

“And the Blind Shall Lead Them”

I met a man last year who swore he wouldn't go crazy. “Nowhere near it” was how he put it, in fact. And recalling the days that ended a week ago, I still cannot say whether he was one of the mad ones. When we met – as I stopped to take advantage of some free literature the man was distributing – his company had him on a street corner which was a minute's walk from where I lived on the outskirts of town. This corner was, for the time being anyway, his outpost.

Upon discovering his kiosk (which resembled a fully stocked newsstand), and seeing him place the volume he'd been reading face-down on the counter, I had quipped ironically that I'd probably go crazy if ever given the time he had to read on the job. He seemed delighted at this and so began our exchange. Worth mentioning here is the fact that, throughout the ensuing interview, I would from time to time assess the stall in front of me, and found there to be an eeriness brought about by its small size in relation to the strong, dreamlike sense I had of its containing within itself everything the mind could ever want. For me, already, the kiosk emanated a tantalizing air of dimensional depth and hominess, like a long-beloved library.

However, the man confessed to spending almost as much time in the corner coffee shop as within the shelter of the kiosk, this notwithstanding a certain hint of the zealot about his manner of work. He hadn't been at this job long, yet it wasn't long before he invited me to join him inside the coffee shop for what he termed a quick cup, saying he could perhaps use some real company. Before stepping in with him, I took note of something strange about this man's eyes, something odd. And the demeanor of newfound zeal was giving way to an apparent nervousness. I surmised that all had not gone well with his world. Furthermore, it was not my business to find out just what. Such people simply seemed to find me...or I them.

My portly companion formally introduced himself after our coffees came. “My birth name is [and here he enunciated something that sounded either foreign or garbled, or was confused by the noise of silverware nearby] – but the dear people rather I chose a common name so you can all me Rex.” I then introduced myself and, when he asked

what occupied my time, figured it best to tell him I was between jobs. “That’s the best place I’ve ever found to be,” he said with dubious cheer, then suffered a too-early sip from his steaming mug. He curled his lips...the eyes looked up at me.

He expounded: “Everyone out here working,” he said, gesturing vaguely to the street from our window, “aren’t they actually working on going insane, ‘crazy,’ as you say? Perhaps it’s not beyond reason to even think they need a little help.”

His eyes again. They kept looking as if he were trying to read me or root something out. I was about to mention this when he broke the silence himself:

“It’s all in the eyes, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean,” I asked, curious. The leaflet in my hand, quotations by seemingly every philosopher from Marcus Aurelius to Wittgenstein, I placed to the side where my coffee cooled. Chances were I had read them all somewhere else, but the collection seemed innocuous. As I gazed back into those orbs of indeterminate color I had the queer feeling that one could do this forever, could stare at this man, Rex, and he would not feel intruded upon.

“I mean that eyesight – seeing – is the sense that expends the most energy, and that’s probably because the eyes have the most to spend.” Here he did something astounding, yet simple in hindsight. He plopped out his two eyes with his fingers and held them in his palms. The sockets under his brow were expertly cauterized. The “eyes” were obviously false, but highly advanced mechanisms. “Yet when you lose your sight,” said Rex, “as I did three years ago, you begin to wish you’d expended a little more of that energy while you had the chance. And so along came a second chance for me – a real gift. You see, the company gave me these eyes last month.” He then placed his eyes back where they belonged and smiled. “I haven’t stopped reading since.”

Apparently this accounted for the slight oddness and awkwardness I’d noticed in him initially. It was as if he were still getting used to his so-called gift.

“And that was just for joining,” he added.

When I asked the name of the people he worked for, he replied: “The World’s Largest Distributor of Free Literature.” I could actually hear the capitals accented in his voice. After further inquiry from me, he told me he knew of no other name for his

employer. Neither did I detect that he was concerned in the slightest, though he seemed to notice my bemusement.

“Sounds funny, doesn’t it. More like a line you’d read in ad copy. And, too, when one thinks about it, isn’t there something inherently hilarious in the concept of free literature, much of which simply can’t be called literate, of course...and the hint of cheapness in the word “free”... But I like the name; many names these days barely hint at what the bearer of the name *does*. But no confusion with that one. As far as being in between jobs, that was the happy state that allowed me to find my current one, and I wouldn’t go back to the race of ratlings from which I came. Yes, you are looking at someone who truly gets to read all day. Oh, not every moment, of course; that would be hard on the eyes, wouldn’t it?” Here he laughed, though not as heartily as he seemed to want to.

It seemed the pedestrians of our small city would, according to Rex, notice his great display of leisure, be drawn to his old-fashioned kiosk, and be granted the right to as many leaflets, magazines, even whole books as they could carry off. All without any money changing hands, or any barter. Indeed I had recently seen, but more or less dismissed, an increase in these very workaday citizens, young and old, of every race and status, toting a variety of reading material around town, some of it even slowing their stride and tilting their heads while they were presumably en route to other places. The museum where I worked, for example.

“We’re to let them take what they want, or at least what they think they want; no questions asked.”

It was as though he were in a deliberate pause now. In any case, this last didn’t seem worth asking an explanation, at least not then. As well, it was I who was pricked in my conscience for the over twenty minutes we had spent over coffee. “Rex, are you sure this has been okay? You shouldn’t be back out there by now?”

“Ah. Yes, I was just thinking... But do accompany me there, please, just for a moment. There is something I can let you have; something you did not ask for but which may prove interesting.” And so we made our way outside, back to sunshine and street corner. Rex thanked me for my “personal time,” as he designated it, and his manner had gone from that of ungrounded confidence man to a cautious and grateful bestower of

speciality. Before I knew it he had dug out from behind the counter a very large book I'd surprisingly never heard of, to present to me. As I hefted it with both my hands, he said, seemingly by way of explanation, "Your lifelong regard for things religious..." Some demonstration of company policy, I thought to myself as I thanked him, mustering an adequate profusion. I then left to get on with the rest of my day. With the dark-colored tome I now carried, this meant getting on a bus to take me the several blocks to work my evening shift at the modern art museum.

On the bus, having only had time to consider the title of the volume (and to wonder what had indicated to Rex anything "lifelong" about my briefly confessed religious explorations), my attention was drawn to the empty seat in front me where a new paperback book sat. It was on economics, another interest of mine. I was about to reach for the book when down the aisle of the unsteady bus came a young adult woman who stole this book off the seat. The bus hissed to a stop, and before she pushed her way through the side door she gave me a look that spoke of embarrassment – but more, and as she glanced down at the cover, of befuddlement. I suddenly became nauseated at the thought of opening anything but the slim mass-market gothic in the inside pocket of my sport jacket. And even that could wait.

