



The Men in the back room at the country club
Rucker, Rudy

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About Rucker:

Rudolf von Bitter Rucker (born March 22, 1946 in Louisville, Kentucky) is an American computer scientist and science fiction author, and is one of the founders of the cyberpunk literary movement. The author of both fiction and non-fiction, he is best known for the novels in the Ware Tetralogy, the first two of which (*Software* and *Wetware*) both won Philip K. Dick Awards. Rucker is the great-great-great-grandson of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. (Cf. the family tree of his mother's brother, Rudolf von Bitter.) Rucker attended St. Xavier High School before earning a B.A. in mathematics from Swarthmore College, and a Master's and Ph.D. in mathematics from Rutgers University. He taught at various universities, including Randolph-Macon Women's College in Lynchburg, Virginia from 1980-1982, before settling at San José State University in 1986, from which he retired in 2004. A mathematician with serious philosophical interests, he has written *The Fourth Dimension; Geometry, Relativity and the Fourth Dimension*; and *Infinity and the Mind*. Princeton University Press published new editions of *Infinity and the Mind* in 1995 and in 2005, both with new prefaces; the first edition is cited with fair frequency in academic literature. As his "own alternative to cyberpunk," Rucker developed a writing style he terms Transrealism. Transrealism, as outlined in his 1983 essay "The Transrealist Manifesto," is science fiction based on the author's own life and immediate perceptions, mixed with fantastic elements that symbolize psychological change. Many of Rucker's novels and short stories apply these ideas. One example of Rucker's Transrealist works is *Saucer Wisdom*, a novel in which the main character is abducted by aliens. Rucker and his publisher marketed the book, tongue in cheek, as non-fiction. Thanks to a grant from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Rucker taught math at the Ruprecht Karl University of Heidelberg, 1978-80. His earliest Transrealist novel, *White Light*, was written in Heidelberg. This Transrealist novel is based on his experiences at the State University of New York at Geneseo, where he taught from 1972 to 1978. Rucker often uses his novels to explore scientific or mathematical ideas; *White Light* examines the concept of infinity, while the Ware Tetralogy (written from 1982 through 2000) is in part an explanation of the use of natural selection to develop computer software (a subject also developed in his *The Hacker and the Ants*, written in 1994). His novels also put forward a mystical philosophy that Rucker has summarized in an essay titled, with only a bit of irony, "The Central Teachings of Mysticism" (included in *Seek!*, 1999). His recent non-fiction book, *The Lifebox, the Seashell, and the Soul: What Gnarly*

Computation Taught Me About Ultimate Reality, the Meaning Of Life , and How To Be Happy summarizes the various philosophies he's believed over the years and ends with the tentative conclusion that we might profitably view the world as made of computations, with the final remark, "perhaps this universe is perfect." Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Rucker:

- *The Ware Tetralogy* (2010)
- *Postsingular* (2007)

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"Yo, Jack," said Tonel as they lugged two golf bags apiece towards the men's locker room. It was sunset, the end of a long Saturday's caddying, Jack's last day of work this summer.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you," continued Tonel, shouldering open the door. "About who I saw sweatin' in Ragland's back yard this mornin'." It was fresh and cool in the locker room. A nice break from the heavy, thick August air.

"In Ragland's yard?" said Jack Vaughan, setting down the bags and wiping his brow. "I don't know. His ninety-year-old mother?" Jack suspected a joke. Ragland was the master of the locker room, ensconced behind his counter. Tidily cleaned shoes and piles of fresh white towels sat on the white-painted shelves around him. Although the bare-skulled Ragland's eyes were half-closed, it was likely that he was listening.

"It was the five mibracc," said Tonel. "Doin' Ragland's yard work. Isn't that right, Ragland? What's the dealio? How you get to slave-driving them Republicans? I need to know." Tonel lived right next door to Ragland. The two weren't particularly fond of each other.

"Don't be mouthin' on my business, yellow dog," said Ragland. Though he cleaned the shoes of popinjays, he insisted on his dignity.

A burst of talk echoed from the little back room beyond Ragland's station. Just like every other morning or afternoon, the mibracc — the caddies' nickname for "men in the back room at the country club" — were in there, safe from women, out of the daylight, playing cards and drinking the bourbon they stored in their lockers.

"Those bagworts do chores?" said Jack. "No way, Tonel."

"I seen it," insisted Tonel. "Mr. Atlee was draggin' a plow with Mr. Early steerin' it. Mr. Gupta was down on his knees pullin' up weeds, and Mr. Inkle and Mr. Cuthbert was carryin' trash out to the alley. Ole Ragland sittin' on the back porch with his shotgun across his knees. Did your Meemaw put conjure on them, Ragland?"

"You want me to snapify your ass?" said Ragland. Though gray and worn, Ragland was, in his own way, an imposing man.

Tonel made a series of mystic passes, hoodoo signs, and rap gestures in Ragland's direction.

"I'll ask the men myself," said Jack, caught up by Tonel's rebellious spirit.

The two boys stepped into the back room, a plain space with a tile floor and shiny green paint on the windowless concrete walls. The five old men sat in battered wooden captain's chairs around a table from the club's lounge. Oily Mr. Atlee was dealing out cards to spindly white-

haired Mr. Early, to bald-as-a-doorknob Mr. Inkle, to Mr. Cuthbert with his alarming false teeth, and to Mr. Gupta, the only non-white member of the Killeville Country Club.

"Hi, guys," said Jack.

There was no response. The mibracc studied their cards, sipping at their glasses of bourbon and water, their every little gesture saying, "Leave us alone." Mr. Inkle stubbed out a cigarette and lit a fresh one.

"Listen up," said Tonel in a louder tone. "I gotta axe you gentlemen somethin'. Was you bustin' sod for Ragland today? My friend here don't believe me."

Still no answer. The mibracc were so fully withdrawn into their clubby little thing that you could just as well try talking to your TV. Or to five spiteful children.

"Scoop," grunted Mr. Cuthbert, standing up with his glass in hand. Mr. Gupta handed him his empty glass as well. With the slightest grunt of non-recognition, Mr. Cuthbert sidled past Tonel and Jack, moving a little oddly, as if his knees were double-jointed. His over-sized plastic teeth glinted in the fluorescent light. Mr. Cuthbert pressed his thumb to his locker's pad, opened the door and dipped the two glasses down into his golf-bag. Jack could smell the bourbon, a holiday smell.

The mibracc's golf bags held no clubs. They were lined with glass, with tall golf-bag-sized glass beakers, or carboys. Big glass jars holding gallons of premium bourbon. It was a new gimmick, strictly hush-hush; nobody but Ragland and the caddies knew. Mr. Atlee, a former druggist, had obtained the carboys, and Mr. Early, a former distiller's rep, had arranged for a man to come in one night with an oak cask on a dolly to replenish the bags. The mibracc were loving it.

Mr. Cuthbert shuffled back past Tonel towards the card table, the liquid swirling in his two glasses. The boy fell into step behind the old man, draping his hand onto the mibracc's shoulder. Mr. Cuthbert paid him no mind. Jack joined the procession, putting his hand on Tonel's shoulder and trucking along in his friend's wake. Tonel was humming the chorus of the new video by Ruggy Qaeda, the part with the zombies machine-gunning the yoga class.

After Mr. Cuthbert dropped into his chair and picked up his cards, Jack and Tonel circled the room two, three, four times, with Tonel finally bursting into song. Never did the mibracc give them a second glance. Odd as it seemed, the liquid in the glasses still hadn't settled down; it was moving around as if someone were stirring it.

Around then Ragland came out from behind his counter, wielding a wet, rolled-up towel. Silly as it sounded, being snapped by the old locker room attendant was a serious threat. Ragland was the ascended Kung-Fu master of the towel snap. He could put a bruise on your neck that would last six weeks. Laughing and whooping, Tonel and Jack ran outside.

