

ALIEN FRINGE

by George LoBuono

Daniel talks with the usual male firmness. He apprehends a subject, reduces it to terms that he can grasp more immediately. Sometimes too quickly for a psychologist, yet sharply for a man with his kind of caseload.

"I haven't seen much of that in my reading," he says.

"They live in other worlds," his partner Michael says. "It's not what they might appear to be externally. It's what they *think* they are."

Daniel nods. "Of course, of course." The two men share a practice.

"It's the larger parameter of mind, the fineness that connects it all. They fantasize the grandiose in order to feel as if they belong, in order to preserve their basic identity."

"I know where you're coming from."

"Do you really? Then why do you cut them off in group all the time?"

"To keep them clear and focused, obviously. They have to *be* with us. We have plenty of time to go into details privately. I thought we agreed on this."

"Did we? Then what are they feeling, what are they really feeling when they elaborate on so grand a scale?"

"I don't know, Michael. What are they feeling?" Daniel says, leaning back in his chair. The wall behind him is lined with photos he's taken—vast landscapes of cloud and stone, abandoned buildings.

"An integrated sense of being, however distorted. If they can't interact to get the attention, the intimacy they've had since childhood, they feel like they've been wronged. When their finest sensitivities have been ignored or sheltered too far inward, they seek greater justification... on the grandest scale, if necessary. It's a creative process; strange, yet vital in ways. There's a prescience within the condition, an extra sensitivity that you and I may be missing." As soon as Michael says it, he knows it's too much. Daniel wants to raft them out of turmoil, make them feel comfortable within a more predictable order. Family and friends, a role within the community.

Michael wants to open up with Daniel, tell him what he's been seeing. Things so much different... but Daniel is a business partner. He starts in on it at times, yet always stops. No point in the same old arguments.

They work in separate rooms in an old house in Noe Valley, a hillside village within San Francisco. Michael consults upstairs in a room with black leather couches and Indian rugs, a view of old wooden houses sloping up to Twin Peaks. It's beautiful when clouds float by, low and tinged with the pale colors of sea mist, almost dreamlike at twilight. Sometimes he just sits and looks out the window, thinking.

Driving up Clipper Street toward home further up the hillside, his car is hot, thick with fumes and the smell of vinyl baking. Too much to do, groceries to get, association fees to pay. Then home, with a view of ivy climbing up into trees.

I live like a goddamned rat. This place is too small. It's not □□□□□ There it is again! Always like that. They say so much more in so much less time. Something about how he lives richly, while others suffer. He imagines how he might describe it to Daniel. "I know this sounds strange, but you know me. I have to be honest... I hear voices."

"Oh.... What kind of voices?" Daniel's eyes widen, deadpan to hide his thinking.

"Actually, they're not really voices. I don't really hear them; I sense them in my mind."

If Daniel had said that to him a few years earlier, he would have thought they were in trouble as a partnership. Michael thought of various ways to tell him. Psi trails, telepathy; the paranormal. All of it non-normal to Daniel. It was sad not to relate his observations because Daniel had a good mind. He listened well, attentive to details, the sentience of being. He'd studied under good people, but he was so... reductive. After a while Michael gave up, yet the communications continued. He'd even become friendly with them. They seemed to be at least as bright as he is, if not smarter.

He walks out and up the rise through dark pines above thick ivy, elevated condos with glass walls facing the inner gardens, an honesty in transparency. At the pool, he finds a chair for his things, then stands for five minutes dipping his toes into the water. Two women are already in, one with large dark eyes, her hair pinned up in back—an intelligent kind of beauty. She's a resident, but they've never spoken. The other has her back to him. Such smooth skin, such fine shoulders. He slips in; the water's cold. He finds the jet where warm water comes out, and clings there. The other woman turns around slowly.

There's something about her nose; her jaw is smaller, more tightly muscled than usual. A trait almost masculine; he's not sure. Her eyes have a depth, a coldness he can't access. She seems to be staring at him out of the corner of her eye. *Almost masculine... not at all □□□□□* Something about women, about non-gender; all said too fast, like the envelope of someone else's thought coming through her—sensed within. She turns and glares at him coldly.

He slips into the water and does several laps with goggles on. Nine, then ten. He pauses, just a warm-up. The dark-eyed woman is also swimming back and forth. After a minute of rest, he shoves off and tries to outpace her. For him the crawl-stroke is the lead weight of labor, increasingly heavy with each stroke, yet she swims ahead faster, almost effortlessly.

He turns to watch her movements as he goes. Now she seems more beautiful, her... *inaccessibility. She □□□□□□* Again, more said than he can put into immediate terms, a communication on multiple levels. Up for air, he lowers his eyes to surface level, goggles half-immersed. Something strange happens at the surface: it's the physics of a reflective membrane. He remembers reading about how radio waves go faster than light, sideways, when they bounce off of the upper atmosphere. Back under, he swims like a fish, slow and quiet, but bored silly.

He goes home and makes dinner with a spot of wine, but it, too, seems strangely biological. A laboratory smell he rarely notices. He can't drink it. He

turns on the TV, then tries to read a book. Nothing in either. Nothing he does for the rest of the night is enough for him. His rooms have no ceilings, only an overstructure that steeps eight feet up above the walls toward the rear wall of glass that looks down onto a slope of ivy. A dim amber light seeps in through the darkness.

He wakes up in the morning slowly. It's not the numbness of being conscious yet unable to move, but similar: not wanting to waken. His dream life is better than waking. Then, as he's sitting in his kitchen eating breakfast with the drapes closed, he remembers. Something in the face of the woman who'd glared at him. It *was* the face of another, a male, in fact. Not real, but posed somehow, as if projected so that the rendering was only clear within the memory.

"Michael?" It's Chris on the phone.

"Yeah... moving slow today."

"Still wanna go jogging?"

"Sure. I've got a slight headache, but I'll take something and meet you on the cliff at ten-thirty."

The trail where they run is seaside wilderness looking out across the ocean to the Marin hills, rolling northward. Chris is excited about extra state money for the school where he teaches.

"It might make a difference," he says, running slightly ahead. He cuts the straightest line around corners.

"Ahh, it's not the money. It's the whole idea of education." Michael eyes the beaches 200 feet down the hillside, imagining which little trail he'd take down through twisted brush and boulders if he were alone.

"I'm listening."

"You can't spend three percent more to reduce class size and come anywhere near undoing the damage done by the violence they see on TV. They go home and *shoot* people in computer games. They dismember beings of higher intelligence."

"You're wrong, Michael." Chris paces his words, as he runs. "Classes of 34 children... aren't an education. They're an indoctrination. We're trying to produce little copies of ourselves. It's an industrial approach." Chris' dark Korean eyes narrow. "Before... we were agrarian serfs, made useful through the denial of knowledge. Now we're industrial slaves. We train them to follow instructions. We don't challenge them to think; we use 'em." They're both silent for a while.

The trail narrows to where they can't run abreast. It curves downward into flowering anise, through crowberry and bent cypress. Michael pulls his arms up to avoid stickers, then peels off his sweatshirt and ties it around his waist as they rise up into a clearing of golden yarrow and beach pea. They slow to a walk. Up ahead a woman climbs wooden stairs in the dirt, where the trail peaks with a view clear across the city toward Angel Island.

The thick aromas of sea and pine dull aching lungs as they walk. Something tells Michael he left the stove on at home. So, in his mind he walks through each step he took on the way out, but he can't remember. *The house could burn down.* But no, it would only heat the room and turn the vent on.

The torso of the woman up ahead sinks beneath the rise at a beautiful angle, the wind fanning her dark hair out sideways against a view clear across the city to the faded slopes of Mt. Diablo. Her jogging top is sleeveless. *Like a Roman girding of leather* □□□□□□□. Something about women and greed this time, then a flash of a Max Ernst canvas. He'd seen it at an exposition, but it wasn't his memory. It was someone else's. Then again, □□□□□□□. This time more vividly and with a definite vocal timbre, slightly bubbly-sounding. Before his next footfall, it passes right through him, each word, each impression exacted as if containing the whole of the depth before him, yet somehow, in some inexplicable way, traveling backward in time. More than he could ever do, then, finally, a note as if of a hollow: the image of a sun fading across the whole of the ocean behind him, yet tucked exactly, dimensioned precisely into the preceding. Not of this earth! No one here is that smart.

Michael is a scientist, yet there's no way to explain it. Still, he has to. He walks on, oblivious to the panorama of surf and cliffs before him. He's an atheist who doesn't believe in an external, masculine deity. No sudden schmalinka by a human-like hand, nothing supernatural. So then, what is it? It has to be--it could only be--extraterrestrial. But the idea is too much to absorb all at once. The mind works in different ways. Sudden percipience doesn't sink in until larger reference is made. He works through such things incrementally.

As he measures the pace of his steps up the small rise, it occurs to him that he's always been skeptical. The last one to fall for such notions. He usually thinks of it as a balm for the uneducated, a short-cut kind of wish fulfillment only realized in hallucinations. Then again, there are tens of billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars... The possibilities are enormous. The main obstacle would be the human presumption to be the greatest of all, when, in fact, others could predate us by as much as a billion years. A billion years ago we were much more humble—tiny multi-celled swimmers with a node, not a brain. Some extraterrestrials could be that much different. Categorically more advanced. He decides to be more careful, more reserved and observant.

At the end of the trail they stand above China Beach, a small cove where people lie out in the sand between grayish brown cliffs. They watch a freighter that looks like a giant lunchbox pick up speed as it heads out through stiff whitecaps toward Asia. So oddly square, so flatly functional. He decides to wait there, shirtless in the sun, while Chris jogs back to get the car to pick him up later.

They stop in a small Russian cafe owned by a Palestinian who employs only Irish women. It's a mostly white neighborhood that's fast-becoming Chinese. Chris flirts with the 20 year-old behind the counter.

"I could be her father," he says when he sits.

Michael asks what Chris thinks about the idea of extraterrestrials.

"I used to think it was all a bunch of shit, frankly. But then I read a book by an Army colonel who was on Eisenhower's national security staff. He handled the foreign technology desk for the Army later." Chris' eyes narrow. "He says aliens actually crashed at Roswell." Chris studies Michael for signs of doubt. "He says the military tracked it on the way down and then pounced on it before

anyone else could get to it. One alien survived and was trying to run away, but was shot by fuck-up soldiers before an officer could stop them. The colonel says he saw alien bodies preserved in glass containers. And that he worked on an Army project to distribute parts of the wreckage to U.S. companies that reverse-engineered them to develop the laser, fiber optics, microcircuitry, and uh... What was it?" He pauses. "Oh yeah, it was Kevlar, the bullet-proof fiber. But why'd you ask me?"

"Something in the paper..." Michael says, lost in thought. "Why do you think they're coming out with all of this now?"

"People know more than before, I guess."

It seems strange to Michael. Ten years earlier he would never have had such a conversation. The talk turns to a friend who's pregnant and how having a baby might change her. Chris has two children of his own, the cutest little things. Chris goes home to eat, leaving Michael alone to read scattered newspapers.

Michael drives through Golden Gate Park, then over the hill toward home, thinking. The streets are jammed with weekend traffic; the stoplights are nauseating. If people could only see what they're breathing. If the exhaust came out dark green and lingered, grotesque and thick, they wouldn't buy such vehicles. They'd have a completely different technology. Chris was right about industry. People knew they could do better, but they were caught in a vicious cycle. The worst of the old regime dragged their feet in order to tilt production to their advantage, however destructive that might be. Market forces determined the weapons economy, which sowed destruction among the poorest and most vulnerable of the world, leaving them all the more vulnerable to foreign scavengers who flocked in to grab up cheap landholdings.

