

Free Radicals

A Novel of Utopia and Dystopia

Zeke Teflon

See Sharp Press  Tucson, Arizona

“[A]mong the best future-shock reads in years. . . .

If we lived in the ‘60s and ‘70s—when audience-rattling paperbacks like *Naked Lunch* were cheap, plentiful and available on pharmacy-spinner racks—critics would hail *Free Radicals* as a masterpiece.”

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—westernsfa.org

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813.6

This book is dedicated to



Glossary of Spanish Terms Used in the Text

AL, phr. An elision of “a” and “el”: “to the.”

BACANORA, n. Home-brewed tequila.

BOBOSO, n. A drooling idiot.

BUENO, adj. The usual Mexican answer to a phone call. Literally, “good.” Corresponds to “hello.”

BUENOS DÍAS, phr. Good day.

CABRÓN, n. Asshole. Son of a bitch. Literally “big male goat,” which refers to the goat’s horns, corresponding to the horns of a cuckold.

CAUDILLO, n. Big boss, chief. (Normally used in a political sense.)

CERVEZA, n. Beer.

CHILAQUILES, n. A breakfast dish. Fried (usually stale) tortilla strips drenched in salsa and sometimes also with melted cheese.

CHINGAR, v. (Mexican slang) To fuck.

CHINGASO, adj. (Mexican slang) Fucked up; messed up. n., A punch.

CHUPA LA VERGA, imp. phr. Suck my dick. Literally, “Suck the dick.” (In Spanish, body parts are never referred to with possessive pronouns, always with articles.)

CHUPACABRA, n. A folkloric monster. Literally a “goat sucker,” a monster that sucks the blood from and mutilates livestock.

CHUPAVERGA, n. Cocksucker.

CHUY, n. The normal Mexican nickname for “Jesús.” Pronounced “Chew-ee,” with the accent on the first syllable.

COJONES, n. pl. Balls.

COMEMIERDA, n. Shit eater.

COMANDANTE, n. Commander.

COMITÉ, n. Committee.

¿COMO ESTAS?, phr. How are you?

COMPÁ, n. Contraction of “compadre”— pal, bud, bro.

COMPAÑERO, n. Comrade. Informally, “bro.” Often used in political contexts. A bit more familiar than “compadre.”

CON, conj. With.

CONFIANZA, n. Confidence. Trust.

¡COÑO!, int. Shit! A Caribbean-Spanish term.

CORPORADO, n. A company man. (Coined term, not in common use.)

¡CORTA!, imp. Cut! (From the verb “cortar,” “to cut.”)

CULERO, n. A homosexual who has anal sex. (Derived from “culo”— “asshole”)

DEFENSA, n. Defense.

DEL, phr. Of the. (An elision of the words “de, and “el.”)

DISCURSO, n. Speech.

DOLENCIA, n. Ache or longing.

¿DONDE ESTA?, phr. Where is (it, he, she)?

ESE, n. A contraction of “socio”: “associate,” but in common usage “bud,” “pal.” Pronounced almost like “essay.”

ESTIMADOS COMPAÑEROS, phr. Esteemed comrades.

GABACHO/A, n. (Mexican slang) A derogatory term for white people.

GRINGO/A, n. Another derogatory word for non-Mexicans, probably derived from *griego* (“Greek”), as in the Spanish-language equivalent of “it’s all Greek to me.”

GUARDIA, n. Paramilitary police.

HABANERO, n. One of the hottest chiles on earth. So hot that they can cause physical damage and agonizing pain if eaten raw. Habaneros are normally used only in sauces.

HACE UNA SEMANA, phr. A week ago.

HERMANO, n. Brother.

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HIMNO, n. Hymn.

HOMENAJE, n. Homage.

HUEVOS CON CHORIZO, phr. Eggs with highly spiced, usually unencased pork or (less commonly) beef sausage.

HUEVOS FRITOS, n. Fried eggs.

IMPERIALISMO, n. Imperialism.

JUNTANOS, imp. phr. (w/pronoun suffix) Join us.

LANZALLAMAS, n. Flamethrower.

LEVANTATE, imp. phr. (reflexive verb w/pronoun suffix) Get up. Literally, “Get yourself up.”

LÍDER MÁXIMO, n. Maximum leader. (“Líder” is pronounced almost like “leader,” and is one of the many border Spanish terms borrowed from English. “Troque” [pickup truck], “parquear” [to park], and “lunchea” [to eat lunch] are other examples.)

LISTO, adj. Ready.

LO SIENTO, phr. I’m sorry. I regret it. Literally, “I feel it.”

LOCO, adj. Crazy.

MAGNÍFICO, adj. Magnificent.

MALDITO, adj. Damned.

MARICÓN, n. Faggot.

MARTIRES, n. pl. Martyrs.

MÁS, adj. or n. More.

MATERIALISMO DIALÉCTICO, n. Dialectical materialism.

MENUDO, n. Tripe and garbanzo soup. The traditional Mexican hangover recipe.

M’ESTAN MATANDO, phr. (“Me estan matando”) They’re (it’s) killing me.

MIERDA, n. Shit. Often used as an exclamation, as in “¡Que Mierda!” — “What shit!”

MONTUNO, n. A fast, repeating chord pattern played by the keyboard (piano) player in salsa arrangements.

MOTA, n. (Border Spanish slang) Marijuana.

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¡MUERTE A LOS CONTRAREVOLUCIONARIOS!, phr. Death to the counter-revolutionaries!

MÚY, adv. Very.

NARCOS, n. pl. A shortening of “narcocorridos,” a subgenre of the common Mexican corrido, varying from it only in subject matter. Like corridos, narcocorridos are ballads, story songs, but their subject matter deals with drug dealers, smuggling, the cartels, and murder, invariably in a glorifying manner.

NO HAY NADA MÁS, phr. There’s no more.

NOS ESCAPAMOS, phr. We escaped.

NOS LLAMAN, phr. We’re called.

NOVIO/A, n. Boyfriend/girlfriend.

NÚMERO UNO, phr. Number one.

OTRA/O, n. Other. Another. One more.

OTRA VEZ, phr. One more time. Again.

PAPAS FRITAS, n. Fried potatoes.

PA’ TODOS, phr. “Para todos.” For all. For everyone.

PARTIDO, n. Political party.

PELIGRO, n. Danger.

PENDEJO, n. Idiot, moron, dumbshit. Literally, “pubic hair.” Very common, but also mildly offensive. Often used as a term of endearment and familiarity, but when used with strangers it is offensive.

PINCHE, adj. Mean, low down, dirty. A mild curse word roughly corresponding to, but not as crude as, “fucking” in the nonsexual sense in English, as in “no fucking good.”

PRONTO, adv. Quickly. Soon.

PUTO, n. Male whore.

¿QUE PASO?, phr. What’s happening?

¿QUE PIENSES?, phr. What do you think?

QUINCEANERA, n. A coming-out party for Mexican girls at age 15.

REALIDAD, n. Reality.

REGALO, n. Gift.

RÉGIMEN, n. Regime.

REVOLUCIÓN, n. Revolution.

RUSOS, n. pl. Russians.

SABROSO, adj. Flavorful. Tasty.

