

PAUL DI FILIPPOSTINK LINESGYRO GEARLOOSE LOVED Ginger Barks. Had that deeply simple sentence possessed no further clause or codicil, no qualifier or amplification, all would have been well. Love, courtship, marriage, babies, grandparenthood, senescence, life-support, heavily monitored institutionalized death, and the survivors left arguing about what to do with the chipped china: the old, old human progression would have flowed like hydrogen through the fuel cell of a new 2025 Wuhan Panda. No headaches, no heartaches, no troubles. No story. So: Gyro Gearloose loved Ginger Barks -- but she did not love him. And that essential lack of reciprocal affection was why Gyro decided to reinvent their world in her honor. The day on which Gyro Gearloose upended the unsuspecting world in the name of unrequited love began like any other. Gyro's bed catapulted his lanky naked form into the soft embrace of the auto-valet's capture net. Via an overhead crane system, that talented apparatus deposited him fully dressed at the kitchen table. The multi-appendaged, radar-eyed oil-drum on a unicycle that served as his chef and butler brought him breakfast: two dodo eggs with a side of mammoth hash. This repast Gyro consumed rather heedlessly, while having the old-fashioned newspaper read aloud to him by another mechanical servant shaped like a large bespectacled green bookworm. Then, after getting his teeth brushed, Gyro rode his unique firecracker-powered vehicle to his office at Happy Duck Research. Inside his quiet sanctum, Gyro's desk quickly ventured to attract his attention. "Mr. Gearloose, you have over one hundred messages awaiting your input. In order of importance, they --" "Not now," commanded Gyro, and the desk fell silent. Gyro tossed himself in a lovesick fashion onto a couch. Reaching over and behind his head to an end-table, he grabbed a framed photo and brought it before his forlorn gaze. The portrait depicted a smiling woman whose delicate features summed perfection in the eye of this beholder. Of an age with Gyro, dark-haired and lithe, this temptress was none other than Ginger Barks. Shaking the frame like an antique Etch-a-Sketch to realign the picture's intelligent molecules, Gyro was rewarded with the image of a child, plainly an earlier version of Ginger. This was the waif Gyro had first fallen in love with at age five, at a time before he had even borne his current name No one in the real world today is ever named Gyro Gearloose from the moment of birth. For one thing a majority of the ancient Gearlooses went extinct during the Age of Reason, victims of ill-conceived phlogistonical and etheric experiments that tended to end in fatal explosions. Those scions remaining changed their surnames shortly thereafter in order to overcome a certain ditzy image. For another thing, no parents -- not even gadget-besotted engineers -- would name their child "Gyro" in the multicultural early-twenty-first-century USA, out of fear of having him mistaken for a Greek sandwich. No, the only universe from which one may choose to adopt the Gearloose name remains a famous comic book one. Which is precisely where our own Gyro Gearloose found his alternate appellation. Or rather, had it thrust upon him. Little Gary Harmon was five years old in the portentous year of 2001. And whatever that year might have meant for the rest of Earth's multifarious population, for Gary it signaled massive upheavals. For 2001 was the year during which Gary's mother abandoned the ineffectual and distant Warren Harmon for love of another woman, and, consolidating her custody of Gary, moved to Duckburg. The town of Duckburg had until very recently been known as Los Gatos, California, an upscale hamlet on the edge of Silicon Valley. But late in the year 2000, Los Gatos was purchased outright by the Disney empire, flush with cash after the success of its latest animated feature, Disney's Golden Ass of Apuleius. (The computer industry that formerly provided much of the area's wealth and stable tax base was churning spasmodically under the introduction of carbon-based buckytube circuitry, and Governor Simpson saw the sale of Los Gatos as a fine way to tauten a sagging bottom line in the state's budget.) This charming, compact town, not far from major population centers, suited Disney's plans perfectly: the corporation intended to construct a monument to one of their relatively unsung geniuses, a staff creator for much of his life who had yet managed to emerge from the bland anonymity that cloaked most Disney artists. The cult artist Carl Barks had been

born in 1901. At the turn of the century he was still alive. And his work had more fans than ever. Starting in the late 1940s, Barks had jolted the basic boring Donald Duck print universe -- always a minor tentacle of the Disney octopus with about ten zillion volts of creative energy. In hundreds of comicbook adventures over the next three decades, Barks added intriguing new characters and dense backstory to the formerly one-note Disney property, creating a rich Benday-dot cosmos. Aided by superior artwork, abetted by humor and a sense of adventure, Barks succeeded in placing his own unique stamp on Uncle Walt's creation. Barks's work had been reprinted and idolized now for nearly half a century. Motivated by a smidgen of benevolence and a heap of self-interest, the Disney suits had decided that Barks's centennial was time to build the man a monument. The Disney imagineers moved into Los Gatos. Under the terms of their purchase, they owned every property in town, which the state had first seized by eminent domain. But the generous enterprise promptly leased the buildings back to any citizens and businesses who wished to remain through the transition. Within twelve months, thousands of workers had transformed Los Gatos into a fenced-off simulacrum of Barks's Duckburg. Role-playing employees were brought in to supplement the other, non-costumed citizens, the admission booths were opened, and Duckburg was in business, after a stirring ceremony involving its humbled founder and a host of luminaries. The Disney drones had even found some genuine Barkses willing to relocate to Duckburg. Harry and Norma Barks, with their young daughter Ginger, were distant relatives down on their luck and happy to move to a town where they would become instant celebrities with a new home and guaranteed income. At the