

Juicy Ghost, 2020 Version

By Rudy Rucker

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This short story is a chapter from Teep, my novel-in-progress. Last year I published an earlier version of the story on my blog and in the ezine Big Echo, under the title "Juicy Ghost. 2019 Version." But now, with our difficult 2020 election coming on, I've revised and expanded my tale of a particular alternate universe that need not, I hope, be too close to ours. Vote.

I'm Curtis Winch, and this is my story.

It's completely obvious to everyone that Ross Treadle has to go, and that Sudah Mareek will make a much better President. But the Treadle Forever campaign plows on.

Supposedly there's an unswayable block of Treadlers. A stubborn turd in the national punchbowl. Not that I ever see any Treadlers. Admittedly, I'm living in a squat in Oakland, California, which is not exactly Treadle country. And all my friends are freals. But I do have to wonder if Treadle's so-called base is a scam, a figment, a sim within the media cloud.

The week before the presidential election, Treadle has an insane, two-day spike in popularity that's caused by a telepathic illness that infects people's brains. Treadle Disease. Sounds like an imaginary ailment that crazy poeple might say they have. Enemies talking in their heads, like that. But Treadle Disease is for real. And once you have it, the Forever Treadle campaign is able to transmit mood-altering chemicals into your brain. Your enemy is talking in your head.

I catch Treadle Disease when some nano percenter sneezes on me in the street. Probably on purpose. Right away I start constantly seeing Treadle's face behind my eyelids—he's grinning at me or frowning, depending how I act. I hear his songs. And it's hard to see or hear anything else.

I'm pissed off at the world and I feel like I've been screwed. I mean, I always feel this way, because it's true, but when I do it Treadle-Disease-style it's much worse. I can't think straight. It's like my mighty IQ has been cut in half.

Halloween night, I'm marching around the big plaza on Broadway in downtown Oakland, and singing Treadle anthems with the rest of the zombies, all of us controlled by Treadle Disease. We're Black, White, Latino, and Asian. We're street people and nano percenters, women and men, old and young, managers and artists. Straight, gay, bi, trans. The Treadle channel is broadcasting images of us to the nation, showing off the wondrous breadth of our mighty President's appeal.

The marchers and I are sick in the head. That's why we're here. And Treadle's hateful bullshit make good sense to us. The woman next to me is yelling a slogan.

"Free Full Gig!"

This means, as you know, that poor people should wear total-control-uvvies and be minimum-wage mind-controlled serfs for nano percenters. I myself have been known to drive a thudhumper cab wearing an uvvy for my link, but it's not like the uvvy was all the way in charge. It wasn't a Treadler-style *full* gig.

"Free Full Gig!" the woman shouts again. The slogan is getting good to her.

Brain-scrambled as I am, I agree. "Right on! Free Full Gig!"

At this particular moment we're zapped by an unseen being in the cloud—maybe you'd call her an angel. Her name is Molly. Molly beams magic spells into the brains of the victims of Treadle Disease.

I feel a tingling buzz, like I'm a glass of carbonated soda. And then, oh my brothers and sisters, the scales fall from my eyes. I feel boss. Sharp as a tack. Smart as a whip. I'm washed in the blood of the yam. Molly is our savior.

At first we don't get what's happened to us. We don't understand the disease in the first place, and we don't understand the cure. The day, November 1, the story breaks hard in the media. Lots of data and graphs and talking heads.

The Treadle Forever campaign is using wetware propaganda. Doping us. Infecting us with gossip molecules that feed us lies and pump chemicals into our skulls. And, given half a chance, the Treadlers will do it some more!

President Ross Treadle disclaims all knowledge of what his "ambitious and creative" campaign workers might have done. He's rather talk about, like, the scandal of his rival candidate Sudah Mareek having hired a nephew as an aide.

The evening of November 1, the freals stage an awesome night of riots. My

Oaktown homies and I are in the mix. We go over to San Francisco and burn the fucking Treadle Forever campaign headquarters to the fucking ground. Secret lab included.

Treadle Never.

And this is when I get recruited by the top pod of freals. I'm on Van Ness Street, enjoying the warmth of the flames, cheering my skinny ass off, and sharing in the bottles passing around—that campaign headquarters had possessed a well-stocked bar. The cops aren't bothering us any. Cops and demonstrators and firefighters are sharing a warm buzz across our uvvies, all for one and one for all. The fire's fully under control, and we freals aren't looking to bust down anything else.

"This will make for a fair election, all right," says a voice right behind me.

"Thanks for helping."

"One way another," I say, turning around. "This Tuesday, the man's boot comes off our throat."

"Well said, Curtis Winch," goes the guy. He's tall, nerdy and twitchy. A techie. I've never seen him before. I guess he picked up my name off my uvvy. He's with a lawyer-type woman and a Euro punk girl.

"We're Gee, Leeta, and Gyr," says the man. I check their uvvies. Gee's a bio teep hacker, Leeta's managerial, and Gyr says she does physical graffiti. She's Danish. They're only letting me see so much and no more.

"Are you shadowing me?" I ask. Could be that they're deep state Treadle agents.

"Don't worry," says Gee. "We're full freal. We found you with a special search tool."

"We're planning a follow-up to what Molly did," goes Leeta. "Just in case. Treadle is a sly, slippery eel."

"A lamprey with a disk of teeth," I say.

"Just so," says Gee. "You live up to your billing. We fully expected you'd be here for this incisive reprimand against the Treadlers. Molly would like you. She's a close friend of ours."

"You talking about Molly in the cloud?" I ask. "The healing angel who cured Treadle Disease?"

"She was my lover," puts in Gyr. "But just for one night. I'd hoped for more. I

still do."

"Why tell me that stuff?" I say. "It's not like I'm planning to hit on you. No need to fend me off."

"The point we're getting at is that we want you to join our new lab," says Gee. "We're starting up tomorrow."

I think that over for about a tenth of a second. "Okay." I say. "I'm low on options. Would there be room for me to sleep? A kitchen and a bath?"

"All that," says Gee. "It's a house."

The freal lab is in Oakland, near the port, in a cheap-ass, beige, trashed, two-story, 1930s cottage amid organ-grow warehouses and poor people's squats. Not all that far from where I've been surfing a couch. Turns out there's only going to be four people working in our secret new lab: bossy Leeta, biotech-whiz Gyr, and teep hacker Gee—and me, the one and only Curtis Winch.

The first day I'm at the lab Gyr gives me a little magic slug, a biot critter that she calls a psidot. Better than a standard uvvy, because it can transmit emotions. My psidot's name is Jilljill. She's yellow with red pinstripes. Shiny and slim. Quite beautiful, even though she's only an eighth of an inch long. Not much bigger than a mole or a beauty mark.

Jilljill is alive, and she can crawl around a little bit. Sometimes I take her off and study her through a magnifying glass. My old uvvy was a just dead blob of piezoplastic.

Jilljill likes to talk and to ask me questions. She says she's crafting a highly excellent and eidetic lifebox copy of my personality in the cloud. She likes to use that word eidetic. It means precise.

Gee, Gyr, and Leeta are hyping the future of lifeboxes. During the uvvy days, the lifeboxes have been kind of low-end—like resumes or family albums or blogs. But now, with the psidots, they'll get a lot better.

"The next big thing," Leeta keeps saying.

But we've got this other thing to do first. On our first few days in the lab, furniture and equipment are being delivered by shady, off-the-books freals. Criminals with stolen goods, basically. I help with unloading and setting up.

I sort of know what I'm doing. Gyr is teaching me stuff, with us connected via our

psidots. Also I attended wetware engineering lectures at UC Berkeley for a year and a half before I got suspended. Someone said I was stealing things from the lab, and I was, but it was for doing experiments in my squat. I was trying to get caught up with the kids from, like, snootster academies in Palo Alto. So I wasn't entirely in the wrong.

I could have fought the suspension, and worked my tale of woe, but by then I was tired of school, and tired of trying to morph into a yuppie larva. I went back to the street. This freal lab job is the best thing that's come along in ages.

On Election Day, the first Tuesday in November, a few days after I join the lab, Ross Treadle—lying sack of shit that he is—steals the Presidency for the third time in a row. Our democracy is dead. Nobody can believe it, and nobody knows what to do. Nobody except for us four.

