

"The Big Oops"

Version 3 (07.25.2004)

by Mark W. Arenz

8559 words

[7:15 pm] Dec 24, 1939 | Sun

Dr. P.B. Fincher waded through his junk-laden laboratory clothed in make-shift armor. Gas mask, welder's visor, heavy lead apron, these were the orders of the day. Although University of Chicago physics department had no stated safety policy regarding massive exposure to electromagnets, Dr. Fincher and his assistant left no precaution untaken that day.

Out from their glassed-in alcove came a wiring snake reaching out to a five meter diameter necklace of magnets, each one hand-wrapped with thousands of copper wire loops. At the foci of this magnetic magnifying glass stood a short white pillar topped with an overripe apple. The pair made their final preparations and exchanged every William Tell joke they knew.

A single copper switch lever slapped down as a low hum filled the room. Switch two. The hum's pitch raised two octaves.

Switch three!

Nothing. No white flash, no great banging noise. Not even the hum.

The junior scientist trotted out to the staging area to inspect the wiring while his senior hunted for a bad breaker on the service panel. Other than the instruments and dials breaking, nothing appeared to have happened at all.

Over an hour passed before either of them realized that the apple was gone.

The significance of this brief and seemingly insignificant event

was lost for most of a century. At the time, most of those who heard and read of the results dismissed them, calling into question Fincher's motives and character. Those who did believe were left without a passable explanation as to what had actually happened and why. If any repeat performance could be managed, they hoped, the US military might be quite interested in a weapon such as this, in light of recent goings-on across the pond. But no follow-up success was to be had.

Fifty years later, Fincher and his claims had been long forgotten when he died of liver failure. That same year, a U of C maintenance worker removed the aging water cooler across the hall from what had been Fincher's lab. To his surprise, he discovered in an instant why the machine had not worked properly for so long: a hole the size of a man's fist was cut through the back of the thing. As he slowly pulled it away from the wall, he noticed that plaster from the back wall had also been displaced, forming a recognizable shape.

-----

[7:15 pm] July 15, 2014 | Tues

International Package Express Headquarters, New York City. Independent contractors Evan Bishop and Michael Klink sat in black metal chairs pointing at one another. They continued this way, not speaking, for some time until Evan Bishop finally pointed at the computer screen, then back to Michael Klink.

"You're trying to tell me that you installed uncertified OS updates the day before the press event?" fumed Evan.

"It's more for tonight's dry run. If we head into any operating system hassles, the support techs won't talk to us if we don't have the newest patches. You know that. It's the first thing they ask as a trick to get you off the line and close the case. This is all a precaution."

"A week ago, this may have been a good idea. But now-" This was no way for a junior to speak to his superior, even if they were just a

pair of unrelated contractors. Klink was the lead on this project and, in spite of his own lack of foresight, tact, and personal hygiene, demanded respect.

More than that, after only three months on the project Evan was garnering a reputation for unnecessary eccentricity: occasional whoops and squeals coming from his end of the lab; the fuzzy bear slippers with wild googley eyes he wore to staff meetings. And with his wildly unkempt locks and terrible posture, people on the street might have thought he was an unstable, unwashed vagrant instead of a highly-paid software engineer. Klink dismissed it all as a mediocre man's attempt to make an impression. This hen pecking only served to irritate Klink further.

Evan turned again to the screen. It had just gone blank. Blink. Blink. Then a rather ugly root level screen popped up explaining that a fatal error had occurred, that the specific memory address (given in hex code) would be helpful information, that it wasn't the OS' fault, and that suing over it would be a fruitless exercise.

"The blue screen of death! Klink, your precaution just became a level one meltdown."

Klink froze his expression not to let his panic show. But his slack jaw betrayed him. It wasn't his fault the OS belched on him. He couldn't be blamed for whatever happened, he assured himself.

He would later note this incident in his "log."

Klink kept logs of every conversation, every setback, every technical glitch, all as a tool to help him wriggle out of trouble if it ever occurred. So far, he'd been lucky. Every project team to which he'd been assigned had contained someone more experienced than he, someone who insisted on accepting the leadership role. When little things went wrong, they took the heat, leaving Klink in the comfortable role of second-guesser. In his long career, Klink often drank of the bitter liquor of complaint. But for the past three months, he'd been forced to work with a talented newbie just out of school. Klink the uppity, overgrown junior was now the jaded senior.

Evan was still looking at him, waiting for an answer.

"I'll fix it," Klink barked. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it. I'll stay here all night if I have to. If you're not interested in making this thing work, just go home."

Home. Every contractor in the building had been living out of hotel rooms since the project began a year before. The word had lost its meaning.

But Evan leaving would satisfy two objectives: it would give Klink an example of his dedication relative to his co-worker, and it would allow him to relax and fix the problem without a critical audience.

"I'm the kind of dedicated professional you're going to see on next year's big Mars mission." Next year. The space agency had adopted the Unit of One model a few years before. Did that mean a NASA staffing call-out in the next dozen months? No, even the most optimistic geeks wouldn't put it that close. Even then, Klink was far too old for anything more than a support role, the crotchety tech support back in terra firma. "Ever since I was a kid, I knew somehow that I was going to be on that team. Can you imagine what it would be like, to be the first man on the surface of Mars?"

