

II. The Fourth And The President

You want to hear another one? Okay, try this on for size, you godless masochist. See how well it suits you.

I only got to experience the thrill of this ritual once, but it was a thing at the mag for us to pack into Leota's van and drive out to Santa Fe every year on Independence Day, as they had the biggest display, even rivaling Albuquerque's in some aspects. Most of the senior staff is going, they ask me to tag along (I think they knew by now my temporary status) and we all pack this giant cooler with tinned ham and lukewarm soda and leave.

Berk stayed behind with an ice pack on his forehead, I think he had some kind of food poisoning in his gut. Not fatal, but enough to strike a nerve. So it was me, and Leota, and Alyson, and Baker, and Natch. I don't remember anything about Natch, he's slipped my mind. Has that ever happened to you, you feel like you should be able to remember how someone looks, but for whatever reason they elude your mind's eye?

I was on the left side in the back seat, Alyson was in the middle, and then Baker was on the right. He had this look in his eyes, rubbing his chin, sports jacket with a tacky design that hurt to look at, hair looked sandy but it wasn't desert sand, just all the hairproducts this guy used.

And then between us was Alyson. Looking back on her now, the way she spoke when I was in the room, how she moved, I think she had a slight crush on me. She had never been fortunate to receive a higher education, father had died in the battle of Philadelphia and her and her mother had lived in a Southwestern tenement ever since, subsidy types. What she didn't know, and what I was hesitant to tell her, was that I had no advantages she didn't and I was as lost as she was. Still not a line I was willing to cross. We remained distant at the office.

But the signs persisted. On this occasion, she put her hand over mine, and I would ignore her advances and roll down my window to get a blast of the cattle ranch atmosphere, and she would take her hand off and put it back onto her lap. It was a desperate ploy in retrospect.

"You have to see it," says Leota, "It's amazing. They have each detonation computerized to trigger itself at an exact time. It's all scheduled and choreographed." Her bouffant mop was enough to be some sort of road safety hazard. Since I had worked that delivery gig with the computerized bike, I had become disillusioned with the latest reports from Transistor Valley. As you may recall, this was now July 1971, the Connectron had been a mainstay in every home and college campus for a year, and like most tested things it was quickly losing its novelty and settling into being a common fixture of the modern home.

Natch makes some kind of sly comment in response to Leota, and then I look over at Alyson and she's just kind of looking at her lap, and I can only imagine what was running through her head, sitting next to someone she actually admired despite her being my superior in the hierarchy of the publication. But she remains ever silent.

We goptto Satna Fe around 5:00 P.M. It was still underdeveloped then, but since has garnered some academic prestige and coverage in various travel reports. Tonight it was a practical city, which is to say there were no frills and it was still in an industrial phase. People who strode to the baseball diamond on the promontory carried the gait not of a frenzied mob but of a polite citizenry who lived a placid existence to which this event was merely a small interruption. Drop in the bucket, if you will.

We passed down a few narrow roads lined with ancient Spanish cathedrals. They had been erected in the time of the Conquistadors and now stood silent, their empty windows a historic view into the past. Once this had been the hold of the fortified Spanish Empire, whose discoveries in the Southwestern region easily rivaled those of Lewis and Clark.

The diamond overlooked a giant expanse, and as I saw it, when we got into the parking lot, my first thought was what happened if someone hit the ball too far and it soared out into that wasteland. Alyson clutched my arm.

"It's cold," she said, and I could legitimately buy this seeing how the sun was fading. I went around to the back and removed the cooler and also got out a shawl I had picked up at a souvenir stand during a brief trip to Albuquerque a few weeks prior to report on the safety of the groundwater.

I drape it around her shoulders and she and the remainder of our group then exit the van, and I lag behind a few yards dragging the cooler. Along with a few other groups we sit down and arrange our area into an ergonomic layout. Behind us is home plate, and I can just make out the thin trail of dust which divides the grass and cuts between first and second.

There will always be something vaguely unsettling about any sports venue used for anything besides its intended purpose. At night, the layout of a designated sports area becomes alienating. The bleachers are empty, they make those ambient metallic clanging sounds when the wind touches them, even slightly, and the grass is cut uniformly. It wasn't artificial grass, but it was so short that we couldn't lie on it. I distributed some towels to everyone. They were accepted without question. Preparedness, I suppose.

I bunched mine up and slipped it under my neck.

Leota holds her hands together as if in a kind of reverent prayer and watches the stars with wild abandon, and Baker as always is distant and nearly impossible to reach. He chooses to stand, hands in his pockets, maybe he thought the line of sight was better.

For a few brief moments the sky is quiet and these islands of people are murmuring silent platitudes among themselves, and the desert is painted with those rustic scarlet tones you see so often from the Impressionist painters- every Mesa is a monolith which stands isolated in an incomprehensible large field of mesquite and juniper.

I look over at Alyson and she's raised a bottle of purified water to her lips. She drinks from it once, shrinks back as if somehow appalled by the temperature- and then replaces it in its nest of ice with the others.

