

# COCOON

## *Greg Egan*

*“Cocoon” was purchased by Gardner Dozois, and appeared in the May 1994 issue of Asimov’s, with an illustration by Steve Cavallo; the story went on to appear on the Hugo Final Ballot in 1995, and to win both the Ditmar Award and the Asimov’s Readers Award. Egan has had a string of powerful stories in Asimov’s throughout the ‘90s. In fact, it’s already a fairly safe bet to predict that Australian writer Greg Egan is going to come to be recognized (if indeed he hasn’t already been so recognized) as being one of the Big New Names to emerge in SF in the nineties, and one of the most inventive and intriguing of all the new “hard science” writers. His first novel, Quarantine, appeared in 1992, to wide critical acclaim, and was followed by a second novel in 1994, Permutation City, which won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. His most recent books are a collection of his short fiction, Axiomatic, and a new novel, Distress. Upcoming is another new novel, Di-aspóra.*

*In the powerful story that follows—one of 1994’s most controversial—he unravels a suspenseful and provocative mystery that revolves around sexual politics, corporate intrigue, and high-tech eugenics, all set against the background of a troubled future Australia...*

The explosion shattered windows hundreds of meters away, but started no fire. Later, I discovered that it had shown up on a seismograph at Macquarie University, fixing the time precisely: 3:52 a.m. Residents woken by the blast phoned emergency services within minutes, and our night shift operator called me just after four, but there was no point rushing to the scene when I’d only be in the way. I sat at the terminal in my study for almost an hour, assembling background data and monitoring the radio traffic on headphones, drinking coffee and trying not to type too loudly.

By the time I arrived, the local fire service contractors had departed, having certified that there was no risk of further explosions, but our forensic people were still poring over the wreckage, the electric hum of their equipment all but drowned out by birdsong. Lane Cove was a quiet, leafy suburb, mixed residential and high-tech industrial, the lush vegetation of corporate open spaces blending almost seamlessly into the adjacent national park that straddled the Lane Cove River. The map of the area on my car terminal had identified suppliers of laboratory reagents and Pharmaceuticals, manufacturers of precision instruments for scientific and aerospace applications, and no less than twenty-seven biotechnology firms-including Life Enhancement International, the erstwhile sprawling concrete building now reduced to a collection of white powdery blocks clustered around twisted reinforcement rods. The exposed steel glinted in the early light, disconcertingly pristine; the building was only three years old. I could understand why the forensic team had ruled out an accident at their first glance; a few drums of organic solvent could not have done anything remotely like *this*. Nothing legally stored in a residential zone could reduce a modern building to rubble in a matter of seconds.

I spotted Janet Lansing as I left my car. She was surveying the ruins with an expression of stoicism, but she was hugging herself. Mild shock, probably. She had no other reason to be chilly; it had been stinking hot all night, and the temperature was already climbing. Lansing was Director of the Lane Cove complex: forty-three years old, with a Ph.D. in molecular biology from Cambridge, and an M.B.A. from an equally reputable Japanese virtual university. I'd had my knowledge miner extract her details, and photo, from assorted databases before I'd left home.

I approached her and said, "James Glass, Nexus Investigations." She frowned at my business card, but accepted it, then glanced at the technicians trawling their gas chromatographs and holography equipment around the perimeter of the ruins.

"They're yours, I suppose?"

"Yes. They've been here since four."

She smirked slightly. “What happens if I give the job to someone else? And charge the lot of you with trespass?”

“If you hire another company, we’ll be happy to hand over all the samples and data we’ve collected.”

She nodded distractedly. “I’ll hire you, of course. Since four? I’m impressed. You’ve even arrived before the insurance people.” As it happened, LEI’s “insurance people” owned 49 percent of Nexus, and would stay out of the way until we were finished, but I didn’t see any reason to mention that. Lansing added sourly, “Our so-called security firm only worked up the courage to phone me half an hour ago. Evidently a fiber-optic junction box was sabotaged, disconnecting the whole area. They’re supposed to send in patrols in the event of equipment failure, but apparently they didn’t bother.”

I grimaced sympathetically. ‘What exactly were you people making here?’

“Making? Nothing. We did no manufacturing; this was pure R & D.”

In fact, I’d already established that LEI’s factories were all in Thailand and Indonesia, with the head office in Monaco, and research facilities scattered around the world. There’s a fine line, though, between demonstrating that the facts are at your fingertips, and unnerving the client. A total stranger *ought* to make at least one trivial wrong assumption, ask at least one misguided question. I always do.

“So what were you researching and developing?”

“That’s commercially sensitive information.”

I took my notepad from my shirt pocket and displayed a standard contract, complete with the usual secrecy provisions. She glanced at it, then had her own computer scrutinize the document. Conversing in modulated infrared, the machines rapidly negotiated the fine details. My notepad signed the agreement electronically on my behalf, and Lansing’s did the same, then they both chimed happily in unison to let us know that the deal had been concluded.

Lansing said, ‘Our main project here was engineering improved syncytiotrophoblastic cells.’ I smiled patiently, and she translated

for me. "Strengthening the barrier between the maternal and fetal blood supplies. Mother and fetus don't share blood directly, but they exchange nutrients and hormones across the placental barrier. The trouble is, all kinds of viruses, toxins, pharmaceuticals and illicit drugs can also cross over. The natural barrier cells didn't evolve to cope with AIDS, fetal alcohol syndrome, cocaine-addicted babies, or the next thalidomidelike disaster. We're aiming for a single intra-venous injection of a gene-tailoring vector, which would trigger the formation of an extra layer of cells in the appropriate structures within the placenta, specifically designed to shield the fetal blood supply from contaminants in the maternal blood."

"A thicker barrier?"

"Smarter. More selective. More choosy about what it lets through. We know exactly what the developing fetus actually *needs* from the maternal blood. These gene-tailored cells would contain specific channels for transporting each of those substances. Nothing else would be allowed through."

"Very impressive." *A cocoon around the unborn child, shielding it from all of the poisons of modern society.* It sounded exactly like the kind of beneficent technology a company called Life Enhancement would be hatching in leafy Lane Cove. True, even a layman could spot a few flaws in the scheme. I'd heard that AIDS most often infected children during birth itself, not pregnancy-but presumably there were other viruses that crossed the placental barrier more frequently. I had no idea whether or not mothers at risk of giving birth to children stunted by alcohol or addicted to cocaine were likely to rush out *en masse* and have gene-tailored fetal barriers installed-but I could picture a strong demand from people terrified of food additives, pesticides, and pollutants. In the long term-if the system actually worked, and wasn't prohibitively expensive-it could even become a part of routine prenatal care.

Beneficent, and lucrative.

In any case-whether or not there were biological, economic, and social factors which might keep the technology from being a complete success... it was hard to imagine any-one objecting to *the principle of the thing.*

I said, “Were you working with animals?”

Lansing scowled. “Only early calf embryos, and disembodied bovine uteruses on tissue-support machines. If it was an animal rights group, they would have been better off bombing an abattoir.”

“Mmm.” In the past few years, the Sydney chapter of Animal Equality—the only group known to use such extreme methods—had concentrated on primate research facilities. They might have changed their focus, or been misinformed, but LEI still seemed like an odd target; there were plenty of laboratories widely known to use whole, live rats and rabbits as if they were disposable test tubes—many of them quite close by. “What about competitors?”

