

Alexander Jablovkov

MARKET REPORT

Information on our buying habits is constantly collected and used by companies intent on selling us more of the same material. It may not be long before that data is used for other, more sinister, reasons as well, Alexander Jablovkov's latest novel, *Deepdrive*, is just out from Avion Eos.

I

slid out of the rental car's AC, and the heat of the midwestern night wrapped itself around my face like a wet iguana. Lightning bugs blinked in the unmown grass of my parents' lawn, and cicadas rasped tenaciously at the sub-division's silence. Old Oak Orchard was so new it wasn't even on my most recent DeLorme map CDROM, and it had taken me a while to find the place.

My father pulled the door open before I could ring the bell.

"Bert." He peered past me. "Ah. And where is—"

"Stacy's not with me." I'd practiced what to say on the drive from the air-port, but still hadn't come up with anything coherent. "We...well, let's just say there have been problems."

"So many marriages are ended in the passive voice." His voice was carefully neutral. "Come along back, then. I'll set you up a tent."

Dad wore a pair of oncefashionable pleated linen shorts and a floppy Tshirt with the name of an Internet provider on it. His skin was all dark and leath-ery, the color of retirement. He looked like he'd just woken up.

"I told Mom when I was coming..."

"Sure." He grabbed my suitcase and wrestled it down the hall. "She must have nailed the note to a tree, and I didn't see it."

I didn't know why I always waited a moment for him to explain things. He never did. I was just supposed to catch on. I had spent my whole life trying to catch on.

"Lulu!" he called out the back slider. "Bert's home."

I winced as he dragged my leather suitcase over the sliding door tracks into the backyard. A glowing blue North Face tent sat on the grass. A Coleman lantern pooled yellow on a picnic table stolen from a roadside rest area. The snapped security chain dangled down underneath:

"Lulu!" he yelled, then managed a grin for me. "She must be checking the garden. We get...you know...slugs. Eat the tomatoes."

The yard didn't end in a garden. Beyond the grass was a dense growth of

trees. Now and then, headlights from the highway beyond paled the under-sides of the maple leaves, but they didn't let me see anything.

"Sure." I sat down at the picnic table. "So how are you, Dad?"

He squinted at me, as if unsure whether I was joking. "Me? Oh, I'm fine. Never better. Life out here agrees with me. Should have done it a long time ago.

Clichés were my father's front defensive line. He was fortifying quickly, building walls in front of questions I hadn't even asked yet.

"Trouble?" I said. "With Mom?" Being subtle is a nonstarter in my family.

"And how is your fastpaced urban lifestyle?" he asked

"We're working a few things out. A bit of a shakedown period, you might call it."

My parents' entire marriage had been a shakedown period. I was just an interim project that had somehow become permanent. I swear, all through my childhood, every morning they had been surprised to see me come down-stairs to breakfast. Even now, my dad was looking at me as if he wasn't entirely sure who I was.

"Well, to start with, Dad, I guess the problems Stacy and I have been having stem from being in the same profession—"

"You know," Dad said, "your mother still has the darkest blue eyes I have ever seen.

"She does have lovely eyes."

"Cornflower blue, I always thought. Her eyes are cornflower blue."

Stacy's eyes were brown, but I guessed my father wasn't interested in hearing about that. "Cornflowers are not the flowers on corn." It had taken me years to figure that out.

"That's right."

"Someone once told me," I said, "that you can hear corn growing at night. It grows so fast on hot summer nights. A night like tonight."

"You need quiet to hear it," he said. "You don't like quiet, do you, Bert?" He was already looking for an argument. "You can't market quiet."

"That's where you're wrong," I said. "There's an ambient recording you can buy of corn growing. Cells dividing. Leaves rustling. Bugs, I don't know, eating the leaves. That little juicy crunch Call it a grace note."

"And so you play it over your Home Theater system. With subwoofer, side speakers, the works? Pour yourself a singlemalt, sit back, relax?"

"You don't *listen* to ambient, Dad. You let it wash over you. Through you. The whole point of modern life is never giving your full attention to any one thing. That gets boring. So you put the corn in the CD stack with the sound of windblown sand eroding the Sphinx, snow falling on the Ross Ice Shelf, the relaxing distant rattle of a horde of lemmings hitting the ocean, pop open your PowerBook to work some spreadsheets, and put a football game on the giant TV. You'll get the Oneness thing happening in no time."

"Are you getting it?" he asked softly. It wasn't like his regular voice at all.

"The Oneness. Whatever it is you're looking for."

"There was a time when I was so close I could taste it..."

"Bertram! There you are!" Had my mother just come out of the woods? She

was knotting the sash of a fluffy white terrycloth robe, as if she'd just stepped from the bathroom. Her gray hair was cut close to her scalp. She looked great. She always had. Even rubbing sleep out of her eyes, her feet bare. She still painted her toenails, I noticed, and they weren't even chipped. "Franklin, weren't you going to go get him a tent?"

"I was," my dad said.

She hugged me, then tugged at the sleeve of my jacket. "Isn't it a little hot for wool?"

"It's tropic weight," I said. "Gaberline."

