neutral in respect to the coup—a reinforcement of the Norheim Syndrome. Ed will also set up the civil network through retired civil servants."

Babbalucci had come into Bennie's life when Bennie had been reassigned to the field, for his second Vietnam combat tour at Thailand's Korat Air Base. Their unit had been the Airborne Command and Control Center. These specially-equipped C-130s orbited for two twelve-hour shifts over two sites in Laos, Alley-Cat and Moonbeam. Shifts changed at seven in the morning and seven at night to provide 24-hour coverage for control of the entire Indochina air war effort. Each crew flew every fourth or fifth day, leaving them free to explore Thailand the rest of the time. Joe Dab teamed up with his wife Gabriella, who was in Thailand covertly, and they and Bennie got to know Thailand very well. Joe had even invested in a stable of fighting chickens and was a regular participant at the Korat Saturday cockfights. Joe left the service after his tour to return to Boston's North End and run the family pizzeria on Blackstone Street, near the pushcart vendors just

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off Haymarket Square.

Goatroper was Bennie's classmate at Maryland in the fifties and had joined the Secret Service after graduation. After retirement, he joined the New York City Police Department as a consultant. He and his wife, Kathi, had come to love the Big Apple and had an intriguing flat in Soho.

Wanda recalled Goatroper's activities, "He's intimately familiar with Secret Service White House procedures and his task will be, through personal contacts, to establish complicity in the coup of the Secret Service and large metropolitan police departments."

"I've sure got to hand it to Bennie," Mercedes thought. "He's got an all star cast!"

"I like that, Wanda," Bennie responded.

Wanda continued, "I don't want violence when we take the White House, Capitol Hill, and as we secure large urban areas. I have no desire to execute former incumbents or put them on trial; in fact, for routine matters, existing legislative and judicial branches can be retained. We can exercise a line-item veto to annul environmentally harmful special interest legislation and litigation."

"That's great, Wanda—I'm impressed," Bobbie said.

"I'm going to de-emphasize probes of the mob to give their operatives room to breathe so Bennie can work out an agreement with Joe Dab. In particular, I'm going to get Justice to ease off on RICO prosecutions, civil suits against mob figures in legitimate businesses which gets them by means of racketeering laws. We'll need what's left of the mob to knock off individuals quietly and professionally, subcontract motorcycle, and juvenile gangs to create civil disturbances, and control extreme right-wing groups to be

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used in disinformation psychological operations. This will reinforce the perception by the media and public that sitting governments are losing their grip on events, further accelerating the Norheim Syndrome and increasing our odds of public acceptance. . . ."

"You lawyers sure know how to package things," Bennie noted.

"No kidding!" Sid said.

"We'll use the next Stoneybrook," Bennie summarized, "to start massaging our agenda. Future Stoneybrook Steeplechase Reunions can be used for reviews of events since the inception of our project, a convenient way for heads of action teams to get together every April without attracting undue attention. Policy proposals will undergo priority change reviews as needed before we commit irretrievably to future actions. To reduce probabilities of errors and judgment, we'll have a secret vote--like a jury--with 34 minds. It'll have to be unanimous or we abort--pure and simple--with no if, buts, and maybes."

"Thanks, Bennie," Mercedes thought. "Maybe I've underrated you. It gives me a veto if you don't convince me. If I feel threatened, I'll covertly go to the FBI. Thanks, Honey."

Bennie knew only too well how staggering the task was. "Just the complex and interlocking constituencies Congress has locked into domestic spending and logrolling will drive our people up the walls. You guys inside the Capital Beltway know what I'm talking about. Politicians have used public choice theory to con the electorate into believing each individual receives a net economic gain and net economic costs are borne elsewhere."

"Bennie, you're talking like a professor," Harlo needled him.

Bennie laughed good-naturedly. "The bottom line is most politicians

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are crooks," he said. "They use the public's economic, math, and political illiteracy to screw them. Conservatives say we don't need rules--individuals can take care of everything--yeah, right. We see how with tobacco and guns, right? We need basic rules like on roads--everyone must keep to the right and stop at red lights. Rules have to be enforced to mean anything and be uniform, so all face the same burdens. Powerful individuals can't be allowed to buy government coercion to realize private gain."

"And, how many Liberals say raise corporate taxes? Corporations don't pay taxes. They can't. They're just legal devices to minimize stockholder personal risk. Only people pay taxes. Raised corporate taxes are passed on to the public by higher prices, just like increased utility or labor costs, but it sounds good to fools out there. Who owns corporations? People do. You do have a few big savers who do, and provide seed money for entrepreneurs to create new jobs. Most, however, are like your granny who supplements her Social Security with dividends so she doesn't have to eat cat food or live in subway stations. Smaller dividends mean decreased consumption and additional layoffs. Without dividend earnings, my parents couldn't have paid for the elder care they received in their late eighties--so would have been up shit's creek."

"Conditioned to the fantasy of immediate benefits and obscure future costs, the public has a hard time relating to our environmental imperative--that we consider up front costs and future obscure benefits. The phenomenon is not lost upon special interests, who prey on fears the electorate has for its jobs. . . ."

"Very astute, Professor Bennie," Sid noted. "Saving the environment requires a long-range evolutionary approach for the changeover from fossil

Chase-136-Virus Rodeo

fuels to clean electricity."

"Staging our surrogate ecological Pearl Harbor makes more and more sense. I really see no other way," Bobbie said. "Man has treated other species with abandon, giving himself rights to exterminate them just because they get in the way of his economic activities. We've missed the whole point! Economic activities are transitory. They can be replaced with other less harmful activities, while other species or life itself can't be replaced at all—PERIOD! Our highest moral obligation is to respect diverse life and fit economic activities into nature harmoniously."

"Amen to that!" The others chorused.

"Wow, Bobbie," Mercedes thought. "You've almost convinced me!"

Bennie sensed Mercedes might be coming around. Turning toward her, he smiled and gave an enthusiastic thumbs up signal.

* * * * *

The Holland Drop Zone

The Next Warm Day

Bennie and Revanne decided to have another go with Ken. Fester had checked the exercise schedule and was pretty sure they wouldn't be interrupted this time. Joe had operatives deployed uprange to alert Fester, by cellular phone, if any soldiers were coming their way.

Joe and Fester watched Ken arrive and stop at the treeline. Bennie and Revanne did their thing and on cue, Ken started to leap out, but felt a thin piano wire being tightened around his throat. Ken's last view was

Chase-137-Virus Rodeo

Bennie and Revanne entwined into detonating series of orgasmic shudders.

Fester completed his task quickly. With Joe, he carried Ken to his sports utility vehicle and drove off to a concealed spot off Manchester Road where two of Joe's operatives were waiting. One took Ken's car keys and after giving the house keys to Joe, drove off to Fayetteville to dispose of Ken's car through a mob used car lot, after its identifying data was altered. The other placed Ken's limp body in the trunk of his car and made his way to Spring Lake to a mob-connected crack dealer's body shredder.

Bennie and Revanne knew this was the last time. They walked in silence to her car and drove toward the Salerno DZ. They embraced, kissed passionately, and had their last erotic encounter—making it transcendent as best they could.

On the way back to Pinehurst, neither said anything. Revanne cuddled up against Bennie and wept quietly. In her driveway, they embraced once more and said nothing. Suddenly, she pushed away, and quickly went to her door without looking back.

A brisk rain shower over the DZs erased their foot and tire tracks.

5

Pinehurst, NC

Later That Night

Joe parked his car in the center of town, walked the few blocks to Ken's house, and entered with the keys. First, he lowered the temperature on the thermostat, and looked over the heating system. He removed the flue and saw it was already partially obstructed.

"That'll make it easy," he thought.

He had brought a bag of chimney residues from a contact who was a chimney sweep. He pushed the deposits into the chimney until they were obstructing the bottom flue access as normal excess deposits would, and replaced the flue connection.

Back in the main house, he drew the shades, then methodically looked around for diaries, computer systems, and video equipment. He turned on

Chase-139-Virus Rodeo

the computer, accessed the hard drive and back up files. He crashed those, then looked for hard copy. He found some and took those which might incriminate Revanne or other female reporters. What he found, he prepared to take with him. He found appointment books and in looking over these, found references to Ken's encounters with Revanne. Later, Joe found diaries full of graphic references to Revanne. All these, he placed with the computer hard copy, which nearly filled his first shopping bag. He then looked over the VCR and Ken's tape file. Finding that Ken, besides taping Revanne, had taped other female reporters at CNN, the Weather Channel, and the networks, Joe erased these and placed them in a second shopping bag.

"What a weirdo," Joe thought.

Suddenly Joe was interrupted by what sounded like a car driving up the driveway. His heart pounding, he looked from behind the shade. It turned out to be a car rounding a corner. Actually, Ken's house was fairly well concealed from its neighbors and the street. He found some timers and set these up with some table lamps. He reviewed his steps in sanitizing the house and, satisfied, left to go back to his car. A few feet from Ken's driveway, he met an old lady walking her dog. The shopping bags drew attention away from his medical examination gloves, which he forgot he had on.

"Good evening," he said casually.

"Hi," she replied as both went on their way.

"Thank God she was spacy," he thought, as he removed the gloves.

Three weeks later, after seeing that the night would be cold, Joe came back and turned up the thermostat to normal room temperature. He could smell fumes begin to waft through the house. Pleased, he left covertly.

Chase-140-Virus Rodeo

* * * * *

In the middle of the night, Fester and Revanne were awakened by sirens of fire engines going by.

Revanne got up and dressed. She took her press pass, videocam, and went toward where she thought the fire was.

Approaching a policeman, who had cordoned off the area, she showed him her press pass and asked, "Can I go see?"

The policeman called his supervisor and turned to face Revanne.

"I'm sorry, not just now."

"OK," she said. Revanne hung around watching the action and spoke with the local paper's reporter. He promised her details on the fire as soon as possible.

Revanne returned home and crawled into bed next to Fester. He turned, embraced her, and pulled her nightgown off over her head.

* * * * *

A Week Later,

at Fester's

Fester and Revanne were getting ready to go to Bennie's for the Stoneybrook reunion. As Fester was casually looking out the window to check the weather, he noticed a patrol car slowly going by their house.

"Come on, man. Don't get psyched out," he thought.

"Hey, Revanne, Su Su! You all about ready?"

Chase-141-Virus Rodeo

"Shit, there he goes again," Fester thought, as he saw the patrol car coming by once more. "I'm sure he looked our way. Come on, boy—steady."

Coming down, Revanne saw her husband intently looking out the window.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

"What's nothing?" Su Su asked..

"This damn cop, he's come by a couple times looking this way."

"So?"

"What?" Revanne almost stumbled down the last step.

"What's wrong with you two? Did you rob a bank?" Su Su looked at her parents and became uneasy.

"Nah! Come on girls, we're late already."

Going to the car, the parents faked nonchalance, but didn't fool their shrewd daughter. Fester and Su Su saw Revanne shake as she fumbled with the car keys.

"Here, better let me drive, Honey."

"Come on, Mom. What's bugging you? You act just like drug dealers at school when there's a shakedown."

Revanne was as white as a sheet. Fester went to the back of the car, opened the trunk, reached into the cooler, and poured Revanne a stiff drink.

"Wow, Mom!" Su Su looked at her mother, perplexed.

"She'll be all right, Honey." Fester hugged Su Su and held the door open for the women.

He backed out and they drove to Southern Pines in silence.

* * * * *

Southern Pines, NC

The Same Day

"Hi, Dave, is it on time today?" Bennie was calling the local Amtrak station clerk to check on the scheduled arrival of train number 82, the Silver Star.

"I expect it in ten minutes, Mister Alza. It's right on time."

Bennie thanked Dave and hung up. He shouted to Mercedes as he headed out the front door, "Back in 20 minutes!"

On board the Silver Star were the Dardens, DeChicos, and Freischtats. The train pulled up and the sleeping cars conveniently stopped right in front of the station. "Hey, Dave, you're two feet off this morning!" Bennie said, giving him a gentle punch on the shoulder.

Bad Basc was first to appear with Schatze close behind. "Hey, Bennie, you bad ass, it's party time!" The thin man's dynamic eyes riveted on Bennie, as the others spilled out behind him.

They all embraced and exchanged salutations—the stronger the epithet in the greeting, the stronger the bond between them.

"Hey, Bennie, you old bastard you, you're looking good;" Cactus Jack yelled as he hugged Bennie.

"How was the trip up?" Bennie looked at his friends, and then planted kisses on each of the ladies in turn, which they each enthusiastically returned. Even Maria was eager to see Bennie. He distributed rental car keys and hotel directions. "Here's your van and your rooms are ready at the hotel; we've virtually got the entire second floor. We'll see you at

Chase-143-Virus Rodeo

the house in a little bit."

"Everyone got their baggage?" Cactus Jack shouted, looking at each to be sure.

Bennie walked back to their Victorian house with his youngest daughter, who had driven the rented van to the station.

"Dad, you'd better not embarrass us at Stoneybrook with any horror shows," she teased.

"Embarrass you! After the Mola Club in Andraitx, and you kids staggering in at seven in the morning after all night at the disco, who's going to embarrass whom? You're a fine one to talk, Monique!" He gave his daughter a gentle nudge.

"Right, Dad, right!" Monique sighed.

As they turned left into the driveway, they saw Fester, Su Su, and Revanne having a beer with Mercedes on the screened porch by the kitchen.

"Hey, guys!" Bennie hugged them all. He noticed Revanne was shaking as if struck by an intense fever.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Grossman." Monique hugged and kissed them as well. "Hi, Su Su." They exchanged a high-five.

Monique went into the house to get more beers.

Su Su took the opportunity to study her parents, wondering all the time what was bugging them. She approached Bennie and asked, "What's with my folks? They sure act funny."

"What do you mean?" Bennie faked ignorance.

"They're real jumpy around cops."

"Oh yeah? Maybe they got a ticket or something."

"Hey, Dad. Phone." Monique said.

Chase-144-Virus Rodeo

"Whew, saved by the bell," Bennie thought. "Excuse me a minute, Su Su," he said.

Su Su sought out Mercedes and cornered her. "Oh, Mrs. Alza," she said.

"Yes."

"What's with my folks?"

Mercedes took a deep breath. "I don't need this," she thought. "First, they murder that Ken--not that he didn't deserve it—but now I have to cover for them. . . ." She looked directly into Su Su's eyes and replied, "I don't know of anything." Mercedes felt her stomach tighten.

"Oh, come now. If there's nothing, how come they freak out every time they see cops?"

"You have a point, but what can I tell you? I don't know anything about cops." Mercedes knew Su Su's curiosity would only grow. She had a time bomb on her hands.

Su Su noticed Mercedes breaking eye contact with her. She knew she wouldn't get satisfaction at this time, perhaps she should let them all get sloshed, then they might talk. She took Monique aside. "My parents are really freaked out by the cops. You should have seen 'em this morning—just because a patrol car drove down the street."

"Oh yeah. I bet they got nailed speeding—or do you think a DUI—ha, ha?"

"Oh, Monique. It seems worse than that."

"Maybe they're felons and their illicit past has caught up with them. I can see it now: local TV anchorwoman arrested for murder—ha, ha."

Monique suddenly realized that Su Su was terrified and that tears were streaming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Su Su. I didn't mean it." She hugged

Chase-145-Virus Rodeo

Su Su tenderly. "I'm sure it's nothing. I get antsy when I see cops on the road, or when they look at our doorway when they go by. I always wonder what they're thinking. It's been years since I grew my pot plant. And your mom being in the public eye, you know, I bet she's just overreacting."

Seeing things getting out of hand, Revanne decided offense was the best defense. She boldly stepped forward and said, "Hi, Monique. I guess you're looking forward to Stoneybrook! Your mother tells me that your brother is bringing his fraternity down."

Su Su noticed her mom's hands weren't steady.

"That's right Mrs. Grossman. Actually, it's just a few who don't have to study this weekend, and a pledge, who stays off booze to drive 'em back to Raleigh. Their designated driver system works as good as ours did in high school."

"The Florida bunch made it up all right, I guess?" Fester asked Bennie to draw attention away from Revanne's earlier trauma.

"Yeah, no sweat--Amtrak was pretty well on time. The Florida bunch went to the hotel and they'll be here soon."

Revanne pulled Bennie aside drawing attention from Mercedes.

Mercedes came over and said sarcastically, "I thought it was over between you two."

"It is, I've got something to tell Bennie."

"Oh, lovers' secrets? Or Su Su?" Mercedes brusquely turned away.

"Su Su? What's going on?" Bennie looked at her with suspense and sighed deeply.

Revanne pulled Bennie's head down and whispered, "Fester told me not to tell you, but we saw some cops cruising by our house repeatedly, this

Chase-146-Virus Rodeo

morning. Su Su's asking lots of questions."

"Shit! Fake it. Treat it as coincidence. Here take this drink."

Revanne gulped it down too quickly, almost gagging on it, and staggered around like a drunk sailor on liberty.

Mercedes came back, "What's with her?"

"She's a bit shook up over what we had to do, that's all."

"Yeah, right."

* * * * *

By the time they arrived at Bennie's, the Florida bunch were wearing shorts, T-shirts, and sandals. Some were just plain barefoot. The beer cooler was well stocked, including Krakus, a Polish beer Bennie had taken a fancy to while in Warsaw, and San Miguel from the Philippines. San Miguel, along with Vietnamese beer 33 (BA M'BA), was the staple of beer brawls in Vietnam. On this day, the men started with BA M'BA, in memory of their time there, and offered toasts in tribute to fallen comrades, whose names were on the Black Wall in Washington.

Mercedes, anticipating the men, played "Those Were The Days" on the stereo, and turned up the volume.

"To Andy Anderson," Basc said, fighting tears. These were always emotional moments.

"Bob Govan, John Strickland. High school classmates from '52 and '53 at Western," Bennie continued.

"Ernie Dickens," added Cactus Jack.

"Bob Mann," Revanne stood and squeezed Cactus' arm.

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"James McEwen," the others said in unison raising their glasses one more time.

"And John Weger." Bennie finished the toast and they all emptied their glasses.

The men had turned quiet, reflecting a moment on their missing friends, when Cactus Jack's booming voice broke the silence. "Hey, if it isn't the Doctor Strangeloves?" he bellowed, as his large frame settled onto a bench in the screened-in porch. He was looking towards a car just arriving with Albalisa and Mario.

"Hey Mario, Albalisa—want a beer?" Bennie called, as they stepped out of the car. Bennie held the screen door open.

"You bet!" The laughing couple eagerly accepted and soon everyone was reacquainted.

Revanne, Cactus Jack, and Mercedes passed drinks and snacks around the large airy porch. Everyone found rattan chairs to sit on, and placed their refreshments on benches positioned conveniently near the chairs.

Despite the informal fellowship, thoughts of the "game" stuck uppermost in their minds.

Maria broached the subject first. "Do we really need to do this, Bennie?" she wondered out loud, her voice betraying anxiety. She wrung her hands as nervousness set in. "You guys really mean it, don't you?"

Su Su and Monique looked at Maria and their parents, seriously concerned about their mysterious behavior. But then they remembered their fathers had been in Special Operations, and what with terrorists, the World Trade Center, and all. They decided to let their parents fend for themselves and

enjoy the party.

"Let's have another beer, Su Su."

"Yeah, thanks Monique."

Bennie grasped Maria's hands to steady them and noticed that her palms were sweaty. "Today it'd be impossible. If we tried now, we'd fail catastrophically because the public doesn't perceive the deep trouble the world is in; they're only concerned with the here and now."

As the others focused on Bennie, he summarized, "Consider this."

"First, people operate with time myopia. Immediate benefits tend to obscure future costs. For example, DDT solved immediate problems in the forties, but created bigger problems downstream!

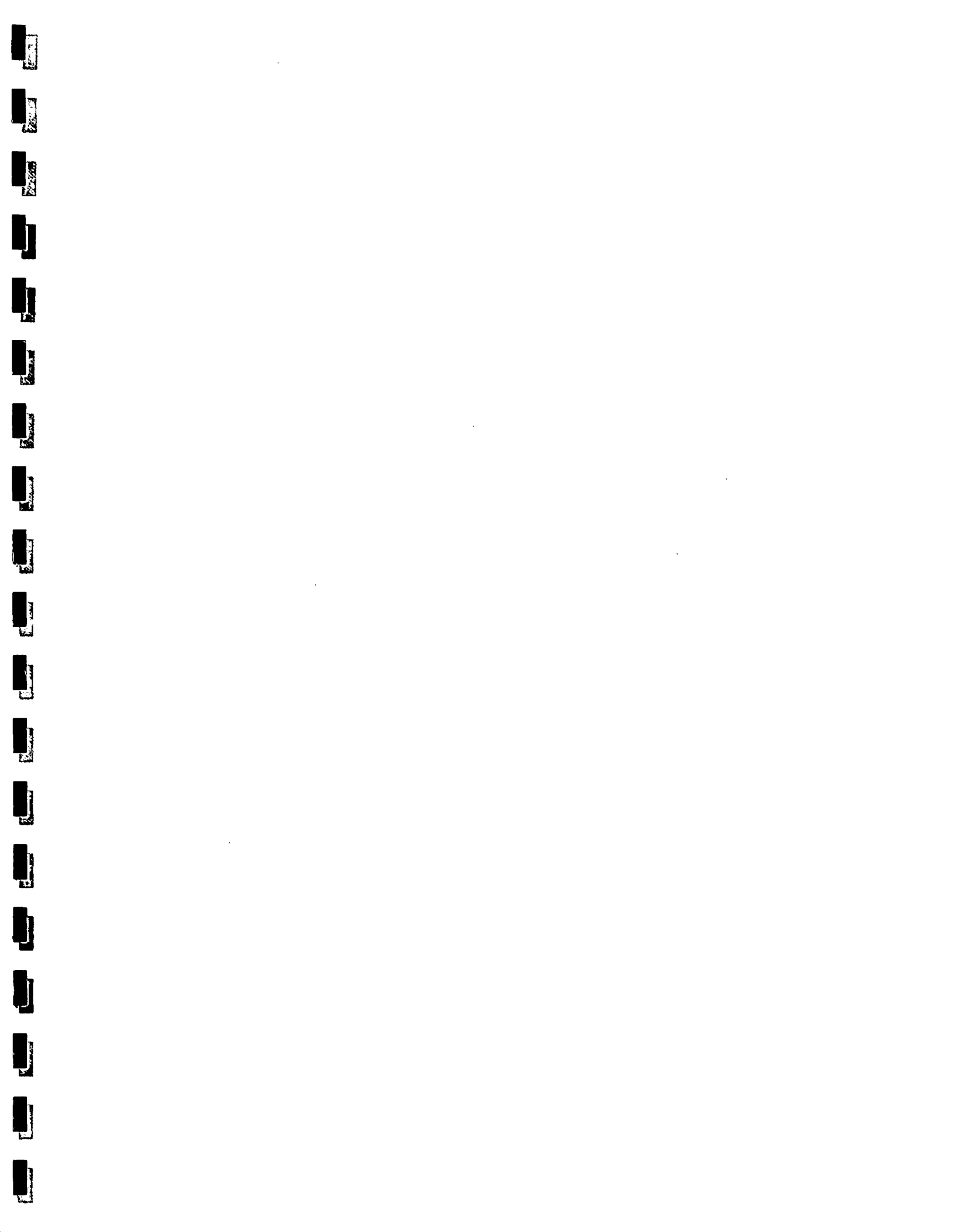
"Second: people tend to think of themselves as being above nature rather than just being a sub-system, like other species we see as being expendable. Religion has a lot to do with this attitude, resulting in our abuse of other animals and plants. It's foolish, we're interdependent with other species.

"Third: people have multiple access to many resources, making it difficult to control wastes and depletion. Fisheries, forests, the ocean, motor-cars, and agriculture are some. People can draw on these at will, using them for immediate needs, rather than reconciling with an eye toward the aggregate and future.

"Fourth: people have little awareness, a short attention span, and politicians exploit this with out-of-context sound bites which sound good."

Bennie enumerated his points like a professor lecturing to a class.

"Fifth: our environmental database is severely lacking, so we have a tough time forecasting credibly and proving a trend is dangerous. Furthermore, there's lots of pseudo-science, along with emotional, extreme, and



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anti-development demagoguery around. That's what makes it so difficult to convince the Joe Sixpacks of the world. What was the ozone layer like in 1657? We've no way of knowing. Fortunately, thanks to Hans Oeschger, of the University of Bern, we do have a database on carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases and their effects on earth's temperatures and climate over the last 160,000 years.

"And finally: we have the problem of dealing with vested property rights, investments in present fossil fuel technologies, jobs, and the needs of under-developed countries to upgrade the lives of their peoples.

"We'll have to work together, and share our advances with the rest of the world. We may have to give up a few conveniences and some wealth for the whole benefit of mankind, but our wealth and conveniences won't mean anything on a dead planet! Some regimentation will be necessary for our survival, hence the morality of an authoritarian government. Congress and the administration have been too generous to vested interests and their Political Action Committees."

"PACs?" Maria looked at him.

"Yeah, they're really a cover for bribes so special interests can buy politicians and pretend they don't."

"Come on, Bennie." Bill Darden said as he shrugged his shoulders.

"That's why we need an ethical autocracy." Fester emphasized by pointing his left forefinger towards the center of the group. "The change will require pain and suffering, but we can't make exceptions for each pet constituency. Regrettably, some people will lose jobs and lifestyles they prefer, but what's that against destruction of planet's life-support system."

"I agree, Fester," Bennie said.

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"It does make sense," Bill said, but showed his reluctance to accept Fester's thesis by looking up at the ceiling, away from the group.

"Anyway," Fester resumed. "The clock's ticking. To err on the prudent side creates economic turbulence. To err on the profligate side may very well exterminate all life on our planet." Fester added. "The evidence isn't absolute—there's no such thing, but correlations so compelling it's time to cut BS, and act in a systematic manner to preserve and generate additional economic wealth with clean energy and industrial processes."

All were impressed by his sincerity and purpose.

"But usurping the constitution?" Bill said. "One would have to be absolutely sure in order to be moral."

"Look, Bill," Bennie said. "There are no absolutes. If we wait until every living thing drops dead like flies—we'd be absolutely sure—wouldn't we? But a bit late—no? There are many variables and insidious processes influencing outcomes. We've got to make educated judgments on correlations in sufficient time to preempt catastrophe. Sure, there's risk of being wrong in acting. But the risk of being wrong not acting is unacceptable, in my view. I'm sure you agree with that, no?"

"That's enough for today," Bill said.

"Yeah, the shit will hit the fan soon enough!" Cactus agreed.

"Look," Anne said, pointing to the table at the back of the porch. "Mercedes made us some of these delicious Roquefort Fondues to eat with the baguettes she bakes."

Cactus Jack took a sample bite. "Umm, that bread is the taste of Paris," he said as he smacked his lips.

"She also made croissants! Bennie, you rascal, what did you do to

Chase-151-Virus Rodeo

deserve all this?" Bad Basc teased with just a touch of genuine envy.

"I think that after we've taken over, we should give Mercedes' bread to everyone to buy off the proletariat!" Anne said in a southern drawl.

"All's fair in love and war!" Bennie exclaimed. "Cam's here, and hey, look who must have left Norfolk at sunrise--Irv and the little Pervs!" He got up and opened the door for the new arrivals.

Cam McClusky, a medium-sized man with straight brown hair, and his petite spouse, Barbara, got out of their car with their teenaged twin boys, joining the others on the porch. Cam had been involved with Bennie in the Test Squadron with MTI (Moving Target Indicator), a Doppler-detection feature designed into RF-4C navigation radars to locate moving vehicles. Then a captain, Cam was Bennie's partner in this test, being in the aircraft while Bennie was truck convoy commander with five trucks simulating enemy vehicles. Cam was now a C-130 National Guard commander at Douglas Field at the Charlotte Municipal Airport; he would be at Pope AFB the following month, as his unit's commander for Volant Rodeo, the big annual international airlift competition.

Irv (the Perv) Smelkinson, graying and still handsome, his wife Frankie, and their lovely teenage daughter, Karen, had come by van. A naval officer sailing nuclear submarines, as he was a nuclear physicist, he'd also been skipper on a Poseidon nuclear missile submarine, then a staff officer at the Pentagon for SLBM (Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile) operations. He was proud of his high-speed Cigarette Boat, the Wellamo, and was a fit and gregarious man. Bennie and Perv had worked together, during Bennie's test squadron days, on inertial guidance systems for reconnaissance aircraft. Slender, dark-haired Frankie had been particularly close to Mercedes and sought her out immediately.

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All exchanged greetings with tight hugs and embraces.

Bennie went into the adjoining kitchen to get more ice cubes and glasses.

Maurice (Keg) Kogan and his wife, Ina, parked their rental car on the street, walked up the driveway, shortly followed by "Easy" Ed Crass and Ethel, his wife. Up came Harlo and Bobbie Sheppard as well. Cactus and Basc hurried to welcome them.

Since leaving the Test Squadron, Keg had become the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, the highest enlisted rank. Later he had retired in Dallas and was now a double dipper working in the Civil Service as the Chief Air Traffic Controller for the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) regional terminal approach control facility. They all settled in with drinks in hand.

"Cam," Basc shifted comfortably in his chair. "Are you and Keg coordinating airlift support, FAA traffic control procedures, and block clearances for radio silence operations?"

"You betchum, Red Rider! Volant Rodeo will fine tune our options," Cam replied, giving a thumbs up signal.

"Makes sense," Bennie said. "Volant Rodeo integrated with Virus Rodeo. I like that, Cam. V.R.X.X.!"

"Keg has pre-arranged sequences for transponders," Cam said. "Controllers will know which aircraft are which--while not unduly alerting anyone. He's to set up a network, within the air traffic control system, to move military transport aircraft about without detection or hazard to normal airline or other aircraft operations. Security will be tight--on the order of the Normandy Invasion. Soldiers will think they're on an exercise--only a few officers and NCOs will know the real plan before H-Hour."

"You guys are just too much." Maria said, concern written all over

Chase-153-Virus Rodeo

her face. Getting up, she filled her glass with ice cubes, then noticed Fester's glass was empty. "Want another, Fester?"

"Don't mind if I do, please." Fester handed Maria his glass.

Cam went on. "Keg's to develop networks within active duty NCOs, through trusted friends embedded in the Pensioned Sergeants League. He's planning aircraft movements with me and will plan V.R.X.X.'s command structure between commissioned and non-commissioned officers, active and retired. Volant Rodeo will be good cover. Starting next year, it will utilize units and tactics for V.R.X.X., so these become routine and no one becomes unduly concerned."

"That's awesome, Cam." Fester was impressed.

Perv turned to give Cam a thumbs up sign and then noted that Eric and Ingallil Nyström had just arrived.

Bill said grudgingly, "Boy, you got 'em all, Bennie. Now we'll control the permissive action links on nukes for sure."

Perv and Eric were to coordinate control of American nuclear forces by the cabal.

Eric, Bennie's classmate in flight school, had just retired as the last Commander of the Strategic Air Command, taking up residence in Denver after Omaha. He'd flown B-52s in Vietnam and then been named Deputy Commander for Operations at SAC where he worked on the SIOP, the Single Integrated Operational Plan, the United States' nuclear operations and planning document.

As the afternoon wore on, families already present prepared the picnic supplies for the next day's festivities at Stoneybrook. Actual mixing of ingredients would take place then, but for now they needed to gather folding tables, flatware and other essentials for the more than 60 people involved, including children. Today's loading up would enable quick departure tomorrow

Chase-154-Virus Rodeo

to beat some 40,000 spectators into the Walsh's farm. Then they'd relax in the sun at their favorite grassy rise by the winner's circle.

As Harlo was loading folding chairs in one van, he spotted Seth (Red) Bielski and his wife Terry, arriving in their rented car. "Just in time to help with the work," he called out, handing a folded table to Red.

* * * * *

That evening's southbound Silver Star arrived 15 minutes late, and Dave chuckled as he watched the group stagger on foot from Bennie's to meet the train. They were feeling the effects of Mercedes' Sangria.

"Good thing the hotel's only a half a block from the station," Eric said. "I'd hate to carry baggage much further."

"Yeah, we sure don't want to drive in the state we're in," Keg agreed.

The blaring horn from the Silver Star, as it crossed various streets working its way south through the center of Southern Pines, brought them out of their fog. On board, the Sobels, Babbaluccis, Fountains, and Zupnicks were feeling good after dinner in the dining car. Once the train came to a stop, the attendant descended, and set down the step platform. He went back up to bring down baggage, which had been stacked in the car's vestibule in anticipation of arrival, and waited to assist detraining passengers. Rhea and Lenn Sobel were first to appear.

Fervent embraces and kisses marked them as typical Stoneybrook crowds.

Rhea (née Ehrlich) Sobel had been Bennie's first teenage love. They'd been torrid lovers in high school. Her parents hadn't permitted her to date a Gentile openly, but Rhea had a highly imaginative and innovative approach

Chase-155-Virus Rodeo

to sexual encounters. Thus Rhea and Bennie had met each other surreptitiously for many years with rendezvous on the Glen Echo streetcar, and enjoyed passionate liaisons in Georgetown doorways. She, like Bennie, was ahead of her time and they had spent many glorious hours up 7th Street, in Washington's black section, listening to the Clovers, Big Joe Turner's Shake, Rattle and Roll, and Ruth Brown. They graduated from high school in 1954, Washington's last segregated class, and Bennie went on to Maryland.

Petite and perfectly-featured Rhea—the smoldering sexual volcano—still got to Bennie and knew it—very much relishing the fact—seducing Bennie at their 30 and 40-year class reunions in Washington DC.

Now in the Civil Service, Rhea was the director of the Social Security Administration's center at Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, one of their major data banks for tax and benefits administration. Lennie, her husband, was with the IRS and one of the few to have unlimited access to the master files at Martinsburg, West Virginia.

Mercedes, soberly biding her time, couldn't decide whether to give Bennie a delicate reality check, or accept it. Albalisa was harmless light play, Revanne had been a one-time affair, but Rhea, that was different, she was a permanent affliction.

This was the last cluster of the Gang of 34 to arrive. After checking in at their hotel, they would come to Bennie's for a nightcap.

* * * * *

The Alzas' Victorian home had four public rooms, including a very large living room which could hold them all. There the Gang of 34 gathered to

Chase-156-Virus Rodeo

relax. Pondering the immensity of their project, they cast glances at each other, reinforcing the inevitable reality.

Harlo mixed gin and tonics.

Irv offered a toast: "We swear to you, Simon, and our betrayed brothers on the Black Wall in Washington, that we'll be worthy of your sacrifice. We'll terminate the polluters who are destroying our Earth and lead the way to the 21st century with pollution-free electric mechanical energy."

They all joined in the toast with solemn enthusiasm. Few found the urge for conversation and they sat in silence, each absorbed in personal thoughts.

* * * * *

The next morning they made their way toward the grassy knoll near the winner's circle, laying out their spread on tables covered with Damask tablecloths enhanced by a silver candelabra in the center. An elegant buffet of Black Forest and Fleur-de-Lis hams was attractively arranged on blue Florentine serving plates as was blood-red roast beef, and assortments of savory cheeses and vegetables. In a white tuxedo, Cactus Jack, the bartender, was setting up crystal with his helpers Gabriella and Maria, both clothed in extremely short chambermaid's skirts, which displayed their lovely olive-hued thighs to full advantage. Bobbie wore a lace bodice ballet gown as did Mercedes, while Kathleen attracted the most attention in her crocheted vest over a semitransparent sports bra and London jean short. Anne, Revanne, and Frankie buttered the crisp crusted French bread while Ina and Ethel worked mustards and other condiments.

Chase-157-Virus Rodeo

With large parasols shielding the tables, they all started sampling the food in the shade, watching the crowd and loosening up. The Gang of 34 took in spring azaleas, wistarias, lilacs, and dogwoods standing out in the brilliant morning sun. UNC-Chapel Hill's pep band and the 82nd Airborne Division Choir provided some pre-race entertainment. By the fraternity van, Bennie's son and the brothers were teasing some wild-eyed youngsters with an iguana. Bennie joined the fun, telling the kids that with one bite they'd be dead, which caused them to run off in tears. That earned him a tongue-lashing from Mercedes.

Meanwhile, Joe Dab began to appraise the horses as Easy Ed took bets. Being very superstitious, Ed placed his bets on number 6, Easy Takeover, in the first race, associating him with the fate of Virus Rodeo. Ed truly believed that as 6 went, V.R.X.X. would.

The first group of horses paraded by the massed spectators along the retaining fence, with stewards, grooms, trainers, and jockeys all giving a vivid display of color. Fans prodded each other as they placed bets and put each other down good-naturedly. The horses' coats glistened as they nervously danced in front of the crowd, jockeys straining to keep them from bolting. There was a momentary lapse as the horses reached and entered the gates on the far side of the track, and then they were off!

From the start, Easy Takeover was out in front running very well. He gained ground on the first fence and Ed began to feel euphoric. "Maybe, Bennie's doing the right thing," he thought. The big horse eased over the second fence and the crowd began to identify with him. Into the stretch they thundered, out of sight but not out of earshot; at last they came around the final turn, jockeys whipping their mounts for that last ounce of effort.

Chase-158-Virus Rodeo

Ed's feelings about V.R.X.X. surged as Easy Takeover had built up his lead—now all that stood between him and the cup was the last fence.

As they struggled toward the last jump, the PA blared the sequence, "Easy Takeover running away with it by six lengths, Status Quo fighting hard to maintain second, and in third, Torpedo."

Going over the last fence, just a few yards from the finish line, Easy Takeover stumbled, dumping his jockey.

Ed winced as he felt a sharp pang at his heart. He was sure this meant a catastrophic end for Virus Rodeo. He broke out into a cold sweat. "We've got to abort this thing," he thought, his heart racing. "I've got to tell someone," his thoughts continued nervously.

The unmounted horse "won" the race, looking relieved, while the fallen rider rolled out of the way. The crowd roared and jumped with excitement as Status Quo crossed the finish line.

The Gang of 34, save for Ed, returned to their tables and blankets to continue partying until the next race.

Easy Ed stood motionless, spooked, and sick to his stomach. Ethel took his hand, noticed it was clammy as a corpse. She took him aside, later being joined by the Nyströms.

"Do you think Bennie's doing the right thing?" he asked, looking directly at Eric, the retired Strategic Air Command commander. "Eric, you once had bombers ready to go in response to a hypothetical Soviet nuclear attack on NATO. Weren't you guys ever uneasy over possibly having to kill all these people?"

Eric placed his chunky hand on Ed's shoulder for a moment. "I'd be lying if I told you we had no misgiving about vaporizing all those people.

Chase-159-Virus Rodeo

During the '62 Cuban Missile Crisis, when we almost went, I spent a lot of time talking to my priest about the morality of what we were doing. I went through the same emotions again during the '73 Yom Kippur War. In fact, at that time it was worse for me." The retired four-star general shuddered. Ingallil took his hand.

"As Israel began winning, the Soviet Union placed airborne units on alert and Nixon, who you must remember was under the gun at that time for Watergate, put us on nuclear alert. Rumor was the Soviets weren't really on alert, but Nixon was saying that to divert attention away from his Watergate troubles." Eric took a deep breath and looked momentarily at Ingallil. Ethel took Ed's arm.

"It wasn't like '62, when I was just an ordinary B-47 crew member. In '73 I was commander of a B-52 nuclear bomber wing. I hoped against hope we wouldn't have to go. I feel the same way now. I wish Bennie didn't have to use V.R.X.X.. I have the same sick feeling I had then because although I don't know much about ecology, what Bennie, Basc, and Fester have been saying makes sense, just like nuclear deterrence did during the Cold War. My church's bishops all signed on to just-war rationales against nuclear weapons, for nuclear freezes, and so on. But I knew we would have to use the damn things if the Soviets crossed the line, and I feel the same way about V.R.X.X.. Deterrence worked then. I hope Bennie's right and so far I trust what he proposes is the alternative."

"But there's no way out," Ed said. "With nukes, we knew we'd probably never have to use them. We'd just use them to psych out the other side. Here we don't have an option." Ed was clearly distressed as he looked directly into Eric's eyes. "V.R.X.X. isn't just a big stick to threaten

Chase-160-Virus Rodeo

with. We're going to have to use it for us to be effective. I don't know if I can live with that . . . or even allow them to attempt it."

Ethel grabbed Ed's shoulders and looked up at him. "Ed! You mean you'd betray Bennie?"

". . . Be-betray?" Ed stuttered. "Is Bennie wiser than the human race? Is he more important? . . ."

"Wait!" Ingallil shouted. "I understand your concerns, but let's think this through. . . ." She looked towards the main group and caught Joe Dab's eye. He was talking to Mercedes. In a panic, Ingallil motioned them over.

"Now, you wait!" Ed yelled and jabbed Ingallil harshly. He knew only too well what Joe Dab's duties included. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Please don't tell Joe," Ed pleaded. ". . . I'm just very troubled with Virus Rodeo." He took both of Ingallil's hands and held them tightly.

Eric, having gone through such anguish himself, was very understanding. Once more, he placed his hand on Ed's shoulder, giving a sincere squeeze and looked at the shorter man with magnanimity. "At the risk of sounding trite, these are indeed the kind of times that try men's souls. We're all very loyal friends. . . . We're like a big family and have been for decades. We can trust each other. Virus Rodeo is such a big project that if we didn't experience the doubts you do, we wouldn't be human." Ethel and Ingallil each took one of Ed's hands. Mercedes and Joe were now within earshot. Ed felt relieved. Yes, he was among loyal friends. He could trust them to understand.

"Hey, what's with you anti-social guys?" Joe prodded good naturedly in his Italian way.

"Ed's having an anxiety trip over Virus Rodeo," Eric replied, turning

Chase-161-Virus Rodeo

away from Ed and towards Joe Dab and Mercedes.

"Oh, is that all? Don't feel like the Lone Ranger!" Mercedes extended a hug and a big wet kiss on Ed's lips. "Welcome to the club! . . . Bennie and I have asked ourselves many times, over the last year, whether we were nuts and should go see a shrink." Ed and Mercedes' eyes locked. "I know how that poor bastard feels," she thought.

"Yeah? . . ." Ed said meekly, then earnestly probed Mercedes' and Joe's eyes for a signal. Both looked at Ed with great compassion. "You guys are good people," he said. ". . . Good People." He almost collapsed to the point where Joe and Eric had to hold him up. Ingallil took Ed's glass just as he was about to spill his drink all over his pants.

"Come on, paisano," Joe Dab said while giving Ed a tight hug. "Lighten up, man. Let's go back and join the others. . . . Why do you think we're spending so much time planning?"

"Yeah, come on, Ed." Mercedes took Ed's hand like a child's. "Don't worry about having doubts. . . . I've had more than my share lately—enough for the whole damn gang! I'm glad to see someone else join me! Misery likes company, right?"

Ed mustered a smile and a weak chuckle. "Thank God for you guys, thank God." Ed shook slightly as he fought back tears.

"It's going to be tough to get through these early stages," Eric joined in. "That's why Bennie is leaving so many safety options to abort the project long before we have to commit irrevocably."

"Yeah, I guess I wasn't thinking straight." Ed's face regained its color and composure. "You're definitely right about the abort points, Eric."

They rejoined the main group who were partying between races.

Chase-162-Virus Rodeo

"Look," Mario exclaimed, laughing merrily, "the brothers are giving Monique a beer shampoo and the TV news crews have caught it!"

"Five—that's WRAL in Raleigh; it'll be on the six o'clock news. VCR time! . . ." Bennie laughed.

After four more sets of races and a sunny afternoon of camaraderie, the Gang of 34 prepared to go back to the Alzas' home.

* * * * *

Evening found the gang at Bennie's for the initial organization of the task ahead. He had to review action and planning priorities to focus the group, so work could get under way in the two main areas of organizational logistics and agenda. The next year would be spent with individuals and small groups meeting to form committees for research. They wouldn't all meet again until the next year's Stoneybrook.

Once more they filed into the living room. Some sat on Oriental carpets, some on sofas, others on armchairs, and a few on straight-back brown leather dining room chairs, which had been brought into the living room. Most couples sat together, holding each other like teenagers at a slumber party.

"Go ahead and enjoy the food. I'd just like to review a few things before we break up, so we can focus our next year's research and organization effort," Bennie began. Some opened bottles of champagne and set up plates with teriyaki-marinated hamburger, beer-batter tempura onion rings, and a vegetable assortment. TV tables were placed conveniently around the living room. Mercedes dimmed the lights so the group could relax in the glow from the fireplace.

Chase-163-Virus Rodeo

Bennie was sitting on a straight-back leather chair next to a Regency table with its Limoges table lamp turned on to illuminate his face.

"It's a pity that after some 200 years of our Constitution," he said, "it's become necessary for us to usurp it. Revanne and I have structured our operation so it can be aborted if government gets its act together to avoid the ecological catastrophe," he said with a touch of hope. "The historical track record favors governments of institutions as opposed to personalities. You need only to look at what happened at Tiananmen Square, and results of the ex-Soviet Empire to justify the doubts many of you have." He glanced at Mercedes, who gave him a gentle smile.

"Our government, designed as a government of laws, has been nit-picked to death by lawyers and special interests. They have an iron grip on decision making. For example, the NRA feigns that, A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, means arms should be sold over-the-counter, without restraints or safeguards."

"Don't lobbyists do some good?" Keg Kogan asked. "I mean, no one can foresee all negative consequences of legislation. People from the street need to point them out, in particular, those directly affected."

Bennie looked at Keg and replied, "Theoretically, yes. There's nothing wrong with good-faith lobbying. In fact it's essential for democracy for the very reason you pointed out, Keg. But, you must admit it's gone way beyond that. Well-regulated, by definition, means safeguards and common sense, not unrestricted sales of semi-automatic weapons to middle-school kids." His eyes scanned over his listeners and he emphasized his statements by pointing his left forefinger directly at various of his associates at random, settling at Goatroper, the retired New York cop. "Yeah, Goatroper."

Chase-164-Virus Rodeo

"Two hundred million unrestricted arms means big money and big payoffs, which many in both parties are only too glad to accept. No rational person objects to sane collectors, farmers, hunters, or sportsmen having guns. But 15-year old thugs, come on, give me a break."

The NRA has a point on protection," Keg said. "Look at all the restaurant shootings."

"Keg, I'm glad you brought that up," Goatroper said. "The NRA has a point about protection, but they're the ones who created the problem. Firearms over the counter almost guarantees some idiot will go out and shoot people at random in public places. I concede some individuals should be permitted to carry concealed weapons to counter this, but only if properly licensed, trained, and formally deputized--that's what well regulated means."

"Amen to that!" chorused the others while clapping their hands enthusiastically.

"I might add," Wanda said. The Second Amendment really means the states have a right to bear arms, not individuals. No federal court has ever ruled that individuals have a right to bear arms, only the states so they can maintain units like the National Guard. The NRA, of course, wants the world to believe otherwise because of the big money involved."

"By Stoneybrook, next year, we need to have in place a plan to infiltrate the NRA, gun sales conduits, gun clubs, gangs, cults, militias, fringe groups, applicable conventions, data bases, rallies, and so on. As part of the initial H-Hour shock--so people know we mean business--we're going to take out gun trafficking networks so that at H plus 1, only legitimate gun shops will be left, and weapons will be sold only to licensed customers."

"There, I can't disagree," Keg, the retired master sergeant said. "I

Chase-165-Virus Rodeo

understand the need for Alba's DNA behavior profile system now."