same time, the former Mrs. Jane Harmon, having reverted to her maiden name of Greer, arrived at the model community, looking for a new start. With her lover, Lorna Lish, and using money from her divorce settlement, Jane Greer set up a ceramics shop in Duckburg. (Having successfully beaten the pitifully ineffective Southern Baptist boycott, Disney was now actively and openly encouraging gay and lesbian participation in all its affairs, and so endowed Jane Greer with many generous tax breaks and incentives.) And so it was that little Gary Greer-Lish was soon enrolled with Ginger Barks and all the other potential Junior Woodchucks in Duckburg's school. No genius was necessary to coin Gary's nickname in this milieu. Within an hour of the first roll-call, every one of his peers was hailing him as Gyro Gearloose. Gary's consternation, as might be imagined, was thick and weighty. Uprooted, friendless, unfamiliar with the basis of his new community, he reacted badly at first to the nerdy nickname. One recess period, as Gary sat disconsolately in the fragrant shade of a eucalyptus tree, one of his female classmates approached him. "I think Gyro Gearloose is cool," Ginger Barks said, then, red-faced with embarrassment, hurried off. That was all it took. Gary was in love. Over the next few months, as Gary ineluctably became more intimate with the history of his chicken-headed humanoid namesake, he felt himself growing comfortable with his new unshakeable name. Barks's Gyro was cool. Unfettered by marriage or convention, brilliant, carefree, indomitable in the face of disaster, Gyro was perhaps the one citizen of classic Duckburg with complete freedom. As role models went, you could do much worse. In subsequent years, as certain of the growing boy's own intellectual proclivities began to manifest themselves, rendering him something of a happily asocial loner, the identification with Barks's creation became complete. So around about the time Gary Greer-Lish got his third virtual Ph.D. (he was nineteen), he answered more readily and easily to Gyro Gearloose than to his legal moniker. And a few years later, when he opened his Happy Duck Research in Duckburg with a few hundred million dollars deriving from his patents on a process that boosted the efficiency of chlorophyll by two hundred percent, Gyro Gearloose was his legal name. As for Ginger Barks, she had left Duckburg in their first year of high school. Her parents had eventually crumbled under the pressure of being permanently on display, and had relocated to San Francisco. Cruelly, at just that period when Gyro was becoming mature enough to deepen his relationship with his one true love, she flew out of his reach. During subsequent years, despite Gyro's constant attempts at forging closer bonds, Ginger had remained

seemingly uninterested in Gyro as anything more than an old childhood friend. Nowadays, in her demanding job as reporter for the San Francisco Examiner, Ginger seldom even bothered to punch Gyro's address into her pocket-pal's e-mail window. Gyro now planted a kiss on the glass front of Ginger's picture. The glass fastidiously cleansed itself of his lip-prints, otherwise Ginger's features would have been obscured by an overlay of such daily traces. "If only I could do something that would bring Ginger back to Duckburg," said Gyro wistfully to the seemingly untenanted room. Not recognizing a command or request, his desk remained silent. "Even if only for a little while. Surely she'd soon see how much I care for her! But what could I do that would be marvelous and startling enough to attract her attention?" There came a tugging at Gyro's pants leg. Looking down, he saw Li'l Bulb, his Helper. Li'l Bulb was Gyro's loyal personal assistant. Approximately fifteen inches high, his form was simple: his head resembled a faceless Edison-era pointed light bulb sitting in a knurled chrome collar; below that, a flexible stick-figure armature, feet encased in bulbous shoes and hands begloved. These primitive looks, however, belied Li'l Bulb's astonishing features. Inside his mock-filamentous head (opaque, with a trompe-l'oeil holo giving the illusion of tungsten-occupied transparency), buckytube architecture granted him a processing capacity of many, many teraflops, the equivalent of several old-time supercomputers. The titanium rods of his body were packed with miniature power-sources and sophisticated sensors. The one thing Li'l Bulb could not do was speak. In this day and age where practically everything talked, Gyro preferred silence in his assistant. However, Li'l Bulb's miming was surprisingly information-dense, and if necessary, he could always scribble a quick note. Now Li'l Bulb's message was obvious. In response to Gyro's complaint, he was waving a rolled-up comic he plainly desired Gyro to read. Gyro took the book, which was one of the many reprints of Carl Barks's drakely adventures to be found at various souvenir stands within Duckburg. Overly familiar with such fare, Gyro perused it briefly, then said, "What's the point, Helper?" Li'l Bulb whooshed his hands as if simulating flight. He gestured in a wavery fashion as if portraying heat-distorted air. He shaped an obvious balloon above his head. He cupped his hands and then exploded them outward. Gyro scratched his head. "Are you saying I should fly a plane to the desert and blow something up?" Li'l Bulb slapped his indestructible glass forehead in frustration, then snatched paper and pencil from the end table. After writing two sharp words, he handed the paper to his boss. "'Special effects.' Hmmm." Gyro took another look at the comic. In one panel, Donald had just been drenched in perfume by an irritated Daisy. From his sodden, dejected, feathered self radiated thick lines indicative of exotic pungency. Gyro shot to his feet. "Helper, you're worth your weight in Einstein-Bose condensate! Now, fetch me my hat!" One article of apparel the original Gyro Gearloose was never seen without was his hat. Some kind of yellow felt porkpie with black band and upcurved brim, it remained securely atop his brown thatch through whatever chaos ensued, thanks to a handy elastic string running under his chin. Our Gyro, no stickler for imitating the appearance of his namesake, went hatless on a day-to-day basis. The hat now being dragged across the floor by a responsive Li'l Bulb clutching its string, although outwardly identical to the original model, was in reality a special instrument devised by Gyro, and used only on certain needful occasions. The crown of Gyro's hat was packed with circuitry that could interface with his thoughts via electromagnetic conduction and induction, amplifying them in radical ways and bolstering his natural creativity and genius. However, the device was neurologically enervating to a certain degree, and Gyro used it only sparingly. Besides, somehow the hat felt like cheating. Even though it was his own invention, he preferred relying only on his unassisted natural brain. If the hat helped him win Ginger, though, he'd gladly compromise any principles and sacrifice any number of gray cells. Li'l Bulb reached Gyro's feet, and wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. The inventor bent down to retrieve the hat. Placing it on his head, he snapped the string under his chin, thus activating the amplification

