

Interregnum: Nineteenth Week's Summary

The trance of political ideology is so deep, that it will remain impervious to even the most blatantly obvious facts. The true believer is able to reframe, or in current media parlance, to “spin”, any event, no matter how egregiously self-contradictory, into another reinforcing element of his stupor. Indeed, his trance is more important to him than his life, and in order to maintain it, he will march into hell itself, happily singing hymns to heaven. Of all the miracles of the commonplace, this miracle is perhaps the most astounding and tragic of them all: that a piece of cloth on a stick, if it is the icon of a flag, is sustenance enough to sustain his illusion of paradise, though he sit among corpses in a smoking ruin.

Dr. Calvin Penrose
*Catalepsy and the Failure of Social
Change*

The days following my submission to “The Ritual” were emptier than any I had hitherto experienced. In the evenings, I occupied myself gazing at the rocks, which had become my companions. They rested, sometimes in my hands, sometimes on my desk, like birds which had arrived from a long journey, quiet now, but with their once gray plumage alive with the colors of their ethereal voyages, their voices partaking of the character of both music and words. Their speech-like warblings were lavishly beautiful, eloquent, purposeless, melodious, fantastic — and sometimes — brutally obscene. As I sat with them, I would find myself utterly void of thought, yet still capable of arranging their living forms into The Rock Gazing Texts, training them to fly or strut across paper or through the lit skies of the computer screen. I was careful with them, handling them with all the respect that a jeweler might have for the precious gems, which he sets in an elaborate carcanet. The sounds that they made rendered time translucent, and they opened the bright facets of their doors into passageways starred with mystery and revelation. I never knew what I would discover next about the characters and places which haunted their labyrinthine depths — or what wonders of triumph or tragedy awaited me as I traversed their landscapes and cities of glass, blood and light. And yet, I found each of these nightly traversals wondrous. I serenely reveled in the strange sensation of reading a contrapunctus of many interweaving narratives, whose oddities amassed their splendors in the most jarring cacophonies or delicate harmonies, their music simultaneously embodying both the barbarous clangor of percussion and the delicate humming of scarcely visible filaments of silk. During these symphonies, the Zen-like sparsity of my rooms began to breathe with the soft “Hong Sau” of a nightly meditation, while Diva and John Wayne, calmed, as only animals can be, added to the peaceful enigmas of my endeavors with their own radiant repose. Sometimes, as I wrote, I would suddenly awaken to what I was doing, and in these spaces of temporary lucidity, I would reach out and stroke the words on the paper or on the screen, exactly as if I were stroking my cat's or dog's fur. Then the animals, somehow attached to these sensuous vocabularies, would stir contentedly in their sleep, as if my fingers were caressing their physical bodies and not the mere shells of words. These instances afforded me a deep, yet featureless pleasure. They were beds without sleepers, love without love's warm

