

J. S. Morrison
545 Wilson Road
Crownsville, MD 21032
Tel. 410-697-3011 (H)
grockmeister@gmail.com

About 106,000 words
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John Morrison

CHAPTER 1--THE PERFECTION OF WOLVES

Once upon a time, before fish could talk and before *The Canons of Cantor* became more popular than the Bible, Quran, and Torah, there was a town nestled in the curl of a river beside a mountain where science, the supernatural, and human belief blended as seamlessly as blue sky and the ridgeline of the Great Smokey Mountains. It was a town born in the Great Depression of the 1930s, whose residents embraced the frontier culture and believed they could impact faraway places through special magnetic connections known as ley lines. But by the summer of 2042 the townsfolk had vanished, and Assurance, North Carolina, was inhabited by a single person—Nadia Holkam, a slim forty-two-year-old woman with long blond hair and green eyes that testified to her Scotch-Irish heritage and the despair that comes from traumatic loss.

There were only two people in Nadia's universe. One was Nadia. The other was her caretaker, who barked at the moon.

From Nadia's perspective, Berky Benson's hairless, paste-white body resembled an obese, 6-foot-6-inch mole-rat. He was silhouetted in the open doorway of her Appalachian home, dancing and howling in the moonlight.

On the floor of the mansion's vestibule, physically and emotionally drained, Nadia watched in numb horror as the fat on Berky's naked buttocks rippled like curdled cheese. Next to him, a black cat circled the lid of a food tray, stopping and starting and bowing as if enacting some voodoo ritual.

Berky was twenty-nine years old, thirteen years younger than Nadia and much stronger as he demonstrated with delight in their every sexual encounter. Now, ignoring her pain, she first climbed to her knees, then onto her feet, then found a knitting needle she had left on the end table near her favorite padded chair. The effort exhausted her. She knew she couldn't muster the strength of limb or will to kill him with this makeshift weapon, however much she fantasized about it. Still, the cold hardness of it in her hand was comforting. Quickly picking up her clothes from the floor—clothes that Berky had torn off just moments ago—she slipped the needle into their ruined folds.

Berky howled in the doorway. "A-wo-o-o-o!" A long, triumphant yowl.

Somewhere on the edge of the Nantahala forest, an animal returned the call.

"Listen," he said to her, eyes darting.

The animal wailed again.

He cocked his head. "That's a wolf—a top predator. They're coming back. God has willed it."

"Maybe not," she said. Her stomach wrenched at the timid act of defiance. She steadied herself on the table, hand atop her clothes, feeling the hard, thin spine of the needle underneath. To distract him, she raked her other hand through the blond hair

draped against her naked, bruised breasts, and inched closer, within striking range. She could smell the raw onion aroma of his sweat from three feet away.

Berky turned from the open door. “You doubt me?”

“No,” she whimpered, holding her balled-up clothes in front of her like a flimsy shield. “I would never doubt you. Other people—people who know less than you—say they’re Shelties, not wolves. Escaped pets that have adapted to a life in the wild.”

Berky stepped closer, towering above Nadia’s five-foot-six frame. He batted the clothes aside and the needle skidded across the floor. When he saw it, he squeezed her cheeks with a powerful hand. “Sheep Dogs are what they use in genetics labs to make Testrial.”

Her voice trembled, but her eyes looked up and fixed on his. “It’s just what they say. There are so many of them now.”

“That’s a wild animal. It’s not a fucking dog. You can’t tame a wolf. And when you try, we fight back.”

“I didn’t mean to disrespect you,” she said.

“We have to combat the ungodly acts of terror,” he said. “Rise against blasphemous interference with divine biological selection. We need to put things back the way they were. We’re an endangered species. You’re killing us.” He pulled her to the floor and sat on her butt, facing her feet.

“I can’t breathe,” she croaked, as she struggled, stomach pinned to the floor under his weight.

“I am the salvation. I have the cure,” he said, closing his eyes and raising his open hands into the air. “I have the perfection.”

He grabbed one of her ankles, pulled it toward his face, and thrust her big toe into his mouth.

She yelped as he tugged at the toe with his teeth.

When he finished ravaging her feet, he turned her over, licked her face from eyeball to nose, then shoved his tongue into a nostril, smiled lovingly when she choked, slathered the side of her head, and licked her ear wax. “You are my cupcake, my lollipop,” he said. “You are my perfect woman.”

He continued licking until her skin was a lacework of ropey saliva, as if a rout of snails had traversed her body. Now spent, and his submaxillary spittle glands dry, he said, “Darling, you must be famished. I want you to eat what I brought. You need your strength.”