“No one else is pursuing this kind of product line, so far as I know. There’s no race being run; we’ve already obtained individual patents for all of the essential components—the membrane channels, the transporter molecules—so any competitor would have to pay us license fees, regardless.”

“What if someone simply wanted to damage you, financially?”

“Then they should have bombed one of the factories instead. Cutting off our cash flow would have been the best way to hurt us; this laboratory wasn’t earning a cent.”

“Your share price will still take a dive, won’t it? Nothing makes investors nervous quite so much as terrorism.”

Lansing agreed, reluctantly. “But then, whoever took advantage of that and launched a takeover bid would suffer the same taint, themselves. I don’t deny that commercial sabotage takes place in this industry, now and then... but not on a level as crude as this. Genetic engineering is a subtle business. Bombs are for fanatics.”

Perhaps. But who would be fanatically opposed to the idea of shielding human embryos from viruses and poisons? Several religious sects flatly rejected any kind of modification to human biology... but the ones who employed violence were far more likely to have bombed a manufacturer of abortifacient drugs than a laboratory dedicated to the task of *safe-guarding* the unborn child.

Elaine Chang, head of the forensic team, approached us. I

introduced her to Lansing. Elaine said, “It was a very professional job. If you’d hired demolition experts, they wouldn’t have done a single thing differently. But then, they probably would have used identical software to compute the timing and placement of the charges.” She held up her notepad, and displayed a stylized reconstruction of the building, with hypothetical explosive charges marked. She hit a button and the simulation crumbled into something very like the actual mess behind us.

She continued, “Most reputable manufacturers these days imprint every batch of explosives with a trace element signature, which remains in the residue. We’ve linked the charges used here to a batch stolen from a warehouse in Singapore five years ago.”

I added, “Which may not be a great help, though, I’m afraid. After five years on the black market, they could have changed hands a dozen times.”

Elaine returned to her equipment. Lansing was beginning to look a little dazed. I said, “I’d like to talk to you again, later-but I am going to need a list of your employees, past and present, as soon as possible.”

She nodded, and hit a few keys on her notepad, transferring the list to mine. She said, “Nothing’s been lost, really. We had off-site backup for all of our data, administrative and scientific. And we have frozen samples of most of the cell lines we were working on, in a vault in Milson’s Point.”

Commercial data backup would be all but untouchable, with the records stored in a dozen or more locations scattered around the world-heavily encrypted, of course. Cell lines sounded more vulnerable. I said, “You’d better let the vault’s operators know what’s happened.”

“I’ve already done that; I phoned them on my way here.” She gazed at the wreckage. “The insurance company will pay for the rebuilding. In six months’ time, we’ll be back on our feet. So whoever did this was wasting their time. The work will go on.”

I said, “Who would want to stop it in the first place?”

Lansing’s faint smirk appeared again, and I very nearly asked her what she found so amusing. But people often act incongruously

in the face of disasters, large or small; nobody had died, she wasn't remotely hysterical, but it would have been strange if a setback like this hadn't knocked her slightly out of kilter.

She said, "*You tell me.* That's your job, isn't it?"

Martin was in the living room when I arrived home that evening. Working on his costume for the Mardi Gras. I couldn't imagine what it would look like when it was completed, but there were definitely feathers involved. Blue feathers. I did my best to appear composed, but I could tell from his expression that he'd caught an involuntary flicker of distaste on my face as he looked up. We kissed anyway, and said nothing about it.

Over dinner, though, he couldn't help himself.

"Fortieth anniversary this year, James. Sure to be the biggest yet. You could at least come and watch." His eyes glinted; he enjoyed needling me. We'd had this argument five years running, and it was close to becoming a ritual as point-less as the parade itself.

I said flatly, "Why would I want to watch ten thousand drag queens ride down Oxford Street, blowing kisses to the tourists?"

"Don't exaggerate. There'll only be a thousand men in drag, at most."

"Yeah, the rest will be in sequined jockstraps."

"If you actually came and watched, you'd discover that most people's imaginations have progressed far beyond that."

I shook my head, bemused. "If people's imaginations had *progressed*, there'd be no Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras at all. It's a freak show, for people who want to live in a cultural ghetto. Forty years ago, it might have been... provocative. Maybe it did some good, back then. But *now*? What's the point? There are no laws left to change, there's no politics left to address. This kind of thing just recycles the same moronic stereotypes, year after year."

Martin said smoothly, "It's a public reassertion of the right to diverse sexuality. Just because it's no longer a *protest march* as well as a celebration doesn't mean it's irrelevant. And complaining about stereotypes is like... complaining about the characters in a medieval

morality play. The costumes are code, shorthand. Give the great unwashed hetero-sexual masses credit for some intelligence; they don't watch the parade and conclude that the average gay man spends all his time in a gold lame tutu. People aren't that literal-minded. They all learnt semiotics in kindergarten, they know how to decode the message."

"I'm sure they do. But it's still the wrong message: it makes exotic what ought to be mundane. Okay, people have the right to dress up any way they like and march down Oxford Street... but it means absolutely nothing to me."

"I'm not asking you to join in-"

"Very wise."

"-but if one hundred thousand straights can turn up, to show their support for the gay community, why can't you?"

I said wearily, "Because every time I hear the word *community*, I know I'm being manipulated. If there *is* such a thing as *the gay community*, I'm certainly not a part of it. As it happens, I don't want to spend my life watching *gay and lesbian* television channels, using *gay and lesbian* news systems... or going to *gay and lesbian* street parades. It's all so... proprietary. You'd think there was a multinational corporation who had the franchise rights on homosexuality. And if you don't *market the product* their way, you're some kind of second-class, inferior, bootleg, unauthorized queer."

Martin cracked up. When he finally stopped laughing, he said, "Go on. I'm waiting for you to get to the part where you say you're no more proud of being gay than you are of having brown eyes, or black hair, or a birthmark behind your left knee."

I protested. "That's true. Why should I be 'proud' of something I was born with? I'm not proud, *or* ashamed. I just *accept* it. And I don't have to join a parade to prove that."

"So you'd rather we all stayed invisible?"

"*Invisible!* You're the one who told me that the representation rates in movies and TV last year were close to the true demographics. And if you hardly even *notice it* anymore when an



openly gay or lesbian politician gets elected, that's because it's *no longer an issue*. To most people, now, it's about as significant as... being left or right handed."

Martin seemed to find this suggestion surreal. "Are you trying to tell me that it's now a *non-subject*? That the inhabitants of this planet are now absolutely impartial on the question of sexual preference? Your faith is touching-but..." He mimed incredulity.

I said, "We're equal before the law with any heterosexual couple, aren't we? And when was the last time you told someone you were gay and they so much as blinked? And yes, I know, there are dozens of countries where it's still illegal- along with joining the wrong political parties, or the wrong religions. Parades in Oxford Street aren't going to change *that*:"

"People are still bashed *in this city*. People are *still* discriminated against."

"Yeah. And people are also shot dead in peak-hour traffic for playing the wrong music on their car stereos, or denied jobs because they live in the wrong suburbs. I'm not talking about the perfection of human nature. I just want you to acknowledge one tiny victory: leaving out a few psychotics, and a few fundamentalist bigots... most people *just don't care*."

Martin said ruefully, "If only that were true!"

The argument went on for more than an hour-ending in a stalemate, as usual. But then, neither one of us had seriously expected to change the other's mind.

