

*- THE INCARNATIONS OF THE AMERICAS -*

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***THE CLEARING AT THE END OF  
THE PATH***

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***WILLIAM HRDINA***

Consider Swift's pamphlet war with the astrologer Partridge in which Swift claimed Partridge had died and Partridge vehemently insisted he was still alive. Swift won hands down by pointing out that just because a man claims he's alive, it doesn't necessarily mean he isn't lying.

**PART ONE- ANGER**

**Chapter 1**

Ben Ainsley looked down at his wife Molly's dead body. Her face was peaceful- the skin thin and drawn out from her two year battle with cancer. Her face no longer held the pain he'd seen there for so long; which was a relief- but a paltry one.

His eye's bleary with tears, Ben fell down to his knees next to their marriage bed. He leaned over and kissed his wife one last time on her lips, they were already turning cold. Tears fell off of Ben's face and onto Molly's, streaking the make-up she'd insisted he apply every morning.

"I want to look my best for you when I finally go." She would say.

She died at home the way she wished, that was a consolation too.

He wiped the tears carefully away before getting up and nodding to the four technicians waiting patiently in the back of the room.

Feeling more alone than he'd ever been in his life, Ben left the room so the techs could do their work. There were two men and two women. Their white lab coats were clean and adorned with the letters RI over the lapel in bold red letters. The two men worked to unload several powerful computers, while the women worked to set up a high volume satellite dish just outside the bedroom window. Using specially designed suction cups she fastened the tennis racquet sized satellite to the wall and flipped a small switch on the side. A green light let the technician know everything was operating correctly.

"We're clear here." She told the man now sitting behind one of the computer monitors.

"Check twice." The man said.

This was protocol. Time was a factor in their procedures and it was always better to check twice and do once. As requested all the necessary checks were remade.

"We're good." The woman affirmed.

Satisfied, the techs turned their attention to the deceased body of Molly Ainsley. From a medical bag the man took out a set of electric hair clippers and a sheet to collect the hair beneath Molly's head. He slid it under her and started shaving. There wasn't

much to do- the chemo kept her bald until she stopped taking it three months earlier. When he was finished, the two women techs began drawing a grid over Molly's entire skull while the other guy prepared a series of electrodes.

Working with practiced precision they placed one electrode at each intersection of the grid until Molly's head was full head of red wires, it looked like she was wearing a clown wig. Once they'd double-checked everything was satisfactory, one of the women sat down at the small bank of computers and began running the downloading process. As the electrodes sent impulses through Molly's brain, her leg would occasionally jump or her hand would flex. The techs paid no attention- such things were normal.

The entire process only took ten minutes from start to finish. Once their task was done they moved quickly, repacking their equipment and making Molly look as comfortable as possible. When they were finished, they left an envelope containing the bill and a copy of Ben's contract on the dresser. They left discreetly. Ben, who was in the kitchen making himself a very stiff drink, didn't even hear them leave.

## Chapter 2

The day Molly died seemed to leech past Ben like sand through his fingers. He vaguely remembered going through the normal motions of a day off. He ate; he sat in front of the TV, watching with his eyes, but not his mind. He was deep inside his own head. Remembering Molly. Thinking about all of the good times they'd had.

He knew he was going to see her again, that made it easier.

Still, he was having a hard time accepting the idea that she would never again wake him up in the middle of the night to make love or laugh so hard milk came out of her nose. Instead of growing old together he would only be able to visit her, like she was living in a prison or a sanitarium.

Ben had an appointment to see Molly at his local headquarters of Reincarnation Industries at 10AM the next morning. A complimentary limo was scheduled to arrive and take him to his first visit as part of the package he'd purchased. It was a nice touch. The idea of driving in congested traffic after visiting Molly for the first time wasn't particularly appealing.

He didn't sleep much, maybe a few hours. He kept thinking he could hear her voice, calling for him to get her some water or help her to the bathroom. Those were just phantom memories, they weren't real. Molly was gone.

At 10 sharp Ben was standing in front of his window, watching for the limo's arrival. It showed up on time, beeping the horn as it pulled up to the curb. Ben walked down in a haze and before he knew it the towering edifice of Reincarnation Industries was towering into the sky directly in front of him.

