

COLLIDING BRANES

by Rudy Rucker & Bruce Sterling

Bruce Sterling's most recent exploits include a stint as the "Visionary in Residence" for the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam last November. In September, he keynoted the Austin Game Developers Conference while publicly appearing as a time traveler. The author's new SF novel *The Caryatids* is just out from Del Rey. Rudy Rucker's latest pair of novels depict a near-future Earth in which every object becomes conscious. The first, *Post-singular*, is just out in paperback from Tor, and the second, *Hylozoic*, will appear in hardcover in May. You can find current information about Rudy's work on his blog at www.rudyrucker.com/blog. In their fifth collaboration together for *Asimov's*, the authors bring us an unparalleled portrayal of what the end of the world will mean to the blogosphere.

"But why call this the end of the universe?" said Rabbiteen Chandra, feeling the dry night air beat against her face. The rollicking hearse stank of cheap fried food, a dense urban reek in the starry emptiness of the Nevada desert. "At dawn our universe's two branes collide in an annihilating sea of light. That's not death, technically speaking—that's a kalpa rebirth."

Angelo Rasmussen tightened his pale, keyboard-punching hands on the hearse's cracked plastic wheel. His hearse was a retrofitted 1978 Volvo, which ran on recycled bio-diesel cooking-oil. "You're switching to your Hindu mystic thing now? After getting me to break that story?"

"I double-checked my physics references," Rabbiteen offered, with an incongruous giggle. "Remember, I have a master's degree from San Jose State."

Rabbiteen knew that this was her final road trip. She'd been a good girl too long. She tapped chewing tobacco into a packet of ground betel-nut. Her tongue and her gums were stained the color of fresh blood.

"The colliding branes will crush the stars and planets to a soup of hard radiation," she assured Angelo. "Then they rebound instantly, forming brand-new particles of matter, and seeding the next cycle of the twelve-dimensional cosmos." She spread her two hands violently, to illustrate. "Our former bodies will expand to the size of galactic superclusters."

Angelo was eyeing her. "I hope our bodies overlap." He wore a shy, eager smile. "Given what you and I know, Rabbiteen, we might as well be

the last man and woman on Earth.” He laid his hand on her thigh, but not too far up.

“I’ve thought that issue through,” said Rabbiteen, inexpertly jettisoning betel spit out the window. Blowback stained her hand-stitched paisley blouse. “We’ll definitely make love—but not inside this hearse, okay? Let’s find some quaint tourist cabins.”

As professional bloggers, Rabbiteen and Angelo knew each other well. For three years, they’d zealously followed each other’s daily doings via email, text messages, video posts, social networking, and comment threads.

Yet they’d never met in the flesh. Until today, their last day on Earth—the last day for the Earth, and, in stark fact, also for Earth’s solar system, Earth’s galaxy, Earth’s Local Group galactic cluster, and Earth’s whole twelve-dimensional universe shebang.

The end was near, and Rabbiteen didn’t care to watch the cosmos collapse from inside her cramped room in her parents’ house in Fremont. Nor did Angelo want to meet the end in his survivalist bunker in the foothills of the Sierras near Fresno—a bunker which, to untrained eyes, resembled an abandoned barn in the middle of a sun-killed almond farm.

So, after a dense flurry of instant messages, the two bloggers had joined forces and hit the great American road together, blasting one last trumpet from the hearse’s dirge-like horn, a mournful yet powerful blast that echoed from Rabbiteen’s parents’ pink stucco house and all through the table-flat development of a thousand similar homes.

Chastely sipping biodiesel through the apocalyptic traffic, they’d made it over Tioga Pass onto Nevada’s Route 6 by midnight. They were out well ahead of mankind’s last lemming-like rush to universal destruction.

“I’ve been obsessing over Peak Oil for years,” Angelo confessed. He was feeling warm and expansive, now that Rabbiteen had promised him some pre-apocalypse sex. “As a search-term, my name is practically synonymous with it. But now I can’t believe I was such a sap, such a pissant, when it came to comprehending the onrushing scope of this planet’s disaster! I was off by ... what is it? By a million orders of magnitude?”

Rabbiteen patted his flanneled arm supportively. Angelo was just a political scientist, so he was really cute when he carried on about “orders of

magnitude.”

He was rueful. “I was so worried about climate change, financial Singularities, and terror attacks in the Straits of Hormuz. And all the time the parallel branes were converging!” He smacked the Volvo’s cracked dashboard with the flat of his pale hand. “I’m glad we escaped from the dense urban cores before the Apocalypse. Once people fully realize that cosmic string theory is unraveling, they’ll butcher each other like vicious animals.”

“Don’t insult our friends the animals,” said Rabbiteen, flirtatiously bending her wrists to hold her hands like little paws.

Rabbiteen’s “What Is Karmic Reality?” blog cleverly leveraged her interest in scientific interpretations of the Upanishads into a thriving medium for selling imported Indian clothes, handicrafts, and mosaics.

Angelo, unable to complete his political science doctorate due to skyrocketing tuition costs, had left Stanford to run his own busy “Ain’t It Awful?” website. His site tracked major indicators for the imminent collapse of American society. The site served to market his print-on-demand tracts about the forthcoming apocalypse, which earned him a meager living.