I did catch myself wondering afterward, though, if I really believed all of my own optimistic rhetoric. *About as significant as being left or right handed?* Certainly, that was the line taken by most Western politicians, academics, essayists, talk show hosts, soap opera writers, and mainstream religious leaders... but the same people had been espousing equally high-minded principles of racial equality for decades, and the reality still hadn't entirely caught up on *that* front. I'd suffered very little discrimination, myself-by the time I reached high school, tolerance was hip, and I'd witnessed a constant stream of improvements since then... but how

could I ever know precisely how much hidden prejudice remained? By interro-gating my own straight friends? By reading the sociologists' latest attitude surveys? People will always tell you what they think you want to hear.

Still, it hardly seemed to matter. Personally, I could get by without the deep and sincere approval of every other member of the human race. Martin and I were lucky enough to have been born into a time and place where, in almost every tan-gible respect, we were treated as equal.

What more could anyone hope for?

In bed that night, we made love very slowly, at first just kissing and stroking each other's bodies for what seemed like hours. Neither of us spoke, and in the stupefying heat I lost all sense of belonging to any other time, any other reality. Nothing existed but the two of us; the rest of the world, the rest of my life, went spinning away into the darkness.

The investigation moved slowly. I interviewed every current member of LEI's workforce, then started on the long list of past employees. I still believed that commercial sabotage was the most likely explanation for such a professional job-but blowing up the opposition is a desperate measure; a little civ-ilized espionage usually comes first. I was hoping that some-one who'd worked for LEI might have been approached in the past and offered money for inside information-and if I could find just one employee who'd turned down a bribe, they might have learnt something useful from their contact with the presumed rival.

Although the Lane Cove facility had only been built three years before, LEI had operated a research division in Sydney for twelve years before that, in North Ryde, not far away. Many of the ex-employees from that period had moved inter-state or overseas; quite a few had been transferred to LEI divisions in other countries. Still, almost no one had changed their personal phone numbers, so I had very little trouble tracking them down.

The exception was a biochemist named Catherine Mendel-sohn; the number listed for her in the LEI staff records had been canceled. There were seventeen people with the same surname and

initials in the national phone directory; none admitted to being Catherine Alice Mendelsohn, and none looked at all like the staff photo I had.

Mendelsohn's address in the Electoral Roll, an apartment in Newtown, matched the LEI records-but the same address was in the phone directory (and Electoral Roll) for Stanley Goh, a young man who told me that he'd never met Mendelsohn. He'd been leasing the apartment for the past eighteen months.

Credit rating databases gave the same out-of-date address. I couldn't access tax, banking, or utilities records without a warrant. I had my knowledge miner scan the death notices, but there was no match there.

Mendelsohn had worked for LEI until about a year before the move to Lane Cove. She'd been part of a team working on a gene-tailoring system for ameliorating menstrual side-effects, and although the Sydney division had always specialized in gynecological research, for some reason the project was about to be moved to Texas. I checked the industry publications; apparently, LEI had been rearranging all of its operations at the time, gathering together projects from around the globe into new multi-disciplinary configurations, in accordance with the latest fashionable theories of research dynamics. Mendelsohn had declined the transfer, and had been retrenched.

I dug deeper. The staff records showed that Mendelsohn had been questioned by security guards after being found on the North Ryde premises late at night, two days before her dismissal. Workaholic biotechnologists aren't uncommon, but starting the day at two in the morning shows exceptional dedication, especially when the company has just tried to shuffle you off to Amarillo. Having turned down the transfer, she must have known what was in store.

Nothing came of the incident, though. And even if Mendelsohn *had* been planning some minor act of sabotage, that hardly established any connection with a bombing four years later. She might have been angry enough to leak confidential information to one of LEI's rivals... but whoever had bombed the Lane Cove laboratory would have been more interested in someone who'd

worked on the fetal barrier project itself-a project which had only come into existence a year after Mendelsohn had been sacked.

I pressed on through the list. Interviewing the ex-employees was frustrating; almost all of them were still working in the biotechnology industry, and they would have been an ideal group to poll on the question of *who would benefit most* from LEI's misfortune-but the confidentiality agreement I'd signed meant that I couldn't disclose anything about the re-search in question-not even to people working for LEI's other divisions.

The one thing which I *could* discuss drew a blank: if any-one had been offered a bribe, they weren't talking about it- and no magistrate was going to sign a warrant letting me loose on a fishing expedition through a hundred and seventeen people's financial records.

Forensic examination of the ruins, and the sabotaged fiber-optic exchange, had yielded the usual catalogue of minutiae which might eventually turn out to be invaluable-but none of it was going to conjure up a suspect out of thin air.

Four days after the bombing-just as I found myself growing desperate for a fresh angle on the case-I had a call from Janet Lansing.

The backup samples of the project's gene-tailored cell lines had been destroyed.

The vault in Milson's Point turned out to be directly under-neath a section of the Harbor Bridge-built right into the foundations on the north shore. Lansing hadn't arrived yet, but the head of security for the storage company, an elderly man called David Asher, showed me around. Inside, the traffic was barely audible, but the vibration coming through the floor felt like a constant mild earthquake. The place was cavernous, dry and cool. At least a hundred cryogenic freezers were laid out in rows; heavily clad pipes ran between them, replenishing their liquid nitrogen.

Asher was understandably morose, but cooperative. Celluloid movie film had been archived here, he explained, before everything went digital; the present owners specialized in biological materials. There were no guards physically assigned to the vault, but the

surveillance cameras and alarm systems looked impressive, and the structure itself must have been close to impregnable.

Lansing had phoned the storage company, Biofile, on the morning of the bombing. Asher confirmed that he'd sent someone down from their North Sydney office to check the freezer in question. Nothing was missing-but he'd promised to boost security measures immediately. Because the freezers were supposedly tamper-proof, and individually locked, clients were normally allowed access to the vault at their convenience, monitored by the surveillance cameras, but otherwise unsupervised. Asher had promised Lansing that, henceforth, nobody would enter the building without a member of his staff to accompany them-and he claimed that nobody had been inside since the day of the bombing, anyway.

When two LEI technicians had arrived that morning to carry out an inventory, they'd found the expected number of culture flasks, all with the correct bar code labels, all tightly sealed-but the appearance of their contents was subtly wrong. The translucent frozen colloid was more opalescent than cloudy; an untrained eye might never have noticed the difference, but apparently it spoke volumes to the cognoscenti.

The technicians had taken a number of the flasks away for analysis; LEI were working out of temporary premises, a sub-leased corner of a paint manufacturer's quality control lab. Lansing had promised me preliminary test results by the time we met.

Lansing arrived, and unlocked the freezer. With gloved hands, she lifted a flask out of the swirling mist and held it up for me to inspect.

She said, "We've only thawed three samples, but they all look the same. The cells have been torn apart."

"How?" The flask was covered with such heavy condensation that I couldn't have said if it was empty or full, let alone *cloudy* or *opalescent*.

"It looks like radiation damage."

My skin crawled. I peered into the depths of the freezer; all I could make out were the tops of rows of identical flasks-*but if one of*

*them had been spiked with a radioiso-tope...*

Lansing scowled. "Relax." She tapped a small electronic badge pinned to her lab coat, with a dull gray face like a solar cell: a radiation dosimeter. "*This* would be screaming if we were being exposed to anything significant. Whatever the source of the radiation was, it's no longer in here-and it hasn't left the walls glowing. Your future offspring are safe."

