

The Wastes



Volume 2 of the KillWare Chronicles

K.D. KRAGEN



THE WASTES

By
K. D. Kragen

Copyright © 2004 by K. D. Kragen
ISBN 1-59507-021-4

Published by ArcheBooks Publishing, a wholly owned subsidiary of
Gelinias & Wolf, Inc. www.archebooks.com

ArcheBooks Publishing
4305 State Bridge Road
Suite 103-121
Alpharetta, GA 30022

Gelinias & Wolf, Inc.
9101 W. Sahara Ave.
Suite 105-112
Las Vegas, NV 89117

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information about this book, please contact ArcheBooks at publisher@ArcheBooks.com.

This book is entirely a work of fiction, although many scenes are based upon historical events. The names, characters, places, and incidents depicted herein are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Important Publisher's Notices to Purchaser

This book, in any form, is fully protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States of America. It is the intellectual property of the author and licensed for publication in this form by ArcheBooks Publishing, the publisher.

This edition of this book, in electronic data-file form, is licensed to the purchaser as a Single-User software license, purely for entertainment, informational, and/or educational purposes only. This file may not be copied and redistributed or sold to any other individual, organization, or party in any form, medium, or manner for any reason. However, the purchaser of this book may place a copy of this book on any computer or display device owned or used by the purchaser, but only for the purchaser's sole convenience and use, provided that this work is not to be made available to other individuals.

Violations of this license agreement may subject the purchaser to prosecution. Please enjoy this book, and if you do, please recommend it to family, friends, and colleagues for their own purchases and enjoyment.

THE WASTES

By

K. D. Kragen



DEDICATION

For their inspiration and encouragement, to all the dogs at the vampnet-xnet-virtualphilosophy eboard community *TheChateau*—Synful (aka synthia42, aka little sister syn and eboard mistress), darksoul_7, Gregoriah, BlackjackII, Tashbaan, Phantom Harlock, Remnant of Israel, xXCloakedMysteryXx, Sweetest Insanity, DarkChristian, Apis4, TiffanyRose, TheWingLessAngel, jellybeen, MorbidAngel81, *et al...* Especially to the memory of *mysticnight*, who passed away from cancer on September 30, 2002. May she RIP.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

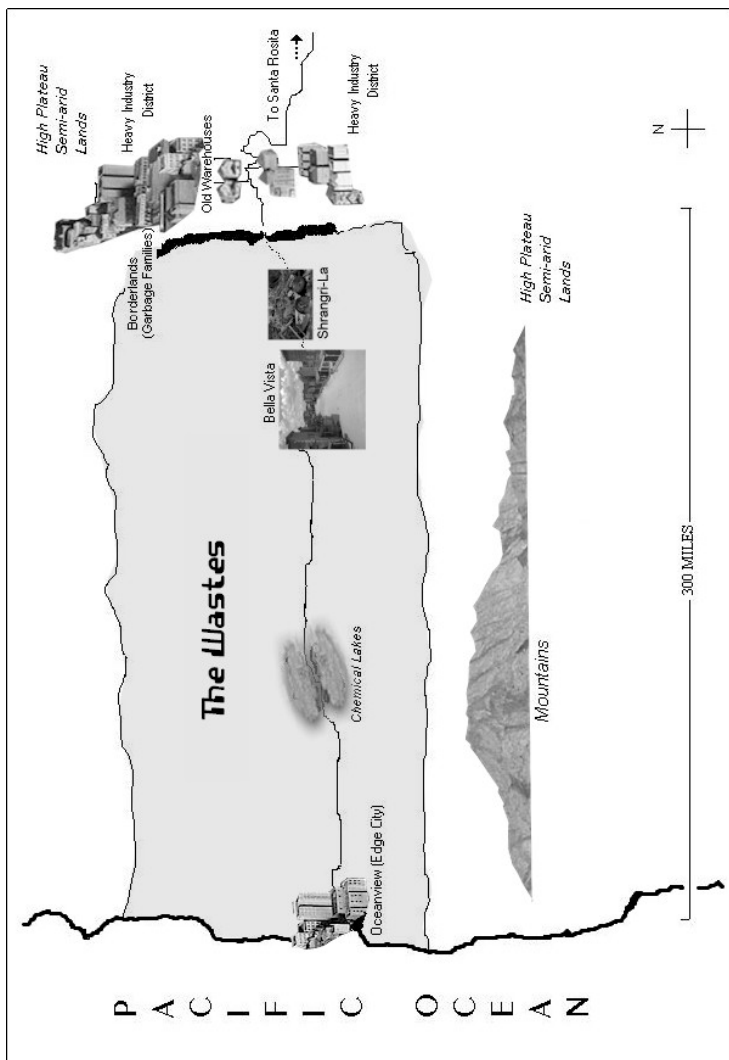
Special thanks to Burt Perkins, owner and master mechanic of *Burton Motorsports*, Suquamish, Washington, for his invaluable critique of an early draft of the manuscript relating to motorcycle racing and technology. Thanks to the *Vmax Owners Association* (v-max.com) for their solid community of Yamaha Vmax support and information; special thanks to editor Steve Jasse, VMOA#708, for kindly featuring Veronica and *The Wastes* in the official VMOA mag, *V-Boost*, Fall 2003, pp. 21-22.

