

# Ice Pick Soup

Fragments from the work of Emmett Burley  
as translated by Alexis Mandell and Joshua Book.

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Editor

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*The Intuinoobs believe everything has meaning, even nothing at all. They have always held this as a way of standing apart, speaking all the idioms. It's the foundation of their existence. Bubblers do not follow this thinking. If one cannot penetrate the world of unmeaning, meaning has no purpose.*

*However, I can give them a meaningful concession. Order is certainly meaningless and timing often useless.*

– Emmett Burley to Alexis Mandell, near Verona.

*Now that I've created this world, I'm stuck. Getting in was the easy part. You're the lucky one, Alexis, living in Kansas like you do.*

– Emmett Burley to Alexis Mandell, night line Verona.

*I really cannot tell you much about Verona. I just live there.*

– Joshua Book to Alexis Mandell, near Verona.

## The Tonkin Bubble

*If you must make a point, never make it so sharp as to puncture yourself.*

– Verse from a Vin Intuinoob drinking song.

The story could begin anywhere, anytime. It's just that some bubbles in the stream are more obvious than others, more profound. The big ones are easier to uncover. They offer a natural doorway into the flow of life. Everything gets washed to the sea anyway, so the first step is not an important consideration. It's how the bubbles appear and disappear, how they flow along that creates the ride.

Most bubbles pass unnoticed. They are incessant but quickly forgotten. Some make for a bumpy ride yet their effects are ignored. A few of these bubbles change everything. Does it make sense to pick out a handful of these unavoidable bubbles and turn them over? Is it meaningful to get up close and take a whiff, feel the spray? Emmett Burley thinks so.

Consider your life a bumping, meandering bubble. Or, a long series of puffy moments of air suckled by translucent skins of wetness in the stream. Who is blowing those bubbles? You're the watcher, not the bubble-blower. You're the rider, not the mule. That should be obvious but it's usually overlooked.

No, this is not Nepal. There is nothing spiritual or transcendent to hinge your time or bring on a squirm. This is Verona and you've never been here in this time line. Consider this an invitation.

Bubbles are the “why” of Emmett Burley. He specializes in big bubbles, the ones that shoot us off course and into his world, the rough riders that threaten to take us over the bank. Think big, just like Burley. He was the chief bubbler back when and he's still working hard at his craft. So diligently, so effectively, that few have ever heard of him.

It's easiest to begin with an ancient home land lobotomy of August 7, 1964, blessed three days later by a once revered Congress. Call this bubble the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the floodgate that spawned the era of the Viet Nam War. But that was only a minor, shadow persona of its dark soul. What this bubble actually created was the ability of an aged cultural leader to engage in unlimited war without a formal declaration from any governing body. In other words, the man Lyndon gave himself war powers and thoughtfully bequeathed it to every subsequent leader of that era. Now, that's a very big bubble. Throw away the annoyances of a constitution, worry not about representative participation, stay deaf to opinion and debate. Just ride the bubble. This was the warp of those times, all those decades before the Banishment.

Here is a fine example, known well to the Intuinoobs, other bubblers, and all others. This is not the beginning but it's where *we* will begin.

Imagine Lyndon's bubble. Consider the thrill of that kind of juicy pull. Now, imagine that he had no idea Burley was the bubble-blower. It's no wonder he so enjoyed pulling the First Beagle's ears. It must have been a grounding experience for him. Lyndon never had a friendly drink with Burley. Never knew he existed. Lyndon just sipped Burley brew and paid heavily for the pint. Many have.

No, this is not Nepal. Still, one must at least consider Karma. The Intuinoobs would demand it.

History assures us there is no point in dipping our toes into the world of politics. It's a filthy business and meaningless for the lobotomized masses of us. Throw out the bickering and philosophical debate. Just remember that the historical psychosurgery of 1964 was actually planned well in advance of the Lyndon bubble. Now, add this for spice: it was the personal spawn of Emmett Burley, the bubbler who stood behind the men in power and made their hearts beat fast with possibilities. Always planned, always thoughtful, always just where he was needed.

You see the point?

It's not about the hundreds of thousands of casualties who fell to the private war powers since Tonkin. It's not about patriotism, propaganda, profit, victory, any particular civilization or society, or even ideology. It's all about Emmett Burley. It's always been about Emmett Burley.

It's not about conspiracies, either. A conspiracy takes at least two. Burley is one. Tonkin could have been Rome. Lyndon could have been the Pope. The casualties could have been few, or even one. Maybe some inscrutable Italian gentleman hanging by a rope from the underside of a tidy British bridge. Doesn't matter. Burley wouldn't care where we dipped into his stream or rode on his bubble.

If you want to understand why unexpected asteroids regularly fall on the collective heads of the home land, think of bubbles. Very large, very dark bubbles. Just don't think of them as random.

Of course, all of this has been lost to common history since the Banishment. One needs to travel to Verona, to find a perfect Intuinoob guide, to taste it personally.

The other choice is to get to know Burley and everything will fall nicely into place.

## **Birthing Emmett Burley**

*The best things in life are short, including people.*

– Orion Smiley, from the home land.

Burley swears by the forgotten trade craft. He has no use for electronic spying and prying, for the wireless world of chatter and nuances. He spurns the media, social or otherwise. Burley knows the aged ways are best. Even if one always works alone, one will eventually need that face-to-face relationship to blow just the right kind of bubble. That's the point of being Emmett Burley.

Know your birth date but keep it to yourself. Subtract three or four years but no more. Add three or four. That's your window. Now, go forth and get born. Start at a cemetery surrounded by those who sound like you, speak in your idiom, move the way you move, share your culture and a common style. Burley always starts out this way, no matter who he chooses to become. It's the trusted trade craft and still as solid as the day it was first conceived.

Start with a stoney, impenetrable legend and grow the tree with deep roots. Never use a disguise. Never falsify an accent. Never lie against the legend. Be wary of translators, no matter how skilled.

From the one come the many, Burley claims. A single certificate becomes a collection of documents. Documents create the person, give him dimension, depth and reality. The born one emerges unique, identifiable, assured and transparent to even the most tenacious vetters. Burley knows this routine well and he's made it work for a lifetime.