I let that pass. "You think all the samples will turn out to be ruined? You won't be able to salvage anything?"

Lansing was stoical as ever. "It looks that way. There are some elaborate techniques we could use, to try to repair the DNA-but it will probably be easier to synthesize fresh DNA from scratch, and re-introduce it into unmodified bovine pla-cental cell lines. We still have all the sequence data; that's what matters in the end."

I pondered the freezer's locking system, the surveillance cameras. "Are you sure that the source was *inside* the freezer? Or could the damage have been done without actually break-ing in-right through the walls?"

She thought it over. "Maybe. There's not much metal in these things; they're mostly plastic foam. But I'm not a ra-diation physicist; your forensic people will probably be able to give you a better idea of what happened, once they've checked out the freezer itself. If there's damage to the poly-mers in the foam, it might be possible to use that to recon-struct the geometry of the radiation field."

A forensic team was on its way. I said, "How would they have done it? Walked casually by, and just-?"

"Hardly. A source which could do this in one quick hit would have been unmanageable. It's far more likely to have been a matter of weeks, or months, of low-level exposure."

"So they must have smuggled some kind of device into *their own freezer*, and aimed it at yours? But then... we'll be able to trace the effects right back to the source, won't we? So how could they have hoped to get away with it?"

Lansing said, "It's even simpler than that. We're talking about a

modest amount of a gamma-emitting isotope, not some billion-dollar particle-beam weapon. The effective range would be a couple of meters, at most. If it *was* done from the outside, you've just narrowed down your suspect list to two." She thumped the freezer's left neighbor in the aisle, then did the same to the one on the right-and said, "Aha."

"What?"

She thumped them both again. The second one sounded hollow. I said, "No liquid nitrogen? It's not in use?"

Lansing nodded. She reached for the handle.

Asher said, "I don't think-"

The freezer was unlocked, the lid swung open easily. Lansing's badge started beeping-and, worse, *there was some-thing in there, with batteries and wires...*

I don't know what kept me from knocking her to the floor-but Lansing, untroubled, lifted the lid all the way. She said mildly, "Don't panic; this dose rate's nothing. Threshold of detectable."

The thing inside looked superficially like a home-made bomb-but the batteries and timer chip I'd glimpsed were wired to a heavy-duty solenoid, which was part of an elaborate shutter mechanism on one side of a large, metallic gray box.

Lansing said, "'Cannibalized medical source, probably. You know these things have turned up in *garbage dumps*?" She unpinned her badge and waved it near the box; the pitch of the alarm increased, but only slightly. "'Shielding seems to be intact."

I said, as calmly as possible, "'These people have access to *high explosives*. You don't have any idea what the fuck might be in there, or what it's wired up to do. This is the point where we walk out, quietly, and leave it to the bomb-disposal robots."

She seemed about to protest, but then she nodded contritely. The three of us went up onto the street, and Asher called the local terrorist services contractor. I suddenly realized that they'd have to divert all traffic from the bridge. The Lane Cove bombing had received some perfunctory media cover-age-but *this* would lead the

evening news.

I took Lansing aside. “They’ve destroyed your laboratory. They’ve wiped out your cell lines. Your data may be almost impossible to locate and corrupt-so the next logical target is you and your employees. Nexus doesn’t provide protective services, but I can recommend a good firm.”

I gave her the phone number; she accepted it with appropriate solemnity. “So you finally believe me? These people aren’t commercial saboteurs. They’re dangerous fanatics.”

I was growing impatient with her vague references to “fa-natics.”  
“Who exactly do you have in mind?”

She said darkly, ‘We’re tampering with certain... *natural processes*. You can draw your own conclusions, can’t you?’

There was no logic to that at all. God’s Image would probably want to *force* all pregnant women with HIV infections, or drug habits, to use the cocoon; they wouldn’t try to bomb the technology out of existence. Gaia’s Soldiers were more concerned with genetically engineered crops and bacteria than trivial modifications to insignificant species like humans-and they wouldn’t have used *radioisotopes* if the fate of the planet depended on it. Lansing was beginning to sound thoroughly paranoid-although in the circumstances, I couldn’t really blame her.

I said, “I’m not drawing any conclusions. I’m just advising you to take some sensible precautions, because we have no way of knowing how far this might escalate. But... Biofile must lease freezer space to every one of your competitors. A commercial rival would have found it a thousand times easier than any hypothetical sect member to get into the vault to plant that thing.”

A gray armor-plated van screeched to a halt in front of us; the back door swung up, ramps slid down, and a squat, multi-limbed robot on treads descended. I raised a hand in greeting and the robot did the same; the operator was a friend of mine.

Lansing said, “You may be right. But then, there’s nothing to stop a terrorist from having a day job in biotechnology, is there?”

The device turned out not to be booby-trapped at all-just rigged to



spray LEI's precious cells with gamma rays for six hours, starting at midnight, every night. Even in the unlikely event that someone had come into the vault in the early hours and wedged themselves into the narrow gap between the freezers, the dose they received would not have been much; as Lansing had suggested, it was the cumulative effect over months which had done the damage. The radioisotope in the box was cobalt 60, almost certainly a decommissioned medical source-grown too weak for its original use, but still too hot to be discarded-stolen from a "cooling off" site. No such theft had been reported, but Elaine Chang's assistants were phoning around the hospitals, trying to persuade them to re-inventory their concrete bunkers.

Cobalt 60 was dangerous stuff-but fifty milligrams in a carefully shielded container wasn't exactly a tactical nuclear weapon. The news systems went berserk, though: ATOMIC TERRORISTS STRIKE HARBOR BRIDGE, et cetera. If LEI's enemies *were* activists, with some "moral cause" which they hoped to set before the public, they clearly had the worst PR advisers in the business. Their prospects of gain-ing the slightest sympathy had vanished, the instant the first news reports had mentioned the word *radiation*.

My secretarial software issued polite statements of "No comment" on my behalf, but camera crews began hovering outside my front door, so I relented and mouthed a few news-speak sentences for them which meant essentially the same thing. Martin looked on, amused-and then I looked on, astonished, as Janet Lansing's own doorstep media conference appeared on TV.

"These people are clearly ruthless. Human life, the environment, radioactive contamination... all mean nothing to them."

"Do you have any idea who might be responsible for this outrage, Dr. Lansing?"

"I can't disclose that, yet. All I can reveal, right now, is that our research is at the very cutting edge of preventative medicine-and I'm not at all surprised that there are powerful vested interests working against us."

*Powerful vested interests?* What was *that* meant to be code for-if

not the rival biotechnology firm whose involvement she kept denying? No doubt she had her eye on the publicity advantages of being the victim of ATOMIC TERRORISTS- but I thought she was wasting her breath. In two or more years' time, when the product finally hit the market, the story would be long forgotten.

After some tricky jurisdictional negotiations, Asher finally sent me six months' worth of files from the vault's surveillance cameras-all that they kept. The freezer in question had been unused for almost two years; the last authorized tenant was a small IVF clinic which had gone bankrupt. Only about 60 percent of the freezers were currently leased, so it wasn't particularly surprising that LEI had had a conveniently empty neighbor.

I ran the surveillance files through image-processing software, in the hope that someone might have been caught in the act of opening the unused freezer. The search took almost an hour of supercomputer time-and turned up precisely nothing. A few minutes later, Elaine Chang popped her head into my office to say that she'd finished her analysis of the damage to the freezer walls: the nightly irradiation had been going on for between eight and nine months.