Our lab kicks into high gear. For the next two and half months, Gee, Leeta, and Gyr work out our plan for striking back. For one thing we're growing all kinds of stinging creatures in gene tanks. Scorpions, cone shells, spiders, you name it. Evolving toward the nastiest one.

When Gee's not confabbing with Gyr or Leeta, he goes into the cloud, connecting with his secret server in the Santa Cruz mountains. He says he's taking care of his lifeboxes—and I'd glad he is, what with my own Curtis Winch lifebox now under his care.

Also Gee says he's still looking for that angel-in-the-cloud woman Molly. Something weird happened to her at the end of her healing broadcast. Gee says Molly turned into a being of light or maybe into an old-school ghost. He says he sees her in his dreams.

I keep on doing errands and helping with the wetware engineering. I've always been good with nano tools. And, like I say, I have good rapport with Gyr. And, just to be clear, I'll tell you there's no chance of Gyr becoming my girlfriend, even if she wasn't gay. I've never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and I'm never going to. I don't get close to people in that way.

Life story? My parents and brother and sister died when I was eight. A shoot-out at our house in Vacaville. Agents and dealers. I don't talk about it. After the kill, I moved to Oakland and grew up in the street. I had a good science-teacher in high-school, and she

felt empathy for me, and she helped me get a special UC Berkeley scholarship for the downtrodden. But I drop-kicked my chance, and slid back to the gutter. I'm not properly socialized. I don't know how to act. I don't filter what I say. I'll never fit in.

Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it.

Let's get to the historic part, starring me. It starts the morning of January 20.

A cold, blue-sky day in Washington D.C. Inauguration Day for Ross Treadle. He's been preening and swanning for two and a half months. As if he's been legitimately re-elected. As if anyone but idiots liked him.

He doesn't know it, but he's on his way out. I'm here to assassinate him. Most likely I'll die too. It'll be worth it.

The Inauguration is still a couple of hours off. Leeta and I are in the crowd around the Lincoln Memorial. The scene is beyond vast. Bigger than a three-day beach rave with free beer, bigger than a pilgrimage to Mecca, bigger than any protest that D.C. has ever seen. More than two million of us.

"A mob of freals," says Leeta, looking around. "I feel safe." Saying this, she makes a knowing *mm-hmm* sound, with her gawky mouth pressed shut. Leeta is never one to think about her looks. She's a fanatic. I am too. We have to be.

"We're going to win," I say, trying to psych myself up.

"Yes," says Leeta. "But today we have to get past a difficult transition."

"Especially difficult for me," I say. "I'm the sacrificial lamb. The suicide bomber. The kamikaze."

"Oh, Curtis," she says. "Just think of your lifebox."

Gyr implanted some special eggs into my flesh at the start of January. Today they'll hatch out and attack Treadle. And then the Secret Service will gun down my larva-chewed remains.

Supposedly having my lifebox will give me a type of immortality. The lifebox will be able to imitate me, and act like an online chatbot. It'll be an interactive Meet-the-Black-George-Washington-type thing. *Curtis Winch, martyred hero of the second American Revolution.*

I like this scenario, I have to admit. I keep running it in my head. "Tell us what it was like to take down Ross Treadle," the admiring users will say to my memorial

chatbot. They'll be in tears. "Oh thank you, Curtis," they'll say. "You're a true hero!"

But will having a lifebox make up for my body being dead? Gee and Leeta like to hint that it will, but I don't believe them. It's a pipedream. A con. Like telling loyal followers they'll live in heaven. From what I've seen, dying is like a jump-cut in a movie, but with no film on the other side of the jump. Welcome to nothing.

Even so, I've been working hard on my lifebox every day. It's all I've got. I talk to Jilljill in my head, and she continually updates my lifebox in the cloud. Words, images, thoughts, emotions, the whole thing. Jilljill uses quantum vortices to read my brain's quantum fields, and she teeps all that to Gee's secret server, down in the Santa Cruz mountains.

Not only does Jilljill store my info in the cloud, she feeds info back. She can access heavy cloud-based processing to munge my data stream. And when I'm willing to listen, she suggests what I might do next. It's sort of the opposite of having Treadle Disease, which is about white-collar criminals telling you to do things that are stupid and wrong.

So I'm lucky to have a psidot. They aren't on the open market yet—they're made by Gyr and her gang, the Dansk Junkers. You kind of have to know one of them to get a psidot. But there's licensing deals coming up, and there's also the likelihood that skeezy pirates are already making back-alley psidot knock-offs.

Gyr worries about this possibility a lot, it bothers her to think her work might be copied in a shoddy way. As for Gee, he just wants everyone to get a psidot any old way. He thinks teep will make the world a better place. As for Leeta—her angle is transactional. She wants to cut deals with every single player in the game.

Speaking of players, there's one who I didn't mention yet. Carson Pflug. A creepy, pale, young weasel who starts coming by our lab during the last week. He's negotiating something for Leeta. In return he wants to glom onto whatever biz she sets up. I don't like Carson. Shit, he's even from the Midwest. I'm glad he's not here with us at the Inauguration today.

Stop ranting, Curtis. Tell your tale.

Okay, yeah, here I am with a big crowd of freals by the Lincoln Memorial. Jilljill shows me an image of Gee Willikers. He's excited, more excited than I've ever seen him.

Flat-out Messianic.

"You're immortal," Gee tells me. "It's finally real." I figure he's shining me on so I'll do the hit. Thanks to teep, he knows I'm thinking this, and for him that's something else to giggle about. He's not a normal person at all.

"Spare me the bogosity of hope," I tell him. "I'm ready to do the job."

"But you need to know about today's upgrade!" babbles Gee. "Your lifebox will be truly alive. It won't just be a chatbot in the cloud. Why? I found a way to give a lifebox a soul. Yes. If lifebox is connected to a psidot that's connected to a living being—well, then the lifebox can leech off some soul. And it becomes something different. It's a *juicy ghost*. Like it? Juicy ghost, man. This my best teep hack ever, Curtis." Gee snorts and whinnies. "I'm like God."

"Be quiet, Gee." I'm kind of laughing at him. Comic relief, but who needs it.. I tune him out.

Freals are streaming in via the Memorial Bridge, down Constitution and Independence Avenues, piling out of the Metro stops, walking in along the side streets and the closed-down highways by the Potomac. Cops and soldiers stand by, but they're not trying to stop us. They're working people too. Low-income city folks. By now a lot of them hate Treadle too. Him getting to be President again is an unacceptable error in our political system. And I'm here to rectify it.

Our crowd swirls around stone Abe Lincoln on his stone chair in his stone temple. We mass along the reflecting pool, as far as the Washington Monument—but not yet onto the Mall. Armed troops are in place near the Monument to prevent the demonstrators from getting closer to the Capitol.

My psidot Jilljill is picking up on the media, and she shows me how the Mall itself is blanketed with actual, for-real Treadlers—deluded, sold out, in thrall to an insane criminal, awaiting the mummery of his noon Inauguration.

What would it take to change their minds?

We freals are zealous and stoked, filled with end-times fervor and a sense of apocalypse. We're rarin' for revolution. Ross Treadle's opponent Sudah Mareek is standing atop one of Lincoln's stone toes. She's shouting and laughing and chanting—wonderfully charismatic. Her voice is balm to my soul, and she's calming Leeta too. The

whole reason we two didn't go straight to the Capitol steps is because we need to see Sudah get her own Inauguration. This is the real one.

Sudah Mareek did in fact win the election—both the popular vote, and the House of Electors. But somehow Treadle turned it all around, and his packed Supreme Court took a dive. Treadle says he'll charge Sudah with treason once he's sworn in. He says he'll seek the death penalty.

But the freals are inaugurating Sudah just the same. We have one supporter on the Supreme Court, and she's here to administer the oath of office. She's tough and old, our justice in her black robe, and she's brought along Abe Lincoln's Bible.

We fall silent, drinking it in. The Presidential Oath—short, pure and real. Sudah's clear voice above the breathless crowd. I'm absorbed in my sensations, The trees against the sky, the cold air in my lungs, the pain in my flesh, the scents of the bodies around me. We're real. This isn't a play, and not a show. It's the Inauguration of the next President of the United States.

