

A Story Believed

A Novella

By Homer Kizer

© 2001 Homer Kizer - All rights reserved.

A STORY BELIEVED

1.

He shouldn't have watched the *Truman Show* last night, shouldn't have rented the video, shouldn't have left his condo. But that's nuts. They know he has to work, has to shop. They've watched him for long enough they know his routine, which he is now careful not to vary. They monitor his comings and goings; they know who he sees, his words, maybe even his thoughts; and they're out there just waiting for him to make a mistake, make any kind of misstep. Paranoia, that's what he has. A self-diagnosis. But is it paranoia to think you're being observed if you are, and he's certain he is, certain he has come under investigation at the lab where his work with methane-consuming microbes, his *bugs*, remains controversial. Whoever they are will only wait so long before they set him up. Maybe they will accuse him of releasing classified material, maybe even make him the object of a criminal sting operation, maybe plant drugs in his condominium. They have already tampered with his lab computer, and all he has ever tried to do is reveal the truth.

Standing to the side of the window, watching the parking lot through the crack at the edge of the drawn drapes, Dr. Seth Macfarland, an atmospheric specialist with first NASA, then NOAA, and now INEEL, knows it's not politically smart to oppose global warming, not smart to oppose a director whose reputation was built showing the damage done by the oxidation of fossil fuels, not that petroleum deposits have anything to do with fossils. His work has been silently belittled ever since he was transferred to the INEEL; it was pushed off Site and into a cubbyhole lab wedged between rail tracks and barley silos. His funding has been continually threatened. He works under the microscopic examination of beaucratic nitwits, men and too often women who took only biology in college.

But being under a microscope at work isn't what brought on this latest bout of paranoia, full blown now for two months. It started when that white delivery van followed him home three days running. It festered like a sliver under a fingernail when, on the fourth day, he took a different route and was positive he recognized the driver of the van following in a gray Taurus. That festering poisoned last month's company picnic when, almost innocently, he was asked by the secretary from the temporary agency if he had any speed. Of course he didn't, but why didn't he say so.

Since that afternoon, he has felt himself in an aquarium where someone fishes tiny barbed hooks baited with carnal pleasures, very few of which he has experienced personally. He has become fearful of following his daily routine, fearful of not following it. He has rigorously avoided putting himself in a position where he can be compromised, of indulging the few vices that come with too much intelligence.

Pet, his cat, a wanton hussy that lures toms into an unbaited Havihart that traps their maleness--he has become expert at slipping stretched rubbers bands around testicles--rubs against his leg as he stands to the side of the window, hidden, memorizing license numbers. They could have, he knows, an infrared scope so he needs to be about his business. Everything needs to appear as normal as possible.

This, he knows, is serious. But he doesn't voice his thought: he is afraid they might be picked up by laser microphone, even afraid his thoughts will vibrate the window pane enough to be read. He can envision the technology necessary to read thoughts, and if he can, so can others. As he understands the difficulties in developing a thought scanner, the problems are purely mechanical--and all mechanical problems can be solved if they haven't been already.

Why, he wonders, would she have asked for speed unless she was an undercover narc. He doesn't deal drugs, doesn't look like he does, never has looked like he does, not that he ever has.

A wet spring has kept the hills east of Idaho Falls green into early July, has given dry land wheat farmers heavy seedheads and low prices, has forced potato farmers to spray for blight a month early, has left streams swollen and flycasters in tube floats on reservoirs. Although Snake River flooding has been nominal--snowpack above Island Park was 700% of normal this past winter--river politics and how to save the salmon continue to dominate local newscasts. But the forthcoming change of administration at the INEEL is what has kept notice of their lab out of the news. They can ill afford the type of attention their sister lab experienced when its security rating was increased a point (they already have the higher biohazard rating); for most of their research involves hantavirus, a North American killer as lethal as any found in Africa especially among those of draft age, a killer that he suspects will be used for a truly evil purpose, something he must stop by any means possible.

Hantavirus wasn't identified until 1993, when Navaho youths in otherwise excellent health died of unexplained causes. Since then, the virus has been found in thirty states, and found in 44% of the deer mice

on INEEL's reservation. It is passed in mouse urine and feces--sweeping a floor can be deadly. Its potential as a bioweapon has been, for three years now, reviewed at his southside lab. But that hasn't been his project. He wasn't even to know about the review, and wouldn't know if someone hadn't used his computer to download files pertaining to its aerial distribution. He reported the tampering immediately. That was two months ago. That was about when it began, when they started monitoring his movements.

From where he stands to the side of the window, he can't see all of the parking lot. He needs to do a little grocery shopping, do laundry, maybe relax a little, unwind, what last night's movie didn't do for him.

It has been a good spring for gathering his *bugs*. He has identified several species different from those he isolated in the muskegs west of Fairbanks: two of these new species are exceptional.

The populations of methane-consuming microbes increase on wet years, and increase following rises in atmospheric methane in a prey-predator cycle. Actually, a realization late coming to him is that if someone wanted to reek economic havoc, his *bugs* could do it if they were released in large enough numbers into a nation's petroleum supply. A very lazy specie is already being tried on oil spill sludge with some success. His exceptional species are not so lazy.

He hasn't checked any of his traps for a week, hasn't checked some of them since being followed, hasn't gone anywhere but to the lab and straight home until last night when he rented that video. His traps are, he's certain, full.

Methane constantly escapes from the earth's crust everywhere, all the time. Clay domes trap underground methane, especially once hydrocarbon pools form. Although more surface methane is found in boggy areas due to vegetative fermentation, plenty of gas escapes through the deep loess of Idaho's croplands; and the variety, the adaptability, and the mutability of *bugs* found on the Snake River plain is astonishing--he wouldn't have believed so many species existed prior to coming here, wouldn't have believed that any specie could be so hungry. One specie can eat its way through transparent acrylic at the rate of 6mm/K²units/year, making them his dangerous favorite.

Where, he asks himself, are they? He knows they are out there. He can feel them, feel their vibes.

Thunderheads build over the Arco desert as the afternoon heat drives moisture high, drives a steady stream of weekend tourists towards West Yellowstone and Jackson, drives stone fly nymphs into shallows

along the Henry's Fork, where this evening's emergence will be remembered by fishermen from Pennsylvania, Michigan, Oregon, each trying to match a hatch they've never witnessed before. They will wade famous runs, release cutthroat as long as their forearms, and will not know that white-bellied deer mice left hanta-laden droppings under their cabins and chalets.

They, whoever they are, will try to stop him; he knows they will. But they will be the ones to make mistakes. Of that, he's certain. So he watches the freeway, hating the societal pollution from too many cars, and knowing that when the lightning strikes are close enough his travels will be more difficult to monitor electronically. Perhaps he can escape then, at least long enough to feed *bugs* hidden in lava caves where only rattlers and deer mice venture. That's where he trapped those *bugs*, and it is those *bugs* that have kept him crawling through hell for now two years.

The sky blackens as the storm approaches. A garbage can is blown over, scattering plastic soda bottles onto the manicured lawn where they are pushed along, helpless to resist forces described but untamed. A house finch clings to a wildly swinging feeder as lightning slices sideways across the freeway. It is, he tells himself, time. He steps away from the curtain, takes from under his pillow a Ruger Mark II--his .22 pistol carried for snakes--and from the closet in the entryway a satchel of specimen bottles and a vacuum pump. He then places a telltale strip of a white plastic grocery bag nine inches down from the upper hinge of the closed, inner utility room door. Every door of his condo is similarly marked.

2.

"How long since you've seen him?" asks Jim Crapo, Bonneville County deputy. "And any ideas where he might be?"

"Friday afternoon. Dr. Macfarland left work a little before five, went straight home, and," referring to an outline laying on his desk, Dr. Dennis Wyte, lab director, adds, "left for probably the Site a few minutes after seven. . . . He was driving his 1989, gray Suburban."

"He was being followed?"

"No, but we had a security breach earlier this summer so for our scientists' protection, we have been--"

"Tailing them."

"No. . . . Seth hasn't been himself lately. His demeanor hasn't been what it was. So, well, we have been, under the new guidelines issued by

Secretary Richardson, making sure he is all right. Not compromised in any way. We've been concerned about his welfare."

"Did he know you've been following him?"

"I don't believe so."

Recording the missing scientist's address, the deputy asks, "What do you think happened to him?"

"I wish I could be more helpful there."

"Is he of Chinese ancestry?"

"With a name like Macfarland?"

"Just had to ask." Jim doesn't see many missing persons reports, hasn't had to take one in a while. He'll make sure this one is according to the book if he can remember procedures. He expects, however, the FBI will be involved shortly. "How has his demeanor changed?"

"That's hard to say. It hasn't really been discernible. But something has been troubling him. He just hasn't quite been himself as of late."

"Any idea what's been bothering him?"

"No, not really. He's a private person, sometimes to a fault."

"By that you mean--"

"Nothing more than I said."

"Description, again?"

"Six one. Two hundred. A little pudgy but not in too bad of shape. Brown hair, thinning, going to gray. Average appearance for someone of Northern European ancestry. Nothing distinguishing. Date of birth is 25 December 1956. We have his prints and a photo in his personnel file. Would you like a copy?"

"Yes. . . . Married?"

"Seth and his wife divorced nine years ago--his wife told him he was dull."

"Children?"

"One daughter, deceased. Traffic accident. She was one of the Ricks students in that van--"

"I remember the incident. . . . Has he been depressed since then?"

"Not overly so. Personnel suggested he receive counseling, and he spoke with his bishop. But I don't believe he maintained his religious affiliation afterwards."

"Who did he speak to?"

"I wouldn't know the name of his former bishop. He isn't one to talk about anything except his work while here at work."

"Has he been seeing anyone? Man or woman?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"No Internet relationships?"

"I wouldn't know."

Handing his clipboard to the interim director, the deputy says, "Fill out the rest of this and we'll list him missing. And tell me, how did your tail lose him?"

"We really weren't tailing him . . . but there was a tracking device attached to his truck. Evidently it fell off."

"Legally attached?"

"The Attorney General's office will have to answer that question."

"I take that as a no? . . . Do you want the media involved?"

"Can we hold the TV people off for a day? For long enough that Washington can decide how public Seth's disappearance should be. His work here is of a sensitive nature."

"What does he do?"

"He collects samples from the Site and tests for pollution."

"For radioactivity?"

"Yes."

"Finding any?"

"What do you believe?"

"We'll get an APB out for his car. Four-by?"

"Yes. He keeps survival equipment in it as well as equipment pertaining to his work. He has it all setup--can weld with its alternator, cut with carbon arc, cook on its manifold. It's quite the vehicle."

"Could he be broken down on the Site? in the desert?"

"He has satellite phone, cellphone, radios. Plus Site security has been notified. They are keeping an eye out for his Suburban."

Impressed, Jim says, "Then if he wanted to contact you, he could."

"This is why we are concerned about him. Yes, he certainly could contact me." Dr. Wyte scowls, then adds, "He either can't or he doesn't wish to. Both prospects worry us."

"Well, let us know if he turns up. He might have found someone. Nine years is a long time without a girlfriend."

"You are making light of a very serious situation. Seth is my friend . . . perhaps nine years might be long for someone else."

Wyte walks to his office door with the deputy, waits for his secretary to make a copy of Seth's prints, then returns to brooding. Site Security is, indeed, already searching for Macfarland; its helicopter has flown most of the reservation. He has been in contact with the FBI office in Pocatello. But, he wonders, why is DIA sending in a team--he has been directed to do nothing until they arrive on a chartered Falcon from

Huntsville. They left an hour ago. He is to personally meet and brief them at the airport. They asked specifically about what he would be driving.

Do nothing probably means I shouldn't have even contacted the Sheriff's office, but if something has happened to Seth, I want him found.

Macfarland's work doesn't have a military application: he finds and breeds bugs; intends to find a bug that will break down oil-bearing shale, intends to prove global warming is a hoax. Of course global warming is. But it serves a political purpose, something Seth has never appreciated. Everyone knows that as a greenhouse gas, methane is the one that counts. The ratio of carbon dioxide curves over before significant warming occurs. So why DIA? His work with shale is promising but still in its infancy. It certainly isn't of any use to the Chinese. But that might not be true.

Site Security has been investigating the computer breach at his terminal: it gives them something to do in this new environment of Chinese espionage. He read the files that were downloaded. There was nothing there. But it is troubling that someone hacked into those files, and who that someone might be is even more troubling. The lab is supposed to be a secure facility. Even its existence isn't public knowledge. So for someone to spend long enough at a second level terminal to open the software and write their way into third level security files is especially troubling. Site personnel believe that someone was Macfarland just because of the time required to scan the tens of thousands of lines of code necessary to do the rewriting. Look, they argue, how long it took to write out the Y2K bug, a bug that might not be dead.

But he has tried to keep an open mind, and until Macfarland didn't report for work yesterday, then couldn't be located, couldn't be raised by either phone or radio, he had been firmly convinced that Seth had nothing to do with the hacking. Now, he questions himself.

Someone would have to be a magician to construct a military application for Seth's bugs, but not so for hanta, which takes long enough to kill that with a little more tinkering it could be spread by human carrier.

3.

The call came in just as he was setting down to dinner, his daughter fiddling with her first lost tooth, not wanting to eat anything but mashed potatoes and lime jello.

"JamiJo, no ice cream--"

"But, Daddy, you promised if I didn't cry."

"I promised only if you'd eat all of your dinner." Then turning to his wife as he finished buckling his Sam Browne belt, Jim Crapo says, "This will probably take awhile. Fires usually do. And I seem to get more than my share of gawkers."

"Be careful." Sarah, his wife of twelve years, kisses him, just a peck to be sure, but enough of a kiss to convey her concern. "I'll put a plate in the frig. You can nuke it when you get home."

Stepping to the door, Jim turns and says, "If she eats her peas and meat, let her have the ice cream."

"Where's the fire?"

He hears Sarah's question, but he's too far across the lawn to answer. It does seem strange, though, that the fire is where he was this morning: at the biohazmat lab off Yellowstone. Perhaps their missing scientist had more on his mind than just disappearing.

By the time Jim reaches the fire, hot, much hotter than he would've expected, a full square mile has been cordoned off and the evacuation of the few residents within the area has begun. He's assigned to traffic; so with his patrol car, he blocks 5th at Sunnyside, and wonders how much radiation has escaped. The labs, he thought, wouldn't burn; thought that they were self-contained with their own fire suppression systems.

So what happened?

Arson. Has to be.

But as he waves cars away from 5th, his flashlight functioning like a light saber, parrying headlights of the curious, his thoughts are of a sparrow he saw this morning and hasn't been able to identify. It wasn't in his bird book: it had two ear tufts that looked like horns. Mysteries trouble him. They gnaw at him, eat away the part of him that believes he should have answers, should know what's happening, what has happened, what will happen. He doesn't like this fire, especially so since he was here this morning. Too much of a coincidence. Too hot.

At nine, he receives word he's not to let traffic through until the whole area can be certified safe, something that won't happen until after daylight. He's told that he'll be relieved at midnight by INEEL's Security personnel, that he's to report back to his present position at 0600.

Overtime. Comptime. Still haven't taken the ten hours I have coming from the 4th. I didn't really need more.

*

Five o'clock comes early, especially so when having lain awake till three perplexed about the day's events; when having lain awake tasting and retasting his warmed-over dinner.

Hamburger steak isn't much good reheated. It seems like I make enough money we could eat better. Where does it all go? House, car payment, a tithe, at least most paydays. And groceries get shorted. Maybe the end will come first. Before we fall on our financial faces.