¡SALUD!, int. The normal Spanish-language toast. Literally, “Health!”
Less literally, “To your health!”

SE ME PARO, phr. (Mexican-American slang) I have a hard on.

SIMPÁTICO, adj. Empathetic.

SOCIALISMO, n. Socialism.

SOMOS REFUGIADOS, phr. We’re refugees.

SUAVE, adj. Smooth. When used with the article “el,” as in “el suave,” it
functions—like all Spanish adjectives—as a noun: “the smooth one.”

TOMATILLO, n. A common Mexican and Southwestern vegetable.

TROQUE, n. (Border Spanish term) Pickup truck.

UN POCO MÁS, phr. A little more.

VAMONOS, imp. phr. (verb w/pronoun suffix). Let’s go.

VATO, n. (Mexican-American slang) This term has no exact translation
in English. The closest thing to it would be “homey” or “homes.” (I once
saw a would-be-hip writer spell the word “holmes,” as in “Sherlock.”)
Sometimes misspelled as “bato.” (“B’s” and “V’s” are pronounced
very similarly in Spanish, hence the occasional misspelling of words
beginning with “V” in border Spanish.)

VECINO/A, n. Neighbor.

VENCEREMOS, v. We will win.

¡VETE A LA CHINGADA!, imp. phr. As commonly used, “Go to hell!”
A very strange phrase that literally means “Go to the fucked female.”
This might refer to the humiliation of Mexican Indian men after their
women were raped by the Spanish during the Conquest.

¡VIVA!, imp. Long live!

VOLVEREMOS, v. We will return.

1

I woke up this mornin' and I got myself a . . .
Well, you can see where this is going . . .

Kel Turner was snoring, one arm dangling down from the couch toward the remnants of last night's dinner—nine mostly empty cans of Schlitz Classic Ice and a greasy pizza box, empty but for a cardboard-like wedge missing several bites and resting against one edge of the box. A few roaches were feasting on the half-eaten piece and the hunks of cheese stuck to the bottom of the box.

Kel stirred. He opened one eye. He screamed.

There, on the end of his nose, antennas wriggling, sat a large, brown sewer roach. Kel levitated a meter into the air as he batted the roach away. He ran to the bathroom and scrubbed his face viciously. Three times.

He filled his his hands with water and emptied them over the top of his head. While smoothing back his hair, he smarted as his hand hit a large knot on the back of his scalp. Where had *that* come from? He carefully put his fingertips on the knot and winced, feeling what seemed like an inch-long cut. He pulled his hand back in front of his face and looked at his fingers. Flecks of blood. He washed and dried his hands, pulled his hair away from the wound again, put his fingertips on the cut, and put them back before his face. This time there was no blood. But it still hurt.

As he walked out of the bathroom, he bumped his knee on the handle of the vanity door; he gasped and reached down. His knee, no, both of his knees, were rubbed raw. What in hell had he done

last night? He turned back to the sink, splashed more water on his face and hair, and muttered, “*Jesus Festering Christ.*”

There were black bags under his eyes, three days’ worth of stubble, long, grey, greasy strands of hair hanging in front of his face, crow’s feet spreading around his eyes like the cracks in drying mud, and a jello-like pot gut he could hold in both hands and jiggle up and down like a lard-filled beach ball. Once you were off Comp-Med, this shit happened *fast*. Kel was only a hundred and eighty centimeters tall, but he easily weighed a hundred kilos, and all too much of it wasn’t muscle.

He grunted in disgust, walked back into the room he called home, and started to pick up empty beer cans. To his surprise, the first one, a can of Schlitz Classic, was almost full; and it would be a shame to waste it. He took a sip. Warm, but not totally flat. It would do.

What the hell time was it? He took a hit of warm beer and blinked a gummy eyelid twice, but his readout didn’t come up. Of course not. When would he stop doing that?

His implants had been wiped in the EMP bursts during The Troubles. Then, it had been nukes exploding above the atmosphere, taking out anything with an unshielded chip for hundreds of miles in all directions. Now, any asshole who could build a half-meter parabolic dish, who knew the meaning of “high energy radio frequency,” and who could tell one end of a soldering iron from the other, could construct a HERF gun, point it in any direction, and fry all of the electronics in its beam that weren’t heavily shielded. So no. No inner-ocular displays.

Kel remembered what it had been like after the first EMP bursts: the feeling of loneliness, of being cut off from the rest of humanity. It had taken him weeks to adjust, and some people never had, like the dust addicts infesting the slumped nano buildings just down the street, shuddering, coughing, staring into space at nonexistent displays. The neuro-stim addicts were even worse, not that there were many still around. The EMP bursts had fried the tissue around their pleasure-center ‘trodes, and most who hadn’t been reduced to drooling cretins had committed suicide within weeks: no way to feel pleasure, no reason to live. Even a lot of people with ordinary

inductive implants and no brain damage had gone bat-shit crazy; some said the abrupt connectivity cut felt like being struck blind. Today, two decades later, all it meant to Kel was that he'd have to learn the time from his wall screen. But that could wait.

He went to the apartment's window, pulled up the blinds, wiped some of the grime from the top pane with the side of his hand, smeared it on the back of his pants, and peered out. The window, so old it wasn't even photosensitive, mercifully faced north, so he was spared the agony of direct sunlight.

At first glance, things looked normal. The huge, 3-D ads floating before the apartments on the opposite side of the street were flashing their usual come-ons, the two most eye-catching ones directly facing Kel's apartment. In the first, a heavily muscled, flak-jacketed Uncle Sam, hefting an M-99 over one shoulder, swept a pair of night-vision glasses from side to side. Its message was simple: "Report suspicious activities. Only those with something to hide need be afraid." The ad had repeated this message endlessly for the past four months.

The second ad showed a gleaming starship blasting off and disappearing into a luminous spiral galaxy: "Your future is in the stars. Live the life *you* deserve!" The flashy emigration board was in stark contrast to its surroundings: dilapidated 20th- and early 21st-century buildings—no arching or branching nano-composite structures here, just concrete, steel, glass, and brick rectangular monstrosities interspersed with debris-strewn vacant lots and, still, the slumped remains of some of the early nano buildings that had been sprayed during The Troubles.

Depending on how much of a dose they got, they'd either oozed into gelatinous puddles or slumped into flattened-skull shapes, their windows gaping like deformed eye sockets. The stench from their entombed—or, worse, partially embedded—occupants had been intolerable for weeks after the rioting ended, and even now the only ones who would go into them were dust or spike heads.

Kel stared at the nearest skull-like ruin as a shivering human skeleton crawled out of an "eye" just above ground level and shuffled down the dirty, potholed street. Kel's gaze followed him as he shambled past shabbily dressed men and women haggling with

street vendors amidst the carcasses of graffiti-covered vehicles stranded like beached marine mammals on the street and shattered sidewalk.

As the dust head turned the corner, Kel chuckled when he glanced at the remnants of an airvan buried nose first in the broken glass-strewn corner lot. For perhaps the hundredth time, Kel mused that the driver must have been mighty surprised when his controls and engine went dead. A lot of people in those flying coffins, and on the ground, had died during the EMP bursts. Today, no one in his right mind would even think about getting into one.

