

## Chapter One

Merling sees himself as the sorcerer, the eye in the magic of imagination that can take a dot and turn it into a globe, a universe, a period at the end of a sentence that casts a spell. He is the magic at the core of reality, a part of the mystery that we call God. Today he is in the conference room of a control center deep below the ground looking at a 3D virtual reality image of a fawn chewing on a spike of wheat, munching the grain, savoring the kernels, the green fertile juices of the leaves. Merling tries to get beyond the image to the life within the dot itself, to feel the earth soft beneath its feet, the sun radiating through its fragile form like a warm bath of light while the wind blows through the sea of golden waves caressing its soft brown fur like the hand of God, my child, our home.

The fawn's mother is a few yards away, and his father with antlers like the Eternal Tree of Life sniffs the air, alert for danger, the snake in the garden, man, the hunters. The air smells of the sweet growth that the veins of life sprout from, the perfume of nature in the breeze, the earth, a few worms, a snail, the lady bug that has escaped the insecticide, and the foul odor of the chemicals, the black alchemy of the earth created by man to transform the bowels of the earth into phantom blood.

The stag whiffs the breeze, the wet mist like blue, and he sees emerald splashes from the corner of his eye, no scent of man, nothing moving but the hypnotic sway of the shoots of grain. His eyes, grown weary from scanning the field, dwell upon the fawn when a bolt of light rents the picture, strikes the child and drops the fawn dead upon the earth. The stag's mate jerks around, startled, shocked as another bolt of light frames her face in horror. He leaps helplessly, his horns pierce the air, and he is dead in the sky.

The ocean of blue turns red as he falls on a bed of gold green olive russet black with no mourning just petroleum soil and the sound of a sea of gold that is protected from the sky by bolts of lightning from a satellite named Zeus Two that looms in space. The three carcasses of meat lie in the field, dead, and they show up on the grid at the control center as three red blotches, three dots losing heat.

Brad Merling laughs, "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll have venison tonight."

Brad, who is the Chairman of the Alpha Commission and the head of Vision World, relishes the applause from the men and women from the Chinese Economic Planning Board who are attending the meeting. Brad notes the pleasure, and they should be pleased. Venison meat is going for a thousand dollars a pound on the world market, and fawn meat... My God, how these mandarins of the New

## Vision World

China love their fawn at five thousand dollars a pound. He wants to burst out laughing at the hypocrisy of it all, but he only smiles and says, “And as you can see, our satellite surveillance system provides perfect protection for our fields. Penetration is impossible.”

In the moment's pause he savors the three red blotches, the scene, and the pictures of death in the fields that are being projected as high definition holographic images into a conference room buried deep beneath the control center. Because of the highly advanced three-dimensional imaging technology, the projections seem real from any perspective, and the conference room, which is in reality a large safe encased in reinforced concrete, seems to be floating on air.

A white rectangular plane with lines that extend into infinity forms the conference table, and it is the axis of a panoramic view of the fields and blue sky, a vast sea of riches extended over two states. The men in the control tower seem like ghostly presences lurking around the conference room as they monitor screens that are vivid portals into the inner workings of Vision World.

Merling watches the electronic monitors controlling the automated machinery that tends to the fields. The screens reveal the data and infrared chemical analysis of the soil that is coming from a satellite. On one of the screens, he can see that the computer, based on the data, is directing yellow bug-like-tank-trucks with tubular sprays to feed the soil and monitor the water content.

He hears Ms. Yuong, the head of the Chinese delegation, say, “The satellite security system is very impressive, but it seems effective only against intruders who try to infiltrate the system in small numbers.” She smiles slightly, “What if we were attacked by hungry mobs of people angered by the fact that we own and control all the best farmland in Montana?”

Merling laughs, “Unlikely, but let's pretend.”

Merling turns to his security chief, John Hathaway, “John, do you think you can conjure up the starving masses for me?”

On one screen magnified for the easy viewing of the delegates, a graphic of the sector where the deer were slain appears as a grid. On the grid, new red dots begin to appear, thousands upon thousands of them.

Merling smiles, “Thank you, John. I'll take over from here.”

He presses a button, and the control panel appears as a pattern upon the surface of the table. He begins to touch the keys on the screen with fingers long and tapered like those of a concert pianist. Red warning lights flash through the room as data appears across the topmost borders of the panel, and a computer-generated automated zombie voice pervades the room, “Priority One Intrusion!”

Merling looks at the red button flashing on the control panel, and he touches it gently as if he were touching the nipple of a woman's breast, and the game begins. He touches a few more buttons, and on the screen appear three armored-troop-carriers loaded with armed personnel and heading for the field

## Vision World

where they are joined by two remote control attack vehicles.

Merling marvels at how the nature of war has changed. It has been reduced to eye and hand coordination and the touching of buttons. He loves it. It's like the video games he played as a child where cartoon characters appeared and disappeared on the screen. In this game, death progresses across the screen in the form of two toy tanks that form the axis of a firing zone designated by a red square on the grid. As the vehicles penetrate the target zone, the red square begins to transpose itself on the target area.

Merling's face is blood red, glowing from the reflection of the screen. He looks at Hathaway and the monitors who are waiting for his next move. They are all appendages of him, the conduit to the conductor, human nerve ends in the system waiting to be triggered.

Brad smiles and fingers the red button once again, the ground opens up, and two heavily armed supersonic hover planes appear on launching platforms rising from an underground hanger. To heighten the drama, Merling raises the volume of the sound and fills the room with the roar of the engines as the warships soar off to battle. He then presses another button and a hologram of one of the remote control attack vehicles in the field appears, larger than life. It extends its firing arms, and the metal arms lock into place to the hum of electromagnetic force. Hundreds of firing ports, packed with photon charges and bundled together like the barrels of an old fashion Gatling gun begin to spin faster and faster until they are a blur of fire pulsating death, but on the grid, the attack vehicles look like lawn sprinklers gone wild as toy helicopters rocket the area with little splashes of red.

Merling's eye travels from the abstract to the real, the blood red reality of pure power, and he thinks to himself, fire is what makes us who we are. We Americans are the final bearers of the flame. This love of fire must have come with us as far back as our Aryan forefathers who wandered in the cold, worshipping fire, gold, the flame being passed on by tribal story tellers who looked into the campfire at night and saw the stars, the children peering from behind into the beyond at flaming chariots and warriors who were given the mysteries of the sun for the price of their immortal soul.

Fire is our power, and we have turned it into all its forms, and now after a history of war and conquest, molten steel, electrons turned into dynamos, now we can, like Zeus, rain death with a lightning bold and split an atom and create destruction far beyond what Zeus could ever imagine from his throne on Mount Olympus.