The hot water runs out just as he finishes rinsing, not that he has taken a long shower. Three minutes. Four maximum.

That waterheater is full of crap again. I need to clean it out, need to get down there and fish out a couple of shovelfuls of white junk. Probably need to replace that bottom element. Just one more thing to do, one more thing to buy as if I didn't have enough.

"Honey, why don't you take JamiJo and go visit your mother. You like going up to Driggs for the day."

"I've a meeting at the Church--"

"Forget it. I think you should get out of town. That fire last night is suspicious, and I don't necessarily believe that nothing escaped."

"What could possibly have escaped?"

"Remember what they told your uncle down at Saint George. Said there was nothing in that cloud." He saw last week where the Energy Department finally, forty years too late, admitted that the radioactive cloud had poisoned the southern Utah town.

"We're probably already exposed--"

"Just go. I have a bad feeling about all of this." Jim knows that Sarah pays special attention to his feelings, which usually makes him a little uncomfortable.

"Should we stay over?"

"Yeah, why don't you. I'll call you this afternoon and let you know what's going on."

"I don't like leaving you."

"I'll be all right." He used to believe he had an angel helper, but now sort of scoffs at the idea. He didn't like the feeling of constantly being watched. "It's just strange, the timing of the fire. And you know I don't like things I can't explain. There's something here I'm not seeing, something I ought to see, something I'm not being told."

"I'll pray about it."

"Do that, but do it up at your mother's."

"You think we should leave right now, then?"

"Yeah. I'll get JamiJo up, kiss her goodbye."

"No, I can do that. Get yourself ready. It's already twenty-five till."

Jim Crapo could be considered the superstitious type in that he had gone on a mission at nineteen, had attended college for two years, had married his highschool sweetheart in a church wedding, and had a firm belief in a hierarchy of beings. But time has tempered his faith; for equally strong within him is a practical side that demands he prove everything. This side of him has been causing trouble for some years. Actually, he can't remember when it didn't trouble him. Having faith has never been easy for him. It would now be a lot easier if he hadn't read the Myth of Er in 9th grade. The *why* questions with which he'd plagued parents and grandparents (why are sunsets orange and sunrises pink; why do some white chickens lay white eggs and some lay brown eggs; why do hollow cottonwoods have bigger limbs than ones that aren't hollow--the questions seemed endless) suddenly became philosophical: where is hell, and why can't I remember heaven if that's where I came from? Why do we pray for someone who's already died, and how do we know the Pope is the AntiChrist? He remembers asking those questions, and he remembers when he quit. That was about when he began wondering if the driver he just stopped had a gun, if this would be the one stop in a lifetime which proves tragic. A little fear, a little apprehension, a little prayer said--each stop gave him enough to think about.

The morning is cool, calm, but the Sunnyside area still smells of smoke . . . the fire had spread to the grasslands south of the lab before finally being contained. Residents are being allowed back into the area.

A television crew films at his intersection. When not busy checking who is or isn't a resident before letting anyone down 5th, Jim watches the crew's monitor. From it he learns that the facility's interim director, Dr. Dennis Wyte, isn't available for a statement and can't be located. Instead, an INEEL talking head, Dr. Nils Swensen, addresses reporters.

Jim, while noting that care is being taken to assure everyone the lab, part of INEEL, has nothing to do with nuclear waste and has been properly secured, hears what's said about Dr. Wyte. At first what he hears is just sound without meaning. But that sound develops meaning after verifying the address of the fifteenth or twentieth resident (he can't remember how many he's let back into the area). Jim feels a gnawing deep within himself, just a little grumbling that earlier might have been last night's dinner, just a little churning like that which comes when he can't see a driver's hands, just a little sourness that will spoil whatever he eats today. A missing director to go with a missing scientist. A fire in a

fireproof building. No nuclear waste where testing was being done on radioactivity, or so he was told. The premonition he'd felt when shaving hasn't gone away. Rather, it builds pressure like magma in a deep vent.

Surely the director will turn up shortly.

During a break in traffic, Jim watches, again on the reporters' monitor, the statement of the INEEL spokesperson, taken before daylight: "This was a surplus facility, used only for storage. Unfortunately, hazardous chemicals were believed stored here, which upon further investigation proved incorrect, so we're sorry that the area's residents were evacuated. We just couldn't risk anyone inhaling potentially toxic fumes."

Surplus, no way. There was plenty of work going on here yesterday so who are they fooling?

The reporter asks Dr. Swensen if there will be an investigation.

"I'm sure there will be one, and we will be very happy to cooperate. We are just thankful no one was injured, that there was no danger to anyone."

I hear what you're saying--there'll be a coverup, and heaven help anybody who gets in its way.

Jim, his feet already tired, wishes, now, he hadn't filed that missing person report yesterday, hadn't gone to their missing scientist's condo, had nothing to do with this. He wishes he were on the Henry's Fork, his new 6-weight graphite loaded and driving a stonefly nymph towards pocketwater. He wishes that waterheater at home would fix itself, that he'd never again see a hamburger steak, that Sarah could cook more than potluck fare--he doesn't know whether he hates green Jello for its taste or for what it represents. And he wishes that just once the Feds would tell the truth.

4.

Noon. Jim is filing his report when he learns that Dr. Wyte's Buick has been found at the airport, with Dr. Wyte inside, an apparent suicide, a self-inflicted gunshot wound to his head around midnight. The state police are investigating: they seem satisfied, especially since questions are being asked about why so many drums of flammable liquids were stored within city limits without necessary permits. But for Jim, Wyte's suicide, the fire, the scientist's disappearance--all seem too coincidental.

Maybe I've seen too many movies.

Again he faces the question he couldn't answer on his Lit final, does art imitate life or life, art? He blew his essay answer, which knocked his

grade, which put him on academic probation, which caused him to sit out a year, which ended his going to Utah State as he got this job with the county during the year he sat out. With the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg, the answer is easy: God created chickens. But do arsonists imitate the arson of moviemakers, or vice versa?

"Deputy Crapo, I would like to ask you about this missing person report."

Jim looks up to see Lt. Ben Gould, a state police detective he once stopped at two a.m., but who is now a member of their church in Ammon. So again shelving the question of precedence, he says, "I thought they keep you chained to your desk."

"Normally I would be, but the FBI asked me about this report. Thought I would check with you."

"Has anyone found Dr. Macfarland?"

"I don't understand why you filed this report. According to the personnel list we were given this morning, he voluntarily transferred last month to Huntsville, where he is presently employed according to INEEL's personnel computer."

"That's bull. I was to his condo yesterday. I talked to a neighbor. He and his cat were there Friday."

"I just came from there. His condominium is vacant, has been for a month according to the units' manager."

"No, can't be. Yesterday, it looked like he'd be back any minute." Jim wonders if it's that hamburger steak he again tastes or that unanswerable essay question. Regardless, his stomach churns around something undigested, and perhaps indigestible.

"Let's go outside."

Jim stands, his premonition of this morning now threatening to erupt: "A Pepsi? I could stand stretching my legs for a minute."

"Sure." The detective follows Jim outside, where a squirrel hangs upside down as it gnaws maple seeds on low-hanging limbs of the tree in the parking strip.

"Who," Jim asks, "cleaned out his place?"

"Don't know, but according to what we were given, Macfarland never worked at that lab or warehouse, whatever it was that burned last night. He worked at the Site until thirty days ago."

"Energy Department doesn't want him found--is that's what going on?"

The detective glances at the parking lot, then turns back and says, "I don't think, Jim, you made the mistake."

"What mistake?"

"I think," taking a sip from his Diet Pepsi, liberated from the dispatcher's refrigerator, the detective looks west, towards the Site before continuing, "Macfarland might be out there. I also think he's responsible for what happened last night, but think that the Energy Department plans on taking care of him."

"Another suicide?" Whatever his stomach wrestles with seems to be growing ameba-like, multiplying, dividing, filling all of him with suspicion.

"No, probably an accident. . . . You heard about Wyte, then?"

"You think Wyte's suicide was indeed a suicide, or another Vince Foster?"

"From our investigation this morning, we couldn't prove it wasn't legitimate. It's suspicious, but only because of last night's fire."

"I don't believe for a minute Macfarland is in Alabama."

"If he's on the Site, he's off limits to us." The detective leans against a green Chevrolet, dusty but cleaner than the white Ford next to it. "Let me tell you about when I first entered law enforcement. I was a young Alaska State trooper on Kodiak Island, and one night near Christmas, four airplanes and twenty-three cars were vandalized, shotup. We knew the responsible parties were from the Coast Guard base. But so did the Coast Guard. They transferred three families to Florida the following day, each family with a teenage son. Our vandalism case officially went unsolved."

"You couldn't go after them?"

"We couldn't even talk to the boys."

"Is that what's happening here?" He's chewing on his suspicions, trying to get them into Tater-Tot size pieces, but they grow faster than he can gnaw them into pieces. It already feels like he has a whole potato shed inside him.

"I think so. . . . You were in that warehouse--"

"That was a lab testing for," Jim paused as he considered what he had been told, "radioactive waste, but I don't know if that was accurate. That's what Dr. Wyte said, and they were certainly working on something."

"How did he seem?"

"Dr. Wyte? Fine. I wouldn't have thought him suicidal, but then you never can tell." Jim likes this less by the minute. The Site has its own culture, one closed to outsiders, something he understands. "I take it we're to terminate our APB for Dr. Macfarland."

"I'm afraid so."

"How," Jim asks, "is this going to come down?"

"No harm, no foul. . . . This is the Energy Department's problem. We're going to let them handle it."

"Okay, but I don't like it."

"I don't either. . . . I never did thank you for getting me started in a different direction."

Dismissing the thanks with a shake of his head and a downward flick of his wrist, Jim asks, "What about the fire?"

"I haven't been out there, but from what I hear, it was probably arson. It burned hot enough to destroy everything inside. That isn't usual." The detective then adds, "And I really do want to thank you."

Jim again shakes his head as if what he did was nothing, then says, "Macfarland's daughter was one of those Ricks' students--"

"I saw that. . . . Forgetting him would be easier if he hadn't become part of the community."

"Maybe that's what's bothering me." How, he wonders, is he to separate State from Church, *community* here meaning that at one time Macfarland had been a Believer? He has never been good at it, but then, it usually isn't a problem. It doesn't get in the way of writing speeding tickets--he just doesn't write very many. It actually makes him less effected by a pretty smile, which he sees more often now than a decade ago. But it seems to him that he works a little harder to solve a case when a brother is involved, that he makes these cases a little more personal.

"Well, nothing official will happen unless he turns up. For now," the detective looks Jim sternly in the eye, "I'd keep quiet about being in that lab yesterday."

"Worried about another suicide? Well, don't be."

"There's a change of administrations coming. Maybe with a change of management and a new Energy Secretary we can get out onto the Site next year."

The detective turns to go, leaving Jim alone to watch the squirrel that has probably eaten a half pound of seeds in the past few minutes, stripping their wings away in a bite. The squirrel seems determined to make sure not one seed remains.

Like President Buchanan planned when he ordered the Federal Army into the Utah territory . . . how can there be no authority except from God when the government comes after the Church of God to destroy it? I just don't trust the Feds.

Jim doesn't know what to tell Sarah: perhaps she should stay with her mother for a few days, at least till he has had a chance to look for Macfarland. He doesn't have the same uneasiness he felt at daybreak, but he feels like he ought to be more uneasy than before. That missing person report feels a lot like a set of trophy antlers, not a set he has bagged but a set he now sports. He has watched old mulies with huge racks that seemed aware that it is their antlers that will get them killed; he's watched them hide their antlers in mahogonies, in bitterbrush, never once letting you get a good look at their racks even if they didn't know you were on the same mountain. He needs to become as wary. For no particular reason. Just a hunch, the kind that leads to answered prayer.

He grew up knowing the history of the Church--he really has never trusted the Federal government. On his mission to Cold War Germany, he hadn't been particularly effective: he'd spent more time trying to prove he wasn't CIA than witnessing about Christ. He had continually felt as if he were being watched, his every step plotted on a map of the continent, his every deed recorded somewhere by the CIA besides somewhere in the Book of Life. He would say hello to a hausfrau weeding her flowerbeds as he passed on the street, and before he reached the next intersection, he would hear questions about whether he recruited her. He would watch a game of chess, and would feel a dozen eyes wondering if he was a spy, a second dozen challenging the authenticity of another testament. He helped get a kitten out of a tree one morning, and by evening he heard he was in league with the witches. He was watched continually. He was always the American, his whereabouts always known.

Then he learned that his mission partner was CIA.

It's hard to put Christ first when your loyalty is to Langley.

There's probably still a file on me somewhere. To break your mission partner's nose is almost unheard of.

5.

"Sarah, how's your mother?"

"Fine. She's taking a nap with JJ. They wore each other out."

"Look, the fellow who gave me that missing person report yesterday committed suicide last night. A questionable suicide."

Sarah interrupts him: "Murder?"

"No evidence. . . . But I think we have a scientist in trouble--Dr. Macfarland. So I asked for a little comptime to look for him."

"Do you want us to stay here?"

"I think so. I won't be home the next few days."

"You'll take Missy with you?"

"Yeah. I'll get a sack of dog food for her on my way home. I think we're nearly out, aren't we?"

"Just about. Bev will feed the chickens for the eggs. I'll call her. And I'll call the bishop and let him know why you'll miss your meetings."

"You're a hon. I'll miss you."

"Dittos. . . . Is there anything else I should know about?"

"No."

"I'll call our prayer group."

"Wouldn't hurt." Jim knows his wife's faith is stronger than his own.

"Do you have something to write down the scientist's name, Dr. Seth Macfarland?" To his wife getting names correct is important, as if Christ can't figure out for whom you're praying if the person uses an alias.

"Be careful, Jim."

"I love you. Kiss JamiJo for me."

As he hangs up, he hears inside his head: to the Jew first, then the Gentile--then the Gentile, the nonBeliever, that fellow who isn't of us, of our tribe, tribalism, loyalty owed, that thin Blue Line. To whom, he wonders, does he owe his primary loyalty?

He is off-call for forty-eight hours, not scheduled for ninety-six, the most he can get without using a week of vacation, which wouldn't have been approved on such short notice. If he can't find Macfarland before he has to report back to work, he'll have to consider him in Alabama, a fiction he just can't swallow.

The problem with fiction is that too often it seeks to imitate life, which is usually boring--and when it isn't boring, it's too easy to believe, making it seem like secular scripture when, really, the teachings of the Prophet should be read.

Unfortunately, besides possibly having to swallow a fiction, he can't use a county vehicle, and he has no idea of where to begin, and there's no money budgeted this month for gas.

Idaho never has been as wild as urban environmentalists imagine. Eberites buried stricken comrades in river sands before shepherd kings ruled Egypt. Prospectors looking for copper crossed the Salmon River while Hiram's ships searched the world. Later, Lybio-Berber prospectors left maps and Ogam dedications incised on river boulders while Rome burned. Bannock traders conducted business from the headwaters of the Snake to the mouth of the Columbia while Newton

watched an apple fall. Even an axe forged by Lewis & Clark's blacksmith at Fort Mandan found its way to the Nez Perce seven months before the Corps of Discovery stumbled over the Bitterroots. So Idaho was already old when Mormon pioneers planted wheat while the Sioux gathered against Custer. Some man, light or dark, has already hiked every ridge, surveyed every valley, drank from every stream, and left his footprint, some softer than others, on wherever Macfarland is this evening, or so Jim believes. That leaves only for him to find the right set of prints. For that set, though, he has no idea of where to start looking.