Kel shifted his gaze to the right and saw two cops confronting Emmy, a middle-aged, black homeless woman, and an occasional recipient of Kel's pocket change. One cop pushed her to the ground and began beating her with his club as she pulled her filthy plastic coat over her head. Kel was glad the window was closed so that he couldn't hear her screams. The other cop pulled out his club and joined in. Kel shuddered as the second cop's truncheon smashed the hand that covered her face. When the bones in her hand snapped, she reflexively pulled it down, clutching it with her other hand, and the cop connected with her jaw. Her teeth went flying in a spray of red.

The cops stopped. The one who had smashed her face hitched his truncheon back on his belt and stood towering, triumphant over Emmy's cowering form. Kel saw his mouth start to work and, even though he couldn't hear him, he was pretty sure, even at a distance of fifty meters, that he could make out the final word, "bitch." . . . *Fucking cops!* And not a goddamned thing he could do about it.

The cop who had bashed Emmy's face reached into his back pocket, looked up at the nearest power pole's dead surveillance camera, its lens smashed, took something small out of his pocket, and stuffed it into Emmy's coat. Then he activated his helmet recorder and gestured for his partner to search her. The other cop began roughly pawing the huddled figure, and shortly held up something that Kel couldn't make out. But he was pretty sure that he knew what it was.

Emmy must have really pissed them off, because this was not the normal drill. Usually, after kicking the shit out of her, they'd

drag her ass downtown, book her, and the following day she'd be hauled in front of a judge on a charge of assaulting an officer or resisting arrest. Six months and out. This time, they'd planted a bag of dust or spike on her and would charge her with possession *and* assaulting an officer.

If they *really* wanted to fuck with her, they'd bypass the dope charge and accuse her of terrorism. But that would be overkill with Emmy, and they usually reserved that charge for politicals. Whatever the charge, conviction was a foregone conclusion.

Kel exhaled noisily and looked away from Emmy. Thirty meters farther down the sidewalk, sub-teenaged hookers were hustling passersby, paying no attention to the cops, and the cops paying no attention to them. Kel took a long sip of warm beer as he watched a blubbery civ-serv in a rumpled, grey business uni approach the kids, haggle for a few seconds, and then waddle past the cops and Emmy with his hand kneading the butt of a garishly made-up 11-year-old in a see-through red mini. No, there was no reason to worry. Everything was normal.

2

MARRIAGE, n. The state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress and two slaves, making in all, two.

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

MARRIAGE, n. A common means of discouraging sex.

—Chaz Bufe, *The American Heretic's Dictionary*

Kel stepped back, rubbed his eyes, and set his warm beer on the window sill. He picked up his acoustic guitar, which was face down on the no-longer-self-cleaning, varying-shades-of-tan carpet, and set it back on its stand, noticing with relief that it was

undamaged. He picked up the pizza box and beer cans, walked to the sink/stove/refrigerator/recycling combo, picked up some additional empties on the drainboard, and fed everything into the recycling chute.

He walked back into the middle of the room and faced the ancient 2-D wall screen, which had activated when he'd started moving. He glanced at the time in the lower right-hand corner. *Jesus Christ!*—1:37 pm. He yawned and said, “Messages?”

“Seventeen. One from—”

“Play ‘em.”

The screen lit up with the all-too-clear image of Mig, an angry, 40-ish woman with dyed, curly red hair, a complexion like sandpaper, and way too much makeup covering it up.

“You bastard! Do you know what you did last—”

“Stop! Erase!”

Jesus, that was it! That was the reason for the gash on the back of his head and his rubbed-raw knees. He'd gone over to Mig's yesterday afternoon with a bottle of vodka, and she hadn't been there. But her roommate Sally had, and Sally had been only too happy to have a drink while they waited for Mig to come home from work.

An hour later, or was it three?, Mig still wasn't home, the bottle was gone, and he couldn't remember who had made the first move. All that he could remember was Sally's bare legs over his shoulders, the rug burning his knees. Then waking up with a blinding headache, blood dribbling down his face, drunk and naked in the hallway outside Mig's apartment, his clothes next to him. Followed by the painful walk home—and finally the welcome coldness of the first Schlitz Classic Ice after he got there, far too close to sober.

Why had he ever gotten involved with Mig? She was mean, vengeful, and man but she could hold a grudge. She was still sore from a couple of months back when he'd made a joke about getting lockjaw after trying to get her off for fifteen minutes. He thought she'd get it, but she hadn't, even though they'd watched that ancient Woody Alvin? Elvin? 2-D together just a week before with the same damned joke. Even after he explained it to her, she was still sore. God could he pick 'em.

He looked back at the screen and said, “Next.”

The All-American Property Management Corporation's logo filled the screen: a golden dragon on a blood-red Viking shield. The dragon had always looked more like a lamprey to Kel. Now, its sucker-like, needle-toothed orifice was flaring out of the screen, its barbed tongue darting menacingly as flames filled the screen behind it and smoke poured from its nostrils.

"Mister Turner, your rent was due on the first. If you don't pay within the next ten days we'll be forced to—"

"Erase!"

Mig's angry face again, close up, taking up the entire screen.

"Answer me, damn it!"

"Erase!"

Mig was replaced by a soothing, robin's egg-blue sky flecked with cumulus clouds. A tiny speck grew into a bird soaring closer, but it faded as it grew in size. As its image vanished, the stylized, cursive logo, "Bank Two, Your Banking Buddy," faded in, along with an all-too-familiar, overly friendly baritone voice:

"Kel, we know that you intend to pay, but don't worry if you can't! We're your *friends* at MDNA's Bank Two, and we have the answer to your financial problems! That's right! *We have the answer!* And we have great news! That's right! *Great News!* You don't need to worry about your bills! That's right! *Don't worry about your bills!* . . . And get cash back! Just report to MDNA's southside organ recycling center at—"

"Erase!"

Dick, a tall, clean-cut man in his early thirties, was next.

"Kel, we have a job Friday night at the Retro. They want really old shit—jazz or blues, and real instruments—so we'll have to practice before then. Bill and Lenny can do it Thursday night. My place. Let me know if that works for you. This could mean regular gigs, so let's not fuck this up. Call me."

The screen went blank and Mig reappeared.

"I know you're there! You—"

"Erase!"

Another second of black, and then Mig again.

"You gutless—"

"Erase!"

Still more Mig.

“I’ll get you for—”

“Erase! Next!”

“You ass—”

“Erase! Stop!”

The screen froze. Kel picked up the remote and clicked to the next message. Mig’s face came up, open mouthed, looking remarkably like the All-American lamprey. He clicked to erase before she could utter a word. He did this nine more times in quick succession, with Mig’s face growing angrier and more contorted with every message, looking almost like 19th-century flash-card animation, until “No More Messages” flashed on the screen.

Kel exhaled, walked to the window, and slugged down the remnants of his warm beer in a single gulp before turning back and staring blankly at the green screen. He walked to the ‘fridge combo, grabbed another Schlitz, walked back in front of the screen, and said “UltraRealityBlue.”

The screen lit up with his favorite feed, the massage parlor 2-D, showing a well-endowed, nude “therapist” working on a moaning, hairy, potbellied customer lying on his back while the therapist stroked him rhythmically with both hands.

