THE MENDELIAN LAMP CASE

by Paul Levinson

[novelette originaly published in _Analog_, April 1997;
to be reprinted in Year's Best SF #3, edited by David Hartwell,
HarperPrism, 1998]

Most people think of California, or the midwest, when they think of farm country. I'll take Pennsylvania, and the deep greens on its red earth, any time. Small patches of tomatoes and corn, clothes snapping brightly on a line, and a farmhouse always attached to some corner. The scale is human...

Jenna was in England for a conference, my weekend calendar was clear, so I took Mo up on a visit to Lancaster. Over the GW Bridge, coughing down the Turnpike, over another bridge, down yet another highway stained and pitted then off on a side road where I can roll down my windows and breathe.

Mo and his wife and two girls were good people. He was a rarity for a forensic scientist. Maybe it was the pace of criminal science in this part of the country -- lots of the people around here were Amish, and Amish are non-violent -- or maybe it was his steady diet of those deep greens that quieted his soul. But Mo had none of the grit, none of the cynicism, that comes to most of us who traverse the territory of the dead and the maimed. No, Mo had an innocence, a delight, in the lights of science and people and their possibilities.

"Phil." He clapped me on the back with one hand and took my bag with another. "Phil, how are you?" his wife Corinne yoo-hooed from inside. "Hi Phil!" his elder daughter Laurie, probably 16 already, chimed in from the window, a quick splash of strawberry blond in a crystal frame.

"Hi--" I started to say, but Mo put my bag on the porch and ushered me towards his car.

"You got here early, good," he said, in that schoolboy conspiratorial whisper I'd heard him go into every time he came across some inviting new avenue of science. ESP, UFOs, Mayan ruins in unexpected places -- these were all catnip to Mo. But the power of quiet nature, the hidden wisdom of the farmer, this was his special domain. "A little present I want to pick up for Laurie," he whispered even more, though she was well out of earshot. "And something I want to show you. You too tired for a quick drive?"

"Ah, no, I'm ok--"

"Great, let's go then," he said. "I came across some Amish techniques -- well, you'll see for yourself, you're gonna love it."

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Strasburg is 15 minutes down Rt. 30 from Lancaster. All Dairy Queens and Seven Elevens till you get there, but when you turn off and travel a half a mile in any direction you're back a hundred years or more in time. The air itself says it all. High mixture of pollen and horse manure that smells so surprisingly good, so real, it makes your eyes tear with pleasure. You don't even mind a few flies flitting around.

We turned down Northstar Road. "Jacob Stoltzfus's farm is

down there on the right," Mo said.

I nodded. "Beautiful." The sun looked about five minutes to setting. The sky was the color of a robin's belly against the browns and greens of the farm. "He won't mind that we're coming here by, uh--"

"By car? Nah, of course not," Mo said. "The Amish have no problem with non-Amish driving. And Jacob, as you'll see, is more open-minded than most."

I thought I could see him now, off to the right at the end of the road that had turned to dirt, grey-white head of hair and beard bending over the gnarled bark of a fruit tree. He wore plain black overalls and a deep purple shirt.

"That Jacob?" I asked.

"I think so," Mo replied. "I'm not sure."

We pulled the car over near the tree, and got out. A soft autumn rain suddenly started falling.

"You have business here?" The man by the tree turned to address us. His tone was far from friendly.

"Uh yes," Mo said, clearly taken aback. "I'm sorry to intrude. Jacob -- Jacob Stoltzfus -- said it would be ok if we came by--"

"You had business with Jacob?" the man demanded again. His eyes looked red and watery -- though that could've been from the rain.

"Well, yes," Mo said. "But if this isn't a good time--"

"My brother is dead," the man said. "My name is Isaac. This is a bad time for our family."

"Dead?" Mo nearly shouted. "I mean ... what happened? I just saw your brother yesterday."

"We're not sure," Isaac said. "Heart attack, maybe. I think you should leave now. Family are coming soon."

"Yes, yes, of course," Mo said. He looked beyond Isaac at a barn that I noticed for the first time. Its doors were slightly open, and weak light flickered inside.

Mo took a step in the direction of the barn. Isaac put up a restraining arm. "Please," he said. "It's better if you go."

"Yes, of course," Mo said again, and I led him to the car.

"You all right?" I said when we were both in the car, and Mo had started the engine.

He shook his head. "Couldn't be a heart attack. Not at a time like this."

"Heart attacks don't usually ask for appointments," I said.

Mo was still shaking his head, turning back on to Northstar Road. "I think someone killed him."

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Now forensic scientists are prone to see murder in a ninety-year old woman dying peacefully in her sleep, but this was unusual from Mo.

"Tell me about it," I said, reluctantly. Just what I needed -- death turning my visit into a busman's holiday.

"Never mind," he muttered. "I babbled too much already."

"Babbled? You haven't told me a thing."

Mo drove on in brooding silence. He looked like a different person, wearing a mask that used to be him.

"You're trying to protect me from something, is that it?" I ventured. "You know better than that."

Mo said nothing.

"What's the point?" I prodded. "We'll be back with Corinne and the girls in five minutes. They'll take one look at you, and know something happened. What are you going to tell _them_?"

Mo swerved suddenly onto a side road, bringing my kidney into sticking contact with the inside door handle. "Well, I guess you're right about that," he said. He punched in a code in his car phone -- I hadn't noticed it before.

"Hello?" Corinne answered.

"Bad news, honey," Mo said matter of factly, though it sounded put on to me. No doubt his wife would see through it too. "Something came up in the project, and we're going to have to go to Philadelphia tonight."

"You and Phil? Everything ok?"

"Yeah, the two of us," Mo said. "Not to worry. I'll call you again when we get there."

"I love you," Corinne said.

"Me too," Mo said. "Kiss the girls good night for me."

He hung up and turned to me.

"Philadelphia?" I asked.

"Better that I don't give them too many details," he said. "I never do in my cases. Only would worry them."

"She's worried anyway," I said. "Sure sign she's worried when she didn't even scream at you for missing dinner. Now that you bring it up, I'm a little worried now too. What's going on?"

Mo said nothing. Then he turned the car again -- mercifully more gently this time -- onto a road with a sign that advised that the Pennsylvania Turnpike was up ahead.

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I rolled up the window as our speed increased. The night had suddenly gone damp and cold.

"You going to give me a clue as to where we're going, or just kidnap me to Philadelphia?" I asked.

"I'll let you off at the 30th Street Station," Mo said. "You can get a bite to eat on the train and be back in New York in an hour."

"You left my bag on your porch, remember?" I said. "Not to mention my car."

Mo just scowled and drove on.

"I wonder if Amos knows?" he said more to himself than me a few moments later.

"Amos is a friend of Jacob's?" I asked.

"His son," Mo said.

"We'll I guess you can't very well call him on your car phone," I said.

Mo shook his head, frowned. "Most people misunderstand the Amish -- think they're some sort of Luddites, against all technology. But that's not really it at all. They struggle with technology, agonize over whether to reject or accept it, and if they accept it, in what ways, so as not to compromise their independence and self-sufficiency. They're not completely against phones -- just against phones in their homes -- because the phone intrudes on everything you're doing."

I snorted. "Yeah, many's the time a call from the Captain pulled me out of the sack."

Mo flashed his smile, for the first time since we'd left Jacob Stoltzfus's farm. It was good to see.

"So where do Amish keep their phones?" I might as well press my advantage, and the chance it would get Mo to talk.

"Well, that's another misconception," Mo said. "There's not one monolithic Amish viewpoint. There are many Amish groups, many different ways of dealing with technology. Some allow phone shacks on the edges of their property, so they can make calls when they want to, but not be disturbed by them in

the sanctity of their homes."

"Does Amos have a phone shack?" I asked.

"Dunno," Mo said, like he was beginning to think about something else.

"But you said his family was more open than most," I said.

Mo swiveled his head to stare at me for a second, then turned his eyes back on the road. "Open-minded, yes. But not really about communications."

"About what, then?"

"Medicine," Mo said.

"Medicine?" I asked.

"What do you know about allergies?"

My nose itched -- maybe it was the remnants of the sweet pollen near Strasburg.

"I have hay fever," I said. "Cantaloupe sometimes makes my mouth burn. I've seen a few strange deaths in my time due to allergic reactions. You think Jacob Stoltzfus died from something like that?"