Undeterred, I scanned the files again, this time instructing the software to assemble a gallery of every individual sighted inside the vault.

Sixty-two faces emerged. I put company names to all of them, matching the times of each sighting to Biofile's records of the use of each client's electronic key. No obvious inconsistencies showed up; nobody had been seen inside who hadn't used an authorized key to gain access-and the same people had used the same keys, again and again.

I flicked through the gallery, wondering what to do next. *Search for anyone glancing slyly in the direction of the radioactive freezer?* The software could have done it-but I wasn't quite ready for barrel-scraping efforts like that.

I came to a face which looked familiar: a blonde woman in her mid-thirties, who'd used the key belonging to Federation Centennial Hospital's Oncology Research Unit, three times. I was

certain that I knew her, but I couldn't recall where I'd seen her before. It didn't matter; after a few seconds' searching, I found a clear shot of the name badge pinned to her lab coat. All I had to do was zoom in.

The badge read: C. MENDELSON.

There was a knock on my open door. I turned from the screen; Elaine was back, looking pleased with herself.

She said, "We've finally found a place who'll own up to having lost some cobalt 60. What's more... the activity of our source fits their missing item's decay curve, exactly."

"So where was it stolen from?"

"Federation Centennial."

I phoned the Oncology Research Unit. Yes, Catherine Mendelsohn worked there-she'd done so for almost four years- but they couldn't put me through to her; she'd been on sick leave all week. They gave me the same canceled phone number as LEI-but a different address, an apartment in Peter-sham. The address wasn't listed in the phone directory; I'd have to go there in person.

A cancer research team would have no reason to want to harm LEI, but a commercial rival-with or without their own key to the vault-could still have paid Mendelsohn to do their work for them. It seemed like a lousy deal to me, whatever they'd offered her-if she was convicted, every last cent would be traced and confiscated-but bitterness over her sacking might have clouded her judgment.

Maybe. Or maybe that was all too glib.

I replayed the shots of Mendelsohn taken by the surveillance cameras. She did nothing unusual, nothing suspicious. She went straight to the ORU's freezer, put in whatever samples she'd brought, and departed. She didn't glance slyly in any direction at all.

The fact that she had been inside the vault-on legitimate business-proved nothing. The fact that the cobalt 60 had been stolen from the hospital where she worked could have been pure coincidence.

And anyone had the right to cancel their phone service.

I pictured the steel reinforcement rods of the Lane Cove laboratory, glinting in the sunlight.

On the way out, reluctantly, I took a detour to the basement. I sat at a console while the armaments safe checked my fingerprints, took breath samples and a retinal blood spectro-gram, ran some perception-and-judgment response time tests, then quizzed me for five minutes about the case. Once it was satisfied with my reflexes, my motives, and my state of mind, it issued me a nine-millimeter pistol and a shoulder holster.

Mendelsohn's apartment block was a concrete box from the 1960s, front doors opening onto long shared balconies, no security at all. I arrived just after seven, to the smell of cooking and the sound of game show applause, wafting from a hundred open windows. The concrete still shimmered with the day's heat; three flights of stairs left me coated in sweat. Mendelsohn's apartment was silent, but the lights were on.

She answered the door. I introduced myself, and showed her my ID. She seemed nervous, but not surprised.

She said, 'I still find it galling to have to deal with people like you.'

"People like-?"

"I was opposed to privatizing the police force. I helped organize some of the marches."

She would have been fourteen years old at the time-a precocious political activist.

She let me in, begrudgingly. The living room was modestly furnished, with a terminal on a desk in one corner.

I said, "I'm investigating the bombing of Life Enhancement International. You used to work for them, up until about four years ago. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me why you left?"

She repeated what I knew about the transfer of her project to the Amarillo division. She answered every question directly, looking me

straight in the eye; she still appeared nervous, but she seemed to be trying to read some vital piece of information from my demeanor. *Wondering if I'd traced the cobalt?*

“What were you doing on the North Ryde premises at two in the morning, two days before you were sacked?”

She said, “I wanted to find out what LEI was planning for the new building. I wanted to know why they didn't want me to stick around.”

“Your job was moved to Texas.”

She laughed drily. “The work wasn't *that* specialized. I could have swapped jobs with someone who wanted to travel to the States. It would have been the perfect solution-and there would have been plenty of people more than happy to trade places with me. But no, that wasn't allowed.”

“So... did you find the answer?”

“Not that night. But later, yes.”

I said carefully, ‘So you knew what LEI was doing in Lane Cove?’

“Yes.”

“How did you discover that?”

“I kept an ear to the ground. Nobody who'd stayed on would have told me directly, but word leaked out, eventually. About a year ago.”

“*Three years after you'd left?* Why were you still inter-ested? Did you think there was a market for the information?”

She said, “Put your notepad in the bathroom sink and run the tap on it.”

I hesitated, then complied. When I returned to the living room, she had her face in her hands. She looked up at me grimly.

“*Why was I still interested?* Because I wanted to know why *every project* with any lesbian or gay team members was be-ing transferred out of the division. I wanted to know if that was pure coincidence. Or not.”

I felt a sudden chill in the pit of my stomach. I said, “If you had some problem with discrimination, there are avenues you could have-”

Mendelsohn shook her head impatiently. “LEI was never *discriminatory*. They didn’t sack anyone who was willing to move-and they always transferred the entire team; there was nothing so crude as picking out *individuals* by sexual preference. And they had a rationalization for everything: projects were being re-grouped between divisions to facilitate ‘syner-gistic cross-pollination.’ And if that sounds like pretentious bullshit, it was-but it was plausible pretentious bullshit. Other corporations have adopted far more ridiculous schemes, in perfect sincerity.”

“But if it wasn’t a matter of discrimination... why should LEI want to force people out of one particular division-?”

I think I’d finally guessed the answer, even as I said those words-but I needed to hear her spell it out, before I could really believe it.

Mendelsohn must have been practicing her version for non-biochemists; she had it down pat. “When people are subject to *stress*-physical or emotional-the levels of certain substances in the bloodstream increase. Cortisol and adrenaline, mainly. Adrenaline has a rapid, short-term effect on the nervous system. Cortisol works on a much longer time frame, modulating all kinds of bodily processes, adapting them for hard times: injury, fatigue, whatever. If the stress is prolonged, someone’s cortisol can be elevated for days, or weeks, or months.

“High enough levels of cortisol, in the bloodstream of a pregnant woman, can cross the placental barrier and interact with the hormonal system of the developing fetus. There are parts of the brain where embryonic development is switched into one of two possible pathways, by hormones released by the fetal testes or ovaries. The parts of the brain which control body image, and the parts which control sexual preference. Female embryos usually develop a brain wired with a self-image of a female body, and the strongest potential for sexual attraction toward males. Male embryos, vice versa. And it’s the sex hormones in the fetal

bloodstream which let the grow-ing neurons *know* the gender of the embryo, and which wiring pattern to adopt.

“Cortisol can interfere with this process. The precise in-teractions are complex, but the ultimate effect depends on the timing; different parts of the brain are switched into gender-specific versions at different stages of development. So stress at different times during pregnancy leads to different patterns of sexual preference and body image in the child: homosexual, bisexual, transsexual.