He starts as Everyman and becomes one man. Yet, he is always no man. True trade craft.

Getting good face time demands ease and easy. Nothing must arouse suspicion, no roughness that can create worry. It also calls for that special kind of presence that centers others. It's not an apparent, obvious strength. Subtlety is critical. Patience is a backbone. Waiting is what Burley knows best. Waiting, listening, working carefully, but always working.

The uniqueness must always seem common and approachable. Ease and easy.

Burley has his personal laws, his code and his special path. Among his favorites is to never be so important as to be seen. No one else needs to understand during face time. Instead, be sufficiently important to never be ignored with the ease and easy. Request nothing. Make no demands. Shadowy always, but never to a fault. Wait for the call, that clandestine invitation to visit, the moment when the stakes are high. Then, be the Burley, the bubbler. Solve the problem and vanish. That is the way of Emmett Burley.

This is what Burley explained to me on the Verona night line. It made sense, after a fashion.

Can you feel Emmett Burley at the back of the train, upstream? He's waiting with his legend in hand. Kansas is a good place to start your search.

## The Poet Randall

*Back then it didn't matter who you were. It only mattered what you wore and how much you could drink on a given Thursday.*

– Unknown Poet of the period.

The Poet Randall is a household name. Has been for many generations. Emmett Burley made it happen. The Poet had no idea how any of this became his personal story. He was just riding the bubble. When I met him, Randall was too old to even care. It was ease and easy that he most craved with his cappuccino. But when I met him years earlier, when the scars were still fresh and obvious, he sang a different song. He was angry then. Not forgetful.

The Poet Randall was spawned from war, disfigured by an aged police action Burley would later offer Lyndon as a bubble. His birthing was genuine, unannounced, well and true to history. No legend was needed for the Poet. The scars he carried were bone deep and forever. The leftover pain is what eventually drove Randall to the pen. It was Burley who sought out those wounds and made the scars shine. It was the Poet who did all the hard work.

It wasn't that Burley was seeking out wounds to lick. It was all about timing. That was beyond Burley's pay grade. That was the proper province of the Intuinoobs.

Stuck on the West Coast after the blessed discharge, snuggled behind a weary generation of vanilla, Poet Randall needed to say something. He needed to shed the anger and bitterness of his wounds. He was also troubled by the secret of the wee folk. Mostly, it was his inescapable rage that kept him upright. It was drying him out and leaving him senseless. He could have robbed, killed or created all sorts of civic mayhem. That was always an option and he sometimes gave it a thought. But it was not the Poet's way. His way was the waltz of the pen. A raging pen from a quiet but uneasy Poet.

It made sense for Randall to settle in the City. That's where all the unsettled settled. It was an open door, a crowd source of inspiration. Or, at least misdirection. Poet Randall liked that time, that place. The City offered all kinds of distraction from the pain. It also suckled many like him. Since the home land experiment was going nowhere, the Poet and his sometimes merry band put on their own clothes, for the sake of distraction and misdirection. For the pleasures of face time without worry. They had no intention of making anything work. Each wanted what Poet Randall wanted most – a beautiful time of life and nights of rage removal.

It felt good to be left alone and overlooked. No one needs that many friends. Randall appreciated the quality of the time.

Burley was at loose ends in the City. It's just where his last bubble landed him. He was waiting, not bothering to count the coin he never had. Just waiting. He claims it was the boredom of the time that made Burley wander North Beach, tap on doors, turn handles, always listen at the dark corners. Practicing the trade craft in a City where trade craft was the way of the streets. That's how Burley likes to tell the story. One can never be sure about these tales, tall or not.

Randall and his wee friends haunted the basement, paced through the narrow streets for drink and chattered too much. Between sentences, the Poet would write. Hungover mornings were best. Alone time was a way to charge out the rage and waltz the pen. Sometimes, he would read, right out loud, right there in front of the wee folk.

Burley was there to listen. It was the rage that caught his attention, that made a new bubble form in the stream. That, along with the certain knowledge that Burley himself was a wee folk.

The bubble plan was absurdly simple. The best of them are. Burley wanted to give Poet Randall a big push, a train-wide berth that any rider would envy. The Poet received his invitation to Verona but quickly lost it among the piling of the bills.

For happiness, Randall made his words sing and pinch, proclaiming the prison of the wee folk and crying out for breathing room. That touched the Burley soul and gave him purpose. Like the Poet, he became inspired. Unlike the Poet, Burley had little to offer in the way of talent. Just a good deal of experience.

Burley went straight to the Ear Police. He had important contacts there, a way to make them listen and pay attention. He demanded the Poet be silenced, sent back to his private land of scars, forgotten and forever lost to history. In other words, Burley made a major stink and got the word out to anyone who would listen. For good measure, he mocked the wee folk and, in the process, enraged and strengthened them.

The Ear Police listened, for a while. Poet Randall was crucified but his death was a rumor. Burley had made sure of that. The raging words were already published, already seeping into the consciousness of the vanilla hoards. Everyone worried. Everyone chattered and pulled down the window blinds. Everyone but Burley. The bigger the stench, the more profound the vitriol, the more fame knocked on Randall's door. What a bubble Burley had blown!

When the pitch was at its height, when the furor stretched across the home land and into everyone's range, Burley made a call on the Court. He twisted the arms, bribed them with visions of honor and history, created in them a sense of what could evolve from the pen of the Poet and his wee folk. Burley just wouldn't leave them alone, wouldn't shy away from threats foul and unthinkable. He would not back away from the Poet Randall.

When it all came crashing down for the Ear Police, guess who was still standing?

That was how Randall became a household name, an icon, a very large bubble who rode along on the Burley wave of the time. The rest is known to all.

Burley always liked that story. It was a Verona night line favorite. His audience was tiny and quiet, just like the Poet's in his early days. The Poet became powerful but it was Burley who first blew the bubble his way. It was Burley who made censorship a weapon that always claims itself as the first victim.

It was the B-side of Tonkin, the unrecognizable, unexposed image of a police action. It made Burley legitimate. It made him inscrutable.

But it was still the Poet Randall who did all the hard work.