I was on thin ice, one could say, at my job, that of an assistant/guard at the old, private art collection. In common with Rex, whom I had met the day before, I too considered myself thankfully out of the rat race, that *larger* collective striving toward more and more strife and bigger heaps of meaninglessness. Why, I had wondered, must we earn our right to exist? One can get down to the harder questions when one's work is essentially standing around, or sitting, for eight hours a day. On this particular day, however, I was caught daring to add to this mix the precious activity of reading, and though it was a time of day when no one was in my gallery, when later I clocked out for dinner my supervisor asked me to turn in my badge. I was gladdened that I would no longer have to sneak paragraphs here and there, but I no doubt couldn't go long without looking for another means to my eventual end. Especially after reflecting on my mildly prophetic opening remark to Rex the day before, and on his observations, I decided this was probably what I had personally been "working" towards – that maybe the firing meant I still had some sane

days left to me. Maybe that meant taking time off for things like reading, or maybe it didn't. Maybe it meant more somehow.

After saying goodbye to a friendly co-worker, I left the place. As I was heading out for a drink in midtown, I spotted Rex virtually across the street from me, this new post of his being about five blocks further into town than where I'd last seen him. At odds with anything normal in my habits, I found myself dodging the rush-hour traffic to go up and greet him, wondering if he might be inclined to take one of his breaks and join me for a beer – as long as we were in sight of his kiosk, I figured.

I found him in a pleasant enough mood. It was getting dark, and as I looked around at the homebound work crowd, Rex stood out to me as being an unencumbered person who enjoyed a job that left him unstressed. Indeed, this time he insisted on getting not a drink but coffee – to, as he put it, “stay attentive” – and I found it a funny thing that I could join him in that instead of indulging in my regular alcoholic treat.

But I also had more questions this time. We were just seated when I started in: “Who...,” then halted. “How is it your company can afford to do what they do? Or rather your organization, ‘FreeBooks’: yes, I discovered their shortened name. How can they print and stock the extraordinary number of pieces they do, and pay people like you to hawk them on the streets of major cities with such...*savoir-faire*?”

Rex just studied me with those eyes. Pulling my own away from his, I'd had a change of heart and caught the nearest waitress. “A mug of coffee for my friend,” I told her, “and I'll have one too but with a shot of whiskey right in it.” When it came I swallowed a good third of the brew and returned the gaze of the odd man across from me. “Do you know what I heard from a patron today? This gentleman came in with a bag containing several books he's been given by your people, but these bear FreeBooks' own imprint. It turns out he's a regular at your kiosk, or maybe not yours, and now he says they've got him onto some kind of course-thing, ‘they,’ and whereas he started with picking up books on psychology, there's now begun to be a decidedly religious turn to the regimen due to the guidance of the kiosk proprietor. And the thing is this: the man's slowly but surely going around the bend, at least it seems that way to me, but he used to be quite nice.” The liquor was already into effect. “He saw me get fired, by the way...yes, that's over. *They* can read, *everyone* can, but I can't! And who the hell are these authors

anyway? I saw this guy's books and I've seen others out there. Now, not only am I a reader, I used to be an editor, and I've never heard of a one of them. And they pay for your new eyes?!" I gulped to the dregs. "I take it you still have your soul..."

"My soul?"

"And even then, why not just an operation? I mean, look, if they can manufacture a false eye--!"

I turned my head to look out the window at the kiosk owned by The World's Largest Distributor of Free Literature. And saw someone go up and steal a thick clothbound book. The man looked neither right nor left, as if he knew this were now his right, even though there was no signage saying the products in the kiosk were free.

"Look, I'm sorry," I offered, "it obviously hasn't been the best of days. And at least this man mentioned there was no money involved when I discreetly inquired."

Rex broke his stare briefly, then was back with me. "This is a world that has lost its sight in many ways," he said. "Suddenly, you surely know, we now have access to all kinds of savory fare via that, er, worldwide device for entrapment, for example, and now no one knows where to place a comma." He sipped his coffee. The optical balls, which looked hazelish, roamed lazily over a menu near the edge of the table. "Yours are valid questions. But I suppose I should have *some* compunction about losing what will surely be the last job *I'll* ever have on this earth. I will tell you this: there are those throughout the centuries who have been willing to die for what they've written, persons who were never *paid*, and do you think we know their names? Is that so important? So yes, we do have access to what I might call the spurious for the curious." A faraway look was lent his eyes, and I marveled at their technology as he continued. "But we also have access to everything else; and most of it is everything else, no? For that's what's been the most read, by the most people. Well now, in the meantime don't think too much about it all.

"However, you may have observed, in your reading, your editing perhaps, a peculiar fact about the written word...about books. Some shelf-haunter reads ten books and, quite satisfied, then writes one himself? Figures he has it all assimilated and that his will be the final word? What about back-publishing, and letting people figure it out for themselves? All those who were left behind, whom no one remembers because of that eleventh author – who has now taken his place again as a second, or a fifth. I'm given to

understand that my employers are currently engaged in undercutting every author whose book you can still find on the shelves, and many more. Finding the trails, going back... You can ask me why, you can ask another proprietor, but we can probably only guess. Perhaps you'd care to know that you're the first who's asked me about it thus far. Well, I simply know that it's quite interesting and it gives me something to do. I would not be, otherwise; I was at an end. I've been honest with you, sir." He paused to drink. "And it's even freer than a library, and new too."

"And you get to read it all." I sipped some water and, looking off somewhere, quoted from *The Gospel of John*: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh."

"Yes, yes, but what do we call our friend John: a Gnostic, am I correct? And why is that?"

"Because they had no new canon back then, and surely no Kiosk of Plenty."

"Ha! I posit that it is only because he was willing to go *beyond* mere study, mere philosophy, which we could easily define as love of sophistry. And what did he see? If this was the same specimen who climbed from the vat of burning oil and gave us the revelation from Patmos, well...need I say more about that?"

I could not tell if the man was playing with me or not. Certainly the Revelator's was a case of the mystic nevertheless producing another book, and the pageantry in that longwinded revelation was at least sufficient to question the author's sanity. But the attention of the formerly sightless fellow in front of me wasn't about to settle anywhere for long:

"However, there is another word that comes to mind, perhaps you've heard it before: it is 'philosia,' love of *seeing*."

I considered this term as the man called Rex, the man who would not be, continued: "You are not the only one with questions, you know. But every day something comes down to us – I speak of the 'brotherhood' of the blind. Each day something to decipher for those who are willing." He cackled and slurped at his mug. "Yes, 'study'!" he said, airing the word with a tone of the obvious. "Well I say let them weary themselves; and when the flesh gets weary enough, what then...? I'm in mind of some people I used to know, whom I now call 'the paper people.' Since we are into subjects

metaphysical... But pardon me, how I digress. In any case, the compilation from which you quote is about the only thing I've not seen issued by us, as perhaps you can understand. It's, er, ubiquity."