If I try to convey the power of those lights, it will not be done justice. I know only that the visual interface was spectacular and that Leota had not been fibbing. The night was coated in plumes of ash and singe, and all the while Alyson's face was coated in a thick vapor, and her hands were clenched such that her nails dug into her flesh, and her lips were taut. Know that it was mesmerizing, this new display of the information age. Terminal to terminal. Instant monitor hookup.

And elsewhere in the void beyond Albuquerque a pyrokinetic madman sat fiddling with the fruits of his labor, while jets of white hot fury nearing the internal temperatures of the sun were detonated and exchanged, creating veritable pinwheels of fervor and mad offshoots of confusion.

If the display had been this way prior to the establishment of the main Transistor Valley firms, Natch failed to mention it.

I was watching Alyson, looking at her, as I reclined on the towel and, exhausted from a long day of work at the office, turned my gaze out at the ensuing spectacle. There was no more night. Only the fizz and the bang and behind us on the suburban lane some children messing around in the water sprinkler. It was idyllic.

And sometimes, when things are idyllic, the truths begin to seep their way out of the floorboards? Don't they? Oh yes. As the display continued and my vision of Alyson started to blur, I for whatever reason concentrated on a set of concentric circles she had embroidered onto her lapel. And the concentric circles never ended. Her face became a soft blur and I was returned to my home realm, the one where I really belong.

The president was a man of impotent stature, perhaps 5'4" with nihilistic sideburns and a cheap flannel suit. He stands before a monotone blue curtain and gazes long and hard into a teleprompter and tries his best to appear in an official capacity. He is the president of Dreamland. He takes his job very seriously. Oh, yes. Did you forget him?

You see yourself in his shoes. He is the public representative and servant of the dream people, elected democratically in a process nobody understands, because this is all a dream. You can mold reality at the flick of a mental switch, stand on the edge of the Seattle Needle one second and climb through air with it slipping through your fingers like silly putty, you think their system of elected officials makes any sense? I got a surprise in store for you.

I go over and shake his hand, and the broadcast to the dream people ends and the technician gives him some kind of signal. He nods in the direction of the booth and the technical people drop out of sight and out of mind. We are alone now, in a small claustrophobic room with blue satin curtains and no visible exit. On his desk there is an ashtray and in the ashtray there is one indeterminate tobacco product. It emits a fragrance.

SHOW ME YOUR PROGRESS? He mouthed. "Oh, yes," I burred. "I have seen much and drawn much, but let's retire to the presidential estate." This was all part of his game. The ruse, the deception- made him excited. It was just like old times. I would be cruising, making deliveries... and then my head was on the verge of exploding and leaving small chunks of my brain all over the pavement.

But these serialized adventures had been rationalized and justified by me, in that I came to accept them even as one of the biological functions, akin to breath and caloric intake, and therefore I was part and parcel of the president's campaign,

a willing diplomat from the space outside. That was what they called it, directly referred to it neither as the waking world or the real world, but only as the space outside. Makes one consider what is and is not acceptably true.

We were at the President's resort in the middle of the winding prairie and it looked like a scene from an old postcard, come to stay here in Kansas or something. And he had poured me a green cocktail and a rum for himself and we looked out over the waving hayseed and prairie dog colonies as my worries faded away and he took a sip from that murky substrate.

"Nosebleeds still affect you?" He pulled out a notepad such as to record my responses and use them in academic areas. This was routine.

"Not so much anymore." I couldn't take my eyes off his fantastically generic two-piece suit.

This was a carefully constructed lie on my part. While they had reduced somewhat in overall frequency such that I was no longer drowning in a sopping lake of gore on my pillow every night, when the time came and there were no tissues to be found, or worse if I were in the office and Alyson was in the vicinity and I detected a breach approaching, my concern was unfathomable. "Uh-huh," he murmured softly, his cheeks rosy, his hair beaded with afternoon sweat. "And the hat man? Any visits from him?" None that I could make out. He usually came when I was wholly unconscious and had to leave me a note on the fridge, saying that he had missed me and would be back soon to discuss my callous theft of psychic power. I chose not to disclose this to the Pres because he was probably already damn likely aware of this painfully obvious fact.

Behind us, you could make out his summer home. It was a sizable estate which sometimes had marble pillars and other times had ones of jade or emerald, though it was always a modest Kansas dwelling which endeared the general public to the Pres, gave him that human quality, sent his numbers up in the polls. Yes, I envied him. I had no transitory arena, no malleable property. I could only observe.

A silent black vehicle approached from the far corner of my eye. This black Volga was captained by the Pres' personal assistant, Milgram, who by coincidence was also a member of the Dreamland dairy lobby. He pushed for calcium and warned against the dangers of calcium deficiency every weekend in a helpful seminar in Dreamland City.

He left the drivers' cabin and immediately had the air of a slowly festering tuna. His flesh as pale and bulbous as I had remembered, though he had received a makeover of some kind as to make his stench less repugnant on the whole. He approached the Pres with some important documents, which he looked over and promptly signed with his 0.7 MM ballpoint pen. In purple ink. You notice things like this over time, gradually.

