

A Change of Mind by Robert Reed

They remembered him as a quiet man, a standoffish man, but essentially friendly -- a good neighbor with an easy smile and enough generosity to order cookies from six of the local Girl Scouts. Except, of course, that he moved away before the cookies arrived, leaving the bill unpaid. Yet nobody acted upset. It had been a nice gesture on his part, and the residents seemed to genuinely miss their one-time neighbor. "When did he move away?" Morgan would ask. To a person, they said it had been a year or maybe thirteen months. Or he left in February, which was almost fifteen months ago. Local memories were conspicuously aligned, always vague but forthright about their limitations. Nobody could remember seeing him move out, so they assumed he had left in the middle of the night. He must have taken his long van, since it too had vanished, and with it his essential possessions, including his hobby equipment. "What kind of equipment?" The shiny stuff, people reported. The fancy stuff. The machinery that glowed in the night, making his windows bleed a purple light. "A deep pure purple light," they described, with exactly the same words and the same intonations.

The man's house had been built at the turn of the century. A drab little split-level made from sloppy lumber and sheetrock, it sat on a side street in what was a tiny, practically anonymous town near the Canadian border. A vigorous old woman in her nineties, named Sandra, lived next door. Her entire life had been spent in the same residence, and with the clarity of mind that comes to people who had done little and gone nowhere, the woman could name every person who lived in the town, alive or otherwise, stretching back over the last eight decades. About the missing man, she could say quite a lot. "He kept his lawn cut," she offered with a certain fondness. "I appreciate that in any neighbor." Then, with a crooked smile, she added, "He was rich, I assumed. We assumed. He bought the house from the Crammers, with cash, and then he didn't work a day in the eight, nine, ten months that he was here with us. Mr. Question just sat indoors, all day and night, playing with his hobbies. Unless he was out cutting his grass, of course."

"Mr. Question?"

"Yes," the old woman replied.

"That's a rather unusual name."

Sandra considered that assessment. Then with a sneer, she said, "I don't think it's that unusual."

"What was his first name?"

"Deep."

"Deep Question?"

"Yes." The ancient face ended with a pursed set of lips. "What did you say your name was?"

"Morgan. Morgan Lee."

"Now _that's_ a very peculiar name!" With a laugh, she asked, "Which web-service did you say you work for?"

She said, "The New York _Times,_" with an easy pride.

"I don't particularly like New York."

"Don't you?"

"I have my reasons."

"People are entitled to their reasons."

The old woman was obviously considering spelling out her distastes. Morgan busied herself by studying Sandra's lawn. The spring grass had been slashed down to a thin green fuzz. A concrete statue of Mary stood in the midst of what must have been a little flower garden, but every plant had been sheared off just above the ground, leaving the landscape on the brink of barren. And that was just one of the resident oddities. It was like looking at a drawing inside a child's magazine: How many things were wrong with this picture?

Someone had tied naked dolls to the limbs of a spruce tree.

On the driveway, the image of Satan had been drawn with clumsy strokes of florid red paint.

Every third window on the old woman's house was painted black, while the outside walls were adorned with cheap mirrors and tattered, yard-long strips of aluminum foil.

Sandra herself was dressed in a nun's habit and mismatched bedroom slippers, one gray and one blue. Like the Mary statue, she wore a homemade necklace -- the foil wrappers of condoms strung together, using what seemed to be the short cords of tampons.

Up and down the street, every house had its own Mary statue.

"Are you Catholic?"

The old woman bristled, as if insulted. But in the next breath, she relaxed, saying with a gentle smile, "Of course."

"Were you raised Catholic?"

"Lutheran."

"When did you convert?"

"Last year."

"Why?"

The question seemed to go unheard. Finally the woman said, "I have a key, you know. To Mr. Question's house."

"Do you?"

"The police never asked if I had one. They just broke through the front door, not even bothering to knock."

Morgan looked at the empty house.

"Here's my key," she heard. "I keep it on my crucifix chain."

What she called a key, was not. Morgan saw an octagon-shaped piece of apparently ordinary metal. Sandra carefully removed her necklace, untied a key knot, and pulled the octagon free, handing it to Morgan with a ceremonial importance.

"He wanted you to have this," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

"Pardon what?"

