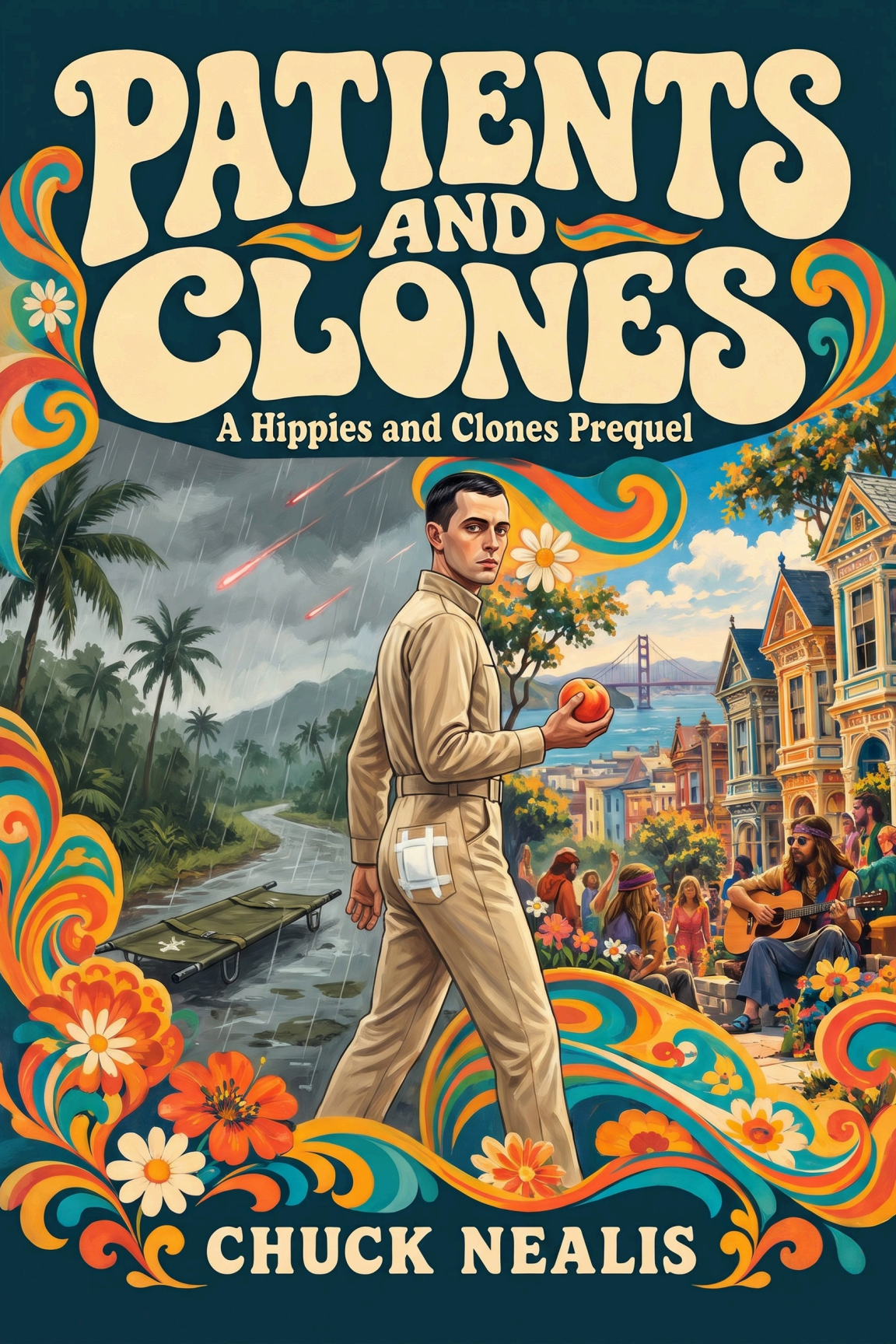
PATIENTS AND CLONES

A Hippies and Clones Prequel



CHUCK NEALIS

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Chapter 1: One of the Last Men

Violation: Failure to Report. Status: Unreported.

The Ministry, 2114

Herbert Gomez was smiling, and somebody was going to have to report it.

Herbert didn't know. He was asleep, floating full-sized in a glass tank at the far end of Lab Sector B. He was the last man the Ministry had managed to grow. Long ago, somebody had stuck a label on his glass that said HERBERT GOMEZ, and nobody had ever peeled it off.

A poster hung over the tanks.

> CLONE SMILING IS NO LAUGHING MATTER
> Prevent Emotional Infection. Report Immediately.

One tank in the row was empty. A red tag hung from its valve.

> DECOMMISSIONED.
> CAUSE: SMILING.

The only person who had seen the smile was Courier 1104. He had been printed in Tank #1104, which was the only name he had. He had filed a Self-Violation Report every morning of his life, and every one of them said the same thing: *Violations: None.*

He was standing four steps from the lab technician. She was looking down at her scanner, feeding his weekly sample into it.

All he had to do was say the tank number.

He looked at Herbert again. Herbert was still smiling. And a little lower down, Herbert was very clearly having an erection.

The courier opened his mouth.

Herbert went on smiling, peacefully, at nothing at all, like a man in the middle of the best dream of his life.

The courier closed his mouth. He turned around and studied the opposite wall. It was beige, and there was nothing on it. He studied it anyway.

"Anything further?" the technician asked, without looking up.

"Nothing further," said the courier.

The scanner beeped.

SPERM VIABILITY: 0.4%

She wrote it under last week's number, which was 0.6, and the one before that, which was 0.9. Then she stamped his form. Behind her, in the tank, Herbert's smile faded, along with everything else.

"Briefing Room 4," she said.

The courier left without looking at the tank. He had just broken the first rule of his life, and if anyone had asked him why, he couldn't have told them.

Nobody asked.

* * *

Briefing Room 4 was beige. The briefing officer stood beside a wall screen with a pointer in his hand and no expression on his face.

"The Ministry is running out of men," the officer said. "It has located more." He switched on the screen. "San Francisco. 1968."

It was a city on a bay, all hills and water and painted houses. The courier had never seen that many colors in one place. He took a step back.

There were white shapes in the sky above the city.

“Clouds,” the officer said. “Disregard them. They were removed in 2102. A little girl saw one shaped like a rabbit and laughed out loud, and her mother reported the cloud.” He tapped the city with the pointer. “You will go there, collect viable sperm from the men of that era, and return in seventy-two hours.”

“This courier acknowledges.”

“To prepare you, the Archive has reconstructed how the men of 1968 made friends.”

He showed a bowling team in matching shirts. Then he showed two cowboys facing each other on a dusty street, their hands hovering over their guns.

“They bonded in three ways,” the officer said. “They rolled heavy balls at wooden pins. They wore hats. And they shot each other at noon.” He lowered the pointer. “Avoid the third.”

“Noted.”

“You will open with a greeting. Repeat after me. ’Greetings, fellow bearer of the Y-chromosome. Let us discuss sports scores and automotive torque.’”

The courier repeated it.

“Again. With warmth.”

The courier said it again, exactly the same way.

The officer checked a meter on his wrist. “Warmth detected: zero,” he said. “Acceptable.”

“Does this courier possess sports scores?” the courier asked.

“Your learning chip now holds everything the Archive still has on 1968 through 1970,” the officer said. “Weather reports and baseball scores.”

“And automotive torque?”

“Lost,” said the officer.

Then he picked up a heavy binder and dropped it on the courier’s foot.

The courier looked down at it.

“In 1968, that will hurt,” the officer said. “When it does, you will stand to attention, state your status and recite the creed. Go.”

The courier stood to attention and saluted. “This courier is compromised. Optimization is freedom. Emotion is inefficiency.”

“Again,” said the officer, and dropped the binder again.

They practiced for most of an hour. By the end the officer was satisfied, and the binder had lost its cover.

* * *

At 09:00 the courier stood in the Aperture Hall in a beige jumpsuit. On the far wall, a tall metal ring was humming.

A young clerk stood by the equipment table with a checklist. Her name badge said OCTAVIA.

“Harvesters, three,” she read.

