

FAULT

THE MAN WHO MADE EARTHQUAKES

MAX V. WEISS

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There was a low rumble as the remote control truck ran over the pile of dolls. Kaylee screamed with laughter.

“Daddy’s running over my dolls, mom!”

His wife poked her head out of the kitchen to see what the commotion was about.

“Travis, what message is that sending?”

“It sends the message that no doll is a match for this monster truck. Don’t worry so much, it’s just fun.”

“For who, you or Kaylee?”

“She’s laughing.”

“And tonight I’ll be the one who has to get up when she has a nightmare about it.”

“Oh relax. Here Kaylee, you can drive the truck now.”

He handed the remote control over to his seven-year-old daughter. She rammed the truck into the piano and backed it into the stereo speaker. Then she drove it into a pile of doll clothes in the corner of the room. These quickly wrapped themselves around the wheel and the truck stopped. Travis took the remote control from Kaylee.

“No honey, you can’t keep driving once the wheel gets jammed up like that. You’ll break it.”

He picked up the truck and tried to unwrap the clothes from the wheel. It was wound up tight. Kaylee watched him impatiently.

“Daddy, aren’t you going to get your tools and fix it?”

“Ok sweety, let’s do that.”

She followed him downstairs to his workshop, a small room that doubled as the laundry room. Some tools were hanging on a pegboard; others were arranged carefully in his toolbox. Travis fished a long nose pliers from his toolbox and started working the cloth out from the wheel well. The cloth started to rip a little, but he was finally making progress. Cynthia called down that dinner was ready. Travis gave his daughter a little nudge toward the stairs.

“You go on up or mommy will be angry.”

“What about you?”

“I’m almost done, I’ll be up in a second.”

Cynthia yelled down again and Kaylee scooted up the stairs while Travis continued pulling bits of torn cloth from the truck axle. When he finished that he turned on the truck but the wheel still wasn’t turning properly. He got out a screw driver and took the truck apart, careful to lay out each piece so he would know how to re-assemble it. He removed the axle and saw that the drive gear and been ground down. He would have to replace it somehow. He looked around his workbench, then the shelves above, hoping to find some small plastic wheel or gear he could use. Nothing. Instead he used a small rubber band as a sort of drive belt. This took a while since he had to get the tension just right so it wouldn’t slip, but not so tight that the band would break.

Occasionally he would hear Cynthia calling down for him, but this came less and less frequently until she finally left him alone. Time started flowing by, as it always did when he really got into a project like this. There was nothing more enjoyable than diving head first into solving some problem or puzzle. It was one of the things that had drawn him to become a lawyer. The practice of law was ninety-nine percent drudgery, but there was that one percent when he really got deep into a legal issue or research project, or drafting a complex legal brief. Time would stop completely and simultaneously fly by. It was this deep immersion in his work that he enjoyed. One percent of the time.

Travis tested his rubber band drive-belt. It wasn’t as good as the gear, but it would have to do for now. He carefully reassembled the truck, then drove it around his small work room, navigating around the laundry basket. His wife walked in and watched him for a moment, then sighed.

“Is this what you’re doing all this time, playing with that damned toy?”

“I fixed it, Cynthia.”

“Hooray for you. I fixed dinner, and yours is cold. Enjoy.”

She started to walk out but Travis picked up the truck and followed after her.

“Cynthia, I fixed it so Kaylee could play some more.”

Cynthia stopped on the stairs and turned to look down at him.

“Kaylee is asleep. Do you have any idea how long you've been down here goofing around? I'm going to sleep. Your food's on the table.”

She went up to the second floor while Travis carefully placed the truck on top of the stack of dolls in the living room. He sat down at the dining room table and ate cold spaghetti. He got up and searched the fridge for a beer to wash it down with. There was none. He found an old bottle of red wine in the fridge door, but it tasted like vinegar and he dumped it down the drain. Travis wandered upstairs, careful not to wake Kaylee or Cynthia. He brushed his teeth, washed his face, and got into bed. When his eyes adjusted to the dark he realized Cynthia wasn't there. She was sleeping in Cynthia's room again. This was the third night this week. It was passive-aggressive bullshit as far as he was concerned. Like he's such a loser she can't even bear to sleep in the same bed with him. It was hard enough for him to fall asleep lately, and knowing she was still pissed off at him just made it harder. His mind worried over what he might have done differently to avoid this, or what he could or should have said. He imagined a million different scenarios. In some he came out the victor. In some he didn't. None of it mattered. All it accomplished was preventing him from falling asleep.

Travis watched the clock. Time stood still again, but not in a good way. He was exhausted, but sleep would come only in fits and starts. Fragments of strange dreams, punctuated by uneasy wakefulness and repeated glances at the clock. This went on till morning. Soon it was late enough to get up, shower, and start his day, even though he felt like he'd never finished the last one. It had been this way for a while, and the lack of sleep was starting to take its toll.

Travis sat on the train platform, his heavy black bag full of files on the bench beside him. An old woman came down the platform and was already eyeing the spot where his bag sat. He avoided eye contact, but moved the bag to his lap, where it felt heavy and cut off the circulation in his legs. He considered placing it on the ground, but there was always a vague scent of pee on the platform and odd stains beneath the bench. He tried holding the bag up off his legs but could only do so briefly before setting it back down. The old woman looked at the huge bag.

“Going on vacation?”

“I wish. These are medical records.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“Lawyer.”

“Oh. I don’t trust lawyers.”

“We don’t trust you either.”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding.”

The train arrived and he noticed how everyone slowly walked along in the direction of the train until it stopped. Why not just stand still and wait? What was the purpose of walking slowly along with the train like a bunch of zombies?

Travis found two empty seats and set the heavy bag beside him, but at the next station the train filled up and he again had to transfer the bag to his lap. He reviewed the records for the Felsano case, a shoulder and neck injury.

“Patient arrives on time in no apparent distress, accompanied by his wife.”

Travis chuckled to himself. Of course he was accompanied by that harpy. She kept him on such a short leash it’s no wonder his neck hurt. Travis read on.

“He relates a history of having been injured at work when he fell from a ladder onto the pavement, impacting his left side. He complains now of pain in his left shoulder that occasionally radiates down the arm.”

Bingo! They had actually given the doctor a useful history of the accident. More importantly, the doctor had actually gotten it down right. Frequently the biggest problem with any case was the complete lack of communication between the client and his doctor. Sometimes the client was too much of a tough guy to admit he was in pain. Then the client expects Travis to fix all his problems, to reach back in time and undo all the mistakes. That seemed to be what people in general wanted. Someone to come along and undo all the mistakes they had made. Wipe the board clean. Whole religions were based on the promise that they could clean that board spotless. Only it never works. You look at the board and you still see all the wrong marks, the scribbles and scratch outs. Wipe it clean and five minutes later there it is staring you right back in the face.

The train jolted to a halt and Travis looked up. They were between stations. Outside he saw cars stuck on the highway in the early rush hour traffic. There was an announcement over the crappy sound system. It came out as one breathless monotone.

“Ladies and Gentlemen I’m sorry but we will be waiting here for a minute while we await a signal change up ahead due to a medical emergency on a train ahead of us again I apologize for the inconvenience and we should be moving shortly.”

The man sitting next to Travis asked, “What did they say?”

“Medical emergency. Probably some homeless guy tossed his cookies and they’re hustling him off the train.”

“Some emergency.”

“Sometimes it’s some poor sap who’s reached his limit and dives in front of the train.”

“I don’t think that’s anything to joke about.”

Travis leaned back and closed his eyes, hoping to avoid further conversation. He was just starting to dream when the train jolted him awake. The train jerked along and he tried without success to fall back to sleep. It had been a fleeting taste of the rest he so badly needed, but that continued to elude him day after day.

He got off at his station and schlepped the heavy bag 6 blocks to his office. When he finally set the bag down his back hurt. He knew from reading so many of his client's medical records which disc it probably was. L4-L5. Maybe L5-S1. What difference did it make, pain was pain. He popped a couple Ibuprofens and wandered off to the kitchen where he microwaved some day old coffee. Travis braced himself for the drudgery that awaited.

Mrs. Felsano was wearing a bright green dress and ultra pink lipstick that gave her mouth a plastic Mrs. Potatohead look. When she talked he noticed the ultra pink lipstick was all over her whitened teeth. Her thick black eyeliner also seemed to be traveling to parts of her face it was never intended to visit. Mr. Felsano sat slumped in his chair listening, as though he were watching TV. He occasionally rubbed his shoulder, or nodded when Mrs. Felsano talked. He looked defeated. The only status he had came from the money he used to bring home. Now that he was injured and off work, he was nothing.

Mrs. Felsano tapped a frighteningly long pink finger nail on a book in her lap.

“It says in here that we’re supposed to be getting 2/3 of his wage every week. Tax free. So far we’ve gotten nothing. I want an explanation as to what you have been doing Mr. Adler to correct this problem. We cannot live on nothing. We have bills to pay.”

Travis opened his mouth to talk but before any sound could come out Mrs. Felsano was tapping her finger and talking again.

“It says this is our right. Our right. And there are bills coming to the house.”

“Have you sent me copies of the bills?”

“Yes, we faxed them to your secretary Liz last week. You should know that. Doesn’t she review these things with you? Are you paying any attention at all to our case, or are you going to let us starve to death while you play golf or whatever it is you’ve been doing.”

“I don’t play golf.”

“That’s not the point.”

“No it isn’t.”

Travis stood up, hoping it would add authority to what he was about to say. But before he could start talking again, before Mrs. Felsano could even begin tapping and talking again, there was a sudden wiggle in the room. An odd vibration. It felt as though the whole 20 story building had turned to rubber and was jiggling a little here and there. At first Travis thought his legs were giving out, or that he was going to faint. But he quickly realized it was an earth tremor. It only lasted half a minute, but to be in the room with these two that long without anyone talking added to the oddness of the moment. Mrs. Felsano looked up at him as though he'd caused the tremor by standing up. He forgot what he'd intended to say, and instead could only manage a weak smile, followed by, "earth tremor."

"Yes," said Mrs. Felsano impatiently, "I know what that is. Is this building safe? It felt like the whole thing was about to collapse. Do you people even have insurance?"

"Um, yes, I'm sure we do. Although it's kind of a moot point if the building collapses and crushes us all. I don't think insurance will be the most significant issue if that happens, do you?"

She was not about to let him have his moment of victory. "My point is," she said, tapping her long fingernail to emphasize her words, "you seem like the type who wouldn't. You seem like you leave things up to chance. You seem, in short, not to know what you're doing, and this is disturbing to me. And my husband." She gestured towards the lump of flesh beside her, and he grunted in agreement. "There will always be tremors, there will always be problems, but some people are prepared and some people are not, and you, Mr. Adler, strike me as the sort who is not."

Realizing that standing up had given him no advantage at all, Travis sat down again. He needed to think. He needed to breath. He needed more coffee. This woman was filled with bile, and any attempt he made to poke holes in her diatribes only managed to open a new gushing torrent of the stuff in his direction. Travis decided to try a different approach.

"Mrs. Felsano," here he attempted a chuckle, but it came out more like a choke, "there are problems for which you can plan and those for which you can't. We have already filed an emergency motion in your husbands case to deal with his

employer's failure to pay the statutorily required benefits, which you so correctly note to be two thirds of his wage.”

“Tax free.” She interjected.

“Yes. Of course. But it will take time for us to get a trial date, and until then we must be patient. We must ride out this little tremor, and hope that it is only just that, and not a colossal earthquake that take the entire State and cast it into the ocean.”

Travis smiled. Mr. Felsano smiled back. Mrs. Felsano did not. She stood up and started out the door, and her husband quickly jumped out of his chair to follow behind her. She stopped in the doorway and spun around for effect, startling her husband who barely avoided crashing into her.

“Mr. Adler, I hope you're better at the law than you are at metaphor. If you were one of my students you'd get a D minus. I want to know when you get a hearing date and I will be present on that day to hear what the judge has to say about all this. And to hear what you have to say to him. I hope it will be more persuasive than what I've heard today.”

With that she left. Her husband gave Travis a doleful look, then trailed off behind her out of the office. Travis walked back to the kitchen. Someone had made a fresh pot of coffee, but all that remained was a thin layer slowly burning on the bottom of the pot. He turned off the coffee maker, set the burnt pot in the sink, and rummaged around the cabinets for some tea. There was only herbal tea, and what he desperately needed was caffeine. Actually, what he needed more than that was sleep, but that wasn't an option right now. He wandered back to his secretary's desk. She was on the phone. He waited for her to finish, playing with a snow globe while he waited. He turned it this way and that, getting lost in the snow, until he accidentally dropped it onto the desk. It was plastic and didn't break, but his secretary shot him an annoyed look. She was still talking on the phone. Travis walked back to his office and sat down, leaning back in the chair. His brain felt like heavy mud. He leaned farther back and took a deep breath. He thought he could still feel the building moving, just a little bit, swaying ever so slightly back and forth. Just as he was about to drift off, he was startled by his secretary's voice.

“Did you want something Travis?”

“Ah, Liz. Good. Yes. Um, did we get some bills from Mrs. Felsano?”

“She faxed them to me 3 times, then emailed me asking me if I got them, which I replied to, but apparently that wasn't good enough because then she called just to make extra doubly sure.”

“Yes, she's quite something, isn't she. Did you send them off to the insurance adjuster?”

“Yes, and I followed up to see if they're going to pay them, but they said they hadn't decided yet.”

“Ok, well let's keep this one on the front burner.”

“Right. They're all on the front burner. Anything else Travis?”

“No. Thanks. Just keep that woman away from me if at all possible.”

“Good luck. Travis you look tired, are you ok?”

“Fine. Fine and dandy. Couldn't be better.”

“Uh huh.”

“Feeling great.”

“Ok, I'm convinced already.”

“Liz, you ever have trouble sleeping?”

“Nope. I sleep like a baby.”

“You practically are a baby. What time do you go to sleep?”

“That's a little personal, isn't it?”

“Is it?”

“Yes. About 10. On a work night. Sometimes 11. Maybe later.”

“Hm.”

“How about you?”

“Different times.”

“Well see, that's your problem, you need a routine.”

“Oh, I've got one. It's called insomnia.”

Liz laughed and went back to her cubicle. Travis looked at the clock. It was only 2PM and the day was slowing down to a crawl. He got up and wandered around the office. Everyone looked busy except Murray, and he didn't want to get stuck in conversation with his boss. He went back to his office and started working on a brief. He got the caption and the heading down, then stared at his screen. It was flickering. He hadn't noticed that before. If he looked straight at it he couldn't see

the flicker, but if he turned his head it was there. He got up and went to Andrew the tech guy's office.

"Hey Andrew."

"Hey . . . um, Trevor is it?"

"Travis. Close enough. Look, my screen is flickering."

"That'll happen."

"Can you swing by and take a look at it?"

"Your screen."

"Yeah. And fix it. Or tell me how to fix it."

"Travis, you're an associate, right?"

"Yeah."

"Been here what, a year?"

"Almost two actually."

"Great. See all these energy drinks behind me?"

He gestured to a shelf with superhero action figures, Star Wars figures, and a wide array of energy drinks.

"Impressive."

"Those are from all the associates that know that someday they'll need my help, and I'll be busy helping a partner, and they know that it might help matters if they were on my good side. So they get on my good side."

"Did they give you the action figures too?"

"Those are mine. Anyway, you've given me nothing. And I'm not saying you have to. You don't. But I'm up to my ass in work as it is. Murray, for example, has me working on his daughter's MySpace page."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I were."

"You're like, setting it up for her?"

"No, hacking into it. He wants to see if she's been communicating with a guy Murray doesn't want her to communicate with."

"Interesting."

"You don't know the half of it."

"I think I probably don't want to."

"You don't."

Travis looked back at the shelf of energy drinks.

“Well, I can bring you something tomorrow. All I really need to know is--”

“Go to the desktop, right click, that gets you a menu, hit properties, you’re in display properties, click settings, advanced, choose the monitor tab, change the screen refresh rate to 75, click ok.”

“Got it. I’ll be sure to bring you something.”

“This one’s on the house. If you actually remember all that you deserve it.”

“Thanks Andrew.”

“No problemo, Trevor.”

“Travis.”

“Whatever.”

Travis went back to his office and fixed the refresh rate. The flicker was gone. Actually it wasn’t gone, it was just imperceptible. Travis went back to work on his legal brief, but the phone rang. It was Cynthia.

“Hey Travis, I’m sorry I got so upset last night . . . ”

He braced himself for the inevitable *but*.

“ . . . but I feel like you’ve been drifting away and I just need a little more support from you. I know you’re busy with your job and you just want to wind down at the end of the day but I’m tired too and I need to feel like I’m not the only adult in the house. You know?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Absolutely.”

“And Kaylee needs to know you’re there too, not just entertaining yourself while she watches but actually engaging with her.”

“You’re right. Yes.”

“Sometimes I just feel like a single mother. It’s like you’re not really . . . oh god, speaking of single look what that Chloe is wearing.”

“The neighbor lady?”

“Yes of course the neighbor lady. She has on these short shorts. Isn’t she a little old for that? I mean she’s got a decent figure but she must be thirty something.”

“Cyn, we’re *forty* something.”

“What are you saying.”

“Well we can’t go calling people too old when they’re younger than--”

“Are you saying I look old?”

“Not at all, you were the one saying she was too old.”

“Well it’s not like I’m tramping around in short shorts.”

“You should some time, you’d look good in them.”

“I’m too fat.”

“You aren’t fat at all and you know it. Please don’t fish for compliments.”

“I’m not fishing. Anyway at least now I know you think I’m old.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well I can see you’re busy. Sorry I bothered you at work.”

She hung up. Travis tried to get back to his brief, but his mind was in a million different places, none of them here.

Travis borrowed a wheeled briefcase from another attorney down the hall and dragged a couple huge files with him to the train. He hated dragging these things along behind him down the sidewalk, it was humiliating. He felt like a damned stewardess, or whatever they were called these days. Getting the bulky briefcase down the stairs and through the turnstyle was difficult, and by the time he got to the platform he was sweating. He tried taking his suit jacket off but the train was so crowded even this was difficult. It was a seven block walk from the station to his house, and by the time he got there his suit was completely soaked with sweat. Kaylee was waiting at the door and ran up to grab him around the neck. He winced.

“Please honey, I’ve told you before not to hang from my neck. You’re getting too heavy for that.”

She looked sad. “Sorry daddy.”

His wife glared at him from the dining room. “You don’t have to make her feel bad, she was just happy to see you.”

“Sorry.”

“No you’re not, you do that all the time.”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“Well then stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what, being in pain when she hangs from my neck?”

“See, you’re doing it again.”

“Believe it or not, I have feelings too, and my neck hurts, ok?”

“Don’t make it into a huge guilt trip. You learned that from your mother.”

“Can we leave my mother out of this?”

“Whatever.”

Cynthia retreated to the kitchen. Travis took off his sweaty suit and carried it upstairs. Cynthia called out, “dinner is almost ready so don’t get into some project.”

“I’m just changing out of my suit.” He felt like he was asking permission to change his clothes. He felt like he needed her permission to do anything in this house. He went upstairs and changed. When he came down she’d set plates for her and Kaylee but not him. He looked at the empty space in front of his chair, then at Cynthia. She didn’t make eye contact, just started eating. He looked around the kitchen and filled a plate with food, then took it to the table, feeling as though he should be asking permission to sit and eat. They ate in silence, broken occasionally by Kaylee chattering about this and that. Travis zoned out. He thought about Mr. and Mrs. Felsano. Is this just how marriage is? Does it inevitably spiral down to this dysfunctional dynamic. He thought about his own parents. It was the opposite of his own marriage. His father did whatever he wanted, and his mother silently seethed. Is there always one person in control and one who’s miserable? Or maybe that was the old system. Now both people are miserable. His thoughts were interrupted by Cynthia.

“She asked you a question Travis.”

“I’m sorry, I guess I was daydreaming. What is it Kaylee.”

“If we get a puppy can he sleep on my bed?”

“We aren’t getting a puppy.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m the one who wakes up first in the morning, which means I’m the one that would end up walking it, and I don’t have enough time in the morning as it is.”

“But I want a puppy.”

“I know sweetie. Maybe when you’re older.”

“But I want one now.”

He looked at Cynthia but she sat silent, as though he was the bad one. He tried to catch her eye but she wouldn’t look up.

“You have any thoughts on this, Cyn?”

She stayed silent.

“Can you hear me?”

Nothing.

He got up, cleaned his plate in the sink, and went down to the basement. Kaylee followed him down and held a book out to him. He sat on the big green couch with her and read the book until his voice started to get scratchy.

“Honey, daddy needs to take a break.”

“Nooooo.”

“Sorry sweetheart, my throat is starting to hurt.”

“Because I hanged on your neck?”

“No no, it's just from reading. I'll read you more later.”

“But I want you to read more now.”

Just then Cynthia called down. “Kaylee, it's bedtime, get up here and brush your teeth.”

Cynthia ran upstairs. Travis sat on the couch, waiting for the sounds upstairs to die down before he would go up. He slowly nodded off. When he woke up it was midnight. He went upstairs and got into his empty bed. Travis stared up at the ceiling. In the dark he could see faint orange geometric patterns, moving, evolving, disappearing. He got up and went into the middle room. Cynthia had insisted on buying a three bedroom house, since her plan had always been to have two kids. But after they had Kaylee the topic of having another kid never came up. Travis sometimes wondered why, but decided it was best not to get into it. As with most topics, it was easier just to wonder than to get into a long heated discussion that would answer nothing.

Travis looked out the window. There was a light on in Chloe's house across the street and he could see her silhouetted against the thin white curtain. She was getting undressed. He could see the silhouette taking off its shirt. reaching back to undo the bra. Then a man's silhouette stepped forward and embraced her. They both moved away from the window, and the light went out. Travis continued staring at the dark space where the silhouettes had been. He heard something behind him.

“Travis.”

Travis spun around. “Cy-Cynthia. I didn't . . . what are you doing up.”

“I heard a noise. I guess it was you.”

“Sorry.”

“Why aren't you sleeping?”

“I've been having trouble with that.”

“Well, I'm sorry if I'm stressing you out.”

Travis couldn't tell if this was sincere or bait. Was he supposed to say, oh no, you haven't been stressing me out. What did she want him to say. What avoided the argument. Travis smiled.

“It's ok.”

“What's ok?”

She wasn't going to let him off the hook. He pictured her as a snarling dog, waiting to snap his throat.

“Everything, Cynthia. Everything is ok. Let's go to sleep.”

“So you think I'm the source of your stress. Well you're causing me a lot of stress, Travis.”

He wanted to fall through a hole in the floor. He wanted to be sucked into a black hole and melted into random atoms, mixing with billions of other random atoms in a meaningless stew of matter.

“Cynthia, I can't argue anymore. I don't even know what we're arguing about.”

“Ok Mr. Innocent. I guess it's all me then. All our problems come down to me.”

“I'm not saying that. I'm just tired of conflict. I need some peace.”

“Ok Travis, you can have all the peace you want. I won't bother you anymore.”

She walked out and went back to Kaylee's room, closing the door. Travis felt like shit. He was getting used to feeling that way.

The next day Travis drove to court. He was merging onto the highway when his cellphone rang. He reached down to grab it and looked up too late to see the car in front of him slow down. Travis slammed the breaks but banged into the car anyway. They both pulled over to the shoulder and Travis got out to check the damage. The car he'd hit looked fine, but his front left headlight was smashed. The other driver hadn't gotten out of the car yet. Travis walked up to the window and tapped on it. A young woman was sitting, staring ahead. He tapped again and she turned, looking surprised to see anyone there. She rolled down the window and Travis leaned in.

"You ok?"

"I was just . . . startled."

"Your car is fine if that's what you're worried about. Not a scratch."

The woman seemed to come back to reality and got out of her car. She walked back to check the damage for herself.

"There's a scratch on my bumper."

Travis looked where she was pointing but saw nothing. He smiled at her.

"Well, no point in getting insurance involved."

The woman didn't smile back.

"I don't know. This is a company car, they might charge me for the damage."

"Lady, there is no damage. Look at my car. That's damage. Yours is fine."

"I don't know. It's my company's car and I'm supposed to report any accident. Right away."

Travis thought. "Well of course, the person they would really want is they guy that cut me off."

"What guy?"

“You must have seen him. I was merging and then he cut me off which is why I swerved into you. To avoid him. And he drove off. It was his fault.”

“It was?”

“Of course. Without him, there’s nothing the insurance can do anyway.”

“Really?”

“Look, I’m late getting to work, and I’m sure you are too. Let’s just get back in our cars and go.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She looked him over. Then got back in her car and drove off. Travis got back on the road and merged into the heavy traffic. It was slow driving, and he got to court a half hour late. He was in front of Judge Bradley, who was known to be a complete ass. He’d never practiced law, having used his political connections to land a government job fresh out of law school, and kissing asses consistently and sufficiently to end up serving as a judge. He stared down at Travis from the bench.

“Mr. Adleberg, I see that you’ve decided to join us today.”

“It’s Adler your honor. I had a little trouble in traffic today.”

“The other lawyers had to drive here to, but they managed to make it on time.”

“Yes your honor.”

The judge berated Travis for the next five minutes before dismissing his motion. Travis wheeled his briefcase back to the car, having accomplished nothing. He took another look at the smashed headlight. The cheap plastic they build cars out of these days had folded and misshapen around the gaping hole. There was no way he could afford to fix it. He just had to park the car close to the wall in the garage and hope that Cynthia didn’t notice the damage. No point in adding yet another piece of ammo to her arsenal of complaints.

Travis contemplated driving all the way back home, ditching the car, and then taking the train in to work, but that would be too far out of his way. He drove to work. At a stoplight a car pulled up alongside him with the windows down and a loud sub bass thumping so loud it made his car shake. Bddd Bddd Bddd Bddd. It made him wonder if the road beneath him was shaking too, and his mind drifted on to earth tremors until the car behind him honked.

When he got to his office he looked up earthquakes on the internet, but he'd only started reading when his boss Murray came in to talk to him. Murray had a habit of drifting up and down the halls talking to people and avoiding his own small pile of work, made ever smaller because everything he could possibly delegate he did. Murray plopped down in a chair and stretched out his long legs. He seemed to have no sense of other people's personal space, extending his limbs as though affirming his dominion over all around him.

"So what are you working on Trav?"

"Just got back from court. Traffic was murder today."

"It's murder everyday. Take the train."

"I would but these files keep getting bigger and bigger, I can barely carry them anymore."

"I know what you mean. I had back surgery 3 years ago and I'm sure it was from carrying around all those damned files. I guess I should have filed a claim."

Travis forced out a laugh. Then tried to look interested in a file on his desk. Murray stared at him a while, then slowly pulled his leg out of Travis's personal space, got up and drifted to the next office down the hall.

The traffic going home was even worse than the traffic downtown had been. What was normally an hour commute in good traffic took two hours. There were times he was aware of himself and everyone around him just sitting still in their big steel boxes, going absolutely nowhere, burning up fuel. Along the way he continued to think about vibrations and earthquakes. He'd taken some physics in college and in particular the physics of sound. It was all waves and vibrations. He tried to forget about the traffic, which was also moving in slow congested waves, and think instead about the waves of energy in an earthquake. Do they make a sound? Are the tectonic plates like a giant speaker pumping out a low frequency hum that no one can hear above the crashing and breakage? What if you could record that sound and play it back, would it start another earthquake? What if you played it softly, would you just get a tremor?