Sarah took their Ford wagon to Driggs. That leaves him with a fifteen year old pickup, four-by and still in decent shape if a person were to ignore its hundred seventy-eight thousand miles on its original engine. So when he signs out at four, still with no idea of where to begin, he takes from his patrol car only a sheaf of maps.

An assistant district attorney, Mike Mendiola, a church member he's helped out several times, gives him a ride home, and for most of their drive together, he fights his urge to ask the District Attorney's office for help. He loses a little before his driveway: "If there were reason to suspect a coverup at INEEL, would your office convene a grand jury?"

"What kind of coverup?"

"That fire last night. It was set to hide something."

"That wouldn't be my call. A tough call, certainly."

"Probably wouldn't happen, then?"

"It'd depend on who gets hurt."

"That wasn't a surplus building. There was plenty of research going on in there yesterday."

"You were there?"

"I was, but maybe I've said too much." His premonition flares up and spews forth suspicions that cool into columns of doubts, hard as basalt. "For now, forget I mentioned this. If anything concrete turns up, I'll bring it to you."

"Do that. Meanwhile, I'll look the reports over. See if something is obvious."

"What's obvious is that a lot of evidence has been destroyed." So as he steps from Mike's car, he turns and says, "I talked to Dr. Wyte when I was there yesterday."

"The suicide. I see." The assistant DA appears visibly worried. "Where can I get a hold of you?"

"You can't. I'm taking a few days off, why I needed the ride home. Henry's Fork, probably. I have a new rod I need to bloody." He has no more intention of casting imitation stoneflies than he has of letting this matter drop, but Mike's expression when he mentioned Wyte causes him concern--he is only so trusting, even of a brother.

Missy, a female border collie/blue heeler cross, a cow dog in the local vernacular, doesn't like being chained all day. She is used to the perks of being part of the pack, meaning that she really thinks of herself as human except when she's in heat, at which time she is a fussy lover, accepting only the attention of a lab/blue heeler cross three houses away. So she is all over Jim while he unlocks his frontdoor--his backdoor is always left unlocked just in case someone without a key needs to get in.

The part of town where Jim lives is older. It was platted in one acre lots, what a family needs to keep a milk cow and a few chickens, important during the Depression and the War. So even though surrounding potato fields have sprouted tract houses on lots too small for anything more than an apple tree and a few petunias for the past thirty years, Jim still keeps chickens, now grandfathered in, and every other spring raises two calves, butchering one at about twelve months, the other at sixteen or eighteen months, depending on whether he shoots an elk that fall. Most of his neighbors use their acre lots to keep a couple of horses. JamiJo is already wanting a horse.

Missy, now seven, is the smartest of the many dogs he has had--he can't remember ever not having a dog. When he's assigned to rural patrols, he lets her ride with him, a bending of rules a bit since she doesn't have the benefit of being under the *color of law*. But it's unlikely a case in Bonneville County would be thrown out because she, not he, first finds pot in a hubcap or a grouse under the seat of a car he stops.

He never knows what he'll find when he stops a car, and anymore, it seems some stereotypes are proving troubling true. He sometimes lies awake at night, seeing over again an older white pickup with Utah plates. A mid-70s Ford. One of these times, there will again be shots fired, one reason he wears his vest all of the time, a reason why he even spent his own money to upgrade his vest to one light enough most people don't know he wears it.

His vest won't stop a bullet from a hunting rifle, but it isn't hunters that worry him. It's kids, tough guy wantabs. It's aliens, illegals with no fear of U.S. law. It's dopers high on meth. So his vest goes on under even the white shirts he wears to Sabbath services.

As he gathers what he will need to look for Macfarland in the desert, or along the Lemhi Range, he wonders why one story is so easy to believe and another so hard. How much evidence is needed to convince a person one way or another? He knows--is absolutely certain--Macfarland isn't in Alabama. So why is he willing to believe Wyte and not the INEEL spokesperson? Was the address Wyte gave him truly Macfarland's? Was the neighbor legitimate? He didn't think to ask what address Ben checked. Maybe they were different condos.

It is again that question of life or art. There hasn't been anything new since Solomon wrote three thousand years ago. So every story has been told, has been lived, has been believed. Only now, so many stories are on the big-screen that it's hard to remember whether he first heard or saw a scenario.

Days are already noticeably shorter than just three weeks ago . . . he'll leave in the morning for the desert. And he drops his pants at the end of the bed, careful to not turn pockets full of keys and change upside-down.

Missy jumps onto the bed, something Sarah prohibits. He rubs her ears, around the base of her ears, then rolls over, and stretching, turns out the last light in the house.

But he lies awake, troubled by why he believes Wyte. He's tired, but not sleepy. It's as if he's on adrenaline. His senses are heightened. So when Missy growls at the bedroom door just after eleven, maybe an hour after he turned the lights off, he slides out of bed, surprised but staying low.

Her growl is low as if she doesn't want it heard by anyone but him.

His training tells him he has an intruder, but that thought is alien to a lifetime of experience. His house has never been broken into, nor have the houses of any of his neighbors. Just doesn't happen. Nevertheless, he slips on his pants and vest without turning a light on.

Missy, ears back, still growling, crouches to the side of the bedroom door.

I don't like this, don't like this at all.

He once loaded a short-barreled, Marlin 12-gauge pump for Sarah to keep in the bedroom: it's a shotgun he bought in a pawn shop to use at cowboy shoots, but he never has had time to participate. It's still in the closet, with shells in its magazine. He has his Smith, but there's no sound like that of a shotshell being chambered--the snap of that shell being released from the magazine and rattling back towards the bolt face, then popping up and banging against the top of the chamber as the

bolt locks into place sends shivers through dark silence from which no amount of experience protects a person.

Crouching a little behind Missy, he waits, the Marlin cocked, his finger on its trigger, his thumb on its hammer. His calves cramp a bit, but all he does is wait, with the muzzle of the shotgun covering the doorway.

He waits silently, motionless, until Missy stands--she stopped growling a few minutes earlier.

Saying nothing, not turning on a light, he takes his cues from her as he moves from room to room, all thought of sleep permanently gone. With no patrol car, no Ford wagon in the driveway, perhaps someone figured no one was home.

But who would even think about entering, especially without turning on lights.

He has a yardlight, one that costs six dollars a month, billed separately. But it isn't enough light to see into the recesses towards the chickenhouse, or between the house and garage.

The steer he'll butcher in November seems undisturbed as it chews its cud next to the irrigation lateral running along the back of his lot, that much he can see. There isn't any traffic on the street in front, at least no headlights. Nothing. It's as if Missy dreamt about an intruder.

But just as a pilot learns to trust instruments so too do those who live close to the land learn to trust instincts: Missy's instincts said intruder, and his instincts say she knows what she heard or smelled or both. If this would've been a normal night, he would've been too sound asleep to have been awakened by so soft of a growl. But then this isn't a normal night. He wasn't asleep. Something has prevented him from sleeping.

And this is the way answered prayer usually works.

The other part of prayer is realizing the person is under constant observation--it's been a long time since Jim felt as visible as he does while, using only a small flashlight, he loads a box of grub and his camping gear into his pickup. Even while in the shadows cast by the dim yardlight, he feels as if he were on stage, in the spotlight, with a darkened audience watching every move he makes, waiting patiently for him to blow a line.

Missy sniffs around his pickup, sniffs its tires, its back bumper, and under the bumper.

Jim, watching her, bends down to look under the bumper--a black something, electronic, square, the size of a smoke alarm battery is attached by magnet to the inside of his bumper's channel, about a foot

from the frame, about where he'd lift with a jack if he were to have a flat tire.

There is one on the other side, too.

Okay, what are they? What do I think? Tracking devices. But why two?

Wyte, Jim remembers, said they had a tracking device on Macfarland's Suburban.

They look too small to be explosive, too far away from the gas tank to use it to assist.

He knows, though, that they are plenty large enough to pack a punch sufficient to demolish his pickup. So he is afraid to remove them, but also afraid to drive with them there. Afraid of vibration triggers. Afraid of who might follow him. Afraid of who knew he would be looking for Macfarland. Mike. Ben. He could hazard a guess, but both are with the State.

He has no doubts now about having a visitor, no doubts about the suspicious timing of Dr. Wyte's suicide, no doubts about the fire covering something up. But what? His missing scientist is probably the only person who might have an answer.

And he's most likely dead.

Maybe not, if someone needs to track my whereabouts.

At this moment, he should call for help. No heroes. Isn't that what the Department continually tells them?

Staring at the bumper of his pickup, not able to see the devices but knowing they are there, Jim again feels this morning's premonition vent suspicions and doubts. Only now, something more escapes, something that's not quite information, not quite knowledge, but more like a semithought that begins a process of speculation about his phone being tapped, of remembering a movie in which Israeli agents planted explosives in a telephone receiver, of wondering why someone risked entering his house. Surely that someone knew he was armed. Why take that kind of a chance?

Not since he was on his mission has he felt as vulnerable, and the answer to what he needs to do now is in what he did then. But as he has grown older, kneeling has become a lot harder.

In leaning shadows next to the house, he trips over a hoe entangled in bindweed.

How strong are those magnets. I wonder if-

"Missy, stay here and lay down, get low. . . . That's a good girl. Now stay!"

On his belly with his vest draped over his head and down his back, Jim fishes with the hoe along the passengerside of the bumper, hooks the device, and with a firm pull dislodges it, only to have it attach itself to the underside of the bumper. A second pull, and it is on the ground, somewhere in the grass he should've mowed days ago.

He would repeat his stretching with the hoe to hook the second device except now he's convinced they are transmitters of some sort, just as he's certain his telephone is tapped. His house is probably bugged.

Someone wants to keep track of me, wants to know what I say, who I see. Are they gonna tell me it's for my good?

His ears burn like when he feels eyes watching him, as if those eyes send out little laser beams that prick consciences, releasing clouds of unassigned guilt that settles like dust on everything he touches, always for good if bishops are believed.

But what good will come from someone tracking him; so still not wanting to touch the device, he kneels beside the bumper, reaches up and rakes the second gizmo free. This time its magnet sticks to the blade of the hoe which he returns to the bindweed that threatens to take over Sarah's westside flowerbed.

With the flashlight and with Missy beside him, Jim now searches his truck, making sure no other surprises await him. None do that he can find, and Missy doesn't seem interested in anything up front. She remains, though, interested in the back bumper where he finds nothing else.

He wants away from the house. The idea of someone being inside leaves him feeling naked. And he wishes he had a remote start for his truck--that's something he will get as soon as he can--so with his door open, he turns the key.

Nothing happens . . . except a tired 360 catches, rumbles alive, and settles into a restless purr.

Missy jumps onto his lap and over him to take her place, paws on the dash, nose against the windshield. She'll sit on the seat after they get underway. Until then, she helps drive.

With headlights off, he pulls out of his driveway and onto Lincoln Road--he doesn't turn his lights on till he approaches 25th. He buys gas when he reaches the freeway, filling both tanks and a five gallon can. Then a little before two on a mild July morning, with more apprehension than he has felt since boarding that plane for Germany a year out of highschool, he follows Broadway, U.S. Highway 20, west,

away from town, away from the help upon which he has come to rely. He's on his own, with somebody or bodies interested in where he goes. He has his .30-06, the Marlin 12 gauge, his Smith, camping gear, but no dog food.

I'll have to stop in Arco in the morning . . . I wasn't wanting to see anyone this trip, or for anyone to see me.

6.

If I were a scientist looking for radioactive pollution, I don't think I'd look just on the Site. Feds probably don't consider it pollution until it leaves the reservation, until somebody finds out about it. Since the Site is relatively secure, I'd set up my equipment around the edges, in places that aren't too conspicuous.

And what about Macfarland. If he's broken down somewhere on the Site, they've probably already found him, knowing how security is there. If he's off the Site and broken down with nobody looking for him, it might be quite awhile before a rancher or a hunter stumbles across his rig--unless he starts a fire. But then he has phones and a radio so the question really is whether body and soul are still together. If he committed suicide like Dr. Wyte, then why send him to Alabama. There's lots of depression here, plenty of opportunity. So he probably doesn't want to be found.

Ben's right. If Macfarland is on the Site, he's out of our reach, at least until there's a change of administration. But they wouldn't have sent him to Alabama if he's on the Site, which means they don't know where he is. So the question is why has he disappeared? What does he have to gain? If it hadn't been for the fire, I wouldn't have thought much of his disappearing. Just another mid-life crisis with no ties to keep him here.

No problems when he left work Friday--I checked his condo. He hadn't slipped in the bathtub, nothing like that. But his neighbors said they hadn't seen him all weekend, hadn't seen his cat either, which suggests he planned to be gone for long enough the cat would need tending. Guess his cat was a regular pain in the ass.

Suppose I should start by determining where he might have gone, not that I haven't been thinking about that. I imagine monitoring equipment shouldn't look like what it is. If it could be disguised to, say, look like weather gauges or a microwave relay station, then fewer people would worry about what's being recorded.

Jim stops alongside the road at Twenty Mile Rock to check his maps. It's still dark enough he'd piss on the pavement--he needs to go bad--but he still feels watched, still feels naked, feels like he's reliving 1984. And again, that damn essay question nags him. He should've written more than what he did, should've mentioned someone other than Wilde, didn't think to use Fielding, but Bunyon--that hardly seems fair.

Enough. There is, he knows, a radio tower on Howe Peak; another on East Butte, inside the reservation; a couple of others just ahead of him, just across the Bingham County line. He'll start with them even though they are not far off the highway.

Naked, that's what he is. How Adam must have felt in the Garden--just knowing that someone is out there watching him makes his skin crawl. Like he has ticks. That the someone might mean him no harm makes no difference. There's something within him, maybe the knowledge of good and evil, that doesn't like being watched, doesn't like being a zoo animal or someone's experiment or demonstration project. That is, if Scripture is believed, what we are: lab animals in a demonstration project to prove that Satan's get-way of government won't work. Prove it to humanity and to the two-thirds of the angels that didn't rebel.

Dust, dead grass, and dry sage is all he finds--the county line towers offer nowhere to hide. There's no gray Suburban at either of the first two radio towers, and no evidence of anyone having recently camped in the vicinity of either.

East Butte can wait.

That leaves Howe Peak, his most likely prospect with its many square miles of nothing but rocks and sage and timbered draws in the Arco Hills.

Although the peak isn't far off the highway, getting to it takes some doing: he follows a fair gravel road across private property for six, maybe seven miles, then turns and begins to climb for another five miles on increasingly ugly gravel. Another turn, another couple of miles up of rough road. At times nearly straight up. All the while choking on dust. But by noon, he's there. And he's tired of thinking.

Already hot, Jim stands, his back to the shack housing the radio equipment on Howe Peak. The dust has settled, and he looks south towards Deadman Canyon and beyond, towards Wild Horse Butte and beyond. He's above soaring vultures, above little dust devils that spin onto the Site, ignoring the warning signs. Like colorful ants, cars crawl through heat shimmers and wiggle into oblivion. A flash. From a windshield or a back window. Then nothing but haze and heat.

To the south, Jim knows a Suburban wouldn't be too hard to hide, especially down near the Great Rift. There are water tanks and caves off the Arco-to-Minidoka road--water will be a problem if a person heads south. Water and rattlesnakes and now, according to what he has been hearing, hantavirus.

But those lava flows are hot in the summer. If he were to disappear--Jim turns and looks north, across Little Lost River valley and towards Saddle Mountain, twenty miles away--that is where he would go, steep country, high, with enough timber that a person would be hard to see from the air, even out in the open.