"The tropics have nothing on Illinois in August." With that last shot, my dad disappeared into the garage.

"Franklin's right. Here." An antique steamer trunk stood on end next to where the house's airconditioning unit poked out of the rhododendrons.

Then my jacket was off, my tie was gone, and I was sitting at the picnic table with an iced glass of cranberry juice in my hand. Mothers do card tricks with comfort. All Dad had offered me was an argument—but then that was his way of letting me know I was home.

"Did the power go out, Mom?" I said.

She laughed. "Oh, no. How do you think I made the ice cubes? It's just the way we live now. Out here in the country."

Now that I had a chance to relax, I could see that the other backyards visible had encampments in them too: tents, tables, meat smokers, greenhouses, even a PortOLet or two. I could hear people talking quietly, even at this hour, and smell the smoke of banked cookfires. Something was wrong, seriously wrong, with this exclusive residential community. I should have known it as soon as my mom gave me the cranberry juice. Her comfort meant that something was not right.

There were times in my childhood when everything had been stable. For a couple of years, for example, my dad had worked in a regular pet store, selling neon tetras and spaniels to wideeyed children who would lose interest in them as soon as they got them home. We'd lived in a suburban house with a yard, all that, and I'd been able to tell the other kids what my dad did for a living. The TV shows I watched seemed to be intended to be watched by people living the life I then lived.

But during that time my mother had barely paid attention to me. TV dinners had been the order of the day, and I remembered a lot of drivethru eating. She thought I was safe, then, and could take care of myself.

It was times like when my dad tried to build a submerged house at the bottom of an abandoned waterfilled quarry and stock the water with ornamental piranha that my mother would bake me apple cobbler and paint farm scenes with smiling cows on the riveted bulkhead in my room. She had always intervened to keep the panic in my memories on a perfectly even keel.

"I should have known," I said.

Ice cubes clinked in my empty glass and she refilled it. "Known what, Bertram?"

"That you and Dad could turn the most wholesome of carefully planned and secure communities into something disturbing. And here I thought, while driving around, that you two had finally settled down, so that I could visit you without fear.

Nice neighborhood, Old Oak Orchard.”

She looked off at the glowing tents of the neighbors. “It is a nice neighborhood. Do you smell roasting joints from oxen and goats hissing fat on ancient sacrificial stones? Hear the minorkey chants of the priests as they rip open the jugulars of bellowing kine with their bronze blades? Does that make you afraid?”

“Lulubelle.” My father broke a branch on a forsythia as he wrestled a heavy bundle out of the garage. My mother winced. “You’re frightening the boy with all this pseudobiblical ‘kine’ stuff. That’s cows, Bert, if you don’t know. Herefords, Black Anguses. Besides, Lulu, you know our whole concept’s not really about...that sort of thing. That’s not the point.”

“I thought we had agreed to disagree on the point, Franklin” I noticed that my mother had scratches up and down her arms, and that one of her little fingers was in a splint. Both Dad and I heard the danger in her tone.

He held up the tent. “It’s canvas, Bert. White duck. Heavy as hell. You know, I saw some hunters out in the Gila with one of these once. They packed in on horses, and fried up a mess of potatoes in a castiron pan two feet across. My friend and I ate some kind of reconstituted gunk out of a plastic bowl. They were hunting elk with blackpowder rifles. The things looked like cannon.”

He’d told me the story before, but the actual physical tent was a new element. It was as if he now needed some real substance behind the memory. My father swore under his breath as he put the thing up. I knew better than to try and help him. It had all sorts of complicated ribs and locking joints. He pinched some skin and got real quiet. You could hear him breathing through his nostrils.

“Oh, come on, Bertram.” My mother chuckled. “You won’t see any animal-headed gods in the Lopezes’ backyard, so quit staring. I was just...kidding.”

She was really being hard on me. She’d noticed Stacy’s absence, but wasn’t going to ask about it. I was sure it pleased her, though.

“It’s late, Lu.” My father looked hungrily at my mother. Men should not look at their own wives that way, and particularly not at the mothers of their sons.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s time for bed.”

It was peacemaking gesture of some sort. They’d been at war, but my arrival had brought them together. My mother smiled at me over her shoulder as she followed him into their dome tent. It was the same old story. My parents had always disappeared behind their locked bedroom door, sometimes in the middle of the day, sometimes when I was sitting down in the living room with uncomfortable shoes on, waiting to go to some relative’s house, and I wasn’t even allowed to turn the TV on.

I woke up. I hadn’t really slept. It was quiet. Still dark. I was thirsty. I walked across the lawn to the back door. The cut ends of the grass tickled my bare feet. It was a great feeling, a suburban feeling. The stars were weirdly bright. The Milky Way was something you wanted to wipe off with a sponge.

The sliding glass door to the kitchen wasn’t locked. As a child, I’d always asked for kitchen water rather than bathroom water. My mother would go downstairs for me. The stairs creaked and I would hear her and know that she loved me. My father would go into the bathroom, make a lot of noise so I knew he hadn’t gone anywhere, even flush the toilet, and then come back and tell me that it was the finest

kitchen water there was. If I was thirsty enough, I would believe him.