At the moment he started to jerk, the audio feed cut out and was replaced by a voice-over: “Why settle for this? For only a thousand a month you can have full-immersion sex! Anything you want: straight sex, gay sex, group sex, cross sex—be a man, be a woman, be anyone, be *anything* you want! Ream an altar boy! *Be* an altar boy! Be Catherine the Great! Or Catherine the Great’s *horse*! Don’t settle for a 2-D or 3-D feed! Get full-immersion for only a thousand a month! Just call us and we’ll deliver your senso-lounger tomorrow!”

Kel was none too pleased as the voice-over ended, because the massage-parlor audio remained off as the man under the therapist’s hands continued to jerk and his mouth continued to make what looked like moans. Then, finally, the announcer cut back in: “And coming next month, our ultra-max prison channel available in 2-D or 3-D! *Don’t miss it!* Sign up now and get your first month free! Here’s a taste!”

The feed from the massage parlor cut back in for a second as the potbellied man climaxed, then immediately switched to an overcrowded prison yard. Not much was happening—just prisoners milling around to no apparent purpose, all wearing their standard-issue prison pinks with Bible verses in large block letters on the back of every shirt. A bald-headed Mexican prisoner turned his back to the camera, and Kel read: “And if a man lie with a beast, he shall surely be put to death: and ye shall slay the beast. —*Leviticus 20:15*.” Another prisoner turned his back to the camera, revealing: “And I shall take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts; but my face shall not be seen. —*Exodus 33:23*.”

Kel smirked, remembering the solemn proclamation a few months ago by Joe Bob Arpayaso, the hopelessly corrupt Secretary of Homeworld Security. When the new prison uniforms were unveiled, Arpayaso had pontificated that constant exposure to random verses of Scripture couldn’t help but have a rehabilitative effect on prisoners.

The viewpoint abruptly shifted to a corridor in a cellblock where two black inmates were straining to hold the arms of a heavily muscled, tattooed white prisoner. Another black, his back to the camera, his shirt bearing the verse “Let every soul be subject to the higher powers . . .” was moving toward them, trying to shove a wicked looking shiv into the white prisoner’s guts, as he was kicking furiously at the assailant’s knife hand. Finally, the would-be murderer found an opening, and struck shockingly quickly.

Kel said, “*Off!*” and drained his beer as the scene cut off in mid-scream. Kel walked to the loudly humming refrigerator portion of his apartment’s all-in-one. He stopped for a moment and looked at its well-decorated door, before grabbing and downing half of another Schlitz, while breathing hard. He closed the door and looked blankly at it. The largest thing attached to it was a tattered flyer for the final gig of his last band, the punk-revival group, Brutal Scrotum Attack; they’d done well that night and had pulled in just over \$32 apiece. Next to the flyer was a brown printout advertising their sole recording, Colostomy Aroma, with what Kel thought was a classic graphic: a 2-D of a filthy bum in a sleeveless T-shirt with tracks up and down his arms, holding a colostomy bag under

his nose, inhaling rapturously. Colostomy Aroma had sold well for a punk-revival burn: 131 loads.

Next to it was a raggedly torn printout showing a boy of two, with a woman's arm sticking into the jagged edge of the print from empty space, and curling around the boy. It was the only print he had of his son, Folky.

After the divorce, all of the other prints and holos of his kid had disappeared, leaving only this one. He would never have another, because Folky, according to Amilee (who'd named him Foucault, and who'd always hated the nickname), had died two years ago. He couldn't bring himself—didn't dare—to ask Amilee for a replacement photo or holo. Not after the last beating.

Seven years earlier, shortly after his discharge from the Peacekeepers, she'd come up to him at a gig at Nimbus. Just looking at her made him want to wrap his hands around her ass and pull her to him, which had happened quickly enough—after the third set.

They'd had it bad for each other, couldn't keep their hands off each other, for months. They didn't talk a whole lot during those months—they didn't need to—and it hadn't worked out too well when they did.

The sex had been great until she'd moved in, they had to talk more, and he'd discovered that there was another side to Amilee, a straight, ambitious side that wanted to make it in academia and was perpetually at war with her sensual side. He'd always figured that although she used a lot of peculiar jargon her heart was in the right place. So he'd kept his mouth shut, hoping things would get better, as they drifted further and further apart.

What had really sealed the deal was their career paths. He'd been gutting it out on the Central-Asian GI bill, studying music theory and comp, not daring to think what he'd do with his degree after he got it. Amilee, whose family had money from cattle operations on the fringes of the Amazon Desert, had been finishing her cultural studies dissertation.

Their contempt for each other's viewpoints—what he considered her “sponge-brained, new-age bullshit” and her contempt for his “simplistic, 18th-century-Enlightenment mechanistic rationality”—hadn't helped, either.

Her respect for him had dropped even further when he'd asked her, during an argument, what the hell The Enlightenment was.

They'd been studiously avoiding talking, having sex less and less often, when she'd proudly shown him the first draft of her dissertation, "Toward an Ur-Feminist Reconstruction of the Epistemological Morphology of Post-Structuralism: A Proto-Ontological, Semiotic Approach," and had basically dared him to go through it.

He hadn't even faked it—he suspected that the people on her committee hadn't, either—and had put her off with ever-lamer excuses. With every week that passed, her contempt for him grew. But by that time she was pregnant, so they'd stayed together for another three years after Folky was born. And as awful as many of the memories from those years were, he found himself smiling at a few of them.

Shortly after she'd started to suspect that he'd never read her dissertation, she'd tested his loyalty by pressuring him to feature her in his cowpunk band, Bubba's Toxic Breakfast, as the lead vocalist. After a few days of badgering, he gave up and allowed her to sit in at a rehearsal. That had nearly led to the breakup of the band. As Duane, the drummer, put it later, "I've heard better sounds coming out of people having hemorrhoid surgery."

But they'd stuck it out for another three years. Why? He still didn't know. Probably habit. Or fear of being alone. The excuse was that it was "for the kid," as if his being around parents who loathed each other was somehow good for him.

But then he thought about Folky. About the first time he picked him up, felt Folky's tiny hand curling around his index finger, and looked into his eyes. When he held him like that, nothing else mattered. Folky's smile was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He was hooked. He'd do anything for his kid. Even put up with Amilee.

It all ended two months after the last time they'd had mutually unsatisfying sex, and two days after he'd had a quicky in his van at a gig—how *could* she have known?! He came home two nights later, after another gig, to find Amilee and Folky gone, and a note on the table saying he was a lying, cheating son of a bitch, and that she never wanted to see him again.

A week later a process server handed him divorce papers. She got full custody. He didn't even get visitation rights.

The first time he called after the divorce, she said "Don't call again," and had abruptly cut him off. The second time, he got a black screen—no way to even leave a message. The third time, he also got a black screen. And a day later two guys stomped him in the alley. They didn't say a word. They didn't need to. His broken ribs told him everything he needed to know.

