

Sym Syty

By Ken Stark

I was brought in for one reason and one reason only. I had money. Lots of it. Piles of the stuff. An embarrassment of riches, some might have called it, but I was never embarrassed by my wealth. I never flaunted it, but I lived well, and I was always appreciative that I didn't have to punch a time clock or answer to some flunky in a two dollar tie. My friend Jerry did both. Well, truth be told, I don't know if he actually punched a clock even back then, but believe it or not, before he became famous, Jerry Weiesnbach was a regular working stiff, and his boss actually *did* wear a two dollar tie. But at least it matched his four dollar shirt. Most of the time.

Jerry might be big news now, but he was just a simple programmer back then. And perhaps more importantly, he was the only person on the planet I had the temerity to consider a friend. I've known lots of people and have even been friendly with some, but they were never what I would call 'friends' even at my most selfless which, truth be told, was never as often as it probably should have been. To me, a friend is someone you actually enjoy spending time with. A friend is someone you will cancel a date for. At its most repugnant extreme, a friend is someone who will help you move, or at least make a sincere and heartfelt offer even though you both know that a team of big-backed giants will take care of the job before you get back from Baja. That friend was Jerry; a few years younger than I, a little high-strung, and with an IQ somewhere north of a brazillion, but a friend nonetheless.

"It's a start-up, Ace," He told me over a beer and a plate of nachos. Yes, we shared the plate, but it wasn't a bromance thing; it was an appetizer thing, and wanted to save room for the steaks that were coming. "Talk to your keepers. Give them the prospectus and see what they think. I think you'll make a few bucks off the deal, but what do *I* know?"

"Besides *everything*?" I quipped, and he gave me the usual 'aw shucks' kind of eye roll.

He always called me Ace. Ever since we were kids. I never knew why, and I never asked. My name was

Anthony, so no correlation there. I wasn't a pilot, was lousy at poker, didn't play tennis and wasn't particularly expert at anything at all, so I didn't get it. Maybe he was being sarcastic after all, like calling the fat guy 'Skinny' or the little guy 'Stretch'. Or maybe it had started out like that, but became something else as we got older and realized that we'd become friends after all, in spite of our differences. Or maybe he'd just seen an old movie and heard the name and thought it sounded cool. It didn't matter, either way. I was 'Ace' when we were kids, so 'Ace' I remained, twenty-odd years on.

As for the term 'keepers', that was a private joke. It's what he called my accountants. Yes, accountants; plural. It was a firm my old man trusted, and when dear old dad shuffled off his mortal coil, I kept them on. After all, what did I know about investments and capital-whatever? All I knew about money was that I could spend it. But Fairweather, Klein and Schmidt kept my bank balance climbing, so I let them do their thing as long as they left me alone to pursue what I knew best; the depleting of said bank balance.

I gave my keepers the prospectus the very next day, and they had a look at it and got back to me before dusk. Apparently they liked it. *A lot*, as it turned out. I would have given Jerry the money even if the three wise guys hadn't given their bald-pated approval, but their official signatures on the dotted line saved me from lying to my friend, so all the better. I didn't have the kind of brain that would understand the details of the start-up, but anything to do with computers was a goldmine if done right, and if my buddy was involved, it'd be done right.

"No, Ace," He corrected me when we met up later, "It's not to help you share pictures of your manhood."

"Ah... not enough gigabytes to fit the whole thing in, huh?" I retorted, straight-faced.

"I'd be more concerned about a virus," he shot back, just as fake-serious.

"Then you might want to delete an email I sent you this morning," I said, then the girl came with the beers and I didn't add what I was going to do about cc'ing his mother. And just as well. He would have come up with something to top me anyway. He was just too quick and too damn smart to beat in a battle of wits.

As we drank, he rambled off the nature of his business, and I did my best to stay with him. It was all polysyllabic computerese geek-talk, and I think I got a tenth of it, but then he broke it down into simple grunts and whistles that a troglodyte like me could understand, and he ran through it all once again from the top without the faintest hint of a patronizing attitude.

"We run simulations," he said, "That's what it boils down to. Simulations."

"Don't we have that already?" I asked, stupidly.

Anyone else might have rolled their eyes or pretended to try to hide a beleaguered sigh, but not Jerry. Like I said, he was a friend. He merely shrugged and nodded.

"Oh, absolutely! We've had computer simulations for decades. But not like this. Thanks to your money," He tilted up his bottle and we clinked in the middle like we were toasting the partnership, "With that fresh capital, we've been able to amass more computing power than any other single facility in the world. In fact, we're employing a new chip that makes our computing power greater than the top five facilities put together!"

I probably looked at him the way a parent looks at a child who'd just declared a future in modern dance, "And all you're doing with all of that power is simulations? Like, for games? Sim City on steroids?"

"Not exactly. We're not selling games, Ace. We're contracting our services to anyone who can afford it. Military, universities, public individuals with great scads of money...."

"Sounds familiar..... All so I can simulate an evening with Marilyn Monroe?"

He smiled at the joke, but then he considered the idea and said seriously, "Actually, you *could*, you know. Easily, actually. I could do that for you on my own time. But it's not what you think, Ace. It's not VR, it's a simulation. You would be there, but not *you*, you know?"

"An avatar," I said, glad that I could show some little bit of knowledge in the area. But really, I was just showing my ignorance yet again.

"No, not an avatar, Ace. It would be a representation of you, odd quirks and all. All of your likes and dislikes, all of your peccadilloes and all of your fears, but not *you*. The simulation would be you in digital form, experiencing an evening with a simulation of Marilyn Monroe formed as accurately as possible, considering that we'd have to do it all so many years after she died; you know, gleaned her personality from biographies, interviews, diary entries and whatnot."

"Yah....that wouldn't be the same," I sighed, and left it at that.

Jerry chuckled at my disappointment.

"Norma Jean would be making every decision for herself. If we constructed her accurately, the sim would do exactly what the real Marilyn would do. But you wouldn't be able to control her actions any more than you could a flesh-and-blood person in whatever night of bliss or carnage you might happen to experience."

"Yah, not the same at all," I sighed.

"Unless you wanted to *watch* yourself strike out instead of *living* it," He chided me, "It might actually sting less that way."

"Pass," I sighed again, "What fun is a simulation if you can't get the little people inside do what you want?"

"Well, that's the point, Ace. The idea is to program events and people and places as a *reality* within the simulation. We'll input all of the data as accurately as possible, and watch what happens." His excitement grew as he discussed his work, and when he saw that I was genuinely interested, he became even more animated.

"Think about this, a physicist at UCal wants to explore the Big Bang, so he or she inputs everything into a simulation that contains everything that we currently understand about the universe. That's not my field, so I don't know exactly what parameters they might set, but we'd have to make it as accurate as we can with respect to the laws of nature; gravity, electromagnetic forces; you know, whatever it is that makes things work in the universe. Then they set the thing in motion, and if the outcome doesn't match the observable universe, they alter *this* parameter or *that* constant or some other variable until the simulation produces the universe we know and love today. In fact, it was just such a simulation that proved the existence of dark matter. Someone was simulating the formation of galaxies, and discovered that the only way galaxies would form at all is if the universe contained a *lot* more mass than we can see. If there wasn't several times as much mass as we thought there was holding everything together, galaxies would fly apart, and the universe would be nothing more than a random scattering of dust. We can't *see* dark matter, we can't *touch* it, we can't *sense* it, we can't *measure* it, but the simulation only works if it's there, so it's there.

