Originally published as an OMNI ONLINE NOVELLA
THE DAY THE DAM BROKE
by
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Of course James Thurber was from Columbus but I don't think he was Italian. The
information meant to tempt someone to Colum bus for post-doc study-intervention
in the plague zone emphasized an Italian neighborhood. I imagined being able to
buy fresh buffalo mozzarella every morning, bundles of fragrant green basil,
fresh bread, and Reggiano cheese cut from a jealous wheel, crumbling deliciously
at the edges into shards I could gobble from stiff paper or nibble between sips
of cappuccino or pale wine.
Dream on, Julia. Maybe before the millennium, but not now. The information I
latched onto in the L.A. dome was, shall we say, a bit out of date.
One of my grandfathers was actually born in Columbus, which was a point in its
favor. Now when he leaps from my cabin wall for a chat--nobody else to chat with
up here in the Canadian Rockies, though I do wait for You--brief auras, fleeting
pic tures, of old Ohio eddy from him, corridors of time which shimmer back to
the great forests, cool, slow-moving Indian rivers, and then pre-history when
the great land swelled and moved without regard to how we felt about it, fleas
upon its shuddering thin skin.
Well, that's what I wanted. Good food. Additional personal depth. The
opportunity to make my mark as one of the hot-shot nanplague meds of the time.
And a chance to get out of the dome.
Those pure enclaves dotted the world like the plastic bub bles they put over
smallpox vaccinations in the nineteen fifties so the kids wouldn't pick the
scabs off too soon. I hypered into that odd little tidbit while researching
plagues. I felt like part of a vaccine against the nanotech disasters of the
recent past, the disasters which still had not ended. As we were to learn. I
ached to be able to help make everything safe enough so that we could remove the
goddamned domes, those sad ellipsoidal barriers to the sky and stars and to what
I saw as Life.
Fine they said go. You think medicine is all G.E. That's genetic engineering and
I did. Inhalants in which DNA rode to the rescue on viral steeds. Wait till you
get out in the sticks. Far from us. Far from the Links--communication was touch
and go at that point but better than now! I must tell you that I am an old
woman. That depends on your definition of old of course but I was born pre-mil,
1999, and it is now . . . can it be? Oh, I'm just teasing you it is, it is
truly, twenty. Ninety-three. 2093. And this took place when I was a young
whippersnapper, as Thurber's grandfather might say, caught up in the RWF, Radio

Wave Fibrillation, and the Great Panic, and there I was, alone without medical
backup (or willing patients either so it didn't really matter) and no fresh
mozzarella either, if there ever had been any. At least I have the latter now.
Maybe that's what I wanted most all along.
I don't digress; press your ears to what must now pass for my heart--the radio.
If the technology is the same as now, and fibrillation has briefly ceased, use
the purple infrabar. That will give you the correct screen; then program in the
code CT2.1 for automatic fine tuning. I don't know what color or even what form
access to radio waves may take further down the road and therefore I have
prepared this in airborne nan form as well--doubtful, doubtful that it would
ever be breathed by other humans, given my remoteness but if so you will learn
how I battled the Great Midcentury Plague and how I lost, like everyone else I
presume. And, if it's not too far past now for you (this might bounce forever
through the aether), at the end of the broadcast file I'll give you directions
on how to find me, and a map if it is breathed, for I do enjoy visitors. I truly
do. At least I think I do. Please, please come visit me. I toss this into the
air frequently, straight up, without regard for possible vandals for after all I
know more than you do and if I don't surely you are more kind than those who
know less, for I believe that information grows compassion. Allow a young-old
woman her fantasies. I grow basil, by the way, in a little plot outside my cabin
door, and cilantro, and masses of poppies which thrive in the long cool summer.
More clues later. Proceed. Beep! (Sorry, but one gets silly with only a dog for
company, genetically engineered though he may be.)
And speaking of silly, those satellites rained information down upon us like
silly rain, let me tell you, silly because one
couldn't count on them. But you can count on me. Real sourdough bread, and I
grow and grind and boil my own soybeans and make tofu so you see I am the real
article. Protein ahead! Hurry! Turn up the gain and maybe that will help.
At any rate--back to the trip from L.A. to Columbus--my maglev arrived at your
station a week late and I was happy and relieved to get there at all since the
last maglev had been blown up somewhere in eastern Kansas (I learned after I had
left L.A.) and then they gave me the wrong sheets.
They? No. That's imprecise. Yes, I know, and you know that I do, and you will
know more if you continue. But for the benefit of other listeners . . . for
posterity, you know . . .
Oh I know it sounds like a nightmare, what we all dreaded at the time, the wrong
sheets, but it wasn't as bad as it sounds. They pumped me full of
Midwesternism.
Those gorgeous clear nansheets with blinking infolights taught me how to grow
corn when the flood tide on the Great Miami River receded and other
information

more applicable to my present situation than anything I ever learned in L.A. no matter how accelerated, and so I can't complain. Those erroneous sheets helped me survive out here and were I not so cynical might have made me a mystic. They upped my empathy with the strange outcast population I was coming to help though the people of Columbus damn well didn't want any help, not from the likes of me, the nanotech enemy. The sheet-empathy was particularly interesting after living domed all my life with all the cultural depth of your typical AI, intelligence incestuous and terribly inward-pointing. So you can see why I love the sky so much, and why I perch just below a ridgetop, south-facing, away from the fiercest, coldest winds. My synaptic code was one or two bits off, out of a billion, but I was sick that day, with a runny nose, so I thought that virus had something to do with my little history lesson, why I learned about corn and how my ancestors survived in the deep woods, and the basics of building one's own radio in the attic as if I were a boy in midcentury Ohio. At least that's what I thought at the time, and that's why I thought Thurber's vignettes were suddenly a part of my mind. Now, of course, we know differently. And one of us knew differently at the time it happened. It all worked out for the best, though; I don't mind!

But I see that you want real people, real settings, real things happening, not an old lady's rumination (truth to tell I look even younger than I did, now, and so of course do you, all new and unwrinkled, emerging from your cocoon. The wild buffalo would call me medicine woman and bow on their shaggy knees and the Puritans would call me witch and the pomos would call me visionary genius. I know this because when the blizzards wrap me round with whiteness I sometimes call up my grandfather, and we discuss such weighty matters and wish he still had a mouth with which to eat my very good buffalo-buttermilk cornbread). Perhaps I like it here so much because it's all edges--the edge of a survivable climate; the edge of myself, quite sharp; perhaps sharper than you bargained for. A different edge is not far from you, either, I'm afraid. Yes, yes, the plague. Allow me to stuff another log into the stove. (Crunch of embers, rain of orange sparks flying upward.) I buffaloed this log in, up and over the high pass, snagged last month from the Pointed Fir Lodge, a guestless retro-hotel in ski country. It has a stone fireplace big enough to hold this entire cabin. Perhaps we could meet there some day, at dawn, when the blue clean lake is still and the geese rise suddenly, with wild cries, from the reeds on the far shore.

There is an enormous shed there, filled with logs surrounded with various mechanical aids to help move them. The guests had to have their show, and the lodge had laid in about a hundred such logs. This giant is aged and perfect like all of them, unrotted, requiring only cutting to twenty-four inch lengths and

splitting. Only, I say, but I've devised interesting mechanical solutions to that problem. Wedges help.
As it burns I am reminded of the first log, which was in side, ready for the fireplace in the almost-deserted lodge. I pulled just-liberated Mildred balking
up the stone steps, the hollow clomp of her hooves in the deserted lobby echoing
from the peeled log rafters three stories above. Golden light poured in the many
windows. I felt so alive as I tied the log, secured it to her harness, shouted
Hyah! and she headed out the door. Behind the hotel at the log shed was the big
winch they used to handle the logs, and I got it onto the wagon. Sure, my cabin
is surrounded by forest, heavy, mature forest but it's more work to fell a tree
than you might think. Besides, this log is always the same log, the first one.
When I burn it, I burn that lonely trip from Columbus on the empty train. I cried a lot on that trip. The vacant town was the last stop the robot train made
when I fled crazed Columbus and I have an anniversary dinner there once a year,
April 23rd, with G.E. lying at my feet as I look out on the azure lake, drink a
priceless bottle of wine as candlelight winks off the etched pine on the wine glass, and wish for You to step off the train which is still in good working order. It arrives annually on that night (except for one irregu lar year when it
was probably sitting on a siding repairing itself) at 9:28. You get my drift?
Of course I might have stayed there at the retro resort but the lodge was quite
drafty since the windows were not self- healing and it was simply far too big.
The sunsets were glorious though and I wished for You to share them with. So after search ing the town I discovered Mildred lowing in a field, lonely but with plenty to eat. She had evidently pulled a sleigh for tour ists; I found it
in a barn. Of course G.E. got in the way whe never possible and ran off with the
first harness I found; she was still a floppy adolescent at the time. I was surprised that there was only one dead person in town, a young woman whose badge
read Alice Stamhall who was slumped behind the check-in desk, dead, though somewhat preserved by the cold. I think she owned the Lodge. The license was in
her name. It seems that all the tourists decided to hurry home to die or go insane and the locals just vanished.
The next morning our company of three left town. Mildred pulled a wagon heaped
with supplies, tools, and the log. At dawn, the air smelled of lake and the pines were deep green, and their wind-stirred shadows danced on the damp dirt road. I heard small creatures rustle away over dry needles as we passed.
We took the road north out of town--see, I am not stingy about clues--and moved
along toward home, what has come to be home, as if this unlikely target was somehow imprinted in me and called me through deep forest and over outrageously
high mountain passes--hurry, hurry please! Sunsets are peach and gold, the