For a moment the knot of fear in my chest is gone. This is going to work. Our country is going to be free. We cheer ourselves hoarse.

Hatch time is near. Leeta and I have to haul ass to the Capitol steps so I'll be close enough to terminate Treadle. And everyone else wants to head that way too. The crowd rolls forward like lava. But there's the small matter of those armed troops at the Washington Monument. They're in tight formation.

"Let's skirt around them," I suggest to Leeta.

But the side streets are blocked by troops as well. We're like a school of fish swimming into a net, that is, into a U-shaped cordon of soldiers. They have shock batons, water-cannons, tear-gas, and rifles with bayonets. Behind them are trucks, armored battle wagons, and even some tanks. Old, non-biot equipment, made of metal.

Leeta and I approach the troops along the right edge of the crowd. Armed men and women, all races. Leeta pitches our case, testing them out.

"Sudah Mareek is our President," she calls, sweetening her voice. "We just inaugurated her. Did you hear the cheers?"

"Move along," mutters a woman soldier, not meeting our eyes.

"*We're* your friends," I put in. "Not Treadle. He's screwing us. He hates us all."

Behind me the crowd of freals is chanting. "We're you. You're us. Be free."

"Be freal," echoes Leeta, reaching out to touch the woman soldier's shoulder.

"You don't need the gun."

"Let's do it," says the brother at her side. He throws his bayonet-tipped rifle to the earth. "Yeah. This thing's too heavy."

The woman does the same, and so does the guy next to her, and the woman next to him drops her rifle too—it's like a zipper coming undone. A whole row of the soldiers is defecting. Going rogue. Treadle will call them traitors.

A few soldiers stand firm. They spray a water cannon, knocking down freals and muddying the ground. Some teargas shells explode. A couple of hotheads fire automatic rifle bursts into the air. But the flurry damps down.

The soldiers aren't into it. They don't want to kill us. We're people like them. This stage of the revolution is a gimmie. Hundreds of thousands of us chant as one.

"We're you. You're us. Be free."

The soldiers whoop and laugh. Bopping and grab-assing like they're off-duty. Some freals try and tip over one of the old, internal-combustion Army tanks, but it's way too heavy. One of soldiers, some wild hillbilly from Kentucky, he breaks out a crate of magnesium flares. He and his buddies go around prying open fuel-tank caps and shoving in flares. Low thuds as the gas-tanks explode, one after the other. The rising plumes of smoke are totems of freedom.

We cheer our incoming President. "Sudah. Sudah. Sudah. Sudah."

A pyramid of freals holds the small woman high in the air. She's waving and smiling. She's the one who won. She's ours. In my head, my psidot shows me the news commentators going ape. *Treadle's faked election, political U-turn, people's revolution, President Mareek.*

And now Treadle's goons strike back. Two banana-shaped gunship choppers converge on the Washington Monument. Like vengeful furies. Men with massive machineguns stand in the choppers' big, open doors. They lay down withering fusillades, shooting into our crowd.

The gunships are painted with Treadle's personalized Presidential seal. The pilots and crews are from the Chief's palace guard. Dead-enders. Pardoned from death row,

recruited from narco gangs, imported from the Russian mafia.

It's insane. Next to me a man's head explodes like a pumpkin. Am I next?

"Asymmetric attack on unarmed demonstrators," mutters Leeta. "Stop screaming. Curtis. Use your psidot."

Good idea. And I hadn't noticed I was screaming. Jilljill overlays my visual field with images of the bullets' paths. A hard rain. Simultaneously, she's computing our safest way forward, showing me a glowing, shifting path on the ground. I take Leeta's hand and lead her.

We come to a cluster of renegade soldiers who've salvaged a rocket bazooka from a charred tank. A dark, intent sergeant raises the tube to her shoulder.

Jilljill brings the nearest chopper's path into focus. I see the dirty bird's past trajectory as an orange tangle. And I'm seeing its dotted-line future path too. Jilljill is using cloud crunch to estimate what's next.

"There," I advise the sister with the launcher, pointing. "Aim there."

Whoosh!

And, *hell* yeah, our canny missile twists through the air like live thing, homing in on Treadle's hired killers.

Fa-tooom!

The chopper explodes like a bomb. Shards of metal go pinwheeling, as if from an airborne grenade. The blazing craft hits the ground with a broken thud that I feel in the soles of my feet. The second chopper flees, racketing into a wide loop above the Potomac.

"That's *my* vote!" whoops the sister, pumping the bazooka in the air. "Count *that* one! For President Sudah,"

Seeing that chopper go down is like winning a round in a videogame. But this game has a ticking clock. My parasites twist in my flesh, ever closer to my skin. I need to be at the other end of the Mall when Treadle mounts his rostrum.

The blockade of troops up ahead has dissolved. At our end, a lot of the freals have fled back toward the river. Many of those who remain are tending to the wounded amid the dead. Fire trucks and wailing ambulances arrive.

In the chaos, Leeta and I pass readily to the verge of the Mall, and from there we

press forward toward the Capitol, filtering through the Treadle base. They're striving to maintain an air of festivity—even after the rush of freals, the troops' desertions, the massacre, and the downing of the chopper—even now they try. Bundled against the January cold, they've laid out their pitiful, celebratory picnics. They wave their Treadle signs, and draw their groups into tighter knots, doing their best to ignore the bitter, embattled revolutionaries around them.

Leeta's good with crowds. She eels through the human mass, finding the seams, working our way up the Mall. I trail in her wake. Soon we're within thirty yards of the the Capitol steps. The dignitaries are in place. The charade is still on. Treadle is about to appear. And the Secret Service agents are watching me. God knows I stick out in this White crowd.

"I bet dying will be easier than you expect," Leeta whispers to me. Her idea of encouragement.

A wave of dizziness passes over me. As if I'm seeing the world through thick glass. Those things in my flesh—they're leaking chemicals into my system. Steroids, deliriant, psychotomimetics.

"What are we *doing*?" I moan. "Why?"

"You'll be a hero," Leeta murmurs, iron in her voice. "Be glad." She leans even closer. Her whisper is thunderous in my ear. "The Secret Security knows. *Mm-hmm.*" She nods as if we're discussing personal gossip. Her bony forehead bumps mine. "They hate Treadle too. It's all set. They're actually paying our expenses. Carson arranged it."

"Carson Pflug? And I'm your patsy. Sacrifice the Black man, sure. What if I change my mind?"

"Don't fuss," says Leeta. She rolls her eyes toward the strangers pressed around us. To make it all the creepier, Leeta is displaying a prim, plastered-on smile. Her voice is very low. "Be a good boy or they'll shoot you early. And then Treadle lives. We can't have that, *hmm*?"

In my head Jilljill is jabbering advice I can't understand. Mad, skinny Gee Willikers is in my head too. He's so elated that he's unable to say three sentences without bursting into laughter. I hate him and I hate Leeta and I even hate my psidot.

Fresh insect hormones rush through me. My disorientation grows. The critters

within my flesh are splitting out of their pupas and preparing to take wing. Eight of them.

On the rostrum, Treadle takes his oath. He might as well be saying, "Ha ha, I'm President again, so fuck you." And then he's into his Inauguration speech, in full throat, hitting his stride, spewing lies and fear and hatred and stupidity.

"Well?" nudges Leeta.

"It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done," I intone, quoting the Charles Dickens novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, which is, like, the only literary classic I ever read in my life. I know I'm going to kill Treadle, and I'm trying to rise above the seamy details of our conspiracy. Aspiring to class. "It is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known."

"You got *that* right," says callous Leeta.

Weird how my whole life has led up to this point. "There's this thing about time," I tell her. "You think something will never happen. And then it does. And then it's over." I pause and peek inside my shirt. Bumps and welts shift beneath my skin.

"Trigger them!" hisses Leeta.

"*Whoa!*" exclaims a Treadler at my side. A mild-eyed old man with his leathery, white-haired wife. He's staring at a wriggly lump on my neck. "Are you okay? Do you need help?"

"Allergy," I wheeze. "Overwrought. I'll be okay when—"

I'm interrupted by a shrieking clatter. It's that second chopper. It's attacking the freals and soldiers and medics around the Washington Monument. We all turn and stare as the whirlybird stitches fresh gunfire into the ragged band.