Traffic started moving again, slowly. He thought about getting off the highway and trying local roads, but he knew he'd just get lost in the tangled web of streets. He thought about driving on the shoulder, but he couldn't afford the ticket. Actually, he could barely afford the gas he was burning right now. The sad irony

was that while all his clients acted like he was the big rich lawyer and they were just humble blue collar workers, most of them earned more than he did. He was still paying off law school and undergrad loans, plus the mortgage on his house. Cynthia was working when they first met, but now she could only work if they hired a nanny for Kaylee. The nanny charged more than Cynthia could earn, so there was no point in that.

Travis tried to forget about money and think about the waves again, while around him people honked and smoked and yelled and crawled along down the long asphalt trail.

When Travis walked in the door he reflexively put out his hand to prevent Kaylee from jumping up and grabbing his sore neck, but she wasn't there. He called out hello, but there was no answer. Perhaps they were at dance class. Or gymnastics. He could never quite remember what nights these classes were, and they seemed to change around a lot. Travis welcomed the alone time, although there was no telling how long it would last. He went downstairs and started up his computer, opening a browser and researching earthquakes, tremors, tectonic plates, and everything else he could find on the subject. He dove into it and lost himself in the flow of information, and when the door opened upstairs and Cynthia called out he didn't respond. He didn't want to give up one second of this. After a few minutes she came downstairs.

"Didn't you hear me calling you, I had groceries to bring in and needed your help."

"Oh, I . . . didn't hear. You want me to get them?"

"I already brought them in. What are you wasting your time on now?"

"Nothing, just researching earthquakes."

"Great, that will make us rich."

Kaylee came down the stairs and jumped into Travis's lap. He grabbed her hands before she could lock them around his neck.

"Hi sweetie, what did you do today?"

"We went to the store and got groceries and I got to pick out a new cereal."

"Good deal. You know, when I was a kid sometimes we would have cereal for dinner, doesn't that sound fun?"

"Yeah!"

Kaylee turned to her mom. "Can we have my new cereal for dinner tonight?"

Cynthia glared at Travis. "I suppose that means you didn't make anything?"
"Was I supposed to?"

"Well I can't if I'm driving her around to class and doing the shopping."

"But I had no way of knowing when you were coming back, or whether you planned to make something."

"Well you could see I wasn't here." She rolled her eyes. "Oh what's the use, it's like talking to a complete moron."

"What's a moron, mommy?" Kaylee asked.

"Just look at your father dear."

Cynthia stormed back upstairs and Travis could hear her banging pots and pans, her demonstrative way of letting him know that yes, she was now making dinner. Kaylee turned to her dad.

"What's a moron, daddy?"

"Oh, mommy was just making a joke, dear. She's just upset."

"Why?"

"Because she's always upset."

"No she's not."

"Well . . . she is now. Hey, you want to learn about earthquakes?"

"No, I want to eat my new cereal."

"Not tonight kiddo."

"When?"

"Someday. Let's learn about earthquakes. Look at this picture. These are tectonic plates. They push against each other harder and harder, and the pressure builds and builds until finally they smash against each other and there's an earthquake. Cool, huh?"

"Earthquakes scare me."

"Yeah, but it's still cool to think about."

"It's just scary."

She got down off his lap and went upstairs. He continued his research. Cynthia didn't bother to call him to dinner, and he didn't bother going up to get it. When he finally looked up to check the time, it was past 1 a.m. He went to bed but couldn't sleep. His mind was filled with waves. 2 a.m. 3 a.m. He watched the time march by while tectonic plates pressed against each other harder and harder in his

mind. He thought about the force it would take to move the plates, to release the pressure in a controlled way. The more he thought about this, the more it seemed possible. At 4 a.m. he gave up on sleep and went back downstairs. He took two pieces of wood and pressed them together in his vice. Then he got out his power sander, placed it on top of the vice, and turned it on. He watched to see if the two pieces of wood moved in relation to each other. They did not. He took them out of the vice and looked for something harder, finally settling on two scraps of metal. He tightened them in the vice and turned the power sander back on. Same result. He kept the sander on as he searched around for something else to test with, then noticed Cynthia in the doorway. She did not look happy.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

“I was just--”

“How am I supposed to sleep with this noise? Have you lost your mind?”

“I couldn't sleep.”

“Well I can. Turn that thing off and keep quiet.”

And she was gone. He turned off the sander and put it away. There really wasn't a good way to model tectonic plates. He needed a way to actually test his idea on the plates themselves. Travis started to imagine what type of machine he would need to do that. How large would it have to be, how much power would it draw, how would he build it, how long would that take? He laid down on the green couch to ponder the possibilities. He imagined evacuating the city for a day, then releasing the pressure between the plates in a controlled manner. It could be an annual event. There could even be a celebration the day after. Everyone could live without the fear and risk of earthquakes randomly occurring. You'd have one small one a year. This would also be a good way to test how earthquake proof the buildings are. Any building that showed signs of stress after the annual pressure release would have to be brought up to code. As his mind wandered, sleep overtook him. He awoke to the sound of the vacuum cleaner humming upstairs. He walked up and saw Cynthia. When she turned and saw him, she screamed. The shrill scream clashed with the whine of the vacuum cleaner. She turned it off and glared at him.

“What are you doing here?!”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s at least 10 in the morning. I thought you were at work.”

“I must have fallen asleep. I guess I better get dressed and catch the train.”

He went up to the bedroom and got ready for work. He heard the vacuum cleaner start again. He thought about the hum of the motor. He thought about the vibrations.

Travis finished getting dressed, ran down, grabbed a stack of files he needed to review on the train, and ran to the station. Halfway there he realized he probably should have driven since traffic would be light at this hour, but he couldn’t bear the thought of going back home and facing Cynthia again.

No one seemed to notice him walking into the office late. He sat down at his computer and started working on a file, but soon switched to the browser and did more research on earthquakes. Then on sound waves, and waves in general. When the phone rang he let it go to voicemail. He ignored his email. Eventually Murray came by on his daily saunter down the hall and parked himself across from Travis.

“So, what are you working on?”

“Just some research.”

“I can’t stand doing research, I don’t know how you have the patience. Well, I guess it’s a good thing you do.”

“I enjoy it. You can get lost in research.”

“There are other things I’d rather get lost in. You know, I’m seeing a new girl.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she’s good looking considering she’s in her 40s. She laughs at my jokes, so that’s a plus.”

“A shared sense of humor is a good thing.”

Travis tried to think back to any time that Murray had actually told a joke, but he came up blank. Murray sat staring at him in his slightly unfocused but expectant way. He stretched his legs out, creeping into Travis’s space. Travis tried to look like he was getting back to his work, but Murray wasn’t getting up to leave. Apparently he still wanted to talk, but just couldn’t think of anything else to talk about. Travis turned back to him.

“So how did you meet her?”

“Online dating service. It's amazing, there are so many girls out there. The ones I end up with all seem to be divorced and in their 40s, but then I'm divorced and in my 50s so I guess I can't complain.”

“Yeah, well . . . sure.”

Another awkward pause. Murray farted. Then more painful silence with the addition of the foul odor floating by. A mixture of egg salad and old age. Murray pointed to the picture on Travis's desk.

“That your wife?”

“Yes.”

“She's a looker.”

“Yes, I seem to have a weakness for good looking women.”

“Good man.”

Murray sat a while longer, then finally got up and left. Travis got back to his research. He took some notes on a legal pad and sketched some diagrams. The voicemails and emails piled up. He continued working until 7, then took the train home.

There were dirty dishes on the table and he could hear Cynthia giving Kaylee a bath upstairs. He yelled hello but there was no response. Travis went downstairs and taped the pages of notes from his legal pad up on the wall of his work room. He went up and cleared the table, putting the dirty dishes in the sink. He dug around the fridge until he found some leftovers, which he ate cold over the sink. He could hear Kaylee running around upstairs and Cynthia yelling at her not to get the floor wet. Travis went back down to the basement and got on his computer to do more research. Kaylee came down and sat in his lap, holding a book up to him.

“Daddy, can you read to me?”

“Sweetie, you’re a good reader, why don’t you read it yourself?”

“Nooo. You read it better.”

She pushed the book into his hand. He picked her up and carried her to the couch, where she snuggled up against him. He opened the book and read. It was part of a series Kaylee had recently gotten into. As far as he could tell it was the same story slightly reworked each time. Still, he tried to read with some enthusiasm, giving the characters unique voices. After a while his mind drifted and he was not even thinking about what he was saying. He was on auto-pilot. The part of his brain that wasn’t engaged in reading thought about how amazing it was that the brain could be doing two things at once. He got to the end of the chapter and realized Kaylee was asleep. He set the book down and carefully picked her up. She had gotten so heavy, and his back and neck ached as he carried her up to the first floor, caught his breath, and then up to her room. As soon as he laid her down in her bed, she opened her eyes.

“Read me another story daddy.”

“You were awake that whole time?”

“Just one more.”

“No, sweetie, you need your sleep so you grow big and strong.”

“And smart?”

“You’re already smart.”

He brushed her hair with his hand and she laid down. He turned off the light and went back downstairs, wondering where Cynthia had gone off to. The dishes were still in the sink and he started to wash them, but was startled when Cynthia came in the back door and into the kitchen smelling of cigarettes. He looked at her surprised.

“I thought you stopped smoking.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I’m not telling you what to do, I’m just surprised.”

“I don’t need your judgment right now.”

“Cynthia, does every conversation have to be an argument?”

“Oh, you’re so innocent. I walk in the door and you start picking on me right away. Then when I react you make it sound like it’s all my fault.”

“I’m not making it sound like anything. It just seems like we can’t have a normal conversation anymore.”

“And that’s my fault.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“I’m going to sleep.”

He finished the dishes and went downstairs. He sat down at the computer but couldn’t concentrate. He kept running the conversation through his head, with different permutations, different results. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Cynthia coming downstairs.

“Do you sleep anymore?”

“It’s been difficult.”

“Try laying down in a bed.”

“I have, it doesn’t really help. Anyway, I thought you were going to sleep.”

“What are you working on all the time?”

“It’s a way to prevent . . . well, this is going to sound a little silly perhaps, but it’s a way to prevent earthquakes.”

She just stared at him, then slowly shook her head.

“You’re really losing it.”

“No. I realize it sounds that way, but actually I have a theory that if you just pumped a sound wave of the right amplitude and frequency into the ground you could set up a standing wave that would activate the tectonic plates in a controlled earthquake that would then alleviate the pressure between the plates.”

“Like I said. You’re losing it.”

“I’m not, it’s a perfectly sound theory. Hey, get it? Sound theory.” Travis chuckled to himself. Cynthia stared at him warily.

“Trav, I don’t want to argue all the time, but I’m pretty much at the end of my rope.”

“Why?”

“See, that’s just it. You have no idea why, or you’re not willing to admit that you do know. Either way, it seems pretty hopeless.”

“But, tell me what the problem is and I can fix it.”

“Travis, it’s like I’m a single mother. You barely help with Kaylee at all.”

“I’m at work all day, what am I supposed to do, take a helicopter back every few minutes and help with Kaylee? Plus I just read to her tonight, doesn’t that count?”

Cynthia shook her head and sighed. “I don’t need your sarcasm and I don’t need examples of what you do. It’s what you don’t do. You could have come up and helped with the bath.”

“But you were doing that. How many people does it take to bathe a 7 year old?”

“Ok, that’s it. I obviously can’t talk to you about this.”

“What. I’m talking.”

“Forget it.”

Cynthia went back upstairs. Travis contemplated going after her, but what was the point. Somehow he’d lost the ability to communicate with her. He could talk to other people. He could talk to Kaylee and she was seven. He could talk to his boss, who was a complete farting bore. But he could not for the life of him connect with Cynthia anymore.

He grabbed his legal pad and sat down on the green couch, sketching out ideas and notes, then leaning back and falling asleep, dreaming of earthquakes. He

woke up around 3 and went upstairs to his bed, but once he laid down his mind was swirling with ideas again and he couldn't sleep. He got up and walked down the hall, carefully opening the door to Kaylee's room. Kaylee and Cynthia were cuddled together on the small bed, underneath a Pink Princess comforter. He closed the door and went back to bed, but still couldn't sleep. He watched the clock for a couple more hours, then got back out of bed and got ready for work.

When he sat down to his computer at work there were more than 50 emails waiting for him.

“Dear Attorney Adler. My doctor says that you should call him and request the information you need directly from him as it isn't appropriate for him to comment to me about my condition.”

“Attorney Adler: I have left you 5 messages and you have not returned my call so I am emailing you to ask you once more if you received the fax I sent you 2 months ago.”

“Dear Attorney Adler, my boss told his secretary that I was overpaid on my last paycheck, but I wasn't, so can he do that? Legally?”

Travis slowly worked his way through the emails, giving brief replies that vaguely promised future action. Then he went through the much more laborious task of checking his voicemail. Client after client droned on about their problems. No money. In pain. Why aren't you doing anything. Repeat. Over and over. Travis wrote down the names of all the clients, then walked down the hall and handed the list to his secretary.

“Liz, I need you to call all these clients and let them know I'm on vacation.”

“You're going on vacation?”

“No.”

“... oh. Well, when are you getting back?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Ok. So what do I do when they ask me what you're doing on their case.”

“Tell them nothing. Tell them that while I'm on vacation, I will be doing nothing on their case.”

“But, you're not really going on vacation.”

“True. But I will really be doing nothing on their case.”

“Ok.”

“Thanks.”

He went back to his office and began researching electronics in sound systems and amplifiers. He'd always enjoyed building circuits when he was a kid. He'd started out with a simple crystal radio that you put together by slipping the ends of the components into springs. He'd graduated up from that to actually soldering components to a circuit board, eventually making an AM radio. He remembered most of the formulas by heart. Watts equals Volts times Amps. The current through a conductor is inversely proportional to the resistance. He looked up the formulas he couldn't remember, and looked at some simple schematic diagrams, tracing them through with his finger on the screen. Then more complex ones. It all came back to him, not just the information but the feeling of taking a handful of cheap components, soldering them together, connecting a battery, and ending up with some useful device. Then tweaking and improving it. Travis loved the process even more than the final result, which ultimately he'd put up on a shelf or cannibalize for parts when he started his next project. So many people never experience the pure joy of creating something. They spend their lives consuming, like a baby sucking on a bottle. When the bottle is empty, they get another one. They never produce anything. They never create. They go from cradle to grave consuming the work and ideas of others. They might as well be living in a zoo.

Murray walked in and sat down. Travis didn't bother closing the browser which now displayed a complex schematic for an amplifier with an equalizer. He stared at it, pretending not to notice Murray, hoping he would just go away.

“Hey Trav, what are you working on?”

“Research.”

“Good man. You been busy?”

“Very.”

“Good. Good.”

There was the usual awkward pause, but Travis ignored it, ignored Murray, and just went back to the schematic, tracing slowly, practically feeling the flow of electrons beneath his finger as it moved from component to component. Murray

watched him for a while, then cleared his throat. Travis ignored him. Murray scratched his face.

“You know, I’ve been doing this 30 years.”

“Oh?”

“30 years.”

“That’s why you’re the best, Murray.”

“I guess so. It gets old though.” Murray looked around at the diplomas on Travis’s wall, then back at Travis. “You ever get burnt out?”

“It happens to the best of us.”

“I suppose. I just don’t have the drive anymore. I think I’ve seen every type of industrial accident that exists. It’s just the same back and shoulder and knee injuries over and over and over. But every client thinks their case is unique. And it is in a way, but not enough. It’s 1% unique and 99% the same as the last case. That 1% just isn’t enough for me anymore.”

“Yeah. Well. I don’t know.” Travis tried to think of a line of conversation that would lead to Murray getting up and leaving, but drew a blank. He fell back on a safe subject. “How’s the dating world treating you?”

“I saw that girl again last night. Took her to the movies. God it’s expensive to see a movie these days. And the popcorn tastes like shit. How can they ruin popcorn? *Why* would they ruin popcorn? They had a perfectly good thing. Popcorn, butter, salt. It’s cheap, it’s easy. But they have to update it to some glowing yellow oily mess. I was up all night with the shits.” Murray farted, as if for emphasis.

“Well, nothing gold can stay,” Travis said.

“Huh?”

“Nothing gold can stay.”

“You mean the popcorn?”

“Anything. Anything good.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Murray got up and sauntered down the hall, looking for his next conversational victim. Travis picked up a file folder and waved off the lingering scent of popcorn oil fart. He decided to leave a little early and stop off at the Tronics Shack down the street. He walked down the hall to Liz’s desk.

"I'm leaving. If anyone calls--"

"You're on vacation."

"Thanks."

It was a little too warm out, but it felt good to walk. The Tronics Shack was pretty much the same as the one he used to go to as a kid, although there were more electronic gizmos at the front of the store. In the back it was the same old racks of components. Resistors and capacitors were arrayed in little plastic bags along one wall, and he grabbed a few. He picked up some wire, solder, battery clips, and some other bits and pieces. He didn't even know what he was going to put together, he just felt like he needed to have some of the raw materials around to play with, to ease himself back into his old hobby.

The girl at the cash register had died green hair and a nose ring. Travis smiled at her. She sneered back.

"Getting some electrical components," he said.

"I see."

"I'm gonna work on a project."

"Wonderful."

"Get the old soldering iron fired up and get into it again."

She looked at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Um . . . nothing. I was just--"

"Here's an idea. Stop talking to me."

"Right."

She put his things in a bag and sent him on his way. Travis walked to the train and waited excitedly on the platform. He kept opening the bag and fingering the components he'd bought. When he got home Kaylee was playing in the back yard.

"Daddy, you're home early!"

"Hi sweetie."

"What did you get me at the store?"

"Oh, this is just some stuff I got. I can show you later."

"Come push me on the swing."

"I've got something I need to work on."

"Pleecease."

"Well, just for a few minutes."

He set the bag down on the back steps and pushed Kaylee on the swing. She giggled and yelled, “higher, daddy, higher!”

“Oh sweetie, I don’t want you to fly away.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

He pushed her higher and she laughed and kicked her legs. Travis looked over at the bag of components sitting on the steps.

“Well, that’s all the swing time I have today honey. I’ve got to get to work.”

“Oh, just a little more.”

“Sorry sweetie.”

He picked up the bag and headed inside. Cynthia was surprised to see him but didn’t say anything. He went downstairs and dug through his toolbox until he found his soldering iron and the little stand that went with it. He laid it out on his work bench and emptied the components from the bag, arranging them next to the soldering iron. He took a mental inventory of the parts, then went to the computer and searched online for some more basic schematics. He searched through them until he found one that he could make with the parts he had. It was a simple flashing light. There might be a few things missing, but he could probably find what he needed in one of Kaylee’s old toys if need be. He went upstairs and grabbed a few electronic toys, including the monster truck he’d been working on before. Kaylee had come back inside and came over to see what Travis was doing.

“What are you going to do with my toys, daddy?”

“I’m going to work on them sweetie and make an even bigger toy.”

“But I like those toys the way they are.”

“Well, don’t worry. They’ll be the way they are only better.”

“I don’t want them better!”

Cynthia peeked out of the kitchen to see what the commotion was. She looked at Travis as though he was the Grinch who stole Christmas.

“What are you doing with Kaylee’s toys?”

“Nothing. I’m just working on a little project and I might need these.”

“What project?”

Travis held his hands out as if to say, wait till you hear this. “I’m going to make a flashing light.”

“A flashing light.” She stared at him. He set the toys back down and started back to the basement. Cynthia called out, “don’t get lost in your flashing light project, we have to go in a few hours.”

“Go?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“I didn’t forget.”

“What are we doing tonight?”

Travis looked at her and smiled. Cynthia did not smile.

“Travis, do you know how to use a calendar. Am I supposed to be your personal secretary on top of everything else I do?”

“It’s just that I’m busy with work and my clients and . . . what are we doing tonight?”

“Parent teacher conference. Madeline is babysitting.”

“Didn’t she kill the gerbil the last time she babysat?”

“We’re not sure that was her fault. Anyway, we have no choice. No one else was available.”

Travis went upstairs and shaved. The buzz of the electric shaver put his mind back on sound waves. He finished shaving and snuck back down to the basement with Kaylee’s toys. He removed the screws that held them together and laid all the parts out looking to see what usable parts he could scavenge. Time flew by until he heard the doorbell and went upstairs to get ready to go. Madeline was standing there looking like a 16 year old hooker. She wore a short skirt and a tight top that revealed a pierced belly button. She had heavy eyeliner, dark eye shadow, and sparkly lip gloss.

“So Madeline, excited about babysitting tonight?”

“Yeah . . . sure.” This was said with a complete lack of emotion and a slight roll of the eyes, which was Madeline’s standard routine after everything she said.

“Well, maybe you can read Kaylee some books, or play a board game with her.”

Kaylee jumped up and down, “Crazy Eights, Crazy Eights.”

Travis laughed. “Or Crazy Eights.”

Madeline looked bored. “I don’t know how to play that.”

“I’m sure Kaylee can teach you.”

“We’ll see. Are you guys leaving now?”

“Just on our way out. Cynthia?”

Cynthia grabbed her purse and gave Madeline a sharp look. “Keep an eye on Kaylee.” Then she was out the door with Travis following behind her. Travis ran ahead of her so he could get to the driver's seat before her. He couldn't stand her driving. She couldn't stand his either, but it was easier to put up with her backseat driving than to actually be in a car that she was driving. She was uncharacteristically deferential to other drivers, letting them merge and cut in front of her, going slower and slower as more and more cars piled in front of her. Travis liked to keep close to the car in front of him so no one could butt in line. This annoyed Cynthia, but she was generally annoyed anyway, so what difference did it make.

They drove to the school in silence. Travis put the radio on. It was a classics station, playing an old Pink Floyd song he'd listened to incessantly when he was in high school. It was just about to reach the guitar solo when Cynthia turned it off. Travis decided not to make an issue of it. Better to sit in silence than argue the rest of the way to the school.

Mrs. Krasner was still talking to the last couple when Travis and Cynthia arrived. They waited in the hallway, but Cynthia kept peeking in the door to make sure Mrs. Krasner knew they were there. A half hour later the other couple finally left. Cynthia practically pushed past them as they were leaving, with Travis following behind. Mrs. Krasner seemed to brace herself, then put on a well practiced smile.

“Well, good to see you both.” She pulled out a folder and ruffled through some papers, pulled one out, stared at it a moment, then looked back up at them. “Good to see you both.” She smiled again.

Cynthia was becoming increasingly impatient. “So how is Kaylee doing?”

“Well Mrs. Adler--”

“Chirter.” Cynthia corrected her.

“Excuse me?”

“My last name is Chirter. His last name is Adler.” She pointed at Travis, who slumped a little in his chair. It had always seemed a point of pride for Cynthia that she'd kept her last name when they married. For Travis it was just one more sign that she had never really made up her mind about him.

Mrs. Krasner cleared her throat. "Yes, well . . . Kaylee is a very bright young girl, but she can be very silly at times. I find myself having to remind her to sit down and listen throughout the day. She's very social, which of course is good, but there's a time and place. She also seems to day dream from time to time. In fact, the only time she's not acting silly is when she's lost in her own little world. I sometimes wonder if she hears a single word I say." Mrs. Krasner looked up surprised, as though she'd forgotten that Travis and Cynthia were sitting there. She put her smile back on and continued, "but she's a very bright girl. Very bright."

Cynthia looked at Travis as though there was something important he should be saying now. Travis wasn't sure what he was supposed to say, but felt compelled to speak.

"Yes, she's very bright. You know, maybe the work is too easy for her. All this coloring and cutting and so on. I remember when I was her age I found school incredibly boring. I was something of a day dreamer myself. I could pass the whole day lost in distant worlds."

Cynthia shot him a look that let him know he'd gone down the wrong path. He stopped talking. Mrs. Krasner smiled at both of them and folded her hands.

"Well, we do our best to keep it interesting."

Cynthia was glaring at her. "What do you mean by silly? She's seven. Don't all seven year olds act silly?"

"Yes, a bit at times, but Kaylee seems more often to be running around the room trying to grab attention than the other children. Much more."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Perhaps you could have a talk with her--"

"And tell her what, stop being silly? Stop acting like a child?"

"Well no, but--"

"Look, you're the teacher, you're the one that needs to maintain discipline in the classroom. She's perfectly fine when she's at home."

"Well, she's getting a lot of attention when she's at home, I imagine."

"Of course."

"Well . . ." Mrs. Krasner seemed uncertain of what to say next. She unclasped her hands and checked her watch, then looked up and smiled.

The drive home started in silence, but Travis knew that Cynthia was going to erupt any second. Her face was going through rapid contortions, each slightly more frightening than the last. He tried not to notice, but she was fidgeting around and he kept looking over at her despite himself. He felt the overwhelming urge to alleviate the tension.

“So . . . that could have gone better.”

“Could have gone better?”

“Yeah, it could have.”

“Better than horrible you mean? Better than a complete disaster?”

“I didn't think it was that--”

“You were so busy waxing nostalgic over your own school days . . . what is that matter with you. Didn't you hear what she was saying? She's essentially accusing Kaylee of being the worst kid in the class. That she's disruptive, not paying attention, not learning. Did any of that sink in or were you day dreaming through the whole meeting?”

“I heard what she said. So Kaylee is a little silly. She likes attention. It's not the end of the world.”

“So you don't think it's the least bit important.”

“I didn't say that, I just don't think it's worth getting upset about.”

“I'm overreacting, is that it?”

“I didn't say that.”

“Forget it Travis, I'll just raise Kaylee on my own, you can go hide in the basement and not have to worry about her. I'll take all the burden and you just enjoy yourself with your dumb ass project or whatever you're doing down there.”

“Cynthia, I don't think you can pin Kaylee's behavior on me.”

“Oh no, it's all my fault, because I'm the one who raised her. You're innocent. You don't even care what happens as long as your hands are clean. I get all the blame.”

“No one is blaming you.”

“Didn't you hear what that teacher was saying?”

“Yes, she said Kaylee acts silly. That is not an accusation.”

“The hell it isn't.”

They drove the rest of the way home in silence. When they walked in the door, Kaylee ran up to hug them. On the floor there were sheets of paper, as well as big gobs of glitter glue. Travis picked up Kaylee and hugged her while Cynthia ran to the kitchen and came back with paper towels. She tried to mop up the glue from the floor, but little shiny sparkles still glittered up from the wood and rug. Travis set down Kaylee and asked, "Where is Madeline?"

"She's downstairs watching TV."

"Great."

Travis walked downstairs to find Madeline talking on her cell phone and watching TV. She didn't acknowledge him as he walked in. He waved. No response. He turned off the TV and watched for a reaction. Nothing, she was chatting away. "No way . . . no way. Nooooo way. She did not. No. She did not do that."

Travis cleared his throat. "Um, Madeline . . ."

Madeline looked up at him, then cupped the phone to her mouth and whispered, "they're home, I'll call you back in a minute." She looked up at Travis. "So how was your movie?"

"It was a meeting. It was fine. Thanks. So, there was a bit of a mess upstairs."

"Yeah, your kid is pretty messy." She stood up and walked upstairs.

Travis followed behind her, trying not to stare up her short skirt, and mostly failing in that effort. When they got upstairs he pulled out his wallet. "So, it's \$10 an hour, and we were gone, what a couple hours I'd say, so here's a twenty."