sky
behind sometimes brilliant green as Venus catches fire from the sun. There. The
stove is hot now, I am satisfied, for the moment. I ice fish in winter, on Lake
Passo, pike. I am well set up and here we can live quite well. I do.
I should warn you, however, I am well-armed and have sent a few yous packing, unfortunately . . . but they were not the True You, and I never killed any of them (except one) only sufficient ly frightened them. Believe me, You. Never. Not a one. Well, only that one, who was very far from being a true you. I have a
weapon which does not kill. Unless . . .
Ah, you are thinking . . . never mind. Trust me please. Yes.
Dear. You. As usual, as always, there is an Ancient Cul ture and how we long for
it. We can't quite believe it gone, we try and linger in it, touch its dying fire. Ours was not as ancient nor as long as Chinese Dynasties; ours was a mere
blip. But in intensity, in the flashing light of what-humans-can-know and really
what else is there? we were glorious. I was and now you are packed tight with information, with true inforam, and therefore believe me believe me, You. My ancestors were peasants in Ireland and on the vast forested Indianed plains of
Ohio, and our DNA is sharp, so believe me, You; I spring from the land. There is
intensity here. So do make the attempt. I love you and I truly know what love is. It is not always just for people, you know. Sometimes it is just for Life. Here it is.
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I was terrified and exhilarated the instant my train car slipped from L.A. through the dome membrane. A missionary for medicine, out into the fray, heading
out from we who were so civilized, with our G.E., our Happiness, our pollen-held
informa tion and pheromonal receptors with which to perfectly and preci sely transmit information. Sometimes the receptors are terribly hungry out here. After all they could absorb most information much more precisely, and more quickly, than any other method. Still I don't consider returning, though something must remain of the domes. I think.
I was leaving L.A. to minister to the primitive folks we had left behind on our
conversion to Flower-Cities. How magnanimous of me! I'd caught hints that they
didn't want help, but ignored them like any good missionary. Outside the domes
nanplagues long outlawed, remnants of the Information Wars, drifted about in clouds, sluiced down occasionally in rainfall. The plagues twisted unpredictably
those who refused to come in from the rain and gather in the Flower-Cities, those who refused our admittedly limited inoculations to try and keep them half-safe, to protect the germ line just a bit. What fell was a real rain of stories as it were. Einstein could flower within you, Fermat's Last Theorem could unfold in breathtaking clarity, hurtling you straight down a swirling tunnel into the eye of the hurricane of Reality but without support you would,
at the very least, forget to eat. And it could be worse. Plagues of violence had, of course, been much more popular than plagues of deep thought, but how was
I to know that there was a plague of Bemused Midwestern ism abroad, wherein

Thurber skewered Salvador Dali by contrasting Dali's upbringing with his own, where that stratum of interested yet detatched observation and acceptance and trust in some essen tial goodness of life would render the victim practically help less, though perpetually deeply amused?
As I say, it could have been worse.
The trip to Columbus took three times longer than scheduled. Only two trains a
year took the eastern loop and we were exten sively briefed on disaster plans.
We were held up more than once by angry citizens. As we zipped across North America at 200 kph, I drank in golden prairies, red rock towers I had climbed in
virtual, the ghost towns and ghost cities of our great and former nation. In the
club car we dined on farm oysters and vat-grown beef. As we sipped wine from crystal which did not shiver, we exchanged rumors that the engineer had run over
more than one protester; it was routine. What were they protesting, I won dered?
An explosion shook the train just out of Denver. I felt the tremor in my bunk because it was foreign to the so-smooth ride. I found later that they simply shed the last seven cars, which had been damaged (I heard that we were a hundred
cars in all, and it was certainly a daunting journey to try and get from one end
of the train to the other; after awhile the cars began to repeat themselves and
it became boring) and swept on through the diamond-starred night. I lay on my back in my bunk and saw the stars undomed for the first time, with only a thin
layer of glass between myself and the night sky. Perhaps you might understand why I would never want to try and find my way back to a dome, somewhere. Here the stars burn for me every night, and surpass any of the wonders civilization
has to offer, for me at least.
The rails did not click they were all of a piece; grown; but my mind clicked, my
heart clicked as if a new kind of blood surged through it. I was heading toward
You and I felt it even then and I was young. But not as young as I am now.
Another log. I put on a glove to shield my hand as I shove it in among the other
disintegrating logs; I step out onto the front porch for a bit and G.E. nudges
my thigh wishing for a run. Silly dog I think no I am busy and she wags her tail
and sits, lifts her nose and samples the air for You. Yes, even she knows You. I
have told her about You in the pheromonal language she understands. And I have
you indelibly lodged pheromonally in my DNA, one of those small benefits left from the Flower Cities which you distrusted and despised, more's the pity.
Frigid wind ruffles G.E.'s brown fur, and freezes what face I've left avail able
after wrapping a scarf around it. The ridges are like waves, all around me, varying shades of black in the night, and the stars remind me of You. I love the
view of space here more than just about anything.
Are you coming? I'm afraid You will not, if I tell You more, but I must; the sheets infused me with dread Midwestern honesty, really the source of all my

troubles let me tell you. No doubt you will be confused on wakening. I cross my
arms over my breasts and cannot help remaining on the porch though my nose burns
with cold, waiting for You possibly threading up the dirt road, my voice
immediate in your mind I did tell you purple did I not, and give you the
numbers? Please. At least for a night or two; don't turn back no matter what for
it is dangerous once you are past Banff, the weather is uncertain, there are
golden moun tain lions and grizzlies, stupendously enough, and you will need
rest. I will not keep you if you do not want to stay. I am not kidding about the
animals but you know as well as I that they are the least of your worries.
Injury and plague would do you in first, statistically speaking, if my antidotes
did not take and it has been so very long I suspect that they did not. But there
are other reasons you might not come, I suppose.
On the wooden porch I turn and look inside: see? A red plaid blanket flung over
the couch, I can be concrete if you so insist, a teal-green chair the color of
Passo Lake, two hundred feet below (a favored color at the Pointed Fir). Fire
flickers orange and blue inside the arched glass window of the cast-iron stove,
and I am cooking soybean soup upon it. Don't wrinkle your nose. It's delicious.
Cedar planks with staring golden eyes warm and complete me, almost. So easy to
find, precision itself, if you know how to read so to speak. And I have the cure
for all Plagues, and for many of the things which cause aging (they even seem to
work on G.E. and Mildred, which surprises the heck out of me), which I will
administer if you are kind, but it cannot make you kind, that is something only
the cocoons could do which is why I must be careful. Please make sure you are
kind before you come all this way. One of you will feel kindness as a great
change, a lifting of darkness. The other will feel unchanged. You knew that I
had the cures long ago, so long ago, more's the pity. If things worked out,
though, you have them now. I tried to administer them before I sheeted you,
amidst the panic of the dam breaking, but as you may or may not remember, you
destroyed whatever you could of them. Out of simple pique. One of you did, and
you know which one of course. I'm not trying to start an argument here. I'm
apologizing for not understanding the dynamics better. But I don't think that
either of you understood them so why should I?
I have plenty of coffee, by the way, from the Pointed Fir Lodge. The supply will
run out eventually, but Alice was ready for a blockbuster season.
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And so the train reached Columbus. We stopped in Cincinnati dome and left
fifteen cars but I did not get off the train; I had been warned against it as
Cincinnati was on a slightly different system than L.A. which might kill me or
at the very least make me sick. I heard rumors that their dome would not be
there much longer; they had thought out an undomed system. Bravo, I said, not
believing. But I had been immunized for undomed Columbus and Columbus only,
though I had 6 clearance which meant protection for me--if it held, which was
doubtful. The 6 guaranteed immuni zation wherever I went it was only a matter