It all seemed so funny, this cynical old man given to irrational cereal box dreams. "What's the point? I hear the network connection up there is for crap, anyway." It was supposed to be a joke, but Klink wasn't responding at all. "They've already got that worked out. For political reasons, the first one down probably won't even be an American, and likely not a man."

"I have a feeling," mumbled Klink. "that's all."

Evan needed to change the subject to save his sanity. "Well, we've got a- a wet run in an hour. Is there any way we can have it ready?"

"It'll have to be." Long pause. "You hungry?" he asked.

"Sure, you want me to zip down to level 20 and get us some grub?"

"Yeah, that'll take twenty minutes or so, right? Yeah, go down there and get me a burger and - wait, that should do it. I'll buy a

Slippery up here at half the price of what they charge down there. And, no ice."

Evan returned to the staging area with Klink's meal as well as a heavily caffeinated drink, a surprise. For himself, Evan had a series of candy bars and a container of juice, part of what he called his "hummingbird diet." But Klink was still working, his body rigid, his eyes molded into the screen. With a grunt, Klink noted the unwanted ice in his drink and gestured at counter next to the workstation.

With little else to do but bother his colleague, Evan decided to tour the rest of the 'porting arena. Other than the outer control room, the only other major feature of this floor of the IPE building was a large air-tight chamber. If one didn't know better, one might think, owing at its shiny, rounded metallic walls and tubular inner-workings, that it was a futuristic rabbit warren. At least, that's what Evan found himself thinking. Anxiety and boredom percolated in his overstimulated brain. Evan crouched down low to the ground and peered up at the opening as if from a lapine perspective.

Hop. Hop.

Bang!

Evan stopped to look up at the woman with whom he'd just collided. From his angle, she looked even taller than his six feet. Her angular face and smooth cocoa skin were oddly framed in her round antique glass frames. At first Evan didn't know whether to apologize, stand up and pretend nothing happened, or simply stay crouched down and hope she didn't notice or care. She said nothing, so he decided to stay crouched. It seemed the safest thing to do.

"Sir, are you going to get up or do you need help?" she asked, her words soaked in a strong but unfamiliar accent. The name tag read, P. Shageri. The roughly-drawn atom icon behind her name indicated that she was part of the physics team.

"Why doesn't it say Dr. or Ph.D. on your tag?" he asked, realizing only much later that this wasn't much for an opener.

"I'm not really sure. It just came that way, I didn't really think

about it much. Are you going to get up or what?"

"What does the P stand for?" asked Evan as he righted himself.

"Well, Mr. Evan Bishop of the computer sciences division, it's Penelope. And I'll answer the next obvious question to save you the trouble of asking it." She took in a deep breath and delivered the next two sentences rapid fire with almost no inflection: "I grew up in Nigeria, but my parents were Anglophiles, took the name from a series of children's books or something. Unfortunately, they're out of print and in no one's database, so I'll never know."

"That was more than I needed to know. All I really wanted was some background on the vacuum chamber since I might have to give a tour tomorrow."

She spread her arms wide, and said, "Well, this is it. Of course, minus the air and dust. It's nothing, really. You see, it's a vacuum chamber."

Evan pretended to laugh at what sounded like a joke. "Why a vacuum? Wait, I have a feeling that this is something I'm not allowed to know."

The IPE project managers had been fairly specific in prohibiting the contract employees from poking around too much in the "big picture" issues, like "how does this whole thing work?" and so on. People with contested patents can be quite touchy.

"It'll be our little secret Evan Bishop," she said through a smile. Evan wanted to smile back just as warmly but feared he could not pull it off correctly. "Without a vacuum to isolate the object from any ambient air or dust, the 'ported object could fuse with what's on the other side. Honestly, it's much more important that the vacuum work on the other side. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise, what?"

"You don't want to know." Just then, she leaned in slightly to whisper. "I saw a picture of one of the early researchers who was accidentally 'ported into the floor of his own lab. They chiseled him

out of there, but the damage had already been done. The molecules of his lower body were fused with the concrete and tile. His blood stream was poisoned within a minute or two, and he died a couple of hours later."

"Magnets, eh?"

"Eh, magnets. Precisely controlled, a massive field roughly ten thousand times the net strength of the Van Allen Belts can roll up space into the fourth dimension - or fifth, depending on how you count them. The effect is something like the world's sneakiest short cut - living in an Escher lithograph."

"The fourth dimension? Isn't that the stuff of nineteenth century mysticism and pseudo-science?"

"Though they won't admit it, nobody really understands it. But if you can make a rabbit this big jump out of your top hat, who's going to argue with you over the science?"

"Or the profits," added Evan cleverly.

"Exactly."

At times like this, when he was feeling self-conscious or nervous, Evan liked to think of the most inappropriate thing to say. Unfortunately, this time he actually said it.

"What are you doing after all of this?" he asked. Instantly, he wanted to breathe the words back into his lungs and forget the whole thing.

"I'm not sure yet. I find out in a week or two if I got the job in New Mexico for the summer." Fortunately, she had missed his point entirely, interpreting his clumsy come on line as a question of career direction.

"Is that the desert hydration project I've been hearing about?" he asked.