Strangely pretentious hacks with money raked in from 19th century scams had banded together with the most vulgar of the nouveau riche to form a criminal substructure that hectored everyone else who did business in North America. The most corrupt among them stooped the lowest; they'd even been fond of the Nazis. They'd used a network of mob types to do corruptions work across the country until RICO laws crippled the old mob structure. They were said to have "owned" J. Edgar Hoover, and they were first to help launder heroin money, then court the favor of banks where cocaine money was counted later.

Trolls beneath "the bridge to the 21st century." It was appalling. People were angry, yet intimidated at the same time. Something had to give eventually. Meanwhile, the U.S. government was the world's biggest cash cow; the place where some of the world's greediest scam artists stopped to drink deeply, only to turn around and deride big government as the enemy when it was the protection of state and the people's tax money that they lusted for more than anything. They, more than anyone, were fed by the hand of an increasingly Byzantine and compromised government. And what made it all possible? It was infantile citizenship. Paternalistic pabulum at election time. Feel good politics.

Michael sits in his chair at work, studying her expression. She's well educated and articulate. She's sensitive and responds to other's feelings more immediately

than he does.

"I feel like the rest of the world doesn't even know I exist." She talks freely, but sometimes eyes him warily. "I go to work in the morning. I take the Muni home. I sit on the train quietly. No one talks to me."

He nods, hoping she'll continue.

"It's like there's a wall there. My neighborhood is like a mortuary."

"How do you mean?"

"People don't mix much. It's way out in the avenues. Completely sterile."

She doesn't know what to do with her hands as she talks. They grope across the edge of her chair cushion, then along the seams of her pants. Thin and delicate, they stop at the knee, where she folds them into her lap. □□□□□□
Of all places... There are more than one this time, but they've never interrupted a session before. Something about his masculinity as a disturbance, about mind itself as an act of observation. It's a complex message laced with subtlety, as if he needs to consider the idea further. They think on multiple levels. He has to derive the larger implications.

She's pleasant-looking, maybe twenty-seven. The tones of her eyes and skin are vivid, yet fading. She reminds him of someone he knew in college, a tall, muscular woman who ran a peer-counseling program.

Now his left eyelid is twitching. Or it seems to be. A regular pattern of impulses. It unnerves him. He looks away from her and peers at a Japanese print on the wall until it subsides. It has never happened before. It felt as if someone else had projected the impulses.

"... but he's like a man of stone," she's saying. "The calculated poses. Controlled, like he's always on camera. I could never be honest with a man like that."

He tries to remember what she said before that, but can't. He never misses a meaning in therapy. It makes him angry.

"Where did you meet him again?" he asks.

She looks at him curiously. "He's just a neighbor. He lives two houses down. I bought some books at his garage sale and he started flirting with me."

"How did you know he was flirting with you?"

"He was obvious. Smiling too long, the tunnel vision. Trying to please me with everything he said." She gestures with annoyance. "And then his mother comes outside to tell him something. I could never take a man who lives with his mother seriously."

He smiles slightly. *Mind as an act of observation. Too obvious if construed in the literal sense. Maybe something to do with the physics of non-locality, world lines in a complex universe.* He listens closely as she talks about how her life is a swamp, a place where all good ideas are slowly sucked under. She says her life is a forbidding grayness; she can feel herself aging.

He wants her to try something different, to get out of her flat and involved in more activity. But he can't suggest it too directly. He can't guide her life. He looks around the room. The art on his walls seems dull and lifeless. It needs more color and movement. A colleague of his rents paintings from a museum store. Thirty dollars a month for first-rate works. He says his clients see new

possibilities in them.

She walks down the stairs reluctantly, almost pained on the way out. Then she opens the door slowly, as if to compose herself. He's learned to sense their feelings as they leave. If they seem uneasy, he makes a note of it.

With no one coming for another hour, he goes up to 24th Street to get a coffee. The sun is out and people are taking their time. He sits on a bench outside the cafe where people do the most talking. A young mother in exercise shorts sits next to him while her two year-old daughter plays with a three-wheeled stroller. Her scent is patchouli. Her chest is heaving; she's been running. Her legs are well tanned, freckled at the knee. *Scrawny, like yours.* □□□□□□□□ He's startled this time—something about how women see each other the way he sees other males in a locker room. Just plain assholes in stinky clothes sometimes.

He looks at her again. Her manner is strong, her eyes sharp and capable. She could be someone interesting; he can't tell. *You can tell. She can see right through you.* □□□□□□□□

He wonders if she's aware of him. □□□□□□□□ Again, something about the limits of his ideas, a mathematical kind of failing. All said softly, with an after-image of dark eye sockets, a Roman nose behind that of the woman next to him. She senses him staring, then turns and looks past him without the slightest interest. As he flushes with embarrassment, the light seems to pale.

It dawns on him that the communications are increasing. He decides to correlate them if he can, to put them in the context of each occurrence, but so much is said so fast that he has a hard time doing so. It's as if they consider mind differently: mind as more complex somehow, more multiply manifold in its coursing. As if the whole-of-mind were relatable through a different idea of time and possibilities.

He finishes his coffee, then goes back to his office. He has a hard time concentrating on his next two clients.

Daniel suggests that they have dinner together to go over a few details about the practice and client billing. They take a seat to the rear of a Thai restaurant, beneath the red glow and figurines of a luck shrine.

"You seem preoccupied recently," Daniel says after ordering. "Is it something we should talk about?"

"It's nothing, really. End of the month details—household crap that I put off for too long." Michael folds his hands on the table.

"It's as if your mind is elsewhere."

"I'm always thinking." *Other worlds, Daniel. You just don't get it. You've boxed yourself in in ways that you can't begin to understand.* He's tempted to explain, but Daniel has to be convinced more directly. The Thai waitress sets two pots of tea on the table. She's fairly tall, with smooth skin and quick eyes, earnest in a way that few would notice.

"We have to be honest with each other," Daniel says, stirring his tea slowly. "I trust you Michael. Maybe we can talk about it some other time." Daniel sips his tea, then talks about a hike in their insurance rates and how the carpet on the stairs is too thick; someone might fall. They have to absorb the cost. He runs

down the list, securing everything in order.

Daniel served in the Army thirty years earlier doing photo work in Asia. He once talked about a trip to Java, which he said was beautiful—thick with tropical foliage and hand-planted rice fields. Prices were cheap there, so he bought new clothes, hand-painted batiks, and filigrain silver jewelry for friends back home. He ate in fine restaurants and motorcycled up through a rain forest into the cone of a volcano while on leave. One day, they had him shoot several rolls of film, standing for hours in the hot equatorial sun. It was a pain-in-the-ass assignment. About twenty teenagers (he thought they were from a boy's home) were doing nothing more than dig a trench. It appeared to be for irrigation. There was an armed Indonesian guard there to prevent run-aways, and none of the boys spoke English, except for one who seemed unusually friendly: he shared a cigarette with Daniel and talked about how he wanted to visit California. "Elvis Presley, Mick Jagger *bagus*," he said, thumbs up and smiling widely. They all seemed to like the U.S.

Finally, when they'd dug deep enough, a few other Indonesian soldiers arrived to inspect their work. Daniel was putting his camera equipment away when he heard an eruption of nervous chatter. One soldier in a U.S.-issue MP's helmet was gesturing with his gun for the boys to all get into the trench. Daniel pulled out his camera as they filed in and were forced to sit quietly, all facing in one direction. Daniel was told to leave, and had driven a quarter mile down the road, when he heard long rounds of automatic-weapons fire. He later learned that they'd killed all the boys because they were from families with labor union ties. It was mass murder, and he was deeply shaken that he'd been anywhere near it. So he took the roll of film to a senior officer, who accepted the film and listened sympathetically, but nothing came of it later.

At least half a million Indonesians suffered such a fate, though few in the U.S. heard about it. It sent a shiver down Michael's spine. The Katyn forest massacre was all over the papers when the Soviets finally admitted to it, but not the genocide in Indonesia. The CIA had sent them lists with the names of thousands of leftists, who were murdered subsequently. The Indonesians also killed more than a hundred thousand Chinese *for being too successful in business*, and then Suharto's cronies cashed in on it all. It chilled him to think that Pol Pot may have thought about Indonesia when he did what did in Cambodia.

Michael sits listening as Daniel talks about a few referrals from a colleague at a university hospital across town. Daniel has wine with his meal and holds his fork gingerly. *One drink and he's a little sloppy. Two drinks and... it's brain damage.* □□□□□ They interject into Michael's thoughts: something about how nerve cells don't grow back, about dendrites and memory. They're talking his language now. His hair raises at the thought of what he could learn.

He remembers a computer sequence of memory being coded into a brain, the hippocampus repeating a thought, and then the opening of ion channels in a neuron. All done in 3-D with space-age effects, while molecules flash too fast to be seen. It effuses forth with his own added ideas about showing cage-shaped proteinase structures and special effects to portray the smearing of the atom.

Cutting edge stuff.

Nothing in response but sustained, deliberate silence. He's embarrassed, and vows not to overstep himself. They seem to resonate. He tells himself to remember, yet feels awkward somehow, as if, in comparison, he's relatively primitive. An ape-man of sorts, groping across a face of stone in search of lesser understandings.

On the following weekend, he drives downtown to meet some friends in a small bar near the waterfront. Along the way, he stops to buy books on subjects that he doesn't read often: complexity theory, the new physics of the mind, and, finally, UFOs—which he finds in the esoterica section. There are dozens of books on the subject. He picks the ones that seem most reliable, but flips through several others before heading for the magazine section.

The place is packed with people reading. A young woman in a floral spring dress stands in front of the magazines he's interested in. He waits beside her while she reaches up, hand poised, intent on her selection. *The curve of her hips in comparison to her waist.* As she reaches, he can't help looking. *Look at her!* Not like him; he usually doesn't notice. *She seems big, strong!*

It isn't him. He's puzzled at the behavior; it seems a strange lapse. The woman turns and scans the rack before him, then reaches across his view for a magazine. The arch in her back is high and firm. When he smiles, she smiles back pleasantly, but when he tries to think of something to say, she flips the magazine open, as if to avert it. □□□□□□□□ Stranger still: something about babushkas in dark floral knits. So starkly dissimilar. *Like yourself.* Suddenly, the air is thick with what smells like his body odor, yet he's squeaky clean and wearing cologne. He whiffs again; nothing. Still, she moves away as if bothered.

He moves down the rack, flustered, and picks up an Aviation Week, opening to an article about plans for a new type of jet fighter. It's supposed to have a new kind of "integrated" technology: electronics that react to abrupt changes in the pilot's brain waves—if he passes out, for example. It's a futuristic design, but it costs hundreds of millions per plane. Impressive stuff at air shows... and then one goes down on camera like a pancake caught in a tornado. Of course, the military seals the place off to collect all the pieces so that nothing can be... *stolen technology.* □□□□□□□□ He can't quite make out the last part. It's garbled in ways, two completely different timbres.

The jet he's reading about isn't very fast, but it can carry nuclear-tipped missiles. With the Cold War over, it seems like an extravagance. He wonders what use it could possibly have. □□□□□□□□ Entirely garbled this time, and then complete silence.