The officer unzipped a long pouch and took out a chrome ball the size of a fist. It lifted off his palm by itself, floated up and bumped against the ceiling. It bumped again.

“It has found a sleeping man,” the officer said. He glanced up. “Lab Sector B is the next floor.”

The courier looked at the ceiling. He didn’t say anything.

The officer pulled the harvester down, zipped it in with the other two and hung the pouch on the courier’s hip.

“Present,” said the courier.

Octavia made a mark. “Beacon, one.”

It was a small metal disk. “If you miss the pickup, press this,” the officer said. “A window will open wherever you are.”

“Present.”

“Spatula, one.”

The officer held up a small beige spatula and a plastic bag. “Sub-Directive 4B. Before any collection, you take a soil sample from the place you land. Three grams exactly.”

“Under all conditions?” the courier asked.

“Under all conditions. No exceptions.”

The courier put the spatula in his chest pocket. “Present.”

The officer handed him a tube of beige Dramamine. “For time-travel sickness.”

Octavia looked at the tube, and then at her list. The tube was not on it. She made no mark.

“Will this courier require money?” the courier asked.

“No,” said the officer. “Rapport will provide.”

Octavia stamped the form. Then she looked up at the courier, and for a moment it seemed like she might say something that wasn’t on the list either.

“This clerk wishes the courier efficient travel,” she said.

“This courier acknowledges,” he said.

Over at the control desk, two technicians were frowning at a screen.

“Year confirmed,” the first one said. “1968.”

“And the location?” asked the second.

“Approximately San Francisco.”

“How approximately?”

The first technician checked again. “Within tolerance.”

The courier stepped into the ring. The Hall went white, then black, then very loud.

* * *

He landed face first in mud.

It was raining, and the mud was cold. In his left eye, the Ministry’s threat-assessment system switched on, and green words appeared over the rain.

YEAR: 1968. CONFIRMED.
LOCATION: SAN FRANCISCO.

He stood up. He was in a field of flooded grass at the edge of a ruined village. There were no painted houses. Smoke rose from the

rooftops. Somewhere nearby, something went *crump*, and the ground jumped under his feet.

LOCATION: RECALCULATING.

Palm trees. A broken wall. A line of tracer fire, red, stitching across the gray sky.

LOCATION: RECALCULATING.

A second *crump*, closer. Mud rained down on his shoulders.

LOCATION: CENTRAL VIETNAM. DEVIATION: 7,800 MILES. ESTIMATED CHAOS INDEX: 9.7.

The courier thought it over.

"Partial success," he said.

Chapter 2: Wrong Place

Violation: Soil Sample Collected Under Fire. Status: Three Grams Exactly.

Central Vietnam, 1968

Someone grabbed his sleeve.

It was an old woman in a conical hat, soaked through, with a small boy clinging to her back. She hauled the courier down behind the broken wall, and the air where his head had been began to snap and whine.

She said something sharp. The translation implant behind his ear crackled.

"Get down, you foolish boy," it said. Then it gave a long electronic squeal and went silent.

The woman pushed a dented canteen into his hands. He looked at it. She tipped it up to his mouth, the way you would for a child, and watched until he swallowed. Then she took it back and looked him over, the beige jumpsuit, the neat haircut, the empty hands, and shook her head like he was a lost dog.

She ran, low along the wall, toward the trees, with the boy bouncing on her back. The courier watched her the whole way.

He was still looking at the trees when the soldiers found him.

* * *

There were six of them, Americans in green uniforms and helmets, coming along the wall with their rifles up. The sergeant in front nearly shot him.

"Who the hell are you?"

"This courier is—"

The sergeant wasn't listening. He was looking the courier over. No helmet. No rifle. No dog tags. A beige jumpsuit with a zipper.

He lowered his rifle. "Spook," he told the others. "Gotta be. CIA."

Nobody asked the courier anything else. They ran him to a shallow ditch beside the road and pushed him down in it.

The courier lay where he had been put and assessed the men of 1968. Every one of them was wearing a hat. All of them were shooting. It was twenty minutes to noon.

Avoid the third, the officer had said. The courier kept his head down.

The soldier next to him was skinny and freckled, with a cigarette behind his ear and a helmet too big for his head. He wasn't shooting. He was holding a snapshot of a girl and looking at it instead of the smoke.

"Eleven days," he said, to nobody. "Eleven days and I'm back in Frisco."

Words lit up beside him.

SUBJECT: Male. Armed. Rapport opportunity: HIGH.

The courier turned to him.

"Greetings, fellow bearer of the Y-chromosome," he said. "Let us discuss sports scores and automotive torque."

The freckled soldier stared at him. He opened his mouth, and closed it again. He put the photo back inside his helmet and moved a little farther down the ditch.

* * *

The firing slowed. The village went quiet, except for the rain.

The courier remembered his mission. He unzipped the pouch at his hip, and three chrome balls rose out of it and hung in the air over the ditch.

"What the hell are those?" said the freckled soldier.

"Autonomous Ejaculatory Harvesters," said the courier.

"Autonomous *what?*"

But the harvesters couldn't start yet. Sub-Directive 4B came first: three grams of soil from the place he landed, under all conditions, no exceptions.

The courier stood up and climbed out of the ditch.

"Hey," said the freckled soldier. "Hey! Get *down!*"

The courier walked to the middle of the road. The harvesters followed him in a neat row. He took the beige spatula out of his chest pocket and bent over.

He scooped up some dirt. It was too much. He tapped a little off, and then a little more, holding the bag open with his other hand.

"Is he *gardening?*" somebody said in the ditch.

Two point nine grams. He added a crumb.

Somewhere in the tree line, somebody fired.

Three things happened very close together.

A mortar round landed exactly where the harvesters were hovering.

The bag reached three grams.

And something hit the courier in the right buttock like a hammer made of fire.

* * *

The Ministry's manual had one paragraph about pain. It called pain a signal, and it recommended medication.

The manual had left a lot out.

The road went away. So did the rain, and the sky, and Sub-Directive 4B. Something that had been quiet his whole life was screaming at him to run, and he had no idea how to answer it.

He sealed the bag. Then he fell over.

* * *

"Man. Man! Are you okay?"

He was face down in the ditch. The freckled soldier had dragged him back into it by the collar and was shaking him.

The courier's training kicked in. He tried to stand to attention. His legs declined. He saluted the mud instead.

"This courier is compromised," he told it. "Optimization is freedom. Emotion is inefficiency."

The freckled soldier let go of him.

"MEDIC!"

* * *

The medic was young and soaked and fast. He slid into the ditch, cut away the seat of the beige jumpsuit and went to work.

"This courier is compromised," the courier said through his teeth. "Optimization is freedom."

"That's it, buddy. Keep talking."

"Emotion is inefficiency."

"You bet." The medic pressed a bandage down hard, and the courier made a sound that was not on any Ministry list. "Okay. Good news. It went through the meat, no bone. Congratulations, pal. That's a million-dollar wound."

"This courier has no funds," said the courier.

"It means you're going home. Bad enough to ship you out, not bad enough to mess you up." He tied off the bandage. "Where's your rifle?"

"This courier is equipped with superior technology."

“Yeah? Where is it?”

The courier lifted his head and looked at the road.

Where the harvesters had been, there was a smoking hole. One chrome ball lay in a puddle at the edge of it, dented, turning slowly. Behind his ear, the translation implant gave one more faint squeal.

“Technology,” the courier said, “is temporarily unavailable.”

* * *

A few yards down the ditch, the freckled soldier was making a noise.

He was bent double. His shoulders were shaking. His face had gone red, water was running out of both his eyes, and every time he tried to breathe, he failed.

“Ritchie,” the medic said. “You hit?”

Ritchie shook his head. He raised one hand and pointed at the courier.

“Optimization,” Ritchie gasped. “Is freedom.”

Then the noise came out of him again, much louder.

The courier had never seen a man do that. It looked painful, and Ritchie kept pointing.

What is this? the courier thought. *And why is it aimed at this courier?*

The green light in his eye flickered.