"Something like that. I do all my bookings through Central Services out of San Diego. I love those people. They take care of all

the business crap: taxes, legalities, getting the next gig."

"They sell for you, too?"

"That's extra, of course. They're really a client of mine, technically. But from IPE's standpoint, I work for Central Services- it helps them sleep better. You should give them a call. They might be able to arrange for a tour of duty out West. You can't beat the 'Diego: cool when it needs to be, warm when it should be."

"I think I'd like that."

Penelope handed him her card, a purple slash of plastic with an optical datastrip on the back. Its face displayed her personal information in a lazy digital hand-script, and by applying a slight pressure on the corner, the Central Services data flashed up in a more business-like condensed font.

"The tour, Evan Bishop," she grunted with full accent.

Evan found that he'd been staring at her a little too long. He hoped that she would chalk it up to long hours and little sleep. She smiled, though it was a little less fiery than before.

"Yes," he said at last. "The tour. Honestly, I can't see myself giving anyone a tour tomorrow, too busy."

Penelope nodded sarcastically.

"I won't get roped into that duty," he said, "explaining fifty years of physics and computer science in as many seconds. Nope."

-----

[9:07 am] July 16, 2014 | Wed

"So, Senator Kayheart, this workstation here controls the whole operation. My team-" Evan could hear Klink angrily clearing his throat a few meters away. "As a part of Michael Klink's software engineering

team, I helped design the interface and mathematical models to make the spatial location algorithms work."

The Senator squinted at the screen, reading. "Spatial location..."

Evan leaned into the plasma screen, clicking and nudging windows with his wiggling index finger. Tap. Nudge. Double tap. Up popped a marvelously detailed wire model of the earth's surface with colored strata indicating levels of elevation. Evan laughed a little to himself, amused at his own satisfaction.

"Basically, you tell this baby where you want the package to go and it spits out a series of instructions for the magnetrons to 'beam' it to the proper locale."

In spite of the visual aide, the Senator did not seem terribly interested, rubber-necking around Evan's head looking for something or someone more interesting. Senator Dean Kayheart of California represented the interests of millions of people including those who happened to own major aerospace companies. He didn't have the time or attention span for science class.

"The spatial location component is one of the project's most innovative aspects, Senator," he continued. "It has to work in three dimensions with an accuracy unlike any physical modeler before its time. If an earthquake sends a small section of California two centimeters higher relative to sea level, this computer needs to know. Every new office building in Taipei, each expansion and contraction in every sky scraper in the world, it all has to be calculated and predicted in this machine. That's the kind of input it takes to run a truly global 'porting operation."

Kayheart's eyebrows turned up. "Global? I notice you didn't use the word universal. Couldn't we save billions and scrap NASA altogether?"

"Whoa, hold on a minute, cowboy!" the silvery voice belonged to Jim Headlund, project manager and one of the few full time IPE employees. Apparently this question was outside of Evan's jurisdiction. "'Porting Neil Armstrong to the Martian surface may sound economical. But any place other than the earth's crust is going to take too much

juice. It's not even a question of energy requirements at that point, it's all about containment. And when it comes to biological organisms, they don't mix with teleportation. At least not right now."

Jim Headlund had this way of explaining dizzyingly complicated ideas in one hundred words or less, level of accuracy notwithstanding. Usually, he just oversimplified the science and told people more or less what they wanted to hear. Maybe he was a shill and a public relations hound, but guys like Headlund were demigods in the new unit-of-one economy. He had steady, single-location employment with benefits. In Evan's mind, the Jim Headlund's of the world were in another class altogether, inside looking out.

The Senator nodded in feigned understanding. "Be honest with me for a minute. Is it the technology or the liability that limits the practical applications of the technology?"

"A little of both, to be frank."

"Actually, our three-dimensional coordinate system is set up with the center of the earth as its origin. I know it sounds a little Ptolemaic but it makes sense for the parameters of this project." Even Headlund knew that the reference was lost on the Senator.

"It just sounds a little short-sighted to me," grunted Kayheart.

"Today we're going to 'port from one known point to another," Evan interrupted, checking Headlund's face for some sign of approval. "Imagine keeping tabs on dune shifts on millions of miles away on top of what this system already has to contend with. The mind, it boggles."

"Come on, Senator," said Jim Headlund as he grabbed the old man by the arm on his way to another grouping of suits. "Let's go boggle someone else for a while."

Just then a pair of armed guards escorted a sealed document pouch, each one holding one end as if it were a pig on a stick. Carefully, the two placed the sack inside an oblong pressurized chamber, a smaller version of the room itself. While another pair of assistants tightened the lid and closed the valves on the vacuum chamber, Klink prepared the system for the journey. He ran a secondary check on the global model,

importing an array of altimeter and GPS readings from various Web-based weather stations and parsing that against the model's predictions.

"Ninety nine percent pure," he said.

"Hope that's enough," whispered Evan, who by that time had loaded up the most current coordinate data for the two to and from sites. Just as he had thought, no errors in the data had cropped up since their last test two hours before.