For the first time Ben started to get a feeling of excitement stronger than his grief. He was almost able to smile walking into the lobby, a sparsely decorated modern space of black and brushed silver with large abstract paintings on the wall in bright reds and blues. A pretty receptionist sat behind an information desk, and a stark rectangular opening tucked into the corner housed the elevators.

The driver of the limo gave him a card with "5<sup>th</sup> Floor- Room 532" written on it. Ben walked to the elevators and waited for a car to arrive. Once he was on Ben hit the button marked 5 and waited patiently for the door to close. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor he was crying

again, his mind and heart filled with so many emotions at once it was almost impossible to breathe. He leaned up against the wall and tried to compose himself. He was maybe half way to calm when the elevator doors opened. Another pretty receptionist sat behind a matte-black desk with a console and keyboard built in.

Ben handed the woman his card without a word. He was struggling, with only minimal success, to maintain some semblance of composure. The woman behind the desk, her nametag said her name was Alice, seemed oblivious to his distress. He supposed the employees of Reincarnation Industries saw people in all sorts of emotional states and had grown immune.

While not particularly compassionate, Alice was polite, friendly, and professional, just like the brochures said she would be. After requiring Ben to fill out seven different forms Alice led him down a long hallway to a room marked 532. Inside was a sparsely decorated room with a desk and an elaborate headset and gloves. Other rooms had full body suits, but Ben wasn't able to afford such fancy extras. Alice showed him to the chair and helped Ben put the helmet on his head and the gloves on his hands. The wires came together into a bundle and went through the floor. There they linked to a larger network inside a massive mainframe taking up the entire 15<sup>th</sup> floor of the building.

Feeling impatient and nervous Ben waited for Virtual Reality helmet to be activated. There was a soft beep in his left ear and suddenly he was standing in a hallway with a single door. Taking a deep breath Ben knocked.

### Chapter 3

Molly Ainsley burst back into consciousness like she'd been woken from a deep sleep by an ice-cold bucket of water. All at once she was awake. She knew she was alive, but she didn't yet know who she was. The computer was still processing the memories. Her sense of inhabiting a body hadn't returned yet either. For the time being Molly was only a disembodied awareness of a massive white void that surrounded her seemingly for eternity. It was terrifying in a purely existential sense. Molly didn't experience the corresponding increase in blood pressure and heart rate, the flooding of her muscles with adrenaline to facilitate her ability to run from danger. There was only pure terror and empty white totality.

Molly let out a mouth-less scream.

The words "Don't Panic." Suddenly flashed across the entirety of what Molly now realized was her perception. The words hung in the air in front of her perception until her silent screams tapered off.

As the computer did its work, things began to come back to Molly. She remembered dying. The memory of it was hazy, like a bad dream. The only detail she could recall clearly was the moment of total panic when she realized her body wasn't going to take another breath. It was done living and it didn't care what her consciousness thought about it. The machine was kicking out the ghost once and for all. She remembered feeling foolish for thinking her mind and her body were partners, when in fact they were reluctant allies at best.

A new message appeared in the whiteness. "Your room will be ready in 5-4-3-2-1."

The room appeared all around her, wrapping her in its familiarity. Along with the perception of the room came with the perception of her body. The first thing she was aware of was the feeling of the carpet between her toes. Then the slight chill of the air and the faint omnipresent un-named smell that was associated with all hotel rooms from the fanciest suite to the Motel 6. It smelled... of multitudes.

Regardless, it was a vast improvement over the white eternity. Molly looked around with curiosity. She remembered seeing this room before. With her husband Ben. Suddenly where she was and what was happening all came back in a flood. She was inside the Reincarnation Industries computer.

She'd been reborn in cyberspace.

Along with this revelation came a second- her body had returned. But this time it would be different. Her cancer was gone and it would never be coming back. She was no longer vulnerable to the pains of the flesh. She held her hand up in front of her face, marveling at the mundane normality of it. Molly remembered watching herself decay, her fingers turning into claws with the bones and cartilage visible, like someone shrunk the skin around her hand. Now the digits were vibrant and pink- they were *alive* again. She remembered being shocked by the festering sores that rose up out of her skin during the final stages of her body's failure.

Now she was well again. She clapped her hands with joy and did a little dance, laughing and smiling at the way her cyber-body obeyed her commands in the way her real body stopped when the cancer came.