"Done at my command," intones Treadle, raising his heavy arm to point. "I keep my promises." He juts his chin. "We're gunning for Sudah Mareek. She meets justice today."

Hoarse, savage cheering from the Treadlers. It's horrible to see my fellow citizens so debased. They're mirroring Treadle. I have to kill him. But, wait, wait, wait, I want to see how the scene at the Monument plays out.

And now I hear what I'm hoping for.

Whoosh!

Yes. The rebel soldiers have launched another rocket.

Fa-tooom!

The blasted second chopper corkscrews along a weirdly purposeful arc. As if it's remotely controlled. The hulk smashes directly against a face of the Washington Monument. Jilljill is feeding me close-up images.

"Bonus points," goes Gee Willikers in my head. He titters. Sick gamer that he is. "Part of our plan," he continues. "We pin this on Treadle."

Gee hacked into the falling chopper's controls? The plot's strands are choking me.

Cracks branch across the Washington Monument's surface. Bits of marble skitter down the obelisk's pitiless slope. The Monument's tip sways, vast and slow. People are scattering. The upper part of the great plinth moves irrevocably out of plumb. It tilts and speeds up, like a special effect, like the twin towers.

The impact is a long, intricate crash—followed by thin, high screams. A veil of dust. A beat of silence. I'm sick with guilt. And so very weary of being human.

Leeta is screaming into my face. "Do your job, god damn you! Now!"

"Get Treadle," I say at last. It's the trigger phrase. I don't say it very loud, but it's loud enough to matter.

Within my flesh, the hymenoptera hear. Ragged slits open on my neck, my chest, my belly, my arms. The pain is off the scale. I shed my coat and my shirt. The bloody, freshly-fledged, bio-tweaked wasps emerge. Eight of them, big guys, each of them two inches long.

For a moment they balance on their dainty, multijointed legs, preening their antennae, shaking the kinks from their iridescent wings. Their handsome, curved abdomens resemble motorcycle gas-tanks. They have prominent stingers and bejeweled, zillion-lensed eyes. They're preternaturally alert.

Leeta slinks off, with no goodbye. The cuts in my flesh are pumping bright blood. The Treadlers around me point and shout. The wasps race up my torso, across my face, and onto the crown of my head. Seven of them rise in flight. A small, lethal swarm.

My job is done.

Or maybe not. Gee Willikers is hollering inside my head. "Your psidot! Put it on the last wasp!" I see a mental image of tiny Jilljill the psidot on the back of my neck. And

I note the laggard eighth wasp. My mind projects a target spot onto the wasp's rear end, the plump, striped abdomen, the part that Gyr calls the gaster. .

I move my hand to the back of my neck, and Jilljill hops onto the tip of my finger. I bring my hand near the wing of the target wasp, and the psidot springs into place on the wasp's gaster.

The wasp is pissed off. She stings my finger. Numbness flows up my arm and toward my heart. The wasp venom contains curare, you understand, plus conotoxin. A custom cocktail for Treadle.

My vision grows dark. I'm an empty husk, a ruptured piñata—poisoned and bleeding. And, ah yes, there's the matter of the Secret Service. They're good shots. They might want Treadle out, and maybe Carson Pflug made a deal with them, but right now they've got to do their thing. For the sake of appearances. For an orderly transition.

I go down in a hail of bullets, limbs flailing, flesh torn. A fitting end.

Last thought? I hope the wasps sting Treadle. And then I'm dead.

At this point my narrative has a glitch. Remember the jump-cut thing I was talking about? Well, it turns out that, for me, there *is* some film on the other side of the jump. Granted, the all-meat Curtis Winch is terminally inoperative. But—

I wake, confused. I look down into myself. I've got my same old white-light soul. My sense of me watching me watching the world. I'm hallucinating a little bit. I feel like I'm in a crumbling, old, Victorian mansion with junk in the rooms, and with paintings leaning on the walls, and doors that don't properly close. There aren't any windows. Somebody's in here with me. A jittery silhouette against a glowing Tiffany lamp. Gee Willikers. This isn't actually a house. It's a lair inside a cave. And Gee is showing me around.

"You're a juicy ghost now, Curtis! A lifebox linked to bio host via a psidot. Play it right, and you'll keep going for centuries." A compulsive snicker. "Def cool, Mr. Guinea Pig."

I try to form words. "Where..."

"Your soul is a parasite, dude. An info virus. A lifebox with a psidot connected to a wasp. Holy malware. To score that inner light, you use any old live host. Glom onto the axons and the retarded potentials. Slurp up the ectoplasm and mysto quantum steam and

all that other good shit. ”

“Wasp?”

“Duh? The one you stuck Jilljill on?” Gee makes a trumpeting sound with his lips, then speaks again. “Juicy ghost!”

“You were wrong to topple the Monument,” I tell him. “A lot of people died.” No response. The guy is ruthless, and he feels no guilt. Duly noted.

This junked, phantasmal suite of rooms inside a cave—I realize it’s Gee’s secret mad-scientist retreat, up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I can see his server outside the open mouth of the cave. The server is a two-hundred-foot-tall redwood tree, and Jilljill shows me that the inner core of the redwood is a glowing shaft of pale green light. The soul of the tree. My operating system and my data base are in there. My lifebox. My juicy ghost. Co-designed and maintained by Gee Willakers. He’s still here watching me, wearing a crooked grin. He’s talking to me through some kind of camera.

“Go for it, Curtis. Plug all the way into that wasp’s nervous system. Hurry before it’s too late. Gotta save the day, man.”

Wanting to stay in the game, I look around this grotty, overstuffed parlor inside a cave, seeking for the plug that connects to the wasp, wanting to stay juicy and, even more than that, wanting to join the attack on Treadle.

“Over there,” goes Gee. “See the smelly rope? Like a tasseled curtain-pull in a Gold Rush saloon? All thick and twisted and dank?”

I fixate on the object and, just like that, I’ve jacked myself into full intimacy with the wasp’s mind. It’s more than sharing her ectoplasmic life force. I’m seeing through her eyes. And controlling her body. *I am the wasp.*

I join the rest of the wasps. They’re eddying around Treadle. He’s bellowing, dancing around, slapping himself. Fighting for his life. He has foam on his lips, like a rabid dog. My fellow wasps are landing on his face, his fat neck, his wattles. But Treadle is swatting them before they sting. Jesus Christ, he’s killed five of them. There’s only two more besides me left..

The evil one’s roars are taking on a tone of triumph. He smacks the sixth wasp against his skull. I can’t let him win. His shirt is untucked. A button is loose. I spy a patch of skin.

Meanwhile the last of the other seven wasps lands on the nape of Treadle's neck. She's got a good shot. But—goddamit—before she can sting, our remarkably nimble prey whips hand over to her and pinches off her head.

Treadle roars in triumph. He thinks he's killed all the wasps. But now he hears the whine of my wings; he sees the blur of my motion. With a frightened grunt, he tries to snatch me from the air. With my cloud-based augmentations, I have no trouble evading him.

I arrow into the opening in his shirt, and land on his bare chest, very near his heart. He knows I'm in there. Desperately he slaps at his body. But he'll never get me. I position my gaster, with my little psidot Jilljill resting on top. I pause to savor the moment. Treadle raises his arm to swat again. He's yelling a threat. It's time.

I sting—I sting, sting, sting.

Treadle's voice changes, as if his tongue is turning stiff. His volume fades. He's wobbly on his pins. He totters backwards and falls. A final groan. Silence.

It is finished.

With nervous wings, I escape the folds of his shirt and spiral high into the air. I hover above the speakers' stand, two hundred feet high.

For a moment the crowd is still. Some are sobbing. But then the cheering begins. Freals and soldiers are leading Sudah Mareek forward through the crowd. Sudah is going to be President. Everyone knows it. Everyone understands. And in the whiplash intensity of the moment, the Treadlers are converting to Sudah's cause. The crowd roars as one.

Sudah mounts the dias and swears again the oath she swore at the Lincoln Memorial. The massed politicians applaud. Treadle's proposed Vice-President bows out. Sudah's Vice-President emerges from the Capitol, just in time. They swear her in. Our coup is more organized than I knew.

