

*- THE INCARNATIONS OF THE AMERICAS*

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**PORTAL**

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**WILLIAM HRDINA**

Once a fortnight the coal cart drives up to the door and men in leather jerkins carry the coal indoors in stout sacks smelling of tar and shoot it clanking into the coal-hole under the stairs. It is only very rarely, when I make a definite mental effort, that I connect this coal with that far-off labor in the mines. It is just “coal”- something that I have got to have; black stuff that arrives mysteriously from nowhere in particular, like manna except that you have to pay for it. You could quite easily drive a car across the north of England and never once remember that hundreds of feet below the road you are on the miners hacking at the coal.

-George Orwell. The Road to Wigan Pier

**PART ONE- Shadows Dancing on the Walls**

Deep in the bedrock of the earth, suspended a half-mile beneath the surface, was a room. This wasn't a mere hole in the earth's crust created by the natural movement of the earth's plates, not a cave carved from the stone by a long-term flow of water now gone dry. It wasn't a nearly perfectly rectangular geological anomaly so freakish it proved the universe had a sense of humor.

The room was manufactured; a hole in the ground the size of a suburban living room. Only this place lacked any of the normal accouterments one would find in a modern American household. There were, for example, no custom colored beige-taupe floor rugs, hand dyed by small children in the Third World. There were no knickknacks, Hummel figurines, Beanie Babies, Emmy Awards, or refrigerator magnets that you rearranged to make clever or inane poetry. There were no plastic molded vases in the Etruscan style, machine painted with a thick glaze. No factory reproduced, market tested artwork hung on the walls.

Instead of the normal things that clutter our rooms, this particular place was decorated in Neo-Crackhouse style, without decoration or individuality. There was only the smallest dollop of furniture and none of it even came close to matching.

The walls of the room were bare beige stone with dark gray and pale white veins running through them. The walls were ground to the smooth texture of well-polished marble and remained eternally cool to the touch. There was a tremendous amount of character and intricacy to the veins that cut through the rock; although it was a rare person who could see it.

This lone solemn room was appropriately occupied by only a single person. He was a man with time on his hands, a man who was quite fond of the beauty in the rock. He often found himself marveling at the subtle marbling within the marbling, the depth that could be conveyed by complex shadings of color. In addition to the wall's appearance he had also grown quite fond of the scent. Or at least the unique lack of scent that can only be legitimately achieved by stone.

The only *major* piece of furniture in the room was a tacky lime green couch. OK, the *only* piece of furniture in the room was a tacky lime green couch of a shade so violent there is probably no hue in the color spectrum that wouldn't clash with it. Nailing down the exact fabric that the couch was made of would also be difficult; it was some weird synthetic blend of cotton and leather which was decidedly lacking in the advantages of either, while somehow managing to mix their weaknesses with remarkable egalitarianism. Whatever the fabric was called, the back side of it was shredded into strips of couchy confetti by the dutiful and repetitive attention of the room's only full time resident, an orange tabby cat named Jubal.

A threadbare carpet covered the hard stone of the floor; it was light brown and lacked sufficient padding to satisfy the sore feet that padded across its surface. And while the carpet was dark enough to make the room look a tad gloomy, it was simultaneously light enough to show the stains of anything that happened to spill into its nappy hair. Still, it was better than nothing.

Technically, the imitation oak end table, standing next to the couch with a single dog-eared paperback shoring up one leg, *was* furniture. But it's surface was only one foot square and it was so covered with random items that it would better be termed a small horizontal closet than a piece of furniture.

Jubal the Cat ruled over the room as if it were the entire universe, which, as far as the cat was concerned, it was. So pampered was this one that even within the small room that made up his world he had his own private space. (A flat within the flat if you will.) Although the cat never found the time to decorate his room, he did have his own towels, which lined the corrugated cardboard box that he called his bedroom.

Jubal was sitting on his lime green sofa, waiting patiently for the return of the man, Jubal's roommate and provider. The cat knew that the man would be home any time for he was finished working his way through his daily routine. The cat had his morning nap, his late morning nap, his afternoon nap, and his siesta. Once the man arrived and fed him, he would immediately begin preparations for his late afternoon nap. After which, he would probably get something to eat again; or maybe nap. Or poop. Pooping was always nice at that time of day.