With a nod to the lab coats, Jim Headlund began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, investors and members of the press, what you're about to see is nothing less than the pinnacle of human accomplishment. Of course, I don't want to oversell this or anything." Headlund waited a beat or two for a laugh. In time, it came. "But you must understand that, when the millennia have their way with history, teleportation may very well be the only modern human invention of significance- because it has the potential to change absolutely everything. Imagine a time when the concept of place means nothing, when sending packages is as easy as sending e-mail and just as fast. Talk about globalizing the marketplace!" Headlund cleared his throat and paused for a moment. "Now, I understand that I'm not supposed to speculate on the possibility of biological teleporteers. Since guessing at its future may affect IPE's stock price, result in stockholder legal issues, the FTC has forbidden it." Headlund glanced at the nearest legal counsel, shrugged a question and received a nod as answer. "But I think I can safely say that today is only the beginning. 'Porting rooms will become smaller, the process will get smoother and cheaper. Of course, not much cheaper until the patent runs out in twenty years."

One corner of the room, Evan presumed them to be the investor clique, laughed heartily.

"The gentlemen from Brink's security have been kind enough to deliver a shipment of bearer bonds, an undisclosed amount, for shipment to another party in Tokyo. It seems like quite a risk for a maiden voyage, but consider paying a courier or armed guards like these boys here to walk these stacks of paper from one end of the planet to the other. You risk robbery and liability at every stoplight and airport terminal. Now, IPE and the team they've assembled have made it possible

to take that fabled journey of ten thousand miles in a single step."

Jim Headlund scanned the crowd as he concluded and seemed happy with their awed response. This was their cue. Evan gestured through the videophone to the pair of techs on the destination side. They bowed curtly.

"Next stop, Tokyo," Klink said with as much mirth as he could muster. No one seemed to notice. A single click of his finger at the screen and the job was done. The die was cast. Immediately, Evan wanted Klink to somehow take it back. He wanted to run those checks again. He wanted to run forward the tape of his life, watch the outcome of this gambit, then run it back again and act on what he knew. That was when he understood, perhaps by instinct, that the Big Oops was upon him. He was in its tentacles even now and would not be free until he saw that metallic turd pop into view on the videophone.

Evan had been so wrapped up that he missed it. But the gasps of the onlookers broke his concentration. When he finally swung his head around to the chamber, he could see that the windows were covered with condensation. As the waiting lab coats squeegeed down the port holes, the container was gone, leaving only a splotch of vacuum sweat behind on the polished concrete floor.

Another wave of gasps swept over the small crowd, followed by a smattering of golf claps.

"What's with the water?" asked the Senator of anyone.

An anonymous physics tech popped out of the alcove. "The condensation is unavoidable. It's a function of the vacuum. That's necessary so the object doesn't fuse with-

The Senator had heard enough, waving him off. "It looks too much like a bad magic act to me. I believe that this demo is on the level, but I could see how people might think it was rigged."

By this time Evan had completely glued himself to the videophone. His eyes did not track, simply stayed focused on the series of pixels describing the destination vacuum. Security measures on the line caused something close to a ten second delay. Surely by now, they must have

something. Then it happened: whoosh! As the rush of water vapor covered the camera lens in Tokyo, Evan felt the muscles in his back and buttocks begin to relax.

But as their automatic wipers cleaned the window back to transparency, the airtight package had not arrived. Something was wrong. The Oops had him again, tightening around his throat.

Jim Headlund was now standing right behind him. "This is just a function of the security features on the videophone. We should see it on appear on the other side very soon." Jim looked over at Klink as if to say "soon, right?"

Klink waited for Evan to speak, but the junior tech simply stared at the screen with increasingly bulging eyes. Eventually the two main Japanese techs appeared on the videophone, obscuring the view. They gave up a shrug, international sign language for "what the hell do we do now?"

The room was spinning now. Evan could see a dark ring overtake his field of vision just before he lost consciousness.

When he came to, it seemed like hours had passed, but in fact nothing had changed. He was still gaping at the videophone waiting for something to happen like everyone else.

-----

[3:11 pm] July 16, 2014 | Wed

"Don't you see what they've done?" Michael Klink silently paced the bare floor of the hidden supply room. "In setting up this whole project as an outside deal with independent sub-contractors like you and me, they absolve themselves from all legal responsibility."

"That's not it, Klink. You're panicking. Calm down and think about this for a minute. The UoE is good for people like us, people who are good at what they do, because we don't have to be loyal to a single

employer."

"And those employers have no obligation to us, either, and no reason to pay benefits or overtime."

"I get paid more now than I did slaving away at PicaSys. Even if you cancel out the benefits and perks, I'm rolling in it here. Plus, I'm my own man as a contractor. I set my hours, schedule my own jobs..."

Footsteps outside. Both men watched the shadows under the locked door until the crisis passed. Klink whispered. "You and I both work something close to eighteen by six. An employer like PicaSys would never ask you outright to work so many hours. But as a contractor, you assume the needs of your client and act accordingly. Face it- they have us by the shorties, now most of all."

"Like I said before, I'm willing to step up and take the hit on this one for reasons I can't really explain."

"You some kind of martyr now, a boy scout?"

"Was," said Evan, surprised by the sudden rush of memory. "Anyway, I'm willing to forget all about the OS install-"

"You think that was the cause of all this? Do you?" Klink was doing his best to be confrontational, to get into Evan's personal space. But Evan was slightly taller, even with his posture. Klink eventually gave up, and went back to sinking into the chair, thrusting his head into his hands. "The truth is that no one outside of the IPE inner-circle will ever know what really happened. You think we were responsible because we know one hundred percent of three percent of the project. The other twenty teams know just as as we do about the larger operation. IPE is hiding something, ready to sacrifice the first person who steps forward to the investor gods."

