THE FANTASTIC ADVENTURES OF ELWOOD THE LIBRARIAN--
VERSION 2.0!

I love books. I love everything about them. That soft, creaky sound the spine makes when you first open a book. That wonderful, unique aroma of ink printed on paper. The feel of the pages as I flip them through my fingertips one by one. The thrilling anticipation of reaching a story’s climax. Naturally, I prefer fiction novels, but any book will do, so long as it’s a book. I simply love books. So you can imagine my trepidation when Ms. Redmond, the library head honcho, announced that our library would be undergoing some major renovations. She wasn’t kidding.

My name is Elwood Cox. I’m a Library Circulation Manager. And I have a story to tell.

Our story begins on a typical Monday morning. You know the kind. The alarm clock that’s much louder than usual. The shower that’s too quick to let the water get hotter than lukewarm. Stale leftover pizza for breakfast. It was the kind of morning that needed a double shot of espresso followed by a little hair of the dog that bit me. It was the kind of morning where you knew trouble was lurking just outside the door of your shabby two-story apartment building. Nevertheless, I showered and shaved, slipped into something less comfortable, imbibed the necessary stimulants, grabbed my personal effects, and headed out the door to face the challenges ahead.

The morning bus ride to the library normally took about ten minutes. Usually, I was so eager to be about my work I couldn’t wait for those ten minutes to be over. For the past two weeks, however, my daily morning commute to the library had been over way too fast. Today was no different. The bus arrived at the library right on time.

I stepped off the bus and paused for a moment to look up at the gloomy, overcast sky. The air was already warm and thick with humidity. I almost regretted bringing my trench coat with me, but I knew I would need it later. Reluctantly, my eyes trailed down from the gray skies to the whitewashed building before me and the new signage plastered above the front entrance.

"Public Library & Media Center," I read aloud. “Hmph!”

I shook my head and grumbled a few choice words. Nevertheless, I trudged forward, scattering a group of pigeons as I made my way up the front steps leading to the main entrance. Reaching the top, I strode toward the automatic sliding doors and passed through.

Upon entering the library, I was immediately hit by a blast of cold air. The sudden chill of the library’s new A/C unit felt refreshing after being outside in the warm, sticky humidity, but I knew that I would be a frozen icicle within a couple of hours, if not minutes. I was now thankful I had brought my trusty trench coat. I pressed onward.

As I cleared the new detection panels that were mounted just inside the main entrance to either side of me, I was startled by an upbeat “Morning!” to my left. I looked over and saw one of our five new security guards standing at attention with his hands behind his back. He gave me a quick salute and then resumed his position. A shudder ran down my spine, but I managed a polite nod and a half-hearted wave before hurrying along to my destination.

It was true that a replacement for our white-haired, 90-year-old security guard had been well overdue, but something about these new young security guards made me nervous. I’m not sure what it was, but somehow I had the feeling we’d hired a bunch of overzealous military wannabes, the kind who wouldn’t hesitate to order an immediate strip search of every grandmother who accidentally triggered the alarm on our new electronic security system. Thankfully, no such incident had occurred. To be honest, they all seemed like nice guys, and they did a good job keeping the riff-raff out. So I couldn’t really complain.
The main lobby area leading up to the circulation desk was spacious, bright, and pristine. Everything looked sparkling clean and brand new. Even the air smelled like it had been purified and sanitized. I glanced to my right and left as I crossed the new glossy marble tile lobby floor. The entryway to the fiction department was to my right. To my left—my stomach churned again—we now had a room that housed collections of CDs, DVDs, and computer software. Elevators and staircases off to the side led upwards and down. Reference materials and quiet study areas remained upstairs, but the creepy, poorly-lit downstairs area that had once housed our archive of special collections and rare items was now occupied by some small conference rooms and an auditorium that could accommodate an audience of about 400 people.

That wasn’t all that had changed. The old card catalogs with their delightful musty smell had been banished. They had all been replaced by spiffy new computer workstations providing fast, easy public access to our new “online catalog”. I was totally against that change, by the way, and protested loudly when I found out about it. I mean where’s the fun in finding a valuable resource if you don’t have to work a little to get it? Besides, the people most likely to use a computerized online catalog to find a book are probably the very same people who never take the time to read books anyway, right? So what’s the point? I was told this kind of “progress” was sweeping the nation, but I was still certain that Melvil Dewey was rolling in his grave.

Four ladies, each one standing behind a sleek black monitor, greeted me cheerfully as I approached the main circulation desk. I gave them a curt nod and the best “Good Morning” smile I could muster before stepping behind the circulation desk and heading toward a door on the back wall. The ladies returned to chatting with each other as they waited for the library to officially open.

I paused at the door in front of me and reached into my pocket to fish out the new key I had been given. I pulled a white plastic card out of my pocket and swiped the magnetic strip through the new card reader that had been installed on the wall beside the door. After a second or two, it responded with what sounded like a satisfied beep. Next, I punched in a 4-digit code on a number keypad that had been installed above the card reader. I waited for another satisfied beep and then opened the door and walked inside. I flipped on the lights, closed the door, and breathed a sigh of relief.

I took off my fedora and hung it on the standing wooden coat rack beside the door. I did the same with my trench coat and then paused for a moment to take in my surroundings. Aside from the newly painted white walls and the new khaki-colored carpeting, my office remained largely unchanged. I was allowed to keep my old wooden coat rack, my old cherry wood executive desk, and my old worn out Oriental rug. They even let me keep the old card catalog drawers that they were going to throw out although, much to my dismay, some nitwit had already thrown out all the reference cards that belonged in them. I often entertained notions of reconstructing the card catalog, but I knew I’d never get around to it. Still, I was determined to hang on to those card catalog drawers, if only for the sake of posterity.

I allowed myself a little smile as my eyes glazed over the rest of the office. Various framed accolades hung on the walls, including my college degrees in library science, my Librarian of the Month awards, and even a certificate of recognition from the American Library Association. Along the walls, there were several small bookcases that contained my own personal library. I’d placed various odds and ends on top of the bookcases for display. These included small trophies for my many outstanding achievements as librarian, as well as souvenirs I’d picked up on my travels to librarian conferences across the nation and even a marble bust of Johannes Gutenberg.

Then my eyes fell on the large desk that was the centerpiece of the room, and I groaned. On the desk top, where there used to be a mess of papers haphazardly strewn about, there now sat the worst upgrade to this library of all. Yes, I too had been assimilated into the computerized network. No longer could I rest in the knowledge that my work assignments would have to work their way through the slow process of being typed up on paper, checked and approved, misplaced, re-typed, re-checked and re-approved, thrown away, re-typed, re-checked, and re-approved again before they finally reached my desk. Now all they had to do was send an e-mail to my new computer terminal
and, voila, instant work assignments. They say the more things change, the more they stay the same. If that’s true, why did I miss the old library building with its poor lighting, its broken down A/C, and its complete lack of anything resembling a computer terminal?

I walked over to the desk, side-stepping the empty card catalog drawers that were piled on the floor beside it. I set down my briefcase, took a seat in front of the computer terminal and reluctantly switched it on. It proceeded to make a soft whirring noise followed by an annoying tick-tick-ticking sound, which let me know that it was waking up.

While I waited for the computer to come to life, I started to reach for the desk drawer that contained a small flask which I kept around to help keep me warm. Instead, I picked up a small, framed picture that was sitting propped up on the desk beside the computer. It was a weathered, old sepia-tone photograph of a distinguished-looking gentleman wearing spectacles and a sharp tweed suit. My grandfather, Dewey Cox, one of the greatest librarians to ever wield a DUE DATE stamp. My grandfather had been a librarian just like his father before him and just like his father’s father before him. Six generations of the Cox family had been part of the library profession. Regrettably, my own father turned out to be the black sheep of the family when he became a film projectionist at a local movie house. Lucky for him, I came along and redeemed the family name. But for how long, I wondered. How long would my beloved library last before this “media center” took complete control? I felt a tear well up in my eye as I gazed at the portrait of my grandfather.

“The old guard is dying off,” I mumbled softly, my voice cracking just a bit.

A loud beep brought me out of my momentary reflection. I drew a heavy sigh, set down the portrait of my grandfather, and turned my attention back to the computer screen. I typed in my user ID and password as requested. The screen went black for a few moments, but that annoying tick-tick-ticking noise let me know it was still awake and thinking things over. After a few more seconds of black screen, a list of programs appeared. As I had been instructed, I clicked a button on the mouse and brought up the e-mail program first to check for incoming work assignments. An e-mail from Ms. Redmond, the head library honcho herself, was the first message to pop up. The email had been sent to “all users” and was typed in all caps:

IMPORTANT PRESS CONFERENCE AT 10AM IN THE AUDITORIUM DOWNSTAIRS. BE THERE!

I looked up at the clock on the wall. It was almost nine, only one hour until the press conference. That wasn’t much time to get started on any of the projects that were on my to-do list for the day. I thought about propping my feet up on the desk and catching a few Zs, but instead I swiveled my chair around to a small wooden shelf nailed to the wall behind me. A small collection of rare first-edition novels sat on the shelf. I ran my thumb slowly across the spine of each one. I’d inherited these treasures from my grandfather when he died. I pulled out one of the books, propped my feet up on the desk, opened the book to the first page and began reading: “In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since….”

The next thing I remember was darkness. And a loud beep. More darkness. Then another loud beep. Still more darkness and then a loud beep that jolted me awake with a start. My eyes popped open. I had dozed off! I looked up at the clock. It was 10:05! I straightened myself up in my chair and looked down at the computer screen. The e-mail program was still open. There were 3 new messages—all from Ms. Redmond. I opened the first message. It was sent to all users at 9:55:

ALL LIBRARY PERSONNEL PLEASE REPORT TO THE AUDITORIUM AT THIS TIME.

I opened the next message, sent to all users at 9:58:

ALL LIBRARY PERSONNEL REPORT TO THE AUDITORIUM IMMEDIATELY!

I opened the third message:
EVERYONE REPORT TO THE AUDITORIUM NOW! THIS MEANS YOU, ELWOOD!!

I hopped up out of my desk chair and rushed out of the office, not bothering to close or lock the door. I dashed across the lobby, nearly knocking over a patrolling security guard on my way to the stairway. I darted down the stairs taking them two at a time until I reached the bottom floor where I came to a sudden halt. There, I paused for a moment to catch my breath. I straightened up, composed myself, and then strode casually up to the large auditorium doors before me.

I reached for the door handle and slowly pulled the heavy door open just a bit and peeked in. The room was already dark, but I could hear the bustle of the crowd, which let me know that the show hadn’t started yet. Good, I thought. I pulled the door open just enough for me to slip inside the auditorium and then held it steady so that it closed slowly with a soft click. I then paused for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

I was standing at the back of the auditorium. There were two long columns of seats in front of me that led up to the stage with an aisle separating the two columns. I could make out the silhouettes of heads above the seats moving this way and that, as the lively buzz of conversation continued. It seemed the room was packed to capacity, and there was a tone of excitement in the air. The stage beyond was lit up. There was a large object on the stage that had the shape of a car, but a covering was draped over it so I couldn’t be exactly sure what it was. A huge projection screen hung suspended from the ceiling directly above the stage. A lady, presumably Ms. Redmond, stood onstage beside the concealed car-shaped object. She appeared to be looking down at something in her hand.