The end of the Universe had begun with a comment from trusted user “Cody” on Rabbiteen’s blog. Cody had linked to a preliminary lab report out of Bangalore’s Bahrat University. The arXiv dot-pdf report documented ongoing real-time changes in the fine-structure constant. Subtle dark and light spectral lines hidden in ordinary light were sashaying right up the spectrum.

Rabbiteen had pounced on this surprising news as soon as it hit her monitor, deftly transforming the dry physics paper into an interactive web page with user-friendly graphic design. To spice up her post for user eyeballs, she’d cross-linked it to the well-known Cyclic Universe scenario. This cosmological theory predicted that the fundamental constants of physics would change rapidly whenever two parallel membranes of the cosmic twelve dimensions were about to—as laymen put it—“collide.”

Although Rabbiteen didn’t feel supremely confident about the cataclysmic Cyclic Universe scenario, that theory was rock-solid compared to the ramshackle Inflationary notion that had grown up to support the corny, old-school Big Bang.

Cosmologists had been tinkering with the tired Big Bang theory for

over fifty years. Their rickety overwrought notions had so many patches, upgrades, and downright mythologies that even the scheme of a cosmos churned from a sea of galactic cow milk by a giant Hindu cobra seemed logical by comparison.

After Rabbiteen's post, Angelo had horned into the act, following a link to Rabbiteen posted by that same user Cody on Angelo's "Ain't It Awful" blog. With the help of vocal contributors from a right-wing activist site, Angelo quickly unearthed a pirated draft of speechwriters' notes for an impending presidential oration.

Tonight the United States President was planning to blandly deny that the cosmos was ending.

The leaked speech made commentary boil like a geyser on Angelo's catastrophe blog—especially since, unable to keep his loyal users in the dark, he'd been forced to announce to them that their entire Universe was kaput. The likelihood of this event was immediately obvious to loyal fans of "Ain't It Awful," and the ripples were spreading fast.

"Listen, Rabbiteen," said Angelo, tentatively slowing the hearse. "Why bother to find a motel? It's not like we want to sleep during our last night on Earth. It'd be crazy to waste those precious few remaining hours."

"Don't you want to dream one more great dream?"

He turned his thin, abstracted face from the bug-splattered windshield, his expression gentler than she'd expected. "I'd rather post one last great blog-post. Exactly how many minutes do we have left in our earthly existence?"

Their Linux laptops nestled together on the gray-carpeted floor of the hearse, the screens glowing hotly, the power cords jacked into a luxurious double-socketed cigarette-lighter extension. USB jacks sucked internet access from a Fresnel antenna that Angelo had made from metal tape, then jammed on the hearse's roof.

Rabbiteen plopped her warm laptop onto her skirted thighs. She scrolled through a host of frantic posts from her over-excited readers.

"Still almost five hundred minutes," she said thoughtfully. "It's two AM here, and the latest doom estimate is for ten-twenty AM local time. Hmm. This scientist woman net-friend of mine—Hintika Kuusk from Estonia—she says that, near the end, the force of gravity will become a quantized step

function. Six minutes after that, the strong force drops to the point where our quarks and gluons fly apart.”

“And then the Big Splat hits us?”

“Full interbrane contact comes seven yoctoseconds after our protons and neutrons decay.”

“Seven yoctoseconds?” Angelo’s gauzy, policy-oriented knowledge of hard science was such that he couldn’t be entirely sure when Rabbiteen was serious.

“That’s seven septillionths of a second,” clarified Rabbiteen. “A short time, but a definite gap. It’s a shame, really. Thanks to our crude nucleon-based human bodies, we’ll miss the hottest cosmic action since the start of our universe, fourteen billion years ago. But, Angelo, if we hug each other ever so tightly, our quarks will become as one.” And with this, she laughed again.

“You think that’s funny?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t it funny? How could it not be funny? If I let myself cry, that’ll be worse.”

“There’s no time left to weep and mourn, not even for ourselves,” mused Angelo. “I realize that you approach the problem of death in your own way. That motto you posted—’the dewdrop slides into the shining sea.’”

Rabbiteen was moved by the proof that he’d been reading her blog. She clapped her glowing laptop shut and gazed out at the stricken moon above a purple ridge of low mountains. “The moon looks so different now, doesn’t it? It’s redder! The changes in the fundamental constants will affect all electromagnetic phenomena. No more need for fancy big-science instruments, Angelo. We can see the changes in the fundamental constants of physics with our own wet, tender eyeballs.”

She wiped her eyes, smudging her lashes. “In a way, it’s wonderful that everything will dissolve together. The mountains and the moon, the rich and the poor, all the races and colors.”

The road’s fevered white line pulsed against Angelo’s pale blue eyes. When he spoke again his voice had turned grating and paranoid. “I keep trying for the high road, Rabbiteen, but I can’t fully buy that this is the End.

I've got a feeling that certain shadowy figures have been preparing for this. There are so many hints on the internet ... You want to know the real truth about where we're going?"