...lll: :::,.... ...,-ll|ll.. ll, ll ... ,, ...ll A strange juncture, it seems. He wonders what they were saying. The last message strikes him as unusual, as if someone entirely different were correcting the first voice, a different kind of mind. The tenor of the latter is more formal, framed as if to draw deliberate distinction between its character, and those of the preceding communications. Something about long-term considerations, and something else—something too complex, too multiply-meaningful for him to put into words. An entire tree of thoughts conveyed at one time, as if some conveyances can't be reduced to linear

phrasing. He tries to characterize it, but can't. With each attempt to remember, the order of events changes somehow.

He's puzzled at the contrast between the voices, curious about who the second might be; it was cool, if not contentious. It could be part of a *different* alien population. He reminds himself to be doubly careful. He feels humbled in ways, lucky to even know what he's onto. They all seem vastly more advanced than he, as if they begin from a different kind of knowledge.

A stale odor hangs in the air as he enters the bar where his two friends await.

"Nice place," he says as he sits with them. "I barely know this part of town."

"So how's it going, Michael?" Julio says. "We haven't seen you for a while." Julio seems tired, like usual. Bernice looks much better.

"Not bad," he says half-heartedly.

"You work too hard," Bernice says, smiling. "It's Saturday morning, remember?"

They talk about friends, Bernice's graphic arts work, and a house that her family owns an hour's drive north in the mountains. They plan to spend the night there when they leave. They ask if Michael wants to join them.

He declines. They need time alone. He plans to spend the weekend reading.

"I just don't have the energy to get out much these days," he says.

"At your age it doesn't just happen by itself," Julio says. "You've got to create it."

"I know. I swim laps at home. I go for hikes with friends. My routine is just about the way I want it at this point, but..." He gropes for the words. "So much is going on right now that there's no time for diversions."

"So, come with us," Bernice says. "It's good to get out of town every once in a while, isn't it?"

He knows she's right, but shakes his head. His mind roams between the shadows of some unformed awareness.

He listens to what they say, between sips of wine and a plate of appetizers, while his eyes rove the place for strange plays of light and color, entirely new geometries. Bernice's hair seems dark in a way that he never noticed. Her eyes are alive, her smile genuine, while those of the men seem weighted at the corners. How would it be if women looked and talked as grimly as men do? He imagines their faces, the controlled tenor, and how men would react to it.

"We'll curl up tonight amid the smell of pine on some dumpy old mattress. But, the thing is, up there I'm fresh every day in the morning." Julio brightens as he says it. "Clean air and deer. We use the fireplace in the summer."

A waitress stands near their table, scanning about coolly. She seems more composed, less self-assuming than those around her. She must be a student, maybe European.

"So maybe you'll watch the game for me?" Julio's saying.

"The game?" Michael returns.

"The Giants. They're playing New York." Julio rears back, grinning widely, hands clasped behind his neck. Then he squares off toward Bernice, expecting her to say something. She spits out a bit about baseball to please him. It pains Michael to see her strings pulled. Bernice was so proud and independent when

they first met. Ten years of marriage have changed her.

For some reason, the scene recurs to him over the next few days. It's as if they've all aged in ways: Julio drinking in a bar and talking too loudly about sports, his hair receding, and Bernice so dependent on him that she's losing her old identity. What bothers Michael most, though, is the way he, himself, can put it out of mind so neatly; which is why he keeps thinking about it. Old sensitivities allowed to lapse can disappear, forever.

Later the next week he has a session with an older man named Rodney from Baltimore. Rodney is spending a summer away from home and complains about the headaches he gets from drinking too heavily. They go through his history of drinking and how he feels about his personal life. He speaks guardedly and without depth. So Michael leads him through a series of discussions until the inconsistencies become obvious.

"You know, Rodney, there isn't much we can do unless we're both honest with each other. Have you thought about what it is you want to accomplish by talking with me?"

"Sure. I mean, you know, I wouldn't be here if I wasn't 3000 miles from home."

"Why's that?"

"I have to be careful in my line of work. If people think you've got problems, you're in trouble. They want someone who can keep his mouth shut." Rodney's dark eyes go cold, as if studying Michael for weaknesses.

"Do you enjoy the work you do?"

"Why wouldn't I? It pays good money and it's easy. All of my clients are important people..." Rodney's jaw hangs slack as he says it, a distancing of sorts. "Look, I don't know what experience you have in the business world, but investment banking isn't always polite. I have to deal with the whole goddamned world, and some of it is ugly, ugly people. If I don't connect with them, someone else will. It could be better, but that's the way it is, frankly. I couldn't change it if I wanted to."

Michael listens quietly, waiting for more.

"Maybe that doesn't sound too good. But you want me to say how I feel, don't you?"

"Of course. You can talk freely here." Michael pauses to allow time for thought. "Do you tell your wife how you feel about your work?"

"Sure, sometimes. But work is work. She lives in her own little world, in ways."

"How would you describe your relationship with her?"

"It's okay. I guess."

"Do you have arguments?"

"We've always had arguments. She thinks I sneak around on her. She bitches about other things, mostly petty."

Michael pauses before his next question. "Do you have ever sex with other women?"

"Sure."

"Does your wife know about it?"

"No. Well... maybe, but I sure as hell don't tell her."

"How often does it occur?"

"Whenever I have a chance. You know how it is."

"And while you're here?"

"I put an ad in the personals. Who knows? Maybe some bitch will answer it."

Michael doesn't dwell on the subject. Their time is almost up. The rest of the session passes quickly.

Michael is tired when he gets home, disgusted by the lingering smell of someone's dog in the hallway. Before long, he falls asleep on the couch, and then wakes up at twilight, feeling slack and rubbery. He makes dinner, then reads some, but still he can't shake it. Another restless night spent lying in bed, staring at the ceiling.

The patterns of light from outside on the ceiling appear to bend and overlap strangely, a normally dreamy quality that now seems clear and exacting. He imagines a warp in the curvatures of light, strange shortcuts through the dimensions of space-time. He finds it hard to keep up with the new physics: scientists who write about faster-than-light dimensionality in all quantum interactions, matter that escapes from black holes; and the possibility that black holes rotate, at least when they collapse, into other dimensions, other universalities that somehow phase or warp the structure of space-time everywhere into what are known as wormholes—strange connections through time.

It's all new and fascinating, but there seems to be a problem in the point of view of such discussions. Should what occurs beyond the Einstein limit (inside black holes) be defined solely in terms of what is outside of black holes, which seems incomplete? It seems more logical to keep in mind the long-term, collective perspective *within* the dimensioning of all singularities, both before the big bang, plus what may have become singular shortly afterward and what continues to become singular as matter condenses and fuses in stars, then cycles into (or through) more singular conditions over time.

Michael plumps his pillow, thinking. Einstein said that when particles of matter accelerate to the speed of light, they acquire infinite mass. So, how could light be particulate (as photons), yet travel at the speed of light and be massless? It's simply energy, say some physicists, but there has to be more to it than is immediately apparent. Some of Einstein's contemporaries argued that all electromagnetism, including light, is simply the manifestation of gravity in a deeper dimension, which is hard to visualize. It takes time to think such things through.

See the whole if you want to understand it, he'd been told. And what was the whole? A white hole (this universe) that connects through deeper dimensioning to black holes at its various ends—other universes, in effect. As if that weren't enough, there was the argument that there are no whole numbers, no whole quantities to be observed in the universe. The universe in its entirety would only *approach* a whole number quantity when observed from its beginning to its end, yet would never quite reach one. In other words, no observation is possible in whole terms. The new physics is weirder than science

fiction.

To travel here from another star would require a way to somehow navigate deeper curvatures of space-time in order to avoid spending years in transit. But then he remembers that time slows down as you near the speed of light, so the trip might not seem to take long. Meanwhile, according to Einstein, time in the rest of the universe would pass much faster. It seems like an impossible conundrum. But if *they* could warp the structure of space, maybe they could also warp the structure of time and not suffer the strange temporal distortions. Suddenly, Michael feels sleepy.

It all seems beyond him. Aliens from vastly more advanced worlds. High-level military officers and astronauts who publicly admit that they've actually encountered extraterrestrials, yet say they were squelched by their command structure to keep it all quiet in order not to frighten people. He knows something important is going on. There's more to it than simply the public's sensitivity.

Three days later he sits in a cafe across the bay in Mill Valley with Kayla, a woman he met a few months earlier. Kayla works in educational software and lives alone in a house surrounded by pines.

"You should have seen this place during the rains a few weeks ago," she says, smiling through perfect teeth, her short blond hair combed straight and shiny. "The street turned into a river because the drains clogged up. All the doorways on this block were stacked with sandbags," she says slowly, easily. She wears hiking boots with shorts and a thin sweater. Her thin shoulders and wide hips are anything but athletic.

"You look like you're ready for the trails," he says.

"Not a bad idea today, but it's better in the morning." Which means they're stuck in town for the afternoon. It's pretty, but thick with ornate crafts and hand-painted furniture, the gossamer emporiums of Mill Valley's rich.

Something about Kayla reminds him of a woman he knew in grad school, an attractive older classmate with whom he had nothing in common. She was friendly, but forbidding in a way that he never understood at the time. There was a wall of sorts between them, a quiet kind of externality. *It was a relationship that...* He's caught off guard. He feels put upon by the intrusion, but has no time to address it.

"Maybe we could just go for a walk around here," he suggests. She agrees, and then leads him up the hill toward her house. The streets along the way are lined with large wooden houses and young redwood trees. Kayla says she seldom sees her neighbors. Like her, they commute to work elsewhere. They follow a damp creek bed where fungus grows thick and green on stumps and along fences, black and spidery along the walls inside the houses. They're both winded but energetic by the time they reach her door.

"Shoes here," she says, pointing to a mat inside her door where she doffs her boots. Her carpets are cream-colored, soft, and unsoiled. All her books are placed neatly on the shelves; her planters leave no specks on the floor. She has a penchant for Asian crafts, brushed character paintings on the wall, elephantine vases, and oddly shaped paper-on-pine frame lampshades. She drifts away into the glow of a skylight near the rear of the house, a soothing spot with a view of

redwoods going up a dense, green hillside toward a neighbor's driveway.

He puts his arms around her from behind and she leans around to kiss him, her tongue quickly entering his mouth. Kayla isn't shy about her desire. She was married for ten years and seems to know more about sex than he does. She has the advantage in a sense, and enjoys talking while they're mingled. She asks what he fantasized about sexually when he was younger. She persists in teasing it out of him then embarks upon it in ways that stretch the bounds of role-playing, her way of making light of his more controlled behavior. She says he's never really naked. Despite her contour, she's in better shape than he is. She plays games to help him concentrate on their arousal; she chided him once when he was about to peak too early.

They were simply friends when they first met, but the more they talked, the more she began exploring his feelings, and he, hers. It quickly deepened and her house became their retreat. He brought along music she'd never heard, and she cooked for them when he stayed over. It was nice, maybe too nice. He forgot everything else when he was with her. They were new to each other, still enthralled, and quick to see past each other's faults. He wondered about her marriage, but rarely talked about it. He knew better.