Evan didn't speak just then, wanting Klink to play his next card. Klink sank further into himself. "Have you considered that perhaps I'll be implicated as well if you do this? You're making your decision for me as well, and I don't like it. Besides, no one said anything about bearer bonds."

Evan looked back to the darkened chamber remembering the almost ceremonial way in which the guards unloaded their cargo. "Come to think of it," he said. "that was a bit odd."

"Odd? Bearer bonds are the stuff of cheap gangster novels. True crime. You're expecting just to get fired and sued into bankruptcy. These unseen baddies could well have you- both of us- up to our necks in polymer-cement by morning."

"I think I can find a way to insulate you completely, keep you out of the fire. But regardless, I'm going to Headlund in ten minutes to tell him what I believe is the truth, my little piece of it, anyway. If you want to do the right thing, meet me outside his office."

"I'm right behind you," said Klink half smiling.

-----

By the time Evan arrived at Jim Headlund's office door, the esteemed manager was already standing there with a sour face and a scrap of paper. "Read it," he said. His shirt was untucked. His foul breath indicated that he'd either been drinking very old vodka or vigorously licking a weight lifters' armpits.

"Can I sit down?" asked Evan as he took it.

Headlund did not move, barring Evan's entry with his arm. "Just read it."

Most of the memo was blacked out, obviously a censored photocopy.

"What is this? I'm not an outsider."

"Read."

The name at the bottom of the memo was none other than Michael Klink, a bad sign. In it, he expressed his deepest regrets for not bringing Evan Bishop's incompetence to Headlund's attention sooner. He included highlights from his "log" of Evan's mistakes. The last of

which was dated the night before the incident:

>> Noticed Evan's ID number on the OS update.

He said that it was only an upgrade and should fix a few interface issues without having any adverse affects on the public trial tomorrow. Worked until 2am trying to undo Evan's blunder. Hope things go well on the morrow! <<

Evan's looked up from Exhibit A with steely eyes. "I bet the date stamp on his log was set to last night."

"That's true."

"And it doesn't seem possible that a systems expert could hack the modification date on his own lousy text file."

Jim Headlund did not expect this kind of resistance, was not ready for it. His cool veneer went the way of his thinning nerves. "What's the problem, Bishop? You buzzed me an hour ago saying that you wanted to talk, to step up. I could only assume that you were ready to turn yourself in even then."

"Turn myself in? Am I a fugitive now?"

"Not anymore, you're not," he barked. From two adjoining offices, blue-suited security guards festooned Evan like barnacles, wrapping his hands and feet in garbage bag twist ties. Headlund called down the hallway after them, "take him to the basement and get a cohesive and comprehensive statement out of him- with vidi if you can."

-----

Channel Ten anchor Chad Carter turned to face camera two. After a pre-read of his teleprompter, he put on his ironic face.

"The legitimate physicists said it couldn't be done. The lawyers said it shouldn't be done. And in the end, they couldn't do it." The director cut to file footage of the IPE building. "Representatives from International Package Express released a statement today detailing how the first public exhibition of their newest innovation, something akin to teleportation, went horribly wrong. According to inside sources, close to five million dollars in bearer bonds were shipped instantaneously into the foundation of a building in Tokyo, fusing them with the concrete and rendering them irretrievable and worthless. Thankfully, no one was reported injured in the incident."

Back to camera one. The over the shoulder box dissolved to a matted photo of Dean Kayheart, his mouth opened in permanent bluster. The IPE logo flew up under him covered by a fat red universal ban sign.

"Senator Kayhart, who attended the event this morning, held a press conference this afternoon to express his distrust of the new technology."

Cut to tape. The Senator stood in front of the obligatory royal blue curtain and American flag, the veins on his forehead bulging slightly for the cameras. Chad Carter continued in voice-over, "The Senator slammed the IPE project as a danger to surrounding residents as well as a possible breach of national security."

"Just like drunk drivers, these irresponsible eggheads have endangered more lives than they may realize. That package could have ended up anywhere. Anyone standing near point B would be fused to whatever it is your transporting, an artificial Siamese twin." Behind him, he unveiled three life-sized blown-up photographs. Two of them were obvious fakes, an "artist's rendition" of the carnage of 'porting gone wrong. But the middle one, positioned to be in the most press photos along with the Senator, was the grizzly, and supposedly highly classified, image of an anonymous teleportation pioneer fused to the floor of his lab. The genie was out of the bottle, he told them, and it was up to the House and Senate to legislate it back in.

When the director cut back to the anchor, Evan's very own ID photo hung over his shoulder like a ghost at 50% opacity. He had been singled out by name for the press and stock holders, the responsible party.

Evan sat motionless on his bar stool, his eyes dilated and moist. He stayed there for what seemed like hours, watching the same story told over and over again with different correspondents, different graphics. Most of them mentioned him by name, covering the voice-over with a scan of his high school yearbook picture, from his sophomore year no less. The worst one featured interviews with other IPE contractors chiding Bishop for his carelessness. Most of them, he reasoned, didn't even know him. Penelope was not among them.