"Hm. Well, I don't know, I can't recall when I last saw one around."

"Well, but a collection of sixty-six books – and certainly no Eleventh Author for that one. Or have there in fact been many..."

The conversation was essentially over, and Rex had finished his coffee. He told me he wished to return to a book he was currently reading at the kiosk, and should really get back there. But before he did, he looked up at me from his expansive mood with an oblique apprehension. He offered what seemed a bit of heartfelt advice, though perhaps I also intuited something of either fear or guilt behind the now lazy-looking eyes that gave way to the ruddy cheeks.

"You are different somehow, my friend. I can assure you I sit here in this café every day alone... Whence comes my courage is most likely a place of great foolishness; but it would be my wish that wherever your journey leads you, you do not take up anything like the course your art-loving acquaintance has. True vision... maybe it comes, maybe it doesn't. What man knows what is there." Then he left.

I remained at the café and periodically looked out onto the darkening December street, observing Rex. I watched as a passerby of the businessman sort stopped to browse the fare at the kiosk. He and Rex were soon in conversation – seemingly about the volume in Rex's hands – and then Rex simply handed his book to the man; after saying goodbye to him, he turned his torso slightly in the more or less cluttered, cavelike structure and selected another book from behind him. I continued to stare but was wary of being seen to do so by the light inside the café. Rex cracked the spine of the new, and slimmer, book and let his eyes settle on the first page, a smile on his face. A smile which, to my disquiet, soon turned into a frown of consternation... The next I looked, he had his nose in a magazine as four or five "customers" bustled around under the small canvass canopy. Rain had begun to fall and an easy camaraderie gave a gleam to their harried faces. A passing policeman tipped his cap to the proprietor. Then, an unseen switch was thrown and the kiosk was bathed in warm light. The last thing I noticed before I got up to go home was something that made a natural paperweight, some would delight in saying,

for a stack of what looked to be skin magazines, this heavy book being *The Apocrypha!* At last, I thought, writings I'd heard of. But pornography too? Maybe "free" cast everything dissimilar in some latent light that lent wholesomeness and sanction according to some strange laws of purveyance.

And I noticed one other thing as I contemplated the check (apparently as good as paid from the generous note left by my friend): it occurred to me that I hadn't had to squint in the slightest to see the title of that spurious scripture...my eyeglasses were still on the table where I had removed them.

Things continued to change in the life I presumably led. Although all change had begun to seem to me to only set the stage for an ultimate worsening, I decided to go back to being an editor, an enticing position having opened up for me out West. While laboring there, I found through some channels that the organization Rex worked for was rather in its infancy, and that there were signs of change there too, changes in the faces, tactics, and purposes of The World's Largest Distributor of Free Literature ("FreeBooks" notwithstanding, I will call it The Distributor for short). One of these changes involved what was apparently the largest-ever single contribution to the land's most esteemed charity for the blind. The gift was made by an anonymous source, but there were inquiries for legal purposes and the designation "TWLD-FL" had been dropped to a national reporter of questionable merit. No indication was made as to whether this was an acronym, but putting it together in my head, this news got me thinking of Rex, or the man who called himself Rex in deference to the organization for which he worked. It had been over ten months since I last saw my café companion, and when the inevitable happened, I found myself on a plane heading back East, determining to look him up and also challenging myself to have spent my last year ever in corporate hell.

But I would soon witness another inroad into society by The Distributor. During the layover at the Midwest hub on my flight back, and in my inebriated state of relief, I encountered them again in their chief activity. This was as I sat finishing a drink in the airport, in one of those utterly sanitary bars that adjoin any number of varying establishments along an airport corridor. I hadn't gotten much sleep the previous night, one full of anxieties about practical matters of living upon my return East. I trained my

stinging eyes out into the corridor and onto a newsstand right in its midst. I could only guess as to what gave it the leeway to be planted in the middle of this busy space, surrounded by sleeker commerce. The position of prominence of a quaint kiosk-type stand like this seemed doubtful next to such high technology. I watched the pedestrian and airway-related traffic pass to the right or left. I paid my bill, found my footing, and walked over to stand in front of the small outlet I suspected I would find familiar.

However, the discreet sign atop this cubicle bore the word “Philosia,” in a bold sans serif font, and after glancing around at the merchandise, I asked the sharp-looking young man behind the counter who the owner of the business, or chain, was. The smile he was already wearing broadened in my direction as he said he was “new here” as of yesterday and (as he snickered here) hadn’t quite leaned to pronounce the owner’s name. Then he added: “I do know he’s blind, though. Isn’t that cool?” At that moment there was an announcement on the loudspeaker regarding my flight, and I told him I’d better get to my gate. The young man was looking at me now with a certain mild but intent regard. It reminded me of a fleeting look I’d registered on Rex’s face when we first met, one that brought a sudden and subtle sense of inner warmth – brief, but the kind of feeling I occasionally got when I imagined I was connecting, or connected, to something outside myself, something vast. On this occasion, however, this sense wasn’t fleeting but remained as long as I held my gaze at this proprietor’s admittedly handsome, youthful face. It had the effect, despite my mention of connection, of a weakening of self with all its notions. And in truth, it felt more as if I were being stared at not by the young man, but by some other entity using his eyes. It turned out this hypnosis was fairly easy to break, however, much like declining an invitation.

When I glanced back at him, the youth’s look had reorganized into one of simple friendliness, and he proceeded. In a politely hurried manner, he told me they liked to ask three questions (“they”), then set forth the first of these: did I figure I spent at least fifty percent of my time reading. I mumbled a yes, my mind more on getting to the gate. “Secondly,” he asked, “what are the top three kinds of content you like to read?” He saw my impatience with the task of mining my addled brain for an answer to this, and moved on to the third. “Okay,” he said with a chuckle, “the last one is, What would you most like to read next – or right now?” I told him that would best be something he probably

didn't have, a sympathetic consideration of willful underemployment. "Ah, yes, well you're in luck, see?" said the new hire. And then, in that aged, tightly packed kiosk wherein the spiffy youth stood comfortably in shirt and tie, he bent down from the waist and came up quickly with a paperback book he placed in my hand. It was by an author I'd never heard of, a fact I realized meant nothing. The book's title was *Don't Work Too Hard*. "Something to read aboard your flight. Or just leave for someone else."

