

Adaptogenia
by Wayne Wightman

Wayne Wightman turned campaign season into silly season with his last story, “A Foreign Country” (Dec. 2008). Now he brings us a new story, one that suggests T. S. Eliot was wrong—“Not with a bang but a hum” might be more accurate than the original line Mr. Eliot used in “The Hollow Men.”

August

As with all catastrophes, it began simply enough, with the chime of the doorbell. Eleven thirty-five a.m., Tuesday, sunny, middle of summer. Bing bong. Good-bye, normal world. Hello, apocalypse.

“Good morning, sir,” she said brightly. “I represent the Girl Scouts of America.” Girl Scout, paper-bag-brown hair, lot of teeth, cute outfit. “—and we have these simply luscious Scotch Tea cookies....” Blah, blah, blah.

Fine kid and all that, I’m sure, but it wasn’t the Girl Scout that caught my eye, with the cute outfit even. It was the *other* “Girl Scout” about thirty feet behind her, near the edge of the street. It looked like the Girl Scout, a little fuzzy maybe, but it looked like the Girl Scout grinning at me from my porch, exactly mimicking her movements—and then it wasn’t there. Then it was, over to the left a bit. Then the top half of its head began to twist, smearing the details of the face around in a mushy blur. Then it evaporated. I’ve had hallucinations, I know hallucinations, and this wasn’t a hallucination. Or at least it was a new taxonomic category.

“...purchase a sampler?” Girl Scout, lovely smile, perfect teeth.

“You guys travel in pairs?” I asked, craftily.

“Oh no. It’s just me today! You look like you’ve had a difficult morning, sir. I’m sure this sampler would perk your day right up. It’s got lots of sugar!” She babbled on. And on.

Too much non-ideational interference. I gave her cash, she gave me cookies, she took off, my mind focused.

Distinct visual impossibilities right there at the edge of the street.

Why me? I asked myself self-pityingly.

Larger questions: Do surreal visions happen to everyone, but they don't talk about them? Do they consider the inexplicable to be normal? Or do they just not register on a consciousness locked deep in the ruts of the everyday? Possibilities: 1) The Girl Scout vision could've been a pre-catatonic hallucination, of a type which are particularly vivid, or, 2) TB of the brainstem, which triggers hallucinations of a distinctly ugly and primitive nature. The old head wound throbbed. Bad sign.

Sweet stuttering Jesus, to think how little I had to worry about that morning. I'd wondered whether the milk in the fridge was still good. So few concerns. At least there was milk. Somewhere there were even cows. Mooing.

I could have gone back to watching Judge Cladgett hand down his cruelly creative sentences, which today involved searching for previously swallowed contraband at a juvenile facility. I could have. I didn't.

Ignoring what I'd seen would not have been ethical. My goofball job required that I report any irregular reality threads (as we in the trade called them) to the omnivorous information-gathering Kamchatka Enterprises Group by way of the *Conspiracy Theorists' Weekly*, one of KEG's many fronts, a glossy yet repugnant grocery store magazine I compiled which invited reader input, thus trolling the cretins for additional scrud. If it was going on, KEG wanted to know about it. Thus my immediate professional obligation, however distasteful: follow the Girl Scout; observe and report any subsequent nonstandard threading.

Unfortunately, I sought and I found.

A police cruiser sidled up to the curb next to me. The officer used his big voice: "Sir, could you—" Blah blah blah.

Down the street, fifty feet away, another "police cruiser" almost took shape as it also pulled over to the curb—a filmy here/not-here/repeat "police cruiser." More head wound throbbage.

"Sir!"

I leaned over and gazed into the cruiser's internal gloom. Larry Loose Change.

"Oh," he said. "Mr. Aprille. Out walkin'? What's happenin'?"

"Wasp nest. Trying to see where the wasps were coming from."

“Tryna see where the wasps were comin’ from?”

“You got it, Larry. Public hazard. I was checkin’ it out.”

“You were checkin’ it out!”

“I was checkin’ it out.”

“Okay, you check it out real good!” He gave me a thumbs-up and drifted his three-ton landcraft down the street. Behind the vehicle, the “cruiser” bubbled outward, growing larger and more transparent till it vanished altogether. Transient attentional modulation paranoia? I’d had it once before, a year after taking the head shot. All karma evaporated.

Back to the house to make a call to Vera Kamchatka, president of Kamchatka Enterprises—a woman with the exterior of a female prison warden and the interior of a woman who could ravage my body and soul with a nod, with a smile, with a “Yes.” Aside from having a photographic memory and endless curiosity about what other people knew, she had become quite wealthy by selling important interest groups carefully selected intelligence of strategic (in-)accuracy.

I briefly explained to her what I had seen. “I’ll write it up, but since it was local, I thought you might want to know. It could just be my disability acting up.”

She said nothing.

“Vera?”

“Be here in thirty minutes,” she said, “right here in front of me,” and disconnected.

Thirty minutes.

Unusual.

Urgency? Tight schedule? I’d know by my reception.

* * * *

Since Vera founded Kamchatka Enterprises fifteen years ago, we had been off-and-on close. But even when we were off, we were off-and-on. In the last couple of years, Vera had less and less to say about her job, which didn’t surprise me, considering its delicate and potentially explosive nature. True, the front and

one visible side of her building was her seed packaging front—retirees listening to the Rolling Stones while they bagged up seeds to send to places in Africa where there was either no dirt or no water—but the remaining two-thirds of the building housed thirty-seven offices where, as she told me once, no one knew what anybody else did and, in fact, she saw to it that they were often not entirely sure what they were doing themselves. And then there were the rumors of dummy assignments—irrelevant investigations to keep everyone guessing. Only Vera assembled the pieces. Vera knew all.