"Tell me, Angelo." Rabbiteen valued his insights into human society, which was a system she herself had trouble confronting.

"Cody calls it the Black Egg. It's hidden in the Tonopah Test Range, a secret base in Nevada, right near Area 51. He says the fascist slavemasters have built a back-door escape route out of our condemned cosmos."

"That's where we're headed?" said Rabbiteen, sounding dubious. "On Cody's say-so?"

"Those in the know have an inside track to the Black Egg survival pod against the collapse of the universe. As major intellectual figures on the blogosphere, we should definitely be going there, right? Why should we be left outside the Dr. Strangelove mine-shaft bunker when the lords of creation have their own transhuman immortality?"

Rabbiteen was unconvinced. "Oh, Angelo, why do you always blog so much about rulers and power? Everything's emergent. The old white men on top are helpless idiots. They're like foam on a tsunami. Can bacteria stop a bucket of bleach?"

"You're naive," said Angelo loftily. "Do you think it's mere coincidence that we were contacted and guided by a heavy operator like Cody? You're a key blogger on weird physics, and I—I rank with the world's foremost citizen-journalists."

"But Cody is just some blog commenter," said Rabbiteen slowly. The frank lunacy of the Black Egg story made her uneasy. "Cody never seemed like a particularly helpful guy to me. He's more like a snoop, a troll, and a snitch."

"He's just geeky, Rabbiteen. Cody doesn't have a whole lot of human social skills."

"On my blog he comes across like a stalker."

"He told me he's a veteran working physicist employed on black-ops projects by the federal government. A lonely old man whose whole life has been top-secret. I had to work hard at it, but I've won Cody over. He never

had any trace of freedom in his life, except for the internet. He thinks of you and me as his most intimate friends.”

“Okay, fine,” said Rabbiteen. “Why not the Tonopah Test Range? If that makes you happy.”

But rather than smiling at her agreeability, Angelo was antsy. “I wish you hadn’t said that. Now you’ve got me all worried. What if Cody is lying to me? All that amazing physics data could be clever disinformation. Maybe he’s just some kind of crazy online pervert who, for whatever twisted reason—”

Rabbiteen aimed a brave smile at her friend’s tormented face. “Look, that sign says Tonopah! And there’s a nice little motel.”

Angelo instantly slewed the heavy hearse into the dark, empty parking lot. Despite the late hour, the motel office door yawned open, with a trapezoid of light on the gravel.

Springy on his sneakered feet, Angelo hopped out of the hearse and into the motel office. Stretching the travel kinks from her back, Rabbiteen noticed a dull glow in the valley beyond this ridge. That must be the whipped old mining town of Tonopah. An all-but-defunct burg like that shouldn’t be emitting so much flickering light and hot glare—oh. Tonopah was on fire.

Squinting into the distance, Rabbiteen could make out motorcycles, buzzing Tonopah’s back streets like hornets. Some of the night-riders carried torches, leaving spark-spewing trails in the gloom.

“We don’t want to stay around here,” said Angelo, returning to her. Carefully, disturbingly, he wiped his feet on the gravel, leaving dark stains. Blood.

A vagrant breeze wafted whoops and screams across the dark hills.

“The owner’s been killed?” said Rabbiteen. Hollowness filled her chest. “Oh god, oh god, I don’t want to be slaughtered by psychos! I want to flash out with the Big Splat!”

“Don’t panic,” said Angelo, hugging her. “Don’t panic yet.” He stepped back and showed her a trophy tucked in the back of his belt. A forty-five automatic pistol. “You see, the owner was web-surfing. He had this handgun right next to his mouse—somebody lopped his head clean off

while he was staring into his screen.” Angelo handed her the pistol, butt-first. “The clip’s full; that survival newbie never fired one shot in his own defense!”

Rabbiteen shuddered as she handled the weapon. Beyond the motel’s sordid lot, a pair of monster trucks bounced side by side down the two-lane highway, their multiple headlights beaming crazed jittering cones. “Maybe we shouldn’t go through Tonopah.”

“I’ll drive like a maniac, and you’ll fire wildly,” Angelo advised. “So it’ll be fine. Let me give you the précis on this Colt military automatic. As a survivalist, I’ve logged a lot of hours on this model. It’s easy except for the recoil. You hold it in both hands and gently squeeze the trigger. Try that.”

Off at the edge of the motel lot, Rabbiteen saw a suspicious shadow. Something looping, boiling, rippling like heat haze. The head lopper? She hastily squeezed off a shot. The pistol kicked upwards with a flash and a deafening bang. The window of a motel unit blew out with a musical crash of glass.

Then, ominous, total silence.

If there had been any guests in this lonely motel, they were all gone. Or murdered. Yet there was still a roiling, phantom shape in the farthest corner of the parking lot. A midnight dust devil, or a smear of tears across her vision.

It was definitely time to go.

“Let’s access some mash-up internet maps,” said Angelo, powering up the hearse with a biodiesel splutter. “I know the Test Range is on the far side of Tonopah, but of course the site’s fully concealed from the sheep-like American public.”