More applause followed, complete with foot stomping and cheers. Goat-roper obliged and took many bows. The group needed some hilarity.

"Congress will protect groups who make it worth its while with fat PAC and campaign contributions," Bennie said. "That means laws will be meaningless—a compromise here, one there, and so forth. It's like saying truckers don't have to stop at stop signs because delays cut their profit margins. And besides, local and state governments deliberately understate pollution levels so they don't lose federal highway building funds, alienate powerful constituencies, or have to enforce existing EPA regulations."

"Oh Bennie, you're too much." Rhea said.

"We have to opt for clean air and water within reason," Bennie said. "The handwriting's on the wall—Germany's Black Forest, surface ozone caused lung lesions, and the higher elevations of the Blue Ridge Mountains."

Lennie spoke up, "We must prioritize. Only the most important and dangerous hazards must be removed. We can't drift toward nice-to-have criteria. Unreasonable regulations and Gestapo type enforcement will turn people off." The balding man looked around and then back at Bennie. "Out west, they're already up in arms."

"You're right, Lenn!" Bennie said. "Our economic impact teams must factor in alternative meaningful jobs. Prudence and common sense suggest we pad things in favor of life-support."

"How can you tell?" Lennie asked.

"Let me give you an analogy," Bennie replied. "I flew airplanes for many years," he said with a grin. "We had redundant sets of instruments to cross check and see if all were saying the same thing. If one would go

Chase-166-Virus Rodeo

in the red, but the other four stayed in the green, we'd ignore it, for the odds of four independent instruments screwing up in the same manner were remote." He saw several of his former pilot friends nodding their heads. "Here we could be quite certain the problem was with the gauge, not the engine. However, if four went in the red, then we shut the damn thing down immediately before burning the wing off!" His audience gave him supporting laughter, relieved at his sudden light-heartedness.

"Well, ecological instruments are each, in their own way, telling us: pay attention, dummy, the yellow caution light is flashing and you better change your ways for there's no rewind on this reel! Carbon dioxide levels in ice cores tell us: you're in the red! The ozone hole tells us: you're in the red! Global deforestation, acid rain, and fog are telling us: you're in the red! Desertification around the Mediterranean is telling us: you're in the red! And as on a doomed and burning aircraft, circuit breakers on the panel are starting to pop right and left. We've hit our limits on clear cutting, erosion, ocean dumping, land dumping of hazardous chemicals, careless dumping of nuclear waste, land desecration for more and more roads, and so on. Indicators are telling us: MAYDAY! MAYDAY! ABANDON THE STATUS QUO! YOU MAY HAVE ONLY 40 YEARS LEFT BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!"

Dramatic though he had been, Bennie didn't feel he was exaggerating—and from the looks on most of his friends' faces, nor did they.

"Well, let's not be Chicken Littles!" Bill said. "But I would agree that democratic processes don't encourage formation of constituencies for sacrifice, long term environmental planning, fiscal or monetary discipline, or bearing of upfront costs for future obscure benefits."

Bennie reviewed, "To justify our actions, we have three major priorities

Chase-167-Virus Rodeo

to address:

"One, our honesty and morality,

"Two, the environment,

"And the integrity of our economy.

"If these are not secured, then everything else is academic. Autocracies survive on ideology or fear; ours will be one for an environmental ideology—which is credible, for we don't want to needlessly repress people even if we have to eventually phase out their gasoline cars."

"Come on, Bennie!" Bill was shaking his finger. "Isn't TRFIS calculated to cause fear?" Some in the dim light looked back at Bill, conceding he had made a solid point.

Bennie fumbled for a moment, taken by surprise. Looking for the right words caused more delay and Bennie could feel momentum slipping.

Suddenly, he regained the initiative. "Yes, there'll be fear, but, we won't be associated with it. The fear will already be there when we come on the scene. People will be desperately seeking relief. By being credible, we're not going to come across as Gestapo storm troopers, but as sensitive saviors."

Bennie felt confident he'd regained his authority. Just to be sure, he delivered the icing. "Mercedes and I were in Bastogne recently. We looked around the Battle of The Bulge battlefield and museum. Interestingly, there were lots of Germans around and I suddenly felt very sorry for them. They could never feel as I did. Suddenly it hit me. I was having an immense high knowing we'd been the good guys there. Imagine how Germans must feel. Well, in 50 years, I want our descendants to feel the same way about Virus Rodeo as I did in Bastogne. I swear to you," he said with heightened

conviction, "we're not going to do anything immoral."

Bill looked at Bennie and nodded his concurrence.

"I'm concerned about what happens to the economy after we make the necessary changes," Rhea said. "I don't want classic central planning. I want market forces to operate as freely as possible, Bennie. We mustn't micromanage individuals or tramp over their rights any more than necessary to save the life-support system."

In the dim light, Bennie suddenly became aware of Rhea's presence. Their eyes locked for a moment. She began to be a distraction, a distraction much harder to cope with than Bill. He looked away, but knew she had him. The playful Rhea would await her chance. She sat up straight in a ladder-back chair, and took a deep breath, displaying her assets to advantage. She pulled her miniskirt up slightly to tease Bennie further.

Bennie tried to look away from her and cleared his throat. He paid scant attention to his hamburger and sipped champagne. "We—we'll accomplish our changeover by means of corrective taxes and subsidies, preserving market mechanisms as the driving force. Our Draconian measures will methodically shape the system away from fossil fuels towards clean electricity by 2025, to give the economy as much time as possible to adjust and become self-sustaining."

"We'll use public policy to steer behavior away from cars to public transport, as America did the reverse in the twenties. We can increase gasoline taxes, parking fees, tolls, and so on to shift economic behavior, but if we don't induce a psychological shock, we'll have a rebellion on our hands—even if public transport is attractive and convenient. We use economic math models to optimize outcomes—the shock takes care of psychological

Chase-169-Virus Rodeo

inducements. First, we upgrade electric train systems so they're perceived as user friendly, then we downgrade the auto infrastructure."

"We're adjusting the ambient economic environment, not individual transactions. Changing from fossil fuels to clean electricity--that's policy. Government, through its duly constituted police powers, has a public responsibility to maintain general welfare and encourage merit behaviors. We ignored waste products in the past. They weren't adequately considered in cost and pricing decisions, thus actually distorting the market. All we're doing is considering social and economic impacts of waste by-products in pricing and cost decisions, removing distortions from the marketplace so correct supply and demand cues are exchanged between buyers and sellers. At the same time, we must consider the total system--economic and social costs. What good are cheap economic costs if we have to pay higher taxes to finance shrinks, prisons, courts--resulting from bitterness or unemployment? And hide in our homes behind multiple sets of locks because of violence on the streets? People want security, not growth per se."

"Exactly, professor!" Rhea lip-synced, blowing him a kiss.

Bennie adjusted his glasses and said, "In the 19th century, government encouraged settlement of western states and territories by opening public lands, encouraging extension of railroads by land grants, and so on. In the fifties, after being impressed by Hitler's autobahns during World War II, Ike initiated the interstate highway program which eventually shaped economic behavior away from rational urban centers, encouraging urban sprawl. Continuation of this policy has led to overinvestment in road transport, triple truck trailers, massive traffic congestion, gridlock, air and water pollution, and unemployment in many cities. And while trucks and cars got

Chase-170-Virus Rodeo

government-subsidized highways, railroads had to pay capital, upkeep, and tax expenditures on their right-of-ways, putting them at a massive competitive disadvantage."

"Very stupid," Rhea said. "It's caused a shift away from rails to road transport. With air transport, it's crazy to crowd skies with carbon dioxide producing shuttles when clean, high-speed electric trains can do a more efficient job with less noise, space, pollution, and hassle? Just look at French TGVs and German ICEs. We really have to re-order incentives to reverse Ike's error. Jobs will result from converting interstate highways into four-track, high-speed rail corridors—mitigating what's lost when roadside businesses close. It'll require people to produce, string up, maintain electric-train catenary cables, and produce and drive new trains. We'll need people to produce and maintain electric personal cars, revitalize cities, clean up and landscape scars from fossil fuels, lay superconductors, repair durable goods, and so on—all this providing millions of new jobs."

Bennie looked at Rhea and said, "That's an A for you, sweetheart!"

Mercedes winced.

Rhea looked at her laughing colleagues with aplomb. "Retrofitting current diesel-electric locomotives with pantographs and thyristers for electronic converters, should keep some folks off the streets."

Rhea chuckled, hoping others would. They did.

Bennie concluded, "The private sector can accomplish most of the conversion, though government will set strategic objectives for environmental harmony. We'll provide direction, but let the genius of the private sector and market mechanisms implement most, if not all, of the new order, through rational decision making as long as we maintain social cohesion. It's hard

Chase-171-Virus Rodeo

to quantify concepts like social cohesion, thus markets fail in that area. Social cohesion is a fundamental responsibility of government."

"If it's all so logical—why is it so hard to convince people?" Bill asked. "I'd rather convert behavior through education than force."

Bennie said, "Too many people have a vested interest in present systems. We can't even pass a ten-cent gasoline tax increase in Congress! Education is too unpredictable, slow, and indulgent. . . ."

As he said slow and indulgent, Bennie saw Rhea seductively mouth those words as he said them. He had to fight hard to maintain his train of thought.

"Th—the real ecological Pearl Harbor has to be avoided at all costs, for obvious reasons."

"Slow and indulgent, I like that," Bennie could see her lip-sync once more. "Her 58 years hasn't hurt her looks," he thought. "She has the verve of a 36-year-old. Her competitive rowing sure helps." He made a supreme effort to concentrate, an increasingly losing proposition. He turned away from her, but felt her within. His mind spun back 41 years. . . .

Bennie and Rhea, barely 17, had just come back to Georgetown after another exhilarating day in downtown Washington, DC. They got off the number 20 streetcar on P Street. Immersed in the center of her neighborhood, they were three blocks from Rhea's house and night had fallen. Her parents, lawyers, were away on business. Feeling silly, they skipped merrily to her house, hand-in-hand. She climbed over the brick wall into her courtyard, quickly followed by an ardent Bennie. Let the games begin:

One: They made their way to her back door. She unbuttoned her blouse

Chase-172-Virus Rodeo

revealing her strapless bra bulging with its contents. She slowly raised her long fifties vintage skirt to her waist, teasing Bennie. She took her time. She released her bra, letting it fall to the ground. Rhea leaned against the corner of the doorway and tantalizingly inserted her hand in her panties. . . . Bennie couldn't stand it anymore. Her eyes locked on Bennie's fingers, his focused on hers, undulating beneath her panties. This game was to see who achieved the crest of passion first, Bennie was the usual victor. . . .

"No way with democratic processes, huh?" Maria asked.

Bennie came out of his trance, shook his head and said, "I—I don't argue the benefits of peaceful transfer of power, given we're around to enjoy it. Th—there exists a committee on earth sciences through the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Look at your handouts, note the organization chart on pages eight and nine. This body is fine to obtain most baseline data since some of you are members."

As he said body, his attention diverted to Rhea once more, who was licking her lips as she lip-synced body. "That bitch, I must not let her do this," he thought to himself with determination. But he drifted off, once more captured by her spell of 40 years . . .

Game Two: Same as one except the goal was to be the last one. Bennie was the usual loser.

Three: Same as one, but realize oral sex for orgasm. Bennie hesitated,

Chase-173-Virus Rodeo

but overcome with desire, seized Rhea and planted on her an intense open-mouthed kiss. She responded urgently by slashing his tongue with hers, and slavered Bennie's mouth with sweet voluptuous nectar. The world seemed to spin their locked bodies. Frantically, they pulled each other's remaining garments off until only air separated them.

Bennie froze, observing the fury of Rhea's passion, hardened nipples, and choreography of lust. She craved him, and he, her. Slowly, he shuffled back to the doorway, gently propped her against the corner, and drove his mouth unmercifully into her pubic hair, driving her mad. On many a night, her shrieks of delight caused more than one window of neighboring apartments to light up. This game usually ended in a tie . . .

Confused and drowsy, Bennie took a deep breath and said, "I'm—I'm—we need to take immediate action to circumvent nuclear terrorism."

Mercedes gave a start. "Nuclear terrorism?"

"Saved again," Bennie thought, realizing he'd been losing it. Nuclear terrorism would divert attention from his losing battle of wills with Rhea.

"Yeah," Fester responded, "with all the ethnic battles around the old Soviet Union, some gangs might want to sell some nukes for hard currencies. It looks like plutonium is already for sale."

"That sounds bad. Aren't there controls?" Mercedes asked.

"The old Soviet Union is ripe for anarchy, I'd say," Bennie affirmed.

"Maybe the Cold War wasn't so bad after all," Revanne said with a clear note of sarcasm. "At least, things were under control."

"I'm not saying we've all the answers. I don't think disruptions need

Chase-174-Virus Rodeo

be as bad as one might think. We'll do exhaustive global studies, with objectives to hold onto economic wealth and lose as few jobs as possible, trying to achieve a one-for-one conversion. Our proposals must be common sense, not arbitrary—promote results, not regulations—protect people, not agencies—and their logic must be self-evident, like stop signs. We can't aim for perfection."

As he said perfection, his attention diverted to Rhea once more, who was licking her lips as she lip-synced, "I'm sexual perfection."

"I wonder what her youth pills are?" he thought. "I know one thing, she adores sex—she never stops." Bennie cleared his throat once more, but couldn't stop looking at Rhea. There she was, smoldering like a volcano ready to erupt in passion, fingers caressing her bare thighs. He felt pressure. "I can't let her do this," he thought, trying to hold firm. But less obedient parts of his mind were imagining the ecstasy of peeling off her garments one-by-one. First her blouse, then her strapless bra, then raising that miniskirt to her belly button, finally tearing off her lace thong bikini—that is, if she was actually wearing one, and burying his mouth into her pubic hair. She relished that, he knew. She always said it was like butterflies fluttering all around her most private parts, driving her crazy towards the edge, and him teasing her by pulling back, intensifying her anticipation, until, after more excursions to the pleasure precipice, he pushed her over the edge, unmercifully unleashing an orgasm within her which caused her to convulse repeatedly, out of control, and gasping for breath. Oh, how he enjoyed turning her on; that was his biggest turn on.

Was she wearing one? He didn't know, and became momentarily preoccupied with that question. He brusquely looked away from her, but knew she wasn't

Chase-175-Virus Rodeo

fooled. He was like a shark being slowly reeled in, but she'd give him a little more line for now.

Bennie pleadingly looked at Rhea as discreetly as he could, and flashed a time-out signal. She just looked at him impassively. "Bitch," he thought.

"We—well, whatever, but we've got to go with what we've got. The supply-and-demand price system has served the West well, but it has deficiencies which people have ignored for the benefits of our mechanical toys powered by fossil fuels. Supply and demand function through short-term economic signals and benefits, not long-term costs—of chemical wastes, for instance. We derive immediate benefits from petrochemicals, only figuring in immediate costs—labor, capital, raw materials—to determine price. Third-party impacts such as terrorism, seepage, persistent waste effects, health costs, and destruction of other species don't enter the equation."

"It's sure complicated, isn't it?" Bill said.

"I know. These effects don't go away simply because we choose to ignore them. On the contrary, we've created a hidden iceberg of immense proportions threatening to collide with our fossil fuel Titanic! Nature isn't private property, so few come forward to defend it as they would an auto plant in Detroit or a ranch in Texas. The whole system is coming unglued. We must change course while there's still time, hoping it's not too late!"

"We have to articulate our program very succinctly," Revanne emphasized. "Under no circumstances should we have a credibility gap—absolutely none. Our program must make so much sense."

"We mustn't exaggerate," Bill said. "Cars do have positives: flexibility, autonomy, and pleasures like cruising down lonely pretty roads in early morning mists. We've got to have a balanced view about this, not tyrannical,

Chase-176-Virus Rodeo

or people will tell us to shove it."

"He's right," Fester said. "In fact people can still have personal cars. Light weight materials and new hydrogen fuel systems could ensure it, and help sell the conversion to the public."

Bennie noticed Rhea signaling her impatience. She wanted his body.

He gritted his teeth to address the issues, ". . . We—we need an interface of dynamic macro-nonlinear, integrative models' studies of climate, hydrology, biogeochemical, ecological, earth history and processes, solar, and human interaction with global macro and micro economic impacts of phasing out fossil fuels by 2025."

Lenn raised his hand, "Wait one, all these \$10 words!"

"Thank God for Lenn," Bennie thought. "I'm sorry, I'm tired" he said.

Peeved, Rhea went to the kitchen to fill her glass with ice cubes and straight vodka. She would win in the end, just like when they were 17, she had no doubts. She slunk back to her chair, belting down the vodka.

Bennie did his best to ignore her.

"If we don't have confidence in our models, we'll have to abort Virus Rodeo—we can't shake up the world without almost certain confidence that it's justified."

"I'll go along with that," Lenn agreed.

Mercedes called, "Hear, hear!"

Bennie took a deep breath, and continued. "Our third area of concern, is erosion of our economy due primarily to the fact it's based on huge mountains of debt. And our loss of manufacturing base, and career jobs. It's almost as if we're having a liquidation sale and discounting an increasing number of assets to generate cash flow. All this to maintain illusions of

Chase-177-Virus Rodeo

prosperity for political expediency. It can't be sustained indefinitely. Government will inflate to put off the day of reckoning, as Germans did with reparations after World War I. Demagogues, to score cheap political points, are already trading on politics of racism, hate, and envy of our creditors to instill resentment in the public as its standard of living erodes. We, on the other hand, can use redundancy of defense engineers and facilities to develop sinews for the new clean electric economy."

He couldn't help himself. His eyes swept towards Rhea, who was sitting quietly biding her time. As he looked her way, she curled her tongue. Holding his gaze, she pulled her skirt up a few more centimeters, pushed her middle forward very slowly, raised and hung one leg over the arm of her chair, and fully accentuated the sensual curvature of her incomparable thigh. She slowly caressed her inner thigh—her hand disappeared under what remained of her skirt—she closed her eyes and entered a state of rapture.

Bennie's tone became hoarse as distraction overcame him. His brow furrowed as he strained to concentrate and speak coherently. He forced a mixture of concepts, "We need to upgrade and electrify Amtrak, like Europe on railroads. Somehow, we find \$200 billion to cover S & L deceit, but not a mere \$500 million for Amtrak. High-speed electric trains should be primary, with airlines only for longer stages. TGVs can run Washington-to-New York, or Boston; we don't need to waste airports and scarce airspace on shuttles. Roads can feed containers by electric trucks to trains and people by electric cars." Bennie scanned the room. "You all look anxious. Let's call it a day!"

Bennie's gaze shifted toward Rhea. He went toward her and quietly placed

Chase-178-Virus Rodeo

a chair next to hers and sat down. He looked furtively around to see if Mercedes was about, his heart pounding. She was nowhere to be seen. Rhea became aware of his proximity.

Bennie made a halfhearted attempt to address business. "Rhea, we need to start accumulating fake Social Security recipients for funds."

Rhea curled her tongue again, moistening her lips. She was breathing hard. Her free hand unbuttoned the top buttons of her blouse and Bennie unabashedly followed the swells rise and fall.

She replied quietly, "My computer scam 'll give us bucks to finance everything," she looked directly at him. "Moles, operations, and . . . " she raised her eyebrows, "anything else you desire." Her gaze shifted down to her parted legs. His followed and she gently teased him on.

Whenever he got near Rhea, it was like they were in high school again.

"You want?" she lip-synced in a trance-like manner.

He nodded yes.

"Well, you can't have," she whispered.

Sexual pressure between the two was building up perilously.

Bennie sat transfixed.

Seeing that she had effect, Rhea ran her hand up and down her inner thigh. Bennie felt his pulse throbbing in his trousers.

She slowly withdrew her finger from her upper inner thigh, raised it to her mouth, and licked it seductively. Returning her hand to her inner thigh, she repeated the motion, and offered it to Bennie, who passionately inserted it in his mouth, and kept it there for the longest time, sucking on it like a child with a lollipop.

He looked at her salaciously, and said gently. "You bitch, you bitch."

Chase-179-Virus Rodeo

She clasped his groin's projection, and smiled. "And enjoying it."

Her undulating fingers caused him to quiver.

"Shame . . ." she lip-synced, faking embarrassment.

Rhea returned to business, "Lenn'll take care of IRS covers. He's got unlimited access to Matinsville's Master Files."

Bennie composed himself to conclude the evening. He turned the lights on brightly and waited for the group to settle down, then announced, "This has been a fruitful Stoneybrook."

Mercedes, who hadn't missed a thing, looked at Frankie and rolled her eyes.

"Girls will be girls." Frankie whispered as Mercedes managed a contorted smile.

"That bitch!" Mercedes lamented. "I've thought of pulling the plug on this," she blurted out in a sudden Freudian slip.

"Oh, my God, Mercedes." Frankie was stunned. "For God sakes, don't let anger motivate you. I know how you feel. Guys are such tomcats. They'll fuck anything in a miniskirt. Why do you think they call my Irv—the Perv? Be that as it may, Bennie and Revanne have come up with something well worth considering. If all Bennie has done is screw around with Rhea—you're a lucky woman—I wish my Irv was that constrained!"

"Yeah, right."

"Honey, you have to decide only on the merits of V.R.X.X.—not his sluts. Believe me, I've had to do that with Irv. I know he loves only me, but now

Chase-180-Virus Rodeo

and then—he says—he needs a bit of rough. . . ."

"I'd say, though," Bennie continued, "the inertia of democracy and the fact that we can't seem to get beyond fossil fuel or Stone Age thinking, forces us to take over. It doesn't matter whether a West Virginia miner works digging coal or stringing catenary; what matters is this person's gainfully employed in an ethical livelihood. Most are unconvinced we have to give up fossil fuels because of its economic uncertainties, but we can mitigate that if we do our homework honestly. We just have to consider everyone's needs and present a program that's sensitive to that and not our egos."

"Amen to that," Irv chorused quickly.

"To the 34," toasted Harlo, rising to his feet.

They rose, filled their glasses and swayed to "Those Were The Days" by the Baja Marimba Band. They downed their glasses. It was too early to retire for the evening. They broke out some Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Rolling Stones, Beatles, and Ray Charles favorites for dancing, finishing up with a group dance to "The Flesh Failures/Let The Sunshine In," from Hair.

* * * * *

Pinehurst

May, The Same Year

Fester was mowing the front lawn. Revanne, wearing a thigh-high mini,

Chase-181-Virus Rodeo

sat quietly on the front stoop with a drink in hand. Fester stopped momentarily, "I'm worried about Joe Dab's fears about Su Su giving our plot away."

"Surely, he wouldn't blow her away—would he?"

"You never know with these mob guys. I've told Bennie to instruct Joe to bring us in before he does anything at all regarding Su Su. I'd rather go to jail, even the gas chamber, before I'd let anything happen to her."

"I'm with you on that. She's been asking a lot of questions. We've got to give her convincing answers."

"Yeah, she's a bright kid. Today's teenagers don't take BS for answers. Oh, well. . . ." Fester started up the mower again and turned to mow the next row.

Suddenly, he was startled. Revanne quickly turned to face in the direction of Fester's concern. Her stomach stiffened as she made out the unmistakable shape of a police car parked in a driveway a few houses up the street, given away by the glint of sunlight off its windshield. The policeman swung and trained his binoculars on her, right at her. She froze in terror, fainted, dropped her drink, and the glass shattered in a million pieces.

The police car rapidly accelerated out of the driveway, kicking up dirt, and drove right up Fester's driveway, siren screaming.

"Shit," thought Fester, as he observed the cop calling on his radio.

A converging siren could be heard in the distance.

"He's called back up," Fester thought, and felt chills down his spine.

The cop leaped from his car. Fester expected him to draw his revolver. Instead, he rushed to Revanne and gently cradled her until an ambulance arrived. "I know her," the cop said, smiling. "She's on TV. I like her reports." He looked up. "Is she sick or something?"

Chase-182-Virus Rodeo

Relieved, Fester meekly smiled back, his heart pounding like a tom-tom.

". . . I—I think it's summer flu, those damn air conditioners," Fester stammered.

The EMT people did their thing, giving Revanne a thorough checking over. Meanwhile a crowd of neighbors had gathered. One man yelled, "It's Revanne Grossman of Channel 11. Something's wrong with her."

Murmurs wafted throughout the dozen or so people gathered on Fester's front lawn. An individual raised his videocam, but the policeman gently, but firmly pushed it down, saying, "Leave her alone, she's just weak from flu." He addressed the crowd, "You all go home, it's nothing, folks. Come on, now." The crowd dispersed.

The cop faced Fester, and said, "I guess they don't have much excitement around here, and she being a celebrity and all." He smiled compassionately.

The medics carried Revanne into the living room, and propped her up comfortably on the large sofa. She started to come around, her chest heaving with uncontrollable sobs.

"You'll be all right, ma'am," one of the medics said with authority.

The Brooklyn woman, recovering quickly, smiled graciously.

A policeman went to her and said, "May I have your autograph, please?"

"Sure."

Medics left some pills with Fester, and after giving him some instructions, motioned to the police and they all left, the police resuming their intensified patrols of the neighborhood, but out of sight of the Grossmans, leaving them to guess what they were really up to. Was it them or something completely different? Fester would have given his right arm to know.

Su Su, who had remained out of sight, rushed to her mother. "You OK,

Chase-183-Virus Rodeo

Mom?"

"I'm a little weak, but fine, dear." She hugged her frightened daughter.

"What's with you two?" Su Su glared at both of her parents. "Why are you so freaked out by cops?"

Su Su was met by stone silence.

"What have you all done?"

"We haven't . . ."

Fester cut off Revanne, increasing Su Su's suspicions. With the sang-froid developed during years of experience in dangerous military special operations, he faced his daughter and calmly said. "Honey, I'm involved in a psychological operation and your mom's freaked out like she was when I went to Iran, back during Carter's administration, to rescue our embassy hostages. A contract may be out on me, but I can't give you details just now. You'll have to trust me and be patient with your mom." He could look at her without blinking an eye for actually he hadn't lied, just edited the truth, an old practice in special operations.

Later, when they were alone, Fester faced his wife and said, "Hey, we've got to get our shit together. We're silly being spooked this way."

* * * * *

Boston, MA

August, The Same Year

Joe Dab and Gabriella found themselves walking northeast on Hanover

Chase-184-Virus Rodeo

Street in Boston's North End—otherwise known as Little Italy. They had left their pizzeria on Blackstone, threading their way through traffic from the Sumner Tunnel to the relative calm of Hanover. Saturday was the religious festival of Festa Madonna Della Cava. Hanover would be closed to auto traffic beyond the fire station and Ristoranti Lucia, allowing multitudes to pour out onto the street for a big party.

Joe and Gabriella needed a party. The responsibility of having to put people to sleep had weighed heavily on their minds since Stoneybrook, and now that the infrastructure was in place, they needed a break. Joe had just finished negotiations with some mob families who had agreed to the terms of Gang of 34 as proposed by Joe and Gabriella. The mob would cooperate and their hit squads, body shredders, contacts with motorcycle gangs, and other operatives would be placed at the disposal of the Babbaluccis. In fact, the last link had been sealed at Lily's, in the Quincy Market shopping area, just before they started walking toward Hanover. Gabriella's shapely legs, tanned to caramel color, contrasted with her white short-shorts while her braless breasts quivered beneath her white Luftwaffe T-shirt, much to the delight of scores of male pedestrians.

Strings of green, white, and red light bulbs were strung above Hanover, illuminating various vendor carts of Italian sausages, roses, Sicilian meatballs, and other delights. After buying slushes, they tried shish-kabob, and Joe presented Gabriella with a red rose.

A sudden piercing siren, from a rescue squad ambulance trying to thread its way through the crowd, drew the concern of the joyful revelers. It finally stopped in front of the Madonna's effigy and the medics rushed to a distinguished looking lady, obviously in great distress on the sidewalk.

Chase-185-Virus Rodeo

Fortunately she was conscious, although breathing in short spurts, but CPR didn't seem necessary. She was strapped to a stretcher and taken to the hospital.

Gabriella and Joe made the sign of the cross, as did many others in gratitude to the Madonna for sparing the poor woman, who had been overcome by the excitement of the festivities. The rock band started up once more, drowning out an elderly woman playing Laura's Song on her accordion in a doorway. People of all ages milled about, including a mob "soldier" watching the street from a doorway, making sure no muggers or others with bad intentions had any ideas of disrupting the festival.

Lovingly and painstakingly decorated, the Madonna's effigy occupied a position of honor on Hanover Street's east side, framed by brilliant naked light bulbs and donations of every denomination were pinned to the backdrop.

Gabriella and Joe each pinned a \$50 bill, asking the indulgence of the saints in their search for solace from the split loyalties tugging them. They were torn by the unique ethical predicament of being basically decent honest people, who were descendants of mob members, and party to a plot to overthrow the democracy of the United States.

"Hmmm, that poor lady gave me the creeps," Gabi shuddered. "Don't you think God is sending us a sign, Joe? Are you sure what we're doing with Bennie is the right thing?"

"We're doing the right thing, but I'm worried about Su Su. She may know too much."

"Get real, Joe. What does she know? She's just a kid."

"A very bright and inquisitive kid."

"You're not thinking about a contract? You do that, and it's over be-

Chase-186-Virus Rodeo

tween us, I mean it. I'll kill you myself."

"Don't worry. Bennie's told me to do nothing. Nothing at all. He wants to know anything I might do with this before I say or do anything."

"Thank God for Bennie. I'm sure Fester and Revanne can handle Su Su."

"Look, Honey. I don't like even thinking about this. I just hope she doesn't find out anything—or at least has the sense to trust and have faith in her parents." Joe sighed deeply.

"All this may be for nothing. I mean, there might be some real environmental candidates in the next election."

"Regardless of who wins, Gabi, it won't change our basic fossil fuel driven economy. Only the ecological Pearl Harbor that we've talked about, and then it'll be too late. In fact, all they talk about is upping car fuel efficiency standards to 40 or so miles per gallon—a Band-Aid applied to a hemorrhaging gusher of greenhouse gases. Fossil fuels have to go."

"Still," she said. "I think we should wait—see if a new administration wins and see what it does."

"I do look at the incident as a sign, Gabi. The lady was spared even though clearly in need of help. We're distressed, standing here agonizing over our coup d'état and having just consorted with mob figures." He pointed to the Old North Church beyond the Paul Revere Mall. "We're preparing to usurp the United States' Constitution . . ."

"So what's the sign, Joe?"

"It's quite evident, Gabi. Even the best possible candidate democracy could present for the environment can't get us off fossil fuels, can't do away with gasoline cars—not without a catastrophe. An ecological catastrophe we must avoid at all costs."

Chase-187-Virus Rodeo

Walking south to Saint Leonard's, they found a pew where they knelt and prayed they were doing the right thing.

Sacramento, California—October

The Recce (Tactical Air Reconnaissance) Reunion was to be a good forum for Bennie. He would sound out the multitude of personal contacts he had in the retired military reconnaissance community regarding the Earth's life-support system and future prospects for the environment. From these encounters, he would gauge sentiment toward an autocratic approach to the public policy requirements of solving this problem. As he found solid recruits, he would quickly extend the network within the retired community. Handlers would be developed to link over with active forces to infiltrate the massive federal apparatus. Bennie wanted the nucleus of the retired network to be in place in a couple of years and from that time, personnel could be stabilized in field positions for the Virus Rodeo window of opportunity from May, 199X on. Bennie and the others would feel out their friends about Virus Rodeo. The Saturday night social would be the time to initiate overtures.

Chase-189-Virus Rodeo

* * * * *

Bennie and Mercedes arrived Wednesday to take in Lake Tahoe on Thursday, and the Sabastiani Winery on Friday. They freshened up in their room before visiting the hospitality room. There they would determine who might be approached for environmental sentiments probing, considering the recently watered down Rio Global Warming Treaty. Not tipping their hand at this time, they'd ferret out those who might be brought into the network's secondary layer.

Bennie wanted an idea of the geographical distribution of recce-retirees and whether a significant number lived in key retirement communities. A 24-hour open bar served as a good indicator of who could hold their booze, essential for Virus Rodeo members. Parties were a good way to assess who might be insecure or have other personal problems. Bennie wanted to weed out those who might later compromise the operation and have to be eliminated.

Entering the grand ballroom Friday night, casual night, Bennie spotted Colonel Russell Holmberg and his wife, Maggie, sitting with Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Townsend and his wife, Pam. There were two empty seats, so Bennie and Mercedes made their way toward their table, threading their way through 400 or so table-hopping participants, jostling about as they recognized individuals they hadn't seen in years, some in decades.

"Glenn, Russell," Bennie yelled above the blaring Dixieland band, going to town on Saint James Infirmary.

Noticing they hadn't heard, Mercedes leaned over Pam Townsend and nudged her.

Chase-190-Virus Rodeo

"Oh, Mercedes," Pam said, eyes lighting up. "My God. How long has it been?"

"Shaw back in '66," Mercedes said. "4416th Test Squadron."

Getting up, the Townsends and Holmbergs hugged the Alzas and invited them to join their table.

"Twenty-nine years since Tân-Són-Nhút, you old rascal," Bennie looked at Russell, smiling.

"Damn, Ben," Russell said. "All we need to make this like our Saigon orgies at the Fuji, are girls and VC outside the wall, ready to lob in their grenades."

"Easy, big fella," Bennie cautioned, noticing wives picking up on girls. "Maybe we'd better get in line while the food is still warm."

"Good idea," Russell understood Bennie's diversion ploy.

Free flowing booze had put everyone in a very good mood, reinforced by rekindled friendships. Most were Vietnam War veterans and camaraderie was very strong, a very fertile ground for Bennie and his associates trolling for Virus Rodeo recruits.

The six came back to their table to join three other couples already there. Like other clusters of 10 to 12 finding seats at large tables with friends of yesteryear, they engaged in hearty gossip.

"So Ben, what do you think of Clinton?" Glenn said.

"Well, he was supposed to be an environment president. Yet, Amtrak is being cut back, road building continues. . . ."

"What really hurt," Russell said. "Was that draft dodger presiding over the 50th anniversary of D-Day at Normandy."

"And that two-bit staff of his stealing stuff from the carrier," Pam

Chase-191-Virus Rodeo

said. "They're like a bunch of school kids."

"I think they're disarming too fast," Glenn said. "Granted the Cold War is over, but look all those ethnic rumbles over there."

"And their 30,000 loose nukes," Maggie added. "God only knows how secure they are."

"I'm worried about that," Bennie admitted. "And the environmental mess the Soviets left behind."

"Gore was supposed to be environment," Mercedes said. "That's why I voted for them."

"You guys voted Democrat?" Glenn looked at Bennie, shaking his head.

"Temporary insanity," Bennie managed a weak smile. "I don't think I'm going to vote anymore. Republicans want to give guns to everyone, pollute everything—Democrats steal money from productive people to give to losers. The bottom line's nothing really changes, just the BS marketing spins."

Nearly all at the table nodded their heads in assent.

As the evening wore on, the Alzas table hopped making retiree contacts and even chatted with some active forces individuals. Finding many within both communities who could be trusted, they felt infiltration might be easier than they'd dared to hope. Frustration and latent disillusionment with the federal government were far more pronounced than expected this early in the game. "Better Virus Rodeo than right-wing militias," Bennie thought.

The formal sit down banquet was Saturday night in the grand ballroom. Friday's crowd repeated the previous night's activities except this time, their talk competed with the din of a combined jazz and rock orchestra. Bennie's group sat at two tables as they merged into the merry gathering.

Chase-192-Virus Rodeo

Bennie, distinguished in black tie, was sure that he had the most beautiful escort of any on his arm. Mercedes wore a black velvet cocktail dress that dipped low in front and showed off the remnants of her summer tan to advantage. She radiated confidence and seemed pleased with her impact on the crowd. Bennie was certain that the evening would be a success.

Bit by bit, other members of Virus Rodeo at this reunion updated Bennie on their accomplishments since Stoneybrook. Easy Ed had already completed new curriculum for ROTC students in order to condition them and others toward the Norheim Syndrome. Keg Kogan had organized the infiltration of air traffic controllers through the new union, and Cactus Jack was having good luck with his mole initiative.

Red and Harlo had equally good news about developing the data link system to energize the DNA time release trigger for TRFIS. Harlo was becoming a regular at Mario's, in Research Triangle Park, and Mario showed him, through computer assisted design, a preliminary virus he hoped to have ready for breadboard testing in 18 months—Zairan Ebola embedded in Giardia lamblia to lengthen its killing cycle, disguised as the long awaited nature immune response to man's abuses of the environment.

Harlo's software virus project was proceeding along on schedule; he'd already infiltrated many computer networks and had successfully penetrated Xerox Encryption Units, devices approved by the National Security Agency (NSA) for installation on personal computers to prevent tampering with the highest security classified Level 1 documents. Harlo had designed a virus that circumvented the XEU's ability to wipe clean its coding instructions and sound alarms when unauthorized personnel penetrated files.

He'd also been successful in countering RSA Data Security's technique

Chase-193-Virus Rodeo

of two-way encryption—keys linked by mathematical formulae and controlled by digital signatures. Along with his other viruses, it enabled him to create an operation to disrupt telephone service in the Chicago area, including air traffic control at O'Hare International, the world's busiest airport. He planned the test for early the next year.

In the confusion and din of the party, Harlo took Bennie aside and proudly reported, "The test will be disguised as an overload breakdown with our software virus invisibly embedded into the entrails of the phone company's switching computer program. It'll be in an obscure set of lines of instruction in the software, and our virus will cause switching equipment to saturate fiber optic lines. They'll actually melt down and cause a fire at a remote unmanned telephone hub we've picked which services a multitude of network switching links."

Bennie looked at Harlo with admiration. "If your idea works, Harlo, it'll validate our theory that phone systems are the Achilles Heel of world hi-tech networks. Phone lines don't just carry conversations between teenagers, but computer links, television signals, air traffic control information, money transfers, and on and on. With your countermeasures over XEU, RSA Data, and others, we can literally control the whole country with a few well placed software viruses." He paused to slap Harlo's back. "God, Harlo—you may have hit the jackpot—you and your NSA moles. What have you picked as your target?"

A fiendish grin crossed Harlo's lips and then he spoke in a foreboding tone. "The switching unit east of Clarendon Hills, Illinois, is the gateway we selected; there are only five like it in the Chicago area. It's unmanned, has a primitive fire suppression system, and controls 50 switching

Chase-194-Virus Rodeo

centers, so this should really wreak havoc!" He nodded his head and as his eyes met Bennie's. Bennie showed clearly how impressed he was as the implications of Harlo's initiative began to sink in.

Harlo continued. "Even if they build in redundancy as corrective action, they'll think only in terms of fire, so it won't do much good because our software viruses can be infiltrated at will throughout all systems. I just want to see what one meltdown does, if it'll really do the trick; I'm convinced it will."

Bennie said, "Yeah, I'm sure it will. This, with Mario's TRFIS, will give us the covert leverage we need to pull off Virus Rodeo. This is incredible, Harlo—really astonishing!"

Satisfied with Harlo's progress, Bennie then turned towards Cam. "So, how's it going, eh?"

"Shit," Cam replied. "I wish I could give you good news like Harlo, but I'm afraid that setting up the network within the Guard and Reserves is proving to be a real bitch, more of a problem than I'd anticipated," he said dejectedly. "As I got started, I suddenly realized that I hardly knew anybody in those organizations, and unless I get a break, it's gonna be a long uphill battle. They're mostly in state, inbred good old boy types. They're very suspicious of outsiders, and have virtually no cross over to retirees and actives. I need help," he sighed. "I guess I'll need to revise my strategy, but it'll have to be quick, because I need the Puerto Rican National Guard to train our Hispanic moles."

"OK Cam, we'll get on it!" Bennie was prepared to give his old friend all the support that he could muster.

Wanda the "Witch" also hadn't made significant inroads at Justice, having

Chase-195-Virus Rodeo

to tread carefully because lawyers had a tendency to look for conspiracies. "Besides," Wanda explained, "they're having it pretty good with their deep pockets litigation lotteries, so they have no real reason to feel bitter or betrayed by the status quo."

* * * * *

Later, Pinehurst, NC

Revanne and Fester, driving up 15-501 from the new K-Mart, had just rounded the Pinehurst traffic circle when they noticed him. The policeman was following them three car lengths behind in an unmarked car. Suddenly, the police car approached them and its dash light started flashing.

Momentarily, Fester thought of accelerating, but stopped, his heart pounding.

Revanne turned as white as a sheet. "Why did we ever get involved in this thing? Why?" She asked bitterly, barely containing herself.

"We've got to keep our eyes on the total. Let's not fall apart," Fester said, doing his best to keep his cool.

Through the rearview mirror, he watched the cop slowly get out of the patrol car and walk up to his car. Fester turned off the ignition, rolled down his window, and patiently awaited events, hands visible on the steering wheel.

"May I see your registration and license, please?" The cop asked.

"Here you are, sir."

Slowly, the cop examined the documents, walking back to compare the

Chase-196-Virus Rodeo

license plate number.

Watching the cop enter his patrol car through the rearview mirror, Fester saw him talk on his radio.

"What's he doing?" Revanne started to look back.

"Don't," Fester said. "Just sit tight. I'm watching him on the mirror. He's talking on his radio."

"Oh my God."

"I'm sure it's routine. Look, Honey. He doesn't know us from shit. He's probably just checking to see if our car's been reported stolen or something. Uh oh, he's getting out and coming back. At least, he's not drawn his gun." Fester poked Revanne and smiled.

Back at the window, the cop smiled and said, "Your left brake light is burned out, Sir."

"Oh, really? Thanks officer." Fester faked nonchalance, his hands in a cold sweat.

"Good night, Sir—Ma'am."

"Good night, Officer," Fester said as he rolled up his window and started the car. Nervous, he kept the ignition on too long, grinding the gears. He quickly released the ignition, paused to calm himself, and then looked carefully for conflicting traffic before pulling out.

They drove in silence for a while. Later, Fester said, "Honey, we're really being silly about this. Routine events are freaking us out. At this rate we'll be ready for the funny farm next time."

"I know, I know," Revanne said as she cuddled up to him. "We've got to steel ourselves. I sure don't know how, though."

"Well, let's not freak out next time. Let's not do anything until some-

Chase-197-Virus Rodeo

thing actually happens. Otherwise, we'll give ourselves away needlessly."

Revanne looked at Fester, her blue eyes betraying vulnerability, not flashing their usual Brooklyn self-assurance.

"I know, I know--easier said than done," Fester said, as he gave her a comforting nudge.

* * * * *

Washington, DC--November

Arriving in Washington around five, the Alzas took the Metro, changing at Metro Center for the Blue or Orange Line toward Rosslyn. Bennie enjoyed the Metro because he could indulge in one of his favorite activities--people watching, and city people were especially fascinating in their diversity. Lost in his thoughts about Amtrak being trimmed, he suddenly realized the train had stopped for no apparent reason inside the tunnel between McPherson Square and Farragut West.

"I don't think this is such a bad way to commute," Bennie said. "It beats driving gridlock on Key Bridge."

"It's cheap too."

"And government distorts true costs of driving by tying up expensive land with free parking for its employees."

"Didn't Carter try to change that?" Mercedes said.

"To his credit, he did." Bennie acknowledged. "But resistance was so fierce he had to back off. Fester's right."

He leaned over and whispered in Mercedes' ear, "without the shock, we

Chase-198-Virus Rodeo

don't stand a chance, even with this nice subway."

Passengers fidgeted in the stopped train, exchanging glances of insecure resignation with others who were complete strangers. "Must be a red light," Bennie reassured his wife. "No big deal! Interesting how uncertainty bugs people. Fester sure knows his PSYOPS stuff."

"Perceptions are warped," Bennie thought. "This is a nonevent, but people think it's a catastrophe because we're stopped en masse. Yet, we kill tens of thousands and injure millions on the highways, and no one gives a shit." He looked around the car again, made eye contact with some, a no no in New York, allegedly. "I hope Alba's behavior models are correct, or we are fucked," he thought. His eyes and a pretty young thing's, two seats away facing him, locked. She smiled invitingly. He scanned her sweater's contents and her legs, barely concealed by a tiny thigh-high miniskirt.

Mercedes didn't miss a thing. "Damn," Bennie thought. "Why are wives so damn vigilant? All I'm doing is looking at her to pass the time."

The PA's announcement of a slight delay caused by a jammed switch in Rosslyn, where the Orange and Blue Lines separate, broke the trance. After about a ten-minute wait, the train got under way, picking up speed after Foggy Bottom only to slow down dramatically into the descending left turn below the Potomac. As Bennie listened to the whine of electric motors braking, he could feel air pressure build up in his ears.

Looking at Mercedes, who was looking away from him at the tunnel's dark void, he yawned to release pressure as an announcement came through for Rosslyn with the option of changing for the Blue Line to National Airport. The train came to an abrupt stop and the Alzas exited in the momentary chaos of pushing passengers and stepped onto the long escalator to the surface.

Chase-199-Virus Rodeo

Against their faces, they felt the rush of wind sucked into tunnels as the moving steps rose up the steep incline. Posting farecards through control gates, they turned right to walk across Fort Meyer Drive toward the Key Bridge Holiday Inn, which was convenient for the Metro and walking across the Potomac to Georgetown's M Street Mall and other activities.

"Mercedes, I'm sure TRFIS will work to condition people to give up their cars if we work it right. Look down there at Key Bridge. Bumper to bumper, ridiculous. You can't tell me the Metro isn't better. Besides, we see all the faces that make up our human community."

"Girls, you mean, Bennie." Mercedes looked at him, annoyed. "No wonder you like public transport."

"Maybe that's the way to market it to leches like me? Pretty legs are better to look at than someone's tail pipes."

"Oh, Bennie. Give me a break. I'm staying at the hotel, tonight. I don't think you and Rhea want me, anyway."

"Yeah, we do." Bennie's insincerity was betrayed by the tone of his voice.

"Sure. Go out and ravish her and get her out of your system—once and for all. Ravish her on the subway for all I care—and be done with it."

* * * * *

The Alzas were to meet Rhea at seven, at the Kennedy Center's Roof Terrace for appetizers of shrimp tempura before Swan Lake at eight. Lennie had been called away by the IRS and Mercedes had a "headache," or so she said. Rhea and Bennie ended up at dinner alone.

Chase-200-Virus Rodeo

Like two young lovers, Bennie and Rhea sat at a candlelit table for two in the main restaurant, looking out over a breath-taking view of Washington. Momentarily absorbed in looking at Memorial Bridge and the Lincoln Memorial, Bennie didn't immediately realize that Rhea was holding his hand to the side of the plates until she stroked up his leg with her toes.

Knowing he was aroused, she smiled wickedly when their eyes met.

"Good thing the tablecloths go to the floor," he thought. "If I'm not careful, she'll spread eagle on the table right in front of everyone. Damn that bitch. Damn her."

Without her toes missing a stroke, Rhea said, "Rosalie is a Foreign Service major at Georgetown University's Graduate School."

"Your kid's already in graduate school. Looking at you, one wouldn't think you'd have kids out of high school, much less in graduate school."

Rhea smiled, then said, as she removed her foot from Bennie's chair. "I'm saving you for later. I'm wet just thinking about it."

Bennie gagged on his wine.

"Rosalie likes her mentor, Doctor Nicole Sarrocco, who really knows her post Cold War global power and ecological politics."

"Oh, yeah? Keep an eye on Sarrocco, maybe we can use her later."

Rhea smiled.