"No," Mo said. "I think he was killed because he was trying to prevent people from dying from things like that."

"Ok," I said. "Last time you said that and I asked you to explain you said never mind. Should I ask again or let it slide?"

Mo sighed. "You know, genetic engineering goes back well before the double helix."

"Come again?"

"Breeding plants to make new combinations probably dates almost to the origins of our species," Mo said. "Darwin understood that -- he called it `artificial selection'. Mendel doped out the first laws of genetics breeding peas. Luther Burbank developed way many more new varieties of fruit and vegetables than have yet to come out of our gene-splicing labs."

"And the connection to the Amish is what -- they breed new vegetables now too?" I asked.

"More than that," Mo said. "They have whole insides of houses lit by special kinds of fireflies, altruistic manure permeated by slugs that seek out the roots of plants to die there and give them nourishment -- all deliberately bred to be that way, and the public knows nothing about it. It's biotechnology of the highest order, without the technology."

"And your friend Jacob was working on this?"

Mo nodded. "Techno-allergists -- our conventional researchers -- have recently been investigating how some foods act as catalysts to other allergies. Cantaloupe tingles in your mouth in hay fever season, right? -- because it's really exacerbating the hay fever allergy. Watermelon does the same, and so does the pollen of mums. Jacob and his people have known this for 50 years -- and they've gone much further. They're trying to breed a new kind of food, some kind of tomato thing, which would act as an anti-catalyst for allergies -- would reduce their histamic effect to nothing."

"Like an organic Hismanol?" I asked.

"Better than that," Mo said. "This would trump any pharmaceutical."

"You ok?" I noticed Mo's face was bearing big beads of sweat.

"Sure," he said, and cleared his throat. "I don't know. Jacob--" he started coughing in hacking waves.

I reached over to steady him, and straighten the steering wheel. His shirt was soaked with sweat and he was breathing in

angry rasps.

"Mo, hold on," I said, keeping one hand on Mo and the wheel, fumbling with the other in my inside coat pocket. I finally got my fingers on the epinephrine pen I always kept there, and angled it out. Mo was limp and wet and barely conscious over the wheel. I pushed him over as gently as I could and went with my foot for the brake. Cars were speeding by us, screaming at me in the mirror with their lights. Thankfully Mo had been driving on the right, so I only had one stream of lights to blind me. My sole finally made contact with the brake, and I pressed down as gradually as possible. Miraculously, the car came to a reasonably slow halt on the shoulder of the road, and we both seemed in one piece.

I looked at Mo. I yanked up his shirt, and plunged the pen into his arm. I wasn't sure how long he'd not been breathing, but it wasn't good.

I dialed 911 on the car phone. "Get someone over here fast," I yelled. "I'm on the Turnpike, eastbound, just before the Philadelphia turnoff. I'm Dr. Phil D'Amato, NYPD Forensics, and this is a medical emergency."

I wasn't positive that anaphylactic shock was what was wrong with him, but the adrenalin couldn't do much harm. I leaned over his chest and felt no heartbeat. Jeez, please.

I gave Mo mouth-to-mouth, pounded his chest, pleading for life. "Hang on, damn you!" But I knew already. I could tell. After a while you get this sort of sickening sixth sense about these things. Some kind of allergic reaction from hell had just killed my friend. Right in my arms. Just like that.

EMS got to us eight minutes later. Better than some of the New York City times I'd been seeing lately. But it didn't matter. Mo was gone.

I looked at the car phone as they worked on him, cursing and trying to jolt him back into life. I'd have to call Corinne and tell her this now. But all I could see in the plastic phone display was Laurie's strawberry blonde hair.

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"You ok, Dr. D'Amato?" one of the orderlies called.

"Yeah," I said. I guess I was shaking.

"These allergic reactions can be lethal all right," he said, looking over at Mo.

Right, tell me about it.

"You'll call the family?" the orderly asked. They'd be taking Mo to a local hospital, DOA.

"Yeah," I said, brushing a burning tear from my eye. I felt like I was suffocating. I had to slow down, stay in control, separate the psychological from the physical so I could begin to understand what was going on here. I breathed out and in. Again. Ok. I was all right. I wasn't really suffocating.

The ambulance sped off, carrying Mo. He _had_ been suffocating, and it killed him. What had he been starting to tell me?

I looked again at the phone. The right thing for me to do was to drive back to Mo's home, be there for Corinne when I told her -- calling her on the phone with news like this was monstrous. But I had to find out what had happened to Mo -- and that would likely not be from Corinne. Mo didn't want to worry her, didn't confide in her. No, the best chance of finding out what Mo had been up to seemed to be in Philadelphia, in the place Mo had been going. But where was that?

I focused on the phone display -- pressed a couple of keys,

and got a directory up on the little screen. The only 215 area code listed there was for a Sarah Fischer, with an address that I knew to be near Temple University.

I pressed the code next to the number, then the Send command.

Crackle, crackle, then a distant tinny cellular ring.

"Hello?" a female voice answered, sounding closer than I'd expected.

"Hi. Is this Sarah Fischer?"

"Yes," she said. "Do I know you?"

"Well, I'm a friend of Mo Buhler's, and I think we, he, may have been on his way to see you tonight--"

"Who are you? Is Mo ok?"

"Well--" I started.

"Look, who the hell are you? I'm going to hang up if you don't give me a straight answer," she said.

"I'm Dr. Phil D'Amato. I'm a forensic scientist -- with the New York City Police Department."

She was quiet for a moment. "Your name sounds familiar for some reason," she said.

"Well, I've written a few articles--"

"Hold on," I heard her put the phone down, rustle through some papers.

"You had an article in _Discover_, about antibiotic-resistant bacteria, right?" she asked about half a minute later.

"Yes, I did," I said. In other circumstances, my ego would have jumped at finding such an observant reader.

"Ok, what date was it published?" she asked.

Jeez. "Uh, late last year," I said.

"I see there's a pen and ink sketch of you. What do you look like?"

"Straight dark hair -- not enough of it," I said -- who could remember what that lame sketch actually looked like?

"Go on," she said.

"And a moustache, reasonably thick, and steel-rimmed glasses." I'd grown the moustache at Jenna's behest, and had on my specs for the sketch.

A few beats of silence, then a sigh. "Ok," she said. "So now you get to tell me why you're calling -- and what happened to Mo."

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Sarah's apartment was less than half an hour away. I'd filled her in on the phone. She'd seemed more saddened than surprised, and asked me to come over.

I'd spoken to Corinne, and told her as best I could. Mo had been a cop before he'd become a forensic scientist, and I guess wives of police are supposed to be ready for this sort of thing, but how can a person ever really be ready for it after 20 years of good marriage? She'd cried, I'd cried, the kids cried in the background. I'd said I was coming over -- and I know I should have -- but I was hoping she'd say `no, I'm ok, Phil, really, you'll want to find out why this happened to Mo' ... and that's exactly what she did say. They don't make people like Corinne Rodriguez Buhler any more.

There was a parking spot right across the street from Sarah's building -- in New York this would have been a gift from on high. I tucked in my shirt, tightened my belt, and composed myself as best I could before ringing her bell.

She buzzed me in, and was standing inside her apartment,

2nd floor walk-up, door open, to greet me as I sprinted and puffed up the flight of stairs. She had flaxen blonde hair, a distracted look in her eyes, but an easy, open smile that I didn't expect after the grilling she'd given me on the phone. She looked about 30.

The apartment had soft, recessed lighting -- like a Paris-by-gaslight exhibit I'd once seen -- and smelled faintly of lavender. My nose crinkled. "I use it to help me sleep," Sarah said, and directed me to an old, overstuffed Morris chair. "I was getting ready to go to sleep when you called."

"I'm sorry--"

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," she said. "About giving you a hard time, about what happened to Mo," her voice caught on Mo's name. "You must be hungry," she said, "I'll get you something." She turned around and walked towards another room, which I assumed was the kitchen.

Her pants were white, and the light showed the contours of her body to good advantage as she walked away.

"Here, try some of these to start," she returned with a bowl of grapes. Concord grapes. One of my favorites. Put one in your mouth, puncture the purple skin, jiggle the flesh around on your tongue, it's the taste of Fall. But I didn't move.