The television was stationed flat against the wall in front of the couch. It was actually much more than stationed, it was entrenched. It was held prisoner, it was irrevocably bound to the wall that it leaned against. This state was achieved by several metal bands, which were bolted directly into the stone. The television's appearance gave the space a distinctly hotel room kind of vibe. It put one in the mind to begin opening drawers in search of the complimentary copy of the Bible found in all hotel rooms, the gift from Gidea; only there were no drawers to open.

On the wall next to the television was the front door. Now, as you may remember we are a half a mile underneath the earth so it wasn't a door exactly, except in function. It was a Portal. Or, as the small plaque attached to the side attested, a People-Mover™ Model 523. Unlike the TV, there were no bands attaching the People Mover™ to the wall. Instead it just hung there in defiance of the gravity that acted on everything else.

Furthering the hotel room feel was the 100 watt bulb, hanging bare from a wire over the couch. The light cast a harsh pallor over everything in its immediate radius and then quickly died off, casting nasty shadows into the kitchenette where most meals were eaten. In the kitchenette were an electric griddle and a refrigerator. Inside was a

miniature version of the People Mover™ called the Food Mover™. It dispensed meals one at a time. All waste was dropped into a Garbage Mover™.

Lazily, as if the very act of doing so required more effort than it was worth, Jubal turned his gaze toward the large, blank screen of the television. He was pleased to find that his favorite television show was on; a show he thought of simply as: Black. He enjoyed the simplicity of the story line and wished that all the people shows were marked with such subtle genius. Instead of the constant motion and colors that marked most of the shows that the person watched, this show consisted of only a single color, black, held for what was a remarkably long time, the static regularity was comforting. Jubal could drift off for a snooze, wake up an hour later and know that he hadn't missed anything important.

The people shows were also unconscionably loud. The black show was agreeably run without an audio track. Pleased, the cat sat and stared meditatively into the device, seeing something that only he understood. If the people found the blankness of the screen boring, well that was a loss for them, and of no concern to the cat.

There were two other rooms in the flat, a bathroom and a bedroom. The bathroom was as Spartan as the rest of the place, with a small sink, a toilet, and a small shower with a water tank attached to the side. There was no mirror, no medicine cabinet, and no carpeting. The sink had a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste resting off to one side. There was also the cat's litterbox.

Adjacent to the main room was a bedroom, only a few feet larger than the bath. The one thing that set the bedroom apart from the rest of the place was the elaborate carvings that covered the walls. Two of the four walls were completely covered, and the third was well on its way. There was a mandala of symbols, words, patterns, and styles that had been hewn into the rock over a period of years. At a glance there was simply too much going on to make any sense of the gist of the carvings. It brings to mind the old proverb, "Never judge a book by its cover," or in this case, "never judge the message of a wall by just a cursory glance." There was meaning in every little scratch, meanings, actually. In many ways the carved walls were like the bare rock in the living room, the only difference was the story being told.

A simple mattress lay on the floor of the bedroom. It lacked a headboard and a box spring. But unlike many of the things in his apartment, the mattress was actually of a very high quality. It was remarkably comfortable, with air springs and more than adequate back support.

If the Portal could be moved one would find that there were no bolts attaching the thing to the wall, there were no stands that propped it in the air. No, the Portal just hung there as still as you please, with nobody and nothing holding it where it was. Like Kubrick's Monolith it was completely black on its face with the exception of two small lights, one red, and one green.

The red light on the People Mover™ began to blink. Jubal would have cared had he not suddenly felt a strong need for a nap. He half-noticed the light through heavily lidded eyes. The Portal changed color slightly, the deep black rippled out in concentric square circles.

The Portals worked by the laws of quantum mechanics; the wacky sub-molecular physics where there is no time, light is a particle and a wave, and things are working on a minimum of 11 dimensions simultaneously. These rules would seem, to most people, to

be nonsensical and non-intuitive; which they are. Unfortunately for most people, the universe doesn't give a damn if you think it's intuitive. The bottom line, the rules work. And as carpenters say, if it works, it works. No further explanation was necessary.