My particular input was compiling the *Conspiracy Theorists' Weekly* from the contributions of our correspondents, adding an occasional story myself of some overheard conversation or the rambling rant of a mondo dismo inhabitant that indicated a potential underlying controlling, yet unseen, intelligence. I received dozens of columns from code-named contributors so my compiling assignment was easy enough it could've been done by a crankcase cowboy. Cushy job, official check in the mail from Kamchatka Enterprises, all a gift from Vera by way of making up for my Disability Experience at her own lovely hands—another story, another time. Publishing the *Conspiracy Theorists' Weekly* was Vera's way, she said, of keeping in touch with the ignorant educated, for whom she had enormous disgust.

* * * *

Twenty-eight minutes later:

"I guess you're wondering," Vera said.

"I'm filled with wondering."

"How's your head lately?" Being responsible, she often asked.

"Wound doesn't hurt too much."

She rose from her chair and towered over her desk. Dressed in black, as usual, she had her black hair pulled into a tight bun, positioned slightly above her medulla. "What do you think you saw?"

"Probably something like a heat reflection. It's been pretty warm. Residual sleep deprivation brain jitter."

"Eliot, my dear, we have two problems."

"You said my name. It's that bad?"

“Yes, Eliot. The first problem is that something is happening, and it’s not just happening here and not just happening now. The second problem is that we don’t know what it is.” She stared into my face, her jaw muscles working. Then her face relaxed. “I’m very nervous,” she said.

* * * *

Twenty-five minutes later, we stood in the same positions. Her hair was still perfect, but she was less nervous.

“At first we thought these were fad hallucinations, but during the last three years, the sightings have become more frequent and more elaborate.”

“So what? People see things all the time that aren’t there.”

“You don’t read your *Conspiracy Theorists’ Weekly*, do you?”

“I tried, but I couldn’t. It’s a horrible rag.”

“It is that. Yours was not the only sighting of duplicate images. The first one observed that fits the pattern was just over three years ago in Florida. There were probably others before that.”

“Maybe it’s a reality bleed,” I said, attempting some levity.

“It’s been thought of. Two groups are tangentially working on that.”

It was spiritually troubling to consider that people were investigating something I made up as a joke.

“Things appear, things disappear—and we ruled out hallucinations in many cases. Still, we considered the phenomenon only marginally relevant and had half a dozen hypotheses. Then, one fine evening, a Secret Service agent saw the President walk across a room and morph into one of the ugly chairs they have in his office. The agent walked over to touch the chair, but at his approach, in his own words, it ‘dissolved and flew out the door.’”

“So now you take it seriously.”

“It was one agent. He could’ve been drunk or lying or mad. Still, it was just one agent. He was debriefed in Egypt and confessed to planting poison gas cannisters at Walter Reed Hospital. A little pressure and the man became

completely unreliable.”

“Connect the dots for me.”

“Can’t. Play this.” She handed me a disk.

I slid it into her machine. The image on the screen wasn’t steady, but the focus was clean: a helicopter, altitude maybe a hundred yards, with a spray rig extending fifteen feet out on each side. Blurry spray out of the nozzles. Then the whole thing bubbled outward, becoming more transparent, till it vanished. Took maybe five seconds. End of content.

“That came in to us two weeks ago. Any hypotheses?”

“Molecular dissociation? Rapid entropy? A trick?”

“We’re at a loss. The largest faction believes there’s an alien presence involved. Agencies that will go unnamed are offering bales of unmarked fifty-dollar bills for an answer. Big bales. I like big bales of fifties, and I’m stuck for an answer.” She looked at me. “I don’t like being stuck for an answer. Kamchatka Enterprises loses credibility. I need to relax.”

“I’m available.”

“Sometime after eight. Have your skin on tight.”

* * * *

At 8:15, bright summer evening, she oozed through my door, desire made flesh. Her mind could focus on one thing to the exclusion of all else, and, at the moment, I was the non-excluded object. In our first moment of silence, just inside the front door, atavistic lust rising—there came screaming from the street.

We turned, threw open the door, and stood in the yard in the early twilight.

A second scream. Then my forever-grilling neighbor Durnell Wickens ran from behind a high hedge waving his arms in the air. “Help me! Help me! Help me!”

I called to him and he swerved in our direction.

“My wife! My wife, she *melted*! My god, it was hideous! She melted!”

Vera and I looked at each other. Knowing looks. At that moment, Mrs. Wickens stepped out on the sidewalk and came toward us. Durnell goggled and staggered backwards.

“Durnell,” the woman said rigidly, “what in the hell are you doing? You scream like a girl. Get back home right now. Sorry, Mr. Aprille.”

Durnell whispered to me, “Is that really my wife?”

His luck had run out. “Yes, Durnell, I’d recognize her anywhere.”

He hung his head and shuffled toward her.

Vera pondered. “Three events that we know of, right here, on your street. It’s ramping up.”

* * * *

Back inside my house, I saw that it was going to be a long night, not in a good way. She sat at my computer, pulled up Kamchatka Enterprises, went through five security screens using cryptic passwords of many characters, until she got to screens of dense text. She read it silently for ten long minutes. She turned to me. I didn’t understand her expression—it was a new one to me. I suspected fear.

“This is going to be difficult,” she said. And, later, in the dark, “A state in the state of chaos is not going to ask Kamchatka Enterprises for a rational security program. States will attack each other till the survivors see it’s lose-lose. And will these toughest-of-the-trash contract with KE? I suspect not. Chaos is not our friend, Aprille, and the chaos quotient is accelerating.” The evening continued in darkness. Wiping her brow, she spoke again: “If physical objects,” she said, “such as food, persons, benches, automobiles, anything—if physical objects can no longer be considered authentic, at least in the usual sense of the word, I assure you that some people will handle this version of reality very badly, and Kamchatka Enterprises will be without clients.” By the light of the moon through an uncurtained window, I saw her lips compress.

“Vera.”

Tears rose in her eyes. “I don’t mind being poor,” she said, “but I’ll miss the power. Help me with this, Eliot.”