A white face peered out of the window in the clubhouse's terrace door. The door swung open and a plain, slightly lumpish girl in a white apron appeared. Gretchen Karst.

"I'm pregnant, Jack," said Gretchen, her sarcastic, pimply face unreadable. "Marry me tonight. Take me off to college with you tomorrow."

"How do you know it's me?" protested Jack. "I'm not the only— I mean even Tonel said he—"

"Tonel is a horn worm. All I gave him was a hand job. And it didn't take very long. Jack, there's a Justice of the Peace out on Route 501. Ronnie Blevins. He works at Rash Decisions Tattoo. I found him online. Since it's Saturday, they're open till midnight. I'm off work right now, you know. I started early today."

"Stop it, Gretchen. You and me— it's not—"

"I'm serious," said Gretchen, although there was in fact a good chance that she was scamming him. Gretchen had a twisted mind. "You're my best chance, Jack," she continued. "Marry me and take me with you. I'm smart. I like sex. And I'm carrying your son."

"Uh—"

Just then someone shouted for Gretchen from the corner of the clubhouse building. It was Gretchen's Dad, standing at the edge of the parking lot. He'd trimmed his flattop to high-tolerance precision and he was wearing his shiny silver jogging suit. All set for the weekly meeting at the Day Six Synod's tabernacle.

Gretchen could talk about the Day Six Synod for hours. It was a tiny splinter religion based on the revelation that Armageddon, the last battle, was coming one-seventh sooner than the Seventh Day Adventists had thought. We were already in the end times, in fact, with the last act about to be ushered in by manifestations of Shekinah Glory, this being the special supernatural energy which God — and Satan — use to manifest themselves. The pillar of fire that led the Israelites to the promised land, the burning bush that spake to Moses — these had been Shekinah Glory. The Day Six Synod taught that our Armageddon's Shekinah Glory would take the form of evil UFOs pitted against winged angels.

Karl Karst's jogging suit was silver to remind him of the Shekinah Glory. The Day Six Synod meetings featured impressively high-end

computer graphics representing the Glory in its good and evil forms. Though Mr. Karst was but a county school-bus mechanic, some of the core founders of the Day Six Synod were crackpot computer hackers.

"Shake a leg or we'll be late," shouted Mr. Karst. "Hi, Jack and Tonel. Wait till you see who I've got with me, Gretchen!"

"I'll deal with you later," said Gretchen to Jack with a slight smile. Surely she'd only been teasing him about the pregnancy. She made the cell-phone gesture with her thumb and pinky. "We'll coordinate."

"Okay," said Jack, walking with her towards her father. "I'm visualizing hole six." Hole six of the KCC golf course was the popular place for the club's young workers to party. It was well away from the road, on a hillock surrounded on three sides by kudzu-choked woods.

Right now, Jack figured to eat dinner at Tonel's. He didn't want to go to his own house at all. Because this morning on the way to the Killeville Country Club, he'd doubled back home, having forgotten his sunglasses, and through the kitchen window he'd seen his Mom kissing the Reverend Doug Langhorne.

It wasn't all that surprising that Doug Langhorne would make a play for the tidy, crisp widow Jessie Vaughan, she of the cute figure, tailored suits and bright lipstick. Jessie was the secretary for the shabby-genteel St. Anselm's Episcopal church on a once-grand boulevard in downtown Killeville, right around the corner from the black neighborhood where Tonel lived, not that any black people came to St. Anselm's. Jessie's salary was so meager that Rev. Langhorne let Jessie and Jack live with him in the rectory, a timeworn Victorian manse right next to the church.

Doug Langhorne's wife and children shared the rectory as well. Lenore Langhorne was a kind, timid soul, near-sighted, overweight and ineffectual, a not-so-secret drinker of cooking sherry, and the mother of four demanding unattractive children dubbed with eminent Killeville surnames. Banks, Price, Sydnor, and Rainey Langhorne.

Setting down his bicycle and stepping up onto his home's porch this morning, Jack had seen his mother in a lip lock with Doug Langhorne. And then Mom had seen Jack seeing her. And then, to make it truly stomach-churning, Jack had seen Lenore and her children in the shadows of the dining room, witnessing the kiss as well. The couple broke their clinch; Jack walked in and took his sunglasses; Lenore let out a convulsive sob; Doug cleared his throat and said, "We have to talk."

"Daddy kissed Jack's mommy!" cried Banks Langhorne, a fat little girl with a low forehead. Her brother Rainey and her sisters Price and Sydnor took up the cry. "Daddy's gonna get it, Daddy's gonna get it,

Daddy's gonna get it... " There was something strange about the children's ears; they were pointed at the tips, like the ears of devils or of pigs. The children joined hands in a circle around Doug and Jessie and began dancing a spooky Ring-Around-The-Rosie. Lenore was trying to talk through her racking sobs. Doug was bumblingly trying to smooth things over. Mom was looking around the room with an expression of distaste, as if wondering how she'd ended up here. On the breakfast table, the juice in the children's glasses was unaccountably swirling, as if there were a tiny whirlpool in each. Jack rushed outside, jumped on his bike and rode to work, leaving the children's chanting voices behind.

Jack had pretty much avoided thinking about it all day, and what should he think anyway? It was Jessie's business who she kissed. And surely he'd only imagined the pointed ears on those dreadful piggy children. But what about Lenore? Although Lenore was like a dusty stuffed plush thing that made you sneeze, she was nice. She'd always been good to Jack. Her sob was maybe the saddest thing he'd ever heard. Grainy, desperate, hopeless, deep. What did the kiss mean for Mom's future as the church secretary? What did it bode for Doug Langhorne's position as rector? What a mess.

Jack's plan was to stay out most of the night or all of the night with his friends, grab his suitcase in the morning, and get the 8:37 bus to Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg. And there he'd begin his real life. Let Mom and Lenore and Doug work things out in pawky, filthy Killeville. Jack's bag was packed. He was ready to set off for the great outer world!

With these thoughts running in his head, he followed Gretchen to the parking-lot, Tonel tagging along. Mr. Karst was mounted in his battered second-hand Ford SUV. Sitting next to him was an unkempt, overweight, luminously white guy smoking a filter cigarette. "Albert Chesney!" exclaimed Gretchen.

"Him!" said Jack. The thirty-year-old Albert Chesney was a Day Six Synodite and a convicted computer criminal. He'd just gotten parole; his advent had been a topic in the Killeville Daily News for several days. Three years ago, Chesney had brought down the entire Internet for a week with his infamous email, which had combined the nastiest features of spam, hypnotism, a virus, a pyramid scheme, a con-game, a worm and a denial-of-service attack. At the cost of infecting seven hundred million machines, had netted seven converts to the Day Six Synod.

"Don't ride with him, Gretchen," said Jack, suddenly visualizing a defenseless big-eyed fetus within Gretchen's slightly curved belly. He

seemed to recall that Chesney had always been interested in Gretchen. Chesney was single, with no relatives.

"Oh, now you're all protective?" said Gretchen. "Don't worry. I can handle myself. Welcome back, Albert. Are you fully rehabilitated?"

"I've hoed a long, lonely row," sighed Albert Chesney. His voice was husky; his head was big and crooked as a jack-o'-lantern. "The Pharisees say I'm not allowed to live in a house with computers. What with the Synod having the tabernacle on my farm, I'm exiled to a humble abode on Route 501. Leastways it won't be but one night. The last battle's comin' tomorrow morning, hallelujah and pass it on. Armageddon. Angels and devils fighting for the fate of our world. Drive your chariot onwards, Karl. I need a taste of my sweet country roads. And then I'll prophesy to the fellowship about the Shekinah Glory."

"You bet, Albert," said Mr. Karst. "Don't he look good, Gretchen?" Mr. Karst liked Chesney because he'd let Day Six use his farmhouse for their tabernacle the whole time he'd been in jail. Swaying and backfiring, the rusty SUV lumbered off.