"I know," she said. "You're leery of touching any strange food after what happened to Mo. I don't blame you. But these are ok. Here, let me show you," and she reached and took a dusty grape and put it in her mouth. "Mmm," she smacked her lips, took out the pits with her finger. "Look -- why don't _you_ pick a grape and give it to me. OK?"

My stomach was growling and I was feeling light-headed already, and I realized I would have to make a decision. Either leave right now, if I didn't trust this woman, and go somewhere to get something to eat -- or eat what she gave me. I was too hungry to sit here and talk to her and resist her food right now.

"All right, up to you," she said. "I have some Black Forest ham, and can make you a sandwich, if you like, or just coffee or tea."

"All three." I decided. "I mean, I'd love the sandwich, and some tea please, and I'll try the grapes." I put one in my mouth. I'd learned a long time ago that paranoia can be almost as debilitating as the dangers it supposes.

She was back a few minutes later with the sandwich and the tea. I'd squished at least three more grapes in my mouth, and felt fine.

"There's a war going on," she said, and put the food tray on the end table next to me. The sandwich was made with some sort of black bread, and smelled wonderful.

"War?" I asked and bit into the sandwich. "You think what happened to Mo is the work of some terrorist?"

"Not exactly." Sarah sat down on a chair next to me, a cup of tea in her hand. "This war's been going on a very long time. It's a bio-war -- much deeper rooted, literally, than anything we currently regard as terrorism."

"I don't get it," I said, and swallowed what I'd been chewing of my sandwich. It felt good going down, and in my stomach.

"No, you wouldn't," Sarah said. "Few people do. You think epidemics, sudden widespread allergic reactions, diseases that wipe out crops or livestock just happen. Sometimes they do. Sometimes it's more than that." She sipped her cup of tea. Something about the lighting, her hair, her face, maybe the

taste of the food, made me feel like I was a kid back in the 60s. I half expected to smell incense burning.

"Who are you?" I asked. "I mean, what was your connection to Mo?"

"I'm working on my doctorate over at Temple," she said. "My area's ethno/botanical pharmacology -- Mo was one of my resources. He was a very nice man." I thought I saw a tear glisten in the corner of her eye.

"Yes he was," I said. "And he was helping you with your dissertation about what -- the germ warfare you were talking about?"

"Not exactly," Sarah said. "I mean, you know the academic world, no one would ever let me do a thesis on something that outrageous -- it'd never get by the proposal committee. So you have to finesse it, do it on something more innocuous, get the good stuff in under the table, you know, smuggle it in. So, yeah, the _subtext_ of my work was what we -- I -- call the bio-wars, which are actually more than just germ warfare, and yeah, Mo was one of the people who were helping me research that."

Sounded like Mo, all right. "And the Amish have something to do with this?"

"Yes and no," Sarah said. "The Amish aren't a single, unified group -- they actually have quite a range of styles and values--"

"I know," I said. "And some of them -- maybe one of the splinter groups -- are involved in this bio-war?"

"The main bio-war group isn't really Amish -- though they're situated near Lancaster, have been for at least 150 years in this country. Some people think they're Amish, though, since they live close to the land, in a low-tech mode. But they're not Amish. Real Amish would never do that. But some of the Amish know what's going on."

"You know a lot about the Amish," I said.

She blushed slightly. "I'm former Amish. I pursued my interests as far as a woman could in my church. I pleaded with my bishop to let me go to college -- he knew what the stakes were, the importance of what I was studying -- but he said no. He said a woman's place was in the home. I guess he was trying to protect me, but I couldn't stay."

"You know Jacob Stoltzfus?" I asked.

Sarah nodded, lips tight. "He was my uncle," she finally said, "my mother's brother."

"I'm sorry," I said. I could see that she knew he was dead. "Who told you?" I asked softly.

"Amos -- my cousin -- Jacob's son. He has a phone shack," she said.

"I see," I said. What an evening. "I think Mo thought that those people -- those others, like the Amish, but not Amish -- somehow killed Jacob."

Sarah's face shuddered, seemed to unravel into sobs and tears. "They did," she managed to say. "Mo was right. And they killed Mo too."

I put down my plate, and reached over to comfort her. It wasn't enough. I got up and walked to her and put my arm around her. She got up shakily off her chair, then collapsed in my arms, heaving, crying. I felt her body, her heartbeat, through her crinoline shirt.

"It's ok," I said. "Don't worry. I deal with bastards like that all the time in my business. We'll get these people,

I promise you."

She shook her head against my chest. "Not like these," she said.

"We'll get them," I said again.

She held on to me, then pulled away. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to fall apart like that." She looked over at my empty teacup. "How about a glass of wine?"

I looked at my watch. It was 9:45 already, and I was exhausted. But there was more I needed to learn. "Ok," I said. "Sure. But just one glass."

She offered a tremulous smile, and went back into the kitchen. She returned with two glasses of a deep red wine.

I sat down, and sipped. The wine tasted good -- slightly Portuguese, perhaps, with just a hint of some fruit and a nice woody undertone.

"Local," she said. "You like it?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

She sipped some, then closed her eyes and tilted her head back. The bottoms of her blue eyes glinted like semi-precious gems out of half-closed lids.

I needed to focus on the problem at hand. "How exactly do these bio-war people kill -- what'd they do to Jacob and Mo?" I asked.

Her eyes stayed closed a moment longer than I'd expected -- like she'd been daydreaming, or drifting off to sleep. Then she opened them and looked at me, shaking her head slowly. "They've got all sorts of ways. The latest is some kind of catalyst -- in food, we think it's a special kind of Crenshaw melon -- that vastly magnifies the effect of any of a number of allergies." She got up, looked distracted. "I'm going to have another glass -- sure you don't want some more?"

"I'm sure, thanks," I said, and looked at my glass as she walked back into the kitchen. For all I knew, catalyst from that damn melon was in this very glass--

I heard a glass or something crash in the kitchen.

I rushed in.

Sarah was standing over what looked like a little hurricane lamp, glowing white but not burning on the inside, broken on the floor. A few little house bugs of some sort took wing and flew away.

"I'm sorry," she said. She was crying again. "I knocked it over. I'm really not myself tonight."

"No one would be in your situation," I said.

She put her arms around me again, pressing close. I instinctively kissed her check, just barely -- in what I instantly hoped, after the fact, was a brotherly gesture.

"Stay with me tonight," she whispered. "I mean, the couch out there opens up for you, and you'll have your privacy. I'll sleep in the bedroom. I'm afraid..."

I was afraid too, because a part of me suddenly wanted to pick her up and carry her over to her bedroom, the couch, anywhere, and lay her down, softly unwrap her clothes, run my fingers through her sweet-smelling hair and--

But I also cared very much for Jenna. And though we'd made no formal lifetime commitments to each other--

"I don't feel very good," Sarah said, and pulled away slightly. "I guess I had some wine before you came and--" her head lolled and her body suddenly sagged and her eyes rolled back in her skull.

"Here, let me help you." I first tried to buoy her up, then

picked her up entirely and carried her into her bedroom. I put her down on the bed, gently as I could, then felt the pulse in her wrist. It may have been a bit rapid, but seemed basically all right. "You're ok," I said. "Just a little shock and exhaustion."

She moaned softly, then reached out and took my hand. I held it for a long time, till its grip weakened and she was definitely asleep, and then I walked quietly into the other room.

I was too tired myself to go anywhere, too tired to even figure out how to open her couch, so I just stretched out on it and managed to take off my shoes before I fell soundly asleep. My last thoughts were that I needed to have another look at the Stoltzfus farm, the lamp on her floor was beautiful, I hoped I wasn't drugged or anything, but it was too late to do anything about it if I was...

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I awoke with a start the next morning, propped my head up on a shaky arm and leaned over just in time to see Sarah's sleek wet backside receding into her bedroom. Likely from her shower. I could think of worse things to wake up to.

"I think I'm gonna head back to Jacob's farm," I told her over breakfast of wholewheat toast, poached eggs, and Darjeeling tea that tasted like a fine liqueur.

"Why?"

"Closest thing we have to a crime scene," I said.

"I'll come with you," Sarah said.

"Look, you were pretty upset last night--" I started to object.

"Right, so were you, but I'm ok now," Sarah said. "Besides, you'll need me to decode the Amish for you, to tell you what you're looking for."

She had a point. "All right," I said.

"Good," she said. "By the way, what _are_ you looking for there?"

"I don't really know," I admitted. "Mo was eager to show me something at Jacob's."