Madeline looked at the twenty dollar bill as though it were a piece of used toilet paper. She finally took it and stuffed it in her purse. Travis said, "It's pretty dark out there, do you need me to walk you home?"

Madeline looked at him, then laughed. "I can handle myself." She gave him an odd smile and left.

Cynthia was still trying to clean glitter glue off the floor. She looked up. "Did you yell at her about the glue?"

"I didn't exactly yell. I mentioned it."

"And?"

"She seemed unconcerned."

Cynthia shook her head. She turned to Kaylee, “did she read you any nice books?”

“No, she just watched TV the whole time and talked on her phone. Can I have a cell phone too?”

“When you’re older. Listen. Your teacher says you aren’t paying attention in class, is that true?”

“I pay attention.”

“Do you run around acting silly?”

“No.”

“Well I want you to sit still and listen to the teacher, and don’t run around the classroom, ok?”

“Ok mommy.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good girl. Now go up and brush your teeth, I’ll be up there soon to tuck you in and tell you a story.”

Kaylee ran upstairs. Travis looked at the sparkles stuck to the floor.

“You need help with that?”

“No, you just run off and work on your *project*.”

He considered doing so but knew it was a trap. He grabbed a paper towel and rubbed it on the floor. Cynthia stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

“You’re just smearing it around. You need to get that damp.”

Travis got up and got a new piece of paper towel, dampened it and brought it back. He rubbed the damp paper towel on the floor but it didn’t seem to be getting up anymore sparkles than the dry one. He tried the dry one again, then noticed Cynthia glaring at him. He got up, threw both pieces in the garbage, and washed his hands.

Travis went downstairs and arranged the components on his work table. He plugged in his soldering iron and got to work connecting wires and components. A few hours later he had a small light flashing on a circuit board. He decided to add a switch to it, and took one off the monster truck. When he was finished he unplugged the soldering iron, placed it in its special stand, and went upstairs to lay awake in bed, running the day’s events in his head over and over and over.

He thought back to grade school. The endless days of dull chatter. Hearing his teacher call to him through the haze of boredom to pay attention. A new topic would be taught and for a while class was interesting. He'd learn whatever they were teaching the first time around, then sit fidgeting while they repeated it over and over for the kids who didn't get it. Then the next day they would go over it again. It was torture. He thought about Kaylee sitting there enduring the same thing. Why did society insist on wasting so many years of childhood with school. Children would be learning a lot more just running around the street.

Travis got up and went to the middle room. He looked out the window. Chloe's light was off. He stared for a while at the empty darkness, imagining he could see shadows moving across the room. After a while he went down to the basement and turned on the TV. It was endless commercials. By the time the actual show came on he zoned out, only coming back to attention when the loud commercial came blaring back. He clicked off the TV and unplugged it, carrying it to his work room where he unscrewed the back. There were some huge capacitors inside, which he knew probably held a huge charge. He took a screwdriver and shorted them out one by one, creating a big spark each time. He took a long nose pliers and pulled some of the components out, trying to figure out what the purpose of each part was. He spent the rest of the night taking apart the TV and organizing the parts he removed on his work bench.

That morning he put the flashing light project in a small box and put that in his bag. He took the train to work, periodically checking on the box to make sure he wasn't denting it. When he arrived at his office, he opened the box and put the flashing light project next to his computer. Travis flipped the switch and watched the light pulse for a while, then turned it off. He tried to work on some files but he couldn't stay focused. He flipped through medical records, read a few pages, and instantly forgot what he'd just read. He flipped the light back on. Then off. The day dragged along like this, and Travis thought to himself what a mistake it had been to come to work at all when he could be home working on another project. Something bigger, more complex. Something that would help him figure out how to make the machine he envisioned. A machine that would create sound waves sufficient to set off a small earthquake. He was daydreaming about the machine when he heard Murray's voice in the hallway. He was talking to one of the younger secretaries, Kelly.

"So that shirt you're wearing might violate the dress code."

"Oh?"

"Just kidding. No, it looks good on you."

"Thanks."

"I'll have to get my girlfriend one like that."

"Yeah."

"So . . . what are you working on?"

"Filing."

"Oh."

There was an awkward pause, then Murray sauntered into Travis's office and sat down.

“Hi Trav. What are you working on?”

“Medical records. They're endless.”

“Yeah, I usually have one of the secretaries do a summary of the records for me, and then come to my office and read me the summary.”

“Sounds very . . . efficient.”

“Well, it gives me a chance to stare at them. Heh heh.”

“Oh, yeah. There's that.”

Murray looked around the small office, his eyes fixing on the box next to Travis.

“What's in the box.”

“It's a little project I'm working on.”

Travis carefully removed the flashing light project from the box and set it in front of Murray, flipping the switch on. Murray watched it a while.

“Hm. So what's it do.”

“It's a flashing light.”

“But what's it do?”

“It flashes.”

“What's the point?”

“It was just a bunch of capacitors and resistors and wire, and now it's a useful device.”

“How is it useful?”

“Well, there's lots of ways you can use a flashing light. It could be a warning signal, or it could be a turn signal in a car, or . . . lot's of things.”

“Hm. So you made a turn signal for your desk?”

“No, it's just an easy starter project to get my electronics chops back. I used to make some pretty complicated stuff. I'm just trying to get back into it.”

“Why?”

“Sort of like a hobby.”

“For fun?”

“Right.”

Murray mulled this over. For a moment his face took on an expression that indicated an impending fart, but the moment passed without incident. Then he got up and walked out, continuing on down the hall to find his next victim. Travis put the flashing light project away. After another fruitless hour of flipping

through medical records, he put the box back inside his bag, got up and left. When he got home Cynthia wasn't there. He sat at the dining room table with the box on the table in front of him. He pulled out his legal pad and started scribbling out notes, schematics, diagrams. He kept working and re-working the basic idea behind the earthquake machine. He thought about ways to focus the sound waves so they didn't dissipate and become too weak to have any effect.

The door opened and Kaylee came running in with Cynthia behind her carrying groceries. Kaylee ran over to Travis, yelling "daddy's home!" She jumped into his lap and gave him a hug. Cynthia carried the groceries into the kitchen without saying anything to him. Kaylee noticed the box.

"What's in the box, daddy? Is it a present?"

"No sweetie, it's a . . . well, I guess it could be a present."

"For me?"

"Sure, why not. Open it up."

Kaylee opened the box and pulled out the flashing light project. She turned it over in her hand, running her finger over the circuits. Then she flipped the switch. The light flashed. She watched it for a while.

"What's it doing?"

"Flashing."

"Is that it?"

"Yup."

"Daddy, this is a boring toy."

"It's not a toy, darling, it's an electronic device with multiple applications in the real world. But you could use it as a toy too. You could make it the warning light for your doll."

"A warning about what?"

"I don't know. It could be an earthquake warning."

"Cool. Can I play with it now?"

"Sure."

She scooted off his lap and went into the living room, setting the flashing light inside her doll house. Then she played earthquake with the dolls, shaking the house and making them fall out. Travis watched for a long time. Kaylee called to him, "Daddy, does it should make a sound too."

“Ok sweety, I’ll add a sound module and a speaker. And a variable capacitor so we can change the frequency of the flashing along with the sound.”

“What?”

“Great idea, I’ll work on it.”

He walked over and took the flashing light project, clicked it off, and carried it downstairs to his work room.

“Daddy, I was playing with that.”

“I’ll be right back.”

It only took a couple hours to make changes to the project. He borrowed a speaker from Kaylee's pink cassette player and a variable capacitor from a radio. He found a sound module in a talking doll and added that too. The finished product would emit a staccato crying noise in sync with the flashing light. He brought it up to show Kaylee, who was sitting down to dinner with Cynthia.

"Look, I made it even cooler." He switched it on.

Cynthia gave him an exasperated look. "Turn that thing off, it sounds awful."

He turned it off and looked at Kaylee to see if she liked it. She stared down at her plate. He went to the kitchen and filled his plate with food, then came back and sat down again.

"Well, maybe with a different sound module."

Cynthia sighed. "Travis, what in god's name are you trying to do, what are all these gizmos? What is the point?"

"It's like warm up exercises. I'm going to make a very complex machine, something that no one has attempted before. I need to get back in fighting shape. Electronically speaking."

"It's insane. You are wasting your time and you are skipping a lot of work. Don't you think they're going to notice?"

"So I'll take some vacation time."

"And go where?"

"Nowhere. I'll work on the project."

Cynthia shook her head. "Do you realize how crazy you're acting? Is this just your way of getting back at me?"

“I’m not being crazy. What’s crazy is living in fear of earthquakes, never certain when one will hit. My machine will end all that. Think what a benefit that would be to people who live in earthquake prone regions.”

“But it’s impossible.”

“Difficult, yes. Impossible no. I’ve thought this through. I have diagrams. I have schematics. I can do this.”

“Number one, you cannot do it because it’s impossible. Number two, even if you could, it would still be nuts.”

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to prove you wrong. And when I’m on all the talk shows I’ll say, ‘I couldn’t have done it without the support of my loving wife.’”

“Very funny Travis.” Cynthia got up and took her plate to the kitchen. Travis took the opportunity to sneak down to the basement and tinker more with his project. He replaced the sound module and added a small amplifier. He brought it up to show Kaylee. She placed it in her doll house and turned it on. The light flashed and the speaker barked out a loud noise about 10 times a second. Travis pointed to the variable capacitor.

“Turn that and it will speed up or slow down.”

Kaylee did what he said and giggled as the flashing and noise sped up faster and faster. Then she slowed it way down until it was an occasional flash and bark. Travis left her to play with the new gadget. He went out to the garage and drove to the small suburban downtown area a half mile away. He found a small Tronics Shack tucked in between a hardware store and a pharmacy. Travis bought up all the components he could possibly need to build a new, bigger gadget. This one would have no light, just sound, and would play a sustained low note, beneath the threshold of human hearing. This would be the first prototype. It was time to get serious.

There were wires all over the place and the smell of hot solder. Travis was surrounded by bits and pieces of electronics, all arranged by category. He'd also dismembered an old boombox and pulled some useful components out. He had no idea now long he'd been working, but he knew it would be several hours before he had something close to what he was envisioning. This was prototype number one. It wouldn't be big or powerful enough to prove his theory correct, but it would at least demonstrate that as far as the electronics part of this project went, he was on the right track. From there he could make improvements. It would serve as the foundation for the ultimate earthquake machine.

Kaylee came downstairs to watch him for a while. She was chattering away but he wasn't listening. Instead he'd mumble an occasional "mm-hmm" or "that's interesting". His mind was completely focused on the task at hand. After a while he noticed she was gone. He wondered briefly what time it was, but didn't bother to check. What difference did it make anyway. There was work to be done.

There were hand drawn schematic diagrams taped to the wall above his work bench. Occasionally, he'd take one down, scratch something out or add something else, or just scribble a note with some arrows pointing here and there. As the prototype grew in front of him, the concept continued to germinate and grow in his mind.

Time passed quickly. He could hear Cynthia getting Kaylee ready for school upstairs. After a while the door shut and there was silence. He fell deeper into his work. Soon it was as though he wasn't there as a participant, but just an observer, watching the object grow before him, watching it evolve. He watched his hands moving as though they were someone else's. He watched as they soldered on the last wire, placed batteries in the battery holder, and flipped the switch. He

couldn't hear the sound, but he could feel it pulsating. He could also see the speaker cone moving in and out. The work bench was vibrating slowly, and the tools and bits of wire on it were jumping up and down. It worked.

Travis shut the prototype off and walked over to the green couch. He just needed to sit down for a little while. Just lean back a bit and rest. Not sleep. Not sleep. Not . . .

He awoke hours later to the sound of Cynthia bringing Kaylee home from school. Kaylee came downstairs, looked at him on the couch, and laughed, calling up the stairs, "Mommy, daddy is home and his face looks fuzzy."

Travis rubbed a hand over his jaw and felt the rough stubble. He got up and gave Kaylee a hug, but she squirmed away when his rough face rubbed her cheek. "Too scratchy daddy." She ran upstairs. Travis soon followed her up. Cynthia was bringing in groceries, and he took them from her at the door and carried them into the kitchen. After the last bag was emptied and the groceries put away, he said, "I want both of you to see what I've been working on. Stay right here and I'll bring it up." He ran downstairs and carefully picked up the prototype. He brought it up to the living room and set it on top of Kaylee's doll house, setting some dolls and small furniture inside the house. He signaled for Kaylee to come over.

"You get to throw the switch, sweetie."

"What's gonna happen?"

"Flip the switch and find out."

She flipped it and instantly the dolls fell over. The furniture seemed to be hovering a fraction of an inch above the dollhouse floor, gliding around and bumping into walls before falling out the front. Kaylee laughed. "It's all moving around." Cynthia stood watching but said nothing. Travis looked up at her.

"Well? Not bad, huh?"

"So, you can make a dollhouse vibrate."

"It's a prototype. All I have to do now is make this bigger. More powerful."

"And then what, you can make our house vibrate?"

"No. The final machine will point down into the ground. There will be very focused sound waves that will activate the tectonic plates and create a small, sustained tremor. Then I amplify that signal and create a controlled earthquake

with minimal damage. It will release the built up tension between the plates and prevent random earthquakes from occurring.”

“And you’re serious about this.”

“Very.”

“And you really think it’s possible.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re willing to give up your job and everything we’ve worked for to test this theory of yours.”

“Well, you don’t have to put it that way. I’m just taking a break from my job.”

“Have you even called in?”

“I . . . was just about to do that. Good idea.”

Travis went to make his call. Cynthia turned off the prototype, then picked it up and looked at it. She set it back down, shaking her head. She could hear Travis in the kitchen.

“. . . for a week. I know. I know. Well, an opportunity just came up and . . . I know. Well, everyone needs a break once in a while. Ok. Ok. Bye.”

Travis walked over to Cynthia and tried to hug her, but she stiffened and he gave up on it. He smiled at her.

“This is going to be fun. This is exciting.”

“This is nuts, Trav. I have no idea what’s wrong with you. You were a normal guy when I met you.”

“Well, maybe I got tired of just being a normal guy. Anyway, back to work.”

He picked up the prototype and took it downstairs to his work room. It was time to make prototype number two. He wanted to boost the power and experiment with different frequencies. Travis plugged in his soldering iron and got to work. He quickly got back into the flow of the project. After working for a while he looked up to see Cynthia watching him. Her face betrayed no emotion, except perhaps concern. She looked at all the components laid out on the work bench.

“What is all that stuff?”

“These over here are resisters, these are capacitors, this clunky thing is an amplifier.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Of course.”

“If you build a big machine that vibrates like that little gadget you made, how is it going to make an earthquake.”

“I’m going to put it in the basement. I might even dig a hole to set it in, I haven’t quite figured that part out yet. But the idea is to have those soundwaves travel deep deep down without dissipating. The inverse square law is my enemy.”

“Uh huh. And what about your family. Are we the enemy?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then why are you hiding from us?”

“I’m not. I was just upstairs demonstrating the prototype for you. I want you guys involved.”

“I don’t think doing a demo for us is quite the same as us being involved.”

“Well, you have to be a little patient. A project like this takes time. I’ve got no one to help me with it, so I need to work that much harder.”

“Travis, I lost patience long ago. You were already so removed from us, now it’s like you’ve built this concrete cocoon. I have no idea who’s inside there anymore or how to reach him.”

“Cynthia, don’t say that. I’m right here. I’m listening. I’m talking to you. I’m right here.”

“No you’re not. I have no idea where you are, but you’re not here.”

She walked off. Travis got back to work. After fiddling around with the prototype, he started thinking more about where to put the machine. Perhaps he could build a space where the sound would resonate. Or dig a deep hole to lower the machine into. Travis got his legal pad out and started writing down ideas, sketching some of them out. He sat down on the green couch and laid back thinking. He had almost fallen asleep when he heard the doorbell. Travis went upstairs to see who was there. When he opened the door there was a shabby looking man, about 50 or 60, it was hard to tell. He looked homeless. The man pointed to the yard.

“Looks like your grass could use cutting.”

“It’s all right.”

“I could do some gardening, water the plants.”

“No, that’s ok.”

“I don’t charge much.”

Travis was about to close the door on him when he had an idea.

“How are you with digging?”

“Oh, I’m real good.”

“Ok, wait right there.”

Travis walked past the man who watched him from the porch. Travis got a couple shovels from the garage and brought them back, handing one to the man. “Follow Me.” He led the man to the basement, and opened the door to the storage bin. It was the only room in the basement that had never been worked on. Back when the house was built there was a dirt floor in the basement, which had since been covered with cement. But the storage bin was still dirt. It was a small room, about 8 by 6. They had put some shelves in there to store things, but never used it for anything else. Travis realized that this space was perfect for the machine he would build. He would need a hole at least 5 feet deep. Perhaps the whole room should be dug out. Travis opened the only window in the room.

“We can throw dirt out there. When the pile gets too big we’ll go outside and spread the dirt out.”

“Sounds good to me. How much you paying me?”

“How’s ten bucks an hour?”

“Better than nothing. By the way, my name is Henry”

“All right Henry, I’m Travis.” They shook hands. “Let’s get to work.”

Travis handed Henry a shovel and they started digging, taking turns tossing dirt out the small window. At times half the dirt would make it out, the other half spraying against the wall and falling back in. As time went by they improved their technique. Travis hadn’t done any physical work in a long time, but Henry was working fairly slowly, so it wasn’t hard to keep up with him. They settled into a slow steady pace and worked for about an hour before taking a break. Travis stuck his shovel in the dirt.

“Looks the same as when we started.”

“How deep we going?”

“About 5 feet.”

“That’s gonna take some time. How about we get ourselves something to drink.”

“Ok.”

Henry followed Travis upstairs, where they both drank some cold water. Then it was back to the bin for more digging. After a while Travis heard Cynthia walking in the door with Kaylee. Kaylee came downstairs and peeked into the open storage bin door. She stared at her dad and Henry digging for a while, then ran upstairs, yelling, “mommy, mommy, there’s a stranger with daddy digging in the basement and making a mess!” Cynthia came down and looked into the storage bin. Travis smiled up at her.

“This is Henry, he’s helping me with my project.”

“Wonderful.”

Cynthia went back upstairs. She had too many things to do, there wasn’t time to argue with a lunatic. Travis and Henry continued digging, but as time went by they slowed their pace considerably. Travis kept poking his shovel out the window to push the pile of dirt away, but it was starting to spill back inside. “Let’s go out there and deal with that pile of dirt.”

Henry followed Travis outside and smoothed the pile out over the lawn. Travis gave it a final pat pat pat with the back of his shovel. They went inside, had more water, and got back to work. After another hour of digging, they once more smoothed out the pile of dirt, then Henry set his shovel against the house.

“I think that’s all I got in me today, Mr. Travis.”

“What time can you come by tomorrow?”

“Oh, I usually get up around 10.”

“Well get here as early as you can. And bring your muscles.”

“Yes sir Mr. Travis.”

Henry stood waiting. Travis looked at him, not knowing what to say, then realized. “Oh, sorry.” He pulled out his wallet and paid Henry, who nodded and then walked off down the sidewalk. Travis stuck his head inside the window to look at the storage bin. You still couldn’t really tell they’d been digging, except that the dirt floor was more uneven than it used to be. Tomorrow they would have to work harder. Travis tossed the shovels in through the window, then slid his body through and into the storage bin. There was a nice earthy smell in the small room. He walked back to his work room to continue on the prototype. There was so much to do and he’d only given himself a week to do it. After a

bit of tinkering he connected a few wires and flipped the switch. It was vibrating more vigorously than before. He switched it off and carried it into the storage bin, placing it down in the middle of the dirt floor. He flipped the switch again and stood back, watching the prototype hum away, kicking up plumes of dirt in the process. He watched for a long time. Kaylee walked in and looked at the dirt, then at her dad.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, I’m gonna dig out this room a bit deeper, make this gadget about 20 times bigger, and then I’ll really be ready to test out my theory.”

“Can you make a swimming pool in here?”

“No sweetie, there won’t be room for it.”

“Please. Mandy has a pool in her house.”

“Mandy’s dad is a partner at a law firm. I’m just an associate.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The associates do all the work and the partners make all the money.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Nope. It’s not.”

Travis switched off the prototype and carried it back to the workshop for more modifications and improvements. Kaylee wandered off to play. Cynthia came down into the work room with a load of laundry, setting it on the washer.

“I don’t suppose you could put these clothes in the washer for me while I make dinner.”

“Sure I can, No problem.”

“What are you doing in that storage bin, digging your own grave?”

“Cynthia, I’m just making a hole to set the machine in. I don’t want the powerful sound waves to bounce off our house, so I need the machine lower than the house, and the waves pointing down. And I can add some sound damping materials to the wall and ceiling so any stray sound waves don’t set up a standing wave.”

“Travis, what do you think it would be like if you put as much time into your family as you’re putting into this project.”

“Cyn, I promise, after I’ve got the machine working, we’ll all go on a nice vacation together.”

“You’re using up your vacation time right now.”

“Just one week. I get two a year. We’ll take a week and go wherever you want. You choose.”

“Paris.”

“Ooooo, pricey. How about somewhere in the US”

“New York.”

“Hm. Also pricey.”

“Well where do you want to go then?”

“We’ll figure it out. It’s just, we’re a little tight on cash right now.”

Cynthia left and Travis got back to work on the prototype. Occasionally he’d notice the basket of laundry and remember he was supposed to put it in the washer, but before he actually did anything he’d get distracted and go back to his project. He replaced a few components, then dug around in the old boom box to find some parts he needed, and added those to the growing structure. He wrote down a list of parts he needed that couldn’t be found around the house and tucked the list in his pocket. He thought about going upstairs, then decided to just sneak out the storage room window, thus avoiding another encounter with Cynthia.

He drove to the Tronics Shack and picked up most of what he needed, then went to a store that sold car stereos and got the biggest sub-woofer they had, along with a powerful amp. He put it all on his credit card, making a mental note that he’d have to ask for an advance on his salary if he were to pay off the bill in time. Or perhaps there was a way to get a deferral on his student loans, the perpetual financial anchor around his neck.

He got home and carefully pushed this new purchases into the storage bin through the window, then climbed back in and brought it all to the work room. The basket of laundry was sitting there and he made a mental note to deal with it when he got the chance.

Travis worked on the machine through the night, finally taking a break around 4am. He felt tired but knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep just yet. He went outside and walked around, ending up at the park with the duck pond, but didn’t dare go into the park this late at night. Instead he walked up the street to the 24 hour pharmacy. Travis wandered up and down the aisles, not looking for

anything in particular, just staring at shelf after shelf of carefully arranged boxes and bottles and plastic containers, each the result of a carefully planned marketing campaign. Was this the height of mankind's achievements? Was this the best we had accomplished? He walked up to the cashier, a skinny guy with short dark hair.

“So, working late tonight.”

“You buying anything?”

“Just being friendly.”

“Don't. Buy something or go.”

Travis walked out of the store and back home. He was careful to close the front door quietly. He went down to the basement and stretched out on the green couch, where he eventually fell asleep. Travis awoke to the sounds of Cynthia and Kaylee getting up, and waited for them to leave before preparing to test the machine.

The prototype was now almost too heavy to carry. He contemplated moving it to the storage bin and working on it there, but he still needed to dig the hole. Travis went upstairs and found his wheeled briefcase. He removed all the papers and carried it downstairs, setting in on the floor next to the machine. He then carefully moved the machine in parts onto the briefcase, and lifted the handle enough to drag the whole thing to the storage bin for testing. As soon as he got through the door the wheels became stuck in the soft dirt, so he left it blocking the doorway. He plugged the machine in and flipped a switch. Nothing happened. Travis realized the potentiometer was set to zero. Slowly he raised it up to one. Nothing. He raised it to two and the dirt beneath the machine started to plume up. Travis covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve and continued turning the knob until it was at 5. He could feel the low vibration in his body. It gave him a somewhat queasy feeling. The dirt was swirling around and he turned his head to face away from it and catch his breath. He started coughing and flipped the machine off before climbing over it and out of the storage bin. He leaned against a thick wooden support, and for a moment it felt as though it was vibrating, but the feeling soon went away and he wondered if it had been his imagination. He heard the doorbell and went upstairs to find Henry waiting.

“I’ve been ringin’ that bell for a while now. Hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“No, I was just testing something out in the basement. Come on down and let’s get to work.”

“Ok chief.”

They went downstairs and Henry whistled when he saw the machine.

“That’s quite a stereo you got there, but what’s it doin’ in the dirt.”

“We need to move it out of the way I guess. Help me lift it up, we can carry it over by the couch.”

The two men carried the machine out of the way, setting it down carefully. They went back into the storage bin and started digging again. They worked steadily for an hour until they were both dripping sweat. Travis wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

“Let’s take a breather, Henry.”

“Sounds like a plan, Mr. Travis.”

They went upstairs to drink some water, then walked outside and smoothed down the dirt pile. After this was done they went back in and sat at the dining room table drinking more water. It was hard to get back up out of the chair. Travis’s muscles were still sore from yesterday’s work, and now they felt worse. But there was much to be done.

“Come on, let’s get back to it.”

Henry nodded and slowly stood up. He followed Travis back to the storage bin. They worked a slow but steady pace for the next few hours, with a few breaks for water and spreading out the dirt pile. They were finally making some noticeable progress but Travis realized it would take them more than a week just to get a few feet down. He had to reconsider the hole. Perhaps make it smaller. He stopped digging and looked at the machine by the couch. The finished project would be at least twice as big. He figured at minimum the bottom would be 4 feet by 4 feet just to have room for the speaker. He went back into the storage bin where Henry was leaning on his shovel, resting.

“Henry, let’s stop digging out the whole floor and focus on a 4 by 4 square in the middle.”

“Sounds good to me. How deep?”

“Let’s shoot for 4 feet down”

“Can do.”

The two men started shoveling again, but they were both already sore and tired. After another hour not much had been accomplished. They walked outside to smooth down the dirt pile, Travis paid Henry and watched him walk stiffly down the sidewalk. Travis went back inside and down to the basement. When he saw the machine he realized he’d forgotten to move it back to the work room. He

would have to work on it here. He laid down on the couch next to it and tried to think about the design changes that needed to be made, but his mind was mud. He quickly fell asleep. When he awoke Kaylee was standing there watching him. Travis smiled at her.

“Hey sweetie, what’s new?”

“Mom’s mad at you.”

“That’s not new.” He laughed at his joke, but Kaylee just frowned. “What’s she mad about now?”

“You were supposed to do the laundry.”

“So I’ll do it now.” He started to get up.

“She already did it. She’s mad.”

“Well, she’ll just have to be mad then. Sometimes people get mad, sweetie. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Is this your project?” she asked, pointing at the machine.

“Yup. Pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“I guess. Can you read me a book?” Kaylee pushed a book towards him. He took it and flipped through the pages.

“Hey, this is pretty good, a chapter book. Are you reading this?”

“Yeah, but it’s your turn to read me a chapter. I already finished reading the first three.”

“Good girl. Ok, why don’t you sit next to me on the couch and I’ll read you a chapter.”

Kaylee jumped onto the couch next to him. He sat up stiffly, trying to find the position that caused his aching muscles the least pain. He read the book, his mind drifting back to the machine sitting in front of him. He needed to finish reading so he could get back to work. He flipped through the pages to see how many he had left, then went back to reading. He finally reached the end of the chapter and handed the book back to Kaylee.

