

Dewey & Decimal
by Adam Altman
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He stands outside, a desolate field, upstate New York, long abandoned. Once farmed, tended, cared for, not unlike the man himself, the field now forgotten and barren, not unlike the man himself. The clouds above one solid mass of gray, unbroken for as far as he can see; the silence above and around one solid mass of gray, unbroken for as far as he can hear. It has been a long time since he has heard anything except for the never ending thoughts in his head, unceasing and merciless, a cycle of noise that he would pay a king's ransom to end. There is no peace in his mind, no peace for this old man, not what he expected in his old age. He has made it 60 years to this point, hoping to find some sort of solace in quiet and yet there is none to be found.

His eyes turn to the sky; the only sign of life for miles are black birds reeling and plummeting in the gray. Ravens? Crows? Sparrows. Each one no bigger than his fists clenched at his side, futile anger in his blood which causes tics and gasps when it reaches his heart, then pumping back out as unclean and impure as it was moments before. The birds swoop low and then careen back into the sky, dots swirling about his head, always dots, always dots.

And how did he get here? To this point? To this dot, he thinks. There is no ready answer amongst the voices, the thoughts, the words in his head, the dots in his head. His legacy lost, destroyed, and still just limited to simple dots. Is that all he will have left behind when he is gone? And that is not so far from now, he thinks. Not much time left on this planet, in this life. He has done some good, how could he not have? Dedicated his life to the idea of doing good, must have done some good. And yet, thinking about it, wondering aloud to the voices in his head, breaking the silence of the field, there are no answers still. Will he be remembered fondly, if at all? He has made some mistakes, but who in this world, in his life, as a human being, has not? No, undoubtedly the good outweighs the bad, must outweigh the bad, the good things heavier each considered on its own than all the bad things he has done considered together. He is not a bad man. He tells himself this. He was not a bad man. The voices, the thoughts, they are silent in this regard. If he has to lie to himself to find his peace, his silence, then so be it. He is not above lying to himself.

And yet, he thinks, over the resurgent noise of the clamoring gnomes inhabiting his brain (for that is how he imagines them) if he were truly good, why is it that he is alone, in this field, in this world, this silent world, long since devoid of life, and of care, and of population. His God has chosen to punish him, that is undoubtedly the case. His God. He chuckles, the thought of his God like an old friend who he had long since lost touch with. They had both abandoned each other long ago. For a time he had been fine with that, but as he thinks about it now, it feels sad to him, or feels like something that should feel sad to him. He lost the ability to tell the difference at some point, he doesn't know when, he doesn't know how.

He lowers his head, intending to check the time on his pocket watch, but as he does, he thinks he glimpses a rainbow in the distance, his head jerks back up. Of course there is nothing there. He can not remember the last time it rained, nor the last time the sun appeared. A rainbow, at this point, is an impossibility. The illusion is a figment of his imagination. He chuckles again, dry, out of practice. This is the hardest he has laughed in years. Without humor, save for the humor he sees in irony, the humor he has always liked best, now he doesn't know what he likes best, what he liked best, if he ever liked, loved, anything at all. Regardless, it is 4:37 in the afternoon.

He doesn't know how long he has been standing in this field. It may be that every time he looks at his watch that it is 4:37 in the afternoon. Or in the morning. Either is possible, such is the quality of the light, the quality of the sky, the chill in the air, the hunger in his belly, the exhaustion that tugs at the back of his eyelids. When did he last eat? Or sleep? He

could not say if pressed, and this disturbs him, accustomed as he is -- was, if he is being honest -- to keeping a detailed record of such. His daily logs of sleep and consumption, height, weight, financial and mental states all kept in meticulous order in files in his home. Or at least he thinks they are. When was he last there? When did he last look? He remembers -- he thinks he remembers -- spending hours poring over the records of his 34th year. But probably not; that sort of nostalgia uncharacteristic of the man. That sort of time a waste and he not a man accustomed to wasting time, or anything else. But then, he is not necessarily himself lately. And how long has this been going on?

And how long has this field been abandoned? He remembers -- seems to remember -- seeing men tend crops here. As a boy. As a man. And where is everyone? And where is he? He is down, yes, he would say that he is down. He remembers -- thinks he remembers -- happiness. Thinks he remembers being happy. And that is not what he is now. And yet he does not despair. The world around him is empty. Is devoid of life. Everyone and everything gone. How? He does not remember. Does not seem to remember. Does not think he remembers. When? He could not say. Has it been 20 years? Or one? Or was it five minutes ago, 4:32 in the afternoon or morning or whenever it was five minutes ago? He could not say, nor would the voices in his head, nor would he listen. All that matters is that everything is at it is and Dot (for that is how Dewey spells his name now) is as he is, or at least, that's what the thoughts in his head are constantly telling him.

There was a time when he (Dewey, known as Dewey, before he changed his name those five times) would have fought against this. Would have pressed back against the oppressive silence, the oppressive emptiness, the oppressive everything. Would have tried to make a difference, instigate reform. To press change upon the status quo of the world, or to press status quo upon unmitigated and unwarranted change. To simply impress his will, one way or the other, however he saw fit, however he saw it.

But he is tired, this Dot, he is so very tired. The world which has taken so much from him, has simply gone away and hidden on the other side of the veil. Obscured, unseen, and silent. And leaving him alone. He remembers faces, friends, lovers, names. And can not put them together. And can not put them away. And can not remember them to any satisfaction or usefulness. And can not forget them either.

It is the voices that are the most fleeting and the most haunting. They are fragments and whispers. No complete thoughts, nothing that brings him any comfort. Nothing that brings him any closer to the peace that he seeks. Nothing that brings him anything. And yet there they are, gone and still speaking.

He sighs, the sound of his breath less disturbing than his chuckle of earlier, and still disturbing the still air in this place, but doing nothing to lift the desolation. What, at this late date, could do that? It would take something near to a miracle to achieve. He thinks of leaving, but knowing not where he is, knows not where to go. He thinks of leaving, but knows not how. He thinks of leaving, but does not do any more than that.

How did he come to be here? Lost. In his own backyard. Lost, and voices calling to him from his past, he thinks of leaving, and there is a voice, one louder than the rest, becoming clearer. He closes his eyes, the image of the birds circling overhead somehow burned into his retinas, he sees the dots flitting about, swimming in the sea of his mind. He is lost, and there is a voice calling to him.

It was his mother's voice: shrill, piercing, commanding, impossible to ignore, perfectly fitting her severe appearance. By all accounts -- that of his father and those that knew her when she was young -- she had been attractive once. Beautiful. Sought after. Eliza Greene had been a catch and Joel Dewey had caught her. Dewey imagined that as the years took their toll upon her beauty, they must have affected her voice as well. She could not have always sounded like this. A siren become a harpy. A melodious titter turned into a sharp cackle, not that she ever laughed, not that Dewey ever heard. There was no humor in this household, this house of toil and piety. How he hated that voice, how it seemed to shake

him to his very core every time it was directed -- with disdain, dripping with contempt -- at him. And there it was again, and again.

"How can you find anything in here?" she asked; she shrieked, Dewey thought, her ire disproportionate to anything that he might have done. "This room is an aberration before God."

Dewey sighed -- through all his years, the sound he made the most, more often than any other a man could make, all sounds of pleasure and pain included, his life was one long sigh. There was nothing for her to be complaining about, Dewey was certain. He peeked his head into his room, where she stood, her arms bent, fists pressed into her hips, an air of utter frustration radiating from her center, permeating and infecting everything that he owned, which at the age of 19 was not terribly much.

"Mother, please," he pleaded, "I've asked you not to come in here." He had, several times, again and again, every time she appeared in his bedroom, begged her to not repeat the occasion. He had long since abandoned the idea that he had any private space except for that which existed between his ears, and yet he did not give up trying to at least maintain some semblance of privacy in his quarters.

"And I've told you, Melville, that as long as you live in this house, and for as long as God sees the state in which you live, that you will be subjected to my inspections. And you do not pass muster, young man." She swept her hands about, and stepped to one side, indicating the mess which had offended her sensibilities. Dewey saw that a stack of books -- his beloved books -- had toppled, scattering notes and pens across the floor. He hung his head in shame.

"I'm sorry, mother. I must have knocked them over as I rose this morning." Dewey set to tidying up.

She caught his arm. "God sees what you do. He knows what you think." Dewey stood awkwardly, a book in either hand, unable to move. He nodded meekly, and seemingly satisfied, his mother released him. She gave him one more reproachful glare and then retreated from the room.

Dewey sighed again -- again -- and continued. He was no slob; kept things neat as he could. Reproached his peers with less tendency towards tidiness than he possessed. And yet he could never approach his mother's level of organization. Her compulsion towards order had appeared in each of her other offspring -- three sons and a daughter: two file clerks, a magistrate and a housekeeper of the highest quality -- in clear and apparent manners. Dewey seemed to have inherited his father's lackadaisical attitude towards order and organization. Truth be told, Joel Dewey was no slob either, but as he had aged, his attention to detail -- a lack of which Dewey had been often chided for; yelled at concerning; and beaten over throughout his childhood -- had faded. Eliza had tried to prevent his slipping through a combination of cajoling, berating, from time to time resorting to outright violence. But, as she had done with her faded beauty, she had come to resign herself to the simple fact that neither she nor her husband nor her God could fight the effects and ravages of time. Instead of resisting it, she turned that energy towards cleaning up after her husband to the point that she would follow him around the house, replacing objects he had taken from their shelves, resetting furniture, righting the ship, as it were. She stayed awake for almost an hour longer than the rest of the household, simply putting everything back where it was supposed to be. Though it wasn't readily apparent, she was not an unhappy woman.

His books, his beloved books, rearranged, his notes organized as much as he felt they needed to be, he settled onto his bed. A student at Amherst college, studying education, learning how to teach, learning how to learn, learning just for the sake of learning. Dewey had no interest in becoming a teacher, wanted instead to become a reformer, to be a reformer. To reform the educational system in America, perhaps then his time at Amherst best spent examining how education was approached, look at it from the inside, reform it from his position on high, up above. His notes, as he glanced at them as he put them away, consisted of detailed critiques of his professors and their methods. His own very specific ideas of how things should be done filled the margins of his textbooks.

Change, the one thing he valued most above all else, the one thing he knew his mother and his father were afraid of, as they embraced the status quo, he knew change was good, was necessary, was the way of the world. His mother believed that change was synonymous with chaos, that natural change was atrophy, was entropy, was the lack of human-imposed order. As if all things were perfect the way they were. As if there was no room for improvement. As if God had laid things down just as they were and always had been and here, in 1870 New York, Eliza Dewey, her husband, and their brood, and the rest of the town, and the rest of the world, inhabited the universe in a perfect state and nothing that Man or Nature did would improve the state of being. Time may or may not heal all things, but it certainly changes all things. Nothing was immune from it, nothing possibly avoiding change. He mapped his own change in carefully kept journals. Charts of his growth from day to day, month to month, year to year. Nineteen years old he stood 5 feet 11 and two-fifths inches; weighed 160 pounds and figured his net worth at \$70 (which included \$45 worth of books).

His focus lately was on changing the very heart of the English language. Words, he thought, had become too complicated, too unwieldy. Too many unnecessary variances in spelling, extraneous letters. Earlier that morning he had announced to his mother and father -- to their great and disproportionate distress -- that he was dropping the final two letters of his first name. "What meaning or purpose do they add?" he asked. "They only serve to confuse the eye upon reading. 'Melvil' is more appropriate." His father simply shook his head and returned to his reading; his mother launched into a lecture on tradition and the importance of keeping his God-given Christian name. Dewey refrained from pointing out that God hadn't given him his name any more than God had given him clothes on his back. Finally, she hadn't so much as relented as she had exhausted every argument that came to mind, had been countered by Dewey at every point, had grown tired of discussing the matter which didn't offend her so much in concept, but again, was simply a manifestation of her fear of change, had thought of something in the sitting room that needed tidying, had just walked away.

He opened a notebook and continued working on his speech which he would deliver to the Amherst College Reading Circle, a discussion of the irregularities in language. In the talk he would argue that English's many spelling irregularities made it difficult for non-Anglo Saxons to learn the language. He referenced Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster, two of his heroes, but also made a nod to his mother -- subconsciously, unconsciously, unknowingly, perhaps, perhaps not -- as he wrote, "Great minds have tried with carefully developed plans to reduce the many irregularities to order." She might have smiled had she read that, that smile may have transformed her face, might have brought a trace of her former beauty back to her visage. But, perhaps not. And would it matter? Would she understand? Could she ever see that her own fight against entropy was in itself a fight against the God she loved so much? She would never admit that to Dewey, had he bothered to ask, and certainly she would never admit it to herself, a distortion of her world view, a monkey wrench into the cogs of the machinery of her life.

As set in her ways as she was, Dewey was too. Focused on change, it was the goal of his life. He knew himself to be destined for some sort of greatness, some sort of larger purpose. From a young age, he saw his parents languish in unimportant labor, his siblings move on to more of the same. File clerks? Housewives? This was not for Dewey. He knew not what had filled him with this spirit of importance, the need and drive, the desire to be bigger and better than the world from which he came. It was not a desire to leave a legacy or to make a mark upon the world. The idea of history remembering his name was secondary, tertiary, unimportant. He would happily fade into obscurity, leaving behind some sort of improvement on the world, that the only thing that mattered.

But the question was, what would that change be? What would he improve? Spelling reform was a topic near and dear to his heart and certainly would have far-reaching impact upon the world, improving the learning experiences of children and foreigners alike. But was

it the most important thing he could do with his time and his considerable talents? He also found himself drawn towards the idea of bringing the metric system into general usage

Dewey closed his notebook, extinguished the light and laid back in his bed. He used to get his best ideas this way, alone, the darkness surrounding him, secretly perverse. He did not consciously choose activities of which his mother would not approve, but it just seemed to work out that way. It wasn't lust that drew him down this path, but his ever burning desire for the perfect idea. Lately, the eureka moments had not come with him as they once had. There was no aha, no rush to relight the lamp, his lasting tumescence leading the way, pointing towards notebook and pencil as a divining rod would lead one to water, his ideas flowing forth from him, spurting onto the page as fast he could write them, Dewey still standing, sighing with the release. Now, though there were no ideas, he continued the activity, perhaps hoping that it would come back to him, in that moment when all thoughts fled from his mind the one thought that mattered might gain entry. And yet there was nothing, or, not nothing, but after the initial release, there was nothing driving him to his notebook, but there was guilt, shame, gnawing at the corners of his mind, eating at his sense that he was doing or had done the right thing at this or any other point in his life. Embarrassed, though there was nobody around to see him, the curtains drawn, the room dark, he shrank back into himself, deflated, defeated, no better off than before.

He laid back on his bed, having risen in the moment, sweat dripping from his forehead even in late and frigid November, the stovepipe in the corner of his room adding to his own natural body heat. His eyes closed, his breathing returning to normal, silence filling the room, his head emptied of thought. Another sigh, the futility of yet another evening dragging his mood to their original lows. Like his mother -- he chastised himself for thinking of her in this moment -- he was not an unhappy person by nature. He was not expressive of his joys, and usually not expressive of the lows. As even-keeled a man as there ever was, he took after his father. Where his mother wore an expression of disdain and contempt nearly constantly, his father was not easily read, the question of what was going on in his mind being oft asked of him. And the lack of expression resulted from a lack of feeling -- Dewey didn't allow himself to sink too low, refusing to feel the depths of tragedy, the troughs of sadness, the dark underground depression that life in the gloomy nights might bring. There was a trade off: dulling himself to the downs dulled his experience of the highs and few and far between as they were in his world, this was a drag to be sure, but it wasn't as if he was missing all that much. Still, he sighed, annoyed at his inability to direct his life, his 19 year old life, he thought, was dragging behind, was lagging slowly, and Dewey, impatient, anxious to find his destiny, so determined to believe that it existed, that it was out there, waiting for him, waiting for him just to find it.

"Melville!" a shriek from downstairs jolting Dewey violently from his reverie, upright, sweating, swearing (under his breath), cursing her name. Footsteps on the stairs, her bulk - - physical and spiritual -- causing the house to creak in protest, causing Dewey to sigh in protest, the most he can manage. He would rather be alone, in this moment, in most moments truth be told.

"What is it, mother?" he called. Her hand on the doorknob, rattling, finding the door locked.

"What are you doing in there?" she asked.

"I'm *thinking*, mother," exasperation unsuccessfully hidden from his voice, often the case, he has found when dealing with her. For the most part, he makes a conscious effort to disguise it, but while he can usually choose the proper words, the proper tone escapes him.

"Thinking," she scoffed. "Always thinking. Never doing. Never acting!"

"I act, mother," despite his best efforts it now came out as a petulant, childish whine. He detested hearing this tone in his voice, it made him cringe then, and when he replayed the conversation later, the recollection will cause him to physically shudder. "I act," he said again, calmer, quieter, more in control. "What do you want?"

"You will come to church with me," she said.

He very nearly replied, "But I don't *want* to," but he managed to catch the words before they come out of his mouth lest he create yet another segment of conversation that he has to play over and over in his mind. Instead, resigned, "When would you like me to go to church with you, mother?"

"Tomorrow," she replied. "And next week, and the week after. You mustn't ignore your duty to God."

Dewey rolled his eyes, thankful that the door prevented his mother from seeing his reaction. He didn't mind thinking, feeling the exasperation and frustration that she caused him, just so long as he didn't subject her to it. He had no problem with betraying his love for his mother in his head. And truthfully, he didn't mind going to church, had no problem with God, had no problem with worshiping God, had been brought up to love and fear God (as he had once loved and feared his mother; now it was just love mixed with the usual annoyance that accompanies all young men as they go through their teenage years), God had never done him wrong. He just simply didn't get the same thing out of church, out of God, out of worship, that his parents seemed to. His parents were so fervent in their worship that they actually attended two different churches: His mother favored the Adams Center Seventh Day Baptist Church while his father was a charter member of the recently formed Adams Center Baptist Church, a group that had splintered from the other church. For his part, Dewey could detect no great difference in the doctrine or practice of the two and didn't understand the reasoning behind their differing loyalties, but he accepted it, as did his parents. There was no animosity or conflict between the two and they attended their separate services without comment or issue. Though his siblings had all adopted their mother's church, Dewey had been baptized into his father's. However, from time to time, at her request, Dewey had attended services with his mother and had found them innocuous enough -- had his mother known that was his impression of her church, it would have sent her into a rage, surely -- but would have rather spent his Sundays (and Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays when she was being insistent) doing other things. Occasionally, he found himself able to drift off in his mind and actually get some work done, but the droning sermon of the minister often served to distract him from his own thoughts more often than it served him as white noise, a background on which to lay his ideas.

"Melville!" his mother cried again. He could somehow hear her pronouncing his name with the 'le' at the end; it made him cringe in frustration.

"Yes, mother," he said. "I'll go with you. I'll go, I'll go, I'll go."

It has been raining for days, a new experience for Dot, standing, the field. He thinks it has been days, he isn't sure, his thoughts, the voices, unrelenting still, unanswering still. His head, feeling the drops of rain, large bulbous beads of water falling ceaselessly, Dot still standing, unmoving, unmoved. The rain is new noise, loud, torrential, but not loud enough, never loud enough to drown out the internal monologue, the internal dialogue, his brain's soliloquies performed for this unsympathetic audience of one. He wants to leave, needs to leave, exit this theater of his mind, find some other venue. He dare not look up, not back to the sky, not knowing how it may have changed, do the birds still reel overhead? Not in this storm, not in this weather. No, his eyes glued to the ground, this ground so long ago abandoned, so barren, so thirsty. The rain drops kick up tiny clouds of dirt and are immediately swallowed, the ground remains dry, the dust covering Dot's shoes, Dot's shoes once black, shiny, meticulously cared for, no longer. Now clouded with a ever-thickening layer of grime, the rest of his clothing as well, the rest of the man as well. Why can't he move from this place, he wonders. There is nothing keeping him here, there is nothing forcing him to remain in this particular spot except for his own inability to move and he does not know where that comes from.

He coughs, automatically, unwillingly, the sound comes forth from his throat like a revelation, the only thing real that he has heard, aside from the rain, and aside from the dust, the feel of the rain on his head, the general dampness in his bones, he is not sure that the rain is real, that the sound of the rain is real, that the dampness in his bones is real,

and while he thinks about it, that the cough is real. He tries again, coughing, and the one is followed by another and another until it turns into a fit, and he is doubled over, wracking his lungs in an attempt to produce something, anything, to make one thing come forth from his withering body. There is nothing. His throat raw, his lungs burning, his eyes watering, he finds himself bent at the waist, hands on his knobby knees, the first position other than upright he has occupied in for as long as he can remember, for as much as he can remember. The feel of his knees on his hands brings him back to himself, the idea that he is indeed here, and real, and existing in this space, the lone clear idea in his head that he actually is, that he actually *is*.

He straightens, with some difficulty resuming his former posture, shoulders high, back straight, knees and legs in line, an arrow stuck at a right angle to the dirt at his feet. He thinks he will try to move and is momentarily struck by the thought that there is nowhere to move to, nobody to go to, nowhere to run. But Dot is a man of action, or once was a man of action, he thinks he once was a man of action anyhow, and if he ever was, he can be again, if he ever was. And thinking this, he struggles, but manages to lift one foot, his left, and he knows that this is a start, that this is movement towards progress, and places the foot back down next to the right. He struggles again, and lifts the right, with the effect buoying his confidence even further. He begins to march in place, notices that the dust is indeed disturbed by his movement, that there are footprints in the dirt under his feet, that they match the size and shape of his shoes, that they are indeed made and remade by his actions, that he is still able to affect this world, that perhaps, even, this world still exists, all these things are positive, all these things are possible, anything is possible.

Those words echo in his mind, anything is possible, he remembers her name, he remembers her face, he remembers her eyes, he remembers her voice, her questions, her desire to know that anything was possible. He remembers telling her, looking into those eyes, telling her, yes, anything is possible, everything is possible. He wonders what happened that made her believe that it wasn't, he wonders how he knew that it was, where he found the positivity to convince her that it was, that it is, that everything is possible, his footsteps in the dust, and he looks behind him and sees a trail of footsteps, distorted by rain, by the sudden wind that swirls up, but still the footsteps obviously there, obviously made by him, and he realizes that this too is possible, that he has moved, that he is moving. If the world has moved on, as all evidence appears to indicate, then he too will move on, will move onwards. His footsteps are possible and therefore travel is possible and therefore moving on is possible and therefore. And he looks behind him and below him and reassures himself that yes, indeed, there is movement, and though it is distorted by rain, his path is straight, and likely true, and though he doesn't know where he is going, and he doesn't know where he has been, and he doesn't know quite how long he has been there, nor how long he will be going, he knows that he is, and he knows that he was, and he knows that anything and everything is possible. And everything and anything is possible. And he remembers.

He was twenty-one years old and it was the first time he had been in bed with a woman, in his rooms above the educational supply store which he ran in Boston. It came upon him suddenly, unexpectedly. He hadn't even thought to ask her to come up, but it had been her idea, and he had no idea. They laid in bed side by side, his hand on her hip -- her naked hip -- and he was nearly overcome with joy, perhaps the first time in his life, overcome with joy, he felt tears at the back of his eyes and he fought them back because he didn't know what they meant, nor how they would be received. And how could he know, when he was younger, that lying here with his hand on her hip, that it would be all that he would ever need, or ever want, again? He had had no idea, how could he have? How could it be possible that something so simple and so beautiful would be so consuming? The sunlight slanted through the window, dust specks floated in the air, shining in the light, his hand on her hip, her blonde hair reflected the light, her eyes reflected his adoration, he didn't know how to look at her, he didn't know how he was allowed to look at her. He was no slouch, but

he had never thought that someone so beautiful would ever let him lie next to her, his hand on his hip, his eyes trying to say things that his mouth never could. Nothing in his life prepared him for this, and he wonders how he has ended up here.

Her name was Annie, and she was beautiful, the most beautiful girl in Boston, if you asked Dew-e (he had changed the spelling of his last name the previous year) and truthfully, there were few who would disagree with him. They had met at the librarian conference, Dew-e having taken over the reins as head librarian at Amherst, Annie being a clerk at Harvard's law library. Dew-e's love of books had easily taken him into the job, his mother's love of order feeding his skill. And his need for reform had lead him to form a unionization of librarians, not so much for labor relations, but to meet, share, and exchange ideas. Some scoffed, wondering how many ideas librarians needed to share, but Dew-e suspected, accurately, that librarians together would come up with much more than anyone might expect. And it had brought him Annie. They immediately clicked, gelled, got along famously one might say. And after several dates, somehow, improbably, she had ended up in his bed.

The experience, for Dew-e, was revelatory. Two years ago, he had laid by himself in his bed, searching for the same feeling, looking for the release, for the peace, that only this experience had ever brought him. He had been seeking this out without ever having known it. And here it was, and here she was, and here he was with her, and he couldn't do anything but repeatedly tell himself that it was real, because there was no way that it actually could be.

But it was, and wasn't the sun shining brighter? Wasn't the quality of the light just indescribably *better*? He couldn't put his finger on it, and yet, there it was. It was as if he had gotten new spectacles, the world clearer, colors crisper. Dew-e's head swam with thoughts, with ideas, with the idea of this woman making him a greater man, and wasn't it just that his head was clearer? That distraction had been removed? That he was finally able to think? He could not say, he would not say anything other than that there he was, looking into her eyes, and feeling like the entirety of him was pouring out of his.

Everything is possible, he thought, and realized that he had said it, had breathed it, his mouth against the nape of her neck, the most amazing thing his lips had ever touched, aside from the rest of the places on her body that they had explored earlier.

"What was that?" she asked. He lifted his head, reluctantly removing his lips from that mystical place, that amazing skin. He looked at her in the eyes, "Everything is possible," he repeated, louder, firmer.

"Is it?" she asked. "Is it really?"

"Yes," he said, and with his eyes tried to show her, didn't know if he was showing her adequately, but tried, and at that moment, vowed to himself to always be trying to show her with his eyes, knowing that his words would not suffice, that words would never suffice, and if anything was possible, that it would be possible for him to show her with his eyes just how true it was, and if he failed, so he failed, but he would have tried, and that is all that would have mattered.

She ran her hand down the side of his face, the tips of her fingers tracing contours, drawing new patterns across his cheek. At her touch, at each touch, he felt reborn, felt renewed. He could not imagine what had kept him from this, all this time searching for something to change and here it was, something so easily changing himself. All his strident efforts at keeping himself from feeling too much were gone, simply destroyed, at a single touch, by hands so small and delicate that he could enclose them both in one of his own. He could not keep from smiling.

"You will do great things," she said, her hand still on his cheek, her eyes still locked with his. "I just know it. You will be a great man."

He was overwhelmed, didn't know how she could know that that was what he needed to hear, what he needed to believe.

They carried on, seeing each other whenever their schedules allowed. They met for dinner, went to parties, and attended the symphony. And every time, Dew-E felt himself drawn further and further into her hypnotic gaze, left smiling like a fool, feeling like a school boy with a crush, something he never felt even when he had been a school boy with or without a crush. They'd walk through Boston, hand in hand, discussing books, libraries, politics, found themselves more and more compatible with every word spoken, found themselves aligned in a similar manner on the issues they faced. The sun never seemed to set when they were together, and for Dew-E, that feeling lasted well after they had parted ways.

