



Frank stood in front of the sparkly Chi-Z-Mart counter; grinning, one might say, in an avuncular fashion.

The gum-popping, latex-uniformed clerk with the silver scleral tattoo crawling across the white of her augmented right eye, looked more and more confused, as said Auggie flipped back and forth between him and her HUD terminal.

Slouching behind her, the manager (an old pro of maybe nineteen) eyeballed the venerable elder. Manager Boy had a metal-tipped crew cut, and neck tattoos that announced his package-boy status in the 14K Triad to anyone who cared.

Finally, the clerk deigned to look Frank in the eyes, Her own look was equal parts confusion and irritation. She scowled, teeth and eyes red from chewing betel nuts. "Uhh, excuse me, sir..."

"Yes, dearie, I'm not wired." he said, putting on his most affable expression. Auggies and piercings and whatall or not, this was a kid. If there was one thing Frank knew, it was how to put kids at ease.

He took off his tweed cap, slapping his palm and drumming his fingers atop his bald white pate like Curly Howard. "I don't have headgear. Not even a chip. I'm afraid you'll have to ring me up."

She looked helplessly at Manager Boy, who sighed and shook

his head, motioning her away from the counter.

"Sorry, old timer," the manager said to him, not meeting his eyes. "I got you. Lanie, watch this." His hands slid out of his pockets.

Frank shoved his bottle of Vernor's Golden Ginger Ale towards him as the manager bent down, slipped a thimble-mouse on his thumb and hand-scanned the bottle by the SKU woven into the cap, all in one deft motion. "That be all for you?"

Frank shook himself, realizing he'd been watching all this with rapt fascination. As the manager's brows began to knit, he felt mildly guilty for coming unstuck in time and wasting their own. "Umm...pack of Parodi Kings cigars."

The manager grabbed the stogies, also from under the counter, without even needing to look. (The first knuckle of pinky finger on his left hand was missing.) Lanie went into the back to re-stock the Local Vodkas shelf.

When the manager looked up again, Frank held out some crumpled green paper.

"Aw, man, cash? I gotta fill out a form for the boss for this, man. Hang tight for a second while I go get it---"

Then he paused, and the hard gangbanger exterior melted away. In its place, Frank was stunned to see a goofy little kid just screaming to get out.

"Oh my God. You're that dude..." He snapped his fingers. It was coming. Frank waited.

"...With the polka-dot jacket, and that miner dude with him that talked funny... The dude with the kid's show, the Grab Bag Theater they're always running around five AM, like when I get off and we go get baked---" Then he remembered that he was supposed to be Management. "Sorry. Forgot my manners. Sir."

But he couldn't stop smiling. "You're (UNCLE GUMBALL), from Channel Ten! But you got old, man, I thought that show was, like, new..."

Frank's smile changed shape, full lower lip curling up to hide the tears that hid just behind his teeth. "Yeah, sucks gettin' old, kid," he agreed. "Don't ever do it. Hey, uh, thanks for watchin' the show. I--" He couldn't finish. They looked at each other.

Manager Boy pointed his own Auggied eye at the HUD. **MANAGER OVERRIDE**, floated up in orange. **PURCHASE BY**

MANAGER TIEN CHANG. USE EMPLOYEE DISCOUNT Y/N? N.
COST. Kthx. APPROVED.

"On the house, Uncle," he laughed, voice full of emotion when he saw Frank's face. "Your money's no good here."

Frank thanked the kid and quickly left, ostensibly to avoid the comedia vulgaria of a nineteen-year-old gangbanger seeing (UNCLE GUMBALL) cry.

Outside, a small crowd had gathered around a young Latina woman who had been Onstarred in her car. Presumably, either the local Military Police or the Repos would be around to pop the locks and impound her vehicle until she got it out of legal hock.

Pobrecita, he thought, watching her proud defiant face in the driver's seat, her folded arms. She was as beautiful as a Zapatista mural. No one remembered Zapata now. Mexico had closed its borders to American "snow-backs. "

Everywhere, cultural illiteracy reared its dirty Dickensian heads of Ignorance and Want, and spit disinformation in his face. The holopane poster above the construction fence to his right showed Mariska Hargitay and Ving Rhames in "Driving Miss Daisy." "Remake," Frank muttered, "I bet Marianne and me are the only folks in ten miles who've seen the original, or even know there was . Still can't get used to Rhames that skinny, or hair..."