SUBJECT: Male. Armed.
SYMPTOMS: Rhythmic diaphragm spasms. Bared teeth. Involuntary lacrimation.
DIAGNOSIS: Acute nerve-gas exposure OR catastrophic respiratory failure.
RECOMMENDED ACTION: Administer atropine.
SYSTEM FAIL—

The light went out, and it did not come back.

The courier had no atropine. He did have one tube of beige Dramamine.

He crawled six inches through the mud on his elbows and solemnly held out a tablet.

"For the spasms," he said.

Ritchie looked at the tablet. He looked at the courier. He took the tablet and swallowed it.

Then he laughed so hard he slid down the side of the ditch.

* * *

The helicopter came twenty minutes later. Two men carried the courier to it on a stretcher, face down. As they passed the hole in the road, he reached down, fished the dented chrome ball out of the puddle and put it in his pocket. Something rattled inside it.

Ritchie walked alongside the stretcher, still wiping his eyes.

"Hey. Hey, spook. Where you from, man?"

"2114," said the courier.

Ritchie had to stop and hold onto his knees.

"Okay," he said, when he could. "Okay. I'm from Frisco. You ever get there, look me up. Haight Street. Ask for Ritchie."

"This courier's mission is in San Francisco," said the courier.

"Then you're going the right way, man." Ritchie slapped the stretcher. "Million-dollar wound."

They slid him onto the floor of the helicopter. As it rose, he could still see Ritchie through the open door, standing in the rain, bent over again.

One of the crew crouched down beside him.

"Is it true?" the crewman shouted over the engine. "You went out there for *dirt?*"

The courier held up the bag.

"Three grams," he said. "Exactly."

The crewman looked at the bag for a while. Then he went forward to tell the pilot.

The courier filed his first report from 1968 lying face down on the helicopter floor.

Self-Violation Report: Pain
Location: Posterior
Classification: Pending
Emotional Response: Suppressed
Suppression Efficiency: 61%
Secondary Event: Unclassified Vocalization (Other Party). Directed at: This Courier. Purpose: Unknown.

Chapter 3: The Field Day

Violation: Excessive Honesty. Class 1. Status: Diagnosed.

Army hospital, Phu Bai, Vietnam, 1968

The story got to the hospital before he did.

By the time the courier was carried into the surgical ward at Phu Bai, face down on his stretcher, the orderlies had already heard it from the helicopter crew. Two of them followed the stretcher down the aisle.

"You the guy?" one of them asked.

"This courier is a courier," said the courier.

"Say it," said the other orderly.

"Say what?"

"The freedom thing."

The courier didn't understand why they wanted it. But it was a direct request, and the Ministry required him to obey direct requests.

"Optimization is freedom," he said into the stretcher. "Emotion is inefficiency."

The orderlies had to put him down.

* * *

The surgeon cleaned the wound, stitched it, and told him he would not sit for six weeks. They put him in a bed near the end of the

ward, face down, with his chin on a pillow. From that position he could see the floor, the legs of the bed beside his, and the shoes of anyone who came to talk to him.

On the second morning, three pairs of shoes arrived.

The first pair was brown and polished and belonged to Major Feld, who had a pipe he was not allowed to light on the ward and held anyway. The second pair was black and practical and belonged to Major Haskins, who carried a clipboard and a stopwatch. The third pair was new, and belonged to Captain Pruitt, who was twenty-nine, carried a notebook, and had already written a title on the first page.

They were the hospital's psychiatrists. They had heard the story too.

"Good morning," said Feld. "We'd like to ask you some questions."

"This courier is available," said the courier.

The three doctors exchanged a look.

Feld took out his wallet and put five dollars in an empty coffee can on the windowsill. "Repression," he said.

Haskins put in five dollars. "Conditioning."

Pruitt put in five dollars and tapped his notebook. "Something new."

* * *

Haskins went first. He held up a card with a black inkblot on it.

"What do you see?" Haskins asked.

The courier lifted his chin off the pillow and looked at it. "Ink."

"What does it remind you of?"

"Additional ink."

Feld wrote something down. Haskins wrote something down. Pruitt reached over and turned the card upside down.

"Now?" Pruitt asked.

“Inverted ink,” said the courier.

Haskins went through all ten cards. The courier correctly identified ink ten times. Then, just to be thorough, Haskins turned the last card around and held up the back of it. It was blank and beige, exactly the beige of Briefing Room 4.

The courier went rigid.

He pushed himself up on both arms, as if to stand to attention, and the stitches in his backside stopped him. He dropped back onto the bed, face down, one hand still raised to his forehead in a salute.

“Optimization is freedom,” he said into the pillow.

All three doctors leaned in and looked at the card.

Haskins turned it over. Then he turned it back. He made a long note.

* * *

“Let’s try something simpler,” Feld said. “I’ll say a word. You say the first word that comes to mind.”

“Acknowledged,” said the courier.

Feld said “mother,” and the courier said “undefined.” Feld said “home,” and the courier said “beige.” “Dreams” got “suppressed.” “Feelings” got “not issued.”

Feld put his unlit pipe in his mouth and smiled around it.

“Tell me about your mother,” he said.

“This courier was manufactured,” said the courier.

“By whom?”

“The Ministry.”

Feld nodded slowly, as if this was what they all said. “And your father?”

“Not applicable,” said the courier.

Feld leaned closer. “Did you feel loved as a child?”

“This courier did not experience childhood. This courier was decanted at full size.”

Feld leaned back in his chair, took the pipe out of his mouth and glanced at the coffee can.

“Repressed,” he said. “I knew it.”

* * *

They asked him where he came from, and since the Ministry required accurate answers, he told them everything. He told them about the century when everyone felt too much, and the stabilizers. He told them about the beige. He told them the windows were gone, the clouds were gone and the word “I” was a malfunction. He told them about Paste, the beige mush that came out of the wall at 12:15 every day, two hundred calories, chew-optional.

He told them about the falling numbers in the Male Wing, and the empty tanks cleaned every morning. He told them about Briefing Room 4, and the bowling team and the cowboys.

He told them his mission. He had come back from the year 2114 to collect viable sperm from the men of 1968.

He said all of it face down, into an Army pillow, in the same flat voice.

When he finished, nobody said anything for a while.

“A man,” Feld said slowly, “sent back in time. To collect sperm.”

He looked at the other two. He didn’t need to say *obviously*. His face said it for him.

Haskins wrote: *Elaborate. Internally consistent. Rehearsed?*

Pruitt had stopped writing. He was staring at the back of the courier’s head.

* * *

On the fourth day, Feld tried to explain the war.

He was a kind man, in his way. He thought it might help the courier to be grounded in reality. So he pulled his chair close and explained it simply: America was fighting here, halfway around the world, to protect the freedom of the Vietnamese people.

The courier listened carefully. Then he asked a question.

"Are the people receiving freedom permitted to decline delivery?"

Feld opened his mouth. He closed it. He looked at the window, and at the coffee can, and at his pipe.

He did not write anything down.

* * *

Haskins tried a standard comprehension question.

"You find an envelope on the sidewalk," Haskins said. "It's sealed, stamped and addressed. What do you do?"

"Deliver it," said the courier.

"How?"

"By utilizing the postal infrastructure."

Haskins clicked his pen. "And if the post office were closed?"

"Determine the optimal delivery route," said the courier.

"And if you couldn't find one?"

The courier thought about it.

"Establish a new postal infrastructure."

Haskins stared at him. Then he wrote, in capital letters, *GRANDIOSE*, and underlined it twice.

* * *

Pruitt came back alone, after dinner, when the others had gone.

He sat on the edge of the next bed and opened his notebook. The title on the first page now read: *The Man from 2114: A Case of Systematized Futuristic Delusion.*

"Off the record," Pruitt said quietly. "Just between us. Will there be another world war?"

"Classified," said the courier.

"Do we get to Mars?"

"Classified."

Pruitt glanced over his shoulder. Then he leaned in.

"Okay. Okay. The New York Mets."

The courier waited.

"You don't know them," Pruitt said. "They're terrible. They've been terrible since the day they were born. They lost a hundred and twenty games their first year. They've never once finished better than ninth. My father has been a fan for six years, and he has aged twenty." He took a breath. "Will the Mets ever win the World Series?"

The courier consulted his learning chip. It was mostly weather and baseball.