He had visited her in her apartment several times, making awkward small talk with her roommate, a woman named Theresa McIntyre, a schoolteacher who had moved to Boston from a small town in upstate New York, just as Dew-E had. Even though they had this in common, along with a shared passion for education, Dew-E found that making conversation with her was difficult. He couldn't shake the feeling that Theresa disliked him, thought that Dew-E was only interested in Annie for her physical attributes, snickered at him behind his back. He tried to be charming, tried to win Theresa over, but there was always a lingering feeling that she disapproved. The time that Dew-E spent waiting for Annie to ready herself for an evening out was some of the most uncomfortable time he spent during their courtship. Theresa herself was dating a man named Franklin Ralston with whom Dew-E was familiar. They were acquainted by way of mutual business associates and Dew-E had heard talk that Ralston and Theresa had a more conservative relationship, that Theresa frowned on premarital intimacy of any kind and this fueled his supposition that Theresa held his dealings with Annie in disdain. It wasn't as if Dew-E and Annie flaunted their intimacy by any means. They were nothing if not discreet. Neither of them were perpetrators of inappropriate public displays of affection. The most that Dew-E had ever done in front of anybody was to hold Annie's hand or kiss her on the cheek. Still, the look on Theresa's face always said to Dew-E that she knew exactly what he was up to, knew what was on his mind, knew what went on behind closed doors.

Dew-E had better luck, and a better rapport, with Annie's cat, a silver tabby called Henry, whom she said was named after Henry V, her favorite of Shakespeare's plays, but whom Dew-E suspected was actually named after Henry James, a childhood friend and crush of Annie's. When James moved to London, Annie had been despondent (so Dew-E had learned from the chief librarian at Harvard who knew them both) and had gotten the cat to help her ease her pain at the separation. The (irrational) jealousy and rivalry which Dew-E felt about James he transferred to the cat which bore his name. At first, Dew-E found himself shunning the animal, but Henry seemed to feel some sort of affection for him and persisted, eventually getting Dew-E to move past his negative feelings for the cat. The two would sit together on Annie's couch, Dew-E stroking Henry's head, Henry purring contentedly. At times, they would wrestle, Dew-E pinning Henry to the ground momentarily, then letting the cat back up to take a swipe at Dew-E's outstretched hand, only to pin Henry down again, all to Annie's delight (and Theresa's obvious displeasure.) Dew-E quickly learned that the way to a woman's heart often led through her pets.

"He never lets anyone pick him up like that," she declared happily, seeing Dew-E hold Henry upside down one afternoon. The cat seemed as content to be dangling, inverted, as if he were sitting comfortably on the floor.

"Yes, he and I have forged quite a friendship it seems," Dew-E admitted. "I've never been one much for those of the feline persuasion, but Henry is quite an intelligent cat."

"Oh he is, is he?" Annie asked.

"Indeed. He's confided in me that he'd like to be called Hen-Ree from now on."

Once, while walking, they passed a child, five years old, holding onto his mother's hand, laughing, cackling, at some joke or some joy that Dew-E could not decipher, laughing with such abandon that Dew-E knew he had never felt, could only have felt as a child, had never felt as a child, had somehow missed out on. Had he ever been that happy? It seemed impossible, a product, a symptom, of his severe upbringing. The child's face illuminated by

the sun, by his smile, pure and innocent, the most genuine thing Dew-E had ever seen. He held Annie's hand tighter, glanced sideways at her, met her gaze, she smiled at him, a gleam in her eye, Dew-E smiled back and felt like laughing himself, like joining the little boy and laughing, not at any joke, but at the joy welling up inside him, at the world with its unblemished sky and its shining sun and its many splendors.

Days later, he found himself visiting his mother and father at their home in Adams Center. They ate supper, and afterwards when the dishes had been done, and Joel Dewey had retired for the night, Dew-E followed his mother around the house as she adjusted out of place objects, setting things right again, organizing the universe.

"Was I a happy child, mother?" Dew-E asked.

She did not immediately respond, focusing instead upon straightening a picture that, to Dew-E's eye, had not been askew. She ran her finger along the top edge of the frame, checking for dust, and only when she was satisfied that there was none, did she reply.

"What does it matter? Were you a happy child? What a question." She moved on to the next photograph. "Are you happy now? And what does that matter? Do you honor God? Do you contribute to society? Happiness," she scoffed, shook her head. "He speaks of happiness!"

"It's a simple question, mother," Dew-E replied. He still had to fight to keep the annoyance from creeping into his voice, though it was getting easier with time and distance from this house. "Was I happy? Do you remember me being happy?"

"I don't remember noticing, Melville," she said. "Life is a struggle, a constant struggle to survive, to keep food on the table, to keep children in line, to keep chaos from descending upon the order. If I didn't have time to pay attention to your happiness, it was because I was so focused upon your well-being."

Dew-E had expected this, had remembered this. Their household had not been devoid of love by any means -- he knew his parents *loved* him, for what it was worth -- but there was no regular practice of showing affection, he could not remember for the life of him the last time his mother had kissed his forehead, given him a hug.

"But you must know -- did I laugh more than I cried?"

"You were a quiet child. I don't think you did much of either."

This was unsurprising to Dew-E, that he would have been even-keeled as a youngster, leading to his unflappable nature as a young adult, and again, as a product of his relatively emotionless household, certainly he was shaped by the environment in which he grew up.

"So I wasn't unhappy?"

His mother turned towards him, threw her hands up in the air in exasperation. "What is it that you want to know, Melville? Do you want me to tell you one thing or another? What will it take for you to let me clean this house in peace?"

"I'm involved with a woman, mother."

She quickly returned to her cleaning, her tidying, organizing things to hide her discomfort at her son's sudden revelation, sharing a kind of intimacy that she wasn't used to, hadn't expected.

"Her name is Annie Godfrey. She is a good woman. A librarian at Harvard. She makes me..."

"Happy?" his mother asked. "Is that it?"

"Yes, she makes me happy. I think that's what it is," Dew-E admitted. "I saw a child on the street, with his mother. He was laughing."

"And you want to know if you have ever felt this way before?"

"Yes, exactly. Did I ever laugh? Did I ever burst out in laughter causing you and father to look at me, wondering what it was that was causing me such joy, perplexed, and then delighted? Laughing at my innocent wonder?"

His mother shook her head, "No, Melville. I don't remember anything of the sort."

"I'm not surprised," Dew-E said.

"I do remember times when you would cry. For no apparent reason. From no apparent trouble. You would cry and there was nothing anyone could do to get you to stop. You

weren't hungry, you weren't tired. You were just crying, and crying. And nobody knew why."

"I don't remember that at all."

"You were very young, I'm not surprised you don't remember."

"I'm surprised that you and father let me cry like that. It must have seemed wasteful, disrespectful."

"Children cry, from time to time. That's to be expected. Do you think that I wasn't worried about you? That I didn't want to make you stop crying? That I wouldn't do anything to keep you from being hurt? In pain?"

"But, you didn't care about happiness. You *don't* care about happiness," Dew-E protested.

"I'm not talking about happiness. Don't confuse happiness with wellness," Eliza said, visibly hurt by Dew-E's accusation. "I cared deeply about all my children. Do care deeply about all my children. That's a mother's duty; her responsibility."

"And I haven't felt that way about anything. I haven't felt so strongly about anything that it made me cry, or even feel like crying. And I haven't felt so strongly about anything that it made me laugh uncontrollably, holding my sides, tears of joy rolling down my face. I hardly even smile."

"And what's so wrong about that, Melville? You are a good boy, you are becoming a good man. We may not tell you every day, but your father and I love you. And we're proud of you."

"But isn't there more to life than that? Isn't there more to life than being good, than giving back? What makes us human?"

"What makes us human? What makes us human is that God gave us a soul and that we give ourselves to God. That is what separates us from everything else on this Earth."

"But it is that soul that leads us to feel, that leads us to laugh and to cry, to feel things. I haven't felt things, until now. I feel so much now and I don't know how to handle it."

His mother scowled. "You will come with me to church tomorrow."

"Mother, I can't. I'm due back in Boston by the afternoon."

"Nonsense. You will come with me to church. You'll learn a thing or two about happiness and what's really important. God will show you the way."

For the first time in months, Dew-E sighed. If his mother heard the noise, she gave no indication. But he relented. And he went.

The rain has stopped, Dot notices, thinks he notices, thinks it has stopped. Can't be sure, but the dust is not disturbed except by his footprints, so he thinks that probably it has stopped, if it had ever started, if it had ever rained. What he does know is that he is walking, is still walking, has made progress, has moved on. Still in the field, but a horizon has developed, mountains in the distance, growing larger, becoming sharper, certainly a surprise to find detail out there, in the world, to find it different from all the same, to find it different from anything at all. And yet there it is, and there he is, one way or the other, existing, occupying space, and there he is. He still doesn't know where he is going, but the idea of the terrain changing, of the world changing, is exciting to him, gives him a feeling he does not recognize. What is it? Hope? Yes. Hope. Something he hasn't felt in a long time, obviously, since he hasn't felt much of anything in a long time, except for the rain, but that doesn't really count, not only because perhaps it wasn't real, but he is thinking about things that he feels, really feels, like how he felt with Annie, his beautiful Annie, wonderful Annie, where could she possibly be?

And he remembers now, as he remembered then, that they had fallen for each other, had fallen in love, had married, and built things, they had built things together: a life, a world, a universe of their own. They had been constructive, productive. There had been a child. Geoffry? Godfrey? Yes, that was it: Godfrey. Where was Godfrey? It had been so long, had been so very long since he had seen his child, what could he be building in his life?

Doing with his time? There were so many possibilities, endless possibilities. And he had no idea, and he had no idea.

It came upon him suddenly, the ruins did. One minute he was walking and the mountains had been there, in the distance, and the next minute, there it was, ruins of something, a building. A house? No, not a house, something larger. Charred rocks, burnt timbers, a skeleton of a building, its shape bringing forth more memories, familiar somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, causing the voices to chatter, causing the noises to be noisier. He approaches and stops, closes his eyes, breathes deeply, and listens closely. And hears. Nothing. But knows. Opens his eyes and looks at the ruins of the church.

For it was a church, once, and was destroyed, by something, by time, perhaps, but more likely by some stronger destructive force, stronger than time, whatever that could be, something man made, something immense and impressive, something unstoppable, something Dot has never seen before. The destruction is utter, complete, it is only the shape of the building, and some feeling, some sense of its former purpose that allows him to determine that it is, that it was, a church at all. But once the idea enters his head it becomes obvious, and he walks through what were once halls, what was once a great worship area, finds splinters of pews, shreds of prayer books, scraps of fabric, finds himself where the altar once was. Finds himself falling to his knees and bowing his head and praying.

They were in bed again, Do-e (for he had changed his name yet again) talking while Annie listened, rapt, intent, absorbed. He knew he would do anything to keep her interested, to keep her looking at him like that. When they were in public, he could feel her gaze upon him at times, and it lifted him up, but there was nothing like the feeling of the way she looked at him when they were alone, when they were truly connected, sometimes in awe, sometimes in fear, sometimes in adoration. It very nearly killed him every time he fell into her eyes, even as it gave him life, gave him new life, like nothing had ever given him such life before, not even his mother when she brought him forth into the world. And how they were connected, not a word spoken between them, or a million words spoken between them, it didn't matter, there was always a glow bouncing off of them, a tribute to the both of them. They planned their meetings carefully, preparing well in advance for seeing each other, looking forward to it incredibly. It was a magical mystery tour of their lives, ever learning more, ever knowing more, about each other, about themselves, about the world, and nothing could touch them.

And still, thought Do-E, he hadn't yet figured out what he would do with his life. Annie reminded him that making love to her, spending time with her, being absorbed in her, was not an answer. It was neither a means to an end, nor the end itself. There was more that Do-e would do, they both knew this, and yet he had still not discovered what that would be.

"Have you prayed?" she asked, for she, like his mother, was deeply religious, though not so much so that she wouldn't spend hours with him engaged in various forms of pre-marital bliss that Eliza Dewey would have frowned upon. "Like I asked you to?"

"Yes," Do-e replied. "Of course." He hadn't, hadn't thought to, hadn't thought of praying other than praying to her, for Do-e felt closer to the divine than he ever had in church, had ever felt when talking to God, whoever God was, could imagine Annie being the Earthly representation of God, would never utter those words aloud to anyone, but felt no guilt in feeling them. He prayed to her, in his own way, worshiping at her feet, at her hips, her thighs, her breasts, worshiping her eyes, blue, crystalline, piercing in the way that only blue eyes could be. He noticed things like this now: the color of people's eyes, how they matched their personalities, how they shaped their personalities. His mother's eyes, also blue, but stern, cold, nearly dead. Annie's more an intense connection into a soul, a place he wanted to be. Do-e's own eyes, brown, Annie told him, for she thought of these things too, gentle, deep, not a pool like her eyes, but deeper still, a place she wanted to be, speaking of intelligence and wisdom, and playful, certainly playful when he was with her, when she was looking into them, certainly thinking. Eyes such an important part of any meeting, he could

not turn from them, she would not turn from him. They spent afternoons, the sun glancing in on them, checking up on them, keeping tabs on them, their own warmth supplanting the sun's, the sun jealous, the sun proud, the sun setting on them still lying together, whispering to each other, making plans for the world.

She brought her hand to his face, her way of bringing him back to the world when she could see he had gone off in his head somewhere, far away. "Melvil," she said. "Please, try. Come to church with me."

And so he had, attending the Episcopalian services that Sunday, and as he sat on the hard wooden pew, struggling to maintain his posture, to attain some level of comfort, the sun, diffused by stained glass still watching over them, the slightest pressure of Annie's hip against his, he resisted the urge to take her hand. He paid attention to the sermon, letting all other thoughts fall away, and he was filled with the presence of something, he could not put a name to it, could not put his finger on it, but felt it all the same, felt it nonetheless, there was something there besides the two of them, something besides the rest of the congregation, besides the minister, the choir, the building, the world. And he could feel it. And it filled him. And he very nearly leaped from his seat and shouted "Eureka!" because an idea had come to him, an idea for an invention, a necessity, his mother's organization, his need to reform, a world of files scattered around offices, desks, piled high, teetering on the edge, stuffed into cabinets, drawers, closets. Disorder on the highest scale. And it struck him that there was a simple solution, an easy answer, a vertical file.

"Explain it to me again?" Annie asked, later that night, the two of them basking in afterglow, a slight sheen of sweat on her delicate skin, their limbs intertwined, this bedroom, this bed became their home base, their headquarters, safe haven, he loathed leaving every time they left, though his confidence set new heights as he knew it was just a matter of time, and a short one at that, before he was back again, with her, his muse, his angel, his savior.

"A vertical file," he said. "A hanging file. I don't know what to call it yet. The verti-hanger, perhaps. The Upright File Storage Brigade. I'm not sure. Regardless, imagine two sheets of heavy paper, attached at one edge, lengthwise, and at the top, the opening, two rods extending the length of the paper. You could put documents into the opening, and use the rods to hang the contraption in a deep-bottomed drawer. A vertical filing system. Each one of these files could then be labeled, kept in order, all documents in one particular file would pertain to one another, so perhaps, there would be a file for information concerning your home loan, and another file concerning your applications to various colleges or universities, yet another dealing with the intricacies of your health situation, records and such. No longer would all these documents have to be scattered about, or tied together with bits of string or ribbon, or bound into large unwieldy books. Stored in my device, they would be kept flat and wrinkle-free, and what's more, incredibly easy to locate when one needed to consult them."

"And this is what you want to do?" Annie asked dubiously. "Become an inventor?"

"An inventor, yes, sure, fine, an inventor," Do-e said distractedly, wrapped up in his head, in his ideas, yes, an inventor is what he would become, and the ideas would keep coming, he was sure of it.

And he was right, each time he visited church with Annie, some new idea came to him -- self-inking stamps, index cards, new & improved grape juice. But she grew more and more distant, the sun, the sun was setting now, earlier, darker, clouds gathered, and he didn't notice, didn't notice so much, didn't pay so much attention anymore. Was just so attached to the ideas, was addicted to the ideas, to becoming something larger than what he had been, was leaving his journals behind, the ALA behind, the metric system, the spelling reform. Was neglecting everything but his inventions.

"Inventors are important people," he protested. "Inventions are important. The wheel, the inclined plane, the pulley. Think of where we'd be without them."

"Your grape juice is delicious," said Annie, said his mother, said his friends, but there was always a but, a caveat: "but, what else are you going to do?" They all, every single last one

of them, expected more from him. Expected him to do something truly great -- as if the vertical file wasn't revolutionizing office organization the world over. As if files across the globe weren't at a record level of flatness, of wrinkle-freeness, of organizability, ease of findability, simply a revelation for secretaries, file clerks. And it wasn't limited to just the office either. People were installing "file cabinets" in their homes, for usage there. The world had become much more efficient because of him. And if someone got him started about the qualities of his new grape juice, it would be hours before he was done discussing its many wonderful benefits and health bonuses, much more than most people really cared to hear.

And so he went back to the drawing board (which he had also invented) and tried to come up with something else, something better, and he attended church more often than anybody he knew, including his mother and father, including Annie, and he sat in church and waited for the spirit to move him, to continue to move him, to take him in a direction in which he had not yet gone, and there was nothing, it wasn't working anymore, and he thought, *I used to get my best ideas this way*. And he thought about masturbating.

He wakes up -- he had slept -- in the dirt, had he dreamed, he did not know, he would not know, perhaps it was all a dream -- his thought, he thought, if he had slept, if he had dreamed, if the voices had told him stories, painted him pictures, if he had dreamed, he did not remember, the voices would not say, perhaps it was all a dream.

It is later, according to his pocket watch, which seems to still be running, he stares at it, making sure, seeing the second hand still steadily tick, if it is keeping accurate time, which it always had, the whole time he's owned it, it is 12:37, most likely the middle of the night, judging by the darkness of the sky, judging by the stars, it must have cleared up, must have blown over. The air is crisp, clear, cold, chills his bones, still damp from the rain, or still damp from his lifetime of dampness. He rises to his knees, kneels, in front of what used to be in front of the altar. Thinks about praying, thinks about his mother praying, thinks about his mother, not able to find anything in his room. How would she feel now, here, in this world, where there was seemingly nothing left to find? Would it drive her mad? Nothing to organize, nothing to tidy, but at the same time, nothing to lose, nothing to be lost, nothing to create any sort of chaos. Somehow, the ultimate in orderliness had been created, and here Dot was, stuck in the middle of it, without any idea.

And so he does pray, kneeling there, in the dust, in the dirt, amidst the splinters and fragments of what used to be a church. It didn't matter, he tells himself, that the church is no longer there. If God is anywhere, then God is everywhere. If God is anywhere. Dot has his doubts. Dot has all of his doubts, and wonders if they are the only thing that remain untouched. Like cockroaches and tax collectors, his doubts (and apparently himself) are the only things to survive the apocalypse.

He stops himself there. Was this the apocalypse? Has he decided that that's what has happened? Had the ultimate battle between good and evil transpired as foretold in revelations? Certainly, the landscape looked scarred as if by battle, but why then was he the only one around? Who had won? If it was the apocalypse, did it matter if he prayed? If it wasn't, did it matter anyway?

No matter, he thinks. No matter at all. I will pray anyway, and if God isn't around, then the Devil can laugh at me. It would be refreshing to hear a different voice laughing at him, so used to hearing God's laughter was he. So used to hearing God laugh.

So he prays. Prays for knowledge, understanding, strength and willpower. All the things he had ever prayed for in his life, leaving out his usual plea for world peace as the world seemed beyond that now. Seemed beyond praying for now. Seemed, somehow, at peace now anyhow. He thinks of other things to pray for. To pray about. His family? Who knows where they are? Who knows who they are? He throws them into the mix. His friends? Where are they now? He prays for his friends, a generic prayer, let them be well, or let them be at peace, let them be whoever they happen to be. Anything else? He can't remember, he can't decide, decides he is done with prayer. Forever? For today, at least. Done with prayer for today.

He rises to his feet, feels enclosed by the ghost of the church. Feels enclosed for the first time since. Since when? Since what? How long has he been as such? This question haunts him. This question will haunt him. How can he have no concept of time? He always felt that as long as he was alive that there would be time left and now it feels as if there is no time left. As if time has fled the world. And he checks his pocket watch and yes, it still works, is still measuring time, but it its own master, it ticks as it will, it does not determine time. It is possibly measuring imaginary time. It is probably measuring nothing. He knows of course that even when there was time to be measured, there was no time to be measured. Numbers, time, all this made up by man. Nature knows no time. God knows no time. There is only growth and decay, nothing frozen in time, nothing changing in time, nothing happening in time.

Dot finds himself on a road, more a thin trail, only identifiable as a road by the fact that it is slightly depressed in the ground, just barely lower than the surrounding area, visible as it snakes off into the distance, just wide enough to allow two cars to pass each other, once better maintained, but not likely better traveled. The road seems familiar to Dot, as does the area, as does everything, which should be comforting, but it only provides him with an inescapable feeling of deja vu that itches at the back of his brain, causing him to squint in frustration at yet another memory that escapes his grasp. There are more and more of them lately, and they have piled up as items on a to-do list, and even they have begun to slip away. How can he remember something if he can't even remember what he is trying to remember?

He slows his travel, focusing more on remembering where he is, how he knows this road, how he knows this world, how he knows himself, if he even does. But he knows this road, knows it, can walk it with his eyes closed, does walk it with his eyes closed, feeling the way with his feet, feeling the way in his mind. He doesn't stumble, doesn't falter, his feet falling surely one in front of the other, and in this way he travels, steadily on toward the horizon, happy now that he doesn't have to look on, doesn't have to stare at this damnable landscape, eyes closed he can imagine that he is wherever he wants to be, and night falls, and still his feet step one in front of the other, knowing where he is going, even if he doesn't, even if all he knows is where the road will be, and where ever his feet take him is fine with him.

He walks on until morning, perhaps he even slept, he does not know, and he walks on until it is night again, but does not notice, so deep inside his own head is he that waking is just like the other, one thing is just like the other, everything is just like everything else, until something is not and his feet, surprising to him, stop, of their own accord, just stop. And he opens his eyes. And through the darkness, he sees the man on the side of the road.

The world is silent, Dot's feet quiet, but the voices in Dot's head are buzzing. He has never heard them so concerned, so agitated, so alarmed. They clamor for his attention, but he has never paid them any mind before so he doesn't see any good reason to start now. Dot examines his surroundings, surroundings that look just like all the other surroundings with which he had surrounded himself before, save for the boulder, a feature conveniently placed in an otherwise featureless landscape, put there just for Dot to hide behind, and that's ok. He gives the man the once-over, twice. He is wearing a long, brown oilskin duster, black boots, a wide brimmed hat pulled down low over his eyes. He is covered in a thin layer of grime, looks as if he has been traveling through this world for a long time without rest of any kind, but looks no worse for the wear, as if this all he has ever known in his life. He stands facing north, facing the direction in which Dot is traveling, doesn't seem to have noticed Dot's approach and Dot is torn between his desire for some sort of human contact and his fear of this unknown stranger. It has been so long, so long since he has heard another voice, save for the made up ones in his head, that the idea of speaking with someone is nearly overwhelming, but overwhelming too is Dot's fear of the unknown, his fear of everything. He stays silent and observes, but there is nothing much to see as the

man on the side of the road doesn't appear to be doing *anything*. The voices are quieter, apparently satisfied that Dot has decided against approaching the man, would be happier if he turned around and walked the other way, any other way, prefer that he not stand here, not observe, even hidden behind a boulder, but the voices know, the voices know. But Dot can't turn around and leave, is stuck, is struck dumb by the idea of meeting this man, this man whose presence causes more of an itch in the back of his mind, causes him to wrack his brain, his memory, his ever-failing, unreliable memory, once so strong and solid, now weak, frail, like the rest of him, falling apart like the rest of him, like the world, once so strong and solid, now weak, now destroyed.

The voices buzz up again, frantic, reaching new levels of noise, new heights of pain in his head. Dot clasps his head in his hands, willing the agony away, but nothing he does, nothing he can do, eases the pain, the noise, the din, he just wants some goddamn quiet, and when he thinks he can't take anymore, when he knows that the noise is going to kill him, it stops. Suddenly. Completely. Silence like he hasn't known in ages.

And then the man speaks.

You could bring the sun to tears, he says. It is a whisper, but Dot can hear it as if they were standing side by side. The voice is gravel against brick, out of practice, disused. But familiar, known to Dot like the road, like the man himself. Another piece of another puzzle. Dot fights the urge to talk, to reply, the man can't possibly be talking to him, can't know he is there, hasn't turned, hasn't seen him, Dot is silent, Dot is hidden, Dot is nowhere. But the man speaks again, says, *You've turned away from God*, says, *You've turned away from reason*, says, *You've made a mockery of your life*, and Dot knows he is speaking to him, somehow knows he is there, somehow knows who he is, like Dot knows who the man is, like Dot might remember who the man is, who the man was, where this road goes, when it goes, when it goes beyond this man, beyond this point, beyond this dot. If only he could remember, but even then, what would he do with it, what would become of it, what difference would it make if he could thrust his head through the clouds, thickening above, thickening ever still, fighting the sun, fighting the truth, and Dot knows he has no choice but to confront the man, to come out of hiding, that he has no choice, or that he has a choice but that the choice doesn't matter, that all that matters is that he make the choice.

He doesn't ask the man who he is, for that will either be revealed, or it won't, and that maybe it matters, but it doesn't. He simply approaches, and the man doesn't turn, doesn't acknowledge his approach, but keeps talking, *You've fallen away from all you created*, and, *You've stopped trying*, and *You've grieved too much for what is done*, and on and on until Dot can't take it anymore and grabs the man shoulder and pulls him and they are face to face and the man falls silent.

"I know you," Dot says, his own voice barely a whisper, his own voice barely a voice. Like his chuckle, like his cough, like his thoughts, barely registering, like his own thoughts not recognizable as his own. His voice is so out of practice that Dot has trouble forming the words, hearing the words as they leave his mouth. The man seems to know this, cocks his head at Dot, waits patiently for him to speak again. Dot clears his throat, the noise of the dry phlegm ejected from vocal cords like wallpaper stripped from the wall, like burrs removed from a jacket, louder than his voice, louder than his voices. Dot covers his mouth and tries again, dust and time hacked into his cupped palm. He looks into his hand and winces, wipes it on his pant leg. "I know you," he says again, better this time, but still quiet, as if Dot is timid, nervous to bring it up, and perhaps he is, perhaps that is why his hands are shaking, legs unsteady, he notices now, his whole body trembling. "I know you," a third time, and now, some confidence there, and it floods his mind, his body, he stands up straighter.

"Of course you know me. But you don't remember me," says the man. "That is unsurprising. You've been through a lot. No more, or less, than anyone else has been through, mind you. Don't go pitying yourself now. We both know what a bout of self-pity will get you."

Dot clears his throat again, so dry, so barren, like the land, like his body, like his mind. "What? What does that get you?"

The man gestures around him, towards the road, towards where Dot is walking, towards where Dot has been. "It gets you this, of course. Gets you nowhere, no-time, no-one."