He thought of one of his favorite old-time Science Fiction writers he loved to read out on the screen porch when it was warm. "Robert Silverberg was right," he groused, staring at the black ferrocrete blocks of the sidewalk as he moved on. "It's easy to screw around with history when nobody knows anything about anything..."

"What's with the strange look?" Marianne asked as he walked up to their beloved screen porch and sat down next to her on the swing. He told her. "Used to be, they only came and took your car, maybe broke a finger---"

Marianne chuckled, pinching his cheek and looking into his eyes. "That was very sweet of that Chinese boy to do that. You just love taking the starch out of Generation Duh, don't you?"

Frank exhaled a blue cloud of cigar smoke. "Those remote-control WiFuckers need some organic confusion every now

and again. Keeps 'em young." He smiled. "Besides Time? I got plenty of it..."

Marianne nodded, remembering something. "Your buddy Joe Dugan called again. He wants you to go onto 'Good Morning, Dallas' with him, before..."

Frank uncrossed his legs, leaning forward. "Yeah, I know. Before one of us dies." He took another drag. "I'm thinking about it."

Marianne put a hand on his shoulder. "Francis Cifelli, you're still as bull-headed as the day we met. Look at the newsie-feeds. GoldenAge TV is... dare I say, hip, again, as if anyone even knows what 'hip' means. It's," she made the air-quotes of their antique time, "'Retro.' 'Vintage.' Or, what's that other one... 'Ironic.' That one was my favorite."

"Shiny," he corrected, "Large. Poppin'. Even their adjectives for 'cool' have to have a massive effects budget. Anyway, @Mother Jones said right on their main feed that the traffic on most of the GoldenAge bands is just the goddamn nōcollecting historical information."

She took her hand off his shoulder. "Hon, really. I'm too tired to go round and round with you about all that," she made the antique air-quotes once more, "'Singularity' stuff again. It makes my brain hurt. Please. That writer Charlie Stross is as dead as Shakespeare. Let him be dead, at least. That idea of his was horrific, and I won't dignify it by even considering it. Things are just not going to work that way, and even if it does, they'd fix it."



He saw a plea behind Marianne's eyes, strapping on armor as fast as it could, hiding behind her sharp tongue. "They'd fix it. The Chinese would, if no one else. Or the Eurasian Space Agencies. Or the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Or... someone, someone could come together and make sure that didn't happen."

Her mouth set. The armor was back on. Frank shrugged, open-handed.

"It's already here. Believe what you want."

Marianne made a wordless sigh he knew from all their years together. It was Sigh #6, the one that meant, simply, God damn it, Frank, you dragged me back into this... "Headgear and Auggies and all that crap are still so new that ...Why, I heard Lanier at MIT say that any sort of collective Spiritus Mundi or world Auggie-mind or whatever...It couldn't happen for at least fifty more years, he said, even taking Moore's Law into account..."

"You're cute when you talk Geek," he grinned. (She tried not to let him see her smile back.) "But Moore's Law is just a guideline, if you really look at it. Yeah, technology's going to exponentiate at such and such a given rate, we all know that..."

He mused. The smoke curled from his Parodi King, making a timeless white haze in the room like a faded Eighties Polaroid in a museum somewhere. "But once in a while, Nature throws a curve ball."

Marianne got that. "Or a monkey wrench," she countered. Frank winced.

"We wouldn't know. Neither of us is wired." Something occurred to him. "When we were kids, we had a machine that controlled people's minds and brainwashed the hell out of them, too." He rose and smiled at her as he snuffed out his cigar. "We called it TV. I think I made a lot of money from it once. Is dinner ready?"

After dinner, poor tired Marianne put her feet up and dozed off in the recliner in the den with that sweet sleep-smile on her face, Smile #4, the one that said all was right with the world for now. Frank was in the living room, watching the news on a lovingly maintained Toshiba flatscreen with an old-time wall mount.

The Toshiba made the holo-head reading the news look purple and pushed together, a grotesque semblance of human visage speaking in a canned synth mashup of Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel.

"Interpol CounterTerrorism units, along with Scotland Yard and advisers from the U.S. Federated Military Corps, raided a flat in Tennant Street, Camden Town today, where five English and Scots nationals were detained and flown to an undisclosed location after attempting to upload a centipede-string Unzip into the Whole Earth Link."