The kitchen was dark. I felt the edge of a Corian counter top. I worked my way toward the sink. I saw the high faucet silhouetted against the window. Wet on my fingers. Something was soaking in the full sink. The water did not feel soapy. The glasses would be in this cabinet over here.

Something hissed at me. For a second I thought it was airconditioning after all, despite how hot it was in the kitchen. Then I saw the eyes.

“What is that thing he’s got in his mouth?” my father said. He peered up above the cabinets, into the shadows cast by the lamp. “A vole? Do we have voles? Or is that a starnosed mole? Native or...recreated?”

“Franklin,” my mother said.

From a cookie jar shaped like a squat Chrysler Building she gave me a Tollhouse cookie. It couldn’t have been baked more than a couple of hours before, probably about the time I was landing at O’Hare. The chocolate chips were still a little liquid. They unfurled themselves across my tongue. I lay on the textured floor. I didn’t want to get up.

A magnet on the white dishwasher said CLEAN. The symbol for CLEAN was the smoking rubble of a city. I reached up and turned it over. DIRTY was that city whole, veiled in a haze of smog. A typical example of one of my father’s deep ecology jokes. Smog is one of those antique sixtiestype symbols he’s always using as if they were arguments.

This time my father heard the warning in my mother’s voice. He squatted down next to me. His knees cracked.

“Sorry’ Bert” he said. “I guess I should have told you.”

“Told me what? That you have animals in your sink?”

“It was a fisher.”

I caught glimpses of the creature as it snaked its way across the tops of the cabinets, some kind of rodent limp in its mouth. It looked like a big weasel. Its eyes gleamed down at me in the lantern light. Its eyes...

“A fisher?” I didn’t look at it. Frogs made a low thrumming noise in the sink. An owl hooted out in the living room. Things examined us from outside the circle of light. When I was little, and wouldn’t go get a drink of water myself, this was what I had known it was really like out there.

“Actually, it’s an extinct species of mustelid,” he said. “This one vanished about the time the ice sheets left North America. It’s part of a controlled breeding experiment, the reason we’ve moved here to Old Oak Orchard. We regress the DNA of animals that went extinct around the Pleistocene and implant it in related ova.”

“Oh, God, Dad. Remember that time you raised insulated sea turtles to give rides at that Aleutian beach resort?”

The resort had been run as some government benefit for impoverished Aleuts. All I remembered of the experience was thick clouds, rocks, and giant lumbering shells covered with barnacles, all roughly the same shade of gray. I didn’t remember the turtles having any heads. My only entertainment had been working on a seaweed collection. It had all climaxed in a riot by the dis-illusioned locals, who had invested heavily in beachfront cabanas and glitzy casinos, and blamed my father for the fact

that sea turtle rides through chop-py ice water failed to draw more tourists. Most of the turtles had been stewed in their own shells on the rocky beach in a drunken feast. Sea lions had barked their approval somewhere out in the mist, which glowed orange with the burning cabanas as we pulled away in our fibreglass *bidarka*. My mother had made my very favourite chili mac while we were there, and tucked me into bed every night with a sweet lullaby in a foreign language.

“We were undercapitalised, that’s all.” My dad was irritated at having it brought up. “The failure wasn’t biological.”

“No, they never are—”

“You’re cranky, Bertram.” My mother supported my shoulders, and I sat up. “Not enough sleep.”

She had an almost suntan lotion smell, even though it was still dark. Some kind of collagen replacement cream. It was a comfort, to realize that my mother wanted to stay young. It was something to hold on to. The extinct mustelid slunk into shadows and did not come back out.

The lighter and fluffier my mom’s scrambled eggs, the worse things were—a classic rule. This morning, with the innocent light streaming in through the kitchen windows, they were like clouds. I had looked around the house, but most of its nocturnal dwellers seemed to have hidden themselves in the cup-boards and cabinets.

“Is Dad driving you crazy?” I asked. The orange juice was metallic, from concentrate, so maybe there was some hope.

“Since when hasn’t he?” She smiled. “But this time I’m driving *him* crazy too. I came here under protest—who wants to move out to one of these bland compounds out in the middle of nowhere, even to raise extinct fauna? Really, that’s no different than playing golf until you die, don’t you think?”

I didn’t tell her how happy I had been to see the place, to feel its stolid normality. Sodden, heavy scrambled eggs would have been a small price to pay to know that I was, at last, safe.

“But I’ve found things to do. I’ve found ways to enjoy this little place. And that, as you can guess, drives your dad bananas. I’m using it *wrong*, you see. I’m not enjoying it the proper way.” She produced a daylabeled pillbox, and started filling it with red, yellow, and green pills. Sunday through Saturday. Her week was set up.

“And how are you enjoying it, Mother?”

She held up a deepgreen lozenge. “Do you think my body used to produce this, and then stopped? What gland do you suppose made it?” The pill had a particularly hard gleam, like a liquidoxygen tank on a Pixar-generated spacecraft in an SF movie.

“I don’t know.”