of
verification and then the proper sheets supplied by local authorities. But that
presupposed, of course, the existence of local authorities, and the definition
of proper sheets had become by that time loose, had most likely drifted. I was
out in the wilderness on my own and I relished that.
What a joke all that folderol was! For in Columbus--but why complain about what
happened there? You gave me the maps which brought me here, beneath the diamond
skies I bonded to once I got far enough north, have you seen the Pleiades? They
are my favor ite the Seven Sisters my very Sisters though I know well enough
they are just radio waves, glowing gas, the artifacts of our birth whose light
only exists. The stars toward which You may travel, any one of you, if you wake
and stretch in some other age, and if you are so misguided as to travel through
space instead of coming here, may well have not been born. Or may have died long
ago.
How strange.
But then my heart is as well, to You, glowing and perhaps in an unborn wave, in
radio wave fibrillation. Yet I selfishly hope you don't doubt that I am really
here, let me tell you more, let me tell you how I bend in the brief spring and
yank fledgling weeds from among the soybean rows. Lettuce and peas grow well
here because it is so cool; I eat the lettuce before it gets to the house and
the peas which survive my greed for sweet green things dry on large screens. The
soybeans have furry green pods; I boil them whole then squeeze out the beans,
which are utterly delicious. Someone else built this cabin, not I; his name was
Peter Johnson and I often thank him. His virtual life is here though it does not
interest me much; still I do not wipe him but leave him compressed out of
respect. Sometimes he leaps from the walls to join Grandfather and we discuss
the deep structure of spacetime and forget that they are both dead as I stir the
soup and tend the fire. Perhaps they are not. Dead that is, for what is death?
You must tell me sometime if you think you know, for you will have been the same
place they are, more or less, except that I had the foresight to see that you
had a body when you woke. They do come in handy. Grandfather and Peter often
complain bitterly about being limited to this cabin.
Some summers have been far too cold, and I think I must leave my glorious
paradise and cease waiting here for You, but there have never been two bad
summers in a row and when I get depressed about the vegetables not growing I
travel to little Flin Flon, quite cautiously, and the most life I detect with
infrared are wild animals and not humans. I take what I need from the hotel's
inexhaustible freeze-dried stores in a cart pulled by Mildred. Are You
convinced? I am lonely, that is all. The rush of wind, which we never
experienced in the dome, which makes me feel so alive, is more than enough to
keep me here. This beauty is sharp. I ache to share it.

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So. In Columbus the train door slid open and I was the only one debarking there,
the only one properly initialized, the other passengers braving on toward Toronto, NYC, D.C. I stepped off the train.
After my first astonished gasp I reeled beneath the blue sky, I danced, I laughed, then I rushed right across many empty tracks and here is concrete for
you, here is actual:
Mildred. I love my water buffalo and depend upon her, but not as much as I depended upon my original Mildred, who hurried after me, laughing. Are You her?
I will talk about You as if you are not listening, because the odds are very much against it. Someone else entirely might be listening, which is why I am a
bit cryptic. Or, and this is most likely, no one.
Mildred's hair was blonde and waist-long, fine as corn silk. That day it was loose, and the wind caught it. Her eyes were wide, the curious shade of blue which I saw that summer matched the delphiniums in her mother's garden. She said
she was Norwe gian, when I asked her, over coffee, in a small shop which disap
pointed with no mozzarella but which fulfilled my expectations with cappuccino,
which I still miss, the ceremony of it. Once in awhile I rummage through the huge kitchen of the Pointed Fir Lodge to try and find a stovetop steamer, but there is only a massive ornate machine in the dining room, electric.
Mildred did not like Don her husband very much, by that time, though she did not
quite realize it yet. It was he who prepared the wrong sheets for me, and it was
Mildred who helped me into them. But it rather backfired.
"Hello Dr. Chang," Don said, stumbling after me across the tracks. When he stopped he stared at me for a very long minute as if surprised. Well, apparently
he was. He had expected a man, I'm not sure why nor why that would make a bit of
difference to him. Communication was not terribly good in those times, though it
was much better than now. He had very short red hair and was partly bald. On his
long face was a small mustache which struck me as being rather unpleasant. His
brown eyes were as closed as Mildred's were open. I tried to feel enthusiastic
about my new colleague. Give him time, I thought.
"We have been waiting for you. Your train is very late," he said, after recovering from his staring fit, then laughed in a way which frightened me, but
Mildred's calm blue eyes caught and settled me. Standing next to Don in a bright
green thin parka, unzipped as it was March and warming, she reached out to shake
hands with me after a brief odd hesitation during which I had the strange feeling that she was going to hug me, tight.
"We will have your trunks taken to our house, for now," said Mildred.
"Thank you," I said, unworried about all the nan inside, all of my research materials. They had been packed in anticipation of any number of catastrophes,
anything else would have been terribly irresponsible.

"Are you hungry?" asked Mildred.
I shook my head. "We just had breakfast," I said.
"Well, then," said Don, obviously pleased. "It's just a few blocks to the hospital, and you can have your sheets there."
"Yes, might as well get that over with," I said, excited. I wanted to know all about this new place, about my new patients; I wanted to find out how many of the local population had survived each plague wave, and how the survivors had been affected. That, and more, would all be in the sheets.
They walked very fast along the sidewalks. On the streets I saw all manner of vehicles--horses, horse-drawn carriages, and many bikes. I saw only one electric car, tiny and battered and yellow, and found later that it was owned by Tolliver Townsby, the man who also owned the Ice Cream Parlor. I was suddenly in another age, the one which I so craved.
"Where are all the people?" I asked, used to dome satura tion. On either side of me, Don and Mildred looked at each other. "Our population, including the county, is fifteen thou sand," said Mildred gently.
"Oh," I said. Much less than I had expected. The sheets toward which we were heading would prevent me from asking such silly questions.
We passed many stores on the ancient main street, with huge plate glass windows, and a requisite amount of patrons. Thomp son's Feed and Seed, Elya's Organic Feast, The Snyder Cafe, it was a community of farmers, really, a completely self-sufficient organism which I now admire enormously. Above the storefronts rose tall, old-fashioned skyscrapers, completely empty. At the time I was stunned. Where are the Italians, I wondered, but was too shy to ask. Don and Mildred received nods and greetings from every person they passed on that five block walk.
Then we arrived at the hospital where they kept the cocoons and that's where I picked up Thurber, with his funny drawings of blunt angry women and cowed men with big noses and tiny eyes. His grandmother who believed that electricity leaked from outlets I could identify with in a way for when I actually saw the co coons after walking through a building which I thought could simply not exist any more in this day and age I stopped. Did a slight chill envelope my heart? It should have, but I don't really remember. I do remember trepidation.
The cocoons were old, on the top floor of the nearly- deserted hospital, at the end of old dun-colored halls which had not been grown but built, probably fifty years before. The sociologists in L.A. had told me that I probably couldn't under stand the pride involved and at that point, staring at the co coons which Don and Mildred showed me with decorum and reverence, I realized the sociologists had been right and wondered what other good advice I might have ignored. Though the hospital smelled of disinfectant the walls were grubby and this room did not quietly gleam with nan cleaners as I was used to. It was lit with a bare bulb and pipes mazed the ceiling with an old fire- protection system. The cocoons themselves filled me with a strange poignancy, for at the

instant I saw them I realized how far in time I actually was from L.A. There were four. They looked like one of the original models, and probably the city had purchased them during the initial surge of faith, when it was thought that nan could cure everything. The style was unmistak able, the curve of the cocoons, the oldstyle computers which regulated them visible, small crystals set on shelves above, connected to the cocoons with cables. An antiquer's delight, the kind of thing you see campily displayed in lofts, or even mu seums. I wondered what long-abandoned programming might lurk within those crystals. I should have wondered harder. As for the hospital itself, it simply staggered me with its age.

One of the things I had learned was how much the natives would dislike me. Though I looked at Don and wondered, I had been carefully programmed to be nonjudgemental about that. Well, that part worked a bit too well, I must say. The natives had good reasons for rejection. Nan had laid waste to most of the country through all sorts of vectors.

"Are you sure . . . ?" I asked and Don looked at me in an exasperated fashion with veed eyebrows dark and shaggy, Mildred behind him a bit more anxious. "Our population is--different from that of L.A., Dr. Chang," he said, still scowling.

"I would be the first to acknowledge how rural we truly are, how backward. But I personally ran the checks . . . "

"Fine, fine," I said, too hastily, please remember and stop laughing at my idiocy that I had never been out of the city and knew nothing, directly. Inforam does not come into play until your hands, as it were, touch. To put it simply, you may not even know that you are filled with the works of Bach, until you sit down in front of an organ and then it all floods out, per fect. No, I knew nothing of Thurber, the Great Plains, or Don's particular fears. I didn't even know how to suspect or infer them, or that I ought to. Mildred was married to Don and did, but did not suspect him of perfidy; I was to learn that was not an emotional possibility for her. And his action sprang from pride, from anger at having some hotshot newdoc sent out with all that authority, jurisdiction, though I was ten years younger than he was, and from fear that I knew a lot more than he did, which was absolutely true. If I had had some sort of background in schlepping delicately among the egos of those who had more--or less--at stake than the mere salvation of humankind, I might have been more cautious.