The screen showed a gaggle of bearded, disheveled men being

shoved into plain black police vans. One dreadlocked fellow's eyes were rolling at the clouds. "It's coming! It's coming!"

Glaswegian dialect had changed but little. To Frank, the ropehead sounded like Ewan McGregor in "Trainspotting." "Your sentencing date's coming, stoner," Frank muttered, "Oh, I loathe those 'Haxor' people who write viruses and such. Bet they all look like that..."

"The so-called Gibsonistas, named after a Nineties science fiction author who invented the words 'cyberspace' and 'lo-tek', claim that the Whole Earth Link is fast approaching sentience, some form of a collective consciousness. The millions of people in the world already wired are being co-opted by this so-called nö."



Frank snorted. "Used so-called twice in one sentence. Corporate news amateurs. No style. And those ropehead jokers operate more like Henry Gibson, in 'The Blues Brothers', sheesh..."

With the lovingly well-kept remote, Frank switched over to a well fed and googled up "noosphere". The page pulled up dozens of streams where the subject was being discussed at that moment. He punched up a stream from Toronto.

A rather tweedy older man was sitting in a plain camp chair, opposite a woman whose hairstyle apparently hadn't changed since one or the other Bush presidency.

"Once the global consciousness is innervated, we will all have as much individuality as ants, and of course, those who already have neural interfaces will have even less," he said. "Headgear will become mandatory. People will only be nodes in the global brain, with as little individuality as neurons - that is to say, none."

He punched up another stream, considerably bluer on the Radical scale. A fossilized ex-Burner chick whose pre-ropehead style had frozen at the turn of the century stared at the camera, snarling,

"The awakening super-intelligence is ready to consume us all! The Beast slouches toward Bethlehem! The global monster opens its tri-lobed burning eye---"

"Hysteria never helped a thing, aether" Feeling tired himself, Frank switched to a elive newsfeed. This time, the holo-head was stretched and golden-hued, a talking banana on the vintage screen. "Over one hundred thousand people swarmed to Thanksgiving Square in Dallas at noon to watch a business clerk put chocolate sauce on a hot dog," the voiceover said.

The stream showed people as far as the eye could see filling the streets of downtown Dallas. The visual was a shaky vidfeed from a phone-plug in someone's ear. "One of Dallasite Travis Young's co-workers blogged a funny piece about his outlandish eating habits, and said that he should charge admission to watch him eat lunch," quoth the banana.

"Dallas Anti-Overpopulation Regional Cell Director Vanessa Bojikhshiya used today is news as a bully pulpit---" The feed cut to a wild-eyed creature with a crew cut, shaking her fist at the camera. "LOOKIT! THERE IS OVER A HUNDRED THOUSAND PEOPLE IN THAT SMART MOB! FREE WILL IS OBSOLETE! YOU HAVE OPENED THE SEVENTH SEAL!"

"That's enough of that," he said, clicking off the screen. But no sooner did he thumb the worn broadband remote when the screen flashed back on, blue: INCOMING MSSG. INCOMING MSSG. INCOMING—

Wearily, Frank thumbed the remote.

"LOOKING FOR FEARLESS FRANK."

Frank sat up like a bird dog on point, clicking the message again. Fearless Frank was his nickname back at college. In the Sixties.

The man on the other end of the screen was almost as old as he was. He had slightly more hair, but not much. Frank squinted.

"Adam? Adam Taylor?"

Adam nodded. "Hey, you old bastard. You still look the same, too."

Frank's brow furrowed. "I haven't seen you since..."

"Fiftieth class reunion." Adam grimaced. "Sorry, tele-reunion. I've been taking it easy."

Frank zoomed in. "Hey, that background looks familiar."

"Yeah, I'm in the West End here in Dallas. I was passing through, and I thought I'd look you up."

Frank was on his feet in two seconds, looking back at the screen as he made his way to the door. "Shit, I'll come into town to meet you!" At that, Adam looked immediately wary.

"Don't bother. I'd rather come see you. Where do you live?"

"Juniper Valley, only about twenty minutes from downtown. There's a light rail station just down the block."

"Great. Ping me directions, will ya'?"

Frank swung out a keyboard and began pounding the keys with two fingers.

"I got it," said Adam. "Hey, lemme finish my brew and I'll be out there in maybe an hour."

Marianne padded into the room, face puffy with sleep. "Who was that on the line, dear?"

"Adam Taylor, my old college friend. Moose. He's in Dallas and he's coming out here to visit."