The Portal's opaque surface was both a particle and a wave, a solid and a liquid. There was only one of them yet there were thousands of them, scattered throughout the crust of the earth in thousands of rooms very much like the one we have been exploring. A terrible sound came from the empty center of the device, like a platoon of fingernails on patrol in a blackboard jungle. A foot emerged from the surface of the Portal, a foot clad in sneakers, splattered with so much paint Jackson Pollack would blush, if he were there to see it. (He wasn't.).

The noise finally stopped as the rest of Alex popped into existence from where he had been; a room identical to this one, only it was completely empty, not mostly empty like his own. He had, in his time here, seen altogether too many identical rooms, the repetition was more mundane and unchanging than the cat's favorite television program.

Alex was carrying a variety of buckets, three in each hand, some filled with paint, each one with the same identical label, FLAT WHITE. The empty buckets were filled with the myriad odds and ends necessary to successfully paint rooms, which, as is probably obvious by now, was Alex's job. These included tape, sticks, rollers, mesh brush screens (for cleaning out the brushes and rollers), and, let's not forget, drop cloths. The paint brushes alone outnumbered Alex by at least eight to one. The number of items he was juggling should have earned him a spot in the circus.

But there were no circuses, not for Alex. He managed, with a walking style that was a combination of Frankenstein's gait and the mincing dance of a ballerina at the far end of a three-day-speed-and-Double-Latté-bender, to move across the living room without dropping anything.

Alex's blue overalls were adorned with as much Flat White as his shoes. He staggered across the living room and into the small kitchen area with the fluidity of a drunken Baryshnikov. Along the way he did an instinctual leap over Jubal who had come over to say hello and of course, to get fed. Reaching the sink, he dumped the brushes, smiling as they clattered satisfactorily off of the metal surface. The rest of the buckets and odds and ends that Alex carried were so impressed with this display of gravity defiance that they decided to return the balance of nature by falling every which way onto the floor.

As if in slow motion, Alex watched everything tumble everywhere, two paint cans opening in the process. FLAT WHITE gushed onto the floor like a hemorrhaging alien with albino blood. Cursing aloud, Alex leaned down, picked up the least soiled of his rags and began frantically mopping up the paint that managed to escape, and it was a lot.

Alex raised his head in frustration and cursed God. He didn't use the term "god," of course. That particular term only manifests itself in religion. Alex had no experience of religion. In fact, Alex had no term or concept that we would recognize as "God.". He did have a concept that was aligned to God, but it was different, it didn't track all the way back to origins. No, for Alex, God wasn't what made what was, it was only who provided the things that were within what was. Things just were as they always had been.

Living, as he did, a half-mile underground, there was no great variety of nature to wonder at. There were no grand sunsets or sprawling vistas. There were only the rooms,

lit by vapid fluorescent lights that hummed stupidly. When he turned them off, there were no stars to marvel at or moons to imagine made of green cheese. There was only nothing. The inky darkness that can only be experienced in a cave or a sensory deprivation chamber. The kind of darkness that many people imagine Hell to consist exclusively of.

In place of God, Alex cursed “The Provider.” Not for creating the world with gravity, thus making his paint cans fall inevitably to the floor. But instead cursing him for making Alex carry so much damn stuff at the same time. There was no going back for things with the People Mover. The Provider was unseen, it was beyond the Portal. It was the “from which” all things came from. The Provider was the source of Alex’s food, water, everything.

But it was also a tyrant. It was, in this way, similar to the Old Testament Jehovah, full of manipulation and spite. But this was just a coincidence, Alex had no more understanding of Jehovah than I have of people who molest collies.

Alex had no more control over where and when the Portal sent him places than you or I have control over the sun rising.

There was one big thing that separated what Alex was thinking of from God. There was no assumption of love from the Provider, and not even a hint that it was all-knowing. No the Provider made mistakes, miscalculations. And there was no love. Not even the kind of love a man has for his dog. No, it was clear that the Provider only provided to get Alex to do its bidding. If he resisted, the Provider simply stopped providing.

Rather than an entity, Alex thought of the Provider as a kind of machine. A relatively sophisticated one, but a machine nonetheless. It had a function to fulfill and a certain number of options available to it in order to fulfill them.

The provider did its job with a ruthless efficiency. From observing the way it interacted with him, Alex was convinced that this machine treated him as a servant. A Biological robot that used people to achieve what it saw as its function.