“How about you read the next chapter, sweetie, while I work on my machine.”

“Ok.”

She curled up on the couch and read out loud to him while he contemplated the machine. He went into his work room and grabbed some essential parts and tools, carrying them back to the green couch where he carefully laid everything

down next to Kaylee. She stopped reading a moment to look at it all, then went back to her book. Travis tinkered away, not noticing when Kaylee took her book upstairs. He worked through the night, then collapsed on the green couch. But his body ached and he couldn't find a comfortable position. He went upstairs and laid down on his bed. For the first time in a long time, he managed to fall asleep there.

Over the next few days he and Henry continued digging during the day, while Travis worked on the machine at night. The smaller hole was progressing well, and the machine was starting to take shape. But his body continued to ache, and he started taking an Ibuprofen or two each day before he went to bed. This helped him sleep, but when he woke up the same old pain was there waiting for him. Still, he toiled on.

One day Cynthia came downstairs while Travis and Henry were digging.

“Travis, it’s your secretary. She needs to talk to you.”

Travis took the phone and sat down on the green couch. “What is it, Liz?”

“Mrs. Felsano called and she’s threatening to hire another attorney. She says you’re not doing anything on their claim.”

“Well, she’s right, I’m not. Did you tell her I’m on vacation?”

“Yeah, she wanted to know where and I said I couldn’t give that information out. Then she said she would start looking for a new attorney.”

“All right, give me her number and I’ll call her. After an hour or so of listening to her complain she usually calms down.”

Liz gave him the number and he called up Mrs. Felsano, occasionally peeking in on Henry who had slowed down his pace considerably.

“Mrs. Felsano, how nice to hear your voice. This is Travis Adler. What can I do for you?”

“What have you done for me is more like it. How can you just run off in the middle of a case?”

“Well, even lawyers take a vacation once in a while.”

“I think you should finish one thing before starting another.”

“But I always have pending cases.”

“That’s your problem. Anyway, I want the status on my husband’s case.”

“I have the case motioned up for trial but there are some depositions we still need to schedule. So once we have those out of the way we should be--”

“How long will that take, another year?”

“No no no. A few months. I’m just waiting for opposing counsel to get back to me with some dates. We’ll schedule the depositions and then we’re off to the races.”

“I thought you already took depositions.”

“That was of the doctors, now we need to talk to the vocational expert.”

“Why didn’t you do that sooner.”

“It’s all part of the flow of the case. One thing at a time.”

“I see, that’s how you lawyers do it so you can bill more time.”

“As you’ll recall, I’m charging a contingency fee, so the time I spend on the case won’t affect my fee.”

“Well I just wish you were being a little more diligent is all.”

“I’ll be getting back to work on the case just as soon as my vacation is over. Don’t you worry about a thing. Goodbye, it was a pleasure talking to you.”

He hung up the phone. He felt like he needed to come up for air. A second later his phone rang. Caller ID showed it was Mrs. Felsano. Dear god, he thought, I’ve given her my home number. Travis turned off the ringer on the phone and set it on the couch. He checked on Henry who was sitting on the floor. Henry looked up and didn’t bother to get up. Cynthia called down the stairs.

“Travis, there’s a Mrs. Felsano on the phone for you.”

“Tell her . . . tell her I’ll get back to her tomorrow.”

“I’m not your secretary, you tell her.”

Travis picked up the phone again. “Mrs. Felsano--”

“I don’t like being hung up on.”

“I said goodbye.”

“Well I wasn’t finished.”

“Mrs. Felsano, I’m on vacation. We can talk when I get back to the office. Now please don’t call me back.”

“I think I need to find an attorney who takes this case seriously.”

“Perhaps you do. Goodbye Mrs. Felsano.”

He hung up and once more placed the phone on the couch, then went back to the storage bin and continued digging.

The week was over, but the work was not done. The machine sat on the floor by the couch. The hole was looking better, but there was still more digging to be done. But not this morning. Travis got up early and took the train to work. He pulled a legal pad out of his bag and reviewed some of the modifications that still needed to be made on the machine. He'd arranged for Henry to come by that night so they could finish digging the hole. Then he and Henry could move the machine into position, and Travis could finish working on it there.

The train jerked to a halt, seemingly for no reason. Travis looked around at the other people on the train. No one spoke or made eye contact. He used to like that about the train but now it bothered him. He'd been in the basement most of the past week and for the first time he felt the need for a little human contact. He went back to his notes. The machine would need an enclosure, something he could place over it that would help keep the sound waves from bouncing around the storage bin. Ideally it would not just block the waves but also reflect them down. Travis sketched out different possible solutions to this problem. He became so focused that he missed his stop and had to walk an extra couple of blocks to work.

His office was as he'd left it, except his inbox was stacked high with letters and medical records to review. He turned on the computer to find several hundred emails waiting for him. The light on his phone blinked, indicating voicemails waiting for his attention, but he didn't look to see how many. He grabbed a yellow sticky note from a pad by his pen, and wrote down, "email, inbox, voicemail." He put a check box next to each. This would be his schedule for the day. Travis started with the email but only got through the first few when Liz poked her head in the door.

“Well, look who the cat dragged in. How was your vacation, or break, or whatever it was?”

“It was . . . productive.”

“You’ve got some catching up to do so I’ll leave you alone.”

She closed the door and left him to his toil. He slogged through the seemingly endless emails. Some were from other attorneys asking for an agreed trial date or inquiring about the status of settlement contracts. But most were mindless exchanges between various people at the firm, discussing and arguing things of little consequence. So much time was spent on these ever escalating exchanges, Travis wondered how anyone got their work done. He tried to delete these but was drawn in to the endless back and forth, the needling and the over reacting. The more he read, the more his sense of needing human contact evaporated. He’d forgotten how petty people were. Ninety-nine percent of the time it’s just bullshit spread out to cover up some insecurity or mistake. The other one percent of the time you could crack through to something genuine, something real, but only briefly. No one could dwell comfortably in reality for long, and soon that window would close and the curtain of bullshit would fall to cover it again. On the whole, life was spent wallowing in the shit, yet still painfully aware that there was something real out there, it’s just that you can’t see it.

Time crawled along and the more emails he read and deleted, the more pointless it all seemed. What on earth was he doing? Why read and delete, read and delete. Why not cut to the chase and delete them all. And yet, there were a few important messages buried in there somewhere. Depending on how you defined important. Travis finally gave in and selected all the emails, then hit delete. The computer asked him if he was sure, and he just laughed, then clicked “Yes.” It took the computer half a minute to delete them all. Down the digital toilet. Suddenly there was silence on the screen, a great open space. Travis breathed a deep sigh. He turned to the stack of paper in his inbox. He picked it up and felt its weight in his hands, then tossed it to the outbox. Done.

And then there was the blinking light on his phone. He played the first message. It was Mrs. Felsano. He deleted the message without listening to it. The next was also from Mrs. Felsano. Delete. The next was from a client asking when his case would be settled. “It’s been over 6 years, when are you going to settle this thing?”

Travis looked his case up on the computer. He'd been injured 6 years ago, Travis had been handling his case for most of that time, fighting to get his benefits and medical bills paid. His doctor released him back to work a month ago, at which time Travis contacted the opposing counsel to start settlement negotiations. So it hadn't really been 6 years. It had been a month. Delete.

Message after message was either an irate client or an irate Mrs. Felsano, and each was duly deleted, faster and faster, until Travis wasn't listening to them at all. Just deleting, deleting, deleting. It felt good. It felt clean.

The door opened and Murray walked in, sitting down next to Travis.

"So, back for more. How was the vacation?"

"Good. Good to be back."

"Back in the saddle. So I got a call from a Mrs. Feltsen."

"Felsano."

"Yeah. Very angry lady. What's going on with her case?"

"Actually, she doesn't have one. It's her husband's case. I'm getting it ready for trial. Setting up depositions."

"She's under the impression you aren't doing anything."

"Yes, she's told me as much."

"She said you hung up on her."

"Not true, but I'm aware that she thinks I hung up on her, and in fact I would like to hang up on her, so it's close to the same thing."

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

"Look Travis, we all have our problem clients. My dad taught me how to deal with them. You just have to let them know that you're not the enemy. Get them angry at someone else. The insurance company, their employer, whoever. That's the enemy."

"I think in Mrs. Felsano's case everyone is the enemy."

"Well, you always get a few like that. You just have to deal with it. We don't want to lose a case, right?"

"Right."

"Good man."

Murray got up and was on his way out when he stopped. Travis thought he was going to say something else, but his ass did the talking. A short intense fart squeaked out. Then he continued out the door. Travis picked up a file folder and waved at the air. He wondered if Murray was even aware that he was farting. Perhaps he was so used to doing it he didn't even realize it might seem rude and repulsive to other people. Sometimes a bad habit just becomes a part of the personality more than an isolated behavior.

Travis got up and walked over to Liz's cubicle. She was on the phone so he sat on the edge of her desk and waited. She was talking to a client.

"He's back in the office today, but he has meetings all morning. I'll have him call you just as soon as possible . . . yes, he's very focused on your case . . . I'll let him know. Ok. Bye." She hung up and shook her head at Travis. "They all want you, Trav."

"Great."

"You want a list of people to call?"

"Hit me."

She handed him a list of clients. "Those are the ones that have called so far this morning. I'll email you each new one as they call. You're going to have a busy day."

Travis took the list and went back to his office. He called the first client, Barb Martin. He'd already tried her case and won. Now it was on appeal. Like most clients whose cases were on appeal, she was getting impatient.

"Mrs. Martin--"

"Why is my case taking so long?"

"As I've mentioned, it's on appeal, we're waiting for the judge to enter a briefing schedule and then--"

"I don't understand a word you're saying. All I know is this case is dragging along and I don't have any money."

"Once we get through the appeals process the respondent will have to pay you the benefits that were awarded at trial. Assuming we win the appeal. And we should."

"But when will that be?"

"I can't say exactly, but it could be up to two years."

“Two years? That’s not acceptable. You’re doing a horrible job. What am I paying you people for, to sit around twiddling your thumbs?”

“Actually, you haven’t paid us a penny yet. It’s a contingency fee, if you’ll recall.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“No . . . factual. It’s just meant to be factual.”

“Oh, you’re quick with the facts when it comes to your fee, but it’s all just legal mumbo jumbo when I want to know when my case will be finished.”

“Mrs. Martin, we want to get paid as much as you do. If I could make the case go faster I would.”

“Sure. By taking a vacation while I’m sitting here starving.”

Travis made a few more phone calls and was treated to similarly unpleasant discussions. Back when he was in law school he’d had visions of himself one day serving as a champion of justice. Righting wrongs. Solving problems. Making the winning argument and earning his client’s respect and gratitude. The sad reality was that most of his clients had little understanding of what he was doing for them, and rarely thanked him for his efforts. He was getting them money in excess of his annual salary, yet they would act like they were the poor and downtrodden while he was the rich attorney without a care in the world. If only they knew how little a beginning associate made, and how much of that was eaten up paying back student loans. But Travis was a professional. He would never discuss such things with a client. Instead, he tried to patiently explain the process to them, that it took time, that there were many other cases before the judge and each one would be dealt with in turn. This never seemed to calm anyone down. It only further infuriated them, since it directly conflicted with their feeling that their case was certainly more important than all the others. Sometimes he felt like getting all 237 of his clients into a room and asking them to raise their hand if they felt theirs was the most important case. Then he would watch as they attack each other, arguing why their case is the most important. The scene would devolve into a riot of disabled people hitting, kicking, and biting each other. The thought both amused and depressed Travis. The fact is, most people go through life thinking they are the most important one. It was the root cause of everything from small arguments to world wars.

After a few more phone calls Travis was half way through his list. Then he looked at his email and saw that Liz had been sending him more and more people to call. He calculated that for every person he talked to, Liz was adding two to the list. It was impossible. He was just falling deeper and deeper. What was the point.

Travis got up from his desk and walked down the hall to Murray's office. Murray was leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed. His mouth was slightly open, and there was a little drool dripping from the corner. Travis considered coming back later, but he couldn't go back to the list of phone calls.

"Murray."

Nothing. He tried again a little louder.

"Murray."

Murray stirred, then opened one eye, which searched around the room, then slowly focused on Travis. The other eye opened. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and sat up.

"Travis, what can I do for you."

"I'm thinking I need another week."

"Another week."

"Of vacation."

"You were just on vacation."

"Right, and now I need another one."

"But, what about your cases?"

"They'll have to wait."

"But they can't. The clients will go nuts."

"The clients are already nuts. Even when I'm working on their cases they act as though I'm doing nothing."

"True, but they are generally wrong. We like it when they are wrong."

"Yes, well perhaps we should try letting them be right."

"No. The clients can sense when they are right, and then they go on the attack with even more vigor. I've seen it happen before. It's not pretty."

"What happens?"

"Much screaming and yelling, but then they actually follow through on their threats to fire us instead of just calling again in a few days to scream and yell some more."

“Maybe we could reassign my cases to someone else.”

“Travis, you’re a good man, and I don’t want to insult you, but there’s no nice way to put this. You are the bottom of the totem pole. There is no one else to assign your cases to. Cases only move down the pole, never up. When you’re higher up the pole you’ll come to appreciate that.”

“I’m sure I will.” Travis was about to leave when he remembered the other issue he needed to bring up. “So . . . the other thing is I need an advance on my salary.”

“We prefer not to do that.”

“Yeah, I can imagine, but it’s just I’ve got the recent expenses from my . . . vacation, and the credit card bill will be coming, and--”

“Two weeks advance, but you need to plan what you’re going to do without a paycheck for two weeks.”

“Right.”

“Fiscal responsibility, Travis.”

“Yes. Right.”

Travis went back to his office. He hadn’t quite contemplated that the two week advance would immediately result in no paycheck for two weeks. Somehow, he’d envisioned paying it back a little at a time. But he wasn’t exactly in a bargaining position. Fortunately, he had most of the parts he needed for his machine, and the digging was done, so there weren’t any huge expenses left to complete the project. But when would he be able to work on it if he couldn’t take another week off.

Travis went back to returning phone calls until he saw Murray leaving for the day at 4. He waited a few minutes, then he got up and left, telling Liz on the way out, “keep emailing me the phone calls, I’ll get to them tomorrow.”

On the train back home all he could think about was getting back to his machine. The idea of it sitting there with no one working on it was maddening. The time he’d wasted talking to clients was lost forever, and only served to further separate him from his goal. He needed time off work and he needed it now. Not just sneaking out early or coming in late. He needed another week off. How could Murray, who routinely takes 5 weeks off a year and barely works the rest of the time begrudge him one more week.

Travis got home and tried to sneak in through the storage bin window, but it was closed. He pushed at it to no avail. He walked in through the front door and

called out hello, but no one was there. Down in the basement he got back to work. He was soon back in the flow of the project, and time melted away into the fabric of reality. He heard Cynthia and Kaylee come home, but continued working for hours. Perhaps he could cram in enough work that he could then go to the office tomorrow, close his door, and grab a nap in his chair, just like Murray did every day. Then he wouldn't need the vacation days.

Travis popped the storage room window open and peeked out. He could see Henry slowly making his way up the sidewalk and called out to him. Henry jumped when he heard his name, then he walked up to the small window. Travis gestured to him.

"Come on in."

"I'm too old to be crawling in and out of windows, Mr. Travis."

"Ok, I'll meet you at the door."

Travis let Henry in and they went downstairs to the storage room. They dug in a slow steady rhythm. Henry looked at Travis.

"This is gonna be it, Mr. Travis?"

"I suppose so."

"You don't have some other work around the house I could do?"

"Henry, I wish I did, but this is it."

They finished the hole and carefully carried the machine over. It was almost too big to get through the door and it was getting heavier with each step. They centered it over the hole and carefully lowered it in. There was just a little extra space around the machine. It looked good sitting there. Travis wiped his hands on his shirt and looked over at Henry.

"Well Henry, what do you think?"

"I think I have to find a new job, Mr. Travis."

"Yeah. But haven't you saved up anything from what I've been paying you?"

Henry laughed. "I've been living on that money. It doesn't go far."

"I suppose not. I wish I could pay you more, but I'm barely making it myself."

"Mm hmm."

"You'd be surprised."

Travis handed Henry his last payment and took him upstairs.

"Can I get you some water before you go?"

“No thanks.”

“See you around, Henry. Good luck to you.”

“Thank you Mr. Travis.”

Henry left and Travis went back downstairs to take a look at the storage bin. The machine looked like it was in a sunken throne. It was a thing of beauty. Travis stood back and admired it. It was getting close, very close. He would have to wait until Cynthia and Kaylee were out again to test it. But waiting was maddening. Perhaps if he just turned it on for a few seconds at a low setting, just to make sure everything was functioning. Travis plugged it in and set the dial to zero, then flipped the switch. He slowly turned the dial and waited, turned it a little more and waited. He was getting the same queasy feeling again, deep in his stomach. He nudged the dial up just a touch. The wall seemed to be vibrating. He touched it with his hand and could feel the slow movement. He touched the ceiling. Same thing. He eased the dial back down again, then clicked the machine off. He would definitely need to build some sort of enclosure for the machine. Travis sat down with his legal pad and reviewed his sketches, trying to simplify the design so he could build the enclosure in a reasonable amount of time. There was still so much to do.

At work the next morning Travis called more clients. The list had grown exponentially. Client after client asked the same questions and was dissatisfied with the same answers. At about 10:30 Murray arrived for the day and gave Travis a wave as he sauntered down the hall. Half an hour later he was back and sat down, waiting for Travis to finish his call.

“So Travis, I’m glad to see you spending ear time with the clients.”

“Yup. Plenty of ear time.”

“I got a call from that Mrs. Feltson again.”

“Felsano.”

“She fired us.”

“You know, technically she can’t do that. It’s her husband’s case.”

“I’m not interested in technically. We’re fired.”

“Well, I guess I saw that coming. She’s been impossible from day one.”

“We can’t just lose clients, Travis. It’s bad for business.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s a bit of a tautology.”

“A what?”

“Nothing. I’m . . . agreeing with you.”

“Good man. Anyway, let’s keep the clients happy. Whatever it takes.”

“Will do.”

“Nose to the grindstone.”

“You bet.”

Murray wandered off. Travis got back to his phone calls. It all became a blur after a while. One endless complaint from a sea of indistinguishable clients. He worked through lunch time, figuring he could save a few bucks and get more calls answered.

At 3:30 he saw Murray sneaking out and soon followed suit. As soon as he left the office and stepped outside he felt the life coming back into his body. Colors seemed more vibrant as he walked to the train. He smiled at the people he passed. Until one of them gave him a dirty look back. Then he resumed his usual expressionless walking-down-the-street-face.

When he got home Kaylee was at the dining room table coloring and Cynthia was in the kitchen. Travis gave Kaylee a kiss on the head, then went downstairs. He measured the machine and the space around it, then made more notes on his legal pad. He ran back upstairs, gave Kaylee another kiss on the head, called out "I'll be right back," and jogged out to the garage. He drove to the nearest lumber yard, which was just the other side of town. He'd figured out approximately how much wood he needed, but decided to load up just in case. One can never have too much lumber. He carefully loaded the wood into his car trunk and the back seat, with pieces sticking out the windows at odd angles. Then he slowly drove back home with the blinkers on. An occasional car would honk as it passed him.

When Travis got home he opened the storage room window and started feeding the wood into the room. Some pieces were too large to go in this way and he had to carry them one by one through the front door and down the stairs. Cynthia watched him doing this but said nothing. Travis set to work cutting the wood down to size. The sound of the circular saw brought Kaylee down the stairs. She stood in the doorway watching him. After a while she drifted back upstairs. Then Cynthia came down.

"How much longer are going to be doing this?" she yelled out.

"Just a couple more minutes." Travis answered.

She went back upstairs. Travis finished up and set the boards out on the floor in front of the green couch. He could build the enclosure walls here, but he'd have to assemble them in the storage bin. He got his power drill and screws and began putting the walls together. The interior side of the walls would have thin boards sticking out at angles to either trap stray sound waves or reflect them back down. He had to carefully measure the angle for each of these before screwing them in place. This took a long time as there were many of these angled boards on each wall. Kaylee came down to watch him again.

"Whatcha doing?"

“Making a little house for the machine to live in.”

“Can you make me a doll house?”

“You already have a doll house.”

“I want a bigger one.”

“Some day, sweetie.”

She watched a while longer, then went back upstairs. Travis was getting faster at placing and securing the angled boards on the enclosure walls. He had one wall of four finished. The roof would need to have a different design and he was saving that for last since it would be the trickiest. As he started on the second wall, Cynthia came down.

“I thought you said you would be finished with this project by now.”

“It took a little longer than expected. But I’m in the home stretch.”

“And the vacation you promised?”

“I asked Murray about taking another week off and he said it wasn’t a good time for that.”

“When will it be a good time?”

“He didn’t say.”

“He didn’t say or you didn’t ask.”

“I decided not to push the issue. He was already in a foul mood.”

“I thought you said he’s always in a good mood.”

“We lost a client, so he was a little cranky.”

“We or you?”

“Ok, I lost a client. But it’s not my fault. Even Murray sees that.”

“Uh huh. And you don’t think that has anything to do with his cranky mood or the fact that he said no to taking another week off.”

“I see your point Cynthia, but the bottom line is we just have to be a little patient. You know I’m still the newest guy there. I need to move up the totem pole.”

“And you’re going to do that by leaving early each day?”

Travis stopped what he was doing and looked up at Cynthia for the first time since she’d started talking. She looked tired and frustrated and concerned. Travis smiled at her, but she didn’t smile back.

“Look, Cynthia. I just need to get this out of my system. Then everything will be back to normal.”

“What’s back to normal. You go back to working normal hours and still leave me to deal with the house and Kaylee and everything else. Travis, normal sucks. And this sucks worse. So don’t tell me things will go back to normal, because I don’t want normal, or super crappy normal, or any of this.”

Travis got up and walked toward Cynthia, but she turned and went upstairs. He started to follow her up and she looked back at him and said, “just leave me alone. Work on your stupid project and forget I exist.” Travis stood on the stairs unsure of what to do. It didn’t seem like anything he said was going to placate her, so what was the point of trying. He went back downstairs and returned to the task at hand. He finished the second wall in half the time it had taken him to do the first one. He continued working through the night until all four walls were done. Then he went upstairs to see if Cynthia had calmed down. All the lights were out. He went up to the second floor and checked Kaylee’s room. They were both asleep on Kaylee’s small bed. Travis went back downstairs and continued working on the enclosure.

At first Travis wasn't sure where he was when he woke up. Somehow he'd fallen asleep in the storage bin, one hand still holding the power drill, the other holding onto a scrap of wood. He was leaning against the wall and his neck was at an odd angle. When he straightened out there was a sharp pain in his neck. He slowly twisted his head back and forth until he could hold it straight up. Peering out the window, he saw that it was dark outside, the first hints of morning were appearing as purplish orange stains against the black sky. Travis stood up carefully, stretching out his sore limbs and working on his neck some more. He looked over at the machine. The four walls of the enclosure were positioned on each side of it, ready to be assembled. He peered out the storage room door into the rest of the basement, and saw the completed roof sitting there. He was still incredibly tired, and a bad headache was working its way up his sore neck into the left side of his head. Still, he decided it was best to continue on with his work. He got his hammer and gently tapped the walls into the small space between the edge of the hole and the machine. They fit in snugly. He then screwed them together and stood back to admire his work. The headache was getting worse. He knew he'd soon have to take a break, but he was so close to finishing he couldn't stop now.

He carried the roof piece into the storage room and strung the power cord through a hole in its center, then placed the roof on top of the four walls and screwed it down. It was only then that he realized he had no way to turn the dial on the machine. He needed to drill another small hole in the roof piece and then attach a dowel rod to the dial. The rod would protrude out of the enclosure. Travis went back to his work room and found a thin dowel rod, but then thought perhaps a straightened coat hanger would be better. He went upstairs

and grabbed one from the hall closet, then went back downstairs straightening it out along the way. He unscrewed and removed the roof, attached the thick wire to the dial, drilled a small hole, and put the roof back on, feeding the wire through the hole.

His headache was now reaching the excruciating level. He'd had migraines before, although they seemed to only come once or twice a year. They were generally triggered by stress, but sometimes it could be something as simple as some wine or chocolate. Travis tried to think back to the last time he'd had any chocolate. Or wine. Then he tried to remember anything he'd eaten in the past few days. His mind was a blank. A painful blank. He remembered the time in college when he'd finally coaxed a girl he liked back to his apartment. They'd been drinking wine from a box and were both pretty drunk. They were sitting on his futon when the headache started. He tried to ignore it but it only got worse. He started to clutch his head between his hands and the girl asked him what was wrong, but he could barely talk. The pain was so intense. All he wanted was to be rid of it. He wished he could float out of his body and be free of the suffering. He laid down and the girl got up and left.

Travis went back to his work but it was very hard to concentrate, and the sound of the power drill only aggravated his headache. When the roof was placed correctly he turned the dial down by twisting the wire, which he'd bent at the top to make a little pointer. He plugged the machine in and slowly twisted the wire to the right. His head was pounding and he felt nauseous. He continued to twist the wire, placing a hand along the side of the enclosure in the way one feels for a heartbeat. He continued slowly twisting the wire, but felt that at any second he was going to be sick. He could feel a slight vibration in the enclosure wall, and the joint between two of the walls started to emit a low hum. The wall rattled harder, then split open. He could feel waves pouring out of the split joint. Some dirt kicked up from the floor and filtered in and out of the opening like a swarm of tiny black bees. His head felt like it was cracking. He staggered off to the bathroom where he immediately vomited into the sink. His guts felt like they were being squeezed in a vice. He looked up at the mirror. Its heavy frame was rattling hard against the wall. Travis felt weak and dizzy. He lifted the mirror off the wall and looked for somewhere to set it. He felt another wave of nausea

coming and suddenly the mirror slipped from his hands. The corner of the metal frame hit the sink hard, cracking it down the middle. Travis slipped and grabbed the sink with both hands. He fell to the floor with half the cracked sink clutched in each hand, the remains of his vomit spilling to the floor. Travis crawled back toward the machine and pulled out the plug. He laid down in the cool dirt next to the machine clutching his head. The pain was unbearable. He passed out.

Someone was shaking him from far away. Someone was saying something. The words just swirled around and around his mind. Slowly, he opened his eyes and saw Cynthia. She looked upset. More so than usual. She was yelling, and both her face and her words were slowly coming into focus.

“What the hell happened, Travis. Why won't you answer me?”

“I . . . I . . . give me a second.”

He sat up, then slowly stood. His headache was gone, but his neck was still sore and he massaged it slowly with one hand. He saw that Cynthia was crying and he tried to wipe a tear from her face, but she pushed his hand away.

“Travis, what the hell is going on?”

“Nothing. I just had a headache and needed to sleep.”

“You just had a headache? What happened to the bathroom?”

Travis thought back and grimaced. “I can . . . clean that up.”

“We have no sink. And what is that godawful smell in there?”

“I'll take care of it, don't worry.”

“Travis, I can't take this anymore. I heard something smash to the floor and came down here and saw the mess in the bathroom, and then I found you passed out in here. I just don't understand what's going on.”

Travis tried to take her in his arms, but she backed away.