Merling looks at the aerial view of the field being projected into the room. He looks at the devastation. There is nothing left of the fields except that in the center of obliteration and the charred soil devoid of any life form, is a small intact plot of wheat with the remains of the deer lying there as if sleeping in a bed of gold, a medieval tapestry of tranquility fringed with terror, a dinner for the Gods.

## Vision World

Ms. Yuong studies Merling for a moment. He is tall and slim with silver white hair folded back like wings. His features are Trans-European. He is the spirit of the West marching through time into the American frontier, a magnificent predator whose character has been blurred by a world of numbers that has depreciated the poetry and the romance in the history of his genes. Ms. Yuong feels a shiver of cold run through her, but she is compelled to ask, "You're not bothered by this?"

Merling smiles and looks at her through steel blue eyes that seldom blink and says, "Feel reassured, Comrade. We take property rights very seriously in America."

## Chapter Two

Colonel Dennis Martino, a military investigative officer for this sector of the United States, has been watching this exercise from the entranceway to the fields. He hears the whirling sound of the electromagnetic fields that generated the photon cannons wind down, and he watches the helicopters return to base through a sky that was once blue but is now gray with swirling snakes of smoke.

“Some barbecue, Sergeant. Do you know what's going on?” Denny asks.

The Sergeant shrugs. “I don't know, sir. I just work here.”

Denny gets back into the army staff car, and his orderly drives off down the road into the charred remains of what was Paradise. Because so much of Denny's work these days is civilian and investigative, he isn't required to wear a uniform that is so symbolic of the sameness of his life. Even a suit and a tie he finds restrictive and uncomfortable. He opens his brief case, and he looks through his papers, the crisp white sheets, the clear black print, the illusion of order. Security is not normally his job, but General Shea was short a man today, so here he is.

Denny reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a pack of Camel straights and lights up a cigarette. He inhales deeply.

He's quite satisfied with the gesture, the inhalation of death. Yes, he smokes when nobody else smokes because a slow death of his own choosing is one of the few romantic gestures left to a man who can't find it in his heart to kill anymore. Denny remembers the first time that he had a cigarette. It was after his first battle. God, it tasted so good, the smoke that smothered the smell of death as he continued to breathe fire. At that moment he realized that all his life he tried to be good, to belong, to be like everyone else, yet the only time he was free was in the fire zone where his senses intensified. He saw for the first time the vivid color in the flowers, blood red, dancing in the sunlight, the jewel in a drop of water, the air vibrating with life in contrast to the oblivion of death, the darkness that swallowed up life like a black hole in space.

He became a junkie to the feeling and a lieutenant colonel at twenty-eight years old, a veteran of three wars. But he had a problem. Not only did his senses wake up, but his mind came to life as well. He began to think about things, and the more he thought, the more confused he became. What confused him most was that as he went from one war to another, the enemy he fought became poorer and poorer. Finally, one day when he was on patrol in Columbia, the truth came into focus when someone took a shot at him from behind a tree. In a rage, he pulled the trigger on his 60mm machine gun loaded with explosion shells. He literally sawed the tree in half, and in the end, he was looking at a burned out

## Vision World

stump of a tree and a twelve-year-old boy with no shoes tangled in the fallen branches, dead. The boy was so thin that if Denny hadn't killed him he probably would have died of starvation. Denny had no stomach for it anymore. Even the dead deer made him nauseous now.

The irony is that now that he is home his main job is to investigate homicides. So he still smokes, but for a while it was all right, a form of divine retribution. He was no longer the killer. He was the seeker, or so it seemed, and for a while he was exceedingly good at his job. He liked the-who-done-it of it all, and he was good at distinguishing the different shades of darkness to find the darkest light of all. Sometimes he would find the scumbags, the real criminals, and that made his job worthwhile. But most of the time, the path into the darkest dark led him into the depths of the depression where he only found poverty and despair, just like in Latin America.

Denny turns on the TV, adjusts the size of the picture, and a picture of an excavation site in the midst of a beautiful virgin forest appears on the screen. The camera focuses in on the towering trees, their giant corpses, and then to a warehouse that has been blown up. Debris is splattered all about the site.

A reporter's voice is heard in the background, "Fortunately, nobody was hurt, but we are told by reliable sources that the property damage is estimated to be in the millions."

The picture focuses on several bulldozers that have been torn apart by explosives. The reporter is standing next to one the bulldozers, its blade arm torn from its steel socket. There are military police on the scene. The caption at the bottom of the screen informs us that we are at the Glacier Park Development Site.

The reporter signs off, "And this is John Sully, Vision World News."

"Shit," Denny picks up the phone and touches some keys.

From the other end of the line he hears, "Federal Security Offices, Control Officer Sweeny here."

"Sweeny, this is Denny. What happened at Glacier Park?"

"The Green Peace Warriors blew up the excavation site and all the equipment. That is, we think they did. Someone called Vision World this morning and claimed he was a member of the organization. The same old stuff, Glacier Park is public land and should remain so, and they, the Green Peace Warriors, will oppose with any means available the encroachment by private enterprise on our national heritage. Quote unquote. Do you want to hear more?"

"No, I got the picture, and I don't like it. This attack may be linked up with this big shot I'm supposed to baby-sit. I want a special terrorist unit on red alert, and I want you to double the security forces on Merling's route."

"They requested low visibility."

## Vision World

"I don't give a shit."

"OK, Denny."

Denny is looking through the papers in his briefcase, looking for anything that will give him a clue.

"Sweeny, do they have anything on the agenda about a military exercise?"

"A military exercise?"

"Yeah, I just watched them torch a square mile of wheat over here. I mean real toasty, attack vehicles, air support, the whole package."

"I'll check. You want to hold?"

"Sure."

While Denny is waiting for Sweeny, he watches the television newscast. On screen he sees Cheri Normal. Cheri is Denny's favorite newscaster. It must be the slight overbite and the eyes that seem slightly crossed, the flaws in the otherwise perfect diamond that makes her seem so accessible. At the corner of the picture is a picture within a picture of the American and Chilean flags coming together - the red, white, and blue of the United States of America merging with the red, white, and blue of Chile - one star about to become the fifty fourth state in the emerging union of North and South America.

Denny listens to Cheri's child-like voice, the slight lisp, the lips touching, almost like a kiss. "The American occupational forces in Chile report that they have nearly eliminated all armed opposition."

The picture switches from Cheri to a picture of American M4 tanks on their way to Santiago, the capital of Chile. Denny hears Cheri's voice as the picture switches again to a high-ranking officer in the United States Army.

"General Ford, how is the liberation going?"

"Very well, we're on our way. And soon..."