The cat hovering next to the tray pawed at the lid, sniffing the air and licking its chops. Berky moved quickly and swatted it with an open hand. “Schrodinger! Stop it! That’s Nadia’s food.”

She was still lying on the floor, physically and emotionally beaten. Both of her big toes felt raw, violated. She closed her eyes as she bent down to pick up the meal, dreading what always came next.



When Berky departed, he took Schrodinger with him, driving toward the bridge and the forest and the world beyond. From the open door, Nadia watched his taillights merge with the whirl of lightning bugs, then dissolve into darkness.

She stretched her arm out the door and toward the moon as though reaching for freedom, and said to the darkness, “I wish . . .” Her mind wandered. *If Diana were here, she’d know what to do. She was always good at fixing things.* She breathed the words: “Diana, I need you.”

A wave of nausea swept through her body. She jerked her trembling hand inside as though the moonlight had burned it. The shadows beyond the doorway marked a world she was incapable of entering—a place where reality writhed and twisted, and sometimes whispered. Fireflies became pinpricks into unseen dimensions, and sources of voices that only Nadia could hear. The world would kill her if she left her house. This was as certain as the vomit rising in her throat and the sudden weakness in her limbs and the dimming of her vision.

When the whispers told her it was unlikely Berky would return, she withdrew her gaze from the road, the bridge, and the forest, gently closed the door on objective reality, and took refuge in the shower, where warm water caressed her skin and washed away Berky’s stink. With eyes shut, she turned her face into the stream and cleansed her mouth, filling it with water but not swallowing or spitting, just letting it overflow and run down her jaw.

She huddled in the spray, imagining a rainy summer day from childhood—better times. *The sun will come out soon, and I’ll get dressed, and Papa will ask me to help with*

the bees, and after we're done in the garden and I've eaten supper, he'll tuck me in and read me a story. She almost felt human again. She dried and dressed and bandaged her toes.

An empty stomach drew her to the food tray. When she removed the lid, her throat clutched. She hated fish and the chalky undertaste of its flesh as much as she hated the stink of Berky's sweat. The fishes figured in her dreams about the end of the world, where only fish remained, and they were laughing.

Berky always claimed his actions were altruistic. Yesterday he said, "Fish genes can hold far more memory of their environment than human genes. They adapt faster. So you need to eat lots of fish. I'm doing this for you, Nadia, to preserve the memories in your brain—the engrams. And how your cells read your genes. I'll keep these memories alive long after you die."

She wondered about the engrams.

I don't know who I am anymore. I have so many memories that seem to swim away when I think of them. It's like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands when it knows you're looking. How will Berky or anyone else find the slippery engrams when I can't?

She resolved to redouble her efforts to write the comprehensive history of Assurance. That and the proper indexing of artifacts in the museum seemed like a more practical way to guard against memory extinction.

The book was a message to the future from the last living resident of Assurance. It would tell of a town that, for most of its existence, seemed undecided about whether it

wanted to live or die. It would explain how the South Prong River kept Assurance alive until the day the water turned black and its inhabitants vanished. It would describe why mountain culture represented the best of all possible worlds. It would reveal who she was and who she wanted to be.

The book was a solution to Nadia's problem: she was a ghost in a ghost town, unknown and unremembered by anyone except Berky, who sustained her. Her agoraphobia made her a prisoner in her own home. She was Berky's resentful but obedient pet. She was nothing.

She reached for her notebook and wrote, *Poof!*

CHAPTER 2--POOF!

On a hot, dusty road in western North Carolina, near a sign for a rural bus stop, Ali Khan Ahmed climbed out of a pickup truck with his traveling bag and thanked the driver for giving him the lift. She was fortyish—twice his age, but easy on the eyes, with shining blue eyes, mouse-brown hair pulled into a short bob, and a yellow tank top blouse above slim cut jeans.

“You sure you got a place to stay tonight, hon?” she said, waiting, hoping, motor running.

Twenty-three-year-old Ali, standing five-two, lean and wiry in a T-shirt and jeans, adjusted his eyepatch then spoke in the choppy cadence of the Indian subcontinent.

“Thank you. I have to catch a bus. I need to meet someone. They are expecting me.”

The woman gave him a come-hither smile, slid sunglasses down her nose, and waited for a reaction. When she got none, she winked, slid the glasses back up, and put the truck into gear.

Ali waved goodbye.