I feel something on my philtrum, reach out, and understand that my nose is seeping with viscous fluid yet again, albeit virtually. It is a disturbing sensation.

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Something brushes past my cheek. A mosquito or something. The Pres offers me a handkerchief. You can tell from how he looks that something feels off about him.

As uncanny as one man and two women standing knee-deep in a swimming pool by the side of a highway, their faces distorted, wires hooked up to their circulatory and neural systems which convert the palpitations of the heart and the firing of neurons into coherent music. He is that unnerving.

"We need you, you know," he repeats this last. "You're valuable to us, provide us with a service we can't get anywhere else. Our previous links, made during the administrations of my forebears, were chaotic at best and utter failures at worst. But you- well, you're conducive in some sense. You take what we shovel at you without question." I raise the beverage to my mouth and imbibe a miniscule portion. It is warm and tepid.

"All part of diplomacy, ol' boy," I retort.

Milgram has decided to retire to the estate and withdraws some of the new extravagant toys the Pres has been gifted by loyal think tanks. Target practice.

"Check this out," says the Pres, retrieving a rifle from the bag and raising it over his shoulder at a predetermined angle which comes as second nature to him. Milgram fires off a hurtling disc which soars out over the desolate steppe, and in an instant the leader of the imaginary pulls the trigger and it breaks into a hundred shards, and I assume this is some kind of Freudian metaphor I'm intended to catch.

They slip those in all the time around here.

"Give it a try," he says with Milgram ready to hurl a projectile at any moment on the right. "Don't be a patsy. Give it a go. Good exercise." I do as I'm told, he waves me through the motions of the thing and when all is ready, he stands a ways back, removed from the action, binocs in hand, which will afford him a comfortable view.

Before the disc comes removed from the mechanism, a hush falls over everything, and I am finely attuned to the noise of these neurally constructed plains. Wind sifting through every fibrous structure, crickets jumping along the pebbles while the small brook in the ravine a mile out provides too much rest for the weary.

The belts spin and the disc is let loose, and I track it in a steaming parabola along my line of sight. Arch. I took this stuff in like nobody's business in algebra, absorbed all the trigometrics in an imitation of a hungry sponge. Mathematical certainty. No, that's not it. Nothing is certain here.

The disc flies out into the aquamarine abyss and it's lost among the atmospheric haze. The Pres moans in defeat. The rifle remains unprovoked. Milgram pops a breath mint.

Pres comes over and retrieves his toy, gives me one hot glimpse of contempt, unbridled fire and brimstone beneath the warm and fuzzy public exterior. If provoked, the master of the unconscious will respond with brute force and vitriol. It happened once before and I don't want to see it again. Not fond of him particularly when he's under fire from the fourth estate. I am aware of his contempt for my breed, though we are brought together by circumstance and coincidence and nothing else. I am not an inquisitor here. I am not at liberty to ask or to reason why. This is, surely, one of the contributing factors to the omniscient claustrophobia of the space between.

The next order of business in this session is to recount the Pres' career. He takes great delight in this aspect of our appointments. He relates to me the electoral process, the intricacies of forming political action committees, etc. This section is always insufferably droll, but it is on the agenda and cannot be skipped.

I am at once enthralled by the differences between actual democracy and dream democracy, while simultaneously aware of the inevitable similarities. For instance, one section of today's roster involves a lengthy analysis of the harvesting of NREM potential for use across the universal network. The Pres' existence depends on the connected auras of real people. They are his actual constituents. Or something like that.

"I find it ironic that you in the space outside have yet to develop a fully operational global connection, while we suffice with so much as theta." His grin is visible even behind the spreadsheet. Wry bastard. I didn't show up at his party to be insulted.

"We're trying," I say. "You hear about this Connectron thing up in TV? Might be the biggest and closest so far." He shakes his head. Then a stirring of the ether occurs, he siphons the information from a student taking a power nap at the Fitzsimons Army Medical Center who has just used a Connectron module to send scans of necrotic fasciitis to a hapless colleague in Golden who specializes in that area. He nods approvingly.

"Still leagues ahead of you." Returns to the paperwork.

"sleeping OK?"

"As good as anyone can these days," I retort.

"Good, good." Taps his pencil against the armrest, picks his teeth with it. Yes, his face is hard to define. The lines are so slimy and the lips are both thin and fat, his sideburns are indefinite, even. No stubble, anyway. Clean shaven.

Milgram is just gazing up as always, a Rene Magritte figure. This is what they do when they're not being used. Stand in one place. Why would they do anything else?

The Pres is involved in the distribution and regulation of nightmares, wet dreams, sleep starts and subtle muscle twitches. He subsidizes nonsense and waters the American heartland with irrational superstition. And here I am, sitting and talking with the distributor whose resources never dwindle.

He is six feet from me.