"I already have all that, how much worse could it get?" Dot asks, and lightning flashes in the distance, the sudden bolt lighting up the sky, burning Dot's eyes, causing him to jump.

The man chuckles, dry grass rustling in the wind, "Well, for one thing, it could start raining again."

"And what would that matter?" Dot asks. "Rain? Wind? Sun? Cloud? It is all the same in this place, it is all for the best, or all for the worst, the weather is no matter. It is no indicator of how things are, or how things were, it just is."

"You could bring the sun to tears," the man says again, shaking his head, a small smile on his face, a wistful look in his eyes -- they are green, Dot notices, beguiling, ever watchful, tricky, deceptive.

"How can I bring the sun to tears when it never shows its face?"

"I want you to remember my name," says the man.

"Do you remember mine?"

"Of course -- it is Melville Louis Kossuth Dewey. And also it is Melvil Dewey, and also Dew-E and Do-e and Dui and now, simply Dot. I imagine by the time we finish with each other you will have changed it to a symbol, something indecipherable but undoubtedly deeply significant."

"How do I know you? How do you know me? I remember you but I don't remember you. I know you but don't know you."

"Because I have always been with you, you have always been with me," the man replies.

Dot looks back at the way he has come, sees one set of footprints, his lone trail stretching off into the distance. "But I came here alone."

"You refer to the lone set of footprints. Looks can be deceiving."

"What do you mean?" Dot asks, but he thinks he knows, thinks he has read this story before, written in flowery script on framed pieces of paper in bathrooms in houses he has visited.

"Melville, you see but one set of footprints because I was carrying you," the man says.

"But.... You can't be...."

The man laughs, heartily, the sound as strange to Dot as anything he has heard. "No, Melville, I'm just pulling your leg. You've been alone this whole time."

"I'm glad to see that you have a sense of humor," Dot says sarcastically. "It's good that not everything in this world is dead."

"Nothing in this world is dead, Dot. This is all in your head."

"You're pulling my leg again, right?"

"Of course I am," replies the man. "Unless I'm not."

"Oh, a sense of humor and unnecessarily cryptic to boot. I'm not sure that I'm going to enjoy our association."

"But we've gotten along so well for so long, Dot. Come on, you remember all the good times we've had together."

Dot stretches his memory, looks back as far as he can, deep as he can, and still is unable to place this man, whom he so obviously knows. The man laughs at the contorted expression on Dot's face. "Fine, shall I give you a hint?" Dot opens his eyes, sighs in relief.

"Yes, please," he replies.

"Ok, but this is practically telling," the man says with a smile. "My name is Jonathan Decimal."

And suddenly, Dot remembers.

May, 1873, Dui sat alone in his rooms. Annie had distanced herself from him, claiming that her work was keeping her too busy to see him, though Dui knew that she had simply grown tired of his inventing, had despaired to see him stray from the reformation of

education that she had thought was his life work. Dui himself had thought it was his life work until the truly important things had come along -- the files, the juices -- and he was content now to go with that flow, save for the fact that the ideas were no longer coming to him as they once had. With Annie's departure, Dui had kept up his attendance at church, but found that he wasn't receiving the divine inspiration that church had previously afforded him while sitting with Annie. He would look longingly across the aisle at her -- and if she was just too busy to see him, why wouldn't she deign to sit with him at church? -- and spend the entire sermon wishing she was with him. Did he wish it for what she brought to him, what she gave to his mind? Or was it that he actually missed her? He certainly missed spending time with her in his bed, on that subject, there was no question. Did he miss her for other reasons, or was it that he just missed his muse?

Regardless, he missed her, and he was alone. His friends had come to his house in an attempt to get him to join them in some frivolous debauch or another, but Dui had never gone in for that sort of thing. Had never taken up drinking or carousing, and didn't have the heart to try it now. One thing he had discovered -- an another splitting point between him and Annie -- was the smoking of marijuana. He had only done it twice before, but had found it liberating, and gathered it was no different than the smoking of tobacco or taking of snuff that others found pleasure in. As his friends left, he locked his doors and sat down with his pipe. He thought he would take his ukulele out of the closet, smoke some marijuana, and play some music. He wasn't much of a player, but had managed to teach himself a few songs, and he thought he might try his hand at writing one or two of his own while under the influence of the drug. He had heard that many people had managed to be more creative while using marijuana, and it sounded like something that he needed to do, sounded like his only option, sounded like his only way out of the creative doldrums.

So he sat on his bed, opened the windows, smoked some pot, and waited for inspiration to hit him, plucking idly at a uke string.

And nothing happened. Had he done it wrong? He didn't feel a thing, didn't feel the divine flowing through him as had been described to him by several of his friends, didn't feel a thing like he had read about in the medical journals he perused in the libraries, didn't feel a thing.

He moved to a chair at his window, sat in the dark, peered through the crack between the curtains. Boston had grown up around him, buildings shooting up taller, more and more people flooding the city, everything dirtier, busier, chaotic, disorganized. As city planners developed their plats, shoving people into tiny rectangles on their maps, they attempted to bring order to the new bustle, they tried to fight off the chaos of an exploding population even as they gave rise to the very chaos they tried to fight. The dichotomous nature of their lives made Dui sick, yet he knew they were just bowing to the inevitable, trying to make the inevitable bearable, trying to keep the city from bursting at its seams, but what if the city simply wasn't there, what if there was nothing here but a few ramshackle homes, some fields to farm, what if everything was as it had been before?

That was his mother's influence talking, Dui decided. Her fear of change brought forth. She kept the status quo by keeping growth in check. And growth was life. And growth was change. And life and change were chaos. And all a man could do was try to keep that chaos manageable, one day at a time, one step at a time, one book, one chair, one lampshade at a time. Maybe the marijuana was having some effect after all.

Light from the street invaded the room, and Dui could remember a time when there was darkness, true darkness, complete black, before the lanterns on the street, before the lights from the surrounding apartment buildings, before a hundred thousand people had flocked to the city, had been born in the city, had given birth to the city. Alone in his room, Dui could not even feel alone anymore. Light and noise dispelling any illusion that anyone could be alone anywhere. Shadows behind curtains telling stories, clues to mysteries about the existence of other human beings, how did it all get this way. He felt a crisis of being coming over him: how could he be a part of this society that had created so much trouble: taxes, bills, wars, issues. Animals had it right, he thought, just going about their lives, rarely

organizing, imposing their will over other animals only when it was time to eat or mate, and just living. Man had been fine, doing just fine, until whichever man it was first decided that he needed to examine things, to ask questions, to organize the world to fit his image of how it should be. To do God's own work. God was doing his own work just fine, or else God wasn't, but it wasn't for man to decide to do it on his own. Think of all the rules and regulations that man had imposed upon his fellow man when the only law that mattered was God's law, God's law which he gave down to Moses at Mount Sinai so many years before. That was what mattered.

And even then there had undoubtedly been men who had rejected that, who had wanted to impose their will, to ignore God's law -- undoubtedly, for the bible told of those men who had forsaken the laws even as Moses received them -- and who was wise enough to supersede the laws of God? Who was dumb enough to think that they could? Dui sighed, the only thing to do was to try to fight back the madness of man himself, the result of man's need to fight against God's way caused so much trouble that there was brisk business in combating that trouble.

Dui pulled back his curtains, opened the window and thrust his head out. Outside, Boston moved busily on around him, the frenzy causing his heart to hurt and his eyes to sting. It boggled the mind, seeing these structures, both physical and sociological. How had man decided that this was the best way? Filing people into buildings, pressing them into work, at times buying and selling them, often killing them, each man trying to beat his fellow man, and the government which had been created by the people, of the people, for the people, just seemed to hate the people, just wanted to drag each and every man down. These institutions grew to become monsters, to become entities that were beyond the control of God or man, were bigger than the sum of their parts, stronger than the sum of their parts, and meaner than the sum of their parts. Dui suddenly understood what kept the doomsayers and end-of-the-world theorists going all the time. They weren't pessimists: they were hopeful. Hopeful that God might come back and undo the damage that man had done upon His Earth, wipe the slate clean and start anew, or just wipe the slate clean, wash His hands of the whole damned mess. Why bother starting anew? The first one had been a complete failure.

What had been so special about the state of the world eighteen hundred and seventy some odd years ago when God had sent Jesus to Earth to teach man a thing or two? There may have been a few more polytheists around at that point, and there might have been less straight up piety going on, but Dui couldn't see that the world was so much better off now than it had been then. If God was saving the second coming for something special, Dui didn't really want to be around for it, because if it got much worse, the world would be unbearable.

He fell back into his chair, the drapes fell back together, Dui became yet another shadow behind yet another curtain in yet another building in yet another city. Anonymous, nameless, faceless, soulless. Urban life was soul stealing, he decided, and decided also, that he was fine with that. Closing his eyes, hearing music in his head, seeing colorful patterns that matched the beat and tempo of the music, he smiled, wondered how long he had been sitting there, what time it was, how he had gotten so tired, so hungry, just sitting there, thinking, wondering what his friends were doing, where they were, where he was -- no wait, he was in his room, he knew that much, what that music was, what --

Dui woke in his bed, his eyes crusty with morning mucus. He scratched at them, clearing them enough to open. His eyelids felt creaky, rusty, like his joints. His mouth dry, a disgusting taste lingering, so thick that not even a long swallow of water from the glass at his bedside could cut through it. Dui moaned, now regretting his choice of the previous evening. This hang-over was wreaking havoc on his senses, his sensibility.

He sat up in bed, took stock of his room. It looked as if a hurricane had swept through, upending books, scattering papers, disheveling his bedding, his clothes. What demons possessed me last night? he wondered. He set to cleaning up his mess, noticed that his ukulele had been splintered, split in two.

"Son of a bitch," Dui said aloud. He wasn't given much to swearing, but he also wasn't given much to getting intoxicated and tearing his room apart, so he figured it was a day for new and different experiences. By the end of it, he mused, he'd be gambling on the outcomes of the prostitute cage matches that were held in the south end.

He noticed a sheaf of papers that had managed to find their way under his bed, and lay on his stomach, stretching his arm out to snare them. Upon extracting the papers, he noticed that they were pages of sheet music, covered in Dui's own handwriting, covered in whole notes, nothing but whole notes. He flipped through the pages and saw that there were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, across thirty or forty pages, and that they made no sense at all. Rather, in Dui's limited ability to read sheet music, he could tell that there was little in the way of a coherent tune, no musicality to this. They appeared to be randomly distributed, without any conscious thought to their placement.

He took the pages to his desk and examined them closer, trying to suss out any rhyme or reason to his creation. If this is what marijuana fueled creativity is, he thought, I'll leave it to the bohemians. There was nothing in this for him, no salvation, no return to his previous productivity, no path back into Annie's heart. If she knew what he had done last night, she might not even return his letters, something, at least, that she was still doing. He couldn't risk it, couldn't risk being found out. He rose, found his pipe and his stash of marijuana and threw them into the metal trashcan, lit a match and tossed it in. As the pot and whatever papers were already in the can burned, he contemplated the notes on the pages once again.

And then realized what an idiotic idea it was to get rid of the marijuana by burning it. The acrid smoke began to fill the room, and with the doors and windows closed, he had no escape. Not wanting to vent the smoke to the world, lest someone see it and either think that his building was on fire or that he was hosting some sort of marijuana party, and not wanting to send the smoke into the rest of the building either, Dui was at a loss. Peering through the thickening smoke at the notes on the page, he shook his head, shook it again, tried to shake loose the cobwebs, tried to clear his head, tried to see anything but the spots in his eyes, the notes on the page, the dots in his eyes, the dots....

For the second time that day, Dui woke up without having consciously gone to sleep. This second time, however, he was on the floor, curled into a fetal position, decidedly less dignified than waking up in his bed, and he was grateful that there was nobody there to witness it.

Except for the fact that there was.

Dui found himself looking through the remaining haze of smoke at a pair of dark leather boots. His mind latched onto details in the footwear, noting the quality of workmanship, the strength of the leather, the number of stitches along the sole, even the manner in which their owner chose to lace them (straight across as opposed to criss-crossy). The boots had been recently polished to a shine so intense that Dui was able to clearly make out his own disturbed reflection in the surface of the toes. They were, in all honestly, simply amazing boots. Dui had no head for fashion, however these boots made such an impression upon his addled mind that he did not for a second wonder about the feet that inhabited them, about the legs to which those feet were attached, about the body above that, about the owner of it all, about the demeanor, personality, presence of someone else in his room, about the idea of someone breaking in, about the idea of someone finding him in such a disheveled and undignified predicament. He thought of nothing but the boots at all until one of them rose in the air, and very slightly, very gently, tapped him on the nose.

The extreme ridiculousness of this act brought Dui back to himself, to the improbability of his situation. He rolled onto his back, looking up at the man, who extended his arm, a gesture to help Dui rise to his feet. Dui took the proffered hand. Stood next to the man, noticed that the rest of his outfit matched the boots -- shiny, clean, well-tailored, well-groomed, well-kept. A suit, a tie, nice pants, Dui noticed all of this in the moment that it took to resume standing. The man tipped his wide-brimmed hat to Dui, and, retaining possession of Dui's hand, shook it in greeting.

"Mr. Dewey," the man said. "It is good to finally meet you, sir."

"I'm afraid you have me at something of a disadvantage. You are?"

The man released Dui's hand and grinned, embarrassed. "Of course, I'm terribly sorry. So rude for me to barge into your house unannounced, uninvited, and worst of all, uninvited."

"Yes, yes," Dui took two steps back, glanced around, found the room not quite up to his standards for receiving guests, but not too bad at that, and besides, the man was, as he had said, unannounced, and uninvited. "These things are true, and so, sir, your name?"

"Yes," the man said, with a flourish and a bow that Dui found charming and inappropriate at the same time. "I am Jonathan Decimal."

Am I high? Dot asks.

No, man, replies Decimal. *This would be a whole lot more fun if you were. It's just the way things are going right now.*

But, Dot protests, *we're talking without actually talking.*

"Oh, yeah," Decimal says. "That'll happen sometimes. Pay it no mind."

"So...that was you," Dot says, disbelieving, but unable to dispute the obvious evidence.

"Like I said, I've been there all along."

"But I met you when I was 25," Dot says.

Decimal waves his hands dismissively. "Fine, almost all along. Very nearly the whole time. How old are you now?"

Dot starts to speak but is unsure. "I don't know. What year is it?"

Decimal looks around. "Judging by the barren landscape, I'd say it had to be at least 2012, but that can't be right. That would make you over 160 years old."

"I certainly feel as if I could be 160."

"You don't. Trust me on that."

"Well, regardless. We don't know when it is, we don't know how long we've known each other, how old I am, or where we are."

"Oh, I know exactly where we are."

"You do?" Dot asks. "Where?"

"We, my friend, are right here. Of course." Decimal says this with a smug air, pleased at his joke, waiting for his audience to show its appreciation.

Dot throws his hands up in exasperation. "I should have expected that. I'm starting to remember more about you now, and what comes to mind is a more or less constant state of annoyance."

"That sounds about right," Decimal replies.

They adjourned for breakfast, that morning, soon after meeting. Decimal spoke of a restaurant around the corner that Dui had long been a fan of. As they ate their eggs and bacon, they were silent, but when they had finished, Dui began firing questions rapidly at his tablemate.

"So, who are you?" he asked.

"We already figured that out," Decimal replied. "I'm Jonathan Decimal."

"Yes, yes," Dui said. "I mean, *who are you?*"

"Oh, I understand. No wait, I don't. I'm *Jonathan Decimal*," Decimal repeated his name loudly and slowly, as if Dui didn't speak English and just by changing the speed and volume of his speech, Decimal could impart understanding.

"You are a frustrating son of a bitch, aren't you?" Dui asked. His swear earlier had felt good and he thought he might try it some more. He was always on the lookout for new hobbies.

"Oh you have no idea, sir," Decimal replied, that infuriating smile, along with a fleck of scrambled egg, on his lips. He leaned back in his chair and patted his belly, and looked for all the world as a man without a care, a man without a thought, and absolutely, thought Dui, a man without any intention of explaining his sudden appearance in Dui's quarters, in Dui's life.

Well, thought Dui, I can play that game too. He took another sip of his coffee and leaned back in his own chair, patted his own belly, tried on an expression of smug satisfaction, checked his reflection in the window over Decimal's shoulder, decided that the expression wasn't the look he was going for, tried another, and another, until he felt that he had found the proper one.

Decimal laughed and said, "Are you going to make faces at me all day, or are you going to tell me why you called me here?"

"Why *I* called *you* here?" Dui asked, his facial expression returning to his usual ("worried schoolboy called to the principal's office for something he may or may not have done but isn't sure and is wracking his brain to discover if there is something infraction in his recent past for which he has been caught") all sense of cool, calm and collected out the window. "You appear in my apartment unannounced, you know everything about me, you invite me to breakfast, you stick me with the tab" -- Decimal had deftly ignored the check as the waiter had presented it, had waited it out so long that Dui had felt no option but to pay the bill -- "and now you want to know why *I* called *you* here? Sir, I've had just about enough. I wish I could say it was a pleasure to meet you, but it has been anything but. It has been *everything* but."

Dui stood, placed his hat upon his head, and removed his coat from the hook, all while Decimal watched with an air of a lazy cat eying a bird -- a deep rooted instinct telling him to pounce but the feel of the sun on his belly too great to leave. Dui took great care in straightening his tie, getting his coat just so, a tactic designed to delay his departure in hopes that Decimal would come to his senses, take pity on Dui, at least explain why it was that he had appeared in his room. But apparently Decimal's patience knew no bounds. The man simply observed Dui as he prepared to go, the same smug smile unchanging, unwavering, and not a word uttered. Dui gave up, bid Decimal good day, and left.

Dui tried to remember what he had scheduled for the day -- meetings with members of the various journals and bulletins he chaired, a review of a new metric system educational pamphlet, a discussion of a proposed new spelling for the word "onomatopoeia" -- and didn't feel like doing any of it. He wasn't used to eating a large breakfast such as he had and that, combined with the lingering effects of his marijuana binges -- both intentional and unintentional -- had left him feeling lethargic and unmotivated. He imagined that the world could get along without him for one day, would just have to get along without him for one day.

He strolled to a nearby park and took a seat on a bench looking out at a playground. Children, observed closely by their governesses, cavorted gaily amongst and upon the swings, merry-go-rounds whirly-dee-dooos and giminy-jaws. It brought a smile to Dui's lips, and then he remembered observing these sorts of antics with Annie, and then he remembered never having partaken of these antics himself, and then the smile faded. When he was a child, there was never time for this sort of activity. If he wasn't in school, then he was helping his father tend the fields, or he was helping his father with his cobbler business (shoes, not pies), or he was helping his mother rearrange the silverware drawer. Never playing, never cavorting, never gallivanting. Dui wouldn't know how to gallivant if his life depended on it. How had these children gotten so good at it?

The world has moved on, thought Dui. The advent of industry, of machinery, of cities. All these things lead to one thing -- a great revolution in the existence of *free time*. What a concept! His insanely industrious parents could have never conceived of such a notion and yet here it was. Amazing how quickly things can change, especially when one hasn't been paying close attention.

Dui laughed at himself -- how could he lament not having free time when he was lazing on a park bench in the middle of the morning, ignoring and avoiding his responsibilities of the day, having just indulged in such foolishness as the smoking of marijuana the night before? Certainly that was a sort of hypocrisy, the sort of thing that Dui abhorred. He started to stand, to rejoin productive society when a hand clasped his wrist and prevented him from rising. Dui looked to his side and saw that Decimal had joined him on the bench.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Decimal asked, more of a statement than a question, certainly just manner of greeting and an attempt to be mysterious and dramatic.

Dui sat back down, sighed, "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you could tell me that," Decimal replied, looking not at Dui, but out at the children playing, wistfully, longingly, as if he wanted to join them and it was only by the thinnest of threads that he was holding onto his adulthood, preventing himself from riding the seesaw.

"This shitfuck again?" Dui wasn't sure if that was a proper oath, but he liked how it felt to say it, so he went with it. Decimal, for his part, didn't appear taken aback in the slightest. He was the most unflappable man Dui had ever encountered, and he started to wish he might learn something about how to roll with the punches as Decimal seemed to be able to do.

Decimal nodded almost imperceptibly and was silent, seemingly content merely to watch the scene in front of him, unwilling to respond. Dui watched the man, amazed at his contentment. Dui had never felt so relaxed as this man appeared to be. He shook his head. "I should go," he said.

"Come now, Mr. Dewey," Decimal said. "You should stay. It's a beautiful day. Look at how the sun shines."

Dui looked around him. Indeed, the sun was coming into the park at such an angle that the buildings at the border of the property were lit up, shining, the glass in the windows reflecting the light, the trees shading Dui and Decimal cast shadows, causing a high contrast effect on the illuminated swaths of land. The few clouds in the sky shone like liquid gold, hanging thin and wispy overhead, thick and fluffy further out.

"We won't have many more days like this," Dui mused.

Decimal brightened, heartened by Dui's acceptance, "Yes, that's the spirit! We certainly won't have many more days like this."

"Winter will be here soon," Dui continued.

"Indeed it will, and what then?"

"Cold, wind, rain, snow. The usual darkness of a New England winter," Dui supposed.

"Exactly. Exactly those things. That's the way of the world, the way of the seasons, the way of time, and the way of change."

"Everybody knows that."

"Yes, everybody knows that," Decimal said. "And yet, somehow, everybody forgets that. It's only on days like this, little oases in the midst of the change, that they remember. Look how you can see the memory of winter in their faces."

Decimal was right. Beneath the joy in the children's faces and the glee and abandonment in their cries as they played; and beneath the quiet contentment and calm demeanor of the governesses as they watched on, occasionally calling to their charges to be careful, to be quiet, to be cautious there was a sad knowledge of the coming of winter.

"So there is always a cloud in the cloudless sky," Dui said, and as he did, more clouds rolled in.

"And each silver cloud has a dark lining," Decimal countered.

"The half full glass is still half empty."

"No matter what's in it. No matter if you fill it again, it will be emptied again."

The playing children, the fetching governesses, all the same, all as they were, had taken on a gloomier appearance in Dui's mind, a funereal tone due to the conversation he had with Decimal. And yet this did not bring Dui down into depression, did not truly cloud his opinion of the day. He merely felt as if the truth of the world had been revealed, or if not revealed, for he had always known it, simply that he had been reminded of how things truly were. They sat, silent, letting the day wash over them.

"Who are you?" Dui finally asked. "And let me warn you, as languid as I am, as relaxing as this is, if you simply repeat your name again, I will have no choice but to beat you. Badly. I've never fought a man before, but I swear on all that is holy, I will beat you, if it is the last thing I do."

"I assure you, that if you attacked me, I would not resist. If you feel the urge to beat me, I recommend going with it," Decimal replied.

"Are you serious?" Dui asked, incredulous.

"Perhaps," Decimal said. "Perhaps not. I might be lying about that. I might be well trained in the pugilistic arts, might be a trained and deadly killer."

"Well which is it, Mr. Decimal? I'm at my wit's end here."

"And here I thought we were simply enjoying the day and each other's company."

"Half of that is true, I suppose. But I'm beginning to find -- no, from the moment we met, I have always found -- your company to be troublesome, perplexing and downright frustrating."

"I am sorry you feel that way, my friend. That is certainly not my aim," Decimal said, seeming for the first time to feel something other quiet satisfaction, something, perhaps pity, perhaps sadness, perhaps true remorse. "I don't mean to trouble you in any way at all. Don't want to confuse you any more than you already are. It's just that I'm simply not at liberty to tell you anymore than you already know."

"But I don't know *anything*," Dui protested.

"Well now, that is simply not true, sir," Decimal said. "You just aren't allowing yourself to remember."

"Remember what? We just met this morning!"

"That may well be, but you have always known I existed."

Dui made a noise, involuntarily, a gasp, a sigh, an exclamation of disbelief and frustration, that caused one of the children's caretakers to jump in astonishment. Dui waved awkwardly to her by way of apology and then pulled his hat low over his eyes out of embarrassment. He gathered himself enough to ask "How is that possible?"

The sad look on Decimal's face deepened, creased his forehead, turned down the corners of his eyes. "Melvil, don't you remember?" he asked. "Anything is possible. *Everything* is possible."

"It's all coming back to me," Dot says, and then shrugs. "Maybe not all of it. But that part of it, anyhow."

Decimal and Dot have moved on from where they met, walking on down the road, though Dot still does not know where the road goes, and if Decimal knows, he is not sharing the information.

"We were good friends, Melvil," Decimal says, a touch of sadness in his voice.

"I find that hard to believe," Dot admits. "I never had many friends, and those that I counted as friends were.... Well, they were less -- how do I put this? -- aggravating than you were. Than you are. And while I appreciate you dropping the useless 'le' at the end of my name, I go by Dot now."

"Yes, I apologize. I'd forgotten. And let me tell you how honored I am that you chose that name."

"It has nothing to do with you," Dot says angrily.

"Of course, of course. And yet, it does. But, no matter," Decimal waves the subject away with a gesture. "If I vex you so greatly, why do you choose to walk with me now? When you could choose to do anything?"

"I suppose I've found that your company is better than no company at all. I suppose. Perhaps. What do you mean I can choose to do anything?"

"Well, Dot, as the kids say, it's your world; I'm just living in it."

"One of these days, one of these times, you're going to give me a straight answer, and you'll find that it won't kill you to do it."

Decimal laughs. "Maybe it will and maybe it won't. But you're right -- one of these days I might just tell you what you want to know, just as soon as you find the right question to ask."

"How did you know that?" Dui demanded. He reached over and grabbed Decimal's lapel. "How did you know? Have you been watching me? Listening to my conversations?"

"How did I know what?" Decimal asked, laughing outright at Dui's sudden outburst.

"That everything is possible!" Dui shouted, drawing more interest from both children and caretaker alike.

"My friend, good sir, everybody knows that everything is possible. Why are you so angry? Calm down for one second, please. I beg you. You're creating a scene."

Dui glanced around, saw that indeed the crowd at the park had grown disturbingly interested in his and Decimal's exchange. He let go of Decimal's jacket, sat back on the bench and held his head in his hands. "What has come over me?" he asked, more to himself than anyone else. "This is so unlike me. Look at me! I've partaken in marijuana, started swearing, ignored my day's responsibilities, dilly-dallied with a most frustrating and exasperating stranger, and now threatened you with bodily harm. I've turned into some sort of monster."

"Come now, Mr. Dewey. Don't be so dramatic," Decimal said soothingly. "You've had a rough few days. It's perfectly understandable."

"But that's just the thing," Dui looked up. "The past few days haven't been any more or less rough than all the ones before it. They've all been equally mediocre, more or less, looking at them altogether."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Decimal replied. "Self-pity is an abominable emotion."

"I agree with you on that. I can't abide by people who whine about their problems. We all have problems, and nobody can say that their problems are more dire than anybody else's."

"What would you say that your problems are, Mr. Dewey?"

"I'm not prone to discussing those with strangers, Decimal. No offense."

"None taken, I assure you," Decimal said sincerely. "But let me assure you, as I have been trying to tell you all along, that we are not strangers. You are known to me, and if you think about it, I am known to you. Or will be known to you. Shit. I can't remember which one it is."