For all intensive purposes Molly found herself standing inside a virtual hotel suite of the kind you'd find in Vegas or the Poconos. The biggest feature of the room, and the reason Molly chose it, was a large window that took up  $\frac{3}{4}$  of one wall. The window had a stunning view of Necropolis, named after the Egyptian City of the Dead. Even though the place carried an ancient name, it was hyper-modern in its design. The towers making up the skyline were sleek- all black metal and chrome. It stretched out beneath her like a picture. To the left were mountains that stretched around to the right, eventually falling into a sea with shockingly blue water. The room itself was tastefully decorated with oak furniture, a queen size bed, and a fairly comfortable looking couch.

Molly wondered how long it would be before Ben came to visit. She sat down on the couch to wait for him. Sitting there, looking out the window at the bustling city below, Molly realized this would be the main facet of her strange new life- waiting for Ben to come and visit.

She looked around to see if there was anything around to keep her attention. There wasn't. No books, no magazines. She checked the night stand and was disappointed to see there were no virtual Gideons to plant a bible- she wasn't a Christian, but anything was better than nothing.

The knocking on her door startled her so badly she let out an involuntary squeak of surprise.

She wasn't aware of the near total silence she was moving in, until the knock at the door shattered it. Molly wheeled around, looking for it's source. The sound was coming from a door she was sure wasn't there the first time she glanced around. With some trepidation she went to it and put her hand on knob. The metal felt cold.

"Who's there?" She asked.

"It's me, Ben." replied his familiar voice.

“Ben?” She asked, her hand fumbling desperately with the doorknob, trying to get it open. He beat her to it. The door swung wide, revealing Ben, smiling from ear to ear.

She grabbed him and was squeezing the air out of him before he had a chance to take more than one step in the door. It didn't take more than five seconds before they were both sobbing deeply with relief and sorrow over Molly's death. They let themselves slide to the floor in a heap of arms and legs- both rocking the other and speaking with optimism through deep, gut-wrenching sobs. Finally after several minutes they'd regained enough composure to try to have a rational conversation. Ben leaned back from Molly, took her by the shoulders and gave her a long look.

“You look terrific- the way you used to before you got sick.”

Yup. All you had to do to make me beautiful again was kill me off.” She said in a lame attempt at humor. Ben smiled, but didn't laugh.

He reached out and held her close again. “Is this place OK? It looks pretty much the way I remember it.” He said, looking over her shoulder at the large window and the city beyond.

“Yeah. It's nice. The only thing I might regret is having that big window.”

“Why? It's a beautiful view.”

Molly pulled away from Ben, got up and led him to the window. About half way there she stopped and took a second look at him.

“Wow, Ben, have you been working out? You look like you're in really good shape. I'm sorry if I didn't notice...”

Ben laughed.

“What?”

“This isn't my body. Remember? We couldn't afford to have my body scanned so they just stick my scanned head onto a generic body. Seems like a better deal for me- this body doesn't have my..er.. baby fat.” He finished with a grin. “Now- you were saying about the window?”

“Yeah. It's just you can see all the activity going on out there.”

“And you can't be a part of it.”

“Yeah. I'm terrible aren't I? I mean I get the privilege of life after death, and all I can do is complain.” Molly looked ashamed of herself. She stared down at her feet and marveled that although she could feel the ground- it wasn't really there. Neither was she for that matter. This particular factoid seemed a little too incredible to really wrap her mind around- especially since her brain didn't really exist anymore.

“It's OK Molly. Freedom is a natural human tendency. You know the minute I am able to afford something better I'll try to at the very least buy you a few hours in the city.”

“You're paying plenty just keeping me alive- I don't need any special trips.”

Molly stopped, her jaws snapping shut as the true reality of what was happening to her started to settle in. “Oh my God Ben. I'm Dead. This isn't a dream. I really died... And I'm back.”

He pushed his lips together in a look of sad resignation and said, “You died yesterday. I was there with you. You looked relieved- you had the first smile I'd seen on your face in over a year. The technicians were standing by waiting for you to pass over. They got a scan very quickly; they don't think there was more than a .05% data loss-

which is very good.” He stared at her for another long minute. “Gosh, it’s just so good to see you looking so healthy, it’s like a miracle.”

Molly looked down at herself. There were no mirrors in the room and although her hands looked better, she hadn’t seen her own reflection yet.