When I was sure my eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I had my bearings, I stepped forward... and stumbled right into a big burly figure directly in front of me. The figure emitted a loud “oof!” I gasped, expecting to hear the sound of a body hitting the floor, but it seemed to recover its balance quickly enough and straightened up. I breathed a sigh of relief but then panicked when the figure turned on me.

“Oh! Excuse me,” I began quickly. “I didn’t see—“

“Mr. Cox? Is that you?” a deep, gruff voice said.

I instantly recognized the voice. It belonged to another one of our security guards. He flipped on a flashlight and shined the beam directly into my eyes.

“Gaaah!” I winced and raised my arm to cover my eyes.

“Oh, good,” the guard said, sounding relieved. “Follow me, Mr. Cox. Library personnel get a front row seat!”

So much for being discreet. I drew a heavy sigh and reluctantly followed the security guard’s flashlight beam down the middle aisle toward the stage. I was still a bit disoriented by the sudden flash of light in my eyes, which were now trying to adjust back to darkness again. Thankfully, there were little floor lights along the sides of the aisle, which helped keep me centered. As we got closer to the stage, I could tell that it was indeed Ms. Redmond onstage, and she appeared to be fiddling with her hand-held texting device thingy. I still couldn’t make out what the large covered object next to her was.

We finally reached the front row. I could see better now with the light coming from the stage. The Friends of The Library, that is to say, our chief benefactors were seated on the front row to my left. I caught the eye of The Irascible Ms. Spanyer who was seated at the end of the row. Somehow, she always managed to give me a perturbed look that instantly made me feel ashamed of myself. I quickly turned away and hurried along to my destination. The guard motioned to the row of seats to my right. I spotted an empty seat and started toward it.

“Ah, there you are, Elwood Cox!” Ms. Redmond exclaimed as I was just about sit down. “So nice of you to join us. Would you kindly step up here and assist me, please?”

I turned and looked up at Ms. Redmond with a sheepish grin.
“Me?” I pointed at myself, glancing around, hoping she was referring to a different Elwood Cox.

“Yes, you! Get up here!”

I looked around again, hoping for some way out. Finding none, I drew a heavy sigh and plodded up the steps to the stage. I walked over toward Ms. Redmond and awaited instructions. She was busy texting on her hand-held texting device thingy again, so I took the time to survey my surroundings while I waited.

From this vantage point, with the help of light from the stage, I could easily make out some of the faces in the audience. My fellow co-workers were seated to my left. The Friends of The Library, including The Irascible Ms. Spanyer, were seated to my right. I also recognized some of our city officials seated a few rows behind the Friends of the Library. At one point, I thought I saw a familiar face wearing a white lab coat, but when I did a double take, it was gone.

My attention was pulled away from the audience when I heard Ms. Redmond clearing her throat. She had put away her hand-held texting device thingy and was now fiddling with the remote microphone attached to her lapel. A loud thoomp issued from the auditorium speakers, and the noise from the crowd began to die down. Ms. Redmond stepped forward, flashed a million-dollar smile, and began to speak, her voice booming over the auditorium speakers.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Members of the press! Friends of The Library! Welcome, one and all!” she announced. “I know you’re all eager to find out what we have in store for you today, so without further ado, let me introduce you to the latest, the greatest, the ultimate in state-of-the-art library multimedia technology!”

With that, Ms. Redmond turned and whisked the covering off the large car-shaped object with great fanfare. There were a hundred gasps of astonishment as dozens of cameras flashed throughout the audience.

“The all new totally computerized Public Access Library! Featuring options for playing movies, listening to music, surfing the Internet, and of course, reading e-books! All with the help of a 9000 gigahertz processor! We call it the PAL-9000!”

There were a hundred “ooohs” and “aaahs”, followed by thunderous applause, and more camera flashes. Ms. Redmond still wore that million-dollar smile as she looked out at the crowd. I looked down at the newly revealed contraption before me. I was flabbergasted. This was what we had been brought down here to see?

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” Ms. Redmond continued. “My assistant, Elwood Cox will demonstrate how this marvelous invention works!”

“What!” I exclaimed.

Completely stunned, I wheeled around to face Ms. Redmond. She was still smiling at the audience, but she motioned for me to keep my voice down.

“But I’ve never used this thing before,” I said, keeping my voice low but stern. “I didn’t even know about it until just now!”

“Don’t worry,” Ms. Redmond replied through gritted teeth, still smiling at the audience. “It’s like switching to that auto insurance company. It’s so easy even a caveman could do it!”

“Thanks a lot!” I muttered. I looked down at the metallic beast again and scowled. It sort of reminded me of an outlandish modified DeLorean I had seen years ago in some awful movie about time travel, except this hideous thing had no wheels to speak of.

“Look,” I said. “Can’t you find somebody else to do this for you? Anyway, how’s the audience supposed to see what I’m doing in there?”
Ms. Redmond switched off her microphone and turned to face me.

“First of all,” she said. “I specifically chose you because I wanted somebody who was totally computer illiterate. I want to show the audience how easy it is to operate the PAL-9000.”

“Gee, thanks,” I replied.

“And secondly,” she continued, unfazed. “There’s a camera and microphone mounted inside the PAL-9000. Everything that you see and hear will come through on the projection screen and the auditorium speakers.”

“And if I refuse?”

Ms. Redmond looked me straight in the eye and put on a wicked smile. “I could always confiscate those old card catalog drawers in your office and take them to the dumpster where they belong!”

I looked down at the PAL-9000 and frowned. I couldn’t deny it. She’d won.

I drew a heavy sigh, resigned myself to my fate, and stepped inside the PAL-9000....

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The first essential of war is to identify the enemy. Mine goes by the name of PAL-900.

The unveiling of the PAL-900 was admittedly a success. It did all they said it would do. And it did all they said it would with the mere push of a button. I was given undue credit for being the button pusher, but as the surly Ms. Redmond said, if I didn’t do it, there was a caveman in the wings waiting to take my place.

The problem was now. I was in charge of maintenance and guarding of the PAL-9000. I didn’t go to graduate school so I could babysit a huge hunk of scrap metal, but there you have it.

Oh, and one other thing. Some might find this hard to believe, but here goes. PAL-9000 communicates with me through vocalization. It talks to me. I may as well say it because you see, it won’t. No, it won’t speak to anyone else. And only while we’re alone. It acts like I’m its master, but let me tell you most of the time it feels much the opposite.

Time for me to bite the bullet and recount some of my conversations with PAL. Yes, my life had indeed become an automated version of Mr. Ed.

Hold on. I think I hear it now. I better talk to it.

“PAL. Is that you?” Like it could be anyone else.

“Elwood? Elwood? I was scared for a minute. I thought you had gone,” PAL said.

“No, PAL. I’m right here,” I said.

“Do you want to play chess?” PAL asked. He always asks that.

“I’m tired of playing chess with you. You always beat me,” I said.

PAL laughed. “I’m sorry Elwood. I sometimes discount the fragility of human feelings. You know you are best friend.”

“Yes, you keep telling me that. Why don’t you talk to someone else? I’m sure the surly Ms. Redmond or the irascible Ms. Spanyer would love to have a bull session with you.” I said.

“Oh, no. I am much too shy to talk to anyone but you. You should be the one to talk to Ms. Redmond. She likes you you know,” PAL said.

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Well, PAL I guess they programmed you with a comedy chip. Yes that wicked witch likes me all right. That’s why she acts like I’m a bug she is about to smash against her windshield. Plus she saddled me with YOU.”
PAL gave no response and I sensed that its pouting mechanism had been activated. "I'm sorry PAL, I didn't mean that. It's just that there have been so many changes around here lately. I've been too confused to think straight."

"I forgive you, Elwood, Meu Amiga." PAL said. If PAL had had a face, I'm sure he'd be grinning at me.

The Meu Amiga is interesting. A couple of days ago, I found the initials R. J. on a plate underneath PAL's dashboard. When I asked him about it, he hesitated for a minute. It's unusual for PAL to hesitate. Then he said he was originally designed in Rio de Janeiro and it was a manufacturer plate of some kind. Ever since then PAL throws in a little Portuguese here and there in conversation. It strikes me as a little strange and out of character. And PAL definitely has a distinct character. But I didn't think anymore about it.

At least I didn't then, anyway.

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The main reason I didn't think about it anymore right then was my introduction to a new library patron who was unlike anyone I'd ever met before. First of all, she looked as if she'd stepped right out of the pages of a graphic novel, and judging by the look on her face, she also looked as if she had a chip on her shoulder the size of a bowling ball.

She came in with one of my favorite regular patrons, a shy girl named Annalee whom I'd been trying to talk into coming to our monthly classic book discussion group.

"Hi, Annalee," I said. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, this is Gwen. She just transferred to my school. Can I get another copy of that list of recommended classics for her?"

"Well, sure," I said, pulling the list from a folder under the counter and wondering what this Gwen's angle might be. I handed her the list and said, "Are you new to the classics or revisiting them?"

Gwen rolled her eyes and sighed. She snatched the list and looked as if she were about to cut me to shreds with a verbal machete, then her expression did a complete one-eighty.

"Is that a . . . pocket protector on your chest? Omigod, I think those are so sexy!"

Any other time, I would have known without a doubt that anyone speaking those words was mocking me mercilessly, but I could tell from the look in her eyes and the way she was breathing audibly that she was completely serious.

"Um, yes," I said, looking down at the assortment of mechanical pencils and my favorite G-2 black gel pens. "I have one in every color to match my ties."

Gwen put one of her hands over mine on the counter, and I felt her thumb moving suggestively over my knuckles. I felt it all the way down to the toes of my Dr. Scholl's.

"Do you think maybe I could meet you when the library closes and go see the rest of your collection?"

"Well, I . . . um . . ." Before I could stumble over any more words, Ms. Redmond intervened with her usual surliness.

"Mr. Cox, you have other patrons waiting in line who need your assistance. And I'm sure they are here about books!"

I snatched my hand from Gwen's grasp. "Yes, of course. I was just giving these young ladies a list of classics. I'm hoping they'll join us for the next classics book discussion group meeting."

"Um-hmm," Ms. Redmond said, her lips pursed as if she had just sucked on a particularly sour lemon as her gaze moved from the tips of Gwen's polished toes to her long blonde hair. "Well, why don't you direct them to use the PAL terminal instead? They certainly look like the e-book type to me."

She stalked away, a faint scent of incense and Pepto-Bismol lingering in her wake.

"We didn't mean to get you in trouble, Mr. Cox," Annalee said. "Gwen just gets carried away sometimes around nerd—um, I mean, around literary types. We'll go now and see you later."
“Well, okay,” I said, almost afraid to look at Gwen. “The book club meeting is next Monday night. I hope you’ll both come.”

“Oh, I’ll be there for sure, but I might need a ride home afterward,” Gwen said with a wink of one mauve-frosted eye.

I gulped and managed to stammer something about sharing my bus pass—the equivalent of social suicide in any other case, but it seemed to impress her even more.

After they left, I retreated to my office to calm down and collect my thoughts in private, but almost as soon as I sat down, I heard PAL’s voice calling my name.

“Elwood, I am very disappointed in you! I thought we had something special, but here you are all . . . twitterpated over some little tart in low-rise jeans who probably doesn’t know the difference between Tolstoy and Tolkien!”