Dinner is by candlelight as the last light of day pales upon the leaves and grayish tree bark out her rear windows, soft tones that later melt into lamplight. She talks of her work and the neighbors. The house out back is much larger than hers. They appear to be fairly wealthy. □□□□□□□□

Something about the comparison of their wealth. He doesn't quite get it. □□□□□□□□□□ This time, an elaboration about how he implicitly compares their wealth to the scarcity of greater numbers of people who live in real need; on the one hand the seeming fullness of the neighbors' abundance, on the other, the vacuity of its larger remoteness and his regard for it. He thinks about it and decides they're probably right.

He feels relieved by the refinement in their thinking, soothed by the scent of moss and pine out the window. He wonders how they live, where they come from, how they're educated and whether they're single or multi-planetary. □□□□□□□□ Something about a number of planets, a yet-larger kind of interaction. And then it hits him: they responded directly. He's tempted to press for more, but decides not to.

It's a stunning realization: a multi-planetary interaction, maybe involving other alien worlds, a multiplicity of civilizations. The distances involved would be tremendous. Much goes through his mind: their perspective on us, the changes they must have passed through over what would be at least tens of thousands of years of development beyond us, if not more. How long have they been visiting, and what's the scale of their consideration? What's in *their* news reports?

He tries to derive a more complete picture, based on what he knows. They act concertedly, so finely in coordination that they appear to have a different notion of mind. Mind as of a larger whole somehow, more universal, a different concept of identity. They thrive on it; they feed on it as if it allows them capacities that would otherwise be impossible.

He wonders about how much of the galaxy they inhabit. There has to be a larger politic, some larger structures of interaction. He groans to think that we're still barely post-monarchical, still deeply affected by the traumas of the collapse of the old order in Europe, while they've clearly moved on into other categories. How did they do it? Again, a complex message of *the second*, and clearly different, alien sort; an entire tree of thoughts related as if homologous with his thoughts of the last few minutes, yet larger somehow—a different kind of dimensionality. Something about the obvious in what he already knows yet doesn't grasp for some reason.

It's a structure of many thoughts related by a mind more aware of its own nature and connectedness, able to amplify any partial consideration as if instantly revolved into, or through, any other part of the larger whole as though mind were observed by the universe, more than vice versa. Then, at the end of the message, a distinct suggestion that it is, in fact, part of an older, more widely-connected civilization than the first, the more manipulative extraterrestrials with whom he interacts more obviously.

It astounds him. A disagreement of sorts between other worlds. He listens for a response, but hears none. Then comes a memory—his own, it seems, but not of his own timing—about precautions in any initial interaction with extraterrestrials: the dundering of destructive humans could jeopardize newly developing relations.

The wind through the screen is cold; he's shivering. Down through the trees he can see the headlights of a string of cars rounding a bend on a near hillside as they curl down the mountain. They move slowly, like ants on the move. □□□□□□ Something about other humans who may try to thwart larger interactions.

Kayla's hand is on his shoulder, sliding down his back, where it stops on his rear, which she rubs playfully. □□ Something abrupt, a kind of non-statement about other cultures. Then cold, deliberate quiet. He's at a loss for an explanation. He wonders what they're trying to get at. □□□□□□□□ Something about overpopulation and a larger ecology of interaction. He kisses Kayla softly, then gets up to pour himself a glass of juice from the refrigerator. He and Kayla move to her couch to watch a video with the lights turned off.

At one point, while returning from the kitchen, he stops to watch her from behind as she sits, the form of her neck, the head held high, the light flickering. Something in her brow, the upward curve and spreading flow of that soft dome, her child-small chin tucked inward; a gentle flow from hip to neck, then back and up—a vision of her father.

The video is good, but she soon grows tired and his mind wanders. They both fall asleep before it's over.

A few days later, Rodney sits in his office again, talking about his early life. He's more relaxed after three weeks on the West Coast, more expansive.

"My father? He gave the orders in our house, no doubt about it. You have to understand: he was a very powerful man. People would have died to have his kind of money. He had to be careful. He had real enemies."

"What kind of enemies?"

"Depended on what war we were fighting at the time. Then there were the Soviets."

"Were you afraid for yourself?"

"I had to be. We had kidnapping drills when I was little. We had to learn how to fight off an attacker, how to use a pistol."

"Whose pistol?"

"My father's, of course. We had a whole gun room in our house. My father collected them. Some real gems. We had enough for a small militia."

Michael can't help raising his brows.

"He kept it locked, of course. It's not like he went out and used them." Rodney's eyes narrow. Michael does his best to sit quietly, unaffected.

"Was your father a forceful man?"

"He had to be. Fear is respect; without it you're nothing. We used to have big parties at home. We had a big carriage house along one drive with varnished wooden floors, an upper tier where musicians performed. Senators would come, generals from the Pentagon. My father hated them all," he laughs slightly. "They were all little people compared to him. None of them were worth much. *Everyone* was after his money." He stops, as though wary of continuing.

"I went to school with a number of wealthy people," Michael says, then catches himself.

"Where was that?"

"Stanford. But it's been a long time."

Rodney thinks a moment, then continues. "My father, uh... he used to set his guests up, in ways. He'd stage fake arguments between people he knew, just to impress his guests. Nothing too much, of course. He just played them off of each other for effect. He used people from foreign governments in it sometimes. It was hard not to laugh when it happened. Some little shit from Archiepogo going off on somebody like it was a diplomatic crisis. They really knew how to act. People always fell for it. Then my father would quietly patch it up so everyone was happy."

"Did you get into trouble much when you were younger?" Michael feigns boredom.

"The usual."

"How did your parents punish you?"

"My mother had a way of chewing my head off, then softening up afterwards. But my father didn't kid around when he was angry. He'd get me in a corner and dress me down like I was military. Hard jabs with his fingers. He'd grab me by the jaw and threaten to disinherit me. He hit me with the back of his hand when I really screwed up... just to make me feel petty."

"Hard?"

"He was a big man... But the worst part was having to shrink away without saying anything. Like he owned you." Rodney slumps deep into his chair. "I wasn't allowed to cry."

"Why not?"

"You were marked for weak if you did."

"But... as a child?"

"As a child. There was always a kind of tension in our house. I mean, this is confidential, right?"

"I'm obligated not to discuss what we say with anyone. I could lose my license."

"It went unspoken in our house. We were different than other people. To stay on top you *had to* keep your mouth shut. Otherwise, you'd get cut out."

"Of what?"

"You know what I mean. All the big stuff. Things don't just *happen* at that level; you have to *make* them happen. Get on people's good side, no matter what it costs. Doors have to be opened. You have to keep people happy. We always knew... We always knew things that other people would never have figured out.

"Weird men would show up, cold sons of bitches. You didn't mess with them. My father would disappear for a few days, then come back like nothing had ever happened and talk so goddamned fake. He didn't even listen to us. Then something big would go down, someone would get hit, or some big blowout. Some *little* fuck-up. We always knew.

"My father had connections all over the place. It wasn't like he was *directly* responsible. Everybody was in on it. The bigger you were, the more you knew, and no one could mess with you. They all used to joke about it. It was like a game for them: who could move the most people, who flinched first. I swear... it was like horse traders.

"We used to practice on the townies, see who could pull the biggest rip-offs. Blow people away, then walk off knowing they'd never see you again. Like you had wings and their feet were nailed to the ground. Doughy types... complete nobodies."

"We used to shoplift in college," Michael avers. Barely true, but said flowingly. *Someone would get hit... some little fuck-up.* Rodney seems uninterested.

"Part of me hated him, and part of me thought that he just did what everyone else did. A lot of times he'd stay out late, say something important came up. But he'd be off screwing some bitch on his boat, or who knows what. I didn't understand that kind of thing then.

"My mother blew up on him about it just once. He *really* straightened her out. His family had all the money, so she had to put up with it—or else. Then she started drinking too much... We weren't around the house much then. In his own way, he kept his head above it all... like he wanted us to know that no matter what happened, he'd take care of us."

"Did she drink alone?"

"Yeah. She'd disappear for a while, then show up smelling like breath freshener. You would never have known she was loaded. We had an image to tend to.

"My father once told me the only time things went wrong was when people found out too much. There was no excuse for incompetence. He *hated* the little people, the way they snooped around, or took him for his money and then jumped ship to work for another company."

Michael steers the conversation back to the topic of Rodney's drinking and

his early thinking about it, but Rodney is reluctant to delve into it. Still, he seems relieved when he leaves. They're making progress.

Daniel's in a good mood as they close up. He saunters into Michael's office smiling and invites him home for dinner with his family. They live across town near an art museum donated to the city by the French after World War I.

"Relax," Daniel says when Michael sits after they arrive. "Jeannie's with the kids at the beach. Can't believe this weather. I never thought we'd swim the ocean in San Francisco."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. Without a wetsuit, believe it or not. The water's ten degrees warmer this year because of El Niño." Michael makes a note of it. He could go to China Beach with Kayla.

"Care for some juice, a beer?" Daniel's place is big: Marina style. High ceilings, a large living room with a fireplace, extra space for an office and a sunroom.

"Any iced tea?" Michael sinks into the cushions of the front sofa. Daniel nods and heads for the kitchen. The couch is too comfortable. After a day of shifting around in his chair, it's hard to get back up once he settles in.

"Have you ever read Coleman's dynamic of the obsessive compulsive?" Michael asks as Daniel hands him a glass.

"No," says Daniel, settling into the chair opposite.

"It's different." Michael makes no attempt to sit up. "He describes a compulsive behavior as the mind's attempt to obliterate an underlying anxiety."

"Sounds good."

"But I'm thinking in a larger sense. Not just repetitive behaviors like hand washing. More in terms of personal identity and the lack of dimension in any number of behaviors."

"For example..."

"Compulsive stimulus-seeking. Some of the overindulged children of the rich, for instance. Their unwillingness... no, the *inability* of some to even comprehend the existence of other people. Children of parents who actually reward them for antisocial behavior by dismissing the existence of people who don't relate to their selfish designs, or by quietly condoning deception and the manipulation of other people."

"Someone in particular?" Daniel swirls his drink, leaning forward.

"No. More generally speaking."

"Come on, Michael. Is it one of your clients?"

"You know how it is. It could be any number of people. I won't say who." He hates to be vague. *Someone comes into the office and talks about mob-related "hits" and corruptions in government like it's just a card game. Worse yet, the man describes it with a childish petulance.* "Have you ever sketched out the psychodynamics of such an upbringing?"

"Of course I have. I've seen a lot of it." Daniel leans back in his chair.

"What I'm trying to get at... is that parents can easily condition their children to be cold-blooded criminals. I'm working on a cognitive model of it. What scares me most is that it can all hinge on just a few parental messages."

"Such as?"

"If the child's conditioned to think that he's born materially superior to other people, for example, he might assume that his material needs and desires, however trivial, supercede those of other persons. He might then assume that others' rights can be compromised, that he has the right to manipulate and exploit other people's conflicts to his material advantage."

"So... Fast Eddy cheats on his taxes and gives money to both parties."

"No, I'm serious."

"Sure you don't want a beer instead?"

"Here's how I'm charting it," Michael says, shaking his head. "Begin with the childhood conditioning, the bare bones messages conveyed by the parents. Two or three simple, basic messages can lead to disastrous pathologies in the adult. Like I said, tell the child he's materially superior to the people around him. Tell him he has enemies at birth, people out to supercede or destroy him, so that he *has to* be a manipulator of other people.