Don left, and Mildred made a few adjustments to the crys tals, silent with a technician's concentration. She smiled and squeezed my shoulder, then I was alone in the warm dry room and I stripped off my skinsuit and stepped into the cocoon. I lay down and felt the familiar clasp as it molded itself around me and was satisfied via the fuzzy logic code which flashed within my retina that this cocoon, Don's sheets, and my internalized system were compatible. It required a standard suppressant of various pre-set biochemical barriers, and I complied.

The slight blip of yellow light gave me to know that though something was minutely off, parity was very close, close enough to function, and I put it down to lack of sophistication on the part of the cocoon. Ha!

The next day I opened my eyes enormously changed, in a very good humor. I stared at the pipes above me and knew that one day in Columbus around 1910 or so, the erroneous rumor that the dam had burst spread, and saw Thurber's swift line drawings of stubby rounded Columbus citizens hoofing it out of the city in droves. I knew that his family had an Airedale named Matt who bit a lot of people. That story really made me howl, no pun intended, for I'd always longed to have a dog (and now I have you, wonderful G.E. and very strong jaws you have too! and one or two yous--the wrong ones--may have been bitten by them, far down the road where I couldn't see). All those delicious Thurber stories, which so lovingly described Columbus, hovered in my mind, in my vision, and I began to laugh.

Just the knowledge that I was here, in Columbus, was enough to bring Thurber out of inforam. My laughter echoed through the large empty room, bounced off the pipes. My mission, so sharp when I left L.A. (you must understand I was second in my class and they were extremely annoyed that I chose to leave; they had other uses in mind for me) was faint and hazy in my mind, like an almost-forgotten dream, when I opened my eyes. But not entirely forgotten. No, not entirely.

And so I rolled out of the cocoon after twenty-four hours, alone. Light came in through a high frosted window and I felt at home in this new place and thanked the sheets, for they had historied me into everything. I knew the past of the region and the medical history of all Don and Mildred's patients as well as that of their parents and grandparents. I knew how to grow corn on the flood plain in the spring. If an Iroquois had shown up, by God, I would have been able to speak her native language with her, though without that stimulus I never would or could utter a word of it.

I took a shower in the small dank concrete-floored stall. There were at least fifty lockers there so I surmised that there had been a time when the cocoons had heavy use. I dried myself, pulled on my skinsuit, and covered it with the native clothing someone had thoughtfully left--overalls. I wear trousers now which do not cling, and plaid shirts from the broken nan ski shop in Flin Flon, which was fortunately well-stocked before the fluid dried up after the townsfolk fled. Ah, what did I know of the fears of the people who lived outside the domes? Sure I used to be an MD once but what did I know? I could cure fear with the proper pheromones but you had to have the receptors first, and I had to have diagnostic equipment, and the pher-pak. Such is life. I can set broken bones now, I couldn't have then. I only knew how to use a computer, that's all, thought I could block the plague but it took me as easily as anyone. Only much

more brief ly. It left me with respect.
And I like living here, save for the loneliness. It's all for the best and that
optimism comes direct from those Columbus sheets. Because of them I am able to
be amused though not at the vagaries of others for there aren't any others here.
I am just generally amused, and I'm always ready to be further amused, though
not at your expense of course. You would find me pretty amusing too I am sure.
You?
I am really here, really, concrete, flesh. Believe it. If You are kind, we could
have children; I am fully functional. Kindness is not really programmable,
unfortunately; it's largely an environmental thing. Don was not kind because he
thought it wouldn't help him get results, but people who are kind are so under
almost all circumstances, save for certain extremes when they may get snappish
and that's always understandable when it happens. But if you have turned out
kind, children would be interesting. Now if that doesn't tempt you you just
aren't the one I'm looking for. There's a fifty percent chance they would have
receptors; I don't know whether that sounds good or bad to you, that germ line
stuff. Who knows what tomorrow may bring. I'm ever so glad I have mine it makes
me more versatile. I am not so lonely as sometimes the fitful satellite gives me
Grand dad, I told you that, and we can talk. Other than that I have delusions of
recreating civilization, only better and in a foolproof way, so now you know
that I am insane and incapable of learning from history. So what? I'm human. If
you are kind, you will like that. Don't come if you don't. I am armed, I tell you.
I fell in love with Mildred, and if you are Mildred I don't know what you will
think about that, though I did not sleep with her. With You. Oh, I'm getting
confused now. I blush. Well, actually, I barely thought of it, though later I
did, and plenty, after I'd shrugged off her touch and made her cry. I am sorry
about that it is my one regret. All the others are for myself only and therefore
silly as errant neutrinos, as meaningless, yet as powerful in the disruption of
communications. Her feelings were real and she needed me. Maybe just once. Who
else was there, for her? Mildred? You would know why I named my most valuable
ally after you. You would like that. I know you. After a year of life with you,
my dear, I know you. Apparently that was the most important year of my life. And
though I look young, and though I think I could have children, I am old. Old and
very, very amused. How good it would be to have company. Especially yours.
#
Perhaps it was the Ohio sheets which made Mildred and I so close. Without them

it all might have been so foreign to me that I would have run screaming back to
smooth surfaces, information at a touch.
She and Don lived in her mother's house. It was a three- story white frame house
with tilting oak floors. The foundation was surrounded by rose bushes which had
been mature when Mildred was a child; she tended them with great care and they
yielded overblown blossoms which filled the house with color and fra grance from
spring to fall. She gave me thorny bouquets for my own little room on 5th
Street, a room with high ceilings and a steam-heat vent, utterly unlike anything
in the dome.
The three of us visited one another's houses in the evenings and cooked for one
another and had the same vision, I thought, combating the plague. Except that we
had endless arguments about the best way to do it. Don found it hard to trust
inoculation. This was not entirely irrational on his part, but it was the best
stopgap we had and better than nothing. Isolation, what they were trying in
Columbus, was simply impossible. He tolerated me because he knew he had to.
Sometimes I found him staring at me with an unreadable expression after a
particularly fierce ex change. I did not find this pleasant. But I was trying to
forge some connection with him, because he was my link to his patients. Perhaps
he misunderstood my attempts.
We sat in kitchens with wide windows thrown open to the scents of a struggling
herb garden and pedestrian footsteps at my house and to the sweet heavy scents
of various roses at yours, and battled over how we would save those who legally
refused antidotes. Both of you, the medical examples for the community, had done
so. Stranger than strange, I thought, and tried hard to get through to you
somehow. Though my vision was often disrupted by those funny, round line
drawings, some of whom occasionally spoke to me, I could tell that they were not
real; I'm sure that Don was disappointed that I had not been seriously disabled.
For all that he could tell, the sheets had not worked at all, yet they had. To
me it all fell into the category of Dealing With The Natives.
As I said, I set up my nan lab, and from my precious seeds began to synthesize
antidotes to all the possible disasters which had been identified. I grew them
as crystals, which would keep well, and I had been told to use what was around
me and so I built a large shelf of oak boards in my lab--planed and stained
them, chuckling once in awhile about Thurber's great-uncle, the only person who
had died of the Chestnut Blight. Little had he known, now people probably
actually could die of it.
Mildred's mother and grandmother had hoarded jars in their basement for
preserving, tinged faintly green with the letters "Ball" sweeping across one

side, and I filled several hundred of them and carefully arranged them. Every once in awhile Don would drop by and I would eagerly show him my programs, which
I'd brought in several mediums--disks, crystals, spheres--and happily they had a
computer there which was crystal-based, so after I got everything running I explained to him in some detail the biochem istry of it all. It puzzled me somewhat to find him so indiffer ent, yet I thought that was because these were
things that he must know, already. And he did, of course; he knew enough to prepare the sheets but that didn't take a lot of skill; they were largely self-explanatory. At any rate he pretended ignorance, said that he was too busy
with the regular medical emergencies of the community to have devoted as much study to nanplagues as he ought to have--that was why, he said, he welcomed my
presence. He said. He always stood uncommonly far from me, and avoided any touch. I noticed this, and it suited me, except that his eyes were often pained
and stoic, as if an elephant were standing on his foot and it would be in poor
taste to mention it.
I kept backups in several places around town, of course--the top floor of an old
bank building, which had an iron door I kept carefully locked; the basement of
the old rooming house in which I lived, with an amusing old man, Keefer, who lived upstairs. He never joined us for dinner, no matter how often we entreated
him, and would never touch our delicious leftovers.
We met unavoidably in the kitchens in the mornings. He smoked cigarettes--grew
the tobacco himself and sold it--and had a hacking cough. I can fix that I told
him the second day, innocently, and he turned quite pale and his coffee cup shook in his hand. He left by carefully edging around the table and rushed from
the room when he got near the door. It took me a week to tempt him back into the
same room with me, and I assured him I was proscribed from using nan on anyone
who did not cons ent. I told him to stay out of the basement, though, and by God
he did. I suppose I ought to have been more careful with all that nan except it
was all cures, you see, it was something that those people ought to have had to
keep them from getting the other stuff; it was like locking up vitamins but I took my con tract seriously because mutations were possible should one mix them
the wrong way.
Once a week I hiked or biked on an old deserted Interstate Highway to the dam and took samples of the deep, clear water. During the winter I carried an ax to
chop through the ice. Below the dam, which was ancient, I always felt frightened
of that towering concrete V, perfectly curved to control stress and the plague-filled water in which the assemblers had time to work through to their pre-set limits and dead-end while held in a ser ies of locks. Plagues came mostly by rain in those days, and were virulent for only a short period of