"Michael Klink could not be located for comment," they all said, as if he had nothing to do with it. "He is terribly distraught," read the official statement, "and is working on a failure analysis report for IPE." Most of the networks read it on the air verbatim.

-----

Michael Klink chuckled softly to himself. The worst had occurred, but the man who had all along prepared for this eventuality had prevailed. Decades of painful career insurance paid off at last. Of course, he wasn't exactly sure of any of this. And, if Michael Klink had been more sure of himself, he could have simply skipped town and gone on with his life. His story would have ended then and there.

The reason he could not be sure was that hours before he had stuffed himself into the air handling duct below the 'porting platform. With some difficulty, he crawled out further from the vent until he was comfortable he would not be seen. All of this, one must admit, was a little much for a man who had basically won the day.

It's not just that no one bothered to look for him in the air handling system. For hours one bothered to look for him at all. What Klink could not know was that the IPE brass was not much concerned since they now had a pair of shoulders on which to place the legal

responsibility for the incident. The entire IPE building, at least this particular floor, was completely silent. Klink didn't even hear the steady, unhurried footsteps of the security detail.

Feeling a bit foolish and more than a little hungry, Klink began to slowly inch himself backwards through the vent, a sensation akin to re-corking a bottle of wine from the inside. With a tap of his feet, the flimsy plastic grating fell away, and he shimmied the rest of the way back into the wide open space of the staging area.

The relatively fresh air felt wholesome in his lungs. He hadn't noticed until now that he had been sweating. Crouching down to avoid the steady gaze of security cameras, Klink snaked his way through the empty room.

Feet walking. Steps in the hallway outside.

"Has anybody seen Mike Klink?" he thought he heard.

That was it. Two words stacked against years of paranoid self-doubt parsed out into volumes of indictments. To him, it was like going away on vacation and coming back to a stack of phone messages- one doesn't have to read them to know that the net effect cannot be good.

"I don't know. Did you need to talk to him?"

"Everybody's looking for him. I've got a pile of messages here, all the major news orgs."

Back into the air vent? The voices were so close, close enough to hear an old buffoon clanging around. He desperately wanted to be just a few blocks away, safely slurping beer at a local bar watching the news roll in.

That's when the idea came to him, standing there with his mouth agape as he stared back at the source of his dismay. The spare pressurized container was just about six feet long on the inside, or at least that was how it seemed at the time. Once he got up the nerve to step inside, he found it much less accommodating. Oddly enough, the locking mechanism worked from the inside or outside independently, as if designed for exactly this purpose. The very sight enormous red

lighted button on the inside bulkhead soothed his nerves like warm tea.

Klink, somewhat less familiar than his junior on the procedure for setting coordinates, elected not to change the numbers too much. Tokyo was as good a getaway as any. Through the dedicated videophone, he could see that the time in Japan was very near morning- the lab would not be empty for long. Through some twists in the remote linking software, he was able to start the vacuum pumps in Tokyo, an accomplishment in itself.

Suddenly, Klink caught himself thinking carelessly. He stopped his fingers in mid-command and exited the global modeler. Just in case he'd been wrong, he began to remove the previous evening's patches. Just in case. Switching to the root account, he very carefully swapped out each slice of code, patch for patch.

Footsteps again, this time passing by very slowly.

-----

Everyone was watching him now. Evan could feel their stares on him like dozens of warming lamps. He had been leafing through the classifieds for half an hour before he noticed them. In his melancholy he was beginning to question every instinct he'd ever had. One mistake seemed to belie so many other smaller ones. He wondered where he had gone wrong, what exactly made the parcel disappear and where had it gone, and whether or not he was worrying himself sick.

And now it seemed that the Big Oops had spoiled his stay here as well. He could leave via the side exit, into the alleyway. But since the only fire exit appeared to be blocked by a rusting cigarette machine, he would have to go out as he'd come in, through the crowd of patrons and out the front door.

He folded the late edition under his arm and summoned his strength. He stood, straightened himself, and walked forward with back straight.

"Only two kinds of people walk with perfect posture," his father, also a sloucher, had once told him, "dancers and condemned men on their way to the gallows." Evan was not a dancer.

The stares became glares. None of them worried him seriously, with the exception of the burly gentleman in the Caterpillar hat and safety orange ski jacket.

"'ey, Rocket Boy!" cried out a man's voice from behind. "You think you could fix my computer? It can't print!"

Laughter ricocheted through the grease-stained corridors of the establishment. "My cash register," said the bartender as he banged the machine with his fist, "you think you can do something about it?"

Evan just kept walking as straight as he could.

"No, I mean do you think you could pay me and get the hell out of here?" the barkeep continued.

Evan had completely forgotten to settle his tab. He opened his sweaty wallet and handed the man a wad, all the cash he had left.

Evan shot the man a look of painful desperation. Okay, ferry man, now get me 'cross this river Styx. There was no reply. "The rest, if there is any, is a tip."

Upon turning back to the door, he found a land mass of hirsute flesh barring his path. It wore a safety orange ski jacket. "Are you really that guy?"

"Wha- what guy?"

