

## The Berkeley Hotel

(pp. 183-190 of *Frameshifts, vol.2*)

Lord, please do not disclose your will.  
Do not disclose your will.  
To range, like protists radial  
In timeless water,  
Let sluggish natures reel reel, reel, and be swirled.  
Disclose no plan of yours  
But show how you explore the world.

—Tom Farley, Waltz from *The Profit of Doom*

A guard was posted outside the room. Jumping from the window of the Berkeley Hotel obviously seemed as improbable to his keepers as it did to Henson. Four floors below, a three-hundred-pound man was eating a moon pie in front of the old tobacco warehouse on Carey Street. Henson wondered why Agent Smythe had brought him to Richmond. Before leaving, General Van Steeveninck, his old boss, had stopped by to give him a memorable two-word sendoff. Two visitors entered without knocking, Smythe and a stooped, elderly man who shuffled behind a walker.

"Take a look, Dr. Singer. We've given him a shave."

Squinting at the bright window behind Henson, the old man said, "Say something."

"Hello, Larry." Hank said.

Hank remembered Larry, a freshman seventy years ago in Science for Liberal Arts. Larry always sat in front, giving a full view of the port-wine birthmarks on his cheek and neck. The birthmark was all he remembered about Larry.

"He looks the same." Singer said. "Is this a trick? I am not well and if this is a trick--"

"It is a kind of trick, Larry, but I am Hank Randall. As least, I'm as much Randall as I am Henson. Identity tends to be less interesting after a few lifetimes. Good to see you again. You became a teacher?"

Alvarez opened the door behind Singer.

"Literature. Forty years. But how--"

"Have a seat, Larry."

Hank offered him a chair, but Agent Smythe stepped between them.

"That's fine, Dr. Singer. Agent Alvarez will drive you back to Shadybrook. You've been very helpful." Dr. Singer teetered backwards, waving the walker.

Hank took his arm and their eyes met.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Singer said. "Yes, it is me."

Singer shook his head. "No, it was you who gave me the idea to make my classroom a studio." Singer's cloudy blue eyes focused on some other place and time. "I did, you know."

Alvarez guided him to the door. Singer looked back at Hank as the door closed. "I did make it a studio. It was a joy."

Agent Smythe sat on the bed, wiped his bald head with a handkerchief, and laid the valise on his knees.

"Please sit down, Dr. Randall. How about this: You tell me what you've been doing for the last fifty years so that I don't have to ask."

"Glad to, Agent Smythe. You could say that I've been guiding an idea. Mostly, one doesn't get the opportunity. We all make ideas about the way things are, and how people are, and so forth. We live on our ideas for a long time—maybe a lifetime. They become more real for us than anything we feel about the world. In a way, it's a kind of general human deficiency in maintaining attention to life. We are so unsteady. The flashes of insight, poems, riffs, and burning bushes that come our way all dissipate like the taste of breakfast. Even disasters that strip us of every dear association finally dissipate. We return to our old ideas—more real than the quivering heart of a sparrow in our hands, the delicate whistling of breath through our sinuses, or the soft squelch of marsh mud under our feet. Alive in our ideas—so alive that we even become characters in our own stories—we fasten onto thoughts as if they were pietons on which our lives are suspended. But after a second or third lifetime, one's attention shifts. You awaken. You learn the use of your senses. You attend. You consider the propositions your body makes concerning the way things are. Most are ill-informed. Only some of them require action. I must tell you: we are not on a climb. We are suspended like swirling protists 'in timeless water,' as a friend of mine wrote. Pope called

our condition a 'middling state.' Whatever it is, it's not a climb. It's an exploration, a wide-ranging exploration. How does one attend to it—the ins and outs of it, the zooms, the magnitudes of it?