Sarah considered, frowned. "Jacob was working on an organic antidote to the allergen catalyst -- but all that stuff is very slow acting, the catalyst takes years to build up to dangerous levels in the human body -- so I don't see what Jacob could've shown you on a quick drive-by visit."

If she had told me that last night, I would have enjoyed the grapes and ham sandwich even more. "We'll, we've got nowhere else to look at this point," I said, and speared the last of my egg.

But what did that mean about what killed Mo? Someone had been giving him a slow-acting poison too, which had been building up inside both of them for x number of years, with the result of both of them dying on the same day?

Not very likely. There seemed to be more than one catalyst at work here. I wondered if Mo had told Jacob anything about me and my visit. I certainly hoped not -- the last thing I wanted was that decisive second catalyst to in some way have been me.

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We were on the Turnpike heading west an hour later. The sun was strong and the breeze was fresh -- a splendid day to be out for a ride, except that we were going to investigate the death of one of the nicest damn people I had known. I'd called Corinne to make sure she and the girls were all right. I told her I'd try to drop by in the afternoon if I could.

"So tell me more about your doctoral work," I asked Sarah. "I mean your real work, not the cover for your advisors."

"You know, too many people equate science with its high-tech trappings -- if it doesn't come in computers, god-knows-what-power microscopes, the latest DNA dyes, it must be magic, superstition, old-wives-tale nonsense. But science is at core a method, a rational mode of investigating the world, and the gadgetry is secondary. Sure, the equipment is great -- it opens up more of the world to our cognitive digestion, makes it amenable to our analysis -- but if aspects of the world are already amenable to analysis and experiment, with just our naked eyes and hands, then the equipment isn't all that necessary, is it?"

"And your point is that agriculture, plant and animal breeding, that kind of manipulation of nature has been practiced by humans for millennia with no sophisticated equipment," I said.

"Right," Sarah said. "But that's hardly controversial, or reason to kill someone. What I'm saying is that some people have been doing this for purposes other than to grow better food -- have been doing this right under everyone's noses for a very long time -- and they use this to make money, maintain their power, eliminate anyone who gets in their way."

"Sort of organized biological crime," I mused.

"Yeah, you could put it that way," Sarah said.

"And you have any examples -- any evidence -- other than your allergen theory?" I asked.

"It's fact, not a theory, I assure you," Sarah said. "But here's an example: Ever wonder why people got so rude to each other, here in the US, after World War II?"

"I'm not following you," I said.

"Well, it's been written about in lots of the sociological literature," Sarah said. "There was a civility, a courtesy, in interpersonal relations -- the way people dealt with each other in public, in business, in friendship -- through at least the first half of the 20th century, in the US. And then it started disintegrating. Everyone recognizes this. Some people blame it on the pressures of the atomic age, on the replacement of the classroom by the television screen -- which you can fall asleep or walk out on -- as the prime source of education for kids. There are lots of possible culprits. But I have my own ideas."

"Which are?"

"Everyone was in the atomic age after World War II," Sarah said. "England and the Western World had television, cars, all the usual stimuli. What was different about America was its vast farmland -- room to quietly grow a crop of something that most people have a low-level allergy to. I think the cause of the widespread irritation, the loss of courtesy, was quite literally something that got under everyone's skin -- an allergen designed for just that purpose."

Jeez, I could see why this woman would have trouble with her doctoral committee. But I might as well play along -- I'd learned the hard way that crazy ideas like this were pooh-poohed at one's peril. "Well, the Japanese did have some plans in mind for balloons carrying biological agents -- deadly diseases -- over here near the end of the war."

Sarah nodded. "The Japanese are one of the most advanced peoples on Earth in terms of expertise in agriculture. I don't know if they were involved in this, but--"

The phone rang.

McLuhan had once pointed out that the car was the only

place you could be, in this technological world of ours, away from the demanding, interrupting ring of the phone. But that of course was before car phones.

"Hello," I answered.

"Hello?" a voice said back to me. It sounded male, odd accent, youngish but deep.

"Yes?" I said.

"Mr. Buhler, is that you?" the voice said.

"Ahm, no, it isn't, can I take a message for him?" I said.

Silence. Then, "I don't understand. Isn't this the number for the phone in Mr. Buhler's car?"

"That's right," I said, "but--"

"Where's Mo Buhler?" the voice insisted.

"Well, he's--" I started.

I heard a strange clicking, then a dial tone.

"Is there a call-back feature on this?" I asked Sarah and myself. I pressed *69, as I would on regular phones, and pressed Send. "Welcome to AT&T Wireless Services," a different deep voice said. "The cellular customer you have called is unavailable, or has travelled outside of the coverage area--"

"That was Amos," Sarah said.

"The kid on the phone?" I asked, stupidly.

Sarah nodded.

"Must still be in shock over his father," I said.

"I think he killed his father," Sarah said.

***

We drove deep into Pennsylvania, the blacks and greys and unreal colors of the billboards gradually supplanted by the greens and browns and earth-tones I'd communed with just yesterday. But the natural colors held no joy for me now. I realized that's the way nature always had been -- we romanticize its beauty, and that's real, but it's also the source of drought, famine, earthquake, disease, and death in many guises... The question was whether Sarah could possibly be right in her theory about how some people were helping this dark side of nature along.

She filled me in on Amos. He was 16, had only a formal primary school education, in a one-room schoolhouse, like other Amish -- but also like some splinter groups of the Amish, unknown to outsiders, he was self-educated in the science and art of biological alchemy. He was apprentice to his father.

"So why would he kill him?" I asked.

"Amos is not only a budding scientist, Amish-style, he's also a typically headstrong Amish kid. Lots of wild oats to sow. He got drunk, drove cars, along with the best of them in the Amish gangs."

"Gangs?"

"Oh yeah," Sarah said. "The Groffies, the Ammies, and the Trailers -- those are the three main ones -- Hostetler writes about them in his books. But there are others, smaller ones. Jacob didn't like his son being involved in them. They argued about that constantly."

"And you think that led to Amos killing his father?" I asked, still incredulous.

"Well, Jacob's dead, isn't he? And I'm pretty sure that one of the gangs Amos belongs to has connections to the bio-war Mafia people I've been telling you about -- the ones that killed Mo too."

We drove the rest of the way in silence. I wasn't sure what to think about this woman and her ideas.

We finally reached Northstar Road, and the path that led to the Stoltzfus farm. "It's probably better that we park the car here, and you walk the path yourself," Sarah said. "Cars and strange women are more likely to arouse Amish attention than a single man on foot -- even if he is English. I mean, that's what they call--"

"I know," I said. "I've seen _Witness_. But Mo told me that Jacob didn't mind cars--"

"Jacob's dead now," Sarah said. "What he liked and what his family like may be two very different things."

I recalled the hostility of Jacob's brother, another of Sarah's uncles, yesterday. "All right," I said. "I guess you know what you're talking about. I should be back in 30 to 40 minutes."

"Ok," Sarah squeezed my hand and smiled.

***

I trudged down the dirt road, not really knowing what I hoped to find at the other end.

Certainly not what I did find.

I smelled the smoke, the burnt quality in the air, before I came upon the house and the barn. Both had been burned to the ground. God, I hoped no one had been in there when these wooden structures went.

"Hello?" I shouted.

My voice echoed across an empty field. I looked around and listened. No animals, no cattle. Even a dog's rasping bark would have been welcome.

I walked over to the barn's remains, and poked at some charred wood with my foot. An ember or two winked into life, then back out. It was close to noon. My guess was this had happened -- and quickly -- about six hours earlier. But I was no arson expert.

I brushed away the stinking smoke fumes with my hand. I pulled out my flashlight, a powerful little halogen daylight simulation thing Jenna had given me, and looked around the inside of the barn. Whatever had been going on here, there wasn't much left of it now...

Something green caught my eye -- greener than grass. It was the front cover, partially burned, of an old book. All that was left was this piece of the cover -- the pages in the book, the back cover, were totally gone. I could see some letters, embossed in gold, in the old way. I touched it with the tip of my finger. It was warm, but not too hot. I picked it up and examined it.

"of Nat" one line said, and the next line said "bank".

Bank, I thought, Nat Bank. What was this, some kind of Amish bankbook, for some local First Yokel's National Bank?