A breeze pushes valley heat upward, into his face. Although Howe Peak isn't as high as those peaks north or northwest of him, he feels, finally, as if he has escaped the eyes that came with last night's intruder. He feels as if he is now the watcher and somehow superior to the drivers of the little cars creeping along Highway 20, drivers unaware that he sees them as they hurry about their business and into the shimmer.

Without the feel of being watched, he can relax, and his need for sleep--he's rummy, hungry--presses him into pitching an early camp. But not here. He needs to disappear himself, and the closest place where that might be possible is Hurst Canyon, fourteen, fifteen miles of bad rock road away.

"Get in, Missy."

He hasn't gone a half mile when he has a flat, driver's side rear. He's still high enough on the Peak that as he stands, not wanting to tackle changing the tire, he watches the top of a falcon sail low over the sage; he watches unobserved by the falcon and feels again the superiority of height, which, like a drug, engenders a tremendous sense of well-being.

Once he frees his Handiman jack from under all of his camping gear, changing the tire only takes a few minutes. The problem is now he has no spare. He still hasn't gotten any dog food--Missy can eat what he does today--so he will have to loop around to Arco in the morning; for the last time he was in Howe, he couldn't get a tire fixed at the store.

He crosses mostly dry Hurst Creek and again feels vulnerable as a rising trail of dust spins up behind him. The dust lingers long after he passes across the bench lands; it hangs close to the road as if it were a pointing finger . . . at least no vehicle can follow without also raising dust.

But he no sooner turns onto Forest Road 534 then he hears thump, thump, thump, the one sound he fears. Another flat, the other rear tire.

He stops, not quite into the timbered draw. Somewhere he has a partial can of puncture seal.

Thought those tires were in better shape than this. I don't have enough weight on them that they should've popped. I wonder what's going on.

As he kneels to loosen lug nuts, he notices a shiny piece of metal deep in the tread--although scored, the piece of steel looks like the head

of a roofing nail. He sets the lug wrench aside, digs his knife from his pocket, and tries to pry the piece of steel free.

It's not a nail, but a triangular piece of hardened steel, a smaller version of the jaxs his department uses to flatten tires at roadblocks.

Wonder when I picked this up.

Jaxs don't flatten tires accidentally. He, Jim realizes, is a problem for somebody, and judging from the amount of galling, he'd guess the jax has been in his tire all day.

Someone didn't want me going far.

Lifting the other flat, he finds, sure enough, a barely visible, triangular twin embedded in its tread.

This is why Missy sniffed the tires. I'd have less problems if I paid more attention to her.

Someone knew I was going after Macfarland, and really doesn't want me finding him. I take it they want to find him themselves.

The sun and the heat has left him too rummy to think properly, but even half awake, he knows of a dozen ways he could have been killed since last night. So killing him isn't the object here, at least not now. Besides, he is in law enforcement; he is part of that blue line which will look after its own. But he's as much a problem to somebody as a Norris character would be in a Chandler mystery.

Who knew I was going after Macfarland? Ben. Mike. And Mike didn't really know.

Most people would be afraid to mess with his or any other officer's vehicle, but whoever did this doesn't fear his uniform, which makes him or her or them all the more dangerous. They didn't talk to him, nor did they really try to warn him away, either of which he would have expected from fellow officers. That, Jim suspects, probably means they are quasi-enforcement, neither civilians, nor law officers.

He feels a little like a puppet as he looks towards the timbered draw where he plans to camp, still most of a mile away. A couple of his puppet strings broke at the wrong time, too early for him, not early enough for them.

A low tube of dust slides towards him along road 125, from which he had just turned off before the second flat.

If he were less rummy, he would have chambered a round in his .06. As it is, he just watches as the dust comes ever closer. He watches until he sees, as if a mirage, a gray Suburban slowing, stopping a quarter mile away.

Am I seeing things?

He just now saw me.

How about that, I've been stopped long enough that my dust has somewhat settled. He didn't know I was here.

Jim waves to the Suburban, indicating as best he can that he needs help.

Still, the Suburban sits in the roadway, rough as a streambed, four hundred plus yards away.

There isn't much I can do to get him here, so, Christ, there's help over there. You need to do what I can't.

He returns to jacking his pickup higher. He only has a little canned air, which might or might not seal the puncture. He won't have enough tire to chase Macfarland far if the scientist doesn't want caught. At least he knows he hasn't been searching in vain.

Cautiously, as if it were an antelope approaching a waved handkerchief, the Suburban slowly steals forward, ready to bolt at any moment. It seems curious, but remains careful.

Jim stands beside the jack, waiting.

When the Suburban is within thirty yards, the driver's side window rolls down.

"This is my second flat. Only one spare."

"I have an air pump if that will help."

"It would, certainly, but both tires have a good-sized hole. Don't know how far I can get on just air."

"I saw you changing the one tire. I was up on the hill." The driver points towards Jumpoff Peak.

So he hadn't been alone. He hadn't been invisible even though he had felt like he was. Macfarland, he assumes, had been watching him. "Nice view from up there."

"You can see the fault line on which the nuclear reactors are built."

"Any danger to us? in case of an earthquake."

"You'd have to ask someone from the Site. That's not my specialty."

Confused--it would seem to him that a scientist monitoring radiation would know about reactors on active faultlines--Jim asks, "You are Dr. Macfarland, aren't you?"

Jim sees momentary panic arise from within Macfarland that almost causes the scientist to throw the Suburban into reverse.

"Don't get excited. I'm with the Bonneville sheriff's office and we got a report you were missing. We thought you might be broke down out here. Instead, it looks like I'm the one who needs rescued."

Still fidgety, Macfarland says, "It does appear so."

"You look okay. Are you?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You haven't been home, haven't been to work this week."

"I should, I suppose, be pleased somebody noticed."

"Dr. Wyte tried to get a hold of you. How come you didn't answer his calls? I imagine you heard them?"

"Yes, I did." Macfarland adds nothing else.

"But you're not going to talk to me."

"I don't know you."

"You know your lab burned?"

"I keep abreast of the news."

"Then you know about Wyte?" When Macfarland doesn't acknowledge his question one way or the other, Jim adds, "You know you're in Alabama?"

Macfarland lets slip a half laugh as if Jim had told a joke.

"I'm serious. That's where the INEEL has you. Huntsville, I think."

"Missile city. Well, I think they're a little confused."

"I talked to your neighbors, checked your condo, even talked to Bishop Lish, who told me quite a bit about you," which wasn't true, "so to sort of even things up, you talk while we put air in this tire."

"Bishop Lish? He told you nothing other than my soul is in mortal danger."

"It might not be just your soul. . . . I don't like being out here in the open. Maybe we can get up into the timber?"

"That might be wise, but what aren't you telling me?"

"I think your life is in danger. There are a few too many coincidences happening where you work, a few too many questions like why did your lab burn?" Whatever lives in his gut again pressures him to consider life versus art, only this time it's body versus soul.

"You tell me how it burned." Macfarland now has about him an aura of complete self confidence.

"For all the help you are, you might as well be in Alabama."

The scientist snorts a half laugh before asking, "How did I get there?"

"Transferred a month ago."

"That I didn't know, but I can fix that."

"Somebody doesn't want you found so if I were you, I wouldn't show up in town." Jim tells the scientist about his intruder last night and about finding the two devices.

"Did they look like this?" Macfarland holds out a small, square gizmo.

"Yeah, exactly."

"Then they were transmitters. . . . I put a hundred amps through this one."

"Fried it? . . . Wyte said they had a tracker on your rig."

"He acknowledged that, huh." Macfarland tosses the black gizmo onto his dash: "German electronics. We don't make anything in this country anymore."

"So you think it was Site security that--"

"Could have been the Chinese. We have a global economy that's polluting us out of existence. . . . I'll pull around behind you and we'll get some air in that tire."

Within another five minutes, both vehicles crawl past a Forest Service sign reminding campers to be safe with fire, then up the draw and into thick, standing timber. Missy, after checking Macfarland out, chases a squirrel up a fir while Jim looks at the tire, which is again flat.

"I have plugs that can fix that tire." Macfarland opens a tool box kept under the passenger seat.

"They're illegal, considered unsafe."

"You don't have to use them. . . . They still work as well as when they were legal, and they've often gotten me home, but--"

"This is what I took out of those tires." Jim tosses Macfarland the jaxs. "Don't see those too often."

"No, I don't suppose you do." Macfarland smiles as he returns the steel pyramids. "I find all of this is interesting, and to think, it all started with someone using my terminal to download hantavirus files."

"I thought your lab tested for radioactivity."

"Whoever told you that?"

"Wyte."

"He lied to you--like you did to me." After a long pause, Macfarland adds, "It is interesting that he would. My research certainly wasn't secret, and I had no connection to the work being done with hanta."

"What kind of work?"

"I know less than what I'll tell you . . . hanta was being developed as a biological agent, for biological warfare. That's what was going on in the lab."

Stiffening his back, standing up straight, with the lines of his forehead rigid, Jim says, "I didn't think we--"

"Engage in biological warfare? Of course we do."

"How can I prove that?"

"Proof is elusive. It is always a matter of believing what you think you know. And much we don't think happens does actually occur."

"Well, the fire was certainly set."

"Oh yes. And it burned hot enough to destroy the virus."

"That's why it was so hot." Now he beginning to find the answers that previously eluded him.

"Perhaps. It would have also destroyed my *bugs*."

"What sort of bugs were they?" He asks the question from habit, but the cop in Jim is less interested in insects than in research being done on a deadly virus virtually within a residential area, a clear violation of public safety, of law, of international treaties, and with, probably, no evidence left of any of it.

"You said you've been up all night--why don't you pitch your tent and take a nap while I work out a few ideas." Then as an afterthought, Macfarland adds, "I baked bread this morning so there are sandwich makings in that wood box. Help yourself."

Jim smells fir pitch and the pine duff, sage and a skunk that has passed through recently. Skunks kill mice that carry hanta, and he feels some type of a literary juxtapositioning that doesn't quite break through to being a thought; he's too tired to think.

7.

When Jim wakes, it is dusk, and actually dark in the timber. Macfarland is gone. Both of his tires have been repaired, and Missy is asleep in the cab of his pickup.

No note, nothing.

As Jim opens a Pepsi, he realizes if Macfarland doesn't want found now, he isn't going to find him, that in all likeliness he wouldn't have found Macfarland if the scientist hadn't sought him out for whatever reason. The scientist seemed to accept what he said, which, considering he's not in uniform, might mean that Macfarland knows a lot more about the fire than the scientist acknowledged.

Mac didn't know I was looking for him. For some reason he wanted to talk to me without me knowing who I was talking to.

There isn't much he can do except go home. He knows, maybe, a little more about who his intruder was. Plus, someone owes him for two tires: plugs won't last long. So he can attempt to find out why he was targeted (not that he doesn't know), find out who tipped whom off. He can look at the remains of the lab, can begin an investigation that, he

imagines, won't get far. What does he know about hanta. Not much. It's a bad bug.

Wait a minute. Mac said he had bugs and he never told me what kind. Another virus? I hope not. I ate his grub.

His stomach suddenly wars with itself, threatens to turn itself inside-out, threatens to pull from his bowels everything he ate as well as whatever has been multiplying inside him.

I'm either a dead man or extremely paranoid. Neither prospect is very comforting.

He had tossed his pocket notebook into the pickup glovebox--in it, he now outlines his meeting with Macfarland and expresses his concerns about an additional virus being cultured at the lab, one he might have ingested. This is the time for good policework. Since the fire, he has been behaving like a cowboy. For a little while, he forgot which tribe he owes his primary loyalty. The accident that killed Macfarland's daughter was so horrible, so effected everyone in the community that he temporarily misplaced his better judgement. Macfarland might be a brother, but if he wanted help he would've stuck around.

His pickup has good headlights, but they don't throw enough light for him to see the roughness of the road until he hits a boulder or falls into a hole; so his journey out of Hurst Canyon takes an hour to go twelve miles. But once he reaches Little Lost River, he's on his way--he's back in Idaho Falls by midnight, home by twelve-thirty.

As he opens the pickup's door, he again feels naked.

Now what am I suppose to do, sit up all night and watch my truck to make sure nobody messes with it.

That idea, he knows, isn't practical. What is practical, though, is simple: he takes a roll of insulated, single copper wire he salvaged--the wiring to the chickenhouse was, before he bought the place, two single wires run a foot apart--and attaches one bare end to a front bumper strut. He shoves the other end into one side of his outdoor plug-in. Then he takes another coil of single wire and wraps one of its bare ends around a prybar that he slides under the pickup; the other end he pushes into the other side of his outdoor plug-in, making sure the two wires don't touch. All he needs now is the heavy dew that's already developing.

He can't sleep. He lies under a sheet with his pants and boots on, and he keeps waiting for a yowl, for anything that would betray an intruder's presence. But his yard is more quiet than a pool of acid rain.

Nevertheless, with the Marlin close at hand, he lies, with Missy beside him, waiting.

Heavy, gray clouds streak the morning sky. They drift southeast, their lower edges tinged pink. Above them, visible through their breaks, lies another layer of clouds, shiny white. Dew lies heavy on the matted grass. His rhubarb likes these forty degree mornings, and he knows hatches will be sparse on the Henry's Fork. But he'd rather be in waders there with few bugs than here, awake and alone and not knowing what he's up against.

It is not knowing what he faces that really troubles him. All of his life he has had answers. He knows the story of Creation, the story of Noah, of Moses, of Christ, of Mormon, of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. The story of Joseph and his coat of many colors taught him about the trials and rewards for resisting temptation. The story of the spies in Canaan taught him faith. The story of Gideon taught him to ask for proof. And proof is what he needs right now, lots of proof. But how is he to prove his government has been experimenting with biological warfare here, where he's raising JamiJo.

Macfarland's story seems believable enough, but he only has the scientist's word for what was going on in that lab. He hasn't seen the evidence himself.

He doesn't want to believe, but considering the number of times the government has lied right up to *I didn't have sex with that woman*, who is more believable, a scientist or some spokesperson for the Energy Department who has Macfarland in Alabama . . . in the end, it's all about lying.

Since I'm up and still off today, I might as well find what I can. See if there are answers. See where the lies lead me.

He grew up believing that answers are, like placer gold, out there, waiting to be found, that if he shovels enough dirt, turns over enough stones, he will find color. Perhaps that is what attracted him to law enforcement. His need for closure. But beginning at least as early as he learned of Wyte's suicide, he began to doubt whether local law enforcement could find that one gold flake on which was written the indictment he sought, an indictment that grows by the hour.

He unplugs the two coils of wire, then unhooks the one from his pickup. And because he can't resist, he checks under both bumpers. Nothing.

Either 'cause I wasn't expected back--and if I would've had those flats in the desert I might not have gotten back, sort of an ugly thought--or I wasn't expected back so soon, they missed their chance at a shocking experience.

An even uglier thought--they might already know where I am and as far as they're concern, it doesn't matter what I do.

Barely six o'clock when he turns down 5th, Jim doesn't expect the flurry of early morning activity at the lab: frontend loaders lift ragged pieces of reinforced concrete into the beds of dump trucks, a line of which wait to be loaded. Two Cats push debris into piles. Strained engines groan. Backup beepers blend with the deep rumbles of turbocharged diesels. Two men with orange coned flashlights direct traffic. And he can't get close, not that there is anything left to inspect. It looks a little too much like Waco.

In another hour, nobody'll be able to prove there was ever a lab here. So what am I to investigate? A fellow doesn't have to be very smart to see coverup written all over this.