It was the first time that Dui had seen Decimal be less than completely sure of himself and the effect was disarming. Decimal appeared human, vulnerable, and Dui was filled with something approaching sympathy for the man. The feeling lasted for but a moment, as Dui remembered how annoyed he was by Decimal, and the sympathy turned into contempt, and then anger.

"What is this ploy now?" Dui demanded. "You don't know if you are known to me or if you will be know to me or if you will have once been known to me?" Dui got twisted in the verb tenses and conjugations and stopped, eyes darting sheepishly about, as if looking for some other form of time in which he and Decimal might be acquainted better.

Decimal checked his watch as if it might hold the answer. "Yes. I mean no. I mean, I don't know. You might find this hard to believe, but I'm just as confused about this as you are. Well, perhaps not quite as confused, but certainly somewhat confused. Certainly somehow confused. Certainly. Certainly uncertain."

Decimal's facade of cool, of unflappability had completely gone. Dui felt his contempt fade, his sudden sense of superiority slip away, as Decimal's confusion caused Dui to feel nervous and uncertain. As uncertain as Decimal seemed to feel. It scared him, as if he were on safari in a strange and dangerous place and suddenly his guide, a man who may have been terribly annoying, frustrating, and inappropriate, had gotten completely lost and had no idea where they were going. Dui didn't understand why he was suddenly so scared -- he knew exactly where he was, knew where his office was, his store, his home, his friends, his parents. There was nothing changed, nothing new, nothing different, and he had only known Decimal for a few (mostly unpleasant) hours -- or had known him forever, or would know him forever, or would have at some point in the future known him forever, whichever was the case. He hadn't placed any stock or trust in the man, and so his sudden discomfort had no reason to cause Dui any discomfort of his own. Still, Dui's natural tendency towards

compassion for his fellow man lead him to feel some sort of sympathy for the man, no matter how frustrating he was.

"Are you," Dui started, "...are you okay?" He placed his hand on Decimal's shoulder.

Decimal brushed the hand away, the first sign of annoyance that Dui had seen him show. "I'm fine," he snapped. Dui jumped back, startled at the outburst. Decimal looked at Dui with disdain, but like Dui's feeling of contempt just before, it was gone as soon as it appeared. Decimal seemed to gather himself, come back to himself, back to his senses, back to his calm, cool demeanor, back to his frustrating cat-who-ate-the-canary air. Dui found that he preferred this to the alternative, it was more aggravating, but much less frightening. "I'm sorry," Decimal said. "Terribly sorry. Please, Mr. Dewey, forgive my rude and inappropriate behavior. I don't know what came over me."

"Think nothing of it," Dui said, relieved that things had appeared to return to normal, or to what passed for normal on this most interesting day. "Only, please, can you explain to me what you meant? What you mean?"

"Of course, of course. Only, not here. I think we've overstayed our welcome," Decimal said, indicating the other occupants of the park. Though the two men had calmed down, the children and their watchers had not completely taken their focus from them, watching them out of the corners of their eyes, wary for any indication of further outbursts, fearful that violence might erupt at any moment.

"Yes, you're right," Dui agreed. "Let's go somewhere more private."

"Perhaps to your club?" Decimal asked.

Dui sighed. He had hoped Decimal wouldn't suggest going to the club, hadn't wanted to take Decimal there, hadn't wanted to have to explain Decimal to his fellows there. Also, he was supposed to meet his associate, Wesley Dixon there concerning the publication of the latest issue of the Journal of the American Library Association. The meeting had been scheduled for the previous hour, and while Dixon would undoubtedly be well entertained, most likely already drunk before he arrived at the club and certainly well into his third snifter of brandy by now, the man would be chuffed by Dui's failure to show. If Dui were to appear an hour late and with some stranger in tow there would be much explaining to do. But, he thought, there was nowhere else to go. He did not want to return to his apartment, reeking of marijuana as it was, and his office and shop would not be private enough for Dui's taste.

"The club it is," Dui relented. "But please, Mr. Decimal, for your sake, for my sake, behave yourself."

"Sir," Decimal replied, his good humor returned, his voice filled with mock indignation, "I wouldn't think of doing anything but."

"You remember that? That first time at the club?" Decimal asks. "Or was it the first time? I felt like I'd been there before, like I'd always been there, like I'd always been there with you."

"You're doing it again," Dot says. "Why can't you stop doing that?"

"It's all I know," Decimal says, a hint of sadness in his voice, as if perhaps there was some other way that he could possibly be, as if there was something better for him out there. "You have to understand that. I don't know how to do anything else, I don't know how to be anything else, I have always been how I am and I have always been at your side and I -- and I'm doing it again. I'm sorry."

"You should really see someone, Decimal." Dot doesn't know how he feels about the blossoming field of psychology, but if anyone could benefit from a visit to a therapist, it was Jonathan Decimal.

"I am seeing someone, Dot," Decimal says. "I'm seeing *you*."

"That's not what I meant. I meant someone qualified to help you. Someone to help you put your head right. An expert. A head shrinker. You know."

"Yes, I know what you meant. But if you're not qualified to help me, then really, who is?"

"How am I qualified to help you? I'm not even qualified to help myself! Where are we? Where are we going? How did I get here? How did *you* get here? Why are you always more or less right at my side? Where the hell is everyone?"

"So many questions, Dot. So many questions. And, yes, so few answers, I know. I know it's frustrating, I know it's troublesome -- all these things are troublesome. It's just that you haven't come up with the right one yet. But don't worry, you will."

Dot slumps, but accepts this as a given, that this is how things are, that this is what his life has become, that his fate is bound with Decimal's, that they are destined to walk this road, forever if he has to, that there may or may not be an answer for him, sometime, somewhere. And that makes it easier, and that makes it bearable.

"When I was a boy," Dot says, "I had head lice. And my mother had to use a special comb to pull the nits from my hair, and it hurt like nothing had ever hurt before. And it was my mother inflicting the pain, and that made it all the worse. As she combed my hair, I cried like I had never cried before. Do you understand? How can a young boy tolerate this kind of pain? How could a mother inflict that kind of pain on her son? But then, you didn't know my mother, do you?"

"I'd rather not say," Decimal says. "My answer might only make you mad."

Dot dismisses this, "Fine, yes, I'm sure it would." But, he is already deep in this memory, the realest one he has had thus far. "Anyhow, the next day, my mother had to do the same procedure, and as the comb came out, I started crying again, and she slapped me across the face, said something about how God would hate to see me crying like this, that I had no reason to cry, that she could give me a reason to cry. I calmed down, and was determined to bear the combing in silence, to be a man -- at 5 years old? -- to not cry, not disappoint her, to not disappoint God. God? A five year old child worried about disappointing God? Regardless, I sat in the chair in the dining room and she went at my hair again with that cursed comb and steeled as I was for the treatment, I was surprised to find that it did not hurt at all. There was no pain! 'You're not doing it as hard as yesterday, mother,' I said. 'I'm combing exactly the same, Melville,' she replied. 'You're just used to it.'

"I didn't think that was possible, that experience with the pain would dull my response to the pain, my ability to feel the pain. She must have been combing lighter, taking pity on me, though that idea made as less than sense than the idea of me being used to the pain, especially after just one application. Like I said, you didn't know my mother, or maybe you did, regardless. I guess the only conclusion that I can come to is that I indeed had gotten *used* to the pain. Had gotten used to pain in general. What else could it be? The second time around, the terrible situation didn't seem as terrible."

"A poignant memory and story, Dot. Thank you for sharing it with me."

"Do you understand? This is how life is. A series of painful experiences that hurt less each time, not because they are less terrible but because we grow used to them, because we inure ourselves to the pain, because we build walls around our hearts, around our minds, around our brain's hearts, our heart's brains, whatever. Everything is pain and everything we do is not to lessen the pain, but to lessen our perception of the pain."

Entering the Alumni Club with Decimal, Dui felt the thrill of the schoolboy ditching his classes. It was excitement mixed with fear, a twinge of guilt, apprehension at potentially being caught playing hooky. He chided himself for the feeling -- the excitement, anyhow. There was no doubt that he would be caught, and he felt shame for feeling any sort of joy in his actions. He was being willfully and blatantly irresponsible. Dervis, the club's steward met him at the door and took his jacket.

"Mr. Dewey," he said. "It is a pleasure to see you again, sir."

"Thank you Dervis," Dui said. "Always good to see you as well. How is your wife? The children?"

"They are well, sir. Thank you very much for inquiring. And how is Miss Godfrey? We have not seen her in some time."

Dui's face clouded, but the question was not inappropriate considering the circumstances. "Annie is well, though I couldn't say for sure. I have not seen her for some time myself."

"That is a shame, sir. She did so brighten the room."

"Yes, indeed she did, Dervis," Dui said. "Is Mr. Dixon here? I was supposed to meet him over an hour ago. I'm afraid another engagement has caused me to run late."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Dixon is relaxing in the Great Room," Dervis replied. "I dare say that he has managed to keep himself busy during your absence. The brandy has been flowing."

"I'm not surprised. I'll go look in on him now. Also, I have a guest joining me today. That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Of course not, sir. We'll take good care of him, as always."

"Thank you, Dervis."

Dui and Decimal made their way through the building towards the Great Hall. The Alumni Club of Boston had been built in the early 1700s, originally used by the colonial government as a meeting house, and then during the War of Independence as a headquarters for General Flagg and his staff. After that, ownership had turned over to Harrison Fletcher, a shipping magnate, who had converted the building into a private club which served as a meeting place, dining hall and escape from domestic drudgery for local luminaries. Dui had joined two years before, having been invited by Paul West, a member of the board at Harvard University. The architecture was magnificent. Floor to ceiling lead glass windows gave a spectacular view on one side of Boston Commons and on the other of the Charles River. High vaulted ceilings rose three stories above. Classical era paintings which had been acquired at great effort and expense adorned the walls. The Great Room, which Dui and Decimal entered, was furnished with plush couches and chairs and was a favorite place for men to sit and chat, discussing ideas great and small while sipping on the finest cognacs and brandies.

Dui spotted Dixon lounging in one such chair, a crowd of intellectuals and businessmen surrounding him, hoping to learn something from the man, or perhaps just looking for Dixon to something ridiculous and not wanting to have to hear about it second or third hand. Dixon was known for getting drunk, doing something embarrassing, and becoming the talk of the club, if not of the entire town. Nobody wanted to miss out on witnessing it for themselves. Dixon, independently wealthy and a confirmed bachelor at 38 years old, had nothing to lose. His reputation had been made on these actions and people would be disappointed if he did not live up to it. Dui weaved his way through the crowd of onlookers and hangers-on and knelt at the side of Dixon's chair.

"Mr. Dixon, forgive me for interrupting" he started. All eyes turned toward Dui, and he was certain he heard someone booing him. He pressed on anyhow, "My humblest apologies for missing our appointment." Dui had made the mistake of not searching for some viable excuse to use for his delay and searched for something appropriate. Meanwhile, Dixon had flagged down a passing waiter, demanding a refill of his brandy snifter which had not gotten very low at all. "I.... Well. I have no valid reason for --"

"Oh fear not," Dixon interrupted, somehow managing to sound as if he was not incredibly drunk. "I certainly don't mind not having to discuss the exceedingly dull business of libraries and spelling. There are far more interesting things to talk about today."

"But, sir, we have pressing --"

Dixon interrupted again. "Nonsense, my dear boy. I was just telling these chaps about the time that James Edward Prescott, Thomas Newell and Allan Pinkerton wrestled a bear in front of the King of Ghana while wearing naught but their pyjamas back in '62. Have you ever heard that story?"

Dui had heard every one of Dixon's stories before but knew that no amount of protesting would keep him from relating one once he was on a roll. "No, sir, I haven't but--"

"Well then, an excuse to tell it again!" A light smattering of applause broke out amongst Dixon's fans. "Do pull up a chair."

"Well, sir, I should love to stay and hear it, but I have a guest with whom I need to discuss urgent business. Allow me to introduce Jonathan Decimal." Dui looked over his

shoulder but Decimal had disappeared. He scanned the crowd, the rest of the room, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

"Jonathan Decimal, you say? Of the Wiltshire Decimals?"

"I admit that I do not know his lineage, Mr. Dixon," Dui said. "Nor do I know his location. Excuse me for a moment, I must go and find him."

"Take your time, my friend," Dixon said. "The day is young, and I believe that I shall be here for the long haul as it were. Now, where was I? Ah yes, Newell had, quite innocently, released the bear from its cage and Prescott and Pinkerton, having been roused violently from their sleep by his cries made their way to the throne room to see what was the bother. You may not know that in Ghana --"

Dui retreated from the center of the room, the crowd pressed back in, filling up the space he had occupied, in order to better hear Dixon's story. Dui fled to the entryway, briefly asked Dervis if he had seen Decimal (he had not) and then continued to search the rest of the building. He finally found Decimal lounging comfortably in one of the private reading rooms off the club's library, sipping Scotch whiskey from a fine crystal tumbler and smoking a Cuban cigar.

Dui waved aside a thick cloud of smoke and crossed the room to the window. He opened it, allowing some of the acrid smoke to clear from the room. "I see you've made yourself comfortable," he said.

Decimal smiled. "This is one hell of a club you have here, Mr. Dewey. One hell of a club. Yes, I've made myself comfortable -- you should try it sometime."

"These creature comforts, the cigars, liquor, they're not for me," Dui said dismissively. "I come here mainly for that which lines the walls in the room outside this one."

"The books."

"Yes, the books," Dui said. "The wonderful, beautiful books."

"You know, your face really lights up when you consider them, Mr. Dewey."

"They are the one thing in my life I am truly passionate about."

"It's good," Decimal said, "to have a passion in life. I, myself, have never had much use for them. But I do have my own passions, sir, not to worry."

"Such as?"

"Oh, such as this fine Scotch, this cigar," Decimal laughed lustily, "beautiful women. You had a beautiful woman once, did you not?"

Dui scowled. "What do you know of that?"

"Oh, not to worry, I know a thing or two, but just a thing or two and little more."

"I'm tired of your cryptic ways, Decimal. Now, I've brought you here, you've had your drink, your cigar, and played your little games. I'm reaching the end of my rope with you, sir. I suggest you either get to the point or get the hell out."

"Of course, you are correct. Of course. I've been nothing but trouble, nothing but a frustration to you and you have been most hospitable, treated me to breakfast, brought me to your wonderful club, put up with my...ways. I know I can be a bother, but you'll have to admit that it's not entirely my fault. I mean, isn't it obvious that you are to blame for some of my behavior?"

Dui was taken aback. "How dare you imply that I am responsible for how you act? We have just met, I have no influence over you, no impact on your behavior."

Decimal merely nodded, but quickly and deftly changed the subject. "You've always believed that you were destined for great things, no?"

Dui was again taken aback as much by the sudden shift in topic as by the accuracy of Decimal's statement. Everything Decimal had said had hinted at a deep understanding of Dui as a person, his history, his self, and yet Dui was utterly certain that the two had never met before. Still, Decimal hadn't been wrong yet.

"Yes, I have," Dui said slowly. "But doesn't every man?"

"Certainly not," Decimal said. "Some men are born into positions of status and falsely believe that they have already achieved great things and never try. Some men such as this inhabit the very walls of this building as we speak. Others are born so low that they feel

they could never achieve mediocre things, much less great ones. And then there are those who aspire to do or be no more than that which they are. They are content with their lot in life, with the legacy (or lack thereof) that they will leave behind. But you, sir. You have made your life a constant struggle to achieve. To progress. You have aspired towards aspiration itself!"

"This is not an invalid analysis, I'll admit," said Dui.

"And yet you have not achieved your goals yet. I daresay you haven't even discovered what your goals are yet."

"You insult me, sir," Dui said. "Are you unfamiliar with my work on the vertical file?"

"Of course not. The vertical file is an amazing contraption, one which has eased the lives of clerk and secretary alike. Thanks to you, documents stand upright, free from fear of being trampled upon, crumpled, or wrinkled ever again. But is that what you want to be remembered for? Indeed, will you even be remembered for that? Who, sir, invented the comb? Or the scissors? Why the greatest inventor of all, the man who discovered the wheel, is unknown to all but a few select individuals. Do you think your name will be remembered above his for creating a document storage device?"

Dui slumped into a chair. "No, of course you are correct. But perhaps," he brightened, remembering, "my work refining juices has more merit! Monsieur DuApple is remembered far and wide. His name is praised around the globe!"

"Juices!" Decimal spat. "I speak to you of doing great things, of moving mountains, reaching new heights, and you speak to me of *juices*?"

"I suppose you're right. And, after all, I'm not concerned with having my name remembered. I just want to do something that changes things. That changes everything."

"You, indeed, are as I had heard you described," Decimal nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"And how is that?"

"I was told that you were an irrepressible reformer, sir. And it seems that I was not misinformed."

"I am glad to hear that, certainly," Dui shook off the doldrums that the prior topic had brought upon him. His annoyance returned. "And though I risk sounding like a malfunctioning gramophone disc, but who are you and how do you know me?"

"Ah yes, that. I suppose I might as well level with you. Now. Finally." Decimal took a sip from his Scotch, obviously stalling for time.

"Oh out with it, already. Out with it, or out with you!" Dui stood and flung the room's door open, gesturing dramatically outside with an outstretched arm and violently pointed index finger.

"The only reason I hesitate, sir, is that I fear that you will not believe my answer, for it is so far fetched as to strain the credulity of even the most gullible man. It is a tale that even the greatest story teller would not dare spin for fear of being branded a witch, a heretic, burnt at the stake and then exiled from his hometown."

"Good Christ, Decimal," Dui said. "I'll be happy to hear any answer, just so long as you give me one."

It was Decimal's turn to sigh -- someone besides Dui sighed! -- and he did so hesitantly, as if he were unused to the concept or execution. He tried it again, and was more successful. "Yes, yes," he said. "Look. Fine. Okay. I was.... I was sent here. Or called here. See, this is why I said you wouldn't believe it. I was brought here? I appeared here."

"You make about as much sense as a Jewish woman who wants the right to vote," Dui interrupted.

"Don't I know it!" Decimal said. "The whole situation makes about the same amount of sense. I mean, it's not like it hasn't happened to me before. There was the telegraph guy, the mathematician, the blind guy, the musician.... Each time, each time I received a note under my door with an address and a name and I went, and though I'd never met the man before, I knew him, knew his life, and knew what needed to happen in order for him to fulfill his destiny."

"This is more shitfuck," Dui said quietly. He still hadn't quite got the hang of it.

"I assure you, I am telling the truth. I have had this same conversation a dozen times and each man has had the same reaction. The same responses. The same disbelief. So, each time I have tried a different tactic. Some have worked better than others. I will make a note that mysterious and cryptic is not the right tack to take. Maybe next time I'll figure it out."

"Who. The. Hell. Are. You?"

"My name is Jonathan Decimal. I'm a facilitator. A synergizer. A catalyst for change in a volatile environment. I help men find their goals, achieve their aims, reach new heights. Where great men are stuck, I am there to help."

"And you are here to help me?"

"That is correct. I am here to help you. Together, we'll make you a great man."

Dui still didn't fully trust Decimal, the story was so fantastic that it defied belief, but at least the man's intentions seemed benign. "Well then, Decimal. What exactly are we going to do? Where does my future lie?"

"I don't know exactly, Dewey," Decimal admitted. "But I do know one thing."

"What's that?" Dui asked.

"It's going to have something to do with dots."

"It's going to have something to do with dots," Dot muses. "Yes, I remember that. Dots. They are versatile creatures, aren't they?"

"That they are. I've worked with them for as long as I can remember. And I can remember a long time."

"So who were the others? I'd love to know."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to tell you now. You must have figured some of them out by now."

"Well, 'the blind guy' -- that was Louis Braille, correct?"

"Yes, you are correct. In 1821 I met Braille, who was then just 12 years old. He had blinded himself accidentally when he was 3 years old -- an accident with his father's stitching awl. He was a brilliant young man, but struggling with a way to create a method with which sightless people could read and write. I showed him the way."

"Dots."

"Yes, dots."

"But if you met him in 1821 -- you must have been but a child yourself.... That is not possible!"

"I know how it sounds, but I was as you met me, and as you see me now."

"Simply impossible!" Dot protests, yet he can not deny the fact that aside from being travelworn and weary, Decimal appears much the same as he did when the two had first met.

"Regardless, I was there, and helped him develop the system which bears his name."

"I suppose I have to accept that. You have aged much better than I have, that much is true."

"Nonsense, my friend. You look excellent."

"I can tell when someone is lying to me," Dot says. "But, thank you for the kindness."

"You're welcome, of course."

"So, the telegraph man, that was Samuel Morse, I assume."

"Right again. That was a tough one, took two of us. Another man, a gentleman named Dash Lineart, joined me. Back in the '40s, we visited Morse, helped him devise his code for transmitting messages quickly and easily across telegraph lines. Some time before that, I helped a musician with musical notation, a mathematician to develop scatter plot graphs. There have been others, more or less important than these, and I imagine there will be more. No reason to stop now, eh?"

"....," Dot silences.

Decimal nods. "I was in on that one too."

Exasperated, Dot asks, "But why are you here now? Do you visit the others?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. I awoke this morning in my rooms, as usual, and there was a note under the door directing me to the location where we met, at the time when we met, and there you were. I daresay I was as surprised to see you as you were to see me."

"I doubt that's the case at all."

"Regardless, I had no idea I'd be meeting you here," Decimal says. "And before you ask, I don't really know where here is."

"Fine, I'll accept that you're just as confused about things as I am."

"Really? Ah, that does make me happy." Decimal looks around, surveying the landscape and then asks, "So, shall we continue on this little trip down memory lane?"

"Is that where we are?" Dot asks. "I thought it looked familiar."

A year later and they were no closer to finding Dui's destiny than when they had started. There had been several false starts, attempts that ended dead ends, blind alleys, utter failure. One attempt -- they called it "pointilism" -- was a method of painting in which small distinct dots of color created the impression of a wide selection of other colors and blending. Critics derided the method, called it childish and immature, though it was rumored that several painters had adopted the style, using it to moderate success. It wasn't the triumph that Dui and Decimal were aiming for. The derision from the critics brought some measure of shame to Dui, causing him to shy away from public life for several months as he was unable to take the negative attention. He bounced back, however, and soon returned to the drawing board, only to face another setback when he discovered that Annie Godfrey had begun seeing another man.

It was an unfortunate accident that Dui made this discovery. He and Decimal had spent the day at Dui's office, working on another stalled effort at greatness. They'd had little luck, made no progress and tensions were running high between the two. Decimal admitted that his previous assignments -- he had no better term for them, had no idea how he was receiving these assignments, who was assigning them to him -- hadn't taken nearly as long to get started, and had never had so many failures as this, and had taken to wondering aloud if he hadn't gotten the address wrong when he first went to Dui. Dui had mostly abandoned his other pursuits. The metric system was mostly forgotten -- Dui had reverted to measuring things in the most obscure and arcane methods possible -- and spelling reform was completely out the window -- sometimes he would spell his name "Mmelleville Dooeyxwuqi" to be willfully obtuse. The journals and the libraries, the attempts at educational reform were all done, gathering dust, falling apart, forgotten. Everything was being put into finding the one great idea that would propel him into the hearts and minds of the American people. He realized that while that had not always been his motivation, his failures combined with the cold shoulder he had received from Annie had changed his goals. While he still was filled with the need to better the planet for the sake of bettering the planet, he also needed to be loved, to be adored, to be honored. If the people loved him, then maybe, just maybe Annie would be amongst them, and he would go back to lazy Sunday afternoons, spent lying naked with her under sun-dappled sheets, limbs intertwined, foreheads pressed together, silly grins on their faces, his fingers tangled in her soft blonde hair. The very thought, the memory of days such as this, sent a shiver down his spine, raised goosebumps on his arms. He desperately needed her back. Thoughts of her were distracting him from the work he and Decimal did and his partner -- for they were definitely partners now -- noticed that he wasn't fully invested.

"Perhaps it's not my place to say this," Decimal started, gently, obviously unsure of how to broach the subject, "but I feel that you're preoccupied with something other than our work."

"You're right, Decimal," Dui snapped. "It's not your place at all. I'd appreciate it if you minded your own damn business."

"Now now, sir, please. We've been cooped up in here for a fortnight and I think it's driving us both a little mad. Perhaps we should take a break. It might do us both a world of good."

Dui calmed considerably. Decimal was right. The endless hours of fruitless labor had started to take their toll on his sanity. Decimal hadn't meant any harm with his statement; indeed, he had simply been showing concern about Dui's health and wellbeing. Why then had he snapped at him so?

"I'm terribly sorry, Jonathan," Dui said, putting out his hand, a gesture of conciliation and friendship. "You're obviously correct. I hope you will accept my apology."

Decimal took Dui's hand and the two beamed at each other. "Of course, my friend. Think nothing of it."

"I don't know what's come over me lately. It used to be that work was enough to keep me focused, to keep me happy. And yet, these days, it's all I can do to get up in the morning, to dress, to tie my shoes properly."

"We just need to take a break," Decimal said. "That's all. You'll see. Let's retire to the club. Mixing with society will take your mind off of things. A snifter of brandy and some friendly conversation is just what we need."

"Yes, of course. Let us go at once."

So the two left Dui's office and went immediately to the Alumni Club where the supper dishes had just been cleared and the members, their wives, and guests were milling about, sipping digestifs, smoking cigars and discussing matters of deep import and the slightest triviality. A string quartet played quietly and mixed pleasingly with the general sound of chatter in the room.

"You were right, Jonathan," Dui said. "I feel better already."

Decimal smiled. "I'm glad to hear it." He took two snifters of brandy from a passing waiter and handed one to Dui. Dui didn't usually partake of alcohol, but during his association with Decimal, he had been inspired, at times, to try it. He found the effects mostly pleasing, as long as they were taken in moderation. The few times he had drunk to excess had not been happy ones, and he had vowed never to repeat them. He took a sip of the brandy and felt it warm his insides as it traveled down to his stomach.

And that was when he saw Annie. He had not seen her in quite some time, having stopped going to church altogether, indeed having stopped mixing in many social circles at all beyond the walls of the club. And Annie was not a member, had never frequented the club while she dated Dui, had expressed disdain at its male dominated hierarchy. And yet, there she was, looking for all the world like the happiest girl on Earth. She looked beautiful as always, and Dui felt his heart beat faster, rising towards his throat, his palms sweat, his legs trembled. What was she doing there? She stood alone, smiling, turning this way and that, greeting friends and acquaintances as they passed.

Decimal saw her as well and sighed. "Ah, Annie." Dui cast a sidelong glance at his partner, still unsure, at times, of Decimal's motivations, his past, his meaning. Decimal snapped out of his momentary trance and explained, "It's just that I feel for you, my friend. I can feel your intense love for her. It affects me as well."

"She is beautiful, is she not?" Dui asked.

"She's unquestionably the fairest woman in the room, I grant you that. What is she doing here? She hates the club."

"I'm not certain, but I mean to find out."

"I shall remain here, my friend. Godspeed," Decimal said.