Thanks to the real Officer Charles Avery, a great cop, a good friend, and the inspiration and model for only the best in my character Aristotle Avis. Thanks to *il mio amico*, Daniel Rice, for his ever-constant philosophical and artistic encouragement. Thanks as always to my faithful readers, Mark and Peggy Schultz, Colleen and Christian von Foerster, and, most importantly, my lovely wife Jannie. Special thanks also to the marvelous and supportive folks in my writers group.

Appreciation goes to the life and work of Jean Vanier (1928-), who in 1964 started a community of healing to persons with developmental disabilities by inviting two men, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to come live with him; thus was the founding of *L'Arche*, now with 120 communities serving mentally disabled persons in countries throughout the world (larcheusa.org). Information on RAD is drawn primarily from *Healing Trust: Rebuilding the Broken Bond for the Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder*, Nancy Thomas (The Love and Logic Press, Inc., 1998, loveandlogic.com). The dynamic and cohesiveness of street gangs described in this story are

drawn from the work of Malcolm W. Klein, Director of Social Science Research Institute, University of Southern California, and author of *The American Street Gang, Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control* (Oxford University Press, 1995). The case of street kids purposefully infecting themselves with HIV-tainted blood was first reported by international news services at the end of the 1990s.

Editorial Note: Excerpt from the poem *The Sun Rising* by John Donne (1572-1631) in Chapter 32 is public domain.



When something has happened, not even God can make it not to have happened.

The Red Horse. Eugenio Corti,
San Francisco, 2000, p. 66.

The hope is that, in not too many years, human brains and computing machines will be coupled together very tightly, and that the resulting partnership will think as no human brain has ever thought and process data in a way not approached by the information-handling machines we know today.

J. C. R. Licklider, "Man-Computer Symbiosis,"
IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics,
HFE-1, March 1960, MIT Archives, Cambridge, MA, 2.
Quoted in *Technomanifestos*,
Adam Brate, New York, 2002.

History's benchmarks are her wars.

—Seneca

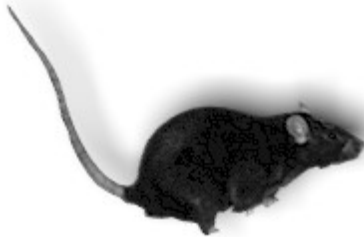
Poisonous dusk settles over the city dump,
slavering dog packs take up the hunt,
and the children of the Wastes
still fear the most
those things that go bump
i'the night.

—*plagueman*

Prologue

Tomorrow. Or maybe the day after.

Some of the events in this story have yet to happen.
The worst ones have already begun.



1 **Children Of The Wastes**

Boys called themselves the wastes, *los desechos*. The girls, the toxics. Dredged up old disks of *Metallica*, *MachineDeath*, *La Familia Necrophilia*, *1910 Fruitgum Company*, obscure Heavy Metal, Industrial Matrixpunk and Bubblegum Rock & Roll. Lived in holes tunneled into landfills, abandoned dumps, low-level toxyards. They skillfully rigged scavenged electrical cable to nearby transformers. Hotwired their dens with rip-off city power so they could run their precious CD's. Gang colors were black and yellow, the color of police tape used to cordon off a crime scene, the color of radwaste warning signs; tag was a circle with three upside-down triangles in it, sign of the devil, radiation danger. They were outcasts. Cave dwellers. Abortions that wouldn't die. The next generation.



Somewhere south of the border.

It was hot. *Muy caliente.*

Ray had never been in the district before this. Who would want to come here? No day at the beach, he thought.

Madra de Dios. He pushed his sunglasses up the bridge of his crooked nose, brushed thick black hair from his eyes, gripped the steering wheel with both hands. The morning was blazing, the air was boiling, and the old flat-bed's steering was loose, which caused the truck to bounce all over the place along the narrow road. Sky's color dripped hazy red. In that light the broken asphalt looked like blood, the heat rising off it smelled like a septic-tank.