Watergate taught the Feds to, in the future, deny everything; Ruby Ridge, to destroy evidence. Jim feels a weakening of Apostle Paul's teaching that rulers aren't a terror to good works but to evil. Where, he wonders, is the evil here? If it isn't this coverup, he doesn't know where else it could be.

He understands no harm, no foul, but there could have been harm, lots of it, if a bug would've escaped or if a terrorist group would've targeted the lab. No harm, no foul isn't good enough when it comes to his daughter's safety. It's bad enough to be downwind of the Site, with all of its reactors and nuclear waste, but a biolab isn't tolerable, especially not when it's growing hantavirus for use as a biological agent.

What about the other scientists who worked in the lab? or anyone else who might have worked there? What do they know? What might they tell me?

The human element of any project is always the hardest to manage. Jim suspects that might be the case here--it's also all he has.

But who worked in the lab besides Macfarland and Wyte?

He suspects, after sending Macfarland to Alabama by computer, that INEEL's personnel records won't be of much help to him. He knows everyone will have undergone a security check, but one conducted by the FBI, not by his office. It isn't likely anyone in his office maintains a list of Site scientists. That leaves only unofficial sources--if he has to, he will ask the Church for help.

The scientists who were working at that lab are, he suspects, likely to have been transferred to another lab to continue their work. If their

new lab is on the Site, they will be a closed door. But the lab wasn't on the Site to begin with because the Site is routinely inspected by officials from Washington. Bio-work would be hard to hide. Too many people would know about it, and there are people of conscience working on the reservation. If Macfarland is correct, the work done at his lab was possibly unauthorized and certainly unreportable.

Those scientists are working in another local lab, continuing their evil in a residential area or industrial park. They're worse than druggies with met-labs next to schools.

If by accident he finds one of the gold flakes he seeks, he will take what he has to the press. He isn't about to trust JamiJo's future to federal courts, where justice for mothers with babies in their arms is riddled by sniper bullets.

He needs photos of this lab when its parking lot was full; he needs license plate numbers. He needs names, home addresses. He needs to know what went on there between when he left after taking to Wyte and the fire. Equipment was moved somewhere--who did the moving? Whose trucks? Ryder? U-Haul? The government, like large corporations, has taken to renting rather than owning. Somebody saw what transpired. He just has to find that somebody.

8.

"Did you find Dr. Macfarland?" asks Ben Gould, Jim's detective acquaintance. The detective, at Jim's request, has stopped by, letting Missy sniff his leg before mounting the porchstep.

Remembering that only two people knew he visited the lab before it burned and only one knew he would go after the scientist, Jim says, a little deceptively, "I did, but I had two flats," he shows one of the jaxs, "so I couldn't catch up to him. He's out there."

"Glad to hear that." Examining the piece of hardened steel, Ben asks, "Do you know where you picked this up?"

"I have an idea, but no, I don't know."

"I haven't seen one this small. Looks like it's for smaller tires."

"How big are the jaxs German police use?"

"Wouldn't know. Why do you ask?"

"No reason in particular. Just wondering."

"You expect me to believe you'd ask a question like--"

"Hang on." Jim looks for the hoe he left in the flowerbed--the bindweed seems to have grown another foot in the past thirty-six hours.

But the hoe is still there, with the device still attached. "Here, look at this. A tracking device. German origin."

"Where did you get this?"

Jim points to his pickup's back bumper.

"I've seen similar trackers for sale in trade publications. They are fairly expensive, but not uncommon. . . . I'm just surprised you have this. Normally the rabbit never knows it's there."

"Is that what I was, a rabbit? . . . Well, I guess I was just lucky to find it." Statements that are less than truthful leave a dusty aftertaste. "Anything more on Wyte's suicide?"

"No. We considered it a homicide, looked at the position of the hand, of the gun, of his head, computed the angle of the bullet. Everything checks out. It looks like a legitimate suicide."

"I was out to the fire this morning. Nothing's left. It's all been sanitized."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"There's a lab in town or nearby that's doing germ warfare research. I can't prove it." Pointing to the device, Jim continues, "But somebody wants to keep tabs on me just in case I find it."

"You, Deputy, want to complicate my life. . . . You might well be onto something. If you, this morning, can get a hold of INEEL's personnel roster, you will find Dr. Macfarland listed as working in that 500 West site. A copy of their personnel list was faxed to our office this morning, a copy we didn't request."

Jim cocks his head as Missy does when he talks to her.

"How many names are on that list?"

"I don't know. Twelve researchers. Others."

"Who sent the fax? Surely there's a machine number."

"It came from the Site."

"It doesn't have Macfarland in Alabama?"

"It has him drawing pay for all of this week."

"That can't be right."

"A person wouldn't think so, but it's impossible to list him as missing when he's at work."

"And he's working at the lab, out 5th?"

"Yup."

"There's computer tampering going on at the Site, maybe." Then remembering what Macfarland said about downloaded files, Jim adds, "Throughout their whole system more like it."

"What do you know about computers?"

"How to turn one on . . . not much."

Ben shakes his head as he turns towards his car: "Everything was neat and tidy. Then the fax this morning. But you, Jim, are really the only loose end left. Be careful."

Loose end, life has begun to sound too much like art for him. He can visualize *loose ends* in a Godfather movie, but not here in Idaho Falls. Nevertheless, he asks, "Can I get a copy of that fax? I need to verify an address."

"Why not. Swing by this afternoon. . . . It's as phoney as the first list, and who knows, we might get another one before the day's over."

*

A copy of the fax waits for him: Jim, in uniform, smiles at the small, female trooper, who seems to have a frown permanently tattooed between her nose and chin. He accepts the sealed envelope from her, says, "Thanks," then before leaving the building, opens and scans the list, which includes addresses and phone numbers.

The first thing he notices is the address for Macfarland is wrong: the listed address isn't for Macfarland's condo but for a residence off Sunnyside Road.

In his pickup, which Missy has watched for him while he was inside, he sits trying to figure out who benefits from having sent the list, and why the wrong address for Macfarland. Obviously, Macfarland benefits in that he will be paid for this week. Who else? He can't think of anybody. He knows none of the names on the list.

If Macfarland's address is wrong, what about the others?

The second phone booth he stops at still has its directory bound by cable to its side wall. He checks names. Only two are in the book, and both of them have the same published address as is on the list.

Now what? Did Wyte send me to the wrong place? Or what? Is Mac sending a message? Which means Mac sent this, but how? And why? Has to have something to do with that street address--

The address isn't far . . . it is the address of an unfinished home in one of those potato field subdivisions. The property appears to only need landscaped before it's placed on the market. It's dark gray with white trim, white roof, and bits and pieces of trimmed white shingles lying, like clover blossoms, across the bare subsoil.

Getting out, walking around, he finds the house locked. No one seems to be here.

What kind of message is this?

"Hello, neighbor."

Jim turns towards the voice, but sees nobody, sees nothing but a cedar fence. The voice, though, he recognizes as Macfarland's. "Where are you?"

"I've never liked Alabama. Their music doesn't appeal to me."

"That's a good trick, drawing pay for this week." He sighs along the fence, but still doesn't see the scientist. "Where are you?"

"I thought you'd be here earlier."

"I might've if you'd have sent me the fax instead of sending it to the troopers."

"I did send one to you. You have a fax modem on your machine."

"Didn't come though."

"I see. Goodbye."

Jim had almost figured out from where the voice comes when the goodbye. *So what was this all about?*

He wants to call out to the cedar board fence, but he's certain Macfarland is now far from here, afraid, Jim imagines, that this fence might have ears. And he again feels naked, feels as if the surrounding boards are columns of cedar eyeballs, each watching his every move, each judging him, each seeing right through him. *I'm becoming as paranoid as Mac.*

Jim realizes that not only is his phone likely tapped, but there must also be some kind of a intercepting, screening device on his line which blocks selected messages. He can't trust anything. If a message gets through, then it's because that mythical *they* want him to receive it, and he'll have no way of knowing what doesn't get through. If he acts on messages received, he'll play right into their hands. If he doesn't, the consequences can be equally dire. He's damned either way.

I'm a mouse in a lab maze, somebody's project, experiment, demonstration, what have you. And when it's over I get killed, or recycled? Ugly, ugly situation.

All he can do is continue: he has other addresses. Maybe they are all legitimate. Or maybe they are part of some game Macfarland plays with him.

The last name on the list is Richard Parker . . . Jim knocks on the door of the address listed for Parker.

"Is your husband home?"

"Is he all right?" asks the woman, still in her bathrobe.

"I'm here to find out if he is."

"I wish he'd just quit. This is too much."

Wondering what is too much, Jim asks, "What sort of problem is he having?"

"I don't know. He won't tell me. He says he can't talk about it because it has to do with the Site."

"Well, I'm interested. He can talk to me about the Site. So here's my card. Tell him I'm investigating the fire and would like to meet with him. He'll know what I'm referencing."

"He hasn't been all right since his boss . . ." her voice fades into silence.

"Dr. Wyte?"

"What about him?"

"Was that his boss?"

"Yes. . . . I've said too much. You'll have to talk to Dick." She closes the door in his face.

He has something, but he's not sure what. He suspects she will pressure Parker to talk to him. At any rate, this address warrants a return visit.

The next name is Sandra Olachea . . . no one answers her door.

The next name is Dr. Oliver Nicholls . . . again, no one answers.

The next name is Dr. Seth Macfarland . . . Jim remembers Mac saying, *Hello neighbor*. He assumed at the time Mac meant neighbor because of the fence between them. What if--he wants to reject the thought without giving it time to fully develop--the scientist is somehow now his neighbor. Macfarland is obviously skilled enough to manipulate computer records. Is he, Jim doesn't like where this line of reasoning takes him, chameleon enough to slip in and out of town without being detected?

His neighbors to the east have been Jon and Wendy Blocker for the past seven years, and it's time to make sure they are still his neighbors.

Crossing town, heading north and east, he has time to think but really can't, just as when he had to write that essay. Why is he suddenly remembering one class, one final from years ago? And from a rather useless class at that. He should be trying to see the big picture, not deconstructing what never was. He's reacting, not initiating action. He's being manipulated. He's being a lousy cop if the truth be known. But then, what's being a good cop? Most of what he does is solve problems between neighbors, slow traffic down a bit, check on things. Not very glamorous work. He talks to people. Good people mostly. He remembers things, and it's his memory that really drives him now.

When he pulls into their driveway, his neighbors are still Jon and Wendy.

"Just stop by to see if a barking dog has been bothering you. I have a complaint."

"Not last night but night before, yeah, we had a dog barking for quite awhile. Someone parked in back of those elms," Jon, retired from the railroad and usually home, points to a line of large trees fronting Lincoln, "and stayed there till about midnight. I was just about ready to call you."

"What were they driving?" Jim realizes the car was probably his intruder's.

"Black car, expensive. I couldn't tell you."

"If you ever see them again, call me immediately. If you can't get through, call dispatch, 911. I had an unwanted visitor about then. Someone tried to break in."

"What's this world coming to. Can't trust nobody."

"No you can't, but we all do."

As Jim pulls into his own driveway, he keeps repeating, good policework sometimes depends on luck, on nothing but luck. However, he knows that sometimes determining what is luck and what is answered prayer becomes difficult.

His neighbors to the west won't be home for another hour. It takes both of them working to pay for the house they built where a perfectly good, but smaller, older home had been. And he has no neighbors to either his north or south.

He now believes the list is genuine. But Macfarland is more puzzling than ever. He doesn't seem a real person, and Jim doubts he ever will.

Jim, though, has a real problem on his hands. Somewhere in Idaho Falls, a person who knows better works with the hantavirus for only one reason: to kill for military advantage.

Christ does say that at the end if He doesn't return, no flesh would be saved alive. A bug is more likely to finish us than nukes. Maybe I shouldn't sweat this. It will happen.

Sitting in his pickup, Missy beside him, Jim feels an old wrestling a little above, a little behind his stomach. He wants to live, wants to be in heaven; wants to save the world, wants to end it; wants to hasten Christ's return, wants to delay that promised return. He can't have it both ways, but a strong part of him insists on both ways.

It'd be alot easier if I didn't have to believe.

"You don't have to--" Jim, startled, spins to see Macfarland beside him, "sit there. Come on in. I took a call from your wife, told her to stay where she was."

"Where's your rig?"

"In your garage." The scientist smiles as he adds, "I hope you understand, I had to check you out. You owe thirty-seven dollars to a dentist in Provo."

"That was--"

"No excuses." Macfarland pats Missy, who, Jim has learned, is a good judge of character. "I was finally able to retrieve everything that was actually downloaded from my terminal. We are both in trouble."

For the next hour, Macfarland explains what hantavirus is, what it does, and the nature of the research which had been conducted at the lab. He briefly highlights his own work, then resumes his story about hanta, saying, "Small scale experiments on human subjects will be undertaken in National Parks. When, I don't know. They might already be occurring."

Jim, angry, a bit shaken, asks, "Why? why do this?"

"I could say *New World Order*. That's probably overly simplistic." Macfarland swept Jim's house for eavesdropping devices when he arrived. He still, though, isn't certain their conversation is truly private, and right now he doesn't want any other audience. He has a chance to end the industrial pollution that chokes the planet. He means to take advantage of the situation. "There's some thinking out there that says for human survival, forty percent of the U.S. population has to be eliminated. Many analysts think that will be done by a Russian nuclear first strike next year or the year after. Since November, 1997, President Clinton has made us vulnerable by ordering that we not launch on warning, but that we would absorb a first strike. That's on the record. You can check it out. But I'm not convinced that they want the type of infrastructural damage that will occur in a nuclear strike, especially not after reading what was downloaded from my terminal."

"You're serious? Forty percent?"

"That's the key, forty percent. Remember that number, forty percent."

"And we're sitting ducks."

"Dead ducks, my friend."

"You are serious." Jim hears a little fear in his voice. He can also hear skepticism.

"Very much so. I'm afraid our environmentalists friends have a better argument for our elimination than any of us have put forth for our survival."

"You know," Jim wishes he had a Pepsi (maybe its sweetness would wash away the bitter taste of what he's hearing), "I can't accept what you're telling me. I hear you, but I can't accept it. You're saying our President is a traitor."

"Whether you believe that or not makes no difference, just as whether I believe it doesn't. We are immaterial, nobodies."

"I don't like that either."

"Well, according to what I read and you'll have to take my word for this, national exposure to hantavirus would eliminate their desired forty percent with nobody being any the wiser. Would leave everything in tact. Would be better than neutron bombs." Macfarland pauses to let his story work its effect before continuing, "Hanta's mortality rate is forty percent. That you can verify anywhere. And they really don't care which forty percent of us die. Bodycount is all that really matters to them. There is just too many of us, using too many resources."

"So why are you telling me this?"

"I sat on that mountain where you found me, trying to figure how to stop what I know will happen. . . . For several decades the concept of mutually assured destruction kept an uneasy peace. It might again if destruction could be assured. The definition of destruction is what's problematic."

"Destruction means wiping things out, doesn't it?" He feels silly even asking the question.

"Do you have an immortal soul?"

"I don't know--sure I do." *What kind of a question is that?*

"Well, you don't. You only think you do. You are a soul. You don't have one. *Nephesh* is the word. Check it out. But my point is that for a long time the destruction of the soul has been considered its existence in hell, which really isn't any destruction at all, so destroying the world can mean its continuance in an altered state." Macfarland again pauses, then adds, "If none of the industrialized nations have petroleum, they will think they're in hell. The world will exist separated from its economic wealth."

"But there's plenty of oil. Hundreds of years' worth."

"Might be. Maybe. . . . If my calculations are correct . . ."