"Ace, the same is going on everywhere," Jerry went on, his face fairly crimson with excitement, "Agencies around the world are using simulations for all manner of purposes; crowd control, irrigation, animal migration, tsunamis.....I guarantee you, if there is a natural process anywhere in the world, someone, somewhere has already run a simulation of it. They build a virtual city, set the parameters for a tsunami of such-and-such a size from such-and-such an earthquake at such-and-such a distance at *this* precise depth in *this* ocean at *this* particular time of year, and they run it to see what happens. In doing so, they see what

structures might fail, what areas might be flooded, where people would be safe, how the flow pattern changes with tall buildings funnelling the water one way and right-hand turns directing it another....."

"Okay," I nodded, "I've seen those on tv. That's why they upgrade bridges and old buildings. Because they know they'll fail."

"Because, for the most part, they've run a simulation."

"So, you can do it better?" I hazarded a guess, "Faster? More accurately?"

"No, no, no," Jerry began, then he acquiesced with a seesaw head-bob, "Well, yes..... *obviously*. But that's not it entirely. Tell me, what's the one thing every simulation lacks? Something that's fundamental to every scenario, but is almost always disregarded?" Luckily, he didn't wait for me to answer. I'm pretty sure he knew I'd either shrug or get it wrong, so he answered before I could embarrass myself, "People, Ace. *People*. I saw a simulation of an earthquake in Seattle years ago. Seven-point-oh, or something. It showed which buildings might fail, which viaducts, which bridges, which areas might be utterly destroyed and which would be spared. By the way, avoid Fisherman's Wharf if you happen to be visiting the northwest when the ground starts to shake," he added with a warning scowl.

"But what they didn't account for was the population. The Seattle-Tacoma area has a population of some four million souls, each with their own agendas and each with their own ways of reacting to emergency situations. One man heads for the hills to save his own ass while another races to an elementary school to collect his children. One woman has heard that it's best to stand in a doorway, but another knows to get under a table. Another is clever enough to know it's safer outside, but she happened to have been called in to a meeting downtown that day, and she'd forgotten that she's surrounded by office buildings clad in glass sheets."

"Okay, I get it," I nodded, "But you can't possibly simulate four *million* people."

"To a degree, we can. That's where my new chip and all of this computing power comes in. We can't make all of them as accurate as you and Marilyn," he winked, "but we can instruct the program to give each simulated human a set of parameters. Like, *this* guy is an ex-Marine, so he's good under pressure. Or *this* lady had three kids at two different schools, x-number of miles apart. Or *this* kid's parents split up and live on opposite sides of town; mom works from a home office and dad has an office in the city. See?"

I did. It was amazing, and I told him so. We clinked bottles again and ordered another two.

"You've heard of Moore's Law?" He asked then.

I shrugged, but then it became familiar once he started me off.

"Gordon Moore, cofounder of Intel. Back in 1965, he suggested that computing power would double every two years."

"I've heard that," I said, "But it's even faster than he expected, right?"

"It pretty much doubles every eighteen months. That's why you have to buy a new desktop or smart phone every couple of years. And in the coming decade, it's expected to grow even faster. Maybe doubling every year. Our new chip, though, that's the quantum leap," He smiled, and I knew he was making a pun that I didn't get, but I smiled back anyway, "With the new chip, we fully expect computing power at Ace to double every *month!*"

I was taken aback, and my face probably showed it. It wasn't the stuff about the computing power and the chip and the sims, it was something else he'd said that'd had such a profound effect on me.

"You called your company 'Ace'?"

"Your money, Daddy Warbucks," He said, coyly. "Least I could do."

I forced another bottle-clink and faked wiping away a tear.

"That's beautiful. I love you, man," I joked, but the sentiment was real, and Jerry knew it and smiled.

"In another year, we might actually be able to simulate true characters, each with their very own personality, complete with phobias, religious beliefs, political views and sexual peccadillos. We'll be able to see how the sack of Rome was experienced by each individual inhabitant. We can watch every face of every man going over the top of the trenches in World War I. We can make it rain fish in a village in Scotland and watch how the pastor calms his parishioners. We can simulate that seven-point-oh in Seattle and watch not just which buildings fail, but *who* panics, *where*, and *why*. We can create a human settlement on Mars a century from now, and see what happens if a water filtration system collapses or a dust devil tears through camp. Can you imagine?"

"You'd be God on a thousand worlds," I said, a little more than half-seriously, "You'd be Shiva; creator, preserver and destroyer. You'll create mankind in your own image, and then wash them away in great flood."

He chuckled, but there was something behind his eyes that told me my off-the-cuff quip hit home. He couldn't fool me. Not after knowing him for so long. He'd already considered the idea, and it didn't sit well with him.

"Well," he said at last, and took a healthy swig of his beer just as our meals arrived, "I only hope that I'm a benevolent God."

I didn't see Jerry for months after that. I kept tabs on his start-up and even started, miracle of miracles, to pay attention to the financial news. He was right, of course. The company was an immediate success, and I quickly began to make a fortune off of my friend's big, beautiful mind. Every 24 hour news channel did a piece on the new 'Ace' technology, and I toasted Jerry every time. They showed examples of his simulations, and the whole country watched as Tokyo crumbled and LA shook and Miami flooded. We watched as individual little people climbed to rooftops and survived, or got crushed in doorways, or sat with head in hands and waited for the end. It was mind-numbingly advanced, positively surreal, and curiously entertaining. We all got to see thousands of people die and thousands of others live, all without leaving the comfort of our living rooms.

Whenever I met up with a buddy at the golf club (an excuse for drinking) or swung by another's place for a game of poker (an excuse for drinking) or picked up young lady for a night on the town (an excuse for drinkingmostly) all they could talk about were those sims they saw on tv. Eventually, and only after endless repeats of those selfsame conversations, I had the one brilliant idea I'd ever had in my life. I called my keepers, a good law firm, and a production company, and floated the idea. They all loved the proposal, because they'd all seen the sims, too.

Two months later, we had a hit new show. With appropriate payments made to Jerry and to 'Ace', we stole a tiny minority of their computing power and offered a different scenario to the viewing public each week. One episode might be a chariot race at Circus Maximus, the next might be the Battle of Agincourt, and the following week might show what would have followed a failed landing at Normandy. 'Sym Syty' we called it, to avoid a lawsuit. The name was stupid, but it was my idea and I owned the company, so everyone lauded my cleverness and the name stuck.

Jerry didn't particularly like the exploitation of a technology he'd envisioned as being purely educational, but in offering an offhanded and sardonic, "Why not let people *vote* on who they want to see die?" he sent Sym Syty into Nielsen heaven. As per his derisive suggestion, we let viewers vote on what they'd like to see next, and the show shot into the stratosphere. The death of Henry II in a jousting competition and the daring assault by Canadian troops at Vimy Ridge in WWI quickly gave way to episodes of how the world would have changed had JFK lived, or how an aging Elvis would have dealt with his only daughter's marriage to the king of pop, and every eye in a dozen countries was glued to their screens every Friday night.