Ray fingered the company ID pinned to his trench coat: "Santa Rosita Crating & Coffin. Your Emergency, Our Routine." What a stupid motto, he thought. Despite the heat, on the way out of the shop he'd grabbed his black trench coat, the heavy one with the deep pockets. He knew about the kids. Had heard the talk from the streeters and wannabes, talk about 'the Wastes'. Like some kind of legendary race of beings or something. Miniature titans. *Los desechos. Los desesperados.* What a joke! What heroes? Runaway children. Radical loners, self-proclaimed anarchists, but not usually violent. Not often, anyway. Crazy, maybe. And definitely into black.

The trenchcoat would provide protection, he told himself. He was six-two and at times wished he was five-

feet-five, less easily noticed. He craved obscurity. It was hard for a big guy. His mother, when he was already a tall tyke, told him he'd be a real Gary Cooper. He loved the old Gary Cooper movies, especially "A Farewell To Arms"—disillusioned WWI medic falling in love with a beautiful nurse.

But life wasn't a movie.

He swerved the company truck around a pothole the size of a dead cow, hit into a couple coyote-size craters. Sunshades flew off onto the cab floor.

"Beauty," he spat, trying to keep out of the ten-foot ditches along either side of the road. He fumbled at his feet for the shades, keeping an eye out for the turn-off to the gravel pits.

The private drive came up faster than he expected, and Ray swung the old Dodge Ram hard through the open chainlike gate. He maneuvered the aged, creaking vehicle toward the big gray warehouses that loomed up on the right like nuclear bunkers.

"Nasty place," he mumbled. Ray hated military contracts. Boss knew it, too.

Gearing down—*grind crunch!*—double-clutch to first, he swung the truck into the parking area in a spray of gravel, being careful to give wide berth to the troop carriers parked there.

"Hey! You! You, mister! Hey—"

"Santa Rosita Crating & Coffin," Ray yelled as he stepped slowly from the cab, keeping his hands in plain view. From an army jeep a radio blared music.

"You got the boxes?" The soldier jogged up to the truck, rusty machine gun pointed at Ray's stomach,

dirty fatigues smelling like warm beer.

“Sure.” Ray tried to sound casual, glanced behind to reassure himself the coffins were still there—or ever had been—lashed down securely in the truck’s bed. He nodded to the corpse-crates, keeping one eye on the soldier, while scanning for someone more seriously in command.

Sure enough, a head honcho-type strolled toward them, kicking up dust, a great big tall guy, shoulders back, straight up in the air short blond hair, graying, dirty beard.

“Stand down, Soldier 241,” he ordered.

“Sir, yes, sir!” cried the soldier. With a quick salute he turned and kicked up more dust as he proceeded to jog back to his post, wherever that was, probably manning the jeep radio.

The new soldier, or officer—Ray could never tell ranks, rates, whatever—yelled right into his face, “You got the boxes?”

“Sure, yeah.” Ray shuffled from one foot to the other.

“Well, show me, mister.”

“Show you?” The crates were right there in the back of the truck. What did the guy want?

“The boxes!” he yelled.

Ray, same height as the man, though he felt a foot shorter, looked at the guy’s gnarled beard and straight-up hair.

The man stared, as if Ray were a mutt dog peeing on his jeep’s tire.

“The coffins?” Ray shook his head. “There they

are,” he pointed at the flatbed. “There.” He didn’t know what else to say. Boss knows he’s afraid of the military—sends him on these jobs just to get his goat. If Ray didn’t respect Boss so much, he’d hate him.

“You’re a fat little man,” the soldier/officer laughed and walked over to the back of the truck, ran a hand along one of the coffins.

“Hey, just a minute,” Ray caught himself, lowered his voice, “I mean, I... I ain’t fat.” He flapped open his black trench coat, revealing a flak-jacket. “You know Boss tells us we have to wear this, especially being out here in *the Wastes* and all. Boss don’t let his drivers out the door without a life vest.” Ray started to loosen the Velcro closures on the bullet-proof vest, as if he needed to prove to this guy that he wasn’t fat—skinny, maybe—but *not* fat. Don’t lose it, buddy, Ray told himself, pulling the trench coat closed, wrapping it around himself like a dark shroud.

Ignoring Ray altogether, the man ran his hand back and forth along the bare, rough wood of one of the corpse-crates.

“They OK?” Ray inquired of the soldier/officer. “You in charge here?”

“You better know it, mister.” He yelled some more troop ID numbers. Three men jogged to the truck. “Help this civilian get these boxes into the warehouse.”

The six crates were carried through the high steel doors inside the huge building.