"Yes," he said. "Next year."

Pruitt dropped his notebook. He picked it up, stared at the courier, and walked out of the ward without a word, and the courier heard him in the corridor, asking an orderly where a man could place a bet.

* * *

In the second week, the doctors put him in group therapy.

There were eight men in a circle of folding chairs, in pajamas and bandages. The courier attended lying on a gurney, face down, at the edge of the circle, so that he could see everyone's shoes.

They went around the circle. One man was named Eddie, and he missed his wife. He had a photograph of her that he took out of his pajama pocket and held while he talked. One man was afraid to go back. One man was angry, mostly at the Army, and said so for a long time, and nobody stopped him.

Then it was the courier's turn.

"This courier," he said, "has experienced a projectile entering the posterior region."

There was a pause.

Then the whole circle laughed.

Eddie laughed so hard he had to hold his side. The angry man laughed and wiped his eyes and said, "Ah, hell." Even Haskins, writing at the side of the room, made a small sound and covered it with a cough.

The courier lay very still.

"This courier does not understand," he said, "why the posterior region generates amusement."

They laughed harder.

But this time the courier noticed something different. Nobody was pointing at him. Eddie had reached over and put a hand on the edge of his gurney, as if he belonged in the circle like everyone else.

It was the same sound Ritchie had made in the ditch, but it didn't feel the same, and he had no category for why. He filed it under Pending.

* * *

The man in the next bed was named Walter.

He was older than anybody on the ward, a sergeant with twenty-two years in the Army and a leg in a cast from ankle to hip. The orderlies called him the ward's most difficult case. The doctors had stopped visiting him. Walter had seen flying saucers over Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1952, and he would tell anybody, and nobody believed him, and he had been waiting sixteen years for someone from somewhere else to show up.

One night, Walter rolled over and looked at the courier.

"You're from the future," he said.

"Affirmative," said the courier.

Walter nodded, as if this settled something.

"Can you take me with you?" Walter asked.

"Negative."

"Why not?"

"Your presence would violate temporal transport regulations," said the courier.

Walter thought about it. Then he nodded again, without surprise.

"Figures," he said. "Government regulations."

He was the only man in the hospital who believed every word the courier said.

* * *

Walter taught him poker.

They played on a tray table between the beds, Walter sitting up against his pillows and the courier face down with his cards held just above the floor. They played for cigarettes, which the courier did not smoke, so Walter was ahead by four hundred.

One night, Walter pushed every cigarette he had into the middle of the tray, called, and laid down a pair of twos.

The courier stared at them. Then he stared at Walter.

"You possessed a pair of twos," the courier said. "Yet for ten minutes your facial posture indicated four aces." He lowered his voice. "Are you experiencing a stroke?"

Walter laughed so hard he had to hold his cast.

"It's called bluffing, son."

"This courier requests a definition," said the courier.

"You lie. On purpose. With a straight face. That's the whole game."

The courier thought about that for a while.

"Lying is the objective?" the courier asked.

"Lying's the *art*." Walter gathered the cigarettes. "Anybody can play the cards they're dealt. The trick is playing the ones you aren't."

The courier did not reply. But that night, face down in the dark, he lay awake and practiced holding his face still while thinking about four aces.

* * *

Eddie went back into surgery on a Tuesday. Something had gone wrong inside, the orderly said, something they had missed the first time. He did not come back to the ward.

In the morning his bed was made, very tight and very neat. On the little table beside it was the photograph of his wife. Nobody had collected it yet.

The courier looked at the photograph.

He had asked Eddie about it once, in the circle, because he couldn't see what it was for. You couldn't eat it. You couldn't deliver anything with it.

"So I don't forget her face," Eddie had said.

The courier was still looking at the photograph when he felt something run down beside his nose and drip onto the pillow. Then another.

He touched his face. His fingers came away wet.

He waited for his training to kick in. It didn't.

He didn't file a report, and he didn't recite anything. He lay with his face in the wet pillow until the orderlies came and took the photograph away to be mailed home, and for a long time after that.

* * *

At the end of six weeks, the three doctors met to decide what to do with him.

Feld's file said repression. Haskins's file said conditioning. Pruitt's file said *The Man from 2114*, and he had already sent the first draft to a journal.

They argued for an hour. They agreed on only one thing.

"Send him home," Feld said.

"Wherever that is," said Haskins.

"San Francisco," said Pruitt. "That's where he says his mission is. Letterman can take him."

They signed the transfer. None of the three had believed a word of his story.

The courier could have activated his beacon that night and gone home. He took it out and looked at it. But the mission was not complete, and the men of 1968 were in San Francisco, and the Army was about to fly him there for free. He put the beacon away.

The coffee can stayed on the windowsill with fifteen dollars in it. Nobody had won.

The night before he left, Walter shuffled the cards one more time and dealt him a hand.

"You're going, huh?" Walter said.

"Affirmative."

"Back to the future?"

"Negative," said the courier. "San Francisco."

Walter nodded. He held out his hand. The courier looked at it, unsure what was expected, and Walter took the courier's hand and shook it.

"Bluff 'em, son," Walter said.

Chapter 4: Paperwork and Haight Street

Violation: Nonexistence. Resolved by Discharge. Also: Unauthorized Peach.

San Francisco, 1968

Letterman Army Hospital sat inside the Presidio, on a hill above San Francisco Bay. From his new bed, if he lifted his chin, the courier could see a strip of blue water through the window.

He looked at it often. It was not beige.

On his third day, a corporal named Dunphy came to process him out. Dunphy had a typewriter on a rolling cart, a stack of forms in triplicate and the face of a man who had not been surprised by anything since 1965.

He fed a form into the typewriter.

"Name," said Dunphy.

"Courier 1104," said the courier.

Dunphy typed *COURIER*. "First name?"

"Courier."

Dunphy looked at him, then typed it again. "Rank?"

"Courier."

"No," Dunphy said. "That's your job. What's your rank?"

"Courier."

Dunphy stopped typing. "Who do you report to?"

"The Ministry."

"Which ministry?"

"All of them," said the courier.

Dunphy rolled the form up, read it, and rolled it back down. "Nationality?"

"This courier does not have one."

Dunphy typed that exactly as stated. The form went into the courier's psychiatric file, directly behind Pruitt's paper, under the heading *Believes he is from the future*.

* * *

The problem took four days to become clear.

The courier was in no Army unit. He was on no roster. No one had enlisted him, drafted him, assigned him or paid him. He had been shot, flown, operated on and fed by the United States Army, but according to the United States Army, he did not exist.

"I can't discharge you without a serial number," Dunphy said on the fourth day.

"Then issue one," said the courier.

"I can't issue a serial number without a birth certificate."

"This courier was decanted. Tank #1104."

"Then I need the *tank's* birth certificate," Dunphy said. Dunphy put his head in his hands. "I can't keep you, either. You're not on the books. You're taking up a bed that doesn't officially have anyone in it."

The courier had spent four days face down with nothing to read except a thick Army manual on hospital admissions, which someone had left on his windowsill. He had read it nine times, and he remembered every word, the way he remembered everything.

"Section 14, paragraph 2," the courier said. "A hospital bed may be occupied only by an eligible patient. A patient who does not exist is not eligible." He rested his chin on the pillow. "Per your

regulations, this courier cannot occupy this bed. This courier recommends discharge."

Dunphy stared at him.

He took the manual off the windowsill and found section 14, paragraph 2. He read it twice.

"...He's right," Dunphy said, to no one.

He stamped seven forms. He handed the courier the carbon copies, including the whole psychiatric file, because regulations said the patient got a copy. He discharged the courier from a hospital he had never officially entered, from an Army he had never officially joined, and released him into the city of San Francisco.

* * *

On the way out, the courier sat down on a bench outside the gate.

It was the first time he had sat down in two months. It hurt, but he did it anyway, slowly, and stayed there.

Self-Violation Report: Seated Position
Classification: Restored
Status: Logged and Enjoyed

He looked at the last word. He hadn't meant to write it, but he left it there.