"Then, list the various assumptions inherent in such thinking: others are seen as expendable; their disciplines don't apply. He actually is the elaborateness of his childhood environment, as imposing as its architecture; he has privileged insights into everything. Take the time to walk your mind through it and you'll find that he develops severely distorted attitudes toward his daily interactions, which you also list: Those who lack his status could never understand him; his feelings are a mastery without need of qualification. Others' standards must be lowered to accommodate him, and so on. Finally, list the behaviors and the reasoning that ultimately result. The adult pathology."

"Okay," Daniel says, nodding.

"So, starting from those two simple messages in childhood (he's materially superior and he has enemies) the adult eventually lapses into a destructive kind of reasoning. He thinks he can literally indulge in wrongdoing if it serves to fortify him; he can exist with lowered standards in order to gain allies for his survival. He thinks that manipulative behaviors are a sign of prestige, a self-validating ritual of distinction. Heavy drinking, drugs, and other crimes are much more likely in his case.

"He's probably aware of the changes he's undergoing, but thinks the signs of his deterioration are simply the marks of an elite character, not indicators of real trouble. He's emotionally handicapped, yet unaware of it. Lacking further qualifications, he decides that the simple outward appearance of competency is sufficient. He has to intimidate others to gain respect. He discovers that by demeaning those he considers beneath himself, he fosters a grudging apathy among those who might otherwise make his life uncomfortable. At this point, his mind may want to obliterate the consciousness of *anything* that bothers him. It's a compulsive kind of detachment.

"Of course, he falls in with others of his sort. They see themselves as uniquely privileged to live out their childhood fantasies. None of them are particularly well educated. In fact, they see advanced study, even complex thinking, as the work of a lower sort of person. They cling cultishly to the myths of their childhood. He feels validated in his superiority, if not vengeful toward

those who might try to disturb it. After all, who provides for *them*?

"For him, the retreat to a vaguely associative superficiality regarding any subject is a tactile, an erotic obliteration of his more negative concerns, a sublimation, according to his way of thinking. Ultimately, as he gets worse, he concludes that self-conditioning actually solves his personal problems; he can reward his own misdeeds in order to eliminate concerns about any damage done to himself or others. Maybe he goes in for physical culture, or secret expenses, and so on. Others have to be corrupted to make them vulnerable—like he is.

"Worst of all, over time he notices that chaotic or tragic crises divert attention from his, or his larger cohort's, misdeeds, which provides him the opportunity to express what he likes to portray as his uniquely-advantaged insights. He feels important, highly stimulated *at the worst possible times*. He also profits by them.

"In the end, he's a creature of strange compulsions. His material circumstance and his daily interactions with others of his sort constitute a tacit recognition of the logic in his strategies. Meanwhile, he's emotionally incontinent, if not intellectually stultified. He explodes childishly without thinking about it."

"In some cases," Daniel says. "It's a plausible dynamic, but there *are* other eventualities."

"Of course... but suppose his parents send him off to boarding school *before* he comes of age. When he needs the intimacy and the closeness of his parents the most, he's furthest from home. He's bullied, forced into a sometimes-brutal pecking order by the other boys at school. So he puts on the masculine mask. He extinguishes his emotions in order to survive his exile.

"Now, here's what I'm getting at: the end result can be just ghastly. Depending on the severity of the case, the person may want to cultivate the same cruel detachment in others, a nominally elitist separation from the larger population. For him, corrupting others, especially those he considers beneath himself, may be fun—a waggish game of sorts with erotic implications. To further embellish his life, to make it more extravagant, he propagates a larger willingness to profit by foreign dictatorships or mass-murder, even crimes against humanity. In some childish, impulsive way, he wants others to share his guilt, to act in self-interest and be spoiled by it. Public types; dogs of a lower order. Authority."

"I hope you're not just now finding *that* out," Daniel says, setting his empty glass down. "I saw it in the Army. People brutalized until they didn't give a crap anymore." Before he can say more, Jeannie comes through the door with their two children. One runs to the bathroom, thongs snapping, while Annie, his four-year-old daughter, ambles in, smiling, then climbs into Daniel's lap.

"Hi, Michael," Jeannie says. "How's everything?"

"Fine, and you?"

"Nice today. Did you see that sunset?"

"No, we missed it."

"Excuse me, I've got sand in my shoes." She turns to Daniel. "Did you put the food in the oven?"

"Fifteen minutes ago. Table's already set."

"Love you." She walks off.

"So," Michael says to Daniel. "Tell me you haven't seen that kind of pathology."

"Obviously, but I didn't vote for him," Daniel says grimly. "Dinner's almost ready." They head for the dining room.

Two days later Michael drives with Kayla to a beach west of the Golden Gate Bridge. It's a beautiful day: sunny, a slight breeze, as they descend earthen stairs to the changing rooms two hundred feet below. The water is calm, a deep aqua-green clear across to Point Reyes.

"Uh-oh. I forgot the food," she says, when they're half-way down. "I left it in the car." He bounds back up to get it while she waits by the sea wall, watching the surf until he returns.

"Look at that," she says, nodding toward the high spray of waves pounding rocks just offshore. People are sprawled out in the sun but the beach looks different; the waves are bigger than usual. They wash up farther than he's ever seen before. "There was a hurricane down in Mexico," she says.

"Good for body surfing," he says, but the waves curl in four feet tall, brown with sand that they draw upward on approach. They clap down on the beach suddenly. What was smooth, clear sand two weeks earlier is now strangely piled up in places. As the waves wash back out, tongues of water form in the troughs between sand mounds, then wash sideways, exposing smooth, round boulders the size of grapefruit.

Still, the water's fairly calm out beyond the breakers, and a few people are swimming there. Kayla finds a spot near one of the faces of rock that wall the beach in a hundred yards apart on each side. She takes off her shorts and stuffs them into a bag, then leans back to enjoy the view. To her right, a young woman sits alone on a towel applying sunscreen to her legs.

"This is just what I need," Kayla says, re-flattening her towel.

"Plan to go in?"

"Mm-maybe."

They sit lost in thought, breeze swirling loose hairs.

Kayla says she's refinancing her house because rates are down. "Prices are up, which means my house is worth more. But there's just one problem," she says, head tilted back. "I couldn't afford to buy again if I wanted to. The thing is, I hate working where I am now." She tosses her hair back. "The man I work for is a little tyrant."

"How so?"

"He's a rodent. He bought his partner out a few years ago. Forced him out, actually, over a contract he lost. Then he laid off five people and simply parceled their work out among us." She tenses as she speaks. "He's dim, and he's cheap. I'd do better elsewhere."

"So... why don't you quit?"

"I'd have to move. Ever commute from where I live to the South Bay?"

He shakes his head. It's an hour and a half's drive.

"Because I live in Marin, he knows he's got me cornered." She dusts sand from her knees and stares out to sea.

"Personally?"

reference. The thing inside, or non-thing (depending on the reference), is on the scale of a microscopic particle.

Such a simple-seeming escape from what we know, and yet it's another universality where time, as we observe it, has ended. While nearing the event horizon, a viewer caught within its grasp may see the rest of time go by quickly within a thin cone of light above, bent outward. Then, at the event horizon, the seeming surface dimples, according to a recent calculation, one universe bizarrely stretching into another. And the singularity? It spins, of course; its collapse was astronomically fast. But *then* what?

If a pair particle splits apart and one particle goes in, what of its quantum (or instantaneous) connectedness to the other? What stays out is somehow still affected by what goes in, in some strangely condensed way. Meanwhile, the singularity, in a larger universal sense when compared to the moment *before* creation, isn't quite as singular. Whether it's a back-door connection to other singular universes (a kind of quantum uncertainty on a cosmic scale), or some strange smearing of time and dimensionality, it is real. Exact somehow. We may be much stranger.

But black holes... the thought alone is quiet refuge. What goes in does not come out; it just disappears, it seems, forever. Black holes are what any corrupted government wants to be: awesome, silent, and forbidding, with secrets far within that none can touch. In a sense, more like religion—a thing apart, held high, idealized. The death of "information." Like things of stone and royal blood, a black hole hoards its secrets inward. No alien form could escape its maws, no monkey king of the universe. Black holes can sit and quietly bide our lush retreat from deeper connectedness.

"Water can't be bad," Michael says, getting up to go check it, but it's hard to walk across the sand. His legs feel thick and clay-like. At the water's edge, the waves wash up across his toes. It's not too bad. He signs, thumbs up, to Kayla.

He wades in to knee depth then waits for a break between waves. A fast walk out to hip level, then straight through a curl; he comes out swimming. The rush of cold, the slap of water jolts him. Swelling up and surging out on rolling blue seems unlike San Francisco. It's a different world of seals and kelp, of floating skates and jellyfish. The largest wilderness in the world only yards away, and he'd completely forgotten it.

He swims out fast, floating high in cold Pacific saltwater. The view is magnificent at surface level. Miles and miles of glittering waves rolling, twisting blue, then green, with peaks of silver sunlight. The curls form bigger than he'd noticed. He has to duck beneath them until he gets out to where a few other people are swimming. He arcs off toward them. Back on the beach, Kayla seems so far away. He watches, swelling up and down, checking every so often for the big one. Fifty yards out an even larger wave is forming. He's too close, so he swims further out to prevent it from catching him.

There's anxious chatter off to his left as the others watch the wave form. It's bigger than he's ever seen along this beach. He stops and waits, then feels the force beneath him surging. It lifts him up, too steeply somehow. He's barely able to avoid being pushed to shore with it. *Something's wrong.*

"Look!" a man to his left says. His hand comes up and out of the water, pointing off toward Stinson Beach, six miles north. Michael doesn't get it. And then a swell lifts him up to where he can see across the distance. A mile offshore and five miles north, two waves roll in—giant curls twenty-five feet high, yet entirely above the water. They're spaced at least a mile apart but are surging fast, without diminishing. The wind whips their white spray high up into the air. *Entirely wrong... the hurricane.*

The two men and the woman to his left spin fast and head toward shore. He watches as they surge up, then disappear behind a wind-whipped curl roiling up and streaming shoreward. It claps down hard and washes way up toward the seawall. Parents run to grab their children, others fall and towels are soaked. Kayla grabs their towel and drags it away fast; she nearly stumbles. As the wave recedes, it washes sideways, deeply. A curly-haired older woman struggles to remain standing as seventy feet of knee-deep backwash rushes the sand out from under her feet. She falls and is spun around underwater, feet in the air, then scrambles back to her knees dazedly.

It's a rip tide. He holds where he is, treading water quickly. He has to watch for more big waves. To be clapped down with that much force onto the boulders... He stares, transfixed; the beauty further out is stunning. The wildness of a storm at sea. One wave comes, not too big. Then another, and another. He's alone; he can't even see the others. He has to wait. Twelve waves pass. He's too far out, too long in the coldly heaving water. It's oddly quiet as he heads in, too tired to stay. The coldness of the water has drained him. The closer he gets, the higher each wave lifts him. It's strange to stare that far upcurl as each passing wave crests more steeply. He's too tired to turn and watch for big waves. Another claps down hard ashore. To drown amid such beauty. Stranger still to see the people on the beach re-spread their towels and laze about—just yards away.

Seventy feet out the rush of water back to sea is fast; it pulls him further out than he swims inward. He has to time it. The others seem to have made it in. Another wave hurls him forward, then rips him back. He's in the wrong place. He swims toward shore as hard as he can, then drops his feet. It's only hip deep; he beat the curl.

