

Silver Fire

by Greg Egan

I was in my office at home, grading papers for Epidemiology 410, when the call came through from John Brecht in Maryland. Realtime, not a polite message to be dealt with whenever I chose. I'd grown into the habit of thinking of Colonel Brecht as "my old boss." Apparently that had been premature.

He said, "We've found a little Silver Fire anomaly which I think might interest you, Claire. A little blip on the autocorrelation transform which just won't go away. And seeing as you're on vacation -- "

"_My students_ are on vacation. I still have work to do."

"Oh, I think Columbia can find someone to take over those menial tasks for a week or two."

I regarded him in silence for a moment, trying to decide whether or not to tell him to find someone else to take over his own _menial tasks_.

I said, "What exactly are we talking about?"

Brecht smiled. "A faint trail. Hovering on the verge of significance. Your specialty." A map appeared on the screen; his face shrank to an inset. "It seems to start in North Carolina, around Greensboro, heading west." The map was peppered with dots marking the locations of recent Silver Fire cases -- color-coded by the time elapsed since a notional "day of infection", the dots themselves positioned wherever the patient had been at the time. Having been told exactly what to look for, I could just make out a vague spectral progression cutting through the scattered blossoms of localized outbreaks: a kind of smudged rainbow trail from red to violet, dissolving into uncertainty just west of Knoxville, Tennessee. Then again ... if I squinted, I could discern another structure, about as convincing, sweeping down in an amazingly perfect arc from Kentucky. A few more minutes, and I'd see the hidden face of Groucho Marx. The human brain is far too good at finding patterns; without rigorous statistical tools we're helpless, animists grasping at meaning in every random puff of air.

I said, "So how do the numbers look?"

"The P value's borderline," Brecht conceded. "But I still think it's worth checking out."

The visible part of this hypothetical trail spanned at least ten days. _Three days_ after exposure to the virus, the average person was either dead or in intensive care -- not driving blithely across the countryside. Maps tracing the precise routes of infection generally looked like random walks with mean free paths five or ten kilometers long; even air travel, at worst, tended to spawn a multitude of scattered small outbreaks. If we'd stumbled on someone who was infectious but asymptomatic, then that was definitely _worth checking out_.

Brecht said, "As of now, you have full access to the notifications database.

I'd offer you our provisional analysis -- but I'm sure you can do better with the raw data, yourself."

"No doubt."

"Good. Then you can leave tomorrow."

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I woke before dawn and packed in ten minutes, while Alex lay cursing me in his sleep. Then I realized I had three hours to kill, and absolutely nothing left to do, so I crawled back into bed. When I woke for the second time, Alex and Laura were both up, and eating breakfast.

As I sat down opposite Laura, though, I wondered if I was dreaming: one of those insidiously reassuring no-need-to-wake-because-you-already-have dreams. My fourteen-year-old daughter's face and arms were covered in alchemical and zodiacal symbols in iridescent reds, greens and blues. She looked like a character in some dire VR-as-psychedelia movie who'd been mauled by the special effects software.

She stared back at me defiantly, as if I'd somehow expressed disapproval. In fact, I hadn't yet worked my way around to such a mundane emotion -- and by the time I did, I kept my mouth firmly shut. Knowing Laura, these were definitely not fakes which would wash off -- but transdermal enzyme patches could still erase them as bloodlessly as the dye-bearing ones which had implanted them. So I was good, I didn't say a word: no cheap reverse-psychology ("Oh, aren't they sweet?"), no (honest) complaints about the harassment I'd get from her principal if they weren't gone by the start of term.

Laura said, "Did you know that Isaac Newton spent more time on alchemy than he did on the theory of gravity?"

"Yes. Did you know he also died a virgin? Role models are great, aren't they?"

Alex gave me a sideways warning look, but didn't buy in. Laura continued, "There's a whole secret history of science that's been censored from the official accounts. Hidden knowledge that's only coming to light now that everyone has access to the original sources."

It was hard to know how to respond honestly to this without groaning aloud. I said evenly, "I think you'll find that most of it has actually 'come to light' before. It's just turned out to be of limited interest. But sure, it's fascinating to see some of the blind alleys people have explored."

Laura smiled at me pityingly. "Blind alleys!" She finished picking the toast crumbs off her plate, then she rose and left the room with a spring in her step, as if she'd won some kind of battle.

I said plaintively, "What did I miss? When did all this start?"

Alex was unfazed. "I think it's mostly just the music. Or rather, three seventeen-year-old boys with supernaturally perfect skin and big brown contact lenses, called The Alchemists -- "

"Yes, I _know_ the band -- but New Hermetics is more than the bubblegum music, it's a major cult -- "

He laughed. "Oh, come on! Wasn't your sister deeply in lust with the lead singer of some quasi-Satanic heavy metal group? I don't recall her ending up nailing black cats to upside-down crucifixes."

"That was never _lust_. She just wanted to discover his hair-care secrets."

Alex said firmly, "Laura is fine. Just ... relax and sit it out. Unless you want to buy her a copy of _Foucault's Pendulum_?"

"She'd probably miss the irony."

He prodded me on the arm; mock-violence, but genuine anger. "_That's_ unfair. She'll chew up New Hermetics and spit it out in ... six months, at the most. How long did Scientology last? A week?"

I said, "_Scientology_ is crass, transparent gibberish. New Hermetics has five thousand years of cultural adornment to draw on. It's every bit as insidious as Buddhism or Catholicism: there's a tradition, there's a whole esthetic -- "

Alex cut in, "Yes -- and in six months' time, she'll understand: the esthetic can be appreciated without swallowing any of the bullshit. Just because alchemy was a blind alley, that doesn't mean it isn't still elegant and fascinating ... but _being_ elegant and fascinating doesn't render a word of it true."

I reflected on that for a while, then I leaned over and kissed him. "I hate it when you're right: you always make it sound so obvious. I'm too damn protective, aren't I? She'll work it all out for herself."

"You know she will."

I glanced at my watch. "_Shit_. Can you drive me to La Guardia? I'm never going to get a cab, now."

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Early in the pandemic, I'd pulled a few strings and arranged for a group of my students to observe a Silver Fire patient close up. It had seemed wrong to bury ourselves in the abstractions of maps and graphs, numerical models and extrapolations -- however vital they were to the battle -- without witnessing the real physical condition of an individual human being.

We didn't have to don biohazard suits; the young man lay in a glass-walled, hermetically sealed room. Tubes brought him oxygen, water, electrolytes and nutrients -- along with antibiotics, antipyretics, immunosuppressants, and pain killers. No bed, no mattress; the patient was embedded in a transparent polymer gel: a kind of buoyant semi-solid which limited pressure sores and drew away the blood and lymphatic fluid weeping out through what used to be his skin.

I surprised myself by crying, silently and briefly, hot tears of anger. Rage dissipating into a vacuum; I knew there was no one to blame. Half the

students had medical degrees -- but if anything, they seemed more shaken than the green statisticians who'd never set foot in a trauma ward or an operating theater -- probably because they could better imagine what the man would have been feeling without a skull full of opiates.

The official label for the condition was Systemic Fibrotic Viral Scleroderma -- but SFVS was unpronounceable, and apparently people's eyes glazed over if news readers spelt out four whole letters. I used the new name like everyone else -- but I never stopped loathing it. It was too fucking poetic by far.