I felt my eyebrow rise in amusement at what looked like a modern self-help bestseller, and turned to go. The man thought he knew me already – a dull gray anger seeped up through the boozy haze of my mind. Added to this, from head down to stomach, I was aware of the vague but familiar knot of unknowing which had always been mine. Nevertheless, conditioned as I was in the niceties, I turned back in a jerk, fumbling in my coat pocket. When I looked up with cash in hand, another person was at the counter and I saw the young whelp's arm raised and pointing, as if in proud salute, to a sign in the opposite corner from that bearing the name *Philosia*. This sign read something too small for me to see, my glasses being in my carry-on bag, and I squinted. But the proprietor's smile drew me back to center as he said to me, "It's free." I thanked him and broke away from the booth to go stand inert in the long line at my flight gate.

Upon my return to the eastern city with which I was familiar and which had been my home, I decided to seek a dwelling as far downtown as was possible, following some salutary notion that I had a better chance of being held, or helped, there – somewhat like a child – than by the midcity or even the outskirts, where things had become fashionably cutthroat. What I had in mind happened to exist, but barely, that being the only rooming-house left in town, although it had never advertised itself as such. From my childhood, I remembered the word "Mission" displayed above a certain door, but even that designation was long gone. Left, however, were the badly weathered, stone-sculpted remains of a small mythical creature, whose name I'd also forgotten. There were a community of monks of an obscure order who had occupied the old house for decades, and even though they were a quite insular group, I knew they sometimes took in "special" persons to rent one of several rooms that were kept for prospective initiates. This in any case approximated the situation, which may well have revealed some unhappy condition

upon my residency. But whatever straits presented themselves, I would be able to save much of what little money I managed to squirrel away again in a nearby bank.

And so I stopped by the mission one morning after the first freeze of the season. In the dilapidated foyer that served as a public “reading room,” but whose tracts and booklets were so yellowed they might crumble in one’s hands, I pretended to read, while warming myself. With me I had brought like a sacrificial goat the cumbersome, decidedly “monkly” book given to me almost a year previous. In no time, among my hosts there was that restrained stir of patronizing attention that greets anyone passing through the lair of any number of self-important sects. This I could see in the eyes of these men as they spoke with me. But I soon understood tacitly that there was no literature of their own that held the slightest interest to the gathering monks when compared with the volume they saw tucked under my arm – that black block I had resisted sitting on (surely to make some perverse comment on the comfort level of their virtually absent furniture, and perhaps upon the book itself). They had heard tell of this book, mostly from other books of course, but had thought it lost forever. For a moment I considered suggesting they get out to their neighborhood newsstand a bit more. Despite their interest in both the book and me, it took about two hours before I was invited to take, on a temporary basis, the only remaining proper bedroom of the house, this being on the topmost floor of the three-story structure.

I decided on my second or third night back to go for a full walk around the end of town where I now resided, and do any of my drinking thereabouts. Of course I also wanted to see if I could find Rex. And find him I did: as I had begun to imagine with only half a mind, his kiosk was easier to find, in fact larger, than last time. First I tied on a single bourbon at a bar near the waterfront, and then I walked out to greet him at his latest location. Immediately it was apparent that something about Rex had changed in the many months since our two successive visits. The artificial eyes had fixed into a more stable appearance, but he seemed to have lost some of the enthusiasm that had been virtually on display upon first seeing him at work. Back then he gave the impression of being almost too satisfied, somewhat in the manner of the proverbial cat that swallowed the canary. Now his head was cast at a slight downward tilt as though he held secrets inside that he

dare not let out. I quickly deduced that, in fact, he did not recognize me as I stood before him. Or perhaps I presented some threat. He looked left, then right, then up and down my person. I too held my say until I heard him putting to me the first of what were surely the same three questions I'd gotten from the man at the airport terminal, that of being at least a fifty percent reader; then I stopped him.

"Rex, it's me. Maybe you don't remember – from a year ago when you were uptown. We had coffee a couple of times and you gave me *Entrainment of the Race*. I soon headed out West for work."

The recognition took, and he started nodding his head quickly. I followed up with what humor I thought might be tolerated, telling him I was at the moment just in the market for a copy of the national television guide.

He seemed temporarily thrown. "I should be so lucky to carry that anymore," he managed, then offered a rather false smile to a customer who selected one book out of two alternatives and walked away. "But surely...well, surely there is no TV where you..."

"At the mission, you mean? How did you know? Or need I ask?"

"No," he said tensely, "no need. Word gets around, you might say." I was finally cornered by the realization that my friend made puns whether he was aware of them or not. As I mused on this, an early mix of rain and snow was suddenly gusted by the wind, and the two of us shuffled off in a direction Rex was pointing. I heard him mumble something about seeing how the other half lived. Indeed, when I opened the door he indicated, I saw the current technology represented in several desktop terminals, and was surprised that he would deign to darken the threshold of the place. Rex had never wished to speak of such things, and I had no real interest myself. (There was a reason for lending the terms of entrapment to such networks.) This establishment was one of the "cyber-café's" that had sprung up in the past few years, first wherever there were young people, and then where age wasn't a defining factor. This one served only coffees and teas; though disappointed, I was glad to have had the earlier drink, and Rex looked glad to be in from the cold. Outside, it had occurred to me that he looked none the richer for his pleasant job with an obviously wealthy company; in essence he was wearing the same

worn suit I found him in last year. But the lights in this café were down low, something for which I was always grateful.

We ordered at the counter. But when we were settled with our coffees in a booth on the perimeter, Rex took out a flask from his coat pocket and surreptitiously spiked his drink. He offered the flask to me and I did the same. He sipped and then spoke:

“Places like this were on their way out, you know, but now they’re in something of a comeback because of the need for people to mix their own madness with that of others, in person. A better stirring of the pot...”

I don’t think I got what he was saying with that, or trying to say, but I let him speak, sensing his need to do so. I only prompted him with, “How are you doing, Rex?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you,” he said. “Yes, a year has passed us by, but added to that, oh...well, nothing really to add. Things are the same, yet not at all. Memory is...is just a padded room, you know, where you bump up against yourself continually. I suppose it was to be a life of some kind, wasn’t it? Well, when the sight came again, then the books...the world! For me, now, it’s like having read your whole life away, only to be able to remember just that. But maybe I’m being spared...”

“Spared what, Rex?”

“It seems you’ve been spared too. The noosphere, my friend: it has a weight it’s never had before. Yes, you – you were the one, and you were correct!” Thus spoke Rex on the night we revisited after my secular sojourn, and he spent the next fifteen minutes or so struggling to attain the coherence to which I could hear he aspired. “And to be fair to your initial assessment, I should indeed go quite mad,” he continued, then chuckled. “Do you know how mad things are getting?” He pulled out a folded newspaper from the inner lining of the coat, and displayed it so I could read the headline: **Paper Shortage Looms – Read All About It**. I was going to examine the paper, wondering if it was published by a certain TWLD-FL, but Rex quickly tucked it away, and in this his persona had briefly broken out into that of a sideshow charlatan. He took what was only the second sip from his mug, then went on: “But this realm of thought – ‘they say’,” he added in a sarcastic tone – “of *mentation*, is what draws people together. Oh, I mean when such a meeting is successful...such as ours? And most of all – most mysteriously to those very people, you see – it is also that which keeps them apart. Especially nowadays.”