We strategized.

* * * *

Defining the problem was handed to me. Our code-named contributors around the country were told what to look for, and *Conspiracy Theorists' Weekly* went into a twenty-four-hour online publishing cycle. At this point, screw the supermarket market. Our Website was a beautiful thing, designed by KEG's own nose-picking genius who lived with his mother and five dogs. Cleetis or Jeedis or something. Funniest guy in the world till you realized he wasn't kidding. At any rate, I now had to read the rag, column by column.

"You're asking me to earn my salary."

"Eliot," she said, in her office, the tip of her nose touching the tip of mine. Her warm breath flowed across my face. "Eliot, in thirty days, if the airlines are still flying, I will take you to Paris and do to your body and soul what mothers most fear for their boy-children. Take these. You can function at eighty to ninety percent efficiency for up to five days."

How in my life could I love any other woman?

* * * *

Day One: Read until words became their elemental lines and curls. Random goofiness. Ludicrous power plots. Buried in the middle of "Vatican Possesses Satan's Penis: Temporal Control Through Directed Disasters" and in "Monthly Virgin Blood Replaces Stem Cell Cure For Wealthy," I found interesting informational strings.

Day Two: It was in the middle of "Aliens Reincarnated As Retarded Persons: Secret Government Techno Resources" that the crystallization began. Six accounts mentioned de-/re-/materialization. Three of those included reports of a humming accompanying the event. That was a clue.

Day Three: With that focus, running through *Conspiracy Theorists' Weekly* issues from as far as two years back, it confirmed that a) this was not a new phenomenon, b) the events were becoming more common, more detailed, more distinctive, and c) fifty-two percent mentioned a humming or droning noise. Conclusion: If we didn't figure out what was going on now, it wouldn't be long till we did, because it would soon be happening everywhere, if it wasn't already.

Phone rang. Vera. She gave me an address. "Go there. They've got sequencing nonstandard events, one after the other. Children are entertained, the

adults are fearful. If the cops stop you, the code word is ‘Manitoba.’” She hung up. Even the cops were in her debt.

I bolted. I drove.

* * * *

High noon, shadows removed, Playday Lane lay before me in all its hideous low-grade splendor. It’s one of the few places I’ve been where the DTs would be a welcome diversion. People sat on their front porches, unmoving, staring like poleaxed schizophrenics. Angry poleaxed schizophrenics. Low-roofed two-bedroom rentals, the stucco shattered here, spidered there, by impacts of various masses and velocities. An aura of gray shrouded the trees. They looked like they wanted to die. And midday, summer—no kids on the streets.

I heard distant gunshots as I stepped out of my car—typical for the area. The ambience, from immediate sensory input, did not discourage the use of spray paint, handguns, or small fires.

Twenty feet away, two hairless twenty-some-year-old males shook their hands at each other in peculiar finger-twisted mudras:

“I *tell* you, those steps was *not* there yesterday.” This person indicated which front door steps he meant by pointing his 9mm at them. The off-set second set of steps did appear anomalous.

“Those my steps, dude! I walk on ‘em every day. I know these steps.” Additional two-finger mudras, cross-body jabbing.

“Those is some a them alien steps.” With that, he blazed away. Chips splattered back in his face and on the side of the other man’s head. After several seconds of slo-mo realization, the objecting man screamed obscenities, threw a nearby garbage can at the shooter, extensive et cetera.

Scene scan. Located the address—behind the house next door—a milling crowd suddenly jumped into a fury of flailing and shrieking, throwing their arms about their heads, shouts going up, some of alarm, some of discovery. An outdoor revival meeting perhaps. I hurried that way, finding them again relapsed into their former state of aimless milling.

On the edge, away from the crowd, stood an unimpressed middle-aged woman who looked cock-headed at the millers with unalarmed puzzlement.

“What is this?” I asked her.

“Watch around over there, by that peach tree,” she said, waving her arm toward it. “Things’ve been appearing, disappearing....”

“They seem to be entertained by it,” I said.

“It is strange,” she said. “At my age, if you’ve been paying attention, you let the willing and eager get the first close-up.”

“So,” I said, “—.”

“There, there!” She pointed at the stunted peach tree at the edge of the yard. A scrub jay the size of a spaniel materialized on a branch—a great big bird without friendly eyes. It spread its wings wider than was comfortable to watch. Much screaming. Ancient impulses made people cower and recoil. I noted that the branch did not flex under the “bird’s” weight. Did gravity not apply?

The extended screaming deafened me.

Then the “bird” dissolved into the tree—or somewhere—but the fear remained.

“Hm,” the woman said, her calmness becoming attractive. Magnetic even.

On the flat top of the scabby fence just alongside the peach tree, a little girl in a blue and white sailor thing came out of the foliage and balanced precariously, four feet off the ground, waving her little arms for balance.

“Louise! Louise, my god!” exclaimed a bustling woman I presumed to be the girl’s mother. “You are such a little pig for attention!”

Little Louise tippy-toed along the fence, tilting her outspread arms for balance, and wore a smile that made one want to believe in deity. Then her head ... disappeared without explosive noise.

The mother screamed and threw herself against the fence as she reached her arms upward for her headless daughter—at which moment the remainder of her daughter dissolved into air. Renewed screaming accompanied by howling and rapid milling. Bystanders lunged to the woman to help her to her feet, and she came up screaming, *“Louise! Louise!”* and so on.

After an unpleasant few moments listening to this mother’s loss, I realized I

was hearing a young voice calling, “Mommy, I’m here! Mommy!”

Moving mother-daughter linkup. Women teary. Everyone regrets thinking, “I’m glad it was her and not me.”

“Now wasn’t that a hell of a thing,” said the magnetic woman.

“It was. Have lunch with me?”

* * * *

She knew a lot, called herself Jane, gave indications of education beyond her economic condition. “I live just off Playday Lane,” she said, “but not by choice. As though anyone would.”