"Do he say the world ends tomorrow?" asked Tonel.

"Don't worry," said Jack. "They always say that. Back in May, Mr. Karst tried to stop Gretchen from buying a prom dress because the last battle was due to come before our graduation."

Turning back to the clubhouse, Tonel and Jack encountered muscular Danny Dank, who'd just finished setting up the giant propane-fueled two-whole-hog barbeque wagon that the club used for their galas. Tomorrow was the day of the club's annual Killeville Barbeque Breakfast Golf Classic, starting near dawn.

Danny tightened down the cover of the quilted chrome wagon and unwrapped a stick of marijuana gum, the pricey brand called Winnipeg Wheelchair. Grinning and chewing, he gestured for the two caddies to sit down with him on a low wall facing the eighteenth green and the last glow of the sunset.

"Listen to this," said Danny, pulling a folded up newspaper from his hip pocket. He hawked some spit on to the ground, then read, more mellifluously than one might have expected. Danny had gone to C. T. Piggott High School the same as Jack and Tonel; he'd been a senior when they'd been freshman. But he'd been expelled before his graduation.

"Falwell County's most notorious computer criminal is temporarily lodged in the Casa Linda Motel on Highway 501 southeast of Killeville, next to a tattoo parlor and a liquor store that rents adult videos," read Danny. "His neighbors include a few parolees and at least one registered

sex offender. His second-floor room in the 34-unit motel overlooks the parking lot of a strip club."

"Punkin-head Chesney," said Tonel. "We just seen him. He and Gretchen goin' to church."

"Gretchen?" parroted Danny, as if unwilling or unable to understand. He was intent on his presentation. "Do you dogs grasp why I read you the news item?"

"Because you're spun," said Jack, laughing. "Give me a piece of that gum."

"Three dollars," said Danny, reaching into shirt pocket. "Casa Linda is my crib. The county thinks they can just dump any old trash on my doorstep. I been planning to write a letter to the paper. But — "

"Who's the sex offender, Dank-man?" interrupted Tonel.

Danny looked embarrassed and chewed his gum in silence. The sex offender living at the Casa Linda was Danny. He'd been expelled from Piggott High for putting a Web cam into the girls' locker room. One of the girls who'd been showering there was frosh Lucy Candler, the pluperfect cheer daughter of Judge Bowen Candler and his wife Burke. The Judge had thrown the book at Danny. Racketeering and child pornography. Even though, Danny being Danny, the website hadn't worked.

"Here's three bucks," said Jack, pulling the singles out of his wallet. "This is my last night in town, Danny. Disable me, dog."

"I'm on the boat," said Tonel, getting out his own wallet.

"I'm up for a power run," said Danny, taking the money and fishing out two sticks of gum. "But Les Trucklee says I gotta be here at dawn for the barbeque. All I do in that kitchen is, like, fry frozen fries for freezing. I can't hack no more of that today. Tomorrow will be here soon enough. You dogs got any booze?"

"We know where there's a lot of bourbon," said Jack, impishly curious to see what might happen if he encouraged Danny. "Right, Tonel?" Ragland had fiercely enjoined the caddies to keep mum about the mibracc's lockers, but tonight of all nights, Jack could afford to be reckless. "You get Ragland to chasing you, Tonel," continued Jack. "And I'll scoop into Mr. Cuthbert's stash." Anything was better than going home.

"What stash?" asked Danny.

So he told Danny, and they talked it over a little more as the light faded, in no rush to actually do anything yet, the three of them chewing their Winnipeg Wheelchair. They strolled into the patch of rough between the first tee and the eighteenth green. There was a grassy dell in

among the trees where they could stretch out without anyone coming along to boss them.

"Danny!"

It was the voice of Les Trucklee, the personnel manager. The boys could see him standing on the floodlit terrace next to the barbeque wagon. He wasn't a bad guy — he'd hired Danny despite his record. Les Trucklee was gay, not too bright, in his thirties, a wannabe yuppie, with thinning blonde hair in a comb-over. He had very large ears and a fruity voice.

"Oh, Danny!" repeated Trucklee, peering out into the night. "I need you. I know you're out there! I hear your voice. You're making things hard, Danny." Jack or Tonel could have made a lewd joke then, based on the obvious fact that Les had a crush on Danny, and on the rumored likelihood that the two were having an affair. But they knew better than to tease their older friend about so delicate a topic. Danny could turn mighty mean. And he carried a sizable pocket knife. Finally Trucklee went back inside.

"Let's get that bourbon," said Danny, breaking the strained silence. Circling around behind the barbeque wagon, the three made their way towards the locker room door. But, dammit, the door was locked. And they hadn't even seen Ragland and the mibracc go out.

"I know another way in," said Danny. "Through the ceiling of the furnace room. You can hop up through a hole I found."

"Go in the ceiling?" said Tonel.

"There's a crawlspace," said Danny. "It goes to the ladies' locker room. There's a grate over their showers. The men's is the same."

"You're still peeping?" said Jack, a balloon of mirth rising in his chest. "You really are a sex offender, Danny. Keep it up, and the Man's gonna cut out your balls and give you Neuticles. For the public good."

"Laugh it up, bagwort," shot back Danny. "Meanwhile Albert Chesney's off with your girl."

Climbing into the ceiling was a dumb idea, but, hey. It was the end of summer. So yeah, they snuck to the furnace room, got up into the ceiling and made their way across the hanging supports. Danny kept making snorting noises like a wild pig, and then Tonel would say "Neuticles," and then they'd laugh so hard they'd flop around like fish. They were riding the Wheelchair for fair.

Eventually they found themselves above the ceiling vent in the shower room of the men's lockers. There were voices coming up. Ragland and the mibracc. Still in here after all.

Peeking through the grate, Jack saw Ragland in the shower with the old men, all of them naked. The men looked sluggish and tired. One of them — Mr. Gupta — had collapsed to the floor and looked oddly flat. Just now Ragland was pulling something like a cork out of Mr. Inkle's navel. A flesh-colored bung. A stream of straw-colored fluid gushed out of the mibracc, splashing on the tile floor and running towards the drain.

"Smeel," whispered Danny.

"You mean lymph," murmured Jack.

"No dog, that's 'smeel'," hissed Tonel. "The Dank-man knows."

They were trying to act like what they were seeing was funny — but they were realizing it wasn't. It was awful. The air smelled of urine and alcohol, meat and feces. It would be very bad if Ragland found them watching. There was no more joking, no more chat. The boys peered through the grate in silence.

Actually the smeel wasn't all running down the drain. The smelly dregs were sliding away, but a clear, sparkling fraction of the smeel was gathering in pools and eddies near the drain, humping itself up into tiny waterspouts, circling around and around, the smaller vortices joining into bigger ones. A spinning ring of smeel slid across the tiles like a miniature hurricane. It headed right out of the shower stall and disappeared into the locker room.

Meanwhile Mr. Inkle flopped over onto his side like a deflating balloon. Ragland pushed the skin around with his bare feet, then trod along its length, squeezing out the last gout of smeel. He nudged the Inkle skin over next to the Gupta skin. After draining the three other mibracc — none of whom seemed to mind — he wrapped the five skins into tight rolls, and went out into the locker room. The clarified smeel gathered into watery columns like miniature typhoons and followed him.

The boys heard a rattling of locker doors. The mibracc skins waited, their edges twitching ever so slightly. Ragland reappeared, still naked. He fetched the skins one by one, clattering and splashing in the next room. Each time they saw Ragland, there was one smeel tornado following him. Evidently he was stashing the mibracc and their smeel inside the golf bags.

Next Ragland took a long, soapy shower. Then came the rustling of him getting dressed, followed by the unlocking and locking of the outer door. All was silent.

Danny lifted loose the grate and the boys dropped down onto the tiled shower room floor. Jack happened to know that under his counter Ragland had a thing like a monster Swiss knife of plastic thumbs, one thumb

for each club member — in case someone died of old age, which happened often enough to matter. Jack fetched the master thumbs and opened up Mr. Cuthbert's locker. They peered into the golf bag.