“And so,” I jumped in, “I wouldn’t necessarily detect your madness.” His response was immediate:

“Nor I yours.” His smile stretched slow and wide. “In any case we can’t go on in each other’s presence forever, and so our suffering will be alone. Suffering the denseness and mounting oppression of this sphere of mental activity until we disengage it somehow. Or?...well, who knows what blessings are brought by true madness.” He shrugged and sipped from his admixture. He then asked for some help in reading the menu, before deciding he didn’t want anything to eat. This otherwise negligible request disturbed me, and I held on to it as I myself proceeded to order a fair meal, use the restroom to gather some slipping wits, then sit again across from my strange friend, making my plate available to him also, though he ate hardly a thing.

He too had taken a moment to relax, and while I felt assured of his basic sanity, or at least coherence, it will be best to summarize in my own words what I learned as I once again inquired into the developments of FreeBooks. Rex started by telling me he was surprised that I’d come across only the one airport kiosk during my time away; that in fact there were more and more kiosks appearing on the streets around not only the major cities but now the secondary ones. I wasn’t aware of this; I had obviously spent that time going from work to home in the shortest time possible, gradually depressing the while. Now, in the supposedly blessed state “between jobs,” which I feared might actually resolve to permanent joblessness, I supposed I could afford to open my eyes.

Following up on the scene at the airport, I asked Rex, “What was that spiel you were about to give me a while ago? It sounded just like the kid out there.”

Rex explained the changed approach of FreeBooks: The company had access to every book that ever existed, calling forth some of them from who-knew-where, but also published its own special line of books. After the three questions were asked, the customer was given a book which was a kind of primer on his or her most avid interest. This was usually nonfiction (and indeed the organization preferred it that way). They were told to come back for another book of the same sort when finished reading it, at which time they would be sent off with another of the typically slender and handy trade paperbacks that gave them, what? – simply more upon that same subject. Indeed there seemed to be an inexhaustible wealth of material on every subject, whatever it was. Each

volume bore a fairly nondescript cover with matte finish, and inside was composed of reprinted material from published authors, republished material from those out of print, and/or newly published material from “other” writers, dead or alive. Thus the reader was subtly placed on a sort of course, but without directly signing up for it.

While Rex elaborated on this methodology I recalled his warning to me, from the year before, to avoid “courses.” My own circumstances had sheltered me. Then Rex anticipated a question I had: Yes, there was something that did keep one coming back for those other volumes of the same type, books of no particular order: when recipients read the literature from the kiosks, their eyesight bettered itself to a more than noticeable degree. Much improved, naturally, was the sight of those who wore glasses (they found they could soon read best with them off); but even the slightly impaired simply had a more enjoyable time of reading – of reading this newly packaged literature, that is; for in reading and seeing all else, their sight was the same as it had been. And apparently, the use of any kind of publication other than the unceasing regimen of topical volumes was now restricted as never before...much of it depended on the proprietors of the kiosks, who were “equipped” by the company to read their prospective customers to a high degree, this ability or psychological insight following the restoring of their own eyes as they themselves progressed through something of the same reading process. In fact, as Rex’s revelations came together, I realized with some sense of horror that all of the kiosk managers were – or rather had been – formerly seeing blind persons before their employment by FreeBooks. Should these kiosk workers be tempted to rebel in some way, or to quit employment, the state of their eyes would return to blindness, the company having its own ways of assuring this, as it presumed to have already assured the greater happiness of those who literally craved again the experience of tracking words on the page, remembering it so well from before their blindness. Understandably, Rex knew little of the kind of technology that might be required for this entire setup. Finally, never was it asked of the “students” of these courses to take any kind of test.

It all seemed an enterprise of the most ludicrous prospect, and yet this was surely how many a successful enterprise must have seemed both in times past and especially in the strange day in which I found myself. And there was no doubt it was succeeding; but to what end? When I asked this of Rex, the increasingly disgruntled company employee

across from me, he took a moment to consider something, and on his face and in his manner I saw clear trepidation. He declared that perhaps the company did have it in mind to play with people, to make up the ends of their plans as they went along. But he vacillated as well – he asked whether it was such a bad thing that libraries should go to the streets, so to speak. Whatever the effects of the devices of the organization, though, whatever FreeBooks’ vagaries, I imagined it must be especially difficult for the proprietors to be in the position they were in. As I ventured this thought, Rex pointed out, “Who among us would go back to blindness?”

“Yes, well,” I said, “it seems the literature is free but the reader is not.” This appeared to depress Rex. A moment later, after sipping from his cooled coffee/whiskey, he mumbled something into his mug which was lost on me due to what had for the last several minutes been an increase in the general noise level of the café clientele. I asked Rex to repeat what he’d said, and he did, though I could not say it was the same as just prior to my asking.

“We’re trying, you see,” he uttered more loudly. “The organization, all of us...all will be OK.” However astute my perceptual powers, I could at least see through this remark. And there was something different about Rex’s eyes as I looked up at him, as if some light had gone or was going out.

My dinner remained all but untouched even by me. There was now a palpable sense of upheaval among the other customers, and both Rex and I felt it to a degree ourselves. What is more, my eyes seemed to be losing their acuity, though nothing had changed about the café’s lighting. Was this my imagination, or some side-effect of the moderate amount of alcohol I’d consumed earlier? I was at least sure that, different from the last occasions in Rex’s company, there was this time no improvement in my vision.

I looked outside at the dying daylight. A seeing-eye dog stopped on its leash in front of the FreeBooks (or “Philosia”) kiosk. The dog’s owner came to a stop too, and began calling after his dog. But the animal did not come to him; it stood stock-still with its eyes staring straight ahead down the sidewalk. The kiosk was to the dog’s right. I peered at the dog and saw the vacant look in its left eye facing the café window. Or could it be called vacant? The beast on the whole gave the impression of a deep shift in...consciousness. As I watched it come upon him, Rex looked out to see what held my

attention. He was squinting. The dog began to agitate, stepping backward then forward, walking in a circle, and now and then stopping to shake violently. The blind man holding the leash was himself stumbling about in an attempt to locate his companion, and when the dog again came to a sudden stop, was more or less jerked back in a reversal of the usual dynamic.

“It’s him! I know him,” Rex said.

“Does he need help?” I asked.