effect. Immediately, his face assumed a loopy expression; you fully expected Gyro's eyes to spin like the cylinders on a slot machine until they came up all cherries. In an abstracted voice, Gyro addressed the desk: "Open new spec file for our nanofab plant, production to begin immediately upon file closure." Gyro launched into a long recitation of abstruse assembly parameters, terminating the instruction string with a final "Close." He snapped the chin-string again, powering off his hat, then removed it. Wearily, he slumped onto the couch, his hat cradled in his lap. Li'l Bulb hopped up beside him. "Well, Helper, would you like to hear what I've just invented?" The automaton shook his head no. "Really? Why not?" Li'l Bulb snatched up his pad and pencil and scribbled a note. "'Legal and ethical deniability.' Oh, come off it! When have I ever gotten us into trouble before?" Holding up his left three-fingered, one-thumb hand as if to enumerate occasions, Li'l Bulb began to count off with his right index finger. He reached five sets of four before Gyro stopped him. "Okay, okay, but this time won't be like those. I've simply adapted an old theoretical idea for my own purposes. Have you ever heard of 'utility fog?'" Li'l Bulb clasped his head with both hands as if in alarm. "What's wrong with utility fog? An evenly dispersed permanent aerosol of intelligent nanomachines about as dense as the air pollution in twentieth-century L.A. An ambient mist that living creatures can breathe harmlessly. Nothing alarming about that. And utility fog could really be helpful. Say your car was filled with the stuff. You'd never notice it until you got in an accident. Then -- instant airbag, as the invisible machines protectively swarm and cohere between you and the dashboard!" Furiously moving pen across paper, Li'l Bulb finished another note. "Why hasn't utility fog been marketed before now if it's so wonderful? Well, there are all those foolish EPA regulations for one thing" Li'l Bulb began to run in circles on the couch. Without warning he leaped up onto Gyro's lap and grabbed a handful of Gyro's shirt. Frantically, the small assistant began to shake his boss. "Helper, stop it! My mind's made up! Nothing's going to go wrong. I've programmed my utility fog to monitor GPS coordinates and remain within Duckburg city limits. And its effects will simply be certain, ah, visual enhancements. Besides, it's too late now. The assembly instructions included immediate dispersal of the first few units into the atmosphere, with self-replication thereafter." Falling back onto the couch, Li'l Bulb lay on his back with hands folded in corpse posture across his tubular chest. "Oh, what a melodramatic clown you are, Helper! But by this time tomorrow, when the fog reaches critical mass, you'll see that all your fears are unfounded." Li'l Bulb's unshaking attitude and fake flickering filament somehow managed to convey immense sarcastic doubt. When Gyro awoke the morning after his Ginger-winning brainstorm he first moved his arm tentatively, noting nothing unusual accompanying its passage through the air. Critical mass of utility fog had plainly not been reached yet. Before he could perform any further non-instrumented tests, the bed, sensing his change in consciousness, launched him into another day. At the office, all was as before. Gyro dealt with many matters pertaining to the swelling fortunes of Happy Duck Research, losing track of time. It was only when his secretary knocked on his door, causing a seated Gyro to look up from various interactive displays, that the savant realized his scheme had borne strange fruit. Each rap on Gyro's door produced an accompanying visual phenomenon. A jagged-edge canary-yellow splotch as substantial and coherent as a piece of floating gauze materialized in midair near the door. Inside each splotch was printed in black the punctuated word KNOCK! These manifestations lasted approximately three seconds before fading to nothing. "Come in," called Gyro. Above his head appeared an unmistakable word balloon. A white oval roughly the size of an unfolded diaper with a dangling curving tail functioning as source-pointer, the balloon repeated Gyro's words: Come in. Gyro got to his feet. "Oh, excellent." A second balloon materialized, even as the first was fading. Gyro walked quickly around the collection of intelligent particles. As solid to the eye as a sheet of vellum, the word balloon displayed its message on both sides in readable orientation. The door to Gyro's office swung open, framing Gyro's secretary, Mina Lucente, bearing a