Denny turns off the sound on the TV and fills in the lines, "The world will be safe for McDonalds." Denny laughs and then freezes the picture on the face of Cheri Normal and magnifies the view of her cockeyed smile, a smile that seems to say that no matter what the news, good or bad, everything is going to be all right because we're going to have fun. That's the American way. Denny's infatuation with Cheri is interrupted by Sweeny.

"Denny?"

"Yeah."

"There's nothing about any barbecue out there."

"OK Sweeny, I'll keep in touch."

Denny hangs up the phone, and some distance away he spots something in the middle of the road. As they draw closer, he begins to make out what it is. It's small. It has ears.

## Vision World

“Stop!” he shouts.

The driver slams on the breaks and skids to a halt. Denny gets out, walks to the front of the car and looks down at a little rabbit frozen in fear.

“What's the matter, baby,” Denny asks in the gentle voice of a child, then crouches down and looks tenderly at the little rabbit who doesn't respond. Only the gentle movement of its breathing tells Denny that it is alive. The poor little thing is in shock.

Denny gently reaches down, picks the rabbit up, and cradles it in his arms, “There we are, sweetheart. You can't hang out in the middle of the road. You're going to be squished. You better come with Uncle Denny, and I'll find a new home for you. These people are fucked up.”

The rabbit makes no effort to resist as Denny returns to the car, and with the rabbit in his lap, they drive off. Denny feels the warmth and strokes the delicate fur like air. He can see where the fire has singed some of the rabbit's fur, and he can feel its little heart beat feverishly as they near the control tower of reinforced concrete surrounded by fortified bunkers that are gray, hard, and angular in form with glass slits for windows like arrow ports.



## Chapter Three

When Denny arrives at the control center, he enters the building with the rabbit cradled in his arms. He is greeted by one of the military officers assigned to the installation, and he is then led to the control tower where he is introduced to Brad Merling's chief of security, John Hathaway. Hathaway, who is in his early fifties, is tall and slightly overweight like a former tight end who likes to eat rich food in expensive restaurants then work it off in the gym with only partial success. However, despite the years of self-indulgence and the wear and tear of time, Hathaway still possesses a commanding presence and an air of authority with his military bearing, the short cropped silver gray hair, and the cold hard face of a mercenary who has succumbed to sadism, tailored suits, and expensive rare sports cars.

Hathaway is about to extend his hand, but then he looks down at the rabbit and smiles, “What's this? Potluck?”

“No, it's a survivor of the ecological holocaust that I just witnessed.”

Denny watches the hypocritical smile of a corporate PR man vanish revealing the corporate mercenary type behind the mask. There you are, Denny says to himself, now I see you, you son of bitch.

Denny extends his hand and formally introduces himself, “I'm Colonel Dennis Martino. I believe you're expecting me.” Hathaway's grip is firm and unyielding, the usual Marine bullshit.

The corporate smile returns, “Yes, Colonel, I'm John Hathaway, and it's a pleasure to meet yo, but as you can see, we're quite busy. My advice to you is to sit back and relax.” He winks at Denny in a conspiratorial way, “Easy duty.”

Hathaway turns his back on Denny and is about to sit down again at the control panel. Denny realizes that he has been dismissed and he says, “My orders from my commanding officer were to report immediately to Mr. Merling, personally.”

Hathaway turns to square off again, and Denny is amused once more as he looks into the hard stare of an ex-major general, a front-line officer, and the one time head of the anti-terrorist Special Forces Command in Washington. Oh, yes, he knows who John Hathaway is. He's been dancing around with guys like him ever since he joined the army, but now things are different. Hathaway has no rank. He's a civilian and that look of superiority is going to buy him a boloney sandwich.

The electromagnetic force created between John Hathaway and Denny is very interesting because they are opposites, yet, they're very much the same. They come from the same place. They have experienced the same things. They understand each other's language, each gesture, the slightest body

movement or expression. That is why when Hathaway reads the disdain on Denny's face, the hard stare fades, and it is replaced by the glint of the black market of the soul and the ironic smile of a man who makes three times as much as Denny makes doing basically the same thing.

“Very well, Colonel. Follow me and bring the rabbit.” Hathaway laughs and says, “This may turn out to be interesting.”

As they walk to the elevator, nearly everyone they pass stares at the little creature in Denny's arms as if it were an alien. Denny strokes its ears, and he can see that it is still quite frightened as it breathes in all the cold calculation of the place.

Denny stops and says to the lieutenant who is accompanying him, “With all the big game hunting going on around here, there must be a kitchen.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, then I want you to take Bugs Bunny here and find a box for him and some lettuce, maybe some carrots, some water. You know what I mean.”

The lieutenant's face is animated, “Yes, sir. I had a rabbit for a pet when I was a kid.”

“Good. Bugs Bunny here is an endangered species, and I'm taking him in custody as a ward of the state. And when I leave this place, I want to see him in the back seat of my car, in a secure box with lots of air and lots of food or your ass is mine.” Denny smiles pleasantly so as to undercut the threat, “Got it?”

The lieutenant smiles and nods to Denny indicating that he understands very well the message. He's part of the joke, and he's been ordered to make everyone kiss Bugs Bunny's ass.

Denny tries to get a firm hold on Bugs with both hands so that he can hand him over to the lieutenant, but Bugs resists, and he attempts to burrow under Denny's coat. A good sign, Denny thinks to himself. First he wants to hide, and then he'll struggle to be free. Just like me.

“Now, don't worry.” Denny says, “The lieutenant here is going to take good care of you, Bugs. Trust me.” Denny pulls Bugs out from his burrow and hands him over to the lieutenant then enters the elevator. Hathaway and he are alone together, and as they descend into the depths of the complex, Denny observes that they both look like they're urinating into a latrine, shoulder to shoulder, legs spread apart, looking up at the descending numbers, feeling the weight of gravity as they descend into the bowels of the system.

Finally, as if he had just shaken the last drop off his dick and zipped up his fly, Hathaway turns to Denny and says, “To be perfectly honest with you, Colonel, I don't know why you're here. For that matter, I don't know why we need this elaborate security network you have set up for the tour. As you know, Mr. Merling has his own security team, and we're quite capable of protecting the Chairman. And... we can do it, Martino, without being conspicuous. Mr. Merling is selling paradise to the

## Vision World

Chinese, not a military police state. Am I making myself clear?"

"Oh, yes, sir, in triplicate. But if you don't want me to be here and you don't like the security measures that we have taken, then call my commanding officer and complain to him, Mister Hathaway." Denny gets a great deal of pleasure emphasizing the "Mister" and Hathaway's loss of rank.

"I did, Colonel."