Something twitched in the golden liquid, making a tiny splash. Yes. Mr. Cuthbert was in there, rolled up like a pickled squid. The preservative fluid was just level with the golf bag's top edge.

Danny leaned over and sucked up some of it.

"Yaar," he said, wiping his lips. "Good."

The stuff seemed to hit him right away, and very hard. When he unsteadily ducked down to drink some more, his chin banged into the bag and, oh God, the bag fell over. Although the glass in the bag didn't shatter, the liquid slopped across the floor.

Mr. Cuthbert slid right out the bag, looking like a wet burrito. Tonel yanked the golf bag upright, but Mr. Cuthbert remained on the tiles.

The spilled liquor and smeel puddled around the mibracc. Slowly the fluid began eddying again, bulging itself into a mound. The stuff had shed its excremental odors in the showers. The room filled with the heady fruitcake-and-eggnog perfume of bourbon. Crazy Danny found an empty glass and dipped it into the vortex.

"Naw, naw," said Tonel, still holding the golf bag. "Don't be drinkin' that mess!"

"S good," repeated Danny, gesturing with his glass. His pupils were crazed pinpoints. There was no reasoning with him. His Adam's apple pumped up and down as he drank.

Jack found a mop and nudged the weirdly animated smeel-bourbon into a bucket that he poured back into the golf bag. All the while the coiled skin of Mr. Cuthbert was slowly twisting around, making a peevish hissing noise.

"Help me jam him back in and let's get out of here," Jack told Tonel.

"You be touchin' him," said Tonel. "Not me."

Jack hunkered down and took hold of Mr. Cuthbert. The mibracc felt like incompletely cured food, like a half-dried apricot: leathery on the outside, wet and squishy in the middle. He was hissing louder than before. A little more smeel trickled from the bunghole in his belly-button.

Gritting his teeth, Jack re-rolled Mr. Cuthbert and slid him into his golf bag. The skin twitched and splashed. A drop of the bourbon-smeel landed on Jack's lower lip. Reflexively he licked it off. Error. The room began ever so slowly to spin.

While Jack paused, assessing the damages, crazy Danny reached past him to scoop out one last glassful of the poison bourbon. Mr. Cuthbert's

golf bag rocked and clattered; bubbles rose to the surface. The noises echoed back from the other mibracc. All five lockers were shaking.

"Let's bounce," urged Tonel, over by the locker room door. He already had it open, he'd unlocked the dead-bolt from the inside. They wouldn't be able to lock the door behind them.

"There you are, Danny," came the voice of Les Trucklee as they stepped out onto the floodlit terrace. He was out there checking over the barbeque wagon and smoking a cigarette. "I hope I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing in your hand."

Jack quickly closed the locker room door behind them. Did it matter that it wasn't locked anymore? If he asked Les Trucklee to lock it, he'd have to explain how they'd gotten in there. But surely the mibracc couldn't get out of their lockers unaided.

"You ain't seein' squat," Danny was saying, holding the glass behind his back. "I gotta leave now, Les, I just got a message from my boys here. It's my mother. She's real sick."

"Mother Dank ill again?" said Les in an indulgent, disbelieving tone. "She's a susceptible old dear, isn't she? Maybe she should wear more clothes. Are you in any condition to drive, Danny? If you'll linger a bit, I could give you a lift."

"No, Les," said Danny, his voice cold. A long moment passed. Dazzled moths were beating around the lights. Dizzy from his marijuana gum and the drop of mibracc fluid, Jack was seeing glowing trails in the air behind the insects. He thought he could hear hammering sounds from the locker-room, but nobody else was noticing. "All right then," said Les, stubbing out his butt. "I'm back to serving our patrons. The ladies are on their dessert drinks, flirting with each others' husbands. They're excited about the barbeque and golf tournament tomorrow. Don't forget you're onstage bright and early, Danny, we'll want to start up the grill at the crack of dawn. You and your friends stay out of trouble tonight." Les sighed and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "I wish I was young again. I never had enough fun."

One of the moths landed on Jack's hand. The feathery touch grated on his tautened nerves. As he brushed the moth away, he seemed to hear a faint cry, and when he glanced down he saw that the moth had a tiny head resembling that of a round-eyed woman with tangled blonde hair. Jack's stifled exclamation turned Les Trucklee's attention to him.

"Good luck at college, Jack. If one of you fellows happens to get a wild hair up your ass, stop by around one or two tonight and I'll give you a free nightcap. Top shelf. Why don't you sleep on my office couch again

tonight, Danny, just to be getting up early. It'll be even better than last time."

This was too much for Tonel, who let out a loud guffaw.

And then they were in the parking-lot, Danny sitting on his obese black Harley gunning it. His face was dark and angry. Les had gone too far, told too much. Danny roared the motorcycle even harder.

Danny had gotten the hog used from a Killeville insurance salesman who'd bought it as a temporary stopgap against his midlife crisis before moving on to a girlfriend in Virginia Beach. The machine was loaded with puffy middle-aged accessories, including enormous hard-shelled saddlebags. Instead of tearing them off — hell, he'd paid for them, hadn't he? — Danny had gotten one of his buddies at Rash Decisions Tattoo to paint them with renditions of the Pig Chef — two smirking pigs in aprons and chef's hats, one holding a meat-cleaver and the other waving a long three-tined fork with sharpness-twinkles. The Pig Chef was — if you thought about it — one of the more sinister icons of American roadside art. Danny's personal totem. What kind of pig is a butcher? What kind of pig cooks barbeque? A traitor pig, a killer pig, a doomed preterite pig destined for eternal damnation. Danny's Pig Chefs showed the full weight of this knowledge in their mocking eyes and snagged snouts.

"I'm gonna go catch Stiffie's act," said Danny. Stiffie Ryder was his idol, his proof of masculinity, his favorite woman to peep at. Stiffie worked as a stripper at the Banana Split, a bar and grill located on the same stretch of Route 501 as the Casa Linda and Rash Decisions Tattoo, Killeville's own little Sodom and Gomorrah, just outside the city limits.

"What about those skins in the golf bags?" asked Jack. "What if they try and get out?" The drop he'd licked off his lip was still working on him. One of his legs felt shorter than the other. He put his hand on Tonel's shoulder for support.

"They can gangbang Les Trucklee," said Danny. "They can warm him up for me." He glared at Jack and Tonel, who had no thought of uttering a response. Danny brushed back his lank, greasy hair, drank off the last bit of bourbon-smeel, and tossed his glass to shatter in the parking lot. For the first time Jack noticed that the tips of Danny's ears were pointed. "I can't believe Les was talking that way in front of you two," continued Danny. "Like he's my sissy. He's gonna pay the price." And with that he roared off.

"Danny buggin' out," said Tonel. "Trucklee better watch hisself."

"I don't know how Danny can drive," said Jack. "I'm so — " He staggered to one side and puked.

"Weak bitch," said Tonel, not unkindly.

Jack heaved again, bringing up the day's four Coca-Colas and the burger and fries he'd had for lunch. Right away he felt better.

The vomit was a little heap at the edge of the asphalt, faintly lit by the terrace lights. Was it hunching itself up like the smeel had done? Beginning ever so slightly to twist into an eddy?

"Come on, dog," said Tonel. "Let's creep on home. You can pedal, can't you?"

"Yeah," said Jack, looking away from the shifting mound on the pavement. "I'm better now. I got a drop of that crap in my mouth. From the golf bags. I can't believe how much of it Danny drank. We shouldn't have let him ride."

"He'd a pulled his knife if we tried to stop him," said Tonel.

They walked over to the rack and unchained their bicycles, a couple of beat-up jobs nobody would bother to steal. The night felt thick and velvety, but it wasn't spinning anymore.