At 7:40, they made their way down to the Hall of States toward the Opera House, passing by the inspiring giant bust of John F. Kennedy. They showed their tickets and turned right, and went up the stairs to take their seats in Box 24, immediately overlooking the stage. Most of the seats in orchestra and the two balconies were already filled with seated viewers scanning the crowd. The orchestra was tuning up and when the conductor arrived, silence

Chase-201-Virus Rodeo

descended, lights dimmed, and the overture began.

"I'm glad we ended up alone," Rhea whispered in Bennie's ear then flicked her tongue seductively around his ear, sending flashes of energy through his body. "It feels like we've always been together," Rhea whispered as she snuggled up to him. "It doesn't seem like 41 years . . . since we were in high school . . . I sure enjoyed our class reunion." Her eyes confirmed the pleasure as she slowly slid her hand up his thigh.

Fighting the rush he felt, Bennie tried to divert his attention by fumbling with his program. "Look Rhea, we shouldn't be doing this." He tried to say it with conviction, but knew his real feelings had overwhelmed his good intentions.

People around them thought to themselves, "Yeah, right!"

She continued to caress his thigh. Her hand moved higher. Bennie's hands gripped the armrests so tightly his fingertips lost sensation.

People in adjoining boxes began to watch the two going at it. Some shushed them but to no avail. Bennie and Rhea were oblivious to their surroundings.

"I want us to wet." She bit his ear tenderly and whispered, "Our juices will mix." Her warm moist tongue flitted about his ear.

A prim lady, in the next box, leaned over to her husband and whether out of envy or disgust, said loudly enough for the lovers to hear, as if they cared. "Look at those two, they just let anyone in these days."

"Why don't you two go to a motel?" The husband said, leaning over toward Bennie's box.

By now, Bennie and Rhea were the principal attraction in their immediate area, causing profuse giggling among nearby spectators.

Chase-202-Virus Rodeo

"Oh God," Bennie gasped, then relaxed, giving in to her. He gasped again as she tightened her vise-like clasp of him. He felt her heavy breathing against his ear and turned toward her. He placed one hand authoritatively on the inside of her thigh, advancing it. He discovered she was drenched with pleasure. He gently probed and tenderly stroked.

Meanwhile, as her deft fingers searched to work their magic, he buried his face in the curve of her neck, losing himself in the taste of her tender flesh, musk of her perfume, and sureness of her touch. His pulse quickened and his other hand tightly gripped the armrest. They both shuddered simultaneously and then relaxed.

During intermission they went on the roof terrace to look at the monuments of Washington and watch planes approaching National Airport. Warmer than usual for this time of the year, they were able to stand outside without coats. They drifted to the west side of the roof where they were virtually alone. As they looked toward Key Bridge and Rosslyn, Bennie contemplated Rhea, her blouse fluttering in the light breeze, who had signaled her insatiable desire for him only an hour-and-a-half ago.

He stood behind her and slid his hands around her waist, then slowly and with certainty, moved to fondle her breasts. Her nipples responded to his touch. She rested her head on his chest, as he kissed her tenderly below the ear. She slid her hands up Bennie's arms and cupped her small hands over his as he fondled her more urgently. He began working the buttons of her blouse.

She turned toward him and reached for him, successfully arousing him once more. She whispered, "Can we get to the ledge? . . ."

Chase-203-Virus Rodeo

Bennie leaned over the hedge-like barrier at the edge of the roof and looked down at the wide ledge, about three feet below. "I think so," he said. "I'll go first and help you down. . . ."

Bennie climbed over the small hedge, carefully made his way down to the ledge, and motioned for her to follow. As she climbed over the hedge, he caught her calves and slowly let her slide through his grip until he had her by the thighs. He set her down onto her feet and they lowered themselves onto the ledge.

"Good thing it hasn't rained," joked Rhea, then gasped as Bennie slid a finger inside her.

"Plenty wet down here," he teased, though his voice sounded husky.

Soon he penetrated her in earnest with small forward movements and half retreats to heighten her sensation of his entrance. She kissed and bit softly at his throat and matched her movements to his rhythm. His own small orgasm earlier now enabled him to keep his release at bay while he brought her to a frenzied fulfillment twice prior to reaching his own uncontrollable orgasm. Sweet fervors rose insatiably, drawing rushing bodies together, spinning, swaying and then he felt her undulating contractions and then, like the aftershock of an earthquake, a series of smaller, intensified contractions until, finally, peace descended upon them both.

* * * * *

The next morning, the Alzas' Metro emerged into daylight just prior to Arlington National Cemetery and through bare trees, they caught the view of Washington to their left. They couldn't help but be moved as the early

Chase-204-Virus Rodeo

morning sun bathed the white buildings in an orange wash. The sequence of airliners approaching National was already in full swing, and Bennie reflected that the pilots must also be enjoying quite a view. At that moment the train went back underground.

"Here we are, right under the Pentagon and they have no idea what we're up to." He feigned concern, "How's this for infiltration?"

After a stop, the train reemerged into the daylight and made its way toward Crystal City and the airport, where they would change to the Yellow Line for King Street in Alexandria. While waiting for the next train, Bennie decided to grade landings at National.

"Jesus—look at that one," he laughed. "Better call the fire trucks—tower!"

"Come on, Bennie—people are looking." Mercedes was impatient with Bennie. She remembered the evening before, when he didn't seem terribly distressed about her missing the outing with Rhea and knowing her, wondered what might have happened, but decided not to ask—doing her best to maintain a Continental attitude toward men dallying.

"So? Let 'em look."

"You're so childish sometimes," she said absently. She looked around, "What a beautiful view."

"What I look for," Rhea checked to see if anyone was within earshot, "is a single person who dies between the ages of 64 and 75."

In Alexandria, the Alzas had walked along King Street toward the Potomac, not taking long to become fully immersed in Old Town. Turning left at Union Street, they entered the Torpedo Factory, an old naval installation featuring

Chase-205-Virus Rodeo

a collection of boutiques and works of art. They met the Sobels by a Christmas shop, which sold custom-made ornaments. Rhea was ready to describe progress made with her part of the plan.

"Let me tell you how we've set up financing," Rhea said. "We've got 25,000 phantoms into the system already." She paused a moment. "This makes me nervous. Let's go outside onto the deck and I'll walk you through the exercise."

Those unfamiliar with Washington's many temperature anomalies would have been surprised by the balmy 75 degrees that greeted them on the wood-planked deck.

"Social Security source documents come through my office when we're informed of a death," Rhea continued once they were outside and on the move, "so we clean up and terminate that particular computer check-dispensing file. I try to find people with uncomplicated income streams, those not likely to invite an IRS audit."

They walked past a group of people who had gathered around a gazebo to listen to a high school band with bag pipers playing Scotland, The Brave.

When clear of the crowd, Rhea picked up where she had left off, "Lenn gets the last five years' file of 1040 copies of a target dead person from the Martinsville repository, and if they had simple statements on 1040As or 1040EZs, I don't terminate their file."

Rhea enumerated her actions on her fingers. "Let's say that Person A dies and after checking her out, we find she was a widow living by herself and has been filing a 1040A with interest income below the personal and standard deduction, hence paying no tax. I divert the death source document, and as far as the system is concerned, that person is still alive and entitled

Chase-206-Virus Rodeo

to a check. As the government's money is kept in the Federal Reserve, we use an interconnected private bank and Federal Reserve Fed Wire to transfer funds to a bank account for one of our retiree moles—call him B—who's already inserted into the cabal tertiary net through Bad Basc, Keg, or one of their operatives."

Rhea looked at each of them and then settled on Bennie. She cocked her head and swished her blue-black hair, which had blown in her face, and continued her explanation as though to Bennie alone.

"That retiree will look after A's fake account, simulate normal activity, and file future 1040s which resemble those previously filed. In turn, we've set up retail fronts in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, as well as dummy insurance and investment companies."

Rhea took Bennie's hand. "After A's Social Security check is electronically deposited in A's fake American commercial bank account laundered by B, that account is debited through CHIPS, the New York clearing house's international interbank payments system." Rhea pointedly began to caress Bennie's palm with her forefinger.

Bennie wondered if she was wearing panties today, or if she was already wet. He couldn't see an outline through her thin tight miniskirt, and imagined seeing her mound of pubic hair.

"I need to dump the others to be alone with Rhea so I can ravish her," he thought. "I've got have that bitch."

Mercedes looked at Rhea with daggers.

The normally shy Lenn blushed and looked away from his salacious wife. Sometimes she was just too much for him.

Casually, Rhea continued, "From there the money is sent to Vaduz to

Chase-207-Virus Rodeo

be placed in those dummy corporation's accounts in the Union Bank of Switzerland's Zurich office. With this, we avoid the common hot-money laundering networks through the Netherlands Antilles and Luxembourg, increasing our odds of success."

"Wow, Rhea, you're a genius," Bennie almost shouted, then laughed nervously as he caught Mercedes' expression. "You and Lenn have done a fantastic job setting this up." Bennie kissed her hand with real enthusiasm before pushing it back toward her with a firm look.

Rhea accepted his signal with a slight apologetic look to Mercedes, whom she now attempted to include in her dissertation.

But Mercedes, wearied by her husband's indiscretions, opted to stroll unobtrusively away toward the boutiques.

"It's easy with computers; everything is standardized so employees work almost like Pavlov's dogs. Only few understand what happens, like Lenn and I. All we do is adjust an algorithm or line of instruction here and there," she said intently.

"For instance, the IRS computer has been set up to identify, for Lenn's action office, the kind of 1040s we want, and to send copies of applicable files on demand." Pleased at her technical success, Rhea beamed. "All this is done covertly and automatically. HUD thinks they had a skimming operation, they were a ham and egg outfit compared to this!" Once more she stroked Bennie's palm with her forefinger. With Mercedes gone, she would have wrapped her legs around Bennie if they hadn't been out in the open. She would have done it right in front of Lenn. He liked that in a torturous way.

Bennie imagined Rhea sitting on his face, his tongue flitting inside her.

Chase-208-Virus Rodeo

Inwardly mortified, Lenn knew his only choice was to endure. He'd always known he'd have to share Rhea with Bennie. One man wasn't enough for her. Though he relished the idea of Bennie thirsting for Rhea, he felt embittered. But he accepted his paradox with good grace and class. After all—he told himself—he had her most of the time.

Rhea continued merrily along. "I get them, remove death source documents, and readjust destinations transferring all funds electronically. Individual transactions are so small they don't trigger audit programs, so unless we really get greedy, this system will keep right on truckin!" Rhea puckered her wine red lips and nodded with satisfaction.

"Awesome, Rhea, just awesome." Bennie looked at her, approval written all over his face. Their eyes locked on each other, air seemed to crackle and raw energy sparked between the two.

"Moles in the field will file dead persons' 1040s in the future," Rhea winked. "With five years' files to go on, they'll be able to make a realistic return and signature forgery. From Zurich, some money goes through CHIPS to the Caymans, where we pay our moles and other funds are diverted to Mario's Sandhills Foundation so he can finance his Tropical Rain Forest Infection Syndrome weapons research."

Rhea glanced at her spouse with admiration, "Lenn's got a fiddle going at the IRS." She looked at Bennie, then noted Mercedes' extended absence. "Where's Mercedes? . . ."

"I think she went back to the Torpedo Factory," Lenn replied.

"I guess, she must have gone to the ladies," Bennie said casually, knowing full well he and Rhea had embarrassed his tolerant wife.

"Well," Rhea continued. "Lenn has backed the existence of the Research

Chase-209-Virus Rodeo

Triangle Park's Sandhills Foundation into IRS computer files, so we're covered there. We use regression analysis with IRS stat audit stimuli to make sure we don't trigger audit screening programs with our skimming operation." Rhea, obviously pleased with her success, did a little victory dance, waving her hands above her head and shaking her butt back and forth as she turned a full circle.

They all laughed and any remnants of tension dissipated.

In the meantime, Mercedes, steamed and fed up with Rhea and Bennie's sex games, went into the Torpedo Factory. Stopping at the first phone booth, she looked up the number for the FBI.

"Hello, FBI?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"I want to report a conspiracy. . . ."

"Please hold. I'll transfer you to Agent Fox."

While waiting, Mercedes scanned the area around her.

"Yes, Ma'am. This is Agent Fox."

"I want to report a conspiracy to overthrow the government . . ." As Mercedes said government, her eye caught a Washington Post headline: "Congressman Arraigned For Trafficking Firearms To Minors."

"Oh, my God," she thought. "What I am doing?" She quickly hung up and left.

"Yes . . ." The FBI agent frantically yelled. "Shit," he thought. "She's hung up. Maybe she's been murdered."

"Roberta," he yelled to his secretary. "Have local cops trace this call and respond immediately. It could be murder. Tell them to call me

Chase-210-Virus Rodeo

immediately when they know where it came from—I'll be ready to go."

Panting, like frightened animal, Mercedes hurried back to where she'd left the others. Suddenly she stopped. "Oh, my God," she thought. "The FBI has fingerprints on immigrants." She rushed back to the phone.

Alexandria police had tracked the call and sent a unit there. Agent Fox was on his way as well.

Mercedes arrived at the phone and found she was number two in line. Fidgeting nervously, she tried to be nonchalant. Her heart pounding, she finally got to the phone, and hearing sirens in the distance, awkwardly wiped her prints off, attracting the attention of a tourist waiting in line. She rushed out, the tourist following her. He saw her meet up with others. Quickly snapping pictures, he faded back into the crowd.

"Rhea, you and Lenn are unreal. I don't think James Bond would have thought up something this sophisticated." Bennie turned to see if his wife was coming back. He saw her running towards them. "Something's going on at the Torpedo Factory?"

"Are you OK, Mercedes? . . ." He put his arm around her and pulled her to him.

"We've got to get out of here and hide. . . ."

"What? . . ."

"Don't waste time. Don't look obvious. Fade in the crowd."

Chase-211-Virus Rodeo

"Oh, officer," the tourist said approaching the policeman. "I've got pictures of them. They're down there, just past the gazebo."

"Fay," the officer said to his partner. "You go to the phone. I'll go with this guy to see what he's got."

The two rushed toward where the tourist indicated.

"Shit," the tourist said. "I bet they heard your sirens and left."

"I'm sure that's what they did. We'll go to the station and process your film."

"Anything in there, Fay?" the officer asked his partner, as they rejoined her.

"I took prints, called backup to secure the area until we know what we've got. I got witnesses who described a petite Hispanic woman. They think they can get a police artist to draw a composite. They should be able to recognize her from your pictures, we'll put a APB out on her, and we'll have it out on CNN by this afternoon."

On the Metro, going back uptown, Bennie leaned over toward Mercedes, concerned. "What happened, Honey?"

"I got pissed at you and Rhea, that bitch ready to drop her pants for you every time she sees you."

Both Bennie and Rhea winced, acknowledging that Mercedes had a point.

"I called the FBI and told them about a conspiracy to overthrow the government. I was about to tell all when I saw this headline, hung up, and started back to you guys. I panicked, realizing the FBI had fingerprint files on immigrants. I rushed back to erase my prints."

"I hope you did a good job," Bennie said sheepishly. "They must have

Chase-212-Virus Rodeo

called the locals. You got to low profile it, Honey. I'm sure there are people who saw you. Police artists'll have your picture all over TV with a big reward. Good thing you're shy and know few people. You got to drop out of sight until the heat's off."

"It'll be Leavenworth for sure if we're caught, Bennie, but I guess some of us have to be willing to sacrifice ourselves." Lennie was obviously concerned, and Bennie reached over and gave him a gentle pat on the knee.

"I know, but if we're gonna go, might as well go big, Lenn. You two have found a gold mine; this'll be the computer scam of the century, whether we get away with it or not."

All at the Alexandria police station held their breath as the film came out of the darkroom, processed.

"Shit," one officer said, looking at the film. "It's no good—overexposed. Damn!"

The tourist examined his camera. With a dumb look on his face, he said, "I had the wrong f-stop in the excitement. I'm sorry, officer."

"Do you remember what she looks like?"

"I didn't pay that much attention, thinking I had pictures. All I can tell you was that she was a short, attractive Hispanic in her forties."

"What about the others?"

"Two guys and a woman. Anglos. The woman may have been a Jewess. A striking beauty."

"Anything else distinctive?"

"She had a short, short mini—and what a pair of legs! Wow! The guys, I just looked at her, I haven't the foggiest about them. I'll go home and

Chase-213-Virus Rodeo

think about it and write down what I can remember. I'll give you a call."

The interrogating officer turned to an officer who had just come into the office. "Anything from the police artist, Bob?"

"It happened so fast, we got lots of conflicting descriptions. Only consistencies are short, attractive. . . . Even the clothes are different. I'm afraid we have nothing to put out that would help—other than a fat reward to see if that scares up anything."

* * * * *

Pinehurst, NC

Revanne and Fester were quietly sitting by the fireplace, enjoying the fire. Turning to look at something he thought he heard, he noticed two patrol cars stop across the street. Police men and women jumped out, guns drawn, and started running toward their house. Revanne and Fester froze in terror.

Su Su, coming down the stairs, watched her parents with disbelief. She was about to say something when she saw the approaching policemen and women. One crouched behind a bush, others took cover where they could. Instinctively Su Su dropped to the floor and rolled behind a large sofa and lay still, very still.

But Fester noticed the police weren't looking at their house at all, but beyond it to the wooded area behind their backyard. He realized that instead of ordinary cops, this was a SWAT team, armed with automatic weapons. Once more, the police advanced their tactical formation toward the wooded area. Two began a running assault while others covered them with their

Chase-214-Virus Rodeo

weapons. The air was suddenly filled with short staccato bursts of semi-automatic weapons discharge.

"What the hell?" Fester faced his anxious wife. "It's not us, for sure." Red-faced, he noticed Su Su. Revanne didn't move.

"Not you? What do you mean, Dad? Is this part of your special operation?" Su Su screamed.

"I—I mean." Fester had to think fast. "What am I supposed to think when I see cops rushing our house? My operation isn't domestic, Su Su." He looked to see if that had put off his daughter.

Su Su said nothing. Her look burned holes in both her parents. She was about to rise when another staccato burst from weapons made her crouch to floor level, like cats do when alarmed.

All was quiet for the longest time. The three said nothing and didn't move, not even a toe. Finally, Revanne saw some of the police move back toward their patrol car. One of them approached their front door and knocked heavily. Revanne lay there in a trance, then saw other police lead a rough looking teenager away in hand cuffs. With a sudden burst of relief, she jumped up, seized her minicam and press credentials, rushed to the door, opened it, ran past the startled officer waiting at the door, and taped the arrest. She interviewed the officers, who were putting the teenager in one of the patrol cars and taped the scene with aplomb, as if she was on a routine news job.

"Look, Honey," she said to Fester and Su Su, who had just staggered out in complete confusion. "They confiscated this AK-47 from that little shit!" Revanne's Brooklyn verve had returned in an instant. "He's been stalking this neighborhood for months."

Chase-215-Virus Rodeo

Su Su looked at her mother with pure admiration, went to her father, hugged him tightly, and kissed him profusely. Fester felt her tears on her cheeks as he kissed her back. Then Fester had an idea. "Come to think of it, he looks like the guy CIA-DO said had a contract on me for Iran?"

"After all that time? Come on, Dad."

"Islam doesn't forget, Honey. Look at Salman Rushdie."

Su Su just shook her head, not knowing how to take all this.

After the dust settled, the three went back into the house, locked the door, and nestled in front of the fire on the floor. Suddenly, with a start, Revanne got up, found three tall glasses, poured three double Bourbons, handed glasses to Su Su and Fester, and cuddled up to them. They looked at each other with deep affection, relief, toasted each other, and downed their glasses like Battle of Britain pilots after shooting down Messerschmitts over the Channel.

Later, alone in bed, Revanne and Fester knew Su Su wasn't fooled.

"She's beginning to know too much," Fester whispered. "We may have to tell her. Joe Dab's getting antsy."

"Tell her, shit! You know teenagers at slumber parties, drinking beer. She'll tell all her friends, then Joe'll put out a contract on her for sure. I wish we'd never gotten started on this. I know the life-support system is at risk, but I'm not going to sacrifice Su Su for it."

Fester said nothing, deeply engrossed in thought.

"Oh, Honey. What are we going to do?" Revanne cuddled up to Fester and hugged him tightly.

* * * * *

Stoneybrook--April of The Next Year

After a year of studying available options, the Gang of 34 came together with reinforced conviction that only a benign autocracy could save the environment effectively. Once more the Gang gathered in the old Victorian house's living room. As before, most were on the floor, lying down on Oriental rugs and propping themselves up with pillows and cushions. Bennie and Mercedes passed drinks and snacks around, and all were ready to go to work, having partied at the race track during the afternoon.

Bennie yielded the floor to Goatroper for an Alexandria update. "Our moles have seen nothing frightening up to now. That doesn't mean it's over. We'll just have to be on our toes, not complacent."

Bennie faced his Gang of 34 to review his concerns. He used multimedia visual aids to focus attention on the effort ahead of them. He tried to make eye contact with each as he went along. "The new administration is getting bogged down in leftist redistribution of income schemes. They certainly have no mandate to phase out fossil fuels or the automobile transport system. We'll still have to take over the country." Gesturing towards his companions, the tall thin leader tried to make his point. "Last Thanksgiving 1,500 scientists, including Nobel Laureates, concluded essentially the same thing we have—unless man changes his ways immediately, only a few more decades of current behavior will mean ecological catastrophe. So people, it looks like our task is clear."

Chase-217-Virus Rodeo

Chastened by the Alexandria experience, Mercedes decided to give them more time to make their case. "I can't let emotion decide this," she thought. "I owe it to the world to be objective."

Resuming with slides and charts, Bennie smiled as his colleagues relaxed. He scanned the group and proceeded. "OK, on with business. Carbon dioxide is up to 356 parts per million and it's been proved surface ozone damages plants and people." Bennie glanced at his wife. "They keep saying we need more studies . . . but the National Academy of Science says we'd better hedge our bets. So there you have it, kids."

Murmurs of assent could be heard as many individuals moved about to shift their legs and make themselves more comfortable. Bennie took a sip of water and stooped to pick up some fallen note cards.

He cleared his throat and continued. "Odds are most lost status jobs won't return and a great sense of disappointment and betrayal will set in. The Norheim Syndrome is alive and well for us. Groundwork for Fascism, as the Norheim Syndrome continues to blanket society, is inadvertently being laid. Quite simply, in a few more years it may be a choice between us or the Fascism of the Religious Right."

Bennie moved to center stage with his display cards to review the organizational chart. "Crossfertilization through interdisciplinary coordination is absolutely vital to this enterprise. It's too complex for us to keep secrets from each other." They all laughed.

"Many climate models have been linear and one dimensional, looking at land temperatures, with many samples taken just from urban areas rather than from rural and oceans as well. Additionally, greater cloud cover from magnified evaporation resulting from higher temperatures, wasn't considered.

Chase-218-Virus Rodeo

We'll integrate all relevant known factors into our nonlinear macro model to simulate more realistically."

"Macro model?" Goatroper asked.

"These are math models which mix inputs from many disciplines as opposed to micro models, which stick to one discipline or problem. Most previous studies and models have been one dimensional, of course, we all know the world is multi-dimensional. So that's how we're going to model so our solutions are more realistic."

Goatroper nodded his head. "Makes sense, we sure want to reduce any built-in errors that we can."

Bennie yielded the floor to Lennie.

"We'll need big gasoline taxes eventually—once our electric train infrastructure is in place. I mean more than \$30-a-gallon eventually to do away with the gasoline motorcars, not the four-and-half cents that terrified Congress. It won't happen without Fester's Virus Rodeo shock. We're talking about a violent revolution here by the people. And they're not going to give up their gas cars voluntarily without death staring them in the face—and for some, that won't be enough! Cars mean a great deal to many people. It's their personal space—their only chance for privacy—an oasis to be alone."

"Lenn's right," Fester said. "We must not underestimate the privacy aspect. People really salivate at the automotive myth of pleasure, excitement, sex, motion—the sensation of controlling one's fate and the world is one's own."

"Yeah, right," Rhea cracked. "Looked at urban gridlock lately?"

"Redundant defense engineering teams can be used to give us electric

Chase-219-Virus Rodeo

trains for primary transport, electric cars for local transport, fusion power plants, superconductors, and efficient electrical storage. We'll model this on banked parallel supercomputers with literally thousands of variables and what-if scenarios for the 30-year changeover from fossil fuels to clean electricity. We'll be world leaders with this new, clean, electric age technology," Lenn continued.

"We'll build an economy with meaningful status jobs, returning social cohesion to the scene. Our patents on this new technology will enable us to achieve a degree of stability for workers and their families to develop confidence in the future. We'll balance social stability with economic and ecological efficiency."

All rose and applauded Lenn, causing this normally shy man to blush.

Bennie identified organizational units. "Bobbie will be our link to the existing Office of Science and Technology's Committee on Earth Sciences. Their organizational chart is as depicted and they cover the basics: hydrology, biogeochemicals, ecologicals, earth systems, solar influences, solid earth processes, and human interactions. We've added these teams: Carbon Budget has these subunits--Lenn for transport, Ethel and Ina for residential and commercial needs, Terry for industrial needs, and Anne, Basc, and Barbara for power generation needs." Bennie looked over his cue cards for the next remark.

"Then we have domestic economics with Rhea and Schatze, and global economics with Kathi and Maria. Mario, Albalisa, Harlo, and Red will look after deforestation and our countermeasures. Ingallil and Frankie will take care of computer simulation and integrative environmental/econometric design while Revanne will sort out communications and information dissemination.

Chase-220-Virus Rodeo

For domestic/global political impacts, we have Joe, Gabriella, Sid, Wanda, and Easy Ed. Military operations will be handled by Irv, Eric, Cam, and Keg. Finally for PSYOPS we'll have Cactus Jack, Sean, Fester, and Bill. OK, Bobbie, give us data on the carbon budget."

Bennie moved away as Bobbie put her glass down and faced her colleagues.

"If ex-Soviets, China, India, and the Group of Seven phase out fossil fuels economies by 2025, we'll get rid of over half the carbon discharges. All of us already have nuclear power plants, so there would be no additional problem of proliferation if we went that route with fast-breeders. But we don't need to go into fission any more than we have now. Barbara, who is with Anne and Basc on power generation options, will give you more data about that. Barbara?"

"Thanks," Barbara replied as Bobbie sat down. "If we decentralize power—after all, residences and commercial outlets eat up 55% of electricity for lighting, cooling and so on—we could use fuel cells, local wind farms, local solar thermal, and photovoltaic as applicable. It's what comes out of outlets that matters, not how it's generated. Buildings can be made twice as efficient to reduce our needs by another half, and still get the same end-result, which is what really matters, not consumption per se."

"We need a crash R&D program for superconductors and some form of electrical storage to further improve our efficiency. Wind and solar aren't going to be steady like current fossil fuel units, so we have to be able to store what we generate in surplus on good days. Right now we don't have the means to take a kilowatt of electricity and store it till next week like you can with a gallon of oil or a ton of coal—that must change. If we can

Chase-221-Virus Rodeo

build underground superconductor conduits from the Southwest, for instance, we could have big thermal solar electric farms in Arizona and pipe the electricity to hubs like Boston or Chicago, as well as ending surface high-tension line issues. We would use that in combination with fusion, if we can make it clean according to Basc's Helium-3 idea, to supply large urban areas, industrial processes, and high-speed electric trains." She took a moment to look at her notes, then added, "OK, that's it for now, Bobbie." Barbara moved to the left so Bobbie could return to the front of the large living room.

Bobbie took center stage once more. "As you can see, just by improving our generation, storage, and transmittal efficiency, we can have the same mechanical energy lifestyle as we have now. And that's without carbon or problems of decommissioning nuclear power plants or waste. Be that as it may, nuclear power, properly handled, has its virtues; its waste doesn't take up too much room, relatively speaking. It can be contained, and if properly stored in concrete bunkers, would certainly have no external spill-overs as do fossil fuels; we must not close our minds to nuclear fission out of hand. Yeah, Fester."

"Its technology may be relatively harmless, in cosmic terms, but public perceptions are such that we might build up a lot of needless psychological opposition if we went the fission route. I say write off fission and go with the others."

"Any other comments?" Bobbie asked as she looked around for raised hands.

"Why is it so hard to get rid of fossil fuels?" Maria asked.

"For example," Bennie said, looking at Maria. "CFCs are relatively

Chase-222-Virus Rodeo

easy, a classic case of few perpetrators and many victims, like nuclear weapons tests. Nukes had two major perpetrators—military establishments of the U.S. and USSR—and millions of victims who were being poisoned by Strontium 90. It was relatively easy for governments to get the military to quit atmospheric testing, the military lends itself to top down solutions. CFCs are the same—a few major chemical corporations versus millions of people. People don't give up their refrigerators, freezers, and air conditioners—they just use a different cooling agent. People don't care what makes it cool, just so it's cool." Bennie paused for a sip of water.

"With fossil fuels, we have many perpetrators and many victims, who don't perceive themselves as victims. The psychology is radically different isn't it, Fester?"

"Totally! Without something to make the public perceive they're in mortal danger, there's no way to get them to voluntarily give up their fossil fuel toys," Fester acknowledged.

Seeing that Kathleen Fountain was motioning to speak, Bennie recognized her. "Kathi, is there something you'd like to add?"

"Yes—what about all the homeless who hang around stations, even the renovated Union Station in Washington? Recently," she said indignantly, "I was filling out a lottery ticket at a table in one of the restaurants when this disgusting character got in my face demanding money. Granted, being homeless is a sad state of affairs but still, this is ridiculous and getting worse." Her eyes narrowed as she nodded her head. "Look, if we want people to use public transport, we can't allow creeps to turn it into a shithole!"

"Boy, aren't we the elitist bitch!" Revanne spat.

Chase-223-Virus Rodeo

"Elitist bitch, my ass, Revanne. This isn't the time to be politically correct with all that liberal bullshit—I'm not a Fascist."

"You sure talk like one . . ."

"Come on, Revanne, we've been making excuses for this and other scum long enough, subjecting decent people to all sorts of outrages. All this in the name of equality, but that kind of equality can only exist at the lowest level. Any student can get an F, but few can get an A. We've turned our society into an F society. The lowest segments are dictating our social norms—any wonder then at our present state of affairs."

"What are you going to do, put them away in some kind of American Auschwitz?"

"Come on, Revanne, be reasonable!" Goatroper said, defensively.

"I don't think it's an either/or proposition," Kathi elaborated. "I'm sure there's middle ground between the present anarchy on the streets, and concentration camps. We don't need to be extreme at either end. I'm just saying we need reasonable standards such as we had in the fifties. I agree that a distinction needs to be made between those who are down on their luck momentarily and career creeps and criminals. At present, they all seem to be lumped together as victims. I look out there and see an orgy of wrongdoer rights that work mainly to line pockets of lawyers—there's big bucks in litigating subjective rights and judgmental equality!"

"We have to rely on the social contract," Bennie emphasized. "If everyone knows the consequences of their behavior without ambiguity, it works. The breakdown that's occurred is a result of a wrongdoer's ability to get away with virtually anything because some advocacy group works overtime making excuses, or uses alleged abuse as rationale."

Chase-224-Virus Rodeo

"Shit," Cactus said. "Anyone can say they've been abused. That's so subjective. I could say I'm abused because I don't take in what Michael Jordan does. It sure doesn't give me a right to fire away in a restaurant." He looked at Revanne who was shaking her head.

"Yeah, I'm exaggerating a bit. Yeah, many have real abuses to contend with. If they blow away perpetrators, I can see making exceptions, like battered women who blow away their tormentors. But to go out and take it out on the public at random, we can't permit that. Undesirable behaviors no longer have predictable negative consequences. Many people want to get away with as much as possible to self-maximize, and they've gone over the edge in the present climate."

"I couldn't agree more," emphasized Goatroper, the New York City police consultant. "Our problems with aggressive panhandlers pale into insignificance with kids running loose with guns, despite our gun control laws. They just go get 'em in New Jersey, aided and abetted by the NRA seeking to maximize gun sales under phony right-to-bear-arms constitutional provisions. We need predictable punishments for anti-social behavior and control, fire-arms licensing, and not confiscation from reasonable people."

"Have you a plan?" Bill Darden asked.

"Here's what I propose." Goatroper got up and walked toward center stage.

"At H-Hour, we've got to get the point across that we're serious about solving problems. We need to give the public an upfront demo that we've the means and will to pull it off. We also want give them an immediate benefit of our take over. One that they can see and agree to right away."

"Makes sense," Fester said. "So what do you propose? . . ."

Chase-225-Virus Rodeo

"We've already laid out the ground work. A big help has been e-mail systems and highways. Our NSA moles have started targeting dangerous hate groups, militias, gun traffickers, and so on. We've started infiltration of urban gangs, the NRA, militias, hate groups, cults, gun distribution networks, and gun clubs."

"One, infiltration of the NRA gives us the intelligence basis to determine who are legitimate gun operatives as opposed to traffickers. Gun distributors and clubs will give us corroboration we need to identify proper targets for H-Hour. At H-Hour, we'll take out traffickers as best we can--which are a fifth of the over 200,000 gun dealers. Legitimate outlets will be closed until a licensing system is in place."

"Won't that piss off legitimate gun owners, create opponents of some who might otherwise support us?" Keg asked.

"There's that risk," Goatroper acknowledged. "We hope to mitigate it by stating our rationales succinctly and repeatedly. By not arbitrarily confiscating or limiting private arms by types, but by having a rational licensing and selection system for gun purchasers and owners. A system that fair minded and reasonable people can agree with. For any law enforcement system to work, the community has to believe in and support it--like stopping at red lights. We can't have a cop at all traffic lights; people have to believe it makes sense so they do it on their own voluntarily. That's how our gun controls must work. No doubt, once under way, we'll have to make adjustments. There'll be some playing by ear on this one."

"I'll buy that," Keg said.

"Two, infiltration of gangs gives intel to identify, locate, and target weapons' storage areas, unrepentant members, and members who really are sal-

Chase-226-Virus Rodeo

vageable innocents, who were really seeking a family as opposed to thugs and killers." Goatroper added. "This intel will be corroborated with existing FBI/urban police intel to make sure we've purged errors. Joe Dab also will give us access to mob operatives who coordinate with gangs for mob activities. At H-Hour, gang storage areas will be taken out with Tomahawk cruise missiles, gang killers we're absolutely sure of will be shot by firing squad, thugs will be jailed at hard labor, and innocents will be salvaged in boot camps by discipline routines and compassionate counselors. Counselors are essential for subjects to accrue intellectual rather than rage responses to solving basic economic and social problems. We've to get into their minds, not degrade them. We've to reinforce positives where possible. There are gangs that are positive like ones in New Orleans which run Big Chief costume competitions on Mardi Gras. These develop community cohesiveness; we want that. Negative, violent, hateful activities are ones we'll curtail. Wanda has the system to take money out of drugs. For realistic prevention of recidivism, we've to remove the obvious temptation of options to make three grand-a-day selling drugs on the street verses \$50-a-day earned in legitimate activities. More about that later.

"Three, infiltration of hate groups tells us levels of hate they espouse. Hate groups that can't be tolerated will be taken out by military operations. Toleration criteria will essentially be based on whether these groups are an actual threat to citizens such as minorities and the general public.

"Four, the same approach will be used toward cults. Cults that prey on vulnerable groups like the elderly, teenagers, unemployed, insecure, just to exploit them, will be taken out. Victim members will be freed, exploiters decommissioned or jailed, based on what they've actually done to victims.

Chase-227-Virus Rodeo

"Five, we'll deal with militias on an as required basis."

"Wow, Goatroper!" Revanne said. "You sure are an urban cop's dream."

"Are we now into social cleansing?" Bill asked. "Isn't all this arbitrary?"

"Gangs, cults, militias, affinity groups—they're surrogate families, communities, and value systems," Goatroper said. "With disintegration of families and increased depersonalization of life, these groups have assumed large significance in the lives of many."

"America is founded on diversity and what some might think are extremes." Bill said. "We've no right to impose our subjective standards on them."

"Believe me, we're not." Goatroper replied. "But it's fair to say some have gone beyond legitimate purposes. Particular groups we're targeting are those who espouse hate, are forming paramilitary militia type units to attack rival groups and overthrow the feds, and are a threat to civil order. We're not going to be arbitrary. For the public to buy into what we're doing, we have to be fair and reasonable. To be targeted, a group has to be armed beyond what normal civilians would have, be engaged in organized paramilitary activities, espouse violent means of extending their solutions, be intolerant of other minorities, and engaged in activities which are only the legitimate purview of duly constituted government police and military forces. We don't want our own Bosnias or Chechnyas."

"Aren't you being hypocritical, talking about duly constituted police powers when we're plotting to overthrow the Constitution itself?" Bill said.

"Under normal circumstances, yes," Goatroper replied. "But death of our planet is a special case and not subjective bigoted hate of others."

"Your opening move is selective social cleansing to get public attention

Chase-228-Virus Rodeo

and establish governing credibility?" Revanne summarized.

"You got that right, Revanne. By eight in the morning, on D-Day, if all goes reasonably well, we should have cleaned up major crime infrastructures which threaten public order at random. Long term problems like drugs will be dealt with by systematic approaches of taking money out of such activities. Wanda."

"It's not possible to eliminate all crime. We just want to go back to the social contract that existed prior to the sixties adjusted for the rights of minorities. Now, specifically with the drug problem. I'm looking at the system of the Netherlands. There, money is taken out by government tending to junkies on the national health system. Junkies are given free fixes and sorted in two groups, those who can be salvaged, those who can't. Since drug dealers can't make money anymore—who's going to pay when they can get it for nothing—right? Dealers go out of business. Talent gravitates to legitimate economic outlets. Collateral crime, to raise money for fixes, disappears and so on."

"Those who can be salvaged are given therapy and reintegrated into society. Those who can't, are allowed to turn on to their heart's content under controlled conditions. Let's face it, folks, there are some who are write-offs. Let them do their thing without menacing the general public. This is the most rational solution economically and socially. Our previous policies have been dismal failures, only making fortunes for drug dealers and cartels. My approach will dry them up through natural processes."

"I have to admit," Bill grudgingly acknowledged. "You and Goatroper will please the public, but out goes constitutional rights, I guess."

"Only very selectively with rigid safeguards. Any doubts as to guilt

Chase-229-Virus Rodeo

will be resolved in the defendant's favor. If they did it, however, there won't be excuses unless it's justified, like a long battered spouse finally blowing away their mate after years of nothing meaningfully done by the authorities. The bottom line is criminals are rational decision makers. If they think costs are higher than gains, they'll stop. The public must think the justice system is fair so they'll cooperate and community cohesion will defeat crime as it did prior to the sixties."

"I agree with that to deal with criminals," Lenn said. "But the homeless aren't criminals. Yeah, Sid?"

Sid, the wildlife photographer, had a sudden inspiration. "I have an idea. We're closing many military bases, right? . . . We're reducing the army, right? . . . Why not use these bases and some soldiers to retrain the homeless into viable citizens, sort of a Kurdish refugee rescue operation here at home. I'm sure many would welcome a chance to salvage their lives. Some, of course, want to live like slobs. Let them do that without grossing out the public. Others can be sent to the bases and run through a basic training of hygiene, self-discipline, job skills, and good personal habits. No doubt," he said, raising his brow, "ACLU will bitch up a storm, but we have to help those who want to help themselves."

"You'd prioritize that over civil rights?" Bill looked appalled.

"I think the lesson since the fifties is that discipline is necessary. It's like training a dog. Concern over civil rights is used by too many to provide a shield for doing nothing or applying Band-Aid solutions," Sid replied.

"Why are we always concerned about civil rights of bums, criminals, and degenerates? What about decent people? . . ." Kathi interjected. "Since

Chase-230-Virus Rodeo

the fifties, we've bent over backwards for creeps and look what's happened? Kids running around with Uzies, school violence, unmarried teenaged pregnancy on a vast subsidized scale, fathers abandoning their children. We can't condone this aberrant behavior. If we do, we won't have to worry about the environment—we'll self-destruct in a vast orgy of social decay."

"Look, people," Fester said, "it comes down to this, in order for people to give us the benefit of doubt and go along and use public transport willingly, we have to be credible, and come across as meaning business. Upfront, we can correct immediate threats like terroristic and random crime, and make public transport user friendly, socially as well as technically. These will provide an immediate payoff for the public to go along with our program. Immediate and relatively painless. Thus, they'll be disposed toward our more rigorous reforms coming downstream."

Fester added, "That means basic rules of conduct and safety—just like we have on highways now—social stop signs and red lights—in terms of endangering people—reasonable and generally acceptable—not angelic perfection."

"Right on, Fester!" Kathi applauded him.

"Boy, you people," Bill said dejectedly, "you really have no compassion for people less fortunate than yourselves."

Sid defended himself, "It's not a lack of compassion. It's a practical concern. Look, I don't let my dog shit all over the house—not because I don't love him—but because living in shit is an unreasonable proposition. We don't need that kind of aggravation. It's kind of social tough love—if you will—that's what I'm talking about."

"If Sid's idea works," Kathi added. "We can also continue the expansion of Single Room Occupancy units like San Diego's. We'll change local codes

Chase-231-Virus Rodeo

recognizing that such units don't need a corresponding parking space. We can expand such concepts to family housing as well. Everyone benefits from SROs—the private sector, homeless, and taxpayers."

"How about strikes by public transport staff?" Harlo asked. "With all the power they'll have, they could hold the rest of society for ransom."

"True," Lenn agreed. "But strikes can be prevented, if necessary, by declaring transport an essential occupation and using industrial juries, representing people from management, labor, and affected consumer organizations to impose binding arbitration. The private sector will run as many transport operations as possible, but no doubt government will have to be involved at some level, because transport has characteristics of a public good."

"Public Good?" Anne asked.

"A public good is one that can't be purchased by a transaction such as a Coke or hot dog. Police protection, defense, fire departments are public goods. Everyone benefits regardless of income—in other words, one's consumption doesn't deny another's," Lenn felt like a teacher now, "My consumption of national defense doesn't reduce yours—you're not excluded. But if I consume a hot dog, you're excluded—you can't eat that hot dog. That's the essential difference between a public and private good. Private goods are exclusionary, public goods aren't. That's why the Left works overtime trying to convert strongly desired private goods—like child care for example—into public goods. Taxpayers pay for public goods, whether they use them or not."

"Hey," Anne had a revelation. "I suddenly understand a lot more about special interest politics."

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"Oh yes," Bennie continued, "that's what makes the political world go round. In fact, even though airlines and trucks are private today, airports, air traffic control, and highways are public. We want our workers to be happy and reasonably well paid, but we don't want union featherbedding as exists in today's private railroads." Bennie smiled in appreciation at the hard work already invested by the Gang of 34.

"Look, guys," Keg said. "People are already up in arms over the loss of individuality in America. In my neck of the woods, they're taking up arms."

"What's the bitch, Keg?" Bennie asked.

"We're having a range war. Ranchers are pissed at grazing rights being trimmed."

"I read about Catron County, New Mexico," Fester said. "Yet they say they want to be good land stewards. Of course they don't bitch about being on cowboy welfare, only on overgrazing restrictions. Some of those dumb shits even believe the FBI, Bloods, and Crips are in league to seize all private property."

All in the room started laughing.

"Why don't you just cram it, Fester?" Keg was about ready to explode. "We're not on cowboy welfare. You Easterners don't understand. We've always been used to open space."

"I think all groups have their share of dumb shits," Revanne said, smiling.

"Thanks, Revanne." Keg appreciated her moral support.

"You, like many other farmers, have been on welfare a long time," Fester couldn't resist needling Keg.

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"Get fucked, Fester," Keg got up and was ready to punch him out.

"Hey, guys, cool it." Goatroper said.

"Look, Keg," Bennie said. "If you ranchers want to maintain your lifestyles into the future, you have to allow land to be self-sustaining, don't you agree?"

Keg paused, thought about it, but said nothing.

"A given piece of land," Bennie said. "With given soil content and rainfall can only support X number of cattle. If you graze 2X or 3X cattle there, it'll give out. Then, instead of the bucolic lifestyle of the past, you'll have a desert. Nothing but bare banks of rivers, cattle-trampled willows and cottonwoods no longer able to check erosion—just a muddy, cow-shit stream devoid of fish and birds."

Bennie and Keg's gaze met. Keg had to acknowledge the logic.

"So," Bennie continued. "You all have to work with government, academic, and business experts to graze, mine—whatever—within constraints of the physics and chemistry of the land. We'll just have to educate. Since ranchers profess to want to be good stewards, it shouldn't be a problem to put six-guns away, should it? I mean, look at land out there objectively. Its abuse speaks eloquently for itself, don't you agree?"

Keg said nothing, but the look on his face said it all.

"Well, people," Bennie summed up. "It looks like we're off to a good start. We must be first to develop the new electric order. We must enhance our technological leadership to buy back our economy as well as to save the world's life-support system. Not too much to accomplish, right?" He laughed. "Keep up the good work and we'll see each other here and there and all next year."

* * * * *

The Holland Drop Zone,
Fort Bragg North Carolina, May

The Sheppards and Alzas parked on Manchester Road, off to the side of the drop area, and got out of their car to watch an 82nd Airborne Division exercise. As a string of seven C-130s started dropping their troopers, Harlo looked away from the aircraft and down at Bennie. He suggested a possible solution to the logistics problem for exercising Virus Rodeo. "You know, maybe we can combine future airlift rodeos, or approximations thereof, with 82nd exercises, learning from Gulf War logistics' lessons."

"That makes sense," Bennie agreed, pointing to troopers landing near green smoke. "I understand the war taught a great deal, so it fits right in with our plans."

"Yeah," Harlo said, musing over implications. "I think that's the way to go, babe."

Harlo pulled out a news release from the New York Times. "Hey—listen to what it says about our software virus in Illinois . . .

"A switching station fire that melted fiber optic communication lines, damaged computers, and caused a large telephone failure in the suburbs of Chicago, has raised new concerns the nation's telephone system is becoming more vulnerable to major disruptions."

"God, Harlo," Bennie said, looking at him with admiration, "that's awesome! Look here—Holiday Inn's reservations messed up, O'Hare air traffic

Chase-235-Virus Rodeo

control delays, even flower deliveries affected . . . just awesome, Harlo."

"This was just a little test," Harlo replied proudly. "Our viruses can replicate like DNA in all major software systems in the country; our NSA moles have given us the entire ball of wax. These new emerging information highways make it easy. Furthermore, with Clinton's idea of fiber optic information super-highways, we'll be able to spread our viruses with impunity. We have another telephone software virus which will interfere with switching centers terminating phone calls and going back on line. This will stall systems of AT&T, Sprint, and MCI like flooded car engines. We'll be able to control everything from POS terminals in shoe store chains like Stride Rite, to nuclear weapons launch command and control systems; possibilities are endless!" Boisterous Harlo energetically slapped Bennie on the back.

"We'll be able to take over this whole country with just two viruses and a handful of well-placed people," Bennie mused as they all turned toward the northeast to observe a string of C-141s approaching.

"Mario says you and Mercedes are going to be guinea pigs for TRFIS," Harlo said, anxiety written all over his face. "Surely, he jests."

"No," Bennie said. "It's time for me to put my money where my mouth is."

"Come on, Bennie," Harlo said. "We can't afford to lose you guys."

"I appreciate your concern, but my mind is made up."

"OK Bennie, you go," Bobbie said. "But not Mercedes."

"I'll go along with that," Mercedes said, relieved.