It was a fatuous waste of airwaves, but it was a blockbuster success, and I made another fortune. *Several*, actually. I poured a lot of it back into 'Ace', and assuaged some of Jerry's chagrin at subverting his dream by tripling his budget and quadrupling his own estimates of advance.

Soon enough, 'Ace' was front page news, and Jerry became a celebrity. Part Gates, part Oprah, part Einstein, he became a media sensation, and I cheered him every time I saw his face on the front of a magazine or watched him banter with Jimmy Fallon or Stephen Colbert. Even the great Letterman came out of retirement to do a special on my friend, and on the back of his new-found celebrity, we started to sell his sims as an app for smart phones, and we *both* made an obscene fortune.

Six months passed before our schedules meshed enough for us to get together for dinner. We met at one of those ritzy-titsy places I hate, jacket and tie *non*-optional, but I knew that Jerry was being hounded everywhere he went, and I figured that the exclusivity of this eatery would limit the obtrusions. Evidently, I was wrong, for even in those swanky digs, patrons would often drift over, swaddled in fur or dripping with diamonds, and Jerry would be asked for his autograph, and he'd be offered vast sums of money to create a simulation of *this* daughter or *that* husband or *that* old flame. Jerry was nothing if not cordial, so he always smiled as he gave one excuse or another, but he never lost that faraway look in his eyes like he was somewhere else entirely.

After the fifth intrusion, I called my keepers and had them buy the whole damn restaurant, and have all of the pesky rich bastards removed bodily to the curb. Ten minutes later, we were enjoying our steaks in peace, and we finished off the meal with a chocolate souffle fringed in actual gold leaf; a special creation of the cordon bleu chef who now worked only for me. Oddly, even after we were alone in the place, I don't think Jerry even noticed. He was so lost in thought that it was only once we'd retired to my humble palace and descended to the billiards room that he finally chugged a beer and exhaled a breath that he might have been holding all night.

"Problems, Jerr?" I asked as I racked the billiard balls, "All that money getting to you? Too many young starlets slipping you their phone numbers? Too many internationally renowned news anchors begging for an interview?"

I was being facetious, and my friend knew better than to think I expected an actual response. Instead, he sat on one of the tall stools against the rail, and smiled shyly.

"A person could get used to that," he acquiesced, "though, you might be overestimating the numbers of starlets."

"Then what's got your no-name Costco tighty-whities in a twist?" I drove the cue ball in and scattered the balls, and surprisingly, a ball actually went down. It was the six ball, so I was evens, and the ten-ball was hovering near a corner pocket. "Tired of playing God, Jerr? Or *being* God, I should say?"

He gave me a wry smile, "No. I'm fully aware that the people I create are simulations, so if I'm a god, I'm a little-g god. Or a little-*cg* god, I guess."

I laughed aloud.

"Well, if you start to get delusional, just imagine all of those millions and billions of people you created finding out that their God's name is Jerry Weisenbach."

He threw his head back and laughed. At first it was real, but then it became choked, like he was forcing it. Finally, it died off, and even the smile was gone. And then he looked at the floor and sucked on his beer idly. Finally, I set up my shot against the ten ball.

"You look like a man who wants to say something," I said over the cue stick, "but you aren't sure whether you should."

With Jerry, I could be honest. I was going to add something about me not laughing at him or judging him, but he knew all of that stuff already. I took my shot, missed, swore violently and with much vulgarity, then stood back and said nothing.

Jerry hauled himself off of the stool and lined up a ridiculous bank shot with the nine-ball. The three was sitting on the edge of a side pocket, but he didn't see it, so I knew that he wasn't himself.

"Oh!" He said suddenly, abandoning the ridiculous shot and returning to his coat hanging over the back of the stool, "I finally got around to running that sim of you and Marilyn." He reached into the inside pocket and handed me a thumb drive. "Sorry, Buddy," was all he said.

"Nuts," I sighed, and slipped the thing into my pocket. "I'll watch it later and see how poorly I did."

He returned to his nine-ball shot, and settled into a crouch over the stick.

"If you're the type that looks away when a car crashes at Indy, you might not want to watch that."

"Thanks," I said, and scowled.

He took his shot, missed, sighed, and returned to his stool. He'd left me a clear shot on the ten, so I sunk it with a flourish and lined up the deuce.

"So, what's the deal, girlfriend," I said, "You're barely here. Are we gonna have to braid each others' hair before we share our feelings?"

He laughed again, just like I'd hoped.

"Oh, it's nothing," He said, finally.

"Saving it for your My Little Pony diary?" I joked.

He laughed again. Good. He was lightening up. A few more flubbed shots and a few more beers, and Jerry started to be more like his former self. I wanted so much to draw him out from whatever dark cloud was raining on his parade, but I knew better than to try. Instead, we chatted about girls, dumb movies we both liked, and whether or not Han shot first, and things eventually returned to where they always were; two old friends, completely comfortable, free to speak, free to tell a dirty joke, free to insult, free to say stupid things, and free to be themselves.

Finally, I had two balls left; Jerry three. I banked too tight on the fourteen and set up a perfect shot on Jerry's seven. He nailed it, gave himself a perfect leave on the one, then set up a tricky little bank shot on the fifteen.

"You know," he said as he chalked his cue, "Playing God isn't so tough. I mean, I know that the people I create aren't real. They're ones and zeroes, that's all. They wouldn't even exist without my fingers on the

keyboard. And in spite of what you see on ZNN, not everything we do is disastrous." He took the shot, and missed by a hair.

"I know," I said, "I watch Sym Syty just like everyone else."

"No, I'm not talking about that *dumb* show," he scowled.

I mocked taking offence. "Dumb? That *dumb* show that made you a millionaire? *That* dumb show?"

"Sym Syty *is* dumb," He squinted sourly at me, "It's a ridiculous waste of resources, and panders to the basest emotions of mankind. It's nonsense. It's fluff!"

I waved my hand at the screen over the bar, waved again, and pointed. Displayed were the names of a dozen cities spread around the globe.

"Fluff? Look! London, Singapore, Hanoi, Beijing....it's on everywhere! Every hour of every day, that *dumb* show is broadcasting somewhere," I gave another wave, and the news page popped up, "Vegas gives daily odds on the outcome of every single episode. Ninety million people lay down their hard-earned money every single day, betting on which sym lives or dies. Ten thousand blogs reference Sym Syty on a daily basis. Eight thousand forums exist, all dedicated to that *dumb* show. You could walk into any law office or sales floor or warehouse or livingroom on the planet right now, and everyone you meet will have something to say about that *dumb* show."

"I know," Jerry sighed again, and missed his shot by a fraction of an inch, "You did great, Ace, and I thank you. You didn't have to cut me in on the profits of that *dumb* show, but you did."

"Well, I couldn't have done it without you, pencil-neck," I said, truthfully, "You've already made me more money than I could spend in a hundred lifetimes, so whaddya say we call it even?"

He chortled, "Yah, sounds even," But then, as I was lining up that pesky fourteen, he added, almost solemnly, "Ace, what do think it means to be God."