Someone pushed a cup of tepid coffee into Ray’s hand. Portable floods had been set up, but the vastness

of the boarded interior left much of the place shrouded in shadow. Ray drank the stale brew nervously and looked around. There they were, the six crates laying side by side, lined up on the cement floor within the circle of harsh light. On the edge of that circle, off to one side, Ray saw the bodies and almost dropped his coffee. They weren't covered up or anything, just laid out there like the corpse-crates, in a neat row, naked, very dead, very dead children.

The cement floor on which Ray stood was a vast morgue slab. He just wanted to get out of there fast. But he wanted to know, too. He needed to know, and that feeling was stronger.

The unintelligible bass-beat from the jeep's radio outside thump-thumped into the warehouse, the music transformed into a kind of perverse, deep organ requiem. At first it seemed nobody took any notice of the row of children laid out there, waiting to be crated up in rough pine boxes, which, only an hour before, Ray and his friends at the shop had nailgunned together. Nobody seemed to take any notice of them, the children laid out in a row on the dirty, concrete floor.

But there was someone!

Ray peered into the shadows bordering the stark edge of the light, and there, kneeling at the end of the row of bodies, crouched a dark figure. What was that man doing, Ray wondered? In the moment, it looked like the man was eating one of the bodies, hunched over it that way, while no one else took any notice. Lunch break. Eat the liver, eat the heart, eat the soul before it can fly away to the house of souls. Ray started to yell,

“Stop that man!” but realized the hunched figure was rocking back and forth, back and forth.

Not dining. Mourning.

As inconspicuously as possible, Ray edged over to the crouching figure and focused hard on him, avoiding the children of the Wastes. The man noticed he was being watched and stood up quickly, pulled off his glasses, wiped his eyes with a rag, and turned to a portable table covered with instruments. Out of the direct glare of the floods Ray could better see the man and the table of medical instruments. And the children laid out all in a row. One of them, a girl maybe twelve or thirteen, had a steel nose ring as big as a quarter, and thick silver lipstick; yet in her hair was a red ribbon like a schoolgirl would wear the first day back after Christmas vacation.

“You alright?” Ray asked the man. Ray tried to pry his vision from the dead children, felt the salt-wetness well up in his eyes and swallowed hard.

The man turned, looking as if he’d just noticed someone there. He coughed out the words, he could hardly speak, “This won’t...take long. Got the samples for the lab...got to verify, more tests.” Their eyes met. “Oh, who are you?” he asked, obviously realizing Ray wasn’t an official but a civilian. He peered at Ray’s ID-badge, looked up, “God...” but the word was followed by tears, they flowed and sobbed out of the man, he shook with them, fumbled for the rag again, turned away.

“Did you...I,” Ray floundered for something to say.

A minute passed, the guy weeping, his back still turned. Then he stuffed the rag in a side pocket of his

rumpled suit, focused his attention on the table with its forceps, knives and saws. The man's shoulders shook but he seemed to have passed through the worst of it.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?" Ray offered, holding up his own cup.

"NO!" shouted the man, then added softly, "No, thank you." He glanced at Ray again, at the Santa Rosita Crating badge, turned back to the table, wiped the blood off a scalpel. "You brought the coffins," he said it, or asked it.

"Hey, mister!" It was the big officer-type with the blond crewcut and ragged beard. "Get away from there!" He waved his meaty hand at Ray.

"It's alright," the mortician called back at him. "He's just bringing me a coffee."

The officer shrugged, and with a great, purposeful stride disappeared back outside.

The mortician sniffled continually. He turned to the children and bent down onto one knee. "Can't even get them to the morgue, autopsy proper," his voice cracked, he held back more tears. "They won't let them within the city limits. I've got to—" he glanced up at Ray, lowered his voice to a whisper, "Kids are shooting up with tainted blood. Lab tests will verify it."

"What?" Ray stared down at the poor man, trying not to see the children lined up all naked and dead. He noticed for the first time the bullet wounds. Riddled with bullet holes.

"Tainted blood," the doctor repeated the phrase, crouched there next to the dead naked children.

"Let's go, mister!" it was the officer again. He waved

a receipt in the air, giving Ray the stare.

The mortician grabbed a leg of Ray's pants, looked up. "Nobody's supposed to know," he gasped in a whisper, eyes red in the artificial lights. "HIV, tainted blood. Shooting up...they—"

"Let's go," the officer grabbed Ray by the collar. "You're disturbing the doc. Here's your receipt." He held it in front of Ray's face as he *guided* the cratemaker toward the big steel door opening out into the furnace of the day. Ray grabbed the receipt as the big guy pushed him outside. "Tell Boss we'll be in touch."