"Look," Bennie said. "Most medical tests have been done on men and we're ignorant of effects on women. What good is a breast cancer test extra-

Chase-236-Virus Rodeo

polated from men? Virus Rodeo is too important to make those mistakes again. Believe me, I don't want to have Mercedes suffer, but what women can I ask? We're the leaders. We have to set the example."

"Use Revanne or Rhea," Mercedes blurted out. Seeing the startled look on the Sheppards' faces, Mercedes quickly corrected herself. "I didn't mean it."

"There's no other way, then?" Harlo looked sad.

"I'm afraid not," Bennie said.

* * * * *

Winter, the Next Year

Getting together for basketball games provided good cover for Mario's team to update Bennie and coordinate with Red and Harlo. The late season Duke-UNC game was the backdrop for Mario's announcement of his breakthrough. At his house, prior to going to the Dean Dome, Mario had an announcement. "As I was saying, my team has a stable virus engineered so we can manipulate its DNA; we're still making trials for repeatability and we may have reliability by summer with the ultrasonic commands."

"Good, Mario," Red exclaimed. "We can pipe ultrasonic commands through normal radio and TV programming and no one will detect them." The electronic engineer sipped on his gin and tonic. "Moles in target countries can set up induction feeders on local TV and radio antennas linked to receivers able to pick up signals from cable TV satellites. Those cover the world—our NASA technicians have built in covert transceivers for our signals. Starting

Chase-237-Virus Rodeo

with the BBC World Service and religious broadcasts, we're going to put our signals on short wave, and piggyback local radio stations from satellites. We've run some signal tests and they work fine."

"Harlo, I like these small antennae you all have come up with," Bennie said. "They're smaller than commercial digital ones. We'll be able to deploy in-country and hook up to their normal TV and radio systems covertly. By summer we can try it here to make sure it works. Red, why don't you get with DeChico's moles to hook up data link to the Mexican cable system to run trials right in Southern Pines? Mercedes and I can try the first TRFIS to see if the bloody thing works. Give us the organic binary and then a general time to watch Mexican TV and we'll see what happens." Bennie shrugged, faking his nonchalance. "We'll call you, if we get sick." Seeing his wife had become apprehensive, he took one of her smooth hands and kissed it tenderly.

"Will we get real sick?" she asked.

"This one won't kill you, but it'll be like the worst hangover you ever had. You'll just want to die." Mario tried to be soothing. "Hey—I'll take some too at another time. We have to do it at different times for control."

"So, I can tell them at Stoneybrook in April that by one of the next two Stoneybrooks, we'll have run an individual test?" Bennie raised his eyebrows as he asked for confirmation.

"That's Charlie on that!" Red said matter-of-factly.

"Right!" Harlo's expression ratified his confidence. "Now we need to decide on some Third World country where we can run a test on a social scale once we see what happens to us." He looked around the table at his

Chase-238-Virus Rodeo

colleagues for some ideas. "Better keep it in tropical deforestation areas for now." All nodded their grasp of implications of this requirement. "Africa is the only place I can see where there are enough endemic health problems and poorly-managed medical care that it would have real impact. I think Zaire is a good place, look how they handled the '95 Ebola in Kikwit. I was there once with the French Foreign Legion; many have radios and they tend to watch TV in groups."

"That's perfect since we're using a strain of Zairan Ebola to generate TRFIS," Red seconded the choice. "We'll start setting up microwave data links required on their TV and radio stations and everything will be in place for the test after our moles spread the organic binary in the food supply and ducks."

"Sounds good," Bennie was satisfied, then looked at his watch. "Hey—it's eight now and the game is at nine; we need to get going soon if we're going to catch a bus to the Dean Dome."

"I've got somebody for you to meet, Bennie," Mario said.

"A Duke puke?"

"You'll see."

Using the Tarheel Express bus made going to the Dean Dome more pleasant as they took a special route avoiding traffic. The Catanis were Duke graduates and wore Blue Devil sweat shirts, catching a lot of good natured ribbing from Carolina fans. Both Duke and Carolina were in the top 10 and Bennie had been lucky to get tickets for this game. Barreling down the special bus lane, he could see the Dean Dome looming majestically on the far side. Upon arrival, fans poured out and jammed past attendants into

Chase-239-Virus Rodeo

Carolina's blue basketball palace. On the way to Upper Section Aisle 202A, Bennie's group stopped at a concessionaire to buy Cokes and into the dome they went, hearing the pep bands blaring and balls bouncing from players' pre-game warm-ups

Coming up to their row, a young man sitting at the first chair came out in the aisle. Mario looked at Bennie.

"Meet Major Roland Taylor, a military medic. He'll be in Zaire feeding CNN information."

"Pleased to meet you." Bennie shook the major's hand, as did Mercedes.

It turned out to be a classic Duke-Carolina game, with Carolina winning by one point after double overtime. By then their voices were spent.

"Wait till the ACC Tournament!" Mario and Albalisa croaked.

"You Dookies haven't got a chance," Bennie needled back. "We're going all the way this year! You all had your two-in-a-row streak!"

Bennie held the door open for Mercedes as they exited into the cool, crisp air. Their euphoria was slashed by gunfire sweeping the area, causing panic within screaming fans on their way to buses and cars.

"What the? . . ." Bennie yelled, hitting the deck instinctively, Vietnam memories coming to front burner. "Mercedes," he yelled in anguish, scanning the area, his gaze freezing on the inanimate object in a pool of blood.

"Those fucking bastards, fucking bastards!" Rage consumed Bennie as, oblivious to gunfire, he rushed out as he'd seen so many times on CNN people in Sarajevo do in similar circumstances. Dodging bullets as he'd learned in his year in Saigon, he pulled his wife back into the Dean Dome where Mario and Roland, who'd appropriated a nearby first-aid kit, were waiting to

Chase-240-Virus Rodeo

administer what ever help they could.

"Get team medics up here, on the double!" barked Roland to a nearby attendant, who in a stunned daze responded like a zombie awakening.

"She's conscious, Ben," Mario said, hope radiating from his eyes.

Albalisa draped her coat over Mercedes and said, "She'll make it, Ben, Honey. She'll make it."

After what seemed an eternity team doctors, accompanied by Duke and Carolina coaches and teams, arrived with a plethora of equipment and stabilized Mercedes. Fortunately, Albalisa's blood type matched Mercedes'.

"She's not slipping, Ben," Mario said. "Her bleeding doesn't look too bad outwardly. Her vital signs are good. Maybe she'll be lucky like Reagan in '81."

"Thanks, guys," Bennie said, relieved. He turned his attention to events outside. "There are others out there." Facing the two top-10 basketball squads, Bennie said. "Let's go get 'em!"

Without hesitation, Harlo, Red, teams, and coaches followed Bennie out at great personal risk, and collected some 80 people lying around in great agony. A sudden intense exchange of fire with police, who moments before had been directing traffic and marshaling buses, distracted the sniper sufficiently to reduce some risk for the rescuers.

Bennie contemplated a nightmarish scene in front of him—flashing lights of emergency vehicles, screaming sirens, moans of wounded and dying, police getting organized and barking tactical orders, media helicopters hovering, sports broadcasters—who just moments before had given the play-by-play, now risking life and limb to give a live feed to a stunned nation. ESPN communicated true March Madness, not the joy of the NCAA Big Dance, but an

Chase-241-Virus Rodeo

all too familiar scene these days—joining countless other symbols of collective insanity.

"Fate has given me a sign," Bennie thought. "V.R.X.X. is the answer. We have to end this madness. TRFIS gives us the unique opportunity."

Dick Vitale told the world, "I've always said these are class programs. They've proved it again tonight. Carolina and Duke, an example for all." Vitale wasn't ashamed of tears welling below his eyes.

By now police had cornered the lone gunman. Exhausted and emotionally drained, Bennie went back to his wife, who was still conscious and had sufficient spunk to give him a reassuring smile while feebly saying, "I hope these doctors aren't Dookies."

Cheerleaders and band members from both teams assisted medics and comforted the wounded. Finally, with IVs hooked to their arms, the wounded were taken by medics to waiting ambulances for transfer to the Carolina and Duke medical centers.

6

July

"Bennie's a changed man, Frankie." Mercedes said to Frankie Smelkinson, her best pal and Irv "the Perv's" wife, as they sat sipping Merlots at a sidewalk table overlooking the restorative Annapolis waterfront, framed by the Maryland State House dome's imposing presence.

"After what you've been through, Honey, any loving spouse would change!"

"Oh, he's always loved me—I knew that. But—he's not the super teenager he used to be."

Frankie took Mercedes' hand and gave a tight squeeze. Their eyes met.

"And, Frankie, can you believe this?"

"What? What?" Frankie almost fell off her seat leaning forward.

"Rhea—Super Slut—is now on the fast track for sainthood!"

"You're kidding!"

"Are you ready for this? Rhea has spent a lot of time with me since

Chase-243-Virus Rodeo

the shooting. She's made a blood oath to me—really—we pricked out fingers and held them together while she swore on the Torah."

"Wow!"

"She swore as Blood Sisters Under The Skin, we had fusion with Bennie. Our mutual sexual links made us one whole person, but out of respect for me and the sign the shooting sent her, she would keep her hands off Bennie and clean up her act. Would you believe it—she's been like a cloistered nun since!"

"Rhea? No way!"

"It's for real—I'm serious."

"I must say my Irv seems to be more subdued these days as well. Honey, what you went through may have been a sign from the heavens that God would let us succeed only if our behavior was exemplary in all spheres. That we had to behave like saints or Virus Rodeo would come tumbling down around us like a Force-10 earthquake. You still feel like pulling the plug?"

"I don't know. The shooting has given me pause to think deeper about this. Bennie's and Rhea's changes in behavior have made it easier for me to be objective. Frankie," Mercedes took both her hands and held them tightly as she spoke. "We have to be absolutely sure—within reason—that Virus Rodeo is the only way—that it's the one exception that justifies the overthrow of American democracy. And that our Gang of 34 is up to the task."

"Mercedes, just know that I'm with you all the way—all the way, even if I have to die for it—I mean it, Honey."

"I know you do, Frankie. It makes it so much easier for me to know this. Believe me, it's been agony—pure hell!"

* * * * *

Summer of The Following Year

Mercedes couldn't believe a year had passed since the Dean Dome shooting and she had convalesced to the point of resuming her role in Virus Rodeo.

A reactionary congress had been elected and was busy dismantling environmental regulation and legislation, gutting Amtrak and gun controls, and favoring its constituents generously, despite preaching fiscal restraint.

Using digital signal compression technology, Harlo and Red had designed a 30-centimeter antenna to capture satellite television signals. Mounted on the side of Bennie's house, the antenna fed into his TV so he could receive Mexican stations. Red had covertly mounted a similar device on a Mexican station's antenna facilities to receive ultrasonic signals from Red's microwave data-link transmitter in San Diego, for covert retransmission to the world. For initial tests, Red thought it better to use Mexico rather than rain forest area stations to minimize chances of compromising the project.

Bennie and Mercedes had been eating food laced with TRFIS' organic binary since Stoneybrook. Neither had suffered any ill effects, and now it was time to test their weapon. They were to watch Mexican TV from 4-6 o'clock on Mondays, Thursdays, and Sundays during July. Sometime during the month, Red would transmit an ultrasonic command by microwave to the geosynchronous TV satellites which would bounce it back to ground receivers. The signal would be picked up by the antenna on the broadcast tower in Mexico and be covertly inducted into regular programming. The program itself would be transmitted to the station's satellite to be received by its audience—

Chase-245-Virus Rodeo

including the hapless Alzas in Southern Pines. TRFIS' organic binary was designed to be activated by such an ultrasonic code, which would energize a specific DNA time-release code for the illness to start some six hours later. The Alza's first week of viewing Mexican television went by without incident, as did the second. On Monday evening of the third week, Red transmitted the command. He and his team waited—Harlo in San Diego and Mario in Durham—for the call from the Alzas who should be sick before morning.

At two-thirty, Bennie woke up with severe cramps and diarrhea. He tried to make it to the toilet, but when his feet hit the cold tile floor, his pyjama pants were already a foul smelling mess. Mercedes began to toss and moan with pain. Then her eyes opened wide and she was fully awake. She barely made it to the shower, letting go down her legs. By then Bennie was seated on the toilet, doubled up in agony.

"Those bastards must have turned that fucker on last night," he groaned. Still seated and his head spinning, he held on to the toilet for dear life.

"I hope this is it," Mercedes whimpered as she looked helplessly at the excrement smeared down her legs. Although very feeble, she finally managed to turn the shower on to rinse off.

"We're supposed to write our feelings . . ." Bennie grunted. "I can barely move my arm . . . Oh God . . . I can barely move . . ."

"I hope they can stop . . ." Mercedes winced in pain as a cramp tightened in her gut. She rested her chin on the edge of the tub and looked up at Bennie. "When? . . ." She managed, before the next cramp cut her off.

"Forty-eight—" Bennie grunted. "hours . . . mild dose," he said, and winced again. He didn't want to leave the toilet, but knew he had to call Mario.

Chase-246-Virus Rodeo

Bennie crawled to the phone and got within reach before needing the toilet again. Knowing he couldn't make it back, he let go on the floor. He reached for the phone, almost passing out as he knocked it to the floor, where it landed in a foul puddle of excrement. He gave a small whine as he reached for the mouthpiece and fumbled for the speed-dial. Its odor so close to his face made him gag.

"Hello," he heard Mario on the other end.

For a moment, he couldn't speak, "Mario," he wheezed. "Tally ho." He tried to hold his breath, but dizzy, he dropped the instrument once more.

"We're on our way, you poor shits," the voice in the instrument said to no one.

Painfully Bennie crawled back to the bathroom where Mercedes was doubled up with cramps. The diarrhea had abated momentarily but she was gasping with the dry heaves.

The Cavalis took over an hour to get to Southern Pines from Durham. The Alzas' dog barked as they let themselves in.

"Thank God," Bennie sighed. He tried to reach Mercedes, but his arm fell limply onto his knees. "They're here. . . ."

Mercedes looked up, her eyes only slits and let out a forlorn sound, a cross between a whine and a moan.

Mario led the way up the stairs. "God, it reeks. You guys are a mess!"

Bennie looked up. "Get bent," he managed meekly.

Albalisa just shook her head with disbelief and compassion.

Mario and Albalisa helped the Alzas get cleaned up, and assisted them to their bed. They cleaned up the mess, spraying room deodorant around to overcome the stench.

Chase-247-Virus Rodeo

"The stuff seems to be working as designed." Mario was satisfied.

"No shit." Bennie managed weakly, his remaining spirit used to focus a look of venom directed at the microbiologists.

"With this version, you have the initial shock of diarrhea and intense cramps to demoralize you," Mario said. "This version we'll use to disable people as required. The other is designed to appear as though disturbing the forest unleashes a new Ebola-like virus, which kills by uncontrolled bleeding. For you guys, diarrhea should taper off, the rest of the time you'll just have pain and feel like dying." He sponged the Alzas' foreheads tenderly as Albalisa massaged their necks and scalps.

"I do feel like dying," Mercedes gasped, turned and vomited over the side of the bed into a bucket Albalisa had placed there for her. The phone rang and Mario answered.

"OK—see you," he said. Red and Harlo would fly in later that day.

Mario, Red, and Harlo took blood, urine, and other laboratory sample data for documentation and control. They and their wives helped the Alzas overcome their extreme discomfort as best they could. By the next evening, Mercedes was no longer in pain, but was so weak that she could hardly stand. By eleven the following morning, they both felt well enough to resume limited activities around the house.

"I'm not looking forward to our turn!" Albalisa shook her head. "You guys were a mess, and your faces were pea-green!" She leaned over and tenderly kissed Mercedes, then Bennie.

"Thank God it's over!" Mario concluded. "If TRFIS works with repeatability as on you, we've got ourselves a sure way to end pollution."

Chase-248-Virus Rodeo

Although Bennie's cheeks were sunken, color was flowing back to his pallid face.

"I pity the poor fuckers who'll have to clean up the mess from these operations," Mario said. "I hope we won't have to use the killer virus too much before society makes the connection to pollution." He shuddered. "Can you imagine? We know what it is and yours lasted only a few days—others won't have a clue. Psychological impacts will be devastating. Fear will run rampant, possibly mass hysteria and panic will follow. Still I really believe this is the most humane way to save the Earth's life-support system."

Bennie and Mercedes said nothing.

* * * * *

Pinehurst, NC

Revanne was reading The Pilot, a local paper, and suddenly exclaimed, "Oh my God!"

Fester, quietly perusing a TV Guide for a ball game, rushed to her side. "What's happening?"

"Look at this," she said, her hands shaking. "A suspect is being held for the fire at Ken's." Revanne's look was pure terror and she was as white as a sheet. "They're even talking about possible murder."

"Let me see!" In his haste Fester jerked the paper out of Revanne's hand, tearing the page. "Shit! I'm sorry, Honey." Sheepishly, he looked for some Scotch Tape, found some, and started to paste the page together.

"Shouldn't we turn ourselves in?" Revanne looked at Fester with a guilty

Chase-249-Virus Rodeo

dog look.

"Or wait to see if they have real evidence for a trial?"

"Fester, we can't let someone rot in jail on our account."

"Honey, this guy has little to lose compared to what the world will if we're caught now. If Joe did his job right, there should be no evidence and they'll let this guy go."

"That could be months."

"Naw. Look here, he's out on bail. If there's a trial and it goes against him, I'll go forward," Fester said. "I'll limit it to me avenging you. That you were attacked, that little was done to Katarina Witt's stalker, and nothing to Monica Celes' attacker."

"No, Fester, I won't let you take the rap alone. I'll go in with you."

Su Su had just slipped into the house, caught their intense conversation, and covertly listened in.

"Thanks, Honey, but someone has to look after Su Su. I'm a soldier. I was trained to sacrifice myself for society, if necessary."

Su Su could feel a cold sweat forming over her. Hidden in the doorway, she strained to hear every word.

"If you go, it'll mess up my rationale," Fester said. "Only I can go."

"Rationale?" Su Su thought. "What the hell? What's going on?"

"It's not fair for you, Honey. I'm the one who was first involved. I should go."

"Go where?" Su Su thought.

"I did it. I go, and that's final."

"Did what?" Su Su thought.

"I can't let you do it," Revanne said. "We'll just have . . ."

Chase-250-Virus Rodeo

As Revanne spoke, Su Su leaned forward to hear and lost her balance, falling against a vanity table and knocked over a brass vase.

With a start Revanne turned and saw Su Su. "My God, how long have you been there?" Revanne's voice quivered with alarm and her faced turned crimson like a beet.

"No problem, Mom. I just got here, really."

Fester decided to say nothing. He scrutinized Su Su's body language and concluded that what she knew wasn't catastrophic. Enough to arouse her curiosity, but not enough to compromise Virus Rodeo.

Revanne looked to Fester for support. He gave her a covert signal to cease and desist.

Su Su left, went upstairs, and slammed the door to her room.

"Let her be," Fester said. "She'll get over it. As long as the suspect is out on bail, we'll do nothing. That's final. Now get your shit together, Honey."

Revanne said nothing, returned to her armchair and sulked.

* * * * *

December

When Bennie visited Wanda "the Witch" and Sid in Washington for an update, Wanda was still at an impasse with Justice. Meeting in her office overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue, they looked out at the swarms of government workers breaking for lunch like ants racing to a child's dropped candy.

"There's no feeling of betrayal by the current system among lawyers,

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which of course is understandable," Wanda lamented. They're still having it pretty good." She looked down and sighed deeply. "I wonder if we really need Justice before the coup?" Wanda thought out loud. "Maybe we should just write them off for now and wait until after the coup." She extended her hand to Bennie and held his affectionately. "What if we spent our time planning, identifying choke points, and pegging which lawyers need to be controlled after the coup?"

He considered the idea and nodded his head.

"Bennie, I hate to be so ineffective at this stage. I think I can make it up later, though."

"Don't worry about it, Wanda. It's not your fault, and maybe we don't need lawyers for now anyway," Bennie said. "Frankie and Bobbie can help you review this aspect, and you can give us your recommendations at the next Stoneybrook."

Changing the subject, Sid interjected, "I heard TRFIS really knocked you on your ass. At least something's going right!" His boisterousness held a note of false enthusiasm.

"God, was it a bitch! I hate to do this to people, but we have to see its social effect when used by surprise. We have to send a clear message so deforestation and auto commuting begins to cease spontaneously."

Sid bravely tried to rationalize his misgivings. "I guess we'll have to see if panic and fear set in as we anticipate. But I wish we didn't have to go through with this."

Bennie understood Sid's doubts were more serious than he had let on. In a solemn tone, Bennie said, "Now I know how Churchill felt when he decided to let Coventry go even though he knew about the air attack in advance."

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"I don't know the story. What did he do?" Wanda asked. Sid's eyes lit up with interest.

"The Brits had broken the German code, so they knew of the planned air attack on Coventry." Bennie sat up and placed his hands on his knees. "But if Coventry had taken any unusual defensive measures, the Germans would've known their code was compromised. They'd have changed it, and valuable future information would've been lost. Churchill elected to act as if he didn't know. He sacrificed Coventry, but the Germans never knew during the entire war their code was broken." Seeing the conscientious FBI agent relieved, Bennie unfolded the rest of the story. "Probably millions of allied lives were saved because of the sacrifice of Coventry's gallant civilians. We'll save many more lives than will be sacrificed by TRFIS. Remember, we're trying to save the Earth's life-support system for future generations. Hopefully no more than a few thousand will be lost to TRFIS."

"Come on, Bennie," Sid said. "Churchill was the legally elected leader of a democratic nation waging a declared war against an easily recognized and despicable aggressor."

"True," Bennie said. "But Hitler was small potatoes compared to destruction of the Earth's life-support system. We can make TRFIS lethal, or just painful like it was for us, depending on objectives. That's the beauty of genetically engineered weapons—they can be designed to work very precisely."

Bennie concluded, "Psychology's the whole ball of wax. After initial runs, people should conclude ecological abuse leads to a deadly new virus which decimates people. Eventually, Tropical Rain Forest Infection Syndrome and its acronym TRFIS, will become part of the language as AIDS has. From time to time we'll have to reinforce perceptions with additional runs. Like

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AIDS has changed some perceptions, we hope TRFIS will stop deforestation once and for all—and eventual relinquishment of motorcars." Their eyes met and Bennie could see the FBI agent from Washington had recovered from his earlier anxieties.

"As for your role, Wanda," Bennie turned to her. "Just sit tight for now and keep your ears glued to the ground in case some government agency gets wind of what we're doing."

Wanda's penetrating green eyes signified she was pleased with that task for the immediate future.

* * * * *

Stoneybrook, The Fourth Year Into Virus Rodeo

Bennie faced his gang, "Well, guys. It's happening. A Fascist undertow is manifesting itself. Congress seems to be moving in a reactionary direction, proposing guns, cigarettes, and pollution for all. Looks like the only choice people have is between the Jesse Helms and Bill Clintons. We should have it wired, guys!"

Revanne added, "They're talking about cutting pollution controls, Amtrak, and transit. If we ever needed a cue to proceed—this is it!"

A massive round of applause followed.

"More immediately, we've got two principal issues to deal with today," he said. "One, what approach do we use in our employment of TRFIS—gradualism for humane conditioning or sudden massive shocks? And two, as we convert to clean electricity, we want to be sure our corrective tax and

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temporary subsidy initiatives don't create new dependent constituencies. Bottom line, welfare hasn't worked for our inner cities—we sure don't want to apply it to high-tech industries." He paused for effect. "OK, which way do we go with TRFIS, people?"

Fester was first to speak. "I can understand wanting to use a graduated approach for humane reasons, but we tried that route in Vietnam and Bosnia—need I say more?"

Irv offered, "Desert Storm worked because it was a massive effort in very little time. With psychological goals in mind, they focused on destroying Iraqi soldiers' will to fight. There's no way around the fact we had to kill tens of thousands in minimum time by overwhelmingly frightening means. Iraqi soldiers felt completely powerless against our airpower, knowing at anytime, out of the silence of the desert, bombs might fall. There was no place to hide from B-52s or A-10s—no safe zone. You saw CNN—how Iraqis even surrendered to Italian TV crews. This is the kind of outcome we must have with TRFIS." Bennie recognized Easy Ed of PSYOPS, "Yeah, Ed."

"PSYOPS' primary objective's to turn target people into putty for manipulation toward desired behavioral outcomes—here to accept massive changes, uncertainty, and perceived inconveniences of converting to clean electricity, giving up fossil fuels, and saying good-bye to gasoline motorcars. We need them to go along on a global scale." Ed paused for a moment, then continued. "Gradualism won't cut it—people have to feel their backs to the wall. Look at disasters we had with gradualism in Bosnia and Somalia."

"I agree," Mario jumped in. "The basic rule of evolution is adaptability—adapt or perish. Man, rats, and cockroaches are particularly good at this. . . ." Many laughed.

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"Look, man," Bill said. "There's a difference between cultural evolution and changes through genetic mutation."

"Exactly," Mario replied. "With genes, it's automatic over generations. With culture, it has to be induced. In our case, we have little time, so TRFIS' massive shock is essential."

"Look, people," Bennie reminded them. "We'll have to kill thousands in a short time with an organized global pandemic which terrorizes people. We'll have to sustain it until everyone feels vulnerable. And we're working against complacency—as with AIDS or Third World starvation—where people can rationalize to themselves it won't happen to me. On a much smaller scale, epidemics of carjackings and highway murders have similar effects. Sales of cellular phones have increased dramatically because people feel mortally vulnerable. They take what protective action they think gives them a chance." He paused.

Bennie reinforced his point. "We might be tempted to use gradualism for humane reasons, but actually gradualism would lead to failure like Vietnam. We'd be inhumane killing people for nothing. Like Fester says, ours has to be the kind of massive shock people feel in their guts. With TRFIS, they have to believe there's no way out except giving up deforestation and fossil fuels—no half measures like cellular phones."

"Here's how I see it," Fester said. "A half-assed effort like Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco is counterproductive and wastes lives for nothing. We have to have a rain forest pandemic that sweeps equatorial areas like a typhoon, where thousands die grisly deaths in just a few weeks, then spreads in bits and pieces to the rest of the world like Ebola. All this broadcast live on CNN, repeated until it sticks. Our media moles will coin the acronym

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TRFIS and its meaning almost immediately so terror can be focused unambiguously. Periodic aftershocks to create lingering uncertainty and discomfort so when Virus Rodeo comes on line, populations literally welcome us with open arms—like Paris Liberation crowds in 1944. Have you objective criteria," Fester gestured towards Albalisa, "with your DNA behavior trials?"

Like a doctor speaking to an AIDS patient with only months to live, Albalisa pronounced without emotion: "Bottom-line, thousands have to die—there's no choice. Thanks to power of the media—given that we use it properly—a few thousand might be all we need to kill. I can't quantify it more precisely because nothing like this has ever been tried before, so despite our scientific tools, we're groping around in the dark on this one. I'd be a fool to tell you I'm absolutely certain of outcomes, but I'm reasonably sure enough to recommend using TRFIS according to Fester's scenario. We'll do our best to see that Mario's targets comprise the majority of deaths, but no doubt some innocents might die. Mercedes you've been our conscience all along—shock or gradualism?"

Silently, Mercedes rose slowly and walked to the front, turned and soberly faced her colleagues. "I've done a lot of soul-searching on this and . . . as you know, it's with immense reluctance I'm even here."

Suddenly, all members of the gang rose to their feet and gave Mercedes a standing ovation. Overcome with an outpouring of emotion, the tribute lasted for over ten minutes.

"Thank you. Thank you." Mercedes fought the tears. Finally, she was able to resume, "I'm aware you share my concerns perhaps people over there could have been convinced or helped in finding other means of making a living than destroying the forest and all it represents. But still it's their land.

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They're really not doing anything we haven't for many hundred years. And what rights have we got to kill them for what we've been doing negligently?"

"We have to do it," Mario said. "Temperate zones will get theirs as well. The life-support system can't take anymore."

"We have to be absolutely sure," Mercedes said adamantly.

"We all go along with that," Bennie said.

"I try hard to believe that," Mercedes said. "They have rights. In some ways, it could be if the rest of the world wanted to and wasn't so selfish, they could help them create jobs and teach them about the importance of the forest for the planet, for medicine as well as just air."

"I'm afraid the clock has run out," Bennie said. "We've no time for slow approaches. TRFIS lays psychological groundwork for global conditioning, not just in tropical rain forests. If we go with TRFIS, it has to be massive initially, then reinforced periodically in order to work. If people have concrete hope they can be spared, it'll fail. Perceptions have to be complete vulnerability yet with hope it's not too late, that someone may rise up offering a cure. Once we come on scene, we offer corrective action which, granted, will be painful, but acceptable and survivable."

"Well," Mercedes said. "If what I said is quite impossible to attain, I regrettably agree Bennie's way is worth considering."

Bennie smiled at Mercedes as she concluded.

Bennie turned to face his colleagues and ask the momentous question. "OK, do we go or no-go with TRFIS? The decision we take today commits us to test the organic binary so we have the option of Virus Rodeo two years from now. Do we authorize Cactus Jack and Bill to start deployment of the TRFIS organic binary? We'll have two more Stoneybrooks until we vote to

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employ. Then we make the final go/no-go decision for Red to push the electronic DNA command sequence binary that September. If go then, we'll be committed come hell or high water. Today, all we decide is whether to test deployment of the organic binary. In no way does today's decision irrevocably obligate us to Virus Rodeo. Any questions?"

"Why just them, not us?" Bill asked.

"It'll also be us," Albalisa assured him. "Mario's almost completed a virus to spread in temperate zones to be associated with motorcars' surface ozone pollution. It's an extension of TRFIS. I'm working on the psychological profiles of victims. We want criminals and violence prone types to be the ones who die. TRFIS will be programmed to kill only these."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Bill became uneasy.

"We'll extend it to heavily polluted areas as required," Mario said. "Temperate nations can't feel immune at all. It'll be a global pandemic. Albalisa still has to refine her behavior models for our timing."

"In the meantime," Bennie said. "Do we go with stage one organic binary?"

Since only authorization to deploy the harmless organic binary was at issue, the Gang of 34 voted yes—then took a break before addressing the economic subsidy issue.

After the break, Rhea and Schatze walked toward the front of the room and set up graphs and flip charts. Their task had been to come up with domestic economic solutions for the environment's problem.

Schatze spoke first, "On the homefront, we want to steer the private market system towards our goals. We have to nudge the private marketplace

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in the right direction. It won't do this on its own," she directed the pointer toward an illustration depicting supply and demand curves of the private market showing the movement left of the supply curve adjusted for social costs, which can only be met with corrective taxes to reduce quantity demanded."

"For example, private markets won't raise gasoline prices creating funds for alternative electric rail infrastructures. They can't respond to global pollution and life-support system destruction prior to the fact." Schatze adjusted her glasses which had slid down her nose. "So we use taxes and subsidies to engineer the economy toward desirable environmental outcomes. These enable us to manipulate private supply and demand cues to shape the economy away from fossil fuels toward clean electricity. TRFIS will emphatically nudge markets toward acceptance of higher gasoline taxes to fund electric railroads."

"Given our program is really the desirable way to go, no?" Bill reminded his colleagues.

"If our program isn't the way," Bennie said. "We'll abort before doing anything at all, pure and simple."

"We're going to make corrective taxes a priority," Rhea added. "I want to stay away from subsidies as much as possible--too many are already on the federal dole." She made individual eye contact with a few of the gang as her glance swept the room. "The key goal is to convert from a fossil fuel economy to a self-sustaining clean electric one over as much time as possible to give all entities adaptation time without dragging it out beyond limits of the life-support system. We've made assumptions used in our model construction as realistic and objective as we know how. All we're doing

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is adjusting for time-myopia market failure in terms of the coming actual environmental Pearl Harbor. We preempt it to save life on Earth."

Eric asked, "How are OPEC countries going to earn a living without oil sales?"

"Good question. I'll let our global specialists field that one," Rhea said. She and Schatze stepped down as Kathi and Maria, tasked with global impact analysis, took center stage.

Maria spoke first. "Some OPEC countries are advantageously located to service Asiatic and African Third World countries. As our conversion processes stretch out over 30 years, they can invest oil profits into electric automobile factories, hydroponic farms . . ."

Ina Kogan raised her hand. "Hydroponic farms?"

Maria answered, "These are farms in greenhouses where crops grow in water enriched with applicable nutrients." Pointing to the map, Maria selected the Persian Gulf. "Bahrein already has a number of these, growing lettuce for instance, for airliners which stop on their way to Australia/New Zealand from Europe."

"That's great, Maria!" Eric applauded, "I like that idea."

"In our models," Maria continued, "we're looking at natural endowments beside fossil fuels to shape economies in an evolutionary manner, so all can earn a decent living. Many OPEC countries, the Middle East in particular, have highly skilled, well-educated populations—look how quickly and resourcefully Iraq recovered from Desert Storm. That kind of ingenuity can help spread the clean electric world to the Third World. We're going to make the spontaneous abortion drug, RU-486, and implanted birth control drug, Norplant, available to the Third World for population control. I hope we

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can do that overtly, but if local religions prevent that--then covertly." A look of resignation crossed her face.

"Why just women bearing the burden of birth control?" Anne demanded "If you guys weren't so eager to stick your dicks in anything wearing a skirt, there wouldn't be a problem. Most guys don't want kids anyway, just a piece of ass."

"Succinctly put, Anne," Mario said, grinning uncomfortably. "Actually, I'm working on a male chemical device to reduce sperm counts covertly through water supplies of target areas. It'll be disguised as an outcome of deforestation and excessive use of fossil fuels."

"That's fiendish, Mario," Bill said. "Forced population control also?" He was shaking his head. "The Pope says we have enough food growing capability to feed everyone. He says the problem isn't too many people, but selfishness of the developed world."

"That may be true in theory," Fester said. "But the real world track record shows people are indeed very selfish whether developed or underdeveloped. And are likely to remain so unless we covertly reprogram their genes—and that's beyond the scope, capability, and mandate of Virus Rodeo."

"Fester's right," Mario said. "We can't start reprogramming genes. We don't want to alter man's basic evolutionary path. But deforestation is just one of major problems. Population has to be controlled and this'll do it harmlessly. Male devices are revocable, just like RU-486 and Norplant."

Kathi faced Bill directly, "Other than deforestation and fossil fuels, excessive populations are the most critical environmental and social problem. Social problems like unemployment, poverty, and wars are a high risk with overpopulated Third World countries. One nuke and they'd use it to blackmail

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the industrialized world. In the eyes of their leaders, they've got the ultimate weapon—expendable populations. Unfortunately, humans are cheap cannon fodder in the Third World—just look at CNN!"

"Fossil fuels have to go," Mario said. "Some will have to die in the temperate world, perhaps many to make the point."

"Oh boy," Bill interrupted. "I don't know what is worse, this or Hitler's final solution?"

"Oh, come on, Bill," Bennie said. "Hitler was a bigot with the only objective of exterminating Jews for the sake of exterminating them. We don't want to exterminate anyone, per se. We want to alter behavior on a global scale to preserve the life-support system. We're not irrevocably committed. If you have a better idea before we deploy the electronic binary, we'll abort TRFIS. Nothing would please me more."

"Hear, hear!" The others chorused.

Mercedes gave Bennie an approving nod.

Bill seemed satisfied with that, so Bennie stepped forward to close the meeting, "We must not lose sight of the integrative nature of our project." He looked directly, one at a time, at some of his colleagues. "None of our initiatives work in isolation. All constantly cross impact. We'll be prepared for normal random events which occur in complete surprise. We must use these to advantage to advance Virus Rodeo."

With that, the Gang of 34 adjourned.

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Pinehurst, NC

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Later That Summer

Fester was sitting quietly watching a baseball game on TV when the phone rang. "I'll get it," he yelled upstairs to Su Su.

It was Revanne from her studio. "I have . . ."

Fester, realizing Su Su might be eavesdropping, cut off Revanne as she started to speak. "You want me to help you edit your news program?"

Taken aback, Revanne said nothing trying to figure out what Fester might mean, then caught on. "Right, Honey. Listen to this. The fire was ruled accidental, suspect cleared, case closed, and owner listed as missing."

Spontaneously, Fester heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"Well," Fester said. "Since it's local to that county and was no big deal, maybe it doesn't need to be on TV. Their local paper will cover it adequately. I'm sure you'll find enough convenience store holdups."

"Oh yes. We had another drug killing in Durham. I'll milk that one."

"Sounds fine, Baby Doll—just fine. Bye." Fester hung up.

Su Su quietly hung up as well. She had caught Fester's deep sigh and wondered why her father had cut off her mother. What owner, what fire, what suspect, and what case? And why would her parents be relieved? It didn't make sense. She started downstairs to ask but caught herself. "I'll find out more if I play my cards right," she thought, as she tiptoed back to her bed, closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

Fester quietly went upstairs, cracked Su Su's door and looked in. "Well she's either faking it good or she's asleep," he thought.

Su Su thought, "now I know they're up to something. I'll watch The Pilot about fires, closed cases, cleared suspects, and missing owners. I'll

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go to the library, look at back issues on microfilm for the beginning of this story. They're up to something. I just know it."

* * * * *

Later, The Washington Golf and Country Club

On the veranda Bennie was finishing breakfast with General Bruce W. Taylor, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and a very old friend. The humidity was low that Saturday at the Glebe Road Golf Club in Arlington, as they left the clubhouse to proceed to the first tee. They flipped a coin and Bennie won the toss. He decided to use a number 2-wood to get started. Off sailed the ball to the center of the fairway and Bruce, who followed, sliced his into the trees. Bruce looked at Bennie with envy.

Bennie had heard what a lousy golfer the general was. Because of his rank, he had won too many games to know he was really mediocre. In his own conversations with the general, Bennie had drawn the conclusion that the general took pride in his game, thus would be hurt if he was humiliated, possibly to the point of being uncooperative. He'd also heard the general express occasional concerns about the environment. In order to probe the sentiments of his old friend, Bennie would have to convincingly fake a loss.

After locating their respective golf balls, they paused on the fairway. Bennie feigned concerns about related issues to generate responses. He needed access to the Pentagon's inner circle. Control of the National Command Authority and the Hot Line were absolutely essential for proper implementation of Virus Rodeo.

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"Look, Bruce," Bennie said to the balding general, pretending to be disturbed, "We need to clean up the streets. The National Guard is a good start, but courts need to keep thugs locked up." After nimbly swinging his 6-iron, he deliberately sliced the ball into a sand trap, well short of the cup.

Bruce showed satisfaction at Bennie's slice, then turned and looked gravely at Bennie. "I know courts bend over for criminals, but using the National Guard, I just don't know." Both walked up to the sand trap and Bennie struggled, finally placing his ball on the green. The general pulled the pole out and held it while Bennie lined up his first putt attempt. He purposely missed by a hair. They stopped by the path to the second tee, updating their score cards.

"God, already two behind!" Bennie shook his head in lament. "I'm off to a piss-poor start today." Then back to his stratagem. "Maybe a dose of martial law will do some good, nothing else has. It could work, even for schools. We could even apply it to polluters."

"Polluters, well I don't know about that," the general said as he pulled out his driver and addressed the ball. He got off an adequate shot.

Bennie continued, "Congress will do little that's meaningful to control pollution. We're putting off dealing with problems of fossil fuels. We're still prioritizing economic over environmental concerns in public policy. Their idea of so called economic cost justification of regulations is BS. How can we put a dollar sign on saving the life-support system? We have imperfect knowledge—but because we can't start life again—we have to err on the side of caution."

The general looked at Bennie impassively.

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"Insurance companies are paying ever larger and larger claims for severe weather damage. How much longer can we wait? What choices do you really think we have?" He asked the hard questions while gently placing his hand on his friend's shoulder. Bruce's response to this would tell Bennie what he needed to know. Bennie probed this Pentagon commander carefully. Was the general disillusioned with the present system?

Bruce replied, "But people vote for policies that promise immediate payoffs, you know that. Everyone wants it all up front and these damn politicians encourage it to keep their jobs. Congress gets itself elected by opening the purse to special interests, yet fakes balancing the budget. Special interests get what they want regardless of who wins."

Bennie reinforced the worried general's logic, "I know, there's no constituency for electrification of railroads, none for reducing overdependence and overinvestment in road transport, and none for reduction of fossil fuel combustion."

"So," Bruce challenged Bennie. "What makes you think the military is any different? The federal government is the biggest polluter around and the military and its contractors haven't exactly been above reproach. Look at the nuclear weapons defense contractors; it's going to cost billions just to clean up that mess."

They were now at the fifth tee. Bennie's luck had changed and he was now one stroke ahead of Bruce. He felt the general would get more satisfaction winning if he sweats a little along the way.

"I know we waste as much money in defense as in other agencies," Bennie admitted, "but contrary to popular belief, the military is driven more by idealism and service than civilians and the private sector. Sure, we've

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had our scandals, but they're nothing compared to civilian agencies and Congress—they're the biggest crooks around. Sometimes I think we should just impose martial law until we get some of these problems solved."

"There's no need to be strident, Bennie." Bruce got ready to putt. "It would be nice if we could call on a force to solve our problems. We military tend to think in orderly organized terms and get impatient with the mess civilians seem to live in. We're an autocracy, so it makes it easy to solve many problems. But there are costs—we tend to be narrow minded. I took an oath to defend the Constitution. And so did you. Look at the track record of previous dictators. How could America be any different? There must be another way." Bruce responded.

Finished with the front nine, Bennie allowed himself to go four ahead of Bruce. They took a short break contemplating their thoughts in silence. As they walked towards the tenth tee, Bruce showed signs of great unhappiness.

They teed off down the tenth fairway. Bruce sank a respectable 10-foot putt. Bennie double-bogeyed and saw a wide grin on the general's face.

"I've thought about it a lot," Bruce said. "I know government has made a mess as has its contractors, but that was when no one gave a shit for pollution control." Bruce looked at Bennie entreatingly. "We need education, information dissemination, and so on."

"Unfortunately, most people have no integrative ability or literacy in economics and ecology. Besides, most are caught up in their day-to-day concerns."

"Come on, Bennie. Get real."

"That's the problem, Bruce—but maybe the military could solve this? They're a means to a political end, and there really aren't military ends

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divorced from politics. Could we shape proper psychological perceptions? That's the big question!" Bennie looked at the general, his old friend of many years, who shrugged and shook his head.

"Do the military know proper perceptions, Bennie?"

Bruce led the way to the last tee. They were tied. Bennie didn't want to put Virus Rodeo on the table just yet with the general. But he felt that he could gain access to the Hot Line and national command structure if he played his cards correctly. First, however, the general had to win. Bruce was off on the side of the fairway.

Bennie hoped to land in the sandtrap, but just barely made it beyond. "Shit," he thought.

The general neatly extricated himself and was now on the green. Bennie did manage to land in a subsequent sandtrap. Bruce birdied. Bennie shot par. Bruce's face lit up like Times Square.

* * * * *

Late Summer

Simmering unrest begins to manifest itself. Believing itself vindicated by the recent Republican blowout of congressional Democrats, the Christian Right becomes more vociferous in its denunciation of policies favoring gays and abortion. Some openly endorse recent murders at abortion clinics. Bennie regularly monitors their broadcasts on Sundays and even begins taping some on his VCR to study their implications. Right-wing extremists become equally bolder. Some fringe elements resort to outright terrorism using home made

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fertilizer/fuel-oil bombs to extract high casualties in horrific acts. He compares these to tapes from Hitler's thirties' speeches, brown shirt activities, and concludes the undertow toward Fascism is becoming dangerous.

Politics of discontent feed on perceived career job disappearance, status erosion, real wage decline, higher and higher taxes, increasing gun violence, confusion at intents of the federal government, and lack of feeling secure anywhere. Large segments of the public seethe with anger at traditional government, business, and their own economic condition. Increasing income disparity, resulting from the information economy paying well for the few highly skilled jobs and little for the mass of ordinary jobs, has commonplace white Joes ready for open rebellion. Such feelings are reinforced by a perception that women, gays, and minorities get all the economic attention from government. The Norheim Syndrome is alive and well without any help from Joe Dab and the mob.

* * * * *

Local News, Raleigh NC

"A shoot-out in Cary? Revanne Grossman is there, Revanne?"

Suddenly, crackle of automatic weapons fire started once more. Revanne ducked as the camera swung around in confusion. Breathing hard and crouching behind the TV news truck, she reported. "I'm told the owner had his equity loan foreclosed. He opened fire, killing the policeman serving the warrant. Other neighbors joined and three more policemen were killed. The SWAT team is just holding until the National Guard gets here." The cameraman panned the SWAT team behind

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police crime control tape dancing in the wind. Sudden exchanges of fire caused them to crouch behind parked cars. "These guys are well armed. I'm afraid Trouble In The Suburbs has come. This is worse than the farm depression of the early eighties. Until six months ago, Cary was booming attracting hi-tech jobs. These subdivisions are brand new, filled with first owners."

Revanne's report was interrupted by the rumble of military vehicles arriving, including two M-1 Abrams tanks on their carriers. As the tanks rolled off their carriers, automatic weapons' fire from houses continued.

A couple of jeep-like light trucks called Hummers with loudspeakers and heavy machine guns led the column followed by the two tanks. A big crowd formed behind the police tape, many dangerously exposed to flying bullets. Revanne was on the line with the crowd, her face showing a great sadness as the cameraman focused on her after panning the crowd. Soldiers in bullet-proof flak jackets took up positions behind the machine guns, cocking their weapons, and then nodding to the young captain in command.

The captain put the microphone near his mouth and spoke, "Attention! We don't want to hurt anybody. We understand your feelings. The bank is ready to negotiate."

His words were met by a fusillade of intense fire, one soldier and four civilians right next to Revanne were hit, one mortally wounded. In a desperate attempt to dress the wound, Revanne took off her shirt and fashioned crude bandages on the gasping victim, who expired while Revanne cradled her head and held her hand. Seeing Revanne

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clad in just a skimpy bra above the waist, a nearby soldier gallantly draped his flak jacket over her shoulders. Soaked in blood, she took a moment to look up at him in gratitude.

"Get a fucking ambulance over here," the distraught husband of the victim was heard to say over the air.

An arriving siren could be heard over the crackle of soldiers returning fire.

In Pinehurst, 70 miles away, Su Su and Fester sat transfixed in front of their TV watching Revanne and feeling a complete sense of unreality.

The grinding roar of military vehicles revving up their engines shook the ground and black fumes belched up in the air were blown toward the crowd by the wind. Turbine engines of the Abrams tanks whined an eerie backdrop to the surrealistic suburban scene. Civilian policemen to either side of the column stepped on the police tape to hold it down while the military unit lurched forward with a deafening roar. They were met by a hail of fire from the houses. The Abrams tanks swung their turrets, raising and lowering their heavy cannons. The military units opened fire with heavy machine guns, taking care to direct fire at garage doors to intimidate and avoid casualties to civilians firing from their living quarters.

"Look, people," the captain pleaded on the microphone. "We have the means to destroy your homes, but we don't want to. Please cease fire and come out with your hands crossed behind your heads. Then

line up on the street in front of your houses."

The answer was another fusillade of fire from houses. The captain leaned over and spoke to his unit on the radio, shortly followed by the lead tank slowly turning its turret, stopping and taking dead aim at an empty gazebo in the open space between two rows of houses. The cannon fired, shattering neighboring windows while obliterating the gazebo and surrounding vegetation. Its concussion stunned the crowd who then reeled at the acrid aroma of cordite wafting toward them.