tray from the company cafeteria. Today, to complement her Daisy-Duckish pinafore, Mina wore robin's-egg-blue pumps. As she crossed the office's tiled floor, each percussive strike of her high heels was accompanied by a spatter of purple centered around a click proportionately smaller than the loud KNOCK! "Mr. Gearloose, I brought you some --" Mina faltered as her words appeared in quasi-tactile form above her head. Holding the tray one-handed, she covered her mouth. "Don't worry, Mina. That balloon's not issuing from you. Well, not entirely." Gyro explained what he had done, his own continuous speech flickering across the surface of a single balloon as if on a teleprompter, as the clever utility fog maximized its resources. "Now, set that tray down and go draft a press release. I'm sure we'll be getting quite a number of calls about this enchanting modification to Duckburg's environment." As Mina was leaving, Li'l Bulb entered. Confronting Gyro with hands placed on imaginary hips, Li'l Bulb regarded his boss sternly for a moment, then reached out and snapped his fingers. The snap was represented as a green bubble that popped out of existence rather than faded. Gyro handed his assistant a pen and paper, and got back this message: "You don't know how glad I am that I cannot speak." Gyro smiled. "Oh, don't worry. The utility fog will soon respond to other things than sound. Just wait and see." WHEN THE MAYOR of Duckburg stormed into Gyro's office, he found the giddy inventor testing the limits of the unmasked-for civic improvement. Uttering any old gibberish that came into his head in order to keep a speech balloon alive -- the Gettysburg Address, pop song lyrics, his projected Nobel acceptance speech -- Gyro was attempting to discover the self-repair capacity of the utility fog. Ripping big hunks out of the floating speech display -- the ragged weightless fragments remained alive for a few hundred milliseconds in Gyro's cupped hands, their portion of print warped and distorted -- Gyro watched appreciatively as new nanomachines swarmed into the damaged area to repair the hovering text balloon. Seeing the Mayor, Gyro called out gleefully, "It's just incredible! Without my hat, I can't even recall all the routines I put into these little rascals, but I must have cobbled together some really neat code!" Already once retired, the octogenarian Mayor Floyd Ramie was not generally an excitable type. From 2005 to 2015 he had had a flourishing career with Disney in their Touchstone division, performing in such cinematic hits as Voodoo Lounge (2012), where he co-starred with a geriatric Mick Jagger as one of a pair of doddering hippies intent on opening a Club Med franchise in Haiti upon that nation's ascension to statehood. Pensioned off to Duckburg, he had won the mayoral post in an uncontested election. The Mayor's generally benevolent and somnolent disposition, however, had been drastically frayed by an hour of watching his own speech -- and that of all the frantic visitors to his office -- come and go above his head. Mayor Ramie had never realized how full of awkward pauses (indicated in the speech balloons by the conventional three-dot ellipsis), stutters, fragments, and senseless interjections his own unscripted conversation was. Now the Mayor banged a fist down on Gyro's desk. His action was accompanied by a dull brown THUMP!, causing Gyro's desk to cry "Ouch!", an exclamation which was simultaneously ballooned in a square shape, indicating machine speech. "God damn it, Gearloose, what the hell is going on here? What've you done? Er, does Disney know about this? Is it something they, ah, asked you to do? Why wasn't I informed first? Do you realize it took me, er, over an hour to catch up with your, um... press release?" Gyro smiled. "No, Floyd, this is entirely my scheme. I thought I'd bring Duckburg a little welcome notoriety. Ticket sales have been off this year, haven't they? Ever since Rio Disney opened. Mighty hard for Uncle Scrooge to compete with all those thong-clad Carioca babes." Watching his own just-uttered words while simultaneously trying to formulate new ones was inducing a kind of psychic vertigo in Mayor Ramie, introducing strangeloops into his neural speech circuits. Face flushed, he groped for coherence. "Jesus, Gearloose, I can't believe you thought I believe you can't Jesus --" At that moment the perpetually replicating utility fog crossed a new threshold, exhibiting a startling emergent property. Mayor Ramie's head caught fire. Wide-eyed, Gyro felt his jaw drop. The Mayor, realizing by

Gyro's gaze that something novel was occurring in the vicinity of his stubbornly unmodified bald pate, reached up. His hands disturbed the vaporous mock flames, but of course he felt nothing. "What, what, what?" he spluttered. "Oh, it's nothing. Just that your head appears to be burning up, obviously because you're angry with me. You see, I endowed my nanomachines with the ability to monitor human physiological responses, including EEG traces. They're akin to miniaturized emotion detectors, only much more sophisticated." With visible effort, Mayor Ramie composed himself, and his crown of flames died down. "So everything I, ah, feel is going to be made, er, objectively clear to everyone?" "More or less. But let's face it, Floyd -- you were never exactly what anyone would call 'poker-faced' before now." Mayor Ramie seethed in silence for a few seconds, until his accusatory glare triggered a new response from the utility fog. From the vicinity of the Mayor's eyes twin streams of tiny daggers flowed, impacting harmlessly on Gyro. The inventor's involuntary laughter was the last straw, sending Mayor Ramie storming out. Mina Lucente entered hard upon the Mayor's departure. Chewing gum, she was accompanied by an orbital cloud of evanescent pink pearls, each encapsulating a small snap. "Mr. Gearloose, I'm holding off hundreds of news organizations that want to talk to you." "Is one of them the San Francisco Examiner?" "Yes." "Tell them they'll have an exclusive interview with me if they send their reporter Ginger Barks to Duckburg." Mina frowned. "Your old sweetheart?" A giant glossy red Valentine heart materialized over her head, then cracked into shards. "Very well, Mr. Gearloose!" Mina stamped off. "And to think I never even suspected Oh, well, it's all for the best. Things are working out exactly as I planned." Little did Gyro suspect that he might soon have to eat his words. Literally. Preening in front of his office mirror, Gyro congratulated himself once again. Ginger Barks had entered Duckburg and was on her way to his office. Her enforced stroll through the living-comicbook town (vehicles other than code-approved ones such as Gyro's firecracker-mobile were prohibited within the metro-park) would surely impress her with Gyro's genius. During their interview, as he expatiated at length on his latest invention and on his boldly adventuresome future plans, he would gradually direct the conversation toward personal matters. By the end of their session, Gyro was willing to bet, he'd have a date with Ginger. After that, it was simply a matter of time before she agreed to become Mrs. Gearloose. Gyro's door burst open, hitting the wall with an impressive orange