

EDWARD MORRIS

Ed Morris is the original Mashup Man — except that he plays with history and reality and fiction, rather than chords. Reading his *Journey to the Center of the Earth* is like listening to Donald Fagen turn a Jules Verne story into a bop threnody. ‘On that train all graphite and glitter, undersea by rail...’ Unbeatable! — Paul Di Filippo

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH



JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

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This story is for Dr Walter Munk, without whose assistance it could not have been written; and Jules Verne, because nobody did it better.

Special thanks to Janice Goldblum, National Academy of Sciences Archivist; Paul Di Filippo, Chief Engineering Officer; and Serena Blossom Appel, my central fire.

“You must go to the sea with a question” —Roger Revelle

“We can sing all sorts of militant songs, but if we can’t bridge those oceans of misunderstanding between human beings, we’re not going to get this world together”

—Pete Seeger

“My answer is that science can always be improved, and that every old theory is always overthrown by a newer one. But we shall soon see for ourselves...”

—Jules Verne, *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*

“His whole captive form, folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which like Satan would not sink to Hell until she’d dragged a living part of Heaven along...”

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

In the Fifties, the top scientists of the day wanted a clear picture of the structure of the Earth from core to outer crust. They wanted to see the precontinental layer of the planet, upon which the continents slide like chunks of butter across a skillet, and sense for themselves the days when the oceans were still oozing up from the central fire and there were a few more planets in the solar system with no asteroid belt between them.

They wanted to know so much about the origins of earthquakes and storms, how old the planet really is, and how we evolved the way we did. They wanted to track the building and erosion of land, and chart the Earth's history the way a botanist sees fire and famine and feast spelled out in the rings of ancient redwoods; the rise of mountains, erosion of soil, motion of deep rocks and deposition of the remains.

The idea came together on a sunlit patio over breakfast. It was to be the first of many, and did not presume to answer all its own questions at one go. It was a scientific version of oil wildcatting which became, in effect, a dry hole.

It was a beginning that only got to begin, and never got to be.

.....
The gigantic assemblage of ship sways with the swell, snap-rolling with the current. The flat gray ocean horizon offers no easy answer. The engines in the hold throb a quiet, infinite beat. Up in the rigging, the wind moans like a man.

The draw still sucks, the pump still screams, the fast-running cable still sings like a tuning-fork, but now the great drill has fallen silent. The drill pipe lies across the deck, rode hard and put away wet.

"Lo! That's not basalt, that's a new land! We've punched through the Moho, boys! Grog all around!" Bill Bascom, *de facto* Captain of this voyage, never loses his sea-legs as he speaks, but the weathered skin of his face is gray. In his eyes, the central fire of the ancient mariner burns high. This man's genius knows no fences. He once put together some old ordnance from the War and invented the deep-moored buoys now used to position all ships on the planet by SONAR and LORAN navigation, and a hundred more such innovations besides that.

Twelve righteous men circle around the muddy coring bit. They are sunburnt and hoarse from yelling over the outboard props and the scream of the drilling pipe, the vibrations of the great derrick looming nearly ten stories over the deck. Their words are Babel like music off down a windy street, torn from their throats and minds, lost at sea.

A rock cylinder slowly drops from the end of the pipe to steam in a shallow half-round tray on the deck. A skinny crewcut guy in baggy khaki pants, a gray undershirt and black vest, kneels down and jams a thermometer into a hole in the core sample. The geophysicist and oceanographer Walter Munk's eyes cut the sample into bits as he waits to take its temp, dreaming of finally sinking the last seismograph and returning to dry land.

He nods after a moment, whipping out a notebook (one much newer than the one with which he used to follow Harald Svardrup around as a student). Then he upends the tray into a bucket of water some roughneck on swabbie-detail carelessly left by the deck-rail and begins to scrub the mud off with surgeon's hands mangled by days at sea.

The great paleontologist Harry Ladd kneels beside him, squinting through his spectacles. Cutting the steam, the magnifying-glass Ladd produces refracts the high sun overhead.

"Peridotite," Ladd pronounces breathlessly. "And...something else. I can't identify this rock... Look at the way it's patterned, and... Oh my God..."

John Steinbeck is at a loss for words when he sees the fossil, but rushes from the circle to the radio shack and his beloved Underwood Noiseless portable typewriter.

.....
To: Henry Luce, *Life Magazine*

Cc: Associated Press Wire Service

The Mohorovic Discontinuity, upper boundary of the Earth's mantle, has been reached at 1122 hours on the morning of 28 June 1963. Samples of the proto-continental layer of the Earth were viewed for the first time by human beings, several miles off Guadalupe Island on the Mexican coast. "Drinks all round," says

Dr Willard Bascom. This cable will be first in a series...

.....
This never happened. Yet once in a little while, the current goes slack when every instrument says it should be choppy. Once in a little while, the barometer tells of a storm when the skies are in fact clear, without a trace of gray.

Once in a little while, a different breeze blows up a fractional drag across a calm sea, and makes waves, which ripple out and change, and come back different. Once in a little while, King Poseidon forks his trident south instead of north, and Odysseus must return home by another route, to a world nothing like the one he left.

.....
Special Agent 008, of Her Majesty's MI-6, was reading the funnies and smoking a pipe full of Amsterdam Blonde when the word came in over the Mojo wire. His Monday morning suddenly got a whole lot more interesting.

The red computer terminal screamed in the quiet hotel room. "M wants you."

008 walked out of his suite, and into the assignment that was to put even his adventures in the Far East to shame. What was to happen to him happened out of the clear blue skies of a day as it might have been yesterday, or as it might be, some dreadful tomorrow.

He surveyed the game of Battleship spread out across the red leather surface of Maxwell Knight's desk, wondering what this was all about. The quiet gray eyes watched him speculatively. Then M dryly gave him the details of an assignment which even he, as 008's CO with hundreds of kills and thousands more hours in the field, was loath to touch.

008 was a world traveler and gambler who loved fast cars, top-shelf booze and women so fine they hurt to look at. Inside him, though, there was a gloomy darkness he'd brought with him to London from the *shtetl*, a native melancholy that couldn't be assuaged, only sung to sleep for as long as possible.

It was a hunger for an orderly future whose blast wave didn't mutate everyone who walked into it beyond all possible

recognition. Well-read even for a Black Ops lifer, reconciling himself with the non-orderly present often made him feel like the robot in that great Binder story from the Thirties, Prometheus hunted and chained, escaping only to be hunted anew.

He rarely let this show. M saw some of it, though, and understood. This agent had been cultured like a pearl to be what he was. He'd make a fine replacement at the end of M's own threescore and ten, and M was well on his way.

Ostensibly, they were to send 008 out to the Guadalupe Island site in his capacity as an intelligence liaison. But after the American government backed out of the project in question, Mohole 2's New Management suddenly became an even greater priority for global intelligence, if such a thing were even possible.

The man bought presidents, for God's sake. Mohole's new investor was a loose cannon. The Crown's trade interests were at stake, to say nothing of the black gold the new investor was probably really drilling for.

In any case, M felt a lot safer with an MI-6 man out there on the new ship. Especially the polymath savant whom the winds of Fate had dropped in old Blighty's lap from Russia, with love. 008, who tore a wall of fire all the way to Oxford, where he'd graduated in '39 with a PhD in Criminology and Linguistics. 008's areas of study were all over the map, including a large chunk of the Political Science curriculum, martial arts, weapons design and, of all things, ballroom dancing.

008 served three years in MI-5 as an entry-level adjutant during the war. He rose to Corporal on the basis of his typing skills, and was instrumental in the high-speed construction of the experimental shield dome over London during the long years of the Blitz.

After the war, 008 returned to Oxford to complete two doctorates, then went back to MI at the administrative level. He was known for his warehouse-sized basement of files, for staying single and always wondering why, and for his fear of flying. His politics were all over the map, too. He hated Ms Prime Minister's stance on eliminating the Red Menace in Thailand and Korea as ferociously as he hated the track taken by American activists like

Eldridge Cleaver and Ken Kesey. It would all lead to a kind of spiritual no-man's land, he put forth when asked.

Held forth, more like, M amended, smoking his pipe and brooding. And don't even get him started on all that flat-Earth nonsense about what clean, harmless petrol is doing to the global temperature. Maybe this mission will be good for him.

M worried about 008 all the time. It was just the way things operated at work...

.....
"The ol' monkey got drunk..."

The doggerel echoed down a weird little stop-and-start back alley, Mexico DF, on Virgin soil where the skies cried Mary and miracles spun and burst in the headlines. All the carnival magic of Guadalupe was a waxen mask hiding an old, polished sugar skull hardened by ritual use.

Under a ceiling fan in the back of the barroom, the scientist sat contained, singing under his breath, doing shots of tequila to get the taste of the terrible local beer out of his mouth. It wasn't very often that he allowed himself a break, let alone a drink, but now...

Well, there was one big break staring him in the face, years of hard work swirling down the commode and gurgling, SUCKER... Pensive, peevish and pissed off ran the round of his thoughts, snarling and fragile and possessed.

"And sat on the elephant's trunk."

What funny little songs the Americans made up. Judy Horton used to sing that one that while she was working, down in Samoa a thousand years ago in 1952. Lovely Judy, who told him once, too late, that their lives were parallel lines which never intersected. They had their careers. But every time he ever raised a glass...

"The elephant sneezed, and fell to his knees..."

Bill Bascom's dream had fallen to its knees as well, or been driven there, not into the sea floor but a maelstrom of delay and snafu and graft at the hands of the idiot contractors Washington chose when he and his brain-trust left it up to them by oversight.

"Oh Captain, my Captain," the scientist muttered. As far as he knew, Bill was still out on the boat overseeing the striking

of equipment and cussing a blue streak. Pity. He himself was probably going to need a land navigator very shortly, an...oh, what did the Air Force jocks call it? A *wing-man*... He chuckled drily, not smiling, ruminating and wondering where everything had gone wrong.

In the spring of 1957, the National Science Foundation panel on Earth Sciences asked itself what project could lead to the greatest understanding of the Earth if cost were not an issue. He and Harry Hess suggested collecting a sample of the Earth's mantle from under the sea, where the overlying crust was thinner than anywhere else. Technology seemed to permit a vessel that would stay in place, and re-entry to the hole.

The American Miscellaneous Society, a kind of scientific worker-owned brain trust, formed a deep-drilling committee of the best oceanographic minds of his generation, to that end. In two years, the NSF funding started flowing. "Thank God," one member was heard to remark, "we're finally talking about something besides space."

The first years were the best. The start-up period was great fun, just east of Guadalupe Island, drilling in twelve thousand feet of water. John Steinbeck and the great photographer Fritz Goro even came to visit, and wrote a big article about the Mohole Project for *Life* magazine. It was noisy, and everyone lost their voices, but not even Steinbeck minded.

The CUSS-1 drilling vessel had its outboard props roaring day and night for the entire first phase, as nearly six hundred feet of sediment and basalt were dug from that vast hole in the bottom of the sea.

When they hit solid basalt, the scientist first suspected that Project Mohole was doomed. Forty million dollars allotted for Phase II couldn't even assuage that knowledge when he saw it in writing.

The rock wall mirrored itself back in Washington. Socony Mobil spent a hundred and fifty thousand dollars of their own money on preliminary studies, bid with multiple corporate backers and asked for no fee, in the name of science and possibly whatever oil they might find on the way.

It's a matter of historical record that owners and backers are always cheap and stupid. When the government is involved, that law exponentiates to the tenth power. The American Miscellaneous Society (that Fortean caucus from all over the NAS who first proposed deep drilling through the crust) could have stepped in and demanded an Orson Welles-style 'final cut' on the choice of contractor. But AMSOC were in a hurry, and abdicated their responsibility, thinking that such things would make no difference.

The scientist blamed and cursed himself for this now. The AMSOC crew (hell, the whole Scripps Institute, whose fleet had by then grown bigger than the navies of several Third World nations) had been taught a sad lesson. Having a good idea is not enough. One needs to be prepared to do the work successfully. Increase the size of the stakes, and the truism only gets more true.

Their dream was being carelessly murdered by the slings and arrows of this Babel, these Congressmen, these Senators, these monumental agreements not to decide, with everyone shouting at once. What was the point of picking any other project back up, at least for the length of a much-needed sabbatical? After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

The world-renowned oceanographer signaled the rotund proprietor for another shot. He had to guess that he'd been seen.

"And what...became of the..."

"Munk." A sidemouth drawl steamed in familiar California rang his right ear. Something was wrong with the man's voice. Why was he wearing sunglasses at this hour? The hand holding him up felt like...a surgical glove? Why was he wearing surgical gloves?

In late May of 1961, they'd had to fire one of the roughnecks for stealing design specs on board ship. The roughneck wouldn't say what company he really worked for. The scientist felt horribly sure that this was that Mohole mole, back for some nefarious purpose.

And that polished maple cane he was using, something about the hook shape of that cane... Why did it make him think of the

news on the television?

"Ain't you Walter Munk? From the Mohole Project? I saw a picture, but, man, you look like shit. Let's go walk you around a little. Me and the boys have been looking for you."

"What for?" Walter asked fuzzily.

The man in the Mississippi string tie roared with laughter. He looked like he'd been put together wrong. He was covered in scars, and wore an idiotic little mustache. The sunglasses slipped down his nose a bit. He had crazy-eye, like a diver with hydrogen poisoning.

His pupils had diamond gimlet teeth. Like a robot's, Munk thought, realizing only then that he had begun to hallucinate. It felt liberating. But not just then.

"You know what they say, don't you, and what I've always believed... Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing." His fists stayed clenched. Every aspect of him was a little off. He looked like a...goblin. That was it. Walter decided he would tell him that, and then promptly forgot when the smarmy little man with the high forehead spoke again. "Step into my office."

He walked Walter toward a little vestibule, where a door and tiny stairway lead down to an outside lanai that Munk hadn't seen on the way in. As if on cue, the jukebox changed songs to the stormy guitars of Harry Belafonte's melancholy 'Sloop John B'.

Boss man-a-lemme-go home

Me wan' go home

Been a long time dyin'

A long time gone

Overhead, paper lanterns painted over the warm, deep darkness with soft golden brushes that pinkened on human skin. Far above the lanai, the vault of the sky appeared to be composed of a conglomeration of nebulous vapors in constant motion that gave no heat. An utter cessation of wind, a silence deeper and more terrible than the silence of the grave hung like a killing sashweight above the bone-gray moonlit beach town, echoing its absence across the Pacific, where even now the blind eyes and

tight purses were pulling up the floating tents of Mohole 1.