Rabbiteen piled into the paint-blistered hearse with him, suddenly cheered by the utter recklessness of their plan. The last night of mankind’s existence—how could it be any other way than this? Car doors locked, and windows up, smelly gun near to hand, she crouched elbow to elbow with her friend, connecting to the global mind, comforted by her talismanic laptop.

“Why do you suppose Google Maps doesn’t even list any super-secret labs?” she complained.

Angelo toyed with the wheel, inching the car across the gravel, waiting patiently as a midnight slew of cars blasted from the darkness down Highway 6. “That’s easy. I mean, I’m a dropout from Stanford ... and Sergey and Larry are both dropouts from Stanford, too. But unlike me, they’re covering for the Man! Because they sold out!”

“Oh, wait,” said Rabbiteen, “Google just linked me to a nutcase map site with tons of great info. Hmm. The Tonopah Test Range is just past the Tonopah airport. It butts into Groom Lake where people see, like, aliens from other dimensions. And, get this, the Test Range has their own secret part, and that’s *Area 52*.”

“Wow,” said Angelo. A raging eighteen-wheeler spattered gravel across their windshield. “That’s one digit higher than 51.”

Rabbiteen’s iPhone emitted the stunning CLANK CLANK of a steam hammer. She’d once missed a vitally important instant message, so her alert preferences were set to maximum stun.

She bumped her head on the grimy dashboard as she lunged for her sleek device. “It’s Cody! Cody is trying to hit me!”

“Hunh,” said Angelo. “Don’t read it.”

“I hot 2 c u 2 n4k3d,” read Rabbiteen. She glared at Angelo. “Hot to see you two naked? What does that mean? What on earth did you tell that guy?”

“I had to social-engineer him so he’d help us break into the Black Egg. Like I said, Cody is a very lonely old man.”

“You told him that you’d post photos of us naked?”

“No, I didn’t say that exactly,” said Angelo, his voice almost wistful. “It’s worse. I told him I’d stream us having sex on live webcam video.” He straightened his shoulders. “I had to tell him something like that, Rabbiteen. I lied to him. And, really, at this point, so what? What possible difference does it make? The whole universe is about to melt.”

Rabbiteen frowned down at her pistol, turning it over in her hands. She was momentarily tempted to shoot Angelo, but stifled the impulse. It was amazing how many user-friendly little clicks and snicks the pistol had.

“Anyway, my gambit worked on him,” said Angelo. He patted the

iPhone, which lay on the seat, its message still showing. "See the digits on the bottom of the screen? Cody also sent you the GPS coordinates to the site."

He punched tiny buttons on a squat plastic gizmo suction-cupped to the dash of his hearse.

"Continue Highway 6 through Tonopah," said the genteel female voice of Angelo's GPS navigation unit. "Turn right at unmarked dirt road number 37A."

Jaw set, Angelo peeled out of the lot and barreled through the crumbling heart of the stricken desert settlement. Knots of drunken, flare-wielding marauders were barricading the streets with smoldering debris. Angelo accelerated through a flaming police sawhorse, and Rabbiteen braced her heavy pistol in both hands, firing wildly and shrieking flamewar abuse through the open window.

Overawed by the style of the loons in the hearse, the rioters let them pass.

Then they motored sedately through the eastern outskirts of blacked-out Tonopah, past burning tract homes and empty desert shacks, past the silent airport and the abandoned mines.

As they turned off onto the dirt side road, Rabbiteen mimicked the feminine voice of the GPS navigator. "Suggestion. What if I posted naked pictures of myself with this gun?" She shoveled in a fresh chew of betel. "What kind of user response would I get?"

"You mean if your users weren't torn apart into their constituent quarks?" Angelo smiled and took her hand.

He was feeling buoyant. The world was definitely ending, in fire and blood just as he'd always guessed, yet he'd finally found a woman meant for him. With that sweet, frank way she had of cutting to the core of an issue without ever delivering anything useful, Rabbiteen Chandra was the very soul of bloggerdom.

His last night on Earth felt as vast and endless as a crumpled galaxy, while the full moon had gone the shape and color of a dry-squeezed blood orange. The clumps of sage were pale purple. The world Angelo inhabited had finally come to look and feel just like the inside of his own head. Incredible to think that he and Rabbiteen might be the last human beings

ever to witness this landscape. It was as if they owned it.

“Isn’t that a guard house ahead?” said Rabbiteen. “If you want to crash through that, I can lay down some covering fire. At least till I run out of bullets.”

The GPS crooned sedately from the dash. “Proceed though Security Gate 233-X, traveling twenty-two miles further into the Tonopah Test Range to destination Area 52.”

“I’d hoped Cody would be waiting for us at this security gate,” said Angelo, slowing the hearse. “But I guess he never leaves his supercomputer console.” His nerves were fraying again. “The guards around here are brainwashed killing machines. Mindlessly devoted to the fugitive neoconservatives of the Area 52 escape pod. If I stop, they’ll extradite us to Guantanamo. If I pull a U-turn, they’ll chase us down with Predator aircraft. If I barrel through the gate, we’ll smash head-on into their truck-bomb tank traps.”