flesh. I do not recall a single detail about them, save the bare fact of their existence, which floated like a bodiless gown through the slightly rustling breathing of the house. My mind, void of everything, but this soft and seemingly infinite sheen, was like a clear supple membrane, whose shape quietly altered itself to the currents of the sweet fluid it contained. To say that I was happy would be to brand a finite affect upon a state marvelously characterized by its infinitude. But in these placid hours, as the neighborhood's lights slowly streaked the shining dark of my curtainless windowpanes, I would not have traded my life for anyone's. The I whom I had been had disappeared into the words and walls and no one and nothing had come to take his place. It seemed to me that I had come to an ending, a period that could admit to no further development. But, just at this time, Time opened, and I was granted the dispensation of a discovery. It happened one morning, after one of those nights of blissful annihilation, and though it might seem odd, even impossible, to those readers still trapped in the baffling prison of the body and its sensations, to me, these new apparitions arose quite naturally, morphing from certain glimmers of light on the spheres of doorknobs or gestating spontaneously from the grain of the wood floors or the patterns in the texture of the walls. True, at first, the utterances of these intruders — that was how I originally conceived of them — seemed utterly nonsensical. However, I would shortly discover that the passage of time would flesh out their austere inanities and prove the validity of their horrifying incriminations. I was being given information that would arch its long spider-like legs across the prostrate body of the nation and scurry into the future with a truth, which remained obscure in the present. I suppose that given an ocean so luminous, by its very depths, it was bound at some point to spawn monsters. And when these monsters appeared, I suppose that it was inevitable that they would be obsessed with politics — politics and violence. As long as I inhabited the metaphysical splendors of night and words, I was free. But when morning returned, I was confronted once again by the oppressive weight of things: the curious object-like nature of my own body, my simple surviving furnishings, the broken mirrors, the walls of the house, the walkway that marched straight across the mat of the lawn and into the street, which then raced off to connect itself to the grid of the city's markets. All of these things — infected as they were with the conjoint diseases of physicality and mortality — began to conspire against the paradise of night and language, and to bring me into that chaotic sphere where ideologies destroy ideals, and where human beings, inflated with arrogance and death, fiddled with dangerous weapons and goaded themselves with insatiable appetites. I began to fret once more about money, or rather, my lack thereof, the frenzy of its abstraction despoiling everything that had come about through civilization's manufacture. And once again, those depredations, which humans justify with the rational maledicta of their large, gelatinous brains, began to infiltrate my empty head with fear. My amygdala opened its hormonal valves to a deep uprushing of foreboding. In short, I worried and read the newspaper. Yes, the Chronicle still arrived in the predawn hours, freighted with lies and rationales, lies that would have choked the airy spaces of my nocturnal temple into nightmare had not the intruders arrived to organize them into revelation. I was maimed by what I saw and heard. But my new crippled gait allowed me to walk among men again, just as if I were one of them. The intruders had come, I realized, not only to bring me news, but also to perfect my disguise and prepare me for re-entry.

Anyone who has had the audacity and patience to question mundane objects will affirm at once the veracity of my experience. Look at the way a blob of sunlight detaches itself from the morning and rolls its globule along the oak floor, its wheaten gold making permeable what dull human misperceptions had fixed and petrified. In these cases, the eye of the aspirant releases the atoms and molecules from their enchantment and allows them to regain their freedom and create at will. This primordial fecundity of matter was what my days of emptiness and quietude, my ever more intimate association with the animals and my daily gazing at the rising sun, were beginning to teach me. I reverted to the gaudy castles of childhood, wallowing in imagination's jewels, and because of my new sensory acuity to matter's pliability, the heaviest and most rigid objects opened themselves to my perception. They sported before me with devious playfulness, dissolving their habitual forms and resurrecting themselves in fantastic shapes. Assuming the solidity of incarnate entities, their resemblance to people, and the artifacts of people were indistinguishable from the automations, which the news media convince us are real. I was not surprised. If sunlight on the floor of my living room began to construct a utilitarian oak desk, a squat, ebony old-fashioned dial phone, and a swivel oak captain's chair, why should this shock me any more than microbes swimming in a slide of swamp water would surprise a scientist peering through a microscope? The strange man at the desk was punishing the remains of his black and gray hair, while with mechanical pencil and slide rule he scratched out complex calculations on graphed paper, whose discarded sheets afterwards were wadded into multi-planed spheroids as irregular as those of certain plant pollens. I could hear the small complaints of the paper fibers as they were crushed into these chaotic origamis and I sensed their discomfort as the pencil clawed into their woven lignin. Like strange beasts descended from a planet of formulas, populated only by mathematical life forms, many had already tried to escape, inching across the desktop, crouching behind the phone and leaping into the black orifice of a wastebasket. A few had even managed to reach the floor and were imperceptibly moving away from the ground zero of their torment, some caught in shafts of sunlight, some cowering in shadow. Diva was fascinated by them, and bapped their bodies with her paws, then pounced on them when they endeavored to flee. John Wayne, wanting to join the fun, wagged his large tailless rearend and sniffed at the paperballs, playful, but still puzzled. I was amused. If there happened also to be snub-nose 38 on the desk, which the man snatched from time to time and pointed to the further corners of the room, as if he expected at any moment that lurking G-men might spring from the shadows to arrest him, why should these gestures particularly alarm me? Far be it from me, Self-Decapitating-Dead-Creating-Thing, to account his behaviors strange or assign them to the pejorative prison of personal paranoia. How could I? This man and the paraphernalia of his existence, here, in my living room, were as real as my own body. His black polyester dress shirt worrying itself into temporary folds under the harness of his black suspenders, the loosened noose of his matching black tie, his shirt front with its pocket protector and plethora of writing utensils — were not these beings also worthy of material existence? And weren't the eyebrow-thin mustaches shaved down to a single pencil line along the verge of a thin upper lip, the shining strands of slicked-back hair Dagwooding out from either side of the high forehead, the delicate hands, white from having lived indoors and grappled with nothing more abrasive than the mutable laws of physics — weren't all of these things — these living beings — as verifiable to perception as my own skin and