“Obviously, a lot depends on the mother’s biochemistry. Pregnancy *itself* is stressful-but everyone responds to that differently. The first sign that cortisol might have an effect came in studies in the 1980s, on the children of German women who’d been pregnant during the most intense bombing raids of World War II-when the stress was so great that the effect showed through despite individual differences. In the nineties, researchers thought they’d found a gene which de-termined male homosexuality... but it was always maternally inherited-and it turned out to be influencing *the mother’s stress response*, rather than acting directly on the child.

“If maternal cortisol, and other stress hormones, were kept from reaching the fetus... then the gender of the brain would always match the gender of the body in every respect. All of the present variation would be wiped out.”

I was shaken, but I don’t think I let it show. Everything she said rang true; I didn’t doubt a word of it. I’d always known that sexual preference was decided before birth. I’d known that I was gay, myself, by the age of seven. I’d never sought out the elaborate biological details, though-because I’d never believed that the tedious mechanics of the process could ever matter to me. What turned my blood to ice was not finally learning *the neuroembryology of desire*. The shock was discovering that LEI planned to reach into the womb and take *control* of it.

I pressed on with the questioning in a kind of trance, put-ting my own feelings into suspended animation.

I said, “LEI’s barrier is for filtering out *viruses and toxins*. You’re

talking about a natural substance which has been present for millions of years-

“LEI’s barrier will keep out everything they deem *non-essential*. The fetus doesn’t *need* maternal cortisol in order to survive. If LEI doesn’t explicitly include transporters for it, it won’t get through. And I’ll give you one guess what their plans are.”

I said, “You’re being paranoid. You think LEI would invest millions of dollars just to take part in a conspiracy to rid the world of homosexuals?”

Mendelsohn looked at me pityingly. “It’s not a *conspiracy*. It’s a *marketing opportunity*. LEI doesn’t give a shit about the sexual politics. They could put in cortisol transporters, and sell the barrier as an anti-viral, anti-drug, anti-pollution screen. Or, they could leave them out, and sell it as all of that-plus a means of guaranteeing a heterosexual child. *Which do you think would earn the most money?*”

That question hit a nerve; I said angrily, “And you had so little faith in people’s choice that you *bombed the laboratory* so that no one would ever have the chance to decide?”

Mendelsohn’s expression turned stony. “I did *not* bomb LEI. Or irradiate their freezer.”

“No? We’ve traced the cobalt 60 to Federation Centennial.”

She looked stunned for a moment, then she said, “Congratulations. Six thousand other people work there, you know. I’m obviously not the only one of them who’d discovered what LEI is up to.”

“You’re the only one with access to the Biofile vault. What do you expect me to believe? That having learnt about this project, you were going to do absolutely nothing about it?”

“Of course not! And I still plan to publicize what they’re doing. Let people know what it will mean. Try to get the issue debated before the product appears in a blaze of misinformation.”

“You said you’ve known about the work for a year.”

“Yes-and I’ve spent most of that time trying to verify all the



facts, before opening my big mouth. Nothing would have been stupider than going public with half-baked rumors. I've only told about a dozen people so far, but we were going to launch a big publicity campaign to coincide with this year's Mardi Gras. Although now, with the bombing, everything's a thousand times more complicated." She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "But we still have to do what we can, to try to keep the worst from happening."

"The worst?"

"Separatism. Paranoia. Homosexuality redefined as *path-ological*. Lesbians and sympathetic straight women looking for their *own* technological means to *guarantee* the survival of the culture... while the religious far-right try to prosecute them for *poisoning their babies*... with a substance *God's* been happily 'poisoning' babies with for the last few thousand years! Sexual tourists traveling from wealthy countries where the technology is in use, to poorer countries where it isn't."

I was sickened by the vision she was painting-but I pushed on. "These dozen friends of yours-?"

Mendelsohn said dispassionately, "Go fuck yourself. I've got nothing more to say to you. I've told you the truth. I'm not a criminal. And I think you'd better leave."

I went to the bathroom and collected my notepad. In the doorway, I said, "If you're not a criminal, why are you so hard to track down?"

Wordlessly, contemptuously, she lifted her shirt and showed me the bruises below her rib cage-fading, but still an ugly sight. Whoever it was who'd beaten her-an ex-lover?-I could hardly blame her for doing everything she could to avoid a repeat performance.

On the stairs, I hit the REPLAY button on my notepad. The software computed the frequency spectrum for the noise of the running water, subtracted it out of the recording, and then amplified and cleaned up what remained. Every word of our conversation came through crystal clear.

From my car, I phoned a surveillance firm and arranged to have

Mendelsohn kept under twenty-four-hour observation.

Halfway home, I stopped in a side street, and sat behind the wheel for ten minutes, unable to think, unable to move.

In bed that night, I asked Martin, "You're left-handed. How would you feel if no one was ever born left-handed again?"

"It wouldn't bother me in the least. Why?"

"You wouldn't think of it as a kind of... genocide?"

"Hardly. What's this all about?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"You're shaking."

"I'm cold."

"You don't feel cold to me."

As we made love-tenderly, then savagely-I thought: *This is our language, this is our dialect. Wars have been fought over less. And if this language ever dies out, a people will have vanished from the face of the Earth.*

I knew I had to drop the case. If Mendelsohn was guilty, someone else could prove it. To go on working for LEI would destroy me.

Afterward, though... that seemed like sentimental bullshit. I belonged to no tribe. Every human being possessed their own sexuality-and when they died, it died with them. If no one was ever born gay again, it made no difference to *me*.

And if I dropped the case *because I was gay*, I'd be abandoning everything I'd ever believed about my own equality, my own identity... not to mention giving LEI the chance to announce: *Yes, of course we hired an investigator without regard to sexual preference-but apparently, that was a mis-take.*

Staring up into the darkness, I said, 'Every time I hear the word *community*, I reach for my revolver.'

There was no response; Martin was fast asleep. I wanted to wake him, I wanted to argue it all through, there and then- but I'd signed an agreement, I couldn't tell him a thing.

So I watched him sleep, and tried to convince myself that when the truth came out, he'd understand.

I phoned Janet Lansing, brought her up to date on Mendel-sohn-and said coldly, "Why were you so coy? '*Fanatics*'? '*Powerful vested interests*'? Are there some words you have trouble pronouncing?"

She'd clearly prepared herself for this moment. "I didn't want to plant my own ideas in your head. Later on, that might have been seen as prejudicial."

"Seen as prejudicial by *whom*?" It was a rhetorical question: the media, of course. By keeping silent on the issue, she'd minimized the risk of being seen to have launched a witch-hunt. Telling me to go look for *homosexual terrorists* might have put LEI in a very unsympathetic light... whereas my finding Mendelsohn-for other reasons entirely, despite my ignorance-would come across as proof that the investigation had been conducted without any preconceptions.

I said, "You had your suspicions, and you should have disclosed them. At the very least, you should have told me what the barrier *was for*."

"The barrier," she said, "is for protection against viruses and toxins. But anything we do to the body has side effects. It's not my role to judge whether or not those side effects are acceptable; the regulatory authorities will insist that we publicize *all* of the consequences of using the product-and then the decision will be up to consumers."

Very neat: the government would twist their arm, "forcing them" to disclose their major selling point!

"And what does your market research tell you?"

"That's strictly confidential."