“I can't take it, Travis. I can't.”

She went back upstairs. He could hear Kaylee on her way down.

“Mommy, what's going on?”

“Nothing dear, go back to bed, it's too early to get up. Sleep for another half hour and then we'll get up and get ready for school.”

Travis looked at the enclosure. Most of it was fine, but one wall had cracked off completely. The machine was more powerful than he'd expected, but he would need to test it at higher levels before contacting the media about his invention. He also needed to add more even power to the machine. Travis reluctantly unscrewed the enclosure and set the pieces to the side. He opened the machine and removed one of the preamps. Then he pulled out another amp. They would both need to be more powerful, and in turn they would need more power. He'd need a second power cable that could reach the other side of the basement so it drew power off a different circuit. He'd need to improve his bent coat hanger control and put a real dial on it. And he needed an external power switch. A "kill switch" in case something went wrong. He set to work and was well into what he was doing when Cynthia came down.

"Travis, I need to lay down. I feel so overwhelmed. Can you take Kaylee to school."

"But Cynthia, I'm almost done with the machine. I'm so close."

"Just take her to school. I got her breakfast, I got her dressed, brushed her hair. Just take her."

He looked up at her. She looked exhausted. "Ok. I'm sorry. Of course I'll take her. You rest." He set down his tools reluctantly.

Kaylee was excited to have Travis drive her to school.

"Will you come inside with me? And meet my teacher? And all the kids will see you?"

"I've met your teacher. Nice lady. But I'm in a bit of a hurry today, sweetie."

"How come you're driving me and not mommy?"

"Mommy needed a rest."

"What was that noise last night?"

"Nothing dear."

"Why is mommy so tired?"

"I think I woke her up with all the noise I was making in the basement."

"You woke me up too, but I'm not tired."

"That's good dear. Well, here we are."

Kaylee struggled with her seatbelt, then pulled it off and stared at him. "Come on daddy."

“Come on what?”

“You’re supposed to take me inside.”

“Can’t you go in by yourself?”

“Nope.”

Travis parked the car and took Kaylee into the school. She showed him her classroom and started introducing her to the other students as they arrived. Mrs. Krasner came over and said hi.

“Good to see you Mr. Chirter.”

“Adler.”

“I’m sorry, of course. Your wife is Chirter. I hope she’s feeling ok.”

“Feeling ok?”

“Well, it’s just she normally drops off Kaylee.”

“Oh, she’s fine. I just wanted to . . . take a turn. Dropping of Kaylee.”

“I see, everything’s alright then?”

“Good as gold.”

“That’s nice, well I need to bring class to order.”

“Yes, good to see you.”

Travis escaped and got back to the car, almost backing into a mom and her son as he fled the parking lot. When he got home Cynthia was upstairs sleeping. He went downstairs and got back to work. First he replaced the amps with more powerful ones he’d salvaged from an old stereo. He added the new power chord and found a way of rigging up the dial so that the physical dial was on the outside of the enclosure where it belonged. He also added external power switches and then put the enclosure back together. Travis plugged in both power chords, one running to the other side of the basement. He turned the dial down and flipped on the two power switches. Then he slowly eased up the dial. Almost immediately he felt a low vibration. He increased the power slowly. The queasy feeling was back, but he tried to ignore it. He continued to turn the dial and felt a strange pressure on his ears. The whole room seemed like the inside of a giant cube of jello, slowly undulating. He kept turning the dial until it was between the one and the two. He walked unsteadily out of the storage bin and closed the door behind him. The undulating feeling was still there, but it wasn’t as bad. Perhaps he could rig up a remote control so he wouldn’t have to be next to the machine

when he turned up the dial. Travis grabbed a legal pad and started scribbling down notes. He walked back to the work room and rummaged through the remains of Kaylee's toys and other electronic devices he'd scavenged from around the house. He found the radio control from the monster truck. It had a pretty good range, and he could probably boost it with a little tweaking.

Travis was well into modifying the remote when Cynthia appeared in the work room doorway.

"I feel sick."

"What's wrong?"

"I woke from my nap with a headache and feeling nauseous, and by the time I made it down here I felt like the room was spinning."

"That's odd, I turned off the--"

Travis realized he'd left the machine on and ran to the storage bin. When he opened the door he felt a wave of nausea overcome him. He fell forward, grabbing at the power switches, managing to turn one off but not the other. He stood back up, feeling dizzy. The entire room seemed to be pulsating. He lunged for the other power switch and managed to shut off the machine. He sat in the dirt next to the machine. After a while Cynthia appeared at the doorway.

"Travis, what on earth are you doing. What is that machine doing?"

"I think I need a better enclosure. Perhaps some sort of sound treatment for the entire storage bin to shield the rest of the house from the effects of the machine."

"Travis, why don't you destroy that damned machine before it destroys all of us."

"It's just a little glitch, Cynthia. I can fix it. I just need more shielding. It's going to be ok."

Cynthia felt too sick to argue. She went back upstairs and Travis returned to his work room. He grabbed some of his original sketches of the enclosure and started re-working them, adding more sound wave traps and a more solid exterior. This would mean his remote would have to be even more powerful to get through the thicker shell. Then he designed some sub-bass sound wave traps for the walls of the storage bin. He shoved the plans into his pocket and drove back to the lumber yard, picking up the supplies he would need to better shield the house from the

effects of the machine. He also stopped off at a moving supply store and bought some moving blankets.

When he got back to the house he brought his supplies downstairs and got back to work. Cynthia came down.

“Travis, your office called, they want to know what time you’re coming in today.”

“Um, coming in today.”

“Work, Travis. Your employer.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot my vacation ended.”

“Well they didn’t.”

“Ok, well tell them I’ll be in this afternoon.”

“You tell them. I’m not your secretary.”

Travis set down the receiver box he’d been working on and went upstairs, grabbing his cell phone from his bag. When he turned it on he saw there were 35 new voicemails from that day alone. He called up the office and asked for Liz.

“Hey boss, where are you?”

“Came down with the flu. Vomiting, headaches. Nasty stuff.”

“Well you better get healthy. Murray was talking to Kevin in the break room and I overheard something about looking for a new associate, and I don’t know if that means in addition to you or instead of you but they stopped talking when they saw me, so I took it as a bad sign.” Travis poked his head in the fridge and pulled out a piece of cold pizza, which he nibbled on while walking around the kitchen.

“Just tell him I’m sick and I’ll be back soon.”

“And all the clients that were pissed off when you took a week vacation, tell them the same thing?”

“Sure.”

“Ok, Trav. Get well soon.”

“Working on it.”

Travis finished the slice of pizza. Too salty. He was about to put the cell phone away when he thought maybe he could use parts from it to make a better receiver for the remote control. He took it down to his workshop and opened it up. It was all tiny chips and he had no idea which one was which. He set it to the side

and decided to continue with his original plans on improving the remote and receiver. After another couple hours it was finished. He was about to test it out when Cynthia came downstairs.

“I’m going to pick up Kaylee. Did you call work?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. You feeling better?”

“Much.”

She left and Travis waited to hear the door close before going to test out the new remote. He took the dial off the machine and attached the small receiver box to the rod that protruded from the enclosure. He turned on the two power switches and slowly turned the steering wheel on the monster truck remote. The receiver box made a whirring noise as it slowly increased the power to the machine. Travis turned the wheel back the other way and the box whirred again, turning the power back down. Perfect. He closed the door to the storage bin and went upstairs to the kitchen, then out on the porch which was above the storage bin. He turned the wheel to the right and waited until he could feel a very slight slow warbling vibration in the floor below him. He also felt slightly sick to his stomach again. He turned it up more. Then he went upstairs to the second floor and into his bedroom. He didn’t feel much of anything up there. He turned the wheel to the right. A little more. And he felt it again. The wavy dizzy feeling. The remote was powerful enough to work from upstairs. Hopefully that would still be the case when he finished the enclosure. He turned the wheel all the way to the left and went back down to the basement. Setting the remote down, he got to work on the new enclosure and the sound wave traps on the walls. He noticed while walking around the storage bin taking measurements that the glass had shattered out of the small window. He cleaned up the broken glass and boarded up the window. This had been the only light in the small room, so he got a table lamp from upstairs and put that in the room. He continued measuring, sawing, hammering, and screwing together the larger enclosure that would fit over the original one. He heard Cynthia and Kaylee get home but continued working so he could finish before bedtime.

Kaylee came down and watched him for a while.

“Whatcha building?”

“I want to trap the sound waves in the storage bin so they don't go bouncing around the house. I want them to go straight down into the ground.”

“Why?”

“Because that's where the tectonic plates are, and that's what I'm trying to hit with the waves.”

“What's tecton . . . tecton . . .”

“Tectonic plates. It's like big pieces of the earth that rub up against each other and make earthquakes. I'm sending sound down to them.”

“So you're gonna play them some music?”

“Something like that.”

“Can I help?”

“You're helping just by keeping me company.”

“I want to really help.”

“These tools are dangerous, sweetie. It's best if you just watch.”

“I don't wanna just watch.” She went back upstairs, and he heard her complain to Cynthia, “Mom, daddy won't let me help.”

Cynthia came down, looked around, and went back up. “It's too dangerous, dear. Stay up here with me.”

Travis focused back on his work. He put up the last of the boards, then hung the packing blankets up at odd angles inside the storage bin, and draped one over the machine. He closed the door and went upstairs to the dining room where Cynthia and Kaylee sat. Kaylee was working on her homework, some simple addition. Travis cleared his throat and they looked up.

“Ladies, you're about to witness history in the making. Kaylee, would you like the honor of turning the wheel on this remote?”

“You want me to drive the truck around?”

“No, it controls the machine downstairs. I want you to slowly turn it this way. See? Like this.”

“Ok.”

Kaylee took the remote and slowly turned it to the right. Nothing happened. She turned it more and looked up at Travis.

“Try a little more sweetie, but slowly.”

She turned it more and then he felt the slow vibration coming up through the floor. Kaylee turned it more and the vibration became stronger. Cynthia stood up.

“What is that, Travis?”

“It’s the machine. There are still some waves escaping up into the house, but it’s not as bad as before. Keep going Kaylee.”

Kaylee turned the wheel a bit more, and then more again. All three of them could feel it in their stomachs and coming up through the floor. Travis took the remote back.

“Let’s keep it there for a while.”

“Travis, why does it make me feel so sick.”

“It’s just an odd side effect of the waves, nothing to worry about.”

“Daddy, I don’t feel good.”

“Don’t feel *well*. Ok, I’ll turn it down.”

Travis reluctantly turned it all the way down. “I guess I’ll wait till you guys are out of the house before I do more testing. I just wanted you to be here for this test. Kaylee had the control up twice as high as I’ve had it in previous tests, and it still worked fine.”

“Travis turn it off already.”

“I did. Maybe the signal isn’t getting through. I’ll go downstairs and shut it off to be sure.”

Travis went down to the basement and into the storage bin, flipping the power switches off. He went out into the basement and placed a hand against one of the thick wood beams that supported the house. He could still feel the vibration. He kept his hand there until he felt it slowly dying down. He went upstairs again, a bit out of breath from all the climbing.

“How’s that?”

“Better, but I can still feel it, Travis.”

“I think the house keeps vibrating a bit after the machine is off. I didn’t notice that at lower levels. It’s interesting.”

“It’s annoying.”

“Well, I could try to build more shielding, but that will mean having to amplify the signal from the remote even more. Let me think about that.”

Travis went back down to the basement and looked at the enclosure he'd already built. There wasn't room to add more in the cramped room. They would just have to tolerate the discomfort. The machine was essentially finished now. He just needed to run one more test to see at what point the machine would initiate a slight earth tremor. Then he could announce his success and begin the process of convincing the City to evacuate for a couple days so he could run the machine at full power and release pressure between the tectonic plates. Travis mused about how best to approach this, but his thoughts were interrupted by Cynthia calling for him. She sounded upset. When he came up to the living room she was pointing at the wall. There was a thin crack zig zagging up the wall from floor to ceiling.

"Travis, that machine is cracking the house."

"Don't worry, that's just a little crack in the paint. I'll just paint over it and you'll never notice it was there."

"That is not just in the paint, look at it."

"Honey, this isn't even a support wall. It probably just wobbled a little too much during the test and a little crack formed."

"Travis, I'm not going to let you destroy this house just to prove your kooky theory. I want you to stop all this."

"But the machine works. It's too late to stop. This is going to change people's lives. It's worth a few small cracks in the wall."

"Not to me."

"Cynthia--"

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. You need to make a decision what's more important to you, Travis. This stupid machine or your family and home."

"That's a false dichotomy."

Cynthia went upstairs and Travis wandered back down. He went into the storage bin, sat on the dirt floor next to the machine, and tried to think. He was getting claustrophobic and decided to go for a walk outside. As he left his house he saw a car pull up in front of his neighbor Chloe's house. She got out with a man he hadn't seen before. Travis called across the street, "hi Chloe." She gave him a funny look.

“Hello Travis.” She turned awkwardly to the man she was with. “This is my friend. Steve.”

Steve gave a little wave. Travis waved back, and watched them go into Chloe's house. He felt silly standing outside, and went back in to the basement, sitting back down in the storage bin, and thinking about the machine.

Travis woke up laying in the dirt in the storage bin. He got up and stretched, then went upstairs to see if there was anymore pizza in the fridge. He found a piece and devoured it. He wiped the grease off his fingers and looked out the window. It was a full moon. He loved full moons and the way they lit the world as if through a paper bag. Everything had a magical glow in a full moon. He went outside and walked down his block. At the other end he could see a group of teenagers standing around talking and running around. As he got closer he recognized Madeline and walked up to the group, saying to her, “aren’t you out a little late?” The entire group stopped talking and stared at him as though he’d stumbled out of a horror movie. After a moment, Madeline recognized Travis.

“Oh, Mr. Adler. Um. Hi.”

“Stay out of trouble you kids.”

Travis walked off feeling awkward. He could hear the kids whispering behind them, then bursting in to laughter before they ran off down the street in the other direction. Travis watched them disappear around a corner. He could still hear their voices echoing into the night. He walked a couple blocks west to DaSilva Park. He and Cynthia used to take Kaylee there when she was a toddler, but she’d outgrown the small slide and baby swings. Travis sat at the edge of the sand box and looked up at the moon. It was a perfect silvery orange against the clear dark blue sky. He heard someone approaching and looked behind him. A tall skinny cop was walking toward him. He looked grim, the official face of all cops. Either grim or constipated. He walked up to Travis and stood towering over him.

“Everything all right here?”

“I suppose.”

“Can I see some ID please, sir?”

Why did cops always say sir? It obviously wasn't a sign of respect. They were the ones who expected you to respect them. Was it mockery, a play on the fact that they were the ones in power, not you? Were they all playing army man? Or pretending it was the 50s? It was annoying and fake and always rubbed Travis the wrong way. He looked up at the towering figure with the oversized utility belt and holstered gun.

"Why should I show you my ID, I'm not driving a car. I'm sitting. I don't need a license to sit."

"Can I see some ID sir?"

"Are you a robot? You already said that, and I asked you why you need to see ID."

The cop talked into a handset attached near his shoulder. "I have a 10-107 at DaSilva Park, request 11-96."

Travis stared at the cop and shook his head. "You know, you guys really should just say what you mean and drop all the code numbers. It's inefficient and childish."

"Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you for some ID."

"You're going to? I think you already did. Twice. Do you mean to warn me that you'll soon be doing it again? Forget what I said, go back to talking in numbers, it suits you."

The cop rested a hand on his gun, the other up by his shoulder, thumb poised on the button of his handset. Travis tried to ignore him and focus on the moon. He wanted to lose himself in a moon beam and become part of the night. He wanted everything to disappear, to dissolve into a pool of atoms swimming around without meaning. He heard a siren approaching from a few blocks off and decided he'd be better off returning home. He stood up and the cop leapt back as though Travis were about to attack. Travis regarded him with disgust, then walked off towards his house. The cop called after him, "sir, I'm going to have to ask you to stay here."

"Well hopefully you won't do so until I'm gone."

The cop followed behind him. "Sir."

"Stop calling me sir, it's annoying."

The other car arrived, lights flashing. Another cop emerged and half jogged over to the first cop. They stood talking while Travis walked off. He looked back and they were still talking. He continued home and was relieved to see they hadn't followed him. Then he felt disgusted with himself for feeling relieved. Isn't it his right to walk freely about. Why should he be grateful that they ended their improper harassment. He felt angry at the cops and angry at himself and angry at a society that feels the need for humorless men with guns to protect them from themselves. To create a sense of oppression that people think will somehow deter crime.

Travis went down to the basement and stretched out on the green couch, where he laid awake for hours, his mind spinning and spinning. He got up and went to the storage bin, flipping the machine on. He grabbed the remote and brought it up slightly. He sat next to the machine to see if he could feel anything. Any side effect. Any vibration. He slowly increased the power. He could feel it in his stomach now. And a slight dizziness. What was causing it? He walked away from the machine out into the basement, but left the door to the storage bin open. The feeling was gone but bringing up the power brought it back. He walked upstairs, then back down, then shut the machine off. Somehow the waves were creating this secondary effect. He wished there were someone to work on this with. He wished he had a partner. But doing the project on his own forced him to devote himself 100% to it, and there was some value in that. With a partner, each expects the other to do the unpleasant tasks. This way he knew who was responsible for everything. It made things simpler. No. It was definitely better to work alone.

Cynthia and Kaylee were on the first floor getting breakfast. Travis listened to the sounds of them walking, talking, clinking spoons. He felt completely exhausted, but he pushed himself off the couch and went upstairs.

“Good morning, ladies.”

“Good morning, daddy. I'm having oatmeal.”

“That's great, sweetie. Maybe I'll have some too.”

Travis went into the kitchen and hunted around for the oatmeal. He noticed it was 9 am, and called out, “hey Cynthia, isn't Kaylee late for school?”

“It's Saturday, Travis.”

Saturday. Normally his favorite day of the week, but today he wanted to test the machine with no one in the house.

“So . . . got anything planned for today?”

“Yes, I thought we could all go to the park for a walk.”

“DaSilva Park?”

“Of course not. The other one. With the duck pond.”

“Columbus. Sounds like a great idea. Although maybe I'll stick around here.”

Cynthia shot him a look.

At the park Travis and Cynthia watched Kaylee tossing bread crumbs to the ducks. Travis drifted over to the shade of a tree while Cynthia sat down on the grass. There were only a few ducks, and they didn't seem altogether interested in the bread crumbs, but some seagulls flew over and started stealing them off the water. Kaylee ran out of bread and ran up to Cynthia.

“Can we go on the swings?”

Cynthia glanced over to the playground. There were some older boys smoking cigarettes. “I don't think so dear. Let's just walk around the pond.”

“But I want to go on the swings.”

“There are some tough boys over there Kaylee. We’ll do it another time.”

The three of them went walking around the pond. Travis was annoyed by the hot sun, but trailed along behind Cynthia. She seemed to be walking slower and slower, and the sun seemed to be getting hotter and hotter. She turned around and looked at him, but said nothing. Travis walked from shady spot to shady spot and was walking by a bench where an old man sat when the man looked up at him.

“Are you Joe?”

“Nope.”

“You son of a bitch, you’re Joe and you know it.”

Travis looked at the man more closely. His hair was filthy and his eyes were yellowish and dull. “Sorry pal, but you’ve got the wrong guy.”

“Well you tell Joe I’m lookin’ for him. And I’ll find him too.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“See you later. Joe.”

Travis caught up with Cynthia and they watched Kaylee skipping ahead. Cynthia turned to Travis.

“What was that all about.”

“Homeless guy.”

“So since when are you friends with all the homeless people in town.”

“He thought I was Joe.”

“Who’s Joe?”

“No idea. Joe Blow.”

Cynthia laughed. It only lasted a moment, but for that brief moment Travis felt the tension lift. and then the moment was over, and the tension drifted back in.

On the drive home Kaylee sang in the back seat while Travis and Cynthia sat silently up front. When Travis pulled up to the house, Cynthia said, “keep the motor running, I’m going to take Kaylee shopping.” Travis jumped out and went inside. He ran down the stairs, flipped on the power switches, grabbed the remote, and ran up to the second floor. He was out of breath when he got there and sat on the edge of the bed, remote in hand. He slowly turned up the power until he felt the familiar churn in his belly. He continued raising the power, higher and

higher. The house was vibrating slowly. He kept turning it up. The room started to feel like it was warping back and forth. More power, and more, and more. He had to lay down on the bed. He could feel the headache starting. He turned it up more. It was now to the half way point, much higher than he'd ever had it before. His headache got worse and he set the remote down on the bed, clutching his aching head. He looked at the clock and waited for five excruciating minutes to pass before he lowered the power again, taking it down to zero. The house continued to vibrate, but he could feel that it was slowly diminishing. He stayed on the bed till it was down to a small vibration. Travis ran down the stairs and out to the back yard, placing his hand on a tree. He could feel it, ever so slightly. He looked around. There was a bucket of water by the garage. He ran over there and looked at the surface of the water. There were patterns of small waves spreading and colliding, then slowly diminishing. It had worked. He had created a small tremor. At half power. The machine worked perfectly.

Travis ran to the front of the house and across the street to his neighbor's house, knocking on the door. Chloe came to the door looking upset. Before Travis could say anything she asked him, "did you just feel an earth tremor or was that a truck going by?"

"Earth tremor, isn't it exciting?"

Before she could answer, he ran back to his house and down to the basement, opening the storage bin door. Everything looked fine. He closed the door again and ran back upstairs, then thought better of it and ran to the back yard, sitting on the ground. He turned up the remote again until it was at the halfway point again. He looked at the bucket of water and saw the waves starting to jiggle into patterns again. He could feel the slight rumble in the ground. He turned up the dial a little more and waited, then turned it up more. He ran over to the neighbor's house again and rang the bell. Chloe opened the door.

"There it is again."

"Amazing, isn't it?"

"What's so amazing about an earth tremor, they're just scary."

Travis ran off again, back to his yard. He was tempted to turn the remote up higher, but instead turned it down to zero. He went back downstairs and flipped off the power switches, setting the remote beside the machine. He went up to the

kitchen and had a victory swig of milk from the carton. Then he pulled out the phone book. Travis could already picture the TV newsman interviewing him next to his machine. He might even do an on air demo. He wondered if the vibrations would show up on camera, or if the movement was too subtle for that.

Travis called the local TV news station and got the receptionist.

“Hello, this is Travis Adler and I've got a great story for you. A scoop.”

“One moment while I transfer you.” He was placed on hold. He listened to “Girl from Ipanema” for a while, then finally a young man answered.

“You have some news to report?”

“Yes, my name is Travis Adler, and I've invented a great machine.”

“We generally don't report inventions unless there's a university or large study involved.”

“You don't understand, this is really big.”

“I'd suggest you contact a university and work through them.”

“Young man, are you a reporter?”

“I'm an intern.”

“How old are you?”

“What difference does that make.”

“I just don't think you're taking this seriously enough.”

“Sir, we get calls like yours every day. There isn't time to sift through them all, so if you can get a university to affiliate themselves with your invention then they do a press release and then we do a story on it.”

“But you're missing out on the story of the century.”

“I guess that's a chance we'll have to take. Thank you for your call.”

The intern hung up. Travis flipped through the phone book to the next local station, called, and got a similar response. At the third one he tried he didn't even make it as far as an intern. He tried a few local radio stations and got no where. And so he called the nearest university and tried to get the head of the science department. Instead he ended up with a teaching assistant for Physics 101.

“Hi, this is Mary.”

“Hello Mary, are you familiar with sound waves?”

“I use them every day. What can I help you with?”

“I’ve invented a machine that can generate high amplitude low frequency sound waves and focus them down deep into the ground, bouncing them off the tectonic plates and creating an earthquake.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Well that’s what you’d think, but I’ve actually done it.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“Look Mary, there’s no point in arguing about it, I’ve done it. I’ve tested it. It works. You can come and see it if you want.”

“Is this Darrel?”

“No, my name is Travis.”

“Darrel, I told you to stop calling me. I’m sorry things didn’t work out but you need to move on. There’s more fish in the--”

“Mary, I am not Darrel. Do you want to see the most fantastic invention since the light bulb or not?”

“I think I’ll take a pass. But thanks for calling.”

Travis set the phone down and stared out the kitchen window. How could he get through to these people? It was as though no one believed in the potential of the human mind anymore. They were numb to the possibility of innovation. They would rather believe that the mundane was all we could ever hope for than take the chance of believing in miracles and being proven wrong. Travis called a local community college and got a geology professor on the phone. He was half way into his explanation when he heard Cynthia and Kaylee coming in the door. Cynthia yelled out, “Travis, what have you done?!”

Travis told the professor, “I think I’d better call you back.” and ran to the dining room where Cynthia was gaping at the wall. Where there had been a thin zig zagging crack there was now a *huge* zig zagging crack. There were bits and pieces of wall on the floor. The wall looked as though it had been struck by lightning. Cynthia still stood there, holding a bag of groceries in each hand, her mouth hanging open. Travis wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“It’s . . . I can . . . don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry? I’d say it’s too late for worry, the thing I didn’t want to happen has already happened. I’m beyond worry, Travis.”

“But Cynthia, everything is ok. My machine works. Perfectly. Don't you realize, this means I can quit my job.”

“And do what, destroy people's homes for a living?”

“We'll be rich Cynthia, we can travel. No more toiling as a lawyer to the malcontents of the world.”

“How does cracking the dining room wall translate into money?”

“I created an earth tremor today. Even Chloe felt it.”

“You were talking to Chloe?”

“I asked if she felt it and she did.”

“What were you doing over at Chloe's house?”

“Nothing. I just went over to see if she felt the earth tremor.”

“And just how often are you over there talking to her about earth tremors?”

“Never.”

“You just said--”

“Cynthia, you're missing the point. I created an earth tremor.”

“At Chloe's house.”

“And our house, and probably for a half block radius.”

“But you didn't ask anyone else. Just Chloe.”

“Feel free to go around polling the neighbors. I felt the vibration and so did Chloe.”

“Mm hmm.”

“You're taking this all wrong. Cynthia, my invention works. In fact I was just on the phone with a geology professor.”

“Good, maybe he can make some use of the rocks in your head.”

Cynthia set the groceries on the floor and went upstairs. Kaylee stood staring at the crack in the wall.

“Daddy, you're gonna get a time out.”

“I wish it were that simple, sweetie.”

“Simple? Time outs are not simple. They suck.”

“Don't say suck, say stink.”

“Why?”

“Stink is more polite than suck.”

“Why? If you stink you smell bad, but if you suck that could be like drinking from a straw or something.”

“Look, why don't you go check on your mother while I put the groceries away and clean up this mess. Plus I have an important phone call.”

Kaylee went upstairs and Travis called up the geology professor again.

“Sorry for the interruption Professor.”

“You were saying you have a machine that makes earth tremors.”

“Well, so far I've only turned it up high enough for a tremor, but I think I could do a small earthquake too. And then release the pressure between the tectonic plates.”

“I suppose that's theoretically possible, but I have a hard time believing one could build such a machine.”

“Come see it for yourself.”

“Well, I'm pretty busy this week, but I could drop by next week after my lecture.”

“Next week? This is the invention of the century and you can't come see it until next week? No wonder you're teaching at a community college. You completely lack ambition and imagination.”