"What did you just say, ma'am?"

Sandra gave a low laugh. "Nothing. I didn't say anything."

In her hand, the metal grew warm. Morgan looked at the oddity and then finally thought to flip it over. On the back, in neat handwritten numbers, was a set of precise coordinates.

"You can see in his windows, if you want," the newborn Catholic reported. "Not that the police left anything to see."

Mr. Question's yard was badly overgrown. Young trees had sprouted up from the shaggy grass. No one had cut the lawn, at least for a year and probably for two. Yet even as she pulled her feet through the tangles, the old woman remarked with an undiluted pride, "I don't know how he keeps it so short now. The grass, I mean. When he hasn't been here in forever."

"It's a mystery," Morgan allowed.

The abandoned house was ringed with yellow tape, sheets of laboratory plastics stapled over the windows. Warning signs spoke of undefined hazards. Yet the authorities had done little to maintain the scene's integrity.

Morgan asked, "Did they wear suits when they went inside?"

"Like spacesuits, yes."

"Didn't that worry you?"

"I've seen worse in my life."

Hopefully not. But the reporter said nothing, peering into a convenient window, looking at an empty room stripped of its furniture and carpeting, every piece of sheetrock pulled free to expose the studs and old-fashioned wiring.

"Is this where he kept his hobby equipment?"

Sandra glanced through the window with an incurious expression. "Yes, it was. I'm sure."

Quietly, Morgan asked, "Is everybody in this town Catholic?"

"Of course."

"I think that's interesting, Sandra."

"I don't."

Morgan nodded and backed away from the house.

"Don't you want to use the key?"

For many reasons, Morgan wanted to run away now. But there was no overt danger. The best available

tools had been applied to every suspicious object, not to mention the air and shaggy grass and the local groundwater. Whatever was here had done its work and then vanished. Nothing remained but odd beliefs and habits that seemed to threaten no one.

Morgan walked back to the street, pausing beside her rental car. She hesitated. She was about to tell Sandra, "Thank you," but something nagged at her. "How much for the cookies?" she asked. "The ones he ordered?" Then, after she dug out her money, she happened to look up at the old woman's house. It was one of the oldest homes in town, and standing in the backyard, at the end of a long Satan-decorated driveway, was an equally old garage. The garage must have begun life as a carriage house; it was almost as big as Sandra's home. For no clear reason, Morgan asked, "Do you drive anymore?"

"No, I do not."

"What's inside your garage?"

"I don't remember."

"No?"

"And I don't care," she added.

A cold terror ran up the reporter's spine. Then with a quiet voice, she asked, "Did the authorities search your garage?"

"They looked everywhere," Sandra promised.

"How about the people wearing the spacesuits?"

"No, they were inside Mr. Question's house. It was the others who were draining our blood and shaving our hair." The old woman cackled at the memory of that officious panic. "Why? Do you want to look inside my garage?"

"Maybe I already did," Morgan allowed.

The witness started to say, "I don't understand." But her voice fell to silence after "I don't..."

"Thank you for your help, ma'am."

"He was a fine, fine neighbor," Sandra had to remark.

"Mr. Deep Question -- ?"

"Yes." She smiled in an odd way, and then added, "If I was a young woman, like you, I think I'd like to sleep with him."

"Really?"

"A handsome young man like that? Why not?"

Morgan shrugged. Dropping into her car, she confessed, "Now that's odd. I don't remember him being handsome."

* * * *

Every residence in the little town had its Mary statue with a condom necklace and naked dolls in the trees

and every third window painted black. But what had seemed infinitely strange an hour ago was becoming a little less strange. After another few days, mused Morgan, she would grow accustomed to these arbitrary oddities. But she didn't want to linger. She drove to the main street and then out to the highway. Her companion was waiting at the roadblock. A big man with a crew cut and nebulous ties to the government, he asked, "How did it go?" When she said nothing, he opened the passenger door and climbed inside, and not for the first time, he reminded her, "This is supposed to be a symbiotic relationship."

Morgan nodded agreeably.

"Did you find out anything?"

"Did anyone search Sandra's garage?"

"That's his neighbor, right?" He consulted a string of files, and, after a moment, began to laugh in a low, bitter fashion. "Yeah, it was checked."