Unspoken words trembled somewhere behind the great oceanographer's paralyzed cerebrum. There was so much he still wanted to ask the sea: Where did it all end? Was there ever time in anyone's life to truly catch up to oneself, or even assess what we leave in our wakes? Was he condemned to remain lost at sea forever, or one day would the message in the capacious bottle of his cranium be decoded and reread upon some unimaginable alien shore, a simple declarative of *Lo, there a New Land is found?*

"You're ahead of your time," the goblin told him. "Me, I'm a man of my times. This century extends the Age of Reason to find the origins of the universe. We got men on the moon already, and Mars by '72. President himself showed me the plans. But you, *mein freund*, are about the business of next century."

Sobriety-by-fear twinkled like a horrid, distant star at the edges of Munk's vision. The goblin was starting to look a little more familiar. The familiarity brought only contempt, a sense of Byzantine practices and slippery powers, smoky backroom deals signed in blood... Walter rubbed his eyes. The goblin was still talking.

"My father's consuming passion was to gain real knowledge of the Earth. He told me one time that the true wealth of the planet lies not above ground, but below it. The route to the center is still virgin soil. The last frontier. We drill down to the Mohorovicic Discontinuity, we gonna find out a lot more than just what makes earthquakes and tsunamis."

Walter really looked at the goblin for the first time. In the low light, he could see every scar on the man's face and much more besides, something like a psychologist's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual fed through the screaming wheel of Kali.

"You gonna find the origins of life." The goblin stuck out his hand, making himself do it with a grimace of effort. "I heard they just scrapped the project, Dr Munk. I'd like to help."

He gave Walter's hand a brisk double-pump handshake that reminded the oceanographer vaguely of the President's. "This'll be the most wonderful adventure ever befell the lot of us human beings, Doc. I know you through your work. You might know

me through mine.” He grinned. For a second in the light, his teeth looked as black as Gollum’s teeth in that old Tolkien story. “Name’s Howard Hughes.”

Suddenly, Walter was as sober as a seismographer. He swallowed hard. The glottal noise echoed in his head.

Hughes knew he’d hooked a captive audience now. He began holding forth like a carny barker with that cane and mustache, those shades and ridiculous hat, croaking Step Right Up, All Bets Down, All Bets Final, Winner Stays, Loser Pays...

“The whole matter is utterly inexplicable. But you shall see and judge for yourself. You will then find that geological science is as yet in its infancy – and that we are doomed to enlighten the world.”

“Uhhh...right. Yes, yes, of course.” This was all really happening. Somehow, he had to come to grips with that. This zillionaire he’d read so much about but seen so few pictures of, this cologne-bathed germophobe in exam gloves and ratty black Chuck Taylor basketball shoes, was really standing here filling his ear. Nothing would stop this man. Worse, he would exhort Munk to be a part of his latest obsession.

“Never fear. I am by nature a perfectionist, and I seem to have trouble allowing anything to go through in a half-baked condition. I beat Lindy’s record for non-stop solo Transatlantic flight, and I’ll be the first man to go all the way d– Err. Hrrrump. John Steinbeck said Mohole 1 was like trying to hang a piece of spaghetti from the Empire State building and have it touch the ground. But what if it was a needle? Or...a straw?”

“Have you...” Walter tried to find something to lean against and gave up. “Have you spoken with Senator Kennedy? He’s... you know, Senate Appropriations, maybe he could...”

“Son, me and Jack Kennedy go way back.” Hughes looked away. “Shame about his brother. But I talked to Tom Kuchel, not Kennedy. Senator Kuchel’s from your district, isn’t he?”

“Er...”

“Good Republican. Few and the proud. But, no, we just needed the go-ahead. I used my own money. Me and some friends.”

“I... What...” Walter was overwhelmed. “I’m floored, Mr

Hughes. But, why on Earth – ”

“Ah.” Hughes wagged one finger. “That’s between me and the Lord.”

“Umm, yes.” Munk shook his head, unreality washing over him in layers. A...cigarette. Thank you, God. His right hand left his pocket, and the first drag was bread from Heaven. “When science has sent forth her fiat, it is only to hear and obey.”

Hughes whipped off his aviator sunglasses, capped teeth bared. “You’ve read Jules Verne.” By his tone of voice, he might have been just as shocked to find another member of some Illuminist secret society in the same bar. Munk realized he was laughing and quit being afraid, if only for the moment.

“Sure, what kid hasn’t? I – ”

Hughes was already somewhere else. “Where you stayin’? Let’s go get your gear. I’ll have Raul see to it himself.” He looked relieved to have found Munk, momentarily put back in his body by the happy coincidence. In Howard Hughes’s world, this kind of dumb luck was the whole of the law.

Walter found his center, gave a wistful goodbye look to the lanai, and took the first step out onto the deep. Trailing behind Hughes like a glider on a tow-rope, he heard the man still ranting.

“President Stevenson says he don’t believe in military precision or control freaks. He encourages randomness. He’s a damn fool. Switched off all the military microwave-relays, and now the only way the military can talk to each other is by computer and satellite. What if all that went tits-up? He won’t listen. Now you, I don’t know if you’ll break in half when we get a towing-lead on you, but the vibe’s right, so...”

Shock whirled around Walter Munk’s sad head as they made their way to the waiting limo. “This is too good to be true,” he muttered. “Mr Hughes, you...how...”

“No single scientific or commercial organization had the in-house capabilities to do this.” Hughes leered. “No *single* one. Me, I got a whole umbrella of ’em fallin’ out of my ass.”

“Thank you for that image, but...”

“Global Marine, to start with,” Hughes told him boredly.

“Where they couldn’t come up with parts, Zapata Offshore stepped in.”

“But...they both lost the bid for Phase Two.” Munk was stuck on that.

Hughes shrugged. “So? Zapata and Global both belong to me. Mostly. ’Cos of my lawyer. Bright boy. New York Republican. Used to work for the Surgeon General and then got some sense. George Gordon Battle Liddy. Good American.”

“Uh...” Walter steadied himself. A big, burly Mexican guy in an immaculate black suit got out and helped him inside the limo. Hughes was still talking. The Mexican checked his immaculate DA in the shotgun mirror, opened that door and got in beside the driver, a sawed-off white guy in a chauffeur’s cap and black Ray-Bans like Les Paul on *Hee Haw!* wore.

“Liddy’s good with the...uhhh...global aspects of business, too... ’Cos of him...me and that two-bit hood...Maheu...leased them islands from Prescott Bush right after Castro started buyin’ up nuke warheads. Zapata Off-Shore, that was, Prescott and his boy George and Hugh Liedtke. They had drilling rigs down on Cay Sal not far from where you were. I got a better one where we’re goin’.”

This was all of interest to Munk. “Have you ever met Fidel Castro, Mr Hughes?”

“Isolated...crazy... Won’t leave his *haci*. They said he lets his fingernails grow real long, and his beard’s down to his chest. Lives on nothin’ but milk and Hershey bars. Wears Kleenex boxes on his feet to keep the germs out and pees in a jar ’cos he’s scared of bathrooms. Anyway, wait’ll you see the drillship we built for you.”

“Me?” Walter closed his eyes and leaned back into hand-tooled leather. Better. “What about Bill Bascom? He was in charge of the whole – ”

“That’s why I went lookin’ for you!” Hughes smacked the seat beside him for emphasis. Hard. “Bill’s back in the damn hospital with the cancer, at a time like this.”

All unbidden, tears swam into Munk’s eyes. He removed his horn-rims and wiped at them. Incredibly, Hughes said, “Sorry.”

“Not...not to worry. Bill’s tough. He’s seen worse. He’d...be pleased.”

“He is. He asked me why didn’t the NSF just give the bid to Zapata in the first damn place.”

Munk put his glasses in his pocket and closed his eyes again. The tequila had loosened his tongue. “Well, we...” He was trying very hard to speak distinctly. His accent was almost nonexistent, but his diction and inflection were precisely Prussian. “Everybody in AMSOC, myself included, were too fancy to give up their persh – excuse me, personal scientific work to operate the second pha – phase of Mohole. And the NSF...they’re not...authorized...to actually go in and do the work. They tried to shelter this project from bureaucracy to such an extent it en – ended up causing the very thing – ” here a sick laugh burred from his throat “ – the very thing it tried to prevent!”

“I see.” Howard actually looked like he was paying attention, but there was a gleam in his eyes that Walter didn’t understand. “I daresay. Lill has his head in the clouds, and don’t even get me started about Waterman. The contractor they hired, Halliburton, Brown and Root, whatever the dummy company’s name is, doesn’t...what is the idiom...know shit from Shinola.”

Walter was surprised at the depth of his own anger. “William Benson, too, the one who put most of this ash – actually... through. Benson’s a geologist, not an oceanographer. And true... to his field, his planning methods revolve around pressure and time, in his case foot pounds of the former and very little of the latter. They ruined it.” His voice became a furious mockery of Brown’s. “Wall, if’n we cain’t do it, we’uns could allus hahr us a acre of engineers’ Please. They’re just this amorphous company. They could have cared less about the Mohole before, or any other scientific problem, period.”

Hughes grinned like a mandrill. “What’s the difference between Jesus Christ and a contractor?”

Munk waited.

“Jesus Christ is coming back.” Walter’s bark of laughter seemed to reassure him. “Oh, yeah. I’ve dealt with those boys. That’s Halliburton’s standard con: fuck the contract up, then

keep what they skimmed off the top. Big oil-field service outfit outta Dallas. They're public works, not science. Hell, they got about four patents and only one PhD on staff. Just started gettin' Federal contracts as soon as their hired politicians made it to Washington. But you're in safe hands now. Ol' Howard Hughes, he don't ever quit. Just like Prescott said in the original bid, we still won't charge a fee, either."

Hughes thought a moment. "We had a guy out to study your boat so we could improve the design."

"Um...yes. Nice to finally clear that up. I suppose...you couldn't do any worse than the contractors did. This might bear fruit." The knowledge that this man had just performed scientific espionage against AMSOC was lost in cactus fumes and chaos in motion.

"Government and science cannot coexist." Howard said emphatically. "I'm the one company who's beholden to neither and knows more about both of them than both of 'em put together."

The lights of Guadalupe were neon spaghetti through the sunroof. Something inside Walter was screaming like a drill-bit stuck in solid basalt. He tried to smile. "William M. Gaines says there's no room for excellence in any government project. Why did you do all this again?"

Hughes grew momentarily sullen. "I told you, I got my reasons."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch."

But Dr Munk could tell Hughes was lying. His lips were moving.

.....
The six o'clock news is due on Maple Street. Every Nielsen Family kid with a Cousteau Society ring is glued to the set as the young anchor adjusts his prescription shades and clears his throat.

"Mahalo, America. Dr Hunter S. Thompson here with you on *CBS Evening News*. Tonight, we open with some very special footage from a certain vessel at the Marianas Trench.

"The Marianas Trench was a very warm place during the War. Research scientists and nuclear submarines went missing here all the time. Now the eyes of the world have returned here for a more peaceful purpose.

“Three years ago, Walsh and Piccard in the bathyscaph *USS Trieste* measured the deepest part of the Marianas Trench at over seven miles below sea level. You could park Mount Everest at the bottom of Challenger Deep. The *Glomar Challenger* is a nuclear-powered deep-sea drillship specially designed by Hughes Aerospace, Hughes ToolCo and Hughes Global Marine, in an unusual collaboration for the three notoriously [beeeeeeeep] companies.

“This far down into the interior of the Earth has never before been visited by man. As Mallory, Irvine and Norbu said in 1924 when discovering the South Col route to Mount Everest’s lofty summit, the men and women on board this ship are making the downward climb...because it’s there.

“Though many species in the Trench are endangered, the area of Challenger Deep has been cleared for drilling by the Japanese parliament. Activist groups have been strangely silent on the issue since President Stevenson gave Oregon’s songbird, one of their leading lights, a security clearance to the vessel. This operation will far surpass the *Trieste*’s 1960 soundings. The whole world is watching.

“Taking into account the Trench’s latitude and the Earth’s equatorial bulge, the crew of the *Glomar Challenger* is a mere three thousand, nine hundred and fifty-four miles from the center of the Earth while they’re sitting on the ocean.

“The drill they will sink into the diatomaceous ooze at the bottom will strike the actual depth of the purported ‘Challenger Hollow’ found by the Russians some years back, a series of caverns rumored to extend down to an even further depth. Occidental Petroleum has run tests in the area, but declined to comment. If those caverns are really there, our men will find them, and sink a riser pipe to drill still further than the Rooskies.

“Like so many other aspects of this project, many of the workings of the *Glomar Challenger* remain a trade secret. ‘It just took an atomic-power plant,’ Hughes states, ‘and a little elbow grease.’

“Every part of this vessel pushes the state of several arts. Its eight outboard propellers, or ‘steering screws,’ were designed by the visionary Henry Woods at Hughes ToolCo in Huston, Texas.

Woods also created the thirty-five-thousand-foot highspeed self-correcting drill string that makes its own transverse waves to keep itself straight within the guide shoe and down through the ship.

“Along that string, the drill pipe will provide hydraulic transmission for the drill itself. Seawater is sucked up into the drill to cool it, into storage tanks under the derrick, and through the pump.

“When they get to the bottom, they still haven’t run out of toys. Dr Roy Edgerton at MIT designed their echo ‘ping’ sounder, which will map the Moho at thirty-six thousand cycles a second. The depth will be recorded by precision instruments, and dredged with the longest winch known to man.

“The Moho will be cored by the precision craftsmanship of the Kullenberg piston when the drill is hauled up, triggered by a weighted lever to feel along the bottom like fingers, and punch holes, and sample the Moho with a whirling diamond ring. The ship carries a proton-precision magnetometer to measure gravity down there, and a hundred other instruments this reporter doesn’t have time to name.

“The *Glomar Challenger’s* drilling rig in its entirety is of a revolutionary new Japanese design by the great physicist Masao Ide at the Masashi Institute of Technology in Tokyo. Its one-of-a-kind ultrasound imaging systems were composed straight from the brain of the great Shinichi Suzuki. Its patented core sampling mechanism is placed to bring back several hundred pounds of earth from the Mohorovicic Discontinuity.