No, it didn't look like a bankbook cover. And the "b" in this bank was a small letter, not a capital. Bank, bank, hmm... wait, hadn't Mo said something to me about a bank yesterday? A bank... Yes, a Burbank. Darwin and Burbank! Luther Burbank!

"Partner of Nature" by Luther Burbank -- that was the name of the book whose charred remains I held in my hand. I'd taken out a copy of it years ago from the Allerton library, and loved it.

Well, Mo and Sarah were right about at least one thing -- the reading level of at least some Amish was a lot higher than grade school--

"You again!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I turned around. "Oh, Mr. --" it was the man we'd seen here

yesterday -- Jacob's brother.

"Isaac Stoltzfus," he said. "What are you doing here?"

His tone was so unsettling, his eyes so angry, that I thought for a second he thought that I was responsible for the fire. "Isaac. Mr. Stoltzfus," I said. "I just got here. I'm sorry for your loss. What happened?"

"My brother's family, thank the Deity, left to stay with some relatives in Ohio very early this morning, well before dawn. So no one was hurt. I went with them to the train station in Lancaster. When I returned here, a few hours later, I found this." He gestured hopelessly, but with an odd air of resignation, to the ruined house and barn.

"May I ask you if you know what your brother was doing here?" I hazarded a question.

Isaac either didn't hear or pretended not to. He just continued on his earlier theme. "Material things, even animals and plants, we can always afford to lose. People are what are truly of value in this world."

"Yes," I said, "but getting back to what--"

"You should check on your family too -- to make sure they are not in danger."

"My family?" I asked.

Isaac nodded. "I've work to do here," he pointed out to the field. "My brother had four fine horses, and I can find no sign of them. I think it best that you go now." And he turned and walked away.

"Wait..." I started, but I could see it was no use.

I looked at the front cover of Burbank's book. This farm, Sarah's bizarre theories, the book -- there still wasn't really enough of any of them at hand to make much sense of this.

But what the hell did Isaac mean about my family?

Jenna was overseas, and not really family -- yet. My folks lived in Teaneck, my sister was married to an Israeli guy in Brookline... what connection did they have to what was going on here?

Jeez -- none! Isaac hadn't been referring to them at all. I was slow on the uptake today. He'd likely mistaken me for Mo -- he'd seen both of us for the first time here yesterday.

He was talking about Mo's family -- Corinne and the kids.

I raced back to the car, the smoky air cutting my throat with a different jagged edge each time my foot hit the ground.

***

"What's going on?" Sarah said.

I waved her off, jumped in the car, and put a call through to Corinne. Ring, ring, ring. No answer.

"What's the matter?" she asked again.

I quickly told her. "Let's get over there," I said, and turned the car, screeching, back on to Northstar.

"All right, take it easy," Sarah said. "It's Saturday -- Corinne could just be out shopping with the kids."

"Right, the day after their father died -- in my arms," I said.

"All right," she said again, "but you still don't want to get into an accident now. We'll be there in 10 minutes."

I nodded, tried Corinne's number again, same ring, ring, ringing.

"Fireflies likely caused the fire," Sarah said.

"What?"

"Fireflies -- a few of the Amish use them for interior lighting," Sarah said.

"Yah, Mo mentioned that," I said. "But fireflies give cool light -- bioluminescence -- no heat."

"Not the ones I've seen around here," Sarah said. "They're infected with certain heat-producing bacteria -- symbionts, really, not an infection -- and the result gives both light and heat. At least, that's the species some of these people use around here when winter starts setting in. I had a little Mendelian lamp myself -- that's what they're called -- you know, the one that broke on the floor in my place last night."

"So you think one of those ... lamps went out of control and started the fire?" I asked. Suddenly I had a vision of burning up as I slept on her couch.

Sarah chewed her lip. "Maybe worse -- maybe someone set it to go out of control. Or bred it that way -- a bio-luminescent, bio-thermic time-bomb."

"Your bio-mob covers a lot of territory," I said. "Allergens that cause low-level irritation in millions of people, catalysts that amplify other allergens to kill at least two people, anti-catalytic tomato sauce, and now pyrotechnic fireflies."

"Not that much distance at all when you're dealing with co-evolution and symbiosis," Sarah said. "Hell, we've got acidophilous bacteria living in us right now that help us digest our food. Lots more difference between them and us than between thermal bacteria and fireflies."

I put my foot on the gas pedal and prayed we wouldn't get stopped by some eager-beaver Pennsylvania trooper.

"That's the problem," Sarah continued. "Co-evolution, bio-mixing-and-matching, is a blessing and a curse. When everything's organic, and you cross-breed, you can get marvelous things. But you can also get flies that burn down buildings."

We finally got to Mo's house.

"Damn." At least it was still standing, but there was no car in the driveway. And the door was half open.

"You wait in the car," I said to Sarah.

She started to protest.

"Look," I said. "We may be dealing with killers here -- you've been saying that yourself. You'll only make it harder for me if you come along and I have to worry about protecting you."

"Ok," she nodded.

I got out of the car.

***

Unfortunately, I didn't have my gun -- truth is, I never used it anyway. I didn't like guns. Department had issued one to me when I'd first come to work for them, and I'd promptly put it away in my closet. Not the most brilliant move I'd ever made, given what was going on here now.

I walked into the house, as quietly as I could. I thought it better that I not announce myself -- if Corinne and the kids were home, and I offended or frightened them by just barging in, there'd be time to apologize later.

I walked through the foyer and then the dining room that I'd never made it into to taste Corinne's great cooking yesterday. Then the kitchen and a hallway, and--

I saw a head, strawberry blonde on the floor, poking out of a bedroom.

Someone was on top of her.

"Laurie!" I shouted and dove in the room, shoving off the boy who was astride her.

"Wha--" he started to say, and I picked him up, bodily, and threw him across the room. I didn't know whether to turn to Laurie or him -- but I figured I couldn't do anything for Laurie with this kid at my back. I grabbed a sheet off the bed, rolled it tight, and went over to tie him up.

"Mr., I--" He sounded groggy, I guess from hitting the wall.

"Shut up," I said, "and be glad I don't shoot you."

"But I--"

"I said shut up." I tied him as tightly as I could. Then I dragged him over to the same side of the room as Laurie, so I could keep an eye on him while I tended to her.

"Laurie," I said softly, and touched her face with my hand. She gave no response. She was out cold on something -- I peeled back her eyelid, and saw a light blue eye floating, dilated, drugged out on who knew what.

"What the hell did you do to her? Where's her mother and sister?" I bellowed.

"I don't know -- I mean, I don't know where they are," the kid said. "I didn't do anything to her. But I can help her."

"Sure you can," I said. "You'll excuse me if I go call an ambulance."

"No, please, Mr., don't do that!" the kid said. His voice sounded familiar. Amos Stoltzfus!

"She'll die before she gets to the hospital," he said. "But I have something here that can save her."

"Like you saved your father?" I asked.

There were tears in the kid's eyes. "I got there too late for my father. How did you know my -- oh, I see, you're the friend of Mo Buhler's I was talking to this morning."

I ignored him and started walking out of the room.

"Please. I care about Laurie too. We're -- we've been seeing each other--"

I turned around and picked him up off the floor. "Yeah? That's so? And how do I know you didn't somehow do this to her?"

"There's a medicine in my pocket. It's a tomato variant. Please -- I'll drink half of it down to show you it's ok, then you give the rest to Laurie -- we don't have much time."

I considered for a moment. I looked at Laurie. I guess I didn't have anything to lose having the kid drink half of whatever he was talking about. "Ok," I said. "Which pocket?"

He gestured to his left front jeans.

I pulled out a small vial -- likely contained only 5-6 ounces.

"You sure you want to do this?" I asked. I suddenly had a queasy feeling -- I didn't want to be the vehicle of some sick patricidal kid's suicide.

"I don't care whether you give it to me or not," Amos said. "Just give some to Laurie already! Please!"

I have to make gut decisions all the time in my line of work. Only usually not about families I deeply care about. I thought for another second, and decided.

I bypassed his taking the sample, and went over to Laurie. I hated to give her any liquid when she was still unconscious--

"It's absorbed on the back of the tongue," Amos said. "It works quick."

God, I hoped this kid was right -- I'd kill him with my bare hands if this wasn't right for Laurie. I put an ounce or two on her tongue. A few seconds went by. More. Maybe 30 seconds, 40 ... "Goddamnit, how exactly long does this--"

She moaned, as if on cue. "Laurie?" I asked, and patted

her face.