bones? If I looked at my hands, or watched as Diva and John Wayne examined this sunborn intruder and his scattered formulae with senses far more acute than mine, how could I doubt the validity of the old Aristotelian doctrine, which assigned to matter the power to spontaneously generate new life? From a puddle of sunlight this investigator had arisen, and suddenly, as if he had just become aware of my presence, he smoothed out one of the crumpled paperbeings (I could hear its crackling protest as he did so, and it made me cringe.) — and then he pointed to a calculation. “It,” he said, “just doesn’t add up.” The nervous blue mosaics of his glance compelled me to listen — that, and the presence of the 38 — although his reference to “it” and the complicated nature of his proofs eluded me. Not that I felt the least bit threatened — rather, protected — but the intruder’s sense of urgency softened my skepticism and prompted me to take both him and his words seriously. I could tell that he intuited this, for as I returned his evasive gaze, he seemed to relax a bit, although not so much that he ever made full eye contact. Nevertheless, he began to smooth out one paper wad after another, and to nervously explain his deductions.

“Look, let’s take the North Tower’s dust cloud as a starting point for the analysis. Why? Because we have good photographs of that structure taken at about 30 seconds after the commencement of the collapse.” He opened a Manila file folder on the desk to expose an aerial photograph showing several high-rises penetrating the billows of huge dust clouds. Numbered red dots marked the tops of these buildings, and he pointed at them in turn as he ticked off the locations. “The west corner of 45 Park Place, the top corner of this structure with the stepped-down roof, the east corner of Building 7 — 30 stories from the crown, the top of the west corner of the Cortland Street Tower, these two points of the upwell, one at 8 stories below the top face of WTC 3 and the other 3 stories below the crown of WTC 2. With these markers we can calculate the volume of the dust cloud.” He grabbed, then discarded, a couple of wads of graph paper, until he found the one he wanted. “Ah, yes. Here it is. $\text{Pi} \times (800 \text{ feet})^2 \times 200 \text{ feet} = 402,000,000 \text{ feet}^3$. Of course, you have to subtract about a quarter of that to account for the volume of the buildings, but that still leaves us with a dust cloud volume — which has, I might add, well defined boundaries — of $300,000,000 \text{ feet}^3$, plus or minus a bit.”

Diva had cornered one of the graphwadcreatures and the rustling commotion caused the intruder to snatch the 38 and point it in the direction of the disturbance. “Hold on there, partner,” I said, carefully lowering the snub nose with an extended index finger. “I believe we are in a secure area here.”

He arched his eyebrows, shrugged, and put down the weapon. “Here’s the first thing you’ve gotta learn.” He looked at me with the compassion that one might show for a nitwit who is about to grab at a pretty blue stoveflame. “*There are no secure areas.*” Then he rummaged through some more paper wads and mumbled. “ ‘Well, you might ask, ‘what about factoring out mixing and diffusion?’”

“I was just about to mention that,” I said, clueless.

“Of course, to answer that question we would need to have detailed data on the fluid dynamics involved.”

“That goes without saying.” I replied, shrugging my shoulders at John Wayne, who was standing behind the intruder, tongue lolling out gleefully.

“Yes, yes, but we have to deviate a bit from absolutes. Manhattan is hardly a controlled laboratory environment.”

“Hardly.”