“This is the slippery layer between the outer crust and the mantle of the Earth, where things start to get hot and physical laws start to change. The crew of the *Glomar Challenger* call it the Moho for short. Presently, the *Challenger* has dropped anchor and set up shop in international waters around the Marianas Trench, deepest location in the Earth’s crust, in the floor of the Northwestern Pacific Ocean, above the subduction, or contact point, between the Pacific and Philippine continental plates.

“The *Challenger’s* drill has an eventual payload, the submersible automatically-piloted drillship *Nautilus*, specially designed

to fit down its drillshaft. Loewy Studios' *Nautilus* must hold up under some of the most savage conditions known to the mind of man, sixteen thousand pounds of pressure per square inch from seven miles of water bearing down overhead as it will drill into the subduction between two fiercely grinding plates of tectonic rock.

"Its mothership, the *Glomar Challenger*, is both vast floating fortress and highly-specialized survey vessel. The drill collects its findings using a narrow, multi-beam echo sounder Dr Ide finished just three years ago. Its findings are plotted on this year's Burroughs Supercomputing Engine to form an 'echo map' of the ocean bottom and the layer between the crust.

"They have miles to drill before they sleep. Things have the potential for bad craziness. But there is no going back, and no time to rest. The crew must ride it out and we here at CBS, as professional journalists, have an obligation to cover the story, for good or ill.

"The only thing that really worries me is the investor. There is nothing in the world more helpless and irresponsible and depraved than - "

**WE ARE EXPERIENCING SATELLITE DIFFICULTIES
PLEASE STAND BY**

"Be that as it may, straight down is the only way to travel. Inner space teaches just as much as outer space. The way down is the way up. In this day and age, you can strike sparks anywhere. There is a fantastic universal sense that what people are doing is right, that mankind is winning by having the momentum and not having to fight.

"No one knows anything of consequence about the true, actual state of the Earth's interior. All modern experiments tend to explode the older theories. Though the dangers and difficulties multiply, the only way to learn is to go and see. It's taken a lot of politicking, but the *Challenger's* crew shall overcome these, and many other difficulties, to unjam the sad mechanisms of their funding, to begin again. Their success depends upon speed and

dispatch. They may hope to travel far.

“The great scientific iconoclast Charles Fort said that there are still plenty of new lands left to discover. The journey there will be choked with lava, by burning rocks and infinite dangers. Following up the discovery of those new lands seems madness for most people I suppose.

“But the geniuses of this age care nothing for theories. Legalization of psychotropics, and the Whole Earth Electronic Link, have paved the way for a scientific Renaissance unheard of since the days of the movable press. As in so many other reports, I must emphasize, viewers, that the science fiction of this age happens on the *Evening News*... and that the Sixties are truly an exciting time to be alive.

“This portion of the broadcast was recorded at eleven am, Greenwich Meridian Time. We take you now to Rod Serling...”

.....
11°21' NORTH LATITUDE, 142°12' EAST LONGITUDE
21 June, 1963. Via Satellite.

Color television is still in its infancy. Live news broadcasts offer countless proofs of this. The wall Rod Serling stands against is stark gray steel, but the camera's white-balance and the strange lighting make it look a bit blue. Serling's tanned skin looks green. The cameraman is as steady as a dolly on wheels.

“Rod Serling, on assignment for CBS *Evening News*. Tonight, we submit for your consideration the strange case of Dr Walter Heinrich Munk.”

Rather than his usual sober black suit and skinny tie, he wears a puffy black vest over a thick sweater, dungarees, big hiking boots, and a red knit cap. The outfit swallows his small frame whole. Serling paces back and forth, looking the Folks At Home dead in the eyes every so often.

“In the 1940s, Dr Vannevar Bush said that science and government make strange bedfellows and must go very carefully. Pure experiments must not become mired in bureaucracy. But with private phil – philanth – Charlie, you can have the boys cut this, but I'm not using that word in this context on the air – investors

like Armand Hammer and Howard Hughes, the lines get blurred and the question becomes moot.

“The most technologically advanced exploration ship in the world has dropped anchor today above the Marianas Trench, on a mission that may shed a good bit of light on the origins of life on planet Earth, as well as the origins of tsunamis and many tropical storm phenomena, measurements of temperature, pressure, gravity and magnetism, and samples of material from both the crust and mantle of the Earth.

“The ultra-deep drilling mission from this free-floating vessel aims to sink a kind of geophysical research shaft, prove the much-debated theory of continental drift... To discover a silent, unknown world, a central sea we know not yet, and to establish a new era in all sciences.

“They will be drilling the deepest hole ever dug, thirty-five thousand feet below sea level, beneath seventeen thousand feet of choppy water, battling salt corrosion, extreme heat, wind, pressure, waves and unpredictable currents.

“The brightest lights in half a dozen disciplines will be turned up full blast out here, and the manuals thrown away and rewritten.

“From the first feasibility tests in 1961 off the California coast, to the two drills Mohole 1 broke sinking their vision to Davy Jones’s locker and the scream of scientist and drill alike when they hit basalt, this project has been fraught with uncertainty.

“The American drillship *Glomar Challenger* intends to drill four-point-three miles below the sea bed, more than twice the distance the Soviets achieved a few years ago. Originally a drillship for Hughes Global Marine, the *Challenger* has been converted into a state-of-the-art scientific fortress.

“Four research areas with multiple facilities on board ship are staffed for physical, scientific and biological analysis of the cylindrical rock samples the *Challenger* and later, the *Nautilus*, will bring to the surface, as well as imaging and other analysis of the drilled hole.

“The *Challenger*’s derrick stands over two hundred feet above the water. Beneath it are the drilling controls, and the lubricant

pumps, whose hose extends up the length of the main pipe. Above the drill, there, those are two sliding joints to absorb the shock. Behind it, we see the casing rack, with three miles of patented phlange-pipe which will attach around the outside of the drill and make sure the hole doesn't cave in. Under the rack – Here, pull in, Jimmy, we want an ECU shot. These are diamond drill heads and coring bits, valued at over eight thousand dollars apiece.

“Up in the stem, aft, is the main control unit, with the core processing lab below, and...ahh...the sonar controls, there, the large dish we have for a figurehead. Charlie, we can go back and do this bit again. Here, on four corners of stem and stern, these gigantic beauties are actually the world's largest outboard propellers, to keep the ship stable when drilling begins.

“The ship is half a football field long. The hundred-foot glass moon pool in the middle of the hull, underneath, is used as a central observation deck and also as a clean room for handling samples from the fathomless deep.

“This floating city is big enough to comfortably house all this and two separate decks for living quarters. The research deck is divided into laboratories, everything from a Vibrotron transducer to measure pressure fluctuations on the seafloor, to photography, paleontology and crypto-zoology, even sections for entire supercomputers. You name it, Hughes has made sure it's here. Hand-picked researchers will be flown out to the ship as needed in each area.

“Global Marine and Zapata Off-shore plan to spare no expense. Operations aboard the *Challenger* will be round the clock, with sixty-five roughnecks hand-picked from the United States Navy and Marines, and fifty scientists and technicians scheduled to work. The Curator will control the preservation of any and all cores hauled up on deck.

“The drill on the *Challenger*, inside which the *Nautilus* will be placed, is a raised drill with a hanging capacity of over one thousand tons, a fifteen-thousand-meter drilling capacity and a ten thousand meter drill string. The *Nautilus* will be placed in a length of specially-constructed pipe and lowered into the hole

to continue down further than anyone ever has, and raise to the surface a self-sealing fifty-gallon cylinder full of a living sample of the tissue of the Earth's mantle.

"Extrusions, or samples, from the Earth's mantle, have been pushed to the surface over millennia. But thanks to Hughes Industries, The Octopus, science now gets to dip its spoon in the primordial soup up close, firsthand, and with the best minds of this generation on board to pluck the golden apples of what Jules Verne called 'the central fire.'

"This will be a major breakthrough for modern science. It is widely held, currently, that life on Earth originated beneath the crust, at temperatures and pressures unknown on land or sea as we understand them. The heat that generated the primordial soup on Earth may have come from the Earth's molten core, rather than the Sun. Any animals living at that depth, micro-organic or otherwise, are as yet unclassified species.

"While in the area, the *Challenger* will be assigned a number of other missions. Among them, its operators will sink sensors into the Earth's crust to provide our allies in Japan and East Asia with an early-warning system against earthquakes and tsunamis.

"The great explorer, Commander Jacques Cousteau, titular leader of this enterprise, states that..."

We cut to a different shot on the ship. A lean, tanned Frenchman in a black knit cap and long underwear sits in front of the camera smoking a Gauloise Straight. The sunlight on the waves twinkles in his eyes.

"We know so little about what is going on just a short distance under our own feet." Cousteau stands and gestures out at the sea in front of him. "This could answer questions mankind has asked since we left the trees. How did we get here? What was the first cause? What did our first ancestor look like? As an engineer, this project has given me *la mal à tête*." He makes headache gestures. "But as an explorer..." He beams, the light in his eyes infectious. "This lifetime opportunity has been recast in Hughes steel, *mes amis*. Sometimes, lightning can strike twice."

We cut back to Serling, in his own berth below decks. Behind him, an umbrella has been coated in tinfoil to maximize the

lighting in the shot. The umbrella sits out of the way in the corner, still and serene, reflecting all the light from one Klieg baby-spot that somehow managed to escape a dunk on the way out to the *Challenger*.

“The curator, Dr Munk, is currently experiencing the rebound of his dreams. On the night of his greatest defeat, he found another door...into history.

“Pass with us under the shadow of the storm as Dr Munk and the crew of the *Glomar Challenger* take a Journey to the Center of the Earth which has already caused a stir throughout the free world. Everyone just wants to know if they can pull it off. I intend to find out for myself. Anyone who'd like to can find out with me... Cut this.” Serling says this into the camera, completely breaking character. “I think. Charlie, was that a bit much?”

From the tiny seashell in his big battered boxer ear comes a rich, booming chuckle all sunlight on a Sunday morning. “Hell, no, Roddy. You know Kronkite eats that lyrical stuff up. I'm just glad we didn't lose the uplink. Don't cut that. It was kind of... moving. Were you ever in radio?”

“You're a good man, Charlie Brown. But, no, never had time.”

“Could have fooled me.” Charles Kuralt pauses at the fusillade of coughs he hears. “Roddy, what's the – ”

“I'm okay.” Serling chuckles tersely to himself. “I haven't had a smoke in a month. The cough's come to stay. I'll kick it out eventually.”

“You're better off, kid. Took me years to quit. And multiple attempts. Don't work too hard.”

“Talk to you tonight, Chuck.”

“You bet.” *Beep.*

Brooding, the CBS correspondent reaches in his pocket for a stick of tea. He's still not convinced that tea is any healthier than tobacco, but Dr Leary the Surgeon General has a hypnotic sort of way about his propaganda machine.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Rod says. The young cameraman, a bearded Beat in a turtleneck, looks up from breaking down the umbrella rig. Serling shows him the joint. “You wanna help me finish this?”

“No, thanks.” Jim Henson is tired. In his eyes, an endless cara-

van of creatures trudges across a sunset waste, heads down, to seek the dark crystal of sleep. "It'd just screw up my high."

He returns to his ministrations, leaving Serling to tune in, turn on and kick back. Out on the deeps, beyond the porthole, surface calm covers troubled currents. Rod Serling is married now, no longer quite so angry. Carol is the best thing that ever happened to his inspiration, or his career.

Once in a while, the war still triggers him. Once in a while, he dreams of the bigger boys on the playground who called him sheeny and yid.

Nowadays, they get a few of these Holocaust-denying shitbirds on the new show, usually junior senators or corporate executives who don't know what to do when they're not behind the scenes. When they come on *Sixty Minutes*, those Lindbergh-worshipping toadstools get to meet Rod Serling up close, and Ed Murrow, too. Then they get to learn what it's like to be sinners in the hands of two very, very angry gods.

Rod smokes, meditating on returning to land and marching back up Broadway with his Emmy.

.....
Cahier #1, 28 Mai 1963-?

The *Calypso* is in dry-dock in Yokohama. Our next documentary for the *American Societè Géographique Nationale* must wait for one year. But when they heard of this, *National Geographic* bargained for the rights immediately.

But Howard Hughes is, as the Anglais say, quite barking mad. Someone or something pushed this man off the deep end a long, long time ago, and he has been sinking further ever since. In a way, he reminds me of every wealthy patron the Society has ever had. They don't know what the hell they want, but they want it yesterday, without complaint. I certainly can inform him of nothing, his conversation being uniformly answered by himself.

We are uprooted, transplanted, cast upon the waters. The crew are restless to begin our journey back out to the Moho. Who knows? We may be on the verge of some great discovery. There is undoubted proof as to the correctness of this surmise. The sum

of money we were offered is so large as to be embarrassing. One can hardly refuse. There is so much good that can be done with that money. The Dutch sea-farms need all the help we can beg, borrow, steal or get on loan.

So much left to do. *Zut*. At least I have my youth.

.....

From the Diary of Dr Walter Munk

Scripps Institution of Oceanography, 22 June 1963

There would be little scenery to diversify the journey, I was to soon learn on the first leg of our trip, the easiest and most monotonous. The horizon was perfectly calm, pure, and free from all haze. The sea was glassy calm thirty thousand feet down, and the reflected sun appeared at the horizontal specular point. We were traveling at close to Mach One.

It must in all truth be confessed that things as yet had gone on well, and I should have acted in bad taste to have complained. I kept my opinions to myself at first, but he wore me down.

The longer I remain alive, the more I realize that wealth never made anyone happier, smarter or nicer, only more insane. And absolute wealth maddens absolutely. I suppose he's entitled to be a little weird. The idea of him is no weirder than that vortex of rich degenerates back in Congress. But, my God, if only I'd known just how weird he really is.

The inside of the H-4 Valkyrie was lavishly appointed. The one we were riding in was the very prototype built for Henry Kaiser by Don Douglas and his team at Lockheed, before they started mass-producing them and lowered the tone of the design. The originals had once carried Special Forces to Normandy. "Captain Robert Morris's division, to be exact, the fella they claim plugged Himmler right through the eye..."

Everywhere that Howard went, such long stories were sure to go. He called his H-4 the *Spruce Goose*. He said that came to him in a dream, just like most of the long scroll of bullshit that came out of his mouth.

Some of it was fascinating. Hughes was a walking headline, an oral tapestry of postwar politics. He would rattle on for hours

about the golden age of World War Two's apogee, in 1947, when he was called upon to abandon the XF-11 and commission Ray Loewy and Richard Feynmann to help design a new spy-plane, the U-2.