## Acknowledgment

*Ice Pick Soup* could never have been produced without the tireless work of Alexis Mandell. To my knowledge, she is the only person to have interviewed Emmett Burley. Their encounter was not one of serendipity, or even some inexplicable event of synchronicity. I believe Burley had her in mind for some time before they actually met. Since Alexis had only published a single book before Burley thrust himself into her life, it seems remarkable that he would show any interest in my writer friend. She certainly never ran in his circles, or anything nearby. They were from different worlds and times. Still, Alexis offers a version of one piece of the larger story that makes sense. It appears in these scenes and seems as straightforward as anything else connected with Emmett Burley.

To make the task even more improbable, Alexis and Burley did not share a common language. Early in their long series of meetings, a Veronian known as Joshua Book used his talents to facilitate communication. After a time, Burley banished Book and demanded to speak only with Alexis. The meetings that followed included no outsiders. It seems that Burley was displeased with Book and wanted to keep his own records straight.

The meetings were painful, prolonged and, early on, not very successful. However, Alexis persisted and the two eventually worked out a way of communicating that produced meaningful exchanges. This offering is the result of some of that difficult work.

Soon after traditional air flight succumbed to the Banishment, Alexis received an invitation to meet with Emmett Burley near Verona. Burley would arrange the details, cover all expenses, and provide for any needs that might arise. She brought the invitation to my attention and asked me to vet its authenticity, if possible. Since Burley had never been interviewed, it was likely a hoax, or so I assumed.

For eighteen months I worked toward vetting or disproving that invitation. It was an arduous time, expensive in terms of research, travel and time. At the end of the day, I could not give Alexis a useful solution to her problem. There was simply no way to know if the invitation was genuine.

No way, that is, but to accept it and travel to the outskirts of Verona. Alexis did that and was away from home for over two years. When she returned, she had produced this translation and several hundred files of notes detailing her experiences with Burley and other fascinating characters. My role was limited to editing and preparing the work for public release in the most suitable manner.

Since the premier, Alexis has taken permanent refuge far away from Verona, and farther still from the rest of us. I hear from her occasionally and often think about her. Otherwise, she goes about her business in her own way, the individualist she has always been.

I think little about Emmett Burley these days, although I don't doubt he is still up to his old tricks. Perhaps Alexis knows more but it's doubtful she will speak of him in the future. I, for one, am happy with that arrangement.

Orion Smiley  
Editor

## Intuinoobs and the Catacombs

*Anyone who claims to be Papa must have something to hide. Otherwise, why dress like that?*

– Joshua Book to Alexis Mandell, night line Verona.

This saga took place long before the Banishment. It's historical now, a time ripple, but much more than a graceful fable. If none of this had found its way to Burley's orchestra pit, we would all be playing the same imprisoned tune for another millennium, or more. Now, we have the wealthiest Gallery in history for anyone to enjoy.

It all began when the talker and the listener shared a night line journey with a purpose.

Burley was always obsessed with Intuinoobs. That's why he spent so much time in Verona, their supposed home turf. He wasn't above using them for a new bubble venture but he never trusted them. It made sense, in a perverse way. Back then, back before the 80s, Burley wanted to know more about the Catacombs. That meant dealing with the Intuinoobs, who could open up the history of the Floppers at the Palace. But none of the Intuinoobs were talking, at first.

Burley could pout when he really cared enough to feel anything at all. He never did well with the schedules of others, especially the ones who kept so quiet. But he wanted a smack at the Palace, at those diminutive fiddle players doing their endless nasties in quiet corners. For Burley, it was a matter of false advertising that had gone on far too long.

But there would be no Palace without an Intuinoob in tow. Burley would just have to play nice to get where he wanted to go. Compromise, for him, was like an ice pick in his soup. He couldn't slurp around it or chew through it. He had to put it out of the way, gently, with smart negotiation. That made the Intuinoobs a necessity.

The Intuinoobs had no language of their own. Or, maybe a better way to say it is that they had every language as their own. It was a way of thinking about the world, meeting the face time burdens of each generation. Like any old-school kid, they only spoke when spoken to. When they spoke to each other, no one ever caught on to the scheme of the game. If they had secrets, there was no way to turn them over, expose their bellies. Not without their cooperation.

For Burley, the worst aspect was their appearance. No body language to give a clue, no nods of the head, nothing from those taught lips that wasn't specifically requested. Ordinary people are always in motion. So are bubbles. Motion points to life, always. But the Intuinoobs were forever still. Most of the time, it was impossible to know if they were sitting or standing, coming or going. It was the kind of behavior that baffled Burley, and sometimes made him angry.

If Lyndon was a babbler, and Poet Randall a scribe, the Intuinoobs were prayer wheels. Since Burley didn't put much stock in prayer, any unlucky Intuinoob who fell under his spell was sure to have a hard road. Yet, he required them from time to time. Now, he needed them to purge the Palace and scour clean the Catacombs.

Not to be contrary, Alexis liked them. Since they didn't babble, she could sit near any Intuinoob and feel right at home. It was like being in the presence of air. She breathed easy and never bothered with them, nor them with her. They never moved around or squirmed, never distracted her or stooped to ask a silly question. She saw them as transparent, just like she knew herself. That relationship moved her, like the silent dance of a prayer wheel can move air. As much as Burley distrusted the Intuinoobs, Alexis found them worthy of any bubble venture.

She was especially fond of Joshua Book, the Intuinoob who would inherit the genetic wrath of Burley and lose his place on the coming night line travels.

Burley looked at all Intuinoobs, including Joshua, with a darker purpose. He was certain the Vatican was awash in Intuinoobs and much worse. That was the problem he faced when working the Papal circuit, when laying down generations of bubbles and watching each of them blessed out of existence. In the usual course of his trade, the Intuinoob presence would have little meaning. He could relegate them to another surrogate annoyance. This time, the problem was location. The difficulty lie inside the Vatican, the Palace not so easily penetrated by the likes of Burley. Whether or not the Intuinoobs spawned from the inner thigh of Verona meant less than the obvious fact they were an established presence in certain, high places. A master of face time, like Burley, needed to find a way around them.

Better still, a way to use them.