Of course he was the guy. The TVs over the bar was still flashing his picture. The regulars were already beginning to laugh, as if they knew the punch line of a joke that hadn't yet begun.

The large man looked around for approval. "Are you the guy who's going to have to kiss my ass to get out of this bar alive?"

Evan backed off solemnly as the man turned around and bent over. Evan felt the tension as an increasing buzzing noise in his ear. Louder and louder.

"Leave him alone, Jerry. Let him get home. The lawyers will have him picked apart by morning."

"No, don't worry. I'll do it," said Evan calmly. The other man was now mugging for the crowd, grabbing his rear end and, oddly enough, making pig noises. But all Evan could hear was the buzzing. "Jerry is it? Okay, Jerry, I'm puckering up now."

The buzz reached its peak just as Evan's foot made contact with Jerry's rump, sending the bowling-pin shaped man toppling forward into the doorway. The concussion of his head against the glass door held it open for a moment. Evan leaped over the body and sprinted for the nearest street corner.

"Cab!" he shouted. The street was dead, no traffic at all. For the first time in Evan's memory, he heard real silence on a street corner in New York City.

Perhaps, he thought, it's just my ears.

Just then, the buzzing returned. He spun around to see that a few of the bar's larger patrons were spilling out into the dark street looking for him.

A streak of yellow burst into view. Evan threw himself into its path like an insurance hoaxter. Screech.

"La Guardia as fast as you can get me there."

A few minutes later, the cabbie grabbed the mirror and examined Evan's face in it.

"Before you say, 'hey, are you the Big Oops guy,' it's not me. I'm not him. I just look a lot like him."

"And you've been drinking like an oops guy, too." The cabby waved off Evan's smell.

For a cabby in New York to find offense in one's smell, Evan thought, that's really something. He hadn't realized it until just then, but he stank a great deal. Reflexively, he pulled his reeking hands away from his face.

"Well, if you want to get out of the country, that's fine with me. Screw the lawyers, that's what I say. Just don't try to reprogram my meter," he said laughing, tapping on the digital display racking up dollars by the second. "We might end up in Borneo or something."

That was when Evan remembered that he didn't have any cash.

-----

Zeros. Too many zeros. Klink watched anxiously from the airtight pod as the time ticked down and the altitude coordinate clicked up by orders of magnitude. Unable to understand what had gone wrong, he reached for the release. But if he aborted now, with only a few seconds to go, he'd never be able to stop the system from sending the empty pod and ruining his only chance for escape without humiliation. Besides, if he ended up a mile or so in the air, so what? The thinner the air, the better his chances anyway. In his fevered mind, he imagined splashing down off the coast of Japan- just like a real astronaut. However, he would have no catch boat and no parachute.

As the grisly scenario played out in his mind, he reversed his decision and punched the emergency release button.

Or, at least he thought he did. He was suddenly overcome by the sensation of having just come to after passing out without the memory of losing consciousness. His flesh burned, molecules and tissues torn asunder and reassembled.

Then he became aware that his eyes didn't work, or that some bright light prevented him from see anything else. Covering his face with his injured hands, he opened one micro-slit between his fingers like a pin hole camera. To his surprise, he saw that he'd landed on very solid floor, painted a rather tacky shade of orange, actually.

This time he made certain that he pushed the release button for real.

-----  
[7:12 am] July 17, 2014 | Thur

Evan sat in the blue plastic airport seat and waited for his flight to nowhere. Through the fingers of his hands, he watched the schedule monitor as if it were a classic film, reacting with varying emotions with each meaningless change.

It had only been twenty-two hours since the Oops and already Evan Bishop would not be able to work in his chosen field for the rest of his life. Even if he did, his pay would be nearly 100% garnished until he died. And if he went on the doll, the litigants and creditors would skim that down to nothing as well. Less than a single day and a man's life was ruined over a single mistake he wasn't even sure he'd made.

He had considered his options over and over again until he seemed to have none left. From his voice mail and other artifacts left behind in his apartment, the press and litigants would eventually catch on to Evan Bishop's plans: closeting himself away in some third-world nation, under an alias, teaching PicaSys API's to aspiring backwater programmers - like some half-baked unpublished hack teaching creative writing at the local community college. It was to be a small life, dull and bitter.

"United Way, sir?"

"Excuse me?"

Across from him stood a young man in a Boy Scout uniform, feet shoulder width apart, chin up. "I'm collecting donations for the United Way."

"I haven't got anything, kid," he grunted. "Now, go bother someone else."

The boy looked unnaturally sad at this rejection. "But surely you have something to give, sir. It's the United Way- they don't take 'no' lightly."

The way he said the last sentence, the apparent reference to the mega charity as something akin to organized crime, made Evan laugh for the first time in a while. Thinking again, Evan rustled in his pockets. He had been hustling the pay phones all morning, snatching enough change for a small meal from a vending machine. He picked out two shining quarters and a nickel.

"There you go, kid. It's all I have left in the world." Evan smiled and straightened his shirt.

"In appreciation for your donation, that man over there told me to give this to you." The boy handed him a fat manila packet. He could feel it jingle. Keys. Before taking it, he glanced over to the granite pillar to his left. The bearded man there nodded. Evan did not recognize him.