To Alex, it was impossible that the Provider be all knowing, because that would entail being aware of Alex’s consciousness, his suffering. It meant that he was being tortured on purpose. If you knew everything, why would you purposely do things that people didn’t like, you wouldn’t have to do it to know what would happen; you created its happening in the first place.

The world had simply always been. So too had the holes that they lived in. People had evolved and become intelligent inside the holes. The Provider made their lives better. It provided things. Thus, the name Provider. They didn’t worship the figure. But they did rely on it, they relied on him even though he was unreliable, and there too the Provider was similar to Jehovah. No one questioned where the Provider came from. The People-Movers™ and their related items had always been there from earliest memory. When he was a child, before he understood what was going on, Alex thought of the Provider the way that you think about your lungs. You don’t ask where they came from and you certainly don’t see people walking around thanking them for allowing breath. Nor do you see people thanking their legs every time they routinely get you out of the way of moving cars. We just call it crossing the street.

It could be said, I guess, that Alex would be considered crazy in our world, because he became aware of his legs when he crossed the street. Only when he did, he

didn't thank them. He wanted to confront them, to let his metaphorical legs know that he was suffering terribly from the isolation that was imposed on him. Alex wanted to know why he was cursed to this small hole, completely alone.

Looking down at the spilled paint, Alex realized that his long standing frustration was turning into anger. Sure he was cursing his bad luck with spilling the paint. Sure he was cursing the Provider. Sure he was cursing all of the myriad accidents that manage to float into even the most normal, mundane life. But all of these things were ancillary, symptoms of what was becoming a more serious disease. Alex searched his vocabulary, trying to think of a word that meant, "more than frustrated."

Sardonic? No.

Constipated? Well, that was the right idea, but he was trying to think of a term more existential than a verb ever has any hopes of being.

Pictures came to his mind. Pictures reminiscent of cartoons with their ridiculous morbidity. First he saw himself running into a wall that had spikes in it; repeatedly. Then he was being forced to eat glass; the pieces crunching between slowly gnashing molars, cutting into gums, the taste of blood filling his mouth but the idea, the mere concept of stopping lost somehow in the act.

He was frustrated the way that one can become when trying to teach Shakespeare to a polar bear, or trying to make a tree play along with you at charades on a windless day. Alex wanted to figure out a way to elicit a response, to force whoever was running the show out into the open, only he didn't know how to do it, he had tried resistance, but it was futile.

The repetitive, mindless work was driving him mad. There was no challenge, no possible way to add character or interest to his daily chores, each room was a carbon copy of the one previous, which was a carbon copy to the one that he was currently standing in. The only difference was that the walls in his room were bare. There was paint on the rug; there was paint on his shoes, on his clothes, forever in his hair, little droplets of paint small enough to be mistaken for dandruff. But there was no paint on the walls, not a single drop. The contrast between his hole and the ones that he painted was crucial for Alex; it made his hole his home, whether he laid his hat there or not.

For now though, Alex was focused on the paint spilled all over his floor. This last accident was in no way his first, and he could see the faint traces of past spills even as he began to clean up the new one. Using every available rag Alex tried to wipe up the majority of the FLAT WHITE, corralling it back into the cans. The paint was uncooperative, seeming to prefer the freedom of the floor to the confinement of the can. Finally, with what was only a ridiculous amount of effort, Alex managed to mop of the worst of the spill, losing several brave rags in the process. Just another problem in a world that seemed to prefer entropy to order, general admission to assigned seating.

There were two main things that were slowly driving Alex mad. Mad as in crazy as well as mad as in angry. Either of these factors would have been difficult but manageable by themselves. Together, they were like mental water torture, they dripped onto his psyche a little bit everyday, and finally after what was a noble struggle, he could feel the beginnings of what would surely end in stark raving nuttiness.

The first problem was his job. Alex hated painting and painted things. As his own walls attested, he didn't like painted rooms. He liked the natural rock, the subtle shading that hides in the cracks. He legitimately preferred his walls the way they were, it

wasn't misplaced angst or aesthetic stubbornness driving him to leave his walls uncovered. Alex had been painting rooms for going on five years. Day in and day out, seven days a week for around ten hours a day Alex did the same thing over and over again. He didn't work because he had a child in Private school or because he had an uncontrollable taste for fine clothes that could only be satisfied by a remarkable work ethic.