Ray just kept on walking. The jeep with music blasting from it was occupied by the first soldier. He waved and smiled. Ray nodded back, opened the truck door with a loud rusty "screeeeech!" The music, too, screeched and screamed.

PART ONE

miafondi.com



2
Mia Fondi's

Syracuse, New York.

Mia Fondi's.

It was hot.

The bar was not crowded. Early diners dribbled in from the late afternoon heat, chatting emptily, oblivious to their mortality, anticipating delightful cuisine. *I Have But One Heart*, crooned the Rigatoni Brothers out in the dining room. Near the horseshoe-shaped mahogany bar were half a dozen tables. Busboys hustled about setting places and lighting candles. Marco, my usual waiter, greeted me. He indicated my usual table in the corner farthest from the restaurant entrance where I could see the bar and anyone coming in.

I took a seat, leaned back and breathed a sigh, loosened my tie, watched one of the busboys sneak a slice of

fresh bread. I wondered how he stayed so skinny working here.

When the guy sauntered into the bar, he reminded me of my old friend Captain Wisdom, that cop way of walking, seeing everything and everybody in a single glance, a casual though highly calculated cop-wariness, which in civilians would be considered paranoia. He stopped and spoke for a moment with Marco. The cop's hair was short, black, and professional, his skin tanned, his eyes close together. Tall and slim, he stood erect yet casual, a seasoned street soldier. Over a decade of virtual horror rushed in on me in the instant, then was gone in a blur of synaptic lightning. My hands trembled from the retinal-charred memories, flash-burn images of Corp torture, pixel flayed skin hanging from computer-generated meat hooks...

The Rigatones started playing *Il Poeta Soldato*. Their music calmed my pixel spirits.

The cop strolled toward my table like I was there waiting for him and like there was no one there, both at the same time—he was polished.

The Rigatoni Brothers sang their way from the dining room into the bar. A young woman at the table they serenaded had eyes filled with stars, her hand in the hand of a handsome man sitting across from her, a platter of polenta between them.

I looked up at the man, nodded toward the place across from me, "*Prego, si accomodi.*"

The cop pulled out the chair and sat down. For awhile neither of us spoke. I had that broken sense of time that randomly overtook me late in the day, another

one of the myriad effects of my PESD, Post-virtual Epistemic Stress Disorder, thanks to a certain nasty multinational, *IntelliGen*, the Intelligent Genetics Corporation, that thought it would be fun to experiment on the brain of a philosopher. Me. My brain! And Mona Grant's brain. And Harry's brain. Mona and I survived, sort of. Harry didn't. Not sort of, not at all. Now my old friend Captain Wisdom had sent this cop to me, to ask me questions. About Harry. About PESD and whatever. Some new case out west in California. Why did I agree to meet him? Wisdom said it was important. "You're needed, Bob," he'd said. "I wouldn't ask you if it weren't really important." So I'd said yes. I still said "yes" when what I meant to say was "no"—that was a *pre*-PESD brain dysfunction.

I stared at the cop across from me. The world of Mia Fondi swirled about me in slow-PESD-motion. The night dropped like black, satin sheets over troubled dreams. The Rigatones sang *Funiculli Funiculla*. The starry-eyed girl ate polenta with one hand and with the other held tight to the hand of the handsome man.

The cop eyed the beer and wine list, "*Ecco Domani*" written across the top.

I glanced at the painting which hung over the bar. Always liked that picture—*La stazione di Rocca di Fondi*, the train station in Fondi, the town back in the old country where the restaurant's owner came from. Beneath the painting a bald man sat talking on his cell phone. He smoked a cigarette, puffing hard as he spoke into the receiver and looking very tired.

Life *is* tiring, I thought.

The cop signaled a waiter.

The Rigatones were now singing *It Had To Be You*.

The starry-eyed woman, her face, it was radiant in the moonlight coming in through the window by her table.

Marco brought over a carafe of ruby-red Chianti and two glasses. "*Il Griogio questa sera, il signor Howard,*" he bowed slightly, then was gone. Another waiter set a large basket of bread on the table. Time wafted about us like the warm breeze through the open window.

"You're Bob Howard?"

The question startled me. I was certain it came from the cop, but there was absolutely no visual or behavioral evidence, no empirical basis for my judgment. I started to reply, but the starry-eyed girl at the table directly behind the cop, she sighed, and I felt that sigh in my bones and...and the Rigatoni Brothers started singing *That's Amore*.

The cop poured a glass of Chianti for himself, then held the carafe over my glass. Steam rose from the basket of hot bread, the starry-eyed girl sighed again.