time--usually, a few hours, sometimes days. I never found anything in the first
lock to which I did not have an antidote. In an emergency, I would not have
hesitated to administer one. If I had found a new virus, I would have created an
antidote. It would have been interesting. Like school again. But I found
nothing. After one rain I did find something rather frightful, the Fascist
Plague, with a concentration of seven. But it had vanished before the second
lock filled.
Don called the general population of Columbus Stupids, and I thought him rude at
the time but he was right. I most fear a company of Stupids finding me out,
hiking up the mountain and getting me, blaming me as a representative of those
who caused all these problems. That is why, take note Stupids, not that you even
have the means of picking this up, I am well-armed, with plagues far beyond your
ignorant dreams. My weapon is my heart, have I said that? I could infuse you
with so much inforam that you would soon abandon your old goals and dreams,
which is the dearest fear of Stupids: change. Sorry. I am unkind. My com passion
has all leaked out, I suppose, or perhaps that is just the way of old women.
They were truly sick in Columbus; the world sickened them. I was surprised to
find this out though they had warned me in L.A. They had no immunities to
nanplagues and they lacked receptors, so they could not live in the domed cities
or even net in from one of the still-functioning nodes scattered about the
country, just for news and suchlike. Legally, we could not give them receptors
without their informed consent. They would not consent, though I did make some
converts: one rough young man who took the magrail to L.A. soon thereafter, a
gentle older woman who was killed by a gang of young religionists when they
found out--she told them, the fool, standing on a streetcorner, yelling forth
the glories of inforam after all her long dark years. The small community was
shocked; a conflicted vigilante group assembled. The religionists fled, of
course, but I wanted to kill the lot of those young men and women,
or--or--horror of horrors, sheet them. Without their consent. Yes, think me
horrible. I was. I still am. I suppose I was lucky the citizens did not turn on
me, then, but they did not believe I coerced either of these two people. There
was a healthy respect for the individual there, precisely why they so feared nan.
Thurber was upon me, and I often laughed hysterically as one or another of his
telling vignettes flashed through me. One day doing medical exams I turned into
Thurber in Draft Board Days, when he was erroneously called to be examined for
the WWI draft every week, and finally, bored, pretended to be a doctor. He heard
a watch someone had swallowed; I heard the pain of extinc tion ticking inside
every one of my poor proud citizens of Colum bus, refusing inoculations despite
the deadly rains which held the only virulent form of the nanplagues; they lost
their potency after going to ground. Everyone stayed inside if rain was merely

predicted. They eschewed filter masks, and why not? A drop on the skin could be
enough. You have to understand. All those who truly believed in the power of the
plagues had long since left for the domed cities, and the ones left behind
pretty much ig nored the whole problem, as easily as so many people had ignored
the threat of nuclear war, the hole in the ozone, the destruction of the rain forests.
I think that Thurber was an hysteric, like me. Or that he made me one. What I
mean is that he had a most strong sense of the absurdity of everything which
most people seem to utterly lack. They lack imagination; they lack the powerful
emotional ingredient of hysteria. Why, without hysteria, without that crazy
laughter which makes no sound, I might have died myself there with Don,
with--Mildred? Mildred, are You there? Really, I don't care if we have no
children. If You are Mildred, it was a silly idea. I lack the facilities for
that here though we could seek them out if you were at all interested. If there
are still domes, we could find them, and take care of things there.
Mildred, when and if you wake, if you wake yourself, and survive--I can help you
with this, if the programs did not--you will know, you must know, that I had to
leave. I couldn't stay and help; I broke my contract to save my own life. But
don't blame Don for all of this. If Don had not deliberately given me the wrong
sheets I would not have been able to cope as I did. But Thurber and Forts on the
Ohio River against which Indians hailed arrows in vain surged through me,
twisting my ideas of what was going on. My pioneer receptors sniffed danger and
forced me out of town. They said electricity is leaking from the sockets and the
bed is falling, really it is. And really, it was.
I remember the first day in the clinic when I was actually able to help.
Tad Schneider slammed the door open and dragged his mother in by the arm. He was
just a kid, and his thin sallow face looked more desperate than usual. They all
looked desperate once they got to the clinic--before the plague took them wild
horses couldn't have dragged them in. That was something I could have done
better, educate them about the nature of inoculation. If I had only had longer
.
. . I was just getting started. A small snippet of nanplague, a few special
molecules to course through your brain, attach to your organelles, handily block
uglier things. Things that make you think that you must rape and kill, or that
dirt is delicious. Arbitrary things like that, some more sophisticated than
others, all thoughts which invade the brain with the power of religion.
At any rate, on this level it was behavior modification on an enormous scale.
The level of belief which makes people agree that a particular war is necessary,
for instance. That to pro tect the practice of a religion which preaches love
and forgiveness it is necessary to commit genocide. That was the kind of thing I
was there to inoculate against. It was a very tricky dance I was trying to do
and I couldn't blame the populace of Columbus for being utterly suspicious of

me
and my kind. Of course your regular death-plagues--cancers of various sorts, dehydrating fevers which killed after seventy-two hours, things like that, were
also entirely possible, and their preventiion part of the baseline immunization
package. It was just so diffi cult for these people to believe that what had killed could also heal. They were not ignorant nor were they idiots; they had just been through too much and had decided that it was better to die than to trust any sort of official emissary. Unless it happened to them.
Then they were happy I was there.
Immunization works, though imperfectly, but in a less than totalitarian state this tampering requires permission. That was part of what I was supposed to do--educate--but I've long since realized that my mission was sabotaged once I
climbed into that cocoon so trustingly. I don't even think Don carefully consid
ered what to do. Scramble the interloper. Ransack the library and give him (or
her--surprise, Don!) something at random to top off the required information. He
probably had no idea what the Thurber sheet was all about. It was just--random.
Maybe, con sidering the fear of sheets he had inherited, he thought that would
be enough. Enough to make the new doctor look stupid and fail. Perhaps it was.
Mrs. Schneider was tall and rather beautiful, with long, steely-gray hair, though dressed poorly because these folks couldn't afford much and pretended not
to want anything remotely connected with nan, such as inexpensive clothing. The
continual din of chanting from the usual five or six demonstrators filled the room before Tad closed the door. Tad, fifteen (I knew the minute, hour, and day
of his birth when I shook hands with him) with shaggy brown hair and the amazing
thinness of youth, looked around the room as if he'd entered the gates of hell
and I, in my starched white coat, were the devil. He yanked his hand away from
mine.
"She's," he said, and shook his head. Tears gathered in his eyes; he trembled.
Mildred, you rushed out then and offered him a Coke; he said no but his mother
said, "Drink it," and he did.
She turned to me and said, "It's true. It's happened to me. Something awful. How
long have I got?"
"We'll have to do some tests, Mrs. S.," I said, though once I shook her hand I
had a pretty good idea of the general parame ters. "Will you sign some consent
forms for me?"
"Gladly," she said, and began to sit on a scarred plastic chair beneath an overhead fixture which lacked one light bulb. Mildred had been in the middle of
changing it. I clearly saw a cascade of tiny yellow electrical bolts falling on

Mrs. S's head from the empty socket. "Why don't you sit over here?" I asked, and
hustled her across the room.
"Stand well back. I bite, you know," she said.
"I quite understand," I said, and she was more friendly after that though I'm not sure if she believed me. She frowned over her task after sitting, and looked
at the hand holding the pen once or twice in a puzzled way, as if wondering how
it func tioned. She bared her teeth as she signed the paper briskly and handed
it back to me. "Hurry, please," she said.
You, of course, know what the Midcentury Plagues were but for the eavesdroppers
I shall elucidate: there were earlier plagues. Plagues of thought. Plagues of stance. These plagues drew on similar biochemical, neurological, and pheromonal
roots. Drew on and played with us helpless humans as surely as malaria causes sweats and death.
Tad and his mother feared this and rightly so. They feared inoculation as well
but really had the willies. I could center them and I did, I had the precise inforam in my lab. It took about an hour to run the tests and customize it slightly and they inhaled it--Tad had been exposed, caught in the same storm though he had no symptoms as yet--and all was well. I did not cheat; I did not
change their emotions or intelligence though I could have easily done so. Hell I
could have inoculated the whole damned city within twenty-four hours but I believed in legality then and freedom of choice. I still do. You are free not to
come if I give you the slightest sense of misgiving. I am lonely but that does
not mean that you have to come, though it might save your life. I myself would
rather die here with G.E. and Mildred the Water Buffalo and Granddad and Peter
Johnson rather than have you show up against your will.
Don came to my lab that afternoon. It got dark early that day; it was December.
I had been in Columbus seven months. I was making notes on my computer. It was
only my third case. I was pleased. I hoped that they would soon begin to trust
me. I had only contracted to stay two years, but I had no intention of leaving,
ever.
Don startled me; I turned at his footsteps. Usually he knocked.
"Tad is certainly thankful," he said, and I couldn't read his face in the darkness, about twenty feet away from me. He stood there.
"Come on in," I said. "Sit down."
He didn't move. "We're just an experiment for you, aren't we? We're not real people. We're some sort of artifact that you've come to study. You can't imagine
independence from your whole crazy system."
"For one thing, I didn't invent that system. And she signed the consent form, if
that's what you're talking about."
"You don't understand," he said.
"Look," I said, and stood. "I've done nothing to impinge on your community.