As she drove away, he looked past the bus stop to a sign pointing toward the Nantahala National Forest, removed his wallet from a hip pocket, and took out his netcard—a millimeter-thin, flexible black slab that was his gateway to information and money. With the touch of a finger, he turned on the card's map display. Enhanced GPS showed a five-mile hike ahead. He checked for messages, sent a coded text to his professor and friend at the University of North Carolina, then shut the card down, broke it in two, and buried the pieces in soft sand ten feet apart and twenty feet from the road. Immigration and Customs Enforcement would be able to track him this far, but no farther.

ICE would have to assume he could be anywhere. He could have gotten on the bus with a fictitious name. He could have gotten another ride. He could have hiked north toward Cherokee, or—worst case—south, into 11,000 acres of wilderness that segued into eight hundred square miles of forests and mountains.

He snapped his fingers, replaying in his mind a magic trick performed by his friend at UNC. You put cards into a hat, turn it upside down to show the cards have vanished, and then snap your fingers, and the hat disappears. *Poof!*

With his bag in hand, he found the trail toward Nantahala and took it, covering his tracks as best he could.



Berky Benson walked into the Aasleagh Pub on Savannah's East River Street carrying a duffel bag and a leather pouch. He was a man on a mission, striving to complete God's

plan. But this pub was not on his divine roadmap. It seemed to be a place where binge drinkers went after they'd visited all the good bars. He spotted his Chief Technical Officer, Gregor Popkins, in a dark corner, acknowledged his presence with a nod, but decided to order a drink before joining him.

The bartender, a full-figured thirty-something woman in a loose purple shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a dragon tattoo on her forearm, stopped wiping the counter as Berky dropped his bag near a stool. She eyed his worn red polo shirt and tattered jeans.

“What do you need, hon?” she said, fatigue written on her face.

“Beet juice.”

“Sorry,” she droned. “That’s not something we normally—”

“Is this enough?” he said, removing his wallet and dropping three Ben Franklins on the counter. “Two of these are for you and the other’s for the server.”

Her face perked up. “Just a moment.” She stuffed the bills into a breast pocket and disappeared into a room behind the bar.

Berky tapped his fingers as he surveyed the pub. It was barely 7 pm and the place was dead, with only a few patrons. Two men at a table near the door fondled beer mugs as they quietly argued over a matter of public policy. A tall woman at a table near the bar sipped an umbrella drink through a paper straw. She wore a hat with ostrich feathers that made her look like a species of giant bird. A young man seated on the other end of the bar, who looked barely 21, wore an unbuttoned black shirt that revealed a chest of hair too thick to be natural. The man tugged on a pendant swinging from a gold chain around

his neck. A single male server flitted between the tables, taking orders, bringing drinks, spreading happy-ness.

After two minutes the bartender returned, placing a glass of dark-red liquid on the counter.

Berky took a sip. “You know, this place is a shit-hole, but if you give me great service tonight, you might get another tip.” With the drink in one hand and leather pouch under the same arm, he lifted the duffel bag with the other arm and walked to Popkins’ table.

“Hiya Boss,” Popkins said.

Berky simply nodded, placed his bag next to the wall, put the leather pouch and drink on the table, and sat down. The lack of illumination in this corner suited his dark mood, stemming from two problems. The first was that God had not spoken to him in three days. The second was that in his haste to depart in his private air taxi for a quick trip to Savannah, he’d forgotten to wear his lucky white socks. He wondered if they might be critical for upcoming deals. *You never know.*

Berky watched the 45-year-old Popkins dribble vodka from his glass onto his jeans and striped sailor shirt, inhaling his drink from a grease-stained glass, eyes dulled behind crimson hexagonal glasses that floated above a shit-eating grin.

“You look like Schrodinger when he catches a fish that’s bigger than he is,” Berky said, referring to his cat. He gulped down most of the beet juice, annoyed that Popkins would drink liquor before an interview, and that he would pick a place like the Aasleagh Pub to meet a key new hire. *Hey, what do you expect from a Russian?*

Popkins adjusted his spectacles and wiped an unkempt beard with the back of an oversized hand. “We now got all the pieces, boss. Ask him about his invention. It’s brilliant.”

“You’ll have to fill me in,” Berky said. “But you’re wrong. We *don’t* have all the pieces. There’s a major one missing. Tonight I’ll—”

“That’s him,” Popkins said, pointing.

Berky turned to see a forty-something man, approximately five-ten in height, dressed in a dusty blue linen blazer and collarless white shirt, with olive-brown skin, tousled black hair, full lips, and a vaguely Asian face. He was smiling.

Berky motioned for the server to deliver more drinks, then stood, offering a hand to the arriving candidate. “Dr. Rao?”

“Please call me Sundar,” the man said, shaking Berky’s hand. “You must be Dr. Benson.”

Berky shook his head. “Actually, I’m not a doctor. I’m the CEO. Have a seat.”