“You know how all these Pleistokooks got together? They all used to belong to the same Internet newsgroup. They’d trade breeding tips, give each other heads up on available DNA sequencers and incubators. Then, a bunch of them decided to live together and work on a big project. They bought into Old Oak Orchard en masse. Some of these people were quite wealthy.”

"It's the latest thing, you know," I said. "The transformation of virtual communities into real ones. One of those wonderful retrogressive steps that makes my job so much fun."

She sighed. "I know mothers can never explain their children's jobs right nowadays, and it always drives the kids crazy. But if you'd only have normal jobs, like, I don't know, accountant, or wrestler, or weatherman, or some-thing..."

"Wrestler?"

"Then we could just say it, and people would know what we meant."

"I've *told* you what Stacy and I do. Call us experimental demographers. That's close enough."

There, I'd brought up the dread name. My mom pursed her lips, but maybe it was because she didn't like the OJ either. "That's not really what you are, is it?"

"No, Mom." I knew she could hear the sadness in my voice. "That's not really what I am. Not anymore."

"Oh, Bertram." Her eyes filled with tears. "I don't know who pushed whom, but she's gone, isn't she?"

"As gone as it gets. And my job along with her."

"She meant so much to you..." She'd never liked Stacy, but she knew what hurt her son.

"The last job we did..." I said. "Stacy soloed, I only advised. She was good, real good. I'd taught her how to spot potentially selfdefined groups...she found a little community of interest among teenagers. A disaffected layer in a lot of high schools, all across the country. People think it's all mass market-ing, but that's not where the real valueadded stuff comes in, not any more. These kids didn't identify themselves as any sort of group, but I could—Stacy could tell from what they bought, the kind of magazines they read, the web sites they hit, and music they listened to, and the street drugs they took, that they were looking for something. Something they hadn't found yet. So she gave it to them."

"What?" My mother was interested despite herself.

"The past. The real deep past. It just took a little marketing push, and they -started mailordering flint blanks for spear points, birthcontrol dispensers in the shape of Palaeolithic fertility figurines, inkjetsprayed wall paintings to conjure up mammoths. It was just this group, but they were really into it. Their rooms at home must have looked like Altamira or Lascaux. When the trend tanks you won't be able to *give* that Acheulean stuff away, but that's off in...the future."

My mother stood up and ran gnarled fingers through her short gray hair. She didn't look young. I wouldn't pretend that. She was old, she was my mother. But she had more light in her eyes than she'd had in years. She also had scratches on her hands, and calluses on her palms, like she'd been work-ing hard somewhere outdoors for quite some time. My mother had never been a gardener and, in fact, there was no trace of any garden in the yard. I'd looked for it.

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" Her tone was bitter.

"Mom, I—"

"Talk to your dad. I mean, really talk to him. I think you still need a few lessons in what life is really like."

She walked out of the kitchen. A few minutes later I heard the door to the yard

ease open. I craned my head out the kitchen window, but couldn't see where she went. I sat down to another cup of coffee. Something that looked a lot like a badger poked its head out from under the sink, saw me, and pulled back. The little door clicked back onto its magnet.

"Dad" I said. "I think you got some problems." Mom had gotten me think-ing about the possible consequences of his new project. I felt like I was back on the job. It bugged me how much I liked that feeling.

"You're telling me?" He spent some time putting the ball on his tee. "I thought your mother and I could work together on this. Instead, she made a bunch of new girlfriends and now spends her time hunting ungulates in the woods with spears. Is that anything a woman her age should be doing?" He swung at the ball with his driver. It sliced viciously, off into the dark woods that bordered the course. In all our years together, this was the first time he'd ever taken me golfing. I already didn't like it.

"I...well, actually, you know, Dad, it's really about time. It's good for her to do something like that."

"God, I knew you'd take her side."

"I'm not taking her side!"

"Deer liver. I'm talking deer liver for supper, with forest mushrooms, fid-dleheads, all sorts of sick huntergatherer crap. She just doesn't seem to get the posttechnological nature of our enterprise. She's a woman who skulks with the foxes." He left the course and started hacking his way through the underbrush. I followed.

"Dad" I, said. "Are we chasing after her? Bugging her?"

"Eh?" I'd caught him. He scratched the back of his head. "Not at all. A golf course is a good place to work out a few intellectual problems. That's all. Golf is the perfect combination of mathematics and frustration."

"Let her be, Dad. She has a right to do what she wants." Even if it was some upmarket version of an old midteen trendlet. No wonder she'd gotten irritated with me. "You're doing what you want' aren't you?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I had a different idea when I came here...it doesn't work without Louise." He never called my mother Louise. Lulu, Lu-lubelle, Looly, all sorts of things. She never liked her given name. "You know, she spends all night out sometimes. Getting nocturnal on me. Pretty soon, her eyes will grow a tapetum and reflect in the headlights. And I'll never see her again."

"Dad, that's just not true, and you know it."

"I want you to help me talk to your mother." His voice was quiet now, matching the hush of the dense forest in which I was already completely lost. "That's all." 1

"Not here, Dad," I pleaded. "Don't try to talk to her here."