"You're no Boy Scout," protested Evan. "No Scout I ever knew did pick up and delivery jobs for swarthy strangers at airports. You should be more careful."

"I know. The gentleman, my sometime employer, said the getup would be artistic. He said that his 'honest eagle' would find it funny."

"I don't."

"That's the money as agreed - and the ticket as agreed, rental car and the rest."

"The rest of what?"

"The agreement."

"Is Klink messed up in this?"

"Tut tut, sir. No names." The boy began to walk away backwards, then stopped. "Oh, by the way. He wanted to know something: how exactly did you monkey wrench this thing?"

"I don't shave points, cowpoke. I did everything I could to make it work. My strategy on selling short is to count on a little thing called entropy. When they say it can't be done - sometimes the big 'they' are right."

"At least for now," the boy giggled.

-----

Deep beneath the offices of IPE Japan, in a small parking garage, a clandestine team struggled to remove the restraining bolts from an enormous non-functional metal door. Two men and a two meter long wrench had not been able to budge the nuts. The members of the recovery team began to sweat for different reasons, each only knowing enough of the whole story to keep them interested and honest.

One gentleman pushed the others aside and angrily flared up his blast torch, easily cutting the bolts free in one fluid motion. Clink. Clink. With a suction cup, another team member started the heavy solid door falling outward as four equally solid men noiselessly caught it.

Once inside, the story become clearer: wireless networking antennas aimed at the dummy lab twenty floors above; the compact vacuum chamber similar but smaller than its cousin; and finally the dew-laden vacuum capsule waiting for them to open.

After removing the unopened capsule, each left the scene separately, leaving only a few behind to replace the repainted door.

One man flipped on his encrypted cell phone, placed a call across the Pacific to bearded man waiting in an airport.

-----

Michael Klink tried the emergency release one more time.

Nothing.

Suddenly, he noticed a smaller control button tucked beneath the release. This one looked even more menacing, green with a lightening

strike through it. The excitement of finding it masked the enormous pain he was beginning to feel. His lightheadedness had not yet begun to concern him.

Yes, he thought. He would disappear into the streets of Tokyo, work in a no-name software lab for a few years with an assumed name and artfully conceived backstory. Perhaps he'd even fly back to the States one day after some plastic surgery and hair plugs.

Green button with the lightening strike. Punch. Nothing.

This was when the panic began to settle on him, the Big Oops. Pain shot up from his legs and torso as he continued in vain to struggle with the emergency systems of the pod.

-----

[11:27 am] July 20, 2014 | Sun

Evan sat in his beach chair soaking up the rich oxygen and counting his blessings. He ran his toes through the black Hawaiian sands and scanned the impossibly blue horizon. It was Sunday, the eternal day of rest- or day of eternal rest, either way.

He named each new set of waves which caressed his bare feet. "Dean," he muttered. "Dean Kayheart." He chided himself again. Wondering whether the Senator was involved was neither to his benefit nor any of his business. Unknowingly, Evan had played his part to the hilt, crying into his beer at the tavern, getting into that fight, and building up the perfect anti-alibi. If Klink had been involved, it didn't make sense, sabotaging the effort then skipping town without the prize money. He decided for the fiftieth time that day to stop thinking about it.

He lazily pulled out his DigiPad and scratched out an encrypted e-mail to Central Services in San Diego. "Regarding bookings for Penelope Shageri for the Month of August, 2014, I would like to schedule her for a project of a sensitive nature on a small Island near Oahu. The

project duration is currently unknown, but may develop into a full time position." The digital signature carried another man's name: Kip Browning. His new identity came complete with social security number, family history, and a driver's license from a state he'd never visited.

-----

[6:45 pm] Nov 02, 2021 | Sat

"Today, we step onto the surface of mars," announced Captain Marshall Islington as he stood poised above the lander's series of ladders. "We do so not as Americans, Japanese, Russians and Spanish. We step onto the surface as one, a human family." Six other members of the landing team, a representative from each continent, joined him one by one at the ladders.

The camera mounted on the lander's jib arm spun around to give the live prime-time audience their money shot: seven human beings ready to share history. In the earth-like gravity, they each descended their own ladder slowly, careful not to lose sync with the others.

"... and, now. Seven representatives from earth look back at our homeworld and wonder- Mars may be our stepping stone to the universe and the next step in bringing universal peace to our own world."

Politicians clapped. Mothers cried. College students drank. People would forever talk of where they were when they heard the soundbite of the millennium uttered for the first time.

Hours later, the team began collecting a nominal series of rock samples and took some photographs, the "PR sortie" as it had been dubbed. But Islington noticed something, an odd coincidence. After rechecking the topographical data from their satellite missions decades before, he could not explain a black object which jutted from the rust-colored surface of the planet only a few hundred meters away from the landing site.

"Marshall, you're supposed to stay within two minute's walk. This

is only the initial sortie," said his science officer from his seat at the Phobos command base. "You can do your walkabout tomorrow."

"I need to look at something. Tell the others to stay back."

Captain Marshall Islington gazed at the blackened vacuum capsule for some time before he recognized it as a man-made object. So perforated and eroded was it that the plastic-composite material looked more like sandstone.

Curious, he touched it. Immediately, the outer shell crumbled away in the Martian wind, revealing the frozen grimace of the first man on Mars.