The server interjected. “What’s your pleasure?” His long blond hair fell against a tight black T-shirt that stretched over bulging muscles.

Sundar wagged a finger. “Nothing for me.”

Popkins held up his empty glass and wiggled his tongue. “Vodka.”

Berky said, “More beet juice.”

The bartender picked up Berky’s glass, stumbled, and spilled residual liquid on his shirt. “So sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

Berky took a deep breath to check his anger. “No problem. My shirt’s red, so it won’t show much. Just remember: I tipped you \$100 on that last round of drinks, and I expect excellent service. I also gave your boss an even bigger tip to make sure everything is perfect. So do your job. Keep me happy.”

The server gave a nervous smile and returned to the bar.

Sundar and Popkins chatted for a few minutes, telling Berky how they met, and how they had irreconcilable differences over whether the Russian drink, kvass, was a refreshment or a hemorrhoidal ointment.

The server returned with more beet juice, vodka, and a bowl of Brazil nuts. “The snacks are on me,” he said, placing the bowl. “You’ll like them.”

“Do they contain Testrial?” Berky said.

The server shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Get me something that doesn’t.”

“Sorry, sir. We’re dotting i’s and crossing t’s tonight. See those two men near the door? One of them’s from the Liquor Control Board. My boss doesn’t want to lose her license.”

“What the fuck?”

His raised voice drew the attention of the bird lady, who tilted her head like an immense cockatoo. The man near the bar fluffed his chest hair, while the two people near the door stopped their argument in mid-synchronous sentence.

The server quickly stepped away.

Berky threw the bowl at him but missed. Nuts rained like hail across the barroom floor. “Little whore,” he yelled. “You feed me poison, but I’ll bet your manager gives you steroids to look buff. You’re a traitor.” He eyed at the men near the door. “They’re killing us with this abomination.”

Sundar and Popkins were silent, just looking at each other.

“What are you staring at?” Berky said to the other customers. The bird lady made a clucking sound and tilted her head down, looking at her drink; the hairy-chested man raised a fist in sympathy; one of the arguing patrons looked at Berky and mouthed the words, “Dick Head.”

At the bar, the server huddled with the bartender, looking at Berky, whispering non-stop in an agitated manner until his female boss finally gestured for him to cool it. She picked up a cleaver, waved it above the counter until she made eye contact with Berky, pointed it at him, then proceeded to chop up a cucumber, beginning with the tip.

Berky jerked his gaze back to the table and slammed down his palm to get attention. This startled Sundar, but Popkins just guzzled vodka and twitched his lips into a smile.

“Give me what you’ve got,” Berky said to Sundar. “Gregor says you’ve developed something called a gahneebo. Tell me what it is and how it’ll benefit Xanadu NeuroLab.”

“Not with the hard ‘g,’” Sundar said in a muted voice. “It’s pronounced ‘jeneeboh,’ and it rhymes with ‘placebo.’” After a moment: “Why did you just—”

Berky felt his face grow warm. “I don’t need to explain to you or—”

Popkins took control of the conversation, changing the subject, squinting at Berky through blurred eyes. “He’s a magician, Boss. Look. . .”

With a painful lack of coordination, Popkins pushed the sleeve of Sundar’s jacket up his arm. “No tricks here. Just here.” He tapped Sundar’s forehead.

“Go to sleep Popkins,” Berky said.

“I got to pee pee first.”

Popkins stood, stretching to his full height of 4-feet-8-inches, gave an exaggerated bow to both Berky and Sundar, then stumbled toward the men’s room, slipping on Brazil nuts in his path.

Berky shook his head. His words to Sundar were tinged with irritation over Popkins’ performance, smoldering anger at the bartender, and the absence of lucky socks. “My associate wants to hire you, but you have to convince me. Tell me why I need to bring you onboard.”

Sundar cleared his throat, then struck a tone that Berky thought sounded rehearsed. “Sure. The technology I invented will cut your costs, shorten your experiment setup time, and improve your trust in the results. It’ll integrate easily with Kublai Kahn, your neuromorphic experiment design system. I’ve already discussed how to do this with Gregor.”

Berky felt a second flush of anger. *Popkins had no business blabbing trade secrets.*

Sundar removed a vial from an interior pocket and held it up to the light for Berky to see. The liquid inside was the color of pale ale. “I developed this for my previous

company,” he said. “They went belly-up and never patented it. It’s an orphaned technology, but one I think is critical for genetic behavior research. Hire me, at my proposed salary, and it’s yours. Don’t hire me and I go to work for your competitor.”