Gunfire from homes stopped. Soldiers crept in tactical formation to line of fire control positions. Slowly, doors opened and frightened civilians staggered out, slowly walking down manicured lawns toward the street with hands crossed behind their heads. Well scrubbed children led the way in full view of their parents, some of them thirtyish, highly paid professionals who had just lost their lucrative jobs in Research Triangle Park.

As civilians took their places on the street as instructed by the captain, automatic fire rang from one of the homes, felling some. Hummers and Abrams tanks immediately fired into that home, splintering double window frames, flower boxes, and lovingly tended shrubbery. Soldiers rushed the home, lobbed stun grenades through the ruined window, kicked open the front door, and rushed in. White smoke wafted out and shortly, soldiers led out two stunned, disheveled individuals—their T-shirts soaked in sweat and blood. The area was secured.

Revanne sought out individuals for interviews.

"You just wait," a young professional in last year's shirt and

Chase-273-Virus Rodeo

running shorts, said. "They manipulate the CPI to tax us by the back door. Huge handouts to their sweethearts continue. My nice inheritance from my parents, who saved and saved after their experience in the depression, has just been taken away with new taxes. That would have paid for my house which I'll lose now—I just lost my fucking job."

Revanne and the world felt the indignation.

* * * * *

Washington DC, A Week Later

"Good Evening, this is CBS News, Edward Sawtell reporting. Congress, under heavy Christian Right pressure, has enacted an attempt to overturn Roe v. Wade. Swastikas have been spray-painted on the Washington Monument, Lincoln, and Jefferson Memorials. Marines from Quantico have been deployed to protect monuments and federal buildings. The pedestrian mall on Pennsylvania Avenue, in front of the White House, has been closed. Norma Fenton is there, Norma."

Before Norma spoke, the camera panned the area around the front of the White House. Marines with emplaced machine guns and backed by armor, were deployed about 50 yards behind the black, wrought iron fence. Some of their officers had bullhorns in case they would need to address the crowd. The crowd was kept on the LaFayette Park side of Pennsylvania Avenue by civilian police and barricades. In the park, pro-lifers were separated from pro-choice supporters by civilian police and barricades as well. Many on each side were wearing T-shirts

decorated with their respective slogans and some individuals held professionally produced posters. A few individuals within the pro-lifers wore NRA=USA T-shirts. Others wore backpacks for collapsible stock assault rifles. Police had their hands full keeping the hostile and unruly groups separated, much less checking individuals for weapons. Tension rose as all nervously awaited the president's decision.

"The pro-choice people have started chants to encourage the president to veto the bill," Norma reported. "The other side of the police barricades has pro-lifers chanting sign the bill."

The camera zoomed in on contorted faces of an ugly crowd and nervous policemen. One could hear the rising intensity of both crowds, some individuals were becoming shrill in their pronouncements, using obscene four-letter words. Suddenly, as if by command, complete silence descended on both groups as they strained to hear the announcement of the president's decision which might momentarily come on a public address system between the two groups carrying live CNN Headline News audio.

"This just in," it announced. "The president has vetoed the anti-abortion bill."

Both sides were momentarily stunned until pro-choicers broke out in loud cheers. Faces of many pro-lifers became twisted with rage. Two persons within their midst—wearing NRA=USA T-shirts—pulled automatic assault rifles from their backpacks and opened fire on pro-

choicers. A few of them returned fire with small handguns.

"I can't believe this," Norma said, shaking visibly. "This is awful, Ed. The police are being overrun by pro-lifers."

Scenes of bedlam and fleeing, panicked pro-choice demonstrators filled the TV screen. Many pro-choicers lay wounded and bleeding on the ground. One of the two gunmen, face twisted in rage, pumped more rounds into some helpless wounded victims. The two swerved and began running toward the White House, the crowd followed like spectators joining players in a vicious fight at a baseball game. Another dozen men pulled out assault weapons and using the leading edge of the crowd as a shield, fired into the police first line of defense. Hesitating to fire into the crowd, police were overrun and the crowd surged to the wrought iron fence.

Marines cocked their weapons, their sergeants gave last minute orders on authorization to fire.

"The crowd has stopped," Norma reported. "Wait. . . ."

The TV picked up announcements from the Marine commander on the bull horn. "We'll fire if you attempt to go past the fence. If you climb over or topple it, you'll be gunned down without further warning. Please go back to LaFayette Park peacefully and go home."

Sounds of ambulances arriving to aid wounded pro-choicers in LaFayette Park could be heard in the background.

The crowd stood still, then egged on by hotheads, began to rock the fence.

"Oh, no. No. No!" Norma yelled in her microphone. "They're going to go over the fence."

"Stop immediately," the Marine bull horn pronounced. "Stop immediately!"

"Oh, no," Norma screamed again. "The crowd has started firing into the White House compound." TV viewers heard the crackle of automatic weapons mixed with staccato from semi-automatics.

Marine commanders, wanting to avoid using deadly force until there was no choice, ordered use of tear gas, slippery chemical agents, pepper gas, sticky foam, and rubber bullets. Momentarily confused, the crowd fell back, some even dispersing toward LaFayette Park to leave the pedestrian mall.

Seeing that, a heavily armed agitator yelled, "Let's get that fucking anti-Christ."

Many in the crowd hesitated, but the rage returned and they surged forward once more.

The Marines fired more tear gas, but unfortunately, while slowing the surge, they couldn't contain the second advance. They held their fire until the fence toppled over and the mob rushed them. Heavy machine guns, accompanied by individual hand-held automatic weapons, mowed down several rows of the mob until it stopped, turned and fled in panic, leaving behind their dead and wounded. Marine infantry rushed forward to secure the breached portion of the fence, supported by tanks rumbling forward from beside the front driveway. Corpsmen rushed forward to aid the dead and wounded.

Norma was speechless. The cameraman panned the scene and zoomed in, broadcasting indelicate, graphic close-ups of the carnage to the world.

Chase-277-Virus Rodeo

The NBC-TV
Evening News

"Ten pro-choice demonstrators were killed this afternoon by thugs in a shoot-out at LaFayette Park across the Pennsylvania Avenue pedestrian mall from the White House, after the president vetoed anti-abortion legislation. Both groups had demonstrators trying to influence the president and things got out of hand when armed thugs, taking advantage of passions, opened fire on pro-choicers. Catholic Church and mainline pro-life organizations issued strong statements of condemnation immediately upon learning of this outrage.

After running pro-choice people out of the park, the mob attacked the White House and Marine combat units opened heavy machine gun fire after the mob toppled the front fence and rushed the Marines. There were 175 killed and over 400 wounded. President Griffiths issued strong warnings that such mob action wouldn't be tolerated and urged leaders of all groups to exhort nonviolence on their followers."

* * * * *

Stoneybrook
The Sixth Year Into Virus Rodeo

"Well, guys, violence is getting worse. We'll have to move soon. I'm pleased to tell you the network's in place and crossover to actives is

Chase-278-Virus Rodeo

completed," Bennie announced to the gathering of the 34. "We've had good luck with the National Guard and Reserves, even lawyers. Right, Wanda?"

"You bet. All have discovered they're mortals like the rest of us, not immune to home-equity loan defaults or violence."

"Mario, have you got TRFIS down so it selects its targets?" Bennie asked as he looked at Mario.

"Yes. Albalisa developed target profiles over the last four years. She assembled target DNA psychological profiles through blood samples of criminals, insensitive exploiters, Nazi-type groups, and other similar types into correlated DNA signature statistical models. Through her models, I've been able to genetically design into TRFIS, a highly selective discrimination ability. Fatalities can be limited exclusively to those demographic groups with 95% probability."

"You're telling us TRFIS isn't an indiscriminate weapon."

"Precisely. For the tropics, it's unleashed by an ultrasonic command after the general population is laced with the organic binary. When the command is given, the virus seeks proper DNA profiles like computer programs asking yes or no questions before proceeding to the next step. If yes, the virus sickens and eventually kills its targets."

"Wow!" Bill said. "You mean it's that precise. Virtually no innocents will die."

"Yes. You've heard of mysterious deaths of some death-row inmates, lifers who should've been executed, and terrorists at their weekend camps, in the last two years? Prior to using them for TRFIS test subjects, we made doubly sure they were in fact guilty of brutal crimes where justice was being delayed or put off by legal mumbo jumbo--or the militants were up to no good.

Chase-279-Virus Rodeo

Once certain of their status, we laced that prison with the organic binary and sent an ultrasonic command through their PA system. And did the same with the militants, embedding their propaganda videos with the command. It worked like a charm with repeatability as did the surface ozone derivative."

"Wow!" Bennie said.

"With our ozone derivative," Mario said. "We'll be able to stage ozone pollution horror shows in L.A., Mexico City, Bangkok, Madrid, and others. TRFIS will lead to liquefaction of internal organs and enough will perish to link car commuting with TRFIS after a few events. Subjects will get ill within a week of a surface ozone event exceeding 90% of federal standards. We'll vary it as required until the message sinks in."

"OK, guys." Bennie said. "All's in place except Red's authorization to energize TRFIS."

In the large living room of Bennie's old Victorian house, each member of the gang squirmed in his or her seats. They regarded each other with foreboding, for once Red initiated the ultrasonic command sequence, there would be no looking back, although the recent carnage on the streets would make it easier.

All knew what they had to do. Rhea quietly handed a ballot to each individual so the vote would be secret and conscience would rule.

Bennie rose and addressed the group prior to the vote. "Any last minute questions? As at a wedding, speak now or forever hold your tongue."

Each member of the gang took a deep breath, many left their drinks unfinished. Bennie slowly scanned the room and observed that one and all were ponderously marking their ballots.

Chase-280-Virus Rodeo

After ten minutes, Bennie noticed all had put their ballots down for collection. "Rhea, please collect ballots so Schatze and Ingallil can count them together."

Rhea collected the ballots and handed them to Schatze. A deafening silence descended upon the room as Schatze and Ingallil counted the ballots. They repeated the count three times.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" Bennie somberly asked the women.

Ingallil rose and faced her peers and said solemnly, "33 ayes, 1 nay."

Stunned, all looked at each other wondering who the nay was.

Bennie was dumfounded and didn't know what to say.

After some tense minutes, Mercedes rose slowly and faced her peers.

"Why, Mercedes? Why?" Bennie asked, doing his best to contain his anger.

"You all know what I went through in the Spanish Revolution and just recently, at the Dean Dome. I think we need to review our rationales thoroughly before we press the bloody button, that's all." She said calmly.

"Shit," Bennie lip-synched and looked at Mercedes with irritation.

"I'll buy that," Frankie said.

Taking a few moments to collect himself, Bennie searched for some notes he knew he had somewhere. The others began to chit chat among themselves, glancing at Bennie occasionally to see if he was ready.

"Ah, hmmm," Bennie started off muddled. "OK, governments have three duties. One, provide defense against external threats. Two, provide for internal order. And three, provide an environment for legitimate economic activities to take place with predictable consequences. Are you all with me?" He looked directly at Mercedes.

Chase-281-Virus Rodeo

She nodded yes.

"One, the life-support system is essential for our survival, yet people casually continue to compromise it every day. I think it's fair to say its proximate destruction is an external threat we can't permit to succeed. Here, the only question is whether we've got the right corrective action—is this correct?"

All nodded yes.

"Has anyone another solution?"

"Is such a drastic make-believe ecological disaster really our only alternative?" Bill asked.

"Bosnia was a good example of where we didn't learn the basic lesson of Vietnam," Bennie said.

"That being," Fester said. "If we're to use force, do a thorough job. You saw what a bucket of shit Bosnia turned into because we fiddled around. We sure don't want to do the same, do we?"

Most shook their heads, no.

"No other way, huh?" Maria said, looking directly into Bennie's eyes.

"I think we've pretty well established that," Bad Basc said.

As there was no further comment, Bennie continued. "Two, internal order: A de facto conspiracy by academia, media, and government applies left-wing solutions to crime against the will of the people—who want criminals punished and taken off the streets. We all know the dismal results! I think it's fair to say the social contract has broken down, hundreds of millions of unsupervised guns contribute to anarchy, and massive confusion exists as to relevance of value systems—is this correct?"

Nearly all nodded yes.

Chase-282-Virus Rodeo

"The presently constituted justice system isn't coping; we're getting further behind the power curve. This contributes to predictable consequences for rational economic behavior and sound money. Hasn't the Federal Reserve been politicized for economic expediency to give the illusion of prosperity? Isn't today's dollar worth less than a 1960 dime?"

"That's certainly true," Bill admitted.

"I feel we're just left with drastic solutions. Time has run out," Bennie lamented. "Isn't Virus Rodeo in line with the desperation of the present situation and the bleak future as we've concluded after exhaustive research and modeling, not to mention real-life indicators we've been getting lately?"

All nodded yes.

"Has our behavior to this point indicated we fit acceptable portions of Albalisa's behavior propensity models and can be trusted with the fate of the world—that we're worthy of this responsibility?"

All nodded yes, even Mercedes somewhat emphatically.

"Are we agreed the clock has run out on ecology, man continues to mindlessly assault the environment, and our present Congress is a step backward—actually making things worse than better or even breaking even?"

"There's no hope with democracy then?" Mercedes looked directly into Bennie's eyes.

"Democracy tends to favor powerful constituents or combinations thereof for short-term needs," Bennie replied. "Individuals look at their needs exclusively of impacts on others or the future. For example, fishermen fished the Grand Banks thinking its bounty would last forever, thus depleting the breeding stock. Government and other sectors completely ignored implications

Chase-283-Virus Rodeo

until there were barely any fish left. More than 30,000 fishermen in Nova Scotia are unemployed. Owners have lost their investments on their boats and the Canadian government pays welfare instead of collecting taxes. This is a good microcosm of how democracy operates, favoring individuals at the expense of the total and future until actual catastrophe occurs. Isn't that what's happening with most or all other hard choices?"

Not one said or indicated no.

"Earth's life-support system doesn't give us the luxury of waiting for the real catastrophe. I submit to you, my dear friends and colleagues, we've run out of altitude, airspeed, and ideas. Unlike purely social or economic experiments, where one can afford to make mistakes like the Soviet Union and start again—the life-support system gives no second chance. If we humans blow it, all life on Earth could disappear in a flash—cosmically speaking.

"I submit to you, that after exhaustive research, Virus Rodeo is the only corrective action I know of that has a chance of saving the Earth. Even with the great experiment of the Soviet Union, we're not out of the woods yet—there are some 30,000 loose nukes out there. TRFIS might help correct that as well. Our country was one of the few where big business preceded big government, that's why government sells its soul to special interests. Our present government is for sale to the highest bidder, be it gun, auto, cigarette, oil interests, what have you."

"TRFIS is the only way?" Mercedes asked. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Honey," Bennie said. "People are tired of regulation. They don't feel current restrictions on their lifestyles are justified. Bombs are thrown at federal offices. Our Congress, over its recent years of power, has worked overtime gutting what few regulations and safeguards we had for the environ-

Chase-284-Virus Rodeo

ment. They've gutted alternatives to oil based road transport. The old Soviet Bloc has embraced the oil based road transport system wholeheartedly as now China and India are preparing to do. Concrete arteries are well under way and some countries are whole hog in the fast lane--their people want motorcars just like us. If we're not already over the edge in destroying the life-support system, this'll do it for sure! I rest my case. I await your verdict."

"Are you sure," Mercedes asked, "we're not like subway nerve-gas or truck-bomb terrorists?"

"They killed without purpose," Bennie said. "Killing is justified in just war."

"They think, in their own way, they're justified--just as passionately as you do."

All other members of the Gang of 34 focused on the Alzas. Had Mercedes found a fatal flaw in Virus Rodeo? Was there something fundamentally wrong with the gang's decision making process which she had understood in the nick of time?

Bennie hesitated. He reached deep within himself and quietly addressed his colleagues. "No. We're not terrorists in the classic sense. We're like Harry Truman when he had to decide to use the atomic bomb on Japan. Our decision is based on rational objectivity like his. Truman had seen the carnage of the battle for Europe. Two huge armies--Anglo-American in the west, Soviet in the east--had been required to crush Germany over many years. Against Japan, years of bloody island hopping against a determined, tenacious adversary punctuated by Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Close to half our Pacific casualties had occurred in 1945. The Magic diplomatic and Ultra

Chase-285-Virus Rodeo

intercepts of diplomatic and Axis communications indicated that Stalin was going to wait until we took the hit against Japan, and Japan itself was deploying 2.5 million troops on the home islands to fight off the expected American invasion. Truman's character was such that we can be confident that his decision making was purely factual and rational. In light of this, there was no reason to believe that taking the Japanese home islands was going to be anything less than wholesale carnage for both sides. The bomb might make the difference, he reasoned, for it was a whole new dimension to war in the context of 1945. He was right. World War II ended within days of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Like Churchill at Coventry, public policy required cold objectivity. Like Truman with the Japanese, we have to use a lever that's completely out of the ordinary and have such an impact, people will alter their environmental behavior drastically--that's the bottom line, people!"

Silence descended upon them as they reflected deeply.

After pausing, Bennie continued. "Is our war just? Our objective's to maintain the life-support system. We've objectively concluded fossil fuels and deforestation have to go for they're the chief threats, recently reinforced by the following:

"Large segments of the Pacific have warmed three degrees and 70% of plankton has disappeared in those areas, threatening the entire marine food chain and then on to man himself. Oceans are dying.

"Dengue fever, normally a tropical disease, is spreading to temperate zones.

"The Larson Ice Sheet in Antarctica has developed huge cracks.

"Large segments of the Third World and the former Soviet Bloc are getting

Chase-286-Virus Rodeo

ready to enter the fossil fuel orgy we've been in.

"I believe these indicators signal the clock is running faster than we anticipated. More and more hard evidence supports our premise."

Mercedes rose slowly, scanned the room, barely betrayed emotion, and said heavily, "Roll Mario's Virus."

The others looked at Bennie and nodded assent.

* * * * *

Six Months Later

"Headline News, Carl Upton reporting." An anxious atmosphere pervaded the news room and the satellite antenna graphic came on. "A severe outbreak of an Ebola-like virus has erupted near Mbanza Ngungu in Zaire." To the side of the reporter, a map located the town, 67 miles west of Kinshasa toward the South Atlantic. "Moffet Campbell has the story."

"Carl, it seems that in the past week, thousands of people, including 70 American Peace Corps volunteers, started experiencing severe cramps, diarrhea, and internal bleeding." Scenes of locals wailing at the losses of loved ones filled the TV screen. Foreign medical personnel dressed in bubble suits were seen attempting to organize the medical countermeasures effort. "There are substantial differences between this year's virus and previous years. Here the sick have been involved in a massive rain forest clearing program. Panic and fear has gripped the city as thousands of people are immobilized by

Chase-287-Virus Rodeo

this extremely painful and debilitating bug. By yesterday afternoon, authorities in Kinshasa were alarmed enough to request assistance from the international community, the United Nations, and the World Health Organization."

The camera panned the dismal scene of multitudes of listless, agonizing individuals. Then tapes of arriving USAF C-17s were rerun as were those of unloading pallets of medical supplies where fork-lifts crawled towards the gaping rear doors of the gray four-engined military jet transports. Young American enlisted servicemen, barely out of high school, appeared to have the unloading under control. "By today, four U.S. C-17s have arrived with medical teams from Germany, and public health teams have sampled water. The CDC has a field team here as does Doctors Without Borders and the U.S. Army's Medical Institute of Infectious Diseases."

Moffet collared a medical officer. "Major, have you come up with anything yet?"

"It's not the water. Some 3,500 are affected. We may have another Ebola outbreak. There are differences, like its clear correlation to deforestation activity. So far, cases have come from the narrow population segment involved with forest clearing. Spreading urbanization appears to be encroaching on the reservoirs of this disease. We're looking to see if this is the first outbreak or if there were others in the recent past." Doctors and nurses were shown gingerly going into isolation wards, their protective garments making them awkward. "Learning from previous experience, medical personnel took better precautions and it's paid off."

Chase-288-Virus Rodeo

Shifting to Atlanta, CNN interviewed a CDC official. "Dr. Applebaum, what do we know about this year's outbreak?"

"Like previous ones, it suddenly appeared out of nowhere with little warning. We've had unconfirmed reports of some cases in the last five months—at first, dribbling in, then intensifying until this week's major outbreak. As in previous outbreaks, we have about a 90% fatality rate, which means we may see some 3,100 dead in the next week. I hope not, but we haven't a cure for this thing."

*

"Wasn't that medical guy Major Taylor, Mario?" Bennie looked at his scientific colleague.

"That's him. Applebaun is one of ours also. Neither has had to spread disinformation. It's actually playing out this way. We've got others coming in Brazil, Thailand, India, Surinam, L.A., and Colombia." Mario looked on with anticipation. "Reinforcement will get attention and begin the end of deforestation and the fossil fuel age. I'm sure these applications will generate the shock Fester says we need."

"I'd say you're right, Mario, look at the reporters slouching, wincing, and their arms drooping. What do you think, Alba?"

"I'm satisfied with initial reactions. It's quite brutal and sudden. I'm satisfied with the current pace. Quite satisfied, I must say."

* * * * *

Two Weeks Later

"Good evening, this is the ABC Evening News, Ronald Stuart reporting. Major outbreaks of the new Ebola mutant virus have occurred in South America and Asia. In Brazil, as in Zaire where 2,500 people have died, it appeared suddenly along Highway BR-364 in the states of Rondônia and Acre. Another particularly hard-hit area has been Paragominas, in the state of Para—Brazil's logging capital—this virus has decimated it. Many thousands of people have been affected. Medical teams are attempting to reach the interior, but like Zaire, it's difficult. Doctor Beth Alderson, our medical correspondent is at the CDC in Atlanta. Beth, just what's going on?"

"Ron, here's Doctor Rachel Epstein, head of the analysis team."

Rachel, a Virus Rodeo mole, told it like it was. "Initial laboratory analysis indicates it's an Ebola mutant related to deforestation. It appears deforestation has killed off its normal hosts, causing a transition to man. We've named it The Tropical Rain Forest Infection Syndrome, or TRFIS. The Brazilian Army has sealed the area, but bribery has allowed some quarantined individuals to escape. There are suggestive correlations to indicate the previous hosts were plants. Which ones and how it transitions to man is a big mystery at this time. It may take years to make an actual determination, our evidence is very scant at this time. Budget cuts have stretched our personnel to the breaking point. We're not able to cover all epicenters."

"Thanks Beth," Ronald Stuart switched reporters. "And now for Surinam, here is Carol Nelson . . ."

*

"It's working, Mario." Bennie looked at his colleague. "How many more?"

"Our Kikwit projections indicated we wouldn't need that many, Bennie. It'll show up by next Tuesday; we have moles there and the media'll get footage. I hope that'll be it for the first round," the conscientious doctor said with a heavy heart, "although we'll need future outbreaks related to surface ozone in temperate zones as well as repeat tropical ones to sustain the psychological tidal wave."

* * * * *

The Following Tuesday

Molly Sumamoto and Alexander Thompson, co-anchors for an ABC evening news show, prepare for their broadcast.

"Molly, look at this stuff." Alex handed her the news brief.

"My God," she spoke aloud as she read. "The new plague is spreading. Many thousands are reported dead in Brazil, India, Venezuela, the Ivory Coast, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Sarawak, New Guinea and Madagascar."

"Let's look at the footage before we run it tonight. My God, will look at this stuff, Alex?"

Scenes presented area after area of human tragedy.

"God Damn . . . Panic breaking out. Loggers, settlers, and land speculators trying to escape to cities who don't want them for fear of catching

Chase-291-Virus Rodeo

TRFIS."

Molly trembled as she shook her head in disbelief. "Here's some of the usual BS: Timber interests allege that somehow, Earth First! ecoterrorists are behind TRFIS. That's a good one. Who's behind AIDS? The Christian Right? . . . I don't buy the Earth First! hypothesis."

"Neither does the FBI. They haven't found any evidence to support such allegations," Alex said. "The CDC report by Doctor Epstein seems in line with what others say about virus behaviors."

"Hey, Alex. Look at the satellite feed . . . a report from the Philippines."

CNN News report: "It's grisly here, absolutely grisly. Locals have recently cleared this area for a sugar plantation, 350 dead with numbers climbing. . . ."

Greenpeace urges the UN to declare an end to deforestation.

Judging by the hordes leaving the jungle, it looks like it's happening on its own."

"Well, are you ready for tonight, Molly?"

"Yeah, let's roll it."

* * * * *

Pinehurst, NC At Festers

That Night After The Broadcasts

Chase-292-Virus Rodeo

"Well, Fester, what do you think?" Easy Ed asked.

"In my opinion, it's going better than I thought it would with fewer casualties required. Mario has done a brilliant job limiting it to the selected target personnel. No indiscriminate killing so far, thank God."

"I'll buy that," Albalisa said.

"What bothers me is how many of these we have to do." Revanne looked distraught.

"I hope to God we were right in our conclusion that fossil fuels had to go," Mario said, taking a deep breath. "The reality of what we've done is almost more than I can take."

"We checked and rechecked our computer models," Fester said. "We ran each through at least 20 independent cause and effect algorithms. I think it's fair to say we did as thorough an analysis as we knew how."

"I heartily agree," Albalisa said. "Each of us came up with high standards on my behavior models. Our hands are clean. There's no doubt we had to do this to save the Earth's life-support system. It's working and the casualties are the deserving ones."

* * * * *

Spring, The Following Year

General Bruce Taylor sat with his wife by a window in Robertson's Crab House in Pope's Creek, Maryland, on a Sunday morning. Bennie had asked Irv to meet Bruce using the crab feast as a cover. They saw a high-powered boat coming up the Potomac. It passed underneath the Highway 301 bridge moving

Chase-293-Virus Rodeo

at a very high rate of speed.

"That must be Irv, Honey," the general said to his wife. "He said he was going to try and make the 120 miles from Norfolk in less than two hours with his Cigarette Boat."

Sally Taylor looked over her shoulder. "It sure looks like he's making it."

Sally watched her husband gulp his food like a condemned man on death row. She knew full well how Bruce had agonized and hedged his decision to go along. Bruce finished his crab snack with his fingers, abandoning any pretense of table manners.

"Come on, Honey," Sally said. "Let's go meet 'em."

"Let me stop by the john and rinse my hands."

As the boat's engine throbbed, Irv neatly steered the Wellamo into a berth as Frankie lay on the bow to secure moorings. The general couldn't help admiring Frankie's well-shaped legs and her bare midriff topped by a loose halter barely covering her unconfined bosom. Walking up the pier, the Smelkinsons caught sight of the Taylors and waved, Frankie's bosom quivering in unison with her vigorous salutation.

"Hey, Frankie, Irv!" The Taylors were eager to get started.

"Sally, Bruce—well—two hours and ten minutes—what a run!" Irv looked at his boat with pride, then looked at the Taylors. "My last go in the fossil fuel orgy!"

"That's quite a machine, Irv. How long have you had it?" General Taylor walked towards the Wellamo and stroked its side.

"About three years. I'd like to go to the Bahamas with it once, but it sure is thirsty!" Irv lamented, then turned quickly and held Frankie's

Chase-294-Virus Rodeo

hand as she came forward. "I've got about 200 miles range at max speed." Reaching for the fuel hose, Irv then looked at the others and exclaimed, "Before we eat I have to feed this monster! I'm giving it up soon. I'll put it up in the shed."

"I bet it hurts!" The general nodded.

"Yes, but it has to be. We'll wash up and join you at your table."

After going through four trays of crabs and three pitchers of beer, they didn't feel stuffed so much as contented.

"Irv, I understand Bennie has a project ready," Bruce probed.

"Both Frankie and I are ready to bring you into it—you'll see it's what you wanted." Irv and Frankie showed the Taylors a brief summary of Virus Rodeo.

"Mmm," Sally muttered. "We've just been talking; you guys have really put it together!" She took hold of Frankie's hands and held them tightly, feeling the sweat. "I just don't know, I really don't."

"Look, Bruce," Irv said. "We need that National Command Center."

A look of concern crossed Bruce's face, "I'm being transferred and being replaced by General Lemuel Lilly the first of the year."

"Well, you have to bring him on board," Irv said. "You'll have to introduce us to him." He looked at the general from the Pentagon and nodded.

He met stone silence from the general. Irv became edgy.

The general's look burned holes in Irv's face.

"Are you sure you all are going through with this?" Bruce asked after what seemed an eternity to Irv.

"It's certain. Let's plan to meet. . . ."

"TRFIS leaves us no choice." Frankie said, looking at Bruce harshly.

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". . . . at the Kennedy Center in October." Irv finished.

Bruce buried his head in his palms and said nothing.

Seized with anxiety once more, the others waited impatiently.

Slowly, the general raised his head and said without emotion. "You guys are major league. I'm in . . . God help me."

"That we are!" Frankie said, feeling the sweat of her palms, "It's not easy to face the stark truth that, given present ecological trends, our world is becoming terminally ill!"

* * * * *

Hall of Nations, Kennedy Center,

Thursday 16 October

General Bruce Taylor, Sally, and the Lenuel Lillys met up with the Smelkinsons and six others.

Frankie held out her hand, "General, please meet Joe and Gabriella Babbalucci, and Carlo and Gina Fioritto from Boston. Let's go down to C level parking so we can talk." The other two were deliberately not introduced.

"Right." The general kissed the women's hands. "This is General Lilly and wife, Barbara." After sizing each other up, they looked up toward the ceiling at the multitude of flags as they slowly made their way to the elevators.

In the elevator on their way down to the C level parking garage, Irv warned his friend Bruce, "The Babbaluccis and Fiorittos have operatives throughout the Center in case of betrayal. So don't mind them if they act

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belligerent and pushy. Mob operatives tend to be antsy!"

"No sweat," Bruce assured Irv. "When I told Lem about Virus Rodeo, he said he'd thought about the need for this after last summer's strange weather and all the problems with TRFIS, which seems to be spreading unmercifully."

"General Lilly, we're not fooling around." Joe said as he scanned the Lillys for any electronic transmitters which might be linked to the FBI, NSA, or CIA. "Nothing, Irv—they're clean, but I'll keep the boys on alert in case we've been fooled."

General Lilly wasn't pleased at all; he was used to deferential treatment. "Look Joe," he huffed, "if we'd wanted to take you guys out, we'd have had it set up so you wouldn't even have a chance to scan me. I'd have you spread-eagled and face down on the floor with a M-16 up your ass!"

"Easy Lem," Irv said, before the general could lose his temper.

"Look guys," Bruce interjected. "We're giving you the whole ball of wax—the National Command Structure. We expect appropriate responsibility in Virus Rodeo."

"That won't be a problem, I assure you," Irv replied and Frankie nodded affirmation. "You can remain in the military command structure, like you are now."

"General Lilly, I'll be upfront," Joe said, his brows narrowing. "We're making book on you all. You know the score if we're betrayed."

"Look boy, I don't take threats from anybody, especially mob types." General Lilly growled.

Barbara Lilly, knowing her husband's flash point, held up her hands in a T signal for time out. "Lem and I share your concerns. One only has

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to see what's happening with the forests and TRFIS lately. I just hope we're not too late. We understand your security concerns. We're ready to do our part to save the environment. In fact, for the sake of our grandchildren, I don't think we have a choice."

The burly, uniformed general glared.

The petite Italian turned and scowled at her husband, "Look paisano, cool it!" The Italian fireball's voice was pure ice.

Joe backed off. He knew better than take Gabi on when she was talking ice.

Gabriella added a sweetener, looking at Lem, "Of course we'd give you a chance to explain any questions before we'd act—if there's time. I hope you sincerely understand our position."

Silence . . . then Sally looked at Gabi, "You're right, for obvious reasons I see why Joe can't take chances. Too many are involved in this—you can't allow compromises." She looked toward her husband. "How about it?"

Joe extended his hand to General Lilly.

The general hesitated, then took Joe's hand and firmly shook it.

Joe hugged the general, who surprised himself by hugging back.

Irv looked at them all, relieved.

Gabriella then said, "Let's go up and see the show and have dinner at The Terrace."

"Yeah, enough of this serious stuff," Joe smiled. "Come on, gang, let's enjoy ourselves!" He gave Gabriella a gentle pat on her butt to melt the ice. She nudged him gently.

* * * * *

Chase-298-Virus Rodeo

Halloween
Fort Meade, MD

Harlo and his chief NSA mole, Colonel Frank Strickland, were driving out the main gate in Harlo's car.

"Frank, how's the intelligence gathering effort going?"

"Money's the lifeblood of the gun trade, Harlo. We started out with gun literature, their magazines, newsletters, club handouts, auction notices, and so on. We built our first models from this base, then filled it in from letters to their editors, retail and wholesale units advertised, infiltration of customer data bases from manufacturers and dealers, NRA membership and magazine rosters, related bank accounts, mailing lists, and so on."

"So much for privacy laws, eh Frank?"

"Yeah. They don't mean anything with electronic data bases. NSA is so much more sophisticated than commercial systems. Southern Poverty Law Center, CIA, FBI, and local police files were integrated into our model. Covertly, we've been able to penetrate, with the FBI and CIA, all our target groups at will. Albalisa's DNA behavior propensity models gave us good profiles for reliable moles and targets for our ozone pollution operation. No one has betrayed us yet as best as we can tell from our FBI ferret operations. And TRFIS will be very selective at who it kills in our urban motorcar discrediting psychological operation. It will be almost exclusively criminals, gun militants, violence prone individuals, and other useless human flotsam types."

"Good." Harlo smiled with relief.

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"For financial operations, we cross fertilized our model from these multiple sources for three years, and now can strangle their system at will with our software viruses. All assets of targeted entities can be frozen instantaneously."

"Wow, Frank."

"We've infiltrated defective ammunition into militia, hate group, and others' storage bunkers. We've located ammo storage areas for most targeted groups who'd give us significant trouble. Covert operatives have also infiltrated their video and print publishing units. By subtle changes in instructions for bomb making, we're ensuring they'll blow themselves up, not innocents. Their tactical manuals have been adjusted as well. Their weapons and tactics will be little more than glorified cops and robber games!"

"Bennie will be pleased."

"We've been tapping gun communication and financing lines, credit card and checking account records, convention attendees, and pinpointing entities that are a threat. Out of 200,000 so called dealers, 35,000 are what I'd call legitimate."

"They're the ones we only close until licensing and tracking systems are in place? Then they can reopen and sell to responsible people?"

"Right, Harlo. They actually service real hunters, collectors, and sportsmen."

"The others?"

"100,000 are probably harmless. Just fronts for enthusiasts to get weapons at wholesale prices. These are two-bit operations which don't pose a threat to society. No doubt there are some loonies in that bunch who might cut loose someday and kill some people at random on the street. But they're

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insignificant in the scheme of things, just like lightning strikes. Out of the remaining 65,000, we'll have to take out about 50,000."

"That many?"

"Yeah, Harlo. They're traffickers who supply gangs, militias, cults, and other groups who have no business having weapons. With these and their customers gone, society will see a vast difference almost immediately after H-Hour."

"Good, Frank. And the other 15,000?"

"We'll have to monitor them. Some could be a problem. Many are self-proclaimed training clubs and mail order houses to meet needs of frustrated males, seemingly answering their needs of self-reliance, protection, belonging, and so forth. With one's VISA, one can buy oneself terrorist starter kits complete with explosives handbooks labeled for information only."

"Yeah, right." Harlo snickered.

"Come on, Harlo," Frank looked at Harlo sarcastically. "Don't you want your own arsenal? Even night-vision devices, snooping devices?"

"Well, Frank. Looks like that's under control. How about electronic warfare?"

"Harlo, as with internal security, we've got everything we need infiltrated into NSA's electronic intelligence division. That massive electronic data base was the ticket, man."

Harlo turned and looked at the colonel and smiled. "So our software viruses are into all U.S. computer networks, information highways, PCs, and mainframes we need?"

"Few people understand the kind of power the computer infrastructure has," the colonel said looking out the side window. "Look at all these lights

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and think that by energizing one virus, out they go . . . poof!"

"Without you guys, we would've been fucked!" Harlo shook his head back and forth a few times.

"Even CERT is working for us."

"Who the hell is CERT?"

"It's the federally funded Computer Emergency Response Team," Colonel Strickland said. "It was formed to deal with hackers who have penetrated Internet and others. Even encryption is no defense against our sophisticated supercomputers. We've got means to control the globe. NSA has its ear to the ground everywhere. Security packages such as Kerberos are a trivial exercise for us! Just ten key viruses and the U.S.A. stops cold!"

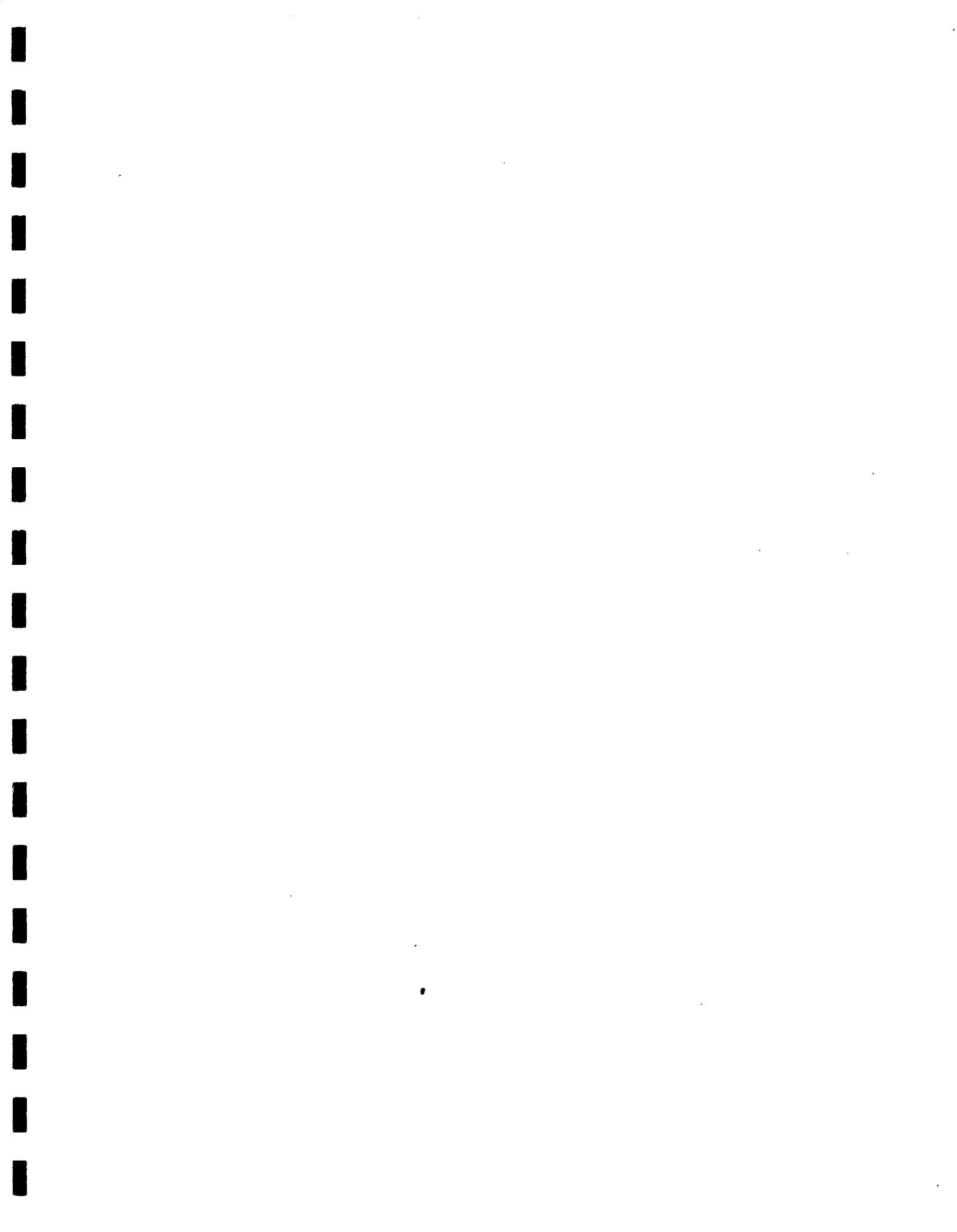
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New York Times News Item, Fall

"TRFIS has spread to temperate zones like dengue fever a few years ago. Clear-cut areas on the Queen Charlotte Islands, Washington State, and Siberia are having outbreaks. Some 500 have died already. CDC infers the same situation is occurring here as in the tropics. As clear cutting removes natural habitats for viruses, they seek new hosts and have found man to be quite accommodating. Scientists consider TRFIS to be a global problem requiring urgent action."

* * * * *

CNN Headline News, Early November



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"August's very high temperatures have produced very high levels of surface ozone pollution in Los Angeles," Monica Lempke reported. "Symptoms similar to TRFIS have killed 1000 already. EPA and medical experts say such conditions are ideal for TRFIS. Experts say young adults are particularly vulnerable because they've spent their entire young lives in baths of surface ozone pollution brought about by cars. Their lungs were damaged by lesions through this repetitive trauma, making them vulnerable to the TRFIS virus. Reports of high fatalities in similar circumstances have come from Mexico City, Bangkok, and Madrid."

"Recently watered down ozone control regulations are essentially unenforceable and have prevented action to limit motor vehicle use. Exhortations for driving reductions continue to fall on deaf ears."

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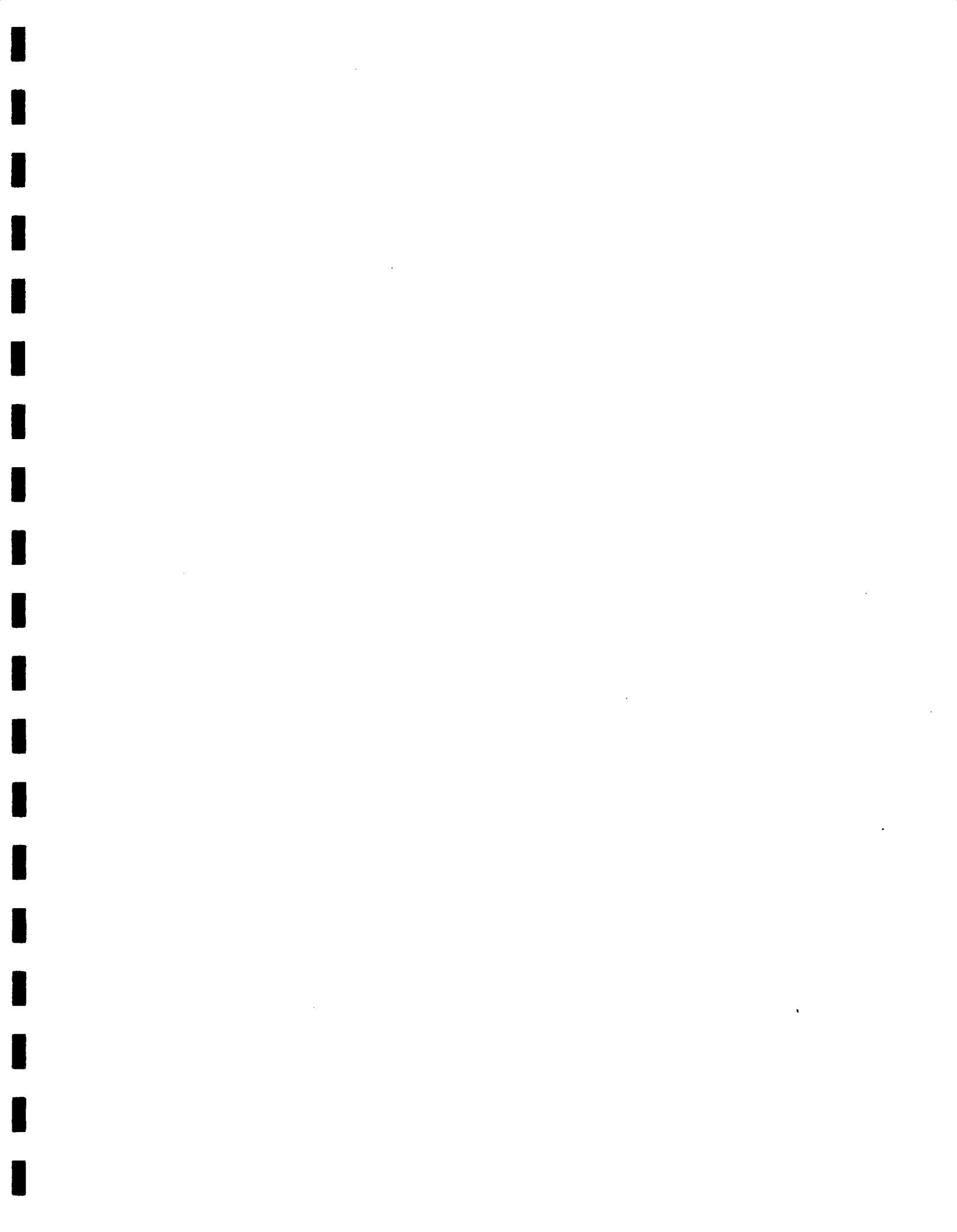
Revanne's Car On Midland Road
Going To Pinehurst, Late Afternoon

Revanne had just picked Su Su up at the Southern Pines library.

"You look worried, dear. What's wrong?" Revanne looked at her daughter who was doing all she could not to cry.

"It's my school project on vigilante groups dispensing summary justice and the NRA's advice that personal firearms are the solution. It's not, is it, Mom?"

"No, Dear. The breakdown of our duly constituted justice system makes



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us like a Third World country. We don't need battles and tensions between ethnics, religious groups, and cults."

"I agree, but why is it happening? Why are they so vicious?"

"The veneer of civilization is very thin. A lot of people don't want to resolve differences objectively by the logic of merits in situations. Most of us tend to be subjective. If we don't get our way, we resort to violence. Violence is the final imperative of what Carl Sagan calls our lizard program. If all else fails, kick their ass!"

"Isn't the government supposed to look after things under The Constitution? Has it failed?"

"I'd say it has. Floundering by the Griffiths Administration and Congress has created a power vacuum. In fact, some moderate commentators say we need discipline, sacrifice, duty to our country and heritage of the Western World. We're becoming factionalized like the Balkans. The extreme right are like fascists. We can't take the law into our own hands. We need civility."

"OK, Mom. Who, then, is Ken Walters?" Su Su glared at her Mum, eyes swollen with tears and a sense of betrayal.

It hit Revanne like T.N.T.. She froze at the wheel and drifted toward the pine trees in the median of Midland Road.

"Mom! LOOK OUT!"

Revanne swerved erratically, narrowly missing a car in the right lane, giving rise to irate horn blowing, epithets, and obscene gestures from its driver and passengers.

"Mom, pull off the side before you kill us. Please."

Badly shaking, Revanne mustered all her remaining strength and pulled

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off the side of the road.

Su Su put the gear in park, pulled the hand brake, and turned off the ignition.

In the meantime, Revanne had started sobbing convulsively. Su Su wept as she hugged her mother intensely. It seemed like hours before Revanne regained her composure.

"Honey," Revanne said meekly. "A few years ago, I was waiting for Bennie at the golf course when this repulsive guy attacked and tried to rape me. Bennie arrived just in the nick of time to save me."

"Oh, Mom."

"We agonized at what to do about it. Bennie concluded that he'd broken into my PC, knew who I was, and was stalking me."

"Oh my God, Mom."

"We discussed it with your Dad. The courts being what they are, we decided to blow Ken away. We felt that was the most logical thing to do under that fact situation."

"My God, Mom, you all killed him? Monique wasn't off the mark when she joked you were a murderer at Stoneybrook."