"And?"

As the door to the elevator slides open and they enter a reception room paneled in dark walnut, Hathaway says, "It's the same old story, Colonel. It is his job and his ass." Hathaway laughs, "And since shit rolls downhill, it's your job and your ass."

"You got that right." Denny is relieved that he may have come to an understanding with this prick. They approach two large smoked glass doors.

"The only problem with this scenario, Colonel, is..." Hathaway opens one of the doors for Denny and gestures for him to go in first, and then says, "It's my job, and you're in my shit."

The door closes behind Denny, and he realizes that he has walked right into the middle of a presentation by the head of Vision World. Denny reaches behind him for the doorknob. He tries to open the door. It's locked. He sees Hathaway smiling at him from the other side of the smoked glass. I'm fucked, he says to himself, and I've only been on the job for a couple of hours. God Damn it, Martino. What an asshole you are. With his back pressed against the cold concrete walls, Denny tries to hide behind the holographic images of the fields.

Merling glances over at Denny then ignores him completely and continues his presentation, "So, ladies and gentlemen, in essence, we are offering you a good part of two states, Montana and North Dakota for development and 50,000 acres of prime farm land to feed your starving masses, for what? For simply offering us the same trade concessions that you have given the Japanese. Think about it. We can do for you, now, what will take the Japanese years to accomplish. We can give you the food surplus that you need, and at the same time, offer you investment opportunities in America."

Merling presses some buttons and the holograms disappear leaving the room bathed in a pleasant light. "Well, that's it. There are touring buses outside, and when we get back, the venison will be ready to serve with an All-American menu, copies of which you will find on the table before you."

Brad watches the Chinese devour the printed words, and he is amused by the obvious pleasure and eager approval of born-again gluttons. Merling laughs. His voice is congenial, "Well, ladies and gentlemen, or should I say, fellow Americans, let's go take a look at the neighborhood, and when we get back, we'll have dinner then continue our conference and discuss my proposal in some detail."

The applause is genuine, and the delegates are impressed. Denny makes his way through the

## Vision World

laughter, the good cheer, and the strange sounds of a foreign language. He makes his way to Merling who is shaking hands with one of the delegates. Merling turns toward Denny. First Denny sees the corporate mask that Cheri, then Hathaway, and now Merling wears. He sees the ubiquitous smile, but then Merling recognizes Denny and the smile seriously depreciates.

Denny snaps to attention and salutes the head of Vision World. "Colonel Dennis Martino, sir. I've been assigned by General Shea to take charge of all security forces while you and your delegates are here. I'm personally responsible for your safety, sir."

Merling smiles and says, "Tell me Captain, do you usually barge into meetings like that?"

"No, sir, but your man, Hathaway, has a weird sense of humor."

"Yes, he does, but I don't."

Denny listens to the voice of a man who can command a satellite in space to strike down a fawn with a lightning bolt, "And, Colonel," the voice says. "If you ever step on my lines again, you will be peeling frozen potatoes in the Arctic."

"Yes, sir."

"Good, then we understand one another." The mask appears again, the smile that gives off no heat.

Merling extends his hand, "Well, Colonel, it's been a pleasure, and I do hope you will be a little more un-obtrusive in the future."

Denny smiles, "Yes, sir."

Merling sees John Hathaway approaching, "And you two have already met."

Denny turns and sees Hathaway. There's a broad smile on Hathaway's face. Merling watches the interplay between Denny and Hathaway with amusement. Then he says to Hathaway, "I want you two to work together." The tone is there again.

As Ms. Yuong passes by, Merling gently grabs her by the arm, excuses himself, and begins a conversation with her as he ushers her to the exit. When the delegates leave the center and enter the tour bus that is awaiting them, Denny walks over to his staff car, and he tells his driver that he is going to ride with Hathaway in the surveillance vehicle owned by Vision World. He orders his driver to follow them then looks in the back seat. Bugs Bunny is in the box chewing on some lettuce. Denny turns to the driver and says, "He looks normal."

"Yes, sir. He's perked right up. I think he's OK."

Denny's relieved. Now he has to find a place for him. Not here. Maybe tomorrow he can take him to one of the national parks and set him free there. Denny takes one last look at Bugs. Bugs can't wait to get out of the box. It dawns on Denny. That's what makes animals superior to humans. We love the box.

Denny enters the surveillance vehicle owned by Vision World. It is similar to the mobile units used

## Vision World

by the military police, but far more elaborate, far more sophisticated. Hathaway hands him a head set then presses some buttons, types out some code numbers, and at his command the video screens that wall the interior of the vehicle and beyond light up revealing the many eyes that guard the way.

Denny is amazed by what he sees. It's as if they were not in the vehicle. The interior extends out into space, projecting high definition three-dimensional views of the route they are taking. Hathaway presses several more buttons and the perspective changes completely. Now, it seems like Denny is in the tour bus with Merling and the Chinese. He watches Hathaway manipulate the laser grid, and he can see that by manipulating the grid, he can monitor the eye movement of anyone on the bus and see what they see. Hathaway makes one final adjustment then focuses the camera, and Denny can see what Brad Merling is seeing.

The vast wheat fields pass by as they cruise onto Route 36. Soon the fields give way to grassland, cattle behind barbed wire, and the plains sloping upward to the misty peaks of the mountains that disappear into the distant blue sky, parallel bands of reality. In the background, Brad Merling can hear one of his assistants giving a guided tour to the Chinese delegates, transforming what they see into dollars and cents.

He hears Ms. Yuong who is seated next to Merling ask, "How did Vision World get started?"

Merling chuckles and looks at his own shadowy image in the window of the bus. It seems to float timelessly in the glass as the exterior world passes by, "Oh, dear," he says. "Many years ago, when I was a young man, I had started out in advertising and then made the switch to television production. Like most young men my age I was always plotting, plotting to make money, plotting to get ahead, plotting to get laid. Plotting to plot, but I worked hard, and I tried to understand the phenomenon of TV. I tried to understand its essence. What it really is. Then one day it dawned on me. I was at my summer home in the Hamptons, and I was drinking with a house guest of mine, Bob Baker, a friend from work. We were talking about what makes an actor an actor and why most TV actors are bad actors. Are you familiar with the history of TV?"

"Oh, yes, I'm a dedicated student." Ms. Yuong's eyes flutter, "I don't want to make too much of myself, but it was my admiration of your work that brought me here. And it was I who insisted you be involved in the land deal. I want you to bring Vision World to China. Are you pleased?"

"Yes, and quite flattered." Merling is embarrassed by the intimacy, so he quickly returns to the subject. "Well, then, if you have studied the history of American TV, you're probably familiar with Tom Resnick."