When the Silver Fire virus infected fibroblasts in the subcutaneous connective tissue, it caused them to go into overdrive, manufacturing vast quantities of collagen -- in a variant form transcribed from the normal gene but imperfectly assembled. This denatured protein formed solid plaques in the extracellular space, disrupting the nutrient flow to the dermis above -- and eventually becoming so bulky as to shear it off completely. Silver Fire flayed you from within. A good strategy for releasing large amounts of virus, maybe -- though when it had stumbled on the trick, no one knew. The presumed animal host in which the parent strain lived, benignly or otherwise, was yet to be found.

If the lymph-glistening sickly white of naked collagen plaques was "silver", the fever, the autoimmune response, and the sensation of being burned alive was "fire." Mercifully, the pain couldn't last long, either way. The standard First World palliative treatment included constant deep anesthesia -- and if you didn't get that level of high-tech intervention, you went into shock, fast, and died.

Two years after the first outbreaks, the origin of the virus remained unknown, a vaccine was still a remote prospect -- and though patients could be kept alive almost indefinitely, all attempts to effect a cure by purging the body of the virus and grafting cultured skin had failed.

Four hundred thousand people had been infected, worldwide; nine out of ten were dead. Ironically, rapid onset due to malnutrition had all but eliminated Silver Fire in the poorest nations; most outbreaks in Africa had burned themselves out on the spot. The US not only had more hospitalized victims on life support, per capita, than any other nation; it was heading for the top of the list in the rate of new cases.

A handshake or even a ride in a packed bus could transmit the virus -- with a low probability for each contact event, but it added up. The only thing that helped in the medium term was isolating potential carriers -- and to date it had seemed that no one could remain infectious and healthy for long. If the "trail" Brecht's computers had found was more than a statistical mirage, cutting it short might save dozens of lives -- and understanding it might save thousands.

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It was almost noon when the plane touched down at the Triad airport on the outskirts of Greensboro. There was a hire car waiting for me; I waved my notepad at the dashboard to transmit my profile, then waited as the

seating and controls rearranged themselves slightly, piezoelectric actuators humming. As I started to reverse out of the parking bay, the stereo began a soothing improvisation, flashing up a deadpan title: Music for Leaving Airports on June 11, 2008.

I got a shock driving into town: there were dozens of large plots of tobacco visible from the road. The born-again weed was encroaching everywhere, and not even the suburbs were safe. The irony had become cliched, but it was still something to witness the reality firsthand: even as nicotine was finally going the way of absinthe, more tobacco was being cultivated than ever before -- because tobacco mosaic virus had turned out to be an extremely convenient and efficient vector for introducing new genes. The leaves of these plants would be loaded with pharmaceuticals or vaccine antigens -- and worth twenty times as much as their unmodified ancestors at the height of demand.

My first appointment was still almost an hour away, so I drove around town in search of lunch. I'd been so wound up since Brecht's call, I was surprised at just how good I felt to have arrived. Maybe it was no more than traveling south, with the sudden slight shift in the angle of the light -- a kind of beneficent latitudinal equivalent of jet lag. Certainly, everything in downtown Greensboro appeared positively luminous after NYC, with modern buildings in pastel shades looking curiously harmonious beside the gleamingly preserved historic ones.

I ended up eating sandwiches in a small diner -- and going through my notes again, obsessively. It was seven years since I'd done anything like this for real, and I'd had little time to make the mental transition from theoretician back to practitioner.

There'd been four new cases of Silver Fire in Greensboro in the preceding fortnight. Health authorities everywhere had long ago given up trying to establish the path of infection for every last case; given the ease of transmission, and the inability to question the patients themselves, it was a massively labor-intensive process which yielded few tangible benefits. The most useful strategy wasn't backtracking, but rather quarantining the family, workmates and other known contacts of each new case, for about a week. Carriers were infectious for two or three days at the most before becoming -- very obviously -- sick themselves; you didn't need to go looking for them. Brecht's rainbow trail either meant an exception to this rule ... or a ripple of new cases propagating from town to town without any single carrier.

Greensboro's population was about a quarter of a million -- though it depended on exactly where you drew the boundaries. North Carolina had never gone in much for implosive urbanization; growth in rural areas had actually outstripped growth in the major cities in recent years, and the microvillage movement had taken off here in a big way -- at least as much as on the west coast.

I displayed a contoured population density map of the region on my notepad; even Raleigh, Charlotte and Greensboro were only modest elevations against the gently undulating background of the countryside -- and only the Appalachians themselves cut a deep trench through this

inverted topography. Hundreds of small new communities dotted the map, between the already numerous established towns. The microvillages weren't literally self-sustaining, but they were definitely high-tech Green, with photovoltaics, small-scale local water treatment, and satellite links in lieu of connections to any centralized utilities. Most of their income came from cottage service industries: software, design, music, animation.

I switched on an overlay showing the estimated magnitude of population flows, on the timescale relevant to Silver Fire. The major roads and highways glowed white hot, and the small towns were linked into the skein by their own slender capillaries ... but the microvillages all but vanished from the scene: everyone worked from home. So it wasn't all that unlikely for a random Silver Fire outbreak to have spread straight down the interstate, rather than diffusing in a classic drunkard's walk across this relatively populous landscape.

Still ... the whole point of being here was to find out the one thing that none of the computer models could tell me: whether or not the assumptions they were based on were dangerously flawed.

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I left the diner and set to work. The four cases came from four separate families; I was in for a long day.

All the people I interviewed were out of quarantine, but still suffering various degrees of shock. Silver Fire hit like an express train: there was no time to grasp what was happening before a perfectly healthy child or parent, spouse or lover, all but died in front of your eyes. The last thing you needed was a two-hour interrogation by a total stranger.

It was dusk by the time I reached the last family -- and any joy I'd felt at being back in the field had long since worn off. I sat in the car for a minute, staring at the immaculate garden and lace curtains, listening to the crickets, wishing I didn't have to go in and face these people.

Diane Clayton taught high school mathematics; her husband, Ed, was an engineer, working night shifts for the local power company. They had a thirteen-year-old daughter, Cheryl. Mike, eighteen, was in the hospital.

I sat with the three of them, but it was Ms Clayton who did most of the talking. She was scrupulously patient and courteous with me -- but after a while, it became clear that she was still in a kind of daze. She answered every question slowly and thoughtfully -- but I had no idea if she really knew what she was saying, or whether she was just going through the motions on autopilot.

Mike's father wasn't much help, since the shift work had kept him out of synch with the rest of the family. I tried increasing eye contact with Cheryl, encouraging her to speak. It was absurd, but I felt guilty even as I did it -- as if I'd come here to sell the family some junk product, and now I was trying to bypass parental resistance.

"So ... Tuesday night he definitely stayed home?" I was filling in a chart of Mike Clayton's movements for the week before symptoms appeared --

hour-by-hour. It was a fastidious, nit-picking Gestapo routine that made the old days of merely asking for a list of sexual partners and fluids exchanged seem positively idyllic.

"Yes, that's right." Diane Clayton screwed her eyes shut and ran through her memories of the night again. "I watched some television with Cheryl, then went to bed around ... eleven. Mike must have been in his room all the time." He'd been on vacation from UNC Greensboro, with no reason to spend his evenings studying -- but he might have been socializing electronically, or watching a movie.