I very nearly asked her: *When exactly did you find out that I was gay? After you'd hired me-or before?* On the morning of the bombing, while I'd been assembling a dossier on Janet Lansing... had *she* been assembling dossiers on all of the people who might have bid for the investigation? And had she found the ultimate PR

advantage, the ultimate seal of im-partiality, just too tempting to resist?

I didn't ask. I still wanted to believe that it made no difference: she'd hired me, and I'd solve the crime like any other, and nothing else would matter.

I went to the bunker where the cobalt had been stored, at the edge of Federation Centennial's grounds. The trapdoor was solid, but the lock was a joke, and there was no alarm system at all; any smart twelve-year-old could have broken in. Crates full of all kinds of (low-level, shortlived) radioactive waste were stacked up to the ceiling, blocking most of the light from the single bulb; it was no wonder that the theft hadn't been detected sooner. There were even cobwebs-but no mutant spiders, so far as I could see.

After five minutes poking around, listening to my borrowed dosimetry badge adding up the exposure, I was glad to get out... whether or not the average chest X-ray would have done ten times more damage. *Hadn't Mendelsohn realized that: how irrational people were about radiation, how much harm it would do her cause once the cobalt was discovered?* Or had her own-fully informed-knowledge of the minimal risks distorted her perception?

The surveillance teams sent me reports daily. It was an expensive service, but LEI was paying. Mendelsohn met her friends openly-telling them all about the night I'd questioned her, warning them in outraged tones that they were almost certainly being watched. They discussed the fetal barrier, the options for-legitimate-opposition, the problems the bombing had caused them. I couldn't tell if the whole thing was being staged for my benefit, or if Mendelsohn was deliberately contacting only those friends who genuinely believed that she hadn't been involved.

I spent most of my time checking the histories of the people she met. I could find no evidence of past violence or sabotage by any of them-let alone experience with high explosives. But then, I hadn't seriously expected to be led straight to the bomber.

All I had was circumstantial evidence. All I could do was gather detail after detail, and hope that the mountain of facts I was assembling would eventually reach a critical mass-or that

Mendelsohn would slip up, cracking under the pressure.

Weeks passed, and Mendelsohn continued to brazen it out. She even had pamphlets printed, ready to distribute at the Mardi Gras-condemning the bombing as loudly as they con-demned LEI for its secrecy.

The nights grew hotter. My temper frayed. I don't know what Martin thought was happening to me, but I had no idea how we were going to survive the impending revelations. I couldn't begin to face up to the magnitude of the backlash there'd be once **ATOMIC TERRORISTS** met **GAY BABY-POISONERS** in the daily murdochs-and it would make no difference whether it was Mendelsohn's arrest which broke the news to the public, or her media conference blowing the whistle on LEI and proclaiming her own innocence; either way, the investigation would become a circus. I tried not to think about any of it; it was too late to do anything differently, to drop the case, to tell Martin the truth. So I worked on my tunnel vision.

Elaine scoured the radioactive waste bunker for evidence, but weeks of analysis came up blank. I quizzed the Biofile guards, who (supposedly) would have been watching the whole thing on their monitors when the cobalt was planted, but nobody could recall a client with an unusually large and oddly shaped item, wandering casually into the wrong aisle.

I finally obtained the warrants I needed to scrutinize Men-delsohn's entire electronic history since birth. She'd been ar-rested exactly once, twenty years before, for kicking an-unprivatized-policeman in the shin, during a protest he'd probably, privately, applauded. The charges had been dropped. She'd had a court order in force for the last eighteen months, restraining a former lover from coming within a kil-ometer of her home. (The woman was a musician with a band called Tetanus Switchblade; she had two convictions for as-sault.) There was no evidence of undeclared income, or un-usual expenditure. No phone calls to or from known or suspected dealers in arms or explosives, or their known or suspected associates. But everything could have been done with pay phones and cash, if she'd organized it carefully.

Mendelsohn wasn't going to put a foot wrong while I was

watching. However careful she'd been, though, she could not have carried out the bombing alone. What I needed was some-one venal, nervous, or conscience-stricken enough to turn in-formant. I put out word on the usual channels: I'd be willing to pay, I'd be willing to bargain.

Six weeks after the bombing, I received an anonymous message by datamail:

*Be at the Mardi Gras. No wires, no weapons. I'll find you.*

*29:17:5:31:23:11*

I played with the numbers for more than an hour, trying to make sense of them, before I finally showed them to Elaine.

She said, "Be careful, James."

"Why?"

"These are the ratios of the six trace elements we found in the residue from the explosion."

Martin spent the day of the Mardi Gras with friends who'd also be in the parade. I sat in my air-conditioned office and tuned in to a TV channel which showed the final preparations, interspersed with talking heads describing the history of the event. In forty years, the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras had been transformed from a series of ugly confrontations with police and local authorities, into a money-spinning spectacle advertised in tourist brochures around the world. It was blessed by every level of government, led by politicians and business identities-and the police, like most professions, now had their own float.

Martin was no transvestite (or muscle-bound leather-fetishist, or any other walking cliché); dressing up in a flam-boyant costume, one night a year, was as false, as artificial, for him as it would have been for most heterosexual men. But I think I understood why he did it. He felt guilty that he could "pass for straight" in the clothes he usually wore, with the speech and manner and bearing which came naturally to him. He'd never concealed his sexuality from anyone-but it wasn't instantly apparent to total strangers. For him, taking part in the Mardi Gras was a gesture of solidarity with those gay men who *were* visible, obvious, all year round-and who'd borne

the brunt of intolerance because of it.

As dusk fell, spectators began to gather along the route. Helicopters from every news service appeared overhead, turning their cameras on each other to prove to their viewers that this was An Event. Mounted crowd-control personnel-in something very much like the old blue uniform that had vanished when I was a child-parked their horses by the fast-food stands, and stood around fortifying themselves for the long night ahead.

I didn't see how the bomber could seriously expect to find me once I was mingling with a hundred thousand other people-so after leaving the Nexus building, I drove my car around the block slowly, three times, just in case.

By the time I'd made my way to a vantage point, I'd missed the start of the parade; the first thing I saw was a long line of people wearing giant plastic heads bearing the features of famous and infamous queers. (Apparently the word was back in fashion again, officially declared non-perjorative once more, after several years out of favor.) It was all so Disney I could have gagged-and yes, there was even Bernadette, the world's first lesbian cartoon mouse. I only recognized three of the humans portrayed-Patrick White, looking haggard and suitably bemused, Joe Orton, leering sardonically, and J. Edgar Hoover, with a Mephistophelian sneer. Everyone wore their names on sashes, though, for what that was worth. A young man beside me asked his girlfriend, "Who the hell was Walt Whitman?"

She shook her head. "No idea. Alan Turing?"

"Search me."

They photographed both of them, anyway.

I wanted to yell at the marchers: *So what? Some queers were famous. Some famous people were queer. What a surprise! Do you think that means you own them?*

I kept silent, of course-while everyone around me cheered and clapped. I wondered how close the bomber was, how long he or she would leave me sweating. Panopticon-the surveillance contractors-were still following Mendelsohn and all of her known

associates, most of whom were somewhere along the route of the parade, handing out their pamphlets.

None of them appeared to have followed me, though. The bomber was almost certainly someone outside the network of friends we'd uncovered.