“Oh, stop talking like that,” said Rabbiteen. “It’s 3 AM on their last night on Earth! How devoted to duty can those guys be? Don’t they have any girlfriends? Or kids?”

The glum little concrete guardhouse that defended the Test Range was in fact deserted. The razor-wire chain-link moaned in the wind and the striped traffic arm pointed uselessly at the starry sky.

The hearse rolled into the empty desert compound, the narrow military road gently curving around peaks that sat on the sand like giant Zen boulders. Here and there old war-gamed jeeps had been shot to pieces from helicopters. Except for this ritualized military debris, there was only the moon and the mountains, the silence broken by periodic updates from the GPS unit.

To cover his growing embarrassment, Angelo propped his laptop on the dash. Automatically he clicked for his blog. “Oh my God!”

Terror gripped Rabbiteen’s heart. “What? What now?”

“Look at my traffic spike! My Webalizer stats are right off the charts! Drudge Report, Boing Boing, Huffington Post, they’re all sucking my dust! I rule the net tonight! Everybody’s linking to me!”

“How about *my* blog?” she asked. “I blogged the Big Splat before

you did—”

“This is fantastic!” continued Angelo. “I’m finally fully validated as an independent citizen journalist!”

Rabbiteen jealously moused around his screen. “Dammit, my own site has totally crashed! Why doesn’t your traffic max out when you get Slashdotted so hard?”

“My ‘Ain’t It Awful’ site is scalable, babe. I pay full service on the Amazon web-cloud and they just keep adding servers. This is the last night on Earth. No one will ever beat my post for traffic. I’m the greatest blogger in the history of the planet.”

Rabbiteen considered this boast. Though galling, it had to be true. Her boyfriend was the greatest blogger in the world. Except nobody would really call Angelo her boyfriend, because they’d never even kissed.

Feeling letdown, she stroked the glossy screen of her iPhone, scroll-flicking her way through a rolling list of friends and landing on, why not, Prof. Dr. Hintika Kuusk, the Estonian string theorist. Dr. Kuusk was a kindly, grandmotherly scholar; a woman of the world who’d always been very kind to the gawky physics enthusiast named “Rabbiteen Chandra.”

Rabbiteen pecked out a text message on the phone’s eerie virtual keyboard. “About to have sex with Angelo Rasmussen inside Area 52.”

She thumb-smearred SEND and launched her confession into cellphonespace. She was glad she’d told a confidante. Blogger that she was, it always felt better to tell somebody than to do something.

Moments passed, and then the phone emitted its signature clank. A sober incoming reply from Hintika Kuusk: “Fare thee well, Rabbiteen.”

“Farewell 4ever Dr. Kuusk,” typed Rabbiteen, her heart filling. She slid a glance over at Angelo, who was steering with one hand while trying to type with the other. She considered cozying up to him and working her wiles, but just then, with another clank, here came a mass-mailing to Hintika Kuusk’s extensive buddy list: “OMG OMG OMG! Rabbiteen-Karmic-Reality is hooking up with Angelo-Aint-It-Awful!”

Within seconds, a follow-up fusillade tumbled onto Rabbiteen’s phone display and laptop screen—from handhelds, from Twitterstreams, from MySpace pages—gossipy whoops and snarks, cheerful shout-outs

and me-toos, messages from half the women Rabbiteen knew.

Angelo glanced over, his eyebrows kinked. “What’s the excitement?”

“Oh, it’s just my silly, romantic women friends. Don’t let me distract you from fondling your famous blog.”

Angelo was gentlemanly enough to close his laptop. “We’re being fools. What do you say we pull over now?”

He tapped a button on the GPS unit for a distance update. “Area 52 is now twelve miiii—” The robotic voice twisted into a sudden anguished squawk. The device sputtered, chirped, and went dark.

Reflexively concerned about any loss in connectivity, Rabbiteen lifted her cell phone. Its display had gone black. “Those wonky Apple batteries...”

“Try your laptop?” said Angelo.

Rabbiteen read from its screen. “You are not connected to the internet.” And then, like a cranky, spoiled child finally falling asleep, her laptop, too, went dark.

And then—oh dear—the car died.

Wrestling the stiff power steering, Angelo guided them to rest in a curved billow of roadside sand.

It was quiet here, so very quiet. The wind whispered, the red moon glowed.

Rabbiteen spoke aloud, just to hear her own voice. “I was sort of expecting this. Electrical circuits can’t work any more. Too much drift in the fundamental constants of electromagnetism.”

“Like a power failure affecting the whole Earth?” said Angelo.

“It’s much more than a power failure. And it’s not just our sweet little Earth. It’s the entire universe.”

Angelo sighed. “For years people called me paranoid. Now I finally know I was a realist. I was truly perceptive and insightful. I was never a fringe crank intellectual, I was a major public thinker! I should have had a wife, kids ... I should have had tenure and a MacArthur Grant.”

Should Rabbiteen declare her love for him? It was on the tip of her tongue. He was oh so close in the rosily moon-dappled car. She reached out and touched his face.

“There’s one important part I still don’t get,” said Angelo doggedly. “Aren’t our nerves electrical? We should be fainting or passing out. But I’m still thinking—and my heart’s still beating ... It’s beating for you.”