"Mmm...," she opened her eyes. And smiled! "Phil?"

"Yeah, honey, everything's ok," I said.

"Laurie!" Amos called out from across the room.

Laurie got up. "Amos? What are you doing here? Why are you tied up like that?"

She looked at him and then me like we were both crazy.

"Long story, never mind," I said, and went over to untie Amos. I found myself grinning at him. "Good on you, you were right, kid," I said.

He smiled back.

"Where are your Mom and Emma?" I asked.

"Oh," Laurie suddenly looked sadder than I'd ever seen her. "They went over to the funeral home this morning, that's where Dad is, to make arrangements. They took your car, Mom found the keys for it in your bag." And she started crying.

Amos put his arms around her, comforting her.

"You have any idea what happened to you? I mean, after your Mom and sister left?" I asked gently.

"Well," she said, "some nice lady was coming around selling stuff -- you know, soaps, perfumes, and little household things -- like Avon, but some company I never heard of. And she asked me if I wanted to smell some new perfume -- and it smelled wonderful, like a combination of lilacs and the ocean, and then ... I don't know, I guess you were calling me, and I saw Amos tied up and ... what happened? Did I pass out?"

"Well--" I started.

"Uhm, Mr., ahm, Phil--" Amos interrupted.

"It's Dr. D'Amato, but my friends call me Phil, and you've earned that right," I said.

"Ok, thanks, Dr. D'Amato -- sorry, I mean Phil -- but I don't think we should hang around here. These people--"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I'm saying I don't like what the light looks like in this house. They killed my father, they tried to poison Laurie, who knows what they might have planted--"

"Ok, I see your point," I said, and saw again the Stoltzfus farm -- Amos' farm -- ashes in the dirt.

I looked at Laurie. "I'm fine," she said. "But why do we have to leave?"

"Let's just go," I said, and Amos and I ushered her out.

The first thing I noticed when we were out of the house was that Sarah and my car -- Mo's car -- were gone.

The second thing I noticed was a searing heat on the back of my neck. I rushed Laurie and Amos across the street, and turned back to squint at the house.

Intense blue-white flames were sticking their searing tongues out of every window, licking the roof and the walls and now the garden with colors I'd never seen before.

Laurie cried out in horror. Amos held her close. "Fireflies," he muttered.

The house burned to the ground in minutes.

***

We stood mute, in hot/cold shivering shock, for what felt like a long, long time.

I finally realized I was breathing hard. I thought about allergic reactions. I thought about Sarah.

"They must've taken Sarah," I said.

"Sarah?" Amos asked, holding Laurie tight in a clearly loving way. She was sobbing.

"Sarah Fischer," I said.

Laurie and Amos both nodded.

"She was a friend of my father's," Laurie said.

"She's my sister," Amos said.

"What?" I turned to Amos. Laurie pulled away and looked at him too. He had a peculiar, almost tortured sneer on his face, mixture of hatred and heartbreak.

"She left our home more than 10 years ago," Amos said. "I was still just a little boy. She said she could no longer be bound by the ways of our _Ordnung_ -- she said it was like agreeing to be mentally retarded for the rest of your life. So she left to go to some school. And I think she's been working with those people -- those people who killed my father and burned Laurie's house."

I suddenly tasted the grapes in my mouth from last night, sweet taste with choking smoke, and I felt sick to my stomach. I swallowed, took a deliberate deep breath.

"Look," I said. "I'm still not clear what's really going on here. I find Laurie unconscious -- you, someone, could've put a drug in her orange juice for all I know. The house just burned down -- could've been arson with rags and lighter fluid, just like we have back in New York, New York." Though I knew I'd never seen a fire quite like that.

Laurie stared at me like I was nuts.

"They were fireflies, Mr. D'A-- Phil," Amos said. "Fireflies caused the fire."

"How could they do that so quickly?"

"They can be bred that way," Amos said. "So that an hour or a day or week after they start flying around, they suddenly heat up to cause the fire. It's what you _scientists_," he said with ill-concealed derision, "call setting a genetical switch. Mendelian lamps set to go off like clockwork and burn -- Mendel bombs."

"Mendel bombs?"

"Wasn't he a genetical scientist? Worked with peas? Insects are simple like that too -- easy to breed."

"Yeah, Gregor Mendel," I said. "You're saying Sarah -- your sister -- was involved in this?"

He nodded.

I thought about the lamp on Sarah's floor.

"Look, Amos, I'm sorry about before -- I don't really think you did anything to Laurie. It's just -- can you show me any actual _evidence_ of this stuff? I mean, like, the fireflies _before_ they burn down a house?"

Amos considered. "Yeah, I can take you to a barn -- it's about 5 miles from here."

I looked at Laurie.

"The Lapp farm?" she asked.

Amos nodded.

"It's ok," she said to me. "It's safe. I've been there."

"All right, then," I said. But Mo's car -- and my car -- were still gone. "How are we going to get there?"

"I parked my buggy at my friend's -- about a quarter of a mile from here," Amos said.

***

Clop, clop, clop, looking at a horse's behind, feeling like one -- based on what I was able to make sense of in this case. Horses, flames, mysterious deaths -- all the ingredients of a Jack Finney novel in the 19th century. Except this was the end of the 20th. And so far all I'd done is manage to get dragged

along to every awful event. Well, at least I'd managed to save Laurie -- or let Amos save her. But I had to do more -- I had to stop just witnessing and reacting, and instead get on top of things. I represented 20th century science, for godsake. Ok, it wasn't perfect, it wasn't all powerful. But surely it had taught me enough to enable me to do _something_ to counter these bombs and allergens, these ... Mendelian things.

I'd also managed to get through to Corinne at the funeral home from a pay phone on a corner before we'd gotten into Amos' buggy. I'd half expected his horse and buggy to come with a car phone -- a horse phone? -- that was how crazy this "genetical" stuff was getting me. On the other hand, I guess the Amish could have rigged up a buggy with a cellular phone running on battery at that... Well, at least I was learning...

"We should be there in a few minutes." Amos leaned back from the driver's seat, where he held the reins and clucked the lone horse along. He -- Amos had told me the horse was a he -- was a dark brown beautiful animal, at least to my innocent city eyes. The whole scene, riding along in a horse and buggy on a bright crisp autumn day, was astonishing -- because it wasn't a buggy ride for a tourist's five dollar bill, it was real life.

"You know, I ate some of your sister's food," I blurted out the qualm that occurred to me again. "You don't think, I mean, that maybe it had a slow-acting allergen--"

"We'll give you a swig of an antidote -- it's pretty universal -- when we get to John Lapp's, don't worry," Amos leaned back and advised.

"Sarah -- your sister -- was telling me something about some low-grade allergen let loose on our population after World War II. Didn't kill anyone, but made most people more irritable than they'd been before. Come to think of it, I suppose it indeed could have been responsible for lots of deaths, when you take into account the manslaughters that result from people on edge, arguments gone out of control."

"You're talking the way Poppa used to," Laurie said.

"Your dad talked about those allergens?" I asked.

"No," Laurie said. "I mean he was always going on about manslaughter, and how it had just one or two little differences in spelling from man's laughter, and how those differences made all the difference."

"Yeah, that was Mo all right," I said.

"That's John Lapp's farm up ahead," Amos said.

The meadow was green, still lush in this autumn. It was bounded by fences that looked both old, and, implausibly, in very good condition. Like we'd been literally travelling back in time.

"So, Amos, your opinion on your sister's idea about the allergens?" I prompted.

"I don't know," he said. "That was my sister's area of study."

***

A barn, a big barn, but no different on the outside than hundreds of other barns in the countrysides of Pennsylvania and Ohio. How many of them had what this one had inside?

Variations of Sarah's words played in my ears. Why do we expect science to always come in high-tech wrappings? Darwin was a great scientist, wasn't he, and just the plain outside world was his laboratory. Mendel came upon the workings of genetics by cultivating purple and white flowering peas in his garden. Was a garden so different from a barn? If anything, it

was even lower-tech.

A soft pervasive light embraced us as we walked inside -- keener than fluorescent, more diffuse than incandescent, a cross between sepiatone and starlight maybe, but impossible to describe with any real precision if you hadn't actually seen it, felt its photons slide through your pupils like pieces of a breeze.