Dui thanked Decimal, and started to cross the room, his eyes fixed firmly on Annie, her eyes fixed firmly somewhere else. As he walked, Dui followed her gaze and realized that she was completely entranced with a man who was approaching her from another angle. Dui stopped in his tracks, saw that the man was carrying two drinks, was beaming at Annie in an all too familiar way. He recognized the man -- it was Samuel Green, a former colleague and fellow founder of the American Library Association. Dui burned with fury and frustration as Green handed Annie a glass of champagne and watched as he kissed her cheek. The joy on Annie's face was unmistakable: she used to beam in that manner at Dui himself.

Decimal appeared at Dui's side. "Come, let's away, sir. You don't need to trouble yourself with this." He put his hand on Dui's shoulder. Dui shrugged it off.

"No, I'm fine," he insisted.

"You're trembling, Dui. This is not the entertainment I had in mind when I suggested we go out. Let's find another party. The night is still young."

"No," Dui said again. "I want to stay. I want to talk to her."

"She is obviously enthralled with another."

"You're here to help me achieve greatness, Decimal," Dui said through gritted teeth.

"Well, I can assure you that being with Annie was the greatest thing I ever achieved. It was my work that drove us apart, and my work with you that kept me from trying to win her back."

"You can't blame me for her disenchantment with you, can you?" Decimal asked, hurt. "If that is the case, sir, then I apologize and hope that you will see your way past that."

Dui relented slightly, hearing the pain in Decimal's voice. "No, I do not blame you. I take responsibility for my actions and I know that it was my actions that drove her away."

"Good, good," Decimal said. "I know it hurts you terribly and I hate to see you in pain, but I would hate more to be perceived as the cause of that pain."

"Don't worry about it, Decimal," Dui said, downing the last of his brandy. A waiter, well-timed in his orbit of the room, provided Dui with a fresh glass. Dui drank half of his new drink, and then handed the snifter to Decimal. Armed with liquid courage, he said, "Now. You go and distract Green. I'm going to talk to Annie."

"But Melvil," Decimal said. "I can't--"

"Fine," Dui said. "I'll do it on my own."

He stalked across the room, closing the distance between himself and the happy couple in a few short strides. More observant (and less intoxicated) members in the crowd took notice and those who knew Dui's history with Annie realized that a confrontation might be in the offing. They tittered with anticipation of an interesting show about to take place.

As Dui reached Annie and Green, however, Annie was excusing herself to the powder room. Before either could notice Dui, he veered off and ducked into a group of local businessmen that he had had dealings with on occasion.

"Grafton, Palmer, Diego," he said, greeting each in turn. "It is a pleasure to see you here this evening."

"Ah, Mr. Dewey!" Palmer said, shaking his hand.

"No, no, Mr. Palmer," Diego said. "It's Dui these days." He pronounced it "dwee", as the French might. "Is it not?"

Dui took the mockery in stride. "No, Diego, Palmer has it right. The spelling has changed, but the pronunciation has not." He narrowed his eyes at Diego and said pointedly, "It's all about returning the English language to an efficiency that years of mixing with *foreign elements* has robbed it of."

"Mr. Dui," Grafton said. "Mr. Diego is American-born and has nothing but love for this country."

Dui feigned confusion and sudden realization. "Oh, I do hope you didn't think that I meant anything by that."

"Not at all, Dui," Diego said. "In fact, I haven't taken meaning from anything you've said for quite some time." The other men chuckled.

Dui glanced over his shoulder and saw that Annie had made her way through the crowd and into the hallway where the lavatories were located. "Well, gentlemen -- and I use the term loosely, I assure you -- I will take my leave of you now, and none too soon."

The three businessmen sneered at Dui's back as he walked away. He had no time for exchanging barbs with those idiots. There were more important things to be done. He walked quickly towards the hallway, dodging waiters and other club members as he went. He reached the hallway just in time to see Annie disappear into the ladies room. He had half a mind to follow her, and had he thought there was any chance that the room was empty, he might have. A grand gesture such as that, sweeping into the lavatory of the opposite gender, excusing himself to the ladies, asking that they give him a moment alone with his beloved. Had he not exhausted all of his social capital with his recent stumblings, he may

well have taken this course, but he knew he couldn't take any more public uproar at his expense. People murmured enough as he passed already.

As he waited, awkwardly standing in the hallway outside the door, for Annie to emerge, he tried to formulate a plan of attack. What could he possibly say to her? He had no valid reason for anger -- jealousy, sadness, remorse, sure -- as she had simply moved on with her life as he had failed to do in his. And yet it was anger, bitter rage that he felt now and none of these other emotions. In the corner of his rational mind, he knew that it was likely just the jealousy, sadness, and remorse expressing themselves outwardly as rage; that was the easiest way for them to come out, and he wasn't prone to public bawling (he thanked his mother's emotionless nature for that). And he knew, too, that any anger he felt should be directed at himself, that he was to blame for the rift between Annie and himself, that she had every right to happiness (even if it was provided by that simpering fool, Green), that he wanted her to be happy, even if it wasn't with Dui.

I'm a fool, he thought. *What could I possibly hope to achieve by confronting her in this manner?* He turned to go, but before he could take two steps, he heard Annie's familiar voice.

"Melvil?" she asked. "Is that you?"

He turned and faced her. Seeing her up close, he was transported back to times when she had allowed him to be even closer. His pulse sped up again, he even thought that he might faint at any moment. He steeled himself, willed himself to be strong, to be strong like he had never had to be before.

"Annie!" he cried, his voice far too loud for the situation. He took a deep breath, concentrated on his speech and tried again. His words came mechanically, as if he were some sort of automaton driven by a steam engine. "It is wonderful to see you. It has been so long. You look lovely. How are you?"

"I am well, Melvil, and thank you. It is nice to see you," Annie looked him up and down, her appraising eye taking in more than just his dapper clothes, seeing through them to his soul (or so it felt.) She made a face at something she saw in him. Dui wondered what it was. "How are you?" she asked.

"I am also well," Dui said. It wasn't necessarily a lie. Wasn't exactly the truth.

"I heard that you abandoned most of your business ventures, but nobody seems to know what you're working on now."

"Well, it's not as if it's top secret or anything," Dui said. "It's just that we don't really know what we're working on either."

"We?" Annie asked, raising an eyebrow. "I thought you had sequestered yourself away, holed up in a laboratory, mixing volatile chemicals, risking the ire of the people of the village." She chuckled at the idea, and Dui joined her. It felt good to laugh with her again, even if it was somewhat at his expense. He missed her humor.

"So all the rumors focus on me and not on my partner, is that it?" Dui asked. "I have an associate, one man who remains loyal to me. His name is Jonathan Decimal."

"I can't say that I've heard anything about this man. Who is he?"

"The circumstances of our partnership are complicated, and rather dull, I must admit. Not appropriate for casual conversation. Perhaps I'll get a chance to introduce him to you this evening."

"I would enjoy meeting this man that has taken up all your time," Annie said. "Tell me, have you made much progress?"

"Sadly, no," Dui replied. "Except for the few things I've recently announced, all of which were met with silence at best, and outright laughter at worst, there has been nothing promising."

"That is a shame, Melvil. Still, you press on, don't you?"

"Well, Annie, you know me," Dui forced a laugh. "Not content to rest on my laurels. Ever striving for greatness."

"Yes, indeed."

There was an awkward silence between the two, as they stood, shuffling their feet. Dui searched for some way to continue the conversation, some natural path down which he could take it, something to keep her from leaving and returning to Green, to the rest of society.

"So," he started.

"Yes?"

"You're here with Samuel Green."

"Melvil," Annie said.

"No, no. It's okay. He's a fine man," Dui lied.

"Don't lie to me, Melvil. I know that you detest him. Anyhow, we've just started seeing each other."

"You told me you couldn't bear to be around him when he and I worked together."

"My opinion was shaped by yours. You never gave me the chance to get to know him."

"Would that I had, you would see him as I do. I assume his true nature will become apparent to you before long."

"Melvil, please, be civil."

"I am sorry, Annie. I truly am. I know that it's my fault that you and I are no longer together. I know that I have only myself to blame. But I also know that when I wake up and find myself alone, see that it is only my clothes folded neatly on my bureau, only my empty glass on the bedside table, only my coat hanging in the closet, that a wave of despair washes over me. And I will make no secrets about the fact that I have longed for you all this time, that I have felt a void in my life ever since you quit with me. I miss you, and it hurts me daily."

"And yet you never made a show of it to me until now. Until you see that I am with someone else. You've had so much time, Melvil, to come to me, to tell me that you still cared for me, that you wanted me back, and yet you did not. Why is that?"

"I'm a fool, Annie. A damned fool. I'm not afraid to admit that. I've been self-absorbed for so long and it took my seeing you look with happiness upon another man, the way you used to look at me, to realize that all along the hole I felt in my chest was because I had given you my heart."

"Melvil, there are better places for your heart than in my hands," Annie said sadly. "I'm sorry if that hurts, I'm sorry that you're feeling pain, but I should go now." She walked back towards the Great Room.

"Annie, no, don't go," Dui said weakly, but she was gone.

Logically, he knew that she was right. Why had he waited so long to tell her how he felt? Why had he simply accepted her departure from his life as a given, as something that couldn't be changed? He had had ample opportunities to approach her, to beg for her forgiveness, to win her back. But now it was too late.

"It's never too late." It was Decimal, at his side again, whispering in his ear, his hand on his shoulder.

"What do you know of it, Decimal?" Dui shouted angrily. "She is gone from me, gone from my life. She wants nothing more to do with me. She all but said as much, and her appearance here with that idiot Green only serves to confirm it."

"As long as your hearts both beat, there is time. Never forget that."

Rage filled Dui as he slapped Decimal's hand away. The two walked now, Dui leading the way, Decimal following after. Dui's purposeful strides gave an impression of a set destination but he knew not where he was going, let his feet guide him. They passed through the Great Hall and Dui grabbed yet another drink.

"Perhaps you shouldn't drink anymore this evening, Melvil," Decimal said.

"And perhaps you should keep your opinions to yourself from now on," Dui snapped back. He drained the tumbler and as they entered the library hall, he hurled the glass against the wall, where it shattered, raining glass down onto the carpet.

"Dui, get a hold of yourself, sir," Decimal protested, gingerly stepping around the broken fragments.

Dui turned on Decimal, the two men stood nose to nose, Dui's finger pressed firmly against the other man's chest. "I will hear no more of your talk, you demon, you witch, you idiot."

"I know it is just the liquor combined with the stress of the evening, the stress of the past year talking, Melvil. I will not take your insults personally, but I advise you not to press me further."

"You advise me? See how much good your counsel has done me? I have lost the my businesses, the respect of my peers, of my community, and lost the love of the only woman that I care about. Your advice has been utter nonsense up to this point. I think that I shall not listen to your advice any more."

Decimal shrugged his shoulders and then grabbed Dui's outstretched finger. With a fluid motion that Dui could never hope to reproduce, he had twisted away from Dui, pulled his arm behind his back and pressed his face against the wall.

"Now, you will listen to me. And you will calm down," Decimal said. His breath was as even and calm as if he were giving directions to a tourist. "I will not demand an apology from you for I know that you are under great duress, however I will not abide any more derision such as this from you."

"You're hurting my arm."

"It is not my intention to hurt you sir, but I must be sure that you are calm. You can't afford any more public displays. The negative press which you have received up to now has been damaging but your actions are verging on the self-destructive. Now, if I release you, will you be calm?"

"Yes," Dui said meekly. "I will."

"Good," said Decimal, and released Dui's arm from his grasp. "Shall we go sit in the library for a moment?"

"Let's."

The pair continued into the library where they sat at a table in the middle of the room. The books had a calming effect on Dui. He felt at home amongst them, they were his old friends, they had never betrayed him, never demanded from him, never turned a cold shoulder to his needs. He took a few deep breaths, felt his heart rate return to a normal level.

"So," Dui said. So much for a relaxing night out on the town, eh?"

Decimal chuckled. "I'm sorry it turned out like this."

"It's not your fault. You couldn't have known that she would be here."

Decimal looked uncomfortable. "Actually...."

"What? What are you saying, Decimal? You somehow knew that Annie would be here?"

Decimal nodded slightly.

"That she would be here with *him*?"

Decimal nodded again.

"And still you suggested that we come here? You claim that you were sent here, that you were called here to help me, and yet it seems that everything you do is an attempt to destroy me. Is this how you helped the others? By tearing them apart?"

"There is an old saying that puts forth the idea that you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs."

"I'm familiar with the sentiment. I wasn't aware that you would be forced to completely obliterate the eggs."

"You are not completely destroyed, Dui. You are still walking, talking, breathing. You still exist, and you are still whole. I just wanted to show you that the world is progressing on without you as you sit and struggle, producing nothing."

Dui's anger rose yet again. "I am producing nothing? Sir, our failure is a team effort. You've failed with me every step of the way!"

"And I couldn't have done it without you," Decimal said.

"There's that famous Decimal humor I've missed so much. Oh, what have I done without that?" Dui rose from his chair, stalked about the room, glaring at the books. He searched for

one in particular, a book on humor written by the great philosopher Franzini in 1233. Unable to find it, he grabbed a book at random and flung it in Decimal's direction. "I don't know what book that was, but perhaps it will aide you in becoming more helpful to me."

The book landed at Decimal's feet. He picked it up and read the cover. "*A Treatise on the Methodology and Practice of Bipedal Amputation*. I'm not sure how that is relevant."

"I'm not either. How about this?" Dui sent another book flying at Decimal.

"*Steam Engines Analyzed and Discussed*. Another miss, sir."

Dui grew angrier and angrier, began throwing random books at Decimal, overturning great stacks, sending entire shelves to the floor. Decimal made no move to stop Dui, and did not flinch as heavy volumes came close to taking off his head. During Dui's entire tantrum, he appeared as calm as could be, as if he had been expecting this all along, as if he had been hoping for it all along. Eventually there was but one book left on the shelf and Dui stopped, breathing heavily.

"Is that the one, Melvil?" Decimal asked. "Is that the book you were looking for?"

Dui glanced at the remaining volume and shook his head. "No, I must have missed it."

"Ah well, it is no matter. I likely wouldn't have gotten much use out of it anyhow."

"No I can't imagine that you would have."

"Feel better?"

"I suppose. I certainly seemed to have worked out my anger on these books." The poor books; they had never done anything to hurt Dui, and here he was inflicting great peril and harm upon them. "I'm just upset that I couldn't find what I was looking for."

"They must not have been very well organized," Decimal offered.

"No, I suppose they weren't," Dui agreed. "And now I have to clean up this mess. I'd never live this down amongst the club members."

"Perhaps, Melvil, we could consider this a great opportunity."

"I'm sorry? I fail to see how the task of picking up all these books could possibly be an opportunity."

"Well, there's nothing that says that you have to put them back the same way you found them."

"You were right," Dot says.

"Of course I was," Decimal replies.

"What do you mean, of course you were?" Dot asks, incredulous. "There were so many things about which you were wrong."

"Like what?"

"Like the dot painting shit. The dot currency experiment. The dot weaponry." Dot enumerates the items on his fingers. He searches his memory for more examples. "I could go on."

"All of those were your ideas," Decimal says.

"That can't be possible. I remember...."

"Yes? What do you remember?"

"I'm not sure. But, we were partners, weren't we?"

"Still are partners, so it seems."

"Yes, once and future partners, we. So the failures are shared."

"But the success was not."

"How can you say that? Your name is in the title of the system we developed."

"Nobody knows who I am. You don't know who I am. I don't even know who I am."

"You're Jonathan Decimal, facilitator, synergizer, catalyst for change."

Decimal smiles wanly. "Yes, I am those things. And those things are indeed me. But where do I go when the sun goes down?"

"Where do you go when the -- what are you talking about?"

"Have you ever stopped to think that maybe I'm just a figment of your imagination?"

"Now you've truly gone off the deep end. If you're a figment of my imagination, then -- "

Dot trails off, blinks his eyes and looks about himself wildly, for Decimal had disappeared.

"Jonathan? Jonathan, where the hell did you go?"

Dui and Decimal took residence in office space not far from Dui's apartment. It was a small two room affair, simply appointed and comfortable, perfect for their work. It had once been a medical office, but the doctor and his staff had had to flee Boston following a series of bizarre malpractice incidents in which patients' vital organs were replaced with various terrifying creatures, truly the stuff of nightmares. Nobody ever claimed responsibility for the acts, and even the prime suspect -- a young female assistant widely known to have a sadistic streak -- had an airtight alibi. Since there was nobody to take the blame, the entire office bore the brunt. They spent a week cleaning the place up, removing the old furniture and installing pieces they found around the city, discarded in the alleyways, being given away by university students leaving for the summer. The overall effect was of a hodgepodge, a bachelor's apartment filled with various hand-me-downs, but it suited them. They put on no airs about being sophisticated, and expected to receive few visitors who would care.

The front door of the building opened onto what was once the waiting room of the ill-fated medical office. Where patients had once sat, waiting nervously to have leeches applied to their faces or to have some other similarly barbaric procedure performed, pretending to read the newspapers scattered about, there was now a simple settee, a table, a lamp. They spent very little time in this room, rarely did more than usher people through it, and they put out no newspapers of their own. From time to time, when faced with a particularly frustrating challenge, one or the other of them might flee from the back to the sofa, bringing a book and a pipe, or a cup of coffee and a hot towel, in an attempt to escape from the work, if just for a brief moment, an attempt to reset, relax, rejuvenate.

There was an open archway separating the front from the back and it was through here where all the magic happened. Dui & Decimal had furnished the room with two simple desks and a large wooden table in between. When each was occupied with individual tasks, they'd sit at their desks, their backs to each other, blinders on, working in complete silence, the only sound that of their pens or pencils scratching across paper, the flipping of pages, the dull thud of a book tossed aside, the creak of leather binding as a new one was opened. Dui would emit the occasional "Hmmm"; Decimal the occasional grunt, but more often than not, that was the only noise they made.

This was in stark contrast to the times when they worked together on a task, or when they received visitors whose help they had enlisted in the project. Then, they would both (or all) sit at the table, debating, arguing, making points and counter-points, throwing their hands up in dramatic disgust, rising suddenly to make a note on the chalkboard. To an outsider, it might have seemed that the men were ill-suited to work together, but they couldn't have been more incorrect. Often it seemed as if Dui and Decimal were born to be partners. They finished each other's sentences, supplied each other with elusive words. If Dui couldn't get his head around an issue, Decimal was right there to help him out. When Decimal got stuck, Dui often was able to figure out the issue. Their arguments were simply fuel to push them along. And it was all in service to the system they had devised.

The system, the Dewy-Decimal Classification system, was brilliantly simple. Dui couldn't believe that nobody had thought of it before, that he hadn't thought of it before. By breaking down major subjects into ten classes -- Religion, Language, History, etc. -- and further dividing these into subclasses -- Religion broke down into things such as Christian Theology, The Bible, and so on -- and assigning these sections numbers -- Religion was 200, The Bible 220, Prophetic Books of the Old Testament 224 -- Dui proposed that all books could be easily classified, organized, shelved, and located. By further adding to the classification numbers through the use of numbers after a decimal place, the system was infinitely extensible, allowing for growth and change the way that no previous system had provided. The partners spent long hours in the library reorganizing the books that Dui had upended, making extensive notes on the classifications as they came up with them. They debated the merits of various main categories, working and reworking the system,

consulting with librarians from around the country. By collaborating with each other and with outsiders both in the field of the library sciences and from all walks of life, they were able to create a classification system that was usable by even a person for whom it was the first time they'd set foot in a library.

Though they were not operating in secret, Dui was still surprised at how quickly word spread of his work. He supposed that his recent failures had caused such a stir that Bostonians eagerly awaited his next big flop. He knew that people, especially academics, couldn't resist a scandal, that they always looked for fresh gossip, a butt for their jokes, something to talk about to distract themselves from their own empty and pathetic lives. At first, he would grow angry and defensive when asked about the system by anyone who was not involved in its creation. Still smarting from previous public embarrassments, Dui was quick to raise his dander, knowing that the inquirer was only looking for new ammunition to fire back at him. After a time, however, Dui's confidence grew and he knew in his heart that this system which he and Decimal were devising was the thing that would finally quiet the murmurs of the public.

With that, however, he faced the new problem of being increasingly angry at the frustratingly fickle academic population. Those who had once jeered him, whether publicly or in private, now treated him as if he were some sort of genius. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to be a part of the development of what was thought to be the ultimate organization system of an ever-growing problem. Each day, new books were being published and with the advancement in printing technology, there were more and more coming out all the time. Further still, it seemed that there were more things to write about. As science, society, and technology advanced, the number of subjects available to the aspiring writer increased, and as soon as one book came out on any particular topic, another one examining it, refuting it, expanding upon it would follow. Libraries were having to expand in order to keep their collections current, and librarians were almost in a panic at the amount of time they had to spend tracking each volume. The books they once loved, cherished, adored, were now becoming objects of their hatred. Their time, which was once spent lovingly maintaining their world of books was now spent answering the most hated question: "Where can I find your copy of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*?" (or other such work). That they had once reviled Dui, used his name as the punchline for humorous anecdotes, was not lost on Dui. Those that now showed him respect, he imagined were just waiting for him to screw up ("to Dewey things wrong" as was often said in some circles, a shit-eating grin on the face of the speaker) and though he fought the urge to shut these people out, he very often found himself unable to remain civil.

He got past this too, with Decimal's help. His partner remained steadfastly certain that they were absolutely, finally, on the right track. His certainty fueled Dui's confidence. He found himself walking taller, standing surely, speaking with great passion on the subject. Whenever he became involved in a conversation about the classification system, Dui could feel his face light up, his heart pumping strongly and his words coming quickly and easily. He was almost embarrassingly talkative when he got on the subject and would end up talking for hours to anyone who would listen. Those that were truly interested were entertained by Dui's passion, while those who had merely inquired so as to appear knowledgeable about the latest trends in library science quickly learned that they had gotten themselves into a situation that was beyond their control and way more than they had bargained for. It was in this way that Dui got his revenge upon the people who he had (somewhat dramatically) deemed his enemies.

The only issue that remained was how to organize the organization. There would be no way for the average library goer to know whether a book had been classified under Etymology (412) or English Etymology (422) without some sort of road map to the library. To that end, Dui consulted with Charles Cutter, another Harvard librarian who had done extensive work in designating rules for cataloging libraries. Dui showed Cutter an early version of the Dewey-Decimal System. Cutter was impressed, and honestly so. While Dui and Cutter shared no great love for each other, neither were they enemies and Dui knew

that Cutter had always given him a fair shake when it came to his failures and missteps. Not quick to judge, nor quick to anger, Cutter was a decent fellow that Dui felt he could trust, and more importantly, Dui was certain that Cutter could help with the cataloging issue.

The two met in Cutter's well-appointed townhouse on a cold February morning. Decimal had been working feverishly on a classification issue concerning the difference between Anthropology and Anthromorphology and where each of those subjects should be placed and had decided to forgo the meeting in order to do more research. Dui was certain that he could handle the meeting himself and wished his friend and partner good luck with his tasks.

Cutter was of old money; his family tree was so full of ties to royal blood that he joked that the leaves upon it were blue. His home in the center of Boston Commons was but one of many households that he kept. Usually, during the winter, he and his wife and children spent their time in their country home in Tallahassee but news of Dui's advancement had brought him back from his vacation early. There was a minimal staff kept on, just enough to see to the upkeep of the house and Cutter's comfort and it was a young boy who met Dui at the door.

"Please announce to Mr. Cutter that Mr. Melvil Dui is here to see him," Dui said, handing his coat to the lad.

The boy, untrained in the art of greeting guests, seemed unsure what to do with Dui's overcoat, looked about the foyer confused and ended up tossing the garment over the back of a Louis XIV chair which had been covered in a dropcloth to protect it from dust during the winter. Dui was perplexed with the lack of formality and the care of his coat and was about to comment upon it when Cutter appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Mr. Dewey," he said amiably. "Do come up and join me. I've just been going over some of the notes you sent along."

Dui looked at the boy, nodded significantly at his coat and then went up the stairs.

"Your boy could use some education in the etiquette of seeing to a gentleman's front door," Dui said.

"Don't I know it," Cutter agreed. "Clarise won't let me bring the staff back on for the time that I'm up here. She says she needs them down in Florida. That boy is the nephew of one of our cooks. He means well, but doesn't seem to have the knack for household work. Who knows where or how he'll end up, but I have little doubt that it won't be in the service of a gentleman."

"Nor I," said Dui. "His treatment of my coat bordered on the obscene."

"Really? I must apologize, Mr. Dewey. Well, I'd have him beaten this evening, but the fellow that usually does that for me is on holiday." Cutter pulled a small scrap of paper from a pocket overflowing with bits and pieces, notes and reminders. With a stub of pencil he produced from behind his right ear, he scribbled hastily upon it. "Have Charles beaten," he said. "There. Now, let me show you to my office."

Down the hall, to the right, Cutter's office was massive, taking up nearly one half of the second floor of the home. Two enormous desks dominated the room. One was covered with reading and writing materials, books in all languages, some known to Dui but many more completely unfamiliar. Souvenirs and knick-knacks from Cutter's travels were scattered about its surface, and the drawers were filled to overflowing with papers and binders, most of them unable to be fully closed. Shelves lined the walls and they too were stuffed with books. A cursory glance convinced Dui that Cutter had organized them to no particular system, perhaps loosely by subject, perhaps by sentimentality.

"You are appraising my collection, no doubt," Cutter said, noticing where Dui's gaze fell.

"Ever since I took up a position in a library, I have been unable to enter another man's home without examining his books, I admit. It is no doubt an occupational hazard that comes with the job, such as an actor attending a play with which he is not involved."

"Certainly," Cutter said. "I do hope you are not as judgmental as an actor. I once saw *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Royal Garden Theater in the company of Charles Hawtrey

and while his comments were most amusing, I found them to be so harsh that I could not enjoy the play. After a time, I wanted him to just shut up and keep his critiques to himself."

"Oh, no sir. By no means am I judging your books, nor their organization," Dui assured him, although in some small way, he was; it simply could not be helped. Dui, however, had sense enough to keep his commentary private. "Your collection is quite impressive. I am not familiar with even half of these volumes."

"I have traveled extensively in my day, Mr. Dewey, and though my wife prefers more traditional mementos of foreign lands such as you see, I am much more interested in acquiring the written documents of other cultures. Thus, many of these works have never before seen the American shores, and were it not for my obsession, never would have."

Dui spotted a Kenyan book -- though he used the term loosely: it was made up of sheets of paper fashioned from leaves, bound together with hempen string -- and gestured to it. "May I?" he asked.

Cutter nodded. "Of course, sir. Only, be careful. That is one of but 6 copies of that work."

Dui gingerly pulled the book from its shelf and opened it. The writing was all in strange figures and characters that he did not recognize.

"The Kenyan people have no written language. Theirs is an oral tradition. This was created at my request in an attempt to inscribe some of their stories and myths. Only I and 3 other people who accompanied me on the expedition know the true meaning of these symbols."

"This is incredible. You have helped a civilization to start down the path of a written language?"

Cutter shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, and no. The books were produced, but there was a faction of the population who were opposed to their creation. Violently opposed."

Dui looked up from the book. "Oh dear."

"Yes, indeed. The men with whom we created the book and developed the language, the women who prepared the leaves, the children who spun the string. They were all rounded up and executed. Viciously, and publicly. Two of my fellow travelers were also branded as heretics and killed as well. I was lucky to escape with my life."

"Did the other books survive?"