“We can, however, make some educated guesses. And, I believe, come up with a conservative enough number to satisfy the most virulent critics.” His hand came down on the 38 again, but I shook my head, and this dissuaded him, so he continued, unarmed. “Look, we know that for at least a minute after the event, the dust cloud behaved as a separate fluid from the ambient air. You can see that a distinct boundary is maintained.”

“Certainly, I can see that.” I said, not having the slightest inkling of the meaning of what this phenomenon might be.

He looked suspiciously at me, and, sneering as if I were a skeptic, said: “We have at least 5, count them, 5, pieces of evidence that support this.

“Oh, yes, 5. A very pertinent number.’

“Yes, yes, very pertinent.” Then he held up his left hand and began to tick off the count on his right, starting with his pinky and working his way towards his thumb. One. The WTC dust clouds advanced down the streets at about 25 miles per hour. Far faster than can be explained by mixing and diffusion.

“Yes,” I said, “far faster.”

He pursed his lips and scrunched his fine, aquiline nose, as if I had just emitted a foul odor. But he continued. “Two. As the dust clouds billowed outward, their frontiers evolved rather slowly relative to the speed of the advance.”

“Well, that is certainly a significant finding.”

The intruder was not sure if I were being supportive, stupid or sarcastic, but he continued his exposition in a manner that left the question open. “The clouds were definitely expanding from within, and even if the surface turbulence was incorporating ambient air, its contribution to the expansion would have obviously been quite minor.”

“Obviously.”

“Three. The top surfaces of the clouds appear as the surface of a boiling, viscous liquid — churning, but not mixing with the air above it. You can easily see that the sinking portions of the cloud are replaced by clear air, not a mixture of cloud and air.”

“Yes, that’s clearly visible.”

He seemed to be getting a little irritated with me, but I was anxious not to rile him. Nevertheless, he fairly shouted the number “FOUR!” then pointed vigorously at the face of his black large wristwatch. “You can’t deny that the dust cloud maintained distinct, I repeat, DISTINCT surfaces for well over a minute into the event.”

“I would never dare deny it.”

“Mixing and diffusion would have produced diffuse interfaces.”

“How could I argue otherwise.”

“FIVE!” He shouted, still unconvinced of my agreement. “There are reports of people being picked up. Do you hear, me. PICKED UP! And carried as much as a city block by the advancing dust cloud. Do you understand how that might have happened?”

“No.”

He looked away for an instant, I think, to bite his lip. Then he turned back and said, his face struggling to contain his outrage. “The cloud had to have been heavier than air. Transporting masses of pulverized concrete, and transporting it, along with people, great distances.”

“Oh, yes. Now that you point it out . . .”

“We can assume, AND in fact, it is most REASONABLE to assume, that extensive mixing with ambient air could not, DID NOT, in fact, account for a significant fraction of the volume of the dust cloud’s initial expansion.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “That is a quite reasonable assumption.”

“NEVERTHELESS,” he bellowed, “I have reduced my estimate of the volume of the expansion — to allow for any objections” — he reached for the gun again and swept its barrel around the room — “by a full third. To a mere a 200,000,000 feet³. Does that satisfy you?”

I had to admit that I was quite satisfied with that estimate, and fortunately this confession on my part sufficiently calmed him, so that he retired the 38 once more to its perch on the desk. Naturally, I was anxious to see that its fubsy steel body did not attempt to fly away again. I kept trying to remember what playwright had said that if you introduce a gun in the first act, it had better go off by the last one. Chekhov? The phone’s metal

mechanical bells suddenly clanged loudly, and we all stared at it as it continued to rattle away for what seemed to be an interminable number of spasms. John Wayne started to squirm nervously, pressing against my legs and whining. Finally, I could stand it no longer, and reached for its heavy receiver. Yet the intruder lay his white hand on the 38 and shook his head “no.” At last the thing exhausted itself and fell into an exasperated silence. But the tension in the room remained, and we knew that our whereabouts had been discovered.

Finally satisfied that the telephone had temporarily broken off its besiegement, he concluded: “Now, we can easily compute the expansion ratio. A tower with a 207 foot width, 1368 feet high would have a volume of 58,617,432 feet³ thus the expansion ratio would be 3.41.”