"What's funny?"

His name was Clark, and that was about all that she knew about him. That and he had a nice smile. "Every team searched that garage."

"Okay," Morgan said. Then again, she asked, "What's funny?"

"Only one team was supposed to. But since everyone filed a report ... well, that implies something funny...."

"Okay."

Clark looked at her for a moment.

Morgan said, "Fargo," and the car accelerated to better than a hundred miles an hour -- the best it could manage on the little two-lane highway. Then she showed her companion the octagonal disk. The metal still felt warm, but the coordinates had vanished. Yet that was no problem since she could remember them clearly, and probably would for the rest of her life.

"It's not Alabama," he realized.

Alabama should have been the next site. Last spring, Mr. Deep Question had moved from Minnesota to another little hamlet of no significance. He had changed his name to The Meme Man, and, after a stay of barely six weeks, he'd left again. It wasn't until some months later that health authorities finally took notice: One hundred and six residents of the little community were digging a hole. With nothing but cupped hands, they had managed to excavate a pit almost thirty feet deep. They couldn't explain why they were doing the work, nor did they wonder why, but they had done their digging with such a single-mindedness that their fingers had worn down to the proverbial bone.

That was the first site to hit the public radar.

"But this one's new," Clark admitted. "It's in northern New Mexico, in a wilderness area."

"So we have to walk in," she joked.

To his credit, her companion laughed. "The plane will take us to Albuquerque, and there'll be a helicopter waiting."

Morgan hated helicopters. Or did she?

"Learn anything else?" he asked.

"Not that I know of."

Clark nodded, his expression thoughtful and rather caring. He looked at Morgan without trying to stare. She could almost hear him thinking, Had she triggered any booby-traps? Were any new, unsuspected memes coursing through her blood now? But those were just the obvious questions. More subtle and considerably more paranoid possibilities loomed for both of them.

Remembering his job, Clark said, "You have to tell me. Everything."

"What is 'everything'?"

A fair question. But he managed to shrug, saying, "Nobody's comfortable with this arrangement. But your old boyfriend is responsible -- "

"Fifteen years ago, he was my boyfriend."

"Sure. But he sent the government your name. 'I'll reveal myself only to Morgan Lee,' he promised."

Mr. Deep Question. The Meme Man.

"Dan," she said.

"Dr. Daniel Abrams Pitt," Clarke said. And then with a bitter little laugh, he added, "The Scourge of the World."

* * * *

Morgan and the scourge had dated during their sophomore year at Stanford. And like every old boyfriend, Dan had come back into her life in the most awkward way imaginable. Barely three days ago, one of the senior editors at the Times -- a powerful figure that Morgan hadn't spoken to twice in ten years -- wandered into her cubicle, cleared her throat with an ominous rattle, and then whispered, "Hey. What do you know about tailored memes?"

"Nothing," Morgan replied.

"No?"

Actually, she knew more than most of the world. But the sciences were no ticket to promotions in her business. Politics and corruption had been her field for the last several years, and she was wrestling with three different stories, none of them panning out quite as well as she had planned.

"I thought you had a biochemical major," the editor countered.

"I switched majors, and schools," Morgan explained. Then an instinct finally took hold, and, looking up from her notes, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"I can't tell you," the editor replied, wincing for a moment. "But I've got the government waiting in my office right now, and they want to talk to you."

Clark was one of the suits. The other half-dozen souls had come from the FBI and CIA, and the president had sent her assistant secretary of defense. But for reasons never made clear, Clark did most

of the talking. He introduced himself, shook her hand with his own warm paw, and then asked the editor's question once again. "What do you know about tailored memes?"

"Very little," she replied.

"Don't be modest," he'd warned. Then he produced copies of a series of articles that she had written five years before. "Deactivated herpes simplex viruses allow the researchers to send complex proteins across the blood-brain barrier," he read aloud. "The proteins borrow the aggressive features of prions, but without the usual hazards. The proteins unfold and interact with the neurons, and the mind acquires a new idea or concept -- what is called a meme -- in a matter of minutes."

"Is this about Alabama?" she asked.

Clark said, "Do you know anything about Alabama?"

"People there like to dig holes. Don't they?"

"Pits," he said.