"Oh," she smiled. "The storied Moose, who did once take nine cops to subdue. I feel like I went to school with him, too. It'll be nice to finally meet him. Where's he live? "

"Err... Massachusetts, last time I checked. But I haven't talked to him in ten years."

"I'm sure we'll get all caught up," she said.

Marianne perked up and kept up with the two old men's train of bullshit for about an hour, but then faded and begged off to bed.

When she did, Frank was still talking a mile a minute. Adam had slowed somewhat. At first, Frank just thought that Adam was tiring out too. But he kept looking back at the door, loosening his tie and fidgeting.

Finally, he leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Say, Frank, do you know what the Panopticon is?"

Frank didn't. "Sounds like one of those fake machines we used to use on 'The Gumball Show.' "

Adam pulled a small box from his vintage fanny-pack. "That's actually where I'm going with this. 'The (UNCLE GUMBALL) Hour.'" He opened the box, removing a small gray device somewhat like an

old transistor radio, and punched a button on its right side panel. "This little buddy tells me your house has no bugs."

Frank frowned. "What is that, a Geiger counter?"

Adam shook his head immediately. "It's a Jammer. From Radio Shack. Scan capability, too. It scans an area of twenty feet on multiple-encrypted phreqs with a low-amp wave."

Frank was instantly on his guard. "Who has a warrant for your arrest? What the hell'd you do, and how much is it gonna cost me to pay off whoever and get you out of this, Moose? Nice to see there are some constants in an ever-fluid universe."

Adam looked him coolly in the eyes as if searching for wires. "You have no headgear, right? And no chips?"

Frank shook his head. "No, and I never would."

"Good. I don't either. For what it's worth, I'm a Gibsonista."

Frank's jaw made a noise when he put it back in place. They both heard it. He shook his big bald head sorrowfully. "Moose, Moose, Moose. Still tilting at windmills, I see."

"Was I the one who wanted us to elect a chimpanzee Class President to protest the war, or some dumb damn thing you stole from your hero Jerry Rubin?" Adam sniped, laughter in his eyes. "Was I the one who got clubbed like a baby seal by some ROTC---"

"---While running through the wrong tear gas cloud late to my 11 a.m. Film Scenes For Actors class." Frank finished wearily. "The times, they were all wrong for change. We just ended up changing ourselves, not the world. Men like Dick Nixon made sure of that, and they got in there and did it quick. We the People gave away most of our real power after World War One, anyway. The Sixties were just the death knell."

Frank looked hard at his old colleague. "From the Summer of Love to Kent State, huh? I went into kid TV to forget. I sold out voluntarily."

Adam shook his head vigorously. "Never. You know what the Poet said."

Frank thought he might. " 'You gotta free your mind instead'?" he guessed.

Adam nodded warmly. "This is why they pay you the big bucks. '(UNCLE GUMBALL)' was the bulliest pulpit I ever saw. You never sold out at all, you just changed audiences"

Frank smiled. "Young minds are a lot easier to change. Jim Henson told me that once." At the mention of the name, both men's eyes suddenly developed some sort of watery allergic reaction, which they quickly averted.

Adam waved a finger. "Working within the system to alter the system. Jerry Rubin would have been proud of the ends, if maybe not the means."

"Yeah, well, times change." Frank fished around for a cigar. "Who would have through The Man would be Robbie The Robot?"

"Isaac Asimov," Adam returned smartly. "Harlan Ellison. Remember 'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream'? You were at the meetings, man. That was, like, SDS required reading. Now we know why. We'll all be trapped in the lens of Mammon if we don't cut the Panopticon's lifeline before it wakes all the way up."

He talked with his hands a lot when he got excited. "The nō is full. The singularity is about to pop. This ain't some far-flung Leftie-dogma doom saying. It's just math. It's full. Now we get to watch how it all shakes out."

"What the fuck can just one of us do, anyhow?" Frank laid his hands in resignation on the tabletop. "It sounds inevitable."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Adam almost believed what he was saying. "I'm sure you've heard about the, well, what we used to call viruses, that our little departments have been attempting to introduce into the Well? "

"The centipedes. Yeah, what about 'em?"

Moose was making the words for Big Brother less and less now. "Every time we launch an attack, we burn a cell. We don't have many left, and we're picking our shots very carefully."

"Right," Frank was lost again. "Why are you telling me all this? "What's any of this got to do with me?"