“What do I look like Ben?” She asked.

“You’re as beautiful as the day we met Darling. You look just like the scan they took of you when we found out you were going to start getting sick.” He looked around the room. “This whole thing is a miracle. You get cancer, you die. But you aren’t lost forever...” He stopped talking, fresh tears poured out of his eyes.

Molly put her arms around Ben. “No I’m not lost- I’m right here.”

In a flood it all came back.

#### Chapter 4

Molly didn’t want to go to the doctor when her joints started aching. She hated doctors. When Molly was 12 she went to a doctor who’d misdiagnosed a pain in her belly as a stomach ache instead of what it was- appendicitis. Her appendix ended up rupturing and she nearly died. The event soured her on the medical profession and ever since she put off her doctor’s visits as long as she could. Molly and Ben were lucky. They both had steady jobs as teachers- with health benefits. Millions of others weren’t so lucky. But still, Molly never went unless she deemed a visit absolutely necessary.

She was only 33. No reason to think a little joint pain was anything but that, a little joint pain.

But it didn’t go away- it got worse.

After two weeks of increasingly painful symptoms Molly found she was willing, if not eager, to go to the doctor. Ben, knowing such trips were traumatic for her, took the day off from work and went along. Molly’s fear was that she was developing arthritis. Her grandmother had suffered mightily from the disease and the idea that she would’ve inherited it didn’t seem outlandish.

Neither of them had given a thought to the possibility of the illness the doctor informed them was almost certain.

Molly had bone cancer. Bad. The doctor said he thought it was fairly advanced. It turned out Molly had an unusually high pain threshold.

“Most people,” the doctor told her, “wouldn’t even be able to walk at this point.”

Driving back from the doctor’s office in a terribly awkward silence they heard a commercial for the new “Middle Class Package” from Reincarnation Industries. Although the company had been in operation for a few years- the highly controversial service was hitherto only available to the ultra-rich. An intelligent sounding voice told them the “deceased will find themselves returned to the flesh, while actually existing only within cyberspace. This way you never have to be without your spouse- even in death.” There was a pause while soothing music played, and then came the tag line, “Together forever really means something- with Reincarnation Industries.”

That night, after tearfully making love in the bed they’d shared for nearly a decade- Ben and Molly decided to call Reincarnation Industries and make an appointment. They told themselves that they weren’t really deciding anything- they were just going to find out the details of what such a thing would cost. But in reality, lying

there in each other's arms, they both knew they were going to sign Molly up if it was even remotely feasible to do so. There probably wasn't anything they wouldn't do to keep death from tearing them apart.

Molly and Ben's love was true. It wasn't built on infatuation and circumstance but on a mutual love- tested through hardship and celebrated by good times. Molly and Ben's love might not jump out at people as romantic- not in the traditional sense. But it was a hell of a lot more real than the figures dancing through the pages of a bodice-ripping novel.

Ben didn't want to lose her and she didn't want to go.

The next day they walked into Reincarnation Industries for their appointment. They spent nearly seven hours checking financial histories and learning the costs and benefits available to the deceased from the different packages the company offered. Their "Pre-death Option Coordinator" was a salesman named Stan who showed too many teeth when he smiled.

At the end of the day they were ushered into a plush, well-appointed office. On the table were four items- 2 virtual reality helmets, a contract, and a pen. Stan ran through a few caveats- the most important being a warning that RI reserved the right to cancel the procedure if it was shown the cancer spread into Molly's brain. Cancer cells destroy the ability to get a clear reading on the subject's brain and therefore all forms of brain cancer or massive head trauma made one ineligible for the procedure. After these legal niceties were handled they all sat down.

"Now I know this is a very hard decision on many different levels." Stan began, warming them up. "We at RI are aware that no family wants to even conceive of the possibility that a loved one will pass into the great beyond unexpectedly or otherwise. As a testament to this difficulty we have a very important incentive that we only offer on your first visit to Reincarnation Industries. If you, Molly and Ben, sign this contract right now, I will knock 20% off of your monthly payment for the life of the contract. This is a one time deal- valid for about 30 seconds, after that, I can personally guarantee you no comparable offer will ever come your way."