Cheryl glanced at me uncertainly, then said shyly, "I think he went out."

Her mother turned to her, frowning. "Tuesday night? No!"

I asked Cheryl, "Do you have any idea where?"

"Some nightclub, I think."

"He said that?"

She shrugged. "He was dressed for it."

"But he didn't say where?"

"No."

"Could it have been somewhere else? A friend's place? A party?" My information was that no nightclubs in Greensboro were open on Tuesdays.

Cheryl thought it over. "He said he was going dancing. That's all he said."

I turned back to Diane Clayton; she was clearly upset at being cut out of the discussion. "Do you know who he might have gone with?"

If Mike was in a steady relationship he hadn't mentioned the fact, but she gave me the names of three old school friends. She kept apologizing to me for her "negligence."

I said, "It's all right. Really. No one can remember every last detail."

She was still distraught when I left, an hour later. Her son leaving the house without telling her -- or the fact that he'd told her, and it had slipped her mind -- was now (somehow) the reason for the whole tragedy.

I felt partly to blame for her distress, myself -- though I didn't see how I could have handled things any differently. The hospital would have offered her expert counseling -- that wasn't my job at all. And there was sure to be more of the same ahead; if I started taking it personally, I'd be a wreck in a matter of days.

I managed to track down all three friends before eleven -- about the latest I dared call anyone -- but none of them had been with Mike on Tuesday night, or had any idea where he'd been. They helped me cross-check some other details, though. I ended up sitting in the car making calls for almost two hours.

Maybe there'd been a party, maybe there hadn't. Maybe it had been a pretext for something else; the possibilities were endless. Blank spots on the charts were a matter of course; I could have spent a month in Greensboro trying to fill them all in, without success. If the hypothetical carrier had been at this hypothetical party (and the other three members of the Greensboro Four definitely hadn't -- they were all accounted for on the night) I'd just have to pick up the trail further on.

I checked into a motel and lay awake for a while, listening to the traffic on the interstate. Thinking of Alex and Laura -- and trying to imagine the unimaginable.

But it couldn't happen to them. They were mine. I'd protect them.

How? By moving to Antarctica?

Silver Fire was rarer than cancer, rarer than heart disease, rarer than death by automobile. Rarer than gunshot wounds, in some cities. But there was no strategy for avoiding it -- short of complete physical isolation.

And Diane Clayton was now torturing herself for failing to keep her eighteen-year-old son locked up for the summer vacation. Asking herself, over and over: What did I do wrong? Why did this happen? What am I being punished for?

I should have taken her aside, looked her squarely in the eye, and reminded her: "This is not your fault! There's nothing you could have done to prevent it!"

I should have said: It just happened. People suffer like this for no reason. There is no sense to be made of your son's ruined life. There is no meaning to be found here. Just a random dance of molecules.

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I woke early and skipped breakfast; I was on the I-40, heading west, by seven thirty. I drove straight past Winston-Salem; a couple of people had been infected there recently -- but not recently enough to be part of the trail.

Sleep had taken the edge off my pessimism. The morning was cool and clear, and the countryside was stunning -- or at least, it was where it hadn't been turned over to monotonous biotech crops, or worse: golf courses.

Still, some things had definitely changed for the better. It was on the I-40 -- more than twenty years before -- that I'd first heard a radio evangelist preaching the eighties' gospel of hate: AIDS as God's instrument, HIV as the righteous virus sent down from Heaven to smite adulterers, junkies and faggots. (I'd been young and hot-headed, then; I'd pulled off at the next exit, phoned the radio station, and heaped abuse on some poor receptionist.) But proponents of this subtle theology had fallen curiously silent ever since an immortalized cell line derived from the bone marrow of a Kenyan prostitute had proved more than a match for the omnipotent deity's secret weapon. And if Christian fundamentalism wasn't exactly dead

and buried, its power base had certainly gone into decline; the kind of ignorance and insularity it relied upon seemed to be becoming almost impossible to sustain against the tide of information.

Local audio had long since shifted to the net, of course, evangelists and all; the old frequencies had fallen silent. And I was out of range of cellular contact with the beast with 20,000 channels ... but the car did have a satellite link. I switched on my notepad, hoping for some light relief.

I'd programmed Ariadne, my knowledge miner, to scan all available media outlets for references to Silver Fire. Maybe it was sheer masochism, but there was something perversely fascinating about the distorted shadow the real pandemic cast in the shallows of media space: rumors and misinformation, hysteria, exploitation.

The tabloid angles, as always, were predictably inane: Silver Fire was a disease from space / the inevitable result of fluoridation / the reason half a dozen celebrities had disappeared from the public gaze. Three false modes of transmission were on offer: today it was tampons, Mexican orange juice, and mosquitoes (again). Several young victims with attractive "before" shots and family members willing to break down on camera had been duly rounded up. New century, same old fox shit.

The most bizarre item in Ariadne's latest sweep wasn't classic tabloid at all, though. It was an interview on a program called The Terminal Chat Show (23:00 GMT, Thursdays, on Britain's Channel 4) with a Canadian academic, James Springer, who was touring the UK (in the flesh) to promote his new hypertext, The Cyber Sutras.

Springer was a balding, middle-aged, avuncular man. He was introduced as Associate Professor of Theory at McGill University; apparently only the hopelessly reductionist asked: "Theory of what?" His area of expertise was described as "computers and spirituality" -- but for reasons I couldn't quite fathom, his opinion was sought on Silver Fire.

"The crucial thing," he insisted smoothly, "is that Silver Fire is the very first plague of the Information Age. AIDS was certainly post-industrial and post-modernist, but its onset predated the emergence of true Information Age cultural sensibilities. AIDS, for me, embodied the whole negative zeitgeist of Western materialism confronting its inevitable fin de siecle crisis of confidence -- but with Silver Fire, I think we're free to embrace far more positive metaphors for this so-called 'disease.'"

The interviewer inquired warily, "So ... you're hopeful that Silver Fire victims will be spared the stigmatization and hysteria that accompanied AIDS?"

Springer nodded cheerfully. "Of course! We've made enormous strides forward in cultural analysis since those days! I mean, if Burroughs' Cities of the Red Night had only penetrated the collective subconscious more fully when it appeared, the whole course of the AIDS plague might have been radically different -- and that's a hot topic in Uchronic Studies which one of my doctoral students is currently pursuing. But there's no doubt that Information Age cultural forms have fully prepared us for Silver Fire. When I look at global techno-anarchist raves, trading-card tattoo body comics, and

affordable desktop implementations of the Dalai Lama ... it's clear to me that Silver Fire is a sequence of RNA whose time has come. If it didn't exist, we'd have to synthesize it!"

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My next stop was a town called Statesville. A brother and sister in their late teens, Ben and Lisa Walker, and the sister's boyfriend, Paul Scott, were in hospital in Winston-Salem. The families had only just returned home.

Lisa and Ben had been living with their widower father and a nine-year-old brother. Lisa had worked in a local store, alongside the owner -- who'd remained symptom-free. Ben had worked in a vaccine-extraction plant, and Paul Scott had been unemployed, living with his mother. Lisa seemed the most likely of the three to have become infected first; in theory, all it took was an accidental brush of skin against skin as a credit card changed hands -- albeit with only a 1-in-100 chance of transmission. In the larger cities, some people who dealt with the public in the flesh had taken to wearing gloves -- and some (arguably paranoid) subway commuters covered every square centimeter of skin below the neck, even in midsummer -- but the absolute risk was so small that few strategies like this had become widespread.