Adam took a deep breath. "Last week, we almost cracked it. The main firewall in Bahrain was ready to crumble. Know how we did it?" Frank shook his head, just knowing he wasn't going to like it. "Because so many WiFuckers were distracted! It was Sweeps Week, and they had the finale of "Survivor: Central Park" on half the fucking feeds on the Well!"

"You mean..."

"Yes, everyone who is online is already a part of the Spiritus

Mundi. You know that. They don't all know it, though. Not yet. The mass mind was distracted"

He looked like a little kid with a new and deadly toy. "We were able to slip most of the way through on the upper phreqs.... because no one was using them!"

"That's really, really bad." Frank looked a little sick.

Moose couldn't meet his eyes. "The kids in that cell gave their lives for us to confirm what we had strongly suspected."

"So what's next?"

"Next attack, we create a distraction and then unleash the upload." He sounded too cautious to be zealous, though. Too old, and scared, hiding behind the motion of the Gibsonista vanguard.

"You sound like I have something to do with this," Frank ventured. Now he was getting cautious too.

"You do. I remember, almost forty years ago, you told me about a little piece of business your producer wouldn't let you use on the air."

Frank frowned."Forty years ago? I can't remember back that far. Damn, what was it?"

"It was a little word game. Monkey talk, I think you called it." Adam sat back. "It may be a low tech solution to a high tech problem - and it just may work, because the high tech solutions haven't."

"Oh---" Frank snapped his fingers and slowly began to chuckle as he remembered. Then he began to remember out loud, haltingly at first.

After a moment, Adam joined in.

"Good Morning Dallas" hosted by Tom Graham, came on at 8 p.m. The old "(UNCLE GUMBALL) Show" retro-segment streamed on 15 minutes later...

"We're happy this morning to have on our show two old friends," Graham said into the camera, "They were certainly my friends when I was growing up Frank Cifelli and Joseph Dugan, better known as (UNCLE GUMBALL) and Joe the Digger on the old Grab Bag Theater, broadcast right here from our own Channel Eight every Saturday morning from 1969 to 1992. Gentlemen, how are both of you?"

The pair of old men mumbled affirmations of thankfulness for their longevity. Graham gestured towards the older of the pair. "Now, Joe..."

Joe stopped him. "Don't call me that!" The host laughed. "So what should I call you?"

Joe growled and grimaced, mugging his first signature line from the show. "Joe the Digger!" The broadcast crew laughed.

Graham made a broad outward gesture. "We have a lot of people here today who were fans of the old Grab Bag Gang here today!"

Frank jumped in. "And our fans loved us. We were the top-rated children's program in North Texas for 20 years!"

"And good years those were," said Graham. "Tell me, how did you come up with material year after year, five days a week, for a live show like Grab Bag Theater?"

"It weren't easy," Joe the Digger growled. More laughter inside the studio. That was the pre-arranged signal for a planted question for Frank.

They'd worked all this out in the green room before the show aired. Graham segued into it without a blink. "Was there ever an occasion when you were censored for something that was a little too racy for the kids?"

Joe put his hands on his knees. "Not often. We usually nipped questionable skits in the daily conference."

Frank rubbed his chin in his best (UNCLE GUMBALL) manner and smiled slyly. "There was a little piece of business that I once wanted to use, but the producer overruled me. We could probably mention it now, through."

Graham perked up at the opportunity for a revelation. "Was it very off-color?"

"Actually, that wasn't the problem," said Frank. "He said it was too annoying."

"Annoying?"

Joe began to groan as he realized where the discussion was going. Graham leaned back and looked over at Joe and leaned forward again. "Okay, we need to hear about this."

"Well, you've heard of Pig Latin, haven't you?" The host nodded. Joe cringed, glancing at the Exit sign off-camera, stage right.

"Well, it's a little like that. It's called Chimp Latin. It's pretty simple. Any time you say anything with an "e" sound, you have to say it three times instead of once."

The host looked quizzical. Joe rolled his eyes.

"That was just when the internet was just becoming common. And I had a joke, 'How do monkeys send messages? By e-e-e-mail!' I was ready to do a whole bit on Chimp Latin, but my producer killed it. He said it would become a fad. For example, instead of saying 'she sells sea shells by the sea shore', you would say 'she-e-e sells sea-e-e shells by the sea-e-e shore. See-e-e?'"

"Wow, that is... truly annoying!" Graham agreed, with a good honest laugh.