We sat over an array of Indian food—unnamable sauces and unidentifiable solid pieces, sixty-four combinations of sauce and solid, all subtle and strong, alternately gustatorily delicate and fire-up-the-nose overwhelming. She appeared to be hungry.

“I haven’t eaten in a restaurant in over a year,” she explained. “The last time was when my ex-husband told me he had gone blind in one eye and was leaving town with a legal secretary. He drowned in Bermuda. I believe she did it, but I don’t care. I used to have a nice house.”

“These dematerializations?” I said. “I’m supposed to check into them for *Conspiracy Theorists’ Weekly*. You know anything about what’s going on?”

“*Conspiracy Theorists’ Weekly*? I’ve seen it at the grocery store. You write for that?”

“I do it for the money.”

“I hope they pay you a lot. Yeah, those things are happening all over the place. At least in my neighborhood. I saw a great one a couple of days ago. Wait a minute. I hate my own cooking.” She forked several sauce-covered chunks of something into her mouth, chewed luxuriously, swallowed and continued. “That’s so good. It was the neighbor’s pit bull, that son of a bitch. It was standing at the fence offering to come through it and kill me when a duplicate of him formed up beside him. He went nuts, of course, charged it, it disappeared, reappeared under him, disappeared, had the dog running in circles till he thrashed around and chewed off one of his own legs. Such loving pets. The creepiest event? One morning the little girl next door was standing near my garbage can. Sunday

morning, in her church dress. I said hello to her, but she didn't answer. No big deal. She's autistic. A lot of that going around. I started to turn my back on her when—now this is hard to describe *or* imagine—when her feet and legs kind of swept up and dived down her big black open mouth till her actual face itself sucked into her mouth and she was gone. And a swarm of bugs flew into the garbage can and I mean a big swarm. Amanda—all gone. Till I saw her later in the day out arranging their silverware on the driveway.”

“She didn't just walk off.”

“Couldn't have. Happened too quick. She vaporized.”

“You said bugs.”

“A lot of bugs flew into the garbage can.”

“Ah ha.”

She stopped chewing. “I don't get it.”

“You think we could get close to one of those events?”

“Hit and miss. Seems they happen most often between, oh, sunset and twilight. At least what I've seen in my neighborhood.”

I wasn't wild about being on Playday Lane after sunset, but the woman was definitely magnetic. Curly dark hair, delicate square jaw, and a profile like Diana of Rome.

I did a restaurant scan. Then, as we paid at the register, I dropped a twenty on the floor. As the name-tagged Sandeer stooped to pick it up, I snagged the can of insect spray kept discreetly below the counter and vanished it into her purse.

“What was that?” she whispered as change was made.

Outside on the sidewalk: “Home Shoppe's Best Bug-o-Slay. 5-dichlorometa-6-2-brominostrafinate. I use it all the time.”

She looked down at it like it was a bomb. “If we stop by my apartment I can get my gun. If you want.”

A gun would be handy in the event of distractive human interference, but in hope of getting out of her neighborhood before dark, I declined.

Back on Playday Lane, she led me a couple of scary blocks. Even more people sat on their front porches, still unmoving, still staring out at us like poleaxed schizophrenics. We came to an empty lot where grass was kept low by trampling and the sole remnant of civilization was the fire-stained cement perimeter of a long-gone residence. Two kids, ten to twelve years old, sat on cement and talked loudly at each other. The word “skank” and synonyms for matricidal intercourse floated on the air.

“Here,” she said, stopping in front of the lot. “I saw a good one here. A boy went double.”

I wanted an excuse to look at her again and was about to make a stunningly complimentary observation on her appearance when ... there she was—Jane #2, her duplicate, behind her, ten feet away, weirdly walking-gliding closer.

“Don’t move,” I said, pulling the Bug-o-Slay out of her purse, and positioning my index finger. “There’s a duplicate right behind you. It’s of you.”

At about five feet, I could see that her skin was mealy-looking and her colors weren’t quite right. The swarming mealiness of it repelled me.

Without the participation of conscious thought, I gave it a quick shot of 5-dichlorometa-6-2-brominostrafinate in the solar plexus and focussed on keeping my eyes open, regardless of blowback.

The spray melted an eight-inch opening in her chest, and for a split second I saw there was nothing in there—she was empty, filled with darkness—and then “Jane” evaporated into a momentary humming blur.

“That was bugs?” she said.

I dropped to my knees and examined the sidewalk. There they were—probably several hundred gnat-to-housefly-sized insects with subtly colored carapaces—white, off-white, and a half-dozen shades of pink and brown.

“These fakes everybody’s been seeing,” she said, “are made up of *insects*? Insects hanging together, like bees?” Her eyebrows squinched toward her hairline.

“There you go.”

A police cruiser, its lights on bright, drifted slowly down the street and

stopped in front of us.

It was Loose Change.

“How’s it all goin’, people?”

“Goin’ fine, Larry. Normal day.”

“Normal day?”

“You betcha, Larry.”

“You betcha, Mr. Aprille! Hey, couple hours ago somebody called in a woman screaming. I came right over.”

A statement beyond comment. “It was a false alarm.”

“A false alarm? One a those now-you-see-’em things?”

“A kid’s head melted. But not really.”

“Kid’s head melted? Jesus H. Christ,” Loose Change said. “Jesus H. I. J. K. Rist. This is gettin’ outta hand.”

I stooped and put my face through the window opening. “*What’s getting out of hand?*”

“What’s getting’ outta hand?” he said with high-pitched incredulity. “Those filthy bugs. You kinda have to admire ‘em, you know, admire ‘em, just being bugs, but this is interfering with civil tranquility.”

“Bugs?” I said, encouraging elaboration.

“Bugs, insects, yeah. Six legs. Bzzz-bzzz.”