“Nice try,” Berky said, “but you won’t be working for anyone else. I did some checking.” He unzipped his leather case and put documents on the table. “Your H-1B visa expired when you left the company. You have only a few days to reinstate it under the new rules. I happen to have the paperwork here and can submit tomorrow.”

Sundar pouted, trying to process the changing dynamic.

“We’ve already done the legwork,” Berky said. “We just need your signature on this petition. It says I’m your employer and states your salary, which is average for new-hires in the industry.”

Berky placed a pen near the petition.

Sundar gave the paper a quick scan. “This salary is an insult. You know very well I’m worth five times that amount.”

“You’re free to go elsewhere,” Berky said, “but if you turn me down, I’ll tell ICE you’re an illegal. They’ll make you their guest for a year or so in a detention center before they ship your ass back to India.”

Sundar looked at the document and blinked.

“Think fast, my friend,” Berky said. “How quickly can you get a visa with someone else?” His poker face transformed into a *got-you-now-you-sonofabitch* smile.

Sundar held Berky's gaze, but his lower lip trembled. He looked at the document. Then he picked up the pen as if it weighed ten pounds and scrawled a light doodle with few flourishes.

Berky lifted the paper, admired the signature, and slid the document into his leather pouch. "That was the right decision, my friend. Wait here until Popkins gets back. He'll tell you what to do, assuming he's sober enough. I'll tell the bartender you're celebrating your big new job and want to pay for our drinks. Remember to give her a big tip. Now excuse me. I've got other business." He gave a short nod to show the discussion was over, then stood, picked up his duffel bag, and walked toward the bar.

The bartender and server stopped their furtive discussion as Berky approached. "Mind if I use your cleaver?" Berky said. Without waiting for a response, he dropped his duffel bag, selected an orange from a fruit basket on the bar, seized the cleaver on the counter, and whacked the orange in two with a single chop. "Never mess with me," he said, loud enough that others in the bar could hear. "I'd consider buying this place just to put you and handsome here out of a job, but I don't invest in shitsties." He picked up his bag and walked out the door.



Nadia sometimes talked to her only companion—a doll wearing a long print dress like an Appalachian settler. Its roughly-carved wooden head had painted eyes and a broad smile framed by human hair the same color as her own. The doll was always supportive but occasionally asked too many questions.

"You didn't destroy the Berky demon," the doll said, matter-of-factly.

Nadia pouted. "Let's talk about something else. I have to write my history."

"He's part of your history," the doll insisted. "He owns the town. He seems to own you."

Nadia made the doll cross its legs. It seemed to wait for an answer. She wasn't going to give it the satisfaction. Instead, she hummed. It was her way of making ugly ideas disappear. *Poof!*

"Okay, I get the idea," the doll said. "You aren't comfortable talking about Berky. What about Lionel?"

"You mean—"

"Berky's father."

"Sure. I was eight years old when they put him in an institution. They say he's crazy. He killed his wife."

"Berky's mother?"

"Right."

"Do you think Berky got hit with the same crazy stick? It might be in the genes."

Nadia hummed, channeling Big Bill Broonzy. "I'm trouble in mind, babe, I'm so blue . . ."

The doll seemed annoyed. "Okay, stop it."

"They say he killed his wife because she put too much salt in his supper, and that disrespected him. Okay? They say he left Gloria's body on the kitchen floor for two days before a neighbor found her."

"Who told you this?"

“Berky.”

The doll’s smile now seemed smug and triumphant. “So, now it’s okay to talk about Berky?”

Nadia drifted into song again: “Lord, if the blues overtake me; I’m gonna rock on away from here. . .”

CHAPTER 3—FUTURE CONTRAPUNTAL

What exactly happened depends on who you ask. When the possibilities intertwine like a hundred people having sex with a herd of goats, we call it a “barblefarb.”

— Canduka Cantor

Berky stepped into the lobby of the Crowley-Burgess Hotel on East Bay Street, a few blocks from the bar where he’d left Popkins and Sundar. He refused to give the doorman his duffel bag, holding it close to his body, as if it contained precious jewels.

“I’m looking for a conference on empowering men,” he said.

The diminutive doorman, wearing an immaculate gray outfit with gold trim, forearm patches for tech interfaces, and a cap that said, “CBH,” frowned at Berky’s red polo shirt with its suspicious red stain. She eyed the bag with equal suspicion but decided that, with ten minutes to go on her shift, this was not the time to challenge a customer,

even if he looked like a ditz. She tapped her sleeve and the display patch came alive as she scrolled through the event schedule. “Sorry. There are no such conferences.”

“It’s supposed to be on the lower level.”