Nothing at all. I haven't even started my educational programs, at your request,
and it looks as if I really ought to. Luckily I'm here now, but I can train you,
or better yet, Mildred, to do this. It's really a med-tech's job. I took a bit
of Mrs. S.'s blood--"
"Mrs. Schneider."
"But you--everyone else calls her--"
"She was my first grade teacher," he said.
I was quiet for a moment, then said, "It's very frightening, isn't it?"
He said nothing.
"I'm very glad I was here, that I was able to help her out," I said. I felt afraid suddenly, just a bit. He was blocking the door. "Why are you so angry, Don?"
His voice dropped to a whisper. I barely heard it. I think he said, "Maybe because I couldn't help her myself." I think that's what he said. Then the doorway was empty.
I can teach you, I thought. I stood amidst my jars, winking in the light of the
computer screen. "Look," I said, speaking to my non-existent student. I walked
over to my shelf, squinted in the faint light, and found it. I said, "Here's the
stuff, here's B-7892, which cured Mrs. Schneider, your first-grade teacher. It's
already half re-replicated; the active nans are green, see, Don; the growth medium is white. I replicated a barrel of growth medium the week after I arrived; it's over there in the corner. If you didn't hate me so you would know
a million times more than this most simple fact."
I went over to my screen. I touched a few bars; I ran the progress. "See? In my
best estimation, this is extrapolated from her blood sample, she would have been
barking like a dog in another ten hours. It's a classic. I can trace this back
to Atlanta, 2014. One of the awful joke plagues. Tad said that she'd already gnawed a chair leg when he came upon her in the dining room, the front of her dress soaked with tears, her eyes wide with terror. See, that's what I wrote in
my notes, just like he told me." I touched another bar and that's what the screen said, a bit more technically. "I know you don't really think that would
be a good thing to happen to Mrs. Schneider. Do you, Don?"
The room was very dark now, and I sat there by myself for quite awhile, doing nothing.
#
How about Don's mother? That did cross my mind. She killed Don's brother and had
the gun pointed at Don, who was only three at the time, when a neighbor knocked
at the door. Don's mother apparently carefully laid the gun on the kitchen table, stepped over the body of her dead son, and answered the door. Don start
ed shrieking and ran outside once the door was open. The neigh bor glanced inside, bravely grabbed Don, and ran for it. She heard the shot which killed Don's mother about a minute later, from half a block away. Don's father had died
two years earlier of some nanplague.

In the orphanage Don did himself proud; he was a smart kid and they needed docs.
At that time, before the infamous Third Wave, the University was still intact and for better or for worse Don got his M.D. without ever having to leave his hometown. But, that was my story too, in a way.
When Mildred told me about this one blindingly white morn ing when we were walking through drifts toward the hospital, I was thunderstruck.
"What an awful story," I said.
"Yes," she said, "it is."
Of course, everyone in town thought he was the bee's knees (as one of Thurber's
crazy great-aunts might say) medically speaking, Doctor Don, Superman. With his
sidekick Med-Tech Mildred they would save the town. But their town was in an Area Of Need--not news to them, exactly, but a category which verged on the absurd as far as they were concerned. L.A. had a lot of Needs too, no? Ha ha they thought, imagine someone from those domes helping us. No no thought Don, we
need no one here but Me, Superdoc! And faithful Mildred, although naturally there's very little I can't handle by myself, thought Don. I know this now, I didn't then.
#
All right. Concrete. I concur. I obey. Here:
The snow was deep in Columbus, that winter, and I delighted in it. Snow was a fairy tale come true. I had never seen snow before, and it never disappeared after November.
It was snowing as I walked down Front Street with my bundle of fresh-baked bread. Winter's end, an April storm; everyone else grumbling and depressed, but
not me. Remember, You? I baked the bread myself. You laughed, did you not, asked
if I did not extract nourishment solely from tubes or a food wall in Flower L.A.
as if we had forsaken all that was important when we converted.
Cold wet snow pointillated my face, the unbundled part. I still did not understand the fascination certain streets held for me. I thought the tall, leafless dark branches of the maples against the old-fashioned streetlights attracted me but really it was The Street Where He Lived--Thurber, that is. To
tell the truth there was an all-night drug store on the spot but it actu ally closed whenever Jan Thatcher decided to call it a night. It only stayed open all
night if she got very drunk and played loud music, and whoever came in knew to
count out their own pills. Once it had been a place where writers could go for a
time and work, the gone Thurber house, that is. But the mysterious attraction of
Place was upon me strongly as if I were Thurber, in the throes of childhood, where all relatives are eccentric and exciting which is why, I supposed, I laughed so often. I don't imagine that Thurber did, really, laugh so much I mean, for people who can make us laugh are often dour grumblers in real life, but I don't know for sure. Perhaps he held it inside and intensified it, like the sperm which supposedly returns to the spiritual centers in tantra yoga. Maybe that's the secret of people who can make others laugh.
I'm a font of information, no?
My face was stinging from the raw wind when I hit the warm air inside your kitchen.
I thought of you two as one, though even in your own minds this was not true, although I believe that you were just realiz ing it. And I was the unwitting

bridge between then and this very strange now. What is now for you, I wonder? I
am curious. Tell me.
Mildred, you were unlike anyone I'd ever known in L.A. Earthy. Connected. Your
eyes were blue and laughing, except when Don snapped at you. Then they darkened.
Toward the end I often saw real rage, though you had no idea of how to express
it.
That evening the kitchen smelled of summer tomatoes and dill and basil released
from their jars. A kettle of boiling water steamed the windows. Two bottles of
homemade wine from a patient had been uncorked. "Jefferson Winery," I read; Mrs.
Jefferson had decorated her label with an approximation of a grape vine, but the
ink had run with condensation. Three rather large mon grel puppies draped their
forelegs over the board which kept them in their corner; their mother was out
for a run. Mildred had promised me one of them. I patted them all with my free
hand and they wriggled and yipped with delight.
I put down my bread, hung up my coat, and poured some of Mrs. Jefferson's finest
into a coffee mug. You have no idea how happy I felt with the two of you. Maybe
you were the parents I never had, who knows.
"Tastes a bit like iron, don't you think?"
Mildred took the cup from me, sipped.
"Yes," she said.
"Like water from a deep mineral well," I said, not at all displeased that wine
should echo its distinctive elements, though it could have been that Mrs.
Jefferson aged her wine in iron casks.
"Always making fun of us aren't you, Little Miss City Doc?" said Don rather
savagely, I thought, from the corner of the kitchen where he was chopping
onions. He sniffed and blinked but doggedly continued chopping. Chop chop. Chop
chop. A bottle of wine stood half-empty at his elbow.
"I didn't mean--" I said, then let it drop. Mildred glanced at him, looking
puzzled. She still didn't understand that he was often simply unkind because
when he treated her that way she couldn't even tell.
And I don't know why he chose that night to force me into the pantry, when
Mildred ran onto the back porch to call her dog, five minutes later, and declare
his undying passion for me and try to roughly kiss me.
He put his arms around me and whispered in my ear "I didn't know you'd be a
woman. I didn't know you'd be so beautiful." At this I laughed. He ignored me
and continued. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I made the bed fall. Let me help you
out. I can re verse everything. I know more than you think--about the sheets,
anyway. Maybe you don't know, exactly; maybe you can't. Mildred and I--we'd been
having problems and I was afraid that when the new doctor came--that's why I
looked so surprised when I saw you, but it was Mildred's job to take you to the
sheets and she didn't know I'd changed them to make you crazy and what could I
say? I only looked later to see what it was that I gave you; I just pulled