As far as the plane we were in, I knew from the papers that Don Douglas hadn't been able to correct for the H-4 being too big for its landing gear. I asked Jerry about that.

"Watch." Hughes's bodyguard's voice came back from the cabin 'com. "Boss just invented the new landing gear with some people from Japan. The government already owns the patent. He says the public ain't ready for these yet, but...he calls 'em Hovs."

Yet the sight (from a prerecorded demo vid patched through to the monitor in the armrest of my seat) of that flying boat hanging mere feet in the air over Lake Ponchartrain was too much for me after a few seconds of glib narration. I clicked it off. "Fascinating."

Raul brought me a Bloody Mary as soon as we got on, a good one with real chile-sauce and a stick of celery. Jerry was flying the plane. As soon as I felt us lift up and arc gracefully to starboard, I was alarmed.

"Where are we going, Mr Hughes? My crew's docked at - "

"I know," Howard said over the intercom from the bathroom. He'd been in there since we took off. "Dr Munk, we are not going to the Mohole. We're going to the deepest point on Earth."

I sipped my drink, smacked my lips and sipped again. "The Marianas Trench."

The intercom rang. "You get a cookie. You've been out there before?"

I snorted. "The University still has a research array or two in the area." My hangover was already feeling better.

Howard Hughes could talk the flippers off a plesiosaur. Half the time, he probably didn't know what he was saying. I just listened, for hours on hours, watching the subtle character of the Pacific change far below. Sea and sky reflected the same color in the sun. The illusion was beautiful and creepy.

"Will you be...personally supervising?" I asked.

There was a pause. "Son, I'm from Missouri."

I waited a moment. "I don't know what that means."

"State motto is 'Show Me the Money'. I like to see what the hell I'm paying for."

"Oh." That's right, he was from Missouri, just like Dale Carnegie and Harry Truman and that Heinlein, the one who won the Oscar for *The Puppet Masters* the same year as Hughes and Cousteau.

"Not like it matters." His voice lowered, as if someone might be listening in. "I sold all my stock to Hughes Medical, which makes the whole shebang a non-profit. I don't pay taxes, son. It's the way of the future. My lawyer came up with the idea."

"Did your lawyer tell you to buy a President, too? Bobby Kennedy's a good man. He should have won."

WHAMP! as Hughes punched the bathroom wall. Something was changing about his voice. No longer did he sound like Robert Heinlein giving an interview to *MovieTone*. Now he sounded like something screaming up from a crack far beyond the edge.

"Then his brother should have paid me back that two hundred and fifty grand I loaned him to buy off the press after he crashed his car and drowned that Bouvier girl! Where were you when I made the world? I was determined to elect a president of our choosing who would be deeply indebted and recognize his indebtedness. Adlai Stevenson and the Populist Party know the facts of political life, so we selected him."

"We?" I imagined Hughes's unshaded eyes like twin brimstone-tipped drill bits boring, boring, boring stereophonic Glory Holes through the bathroom wall. "Sorry I asked."

A pause. "Yes, Dr Munk. We. We are men of the world. None of this should be news." The light through the windows changed, becoming the golden of late afternoon out there on the sea.

"I guess I don't know everything," I admitted. It was something to say.

"You're damn right you don't. You Austrians are so naïve about American politics."

At that, I bristled. "I'm an American citizen, the same as you."

"Yeah, well. This country was bought and sold before either of us were ever born. Who the fuck is anybody to make a moral

judgement? The favors I did for the CIA got me ownership of most of Las Vegas – ”

“And Hollywood,” I pointed out. There was a noise that the ‘com almost didn’t catch.

“No, no, gave up movies. I crashed and burned in Hollywood. Too many years to make a movie right. Too hard to tame a leading lady.”

“Or stay married to one?”

WHAMP! WHAMP! WHAMP! “Hrrrump. Err. Haah. Harrumph. I. Errr. Haaah. Have...” (Raul looked at me, making frenetic guillotine gestures, but Hughes soon enough regained control.) “I...have a...partner now. A...special friend.”

Why was this so alarming? “Good for you.”

“Someone I...someone I couldn’t...dominate. I...gave up sex, before, when I heard the McWhirters had me listed in their little record book as having spent the most on my sex life of anyone, ever, but...”

WHAMP! “It is true that the intensity of weight will diminish just in proportion to the depth to which we go. You know very well that it is on the surface of the Earth that its action is most powerfully felt, while on the contrary, in the very center of the Earth bodies cease to have any weight at all – ”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I responded, thinking he was joking in some weird, stream-of-consciousness way. *What did they put in my drink, again?* “Gravity, for the most part, gets greater as you go down. Verne’s idea that you get lighter as you go down was pure hokum. You’d better start making sense, or I’ll turn this plane right around...”

Jerry hissed at me *sotto voce*, ruefully shaking his head. “You’ll just make him mad. Humor him.”

“Uhhh...of course.” I raised my voice a bit. “Of course, Mr Hughes! Tell me more!”

WHAMPWHAMPWHAMP! “Joe McCarthy was misunderstood! There’ll be no more America with all this globalization bullshit, no more know-how and make-do, just Plague and Pestilence and Famine and all them little creatures crawlin’ everywhere...”

He lapsed into silence. I thought of my own lawyer, and the will in my desk drawer at home. I was very glad we'd gotten that all written out.

"I am Mars, Bringer of War, Dr Munk. I build weapons for the world and turn out over a billion dollars a year. I prevented any major political future for an entire family. I own the White House, and Senate Minority Leader Nixon as well. I hedge my bets." He sounded like he was coming back into his body. I went for it.

"So what kind of vessel are we using?"

A rational question. Surprisingly enough, it helped. More surprisingly, he started to tell me. "CIA spent two hundred million on it last year to recover a wrecked Rooskie nukesub three miles under the sea, the *SSB K-129*."

"I never heard about that."

"Nor will you. It was called Project Jennifer."

"Did it work?"

WHAMP! Sigh. "She tore in half. But the new one won't. I got it licked. This'n's a sixty-five thousand ton deep sea salvage vessel. It's just gonna be the anchor platform. The drill is a whole other ship I had Ray Loewy design for me with Commander Cousteau. He ain't well. Loewy, I mean. Got his assistant to do most of the work. You'll meet him on the phonesat if you got any technical issues. Angeleno. Good kid. Name's Ed Roth."

"Ed Roth. Yes." I was never going to remember any of this. I had finally made it to Hell. I went to the front of the cabin, made myself another Bloody Mary, and settled back to enjoy the ride.

Even without navigational instruments on my person, my body knew that we were very near Challenger Deep. It was the taste of the air circulating in from outside the Valkyrie, the pressure in my ears, the simple second nature of my lifelong passion. I pointed this out.

"Right you are," Raul said from the cockpit. "Now boarding for the Subduction Zone."

I'd heard the stories, and wondered why Hughes wasn't flying his baby himself, but Jerry just said something about a 'bad spell' and would say no more. That was one hour prior to takeoff. He

still hadn't come out of the bathroom then, either. I wondered if he was afraid to let anyone see his itsy-bitsy teenie-weeny yellow polka-dot bikini.

As we circled in towards the water, I could see a gigantic floating horseshoe that looked like an aircraft carrier with an oil derrick larger than I was used to reaching up out of it to meet us. The waves came, far below, spuming thundering volleys of spray. Here and there, a distant bird soared by.

Jerry'd told me that the crew aboard ship were mercenaries, soldier-scientists and soldier-geologists, each with a long story to tell. A small tender ship was anchored alongside the horseshoe, belching black smoke. That'd be for the roughnecks, the drilling crew, housing mud pumps, power plants, and supplies as well.

My brain played over the spectacle of ghastly pale rays of sun through the clouds all around us, timeless white haze under mountain ranges of thick cumulus, with thirty-knot winds from the north. The vertiginous rush made me forget for a moment who, and where, I was. I forgot who had brought me here. The ocean was mine. I could do anything.

"Mr Hughes, you're really missing a lot of the view," I pointed out, lost in the golden sunlight on the vast waste of waters.

"This ain't no pleasure cruise. Riding a big raft over a pond just bothers me. Don't talk to me about admiring scenery, or any other sentimental trash." *WHAMP!*

I noticed I'd been biting my lip for hours, but was surprised to taste the blood.

.....
"What can we expect when we come to the upheaved regions shattered by volcanic eruptions and subterrene commotions? Far below the winding, desolate seashores, horizontal strata of rocks bend and stretch over boiling hot magma. The new islands that spring up around lava vents automatically acquire a supernatural reputation by default, incidental countries where agglomerations of nature's ruins form terrible chaos.

"Howard Hughes has chosen this region not for its wild beauty and the hardiness of its varied marine life, but for its efficacy. We are positioned directly over the Subduction Zone, and the

nearest islands are passing strange enough to show it.

“It’s overcast but settled today. We have neither to fear the fatiguing Pacific heat nor drenching rain. Tourist weather, you might say.”

Brooding again. The analyst warned me about that. She said it shows on camera. Damn it.

“Beneath us, the Mohorovicic Discontinuity is never in complete repose, a perpetually agitated current like wrinkling skin forever changing shape with the action of tectonic shifts and volcanic upheavals. There are steam vents far above it, and volcanic shafts, forms of life never before captured on film by the multitudes of creatures who walk across the surface of this planet every day entirely ignorant and unsuspecting that there are whole other rings of world below, rings of smoke and heat, a world with drives and dreams and the perpetuation of life just like our own, only far more wild and alien.”

How to describe that vast, floating island cutting a chunk from the sea, rooms on rooms striped in yellow and black and the *hod-d-d-d-d-d-d-d* of the core processing flow far below as the drilling platform would soon suck in tons of Mother Earth along the conveyor belt to be filtered and sucked anew...

A whole city run by a few control rooms; Engine, Ballast, Dynamic Positioning, Acoustic Positioning... I was in the belly of a great whale, lit only by the lamps of his mouth. I could still hear him showing me the vast, alien-looking suction pipe they were using to house the drill, rapping on each length of it up on the drillracker in the stern: “It’s called the Hughes Phlange! It come to me in a dream!” Bruh.

“The *Nautilus* is equipped with twin Hughes Deep Rock x2000 bits. On its own, the *Challenger* was only equipped to drill in waters up to eleven thousand feet. Now the *Challenger* will only be the insertion mechanism, the needle, one made of a million pounds of superstructure and dynamically positioned equipment from Hughes Marine, the largest offshore drilling contractor in the world.

“When choosing a president, a philanthropy, an underaged mistress or a scientific mission, Howard Hughes always keeps

the stockholders in mind. (Charlie, cut that. Sorry.) Commander Cousteau's insistence on filming the whole enterprise, setting each leg of drilling back by days and thousands of dollars, puts Mr Hughes in a towering passion. Our host does not count civility among the cardinal virtues."

I shut off the tape recorder and sighed. This was the worst head-trip I'd ever been on. Why was I burning out like this? Was Hughes really so hard to say yassuh-boss to until I was off the boat, and then I could have him on the griddle with Murrow any time I wanted?

Any thoughts but those. Then a new fish landed gasping on the deck. The tall, bespectacled Austrian made the gangplank of the *Spruce Goose* rather uncertainly, clambering a long way down onto the main foredeck of the *Explorer* and putting the fingertips of his left hand to his temple.

I shook his hand briskly. He had a way about him, and eyes that penetrated inner space. "Rod Serling, Dr Munk. CBS News. I'll be your waiter for today."

Walter Munk smiled at me, an odd little smile smile that said, *Son, you don't know the half.* "You're very astute, Mr Serling. I trust I won't hold up the parade just yet?"

I snorted. "Half the crew's stoned on hashish all day. They go for these long-distance endurance dives, and spear-fish, and put on plays for the camera at night. One guy's always the woman, and I think that -"

But Munk was looking at me like I was a two-headed calf. I shook my head. "You'll find out. Welcome aboard. Crew chow's in ten minutes. Hope you like hot dogs. The roughnecks and the film crew don't mix much. You're kind of the only one that transcends that bridge. Yet."

I led Munk down below decks to the nominal Officers' Mess. Cookie surprised me. For the doctor, it was a real sit-down meal with prime rib and cloth napkins and silverware that matched. Hughes must have taken his Thorazine today. Small favors. We talked awhile...

.....
"I mean, it's typical Hughes reasoning." Munk's eyes were twink-

ling. He was on a tear, not willing to admit that he was happy to be here and back at work. It hadn't hit him yet. I let him talk. "If you were going to drill a hole to the bottom of the crust, you'd want to start from the deepest point. He does nothing half-assed, this man."

I chuckled, spearing a parsleyed potato and using it like a classroom pointer for a moment. "We're on a timetable of three weeks. He's getting cagey."

"Three legs of drilling in three w—" Just like that, Munk inhaled a chunk of meat and began to choke. I was out of my seat in two seconds, popping my thumbs up and in for the medic's favorite embrace. Hughes's man Jerry materialized in the doorway. I told him in Ranger hand-sign CODE FOUR, STAND DOWN, and he did.

"The Nautilus is fusion-powered," I clarified, after a moment. "At maximum capacity, its reactor could run a full payload, at an RPM that would astonish you for...oh, just shy of four thousand miles worth of solid matter. Then the hull would buckle, I'd imagine, or it would lose the autopilot signal or some dumb damn thing. But theoretically —"

Walter saw where I was going. "You're as mad as Hughes if you believe that," he told me shortly.

I shrugged. "I'm just a newsman. It's in the specs."

"Yes, well...I'm from Missouri," Munk said, and finally began to eat in earnest. Like most skinny guys I know, he ate like he'd never seen food.

"Heh," I chuckled, "point for you. Anyway, no one's supposed to know the *Nautilus* has a miniaturized fusion engine. If this prototype got out, well, Hughes would lose a lot of money. And he only likes to do that when he's gambling it away. He gambles a lot."

"So I've heard," Munk said in between bites.

I thought of the *Nautilus*, up there on the derrick. Howard's baby. When he lectured the roughnecks on any aspect of its preparation or maintenance, it was like his lips swelled up in rut and his tumescent manhood left the deck, nosing up there for the socket of a sore tooth he couldn't stop picking at.

Were we all the victims of a madman, or was Hughes a dis-

coverer of rare courage and grandeur of conception? To a certain extent I was anxious to be off this assignment. That wouldn't change. But I was never one to mince words. I just hoped that would be enough.