“Why do you think this?” I queried

“Okay: Last Tuesday, south of town? I was out there in a parking lot because of a marital dispute. The lady had to be cuffed because of her aggressive nature? And her husband was standing there holding a towel on his neck? It was just a flesh wound—and like out of thin air, there was his wife again, a second one, and she looked just like the mean one we had that was screaming in the back of the enforcement transport vehicle. The gentleman made water as he fled the

scene, which is how we found him later on. But that second wife kinda looked a little funny? You know? Then she like melted, and for about two seconds we had bugs all over us. Then they were gone.”

“Larry?” I said. “Why do you suppose the bugs are doing this?”

“‘Why?’ You’re asking me one of those college questions about why bugs do what they do? Hey. Look at me. I’m gonna tell you something you don’t know? I just do domestic tranquility.”

“Your help has been invaluable. Thank you so very very much.” I fastened my right hand on Jane’s upper left arm and led her with significant pressure away from the policeman. “Confirmed,” I said. “Bugs hanging together in contoured sheets to look like you, or like that kid on the fence. As a chemo-physical entity raised in Missouri, I am not often surprised by the malevolence of animate or inanimate objects—but what’s their motivation? What’s the survival benefit?”

We thought.

“Ten thousand bugs,” she said, “that look like a human being could walk into a grocery store and eat everything in sight.”

Magnetic *and* intelligent.

“That’s not the kind of thing that would get in the newspaper,” I said. “*Safeway Stripped by Bugs*. Or warehouses.”

We thought silently together.

“This could have ripples,” she said. “Tsunamic ripples.”

“I have to get this off to the CTW,” I said. “By the way, what’s your number?”

* * * *

July

Story out of Washington, the White House, Rose Garden: Secretary of Defense by his side, the President gave another news conference without content, gave it up when reporters ignored his vacuous platitudes and became overtly rude, one asking if he knew how many legs an insect had. He evaded the question. Someone was heard to mutter, “Halfwit nitwit.” After enough of that, the

Secretary of Defense was seen strolling after the President into the White House proper, and as the door began to close upon them, the SecDef dissolved into a vague cloud and disappeared inside. Everything was denied and no further details were given, but in this case, the worst was hoped for.

The supermarket version of *Conspiracy Theorists' Weekly* folded. A lot of things folded. Even Kamchatka Enterprises operated with a decimated staff, and Vera was out of town a lot. "Vera," I said to her voicemail, "this doesn't look promising. How about an expensive dinner before the collapse?"

No answer. Weeks passed.

It didn't take a lot of time before the dots were connected. The two dots. *Bugs and everything they find edible*. Typical example: a watchman checks a grocery warehouse. Two hundred thousand square feet, stacked to the rafters with pallets of cereal, powdered milk, instant noodles, soups, thousands of things, tons of stuff not in cans. The watchman conscientiously patrols every corridor between the stacks every half hour. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing moving. Everything is A-Zero normal. Until the pallets are loaded and the trucks don't come up to the right weight. Not even in the ballbark. Or even in the right hemisphere. They suspect a scale malfunctioned. Upon examination, everything on the pallets is an empty husk. Plastic has been chewed through, cardboard perforated, all that is left is dust and the detritus of insects.

They also went for the Midwest wheat and corn fields. Across an amber field of waving grain, Mr. A. P. Dixon, the driver of a Guang Dong Rocket combine harvester, saw another Dong Rocket, as they affectionately called them in Iowa, in the same field, but running cock-eyed, then backward, then sideways. His contract with the owner was exclusive, so he called the owner and explained, "What are you doing to me? Is this some money-saving competition? Why do you hate me?!"

The owner said he would fly over in his Cessna, and twenty minutes later, as he buzzed the second harvester, it vanished into millions of winged particles. But it had been harvesting corn, all right—right down to the dirt, far cleaner than the contracted driver. The owner wept with rage. Flying back to the farm, he speed-dialed his seed company—he had paid through the nose for herbicidal/insecticidal seed. As he listened to the your-call-is-important-to-us message, something from the corner of his eye caught his attention. He looked: There he was, in an identical plane. He experimentally waved to "himself" and got the wave returned. He turned his glassy-eyed face to the front windshield and tried to think of Jesus.

It was all over the papers. Till they were eaten too. In a printing annex, some insignificant chair or drum of cleaner would evaporate in the quiet dark and with frightening rapidity, eat or make unusable every roll of paper in the shop.

“Vera,” I said to her voicemail, “it’s been eight months. I want to smell you again.”

No answer. Depressing.

Another time: “Vera, the long black cloud is coming down. We need to have civilization-relevant observations before it’s too late. We need to reach some kind of philosophical hypothesis concerning the meaning of human existence and justify its collapse. It might make us feel better. Come back soon.”

I went out with Jane most weeks and we kept it light. She didn’t trust me and I didn’t either. She canceled on me once because she had nothing to wear. Bugs.

People lost their clothes—occasionally while they were wearing them. In April, the bugs went on a cotton frenzy. Less than forty percent polyester, they’d eat it. More and more, one saw people wearing plastic raincoats and flip-flops, whatever the weather. Styles developed.

What we began to notice through all this was that the bugs generally went for the bigger things: truck- and trainloads, storefulls, silos, and warehouses. But that was no guarantee they wouldn’t try to eat your underwear under your raincoat. I saw it happen once: pure torture involving public blood. Bystanders fled.

Things fell apart—China, Europe, and South America, more than other places. China drifted into silence. There was writing on the wall, but no one cared to translate the Chinese indicant of doom.

Still—no Vera.

Jane and I learned to eat canned food as did everyone else. One last dinner out cost \$215 and consisted of sliced peaches, black beans, and mushy asparagus. It was wonderful. She almost came home with me.