Alex worked as much as he did because it was what he had to do. Everything in his life was based on essentially a simple "carrot and the stick" pattern. If he worked slowly, maintaining his productivity at a level well below what he knew he was capable of, he was provided with the bare minimum he needed to survive. There was food, but not a lot, and not of very good quality. The television didn't work. The lights in the apartment, lacking on even his best days, faded to a point where just walking across the room could be dangerous, especially if you accidentally left a paint can in the middle of the room. If he remained under his potential for more than two days, even his mattress and ratty old couch disappeared.

Even when Alex worked to his potential there was very little luxury. For example, even on his best days the water which appeared in a tank next to the shower was extremely limited. It only gave him enough time to rinse the worst of the day's dirt off and no more.

If he worked hard, pushing himself to the limits of his ability, then he was provided with certain basic luxuries. The food got better and more plentiful. There was a little extra water in the shower tank, sometimes it was even heated; the condensation apparent as it clung to the side of the tank. His cat, Jubal arrived on a day that he set a personal record for rooms painted. As long as he maintained a minimum level of four painted rooms a day, the television worked, if he did five, there might even be a six pack of beer waiting for him in the fridge.

There were no excuses and no reprieves. If he got sick, which has happened once or twice through the years, there were no breaks. He worked or there was no food. Once, on a day a particularly bad fever had been racking his body, Alex managed to paint only a single room through the fog of mucus and freezing heat that coursed through him. When he returned home that night, Jubal was gone. Only the fur on the couch remained to remind Alex that the cat had ever been there. Two weeks later, after his work productivity returned to normal, the cat reappeared.

Jubal was clearly furious with Alex for letting him be uprooted from what the animal had come to think of as home. He wouldn't allow himself to be petted for almost a week afterward. So it was that Alex came to realize that even the cat was a furry hostage, stuck in a meaningless, isolated world, with no sufficient explanations, and no one to ask anyway.

This brings us to the second of Alex's problems. He was, and had been for the past five years, utterly alone. He was not alone the way we all feel sometimes, separated by our thoughts or opinions from other people we interact with on a day to day basis. No, Alex was alone in the guy stranded on the island sense, in the Tom Hanks and his friend the volleyball sense. There was not another soul around to idly chat with, only the cat and the TV, neither of which ever answered in a way that any rational person would find satisfactory. Isolation would be an understatement.

Each night Alex sat in front of his television, cat fast asleep next to him or on his lap and did his best to interact. Like television in Tibet or Bangladesh, there was only a single channel to choose from, and its signal was weak. The picture full of fuzz like a perpetual snowstorm raged just behind the glass. This didn't bother Alex; he had never seen a clear picture so he had no idea what he was missing.

Although there was a television, one would have to be in Alex's situation to ever watch it. He didn't have the normal assortment of TV garbage that we have. Nobody was selling George Foreman grills, car wax, or get rich quick schemes. There were no hard hitting, corporate bought attacks on the dangers of democracy, no Jerry Springer with his lesbian bartender physicist guests who are cheating on their girlfriends with their Grandfathers. There were no movies, no Bogart or Pauly Shore; no Deniro and no Carrot Top. (Needless to say there are some hidden blessings in everything.) Instead there was only one show. It played from the first episode to the last in succession, over and over.

Forever.

The show chosen was a good one, but like the curse, too much of even the greatest of things gets tedious after a while. What was the show?

It was I Love Lucy.

Alex watched and watched. Long after he could take even a modicum of pleasure from the experience he continued to watch Lucy run her never-ending scams on her husband, desperate for a glimpse of the success and recognition he enjoyed.

After a lifetime of the show Alex knew every episode of Lucy by heart. As an amusement Alex would invent his own dialogue to fill the empty spaces that were filled with the live (now dead) audience laughing appreciatively. It is in this way Alex managed to hold his sanity together, at least so far. He was able to maintain the illusion that he was holding a conversation; indeed, the characters seemed to respond to him. If he already knew what they were going to say, well what of it? Aren't married couples the same way?