Two months after that, he got a terse note saying that Folky had drowned. He dared to call. As he expected, all that came up was a black screen. He ran a search of the public feeds, but he couldn't find anything. He hadn't expected to, but he couldn't have lived with himself if he hadn't tried. When anyone ran a search about people like him, searches revealed all, no matter how horrifying or embarrassing. But when people like him ran searches on people like Amilee and her family, they revealed only what people like Amilee and her family wanted them to reveal. When the government or the mega-corps ran searches, it was, of course, a very different story. But he wasn't the government or a mega-corp.

Then he started thinking about the dirt in the corporate walled-off areas (including that of Amazon Desert Cattle Corp., Amilee's parents' fiefdom) and the news corporations' back channels, and he hired a snoid, a hacker who supposedly could get into anything.

Two days later, the snoid was nearly beaten to death, and Kel found himself lying in a pool of blood, face down on his living room floor, his nose broken, a knee pressing down painfully on his back. The pressure on his back increased as his right arm nearly jerked out of its socket as it was pulled straight up. Then blinding pain as his right pinkie finger snapped. Kel screamed as his assailant threw his arm to the floor. The goon grabbed Kel's left arm, wrenched it up and, Kel felt his pinkie and ring fingers—on his fretting hand!—held in a vice-like grip for what seemed like minutes. When the grip released, he relaxed momentarily. And then he felt his head pulled back by the hair. His face smashed into the floor. And then again. A moment later, the pressure on his back eased, and he vaguely registered, "Knock it off, asshole, don't let there be a next time," before repeated kicks in the guts. As he

curled into fetal position clutching broken ribs, he heard retreating footsteps, a slamming door, and then silence.

Now, all that he had left was his bitterness, this 2-D print marred by Amilee's intruding arm, the remnants of his music gear, and the strong suspicion that she'd lied to him about Folky's death.

He was at a dead end: alone, almost penniless, living in a shit hole that he could barely afford, playing any gigs he could get as long as they paid, even when he hated the music, and developing an embarrassingly large beer gut and a major case of depression. He was nursing outright rage toward Amilee, and an aching need to see his supposedly dead son. And he had absolutely no way to do anything about either.

After several moments Kel's anger subsided. He looked away from the printout and opened the refrigerator portion of the all-in-one. What could he do? Nothing.

He had a hangover that would have dropped a water buffalo, and he nearly picked up the traditional remedy on the top shelf of the 'fridge: a liter jar of menudo. But he hesitated, his hand hovering over the jar. Yes, the menudo would taste good, but it had no therapeutic worth, only distraction value; it would be impossible to focus on a hangover while chewing soft, slimy honeycomb tripe. He suppressed a shudder. Worse, this was a jar of street-bought, brown menudo. It'd taste good, but sometimes the brown spices were added for a reason, and Kel really didn't want to think about the nature of some of those flecks floating in the broth. Worst of all, getting the jar out, opening it, emptying it into a bowl, and nuking it seemed like way too much work.

So, Kel pushed aside a clump of green slime that had once been . . . celery? . . . lettuce? . . . broccoli? . . . grabbed another can of Schlitz, wiped the remnants of the green slime sticking to his hand on his pants, sat down on an armless, backless chair, leaned over, picked up his acoustic guitar, popped the top on the Schlitz, took a long slug, played scales for five minutes, and then began running through jazz and blues numbers for the gig at the Retro.

He didn't need to practice, and he didn't need to drink another seven cans of Schlitz. But he did.

3

Stairway to Free Bird

... or ...

MUSIC, n. An area of universal expertise. The less formal musical training persons have, the more certain they are to know what is “good,” and the more certain they are that their opinions are just as valid as the opinions of those who have spent their lives studying, playing, and composing music.

—Chaz Bufe, *The American Heretic's Dictionary*

Kel was setting up the p.a. system, snaking cables around mike stands, frantically trying to get everything up and ready for the sound check. Somehow, two of the mike cables had disappeared since the last gig, and he had exactly enough. If any of them were bad, he was fucked. What was almost equally fucked was that the stage lights were off, and that the barkeep had told him that nothing but the brights were working. So, he was working in near darkness.

He sourly pondered the thought that he should have taken up another instrument as he held a flashlight in his teeth while trying to shine it on the back of the mixer, as he tilted it up with one hand while attempting to insert a cable with the other. Jesus. What a gig. Guitar players were a nickel a dozen. If you wanted to play, you'd better have a p.a. system, be willing to lug it around, set it up, maintain the vid presence, and more often than not do the booking, too. Kel inserted the cable, took the flashlight out of his mouth, turned it off, and grabbed another cable.

Shitty sounding, loud, canned neo-rap music assailed Kel from the club's system as he fussed and stewed. Outside, huge holos hung in a grey, drizzly sky, almost eclipsing the skyscrapers behind them, with the tracks from elevated mag-lev tracks vanishing into and jutting out of the ads.

The ads were for the usual: virtual sex (anything your sick little imagination could desire—virtual sheep? no problem, no extra charge) Maui Wowees, emigration to any of a dozen recently opened stellar systems, Black Mamba Malt Liquor (“When You Want a Deadly, Aggressive Bite”), and, of course, the omnipresent, body-builder Uncle Sam, sweeping his field glasses endlessly along the horizon.

Below, an orange neon sign reading “The Retro,” hung from rusty iron brackets on the corner of an ancient, two-storey brick building, reflecting off rain-soaked, faux-cobblestone streets in a rundown commercial district of two-and three-storey converted warehouses. Canned blues music replaced the neo-rap and drifted out the bar’s door, growing louder and softer as people walked in and out dressed in flapper clothes, zoot suits, disco outfits, punk gear, grey, severe, youth-for-truth unis, and unclassifiable outfits such as the one on the rail-thin 20-something with a sculpted, narrow black beard, shades, black skull cap, wearing a cheap black synth suit with white vertical stripes, a good ten centimeters too short at the wrists and ankles, all set off by cheap, shiny, black patent leather shoes without socks, and with fluorescent green tattoos of barbed wire wrapping themselves around his shins just above his ankles.

As he set up, the scene facing Kel was dismal. The Retro was modeled on a twentieth-century rock club: dimly lit, tiny round tables scattered randomly around the interior; uncomfortable, high-backed, wrought iron chairs crowding the tables; grimy red shag carpeting on the floor; black velvet on the walls; a sequin-spangled ceiling with discolored strips of paint hanging down—no one ever noticed; no one ever looked up—and halter-topped, slit-skirted waitresses shivering from the frigid air conditioning, lugging around trays of overpriced, watered-down drinks.

Kel was still running cables, but glanced up as a pair of diesel dykes—at least that’s what they looked like; at the Retro, you never knew—walked in and found their way to a table off to the side of the stage: sunglasses, fake piercings, fake brands, fake tattoos, motorcycle boots, leather vests over too-tight black T-shirts, with too-ample stomachs bulging beneath the shirts, black men’s jeans

with keys jangling down on chains, and pancake make-up heavy enough to hide the pallor of a corpse. Kel did a double take. Even beneath the disguise, Kel was pretty sure it was Mig and her best friend Melly. What the fuck were they doing here? Nothing good, no doubt of that, but what?

He stared at them, but they didn't even glance at him as they ordered drinks from the slit-skirted waitress and then turned toward each other and started talking. Kel returned to his task in an even fouler mood.