Always, always there is a next. And one must always deal with one next thing, then another. But also, there are always saints—partners. I call them the Fellowship of the Attentive. "So, this idea of mine got loose, but I had the chance to get in front of it for awhile so that I seemed to be leading. What usually happens when an idea escapes is—you lose it. The first human to use a word for 'grabbing' or 'seizing'—probably something like 'TAG'—never knew how his word would later branch and flow into 'TOUCH' and 'TAX' and 'TANGO.' But what happened to me was different. "Because I have aged slowly, I have had a long time to track my ideas and to watch my judgment. It flails about. We think ourselves so sure, so well linked to how things are. But in time, every idea loses its moorings. It must. Human experience goes on without us. Corrections are made. Humans are in perpetual rehearsals. Glorious isn't it?"

Smythe was silent, so Hank continued.

"Experience is all we have. The mysteries we encounter are only our ignorance—and challenges. We are made to explore and rehearse and inquire—not to want and conflict and acquire."

Smythe wiped his head again. "Doctor, I'm not a philosopher. Can you break it down? Tell me why you sabotaged your own agency. Explain why you left the papers and photos in the valise."

Hank stood up. "Yes, you must be the Interrogator now. I understand. We are a swirling exchange of roles, identities, and parts—all of us in each of us. We are our ideas about ourselves. As Tom's song goes, 'We move from part to part. And what endures, derives, residual, from what injures.' However complex the adaptation—a jaw more gracile, permitting speech; a shape more segmented, permitting separable movements; an expression more elegant, permitting new geometries—each is a stage for what comes next. Like brokered deals, our roles are the settlements reached after thousands of unseen transactions. You must be the Interrogator. So interrogate!

"Do what you are suited for. Probe your heights and depths. Join your sainted partners, the fellowship of sleuths who attentively perform mystery plays in drawing rooms, crime scenes, and village socials. None of you believes that mystery is anything but ignorance. Presumptions, fallacies, and unobserved trifles bring you joy. You invite us to witness the evidence of 'what we have seen, and heard,

and touched with our hands concerning the word of life.' And, for at least an episode, you right the imbalances between the seen and unseen worlds."

Hank slumped forward on the couch. Smythe shouted for Alvarez. After two hours, Hank sat up in bed. Smythe and Alvarez stood nearby.

"Usually I have better control," Hank said. "Since I became a chimera, I sleep more and more. My old Cherokee friend would have said to stop resisting. 'Enter the dreamtime with all the Earth's other peoples—the deer, green lacewings, sedges, hills, and lost beloveds.' But I resist. "The sluggish tardigrade in me gives health and life in exchange for diminishing wakefulness. It's a good deal. I usually know when I'm about to drop off, but sometimes I become excited and forget."

Hank took the salad from the bed stand. "Dandelion greens and chives! Your idea, Agent Alvarez?"

Alvarez smiled and nodded.

"Okay. Just the facts now. Right, Agent Smythe? Here's the evidence for your report: "The subject was a sleeper agent—a mole, if you like—for an extremist organization occupying a vast compound in rural Virginia. Apparently a millennialist cult with an apocalyptic message, it colluded with the S&U corporation for federal appropriations to finance its activities. The subject managed the federal contracts and gave the Northern Region funding to establish autonomy from regulatory control and taxation. He also assisted in seeding other states and countries with extremist cells, such as the Southwest Salvage Region, centered in Santa Fe."

Hank sipped his water. "How am I doing, gentlemen?"

Smythe frowned. "S&U fronts for the Temple Independents?"

"Oh, no." Hank sat on the edge of the bed and pulled up his socks. "The Salvage holds all the cards—the research park, the shares of S&U, and even the Board of Faith and Practice—although they are slow to realize it. But all the Salvage did was to hold some variables constant long enough to install their ideas. They froze the deck. Now the Salvage has already made its next move—and its last. Things are going quite well. Avery would have been pleased." "You mean Avery Crawley—the cult's founder?"