"I have to. I can't stand it anymore. Back me up, will you, son?"

They created me as a ref. Both of them. I might as well have been born with a blackandwhite striped shirt on and a whistle in my mouth. I was the gobetween in all their arguments.

"Dammit." He tripped over a thick tree root. "Where do you suppose that

thing's gone? It was a good one, Titleist."

He was maintaining the imposture, even though we'd now been wandering in this thick jungle for a quarter of an hour. He'd occasionally brush some wild sarsaparilla or poison ivy aside with his iron, but he never actually looked at the ground underneath for his ball.

"Dad" I said. "Do you remember when you used to take me camping?"

"Eh?" That caught him by surprise. "Sure, of course I do."

"Why did you stop?"

"Stop?"

"Stop taking me!"

"You didn't like it."

"How did you know that?"

"Know what?"

That took a deep breath. "That I didn't like it."

"You just didn't, that's all. It was hard, you got blisters, we got rained on, the food was always kind of grainy or lumpy. Don't you remember? Those trails, mud where they weren't trippy rocks, bugs, and nothing, nothing to do except walk and look at stuff."

I didn't remember hating it. Oh, sure, I bet there were times when I had been a real pain in the butt, not wanting to poop in a trench, or unwilling to get out of a warm sleeping bag to greet the icy dawn, or whining over my blisters-. But I remembered happiness when I would wake up in the middle of the night, moonlight streaming through the mosquito netting, trees rustling in breeze, my father's heavy bulk snoring next to me. The mountains at sunrise had looked something like heaven.

"You shouldn't have stopped taking me, Dad," I said. "You love it." He still went every year, with his increasingly creaky friends he'd been going with since high school. "It's something to share."

"You can say that, but you didn't have to put up with you. All the questions, all the suggestions. Sometimes it was technical—ways of packing more efficiently, that sort of thing. But sometimes it was, I don't know, spiritual or something. How we could enjoy ourselves better. How we could be more ourselves. I tell you, Bert, that's a little hard to take when all you want to do is go on a hike."

He and his friends Bill and Frank had been the sort of limited demographic I later made my career out of satisfying. They weren't high-intensity rock--facesleeping types. I did vaguely remember trying to figure out why they liked what they did, and how they could like it better. My dad's gear had even been pretty lame. For example, the waterproofing had come off the bottom of his tent and it always got a little wet.

I was starting to remember now. A fight. Not even on the trail, but before. I'd hauled his tent out of the garage, where he'd packed it up wet, cleaned all the dirt and grass off of it, and rewaterproofed the bottom. It had taken me all afternoon, patiently coating every square inch with the goo. While I was at it, I sealed all the seams. My father never really understood that they sold you the tent with the seams unsealed, so rain had always run down the stitching. When I was done you could have used that tent as a boat. I stood back, hands on my hips, and admired it as it stood in the backyard.

"What are you doing?" my father had said behind me, and I turned to

ex-plain.

I didn't remember the anger itself. All I remembered was his car driving away, his friends Bill and Frank sitting in it instead of me, both of them in-credibly embarrassed. I had solved a problem for him, and that was some-thing he just couldn't stand. All of my mother's entreaties had been useless. I had to stay behind. I was too young, he said. Too much trouble to take along. Maybe when I was older...That had been the last time.

"Maybe we can just go for a hike sometime," I said.

"Let's count this as a start."

For a moment we moved in synch through the trees, as if we were together, heading for the same place.

"Let me take advantage of your expertise for moment, Bert" he said. My dad had always known exactly what I did, though he had never approved of it. "Could you find us? I mean, if you were back in your office. Without know-ing anything about us, would we pop up when you searched for unusual pat-terns in purchases?"

"Sure." I'd already been thinking about it. "This operation can't just boot-strap up from nothing. You had to have bought all sorts of things, gotten all sorts of technical information. All of that can be traced."

"But that's not so bad, is it? All you'd want to do is sell us more things. My dinner of antelope and tree bark will be interrupted by a call from someone trying to offer me a zone electrophoresis setup or a subscription to an Embryo of the Month club. Free samples of restriction enzymes and mammoth kibble in the mail. Right?"

He wanted me to reassure him. This was my territory.

I couldn't do it.

"You know, Dad, when I met Stacy, she was just a research assistant. Not-mine, understand, just in the department. But she was eager to learn. She had a Ph.D. in sociology, but thought her whole life would be studying some-thing like the distribution of ethnic first names in middleclass households. I showed her the ropes."

"She seemed...I don't know, Bert. She never seemed like your type. Dumb word, I know. Not clear at all. But what upset your mother was that, when you visited, you never seemed...yourself. Now, that's natural when you're starting out, I guess..."

"I worked it, Dad. I mean, I really worked it. You have no idea how far I went. I wanted her...at first it was just sort of ambition. She was beautiful, right? But that wasn't all. She was so sharp, so crisp. So *focused*. For a while she focused on me. I melted. I resisted, that wasn't my plan, but it happened before I knew it. I don't know...I don't know if *she* ever did. There comes that moment, you know? Where the other person...melts. I always deluded myself into thinking it had happened. My game just wasn't good enough."