"It means you can rig the sym and make a fortune in Vegas," I replied flippantly.

"No," Jerry sighed again, laboriously, "I mean for my syms. What does it mean for me to be God."

"It means that someone is painting your likeness on a digital version of the Sistine chapel," I shrugged, "Hopefully with a ludicrously tiny penis. You know, art imitating life."

That's when I knew that whatever was eating at Jerry, it was too big to joke him out of it. The Jerry I knew would never let that insult go unanswered. But there he sat on his stool, head down and lost in contemplation. I said nothing and waited for my friend to make up his own mind, and finally, once I'd sunk the fourteen and moved to the sixteen, he piped up.

"What if I *am* God?" He said, and let it hang like that.

I backed away from my shot, set the cue on the ground, and made a big production of applying chalk. Really, I was just giving myself time to think.

"You think you're God?" I asked him, matter-of-factly.

He harumphed and smirked.

"No, Ace, I'm not delusional. I'm just saying that as far as the people in my simulations are concerned, I *am* God. Capital-G. *God*."

"Okay," I ventured, "What of it? They're a construct of ones and zeroes and your slightly deranged mind. They're not real. They're syms. Who cares if you're their God, capital-G or otherwise? They're not real, so it doesn't matter."

"And what of *our* God?" He said then, and I have to admit that I wondered at that moment whether my friend was.....well.....okay.

I prolonged the chalking process as long as I could to formulate a response. Finally, I went with the obvious.

"God is early man's attempt to explain the world around him. I've seen no proof to suggest that an old man sits on a throne in the sky, and directs all of our lives."

"But what if our God is just like me? Just some guy behind a keyboard?"

I made some remark about working too hard and maybe switching to a nonalcoholic beer, but Jerry was adamant.

"I mean it, Ace. What if everything we know, everything we *think* we know, is some guy in an AC/DC t-shirt, swilling Red Bull in his mom's basement?"

I didn't know what to say. What the hell *could* I say? Finally, I mumbled, "Cogito Ergo Sum," as I sunk the sixteen.

Jerry scoffed, "My syms think, too."

"No, your syms react to a set of parameters assigned to each individual. That's not thought any more than my PVR choosing what shows I might want to record."

"Isn't that what *we* do?" He countered, "You're arachnophobic and slightly agoraphobic, and you're partial to cheeseburgers and german beer and girls with long legs and big boobs. *Those* are your parameters. But the question is, are your likes and dislikes a byproduct of the genetic soup you inherited from your ancestors, or are they a result of a lifetime of experience? Or maybe, just maybe, might you have been given those parameters by some wizard hiding behind the curtain?"

I flubbed the next shot and handed the table over to Jerry, but he was too engrossed in the topic to even notice.

"I like cheeseburgers because they taste good," I said, "I like german beer because I've tried every brand of beer known to man and found that I preferred the taste of german beer. And I like long legs and large breasts because I'm a normal, healthy human male."

"But why do cheeseburgers taste good to you? Why not chicken. Or tofu?"

"Refer to my previous comment," I scoffed.

"There are a lot of normal, healthy human males who would find the notion of a crushed and reconstituted disk of charred animal flesh rather off-putting. That's not an answer. You can't explain why you like something by saying that you like it because you like it. *Why* do you like a cheeseburger? Did you *always* like cheeseburgers?"

I was beginning to feel the first inklings of irritation, but it was only because I could never hold my own in a debate with Jerry. He could outthink me by such an immense degree that it was always like I'd shown up at

a gunfight with a damp sponge.

"Alright, Jerr," I said finally, "I don't suppose I was born liking cheeseburgers any more than I was born liking big boobs. And before you say it, I would like to declare that any Freudian mention of my dear sainted mother's mammaries is positively forbidden! Now, I don't recall, but there was probably a day when I was given my very first disk of charred animal flesh, and I found it enjoyable. I then went on to live every day eating a variety of foods made from different ingredients and prepared in a different manner, and at some point I made a conscious decision that some of those foodstuffs were more palatable than others. And so, those pieces of cow flesh went to the top part of the list, and essence of bean curd was relegated to the bottom, right between mucilage and snot. Honestly, dude, *no one* likes tofu."

"That's still not an explanation," Jerry shook his head slowly, "You're still saying that you like something because you like it."

"Well, what do you *want* from me, Jerry? *You're* the goddam genius, not me!" I saw a pinched look pass over his face, and immediately regretted my outburst. And then something occurred to me and I spoke up again. "Wait a minute. I do like a particular type of woman, but I didn't always. In fact, I used to be attracted to smaller girls. Petite, I guess, with big eyes and dark hair."

"What changed?" He asked, genuinely intrigued, "When? And why?"

I shrugged, "Dunno. I guess after dating a few more....*statuesque* women, I realized what I was missing.

"Or someone changed your parameters," Jerry suggested as casually as if he were commenting on the weather.

"If you're saying what I think you're saying, Jerr, you're nuts. You can't conclude that this is a sym just because a man changes his tastes. I have a lifetime of experiences. I remember every Christmas and every birthday and some Thanksgivings and even a smattering of New Years Eves when I wasn't passed out. I remember arguments I had decades ago and I remember being slapped by more girls than I can count. I remember being stung by a bee when I was ten, and getting my driver's license when I was sixteen, and rear-ending a BMW when I was seventeen, and my dad taking away my license until I was eighteen. I remember meeting *you*, Goddamn it!"

Even as I spoke, Jerry had that faraway look, like he was imagining a distant world where all was essentially the same but just slightly different.

"I remember meeting you, too," He said, finally, "We were both cutting english class and came across each other behind the shop class. You had a smoke you stole from your mom's purse, and we both took a single drag and puked our guts out."

I allowed a laugh, but it was a melancholy sort of thing.

"That's right," I sunk my last ball and moved to line up the eight to win the game, "My first and last cigarette ever."

"I've created a hundred worlds," Jerry sighed, "Thousands. *Hundreds* of thousands. I wonder how many of the kids I've created had their first and last smoke behind a fake school while skipping a pretend english class."

I slammed the eight bowl into a side pocket, and started to refill the rack.

"I win. Two out of three."

Jerry was staring off into space, and I started to wonder if he even knew where he was. At last, he threw me a sideways glance and flashed a little grin.

"You know, Ace, in another three years, four maybe, we'll be able to make syms who can truly think. Imagine that. They won't just react, they'll actually be able to think for themselves. Where do you suppose we'll be in another hundred years? *A Thousand?* Hell, how about a *million* years, or a *billion?*"

"Your break," I said, and stepped back.

"In a few years' time, we'll have syms who won't need programmers to tell them how to think. In ten years, maybe, syms that feel emotions. In fifty years? A hundred? A thousand? How many simulations will we be running in a thousand years? Scholars debating the Hundred Years' War, historians analyzing the minutiae of the Peloponnesian War or the Cuban Missile crisis or 9/11. How many simulations will those future historians be running in a century? A millennia? A *thousand* millennia? Maybe our grandchildren-times-a-thousand will be so distant from us, they'll be running syms of those ancient, laughably primitive Homo Sapiens as a screen saver, just for fun."

"And what of it?" I offered, "Who cares what people do a million years from now?"