Ben and Molly didn't need to talk about it. Throughout the day they'd exchanged a number of poignant looks. They were both impressed and thought they should go through with the procedure. The only time they hesitated was during the financial interview. It was clear that affording the service was going to stretch them financially to the limit and the company gave very little leeway to those who didn't pay their bills. If any bill- for any amount of money- became 90 days past due, Reincarnation Industries reserved the right to erase Molly's information from their database. This process was not reversible. Once a client was scrubbed from the mainframe- they couldn't be recovered.

Still, when Stan picked up the pen and held it out- Ben took it and signed at the X. Molly did too.

Clearly pleased, Stan said. "You made the right choice. I don't even want to talk about how many people come back the day after their initial interview begging to sign up for the 20% discount. It's always good to see people who are smart enough to grasp the ring of opportunity when it's offered. Anyway, if you both put on your Virtual Reality helmets I can lead you through the different room models available in your chosen package. Of course you can change your mind about your accommodations within the

VR world at any point up to the time of passing, but any change made post-reincarnation is subject to a nominal service fee.”

Relieved to put on their helmets to get away from Stan’s teeth they slipped the devices over their heads and ten minutes later the deal was done. They left that night and never spoke of their decision again.

Not a single time.

### Chapter 5

Corey Inglewood walked into a small room with blank white walls and tacky tan linoleum tile on the floor and sighed. A hard wooden chair was situated in front of a video monitor/player on a gray metal rolling stand plugged into the wall. The rest of the room was empty. Maybe room is too nice a term for where Corey found himself, “glorified closet” was a little more accurate. The door clicked shut behind him with a vague echo. Reluctantly, Corey sat down in the hard wooden chair, leaned forward, and pushed play on the DVD player.

He hated this part of working at a new company. There was always one of these video presentations. “We care about our employees... Blah blah blah.” It was all bullshit anyway. The truth was; he would have a job until they figured out a way to get a computer or a robot to do what he was doing- and not a second longer.

The fact that Corey possessed a genius IQ didn’t change this fact one iota.

An attractive woman appeared on the monitor in front of him. Corey had no doubt there was an equally attractive man that appeared when the new-hire was a woman. All part of the equal-opportunity sexism that’d become so popular.

“Welcome to Reincarnation Industries.” said the woman on the screen. “My name is Loretta and I’m going to be your guide on this fabulous trip through the history, the future, and the expectations of Reincarnation Industries.” The woman spoke in the slightly condescending voice of someone who’s spent most of her life talking to children. Her pleasant southern accent masked the tone- but could not eliminate it.

Corey could already tell the presentation was going to be as bad as they came. As was always true in such situations, the bigger the controversy surrounding a company, the more they would try to bury the ugly truth in flowery rhetoric and sophomoric simplicity.

He bet himself (correctly) that the mountain of lawsuits and political/religious opposition that plagued the company since the day it opened its doors wouldn’t even be mentioned in the presentation. All he’d get was happy-crappy.

Corey shook his head and tried to shift into a more comfortable position. There wasn’t one. It was as if the chairs were specifically designed to be uncomfortable<sup>1</sup>.

The woman continued. “From the invention of God, to the idea of cybernetics, people have dreamed of finding a way to extend consciousness beyond the frail trappings of the human flesh. Reincarnation Industries is the first company in history to turn this science fiction, into science fact. This amazing feat was made possible by our founder, Gustav Rawles. He was the only man brilliant enough to design a computer system capable of modeling and replicating *every single neural connection in a human specimen* at one given moment. All by itself this would have been a monumental achievement. For those of you who may have been hired to do custodial work in the building, this

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<sup>1</sup> They *were* specifically designed to be uncomfortable.

means Professor Rawles developed the technology to clone a brain “electronically” inside a computer.”

Corey groaned with embarrassment for whoever wrote such a condescending line. The temptation to put his hands over his ears and start humming was almost unbearable. The worst part was the way she made the quotation marks in the air with her fingers when she said “electronically.”

“The Professor’s original idea was much less ambitious than what was eventually achieved. He wanted to use the computer cloned brains to better understand the effects of drugs that alter brain chemistry. The idea was to experiment with drugs inside the computer simulation instead of inside a patient. This would allow doctors to try drug therapies before administering them to actual people- allowing for massive clinical tests of any brain targeted drug, without putting anything but data at risk. It was his hope these models would speed research on new drugs- facilitating cures for everything from depression to overeating.”