"We set up a trap. Bennie and I had cyber sex on the PC. We had to spice it up with a real affair, to lure Ken to the Holland DZ."

Revanne glanced unobtrusively at Su Su to see her reaction.

Su Su, taken aback, was slow to react. Suddenly, she exploded, "Why didn't you trust me? Why didn't you tell me?" Su Su turned and pounded on her mother, in sadness, not viciousness.

Revanne let her do to purge the venom. Su Su's blows gradually diminished. She desperately reached out and intensely hugged her Mum. Her sobs

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gradually dissipated and silence descended on both.

More than twenty minutes elapsed before Su Su pulled away and faced Revanne. "Mom, you, a murderer! A sex goddess! I don't believe it. Just like on TV. Oh, how I'd love to tell my friends. That would be the biggest thing at school! What did you do with the body?"

"One of Bennie's Mafia friends, Joe Dab, took care of him."

"Joe's in the mob. Awesome! And we think our parents are such old boring fossils! My Mom, A Mafia queen! I wish I could tell. I'd be the envy of everyone. Boy, would they all kiss my ass!"

Their eyes met intensely. They hugged and kissed profusely.

Revanne started the car, pulled into the road and quietly started home.

After some time, Su Su looked at her mom proudly, "I better clean up my act, otherwise, you'll put a contract out on me. Some trash guys from Queens will slit my throat and shred my sex-hungry little warm, moist body."

"Su Su!"

Both started laughing heartily. Revanne took a hand off the wheel and extended a high five to Su Su, which she returned with gusto, eyes gleaming.

"I love you, Mom. Oh, I love you so much. You're so cool. Oh, I'm so glad you're my Mom from Brooklyn!" Su Su gave her mother an enthusiastic nudge, then leaned her head on Revanne's shoulder all the way home.

Revanne started swaying to the Rolling Stones playing We All Need Some-one We Can Lean On on the car radio. Her nightmare was over. Finally!

* * * * *

Final Meeting at Bennie's

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Prior to V.R.X.X.

Frankie started Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy by the Andrews Sisters on the stereo for background music. The 34 filed into the big room at Bennie's Victorian House for what they all felt was their last gathering.

Eric gave a last minute update of military information. "The Air Force has perfected the Joint STARS electronic battlefield detection system. Its high-resolution SLR can spot tanks, vehicles, troop concentrations, and other military information in real time, as opposed to the time lag we've had in the past."

"Great, Eric," Bennie said, smiling.

"What kind of aircraft is it?" Frankie asked.

"An E-8A, a modified Boeing 707-320B carrying sensors and operators for data-linking ground stations while flying orbits to the side of battle areas. Most important ground movements can be relayed immediately to battle staff, so counter moves can be in place by the time an enemy initiates its operations. It can also monitor urban areas. We've used Fort Bragg's simulator to run battle scenarios for various contingencies. This year's Volant Rodeo has been a good dress rehearsal for Virus Rodeo. I'm quite pleased with the results. Joint STARS is go!"

"Any more questions?" Bennie asked, looking around the room.

There were none.

Bennie's tone was somber as he faced his clan. "Churchill told the British at the start of the Battle of Britain, this is our darkest hour! We, the Gang of 34, are like fighter pilots at Biggin Hill. A lot depends on us, everything, in fact--we can't blow it!"

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"We're still go with social cleansing?" Bill asked.

"We've tried lots of enlightened solutions to social problems since the fifties and they just haven't worked," Revanne said.

"Many can't cope on their own but need guidance and support networks," Easy Ed said. "Religion used to fill those needs, but corruption has caused it to lose credibility for many. Many have been left without spiritual foundations and some find themselves drawn to fanatical cults, gangs, and militias. Many such groups are exploitative and out of hand. Breakdown of families accelerates the trend--day care kennels are no substitute for loving mothers."

"Oh come on, Ed!" Revanne responded. "It's always women who get blamed for being single poor parents or having to work. A lot of women would like to spend more time as mothers and wives."

"You're right," Ed said. "But the point is valid. There's a social price for all this. I maintain that economic status has little to do with family disintegration, I mean--look at the British Royal Family."

"I think Ed has a point," Anne added. "The thirties' depression hit much harder--yet there was no wholesale violence or crime. Racial prejudice was far worse then. The social contract held because family, church, and law enforcement were more tightly connected. Now we have armies of talk shows, shrinks, and lawyers making excuses. Then, punishment for errant behavior was certain, predictable, and severe. We have to restore the social contract in our new order almost immediately."

"That we'll do," Bennie said. "Goatroper, how about it, Babe?"

"Harlo and Cactus Jack found something for the CIA and NSA to do after the Cold War. We got a bead on gangs using national technical means

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technology developed for the Cold War."

"Yeah?" Schatze's eyes lit up.

"Gang members use cellular phones." Goatroper said. "NSA has been listening in, using supercomputers for analysis, code breaking, and locating origins of communications from stolen phones or account number codes. Urban cops, FBI, NRA moles, and CIA have been used to pinpoint weapons flow and exact ground positions. Other than big gangs, like the Bloods or Crips, most local gangs have cores of some 30 with about 100 associates. In old urban areas like in the Northeast, they take over walk-ups in decaying neighborhoods, use some units as club houses and living quarters, basements to store weapons and ammunition, and fortunately most aren't too sophisticated in their organization. They're more like the Haitian army of '94. In L.A., weapons are stored in junk car lots."

"Why haven't they been rooted out?" Revanne asked.

"Well, let's look at the South Bronx, for example," Goatroper said. "Up to the end of World War II, it was a nice slumless area. After the war, there was an influx of people looking for jobs. There weren't jobs, so they went on welfare. Landlords saw they could make a killing by hotbedding."

"Hotbedding?" Bennie looked intently at Goatroper.

"Yeah. What happens here is that landlords rent a unit to three welfare households in shifts. Rent controls distort incentives. Good tenants can't be jacked around, but welfare bureaucrats can be bribed, so landlords triple their rents by becoming slumlords. The welfare tenants live in shifts of 8 hours in, 16 on the street, plenty of time to get in trouble. As gangs proliferate and become more powerful, they terrorize welfare tenants out of units and bribe housing authority bureaucrats with drug money. They rip

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out infrastructures, selling plumbing, electrical fixtures, and cables to crooked contractors. Where they need power, they tap into Conn-Ed street lights."

"Oh my God," Bill said, shaking his head. "What a social cancer."

"You got that right. Huge areas of Morrisania and Melrose have become such hellholes. It's sad. My parents used to talk about how nice it used to be. But we've got the specifics targeted and H-Hour will change all that. They'll be taken out with cruise missiles and precision rockets, followed by infantry and SWAT team assaults. Our task forces have been issued ultrasonic guns to ward off packs of hungry dogs wandering around."

"Dogs?" Bennie looked at Goatroper in disbelief.

"These dogs attack people in feeding frenzies. Some gang hits are disposed of this way."

"Oh my God," Maria was sick. "And you mean to tell me authorities just stood by taking bribes with all this in front of their eyes."

"Oh, yeah. Our old 41st precinct headquarters was called Fort Apache. A lot of troubled cops used to be sent there for punishment. It was looked upon as a shit assignment."

Stunned, most of the group could only shake their heads.

"Any more questions?" Bennie asked. "OK, Harlo."

Individuals adjusted their seating postures for more comfort as Harlo prepared his data flow graphics, slides and photographs to illustrate the progress of the software virus deployment.

"I can tell you with near certainty," he said, "we have power to gridlock this entire country, the world even, selectively or completely."

Many of Harlo's associates' eyes lit up with anticipation.

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Harlo smiled, positioned his briefing wand to selected locations on his graphic, nodding for Bobbie to change to the next one. "I don't feel it'll be necessary to immobilize everything. Thanks to our NSA moles, we have a whole range of options as you can see here, from screwing up traffic lights in cities, seizing gun distribution assets, to total utility shutdowns. If it becomes necessary and we choose to do so, we can shut down the world's entire electrical system at will. Just imagine what that'll do—Stone Age Time, baby!" Harlo did a little dance and waved his arms.

Fester added, "The Northeim Syndrome has worked on its own. TRFIS is contributing to growing political unrest. I personally feel people will welcome a group that has its shit together. Total shutdown won't be necessary, only selectively. It'll be useful for discriminate media blackouts to keep the press under control during initial stages of Virus Rodeo. We'll shut down as required based on significant popular resistance." Here he paused and grinned amiably. "I'd rather shut off people's utilities than gun 'em down in the streets."

Harlo started up again, "Meanwhile, our computer viruses are in all major mainframes, major PCs, computer communication networks, both classified and unclassified, and nuclear weapon electronic permissive action link locks for command and control." He looked at each of his colleagues, who were quite impressed with his thoroughness. "Our NSA people have designed actuating and control systems for viruses with coded pulses in the power supply to bypass restricted password defenses, compartmentalizations, and closed natures of restricted communications. Our supercomputer banks can run through all combinations of security passwords in just literally seconds. Our penetration is virtually across the board, simultaneous, and profound. We're

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on our way!" Bobbie changed to another graphic, this the one for microwave bomb deployment.

Harlo took a sip of water, and briefly described the deployment. "Thanks to Eric's efforts, we have ten-megaton microwave bombs on subs in case anyone launches missiles. These bombs will fry electronic components of missiles, literally short-circuiting them into uselessness. I like playing with a stacked deck," he stated with a sly grin, "so this is our ace in hole!"

"I've just thought of something," Bad Basc said. "You said earlier that we control power supplies. Harlo, what about individual generators?"

"We certainly don't control those," Harlo replied quickly. "But it doesn't matter. As you can see when we have hurricanes or big snow or ice storms, central utilities give the politically significant power."

"Politically significant?" Anne asked.

"That's what makes a difference in terms of political unrest," Harlo elaborated. "If power grids are out for a long time, people get anxious. Individual generators help some, like hospitals—which we'd want anyway."

"I agree," Bennie showed his admiration as the others murmured their assent. Putting his hand on Harlo's shoulder, he praised his colleague without restraint. "Harlo, you never cease to amaze me. This is awesome, just fantastic; we can go with confidence now, software and TRFIS viruses lock us in. Mario, I guess all is in place?"

The microbiologist replied, "We're locked in. Sugar processes, ducks, fleas, and mosquitoes have worked well. Our health service moles in the field have been running random samples of blood tests to see if desired target populations are still properly infected with the organic binary. They report 95% reliability, confirming our first two horror show results. I feel real

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good about it—we're ready for reinforcement as required."

"We've also used our genetic-engineering skills to develop bacteria to control methane production in landfills, rice fields, cattle feedlots, and termite mounds. Trials at our NC State Vet School experiment are running near 100% without harmful side-effects. We're, of course, ready for mutations, but as with TRFIS, we've been able to be very precise with our computer-assisted genetic-engineering design. Application to rice production is equally impressive—this technology can be applied to other sources of methane. We're also working on CFC absorbent bacteria to be applied to the upper atmosphere as an aerosol, so it'll eat up CFCs and close the ozone hole. That one's far from ready, I'm afraid."

"I've one last thing to say," Fester said. "The first wave has the population almost ready for sacrifices, but politicians are still reluctant to go after the special interests. In fact, I feel we're now at the crossroads. Even after our horror shows, politicians have yet to acknowledge that fossil fuels have to go, despite our planted hints here and there which the people and scientists are willing to consider. To push the politicians over the edge, we'd have to dramatically escalate casualties, probably have to start killing indiscriminately. Our choices are really two, to save democracy and politicians, we have to kill literally millions—and then we're still not sure they'll do what is needed unless we keep escalating the pressure—killing even more millions. Otherwise, we take over as planned, convert the economies—with only a few more thousand killed—keeping those within our target profiles of the most deserving to die. I think our choice is obvious."

"Friends," Bennie rose to address the departing Gang of 34, "our agenda

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must be in place to articulate our platform to the public. By next year we must be ready to move. Events are beginning to assume their own momentum. We now control all nuclear warheads, utilities, computer networks, and TRFIS has succeeded in putting the fear of God in people. The violent crime wave, wage erosion, and social corrosion have conditioned the population for the final push. Are we all agreed?"

"Let's get going," Fester said.

Bennie sat back in his armchair and said with quiet determination, "Roll Harlo's Virus."

7

Fall X(X-1)

National Reconnaissance Office (NRO)

Washington, DC

"Come over here, Bob! Take a look at this and tell me if I'm seeing things."

Dwight Holly, the senior enlisted photo intelligence operative, was looking over reconnaissance imagery, his eyebrows narrowed in perplexed concern. He was a veteran with 29 years experience analyzing photo intelligence data and had been looking intensely at a particular package of intelligence data concerning Iran. He had concluded construction activity in that area had been sporadic since March, but in November data began to show camouflaged storage areas for nuclear demolition charges mounted on solid-propellant missiles. As he doubled checked optical and AFP-731 line-scan high-resolution imagery, Holly rubbed his hands together nervously, then called Robert 'Bob'

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Ingram, his GS-11 civilian colleague. Like Holly, Ingram had decades of experience analyzing intelligence data and both were senior analysts for the National Reconnaissance Office's National Technical Means Desk with the Pentagon's Central Imagery Office (CIO).

As Ingram looked over the data display, Holly walked to the window and looked out onto arrays of sophisticated antenna farms bathing in the gray mists. He returned to the intelligence data display module and adjusted his glasses as he leaned over to examine it. "You can see in April we found more or less nothing," Holly said as he looked over his shoulder to his colleague. He pointed at new developments that had been revealed by using COMINT (Communications Intelligence) and SLR (Side Looking Radar).

"There are mounds here disguised as part of this 502 foot hill line. See where it sticks up out of the sand by itself, 8.2 nautical miles east southeast of Ahwaz Airport. See the slight shadows?" As Ingram looked closely, Holly continued, "COMINT and the change-detection program for computer analysis keyed these UTM coordinates repeatedly, but on individual examinations I didn't see anything unusual at 39R TQ9605157342. I've retrieved every single satellite run since April and we were lucky. Satellite optics corroborated high resolution SLR. Look at this sequence of imagery."

Holly pointed to another series of crystal clear, highly detailed digital images. He scrolled through a series of photos the computer assembled in sequence to be called at will. At times he stopped to zoom in on specific data as he interacted with the system. "Look at this time sequence since April. See excavation at the start, subsequent construction, covering it up, and attempts to make it look like fill for oil terminal and other related construction? This is a deliberate and sophisticated attempt to conceal

distinctive patterns of nuclear storage facilities." He zoomed in on an individual annotated grid in the southeast corner. "That pattern—looks a lot like neutron flux protective distance separation grids—don't you think?" He pointed to the pattern and tapped on the screen. He ran nervous fingers through his thinning salt and pepper hair. "And you know what these mean?"

"It means they're almost there." Ingram's look conveyed he understood the significance of Holly's discovery.

"Roger that." Holly winked. "And look here," he said, zeroing in on another sector. "I'll bet you a 100 bucks these camouflaged storage areas are for nuclear demolition charges mounted on North Korean-derived long-range uprated Scuds and Chinese-derived M-9/M-11s."

Holly brought up an image sequence on the IR (Infrared) screen, "And there's more—they're deploying seismic detection devices in case anyone thinks of tunneling underneath in the future. Bastards!"

Ingram rubbed his chin as he ran back through series of high resolution time-sequenced IR images. He pointed out, "It looks like the place is ringed with mine fields too. Pathways have emerged. They've fenced in that area and constructed a by-pass road to the east for civilians . . . Hmmm, looks like we're in deep shit."

"Right." Sergeant Holly stood and moved around the table toward the coffee pot to refill his cup.

"Dwight?" Ingram's eyes met Holly's, and he looked toward the window, then back at the imagery. "Do you follow the implications of this?"

"Oh yeah," Holly was quick to confirm. "This threatens to put more than half the world's oil reserves under Iranian nuclear blackmail—affecting

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the entire Gulf region and then some. With additional mods, they could eventually hit southeastern Europe." He shook his head.

"Since Russian Fascists took over," Ingram said. "Their nuclear power plant technicians have taken advantage of confusion and found themselves dynamite employment—Cold War, Volume II. Stay Tuned!" Sighing deeply, his arms dropped limply to his sides.

Holly paused a moment. "None of this is absolutely conclusive, but all these anomalies . . ." He gave a half-smile. "Shit, why does this always have to happen on Friday? Not only is this going to fuck up the president's weekend, but Thanksgiving too." He rolled his eyes.

"Well, it is Friday . . . What do you expect?" Ingram exchanged a wry glance with Holly, remembering some past Friday Afternoon Follies horror shows. "Well, let's take this data to the chief so he can send it on to the White House. I don't see any other way."

"The shit's really going to hit the fan," Holly said, sighing. "Talk about a Chinese Fire Drill! Let's get it over with."

Major General Garrison was hesitant to send a CRITIC (high priority-urgent) message to the White House on suspicions of a Chief Master Sergeant and a GS-11, especially without HUMINT (human intelligence/actual agents in the field) corroboration. Still, they'd been in the field for many years and their records were exemplary. Everyone on the staff agreed this was far too serious a matter to take the normal CYA (cover-your-ass) tack. But the general still hesitated. One didn't make points in Washington by needlessly rocking the boat. If they were wrong, he'd lose his promotion. The general anguished, tapping his fingers nervously on his desk. As he stood

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to question Holly further, the general knocked over a picture of his family and the glass shattered as the frame hit the floor. The portly general grunted and strained as he bent over to retrieve the photo.

"Are you sure, Holly?" The general asked, trying to reassure himself. "Hasn't Iran been behaving lately?"

"We don't have HUMINT confirmation, but all available data points toward the same conclusion."

"Damn shitheads!" Garrison nodded his head vigorously as though trying to convince himself. A fine bead of sweat broke around his lip and, flung loose by his abrupt head movement, splashed on his desk. His eyes confronted Holly.

"Well, sir . . ." Holly nudged.

"Send the damn message!" The general plopped into his chair and waved them out of his office.

* * * * *

Barbara Ivey, Chief Watch Officer at the White House Communications Center, had just finished touching up her nails as she thought of the weekend ahead. Just over an hour to go and she'd be off to Chincoteague, Virginia. Startled by the flash message cue, her heart sank as a secure message began to trickle in . . .

CRITIC

CRITIC

CRITIC

CRITIC

FLASH 152247Z November 9(X-1) TOP SECRET LEVEL 1 NOFORN EYES ONLY

NOCOPY UMBRA

Chase-319-Virus Rodeo 2025

FM: CIO-NRO

TO: President James Griffiths

SUBJECT: Possible Iran Nuclear Weapons, UNCONFIRMED. Storage areas normally used for nuclear weapons detected. Activity at 39R TQ96051 57342 lends credence. All redundant sources point to same conclusion. No absolute verification, but analysis determines 95 percent probability supported by COMINT--No HUMINT available. Most likely system are uprated Scuds--and M-9/M-11 with up to 1,600-mile ranges possible on the latter.

Despite her usual professional confidence, Ivey stumbled into the Cabinet Room like a drunk. She steadied herself on the massive table as she pulled back a leather covered armchair to sit. Dwelling on the T. E. Stephens' portrait of Dwight D. Eisenhower hanging over the mantelpiece, she collected herself and rose to continue toward the Oval Office. Her face showed concern as she knocked and handed the message to Griffiths' Chief of Staff, Cecil Sheps, an athletic man in his mid-fifties.

Sheps had been spending the afternoon socializing with the president's appointments secretary and a Secret Service agent in the small closet-like Reception Room. "Jesus H. Christ!" He gasped then turned and went into the Oval Office and handed the message to the president.

President Griffiths sank into a wing-backed chair; the silence seemed to last an eternity. The president collected himself. He mumbled at first. "It just can't be, Cecil . . . it doesn't make sense . . ." His gaze followed the horizontal molding along the wall, back and forth, back and forth as he desperately tried to organize his thoughts.

"Actually it does—actually they do have means to effect a new Caliphate. Not since the reign of Haroun of Rashid, at the end of the eighth century, has Islam seen such opportunity for ascendancy," Sheps responded.

"If that's their goal, then control of all that oil will give them means to extract tribute from the rest of the world. They've learned well from Saddam Hussein's errors. His attempt to control oil resources were premature. He took over Kuwait before he had nukes—another year, Saddam would've had all the aces. Now the Mullahs have them," Griffiths concluded. "But I pray to God they haven't. As if we didn't have enough problems with Fascists in Russia and at home." A look of shock appeared on his face as a new realization came to him. "It can't be . . . it must be a plot within our own military." He looked to Sheps for ratification.

"Well, it's possible," Sheps said, looking at colors of all the Armed Services with streamers from major campaigns lining the wall. "They've been disgruntled with defense cuts—they're especially sore about Star Wars." He paused to consider realities. "Naa—I don't think so. Now maybe retirees—they're restive over decay of social norms. I've even heard that some are members of right-wing militias. But how could they do something like this?" After all, this is beyond truck-bombs or NRA guns." He paused a moment, the idea intriguing him. Then he dismissed it. "Naa, I don't think so there either. Let's face it, the Muslims have finally found a way to get even with us. In all fairness, it's not like we don't deserve it. After all, we the West sure fucked them over in Bosnia."

"Cecil, you're right." The president sighed.

"Sir, we must go on as if nothing happened until we verify this situation. You must go through with your weekend appearances; they're important

for the next election."

"There may not be any," President Griffiths said softly, then his voice rose in anger. "They use just one of those babies and that whole area could go up in smoke. It'll make Kuwait oil well fires look like matches. Economic effects would be devastating."

"God, what's going on?"

"Cecil, we have to convene an Executive Committee."

"An EXCOM? I don't know, Mr. President," Cecil answered wearily.

"We have to figure out what to do," the president said quietly. "There's revolutionary fervor in the population." Life sunk out of his voice. Bewilderment flashed across his face, and Griffiths turned to his chief of staff and old friend. "Damn it, Cecil, what can we do?" The tall gentleman with thinning hair removed his glasses and stared pensively at the ceiling.

Cecil Sheps got up, poured himself a double bourbon, and sat down looking out the window. The leaves were gone and trees looked naked. "Naked like us," he thought.

"Here's who I recommend for EXCOM," The president said resolutely. "You, Secretary of State Cavender, Secretary of Defense McGlohon, CIA Director Tanner, our Special Counsel Karen Glass, and Doctor Nicole Sarrocco of Georgetown University's School of Strategic Studies. I've been reading her position papers and she makes a lot of damn sense." He paused a moment as Cecil wrote down names. "We also want Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Fred Martin II; and Randall Farley, our NSC Chief." He paused again, concentrating. "We need a ninth person in case we need a tie breaker. Ah yes, the Vice President. I want us to meet as equals, not representing our respective turfs, but acting independently for the good of the country."

Not the usual protocol. But we must have absolute secrecy. And we mustn't panic. As we don't know the military's role in this, we mustn't give them an excuse to overthrow the government." He looked at Sheps with reinvigorated determination. "We must explore every option, every possibility, every conceivable alternative. We mustn't do anything hasty which might unleash those nuclear weapons. Fortunately, we have no public posture on this to defend; this gives us more flexibility. What ever we do, I don't want to be the one responsible for oil prices going to \$300 a barrel—God no! Let's go about our immediate business as planned and convene the meeting tomorrow at ten in the Situation Room."

Sheps left the Oval Office feeling like a crew member on the Titanic seconds after hitting the iceberg.

The president shook his head as if in disbelief, then slowly walked to the small bar and poured himself a double bourbon as well.

* * * * *

In his private quarters upstairs, President Griffiths went to the T. Burgess Mahogany Secretary, opened its glass doors and poured himself another bourbon, sank into an overstuffed armchair, and stared at the Washington Monument beyond the Ellipse. Large glass doors gave him a full view, and as cars passed by on Constitution Avenue, he felt like an oppressed prisoner. Deeply engrossed in inner thoughts, he didn't notice the first lady slipping in until she sat next to him on a throw rug and folded her arms on his knees.

She looked directly into his weary eyes and said. "It mustn't have

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been easy this afternoon . . . You look sick."

"Hon, we've got bad news. It looks like Iran has nuclear weapons."

"Oh no!"

"The evidence isn't absolute, but . . ." the president said hesitantly, "I'm sure the weapons are there."

"What are you going to do, dear?"

"I don't know, Alice. This has been such a jolt." He sighed deeply. "This could unravel the economy," he said, his voice a dull monotone. "Definitely, it looks like the U.S. made a major error somewhere . . ."

"Well, maybe your advisors'll have some good news," she said as she stood up. She looked out the window and saw many walking in the distance. "It'd be nice to escape this prison and go out for a walk like normal people for once!" The first lady sat on her husband's lap and leaned her head on his shoulder.

* * * * *

Behind a heavy oaken door lay the small darkly paneled Situation Room, crowded by the massive teak conference table. By eleven that Saturday morning, General Garrison, CMSgt Holly, and Bob Ingram had finished their briefing. All members of the EXCOM had been given handouts with relevant data and imagery. Holly appeared in his dress blues decorated with rows of service ribbons including the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Gulf War, Vietnam Service with many oak leaf clusters, and other honors. His brilliant expertise and analysis made a very persuasive case.

The president rose uneasily and faced the group. "I don't need to remind

anyone as to the seriousness of this," he began haltingly, though he tried to appear in command. "Only a few of us know about it besides the Iranians —if in fact they've really got nukes. Some of the options I've thought of are these:

"One, initiate covert diplomacy.

"Two, send Delta Force to capture them.

"Three, a surgical air strike, or

"Four, delay action until their intentions become clear." Here, his demeanor conveyed his initial preference for this option.

"I think we should give ourselves a week to review options, establish positives and negatives to select the optimum solution. General Martin, you have some input?"

Martin stood. "Sir, there may be plenty of these units around. An air strike or Delta Force would get only a few while all they need is one or two strikes to wreck the world economy! Remember how difficult it was to find all Saddam's Scuds in '91."

Martin took his seat then gazed around the room assessing the group. Each seemed desperate to seek release from this brutal decision, even Martin himself who really couldn't propose a viable military alternative at this time. Everyone seemed overwhelmed except for Doctor Nicole Sarrocco, a Vietnam Veteran who had used her GI Bill to obtain a PH.D. Her demeanor seemed totally out of character with this situation and yet seemed entirely appropriate, as though she possessed some element of strength the others lacked.

"She . . . Doctor Sarrocco . . ." Martin's thoughts became jumbled up. He kept connecting her with Sir Winston Churchill at the time Chamberlain

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was appeasing Hitler. "This renowned Georgetown University Professor has come to save us," he thought. The general dwelled on Nicole's penetrating black eyes.

CIA chief Keith Tanner added, "We've lost significant capability. We have no HUMINT to provide positive verification. Our failure to meaningfully help Shiites around Basrah and Kurds to dispose of Saddam in the Spring of '91—well that was a bitter pill for most Muslims. And then the Serb atrocities against Bosnian Muslims while the West acquiesced in that holocaust." Tanner's eyes seemed to accuse each member of the group, his intense gaze accentuated by his peculiarly arched and partially shaved eyebrows.

"You can imagine gaps we have. They've learned the lessons of Saddam's defeat in Desert Storm and I'm afraid when the UN Embargo was extended after we liberated Kuwait, a bitterness set in similar to that Germany experienced after the Treaty of Versailles." The group seemed to twitch in alarm. "This is a technical surprise for which we're totally unprepared! These things could be scattered all over the place and launched at will as Saddam did with his Scuds in '91—they have the element of surprise and initiative." Tanner surveyed his colleagues once again, relaxed his brow, and sat down with rectitude bordering on the mechanical.

Doctor Nicole Sarrocco was dumfounded. The stunningly attractive professor had risen fast in her career and now in her mid-forties, was head of her department. "You mean to tell me we've never anticipated anything like this? Look at the thousands of Muslims dying in Iraq due to the sanctions after the war. Hundreds of thousands actually—needless and horrible suffering. Sure, Saddam had to comply with UN directives—but at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Muslim innocents? And add to this tens of thousands

of Muslims raped, tortured, and brutalized by Serbs in Bosnia. Allah should rightfully decree retribution—I can't believe it," she said, slowly shaking her head in contempt. "I can't believe that isolationism has made that rapid a comeback!" She looked directly at the president, then swept the room as her gold bracelet diffused light in all directions, and shook in consonance with her accusing finger motion.

She raised her voice and went on. "What better way to avenge than a few dozen Scuds with nuclear warheads? What have all our think-tanks been doing lately? Just because we were the only military superpower after the disintegration of the Soviet Union didn't mean we should shut down our operations and return to the womb of 1914 by disarming quickly, as we did after the two world wars." Some of her audience nodded their heads at her telling point. "And on top of this—a Fascist Russia as well!"

"If nukes are there, it's the beginning of a New World Order compounded by Russian Fascists. We're talking about global implications and with our defense establishment having returned to hollow forces, we'll not be able to do much about it in the near term." Nicole emphasized her argument by pointing directly at the president. She tilted her head back, adjusted her jet black hair and with her piercing black eyes fixed on those huddled nervously around the table, she pronounced: "We don't even know whether they've got the damn things or where they might launch them for any sort of preëmptive action. Sergeant Holly, did you verify it's for real?"

"Yes, ma'am, we double checked, triple checked. There's no doubt; we have imagery." He flipped some pages of his handout, pointing to specific configurations for the facilities. "If you refer to Annex II of your handouts, you'll also notice crates here on page 5; they're the size and type

commonly used for such munitions."

"Bastards!" Nicole pounded her fist on the table. "Sergeant Holly, I'm glad to see someone still has some sense in the govern . . ."

"Nicole, you're out of line!" Cecil Sheps defended the system as Holly, elated by Nicole's approval, sat down with flourish and ceremony.

"No, I'm not," the professor protested strongly. "You people have been living in a fairy tale world; you missed the point completely with the New World Order. It didn't mean we should forget about military threats, domestic or foreign. Oklahoma City gave us a reality check on domestic threats, the World Trade Center should've on foreign ones." Nicole gathered momentum, and the others were intimidated by this female riptide. "History's shown man is predatory and if one side gets disproportionally weak in relation to the other, there'll be problems. This gives them absolute leverage, doesn't it? What can we really do that's effective and won't ignite those oil fields?" Nicole sat down and folded her hands.

Sheps had a sudden inspiration. "Look," he said, his weary voice seeming to rise from resigned despair, "Iran doesn't know we know. If we do nothing, they won't interpret that as a sign of weakness. We can, for now, let it ride and see what their next move is, if any. If this is a probe by them to see what we'd do, if we 'don't know' about the nukes, how can we do something about them? Right?"

"You may have something, Cecil." Special Counsel Karen Glass rose from her chair alleviated by this seeming redemption which brought color to her emaciated hands. Looking around, the suspicious attorney changed her vacant gaze to one of imaginable vitality as she attempted to rally Griffiths' mummified administration. "This 'll give us time to carefully analyze things

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to make sure Sergeant Holly's correct in his conclusions and also to massage options carefully so if we go to other alternatives, we do the right thing."

"We have to keep our cool," Karen continued. "We know all the informed individuals on our side to plug leaks. All should realize what release of this information would mean—it'd force us to act prematurely just to save face. In no way must this get out, especially since the opposition is looking desperately for ways to come back to power. This'd be perfect for them," she paused for effect, glanced furtively about the room, and cleared her throat. "Remember, the next election isn't far off and I'm sure you'd like to renew the lease on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." She sat down.

"Karen," Nicole said, "what if they use 'em? One or two of these babies could cause global economic collapse. Look--there's no other way," Nicole paused grimly and looked at the others. "If those nukes are there, they have to go—even if it means that we use nukes to make sure we get all the damned things!"

All watched in fascination, attracted to animated and forceful movements of Nicole's tantalizing fingers as she gestured.

"I think we all can agree on one thing," the president said as he stood up. "This isn't so urgent we need to act in the next few hours." There was hope in his tone. "I'm not ignoring your concerns, Nicole, but I don't feel this action puts us at the crossroads, at least not yet. Nor do I feel we have to assume Iran knows we know." He paused a moment and looked wearily at the assemblage. "I may change my mind later with more evidence, but my law background causes me to avoid making assumptions; I do think geopolitical types overdo it at times." His vacant voice was unconvincing. "Let's convene again later; this will give us time to think about our options to review

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them, one by one, and perhaps start building a consensus towards a decision." He looked at his colleagues and announced proposed action teams. "Let me assign primary action persons for options mentioned earlier; this doesn't limit us to these:

"The Vice-President and Chief of Staff Sheps are to come up with additional alternatives.

"Nicole, you and General Martin are to examine options like Delta Force, surgical air strikes, and other military moves.

"McGlohon, look at possible motivations broadly.

"Karen, you and the Secretary of State look into diplomatic pressure, including going through established UN procedures.

"Randall, you and Ken examine implications for a wait-and-see policy.

Griffiths closed with, "Good day and God bless you." Even his staunchest supporters had to admit he seemed somewhat irresolute.

"Shit!" Nicole thought aloud, generating a disapproving look from the vice president. The secretary of state sat with his sweaty palms clasped together, opening and closing his fingers aimlessly.

* * * * *

No major developments occurred during the week so the EXCOM was not reconvened until the scheduled decision day of 19 November.

The president faced the group, cleared his throat and announced, "I've decided to do nothing at this time." Anticipating the Georgetown professor, he commanded while waving her away, "Please Nicole—let me finish. At this time, in view of no provocations or hostile actions by Iran, there's a dis-

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tinct possibility nukes may not be there at all." Though he tried to appear decisive, the others felt the president's desperation. "Thus, if we use any military force, and they're not there, we'd be humiliated diplomatically."

"You know the damn things are there." Nicole stood up and waved her forefinger menacingly at the president, almost touching his nose. "We sat on our asses over Bosnia and look at the catastrophe this has unleashed. Hasn't anyone in this administration got some balls?"

A hushed murmur swept the room as the others looked at the president seemingly trapped by Nicole.

Finally he managed, "I don't want to do anything rash and foreclose future options at this time. By choosing this option, I keep others open and control the situation. I don't wish to use intrusive X-rays at this time—that would tip them off we know something. But we may have to use them in the future. If there are no further comments, we'll adjourn to await further developments." Then with resignation, he looked towards Nicole, "Yes, Nicole?"

"Mr. President," the university professor said calmly, "I may be redundant, but I can't in clear conscience leave here this morning without making this statement. We Americans have a tendency not to appreciate political and psychological aspects of military moves; we've tended to fight our wars militarily. Iran's action may be nothing, which appears unlikely at this time, or it may be a way of blackmailing us by means of psychological intimidation as to what could be done to the oil facilities. The placement of nukes was done within a geopolitical context—an opening move." Once more, her lucid black eyes swept her colleagues like an irrepressible tide. "Other moves may follow and as Iran gets more ratification of momentum, it'll

be more difficult for us to counter this trend downstream." The others reluctantly acknowledged the logic of this reality with a low murmur.

"Nicole," President Griffiths said patiently, "I don't want a confrontation with Iran over an issue we aren't even sure of. I don't want to place us on a track where we may be backed into actions that could lead to nuclear war."

"You just don't understand Islam." Nicole no longer could restrain herself. "You're copping out. Muslims are going to get even with us for outrages their people have suffered while we've stood by. The Koran dictates it. You've lost it, sir!"

Some members of the president's entourage concluded the chief executive had lost his grip. One by one, they felt a cold chill sweep over them causing shivers visibly manifested by tremulant hands.

With one last supreme effort, the president contained Nicole. "My decision stands. Thank you all for your patience and cooperation. I hope Thanksgiving brings serenity to you."

* * * * *

Nicole, General Martin, and Secretary of Defense McGlohon were to meet in the Secretary's Pentagon office Thanksgiving evening to discuss implications of Iran's nukes and preemptive counter measures available. Nicole had changed to the Blue Line in Rosslyn and was now on her way to the Pentagon, emerging into the gray evening near Arlington National Cemetery. She couldn't help but feel time had run out for indecision and even a military coup might be in order. As the train went underground once more beneath

the Pentagon, Nicole reluctantly concluded General Martin wasn't the sort of man who would think of a military takeover, much less lead one.

* * * * *

President James Griffiths was rudely awakened by Cecil Sheps.

"Iran's Khark Island and Saudi Arabia's Al Jubayl have been nuked simultaneously!" Sheps was shaking the president and trembling with indignation and terror, for he was angry and unable as yet to ascertain dimensions of this new event in the Middle East. "The nukes responsible weren't Scuds, but SADM's."

"SADM's?" The president queried groggily.

"Yes, sir. Satchel atomic demolition munitions—lightweight individual nuclear devices of Hiroshima blast equivalence or less. They're used by special forces and combat engineer type units for behind-the-lines unconventional covert warfare."

"Those!" Griffiths gulped. "Where would terrorists get them?"

"Offhand I'd say from Russian rogue units taking advantage of the Fascist takeover."

"My God! Convene EXCOM immediately!" President Griffiths caught his foot in his bathrobe belt and stumbled into Sheps. "Let's get the latest in the Situation Room."

The CIA chief was already there. "Mr. President, this is grave," he said, eyes narrowed. "Everyone's coming in. The Iranians wouldn't blast themselves—it must be terrorists."

"Any moves by anyone?" Griffiths asked.

"No one had made any moves or increased the state of readiness of any of their forces," the intelligence chief replied, perplexed. "All seem to be totally stunned by this activity; there's no unusual telephone or radio traffic. It's been surgical. Tanker loading facilities have been hit without causing oil spills—the devices were even low fallout. A significant amount of oil will be taken off the market for a long time and, of course, more devices may be in the pipeline, but we have no means to surmise where. The next device might well be at Metro Center—here in DC." Unruffled, he looked away from the president toward an apparent disturbance.

"The press is outside baying like wolves, Mr. President," Sheps said. "They want a statement. The majority and minority leaders of both houses of Congress are here as well," the chief of staff lamented.

"Vultures," the president said grimly. "They're not going to push me into a war when we don't even know who the enemy is."

The president faced the congressional delegation and reporters in his bathrobe; he was a tired, spent man. "I have an announcement to make; I'll not take any questions. The United States will not intervene until we know who is responsible."

This was met by massive groans from the gathering.

* * * * *

Christmas day found Bennie lounging in his den listening to holiday music. "Silent Night" was interrupted by a brief news flash informing the public of nuclear detonations in the Middle East and President Griffiths' posture. Bennie's whole plan to take over the United States had been waiting

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for just such a humiliation, but still he felt sad at his country's latest international reversal. Not since the final agonizing defeat in Vietnam on 30 April 1975, when the U.S. Embassy in Saigon was hastily evacuated and loyal Vietnamese were left clawing at the gates, had Bennie been overcome with such revulsion.

His mind filled with images of Parisians weeping when Adolf Hitler marched triumphantly down the Champs Elysees after the French defeat of June 1940.

Virus Rodeo XX was now committed. Destruction of the oil facilities was the final straw; this was the final shock for the surrogate Pearl Harbor Bennie needed for the new order on the environment. The perpetrators had inadvertently given Bennie final icing for the Norheim Syndrome; people would certainly accept him now as gasoline prices would go through the roof in coming weeks.

The financial firestorm started after Christmas in Tokyo and Hong Kong, when foreign currency and oil markets opened. Wave upon wave of dollar and U.S. debt instruments sell-offs mounted in intensity as they came through Zurich, Frankfurt, London, and Paris. By the time the tidal wave reached New York, the dollar was in free fall, overwhelming the major central banks' attempts to stem the tide. Gasoline price futures went past \$40-a-gallon, as markets groped to find a new equilibrium.

* * * * *

Great Falls, Virginia

December 27th, X-1

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"We have contact, Bennie," said Mercedes, as she spotted a car driving toward them.

Bennie recognized the car, "It's Lennie, Rhea, and some others."

Bennie held one door open. Rhea, Lennie, Rosalie, and a stunning Haitian woman in her mid-forties, came out of the car.

"Bennie, this is Doctor Nicole Sarrocco, of the Georgetown School of Strategic Studies." Rhea introduced Nicole.

Bennie's eyes met Nicole's and he liked her jewel-like face.

"Hello," he said.

Nicole studied Bennie, smiled and asked, "You do know about the oil terminals?"

"Yes."

"Both Iran and Saudi Arabia?"

Nicole became solemn, "Iran had nukes, but do you know the weapons used were SADMs?"

"WHAT?" As his eyes met Nicole's, he could see she was deeply troubled.

"Iran had nuclear-tipped Scuds, but since they were hit also, it must be terrorists. Who, we don't know. It could be Bosnian Muslims finally settling the score because the West turned their backs on them." She had Bennie's full attention. "We just don't know."

"Oh shit," Bennie said, as he released Nicole's hand. "Shit . . ."
Bennie repeated as he steadied himself against the car and tried to grasp implications of this new information.

"I've just made an important decision," Nicole said. "I need assurance your group's for real. Rhea told me a great deal. I even gave her a blood

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sample for Albalisa. I want to hear it out of your mouth, Bennie."

"I'll buy that."

"Rhea has satisfied me on technical requirements. She's told me about Mercedes. I need vibes from you two. Bennie, how do you propose to prevent corruption?"

"I'm sure Rhea gave you background on Albalisa's DNA behavior models and as best as the 34 of us can tell, their predictions seem to be reliable. I'd be the first to tell you I can't guarantee anything, but statistical probabilities appears to be with us—that's all I can say. I wish I could be certain and it's as sure as I'm holding your hand this instant. It's like our projections on the environment—we've done exhaustive studies and ran them through multitudes of independent cause-and-effect algorithms. The statistical correlations are in limits."

Their eyes seemed to fuse and forceful energy consummated their intellects and essences. Mutually holding each other's hands tightly and intensely looking into each other's eyes, the two felt a conjugality of conviction in each other at a level higher than sexual union.

Nicole released Bennie and took Mercedes' hand. "Rhea told me all about you. Do you have any reservations left on Virus Rodeo?"

"Not anymore. I never realized the extent of corruption of individuals actually running our constitutional government. Only as we got deeper in our research did I appreciate the scope of winks and nods—how officials look the other way to placate powerful special interests to raise campaign funds—be they pharmaceuticals, oil, auto, highway, union, financial, whatever. They've done absolutely nothing in face of TRFIS. It permeates their entire being. The trauma of disillusionment was as great as that

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experienced when I faced the reality of some Catholic priests sexually molesting children. My world view holds some activities are inviolate. Trust in priests is inviolate. Trust in elected officials to place public interest above personal wealth is inviolate. Betrayal has occurred at all levels. My gut feeling is to place these individuals in front of firing squads. I assure you, Nicole, that's only my gut feeling. We're doing no such thing with Virus Rodeo—except perhaps in the most egregious cases—but that's up to Wanda. I've examined our little group of 34 and how ridiculously clean we are—not one of us has a questionable loan, job influence, promotion, abuse of subordinates—Albalisa's models work. I'm committed to Virus Rodeo's objectives—lock, stock and barrel. Nicole, there's no other way."

Bennie looked intently at the distinguished Georgetown professor and asked, "Do we pass the exam?"

"I've come to join your operation." Nicole took Bennie's hand again, gave an ardent squeeze to signal her devotion.

8

January of Year X

"Thanks for coming out here," Pitruch said.

"What's it all about?" said Baw, his face tight against the wind on a cold snowy Thursday. FBI Special Agent Nelson Baw was meeting with Edward Pitruch of the Social Security Documents Administration Division for Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. Pitruch waddled, rather than walked, from railroad tie to tie. The two had walked halfway across the bridge toward the tunnel.

"Maybe something, maybe nothing. I'm hoping you can tell me."

Baw waited a moment, then said, "Maybe you better start at the beginning."

"I don't know what it means," Pitruch said. His hands were unsteady as he glanced nervously about as though waiting to be caught. "My boss, Rhea Sobel, handed me this folder to terminate disbursements to Dora Marie Patterson, from Saint Petersburg, Florida. Perfectly routine . . . until

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I remembered I had an aunt by that name in Coon Valley, Wisconsin, who died four years ago."

"The plot thickens!" Baw winked at Pitruich.

Mists rose from the Potomac shrouding the CSX rail bridge from Harper's Ferry to Maryland Heights, where the tracks disappeared into a tunnel.

"When I was a kid, she always took me to the Q Lunch restaurant in North La Crosse, Wisconsin--an authentic railroad lunch room--that's why I remember her so well."

"Makes sense."

"Anyway, I ran a complete computer search by Social Security number and sure enough, this Dora was my Aunt Dora. But get this--" he held up the folder for emphasis, "this Dora 'moved' to Florida the day my aunt died. My aunt never lived in Florida and this Florida Dora has been drawing her benefits since four years ago."

He opened the folder to show a specific entry on the computer printout, and the wind almost lifted it away. Sheets of paper unfolded and started flapping in the breeze, but the younger FBI agent grabbed them with an agile move to prevent further tearing.

"Something's not right here. I don't want to accuse Sobel of anything, but she controls all source documentation through her office. I haven't said anything to her. I thought I should contact you guys instead. Here's Dora's bank account number where it's sent electronically."

The FBI agent endorsed the civil servant's actions with an approving look. "You were right not to say anything, Mr. Pitruich. I'll take this back to Washington and investigate further. We'll check with Midland Bank and IRS to see what's up. It looks like some sort of computer scam. You

Chase-340-Virus Rodeo 2025

just go about your business and we'll contact you as required. Thanks for your vigilance." An icy blast of wind hit them and Agent Baw pulled his overcoat more tightly around himself.

* * * * *

"So all Dora's money's transferred electronically to a Liechtenstein car dealer and insurance company for deposit in the Union Bank of Switzerland?" Attorney Reid asked.

Agent Baw and his immediate supervisor, Agent Joe Caskey, sat in Department of Justice Attorney Philip Reid's office discussing the implications of the past week's investigation.

"That's correct, sir," Agent Baw corroborated. "Additionally," he leaned over the desk to point out a data cluster, "we've found 33 more Social Security recipients doing the same thing; there's no other activity in their Midland Bank accounts."

Attorney Reid reviewed the two agents' discoveries, squinting to read dot matrix characters on the computer print-out.

"All have PO box addresses," Baw said. Their eyes met, reinforcing their suspicions. "And none are listed in the phone book. We can find no corresponding street addresses. Money coming from the government by electronic transfer is turned around and sent on to Liechtenstein."

Reid analyzed the documentation further.

"There are a few random differences," Agent Caskey added. "But other than a little bit to cover bank maintenance fees, all pretty much goes to Vaduz. We've given these other names to Pitruich so he can make a computer

Chase-341-Virus Rodeo 2025

search to see what we come up with, but I'm willing to bet that they're dead too. The IRS is forwarding their 1040s to us for further investigation."

"Good!" Attorney Reid approved as he swiveled his chair. He rocked backwards periodically as he considered further action. "I'm going to get a warrant from Judge Nash to put a tap on Sobel to gain access to her IRS forms, bank, and credit card records. This may be the tip of a very large and sophisticated iceberg. Without Pitruich's Aunt Dora, we'd have never known." Reid looked out his window as the FBI agents left his office. Then he stared back at the documents, resting his head on his right palm, deeply engrossed in thought.

* * * * *

February of Year X

"Good evening, CNN Headline News, Jodi Vaughn reporting. After a time consuming analysis, the nuclear explosions in Iran and Saudi Arabia have been traced to devices from the former Soviet Union. They were caused by satchel nuclear weapons, known as SADMs. SADMs are portable weapons which weigh about 35 pounds and deliver an impact of 15 kilotons, a Hiroshima-type blast. They are used by Special Forces for covert actions. Both the United States and Russia have them."