"We ought to talk to Ragland," said Jack as they pedaled off. "Ask him what's up."

"I gotta eat first," said Tonel. "Dad's makin' that burgoo."

"Can I come to your house too?" said Jack. "I don't want to go home." And then he told Tonel the story about this morning.

"That's some sad stuff," said Tonel when Jack finished. "Preachers always do like that. But you sayin' his children had pointed ears?"

"Like Danny's," sighed Jack. "Everything's coming apart, just when it's finally time for me to get out of here. Back on the terrace I thought one of those moths had a woman's head. And the mibracc — I can hardly believe we saw that. Maybe we're just really high."

"Be some mighty crunk Wheelchair make you see five men turn into somethin' like chitlins." They pedaled down Egmont Avenue in silence for a minute, the occasional car rumbling by. Frek didn't dare try and look at the drivers. Finally Tonel broke the silence. "If you not goin' by the e-rectory, how we gonna get a ride?" Normally they took Jack's mother's car out at night.

"Ask Vincente for his," said Jack.

Tonel's father Vincente ran a second-hand appliance store called Vaughan Electronics — it so happened that Tonel's and Jack's families shared the same last name, which no doubt had something to do with plantations and slaves. Sometimes Jack would tell people that Tonel was his cousin, which wasn't entirely implausible, light-skinned as Tonel was. Tonel's mother Wanda had been mostly white. Even though she'd

run off to Florida, Vincente had a picture of Wanda on the kitchen wall in his apartment at the back of the store. When the boys entered through the alley door, Vincente's wall of screens was tuned to a porno webcast; he quickly changed it to a boxing match.

"Help yourself to burgoo," said Vincente, gesturing towards the stove.

"Put the ho's back on, Daddy," said Tonel. "We don't wanna see no thugs."

"Wouldn't be fittin' to expose you," said the wiry Vincente.

He was lounging in a duct-tape-patched plastic recliner facing twenty-four clunker TVs stacked in a six by four grid. Vincente had installed special controllers so he could switch his digital mosaic between showing a bunch of random channels and showing a single channel with its image jigsawed into pieces. He'd learned electronics in the Navy during the second war on Iraq. He began fiddling with his remote, breaking up and reassembling the dataflow, temporarily settling on a Sudanese dagger-fighting flick.

Meanwhile the hearty smell of the rabbit and chicken stew pushed away any lingering queasiness Jack felt. He had the munchies. He and Tonel ate quite a bit of the stew, the thuds and yelps of the movie bouncing along in the background.

Jack's cell phone rang. He peeked at the screen, fearing it would be Mom, but, no, it was Gretchen, looking tense.

"Hey," she said. "I'm still at the tabernacle. It's getting way too trippy. You think you could come and get me now?"

"Um, I guess so," said Jack. "I'm at Tonel's. We have to see about getting a car." "Axe her can she hook me up a honey," put in Tonel. "I'm driving. Right, Daddy? I can have the van?"

"If you can start it," said Vincente, twitching his remote to break the image into twenty-four new channels. "Sneak the battery outten Ragland's truck. I seen him come back a half hour ago. You know he ain't goin' out again."

"How do you mean trippy?" Jack asked Gretchen meanwhile.

"It's that Armageddon thing," said Gretchen. There was a trumpeting noise in the background.

"Albert Chesney is getting really weird about it. He wants me to spend the night with him at Casa Linda to help him 'gird his loins' for the last battle. None of the Day Sixers wants to help him. Albert says that he and five pure hearts can turn the tide. Dad wants me to be with Albert even though he himself plans to stay home. Come get me, Jack. Right now

they're watching a video, but when it's done, Dad's driving Albert and me to the Casa Linda."

"Is this another of your put-ons?"

"Save me, Jack. I mean it. And, you know, I really am pregnant." Gretchen never let up. Jack liked that about her.

"Hook me a honey," repeated Tonel.

"We're coming," said Jack. "And Tonel wants to know if you can find a date for him?"

"Pinka Wright is into him. I might call her." The trumpets rose to an off-key crescendo. "Hurry." Gretchen hung up.

The tooting noise didn't stop when Jack turned his phone off. After a moment's disorientation, he realized that Vincente had tuned his screens to some random webcast of — what was it? Three glowing donuts moving across the wall of TVs, silver, gold and copper. Behind them was a background of unfamiliar stars. A cracked brass fanfare played. Before Jack could ask about the picture, Vincente punched his controller again, splitting the image into twenty-four new channels.

"What she say?" demanded Tonel.

"Her father wants her to spend the night with Albert Chesney," said Jack.

"She jivin' you again," said Tonel. "What she say about my date?"

"Pinka Wright."

"Ooo! Let's bounce it, dog."

"Don't let Ragland hear you," warned Vincente. "He's got that shotgun."

First of all they had to check the tires of Vincente's ancient van, and of course one of them was flat — Vincente's driving license was suspended and he didn't keep insurance up on the van, which meant that he hardly ever drove it. Tonel found an electric pump in the bowels of Vaughan Electronics and they dragged out an extension cord and filled the tire. The tire seemed to hold its size, so that problem was solved.

Next came the issue of gas. A quick check of the van's gauge showed it to be stone cold dry. Tonel produced a can and a squeeze-bulb siphon from the back of the van. The plan was to get gas from Ragland's truck as well as borrowing his battery.

Quietly they walked down the alley to Ragland's truck. Tonel popped the hood and set to work extracting the battery while Jack began pumping gas from Ragland's tank. It felt stupid to be making such a complicated thing out of getting a car. Gretchen needed his help. Shouldn't he just walk around the corner and take his Mom's car? Right about then

Ragland appeared, gliding out of his back yard like a ghost, the barrel of his shotgun glinting in the streetlight. He was holding it level at his waist, pointing right at Jack's stomach.

"You hookworm," said Ragland. "I oughtta blow a hole in you."

Tonel jumped backwards, letting the hood slam shut. "We just tryin' to use Daddy's van," he said.

"We figured we could borrow your — "

"I'm gonna call the po-lice," said Ragland. "A night in jail be good for you two whelps."

"Oh yeah?" said Tonel. "How 'bout if I tell them what you do to them old men in the locker room? We saw you rollin' em up. Cops might even call it murder."

"You was in the lockers?" said Ragland, letting his gun droop.

"We came in through the grate in the ceiling," said Jack. "And then we let ourselves out."

"You left the door unlocked?" said Ragland after a pause. "Oh Lord. You gotta help me now. Jump in my truck."

"How long have the mibracc been like that?" Jack asked Ragland as he drove them towards the club.

"Goin' on two weeks," said Ragland. "Right when they got them big glass jars. Was Mr. Gupta showed me about the stomach plugs. He got it from somethin' he seen on TV. The men like me to do 'em that way. I drain 'em every night, and plump 'em up in the mawnin'. We use the steam room. They been payin' me extra and, yeah Tonel, they even doin' some yard work for me."

"But what do it mean?" asked Tonel.

"That's a conundrum," said Ragland. "But I ain't wantin' to see what happens if they get out on their own."

As soon as he'd parked, Ragland was out the door and across the parking-lot, still carrying his shotgun. Jack noticed that he'd left the keys in the ignition. Should he just take off and save Gretchen? But then Ragland glared back at them and gestured with his gun. Jack had a feeling the old man wouldn't hesitate to use it. Somewhat unwillingly, Jack and Tonel went to lend him their support.

From the terrace, Jack could see past the barbeque wagon and into the air-conditioned grill where Les Trucklee was pouring out brandy for a last few red-faced Killeville gentry. He could hear their voices braying even through the closed windows. Nasal, buzzing, self-satisfied. Tomorrow Jack would be gone — if only he could make it through tonight.

The locker room door was still unlocked. Ragland led the boys right in. The air was thick with vapor; voices boomed from the steam room. It was the mibracc, sounding hale and well-rested.