“It’s too thick, all around this small section of town. He is called the Backslider. Observe the dog itself!”

At that moment the dog performed a thrashing twist-about and strained toward the waterfront, actually pulling its owner for a few steps. Then the man let go of the leash and the dog bolted, dragging the leash behind it.

“It went blind,” said Rex with a shudder. “Lights out, ha! Can you imagine: the whole ordeal of earthly consciousness suddenly flooding the poor beast’s brain?”

“Your *philosia*?” I asked.

Rex wobbled his head as if indecisive.

“And the man?”

“He managed the very first kiosk, some two years ago. Then it was the proprietors who were constrained to read all, to course their way to madness. He refused to become the first guinea pig. They struck him back to his blindness. He was happy to have it. What an awful trick, though. And if not for the shuffling of locations he would never have dared come within half a block of us. Horrible... Please excuse me, I must attend...ah...” Rex was in the process of scooting out of the booth, but his movements were uncertain. The crowd around us was now so loud as to make it necessary to shout. I got out of my seat and knelt by Rex to hear what he was saying. The dim light caught a face that had grown more haggard and full of fright in the last hour.

“What’s the matter, Rex? Are you feeling well?”

“I-I mustn’t see you again, I’m afraid. Do help me up, however...must shut down for the night ahead.” A shadow in back of us shifted among the crowd, allowing a ray of light to fall upon Rex’s eyes. I saw no reaction in them at all, no dilation. I had him by

the arm as he stood on his feet. The arm then felt out for me, and the other arm found the table top.

“The bastards,” I fairly shouted, for one cannot shout such a thing as pity, and led my blind friend over to the door.

“Thank you,” Rex was saying almost too quietly for me to hear. “Can you tell me, friend Nott, er, can you describe the scene around us before we depart...”

I took in the central floor of the café. The scene was stark: each informational station was given a wide berth, its apparatus baring dull black “eyes” that seemed to be waiting for attention. The patrons were huddled together in groups on unfixed sofas and around tables with spilled beverages, in heated argument and with books in hand – *all of a slender trade-paperback format with matte finish*. Some of the patrons were waving these books in the air... Everywhere were to be heard violent or desperate bursts of conversation and entreaty. It truly was an atmosphere – or a noosphere – of noxious, smothering weight.

After my brief description, Rex murmured: “They are trying to remember everything *else* they have read.”

Outside, I assisted him in closing down the kiosk. When we were done, a large man who was obviously a personal assistant appeared from around a corner and took the blind Rex wherever his home was.

I passed the remainder of the evening away from that vicinity, reaching by bus a restaurant I used to frequent much further uptown. I drank more than I ate, and reflected uncomfortably over this last meeting with Rex and on the stirring of the mad intensity near what was now my own home. Then I called a taxi, which took me back through the accumulating snow to the massive front door of the mission. Upon arriving and tossing my coat to the floor, there was a knock at the door I had just shut. I opened it. There stood the large man whom I had last seen attending Rex. He gave a stiff smile and simply handed me a folded letter, which I tucked away. I thanked him and he left. The senior of the mission house appeared in the vestry-like foyer and inquired into the source of the knocking; he was in a generally curious state about my evening, but despite the

intoxication that was now taking greater hold at a remove from the night's dire discussion, or perhaps because of it, I managed to bore even him.

I read the letter upstairs in my bedroom. It was badly penned, and read:

“8:06 p.m.

Nott –

You and you only should receive this, and from my assistant, a dear mute friend who has helped me from my days of, I want to say, prior blindness. I am appreciative tonight for both your ear and kind hand...and now of your own healthy eyes. I will miss my [undecipherable] but have glimpsed what is coming. I don't know what to make of it, I'm a simple man. Useful only for a while, apparently – but I'm sure they know this about many of us. The orbs I had gotten used to had gone unregenerated all of today (yes, as in a battery). So: there is the falling back into blindness and the rising above it to a greater one. To each his own.

Tomorrow morning will not “see” me in my usual place. Could I impose on you to ask a favor? I should find someone to replace me there, to “show up,” as it were, until I figure out what to do; and surely that will not be long. I actually fear for my life if the stall is unmanned so soon. You see, I do not intend to avail myself of what is a 2nd chance the organization offers, which includes the making of amends. For I do not at this time intend to stay on...

I have treated you as other than a customer. They are not happy with this. They will make an example of me, to be sure. Is this not how the corporations themselves function? And not only that, but my cavalier acts have put you at risk: FreeBooks knows about the grimoire I passed on to you last year. I must now warn you that the Powers That Be are concerned about the group with whom you are boarding. It is from them, in fact, that I believe they must have taken the term “philosia”...referring to that fabled (more accurately forgotten) state to which they aspire. In any case, I do hope you are not thinking of joining this order other than proximally. They are called the Scripturalists (those “paper people”) not without reason – I would spare you the tedium of becoming their librarian or

such. Far better to sling hash...Scottish of course. But certain of them have taken advantage of this manipulable man, me, to the acquisition of books that, upon looking at them, (if I may be so outlandish) will practically stare right back! Yes, they are ready to take the jump, it seems...or so they think. Personally, I can't understand why the Bosses On High aren't overjoyed to again have the occasion for a test case for their purposes. Nevertheless, I must warn you there may be trouble. I don't presume to know the form it will take. Please consider another shelter. For tomorrow, if you would be so good as to open the kiosk with the small key I slipped you at the café, I would be ever so grateful. Yes, tomorrow – more to see, more to say, I hope. Do be in touch.

Yours sincerely,

R.”

The next day I awoke to the sight of a blizzard outside my window. The senior of the house had notified me the night before of an increasingly bad weather report. As there was no television on the premises, I gathered he had a radio somewhere, as he rarely if ever went outside. It was a pitiful little scene: I attempting to stumble my way upstairs, Rex's letter in my breast pocket; he sitting in mild, almost fatherly accusation, knowing perhaps that I had not been looking for work that day and, I supposed, having spotted the letter. Then there had been a gleam in his one unclouded eye as he invited me to stay in for the morrow's Day of Contemplation, during which, except for meals, every "monk" in the house would eschew all reading and play silent host to whatever enlightenment saw fit to come.

Looking out of the window, on impulse I tried to locate Rex's kiosk; and through the windblown snow, I did spot something looking like a small business stall. The view was partial, the hazy structure being on the perimeter of my vision. I also knew there had not been a kiosk that close to the mission the day before. Perhaps they were so driven as to have already found someone, a new or old hire, to man the outlet upon Rex's leave-taking, for it seemed there was some general activity within or about the structure I was straining to observe. But most probably it was simply the swirling activity of the elements. I then thought of Rex's obviously delirious request, and whether I should not in

fact make my way up the street – “show up” for work. Would that satisfy all my curiosities? Grant me enlightenment and the servitude of my current housemates? At least impart a sense of worldly redemption? But as had been so often the case in the past, I was easily distracted from further thoughts about what I might want to do. The present distraction came from the opposite periphery of my vision, where something was moving up the middle of the blanketed street...