"Three weeks." Munk sat there aghast, with wonder trying not to surface in his eyes. Around us, senior officers came and went, giving us room. "The idea is simply absurd, the hallucination of a distempered imagination." He was shaking his head.

"You'll be briefed after the meal." Then, just like that, dinner skewed to port.

I could only imagine Munk's reaction to the tiny thunderstorm who slid into the seat beside him, locks of blonde boyish bob ticked behind either elfin ear, witchy eyes on fire.

She was like a Hepburn, I thought for no reason, like Kate Hepburn's mad-genius younger sister. Our thunderstorm was wearing a long patchwork peasant skirt tonight and a white blouse open at the throat. There was a moonstone pendant around her neck.

"I thought that was you. You're the *Acoustic Thermometry of Ocean Currents* guy," she rattled off in her sweet, cool voice. "Do you really think ultrasound has no effect on seal breeding patterns? Because I went up there after you and Svardrup left, and I'd like to respectfully differ."

I could see Munk taking her in, his Norman Rockwell face bemused by her vibrance and the snapping mantis claws of her controlled professional ire. Beneath that, though, a golden-skinned alien beauty sang a strange, wild song.

"Harald Svardrup is a great man. Don't you dare – " Munk caught himself. "Who the hell are you?"

"This is our folk singer." Both of them looked at me. "President sent her to keep the activist crowd happy. She runs a...a grass-roots group."

"The Left Hand of Gaia," the elfin young woman elucidated. "Don't let the name scare you, Doctor. We demonstrate in the boardrooms a lot more than we do on the streets. I've been to protests, Doctor. I know how easy it is to clear an area. Umm, we need to talk some more later."

Now Munk looked lost. "I thought Mr Hughes told me that the President was sending –"

"Yeah. Doctor Carson went and got sick. I'm... I'm surprised no one told you."

Munk looked like he wanted to be somewhere else. "I never even got a Mojo about it." He took the woman in for a long time, finally understanding all this, and groaned. "No Rachel Carson for this, period. Damn it. What happened to her?"

"Ahhh...mercury poisoning. She's doing okay. I –" It wasn't very easy to put me at a loss for words, but our songbird could do it every time.

"Do you know Doctor Carson?" Munk asked her, hanging his head. He knew when a woman had gotten the better of him, and never pressed the issue. She just appeared tiredly amused.

"Before I took it on the road with poor dear Bobby Zimmerman, Goddess rest his soul, I was one of her students. I'm just here in the capacity of note-taker, I suppose you could say. The Feds throwing me a stipend. Look –" she put one funny, expressive little hand on his shoulder "– this is tremendously exciting, but the Devil's in command out here, Doctor. You're the first senior staff to arrive who isn't barking mad, or –" she tried not to look at me "– CBS. How dangerous is this going to be? Really?"

"Don't ask me," Munk sighed. "I just got here."

I blessed him for that. Then something about him changed, like he puffed up from the inside, found his center or something, and spoke again. Our Lorelei folded her hands, her face still and clear and rapt. I was done eating. I just wanted to go smoke a jay.

"There is not an hour to lose on our differences," he told her matter-of-factly. "That is the least part of the business, and doesn't in any way trouble me. What is curious for me is not the surface, but what is below."

Now Munk didn't look hungover any more. Not hungover at all. "If you're the President's special consultant, then perhaps you would do me the great honor of accompanying me to this briefing Rod tells me of. Perhaps you can make some sense out of Mr Hughes's itinerary."

She rolled her eyes. His own eyes dimmed and grew apolo-

getic. "I knew I recognized you. I loved your first two albums. Especially the first, the one you just titled with your own name. 'Blowin' in the Wind' was my favorite. Quite beautiful."

"That wasn't mine," she bristled automatically, "that was one of...Bobby's..." Her own amber-hazel eyes twinkled on their own, without warning. "You liked that? Nobody dug that one."

"Then they're fools," Walter replied immediately. "And on the second album, *Ursula Le Guin at Carnegie Hall*, you..."

I faded back to my room and my tape recorder, waiting for phonesat hour to call Carol and the kids. Two more weeks of this. At least now Ursula had a new brain to pick. Just another Monday, in the land of the sea and the sun.

.....
From the Diary of Dr Walter Munk

Scripps Institution of Oceanography, 23 June 1963

We begin drilling at first light. My mind still reels with all I have seen. I regret that I have to spend a moment idle.

After the charming and delightful Ms Le Guin took her leave, I was most graciously received by Captain Robert Keeshan of Hughes's team, and treated like a visiting foreign dignitary by the men working under him.

For some reason, most of them know him by the familiar nickname of Captain Kangaroo. He won't say why. Like most of the team, Keeshan is a decorated former officer in the United States military. In his case, the decorations were a Distinguished Service Cross and a Purple Heart.

Keeshan was a Marine who saved most of his unit during the siege of Tokyo in 1954. President Dewey personally awarded him the DSC after the very emotional surrender of Emperor Tojo had time to fade from the evening news.

All of Keeshan's unit have their stories. Their munitions expert is a Hungarian named Sylvestre Matuschka. He looks like Bela Lugosi, and seems old enough to have witnessed the Franco-Prussian War firsthand. However, he speaks High German and is the only person on this gigantic floating island whom I thoroughly understood from the moment we landed.

Even Matuschka gets excited from time to time, and allows himself to be carried away by his imagination. I do, too. I've been out here before, far above the nightmare countries beneath the waves, trolling the hydrothermal vents along the bottom where the firm ooze is deceptively visible even from far up in a bathyscaphe, trundling through schools of giant sole and flounder, the shrimp hatches so thick that any gourmand would drool at the porthole.

But nothing could have prepared me for this floating city-state armed to the teeth against enemies real or imagined, with its very own hospital and much more besides. When Rod took me on the tour, I saw the great derrick out front and center stretching toward the sky further than any ship should be able to support.

Looking up at it, my legs gave way like those of a drunken man. I felt as though I was falling headlong into a yawning Stygian gulf. I crawled upon my hands and knees like a snake.

Overhead the gray, heavy sky hung like a funereal pall. The boat stood still. The sea seemed to spin. I craned my neck to peer up to the top of the derrick, where Roth's mad contraption hung, a missile more vast than the chains anchoring it by all rights should have been able to hold.

It appeared to be the twin-fanged stylus of an immense sundial, the shadow of which pointed on one given day, like the inexorable finger of fate, to the yawning chasm yet to be. Along its side panels, etched in Bauhaus letters, was the word *Nautilus*.

For the thousandth time, I wondered what I'd wrought by omission and default. Obscurity raged around us, but Howard Hughes knew only mania. The atmosphere was black and foggy, its complexion ugly with unprocessed rage.

All too well sprang Nietzsche's warning to mind, unbidden, then, that when one stares long enough into the darkness upon the face of the deep, the face of the deep within oneself stares back. Under the circumstances, I felt I ought to neglect no precautions.

So thinking, I got back to my feet and followed with my eyes the long length of pipe storeys up on that improbable hoist, down past the little custom-designed drillship, down, down, down, and

through the meniscus of that turgid other world, cutting the light on the water.

I advanced to the rail, and was drawn back by the firm and powerful hand of Commander Cousteau. God, had it been ten years since I saw him take home the Oscar? He won one as a documentarian for *L'Histoire d'un Poisson Rouge* the same year Hughes won one for *The Flying Leathernecks*. How time flew. "What the hell are we doing out here, Jeek?"

Cousteau shrugged. He wasn't much older than me. There wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere on his body. He looked like a stringy, wiry merman, Gallic face full of rapture at our world, his element and mine, surrounding us on all sides.

"To descend into the interior of a cannon," he whispered, "is the act of a madman." As he spoke, I imagined the drilling pipe from the inside, descending myself down that mad, twisted Duchamp staircase into an inner world lit only by bioluminescent bones, upon whose shores a twelve-foot herdsman led half-blind mastodons down to lap at a sunless sea. "Indeed."

"Hi, Jeek," Rod told him. "Look, ahh, you want to show Doctor Munk around the rest of the research facilities? I...gotta cut this short, gotta go take my medicine."

"*Bien sûr*. Delighted to, Roddy." Rod clapped me on the back and headed for the aft stairway down to Visiting Crew Quarters. Cousteau addressed me. "I am, how you call it, up to my eyeballs with these idiots." For some reason, he couldn't dam the chuckle in his throat.

"Don't you have an assistant, Jeek? They're supposed to keep the bullshit off your back."

Cousteau threw up his hands and groaned, gesturing up the derrick. "May I present my assistant, Marcel." Up there, a pale shape, looking entirely naked, clambered like a white spider from girder to girder. Far below, on the opposite side of the tower's base, I saw lots of red hats and Speedo swim trunks cheering him on. There were quite a few hash pipes circulating, as well.

"Payday," Jeek told me, as if that explained everything. "Even out 'ere, I got to pay them every Saturday at noon. As long as I do that, there is nothing they won' do for me. But -"

He looked up at the white spider again, for longer this time, squinting, irritated. “*Marcel! Allez! Tout-de-suite!*” he roared. The man clambered around the other side of the tower, away and down, so fast that the whole thing might have been an optical illusion. On the deck, Cousteau’s fish-men disappeared like minnows under a rock.

“You’ve got them well-trained,” I observed.

He shook his head. “Would that I did. They just respond well to the, um, the voice-commands.”

I had to stand there for a minute. Where I was washed over me like a drug, only I hadn’t taken anything. “Shame we didn’t get something like this started a long time ago, old friend. I just wonder where we’d be with the continental-drift theory if Alfred Wegener had lived through the Manhattan Project. He wasted his last two years planning underground nuke-tests, and for what? If he only knew Fermi would have solved the fusion problem, he’d probably be out here with us.”

Cousteau smiled sadly. “And if I had not died so early,” he intoned, “seeing the heavens so kindly towards you, I would have given you strength for the work.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Dante’s *Inferno*, Jeek? Never figured you for the melancholy type.”

He shrugged. “Rather, ask, what can we do now that we are here? What will we find, and how will we tell the world? We write the rules now. Come.” He made an ironic little bow. “Let me show you the decompression chamber I just invented. Perhaps we can persuade *mein herr* down for a look round in the *Polhymnia*.”

I frowned at him. “What kind of vessel, is it a – ”

“Bathyscaph. Four-man. With the new Plex-Ann glass, and a Hughes Hov for a float.” Cousteau glowed when he told me. “She...sings. The hovs, they make the body vibrate like a tuning fork.”

“I’m in,” I told him. “Had any interesting dives yet?”

He looked like the cat who ate the canary. “With the Kuroshio, it’s warm enough to survive, cold enough to wake you up. Until you hit about six thousand feet or so.”

“Interesting.” He was having me on. “You’re talking about

free-diving beyond six thousand...”

“Not at all. Herr Dräeger – you remember him – helped me design an ultralight full-body aqualung before we set sail. The Inversuit. Hughes calls it the...oh, *comment dit-on*, the...Batman. Only one onboard, I’m afraid. You could try it on, if you took a few of my idiots with you to spot you...”

We headed up to the dry, antiseptic vast back pagoda of the Research Decks, and didn’t stop talking for a true three-hour tour. After he finished showing me around, I put on the Batman suit and fell into that silent world like a penitent with my head low and a Mag-Lite in either hand.

Above me were five of Cousteau’s brawniest fish-men, descending in an arc with magnesium flares and floodlights blazing a trail of white effulgence and a reverse flood of bubbles, rising/falling deeper/higher into the vasty hall, into the purest blue, into the instant LSD trip of nitrogen narcosis.

I’m ashamed to say how long it’d been since I dove. I’m amazed to say I went ten thousand feet down, and only stopped because I knew it would take two hours to come back up.

I came back up too fast. But I didn’t get sick at all. Cousteau told me later that Herr Dräeger calibrated the atmosphere of the Inversuit, as he called it, with notes cribbed from Wehrner von Braun at NASA over brandy and cigars. Old Dräeger and the Commander were thick as ticks since Jeek invented the aqualung.

I promised him I’d study the specs. Perhaps I could get Director Revelle back at Scripps to order one for the Institute. Poor Roger, who more or less discovered the theory of plate tectonics and got almost none of the credit. Roger was out at Mohole with me, a thousand years ago when Bill Bascom took the highest dose of radiation a human being has ever voluntarily taken and put his cancer into remission for a whole year.

I remembered Bill Bascom back in ’61, crazy with the courage given a dying man to dredge deeper, dream higher, sail further and publish more than he ever had in his life, and then live to tell about it. I wondered how he would advise me.

Bill was there in 1948, for the mad dashes between the Scripps

vessel *Spencer Baird* and Roger's research boat the *Horizon*, at a place called Bikini Atoll. Our Institution had been drilling holes then, too, much shallower ones in the volcanoes around the coral atolls as Darwin tried to in the 1850s to prove the general subsidence of volcanoes beneath the sea. That was Dr Harry Hess's baby. He weathered the nuke-test with us as well.

We were convinced the test of the atomic device simply known as 'Mike' would launch a tsunami wave that would wipe out most of Oceania, and some of Southeast Asia. We stayed to hit the panic button ourselves if it did, since our instruments would only warn our friends on shore when it was too late.

The *Horizon* ended up being directly under the fallout from the mushroom cloud. We barely escaped the blast wave. I became apolitical after that, as much as anyone can. Roger started beating the drum for disarmament. I never bothered him about it. I saw what he saw, and ran from it beside him. The *Horizon* stayed radioactive and dry-docked until '62, when we sunk it with dynamite. Do the math.

The last time I'd been in this area, Roger had been here, too, filling my ear with his 'global warming' theory then, an attempt to prove a causal link between CO₂ and fossil fuels. That was after Bikini, when we were trying to prove continental drift by the thinness of the sediment on trench floors from there to Tonga, following magnetic wiggles in the Earth's gravity, making grids of them, making maps. Mapping new lands.

But that night, though the dive made me feel creaky and old even for my puppy age, Dräeger's prototype screamed for further exploration. I missed having my colleagues around to share this with. If I got him to sit still long enough, big dopey Roger would have been able to put my deepening fear of this voyage into a few words and dispel it in the time it took to crack a few beers.

Until then, I had Jeek...and this strange woman named Ursula whom I couldn't stop thinking about, the one who was supposed to be my enemy, but...

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend." I picked myself up and got off to bed, dreaming of the hole so far down, the nightmare shapes of the coral, and strange bottom-dwellers who didn't quite

know enough of man to fear us yet.