* * * *

June

After six months of denying there was a problem, the President admitted to widespread aerial spraying over metropolitan areas. Lawsuits were immediately promised, blaming the government for rashes, blisters, cases of asthma, deformed babies, future madness, and whatever other anomalous physical indignities were suffered by those with lawyers. The President assured the country that the spraying had already been curtailed because it didn't do any good. In fact, after a brief respite, the problem became badly worse: More insects, more duplications, more detail in their duplications, and duplications wandering so far from their originals that no one any longer questioned their source. Upshot: lots and lots more eaten, faster and faster. The attempted assassination of the President was cheered in the streets by people in raincoats.

The very next day, Vera's driver gunned her car up across my lawn, the door opened, and Vera, herself, finally, well dressed too, dashed from car door to front door. Dressed in her prison-warden black skirt, black blazer, tiny white ruffle at the neck, she strode in, fixed me with her coldest glint ... remembered who I was, her expression softened, slowly softened, till it was the face of Vera that I knew in dim light at two a.m. She put her arms around me.

"Sorry," she breathed against my ear. "Hell has arrived. India's crumbling along with half of Southeast Asia. But we know what the problem is."

"Loose Change probably knew from the beginning."

We sat.

"You know those allegedly dead links in your DNA?"

"It wasn't a rumor?"

"They're not dead."

"Waiting to be awakened?"

"Apparently, in a species of hymenoptera, some kind of ant or wasp most likely, something triggered an adaptogenic response, a really fast adaptogenic response, and the species differentiated into hundreds of thousands of forms. Evidence is sketchy but personally convincing that other insects are experiencing this same explosive speciation. The more they were sprayed and poisoned, the better they adapted. And here we are. What activated those dead links? Something in the environment, a virus, nobody knows and the best guess is we probably won't. Too many things are breaking down for research to take any

coherent direction.”

“Worst case?”

“They’ll eat all plant material and then they’ll eat us.”

We sat there. Out the living room window, the streets and houses looked vacant. They weren’t. People only went out when they had to.

“And I was worried about AIDS. Bird flu. Global warming. Genetic predispositions.”

“You’ll never know the color of the knife. The varieties of lethal experience are limitless.”

“What do we do?”

“I’m working on it.”

* * * *

Month later:

At Vera’s office: “Kamchatka Enterprises has a shelter,” she said. “I’m going there later this week. You can come along, but you won’t be seeing the sun for a while.”

“That bad?”

“Slip into your grimmest paranoia, you’ll get a clue. In northern India, after the food ran out, the bugs changed their diet. They adapted. They went after meat, i.e., people. There are some guesses that the North American non-human insect food supply will run out in the next two months. Or less. Eliot, you don’t have an option here.” She took my hands. “You can bring Jane.”

“Mind-reading again.”

“I just know more than other people.”

“What do we bring?”

“Get your food together, all your drugs, and whatever else you can carry. I’ll send my car tomorrow. Don’t say good-bye to anyone. Same for Jane. Have

her at your place.”

“You’re generous.”

“Generosity is one of the few things I have left. Tomorrow, nine a.m.” Vera stood. “If the car doesn’t make it, here’s the address. Do your best to get there. Travel light.”

She kissed me like there was no tomorrow.

* * * *

A modified underground warehouse—constructed within the previous year (That Vera!)—a block from the KE building: A common area with comfortable furniture, music and movie collection, kitchen, fifteen small private bedrooms, twenty-seven humans, total, three cats, one small dog, exercise equipment that generated electricity and ran the air pumps, two tons of food, and 20,000 gallons of water. No slacker than Vera.

Jane and I made a pair. At some point Vera and I re-became a pair as she grew fond of Jane.

We survived. Not happily. We survived while the bugs scoured the Earth, and every living thing that we had ever seen was or would be eaten in the immediate future. We could only guess at the details of the catastrophe.

But there were moments of levity. One day we began speculating: 1) Did the sequence of human existence have meaning? and 2) What would the next “intelligent” species think about our paleontological refuse?

We worked this like homework, over days, parsing every semantic shade till all our words defined congruently. We parsed every individual-generated possibility. Our conclusions: 1) Human existence doesn’t have a “meaning,” whatever that meant, any more than the existence of the dinosaurs had meaning. They were there, then they died. But their meaning eluded us. At the end, it seemed like a stupid question. 2) We also agreed that if, for example, we could understand in some most basic, most general way how a bug of some intelligence, a million years from now, would process information, then we might have a clue as to how this subsequent dominant species might think of us. We agreed that this was a screw-head task. Upshot: No meaning, no future. We had a beer. That was our moment of levity.

* * * *

May

For a few months, rotating groups of us went upside, generally for briefer and briefer stays. It seemed that the evolutionary punctuation had subsided into some kind of equilibrium. But we recognized the provinciality of our observation.

True, there were cantaloupe-sized beetles with which one did not want to contest, and at every turn, whether in the air (the occasional beetle traveling at freeway speeds, a bullet of chitin), or on the water (aquatic shark-bugs that could take off a finger), or right at one's feet (mutated ant-swarms trying to eat one's flip-flops)—everywhere we turned, there they were, along, of course, with the fake humans, what we called the Imitators, which, as it turned out, we came to regard with sweet nostalgia.

"Hello, Vera. Hello, Jane. Hello, Other Vera. Hello, Other Jane." It almost became a charming ritual, in memory of the old days, when there was something decent to eat.

The Imitators were harmless. They were decorative. But one had to exercise caution that they were not invited near foodstuffs. Eventually, upside insect populations began to change, the sparrow-mosquitoes became more numerous, and we, the humans, using our combined prefrontal-cortical powers of reality-mapping and prediction, decided our upside trips invited disaster and retired beneath the earth, to the realm of darkness and worms. Call us wise.

Eight months. Mid-February, our above-ground sensors told us it was cold enough to make normal insects sluggish. Vera got out the plastic, we dressed, we went up and had another look.