The Floppers at Papa's table spoke many languages and had mastered every dirty word. When difficulties would arise, they would fall back on Latin. It was the default idiom from forgotten times, from an age when all the finances could be counted with simple math, all indiscretions were discretely managed, all secrets were preserved with tradition. Those days were long ago, well before the Intuinoobs were considered a species and certainly before they infiltrated the Vatican. The Floppers just failed to recognize changing times, ignored the cacophony of screams outside the gates and pretended that all was as it had always been.

The Floppers indulged in playing with stunted flutes, chasing around the Catacombs, slipping in and out of the secret places that riddled the Palace. It was a generational pastime. They had such enormous secrets that any prayer wheel would immediately fly off its axis in a light breeze. For long decades the Floppers had protected themselves with their ancient Latin whisperings. They steered around the shoals of the genteel overseers, or simply invited them into the sanctum for a spin around the Catacombs when the path was clear. In this way, they had always felt protected, forever entitled to their pleasures, always apart from any bubble-blower.

But they underestimated the Intuinoobs. They had deceived themselves as well as their victims. They had forgotten what Burley knew so well. Prayer wheels move silently, see everything, live for the patience of the next prayer.

Rome, in the years before June 1982.

The Floppers had a network of secrets and victims scattered across the Empire. The enterprise had grown from lustful, to bloated, to unmanageable. Keeping control demanded coin. Lots of coin and many payoffs. There was never a shortage of coin, just a dearth of common sense and a broken compass to bring down the walls that had kept them safe for generations.

The biggest profiteer of all was the Banker. He stood at the hub where all spokes met, each with coin in

hand. His investment was knowing their foibles and a willingness to parse it all out with excellent timing. It was the withered, hackneyed secret society conspiracy fable that everyone knew was nothing more than a cover story. All the action was below the belt. All the payments were in coin, not trade. No one was trusted even though each claimed that right.

This state of the State is what drew Burley from Verona to the less venerable chaos of New Rome. It was an entrenched, overlooked Intuinoob who reached out, broke the silence of his species and knocked on Burley's door. He carried the essence of a bubble that just wouldn't go quiet on its own. Whether or not the Intuinoob was seeking revenge, paying off his own debt, or just clearing out his personal baffles was never the question. Burley met him on the night line and they talked.

It seemed the Banker had been fiddling with the books while the Floppers were fiddling down the marbled Roman hallways and sanctuaries. Burley's Intuinoob told stories of nether-dealings, all manner of secret societies, and endless Catacomb crawling that made Lyndon look scrawny and irrelevant.

None of this would have worked out so well if Burley had been indifferent to Vaticanism. But, he wasn't. In fact, he had major issues with the Palace and its doings. From Burley's point of view, this was a chance to bubble-out the creepiness that was rotting the core of the Holy Apple. Perhaps it was straight-line payback on his part, or an ancient, lurking phobia in the Burley gene collection. Whatever the opportunity meant to him, Burley took it all to heart and began to blow his bubbles.

He struck first in 1978, producing a tidy report that the Banker's Bank had floated off a few billion beyond the venerable Roma coin jurisdiction. Not one to let a sleeping bubble wander too far, he gathered his media contacts in solemn meetings, shunted off just the right information to *Polizia* friends, pierced the secret societies, and stirred the incense hard on the home front. By 1981, the Banker was into and out of the courts, suspended on his sentence, fined nicely, hustled hither and fro in various escape vehicles, multiplied his residences, and even made a feeble attempt at *suicidio*. This was music to the Burley ear.

All of this was fascinating to the uncleansed world and sales were brisk. The saga stirred their souls in a way the Papas could never manage. In fact, the stable was on fire and the horses were running all around the town. But the Floppers back at the Palace were still prowling, heads still held high with the old Latin whisperings still clanging off the ivory walls. Of course, the Intuinoobs were still listening, still overlooked, still part of that other prayer wheel that seemed so safe, so predictable.

Burley decided to float a few more bubbles, just to be sure all would go according to plan. Another night line spent with his best Intuinoob put the icing on the cake, made a long story brief and pleasing.

The Italian Banker went British without proper authorization, via Venice. He ran afoul of at least one secret society, alienated all his Flopper friends, hid what was left of the coin, lost it all to his nether acquaintances, and found himself dangling from Blackfriars Bridge, a breath from London's financial district. This was late on June 17, 1982, the day the first big bubble landed on Vatican soil to stay. For Burley, this was a common whopper transfigured into a sumptuous meal. It had a lovable symmetry reserved for the most rare of bubbles.

After the bridge, the Intuinoobs stole the football and began to talk, and talk. The Floppers began to fall, one by one. Sometimes they flamed out in groups, right there in front of the Catacombs. The Palace was rocked, its rotten foundation painfully dragged open to the sun. Coin was thrown here and there. Papas came and went, signing checks and shadowy documents along the way. Everyone back

there headed deeper into the Catacombs, seeking the safety of silence. But nothing could save the lot of them.

Burley and the Intuinoobs had done what two millennium could not. The Floppers were named, dragged away from their sanctuaries, made wispy like those ancient vampires who refused to recognize the breaking dawn. They were not perfect partners, Burley and the Intuinoobs. But they did work together, once. It was a powerful bubble that lasted decades.

This was one of the most treasured chapters for Alexis. She adored the happy ending, the balance of it all, the symmetry of the bubble. It made her ever so fond of the Intuinoobs and all they could manage without speaking a comprehensible word. She visited the Palace Gallery often and wondered at its richness, long free of the Floppers.

Not a man usually fond of repetition, Burley recounted this story three times in two years, in honor of the fallen Palace. Each time, the ending was the same.

## The Maddercough Play

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FADE IN:  
INT. BULLET NIGHT LINE STATEROOM – EVENING

JOSHUA BOOK rapping lightly on the stateroom door.

JOSHUA (rapping again): Ms. Mandell, this is Joshua Book. Are you doing well in there?

ALEXIS: Hmm, yes, I'm fine. Maybe . . . maybe dozing for a moment. Please, come in.

JOSHUA (carefully opening the stateroom door): Ah, thank you. I didn't mean to disturb you.