"We had an original run of 10. Three, I saw destroyed with my own eyes. I, myself managed to save three of them (two of which I gave away as gifts -- one to President Lincoln, the other to the King of Prussia). My fellow compatriots each have one."

Dui did the math. "That leaves one more."

"Yes," Cutter said gravely. "The location of the 10th book is unknown to me. Its disappearance is a most troublesome and disturbing mystery. I have spent many years in search of this book, but all my efforts have been for naught."

"That must be a very consuming and involving task," Dui supposed.

"Yes, it is, indeed. Much of my finances are tied up in the reacquisition of the book. I have men searching the globe for it, looking for any indication of its location, or any evidence that it even exists. They follow every rumor, every murmur, no matter how small or far-fetched. It has cost me dearly, this quest of mine."

"Not just in money, I would imagine."

"You are correct," Cutter said, his voice revealing the pain of a man who has lost a great many things dear to him. "It cost me many friends, my wife, and very nearly my sanity."

"You say it cost you your wife?" Dui asked, confused. "But Clarise is still with you, is she not?"

"She is," Cutter said. "Rather, she is back with me. I didn't always let others carry out the search on my behalf. I once traveled in service to the quest myself. She hated my constant absence, my sleepless nights, my furtive meetings with shadowy agents in the darkest corners of far flung lands. She couldn't rest knowing that I might be in danger, that she had no way of knowing whether I was safely ensconced in my hotel or out tracking down some clue purchased with blood, sweat, tears, and a considerable amount of money

from some shady, unseemly ruffian who would just as soon slit my throat as he would give me the time of day."

"How did you convince her to return to you?"

"Well, as I said, I began to hire private detectives, agents who acted as my proxies. I now have a large network of men who act as my eyes and ears, and sometimes as my hands, all across the world. Only when there is a matter that requires my personal attention or intervention do I travel now. And always, I bring Clarise. These promises were what allowed me to convince my love to return to my arms."

"Do you not feel trapped by that? Wouldn't you rather be searching for the book yourself?"

"I admit that there is a part of me that wishes I was still out there, still on the hunt. It was terribly exciting, never knowing where the search would take me next. Never knowing what danger lurked around the next corner." Cutter sighed wistfully. "But no, I am an old man now. I leave that business to the younger lads. And truthfully, without my Clarise, I'm no good to anyone. I told her I would forgo looking for the book, that I would forget about its very existence, if it meant that she would come back to me."

"But you were able to compromise," Dui said.

"Yes. And that's the beauty of love, true love." Cutter smiled, his face transformed with thoughts of his wife.

"I'm surprised you came back to Boston without her."

"Well, she understands that it is important work that you and I are doing, and that her presence might simply be a distraction. Besides, it is frightfully cold here, and the children would be devastated if they couldn't have their winter in Florida. Yes, I miss my dear love, but we work for the greater good, and that is of the utmost importance."

"That's an incredibly healthy attitude, I must say."

"Needs must when the devil drives, Dewey. If the perfection of your classification system requires that I be apart from my wife, then so be it. It is of no great import in the grand scheme of things."

"Well, I admire your dedication to this cause, sir. And I appreciate your help. As I said in my letter, I have been closely following your work on the matter of library catalogs. I do believe that when combined with my classification system, an indexing system such as yours would lead to the ultimate in library organization and maintenance."

"You flatter me, sir, but I appreciate your kind words," Cutter said. He took the book from Dui and showed him to a chair at the other large desk whose surface was immaculately clean. Save for a sheaf of notes and a lamp, the desk was empty. Where the other desk was Cutter's dumping ground, this one was obviously his work space. "Please, let us sit and talk."

"Of course. But, I wonder. May I trouble you for a cup of tea? It is so dreadfully cold out today and a hot beverage would do my body some good."

Cutter clasped his hands in embarrassment. "Dear me," he cried. "Where are my manners? Of course. I won't be but a minute."

Cutter left Dui sitting at the desk as he rushed from the room. Dui heard him cry out to a staff member for immediate tea service. Cutter soon returned and sat across from Dui at the desk.

"Now then," Cutter started. "What did you have in mind?"

"Cutter is important to this story, isn't he?" Dot asks.

"Indubitably," Decimal replies.

"Creating the system wasn't enough."

"Not by a long shot. You needed -- we needed -- his methods of cataloging in order to create a way for people to find the books they needed."

"We couldn't have done that on our own?"

"We were over our heads as it was. The system was simple, but there was more work than just you and I could do. Going to outside sources helped immensely but we were so

focused upon the creation of a classification that could fit all current books while being open enough to allow for future publications. The world was changing -- still is changing, I hope - - and there was no way for us to foresee the advances in society and technology that would create entirely new subjects needing new branches in the system. We had to be open minded, forward-thinking, prognosticators if you will."

"That was the beauty of it," Dot says, allowing himself a moment of pride. "Numbers are infinite. Dots make everything possible. If you have enough of them, you can do anything."

"Exactly," Decimal replies. "And there are always plenty of dots to go around."

Dui left Cutter's house confident that they had laid the groundwork for a standardized system with which all libraries could catalog their collections. He had come to Cutter thinking that by combining his vertical files with letter-sized sheets of paper, each one describing the pertinent details of a volume, that their problem would be solved. He had just needed Cutter's ideas on what those details were and how they should be arranged. Cutter had provided so much more. His idea was to take smaller index cards which whittled down the details to a few terse lines, classifying each book in standardized ways. By shrinking the size of each book's index entry, they would be able to reduce the footprint of the card catalog, allowing for many more books to be listed in a smaller space. Furthermore, books could be cross indexed such that they could be looked up by title, author or subject, meaning that a library patron would only need to know one of those three things in order to find a book. Browsing the catalog for a particular topic would yield better results than ever before, increasing the efficiency of research, eliminating the fear of being overwhelmed by the volume of information that kept so many people from ever visiting a library. Dui had thought that the work with Cutter would take quite a bit longer to develop and was nearly bursting with pleasure as he walked back to the office, excited to tell Decimal about their progress.

However, he found the office empty. Decimal had apparently decided to take a break from the work. Dui glanced at the desk on which his partner had spread out his papers earlier that morning and found it empty. Perhaps Decimal had taken everything out to consult with another librarian, having been frustrated with some conundrum of classification or another. Dui was irked, mostly because he had wanted to share the news of his morning's work with his partner, and particularly frustrated that Decimal hadn't left a note so that perhaps he could meet up with him and lend a hand. He was itching to get some more work done, the progress of the morning filling him with the energy needed to make further progress, to get this whole thing wrapped up, get it published, get to work on the next project.

Still, he thought, perhaps he deserved a break himself. He had been pushing himself incredibly hard over the past week, over the past month, and had found little time for socializing, no time for himself at all. It was easy for Dui to forgo the pleasures of casual conversation. What little human interaction he had had had all concerned the system, everything was about the system. The books, the numbers, the dots. It was all he thought about, all he talked about, and lately all he dreamed about. His sleep was filled with visions of decimal points, all swirling about his head. On good days -- the days filled with progress and breakthroughs, the days where he was certain that he had finally found his calling in life -- the dots danced in his field of vision, playful as puppies, gentle as a summer breeze, urging him on, breathing sweet fragrances, tickling his nose. On the bad days -- the days where he felt as if he and Decimal had run into a wall, the days where they fought, the days that caused Dui to throw his hands up in the air and declare that they would never finish this damnable work and that they should have stuck with spelling reform, or worse yet, remained a simple, humble librarian -- the dots were vicious, cruel, attacking him, swarming in his face, flowing into his mouth and nose, choking the breath from his lungs, sucking the very life from his body. On those nights he would awake with a cry, his body skin covered in sweat, his sheets soaked, his heart racing, his limbs trembling, tears in his eyes, his hands twisted in his sheets, holding on for dear life. It always took him a few

moments to realize that it was just a dream, that the dots were his friends, were his salvation. He would rise from his bed, walk to the window, a glass of water in his still shaking hand, take deep calming breaths. He hated those nights, thought those nights would be the end of him, but feeling the cool night air on his face would bring him back to himself, bring him back down to Earth. He found it best to not return to bed until he had come up with at least one idea for the next day's work, one potential solution to whatever dilemma faced him. Once he had done that, he would strip his soaking sheets from the bed, leave them piled in a heap on the floor and return to sleep, unplagued by troublesome dreams.

As much as his work was on his mind, and it was always on his mind, he still hadn't forgotten about Annie Godfrey. Happy as he was to be completely wrapped up in productive endeavors, he missed being wrapped up in her. There was a difference between being involved in his work and involved in Annie, a difference he couldn't adequately explain to Decimal's satisfaction. The two would talk about Annie at length, after they had put down their pencils, done with work for the night. Decimal was supportive of Dui's continued infatuation, constantly reassuring him that the work they did on the system could only mean that Dui would eventually win her back. However, he encouraged Dui to seek out another woman reasoning that it would be good for him to attempt to move on. Dui refused this idea, determined to remain faithful to Annie, even if she had not been to him.

He sat now in the office, the sun well on its way towards the horizon, its waning light casting a glow upon the buildings as he looked out the window. The boys were out lighting the street lamps before darkness settled across the city. Dui put his feet up on the desk, leaned back in his chair, his hands behind his head. He felt a bittersweet nostalgia, despondent and hopeful, sad but content. It was certainly a strange feeling for him and he didn't know what to make of it, nor what to do with it. He was sick of being alone, tired of being cooped up in this office, yet unsure of what to do or where to go. The few times he had actually tried to go out, to socialize, he had been unable to fully commit to it, never completely involved in whatever activity he undertook. Even the work he was doing was not completely successful at distracting him from the melancholy that he felt, a constantly present low-level sadness that hovered at the horizon as he went about his life. It was better, he supposed, than being completely immobilized, totally disabled by crushing depression. On the other hand, he thought, perhaps it would be freeing to at least be fully invested in feeling something, anything, rather than being constantly on the edge one way or the other. He often thought of seeking out someone to talk to, having a more positive outlook on the burgeoning field of psychology than most. Dui knew it wasn't just for "crazy" people, knew he'd benefit just as much as a mentally ill person (and who was to say that he wasn't mentally ill anyhow, he thought) from talking to someone professionally trained to listen. His conversations with Decimal were helpful, but he knew that his business partner had his own agenda, his own biases that he didn't keep from their talks. Dui had even obtained (discreetly) a recommendation for a psychologist to visit, but on the days that he was feeling good saw no reason to call upon him and on the days he was feeling bad, had no energy or willpower to do it. The cycle was frustrating with its ups and downs, highs and lows but he didn't know how to break out of it for the life of him. As it was, he had no idea what to do, other than to sit in his office and think about her.

He knew that she was no longer with Samuel Green, and that much was a relief. He had heard that Green had proposed to her twice, and that twice she had refused. The second refusal was too much for Green's pride and bloated ego to bear and he had broken up with her. That would be perfectly understandable, and acceptable, but Green had gone on to spread vicious rumors about Annie, her family and her friends. Dui's anger at Green had been renewed and he spent long hours fantasizing about taking some revenge upon him. The daydreams ranged from thoughts of humiliating Green publicly to torturing the man in ways so vicious and disgusting that they disturbed Dui. He knew he wasn't capable of enacting the more violent fantasies, but he was shocked that he had even had the mental capacity to come up with them. It had been bad enough that Annie had taken up with

Green, but Dui hadn't foreseen this sort of malicious behavior coming. Dui knew that Green's betrayal had hurt Annie deeply and that she had become somewhat of a recluse. The few times that Dui had ventured out to a social gathering, he had looked for her, hoping he might see her somewhere, but he heard that she was usually found at home, licking her wounds. Dui hadn't been able to find time, nor an excuse, to visit her.

Dui dozed off, and when he awoke from his nap found that the sun had fully set and that Decimal had not returned to the office. The two had planned on working well into the night preparing a presentation of the Classification System to a group of investors that was coming up the following week. Dui blinked sleep from his eyes, fought off the disorientation that comes from waking up from an unexpected sleep, fought off his frustration with his partner's absence, struggled for a moment to remember what he had been dreaming about. He was certain there had been no dots involved, but wasn't able to put his finger on exactly what had been involved. The more he tried, the further away recollection seemed. He stretched in the chair, straightened his rumpled clothes, tried to remember the last time he had eaten. It had likely been the night before, judging by the empty feeling in his stomach, the rumbling noises it was making. He hadn't been eating well lately or on any schedule, another symptom of his melancholy. He rarely felt hungry anymore, and when he did, rarely felt that he had the energy or motivation to do anything about it. Now, though, the hunger was breaking through, and he found the drive to go out for something to eat.

By the time he got his coat and locked the office, the sun had set. The streets were filled with people, coming to and fro, leaving work, going about their business. Dui weaved his way through the crowd, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his head down, avoiding eye contact with those he passed. He walked without conscious knowledge of where he was going, his hunger driving him forward. He found himself in front of the restaurant where he and Decimal had first eaten together and decided it was just as good as anywhere else; better than anywhere else, he decided, when he saw Decimal seated inside.

"Jonathan," Dui said, sitting down opposite his partner.

Decimal looked up from the newspaper he was reading. "Melvil," he said. "How was your meeting?"

"It went very well. Cutter is most accommodating, very supportive of our effort. I believe that together we have devised a solution to the cataloging issue."

"That is excellent. I would be most interested in hearing all about it, only do allow me to finish reading this article."

"Of course. What does it concern?"

"It regards the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago this year. It seems that they've nearly completed building the fairgrounds and are well on their way towards being ready for the fair to begin."

"Why does that interest you so much?" Dui did have a vested interest in the fair -- he had been invited to exhibit his vertical file in the Hall of Inventions. At first he had been excited about the prospect. It was a large and prestigious stage on which to display his work, and people from around the world would be traveling to Chicago. However, as the classification system had taken over his life, he had all but forgotten about the fair. The idea of presenting such a relatively trivial accomplishment seemed silly now. There was much better work to display. Perhaps now he might parlay his invitation into a chance to display the system and the new catalog if it were in working order in time.

"Allow me to finish -- as well as the work is going, there is also a dark side, a seedy underbelly, a nefarious undercurrent in the air."

"Do tell!" Dui said, growing more interested.

"Well, everything was going smoothly, Daniel Burnham's plan going as scheduled, the work getting done accordingly--"

"Accordionly?" Dui asked, misunderstanding Decimal. "What do you mean it was going accordionly?"

"No, sir, you misheard me. I said that the work was getting done *accordingly*."

"My mistake. I apologize for interrupting you."

"By all means, it is of no matter."

"Pray, continue."

"Where was I?"

"You were saying that the work was going accordionly."

"Accordingly."

"Yes, yes, the work was going accordingly."

"So, as I was saying, the work was going accordionly," Decimal stopped and laughed.

"Look what you've done, sir! Now you've got me saying it!"

Dui laughed as well, could barely speak, so amused was he. "Oh, I do apologize!" he managed. "I am dreadfully sorry!"

Decimal wiped tears from his eyes and tried to take a deep breath, calm himself, regain his composure. "Ahh, sir, that was hilarious."

Dui nodded. "It certainly feels good to laugh in that manner. It feels like it has been quite a long time since I have done so."

"I know what you mean," Decimal agreed. "There has been something of a dark cloud hanging over your countenance for a long time."

"How long would you say, Decimal? How long have I been as such?"

Decimal pauses, appears deep in thought. "I would have to say that you have seemed at the very least melancholy since the day that we met."

"I suspected as much," Dui said. "I haven't felt myself in a very long time."

"Perhaps you should try feeling yourself more often!" Decimal proposed.

Dui was initially shocked by his friend's inappropriate comment, but then, in the spirit of the moment, got the joke, laughter resumed, the pair guffawing to the point that other diners looked in their direction with wonder and awe.

"You're too much, Decimal," Dui said when the laughter subsided.

"It pleases me to see you smile, Dui," Decimal said. "I hope to see it more often."

"Yes, yes. I as well. I'd forgotten how much I enjoy that."

"You'd forgotten how much you enjoyed feeling yourself?"

"Now you're just pushing it, Decimal," Dui said.

"You're right. That didn't feel right the moment it came out of my mouth. I am sorry."

"Think nothing of it. Now, I beseech you: do go on."

Before Decimal could continue his story, a waitress came to the table and took Dui's order. He asked for the special of the day: a 12 ounce ribeye steak served with pomme frites, grilled mushrooms, sauteed string beans and boursin paprika mashed potatoes. When the waitress left the table, Decimal resumed.

"It appears that there has been a murder on the fairgrounds."

"Murder you say?"

"Yes," Decimal replied. "Murder. Murder most foul."

Dui absorbed this revelation, allowed it to sink in before continuing. "Who was killed?"

"The man has not yet been identified. The murderer left little in the way of identifiable parts for the police and they are having some difficulty in determining who he is. Furthermore, nobody has been reported missing that might be the man."

"A city that size and there are no missing persons?"

"None that fit what description of the man they can fashion together."

"That is most disturbing. This exposition is to celebrate the wonders of humanity and someone has sullied it with a despicable crime. This will not reflect well upon the city fathers in Chicago. If they can't keep their grounds safe prior to the fair, how on Earth are they going to make visitors to the fair feel secure?"

"That is a good point, Melvil, and one that this article discusses at length. There is an editorial which calls for a boycott of the fair!"

"Boycotting the fair?" Dui asked incredulously. "That's preposterous. This fair is exactly what Chicago needs, what this country needs right now! To boycott the fair is tantamount to treason in my eyes."

"I couldn't agree more heartily," Decimal said. "To call for a boycott is absurd. I think that the author of this editorial has some personal bone to pick with someone in Chicago, perhaps with Burnham himself. This does not come out of concern for the safety and well-being of fairgoers, but rather out of personal enmity against the entire city."

"Doesn't that go against the mission and responsibility of our newspapers?" Dui asked.

"If you ask me, our newspapers have been forgoing that mission for some time. They are seemingly more interested in selling copies of their paper than they are in reporting news that people need to know."

"It's a shame, that. It used to be that newspapers were the last bastion of the freedom of speech, were the defenders of our liberties, of our rights to know what was going on in the world. Now they are just business entities more concerned with the bottom line than anything else."

"I agree," Decimal said. "Now that the majority of the paper is taken up with advertisements from local businesses, and with the rising competition in other newspapers, their only interest is in showing their ad buyers that they have a greater circulation. And what better way to increase circulation than to create the largest spectacle on their front pages? People love scandal, don't they? And they'll flock to the paper with the most titillating headlines."

"It's a damn shame," Dui said. "And once they get their readership they can use the power of the written word to convince them of anything."

"Yes, I've heard people talking about boycotting the fair just as I was reading this!"

"That's ridiculous. People are such sheep."

"Indeed they are. They will follow the loudest voice, come to the sharpest whistle, go where they are told to go."

Dui mulled this over. Certainly some people would feel concerned about their safety. If Chicago's police force appeared to be unable to keep the peace then fair attendance would suffer. If one murder turned into two, turned into more, then certainly people would, of their own accord, reconsider their decision to travel to the big city. But that hadn't happened yet! he thought angrily. The newspaper was irresponsibly fueling the flames of panic. People were easily scared enough on their own. They didn't need help from a well-respected newspaper to become fearful.

"We are still going to Chicago," he declared.

Decimal gave Dui a look that said that was unarguable. "Of course we are," he said. "Still, I'm glad you are not swayed by this drivel. Honestly, I had thought you'd forgotten all about our obligation to be there."

"Of course not," Dui said. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"Good show, sir," Decimal said. "Now, what news of your meeting with Cutter?"

"It went well, as I said before. Cutter is on board and had very helpful ideas." Dui described the details of his meeting, leaving out nothing. When he had finished, Decimal looked pleased.

"That sounds very promising indeed."

"Yes, I am encouraged by his enthusiasm. I had not expected the meeting to produce such immediate results, but Cutter is a thoughtful man and he had obviously been considering our situation for quite some time."

"I daresay that there are many out there who would enjoy a chance to work on this now," Decimal suggested.

"Yes, the librarians are talking about us, that is true," Dui agreed.

"Even those outside the field of library sciences are talking about this. I heard that the sommelier employed by Winston Durant is interested in a similar classification and organization system for his wines."

"I never suspected that this would have use outside the library," Dui said, considering it. "But why limit ourselves? We could devise systems that organized anything: wines, cheeses, newspapers, tools, other hardware, fruit, vegetables, other types of produce, medical supplies, sundries, currency, weaponry, material.... Anything."

"The possibilities, as I have always suggested, are endless."

"Clothing, linen, keys, fish. Amazing!"

"Yes, my friend," Decimal said. "But for now, what do you say to the idea that we stay focused on the books? They are plenty enough for us at the moment, no?"

Dui returned from his flight of fancy, a sheepish smile on his face. "Of course, you are correct. The books are enough for now."

Dui's food was brought to the table -- Decimal claimed not to be hungry -- and he dug into it with gusto. The first bite was delicious and his body demanded that he consume the entire plate of food without taking a break.

"It is good to see you eating with such energy," Decimal said. "It had been a while since you consumed anything, had it not?"

"Yes it had," Dui said around a mouthful of beef. "I seem to keep forgetting how important it is to eat regularly."

"I should remember to keep an eye on your eating habits, but I get so wrapped up in the work myself that I forget as well."

"Now that I think about it, I haven't seen you take a break to eat." Dui took a long swallow of water.

"Don't worry about me, Melvil. I'm taking care of myself."

"You don't seem to have any worries; any cares or issues above and beyond the work we are doing."

"That's my only focus, Melvil," Decimal said. He cut off any further inquiry by burying his nose into the paper. Dui simply shrugged, more than used to his partner's strange ways and unwillingness to discuss his past, or, for that matter, his present. Any conversation other than that which directly affected Dui tended to end in a similar manner with Decimal changing the subject, walking away, or merely shutting off. Dui paid it no mind.

When he had finished eating his supper, Dui inquired about Decimal's progress that day.

"Yes," Decimal said, looking up from the paper. "I was able to work some things out with the etymology issue. I left my notes at the office for your review."

"I was at the office. I saw no notes."

"I left them on my desk. You didn't see them?" Decimal asked.

"No, Jonathan, I did not," Dui said, growing concerned.

"Well, I'm sure they're around there somewhere. Perhaps Miss Cabot moved them when she was in to clean this afternoon."

Dui frowned. Estelle Cabot had been cleaning his offices for years and she had had a bad habit of moving his papers, trying to organize them for him, when in fact she just made it impossible for Dui to ever find anything, a habit which brought him uncomfortably and unhappily back to his childhood when his mother would do the same. Dui had admonished her for this and though it had taken several months to break her of the custom, she had finally stopped. Dui's insistence that she not even think about touching his documents, much less moving a single paper often forced her to clean around piles of papers which lead to having what she referred to as "islands of chaos in a sea of order." Dui figured that's how life was anyway. As long as he knew where everything was, what did it matter?

"If she did, I may consider firing her," Dui said. "I didn't think I would need to have this talk with her again. She knows better."

"Tut tut, Melvil. I'm sure there's some explanation. There's no need to take it out on her," Decimal implored. He winked. "Besides, she has a thing for you, you know."

Dui blushed. "That is certainly not true."

Decimal chuckled. "Don't think I haven't seen the way she looks at you. And the way you look at her when you think nobody is watching. She is an attractive young woman and she is single."

"But she is my cleaning woman. It wouldn't be appropriate," Dui protested.

"Oh get off it! Forget about what you think might or might not be appropriate. She is a fine woman and there is nothing wrong with you asking her to dinner."

Dui considered this. Estelle was indeed an attractive woman, smart and witty. He had known her for some years, knew her story, knew that she had been married before, but that her husband had died in a freak accident involving a runaway rail car, two pigeons and a ball of yarn. Prior to his death, she had been studying to be a teacher, but once he died she had been forced to take up work as a cleaning woman in order to take care of her ailing mother. Just because her circumstances had caused her to cease her education did not mean that she was beneath his affections, he thought. And he had noticed that she looked at him in a strange way, in a way that suggested she might find him attractive. And she did not appear to have interest in any other men, had not seen her with anyone. Perhaps it might be good for him to consider.

But no, all that was important was the work, and he said as much to Decimal.

"Perhaps," Decimal replied, "the work suffers because you are...preoccupied?"

"The work doesn't suffer," Dui protested. Then, less sure of himself: "Does the work suffer? Do you find that my work is suffering? Have I not contributed enough to this project?"

"No, no," Decimal assured him. "I do not think that you have given less than full effort to this endeavor. I would never even think to suggest that you had been anything other than fully dedicated to the project. You have been fully involved in it."

"So then what do you mean?"

"Perhaps it is not the work that is suffering due to your preoccupation. Perhaps it is your life that is suffering due to the work."

"I have made some certain sacrifices in order to complete this. Hell, I've made sacrifices in order just to figure out what this project was. Many things in my life have gone by the wayside just to get this done."

"Yes, and perhaps it's time now to let yourself enjoy some of those things that you've set aside."

"Why now? We are so close to being done with this. I can make it a few more weeks, a few more months without distracting dalliances, without the creature comforts that I've avoided. I can persevere."

"Alright, my friend," Decimal relented. "But promise me that once we have published the system that you will take it upon yourself to start living like a human being, to fighting off the melancholy that plagues you, to enjoying something. Anything."

"I promise."

The two returned to the office after Dui had finished eating. Dui was keen to go over the notes that Decimal had made that day but they were nowhere to be found. Even at her worst, Estelle had never completely removed documents that were laying around, nor had she ever made the mistake of discarding them.

"Perhaps you put them in the safe?" Dui wondered. Decimal didn't think that was the case but agreed that it was possible he had done so and forgotten. Dui went to the far wall of the room, pushed aside an elaborate replica of a DaVinci sketch which hung, framed and hinged on the wall, obscuring the safe in which they kept all sensitive documents. He opened the safe and pulled their working file from inside. Together, they flipped through each page in the file but could find no trace of the documents which Decimal had worked on that day.

"This is curious indeed," Decimal said. "I'm certain that I did not leave the building with them."

"I wonder if we have been robbed," Dui said with sudden alarm. "Could someone have broken in while we were away, looking for some insight into the system, found only these documents laying out and absconded with them?"

"I suppose it's possible," Decimal allowed. "But did you notice any signs of forced entry when you returned this afternoon?"

"I did not. But, I will admit that I was exhausted, likely weak with hunger, and so jubilant about the success of my meeting with Cutter that it is possible that I overlooked any such

signs." Dui sighed, slumped into a chair. "This is terrible. A whole day's work gone." Suddenly hopeful, he gazed up at Decimal, a pleading look on his face. "But wait -- did you not make a back up copy of the pages? You are always so good about making backups."

Decimal frowned. "I'm sorry to say that I did not make any copies. I don't know why I failed to do so today, as you are correct in observing that I am most particular about creating archives of our work in case such an event were to occur. Today, I have failed."

"What a disaster," Dui lamented.

"But, fear not, aside from the graver implications that such a robbery holds -- and I am still not certain that Miss Cabot did not simply relocate or misplace the papers -- I am certain that we can recreate the work I did with minimal effort or loss of time. I shall work deep into the night if I have to."

"I admire and appreciate your dedication to this work, Jonathan," Dui said, the melancholy breaking, if just for that moment. "Really, I do. I know I don't say that often enough, but I wanted to be sure that you knew that."