“Human nerves are mostly chemical,” said Rabbiteen, her voice rising to a squeak. She made a lunge for him. At last they kissed.

“We could lose our ability to think and feel at any moment,” Angelo said presently. “So it’s the back of my hearse, or it’s the sand. Unless you want to get out and hunt for Cody’s Black Easter Egg.”

Rabbiteen turned and gazed behind herself. The hearse did have white silk ruffles. In the weirdly altered moonlight, those were kind of—romantic.

As they bucked against each other, bellies slapping, vivid and relentless, it occurred to Rabbiteen that she and Angelo were just like the two cosmic branes.

It could be claimed that the once-distant branes were violently colliding, but that was a very male way to frame what was happening. If you laid out your twelve-dimensional coordinate system differently, the branes passed through one another and emerged reenergized and fecund on the other side of that event.

It was like the urge to have sex, which was loud and pestering and got all the press, as opposed to the urge to have children, which was even more powerful, obliteratingly powerful, only nobody could sell that to men.

Afterward came the urge to abandon all awareness and slide into deep black sleep, which no one could resist. Cuddled in the sweaty crook of Angelo’s arm, Rabbiteen tumbled straight over the edge of nightmare.

She saw a lipless, billowing, yellow-eyed face peering into the side window of the hearse. Its enormous mouth gaped in woozy appetite, yawning and slamming like some drug-drenched door of perception. The otherworldly visitation of a Hindu demon. Had she dreamed that?

“Angelo!” She poked his ribs.

But he was off-line, a blissful, snoring mass. She retrieved the gun from the front seat, and stared with grainy-eyed, murderous intent into the moonlit desert. Despite her fear and wariness, she couldn't keep her lids open.

Red distorted sunlight woke them through the windows of the hearse.

"Oh no, here it comes!" yipped Angelo, sitting up with a start. He'd mistaken the rising sun for the final cosmic conflagration, and not without reason, for the solar disk was ten times its usual diameter, and the light it shed was as dim as the clouded gaze of a stroke victim.

The world outside their hearse was rendered in faded Technicolor. The skewed interaction between light, matter, and their human retinas was tinting the sage red, the sand a pale green, the sky canary yellow.

With icy, tingling fingers, Rabbiteen grabbed Angelo's wrist, trying to read his watch. "It can't already be time for the end, can it?"

"My watch has a wrecked battery now," said Angelo. "But if the sun's coming up, then it must about six AM, right? We've still got, what, four hours to hunt for the Black Egg."

Rabbiteen's bare belly rumbled. "Do you have any breakfast?"

"Of course! Angelo Rasmussen is the Compleat Survivalist. I don't always have great sex with gorgeous Californian tech chicks, but I always have food and water."

As she preened a little, he dug into the wheel-well. "Here we go. Fruit-leather and freeze-dried granola."

They munched companionably, sitting with their legs dangling out the hearse's open back door. Rabbiteen felt happier than ever before in her life, out of her mind with head-over-heels, neck-yourself-silly romantic bonding. It was beyond ironic that this would happen to her just now.

"Do you really think a lame stalker like Cody could dodge the Big Splat?" she essayed. "I'd love to hope that's the truth. I mean, now that we're together, it would be such a great ending if somehow—"

"Not looking good," said Angelo, staring into the particolored desert gloom. "If Cody's story was for real, we should see scads of black

helicopters flying in here, with all kinds of fat cats saving themselves from destruction.”

“Even your *black* helicopters can’t work today,” said Rabbiteen a little impatiently. “It’s not just the batteries, Angelo. It’s spark plugs, ignition, control chips—everything. No electrical machine will ever function again.” Seeing his stricken look, she tried to soothe him. “Maybe all the refugees are here already. Maybe they’re all crowded into the brane collision survival pod. Imagine the fun when they see us.”

“The Black Egg of Area 52,” said Angelo, drawing fresh strength from the idea. “Let’s walk there.”

“I’m ready. We’ll walk to the end of the earth.”

Angelo loaded a stained khaki knapsack with food and water, daintily lotioned his skin, and even produced a couple of wide-brimmed hats, blister packs, and a telescoping metal walking-stick.

“Rabbiteen Rasmussen,” he murmured as they gamely trudged the sandy road. “What a fantastic name. That would be a king-hell blogger handle.”

Rabbiteen’s heart glowed with joy.

They came to a fork in the troubled road—with both alternatives equally bleak. “My compass is useless now,” Angelo griped. “Also, I think the sun is exploding.”

Indeed the swollen, ruddy sun was spiky with fractalized flares. Its face was mottled with dark writhing sunspots, vast cavities into the star’s inner layers. Old Man Sol was visibly breathing his last. It was like seeing a beloved parent succumb to a disfiguring disease.

They picked the road to the left and slogged forward.

Rabbiteen’s love-smitten psyche was bubbling over with happy thoughts, yet the fear goblins ran fast behind, eating them. Compulsively, her mind returned to that demonic toad face she’d glimpsed in the midnight of her soul—but she didn’t share this inner terror with Angelo. He’d only make fun of her or, worse, drive himself frantic with speculation.