“Hmm. In that case, you’ll have to go up before you go down. Take the escalator to the mezzanine, then go past the Grand Arcadia Ballroom. You’ll see a service elevator. Take it down to the basement on the River Street level. At the far end of the hall is the Swamp Room. Maybe that’s what you’re searching for.” She stretched her lips into a fake smile, ending the engagement.

Berky rode the escalator, walked the palatial corridor and found a video wall near the ballroom pitching Human Endowment Rights (HER). The blurb intrigued him. He bypassed the event registration desk, wedged himself into the middle of a badged group of well-dressed women, and entered the event.



Marcy Darcy, a 5-foot-2-inch African American beauty dressed in a sequined white jumpsuit, like some magical fairy queen, walked to the podium as if ascending to a throne. The crowd honored her with applause, cheers, and a few wolf whistles.

Marcy, Marcy, Marcy, they chanted.

Her spotlight face glowed like an alien black sun, magnified to immense proportions in a full-color, high-resolution hologram floating above her position.

Marcy bowed, then raised her arms to acknowledge her fans. The majority were older women who acted like adoring teenagers at a rock concert. She smiled confidently,

waited for the din to subside, then spoke to her subjects about hopes and fears and promises. Her voice boomed from speakers in the ceiling, walls and floor.

"The future is bright," she said, pausing for effect. "We are transforming the human race into peace-loving beings who respect all creatures, all lands, and our fragile environment. These changes are due—in part—to genetic science. There's a blossoming of equality for all. Can you feel it?"

The crowd cheered. Marcy raised her hands to quiet them down. In the back of the room, she heard a cry of "Bullshit!"

Heads turned toward the voice.

Marcy saw a large bald white man in a red polo shirt being quickly escorted out of the hall. "I guess he doesn't feel it," she said coolly. "To my guys in the back: please help that confused man get in touch with his feelings."

The crowd erupted in laughter.

Marcy took control. "Archaic thinking and habits still reign in some non-believers. But we know better, don't we?"

The holographic display hovering above the stage zoomed to show the dimples in her cheeks, magnifying them like twin space warps. People screamed and stomped.

"I need your help. With your generous support, our non-profit organization will continue to ethically guide governments and commercial companies to make the right choices for the future."

Her fans stood in elation.



Three brawny women shoved Berky away from the ballroom entrance while a small crowd gathered to witness the brouhaha. He played tug-of-war with one of the female bouncers in an effort to retrieve his duffel bag and hit her with his leather document case until she let go. Things got ugly quickly.

The tallest bouncer, matching Berky's height and dressed in a black suit and red power tie, flexed rope-like tendons in a neck that moored a butch-cut head to a powerful body. "You need to leave by the service elevator, or we'll call the police," she said.

Someone in the crowd yelled, "Slap him down," initiating a four-person chant: *Slap him down. Slap him down. Slap him down . . .*

Berky turned toward the throng. "You're all idiots."

The tall woman stepped between Berky and a group of five chanters, folding her arms. Her smaller partner who had attempted to take away his duffel bag, punched the *down* button on the elevator. The doors opened, and the three bouncers shoved him in.

"Fucking assholes," Berky said, under his breath.

As the doors closed, he gave the women a one-fingered salute. "Fuck you."

He rode the elevator to the basement level. It wasn't difficult finding the Swamp Room. No fancy digital signage, just a metal plate suspended on a chain from a hook in the wall. The cryptic title, hand-written in Magic Marker, read: Hereditary Investments for Men (HIM).



In a cramped, windowless conference room with peeling paint and erratic ceiling lights, Canduka Cantor, 55 years old, frowned as a new arrival interrupted pre-meeting small

talk. With snorting and loud “Excuse me’s,” the young man with a stained red polo shirt and gleaming cue-ball-shaped head, teetering under the burden of a large green duffel bag, squeezed his way toward the remaining seat, bumping the trash can near the door and stumbling over a large backpack crammed with equipment cables for the projection system. The man stood for a moment on the opposite end of the table from Cantor, staring, seemingly oblivious to the thirteen other seated men. Finally, the large man eased his bag to the floor, sat down, and thundered, “Nice view.”

Cantor closed his eyes to regain composure, pushing the word *asshole* out of mind in favor of an idyllic image of a bubbling brook and a school of lazy fish. He breathed in and out. The perfect future required a perfect start.

When he opened his eyes, he smoothed his rainbow-colored robe, stroked his mufti beard and arched an eyebrow sprouting like wild seagrass on the crooked shoreline that was his forehead. His words began with the measured, R-less lilt of a Savannah accent, dripping like dew from Spanish moss.