ALEXIS: Fine, you're not interrupting, Joshua. I was caught up in the beautiful scenery passing by. This is a wondrous valley, gorgeous. Nothing like my home land.

JOSHUA (nodding): Yes, Kansas, correct?

ALEXIS: That's right. Flat but, I suppose, beautiful in its own way. It's just that here, this place, it seems so lush, so green. (momentarily staring at the passing scenery) There are so many hills, so many soft angles and quiet corners. I believe I'll like it here, very much.

JOSHUA (eyes fixed on ALEXIS): It is a fascinating land. I am very fortunate to call it home.

ALEXIS: Hmm, you are, indeed. You were born here?

JOSHUA: Yes, after a manner. We are all from this place.

ALEXIS (echoing): All?

JOSHUA: Yes. All Intuinoobs call this home.

ALEXIS (turning toward JOSHUA): Ah, yes. Smiley told me about this once. Well, a bit, anyway. You're not well understood in Kansas. Sorry.

JOSHUA (ignoring the lead): I am here to remind you about your meeting with Burley. It will take place at dusk plus one, in the Dining Car. No meal will be served. The meeting . . .

ALEXIS (interrupting, echoing): Dusk plus one? When is that?

JOSHUA: Very soon now. Night falls quickly here, especially as the Long Valley narrows. I thought it best to let you know, to give you some time to prepare. Perhaps, a light snack if you are hungry?

ALEXIS (nodding): No, not hungry. Thanks. Curious, though. Can you tell me more about Emmett Burley? I've never met him, you know. I've been told no one meets with him. Is that true?

JOSHUA: My apologies but I cannot do that. It would not be proper. Nor would he approve of it. I am here to translate and to make you as comfortable as possible. Would you find a need for anything to pass the time until you meet with Burley?

ALEXIS (fiddling with her digiplane): No, thanks, nothing comes to mind. I understand if you don't care to talk about Burley. I understand that. Curiosity on my part, you know?

JOSHUA (watching her fumbling): Yes. I know.

We have many traditions here. Some are designed to amuse. Others to teach. When we meet someone new, someone for another home land, we have traditions to offer, to pass the time. To make for comfort. Perhaps one of these would appease your curiosity a bit. Would you be interested?

ALEXIS (excited and quietly shuffling her feet): I would! That's a wonderful thing, for me. Please, amuse me, or teach me, or . . . well, whatever you think is appropriate.

JOSHUA: Fine. There is one . . .

ALEXIS (interrupting): Would you like to sit? There, maybe, at the table? Or, on the couch here? Do you even sit? I'm not sure, sorry.

JOSHUA: Thank you, no. I prefer to remain here while I share this.

I would like to tell you a story from your home land. It is a story about the men who became heroes, then villains, then vanished and were forever forgotten. It is a story about cycles and circles, like the Oroboros. This is a traditional story and something we like to share with others. It seems to be made especially for you and for those who know of Kansas and your home land.

Would you like to hear this tale?

ALEXIS: Yes, certainty! I'm a bit surprised you would share a tale from *my* home land when yours is so fascinating, so much older and deeper. This is . . .

JOSHUA (interrupting): It is a common tale of teaching, Ms. Mandell. It could be from any home land, yours or mine. These things are shared, and the tradition here is to give, not take. I am sure you understand.

ALEXIS (quietly, apologetically): Yes. Sorry. As you can tell, I'm more than a bit excited about this time, this place. Please, tell me your tale. I'll try to sit still and keep quiet.

JOSHUA: There was a man called Mooley Madderough, who came from your home land. He never claimed to be from Kansas but he also never claimed to not. Madderough was not born to wealth. He was, however, quite bright and articulate. His expression was pleasing. His idiom was refined, informed, ease and easy. He . . .

ALEXIS (interrupting, blurting): I'm sorry. Madderough?

JOSHUA (a finger to his lips): You have heard of him and know him. He is many and you have read of him often. Perhaps you will meet him one day soon. May I continue?

ALEXIS (nods with embarrassment):

JOSHUA: He was educated and ambitious. Madderough always sought more and, in those days, it was coin that moved the world. However, he had none. It was his wish to have a vast collection.

Madderough did offer much with his face time. In fact, he was a born master of face time and he understood this from his early years. Others were often mesmerized with his abilities, his certain ways of making a point. He was not bred to this, like a bubbler. It came from elsewhere but certainly had much meaning.

In those days, desire prevailed and the pursuit of collection was much more than a way to pass the time. The activity was perceived as a vital need and Madderough was apparently born to fill that need, as he would tell the others.

His plan was simple and ancient. Madderough would take coin from another with a promise to return even more coin later. The other need do nothing but wait for a time, during which the other would be given small gifts. It was a form of offering good faith where faith alone would be insufficient.

Madderough collected many others, convincing each of them to offer coin and be patient. During the waiting time, he would send each of them a gift, a smaller offering that pointed to a much greater gift for a tomorrow. He made many promises to many of the others. In this way, he was using the old form of misdirection. It was the known way of the Ancient Magician but Madderough gave it a pleasing form, a kind of pretty presence.

After a time, Madderough had a vast collection of others, each begging to make an offering, each waiting for the day of the great reward. While waiting, Madderough would faithfully send each a small gift, along with courier pages that proved they were safe with each coin he had ever collected.

Of course, you know what it is called in your home land?

ALEXIS (nods, remains quiet):

JOSHUA: Madderough did this for decades and across many places throughout your home land. He lived well until the day came that he, himself, could make no further gifts. All the coin had vanished, washed away in a flood of courier pages and meaningless promises, used up and wasted.

All gifts were suspended. Every offer dusted away. All the others were angered. Their hero had become their villain, in only a moment. Where once Madderough's name was revered, all was now dark and disdained. So many others had convinced even more to take Madderough as the hero. Now, everything was shattered.

Madderough went away, to sleep for the rest of his life. His image eventually faded and all the others reclaimed what they could. It was not much. Many of them strayed, angry and bitter. All of them remembered.

This is the way of the hero, surely in your home land. Even elsewhere it is so. One cannot know tomorrow and can never reclaim yesterday. To think a hero can do so is foolishness, is it not? Would it not be wiser to never acknowledge the hero at all?