And then the rush of water outward knocks his feet out from under him. It's like trying to stand in a fast-moving river, but the moment his feet touch, the sand washes out beneath them, bowling him over, outward. Only fifty feet more. He dreads the curl, but is so tired that the rush of adrenaline is as weak as coffee. He has to paddle numbly ten feet forward somehow, then get up and run to beat the next wash, worse yet the curl.

He pops up, thigh deep, and runs his last. Again, the washout tips him backward. The beach slopes upward like a hill, and then he's only ankle deep. He's out. Warm air and sunlight, people talking.

"I didn't think I was gonna make it out," the woman who was swimming is saying to someone else. He turns to look back as water rushing out across the boulders rolls them loudly seaward. *Clackata-clack clack*, the cobble of crazy horses.

Whooomph... Kayla's sitting on the towel, oblivious. He tells her it's too dangerous to swim; he misjudged the water. They stay only briefly, and, as they're leaving, two rangers arrive to scout the water for rescues and to post warnings.

Four days later Kayla calls him at 1 a.m., upset and unable to sleep. She says she has to see him. She says she loves him, and that she was thinking about him.

"I love you too, Kayla," he says softly.

"I feel like we live in separate boxes. It's hard for me sometimes. We go so deep when you're here... and then you just disappear until the next weekend. Sometimes it's so beautiful. I feel more complete when we're together."

"I feel lonely without you too. Up on this hill, it's like a desert sometimes."

"How can I say it? I feel like you're holding back on me." She pauses. "We live so far apart, Michael. Maybe we should move in together..."

"I'd love to Kayla. I need more time with you, too. But I'm stuck with this stupid little place for now. I'd have to rent it..."

"Sometimes I feel like you're insensitive to my needs, Michael. I can't go on like this forever."

"Give me a week, at least."

"If you would only listen to me. Honestly," she says firmly, "I need a week or two, myself, to think it over." Then, click, she hangs up and doesn't answer when he calls back. Her phone's turned off, so there's no way to get in touch with her. She wouldn't even answer the door if he drove over. It's happened before; she's left him hanging. She plans her moves carefully. It's his turn to suffer.

The next day, he has a hard time concentrating, but he has to put his life aside to be fair with his clients. Otherwise, it's a typical day: no major breakthroughs. And then Rodney comes in.

He says he's been prowling the streets at night. He's run into a few people he knows, but brushes them off in favor of other diversions. One month in town, and he already knows where the high-stakes card tables are. He likes to play at a place in Chinatown run by an association that he's done business with elsewhere.

"Do you think there's any danger in it?" Michael asks. "There've been some incidents in the papers. Gangs and such."

"Nothing to worry about. They're all little fish. People know who I am. They wouldn't touch me."

"Do you gamble often?"

"Not really. Only sometimes when I'm bored." He says he's taken on a mistress, a private relationship in which he pays, but she only works with two other men at a given time. "It's clean," he says. "Free of risks. She just needs enough money to get through college. It's not like it's a set-up."

"A set-up?"

"You know, like the lingerie shows in chauncey little bars near fed buildings. Girls who work on the side... assignments for the camera."

"Have you ever worried about such things?"

"Not me. But there's always something like that going on. I see it every day. In D.C., for instance. Just part of doing business."

"So it doesn't bother you?"

"Not at all. They know what they're getting into. Mob used to run all that stuff. If people fall for it, it's their own damned fault."

"How would you describe your stay here so far?"

"Relaxing. Easy. I feel like I've escaped, in a way. I'm on the phone a lot with people in New York, but it's not much. I almost feel like I could run off the way other people do, and just travel the world for a few months."

"Do you talk with your wife?"

"Every now and then. She's up at Tupper Lake for the summer. The kids come up and visit, so she's okay."

Michael wants to talk with Rodney about the danger in his life, but he can't plunge into it too far out of context. Rodney has to volunteer it for it to be safe, but he's not in an expansive mood. He sits quietly, expecting things to be done for him.

"How do you feel about her being so far away?"

"I feel like... I can be my old self more out here, more like when I was younger," he says, his dark eyes roundly dilated. Michael waits for him to say more, but he stops cold and says nothing. Something strangely forbidding in his silence: the flutter of desperate wings in the darkness. Something that Michael has seen in Rodney all along without discerning it, a cold withdrawal from any involvements. Dark pools of indifference.

It's all too obvious that Rodney won't *allow* himself to surface. And if he did, what would he say? Something about a murdered prophet, an American Nero's scheme to set the nation afire, a Mafia palace? Maybe a drunken tale about how easy it was for an American Borgia to dupe the public? Too many ghastly details.

Rodney simply doesn't want to discuss the ugliest within him. It's all too neatly sealed away; it seems unreal to him somehow. As if no one would ever know; it's all so carefully guarded. Like a private faith, too much like a religion.

When Rodney steps out to answer his mobile phone, Michael writes it into his notes:

Rodney and his kind have so elaborately withdrawn from the larger commonality that the only way to adequately describe their way of thinking may be in terms of a chosen religiosity. Their outlook stems from the most immediate, the most detached and idealized perspective of the individual. As a result, there's no room for a larger, ultimate kind of being, whether construed socially, or in terms of a universal consciousness. For them, nothing exists but concretes; everything, including mind, is mechanical.

As such, they take pride in manipulating others, and the most sacred of sacreds is property, not human life, nor the value in it. They seem to sense that the richest individual experience may ultimately draw upon (and thus enumerate) the ghastly suffering of lesser others. This is the special dilemma of their belief—the need to participate in atrocious economies, yet not be overly burdened by them, either psychologically, or in terms of the public's awareness. Hence, they think a naive public is a happy one.

Conspicuous extravagance is seen as necessary in order to both impress and intimidate others. It helps to propagate a childish and monarchically derived mythology, a larger than life fiction used to belittle any too-tightly-integrated notions of government-as-commonality. With so much invested in the need to impress others, they're prone to a kind of stimulus seeking that's comparable to substance addictions.

When Rodney returns, Michael takes up where he left off. "What kinds of things would you do, if, instead of being here, you were at home?"

"If I were at home? I travel a lot between New York and D.C., normally. But if I were at home, I'd work and play more golf, maybe go to parties in the evening. There's always something going on. But I get bored with it."

"Who do you drink with normally?"

"Anyone I'm with, at the time. The opportunity's always there. Every lunch, after every meeting, at all the parties. All served so neatly, on silver trays. We didn't used to think about it the way people do now. You scarcely realize how much you've had," he sighs. "I'm not half as bad as some of the people I know."

Michael nods and waits for him to continue.

"Sometimes I just forget how many it's been. They're all so sweet these days; I drink 'em like juices, but only when it's okay to drink. When I'm with other people. I've seen people you probably read about in Time or Newsweek, I've seen them completely loaded. Some of the most notorious old hard-liners, I've seen them buzzed up on coke for weekend sails, or down below with prostitutes." He studies Michael closely.

"How do you feel when they do that?"

Rodney shrugs his shoulders. "Someone else is at the helm, plus they've usually got security. They usually straighten out, and then they give *you* the once-over as you file off in port."

"Do you ever use drugs?"

"No. At my age, I wouldn't live long."

Michael asks him whether he's drinking more or less now. He says he drinks less hard alcohol when he's away from home. "It's different back there. I have to be on top of everything."

"How do you mean?"

"There's my company, my personal investments. Plus my wife has a few businesses of her own. There are places I have to go, all the petty crap I have to do, whether I feel like it or not. I have to keep up with what's happening 24 hours a day on every single continent. I need to know what's going on *before* it happens, or I get burnt. It isn't easy.

"I get jet-lag all the time, phone calls in the middle of the night. One day it's someone telling me what I already heard on the news, the next it's Igor telling me that Frankenstein's gonna cut a deal with someone else if I can't get some money to him. Compared to the average person, my day-to-day routine would seem completely alien." He holds a burp down.

"Outer space, huh?" Michael smiles slightly.

"You an alien buff?" Rodney smiles, but his eyes are serious.

"We're getting into a gray area, aren't we?"

"You're serious," Rodney says, head cocked to one side.

"I read the colonel's book. It was fairly explicit."

"Uh-huh." Rodney scratches his chin, thinking. "Guess there are some books by people in your field."

"Have you read any of them?"

"Not really. I know enough about it, though. Serious stuff. I mean, if I told people what I really do along those lines, they'd think I was insane. So, you know about that stuff... I keep forgetting, this is California."

"It's a matter of real gravity."

Rodney laughs, then covers a yawn with both hands. "Big money goes into some of those, uh, *projects*. You know what I mean; too big to be left out of. To do any business along those lines you have to know people on the inside. Court their opinions and prove they can trust you, maybe put 'em on when they retire from the service. They love that kind of stuff; gives 'em something to really shine about. Good example of what I've been saying all along: they've got a fix on the technology for the next few centuries. And who gets it? It's all being done in secret.

"Do you know what kind of power that is?" Rodney says hushedly. "It scares the crap out of me sometimes. If you think the CIA disappeared into a black hole... That kind of stuff."

"Makes you wonder."

"Of course, they've got a job to do. You never know *what's* out there. What if they're all Communists?"

"You think?" Michael says, deadpan.

"We're playing it from every angle. Can't be too careful." Rodney almost laughs beneath his breath. "Here we play 'em along like we're soul brothers, meanwhile we shoot some of them down every so often. You can imagine what it's worth if we get our hands on it. They think it's loose cannons, a cabal of fringe types. And the average person?" He throws his hands up.

"Any encounters?"

"Me? Personally?"

Michael nods slightly.

"They could be in this room right now. Listening to us. They're smart, maybe too smart. Let's just say I've had some run-ins."

"I understand."

Michael steers the conversation back toward Rodney's drinking. He's said enough as it is. Rodney says that maybe the problem was just the hard alcohol. Michael isn't so sure. They discuss it at length.

Rodney checks his watch when the session ends. He says he has to meet someone. Before he leaves, he looks Michael over closely. Michael wonders what he's thinking.

Michael closes up in a hurry. He has to meet Kayla at a little place down on South Park, a small lane lined with trees and restaurants. It's an oasis of old houses, a quiet, neighborly feel right in the middle of Multimedia Gulch—the perfect place to apologize and talk quietly. He had to call her at work, which

was touchy. She couldn't say much.

It's after six when he parks three blocks away on an empty looking stretch of old brick and barbed wire. As he locks his car door, he looks over his shoulder. A thick finger of fog is on its way through the city toward the East Bay. The wind is strong and he's freezing without a sweater.

Across the street, the doors to a ratty-looking bar yaw wide open. Some scruffy old fud is standing in the doorway. Six-fifteen, he's late. He has to walk quickly. Hard to believe that this is where the Internet grew to worldwide proportions. But then again, rents were cheap at the time. It seems like ancient history.

He walks so fast that he's winded when he reaches the next corner. Fearing she might leave, he cuts up a parallel street to shorten the distance, then runs up to where a cross street should be and whips around the corner. Nothing but a driveway into a body shop.

"Dammit." He starts to run back.

"There he is!" Two men in suits are following him in a late-model car with dark windows. No one he knows—he scouts around for a fast exit.

"Hey you! Stop!" one of them yells, leaning his head out the driver's window. His neck is thick like a bulldog's. *Weird men, cold-looking sons of bitches...* Through the back of the body shop he sees what looks like a rear driveway, so he turns and runs straight into the place, past the smell of paint and sanders grinding as tires squeal wildly behind him.