Holding his shotgun at the ready, Ragland peered into the sauna. Two of the skins were still on the floor where they'd slithered; the other three had already plumped up. They were talking about golf, poker, and politics in that bone-dull Killeville way that made it impossible to hear more than a few consecutive phrases.

"Get back in your bags!" Ragland told them. "It's still night."

Mr. Cuthbert looked over and gave Ragland the finger, baring his top row of ivory yellow teeth. And then Mr. Atlee strode over and grabbed the barrel of Ragland's gun.

The blast of the shotgun shell was shockingly loud in the small, tiled space. Jack's ears rang, he felt like he might be permanently deafened.

Though a large piece of Mr. Atlee's stomach was gone, the mibracc was still standing. Worse than that, he'd taken control of the shotgun. Mr. Atlee struck Ragland on the side of the head with the gunstock, dropping him. And then he leveled the barrels at Jack and Tonel. The two took to their heels. There was another blast as they reached the door; the buckshot hailed against the lockers.

Without looking back for Ragland, they jumped in the old man's truck. Tonel drove them down Egmont Avenue, tires squealing, the truck slewing from side to side. Slowly Jack's hearing returned. His cell-phone had a message on it; he'd missed the ring. It was Gretchen.

"Where are you?" cried the voice, anxious and thin. "Dad's driving Albert and me to the Casa Linda! Oh, Jack please help me now and I'll always — " Abruptly the message broke off. All thoughts of calling the police or going back to try and save Ragland flew from Jack's mind.

He and Tonel made their way through downtown Killeville and out Route 501. The flare of neon lit up the muggy, moonless August sky. Here was the Banana Split, with Danny's heavy Pig Chef Harley parked in front among the SUVs and pick-ups. Next door was Rash Decisions Tattoo. And beyond that was the dirty pink concrete bulk of Casa Linda, faint slits of light showing through some of the tightly drawn blinds.

Gretchen was on them as soon as they got out of the car, running over from the shadows of the Casa Linda parking lot.

"Jack! You've come to save me!"

"Where's Chesney?"

"Oh, he went inside alone," said Gretchen airily. "I put down my foot. I'm still available, Jack." She took hold of his arm and pointed towards

Rash Decisions Tattoo. "Justice of the Peace Ronnie Blevins is right in there."

Jack felt like his head was exploding. "Dammit, Gretchen, it's too much. You can't keep scamming me like this."

"Oh, I'll settle for one last hole six blowout," said Gretchen. "Get Danny to buy us some beer. I see his bike over there."

"We stayin' away from Danny tonight," said Tonel. "He way too spun. I can buy us beer. What about that Pinka Wright, Gretchen? Did you talk to her or not?"

"I can call her now," said Gretchen. "We'll drive by her house on the way to the club. I bet she'll come out with you. She craves the wild side."

"Was it all a lie about Albert Chesney?" demanded Jack .

"Albert really does say the last battle is tomorrow," said Gretchen. "At the tabernacle he was showing this video of donut-shaped flying saucers. Supposedly they're going to come for us at dawn, full of devils. But angels will be here to help fight them. Albert says if six righteous people step forward they can turn the tide. But I think we ought to leave before he comes back out of the motel. He's real intent on that girding his loins thing." Seeing Jack's face, Gretchen burst into laughter. "Why are you always so uptight?"

So they bounced out of there without seeing Chesney. Tonel got beer from a downtown 7-11 clerked by his cousin. Some of the people at the store recognized Ragland's truck, which reminded Jack that, oh God, they'd left Ragland lying on the steam room floor at the mercy of the mibracc. What with the pot gum and the worry about Gretchen he'd completely spaced that out. It was a good thing they were heading back to the club.

Meanwhile Gretchen worked her cell phone and not only did they pick up Pinka, but a bunch more people said they'd meet them at the parking lot — arty Tyler Simpson, pretty Geli Yoder, Lulu Anders the Goth, fat Louie Levy, and even goody-goody Lucy Candler and her jock boyfriend Rick Stazanik.

The Killeville Country Club was dark, save for Les Trucklee's office light on the second floor of the club's front side. Maybe he was waiting up for Danny Dank. But Les wouldn't be a problem for the kids. He turned a blind eye to their hole six parties.

Some of the kids were already there, waiting and drinking beer.

"Come help me see about Ragland," said Jack to Gretchen and Tonel.

"Yuck," said Gretchen. "In the men's locker room?"

"Chill," said Tonel, who was in a heavy conversation with Pinka. "I'm gettin' over."

"Let's party," said Rick Stazanik. This was the first hole six event he and Lucy had attended, and they were gung-ho to get it on.

"There might be some zombies out there," warned Jack. "The mibracc. You guys have to help me check if they left a corpse in the locker room."

"How spine-tingling," said Lulu.

"Safety in numbers," said Louie Levy. "We'll stick together."

So before heading out onto the links, the gang did a quick check in the locker room for Ragland. No sign of him. And when Jack used Ragland's master-thumbs to try and show them golf bags of bourbon, the bags turned up as empty as the gas tank on Vincente's van.

They had some fun grab-assing and scaring each other on the long trek out to the green of hole six. But in truth there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary. There were not a few laughs at Jack's expense. And then they settled down on their green, drinking beer and chewing marijuana gum. Tyler Simpson had brought speakers and an iPod with all the alternative hits of their high-school years.

After a bit Jack and Gretchen crept off to a private spot twenty meters past the green and made love. It was, after all, their last night together. As always, Jack used a condom. He'd been a dope to let her scare him with that pregnancy thing. She dropped most of her games when they were alone like this.

"Will you remember me at college?" Gretchen asked Jack. Her face looked big and open under his. "I will. It's not all that far. You can come visit. Or I'll visit here. You'll have your classes too." Gretchen was going to be studying at a local business college.

In the distance Jack heard the roar of a motorcycle pulling into the lot. Danny. He kind of hoped Danny was here to see Les and not here for the hole six party. What a weird day this had been. He was still uneasily wondering where Ragland and the mibracc had gone. After a bit, he and Gretchen went back with the others on the green.

An hour later, in between the songs, Jack began hearing the mibracc's voices, accompanied by the clink of tools in dirt. He tried to tell the others, but they either couldn't hear it or they weren't interested, not even Tonel or Gretchen. It sounded to Jack as if the mibracc were somewhere close to the clubhouse. That meant that, all in all, it would be safer to stay out here till dawn. Lots of people would be showing up for the Killeville Barbeque Breakfast Golf Classic. And then Jack could get his suitcase,

say goodbye to Mom and hop the 8:37 bus to college. He wished he'd called Mom. She'd be worrying about him.

About four in the morning, Lulu Anders, Louie Levy, Lucy Candler and Rick Stazanik wanted to leave. By now Jack had gotten them to notice the mibracc's voices, but the four figured that if they went all together there wouldn't be a problem. Jack warned them not to, getting pretty passionate about it. But they wouldn't listen. They thought he was spun. They were more scared of their parents than of the mibracc. Their screams across the golf course were terrible to hear. Four sets of screams, then nothing but the muttering of the mibracc and the scraping of metal against soil.

When dawn broke, the remaining six kids were flaked out around a mound of empty beer cans. Geli and Tonel were asleep. Pinka had chewed a lot of marijuana gum and was jabbering to Tyler, who was delicately jabbing at his music machine's controls, mixing the sounds in with her words. Gretchen and Jack were just sitting there staring toward the clubhouse, half knowing what they'd see.

As the mist cleared, they were able to pick out the figures of the five mibracc, busy at the eighteenth green, right by the terrace. They had shovels; they'd carved the green down into a cupped-out depression. Like a satellite dish. The surface of the dish gleamed, something slick was all over it — smeel. There was a slim projecting twist of smeel at the dish's center. The green had become an antenna beaming signals into who knew what unknown dimensions.

On the terrace the large barbeque grill was already fired up, greasy smoke pouring from its little tin chimney. Next to it was a sturdy table piled with bloody meat. And standing there working the grill was — Danny.