I wanted to stay down there. I wanted to grow gills. But there was work up here in the sun. Even in the depths of my unease, I knew I still had something left to learn.

.....
From the Diary of Dr Walter Munk

Scripps Institution of Oceanography, 26 June 1963

Two round-the-clock nights later, we had our first core, our first sample to analyze. The sample wasn't from the Moho by far yet, but seven thousand meters beneath the floor of Challenger Deep. Close. Close and gaining.

It was the greatest night of my life to stand in the clean room in the middle of the cool, cozy bridge on the Moon Pool, and touch with Koroseal-gloved hands a chunk of history from before our ancestors walked on their fins. Far from being yellow diatomaceous babyshit, this core was pelagic sediment, with the larger grains settled on the bottom, a red clay swirl overlain by a layer of globigerina ooze from the end of the last Ice Age. If I had it right, the next sample would be sixty million years old.

I could clearly see the sediment from the waters which once covered the whole planet, glowing in the cells of this calcareous muck. We would find organisms perhaps unclassifiable as virus or bacterium but something in between, I told them.

"I told you, Munk," Cousteau called out sharply, "someday is right now." At that, he moved to the electron microscope snubbing into the clean area from the far side of the glass. With our hands and the robot grippers inside, we were soon jostling at the microscope like schoolboys.

(see add'l notes/subhead: 'new species'/(living organisms which came into existence before free O₂ could be had)/WHM/private memoirs)
.....

Out on the deck later, I was sorry I stayed awake. A conversation beneath the stars, meant amicably enough, went rapidly southward. The Boss was back in town, but stayed locked in his room

below decks most of the time. Except when he was sitting in a deck chair wrecked on codeine and puffing up at me like a pigeon.

We'd been talking of science fiction. Hughes ran to his stateroom to grab a book, and returned in a huff.

"My...dear...Doctor...Munk," he said archly, "Jules Verne's story was an allegorical fable based on events that actually happened. It ain't no mystery. The cavern went through the Earth on an angle. And it wasn't in Iceland, either. We checked. Look right here."

My eyes swam. The Boss was holding an old paperback of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* open to its blank flypage. The cover was well-worn, and hanging by a thread. "See?" He pointed to the blank page. "Doubt that."

"I...should be getting to bed. Long day tomorrow. We have the first core, and I think we can speed up drilling by at least three days if we were to just -"

But Howard wasn't done. "We built the *Nautilus* a whooooole lot better than we ever told you. Loewy and Roth were in on it, but they've been well-paid to keep quiet. Cousteau, now, I don't think he got the full import of what that little baby could do, but he ain't no scientist."

I jittered on my feet. "Howard, really, I -"

"If my calculations are correct, the *Nautilus*'ll dig all the way down...and I'll be the very first man to..."

This was news. "What?"

Hughes's eyes went out. "Cholera. Typhus. Diptheria. Plague. Them damn niggers across the tracks, Howie, they bring it all in, so you got to wash up good, especially...right...there..."

His lights were on, but no one was home. I felt like a long, cold shower and a frontal lobotomy. I settled for a very fast walk back to my stateroom, a hard slap across my own face, and some sleep that took a long time to come.

.....
Rod Serling

Field Notes, 27 June 1963

Full moon over the *Glomar Challenger*. A long day of work, and

then a good stiff drink and a roasted crustacean or ten out on the deck. The boss was locked in his room and the mice liked to play a lot, it seemed. I thought of Carlo Collodi's Dantesque vision of Pleasure Island, wondering for the thousandth time how long this hitch would truly be.

It was a dark night, with a strong breeze and a rough sea, nothing being visible. You know, it felt like a real campfire, out there on that grotesque metal island in the dark with the salt spray everywhere at the edges of conscious thought and the hashish circulating liberally.

I've always felt that if you need drugs to write, you're not a good writer. Drugs are for direct experience of event. Most of the sailors delighted in tobacco, but that was starting to not get to me. As long as I had a little hash, I was fine.

Jeek's fish-men were all beside themselves with happiness at the Ethiopian coelacanth they'd caught this far afield. I'd heard of the weird missing-link fish before, but never seen one. Jeek's boys had Jules, as they named the coelacanth, in a big tank of salt water and were waiting to see it do floating headstands, the way coelacanths did, with much merriment and cries of: "*Regardez! Il fait encore!*" It was kind of alarming to watch, almost as alarming as when it walked along the bottom on its pre-Devonian fins.

At one point, I remember asking everyone around the fire, "When you were a kid, did you ever try to dig a hole to China?"

"I made faery-huts and talked to the animals," Ursula said wistfully, tapping her temple. "Up here was my inner space."

"I almost got there," Munk joked, "but we had a Texan kid down the block who tried to take over and screwed it all up, so we all got in trouble."

"Where I grew up," Cousteau told us, "we always said we were digging the hole to Cleveland."

It was a good party. At one point, I strongarmed Jimmy Henson into getting his puppets out, those weird soft marionettes that look like sock monkeys. The ones he keeps in his spare duffel and won't go anywhere without. The ones he treats like his children.

Jimmy put on a show for the few civilians on the crew, and Captain Keeshan. It was a good one, one of the ten or fifteen

lovers' spats he's written for the green frog and the pig. Really screamingly funny stuff, especially to a deck full of stoned people and, in Keeshan's case, one pleasantly wine-squiffed ex-Marine gunnery sergeant. Walter Munk told me Jim was as funny as the great puppeteers he remembered seeing in Vienna as a boy. Munk was sipping rum, himself, but much more interested in the results of Cousteau's impromptu barbecue at first.

Bob Keeshan was stunned and delighted by the puppet show, almost beyond words. I saw fifteen years melt off that old gyrene's face from the first time the pig screeched, "*Excusez-moi?*" The fish-men were all roaring with laughter too.

"Yeah," I heard Keeshan muttering, "yeah. That's how it's done..." His was the look of an embittered child who has kept a pet leprechaun hidden from the sadistic censors for much longer than anyone should, and wants very badly to let it out to play. In his newly joyous eyes, I saw laughing children yet unborn.

Ursula ran down to her stateroom to get her axe at one point. The next part was something no one could forget. My blood was chilled beneath those cold, amazing stars as she returned hauling the most famous one of 'her girls', as she called them, a big old hollow-bodied Gibson guitar with silver strings.

"My monkey is..." she trilled mockingly, hauntingly, "A handsome devil... He's got a drill-chain...six miles long..."

Munk looked very embarrassed, and lit a cigarette. "The specific length of the chain is not relevant," he managed to deadpan back, his eyes away from her, "but rather the strength of the current."

"Where I grew up, we always said, 'It's not the size of the stick, but the magic in the wand.'" Ursula cackled bawdily. At that, she went over and had a few murmured words with my shooter Jimmy Henson, who barely knew if his socks matched half the time, yet had just become Anansi the Storyteller to everyone on the deck for those ten minutes.

Ursula and Jimmy took their cues from each other, and led the little knot of us in a round, a sing-along, a kind of Surrealist madrigal against the night and the cold out on the face of the deep. Our Lorelei walked far away with her guitar, standing up

in the stern like a figurehead, singing to the tide.

All the while, Munk looked like he was having some kind of revelation. Or maybe a seizure. Or both. I heard him mumbling over the song, something from Shakespeare. I was lost. The *spiritus mundi*, if you will, of those assembled around the camp stove, made me think of that great C.S. Lewis poem ‘The Waste Lands’. I took out my tape recorder. My hair was standing on end.

“This music crept by me upon the waters,
Allaying both their fury and my passion...”

“The water is wide... I cannot cross over...”

And neither have I wings to fly...”

I looked to my right at Captain Keeshan, who was letting his hair down more than anyone with a crewcut usually did. He was listening to the song and humming along, sucking on his canteen full of sweet red wine. “Listen,” Bob said to me, grinning a big, goofy Norman Rockwell grin, and began to sing a counter-melody in a big booming voice:

“Howard the Kiiiiing, in hiiiis...ra-ging...”

I recognized his riff on the bloodthirsty ‘Coventry Carol’, and chuckled. Ursula’s half-closed eyes flew open and she looked up, startled at the harmonic convergence, then grinned herself and continued to pick and sing. Munk was still reciting:

“With its sweet air. Thence I have followed it,
Or hath it drawn me, rather, but ’tis gone,
No, it begins again...”

“Judgèd he hath this daaaaaay...”

*“Give me a boat that can carry two,
And both shall row, my love and I...”*

“Full fathom five thy father lies.
Of his bones are coral made...”

“His maaaaan of might, in his own sight...”

*“A ship there was, and she sailed the sea,
She’s loaded deep as deep could be...”*

“The Innocents to slaaaay...”

“Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade...”

“Lullay, thou little tiny child, lullay...”

“But not so deep as the water I’m in...”

“But doth suffer a sea-change...”

“By, by, lull-eee, lull-aaaay...”

“I know not how...”

“Lullay, thou little tiny child, looo-laaay...”

“Into something wondrous strange...”

“I sink or swim...”

“By, by lully...” What a ham that Captain Kangaroo was, drawing out the basso to the last dregs of the note. **“Loooooooo-llllaaay.”** Then he feigned choking, and made a Gookie-face like Harpo Marx. Cue thunderous applause and laughter all around...

I never wanted their song to finish. Eventually, like all things, it did.

The stars turned overhead. The night wore on.

.....
“You have this Shaolin master thing going. It’s cute.” Ursula snickered in the wavery gas light. “You only want to continue talking about that if I look it *up*?”

“You miss the point.” Munk was feeling the drink. “In order for there to be a discourse, you have to have read the same thing I was just on about. I value your opinion, not...the other way around. I just wanted to know what you thought of... Damn it.” The whole time he spoke, her face hadn’t changed expression. “Forgot the page number.”

The pale elven bard from the mists of Portland laughed and put her arm around him. Here was a stretch of ocean he understood. He offered her his flask of rum, and she took a pull, bending her elbow back like a man. “I’ll let it go this time.”

Walter was beginning to flush a scarlet, sunburnt shade of red old Max Faktor may have only seen in his deepest dreams. When she took his hand, he didn’t drop hers.

“What I am fondest of about your work, Munk,” Cousteau spoke up from his side of the fire, “is that, though you have to scrape together these millions of dollars from ’orrid people, as I do, you understand that if we link up all the satellites from all the countries that can do it, we can constantly have the pulse of the

ocean and check its health all the time, where all the upwelling currents are, where is the best place to comb, to stimulate, to..."

He talked with his hands a lot when he got excited. Munk thought to himself that it was completely French and very fun to watch, but he would never tell Jeek that. He sighed. "It's still going to be a long way off. Remote sensing and tele-measurement take two totally different kinds of readings, and -"

Donc, one of the fish-men, piped up from the far side of the fire, chewing on a Philly cheroot. "Yeah, yeah, but they both use the satellites. *Por quoi pas?*" Everyone looked at the big overgrown kid in his black watchcap, ears sticking out, a kid who painted stubble on his face and took steroids. "*Jeek, les Americains n'vont pas la meilleur -*"

"*Tais-toi,*" Ursula told him good-naturedly. "*Un jour, tout le monde á les jouets comme Hughes.*"

"Yeah," Marcel said from Donc's side, sucking on a crab leg. In his clothes, he looked like Art Garfunkel from the band Tom and Jerry. "An' not just the toys like Hughes has, but...we use them, like with the sea-farms, the..."

"Mariculture. I had fun writing about that." Walter grinned. "Got a little more sunburnt than usual, too."

Ursula frowned. "I never knew you wrote about the deVries Project."

Donc knew this answer as well. "In August of fifty-nine, man, when it started. He say that there are six areas on Earth you could make the sea-farms, an' Jeek, he go find a globe when he hear this, look at the globe, he poin' to same six places."

Cousteau started talking with his hands again. "Fishing is just raping the sea for what it has. We are still barbarians in the sea. We must be farmers instead. By detection first from space, we can farm the rich areas and leave the New Englands, the overfished parts, behind."

"We over-hunt everything." Ursula picked up the conversation deftly. "As a species, I mean. That's tens if not hundreds of thousands of years of social conditioning. Stupid humans just seem to breed faster because we get to change the rules. We get to cheat. Humanity won't die out. But what kind of life are we going

to allow ourselves?”

Cousteau held up one finger. “*Non*, because all those thousands of years ago we had more innate knowledge of where to hunt, and we did not have so many – ”

“Two words, *mon ami*: woolly mammoth. They were hunted out by your noble savages.” There was no malice in her eyes. She just knew how to debate. Cousteau started to say something, shrugged and looked at Deni, who shrugged back twice as eloquently. Ursula was on a roll. “If we hadn’t overhunted the whale back in Melville’s day, we could have exploited the critters, if we just didn’t overstep the maximum yield. You need ten thousand pounds of plant matter to make one tuna fish. Whales are kind of the economy-sized fish, because they eat krill, which don’t use as much – ”

“You’d better be careful,” Walter told her fuzzily. “You keep talking like that on this boat, Hughes is going to have to pay you the same as what he pays us.”

“I grew up around ecologists,” she answered obliquely. “And no, I don’t ever approve of using whales as food.”

Cousteau roared with laughter. “Nor do I. I like a good tuna steak. Such is this life.”

“Yes. And salmon, too.” Ursula pretended to smack her lips. “But, I mean... Heisenberg’s Principle. How can we even help without making things worse?”

On the other side of the fire, Marcel was trying to act all hard, and took a manful pull from Jeek’s plastic bottle of something called Slivovitz, which looked like gasoline with plums floating in it. Jeek’s laughter echoed like machine-gun fire out across the waves when Marcel’s fine mist of plum Slovak popskull ignited over the stove and went *whoomp*.

Cousteau turned up the flame on the stove. The shadows did strange things with his face. He looked like a Boy Scout telling tall tales around the campfire. Clearly, he was enjoying this immensely. “Nature, she is up to bat last,” he intoned. “I see some strange things, being out on the *Calypso* so long. Like the giant whelk. She live thousan’ feet down, in the trenches. Every once an age, *mes amis*, she roll over, and open the one big eye, and

sometime... Sometime, she come up an' see *you*."

"I think the giant whelk just took his little cigarette-boat out for a joyride," Ursula said, sipping from Walter's flask again. It was good island rum, cane rum that stung the throat and opened the eyes immediately, blooming a warm nova in her gut-chakra from the word go. "Last time, he stayed gone two days. Raul told me the only thing in his suitcase when he came back was a dentist's drill and a woman's dress."