The house was half full as the band did the sound check, a verse of "Messin' with the Kid," and then launched into the first number, as the overhead lights flared on, blinding them. It was so bright on stage that it was almost impossible to see if anyone was dancing. But Kel could tell by the near-silence between songs that no one was.

Forty-five minutes in, the band was finishing "Shotgun Blues," while a drunk at one of the front tables shouted, "Play Free Bird!"

Kel and the other musicians ignored him and broke into a fast, jazzy version of the "T-Bone Shuffle," with Kel taking an extended guitar solo and Lenny, the bassist, playing inspired walking bass throughout the entire song. The false ending and reprise were killer, but no one noticed. Almost no one applauded; and, still, no one had gotten up to dance.

Kel leaned into the mike and said, "Here's one for all of you who've ever had a close encounter of the fourth kind. It's called 'Abductee Blues.'" Dick looked at Kel with a cocked eye, and nodded toward the near-invisible table where his girlfriend, Teena, who had always hated the song, was sitting. Kel looked at Dick and silently mouthed the words, "Come on!" After a few seconds' hesitation, Dick shrugged and muttered, "What the fuck. Let's do it," and Kel began playing the fast, jazzy eight-bar intro, with the bass and drums joining him on the second verse. After another eight bars, Dick's vocals kicked in.

Two verses later, no one was dancing, as Dick sang the third verse:

They jabbed me, they stabbed me
 They stroked and they poked
 Until my mind
 Was very nearly broke
 I'm telling you man
 You need the patience of Job
 Just to survive
 That rectal probe

Kel took a short solo, and they went into the bridge:

The gray said
 Don't worry bro
 It's no big thing
 (instrumental fill)
 Don't worry bro
 It ain't all that big
 Now just . . . bend over . . .
 And squeal like a—

Kel pulled off a glissando that sounded reasonably like a screaming hog. He then launched into a prolonged solo, and came out of it into the final vocal verses:

Now I got chips in my head
 And chips in my bones
 This ain't about no E.T.
 Tryin' to call home
 They flew all the way
 To our pretty little globe
 Just so they could use
 That rectal probe

Rectal probe
 Rectal probe
 Nobody wants a
 Rectal probe
 Don't have to be
 No homophobe
 To live in dread of an
 Alien rectal probe

They vamped on, with Kel taking another solo. Finally, since Dick wouldn't do it, Kel went back to comping and leaned into the

mike yelling, “No! No!! Oh my god, *no!!!* That thing’s got *spines* on it! Aaaagh! No! Please No!! Use some Astroglide!! 30 weight!!! WD40!!!! Tabasco sauce!!!! Anything!!!!!! Aaaagh!!! Aaaagh!!! Aaaaaagh!!!!!! *Anything!!!!!!*”

When he stopped shrieking, he played the first few bars of “Dueling Banjos.” A good five seconds after the final note faded, and with all the other players silent, Kel leaned toward the mike and yelled, “soooooooooo—eee!!”

There was virtually no response, not even the usual scattered applause from the one in ten people who “got” the song, and not even the usual yells of abuse, to which Kel invariably replied, “Thank you, glad y’all liked it!” while holding his Strat by the neck in case he needed to use it as a club. Now, the only response was nonverbal: Teena was looking daggers at both him and Dick.

As the lights faded to black, an audience member shouted, “¡*Una más!*” Kel caught Dick’s eye and mouthed the words, “Crazy Woman”? Dick nodded as the lights came halfway up. He picked up his acoustic guitar, pulled the strap over his shoulder, bent down toward his mike, and said: “Here’s an old cow-punk tune called ‘I Love a Crazy Woman.’ We hope y’all like it.”

They finished the song to dead silence. No one had laughed at all, not even at what Kel thought were its funniest lines: “She’s in deep psychosis, but I’ll tell you boys she’s fine. She’s on a dozen medications, and I’m proud that she is mine.”

And, still, no one had gotten up to dance. Dick looked at Kel, and asked, “Bad News Blues treatment?” Kel nodded. Bill and Lenny quickly fell in behind them as they broke into “This Guy’s in Love,” in an even slower and schmaltzier version than the original.

A young, neo-Goth couple, with so many facial studs and piercings that they reminded Kel of porcupines, got up and slow danced, rubbing their bodies against each other, but keeping their faces well apart. As Kel strummed the major 7th chords characteristic of the song, he couldn’t keep his eyes off the couple, and he couldn’t help but wonder how they managed oral sex.

When the song ended and the meager applause died out, Dick bent toward his microphone and opened his mouth, intending to say, “That was supposed to be punishment. Want more?” but be-

fore he got the first word out he was interrupted by a raging drunk: “Play Free Bird! This is the goddamned Retro! *Play Free Bird!*”

Dick stood gaping for too long, while a few other drunks took up the call, sounding as if they were mocking the first drunk, and the band.

“Yeah, Play Free Bird!”

“Free Bird!”

Kel gave the traditional reply, saluting them with his middle finger while yelling, “Here’s your free bird!” But the drunks were into it by then, yelling one on top of the other:

“Proud Mary!”

“Mustang Sally!”

“Black Cat Bone!”

“Free Bird!”

“Stairway to Heaven!”

“Hoodoo Love Thang!”

“Margaritaville!”

“Free Bird!”

“Love Bone Boogie!”

“Taking Care of Business!”

“Rock and Roll All Nite!”

“Brown Eyed Girl!”

“Martian Mojo Man!”

“Old Time Rock and Roll!”

“Sweet Home Alabam’!”

Kel shuddered. That was it. “Sweet Home Alabama” was the last straw. An ode to the state whose official motto was “*Incestum, Tentoria, Obesitas Morbidus*”: “Incest, Lynchings, Morbid Obesity.”

Worse, while he was gritting his teeth, he noticed Dick holding up his hand to the crowd, palm out, grinning at him with a demonic gleam in his eye. The fucker had always had a perverse streak, and a few months ago had even forced him to play “Brown Eyed Girl” at a gig. That had been bad enough, but “Sweet Home Alabama”? Finally, Dick lowered his hand, looked away from Kel, bent over his mike, and said: “Thanks so much. We’ll take a short break and be right back.” Kel exhaled to the frenzied but pro forma cries of “Play Free Bird!” and “We want some Skynyrd!!!”

As the lights went down and the canned music came up, Dick, Bill, and Lenny walked off stage, carefully avoiding eye contact with the drunks. Kel reached to the back of his amp and flipped the switch. He put his guitar on its stand, emptied what was left of a pint of stout and, empty glass in hand, headed to the table where his bandmates and their girlfriends were sitting.

Still blinking away the after-images from the brights as he came off stage, he snuck a glance at the apparent dykes three tables over. Mig looked up and waved. Kel turned away without acknowledging her. This was almost too strange. Mig had always loved frilly, ultra-feminine dresses that would have looked great on a chick twenty kilos lighter. So, diesel dyke gear? She had to be fucking with him.

As he sat down next to Dick, he motioned to a waitress, held up his empty glass, and pointed to it.

Dick turned toward Kel and said, “This is a fucking morgue. Don’t these fucking people know how to dance? Are they fucking paralyzed?” He took a sip from his drink and turned back toward Kel. “What the fuck do we have to do to get them up?”