Gee Willikers is talking to me. He's ecstatic. "Secret Service is on our side, dude. The armed forces are on board. Congress is down with it. Done deal."

I feel a shifting sensation. A doubleness of vision. A group of freals is carrying my bloody, broken form up the Capitol steps. They hold my remains high, heedless of the dripping gore. Wave after wave of applause. Sudah Mareek and her Veep salute my ruined body.

"Curtis Winch, martyred saint of the second American Revolution!"

"Do I have to keep being a wasp?" I ask Gee.

"Glue your psidot wherever you want," he says.

"Another host?"

"How about somebody in this crowd," suggests Gee. "That Treadler babe in the trucker hat?"

"Idiot," I snap. "Can you get the fuck out of my head?"

"Sure," goes Gee.

"Oh, and don't forget to post a chatbot version of me for the Curtis Winch memorial."

"It's already online," Gee tells me. "The chatbot is a special front end for your real, actual lifebox. The front-end is like a polite face you'd put on for talking to goobs. All the incriminating, intimate, too-real-for-prime-time goodies are filtered out. Took me about ten minutes to set it up."

"Shit, Gee. "

"Your memorial's up to twenty million hits. Viral flash mob, Curtis. User tsunami."

"I hope they can't actually find me. Can't track my psidot. Can't tell where the lifebox is stored. I want to stay dark."

"You're fully obfuscated. I ran you an aleatory scramble with a Mandelbutt tail. And—you want me out of your head? To hear is to obey, oh noble Saint Curtis." Gee makes a wiggly hand gesture—and he's gone.

Shrilling my wings, I buzz on beyond the Capitol. On my own, feeling good, savoring the ectoplasmic soul of my insect host. My psidot Jilljill remains perched on the wasp's gaster.

My compound eyes are reflexively hypervigilant, watching for hungry birds, but there's none around. I make my way into a residential neighborhood northeast of the Capitol. I fly until it shades from gentrified to tumble-down. I spy a mutt on a cushion in a back porch. A collie-beagle mix, mostly cream-colored, with an orange ear and a big orange spot on his back like a saddle.

There's noise all over the neighborhood, and people are running around cheering.

The news is out. But that dog looks like he's sound asleep.

Gently, gently I land beside his head. Mustn't wake him or he'll start snapping at me. Hell, I'm a two-inch wasp!. Moving with an insect's robotic deliberation I stilt-walk into the shadow of his floppy orange ear. Creeping forward along the dirty sofa cushion, I spot a waxy patch of bare skin within the opening of the dog's inner ear.

"Hop," I tell Jilljill.

Another jump cut. And then, yes, my mind is percolating into the dog's nervous system. I'm in.

I stand, shake my body, and bark.

Joyful. Free.

I've still got my line to my lifebox on Gee's server open—gotta do that, because my lifebox is my mind. And my link to the dog's nervous system is open too—he's my body. But other than that, I've got my teep powers cloaked, so nobody around here picks up on me. For sensory input, I'm depending on whatever this dog takes in.

I hear a rising sound of voices from the houses all around. People are very, very excited about what I did at the Capitol, yes! I bark a little more.

Oops, someone grabs me from behind. It's a ten-year-old sister with her curly brown hair pulled up to make an afro-puff crest. Like a soft mohawk.

"Woofers!" she cries. "What you barking at, fool? That big old wasp flying around? You lucky he didn't sting you." She pushes me over on my side and rubs my chest. "Bad loud dog. Nasty old dog. Woofers dog. Did you hear the news, Woofers? President Treadle's dead!" She whoops.

Reflexively I writhe, and stretch my neck, and try to lick her face, but she keeps out of reach. "You want to come to the park, boy? Do you, Woofers?"

I stand and give myself another shake. This seems to be something that I'm going to do whenever I'm mentally changing gears. Shake it! Inside Woofers's ear, my psidot Jilljill hangs on for dear life.

"Come on, Loranda!" calls a woman from the house. I hear jubilation in her rich voice. "We gonna celebrate. It's our time to rise and to shine. The bad man is gone! Put a leash on that dog so he don't run off."

Loranda has a firm grip on my collar. I don't like the idea of a leash. The

consequences of Treadle's death are unfolding like a fast-forward rose, cascading like an avalanche, surging like a tsunami from an H-bomb test. No telling what's next. I might need to flee. But I do like being with Loranda and her Mom. It would be nice to settle in with them for a few days.

Crowds of people are on the street—dancing, laughing, hugging, weeping, and playing trumpets and trombones and drums and tambourines and even tubas. A carnival. Someone starts lighting firecrackers, and that hurts my ears. I howl, yank my leash free of Loranda, and run.

"Hold up, Woofers," she calls, right on my heels. "You stick with me!"

After a block I pause, and loll my tongue and look up trustingly. I try gently teeping to Loranda's uvvy, sending a subliminal plea that she unclip my leash. And she does it. I don't think she consciously notices my teep—I think she's just used to her and Woofers understanding each other.

"Let's run to the park," Loranda tells me. "See you there, Mom!"

What a crowd. Everyone's dazed and amazed. An hour ago, Treadle was about to assume his third term in office. And now—people are waving posters of Sudah Mareek. Word is, Sudah has already dissolved Treadle's core of secret police, and she's grounded his private army. And the officers who ordered the chopper attacks on the demonstrators are in the brig.

I've never felt so proud. I'm dog-grinning with my tongue hanging out, and I'm sticking close by Loranda's side. She gets hold of a couple of burgers, and hands me one. I shake loose the tasteless bun and wolf the meat.

It's good being a dog. So many smells! The feet, the legs, the cooking food, and, ah, the other dogs. A lot of them are off leash like me, and they're not at all shy about coming over to sniff me and rub against me. One feisty little beagle mutt puts his front legs on my rear end and makes as if to hump me. Jerky spastic twitches of orgone energy. I let out a low growl and sidestep away.

Still with me, the beagle sniffs my neck and echoes my growl. I make as if to nip him. He dodges, then throws his forepaws onto my back again. I flip him onto his side. Stand over him snarling. *Who's the boss now?* He offers his stomach in a gesture of surrender. I turn around and paw the ground with my rear feet, kicking shreds of grass his

way. He yips, regains his feet, and goes for my neck again—but now a third dog moves in on us, a shabby terrier, a lascivious, importunate butt-snuffer.

Somehow the terrier reminds me of the English professor I had during my year at college—the way the man would go on and on about what my semi-deranged essays might mean, when really I'd written them on autopilot. I snarl at the terrier, and I run off, with my two new playmates pursuing me. Like a dance. Such fun.

Suddenly I hear Gee talking in my head again. My psidot cloak function doesn't keep *him* out. "You should know that Treadle was wearing a psidot when you killed him," says Gee. "Jilljill and I noticed it on his neck when you closed in on him. The motherfucker was backing himself up on a lifebox all along."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to distract you from the kill. And then, well, I wanted to think about our next step before telling you. Also you *did* say I should leave you alone. For a while. So I gave you an hour."

Right about then, that horndog terrier gets his cold nose right up against the bare skin of my buttock. Freaked by Gee's news as I am, I make a fully serious effort to bite the English-professor-type dog as hard as I can, but he ducks me. And even now he doesn't retreat. He circles around, waiting for another go. He's not done savoring my smell, and I'm expected to indulge him. Dog etiquette.

"You're getting good at this," says Gee, kind of amused.

"What do you want from me?" I demand. "Can the Treadlers hear you and me talking? Are they going to find me?"

Geek that Gee is, he numbers the parts of his answer. "(1) You have to do a follow-up—you have to erase Treadle's lifebox. (2) Treadle's goons can't *remotely* crack our comm channel. (3) They're using ultra-hi-res satellite surveillance to follow you. Butt simple. I hadn't realized they'd do that. They watched your wasp fly to Woofers. They know you're here."

"Bad news."

"(4) They're coming for you right now. (5) If they get *physical possession* of your psidot, then they *can* crack our crypto, and they'll back-track to my server, and they'll destroy your lifebox. (6) Treadle will come back to life, and you'll be all-the-way dead."

"No! What do I do?"

"Don't let Jilljill get caught."