Perhaps you will remember this tale when you meet Burley.

FADE OUT:

## Preface

*“Ch, ch, ch, chia,” he sang. Feed me and watch me grow. Did you search the archives as I suggested? Chia Pet. Did you? You know, Alexis, that was one of my bubbles. You knew that, right?*

– Emmett Burley to Alexis Mandell, over Vin near Verona.

Long before the Banishment, when I was still young and agile, libraries dotted the land. Family stories convinced me they were once prolific, omnipresent. That was well before my birth but the tales of so many wondrous places riveted me throughout my younger years. I sometimes wondered about their purpose, their meaning to the past generations, the secrets they held so fast.

One of the remaining libraries was close to my Kansas home, not a far walk. I decided to see it for myself, to experience what had such a profound influence on my parents. I was twenty-four years old on the day of my first visit. Before that encounter I hadn't given them a Dinor of my precious face time, caught up in the silliness of becoming. Still, I always sensed a lurking connection with word collections. Like many others of my age, I had written much. I had worked through eleven books, destroyed ten of them, and published one by the beamer. That one was a flop. Almost no buyers, no reviews at all. It was clear I would never make it as a writer. So, the next best choice was to become a reader – a library lurker and future docent. When you live in Kansas, you can do just about anything that comes to mind.

This rural library was a stunning, graceful place, sporting an exterior worked over with more than two centuries of fluffy style and all things never degradable. Nothing surrounded it but rolling, golden flatlands for many k-blocks. The building was filled with ancient volumes, shelf upon shelf, some braced against crusty walls that seemed incapable of sustaining their meaningful weight. Books were everywhere yet neatly arranged by an unseen hand, always in a numeric order whose meaning had been lost to time. As was the wont of the period, there were no keepers, no administrators, nothing mechanical or noisy; just the occasional shuffle of an infrequent visitor. The place was a treasure find, a sanctuary that took me far away from the droll of my easy life. I could immediately understand why the elders were so nostalgic, so serene with their memories of this place.

Like any good explorer, I wandered, visit after visit. Memory tells me that I had no specific goal in mind, nothing that drew me in a particular way. For the most part, I simply enjoyed the quiet, the musty smell of old pages, the random patron who seemed to be there for a purpose. All of them were much, much older. To my young mind, they were reliving time, strolling through their own eras on a hunt for something forgotten or misplaced. I had never seen such a magnet for the old ones, nothing at all like the library.

One evening, after spending time wandering the shelves, I followed an ancient gentlemen as he lovingly placed a very worn book back on its home shelf. He moved with such determination, such solemnity, that I remember thinking this must be a wise one, a survivor of those times when pages were crucial to a meaningful life. His dance was slow but obviously practiced and comfortable. He was home.

After he left the library, I wandered over to the shelf and pulled down the book he had replaced with

such care. It was *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* by a man who called himself C. G. Jung. Judging by the age of the book, it occurred to me that the writer had used his real name, his given birthright. This was, in itself, most unusual for the time. There was a faded, uncolored photograph on the back cover. It was the image of an elder peering off beyond my shoulder, squinting through lenses from the lost era. He seemed so intent, so involved, yet also placid. He was, I recall, a bit frightening at the same time.

I read his book several times. Nothing about it came easy to me. The ideas were strange, formidable. There were too many words, too many references out of time. Yet, there was wisdom here. There was a notion of looking through dim glass to a brilliant horizon that struck me as purposeful, and useful. There were instructions and whisperings embedded between the sentences, tiny bubbles of genuine thought that all led to a central place. That was where I wanted to journey, to that place the writer man Jung had stumbled across and tried so hard to describe. I recall that it saddened me because he was then and I knew nearly nothing of then.

There was also a penned note on the inside back cover of the book. It was a digipoint locator ID that directed me to a place very near my home. Curiosity abounded. The writing seemed fresh and clean, the product of a practiced and determined hand. The writer man Jung had spoken to me of dreams, synchronicity and events that seemed well out of time, far beyond the linear life of Kansas. Now, someone had left a meaningful mark in the same place. The trouble taken in creating such a mark would have been significant to its creator. It was not a simple doodle ride, I decided. It certainly was bred of intent and purpose.

The digipoint locator ID led me to a rural post station three k-squares from my home. The last four points of the digit directed me to a public box near the back of the station. Excited, I presented the full digipoint to the station master and laid claim to its contents. He politely vetted me, carefully scanned the digipoint and pulled out a single courier page from the box. He flipped the box on its side, proving its emptiness, and slid the courier page across the counter in my direction.

On the page was the name Emmett Burley. Below the meticulously handwritten name was a beautiful, formal invitation to meet this man in Verona – legendary Verona! Emmett Burley! The writer and creator of bubbles, a man who spoke to no one, who was no one. Yet, here it was, in my hand. Nothing about this smacked of Kansas.

My first thought was that the courier page was nothing more than a reflection, a dream, just as the writer man Jung would have proclaimed. Still, everyone knew about Emmett Burley. Everyone seemed to possess the important legends of Verona. Why, then, an invitation? Why me, a nowhere Kansas girl with a pigeon-toed life planned well and easy. It made no sense, but it certainly webbed me into the chase.

I turned to my friend, my mentor, Orion Smiley, for help. He was the only accomplished writer I knew, although he repeatedly denied the characterization. What I wanted was some direction. Kansas is far from the world, absolutely apart from legendary Verona. What I desired most was a stopover point, a place to think about what this meant, if anything at all. It was Smiley who could provide those answers, that gentle guidance to a young friend.

At the end of this early journey, Smiley knew little more than I had learned that day at the post station. Nearly two years had already passed. So, we agreed that I should just accept the offer and find out for myself. Kansas would have to wait. As events unfolded, I never did return home. Burley made that impossible.

It's been so many years since that early crossroad walk. I am an elder now, just like those patrons from the past. The library has been closed for a long time but the book by the writer man Jung is still in my possession. I read it again this past summer. There are still far too many words for my liking but, as I grow in age and patience, more of it makes sense. Burley's invitation was carefully excised from the book, digitized, multiveered and is safely in the hands of Smiley for other generations. I am still kicking around, very far from Kansas, no longer wanting to be close to home.