"Thanks," I said to the cop. "You can call me Bob."

He filled my glass, said, "I'm supposed to be on vacation. Here in New York on vacation. I'll pretend this is my last night." He took a swallow of wine and sighed.

The accordion shifted into the *Marianna Waltz*.

"*La dolce musica d'italia,*" said the cop. He leaned forward, smiled. "My name is Aristotle Avis. My parents are Greek-Italian. But that's my story." He hesitated, then continued, "Captain Wisdom seemed a little reluctant to tell me where I could find you, Dr.

Howard. He was concerned—” he dropped the thought, picked up his glass and leaned back in his chair, gazing out into the dining room.

An elderly Italian grandmother danced with a young girl, maybe seven years-old, and the diners loved it. The Rigatoni Brothers held the world in their magic. Even the starry-eyed woman turned from the object of her affection to the siren song of *Italian Serenade*.

More people came into the restaurant, ordered food and drinks, relaxed, danced, sang, and clapped their hands. The music played on. Wine was generously poured. Children laughed. Amidst the *cantando*, the singing, only one woman chattered on and on in a political tirade pressing relentlessly against the others at her table.

“Too bad about your vacation.” I eyed the woman talking politics. “Wisdom and I have lunch here sometimes,” I said randomly. “He’s dying of cancer—from the radioactive tunnels.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The cop leaned forward in his chair again, looked contemplative, everything continued in slow motion, the night, the air.

The politicking woman kept up her harangue. The Rigatones played music to heal the soul. They played the Ames Brothers’ *Nevertheless*. Old women melted. The starry-eyed girl fell back into her lover’s eyes.

The cop held up his wineglass, “*Salute!*”

“*Cin cin!*” I replied.

We clinked our glasses.

The evening cooled a little.

The cop ate some bread dipped in olive oil and balsamic vinegar. “I need your help, Dr. Howard.”

“Bob,” I said.

He nodded. “I need your help, Bob.” He was phrasing his words carefully, now, as if a great deal rode on them.

The Rigatoni Brothers strolled to the table of the politicking woman. They sang *I Only Have Eyes For You*. She stopped cold, looked surprised, disoriented, glanced at her fellow diners, smiled broadly—politics forgotten. Everyone was happier than ever.

I sipped my wine, looked away from the man across from me, spoke slowly, “Somebody else said that same thing to me once, ‘I need your help, Dr. Howard’. He’s dead now.”

“I’m sorry about Harry Osborne. It’s not easy to lose a good friend. I’ve lost a few, myself. Part of police life.”

Diners came and went. The moon drifted from the night sky like a memory, leaving the world dark and deep. We were on Mediterranean time, unhurried as the rising and setting of Venus.

“I imagine Captain Wisdom informed you about the details.” The cop was back to business, though I thought it kind of him to go slowly with me. Wisdom must have filled him in on my myriad mental problems.

“Officer Avis,” I began, feeling bold, uncharacteristically so—the Chianti flowed in my veins like the waters of the Mediterranean, lapping softly at the shores between Europe and self-consciousness. *Better than Budweiser!* I thought.

The cop waved offhandedly, “Call me Aristotle, *per favore*; still on vacation, remember.”

“Aristotle, I’m a philosopher. I teach philosophy and

logic at—”

“Yes, I know, Bob. Captain Wisdom said you might be able to help us.”

I sighed, not like the starry-eyed girl, either. She’d left. So had the politicking woman and her entourage. The Rigatones played quieter, more haunting melodies. I nibbled at my order of *gnocchi*, the cop took another bite of his *fettuccine*.

“OK,” I said. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

We talked about history, police procedurals, the case in California.

The Rigatones played *It Had To Be You* again. The bar and dining rooms emptied out a bit. Another man sat where the bald-headed man with the cell phone had been. It was Teo, the artist who owned Mia Fondi, who lived in the back and painted and sculpted the old world, *L’Italia vecchia* packed away in his brain, flowing into his art year after year, filling the back of the restaurant.

The bar TV had an ad for AcmeOnLine depicting two brains in vats chatting to one another in the BrainInAVat chatroom—zombie humor that sent electricity through my eyes.

PESD, post-virtual epistemic stress disorder.

The night was still a little warm, though its breezes cooled a fevered soul.

The picture over the bar, *La stazione di Rocca di Fondi*, seemed more real than the TV and its AOL ads, more real than its creator, Teo, who’d painted it, more real than the pictures lumbering noisily about in my skull, painful pictures of my old friend Harry Osborne, in a dirty green rad suit, with no head and a never-ending

scream that rent nature. A decade had gone by since then. Now, it seemed but weeks. PESD hit me like only yesterday. The old synapses ached. I thought of Mona again. I had spoken to her seldom in all the years. We reminded each other of too much horror.