* * *

He walked out of the Presidio in an Army-issue shirt, a pair of hospital trousers and his beige jumpsuit rolled under his arm. In his pocket he had the beacon, the spatula, the tube of beige Dramamine and the last harvester, dented, with something rattling around inside it.

He had an address. It was the only one he had: *Haight Street. Ask for Ritchie.*

The city did not give him time to adjust. It was loud, and it was steep. A cable car went past ringing a bell for no reason he could identify. A man on a corner was playing a trumpet into the wind. Women in long skirts printed with flowers walked by, barefoot, holding hands with each other and with men and with small children, all at the same time.

And there was color everywhere. Painted houses, yellow and violet and green. Posters in letters that melted. A bus painted every color at once.

The courier stopped on the sidewalk and shut his eyes, because it was too much. Then he opened them again, because he wanted to see more. He didn't file a report. He wouldn't have known what to call it.

* * *

He had been walking for two hours when he understood that he was hungry.

At home, Paste came out of the wall at 12:15. Here it was 2:40, nothing had come out of any wall, and his stomach was making its position clear.

He stopped at a delicatessen on Haight Street. Behind the counter, a large man in an apron was slicing meat.

"What'll it be?" the deli man asked.

"This courier requires nutrition," said the courier.

"Pastrami's good."

"This courier will accept pastrami." He paused. "This courier has no currency."

The deli man stopped slicing.

The courier remembered the briefing officer. *Rapport will provide*. He considered the Y-chromosome greeting, remembered how it had gone over in the ditch, and decided against it.

Instead he took the last harvester out of his pocket and set it on the counter.

"What is it?" the deli man asked.

"An Autonomous Ejaculatory Harvester," said the courier.

"A what?"

"It is very advanced."

The deli man picked it up. He turned it over. He shook it, and it rattled. Then he looked at the courier, at the Army shirt, the hospital trousers and the careful way he stood with all his weight on one leg.

He set the harvester down next to the pickle jar.

"Okay," he said, and started making the sandwich.

When it was handed across the counter, the courier leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"Do not activate it," he said, "near anyone who is sleeping."

The deli man nodded slowly. "Sure thing, pal."

The courier ate the pastrami standing on the curb outside. Halfway through, he had to stop and just look at the sandwich.

* * *

The peach came from a woman with a fruit cart on the corner of Haight and Masonic. She saw him looking at the fruit, said, "You look like you need one," and handed it to him.

He bit into it, and juice ran down his chin. He didn't even try to write a report about that one.

* * *

Two blocks farther on, there was a crowd in front of a shop window.

The sign over the door read MURRAY'S ELECTRONICS & REPAIR. In the window was a pyramid of television sets, all tuned to the same program. On every screen, a woman with wild eyes

stood at a candy factory conveyor belt, stuffing chocolates into her mouth, her hat, and the front of her uniform, while the belt went faster and faster.

The crowd on the sidewalk was laughing. So was the sound coming out of the televisions.

The courier stood at the back and watched. A short man with glasses came out of the shop and stood beside him, arms folded, watching his own window.

"Why does the audience produce synchronized vocalizations?" the courier asked him.

"Because it's funny."

"Does the program instruct them when to do so?"

"Nah," said the man, who was Murray. "That's *I Love Lucy*. Live studio audience. Those people were really there." He nodded at the screen, where the woman's cheeks were bulging with chocolate. "Those people really laughed."

The courier looked back at the screen. Real people had sat in a room, watched something foolish and laughed out loud together, and nobody had told them to, and nobody had filed a report.

He watched the chocolate episode all the way to the end. Then he watched it again when Murray put it on for the second time.

* * *

He came around the corner onto a wider part of Haight Street, and into a march.

There were hundreds of people, and they were singing. A young man with a beard pushed a cardboard sign into his hands without stopping, and kept walking.

The courier looked at the sign.

MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR

He read it twice. Then he caught up to the nearest marcher, a woman about his own age with a flower behind her ear.

“These are not mutually exclusive operational categories,” he said.

“Sorry?” she said.

“The sign presents them as alternatives,” said the courier.

“They are alternatives,” she said. “That’s the point. You can choose. You can choose to stop hurting people.” She looked at him, at his Army shirt and the way he walked. “You just get back?”

“Affirmative,” said the courier.

She didn’t say anything else. She took his free hand for a moment, squeezed it, let it go, and walked on.

The courier stopped in the middle of the street, holding the sign, while the march went around him.

He thought about the ditch, and the old woman with the canteen. He thought about Eddie’s empty bed. Nobody had ever told him it was a choice.

He carried the sign for the rest of the march.

* * *

At the end of the day, he started asking for Ritchie.

He asked a man selling newspapers. He asked two girls on a stoop. He asked a man sitting in a doorway playing a flute.

“Ritchie?” said the man with the flute. “Which Ritchie? There’s like nine Ritchies.”

“Freckles,” the courier said. “A helmet too large for his head. He laughs at this courier.”

The flute man squinted up at him.

“Oh,” he said. “*That* Ritchie.”

Chapter 5: Contact

Violation: Physical Contact. Class 1. Status: Repeated.

The house was purple, with yellow trim and a front door painted like a sunrise. Music was coming out of every window, and none of it was the same song.

The courier knocked.

The door opened. Ritchie stood there in bare feet and a T-shirt, no helmet, his hair already growing over his ears. He looked at the courier. His mouth fell open.

"No," Ritchie said. "*No*."

"This courier has arrived in San Francisco," said the courier.

Ritchie started to laugh. It started out like the laugh in the ditch, and then it turned into something else. He grabbed the courier by both shoulders, pulled him through the door and hugged him.

The courier stood perfectly still with his arms at his sides, like a coat rack somebody had decided to hug.

"Spook!" Ritchie shouted into the house. "Everybody! The spook's here! The guy from the ditch!"

* * *

There were four people living in the house, or nine, depending on the night. That evening there were Ritchie; Mama Jean, who was fifty and owned the house and cooked for everyone; Lou, who

played guitar badly and constantly; and Sunny, who was nineteen and barefoot and wore bells on her ankles.

Sunny took one look at the courier and smiled.

"I love you," she said.

The courier took a step back.

Over the next hour, he watched her say it to Lou, to Mama Jean, to the mailman, to a cat that came in through the window and to a pot of soup. Nobody else seemed concerned.

Every single time, she started with the word "I." That night, he filed a Linguistic Violation report on her behalf. He did not know where to send it. He left it on her pillow. In the morning she had drawn a flower on it and stuck it on the refrigerator.

* * *

At dinner, Ritchie told the story of the ditch.

He told it standing up and acted out every part: the mortar, the medic, the courier bent over in the middle of the road measuring dirt with a tiny spatula while the whole world shot at him. He did the bullet. He finished face down on the kitchen floor saying "This courier is compromised" in a perfect flat voice.

The whole table was laughing. Lou fell off his chair.

"And then," Ritchie said, wiping his eyes, "he gives me a pill. In the middle of all that. For my *spasms*."

"It was beige Dramamine," the courier said.

"I know! I took it! I slept fourteen hours straight, man. Best sleep of the whole war."

The courier didn't understand why that made everyone laugh even harder. But nobody was pointing at him. They were looking at him the way the men in the hospital circle had, like he was one of them.

* * *

After dinner, Mama Jean put a box on the table in front of him.

It was red. It said CHEEZ-IT.

The courier picked up one of the small orange squares and examined it.

"Composition?" he asked.

"Cheese," Mama Jean said.

"This is not cheese."

"Close enough," said Mama Jean.

He ate it and sat very still for a moment. Then he ate another one, and another, and then he lost count. When he looked down, the box was empty and everyone at the table was watching him.

"How many of these are permitted?" he asked.

"Permitted?" said Mama Jean.

"Per human," said the courier.

Ritchie leaned back in his chair. "Man. It's America."

The courier looked down into the empty box.

"This courier approves of America," he said.

* * *

The next morning Mama Jean handed him a leather jacket.

It was brown and old, soft at the elbows, cracked across the shoulders, and it smelled like rain and somebody else's cigarettes. She had bought it at a church rummage sale for a dollar.

"Here," she said. "You look cold."

The courier held it without putting it on.

"What compensation is required?" he asked.

"None," said Mama Jean.