It was Burley who parsed my life and reassembled it into its current form. I wouldn't suggest this for another but I am reasonably happy with the results. Burley will always stay well inside his own time line. That's not meant for me. As to the writer man Jung, I know little else. Not wanting another friend, I never bothered to work my way back to him for face time. Yet, somehow, he will always be at my shoulder.

Finally, there is Smiley. All my love to Smiley, always, just like the inscription reads.

Alexis Mandell

## Heisenburg's Knickers

Courier page (by beamer)  
vet only for O. Smiley, CTC  
Digipoint Locator ID: 340464384004:AA1:4004

Smiley, my love, the recent night lines have been arduous. There is so much to say. For now, I want to send something to your archives and ask your help, yet again.

Joshua Book was excommunicated from Burly some time ago. Uncomfortable questions floated his way, questions that should not have been asked so early. Burley was suspicious of the translation and always wary of the Intuinoob way. There were many reasons, I suppose. In the end, Joshua had to go.

Burly is pleased with the situation. I less so. I miss Joshua and well recall his first warning about heroes and villains. None of this arose in Burley face time. I will keep in contact with Joshua, one way or another.

What did arise is something I hadn't foreseen: Burley's singular discomfort with uncertainty. Call me Kansas, naive and the like, but I assumed such a bubbler would not for any insecurity. To hear the official Burley tale, such uncertainty was never a tickler. But I know that he has lied about this, which makes me wonder about all face time, about what is true and what is not. I cannot doubt that this was one of the messages Joshua sent my way, perhaps with too much silk and whisper.

Playing around in his collection, Burley came across the science man Werner at some point. I have limited beamer access here so I'm hoping you will reach back and learn more about smW. What I do know is that Werner put a tickle into Burley that he still carries. Piecing it together from several night line face times, here is what I believe happened.

Werner, as I mentioned, was a science man from long ago. At some point, he convinced many others of his notion that, ultimately, at some small point, the flow was uncertain and unpredictable. In other words, the Burly gods of connectivity and continuity could be breached, even if it was an unnoticeable event. Not Kansas, right? Certainly not! I was shocked that Burley would pay this much attention to a minor science man from so long ago.

Burley certainly had his failures but he typically viewed them as tactical events on a field of battle. Once, when he spoke of the Palace and Floppers, he mentioned his many bubbling attempts that strayed. He assured all who knew that this was simply a matter of tactics and enemies. All that was needed was time to refine his purpose, to assess all things at hand, past and present. It was this series of missteps that originally sent Burley to his private archives, to wander the past and find a way to refine his purpose.

What he found instead was science man Werner.

If smW was correct, according to the Burley interpretation, no bubbler could ever be certain of success. Tactics simply didn't matter. Enemies were not of such significance. A failure could be as simple as a misreading of something very small, some point of departure that slept beyond his ability to notice. This meant that connection and continuity could never be Degree Absolute. The game was up for grabs and no winner may be declared, depending on the situation.

For some time, Burley refused to accept the science man and his Declarations. To the Burley mind, this could be an Intuinoob vision, craziness, or even the work of another bubbler he had yet to identify. Later, it became apparent that smW had been on to something. Penetrating the archives further and through much time, Burley reluctantly decided that smW was legitimate.

The Werner Declarations were both mathematical and philosophical, I am told. Burley could easily dismiss the wispy side of the argument. However, he could not ignore the mathematical. Nor could he disregard Werner's name popping up here and there throughout the generations. For a time, Burley wondered if smW was a bubbler himself. History shows no evidence of this, Burley demands. I don't know.

Burley was forced to travel back to his failures and live them once again. Perhaps there were not as many enemies as he assumed. Maybe his tactics were not absolute. In the very tiny world of smW, things easily came apart. Confusion was consistency and not much was certain. Very bad news for Burley.

Burley is certainly not my hero. Nor is he my villain. I have learned he is just one of a species caught in his own time line and fulfilling a purpose I have yet to appreciate. I suppose the Werner Declarations could apply to his situation as comfortably as others, and mine?

For now, Burly rants about POUT (Problem of Uncertain Time) and wastes words on me. From the little access I have been granted, smW seems to have made powerful Declarations. I have been assured he claimed his birthright in the old way and wrote much. I have also learned of his politics. Beyond this, I know very little.

Could smW have discovered a god? It that where a god would live, inside that tiny bubble of uncertainty? Can I ever be certain about anything? Are things in the big world as uncertain as they are in the small one? Could writer man Jung and science man Werner be a species? What is going on when we're not looking?

I have so many questions. I wish I was there with you and we could explore them together.

Would you be kind, Dear? Would you reach back for smW and discover if there is something I should know right away? Perhaps Burley will move on and this issue can wait. Not sure. Please use trade craft if you need to reply in urgent time. Otherwise, wait.

Well here.

Alexis

## Well Come

*If you try to silence me, I'll just shut up and pout.*

– Alexis Mandell to Emmett Burley, Well Come night line.

September 29, 1967.

For three years, Lyndon's bubble had remained far upstream, thrashing around in the tangled reeds and rushes of an intense home land security obsession. It would be a few years before the rumblings would be felt downstream, before the Awakening would make its mark. In time, the Fan would fling it all around this small globe. Meanwhile, Burley was content in his own time line, not worried about the idle days ahead. He enjoyed the leisure as much as his work.

Burley would be the first to admit he was never alone among bubblers. In fact, he knew many. Each had their own specialty, their unique way of dipping into the stream and making their mark. It was just that Burley had made an early name for himself, despite himself. That, and his time line. These were obvious advantages and he shamed no one by using them when needed.

In Verona, he could relax and pursue his passions. One of these was assembling as large a bubbler collection as he could manage. Searching, correlating, cross referencing, and combing across the times and places. It was his way of staying in the game between opportunities. Fiddling through his trinkets and files, wondering about the bubblers of other places and times, Burley found himself repeatedly knocking on the same doors, squeezing the same fruit from its skin, time after time.

This habit had the mark of meaning. It became something he deeply wished to share.