Munk took the flask back, looked at it, screwed the cap back on and set it between them. "He is crazy."

"Who isn't?" She was serious. "Aaah, anyway, Republicans are a whiny minority. Just...that at times they have the tendency to whine pretty gods-damned loudly. Did you ever wonder why he's been so weird from the start?"

Walter was idly playing with one lock of her hair, the one she usually kept behind that ear. She looked at him but didn't say stop. "You mean," he asked, "besides the fact that he's Howard Hughes?"

Cousteau roared, "*Mais bien sûr*. But no, seriously... He should be very careful. We all should. Do any of us know really what we're doing?" He looked around the fire, but answer came there none. "I wish I knew what made him tick," he said to himself. "What has halted his madness?"

"Or...who?" Ursula looked at him meaningfully. "You know, even Suleyman the Magnificent wasn't the wisest man in Christendom. He just had the wisest wives."

Cousteau nodded. He was very drunk, but alcohol seemed to have a different effect on him, one of rest, and sharpening. His breath reeked, yet the energy around him just felt like a warm handshake. "Behind every great man, something like this. It feels...almost like that, but different. Someone's been keeping him in check. Anyway, we all start having to work hard-hard-hard, soon. *C'est pas facile, mais c'est simple*."

Walter looked proud. "I wouldn't be taking a break if Engineering wasn't on the ball," he told him. "Your Corporal Zimbalist's still up in Control running systems checks. I don't know when that man sleeps. I almost hate to say it, but –" he looked at all of

them “ – I think we may do Bill Bascom proud tomorrow.”

At that, everyone raised up their drinks. Cousteau grew quickly serious. “Walter, I’m so glad he got you for this project. We will be first in this field. We will continue Bascom’s work. And Wegener’s. All of us.” He barked something else, something curt and more colloquial. Marcel and Deni looked at each other and spluttered wine from their noses with laughter.

“Sorry, Jeek, my French – ”

“I said, and bring this fine lady back to the mainlan’ with you or I put the leeches on you.”

“Jeek – ” Now it was Ursula’s turn to blush. Walter closed his eyes. It had been a long, whirlwind couple of weeks but now there was a girl, a dream, a vision, now the curatorship had been handed to him.

“When you are old and gray and full of sleep,” Ursula asked, “when you’ve done all you set out to do, what’s left to explore?”

Cousteau’s eyes shone. “Everything. No end to it. We just get to keep coming back and exploring.”

Munk closed his eyes and rested his head on her sweet soft shoulder. “So much of what we want to do can’t be done overnight,” he mumbled. “Humanity just isn’t ready.”

“You’re drunk,” Cousteau told him. “When we went to the Moon back in ’60, we had highly visible men in a hostile environment, with a clear entrance and exit strategy, instruments to plant, samples to take, and support from people on the ground. And the LANDSATs. We just have to work to harmonize all these new tools and toys.”

“Aah,” Munk sighed, “most specialists in my field can’t see ten feet past the end of their own footnotes. No global theory. No offense.”

Deni said something rude to Donc that no one else caught. Donc choked on the smoke from his cheroot and whacked Deni upside the head, dislodging Deni’s red *baratiña*.

“You have to see right through the math, to what things mean out on the boat,” Jeek pointed out, “and then invent new instruments to record it.”

Munk sounded like he was struggling to maintain conscious-

ness. "Why'd Hughes put us together all slapdash like this?"

"Appearances," Marcel pointed out. "He lives in them. No idea how to link them together. Boss, I'm off to bed."

"Okay." Cousteau's mind was clearly elsewhere. "One day, our students will be up in space working together like this."

Ursula considered this. "You could still be an astronaut."

Cousteau winced again. "I'm not past cut-off age for that rocketship, that... how you call it, the spaceplane. I wan' to go up there, just to see the ocean I've given my whole life to."

"Up on the Blackstar." Ursula nodded. "The X-20 Dynasoars. I have all the clippings. Goddess help me, I want to go up, too."

"Who doesn't?" Munk pointed out. "Hughes had unmanned X-20s since the Fifties to drop satellites and bombs. Everybody knows that. Air Force Space Command loved it because he was a civilian contractor and they could say, 'Oh, we don't have anything like that,' while they fight for space with the Russians and the Chinese."

Cousteau snorted. "Millions for defense, but only one cent for science when we kiss their ass. No LASER-imaging gear for us."

Ursula looked familiar with this territory. "Oh, ever since the *Apollo* blew up in '56 and all those expendable booster failures, the Pentagon would have done anything to have that assured access to space that General Eisenhower kept talking about. So they could watch the whole rest of the world." She was getting sleepy, but her mind never rested. "You know, Jeek, they're doing work on Luna-One now where they collect solar energy on these big photovoltaic panels and beam it down to Earth."

"Sure. It's still experimental. They say. Arco just bought the patents."

"Shit."

Cousteau sighed. "Not for our kind, *la lune*. I know one day people besides military will live up there. But not me." He looked all around us, then straight down off the port bow. "My world is here. You have to remain deeply attached to the Earth if you want to understand what's going on."

Ursula raised the flask. "And lo, through the rusty squalling of the great locomotive of government, through a hundred different

kinds of ruthless bastardry, careful combing and stimulation of the rich, and maybe just a bit by the grace of Lord and Lady if at all...some of these fantastic pipedreams just might happen by the time a Kennedy gets in office.”

“Understanding passes everything,” Cousteau said from his inscrutable cloud of plum fumes. “We’re a bit alike, the Boss and I.”

Munk mumbled something. “The hell you say,” Ursula told Jeek. But he was serious.

“Oh, yeah. He’s five years older than me, but...we both loved movies and machines, invented things and took things apart until our parents wan’ to kill us... We both brought home cameras, raise hell in school...” The crooked, enigmatic grin on his face shone in the night. “But unlike him, my parents, they didn’t die. They sent me to boarding school. Smartest thing they ever did, *L’Ecole Navale*. I joined Navy during the war. Started as a gunnery-sargent like Keeshan was. From there, all it took was one invention and – ” he spread his fingers “ – ’ere we are.”

“So you can...relate to Howard,” she guessed.

Cousteau swallowed, his big Adam’s apple going up and down like a cormorant’s tied throat with a fish in it. “I almost *was* him!” He flapped his hand. “The people of this Earth have gotten the Napoleon they wanted. So many more people. So many more cars. We will be overpopulated, no matter what. The question is how to make the world better for the new arrivals. Hughes contributes to that with the left and steals back with the right.”

“We should build up, instead of out,” Ursula suggested. “I learned that from my youngest student at the collective. Boy named Tom Robbins. That’ll be the only way.” She giggled. “Tommy told me the thing about Solomon’s wives, too.”

“It’s difficult to understand.” Munk felt like the waters were still and the deck was rolling and undulating. Giant stone drums whomped and walloped in his ears. “What the Republicans want would be a disaster. But all politicians are mostly bought. It’s the corporations that rule us, and they’re not accountable to anyone. Some of them know about...all this, though, overpopulation and the rest, like it was...” He struggled to catch the departing train

of thought. "Like that Populist Senator from Schenectady, that Vonnegut. He calls it a meat glacier –"

"Every fifteen years," Jeek cut in, "I go back to the same patch of sea. It looks worse and worse. How do I convince a corporation of that without accurate instrumental, emm, accompaniment? How do we get sharp enough to show them where they are fucking up? I am an engineer, a photographer, a public speaker. But I am no geophysicist."

Walter Munk snapped his long, spindly fingers. "Revelle thinks it's because carbon dioxide increases the acidity of the ocean."

"The Keeling Curve clearly demonstrates that," Ursula pointed out. "You –"

"Keeling is still largely untested," Munk told her. "We need more hard data to show what gasoline is doing to the atmosphere. But I agree that it should be studied, no matter what the oil companies think."

She nodded matter-of-factly. "Indeed."

"Mmm." Cousteau said nothing for a while. "We have people living under the water, and up in space. Why not make it livable down here?"

"Why are we even out here? Tuzo Wilson up in Canada will prove continental drift by the end of the year...in theory," Munk pointed out. Cousteau shrugged. "So let's bring him out to help."

Walter was going to say something else, but then the past few days of work and the rum caught up to him. The conversation followed him down, down, down the drillshaft of unconsciousness, into a bright sea of electric fluid, and out the other side of Time.

Ursula dragged him off to his stateroom and left him there fully clothed. When she kissed his cheek, he smiled. She carried that smile with her back to her room.

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**From the Diary of Dr Walter Munk
Scripps Institution of Oceanography, 28 June 1963**

The days of drilling bled into one. Hughes's mad genius knows no bounds. I've not yet seen the fusion power-plant way down

in the hull. However, I've copied the self-lubricating riser pipe of the Hughes Phlange, and his Gatling-gun design and belt feed mechanism to continuously bring pipe up the derrick and down the drill chain until the bit is ground down to nothing and we round-trip the whole process back to square one. In her stand atop the derrick, the *Nautilus* waits for old Matuschka to widen out a funnel in the bottom when we get to the second layer of the Earth's crust.

On the last round-trip of drilling, we took a break and sent down *Robbie* the submersible robot, watching from the moon pool as his cameras opened up on the bottom of the funnel-shaped hollow where the *Nautilus* would begin remote drilling in a few weeks. It was about five hundred feet across, far beyond anything seen in the upper world. Shadows seemed to crush that colorless, sullen water by their weight.

Silvery rays of electric light, reflected here and there upon some small spots of water, brought up luminous sparkles. Down there in the cracks, crystals of opaque quartz, adorned with limpid drops of natural glass suspended to the roof like lusters, seemed to take fire as *Robbie's* endoscope angled by. The central crack went down in an inverted cone to a depth of infinite feet.

The Russians were right. There were caves further down. I made a mental note to phonesat an old friend at the University of Volgograd, a Polisher named Lem, who could publish this and make some quick money.

So went my thoughts until the D-Day of Mohole 2. All fancy-sick and pale of cheer, we were to subsequently learn that behind our backs Occidental Petroleum had sent men out to verify the presence of oil somewhere in those rocks. I imagined the new Mohole as a firewell like one in a Texas oilfield, exploding a column of burning petroleum gas from the pipe, from the black waters...

Hughes couldn't contain himself when he came back in and showed us all the Mojo paper with the news that had been kept even from him until the team was assembled and we began the more precise leg of the work. They'd found a ridge of Miocene shale twenty thousand feet down that might well have stretched

a good way west. He wanted to re-drill elsewhere.

I could no longer overlook his massive industrial plagiarism of AMSOC's work. Hughes took a big gamble in guessing that he'd find oil at the Marianas, but it was the only way he justified the expenditure to the stockholders. Of course, he only told us then. "Well, we could go deeper here," the smug bastard airily suggested, "but it'd have to be a really deep hole to pay."

Yet, we'd found the Challenger Hollow as well. Who knew what his mad mind was inclined to suppose, and what those suppositions justified to him? For his whole life, he'd pretended to be an oil wildcatter like his father. Oil wildcatters are only interested in making a hole where the oil is found. His fake hypothesis of drilling from the deepest point on Earth used covert technology to carry it out.

"It's going to be the biggest source of oil on Earth," he told us with a straight face. "And y'all found it. Well done."

Ursula couldn't keep her mouth shut. "There's a whole world down there you'd wipe out for oil that might or might not be - "

Hughes stormed up to the center of the bridge, wobbling on his cane like some blighted Chaplin. "Yeah, and what of it? It ain't gonna blow. We'll be watchin'. Your little fishies are in no danger. See to it myself."

"No," Cousteau said tiredly, "this is enough. I won't allow this. You can have your check back, sir. This is lunacy. The United Nations - "

"*Fuck* Ralph Bunche, and fuck you, too!" Hughes whirled, trying to glare everywhere around the room at once. I took the opportunity to speak up.

"I have other work to do," I told him. "I no longer wish to have my name associated with this project."

Ursula slid over and stood by me, clasping my arm, standing close, smelling of jasmine and vanilla. I felt her breath brush my neck. Hughes acted like he'd gone deaf.

"You want to run that by me again, doc?"

"I want to go home. Let me go home."

"You will do as I say." His face was getting very red. "Or none of you will leave this boat."

After that knowledge, we proceeded to the main deck to get very drunk and begin a mutiny of which India's President Gandhi would have no doubt approved, sitting on our asses and doing no work at all. Keeshan wouldn't order us back to work, either, when asked. Hughes flew into a rage and locked himself in his stateroom again.

Stalemate.

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From the Diary of Dr Walter Munk

Scripps Institution of Oceanography, 29 June 1963, 0900 hours

"That's no speedboat." Serling put the field glasses down, bemused. "That's an Atlas hydroplane. Those things go about four tons. English..." All of a sudden, he did a double-take and flipped the glasses up again. "English registry. Supercharged engine. Diplomatic crest." He looked up at me from his lotus posture on the deck, a young Siddhartha Gautama drawn by James Thurber. "You should call The Boss, Walter, he - "

I shook my head, sullen, feeling how little actual sleep I'd gotten. "That little garden gnome is not, has not been, and never will be, my 'boss' in any sense of the - "

"ENGLISH HOVERCRAFT OFF THE STABBOARD BOW OF THE GOD DAMN USS GLOMAR CHALLENGER, PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELF IMMEDIATELY OR WE WILL OPEN FIRE!"

Serling handed me the field glasses. "Get a load of this," he chuckled, *sotto voce*. I didn't understand what I was seeing. The hydroplane's helmeted operator wore a black wetsuit and waved a white handkerchief. The guns of the *Challenger* waited at half-cock.

The hydroplane moored at the side of our vessel with some kind of magnetic rig whose like I'd never seen, one that just rolled right upwards, flush with the hull, until the man could disembark directly on the deck. It sounded like a can opener, and it hurt my ears.

Hughes just stood all the while, leaning on his cane, waiting, flanked by his big polite thugs. Raul had a Kalashnikov rifle. Jerry

had a Colt .50 Desert Eagle. Both of them had radios. Hughes had worse things.

The Queen's Man had a Union Jack on the right breast of his wetsuit. He removed his helmet and held it at his side. His peasant-Slav face was wise beyond its years, Big Two and the Punch and Judy show of Military Intelligence written on it in ink that never really disappeared. His sideburns were much longer than regulation. Behind the miniature secret cameras of his fake Coke-bottle hornrims, his eyes were windows on an unknown central sea.

"We meet again, Mr Hughes."