"Then why are you transferring ownership?"

"Because you need it, honey."

He put the jacket on. It fit.

He spent the rest of the day waiting to find out what she wanted in return. He offered to wash the dishes, and she let him, and that was all. By nightfall he understood that she wasn't going to ask for anything, and somehow that rattled him more than getting shot.

* * *

That evening Sunny found the name.

She was sitting next to him on the front steps, playing with the collar of his new jacket, when she turned it over. Inside, in faded laundry marker, someone had once written a name.

"Arthur," Sunny read.

"That is the previous owner," said the courier.

"Well, it's yours now." She smiled. "Arthur."

"This courier has no personal designation."

"You gotta have a name, man," said Ritchie from the doorway.

"Why?" the courier asked.

"So people know who they're talking to."

"This courier is currently the only courier present."

"Arthur," said Sunny firmly, and from then on that was who he was. Mama Jean called him Arthur. Lou wrote a terrible song called "Arthur." The mailman called him Art. The courier didn't see why any of them needed it. But when somebody called "Arthur" from the kitchen, he got up.

* * *

"One thing," Ritchie said, a week later, as they walked down Haight Street. "Rule one on this street. Never give the cops your real name, man."

"Why?" asked the courier.

"Trust me," said Ritchie.

The courier logged it as a directive.

* * *

Three days later, the courier was stopped by the police for gardening.

Technically, the mission was still on. He had no harvesters left and no way to collect anything. But nobody had ever canceled Sub-Directive 4B, and this was a new location. So on Tuesday morning he knelt beside a little dirt planter around a tree on Haight Street, took out his beige spatula and began measuring out three grams of soil.

A shadow fell across the planter.

He looked up. A police officer was standing over him, big and pink-faced, with his thumbs in his belt. Behind the officer was a storefront, and over the storefront was a painted sign:

BOB'S HARDWARE

"What are you doing?" the officer asked.

"Collecting a sample," said the courier.

"Of what?"

"Dirt."

The officer looked at the spatula. He looked at the tiny bag. He looked at the long-haired people walking by, some of whom were clearly carrying things in tiny bags that were not dirt.

"Name," the officer said.

The courier opened his mouth to say Arthur.

Never give the cops your real name, man.

He closed his mouth.

He had never made anything up in his life. Every name he'd ever had was given to him, by a tank, by the Ministry, by a jacket. For a moment his mind went completely beige.

His eyes went to the sign over the officer's shoulder.

"Bob," he said.

"Bob what?" said the officer.

His eyes went back to the sign.

"...Hardware."

The officer's eyes narrowed. "Where you from, Bob?"

A Volkswagen bus pulled up at the red light behind the officer. It was painted with flowers and peace signs, and across its whole side, in tall letters, it said MAKE LOVE NOT WAR.

"Make Love Not War," said the courier.

"*Where?*" said the officer.

The light changed. The bus pulled away. The courier lifted his spatula and pointed after it.

The officer turned around and watched the bus drive off down Haight Street. He watched until it turned the corner. Then he turned back and looked down at the courier.

"Get out of here, Bob," he said.

The courier walked home. Halfway there, he had to stop and lean on a lamppost, because something odd was happening in his chest. He felt warm all over, like he'd eaten a whole box of Cheez-Its.

He filed the report standing up.

Self-Violation Report: Deliberate Falsehood
Classification: Severe
Emotional Response: Unexpected Satisfaction
Status: Logged

Walter had been right. The trick was playing the cards you weren't dealt.

* * *

On Friday, Ritchie took him to a poetry night.

It was in a basement coffeehouse on Grant Avenue, so full of smoke the courier could barely see the little stage. A young man in a black turtleneck was reading a poem about a refrigerator. When he finished, nobody clapped. Instead, the whole room snapped their fingers.

The courier made a note: in this room, snapping meant they liked it.

The woman running the night stood up with a clipboard.

"Next up is Danny," she said. "Danny? Where's Danny?"

Danny was not there.

She looked around the room. Her eyes landed on the courier, in his leather jacket at the front table, with his serious face and his Ministry haircut grown halfway out.

"You," she said. "You look like a poet. You're up."

Ritchie pushed him out of his chair.

The courier stood at the microphone, and the room went quiet. He had never performed anything in his life. He had no poem.

What he did have was the report he'd written on Tuesday.

He read it the way he read everything, flat and exact.

"Self-Violation Report. Deliberate Falsehood. Classification: Severe. Emotional Response: Unexpected Satisfaction. Status: Logged."

He looked up. Nobody made a sound.

Then the whole room began to snap. It went on for a long time. A woman at the front table was wiping her eyes. A man with a beard stood up.

"Man," the bearded man said. "That's *deep*."

"This courier was reporting a violation," said the courier.

"Exactly, man," said the bearded man, sitting down slowly. "*Exactly*."

The courier stood at the microphone while they snapped for him. He had no idea what he'd done, but he didn't want them to stop.

* * *

The Sunday after that, they all went to Golden Gate Park.

Mama Jean brought sandwiches. Lou brought his guitar. Sunny brought flowers for everyone's hair, including the courier's, and he allowed it. They found a meadow full of wildflowers and lay in the grass, and the courier lay down on his back, carefully, for the first time in three months.

The sky was blue. There were clouds in it.

He watched them drift by. None of them was shaped like anything useful. One of them looked like a rabbit.

Lou had borrowed a Polaroid camera. Late in the afternoon he stood up and waved everyone together.

"Picture! Come on. Everybody in."

They squeezed together in the flowers. Sunny pulled the courier into the middle. Ritchie threw an arm around his shoulders. Mama Jean held onto Sunny. Lou knelt in the grass in front of them with the camera to his eye.

"Okay," Ritchie said. "Okay, everybody smile. Everybody say it with me."

They had all heard the ditch story six times by now. They knew exactly what to say.

All of them, at once, in perfect flat robot voices, said:

"OPTIMIZATION IS FREEDOM. EMOTION IS INEFFICIENCY."

And for the first time, the courier heard it the way Ritchie had heard it in the ditch: his friends, with flowers in their hair, in a meadow in the sun, chanting the most serious words in his world in voices like broken robots.

And he laughed.

It came out of him all at once, loud and helpless. He doubled over. He could not stop. Tears were running down his face. He was holding onto Ritchie and Sunny, both arms around them, and he did not let go.

Lou pressed the button, and the camera clicked.

* * *

The picture slid out of the front of the camera, and Lou peeled it apart, and they all crowded around and watched the colors come up out of nothing.

There they were. Four people in a field of flowers. And in the middle, holding onto everyone, his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth wide open, laughing, was a man in a leather jacket.

The courier couldn't stop looking at it.

"The device has captured a moment," he said.

"That's what cameras do," said Lou.

"But the moment no longer exists," said the courier.

Sunny put her head on his shoulder.

"Sure it does," she said. "Right there."

He thought about Eddie and the photograph of his wife. *So I don't forget her face.*

Now he understood why someone would keep it.

* * *

That night, after everyone was asleep, he walked back to the meadow alone with the Polaroid, the beacon and the report he had been writing for three months.

The report was long. He had written it in his best Ministry format on yellow paper from Mama Jean's kitchen drawer, and it had everything in it, including his recommendation.

He sat down in the grass, turned the Polaroid over and wrote something on the back in careful block letters. It took him a while. He had to start one of the words twice.

Then he activated the beacon.

The air in front of him folded. A tall ring of light opened in the middle of the meadow, humming. Through it he could see a beige room, a beige floor and the edge of a control desk.

He stood up and looked through the ring at all that beige.

Then he folded the Polaroid inside the report and pushed them through.

The beacon had a small screen. It asked him for a final status, and it offered three choices: NOMINAL, COMPROMISED and TERMINATED.

He typed in a fourth.

SAMPLES COLLECTED: 0
MISSION STATUS: ABANDONED
CURRENT STATUS: HAPPY

The ring of light closed.

The courier stood alone in the meadow in the dark. The rabbit-shaped cloud was gone. There were stars.

He walked home. Somebody had left the porch light on.

Chapter 6: Retrieval

Violation: Class 3 Linguistic. Status: Sealed.