I grilled Mr Walker as gently as I could. His children's movements for most of the week were like clockwork; the only time during the window of infection when they'd been anywhere but work or home was Thursday night. Both had been out until the early hours, Lisa visiting Paul, Ben visiting his girlfriend, Martha Amos. Whether the couples had gone anywhere, or stayed in, he wasn't certain -- but there wasn't much happening locally on a week night, and they hadn't mentioned driving out of town.

I phoned Martha Amos; she told me that she and Ben had been at her house, alone, until about two. Since she hadn't been infected, presumably Ben had picked up the virus from his sister sometime later -- and Lisa had either been infected by Paul that night, or vice versa.

According to Paul's mother, he'd barely left the house all week, which made him an unlikely entry point. Statesville seemed to be making perfect sense: customer to Lisa in the store (Thursday afternoon), Lisa to Paul (Thursday night), Lisa to Ben (Friday morning). Next stop, I'd ask the store owner what she remembered about their out-of-town customers that day.

But then Ms Scott said, "Thursday night, Paul was over at the Walkers until late. That's the only time he went out, that I can think of."

"He went to see Lisa? She didn't come here?"

"No. He left for the Walkers, about half past eight."

"And they were just going to hang around the house? They had nothing special planned?"

"Paul doesn't have a lot of money, you know. They can't afford to go out much -- it's not easy for them." She spoke in a relaxed, confiding tone -- as

if the relationship, with all its minor tribulations, had merely been put on hold. I hoped someone would be around to support her when the truth struck home in a couple of days.

I called at Martha Amos's house. I hadn't paid close enough attention to her when I'd phoned; I could see now that she was not in good shape.

I asked her, "Did Ben happen to tell you where his sister went with Paul Scott on Thursday night?"

She stared at me expressionlessly.

"I'm sorry, I know this is intrusive -- but no one else seems to know. If you can remember anything he said, it could be very helpful."

Martha said, "He told me to say he was with me. I always covered for him. His father wouldn't have ... _approved_."

"Hang on. Ben wasn't with you on Thursday night?"

"I went with him a couple of times. But it's not my kind of thing. The people are all right. The music's shit, though."

"Where? Are you talking about some bar?"

"No! _The villages._ Ben and Paul and Lisa went out to the villages, Thursday night." She suddenly focused on me properly, for the first time since I'd arrived; I think she'd finally realized that she hadn't been making a lot of sense. "They hold 'Events.' Which are just dance parties, really. It's no big deal. Only -- Ben's father would assume it's all about _drugs_. Which it's not." She put her face in her hands. "But that's where they caught Silver Fire, isn't it?"

"I don't know."

She was shaking; I reached across and touched her arm. She looked up at me and said wearily, "You know what hurts the most?"

"What?"

"I didn't go with them. I keep thinking: _If I'd gone, it would have been all right_. They wouldn't have caught it then. I would have kept them safe."

She searched my face -- as if for some hint as to what she might have done. _I was hunting down Silver Fire, wasn't I?_ I ought to have been able to tell her, precisely, how she could have warded off the curse: what magic she hadn't performed, what sacrifice she hadn't made.

And I'd seen this a thousand times before -- but I still didn't know what to say. All it took was the shock of grief to peel away the veneer of understanding: _Life is not a morality play. Disease is just disease; it carries no hidden meaning. There are no gods we failed to appease, no elemental spirits we failed to bargain with._ Every sane adult knew this -- but the knowledge was still only skin deep. At some level, we still hadn't swallowed the hardest-won truth of all: _The universe is indifferent._

Martha hugged herself, rocking gently. "I know it's crazy, thinking like that. But it still hurts."

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I spent the rest of the day trying to find someone who could tell me more about Thursday night's "Event" (such as where, exactly, it had taken place -- there were at least four possibilities within a twenty kilometer radius). I had no luck, though; it seemed microvillage culture was very much a minority taste, and Statesville's only three enthusiasts were now _incommunicado_. Drugs weren't the issue with most of the people I talked to; they just seemed to think the villagers were boring tech-heads with appalling taste in music.

Another night, another motel. It was beginning to feel like old times.

Mike Clayton had gone dancing, somewhere, on the Tuesday night. _Out in the villages?_ Presumably he hadn't traveled quite this far, but an unknown person -- a tourist, maybe -- might easily have been at both Events: Tuesday night near Greensboro, Thursday night near Statesville. If this was true, it would narrow down the possibilities considerably -- at least compared with the number of people who'd simply passed through the towns themselves.

I pored over road maps for a while, trying to decide which village would be easiest to add to the next day's itinerary. I'd searched the directories for some kind of "microvillage night life" web site -- in vain, but that didn't mean anything. The address had no doubt made its way, by electronic diffusion, to everyone who was genuinely interested -- and whichever village I went to, half a dozen people were sure to know all about the Events.

I climbed into bed around midnight -- but then reached for my notepad again, to check with Ariadne. Silver Fire had made the big time: video fiction. There was a reference in the latest episode of NBC's "hit sci-fi drama", _Mutilated Mystic Empaths in N-Space_.

I'd heard of the series, but never watched it before, so I quickly scanned the pilot. "Don't you know the first law of astronavigation! Ask a _computer_ to solve equations in _17-dimensional hypergeometry_ ... and its rigid, deterministic, linear mind would shatter like a diamond dropped into a black hole! Only _twin telepathic Buddhist nuns_, with seventh-dan black belts in karate, and enough self-discipline to _hack their own legs from their bodies_, could ever hope to master the _intuitive skills_ required to navigate the treacherous quantum fluctuations of N-space and rescue that stranded fleet!"

"My God, Captain, you're right -- but where will we find ... ?"

MME was set in the 22nd century -- but the Silver Fire reference was no clumsy anachronism. Our heroines miscalculate a difficult trans-galactic jump (breathing the wrong way during the recitation of a crucial mantra), and end up in Present Day San Francisco. There, a small boy and his dog, on the run from mafia hit men, help them repair a vital component in their Tantric Energy Source. After humiliating the assassins with a perfectly

choreographed display of legless martial arts amid the scaffolding of a high-rise construction site, they track down the boy's mother to a hospital, where she turns out to be infected with Silver Fire.

The camera angles here grow coy. The few glimpses of actual flesh are sanitized fantasies: glowing ivory, smooth and dry.

The boy (whose recently slaughtered accountant-for-the-mob father concealed the truth from him), bursts into tears when he sees her. But the MMEs are philosophical:

"These well-meaning doctors and nurses will tell you that your Mom has suffered a terrible fate -- but in time, the truth will be understood by all. Silver Fire is the closest we can come, in this world, to the Ecstasy of Unbeing. You observe only the frozen shell of her body ... but inside, in the realm of _shunyata_, a great and wonderful transformation is at work."

"Really?"

"Really."

Boy dries tears, theme music soars, dog jumps up and licks everyone's faces. Cathartic laughter all round.

(Except, of course, from the mother.)

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The next day, I had appointments in two small towns further along the highway. The first patient was a divorced forty-five-year-old man, a technician at a textile factory. Neither his brother nor his colleagues could offer me much help; for all they knew, he could have driven to a different town (or village) every single night during the period in question.