I don't remember by now exactly how my appointment as ambassador to Dreamland started. Only that it was sometime making deliveries on that bike of mine. I showed up at the door of some old lady and her custom earmuffs were soaked in blood. I told her we could offer her a refund, and that I would note it on my bike's Compu-Log, but she told me not to worry and slammed the door in my face. Or maybe that wasn't when it started. All the trips I took making deliveries are incomplete in my catalog of memories. They blend together, all unmemorable and nondescript. All the products I sold were bland trinkets. And now here I am, having graduated from an amateur delivery boy to a political figure of sizable significance. The cookies do crumble. If only I was worth a shit in the space outside.

Oh, well. One can always dream.

It's late and we're back in the studio now. I have vague recollections of having driven here. Or having been driven here. To something around the figure of 100,000 denizens, Dreamland is conducting a fundraiser/variety show. I can hear the noise in the booth adjacent to ours.

At arm's length, the Pres is holding a bottle of tablets which I assume are made to treat his stomach problems. He told me once, he gets indigestion. His hair has been coated with fresh chemicals and his breath is practically an aphrodisiac.

A manicurist is sitting at the table across from me and she's having some difficulty on my ring finger. She takes the file very carefully and tries her best to hone it down to acceptable parameters. The Pres goes over to the curtain and glances outside. Rubbing his hands. He's got a nervous tic about him, him and this smoky flop joint.

"All about aesthetic, tonight," he says. "They get off on that shit, take it like cocaine. Remember. Appearances are everything. If they don't like you, they'll never let me live it down. He removes the Presidential seal from his lapel and gingerly affixes it to mine. Musses my hair up a little, Watches in great detail how it moves when I saunter.

The manicurist takes one last good look at me, holds a mirror up. Can't see myself very well in this dream logic, though I seem to have been awarded with a tasteless coiffure.

From outside come the noises of the dream people, a hundred derelict figments all writhing in the darkness of the auditorium of fiction, in a million shapes they come, from the fervent inklings of a bestselling author in Des Moines to the wine deluged fervor or a career criminal in Toledo. The applause gradually kills itself and the manicurist leads me to the aperture from which I am to emerge, in full splendor, to the assembled people of Dreamland, as ambassador of the real.

I look back at the Pres, who flashes the O.K. symbol and winks. I wish I felt like winking back but my incompetence in this role, the sheer non sequitur of my presence here, is enough to make me pine for one of his stomach pills.

I have often wondered, not even here in particular, how one can wrestle with inner turmoil and suppress it without so much as a thought. How do you calm your angst? Few deep breaths won't cut it. They envision me as the enemy.

Alyson grabs my hand.

This momentary, almost imperceptible shift back into the field at Albuquerque's demented relative was enough to have me return from Santa Fe to the hurtling concentric circles of the theater. I take ten steps forward and find myself in the open arena, a spokesperson for sense and for sanity. The man pulling the ropes is an ill-defined concept seen once on a soap opera. Trying my darndest to exude charisma and goodwill, I shoot him a hearty salute and he snaps back with what I assume is a misplaced profanity.

I approach the podium. A large basket of money is on the far end of the stage, and the announcer and a showgirl are busy counting the receipts. This is a crucial venture for the prolongation and perpetuation of the DNA (Dream Network Action) fund, and whether the numbers on the dial continue to spin will depend entirely of how well I can make the case for myself and for we - well, what would you call us exactly?

"Hello!" I announce off the precipice. The microphone is metallic and well-honed. "I can see you're all here tonight. Well, most of you. Let me see you stand up." They rise in unison without once speaking, and resume their positions on the cheap velvet seats with just as much ease. The faces are dim and poorly lit, but they aren't the kind of thing you could cope with while retaining a healthy attitude.

"People, let's be sensible," I drift on. I'm ad-libbing it, they can see that much. The beady eyes pierce right into my sternum and out the other end. "We are in effect symbiotes. Without us, you would be nothing, and without you- well, let's just say our side would have a lot of pent-up hostility." My understatement of this blunt truth brings forward a light drizzle of smiles. They can like me. Anyone could like me.

"And let's hear something for these fine workers," and I motion towards the long table of switchboard operators who are speaking to the donators with muffled tones and hushed whispers. Their presence is noted, though not diverting. "You know, what, like twenty of them are coming here tonight just to save your sinking foundation? Damn, if my side had this many hard workers, we'd be leagues ahead of where we currently are!" That's it, gently ribbing yourself is always a good diplomatic strategy. Clapping all around, pats on the back and wide grins. Their superiority complexes are kicking in now. I'll use that to my advantage like a glassblowing trumpet.

Of course, glass can also snap in an instant.

"Good people," I continue, and hold the mic aloft so as to give off a more animated demeanor. Aesthetic is key. "You're all really great. Every time I come here, I find something new. I said that to President What's-His-Name just the other day. I said, 'Man, how long does this street in your city go on?' And let's be honest, here. Something wrought purely from extra sensory energy is no less something to be proud of. Might even be more remarkable in some aspects. And every day you're flying off rooftops and eating strange foods that are delicious but visually disgusting, and that's the sort of lifestyle I think deserves more respect. And we will give you the recognition you've been craving. I'll see to it. I would lose my livelihood if it meant drawing a little press to what you have going on here."