"A source close to the investigation revealed that the perpetrators left many blind alleys to confuse investigators. Russia's Fascist turmoil has made verification of suspicions more difficult. Military officials discovered a total of ten such devices missing—meaning

Chase-342-Virus Rodeo 2025

terrorists still have eight. A massive search is under way for the remaining devices."

* * * * *

Monday, Late February

In the small, crowded Half Street SW FBI offices, agents Baw and Caskey reviewed the perplexing data they had gathered.

"We've either stumbled on a computer scam or a covert operation. Either way, it's big." Agent Caskey was apprehensive. "I've run a background on Sobel and there's nothing suspicious about her financial records—no high living, no unusual assets." He looked at Baw quizzically as he brushed through the pile of documents on his desk. "Nelson, there are no unusual charges on her credit cards, no deposits in her bank accounts other than salary and normal savings, no big cars, no big house, no beach house, nothing. Maybe she's not involved. What did Pitruich say about the other 33?"

"Same deal as Dora Patterson, Joe—all dead for three or four years. Same deal with Fed Wire domestic and CHIPS international electronic fund transfers. What makes you think covert ops?" Agent Baw asked, his curiosity growing.

"Well, the fact this is so systematic and that Sobel doesn't seem to be involved . . . or she's covering her tracks professionally—I just don't know. I'm going to talk to Reid. Maybe we should leave it alone. With terrorist problems, Fascists in Russia, domestic militias, and embittered Bosnian Muslims about—it could be Special Operations covert. They might

Chase-343-Virus Rodeo 2025

figure it makes more sense to scam Social Security funds than sell arms as was done with Iran-Contra. If that's the case maybe Sobel knows nothing about it. If that's true, this plan is well thought out, better than involving ourselves with sleazy druglords."

"That's a wild notion, Joe, but it might not be far off the mark." Agent Baw paused to consider the idea and nodded his head in agreement. "We had surveillance on the mail boxes of the 33 in Saint Pete, and people who accessed them were not Social Security retirees at all. They were a group of CIA types who just serviced the boxes so mail wouldn't pile up. 1040s have been properly filed at IRS and signatures well forged. This is a professional operation, no doubt; Reid calls it the Aunt Dora File and has filed it in the secure data base." He checked his watch. "Hey—it's about time to go to his office."

After signing in with the uniformed guards at the 9th and Pennsylvania door, the two FBI agents entered Reid's office compound and the secretary showed them into an office that faced Pennsylvania Avenue and the J. Edgar Hoover FBI administrative offices on the other side.

Once inside Reid's office, the agents advanced their covert operations theory.

Attorney Reid thought for a moment, "Continue the surveillance," he decided, frowning his brow. "We need to see if Sobel can be linked conclusively to the scam. We've no evidence she's even involved; someone else could be instigating this and just leading us on a chase after Sobel." He shook his head and surveyed the evidence. "Certainly it could be covert ops. Definitely, someone else could be benefiting. All her conversations

are normal."

* * * * *

March

"Good afternoon, CNN Headline News, Ron Powell reporting. The Big Three report a huge increase in demand for their green electric cars while demand for ordinary gasoline cars plummet. Salesmen report if their unsold gasoline cars were electric ones, they'd be sold three times over. Production is being maximized with recalls going out to previously laid off workers. Technological productivity advances of the last decade prevent creation of many jobs. Many recalls are for just a few years.

"Natural gas conversion kits for vehicles report windfalls from the oil crisis. Taxi and bus companies, converting a few years ago—in Washington DC for instance, report booming business with little disruption. Gasohol suffers from a shortage of corn and refinery reformulating capacity. Farmers plan to double their acreage for the coming growing season."

* * * * *

Thursday, Mid-March

A blustery day greeted Agents Baw and Caskey making their way to the Justice Department. Checking in, they went upstairs, knocked, and Suzanne,

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the division's secretary invited them in. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Mr. Reid is down with the flu. I'll see if Attorney Osborn is in; otherwise, you'll have to see the supervisor." Suzanne tried to be helpful as she checked the office call box.

Baw and Caskey exchanged looks. "Damn!" Caskey muttered.

"Beg your pardon?" Suzanne smiled politely.

"Oh! Sorry." Caskey blushed slightly, "but only Attorney Reid knows about our case."

"What case is it?"

"It's the Aunt Dora File," Caskey replied.

"Aunt Who?"

"Dora!" Baw repeated.

Suzanne activated her computer search mode and scanned files a couple of times. "I don't find an Aunt Dora File." She looked at the agents and shook her head.

"It's Special Operations-Urgent!" Caskey blurted out with exaggerated patience.

"Urgent—oh my," Suzanne responded. "Well then, you'll need to see the supervisor; I'll see if Ms. Zupnick will see you." Suzanne pressed down on an intercom button. "Ms. Zupnick, I have two FBI agents who need to see you on an Aunt Dora Case."

Caskey realized that he might inadvertently compromise the case, and tried to minimize the damage. "It's not that urgent," he said.

"Oh, it's no trouble." Suzanne reassured.

She tried the button again. Still no answer. She looked down at her hand and realized that she had been pressing Reid's button. She tried again

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making sure she had Wanda Zupnick's. "Ms. Zupnick, I have two FBI agents who need to see you about an Aunt Dora Case. It's urgent."

"I don't know anything about Aunt Dora. Isn't Mr. Osborn in to take care of them? I'm terribly busy this afternoon."

"No ma'am, Osborn is on vacation and Reid's sick—real sick!" She turned towards Baw and Caskey, then raised her eyebrows, "Well, what about it—it is urgent?" She nodded her head and looked directly into their eyes. They began to nod in unison like obedient dogs.

"Ma'am, they insist."

"OK, I'll call the file from the secure data base. I'll look it over and call for them. Send them for coffee. I'll be at least 20 minutes."

"Yes ma'am." To the agents, Suzanne said: "Gentlemen, why don't you come with me on my break? Ms. Zupnick will not want to be interrupted while she studies the case. I hope it's worth her time or she'll have a cow!"

Feeling apprehensive, Baw and Caskey crossed 10th, going up Pennsylvania with Suzanne. Bare of traffic other than Washington's natural gas powered taxis and buses made it pleasingly quiet. Continuing towards the IRS Building, Suzanne stumbled, catching the thin heel of her shoe in a space between the pedestrian crosswalk bricks. The men helped her up. They passed the IRS, a Victorian bandstand, and entered the Old Post Office Pavilion. Baw helped Suzanne push open the massive hardwood doors. Once inside, they passed a flower stall and made their way to tables and chairs in an open area housed under a glass roof suspended by archways at the top of gray bordered walls, framed by metal works from which historical American flags hung. Stopping at a cookie concession, Suzanne recommended cinnamon twists,

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buns, or apple muffins.

"Thank God they didn't tear this place down like so many other historical buildings here in Washington," Suzanne said. "Like Union Station, it's worth preserving these architectural masterpieces."

Baw bit into an apple muffin and smiled. "Man, this is good!"

"I love it here," Suzanne continued.

"Hey, what kind of person is Ms. Zupnick?"

"She's demanding, but fair. She'll give your case a thorough going over."

As Suzanne and the agents closed the door behind them, Attorney Wanda Zupnick opened the file, printed the summary and gasped when she saw the name: Rhea Sobel! Urgently Wanda pushed the scroll button for the entire file, devoured it, heart pounding hoping against hope that this case wasn't known all over Justice. Keys stuck to her sweaty fingertips as she lashed through page after page. Closing the file, Wanda rushed to the ladies room to regain her composure. She looked in the mirror. Her make-up was fine but her expression looked as panicky as she felt.

"Are you all right, Wanda?" one of her aides asked.

"I think so; it must've been something I had for lunch. I'm starting to feel better," Wanda said as she steadied herself with a deathgrip on the washstand.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm OK." Wanda splashed her face with cold water and took a deep breath, trying to relax her stomach muscles. She breathed deeply to

Chase-348-Virus Rodeo 2025

keep from passing out and bring color back to her ashen face. She knew the fate of Virus Rodeo--and that of the environment--had just been placed on her shoulders; she mustn't blow it. She repeated this over and over again in her mind, then gritted her teeth and returned to her office to await the FBI.

"You ready, ma'am?" Suzanne asked over the intercom.

"Send them in, please."

"OK, gentlemen, she'll see you!"

As they entered, Caskey made the introductions. "Good afternoon; this is Agent Nelson Baw and I'm Agent Joe Caskey of the FBI. We've been working on the Aunt Dora Case since January with Attorney Reid."

"I'm Wanda Zupnick. Pleased to meet you both. Please sit down, gentlemen. I see that you've made a thorough investigation of Sobel, yet have turned up nothing which implicates her."

"True," Baw agreed, "although no one else could've authorized continued benefits to these dead people." The two FBI agents sat down and faced the Deputy Attorney General squarely, but nervously. "It has to be her--I can have Pitruich bring the other files to Harper's Ferry this weekend. He's completed searches and there are many more than the initial 33 we investigated. But they're all the same as Aunt Dora--single, low profile, and with simple income streams. It looks like a huge scam, ma'am."

"You boys have done a great job." Wanda needed to take the case without alarming the FBI agents. "This provides corroboration for a case I've been agonizing over for months. I wish I'd seen this sooner because it gives me just what I need to move ahead. Oh well, it's typical of the left hand

Chase-349-Virus Rodeo 2025

not knowing what the right is doing." She looked casually at Baw and Caskey to see if they were buying her bluff.

They actually seemed relieved.

"This file fills in missing pieces. Since Reid's ill, I'll integrate this into my case. I'll need you to brief me on who's involved. We have enough to prosecute. I need to get my ducks in line to handle this carefully so we don't blow it in court!"

"Yes, ma'am." Baw was delighted. "I've always felt Attorney Reid was too cautious."

Wanda had collected herself and felt in charge of the situation. "OK, give me names of all involved so I can build a case that won't be botched. There are you two, Judge Nash, Attorney Reid, Mr. Pitruch, Midland Bank vice president Marvin Smeltz, and Miami Agent Enrique Mateus. Anyone else?"

"No ma'am," Caskey replied. "Mr. Reid wanted to keep this contained so it wouldn't leak and blow the case. I guess now there's Suzanne since she's become aware of Aunt Dora today.

Wanda let out a deep breath, relieved. "Good for Attorney Reid!"

"That Ms. Zupnick is a real go getter," Baw said as they left her office. "She's not like Reid—she wants to get it done."

"You're right," Caskey agreed.

"Suzanne, I'm going to the Old Post Office for a snack; want anything?"

"No ma'am—I had plenty with the FBI. How long will you be gone?"

"Give me an hour."

Wanda walked up Pennsylvania Avenue and the wind felt good against her

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face. Stepping into a pay phone booth, she looked up the area code for Boston and found 617.

"Gabi? Hi, this is Wanda."

"Hey, how are things inside the Capital Beltway Disneyland?"

"Out of sight, kid; tell Joe I need seven pizzas by rail at seven this evening." Wanda was referring to the computer railroad communication system.

"Right, we'll send them by TGV!"

"Thanks—give my love to Joe."

"Kisses and hugs to Sid. Bye!"

* * * * *

Gabriella urged Joe out on Blackstone Street and they made their way toward Faneuil Hall, blending into crowds strolling about the Quincy Market buildings and plaza. A juggler tossing flaming batons held many people's attention.

"Wanda just called, Joe. She needs seven hitmen to put some individuals to sleep. We'll have details on the computer railroad at seven."

Joe sighed, "She must have uncovered a leak. That's all we need now with just three weeks to go until Virus Rodeo. Hopefully, we can plug it before we all end up in jail."

"I'm dying to find out what it's all about."

* * * * *

Wanda left Justice to get to Rosalie Sobel, whom she knew had an evening

Chase-351-Virus Rodeo 2025

class at Georgetown's Intercultural Center. Her cab went up 37th onto the Georgetown University campus at the O Street gate. Rosalie was interning at the University Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) under the tutelage of Nicole Sarrocco, and at 5:50 would go from her class to the government documents depository in the Lavinger Memorial Library for research.

Wanda looked nervously at her watch as students casually walked in front of the cab, blocking traffic. She jumped out and, in the confusion, gave the cabby a \$50 tip, which he appreciated immensely. She headed toward Healy Hall, its imposing clock tower a major Washington landmark. The sound of low-flying aircraft approaching National Airport intensified the energy of the massed students and Catholic clerics milling around the open space. Wanda rushed to the gray modern library to intercept Rosalie, but mistakenly tried to enter through the out door, causing a jam up. After being admonished by irate students, she went through the correct door, and made her way to the documents room where she approached a stunning female professor.

"I have to see Rosalie Sobel! It's an emergency," the robust attorney pleaded.

"This is highly irregular—do you have a message?"

"It's her mother. Tell her Volant Rodeo," Wanda whispered urgently.

Nicole understood, took Rosalie aside, and dismissed the other researchers for the evening.

"Nicole, meet Wanda, she's one of us," Rosalie said with a suggestive look towards Wanda. Wanda's eyes went wide.

"Let's get outside, the computer train's at seven!"

"Computer train?" Nicole gave a start. Rosalie burst out laughing

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and Wanda smiled. "OK, guys—what's going on?" Nicole wasn't laughing.

"We have this amazing communication system," Wanda explained. "We use a model railroad system in a computer network so we can communicate openly without rousing suspicions. You'll see at Derry's."

"We can use my new electric car," Nicole volunteered. "Where to?"

"The station is out MacArthur Boulevard and left on Chain Bridge Road, down the hill. It's a little house on the left; I'll point it out."

When the women were out in the open approaching Nicole's car, Wanda elaborated, "Rosalie, your mother is under surveillance and the shit is about to hit the fan. I've put in to Joe for an order of pizzas. Your mom's line is tapped, so be careful what you say. The FBI also has a tail on her. After we're done at the train station, go back to your room and call her. Have your parents come meet you this weekend and use the Great Falls visit code for caution alert so they come casually. We'll meet at the Namviet in Arlington near the Clarendon Metro Station. Rosalie, brief Nicole on the subway ruse, and get off at Court House."

Nicole's eyes sparkled with anticipation at the coming intrigue.

Since Wanda was in the Justice Department, she didn't keep a railroad club terminal at her house, but used one set up in the basement of one of Bennie's high school classmates, Derry Robinson, a retired lieutenant general of the army who had been in the cabal since 1992.

"I see that you've come to see the Great White Father," the thin bespectacled widower teased. "What time?"

"Seven!"

"We have 20 minutes. Drink?" he asked.

"I sure could use a Scotch!" Once she had her drink in hand, Wanda

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related the day's events to the uneasy group.

"I hope Joe can plug this," the general said as he looked at Wanda with respect. "Imagine—our operation failing for one Aunt Dora in Coon Valley, Wisconsin!"

Wanda coded her message into the model railroad software program, patiently typing the key characters sequence. The video screen exploded with colored symbols and characters. She sent Rhea a remain-inert message, and then trains, cars, passengers, and other model railroad tokens began to move about the screen for the normal 7 P.M. information update.

"This is unreal, gang, unreal!" Nicole was overwhelmed, eyes as wide as a cat's in dim light.

Soon the motions stopped and Wanda used a Rivarossi catalog to decipher codes using model numbers of this Italian model railroad manufacturer. Focusing her attention on a blue sleeping car as detailed aspects of its passengers and attendants showed up, Wanda interacted with them to get hitmen and mole data. The passenger manifest was now ready for this sleeper of Simplon Orient Express fame, as was the attendant's roster for the dining and sleeping cars, the attendants being hitmen, and passengers—targets. Pressing appropriate keys to interrogate, Wanda determined FBI agents Baw and Caskey as well as Pitruch, would be served by Ann Cosimano, Pete Gallo, Chuck Vittorini, and Marina Tranchina in Harper's Ferry. Judge Nash, attending a concert in the Kennedy Center, would be served after his usual night cap at a Watergate bar by Sal Rossi and Luigi Digilio. Attorney Phillip Reid was to receive a pizza delivered by Ellen Lombardi. Midland Bank vice president Marvin Smeltz would meet Litta Cordoni and Guy Sapperini, while Florida FBI agent, Enrique Mateus, would be well served by Danny Capuana and Joe Barzini.

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"How do you make all these determinations?" Nicole asked as she leaned over Wanda with rabid interest.

"See number RI-LX 3487, now look here in the Rivarossi catalog. RI is for Rivarossi, LX for CIWL sleeping car and 3487 identifies the particular sleeper as Simplon Orient Express. Joe inserted these in Boston, so now I press the return button and get people characters. These are drawn from Preiser, a very fine German manufacturer of HO gauge personnel. I get PR 4011 and PR 4020. PR is for Preiser and 4011 are railway personnel and 4020 are assorted passengers. See here in the Preiser catalog."

"Awesome!" Nicole couldn't restrain her enthusiasm.

Wanda continued, "For detail I press PR 4020-DT, then return, and let's see what we get here." Wanda went ahead and pressed applicable keys.

"Look!" Wanda exclaimed, "Caskey and Mateus are ours; how's that for compartmentalization? The extra pillow in their room means that he recognizes them as ours, and of course, they won't be blown away!"

"How do you tell that?" Nicole pressed forward.

"Once I ask for details on the passengers, I receive the manifest as you see on the screen. If code V.R.X.X. appears next to a passenger's name, he's one of ours. V.R.X.X. stands for Virus Rodeo Double Virus. Let's see if any more are ours."

"Suzanne, your secretary!" Rosalie joined in. "So all that need be put to sleep are Baw, Pitruch, Judge Nash, Reid, and the bank guy. I wish I could go to Harper's Ferry and watch that asshole Pitruch get his." Rosalie was ready to do Pitruch in herself. The irate, green eyed graduate student raised her fist menacingly. "He wanted to bust my Mom!"

"Rosalie, you didn't learn that at Georgetown!" Nicole chided half-

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heartedly and changed the subject. "I love this communication system; who'd ever suspect?"

"I can tell you it works." Wanda said and nodded. "The FBI never suspected a thing—I just hope teenaged hackers are as easily led astray." She settled back into the sofa and unbuttoned her jacket and the top button of her blouse. I need another drink—this was too close, much too close!!" She settled back into the sofa.

"It's not over yet," the general cautioned, "I won't rest easy until everyone on the sleeper is sound asleep!"

"How do you show that?" Nicole asked.

"When their respective bedrooms are locked, that means they've been secured," Wanda replied with confidence, finally a bit more relaxed. "Here, I'll run a simulation." She keyed simulation and pressed return. "See, each respective hitperson goes to their client's bedroom and locks the door. That means asleep, baby! Not to worry."

"My mind is overwhelmed," the Georgetown professor admitted. "You've all been so efficient, so economical!"

"It's not quantity that wins wars, Nicole," the general reminded her, "it's strategy, politics, and psychology. We Americans tend to be quantity oriented, but quality is what really counts. With a few well-placed resources, we can pull this baby off."

"I hear you talking, general." Nicole was in her element and young Rosalie was getting an invaluable lesson in street-level geopolitics.

"And to think it almost all went down the tubes," Wanda lamented. "Do you know I almost palmed off that FBI inquiry before I'd read the file?" She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "I still shake when I think of how

Chase-356-Virus Rodeo 2025

chance saved our asses on this one. If Reid hadn't had the flu, we'd all be on our way to Leavenworth instead of carrying out Virus Rodeo!"

* * * * *

On Reservoir Road, Ellen Lombardi drove her pizza delivery truck across MacArthur Boulevard, to the row of two-story red brick apartments which bordered the Georgetown reservoir. Tenants there enjoyed a lovely view of the reservoir, the Potomac, and the green Virginia hills to the southwest. There was no traffic moving through the evening's darkness now descending
x over the capital city. Philip Reid lived on the second floor of the corner apartment to the east. Ellen read the name plates and climbed up the narrow stairs and knocked on the door to the left of the landing.

"Your pizza, sir!" She announced as she tossed back her long raven hair.

She could hear shuffling as Reid staggered to the door. "Just a minute please."

Ellen hated these missions, especially to a sick man. Reid's phone lines had been tapped and his pizza order intercepted.

"You sure were fast," the man smiled meekly. He took the pizza box and tipped Ellen ten dollars.

"Gee, thanks, sir! Have a good night." Ellen exclaimed sincerely, as she turned to go down the stairs into the refreshing evening.

Attorney Reid sat down, opened a bottle of Sam Adams, and started munching on his pizza while watching "Mystery" on PBS. Within an hour, Reid was dead of genetically-engineered botulism, which would self-destruct without

Chase-357-Virus Rodeo 2025

leaving a trace, giving the impression that he had expired of natural causes.

* * * * *

Judge Frank Nash was walking back toward the Kennedy Center along New Hampshire Avenue after his regular post concert Grand Marnier at the Watergate's Les Champs and Peacock Bar. Nash, a bald and aging bachelor, had taken in trumpeter Wynton Marsalis in the Kennedy Center's Concert Hall. Marsalis had donated his time for an evening of jazz to benefit My Sister's Place, a shelter for battered women and children. Nash was making his way back toward the Center's underground garage to pick up his car when he noticed a dark gentleman moving toward a Diamond Cab. It was parked across the street from the Embassy of Saudi Arabia, heavily guarded by U.S. military units since the nuclear detonation at Al Jubayl.

Luigi Digilio sat in the driver's seat of a fake cab, waiting for Sal Rossi to persuade the judge that he had drunk too much and should take a cab home. Sal approached Nash.

"Good evening, sir. I'm Detective Sergeant Rossi of the Metropolitan Police's Drunk Driving Squad. I noticed you in the bar and called this cab for you, sir." Sal flashed his fake police badge.

"I only had a few drinks. I'll be OK." The judge pulled on his collar, inadvertently tilting his bow tie.

"Well sir, that's how most people feel, but we'd rather avoid accidents or arrests. That's why we've started this prevention program. Diamond Cab is assisting us tonight. They're powered by natural gas, so it's low cost. We feel it's good public policy." He reached over to open the cab's door.

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"Yeah, I know. I read about it in The Washington Post. Look, it's a good program, but I'm OK, really, I swear to you. I'm a judge so I know what I'm doing, but thanks anyway." He tried to pull away but Sal neatly sidestepped him.

"Sir, if you're a judge, you know how important it is to set a good example. Just give me the information on your car and I'll have it sent to your home." He held the door open and assisted the judge into the seat.

"Perhaps you're right." The judge fumbled around his pockets. "OK, here are the keys." He dropped them and Sal picked them up. "It's a 'XX Ford electric car—red—parked at level B near the Hall of States entrance. I live in Georgetown on 35th between O and P Streets across from the convent. Thanks and good night."

"Driver," Sal said. "Take this gentleman to 35th, between O and P." He verified Judge Nash's identity on his driver's license and automobile registration. Then added, "Make sure he has a restful ride."

Judge Nash sat back as they pulled away from the curb. He felt a little claustrophobic as he noticed he was sealed off in the back from the driver's compartment by a heavy acrylic glass plate extending to the floor.

"Why such thick glass?" He asked the driver.

"Muggers, sir!" Luigi answered matter of factly as he flicked a switch on the dash.

Judge Nash felt drowsy and thought he might be a little drunk after all. As he dozed off, he began to appreciate the police officer persuading him to take a cab. When Luigi got on the Whitehurst Freeway, he noticed the judge's head nodding. Coming under Key Bridge, he turned sharply right to enter the bridge going toward Rosslyn and saw that the judge had collapsed

Chase-359-Virus Rodeo 2025

to the left, unconscious. Luigi left the carbon monoxide switch on all the way to the Highway 50 exit, which he took in order to go to Vale where the mob had a body shredder and incinerator.

* * * * *

The Next Day

Commentary, The Washington Post:

Demonstrations Protesting Massive Layoffs.

The oil crisis brought about by December's nuclear bomb explosions has caused many firms to close their doors and lay off their workers throughout the country. The fact the American economy is oil based means adaptation to new economic realities will take a long time. Despite good news in the electric vehicle sector, it's so small that its total effect is negligible.

Political unrest is increasing and an air of revolution, not seen since the depression of the thirties, is about in the land. Additional police and military vigilance have been ordered as authorities feel only a small spark might set off massive violence.

* * * * *

That same day, Wanda hurried out of the Archives Metro Station and hailed Suzanne who was crossing west on Pennsylvania Avenue near the National Archives Building.

"Oh, Ms. Zupnick!" Suzanne was caught by surprise.

Chase-360-Virus Rodeo 2025

"Let's go toward the ice rink on the Mall." Wanda said.

"I'll be late. Mister Reid will be furious."

"Don't worry about Reid. I've got something to tell you, but wait till we're in the open on the Mall."

"God, Ms. Zupnick, why the mystery?" Suzanne feared Wanda had found out she was a Virus Rodeo mole. She tried to control her anxiety.

"Look, Suzanne, I know." Suzanne gasped and looked panicky as though she might run away. "Suzanne, it's OK--I'm in it too," Wanda reassured.

Suzanne's panic rapidly turned to suspicion, "Sure you are--so what's the cipher?" She kept her distance in case she did have to run.

"V.R.X.X." The attorney stated with placid forcefulness.

"Pizza," Suzanne challenged with the counter cipher.

"Environment--Volant Rodeo!"

"Oh, thank God, Ms. Zupnick, thank God!" Suzanne was relieved but still shaky.

"Forget the Ms. Zupnick bit, except when we're in the office. We have our hands full--Aunt Dora almost did us in, kid! Sobel is one of us, and so is Caskey, but he doesn't know about you, me, or Rhea." Her mood changed from empathy to one of command. "Call him over when we get to the office so we can get together on how we're going to deep six all computer and hard copy investigation files on Aunt Dora. We can't have a fuck up like Reagan's NSC with the Contra fund diversion. We'll meet at the old National Art Gallery at one. By the way, Reid and Nash have already been put to sleep, so fake surprise when you receive the police report. Baw and Pitruich will get it this weekend; Mateus is one of us and Smeltz is getting it even as we speak."

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"God, Wanda, I hope Caskey controlled the documentation carefully so it'll be easy to get rid of. One of the moles in my cell is in Judge Nash's office—Marlo Kendall. I hope she was careful as well. I'll get her to come too. We were briefed by our cell leader if anything really out of the ordinary came our way, to handle it very carefully. We realized compartmentalization would create such situations."

"Good thinking, Suzanne." The older woman placed her hand on the younger woman's shoulder and gave a warm squeeze.

* * * * *

Bank vice president Marvin Smeltz pulled into the Midland Bank's suburban Saint Petersburg parking lot and was relieved to see a police car parked across the street with one uniformed patrolman getting out. Smeltz, a nervous, skinny man, always felt comforted when he saw police around his bank, particularly with the recent problems of electronic transfers to Europe and mysterious Social Security retirees. He feared for his life and had altered his routines as much as possible. Still, his fear felt foolish today. The FBI hadn't interfered in any way with the 34 accounts, so why worry, he thought. The perpetrators didn't even know the FBI was on to them.

He made his way to the door as a stunning, full breasted woman approached him. His eyes fixed on her thin white tank-top where it stretched tautly across her breasts. She was clearly wearing no bra and her aroused nipples stuck out in detail.

As the woman leaned over her purse, the loose V-top ballooned downward revealing her in the flesh. She took a deep breath and straightened up.

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She looked at him—seductively, he thought—and asked, "Excuse me, sir, do you have a light?"

He reached into his pocket, but before he could find a lighter she pulled a small caliber revolver out of her purse and took aim. Before she emptied the clip, she yelled, "You bastard—taking away our home! We only missed three fucking payments."

Smeltz fell dead on the pavement as nearby pedestrians screamed and gasped. The woman walked away and was grabbed by the police officer, who had run across the busy street from his patrol car as she opened fire. He pushed her brutally into the back seat and slammed the door. The patrol car sped away.

"Well done, Litta!" The officer declared as the woman pulled the screen down and climbed into the front seat.

"Thanks." Litta Cordoni was relieved. "It'll take the crowd time to figure things out. We'll be long gone!"

* * * * *

Wanda and Suzanne met with Agent Joe Caskey and Marlo Kendall in front of the National Art Gallery and the four made their way toward the U.S. Capitol's reflecting pool. The din of motorcars, which existed prior to escalation of gasoline prices, had been replaced by precious silence. They could even hear organ music from the carousel at the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Museum wafting its way unevenly in the wind. The accompanying sound of the children's laughter made them feel lighthearted.

Wanda spoke first. "You all know what needs to be done. Marlo, Joe,

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have you taken precautions?"

"I sure did," Agent Caskey replied with confidence.

"No sweat," Marlo smiled. "It'll be easy to deep six our electronic and paper files. I'll double-check everything when I get back to the office. I used the containment procedures we were briefed on by our cell leader."

"Good!" Wanda said, very pleased. "Give me completion messages through normal procedures so I can forward it. What about the Secret Service, Joe?"

"No problem. One of the guys watching Nicole is with us; he'll let me know if anything is amiss. I'll recheck with Ed to make sure and let you know immediately if anything changes." Caskey paused a moment before he asked for a favor. "Now, Wanda—Saturday at Harper's Ferry. I don't want Baw killed. He's a good guy, and he's my buddy. Can we set it up so we capture him and keep him on ice until after Virus Rodeo? I can tell his wife he's been sent in the field for cocaine or something." His eyes met Wanda's. "I could walk them into the tunnel, at the end of the bridge on the Maryland side, and your people can knock Pitruich off and jump us until we're disarmed."

"Sounds reasonable, Joe." Wanda reached toward him and gave his arm a gentle squeeze. "I'll check with the chief railroader; Suzanne will pass authorization on to you. Good luck!"

"Thanks Wanda, I really appreciate this. Nelson and I have been a team for eight years and he has a nice wife and three kids."

"I'm sure that it'll be done. We don't really want to kill any more people than absolutely necessary. In fact, tell you what—I'll take it upon myself." She took Caskey's arm. "I'll decide now—Nelson will be spared."

* * * * *

Enrique Mateus opened his eyes, looked around, and realized that he was aboard a ship of sorts. His mind cleared as the sweet melody of the twin twelve-cylinder diesels, which were pushing the 116 foot Feadship yacht at 15 knots, permeated his brain. Two shadowy figures appeared in the cabin as the haze lifted and his eyes focused. When he attempted to sit up, he discovered he was bound to the bunk.

"Easy now," Joe Barzini urged as he lit a cigarette.

"We're one of you," Danny Capuana comforted him. "V.R.X.X." Danny had the arms of a body builder. "V.R.X.X. . . ."

"My head, God, my head," Enrique moaned as Joe undid the restraints. "What happened?" He looked at his hands, which seemed numb and unresponsive to commands from his brain.

"You remember the Midland Bank investigation?" Danny answered him as he held out a glass of water.

"Oh that—what about it?" Enrique's mind suddenly snapped to full power.

"That investigation almost blew the whole exercise," Joe cut in, "We almost over-compartmentalized. We were lucky though."

"God, what stopped it?" Enrique looked, then reached toward Joe and steadied himself.

"Well," Danny said, trying to be helpful, "the investigation, by chance, fell into the lap of a higher up who saw right away what was happening. Your files on this case are being deep sixed by another of our Miami moles, Maria Gonzales. Maria fixed your coffee and brought you to the Southern Cross, our command and control ship for this area of V.R.X.X.."

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"Whatever she put in my coffee has sure given me a bad headache. You got aspirin?"

"Here." Danny handed the woozy FBI agent some white pills. "By the way, you've been called in sick this morning. Remember that when you go back to work tomorrow. Maria will meet you tonight at dockside and fill you in on your cover story."

* * * * *

Chuck Vittorini and Marina Tranchina were checking into Harper's Ferry Hilltop House Hotel as Mr. and Ms. Albert Patti. The tanned stocky Chuck had just finished writing down the date when the clerk addressed him. "How long will you be staying, Mr. Patti?"

"Just one day, I'm afraid. I wish we could stay longer."

"Any baggage?" asked the clerk.

"Just these duffel bags," he said, pointing toward the floor. "Can you tell me if the Orellis are here yet?"

"Yes, in the room across from yours at the far end of the hall. Enjoy your stay."

Chuck and Marina knocked on the door, which Ann Cosimano opened since Pete Gallo was in the toilet.

"What a view, eh?" Ann was delighted.

"Pete . . . or the mountains?" Marina chuckled as she kissed Ann. "I wish all our jobs were in such lovely locations."

"Ha, I see Pete is in the command post, probably sending President Griffiths a top priority message by ceramic sideband. Hey, get your ass

out here, Pete."

"Don't get impatient, Chuck," Marina scolded. "Pete has a lot on his mind! Here, sit next to me, love!"

"Hey, guys." Pete emerged from the toilet pulling up his trousers and tightening his belt.

"Phew—close the door," Chuck complained. He waved the odor away with one hand as the other stroked Marina's bronzed thigh.

"Oh, it's not that bad. Let's go out on the overlook and check out the scenery before sunset. You girls want to get laid tonight after dinner? We could do a foursome!"

"You guys are disgusting." Ann pretended revulsion while raising her mini-skirt and mooning the others. "What do you think, Marina? Are these two gangsters worthy of our bodies?" She ran her hands down her breasts and down her hips, giving a slow pelvic thrust.

Shadows from the West Virginia hills near Harper's Ferry were beginning to creep toward the Maryland Heights, on the east side of the Potomac. The CSX bridge crossed below them and a smaller bridge, carrying a track to the West Virginia side of the Shenandoah River, was to the right. The bridges came together on the Maryland side before the tracks disappeared into a tunnel below the Maryland Heights. The Shenandoah flowed into the Potomac at this point and was framed by the railroad junction, Maryland Heights, and Loudoun Heights on the Virginia side of the gap.

"God, this is beautiful," Ann said.

Pete was all business for the moment and began to review the plan for tomorrow's hit. "Ann, you'll dress as a hippie and cross the smaller bridge

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about fifty yards behind the Caskey party on the main bridge. Marina will be 'camping' by the C&O canal towpath upstream of the main bridge. As soon as Caskey's party passes overhead, Marina, you start up the hill to cover the west portal with Ann, who should've moved into place by then. Chuck and I'll go by car to cover the east portal. Ann will shoot a tranquilizer dart at Agent Baw and Caskey will knock off Pitruch. Then we walk out the east portal with the bodies as if we're a bunch of drunks, in case there are other campers along the canal towpath in that area. We'll take Pitruch to our body shredder in Taylor Town while you girls go back to the hotel. A helicopter will be waiting for us at Waterford and Agent Baw will be taken to a safehouse on Chesapeake Bay until V.R.X.X. is completed. Any questions?" Her raised hand caught his attention. "Ann?"

"How far into the tunnel should they be before I fire the dart gun?"

"It depends on how many people are around—better do it while you can see well so you don't miss. OK, let's go over the backup plan; if Ann can't hit Baw for any reason, Marina is to creep up and tackle him. As she does this, Caskey will hit him with a blackjack, push Pitruch to the side for Chuck and I to blow him away. Ann, stay out of the tunnel so you don't get shot, cover the west portal. Marina, make sure you stay down—we may have to blast away. Any more questions?"

"Oh look," Marina said. "You can see campfires and lanterns flickering over there by the canal. I think we all understand what we're supposed to do so let's enjoy the sunset and twilight."

* * * * *

All were in place as the Potomac's morning mists shrouded the bridges. Agent Caskey and his party had come down High Street to Shenandoah, turning left and passing John Brown's Fort before getting on the tracks toward the bridge. Agent Baw amused himself trying to maintain his balance on the rail like a ten-year old schoolboy. A westbound train was blowing its horn prior to entering the east portal of the tunnel and the locomotive's laboring throb, pulling coal empties going back up Cumberland Gap, was now fully amplified by the tunnel. Picking up the light of the lead diesel, they could see it was on the upstream track and they would be OK on the downstream track. The engineer sounded two toots as they waved. Caskey knew, through his contact at CSX, this was to be the last train for the next couple hours.

"Look at that hippie on the other bridge," Pitruich commented, "I wonder if she's taken a bath lately."

"She sure has a nice body, though," lamented Agent Baw.

Caskey played the stud. "We could ask her to do all three of us in the tunnel."

"She's probably got AIDS," Pitruich responded.

"Too bad to waste that body," agreed Baw. "But I bet she's been around. OK, Mr. Pitruich, we'll walk into the tunnel so we're out of sight, but we'll stop while we still have enough light to see your documents. After this, we'll need you as a witness against Sobel when she goes on trial."

"I'll be glad to see her locked up," Pitruich relished. "I've never liked the idea of working for that bitch."

"Mister Pitruich," Caskey said facing him, "if we didn't know better, we might conclude all this has arisen just so you could get at her."

"I just don't think a man should have to take orders from a woman, that's

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all! I get enough shit from my wife."

"Ah, Pitruch, you're just pussy-whipped," said Baw. He chuckled. "OK, this is far enough, no trains coming. We can . . . what the fuck?" He saw the dart in his arm. "Caskey, what . . ." As he collapsed, he saw Caskey pointing a gun with silencer at Pitruch.

"Caskey, what are you doing?" Pitruch froze in terror.

Two short blasts leveled Pitruch. Pete could see muzzle flashes when he and Chuck approached Caskey to assist.

* * * * *

That afternoon at his home, Bennie selected the model railroad club's on-line file for his computer screen. He wanted to check the status of the sleeper's cabin doors to see if the crisis had been resolved satisfactorily.

"All done, Mercedes—they're closed and locked except for that FBI agent. Wanda was right to spare him," Bennie said. "God, was that close! She sure saved our asses this time—I wonder how many more such icebergs lurk out there in the fog over the next three weeks? We really don't need this."

"That's for sure."

"Well, I'd better go to the commissary, eh?" Bennie said. "Payday crowds should be over by now. Where's the list?"

"On the counter," Mercedes replied.

Bennie started out toward Fort Bragg to meet the Commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps. He was to meet him in the vegetable locker to receive final word on the disposition of troops for Volant Rodeo. The general was to

confirm participation of these troops in Virus Rodeo.

Wearing a yellow XX Airlift Rodeo T-shirt, Bennie walked past the vegetable display area through storeroom doors and turned right into the packaging room. He saw the gruff stocky general looking over some yellow squash with the attendant. Bennie checked his watch—exactly 15:45. He approached the attendant and asked: "Any Boston lettuce?"

"I believe we have some in the cooler," the attendant replied, looking over some cartons.

The general checked his watch and noticed Bennie's yellow XX Airlift Rodeo T-shirt. The general moved forward and said, "I'd like some Bibb lettuce, but will take Boston if you don't have Bibb."

They all entered the cooler and as the attendant went to the rear to pull down some lettuce cartons to find Boston or Bibb, Bennie turned to face the general. "Boston lettuce is good with pizza, General."

"I know, I have pizza for all my parties, senators and people."

"Oh, foreigners like them too," Bennie acknowledged. "S.P.Q.R.!"

"I'll have pizza for everyone at my flying party, V.R.X.X.!"

"Wonderful," Bennie replied. "I hope you all have a good time."

"Thank you," the general winked confidently.

As Bennie strolled down the cereal aisle, he passed young soldiers, some with babies in their shopping carts. Bennie loved babies. Bennie's mood changed as he thought some of these guys could be killed. They didn't know what he had in store for them with Virus Rodeo. Hopefully not too many would die. . . .

* * * * *

The Next Day

Commentary, The Washington Post

"Wholesale violence erupted in South Bend, Indiana overnight as a mechanical parts factory closed, throwing 800 people out of work. An attempted lawsuit by the workers' union and city using RICO laws, legislation originally intended to trap mobsters, was thrown out of court. Workers are losing their homes, cars, marriages, and college educations for their kids. "It's like death," said a 24-year veteran of the plant faced with loss of job, pension, and no alternatives. Six-hundred-fifty heavily armed workers converged on the plant, captured it, and opened fire on management personnel as they came to negotiate, killing 25. Using assault weapons to hold off police, workers proceeded to blow up the plant. A gun battle continues at this time. There are reports of similar outbreaks in Birmingham, Alabama; Gary, Indiana and a big gun battle between workers and police in Pittsburgh. Police and military units are refusing to go against workers. Anarchy is beginning to rule the streets. Juvenile gangs in Denver and Omaha have taken over their neighborhoods. Reports are coming in that Brooklyn gangs are extending control to Queens. Police aren't going in."

* * * * *

Saturday Morning Before Virus Rodeo, Mid-April

Bennie sat in his favorite chair, watching CNN Headline News. "We've done it, haven't we?" He looked at Mercedes who had just sat on the carpet. "I feel we've done the right thing."

"Deforestation seems to have stopped," Mercedes said. "From the looks of the networks and CNN, Fester's shock is working. TRFIS has everyone panicked—and gas at \$25.43. Boy!"

"I know. People are firing on each other protecting their gas tanks. We've definitely hit America's raw nerve!"

"Bennie," Mercedes said. "We must succeed so none of this is for nothing. It's been a long way, but I'm at peace with our decision. Even now, some reactionary congresspersons are still out to cut clean air and water acts."

"I've taken on the responsibility for the future of the planet. I've practically set myself up as a god. Albalisa said my DNA behavioral fingerprint showed I could hold up . . . I hope she's right. If I blow it, I'll be responsible for the end of the world."

"Come on Bennie, don't over dramatize. I had my doubts at first, but I really do believe we've chosen the best alternative." She placed her hand on his.

He breathed in deeply, "This is our last Stoneybrook as private citizens. Next year, we'll either be in power or in prison. Or dead. . . ."

9

Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina

10:00 AM Monday Mid-April, 199X

Volant Rodeo Opening Ceremonies

Air and ground crews from eleven nations and those for most U.S. Air Force, Air Force Reserve, and Air National Guard airlift and tanker wings, stood at attention next to their respective aircraft. The Commanders of US Air Mobility and Combat Commands, 18th Airborne Corps, and the 82nd Airborne Division drove slowly down aircraft parking areas on the flight line reviewing all the units from their hummers. In the distance, one C-5, one KC-10, two C-17s, three C-141s, and three C-130s were holding over Buffalo Lake for the low altitude flyover just before the opening ceremonies. Upon completion of the aircraft and unit review, the crews, outfitted in their flying and ground support uniforms of various national colors, flanked the parachutist landing area in front of the VIP grandstand.

The VIPs had taken their places on chairs placed on a flatbed trailer decorated with red-white-and-blue parade bunting. The band had just completed Stars and Stripes Forever when the stillness between events was shattered by two A-10s, followed by two F-16s, thundering by just barely above the heads of the spectators. The crowd gasped with awe and turned north where the giant C-5 led its group equally low over the crowd, the roar of its huge engines shaking the ground beneath the feet of spectators. A KC-10 and two C-17s followed with an equally impressive performance. The distinctive whine of C-141 engines announced their arrival as they broke off their formation—right over the crowd—applying maximum engine power for dramatic effect—one aircraft breaking to the left, one remaining on center course, and the third breaking right. After a moment, three C-130s came in at maximum speed, barely fifty feet off the ground, in an echelon to-the-right formation. Each pulled up steeply directly above the crowd and immediately swung into a perpendicular left turn, drawing gasps of awe from the crowd. The aircraft leveled off downwind of the runway and assumed their landing pattern.

All eyes strained upward again to spot the smoke streamers trailing the Army Golden Knights Parachute Team. This precision team, in free-fall from 15,000 feet, was skilled enough to have each individual land in sequence on an X marked by two four-foot strands of black duct tape inside a twenty-by-twenty foot square flanked by the VIP trailer and Volant Rodeo team members. Smoke cans were attached to one of each parachutist's jump boots. One by one they spiraled down to earth, each carrying the flag of one of the international participants. At the last possible moment, they popped open their parachutes and set up a circular approach path to the landing area. Special sports parachutes enabled them to maneuver precisely in a

Chase-375-Virus Rodeo 2025

circular column while each flag fluttered colorfully downwind of their flight. One by one the parachutists landed almost exactly on the X, saluted the VIPs, and marched smartly to a flag stand on the side of the VIP trailer. Each Golden Knight placed his flag in line with the previous one while the band took up "Strike Up The Band," causing the audience to clap their hands in joyful exuberance. Each parachutist marched back to precisely line up in front of the VIPs. Once all were in formation, right hands rose in salute to await the American National Anthem.

After the anthem, a precision drill team from the Air Force Academy went through its marching routines, complemented by military rifle drills, and split-second rifle exchanges between members of the team. After the show, various commanders gave pep talks and welcoming speeches. Flying competition would begin the next day.

* * * * *

Airlift Center Loading Ramp (ALCE Ramp), Pope Air Force Base,
North Carolina, 82nd Airborne Division Troopers
Boarding Volant Rodeo Aircraft

Tuesday evening twilight coated a burly corporal leading his squad of blackened-faced paratroopers toward the yawning rear ramp doors of a C-141 being loaded with two platoons of soldiers. He turned to his platoon sergeant, "You know," he began. "This feels like more than just an exercise. It's nothing I can put my finger on . . . but they did issue live ammunition."

"God, Sarge," the platoon sergeant turned to ask the sergeant-major,

Chase-376-Virus Rodeo 2025

"combat?" The stocky young soldier quickly checked his personal gear again.

"Well, it's always a possibility, Jim," the sergeant-major said and winked to put the young soldier at ease. He checked his men over once more and satisfied, walked over to coordinate with the two load-masters.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 8:00 PM Eastern Daylight Time, Midnight Zulu

"This is the BBC World Service. Welcome for another evening of rock oldies. Leading off tonight are the Shirelles with Tonight's The Night."

*

Secret Service Team Seven, The White House

"Listen to the fourth and seventh numbers," the team leader said. "They should be Noble Thin Man Watts' Midnight Flight and It's All Over Now by the Stones. If all goes well, V.R.X.X. will be at the gate in eight hours."

*

New York Police Mole Team Number 23,

41st Precinct

Chase-377-Virus Rodeo 2025

"Midnight Flight—this is it!" A SWAT team leader transmitted the encrypted message to his men as they snaked up Hoe Street in twos and threes.

Others were coming down Bryant. All were heading toward a large 5-floor walk-up unit taken over by a local gang. They were part of many such teams preparing for action in New York City, and throughout the nation to destroy gangs, and their drug and gun storage facilities.

"Now we wait for further confirmation! Then we go to our briefed area to hit at 08:30Z." Each, to a man, felt his throat parched and his pulse rate increasing.

Camouflaged as gang members, SWAT team members individually worked their way toward the target. Streets were littered with burned out car hulks, broken glass, ripped couches, and the charred remains of once beautiful homes.

"Shit," one whispered, as his boot squished an old condom on the street.

Other members worked their way onto Lyons Square from Whitlock Avenue. An eerie silence pervaded the area, save for the occasional car tire racing over joints of the elevated Bruckner Expressway. Little did car passengers or gang members know what was in store for them a few minutes away.

"Uh oh," one trooper said. "Dogs!"

"Fuck!" Another said.

A few yards away, some 20 odd Dobermans, shepherds, and other emaciated, hungry dogs were stalking the troopers. A midnight snack was at hand, or so thought the dogs as they approached the troopers, snarling. The men drew their ultra-sonic weapons.

*

Aboard the USS James Polk Attack Submarine With A Delta
Force/Navy Seals Assault Group, 5 Km West of Neskowin, Oregon

"There go the Stones with It's All Over Now," the experienced XO relayed. "Confirmation should be in the next hour with Crossfire, by Johnny and The Hurricanes as the second number." He looked through his code book for the next sequence. "At 08:00Z, Bumpity Bump by Smiley Lewis and at 08:19Z, Man of Mystery by the Shadows, the execute number. Let's put the force ashore to be in place at 08:00Z."

Catching the eye of the eager XO, the skipper raised his eyebrow and smiled. Quietly checking his navigational position, he gave the order to halt the submarine. All hands were alerted for surfacing. The skipper raised his periscope and scanned the horizon, then lowered the scope and gravely nodded to the XO.