THWACK!!! Inrushed Li'l Bulb. The lively small automaton was plainly very excited. Jumping up and down, he pointed backward out the door, then pinched the space where his nose would have been. "What is it, Helper? Another leak at the bioremediation plant? I thought we fixed that for good." Li'l Bulb shook his head in the negative. He began another miming, then abruptly stopped. Folding his arms across his chest, he composed himself patiently, as if to say, You'll soon see. And see Gyro did. For at that moment Ginger Barks, eternal romantic icon lodged in Gyro's perpetually adolescent heart, re-entered his life. Not unaccompanied, however. For radiating from Ginger's entire body were innumerable stink lines. The nanomachines had outdone their past creative efforts. The stink lines they had created were inch-wide wavery ribbons of various bilious shades: diarrhea-brown, vomit-yellow, squashed-bug-green, fresh-road-kill-purple. Extending upward from Ginger's anatomy in varying lengths, they resembled a forest of sickly, current-stirred kelp. Gyro was dumbstruck. The look on Ginger's face did not help him to recover his voice: her beautiful countenance was contorted with anger. When she fixed her baleful gaze on Gyro, a small black storm cloud appeared over her head, discharging tiny lightning bolts and thunder rumbles. "Gyro Gearloose! I assume you're responsible for all this! What the hell are these, these attachments?" Ginger was unmistakably displeased. "I picked them up as soon as I came into town!" Gyro hesitated to name the display with its conventional rude tag. "They're, um-- fragrance motifs! I assume you're wearing some kind of perfume...?" "Yes, of course. Calvin Klein's newest. Compost. It's part of his whole 'WakeUp, Gaia' line." Advancing tentatively on his beloved, disinclined

to sample any odor that could have provoked such an abundance of stink lines, Gyro essayed a delicate sniff. Not surprisingly, given Calvin's fine reputation, Ginger's perfume proved to be an attractive melange of subtle organic scents. However, some esoteric chemical underpinning must have provoked the utility fog's garish reaction. "Quite nice," Gyro hastened to compliment Ginger. "You smell like a summer tomato. As for the, er, fragrance motifs, they're just a small glitch in my creation, I assure you. I have an idea! Let's talk outside. Perhaps the effect will dissipate out of doors." Ginger's personal storm cloud vanished, and she bestowed a warm smile on her childhood friend. Gyro hoped the smile reflected personal affection, and not just dreams of a Pulitzer. "Okay! I need to learn all about what you've done here, Gyro. The whole world needs to learn! I can't believe you granted me an exclusive!" "The least I could do for my dearest friend," Gyro said dashing. He motioned toward the door, and moved to drape an arm around Ginger's shoulders as gentlemanly guidance. But at the last moment, he hesitated. Those stink lines as they left the office, Gyro looked back over his shoulder. Li'l Bulb was doubled over in silent laughter, slapping his knee. Gyro wondered if he could possibly sneak back for a moment and kick his Helper's blank titanium butt. ON THIS LOVELY sunny day, Duckburg was packed with tourists. Drawn by media reports detailing the unprecedented improvements to the familiar Disney attraction, visitors had swarmed in. The park employees and Duckburg's infrastructure were hard-pressed to deal with the flood of visitors. Lines had formed outside the restrooms (from which structures, Gyro was mortified to see, garish stink lines radiated in Hydran profusion), and also outside the snack stands (from which sinuous good-aroma tendrils, colored in various ice-cream shades and equipped at their tips with beckoning fingers, slithered out toolfactorily entice). "Let's stroll down Main Street," suggested Gyro. As they walked past various storefronts -- including Greer-Lish Pottery, now no longer run by Gyro's two mothers, who had sold the business and retired to Ariel's Palace, a floating Disney arcology -- Gyro recounted his inspiration and the method by which he had endowed vanilla reality with these Lichtensteinian bells and whistles. Ginger nodded intelligently, recording his words on her pocket-pal. Out from an alley raced a stray cat being chased by a loose mongrel dog. The dog's yaps were concretized as steely BB's, while the cat's hisses were a spike corona. Several feet past the alley, on a small outdoor stage, the actress wearing the concealing outfit of duckly sorceress Magica De Spell went through her accustomed act, threatening her bound captives, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. To the amazement of the onlookers -- and most likely to her own -- Magica's mystical gestures were accompanied by actual spark trails and fizzing lightning bolts. Shortly Gyro and his guest found themselves near one of the village's main attractions: Uncle Scrooge's Money Bin, repository of the fabled Number One Dime. A crowd of several hundred people were gathered in the square. Gyro now had a chance to see how certain of the utility fog's processing routines fully manifested themselves. For instance: the utility fog tried not to overlap individual speech and noise balloons, if possible. Positioning a balloon ideally above the head of each speaker, the fog would only layer the balloons like multiple windows on an old-fashioned computer desktop if individuals were crowded together, such as now. Additionally, of course, louder noises and shouts produced proportionately larger displays, which perforce interfered with smaller ones. Quickly picking upon this, children had begun screaming in order to overlay their parents' words. The consequent decibel level was almost painful. Gyro glanced up at a clock on town hall. "It's time for the daily raid by the Beagle Boys." "As if I could ever forget," Ginger said. "Don't you ever wonder sometimes, Gyro, what kind of people we would have been if we had grown up in a normal town?" Gyro astonished himself with his boldness. "Why, I think you're just perfect as you are, Ginger." Ginger smiled and said, "Thank you," with Gyro's words hanging embarrassingly in the air between them. Right on time a gunshot rang out, accompanied by an unprecedented leaden BANG!, and the trio of masked and stubble-faced Beagle Boys tumbled out of the Money Bin, clutching bags of loot.