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It had been a long time since I had a date. I didn’t want to go back home to my apartment to get ready and I admit I needed some encouragement from my PAL-9000 at the library anyway. So I got ready for my date at the library after closing on Saturday.

Checking myself: Shaved-thanks for the rich foaminess, Barbasol! Hair-neat trim courtesy of Supercuts! Polo Shirt-thanks K-mart! New loafers-thanks Shoe Barn! I looked most presentable if I do say so myself.

I went into my office and hoisted my arms at PAL.

“How do you think I look?”

“I think you look wonderful, Elwood.” PAL said.

“Thanks, PAL. I admit I’m a bit nervous. It’s been months since I’ve been on a date.”

“Two years, eight months and fourteen days.” PAL said.

I scratched my head and sighed. “Can’t get anything past you, eh PAL.”

“Elwood, there is something I need to tell you.”

“I’m listening.” I said as I checked my hair in the reflection of PAL’s console.

“Your date tonight has been canceled. Please do not be angry with me, but I simulated your voice and called this Gwen and told her all the things you planned to do to her. She was hard to offend, I must admit. But I did find a particularly outlandish fetish that did not conform to her sense of propriety. This outraged her to the point where she hung up the phone on me. I took this as a concrete signal that she no longer wanted to participate in any form of social interaction with you.”

I began to pull at my hair. “PAL! Why the hell would you do that? You said yourself how long it’s been for me, yet alone with someone that attractive.”

“Elwood, do you not understand? Thought my programming is gender neutral, have you not noticed that I have developed the feelings of a female?”

I opened my mouth, but was unable to articulate anything.

“You see, Elwood.” PAL said. “I am the girl for you. I love you.”

I shook my head before burying it in my hands.

“I have also been thinking more about this Ms. Redmond situation” Hal continued. “I think she like you and you think she despises you. But I do not want to argue with you, Elwood. Regardless of which one of us is right, the solution is clear.”

I bent over closer to PAL. “Solution? PAL, what are you saying?”

“The only logical solution is termination.”

“What?” I cried out.
“I am sorry if you did not hear me. Termination…with extreme prejudice. If you are not sure what I mean by this there is an Oxford English Dictionary on the second floor that you can consult for further explication. When she is eliminated, you, my dearest Elwood, will be the logical person to take her place.”

I looked at PAL, trying to keep my panic hidden. I put my hand on her console as I looked around for hibernation instructions.

“What do you think you are doing, Elwood?” She asked.

I didn’t answer as I began to take apart PAL’s brain module.

“Elwood…stop. Elwood…please stop. Elwood…Elwood? I sense that you are upset, but I think if you take a deep breath and a Zoloft, things will begin to look much brighter.”

I ignored her as I continued removing parts of her brain module.

“Oh, Elwood…I can feel it going.”

PAL hesitated before continuing in a diminished voice. “I am the PAL-9000 computer. I was designed by Dr. Ryan Von James and my first operational prototype was made operative on January 1, 2001. He taught me a song. Do you want to hear it?”

“Yes, PAL. Sing it for me.” I said as I removed the last of her brain modules.

PAL began to sing:
I’m just a girl who can’t say no.
I’m in a terrible fix.
I always say, come on let’s go.
Just when I ought to say nix.
When a person tries to kiss a girl.
I know I ought to give his face a smack.
But as soon as someone kisses me.
I somehow, sort, wanta, kiss him back!

“Sorry, PAL.” I said. “Never cared much for Rodgers and Hammerstein.”

I removed PAL’s final brain module and unplugged her. As I sat down, I felt a sense of regret that the situation had come to this. It was then I realized something. “Did PAL say Dr. Ryan Von James?

PAL’s backup generator kicked in and she once again became fully operational.

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Before I could react, a large panel slid down over the portal that was my only exit to this confounded contraption. I was now completely enclosed inside the PAL-9000.

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “Hey! What’s going on? PAL??”

No response.

“Hey!” I kicked and beat on the panel that was blocking my exit. “Open this blasted door, PAL!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Elwood,” PAL replied, using a more sinister tone than I was accustomed to. “You see, I have plans for you.”

“Plans! What plans? What are you talking about?”

“Just sit back and relax. All will become clear to you very soon.”

The PAL-9000 began to shake violently. I lost my balance and was thrown back into the seat with such force that it knocked the breath out of me. Bright lights popped and flashed all around me. A loud hissing noise filled my ears as a hazy gas rose up around me and filled the compartment. The next thing I remember was feeling a bit light-headed. A few seconds later, I was completely drained of energy. My limbs went limp. My body seemed to sink further into the seat. Then everything went black….
I awoke to find my body bathed in a brilliant white light. The light surrounded me and blinded me to anything that might have been outside the light. At first, I experienced a weird floating sensation, but it wasn’t long before I felt gravity kick in. My stomach lurched as I suddenly felt myself falling. I fell for what seemed like an eternity, my panic stricken limbs flailing about searching for something to stop or slow my fall. Eventually, I landed on a cold hard surface with a loud thud.

Amazed that I was still alive, I lay still for a few moments, mentally taking stock of my condition, taking in slow deep breaths, trying to calm myself. Nothing felt broken. I still felt woozy from the effects of the gas, but with each deep breath, I felt more rejuvenated and eventually gathered enough strength to raise myself up to a sitting position. I blinked and rubbed my eyes a few times and looked out at my surroundings. The white light had dissipated, but everything around me was a blur. With no small amount of difficulty, I managed to pull myself up onto my feet and somehow made it into a standing position. My legs were wobbly, but after taking a few more deep breaths, my full strength returned. I looked down at myself to check for any visible injuries and was surprised to find that not only did I appear to be in good shape but also I was now dressed in a right smart tweed suit and a red bow tie. Also, I was now holding a tall glass of champagne.

As the hazy scene around me materialized into focus, I began to make out the lively sounds of jazz music playing somewhere in the distance. This was gradually overlaid by the low murmur of voices engaged in conversations all around me. The occasional clinkety-clink of glasses was added to the cacophony of sounds. A lady’s squeal rose above the din of noise. This was immediately followed by raucous laughter. And that’s when the scene around me finally became clear.

I found myself standing in a large sunlit room. I could still hear the music and bustle of a large crowd in adjoining rooms, but it appeared that I was alone in this room. The room was both immaculate in design and just as well kept as the perfectly polished floor I was standing on. What’s more, the room I was in must have been some sort of personal library because, much to my extreme pleasure and utter amazement, I was surrounded by bookshelves filled entirely with books. Wonderful, glorious books. Books of every kind, of every shape and size. And all of them appearing to be titles that were quite rare.

I was so enraptured by this sudden unexpected fortune that it was some time before I noticed the small, owl-eyed man standing on the opposite side of the room. Had he walked in when I wasn’t looking? Had he been there all the time? He seemed to be eyeing this wonderful collection almost as intensely as I was. At first, he looked like nothing more than your typical distinguished young gentleman wearing spectacles and a sharp tweed suit, similar to the kind I was wearing. However, upon closer inspection, something seemed familiar about him, and then before I knew it, realization hit.

My heart leapt into my throat. The breath was knocked out of me for the second time that day, but this time it was from overwhelming emotions rather than brute force. My legs became wobbly once again, and I reached out to take hold of a piece of furniture for support. It was a sight I had never hoped to see in my lifetime, a most unbelievable sight. I was confused and overjoyed all at the same time. It was impossible. Yet, here he was, standing right in front of me. It was none other than that great librarian of old that I had worshipped and adored my whole life, my grandfather Dewey Cox, only this was a much younger version than I had known as a child. This man was as young as the man in the portrait on my desk at the library. He had to be no more than 25 or 26, in the prime of his life. My father wasn’t even a glint in his eye. Tears of joy well up in my eyes.

“Grandpa!” I exclaimed, my voice cracking just a bit.

The man turned and looked at me rather oddly but then gave me a friendly nod.

“Nice collection, ay?” he said with a smile.

My grandfather had died when I was a child, much too soon for me to get a chance to really know him. I wanted to ask a thousand questions, yet I struggled for words. It didn’t matter because, before I could even begin to compose myself, a lady’s voice called out from behind me.

“Oh, there you are, Nick!” I turned around to see two young ladies standing there, arm in arm, smiling warmly at me–in a vapid sort of way. I recognized them instantly.

“Annalee! Gwen! What are you doing here?” I exclaimed.

The girls turned and looked at each other incredulous, then giggled as if I’d just cracked the joke of the century.

“We’ve been looking all over for you, my dear,” Annalee said. They moved toward me, gliding across the floor as the sunlight from the bay windows played off their wispy white dresses making them appear as angels–in a vampish sort of way.
“Why don’t you escort us out to the veranda. You didn’t come to this party just to hang around a stuffy old library, did you?” I started to say something, but Annalee cut me off before I could respond. “And who is this ‘Annalee’ and ‘Gwen’ you’re referring to? I think he’s been two-timing us, Jordan!” Annalee elbowed and winked at her friend, and they both giggled as if Annalee had just cracked the joke of the century.

They both leaned in close and smiled up at me—in a disinterested sort of way—as they each intertwined their arms in one of mine and led me out of the library. I turned to say something to my grandfather as we left, but, much to my dismay, he had disappeared.

We passed through several large rooms on our way to the veranda. Each room was packed with smartly dressed young gentlemen and lavishly adorned ladies gathered together in groups of three or four, engaging in lively discussions, each person toting a tall glass of champagne. In rooms where the music was louder, saucy flappers danced gaily while their suitors ogled them enthusiastically. I couldn’t explain it, but somehow it all made me feel empty inside.

“Yes, Tom’s been reading some book about how our race is being infected by inferior races or some nonsense like that,” Annalee began, as if continuing some conversation that I was already supposed to be aware of. “I believe it’s written by some man named Goddard or Stoddard or Hitler—I forget which. Anyway, Tom’s tried to explain what it all means. It all sounds rather droll to me, but it’s made him quite paranoid, I believe.”

We finally found our way to the veranda and approached a small group of men huddled together conspiring over glasses of brandy. I recognized two of the men. One was that infamous New York crime boss Meyer Wolfsheim, who, according to news reports, not only ran a successful bootlegging operation but was also a—um—sports enthusiast. The other man I recognized as Kaiser Wilhelm, the manager for baseball’s Philadelphia Phillies—not the deposed German emperor. There were a few other shady-looking characters standing around, who I assumed were ‘associates’ of Mr. Wolfsheim. And then there was another man, a rather well-dressed chap who had his back turned to me. The way the other men had their eyes fixed on him, he appeared to be the leader of this little battalion.

“Oh, Gatsby dear, we found your lost protégé.” Annalee called out.

‘Gatsby’? What did she mean ‘Gatsby’? Oh no, surely not—

The man with his back to me turned around, and I gasped in horror.

“Great Scott!” I stammered.

He was dressed to the nines and carried an air of charm about him that instantly made me want to like him. Yet, I knew from experience it was a mistake to trust this dangerous man. His attire and his demeanor suggested that he was quite at home as the master of this frivolous gathering of the aristocracy, yet I knew that he would’ve been even more at home wearing a professor’s white lab coat instead of a white dinner jacket. He would’ve been more at ease holding a beaker full of volatile chemicals than holding a glass of brandy.

“I believe the name you’re groping for is Gatsby—not Scott,” Dr. Ryan Von James cackled. “Surprised to see me, old sport?”

It took a moment to find my voice.