I tried to calm John Wayne, patting the Rottweiler affectionately on his large, round head, then smiled sheepishly at the intruder, as if I had understood. Diva sneered peevishly at one of the worried paper wads. As soon as she swatted it, I recommenced breathing.

As if awaiting this cue, the intruder picked up the gun again, then plopped down in the swivel chair. Seeming to have released himself of some great anxiety by deriving the expansion ratio, he spun round in the chair, playfully bringing the 38 to eye level, drawing it close to his face, and sighting down its business-like black barrel as he and it turned. Sometimes he held his legs out straight, sometimes he folded them under the chair, respectively slowing or speeding his revolutions. He seemed to be thinking. Diva, John Wayne, me— we all stopped our motions and watched — out of veneration, I suppose, for his calculated, weapon-pointing pirouetting musing. The room became very calm. Perhaps all of us had synchronized our breathing and eye-blinks. Outside, the budding branches of the hackberries adjusted their candelabras so that the sunflickerings on the floor, walls, desk and phone began to gather their randomness into a pulsation, which seemed to harmonize the beatings of our hearts. Like the perpetual motion machine whose invention had eluded so many alchemical mechanics, the oak chair seemed to be achieving an order of movement that appeared to be self-generating. Certainly it was hypnotic, turning as it did, in that pulsing light, the glint of gunmetal throwing its beacon around the room and into the backs of our retinas. These soft flashes strobed our quiet green underworld, and seemed perfectly capable of sustaining the chair’s wavering lambent energies — in defiance of the laws of entropy — forever. Finally, the intruder stopped spinning, stood up, pointed the gun barrel up, and flicked it with a couple of hard, audible ticks of his well-manicured indexfingernail. “Steel,” he said. We all, involuntarily, nodded our agreement. He unpocketed a surprisingly beautiful (and black) 40’s vintage Zippo, and held its blue flame to the gun barrel, cocking his head slowly sideways in fascination as he studied his own demonstration. “Hydrocarbon fire from the lighter fluid, not all that different from jet fuel.” The animals’ eyes and mine all bobbed in ascent to the floating blue flame. “Still,” he said, snapping the Zippo closed, “it will never melt this baby.” We all shook our heads “no”, John Wayne’s loose jowls softly snapping in the green light. “Why?” We all shrugged our shoulders. “Because hydrocarbon fires top out at 16/1700° F. Fuel-rich smokers like ours in Manhattan, probably much cooler. On the order, say, of 12/1300°.” He wrapped

his hand around the gun barrel, which had now cooled sufficiently to be touched. “Plus, heat siphons off fast. Nope. There were 47 massive steel columns in the center of those buildings, 240 round the perimeters, and none of ‘em would’a popped so much as a rivet or buckled a joist until they got their molecules jacked up to 2,770°F. Which is why,” he said, abruptly snapping round to stare at us, so that our heads all recoiled as suddenly as if we had heard a gunshot, our eyes opening wider in astonishment, “no steel building has ever, I repeat, EVER, collapsed from causes solely attributed to fire.”

He let the silence fill the room again as if to give us time to absorb that crucial piece of information. Meanwhile, he took a mechanical pencil from his pocket protector and slipped it through the trigger guard of the revolver, as you see detectives on crime shows do when they’re tagging a piece for evidence. We watched, mesmerized, awaiting with baited breath his next utterance. But the intruder seemed mesmerized too. Remaining silent, he started wandering, eyelessly, his attention apparently fixated on the dangling gun, towards the back of the house. As he moved, he tipped his head first to one side and then to the other, as if he were trying to find the balance point between certain arguments he was weighing. We followed. I noticed that he was wearing very fine, classically designed Italian shoes. They were black, of course, with long smoothly rounded toes, which were tastefully crossed with a single handstitched toebraid. Discreet in their whispering movements, they seemed to be his guides. I was concerned that they might inadvertently step on the column of ants, which traversed the threshold that stepped down into the rumpus room. But they negotiated this passage with Old World courtesy.