Till now no one was to be seen on the street. Despite the senior’s invitation, I’d intended to sleep late but had been awakened by a bad dream, a nightmare of abstract yet somehow geometrical concept-images each representing the central ideas and terms of the great philosophers, each in orbit around the others, grappling... In bed, when I turned my eyes window-ward to daylight and snowflakes, yet heard no sound from outside, part of my mind wondered if everyone was staying home from school or work to read all day. From my early years this had been a mental image of great comfort. But, with reading and its joys having recently been so corrupted, instead of acting as a soporific this nostalgic thought soon thrust me onto my feet wide awake.

This was the day mentioned by the senior of the house, I thought. And then I recalled something of which Rex had informed me: on this day, as the Scripturalists had surmised from one prophet in their midst, many mysteries would be answered, or, failing this, new ones would present themselves as the most worthy of reflection. And they owed it all, they couldn’t help but believe, to books, *those* books, which had come in the fullness of time and bearing the hidden wisdom of ages past, et cetera, et cetera. Religious history was replete with such arcana, I knew, and maybe this “prophet” also happened to be a speed-reader. But in spite of my own cynical outlook, I was aware of a disturbingly quiet imperative breaking through to my consciousness, and it was this: *Count all words as prologue*. I was no prophet, but believed I knew better than the people in the house that sheltered me. I was convicted of the link between desire and deterioration; that it was obtaining exactly what one desired that led to madness.

And I myself was afraid of something that had haunted me for as long as I could remember: that there was nothing which was truly known. Not that certain things were simply unknown or even unknowable, but that the very *existence* of those “things” had always and would ever be in doubt. Every expression of knowledge only proclaimed our

ignorance. If any of the recluses with whom I homed had any insight at all by way of the literature they were handed *gratis*, that insight would surely show, I thought – even through their imminent blindness. Had any of them the guts to admit this?

At this moment I heard the crash of glass, as of a lamp, in another room, followed by a muffled thump and a raspy cry of pain... The day was not dawning, but dimming, upon our house.

And, I continued to wonder, had they enough now, at this juncture, or would they feel threatened, cut off from their ever-flowing source...by the apostate Rex?...even by the falling curtain of white outside? It remained to be seen if they would obey their own imperative and avoid reading. But I didn't want to be among them this day, I wished I were far away. Having lived among the "Scripturalists" for one week, I now wished I could escape what was clear to me was their utter foolishness, and blindness indeed!

I looked again out the olden, flimsy-paned window. The distant object down the street was to all appearances the huddled upper halves of two grown men. One helped the other as they shambled through the now intermittently sunshot snow. One figure periodically moved his hatted head back and forth as might someone who was getting his directional bearings. This figure carried a bag of some sort. As they drew closer I guessed this man to be Rex, and the taller figure the mute assistant I'd seen last night upon returning. Were they headed for the kiosk, or to the mission? The snow must have been almost three feet deep at the drifts. By the time I threw on some old clothes, a snowplow had rumbled down the street and the two men stood beneath my window. Rex upturned his head and yelled:

"Nott! Nott, if you are there do not embark on my errand...do you hear? Stay inside, Nott – I will ask to be admitted."

But at that moment the door of the old building flew open. The wind was strong, though I sensed it was not responsible for this vehemence. I heard a dry rattle of voices, and then Rex's widened mouth betrayed the presence of another. Several others. Several Scripturalist devotees, I now saw, began to choke the entrance to the mission. In their black capes and cowls, they fluttered against the background of white, pristine snow like a flock of crows. The sun had vanished.

One of the eldermost men grabbed Rex by his jacket and was having angry words with him, the others falling in around the two. I opened my window...

"Let him inside," I cried from above. And within a few moments my friend and his man were shoved in through the doors, which then slammed shut. I hastened to meet them in the foyer.

When we were inside my bedroom I locked the door.

"You were once among them, weren't you," I said.

We went to the window, where as if in answer to my deduction the blind Rex headed unerringly, and he instinctively looked down with me. There were shouts of every imaginable kind. Many of the mission residents were joining their plainly blind brothers along the front of the house, some of them stamping and kicking a haphazard path into the street. Through their general constriction, fear abounded. I tried to detect a more specific tone, to hear through the whistling wind the content in the chaos. Some cried out for revenge of some kind, and, lest some of their number might still see, I hid Rex behind me as a contingent of monks shook pinkish-gray fists in the direction they determined my window to be. Others of the order pleaded forbearance, arguing for courage in the face of an invited destiny. One man was attempting to lead his fellows across the street, seemingly toward the kiosk. Then something more disturbing: I watched as Rex's assistant was pulled from indoors to act as a guide, strength born of desperation overcoming the large man's bulk. The wind, meanwhile, had begun to blow debris along the street; a monk who was part of the imagined journey uphill stooped to pick up something that had flown to his ankles or else dropped from the folds of his robes. I was not surprised that it was a trade paperback book, one of those freely distributed by the organization of a visionary blind man. Suddenly leaflets and books and magazines were all blowing through the air from up the street where the kiosk, moments before a virtual mirage, sat solidly delineated as if in mockery.

"There is a new hire today," Rex said beside me. "Probably new tactics as well." I was silent, continuing to watch the melee. The journeyers to the kiosk were all but stuck fast. "A Day of days, eh, my friend?" he went on. I heard the capital. "But as you can see, though I cannot, a little contemplation can be dangerous. They are blind as the bats they

resemble! They will want to make an end of it, some of them at least, or else arrest the supplier of their own outlandish requests – I must be careful.”

“Well, thank you for withdrawing your own request,” I said, wiping my face of sweat and continuing to spy upon the blurry scenes below.

“Ah but I am ready to die... Tell me...is the literature there too? And is it burning the snow where it lands?”

“You’re insane,” I exclaimed. “Along with the death of this order goes my—”

“No, no, dear friend. I will share, there is of which to share...”