He's scared silly. He should never have trusted Rodney. He read about people being dragged into dark cars, then driven away and beaten badly. They kept Yuri Nosenko in a basement for a year; he's read they've got captive aliens.

"Police! Call the police!" he yells as he sprints through the darkness. Maybe it's adrenaline, maybe it's just the chicken wings of survival, but he's never run so fast. He remembers running like that in his dreams, leaping twenty feet with each step—almost like flying.

The back gate's open. He rips through it and arcs off toward where the cross street should be... and there it is. He's way ahead of them, so he runs down to where South Park begins, but, instead of entering, continues on and goes down the next street. They'll think he's heading elsewhere.

He cuts the corner fast and close. And then his feet are sliding out from under him... The last thing he sees is broken glass and a pool of foamy liquid, then he's climbing to his feet again and running before he can even think about it. As he rounds the last corner, he looks back. No sign of them. He ducks into the tree-lined shade of South Park.

The walk curves around an island of trees. He reaches back to check for blood where his shirt's wet, but it's only beer that he fell in. He scoots past three old wooden houses, then ducks quickly into the open doors of Zoey's. Kayla is toward the back near a garden window.

"Kayla!" He holds his hand up haltingly; it's grimy down one side. "Sorry I'm late," he swallows, a raspy sting in his lungs.

"What happened to your arm?" she asks. The sun is hot through the window like a greenhouse.

"Had to run to get here on time. I slipped on the sidewalk." He sits closest to the window so he can watch out the door.

"What's the matter?" she asks.

"Nothing. Have to catch my breath." He wipes the sweat from his forehead. His back is sore.

"I like this place," she warms. "It's quiet here."

"I'm sorry... about the way I spoke on the phone last night. Takes me a while to wake up completely."

"I love you, Michael," she says, reaching for his hand. He has to pull it back slightly to prevent her touching a smear of grime across one knuckle.

"I need you, Kayla. I feel it more and more with time." He looks her in the eye, about to go on, when two men stalk past the front windows. It's them.

"What's wrong?" Kayla asks.

"Something outside. Some people running up the street." He looks around for some way to obscure himself. They could be armed. He needs witnesses. They could follow him when he leaves and jump him.

"I've never been in this neighborhood before." She wraps her hand into his and squeezes gently. "But the menu looks good."

"Kind of hot, here by the window." The sun is right on his back. The smell of beer is welling upward.

"I'm glad you called. I left work early to get here."

He tries to think of something to say, but can't. His heart is pounding. There's no way out if they find him.

"It was beautiful coming across," she says softly. "The fog was curling in, just below the bridge. It seems to have followed me. It should be here before long." She pulls his hand closer and presses it to her stomach as she leans forward. Her lips are full, her cheeks smooth. Her nostrils are flaring.

He kisses her, then pulls away. He's still winded.

"You're sweating," she says tenderly. "We could move to another table."

"I have to tell you something."

"What?" Now she's curious.

"What's been happening recently..."

"So tell me."

He checks the room. No one's listening. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you." He wants to say it, but can't.

"You can tell me," she pleads. And then he catches his breath fully. Finally, he's breathing normally, more relaxedly.

"It may sound strange," he sighs deeply, "but some men are after me. I don't know who they are. They could be government agents, for all I know." Her face goes pale. "I don't know how to explain it. Remember the time we talked about ESP... about telepathy?" She sits quietly. "Stanford Research Institute—their experiments with telepathy? It's real, Kayla. The men following me... it's about extraterrestrials. They've been contacting me for a while now." He holds her hand firmly. "I have to be honest with you. I'm not kidding around. I think some of the wrong people found out about it."

Kayla slumps as what he says weighs upon her. She holds herself up with

both hands on the table. Then she recomposes; her face stiffens with the implications.

"I don't know what to say, Michael. I leave work an hour before I'm supposed to, I risk my job to come over here. And you stumble through the door stinking like beer then come off with some Saturday morning cartoon crap about space aliens?" Her lip curls. "No. I'm sorry. And you're a psychologist." Her voice is thin, almost crying. "Why are you doing this to me, Michael?" She tries to hold it back.

"Kayla, I'm only telling you the truth." He reaches for her hand, but she pulls it away quickly. Her face darkens, cracked china.

"What can I say? You expect me to believe that? After all I've done for you. I trusted you, and now I don't know what to think. I can't..." she stops and waves her hand feebly. "I'm sorry." She gets up to leave, ashen.

"Kayla!" He pleads, but it's no use. She doesn't look back. A well-dressed couple toward the front watch quietly as she passes on her way out the door. Michael stares at his hands. They're filthy. He feels crushed, leaden. People are staring.

He sits alone for a few minutes, trying to think about how to explain himself. The clatter in the kitchen, the chalky white walls, the brittle wood and glass of the windows weigh in upon him with a strange gravity. The place seems dully linear with broad borders, thick with after-hours restaurant stink. He gets up dazedly and goes to wash his hands.

In the mirror, his shirt is wet all across the back. He peels it off. The logo T-shirt beneath is fairly clean. He holds it out beneath the hand dryer a while, then washes his hands and his face. He has to get out of there.

He tells the waiter he won't be ordering, and, as he turns to leave, he stops cold. The men who were chasing him are right there, waiting.

"You're gonna have to move your car! You're blocking my driveway," the bigger one says angrily. They stare at him like he's crazy, then turn and leave. One swears on the way out.

He feels low as he opens the car door and tosses the wet shirt into the back seat. The fog is thickening a mile away downtown. The tinted geometric panes of an upper story hotel lounge mark the edge of its advance. It's the perfect place to sit and look down on it all, maybe have a drink and recompose himself among a more settled crowd. A change of ambience. He could phone Kayla and at least leave a message, a milder explanation.

The air conditioning is on full blast when he enters. The place is full of casually dressed vacationers. The elevator up is fast. When he steps out, he's fifteen feet from a few empty tables nearly touching a wall of glass that arches twelve feet up from floor level. It tilts outward; to draw close feels vertiginous. He circles slowly around toward the bar, and there, sitting in a padded booth near a larger window is none other than Rodney, with two toothy-looking men in business suits and a stern-looking woman.

Michael walks toward them, and when Rodney looks up, says "Hello." Rodney looks away and ignores him. Michael veers toward the bar, without breaking stride, and grabs a stool.

The two men appear to be business associates, all talk and smooth gestures. The woman wears a puffy-looking smile, tightly pinched at the corners. Rodney seems bored with them and is helping himself to a plate of appetizers. He looks different somehow, a bluish color in his lips, more sharp-eyed and guarded.

It piques Michael to even see him—plopped into a booth drinking something dark and vile, while Michael sits like a bird on a stool, thinking about how to piece his life back together. □□□□□□□□□□ Something about Michael going on a paranoid tear and taking dangerous risks. Something about Rodney and his kind, then a peculiar silence, as if due to another's caution.

He wonders if they're giving up on him. They haven't related much for quite a while, except one cryptic caution. In the window looking out over the darkening bayscape below, he sees his reflection amid the violet glow of bar lights. He sees himself as uglier with time, more stooped and silent. Bound to sit and listen, while people like Rodney spill out unspeakable details about what they do, crimes that few would know about. In his own narrow, self-serving way, he protects them...

It's a plastic moment, a kind of fossil futility. Some future hand will point down below different layers of earth to a stratum of junk-rich sediment and say, *This was the twentieth century, the petroleum epoch.* He imagines how they'll describe it.

There are other lights reflected in the window, floating pale and whitish. Different somehow. And then he sees them, their forms only visible within the pale of memory. Thinner than he, with delicate hands and feet, larger-than-normal heads; big eyes. They're watching in the direction of Rodney. Somber, studied; they're allowing Michael to see them. They don't seem to care. It takes him a while to grasp just what he's seeing. He tries it again, feeling as though he's being guided in doing so.

There seems to be some kind of discussion going on among them, a communication of thought with the quiet awareness that he's right there, watching. They hold as such, until they seem sure he understands, until a subtle kind of tension has abated. Then they're gone as if they faded into the peals of the conversation and the clinking of glassware around him.

People sit and sip their drinks. The air seems stale. He gets up to leave and glides to ground in the elevator, then drifts over to a small couch where he sits for a while lost in thought, watching people come and go, unaware of the time.

"Didn't expect to see you here." It's Rodney, sitting in a chair behind him, facing opposite.

"Oh, that's all right." Michael has to crane his neck around to see him. Rodney's holding a newspaper up, as if reading it.

"You know how it is. People might recognize me," Rodney says.

"I understand. So... you seem to get around."

"Those guys upstairs? Branch managers. A pain in the ass, frankly."

"Have you ever been to the Mission district?" Michael asks. Rodney shakes his head. "It's the Latino barrio." No answer. "How about Sausalito?"

"Long time ago." Rodney looks around quickly. "Listen, you wanna go somewhere we can talk privately, maybe have a drink? Non-alcoholic, if you

want."

"Why not?" He wonders what's on Rodney's mind.

"I'll pick you up on the curb outside."

Michael ambles out into the night air and waits, off to one side. A few minutes later, Rodney swings by in a nondescript looking rental car and opens the door.

"So, what are your favorite haunts around here?" Rodney asks, as they pull away. The further they go, the more relaxed he seems.

"Favorite haunts?" Michael wants to take Rodney to places he'd never go. Poor neighborhoods, places where people live in ways that men like Rodney have long forgotten. Somewhere right on the edge of it. "Let's see..." It's hard to think when he has to. "I know a nice place over on 21st: jazz, nice art and low lighting."

"Which way?"

Michael points him uphill. People are out in numbers, the usual summer crowd. Tourists from out of town, mostly.

"A lot of restaurants in this town," Rodney says. He hangs a left too early.

"Wrong turn," Michael says.

"I know a shortcut. I'm getting to know my way around."

Michael sits quietly while they drive downhill toward a rough section of town. As the finest hotels recede behind them, the buildings get smaller, the hotels more modest.

"They call this the Tenderloin," Michael says.

"Fitting, isn't it?" Rodney has a numb look on his face, but his speech is clear. "Just a minute. Gotta get a newspaper." He pulls up to the curb in front of an old brown brick hotel, then gets out, and heads for a row of newspaper machines. He buys two and then hops back into the car quickly, laying the papers flat on the seat between them. One is the Wall St. Journal, the other is a sex sheet filled with escort and stripper ads.

"I know a place where no one will find us," Rodney says, then hangs a left and parks the car two streets down in the darkness. "A lot of people come down here," he says. "One at a time." He laughs at his own joke, a morbid, low-pitched chortle.

Michael rubs his arms against the chill when he steps out. Fog trails through the streets like aurora, moist white seams drifting downward. The flashing lights of a strip-tease place and a Chinese restaurant on the corner give his skin an anemic color. Along the next few blocks are a few empty-looking bars, a massage place, and two more flashing billboards.

"I normally don't come to these kind of places, but nobody I know'll be here," Rodney says morosely. A few hard-bitten people linger to one side in the darkness, talking drunkenly. The place is bleak and crumbled-looking.

"It's a hard life down here." Michael shakes his head. "Most of the women who work in these joints were sexually abused as children. Eighty percent of the prostitutes have herpes."

Rodney raises his brows blankly.

"A lot of drugs." Michael says, stuffing his hands into his pockets to warm

bar as if to set the tone of their entry: cool and distant. He's more at ease than Michael had expected.

Rodney finds a seat toward the rear, facing the door. The light is low, except for a spot on a dartboard behind him.