Macfarland hesitates. "If my calculations tell me what I think they do, civilization hangs on by the thinnest of threads."

"I don't--" He doesn't want to hear this.

"Understand? I didn't either, not at first."

"What you said about hanta rings true, but I don't want to believe it. I have a daughter--" He's about to use a word that seems logical but really has no meaning; he doesn't need the word. "There's another lab somewhere closeby where all that equipment went." Jim tells Mac what Mrs. Parker said.

"Dick, I know, has been troubled for several months now. I thought he was merely having marriage problems. Actually, I thought his wife might be seeing . . ." Mac doesn't name who he was about to.

"My intention is to find that lab."

"Go for it. I hope you won't mind, though, if I stay here. I need your natural gas line. I have some hungry *bugs*."

"I'm on call in the morning."

"Good. But forgive me if I seem callous. I don't think there's anything you can do to stop the hanta project. A lab here, a lab there won't make any difference." Macfarland unpacks a box of modified specimen bottles. "From an article that appeared several years ago in *Nature* magazine, some bright fellow put together what it has taken until now for me to realize." He goes to the kitchen range and lifts the stove top as if he intends to ignite the pilot light.

"I take it you haven't eaten."

"I found our hell, found it more than a year ago." Macfarland loosens the line to the right front burner, then slips a rubber hose over the gas line. "Have you read the *Apocalypse of Paul*?"

Jim shrugs, not wanting to say that he's never heard of it.

"It's rather fantastic reading, but its vision of hell will be nothing compared to the fight for the last drop of oil." Macfarland seems to enter a world of his own. "I found two microbes that, if introduced to a pool of oil, will completely devour it. One is a little lazy, but the other would take about three and a half years to eat every bit of oil in the Persian Gulf."

"Where did you find them?" Although he asks the question, he really wonders why Mac would mention a book when books are what he's been thinking about. It's almost as if divine inspiration is occurring.

"I found them south of the Site. Note, there isn't any oil out there. If there ever was, they would have devoured it, multiplied, and spread beyond their present range."

"How would you get them in an oilfield?" The professional portion of his mind seems detached and asks questions without conscious

thought. His interest is in the question of possible inspiration. Is it possible to be both skeptic and believer at the same time? No. Probably not.

"In most fields, water is pumped back into the ground. Put a little oil in that water supply, then introduce them."

"I'm lost. I was thinking about something else." He recalls the sounds of words he heard as he tries to assign meaning to them. "You want to put microbes into an oil field to stop the spread of hanta that's intended to kill off forty percent of us, all the while Russian or Chinese nukes are still aimed at us with us having no defenses. Is that the story?"

"It's too simple for even a book plot."

"And your intention is to threaten oil dependent countries like Russia or now China or even us, the U.S., that if they kill forty percent of our population, your bugs will eat up their oil supply. Is that the rest of the story?"

"The villains here are not any one national government."

"You really believe in what you're telling me, don't you?"

Nodding yes, his back turned to Jim, Macfarland meters the flow of methane into each bottle. Although Mac can't see his bugs without magnification, he behaves as if he's quite attached to them.

9.

Jim had hoped for a call from either Parker, Mr. or Mrs. He didn't expect to see video of Parker's minivan on the ten o'clock news:

"Pronounced dead at the scene, forty-eight years old Dr. Richard Parker was wearing a safety belt when his 1998 Caravan was broadsided by the pickup of 19-year-old Hector Lopez of American Falls, who entered the intersection of Broadway and Skyline at a high rate of speed . . ."

An accident. A suicide followed by an accident--how many more will there be? Jim is almost afraid to answer his own question: there'll be two more, his and Mac's.

Staying alive--and he really wants to live, to have more children, to see them marry and have children--might be a problem, and again, an uneasy feeling about stopping an older pickup with Utah plates sours his stomach, and as if stifling a belch, he swallows hard and pushes apprehension down into his bowels where it will ferment longer. He can almost see the truck, a white Ford, mid-70s, but the driver's face is blank.

Why a white truck? Because of what happened before? Possibly. He doubts he'll ever again be comfortable approaching a white Ford pickup, and there are lots of them on the road. He would almost as soon let one go as to stop it, even when necessary. In a way, he has lost faith; he's unsure about whether he will be protected. Dying is just too easy.

After the news, he takes Missy outside, where standing in the shadows of the garage, he wonders if he really believes in heaven, a doubt he's had for several years. Christ seems real enough. Same for Moses and Adam. There's nothing wrong with the Commandments. He understands a Resurrection. But Idaho Falls isn't such a bad place to live. He really doesn't want to go anywhere else. Things are pretty good here. Pleasant evenings. Not muggy hot like the Midwest. Sun shines most every day. Roads get a little slick in January, but winters here aren't real severe. Hunting isn't what it used to be but is still pretty good. Fishing is good. He's not a great fan of singing; he'd rather be hunting than singing heavenly praises, not that praises aren't due. He just doesn't see any advantage of being in heaven--and if he were to voice these thoughts to Sarah, she'd give him at least two hours of reasons why he should want heaven. Actually, he'd rather have Christ down here. Who knows, if Christ isn't going to drink wine until He returns, then maybe He would like to cast a fly on the Henry's Fork. His reputation as a fisherman, well . . . *

The phone rings.

"That car I was telling you about," says Jon, his neighbor, "just pulled behind those elms."

"Turn out your lights and stay inside. You might call dispatch, have them send somebody by to run its license plates."

"I'll be taking my Winchester to bed with me, then."

"Do that."

Macfarland has been busy cutting and cementing together with silicon clear plastic boxes made from the panes of Jim's storm windows. But when the phone rings, he stops what he has been doing and waits.

Jim points to him, saying as he does, "We have to hurry. Company is on their way."

"I have to protect these bugs. Most important thing."

Handing Mac the shotgun, Jim orders, "Take this Marlin and take your bugs to the root cellar," he points to a door in the floor of the utility room, "and shoot anybody but me who tries to get down there."

"I have," Mac points to the garage, "a night vision scope in the Suburban, under the front seat. It's Russian, not as good as ours, but all I could get last year."

"I'll get it." The garage isn't attached to the house, but the yardlight doesn't reach around that far.

"You'll need the key." Macfarland tosses him a key ring. "Otherwise the alarm makes a little noise, among other things."

He has to hurry. It will only take their company a minute or two to walk over from the Blocker's.

The night vision scope is mounted to a headband--Jim dons it, then ducks back out the garage's rear door and stays in the shadows. He suspects the scope is on the headband so the scientist can drive without headlights.

Crouching at the corner of the house, still in the garage's shadow, he scans the blackness beyond the gloom cast by his yardlight. He had thought his yardlight dim, but looking through the scope, he's almost blinded by its brightness.

He locates them: two fellows, in dark clothes, the smaller fellow Caucasian, the other Black, both watching his house more than where they're going, both having trouble avoiding the coils of rusty barbwire that Jon scattered through the knee-high grass sometime this afternoon. He knows Jon, knows Jon can't resist helping out, and he wishes he had with him his handcuffs, which are on his Sam Browne belt upstairs. He would arrest these two, would make some kind of a charge stick.

The two fellows, unaware that they are being watched, linger beside Jim's utility trailer, made from the bed of his dad's '56 Ford pickup. They are equally unaware that an urge, evil and almost overpowering, argues for Jim to just shoot them. No warning, no waiting for them to enter his house. He wants to kill them where they stand, and he understands why an occasional homeowner will fire at a prowler who isn't necessarily threatening bodily harm. Just the presence of a prowler, especially these two, threatens him.

Lights are still on throughout his house. It looks like his guests are waiting for them to be turned out. They might or might not have heard him rack a shell into the Marlin's chamber the other night--they seem unwilling to take chances tonight.

I could use a little help, Father. Satan just put his two-cents in, but I can't do it, just can't quite kill them, not right now. So if you have an angel send them packing, it wouldn't hurt my feelings. I really don't want to take care of them myself,

don't want a shooting, don't want the questions, the paperwork, their blood on my conscience. So in Christ's name, I'm asking for help.

He hears his internal monologue, and for a minute dislikes himself for having a hippocket god, one he pulls out every time he faces difficulties. After all, each time he invokes Christ's name, he asks Christ to remember His death. He doesn't even like remembering the whippings his dad gave him; he wouldn't want to remember being crucified. So as he watches the two fellows, he feels anger at himself build, the type of anger that tightens his trigger finger, that steadies his aim.

The moon, nearly full, slips from behind dark clouds and shines bright across the pasture where his calf, now a thousand pounds, stirs, then bawls, thirsty from Jim having forgotten to water him today. Not being Jim's waterturn, the lateral behind his pasture is dry. But Blocker's lateral also supplies the field across the road where ditchwater fills a sump before being pumped into a wheelline that clicks as sprinkler heads wet growing potatoes.

The calf, smelling the flowing ditch, leans against the fence as it continues to bawl. Inside the house, Missy barks. One rooster awakens, then a second--a light is always on in the chickenhouse. Their dueling crows start Blocker's roosters crowing. A fox barks from somewhere in the potato field, and his hens and Blocker's hen squawk in unison, raucous rocking squawks that spread the alarm, letting everyone within a half mile know a fox is about.

Jim sees the porchlight of his neighbors to the west come on--the fellow, in white shorts and a white T-shirt, steps outside as the calf, still bawling, cracks a juniper fencepost, letting the fence sag just enough that the calf thinks it can jump over, which it really can't do. It gets tangled in the barbwire, panics, flounders, and bellows as loud as a cow can. His neighbor steps back inside, emerges almost immediately with pants on, and hurries towards the calf.

The two fellows back away from the utility trailer, and disappear before Jim's neighbor reaches the calf.

Jim, over his squawking hens, hears a muffler loosen, then come off. He hears that car's engine rev high as if the vehicle were stuck; hears someone press its throttle, then back off as if trying to rock the rig back and forth; hears the rocking repeated a couple of times; then he hears the rig spin out onto the pavement. The roar of its engine fades eastward.

It takes a gunny sack over the calf's head and both Jim and his neighbor to get the calf free from the barbwire, which leaves deep gashes just above the hooves of two legs. Stitches will be required; so Jim calls his vet, who lives a mile away and who reluctantly drives over to repair the damage, leaving a bill for \$79.48 and a prescription for antibiotics that will cost another fifteen dollars.

Jon Blocker appears out of the darkness while the vet wraps what looks like an ace bandage with a sticky side around one of the calf's hocks.

"I ah," Jon says, "must've dropped a block of firewood out there in the dark. Think that car got high-centered for a minute or two there."

"Did you have your Winchester with you when you dropped it?"

"Oh, yes. I was out there after that fox. She upset my hens enough they're likely to shut down for the rest of the week."

"Did you happen to get their license number?"

"I did better than that." Jon reaches inside his shirt and hands over a Washington license plate. "They must've lost it when they ran over that block."

"Let me call it in. Maybe one of the units will pick them up for *illegal display*." So as soon as the vet finishes, Jim uses his portable radio to call dispatch. He is now on-call. But with his car in the county lot (it was time for it to be serviced anyway), he doesn't expect to be summoned tonight.

The calf, still thirsty, doesn't like the feel of the wrappings around its legs; so it kicks as it continues to bawl. Jon helps Jim string a hose to a clawfoot bathtub, empty but green with algae, that stands just inside the fence, which will have to be repaired before he can go to bed. And the calf, still with more white showing in its eyes than usual, tries to butt the end of the hose as if by butting the water will flow faster.

Jim thanks Jon as Missy runs around the yard. She continues to run, smelling, Jim believes, the two fellows. She might also have winded the fox. So as he drives a steel fencepost that his western neighbor brought over before returning to bed, he doesn't expect his intruders to be back; they might not ever return.

Fixing fence in the dark isn't high on my list of favorite activities.

But in the cool darkness, moistened by the wheellines, he feels satisfaction: he has a couple of leads besides the list of names. Dr. Parker was west of the Freeway at the time of his accident; he lived near Grand Teton Mall, meaning the lab's new location is probably on the west side. He has a plate he can run. He had a good look at the two

fellows, thanks to Mac's scope. He'll recognize them. And he's repairing the portion of the pasture fence that has needed it for at least seven years. All he lacks is sleep.

*

Morning: leaving Macfarland building boxes that look like sealed inverted aquariums, leaving the Marlin with him, Jim turns onto Yellowstone and follows traffic under the railroad tracks. He turns onto Broadway, crosses the Snake and crosses under I-15. He pulls over just before Skyline, and with his pickup's 360 idling a little rough, he waits for a gray Accord, license number 4B 6555: Sandra Olachea's Honda.

It's nearly nine before she passes, hurrying to get to work. He almost misses seeing her. As a result, she is two blocks ahead and getting farther away by the time he enters the roadway.

She turns right without signaling, speeds along Bellin, then off Grandview, turns onto a set of dusty tracks that meander towards the airstrip . . . he can't follow without being noticed; so he returns to Broadway, loops around to 2600 and circles along the west side of the strip.

He has lost her.

Needing the help of his department--the Sheriff's office should know where those tracks lead--he might as well return home, get into uniform and sniff around some. Besides, he has a plate he needs to run.

When home again, the driving beat of the looped introduction for Rush Limbaugh pushes out ahead of him when opens his door. Missy, never happy being left home, jumps over him, and Macfarland, opening the overhead garage door, greets him with, "Any luck?"

"I lost the car I was after."

"You're chasing spooks."

"Just about caught two last night and one this morning."

"Come with me. Ride shotgun. You really can't do any good here, you can't stop them."

"Where are you going? Besides, I can try. That's all any of us can do."

"If you are *trying* and I'm *doing*, I will defeat you every time."

"Where are you going, back out into the desert?"

"Suit yourself. Stay here. I know what it's like to lose a daughter--"

"Where are you going?"

"To find an oil field. . . . It's *save the world time* although that might be a cliché. . . . I can't stand by and watch people die, but evidently you can."

"By yourself?"

"No. Pet's with me."

"Your cat? I have a wife and a kid, a job, this place. I can't just take off."

"No, you can't."

"Who do you plan to threaten with your bugs? You can't just call up the President and say that I'm going to end industrial civilization as we know it in three years."

"Don't intend to."

"Then how is anybody going to know you have them?"

"They already know. They just don't know if I realize what I have. I'm the one who's late coming to the party."

"I dunno." Jim would take what he has learned to the press, but the story, compelling as it seems, is really too fantastic for even him to believe. "I don't want to be part of that forty percent, don't want Sarah or JamiJo to be part of it. I have to stay here and prove you wrong. Show that they can be stopped."

"You know I'm right, don't you?"

"All I know is I can't prove you wrong. Beyond that, I don't know. Don't know what to think. You tell a good story, but hardly a credible one."

"If I'm not telling you the truth, will you recognize the truth if you hear it?"

"Yes--maybe." Jim knows that because the Department of Energy is involved, everything is deniable and will be denied. He also realizes he has no criteria for determining what is true other than what he has always believed. "A few kooks might believe you, the conspiracy theory buffs, but nobody else will."

"I was supposed to be fired, the reason why someone downloaded files from my terminal. And those files are so damaging that what was downloaded could never be released. They wanted to make sure I had no way of defending himself."

"Why weren't you fired?"

"Dr. Wyte knew I didn't do the deed. I wasn't interested in other projects. I had enough to do proving global warming is a hoax. Plus, I was beginning to see the potential of my bugs. I put a few ideas out. Evidently one of them attracted attention."

"You could've committed suicide as easily as Wyte."

"Might have happened. But if I would've been fired, then I would have found a job at some university and would never have been heard

from again. Could've died from a stroke or a heart attack or a bicycle accident within a year. No one would've noticed. . . . Who would've cared?"