“Play Margaritaville?”

“Seriously.”

“Free Bird? Mustang Sally?”

“Fuck off, Kel.”

“Stairway to Free Bird? Love Bone Sally?”

Dick grunted disgustedly, not deigning to reply.

Kel wasn’t deterred: “Free Mary? Proud Margaritaville?”

Dick glared at Kel for a few seconds, pulled out the set list, and he and Kel began to pore over it. The waitress arrived with Kel’s pint of Terminator Stout, and he downed half of it, in all its 7.2% glory, in a single gulp.

While they were going over the set list, three Homeworld Protectors swaggered into the club. They were typical federal bulls: steroid-, gene-mod-enhanced slabs of beef wearing black uniforms, mirror shades, ceramo-helmets, slim-kev body armor, flechette and stun pistols, gas canisters, shiny, knee-high poly-leather boots, and in a seeming tribute to cops past, black truncheons with lead tips.

Kel and Dick, absorbed in planning their next set, didn't notice them, but almost everyone else in the place did, and immediately developed an intense interest in their drinks.

One of the Protectors started walking toward Mig and Melly. They looked down at their rum and cokes, shaking, but the bull stopped well before them. He hovered over a bearded zonie, who was smoking and was so spaced out that he hadn't even noticed the cop's approach.

The Protector tapped his baton on the table and drew it back. The zonie looked up, startled. The cop smashed him on the temple as his head came up. The bar went silent as the sickening sound of shattering bone echoed across the room. As the man slumped to the floor, his body spasming, the cop walked away, spitting out the words, "Tobacco's illegal, asshole."

The other two Protectors walked toward the stage, searching. Their necks stopped swiveling as they neared the band's table and rushed Kel. As he began to rise, one of the cops rammed his baton into Kel's solar plexus. Kel doubled over as the other one slammed his truncheon into the back of Kel's head, splitting his scalp open and showering blood over Dick, Bill, Lenny, and Teena.

As he was being hauled out, his bleeding head hanging down, the last thing Kel registered was Mig's loud, cackling laugh.

4

JUSTICE, n. A term of vicious mockery,
as in "equal justice under the law."

—Chaz Bufe, *The American Heretic's Dictionary*

Kel's arms ached. Two black-helmeted, black-uniformed jailers, faces invisible behind blackened visors, held his biceps in painfully tight grips, as they dragged Kel's bedraggled figure before a judge. A week after they'd hauled him in, his hair was still caked with blood from his untreated scalp wound, and his midsection still ached intensely.

His eyes winced in the light of arctic-white illumination strips, their cold glare bouncing off the grimy white tiles on the floor of the seedy courtroom. The door in the back of the room opened, and a balding, round-shouldered man, wearing a judge's robes, entered. Given that he was probably on Merit Med, he could have been anywhere from his apparent thirty-five up to ninety.

Kel looked up, his eyes pinning, searching for some sign, any sign, of where he was, even a name plate on the podium. His heart rate doubled as he looked at his surroundings and realized that he was in a special terrorism court, a secret court with a no-name judge, no defense witnesses, no defense attorney, and no recourse. To be charged was to be guilty.

The judge frowned at him. "Kelvin Edward T . . . Turna. You have admitted to associatin' with known subversives, assaultin' t . . . t . . . two federal police officers with intent to kill, and bein' a member of the illegal, terroris' organizations, The People's Will and Food Not Bombs."

"What!!!?"

The jailer on his right viciously twisted Kel's arm. Kel screamed in pain, but tried to continue.

"I didn't—"

The jailer twisted his arm even harder as the other jailer slugged him in the kidneys. Kel screamed again and dropped to his knees. The judge tensed, the muscles around his left eye contracting convulsively.

"Y . . . you were s . . . sayin', Mistah . . . T . . . Turna?"

Kel, grimacing in pain, gasping, didn't even raise his head.

The judge continued, his face twitching. "You're wise to show proper respect to th . . . th . . . th . . . this court, Mister Turna. Do you have anything else to say in y . . . your defense?"

Kel glanced fearfully at the guards and remained silent.

"V . . . v . . . ver . . . very well. You are hereby ordered to be de . . . de . . . ported to Extrasolar Penal Colony Number Three on the next available transport. Until th . . . that time you will be con . . . con . . . con . . . conf . . . conf held at the Coulter Cryogenic Correctional Facility."

"No!—"

The guard on the left slugged Kel in the kidneys again, harder. Kel crumpled, writhing in pain.

The judge looked down at him. “M . . . m . . . m . . . mista’ Turna, you should have th . . . th . . . thought of the consequences before assaultin’ peace officers and engagin’ in t . . . t . . . t . . . t . . . terrorism.”

5

EXILE, n. One who serves his country by residing abroad,
yet is not an ambassador.

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*

After a high-G deceleration, made possible by cold sleep and the cushioning gel encasing the bodies of prisoners and crew, the AI controlling the prison-transport, the Rush, woke its crew members for the final two weeks of its journey. At the end of it, the huge, bloated ship slipped smoothly into a parking orbit above Extrasolar Penal Colony 3, a blue-green planet with a single small, narrow continent just north of the equator, and smaller islands in scattered patches. Although it was moving at thousands of kilometers per hour, the Rush seemed to float in place above the sole continent’s west coast.

A shuttle, tiny in comparison with the Rush, slipped out of a hatch and headed down toward the surface. Inside the shuttle, row upon row of coffin-pods, stacked three deep, lay in the cargo hold; Kel’s was among them. As the shuttle’s skin glowed red with heat, another shuttle emerged from the Rush and began its descent. And after that, still another.

Kel’s shuttle swept down toward an amalgam of airport and gulag set at the western edge of a sprawling city of one-and-two-storey buildings—long runways leading to grey, blockish structures, with a high wall running all the way around the entire compound, and ramshackle buildings fading into the distance beyond the walls.

The shuttle landed and taxied close to a building near the edge of the runway, coming to a full stop when electro-magnets buried in the concrete locked onto those in the belly of the shuttle. A panel in the taxiway slid to the side, and a hydraulic hoist began to rise. As it did, doors in the bottom of the shuttle retracted, allowing the hoist to enter. The hoist platform was a half-meter narrower on all sides than the shuttle's bay, but, once it was even with the shuttle's floor, panels slid out from the sides of the bay, closing the gaps, and the crew began loading pods onto the platform.

Within five minutes, the panels retracted and the hoist began to descend, bearing two dozen pods. It passed below the surface of the runway and came to a stop six meters below ground, where forklifts plucked the coffins off the lift and sped them down a dimly lit tunnel to an immense, bare-concrete room, depositing them in neat rows, as the lift and others like it rose and descended again and again, bearing their human cargo.

After dozens of landings and departures, all five thousand of the prisoners' pods rested in a huge concrete sarcophagus. Pneumatic ratchets echoed off the dank cement walls. The blur of sound continued well into the night, as technicians opened coffins, pulled out tubes, plugs, and wires from bodies, and lifted those still alive, men and women alike, naked, shivering, and groggy, out of their slimy coffins onto green gurneys bound for "the car wash."