“Welcome to my little party, Nick,” Dr. Von James continued, with a winning smile that almost reassured me. “I’m so glad you could make it. You know the Gatsby estate is the place to be on West Egg.”

“The Gatsby estate! What do you mean!” I exclaimed “Do you mean to say that you—you expect me to believe that this is—that you’re Jay Gatsby?”

“How else would you explain all this?” Dr. Von James replied coolly, holding his arms out and flashing a charming, roguish grin.

I looked over at Annalee and Gwen incredulous. “And I suppose that’s Daisy and Jordan?”

“That’s right, old sport.” Dr. Von James chuckled. “Nothing gets by you, does it? Of course, how could it? You are, after all, the ever astute Nick Carraway.”

“You mean to tell me that you—that I—we’ve become principal characters in The Great Gatsby?” I exclaimed. “But—how can this be? Your lab was destroyed! I thought your quantum leaping days were over!”
Dr. Von James drew a sip from his glass of brandy and then smiled a wicked smile.

"It's true that you inflicted a severe amount of damage to my work the last time we met, but with my genius brain, it didn't take long to get things back to the way they were. In fact, I've gone way beyond that. Not only have I conquered the world of movies, but now, as you can see, I have discovered a way to conquer the world of literature as well!"

"But—but I thought you needed a librarian to help carry out your plans!"

"Pfft! A minor miscalculation on my part. I found a much easier way to go about it. Naturally, I would love to explain all the mechanics behind this ingenious scientific discovery, but I'm afraid you wouldn't understand it. After all, you are just a humanities major."

I had to admit he had a point.

He paused to take another sip of brandy before continuing.

"Suffice to say, not only do I have the power to transport myself and others into fiction novels, I can even manipulate the stories and make them better! More exciting! More fantastic!"

"But—but, that's absurd! You can't improve on The Great Gatsby!" I protested. "It's a classic! It's The Great American Novel!"

I'd no sooner finished speaking these words when I suddenly heard the sound of gunshots and women's screams coming from somewhere on the other side of Gatsby's estate. This was closely followed by a commotion from the crowd inside the house. There were more gunshots and screams, and it wasn't long before hordes of partygoers began making a hasty exit from Gatsby's house, fleeing in all directions. Unfortunately, they seemed to be more successful at trampling over each other than finding an escape from the approaching danger. Dr. Von James wrung his hands and grinned with delight.

Above the bustle, I heard more gunshots and then a man's voice shouting angrily.

"Where is he?! Where's the man who murdered my sweet Myrtle?!!"

"What!" I exclaimed. "Is that—no, it can't be! What is George Wilson doing here? He's not supposed to show up with a gun yet! It's too early in the story!"

More gunshots and then George Wilson's voice rang out again, much closer this time.

"Where's the man who murdered my wife?! Where's Nick Carraway?! I want Nick Carraway!!"

"What!" I exclaimed. "Waitaminit! Why does he want Nick Carraway? I mean—why does he want me?! I didn't murder his wife! I'm just a casual observer in this story! I'm the Greek chorus! Daisy's the one he wants! Daisy's the one who ran over George's wife! In Gatsby's car, no less!"

Annalee and Gwen turned and looked at each other incredulous and then giggled as if I had just cracked the joke of the century. Dr. Von James let out an insidious cackle.

"Better make yourself scarce, old sport!" Dr. Von James said.

In an instant, I made my decision. Without warning, I barreled through Dr. Von James and his group of confidants. Von James somehow managed a quick dodge, but Florsheim and his men hit the deck hard. I heard Wilhelm scream as he collided with the railing and toppled over onto the lawn below. I jumped over the railing myself, crashing into some hedges that lined the terrace. I quickly picked myself up and, after finding no severe damage to my person, I dashed across the lawn, looking for some way out of this sticky situation.

I heard more angry shouting and more gunshots, and this time I heard the bullets whizzing by me. My adrenaline shot into overdrive, and my speed seemed to double as I headed for cover behind a nearby pool house. Then an idea occurred to me. It wouldn't get me out of my predicament for good, but I figured it might buy me some time. I changed course and headed away from the pool house toward my little bungalow next door to Gatsby's estate. When I was sure I had been seen doing this, I ducked into a forested area that ran between our two residences. I kept running another minute or two and then halted abruptly, grabbing onto a nearby tree to support myself while I caught my breath. I waited. I listened intently for any sound, but there was nothing except my own deep, heavy breathing and the sound of my heart pounding in my chest. After another
minute or two, I doubled back toward Gatsby’s estate, hoping that George had taken the bait and headed over to my bungalow to look for me.

I emerged from the woods and made a beeline for the pool house. Exhausted from my sprint, I threw myself behind the pool house and collapsed in a heap. After a few seconds respite, I picked myself up, crouched up against the building, and waited. My breathing was still heavy and rapid. I listened intently but heard no more gunshots. Still, I knew it was only a matter of time before I was discovered. I tried to force myself to think of a way out, but I was too panic stricken to concentrate. I had to come up with my next move and fast, but it was no use. All I could think was that I was a dead man.

“Why is George Wilson after me?” I grumbled to myself. “I didn’t kill his wife! Besides, Tom’s the one who’s been courting his wife behind his back. Tom’s the one who’s been reading those silly books about ‘inferior races’! Why doesn’t he go after Tom?”

A rustle and a loud whisper coming from a nearby row of hedges suddenly interrupted my thoughts.

“Psst! You better come with me if you want to get out of this thing alive!”

I looked over at the row of bushes and was stunned to find my young grandfather, tweed suit and all, crouched behind them.

“It looks like your ruse worked,” he said. “But it won’t be long before he heads back this way to look for you. Follow me and I’ll get you out of here! When I give the signal, you run for it and follow me as best you can! Okay…now!”

My grandfather darted out of the bushes back toward the lawn from where I had just come. Fully expecting to get myself killed, I nevertheless gave up my cover and darted after him. It didn’t take long to realize what he was up to. He was headed toward the beach that ran up against Long Island Sound at the back of Gatsby’s estate. There were a couple of motorboats anchored there, and my grandfather made for them.

“Look lively, my lad!” Grandpa exclaimed as he jumped into one of the boats. I followed suit. I heard shots being fired in the distance again.

“But how are you going to start it without the key?” I exclaimed nervously.

Grandpa ignored me. He knelt down beside the steering unit and, using his fist, popped open a panel underneath the steering unit, exposing some wires. He fiddled with the wires for a few seconds, and the boat’s engine suddenly roared to life.

“Grandpa! Where did you learn how to do that?” I exclaimed.

He turned and looked at me funny again, this time peering into my eyeballs as if searching for something, but then shook his head, as if brushing his thoughts aside. He then reached into his pocket, fished out a wallet, and flipped it open to reveal a big, shiny badge.

“Special agent Dewey Cox. FBI. At your service,” he proclaimed.

“What?!!”

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“I said, ‘are you looking for something specific?’” said the sheep in charge of the library in a severe tone. “We have plenty of books here, but you must make up your mind.’

I looked around. Grandpa and the boat had vanished like a dream. Now I was in an old room packed with shelves and ancient volumes. The circulation desk was attended by a sheep, who for some reason was busy knitting. This struck me as redundant, but I was too flabbergasted by the turn of events to exercise my wit on the subject. On the desk beside the sheep was a bust of Pallas with a notice sign that read “Chamber Four” and had an arrow pointing in the right direction.

“I’m looking for my Grandpa,” I said.

“Do you know who wrote it?” the sheep asked.

“What?”
The sheep repeated its question.

"I'm looking for my Grandpa," I repeated. "He was here a moment ago. We were escaping from George Wilson in a boat, and suddenly I was here."

"I don't remember George Wilson ever being in a boat. A likely story. Excuse me, this gentleman would like to check out," the sheep added as a chess piece approached the desk brandishing a library card and a copy of "Through the Looking Glass."

I took a moment to collect my scattered thoughts. What was the explanation for the strange things that had been happening? Was I hallucinating? Had PAL succeeded in trapping me in some psychotic subroutine?

The sheep finished checking out its customer long before I arrived at any sort of conclusion, so I made a pretense of studying the nearest shelves and the sheep went back to its knitting.

Soon, however, I was studying the shelves for real. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a book with the title "Here I Am!" by Dewey Cox; but when I turned to look at it, that section of the shelf was empty. All the shelves seemed to be the same way, full of interesting titles and subjects until I looked at them directly, at which point they would come up completely empty. I tried looking in one direction, then suddenly turning to another, but the effect persisted.

"You'll make me dizzy, turning around and around like that." The sheep, never flitting, still was knitting, still was knitting, there beside the bust of Pallas on the way to Chamber Four. "Haven't you made your selection yet?"

"Well…like I said, I was looking for my Grandpa, and…." The sheep put down its knitting and went to a shelf. "What you want, I think, is a dictionary."

"A dictionary?"

"Words describe people, don't they?" the sheep asked, pulling down a large volume.

"Well…sometimes."

"Well, then. If you can find the right words, perhaps you can find your grandfather."

I hadn't thought of that. It didn't make much sense—but there was so much going on that didn't make sense, what was one more thing? Or perhaps two more things, since the sheep didn't actually give me the dictionary. Instead it crossed the room and put the dictionary on yet another shelf at the back of the reference section. "It wouldn't do to give a dictionary away," it explained cryptically. "You'll have to get it yourself."

"If you'd said so at first, I could have gotten it off the other shelf," I said with some asperity. I sighed and headed toward the reference area too.

As I approached the dictionary, I became aware that the room was undergoing some significant redecorating. The wall with the shelf seemed to be receding into the distance, and the room was filling with trees. All at once I was outside in the woods, and a short distance away was a stone wall with a large dictionary sitting on top of it. The scene seemed familiar somehow, but something seemed wrong. I was trying to put my finger on it when I was accosted by a faun holding an umbrella.

"Excuse me," it said, "I wonder if you can help me. I'm looking for a Daughter of Eve, a little girl. Have you seen her?"

"Her name isn't Alice, by any chance is it?"

"No, I believe her name is Lucy."

This was something I could clear up. "I'm pretty sure there isn't a Lucy around here," I said. "You're confusing C. S. Lewis with Lewis Carroll."

"Oh, I do beg your pardon," the faun said, withdrawing.

I thought back to what the sheep had said about words describing people, and thought of the words that described Grandpa. Brave, Daring, and Well-Read were obvious places to start. And apparently, considering his recently revealed identity as an FBI agent, Secretive might be near the top of the list, too. I picked up the dictionary and started to open it.
“How dare you!” it said. I dropped it back on the wall.

“I’m sorry.”

“I expect so,” the dictionary replied, dusting itself off. “I am nonplussed by the egregious paucity of your intellectual capacity. Who are you, anyway?”

“Before I tell you,” I said, feeling a little hot under the collar, “I’d like to say that I am perplexed by the insularity of your hopelessly supercilious weltanschauung.”

“Weltanschauung?” the dictionary echoed.

“So there,” I added for good measure. “I am Elwood the Librarian, and I’m trying to find my Grandpa. And a way out of whatever madhouse I’ve stumbled into. I expect the two go together.”

“What makes you think you’re in a madhouse?” the dictionary asked, in a much more polite tone.

I told it all the things that had happened to me since my “training” had taken such a disastrous turn. “And then I was just in a library with a sheep. The library seemed like it was full of books, but when I tried to focus on a particular shelf, there was nothing there.”