"Maybe even from hanta."

"That's not reliable enough. Hanta kills by percentage. If this nation loses forty percent by hanta, the survivors will be much stronger. A better gene pool. Better immune systems."

"And you think you can stop that?" Jim still has doubts about any plan to kill Americans.

"No, I don't."

"I thought that's what this is all about?"

"It is what this is about, but I don't think I can stop them alone. I'm betting against the odds. . . . This New World Order plays rough. I'm a scientist. I'm not a violent person."

"Then why--"

"Because I have to try. Besides, it's time."

"For what?" Jim didn't eat before he left, didn't get much sleep after fixing that fence. He's both hungry and sleepy, and all he really wants is breakfast--and to see JamiJo safe.

"It's time for all this to end, the greed, the pollution, the killing . . . because of our international fiscal policies, particularly those of the IMF, the United States is truly hated in Asia, in Russia, in Brazil."

"Yeah, we have real enemies, within and without, right?"

"Our time is short, but it's not us, not Capitalism, or Socialism. It's the end of one demonstration, time to begin a new one."

Wishing he had never taken that missing person report, wishing he never heard of hantavirus, Jim says, "And you're supposed to make sure it happens?"

"No. That's silly. . . . If anything, I'd like to stop it from happening."

"So you're not going to make our time even shorter?"

"Not my intention." Macfarland, by training and by experience, is hesitant to reveal what he knows. "Do you believe the lost tribes of Isreal are here."

"Sure."

"In the Tribulation Israel's again in captivity, which means so are we, or we're wearing the mark of the Beast. Is either of those scenarios what you want?"

Jim doesn't answer. He never understood Revelation although he thought he did years ago, and he certainly never will let what he doesn't understand influence him.

"One of the two will occur."

"Or we can go on just the way things are." Jim knows that isn't possible, but he refuses to be hooked by Revelation's stories, by any 666 reasoning.

"I'll either hasten the Tribulation, bringing about the end for everybody, or I'll back the globalists off who want to bring America down to the world's mean-level of development."

"You think pretty highly of yourself."

"Look, if I can back the globalists down until better sources of clean energy are developed and we're less dependent on hydrocarbons--they don't want to go back to the Middle Ages--well, everyone benefits."

"If you start destroying oil, we're likely to go back to the stone age."

"Not true."

"But even if you destroyed all of the oil, how does that stop killing off Americans?"

"As long as my bugs are out there, civilization is vulnerable until more sources of clean energy are developed. As those sources become available, there will be less reason to reduce our population, and we will be the ones to develop those sources. Americans and America will be needed for something more than wheat, corn, and soybeans."

"I think you have delusions of grandeur."

"Possibly, but come and be a martyr with me. I'll have my hands full just caring for my *bugs*. There's not enough of me to be watching ahead and behind at the same time."

"You're asking me to be a martyr?"

"You can either volunteer or get drafted."

"I can get the hell away from you."

"There's a need for martyrs. There'll be a lot of us."

"I think you're crazy. I can't believe I'm listening to you."

"Paranoid, maybe, not crazy. But stay here. See how long you last. Your daughter needs what little time the two of you have left together."

Jim feels hate for Macfarland.

Hate might be too strong a word. Perhaps the right word doesn't exist. A loathing. That's better. What a person feels when you hear something you don't want to believe but have to.

"Do you have a plan?"

"Not really. I have some ideas."

"You'll have to demonstrate what your bugs do."

"I have that part figured out."

"What if they get loose?"

"You will again be a Rider of the Purple Sage, I imagine."
"Is that all the far back we'll have to go, to cowboying?"
"For you, probably. For a Wall Street broker . . ." Macfarland doesn't finish his thought.
"Just curious, where do your bugs come from?"
"Methane percolates up through the earth's crust, gets trapped by clay domes, forms pools which trap more, forms oilfields. These bugs are just another life form, only they feed on that methane."
"Natural gas? That's not oil."
"In the lab, we can breed them to break hydrocarbon chains down to methane. They remain slow at doing that, though. But it so happens mine mutated when they passed over the Yellowstone Hotspot. They became a lot hungrier, a lot better at breaking down chains."
"So these bugs are everywhere?"
"Some places are better hunting than others, kind of like hunting rabbits. Some places have an over population. In some places they are a little scarce."
"How come I've never heard of them?"
"I don't think Adam named them."
"You need my help so don't get--"
"There's much we're still learning about this planet. How long ago did we learn of tube worms that convert heat from volcanic vents into energy? A decade and a half ago?"
"You're nuts."
"That happens when you take a doctorate."
"I'm going to get something to eat and think about this. I still think you're a nut case."

10.

Jim calls Sarah, and sparing her as many details as he can, he tells her about the work done with hantavirus. She is appalled, as he expected her to be.

"Is there anything you can do, Jim, Honey?"
"I think Mac's crazy, but something's being covered up here, something big. Just wish I wasn't the one to know."
"Who can we tell? Or where can we go to find out more?"
"He knows more about what was going on in that lab than anyone else, or at least anyone who will talk."
"Call the FBI--"

"I think they're part of the problem. The same tracking devices were on our pickup as was on Mac's rig, and I know either Site security or the FBI put the one on Mac's."

"What about the newspaper. Surely they'll want to cover this. Or what about your friend in the D.A.'s office?"

"Right now, I don't trust Mike."

"Then call *60 Minutes*."

"No, they'll think I'm a kook. Mac's been discredited. The Site will say he stole secrets, will put him in jail. The press will treat him like they do Art Bell's guests." And again he recalls that essay question. All-night talk radio is certainly the home of mental fruitcakes, but can a demon be mistaken for an alien? Sure it can. And some of the best minds of this planet, including Christ, believed in the existence of demons. So where is the line between art and life? Maybe no line exists.

"You have already made up your mind to go with him, haven't you?"

"I'm thinking about it." Why has he been singled out, he doesn't know. He wasn't wanting to know about hantavirus or methane bugs, but now he does. He doesn't want to trust Mac, but he can't trust the Federal government: *"I didn't have sex with that woman"--yeah, and JamiJo was born by immaculate conception.* The Federal government has twice moved against the Church; they have recently gone after seventh-day Sabbath keepers at Ruby Ridge and Waco; they have undermined governments in Brazil and Iran that he knows of. They practice deception, disinformation and coverup. What else can he expect from Washington? And he has to balance this against what Mac tells him. "I don't know, Honey, what to believe or what else to do."

"I'll call around. Everybody will be praying for you."

"Don't think that's necessary."

"I do . . . and protect yourself."

Goodbyes have never been his strength. He avoids them whenever possible. Now is one of those times: he mumbles his love for her and JamiJo into the receiver, then quickly hangs up as if the phone were too hot to touch.

So as he leans on the fence, watching his steer calf chew its cud, the calf oblivious to its future--it munches a little grass, accepts a flake of hay, drinks a few gallons of water; it doesn't ask for much, all the while gaining poundage; it balks once in awhile, but usually lets itself be lead around--Jim wonders if he, his neighbors, everyone in the Department, in Idaho Falls can be equally oblivious to their future. Most everyone he knows believes in Christ, in the Prophet. They all think about the

future, talk about it, preach about it. But do they really know anything? Maybe not.

Sarah told him to look in her dresser. Maybe, before he commits himself to this idiocy, he ought to find what she insisted he read.

He finds a copy of a 1943 newspaper. Bottom, centered is a letter her uncle wrote when in Sicily. Not all of the letter. Probably most of it, though. And he reads the yellowed newsprint carefully:

We might think things are tough in the States and that we are being mistreated and at times falsely led, but until one sees the once well-to-do people on the streets begging for food because they have had nothing to eat for days, then and then only can we realize just how fortunate we of the United States are.

The letter continues, telling about the beauty of the island, saying that not everyone can be on the fighting front but that everyone has his own front on which he can fight.

He didn't think her uncle was that philosophical, and he can't understand how anyone can think otherwise about how fortunate we are. If not for America, how would the Church have been restored? So who, he wonders, are these people who would kill Americans because we eat too much or drive too many miles or piss in too many streams? They aren't some foreign nation that wants to occupy our potato fields. They're that couple with backpacks and a birdbook and spotted owl T-shirts, who also had a grandfather in Sicily in 1943. They're politicians who spent Vietnam safely in law school, who protested the draft and the war while attending Oxford. They're actresses with hearts of goodwill, who went to Hanoi and sat in antiaircraft batteries while American planes were shot at. Do they care if they are one of the forty percent? Or will they be in Brussels when the virus attacks children and old folks?

That's one helluva way to solve the Social Security crisis.

Macfarland is probably right. There's probably nothing he can do to stop whatever's planned. Once they figure out Mac has been here, they'll realize that he knows too much. He'll have to be killed. They might even go after Sarah and JamiJo to get at him, which is Sarah's unvoiced concern.

He returns the newspaper to Sarah's dresser drawer, kisses a picture of her and JamiJo, then looks for Macfarland.

"Okay, Mac, I'll believe you. I'll ride along, but that's all. Nothing else." For now, he'll choose to believe Mac, but then, belief is always a

choice. "I really don't like believing you, don't like not trusting our government."

"Then why don't you stay here. I'll be gone in a couple of hours."

"You want help or not?"

"Yes, I want help. I need it." Then with the patience of a schoolteacher trying to inspire a promising student, Mac sets the propane bottle he has been filling with methane down, and says: "You know, Deputy, when you pick up a book, you want it to be fiction or nonfiction or literary or whatever. It's more comfortable knowing whether you should believe the story or not before you start reading. But life is not like that. The price of gas is a story, but what kind of a story? one of oil companies getting rich or one of over taxation? You might believe one or both of those stories, but the story is much, much more complex. But you don't think about that. You just pay, right?"

"What are you getting at?"

"There are stories going on all around you. You believe some of them, some you don't. You don't want to believe there are people who want to kill Americans, yet you know there are, the reason for national defense." Mac pauses.

"Go on."

"It would simplify things if murders were only in mystery novels, intrigue only in Tom Clancy novels. You could disbelieve them, believe the Prophet, and sleep at night without any confusion, everything all neat and tidy. But how long before there's a murder here in Idaho Falls? A month, three maybe, certainly sometime within a year. Life isn't literary, isn't an over-the-top pulp thriller. It's more like a thinly veiled religious tract that can be dismissed by a handful of sleeping pills. That makes critics uncomfortable and us harder to categorize. You and me, we're both the same, characters playing parts in a story where the end has already been written. You can't change that ending. Oh, we might add a page or two to the story, but that's all so it really doesn't matter whether you stay or go--except to you. . . . and maybe to that little girl of yours."

"So what do you want me to do? . . . What do you need from the Sheriff's office?"

"Another set of plates, another ID. I imagine my name has already been flagged, and there are some computers I haven't been in. Canadian immigration is one of them."

"Where are we going?"

"Alaska. The Kenai gasfields--"

"Why so far when there's oil right across the border in Wyoming?"

"The oilbearing strata under under Cook Inlet is fifteen hundred feet deep, mostly fractured shale with water leakage."

"Your bugs are good swimmers?"

"What happens when oil is pumped from the ground? I just told you."

"I dunno, what? . . . Water is pumped into the field."

Macfarland picks up the last sheet of clear acrylic he has to cut. "In the Kenai field, there are a lot of fissures in which my *bugs* can hide. Plus, the fractured nature of the shale will let water in without anyone knowing that my *bugs* have devoured their oil. So," using his hand to punctuate his words, "*my bugs survive*. They will inadvertently be pumped out, and they will scare the hell out of the industry. And we'll go from there. Might just put an end to industrial pollution."

"If there's no global warming, then why are you worried about pollution?"

"There's no shortage of problems to worry about."

"Well, your bugs will sort of put a premium on nuclear power?"

"Almost as if they were bred by that first breeder reactor out there at Arco."

11.

Jim has never before seen the springs of a Suburban inverted, but this Suburban is a virtual tank. Plus, besides themselves, Pet has her carrier. Missy sits between them. The Marlin and his .30-06 are cased and behind the seat (his Smith is inside the door panel for Canadians have a long standing dislike of handguns). The bugs are in their boxes--the boxes are visibly empty--on the backseat. And about everything else a person can think of is stowed somewhere.

Jim motions for Mac to proceed.

"Considering our gas mileage, I needed paid for this week. Good thing I have direct deposit."

"I'll be surprised if you get it."

"Don't be. Computers are wonderful even with their bugs."

Being cautious, worried about being followed, they head out Highway 20, towards Rigby and Rexburg and the Henry's Fork. The speed limit is only 55 although most everyone goes faster. So by staying on the limit and watching behind them, they can notice any rig that lingers, and none do.

At Rexburg, they leave the fourlane, turn onto Highway 33, where they're the only vehicle in sight. They head for Sage Junction, the intersection with I-15. Now, northbound towards Montana as dusk darkens, they are certain they are alone, that they have escaped the gaze of their mythical "they."

The Suburban holds 120 gallons of fuel, and gets twelve miles to a gallon. So they don't have to stop in Montana, don't stop at Coeur d'Alene, nor in Spokane. However, they top off its tank at Tonasket, buy groceries, and cross into British Columbia midmorning, the border crossing uneventful once Jim produced Missy's vaccination record, printed out by Macfarland on his laptop.

"How did you access her record?"

"I didn't. I just gave her what she was supposed to have."

"But that's exactly what she has had."

"You are that kind of a person."

He stewes about what Macfarland said . . . he is supposed to be on call; he's supposed to be back at work tomorrow so he'll have to call in sometime today. If he can save his job--*I should be able to*--he has to try for Sarah's sake.

At Prince George, they stop for fuel and dinner: Macfarland orders poached salmon, he a steak considering that Mac is paying. Since being *that kind of a person*, they haven't talked much. Both of them are as suspicious as coyotes. Both have been watching behind them. Both feel the strain of being suspicious.

While in the restaurant, Jim uses his calling card to reach his boss at his home: "I need a leave of absence. I'm in the middle of British Columbia, broke down. I can't make it in for a while. Don't know for how long."

Getting no promises, just a "I'll see what I can do," Jim feels the spell of Macfarland's story losing its hold on him.

"Wish you hadn't made that call," Mac says.

"I wish I hadn't agreed to come along on this fools' errand."

"We've had it easy so far. You can now expect that to end." Then outside in the parking lot, Mac adds, "You, I see, don't yet appreciate who you're going up against, or how well connected the globalists are."

Nothing more is said as, instead of continuing towards Dawson Creek, they retreat back to the south edge of town and turn west on the Yellowhead.

Twilight lingers to nearly midnight even as far south as Burns Lake. But the darkness only lasts till they turn onto the Cassiar, a road built to open up Northwestern B.C.

Miles flow like spindraft on the Stikine, swiftly determined to reach a destination--they cross into the Yukon and stop midafternoon at Teslin, where they both order hamburgers, buy a piece of smoked lake trout, and let Missy out.

They stop again at Haines Junction where night seems like day. Not wanting to fill up on sixty-two cent fuel, Macfarland adds only 150 litres, then complains about the exchange rate he receives. He is still complaining when, four hours later, they cross into Alaska.

But just as they start down the rise on which the U.S. checkpoint sits, they pass, parked on the shoulder of the road, a blue van with Air Force markings and four men inside, all in suits. The van pulls out behind them. And Jim, now driving, wakes up Macfarland, who has been asleep since Destruction Bay.

Jim doesn't like the feel of being followed. The van stays a half mile back.

Once they leave behind the muskeg flats right at the border, the highway snakes over hills of boreal forest, the road heaved in places, the pavement broken in others.