something out in a panic when we heard that your train actually survived. I hated you before you came. I thought that you'd take my place here, that they would all realize that they could do without me. I didn't know that you would be--you. Julia I'm so sorry, my love" and he squeezed me and that's when I heard
your steps on the porch stairs and do you blame me, still, for being confused?
Aside from the fact that I'd been intention ally, nanotechnologically, confused?
Can you forgive me for saying nothing, and I mean nothing, I don't believe that
I said two words during dinner did I, nor ate two bites. The sheets? The bed falling, the way I often heard it fall upstairs while my mother (Thurber's mother that is) shrieked that the bed must have fallen on Father at last? What
the hell? How does he know? I remember that I stared at him as he pressed against me and speechless pushed him away and ran from the pantry as you came in
with the dog, your hair brilliant with snow. Do you remember how I looked at you? Do you remember that Don said, "Well, let's eat!" and started throwing the
nests of carrot pasta into the pot immediately? Do you remember that I left early? I remember how disappointed you looked and how he glared at me the whole
meal, afraid of course of what I might say to you. I was angry, filled with rage, and he knew it. Surely he guessed that I could not go long without telling
you. What we had, our easy camaraderie, had lasted only ten months or so. Yet it
has given me a lifetime of memories, memories of what real humans are about, can
be--so interesting, so amusing (I mean that in the most respectful way, I'll have you understand, for you have to really know someone, I think, to be truly
amused by them. Maybe that's love, or at least a great part of it).
Mildred, I cannot force this story into the proper channels. I thought, as I slipped along the dark snowy streets, now what would those sociologists say? Should I tell Mildred, and let them fight it out? Would she blame me, though I
had done noth ing, as far as I could tell, to provoke such a confession? I realized at that moment how much I cared for you, Mildred, and how plain my life
would be in Columbus without your brightness. I thought of the afternoon the previous fall when I held you as you sobbed, after an incident when Don was particularly mean and left the house, slamming the door behind him. I felt a surge of something--and was afraid and let my arms lose their tension. You drew
back, looked at me so directly, and kissed me hard, then laughed, turned to the
sink, and splashed water on your face. Then you poured us each glasses of wine
in your grandmother's crystal and we walked out into the waning fall garden beneath glowing maples and sat in wire chairs, oddly at peace, happy, connected,
complete.
There are people whose very presence cheers. I hadn't met one before. After that
afternoon every day I did not see you was not quite as bright, and though we never touched each other again it did not matter. I was not the only one who felt that way, I realized, as I watched you in your work with your beloved

townsfolk, with children, with aged folk about to die. They all felt it. Don I suppose realized that too, in the aftermath, when he considered, that night, as he cleaned away my uneaten dish of carrot pasta and dumped out my glass of Mrs. Jefferson's wine. At least one would suppose that something along those lines ran through his mind. When I got home I was exhausted. I could not even think. I went to bed.

The next morning I got up and still did not know what to do. I shared coffee with Keefer as he hacked away. I'm sure I seemed distracted. The snow was about six inches deep, but melting. I stared out the window, thinking. I saw Don walk past, carrying a large satchel. Nothing unusual--just on his way to the hospital.

I wondered then, looking out through the white curtains, if he had perhaps contracted some sort of plague. That's what Mildred would say, I snorted to myself; she always had an excuse for darling Don. That's what Don would tell her too.

"What?" said the old man.

"Nothing," I said. "I didn't say anything." I got up to get ready to go to the hospital myself. I suddenly felt very protective about all my jars of crystals, about my computer.

When I saw that my stores had been violated, what did I do? Nothing. Amusement held me, as if I were in one of Thurber's stories and was waiting to see what happened, so that I could retell it in a droll way and make everyone laugh. Not at all like my usual self. It was a sort of heaviness, a distance. They were good things, after all, jars and jars of good things put up against the raging winter of the plagues. In their pure form. If no one tampered with them, or mixed them.

What luck for Don, my reaction. In the short run that is.

I wasn't sure what to do after that, but the chill of Don's eyes that day, when we happened to meet in Mildred's office, frightened me. Truly frightened me. I thought about Thurber's demented Grandfather, who sometimes believed that he was still fighting the Civil War. Don is insane, I thought. Deluded. I think that was one very bad side effect of those Thurber sheets--it created convenient categories into which I could put people, based on minimal similarities.

But in terms of the problem at hand I felt that we were really getting somewhere at last. More and more people were coming in to be immunized. Why, three in one week!

What was the danger of the plagues? The danger was precise ly what I was experiencing: insanity. Mine was on a rather mild scale since I knew what was happening, really I did, I assured myself, and didn't have the time to actually search out what exactly the problem was--and I had enjoyed it, in a way, until that night. I guess you could say that it was a part of the excitement of being undomed. Another way to say it was that I was too stupid to live. I should

have
confronted Don and Mildred and caught the next train home--they came by at six-month intervals, it is true, but still. One was due soon, if it hadn't been
blown up. But although I understood in a way what had happened, that understanding lacked sharpness; that was part of the disease. It gave off its own chemicals which imitated the natural chemicals of happy enjoyment, endorphin
or opiatelike in structure, as if I were constantly laughing deep inside.
I think that Don, once he saw the possible efficacy of what I had brought with
me, decided to study it, and when he had learned enough, to claim it for his own
for his greater glory. The horrible part was that would have been just dandy with me. What did he think, that I planned to live and die in Columbus and become Mother Julia? Hell, no! I was going to put in my two years, satisfy my curiosity, maybe make a round of the other great domes--Toronto, Quebec, NY, D.C.--then head for home, unless I really took a chance and ventured bare out onto Cape Breton, which called me for some reason, the reason I know now: my home is, for reasons which I could not have predicted dome side, wilderness. I know, elsewhere I say I had decided never to leave. I guess I did feel like staying forever, before that unpleasant night.
At any rate, it would certainly spoil Perfectpicture if I said anything to anyone. Don was too proud to ask me not to say anything, I'll give him that, but
it seemed to me that Mildred ought to know--I certainly didn't think that it was
anyone else's business. But he maneuvered to keep us apart for three days. While
he set his plan in place, I see now. As for me, I was just mulling things over,
trying to decide what to say and do. The only thing I was absolutely sure of was
that he held not the least interest for me.
I knew how much You loved Don. I knew how little he de served it. I knew how it
might devastate you to hear about what had happened. And although there was no
reason for it, I thought that it would be easier to blame me than him for it, and I did not want to be banished from your heart. I thought that perhaps I should plan to leave. But that annoyed me tremendously--I would leave my work unfinished! And I knew that you would miss me and be very puzzled, and wondered
if I should ask you to come with me. I wondered all sorts of things as I went to
work and said nothing.
Then things became, we might say, curious.
#
I missed my regular pilgrimage to the dam Monday morning. Old man Keefer was practically hemorrhaging in the kitchen. Gasping, he agreed to be healed. That took most of the day. But how happy I was about that--not only to have healed Keefer, but to think that (if things took a normal course, which I saw I
could not always count on) he would be a living example of what nan, properly used, could do.
For that reason I set off early on Tuesday along the Inter state. The sky was filled with dark clouds; it had rained all week, it had snowed all winter. The
river next to the Interstate was already creeping onto the flood plain, a month

early, they said.
Musing along, thinking in equal parts of Keefer, Mildred, and Don, I didn't really pay much attention to my surroundings until I was almost at the dam. I had hiked down the frost-heaved exit and taken the utility road simply as a matter of habit.
Then I noticed someone climbing the metal stairs next to the locks.
I was less than half a mile away. I stopped, curious. By the way he moved, I realized that it was Don.
I began to run.
It took me five minutes to reach the base of the dam and the overflow sluice into the locks hid the sound of my footsteps, which were as loud in my ears as
my pounding heart.
He stopped climbing at the first lock and pulled something from within his coat.
His arm reached out. He twisted his wrist.
I wasn't sure exactly, as I stared up at him, so astonished I couldn't move, what sort of nan he poured into that lock. It was a rather good bet that he didn't know himself. But whatever the effects, they could easily be blamed on me. I remembered my ransacked jars. No telling. Nan was in the final lock, and
would be in the water supply system within twenty minutes.
I turned. I jumped into the fringing woods, and crashed through the saplings. As I ran, those silly line drawings rushed across my vision, everyone rushing from Columbus because of the false rumor of the breaking dam and I thought Yes,
Don, Yes! That's the answer! I'll get everyone out of town just like in the story. I'll tell them the dam has broken!
I was drenched with sweat when I reached the outskirts of Columbus, the farmhouse of Sally Cabriello, and I knew that she had a phone.
I shoved the door open and yelled, "The dam has broken!"
She turned pale. "No!" Her light brown hair was held back with a bandanna. She
held her blond baby and another four-year- old boy rushed to her side and said
"Mommy what's wrong?"
"Can I use your phone?" I asked.
She nodded, as she grabbed a pack and tossed bags of beans and grains into it.
As I told John, the operator, and exhorted him to tell everyone Plan 2 was in effect, wherein they were all to go to the high ground enclaves which had been
prepared, Sally bundled up her children, utterly calm, and led them outside. She
set the boy in the wagon, put the baby in the bike seat. Then she paused, looking in through the window, staring at me think ing, I knew, what about her?
"Go!" I yelled, and motioned frantically. She looked doubt ful, then turned back
toward her children and jumped on the bike without a second look.
Meanwhile, John said something really strange.
"Don told me you would try this," he said.
" What?"
John's voice was flat, without affect.
"He said you might try something like this. Pretend that the dam broke so that
everyone would agree to be inoculated. He's pretty smart, you know."
"You don't understand," I said, wishing he was next to me so that I could tear
his throat out. "Everyone has to get out of town. Now. There's no time--"