This statement is popular. They clap for about 30 seconds and then I wave them back down. The table of operators look from one side to another, then pick up the handsets from their cradles and resume collection.

They're trying every tactic to play on the sympathy of the dream people at home. Some have scripts prepared. I sure wish I had the luxury of a script.

IT GNASHES.



"I admit, we've made some mistakes," I say. "Where I come from, I'm virtually nobody, but so help me if I ever become influential or even remotely successful, I will see to it that coffee is lessened in the public's eye!" This is an empty promise and they know it. They don't want to know what I'll do when I get back. They only care about me now. Because I could wake up at any time, and I'd be gone. The moment must be seized. Double back, retread.

"OK, I'll be the first to admit," raising the pinkies. "I've had a cup in my time. Been trying to quite ween myself off the dreck ever since high school, when I would sneak into the teacher's lounge for some of the shit so I could cram and ace my finals. But that's honesty for you. Open. Truthful. And I regret having done it. I really do." Silence from the assembled throngs now. Not sure if this has made them admire or loathe me, this needless tangent.

"Same goes for the uppers," and this sense is lost. "See all these fools all the time who take them just because they figure it'll make 'em more productive. You know what I say will make anyone more productive without wrecking the head? A good night of sleep, that's what I say!" And I raise my fist in anger or mock contempt, not really sure which, and I slam into the podium so hard a pen bounces off, and they all go wild. They're getting hyped up now. From across the aisle the phones are ringing off the hook. One is connected to machines which pump and drive the numbers up, and the dials whir, and the cameras remain locked onto my portrait like crosshairs.

Overstating one's prevalence never did much good in the long run anyway. A hard truth of running any solid campaign, and I initially learned this during the Ford campaign, is to string them along just enough that they vote for you on Election Night, and after that your security as leader of the free world is virtually secured and locked in. What a joke, Ford.

The announcer of the special cuts in. He's wearing bee yellow and bounces toward me like a Boeing missile. The kind you see get associate degrees in things nobody thinks twice about. Can't tell if he's one of us or them.

"Wow, just wow," he holds the mic and struts from my end of the amphitheatre to the other while spinning on one very well-greased shoe. "Is this something, or what? We have right here possibly the best assistant ever appointed, and you don't stop calling in. Keep calling in. Break open the piggy banks. Reach under those mattresses. Money is output! Output is effort! Effort fuels this broadcast, and it'll keep us going for years ahead. We'll never give the sign off signal! Am I right?" The row explodes, and then the row behind that erupts, and so on, and the response is near-unanimous as they all scream and howl: Yes, by taking the initiative and pledging imaginary currency, you can create a ripple effect in your community.

Keep dialing in, don't stop. All the stations are swamped and the lines are overwhelmed with the vigor of a hundred unrelated thoughts swirling. All in unison. All as one, going the extra mile to help an institution they believe in.

It would be touching if it weren't all so disingenuous. All so tasteless. Even here, artificiality is a constant. Phonies who would sacrifice millions if it meant improving other people's perceptions of them. Authenticity is yesterday's news, it went the way of the dinosaur. Just a big bowl of resources and tired

syncophants who sit and talk and wait for that extra check to bounce. If I weren't such a talented sophist, I might very well convince myself that I gave a rat's freezing chance about what happened to this place or its system.

The showgirl is waving her arms toward the dial and grinning at the rig which hovers and swivels around us to provide the best possible angle of the action to the people watching from home. She goes over to the bucket, dips her long fingers all the way in and lifts a handful of cash at the audience, a wide grin ear to ear. Don't know what talent agency she was procured from, or if they have talent agencies this side of rapid eye movement, but I have to admit she's much better than I am.

The announcer hands back the mic. The deal is practically cinched now. Just need to tie up the loose ends. Deep breath. back in the Santa Fe diamond, Alyson is holding my hand.

"Give it up!" I yell at the heavens. "YOUR DA OF RECKONING IS ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~DRRECTUUY!"

Emotional, soul-rending magic as the group stands and warmly embraces, calling each other wonderful things and the entirety of the realm is taken to the receiver to pledge every last disposable penny. God, show business really isn't for me. Need to get back behind a typewriter soon, I think. Not out here. Not exposed.

But what am I worried over? Nobody will remember me when they wake up tomorrow. They'll remember only the strangely familiar diners and the disturbing static, the red pupils in the closet and the nonexistent family members getting engulfed by ferociously pounding waves. The shelves of board games that nobody has ever heard off the top of their heads, and the grand sweeping geometrically impossible vistas. Nobody will be able to recall this speech past 5 minutes after waking up at the most. Which is a crying shame, as this is likely to be the best speech I ever give, in the Space Between or the Space Outside.

History has been made and recorded by the people who have very little impact on us, who exist only as clouds and wisps of delusion, and as I exit off to one side the whole of the theater grows faint and I know that what I have done is sufficient.

Like all appointed officials, I have been selected entirely at random by people who know much less than I do. I was not voted in and am therefore not subject to public opinion. I exist whether you want me to or not. Suck it, dreamland.