Their few remaining moments of togetherness were passing all too fast. There was no sign of any secret base, or of any human beings at all.

They were trudging endless, badly colored terrain in utter forlornness, like the last two holdout players in some outdated internet game.

Angelo was stumbling, leaning heavily on his fancy high-tech walking stick.

“My feet are asleep,” he complained.

“Me too.” Rabbiteen rubbed one tingling hand against another. “I guess—I guess the changes in the electrical constants are finally getting to our nerves and our bodies.” Against her will, a sudden wail forced itself from her. “Oh, Angelo, do you love me?”

“Did I forget to say that? I get so distracted sometimes. Yes, I love you. I do love you. I’d post it in letters of fire bigger than the sun.”

This declaration revived her a little; they wobbled on, teetering on their rubbery ankles.

Angelo was thinking hard. How strange it was that a woman’s welcoming body could nail a man to the fabric of space and time. This was a mystical proof to him that sexual intercourse was an inherent part of the fabric of the universe. His brain was working very fast—as if some kind of electrochemical friction had vanished inside his skull—but the fringes of his nervous system were fading. It was terrible to know he would soon die, and worse to know that Rabbiteen’s kindly, ardent body would smear across the cosmos like a spin-painting.

“Look!” she cried. Another unguarded, open gate. They tottered through, their knees wobbling. In the fractured, crystalline distance they could see sun-blasted buildings and a sandy airstrip. “It’s too far,” added Rabbiteen, bursting into tears. “And we’re too slow! We won’t make it.”

They sat in the shadow of a boulder, arms around each other, awaiting the end—or the strength to rise and slog on. But now a deep rumble filled their ears. Sand rose into the air as if blown by an impalpable gale; rocks flew off the mountains with the ease of tumbling dice.

The two lovers fell upward.

There was frantic, incomprehensible activity all around them, as if they were mice in the grinding engine of a merry-go-round. Like the maculated sun overhead, the planet’s surface had come unmoored. Geological strata had gently unpacked like the baked layers of a baklava, sending the surface

debris crashing about in search of new equilibria.

Eerie pink sunlight glittered from the hearse's window as, plucked from beyond the horizon, it tumbled past them, its hood and doors slamming rhythmically, bouncing up the slopes of the nearest peak.

In ordinary times, the earthquake noise alone might have crushed their clinging bodies, but the booming of this planetary destruction was oddly muted and gentle. The fundamental constants had plateaued for a moment. A new order of gravity settled in, with everything that could come loose from the Earth being messily sorted according to its mass.

Belatedly, a reluctant mountain tore itself loose and rose ponderously into the lemon sky.

Rabbiteen and Angelo were floating a few score yards above the remains of the ancient desert—a patch of fine dust beneath a layer of sand with pebbles admixed, topped by bones, sticks, stones, and target-range military rubble.

A venomous little Gila monster tumbled past them, dislodged from some flying mountain redoubt, its stubby tail twisting, its skin glittering like a beaded arm-band.

Angelo's blown mind irritably snatched for facts. "Are those nerve-gas canisters up there? They're like weather balloons." He beat his helpless legs against the empty air and began to twist in place. "Can you explain this to me, Ms. Karmic Science?"

Rabbiteen's mind had frozen with awe. The mountains of the firmament were floating across the spotted face of the bloated sun. She had no way to think clearly—with thunderhead shelves of granite and feldspar poised to crush her.

"Hold me, Angelo! You're drifting away! I want to be with you till the very end!"

"We're doomed," said Angelo. He squinted into the hazy, polymorphous distances. The stark concrete hangars and wooden shacks of Area 52 were piled in midair like badly assembled Ikea shelving.

The humbled remnants of the secret federal base showed no signs of life. No super scientists, no fat cats there, no Black Egg. All those cogent hints about close encounters in the American Southwest with psychic

saucer-craft, and nobody was even here. People were so cynical about the miraculous that they couldn't even bother to show up.

"I can almost feel that other brane arriving now," said Rabbiteen. "Once the force of gravity has changed, we only have six minutes."

"Cody!" hollered Angelo, his voice echoing off the floating islands of stone. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Help us, Cody!"

"Come on, Cody!" shrieked Rabbiteen. Giggling shrilly, she grappled at Angelo. Her fingers were numb, and the flesh of his neck and shoulders felt spongy and strange. "The desert's so beautiful, Cody! Especially upside down! We had great sex, and next time you can watch us, I promise!"

"Cody, Cody, Cody!!!"

A lens-like shape formed in mid-air, magnifying the tumbleweeds and boulders. Slowly, it opened a dark throat.

"Hello?" said Angelo.

The blackness folded in on itself and took form. The hole became crooked, then everted, like a giant origami tentacle. It swayed around in mid-air like a hungry feeler.

It took note of the two of them.

The warped tentacle wriggled and dimpled; the tip flexed to assume the shape of a staring, glistening face. Complex forces within the bulging shape were manipulating it like a sock puppet. The eyes bulged like a rubber mask, the mouth stretched and gaped like a toad's.

"Cody?" said Angelo, yet again, one arm wrapped around Rabbiteen. "Are you here to save us?"