Corey wished they’d been successful at finding a cure for boredom. He stared up at the ceiling and counted the pock marks in the ceiling tiles.

“The most difficult aspect of his research was finding the proper algorithms to make the brain act as if it were “alive.” This was a necessary condition for the drug experimentations because without them he would be working with a static brain model instead of an active one. Only an active brain could show him the effects of the drugs. The interrelationship of neurons and neural pathways in the human brain is a massively complicated system, and in order for the model to work, Professor Rawles needed to find the right mathematical framework to set the static snapshot of a person’s brain into motion. Greatly simplified, he needed to find a way to get the cyber-brain to “think” the way our own brain’s do. For nearly five years, the Professor tried literally thousands of different techniques and algorithms, trying to get his virtual brain to work. When the breakthrough finally came, Professor Rawles credited his success to the lessons learned from robotic cockroaches.”

Corey looked back at the screen. This was new information to him.

“Yes, you heard me right.” The woman on the screen laughed, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

“For years researchers into robotics tried to write sophisticated programs that mirrored the behavior of simple insects. At first, massively complicated strategies were used, long drawn out programs that tried to write into the program code every contingency that could come its way, from food and energy, to how to go around a chair that’s in the way. This proved to be a Herculean task. To everyone’s surprise, the most effective way to program the robotic cockroach was to put in extremely simple commands and let the thing loose. No one expected that complicated behavior could arise out of a set of simple commands, but it does. Ironically, Professor Rawles was familiar with the electric cockroach research, but he rejected it as too simplistic to work in the human mind, assuming such strategies would only work on “lower” organisms. After five years and endless failures, he decided to try the ‘simple approach’.”

Corey sincerely wished the woman would stop making air quotes- it was a pet peeve of his.

“It turns out the simple approach works. The program that runs the Reincarnation Industries brain data has only 25 lines. Much to Professor Rawles shock, just 25 lines of

code allows much more than just a mere “model” of the brain to occur. The person being modeled comes alive- inside the computer. You can imagine Gustav’s shock when one of his computer models began yelling out for “help” in a desperate voice from out of his computer speakers. The voice belonged to brain pattern #55532- a 47 year old man named George Papadopolous. The cyber-George reported the experience of floating in the middle of a white void, and, most disturbingly, he seemed to think he was alive. Fascinated, Professor Rawles tracked George down and got him to come into the lab. One of the strangest conversations in history then took place when George talked to the cyber version of himself for about twenty minutes. At the end of the conversation George was convinced he’d spoken to himself.

When Gustav realized he was creating a virtual version of a living person he decided to bring his work to a halt. The moral quandaries surrounding the cloning of still living people caused him to abandon his research entirely. He took his research and moved into a small hut on the side of a volcano in Hawaii. Many people tried to reproduce his work without success- without the simple 25 line algorithm dubbed “the life wave,” they were wasting their time.

Six long years passed before Gustav suddenly showed up at MIT’s door with a new idea. By this time, Gustav was a legend within neuroscience, computer, and philosophy departments across the globe. MIT jumped at the chance to fund his research. Over the ensuing six years Gustav had come to a solution to his conundrum that he found satisfactory, although he wasn’t sure it would work. Gustav theorized he could take his brain scan and apply it to a subject immediately after death. Then, he could download the brain into the computer. Using the virtual neurons it was then theoretically possible to bring the newly deceased person back from the dead inside the computer.

Over the next two years Gustav and his team determined the process could indeed be performed within fifteen minutes of death and still create a viable consciousness. At the end of the first successful test Gustav was seen to fall down on his knees. He was thanking God. Reportedly he said, ‘I’ve just given the entire human race the power to be Lazarus.’ Professor Gustav’s happiness was short lived. He died four weeks later of an unexpected stroke. Tragically, he was working late into the night by himself and he wasn’t found for several hours. As a result, doctors were unable to download his own brilliant mind into his creation. As a result, humanity lost one of its greatest intellects.”

As the woman narrated, the screen showed pictures of Gustav; first as a young man in a suit, then standing in a lab coat playing with a dog. All the pictures were pleasant, with an almost Rockwellian flavor. Gustav looked remarkably normal for a genius scientist. His hair was slightly receding; he had thin lips and wide friendly eyes. Not surprisingly, there was no mention of his famous thirst for beer or his legendary inability to deal with people when they made mistakes.