"A black Russian for me," Rodney says when the waiter approaches. Michael asks for orange juice. The place is empty, except for a young man near the door talking to the woman behind the bar.

"Only my second drink tonight," Rodney says. "My last one."

Michael waits a while before speaking. "Not a bad place..."

"You live here in town?"

"Up in Glen Park." Michael says. Dugout talk. The waiter wipes their table, then sets the drinks down.

"Nice here at night," Rodney takes a sip, "the lights up on the hills. Air's actually clean."

"Baltimore's similar, isn't it? A cousin of mine lives there."

Rodney shrugs. His offers his words grudgingly when drinking. Michael feels awkward, out of his element—the pool table across Rodney's shoulder, the cobalt blue lighting. His mind is going fast: larger interactions, entire communities of mind. The implications take him to the verge of considerations he might never have arrived at, otherwise, but the stink of alcohol on Rodney's breath and the tinny elements of the room deflate his thoughts—a thick black bulb beside him breathing inward and outward, ominously.

Michael watches him bend down, the black liquid rising up through his straw, and wonders why Rodney makes himself seem so darkly forbidding. Then it clicks; it seems obvious. Rodney wants to hide within an impossibly singular kind of anonymity. Although he pretends otherwise, he wants to lower himself into the darkest and ugliest, the most mechanical corners of human history. There's a touch of hysteria in the refuge he seeks there, the hoarding, the compulsion to strike archaic postures; a touch of frenzy in the way he wants to portray infinity as of a concrete sense, impossibly reduced to his immediate observations.

Rodney licks the sweetness of liqueur from his lips and looks at Michael as though he wonders what he's doing there. His eyes go dark and distant, his mouth puckered with indifference.

"I come to places like this every so often," Rodney says. "Rough, but it's real. The average person..." his voice trails off.

"Sure it's safe down here?"

"Long as we don't go too far into it."

Rodney's eyes are the blackness of beetles. To his left is a yellowish glow, an inversion of the light on the wall behind him. Different from before, a nearly invisible quality within it. And then, within the space of an instant, the light phases and there's an elongated but barely visible form within it, a thin body, poised and graceful-seeming, *with a very large head*. . . .

It beckons Michael to look at Rodney more diffusely. Rodney's mind is a muted, bluish-green and violet glow with strangely linear arcing, like

discharges. Rodney is nearly transparent as Michael's own translucent glow merges with his. Michael's light is finer, less linear but larger, and all throughout the outer margin is a tremendous amount of tiny, but more highly defined activity—stretching off and deeply into itself for what seems to be a large distance.

Michael feels as if he literally floats beyond Rodney's capability, able to see through and match any of Rodney's thinking. To know about the assassinations, all he has to do... is suggest them. So close, yet so vulnerable. It's as if he's phased larger somehow, part of a greater mindedness. Something that Michael sensed before, but wasn't cleanly aware of. A truth within an awareness that he can't simply know; he has to be it to realize its depths.

Somewhere a criticism of Michael sounds, a foreboding about how he scorched the thought before, how he literally derided it. And yet he floats... An internal discussion is going on, a debate over the risks of people like Michael being approached too early, an exchange of thought about how too-direct a manipulation of people like Michael might lead to dangers: destructive misuses of knowledge and technology. Then, as if a third mind were re-stating it, a mind so human it could be his own, comes the possibility of a strange reaction on earth, a withdrawal into an archaic kind of fortification. A crude waste of resources at a critical juncture.

Across the table, Rodney looks up from having bent to take another sip. His eyes narrow—it just seemed to him that for a moment Michael had disappeared, like he'd gotten up from the table and had sped away in a blur of fast motion as if, within a split-second, time had condensed and he'd voyaged off to some distant place. He checks for strange qualities in the taste of the alcohol, but nothing.

"What I said about the aliens... in strict confidence, you understand." Rodney says, slowly sucking on an ice cube.

"Of course."

"If the wrong people found out, who knows what they'd do. We'd have Israelis trying to steal our technology, Russians trying to bribe people." Rodney eyes him closely.

Michael wants to laugh. The Israelis, the Russians; they're all being asked to pool what they know, to get in on what's being salvaged. It's offered in terms of mutual defense. It's all over the bookshelves.

"People would get scared. Who knows what they'd do?" Rodney says coolly. He has the advantage; he revels in it. "It could be disastrous."

Michael raises his brows. They've dug a hole so deep, they don't know how to get out of it. They've become a separate tribe. The vantage thrills them. It's a whole new area of psychology. They may not be up to it. □□□□□□*
Something unclear, a kind of non-statement about certain people of his time, a doubtful tone.

Something larger is going on. Michael feels as though he's just beginning to get a sense of it. There are multiple dynamics involving multiple populations. There may even be multiple universalities. There's clearly more to the universe than can be observed at any given time. The thought lingers... *invisible*

increments in the incidence of everything

everything

everything
everything

In order for a person to observe anything within the universe, part of the universe has to remain invisible in order facilitate it—like time and space, gravity and more. Since it all fits together ultimately in a unified theory of physics, in order to be observable, the universe would have to intravert, or fold into itself through a kind of no-boundary condition, a larger kind of non-locality.

If such is the case, it's also true for mind. There have to be invisible increments in the incidence of mind, ways in which the future is anticipated by the forms of mind, and being, in the present. One scientist's analogy is that of a rope: when shaken, waves form at intervals that anticipate the length of the rope *before* they travel along it. Photons do the same in two-slit experiments.

It's a given of quantum mechanics: part of the future is in the present, yet not visible, not incident within our immediate ability to observe it. It's a balanced consideration. Since it cancels itself out in terms of its reference, it allows for its own existence. It's an encouraging thought, but the larger implications are even more stirring. In the universe of mind, in the whole of everyone's commonality, a mind that commits to *all other* minds, could marginally know, without measuring, the invisible increments of what it will ultimately become: a universal mind, or mindedness. A larger connectedness, a larger sentience that could ultimately move into other universes.

"There's some nice-looking bitches in that place just down the street." Rodney looks like he wants to leave. He lays a ten on the table, then gets up and heads for the door, expecting Michael to follow.

It's cold as they walk out into the night. The street seems darker along the next few blocks. Puffs of wind stir scraps of paper up past old stucco facades with windows painted dark blue or boarded up. Torn curtains furl in some, a strangely painted mannequin stares out of another. It could be any city, anywhere in the world. A few dark-skinned children are running in the street a block ahead, laughing and playful.

"Watch out," Rodney says, nodding toward the children. "They could have guns. Kids these days..."

"Yazhunhh."

Rodney shakes his head; Michael's voice sounds oddly fluttered. Rodney keeps his eye on the kids. They're getting closer.

"It scares the crap out of me sometimes. When you think about what some of them'll be like when they get older." Rodney twidges his head to one side, his jaw keening.

"Ehzhj ehh..." Michael's voice rasps doubly. Rodney starts as something one of the children threw floats through the air toward them and bounces off of a wall twenty feet ahead in the darkness. It rolls off to one side, partway into an alley.

The pale glow of a flickering streetlamp illuminates it—just a toy, and, when a small, dark-eyed Indian boy runs up in frayed pants and a yellowed shirt straight out of Old Delhi, the glow brightens bluish and takes on the living form of yet another kind of alien.

"I can't believe it," Rodney snaps. "Sons of bitches will do anything to make us look bad." The boy stops, afraid, as the two men approach, unsure of whether to make a stab for his Frisbee or run off to safety. His eyes are large and clear. He stoops quickly—within the bluish glow, the darkness deepens as the alien form bends and picks up the toy. A somber-looking being with bluish skin and a large head phasedly-attached to a small body, it appears against a slant of other-worldly background: a street scene of odd shapes warping into view, yet palpably ordinary in its own way—a number of aliens out for a nighttime stroll. It studies the disc, which emits pale light from dark openings, then flicks it off toward the other boys.

"*Mierda, es que, mis manos...*" Further down the walk in the darkness, two stooped-looking men lean against a wall, sharing something. The disc lofts at smoothly pulsed intervals, changing geometry as it floats over them. They look up, bewildered.

"What the hell is *that*?" Rodney says. "Right out in the open..."

Across the street, an old Chinese man holding a plastic bag approaches a waste bin. When he lifts the lid and stirs the contents with a stick, the underside of the lid glows, casting a thinly ribbed light into a slant of alley darkness. Within the darkness is a dirt gangway of frail, dark-skinned families huddled against pale walls beneath thick tangles of power lines. They look up slowly, eyes severe, one man reaching to protect a goat, others hiding behind a cart, or a hanging sheet—their only walls—as the light hits them.

The smell of wood-smoke is in the air, soapy and pungent; the old man stirring the waste bin seems not to notice. The lid lifts higher—another form, glowing faintly violet, is holding it up with one hand. Turning its broad head, it aims the light toward a spot just across the walkway. There, atop a concrete abutment, lies a gaunt Indian man. His eyes are clouded; he seems weak but turns his head as the roar of an engine approaches along a street down the alley. The blue and green lights of a police car wash by quickly, then darkness.

"Why don't they mind their own business?" Rodney says sharply. "Sons of bitches are always fucking around where they don't belong. You know what people'd think if they saw this kind of thing? They'd fawn *all over it*. They'd think it was a fucking revelation. They want us to look bad because they want to move in on what we've got. First they'll want an embassy, then it's treaties—on *their* terms, and in the end, we're just another outpost of an empire somewhere. We're nothing to them. They're fucking weird as far as I'm concerned! They aren't even sexual... The best thing to do is just ignore 'em." Rodney tucks his neck against the wind and walks on, Michael slowing beside him.

Several blocks ahead, an electric bus stalls along the curb, a shower of sparks flaring into the darkness. The glare lingers, brownish, as bleak facades dim back to chalky color.

"Aw, you always talk shit!" says a woman crossing the street, followed by a

drunken man.

"Fuckin' bitch. Just get out! I don't want your shit in my place. I'll throw it all away."

"Aw fuck you, fuck you! I'll call the police." They drift into a doorway, where words are exchanged before she enters and slams the door loudly. He kicks it hard a few times, then stalks off fuming. Just above, peering down from the window of a ratty-looking upper flat, is a dark form framed by bluish TV light. The light coalesces as if bending, somehow darkening to a clarity within the space behind the figure, which turns to one side as though called from within. Its head is also large, its body small but muscular. A few others join it at the window; one cups its chin within its palm, elbow resting on the windowsill.

Both men feel the ground behind them rumble as a long white truck speeds into the intersection, air brakes blasting. Its small amber lights swing wide into the turn, hissing and squeaking heavily, then it pales into the night like the rustle of a small town dream.

The last light dimming around the corner fades across a wall of textured stucco, slowly folding into shadow that opens into backyard darkness. On a clothesline strung from one rotted wooden porch to another, old sheets billow in the night sky. There are people in the rear windows: a man in a sleeveless T-shirt beside a gas stove, an old Chinese grandma. The darkness out back seems to buckle oddly, spanning far and faintly inward as another form appears, hovering dimly—as if partly dimensioned elsewhere.

"They'll do anything to impress us. Like they own the goddamn place." Rodney looks about uneasily. "Good thing nobody's watching. Wouldn't wanna get the wrong idea. You follow?" He turns around, wondering where Michael is.

"Yr zrupt, I'L 7 rsztr na." Michael's eyes are dark, pear-sized ovals, the faded inner lids retracting.