"Oh, yes, I've seen everything he's done."

"Good, that's who we were talking about. Tom is an excellent example of a very bad actor that was a very big success. And as we were talking about him, it occurred to me why Jim Colt, Tom Resnick's

character, was so appealing. Jim Colt's a big strong guy who kills people. But, he's got a little boy's voice. Women want to mother him. He's a big baby. He's Tom Resnick. There's no acting there. Tom is one of the biggest babies I ever met, and he naturally has a little boy's voice. That's why he got the part. He didn't have to act."

"And, as Jim Colt, he's totally dependent on the rich," Ms. Yuong says. Her voice is accusatorial.

"Yes, he's sort of a night watchman, caretaker, and, uh, security guard, who sidelines as a detective, but he spends most of his time fuckin' around on the beach and driving a red Ferrari that he doesn't own."

Ms. Yuong laughs, "He's not too bright."

"No, but he figures things out eventually. Actually, he's just an average guy who fell into a cushy job working for the rich. Look at his war buddies, JP, the big black guy who is a little overweight and has a one-man helicopter service, and then there is Fred the bartender. They're both average guys, like Colt, living off the land, not really settled down, playing out their youth for all its worth as if tomorrow may never come, lucky to have survived Vietnam. Fits a lot of guys, don't it?"

"Yes."

"Another thing that I recognized as I studied the characters in the show was that Colt's girlfriends are never really knock outs. Any girl's got a real chance with him."

Ms. Yuong smiles and says, "You're right, of course. Even I fantasized."

"So you see. Anyone can identify with him, and he's within reach. That was the first key. Now take Mr. B. You're familiar with him?"

"Yes."

"Bottom line, Mr. B was a loudmouth, no talent bouncer that they literally picked off the streets and made a star. It was like he won the lottery, and he proved that anyone could make it. That was the second key. Bob and I went on and on with example after example, filling in the picture, but in the end, Bob missed the point, and I knew what I had to do. I had to create a show in which the audience feels like they are walking into the TV, into the show, the character, and the character is walking out of the TV and is alive in their living rooms, the two become one, the viewer and the viewed. That was the secret. That was the formula for *Windows*, my first major success. In *Windows* I filmed a real live family on location in Manhattan. Day and night we filmed the Labelle family, and because the camera was always on them, they began to play to it. And as they played to it, the camera brought out the extra in the ordinary, until, finally, they were extraordinary.

"Mr. Labelle was a modestly successful entertainment agent who became more successful as we filmed him. His eldest daughter, Jan, who worked for him, had an over developed libido, and she turned

## Vision World

into a bombshell under the lights. Ms. Labelle, his ex-wife, was a plain looking fat woman who also grew under the lights. She became brighter. As we turned her inside out, she became very articulate and humorous, so we made her a talk show host. And Miranda, the youngest daughter, was a crazy teenager who played to the cameras naturally. We didn't have to do anything with her except convince her that she could do anything that she wanted to do, anything that came into her mind. And she did.

“Everything was coming together. We combined the elements of a modern soap, a variety show, and a talk show. It was great, but in the end, something was still missing. I decided that it was the advertising breaks. They broke the tapestry of fantasy and reality that I had woven together as a seamless whole. That's when I discovered what I thought to be the final key. I made the ads a part of the show. The products sold the show, and the show sold the products. The ads were reinforced by the story, by subtle gestures, images and colors that would repeat themselves until they climaxed once again in the ad that became the story and the story that became the ad.”

“And *Windows*,” Ms. Yuong says, “revolutionized the industry.”

“Yes, it did. I had one success after another, and I became the head of the network. I thought I was on top of the world. But it's curious though how destiny and chance seem to conspire. Right when I thought that I had reached the peak of my success, Averill Reed discovered how to turn an electron particle into a wave and then back into a particle again, and we developed vision board, a wall board that makes every wall a camera and projector and every room a holographic grid that produces high definition three-dimensional images that are so real you cannot distinguish the real from the images.

“Then Roland Marchant invented the quantum supercomputer, and we now had the capability of processing the quantum nature of human consciousness and the billions of alternative universes that collectively dwell in each of our minds, the billions of stories in which each of us is the main character, the focal point of the camera. Now everyone is on TV or can be, and everyone can be spied on. This is the carrot and the stick. This is the plugged in, turned on society where everyone can substitute themselves for the main character or sports hero in any story or game. Everyone can alter their appearance, lose weight, enlarge their breasts or penises, change their shape and the color of their hair or eyes and buff themselves up with just the push of a button and the turn of the knob, and every day, every minute, anyone can audition for a part in the main story that brings all these alternative universes, these individual focal points, into one story that expresses most completely our collective consciousness and the American Dream.”

Ms. Yuong touches Merling's hand, “And we want to be part of that dream.”

Merling laughs, “Well, first you better buy yourself some real property.”

They both burst out laughing then Ms. Yuong says, “You married one of the stars of *Windows*, didn't you?”

## Vision World

“Yes, I married Jan Labelle. In fact, my sister-in-law, Miranda, is hosting an opening of a project that I helped fund and organize.” Merling leans forward towards Ms. Young in a false gesture of intimacy and says, “That's one of the reasons I was willing to come out here to Montana. I want to see it, and I think you'll enjoy the exhibit as well. In fact, it should be one of our first scheduled stops.”

Merling consults his notebook computer and is puzzled. “That's curious.” He touches a button on the communications panel, “John?”

“Yes, sir.”

“John, I don't see Miranda's opening here on my agenda.”

“You never indicated that you wanted to stop there, sir.”

“Well, I'll be damned. I thought...” Merling paused for a moment, puzzled, then he said, “You do know what I'm talking about?”

“Yes, sir, the supermarket.”

“Well, my mistake. I guess I forgot.”

He reaches for his computer notebook and uploads a map of the local area and directs the computer to locate the exhibit. “John, the address is 362 Green St., the old Route 13. From the map it seems to me that we can make a short detour and make it our first stop.”

“But that area has not been secured, sir.”

“Well, do your job, John.”

Merling turns to Ms. Yuong and says, “You'll enjoy this.” Merling looks out the window of the bus, and he can see that they are approaching the foothills of the Rockies and entering the walled suburbs of Helena that are guarded by a private security force. The walls are made of artificially aged red brick, and they are covered with ivy. The entranceway gate is made of ornate wrought iron and gives the impression that you are entering Paradise, or at least an upper middle class version of paradise that is decidedly Victorian with its peaked rooftops, pillared porches, tall windows, carriage houses, and stately shadows and flower gardens.