But that wasn't what he said, of course. He said, "Pitts," and waited for her reaction.

Morgan didn't notice the pun. Why would she? Staring at the important faces, she had to wonder aloud, "What do you want from me?"

Everyone was silent.

"I heard about some people in one of the Dakotas," she confessed. "South or North? I don't know much geography -- "

"That's Minnesota," Clark reported. "Did you hear about the apartment building outside San Francisco?"

"What building?"

"Everyone who lived there two winters ago -- every last one of them -- now speaks a fluent Mandarin brand of Chinese."

"I hadn't heard that one."

"By tonight, it'll be the lead story everywhere." Clark glanced at the editor, winning an agreeable nod. Then he looked back at Morgan, asking, "Are you worried?"

"A lot of things worry me."

"Someone's spreading memes across the country -- "

"That's one speculation," she allowed. "But two, now three places ... I don't know, there could be other explanations...."

"Such as?"

She shook her head. "If you want an expert's opinion, I'm going to disappoint you. I haven't read the literature in years. But what I remember ... there were a lot of mountains between what was possible and what we're seeing today. The most impressive result was a human volunteer who hated broccoli until he was treated with huge doses of one meme, and then he had a mild, temporary fondness for the vegetable." She paused significantly. "In other words, the technology was about as impressive as

hypnosis."

"Eighty-nine adults and thirty children," Clark rumbled. "And a little more than a year and a half later, every last one of them suddenly began speaking Chinese as their primary language."

"Do they live in that apartment building now?"

"Many do," Clark allowed. "But others have moved, sometimes across the country."

"The meme was implanted eighteen months ago," blurted one of the FBI men. "But it remained dormant until now."

"You're sure?"

Men and women nodded with authority.

"Why come talk to _me?_" Morgan made herself laugh. "I haven't been in California for years."

"College," said Clark.

She felt her heart kick. Adrenaline coursed through her own mind, generating a moment of utter clarity. Then with a low, firm voice, she said, "No."

Clark leaned toward her. "A friend of yours used to live in that building."

"Pit," she muttered. And then, "Pitt?"

"Two winters ago, he paid his landlord two years' worth of rent and vanished." Clark produced a series of photographs showing a cramped one-bedroom place. Whoever lived there had slept on the floor in the living room. The bedroom was stripped of furniture and carpeting, the naked boards of the floor stained by chemicals and scarred by at least one brief fire.

"It can't be," Morgan said.

"What can't be?"

She decided to say nothing.

"He left a message behind," Clark allowed. "In the bathroom, taped to the mirror."

She was handed another photograph. In a glance, she read a note written on the same kind of yellow legal pad that Dan always used for doodling and all of his important work. "If you want me," said the flowing letters, "then send Morgan after me. I won't reveal myself to anyone else." Then he signed his name, left a spot of his own blood on the paper, and wrote down an exact location.

"This can't be," she kept muttering.

"It obviously _is,_ " said the FBI man. "He singled you out -- "

"No," she interrupted. Then she looked at the smartest, most open face in the room. "Dan hated the meme technologies. The last time I talked to him ... on the phone, I don't know, three years ago -- ?"

"Not quite that long ago," the FBI man said.

She ignored him. "Dan thought these were very dangerous technologies," she told Clark. "Evil, really. The world was risking oblivion if people didn't stop playing with these awful new toys." She hesitated for a

moment, and then added, "I can't see him being involved in this."

"Give us someone else then," said a CIA man.

Clark gave everybody a quick warning stare. Then, with a shamed little smile, he told Morgan, "We have our marching orders. You'll be given every resource, starting now. This minute."

Morgan concentrated, trying to make sense of this unexpected tangle.

The FBI man mistook her silence for doubt. "The president herself wants you to help your country, and your world."

"That's not what ... the problem is..."

Clark understood enough to ask, "What is the problem, Ms. Lee?"

"If someone ... Dan or anybody else ... if they made this much progress between five years ago and two years ago..."

The room waited for her to complete her thought.

With a heavy sigh, she asked, "What if he's made even more progress? If he has genuinely mastered this power ... this force ... what could he have accomplished by now, and really, what can any of us know for sure...?"