*

Also In The Pacific, Aboard The U.S. Helicopter Carrier,
Iwo Jima, 87 Miles West of San Clemente Island, California

"Crossfire, haven't heard that one in a long time." Barely able to hear the BBC signal, they were fortunate that the platoon leader collected old rock numbers and could easily recognize them through the static. He turned to his Colonel, "Sir, our night vision devices have been checked—we're go!"

"Good, sergeant," the colonel replied.

Chase-379-Virus Rodeo 2025

"The commanding general boarded his helicopter, checked his Joint Stars SLR data link, reviewed his charts one more time and checked his personal gear, particularly his sidearm and helmet.

*

Aboard the Cruise-Missile Battleship New Jersey,
Newly Recommissioned Because of The Fascist
Takeover in Russia, off Moro Bay California

The fire control chief verified all data, "Missile launch will be at 08:20:54Z if we get confirmation. Recheck target coordinates."

The firing officer checked the computer read out against his battle operations order.

* * * * *

The James Polk bubbled up slowly in pitch blackness off the coast, three miles north of Lincoln City, Oregon. In dead silence, it nudged within 2,000 meters of the Oregon Islands National Wildlife Refuge by precision guidance from the military Global Positioning System (GPS), comprised of interrelated satellites and accurate to five meters. Commandos silently boarded their rubber Zodiacs and paddled to land north of the inlet. After landing, they were to march 2,000 meters inland toward the summit of Hill 549 and east toward the Temple of Pacific Dawn religious cult, 300 meters west of the summit. Its 400 heavily armed members fancied themselves as commandos of

Chase-380-Virus Rodeo 2025

enlightenment. Specializing in bilking lonely elderly out of their savings and social security checks, they preyed on them through elder care organs, crafts centers, support groups, and nursing home visitation teams. Preaching rebellion if the government continued developing any kind of licensing and regulation for the elder care industry, the cult had sophisticated military-type weapons for its militia.

Delta Force and the Navy Seals had five hours until zero hour. In order to avoid a Branch Davidian type massacre, Virus Rodeo moles had spiked drinking water with mild TRFIS ingredients to render members unfocused and ambitionless. Earlier, through high-resolution photography, the precise track had been plotted to take advantage of natural concealment while still making the trek as easy as possible. Using the man-portable GPS receivers carried by each squad leader, troopers slowly found their way ashore. Receiver memories were programmed with the sea and land tracks. Each squad leader wore small ear phones and the system would tell him to go right or left by different sound signals. A few inbound rafts caught their oars in otter nesting debris, but by and large each unit arrived precisely at its landing zone. Night vision devices made it relatively easy. After assembling, they made their way east and dispersed in their staging area to await 08:30Z.

* * * * *

In A Command Vehicle Within
2000 Meters of The White House.

Bennie and General Lilly were sitting at the main communications/video

data module flicking through representative Virus Rodeo venues in real time.

"Bennie, this is the mother of all giant video games."

"You got that right, Lem," Bennie replied, smiling, trying hard to contain his self-satisfaction. "It's scary, everything falling into place so smoothly. We need a few glitches for comfort."

"We've had some minor ones," Lilly reassured Bennie. "But our forces are so overwhelming, and the public so distraught, that our initial shock phase will be well received. Even if we fail eventually, at least our social cleansing will give the country a new start." Bennie nodded agreement without looking away from the screen.

"Since we're taking the hit for usurping the Constitution, might as well make the up front flak worthwhile, eh?" Lilly looked at Bennie and nodded his head.

"Let's monitor the 141 raid on the Nazis," Bennie said as he selected the appropriate channel.

Lilly laughed. "You airlift guys never get it out of your blood, do you?"

"To tell you the truth," Bennie replied wistfully. "I wish I was in the lead aircraft."

* * * * *

In The Lead C-141 of A Formation
Of Twelve From Pope Air Force Base,
Flying On Airway J-20 Toward Pocatello, Idaho.
Each Aircraft Loaded

Chase-382-Virus Rodeo 2025

With 82nd Airborne Division Paratroopers

"Salt Lake Radio, Salt Lake Radio—Mayday! Mayday! This is Scab 69 with a rapid decompression. We've got pax, need immediate descent to 12,500 feet. ETA Papa-India-Hotel at 07:47. Out of flight level 350 at this time. Eighty-six souls on board, 120,000 pounds of fuel," the copilot called over the radio.

"Roger Scab 69. Altimeter setting 29.85. Repeat Mayday condition," the ATC (Air Traffic Control) facility acknowledged and instructed.

"Scab 69 has Romeo Delta Salt Lake, Romeo Delta."

The air traffic controller recognized the Virus Rodeo initiation code, "Roger Scab 69, cleared to 12,500 feet."

"Thank you, Salt Lake."

Later at 08:06Z.

"Salt Lake, Scab 69," the lead aircraft's copilot called ATC.

"Go 69."

"Roger, level 12,500 feet."

"Cleared to contact Salt Lake on 128.35 or 381.6," ATC switched them to the successor facility.

"Roger, 128.35 or 381.6. Good night."

"Good night."

All front-end crewmembers carefully monitored their location in relation to the mountains on radar. Mountains higher than the aircraft made big blobs with large black shadows behind them, like Borah Peak at 12,655 feet off their right wing.

Chase-383-Virus Rodeo 2025

"Salt Lake, Scab 69, flight of twelve C-141s inbound Challis, 12,500 feet," the copilot called the new ATC facility.

"Good morning. Squawk Mayday," ATC radioed.

"Roger, Mayday."

"Thank you. Got you 37 south of Lima-Kilo-Tango. Squawk normal."

"Roger, going VFR on top," the copilot said finishing that phase.

"Roger, good day."

Scab 69's skipper turned toward the copilot, adjusted the throttles to maintain 230 knots-indicated and put on his night vision device to skim over the Salmon River Mountains beyond the pre-IP of Challis. All could feel the tension build up as they threaded their way through the mountains—or rock clouds as aircrews referred to them.

"It's like flying in an inkwell," said the copilot.

"You betchum," the aircraft commander said, chuckling.

On his navigation radar, the lead navigator saw the Salmon River Mountains cast long menacing shadows behind the bright radar returns of the mountain range facing the aircraft. They flew northwest through the valley to the southwest edge of the Lost River Range followed by 11 other C-141s keeping formation on SKE (Station Keeping Equipment), a radar device enabling aircraft to see one another on another radar set and maintain formation with pre-set computer offsets. Pilots maintained formation position by keeping the ILS (Instrument Landing System) crosshairs centered as if executing a precision approach to a fogged-in airport. DME (Distance Measuring Equipment) ensured proper separation between aircraft.

"Salt Lake, Scab 69. Mayday. Shutting down number four—fire warning light. Request straight-in to Runway Three-Zero-Zero. Give weather please,"

the lead aircraft copilot initiated the next phase.

The Salt Lake City controller knew that this was the code to begin the run on the heavily armed white-supremacist compound near Sleeping Deer Mountain. "Clear, altimeter setting: 29.79." On his air traffic control radar, he could see F-15Es dispatched earlier from Seymour Johnson AFB, in North Carolina. They were holding, getting ready for their 08:30Z bombing run on the arms and ammunition storage bunker to clear the way for the paratroopers. The F-15Es were followed by A-10s from Mountain Home. The controller suddenly saw his radar explode with activity like a video game as Apache helicopters joined the fun. The clock read 08:10Z.

* * * * *

The Small Town of Challis, Idaho, 08:12Z

The low-flying jets shook the homes to their foundations. Terrified townspeople jumped out of their beds, groping for light switches. They stumbled to the streets half-awake, and found the night very dark. The overpowering roar of the military jet transports reverberated off surrounding mountain ranges. Engines spooling up and down caused a frightening din as pilots adjusted throttle settings to maintain formation. Townspeople searched the sky for aircraft, but saw nothing because running lights were turned off. Little did they know that in 18 more minutes, the sky northwest of the mountain range would light up followed by the sound of 3000 pound bunker-breaking bombs. Crackling cluster-bombs would deliver the finale, adding terrifying dimensions to the eerie morning.

Chase-385-Virus Rodeo 2025

Crying babies and barking dogs suggested that the wrath of God was bringing about the end of the world. The local sheriff picked up his phone to check with State authorities. The telephone was dead. A mood of corrosive loneliness engulfed them all. Many fell to their knees and prayed. A few right-wing militia types concluded that the federal government was finally going after normal American citizens. None could have ever have imagined Virus Rodeo.

* * * * *

The lead aircraft, Scab 69, would soon be skimming over the Salmon Mountain ridgeline. Crew members raised themselves in their seats as the aircraft went over the ridge.

"Man, that ridge tickled my ass," the lead navigator chuckled over the intercom. The rest of the crew broke out in a tension-breaking laugh.

At this time the navigator initiated the airdrop sequence. "Twenty minute warning," he said over the intercom. He updated the INS (Inertial Navigation System) with the GPS (Global Positioning System). The pilots, engineer and load-masters made initial preparations for the slow-down sequence and checked their helmets. One pilot used his night vision device while the other remained on instruments. Load-masters opened the pressure door after depressurization. Jump-masters looked over their troops. The troops stood up, checked their gear and weapons, and prepared static lines for hook up. They yelled and stomped to psych themselves up for the impending jump.

The lead navigator saw the IP on his radar, a 9,545 foot peak just two miles ahead. He looked at his watch, 08:22Z. "Ten minute warning." He

Chase-386-Virus Rodeo 2025

barked. "Hold heading 298."

"Roger," the pilot acknowledged. He turned on the red light to warn the load-masters and troopers.

"Acknowledge, engineer," the engineer replied. "Paratroop doors?"

"Acknowledge, load-master," the load-master replied.

"Clear to open," the pilot said.

Load-masters opened the side doors while jump-masters made sure troopers hooked up their static lines properly on the anchor cable.

"They call this the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness," the navigator said.

"Those fucking Nazis won't be returning," spat the engineer, a much decorated master sergeant.

"Roger that," the skipper acknowledged.

"Slow down!" the navigator called four minutes later, directly abeam of the 365 foot lookout tower equipped with a special radar reflector. Virus Rodeo moles in the forest service had placed the reflector there. Two of them had been personally attacked by venomous right-wing extremists.

The skipper pulled back the throttles while the copilot lowered the flaps to bring the speed down to 135 knots, the drop speed. Both pilots adjusted their positions in their seats for the final run.

At 08:27Z, the navigator announced, "Five Minute Warning," over the intercom.

In the back, jump-masters prepared to go to the doors to look for the impact point. They would do this when cleared at the one minute warning.

"Two minute warning," the navigator said. "Clear of the 8,000 foot

ridge line."

At this time, the pilot initiated a rapid descent to 7,500 feet. Immediately after the drop, he would make a maximum effort climb to 10,500 feet to clear a 7,500 foot ridge line just a mile beyond. An error in judgment or disorientation induced by night vision devices, would lead to catastrophic impact into that ridge line. Upon completion of this maneuver, the formation would initiate a right turn to the east, climb to flight level 370, and return to North Carolina.

The 12 C-141s continued to bear down on the neo-Nazi camp while F-15s destroyed the ammo bunker with smart bombs. At 08:30:30Z, it was the A-10s' turn to come in with cluster-bombs and kill as many of the 200 neo-Nazis as they could before the troopers parachuted in to finish the job. Apache helicopters hovered five miles southwest of Meyers Cove, standing by to give troopers air support once they were on the ground. Joint Stars I was orbiting 80 miles to the southwest at 40,000 feet to monitor movement about the camp. Real-time SLR (Side Looking Radar) would enable them to see activity as it unfolded and relay it to relevant units as required.

* * * * *

Capitol Police Mole Team 15, Washington, DC

"Crossfire—haven't heard that one in years!" They picked up the BBC signal loud and clear. "People," the leader called out. "Night vision devices are go! Stand by to take Capitol Hill!" Later, as Man of Mystery played, selected lights went out and patches of the city lay in total dark-

ness. Only rats, drug dealers, and Virus Rodeo teams continued to go about their business.

As soon as Man of Mystery finished playing, members of the mole team assumed their positions inside the Capitol, Senate Office Buildings and House Office Buildings. As it was the middle of the night, they neither expected nor encountered any resistance—the on-duty security guards were also Virus Rodeo moles. At exactly 08:30Z, Mole Team 15 was the first Virus Rodeo outfit to complete its mission—that report immediately forwarded to the model railroad layout.

* * * * *

At the White House, Secret Service agents and gate guards allowed Bennie and his party to enter the grounds and the buildings. The on-duty personnel had already secured the building and grounds for Virus Rodeo, and it was now only a matter of waking the president. They were ushered into the Diplomatic Reception Room on the ground floor. Bennie's party checked their watches and waited for 08:30Z.

* * * * *

In the 41st precinct, the NYPD SWAT team awaited 08:30Z as well. As Man of Mystery ended, lights went out in a ten-block radius surrounding their position. Through night vision devices, they could see some gang members look out their window at the street light from which they were stealing electricity. Others staggered out, confused by the sudden darkness.

Chase-389-Virus Rodeo 2025

Near Aldus Street, troopers converged on their target, crouching behind burned out cars and discarded sofas for concealment.

The team leader whispered to the cop next to him, "That'll be a few less of these cocksuckers. It's 08:29:30Z, arm the TOWs."

TOW missiles designed as anti-tank military weapons were perfect for destroying such buildings. Fitted with high-heat phosphorus warheads, these weapons would melt down firearms and cause secondary explosions of stored ammunition. Four cops were to fire one missile each at 08:30Z. Knowing which basements stored the weapons and drugs, the cops took aim at the ancient coal chutes, used in the old days to load coal in basement storage bins. Their hearts pounding, they awaited the signal from the police lieutenant.

Feeling the stubble on his chin, the team leader focused on his watch. Five-four-three . . . Down came his arm. Four TOWs found their way into the basements and connecting tunnels. Overlaying buildings and their occupants were blown away. Throughout the United States at exactly this time, thousands of similar illegal and "front" gun and ammunition stashes met the same fate.

Spared gun outlets were occupied by Virus Rodeo operatives to be reopened once licensing and tracking mechanisms were in place. The NYPD operatives slithered away for a well-earned coffee and doughnut break. Just as suddenly as they'd gone out, lights in the ten-block area returned, as confused locals converged on the massive rubble filled hole in the ground where once stood home to a brutal gang. Word quickly hit the street that nearly all such units were gone. The street wise took notice that something new was in the air. Long terrorized locals opened their windows to let in the clean, fresh air.

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On the battleship New Jersey, the Tomahawk cruise missile fire-control crew focused on their missile launch duties.

The fire control officer continued the check list . . . "Safety seals."

"Roger," replied the firing officer, then broke the firing sequencing lever's safety cover wire seals and raised the covers, exposing the firing levers.

At this time, eyes focused on the clock as it ticked down past 08:18Z.

"Fire," yelled the fire-control officer at 08:18:54Z.

Applicable sailors pressed the firing levers. Fourteen Tomahawks left the New Jersey. Destination: 14 of Los Angeles' most notorious gang owned "junk" automobile yard weapons' storage areas—91 miles away. As soon as the missiles fired away, all the lights went out in the 14 targeted neighborhoods.

As the missiles thundered inbound, helicopters from the Iwo Jima loaded with Marine shock troops from Camp Pendleton—these to join LAPD Special Operations and ordinary street cops to round up the gang survivors—were coasting in from the southwest. The 'copters held short of the blacked-out neighborhoods until after missile impact. As with other anti-gang operations nationwide, survivors would find themselves in rigorous boot camps by dawn, staffed by National Guard drill sergeants, compassionate counselors, psychologists, and teachers. Members would be given one more chance.

Fourteen carefully selected targets suddenly burst in a cacophony of high explosives. Highly accurate terminally guided missiles sought out speci-

Chase-391-Virus Rodeo 2025

fic installations rather than personnel--their purpose to put the fear of God in gang members, not necessarily kill them. Crack houses, gun and ammunition repositories were leveled in seconds. At first many thought a major earthquake had hit. They staggered out with candles and flashlights.

Helicopters descended on each location and troopers, using night vision devices, rappelled down ropes and fanned out to link up with LAPD and Marine elements arriving by surface means.

Los Angeles was only one of hundreds of such operations taking place at exactly this same moment nationwide.

On the ground, forces sped toward their objectives in hummers and 6x6 trucks, the grinding roar of diesels belching black smoke into the damp morning. One by one, vehicles tore into the neighborhoods, scattering scrawny cats whose vampire-like eyes glowed in the headlights' glare as they peered out from behind trash cans. Emaciated dog packs, tails tucked between their hind legs, whimpered pathetically as they ran off into the night.

Drivers reinforced a deafening amplification of noise by walls of buildings by working up and down gears to negotiate neighborhood streets. Many individuals within their homes cowered below window ledges. Frightened rats scurried about in panic.

Using precision electronic navigation systems and input from realtime SLR data from Joint Star II, orbiting off the southern California coast, the strike force was able to pinpoint their objectives. Many locals were dazed and confused. Illumination flares lit up alarmed people staggering about. They were only too glad to respond to assertive commands given by the strike force. Wounded were tended to by military medics; the dead gathered respectfully for identification and burial. Others were given

blankets and coffee and instructed to sit in designated areas for eventual repatriation to their homes and families. Gang members were marched in formations for eventual deployment to the boot camps.

* * * * *

"This just in," a shaken CNN reporter interrupted the 04:00 EST Headline News. "Disturbing nationwide reports of massive power failures, police, and military attacks on thousands of gun traffickers, storage sites, drug houses, hundreds of street gangs, and dozens of cults. We also learned that murderers whose guilt wasn't in doubt, but whose death sentences were delayed by innumerable technicalities, have been executed throughout all states. Others, who got out of the death penalty through legal mumbo jumbo, were executed as well. Many telephone lines are inoperative. Capitol Hill is in darkness and all military camps are at maximum security. The White House has been described as inaccessible. Soldiers, marines, police, and the National Guard are out in force simultaneously throughout the nation. Most airports, train, and bus stations are closed. All major highways have checkpoints checking traffic. We have reports of massive air attacks on hate groups of all shades and persuasions. The only official corroboration of all this activity is that we should put the word out not to worry, that all this is our own people acting under legitimate orders and to stand by for further updates. Ordinary law-abiding citizens have nothing to worry about—just be patient."

The reporter was trembling visibly. Suddenly, CNN went off the

Chase-393-Virus Rodeo 2025

air.

People surfing the TV channels saw the following message on all channels, including premium cable:

Please stand by for official information
which will be forthcoming when
OPERATION CLEAN DAWN is completed.

Viewers throughout the nation, their curiosity aroused, woke other family members up, fixed an early pot of coffee, and excitedly discussed what Clean Dawn might be all about. Many kept their radios on while watching movies on their VCRs to kill time. All radio stations were broadcasting the emergency signal with periodic instructions to stand by for further information. Most at home kept CNN Headline News as the channel of reference.

* * * * *

At the Temple of Pacific Dawn, it was 08:30Z, so Major Bartow of Delta Force gave the command to attack. The force surged forward to the perimeter fence and cut their way through. They first went to the arms bunker and secured it. The cult sentry was passed out. He was taken to the prisoner marshaling area for the Oregon State Police to pick up at 09:15Z. They now made their way to the building which housed the commune. They circled it and looked in the windows. What they saw was a crowd of half dressed and naked cult members staggering about in stupor.

Major Bartow used concussion grenades to minimize casualties. At the

Chase-394-Virus Rodeo 2025

signal, stun grenades were thrown in windows and doors and exploded, numbing cult members into passivity. Rounding them up proved to be a breeze. Soldiers found blankets and items of clothing and by the time State Police arrived, cult members were ready for incarceration.

* * * * *

"Wow, look at those fireworks!" The copilot of the lead C-141 broke in. "Look at that secondary--they've found the ammo dump." The copilot didn't try to contain his enthusiasm for the first F-15E bomb drop.

"One minute warning," the lead navigator barked over the intercom. The skipper pressed the one minute warning command on the SKE to alert the other aircraft.

"Jump-master cleared to exit?" asked the load-master.

"Roger," the skipper responded and descended to 500 feet above ground level.

The two jump-masters went to the side exits to look for the impact point. Secured, they leaned out into the cold Idaho night. They easily found the impact point as smoldering light from the F-15E bombing raid lit up the area.

"Six second warning," the navigator said.

At exactly 08:32Z, the navigator said, "green light." The green light went on and troopers started their jump. They floated from C-141s in streams over the smoldering Nazi camp below them. They could see confused survivors staggering about in chaos. Major Eatman found himself swinging like a pendulum from a tree which had caught his parachute. He took a moment to orient himself, then rappelled down to the ground to join the rest of his

Chase-395-Virus Rodeo 2025

unit. Some Nazis had survived the air attack in a bunker and sought out their attackers. Major Eatman was warned by Joint Stars I and given their location. He programmed his GPS, then led his unit to attack, kill, or capture the Nazis as required.

Seeing isolated Nazis with their night vision devices, troopers slithered toward them for optimum tactical deployment and secured them. Other threats looked significant enough to use rifle grenades. Eatman ordered his men to prepare for attack. On signal, they launched rifle grenades and TOWs, which impacted Nazi bunker walls and destroyed them. Surviving Nazis fired automatic weapons in the direction of Eatman's unit, but couldn't draw a bead on it as their night vision devices were being blinded by electronic countermeasures. Eatman's unit fired massive salvos of grenades, TOWs, and machine gun fire into the eventually silenced Nazis. A few raised white flags, the rest raised their hands in surrender. Once the area was secure, the wounded were tended to and prepared for the Idaho State Police, who were on their way in hummers.

* * * * *

Still waiting in the Diplomatic Reception Room, Bennie and his party were preparing to meet President Griffiths in the Oval Office. Bennie sat on the New York sofa situated in front of an oval wall decorated with historic Scenic America wallpaper. After informal chit chat discussing that room's artifacts, they reviewed data from the portable model railroad communication unit that they had deployed with them.

Wanda spoke first, "We've succeeded in eliminating gangs and gun shops

as significant forces. Even if we fail, we've done some good."

"Roger that," Bennie gave a thumbs up signal.

"Looks like we got the cults also," Fester added. "Look, they just blew away the Idaho, upstate New York, Oklahoma, and Arizona ethnic extremists. Only a few more of these assholes to go. We don't need any of this ethnic cleansing bullshit here in the United States."

"I'm with you," Eric agreed. "By the way, Bennie, we've got all the nukes. I think we're ready to go call on President Griffiths."

"Yeah, and Harlo . . . You can turn CNN and the rest back on." Bennie added with confidence, "Hey gang, I think we've pulled this baby off."

* * * * *

Chief of Staff Cecil Sheps awoke the president at 04:00 that Wednesday morning. Alarmed, he was shaking his boss energetically. "Wake up . . . Someone has sent a Hotline message. CNN is saying all sorts of things."

Next to the president, his wife was groggy. "W-what's going on?" Her eyes focused. "Cecil, what's going on?" she asked as she pulled the sheets and blanket to her neck.

The president came out of his drowsiness abruptly. "I haven't authorized any messages." He turned to his wife. "There's also lots of unauthorized military activity."

"Something's going on, I think we'd better . . ."

"Gentlemen, please." A Green Beret with a M-16 motioned to the president and his chief of staff to make their way to the hall. "I have orders to place you under house arrest. You're to go to the Oval Office at this time."

As President Griffiths was led down the hall, he caught sight of one of his Secret Service bodyguards. "Bill, what's happening? Can't you do anything?"

"I'm sorry, sir—this is bigger than I am. We've been given our orders!" The bodyguard gave a sympathetic look, but took no action to help Griffiths.

He exchanged apprehensive glances with Cecil Sheps, then entered the Oval Office with as much dignity as he could muster. Thirteen people filled the office, standing in clusters of two or three. He recognized only one—Nicole.

He hesitated, stunned. "Nicole? You?"

"No, Mister President, me." Bennie stepped forward to make himself known. He spoke calmly, yet with the ice of determination and purpose. "Nicole joined us only last January after you fumbled the ball with the nuclear terrorists. Permit me? I'm Bennie Alza, the first American dictator, if you will." He reached for his wife's arm. "This is Mercedes, my wife." Then he beckoned towards the Sobels. "Meet Rhea and Lennie Sobel, who've financed our operation by skimming the IRS and Social Security."

Those who were introduced acknowledged his rank. "Pleased to meet you, Mister President."

Bennie continued his introductions. "These are the Nyströms, Eric and Ingallil. Together with Irv and Frankie Smelkinson, they've made sure we control all our nuclear forces. Lester and Revanne Grossman have been in charge of unconventional warfare. We're in the process of capturing the SADMs," Bennie stated casually. "These are Wanda and Sid Zupnick—they took care of the infiltration of the FBI, Secret Service, and the Justice Depart-

ment."

"Are you people for real?" Wild eyed, the president jerked his head around the room from face to face, finally fixing his gaze on Nicole.

"Is this true, Nicole?"

"I'm afraid so, Mister President," she said calmly. "To tell you the truth, I've been astounded by the dimensions of this plot."

She nodded her head slowly and gazed around at her newly acquired colleagues, still awed by the events of the four months since Christmas.

"But why, Mister Alza? I did the best I could," the president pleaded.

"Mister President, there's nothing personal in this," Bennie said. He felt genuine sympathy for the deposed leader. "Our operation was initiated many years ago after several administrations and Congress didn't address basic problems involved in the relationship between the environment and the economy. Our basic goal's to get rid of fossil fuels and stop the systematic extermination of the earth's other species. I must say we had serious qualms about overthrowing the present political system, but we had no choice. We're here to see that the United States bites the bullet. As of today, we begin an evolutionary change from fossil fuels and our economy of manufacturing mindless garbage, to clean electricity and economic prosperity through manufacturing sustainable substance. I'll outline our plan when we call in the press later this morning."

Bennie paused for a drink of water.

"B-but," Sheps stammered. "How did you—there weren't even any rumors!"

"I may as well tell you," Bennie decided. "This'll help pass time until we're ready for the press." He paused momentarily to organize his thoughts, looked up at the ceiling, and began. "Let's first tune in CNN."

Chase-399-Virus Rodeo 2025

After the broadcast and latest update on the broad based attacks against gun distribution systems, cults, and political extremists, Griffiths and Sheps were stunned.

"My God," Griffiths finally said. "You control the entire country."

"Yes," Bennie replied. "We have total control of communications, the armed forces, local police forces, computer networks, utilities. As you saw on the news, our shock troops made up of military and local police units have targeted key undesirable groups for elimination. That aspect is already pretty well completed. Remnants of these groups won't be a threat to our new order, just a nuisance like flies in the summer." Bennie raised his hand toward Wanda. "Wanda is our new Minister of Justice. She'll tell you about drug dealers and other immediate justice changes."

Wanda stood up and faced Griffiths and reviewed the program to take money out of drugs, sort junkies, and reduce collateral crime.

Wanda took her notebook to look at other key elements. "We're going to eliminate insanity defenses and institute uniform penalties for major crimes. The death penalty will be operative for unjustified murder, drug dealing, severely hurting people with weapons, and other such crimes too numerous to list now. But I think you get the idea. There will be one appeal to make sure the accused is really guilty, but no more of the drawn out technicalities circus."

After Wanda's briefing, Bennie proceeded to reveal the essentials of the operation to the fascinated president, his wife, and chief of staff. He wound up with the model railroad communication system, ". . . by using such a layout, we could represent activities by their actual models in most cases. This made it easy for everyone to relate to and understand activi-

Chase-400-Virus Rodeo 2025

ties, yet didn't arouse suspicions from outsiders as these activities were normal for a computerized model railroad club. In fact, no one ever suspected what we were up to! It turned out to be the perfect system." He ended in broad grin.

"How did you work the moles?" the president asked, gripped, perhaps even envious of the cabal's thoroughness.

Fester explained, "Over the years, we inserted them in applicable countries by submarine—after DNA fingerprinting to increase the odds that they'd be highly motivated and disciplined. In fact, all of us have been DNA fingerprinted to reduce the probability of economic corruption, disloyalty, or other negative traits which might compromise our operation or the implementation of our program once we secured the country. Those who didn't measure up and knew critical information were disposed of by our other connections."

James Griffiths, his wife Alice, and Cecil Sheps shook their heads in stunned fascination.

"Supplies and people were financed through Rhea's fake Social Security recipients and . . ."

"Hey, Bennie!" Fester bellowed as he cut in, jubilant with a message he'd just been handed. "Most of the U.S. is secure. We had some minor skirmishes with extremist militias, but their defective ammo rendered them ineffective and they surrendered. Most people are waiting patiently to see what comes down."

"Good, I'm glad," Bennie said, relieved.

"We've had to gridlock relatively little, mainly to control the press," Fester continued. "Babe, I think we've pulled it off!"

Chase-401-Virus Rodeo 2025

Alleviation overtly manifested itself on Bennie's face as lines of anxiety disappeared. Solid reports of success was just the tonic he needed to overcome fatigue. "OK," he said. "Let's get ready for the press."

* * * * *

News Flash Interruption of Continuing News Coverage
of The Previous Night's Dramatic Activities
Wednesday, Mid-April 199X

"We've been asked to go to the White House Press Room for an important announcement. Many rumors are flying but we've been unable to verify them. Last night's military attacks, police sweeps, phone breakdowns, and electrical problems interfered with our ability to obtain information, so little is known at this time about the implications of last night's activities. Now to the White House Press Room and our correspondent, Carole McCleod. Carole?"

"We've been told to stand by. There's a high level of anxiety and anticipation. A group of people is now entering the Press Room. I've never seen any of these faces before. Oh wait! There's President Griffiths. He looks distraught." At this time, the TV cameras zoomed in to isolate President Griffiths' ashen face. As the camera panned the rest of the platform party, Carole described the scene. "I believe the black woman you see is Doctor Nicole Sarrocco from Georgetown University's School of Strategic Studies."

"Do you get any sense of what's going on, Carole? Do you have any idea of who these other people are?"

"No idea, Paul, but one of them has approached the microphone."

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, I have an announcement to make. I'm Revanne Grossman representing the Gang of 34. We're responsible for last night's mischief. Our country is now under authoritarian rule and I would like to introduce our leader, Mister Bennie Alza."

The announcement was met with shocked gasps and groans of astounded disbelief. Some reporters instinctively rushed to telephones, only to sit back down in embarrassment, remembering this event was on live TV.

"Hi, I'm Bennie Alza." The tall slender man addressed the crowd. "Let me assure you, upfront, ordinary law-abiding citizens have nothing to fear from us."

Incredulous reporters, members of Congress, and diplomats observed Bennie's casual and confident demeanor in stunned silence.

"We have total control of all military and civilian forces, as you've seen over the past six hours. This includes nuclear units, computer networks, software, media conduits, and utilities. All of our friends are protected by rings of neutron and microwave bombs to dissuade anyone from attempts at any monkey business. And I assure you we'll eventually restore the Constitution, as Juan Carlos restored democracy in Spain after Franco, once our government has been corrected to fulfill its basic responsibilities."

McCleod's heart was pounding as she struggled to swallow through her

Chase-403-Virus Rodeo 2025

parched throat. Moving her gaze about the tomb-like press room she observed that, like herself, many of the others were sitting on the edge of their seats, trembling.

"I guess I owe you all an explanation!" Bennie said, winking.

The throng managed an apprehensive chuckle.

"Governments have three duties. One: to provide for defense against external threats, military or otherwise. Two: provide for internal order. Three: to provide an environment for legitimate economic activities to take place with predictable consequences. In the last few years we've noticed, as status jobs disappeared, the value of our money decreased, criminals violently took control of our cities and towns, and finally last Christmas, when terrorists destabilized our oil-based economy, the present system of governing could no longer fulfill its mandate. The public no longer knew which way to turn—faced either with corruption or indecision. As many of you know, we've already gone after criminals massively."

Bennie paused a moment to assess the crowd's reaction. They seemed apprehensive but not hostile. Reporters seemed eager for a chance to ask questions. Bennie continued, "Item one, previous governments have failed to act effectively and decisively on environmental issues. We have to reorder our priorities entirely, and that's why we need an autocracy." He pointed his left forefinger emphatically at the crowd.

"The threat to the life-support system is real. We have to change to clean fuels and sustainable activities in an evolutionary manner as soon as possible. You'll be given manuals and handouts which explain our program. Abuse of the environment is the most catastrophic external threat we have to contend with. It'll lead to our and all other species' extermination."

"The change will require some pain and suffering; we can't continue to fragment decision making, as we've been doing, by making conflicting exceptions for each pet constituency. Unfortunately, some will be hurt, some will lose their jobs and lifestyles, but the alternative is the destruction of planet's life-support system."

"We no longer have much time and if we err on the prudent side, the only cost will be some economic turbulence. On the other hand, if we err on the profligate side, which is what we've been doing up to now, we may very well exterminate ourselves and all other life on our planet. Although the evidence isn't absolute, it's so compelling we think, after you see the handouts, you'll come to agree with us. The time has come to act in a systematic manner to preserve life and generate additional economic wealth with clean energy and industrial processes." Bennie caused a murmur in the uneasy audience but they were impressed by his sincerity and purpose.

Bennie paused for a few minutes to give his audience time to shift in their seats. He then briefed them on the highlights of his plan and rationales and prepared to summarize the proposed compact for the new order.

Bennie raised his head and looked dramatically at his audience in the crowded White House Press Room.

"Now to a proposed compact: we and major UN powers agree to use military force if, within a reasonable time established by the best cross section of brains in the world, nations continue to compromise the integrity of the environment by:

"One: violating protocols protecting the high-altitude ozone layer.

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"Two: not getting rid of surface ozone, acid fog, and acid rain.

"Three: massive release of Greenhouse Effect gases.

"Four: refusing to convert to clean electricity and phase out fossil fuels as expeditiously as possible.

"Five: exuding agricultural and industrial runoffs which are poisoning the oceans, lakes, ground waters, and rivers.

"Six: careless disposal of toxic wastes.

"Seven: mindless deforestation, although it seems that TRFIS has taken care of that for now.

"Eight: destruction of other species and cultures.

"Nine: other means which arise from time to time.

"This nine-point proposal shows our firm commitment to responsibility, sensitivity, and personal dignity. Finally, I must stress I believe saving the environment requires a moral commitment—one which I and my colleagues have devoted our lives toward fulfilling. We may have only a few more decades before the damage becomes irreversible. I'm sorry we've felt compelled to use force, but I hope you see the logic and need." Reaching for a glass of water, Bennie could see most listeners were at least willing to listen. "Ms. Wanda Zupnick, our new Minister of Justice, will address the maintenance of internal order."

"Thanks Bennie," Wanda took center stage. "In the last six hours, our units have removed the most significant threats to internal order. For decades, public policy favored trouble makers and criminals over decent people who pay the taxes. It hasn't worked. Quite the contrary, it's led to government subsidizing the destruction of the social contract and institutionalizing aberrant behavior. The street now knows we mean business. We'll

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be compassionate and reasonable, but not foolish or naive. If crime pays, it attracts participants, as we've seen. Our handouts spell out the most important details of the new order. I'm sure questions will arise in the next few days which I'll be glad to answer as best as I can. The bottom line is: Crime no longer pays."

"Rhea Sobel will touch on the economy," Wanda introduced Rhea.

"We also felt that force was required to restore our nation's financial strength to rapidly curtail the self-indulgence and greed of spoils systems' politics as usual. Politicizing the Federal Reserve, for example, has led to accelerating inflation which devalued our money and savings of ordinary people. They could no longer reasonably predict what the consequences of their economic behavior would be. Taxes are too high and perceptions are that proceeds feed constituencies who whine loudest. For example, farmers don't buy crop insurance because they know government will cover them if they whine on the media. Wouldn't it be nice if all of us could get out of our auto and fire insurance premiums in the same manner?"

A sprinkling of applause followed Rhea's comment.

"If we institutionalize and ratify parasitic behavior," Rhea continued. "We shouldn't be surprised if people start behaving as such. Logic suggests: if individuals don't suffer consequences of poor economic decisions, they'll have no incentive to apply corrective action. Therefore, our new order will set the example at the top. Our clean electric economy will work in harmony with the constraints of the life-support system, generate economic wealth based on sustainable substance, give everyone a chance to participate up to their potential, and require personal responsibility for one's actions. We'll have a safety net, but it'll work like when a community is hit by a

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flood, earthquake, tornado, or a swimmer is rescued from drowning. People'll be helped to overcome emergencies, but not in a manner that makes them opt to be permanently subsidized. Rescue—yes, permanent subsidies—no. Let's not make drowning so attractive an option that a rescued swimmer jumps back in after being pulled out, and again and again."

Rhea received another round of laughs, many clapped as well.

"Our new governing system will set a good example," Rhea concluded. "We'll live within our means. Spend money for beneficial public policy projects, such as electrification of railroads—not favor special interest constituencies like corporations or unions to just generate political campaign contributions for powerful individuals—who end up diverting these proceeds for personal expenditures. We'll restore the sound value of our money, here at home and abroad. It hasn't been that long since we paid three cents to mail a letter, a nickel for a Coke, or received three-and-a-half German Marks for our dollars. Study your handouts. We'll be giving interviews immediately. Good day, ladies and gentlemen of the press and the World."

* * * * *

Later in the evening, after a barrage of interviews, Bennie and Mercedes made their way to their private quarters. "Hell, I wish I could have told those reporters the whole story, Middle East SADMs, TRFIS, and all."

Mercedes turned toward him. "Hmmm. Before you start, I've a confession to make."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Bennie, I almost blew your operation. You know about Alexandria, but

there were other near misses."

"What convinced you?"

"After the Republicans got elected in '94, state legislatures and Congress cynically started dismantling good environmental legislation, letting polluters write new weasel-word laws—which were unenforceable, and then the massive new rape of the environment which followed. As if this wasn't enough, there were the subtle changes in weather—increased annual numbers of more violent hurricanes, increased incidences of flooding, and so on. The final icing was that once we became privy to the inside workings, just discovering the sheer magnitude of winks and nods of internal corruption and private gain by incumbent government officials."

"And, what have you got for me?" She asked, raising her eyebrow in curiosity.

"I'll tell you as we look around our new home," Bennie said. "So much has happened so fast, I think we need a break just to relax and take all this in." In the White House's second floor presidential apartments, Bennie held the door open for Mercedes to walk out into the West Sitting Hall, then they turned right and entered Center Hall. "Let's start in the Yellow Oval Room," he added.

"Are the Griffiths set up in Blair House?" Mercedes asked.

"Yes, we set them up with the least hassle as possible. We factored that into our plans," Bennie replied. "I hated to do this, really."

"We must respect the history of the White House," Mercedes insisted. "Since we're interlopers in the sense of not having been elected, we mustn't change anything. I'm not a real first lady."

"I know," Bennie concurred. "If we do a good job, the nation will com-

memorate us here. If we do so ourselves, as real presidents have done in the past, I think that would be insolent and in bad taste."

"We must treat this house with utmost sensitivity," Mercedes emphasized.

They turned right, walked into the Yellow Oval Room and stopped beneath the bronze-doré chandelier, hung with chains and drops of rock crystal.

"Well, those ten SADMs came from former Soviet stockpiles. From their commander no less," he said almost casually.

"What?" Mercedes stopped in her tracks.

"Shhh, not so loud—this must never get out. I've known Yuri since 1947. We were occupation brats together in the Berlin rubble."

"I remember you telling me about him sometime ago, but . . ." Mercedes' curiosity was fully aroused. "It gives me chills—just being here," Mercedes literally shivered.

"Look at those two paintings to the right of the fireplace," Bennie pointed to Thomas Birch's Mouth of The Delaware and Fitz Hugh Lane's Boston Harbor.

"As kids in postwar Berlin, we'd become pretty close. I met him then by accident really. I was on one of my black market cigarette forays when I ran into him. His father had a similar position as Pop's in OMGUS at the Soviet equivalent. His old man wanted American cigarettes, so I obliged."

"How did you all ever get back together?" Mercedes asked.

"Goatroper arranged it in New York when Yuri came over to coordinate UN peace keeping functions."

At this point, Mercedes looked at her husband intently and swayed her head gently. "So the fate of the world has been decided by a chance meeting of two occupation brats dealing in black market cigarettes! And an American

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and a Russian at that! Bennie, you're too much! Oh, look at the Cézannes!"

"Don't forget the daughter of a Spanish revolutionary who gave us the final GO vote!" He smiled back at her in gratitude and appreciation.

"Hmmm." She looked at Bennie and raised her eyebrows.

"Think of all the distinguished people who have visited with the president here," Bennie reflected. "I hope we're worthy of standing here.

Before walking down the Grand Staircase to the first floor, they looked into the Treaty Room, Lincoln Bedroom, and Queen's Bedroom. "Churchill and Molotov both stayed here," Bennie said. "I think I'll stay here at least once."

"Oh Bennie, come on." Mercedes shook her head.

"If Molotov stayed here, surely I can."

"I guess you can. Let's go downstairs, I want to see the colored rooms, Entrance Hall, and East Room."

"A few years ago," Bennie continued. "Mario met Yuri in India when he was there for a molecular biologist convention. Yuri was there on a senior officer goodwill visit and Mario was blessed with a stroke of blind luck—one member of Yuri's entourage was hurt in a traffic accident and needed blood. Well, guess what—Yuri had the same blood type and Mario just happened to be available to take care of the transfusion. In conversations, he found Yuri and I went back to our Berlin days. He took some extra blood for a DNA fingerprint run on Yuri. We hit the jackpot. Yuri turned out to have a 95% probability of loyalty to his friends, decency, honor, integrity, honesty, public spirit, and other such desirable traits of character; that made Mario's decision to bring him in much easier."

Mercedes was incredulous. "Mario brought the Russian in . . . just

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like that? What ever for?"

"We needed their cooperation for our coup. They would need to feel confident it wasn't directed against them. Yuri was really shook up over Chernobyl, and that plus destruction of the Aral Sea's life-support system, made him realize ecology had to be top priority for a new world order, that is if we were to survive to have one at all. Just look at Eastern Europe."

From Cross Hall, they drifted into Entrance Hall, paused and looked up at marble columns and back toward the Blue Room. They wandered into the Red Room, where Mercedes sat in an American Empire Sofa with dolphin feet.

"Oh, is this nice." She took a deep breath and smiled in satisfaction like a child on a treasure hunt.

Bennie continued, "I've corresponded with Yuri since we met again in New York. He's always expressed great concerns about Soviet destruction of the environment. Their economic problems, Chechnya, and political turbulence made it difficult for him to do much directly at first, so we took the initiative." Bennie concluded.

She looked at him, eyes sparkling.

"After dissolution of the old Soviet Union and possible access of their nukes to terrorists, Yuri got an idea for a surrogate Pearl Harbor he thought I'd need to rouse America behind me. He knew Americans were reluctant to give up their cars voluntarily, yet wastes couldn't get out of hand. Remember, he doesn't know about our link to TRFIS. He reasoned, might not a terrorist threat right in Middle East oil fields, trigger enough fear in a most virulent way to create the Pearl Harbor we needed?" Bennie sat forward and clasped her hands.

"Last Christmas, on his own initiative, he used one of his most loyal

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remaining SPETSNAZ units, took ten SADMs and set two off. He didn't tell me then. He wanted me to be sincerely upset about these explosions so my credibility and sincerity wouldn't be compromised. I ran into him a month ago in Switzerland. We exchanged ideas on recent developments and I asked how he felt about terrorists in the Middle East and possible environmental consequences."

"He looked deeply troubled. I told him the United States and Russia could collude fruitfully to wipe out such threats. You know what? He put his hands on my shoulders, looked at me intently, and blurted out he'd set off those SADMs. I was freaked out, really freaked."

Mercedes was speechless.

Before retiring back to their bedroom, they visited the State Dining Room, Green Room, and East Room. "I could put a hell of a model railroad layout in here," Bennie joked.

"Oh Bennie, be serious."

Bennie strolled toward a mahogany piano, sat down and played a couple of numbers by Duke Ellington, including Billy Strayhorn's Take The A-Train.

Later, Bennie said, "Yuri was disillusioned with their new order—Fascists after Yeltsin—the anarchy and violence occurring during that critical period recently. He said, I give you these bombs for shock value. I was struck dumb." Bennie started breathing hard as excitement swept over him once more. "After a few moments, I knew I had it—my immediate highly visible surrogate Pearl Harbor. We didn't want to disrupt the U.S. too much. It might have worked against us, but a nuclear Pearl Harbor on Middle East oil facilities without fingering Iran or others, was perfect. I knew now I had

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the icing to the Virus Rodeo cake—Yuri's SADMs' military threat and a humiliation of the United States Griffiths would accept—but the public wouldn't."

Mercedes said nothing.

"Between his DNA fingerprint and our conversations, the probability was almost absolute he could be trusted, and now I didn't really have a choice, did I? Public acceptance of preemptive draconian actions was necessary to save the environment. Our moles at Bethesda Medical got hold of Griffiths' blood samples from a routine physical. Alba ran a DNA psychological profile—it turned out Griffiths was a patsy—a late 20th century Neville Chamberlain of sorts—perfect for a Middle Eastern Potemkin Village."

"Bennie, you're a lucky guy."

"That helps, Baby. Intelligence agencies had detected Iranian nuclear weapons, or so it seemed. These were fake, made up by computer viruses—disinformation from Harlo. It confused the administration into gridlock when Yuri set off the SADMs. Yuri's SADMs stacked the deck overwhelmingly in our favor—as did the latent Norheim Syndrome already pervading the American people—violently reinforced by post-Christmas economic collapse."

Bennie's and Mercedes' eyes met and she was energized by the intricacy and integrative nature of Bennie's plot.

Bennie continued. "Yuri's SADMs ensured that Virus Rodeo, if executed properly, virtually couldn't fail. We now had all the aces—thanks to the Russians!"

Mercedes looked at her husband to see if he was for real—yes he was, right there in front of her blurting out this most fantastic story. Bennie paused for a glass of water and resumed his revelation to his dumfounded

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wife. She just could not believe this story, yet it just had played out before her big black eyes—in living color!

He took her hands once more. "A bold move was what was required to trigger acceptance . . . bold, yet not reckless or uncontrollable . . . something that would blend in with ambient events like our declining standard of living, disappearance of status jobs, education woes, violent streets, resultant personal uncertainties, changing demographic composition of our population, uncertainties brought about by home-grown extremist, Islamic, and Jewish terrorists setting off explosives in our major urban areas, and lingering bitter middle eastern tensions. We could almost be certain that these combined shocks would trigger the American people's acceptance of an ethical authoritarian government which could later extract future sacrifices required to save the environment—a classic Pearl Harbor syndrome reaction—the natural outgrowth of the Northeim Syndrome!"

"So how did Yuri fit in? I still don't quite get it."

"Think about it," Bennie replied. "What would be more natural than terrorists capitalizing on all this by upping the ante . . . say, by blowing away key oil facilities in an ambiguous way with SADMs. With Griffiths in the White House, it was a piece of cake! Talk about a rerun of Neville Chamberlain at Munich. We couldn't have asked for more if we'd planned it all that way back at Stoneybrook in 1992!" Bennie sat back to allow Mercedes time to digest the logic.

She paused for quite a long time, then asked impishly, "By the way, what type cigarettes did you sell to Yuri's old man, back then in Berlin in 1947?"

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Bennie, at first startled, hesitated a bit, then suddenly broke out in a wide grin. "Mercedes! You'll never believe this: LUCKY STRIKES!!!"

THE END