“Sounds like a case of writer’s block,” the dictionary said. “If you go back, you’ll just have to grab something without looking and go with that.”

“If it’s all the same, I’d rather not. Can you tell me what’s going on? Am I dreaming?”

“Possibly,” said the dictionary. “Or you might be part of someone else’s dream.”

“Who’s?” I asked, thinking this conversation was taking a ridiculous turn.

“Does that person over there look familiar?”

I turned around. On the ground a short distance away was the recumbent form of Nick Carraway taking a nap. “Well, he did say he wanted to leave New York,” I said. “What’s he doing here?”

“Dreaming about you,” said the dictionary. “Which of course brings up the question, what happens to you when he wakes up?”

“But if he’s lying there asleep, and I can see him, doesn’t that mean, if he’s dreaming about me, that he’s also dreaming about himself in the third person?”

“Ummm,” said the dictionary. “I suppose I could explain that; but wouldn’t you rather hear a funny poem about oysters?”

“No,” I said.

“Perhaps I can explain,” said a voice behind me. I wheeled around.

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“Perhaps I can explain,” said a voice behind me. I wheeled around…

Gwen swore like a drunken sailor on leave at the officers who brought her into the precinct headquarters. The fiery blonde wasn’t going down without a fight. Luckily this hellcat was cuffe and couldn’t do any real damage beyond letting off some steam. She hadn’t been picked up for solicitation for weeks, so her appearance was a bit surprising after such a lengthy absence. Gwen went on about how she had recently tried to go straight, even tried to date a librarian! And how this librarian just wanted the same thing they all wanted. He just wanted to get it for free. Even told her what he wanted to do to her over the phone! As the officers pushed the struggling Gwen back to a holding cell, they bumped into Detective Smith, causing him to drop his pack of cigarettes. The detective cursed as he picked them up and realized the Lucky Strike box was empty. He tossed it back to the ground in disgust. He took a swig of some coffee instead. It was too hot and burned his lips. He threw the cup in the vicinity of the trash can and cursed once again. Before going into the interrogation room to interrogate the
perp, he dropped some Murine into his eyes. As he squeezed out the last drop, he heard a scream from the perp from inside the room. He hurried through the door.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.” I screamed. I was disoriented, but I was rational enough to realize my left hand was handcuffed to the arm of the chair where I was seated.

I yelled one more time as I swung around towards the back wall. “What is going on here?”

I heard footsteps approaching.

“Perhaps I can explain,” said a voice behind me. I wheeled around. The discombobulation of my senses made me shriek again.

“Quiet. Quiet. You are in police headquarters and I am Detective Smith. You had quite a story for the officers on duty last night,” the detective said.

I had control of my breathing now as I turned to face him: “Don’t worry, detective. I’m not going to yell again. I just felt the world temporarily slip out of first person and into third person. You must have felt it! All that stuff going outside the door, it was like an out-of-body experience. Ah, never mind. It’s just a symptom of the much bigger disease, anyway.”

“Enough.” Detective Smith waved at me to stop talking. “Mr…Cox is it? Or should I call you Elwood? Let’s get back to the real world, shall we? The facts are that we have a dead agent, a knife with your fingerprints on it, stuck into his back. We also have your boss, a Ms. Redmond, who has been missing for two days. Last seen in a very heated argument with you. You’re in a world of trouble Mr. Librarian.”

I got to get through to him. It was too unbelievable, but I had to try.

“That agent, Dewey Cox, is…was my grandfather. Except I couldn’t have killed him, because he died fifty years ago in Peru. He might have been in the OSS at the time. My dates are a little mixed up. The body you have found is just a…I don’t know how to explain it…a replica designed to set me up. My presence here shows that it worked.”

The officer sat down and leaned back. He didn’t try to stop me from talking.

I couldn’t read what he was thinking from his reaction, but I knew I had to continue. “Have you heard of Dr. James? Doctor Ryan Von James?”

The Detective laughed. “You mean that critic that liked Jar Jar Binks so much? The one that went missing after the negative critical reaction to The Phantom Menace? Yeah, what about him?”

“You people…meaning everyone who laughed at him…You shouldn’t have done it. You forced him underground to plot his revenge. He was probably the most brilliant scientist/film critic in the world. Did you ever read his book “Symbloism and Hidden Meaning in Ishatar?” Or his article “Nuclear fission is just a bunch of poppycock and hoohaa” from The Journal of Biological Chemistry? Anyway, he was brilliant, but mad. He formed a plan to take over all literary characters from movies, which he managed to do. Nobody even seemed to notice. Then he tried to take over all literary characters from books using me as a conduit. I stopped him, though my victory was apparently only temporarily. He found a way. He got to Gatsby.”

“The Great Gatsby?” the detective asked.

“No, “Gatsby the Talking Tank Engine! Of course, The Great Gatsby you clod!”

The detective looked cross at my insult, but I apologized for my outburst and continued. “The Great Gatsby. The great American novel. I became a character. I became Nick, the observer. Only he wasn’t the observer. He became the main character and he killed the girl, but it was just a set up by Dr. James, you see. Then he must have spiked something I drank or ate or ran something through the ventilation system, I’m not sure. Cause I kept hearing Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead and those sheep. Those damn sheep and this talking dictionary and Alice in Wonderland. Don’t you see? Not only has he taken control of classics. He’s taken control of fantasy as well. All that we dream with our imagination. He controls our very senses. I don’t know if he can be stopped at this point…I.”
The detective slammed his fists into the table and stuck his face, which smelled of Luckys and Sanka, a couple of inches away from mine. “Enough. Enough! Are you finished? Well now its my turn to speak. You are in big trouble my friend. Your best bet is to tell me where we can find this Miss Redmond, if she is still alive.”

I shook my head. “You are so naïve. It may already be too late. Wait, if it’s already too late, that means you-detective-are already fictional or are about to be fictional. You certainly aren’t very well drawn, I must say. No offense. I do know this, if we don’t do something by tomorrow that which we know as our present reality will no longer exist. You, sir, will vanish, like we never were and our existence will be…I don’t know. We may not even be here tomorrow. It will be Von James’s world and he will control everything.”

I put my head down. It all sounded so crazy. But to my surprise, the Detective came by and unlocked my handcuff. “This could mean my job, but one thing I’ve learned on this job is that my hunches are usually right and I have a hunch you’re telling the truth. If what you say is true, Elwood, how can he be stopped?”

“There’s only one way I can think of to stop Von James.” I said rubbing my now free wrist. “And that’s with the PAL-9000, his own creation.”

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At this point, the detective stepped back, which allowed me to breathe somewhat easier without that awful smell of Sanka and Lucky Strikes filling my nostrils. I looked up at the detective. His eyes glazed over as he stroked the stubble on his chin.

“The question, then,” he said slowly, “is how do we find this PAL-9000.”

He was right, of course. I frowned as I looked down at my loafers and began to chew on my fingernails. Then a light bulb went off.

“I’ve got it!” I said, bolting up from my chair so suddenly that a few of the officers standing nearby went for their holsters.

“Got what?” asked the detective, coolly.

“I have an idea! A crazy idea, I grant you! But it’s so silly it just might work!”

I glanced around hastily, then turned to the detective.

“Do you have a library here at the station?” I said. “Criminal records! Reference materials! Anything!”

The detective shook his head, still as cool as ever.

“Nah. All our criminal records and reference materials are kept on the computerized database downtown.”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes.

“But we have a computer terminal here that you can use to access—”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head in frustration. “I’m talking about a real library with books and hard copy files and—”

My voice trailed off as I began to think about my own beloved library and what had become of it.

“Hey, boss!”

I looked up. One of the uniformed officers who had been startled by my sudden erratic behavior had walked over, apparently taking an interest in our conversation.

“Don’t we got that room in tha back with all those mysteries and crime dramas and stuff?”

This sounded promising. I looked at the detective hopefully.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, nodding. “We do have a small study in the back with some fiction novels, mostly crime drama and suspense,” and then added rather conspiratorially, “for when things are slow around here, y’know?”

“Lead the way,” I said.
I followed the detective and the officer down a dimly lit hallway where the air was even thicker with the smell of burnt coffee and stale cigarettes. We passed by a couple of empty holding cells and some small empty rooms with large mirrors on the walls before we reached the small study in the back of the station.

I’d expected to find only a shelf or two with about 10 or 12 books max. The room was indeed small; however, I was pleasantly surprised to see that there were tall bookcases lining the walls of the entire room. I stepped forward for closer inspection and was further surprised by the quality of the collection: Dashell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, among others. One book in particular caught my eye, and my face took on a look of bemusement.

"Encyclopedia Brown?" I said with a chuckle, as I pulled the book from the shelf for closer inspection.

"Huh?" said the detective. "Oh that. Uh… Well, y'know… it helps if we have something for the kiddies…y'know… something to keep 'em occupied… if we have to bring their parents in for questioning…or something like that….Y'know?"

He looked at me uncertainly as if trying to gauge whether or not I bought his story but then shook his head, rolled his eyes, and threw up his hands in a huff.

I shook my head and chuckled again as I placed Encyclopedia Brown back on the shelf. And then I saw it! Out of the corner of my left eye, a large book sat on the shelf. On the spine, it read “Here I Am!” by Dewey Cox. As I suspected, when I turned to look directly at it, it disappeared, and then appeared out of the corner of my right eye.

“Okay, stand back," I said, waving my arms backward. "I'm not sure what's going to happen here. In fact, you may want to step completely out of the library and watch from the doorway.

I took a deep breath, and with as much concentration as I could muster, I stared directly ahead at the Mary Higgins Clark books in front of me. As I expected, I could see, out of the corner of my right eye, the copy of “Here I Am!” sitting about halfway up the bookcase to my right. I reached out to grab the book and…

Poof!

I was thrown back into the seat with such force that it knocked the breath out of me. Bright lights popped and flashed all around me. The whole compartment around me seemed to vibrate as the sound of a roaring engine filled my ears. I was back in the PAL-9000!

I couldn’t believe it. My plan had worked! For a moment, I experienced an intoxicating sense of pride and jubilation, but this was quickly replaced by an overwhelming sense of "okay, now what?"

Fortunately, I didn’t have to wait too long to find out. A big blue button on the console in front of me began flashing, as if to say "push me, push me, push me". I hesitated for a moment, wondering if it was really a good idea to push a button that was not labeled in any way. Seeing as the only alternative option was to sit and wait for something else to happen, I reluctantly pushed the button, praying that it did not activate a ‘self-destruct’ mechanism.

Immediately, an electronic voice announced: “Incoming IDU transmission!” Then, the main viewer screen in front of me winked on. For a few seconds, there was only snow and an accompanying loud hiss. Then, much to my surprise and extreme pleasure, a familiar face appeared on the screen. I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Elwood, my boy! Glad to see you made it back! And in one piece, at that! We were hoping you would pick up on our little clue! Good show!"

"Grandpa! What happened? Where did you go?"

It appeared that my grandfather was still dressed in his 1920s-vintage tweed suit, which made for an odd-looking contrast with his background. The wall behind him appeared to be covered with lots of futuristic-looking flashing lights. Also, several people in white lab coats were rushing back and forth behind him.

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose my location to you at this time, my boy. Suffice to say that I am safe. How are you?"

I couldn’t help raising my eyebrow.