Frank continued. "He said if kids started doing that, teachers and parents would have our heads."

At that, he jumped off his stool. "Well, that was 50 years ago. It's about time I finally got a chance to use it..."

Frank launched into a solid five-minute skit on Chimp Latin that had the crew, Graham and Joe alternately laughing, groaning and swearing. When he was done, he wiped cold, ball-bearing-sized beads of sweat from his brow as he sat back down on his stool.

"There's a last little bit of silliness from (UNCLE GUMBALL)," he chattered. "You forgive me-e-e-e, don't you?"

The hot spotlights were burning his head. In his ears, Francis Mario Cifelli's old work-horse heart beat like cop jackboots in slow lock step, like truncheons hammering on metal riot shields. He smelled the colorless no-smell of tear gas, and heard, louder and louder...

A studio laugh track, drowning out his own terror, rolling and fading up and down on deteriorating reels, the voices blending and becoming strange.

(UNCLE GUMBALL) faked the rest, and wondered what he'd done.

Three days later, Marianne finally spoke her peace. "Honestly dear, after all these years, I had forgotten about that damned Chimp Latin!"

Frank tried not to smirk. "You were probably the first person I

ever rehearsed that bit on, half a century ago."

"I didn't like it then, either!" she burst out, "And since you mention it, that was a whole five minutes of memory I'll never, ever get back. Some potentially life-saving piece of information is now gone from my brain for good in favor of that routi-e-ene!"

Frank made the mistake of laughing. "Oh, yeah, very funny, " Marianne went on. "Emily called today."

Their dear little girl Em now taught third grade in East Dallas. "Emily said her third-graders, and every damn kid down there at Greater Garland Elementary, are all going around going, e- e- e!"

Frank's eyes got dark again. "For want of a nail, the kingdom was lost," he intoned.

"Cryptic much?" she gibed. He shook his head tersely. "Sorry, dear. You know how this old goat loves to go and gather wool, sometimes. We did more annoying stuff than that, though, I thought. You remember that Mark Twain bit we did that they let through, the one that went 'Punch, brothers, punch with care, punch in the presence of the passenjare'?"

She shook her head. "Honey, that was over fifty years ago. Can I get an English translation?"

He was still in his creative zone. She let him ramble. "Or that Fritz Leiber story I read in high school about the Devil inventing a beat that no one could stop playing. How did that go?" He shook himself. "I'm goin' to the Chi-Z Mart to get a cigar. You need anything?"

She shook her head, moodily punching up 'The Falun Gong Show.' Frank left her to it and strolled outside, down the sidewalk and down the block.

A trio of teenage boys on scoots (one with an orange traffic-cone stuck on his head) roared through the crosswalk just as he stepped out. Frank jumped back, yelling something inchoate. The boy with the cone gave him the finger.

"Bite me-e-e-e!"

Frank smiled, and crossed with the holo this time. When he walked into the Chi-Z Mart, he could see a long line in front of the counter.

Lanie was wringing her hands. Tien the manager was red in the face, pacing back and forth and looking like the piano player in a burning whorehouse.

On every HUD and TV screen, every ad pane and talking wrapper in the joint, the same message skipped and buzzed like something called a broken record. SERVICE NOT AVAILABLE-E-E-E-E-E-E SERVICE NO

Adam's little gnomes must have planted one hell of a bug on Prime Time, Frank thought wonderingly. He couldn't stop laughing, and couldn't care less who was scowling at him. He felt horrible for laughing, but what was done was done. It was like...

Why, it was something like being the change he wanted to see in the world. Something like having someone count his change, speak the time of day, look into his eyes for something besides a mere transactional bump of tête-à-tête commerce.

Something like seeing History unfold in front of him in a long, fine flash. Something that blew in the wind, and changed the times. Something he'd maybe never given up on, no matter what he told himself or anyone else.

The man in front of Frank turned to him. "Looks like we're fucked." He turned to survey the crowd, "Get back to your families, folks! This is gonna be bad! Go home!"

The lights began to flicker. The manager banged the counter. Frank and the rest of the customers left the line.

Frank walked back home, letting the door bang behind him by mistake. Marianne usually ripped him a new one for that. This time, she didn't.

"Honey?"

He froze in the living-room doorway, nostrils twitching. She hadn't moved since he left.