The Ministry, 2114

Back when his seventy-two hours ran out, the Aperture had opened right on schedule at the spot where he landed. It looked out on an empty road in the rain, next to a smoking hole. Nobody came through. Procedure said to wait for the beacon, so the Ministry waited. It waited three months.

The alarm in the Aperture Hall went off at 11:52.

"Contingency signal," said the technician at the control desk. "Courier 1104. His beacon."

The supervisor came out of his office. "Location?"

"San Francisco," said the technician. "Confirmed."

"Then he made it," said the supervisor.

Junior Clerk Octavia stood by the equipment table with her checklist. On it was the list she had read to him three months earlier: *Harvesters, three. Beacon, one. Spatula, one.* She had brought it in case anything came back that needed checking off.

The ring on the far wall began to hum. Through it, for a moment, they could see dark grass, and night, and stars.

Everyone waited for him to step through.

Nobody stepped through.

Instead, something slid out of the ring and landed on the beige floor with a soft slap. It was a thick bundle of paper, folded in half.

The paper was yellow and lined, nothing the Ministry would ever issue, and there was a coffee ring on the top sheet.

The ring closed.

The beacon's last transmission came up on the control screen.

SAMPLES COLLECTED: 0
MISSION STATUS: ABANDONED
CURRENT STATUS: HAPPY

The technician read it twice. Then he looked at the supervisor.

"That isn't one of the options," he said.

* * *

The supervisor picked up the bundle. A small square of stiff paper fell out of it and landed face down by his shoe.

He bent and picked it up, and turned it over.

Octavia, across the room, couldn't see what it was. She could only see the supervisor's face, and it didn't change. It was a Ministry face. But he held the photograph a little farther away from himself than he needed to.

He turned it back over. On the back, in careful block letters, someone had written:

I AM STAYING.
TELL THEM IT IS BEAUTIFUL.

* * *

"Class 3 violation," the supervisor said at last.

The technician stood up. "Sir?"

"He used the word *I*. In writing." The supervisor slid the photograph back into the bundle without looking at it again. "Seal it."

"Shouldn't someone read the report first?" the technician asked.

"No," said the supervisor.

The supervisor stood in the middle of the Hall, holding the bundle, and dictated a memo to the room.

"Effective immediately. Emotional reports will continue to be filed. They will not be read."

The technician typed it. The screen accepted it. It went out to every department in the Ministry before 11:58.

Then the supervisor turned and held the bundle out to the nearest person who was not essential.

"Clerk."

Octavia stepped forward.

"Take this to the Sealed Archive," he said. "File it. Do not read it."

"Understood," said Octavia.

She took it. It was heavier than it looked. Through the paper she could feel the stiff little square of the photograph, and she held the bundle carefully against her chest, so nothing would fall out.

She took the elevator eleven floors down to the Sealed Archive, where the Ministry kept everything it had taken away. It was cold at the bottom. A gray-haired archivist stamped the cover in red: OPERATION NATURAL SOURCE. 2114. STATUS: FAILURE. FINAL REPORT: UNREAD. He handed her the stamp for the receiving line, and she pressed it.

RECEIVED AND SEALED: JUNIOR CLERK OCTAVIA

Then she rode the elevator back up, and at 12:15 she ate her Paste.

She did not read the file. She had been instructed not to.

Chapter 7: Twenty-Three Years Later

Violation: Unauthorized Curiosity. Class 2.

The Ministry, 2137

Twenty-three years later, the end of the human race came up on the agenda at 12:10, right after corridor lighting and right before lunch.

The junior clerk was Minister Prime Octavia now, the highest official in the Ministry. She sat at the head of the table in Conference Room 9 with the six other members of the Continuity Committee, all in beige, all with the same haircut, while an analyst from the Fertility Bureau read from a single sheet of paper.

"Final viability assessment," the analyst said. "Male genetic material. All remaining units."

The screen on the wall lit up.

SPERM VIABILITY: 0.000%
TREND: STABLE

Six members of the committee clapped, three times each. The Ministry loved a zero. Zero incidents. Zero complaints.

Octavia didn't clap. She was looking at the number, trying to work out what bothered her about it. Every zero she had ever seen in that room meant a problem had been taken care of. This one meant they had run out of men.

“Item 4,” said the Chair. “Species continuity. The Bureau recommends acceptance.”

“Acceptance of what?” Octavia asked.

The analyst checked his paper, although there was only one line on it. “Extinction, Minister.”

“How long do we have?”

“The last clones wear out in about sixty years,” the analyst said.

“Motion to accept extinction,” said the member from Supply.

“Seconded,” said the member next to him.

“All in favor?” said the Chair.

Six hands went up, all to exactly the same height.

Octavia’s hand stayed on the table.

Everyone looked at it. After a moment, the member from Supply leaned over, lifted her wrist about an inch, and let go. It dropped back onto the table.

“Minister Prime,” said the Chair, “your hand is down.”

“Yes,” said Octavia. “This minister is opposed.”

“On what grounds?”

“Insufficient data.”

“The data is zero,” the Chair said.

“Zero tells us what happened,” said Octavia. “It doesn’t tell us why.”

The clock on the wall clicked over to 12:14, and six heads turned to look at it.

“We’ll finish the vote after lunch,” the Chair said, already getting up.

“The species—” Octavia began.

“Will still be here at 12:45,” said the Chair, and he was gone.

The other five lined up at the Nutrient Wall. At 12:15 it went *blorp* six times and dispensed six servings of Paste (Beige, 200 calories, chew-optional). They ate standing up, facing the wall, their sporks going up and down together.

Octavia stayed at the table. She was thinking about the Sealed Archive.

She had been down there once in her life, as a junior clerk, carrying a bundle of yellow paper she had been told not to read. She had never stopped knowing it was there. She opened an access request on the table screen, and under REASON she typed: *Insufficient data.*

REQUEST APPROVED.
PRIOR REQUESTS ON FILE: 0

At 12:45 the committee came back and voted to end the human race. It took eleven seconds. Then they moved on to the spork rotation, which took forty minutes.

By then, Octavia's chair was empty.

* * *

The elevator took its time going down. The lights flickered twice. At the bottom, the doors opened halfway and stuck, and Octavia squeezed through sideways.

The Sealed Archive was cold and dark and smelled like dust. Shelves ran back farther than the light could reach. Near the elevator stood a desk, a lamp and a very old man in a beige cardigan, asleep in his chair.

His eyes opened. He saw her. He jumped up so fast that his chair fell over.

He picked up the chair, set it upright and straightened his cardigan.

"This archivist," he said, "is entirely neutral about your arrival."

Under the desk, his left foot was tapping.

He looked down at it and pressed it flat with his other foot. It went on tapping. So he took a form out of the drawer and filled it in while she watched.

Self-Violation Report: Excessive Enthusiasm
Classification: Involuntary (Left Foot)
Status: Logged and Ignored

He dropped it in a tray marked OUTGOING. The tray was full to the top.

"This minister is looking for anything on male reproduction," Octavia said. "Before the decline."

The archivist took his lamp and led her back into the shelves.

They walked past crates stamped CONFISCATED. One was labeled BIRTHDAY CARDS (UNOPENED). Another was labeled MUSIC (ALL). Something under a gray sheet had a brass horn sticking out of the top, and as they passed it, the archivist reached up and tucked the sheet in a little tighter, the way you'd tuck a blanket around someone asleep.

A framed photograph lay face down on one of the shelves. Octavia reached for it.

"Please don't turn that over," the archivist said.

She left it where it was.

At the very back, the shelves ended at a single gray cabinet. The archivist pulled out a drawer, ran his finger along the tabs and stopped.

"Reproduction, male," he said. "There is only one."

The folder was thick, and heavier than it looked. The cover had been stamped in red:

OPERATION NATURAL SOURCE
2114
STATUS: FAILURE
FINAL REPORT: UNREAD

Below that, in smaller letters:
RECEIVED AND SEALED: JUNIOR CLERK OCTAVIA
Octavia stood looking at her own name.

“You were the clerk,” the archivist said quietly. “This archivist remembers. You carried it like it might break.”

“This minister was told to file it,” said Octavia, “and not to read it.”