"Your mother, for example, was very resistant." Dad was reminiscent. "Somehow, my line of nonsense didn't particularly charm her. Imagine that! But one day, we went out canoeing. There were a lot of toppled cottonwoods in the river, and several times we had to pull the canoe over them. It was hot, and there were a lot of bugs. It should have made us cranky with each other, but instead, each drag across made us more of a team. I fell in the mud, more than once. Your mother wore

white shorts and a light blue blouse with a collar. I remember her staying completely clean, she remembers herself getting covered with drying mud. That was all fine, it was a step forward. Mosquito bites and all, it was something we'd shared. Then, just as we were getting ready to turn around and go home, a water moccasin swam slowly out to us. Now, I knew a thing or two about poisonous snakes at the time—I had a Pentecostal friend who made a great living at county fairs—and I was able to...hypnotize it, I guess you'd say. It fell asleep on my paddle, eyes still open, and your mother stroked its head. She wasn't afraid. She trusted me. Then she looked at me and...I knew it had happened. Nothing would ever be the same again. After that—"

"Dad—" He was pushing it.

"Oh, no details, no details. Not about the rest of that day, anyway. But after that, we got married and I started a viper ranch. I saw it as fate. Your mother helped raise the money to start it. After a year or two, it failed, and we had to let the snakes go. It still gives me a tear to remember the black mamba slithering across the parking lot toward the drainage ditch by the highway...But, you know, your mom never faltered. She always stood by me. And she was already pregnant with you, by then. Given the amount of venom she encountered during her pregnancy; I'll bet you're immune to a wide range of toxins."

"I've never really had the chance to check that out. But Stacy...I suppose it was a cliché man/woman relationship, mentor and pupil. But she was so sharp! It was like no one had ever listened to me before—"

"You know, son, I've been meaning to work on that, really I have..."

"That doesn't matter! For the first time, someone focused her full attention on me. It's an incredible rush. I never knew...We fell in love. You know the rest. We became a team. I molded her, taught her everything."

My father cleared his throat. "For what it's worth, Bert, I think she really did...love you. That one time you visited...maybe she didn't melt. But you or as close to it as anyone possibly could." He shook his head. "Your mother would kill me if she heard me telling you that."

I blinked my eyes and looked around. "Boy, this place really is a jungle."

"Yeah. They've gone too far, is all I can say. We get together, try to recreate a few species, just a gentle hobby, like miniature trains or building ships in bottles...and these guys go completely berserk. That's life in the exurbs for you. All sense of social control is lost. Your mom has to be somewhere around here..."

My dad pulled a machete out of his golf bag and hacked at the trailing vines and lianas. Leaves flew around him, but he didn't make much headway. He'd had muscle once. I remembered him mowing the lawn with his shirt off. He'd insisted on a push mower. It was an old one he'd bought at a yard sale. Being my father, he'd never lubricated it right, and the blades were so dull they sort of folded the grass instead of cutting it. But I remembered his delts and back muscles gleaming with sweat as he struggled and swore and dug gouges in the lawn. In later years, Mom would have me borrow an incredibly noisy and smelly power mower from the Hendersons next door and cut the grass while he was away for the day. If my father ever noticed anything, he didn't think it worth mentioning, and eventually he stopped using the push mower. He left it outside by the side of the house and it

rusted into a solid lump of metal.

But now his skin sagged down over slack muscle. I could tell his joints hurt by the clumsy way he swung the blade. Tomorrow he'd be awake before the first light of day with a rotator cuff on fire, slathering on the BenGay. And he hadn't sharpened the damn blade. Some things never change.

"Dad."

"Could I do that?"

He looked at me over his shoulder. "You ever handle a machete?"

"Just let me try it. Come on."

"It's not a toy, Bert. It's a very specialized tool, regardless of what you might have seen in some damn blowgun epic—ouch, dammit!"

The blade rebounded from a particularly resistant vine and blunt trail-ing edge bounced off his forehead. I caught him under the arms as he fell backward. The machete embedded itself dramatically into a rotting tree stump and stood there, cracked Bakelite handle up.

He looked up at me. He'd have a bruise, but he hadn't broken the skin.

"Bert," he said. "What finally happened?"

"With Stacy?"

"With whatever."

I helped him to his feet. He'd lost a lot of muscle but he didn't feel any lighter. Without any objection from him, I pulled the machete out of its tree stump and started hacking at the vines. It was harder than it looked. A lot harder. Blowgun epics...I couldn't remember ever seeing any of those, no latenight TV viewings of *Yamomano!* or *Death on the Amazon*, but I suppose there could be such things, made on virtual soundstages in Malaysia.

"She was smarter even than I thought. Or maybe I was a better teacher than I ever imagined. You see, I'd marketed myself. I'd created an interest group for her, found what she'd secretly wanted, and gave it to her. Mom was right. I wasn't myself. I was an ad for myself. A good one, much better than the actual product. So she finally figured out. By then she was good, better than I was at what I do. We had our last fight when I said I could *become* my ad, really be what I had for so long pretended. She'd never know the truth, I told her. She would be living with the man she'd always thought I was. I was pathetic."