In the next town, a couple in their mid-thirties and their eight-year-old daughter had died. The symptoms must have hit all three more-or-less simultaneously -- and escalated more rapidly than usual -- because no one had managed to call for help.

The woman's sister told me without hesitation, "Friday night, they would have gone out to the villages. That's what they usually did."

"And they would have taken their daughter?"

She opened her mouth to reply -- but then froze and just stared at me, mortified -- as if I was blaming her sister for recklessly exposing the child to some unspeakable danger. There were photographs of all three on the mantelpiece behind her. This woman had discovered their disintegrating bodies.

I said gently, "No place is safer than any other. It only looks that way in hindsight. They could have caught Silver Fire anywhere at all -- and I'm just trying to trace the path of the infection, after the event."

She nodded slowly. "They always took Phoebe. She loved the villages; she had friends in most of them."

"Do you know which village they went to, that night?"

"I think it was Herodotus."

Out in the car, I found it on the map. It wasn't much further from the highway than the one I'd chosen purely for convenience; I could probably drive out there and still make it to the next motel by a civilized hour.

I clicked on the tiny dot; the information window told me: Herodotus, Catawba County. Population 106, established 2004.

I said, "More."

The map said, "That's all."

* * * *

Solar panels, twin satellite dishes, vegetable gardens, water tanks, boxy prefabricated buildings ... there was no single component of the village which couldn't have been found on almost any large rural property. It was only seeing all of them thrown together in the middle of the countryside that was startling. Herodotus resembled nothing so much as a 20th century artist's impression of a pioneering settlement on some Earth-like -- but definitely alien -- planet.

A major exception was the car park, discreetly hidden behind the huge banks of photovoltaic cells. With only a bus and two other cars, there was room for maybe a hundred more vehicles. Visitors were clearly welcome in Herodotus; there wasn't even a meter to feed.

Despite the prefabs, there was no army-camp feel to the layout; the buildings obeyed some symmetry I couldn't quite parse, clustered around a central square -- but they certainly weren't lined up in rows like quonset huts. As I entered the square, I could see a basketball game in progress in a court off to one side; teenagers playing, and younger children watching. It was the only obvious sign of life. I approached -- feeling a bit like a trespasser, even if this was as much a public space as the main street of any ordinary town.

I stood by the other spectators and watched the game for a while. None of the children spoke to me, but it didn't feel like I was being actively snubbed. The teams were mixed-sex, and play was intense but good-natured. The kids were Anglo-, African-, Chinese-American. I'd heard rumors that certain villages were "effectively segregated" -- whatever that meant -- but it might well have been nothing but propaganda.

The microvillage movement had stirred some controversy when it started, but the lifestyle wasn't exactly radical. A hundred or so people -- who would have worked from their homes in towns or cities anyway -- pooled their resources and bought some cheap land out in the country, making up for the lack of amenities with a few state-of-the-art technological fixes. Residents were just as likely to be stockbrokers as artists or musicians -- and though any characterization was bound to be unfair, most villages were definitely closer to yuppie sanctuaries than anarchist communes.

I couldn't have faced the physical isolation, myself -- and no amount of bandwidth would have compensated -- but if the people here were happy, all power to them. I was ready to concede that in fifty years' time, living in Queens would be looked on as infinitely more perverse and inexplicable than living in a place like Herodotus.

A young girl, six or seven years old, tapped my arm. I smiled down at her. "Hello."

She said, "Are you on the trail of happiness?"

Before I could ask her what she meant, someone called out, "Hello there!"

I turned; it was a woman -- in her mid-twenties, I guessed -- shielding her eyes from the sun. She approached, smiling, and offered me her hand.

"I'm Sally Grant."

"Claire Booth."

"You're a bit early for the Event. It doesn't start until nine thirty."

"I -- "

"So if you want a meal at my place, you'd be welcome."

I hesitated. "That's very kind of you."

"Ten dollars sound fair? That's what I'd charge if I opened the cafeteria -- only there were no bookings tonight, so I won't be."

I nodded.

"Well, drop in around seven. I'm number twenty-three."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

I sat on a bench in the village square, shaded from the sunset by the hall in front of me, listening to the cries from the basketball court. I knew I should have told Ms Grant straight away what I was doing here; shown her my ID, asked the questions I was permitted to ask, and left. _But mightn't I learn more by staying to watch the Event? Informally?_ Even a few crude firsthand observations of the demographics of this unmodelled contact between the villagers and the other local populations might be useful -- and though the carrier was obviously long gone, this was still a chance to get a very rough profile of the kind of person I was looking for.

Uneasily, I came to a decision. There was no reason not to stay for the party -- and no need to make the villagers anxious and defensive by telling them why I was here.

* * * *

From the inside, the Grants' house looked more like a spacious, modern apartment than a factory-built box which had been delivered on the back of a truck to the middle of nowhere. I'd been unconsciously expecting the clutter of a mobile home, with too many mod-cons per cubic meter to leave

room to breathe, but I'd misjudged the scale completely.

Sally's husband, Oliver, was an architect. She edited travel guides by day; the cafeteria was a sideline. They were founding residents, originally from Raleigh; there were still only a handful of later arrivals. Herodotus, they explained, was self-sufficient in (vegetarian) staple foods, but there were regular deliveries of all the imports any small town relied on. They both made occasional trips to Greensboro, or interstate, but their routine work was pure telecommuting.

"And when you're not on holidays, Claire?"

"I'm an administrator at Columbia."

"That must be fascinating." It certainly turned out to be a good choice; my hosts changed the subject back to themselves immediately.

I asked Sally, "So what clinched the move for you? Raleigh's not exactly the crime capital of the nation." I found it hard to believe that the real estate prices could have driven them out, either.

She replied without hesitation, "Spiritual criteria, Claire."

I blinked.

Oliver laughed pleasantly. "It's all right, you haven't come to the wrong place!" He turned to his wife. "Did you see her face? You'd think she'd stumbled onto some enclave of Mormons or Baptists!"

Sally explained, apologetically, "I meant the word in its broadest sense, of course: an understanding that we need to resensitize ourselves to the moral dimensions of the world around us."

That left me none the wiser, but she was clearly expecting a sympathetic response. I said tentatively, "And you think ... living in a small community like this makes your civic responsibilities clearer, more readily apparent?"

Now Sally was bemused. "Well ... yes, I suppose it does. But that's just politics, really, isn't it? Not spirituality. I meant -- " She raised her hands, and beamed at me. "I just meant, the reason you're here, yourself! We came to Herodotus to find -- for a lifetime -- what you've come here to find for a few hours, yourself!"

* * * *

I heard the other cars begin to arrive while I sat drinking coffee with Sally in the living room. Oliver had excused himself for an urgent meeting with a construction manager in Tokyo. I passed the time with small-talk about Alex and Laura, and my Worst Ever New York Experience horror stories -- some of which were true. It wasn't a lack of curiosity that kept me from probing Sally about the Event -- I was just afraid of alerting her to the fact that I had no idea what I'd let myself in for. When she left me for a minute, I scanned the room -- without rising from my chair -- for any sign of what she might have come here to find for a lifetime. All I had time to take in were a few CD covers, the half-dozen visible ones on a large rotating rack. Most looked like modern music/video, from bands I'd never

heard of. There was one familiar title, though: James Springer's The Cyber Sutras.