“Well Mr. Adler, I hardly think that's fai--”

“Forget it. You don't deserve to see my machine. You don't deserve to be in its presence. Keep toiling away Professor, and when you see me in the newspapers you'll be kicking yourself for what I'm sure is one of many lost opportunities.”

Travis slammed the phone down, putting a crack in the receiver. He went into the dining room and picked up the bags of groceries Cynthia had left there. After putting away the groceries, he looked at the crack in the wall. It was pretty bad looking. No amount of Spackle was going to fix this. He found a broom and swept up the mess from the floor. Then he went upstairs. Cynthia was laying on the bed staring up at the ceiling with Kaylee snuggled against her.

“Look, Cynthia, I know it must be upsetting to see a big crack in the wall, but my machine really does work. I can demonstrate it for you.”

“And put a bigger crack in the wall.”

“Well, there's that chance.”

“No. I'll just take your word for it.”

“I just wish I was having an easier time of convincing everyone else. If people only realized . . .”

Travis went back downstairs and pulled out the phone book again. He called City Hall.

“When is the next City Board meeting?”

“Tonight at 7 pm.”

“Will the media be there?”

“They generally are not at meetings unless we let them know that we’re making a big announcement. Which is pretty rare. I think the last time we did that was when Mayor Bloom stepped down.”

“Who is in charge of contacting the media?”

“Our media relations department. Ben. Would you like me to connect you with him?”

“What’s Ben’s last name?”

“Miller.”

“Thanks.”

Travis hung up and called the local paper.

“Hi, this is Ben Miller, from City Hall.”

“Ben who?”

“Miller. Ben Miller. I’m in the media relations department.”

“Ok.”

“There’s a City Board meeting tonight and there’s going to be an exciting announcement. There’s a man who has demonstrated the ability for a machine to create low level earthquakes. We’ll need to plan an evacuation of the city.”

“You said your name was what again?”

“Ben Miller.”

“Ok Ben, I’ll let the editor know.”

Travis hung up and called more newspapers, radio stations, TV stations. Every number he could find he called. Then he went upstairs and showered and shaved and put on a suit. He went down to the basement and took a picture of the machine, then printed it out on his printer. It didn’t really come out, so instead he tried to do a drawing of the machine, but that ended up just looking like a pile of boards. He looked around. He needed some visual way to demonstrate what

he had accomplished. Then it came to him. He went out to the back yard and got the bucket of water. He put that in the back of the car on the floor. Then he went back inside, found a little transistor radio, and stuck it in his pocket. He checked the time. The meeting wasn't for 3 hours. He went into the kitchen and dug out some of the groceries Cynthia had bought. He ran upstairs. Cynthia was still lying on the bed, still staring up. Kaylee was asleep next to her.

"Cynthia, I'm gonna make soup tonight."

She didn't answer.

"You just relax here with Kaylee. Tonight we celebrate."

He ran back down and started chopping vegetables, tossing them into a pot. Then he found a can of vegetable soup and added that. He tossed in a little of every spice in the spice rack. Then decided it would be nice to have something sweet in there, and chopped up some apples and tossed them in. He set it on a low flame with the lid on.

Travis cleared off the table, set out the dishes and spoons, glasses of water, and napkins. He checked the soup which was simmering. He stuck a wooden spoon in and gave it a taste. It was . . . odd. He rummaged around in the cupboard until he found some tomato sauce, which he stirred into the soup. He found some old tortillas in the fridge and tore them into little pieces, adding this to the soup as well. He let it simmer a while longer, then gave it a taste. It was . . . odd. Perhaps not sweet enough. He poured in some honey and a little sugar, then found some molasses on the back of the shelf and added a little more of this than he'd intended. He gave it a taste. Still odd, but better. Sort of interesting, actually. He went upstairs.

"Cynthia, dinner is ready when you are."

"I don't want to wake up Kaylee."

"Well, just come down when she wakes up."

He went back down and lowered the heat on the soup. Then he went down to the basement to try another drawing of the machine, this time based on his original plans. It still didn't look like anything. After a while he could hear Cynthia and Kaylee so he came up.

"Ready for dinner?"

"Daddy, you made dinner?"

“Yup. It's gourmet.”

“Is it good?”

“You bet, sweetie. Have a seat.”

He brought out bowls of soup and they all sat down to eat. Kaylee took a tentative sip and made a face.

“This is icky.”

“Now sweetie, you're just not used to it. Cynthia, what do you think?”

“Well . . . it's nice that you made dinner. Why are you dressed up?”

“I'm going to a meeting tonight.”

“For work? It's the weekend.”

“No, it's a . . . surprise.”

“Travis I don't like surprises.” She pointed at the crack in the wall. “And you've already given me one today, remember?”

“Honey, don't worry. Things are turning around for us. Things are just about to pick up and soar.”

“So we're turning around, picking up, and soaring. Have you switched from making earthquakes to tornadoes?”

Kaylee turned to Cynthia.

“Mommy, can I have something I like for dinner?”

“Yes dear, just wait until I'm finished with my soup.”

Travis jumped up. “I'll get it. How about a PB&J?”

“Ok daddy.”

He made the sandwich and gave it to Kaylee.

“There you go sweetie, how's that.”

“It's got too much jelly.”

“There's no such thing as too much jelly. That's what makes it so delicious.”

“It squirts onto my hand when I eat it. I don't like it.”

“But sweetie, it's what you wanted.”

“No it's not. I hate it.”

She put the sandwich on her plate and pouted. Travis looked to Cynthia for help.

“Kaylee, your daddy made you a nice sandwich, now eat it up or no desert.”

Kaylee reluctantly picked up the sandwich, squeezing some of the excess jelly onto the plate, then ate it in tiny bites. Travis went downstairs to gather together some of his diagrams and plans, which he stuck in his pocket. He came back up. It was still too early to go to the City Board meeting, but he couldn't wait.

“Well, I'll see you guys after the meeting. Maybe we can play a game or something. Think about what you'd like to do.”

“Ok Travis. Just be . . . careful.”

“Of course. Always.”

On the drive to City Hall, Travis practiced what he would say. He was making speeches in his car, then revising and retrying his lines. He wanted to convey how monumental his achievement was without sounding conceited. A delicate balance. As he was speaking to the imaginary audience before him, a car swerved to avoid a pedestrian and cut him off. Travis slammed the breaks, and almost immediately felt cold water rush forward along the car floor, soaking his left sock. He realized, a bit too late, that he should have brought the bucket empty and filled it at City Hall.

Travis pulled over and got out of his car. He emptied what little water was left from the bucket, then took out his floor mat and beat it against the sidewalk to dry it out a little. He took off his shoe and sock, squeezing as much water as he could from the sock and putting it back on. It was still wet and uncomfortable, but he didn't want to go back to the house and change. Cynthia already thought he was nuts, this wouldn't help matters any. Travis got back in his car and continued on to City Hall.

The parking lot was filled with police cars so he drove around to find street parking. He ended up parking a few blocks away. He debated bringing the bucket with him. Now it just seemed silly. Perhaps the drawings were enough of a visual aid to convey what he had done. Or perhaps they would have glasses of water. He could place the transistor radio face down on a table and show how it made vibrations on the surface of the water. Or maybe just go with the drawings. Or just talk. Travis debated this for a while, finally deciding to leave the bucket in the car and see what the situation was when he got there. He could wing it.

The walk to City Hall was unpleasant due to the wet sock. When he got there he asked where the men's room was, hoping there would be an automatic hand

dryer he could use to dry his sock. But there wasn't. There was an empty paper towel dispenser. He went into the stall and rolled out some toilet paper, then removed his shoe and sock and tried squeezing the sock with the toilet paper to dry it. This only resulted in the toilet paper falling apart and sticking to the sock. Travis removed the little pieces of toilet paper and put the sock back on.

Travis went to the information desk and asked directions to the City Board room, then checked the time. The meeting wouldn't start for an hour. He went to the room to scope it out. It was smaller than he'd expected, a long table with chairs along one side, a portable lectern in the middle, and twenty or so folding chairs arranged facing the table for anyone that came to watch. There was no pitcher of water, no drinking glasses. He tried to pick the best spot to sit so that when he stood to talk everyone would be able to see and hear him. He tried different places, but they all seemed about the same. Travis finally decided on front and center, since he could then address the City Board, or turn to address the assembled crowd and any reporters that showed up. He stood and imagined what he would say, silently mouthing the words. As he was running through it again he heard someone come in. He turned and saw a man with a camera around his neck. The man smiled.

"Hi, I'm Jake from the Palmvale Sun. We got a call from Ben about an announcement . . ."

"Oh yes, it's going to happen at the meeting."

"They usually give us a heads up on this stuff so we can have some questions prepared."

"I'll be happy to give you a full briefing."

Travis walked back and pulled out his scribbled notes and diagrams. Pointing to one he said, "now this is a diagram of a new invention, perhaps the most significant in a century."

"What's that got to do with the City?"

"I'm getting there. You know that we've had a problem with earthquakes, and the threat of a huge devastating earthquake hangs perpetually over our heads. Or under the ground actually. So the question is, what can we do about it?"

"Make buildings earthquake proof?"

“No such thing. The only thing to do is find a way to slowly relieve the tension between the tectonic plates. But how?”

“Blow them up.”

“Not quite that dramatic. You send subsonic sound waves at the right amplitude and frequency to get those plates moving in a slow, controlled manner. Of course it creates a small earthquake, but you just evacuate the area before doing this, and then you release the tension. Then everyone comes back and lives safe and sound. Plus you see which buildings sustain minor damage and make them as earthquake proof as you can. But ultimately, that's not going to save anyone from the big one. We need to relieve the tension. And that is done with a machine.”

“A machine that makes earthquakes.”

“Right.”

“But there's no such thing.”

“There didn't used to be, but now there is. I've seen it, I've used it, I've tested it. It works.”

“That's not possible.”

“I can show it to you. You can see it in action. Right after the meeting if you want.”

The reporter stared at Travis, trying to decide if he was completely nuts or just a little nuts. Travis smiled at him and pointed to the diagram of the machine, as if that should resolve any doubt.

The City Board members started to drift in and take their seats at the long table. Most of them were dressed casually. They gave Travis and the reporter curious looks. One of them called out, “you two here for the meeting?”

“Yes, I have an announcement to make.” Answered Travis.

“If it's not on the agenda you'll have to wait till the end of the meeting. Ok, if we're all here, let's get started.”

The meeting was long and dull, and mostly concerned a particular parking regulation that half the members thought was too strict and was deterring people from shopping downtown, and the other half thought wasn't strict enough, and could be bringing in more revenue in fines if it were more heavily enforced. Travis had his work cut out for him sitting still through it all. He fussed with his papers nervously. The reporter stayed in the back of the room, not sure whether he

should stick around for the announcement or go home and get some dinner. Then one of the board members stood up.

“Well, if there are no other issues on the agenda--”

Travis jumped up, “I have one.”

“Hang on. If there are no other issues on the agenda we’ll turn to comments from the public. Sir, please state your name and address the board.”

“I’m Travis Adler. I’ve invented a machine that makes earthquakes and we’ll need to evacuate the city so I wanted to see if we could schedule that or how we would go about something along those lines.”

There was silence. The board members looked at Travis and each other. One of them asked, “Could you . . . explain that a bit?”

“Sorry, I was a little unclear. You see, the tectonic plates store up energy and to release that energy my machine sends sound waves into the ground and--”

“I’m not real clear on what this has to do with the city.”

“I’m getting there. I can use my machine to create a low level earthquake and avoid a larger one in the future, but we’ll have to evacuate the city first. So that’s something I’d like to . . . discuss. With you.”

The board members leaned in and whispered back and forth, then one of them turned to Travis.

“You say you have a machine?”

“Yes. It generates the low frequency sound waves.” He pulled out his transistor radio. “I brought this to demonstrate, but I would need a glass of water.”

“Is that your . . . machine?”

“No, no. This is a radio. It’s just for demonstration purposes. The machine is in my house.”

“And it makes energy with sound.”

“It releases the tension between the tectonic plates with sound.”

“Like a radio.”

“Sort of, yes.”

“Well . . . we certainly thank you for bringing this issue up for our consideration, and we’ll certainly be . . . exploring our options.”

“So when will I hear back from you?”

“Regarding what?”

“The evacuation. We should schedule it and announce it.”

“Because there’s going to be an earthquake.”

“Right.”

“From your machine.”

“Yes. You’ve got it.”

“I think we’ll need to discuss it some and then address it at a later meeting.”

“When?”

“The agenda is pretty much set for the next few months. Why don’t we take your information down and get back to you when we’ve made a decision.”

Travis wrote down his name and number on a scrap torn from one of the papers he’d been holding. He pointed to a drawing of the machine.

“That’s it right there.”

“Looks like quite a machine you’ve got there. We’ll take it under advisement. Thanks so much.”

Travis walked out of the room with the reporter close behind him.

“Excuse me Mr. Adler, perhaps I could get a picture of you holding up that drawing of the machine.”

“Sure.”

He took some pictures, got down Travis’s name and address, and went home where his wife heated up two TV dinners and laughed uproariously as the reporter told her about his day. He spent an hour working on the article. His wife proofread it before he emailed it to his editor so it could be in the next day’s paper. He downloaded the pictures from his camera to his computer and clicked through them. He finally picked out one in which Travis had a goofy smile on his face. His eyes were wide open and staring to the left where he held up a crazy looking diagram. He looked like a complete nutcase.

Travis drove home. Cynthia and Kaylee were asleep in the big bed. He took off his suit, went downstairs, and laid down on the green couch. He tried to convince himself that things had gone well, but he knew better. Still, at least he’d spoken to the board members. They knew he existed. They knew the machine existed. Whether they believed him or not was another matter. It was natural that at first they would resist such a new and novel idea. People are never ready for something different from their day to day mundane patterns. It took someone like Travis to

shake them awake. Perhaps Travis should come to the next board meeting and try once more to explain his invention. Or some sort of demonstration. He got up and went into the storage bin. Some day this place would probably be a museum. They would recreate this space and people would come from all over to see the original earthquake machine. Somewhere at a large university there would be a new, bigger version of the machine that was used to regulate earthquakes. Next to it, a picture of Travis. Or a statue.

Travis went back to the couch and laid down, filled with hope for the future, tinged with a hint of dread.

Sunday began well. It was nice weather, and Travis got up early for a stroll. He found Henry wandering around a few blocks away and had him look at the crack in the wall.

“Think you can fix that?”

“You’re best off cutting out that whole piece of wall and replacing it with a new piece of dry wall.”

“We can’t just patch it up?”

“You can put some mesh and some plaster but it’ll be a mess. Like I said. Cut right at the joists, cut a new piece to fit, tape the seam and paint it. That’s what I’d do.”

“And so if you and I worked on it together, what would you charge?”

“I can’t do work like that, you need someone with experience. I’ll just mess up a bunch of dry wall.”

“But you’re my guy.”

“Mr. Travis, you think if I could do work like that I’d be digging holes in basements for ten lousy bucks an hour?”

“No. You’ve got a point there.”

The two men stood looking at the wall. Henry cleared his throat.

“Well, I should be moving along.”

“Hang on a second, come downstairs and I’ll show you what all that digging was for.”

He took Henry down to the storage bin and opened the door. Henry poked his head in and whistled.

“This is some crazy work of art you’ve done here, Mr. Travis.”

“Thanks.”

"I'd like to see the expression on your wife's face if you fixed up the dining room wall like you fixed up these walls."

"I don't think I'll try that."

Both men laughed. Travis pointed to the machine.

"And that right there, that's my baby."

Henry's face turned serious. "No Mr. Travis, your baby is that little girl you got. This here looks like some crazy idea you're working on."

"It's not just a crazy idea, it's an earthquake machine."

Henry stared at Travis, then back at the machine.

"Well, it's a mighty nice one."

Henry started back up the stairs with Travis behind him. When they got to the dining room Henry pointed to the crack in the wall.

"You might want to take time off your earthquake machine and focus on this for now. I know how women get about their dining rooms. That's a sacred place."

"I gotta find someone to fix that. Can I get you a glass of water before you go."

"I'd appreciate that."

"Have a seat." Travis got a couple glasses of water and sat down with Henry.

"You're right about women and dining rooms. Women and houses, really. Are you married?"

"Used to be."

"Got any kids?"

Henry looked down at his glass of water, swishing it around in circles. "Used to."

"What do you mean?"

"I had a little girl. 3 years old. But I lost her."

"I'm sorry to bring it up."

"I loved that little girl like . . . like I've never loved nobody in this world. My heart had to grow 10 sizes bigger the day she was born, just to fit all the love I felt for her." He paused, staring at the water swishing around. "Then one day she was a little sick. Like flu, a little fever. We set her down to sleep for the night, thinking she'll be better in the morning. Come morning I hear my wife scream. She went to wake up my little girl, but she wouldn't wake up. She wasn't breathing. My baby was gone."

There were tears streaming down Henry's cheeks. He kept staring at his glass of water, swirling it around. For a long time he seemed lost inside that glass. Travis leaned forward and touched Henry's hand. Henry jumped as if he'd forgotten there was another person in the room. Then he looked back down at the table.

"After that I took to drink. Managed to ruin the few good things I had left. Wife left me. But that was all years ago."

"Maybe you could get back together with your wife some day."

"She's married to another man. They got kids. I don't exist in her world."

"Sorry about that."

Henry got up. "I should be rolling along."

Travis walked with him to the door. Henry turned to him. "You know, we build up this big house of cards and then forget that no matter how hard we worked to build it, just one strong wind will knock it all down."

Travis watched Henry leave, then looked at the big crack in the wall. He ran his hand over it and more powdered fragments fell to the floor. He went to the kitchen and grabbed the yellow pages, flipping back and forth, trying to figure out where they'd put the dry wall fixing people. Carpenters? Handymen? He called a few places and left messages on voice mail, hoping the people he was calling were better at checking their voice mail than he was.

Cynthia was reading upstairs and Kaylee was playing in her room. Travis sat down next to Cynthia.

"So I could make lunch today if you like," he said.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I could heat up that soup."

"I think I'll pass, Trav."

"PB & J. That's the only other thing I really know how to make."

"Don't worry about it, I'll make lunch. You just take care of the dishes."

"Can do."

He jumped up and got to work on the dishes. He heard someone at the front door and called out, "Cynthia can you see who's there, my hands are wet."

She opened the door and called back, "it's just the newspaper."

And then there was a pause. Now there are pauses and then there are pauses. This one was of the latter category. It had no measurable duration. It was more

like a black hole that sucked up all the surrounding time until there was a chronological vacuum. Travis sensed that something was not right. He dried his hands and left the kitchen. When he saw Cynthia she was standing holding the paper out in front of her with straight arms, as though she were holding a bag of puke. She stared, open mouthed, at the front page of the paper. Travis, not wanting to take the paper from her, moved around by her side so he could see what she was looking at. There was a picture of him holding up the diagram of the machine under the headline, "Crackpot Disrupts City Board Meeting." The sub heading read, "Travis Adler, who claims to have built an earthquake machine, asked City Board to evacuate city." Travis tried to put his arm around Cynthia but she pulled away, screaming, "Travis! You . . .". She dropped the paper and went upstairs. Travis called after her, but she didn't respond. Kaylee came down to see what was happening.

"What's wrong, daddy?"

"Oh nothing, sweetie. Mommy just needs a nap."

Travis went upstairs. Cynthia was sitting on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands. Travis sat next to her.

"Look, they obviously got their facts wrong on purpose to make it sound sensational. To sell papers. And no one reads that paper anyway."

"Everyone in the neighborhood gets that paper. Everyone at Kaylee's school gets that paper. There are even people at your job who live out this way."

"It's not as bad as all that."

"I've never been so humiliated in all my life. What have you done?"

"It was all part of the process. They need to evacuate the city so I can--"

"I feel like the biggest fool in the world."

"Well how do you think I feel, it's my picture on the paper."

She looked at him. Travis smiled. Cynthia looked back down at the floor.

"I should never have married you."

"Now Cynthia, that's not fair."

"I made a huge mistake. I should have left as soon as you started working on that damned machine."

"Cynthia."

“There’s no way I can face those people now. Her teachers. The other parents. It’s so . . . humiliating.”

“So I’ll take her to school.”

“And have the other children make fun of her because her dad is the village idiot?”

“Cyn.”

“I’ll take her to New York. I can put her in a nice private school there.”

“We can’t afford to live in New York.”

“Not you. Me and Kaylee. We could stay with my parents. They’d help with school. You could send child support. I could get a job.”

“Cynthia, you don’t want to leave me.”

She looked at him. “Actually Travis, that’s exactly what I want to do. It’s not a great solution, but it’s definitely the best solution. We’re done.”

She got up and went to the closet. Looking at her clothes she said, “we’ll have to box this all up. Mail it out there. A couple boxes of clothes. Some books.”

“Cynthia.”

“Travis, it’s over.”

Everything was in boxes. Cynthia was checking through drawers and shelves, making sure nothing important was left behind. The house looked big and empty and odd. It was as though Cynthia had surgically removed that part of the house that belonged to her, leaving behind a book here, a picture there, that was oddly out of place without the things that used to surround it. Travis walked around realizing how little of what they had was actually his.

Kaylee was taking toys out of boxes and playing with them, but Cynthia would give her a look and she'd reluctantly put the toy back in the box. Travis went up to the bedroom and sat on the bed. At least she wasn't taking that. It actually was hers originally, but perhaps she figured Travis had squatter's rights. In any event, her parents had plenty of furniture, she wouldn't be needing it.

Cynthia walked in and looked at Travis.

"We should get going soon."

"Cynthia, you don't have to go."

"Oh no, that's definitely something I have to do. It's something I've needed to do for a long time, I'm just getting around to it."

"I don't understand. What's the main issue. What's the thing that makes it all so . . . terminal?"

"Travis, what's the thing that would keep me here?"

He thought about this. "Our family."

She laughed but it came out more like a snort. "Right. Do you honestly think we've been functioning well as a family?"

"Nothing's perfect. But it's good for Kaylee to have stable family environment."

"Oh, she'll have that at my parent's house. Here she has one frustrated upset mother and an absent father."

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s not?”

He couldn’t answer. Instead he got up from the bed and walked toward the door. “Let’s go.”

They hit heavy traffic on the drive to the airport. Cynthia kept looking at her watch. Travis noticed and said, “don’t worry, we’ll get there on time.” She said nothing. Kaylee was singing one of her infinite made up songs in the back seat. Travis turned to Cynthia.

“Should I park when I get there?”

“No, just drop us off in front of the door.”

“It’s usually pretty crowded there.”

“That’s alright. It will be easier that way.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant but dropped the topic and focused on the thick convulsing traffic. When they finally arrived at the airport there were cars double and triple parked by each airline’s entrance. Travis saw a limo pulling out and tried to grab its spot but man in a convertible zipped in. Travis pulled up alongside another car and flicked on his hazard lights. Immediately the car behind him started honking. Travis got out and tried to wave the car around him. The driver just continued honking. Travis tried to ignore him and opened the doors for Cynthia and Kaylee, helping Kaylee out of the back seat, giving her a tight hug before setting her down on the sidewalk. He popped the trunk and got out the suitcase. Travis looked at Cynthia.

“You don’t have to go,” he said.

“I do.”

“You can always come back.”

“I won’t.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Goodbye Travis.”

She took Kaylee by the hand, grabbed the suitcase, and walked into the airport. The car was still honking at Travis. He stared at the driver, whose face was contorted and red. Travis got in his car and drove back home. Traffic was still heavy, but he didn’t mind. He was in no rush to go back to the empty house. As he got closer he decided to take a detour to the park with the duck pond. He sat by the pond and watched the ripples on the surface of the water, and asked himself,

is it the ripples, the water underneath, or all of it. What's real. What we see on the surface or what's below. Or everything all at once. It seemed overwhelming and relaxing at the same time to just let everything be all at once. But he couldn't stay in that place for long. Soon the thought of Cynthia and Kaylee leaving dominated his thoughts. He felt like he couldn't get up, like he would stay glued to this muddy spot by the filthy pond for the rest of his life. They would bury him here. His bones would turn to dust, his atoms would join the atoms in the soil and the leaves and the trees and the water. Maybe then he would have peace.

After a long time Travis slowly and stiffly stood up, stretched out, and walked home. He forgot that he'd left the car at the park. It didn't matter anyway.

The house seemed strange, as if it had grown one inch in every direction. The walls, the floors, the ceilings, everything seemed a little too big. He wandered around, upstairs, downstairs, basement. He felt completely lost. He thought about laying down and sleeping, but his bed looked all wrong. It was the wrong bed. An inch too large. It didn't seem real. He went back down to the basement and sat on the green couch, but it didn't feel right. There was something wrong with the springs. Something wrong with the cushions. Something wrong with the color.

He went into the work room and got a sledge hammer, which he carried up to the dining room. He stood staring at the crack in the wall. That was it. That was what must have put her over the edge. He swung the sledge hammer at the wall, hitting right in the middle of the crack and opening it up wider. He swung again and again. Plumes of dust rose from the wall. He continued to swing and smash at the wall, over and over. He smashed through to the kitchen, smashed away all the drywall, then smashed and splintered the wooden studs. When he was finished there was no wall between the kitchen and dining room. It was all one big room with a big pile of debris in the middle. Travis set the sledge hammer down and went downstairs. He went into the storage bin and sat next to the machine. Travis leaned his head against the wooden enclosure and hummed to himself. It was a song from long ago, he wasn't sure when or where. The notes drifted and hovered and bounced into each other. It was his song and he didn't even know the words.

When he woke up, his head hurt. He felt his forehead with his hand. There was a dent where his head had rested against the wooden enclosure. He stood up and trudged upstairs to the kitchen, opening the fridge and staring at the food for a while before closing the door again. He poured a glass of water and sat down in the dining room, facing the crack in the wall. And he thought. He'd given it all up for nothing. No one even believed that he'd created the machine. No one believed it worked. In fact the only person who had even felt the tremor besides him was probably Chloe. Perhaps if he could show her that it was the machine that caused the tremor, maybe then she could verify it and people would believe him. It wouldn't just be one crackpot. There would be an objective observer. They would have to take him more seriously then. And all his work wouldn't have been in vain. If he redeemed himself, Cynthia would come back. He would have his wife and his little girl back and everything would be ok again. Travis mulled this over as he went back to the storage bin and flipped on the power switches. He grabbed the remote control and walked across the street to Chloe's house. He had to ring the bell several times before she came to the door. She looked like she'd been asleep. Her dark hair was messed up and she only had on a t-shirt and shorts. She looked pretty good that way. Travis smiled.

"Chloe. Remember the other day when there was that earth tremor?"

"I saw you in the paper, Travis. Have you gone insane?"

"No, I have not. And I'm going to prove it. Remember that earth tremor--"

"You're going to tell me that you caused it with a machine in your basement."

"But I did. I can show it to you if you want."

"Is Cynthia home?"

"No."

"I think I'll pass." She started to close the door. Travis stuck his foot in.

"Wait, Chloe. I can prove everything to you."

"Travis, get your foot out of my door or I'm calling the cops."

"But if you'd just give me a second."

Chloe opened the door and gave Travis a well practiced kick to the gut. He slumped down as she shut the door, bumping his head in the process. Travis gasped for air. He tried to sit up but he couldn't yet. Slowly the air came back to him in tiny sips. Then bigger sips. He sat up and rubbed his head. It felt like there was a bump on it. He realized he wasn't holding the remote anymore and looked around for it. He must have dropped it when Chloe kicked him. Travis started poking around in the bushes by the front door, looking for the remote. Just then a police car pulled up. Travis heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Sir, could you please step over here and show me some ID."