A maroon thudhumper car is in the park. It's driving toward me across the grass. A white Treadler agent is leaning out with a gun. The celebrants in the park aren't having this. They run at the car, kicking it's meaty flanks. Dozens of brothers and sisters mass together. They roll the thudhumper over, yeah! Sudden gunshots sting my ears. That Treadle guy in there is not gonna get me. I'm safe.

But—wait—all at once someone grabs my collar. It's not Loranda, it's some random brother. But Jilljill flashes me the news that the man is an underground Treadler. The thudhumper car was a distraction.

I'm going *ki-yi-yi* as loud as I can. Loranda's Mom is hollering at the underground Treadler. Loranda is shoving him. Mom punches the man in the gut. The brother's grip weakens. I twist free. And here comes my terrier prof, right on me, nuzzling my ear.

"Hop!" I tell Jilljill.

She's ready for the move, already out on the edge of Woofers ear.

Jump cut!

Jilljill has fastened herself to the terrier's tongue. I'm in.

My name is Cuthbert. Keeping my psidotted tongue in my mouth, I trot over to my owner, a lean, dapper brother with horn-rimmed glasses and a drop-dead-elegant light-weight tweed suit. He's sitting on a bench, enjoying the sqwonks of an impromptu jazz band. I take shelter under the bench, between his fine leather shoes, looking around. I know the satellite's still watching. They will think of the terrier. I need to hop some more.

Here comes a poodle, peering under the bench, sniffing me. I lick her nose.

Jump cut.

Fifi's mistress walks her off. Madame pauses so Fifi can greet a passing stray.

Jump cut.

The stray takes me into some dense bushes where other homeless mutts are eating garbage, digging holes, growling, napping, and fitfully trying to mount each other. These dogs are unseen by the eye in the sky. I hop.

I urge my rangy new host into a culvert beneath some railroad tracks, and in there I hop to another dog—a glossy, medium-size, short-haired, warm-colored hound with no collar and a tail that he holds unattractively high. What people call a yellow dog. I've never much liked yellow dogs, but I try not to communicate this to my host. He doesn't seem to have a given name, so I name him after certain sound he makes. Shrill Yelp. Jilljill is perched on the bare skin inside Shrill Yelp's ear, the same as she did with Woofer.

I'm still cloaked against casual teepers, and still open to Gee. He's got some kind of plan. For starters, he's got me heading uphill toward the mansions near the Capitol. I move casually and unobtrusively, along fences and under bushes, sniffing everything, taking my time.

"I hacked a backdoor into that spy satellite," Gee tells me. "So I know where they're at. And they've totally lost track of you. Good dog."

My spirits lift. Shrill Yelp and I continue up the hill, moving along a grassy back lanes, turning left and right according to Gee's prompts.

"Does this part of my excellent adventure go onto my Memorial Site?" I ask him.

"Not posting this part yet!" says Gee with one of his giggles. "Maybe later. But if we don't finish off Treadle—you won't have a memorial site at all. You'll be an unperson. Erased from history."

"Fuck that! This is my play for stardom. What do we do?"

"You're almost at the mansion of Treadle's Attorney General, Chuck Popham. Chuck and his wife Lucy. They have a dachshund named Friedl. They set great store by that dog. A few times a day the housekeeper Candace sends Friedl into the back yard to do her doody. There's a hole under the fence. We want you to switch over to Friedl. Put Jilljill onto her."

"And then?"

"Once you and Friedl are in the house, you get hold of Treadle's psidot. He's called Wladimir. Looks like a gray ladybug. He's still live, still connected to Treadle's lifebox in the Soviet KGB cloud."

"Wladimir the Treadle psidot is in the house sitting on a counter? Or what?"

"You'll see," goes Gee. "I don't want you overthinking this. Once you get hold

of Wladimir, your psidot Jilljill will be on him like stink on shit."

"Real folksy, Gee. We're sure Jilljill will win?"

"Wladimir is a first gen psidot. Somebody stole him from the Junker labs last month. Jilljill is much better. She has Molly's upgrades."

"I'll crush Wladimir," puts in Jilljill, sounding tough, graceful, and confident. "I'll run a vortex thread through Wladimir and all the way to Treadle's lifebox in the KGB lab."

"I love you, Jilljill," I say. "I believe."

"Stop walking now," says Gee. "The Popham mansion is right here."

The Pophams have three garbage cans and a dumpster. I piss on them one by one, lifting Shriell Yelp's leg four times. Rationing my elixir. Odd that they'd need a big dumpster.

A calico cat in a red collar chances past. I run after her. I nearly catch her. She yowls. I love it. The cat disappears through a hole under the Pophams' white-painted wooden fence, which is a little rotten at the bottom. There's a dense, spreading pine tree overhead, covering the fence and part of the yard.

I stick my nose through the hole and I sniff. The cat bats my snout with her paw. I growl really hard. She climbs onto the top of the fence and studies me, impassive and aloof. Her eyes are yellow. I claw at the hole in the fence to make it bigger. This is fun. How would it be if I were to inhabit a long succession of grubby, mindless dogs—for years and years and years?

"Curtis!" Gee's still on my case.

"What."

"You're doing good. Make the hole bigger. But don't go into the yard until Friedl comes."

I claw at the fence some moe, and I even bite into it and twist my snout to tug off some chunks. Pretty soon I can get my whole head through. The cat's on the back steps. I wonder if she lives here. Otherwise the yard is empty and nobody else is watching. Good luck to have that pine overhead. I'm hoping the satellite doesn't see me.

The hole still isn't quite large enough, but I don't want get too obvious. So I dig at the damp dirt beneath it, doing a full-on dog thing, clawing with my front paws, and

tossing the dirt back between my rear legs. As I work, my tail is tense and trembling.

The dirt is black. It's full of decayed leaves and pill-bugs. It smells good. Pretty soon I've made a nice little trough. When it's time, I can slip through. I settle down under a holly bush on the other side of the alley, out of sight.

Before I know it, I've fallen asleep. It's been a crazy day for me and for Shriill Yelp both.

What kind of dreams do you have when you're a lifebox connected to a psidot connected to a dog? Well, I dream about chasing a rabbit. My legs twitch in my dream. Vintage dog action. Something odd about that *rabbit*. She glows. She pauses and looks back at me. Her face is—

"Psst! Curtis!" Fuckin Gee. He'll never leave me alone.

I hear yipping, and I hear the jingling of collar tags. Friedl! Body low, I skulk over to the hole in the fence and peer through. There's Friedl, shiny in that greasy dachshund kind of way. She's a nice chestnut color, with fine features and golden highlights. She's in the middle of the lawn, slightly hunkered to take a pee.

"Get ready," I teep to Jilljill. I feel her creeping out to the edge of my ear.

I wriggle half-way through the hole in the fence, then pause, flat on my belly. Friedl goes on the defense. She barks staccato-style, her voice high. She makes a run at me, coming to a stop three feet away. She braces her legs, and lowers her head. Her barking grows more furious. The housekeeper's not bothering to come out. Probably Friedl has a fit like this every time she goes outside.

I tense my muscles and spring. Friedl doesn't expect this. She's surprised how large I am. She squeals and turns to flee, but I'm on her. I knock her onto her side. I rub my head against hers. Ear to ear.

Jump cut.

Jilljill is in Friedl's ear, and my mind is inside the dog's body. I trot quietly towards the house. I sense that the cat is still watching me, but I can't quite see where she is. Never mind. My dachshund body language is, like, *What barking? Me? Nothing going on here*. For his part, Shriill Yelp decides this a bad scene. He's goes out through the hole and heads down the alley.

At first I can't get up the back porch steps, but then I relax and let Friedl do it.

She knows how. She moves like an old-time Slinky toy in reverse. At the top, Friedl scratches the door. And here's the housekeeper, a sister in jeans and a turtleneck. Candace.

She gives me a nice smile and hands me a dog treat—a little baked biscuit in the shape of a bone. I savor the sensations of Friedl crunching it up. She works the treat to her back teeth to apply real pressure, and she licks the frags off the the gleaming hardwood floor.

Studying what I can see of the kitchen through Friedl's eyes, I notice a restaurant-sized fridge and stove, plus a very wide and heavy-duty staircase leading to the basement. How many people live here?