Jerry was silent for a long while, then he leaned forward in his stool and almost whispered, "What if they're already doing it?"

Okay. Now things were getting weird. I started registering everything Jerry said as something I might have to repeat to a medical panel later on, but for now I just shrugged and offered an anemic, "M'kay....."

"You don't see?" He chided, and that's when I knew that he'd changed. My friend would never speak to me in that sententious tone.

"No," I said, gruffly enough that he'd take the hint, "I *don't* see, Jerry. Why don't you enlighten me."

Again a silence, followed immediately by Jerry's hand on my shoulder and a conciliatory tilt of his head. It was an apology. Or as close to an apology as we two ever got. Good enough. We were okay. Friends again. I acknowledged the accord with a smirk, and stepped back to let him break. The four and the seven went down on the break, so Jerry took the easier shot; the nine ball hovering on the lip of the corner pocket.

"Think about that future for a minute, Ace. Imagine a million simulations running on a million laptops in a million homes. Each one of those simulation would be of a specific time period, depending on the user; Ancient Rome, Classical Greece, Middle Ages, the 21st century or the *50th*, for all we know. Now, with all of those simulations running on all those laptops in all those homes over all of those millennia, what are the chances that we happen to exist in the one true reality? Thousands to one? Millions? Billions? *Trillions*, even? We spend our lives convinced that we exist in the one true universe, but would you lay money on a bet with odds like that?"

I said nothing, and let him continue.

"There's a concept in astrophysics and cosmology called the 'anthropic principle'. Without boring you with all of the math, what it boils down to is that the physical laws of the universe have to be almost precisely what they are for life to exist. Tweak the parameters even the tiniest bit, and the universe is a lifeless void. Dial down the nuclear forces ever-so marginally, and stars would never ignite. Alter gravity's effect the slightest bit, and gases would never coalesce to form suns. If the universe were much older or younger than it is, it would be either a soup of elementary particles or a dark abyss. So, what are the chances that we find ourselves on the *perfect* planet with the *perfect* amount of water and the *perfect* mixture of gases in the atmosphere, with the *perfect* sun at a *perfect* distance in a region of a galaxy *perfectly* suited to harbour life in a universe with the *perfect* set of physical laws to accommodate suns and rocky planets and liquid water and,

ultimately, bags of sentient meat like you and me? Now, multiply *those* odds against the odds of this being the one and only true reality in a countless number of simulations that will be running in the next million or billion years by countless generations of humans and whatever we might become. How do you feel about your wager now?"

When Jerry was on a roll, he could be incredibly convincing. It usually had more to do with the passion he displayed than with the evidence propounded, but in this instance, I had to admit that he was making sense. Maybe not a lot, but it was sense of a kind, and if a brilliant man like my friend believed that something was possible, who was a caveman like I to argue against it? Nevertheless, it was all I could do to offer a noncommittal, "Couldn't you find out, one way or the other? I mean, science is all about testing a theory, right?"

"Actually, some fine people are actually looking into the possibility, believe it or not. That's right, Ace, greater minds than mine are actively pursuing the hypothesis. They're looking closer and closer at reality to see if there is some finite unit of space-time that could be defined as a 'pixel'."

"They're really doing that? Seriously?"

"I wouldn't lie to you, Ace."

"Oh, I know that, buddy," I said truthfully, "But I have no problem with the idea that you might be bat-crap crazy."

With that, Jerry laughed again, and whatever tension there was in the room melted away.

"Suppose you're right," I acquiesced with a shrug, "What if some geeks somewhere prove that we're inside a simulation? What then?"

"Besides rewriting all of our textbooks and holy scriptures? Nothing. There's nothing to do about it. Oh, I suppose we could make some attempt to communicate with the man or Vulcan or Zargon behind the keyboard, but that isn't likely. In fact, if someone were to discover that we do indeed dwell within a construct, he might do well to keep the truth to himself. If the whole world became aware that they were nothing but digital information, it would fundamentally alter human behaviour. At that point, perhaps the programmer might deem the entire enterprise a failure, and abort the simulation. Maybe he'd delete us all entirely, or maybe he'd just reboot it, and we'd wake up tomorrow in the dark ages or on a giant space-ark in the 28th century."

"That would be pretty cool, actually," I admitted dolefully, "I've always wanted to go to space."

"Sorry, Ace," Jerry dashed my hopes with a shaking of his head, "If the system rebooted, you wouldn't be *you* anymore. You'd have all new memories and all new life experiences, with no memories of this time and place and who you are right now. Besides, Ace, how do you know you won't be the guy in charge of unclogging the space-toilet."

"They wouldn't dare!" I protested with an exaggerated grimace, and Jerry laughed again.

"Listen, Ace, when we create a simulation, we don't develop each of the characters from scratch. That would be far too costly in time and resources. Instead, we select character templates at random from a massive database, tweak them to fit the scenario at hand, and insert them. One moment, a woman might be experiencing the invasion of the Hun, and in the next moment find herself witnessing the gunfight at the OK Corral. She would have the same template in both worlds, but with a different set of parameters specific to the situation, you see? She would obviously have no memory of having witnessed Attila crossing the Danube in a previous incarnation. She would arrive in Tombstone with a fully-integrated biography, complete with memories of a childhood and parents and friends. To her, it would be as if she had lived an entire lifetime in that world, unaware that her 'world' had only been activated that very second."

"So everything I've know my entire life might be a lie," I said, probably more dejectedly than I'd intended.

"No, not a lie. Per se. Everything you've experienced is absolutely valid. Everything you remember, everything you believe, everything that makes you *you* is completely and utterly real. For you. And for me too, ultimately, because your life experiences have shaped you into the person you are, and any interaction I have with you helps to shape me as well, you see?"

"But if what you say is true, those memories aren't mine. This whole world might have just been switched on ten minutes ago."

"Or just now," Jerry said, then he looked to his wristwatch and smirked, "Or *now*. Or just *now*."

I released a beleaguered sigh, "That is profoundly....*disconcerting*. I know a certain tryst or two that I remember quite fondly, and here you are, telling me that they might not have happened at all."

He smiled and slapped me on the back.

"Not at all, Ace. For you, they *did* happen. Even if this reality does end up being a simulation, it's the only world we will ever know, so your memories are as real as the house around you, or the mountains of gold you keep in your money pit like Scrooge McDuck."

"But it could all be gone tomorrow," I protested with a scowl.

"True, but you'll never know either way," Jerry reminded me, "If the system reboots, you'll vanish in the blink of an eye. Maybe you've already lived a thousand lives. Maybe you'll live a thousand more!"

Something occurred to me, and I found myself blurting out. "Hey! That's reincarnation! There *have* been cases where people claim to remember past lives, right? Maybe that's because there was a glitch in the software, and some memories bled through from one sym to another."

To my amazement, Jerry didn't immediately discount the idea. He actually considered my words with a raised eyebrow and a pursing of his lips.

"Who knows?" He said at last, "Perhaps it also explains *deja vu*."