"Thank you, Melvil," Decimal said gratefully. "It is good to hear that."

"Absolutely, Jonathan. I would still be refining bottled juice if it weren't for you."

"I'm sure that's not true," Decimal chuckled. "But thank you."

"Indeed," Dui replied. "Now, let's get to work."

Dui did end up questioning Estelle Cabot about the missing papers but she insisted that she had not moved them. They had indeed been there when she let herself in to clean the office that day, but as instructed, she had simply cleaned around the pile on the desk. She also was certain that she had carefully locked the front door as she always did. Dui might have accused her of lying, of having stolen the papers herself, of aiding someone else in their theft but two things stopped him. The first was that he and Decimal had easily recreated the work he had done. It had not taken but a couple of hours and Decimal assured Dui that not only had they faithfully recreated it, but with Dui's input they had actually improved on his day's efforts.

The second was that in interacting with Miss Cabot, Dui could see that Decimal was indeed correct in his assessment of her attraction to Dui. The way that she looked at him was unmistakably amorous and now that Dui recognized it, it made him somewhat uncomfortable. He found himself having thoughts about her that were inappropriate for an employer to have about an employee. Estelle brushed against Dui more often than the cramped quarters of the office dictated and each time, Dui felt a little thrill.

His mind fought against the loneliness of the heart and the stirring in his loins. He couldn't distract himself from work with something as trivial as the affections of a woman. He was stronger than that, he told himself. He was better than that. He was distracted enough as it was without adding that to the mix. His general melancholy, his tendency towards sadness would not be well served by constantly wondering about what someone else was doing, how they were feeling, what they wanted, how he was behaving.

And yet, he thought, was he not already so distracted? Did not his constant thinking about Annie and what troubles she might be facing take his focus from his work? Perhaps if he was able to put what energy he wasted on thinking about her into thinking about Estelle which could turn out to be way more productive and rewarding, then he would be able to fight through some of the sadness he constantly felt.

Over the next several days, he found himself thinking about Estelle more and more, until she had all but drowned out his thoughts of Annie. It was a surprising thing to him when one day, he realized he had gone an entire week without wondering about her and what she was doing. He also realized that his pain had subsided, and he felt a bittersweet sadness about that -- as if he missed the pain. He couldn't help but to laugh at himself wondering if he'd always had such a talent for finding something to be moping about.

Meanwhile, there had been grim news from Chicago. In the intervening weeks, several more murders had been committed, and a city which often saw more than its fair share of missing person reports, the number of people who had been listed as disappeared was on

the rise. According to the papers, the police had no leads, no suspects, no hope of catching the perpetrator. The papers no longer needed to sensationalize the news because the news was sensational enough as it was. A city about to host a grand international event could ill afford to have such negative press leading up to it. Even those who hadn't read the original editorials calling for a boycott of the fair were discussing the idea. There didn't seem to be anything formal brewing, from what Dui could tell in his observations, but there were many people who had originally planned to attend that now swore up and down that they wouldn't be caught dead -- and the joke wasn't lost on Dui -- in Chicago until the police could get their heads out of their collective asses. Dui himself had begun to have doubts about attending, but Decimal was adamant.

"We cannot let this terrorist dissuade us from going, Melvil," he argued. "If we do not travel to Chicago as planned, that will mean that he has won."

"I am aware of this, Jonathan," Dui said. "There is no doubt in my mind that whoever is killing these people is doing so in order to prevent the fair from being a success. I only wonder what motivation they might have for ruining the exposition."

"It is an interesting question indeed. Perhaps they have had some argument with some of the city fathers, or a problem with Burnham himself. Maybe they are some foreign agent who wishes to humiliate the United States. Maybe it is a Luddite upset with the idea of technology being so brazenly on display."

"Or maybe they just like to kill."

"What do you mean?"

"In my reading, I have come across accounts of men -- though I use the term loosely, for they are more like animals -- who for some reason or another have a compulsion to kill. There is no argument with their victims, no reason for them to target a particular person save for whatever delusion drives them. They can not be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. These men just want to see their fellow man suffer, see them die, watch the light go out in their eyes as they take their lives. One such man said that you can only truly know someone else when you see them die."

"That is most disturbing. Do you think that such a man -- such a beast -- might be terrorizing Chicago?"

"I do not know, Jonathan. I am no expert on these matters. However, I would not rule out such a possibility. These are interesting times in which we live. The revolution of industry and technology, the population explosion, the growth of the cities -- they all can have odd effects on a man, do strange things to his mind. We are facing issues as a people that we have never had to deal with before. Even the work that we do in some small way will change the way society behaves. With all these changes, is it any wonder that there are men who are unable to deal with it? Things are changing more often and faster than they ever have in human history. With each advance, there are a dozen more that it enables."

"You have obviously thought long and hard about this."

"I have. When I was a boy, it was an occasion to have visitors to our home. We would gather around together, listening eagerly for news from other parts of the country, even if it was just as far away as another state. Now, news travels almost faster than light! You may learn of an event almost before it even happens. There is so much more input, so much more stimulus, so much pollution of sound and images, how can one person process all of these things without going a little mad?"

"What is to be done about this? Surely you aren't arguing in favor of slowing down human progress."

"Not at all," Dui said. "No, I would no more trade in the advancements in science, medicine, culture than I would trade in my own arm. I love these times. I love modernity. I revel in it. I eagerly await the next big thing that comes down from the brilliant minds that are working on nothing but coming up with some new amazement. Something that will dazzle and baffle our senses. Did you know that there is to be a demonstration of electric light at the exposition? Imagine it -- no more oil lamps, no more gaslights. Clean, bright, brilliant electric light will guide our way into the next century. I find it thrilling!"

"I wish I shared your enthusiasm," Decimal said. "However, if it leads to man doing terrible, unspeakable things to his fellow man, isn't it too great a cost?"

"I hate to say it, but these are just growing pains of our society. This is the price we pay for evolving. I suggest that it is not too great a cost. There is no cost too great for our expansion as people. There is no cost too great for the benefits, the good, the brilliance that comes from these minds. People have done amazing things, continue to do amazing things, and I would not want to stop these at any cost short of the complete and total destruction of the human race."

"Do you not fear that it might come to that?"

"There is that possibility, I suppose," Dui said. "But I trust in mankind's natural goodness, and in man's sense of self-preservation. We would not permit such a thing, could not permit such a thing. It's against our very nature as a people."

"And yet societies have crumbled before, have vanished from the very face of the Earth."

"Not through their own doing, and never the entire human population."

"Not that we know of anyhow," Decimal countered.

"What do you mean?"

"It's possible that there has been some cataclysmic event that wiped people from the planet, destroyed all evidence of their very existence. We would never know. Maybe this has all happened before, Melvil. Maybe this is a never-ending cycle of birth, growth, destruction, and death."

"Like the cycle of life itself."

"Exactly. Who's to say that in another hundred years, we won't have invented some doomsday device capable of destroying every man, woman and child alive? And who's to say that this didn't happen two thousand years ago? Ten thousand years ago?"

"This is the most ridiculous conversation we have ever had."

"What makes it ridiculous, Jonathan?"

"You've never been so contemplative. Never been such a radical thinker. I'd have to say that this is completely out of character."

"I've been feeling different lately, I told you that already."

"Yes, and don't think I haven't noticed."

"I know you have."

"Well, then. There it is."

An awkward silence followed, years of unsaid statements hung in the air between the two, who, if one were to think about it, never really knew each other all that well, even though they were most intimately involved. A stream of consciousness flowed, a river of random words, letters, syllables, incoherent grunts. The last place either of them wanted to be was everywhere in the world. Dui considered throwing himself from a balcony, if only he could find one that was high up enough to do him any good.

"What about Estelle?" Decimal asked.

"What about her?" was Dui's reply.

"I see that the glances between the two of you have become more smoldering than ever before."

Dui blushed. "You've noticed that, huh?"

"It would be impossible for me not to. I've had to excuse myself from the office so many times lately just so I wouldn't accidentally intercept a gaze, or a giggle, or a glance that was meant for someone else."

"Oh that is terribly embarrassing. I apologize, sir."

"Do not worry about it, Melvil. There is nothing wrong with you having fun, with you being flirtatious. I am happy to see it. It makes me glad to know that you are still capable of doing that."

"Honestly, it came as a surprise to me as well. I didn't know I still had it in me."

"Yes, well, it is a pleasure to see. It has been far too long for you, my friend."

Of course, just as Dui was getting used to the idea that he and Estelle would make a good match; that she was indeed attracted to him, interested in him, *into him*; that his undying affection for Annie perhaps needed to be put to rest, Annie came back into his life. She had come out of her shell, had gotten over the terrible way in which Green had treated her, was moving on, moving up, getting out. Word around town was that she was as bright and gay as ever, as if nothing had ever happened, as if the world was a normal and wonderful place. Dui heard all this and his heart was lifted and destroyed at the same time. Obviously he was happy for her, happy that she was happy again, happy that she was normal again, but something in him broke, something in him was less than whole and he didn't know what it was, why it was.

There was something wrong with his heart, there was something wrong his head, there was something wrong with everything and it was tearing him apart. The more he tried to fix it, the worse it seemed to get. Nothing worked. Nothing worked and everything was broken. His cries for help were silent in his throat, his cries for help were silent on the page. His cries for help might not have been cries for help at all. He sat outside and he saw his breath coming in waves of steam, he felt his cold blood pumping through his veins, he felt his life seeping out of his pores, running down his skin, felt his life in tears staining his face.

Estelle found him like this, seated alone outside the office, the tears frozen on his cheeks, the breath shallow and ragged, his hands clenched, his complexion pale, his eyes vacant and wild, unseeing, unknowing. He didn't acknowledge her presence, her hand on his shoulder, her queries about his well-being unanswered, unheard. She tried to coax some explanation from him, but he didn't know where to begin, couldn't know where to begin, and so she took him in his arms and at that moment, he broke, he came unhinged, he began to cry like he never had before, he fell to pieces, showed her exactly how he was feeling without saying a word, and he couldn't say a word, and he wore his heart on his sleeve, wrote his heart with his eyes, with his tears.

"Oh, Mr. Dui," she cooed, "what is the matter? You are scaring me, scaring me to death. Don't you know that I would do anything if I could just make things okay? What is the problem?" She tried to stem the tide of his tears with her handkerchief but it was a losing battle, it was like trying to stop a flood with a damp rag. "Are you hurt? Did someone do something to you?"

Dui couldn't reply, couldn't find a reply, didn't know how to reply. He took deep clearing breaths, the only kind he knew how anymore, aside from the great shuddering ones, tried to cleanse himself, felt so safe in Estelle's arms, but also so exposed, so vulnerable, so out of his element. Too exhausted to even shiver, his body spending all the energy normally used for to keep itself warm on everything else, he felt the cold through his bones, felt the cold through his soul, felt the cold like his blood was freezing, was already frozen, was sluggishly barely even trying to flow through his veins, thick, syrup, how cold does it have to be to for blood to freeze? He tried to move his arms, couldn't; tried to move his legs, couldn't. Tried to lift his head, couldn't. Made no more effort, could make no more effort, breathed a syllable, a simple, "No," and laid limp in Estelle's arms and she seemed to understand, seemed to get it, just sat, shivering in her dress, with her apron, but uncaring, still giving her warmth to Dui, giving everything she could to Dui, Dui feeling for the first time in a long time, safe, warm, safe, safe, safe.

And little by little, that changed things, made things okay, made things alright, the warmth, the contact, the closeness, that made things okay. Everything slowed down, everything stopped, his eyes cleared, his head cleared, his throat was raw, but it was cleared, his lungs cleared. "Water," he croaked. "Please."

Estelle, startled at the sound of Dui's voice, nearly dropped the man. "Of course, Mr. Dui, of course." She helped Dui to his feet, helped him inside, felt him start to shiver as he crossed the threshold of the office, set him up in front of the stove, its warmth radiating out, saw color quickly return to Dui's face, saw life return to his person. She retrieved a blanket from the settee in the front room, put it about his shoulders and then poured a glass of water, brought it to him. He drank it greedily, the liquid filling his stomach, calming

him further, bringing him back. He felt rehydrated, rejuvenated, he felt almost human again, he felt almost real again.

"Are you feeling better, Mr. Dui?" Estelle asked. "You're certainly looking better."

"I am, Estelle, thank you," he said, smiling weakly up at her, smiling sheepishly, embarrassed. "I'm -- I'm sorry that you found me like that."

"Oh, Mr. Dui," Estelle gushed, "please don't apologize. I'm just so happy I could be there for you. I hope I was some small comfort to you in your time of need -- whatever that need was."

"Estelle, please, do not in any way belittle the contribution you have had to my current state of relative well-being. I do not know how I would be now if you had not come along with your kindness and compassion. I would undoubtedly still be freezing to death outside, wallowing in self-pity, drowning in despair."

"Well then I am very pleased that I happened upon you when I did."

"I am as well, Estelle. You have no idea how grateful I am." Dui smiled, stronger now. Estelle beamed down at him, ecstatic in his approval. She stood above him, Dui still slumped in the chair, but sitting slightly straighter, his will slightly stronger, his mind slightly clearer. He looked up at her, his eyes bright though ringed with red, puffy, sore, rubbed raw, but still bright, alert, crisp like the air, crisp like the breath that caught in his throat as she leaned down, as she leaned closer, as she closed her eyes and he knew that in a moment a line was about to be crossed, things were about to change, and that's when Annie came back.

The office door opened, and there she was, standing, in the doorway, outlined by the late winter late afternoon sunlight, in all her glory, with all her beauty, with all her presence. Dui jerked his head towards the door at the noise, Estelle leaned back from the imminent kiss, the charge of the looming contact still in the air but dissipating quickly, fading into ozone and crushed expectations. Dui saw Annie and could no longer see anything else, his heart immediately beating faster again, his memories of Annie flooding back, his memories of love flooding in. After all this time, after all these months, there she was, unannounced, unperturbed, smiling, there. And in his head it was like no time had passed, like nothing had come between them, like there weren't years of separation, the agony of betrayal, or ignorance, or misunderstanding, or anything between them except for the love, the partnership, the connection. And in his eyes she was all that was there. And Estelle had disappeared until she cleared her throat and Dui looked up at her, sprang to his feet, Estelle forced to jump back. She cleared out of the room, attempted to look busy, attempted to look unaffected, Dui watched her for a moment, for a brief moment, before his attention returned to Annie, only Annie.

"Hello. Miss Godfrey," he said, the formality of the words feeling strange in his throat, on his tongue. He tried again: "Annie." That was better, though strange in its own way.

Annie just smiled, entered the building, closing the door behind her. She stood in the front room, looking through towards Dui in the back. "Hello, Melvil. I hope I wasn't interrupting anything."

Dui glanced back towards Estelle who was trying to find something to clean, hovering over Decimal's desk, which he always left almost unnaturally tidy. He looked at Annie. "No," he said. "Not at all. Of course not. You're always welcome here."

"Well, that's a relief. I wouldn't want to show up unannounced at an inopportune time."

"Not at all," Dui repeated. He walked through the doorway to the front of the office, took Annie's elbow, ushered her to the settee, stood nervously above her, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "What can I do for you?"

"I have something I need to discuss with you," Annie started. Dui crossed his arms, trying to appear relaxed, found that it wasn't working, tried leaning up against the wall dividing the two rooms of the office, crossed his legs, appeared casual, appeared incredibly awkward. He decided to get a chair from the other room, abruptly left, then returned.

"Excuse me for a second, Annie," he said. "I'm just going to get something to sit on."

"That sounds like a fine idea, Melvil," Annie couldn't help but giggle at Dui's awkward behavior.

"Yes, yes," Dui said. He shook his head at himself, fled to the back where he found Estelle gathering her things to leave for the day.

"I'll just be going, Mr. Dui," she said, her voice now crisp like his breath had been before, catching in his throat, like the air outside, like the air in the room, like the air she now exuded, like something was broken.

"Yes, fine, Miss Cabot," Dui said, distracted, trying to decide which chair would be most easily brought from back to front. "Have a good evening."

"Thank you," she said coldly, so coldly. "You as well."

She let herself out the back door, a gust of wind blowing into the office, discernible only by the papers it disturbed, the temperature already having dropped to that of outside by the chill in Estelle's heart. Dui shivered, rubbed his shoulders, decided upon his rolling desk chair and wheeled it to the front room. He placed it in front of the settee at a comfortable distance and took a seat.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"It's no trouble," Annie replied.

"So, what did you have to speak to me about?"

"It is a pleasure to see you, Melvil."

Dui, surprised, taken aback: "Yes, Annie, of course it is." He wrung his hands nervously. "It's a supreme pleasure. I have meant to call upon you for some time now. Ever since..." He stopped himself, not wanting to bring up a sore subject, open up wounds that Annie had undoubtedly been trying to let heal for months, if not years. The unsaid words hung in the air.

Annie let him off the hook. "I wasn't receiving visitors," she said. She stopped, considering it. "Though I would have seen you. I would have always seen you, Melvil."

"I'm sorry I never made the time." He gestured at the office in explanation. "All of...this...has been incredibly absorbing."

"I imagine it must be," Annie said. "I've been following your work, you know. My friends and colleagues all speak so highly of you now. I have to bite my tongue when the same people who once disparaged you, who laughed at the very mention of your name now praise you and speak of you as if you are the closest of friends." She stopped and blushed. "I'm sorry, Melvil, it was cruel of me to bring them up."

Dui chuckled and waved a hand dismissively, "Don't worry about it, Annie. I'm over it. I'm over them. It was difficult for me to restrain myself from flying off the handle at everyone who came back to me once we started our work on the System, but eventually I was able to put my anger aside and keep a civil tongue."

"That is a good thing, Melvil," Annie said. She quietly added, "You must know that I was never amongst them. I never spoke an ill word of you, never had anything but the highest respect for you, for your work, for your aspirations."

"Even," Dui said, "when I was refining grape juice?"

It was Annie's turn to blush. "I have to apologize, Melvil, for some things I said, for the way I treated you, for how I reacted. It wasn't that I looked down on the work you were doing, but I felt that you weren't happy with the work you were doing. I saw you toiling at all those things, all those inventions, and I knew they were all worthwhile activities, because they were activities you undertook, with your boundless creativity, with your keen mind, your intellect. You weren't wasting your God-given talents, your abilities. You weren't sitting idly by as the world passed by, content to spend your life on menial tasks. You were doing things, Melvil. You were struggling, you were scattered, but still you aspired. But I could see that you weren't happy. I could feel that you weren't happy. And I could feel that there was nothing I could do that could make you happy so long as you hadn't found the one thing, the one way that you would change the world, make it better, reform things, change things. And I knew that you were holding me back."

"Holding me back!" Dui nearly roared. "Holding me back! Forgive my outburst, but

that is preposterous, Annie. You were the one thing that was driving me ever forward. You were the one who was always there, the person I could always count on, the woman who held my hand when I was scared and held my head when I was hurt. You were my inspiration, my enlightenment, my salvation, my muse. Annie, you gave me every idea I ever had. You were the most important thing in my life."

"Maybe that was the problem, Melvil," Annie said sadly. "Maybe you were too focused on me. Maybe when we parted ways, it was for the best. Maybe it allowed you to set your mind free, get to where you really needed to go, be who you needed to be."

"When we parted ways, I fell apart. I didn't become anything other than a wreck, a joke. You know. You heard them talk, you heard them laugh at me. You know I was the butt of every joke on the lips of every library scientist in the city. I didn't become who I was supposed to be. Not without you."

"But you did, Melvil. You did. Eventually you did. Without me holding you back, you were able to come up with the system that's going to revolutionize the library sciences."

"That wasn't until I met Decimal," Dui said. "That wasn't just me."

"Oh yes, the mysterious Mister Decimal. I would still be interested in meeting him. I am surprised that his name does not come up more than it does. It's all Dui this and Dui that, but never anything about Decimal."

"The Dewey-Decimal System is named after the both of us."

"Yes, of course. Still, I everyone that I have spoken with has made no mention of the man."

Dui nodded, "I have tried my hardest to share all the credit with him. He truly has been a great help with the work. Without him, I would have never been able to do any of this."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"No, in all honesty, it is," Dui said. "It's been a rough few years. Without Jonathan's help, I would still be lost, afloat -- " He chuckled. "Wandering the seas of academia without a clue, without a prayer, without a hope."

Annie laughed as well. "I'm sure it's not so dramatic as that. Who is this man? Where did he come from? When last we met, you avoided the question. I would very much like to know how you met."

"You really want to know?"

"Yes, of course I do, Melvil. After all, he is the man who replaced me in your life."

Dui laughed. "Nobody could ever replace you, Annie."

"It seems that your cleaning woman is trying to," Annie said with a laugh.

Dui blushed, giggled nervously. "Oh, Estelle, she's a wonderful worker. We were just talking when you came in, there is nothing between us."

"From where I stood, it didn't look as if she knew that, Melvil. You should be careful with her. Don't break her heart just because she's a cleaning woman and not a -- " Annie searched for an example, shrugged, and said, "a librarian."

"Of course not. I would never discount a woman's value due to her occupation. I just don't have time for such frivolities nowadays. The work is taking up all my time. Perhaps when it's done I'll be able to focus on...."

"On living your life? On living *any* life?"

"Yes, I suppose that's right."

The conversation paused. Dui and Annie stared at each other, neither knowing what to say, neither knowing what to do. Dui still wrung his hands nervously. Annie's were folded primly in her lap.

"Look at us," she said finally.

"What do you mean?"

"We used to converse so easily."

"Time has passed."

"Yes, so much has happened," she agreed. "Yet somehow it feels like no time has gone by at all."

"It feels like decades to me. No. Like centuries. Eons. A different lifetime. A different man."

"You are not so different, Melvil. You are still very much the same man that I once knew."

"And yet I'm changed. A man at the top of his game is very different from the same man when he is at the lowest depths."

"And you are at the top of your game?"

"Well, at times. Occasionally." Dui hesitated. "Often," he said less confidently.

"And yet...." Annie started.

"What?"

"I can't help but notice that your eyes are all red, Melvil. That you are disheveled." Dui looked at his clothes, smoothed them down self-consciously. "That you have been crying."

"Yes," Dui admitted. "It has been.... It has been a difficult time."

"What is the matter?"

And it all came out. The disappearance of all of his notes, all of his work, his lies to the publishers, to his creditors. Decimal's absence. His descent. His despair. By the end of the story, Annie had taken his hands, and tears were streaming down his face.

"Oh, Melvil," she said, hardly able to keep from crying herself.

"If only I hadn't been so hell-bent on achieving *something*," he said. "Why couldn't I be content to be who I was? Why did I have to drive you away?"

"Melvil, you didn't drive me away. Let me say that again. You did *not* drive me away. Okay?"

"Okay," he sniffed.

"And you were so hell-bent," Annie said, "because that's who you are. That's your nature. That's one of the things I loved -- that I love -- about you."

Dui was comforted by this. "I thought you would resent me."

"And I thought the same about you," Annie admitted. "And honestly, I did resent you. No, not you. I resented it. I resented the drive in you that made me think we couldn't be together, even knowing full well that it was, as I said, one of your most attractive qualities. I wouldn't want you to lose it, not by any means, because that would make you a different man from who you are, but at the same time, I knew it meant that we were destined to be apart."

Dui looked down at their hands, joined, clasped together, he always loved holding her hand, small, comforting, safe, warm and cool at the same time, a connection, the flow between them, running from her through her hand, into his, into him and back again. It was a simple thing, the holding of hands, and yet it meant so much, was so much.

"Remember how we used to talk?" he asked, gripping her hand tighter, still gently, but firmly, instilling meaning and depth into the gesture.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"How we used to talk. You know. How we used to talk about how glad we were to have met, how glad we were to have gone through everything we'd gone through in our lives to get to where we were so that we could meet and be who we were together."

"Yes, I remember. 'No regrets.'"

"That's right -- no regrets about anything in our pasts because it made us who and what we were. Brought us together. No regrets, not even about the really bad stuff."

"And yet now, here, I have regrets. I regret slipping away from you."

"And I regret letting you."

Chicago, in 1893 was, if possible, dustier, dirtier, crazier, more dangerous than Boston or New York. It was a bustling metropolis with all the population of the eastern cities combined with the uncertainty and lawlessness of the wild west. The city had been nearly destroyed in the Great Fire and the rebuilding process had allowed for modern construction techniques and city planning to dominate the landscape. Daniel Burnham had been at the center of the regrowth, his great plan for the city guiding the shape of the new city that emerged from

the ashes. It felt like a city that had sprung up overnight, residents and tourists alike walked with their heads craned towards the sky, murmuring in awe and delight -- voices tinged with fear and confusion -- at the new wonders that dotted the skyline. Where construction techniques had advanced in New York, it felt like it had been slapped on top of an old city. The fire had given Chicago an opportunity to get rid of the old, throw in the new, and the wonders seemed to never cease.

More amazing was Burnham's "White City" which stood in the southern section of the city. Set against the new buildings, the hundred or so he had constructed for the exposition were in the classical style creating a stark contrast against Chicago's rush towards modernity. The mix of architecture was alarming, but Dui, arriving on a June morning at Grand Central Station, found it comforting. As urbane and sophisticated as his time in Boston and New York had made him, as modern as he liked to believe he was, his mind was not yet prepared to deal with what Chicago had presented him with.

There was, amidst the buzz and excitement over the exposition, still an air of fear and terror brought on by the series of murders that had been occurring. Paperboys cried out their headlines, each one some comment on the murderer, the police department's ineffective investigation, suppositions as to who might be next, all designed to instill fear in the public and sell papers. There didn't seem to be any actual content, any actual news. Dui bought a paper nonetheless, more a souvenir of his trip than reading material. Everywhere that he and Decimal went, there appeared to be only two topics of conversation: the exposition or the murders. He wondered if anyone talked about anything else. He would welcome a frivolous chat about the weather.

They arrived at their hotel, the Palmer House, a grand building, more opulent than Dui had ever seen in his life, even in Manhattan. The lobby was huge, bigger than the train stations Great Hall, bigger than anything he had ever seen, such a display of wealth and excess, he wondered how he had even gotten to this point in his life.

"They have spared no expense for us, my friend," he said to Decimal.

"You certainly deserve it," Decimal replied. "After all this time."

"I wonder if I do," Dui said. "We're only here for the file. The vertical file."

"And for Cutter," Decimal said. "Don't forget about Cutter."

"Of course not. But what are we going to do when we find him?"

"We will figure that out when it comes time. I do not doubt that."

Alone, again, Decimal nowhere to be found, Dot wants to stop walking but can't. Wants to cry but can't. Wants to remember more but can't. Wants to sleep but can't. Wants to want something that he can have. But can't.

Alone, again, still walking, still, only memories of leaves rustling, a wind chime jingling in a breeze, a chill in the air, images from paintings, feelings from images, everything false, everything real, never anything realer than this memory that he is having. Everything fragmented, broken into pieces. Dot is broken into pieces. He wants to know how it all happened but can't.

He is angry now, so angry he is raging inside. The frustration boils over, he looks about wildly, searching for something to destroy, something to bear the brunt of his hatred, his disgust. But it is too late; everything has already been destroyed. What anguish! What pain! His heart is nearly bursting, pumping his ire-filled blood through his veins, beating faster than it ever has, his rage fueled with every beat, and there is nothing to let it loose upon, and he has never felt so useless, so impotent, so defeated.