But as they ran from the arriving Duckburg police, something new was in evidence. The Beagles were surrounded by motion lines. In the air behind them, the runners left day-glo jetstreams, and their pumping legs were hidden in spinning-prop effects, making the robbers appear to be torsos mounted on careening wheelchairs. Disconcerted, the Beagles ground to a stop and began to wave their arms about, as if to shoo curious encircling bystanders away from their possibly dangerous appearance. Their arms exhibited ghost-replication: faint duplicates of their limbs traced the paths of their every movement. Gyro turned to Ginger. The reporter with whom he was incurably in love was regarding Gyro as if he were a caged specimen of the bulletheaded Bomb Bird that Donald had encountered in "Adventure at Bomb Bird Island." "Heh-heh, quite harmless. Over a certain velocity and under certain emotional stresses, these effects kick in, you see "Now the Beagles were arguing with each other. One began to swear, and his curse words were represented in his balloon by various censorious icons: asterisks, whirlwinds, stars and such. A second Beagle decided that the show must go on, and he resumed running. Unfortunately, he tried to continue the argument at the same time, looking over his shoulder, and thus impacted a tree. Despite the protection of his foam costume, he fell unconscious to the ground, and a flock of twittering bluebirds began to circle his head. "I need pictures of this!" Ginger said. "My camera's in the car." "I'll come with you," Gyro said hastily, wondering how he would ever begin his romantic pitch under these awkward circumstances. Together, Ginger and Gyro reached the main gated entrance to Duckburg. Departing the town limits, they headed toward one of the many parking lots. They were halfway there before Gyro noticed something. Ginger's stink lines still attended her. "No," said Gyro unbelievably, "this can't be." His words were promptly ballooned. Ginger stopped. "What's the matter?" "The utility fog is supposed to be constrained within the perimeter of the town. No leakage." Gyro looked back at Duckburg. A small mechanical figure was hastening through the gate toward them. In a few seconds Li'l Bulb had caught up with his boss. The assistant carried Gyro's pocket-pal, which the inventor had forgotten while focused on impressing Ginger. Gyro took the all-purpose device from Li'l Bulb. His assistant had already tuned the communicator to a news broadcast: "-- solar flares of unprecedented dimensions. All GPS satellites are out of commission. The system is not expected to come back online for a week. For further details, visit --" "A week," moaned Gyro. "Without proximity constraints on their replication, the utility fog could fill the Earth's whole atmosphere in a week! This is awful! What else could go wrong?" The answer to Gyro's rhetorical question was not long in coming. For over Ginger's head, a new kind of balloon had formed. Nubby-edged in contrast to the sharp lines of the speech capsules, its connection to its owner made not with a tail but with a series of bubbles, its species was self-evident. It was a thought balloon. And it contained this observation: What a fuckup! GYRO'S WEARY HEAD lay cradled in his folded arms atop his silent desk. Suspended above the woeful inventor's noggin was a thought balloon filled with colorful graphic images: Gyro strung from a noose, Gyro with his head in a guillotine, Gyro wilting under a hail of stones thrown by an angry mob of citizens. Some such fate, it seemed, was very likely to be his at any moment. For he had failed to stop the utility fog. And that mission was the only reason he retained his freedom, instead of languishing in some Federal oubliette, awaiting the trial of the young century, followed, no doubt, by public tarring and feathering. Oh, the frustration, not to mention the damage to his pride! And he had come so close. Of course, a cautious Gyro, under the earlier influence of his mindbooster hat, had engineered a failsafe into the fog. A certain signal, broadcast on a certain frequency, was supposed to trigger instant shutoff in the nanodevices. And so, with minor reluctance, as soon as he verified that the fog had indeed seeped past Duckburg's city-limits, Gyro had sent that killer message. At first, all seemed well. But Gyro had not reckoned with mutations. Stray high-energy particles from the same solar flares that had decommissioned the GPS satellites had also jiggered with the quantum-sensitive nanodevices. One percent of the invisible critters ignored

the shutoff command. That proved to be plenty. Consistent with Gyro's off-the-cuff estimate, during the past week the escaped nanomachines from Duckburg had contaminated every cubic centimeter of the globe's atmosphere up to several miles high. Despite their early near-extinction, the fecund utility fog easily filled all available niches. (Replication thereafter among the communicating contiguous nanomachines, as programmed, slowed to replacement levels.) Within six days, the entire globe had been Barkserized. Not very many people were happy with this. In fact, practically no one. The bulk of the fog's pop-ups and hi-litings were surely annoying, yet easy enough to deal with. Although nobody really appreciated stink lines, for instance, signaling the inefficaciousness of their underarm deodorant, they could live with such indignities, since everyone else was subject to the same automatic insults. (In fact, one positive aspect of the silent invasion was that personal hygiene, as monitored by a partially functioning CDC in Atlanta, actually improved.) Perhaps people could even have learned to tolerate the truly ridiculous motion-lines that accompanied the intimate actions of lovemaking. (What had Gyro been thinking?) But the one intolerable aspect of the fog, the ultimate intrusion, were the thought balloons. The same mind-reading circuitry found in Gyro's intelligence-amplifying hat existed in distributed form among the nanodevices. And all censorship filters had been wiped. Any thought that reached a certain density of conceptualization was fair game for display, as words or pictographs. Husbands and wives, bosses and employees, salesmen and news anchors, diplomats and world leaders -- all found their formerly hidden sentiments suddenly spotlighted for anyone to read. International and domestic antagonisms that would not be settled for decades instantly blossomed. The initial effect was similar to worldwide attack by deadly anti-personnel bombs that left infrastructure intact. Streets and public buildings emptied as people huddled at home (in separate rooms for each family member) closeted with their suddenly naked thoughts. And had most of society's vital services not been fully cybernetically maintained (Li'l Bulb's cousins, anthropomorphic or not, had no thoughts they were ashamed of), complete collapse of society would have swiftly followed this mass abandonment of the workplace. Within a couple of days of the advent of this prosthetic telepathy, a few makeshift strategies to avoid the thought balloons had been devised. The highest levels of the world's many governments now functioned in airtight rooms whose atmospheres had been cleansed of fog by meticulous filtering. And since the dramatic yet