By the time the three of us crossed the square and approached the village hall -- a barn-like structure, resembling a very large cargo container -- I was quite tense. There were thirty or forty people in the square, most but not all in their late teens or early twenties, dressed in the kind of diverse mock-casual clothing that might have been seen outside any nightclub in the country. So what was I afraid was going to happen? Just because Ben Walker couldn't tell his father about it, and Mike Clayton couldn't tell his mother, didn't mean I'd wandered into some southern remake of Twin Peaks. Maybe bored kids just snuck out to the villages to pop hallucinogens at dance parties -- my own youth resurrected before my eyes, with safer drugs and better light shows.

As we approached the hall, a small group of people filed in through the self-opening doors, giving me a brief glimpse of bodies silhouetted against swirling lights, and a blast of music. My anxiety began to seem absurd. Sally and Oliver were into psychedelics, that was all -- and Herodotus's founders had apparently decided to create a congenial environment in which to use them. I paid the sixty-dollar entry fee, smiling with relief.

Inside, the walls and ceiling were ablaze with convoluted patterns: soft-edged multi-hued fractals pulsing with the music, like vast color-coded simulations of turbulent fluids cascading down giant fret-boards at Mach 5. The dancers cast no shadows; these were high-power wall-screens, not projections. Stunning resolution -- and astronomically expensive.

Sally pressed a fluorescent-pink capsule into my hand. Harmony or Halcyon, maybe; I no longer knew what was fashionable. I tried to thank her, and offer some excuse about "saving it for later" -- but she didn't hear a word, so we just smiled at each other meaninglessly. The hall's sound insulation was extraordinary (which was lucky for the other villagers); I would never have guessed from outside that my brain was going to be pureed.

Sally and Oliver vanished into the crowd. I decided to hang around for half an hour or so, then slip out and drive on to the motel. I stood and watched the people dancing, trying to keep my head clear despite the stupefying backdrops ... though I doubted that I could learn much about the carrier that I didn't already know. Probably under 25. Probably not towing small children. Sally had given me all the details I needed to obtain information on Events from here to Memphis -- past and future. The search was still going to be difficult, but at least I was making progress.

A sudden loud cheer from the crowd broke through the music -- and the room was transformed before my eyes. For a moment I was utterly disorientated -- and even when the world began to make visual sense again, it took me a while to get the details straight.

The wall-screens now showed dancers in identical rooms to the one I was standing in; only the ceiling continued to play the abstract animation. These identical rooms all had wall-screens themselves, which also showed identical rooms full of dancers ... much like the infinite regress between a pair of mirrors.

And at first, I thought the "other rooms" were merely realtime images of the Herodotus dance hall itself. But ... the swirling vortex pattern on the ceiling joined seamlessly with the animation on the ceilings of "adjacent" rooms, combining to form a single complex image; there was no repetition, reflected or otherwise. And the crowds of dancers were not identical -- though they all looked sufficiently alike to make it hard to be sure, from a distance. Belatedly, I turned around and examined the closest wall, just four or five meters away. A young man "behind" the screen raised a hand in greeting, and I returned the gesture automatically. We couldn't quite make convincing eye contact -- and wherever the cameras were placed, that would have been a lot to ask for -- but it was, still, almost possible to believe that nothing really separated us but a thin wall of glass.

The man smiled dreamily and walked away.

I had goose bumps. This was nothing new in principle, but the technology here had been pushed to its limits. The sense of being in an infinite dance hall was utterly compelling; I could see no "furthest hall" in any direction (and when they ran out of real ones, they could have easily recycled them). The flatness of the images, the incorrect scaling as you moved, the lack of parallax (worst of all when I tried to peer into the "corner rooms" between the main four ... which "should" have been possible, but wasn't) served more to make the space beyond the walls appear exotically distorted than to puncture the effect. The brain actually struggled to compensate, to cover up the flaws -- and if I'd swallowed Sally's capsule, I doubt I would have been nit-picking. As it was, I was grinning like a child on a fairground ride.

I saw people dancing facing the walls, loosely forming couples or groups across the link. I was mesmerized; I forgot all thoughts of leaving. After a while, I bumped into Oliver, who was swaying happily by himself. I screamed into his ear, "These are all other villages?" He nodded, and shouted back, "East is east and west is west!" Meaning ... the virtual layout followed real geography -- it just abolished the intervening distances? I recalled something James Springer had said in his Terminal Chat Show interview: We must invent a new cartography, to rechart the planet in its newborn, Protean state. There is no separation, now. There are no borders.

Yeah ... and the world was just one giant party. Still, at least they weren't splicing in live connections to war zones. I'd seen enough we-dance/you-dodge-shells "solidarity" in the nineties to last a lifetime.

It suddenly occurred to me: If the carrier really was traveling from Event to Event ... then he or she was "here" with me. Right now. My quarry had to be one of the dancers in this giant, imaginary hall.

And this fact implied no opportunity -- let alone any kind of danger. It wasn't as if Silver Fire carriers conveniently fluoresced in the dark. But it still felt like the strangest moment of a long, strange night: to understand that the two of us were finally "connected", to understand that I'd "found" the object of my search.

Even if it did me no good at all.

* * * *

Just after midnight -- as the novelty was wearing off, and I was finally making up my mind to leave -- some of the dancers began cheering loudly again. This time it took me even longer to see why. People started turning to face the east, and excitedly pointing something out to each other.

Weaving through one of the distant crowds of dancers -- in a village three screens removed -- were a number of human figures. They might have been naked, some male some female, but it was hard to be sure: they could only be seen in glimpses ... and they were shining so brightly that most details were swamped in their sheer luminosity.

They glowed an intense silver-white. The light transformed their immediate surroundings -- though the effect was more like a halo of luminous gas, diffusing through the air, than a spotlight cast on the crowd. The dancers around them seemed oblivious to their presence -- as did those in the intervening halls; only the people in Herodotus paid them the kind of attention their spectacular appearance deserved. I couldn't yet tell whether they were pure animation, with plausible paths computed through gaps in the crowd, or unremarkable (but real) actors, enhanced by software.

My mouth was dry. I couldn't believe that the presence of these silver figures could be pure coincidence -- but what were they meant to signify? Did the people of Herodotus know about the string of local outbreaks? That wasn't impossible; an independent analysis might have been circulated on the net. Maybe this was meant as some kind of bizarre "tribute" to the victims.

I found Oliver again. The music had softened, as if in deference to the vision, and he seemed to have come down a little; we managed to have something approaching a conversation.

I pointed to the figures -- who were now marching smoothly straight through the image of the image of a wall-screen, proving themselves entirely virtual.

He shouted, "They're walking the trail of happiness!"

I mimed incomprehension.

"Healing the land for us! Making amends! Undoing the trail of tears!"

The trail of tears? I was lost for a while, then a memory from high school surfaced abruptly. The "Trail of Tears" was the brutal forced march of the Cherokee from what was now part of Georgia, all the way to Oklahoma, in the 1830s. Thousands had died along the way; some had escaped, and hidden in the Appalachians. Herodotus, I was fairly sure, was hundreds of kilometers from the historical route of the march -- but that didn't seem to be the point. As the silver figures moved across the dance floor twice-removed, I could see them spreading their arms wide, as if performing some kind of benediction.