"Let's go," said Jack. "I have to get out of this town."

He shook Tonel and Geli awake. There was a moth resting on Tonel's cheek, another moth with a human head. Before flapping off, it smiled at Jack and said something in an encouraging tone — though it was too faint to understand.

"I been dreaming about heaven," said Tonel, rubbing his hands against his eyes. "What up, dog?"

Jack pointed towards the clubhouse and now all the kids saw what Danny was doing.

Geli, Pinka and Tyler decided to stay out at hole six, but Jack, Gretchen and Tonel worked their way closer to the clubhouse, taking cover in the

patches of rough. Maybe they could still fix things. And Jack couldn't get it out of his mind that he still might catch his bus.

He was seeing more and more of the moths with human heads. Their wings shed the brown-gray moth-dust and turned white in the rays of the rising sun. They were little angels.

A cracked trumpet note sounded from the heavens, then another and another. "Look," said Gretchen pointing up. "It's all true."

"God help us," said Tonel, gazing at the gathering UFOs.

A silver torus landed by the clubhouse, homing right in on the eighteenth green. Some creatures got out, things more or less like large preying mantises — with long, jointed legs, curving abdomens, bulging compound eyes, and mouths that were cruel triangular beaks. A dozen of them. They headed straight for the barbeque wagon.

Stacked on the table beside the barbeque wagon were the headless butchered corpses of Lulu Anders, Louie Levy, Lucy Candler and Rick Stazanik, ready to be cooked. The aliens — or devils — crossed the terrace, their large bodies rocking from side to side, their green abdomens wobbling. Danny swung up the barbeque wagon's curved door. There in the double-hog barbeque grill were the bodies of Les and Ragland, already well-crisped.

Sweating and grinning, Danny wielded a cleaver and a three-tined fork, cutting loose some tender barbeque for the giant mantises. The monsters bit into the meat, their jaws snipping out neat triangles.

Danny's eyes were damned, tormented, mad. He was wearing something strange on his head, not a chef's hat, no, it was floppy and bloody and hairy and with big ears — it was poor Les Trucklee's scalp. Danny was a Pig Chef.

Over by the parking lot, early-bird golfers and barbeque breakfasters were starting to arrive. One by one the mibracc beat them to death with golf clubs and dragged them to the barbeque wagon's side. Even with the oily smoke and the smell of fresh blood in the air, none of the new arrivals thought to worry when the five familiar men from the back room approached them.

"The end of the world," breathed Gretchen.

"I have to see Mom," said Jack brokenly. "Get my suitcase and see Mom. I have to leave today."

"I want to get Daddy," said Tonel.

The three looped around the far side of the clubhouse and managed to hail down a pick-up truck with a lawnmower in back. The driver was old Luke Taylor.

"Can you carry us home?" asked Tonel.

"I can," said Luke, dignified and calm. "What up at the country club?"

"There's a flying saucer with devils eating people!" said Gretchen. "It's the end!"

Luke glanced over at her, not believing what he heard. "Maybe," he said equably, "But I'm still gonna cut Mrs. Bowen's grass befo' the sun gets too hot."

Luke dropped them at Vaughan Electronics. Jack and Gretchen ran around the corner to the rectory. The house was quiet, with the faint chatter of children's voices from the back yard. Odd for a Sunday morning. Rev. Langhorne should be bustling around getting ready for church. Jack used his key to open the door, making as little noise as possible. Gretchen was right at his side.

It was Gretchen who noticed the spot on the banister. A dried bloody print from a very small hand. Out in the back yard the children were singing. They were busy with something; Jack heard a clank and a rattle. He didn't dare go back there to see.

Moving fast, Jack and Gretchen tip-toed upstairs. There was blood on the walls near the Langhorne parents' room. Jack went straight for his mother's single bedroom, blessedly unspotted with blood. But the room was empty.

"Mom?" whispered Jack.

There was a slight noise from the closet.

Jack swung open the closet door. No sign of his mother — but, wait, there was a big lump on the top shelf, covered over with a silk scarf.

"Is that you, Mom?" said Jack, scared what he might find.

The paisley scarf slid down. Jack's mother was curled up on the shelf in her nightgown, her eyes wide and staring.

"Those horrible children," she said in a tiny, strained voice. "They butchered their parents in bed. I hid."

"Hurry, Mrs. Vaughan," said Gretchen. She was standing against the wall, peeking out the back window.

"They're starting up the grill."

And, yes, Jack could smell the lighter fluid and the smoke. Four little Pig Chefs in the making. A smallish alien craft slid past the window, wedging itself down into the back yard and alley.

Somewhat obsessively, Jack went into his bedroom and fetched his packed suitcase before leading Gretchen and his Mom to the front door. It just about cost them too much time. For as the three of them crept

down the front porch steps they heard the slamming of the house's back door and the drumming of little footsteps.

Faster than it takes to tell it, Jack, Gretchen and Jessie Vaughan were in Jessie's car, Jack at the wheel, slewing around the corner. They slowed only to pick up Tonel and Vincente, and then they were barreling out of town on Route 501.

"Albert was saying we should come to the Casa Linda and help him," said Gretchen. "He said he'd be watching from the roof. He said he needed five pure hearts to pray with him. We're pure, aren't we?" Jack wouldn't have stopped, but as it happened, there was a roadblock in the highway right by the Casa Linda. The police all had pointed ears. The coffee in their cups was continually swirling. And the barbeque pit beside the Banana Split was fired up. A gold UFO was just now angling down for a landing.

"I'm purely ready to pray my ass off," said Vincente.

When they jumped out of the car, the police tried to take hold of the five, to hustle them towards the barbeque. But a sudden flight of the little angels distracted the pig-eared cops. The tiny winged beings beat at the men's cruel faces, giving the five pure hearts a chance.

Clutching his suitcase like a talisman, Jack led Gretchen, Jessie, Tonel, and Vincente across the parking lot to the Casa Linda. They pounded up the motel's outdoor concrete stairs, all the way to the roof. The pointy-eared police were too busy with the next carload of victims to chase after them. Over by the Banana Split, hungry mantises were debarking from the gold donut.

They found Albert Chesney at the low parapet of the motel roof, staring out across the rolling hills of Killeville. He had a calm, satisfied expression. His prophecies were coming true.

"Behold the city of sin," he said, gesturing towards Killeville's pitifully sparse town center, its half dozen worn old office buildings. "See how the mighty have been brought low."

"How do we make it stop, Albert?" asked Gretchen.

"Let us join hands and pray," said Chesney.

So they stood there, the early morning breeze playing upon the six of them — Albert, Gretchen, Jack, Jessie, Tonel and Vincente. There were maybe three dozen toroidal UFOs scattered around Killeville by now. And beside each of them was a plume of greasy smoke.

Jack hadn't prayed in quite some time. As boarders in the rectory, they'd had to go to Reverend Langhorne's church every Sunday, but the activity had struck him as exclusively social, with no connection to any

of the deep philosophical and religious questions he might chew over with friends, like, "Where did all this come from?" or, "What happens after I die?"

But now, oh yes, he was praying. And it's safe to say the five others were praying too. Something like, "Save us, save the earth, make the aliens go away, dear God please help."

As they prayed, the moth-like angels got bigger. The prayers were pumping energy into the good side of the Shekinah Glory. Before long the angels were the size of people. They were more numerous than Jack had initially realized.

"Halle-friggin-lujah!" said Vincente, and they prayed some more.

The angels grew to the size of cars, to the size of buildings. The Satanic flying donuts sprang into the air and fired energy bolts at them. The angels grew yet taller, as high as the sky. Their faces were clear, solemn, terrible to behold. The evil UFOs were helpless against them, puny as gnats. Peeking through his fingers, Jack saw one of the alien craft go flying across the horizon towards an angel, and saw the impact as the great holy being struck with a hand the size of a county. The shattered bits of the UFO shrank into nothingness, as if melting in the sun. It was only a matter of minutes until the battle was done. The closest angel fixed Jack with an unbearable gaze, then made a gesture that might have been a benediction. And now the great beings rotated in some unseen direction and angled out of view.