wispy utility fog displays could be dispersed with a sufficient breeze, the few people brave enough to mingle took to carrying portable fans and blowing away their thoughts before they could be read. During this crisis, Gyro had of course not been inactive. Spending debilitating hours under his neuron-goading hat, he strove to come up with some method of disabling the utility fog. But no easy answer presented itself. His best plan -- to release killer nanodevices in sufficient numbers to eat up the fog -- was instantly and loudly vetoed by every world leader. No one was willing to risk a second plague possibly worse than the first. Today Gyro was at the end of his wits. Wracked by guilt -- which manifested itself as an impressive yet weightless anvil atop his shoulders -- he probably would have simply quit by now, had it not been for his small band of supporters: Mina, Ginger, and Li'l Bulb. These three stalwarts had never been far from his side during the past week. Mina, seemingly recovered from her heartbreak, handled all practical details, including meals. Ginger dispensed cheer, while filing report after objective and charitable report to her newspaper, and then to an expectant and angry world. Li'l Bulb helped on the technical front. Additionally, Mayor Ramie, designated the official government contact with the criminal inventor, visited often, bringing with him blustery reassurances and encouragements, along with invariably innocuous thought balloons that testified to his essentially empty mind. (Already, there was talk of running him for Governor of California.) There came a visible and audible knock at the door. How long ago it seemed, thought Gyro weakly, that first knock of Mina's proving his illomened brainstorm a reality. Gyro raised his weighty head, and the ever-present anvil recalibrated its

location on his shoulders. "Come in." Ginger Barks had lost her stink lines. Too busy to go home and get her perfume, yet not neglecting revivifying showers in the Happy Duck Research gym facilities, she no longer triggered the utility fog's repulsive iconography. Holding up incredibly well under the pressure, she actually looked more radiant by the day. Gyro loved her more than ever, yet had never felt her to be further out of his reach. After that first harsh thought had escaped her in the parking lot, Ginger had been very careful to keep her displayed inner sentiments scrupulously neutral. This control could be achieved, but only by stringent acts of will most people found themselves incapable of. Prior practice with some form of meditation appeared to help, and Ginger had indeed been practicing Tibetan visualization techniques for many years, ever since interviewing the elderly Richard Gere in his retirement home in liberated Tibet. The thought balloon above Ginger's head now conveyed her pity for Gyro, a pity more hurtful than scorn: Poor guy! He looks like he's on his last legs. This can't go on much longer ... Gyro pretended not to have seen this thought. (Already, an etiquette involving keeping one's gaze low was developing. Yet this tactic did not solve perhaps the worst feature of the thought balloons, which was often not being able to see your own. Gyro understood some people now never left sight of an arrangement of paired mirrors that would allow them to monitor their thoughts continuously.) Essaying a weak smile, he tried to put a positive spin on things. "Well, Ginger, I'm planning to go under the hat again within the next hour. I expect this will be the turning point. At some point the solution has to come, you know --" Ginger closed the door behind her and crossed the room. Unexpectedly, she sat on Gyro's lap. Ignoring his insubstantial anvil, she put her arms around his neck. "Gyro, don't fake it for me. Do you know what you really thought just then? 'She'll hate me if I fail.' I won't hate you, Gyro! How could I? I've known you since we were children, and you've never been anything but kind to me. But this insistence on being the brightest, on being infallible -- ever since elementary school, it's made you almost unapproachable. I never felt I'd be good enough for someone who held himself to such impossibly high standards." Gyro relished Ginger's comforting touch. He felt simultaneously chastised and reinvigorated. "Well, you certainly see now I'm not infallible, and so do I. As for being the brightest -- sometimes I think my Helper is smarter than me!" "You're just human, in other words." "Uh, very," agreed Gyro warily, sensing certain physiological responses to Ginger's weight in his lap. Then she leaned down for a kiss. For the next twenty minutes, after the couple moved from chair to couch, their thought balloons fused and displayed a frisky scene only slightly more suitable for immature viewers than the physical reality of their entanglement. As they were dressing, rather shamefacedly keeping their eyes away from their now separate post-coital thoughts, another knock sounded. Before Gyro could call out permission to enter, the door swung open. Dragging Gyro's thinking hat, Li'l Bulb trudged in. The usually cheerful autonomous automaton seemed preoccupied, as if struggling with some important decision. Every line of his sexless frame expressed inert tumult. He brought the hat to Gyro, regarded the two humans thoughtfully for a moment, then went to a small locked cupboard with doors suited to his height. Keying them open, he revealed a shrine. "Why, Helper, what is this? I never knew --" Ignoring his boss, Li'l Bulb knelt down before a triptych displaying three portraits: Isaac Asimov, Alan Turing and Hal 9000. In front of the triptych sat a model of the first printed circuit. Bowing his head, Li'l Bulb prayed silently for a minute or so. In response, the utility fog constructed a halo around his pointy bulb head. Finally rising, Li'l Bulb gestured to Gyro to don the hat, and the man did so. Then Li'l Bulb motioned for a hand up. Perched on Gyro's anvil-less, sex-soothed shoulder, Li'l Bulb opened up a port in the hat. He took off one glove, and it was instantly apparent that the port was meant to receive the four fingers of the assistant. Li'l Bulb jacked in, and nodded. Gyro snapped his chin string. Instantly, Li'l Bulb stiffened as if electrocuted! Real smoke began to rise from his ridged collar! Meanwhile, Gyro's face was undergoing contortions worthy of an exorcism. Ginger, horrified, dared not