* * * *

Expected something like the plagues of Egypt as portrayed in movies—grasshoppers darkening the sky, the devastation of absence everywhere.

Wrong.

Our piece of the world looked surprisingly normal. Buildings as we remembered them, cars parked along the street. Even several trees stood unstripped, unlike when we went to ground.

"Clean, isn't it," I said. "Bugs ate all the trash—not even black gum-spots on

the sidewalk. It doesn't smell that good." It was probably the odor of insects, for which it is uncommonly difficult to find analogs.

We started to walk away from the Kamchatka building, but Vera whispered, "Stop."

Turning to look in the direction of her alarm, I saw another one of her. Two Veras. Really really identical. They turned and looked at each other, each appearing as real as the other.

The briefest conundrum.

I poked an index finger into the solar plexus of one of them. There was only the slightest resistance as my fingers and hand disappeared into it.

"Now you know," Vera said, although both of them moved their lips. "Look behind you."

"I really don't want to. I didn't look that good this morning."

"Vanity." Taking my hand, she said, "So we won't confuse each other for what we aren't."

"It feels like February," I said, "but it doesn't look like February. Those trees are deciduous." I pointed at the row of full, beautifully leafed-out ginkgos along the edge of the sidewalk.

We took a dozen steps toward the nearest one. The buggy versions of us walked behind us, holding hands—not a "cute" couple, but a good couple. Amazingly humanoid, even close up.

"The tree looks real," Vera said, inspecting the bark. She pulled a low twiggy branch down so the leaves were near our faces. The branch snapped off like the dead stick that it was, the leaves dematerialized, and, with a faint hum, disappeared. Vera looked at her hand: where she had pulled the branch down, the "bark bugs" had mashed across her palm, leaving it brown and gooey. "Some of them are very very small," she said, studying the residue. None of the leaves were leaves.

I kicked the tires of the nearest car. Bugs. The kicked section momentarily dissolved and then reappeared when I drew my foot back. Street sign, fire hydrant—all bugs.

“I don’t see any good news here,” I said.

Vera let go of my hand and walked a few steps to the front of an abandoned bakery shop. Where there had been glass in the windows, there was open space. She touched the door latch. It melted away and then reformed as her hand moved away.

Even the trees. Even buildings.

We found a bicycle that was real.

It was a world of protective insectual camouflage, a lot of it. Grocery stores stripped, clothing outlets empty—except one with lavishly dressed mannequins in its window display. My hand waved through them.

We found nothing we could eat. They had devoured it all and had replaced much of it with their own constructions. We found no other people in our several-mile circuit. We thought it odd that we saw no bones. The operative conclusion gave no comfort.

“Vera, because you know more than anyone, guess for me what we are going to do.”

She gave me that flinty look, but because she no longer wore her prison wardeness outfit, it didn’t have quite its former chilling effect.

“We’re going to wait till late summer when their spring eggs have hatched out and matured and they’ve found out that they themselves are the only remaining food source.”

“Then what?”

“How’s your gag reflex?”

“Normal.”

“Too bad. Our food will be gone. We’ll have to come out then anyway, all of us, and we’ll either learn to eat bugs or die.”

“I guess if we’re really hungry, it’ll be as good as a fat greasy burger would be right now.”

“I’d bet on it. We’ll probably die anyway.”

We returned, but before we went down to the others, we did the laughably distasteful process of cleaning of our bodies, finishing with an excruciating full-body wipedown with alcohol. Then we told the others what we'd found.

There were tears, there was silence. We began the six-month wait.

Just before we ran out of food, Jane became pregnant. Vera became protective, pleased, and saddened.

* * * *

August 15

Deciding to go out immediately after our last meal, we portioned out the final macaroni and washed it down with sweetened water.

Wearing our plastic raincoats and flip-flops, like the dominant species we were, we cautiously pushed through the final door and huddled on the empty sidewalk. First thing we noticed, we stood ankle-deep in the dried exoskeletons of insects. Second thing, the devastation. No green trees this time. Nothing green anywhere. Third thing was the smell. A young woman named Gwendolyn puked and a couple of others choked. It was like breathing thick air in a chemical plant.

That evening, a mile or two away, inside a good-sized storage building, after blocking all openings where light might attract the unwelcome, the twenty-seven of us enumerated what we'd seen: only a few insects, none of which we could remember having seen before, but several of them were significantly large, pecan-sized, with various kinds of saw-edged mandibles and feet like fish hooks. We saw nothing normally considered edible by insects. They'd got it all. Upholstery in car seats had been eaten away after the artificial fiber seat covers had been perforated dozens of places with inch-long rips. Most electrical wires we'd seen, under car hoods or in people's houses, had the insulation peeled off every few inches. Bright colors probably signaled food. Some of us discussed how long it would be before we got hungry enough to enjoy a bug burger. Without bread. Without lettuce. Maybe with ketchup. No one looked forward to it. Looking for a bright side which I couldn't really see myself, I said, "But after we eat them, we won't be hungry anymore." Silence ensued.

Then, the subject I'd hoped could be delayed: "What," the previously vomiting Gwyndolyn asked, "if there are bugs that want to eat us? Or like those big mosquitoes, if they came in swarms to drink our blood? What if?"

Someone said, "We talked about that before. Not much to say about it."

"Do you suppose that's why we don't see anyone?" Gwyndolyn said. "Everyone was eaten, bones and all? Can insects eat bones?"

"Maybe," someone said, "everyone got away someplace."

Silence expressed the complex absence of hope.

I took Jane's hand. Vera took her other hand. One look: Vera knew things, and the reasons for despair were about to have yet another addition.

Several dozen eyes turned to Vera. She took a deep breath.

"First, a reality check: we'll probably all be dead within a month. Look at it this way—everyone else is. We're just later than most. They do go after people, but you have to look at the mechanics of predation in regard to population. Once prey population drops below a level that sustains predation, predators die or move on to find other sources of food, and if the prey has the survival skills of a squirrel, which are not negligible, a few of them will survive. Some. A few."