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The helicopter hovered over a green meadow. No human was visible, or any trace of human activity. A platoon of Rangers had arrived first, using tiny robots to sweep the ground for contaminants. None were found. Then they took up positions in the nearby woods, and through their crosshairs, they watched the helicopter descend and touch down, two passengers climbing off.

"Nothing," Morgan said hopefully.

Clark said nothing, studying the grass at his feet and then more distant terrain. An outcrop of rock shone in the bright afternoon light, and something bright enough to glitter caught both of their gazes in the same instant.

He looked at her, and nodded.

Morgan went forward. From several strides out, she could see a larger octagon of metal fixed to stone with some kind of glue. "I guess this is it."

One of the hidden Rangers called Clark.

"Do I touch it?" she asked.

He was busy talking on the radio. "Which direction are you?" he was asking. Then he turned, looking downwind. "How many?"

The metal disk was bare and warm. But when she touched it with her thumb, it grew even warmer, and, after a few moments, the blood from her thumb found its way to her head, another global position implanted in her mind.

The herpes virus had been replaced with doctored buckyballs. That was one of many improvements

made over the last few years. By Dan, or others? Morgan couldn't feel sure about anything. Not even the most ordinary thought in her head felt reliable, much less trustworthy, and even her doubts were cause for a certain rabid suspicion.

She began to turn, ready to tell Clark about the new position. Then she saw the black bear coming across the meadow, running hard. She heard the animal panting and saw the glazed wildness of its eyes, its big body racing past both the helicopter and Clark without even a cursory glance. He pulled a pistol from under his jacket, but he decided not to fire. Instead, he watched as the bear pulled short of Morgan, sniffing the air as if smelling something wondrous, and then dropping and rolling on its back like a dog desperate to prove its devotion.

Moments later, again from downwind, a dozen mule deer arrived.

Mice and ground squirrels came from the surrounding meadow, but their little legs made for a longer, more arduous pilgrimage.

Within minutes, hundreds of animals had gathered around Morgan. Each drank in her scent and purred in some oddly endearing fashion, and she found herself close to tears -- from fatigue and nerves and a strange sweet pleasure -- as she walked through the milling bodies, trying not to crush the tiniest vole as she slowly, slowly started to make her escape.

* * * *

Daniel Pitts was not a particularly good-looking man. What passed for an attraction came from his personality, which was intense, and his style in bed, which was equally intense. Being a certified genius wasn't a bad credential, either. Morgan hadn't been the first coed lured by brilliance, and since college she had met and occasionally dated other Great Minds -- a pool of experience that taught her that little Danny wasn't nearly as arrogant as he had seemed, or as condescending, or half as boring as his arrogant, condescending peers.

"I want to win the Nobel Prize," he had admitted on several occasions. "Know why? Because I want to refuse it. Make a big public splash when I tell them to leave me the hell alone."

"You wouldn't," she told him. But when he refused to back down, she said, "You're just trying to be difficult, Danny."

"Exactly. Isn't that the point?"

"But what's the good in refusing the Prize?"

"I'd find some reason," he promised. "A cause. A rallying cry." Then he laughed at his girlfriend, reminding her, "There's always a cause that needs a champion. I'll refuse for the sake of the hungry or the ignorant. I'll use the podium to focus attention on someone who really needs it."

"You can't do that as a Nobel Laureate?"

"Name last year's winners," he countered.

But she couldn't, of course.

Morgan was spending a lot of time remembering moments like that. Some years later, in one of their last conversations, Dan warned, "This is very dangerous work. Don't attribute the quote to me. We're just two old friends meeting for lunch. But I think you should know: This meme-implanting technology is more dangerous than a mountain of plutonium."

"And you happen to work with this mountain," she countered.

"I'm just one of many," Dan muttered to his salad. More than ten years had passed since their break-up. Judging by appearances, his sexual intensity had dissolved into a belt of fat around his waist, but his emotional intensity had grown more focused, more tiresome. "You know who's the biggest funder of the research, don't you?"

"The defense industry."

Stabbing at the spinach, he said, "They pay well for good work."

"Are you going to tell me about your work?"

Dan seemed to consider the question, and then he said, "Yes."

She waited.

His gaze lifted. "Later."

She remembered prompting him by saying, "I've got deadlines."