I shouted, "But what does _Silver Fire_ have to do with -- ?"

"Their bodies are frozen -- so their spirits are free to walk the Trail of Happiness through cyberspace for us! Didn't you know? That's what Silver Fire is _for!_ To renew everything! To bring happiness to the land! _To make amends!_" Oliver beamed at me with absolute sincerity, radiating pure good will.

I stared at him in disbelief. This man, clearly, hated no one ... but what he'd just spewed out was nothing but a New Age remix of the rantings of that radio evangelist, twenty years before, who'd seized upon AIDS as the incontrovertible proof of his own _spiritual beliefs_.

I shouted angrily, "Silver Fire is a merciless, agonizing -- "

Oliver tipped his head back and laughed, uproariously, without a trace of malice -- as if I was the one telling ghost stories.

I turned and walked away.

The trail-walkers split into two streams as they crossed the hall immediately to the east of us. Half went north, half went south, as they "detoured around" Herodotus. They couldn't move among us -- but this way, the illusion remained almost seamless.

And if I'd been drugged out of my skull? If I'd embraced the whole mythology of the Trail of Happiness -- and come here hoping to see it confirmed? In the morning, would I have half-believed that the roaming spirits of Silver Fire patients had marched right past me?

Bestowing their luminous blessing on the crowd.

Near enough to touch.

* * * *

I threaded my way toward the camouflaged exit. Outside, the cool air and the silence were surreal; I felt more disembodied and dreamlike than ever. I staggered toward the car park, and waved my notepad to make the hire car flash its lights.

My head cleared as I approached the highway. I decided to drive on through the night; I was so agitated that I didn't think I had much chance of sleeping. I could find a motel in the morning, shower, and catch a nap before my next appointment.

I still didn't know what to make of the Event -- what solid link there could be between the carrier and the villagers' mad syncretic cyberbabble. If it was nothing but coincidence, the irony was grotesque -- but what was the alternative? _Some "pilgrim" on the Trail of Happiness, deliberately spreading the virus?_ The idea was ludicrous -- and not just because it was unthinkably obscene. A carrier could only _know_ that he or she had been infected if distinctive symptoms had appeared ... but _distinctive symptoms_ only marked the brutal end stage of the disease; a prolonged mild infection -- if such a thing existed -- would be indistinguishable from influenza. Once Silver Fire progressed far enough to affect the visible layers of the skin, the only options for cross-country travel all involved flashing

lights and sirens.

* * * *

At about half past three in the morning, I switched on my notepad. I wasn't exactly drowsy, but I wanted something to keep me alert.

Ariadne had plenty.

First, a heated debate on The Reality Studio -- a program on the Intercampus Ideas Network. A freelance zoologist from Seattle named Andrew Feld spoke first -- putting the case that Silver Fire "proved beyond doubt" his "controversial and paradigm-subverting" S-force theory of life, which "combined the transgressive genius of Einstein and Sheldrake with the insights of the Maya and the latest developments in superstrings, to create a new, life-affirming biology to take the place of soulless, mechanistic Western science."

In reply, virologist Margaret Ortega from UCLA explained in detail why Feld's ideas were superfluous, failed to account for -- or clashed directly with -- numerous observed biological phenomena ... and were neither more nor less "mechanistic" than any other theory which didn't leave everything in the universe to the whim of God. She also ventured the opinion that most people were capable of affirming life without casually discarding all of human knowledge in the process.

Feld was a clueless idiot on a wish-fulfillment trip. Ortega wiped the floor with him.

But when the nationwide audience of students voted, he was declared winner by a majority of two to one.

Next item: Protesters were blockading the Medical Research Laboratories of the Max Planck Institute in Hamburg, calling for an end to Silver Fire research. Safety was not the issue. Protest organizer and "acclaimed cultural agitator" Kid Ransom had held an impromptu press conference:

"We must reclaim Silver Fire from the gray, small-minded scientists, and learn to tap its wellspring of mythical power for the benefit of all humanity! These technocrats who seek to explain everything are like vandals rampaging through a gallery, scrawling equations on all the beautiful works of art!"

"But how will humanity ever find a cure for this disease, without research?"

"There is no such thing as disease! There is only transformation!"

There were four more news stories, all concerning (mutually exclusive) proclamations about the "secret truth" (or secret ineffability) behind Silver Fire -- and maybe each one, alone, would have seemed no more than a sad, sick joke. But as the countryside materialized around me -- the purple-gray ridge of the Black Mountains to the north starkly beautiful in the dawn -- I was slowly beginning to understand. This was not my world anymore. Not in Herodotus, not in Seattle, not in Hamburg or Montreal or London. Not even in New York.

In my world, there were no nymphs in trees and streams. No gods, no ghosts, no ancestral spirits. Nothing -- outside our own cultures, our own laws, our own passions -- existed in order to punish us or comfort us, to affirm any act of hatred or love.

My own parents had understood this, perfectly -- but theirs had been the first generation, ever, to be so free of the shackles of superstition. And after the briefest flowering of understanding, my own generation had grown complacent. At some level, we must have started taking it for granted that the way the universe worked was now obvious to any child ... even though it went against everything innate to the species: the wild, undisciplined love of patterns, the craving to extract meaning and comfort from everything in sight.

We thought we were passing on everything that mattered to our children: science, history, literature, art. Vast libraries of information lay at their fingertips. But we hadn't fought hard enough to pass on the hardest-won truth of all: Morality comes only from within. Meaning comes only from within. Outside our own skulls, the universe is indifferent.

Maybe, in the West, we'd delivered the death blows to the old doctrinal religions, the old monoliths of delusion ... but that victory meant nothing at all.

Because taking their place now, everywhere, was the saccharine poison of spirituality.

* * * *

I checked into a motel in Asheville. The parking lot was full of campervans, people heading for the national parks; I was lucky, I got the last room.

My notepad chimed while I was in the shower. An analysis of the latest data reported to the Centers for Disease Control showed the "anomaly" extending almost two hundred kilometers further west along the I-40 -- about half-way to Nashville. Five more people on the Trail of Happiness. I sat and stared at the map for a while -- then I dressed, packed my bag again, and checked out.

I made ten calls as I was driving up into the mountains, canceling all my appointments with relatives from Asheville to Jefferson City, Tennessee. The time had passed for being cautious and methodical, for gathering every last scrap of data along the way. I knew the transmission had to be taking place at the Events -- the only question was whether it was accidental or deliberate.

Deliberate how? With a vial full of fibroblasts, teeming with Silver Fire? It had taken researchers at the NIH over a year to learn how to culture the virus -- and they'd only succeeded in March. I couldn't believe that their work had been replicated by amateurs in less than three months.

The highway plunged between the lavish wooded slopes of the Great Smoky Mountains, following the Pigeon River most of the way. I programmed a predictive model -- by voice -- as I drove. I had a calendar for the Events, now, and I had five approximate dates of infection. Case notifications

would always be too late; the only way to catch up was to extrapolate. And I could only assume that the carrier would continue moving steadily westwards, never lingering, always traveling on to the next Event.

I reached Knoxville around midday, stopped for lunch, then drove straight on.

The model said: _Pliny, Saturday Jan 14, 9.30 pm._ My first chance to search the infinite dance hall for the carrier, without an impassable wall between us.

My first chance to be in the presence of Silver Fire.