The demonic toad twisted his head this way and that. He had large, golden eyes. "Do I look properly embodied within your planet's three spatial dimensions?"

"No!" Rabbiteen squeaked, stiff with unearthly terror. "You look like hell!"

"Interaction was so much easier on the internet," said the toad,

smacking his thin lips. "It's a lot of trouble to manifest this low-dimensional form to you." The creature's voice was modulated white noise, like sand sculpted into letters.

"I saw him last night, Angelo," cried Rabbiteen. "I saw him peeking into the hearse! And he was in the motel parking lot. Cody was stalking us."

"I was monitoring you," said Cody, his head billowing like a black pillowcase. "You two alone have reached Area 52, naturally selected from the many billions on your planet. You are like sperm cells beating their way up a long canal—"

"—to reach the Black Egg," completed Angelo hurriedly. His molecules felt overstretched. "Okay, yes! Here we are! Let us inside!"

Cody leered at them provokingly. "The Cosmic Mother," he said, "is the immortal entity that fills the band of hyperspace between the twin branes of the cosmos. I am the tip of one of Mother's many tentacles. If you can imagine that."

"Of course we can imagine that!" jabbered Rabbiteen. "Don't let us die!"

"Let us in," repeated Angelo. His fingers felt and looked like orange circus peanuts.

"This Black Egg is prepared for you, my blogger friends," said Cody simply. "The universe is collapsing, so the Cosmic Mother has placed a Black Egg on every space and place that supports intelligence. Billions of eggs, spewed in the cosmos like dewdrops in the shining sea."

"Oh Cody," said Rabbiteen, "you read my blog too."

"Of course I do. Physics is collapsing, but the network will persist. All the Black Eggs are linked via quantum entanglement. Telepathy, if you will."

Momentarily, Angelo forgot his fears. "Wow, I always wanted some telepathy."

"There's also infinite connectivity and infinite storage in the network of eggs," Cody evangelized. "The network has an infinite number of users. They're all upset and angry, just like you, because they're all indignant to see their universe collapse. They all believed they were the most important aspect of the universe. Imagine the confusion. We have an infinite number

of anthropic principles—one for each race!”

“Then you’ll need moderators,” said Rabbiteen practically. “You need some users that know how to link and comment.”

“Absolutely we do,” said Cody. “This cosmic cycle was planned out and architected rather poorly. It’s closing down much earlier than the Cosmic Mother expected. Instead of crashing like this, the universes are supposed to get more stable with each new release.”

“We’re just the kickass bloggers you need!” crowed Angelo. “We can keep up our moaning and complaining for millions of years! Assuming that we’re rewarded for our efforts. I mean—is there any kind of revenue stream inside there?”

“You’ll lack for nothing inside your race’s Black Egg,” leered Cody. “Except your human need to eat or breathe. There will be sex, of course. There’s always sex on the Net. The Cosmic Mother adores sex.”

“Wow,” said Rabbiteen.

“Now come closer to me,” said the toad-headed tentacle. “Technical detail: your Black Egg is a hyperdisk where the branes are riveted together via a wormhole link in the twelfth dimension. In this one special region—it’s down my gullet—the branes can’t collide. I know your primitive minds can’t understand that. Think of me as a pinecone that protects a tree’s seeds from the heat of a fierce wildfire.”

Angelo shook his bloating hands. “Never mind the license agreements, just sign us up and log us in!”

Rabbiteen had to annotate. “Really, Cody, I think it’s more accurate to say the cosmic branes pass through each other serenely.”

“Ah, you refer to the Twisterman coordinatization,” said Cody, his bloated demon head expanding with a ragged jolt. “Yes, under that viewpoint, we’ll all be transformed into our mirror-images. If you calculate in terms of the diffeomorphic quiver bundles, then it’s—”

“Hurry up!” screamed Angelo—losing his composure as his left thumb snapped off.

“Fine,” said Cody. “Over the next ten million years we can discuss these issues fully.” His wide mouth gaped open. The inside looked dank

and slimy.

Rabbiteen felt another flicker of unease. Could it be that Cody was an underworld demon after all? Under his promise of cosmic transformation, was he luring them to a fate infinitely worse than mere death? Would the toad behave any differently, if he were doing that?

Cody waited with his silent mouth agape.

Up in the sky, the sun went out. The stars and moon were gone as well. Utter darkness reigned. A shrill buzz filled the nonexistent air and slid menacingly down the scale.

Pressing together, Angelo and Rabbiteen crawled into the toad's mouth. Pushing and pulling, moving as one, the lovers wriggled their way down to the womb of the Black Egg. And of our world they saw no more.

Within the Egg's twelve-dimensional kalpas, time and space regressed. There was neither room nor duration in which to hunger, to tire, or draw a human breath. Yet in another sense, this was a weightless and limitless utopian paradise in which happy Neetibbar and wry Olegna could gambol and embrace.

The mortal races of the next universe would occasionally comment on two glorious superclusters, titanic arcs of creative energy stenciling the void like a net—sharp and sleek, stable and sweet, weaving the warp and weft of the reborn cosmos.