I wondered how her brain was working—or not.

3

Old Philosophers Never Die

We left Mia Fondi, which was only a block from the campus, and walked toward the philosophy building. “I should get a little more work done this evening,” I told Aristotle. I was determined to finish grading some papers before driving home. Summer class finals were coming up in three weeks, and, as Kant always impressed upon his students, *a philosopher’s work is never done* (though his aides do a lot of it).

The cop said it right out, “I need a philosopher, Bob. We need you. Will you help us?”

“Who are you really? Did Craig and Judy in Computer Psychodynamics hire you to do this?” I waved my arms like a drowning man, good special effects. Madness can be convenient for avoiding certain unpleasantness. “Is this a psi-computer psych joke?”

Sometimes I don't get this CP, er, Computer Psychology stuff—of course *my* computer's schizophrenic!—it has absolutely no connection with reality!—its dreams never go beyond..." I nodded my head side to side, then in little up-down jerks, tick-nod, tick-nod, like a trip-hammer working a bad stretch of road along some *virtual-fucking-highway*.

Aristotle Avis smiled at my craziness. He almost laughed, but clearly subdued it in favor of a more professional, sensitive expression. I think a good cop must also be a great actor.

"I'm on the level," he insisted. "The real McCoy."

"The real McCoy, huh? On the level. Which level?" I felt a level-confusion headache coming on. "Third level of hell," I sighed as we came up to the building's steps. They were cracked and worn. The edifice was a hundred and fifty years old, the oldest architectural heap on campus. *Old philosophers never die; they Kant*. Everywhere blackness. There it was again. The vision. Mona.

The Woman in Black.

Mona had been given a grant, a scholarship, and the promise of a fellowship at some university out in California, some small out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere-dump called Berkeley, if I recollected it—*which was always a question for me, recollecting*. Berkeley, an offer Mona couldn't refuse. No strings, just a simple, happy Ph.D., a two-year teaching contract, money, her own bio-research group, no connections with any major corporations—so they said. Yeah...right.

The cop cleared his throat. "You don't have to agree to anything tonight. I can come by your office tomor-

row. Here's what we've got," he handed me a manila envelope, then leaned against the railing, looked up at the gray stone building. "As I said, the case is under California jurisdiction. Santa Cruz police filed the report four days ago. I was called in the next day—I mean, called off vacation!—three thousand miles off vacation. My office faxed everything out here to the Syracuse P.D. Big rush! That's where I hooked up with Captain Wisdom. Funny they still call him that, even though he's the Chief of Police of this town. At first it was 'tough shit'; then Wisdom read the cover sheet and everything changed. Whole department! Older cops got real polite with Wisdom—as if they were afraid he'd go postal or something. Like some kind of jail lock-down! I've barely slept one night in the last three. Studying the details. Online with the Santa Cruz department. Researching this PESD thing. Seems you and Mona Grant invented it." He waved that aside, breathed deeply.

"Look, it's all there in the file. A real mess. They found the two kids. Five, six years-old, wandering along the tracks north of Santa Cruz. Where the old narrow gauge train used to run. They were naked. No signs of physical harm, other than exposure, dehydration. Figured at first it was just another abandoned children thing for CPS. However, the examining doctor found extensive mental trauma. Brain scan very weird. And there were 'implants' in the forward cerebral hemisphere, fiberoptics down to the cerebral cortex, sophisticated; 'wetwire inputs', the doc called them, said some old scientist, name of William Gibson, coined the expression."

I held onto the railing with all my might. "Look, Ar-

istotle, I... I don't really think I can listen to this right now." My stomach started to climb up my esophagus looking for the God knows what.

"Bob! Please. This is horrible stuff! OK, these kids, some kind of experiments had been performed on them. They were in bad shape. Couldn't really see, visually, I mean. At first there was talk of childhood autism. Physical sensory perception erratic. Speech nonsense, a chopped-up recording of a kid's nightmare. Child psych examined them. Said they might be suffering from something new. Brain-manipulated hallucinations. She called it 'PESD', *Post-virtual Epistemic Stress Disorder*, induced by physical, high-level invasive brain trauma. You are the living expert on PESD, Bob. I need your help, here."

I mouthed the words "living" and "post-virtual epistemic stress disorder." The sky had dropped a dark steel blanket over the earth, overcast by swirling death-black clouds, heavy with deep space, closing in, gravity grown thick with ancient blood.