"Isn't that an awful, ominous word?" he asked, touching her hand with one of his. "'Deadline.'"

Morgan waited, nibbling at her own buffalo burger. When she felt she had nothing to lose, she agreed with him. "It is an ominous word." Then she told him, "We can't do very much. With meme-implanting, I mean."

His salad must have been fascinating, judging by how he was staring at it.

"I don't understand," Morgan confessed.

"What don't you understand?"

"Why did you break up with me?"

Dan looked up, smiling softly. She remembered a plain man, balding and a little heavy. But his considerable burdens seemed to lift suddenly, a boyish energy mixed with the whispered question, "Is that how you recall things, Morgan? That I broke up with you?"

* * * *

Next was a Marriott in Sao Paulo where the scourge of humanity had stayed for a single night, and, during that interval, the staff and every guest acquired a desperate, mostly secret fondness for Finnish poetry. When confronted with his odd hobby, the night manager laughed as if embarrassed, turned to Morgan, and after quoting an obscure passage about snow and bliss, he handed her a piece of paper. The paper had been torn from one of the hotel's complementary tablets, cut into an octagon, and in Daniel's handwriting, it showed a new set of coordinates.

In a Chilean helicopter, she and Clark swooped down on a small mining town high in the Andes, discovering people of no great education or wealth who had mastered the basics of high physics. Not only that, every adult and child spent their free time attempting to enrich uranium from local supplies. It was all very crude and exceptionally slow, and after a thousand years, their descendants would have had only a marginal chance of success. But they calmly explained that whenever they finished their offering, tomorrow or in a million years, they intended to gather around the holy object, using its fireball to let them walk to their Lord.

The next destination was waiting for them in the mine's main office.

That night, racing across the Pacific at mach two, Clark got word of a new site. "We're passing over it right now, in fact."

Morgan saw nothing but ocean on the plane's monitors.

"Easter Island," he explained. "A few months back, the natives started carving new heads out of the black rock. Tourists assumed it was a demonstration project -- "

"Did Dan visit there?" she interrupted.

"Not that anyone can tell." He stared at her for a moment, and then stared harder at his own big hands. "Which may be the point, of course. Commercial airliners take in fresh air all the time, and the old stuff is bled out into the stratosphere ... ending up everywhere, eventually...."

The next stop was an abandoned settlement in the Australian outback.

The local whites had left their traditional homes, now living happily in the desert, subsisting on a diet of kangaroos and termites.

In China, there was a village where every morning, at dawn, people congregated to sing selections from The Sound of Music.

In northern India, a female tiger entered a certain village at nightfall, and every human male gave her gifts of raw meat and then attempted to make love to her.

In one corner of Kenya, corruption at every level of government had suddenly vanished.

A Swiss village was the next site, and an entire day was invested trying to decipher what was wrong. Morgan interviewed more than a dozen locals, finding nothing. Their beliefs were bland, their politics reasonably conservative, and every English speaker had the appropriate accents. But while she was in the mayor's home, she noticed a child's drawing fastened to the refrigerator, and on a whim, she asked, "Who drew this?"

"My daughter," the mayor said with a genuine pride. "Only seven, but look at the details."

It was a seven-year-old's drawing, and the artistry was minimal. But Morgan nodded as if agreeing, and then asked, "What's wrong with it?"

The mayor pushed her face up to the crayon image. "Nothing."

"I know she's your daughter," Morgan persisted. "But if you look at the colors of the mountain -- "

"Yes?"

"And the sky. Do you see what I'm saying?"

The woman shook her head, puzzled by the silly questions.

"Come outside," Morgan suggested. Then when they stood before the Alps, she asked, "What's the sky's color?"

"Blue." Laughter. "What else would it be?"

Daniel Pitts had spent several months in the village, slipping away just three weeks ago. Besides rearranging the color perceptions of several hundred people, he had done nothing. The tiny house that he rented was full of odd equipment that meant little. "Our best assessment," Clark explained, "is that whatever he was doing, he had finished his work in Minnesota. Inside that old woman's garage."

They were flying across the Atlantic, chasing nightfall. Their little hyperplane was skimming at the brink of space, and the crew was locked inside the cockpit, and the two of them were sharing the little foldout bed. After more than a week of living together, under constant pressure and with everything at stake, this arrangement had become both a comfort and a surprising joy.