The ants: Scusi, Signore, our pheromone trail runs right across here.

Le Scarpe: Ah, mi dispiace. Non l’ho visto. Grazie per l’informazione. Ma non preoccuparvi, miei amici. (They stepped over deftly.)

The ants: Grazie mille. È stato molto gentile.

Le Scarpe: Non c’è di che. ArrivederLa.

The ants: Ciao.

Once in the rumpus room, he took his eyes off the gun, which he still held dangling before him, and stared into the extensive filigree of tree branches that twitched and undulated in the breeze across the whole screen of glass that enclosed the back of the house. A squirrel was shelling an acorn and the tiny fragments fluttered through the moist green air to the ground. Their two gazes touched, and the intruder started talking again. “We’ve got 90,000 tons of re-enforced concrete, virtually all of it instantaneously pulverized.” He reached my writing desk and slipped the gun off its pencil and let it come to rest between my lacquerware piece and the little clay pot that held Esclarmonde’s gift of the rose quartz shard. I seemed to detect a slight glow pulse in the weapon as it settled between these two venerated objects. Did an energy flow arc between them? Suddenly, the intruder’s face darkened, and he bent down to scrutinize the gun, pulling one of Diva’s fine black sheddings — carefully, very carefully, as if

defusing a bomb — from the nervous black curve of the trigger. Brushing his two fingers together briskly to slough off the wayward lint of fur, he said: “Dust that was in the 10-60 micron range. No large chunks. Stuff finer than fine hair.” He smelled his fingers as he continued. “It takes a lot of energy to make a dust that fine. The official story just doesn’t pass the smell test.” Although we didn’t know why yet, we could not have agreed more. We were watching his every move as if his words, mysterious as they were, would become lucid to us if we understood the matrix of gestures from which they arose. When he picked up the lacquerware and gazed into its nacreous depths, we marveled at the changes that we saw come over his face, the white surfaces stretching into the heights of a space whose profundity suggested something completely beyond the human. We had the impression that we had sailed to the verge of a vast and lonely continent, and that these high, white cliffs now confronting us, honeycombed with the burrows and nests of exotic, previously undiscovered birds, were about to sing to us in harmonies whose intricate interweavings would reveal a story about the unknown landscapes which lay behind them. We craned our heads up and up to see where their dizzy altitudes might finally be subsumed in sky and wisps of cloud. We knew some magic was about to ensue, and the intruder did not disappoint us, for he lifted the lacquerware over his head with his left hand, and he held it aloft. In that moment, which seemed to dangle at the edge of revelation, we knew that we were about to be vouchsafed a sacred trust, if we could but understand its intimations, and that if we could just remain open in our own naiveté, he would shortly clarify for us the mysteries of his mathematical discourses. Our hearts throbbed in our throats, but we would not have to wait long, because in the next instant, he let the piece fall, catching it with his right hand before it could shatter into fragments on the floor.

“There is of course, the energy potential in gravity itself, the buildings being in a virtual free fall, raining to the streets in 8 to 12 seconds per building, not the 45 seconds or more we might expect if the building were ‘pancaking’ down, each floor falling on and crushing the one below it, as the official explanation would have us believe.”

We shook our heads in alarm. The official explanation having become anathema to us.

“Plus, debris from the top of the buildings was ejected out forcibly for more than a 150 feet at the initiation of the collapse. No. Gravity could not have provided the energy potential required for this type of destruction. We must look elsewhere.”

We looked. But we were helpless to find what we were seeking. And we knew it. Diva paced. John Wayne whimpered nervously. I began to pull at the ends of my fingers with alarm.

“Of course, official apologists don’t go anywhere near these questions.”

We had been concerned about that, and now that our concerns were made manifest, our anxiety deepened.

“Unofficially, certain observers — who shall be nameless — have tried to account for this expansion ratio through calculating the thermodynamic energy sink and the water vaporization energy sink.”

Our hopes rose.