Brad sees children playing on one lawn, and he wonders why he married Jan. Probably he married her because she was his first creation, the first creature of the New Age to emerge from Zeus's mind. It was like falling in

love with himself.



## Chapter Four

God damn it!” Hathaway shouts when Merling cuts him off. “Why do we have to go to that god damned exhibit now?” He turns to Denny, “Martino, can you get your people over there?”

Denny taps into the communication lines. “I can if you can buy me some time. How about the scenic route?”

“You got it.” Hathaway presses some buttons and the map of the route and the surrounding area appears.

Denny points to a route on the map, “There, the scenic loop.”

“I got you.” Hathaway contacts the driver and gives him the alternative route. He then turns to Denny who is dispatching a security unit to the site of the exhibit and says, “Martino, clear the area. I don’t want to see a civilian.”

Denny taps in a number on the phone, and as he's doing so, he says to Hathaway, “We're in luck. The opening isn't until later this afternoon.”

Denny speaks to the director of the exhibit who at first is not very cooperative. But then Denny explains to the director how gravity works and what will happen if a guy like Merling, who lives on the top floor, decides to take a shit.

“We don't want any leaky pipes here, do we, sir?” The director agrees, and Denny orders a computer link up. He wants names and addresses of all employees and personnel directly or indirectly involved in any way with this exhibit. Denny hangs up the phone, and he watches the personnel data that the director is feeding into the system. He then runs the list of employees through the computer banks to see if there is anyone on the staff with a criminal record or known affiliations with a radical political or environmental group. He finds nothing that would indicate to him that there is any danger there.

Denny sits back in his chair. There's really not much more for him to do until they reach the red zone. He becomes curious, “Hathaway, why are we selling all this land to the Chinese?”

“Because the Chinese and the Japanese are about to sign a treaty that will eliminate all trade barriers between the two countries.”

“That's bad?”

Hathaway rolls his eyes at the stupidity of the question. “You're god damned right it's bad. We're in a trade war here. And the three main combatants are the United States, Western Europe, China, and Japan, right?”

“Right.”

## Vision World

“Well, figure it out. We control the Americas. The Western Europeans control Eastern Europe, Russia, and most of the old Soviet Union. The Middle East has been sucked dry. We are all cutting up Africa for whatever is left there, and the Chinese and the Japanese control all of Southeastern Asia. Now what do you think will happen if China allies itself with Japan?”

Denny pauses for a moment. He's thoughtful, and then he says, “China and Japan will control the Far East. So we have to keep the China door open, or we're in deep shit. It's trade for land.”

Hathaway aims his index finger at Denny as if it is a gun and fires one off, “You got it.”

Denny thinks about this, and he still doesn't like it. It doesn't seem right. We shouldn't be able to sell our country the way we do, but he doesn't say anything to Hathaway because Hathaway is a mercenary, and he would probably laugh in his face. Denny returns to casually monitoring the route they are taking. He can see that they are passing through Apple Grove, a replica town for tourists and retired middle level management personnel owned by Disney World. They still have a long way to go.

On Main Street, they pass by a 50's theater with a neon starburst of orange and blue and flowing electronic script that spells out the name of the theater. Across the street from The Star Theater is the Red Robin, a chrome wrap-around dinner reflecting the colors of the neon sign and the colors and images of the street and the russet tones of Hancock's, a forties hardware store that stands next to The Red and White Drug Store from the same era. In the middle of the town stands a courthouse with classic Roman columns guarded by the symbol of the American Revolution, a bronze eagle perched upon its dome. The oak and walnut trees shadow quiet lawns, and the “Real Estate for Sale” signs on many of the lawns arouse the curiosity of the Chinese on the tour bus.

At the other end of town the shapes flatten out into low slanted rooftops, extended eaves, and the elongated planes of the brown brick ranch homes of the fifties that open up to a world of picture windows, hedges, dogwood trees, and neatly mowed lawns and flower beds. This is the section of Helena where Denny lives.

Denny decides to see what his wife is doing. He taps some keys that access the surveillance system, and his wife, Heather, appears in their bedroom. She is shopping at one of the Vision World home fashion stores. With her remote control, she is able to turn the room into a mirror of cameras that reveal from every angle what she looks like as she tries on one thing after another with just the touch of a the buttons that float in the air like pretty colored bubbles.

At the moment she is trying on a black cashmere dress that shows off her legs and ass as she gracefully swirls her skirt and watches the flow of fabric as if she were caressing herself, but then with the touch of a button, the cashmere dress changes into a paper dress made like a cutout for a doll. With another touch of a button, she changes the color, length, and style of her hair. Her hair is no longer blond, flowing over her shoulder, but bobbed, jet black to match her long black lashes, sky blue eyes,

## Vision World

deep red lips, and rouged child-like cheeks.

Heather is smiling at the walls, the cameras, the millions of eyes she believes to be there. She whispers the lines that Vision World has fed her in hopes that she will be picked up for a live ad, the dream of every housewife. This is not an unrealistic dream for Heather. Vision World seems to like her, and she's been picked up for a spot-ad quite frequently. Probably because, from the beginning, Heather was a TV baby, nurtured by the Tube, fed with images of the perfect upper middle class housewife to grow into, the perfect illusion, nothing too big, nothing too small, attractive, agreeable, pleasant, always smiling, bubbly, full of life, enthusiastic. Yet, she was iron hard and willful in her relentless pursuit of the American Dream, and she was willing to ignore all the suffering in the world, the babies starving, bellies bulging pregnant with death if, for one moment, that vision endangered her picture of the perfect home. Otherwise, she's caring, concerned, charitable in a tax deductible way, willing to give of her time in token gestures of good will that she wears like precious earrings, attuned to the sound of praise, a good woman, totally out of touch with reality, the perfect subordinate, secretary, or assistant, a dream on paper and frigid in bed. She's what every lower-class woman wants to be and a role model for her peers. She's Miss America without the measurements. Most women can identify with her. Most men would like to marry her and, with the proper makeup, she's within reach for most women in the mirror.

Heather presses another button, and her hair turns sapphire blue, straight, shoulder length, long dark sapphire lashes, and green eyes. Her candy necklace turns into a silver thread with a blue sapphire stone. She whirls about, and her paper dress changes into silver polymer that clings to her skin.

The phone rings.

Heather steps naked out of the hologram. She orders the baby doll dress and the accessories to be delivered later that day then puts on a cotton robe and presses a button on the control panel. A print out appears on the screen informing her that her mother-in-law is calling. Heather instructs the system to put her mother-in-law on hold.