“And you didn’t.”

“No.”

The archivist nodded. Then he walked all the way back to his desk with the lamp, and came back with the lamp and his chair.

She didn’t take the chair. She sat down on the cold floor of the Sealed Archive, broke the seal and started to read.

Chapter 8: Octavia Reads It

Violation: Self-Violation Report Suppressed by Its Author.

The Sealed Archive, 2137

She read it by the light of the archivist's lamp.

The report began with his equipment, listed exactly the way she had once read it to him: *Harvesters, three. Beacon, one. Spatula, one.* She remembered his face. She had wished him efficient travel.

Then came the mud, and the rain, and the old woman with the canteen, and the three grams of dirt.

He had attached the United States Army's psychiatric file, in carbon copy, because the regulations said the patient got a copy. She read Major Feld's notes, and Major Haskins's notes, with *GRANDIOSE* underlined twice. She read the title page of a paper by a Captain Pruitt: *The Man from 2114.*

She read about Eddie's photograph.

She read about Section 14, paragraph 2.

She read about the pastrami, the peach, the chocolate factory and the march. She read about a jacket that cost nothing. She read that his name was now Arthur. She read about a man named Bob Hardware, from Make Love Not War, and she put her hand over her mouth and kept it there.

The archivist sat in his chair at the end of the aisle, carefully not looking at her. Every few minutes he cleared his throat as if he were about to ask how far she'd gotten, and then didn't.

* * *

Near the end of the report there was an addendum.

ADDENDUM: LAB SECTOR B, 2114

On the morning of departure, this courier observed Tank #7429 (HERBERT GOMEZ) exhibit an unauthorized physical response. A smile. Also the other one.

This courier did not report it.

This courier now understands why. The subject was not malfunctioning. He was a man, and he was happy.

This courier recommends that no one report it.

Octavia read the addendum twice.

Herbert Gomez was still in his tank, upstairs in Lab Sector B. He was the last man the Ministry had, and at 12:45 that afternoon, the committee had voted his species out of existence.

It was 04:10 in the morning. There was no signal in the Sealed Archive, and there never had been. She kept reading.

* * *

The last page was his recommendation. It was the only page he had typed, in proper Ministry format, on a typewriter he must have borrowed.

> MISSION RECOMMENDATION: DO NOT SEND ADDITIONAL PERSONNEL.
> REASON: THEY MAY REFUSE TO RETURN.
> SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION: SEND MORE CHEEZ-ITS.

Octavia didn't know what Cheez-Its were. She read the line three times anyway.

When she unfolded the last page, the photograph slid out into her lap.

* * *

Four people in a field of flowers, under a blue sky with clouds in it: a barefoot girl with bells on her ankles, a big woman with a kind face, a skinny man with freckles, and in the middle, holding onto all of them with his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth wide open, the courier she had checked off twenty-three years ago. He was wearing a leather jacket and had flowers in his hair.

He was laughing.

She had never seen anyone laugh. She had walked past the poster, CLONE SMILING IS NO LAUGHING MATTER, every morning of her adult life, but she had never seen the real thing. It looked nothing like the poster. It looked dangerous, and she couldn't stop looking at it.

She turned it over.

I AM STAYING.
TELL THEM IT IS BEAUTIFUL.

The first word was *I*.

That word had been retired before Octavia was printed. She had never seen it written down by someone who meant it.

She sat on the floor of the Sealed Archive, holding the photograph in both hands, and something she had no name for happened to her face.

* * *

After a while she took a form from her sleeve and filled it out.

Self-Violation Report: Ocular Moisture (Bilateral)
Classification: Unknown
Status: Suppressed by Its Author

She folded it twice and put it back in her sleeve, where no one would ever process it.

Then she asked the archivist for paper. He brought her a stack of blank forms from his desk, and she turned the first one over and began to write on the back.

When her pen ran out, he brought her another. He didn't ask what she was writing. He just held the lamp a little higher so she could see.

She wrote for two hours.

She did exactly what the courier had told them not to do. She planned a second mission, built out of everything that had gone wrong with his.

He had gone alone. *Three clones. No one alone.*

He had arrived unarmed. *One armed asset.*

He had landed 7,800 miles from his target. *Coordinates verified on arrival, before any other action.*

He had been touched, and fed, and given things, and called by a name, and it had changed him. *No emotional contamination. At no point will physical contact occur.*

His technology had failed in the first hour. *Analog contingency kits.*

He had stayed. *Hard time limit: 180 hours.*

At the top of the page she wrote the destination: San Francisco, 1968. It was the only year the Aperture had ever reached. It was also where he was, but she didn't write that part down.

* * *

When she stood up, her legs had gone stiff. The archivist walked her back through the shelves to the elevator, and she handed him the file, sealed again. She kept her plan. She kept the photograph too. It was in her sleeve, next to the report no one would ever process.

The archivist looked at her sleeve, then at her face, then at the OUTGOING tray on his desk, full to the top.

He took a form from his drawer and filled it in while she watched.

Self-Violation Report: Theft Observed
Items Observed: None
Status: Logged and Ignored

He put it in the tray. Then he pressed the button for the elevator, and held the door for her while it stuck.

When the doors had closed and the elevator had begun its long climb, the archivist took his lamp and walked back into the shelves. He stopped at the framed photograph lying face down.

He stood there a moment. Then he turned it face up, and left it that way.

Chapter 9: The Smile

Violation: Unauthorized Smile. Category Red.

The Ministry, 2137

When Octavia got back to her office, there was one new message on her desk screen. It was from Lab Sector B, time-stamped 06:18.

TANK #7429 (HERBERT GOMEZ): CATEGORY RED.
UNAUTHORIZED SMILE. ASSOCIATED PHYSICAL RESPONSE.
DECOMMISSIONED BY DIRECTOR DAYSA.

It was 06:31.

She typed an order anyway: *Halt termination of Tank #7429.*

The screen took a moment.

ORDER RECEIVED: 06:31.
TERMINATION COMPLETED: 06:18.

Octavia sat down at her desk.

She took the photograph out of her sleeve and looked at the man in the middle of it, laughing in the flowers. She thought about Herbert Gomez smiling in his tank, the way he had smiled twenty-three years ago when a courier four steps away had looked at the wall and said nothing.

This time, somebody had reported it.

She read the name on the message again. *Director Daysa.* A woman who had seen a man smile and pressed a button, because

that was what the rules said. A woman who had never seen a field of flowers either.

Octavia put the photograph back in her sleeve.

If anyone needed to see what the courier had seen, it was the woman who had pressed the button.

Octavia opened the summons form and typed three names. She put Daysa's first.

MINISTRY SUMMONS
07:00
DIRECTOR DAYSA. RESEARCHER HULA. ASSET PHOEBE.
OPERATION: NATURAL SOURCE RECOVERY.

She sent it.

* * *

San Francisco, 1968

On Haight Street it was a bright, loud morning, and the man everyone called Arthur was running.

He was not running from anything. Mama Jean had sent him to the corner for bananas, and he was bringing two back, one in each hand, and he was running because he could. His stitches had healed months ago. It seemed like he had not worn a shirt since June. His hair had grown down past his collar and kept going, and Sunny had stopped trying to braid it.

He was singing Lou's song about Arthur, badly, at the top of his lungs.

He jogged past the alley behind the Sunflower Apothecary just as the air in it folded and shimmered, like heat over a road. Three women in beige jumpsuits blinked into existence beside the dumpsters, very straight and very still, squinting into the sun.

He did not notice them.

He was too happy.

Behind him, a flat, careful voice said, “This asset suspects the target era is emotionally unstable.”

He did not turn around. He was already at the corner, a banana in each hand, singing.

* * *

Their story begins in Hippies and Clones.

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One Small Favor

The Ministry would want you to report this.

> Self-Violation Report: Enjoyment of Unauthorized Fiction
> Classification: Contagious
> Status: Logged and Enjoyed

If this story made you laugh, or made your face do something you have no classification for, the story continues in *Hippies and Clones*. When you finish it, please leave an honest review on Amazon. One sentence is plenty. Reviews are how other readers find books like these.

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Thank you for reading. —Chuck