I looked, and some of the signatures were coming undone from the books, the folded pages flying with the wind or by their own strange power into the rapidly reddening faces of those in the increasing flock. “I can see!” shouted some, attempting to snatch the papers with stiffening hands only to have the “flyers” move on after a few flaps of their pages, leaving the readers blind again. It was evident that most of their hysterical company thought clues and answers still possible from the writings, and they now attempted to secure this airborne literature under weights. But the only weights to be found were chunks and balls of snow, and the paper, instead of emitting any minute heat according to physical law, appeared to become soaked at an unnatural speed. The howls of anguish assumed the proportions of a catharsis, yet also became gagged, the wind rushing into open mouths and distorting words and voices into airy caws. From just behind me, Rex dressed up his commentary:

“It sounds like the splitting of minds. They have taken the leap but are now victims of their own inner perception. Perhaps “deception” is a better word. They are seeing, make no mistake! And yet they reasoned that voluntary blindness would bring them something from their God...not *nothing* from *no* one. Does sight exist when there is nothing to see? I would envy them if I could only stop laughing.”

He was not laughing. “Get ahold of yourself, Rex.”

“I am safe, if only for the moment. Safe and sold out, a true backslider if there ever was one. How I envy them: the colors, the shapes and the sheer *size* of the unknown. Oh the irony! For now I see neither the apparent forms, nor that other, which is not other.”

“I’d just as soon adjust to my blindness if I were you,” I threw over my shoulder.

“The chaos you hear now they are hearing first inside their skulls. They seek a return to the written word because they are in terror from a more primordial thing, the madness of *heard* words...but it still all comes down to words. If they could accept, it might transmute to ecstatic utterance. Were there any among them really aware – and how could there be? – they would embrace the, shall we say, “endarkenment” of the present and final situation. So look upon them; enjoy if you can the absurdity of a rebellion against nonsense! They are a sacrifice for us all! What do you see?” He was like a child at a circus.

“There are some others who’ve made it to the street, and everyone who does has...”

“His nose in a book?” Rex finished and then cackled.

It was true. Some had carried their own “literature” outside, but it appeared to be in compliance with a weird admonition to bask in these events, at the risk of privation. Half the city dwellers showing up were ill-clothed for such weather, and this disregard was more apparent when they started shedding their gloves in order to handle the books...to turn the pages.

Yet paper of every kind also wrested free, went aloft.

“The thoughts, they are weightless, are they not?” Rex’s voice was itself elevating. “Do let yourself go, friend Nott! You will have help when the drafts reach this high. Ahhh... A special dispensation has surely been granted this day.” The man’s mumbling reverie trailed off as he lifted the shabby bag he had brought.

It had gotten stifflingly hot on our side of the window, but outside it was like a solstice pageant. “The Teasing of the Leafs” lasted the better part of twenty minutes, with pedestrians assaulted or eluded, eyesight given then taken away. When every kind of mad theory regarding the nature or supernature of this maelstrom had been proclaimed, there began to settle a relative calm over those assembled. Beneath the faint riffling still made by the “free” literature, I imagined I could hear the breath of the falling snow.

Rex, too, had hushed his accompanying libretto, until his curiosity got the better of him: “What is happening now?”

“Freezing of the Flock,” the thought emerged rapidly. But spoken words were coming more slowly, and I had to summon speech. “The ‘Paper People,’ as you call them, say they are Gnostics.”

“Yes, and they soon shall be again! But from the beginning those old boys couldn’t have endured long without books. And now the knowledge-seekers face a rapid epistemological breakdown. I can’t help think it is soon upon them: the experience of the opposite of gnosis, blind ignorance, as the true knowing. Why, if you are experiencing what is, you cannot “know” anything! Yes, and this ignorance is being eternally born of all the prevailing knowledge in the world. It is always already. Now, how are our fellows doing – have they resorted yet to public supplication?”

“They’re huddled together...for warmth, it looks like. Or they were. That is,...they aren’t moving.”

“Yes, what has happened to the chorus? I should think they would babble on unto glossolalia.”

Babylon. I turned and gave him a curious look, a thing or two arising in my own tired mind. My gaze returned to the developments outside just as an intrepid neighbor approached those from the mission. She reached out a hand.

“They’re being touched, like—like a statue.” Another person stepped up to the frozen flock. “The senior was just disrobed by someone and his body is ashen.” I took in this sickening tableau, and recalled a stark similarity. The black but snow-mottled clutch of monks looked like the famous sculpture of the victorious soldiers with flag on an island in the West Pacific. Except that these figures held nothing, the exception being that certain hands had frozen onto the shoulders or robes of those next to them, in an effort to climb a mere inch. They were all gathered in the approximate shape of the letter A, a few fingers still twitching spasmodically at the air where they had all reached for a hovering volume now long gone. I described all this to Rex. “It is the effrontery of religion, isn’t it?”

“Ah, very good, Nott. Yes, the desire for God just another one to make men miserable. But our populace is in momentary peace?”

“Yes.”

“I suspect the authorities, for reasons unknown to them, will soon remove the frozen statue, and one day soon it will be thought that a statue is all it is or ever was, and it will stand in some nearby park, if there be any left. A story will be told commemorating...”

As Rex indulged the imaginative scenario to which anyone was entitled, three other things happened outside. The snow now fell straight and slow, but became so thick as to cause a virtual white-out; and as if to refute the age-old caution that books were but dead words, the last of the books winging about were seen to have such dense writing on their pages that they appeared black, thus being the only discernible objects as eyes turned heavenward. And this writing was taking place *as they flew!* Finally, the very last book I saw myself was the one that swooped sideways and knocked off the highest hand of the tallest of the eternally grasping monks. Off it fell onto the ice, where it twitched no more.

“...an example has indeed been made.”

Rex was now quiet a moment. Who knew if what he was saying was so; but it might as well be. It made as much sense as anything else. I was glad I had not joined the Order of the Haggis. And that they had never seen fit to return the book I’d entrusted to their keep. But my thoughts were now disturbed by a rustling behind me. Rex had retrieved something from his bag. More literature? Somehow I doubted it. Turning to the window again, I thought I might rest my chin for a moment on the cold sill...might watch the falling flakes. But this was not to be.

“Here is something, here are clues,” Rex was saying, his voice much less exultant. And instead I had to make way for what Rex was attempting to place upon the sill, the object backlit by the glare from outside. “They too have been talking among themselves,” he said. “We have not been at odds, no, it is not truly that way.” He was clearly agitated underneath the reasonable words. “Please to read it as I cannot; perhaps some indication of the scale... Er, people’s thoughts. Aloud, please.”

It was the compact, squarish form of that electronic animal we have all lived with for some time. Instead of being brought down in spirit, however, I felt a definite draft, but one of transcendence, an “above it all” I’d not felt in years.

I pushed the thing from the window just as its operations lit up its filmy eye. Again Rex acted on the instinct of one whose sight was intact – he joined me head-to-head to watch the short plummet of the object from his bag. What we saw – rather, what *I* saw, and with my own eyes – was only a hole of the most incredible depth in the snow, as going through the street itself and into hell. Shall I not say it as it looked to me? And around the fringe of the initial shape, the snow was a singed and smoky black.

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