“Any physics graduate student can do these calculations. I’ve read the papers, done the calculations myself. Nothing more than the application of the ideal gas law to account for the expansion.” He began reciting in a mocking singsong voice: “the product of the volume and pressure of a parcel of gas is proportional to absolute temperature, blah, blah, blah. $PV = nRT$. There are complications, naturally, but nothing that can’t be solved with some good deductive reasoning about the conditions inside the cloud.” Now we were getting somewhere. We began to feel a bit more secure. But immediately our hopes were dashed. He took out his Zippo again and lit it. “Where’s the heat?”

‘In the flame, in the jet fuel,’ we thought, ‘in the burning desks, paper, furniture. In the clothes, oh my God, and in the flesh of the people inside the building.’ But we knew our explanations were inadequate. The magnitude of the tragedy was beginning to sink in. We were close to despair.

“Oh, yes, you can run numbers all day long. How much heat would be required to vaporize the 900,000 liters of water still present in the cured concrete? How many thousands of liters were stored in the plumbing system? And yes, people are mostly water, too. Are we going to say that the thousand victims never identified helped blow up the building with their 30,000 liters of body moisture? It’s too gruesome. It’s too absurd.”

Now we could see what a horrible position we were in. The dangers of people and jet fuel combining to blow huge skyscrapers to powder were too awesome and fearful to contemplate.

“But all of these calculations, as interesting as they are from a mathematical standpoint, still beg the main question.”

“Which is?” we asked.

The intruder looked at us and made full eye contact for the first time. “You don’t know anything about physics, do you?”

We shook our heads ‘no,’ but still looked at our guest, hoping that his answer would appease our anxiety.

Suddenly, his face softened. “You don’t know anything about anything?”

I ventured to speak for all of us. “We don’t know anything. We don’t even suspect anything.”

He shook his head in exasperation, and looked for a long time at the toes of his wonderful Italian shoes. “Quale la data?” they said. And then he looked at us and asked: “What is the date?”

“It’s March,” I said.

“March of what year?”

I thought that a strange question, but before I could answer, there came a loud ringing from the other room. The intruder grabbed for the 38, but I got there first. The ringing kept going, its clamor highlighting the drama of our struggle over the gun. Finally, just as he was about to wrest the weapon from my hand, I managed to blurt out: “It 2001! March, 2001!” Suddenly he stopped, looked confused. Then said, as the ringing from the other room continued to mount towards crescendo. “March? Well it’s still six months awaaaa . . .” but his voice faded, and so did he, before he could finish — leaving nothing behind of himself but a vapor cloud and his beautiful Italian shoes. Finally, le scarpe dicono: “La porta.” I ran to the front door, dashing through the sunspot on the door where the desk once stood and where now only the antique phone and a few graphpaperwads rested. I opened the door, still armed, as I suddenly realized, with the 38. A man in a brown uniform lay a package carefully at my feet and backed away slowly, never taking his eyes off the barrel of my weapon, while, I, smiling weakly, with the gun, Vanna White-like, waved.

It had been an odd morning. Now I had some mathematical calculations, a phone connected to what or to whom I could not imagine, and a pair of very nice dress shoes. What was I to make of all this? I sat on the floor with the package, while Diva and John Wayne gathered round to investigate. The package contained a very elegant blue, single breasted, Italian suit, a crisp white shirt, a gorgeous silk tie, an elegant black belt and a pair of finely woven socks. The note with these items was from Mary Ann.

I bought this thinking I would need to have something decent to bury you in. I calculated the size based upon the wasting that the tailor said would undoubtedly accompany your last days. (‘How thoughtful,’ I thought, ‘and how very much like her.’) I hope it is not too small.”

Maya,

If handwriting could express something so subtle as ‘disguised regret,’ then this handwriting did so. I was not dead. And that surely was a disappointment to my soon to be ex-wife, and also, I had to admit, somewhat to me. Diva and John Wayne, however, as they looked at me and eagerly sniffed at the package, seemed to feel otherwise. The suit fit to a T, as did the wondrous shoes, and as I looked at myself in the much- healed armoire mirror, I thought, with a shave and a haircut, you look like you could be going somewhere important. I did not know where the expansion cloud of time was going to carry me, but I did know that when I arrived there, I would be dressed fit to kill.