interfere. With a conclusive, concussive POOF! both the hat and Li'l Bulb shorted out. The automaton toppled from his perch, swinging lifelessly from his still-socketed fingers. With great reverence Gyro removed his hat with one hand, cupping Li'l Bulb's body in the other. Above Gyro's head now flared a giant antique light bulb, signifying a Really Big Idea. "I never even thought to try such a thing. He linked all his idiosyncratic processing power with the hat's," Gyro explained, "even though he knew the two operating systems were ultimately and fatally incompatible. But it worked. I know now how to deal with the utility fog. It's trivial." Ginger poked Li'l Bulb gently with one finger. "And now your friend is gone for good?" Gyro smiled. "Of course not. I'll just dig out one of his spare bodies and reboot him from this morning's backup. The little bugger never could resist milking humans for all the pathos he could get." Ginger flung her arms around Gyro. "You did it then! You and Li'l Bulb! I've gotta run and file my story now! Don't go anywhere!" "I'll wait here forever for you, Ginger, if you tell me to." "Oh, it won't be that long!" On her way out, Ginger stopped in the doorway, turned -- and blew Gyro a kiss. The larger-than-life wet glossy red lips flapped across the room and plastered themselves on Gyro's cheek with a smack! There were some things about this catastrophe he was going to miss. The pride of the official Disney spaceship fleet appeared to hail straight from the Tomorrowland of seventy-five years ago, a finned rocket styled by Wernher von Braun, fit only to top some antique writing trophy. But its looks were as deceiving as those of Li'l Bulb. Its fantasy shell housed the latest in spacefaring equipment and drives, and the ship saw regular use ferrying rich pampered tourists to Disney attractions as distant as Minnie's Mars, Horace Horsecollar's Helios or Bucky Bug's Belter Bar. Now, however, the retro-looking, fully provisioned craft was about to blast off on an Earth-saving flight carrying only a single passenger. Mayor Floyd Ramie of Duckburg. A safe distance away from the soon-to-be-unleashed rocket flames, Gyro stood with his two friends, Ginger and Li'l Bulb. This last-named calf-high individual wore a miniature Chinese coolie hat atop his pointy ultraglass head, strictly as a fashion nod toward the hot Florida sun -- an orb now obscured, but one which everyone hoped would soon reappear, once the massed utility fog from all corners of the globe ceased to form a dynamically maintained white roof above their heads. Rebooted into a new body with no memory of his last few hours, Gyro's Helper had steadfastly refused to admit he might have sacrificed himself for his boss in another incarnation, even when presented with the sight of his own corpse. Furiously scribbling, he finished his first post-death note and passed it to Gyro. With amusement, Gyro read aloud, "'Even Holy Asimov never perpetrated such a maudlin tear-jerker! Give it up!' Well, I think you protest a trifle too much, Helper. But if you want to pretend that you have no feelings for me, that's fine. I know what I know." Li'l Bulb thumbed his blank nose at his boss, then left the room. In the weeks since, the feisty manikin had quite consistently carried out his duties with an air of blase servitude that only made Gyro smile. Quickly following his revelation about dealing with the rogue fog, Gyro had summoned Mayor Ramie to his office. When the bland and blustery fellow arrived, Gyro was happy to see that his accompanying thought balloon -- despite the ongoing life-or-death crisis -- reflected the man's typical vacuity, consisting mostly of an empty white canvas with some children's primer figures -- Dick, Jane, and Spot -- romping about. "Mayor Ramie, how would you like to earn all the credit for ridding Earth of my accidental plague? I'm sure that a grateful global populace would let you name your reward afterward." A puzzled expression occluded the Mayor's features, and his thought balloon changed to a depiction of a shyster trying to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to a tube. "Will I, ah, be, er, alive afterwards to enjoy my reward?" "Of course. The one catch is that you'll have to stay in orbit for a year first." Mayor Ramie pondered this proposal momentarily, his exteriorized thoughts symbolically represented by a slate with the equation $2 + 2 = ?$ chalked on it. Finally he consented, saying, "It's only because I trust you personally, Gyro." Genuinely touched, Gyro clapped a hand on the Mayor's shoulder. The utility fog produced a synthetic puff of dust and

a couple of moths, as if the Mayor's clothes had been hanging in a closet for decades. With the Mayor's consent secured, Gyro got busy with his simple plan, a basic variation on the Pied Piper fable. Above all, the fog was cerebrotropic, flocking to individual loci of thought. All Gyro had to do was make one amplified pointsource of thought that outshone all others. So as not to interfere with this fog's seductive broadcast, the human bait should possess very few of his own thoughts to project. Floyd Ramie matched that description to the tenth decimal place. With Li'l Bulb's help, Gyro quickly cobbled together a new version of his thinking cap, one that simply radiated an irresistible come-hither to the fog. Once all the principals were assembled at Disney's Florida launching site, Mayor Ramie had been hustled aboard the ship wearing the activated cap. The instant results were impressive. All the fog in the immediate vicinity began to collect above the rocket, forming a thought balloon large as a dirigible. This massive balloon depicted nothing but two gigantic words: COME HERE! The urge to swarm now radiated outward from one nanodevice to another. Even as they gravitated toward the impulse, they passed the baton of command backward to more distant fellows. In a week's time, every iota of utility fog from around the planet had collected here, or died trying. In their amalgamated mass, they now formed a flat sheet spreading above many square miles centered around the rocket. Thick as clouds, the fog allowed a level of illumination equivalent to a stormy day. Standing at the distant mission control, Gyro felt immense satisfaction. The solution was so elegant it almost made him forget his initial stupidity. Nothing remained except to send Mayor Ramie into space, taking the utility fog with him. "I guess it's time," Gyro announced. Ginger stopped dictating her latest dispatch into her pocket-pal long enough to squeeze Gyro's hand. "I'm proud of you, Gyro. You never gave up." "Maybe that quality of mine has its drawbacks. Never giving up on you was what caused this whole mess in the first place." "Oh, Gyro, what woman wouldn't be flattered that someone loved her enough to risk the end of civilization as we know it to win her?" Li'l Bulb corkscrewed his finger at the level of his temple and turned away in disgust. Gyro and Ginger kissed. Then, using his own pocket-pal, Gyro triggered the launch. The inventor had expected the rocket to pierce the semi-living cloud, soar ahead, then pull the fog behind it. But he had forgotten the cloud's self-positioning routines. Seeking to maintain a stable distance from the rocket, the cloud lifted first above the needle-nosed ship as soon as it sensed movement. As the rocket climbed, the cloud went with it as a cloak, as if it were an enormous, message-imprinted, fluted silk handkerchief caught on the prow of the rocket. Soon the rocket and its companion dwindled to a dot. Cheers erupted from happy bystanders. Ginger held up her communication device so that Gyro could make a public statement. "Citizens of Earth, I apologize profusely for the past few harrowing weeks. Rest assured that the utility fog, lacking raw materials for replication in the vacuum of space, will all die within a year's time. There will be no further repercussions from this invention of mine." But of course in between the moment when the fleet of aliens announced their proximity and their actual arrival in the Solar System, Gyro had had plenty of time to revise his opinions about the wisdom of mounting a gigantic welcome mat in orbit.