"Shadow people!" I aimed a finger into the air and ignored the grimace on my friend's face, "Ghosts! UFO's! Lake monsters! Holy crap, Jerr, so much could be explained by computer glitches!" The more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became, "The Loch Ness monster could be a.....whatchamacallit.... a Plesiosaur from a Jurassic Park sym, or UFO's could be from aa *Jetson's* sym, or whatever. Those people that claim to be psychic and see the future? Maybe they're just catching glimpses of what's coming up in the program. Oh, holy *crap*, Jerr, have you ever had one of those moments when you put down your coffee, and when you turn around again, it's a few feet away or across the room? I remember once that I couldn't find my keys for the life of me. I always, always, *always* put them in the same place when I come home, and they weren't there. I looked everywhere and couldn't find them. An hour later, I come back to the same place, and there they were. *Glitches*, Jerr! *Glitches!*"

To his credit, Jerry didn't throw his head back and laugh. In fact, once I finished my little diatribe, his face took on a sober, reflective look. He arched his eyebrows and tossed his head from side to side like a college professor who'd just been handed a ticklish question from the back row.

"It's possible," He said, finally, "But Occam's Razor would suggest that you couldn't find your keys for a simpler reason. Chances are, you were drunk."

I'm ashamed to say it, but nearly a year passed before I saw Jerry again. We texted and we emailed, but he was busy with his work and I was engaged in other interests, and our schedules never overlapped. But all the while, I watched as our mutual interests climbed to uncharted levels of success. As my friend had predicted so long ago, the computing power of 'Ace' kept doubling every month, so the graphics went from awesome to nearly unbelievable in fairly short order. Sym Syty grew from a weekly show to a daily broadcast, and hit the record books as the first broadcast since the advent of VCR's that people would actually race home to watch. They could record it, or catch it in their cars, or at work, or on the bus, but everyone wanted to be the first to see it, and only a big screen would ever do. It became a nightly event, and ZNN even did a story on how utility departments in every city around the world braced for commercial breaks during the airing of Sym Syty, because so many toilets were being flushed at the same time. It was a remarkable thing to experience, and as a result of the show's success, I became so rich that it was almost obscene.

When I realized that I'd never be able to make a dent in my fortune in a thousand lifetimes, I began to funnel huge amounts of money back into the community, and my name began to appear on schools and universities and hospitals around the world. I financed tens of thousand of scholarships for students studying physics and astronomy and cosmology, and funded space probes and satellites and particle accelerators by the dozens. But it wasn't entirely altruistic. I had one goal in mind; to find that elusive pixelation that Jerry had spoken about. Truth be told, my friend had set me on a path that night, and I could never stray far from it. When I wasn't cutting a ribbon at this college or that science lab, I was at home with text books and physics papers and a laptop open to the latest discoveries in all branches of science.

I was like a dog with a bone, and though I couldn't possibly hope to understand even the simplest math related to Newtonian physics or the crazy world of quantum mechanics, I could understand the basic principles, and related everything I read, heard or saw to a wild hypothesis that soon began to look less and less insane. Near death experiences, OBE's, the placebo effect, the absurdly contradictory results of the double-slit experiment, the strange weakness of gravity, creatures like Megalania, Dingonek, Kongomato or Mokele-Mbembe, and dozens of other mysteries that science either couldn't understand or ignored outright; all of it factored into my newfound passion.

When our schedules finally allowed us to get together, and Jerry at last arrived at my house, it was by chauffeured limousine. When I pointed out that he looked to be enjoying his new-found wealth, he explained simply and matter-of-factly that the time saved by being driven allowed him to continue his work

and make us both richer by the minute. As proof, he showed me his little enclave in the back of the limo. I saw a wall of video screens, a bank of keyboards, and more computing power in the units under the seats than a supercomputer as big as a skyscraper would have managed as recently as two years ago. He brought a little pad with him as we went inside, and he wore the type of expression and bearing that made me think that he considered the whole evening a further waste of his time. Finally though, once the doors were closed, the beer poured, and the pool balls racked, he dropped his pad on the bar, plunked himself heavily on a stool, and released a sigh that he might have been holding onto for a week. He cast an eye around the room, took in the pile of books stacked on the bar, and threw me a little grin.

"Been busy, Ace?"

I shrugged, "Couldn't sleep."

"Quantum mechanics, supersymmetry, paranormal investigations, ufo's...." He read the spines with a tilt of his head, then straightened and threw me a smirk, "What, nothing about sasquatch?"

"Upstairs," I told him in all seriousness.

"Need I ask why the sudden interest in....well.....*everything*, apparently?"

"You know the answer to that," I said, "You put a bug in my ear, and I've been doing research."

"Research?"

"Reading, then," Said I, "There's nothing wrong with reading, is there?"

"Heaven forbid! No, Ace, I applaud you! Bettering one's knowledge is a noble and commendable endeavour. It's quite a wide range of interests, though."

"That's the whole point," I explained, "I want as wide and varied a base of reference as I can manage. I just wish there were more hours in the day."

"It's the way time was programmed."

"Okay, now you're poking fun," I scoffed angrily.

"Not at all," My friend dissented with a grimace. His eyes drew narrow, and there was something in the set of his jaw that bespoke unease. "I am more convinced than ever that my earlier speculation was correct. In fact," he went on, his voice lowering to a near-whisper, "I have no doubt whatsoever that this so-called reality is, in fact, a simulation. You might even say that I was given proof."

I made no attempt to hide my excitement, "What? Really? I've seen nothing from Fermilab....."

He cut me off, though his voice barely registered above a hush.

"No, not that. In fact, I shouldn't have called it proof. Really, it's only anecdotal evidence at best. Certainly not enough to warrant a paper if I were foolish enough to consider such a thing."

"Anecdotal," I mulled over the connotation of the word and suggested, "A personal anecdote, perhaps?"

He nodded.

"I saw something," He said finally, and we both let the statement hang in silence for some moments.

At last, Jerry gave a self-deprecating little chuckle, and threw me an amused grin.

"How ridiculous we humans are! Here I am, whispering, as if we might somehow be able to keep a secret strictly between us. Though, I suppose I can't blame myself, can I? After all, I'm just following my programming. No one else would believe what I'm about to tell you, Ace, and I'm not sure I'd want them to. But, yes, my friend, I saw something. You see, since we last spoke, you haven't been alone in your single-mindedness. I, too, have thought of little else. Every minute that I sat at my keyboard, I put myself in the shoes of one of my simulated characters. How might that character begin to wonder if their world was a construct? And more importantly, if the notion occurred to him, how might he go about proving my existence? You see, that gave me rather a unique perspective on the issue.

"I was monitoring one of hundreds of simulations we happened to be running at the time, looking down on the inhabitants of that world as a god gazing down upon his flock, and as I scanned lines of code and fine-tuned parameters on yet another world, it dawned on me. You see, in every simulation, whether for Sym Syty or for more, shall I say, *scholarly* pursuits, we never build an entire world down to every last grain of sand. There's no point, and no need. So we cheat. If we're building a representation of the French Revolution, we put all of our resources there; in Paris, in Versailles, in the countryside of France. There's no need to include Molokai or Rangoon or Formosa, because there is no chance of anyone in that simulation

having any interaction whatsoever with those far-off places, you see?"

"I get it," I told him honestly, "Like, if a simulation was focussed on me, there'd be no need to create, say...well, *France*, now that you mention it. I've never been there, and I have no plans to visit the place. It's enough that France exists in my head, yes?"