Denny watches Heather leave the bedroom and enter a kitchen fashioned into soft edges, pleasant symmetry, bright primary colors offsetting black enamel and a white linoleum floor. She takes out a can of crushed tomatoes, a couple of bell peppers, an onion, and cilantro from the vegetable bin, and then she arranges the ingredients on the worktable. She makes sure that all the labels are showing. Denny knows exactly what she is doing. She's setting the stage for a home kitchen show in hopes that her mother-in-law will want to play.

Heather turns on the telephone channel for the TV, and Denny's mother appears on the TV screen. She is in her room at the state home for the aged, but she is surrounded by holographic images of her past. Her room, at this moment, looks like the kitchen they had when Denny's dad was alive. Denny

## Vision World

can see the old kitchen cabinets with the oak veneer, the old coffee machine standing alone like a dinosaur of early plastique. He can even see the old refrigerator, a big block of pink enamel. Pasted on the door of the refrigerator is a decal of the sun, a yellow circle with black dots for eyes and one curved line for a smile. He had put that decal on the refrigerator when he was a child right next to the little choo-choo train magnet that still holds in place a shopping list. “Candy” is written in the scribble of a child at the bottom of the list. Mom’s hair is gray, and she has warm brown eyes and a pleasant smile. She touches her hair, and Heather picks up the cue.

“Oh, mother, you've been to the beautician.”

“Yes, dear, do you like it?”

“Very much.”

Denny's mother poses for a moment. She has that pleasing appearance of a woman who has worked hard all her life, but not too hard, who has suffered, but not too much, who has lived, but not excessively. Denny's mother was a schoolteacher, and she believes in good, but she also believes in life insurance, old age benefits, health insurance, and counting your change. These days she lives out her memories, drinks tea, watches TV, and worries about her grandchild. Denny's mother is perfectly normal, and he loves her.

Denny’s mother's eyes wander around the room, looking for something new to talk about, a new appliance, a new look, there is nothing, but then she spots the food on the work table and asks, “Are you making dinner, dear?”

“Yes, mother, I'm trying out a new chili recipe that I got from our housekeeper. She's from Guatemala. And look.” Heather reaches into the cabinet and brings out some dried chili peppers. “I got these and the cilantro from the Latin Quarter yesterday.”

“Oh, that should be nice, Heather. Can I see the recipe?”

The cameras have been programmed by Heather for a cooking show, so they first focus on the recipe, then on Heather, then the gloss of the green pepper, the voluptuous shapes she is cutting as she explains the recipe, step by step. Then the camera focuses on the yellow label in the background and the brand name, Cora, and the holographic picture on the label of bright red plum tomatoes and the rustic brown and earthen yellow color of the onions in the background, a perfect commercial still-life.

Denny's mother is smiling as she intently devours the directions into the hot spicy flavors and mysteries of Latin America, but then something very strange happens that shocks Denny. Vision World is turned off. The kitchen loses all its color, its lines, the décor, and his mother's room turns into an empty space with just a bed, a table, and a chair.

He looks at the screens. Everywhere the illusion is gone. His wife looks catatonic, as if she were in

## Vision World

a still frame. His mother puts her hands over her eyes and cries, “Oh, Heather, sometimes I feel so empty.”

For a split-second Denny gets a glimpse of what is behind Vision World, the living being that tries to pull him into the void and then is gone. Vision World goes on again, and Heather and Denny's mother go on again as if nothing has happened.

Denny turns to Hathaway and says, “What was that?”

“It's a brown out. You've never seen one before?”

“No.”

“It's not common, but in areas like this where the system is expanding so much, sometimes there just isn't enough juice.”

Hathaway turns Denny's wife off, the screen goes blank, and he says, “Let's get back to work Martino. We're getting close to the exit.”

## Chapter Five

Denny watches the tour bus pass through the geometry of the sixties and seventies, cubes transposed one upon the other like an atonal musical scale ascending to the floating tiers of Helena's modern skyscrapers that circle the parks, the bicycle paths, the ponds, the squares of the inner city with their historical shops and trolley cars, and the 1880's train station where the magnetic commuter trains speed to a stop. Out over the city, Denny can see where the terrorists struck, the gouge in the mountain. Far below the site of the explosion are the shantytowns that have grown up along the mountainside, a necklace of poverty strangling Helena.

The bus makes a turn onto the exit and descends into the inner city. This section of Helena is where luxury autos are sold to the extremely rich, and posh restaurants serve food that no one else can afford. For some reason the surveillance cameras and the computer surveillance system focused on the Peugeot Cafe, a glass and chrome tube construction where a customer can dine, lounge, sip cocktails, and buy a car. In the cocktail lounge, chrome automobile bumpers artistically welded and sculpted together form a circular bar. At the center of the bar, a futuristic prototype automobile rotates slowly so as to highlight its features, the sweeping lines, and the flow of air and light that generates energy and causes the photo-sensitive skin of the car to glow and change colors with the change of light, fire red at sunset, midnight black at night. Beyond the bar, the seating is casual, leather lounge chairs and couches with chrome frames. The floor is surfaced with refractive glass, like the lens of an old-fashioned automobile headlight.

“Hold it right there,” Denny says.

Hathaway freezes the picture.

“No, back a little bit,” Denny says

The camera tracks back.

“There. Who's that?” Denny asks. He points to a woman sitting with two men at one of the tables.

“That's Miranda Labelle, Merling's sister-in-law.”

“I thought so.”

Yes, he says to himself. I do remember her from the hit show, *Windows*. She was much younger then, but she still has those beautifully shaded eyes, the shy look, and the girlish gestures that are more artful now, graceful. She is deeply involved with the conversation, animated.

Denny turns to Hathaway, “Do you recognize the two men?”

“No, but it's obvious that they're all there for the opening.”

“Let's listen in.”

“No, we don't have time,” Hathaway says, “But I'll program the computers to monitor the conversation

## Vision World

and take some close ups of the men with Labelle. I'll do a make on them later." Hathaway gives the computers the appropriate commands then switches the focus of the cameras to Merling.

Denny hears Brad Merling say, "Twenty-five years ago, the Art Council and the American Historic Commission bought the supermarket with all its contents. We also bought every car in the parking lot. Then we sealed the supermarket and the parking lot in a vacuum shell to be opened today. Gentlemen, welcome to the Grand Opening of the Super Shopper Food Market."

Denny scans the parking lot, and he sees that the parking lot is a historical museum of cars. He smiles at the old familiar faces, the steel giants from the past with chrome teeth, life-like eyes, and wide gaping mouths that gobble up air and turn it into fire, 400 cubic inches of pure power and muscle. In between the monsters, he can see the little bugs with their hard little shells that replaced these fiery reptiles and the fierce mammals, the Cobras, the Broncos, the Mustangs, the Scorpions, the Cougars, and the Thunderbirds that roamed America's roads when men were free, long before we ran out of fire, and long after the skies darkened and the dinosaurs died.