"Fireflight," Amos whispered, though I had realized that already. I'd seen fireflies before, loved them as a boy, poured over Audubon guides to insects with pictures of their light, but never anything like this.

"We have lots of uses for insects, more than just light," Amos said, and he guided me over, Laurie on his arm, to a series of wooden contraptions all entwined with nets. I looked closer, and saw swarms of insects -- bees mostly, maybe other kinds -- each in its own gauzed compartment. There were several sections with spiders too.

"These are our nets, Phil," Amos said. "The nets and webs of our information highway. Our insects are of course far slower and smaller in numbers than your electrons, but far more intelligent and motivated than those non-living things that convey information on yours. True, our communicators can't possibly match the pace and reach of the broadcast towers, the telephone lines, the computers all over your world. But we don't want that. We don't need the speed, the high blood pressure, the invasion of privacy, that your electrons breed. We don't want the numbers, the repetition, all the clutter. Our carriers get it right, for the jobs that we think are important, the first time."

"We'll they certainly get it just as deadly," I said, "at least when it comes to burning down houses. Nature strikes back." And I marveled again at the wisdom of these people, this boy -- which, though I disagreed about the advantages of bug-tech over electricity, bespoke a grasp of information theory that would do any telecom specialist proud--

"Nature was never really gone, Dr. D'Amato," a deep voice that sounded familiar said.

I turned around. "Isaac..."

"I apologize for the deception, but my name is John Lapp. I pretended to be Jacob's brother at his farm because I couldn't be sure that you weren't videotaping me with some kind of concealed camera. Jacob and I are roughly the same height and weight, so I took the chance. You'll forgive me, but we have great distrust for your instruments." His face and voice were "Isaac Stoltzfus"'s, all right, but his delivery was vastly more commanding and urbane.

I noticed in the corner of my eye that Laurie's were wide with awe. "Mr. Lapp," she stammered, "I'm very honored to meet you. I mean, I've been here before with Amos," she squeezed his hand, "but I never expected to actually meet you--"

"Well, I'm honored too, young lady," Lapp said, "and I'm very very sorry about your father. I only met him once -- when I was first pretending to be `Isaac' the other day -- but I know from Jacob that your father was a good man."

"Thank you," Laurie said, softly.

"I have something for you, Laurie Buhler," Lapp reached into his long, dark coat and pulled out what looked like a lady's handbag, constructed of a very attractive moss-green woven cloth. "Jacob Stoltzfus designed this. We call it a lamp-case. It's a weave of special plant fibers dyed in an

extract from the glow-worm, with certain chemicals from luminescent mushrooms mixed into the dye to give the light staying power. It glows in the dark. It should last for several months, as long as the weather doesn't get too hot. Then you can get a new one. From now on, if you're out shopping after the sun sets, you'll be able to see what you have in your case, how much money you have left, wherever you are. From what I know of young lady's purses -- I have three teenaged daughters -- this@ can be very helpful. Some of you seem to be lugging half the world around with you in there!"

Laurie took the case, and beamed. "Thank you so much," she said. She looked at me. "This is what Poppa was going to get for me the other night. He thought I didn't know -- he wanted to pick this purse up, at Jacob Stoltzfus's farm, and surprise me for my birthday tomorrow. But I knew." And her voice cracked and tears welled in her eyes.

Amos put his arms around her again, and I patted her hair.

"Mo would've wanted to get to the bottom of this," I said to Lapp. "What can you tell me about who killed him -- and Amos' father?"

He regarded me, without much emotion. "The world is changing before your very eyes, Dr. D'Amato. Twelve-hundred pound moose walk down the mainstreet in Brattleboro, Vermont. People shoot 400-lb bears in the suburbs of New Hampshire--"

"New Hampshire is hardly a suburb, and Mo wasn't killed by a bear -- he died right next to me in my car," I said.

"Same difference, Doctor. Animals are getting brazen, bacteria are going wild, allergies are rampant -- it's all part of the same picture. It's no accident."

"Your people are doing this, deliberately?" I asked.

"My people? -- No, I assure you, we don't believe in aggression. These things you see here" -- he waved his hand around the barn, at all sort of plants and small animals and insects I wanted to get a closer look at -- "are only to make our lives better, in quiet ways. Like Laurie's handbag."

"Like the fireflies that burn down buildings?" I asked.

"Ah, we come full circle -- this is where I came in. Alas, we unfortunately are not the only people on this Earth who understand more of the power of nature than is admitted by your technological world. You have plastics, used for good. You also have plastic used for evil -- you have semtex, that blew up your airplane over Scotland. We have bred fireflies for good purposes, for light and moderate heat, as you see right here," he pointed to a corner of the barn, near where we were standing. A fountain of the sepiatone and starlight seemed to emanate from it. I looked more carefully, and saw the fountain was really a myriad of tiny fireflies -- a large Mendelian lamp. "We mix slightly different species in the swarm," Lapp continued, "carefully chosen so that their flashings overlap to give a continuous, long-lasting light. The mesh is so smooth that you can't see the insects themselves, unless you examine the light very closely. But there are those who have furthered this breeding for bad purposes, as you found out in both the Stoltzfus and Buhler homes."

"Well, if you know who these people are, tell me, and I'll see to it that they're put out of business," I said.

For the first time, I noticed a smear of contempt on John Lapp's face. "Your police will put them out of business? How? In the same way you've put your industrial Mafia out of business? In the same way you've stopped the drug trade from

South America? In the same way your United Nations, your NATO, all of your wonderful political organizations have ended wars in the Middle East, in Europe, in Southeast Asia all these years? No thank you, Doctor. These people who misuse the power of nature are _our_ problem -- they're not our people any longer but they come originally from our people -- and we'll handle them in our own way."

"But two people are dead--" I protested.

"You perhaps will be too," Amos said. He proffered a bottle with some kind of reddish, tomatoey-looking liquid. "Here, drink this, just in case my sister gave you some slow-acting poison."

"A brother and a sister," I said. "Each tells me the other's the bad guy. Classic dilemma -- for all I know this is the poison."

Lapp shook his head. "Sarah Stoltzfus Fischer is definitely bad," he said solemnly. "I once thought I saw some good that could be rekindled in her, but now ... Jacob told Mo Buhler about her--"

"Her name was on Mo's car phone list," I said.

"Yes, as someone Mo was likely investigating," Lapp said. "I told Jacob he was wrong to tell Mo so much. But Jacob was stubborn -- and he was an optimist. A dangerous combination. I'm sorry to say this," he looked with hurt eyes at Laurie, "but Mo Buhler may have brought this upon Jacob and himself because of his contacts with Sarah."

"If Poppa believed in her, then that's because he still saw some good in her," Laurie insisted.

John Lapp shook his head, sadly.

"And I guess I made things worse by contacting her, spending the night with her--" I started saying.

All three gave me a look.

"-- _alone_, on the couch," I finished.

"Yes, perhaps you did make things worse," Lapp said. "Your style of investigation -- Mo Buhler's -- can't do any good here. These people will have you running around chasing your own tail. They'll taunt you with vague suggestions of possibilities of what they're up to -- what they've been doing. They'll give you just enough taste of truth to keep you interested. But when you look for proof, you'll find you won't know which end is up."

Which was a pretty good capsule summary of what I'd being feeling like.

"They introduced long-term allergen catalysts into our bloodstreams, our biosphere, years ago," Lapp went on. "Everyone in this area has it. And once you do, you're a sitting duck. When they want to kill you, they give you another catalyst, short-term, any one of a number of handy biological agents, and you're dead within hours of a massive allergic attack to some innocent thing in your environment. So the two catalysts work together to kill you. Of course, neither one on its own is dangerous, shows up as suspicious on your blood tests, so that's how they get away with it. And no one even notices the final innocent insult -- no one is ordinarily allergic to an autumn leaf from a particular type of tree against your skin, or a certain kind of beetle on your finger. That's why we developed the antidote to the first catalyst -- it's the only way we know of breaking the allergic cycle."

"Please, Phil, drink this." Amos pushed the bottle on me again.

"Any side effects I should know about? Like I'll be dead

of an allergic attack in a few hours?"

"You'll probably feel a little more irritable than usual for the next week," Lapp said.

I sighed. "What else is new."