We shall leave Alex now, sitting on his couch, a cold can of soda on his lap, Jubal sleeping in a heap next to him, purring quietly. On the TV Lucy is drinking spoonful after spoonful of the inebriating cough syrup trying, without much success, to make a commercial.

In another room, far from where Alex was sitting the red light on another People Mover began to blink. This room was much larger than the one that Alex calls home and it was stocked with a great deal more furniture. In this room there was, in fact, altogether too much furniture. Identical sofas were stacked one on top of another like firewood, a massive pile that rose fifteen or twenty feet into the air. There was no cat in this room to mark the blinking on the People Mover™, only the couches, and not surprisingly, they had no comment about the blinking red light. They just sat and observed the world in the passive way that couches do, perhaps dreaming of the eventual day when asses, instead of other couches, would sit upon their cheaply upholstered cushions.

Two men walked out of the machine, emerging into the cramped and overly full room. They groaned in unison as their eyes scanned across the sheer mass of furniture stacked in front of them.

“Damn it,” Carl complained, looking at the room with disbelief. “Can you believe this shit? I sure hope we aren’t expected to move all of these things before we are allowed to knock off. This will take hours and it seems like quitting time should have come a week ago already.”

“No use complaining about it, let’s just get a move on.” Aaron was as annoyed by what he was seeing as Carl, but he dealt with it differently, preferring quiet suffering to vocal complaint. Glancing over his shoulder Aaron saw that the People Mover™ was already blinking green again, indicating that they were supposed to pickup a couch and get moving. They were never given any time to rest, except at lunch. Once the work began, it continued non-stop till quitting time.

It was clear from the muscles in the men’s arms and legs that they had been moving furniture for quite a long time, and this was true, Aaron had been moving for eleven years, Carl for seven. Both men hated the job, hated it like Republican’s hate assisting the poor.

But they were resigned to it.

Aaron did his job and tried to keep the most positive possible attitude about the endless couches, tables, chairs, and beds they had to move each day. It wasn’t easy, but Carl complained plenty for both men. It made keeping a positive attitude a whole lot easier.

Aaron went through most of his day in relative silence, there was no weather to discuss, no sports teams to argue over. And, having worked together for several years now, the Lucy episodes running endlessly on the television had long since stopped being an interesting topic of conversation. It wasn’t quiet though, not by a long shot. Aaron’s lack of talking was more than made up for by Carl.

Carl liked to complain. It was his way of getting himself through the monotonous days. He bitched his way through like a mother-in-law with a toothache. This helped Carl’s mental health in a backward kind of way. The complaining did get on Aaron’s nerves sometimes, but he had to admit, Carl was creative about it. For Carl, it was a kind of art, he rarely if ever repeated a complaint twice in a week and when he did repeat one, it was always in a new context.

There were no animals in Aaron or Carl’s life, they had each other, and apparently, that was all the company they were going to get.

Carl walked over to the nearest couch and picked up an end, Aaron took the other and together they stepped through the People Mover™<sup>1</sup> and disappeared from the room. The room was silent for a few minutes, and then Carl and Aaron appeared again. Not even hesitating this time they walked to another couch, picked up opposite ends, and as Carl complained that these particular couches were heavier than any they had ever had to lift before, they disappeared back the way they had come through the Portal on the wall.

Angela winced with pain. Instinctively she squeezed her finger, holding it up to her eyes to get a good look at the injury, hoping the needle hadn’t gone too deep. It hadn’t. It was only bad enough to draw a small pinprick of blood. She stuck her finger

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<sup>1</sup> Public Service Announcement: From now on the “TM” at the end of People Mover™ will be assumed and envisioned every time you read the words People Mover. Thank you for your cooperation. –THE MANAGEMENT

into her mouth and sucked hard, tasting the light coppery flavor of the blood. She glanced at the People-Mover attached to the wall of what she had come to see as her permanent prison cell. She hoped that she would see the green light blinking, the signal that she could send all of her stuff through the portal and be done with her work for the day.

It wasn't blinking, just as she knew in her heart that it wouldn't be. The light wouldn't blink until she had finished with her work and there was still a pretty big pile of cut fabric sitting next to her sewing machine, an electric Seamstress Model 7. Angela had let her mind wander, and as so often happened, the machine had found a way to punish her for it. For although the act of sewing shirts and pants took up almost none of Angela's intellectual capacity, it did require a great deal of concentration. After all, there was a fast moving needle involved.