The vehicle that Denny and Hathaway are riding in pulls to a stop, and Hathaway turns to Denny and says, "Let's go."

They hurry out of the communications vehicle and make their way to Merling who is leading the delegation into the supermarket. As they approach the entranceway, the doors of the supermarket slide open, and Denny moves quickly through the door so as to take a defensive position in front of Merling, but as he does so he almost bumps into a shopping cart being pushed by a man leaving the store.

"Excuse..." Denny stops in mid-sentence. He is looking into the face of a man whose eyes are staring beyond him, through him, to the parking lot and the monster that waits. Denny looks beyond the man and sees that the market is full of people frozen in time, people coming and going, pushing their grocery cart before them, all motion stopped, still lives.

As Denny steps around the life-like figure, he hears Merling say, "We took pictures of everyone in the store, and then we made the most characteristic of them all come back and did plaster casting of them, exactly as they were. This is how they dressed; this is how they looked."

The phantom people spook Denny. They're just too damned real. And the supermarket, the total vision, is awesome. It's like it was before the depression before the food shortages and the starvation. The room is immense. The meat section and vegetable section extend beyond belief, and there are so many things, so many colors and shapes - flowers, rows and rows of candy, canned goods, walls of soda pop.

Denny is impressed with how many overweight people there are. He looks at a woman who is blown up with fat. Her children are overweight too. The woman is dressed in a simple cotton dress, athletic socks, and nameless brown loafers. The two boys are wearing sweatshirts that advertise products in bright bold letters, jeans that have a large label on the back pocket, and sneakers that advertise with bold logos and

## Vision World

letters the product of the maker. Nobody, however, wears price tags like they do today. Denny looks into the cart and sees that it is filled with half gallon bottles of Pepsi, boxes upon boxes of cookies, TV dinners, a large box of sugared corn flakes, ice cream, huge gobs of ground beef wrapped in clear plastic that clings to the red meat.

Denny then looks into the mother's eyes, the eyes of the children, the eyes of the people in the store. They all have blank mindless stares. They seem to be in a trance, intent on their consumption of the vast amount of food being offered to them, devouring with their eyes the labels, the greens, the bloody meat, bumping into one another, forming traffic jams of shopping carts full of food.

These people were junkies, Denny thinks to himself, and the exhibit captures that era for what it was, an era of mindless consumption. They consumed anything and everything, until they consumed themselves and sold out their birth right for a handful of beads, a couple of Japanese toys, Pepsi Cola, a cart full of TV dinners, and an image of America that didn't exist. They all sold out for chump change, even the smart ones and the thin ones who bought fresh vegetables and fruit, good cheeses, and low cholesterol meat. That's as smart as they got. They're the ones with the Porches and the BMW's in the lot. And now they're riding the bus with everyone else.

As he passes into the fresh fish section of the store, Denny observes the fresh fish piled one on top of the other, all varieties from everywhere in the world featuring dead eyes, lips puckered out, all colors, dead rainbows. Even the big predators have been slaughtered, the Mako shark cut up into slices, the tentacles of an octopus all mashed together. On the far side of the counter he notices a couple with a child who is riding in the shopping cart. The man is looking down the aisle. He seems to be staring at Denny. The woman is pointing at a fish item, and the counter person seems to be intent on pleasing. Denny notices that the man has a stain between his legs. A thought flashes through Denny's mind.

Statues don't piss their pants.

Denny reacts immediately. In one single movement he pushes Merling aside and reaches for his pistol. The apparition erupts into reality and plaster shatters everywhere as Denny sees beyond the illusion to the man, the gun. The man fires wildly. Denny hears screams. He hits the man, once, twice, three times in the chest and then another apparition erupts, the woman.

A burst of fire rips into the woman, then the child. The woman crashes into the piles of fish and the fish shatter into fragments, eyeballs roll across the floor like marbles.

Denny shouts to the security guards, "Cover Merling!" Then he swings his gun around looking for another assassin to break out of the life-like figures. The supermarket has erupted. The security guards are firing at all the still lives, the shoppers, the vegetables, the meat, the rows of boxes and cans. They're terrified by the phantoms, terrified that something could be alive in here, that it could kill them, and that it could be anywhere.



## Vision World

Finally, the fire subsides, and the tension drains into an empty silence. Denny looks around and sees that the exhibit is destroyed, reduced to fragments of plaster of Paris, papier-mâché, cans riddled with bullets, boxes torn apart, empty. All that remains is the real horror of death. Denny stares at the man and woman torn apart by bullets, and then he panics. Was there really a child? He stares down into the horror, and he sees the child's head, cracked. The hand is still intact, the box, the label, the eyes. Denny is relieved to see that there is no real person inside the illusion.

Denny feels a hand on his shoulder. He hears Hathaway's voice, "Martino, it's all over. Great job."

Denny hears himself say, "Merling?"

"He's all right. But the Yuong woman ate it. That's it for this fuckin deal. Come on. You need some fresh air, soldier."

Hathaway turns Denny away from the death scene, and he walks him out of the supermarket.

Denny hears himself say, "Did anyone else get hurt?"

"Another Chink bought it, and a security guard got it bad. A couple of other people got nicked. There was a lot of loose fire in there."

"Too many ghosts."

Hathaway studies Denny for a moment, "Listen, Martino, are you all right? I've got to get the rest of the Chinese out of here."

"I'm all right."

Hathaway studies Denny for a moment more, and there's a smile on his face when he says, "Dennis Martino, you're a real live motherfucker."

Denny doesn't respond, but he feels the lack of Hathaway's presence as he walks past the cars, the stare of the monsters. He stops in front of a Volvo station wagon. He touches the hard, cold steel, the silver gray. He walks around to the driver's side and touches the door handle. It's not locked. Denny opens the door and slides into the driver's seat. He looks at the dash, the gauges, and feels the sense of being in a cockpit. The key is in the ignition. Denny starts the car and listens to the soothing throb of the motor. Those were the days when the roads were open to everyone, not just the elites. He remembers when Heather and he were young, driving a car just like this across country, free to go wherever they wanted, stop when they wanted to, camping along the way in the national parks. He remembers one night how they danced around the campfire, the doors of the car wide open, the music from the car stereo filling the empty park, drifting through the tree tops to the stars, two high notes entwined like the strings of a guitar, vibrating, making love to the sound of the falls, gravity pulling them down into the core of the fire, the silent sleep.

They woke the next day to the sound of birds chirping, and they were on the road again, the open road to freedom. How he loved this car. Denny puts his hand on the gearshift. Reverse.