Decisions ... Even if I had the first catalyst, I could live the rest of my life without ever encountering the second. No, I couldn't go on being so vulnerable like that. I liked autumn leaves. But how did I know for sure that what Amos was offering me was the antidote, and not the second catalyst? I didn't -- not for sure -- but wouldn't Amos have tried to leave me in Mo's house to burn if he'd wanted me dead? Decisions...

I drank it down, and looked around the barn. Incredible scene of high Victorian science, like a 19th century trade card I'd once seen for an apothecary. Enough to make my head spin. Then I realized it _was_ spinning -- was this some sort of reaction to the antidote? Jeez, or was the antidote the poison after all? No -- the room wasn't so much spinning, as the light, the fireflight, was flickering ... in an oddly familiar way.

Lapp was suddenly talking, fast, arguing with someone.

Sarah!

"There's a Mendel bomb here," she was shouting. "Please. You all have to leave."

Lapp looked desperately around the room, back at Sarah, and finally nodded. "She's right," he said and caught my eye. "We all have to leave now." He grabbed on to Sarah's shoulder, and beckoned me to follow.

Amos had his arm around Laurie, and was already walking quickly with her towards the door. Everyone else was scurrying around, grabbing what netted cages they could.

"No," I said. "Wait." An insight was just nibbling its way into my mind.

"Doctor, please," Lapp said. "We have to leave now."

"No, you don't," I said. "I know how to stop the bomb."

Lapp shook his head firmly. "I assure you, we know of no remedy to stop this. We have perhaps seven, maybe eight minutes at most. We can rebuild the barn. Human lives we cannot rebuild."

Sarah looked at me with pleading eyes.

"No," I insisted, looking past Sarah at Lapp. "You can't just keep running like this from your enemies, letting them burn you out. You have incredible work going on here. I can stop the bomb."

Lapp stared at me.

"Ok, how's this," I said. "You clear out of here with your friends. No problem. I'll take care of this with _my_ science and then we'll talk about it, all right? But let me get on with it already."

Lapp signalled the last of his people to leave. "Take her," he said, and passed custody of Sarah along to a big burly man with a grey-flecked beard. She tried to resist but was no match for him.

Lapp squinted at the flickering fireflies. They were much more distinct now, as if the metamorphosis into bomb mode had coarsened the nature of the mesh.

He turned to me. "I'll stay here with you. I'll give you two minutes and then I'm yanking you out of here. What does your science have to offer?"

"Nothing all that advanced," I said, and pulled my little halogen flashlight out of my pocket. "Those are fireflies,

right? If they've retained anything of the characteristics of the family _Lampyridae_ I know about, then they make their light only in the absence of daylight, when the day has waned -- they're nocturnal. During the day, bathed in daylight, they're just like any other damn beetle. Well, this should make the necessary adjustment." I turned up the flashlight to its fullest daylight setting, and shone it straight at the center of the swirling starlight fountain, which now had a much harsher tone, like an ugly light over an autopsy table. I focused my halogen on the souped-up fireflies for a minute and longer. Nothing happened. The swirling continued. The harsh part of their light got stronger.

"Doctor, we can't stay here any longer," Lapp said.

I sighed, closed my eyes, and opened them. The halogen flashlight should have worked -- it should have put out the light of least some of the fireflies, then more, disrupting their syncopated overlapping pattern of flashing. I stared hard at the fountain. My eyes were tired. I couldn't see the flies as clearly as I could a few moments ago...

No ... of course!

I couldn't see as clearly because the light was getting dimmer!

There was no doubt about it now. The whole barn seemed to be flickering in and out, the continuous light effect had broken down, and each time the light came back, it did so a little more weakly... I kept my halogen trained on the flies. It was soon the only light in the barn.

Lapp's hand was on my shoulder. "We're in your debt, Doctor. I almost made the fool's mistake of closing my mind to a source of knowledge I didn't understand -- a fool's mistake, as I say, because if I don't understand it, then how can I know it's not valuable?"

"Plato's Meno Paradox strikes again," I said.

"What?"

"You need some knowledge to recognize knowledge, so where does the first knowledge come from?" I smiled. "Wisdom from an old Western-style philosopher -- I frequently consult him -- though actually he probably had more in common with you."

Lapp nodded. "Thank you for giving us this knowledge of the firefly, that we knew all along ourselves but didn't realize. From now on, the Mendel bombs won't be such a threat to us -- once we notice their special flicker, all we'll need to do is flood the area with daylight. Plain daylight. Sometimes we won't even need your flashlight to do it -- daylight is after all just out there, naturally for the asking, a good deal of the time."

"And in the evenings, you can use the flashlight -- it's battery operated, no strings attached to central electric companies," I said. "See, I've picked up a few things about your culture after all."

Lapp smiled. "I believe you have, Doctor. And I believe we'll be all right now."

"Yeah, but it was a good thing you had Sarah Fischer to warn you this time, anyway," I said.

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Of course, the enemies of John Lapp and Amos Stoltzfus would no doubt come up with other diabolical breedings of weapons. No one ever gets a clear-cut complete victory in these things. But at least the scourge of Mendel bombs would be reduced. I guess I'd given them an SDI for these pyro-fireflies

-- imperfect, no doubt, but certainly a lot better than nothing.

I was glad, too, about how Sarah Fischer had turned around. She'd come back to the barn to warn us. Said she couldn't take the killing anymore. She said she had nothing directly to do with Mo's or Jacob's -- her father's -- deaths, but she could no longer be part of a community that did such things. She had started telling me about the allergens -- the irritation ones -- because she wanted the world to know. I wanted to believe her.

I'd thought of calling the Pennsylvania police, having them take her into custody, but what was the point? I had no evidence on her whatsoever. Even if she had set the Mendel bomb in John Lapp's barn -- which I didn't believe -- what could I do about that anyway? Have her arrested for setting a bomb made of incendiary flies I'd been able to defuse by shining my flashlight -- a bomb that Lapp's people were unwilling in any way to even acknowledge to the outside world, let alone testify about in court? No thank you -- I've been laughed out of court enough times as is already.

And Lapp said his people had some sort of humane program for people like Sarah -- help her find her own people and roots again. She needed that. She was a woman without community now. Shunned by all parties. The worst thing that could happen to someone of Sarah's upbringing. It was good that John Lapp and Amos Stoltzfus were willing to give her a second chance -- offer her a lamp of hope, maybe the real meaning of the Mendelian lamp, as Lapp had aptly put it.

I rolled my window down to pay the George Washington Bridge toll. It felt good to finally be back in my own beat-up car again, I had to admit. Corinne was off with the girls to resettle in California. I'd said a few words about Mo at his funeral, and now his little family was safely on a plane out West. I couldn't say I'd brought his murderers to justice, but at least I'd put a little crimp in their operation. Laurie had kissed Amos goodbye, and promised she'd come back and see him, certainly for Christmas...

"Thanks, Chief." I took the receipt and the change. I felt so good to be back I almost told him to keep the change. I left the window rolled down. The air had its customary musky aroma -- the belches of industry, the exhaust fumes of even EPA-clean cars still leaving their olfactory mark. Damn, and didn't it feel good to breathe it in. Better than the sweet air of Pennsylvania, and all the hidden allergens and catalysts it might be carrying. It had killed both Jacob and Mo. They'd been primed with a slow-acting catalyst years ago. Then the second catalyst had been introduced, and whoosh ... some inconsequential something in their surroundings had set the last short fuse. Just as likely a stray firefly of a certain type that buzzed at their ankles, or landed on their arm, as anything else. Jacob's barn had been lit by them. The lamp was likely the other thing Mo had wanted to show me. There were likely one or two fireflies that had gotten into our car on the farm, and danced unseen around our feet as we drove to Philadelphia that evening... A beetle for me, an assassin for Mo.

The virtue of New York, some pundit on the police force once had said, is that you can usually see your killers coming. Give me the soot and pollution, the crush of too many people and cars in a hurry, even the mugger on the street. I'll take my chances.

I unconsciously slipped my wallet out of my pocket. This thinking about muggers must have made me nervous about my money.

It was a fine wallet -- made from that same special lamp-weave as Laurie's handbag. John Lapp had given it to me as a little present -- to remember Jacob's work by. For a few months, at least, I'd be able to better see how much money I was spending.

Well, it was good to have a bit more light in the world -- even if it, like the contents it illuminated, was ever-fleeting...