It was hard, remembering her contempt. I'd taught her to see clearly and here I was trying to get her to put blinders on again. I think it was that anger that drove her to what she did next. In the aftermath, I was forced to submit my resignation.

"She left the company when she left me and moved on to the *Interrogator OnLine* TV show. She uses what she learned for tabloid TV segments. She spots and exposes incipient cults, weird social groups, fads, that sort of thing. It's the coming thing. There are more bizarre groups all the time. And the first group she outed was us, my company. A bunch of paranoid megaloma-niacs who think that they control the private interests and identities of mil-lions of Americans.

"Us," he said. "Isn't that right? You're saying she's after *us*."

My old man wasn't so stupid after all. That was exactly what I was saying, I realized. I just hadn't known it myself. My dear Stacy could be floating above us right now in one of the media's black helicopters, scanning us, get-ting ready to

drop a camera team down and expose this place on national TV. That fisher wouldn't make much of an image, but there had to be something more interesting around here...

"Dad—"

"Look out!" He knocked me over.

I went down. The tawny shape of the springing animal blurred over us. It hit, turned quickly...but did not leap to finish us off. Instead, it sat back on its haunches.

It was a big cat, like a lion or a tiger. Except—I had to look again. I didn't know a lot of biology, but I did know that there wasn't anything in a zoo that looked like a tiger but had tusks like a walrus. It made a low rumble I could feel in my chest, and lashed its tail. In knocking me over, my father had twisted my ankle. All I could feel down there was that pressure that was the shadow of future pain.

"They're pretty nearsighted," my father said. "I don't think we should move."

"What the hell is that thing?"

"Eh? Oh. It's a smilodon. Call it a sabertoothed tiger, though that's not very accurate."

"Whatever it is, it's opening its mouth at us. I don't think I can move."

"If it's anything like a tiger, that's called flehmen. It's using its vomeronasal organ—trying to smell us. Which way is the wind blowing?"

I looked up at the leaves to see if I could tell, and found myself mesmerized by the sky. The trees stretched what seemed hundreds of feet up, and their gigantic crowns spread out against the placid blue. Birds flew back and forth up there. I could smell the thick loam under my head, and a single shaft of sunlight pierced through the upper stories and lay on the side of my face, as warm as a mother's kiss, Lacywinged insects flickered through and were gone.

"Are you all right?" My father was so close I could feel his breath as he spoke.

"I don't know. My ankle..."

My father prodded at it, which actually did make it hurt.

"I have something to tell you," he said.

"What's that?"

"I have no idea whether it's broken or not. I don't know what to look for."

The sabertoothed tiger, as if puzzled by our incompetence, lay down completely and yawned again.

"I'm sorry, boy."

"That's okay, Dad."

"No it's not. I shouldn't have brought you here. It's between your mother and me."

"It's between all of us," I said.

"Will she...will Stacy find us, do you think?"

"If you've been buying the gear and subscribing to the magazines I think you have, yeah. I doubt the next development over buys as much as a single cloning setup a year, even as a gift."

"You got that right" he said. "The Menhir Manors people are mostly shaman-istic fire worshippers. I think your mother has some bridgeplaying friends over there. Buy briquettes by the truckload, but no restriction enzymes."

“Oh, God.” I rubbed my forehead. “Another Internet newsgroup that decid-ed to settle down in the exurbs?”

“Actually, I think most of them got a number to call off photocopied an-nouncements on the walls of tattoo parlors. Traditionalists, the lot of them. But even they have to put gasstack scrubbers on those big brazen idols of theirs, or they’ll catch an EPA raid. But what can we do, Bert?”

Did the weight of his need make me feel lighter, or heavier? I wasn’t sure.

“Franklin.” My mother’s voice, from somewhere off in the underbrush. “What are you doing here?”

“Lulu!” He shouted, even though she wasn’t more than a few feet away. “It’s important.”

“Go away. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Please! And Bert’s twisted his ankle. That damn giant kitty...”

“Don’t fuss about the smilodon. She doesn’t hurt anyone. Besides, she hunts large game. Those teeth aren’t any use against something as puny as a human being.”

A rustle in the leaves, and five women appeared, my mother among them. There was nothing remarkable about them really. They ragged in age from their mid twenties to at least their sixties, and my mother wasn’t even the oldest. Several carried composite bows with pulleys on them. One had a dead rabbit hanging from her belt. They could have been students at some Adult Extension class.

A woman in her early thirties, with wild black hair, knelt down next to me. After silently examining my ankle, she pulled an instantcold pack out of her bag and cracked the inside partition. Then she attached it to my ankle with an Ace bandage.

“RICE,” she said. “Rest, ice, compression, elevation. Can you handle it?”

“Sure. Particularly the rest part.”

I could smell the stink of her crudely cured buckskins, but somehow that did not make her seem less attractive. Her face looked like she’d spent a lot of time squinting into the sun.

“Stacy!” My mother shrieked at what my dad told her. “I knew it.” She knelt by me. “Oh, baby. I’m sorry. I know she meant a lot to you. You loved her.”