I hear a rumble of voices from a room beyond the kitchen. A woman and two men. That second man—his voice—what the fuck? I trot across the kitchen, down the hall, and pause in the shadows, peering into the room.

Yep. Ross Treadle sits on a leather couch next to Chuck and Lucy Popham. All two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of him. I can smell him as soon as I stick my head in there. It's the same stench I picked up on when I was a wasp inside his shirt. Like rotting meat, with a tang of ammonia, and a whiff of cloves and halitosis.

At the psychic level, an overwhelming aura of evil and bad vibes radiates off the man. Like the anti-light of a black-hole sun. It's all I can do to keep from pissing the floor.

I go online and call for help. "Gee?"

"He's a clone," says Gee. "The Treadlers were ready for our hit today. They grew the clone in a tank on Popham's lower level. It was blank and ready. When Treadle died, it was just a matter of moving his psidot from the corpse to the clone."

"You couldn't warn me before I got in here?"

"I didn't want you tensing up. Don't go all Cujo and try to rip out Treadle's throat."

"I'm a dachshund, Gee."

"You're more than that. Listen to me. You're going to nip that psidot Wladimir off the back of Treadle's neck. Jilljill will run a thread through Wladimir. You'll follow the thread to Treadle's lifebox. You'll bust it up."

I'm having trouble visualizing this. "Is there a chance I might lose?"

"You won't. Use your hate. That's another thing we picked you for, Curtis. You will win."

"And then?"

"Improvise. Get out of here the best you can. Don't let them take you alive."

"Am I still immortal?"

"You are, sure, but the immortality, it might be—intermittent. You can be sure that if you die, I'll set you up in a new psidot and a new body down the line."

"Got it."

"You're the man, Curtis. You're the king."

I waddle forward in my dachshund body like I own the place. Probably Popham calls this room the library. Leather law books on shelves, Persian rug, crystal chandelier, a leather-topped table with pens and vintage chairs. Even a stained glass window depicting, I don't know, Saint Gold Bar Blesses the Honks.

Seeing me, Lucy leans forward and slaps her hands on her thighs. "Come here, girl! Come on, Friedl!"

I scamper across the rug and leap onto Lucy's lap. I wriggle as I settle in. Lucy is next to Chuck Popham, who's next to the motherfucker I thought I already killed.

The clone skin has a raw-dough look, like a cookie out of the oven too soon. His eyes are watery, not fully in focus. His expression is stony. I'm guessing his psidot is still settling in, getting up to speed on the new meat.

Gee says Treadle's psidot's is called Wladimir? Someone's bad joke. I can see Wladimir from my perch on Lucy's lap. A dark gray, lentil-sized sea slug on the nape of the Treadle clone's neck.

I'm supposed to lunge up there and nip Wladimir off the neck and, I hope, keep him from taking over my dachshund body. Jilljill can help with that. I'll have her crawl to the inside of my mouth so she can get right on Wladimir when the moment arrives.

But I'm not really clear on what happens then. To me, Gee's concepts are like frantic writhing snakes. Hard to get a handle on them. Maybe he said that when Jilljill touches Wladimir, she'll send a zap through him that erases Treadle's lifebox in KGB cloud-cuckoo-land.

Or, no, wait, he said I'd have to go in there and do it myself. Follow some fucking thread? I heave a sigh. For sure I'm going to die again. And what was that shit about my immortality being—*intermittent*? I should have stayed on Loranda's back porch.

Looking for comfort, I make myself limp and cuddly on Lucy Popham's lap. I breathe as slowly as I can. I tell myself I'm a winner. And then, before I know it, I've flipped into manic superhero fantasyland. I am much more than a dachshund. I won't stop at just destroying Treadle's lifebox. I'll wipe out the Treadle clone body as well. Yeah, man.

Killing Treadle felt so good, I'd hate to do it just once.

As I loll and nestle and dream on Lucy's lap, Jilljill works her way out from beneath the flap of my ear, across my cheek, over my black lip, and into my mouth.

The Treadle clone is talking to Chuck Popham. His voice is slow and blurred. I hear my name.

"That Curtis Winch fellow. We have to eliminate his memorial site. Rabid un-American propaganda. Winch is a loser. A traitor. Scum. Human garbage."

"We're a little out of the command loop for now, sir," says Chuck Popham. "It'll be different once you're back in office. We'll raise funds, build up our infrastructure, and start working through channels."

"Fuck the channels," says Treadle. "We go public and I resume power. I didn't die. It was a hoax. Fake news. We'll take it to the courts. I own the doctors and the judges." He shakes his massive head. "Swearing in Mareek was a travesty." He slams his fist into his hand. "Unconstitutional! I am the first three-term President."

"What about Franklin Delano Roosevelt?" pipes up Lucy Popham. "He was elected to *four* terms, Ross."

"You shut up," says Treadle, his voice thick with rage. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Lucy flashes a hard frown.

"Lucy's right, Mr. President," Chuck Popham puts in. "Keep in mind that you're our guest. This is Lucy's home. You need to show respect."

"You're a wimp," Treadle snaps at Popham. "A lackey. An ass-kisser."

"I understand that you're not yourself, Mr. President," says Popham. "You'll feel

better soon."

I worm over to Chuck Popham's lap, whining and being all cuddly and flexible. And mainly I'm getting closer to the back of Treadle's neck. By now, Jilljill is perched on the tip of my tongue.

"*Meow.*"

Oh, god, it's the calico cat, coming in from the kitchen. Her yellow eyes fixate on me. As I focus on her, I pick up a faint teep signal. Fuck. Why didn't I notice that before? She's wearing an uvvy under her red collar. Someone's uses her for surveillance. And, um, this someone is the armed man right behind her. He's wearing one of Treadle's absurd private guard uniforms.

"What is it, Captain Burke?" asks Popham. "We're busy." Meanwhile Popham is steadily petting me. My presence soothes him.

"It's about your dog, sir," says Burke. "Another animal touched her. While she was in the yard. I saw it through the watch-cat."

"You leave my Friedl alone," cries Lucy Popham. "See, Chuck? This is what we get from sticking with Treadle. We have this vile unholy clone in our library, and a cabal of paranoid thugs in our basement. It's time to move on, Chuck. Like everyone else in the country."

I snuggle closer into Popham's belly, making myself warm, smooth, and lovable. Popham's hand continues running over me.

"The dog appears unscathed by whatever encounter your cat seems to have witnessed," Popham tells the guard. He raises my ears one by one, peering inside. "No secret psidots to be seen. As you were, Captain Burke. Go back downstairs with the men."

Burke goes into the kitchen and thumps downstairs.

"Good Friedl," says Popham, still caressing me.

"I don't like that dog being next to me," grumbles Treadle. "Dogs are unclean."

"Oh, but look at her," says Popham in a teasing tone. Maybe he's about had it with Treadle too. He picks me up and holds me against his shoulder like a baby. "Friedl is a cutie. I bet she wants to give you a kiss, Mr. President."

Things are going my way. I can skip the part about nipping the psidot off

Treadle's neck. I'll just spit Jilljill out—right on top of Wladimir. And let the best psidot win.

I stretch out my neck as far as I can. Lucy Popham giggles. I angle my elegant snoot and give the back of Treadle's neck a quick, wet lick, during which Jilljill detaches herself from me.

Jump cut.

I'm in a zone of chaos—experiencing the world from Jilljill's point of view. She and Wladimir are in a micro Sumo wrestling match on the back of Treadle's neck—squeezing each other and pulsing energies back and forth: brainwaves, electrical sparks, and quantum fields.

In my cloud-based lifebox-mind, I visualize the fight as a 3D abstract painting with collaged-in scenes from my life and from Treadle's life, and with a thunderstorm all around. I begin to hear the whining of a tornado. And now I see it, a narrow whirlwind amid swirling debris. A quantum vortex thread. A big one.

I go toward it. Something crude and stupid tries to get in my way. Wladimir. I see him as a boxy tank with a cannon. But Jilljill—Jilljill is a sleek, ultramodern jellyfish. She drips slime onto Wladimir and begins to disassemble him.