Hunched over, cursing, gasping for breath, he screams to noone and nothing at all, to everything, to God, he screams, unintelligible, incoherent. He screams to release it, it can never be released, never leave him, this rage. His breathing becomes shallower, calmer, measured. The voices audible, he finally recognizes them. Finally picks one out from the others. His mother. Annie. Cutter. Decimal. He has conversations with them, in his head, talks, yells, screams, rages at them.

And Decimal is the only one that answers.

Can he lie to himself? Certainly. He is well practiced in the art. He is a master. It is what he is best at. He could teach lessons on the subject. Can he lie to himself? What sort of question is that? He has done little else these past several years, nothing but lying, nothing but self-deception. Making things out to be worse than they are, making things out to be not what they are. Convincing himself that he is at fault, that he is not at fault, that there is no fault, convincing himself that the way things are is the way things should be, or that the way things are is not the way they should be, or that the way things are is not the way things are at all.

Can he lie to himself? A better question would be can he tell himself the truth? Can he do anything but? For the love of God, has there been a word of truth in his head? When all is well, he tells himself it is at its most dire. When all is at its most dire, he somehow makes it worse.

It all became clear when Cutter published a system of his own. The Cutter Expansive Library Classification and Cataloging System was received with great fanfare and success. It was the talk of the Library Science Conference that year. Dui couldn't believe it. It expanded on Dui's system with extensive detail, each call number of Cutter's included more information than Dui's, practically told everything that a book contained in a six digit number, with more information coming after a single, smoking gun of a decimal point.

"You sold me out, Decimal," Dui accused his partner.

"How can you say that?" Decimal asked, insulted.

"You gave him everything. You gave me up."

"I did no such thing."

"Everywhere a decimal is, you are there. Everywhere dots are, you are there. You told me that yourself."

"But I've been here. With you. All along. Remember?"

"No, you've been working with him. You've been talking to him. You've been missing, files are missing, everything's missing." Dui swept papers from the desk in a blind rage. "You betrayed me."

"You're not yourself. I'm going to leave now, and when you've calmed down, we can discuss this further."

Decimal and Dot walk along the road, mostly in silence, occasionally exchanging a word or two, never anything of any importance, for what matters of importance could there be for two men who are beyond most corporeal needs, nearly beyond time and space. They simply walk.

They come to what once was a large lake, dry now, barren now, empty and avoided now, once was a large resort area, once was populated, thriving, vibrant. It is more familiar to Dui than anything else they have seen, the feeling that he knows this place is tearing him apart, he looks to Decimal but Decimal won't look back at him, can't look back at him, doesn't know where they are, knows exactly where they are.

"God, I know this place, know it well," Dot says.

"Yes," Decimal says sadly, "you do."

A faded, splintered sign sits at the side of the road, barely legible, calls to Dot. Tentatively, he approaches, pulls aside the overgrowth, dead weeds that crumble at his touch, the sign reacting much the same, but not before he can read the words "Lake" and "Placid." And it dawns on him. Everything dawns on him, everything is drawn to him, everything drowns in him. He is home, somehow back home, and he knows this road and if they turn right up just past the lake and walk for another mile and a half, he will truly be home.

But he can see that there is nothing there for him to go home to. Visibility is such that he can tell that just past the lake and a mile and a half to the east there is nothing there, nothing of the house that once stood there. For that matter, nothing of this little resort town

that he helped to put on the map, nothing around for miles at all.

"What happened here?" Dot wonders aloud. "What happened everywhere?"

"I don't know," Decimal says sadly. "There doesn't seem to be any explanation for this sort of devastation."

"It can't be real. It can't be tied to any particular event. I can't believe that God would choose the two of us to survive the apocalypse, to survive whatever catastrophe befell...well, everywhere."

"But it is real, Dot. As far as I can tell, anyway. We're here, and we're seeing this, and this is real."

"No... Wait. But you're not real. You've never been real, and I've always known it. I've always known it. Nobody helped Braille create a writing and reading system for the blind. Nobody helped Morse make his code."

"People help. People always help. I helped. I continue to help. There is a man named Ken Olsen -- he's just a child now -- who will, my God, you have no idea how much he'll do. How much is going to happen. Remember our conversations about technology? About human progress? You think it has been fast in your lifetime? It's a shame you won't be around to see what fast really is. How fast we can really go as a people. And God, I'm going to help them. There are these things, called computers...."

"Yes, I know -- men sitting around, doing math."

"No, no. How can I explain this? Digital computers. Machines that can count, can process information. They're going to render our work obsolete in a hundred and fifty years. Cutter will be entirely forgotten."

"Well, at least there's that. But what do dots have to do with these computers?"

"Display...screens. And...printers. Olsen and I will create a...he's going to call it dot matrix, I think. I'm sorry, it's all a little fuzzy."

"Are you telling me you know the future?"

"The future? The past? The only thing that hasn't happened yet is the present and that's slipping by faster than I'd like it to."

The single, smoking gun of a decimal point, the single burning decimal point of a bleeding wound in Cutter's head in Dui's mind in Dui's dark wild fantasies of revenge. The single speeding dot of a speeding bullet over and over playing on the movie screen (he did not invent motion pictures, mind you) of his head. He would like to watch something else, some other feature, some wacky picture of a man falling down or getting hit by a ball in the crotch, but all that is there is Dui's gun (he does not have a gun) in his hand, his arm outstretched, the trigger cocked, Cutter before him, on his knees, begging for forgiveness, begging for mercy, begging for his life and Dui not in any kind of mood to give him any of that. Dui not in any kind of mood but to do anything but pull the trigger, pull the trigger again and again, firing the chambers dry, making sure, making sure that there was nothing left of the consciousness of the existence of the being that was Charles Cutter. Fire did not burn as hot as Dui's hatred, Satan did not enjoy death as much as Dui did in his mind. Cutter collapsing, falling on his face, or simply slumping backwards, triumph, victory, joy, all erupting in Dui's heart. He knew that were the deed to be done in reality, whatever reality was anymore, wherever reality was anymore, that there would be guilt, there would inevitably be guilt, Dui, who couldn't kill a spider because someone had once told him it was bad luck, who couldn't bear to see a rat or a mongoose or a bird or a chipmunk hurt, trapped, injured, killed, Dui who very nearly fainted at the sight of his own blood dripping from a wound in his pinkie finger knew that the repercussions, his reaction to his murdering -- and it would be murder, no matter how justified Dui felt that it was, no matter how righteous a kill it would be -- would be deeper, heavier than they were in his head. In his head, he stands over Cutter's lifeless body, the gun smoking, empty, useless in his hand, dangling there, the smile on his face grim, humorless, but satisfied, some prophetic, witty, and entirely appropriate quip on his lips, easily, effortlessly, something about decimals, or theft, or the theft of decimals or something, he didn't know yet, that was the one hole in his

fantasy, but he knew he could figure something out, would figure something out if it ever came to it -- and he knew it would never come to it -- but he would come up with a line that would match the greatest writers of dramatic dialog throughout the history of literature. He is certain that he can become a hero, an action hero, a modern day Robin Hood, a man of action and mystery, a man of substance and class. He can be all these things, he can be together and whole, he can be pure and unblemished, unbroken, if only he can....

If only he can what? Dammit, Dui, if you knew the answer to that question, all of this would have been figured out a long time ago. You wouldn't have wasted your chance with Annie, wouldn't have wasted your time with all the ridiculous aspirations to be something bigger than what you are, wouldn't have pinned all your hopes on what, a scheme for the organization of books? Fuck it, throw the books in the air and let them fall where they may. Who gives a shit which book comes first? They're all the same, more or less, all pages and pages of words that are meaningless when you stop and think about it, all meaningless, all the same, all saying nothing, none of them with real answers, all man made and irrelevant, from the Bible to whatever piece of crap just was published, just was churned out, just was puked out by Scriveners five minutes ago, five seconds ago, five seconds from now. The only real answers, the only truth, the only thing worth seeking is out there in the world, out there in life, out there in everything that he wasted, everything that he was wasting and now, now it was down to him pinning his hopes on a fantasy in which he murders -- for it would be murder, cold-blooded, unjustified, unwarranted murder for which he would certainly hang -- a man for stealing -- for not even stealing, simply for borrowing, expanding upon, possibly improving -- something that he had created with his partner. With his partner, his hallucination, his imaginary friend. His imaginary enemy. His imaginary imagination. The most amazing thing he had created wasn't real, the most amazing things he constantly created were all fabrications, all creations are fabrications, this he knows, but these more than most, there were more than most. His heart racing (again) his brain racing (again) he sighs (again) he does (again.) What more is there to do? How he longs for a balcony, how he longs for a bridge, how he longs for an end to the ache to an end to the cries for help to an end this. The wondering. The wandering. The endless cycle of wake, wash, repeat. It's all been going on for far too long and he can't stand the ache, the tears just around the corner, the fear just around the corner, longs for it, longs for it, waited far too long for it.

And he stands. And he stumbles. And he falls. And he crawls. Along the floor, he goes, clawing at the floorboards, his fingernails bending, his eyes bulging, he wants to get outside himself, knows no way to get outside himself, knows nothing that will let him escape himself. Grasps at the table, at items on the table, brings them crashing to the floor, surrounding himself in broken glass, in twisted metal, in twisted memories, in darkness, the darkness that permeates, penetrates, sinks into his bones, into his eyes, into his soul. Knows nothing will be the same again, nothing will be right again, can't stand to have to say it again. And again. And still he claws his way along, his gasping sobs choking the words from his throat, preventing words from emitting, a good thing for he knows not what he is trying to say, his eyes turn black, his hair turns gray, he ages a million years in the slow dry blink of an eye. It's all turning in on him now, it's all crashing down on him now, he's pulling the legs out from under the world and bringing it all crashing down on him now.

He wants to blame something but can blame nothing but himself; he wants to punish something but can punish nothing but himself. There is no answer, he realizes, there is no meaning, there is no method, there is no substance. God said the first shall enter last and the last shall enter first and either way, Dui knows, he will be stuck right in the middle, as usual. And Dui knows, either way, that God didn't say anything of the sort, that God never said anything of the sort, that God never said anything. That the Bible is just like Brunswick's *Treatise on the Morphology of Platypus Semen*: well received at first, followed as irrefutable truth for a while, but ultimately discovered to be the work of a lunatic who just made the entire thing up in order to impress a woman.

So, God's no help to him. Either God does not exist or God is laughing at him, and either way, there is no help in that. There is no comfort in that. There is not anything in that. God's musical laughter ringing merrily in Dui's ears is not a comfort, and likely not even real, the tinkling sound the sound of a broken drinking glass falling slowly, impossibly slowly, to the floor. The joy Dui feels the joy of the shards sinking slowly, impossibly slowly, into Dui's skin, into Dui's head, into Dui's arms, legs, body. The joy of the pain, the joy of feeling something, the joy of getting out of himself for a moment. The laughter is not God's, but Dui's.

And still he crawls. And struggles. And struggles. With bits of glass sticking out, and his pants torn, and his hair disheveled and falling out and turning gray and standing on end, with his mind erupting with nothing but voices screaming, nothing but desperate voices shrieking in pain, nothing but bad ideas one after the other, he crawls and wishes that there were an end that he were crawling towards, that there was a point to the struggle, or that there was an edge, a ledge, the end of the Earth, that it was at hand, that he was close to the end.

And it's all turning away, it's all turning back on him, it's all coming back to him, there is an edge, and it's turning gray. They're all turning back on him, his eyes turning black on him, the sun shining down on him is fading away. He can't remember the last time the sun shone down on him, can't remember the last time he felt its warmth, its life, can't remember the last time he gazed upon it, saw the blaze, blinked and rubbed his eyes. He can't remember the last time he looked at the sun and looking at the sun made him smile. He can't remember the last time he remembered something.

He can't find anything in this room. In this head. In this world. In this life. He wonders what he should be searching for, what card to look up in the Cutter Catalog. He can laugh at this, he can laugh at this, he can laugh at anything. He gives up on the floor and claws at his face, wonders, his fingers slipping through blood and tears, if he would ever have the courage or the balls or the demented idiocy to claw out his own eyes, laughs harder, cries harder, wonders still if he could ever tear off his ears, or cut off his nose, or do anything bold, or dramatic, or brave. Or do anything so that the outside would match the inside, so that the world could see him as how he feels, so he could stop trying to put it in words.

Because words haven't worked, haven't ever been adequate, have always let him down, have always steered him wrong, or have always been steered wrong by him. Strings of letters, linked together by some random agreed upon structure, following no structure at all, following no reason at all, locked together by society, held together by chance and then put together into syllables, into words, linked together in sentences, imbued with meaning, wrapped up in symbolism, shoved into paragraphs, ideas, thoughts, essays, books, goddamned books, all the goddamned books in the world. He'd clawed his way, crawled his way into his library, and all the goddamned books in the room looked down upon him, looked down at him, loomed over him, all his life and all the books, loomed down on him, like his life flashing before his eyes, like his mind flashing before his eyes, this library, that library, he prayed, no not prayer, he hoped for the books to fall down, for the books to crush him, suffocate him, smother him, for the books to finally do what they had been trying to do all along, for the books to snuff out the last glimmer of life in his eyes, his eyes, turned black, turned back, in on himself. His eyes slowly closing, slowly squeezing tight, slowly going slack, slowly leaking tears, slowly leaking life. He laid on his stomach, he rolled to his side, he curled up into a fetal position, he rolled to his back, his arms flung wide, his plea to God, he chides himself, returns to the fetal position, prays to himself, tries to find hope, wonders if he should bother, is there a reason, is there something he wants? Is there some reason to try to start the cycle again? He is done, he is given up, he is alone, he is lost, he is despair, he is sick of himself, sick of being sick of himself. He comes to a decision, a conclusion, a reaction. If he can not stand up, if he can not stand up and be a man, he will stay here, he will stay here on the floor, his eyes closed, his head down, his hands balled into fists thrust up under his chin, bawling like a fucking baby, bawling like a fucking child. If only his mother could see him now, if only his father could see him now, a

grown ass man, splinters of glass sticking from his skin, splinters of the floor jammed under his fingernails, bloody, bruised, broken, hardly a man anymore at all. Hardly human anymore at all. Hardly recognizable as anything at all. If only Annie could see him now, she wouldn't even recognize him, his face contorted, a child's monster mask taken over, the most horrid expression, he tries to wipe it off his face, tries to relax it off his face, tries to claw it off his face, his fingernails digging into his eyes, into his ears, his nose, his mouth, wonders if he can do it, finds again that he can't, finds again that no matter how horrid it all is, finds again that no matter how terrible it is, he still lacks what it takes to do what it takes to make it all stop. He still lacks what it takes to do what it takes to make it start to stop. He longs for an edge. He longs for a change. He longs for a balcony, a gun, a noose, an end.

He finds that he can't breathe, that he can't do anything but breathe, that breath is coming in great sobbing, rasping gasps, that breath is coming in too big to be useful, that breath is becoming irrelevant, that breath is coming, unbidden, too big, too useless, that his breath is painful, is pain, that what breath he has left is shallow and uninspired. Great gasping, rasping sobs, and all he can do is go with it, nothing but hyperventilating now, if only Decimal could hear him now, if only Decimal were standing over him now, could he stand to stand over him now? Could he stand to try again to spill calming words, to bring Dui around, to stand Dui up, to brush Dui off, to push Dui back out into the world? Would he bother to speak encouraging words, would he just shake his head sadly, would he stand there and laugh cruelly, knowing that this was his intent all along, to truly break a man, to completely destroy him? Would he just disappear?

He closes his eyes, opens his eyes, unable to decide which vision is more disturbing, which hell he prefers. Both are of his own devising, both are his own creations, both are his own inventions. The sight of this room, this world with his books, his predilection towards organization destroyed by his inability to hold it together, his sudden need for absolute chaos, his tragic self-destructive tendencies bringing the world to pieces around him. It bleeds into his visions when he closes his eyes, a black and white world, everything destroyed, the ultimate in chaos, and the ultimate in order. Such a fine line between the two, razor thin, razor sharp, razor close. Cutting fine, cutting close, shaving thin. On either side lies the same thing, the same unwelcome sight, the same unrelenting truth, and yet truth eludes him, reality eludes him, everything eludes him. If forced to choose, which side would he take? Is he forced to choose? Is there a third choice? What could cause such destruction in a man's mind, in this man's world, in every man's world? His eyes closed, no fires burn, no bombs explode, and yet the planet has been ravaged, looking in on it as from a great height, still details reveal themselves, he can see it all, where nothing exists as it once did, everything ruined, nothing left to find, nothing left to lose.

He once thought he had nothing left to lose, that there was nothing left to find, and there is nothing left to sort, and there is nothing left to organize and there is nothing left to fall apart. And yet, there still were. Even when he thought he had hid the bottom, he managed to sink a little more, to fall a little farther. That was the most tragic part of all. To think he had seen the worse, and then he would see something more. Then he would learn another thing, forget another thing, find another thing, lose another thing. Just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. It does. It always does.

When there's nothing left to lose, there's nothing left to do, but until then, he just keeps on struggling, just keeps on trying, keeps on clawing at the floor, keeps on clawing at the earth, feeling dirt replace the splinters in his fingernails, feeling rain replace the tears on his face. Feeling the dry air of his library replaced by the damp air of a devastated field, a field that has not been tended to in years, a field that has been ravaged by wind and by time and by the travesty that is Dui's mind, by the travesty that is.

He curls up, he curls up into himself, curls up into a ball, tries to make himself as small as possible, tries to make his self as small as possible, his mind as small as possible, tries to become a single point, a single spot, tries to become a dot, becomes a Dot on the floor, no, on the ground. Dirt replaces floorboard, dirt replaces everything, dirt replaces all. He feels

it, dry, crumbling, moving with him as he moves, slowly sinking into the ground, he wonders if even the worms are gone, if they have survived, if there is anything at all left to find, and when he opens his eyes, it is all still there. Or rather, it is all still not there. His eyes open, lying on his side, he blinks at his surroundings, at his black and white world, he blinks in wonder and a wide-eyed amazement, thinking *Perhaps I have escaped* and *perhaps I have finally broken free*. He stretches out his index finger, and digs a little in the soil, finds it dry, finds it yielding, finds it barren, and finds nothing else at all.

He closes his eyes again and sees his library, sees his books, sees his world, and sees it fade, sees it slowly disappear, sees it go. And now when he closes his eyes it is just blackness, just dark, just him, lying on the ground, the very real ground, in the dirt, in a field, in a black and white world, and he fully commits to it, stretches out on his back, his arms and legs outstretched, his eyes wide open to the world, looking at the sky, the gray gray sky and blinks his eyes again, tries to get the spots in his vision to fade, tries to get the dots to stop circling overhead, but there they are, a dozen decimal points swirling, swooping, reeling and plummeting above.

The Continuing Adventures of Jonathan Decimal

He sat on the side of the road, the boots on his feet squared off in front of him, sunk in the dust, the dirt swirling about in the wind settling on the tops, a thin gray layer speaking of days spent in the same position. The breeze was hot, offering no respite from the stifling heat of late July. He appeared overdressed for the weather in boots, jeans, a long leather duster hiding whatever outfit he wore underneath, a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes. Of those who passed him on the sidewalk, few actually noticed his presence. Even fewer gave him more than a simple glance. Those who did were surprised that the man was not sweating profusely, didn't even seem the slightest bit uncomfortable. Everyone else was sweating, trying to beat the summer heat which had come into town earlier in the month and gave no indication of having any intention of leaving until fall rolled in some months down the road. The heat wave had caused tensions to rise, tempers to flare, and uncared for senior citizens to drop dead. Still, the man sat there in his too many clothes, doing too much of too little, sitting there with a satchel the strap slung over his shoulder, across his head, turned so that it rested in between his thighs and his chest, so full that its contents nearly spilled out from beneath the flap which was pulled tight over top.

The contents of the satchel had been collected over the years, from time to time, as technological advances allowed, moved from one storage container to another. The man had seen a lot of things in his time, but nothing had impressed him so much as the ability for man to refine the art of holding things. Drawstring pouches had given way to buttoned purses had given way to snaps had given way to automatic buckles. Now there were so many options for the fastening or sealing of a container, the man had lost track, had lost count, but had not lost interest. The satchel -- which had changed with the times as well, he favored a large messenger bag from Timbuk2 -- had multiple ways of closing -- carabiner's backed by plastic buckles, backed by Velcro fasteners. Though its flap bulged, threatened to explode, the man was confident that it would hold fast.

Over the years people had wondered about the contents of the satchel, which was ever-present at the man's side. At various times it was supposed that it contained the tools of his trade -- with varying suppositions as to what that was including bookmaker, bookkeeper, tool & die salesman, butcher, baker, candlestick distributor, clam digger, haberdasher, plank planer. When the man stayed in one place a little too long; when people noticed that he had lived perhaps a dozen years longer than any man had a right to expect, they began whispering that he was a witch, or a demon, or a witch possessed by a demon and they insisted that he was a witch and that the satchel contained shrunken heads, vials of cat's whiskers, or jars of star-nosed mole testicles. Children who talked about the man argued about whether it contained pixie dust or the noses of wayward kids who had been caught up in the hypnotic spell of the man's devil magic.

In reality, there was nothing so nefarious in the bag. Aside from a t-shirt, a spare pair of socks, a toothbrush and a stick of deodorant, the bag contained nothing but a dozen or so carefully sealed Zip-loc brand sandwich bags. Inside the bags were dots, and Jonathan Decimal was the only man who knew how to use them.

The people were right about one thing: Decimal had been alive for longer than a man should be. He had seen -- and he was pretty sure this was true and not just some made up memory, some dream he had had -- China in the 14th century BC; Egypt 300 years later; remembered moments in India in the 800s; had seen Babylon, Mesopotamia, the great Mayan empire, had been everywhere and everywhen. He had long ago stopped questioning his longevity having not received an answer in any quarter where he had looked. He had tried prayer, research, scientists, everything he could think of and of those who believed him, or at the very least humored him, nobody could explain it to him.

So Decimal walked the Earth, never staying in one place for very long, having learned after being chased out of several towns by angry and scared townspeople, torches and pitchforks in hand -- he had had to chuckle with recognition when Frankenstein came out in 1931, seeing Colin Clive playing the titular doctor, as he was chased from his village. "Been there, done that," he had thought.

Since those days he had been smart enough to, when not working, keep on the move. His work, such as it was, paid him no money, but did provide for his housing, food, and other needs. From time to time, had had tried to take on a job, but it had never worked, one thing or another preventing him from attending, preventing him from performing, keeping him from it. Without money, he had worried about lodgings, but it turned out that whatever force kept him from dying (and that was how he thought about it, not that it kept him alive) also kept him from being homeless. Arriving in a new city, he would inevitably find himself in an apartment, or in a house, available, unoccupied, and never a problem. Clothing, food, all just as available, just as ready whenever he needed. And aside from that, there was nothing but the notes.

The notes appeared under the door of wherever he was sleeping, while he was sleeping. He would wake from dreamless slumber, knowing somehow that there would be a slip of paper lying innocently, unassumingly on the floor, waiting for him, waiting to direct him to his next task, his next assignment. Sometimes there would be a lengthy period of time between assignments, Decimal left to his own devices for years, centuries at a time. Then it would seem that they would rain down upon him, forcing him to be in several places at one time, another of his talents that was inexplicable by anyone he asked.

Decimal had never taken a wife, never had children, had no legacy, practically had no identity other than the name -- which had always been Decimal, but wasn't always necessarily Jonathan -- but the name didn't mean anything, had no connection to the man, but only to the contents of those bags, those dots, those incredibly powerful points of dark which he scattered like seeds across the minds of those chosen by the notes, those indicated in the notes. Though he spent most of his time alone, he had never spent any of his time feeling lonely, or at least not that he could remember. He didn't know if he would know if he was feeling lonely, or what loneliness was. Time passed for him at the same speed as it did for anyone else, or so he assumed. He had no reason to believe otherwise, didn't feel like his experience was different from anyone else's except in that it had been incredibly longer than everyone else's. Since he didn't stay in one place for very long, he didn't make many connections other than those to his assignments, and that was for the better. Having seen innumerable people grow old and die, or stay young and die, Decimal knew better than to get too close to any one person. He hadn't hardened his heart, or closed off his affections; he simply didn't have those things, and what's more, it had never come up. Never had he had to explain to a woman that he just wasn't able to love her properly or anything like that -- Decimal had seen *Highlander* when it came out, sympathized with Connor McLeod, but other than the everlasting life, had no real connection to the man. Decimal wasn't capable of love, also wasn't curious about love, didn't wonder how the other half lived. Another talent of his, perhaps, another blessing from his

benefactor, or his employer, or his maker. Whoever it was pulling his strings, stringing him along, leaving him notes, giving him the ability to stay where he needed to stay and go where he needed to go.

His travel arrangements too were taken care of in that he simply traveled. When he needed to travel he just did. Time just passed, he just went, and he was there. And that was how he had gotten here, to Chicago. The note, scrawled in a hasty but neat and legible hand on a scrap of paper torn from a memo pad, had listed a location (220 West Huron, Chicago, IL); a date (July 28th, 2012); and a name (Mr. Grady Louis) and that was it. Decimal had shoved the note in his pants pocket, taken his bag from its hook by the door, cast a glance around the apartment which was empty of any personal belongings -- he had few -- and left, never, most likely, to return.

On his way out he passed the building manager, Paul Donnelly, with whom he had never had a conversation longer than a couple words of greeting. Donnelly nodded to Decimal, and Jonathan wondered whether he should tell the man that he was vacating the apartment, whether Donnelly had even known that the apartment had been occupied. Decimal had been there -- a small studio apartment in a quiet neighborhood in outlying Seattle -- for six years, never paying rent, never meeting his neighbors, and never having a problem. Decimal had no roots, no roots to lay down, no desire to root either.

And then, two days later, on the appointed date, Decimal was there, at the appointed address. Usually upon his arrival, he'd know exactly where to go, if not exactly what to do. This time, however, he had felt none of the usual impulses or urges that gave him direction. Compounding this problem was the fact that there was nothing at the address he had been given. The empty lot which provided the dust which swirled about Decimal's feet and head looked as if it had been vacant for quite some time. It seemed that there had once been some plan to build a high rise building there but construction had been canceled, there were no workers, no signs of any activity, no signs of life. Decimal had made a cursory inspection of the site, finding nothing that gave any indication that this was the place where he was supposed to be. He checked and rechecked the slip of paper in his pocket, making sure that he had the right address.

So he sat, took up residence on the side of the street, and started gathering dust, attained the look of a man who was lost, who had been there for days, for weeks, in the minds of passers-by blending into the scenery, part of the backdrop of city life, not even there. And he waited.

And time passed, as it always did, at the speed that it always did, the time went by at the same slow speed even as he watched the back and forth, the people doing this and that, the day slipping away, slow, fast, at whatever speed it went.

It was the last minute, the last minute possible, when the man -- tall, pale-skinned, well-dressed, clean-shaven approached Decimal directly, walked up to him with purpose and direction and intent, walked right up to him, stood there and said, "I wasn't sure you'd come."

Decimal looked up expectantly, confused.

"You are Jonathan Decimal, right?"