When they reached it, more techs, former prisoners themselves, hosed down the new arrivals. Then, still more techs wheeled the wet, violently shivering prisoners to the revival bay; they lifted them from the gurneys and flopped them down on row upon row of stained, sheetless mattresses, and threw filthy blankets over them.

Back in the receiving area, the transfer technicians pulled out the tubes, plugs, and wires from those who hadn't survived and lifted them onto other gurneys: those brain dead but with salvageable parts onto red gurneys, and the few so ripe they were clearly worthless, except as biomass, onto black gurneys bound for the city's rendering plant.

In the revival bay, technicians injected Kel and the other survivors with restorative nanobots, nutrients, and time-release stimulants that would kick in the next day.

Hours later, when he wasn't preoccupied with dry heaving, or with clutching the painful places where tubes, needles and wires had been withdrawn, Kel looked at the grey, windowless walls, and concluded that his worst nightmare had come true: he was still in prison on Earth, being tortured while under the influence of drugs.

6

Capital punishment is our society's recognition of
the sanctity of human life.

—Senator Orrin Hatch

The next morning, Kel trudged leadenly down a dim, concrete hallway toward a blinding, white rectangle, occasionally stumbling against other trudging prisoners. His veins, orifices, and urethra ached, his mouth tasted like gun metal, and his long-unused guts churned. As he dragged himself through the painfully bright opening at the end of the corridor, he raised his hand to shield his eyes, and tripped over another prisoner's foot. He stumbled to the ground and his body spasmed at the sharp sting of a shock baton. A loud voice growled, "Get up, asshole. Keep moving." Kel staggered to his feet and stumbled forward, nearly tripping again with his first step.

After more stumbling and more shocks, he took his place in the ranks standing in the sand. Kel looked around. Jesus. What a motley looking bunch. Then he looked at himself. Like all of the other prisoners, Kel was dressed in a work shirt and dungarees, and had a dull green duffel bag at his feet. He'd been so out of it that he hadn't even looked through it when he'd received it.

After more persuasion from the shock batons, the prisoners stood sullenly in quasi-military formation, swaying, some collapsing, as still others were herded into rows behind them. Those who collapsed were quickly and painfully roused back to their feet.

Kel closed his eyes and concentrated on staying upright. To steady himself, he began breathing deeply and slowly, visualizing

himself standing. After what seemed like hours, he rubbed his stubbly cheeks, opened his eyes, and looked around. He was in the third row from the front in a barren, rectangular courtyard surrounded by windowless two-storey buildings. The structures formed two sides of the square. The third was dominated by a two-storey-high wall with a huge gate in its center; on the fourth side, facing him, was another high wall, this one bearing gun-toting guards, with a gallows before it.

Kel wiped his brow; it wasn't even close to noon, but he was already sweating in the dead still air and strange light. He looked up, and the sun was wrong—too orange. It was nearly straight overhead, but had the color of the sun near the horizon back on Earth. He turned his head and looked at the doorway where he'd entered the square. A few prisoners were still coming through it, stragglers being nudged along none too gently by the guards.

After the final few were herded into ranks at the back of the courtyard, they and all the rest of the sweating, terrified prisoners waited. And waited. Finally, a door in the building to Kel's right opened, and a round, balding man in full dress uniform, with a pencil-thin mustache, stepped through it and strode rigidly to the gallows, which dominated the courtyard. He mounted the platform with remarkably mechanical steps, rhythmically slapping a riding crop into the palm of his black-gloved left hand. Once on the platform, he put his hands behind his back, rocked on his heels, and stared at the prisoners for several seconds. A few guards carrying projectile assault weapons, obviously enjoying the show of dominance, stood facing outward below the man on the platform; a few others stood by the heavy, locked gate; and still others looked down from the top of the wall.

“Welcome to Extrasolar Penal Colony 3, or as we call it here, Tau Two. I am Colonel Corona, the commandant of this planet. Your commandant. Remember that. And remember this. This is simple enough that even scum like you should be able to remember it. There are only two rules here: don't rebel, and don't fuck with us. That's what this is for.”

He patted the gallows with his riding crop and then abruptly slapped the crop into his hand. He looked out over the prison-

ers, waited until the silence became uncomfortable, then unbearable, and finally released the crop and gestured with it to an officer standing at the door of the building to his left. The man opened the door and stepped back.

Kel gaped in horror as two beefy guards pushed a struggling, hooded prisoner—a grotesquely fat, dead-fish-colored white man, naked above the waist but for the hood—through the door. Once through it, they released the man's hands, and he began frantically trying to pull the hood off of his head. As he was clawing at it, one of the guards ducked below his flailing arms, pressed his shock baton into the man's chest, and pressed its activation stud.

The hooded man fell to the ground writhing. Corona and most of the guards laughed. Kel felt physically sick. They had released the man's hands to give him hope, only to snatch it away.

After the guards stopped laughing, and the prisoner stopped writhing, the guard with the shock baton adjusted its handle, stuck the baton into the folds of flesh on the prisoner's back, and pressed the stud again. The prisoner jerked, but not as violently as with the previous jolt. As he was still shuddering, the other guard leaned over him. "Get up, scumbag!" The man rose slowly, unsteadily, and once he was on his feet the guard with the baton prodded him almost gently, without shocking him. But then he did, and the man lurched forward. With the aid of several more jolts, the prisoner staggered to the scaffold, where he stumbled on the steps and fell forward, smashing his hooded face on the edge of a step. Again, Corona and most of the guards laughed.

The two guards conducting the prisoner pulled him to his feet and, with effort, dragged him up the steps. Once on the platform, the smaller of the guards forced the prisoner onto the trap with one final, gratuitous jolt from his shock baton. The hangman, wearing a captain's uniform, his hatchet face unconcealed, put a noose over the hood and around the prisoner's neck, and pulled it tight, as the larger guard bound the man's hands behind him.

Corona stepped forward and addressed the crowd, as the prisoner trembled and the hangman stared out at them.

"This man is a common criminal. We don't care about that. But he made the mistake of counterfeiting currency. He thought that

he was one step ahead of *us*.” Corona paused, smiled, and said: “But obviously he wasn’t.” He gestured to the hangman.

The hangman sprang the trap. The prisoner dropped, and when the rope snapped taut the prisoner’s 200-kilo body continued plummeting toward the earth, but his hooded head didn’t. It separated from the body, rebounding upward from the noose, spewing a rainbow of blood. The headless body slammed into the earth, spasmed momentarily, and then lay still, blood pumping from its neck, as its loosened bowels and bladder stained its pants.

After a moment staring hard at the stunned prisoners, with the stench of shit, blood, and piss gradually spreading outward in the nearly still air, Corona spoke again.

“Remember this. Remember what happens if you cross us. Remember this simple rule and you might live: don’t screw with us. Other than that, do what you want. And don’t come crying to us if you get in trouble. We don’t give a damn about what you do to each other.”

He paused and then turned his head to survey the prisoners, tapping the riding crop into his gloved hand. After he’d stared at the crowd for several seconds, he stopped tapping and said, “You’ll be issued five hundred credits each. Do with them as you will. Get the hell out of my sight!”

Corona turned away from the prisoners, descended from the gallows, and walked stiffly into the nearest building without looking back.