Smythe took out a notebook, even though the recorder was running. "Yes. As Avery explained it, I was restoring the funds to their original purpose of providing security. Do the great Defenders create security by attacking nomads on the oil fields of Samarkand, or sending an aircraft carrier to India to protect a corn monopoly? Is this providing for the common defense? Were we more secure after reserve units put down the mobs on the East Coast, angered by the loss of their towns during the last ten years of neglect? Defenders call this security, but it feels like a distraction and an imbalance. And what of the other kinds of securities held by the investors in oil and corn monopolies, the disaster-speculators, and the other corporations deemed more important than attention to our own people, our own coastlands, our own future? What secures them? Shiny metal in a vault? Did any of the Defenders' costly arms, military occupations, or preemptive wars correct imbalances and create long term security for all the People in the vessel of the Earth?" Smythe and Alvarez nodded and walked toward the window. "There's nothing new about creative reallocation of appropriations," Hank said. "Defenders have done it for years. They have a long history of frightening self-justifications. I remember many of them, such as Tin Balloon, missile gaps, remembering the Maine, the Yellow Peril, various domino theories, destroying weapons of mass destruction, manifest destiny, the red menace, mutually assured destruction, the war to end wars, and the war on terror. Now it's 'the yellow wave.' All shams and distractions.

"Committed as they were to protection, preservation, and defense, the Defenders repeatedly left us in undefendable situations without protection and fewer values to preserve. After all the great distractions, waste, and indecision of our Defenders, a correction was needed. Herr Schumpeter might have called it a 'creative destruction.' But how does one link human imagination and innovation to life-promoting change instead of weapons research and distribution? My reallocations to the Salvage were actually spent on life-promoting security—not on slogans like 'war is peace,' 'business is freedom,' 'weapons are protection,' and 'corporations are persons.' "

Hank took a shirt from his backpack and put his arm into the sleeve. "Proof of this will come when Operation Breakaway breaks down as soon as troops enter the Northern Region. You should mention this to General Van Steeveninck, by the way."

"How do you know about Operation Breakaway?" Smythe said, gazing at the flowering tree outside the hotel window.

"I read Fragmentary Order 14803A." Hank buttoned his shirt, tucked it in, and slipped on a pair of jeans. He left the beach togs hanging in the closet and put his backpack by the door. "That's when I decided to retire from the Agency. All this bother is superfluous, you know. The Salvage will soon shut down. I went to the newspapers to undermine Van Steeveninck's pretext for the operation. Breakaway has nothing to do with rescuing Dr. Brooks from a cult. It's only about capturing MT technology to use as a weapon. What a surprise for the Defenders! Anyone capturing the viral crown will be captured by it."

Agent Alvarez took a manuscript from the valise and read aloud: "Unsevered leaves, still sunned in golden fall above Foxglove's separating wall; unsevered leaves, no more tip-edge of reach, still held and sunned; like some archaic speech—"

"Yes," Hank said. "That's the crown. The Apocalogeny Division couldn't figure it out more than seventy years ago. They knew that it coded the viroid nucleotide sequence used in the micronized transponder. Of course, they didn't understand that it is a kind of supplement to correct the widespread human deficiency in maintaining attention to life. Like Van Steeveninck, they only wanted control. Did your cryptographers have any luck with it?"

The agents were silent, both of them quietly reading the poem.

Hank put on his coat and went to the door. "Didn't think so. It was written by Tom Farley, who recently passed away. It's a good lesson for your cryptographers, but the Salvage doesn't need it anymore. The Installation is finished. And the Correction is underway.

And, you know, even I have visions now. Avery used to say he 'felt the doom,' but for me, it's the feeling of being one of thousands of motes dancing in a viscous suspension—slowly sinking, perhaps, but too occupied with the patterns of the dance to notice anything but the honey-sweetness of life, the flickering lights between the dancers disappearing and reappearing—with seconds or centuries between them—and all of the intricate steps of entrances, ensembles, loops, and closings which can only be understood by being in the dance, in the Fellowship of the Attentive. It's my idea of the communion of saints. Perhaps you join it now. The viroid was only our preceptor, our Dadouchos to the divine path. We only understand when we join the dance, as you may be doing now. Understanding no longer comes through boosted signals from viroids, but rather, through contact with those of us who carry the signal. In

fact—" Hank opened the door, picked up his backpack, and looked at the two agents, as they smiled at the treetops outside the window. "I think that you gentlemen understand what I mean."