It hits me. I remember now the first time I saw the Pres. I had just finished a long climb up a particularly difficult hill and half my merchandise had fallen off the back of my bike during the ascent. So I locked the bike up at the top and went back to retrieve the stuff, and record what was broken and like that. And halfway down the descent I see him.

He was maybe even less defined then, and if he didn't stand out so much on our side he might have even passed for one of us. He picks up one of the pieces which had fallen off, dusts it off and glances at it. It's a small spice rack, made to carry jars of oregano and coriander and like that. Tasteless junk, like everything else my employers pay me to market. Useless effluvium. And I reach him and notice he has no face, not a defined one at any rate, and I would scream if it weren't for the fact that as I approach his location my nose starts dripping like Niagara Falls. But I don't scream, I'm too tired to scream. So we just look at each other for a while, size each other up.

He came over to me then, taking the sort of strides you only see at 3 A.M. in the morning and he put his hands on my temples and in doing so shook my whole world upside down. I was old enough to know the horrors of the world, sure, but had never been in any actual danger and was far from desensitized to this kind of thing.

Bleed out, he says then, just let it bleed out. Something like that,...

And after a while of this pragmatic lock he lets go and I catch my breath and sure enough the bleeding has stopped. At my feet there's a puddle about the breadth of Superior, but the bleeding is no more. I'm faint and frail and too dazed to run, so he hands me the spice rack and I go around picking up more of the things while he stands there watching me—hands in the pockets of this oversized trenchcoat he was sporting, as I stoop to retrieve a loofah, some pillowcases, and some commemorative baseball mugs which had split into 50 small commemorative baseball shards. And during this process I have no fear or apprehension about the guy.

I make my way back up the hill, these cardboard suburbs are now engulfed in a thick orange dusk and the air is getting sort of chilly, and I know I won't be making any more sales today so I'm in no hurry, and he follows me up to where my bike is locked and observes silently as I free it from its chains.

"We need people like you," he finally says. "Need you where I'm from, you could make a big difference. It pays nothing, provides nothing unless you allow it to, but it would be great on my end. You interested?" He takes what I figure to be a dream cigar from his pocket, pinches it between his thumb and index finger and appears to contemplate it as he phases in and out at spontaneous intervals. Behind him I could see the lights in the windows of the duplex across the lane.

"What did you do to me with that nosebleed?" I may be too weak to pedal with all this lost life juice, might have to walk the bike home. In the morning cops will show up because they'll think it's a crime scene, there's so much blood.

"I can help with that," he says. "Me and my staff will give you techniques, assist you in their implementation. You know exactly what's been going on here. You walk into places without remembering doing so, strange buildings spring out of the ground and then recede. We can aid you in those areas and more. But this role won't really benefit you, not unless you tapp its full potential." I am tired by now, tired of hauling this rusty machinery for pennies on the dollar, tired of knocking on people's doors even when they have a "No Solicitors" sign up, only to be rejected anyway, tired of the grueling 8-hour shift which I feel is preventing me from getting ahead in my social life and at school— a new line of work might be just what I need, I'm thinking.

"Details?"

"Can't provide any. Just know that it will be worth your while, and get me out of a difficult situation. My voters are upset with me. Need someone to fill this slot."

"Oh," I say. "You're a politician."

"Yes, I guess you could call me that."

"In that case, I respectfully decline," I muster the courage to stand up and face him, hands on hips. "You see, I'm an aspiring member of the fourth estate, and our respective objectives are diametrically at odds with one another." He fades back into the gathering twilight, almost out of focus now. Going, going, gone.

I accepted his offer about a month later. The nosebleeds got worse, and I WAS sick of delivery, and while the new position as diplomat to Dreamland didn't pay me anything, there was something incomprehensibly exciting to an inquisitive mind such as mine about having free access to America's collective hive mind whenever I wanted.

Scratch that, not whenever I wanted. Only when I was called upon. Only when I was needed for a public speaking event or a fundraiser such as the one I gave that night in the theater. And I learned their language, too, their kind of droning effluvia and meaningless jargon. If you see any of that in me, you know where it came from.

I sometimes feel guilty about my double life, but then realize that everyone lives a double life in some form or another. We all have secrets bubbling under the surface that we'd like to tell someone but can't, not necessarily because it would have any serious repercussions but because it would sound stupid. And I assume that's how all this sounds, crazy and stupid.

As we say in the business, take it with a pinch of salt. Maybe some coriander.

Alyson squeezed my hand which roused me from my slumber. The lights of the baseball lot were on now and the display was over. While I had been holding the audience captive at the theater, I did still have a kind of record in my cerebral cortex of how the display had been, although I was disconnected from the events. Whenever I phase out, all the beauty in the events lived in the Space Outside is stripped and I'm left with a cold and analytical process, a wholly sterile record to be filed away for future reference.

All five of us got up and we packed the food back into the trunk. I looked out into the desert, but there wasn't anything left. No more golden plumages, no more sprouts of flame to coat the cosmos in a wild trail of screaming whistles and scorching-hot Magnolias. Just an empty diamond with sand and bases, and a vacant seating area. And the world beyond.