And then the phone was wrenched out of my hand.
Don covered it up and said, panting, "I saw you. You spied on me."
"You idiot," I said. "Tell John to get everyone out of town. You have no idea what you've done."
He just grinned and yanked the phone line out of the wall.
"You're going to tell me exactly what to do to fix everyone. Let's go."
Fine, I thought, as he shoved me ahead of him onto the road. I don't care who gets the credit. It's my chance to inoculate the whole damned town.
There were several things neither of us took into account.
One, Sally. She was just as good as a siren.
Two, the fact that when we got back to town, the clinic was mobbed.
And three, the dam really did burst.
It was old. The spring runoff, after all that snow, had been too much for it.
We heard it the first minute after coming into the clinic.
We saw we couldn't get in the front door so we came in the back way. It was packed. People were shouting at Mildred, demanding antidote nans to take with them to the Survival Bunker. People are funny, aren't they? Children were crying, many of them, adding to the general godawful cacophony. Mildred was pretending she didn't know where the nan was, unsure what I would want, I suppose.
"They're up on the top floor--come on!" hollered brave Don, as Mildred stared at
him, then at me. I just nodded and she yelled "Wait now, be calm, just line up
over here--"
Then we heard the dull explosion.
Everyone knew what it was. They thought the dam broke before, even though they
heard nothing, which had probably made them feel safe, like maybe it's not broken, maybe it's just a small fissure and we have time to fool around.
Now they knew it for a fact.
Mildred was between them and the door.
"No!" yelled Don. "This way! The nan is this way!"
It took about three or four minutes for them to shove through the doorway. Some
of them picked up chairs and the sound of glass shattering mingled with the general hue and cry, and the pounding footsteps of a hundred crazed people running down the front steps to join the mob in the street.
Then there were just the three of us.
The shards of glass left in the window frames were smeared with blood. Mildred
was lying limp in the doorway.
We rushed over and knelt beside her. She looked directly into my eyes. "Please
save Don," she told me, as if she knew I might not. I couldn't help thinking, sure, if I have the time. I might be busy, though.
She said to Don, "Take mother's silver out of the buffet and put it in the attic. Don't forget. And the photographs in the hall closet too." The side of her head was swollen. Her nose looked broken. As she spoke Don felt her body quickly, expertly. He turned to me. He gasped a few times before he could speak.

"The cocoons," he said. "Can they heal a broken neck?"
I ran for a stabilizing collar. We strapped her onto a board. The elevator was
not working. As we paused at each landing to catch our breath, we saw people hurrying by on bikes, on horses, on foot, heading out to the Bunker, which was
five hundred feet above the city. I saw four teenage boys drag Mr. Tolliver, the

owner of the ice cream shop, from his yellow car and shove him into the street,
and then we trudged up another flight, sweating.
The cocoons were on the twelfth floor, the top.
Water was surging through the streets by the time we made it up there, and whatever Don had poured in the lock was beginning to have an effect. I had no idea what it was of course. He stared at you, Mildred, and began laughing hysterically. Then he began to cry. He was pulling at you, making little sobbing
noises, trying to keep you away from the cocoon. I was looking around for something to bash his head with, I must be honest with you, when he collapsed onto the floor.
I lifted you into one of the cocoons without any of his help, what they say about emergencies making you strong is true. My hands were shaking but I soon had it breathing for you, and it told me you were stabilized. Any damage I had
done in handling you would be repaired. I was weak with relief. The cocoon was
self-powered, of course, the bacteria still lived, one of the reasons they were
kept locked up on the top floor, because of their scariness. I looked over at Don. My energy had ebbed. I couldn't possibly lift him into a cocoon, could I? I
looked back at you.
I had to sit down and think for a few minutes before decid ing what to do and how to do it. Now where is that vial of Kindness, I wondered, surely I must have
one, it would be yellow, don't you think, though of course there was a more precise code for it so I paged through my printouts, as if I had plenty of time,
and found that. It's hard to explain, but that jar was full of stories. Stories are good for teaching things like kindness, espe cially if you believe
you are living them. I started to sort of waltz past my shelf of pretty jars wondering if Kindness, too, had been smashed as I tried to ignore the sight of
the First National Bank crumbling, quite slowly, to one side out the west window.
#
When I finally was finished I had managed to load Don and administer, I think,
Kindness. You must remember that things were, to put it mildly, rather haywire.
I included a radio code, despite Fibrillation (it seems to subside every few months) for I had no idea where I would go but in my hubris I thought that when
you woke, regrown, and each incarnation of you thereafter, you might want to find me. Or if not, at least get some information from me about surviving.
I gave you, as you sank deeper and deeper into cocoon immer sion, every single
immunization I could muster. Hell, it wasn't hard. I just scooped vials of immunization from the floor on my knees. Someone--now why did I think of Don? had smashed a row or two of them. The crystals had spilled to the floor in a rainbow of what looked like colored sand. He had pried open the large can of replication medium and dumped it where they could all mingle, so they were replicating like mad, I am sure.
One of the puppies--they were big enough to follow You to work, and to wait outside the hospital patiently--wandered in the door and after she got over her
joy at seeing me, began lapping away at the nan on the floor. Hmm I thought,

as
I loaded it into the cocoon vents, must be tasty. In a dazed way I gathered up
samples of what I thought I might need and sealed them tightly in my original
small plastic vials, and wrapped those in plastic and--oh, what does it matter
if it leaks, I finally thought, and tossed the sealed jars into my original bag
and sealed that as well.
At any rate, by the time G.E. and I climbed out the second floor window and swam
over to First Street, where we staggered ashore, me with my pathetic bag of nan,
it really didn't matter. You were lucky, in a way.
A new plague was sweeping the country, as it were. Columbus would have had it at
any rate. It was from Asia, I heard later, whenever the Fibrillation paused, as
G.E. and I rushed west, then north, on the robot train, out here to the end of
the line.
#
I know now that Kindness did not take on at least one of You, Don. When you
walked up the hill, shaggy and bearded, all I had to do was hug you, and because
you were unchanged your breath stopped. That's all. I have the directions within
me, and cannot change them now. If you are Kind, which is a very precise nan
instruction, you will certainly live when I hug you.
Well, that should keep the rest of you away, if there are any. Read it in the
news.
I wonder what you have done with Mildred, unkind one. Why has she never come?
She was kind already. I would have loved to see both of you come, together. Or
if not, I would loved to see both of you have children. If you had become kind.
Mildred talked about it a lot. She asked me if I had nan to fix what was wrong
with her and I did, but she never got around to talking to you about it. I told
her just do it; he'll never agree. He wanted children. But not, of course, as a
gift of nan. Well, I think I fixed that, at least.
These are my thoughts. But I have plenty to do.
I weed my soybeans. I talk to Granddad
And, on one day a year, I visit the Pointed Fir Lodge.
I go down into the cool stone cellar, and seriously debate the choice of wine.
G.E. and I choose an unrotted rowboat. The oars cut into the shimmering water
and I pull away from the wavery granite shelves of the shallows, pull hard,
until we glide quickly. It takes a while to catch pike, but it's great fun. The
most fun in the world. I always catch two. Sometimes I grill them; sometimes I
poach them with herbs.
There is a lot of rice in the cellar, and bitter shoots of rocket in the spring.

On one evening the robot train rushes into town and stops precisely on the mark.

Sometimes G.E. and I watch from the shadows of the old stone station; other times we finish our dinner in late and dignified fashion and just hear it come
and go as the candle flickers--it depends on how long we stayed out fishing and
that depends on the mood of the pike.
Never has anyone been on it.
It is coming again tomorrow, Mildred. Probably You are old now too, perhaps you
woke long ago, and the Don you woke with was kind, and together you rebuilt your
town and salvaged the minds of your townspeople and did not allow your ghostly
doubles to grow. I did my best to override that old one-year programming on that
horrible day but could not be sure that it would be success ful.
Sometimes I wish that I had been strong enough to return, and undo it all. And
sometimes I am glad that I was not, think ing (as I so often do, here in the bright sun of my mountaintop) of the best possible outcome, which was not so unlikely after all. I was second in my class you know; if anyone could have corrected the programming on such short notice, it was me. And at the time I could not bear the alternative of just letting you die.
So if that worked. If that worked, and the kind Don has died, as he probably would have when he was 78, according to my genetic projections, much earlier than your projected 107 years, please come. Just pack a small bag, you won't need much.
Get off at the end of the line.
Head north.

The End