*An anti-viral, anti-drug, anti-pollution barrier, alone-or a means of guaranteeing a heterosexual child. Which do you think would earn the most money?* Surrounded by cheering spectators-half of them mixed-sex couples with children in tow-it was *almost* possible to laugh off Mendelsohn's fears. Who, here, would admit that they'd buy a version of the co-coon which would help wipe out the source of their enter-tainment? But applauding the freak show didn't mean wanting your own flesh and blood to join it.

An hour after the parade had started, I decided to move out of the densest part of the crowd. If the bomber couldn't reach me through the crush of people, there wasn't much point be-ing here. A hundred or so leather-clad women on-noise-enhanced-electric motorbikes went riding past in a crucifix formation, behind a banner which read DYKES ON BIKES FOR JESUS. I recalled the small group of fundamentalists I'd passed earlier, their backs to the parade route lest they turn into pillars of salt, holding up candles and praying for rain.

I made my way to one of the food stalls, and bought a cold hot dog and a warm orange juice, trying to ignore the smell of horse turds. The place seemed to attract law enforcement types; J. Edgar Hoover himself came wandering by while I was eating, looking like a malevolent Humpty Dumpty.

As he passed me, he said, "Twenty-nine. Seventeen. Five."

I finished my hot dog and followed him.

He stopped in a deserted side street, behind a supermarket parking lot. As I caught up with him, he took out a magnetic scanner.

I said, "No wires, no weapons." He waved the device over me. I was telling the truth. "Can you talk through that thing?"

"Yes." The giant head bobbed strangely; I couldn't see any eye



holes, but he clearly wasn't blind.

“Okay. Where did the explosives come from? We know they started off in Singapore, but who was your supplier here?”

Hoover laughed, deep and muffled. “I'm not going to tell you that. I'd be dead in a week.”

“So what *do* you want to tell me?”

“That I only did the grunt work. Mendelsohn organized everything.”

“No shit. But what have you got that will prove it? Phone calls? Financial transactions?”

He just laughed again. I was beginning to wonder how many people in the parade would know who'd played J. Edgar Hoover; even if he clammed up now, it was possible that I'd be able to track him down later.

That was when I turned and saw six more, identical, Hoov-ers coming around the corner. They were all carrying baseball bats.

I started to move. Hoover One drew a pistol and aimed it at my face. He said, “Kneel down slowly, with your hands behind your head.”

I did it. He kept the gun on me, and I kept my eyes on the trigger, but I heard the others arrive, and close into a half-circle behind me.

Hoover One said, “Don't you know what happens to trai-tors? Don't you know what's going to happen to you?”

I shook my head slowly. I didn't know what I could say to appease him, so I spoke the truth. “How can I be a traitor? What is there to betray? Dykes on Bikes for Jesus? The Wil-liam S. Burroughs Dancers?”

Someone behind me swung their bat into the small of my back. Not as hard as they might have; I lurched forward, but I kept my balance.

Hoover One said, “Don't you know any history, Mr. Pig? Mr. *Polizei*? The Nazis put us in their death camps. The Rea-ganites tried to have us all die of AIDS. And here you are now, Mr. Pig,

working for the fuckers who want to wipe us off the face of the planet. That sounds like betrayal to *me*.”“

I knelt there, staring at the gun, unable to speak. I couldn't dredge up the words to justify myself. The truth was too difficult, too gray, too confusing. My teeth started chattering. *Nazis. AIDS. Genocide*. Maybe he was right. Maybe I deserved to die.

I felt tears on my cheeks. Hoover One laughed. “Boo hoo, Mr. Pig.” Someone swung their bat onto my shoulders. I fell forward on my face, too afraid to move my hands to break the fall; I tried to get up, but a boot came down on the back of my neck.

Hoover One bent down and put the gun to my skull. He whispered, “Will you close the case? Lose the evidence on Catherine? You know, your boyfriend frequents some dangerous places; he needs all the friends he can get.”

I lifted my face high enough above the asphalt to reply. “Yes.”

“Well done, Mr. Pig.”

That was when I heard the helicopter.

I blinked the gravel out of my eyes and saw the ground, far brighter than it should have been; there was a spotlight trained on us. I waited for the sound of a bullhorn. Nothing happened. I waited for my assailants to flee. Hoover One took his foot off my neck.

And then they all laid into me with their baseball bats.

I should have curled up and protected my head, but curiosity got the better of me; I turned and stole a glimpse of the chopper. It was a news crew, of course, refusing to do anything unethical like spoil a good story just when it was getting telegenic. That much made perfect sense.

*But the goon squad made no sense at all. Why were they sticking around, now that the cameras were running? Just for the pleasure of beating me for a few seconds longer!*

Nobody was *that* stupid, that oblivious to PR.

I coughed up two teeth and hid my face again. *They wanted it all to be broadcast*. They wanted the headlines, the backlash, the outrage. ATOMIC TERRORISTS! BABY-POISONERS! BRUTAL

THUGS!

They wanted to demonize the enemy they were pretending to be.

The Hoovers finally dropped their bats and started running. I lay on the ground drooling blood, too weak to lift my head to see what had driven them away.

A while later, I heard hoofbeats. Someone dropped to the ground beside me and checked my pulse.

I said, "I'm not in pain. I'm happy. I'm delirious."

Then I passed out.

On his second visit, Martin brought Catherine Mendelsohn to the hospital with him. They showed me a recording of LEI's media conference, the day after the Mardi Gras-two hours before Mendelsohn's was scheduled to take place.

Janet Lansing said, "In the light of recent events, we have no choice but to go public. We would have preferred to keep this technology under wraps for commercial reasons, but innocent lives are at stake. And when people turn on their own kind—"

I burst the stitches in my lips laughing.

LEI had bombed their own laboratory. They'd irradiated their own cells. And they'd hoped that I'd cover up for Mendelsohn, once the evidence led me to her, out of sympathy with her cause. Later, with a tip-off to an investigative reporter or two, the cover-up would have been revealed.

The perfect climate for their product launch.

Since I'd continued with the investigation, though, they'd had to make the best of it: sending in the Hoovers, claiming to be linked to Mendelsohn, to punish me for my diligence.

Mendelsohn said, "Everything LEI leaked about me—the cobalt, my key to the vault—was already spelt out in the pamphlets I'd printed, but that doesn't seem to cut much ice with the murdochs. I'm the Harbor Bridge Gamma Ray Terrorist now."

"You'll never be charged."

"Of course not. So I'll never be found innocent, either."

I said, ‘ ‘When I’m out of here, I’m going after them.’’ *They wanted impartiality? An investigation untainted by prejudice? They’d get exactly what they paid for, this time. Minus the tunnel vision.*

Martin said softly, “Who’s going to employ you to do that?”

I smiled, painfully. “LEI’s insurance company.”

When they’d left, I dozed off.

I woke suddenly, from a dream of suffocation.

Even if I proved that the whole thing had been a marketing exercise by LEI-even if half their directors were thrown in prison, even if the company itself was liquidated-the tech-nology would still be owned by *someone*.

And one way or another, in the end, it would be *sold*.

That’s what I’d missed, in my fanatical neutrality: you can’t sell a cure without a disease. So even if I was right to be neutral-even if there was no difference to fight for, no dif-ference to betray, no difference to preserve-the best way to *sell* the cocoon would always be to invent one. And even if it would be no tragedy at all if there was nothing left but heterosexuality in a century’s time, the only path which could lead there would be one of lies, and wounding, and vilifica-tion.

*Would people buy that, or not?*

I was suddenly very much afraid that they would.