Checking the van in his rearview mirror, Jim says, "We'll have to stop for gas soon."

"I'm trying to remember Tok . . . as you come into the junction, the road to Fairbanks is straight ahead. You turn left to Anchorage, about a hundred degree turn. There's a station right at the turn. Start towards Anchorage, then keep making a left turn and come into the station."

Jim understands looping back into the station. If they're being followed, the van will either have to continue towards Anchorage or make its intension obvious. But it is the many miles of desolate--if it weren't for the motorhomes--road between here and the Junction that most worries him; so he pushes the Suburban around curves and over hills, expecting to see something other than another Winnebago or another black bear. The Suburban should handle at least as well as that van, should have as much speed, but this is their third day of driving and he's feeling a little like Jonah; he's ready to get out and walk around for awhile. He doesn't trust his reflexes.

The road straightens out and flattens ten miles or so before Tok, and the van tries to close the gap between them. But Jim floors the Suburban: its four barrel opens, its 350 reaches rpms it seldom endures,

and the van falls slowly behind. Four hundred yards. Seven hundred. A mile. When they slow for the turn to Anchorage, the van is no longer in sight.

They have to stop, though, at Tok.

Macfarland fills the tanks while Jim waits with Missy and, after removing his Smith from the door panel, with his revolver beside him on the front seat. Both he and Mac watch behind them.

No van. Nothing but another Winnebego and two Pace Arrows that appear to be traveling together.

"Maybe they blew their engine," Jim suggests.

"More likely they turned off onto that road to the Loran tower. That tower is high enough they can radio anywhere. Call ahead for a roadblock or another tail."

"I hope you know what you're doing, where you're going."

"So do I."

"We've come a long ways for nothing if--"

"If nothing else, you can now say you've been to Alaska."

"Yeah, well, it isn't so far."

"No, it isn't--unless you're a microbe from a lava tube in the Arco desert." Macfarland seems surprised that the Suburban takes 108 gallons.

Mac's last comment worries Jim, who's tired and a little rummy. His head hurts some. Aspirin doesn't seem to help. But he still functions well enough to realize, perhaps for the first time, that they, too, are also waging biological warfare. What they are doing is akin to introducing smallmouth bass in the Henry's Fork. The bass will take over, destroying cutthroats and rainbows. What they are doing is like introducing whirling disease, only worse. And for someone who used to think the races should stay where God put them, introducing a new specie into an area is a serious concern, one that only now begins to trouble him, really trouble him.

"You're certain your bugs are still in those boxes. They look awfully empty."

"They are still there, and I'm sure still alive and well."

"Then why does the story of the king and his clothes keep coming to mind."

"Let's get going. When you get to Glennallen, head for Valdez. We're expected, so we might as well show them what we have. Give them something to think about."

As they near Glennallen, the only radio station that comes in is Christian. Macfarland turns the radio off.

The turn is a little before the main part of town. They continue straight ahead instead of turning right, towards Anchorage. And near the top of Thompson Pass, a dozen motorhomes have stopped to watch a mountain goat nanny and her kid graze on the uphill roadside. Jim slows, then slams on the brakes to avoid a woman with camera in hand, who darts from behind a minivan parked across the road. Missy, thrown against the dash, twists to right herself, her toenails scratching Jim's forearm. Pet, out of her carrier, meows as she clings to the seatback. Mac shakes his head as if he can't believe the woman's stupidity

Once past her, still in disbelief himself, Jim checks his rearview mirror, and sees the blue van, not a half mile behind them: "We might have trouble."

Macfarland turns to look.

"Any," Jim asks, "idea who they are?"

"Air Force. . . We can't do anything about them. Just keep going."

Downhill all the way into Valdez, Jim lets the Suburban roll.

"If we aren't interrupted, we won't be long." Mac points towards the Exxon terminal. "We need to figure a way to get in there."

"I'm just along for the ride, remember."

"Put me off in front. Then go around to the small boat harbor and wait for me. I might be a good long while."

"Where's that? the boat harbor."

Grabbing a clear box the size of a briefcase, Mac says, "You'll find it. Drive around until you do."

Jim stops in front of the tank farm and dock, with its maze of pipes and cyclone fencing. The van isn't yet in sight, still isn't in sight when Mac strolls up to a gate clearly marked *Employees Only*. Jim doesn't stick around to see if Macfarland gets in. Rather, he makes a U-turn and heads back the way they came, getting nearly to the grocery store before the van, on its way into town, passes him . . . it brakes, then, tires squealing, turns hard left.

The store isn't large, a little bigger than a stateside convenience store, but its parking lot is full enough that he can nearly hide the Suburban. He rolls his window down while he waits, watching for the van to return, his Smith in his lap.

Leaving the store, an older man, rather distinguished in Filsons and a plaid wool shirt, heads directly for him. Missy sits beside him--he expects her to growl at the fellow's approach, but she doesn't.

When the fellow is close, he says, "I'm here to tell you your family will be spared."

Puzzled, his Smith cocked, Jim says, "Don't know what you're talking about."

"You should've asked for more." The fellow nods, then turns towards an older, white pickup with Utah plates, gets in, and pulls out of the parking lot, apparently heading for Glennallen.

Jim watches the pickup disappear and misses seeing the van pull into the parking lot. He doesn't know about the van till he hears a door slam . . . two guys hurry into the store. The other two huddle over a map that they hastily fold when the others return and point up the road, back towards Glennallen.

Van tires spin loose gravel, left from last winter's roadsanding, as the van pulls out in front of a Champion motorhome.

Jim waits a few more minutes before starting the Suburban, its 350 muffled to near silence. His Ford never ran so smooth.

A small, green sign directs him to the boat harbor.

One road into town, same road out: the road is wide two-lane, with substantial traffic. Still, as he looks for a parking space in the overly full lot next to the harbormaster's, he worries about a possible ambush, and he worries about what the kook said. Family spared. Jim has no idea what the kook could've meant. Sarah and JamiJo were still in Driggs, still with her mother. *And who the hell was that kook?* He hears the roughness in his thoughts and wishes he didn't feel a twinge of guilt each time he said *hell*.

Raise up a child . . . he will not depart, even when he's old. Guess I have you to thank, Dad, for not being able to curse. I can help kill off all of civilization, but--hell, I can't even say it.

He can't tell what time it is without looking at his watch: the sun circles around to the north, sets in the north, raises in the north. The sun has seemed all messed up for a day now. The clouds are too low. The trees are too short. The mountains run the wrong direction. And fish are bright orange--he watches an elderly couple lug their catch of orange fish and one halibut up a ramp and to their motorhome.

The words of that kook seem to take possession of a little space high in his ribcage, left of center. They won't let go, won't let him dismiss them. If he could believe them, he should be reassured. But there isn't any reason to believe them. They seem as fantastic as Macfarland's bugs.

He parks between two motorhomes, lets Missy out while being careful to block Pet's attempted escape.

There's still bread left so he makes himself a sandwich while he waits. If he were home, he would probably be making himself a sandwich. Three thousand miles hasn't changed much. He's still hungry. He still has doubts, still has faith. And the thought of introducing smallmouths into the Henry's Fork bugs the hell out of him.

Missy nudges him awake . . . he spins around, not recognizing where he is. The rising mountains could almost be the Sawtooths, but they're not. Trees are wrong. Then he remembers he's in Alaska, and why he's here.

He hadn't wanted to doze off, but sleep has come in fits for days. It's no wonder his system shutdown.

He looks to see why Missy woke him.

Searching for any bite of food left out, a sled dog with one blue eye trots from motorhome to motorhome. Two couples, their backs to him, watch photos being taken of a hoisted halibut--he can only see part of it--that's taller than the fisherman. A little girl of eight, maybe nine stands, apparently fascinated by Pet, six feet from the Suburban.

He was dreaming something about a white pickup with Utah plates, and fear tightens muscles all over him as he realizes he saw that truck--it was the kook's truck. His skin itches: he feels something like no-see-ums or poultry lice crawling on him. He can't see them, but he feels them as he remembers the truck.

A long time ago, actually just five years ago, he stopped a similar pickup. Two kids high on meth. One with a gun. It all seems like it happened in slow motion, the muzzle of that Sig rose, the kid grimaced, then his cheek and ear dissolved into pink mist, the mist expanding, growing as if it had life, then settling on the windshield as the sidewindow fell in a slow cascade of glass shards, his Smith suddenly heavy in his hand.

"Let's go." Macfarland bangs the roof above the passenger side door before he jerks it open: the banging sends Pet under the back seat.

Letting out the clutch, feeling the Suburban's front tires chatter just a bit when cramped hard left, pulling from between the motorhomes, Jim asks, "Deed done?"

"I don't suppose you fed my bugs while I was gone?"

"Can't see them to feed them." Jim then tells Mac about the blue van. "They seemed to be after a white pickup. Either they thought it was us, or they're just running around."

"Stop alongside that creek on the way out. You can watch the salmon while I take care of the bugs. They multiple faster than I calculated. I've actually been starving them."

"How much faster?"

"Ten to the seventh power."

"Don't know what that means."

"That, my friend, means their population cycles occur in hours. They have always been a remnant, always starved. It's no wonder there's oil in Wyoming and none in Idaho." Macfarland pauses when, right in front of them, a Beaver Coach, a motorhome as large as a tour bus, stops to let two Huskies cross the road. "They multiple so fast they have never been able to disperse their population because they devour all available methane or methane producing compounds almost immediately."

"So what we're doing is a million times worse than introducing bass in the Henry's Fork, or rabbits to Australia."

"Only if you think of Australia as being a pool of oil."

A certain sourness grips Jim's stomach. Until yesterday or earlier today (time doesn't seem to matter), he hadn't been troubled by what they were doing. He had been, he realizes, caught up in trying to stop the deliberate spread of hanta; caught up by a story he can't prove and hasn't really thought out. But with fish, with game, with people, he opposes--has to oppose because of what the Prophet has said--biological introductions. For cause. He knows the problems caused by Canadian thistle, by star thistle, by Russian thistle, by cheatgrass, by spurge, by English sparrows, by starlings, by lamprays in the Great Lakes. The list seems endless. And now, he is party to the diabolical introduction of a microbe that will destroy all oil.

"NO! This has to stop now." Pulling over to the side of the road, Jim says, "I can't do this, can't continue."

"What do you mean? We have to get the bugs to Kenai."

"No, we don't."

"Nothing is more important--"

"No. We don't do it this way. Not this way."

"I thought you wanted to stop that spread of hanta."

"I do . . . but I'll take my chance with hanta. You said it was a percentage killer. . . . It's the kind of person I am, your words. I can't do this."

"It's a percentage killed of the young and the old." Mac's good humor, of which there never has been too much, vanishes. "I was afraid

of this, afraid of a sudden attack of conscience. Your weakness. You'll wait till they kill you. Then it's too late." Reaching behind the seat, a movement that causes Jim to pull his Smith, Macfarland takes out his satellite phone, and after a few minutes, raises the operator. Then to Jim, he says, "You need to talk to your wife."

The switching takes another moment before Jim hears Sarah: "Where are you? You need to get back here. JJ is real sick and I'm not feeling very good. I think we've got the flu, bad."

"Have you been to the doctor?"

"Yes, but--"

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

Macfarland takes the receiver, saying as he does, "Hanta begins like the flu . . . Wyte was working on an antivirus, had it where it would work half the time. I have it and you need it, or your little girl probably won't live. Your wife has a little better chance."

"What," his thumb around the hammer spur of his Smith, his finger heavy on its trigger, "do they have?"

"My guess is they have both been exposed to hanta, and it sounds like they both have it."

"How were they exposed?"

"You help me get my bugs to Kenai, and I'll give you what Wyte had. It might not be enough, or get to them soon enough, but it will increase their odds."

"You did this?" Only his thumb holding back its hammer prevents the Smith from firing.

"They don't have a lot of time and you're wasting what they have. . . . It's my bugs and your family or neither one, you choose."

"I wouldn't have even known--"

"Well, knowing that you would need it, I would've given you what I have of the antivirus when we reached Kenai, anyway." Macfarland turns and looks ahead, back the way they came. And with the side of his face to Jim, he says, "If you're thinking about taking it from me, you don't know where it is, what it looks like, nor how to administer it, and Wyte won't be of much help to you."

"So you set the fire and you killed Wyte. What about Parker?"

"What do you think I am? Some kind of a monster. I'm trying to save lives, not take them. . . . Besides, I think Wyte was seeing Parker's wife."

"You expect me to believe you?" They are stopped in sort of a bad spot, at the edge of town, not fully off the road. Passing motorhomes can see everything going on in the Suburban.

Jim lifts the muzzle of the Smith maybe an inch. He has been taken in by a story, a good one. Maybe there are people who plan to release airborne hanta, who want forty percent of Americans killed. Maybe blackmail will stop them. Maybe Wyte really committed suicide and Parker really had an accident. How is he to know the truth--hardware stores don't sell truth testers.

"Your little girl hasn't long to live if we keep sitting here, and I can help her."

"Just exactly how did she get hanta?"

"I'm sure your intruders wanted all of us killed. Hell, they have been trying to frame me for a long time, tried to get me on a drug sting."

"How did she get hanta?"

"Right now, how she contracted it isn't important, is it?"

"How did she get it?"

"I would tell you, but you won't believe me. You'll believe only what you want."

He again sees, as if dreaming, the white pickup he stopped five years ago. Only this time it's a different pickup, not the one he stopped, maybe not the one he saw yesterday. He remembers the truck and the kook, but he can't see the kook's face: the kook talks to him but without a face--it's his words that matter, not what he looks like. And Jim hears again what the kook said.

He has believed stories all of his life, has accepted them on faith. Why then is it so difficult to believe anything right now? Is it because he wants to believe so badly?

Or is it that he did believe and now crucifies himself?

There's a break in traffic. For a moment, no one will be able to see what he does. No one would see if his thumb slips off the Smith's hammer. It would be so easy. Only he can't. He wants to, but he can't. He just can't.

Perhaps he could if he knew for certain Mac had given hanta to JamiJo.

Suddenly, as if hit by a hammer, his chest hurts. Again! And he hears the pops of a .22.

The Smith fires . . . Missy jumps out of the way when Macfarland slumps forward. Pet dives through the broken window and disappears into the fireweed, their spikes already in bloom.

*

Epilogue

When the tanker *Exxon Cordova* arrives at Port Angeles, seven days after it loads eleven million gallons of Prudue Bay crude oil at Valdez, its watery acid cargo puzzles industry experts, petroleum engineers, and a host of federal officials. No explanation makes sense. The captain can't explain the loss of his cargo. So word on the dock is that green weanies somehow sabotaged the loading of the tanker, that pipes were switched or rerouted. But Exxon officials know that isn't the case.

Meanwhile, the tanker sails twelve miles offshore and pumps the watery acid into the Pacific.

Two months later, a badly decomposed body of an adult male of about fifty is found under a pile of cottonwood limbs a few miles south of Copper Center, on the road from Valdez to Glennallen. The male was, according to a Department of Public Safety spokesperson, the victim of foulplay. According to the same spokesperson, voles had gnawed away his fingertips, but his dental records would be sent to the FBI. Help is being sought from anyone who might have witnessed a motorhome parked in the vicinity of the pullout around the middle of July.

With the body are also found five cubical boxes of clear plastic that appear empty . . . the boxes are still held as evidence by the State Troopers at Glennallen.

In Idaho, two lead.22 bullets, distorted, oxidized, taken from the vest of Bonneville County deputy Jim Crapo lay on top of a newspaper section from 1943.

* * *