The screen then flashed the very famous photograph of Gustav on his knees, eyes pitched up to heaven. It faded out to be replaced by an aerial shot of Gustav’s funeral.

It was taken from too far away to tell that one half of the crowd was in open warfare with the other half. Five people at the funeral were killed, trampled in the ensuing melee. Most observers of the event were surprised the casualty count was so low.

At the time of Gustav’s death only five weeks had passed, but the issue had already exploded into the forefront of world’s attention. Like abortion, the reincarnation

issue was one where both sides held strong- mostly emotionally motivated beliefs, and a strong tendency towards looking at everyone on the opposite side as one of the basest incarnations of ignorance and evil in the world.

One side saw Gustav as a hero and a genius who had potentially given humanity victory over death. The other saw him as a monster from Hell who was responsible for the single greatest human atrocity since Auschwitz. Most people's opinions sat somewhere in the middle of the spectrum- but few non-fanatics went to the funeral. It was a fight you would've had to have been blind not to see coming.

Then, the woman narrator told a straight up lie.

"After Gustav's death his company transferred to a board of directors who immediately sought to bring this marvelous new technology to the people of the world. Reincarnation Industries was born."

On the screen flashed the enormous edifice of Reincarnation Industries headquarters in Lubbock, Texas. It took a great deal of self control on Corey's part not to laugh incredulously at the claim Gustav's technology transferred peacefully to the control of the board of directors. Gustav actually wrote an explicit last will and testament- putting his estranged son Adrian in charge of the hyper-valuable technology he'd created.

Through massive fraud and bribery on the level of Tammany Hall, a group of lawyers managed to have the will declared null and void. Then they swooped down like vultures and stole Gustav's patents and methods, selling them to the highest bidders, a shady group that became the "board of directors" of Reincarnation Industries. The exact identity of the individuals on the Board was never released to the public, and no one within the company seemed real eager to name them either. No matter what side of the issue you were on, everyone who was honest had to admit Reincarnation Industries was founded on a stolen idea. But then again, so was Microsoft Windows- so what the hell?

Nothing much surprised Corey anyway, he'd seen it all.

Corey Inglewood was a member of a sizable migrant employee population who traveled across the country in search of the highest paying programming work. Corey was, in his time, known as one of the best in the business- at least until his wife Jackie died when he was 25. After that, he found it difficult to focus. His uncanny ability to find a way into even the most well-protected computer system atrophied, and his salaries and job prospects dwindled.

He became just another soldier in an army of traveling middle class people who struggled to find paying work in a field increasingly controlled by the computers themselves. Because of the temporary month-by-month nature of the jobstyle Corey often found himself working for firms whose ethics and practices sickened him- but necessity made such concerns take a back-seat to practicality- he had to eat. After all, he could do the sort of work they wanted without using more than 1% of his intellect- which was good because he wanted to use the other 99% for wallowing in self-pity and alcohol.

Corey was 35 and he hadn't gone on a single date in the preceding ten years. He had no children. He'd lived on both coasts and in countless cities and towns in between. Often his work involved programming the very computers destined to cancel out his job and send him back to one of the perpetual hotel rooms he lived in to pack his single large suitcase. He would spend several tense days applying for new positions, and once he found one he would head to the next town- where it would all start over again.

After ten years, Corey was tired of running. He took the job at RI for two reasons. One, it was semi-permanent, and two; it was close to his Mother, the only family Corey had. The combination of the two made the job too great a temptation to resist. He despised the high fees and exclusive nature of RI's services, but the position he'd be holding probably wouldn't be eliminated in the near future.

The ad in the newspaper described the position as a "retrieval services technician," which basically meant Corey would be one of the people circling like a vulture, waiting for the patient to die so that RI could do its voodoo and get the person virtually placed on the web. It was the kind of job he could conceivably continue to do for several years because the job required a compassion no machine could emulate; yet.

Besides, the job featured a bi-yearly visit to the doctor- a privilege usually reserved for executive level positions and a few politically powerful unions, like the teachers and the electricians. The complete privatization of health care led to insurance levels that were so high only the richest of people could afford it.

If everything worked out the way Corey hoped, he would be able to buy property instead of just renting the way he had for the first decade and a half of his adult life.