Travis looked and confirmed that it was the same cop who he'd talked to in the park. He called over his shoulder, "I my thing is in Chloe's bush, give me a second."

"Sir, I need you to come over here right now and show me some ID."

Travis ignored him and continued searching. Where was that damned remote? Could it have fallen inside the house? He started knocking on Chloe's door.

"Hey Chloe, open up."

The cop came up to Travis and grabbed him by the arm. "Sir, you are trespassing on private property. You need to come over here to the sidewalk with me and show me some ID. Now."

"I live just across the street. This is my neighbor. I'm just knocking on my neighbor's door. Since when is that against the law?"

"Since your neighbor called the police to complain that you are trespassing. Now don't make me charge you with resisting arrest. Come over to the sidewalk with me."

"Are you arresting me?"

"Not yet."

"Then how can I be resisting arrest?"

The cop spoke into the handset of his walkee talkee. "I have a 10-107 at 569 North Bella Vista, request 11-96."

“Again with the numbers. You’ve been well programmed, I’ll give you that.”

“Sir, at this time I am charging you with resisting arrest and placing you under arrest. You have the right to remain silent.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“You can’t arrest someone for resisting arrest if they aren’t already under arrest.”

“You have the right to an attorney.”

“It’s not logical.”

“If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.”

“Actually, I am an attorney.”

“Very good sir.”

“Don’t call me sir unless you really mean it. Unless you actually see yourself as being a mere servant to me.”

“Excuse me sir?”

“Do you even realize that we’ve met before?”

“Sir, I’m going to need to put these handcuffs on you and then you can sit in my car while I await backup.”

“Why would you need backup if you have me in handcuffs, locked in your car?”

The cop put the handcuffs on Travis and helped him into the back of the car, closing the door. The cuffs were tight and cut off the circulation to his hands. Travis felt tired. His stomach still hurt from the kick, and his hands were starting to feel tingly. He laid down on the car seat and tried to sleep. He tried to disappear. The car door opened.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to sit up.”

“I’d rather lay down.”

“Sir, you’ll need to sit up or I’ll charge you with resisting arrest.”

“I think you need a circuit replaced. You’ve already charged me with resisting arrest.”

“Sir, this police car is government property and you need to respect it. Please sit up.”

“I need to respect a car? I’ll tell you what. If you loosen my handcuffs I’ll sit up.”

“I can’t do that sir.”

“Why not?”

“Safety reasons.”

“Of course. Then I think I’ll stay laying down.”

“You can’t.”

“I am.”

Just then another police car pulled up. The cop closed the door and went to talk to the other cop. Travis tried to sleep. His hands were becoming numb. He felt horrible. He sat up and saw that Chloe was talking to both cops. After a long time the second cop came and opened the door. He removed Travis’s handcuffs and helped him out of the car.

“Where do you live, sir?”

“Across the street. Right there.”

“If you go home and promise not to disturb your nice neighbor here, we can let you go with a warning. If we have to come out again you’re going to be arrested for trespassing. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Chloe walked up to him and handed him the remote. “You dropped this.”

Travis held the remote in his throbbing hands. “Chloe, this is what I wanted to show you. Watch what happens when I turn this wheel.”

He turned it. Nothing happened. Chloe stared at him with a mixture of pity and fear. Travis pointed the remote at his house and tried again. Nothing.

“We’re too far. But stay right here, I’ll show you.”

He ran over to his house. The cops got in their cars and drove off. Chloe went back inside and locked the door. Travis turned the wheel to the right. He didn’t feel it yet. His fingers were still numb and it was hard to turn the wheel. He tried again, but this time turned it all the way to the right, farther than he’d turned it before. He heard a loud noise coming from inside. Travis ran into the house and down to the storage bin. The wooden enclosure had blown open and there were parts of the machine scattered around the room, some were even embedded in the walls. He tried to pick up a circuit from the dirt floor but it was burning hot. The room smelled of melted plastic. Travis flipped off the power and sat down next to his broken machine. All that work. All the stress and arguments it caused, and for what. There was only one thing to do, and that was to build another, bigger machine.

Travis thought about the ways he could improve upon the original. The new one would definitely need to be more powerful. For this project to really be successful, he needed to create a much bigger tremor than the old machine could create. But in making the new machine more powerful, he would also have to build it stronger so it could withstand the forces it was creating. From this point forward, he would think of the first machine as a dress rehearsal for the new machine he was about to create. He sat down and sketched out some ideas, then leaned back and day dreamed about his new machine.

Travis went up to the kitchen to eat. Nothing looked good so he had a slice of bread. There was a message on the machine and he played it.

“Hi Travis, it's Cynthia. We got to New York ok. Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I was harsh but I just needed to leave. It's been building up for a long time. I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm just trying to protect my own sanity. So anyway Kaylee is fine and I'm fine and if you want to talk to Kaylee you can call me at my parents'. Bye”

He picked up the phone and started to dial, but set it back down. He really didn't want to get stuck on the phone with Cynthia's mom. Travis erased the message, then wished he hadn't. He opened the fridge and had another slice of bread. Then he went downstairs, grabbed his legal pad, and made a list of parts he would need to rebuild the machine. About halfway through he stopped, thinking that the second machine should be even bigger and more powerful. So he flipped to the next sheet of paper and began drawing modifications to the original machine. Bigger amplifiers, fans to cool the machine down, a better remote control system. He then designed a new enclosure. He filled page after page with ideas, sketches, schematics, diagrams. It was all coming together in his mind.

Travis went into the storage bin and tried to figure out which part of the machine had blown up. It looked as though it was the main amplifier. That was the weak link. He went back to his diagrams and sketches, made more changes, then put together a parts list. There wasn't much he could salvage from the original machine, it would probably be easier to start from scratch.

He heard the phone ring and ran to pick it up, but just before he did Travis noticed on the caller ID that it was work calling. He let the answering machine

get it and went back to his project with the sound of Murray's voice droning on in the background. Travis went over his parts list one more time, then drove to Tronics Shack and bought most of what he needed. He smiled at the cashier, a skinny girl with long black hair, a black t-shirt and black jeans.

"Are you in a band?"

She stared at him a while, then slowly answered, "Nope."

"Do you know if there's anyplace around here I could buy a bass amp?"

"What's a bass amp."

"An amp for a bass guitar."

"Nope."

The man behind him leaned nudged him on the elbow. "There's an instrument shop four doors down, buddy."

"Thanks."

Travis stopped by a musical instrument store and asked the salesman to show him their loudest, biggest bass amp.

"You a bass player?"

"Nope, I just need a really powerful bass amp."

"Any brand in particular you'd like?"

"The loudest one with the biggest speaker."

"What's your price range?"

"Loudest. Biggest."

"Ok then."

The speaker cab of the amp he ended up buying was too large to fit in the car so the salesman helped him tie it down on top of the car. They put the heavy amp head in the trunk. Travis drove carefully and slowly home so as not to jar the expensive equipment, much to the consternation of his fellow drivers.

When he got home there was a message from his credit card company. Unusual purchasing behavior on his card. He deleted the message and got back to work. He carried the speaker cab and then the amp head down to the basement. Then he heated up his soldering iron, organized all the parts he'd bought, and started working on the circuits he would need. He worked without a break, time streaming by. He was working much faster, much more efficiently now. The circuits were taking shape before his eyes, with the comforting smell of hot solder and the

small wisps of smoke rising off the soldering iron like some special geek incense. He tested each circuit, then connected them together and tested again.

Travis worked through the night and into the morning. He was making good progress but there was much yet to be done. He took a break and sat down, then laid down on the green couch and within seconds he was asleep, dreaming about the machine. When he awoke, he didn't bother to check the time, he just got back to work. There was an urgency to everything he did, but he was careful, checking his work over, testing, re-testing, before moving on to the next part. As he tested the parts he'd assembled so far, he realized that the finished machine would draw more power than the two circuits he'd been using could supply. He would need more electricity. He contemplated asking Chloe if he could run an extension cord from her house, but thought better of it. Then he decided the best solution would be to put a couple generators in the basement. He could feed the exhaust out the hole for the dryer's exhaust hose. He set down what he was working on and went outside with the idea of driving to the home supply store, but when he walked out it was pitch black. He realized he didn't know what day or what time it was, or how long he'd been working in the basement. He heard some voices from down the block. Madeline and her friends were goofing around in front of her house. He watched them for a while. They seemed so happy. So oblivious. We walked towards them a little, losing himself in thought. Then he heard Madeline call out, "Hey, Mr. Adler. Come here."

He walked closer and Madeline's friends all stared as he approached. Madeline walked up to him. She was in her usual too short skirt and too tight top, with the addition of some very high heels. She was a little wobbly on these, giving the impression of a drunk staggering down the sidewalk.

"Hey Mr. Adler. I saw you in the paper." Her friends started to laugh.

"Yeah, I guess I'm the talk of the town now."

"You're famous. You should go on reality TV."

"I'll have to think about that. The whole thing is actually a bit embarrassing, but I guess there's no such thing as good publicity."

"Bad."

"Bad?"

"The expression is, there's no such thing as *bad* publicity."

“Oh. Is it? That doesn't sound right.”

“Well it's right. Hey, are you ok Mr. Adler?”

“Yeah, fine. Just getting some air.”

“Well let me know if you need a babysitter, I'm saving up for something and could use the cash.”

“What are you getting?”

She gave him a sharp look. “None of your business. Anyway, you've got my number. See you later.”

She walked back to her friends and Travis walked back to his house. He heard the kids whispering and giggling, and one of the boys called out, “crackpot!” causing an eruption of laughter.

Travis went back home, heated up his soldering iron, and got back to work.

The answering machine was full and wouldn't take any new messages. Travis was getting tired of hearing the phone ring so he unplugged all the phones. He started to listen to the messages. They were all from work, wondering where he was.

“Trav, this is Hanna. The clients are going nuts. You need to make an appearance and call back some angry people. Murray's looking for you too. He keeps asking me where you are. Call me.”

“Trav, it's Hanna again. Murray told me to tell you to get your ass in here. His words, not mine. I assume he wants the rest of you in here too. bye.”

“Travis, is everything ok? Did you fall off the face of the earth? I'll check the sky. Nope, don't see you floating around out there. If you're still here on earth, give me a call.”

“Travis, it's Murray. I know you said you wanted some time off but we just can't spare you right now. It's all hands on deck. You've been a good worker and we don't want to make any changes, but if we have too . . . give me a call today.”

Travis unplugged the answering machine, dropped it on the floor and stepped on it. The top caved in, then cracked, exposing the circuits inside. Travis picked it up and ran his finger over the circuits. They looked like tiny cities lined with silver streets. A topographical map of a well built and organized world.

His work in the basement was progressing well. The generators were in the work room with cords extending to the storage bin. Two more cords still extended to either side of the basement. Together they would hopefully provide all the power he would need to run the machine at full capacity. But first he needed to test it as its lowest capacity, which on this machine would be equal to about the halfway point on the first machine. The new enclosure was built and he was ready

to put it together around the machine. He had the new remote finished as well. Everything was almost ready for the first test of what he was calling “2.0”.

Travis put some finishing touches on the machine before screwing the enclosure together. He flipped on the four power switches, started up the two generators, closed the storage bin door, and went upstairs and out to the backyard. The new remote had a digital display and two buttons with arrows pointing left and right to raise or lower the power. He looked around. It was a bright sunny day. He hadn't seen direct sunlight in a while and it seemed surreal, the hard shadows and the vibrant way it made everything it bounced off of look. Travis leaned against a tree and pressed the right arrow button. The digital readout went from 00 to 01. It would go all the way up to 99 when it reached full power. He pressed the button again. 02. He was feeling the queasy feeling in his gut, but no vibration. He slowly raised the level up to 05, and then he felt the vibration in the tree he was leaning against. He staggered back away from the house, into the alley, and raised the level to 07. Resting his hand on the corner of the garage, he could feel the slow swaying. 08. 09. It was stronger. 10. 11. He backed away farther, the queasy feeling was getting too intense and his headache was starting to come back. He walked halfway down the alley and raised the power slowly to 15. He could feel the swaying in his neighbor's garage. He walked all the way to the end of the alley but couldn't feel anything down there, so he raised the power some more, up to 20. He circled around and walked up the street. Madeline was getting out of a sports car in front of her house. The boy driving seemed impossibly young to be handling something so dangerous as a car. Travis waved at Madeline and she looked at him strangely.

“What's that thing?”

“Remote control. Look what I can do with it.”

He slowly increased the power to 30 and placed his hand against a tree. He could feel it. He yelled to her, “touch that tree by you, tell me if you feel anything strange.”

“What?”

“The tree. Put your hand on the tree. Feel it”

“Um, maybe later.”

She went inside her house and the boy screeched off in his car, blowing through a stop sign and disappearing around the corner. Travis walked back towards his house. As he got closer he still didn't feel an earth tremor, but the swaying feeling became stronger. Somehow this machine was different from the last one. Perhaps he'd done something wrong. He turned up the power to 35, and then it hit. A rumbling, stronger than any of the previous tremors. He could feel the shaking through the ground. He turned the power back down to zero, then bent over and puked in the middle of the sidewalk. He wandered back to his house and down to the basement, shutting off the power switches, removing the enclosure, and examining the machine. It was very hot. The fans were useless in cooling it down because the enclosure only had small hole for them to vent out. He might have to forget about the enclosure entirely. Then he could put bigger fans in the storage bin. Travis thought this over. He wasn't sure how much the enclosure had been helping anyway, an awful lot of energy was leaking out of the storage bin and bouncing around, not just in the house but throughout the neighborhood.

Travis went back upstairs to see if the house had sustained any damage. There were more cracks in the walls, and there were cracks developing in the ceiling, but nothing major. He went back down to rethink the enclosure and cooling system. He was getting closer. The machine was getting closer.

Travis was in the back yard again. He'd removed the enclosure and was ready for a quick test. He quickly took the power up to 5, then slowly went up to 10 from there. The queasy feeling washed over him like a wave of bile. He turned the power back down and dry heaved. When was the last time he'd eaten? He went inside and looked in the fridge, but everything he looked at turned his stomach. He poured a glass of water and sat down. He felt weak and tired. He needed to work on the enclosure problem, but he knew he needed to rest too. He leaned his head down on the table and took a nap. When he woke up it was dark out.

He walked outside to get some air. He could hear Madeline and her friends down the block, but didn't walk down that way. Instead he went back inside and looked at the storage bin walls. He could try building them up more, sticking in the fans, and hoping for the best. He would need more lumber though, and the lumber yard was closed. Plus he was broke. He'd probably already maxed out the credit card, and he doubted they would take a check. Travis decided to drive by the lumber yard. Perhaps they threw away scraps that would be large enough for him to use.

As he drove Travis noticed his night vision had gotten worse. Oncoming headlights looked blurry. He was having a hard time seeing the line in the middle of the road. He pulled into the lumber yard parking lot, got out and walked around to the back of the building. There was a fence, and just inside it was a dumpster with tons of scraps. Travis looked around, then started to climb up the chain link fence and down the other side. The fence was only about 6 feet high, but the effort of climbing took the wind out of him, and he leaned against the dumpster to catch his breath. After a short break, he grabbed a promising looking piece of wood and tossed it over the fence. Then another. And another. The falling wood

was making a fair amount of noise, but he figured if he worked fast he could be out of there before anyone noticed him. Ten more pieces of wood over the fence, then Travis climbed back over again, caught his breath, and carried the wood to his car. He pulled out of the parking lot and was heading back home when he saw flashing red lights in his rear view mirror. He looked for a good place to pull over and settled on the parking lot of a small liquor store called "Happy Bottles." It had been there forever, and the half burnt out neon sign made a low sizzling noise as it went through its routine of lighting up each letter in "Happy" one at a time, followed by a dancing smiling bottle.

The police car pulled up behind him, turned off the flashing lights and turned on the annoying spotlight, shining it at Travis. He rolled down his window but stayed in the car and waited. After a minute the cop walked up to him and leaned down to look him over.

"Looks like you got some wood."

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"A friend."

"Where's he live?"

"Up the street."

"Well hows about you hop in my car and we can drive over to your friend's house to verify your story."

"I hate to bother him at this hour."

"But you just did."

"Yes, but when I left he seemed very tired. And I'm very tired as well and anxious to get home. With my wood."

"Can I see some ID?"

"Sure." Travis handed him his driver's license with a slightly shaky hand. The cop paused a moment before taking the card, watching the hand. At this point a few patrons of "Happy Bottles" had come outside to see what was going on. Travis gestured towards them. "Looks like we're drawing a crowd."

"Happens all the time." He took the card and walked back to his car. Travis held up his hand to block the spotlight's reflection. He waited. Eventually the cop came wandering back.

“Mr. Adler, I’m going to let you go on your way, but if the lumber yard reports any stolen wood--”

“You know where to find me.”

“Yes. You have a nice night.”

Travis drove home and unloaded the wood into the basement. He got his saw, power drill, a hammer and nails, and worked on the storage bin walls, creating a better sound wave trap and barrier. When it was done it looked like an elaborate three dimensional maze, with the machine at its center. Travis placed a large fan in the room and pointed it at the machine. Hopefully the circulating air in the room would be enough to keep the machine from blowing up again.

Back outside he could hear Madeline and friends at the end of the block. He pushed the arrow button on the remote and eased the power up to 05, then 10. He could feel it, but it wasn’t as bad as before. He went up to 15, then slowly up to 20. It was starting to hit him. Travis walked down the alley again, slowly raising the power on the remote. He stopped at the end of the alley and went to 30 on the remote. He didn’t feel the waves like before, but he was starting to feel the tremble of the ground. He took it up to 35. He circled around to the street. Madeline and her friends were quiet. Travis called out to them.

“Now do you feel it?”

The teenagers stared at him. He turned it up to 40 and there was a solid tremble coming up through the ground.

“Should I turn it up higher or do you believe me?”

They said nothing. He slowly turned the power back down to zero and laughed. “Guess I’m not such a crackpot after all.”

Madeline gaped at him. “Can you do it again?”

“Of course.”

He slowly eased the power back up, this time taking it to 45. There was a low rumble. They could hear a car alarm go off about a block away. He brought it back down.

“I hope you enjoyed the demonstration. That was just 45. It goes up to 99. Do me a favor and let people know I’m not completely crazy.”

And with that Travis jogged triumphantly back home. He had a slightly sour tasting glass of milk to celebrate his victory, then went downstairs to check on

the machine. The storage bin was hot, but the machine seemed fine. He kept the door open and let the fan blow out the heat into the rest of the basement. A better cooling system would be necessary if he wanted to run it for sustained periods of time. Travis grabbed his legal pad and wrote out some ideas for the cooling system. The one he liked best would run water from the bathroom tap through a hose wrapped around the machine, then back to the bathroom to drain down the shower stall. It was simple and would probably work well. Travis went out to the garage and got the garden hose, bringing it down to the basement and hooking it up. He had to wrap tape around the faucet to keep the hose attached. After he wrapped the hose around the machine, he ran it back to the shower stall. He turned on the water and it sprayed out of the tape until the hose fell off. Travis turned off the water and looked around. He unscrewed the shower head and measured the diameter of the opening. He would need something to connect the shower head and the hose. If only the damned hardware store were open 24 hours. He wrote down the measurements on a scrap of paper and shoved it in his pocket.

Just then he heard the doorbell ringing and went upstairs. Travis opened the door to find Madeline smoking a cigarette.

“Aren't you a bit young to be smoking that?” He asked.

“I'm older than I look,” she said, stamping out the cigarette and walking in. She turned and faced Travis. “I want to see it.”

“The . . . the machine?”

“Yes dummy.” She laughed.

“It's downstairs.”

Madeline went downstairs ahead of him. “Whoa, what a mess down here. What have you been doing?”

“Building the most important invention of the last century.”

She squinted at him. “So where is it?”

Travis opened the door to the storage bin. “In here.”

Madeline squeezed past him and stepped into the room, which was lit by a single bulb casting crazy shadows on the uneven walls and the wood protruding at odd angles.

“Wooow. This is pretty cool. It's like a space ship in here.”

“Thanks.”

“How’s it work?”

“Subsonic waves penetrate the earth’s surface to the tectonic--”

“No goofball, how do you make the machine work? Where’s that remote control you were walking around with?”

He got the remote and handed it to her. “Hang on, I have to turn the generators on first.”

He went back to the work room and started the generators, then walked back to the storage bin and said, “We have to get out of here before we start it up or it has . . . unpleasant side effects. Let’s go upstairs.” Travis flipped on the power switches and lead Madeline to the upstairs bedroom.

“So we have to go to your bedroom?”

“It’s the farthest spot in the house from the storage bin.”

“Just seems a little weird.”

“Well, it’s not weird. Anyway, let’s stay focused here. Look at the remote.”

“Looking.”

“Ok, *slowly* increase the power with this button.” She pushed the button a few times.

“Nothing’s happening.”

“I know, just keep pushing, but not too fast.”

She impatiently pushed the button until it was at 20. “Why does everything feel so . . . drunk?”

“It’s something to do with the waves at that frequency. I’m not really sure to tell you the truth. I’ve tried to reduce the side effects, but this is the best I can do so far.”

“The room feels like it’s wobbling around.”

“Yes.”

“I think I’m gonna be--”

She puked on the bed. Travis took the remote and turned the power back down to zero. Madeline looked embarrassed.

“Sorry Mr. Adler.”

“You can call me Travis, and don’t worry about it. I hardly ever sleep in that bed anyway.”

She squinted at him again. "Where's your wife? Where's your kid?"

"They went on vacation."

"She left you didn't she."

"She'll be back."

Madeline looked around. "No she won't. You really fucked things up, didn't you."

"I'm not really comfortable discussing this with you."

"Uh huh. Well, don't worry, there's more fish in the sea."

"Yes, but I live in the suburbs."

Madeline laughed. "That's a pretty good one. You're kinda funny Mr. Adler."

"Thanks."

"Maybe you and Chloe could get together. Wouldn't that be romantic? They lived across the street from each other, but never noticed one another until one day, he made her puke with his earthquake machine."

"Um, I think Chloe already has a boyfriend."

"I think she has several."

"That's . . . none of my business."

"Yeah, I guess not. Well, it smells like puke in here, and I gotta go. Thanks for showing me the machine. It's cool. See you later."

She went downstairs and left. Travis took the cover off the bed and tossed it in the bath tub, trying to wash the puke off, then leaving it there to dry. He went downstairs and noticed the lingering scent of cigarettes and teenage girl. He went to the basement and shut off the the machine and the generators. The heat from the machine had melted the hose slightly and there was a smell of burnt plastic. He sat down and designed a frame around the machine to put the hose on so it wouldn't touch the hot machine but cool the air around it. He got to work building the frame. When it was done he pulled out his scrap of paper and wrote "heavy duty hose" on it. He checked the time. It was 5 in the morning.

Travis drove to the hardware store and parked outside. He walked up to the door to read the store hours. It opened at 9AM. He went to the car and leaned back the seat so he could rest. From this angle he could see the cool black and blue sky and one tiny white star. He gazed out for a long time until he fell asleep.

He awoke to a jolt. A car was parking behind him and tapped his fender. Travis sat up and looked out the back window. The driver smiled and waved. Travis checked the time. 8:50.

He wandered up the block and saw Chloe getting out of her car. She saw him and waved. He waved back. She seemed to be debating coming over to say hi, but finally did.

“So . . . Travis.”

“Hi.”

“Yeah. Look, I’m really sorry about kicking you. And calling the cops. And all that. I might have overreacted.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“It’s just I live alone and I’ve had some bad experiences, so I don’t take any chances. But anyway, sorry about all that.”

“Don’t worry about.”

“You were acting pretty strange though. Are you alright?”

“People keep asking me that.”

“Well, that should tell you something.”

“It just tells me that people don’t like anything out of the ordinary.”

“Maybe. Anyway, I hope you get your shit together and everything turns out ok.”

“Um, thanks. Yeah.”

She walked off.

He went back to the hardware store. They were just opening. Travis wandered up and down the aisles looking for the hose and adapter he needed. A salesman came up.

“Can I help you sir . . . hey. It’s the man from the paper. Building any more inventions today?”

“I need a hose. Heavy duty. And an adapter to connect the hose to a shower spout.”

“Can do.”

The salesman got him the hose and adapter and walked him up to the register.

“This is the guy from the paper.”

The girl at the cash register looked up at him with half open eyes, then went back to chewing her gum.

Travis got home and installed the hose. He wrapped it around the frame and ran it back to the shower drain. When he turned on the cold water, it took a while for it to start draining into the stall. There were no drips. Everything was perfect. Travis flipped on the power switches and closed the door over the hose. There was just enough room for it to fit through the bottom. He started up the generators and went out to the back yard with the remote. He eased it up to 20, then 30, then 40. He felt nauseous and walked down the alley, and around to the street. There was no one in front of Madeline's house. It must be a school day, thought Travis. He walked back up the street, feeling the low rumble in the ground. He considered stopping by Chloe's house, but decided against it. Instead he walked up the street to see how far the rumbling could be felt. At about two blocks from the house he felt nothing. He sat down on the ground under a tree and looked up at the blue sky. Travis wanted to let the machine run a while to make sure the cooling system was working. He was tempted to turn up the machine but decided against it. So he sat and waited. A woman walked by with a toddler in a stroller. Travis smiled up at her.

"Nice day."

"I thought I felt an earth tremor."

"That's just me. I can turn it down if it bothers you."

"What?"

Travis turned the power down to 20. "That better?"

"Yes . . . thanks."

She walked off, occasionally stopping to stare back at Travis under his tree. He got up and walked back home, turning the power down to 01. He went into the basement and slowly opened the storage bin door. He felt the nausea and a wave of heat came out of the room. He closed the door and went to the shower stall, running the water exiting the hose over his hand. The water was hot. Everything was working perfectly. Travis shut everything down, went upstairs and plugged in the phone. He called Cynthia's parent's place. Cynthia's mother answered.

"Chirter residence."

"Hello Louise."

“Who is this.”

“It’s your son-in-law, Travis.”

“Well it’s about time you called. You’ve got a lot of nerve abandoning your wife and daughter.”

“Louise, they left me. I’m still here.”

“Well aren’t you clever.” He heard her calling out, “Cynthia, it’s your husband.” He heard running and then Kaylee was on the phone.

“Daddy?”

“Hey sweetie, how’s New York?”

“When are you coming back?”

“Honey, I am back. I mean, I never left, you left.”

“Well then when are you coming to visit me.”

“I don’t know Sweetie, I guess that’s up to your mom.”

She yelled over her shoulder, “Mom, can dad come and visit us?”

Cynthia took the phone from her. “Hello Travis, it’s about time you called.”

“Sorry, I’ve been . . . busy.”

“Don’t make excuses. What do you want?”

“I just wanted to let you know that the machine is almost done.”

“I thought it was already done when I left.”

“There was a problem, but I made a bigger machine and it works even better.”

“So what am I supposed to do now, applaud?”

“I just wanted to let you know. After I demonstrate the machine, you guys can come back and we can all live together again. Or travel, or whatever you like.”

“Travis, you sound tired, have you been getting enough sleep?”