He knelt and took her wrist, feeling for a pulse. After a long time, he dropped it, then looked at her eyes. Then he got to his feet, roaring louder than Rubin ever did with or without a megaphone, roaring at the flat screen

"DIAL NINE-ELEVEN NOW, PLEASE! CHARLTON METHODIST HOSPITAL INSUR-IDENT NUMBER---"

But the screen was off, frozen on a battery-powered burn of the last transmission:

SERVICE NOT AVAILABLE...AVAIL...SR...E-E-E-E-E-E-E...
E-E-E-E-E-E...

Frank somehow managed to get her up on the couch. Through his tears, he knelt before her and closed her eyes.

Then he got up and drew the curtains, looking out the window across the city. His neighborhood was going dark in great chunks, like the footfalls of a gigantic saurian that ate light and shit out screams and car alarms and the pop-pop-pop of small arms fire.



There was a gas-powered Honda generator still wired into the house's own tiny grid, down in an unused corner of the basement. After locating a flashlight in the kitchen drawer, he went down into the basement.

The generator had gotten them through more than one hurricane, just never one of this type. The gas can was well sealed. Not many people used gasoline for anything any more.

He filled the generator's tank and pulled the cord. It started right up, and the house lit up again.

That was good. He started thinking about a winding shroud, trying to remember how to sew, and where she'd been keeping the best sheets, damn it, she always moved everything around, but now his dear one never would again—

The (UNCLE GUMBALL) avatar flashed in the bottom right of the flatscreen.

OLD MAIL, the avatar spoke in a balloon full of type. Message had come in while he was at the store.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED, Adam's missive read tersely, GOD BLESS YOU, (UNCLE GUMBALL). WILL EXPLAIN AT SOME POINT. NO MORE TIME TO SEND.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE.

Adam didn't have the opportunity to make it back to Dallas for five years after the Great Implosion. Emily Cifelli sent him a letter by the new "retro" land-mail and filled him in. Marianne had died of

heat-exhaustion and shock the night of the Crash.

Frank made it until the following summer, Em wrote, "But neither one of them could take Texas summers without AC." She went on to say that she'd only recently finished cleaning and packing up the house, and it was for sale.

Em said nothing in the letter to indicate that she knew the role her father had played in the Crash. Adam couldn't help but wipe away a tear as he tucked away the letter.

Adam had a seat on a convoy that was taking him to a Provo Training School in the Bay Area. It was to overnight in Dallas. That night, he introduced himself to the cadre headquarters, and a personnel-carrier full of whistling Anarch Provo Guards gave him a lift to Juniper Valley. Most of them had wetware-removal scars.

Frank and Marianne's block was lousy with new, hip young people who had apparently grown out of their holo units. Adam had the carrier stop in front of the house with the "For Sale" sign in the front yard. In Dallas, Adam was able to contact Emily and she told him where the key to the house was hidden.

Now he stood in the bare, empty kitchen where he last sat with Frank, and pulled an envelope from his uniform pocket.

Emily's original letter included a smaller, sealed letter, which Frank had asked, be delivered to him. He hadn't opened it yet.

His visit seemed to have the feeling of a religious pilgrimage, thought Adam. He had waited all these weeks. Now it was time.



The letter was written on yellow legal paper that had aged to a weird consistency like parchment.

"Moose,

"I don't think I'm going to make it until we see each other again. It's July 4th and 98 degrees. But I'll see that you get this.

"In all our lives, maybe if we're lucky, we get one chance to Do Something. Thank you for

giving me mine. When I go, which is probably soon, I will be at peace with God, and smiling. Because of you.

“Anyway, it beats the hell out of bombing some Federal courthouse. Less chance of arrest, either. Ha!

”Frank.

Adam folded the paper and tucked it back into his uniform. The young PFC behind the wheel of the carrier cocked his head.

”What’s that, old-timer?” He backed up and peeled out. The new Anarch Guards, the so-called ”Geek Squads”, were so good to the elderly. It was a whole different world, now, or would be in time.

Adam chuckled. “Squirt, that right there is a personal note from the Messiah.”

”You mean---” The soldier’s eyes slitted. ”No, no,” Adam quickly replied. ”(UNCLE GUMBALL) Ever heard of him?”

Universes were born and died in the pause.

”That’s okay. How long of a ride did you say we had? I’ll tell you on the way...”

END

For Jerry Haynes and
Bill Camfield

CONTENTS -

www.planetarystories.com/PS27ToC.htm