Avis, put a hand on my arm, "This child psych, she came up with your name. And Chief Wisdom of the Syracuse P.D. That's why I'm here." He shook his head, "I *was* going to catch the train into New York City tomorrow. Touch the Statue of Liberty, wander down Mulberry Street, diner at *Il Fornai*o's, dessert at *Caffe Biondo*." He sighed.

"Goodnight," I said abruptly, and rushed up the stairs. At the door, I turned, holding onto the handle, grasping it with all my strength. "I'll... I'll talk to you in the morning. Decide then. Come by the department office. It's open at 7:15. Goodnight."

“Goodnight,” replied the cop, and he turned away toward the university parking lot.

I stumbled through the heavy doors, began the climb to the fifth floor.

The end of the dream, I thought. Can't pretend I'm not awake!

Can't *know* I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.

Damn damn damn.

4

Gato Negro

I got to my office, slammed the door, locked it, checked the lock two, three times. Glanced around. Checked the lock again. Looked up for hidden cameras. Stamped my feet to ground my reality-connectedness so I wouldn't get a reality shock. I drew the window shade against the evil-dripping night. All was quiet in the department offices outside. All was dark, except for the dim security lights which crept in softly under my door. In the distance a siren screamed in despair.

I sat down at my desk, same desk as years ago, same office, same window behind me, same shelves crammed with old philosophy, thick logic, well-used arguments, tired dreams. Books and monographs. Chomsky, Searl, Catherine Lord. Best of the best. Thomas Reid. Artificial life. Real life. Got to remember the difference.

My hands trembled.

Got to remember the difference!

From the bottom desk drawer I grabbed a glass and a half-full—or half-empty?—bottle of Gato Negro Cabernet Sauvignon. Pulled the cork. Poured. Took a swig. On top of the half-carafe of Chianti downed at Mia Fondi's, the cheap yet full-bodied, hearty red wine felt wonderful going down my throat. Love the Black Cat!

I leaned back in my chair.

The computer was OFF.

I glanced about the room, checking again to see if anyone had installed security cams while I was out, took another swallow, looked around, head swimming, eyes vibrating.

Calm down, Bob, I told myself. You've been doing just fine for at least two years, five months, and a whole bunch of days! Breathe deep, old man. Breathe deep. The Corporation is DEAD! Dead. The dead don't raise. Not when they're burning in HELL! My name is Bob Howard. I teach philosophy at...

It didn't work.

I looked at the phone. Reached toward it, drew back my hand.

Damn!

I knew that if they'd come after me about this new PESD case, surely they'd go after Mona, too. After all, she's already in Berkeley on her fellowship. Can't be but a couple of hours from Santa Cruz, Avis' town, down the coast from San Francisco, where, probably still smoldering in toxic lava, lay buried the old nuclear tunnels and torture chambers of the Corporation.

I picked up the phone. It was an old push-button. I wouldn't let the department replace it with one of the new voice-activated vid-phones. I didn't like robots. Even phone-shaped ones. Definitely not ones that looked like people. With images of people claiming to be real.

I punched in Mona's number and caught my breath.
"Hello?"

I pulled the receiver from my ear, stared at it.
"Hello?" the voice again.

I moved the receiver back to my ear.

"That you, Bob?" Questions. Questions. How did she know it was me?

I took another swallow of Gato Negro Cabernet Sauvignon.

"It's you, isn't it. Come for you, too, have they?"

Good ol' Mona, woman of few words. I put the receiver to my head, spoke softly, "Yes." I pictured her black dress, black stockings, black shoes, black dreams.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then? Buy you dinner. We'll drink some red wine like you like and talk synaptic pas-sageways." She laughed slightly, unusual for her. I wondered if it really was her or some computer construct tapped into California Bell. I took another sip of wine.

"Missed you," she said.

"I've missed you, too," I said, and sloshed the wine on my keyboard. I up-ended the glass bathing the keys in Gato Negro Cabernet Sauvignon. That made me smile. I breathed a sigh.

Mona's voice was years distant, "I'll meet you at the

airport—email your arrival time, OK?”

“OK,” I said and lay my head down on the desk in front of the keyboard, my hair in the spilled wine, the smell of wine in my hair, real, physical, the receiver still to my ear. Red wine madness.

“Goodnight,” said Mona in a small, far-away voice.

“Goodnight,” I said and cradled the phone on its hook.



After awhile I corked the bottle and put it away in the bottom drawer. The wine was sticky in my hair. The smell of red wine strong and real. Red wine ran out of the keyboard and dripped down the front of the desk drawers onto the floor. I stared at the blank computer monitor, thought, *I've killed it! And it's bleeding all over everything!*