"Exactly," Jerry retrieved his pad and laid it out before me, "Now look at this. It's a standard city map with my phone's GPS showing my position as a red dot. That signal comes from an array of satellites in stationary orbit all around the Earth, and the GPS unit within the device calculates the time it takes for each signal to reach it in order to triangulate my exact position. At least, that's what we are led to believe. Now, what would happen if I were to get in my car and drive across the country?"

"Your chauffeur would get some time off?" I tried to be funny, but it came out sounding dismissive, and I apologized with a solemn nod, "Okay, if you were to drive east, the map would change as you went, plotting your course every step of the way."

"And if I strayed from the map? What if I decided to fly to France on a whim? I've never been there either, but suppose I hopped a flight for no reason other than as a last-second caprice?"

I got what he was trying to say, but I could only shrug, "You'd get off a plane in France, presumably."

"No doubt," Jerry nodded, "No doubt I would. But that's because the programmer would have *known* that I'd be getting on that plane, or because I was *meant* to get on that plane. Until I actually landed, though, there'd be no need to create a place called France at all. As with you, it's enough that I believe it exists. I might videochat with a colleague at L'ecole Polytechnique and catch a glimpse of Paris through the window behind him, but France still need not *actually* exist. Think of all of the places in this world you've never been to. Are they real? You see Zimbabwe on a map, maybe you learned about it in school, and you see it on the news. But is it there?"

Untethered. In hindsight, that's how I was beginning to feel. Untethered. Somehow, in all of my research and all of my thought experiments, it never occurred to me how far-reaching were the implications of Jerry's theory. It was one thing to imagine that the world and all of its inhabitants might be made up of ones and zeroes, but it was quite another to imagine that the vast majority of everything I knew, everything I *thought* I knew, was the stuff of dreams.

I had to ask, "You don't think that this entire world was created for just you and I, do you? Neither of us are

very important. Well, okay, *you* are, but I'm nothing!"

"Perhaps someone is studying global warming, and we exist on a complete representation of Earth in the 21st century after all. Or maybe it is a study of what will eventually lead to a pandemic or nuclear war, and only portions of the planet are needed. Maybe it's a simulation created for the sole purpose of exploring the development of music through the ages, and parts of the planet will be created as needed. Am I conceited enough to think that's it's all centred on me? I certainly am egocentric, but no, I don't believe that I am the single most important person in this realm.

"But you don't get it yet, Ace. If I were the focus of the simulation, I would need friends and family, colleagues and contacts. You would all need to be as self-aware as I, or as any of the characters on that silly show. *My* friends would have friends, *those* people would have friends, and so on. Every character would have to be fully developed, with a full complement of memories, emotions and ambitions, in order to make the simulation accurate. Perhaps this world was created to study some person neither one of us has ever met, but whom we come to influence in some subtle way. You introduce me to a friend, that friend lends me a book, I draw some influence from the experience, pass along some kernel of information to a colleague, and they in turn make a comment that is overheard by a stranger at a restaurant, and so on and so on. A century hence, because of some subtle plucking of that string of events, someone makes the arbitrary decision to step off of a curb with their right foot instead of their left, and the man who would sire the next Albert Einstein dies. In that way, we are all required and we are all vital, but it could be that your entire value in this world is contained in some single, off-handed comment or gesture you might never remember, but that was made at precisely the right time and to the right person to untie or perhaps *retie* the string of events.

I scowled, "I've often considered that I may have been put on earth as the poster boy of what *not* to do."

Jerry smiled, and slapped me on the shoulder.

"Maybe so, my friend, maybe so. Or maybe I'm wrong, and everything in this world *is* about you. Perhaps this simulation is the 22nd or 50th century's equivalent to a framed photograph, and everything we currently experience hangs on your great-great-great-great grandson's wall."

I helped myself to a cold beer, and set another bottle on the corner of the pool table next to Jerry, "Intriguing notion. A whole world created for my sole edification feeds quite well into my narcissistic tendencies, although I doubt I'll ever feel comfortable in the shower again. But tell me, Jerr.....you said you have proof. You saw something. What did you see?"

"I was getting to that," Jerry drained half of his beer in a swallow, and sighed contentedly, "It occurred to me that this simulation might be of any size. It might indeed be centred on a single person and might involve a few hundred people, or it might be a sociological or historical study requiring a world teeming with billions. If the former, the so-called 'reality' might be fairly small. If the latter, then every square centimetre of this world would have been filled out in excruciating detail. But then came the thought, *would* it? Even if the simulation were global, surely there would be some tiny corners of this world where no one sets foot on any given day. A particular spice shop in a back lane of Jakarta, maybe, or a second-hand book store in Leeds. How many attics and basements, back rooms and closets go unvisited on any particular day? In such cases, resources might be saved, and so those little unseen corners of the world needn't be filled out in perfect detail."

"I have rooms in this house I haven't seen in months," I admittedly, "*Years*, maybe."

"Undoubtedly," Jerry raised an eyebrow and smiled, "Well, with this thinking in mind, I set myself on a track. I wanted to find one of those backwater little places where nobody went. A pantry in an empty house in Meda. The back corner of a narrow alley in Vanrhyinsdorp. A tiny bit of hidden coastline in Antofagasta. I couldn't hope to peer into every dark corner of every street in every city, but every chance I got, I went where I'd never gone before. If I normally turned right at a corner, I turned left. If I never before looked down an alleyway in passing, I stopped and studied every brick and every cobblestone. If a door was closed, I opened it. If there was some corner of some building or some off-set little corner of the city, I looked into it. I purposely took random routes from here to there, showed up at my office at unexpected times, and woke in the middle of the night to shine a light into every drawer and every cupboard. I must have seemed like a crazy man, and I know for a fact that my staff were talking behind my back, but I kept at it. After all, the difference between a madman and an eccentric is just a matter of wealth, no?"

We clinked our bottles together, and acknowledged our mutual prosperity with a sly grin.

"Welcome to my world," I said.

We clinked again, finished out bottles, and I retrieved two more. Finally, once Jerry had taken a few long swallows and I made clear that he had my undivided attention, he elaborated.

"It was two months ago. I needed a break from work, and remembered one of my staff mentioning that a friend had made some comment about a deli around the corner offering the best cheesesteak this side of Boston. Now, I cannot abide cheesesteak, so of course I went. And on my way, I lifted the front of every newspaper box and the lid of every trash can on the route, much to the amusement of random passers-by.

And then, mere meters from the delicatessen, I noticed that the alley beside the structure wrapped around the back of the place. I made as if I were continuing on, then at the very last moment, I changed course, ducked into the alley, and ran full tilt around the back of the building.

"And there it was. I kid you not, Ace, there it was! It was only a second, really a mere *fraction* of a second, but there it was, and I saw it as clearly as I see you now."

"What?" I could barely contain my curiosity and excitement, "What was it? What did you see?"

He leaned in toward me, rested a hand on my shoulder, and smiled coyly.

"Nothing."

"Huh? What? What do mean *nothing*?"

His smile broadened, "It was literally nothing. A blankness. A void, if you will. In one of those forgotten little places where no one was supposed to go at that particular time on that particular day, I rounded the corner of a dark little alley at the back of an obscure little deli, and came face to face with nothingness!"