"Praise God!" said Albert Chesney when it was done.

"Praise God," echoed Jack. "But that's enough for now, Lord. Don't have the whole Last Judgment today. Let me go to college first. Give us at least six more years."

And it was so.

A Greyhound bus drew even with the Casa Linda and pulled over for a stop. "BLACKSBURG," read the sign above the bus window. Jack bid the quickest of farewells to his mother and his friends and then, whooping and yelling, he ran down the stairs with his suitcase and hopped aboard.

The Killeville Barbeque Massacre trials dragged on through the fall. Jack and Albert had to testify a few times. Most of the Pig Chef defendants got off with temporary insanity pleas, basing their defense on smeel-poisoning, although no remaining samples of smeel could be found. The police officers were of course pardoned, and Danny Dank got the death penalty. The cases of Banks, Price, Sydnor, and Rainey were moot — for with their appetites whetted by the flesh of the children's

parents, the mantises had gone ahead and eaten the four fledgling Pig Chefs.

The trials didn't draw as much publicity as one might have expected. The crimes were simply too disgusting. And the Killeville citizenry had collective amnesia regarding the UFOs. Some of the Day Six Synodites remembered, but the Synod was soon split into squabbling sub-sects by a series of schisms. With his onerous parole conditions removed in return for his help with the trials, Albert Chesney left town for California to become a computer game developer.

Jessie Vaughan got herself ordained as a deacon and took over the pastoral duties at St. Anselm's church. At Christmas Jessie celebrated the marriage of Jack to Gretchen Karst — who was indeed pregnant. Tonel took leave from the Navy to serve as best man.

Gretchen transferred into Virginia Polytechnic with Jack for the spring term. The couple did well in their studies. Jack majored in Fluid Engineering and Gretchen in Computer Science. And after graduation they somehow ended up moving into the rectory with Jessie and opening a consulting firm in Killeville.

As for the men in the back room of the country club — they completely dropped out of sight. The prudent reader would be well advised to keep an eye out for mibracc in his or her home town. And pay close attention to the fluid dynamics of coffee, juice and alcoholic beverages. Any undue rotation could be a sign of smeel.

The end is near.

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Tom Maddox

Halo

In the latter half of the twenty-first century, freelance data-auditor Mikhail Gonzales has been contracted to monitor an AI-controlled orbiting colony. Complications arise when an experimental treatment for a critically injured man is opposed by Gonzales' employer, the SenTrax corporation.

Rudy Rucker

Postsingular

It all begins next year in California. A maladjusted computer industry billionaire and a somewhat crazy US President initiate a radical transformation of the world through sentient nanotechnology; sort of the equivalent of biological artificial intelligence. At first they succeed, but their plans are reversed by Chu, an autistic boy. The next time it isn't so easy to stop them.

Most of the story takes place in a world after a heretofore unimaginable transformation, where all the things look the same but all the people are different (they're able to read each others' minds, for starters). Travel to and from other nearby worlds in the quantum universe is possible, so now our world is visited by giant humanoids from another quantum universe, and some of them mean to tidy up the mess we've made. Or maybe just run things.

Rudy Rucker

The Ware Tetralogy

Your Guide to the 21st Century!

It starts with Software, where rebel robots bring immortality to their human creator by eating his brain. Software won the first Philip K. Dick Award.

In Wetware, the robots decide to start building people —and people get strung out on an insane new drug called merge. This cyberpunk classic garnered a second Philip K. Dick award.

By Freeware, the robots have evolved into soft plastic slugs called moldies —and some human “cheeseballs” want to have sex with them. The action redoubles when aliens begin arriving in the form of cosmic rays.

And with Realware, the humans and robots reach a higher plateau.

Charles Stross

Accelerando

The book is a collection of nine short stories telling the tale of three generations of a highly dysfunctional family before, during, and after a technological singularity. It was originally written as a series of novelettes and novellas, all published in Asimov's Science Fiction magazine in the period 2001 to 2004.

The first three stories follow the character of "venture altruist" Manfred Macx starting in the early 21st Century, the second three stories follow his daughter Amber, and the final three focus largely on her son Sirhan in the completely transformed world at the end of the century.

According to Stross, the initial inspiration for the stories was his experience working as a programmer for a high-growth company during the dot-com boom of the 1990s.

Charles Stross

Scratch Monkey

There are standard methods for lifting material out of brains. Everyone, everywhere in human space, is riddled with nanotech Dreamtime encoders. They're in the air, in the soil, in their cells and reproducing like bacteria. They constantly monitor cerebral activity, transmitting updates of their host personality to the encoders, that upload minds into the Dreamtime when their bodies cease to support them. It even makes a neat debriefing tool, if you have the equipment to interrogate the brain encoders directly. (Only Distant Intervention, that I know of, is allowed to play with this kind of kit.)

James Patrick Kelly

Monsters

James Patrick Kelly

Burn

Colonization is the theme of this exciting, complex page-turner that provides a provocative and entertaining look at Thoreau's classic eco-text Walden. Eccentric billionaire Jack Winter has bought the planet Beekman's Pea, renamed it Walden, and created a utopia in which members renounce the technologies of human civilization. Marginalized by these newcomers, the planet's original inhabitants are resisting the colony's dominance by setting fires

to Walden's artificial ecology. A member of Walden, Prosper Gregory Leung is a veteran firefighter who believes in protecting Winter's utopian vision, but when he is wounded, he begins to learn of the terrible price that the people of Walden are paying for their paradise. Interwoven with themes of environmental responsibility, political struggle, and courage, this adventure novel nimbly combines political and social relevance with a flawless and gripping narrative from a veteran science fiction author.

Peter Watts

Starfish

A huge international corporation has developed a facility along the Juan de Fuca Ridge at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean to exploit geothermal power. They send a bio-engineered crew--people who have been altered to withstand the pressure and breathe the seawater--down to live and work in this weird, fertile undersea darkness.

Unfortunately the only people suitable for long-term employment in these experimental power stations are crazy, some of them in unpleasant ways. How many of them can survive, or will be allowed to survive, while worldwide disaster approaches from below?

Peter Watts

Blindsight

Two months since sixty-five thousand alien objects clenched around the Earth like a luminous fist, screaming to the heavens as the atmosphere burned them to ash. Two months since that moment of brief, bright surveillance by agents unknown.

Two months of silence, while a world holds its breath.

Now some half-derelict space probe, sparking fitfully past Neptune's orbit, hears a whisper from the edge of the solar system: a faint signal sweeping the cosmos like a lighthouse beam. Whatever's out there isn't talking to us. It's talking to some distant star, perhaps. Or perhaps to something closer, something en route. So who do you send to force introductions on an intelligence with motives unknown, maybe unknowable? Who do you send to meet the alien when the alien doesn't want to meet?

You send a linguist with multiple personalities, her brain surgically partitioned into separate, sentient processing cores. You send a biologist so radically interfaced with machinery that he sees x-rays and tastes ultrasound, so compromised by grafts and splices

he no longer feels his own flesh. You send a pacifist warrior in the faint hope she won't be needed, and the fainter one she'll do any good if she is. You send a monster to command them all, an extinct hominid predator once called vampire, recalled from the grave with the voodoo of recombinant genetics and the blood of sociopaths. And you send a synthesist—an informational topologist with half his mind gone—as an interface between here and there, a conduit through which the Dead Center might hope to understand the Bleeding Edge.

You send them all to the edge of interstellar space, praying you can trust such freaks and retrofits with the fate of a world. You fear they may be more alien than the thing they've been sent to find.

But you'd give anything for that to be true, if you only knew what was waiting for them...

Robert Sheckley

Reborn Again



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