* * * *

I arrived early -- but not so early as to attract the attention of Pliny's equivalents of Sally and Oliver. I stayed in the car for an hour, improvising ways to look busy, recording the license numbers of arriving vehicles. There were a lot of four-wheel drives and utilities, and a few campervans. Many villagers favored bicycles -- but the carrier would have to have been a real fanatic -- and extremely fit -- to have cycled all the way from Greensboro.

The Event followed much the same pattern as the one in Herodotus the night before -- though Herodotus itself wasn't taking part. The crowd was similar, too: mostly young, but with enough exceptions to keep me from looking completely out of place. I wandered around, trying to commit every face to memory without attracting too much attention. _Had all these people swallowed the Silver Fire myth, as I'd heard it from Oliver?_ The possibility was almost too bleak to contemplate. The only thing that gave me any hope was that when I'd compared the number of villages listed on the Event calendar with the number in the region, it was less than one in twenty. The microvillage movement itself had nothing to do with this insanity.

Someone offered me a pink capsule -- not for free, this time. I gave her twenty dollars, and pocketed the drug for analysis. There was a slender chance that someone was passing out doctored capsules -- although stomach acid tended to make short work of the virus.

A handsome blond kid -- barely in his twenties -- hovered around me for a while as the trail-walkers appeared. When they'd vanished into the west, he approached me, took my elbow, and made an offer I couldn't quite hear over the music -- though I thought I got the gist of it. I was too distracted to feel amazed or flattered -- let alone tempted -- and I got rid of him in five seconds flat. He walked away looking wounded -- but not long afterward, I saw him leaving with a woman half my age.

I stayed to the very end -- and on Saturday nights, that meant five in the morning. I staggered out into the light, discouraged, although I didn't know what I'd seriously hoped to see. _Someone walking around with an aerosol spray, administering doses of Silver Fire?_ When I reached the car park I realized that many of the cars had arrived after I'd gone in -- and some might have come and gone unseen. I recorded the license plates I'd missed, trying to be discreet, but almost past caring; I hadn't slept for thirty-six hours.

* * * *

The nearest Event west of Pliny, on Sunday night, was past the Mississippi and half-way across Arkansas; I made a calculated guess that the carrier would take this as an opportunity for a night off.

Monday evening, I drove into Eudoxus -- population 165, established 2002, about an hour from Nashville -- ready to spend all night in the car park if I had to. I needed to record every license plate, or there wasn't much point being here.

I hadn't told Brecht what I was doing; I still had no solid evidence, and I was afraid of sounding paranoid. I'd called Alex before leaving Nashville, but I hadn't told him much, either. Laura had declined to speak to me when he'd called out and told her I was on the line, but that was nothing new. I missed them both already, more than I'd anticipated -- but I wasn't sure how I'd manage when I finally made it home, to a daughter who was turning away from reason, and a husband who took it for granted that any bright adolescent would recapitulate five thousand years of intellectual progress in six months.

Thirty-five vehicles arrived between ten and eleven -- none I'd seen before -- and then the flow tapered off abruptly. I scanned the entertainment channels on my notepad, satisfied by anything with color and movement; I'd had enough of Ariadne's bad news.

Just before midnight, a blue Ford campervan rolled up and parked in the corner opposite me. A young man and a young woman got out; they seemed excited, but a little wary -- as if they couldn't quite believe that their parents weren't watching from the shadows.

As they crossed the car park, I realized that the guy was the blond kid who'd spoken to me in Pliny.

I waited five minutes, then went and checked their license plate; it was a Massachusetts registration. I hadn't recorded it on Saturday night, so I would have missed the fact that they were following the Trail, if one of them hadn't --

Hadn't what?

I stood there frozen behind the van, trying to stay calm, replaying the incident in my mind. I knew I hadn't let him paw me for long -- _but how long would it have taken?_

I glanced up at the disinterested stars, trying to savor the irony because it tasted much better than the fear. I'd always known there'd be a risk -- and the odds were still heavily in my favor. I could put myself into quarantine in Nashville in the morning; nothing I did right now would make the slightest difference --

But I wasn't thinking straight. If they'd _traveled together_ all the way from Massachusetts -- or even from Greensboro -- one should have infected the other long ago. The probability of the two of them sharing the same freakish resistance to the virus was negligible, even if they were brother

and sister.

They couldn't both be unwitting, asymptomatic carriers. So either they had nothing to do with the outbreaks --

_ -- or they were transporting the virus outside their bodies, and handling it with great care_.

A bumper sticker boasted: STATE-OF-THE-ART SECURITY! I placed a hand against the rear door experimentally; the van didn't emit so much as a warning beep. I tried shaking the handle aggressively; still nothing. If the system was calling a security firm in Nashville for an armed response, I had all the time I needed. If it was trying to call its owners, it wouldn't have much luck getting a signal through the aluminum frame of the village hall.

There was no one in sight. I went back to my car, and fetched the toolkit.

I knew I had no legal right. There were emergency powers I could have invoked -- but I had no intention of calling Maryland and spending half the night fighting my way through the correct procedures. And I knew I was putting the prosecution case at risk, by tainting everything with illegal search and seizure.

I didn't care. They weren't going to have the chance to send one more person down the Trail of Happiness, even if I had to burn the van to the ground.

I levered a small, tinted fixed window out of its rubber frame in the door. Still no wailing siren. I reached in, groped around, and unlocked the door.

I'd thought they must have been half-educated biochemists, who'd learned enough cytology to duplicate the published fibroblast culturing techniques.

I was wrong. They were medical students, and they'd half-learned other skills entirely.

They had their friend cushioned in polymer gel, contained in something like a huge tropical fish tank. They had oxygen set up, a urethral catheter, and half a dozen drips. I played my torch beam over the inverted bottles, checking the various drugs and their concentrations. I went through them all twice, hoping I'd missed one -- but I hadn't.

I shone the beam down onto the girl's skinless white face, peering through the delicate streamers of red rising up through the gel. She was in an opiate haze deep enough to keep her motionless and silent -- but she was still conscious. Her mouth was frozen in a rictus of pain.

And she'd been like this for sixteen days.

I staggered back out of the van, my heart pounding, my vision going black. I collided with the blond kid; the girl was with him, and they had another couple in tow.

I turned on him and started punching him, screaming incoherently; I don't remember what I said. He put up his hands to shield his face, and the others came to his aid: pinning me gently against the van, holding me still

without striking a single blow.

I was crying now. The campervan girl said, "Sssh. It's all right. No one's going to hurt you."

I pleaded with her. "Don't you understand? She's in pain! _All this time, she's been in pain!_ What did you think she was doing? _Smiling?_"

"Of course she's smiling. This is what she always wanted. She made us promise that if she ever caught Silver Fire, she'd walk the Trail."

I rested my head against the cool metal, closed my eyes for a moment, and tried to think of a way to get through to them.

But I didn't know how.

When I opened my eyes, the boy was standing in front of me. He had the most gentle, compassionate face imaginable. He wasn't a torturer, or a bigot, or even a fool. He'd just swallowed some beautiful lies.

He said, "Don't you understand? All _you_ see in there is a woman dying in pain -- _but we all have to learn to see more_. The time has come to regain the lost skills of our ancestors: the power to see visions, demons and angels. The power to see the spirits of the wind and the rain. The power to walk the Trail of Happiness."