"Good God!" I found myself exclaiming, "Do you understand how monumental this is? I have to see it!"

He waved the matter away.

"I'm sorry, my friend, but that's quite impossible. I suppose the program is designed to respond immediately, or it might be that the simulation updates itself every second or portion thereof, but no sooner had I observed the void than it vanished, replaced in an instant with solid brick and mortar and glass."

"Coming from anyone else, I'd say it was trick of the eye. Are you absolutely certain of what you saw? Or rather, what you *didn't* see?"

"Positively," Came the matter-of-fact reply.

"Then you have to tell the world!" I implored him, "Write a paper! Tell the newspapers! Go on ZNN! Shout it from the damn *rooftops!*"

He looked aghast, "Heavens, no!"

"Why the hell not? You'll be famous! Why, this is the greatest discovery since...since...well, *ever!*"

Jerry took another gulp of beer, and narrowed his eyes at me, "Firstly, Ace, I *am* famous, thanks to you. Secondly, making any news of my experience public would be the worst thing I could possibly do."

"Oh, come now! If you're afraid of censure, you shouldn't be. They'll believe *you*, of all people. Maybe not everyone, but most will. And what is the main tenet of the scientific method? Replicating the results, right? You see, Jerr, I *have* been reading. There must be other voids like that. Thousands. Millions, even! Imagine a thousand people from all over the globe following your lead, looking into every back alley and dark corner in every city in every country on the planet. Imagine a *million. Tens* of millions, all with the single goal of replicating your result. Why, with all of those eyes peering into all of those forgotten little corners of the world, someone else is sure to come across the same nothingness. We could even offer a reward for conclusive proof! All it would take is one man with a camera, and you would be vindicated! The world would *have* to believe you."

"Don't you understand, Ace? That's exactly what I *don't* want to happen!"

"Well, why *not*, for heaven's sake?"

He was silent for a long moment, then he drained the last of his beer and sighed heavily.

"Suppose that were to happen. Suppose someone somewhere found irrefutable proof that this world is no more than electrical impulses in some future historian's laptop. What would happen then? I'll tell you what, Ace. Pandemonium would happen. Absolute, total, worldwide pandemonium. The masses won't care if this world is the only one we have, and is the only reality we will ever know. They'll stop listening after some news pundit equates our situation to the Star Trek holodeck. Such a revelation would mean the end of civilization as we know it. Who would bother going to work anymore? Why would anyone pay their bills? Would laws exist with no one enforcing them? Would the government function at all? Why bother passing legislation if the laws of nature are a construct? Why fund education or tend to the sick if the citizens they govern are mere characters in a video game? Why bother with petty things like national security and the economy and the environment? I tell you, Ace, making this public is the worst thing we could *ever* do."

"I guess I give mankind a little more credit than that," Said I, with some disdain.

"You?" Jerry's eyes opened wide and his lips curled up in a smirk, "You, Ace? Since when did you become

such an optimist?"

I shrugged the near-insult away and admitted, "I've met some brilliant young people since coming out of my shell."

He clamped his hand on my shoulder, said, "Then hurrah for broken shells!" and stood to retrieve a couple more beers while I gathered the pool balls back into the rack.

The next day, I set about proving my friend wrong. My eyes were opened to the truth, and as far as I was concerned, the world needed to know. I didn't bother with the newscasts, but instead used my considerable influence and a substantial amount of money to fund teams all over the world, all toward the same end; replicating Jerry's results, and providing real proof of the nature of reality.

Within weeks, I had thousands of people following Jerry's protocol. When the next few months showed little progress, I threw in a reward a hundred times that of any king's ransom, and the number quickly swelled to tens of thousands. Once I appeared on ZNN and allowed them to mock the eccentric billionaire ready to squander his money, suddenly there were *millions* on the trail. Millions upon millions of normal, everyday people scouring streets and alleys and back rooms in every city in every country on every continent on the globe. After that, it was only a matter of time.

The first photographs were blurry and full of shadows. Most were obvious fakes, but a few showed the type of nothingness Jerry described. I poured over every spurious photograph, and every shaky video, and handpicked the best to show the world on an exclusive broadcast funded by myself and aired around the world. The scientific community rebelled and called me a crackpot and refuted every image with claims of fakery and grandstanding, but the show itself was a huge success. The notion caught people off-guard, but it got everyone talking so much on the subject that eventually, Jerry himself appeared on ZNN to disparage the so-called evidence, denouncing me to the world and making aspersions as to my mental stability. I should have hated him for that, but there was such a sadness behind his eyes that I instantly forgave him even as he maligned my character.

And then came the big day. The day that would change the world. A ZNN crew was in Sao Paulo, following a group of locals who'd banded into a team to better their chances at the reward. They were ferreting around in the sub-basement of an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town when the discovery was made. They'd busily peered into every dark corner and cobwebbed recess that hadn't seen a human

presence in decades, and they'd just about concluded the endeavour a bust when a young boy noticed an oddly straight edge behind a jumble of old machinery parts. Despite the tittering of undisguised derision from the news crew, that young lad managed to manoeuvre enough flotsam out of the way to uncover a little side door leading to some forgotten room deep in the bowels of the building. Then, with the entire film crew directly behind him, fully prepared to capture the chagrin of failure on his pubescent face, he took hold of the handle and recklessly flung the door open.....

.....and there it was. A complete and utter nothingness. Not the blackness of an unlit room, mind, but a void exactly as my friend had described. In full view of that small boy, two television cameras and a dozen witnesses, lay a vast and undeniable *nothingness*.

A fraction of a second later, the nothingness was gone, replaced by a room full of pumps and electrical conduits and lockers and the detritus of decades of disuse. But that fraction of a second had been enough. The testimony of local eyewitnesses might easily have been discounted, but the ZNN crew was beyond reproach, and the video they'd shot was irrefutable. Every university, every government facility, every news agency and every skeptic dissected the video frame by frame and pixel by pixel, and subjected it to every form of analysis imaginable, and eventually, no one was left who could argue with the facts. The video was declared authentic, and the investigation turned to exactly what it was they'd actually captured.

The theories numbered in the hundreds, but they were dismissed one by one until, at last, there wasn't a scientist or pundit or naysayer in the world who could disavow the evidence. What had been captured on that news crew's video had been a void. A nothingness, exactly as I had propounded to the masses. No one could dispute the evidence. And finally, everyone knew the truth. The world we lived in was no world at all.

That was mere weeks ago, and now that it's done, I sit at my desk, scotch in hand, books and papers stacked all about me, photos and video disks and thumbdrives strewn about the place like so much flotsam, and I watch as my friend tries to explain the situation to the world. By telling everyone that I was right all along, he is also confirming the theory that he himself had so long ago postulated, but there is no joy in his expression or bearing. In fact, he appears absolutely morose as he provides irrefutable evidence that everything we had ever known is wrong. That evidence given, he's now calling for public calm while the scientific community and world leaders are able to truly understand the new paradigm.

In my opinion, he needn't bother. There will be changes, certainly, but nothing like what he envisioned. The stock market will hiccup, religious leaders will resist, and alcohol sales will increase, but things will