I slip inside the shrieking tornado. Its vortex thread carries me through a storm of Treadle memories, and outward to the psidot Wladimir's source of power. It's a dowdy, concrete cube at the University of Moscow. No title on the building, no windows, only one door. A KGB research lab. I'm inside it now, looking at a twinkling box of lights. Treadle's lifebox. Someone hands me a heavy fire axe. Who?

It's a woman with a shining face. I saw her before, when I dreamed about chasing the—

"I'm Molly," she says. "Hurry the fuck up."

A fried egg flies by my head, narrowly missing me, and a second one splats onto my face. It stings like acid. Molly wipes it off. I raise my axe and smash into Treadle's lifebox, hitting the construct over and over again—until all the glass is broken, and all the lights are gone.

The tornado slows. I drift through shoals of scattered Treadle dreams, away from Moscow University, across the globe, back to Capitol Hill, and I merge with Jilljill. She's

solidly fastened to Treadle's neck. No sign of Wladimir. Jilljill ate him. To complete the scam, Jilljill has changed her coloring to look like the psidot she replaced.

I'm out of my surreal visions and seeing through human eyes. I'm sitting on the leather couch in Popham's library. I won. I killed Treadle's lifebox. And now I'm inside—oh, fuck—I'm inside the clone of Treadle's body.

How do I get out of here? I twitch my hand and clear my throat. That cute dachshund, my former host, what's her name—Friedl! She's over in Lucy's lap. Popham is looking at me oddly.

"Are you all right, Mr. President? I had no idea a dog kiss would affect you like that. A foolish joke. I apologize."

"Ross's clone is defective," says Lucy, her voice far from kind. "He had a seizure. I think you ought to put him down, Chuck. Like a rabid dog. Can you hear me at all, Ross?"

"Ah, yes," I manage. "Indeed."

Do I know how to talk like Treadle? Well, maybe, approximately. After all, I'm using his lungs and his vocal cords and his mouth cavity—*ugh!* My gorge rises. Keep it together, Curtis. If I'm talking through Treadle's body, then I'm bound to sound like him. Especially to idiots who are dumb enough to have ever been on his side.

"I hear you, Lucy Popham," I say. "And, no, I did not have a fit. I'm in perfect health. Where's my man Burke?"

"Back downstairs," says Popham, exchanging a glance with his wife. "With the men."

I'm getting the inklings of a plan. "How many men are there?"

"Twelve, sir. Remember? We call them Treadle's Apostles. Ready to die for the Forever Treadles cause.

"Very fine," I say. I'm still riding high on having destroyed Treadle's lifebox. I've killed him twice. And now to kill him for a third and final time. I'll blow up his clone and his right-hand-man Popham and the frikkin twelve apostles. Where do I get a bomb?

I'm struck by an idea, a wonderful, crazy idea. But I'll need some help with it. And this time I'm not going to Gee.

"Gyr?" I silently say, as I mentally uncloak that one channel alone. "Can you hear me?"

"Curtis!" She's laughing and happy, on a plane back to Denmark, is what it looks like. "Channeling you, my man," she says. "Security's good. You're a god."

"I deign to entertain," I say, feeling proud of myself.

"How come you never humped any of those other dogs?" asks Gyr. "I was sure you would."

"Come on, Gyr. Don't tease me like that. You know I'm asexual."

"Oh, you'll find your dreamboat yet. But I know you're not here for lonely hearts advice. You want some kind of help. Pitch me, my dear Revolutionary Hero."

"My psidot is on Treadle's clone," I tell Gyr. "Right now. We're in the house of his friend. I want to blow the place up. And in the lab, you told me that when a user gets a psidot, the psidot installs a bunch of gossip molecules inside the user's body, and from then on, the psidot can tell the gossip molecules to make whatever chemicals inside that user's body."

"Not just any old chemicals," says Gyr. "Neurochemicals. For transmitting emotions. And tell me, o king, where does this line of thought lead?"

"I want to fill Treadle with nitroglycerin," I say. "He'll be like a fat-man chunk of dynamite. Jolt him and he goes boom."

Gyr starts laughing, and it takes her a minute to answer. "Well, maybe in this case the psidot *can* order up any old chemical," she says. "It could be done."

"But will the nitro kill him before I can get him to explode?" I ask. "Is it a poison?"

"Nitroglycerin can be used as a medicine, you know," says Gyr. "It lowers the blood pressure. The Treadle clone will get dizzy. Eventually he'll faint."

"I'll work fast and load him to the gills with nitro and walk him into position before he keels over," I tell Gyr.

"I love it," says Gyr, still on that plane above the Atlantic. Seems like she's ordered herself a glass of champagne. "Here's to the final Treadle temper tantrum!"

"But do you know the chemical formula for nitro?" I fret. "And can Jilljill message the template to Treadle's gossip molecules? Will the gossip molecules ignore

such a crazy request?"

"A prize problem," says Gyr, practically rubbing her hands. "Worthy of the wetware engineering Olympics." She pauses briefly in thought. "Yes," she says. "Yes I see exactly how to do it. But, Curtis—you'll lose Jilljill. She's on the clone's neck. She'll go up in the explosion. Your second death today."

"Gee claims he'll keep on bringing me back."

"Well, yes," says Gyr, nodding. "I'm sure he will. As long as your lifebox stays intact. But even so. I admire you, Curtis. And you too, Jilljill."

"We mean to finish this job," I say. "Wipe out every trace of Treadle."

"I'm glad I'm not your enemy, Curtis."

"I almost love you, Gyr. What if I came back as a woman?"

"Oh, you know that I'm waiting for Molly," Gyr says with a laugh.

"I saw her!" I say. "I forgot to tell you. When I went to destroy Treadle's lifebox. Molly was made of light."

"Did she say anything to you?"

"She said, '*Hurry the fuck up.*'"

"Good advice," says Gyr, laughing again. "I'll make the nitroglycerine template, and fix it so it passes any security checks, and send it to Jilljill. And meanwhile you get back to scamming your Treadle Forever friends. Get the ducks in a row."

This talk with Gyr goes a lot faster than it looks when it's written out. Even so, it does take a while. As I pull myself back into focus, back here on the leather couch in Chuck Popham's little library, I realize that I've been making a truly senile droning sound with my Treadle mouth. Drool all over my shirt. I'm like a stroke victim on his way out. I sit up straight and try to act alert. Chuck Popham looks quizzical.

"I have an idea," I tell him. "You and Lucy are showing signs of discontent."

"Oh, we're fine," insists Popham. Even now, with me in my reduced state, he's scared of me. But Lucy isn't.

"You're right," says Lucy. "Frankly, I'd to get you and your little band of storm troopers out of here, Ross."

"Yes," I say. "That's exactly what I plan. In fact I'm about to go downstairs and tell the men. Chuck, maybe you can come with me. But the details, Lucy, the details of

what I'll be telling them—highly confidential. I wonder if you could go outside."

"I'll stay up here in the kitchen," she says with a shrug. "You'll be downstairs. I don't particularly care what you tell your men. I'm not interested. WGAF. You know that expression, Ross? I'm sure you do. You're good at cursing, you bully, you asshole."

"I want you outside!" I scream at her, putting that Treadle rage into my voice. "You, and the housekeeper, and your fucking dog. The three of you outside. Way the hell out. On the other side of the street."

"He's completely insane," Lucy says to Chuck. "Is there a way you can turn him off?"

"Well, if I could get to his psidot, I'd be able to," says Chuck.

"Don't you dare!" I shout, jumping to my feet. I go into the kitchen and holler down the stairs. "Men! I'm coming down there. Form up and present arms! And, you, Lucy Popham, you get out of the house!"

"So ridiculous," says Lucy. She carries Friedl to the kitchen. "Candace? Did you hear?"

"I heard plenty," says the housekeeper. "And I don't need no more. I quit."

"Any chance I can come with you?" asks Lucy.

The two women laugh, walk down the front stairs together, and head off down the block.

"Ready," says Gyr in my head.

"Go on ahead down the stairs," I tell Chuck Popham. "I'll come in a second."

I drink a big glass of water from the kitchen sink. Listening down into the Treadle clone's body, I can feel the nitro taking effect. It's coming on strong and fast. Already I'm getting faint. I limp over to stand at the head of stairs. A good long flight. Plenty of room to bounce. I lurch forward as the full wave of faintness hits.

Jump cut.