Angela had a hard time holding her attention on something so straight forward and uncomplicated as sewing shirts and she often found herself spacing off, thinking about her situation, trying to think of ways to remedy it.

Pulling a rebel strand of her long blond hair out of her eyes Angela sat for a moment and just looked at the wall. It was blank, painted a dull shade of white. Her mind tried to categorize the shade and settled on "flat." It wasn't completely uniform though; the cheap paint was chipped in some places, revealing the dull tan of the stone that lay beneath.

She checked her finger to see if the bleeding had stopped. There was still a small dot of red but it showed no signs of growing, which meant that Angela might as well get back to work. The pile wasn't going to get any smaller while she sat there with a throbbing finger and a rumbling belly. It seemed like the work day had been getting longer and longer lately. Time was stretching like the fresh taffy you can see being made in places like Pigeon Forge, Kentucky, or the Wisconsin Dells. Sighing, Angela returned to the shirt that she was sewing, pushing the activation switch of the sewing machine with the side of her knee. The machine burst back into life with the telltale snicker-snee snicker-snee that had become the soundtrack of her young life.

Angela had little memory of any existence prior to six months before. The majority of her life had a haze over it, like a shroud. She had isolated memories of living with a large family, but these thoughts were like phantoms. For six months she'd been sewing, but it already seemed like a million years.

She figured eventually she would grow used to this life, the way that one grew used to the darkness when the lights went out, the darkness that scared her when she was a child. One of her clearer memories was the way her Father came in when her imagination turned against her, bringing monsters and goblins out of the inky black walls, monsters who liked nothing better than to eat little girls named Angela.

He would come and take her in his arms, rocking her gently, talking in the low, confident tone that he always used with her, a tone full of assurance and calm. He would tell her that there were no monsters, and to prove it he would turn on all of the lights, even though it caused all of the other kids in the room to complain and pull their blankets over their heads to keep out the light.

They never complained too vehemently though, all of them fought their battles in the darkness, and there was none of them who could claim to have never lost a battle.

The darkness of an underground room is the total darkness of a crypt, a fact all children understood on some deep primordial human level.

There was nobody there to comfort her now, not that she imagined demons coming out of the darkness anymore. Now the demons were loneliness and despair. Creatures that had few teeth, but were, in their own way, much more frightening.

With a jolt she pulled her knee back from the machine, it immediately reacted, cycling down again. She had nearly stuck her whole hand into the path of the needle this time. She cursed herself as she cupped her uninjured hand close to her body, assuring it that it was safe and sound. It wasn't like she could run off to the doctor. During her first week she caught herself a good one from the machine, her tears blocked her view of the small silver shoe that housed the needle. She had grasped her hand, pulling it back still trailing the string. She had nearly made her hand part of the nondescript work shirt that she had by now mastered the art of tailoring.

As the blood gushed from her hand, and ran down her wrist she thought that someone would come around and tend to her. After sitting for five minutes without any signs of life at all she had given up and went into the bathroom herself. She rinsed the wound, carefully, and quite painfully yanked free the string which was embroidered into her hand. She looked in the medicine cabinet and found two bandages sitting on the shelf. They had not been there in the morning when she brushed her teeth. Puzzled, but too worried about the bleeding to really care, Angela carefully applied the bandages and went back into her work area.

She assumed that since she was injured her work day would be cut short and she looked expectantly at the People Mover waiting for it to start blinking. A minute went by. Then two, then three, and now the sharp pain had changed into a deep throb, she could feel her own heartbeat in the pain, it arced up each time her blood passed through the damaged part of her hand. And still the light didn't blink. Finally it became clear to Angela that she could sit there until she starved to death, the light wasn't coming on. No wound, no matter how mortal, would bring her work to a premature conclusion. When the fabric was sewn into the day's clothes, then the work day was done. Nothing shy of her death would give her reprieve.

Two hours later, the bandages on her hand were soaked through with blood and so Angela returned to the medicine cabinet. She was surprised to find the old bandages were replaced with new ones. She applied them and returned to work.