On the way back I ate my weight in stuff out of the cooler, I was hungry from my voyage to the unconscious. And all the while Alyson just sat and absentmindedly stuck her head into the night and let the freezing desert wind blast her. I think she felt rejected or something. I had no feelings for her beside the platonic. I hope she knows that now.

I considered the significance of the event, the Fourth of July and the amazing computerized display of Santa Fe. I could write a small article on it in the morning, a little op-ed to brighten Las Cruces up. No, scratch that. It would be devoid of passion, and the last thing anyone needs to see in the paper over a screaming breakfast is a newspaper article devoid of humanity. It would be like choking on sand.

So that was the only time I had the opportunity to engage in this Las Cruces tradition. I wish I had been able to stick around longer, Natch was tiring of the game and I could have nabbed his position, but there was nothing in climbing the ladder at such a small publication. It was a joke of a supplement, really, only viewed at gas stations and retirement homes.

But it was nice to feel included, anyway. It's rare I get the chance, as an impartial observer, to engage in the action.

New Mexico is a beautiful state, and if I could have remained there I would have. I really would. There was something about its mesas and sands that revealed an American heritage and a pinch of arcane potential. But I had more fish to fry, and if I had kept it up in Cruces I would only have been leading Alyson on, and I felt wrong in going that.

I needed something else, a hit on Gopamin. A quick hit to the pineal gland, if you will. By late 1971 I said goodbye to the editorial staff, handed in my resignation, told them that they had provided me with both an interesting glimpse at the fringe lifestyle and an entry on my resume, and that I would keep in touch. This was a guarantee as empty as the promises I made to the assembled citizens of Dreamland on July 4.

Never saw Berkowitz again, either, now that I think about it.

Compared to what I would be up against next, he was small potatoes, so maybe that was for the best.





Transistor Valley, U.S.A.

An exclusive interview with the creator of the Connectron, Chaz McDowell

By William Purl, technology dept.

Seen here is up-and-coming computer hotshot
Chaz McDowell in the summer of '69.

A mere visitor to his home might see him as a devoted husband and father, and nothing more- sitting in his armchair, reclined, sipping from his glass of Four Roses, he looks like the approachable blue-collar type. Anyone familiar with the emerging field of computing science would know, however, that Chaz McDowell, 35, is more than a casual bowler- he is the creator of the connected information network that's recently taken America by storm.

Since its introduction in March last year, McDowell's "Connectron" has risen fast in numerous subcultures as a quick and efficient method of communication- across state lines and even, he assures us, globally. McDowell is one of a growing movement of savvy investors and smooth-talking salesmen in a region along the Front Range Corridor we here at the Zeitgeist Monthly term "Transistor Valley."

We sent Billy Purl, our "international fun boy," to Mr. McDowell's humble estate in Boulder, Colorado, to discuss the role of computing in modern society, the potential of the Connectron, and how his life has changed since the conception of the device.



Purl: Thanks for offering up your insight.

It was a tough ride over here.

McDowell: Ha ha. I know what you mean. A trip over the Divide can do that to some people- make them carsick, especially on those tight curves.

Purl: Mr. McDowell, I think most of our readers are aware by now of your face, or at least your name- would you like to share a few more details about yourself?

McDowell: Sure. I feel like a lot of people are intimidated by me, so I'll try to demystify myself. I'm married happily with my wife, Rita, we live here in this small residential neighborhood. I have a daughter named Carlene, she's 2 and learning to walk. I also own a pet garter snake named Licorice. Is that sufficient?

Purl: Yes, I think so. How did you first come up with the Connectron?

McDowell: Early on, during my college years. '57 or '58. At Vassar we had access to the Numeric Rush- one of the greatest machines of the Great War, it was competent even a decade later. Created by the French to aid the invaded Englishmen, slip codes in and out, and like that. It was stupendous. By the time we got our hands on it, it was still in perfect working order. And we put it to work. We hooked it up to several monitors, and asked it questions and gave it simple algebraic equations, then we moved onto things like physics. We asked it to calculate the curve of a golf ball given so-and-so conditions, the density of such element, and

it was spot-on every time. They don't make them like that anymore. Built to last.

McDowell points to a broken monitor at the back of his workshop, which is located in the rear of the family garage.

McDowell: What you see there is a monitor from the Rush. Only a keepsake, really. It'll never work again, but I keep it around for inspiration- because that's the exact monitor I was looking at when I had the first spark of inspiration that developed, over a decade later, into the Connectron.

Purl: Working next to a machine that sophisticated, it would be hard NOT to be inspired to do something amazing.