"What do the experts think Dan was doing?" Morgan inquired. "His final goal. If he actually has one, I mean."

"That's what I'm asking you. Since nobody else has a good half-assed guess."

She thought about the question, and then she stopped thinking about it. They were flying toward the next coordinates, which happened to be inside Washington, DC. In their wake, secrets were escaping containment. The news media were descending on every odd village and meadow, fueling a panic that couldn't grow worse, yet did. There were demonstrations in every major city, and biohazard suits were selling for a million dollars each, and even the wildest rumors fell short of whatever news leaked out next.

"We used to argue," she muttered.

Clark rolled onto his side, propping his head up with an arm. "You and Danny argued?"

"About a lot of things."

"A stormy relationship. You told me."

She shook her head. "What I mean is..."

"Tell me."

"Dan had this trick. I had my position on some issue, and he'd take a different position. On capital punishment, say."

Clark said nothing.

"I was for the death penalty. But Dan argued that it was wrong in every circumstance. In fact, war was wrong, too. Not just because it killed innocent people, but because it killed even the bastards."

"So what?"

"He approved of war. On a later occasion, I remember ... he came out for that little fight in Honduras that I thought was wrong...."

"You caught him on that?"

"I called him a two-faced liar. But do you know what he said? 'The purpose of an argument isn't to give your position,' he told me. 'It's to change your opponent's mind.'"

Clark scratched his jaw, watching her.

"Who are you?" she blurted.

"Who do you think I am?"

Morgan touched the hard, masculine face and ran a hand through the thick stubbly hair. Her breathing quickened. Her mind raced. A wild, almost intoxicating panic took hold of her throat. Then once again, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Sleep," was his advice.

And despite all of her anxieties and a mountain of half-remembered nonsense, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

* * * *

They reached Washington in time for the vote. With an unheard of speed, Congress had drafted and passed sweeping laws that would outlaw all kinds of meme-transfer technologies, and, standing in the Oval Office as an honored guest, Morgan watched the president pick up a long pen, smile at the cameras, then sign the legislation with an officious fury.

Within the day, every government in the world produced the same laws, almost word for word. But even more impressive was the ease -- the perfect smooth inevitability -- that swept over every sentient mind. Suddenly nobody was interested in the dangerous technologies, and everyone felt secure in that assessment, and what had been a panicky atmosphere just two days ago was now a business-as-always approach.

"Implanted memes did it all," Morgan said.

Clark was sitting beside her on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial. They were holding hands. But he shook his head, offering, "First, people had to be made open to the sanctions. Everyone had to see for themselves that this is the only reasonable course to take."

"But the memes helped," she said.

"Ideas have always fueled our lives," he countered.

She waited a moment, and then screwing up her courage, she asked, "Why me? What's my role in this?"

"What do you think your role is?"

"As a witness, maybe. Someone who can write about what really happened. If not today, then someday."

"Maybe you're right," he allowed.

"Or maybe the genius simply missed my company, maybe."

He shrugged and laughed quietly.

She had always liked that laugh. It was a funny and reassuring little thing to remember now.

"What do you really think?" she asked.

He almost looked at her. Then he took another pull on the beer tucked inside a brown sack, and with a big boyish grin, he asked, "Think about what?"

"Meme-transfers," she said. "Do you really believe they're evil?"

"Not always, no."

"Do you think there's never any place in society for the quick and easy dissemination of knowledge?"

"I think there're going to be times where this technology could be used, and we'll miss not having it."

"But we can't work with it. Even in secure labs."

"Not for a generation or two." He shrugged. For a moment, he looked like a huge boy, happy and proud, thrilled to have this one person to whom he could throw out a little boast or two. "The argument has been delayed for a few decades. That's all. But if we could have debated about when and how to use this magic ... well, some of us would have inevitably taken the permissive ground, and the results would have been too awful to bear, I think...."

"Here I sit," she purred, looking up at a sky that was blue again. "Next to the world's finest mind."

"Is that what you think?" Danny laughed as if nothing could be funnier. Then he winked at her, saying, "Think again, and you'll see."

Of course.

Isn't that funny?

Until now, until this moment ... she had forgotten all of that....