On good days, when the memory of his wife Jackie wasn't too great- he even thought he might try to find a girlfriend, get remarried, and start a family. After all, he'd not even reached the half-way point of his life expectancy yet.

Ah, but such talk was pie-in-the-sky and Corey knew it. For the time being he was just happy to be getting a steady paycheck. He'd listen to all the lies they felt like slinging at him as long as they let him see a doctor once every few months.

Corey sat as patiently as he could manage, his back hurting a little more every few minutes from the ridiculously uncomfortable chair. When he could take it no more, he got up and paced back and forth while the monitor talked about the enormous growth and opportunities available to the employees of Reincarnation Industries.

At least it was Friday- he wouldn't actually have to start working until the next Monday. The fact he had to accompany his Mother to church on Sunday annoyed him, after all he wasn't a believer, and it was going to be his last 24 hours of freedom before once again being locked into the 9 to 5 grind.

Corey complained, but he didn't really mean it. Corey's Father died a year-and-a-half earlier and he knew his Mom was struggling with the physical problem of keeping up with the maintenance on the house and the psychological problem of loneliness (He was particularly familiar with the loneliness.). He'd repeatedly tried to get her to sell the house and move into a smaller apartment where there would be more people around- but she refused. His Mother Dorothy still lived in the house Corey grew up in- she swore every time the issue came up it would be the same place she'd die.

If his Mom wanted him to go to church Corey wasn't going to disappoint her. Besides, he told himself, maybe he could get her to go back to St. Catherine's- the church they made him attend as a child, and stop going to that creepy new "super-church" she started attending a few months after his Dad's death.

The new church- The One True Holiness Ministries Church of the One True God seemed more like a cult than a legitimate house of worship; and it made Corey nervous. Greedhead Preachers stealing money from lonely old people was one of the oldest scams in history; coming into existence about ten minutes after prostitution. When Dorothy told

him she'd switched to the new church out of curiosity Corey watched one of the services on TV.

He didn't like what he found. The preacher, a Reverend Horace Amsterdam, came off like a vacuum cleaner salesman- a very good vacuum cleaner salesman to be sure, the kind of fellow who could sell abstinence to Bill Clinton, but still just a vacuum cleaner salesman.

Corey loved his Mom, but she was as trusting as a kitten. He figured this Horace guy could probably get her to sign over her life savings during the commercial break and still have time to get himself a sandwich and a bag of chips.

Because his thoughts were focused on his Mom, Corey barely noticed when the video finally ended. It wasn't until the man who'd brought him to the room came to retrieve him that he was aware of the white snow crackling across the video monitor.

The remainder of the day was spent filling out the endless paperwork that accompanies starting a new job. Corey could fill out the forms in his sleep he'd done it so many times. There were tax forms- both state, federal, and local; requests for his limited health care, a rudimentary physical was performed by the DIGNOSTICON 235- a machine that looked and performed like something out of Star Trek, complete with 3-D holographic model of all the internal structures.

Finally, in the last step before leaving, Corey offered his forearm and they placed his personal "security chip" under the skin of his right forearm. The employment chip sat just underneath the "US CITIZEN'S ID CHIP" a device that became a legal necessity 2 years earlier. There were approximately 250 cases rocketing toward the Supreme Court, trying to get the chip plan repealed, but few people had any real hope the policy would be overturned. Billions had already been made and spent installing a chip in every living American on the planet; they weren't going to toss all that work out over a little detail like it being a gross violation of privacy and civil rights. Besides, the government continued to insist that just because the microchip was designed to make it possible to track your every movement, this did not mean they were going to use the chips for that purpose.

Corey stepped out into the sunlight and looked first one way down the street and then the other. He spotted what he was looking for. A bar stood on the corner, a mere 30 second walk away. He saw it on his way into the building that morning. He looked at his watch. 36 hours until he needed to pick up his mother for church. A man could do a lot of damage to his liver in 36 hours. He decided to go see exactly how much.

In truth, the idea of spending the intervening time all by himself in his small apartment seemed just as damaging as spending it pickling himself for posterity. As he did every time he went on a bender Corey told himself it was the last time he would go to a bar just to get drunk. The next time he went he would be with co-workers, and his depressing drinking would become social again.

At least that's what he told himself.