It was at that moment that Angela realized the stories she'd heard about the Provider were literally true. They weren't just stories her parents told to freak her out. Up until that moment Angela had been able to convince herself that sewing shirts was only a temporary fate, that there would be more to her life. She wanted to believe that she would have children of her own someday, unlike her own Mother and Father. But those bandages, sitting innocently on the shelf in her bathroom had killed that idea and taken a decent chunk out of her soul as well. When she saw those bandages it really came home to her. This was real. This was going to be her whole life.

Presently, Angela shook her head out of her memories and returned to the shirt. She had about eight more to go before she was finished. Then, and only then, would she be allowed to retire for the day.

It was nearly three hours before she finished her work, the sewing machine cycling down for the day. Next to her lay a pile of shirts. She looked down at them with

unhappy annoyance and then looked to the People Mover with expectation. As it always did, the machine somehow knew she was finished and the green light blinked at her expectantly. Sighing, Angela picked up the shirts, holding almost all of them and carried them to the Portal; she stepped through and found herself instantly transported to the finishing room.

The finishing room was much larger than the one Angela toiled in. The walls were painted the same Flat White, there was still no furniture, but the ceilings were higher and the walls were at least twice as far apart. There were shirts piled six feet high. Angela was responsible for every one of them. Each day she had to return to this room to be reminded of the apparent futility of her daily labors. She knew that if she chose to push her way through the piles of shirts that filled the room like a cottony snowdrift she would find, near the back, her earliest attempts at shirt craft. Her hems had not been as straight then, her buttons not nearly as well fastened. But the shirts were there, collecting dust the same way she was, marking their own time. Letting the days go past without noticing, one day blurring into the next like the montage in a Rocky movie.

Angela dropped her day's labors onto the pile and stepped back toward the People Mover, knowing she would be back inside this room in approximately twenty four hours with another pile of shirts. The only sign she'd been there would be a slightly bigger pile of what already was an enormous pile of shirts.

If she was lucky, she supposed maybe she would get switched back onto pants; she hadn't done them in over a month. But the futility was the same. There was another room, just like this one, equally nondescript. The only difference was in this room there were piles of pants, stacked up like cordwood, gathering dust the same way these shirts were.

Angela stepped into the black maw of the Portal machine and wondered like she did every time she left these store rooms, what would happen when the room was filled? What was she going to do when there was no more room to store the shirts? Was there another room, just like this one, waiting, and empty? Just existing until the day came for it to be filled again with another year's worth of shirts or pants? She didn't know the answer to this question. But she thought that it was yes. There probably were other rooms, rooms where they made the sewing machines. Rooms where they made the parts for the sewing machines, rooms where they made the thread and the fabric. Rooms upon rooms upon rooms, never-ending.

The irony was that in spite of these infinite strings of connected rooms her existence was limited to only three. It was possible that there were millions of rooms, a fat lot of good it did her either way. She only saw her own room and the two she brought her finished products to. She could also vaguely remember the large interconnected rooms that she had grown up in, but the memories were hazy. Fuzzy or not, these rooms were gone now. Memories that she couldn't return to, even if her recollection of them were pristine and perfect.

She might have just broke down then, broke down and cried at the existential futility of her life. But she was hungry. The robot of the body overwhelmed the fragility of the mind. She wanted food, she had earned food, and she wasn't going to wait any more to get it. Angela crossed her room, opened the refrigerator and was not surprised to see it stocked with enough food for an evening meal. There were two chicken breasts, some oil, some vinegar, a package of salt, a bowl of lettuce with what appeared to be

carrots and a few tomatoes, four slices of bread, and three chocolate chip cookies. She took it all out of the refrigerator and tossed it on the counter. Her body rejoiced at the sight of the food, rejoiced and was satisfied. Her mind continued to boil away, a chaotic signal interfering with her stomach's happy warblings. It was this state, this torn contradiction of body and mind that was the closest thing she ever came to being happy. And realizing that only reinforced the pain.

Taking down the frying pan from its hook on the wall Angela began to prepare her unremarkable meal, thinking that she would watch a little TV after she was through. It wasn't much, wasn't much at all. But she felt reasonably confident that it was better than nothing, so she hung on and toughed her way through the boredom as best she could.