"We meet again, Double-Oh Eight," Hughes replied with weary disgust, lowering his band-camp megaphone and signaling his dogs to stand down. As an afterthought, he looked in our general direction and raised it again. "Boys, say hello to Special Agent Isaac Asimov, Assistant Director General of Her Majesty's MI-6."

He looked back at 008. "Maxwell Knight's fair-haired boy. Only he little suspects the marvelous part he is about to play in the history of the world. To what, sir, do we owe the honor? You...come to...turn the golems loose on me?"

"Uhh...whatever you say, Mr Hughes." Asimov approached him, smooth as fused glass. "Headquarters just wanted me to come pay you a visit, have a look around, report back to Q and the rest of the technical drones. We drew straws. I lost. Mind if I have a dekkko?"

"Yes," Hughes answered, "I do mind. You explain what diplomatic purpose it could possibly serve to -"

"Hold a subject of the Crown against his will?" Asimov countered, still not raising his voice. "You're not the only one who knows how to plant listening devices, Mr Hughes. We have them all over this bollocky old tub. Doctor Munk was granted dual citizenship by Her Majesty Queen Margaret for his work in Blackpool with Dr Swallow from the Woods Hole Institute. Or hadn't you read up on that before you hired him?"

Hughes spluttered and fumfuhed. Advancing with Rod at my back, I noticed a vein standing out on the side of his head. "I ain't

keepin' anyone prisoner," he was forced to counter. "All I ask of the good Doctor is that he not tender his resignation so hastily."

"Oh, bullshit," I told him. "Last night, you said no one was leaving this boat or you'd kill us all. Get me off of here, Dr Asimov. I've heard of you." I waited a moment, then added, "How's it feel to know everything?"

"He's dee-lusional!" Hughes cried. "Clearly obsessive-compulsive and dee-lusional! You saw! He –"

"Doctor, I only know how it feels to have the *reputation* of knowing everything. And you –" Asimov coolly cut him off at the knees, appearing first stunned, then thoughtful " – you're slipping, Howard." I had no idea what he was talking about, but apparently it hit Hughes right in the store. "You're slipping, and everyone's going to know."

Then the most singular thing happened. Hughes went apoplectic, turning beet-red and setting his jaw. I heard his top and bottom rows of teeth squeak together. With great effort, he struggled to regain his composure. A forelock of bangs fell in his face as he chewed his way back to coherent speech like a Rottweiler burrowing through a side of beef.

"Howard, please." Asimov didn't blink, his eyes black ice in the bright day. "I'm just doing my job. Surely you understand that. You're not well. We should get you looked at. Do you expect me to just *leave*?"

"No, Dr Asimov, you Communist. I expect you to die."

Asimov's hands went to his belt, making an outward V in a deceptive attack-stance I knew from Hapkido. He assessed the situation around him and prepared to swing or duck...or reach through the slit in his wetsuit to the suspicious bulge that looked like some kind of a holster. "Ah-ah-ah, Mr Hughes. Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent."

"All right, God damn it," Hughes snarled in that horrid nasal twang. "Man wants a thing done right, he's got to do it hisself." Goons in tow, he stormed away, still ranting. "You're all fired! This project is henceforth declared the property of Hughes Aerospace! Take the place apart, boys, and get the *Nautilus* ready!" His next words chilled my blood. "I'm goin' down!"

After that, I'm afraid everything got a little weird.

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Dr Asimov kept a cool head. When Hughes's roughnecks boiled out onto the deck at some unknown signal, he just looked at me. "These are trained killers." As he spoke, his hand was on my shoulder like a calm bouncer about to defuse an ugly barroom brawl. "Ever read Sun Tzu?"

That swarm of angry apes in black battle-dress uniforms were milling towards us, hollering. I floundered, wishing I was ocean-sized, able to call down the death wave of Hokusai Katsushika himself. I just fumfuhed and made noises. "I'm a scientist, not a... Yeah, yeah, *The Art of War*. What's your point?"

Asimov grinned. Hughes had run for the derrick, and his toy at the top, just seconds before. His megaphone sat far away on the deck. The Queen's Man scooted over now and picked it up, then returned to our position.

"Supreme excellence lies in conquering the enemy's resistance without a fight."

Without a word more, he flipped the megaphone on. In twenty seconds, he de-escalated the situation with nothing but the truth. Ever the split-second decisive CO, Bob Keeshan came charging out onto the deck in a long underwear shirt and uniform pants, ordering the men to stand down. Then he ordered them to call the Coast Guard and start filling up lifeboats.

"...I REPEAT, ABANDON SHIP! AND I WANT IT DONE FIFTEEN MINUTES AGO, GROUP! THIS MISSION IS FUBAR, I REPEAT, FUCKED UP BEYOND ALL RECOGNITION! TAKE NO ACTION AGAINST HUGHES, JUST GET US EVAC! CIVILIANS FIRST!! I - " He couldn't continue. He lowered the megaphone. "Captain always goes down with the ship," he muttered, just loud enough for me to hear. "But not today." He handed Asimov the megaphone and took off to go supervise.

Dr Asimov flipped the megaphone back on and pointed it up at the *Nautilus*, which even now was beginning to power up with a whine and a roar as loud as one of those DynaSoar spaceplanes.

"GOODBYE, MR HUGHES!"

In two minutes, a Coast Guard Huey personnel-Hovercraft was roaring down onto the deck like the wrath of God.

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From the Diary of Dr Walter Munk

Scripps Institution of Oceanography, 31 June 1963

I read this now by Dictaphone aboard the *USS Thresher*, one of the miraculous new fusion-powered submarines. Asimov has been knighted, I just heard, before the garbled squawking distress calls on the instant replay of ham radio ops around the globe: "...Attack ships on fire! Hughes off his chump! Mayday, mayday, mayday! Send anybody! Hell, send Private Ron Hubbard and his whole merry cupboard back from Leavenworth and give them some new U-Boats! Mayday, mayday, mayday..."

The last thing I remember seeing was Hughes's face, grim and determined, looking like the Green Goblin in one of those William M. Gaines *Spiderman* funnybooks, as he climbed into the drillship, sealing his own coffin.

As far as any of us know, he died in the *Nautilus*, naked as some malign satyr in place of Venus inside the shell, hell-bent on his own destruction, damn the torpedoes full speed ahead to the center of the Earth.

After playing me the recording of the distress calls and the rest, Rod just looked at me. I knew the look, that instant hang-dog telepathic scream... I gave him one of my Pall Malls immediately, and lit it for him. No more was said on the matter. Sometimes, it just didn't pay to say anything at all.

At any rate, Roger wants to have a talk about the Keeling Curve, and this whole global warming business, when I get back. We AMSOC ruffians have a lot of big plans for outer and inner space these days. All of a sudden, getting down to the mantle doesn't seem so important any more.

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Aboard the *Nautilus*, 29 June 1963

All must end in smoke. After this, there will be no more worlds to conquer. Yet. But I've seen the plans.

The comedown is the hardest part to ride. The first step on the deep. Mainland China, here I come, The Man Who Never Returned.

It all makes my soul shudder, and my blood run cold. I can't bring my brain to think, lost forever in tenebrous shades of madness, seeking to drink the blood from my scars and be absolved forever, watching the shadows on the wall as I butt my head against it again and again.

Where am I going? It's impossible to say. I'm perfectly ignorant of the matter, insensible and covered with blood. I just know that, wherever it is, I have to get there.

The thrusters go, and the ship starts spinning, slow and leisurely, like the *Titanic*. I feel a cold, sliding sense of horror, a clinical wonderment at standing on the edge of the known world and seeing the waters rushing over it.

Middle finger up to Science. Push the red.

Push the red.

I have penetrated between the great teats of Gaia. Down here at the bottom of Challenger Deep, you can feel every drop of seven miles of water pressing in on you. Down here, the human eye can no longer distinguish color, only shadow and light. You forget that there was a sky, or that the sky is anything but this fluid, motile blackness and unbelievable pressure. Without this Inversuit, I'd pop out there. Or in here. Without a whole battery of lights out there, though, you'd literally be turning your head to see what ate you.

It's a cathedral silence, an uncomfortable one, closing in on you, and...

Oh, God. Jerry... Jerry! There are germs! Jerry -

Wait. Jerry's up topside on the *Challenger*. Way up there where people breathe without help. Where there's a sun. Where there's an Ava Gardner, oh Ava, my Beatrice Portinari who waits for me in Paradise if I could ever...just...if I could ever just...one more thing...

Did I say Ava? Truman would slap the shit out of me for that. Poor, dear Truman, who's helped me through these hard long years as much as he has. Pity he isn't a woman. (Wait, let me

rephrase that...)

I can only imagine the book Truman will write about this. It took him two years to write another book after *In Cold Blood*. I wonder what he will ever do without me (besides cartwheels) and stifle a sob as I remember the opening lines of his fourth novel, *Answered Prayers*: 'If I could do anything I wanted, I'd tunnel down to the center of the Earth, hoard pitchblende and emeralds and dragon gold, look for unspoiled monsters, and then take a nice, long nap.' Yeah, good luck with that, Holly Golightly, and yes, there is a Santa Claus.

Tell Capote I'm trolling Atlantis, and I'll die with my hand on the throttle. Except there really is none, to speak of, nor a seat, either, and it's dark and cold and I can't really breathe and I'm all over blood. But I think my drillship knows which way to go. I remove the miraculously undamaged pencil flashlight from my pocket and check the compass.

"Yup." It's pointing due south.

The upper orifice is every minute decreasing in size. The sides of the shaft are getting closer and closer. The light is filtering down in a most extraordinary manner. A faint kind of dawn of day awakens my eyes, a thousand and one prisms of lava. To me, there is something terrible in this calm, then a moan of suddenly displaced air, and the noise of stones roaring up into the vertiginous void.

The final sound is sooner heard.

Truman, I...

.....
It was days before any of it made the news. Looking back on those events, all who were there grew bewildered, and scarcely able to believe in their reality.

Up from the bottomless deep, the firewell from the drill-shaft of the *Glomar Challenger* roared a thousand feet tall and blotted out the sun. The crew looked back from far past the blast wave. No one was turned to a pillar of salt. The Hueys shook a bit. That was all.

Hughes's former mercs were all clustered into the biggest chopper. Sylvestre Matuschka, the old munitions guy The Boss

once scrounged up from somewhere, was staring out the window with eyes as wide and rapt as a child's. His white hair stuck up in corkscrews. His fly was open. He was –

Captain Keeshan whacked him in the back of the head with a Mag-Lite. "Put that back in your pants, you sick old bastard, before I toss you outta this bird! What in God's holy –"

Matuschka looked up at him, rubbing his skull, eyes twenty times wilder than Hughes's. "Remember that kill-switch I tell you I put on the *Nautilus*?" he asked, coming back into himself, face growing red as he buttoned his fly.

Keeshan nodded hesitantly. "I thought you were joking."

"I do not joke. It was really a kill-switch. I know, you see, I know what this man was going to do." He tapped his temple. "I do not have the English, but...I know this man of old." He spat. "This *dybbuk*."

The Captain was rapidly turning green. "So you took it upon yourself to –"

"I fix." The mad bomber's smile was full of a wicked, horrible certainty and satiation. "I just wish I could have heard him scream."

Without a word more, Captain Kangaroo pulled his sidearm and shot Sylvestre Matuschka through the head.

Cue thunderous applause.

.....

Ursula K. Le Guin
LG Co-Op, Admin.
300 W Burnside
Portland, OR

Dr Walter Munk
Scripps Institution of Oceanography
La Jolla, CA

2 July 1963

Dear Monkey,

I'm sure this letter comes as rather a surprise. Not that we need any more of those. I still have to beat the news crews away

with a stick. I hope this letter finds you well and rested, and the better for what we saw out on that awful boat.

For a short time, though, while we were there, I mean

[here a line is crossed out]

Did you feel it too, Doctor? It was there, for just a moment. It didn't call attention to itself. It came to us when we stopped looking for it, and bowed its head, and lowered its silver horn.

My prodigal protégé, young master Robbins, said in one of his four hundred thousand monographs once that women who've been badly hurt have to love women before they can learn to love men again. That's not quite it, in my case, but... Tom does have a way with words.

You just have to know what to do with a unicorn, Munk. No sudden motions. You were a perfect gentleman in every sense of the word, and you made me think and feel things I'd forgotten that a man could make me think and feel.

You also said that if I kept talking the way I did, that I'd have to get paid the same as you and Cousteau. I'm coming to see you...at work. I'd like to hear more of what you meant by that. I think

[here a line is crossed out]

I hear your American Miscellaneous Society is getting a lot of new members. I've met Revelle's PR man for that whole orbiting biosphere project with NASA. It's so funny. Two Rogers. They look like they could be father and son. Very talented protégé, too...blanking on the last name... 'blacksmith' in Polish... Oh, yeah. Zelazny.

I'll call your office when I get there. Let's just leave it like that, dangling on a preposition.

Very truly yours,

Ursula K. Le Guin

.....
Bob Keeshan spoke not another word for an entire week, until he ran into Rod Serling's cameraman at Schrafft's in Manhattan. Jim Henson quit his job that day, and they started writing material. Soon their wives were involved. Then their children. Then CBS.

None of their families ever spoke of that summer again. They

were too busy teaching the world to sing. *The Captain's Muppet Variety Hour* was running in syndication almost overnight, and they began to work on movies. One of them, *The Great Space Caper*, was the first film viewed on the Apollo-89 mission to Mars...

.....

1 July 1963

A tinny transistor radio off down a breezy hypersaturated summer street belts out the six o'clock news.

"Mahalo, America. It is with deep and profound sadness that I enter your living rooms this evening as the bearer of bad tidings. Tonight, we as a nation mourn the passing of one of our greatest geniuses, an inventor...who made it possible for planes to circumnavigate the globe, Howard Hughes, an humanitarian who - "

Fifteen full seconds of dead air time. The black pearls of Hunter Thompson's eyes remain. Finally, he gets up from his chair and, snarling, throws the script across the soundstage. Camera pans back for a wide shot.

"Give me a break!" Thompson snarls in front of millions of viewers. "I'm not reading this on the air!"

.....

What sort of toy do you buy for the spoiled child who has everything? The best man to answer that was Howard Robard Hughes. Howard became a martyr to daredevils everywhere, ended his own mad journey, and found his greatest adventure in...*The Twilight Zone*.

We hold, then:

FADE TO BLACK. ▣

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