"There probably aren't any squirrels either," grimly said one of our band.

"The problem," Vera continued ... then hesitated. "...was identified a year ago, first cases in Brazil. As you mentioned, the problem was mosquitoes ... the size of birds. They traveled in swarms of several dozen and could take down a healthy person in a couple of minutes. Apparently the pain was ... the pain....The horror of it...."

That evening, we slept much closer than we would have previously.

* * * *

We learned to eat bugs. We discovered the tastier parts of the meatier specimens. Roasted was usually better.

Occasional moments of levity, even then:

"Seems to have the aroma of blackberry."

"Aftertaste of chicory."

"And an overall velvety smoothness between the grit."

One soon day, half of us went out scavenging for canned foods, as usual. Three didn't come back. Same kind of thing other days—people went out, didn't come back. Oddly, groups of two or three would not come back—never a survivor from a group. Negative implications, only speculation possible.

Then six wanted to move north, to a colder area of more sluggish bugs. We talked about the risks, the unknowns, the unknown unknowns. Then they left. A few days later, more decided to follow the north-heading six, including the still vomiting Gwendolyn, whose pregnancy provoked heightened anxiety and, in Vera, a paralyzing grief, temporarily. Finally, at the end, at last, the three of us sat alone in a room in our warehouse.

That night, after full dark, five or six hours after the last ones left, Vera said, "Now we can go."

Jane and I looked at her.

She explained: Before we all went underground, she had secreted a boat, a twenty-one-foot sailboat of some kind, fully sealed, fully loaded with fuel and as much food concentrate as she could round up. Vera planned. She had a very well developed prefrontal cortex. "If it came to this, the boat would be there. It came to this. We can be there in an hour." Vera held our hands. "Very few insects out at sea. And quite a few fish, we hope."

At first light, we set out.

* * * *

April

I hate the sea. It is very large, very repetitive. When it isn't repetitive, it's homicidal. If the ocean were a person, it would be friendless.

Six weeks. Up and down. But no bugs. Also very few fish. Mostly rotten floaters, but we ate those too. Always hungry. We lost weight. I could see Vera's ribs.

"I once heard," Jane said, "that starvation isn't all that uncomfortable. Another filthy lie." On her wasted body, her pregnancy looked unnatural.

One night, the boat sitting quietly, very slow swells, a dozen miles off the coast, Vera looked across the small candle at me. "I'm sorry," she said. "That time,

when I tried to kill you.”

“Anyone would have done the same. Probably hit some of the ninety percent I don’t use. It shouldn’t hurt much longer, considering how things are going.”

“Well. I apologize.”

Next evening, in the cabin, by candle light, we sorted our barbiturates, tranquilizers, and painkillers into measured piles on the pull-out table. Knowing about these things, Vera arranged for each of us an assortment. At the proper time: A solid hit of tranquilizers, followed in twenty minutes by big painkillers, the rest of the tranquilizers, and finally a lot of barbs, all to be washed down with vodka-fortified five-year-old chardonnay.

We sailed/motored north. The plan was to run aground on a sandy beach in southern Oregon, near a town where we might find something to eat, if we got to shore, if we had the strength to get to the town, if—long shot here—if there was anything the bugs or final humans hadn’t devoured.

Plans, by definition, must begin before they go astray; ours did neither.

We bobbed a hundred yards off-shore, watching our welcoming committee waiting on the beach. Three “men” of various ages, three “women” similar, a couple of others; one, perhaps, appeared to be a “Girl Scout.” Perhaps not.

“They’re not people,” Jane said. “They’re bugs.”

Not much else to say.

I grew tired, I grew weary of being prey, of being hungry—I had had enough. I resigned.

* * * *

He grew tired, he grew weary of being prey, of being hungry. He understood final resignation in a way that precluded interest or concern.

“They’ll eat us,” Eliot said.

“Yes they will. Either we go to them, or they’ll come at us. I don’t know why they haven’t already. Time to break out the chardonnay?” Vera asked.

“We could try to kill as many as we can,” Jane said. “But ... to what point? They wouldn’t understand the gesture.”

“Let’s go ashore,” one of them said. “There’s some chance we’ll get into town.”

Another moment of levity.

Before dropping into the anemic surf, Jane hesitated. She said, “Both of you.... If I hadn’t met you....”

“And I you.”

“And I.”

Ashore, clothesless, they observed the usual Imitators, morphing as they watched into forms more like themselves. Oddly, far back on the beach sat a gray thing, not an insective construct, not an Imitator—a gray mammaloid thing the size of a large housecat, but with scales flecked around its face, down its back, and along its narrow whiplike tail. It appeared to sniff the air, came alert, and slinked liquidly toward them, more exploratory than predatory.

From all directions they heard the approaching swarming buzz, turned to each other, held their arms across each other’s shoulders, their thin brown backs exposed. Drugs evicted all thought, numbed most pain. Within minutes, ten minutes—but no one was left to measure time or would in any imaginable future want to measure it—within ten minutes they no longer bled.

Once the easily digestible tissues, the muscles, and the mucus had been stripped away, there remained in the cage of bones a crouched gray whiptailed thing, a smaller one, that stepped out of the post-human litter onto the dry sand. Two of them now.

On the beach, the duplicates still hovered over the sand. “Eliot” appeared to hold an “arm” out to “Vera” and “Vera” gestured to “Jane.” “Vera,” “Eliot,” and “Jane” “walked” toward each other, “arms” reaching out as though to embrace. They did not embrace. They melted together, into a shapeless swarming cloud. They were one—a gesture performed without recognizable consciousness, without symbolism, without meaning.

Then they were gone.

The air hummed and the bone-eaters arrived.

The gray things sat impassively, occasionally snapping mouthfuls of insects from the air.

Nothing human remained.