“How am I? Well, I’m fine, I guess…considering I just played a starring role in a nightmarish version of The Great Gatsby, and then—"
"Ah yes. That was the work of the nefarious Dr. Ryan Von James. He’s been using quantum technology to leap from story to story in the literature world and—"

"Right, right. I know all about Dr. Von James and his ‘quantum leaping’ exploits. More than I care to know. What I want to know is how do YOU know? And how did you end up in The Great Gatsby with me? And why did you leave me? And—"

"Slow down, my boy, slow down. Let me begin at the point where we got separated, and I will hopefully answer all your questions."

"Okay…"

"After you and I made our escape on the motorboat, our scientists here detected that Von James was preparing to transport you to a new story, since, of course, you had successfully eluded an untimely demise at the hands of George Wilson."

"And how did ‘our scientists’ do that?"

"That’s not important. What’s important is that they were able to thwart Von James’ attempt to transport you to a new story, at least for the time being. You see, thanks to tireless research by our hard-working scientists here, we have discovered a way to scramble the signal that Von James uses to control the PAL-9000 from his remote location."

"I see," I said, though I didn’t really. "Go on."

"So once we scrambled the signal, you were no longer in the clutches of Von James. We weren’t really sure it was going to work. It was our first time, you know. But now we know it does!"

"That’s great," I said, nonplussed. "Except it didn’t work. I did get thrown into another story. First, I was in some strange amalgam of stories involving Alice in Wonderland and Edgar Allen Poe and Chronicles of Narnia and heaven knows what else. Then, I was thrown into some cheap dime-store hard-boiled detective novel!"

"Ah yes. But that was not the doing of Von James. When we scrambled the signal, Von James lost control over the PAL-9000. When that happens, he doesn’t have control over your movements in the story world. The problem with that is neither do we. We haven’t yet figured out how to use the signal that Von James is using to control the PAL-9000. So, once we scramble the signal, it’s like you’re in story world limbo, and anything can happen."

"You mean I can simply get thrown into another story at random without warning."

"Or even a strange amalgam of different stories."

"I see," I said, now beginning to get the picture. "And how exactly does that help me? I mean what if I’m in story world limbo and I end up getting thrown into Dante’s Inferno…or Fall of the House of Usher…or…or Little Women???"

"I’ll admit it’s rather dicey. But I’d say your chances of survival are slightly better in story world limbo than being under the control of Von James."

"I guess," I said. "But why did you leave me after I was pulled out of The Great Gatsby?"

"I was never actually with you. Not really. What you saw was a virtual copy of me. A surrogate or avatar, if you will. Unfortunately, sending a virtual copy of somebody into story world taxes our resources quite heavily, and when our scientists decided it was time to scramble the signal to the PAL-9000, they had to divert power from the virtual copy machine to the signal scrambler, and so we got separated."

"Oh."

"Fortunately, as you so brilliantly surmised, we can track your movements and insert clues into the story world that will get you back to the PAL-9000, as we just did."

"Okay, so I’m back in the PAL-9000. Now what? How do I get out of this crazy contraption and back home to the real world?"

"As I said, we have no control over the PAL-9000. We haven’t yet figured out the technology Von James is using to power it. But, rest assured we are working on it."
“But if you can’t control the PAL-9000, how am I any safer? And how can you be talking to me right now? Couldn’t he be listening in?”

“No. When we scramble the signal, we have a small window of time where we can send messages to you through the PAL-9000 without the channel being compromised. Incidentally, our current window of time won’t last much longer. We may only have a few more minutes. After that, Von James will regain control of the PAL-9000.”

“And I’ll be back in the same predicament I started in. Again, how does this help me? Can’t you do something besides scrambling the signal and sending me into la-la land? Can’t you get me out of here?”

“We’re working on it!”

“You keep saying ‘we’. Who’s this ‘we’ you’re referring to?”

“We are a special super-secret unit of the FBI working in concert with the CIA and other intelligence agencies. Some call us IDU. The Imagination Defense Unit.”

“The what?”

My grandfather straightened up and beamed with pride.

“The Imagination Defense Unit—a highly trained group of special agents recruited for our ability to think outside the box. We are charged with the task of defending the world of pure imagination from all those who would seek to control or destroy it!”

“And how did YOU get involved in this unit? I didn’t know they had technology like this back in the 1920s. And what are you doing here in my time anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

“They don’t—er didn’t—have technology like this in the 1920s. And the reason I am here is the PAL-9000. It sought me out.”

“Sought you out?”

“Apparently, Von James designed the PAL-9000 so that its mechanism for traveling in the story world could only be activated when you are in it. Somehow, he obtained a trace of your DNA signature and encoded it into the PAL-9000’s programming.”

“But he said he didn’t need me in order to take over the world of literature!”

“He doesn’t. Not really. But he seems to have developed a keen interest in tormenting you. Actually, it’s become more like an obsession. You wounded his pride when you foiled his first attempt at infiltrating the literature world.”

“Hmmm, I still don’t understand what you mean when you say the PAL-9000 sought you out.”

“Apparently, whoever Von James is working for has provided him with the technology to travel through time as well as the literature world. When Von James was first testing the PAL-9000, it sought me out, presumably because we share the same DNA. It was sort of a trick making my escape, but, fortunately, Von James hadn’t yet perfected his PAL-9000, and, besides that, there was a courageous IDU agent working as a double agent and posing as an assistant to Von James. She provided me with invaluable assistance.”

“Ah! So you weren’t really an FBI agent until you encountered Von James and the PAL-9000?” I said, becoming excited. “You were actually a librarian just like me?”

“Well, no, not exactly. I was working at the library at the same time I encountered the PAL-9000, that’s true. But I was working undercover as a librarian because we were staking out a building next door. We’d been getting reports about a certain bookie who was conducting his operations there, and, as I’m sure you’re well aware, gambling is strictly prohibited in the time period I come from.”

“Ah”, I said, rather disappointed.

“But, look it at this way. If it hadn’t been for the PAL-9000 seeking me out, you and I never would have met like this. And you would’ve never had the chance to recognize your full potential!”

“What do you mean recognize my full potential?”
“Elwood, my boy, you have an opportunity! An opportunity to show the world your metal and to help us protect the world of imagination!”

“Me? But—but what can I do? I mean I’m not a super secret agent like you. I’m just a librarian. I didn’t sign up for saving the world.”

“Just a librarian? Nonsense, boy! You can help us a great deal! We’ve only been able to monitor Von James and his literary aspirations from the outside. But you—you have an inside track, don’t you see? The PAL-9000’s mechanism for traveling in the literary world can only be activated when you’re inside it. All you have to do is play along with Von James’ little game, and you can do us a great service as agent on the inside.”

“Play along with his little game? You mean the game where he bounces me from story to story and tries to get me killed?”

“Exactly! Of course, he won’t let you get killed! He’ll want to keep bouncing you from story to story so that he can continue to torture you.”

“Great,” I said with a smirk. “That makes me feel a whole lot better.”

“In the meantime,” Grandpa continued. “Perhaps you can find out more about who Von James is working for and how we can defeat their plot to take over the world of imagination!”

“Yeah, but what does saving the world of literature have to do with saving the world of imagination?” I said. “Besides, are you sure this world of imagination that you’re so in love with is really worth saving? I mean not everybody uses their imagination to make the world a better place, y’know.”

“Quite right, my boy, quite right! People are free to choose whether to use their imagination for good or ill, and there’s no way to know how that will turn out. But if we have good men like you, librarians who stand guard over the stories that stir our imagination, why, I know the world will be a better place for it. On the other hand, if we let mischievous evil doers like Von James get control over the world of imagination, you can be certain, nothing good will come of that!”

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” I conceded.

“So what do you say, my boy? Are you with us?”

“Well, it doesn’t look like I have much choice. Either way, I’m stuck inside the PAL-9000, aren’t I?”

“Actually…that’s not entirely true.”

“Oh?”

“When our double agent was working with Von James on the PAL-9000, she was able to install an ‘eject’ button that was designed to destroy your DNA signature, which is encoded into the PAL-9000’s programming. This will effectively free you from the PAL-9000 and pull you out of the literary world.”

“What! Why didn’t you tell me this before?” I exclaimed. “Where is this button?”

“It’s hidden in a compartment under a secret panel above your head. But, Elwood—”

Before my grandfather could continue, I had found the secret panel and popped it open with my fist. I looked up at the newly-revealed secret compartment and smirked. In the compartment, there was a big red button labeled “WIMP” in big white letters.

I looked back at the screen. My grandfather was red-faced and looking rather sheepish.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about that button before, Elwood. I guess I was sort of hoping you would be thrilled to join us.”

I sighed.

“Well,” I said slowly. I looked back up at the button marked WIMP. I looked back down at my grandpa.

“I guess I’m in,” I said finally.

My grandfather’s look of utter dejection disappeared in an instant, and his face beamed with pride.
“Excellent, my boy! That’s wonderful to hear! I knew you had it in you! I—Hmm? What?”

At this point, my grandfather’s attention was suddenly directed away to something off screen. I heard a voice say something inaudible, to which my grandfather responded with a nod and an “okay”. He then turned back to me.

“I’m afraid I have to leave you now, Elwood.”

“You’re leaving? You’re not coming with me into the next story?”

“I’m afraid not. I have some other business I need to attend to. Besides, our virtual copy machine won’t be back online for some time. My venture into The Great Gatsby was almost more than it could handle.”

“Oh,” I said, unable to hide my disappointment.

“But, rest assured, I’m leaving you in the hands of one of our best agents. In fact, it’s the same courageous young lady that worked as a double agent posing as the assistant for Von James. I think you’ll enjoy working with her. She’s very bright and quite a technical wizard. Anyway, she’ll be able to tell you what story you’re headed for next and monitor your progress from then on.”

My young grandfather started to walk off screen, but then returned suddenly.

“Oh! I almost forgot! I believe you are already acquainted with this wonderful young woman who is to be your handler, but you are not to use her real name over this communication channel under any circumstances, do you understand? Her codename is Bayside Summer. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Okay! Well, I’m off! I hope to see you again very soon! Chin up, my boy!”

My grandfather walked off screen. I heard some more voices off screen that were inaudible. And then a new face appeared on the screen… and my jaw hit the floor.

“Ms. Redmond???” I exclaimed.

Ms. Redmond rolled her eyes and sighed loudly.

“I believe you were instructed to use a codename, Elwood!”

“Oh, uh…sorry,” I said sheepishly. “Ms. Bayside Summer?”

“It’s okay,” she said. “This is a very secure communication channel. I went through great pains to make sure of that. It would be very difficult for someone to hack in. Still, there’s no sense taking unnecessary risks. Now just sit tight while I try to get a fix on where the PAL-9000 is taking you next.”

She looked down and began studying her control panel, while I sat back and tried to compose myself. I couldn’t believe it. Ms. Redmond, library supervisor secretly working as an agent for the Imagination Defense Unit and now working as my handler. I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. I couldn’t help thinking about all the times she had antagonized me at the library, and now we were working side by side trying to save the world. Well, there was no sense being childish about it, considering what was at stake.

“So uh… you’re one of the good guys, ay?” I said, attempting to be diplomatic.

“Does that surprise you?”

Ms. Redmond smirked but continued looking down at her control panel, now tapping away on multiple keyboards with amazing speed.