“Welcome. Whatevah you believe, you must know two things about me. First, I am an artist, and my palette is the mind. Second, I am not c-r-a-a-z-y.” He spoke the last word in a resonant, hypnotic, radio-announcer voice, segueing the final “y” into a broad, beatific smile, like the Cheshire Cat.

Cantor made eye contact with each of the investors, most of them dressed in business casual, some swirling drinks purchased from the lobby bar, others fingering their netcards, like worry beads.

“You are all here because you believe as I do that men will rise again,” he said. “Our place of honor in society is eroding, to the detriment of the country. Are you ready to fight back?”

Nobody said anything, but he seemed to have their full attention, with one exception. The man wearing the red polo shirt seemed to be lost in a newspaper called *National Scandals*. He looked vaguely familiar, but Cantor couldn’t remember inviting him.

Cantor wanted to evoke a reaction, any reaction, so he lifted a foot onto the table and wiggled his sandal-thonged toes. Tilting his head back, he closed his eyes and painted a vision with the broad sweep of an open hand.

“Two tried-and-true ways to become rich in our society are to invent a breakthrough technology or lead a popular religious movement. I intend to do both simultaneously.”

The red-shirted man in the back of the room blew his nose with three loud honks.

Cantor was undeterred. “As my investors, you will make an obscene amount of money and restore respect for men. Let me show you how.”

He hit a button, and an ancient digital projector whirred to life. It lased the screen with colored charts promising wealth and high social status.

“The technology we’ve perfected is called”—he made air quotes— “life cloning. Yes, I know it’s against the law, but we’re exploiting a loophole—no, let me rephrase that. We are using an approach consistent with the International Compassionate Family

Act. The religious crusade we're perfecting will motivate people to buy our services and will generate immense profit."

Breaths punctuated the silence as forebrains processed his words.

"The technology," he continued, "was developed by my prior organization, Clonaid. Their initial successes were with families in North Africa and the Middle East—families with a little money and a lot of tragedy. Families who had seen their kids become martyrs. Families who could provide a bit of tissue, but not much more. They wanted their male children back—the same, only different. They paid a high price for cloning skills, and the company gave them new look-alike babies to replace the children who blew themselves to smithereens."

The red-shirted man in the back of the room said, "Amen."

Cantor continued. "The greater good was to provide comfort to those families who lost loved ones to tragedy. I believe everything happens for a reason. I am part of God's plan to bring sanity to this crazy world."

A man in the middle of the table, on Cantor's left side, raised his hand. "How does this—"

"Great segue," Cantor said, cutting him off. "The facts I just gave you speak to our expertise. Now I'm going to tell you about a breakthrough that will change your life and give you hope. We've created a vaccine to inoculate men against the effects of Testrial. But that's not all. You can pass down that immunity to your heirs. We'll never have to kowtow to women overlords again! This solution could be yours today by investing in shares of our privately-held common stock. All you have to do is contribute a

modest amount of funding, which we refer to as our ‘Bronze Level’ of participation.

Simultaneously, you become an emissary for the Cantor Tax-Exempt Spiritual Community, a not-for-profit company, which gives you special tax write-offs. The ‘Silver Level’ of participation gives you more stock in the for-profit and allows you to be a beta tester of our vaccine. And at the ‘Gold Level,’ we’ll immunize your entire family at no additional cost, and provide a certificate naming you as a ‘Spiritual Guide’ in our not-for-profit, which has even more tax advantages.”

Thirteen uninterested faces, save one, were motionless. Cantor knew he was losing them.

“Don’t you get it? It’s really simple. Technology plus religion. Get rich; channel God’s narrative; control your genetic destiny; help take your country back.”

The mannequins stirred momentarily. Cantor wasn’t sure this group could envision an idea on such a grand scale.

He hooked a finger inside his cheek and made a pop that surprised everyone. He wanted to wake people up.

The attendees stood up, one after the other, waved their hands under their noses and departed.



“Oh, the progress we’ve made in the last three decades of the new millennium,” Marcy said. “Five years ago, men represented eighty percent of all homicide victims and committed ninety-five percent of all crimes. Just think how we’ve turned things around.”

A wave of applause rolled through the ballroom. She waited for it to subside.

“Epic levels of violence—in our schools, workplaces, and houses of worship—finally tipped the scales for action in this country. That violence sapped our nation’s productivity and challenged our morality. But it took a woman president, a sympathetic Congress, and a deal with the NRA that lifted all restrictions on gun sales, to chart a new course.”

A wave of chanting, “Marcy . . . Marcy . . . Marcy” erupted from the crowd.