“Yes. Well, no, not really. But that’s my point. The worst is over. Everything’s going to be ok.”

“Travis, I think you need help.”

“I’m fine, the machine is already done. I mean I suppose I could use a publicist. That thing with the newspaper could have gone better.”

Cynthia winced. “That’s not what I meant. I mean maybe you should see someone. A counselor. A therapist.”

“Cyn, I’m fine. Ok, I got a little obsessive about the machine, but you don’t understand. It’s the first time in years I felt like I was doing something really important.”

“That’s because you don’t consider taking care of your family important. You could have thrown yourself into that but you chose not to, and you’re going to have to live with the decisions you’ve made.”

“I can’t believe you’re being so negative. You’ve never been supportive of anything I wanted to do. I shouldn’t have bothered to call you.”

“Maybe you’re right. Goodbye Travis.”

She hung up. Travis disconnected the phone and threw it against the wall, then opened the window and tossed the phone out into the backyard.

City Hall seemed completely abandoned, the building somehow too large for the few people contained in it. Travis walked up to the information desk. The woman working there was talking to another woman at a desk about 10 feet away. They were half talking, half yelling. Travis waited a while for her to acknowledge him. He drummed his fingers on the counter. Picked up a brochure, held it up to inspect it, then set it down. He cleared his throat. Then coughed. The woman looked up at him and smiled.

“Are you ok?”

“Fine, I just wanted to ask about the City Board meeting.”

“You’re here on the wrong day, hon. the next meeting is in a week.”

“Ah, that’s what I wanted to know.”

“You can always check our website.”

“Well, I needed a walk anyway.”

“You need a shave too, honey.”

“Thanks for the advice. Are any of the board members here now that I could just talk to. Just to speak to. I can’t really wait for the next meeting. This is important.”

“I know, it’s about earthquakes, right?”

“Exactly.”

“I heard all about it. And I saw that article. They slammed you.”

“Yes they did. People are always skeptical of innovation, but I think calling me a crackpot was taking things a bit too far, don’t you?”

“If you can’t say something nice . . . that’s what I always say. Do unto others.”

“So can I speak with one of the board members.”

“Honey they don't work here, they just come here for the meetings. They all have other jobs. Like Mr. Weston, he's a lawyer. He's got an office over on Palmvale Avenue. You musta seen it a million times. Next to the CD store.”

“You're right, I have seen that. Ok, thanks.”

“You go get 'em tiger. Have a blessed day.”

“I'll do my best.”

Travis drove to Weston's office. On the way he mulled over the whole “blessed day” thing. On the one hand, most people who say it seem like they're just trying to be friendly. But sometimes it's said in an aggressive, proselytizing way, as an excuse to bring religion into the conversation. Like they have religion and think you need it, so they're going to bless you and hopefully save you. From what. From your sins? Does that mean the person saying it is free of sin, is above human frailties? Are they little demigods walking around blessing people? The whole thing becomes absurd at a certain level. Humans blessing humans. It's meaningless. Still, he liked the old lady at the information desk. She meant well. Sometimes that's good enough. Sometimes that's rare.

Travis walked into the law office. There was a frazzled looking secretary on the phone, she looked up at Travis and signaled for him to sit down on one of two broken looking chairs. He picked the one that seemed least likely to collapse beneath him. Travis had always wondered what it would be like to just hang up a shingle and practice law on his own. It seemed so risky. What if nobody ever walks in the door. What happens when the rent comes due and you have no cases, no income, no nothing. He preferred the safety of working for a firm. Although come to think of it, he probably no longer worked for his firm. He made a mental note to call them just as the secretary was hanging up.

“Do you have an appointment, sir?”

“Nope, I just need about five minutes of Mr. Weston's time.”

“Is this regarding a legal matter?”

“No.”

“He's very busy today.”

“I mean yes. Yes. It does regard a legal matter. Yes.”

“It does.”

“Yes.”

She looked him over, then got up and walked through a side door, leaving it slightly ajar. He could hear her saying, “there’s a scruffy looking guy who wants to see you.” Travis couldn’t hear the reply, but the secretary came back and told him, “go ahead, but he’s very very busy.”

“Yes. Thanks.”

Travis was surprised at how small the office was. It was about half the size of the reception room he’d just been in. The man behind the desk looked tired and wary. Travis shook his hand.

“I’m Travis Adler. I was at the meeting. You remember.”

“Yes, I remember. What can I do for you Mr. Adler.”

“Look, I know you don’t believe my machine exists. But it does. And I will prove it. If I prove it to you, will you then evacuate the town so I can create a low level earthquake and relieve the tension between the tectonic plates?”

“How will you prove it.”

“I’ll tell you, but answer my question first.”

“Yes, if you could actually prove such a thing, I suppose it would be wise to evacuate. But how would you prove it.”

“Tomorrow there will be two earth tremors, one at 11 AM and one at 1 PM. Precisely. That will be my proof. After that I want you to call an emergency board meeting and set a date to evacuate the town so I can proceed with my work.”

“Are we done?”

“What time am I setting off the earth tremors tomorrow?”

“11 and 1. I got it. Thanks for your time. There’s the door.” Weston went back to the stack of papers on his desk.

Travis drove to the office of the Palmvale Sun. He had expected something like the newsrooms he’d seen in movies, but this was ramshackle office with a few mismatched desks, out of date computers, and no one in sight. He called out, “anyone here?” From a back room an old man looked out, then walked up to Travis.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m here to give you a scoop.”

“You look familiar.”

“Yes, you managed to humiliate me recently with your front page story.”

“Oops. Sorry about that. But you know, it’s something to put in the scrapbook. In a few years you’ll be laughing about it.”

“My wife left me.”

“Well . . . wives do that. Mine left me years ago. Gave me more time to work on the paper. So what’s the story you wanted to tell me about.”

“She took my kid with her.”

“I see. Is this the story? ‘Cause I can tell you right now, it ain’t news.”

“No, I’m getting to it. It would just be nice if you felt a little bit sorry for what you did.”

“Hey, we just report the news. Well Jake does. I just edit it. Just the facts, nothing wrong with that. News.”

“Crackpot.”

“Huh?”

“You called me a crackpot. That’s not news, that’s a personal attack.”

“Well, we gotta get people to read the damned thing don’t we. You think people will pick up a paper if it just says ‘Nice Guy Does Nice Thing’ on the cover?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well I do. They won’t. People don’t want to hear good news. They don’t want positive this and cheerful that. Oh sure, maybe on TV news they can get away with that crap between the murders and rapes and scandals. But people expect more from a newspaper. You pay good money for it after all.”

“Twenty-five cents an issue is good money?”

“You’d think it was twenty-five bucks the way people act about it. Never mind that we have bills to pay, a full time reporter--well actually part time, but still.”

“So you think that justifies slandering people?”

“Hey, I thought you said you had a story for me.”

“I’m just trying to get an apology out of your first.”

“Well you ain’t gettin’ one, mister. I don’t play that game. I publish the news and you can like it or not like it but I’m not about to apologize for the whole human race. Just because people have a lust for blood, don’t lay that at my doorstep. Everybody’s gotta make a living you know. What the hell do you do that’s so holy?”

“I’m a lawyer.”

“Ooooooh, well there you go.”

“What's that mean?”

The old man pulled out his wallet and pretended to hand it to Travis. “Here you go, you bloodsuckers didn't get it all yet.”

“Great, another lunatic who had a bad experience with a lawsuit.”

“Oh, lunatic. That's rich. Pot. Kettle. Glass house. That sorta thing.”

“Let me guess, you went through an ugly divorce.”

“And custody battle.”

“Right, and that's supposed to be some lawyer's fault. Did you ever think you and your wife might have had some role in it all?”

“Yup, you're a lawyer all right. Sound just like one.”

“Yeah, and you sound like a bitter old man, but that's not my problem.”

“Well what is your problem then? Forget I asked that. What's the story?”

Travis considered just leaving, but so far this was the only paper that had shown any interest in him, even if it was negative interest.

“I'm going to be doing a demonstration of my earthquake machine tomorrow at 11 and 1.”

“And you want me to have a reporter there or something? Take pictures of the amazing machine in action?”

“I hadn't thought of that, actually. It wouldn't be safe to get up close to the machine while its running. It makes you sick.”

“Sick how?”

“Nauseous.”

“Ah, so no one can get near this machine but you. No one can see it but you. I get it. Not interested.”

“You have it all wrong.”

“No, you have it all wrong, buster. Your fifteen minutes of fame are over. You're already has been and you don't even know it.”

“You're amazing, you know that? You've got the story of the century right under your nose and you're passing it by.”

“They'll have to inscribe that on my grave stone. It sounds real solemn coming out of you.”

The old man wandered back to his little room. Travis left and went back home to get things ready for the next day's demonstration.

There was a knock at the door. At first Travis thought he'd imagined it, but it was getting louder and more urgent. Travis went upstairs and peaked through the window. There was a cop car parked in front of his house. He opened the door. It was the cop who had un-cuffed him at Chloe's house. He was smiling, but it was a wolf's smile.

"Hello Mr. Adler, I wonder if I could have a few minutes of your time."

"Is this about the wood?"

"What wood?"

"Never mind. Is it about Chloe? I haven't been anywhere near there."

"No Mr. Adler. Just following up on something that was reported by one of our City Board members today. Did you speak with Mr. Weston?"

"Yes, at his office."

"And do you admit to threatening him with a planned act of terrorism?"

"What? Is that what he told you?"

"Just answer the question please, sir."

"No. I did not. He's a liar and a moron if that's what he told you."

"Did you threaten to create an earthquake?"

"Oh, now he believes me. Or is it that he only believes me for purposes of harassing me. I don't get this guy."

"Could you please answer the question."

"Tomorrow at 11 and 1 there will be an earth tremor. After that hopefully you people will stop calling me names like crackpot and realize that I have a spectacular invention here that could avoid millions of deaths and injuries over the years. I'm not threatening anyone, I'm just doing a scientific demonstration so that we can move on with the evacuation."

“Evacuation? Now see, Mr. Weston mentioned that. Why would there be an evacuation?”

“For safety.”

“So you are threatening to harm people if we don’t evacuate the city?”

“No I am not. Look, I’ve answered enough of your stupid questions.”

Travis slammed the door shut and locked it. The cop started pounding on the door. Travis yelled out, “go away, before I arrest you for trespassing. Hah!” He went back downstairs to continue his work, preparing for the next day. The pounding stopped. He peeked out the basement window and saw that a second police car was now parked outside his house and the two cops were talking. Travis’s mind started racing. If they interfered with his demonstration, people would forever think he was just a crackpot. Cynthia would never come back to him. He would never see Kaylee again. He would become nobody and nothing. He needed to protect himself and the machine. He looked around at the scraps of unused wood piled up on one side of the room. He could barricade himself in. He would just need to hold out till 11 am. That demonstration alone should be enough to convince Weston. Oh why had he scheduled it so late, he should have said 11 PM tonight. Too late now. He needed to make sure nothing happened to stop the demonstration from happening at 11 AM tomorrow.

Travis took some boards upstairs with a hammer and nails and started boarding up the doors and the windows. He would see the cops outside watching him, but they couldn’t stop him. There was no law against boarding up your own windows. Or was there. Maybe he needed a building permit. Could they arrest him for that? Or just give him a fine. Travis pondered this while hammering up more boards. What was the deal with building permits, anyway. Why should one need permission to work on one’s own home? It was just another way to tax people for creating. It was one more way to keep people in their little consumer box. Oh, you want to actually take control of your environment? Great. You’ll need our permission, and you’ll need to pay. If anything the City should be encouraging people to improve their homes, not tax them for it. Of course, boarding up the windows might not be seen as an improvement exactly. But it improved security. That was valuable. In any event, he didn’t think there was much the cops could do other than send the city inspector around, and by then he’d be done. No one

could get in. He would be his own government in his own castle. And he would finally be free.

It was very late, and Travis was very tired. He finished boarding up the first floor and then moved on to the basement. He figured that was good enough for now. He needed to rest. His muscles ached and he could barely keep his eyes open. Yet as soon as he laid down on the green couch, his mind started racing again. He kept thinking he heard someone outside the window, but when he'd get up to look there would be nobody there. He went up to the second floor and looked out the windows. The police cars were gone. He opened a window and listened. Down the street he could hear Madeline and her friends goofing around. He climbed out the window onto the first floor roof, and walked out till he could see down the street. He watched the teenagers pushing and shoving and grabbing and running around yelling. He couldn't remember ever staying out at night with friends like that, just hanging out, killing time. Somehow his idle time had always been more productive. Travis climbed back in his window and laid down on the bed. He still couldn't relax. He was completely exhausted, yet somehow his mind refused to let go. He kept getting up and looking out the windows to convince himself there was nothing and no one there. Except he wasn't convinced, so he would do it again. And again. And the hours passed slowly by but his mind wouldn't let up. He thought about taking a shower, but the bed cover was laying in the tub, and the downstairs shower was hooked up to the cooling system, and it all seemed impossible. He thought about working on the machine but it was already done. He thought about calling Cynthia, but it was too late and the phone was laying in the backyard. He thought about walking around outside, but he was afraid to leave the house. And so he was stuck, and sleep refused to come.

He got up, walked around, then looked across the street to Chloe's house. The light was on and the curtain open, but no one was there. He could see into her room. There was a corner of the bed visible, and her dresser with some bottles arranged on it. Somehow, it all made him sad. The things people collect, that then become a part of the space they inhabit, and part of the space inside their mind. It all seems necessary, but when you look at someone else's little collection of essentials, it all seems completely random and valueless.

Travis got bored of staring into Chloe's empty room. He went down to the kitchen and made a sandwich, then sat and stared at the sandwich, but didn't eat even one little crumb. It repulsed him. After a while he couldn't even stand the smell of it, and he threw it in the garbage. But he could still smell it somehow, so he put it in the freezer. He froze the sandwich, and then it didn't smell. He ran some cold water from the faucet and it felt hot on his hands. My god, he thought, are they tampering with my water? Or have they somehow drugged me so that I'll think I'm losing my mind? I have to hang in there. I have to make it till 11am. It can't be that much longer. And after that everything will change. Everything will be ok.

He looked at the clock for a long time. Somehow the numbers didn't make sense to him. They looked like abstract figures glowing, hovering in front of a black field. The longer he looked the more blurry it appeared. Travis turned off all the lights and looked out the cracks between the boards covering the windows. Nothing. But they were out there somewhere. And they were coming to get him. He felt certain of that. Maybe he should have gotten a weapon. It was too late now. He was trapped in here. Trapped without a weapon.

Travis went back upstairs and laid down on the bed. He got up and walked around. He went downstairs and checked the boards. Looked out the windows. And started over again. Time crawled by, but his mind was racing, racing, racing nowhere.

There was a voice calling his name. He looked around the dark room, trying to focus his eyes, but it all seemed slightly fuzzy and distant. For a while he wasn't even sure which room he was in. Then he saw that the window was open. He was in the bedroom, but there was something different about it. In the darkness it looked more like his childhood bedroom. Travis was now at the window, although he didn't recall getting up. Standing out on the lawn, illuminated by a street lamp, was Madeline. She called his name again.

"Travis."

"Madeline? What are you doing out there."

"I'm lost."

"But, you're right here. On my lawn. Your house is down that way."

"I don't know where my home is."

"Madeline, are you playing a game? You aren't lost."

"Are you ok, Travis?"

"Sure. I'm fine."

"You seem very tired. There are boards on the windows. And you haven't shaved."

"I'm fine."

"I think you might be lost too."

"No, I'm in my house."

"Have you been sleeping?"

"I'm not sure." As Travis pondered this he lost track of Madeline. She wasn't outside anymore. She was in the room with him. But the street lamp still lit her from an odd angle.

"Madeline, how did you get in here?"

She ignored the question and lit a cigarette, blowing out a long stream of smoke. The smoke started to move in waves, vibrating in impossible patterns. Travis reached out to touch the smoke but it evaporated. Madeline was getting up to leave. Travis felt panicked.

“No wait, please don’t go. There’s something I have to tell you.”

She turned to look at him, but he couldn’t remember what it was he needed to say, and she crawled out the window and disappeared. Travis looked around the room. He heard water running. He went to the bathroom and saw that the tub was full of murky water. He thought about getting in, but then realized he was standing knee deep in water. He walked out of the bathroom, into the hall, which was two feet deep in dark water, but it tapered off down to about an inch of water in an impossible aqua ramp. He went downstairs but instead of the dining room he was in the storage bin. It was very dark, and the machine was gone. There was just a hole in the ground. He reached down into the deep hole and felt cold water. There was something cold and hard in there, it felt like a frozen hand. He tried to pull it up but couldn’t. Then the frozen fingers grabbed his hand and started to pull him down. He was surrounded by a wet darkness and couldn’t breath or move. He was being pulled deeper and deeper. There was a light far away, blinding and painful. He closed his eyes tight. The light got brighter. He opened his eyes.

Travis was laying half on and half off his bed. The sun was streaming in through the window. He looked out the window. No one was there. Or at least, no one he could see. Travis got up and used the bathroom. It stank of old vomit. The blanket was starting to mold a little in the tub. Travis went downstairs and peeked through the boards on the windows. No one. Good. He went to the basement, grabbed some wood, a hammer, and nails, and carried them up to the second floor. He boarded up all the upstairs windows. He continued working until he'd used up the last of the scrap wood. Travis went back down and looked around. Everything seemed secure. But what if they broke through. He should barricade himself in the basement, just in case.

Travis went through the house grabbing everything made of wood. Tables. Chairs. A cutting board. The scraps of wood he'd broken from the dining room wall. He took it all into the basement, closed the door, and broke up the chairs and tables, using the broken pieces to nail the door shut. He fit the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. He reinforced the door until it seemed solid and immovable. He checked the basement windows. They seemed secure. In any event he was out of wood. Travis checked the time. It was 9:30 in the morning. But somehow it didn't feel like 9:30. Perhaps the clock was wrong. What if he turned on the machine at the wrong time. He turned on his computer and checked the time on the internet. It was 9:30. He checked his email. There were hundreds of messages. He started writing an email to Cynthia.

"Dear Cynthia, I should have called you. I should have called you and Kaylee. I should have done many things that I didn't do but there always seemed to be something else that needed doing. So I did those things and then the other things were left undone. And we became undone. Or maybe we never should have been

together in the first place. I'm not sure. I'll never know. Maybe you leaving was right and maybe it was wrong. Or maybe the distinction is meaningless. Maybe there are a million possible paths and no one is any more valid than another. We pick and choose, and then assign value to each choice. We feel pride or shame or regret and make the next choice and hope we do a better job. We try to learn from the mistakes but really there's nothing to learn because they weren't really mistakes. They were just choices that we made. And we can't make them again. Every choice is a new one. An endless chain of cause and effect that sweeps us up and carries us along, and we drop our little bread crumbs. And when we try to get back they're gone. Time's arrow points in one direction. Or maybe even that's not right. I don't know. I don't know anything anymore, and that's both scary and liberating. So if I've hurt you I'm sorry and if this is all my fault or all your fault or somewhere in between, I don't really care. Kaylee matters. I only want good things for her. And for you of course. But mostly for her."

Travis continued this way and had about 4 paragraphs done when he selected it all and deleted it. Instead he just wrote, "I'm sorry." and sent it.

He checked the website for the Palmvale Sun to see if there was any news about him. Nothing. Well there would be soon. After this demonstration they would come running for interviews. He would get the acknowledgment he deserves. That annoying reporter would have his tail between his legs. And that editor, or whatever that annoying old man was. Travis checked the power cords, the generators, the remote, the cooling system. He checked and re-checked. He decided to build a small bunker to protect himself as much as possible from the side effects of the machine. He turned the green couch upside down and piled pillows and moving blankets on the side facing the storage bin. This seemed insufficient, so he got out the sledge hammer and smashed the wall separating the workroom from the rest of the basement. He used the wood and drywall to create a pile of debris on one side of the couch.

Travis crawled into the small space under the couch. It was a tight fit, but it would do. Years from now they'd all laugh as he recounted the small enclosure he had to lay in while doing the first real demonstration of the machine. He pictured himself before a large audience of scientists, professors, politicians. He was being honored for his contribution to mankind. Perhaps the President was there. He's

show them slides of the couch with all the debris. But then Travis realized he had no pictures of it. He should have brought a camera downstairs to document all this. Why hadn't he thought to do that. He took a stab at drawing a sketch of the couch, but it ended up looking like scribbles. He set the paper down and crawled back under the couch again. It was stuffy under there. Not ideal.

Travis crawled out from under the couch. It was a little after 10. He started to worry that the windows weren't adequately protected. He looked out the window through a crack between the boards. There was no one there. Across the street he could see Chloe working in her yard. She had on a t-shirt and tight shorts. Her hair was up in a pony tail and swung back and forth as she fussed with some flowers by the side of her house. She looked good when she bent over. Travis watched her for a while and forgot everything else. Then he watched her go back inside, and waited for her to come out again. But she didn't. He watched for a long time. Nothing. Occasionally someone would pass by. A mom with a stroller, a jogger, a man walking a dog. Who were all these people. Travis thought about all the people all over the world that were going through their day right now. Or asleep. Or in pain. Or laughing. Or alone. Millions of people. Billions. Like termites all over a giant ball of dirt. Did any of it mean anything at all? Or was it just this ongoing meaningless mixture of atoms and waves, bouncing around, adding up to zero.

Travis unwrapped the cord from the basement phone and plugged it in. He called Cynthia but her mom answered and he hung up. A second later his phone rang. He answered.

"So you just call and hang up?"

"Sorry, I wanted to talk to Cynthia."

"How rude."

"I just wanted to tell her--"

"You don't just call and hang up, Travis."

"Right. Sorry. Is she there?"

"No."

"Well when she gets back can you tell her--"

"I don't think she wants to talk to you anymore."

She hung up. Travis said to the phone in his hand, "Hey, I thought it was rude to hang up." He ripped the cord out of the jack and threw the phone across the room.

Travis checked the time. It was almost 11. Travis started the generators. He flipped the switches and took a look at the machine before closing the door. He grabbed the remote and slipped under the overturned couch. He realized that the cooling system wasn't on and got back out, turned on the water, checked the time, and squeezed back under the couch. He eased the power up to 10, then even slower up to 20. He could already feel the waves, the nausea. Slowly up to 30 and the headache was back, cracking through one side of his head like a chisel. He went up to 40 and the pain was far worse. How could he manage to get up to 50? He put the hand holding the remote underneath him so his body weight would push the button. He eased his body down. He couldn't see the power reading but the pain in his head worsened. He was seeing an aura of light, a narrow patterned tunnel of bright light. Closing his eyes didn't make it go away. The pain reached a level where it was beyond comprehension, he forgot where he was, what he was doing. His mind cracked open and everywhere there was bright bright light, burning in, burning out. He was no longer Travis, he was the light. And the pain.

His body shifted so that now he was pressing the other button. The power went down. The light was gone, replaced by a deep and eternal darkness. Travis gasped for air and slowly crawled out from under the couch. There was still a slight rumble coming from the floor. He checked the time. Less than a minute had passed since he'd started. Surely the machine had gone up at least to 70 or 75 during that time, but he had no idea for how long. Perhaps only seconds. Travis looked out a crack through the boards covering the basement window. People were coming out of their houses. He could hear car alarms and sirens. The sirens were getting closer. Travis found his transistor radio and flipped it on, finding a news station. After a commercial for refinancing your mortgage, the announcer came on and said there were calls coming in reporting a brief earthquake in the Palmvale area. The sirens were still getting closer. Travis looked out the window and waited. The first police car screeched to a halt in front of his house. The cop jumped out and ran up to the door, thump thump thumping it with his fist.

"Mr. Adler, we'd like to speak with you."

Travis yelled out the basement window, "Are you going to evacuate the town now? Do you believe me yet?"

The cop came down and knelt so he could peer between the boards covering the window. "Mr. Adler, you need to come out here and speak with me."

He tapped the window with his baton for emphasis. "Come out now."

Another car pulled up, then another. He could hear more sirens coming. "I think I'll stay right here. Let me know when the City Board has agreed to schedule an execution. I mean an evacuation."

"Come out here and we can discuss that. We would love to hear more about it. All you need to do is come out here and give us the information we need to initiate the evacuation."

"I don't think so."

"Mr. Adler, if you don't come out we will get a warrant and break in."

"If you do that, I'll start another earthquake, even bigger than the last one."

The cop walked off where Travis couldn't see him anymore. A firetruck pulled up to the house, blocking off the street. Cops were taking up positions around the house. The neighbors came out to see what was going on and a crowd was forming. More cops arrived to keep back the crowd. Travis watched it all with amusement. They were finally paying attention. It had taken all this, but they finally took him seriously. Another police car arrived and the cop who walked out was waving a piece of paper at the other cops. The cop he'd been talking to came back and tapped the window with his baton again.

"Mr. Adler we have a warrant to search your house. You can either open the door or we'll break it down."

"Not if you know what's good for you. Get off my property. Clear everyone off."

"Mr. Adler, we just want to talk to you."

"You'll destroy the machine, I know it. That's all you're capable of is destroying. Tell me one thing you've created. Just one thing. You consume and discard. You create exhaust and trash. That's your contribution to the world. Crap."

The cop walked off again. Travis saw the cops pull a battering ram out of one of the cars. Two cops carried it to the front door. Travis couldn't see them anymore, but he heard the hard thud of the battering ram against the door. Over and over

again. Pound. Pound. Pound. Crack. He could hear the door giving way. More pounding and then the sound of the door being smashed open and the cops running in. He could hear them at the basement door now. It would just be seconds before they were in. He grabbed the remote and went into his work room where he got some electrician's tape, then he squeezed under the couch. He taped the power up button so that the power was increasing automatically. He set the remote down and laid on his back, waiting for the pain. He turned and could see the power quickly ticking up. It was at 50 already, and he felt his head splitting with the headache, light pouring in. It was at 60. He could barely see it. The light was so bright, so painful. His eyes were shut but the light poured in through the cracks in his skull. He was in the light but he could feel the rumbling too. The tremble from below, rising up, shaking him, shaking everything.

The whole house was shaking. The cops were almost through the basement door, but dropped the battering ram and ran out of the house as the walls and ceiling started to crack and the house creaked and swayed. From outside they watched as the roof caved in, then the second floor collapsed down to the first. They pushed the crowd farther back. They could all feel the earthquake, bigger than the last one. The house continued to collapse in on itself, crushing down to the basement. There was water spraying up and the smell of burning plastic and metal, and then an explosion. It blew the roof back up into the air where it hovered for a moment before sailing back down with a crash.

At the moment that Travis died, Cynthia was talking to a man she'd just met in a used bookstore in Manhattan. Kaylee was having lunch at a table by herself at her new school. Madeline was in back of her school sneaking a cigarette with one of her friends and talking about a boy they both liked. Chloe was standing out in her yard watching the explosion across the street. Jake the reporter had just gotten a call from his editor and was driving over to Travis's house. People throughout Palmvale felt a brief, mild earthquake. People outside Palmvale felt nothing.

At the funeral Murray told Cynthia what a good worker Travis had been. Cynthia's mother told Kaylee to stop squirming. The service was brief and sparsely attended. There was no wake.

Government agents came to pick through the rubble and try to reconstruct the machine, but there was practically nothing left of it. The only part they found virtually intact, and it was of no use to them, was the remote control under the couch, clutched in what remained of Travis's hand.

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