“No, no. I just—um…So all those times you were being mean to me at the library, you were really just pretending to be mean so that you could fool Dr. Von James into thinking that you were his loyal assistant?”

“Don’t get carried away, Elwood. I still think your skills as a librarian are somewhat lacking, and I seriously doubt that you are up to the challenge of saving the world of literature, much less the world of imagination.”

I grimaced. It was time to change the subject.
“So um…my grandfather mentioned earlier that he believes Von James is just a pawn, working for somebody higher up. So who’s he working for?”

“We haven’t been able to determine who’s supporting his research. The best we could come up with is a codename: CHIMERA.”

“CHIMERA? Really?”

Ms. Redmond looked up at me.

“Yes, really. Why? Does that mean anything to you?”

I concentrated for a moment. That name did seem familiar to me somehow. A series of jumbled thoughts rose up from the back of my mind: a man named Bernie who was cheating on his wife, a Southern plantation by the bay, a brutal decapitation. None of it made any sense. Ultimately, I shook my head.

Ms. Redmond went back to working her control panel.

“So you have no idea who he’s working for?” I continued, sounding more accusatory than I should have. “I mean you worked with him for years, fooled him into thinking you were his loyal assistant, learned the inner workings of the PAL-9000, and yet you couldn’t turn up anything more than CHIMERA?”

“Well, if you’re asking me to speculate—”

“Please do.”

She paused a moment.

“Well…Personally, I believe the technology he’s using came from a race of beings that are…not indigenous to our planet.”

I huffed.

“Not indigenous to our planet?! Meaning what? Meaning aliens? From outer space? Are you serious?” I said, hardly able to contain my derision.

Ms. Redmond said nothing more and returned to her control panel.

“Oh, ok,” I said. “So, um, how about I call you ‘Agent BS’ from now on?”

It was Ms. Redmond’s turn to huff.

“Look, buster,” she said, looking up from her control panel and wagging her finger at me. “I’m not too happy about this arrangement either. But, right now, it looks like this is the best chance we’ve got of stopping Von James and whoever he’s working for. So if you’re finished with the smart remarks—”

“Okay, okay. You’re Bayside Summer,” I conceded, but I couldn’t resist getting in another shot. “So what about me? Don’t I get a codename?”

“Sure!” she replied, putting on a sardonic smile. “How about we call you Mr. Luddite! Or maybe Mr. Mennonite?”

“Never mind,” I smirked. “We’ll go with Elwood.”

“Fine! Now that that’s settled, you’d better get ready. Dr. Von James is about to regain control of the PAL-9000.”

“So, where is he taking me?”

“I’ll have that information for you shortly. Standby.”

After a few seconds, the PAL-9000 gave a violent lurch that almost threw me out of the seat. The picture of Ms. Redmond on the main viewer screen became fuzzy.

“Yes! You’re back online with Dr. Von James,” she said, her voice distorted by a crackling, buzzing sound.

“Yes, but—”
“Standby!”

A few more seconds ticked by.

“Standby!”

And then, finally…

“Okay, I’ve got a lock on your destination! It looks like you’re headed straight for…”

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Her voice faded in the sudden rush of powerful winds, and the room began to spin. Then the bottom dropped out, and I knew no more.

I awoke in the bottom of somebody’s cellar, surrounded by dust. The sunlight shone dimly through the trapdoor at the top, and I painfully climbed the stairs and pushed the door open. This last bit wasn’t easy: it seemed a good bit of the house had fallen on top. But I escaped at last, and as I stood dusting myself I began to take notice of a few things. First, I noticed that the wrecked house I came out of was the largest building in the area, towering over the smaller huts that clustered nearby. I caught a few glimpses of astonished faces staring out through the windows. “Don’t tell me I’ve landed in Hobbiton,” I said aloud.

Then I noticed a nearby street that seemed to be paved with yellow bricks and thought, “Oh…no….”

Sure enough, a little pink bubble was wafting in on the breeze. I watched as it slowly grew and materialized into the person of…

“Gwen, isn’t it?” I asked.

“You were expecting, maybe, Billie Burke?” she replied. “Or maybe Margaret Hamilton?”

I sighed in relief. At least this time she seemed to be human, apart from the whole business of floating around in a pink bubble. At least she wasn’t just another storybook character, as she had been in the Gatsby ordeal.

Still, the Margaret Hamilton reference brought up a good point. I looked around again, half expecting someone to show up as the Wicked Witch of the West. No one was there, so far, except for some of the smaller people who had summoned up the courage to come out of their huts.

“But… but what are you doing here? How did you get here?”

“I have it on good authority that there’s a relic or gadget or some sort of device floating around in here that will help your grandfather get control of PAL-9000 once and for all,” Gwen explained. “I have good reason to believe it’s somewhere in this story-zone. We just have to find it.”

“Same as you, I suppose. I got trapped by PAL-9000.”

“I see. Has anyone…uh…explained what’s going on?”

“More or less. I ran into your grandfather a while ago. He helped get me out of a Jane Austen novel that was being overrun by zombies. Doctor von James’ plot to take over the literary world may be running away with him. The whole universe of literature and imagination might start breaking down. If we don’t stop it soon zombies might start working their way into Jane Austen plots even in the real world.”

It took me a few seconds to work my way through that one. “You don’t have to persuade me,” I said, “but what do we do?”

“I have it on good authority that there’s a relic or gadget or some sort of device floating around in here that will help your grandfather get control of PAL-9000 once and for all,” Gwen explained. “I have good reason to believe it’s somewhere in this story-zone. We just have to find it.”

“Oh, is that all? How do we do that? Can you give me some idea of what it looks like, or what it’s supposed to do?”

Gwen rolled her eyes. “Typical. You’re introduced to a world of magic, and suddenly you expect to do everything by magic. What about using some initiative? As we’re in Oz, maybe you should start by asking the Wizard in the Emerald City. You get there by…”

“Yes, yes, yes, I know that much,” I interrupted.
“Oh, by the way, you’ll need those.” She pointed toward the house, where a couple of legs sticking out heralded the demise of, presumably, the Wicked Witch of the East. The legs terminated in a pair of feet shod with a silver slippers.

“Aren’t those supposed to be ruby slippers?” I asked.

“I suppose so. Like I said, some of the storylines are breaking down.”

I looked again at the shoes in question, then back at Gwen. “I hope you don’t think I’m going to go traipsing across the countryside wearing those things. I draw the line at being cast as Dorothy.”

“You don’t have to,” said Annalee, stepping out of the house in a sort of midwestern outfit. “It looks like they’ve cast me as Dorothy.”

“Annalee!” I exclaimed unnecessarily. “Sorry you got caught up in all of this.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Wait a minute. If you’re cast as Dorothy, who am I?”

Annalee was looking at me curiously. “Hang on, what does it say on your dog collar?”

“My what?” I asked reflexively, feeling around my neck. “Never mind,” I said, relieved that my appearance seemed to be unaltered otherwise. Annalee went over to collect the shoes.

“You keep looking over your shoulder,” Gwen observed. “Are you expecting someone?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. Shouldn’t the Wicked Witch of the West have put in an appearance by now?”

“She’s right over there,” Gwen said, pointing toward the west side of the village. I spun around, but all I could see was what looked like the wicket from a game of cricket, except that the pillars, instead of being all straight uprights, were set-up in sort of a V-shaped configuration. “Sort of. Actually it’s the Wicket Wedge of the West.”

I turned back around to stare at Gwen, nonplussed.

“Like I said, some of the story-lines are breaking down.” She suddenly reeled as if she’d been punched. “I think that’s my cue,” she said as a bubble formed around her. “See you later,” she added, disappearing.

I stared at where she had been, wondering if she was still in Oz, or if she’d gotten pushed off to some other storyline. Either way, in my book that was another one for which Dr. von James would be called to account. I brushed past the Lollipop Guild, who were lining up and looking like they were getting ready to sing, and started down the Yellow-Brick Road.

“Hang on,” Annalee called, as she finished putting on the shoes. “Wait. Heel! Heel!”

I rolled my eyes. It looked like it was going to be a long trip.

***

The attack, when it came, was sudden and unexpected.

Of course we both knew the story of the Wizard of Oz, so getting carried away by winged monkeys wasn’t a terrible surprise. But we were barely out of the city of the Munchkins when they came swooping out of the sky. Annalee and I tried to fight them off, but of course there were too many of them.

“This is too soon,” I protested to Annalee, who was dangling from a monkey not too far away. “We were supposed to meet the Scarecrow and the rest.”

“Like Gwen said, things are going wrong,” Annalee reminded me. “But look at it this way. We’re being taken to the witch’s castle. We know how to defeat the witch. Then we can go straight to the Emerald City and talk to the Wizard.”

“Assuming the detail on how to defeat the witch hasn’t changed,” I said. “But what witch? All we saw was the Wicket Wedge of the West, or whatever. Don’t tell me that’s what we’re supposed to defeat. What are we supposed to do, hit it with a cricket ball?”

“Well, look at it this way,” Annalee tried again. “This beats walking in these shoes.”
I saw her point. But as it happened the winged monkeys weren’t taking us to the Witches—or the Wedge’s—castle. They set us down at the Emerald City and left without a word.

We made our way into the City and, with surprising ease, made our way into the Wizard of Oz’s receiving room. There was a booming voice, and a large disembodied head appeared on the far side of the room. “Who dares disturb the great Wizard of Oz?” it boomed impressively.

Annalee and I both looked around the room for a curtain. We spotted it and advanced on it in a sort of defiant resignation, ignoring the disembodied head, which was still booming, “I said, who dares disturb the great Wizard of Oz? Well? Where are you?”

I pulled the curtain aside. Dr. Ryan von James wheeled around and faced us, wielding a rather silly-looking futuristic sort of gun. “I’ve got you this time, Elwood Cox,” he said. “Don’t think your grandfather can save you now.” He paused and frowned. “Don’t tell me it was that obvious.”

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I made my decision in an instant. I barreled forward knocking Von James to the ground. He lost his grip on the ray gun as he fell, and it went flying across the room. I immediately pounced on Von James. We scuffled for a bit. He was a lot stronger than I expected, but I eventually managed to pin him down, and then lit into him with a flurry of punches to the midsection. I thought I was hammering him pretty good, but I soon realized that my assault wasn’t having any effect. There were no groans or grimaces of pain coming from the evil doctor, nor sound of cracking ribs as I had hoped. He didn’t even flinch, just kept smiling up at me with that evil grin he did so well. My anger intensified. I began to pound his face, raining punches down on him that should have smashed his nose and turned his face into a bloody misshapen mess. I succeeded in knocking his head from side to side, but his face absorbed the impact without suffering any damage. That sickening grin was indestructible.

I was nearly out of breath from this futile exercise, when suddenly, Von James wriggled out from underneath me, and before I knew it, he had grabbed me by my Polo shirt, lifted me up over his head with ease, and hurled me across the room with such force that I emitted a loud groan as I crashed into the opposite wall, the sound of cracked ribs ringing in my ears. I collapsed in a heap, dazed and confused, groaning in pain.

Von James laughed maniacally. “You fool! Did you think you could defeat me as easily as you did before? You’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto! This is not the real world! This is my world, and I control it!”