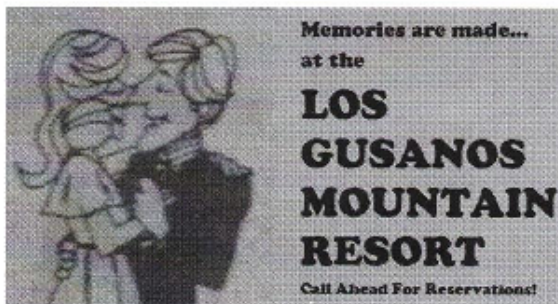
McDowell: You have a point there. I was looking at that exact monitor- it was playing a graphic of a simulated raindrop, if I recall. The drop hit, again and again, and I thought about Chinese water torture. And then somehow this thought developed into Morse Code. I thought about the old telegram systems- miles of wires stretching across the country, and here's the thing, which a lot of people seem to forget these days: THEY WORKED. You could send a message from St. Louis, and it would go over those hundreds of miles of poles and wind up in Sacramento, and it would be legible. And in my mind, looking at the monitor, I saw in place of those telegram stations rows of monitors, all wired up to each other, all sending signals back and forth interchangeably. A hive mind. And I knew then that if such a computerized network were to be established- it would rival the



postal system, even the phone system, in terms of accuracy. Consider all the times the operator has given you an incorrect number due to human error. All the times the payphone has eaten your quarter, and all the times the grid has been blacked out or overloaded. Now imagine, instead of phones, you have computers, instead of communicating using your voice you use the written word, like on a typewriter. And instead of some unseen person on the other end, cold and distant, you can view pictures and text with startling accuracy, all in just seconds. That's the reason the Connectron has dominated the market in terms of applicability. Convenience, and access to an unprecedented level of information at the click of a button.

Purl: Based on what you're saying, it sounds like it took you a while to develop the Connectron. What were your key obstacles during the developmental phase?

McDowell: Cost, mostly, but also time. I had to graduate, get my degree, and then there was the whole funding thing. Prior to last year, when we rolled the product out, the idea of inter-computer communication was untested and shaky. I hunted around for a ton of investors to come over and check out my schematics. Five years ago, Boulder wasn't nearly in the position it is now.



McDowell unrolls a schematic and lays it on the desk. It is approximately 5 feet by 4 feet and sketched in pencil.

McDowell: What you're looking at here is an early vision I had for the key component of the Connectron, the Microdie. It underwent a few revisions prior to rollout, but it's essentially the same. A tiny integrated circuit with billions of minute connections seared on. You can attach this thing to any personal home computer to make it Connectron-compatible. When I brought this thing to Agarico-

Purl: For the readers at home, Agarico is the investment firm based in Denver, correct?

McDowell: Yes. One of my associates who works in the technology sector had recommended them to me. They took one look at the die and said they could produce a hundred in the first week. And they did, and they have. Boulder has practically been transformed overnight.

Purl: Looking over your sales figures, which demographics are the biggest consumers of the Connectron so far?

McDowell: Well, up until around June, most of our orders were coming from college campuses, in particular UC Boulder and UC Denver. These young people, who are a part of what I guess you could call the counter-culture, and especially the medical students, are really into it. Sharing files and charts, they're able to create cures for this Manchurian toxin a lot faster. They also like to unwind after a long day by logging onto



their local network. Currently we have specific networks set up for each college. Sometime in June, I guess someone from UC Boulder told his family about it, and they insisted that I send them one. And from there, it's kind of been a snowball effect. A lot of people, especially young people who are savvy with home operating systems, can't get enough of the Connectron experience. And they look up to me. I'm not sure how to handle it. Sometimes I wonder how it got to this point.

Purl: I know what you mean, an unexpected rise in popularity can do that to people. Alienate them. You said this apparatus had practical uses in combating the toxin? Does it have any other practical applications on the front lines?

McDowell: Not as of yet. The signal is still in its infancy, too weak to reach Manchuria. To boost the signal, we would need to create a system of satellites to transmit it around the curvature of the earth- although Agarico is connected to several prominent Government Agencies, including NACA, they all report such a system would cost too much. Still, we are optimistic. A lot of these young types use the network to actively fight against the war in Manchuria, organize rallies and the like. But it is useful in combating the toxin. You can't get much more accurate in biology than a complete computer simulation which can calculate how quickly the gas attacks the nerves, from what angle it was discharged, etc.

Purl: Before I leave, would you care to demonstrate the Connectron in action?

McDowell: Yes, by all means.

McDowell sits down at an Agarico monitor. He places his left hand onto an electronic keyboard, connected to the hard drive by a thin wire. His right hand grasps a small object with yet another wire on the rear.

Purl: What's that?

McDowell: They call it a mouse. You've never heard of it?

Purl: I have, in passing references at expos, but- I've never seen one like THAT. They must have some team over at Agarico.

McDowell: That they do. Watch closely now.

He enters a few key commands and the monitor springs to life. A small box appears, demanding a numeric passcode. McDowell hits the "Enter" key. Instantly, there is a larger box before him. He maneuvers the "mouse" to the top of the screen, clicks once. A blinking line appears.

McDowell: What would you like to see? We have several databases and indexes already compiled. Choose something.

Purl: Find the encyclopedia entry on a classic Buster Keaton comedy. Safety Last.

McDowell: You underestimate me. We can do better than that.

McDowell types something in, clicks the mouse once, and Harold Lloyd springs to life on the screen, dangling from a clock.

Purl: This... this is impossible...