Marcy raised her hands, eliciting silence. “Now the tide is turning. The monthly killings at schools recently hit a five-year low. The murder rate in our worst cities has fallen to unprecedented lows. And we did this without taking away any guns. We didn’t have to. The demand for them is vanishing. And companies that sell weapons are starting to lose money.”

Applause and cheers.

“The benefit came when we successfully lobbied to put Testrial into pizza, beer, and bar snacks. By the end of this year, we’ll see the testosterone-reducing supplement in *all* foods in school cafeterias, prisons, sports stadia, and soup kitchens. The violence in bars, soccer games, and on our streets will be a thing of the past.

“We forget how bad things were, and how, as a species, we’ve slowly overcome our worst instincts. Those violent impulses in males nearly wiped out *Homo sapiens* between five and seven thousand years ago, when the Y chromosome almost went extinct as nine million males killed each other in tribal warfare—nearly half the human population at the time. The 2018 paper by Zeng, Aw, and Feldman has now been corroborated by other careful studies of the genome.

“We don’t need more cavemen. We don’t need protection from wolves and saber-toothed tigers. We don’t need clans and tribes fighting bloody tooth and nail. We need women and compassionate men working harmoniously together. And of course, we need technology to define a new age of human existence. Testrial is the new promise. The new hope.”

She closed her eyes as applause rose like the thunder of a gathering storm.



Cantor was alone in the room with one other person. *What just happened here? How’d I lose an entire audience of potential investors? Who’s the guy at the end of the table?*

He turned the projector off. The whirring fan slowed to a stop. This allowed air from the back of the room to circulate forward. It carried with it a nauseating stink. The sound of a fart punctuated the silence.

The man in the stained red shirt clapped loudly, stood, and walked forward. “That was brilliant! Brilliant!”

“Thank you,” Cantor said, stifling a gag reflex. “And you are?”

“Name’s Berky,” the man said, looking down at Cantor’s 5-foot-10-inch frame, grabbing his hand, shaking it vigorously. “That’s all you need to know for now.”

Cantor put a power cord in his hand. “Fine. Hold this, Berky. It’s all I need from you right now.” He began packing up his projector and laptop, disregarding the stranger who watched him like a beaming Buddha.

“What’s the significance of the tattoo? What’s a *Barblefarb*?” Berky asked, looking at the back of Cantor’s right hand.

“It reminds me of something I want to avoid. Can you stow that power cord now?”

Berky dutifully put the cord in the backpack as Cantor reached toward the projector.

“Ah, frikin’ fudge!” Cantor shouted as he touched the projector lamp. Then he picked up the bag with cables and the rotted bottom gave way, spilling accessories across the table. “Shit.”

“For someone who claims to have a formula for getting rich, it looks like you can’t even afford modern equipment,” Berky observed. “And how about the crappy sign outside? Did you draw it yourself?”

Cantor rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. He didn’t need smart-ass remarks. What he really craved was a new bag. And air freshener. Maybe a whiskey. He had never failed this miserably before—he had not landed a single investor. He wanted to break away from Berky’s presence, or maybe just break Berky, but something about the hairless fat guy gave him pause.

Berky touched Cantor’s shoulder and leaned forward as if to impart a confidence. But his voice boomed out so loudly, like the voice of a revival preacher, that Cantor jumped, startled.

“God has given me a chance to save mankind!” he thundered. “Like you, I’m part of His plan to restore order to the world. I can read His messages in the genome, sent from the beginning of time. They tell me how to overcome the bio-engineered poisons that sap our manhood and lead us toward a feminist hell-on-Earth. I have a plan to make

things right again, but I need a partner who knows how to produce. Are you The One? Do you have what it takes? Is your technology real?"

Cantor couldn't be certain, but he suspected the man had surreptitiously detonated another stealth fart bomb. He opened the door to the conference room to let the place vent. Fresh air enabled him to think more clearly.

His brain fixated on a single question as he looked at the blubbery, disheveled bald man. That question was: *How deep are your pockets?* Instead, he said: "What do you have in mind?"

"I propose to test you, Mr. Cantor. If you can do the things I need, you can be my partner. If you can't—well then, you are nothing more than a charlatan. To prove yourself, I want you to bring Ichthy back to life."

Cantor blinked at the disgusting man in the disgusting shirt—the source of a disgusting stink. "I'm not sure I want to bring your Icky back."

"You don't understand," Berky said. "Ichthy was an important historical figure. I have sixty-nine million dollars we can use. Is that enough?"

Canduka Cantor cleared his throat as an involuntary spasm grabbed his esophagus. He regained his composure and wrapped an encouraging arm around Berky. "Not nearly enough," he said. "But it's a start."