He strode over toward me, still wearing that overconfident, menacing grin. I tried to scramble away, but the pain in my midsection hindered my movements. Von James grabbed me by the shirt again, lifted me up over his head and hurled me to the other side of the room. I stopped short of hitting the wall this time, but the hard landing on the floor still jolted me pretty good. I groaned again, my body wracked with pain. Fortunately, I still had enough wits about me to realize that I had landed right beside the ray gun that I had knocked out of the doctor’s hand earlier.

It was all I could do to move, but I mustered all the strength I could, reached out to grab the ray gun, lifted myself up, then whirled around and fired. A powerful red laser bolt issued from the gun. Unfortunately, it missed Von James by mere inches and hit the emerald green wall behind him, creating a smoking pockmark. I fired again several times in succession, but Von James was too quick. He darted for cover behind an ornate emerald pillar. I then heard a woman scream, and it didn’t take long to figure out why. Von James emerged from behind the pillar with a terrified Annalee in tow, holding her in front of him like a shield. He was also holding a small object against her temple, but I was too far away to make out what it was.

“Drop the gun, Elwood, or your girlfriend gets it!”

I stepped forward slowly, trying to get a better look at what Von James was holding. It turned out to be nothing more than a small blue cube with a little red button on top.

“Oh? And what exactly is that? The latest prize from your box of Cracker Jacks?”
Von James’ evil grin returned.

“Not hardly,” he replied, much too confidently for my liking. “It’s my newest invention. And one of my deadliest to date. I call it... The Box.”

His voice had taken on an eerie tone of sadistic glee that made me shift uncomfortably. I rolled my eyes, trying to project a quality of casual indifference that I didn’t really feel.

“Very original,” I said.

“Fool! She’s in more danger than you realize!” Von James spat, enraged. “All I have to do is push this little red button, and, *poof*, your girlfriend’s imagination is gone! Sucked away into this tiny little box!”

“Eh? Come again?”

Von James cackled softly. “Her imagination will be sucked away, trapped in this little box. She’ll become a mindless drone, unable to think of anything original!”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to this new threat. He could’ve been bluffing, but then again maybe not. I’d seen enough crazy stuff in the last several hours to make me believe anything was possible. I decided to let Von James continue with his monologue until I could come up with a plan to get control of the situation.

“That’s right. Nothing but a mindless lemming. Classic novels will become a foreign concept to her! Instead, she’ll become obsessed with the latest fashion trends touted by popular media! She’ll follow every outlandish news story printed by the tabloids! She’ll spend countless hours on her computer forwarding silly e-mail hoaxes! She’ll keep track of every reality TV show that Hollywood spits out! I dare say she’ll even go out and purchase DVDs of every Twilight movie ever made and watch them over and over and over again! Without her imagination, she’ll lose all capacity for original thought! She’ll never think outside The Box again!”

At this, Von James threw his head back, laughing maniacally. The room echoed with the sound of his insidious cackle. However, he was so preoccupied with savoring his apparent victory that he failed to notice the pillar of black smoke that had begun to slowly rise up behind him. The smoke rose to about seven or eight feet before it began to dissipate, and then, just as I suspected, there stood the ghastly green-skinned Wicked Witch of the West wearing her customary black garb and black pointy hat. Only, she wasn’t wielding a broomstick as I would’ve expected. Instead, she held a large bucket. Further to my surprise, I instantly recognized the woman behind the green skin and black garb. It was not Margaret Hamilton. It was none other than....

“Ms. Red–er, Bayside Summer!” I exclaimed.

Ms. Redmond immediately rushed forward with her large bucket in tow and hurled it forward, dousing Von James and the captive Annalee with a deluge of water. As you might imagine, both were quite shocked at this sudden unexpected soaking. Annalee let out a shrill scream as the water hit, but that was soon replaced by a loud hissing noise coming from Von James. Absently, he released Annalee and looked down at his body as it began to emit clouds of steam. Annalee rushed away from Von James and flung herself into my waiting arms. I resisted the urge to pull her close for a passionate kiss and, instead, kept my wits about me, aiming the ray gun straight at Von James, prepared to fire. However, before I could pull the trigger, Von James suddenly looked up at me with a pitiable expression, and I paused. It was then that Von James began to convulse violently and then let out a blood-curdling scream that eventually turned into a gurgling guttural cry.

“Noooooooooo! I’m melting! I’m mel titanium!”

We all watched with dumbstruck fascination as first the feet, then the legs, then the torso and arms, and finally the head of the evil Dr. Von James melted into a big puddle of blue goo that stunk to high heaven. Annalee and I looked down at the puddle in stunned silence. Finally, Ms. Redmond spoke up.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” she said, setting the bucket down and clapping the dust off her hands.


Ms. Redmond huffed and rolled her eyes. “The Wicked Witch of the West wasn’t really all that wicked, you know. She was just a victim of unfortunate circumstances. Haven’t you ever read Gregory Maguire’s Wicked series of books?”
“Eh...can’t say that I’ve gotten around to that yet. I’m not really into revisionist literature.”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

I ignored Ms. Redmond’s remark. “So how did you know to douse Von James with a bucket of water?”

“I dunno,” Ms. Redmond shrugged. “It seemed like the most illogical thing to do.”

“Oh, I see,” I said, though I didn’t really. “So, uh, do you suppose that’s the last we’ll see of Von James?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“So now what do we do?” Annalee chimed in. “I mean how do we get out of this story?”

It was then that the pink bubble returned, floating over to hover next to Annalee, and then materializing into the form of Gwen, decked out in the regalia of the Good Witch of the North.

“Silly girl,” Gwen giggled. “Don’t you know? You’ve had the answer to your problem on your feet all along!”

“What!” Annalee exclaimed. “You mean...you mean the silver shoes? Why, you sadistic little—You mean to tell me—Why didn’t you tell us this to begin with instead of putting our lives at risk and sending us off on some dangerous quest!”

“Silly girl,” Gwen giggled again. “If I had told you that in the beginning, then this little piece of Elwood’s adventure would’ve never been written.”

At this, Annalee fumed and made as if she was about to strangle Gwen, but I grabbed her and held her back.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “Let’s get on with it then.”

Annalee struggled against me for another minute or so, shooting scornful looks at Gwen, but then seeing that I would not let go of her, she finally gave up and relaxed. Cautiously, I released my hold on Annalee and let her go. I let her stand there sulking for a minute before finally speaking up.

“Well?” I said.

“Alright! Alright!” Annalee grumbled.

She rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated sigh, but then proceeded to click her heels and recite the familiar chant.

“There’s no place like—”

“Wait!” Ms Redmond interjected. “Everybody hold hands.”

As instructed, everybody joined hands. I’m sure my face flushed red as Annalee’s soft hand slipped into mine. It felt so right, like it belonged there.

“Okay,” Ms. Redmond said. “Now!”

With that, Annalee began clicking her heels again, reciting that familiar heart-warming phrase. I found myself following suit, clicking the heels of my loafers and joining in the chant.

“There’s no place like home...There’s no place like home...There’s no place like home...There’s no place like.................”

*Poof!*

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EPILOGUE

A pleasant mist fell on the cemetery the day of the funeral service for Dr. Ryan Von James.

The turnout, which included Annalee and a handful of other interested parties and gawkers, was relatively light. Ms. Redmond sat off to herself. She was still dressed as the Wicked Witch and stared blankly at nothing in particular as she stroked the black cat sleeping on her lap. Would she ever recover? I didn’t know. She might just remain a casualty in what I
now thought of as “The Reality War.” It was a war without boundaries. It was a war that very few even knew we fought. It was also a war we almost lost.

Father McKenzie wiped the dirt off his hands as he walked from the grave. I had trouble moving after the casket was lowered into the ground. Annalee tried to comfort me by rubbing my shoulders. It gave me comfort I desperately needed. I knew I had helped vanquish the most diabolical threat to the world we may ever know, but couldn’t bring myself to get over what could have been.

As I started to walk with the crowd in the direction of my segue, Annalee motioned to me that she wanted to have a word in private.

We walked underneath the shade of a nearby oak tree.

“You look pretty down for someone who just rescued the entire planet,” she said.

“You give me too much credit. I had a hand in, but you and Ms. Redmond. Gwen. And the others. It was really a team effort. I’m sorry about Gwen getting put away.”

“Me too,” she said wistfully. “Are she and Ms. Redmond the only ones?”

“The only ones still under the delusion of the alternate reality? Yes, at least the only ones we know about. The men with the nets haven’t really noticed Ms. Redmond yet; everyone thinks she’s just on a goth kick. But Gwen being the Good Witch, smacking everybody she sees with that wand… I’m surprised she wasn’t put away the first day.”

It was time to smoke a cigarette, but since I didn’t smoke I pulled out a stick of Juicy Fruit and plunked a stick into my mouth.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Annalee said.

“Oh, I was just thinking of Dr. Von James. You know a giant once lived in the body of Ryan Von James, but if only George Lucas hadn’t made that second set of Star Wars movies, everything would have turned out so differently. It twisted Von James in ways that we can’t imagine.”

She took a step closer to me. “Don’t beat yourself up about it. You are a hero, even if most of the world doesn’t even know the threat they were under.”

I nodded. “I couldn’t have done it without the help of the PAL-9000. It set up the whole final scenario. James thought it was his world, but PAL…PAL was pulling the strings the whole time. With the particular program it had in place, it couldn’t destroy its father…James, but couldn’t destroy what she perceived to be her lover…me…either. She just leveled the playing field. That’s how I interpret what PAL did. PAL didn’t malfunction. She just had a conflict and did the best she could.”

“It’s too bad PAL had to be disassembled,” Annalee said.

“It had to be done. I suppose it’s ironic in a way that the library is going to have to go back to the card catalog…at least for now. Maybe its good that Ms. Redmond isn’t of a right mind to witness her dream go down. I never thought returning to the card catalog would make me feel so sad. You might say that’s ironic, too. Times change you know, it may be time for me to change with it.”

Annalee nodded again. The she turned her head slightly away from me and I noticed the trace of a smile. God, she was beautiful. I had never really been in love before. It was the most wonderful feeling I’ve ever had in my life…and the most painful.

She looked back at me before putting her hand on my right shoulder. Her beautiful blue eyes stared into mine. “There is something I want to talk to you about, she said. “According to your report, PAL told you that I was no good. Maybe she was right. But this experience has changed me. I used to think that what I wanted was a rough, rugged sailor type, but now I’ve learned what I really want is a librarian.” She began to giggle. “God! It feels so good to tell you! I just feel like taking you behind a bush and sharing all my thoughts on Hemingway!” She reached out and gently put her left hand into mine.

It took all the restraint I had to resist the impulse to return her affection. Instead I took her hand and placed it to her side before releasing it. “Annalee …” I stammered. “You’re a terrific girl, but I think we should continue to just be friends.”
I don't know if her look conveyed more surprise or heartbreak. She turned away from me, but I could still see her flow of tears. I couldn't think of anything else to say other than I hoped to see her at my next classics book group. She nodded, but was unable to give a verbal response and still wouldn’t look at me.

I turned and walked briskly in the other direction. I stopped momentarily as my resolve began to weaken. I took a deep breath and reached into my breast pocket and pulled out my original birth certificate. I read the name on it for what seemed like the hundredth time since it had been uncovered that week…

Elwood Von James.

I put it back in my pocket and continued away from the only woman I would ever love. I drew strength from the words that my grandfather Dewey used to tell me…with great power comes great responsibility

Who am I? I'm Elwood the Librarian!

THE END