“Don’t embarrass him, Looly.”

“I’m not...am I embarrassing you, Bert?”

“Yes, Mom, you are.”

She sat back. “Well! Try to show a little maternal warmth—”

“He knows that, Lu. You know he does. But he has other things on his mind.”

“What? He’s a refugee, Franklin. When your marriage ends...you’ve lost your country. Your native language. Everything. And he’s come here to us...”

Was that what had happened? I wasn’t sure any more. Sometimes what seems like free will is only the following of the deepest patterns, the ones you can no way resist. Stacy didn’t need me, and in the aftermath of her depar-ture, it seemed that no one did. Except here.

“Ladies!” I said. “Do you mind if I explain a few things to you?”

“Of course not.” The blackhaired woman patted my hand. “We know what helps a man relax.”

“Don’t patronize me. This is serious. I’ll give you the information, and you can decide what you want to do with it. Now, imagine if Old Oak Orchard was on

the cover of *Time*, the subject of three tabloid news shows, and had tigerstriped tour busses coming through to look at the fauna. What would that mean to your lives?"

That got their attention, big time. They sat around me in a circle and watched me closely.

"You've concealed yourselves pretty well. From outside, you look just like any other exurban residential community centered on a golf course. Kudos for that. But, and this is even more important, all of your purchases can be tracked." I told them how they could be found, how, in fact, I would have found them a few months before, if that had been my job.

I felt a sudden surge of power as I spoke. I had no idea why changing from predator to prey felt so liberating, but it did.

"But there's one thing they aren't used to, those searchers after fads. They aren't prepared for a deliberate deception. They aren't ready for someone to be on to their game. Fake purchases, odd magazine subscriptions, anomalous hits on Internet sites. If we massage the statistics just right, we can send them baying off after entire demographic shoals of red herrings."

And a brilliantly specific deception came to me in a flash. A play with ex-cavation equipment rental, freeze-dried food supply purchases, air recirculation systems, self-tanning gels...the works. It would show an incipient self-defining group. Call it Bomb Shelter Chic. Latemiddleage security-minded exurbanites moving into underground palaces. Stacy and her compadres would cat that up. The kitschy paranoia of the past made for the cool trends of the future. A few Morlock Madness Midnights at the local mall, and we'd have everyone from Malaysian marketeers to *Hardcopy* video journalists looking desperately for something that did not exist.

And that was only the beginning. Canned calves brains packed in caul fat on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, hyenaprint sarongs in northern Minnesota, and sophisticated digital recording equipment in Shreveport would send the entire system wobbling on its axis. Old Oak Orchard would vanish into an Antarctica of white noise. We could survive.

The smilodon watched me carefully as I spoke. Did it know I was protecting it from exposure? Perhaps it would not have approved. Maybe it wanted to be in commercials. The woman with the buckskins and the bow—maybe she wanted to get the endorsements, like a beach volleyball star. But, no. The essence of the new marketing paradigm was that not everyone wants the me thing, no matter how much easier that made production.

Those women gave me a standing ovation. It felt good. I was here. I was at work. Then they picked up their bows and faded back into the woods.

I looked around for my father. He had passed the ball to me, and I wondered how he felt about it. At some level, of course, he had hoped, all the way along, that I would solve his problems for him. Still, it couldn't have been easy. I did remember that he had taken that damn waterproofed tent on that camping trip with his friends. I was sure he'd stayed dry.

He talked quietly with my mother. I wondered if either of them had paid any attention at all to my worldbeater speech.

"Hey," I said. "Could I get a little help here?"

With their support, I managed to limp along, one arm on each of their

shoulders.

“That woman,” I said. “The one who fixed my ankle...”

“Jennifer?” my mother said.

“Her name is Jennifer?”

“Look, Bertram, having a popular first name is not the kiss of death. But you wouldn’t be interested in her.”

“Why not?”

“Well, she’s really a bit of a tomboy.”

“Mom, you run around the woods hunting deer with bow and arrow.”

“Really, Bertram, as if that’s relevant. Jennifer is not your type.”

“Do we have any lasagne at home?” my father asked.

“Some of the spinach,” my mother said.

“Spinach? None of the sausage?”

“We finished that on Tuesday. Is the spinach a problem?”

“No, of course not.”

“I can make some sausage up fresh.”

“Oh, no...no, don’t take the trouble.”

“It’s no trouble.” She shook her head, “Jennifer. Imagine.”

“Give the boy a break.”

“Please, Dad.” I hated the way they talked about me right in front of me. “That’s not important.”

“That was quite a speech. Thanks for saving our saggy polyesterclad butts, son.”

He made me laugh, even though my mom didn’t seem to think it was funny.

“You’re welcome, Dad.”

Why was my mom working so hard at trying to make Jennifer seem inter-estingly forbidden? Was she really learning more about how her son’s mind worked, even at this late date? That was a scary thought. I was more part of my family than I had thought.

“Your mother’s lasagne will set you back on your feet in no time,” my father said. “Even if it is spinach.”

“I told you, I can *make* sausage...”

Impossible creatures lurked in the underbrush, but I knew I was home.