There were also parallels to be discovered. If Alexis fell unwittingly upon her fascination with libraries and the one she called “writer man Jung,” it was the bubbler-as-artist for Burley. His work had always been technical and closed in form. He had been bred to his purpose and made an expert in the trade craft. Burley's work had a mechanical flavor that suited his structured existence and his roots. Across the other hemisphere of his brain, the lighter pull would sometimes surface, especially when he spent time rummaging through his collection. The ones he would call Art Bubblers held a special fascination. These were the most treasured in his realm, the works he would return to as often as possible. They were the bubblers he most admired and the ones he chose to share with Alexis.

Naturally, Burley followed his passion, always appropriately. Secretly, he admired their predilection for inspiration, these Art Bubblers. He had always relied on hard work, patience and a long lifetime of technical prowess. He was not much of an artist. Still, that never stopped him from dreaming of alternatives.

Across the Cold Waters, the Art Bubbler SAMan unexpectedly launched himself right under the noses of all, on this very date. This was an act of absolute inspiration. It was always Burley's view that SAMan was more than a common Art Bubbler, more than quite talented. Burley viewed him as a kind of savant bubbler, that most rare type of man caught in his short time line but able to reach far beyond himself, right to the shores of the stream that always rushes seaward.

Burley believed SAMan never recognized his own genius, nor his critical role as a bubbler. That recognition would flow from the words of others, like Burley, much later. SAMan never needed to learn the trade craft and never questioned the veil of inspiration he so easily ripped away from lesser bubblers. He was the Mozart of that annoyance screen so prolific and popular in its time. He was a natural in a cloistered universe of very unnatural bubblers.

SAMan simply created himself and then set his masterpiece adrift in a series of 17 bubbles, each pregnant with its own impenetrable core. Burley's favorite was Rover, the biggest bubble he had ever seen. According to all those who followed, this kind of bubbling was a unique accomplishment in any time line. Especially so for one with such a short shelf life.

So began the first bubble, on this date, back in the home land across the Cold Waters. True to his trade craft, SAMan never floated his name, only his number. It was these first few lines that always captivated Burley and sent him spinning to the other hemisphere, wishing that he, too, could someday be inspired. It was these lines that Burley insisted be read to Alexis by Joshua Book on their third night line meeting:

Number 6: Where am I?  
Number 2: In the village?

Number 6: What do you want?  
Number 2: Information.

Number 6: Whose side are you on?  
Number 2: That would be telling. We want information . . . information . . . information.

Number 6: You won't get it!  
Number 2: By hook or by crook, we will.

Number 6: Who are you?  
Number 2: The new Number Two.

Number 6: Who is number One?  
Number 2: You are number Six.

Number 6: I am not a number! I am a free man!

And so, *The Prisoner* arrived, struggled through his weeks of captivity and evolved himself right out of existence. On February 1, 1968, the last bubble was found rushing towards the sea, rounding the final turn towards home. With that, the bubbler reclaimed his quiet while Burley permanently sealed the file against future changes.

Now, after these many generations, SAMan is known well among the community of bubblers. He is always regarded and welcomed in Verona. For Alexis, he was both a lure and a vision.

## In Sogni

*Yes, I spend much of my free time at Sogni. Many Intuinoobs do the same. We go for the Vin and for the company of others. I believe you will find much meaning there. It has a rich and uncertain history.*

– Joshua Book to Alexis Mandell.

Sogni lies a short walk north of Verona, cleaving to the foothills above the Long Valley. It's an ancient place and, in most ways, typical of the villages that populate the area. Sogni is small, only four k-blocks, with narrow, antediluvian streets and clusters of colorful buildings from long before the Banishment. Across the gorge that separates the village from the flatland that answers to the Warm Sea, is the Holy Apostate Vineyard. This is the ancestral home of Vin, the favored drink of the Intuinoobs.

Legend recounts it was Vin that spawned the new life of Sogni, first attracted the Intuinoobs, and continues to move the settlement ever forward. Vin, along with the endless fables that embrace this lovely place and give it dimension.

Intuinoobs insist that Vin is sentient, not merely a pleasant beverage. They believe the act of drinking it brings wisdom, a rounder life and purposeful intent. Bubblers, like Burley, scoff at this idea. Others simply brush away the tales and enjoy themselves. What *is* agreed is that Vin is incredibly delicious, tingly and different from all other drinks. On this point, there is always consensus, in any time line.

Joshua had arranged for Alexis to have use of an apartment in Sogni when Burley was away from Verona. That was often, so Alexis spent many pleasant weeks in the village. Her accommodations were above an understated trattoria operated by Venoli Bernatucci, a supposed expatriate from the south. The building was high and narrow, typical of the village. Venoli's trattoria bustled after dusk, often with the local residents or visiting Intuinoobs, or even an occasional wanderer from another home land. During the quiet time, the chubby proprietor would provide wonderful local cuisine and have it served to his patrons in the authentic way.

The apartment above the restaurant was simple yet elegant in a past-era way. It was a single room, plastered and colored everywhere, without any straight walls or corners. The centerpiece was a large, unplanned window that looked across the gorge to the vineyard. This was a perfect sanctuary for Alexis. It was serene, comfortably warm and, most importantly, quiet. Even when the trattoria was bustling downstairs, there was little to disturb her. Intuinoobs were always so quiescent, so welcomed in their silence, there was never a fuss. Even the occasional other seemed to whisper when downstairs, even when the Vin was flowing without restraint.

Venoli took a liking to Alexis. Perhaps it was her uniqueness to him, her other home land ways and speech. He was much older, as were all the villagers, and accepted her as a traveler and potential friend. He never discussed Burley and, from her point of view, probably knew nothing of their relationship. This suited her need for relaxation.

Venoli also enjoyed face time at well-paced moments, never invasive or evasive. Very aware, from the Alexis point of view. His life among the Intuinoobs was sufficiently quiet to keep a naturally chattering soul in check. He was also quick to let Alexis know he would trade his lot in life for nothing else.

Venoli was content in his village, fulfilled and purposeful. Everyone knew that.

He was a skilled proprietor but nothing of a chef. Those duties fell to the Intuinoob, Adam, his omnipresent companion. Together, they ran the trattoria and managed the needs of their single guest.

Here she found a home that gave her renewed pleasure. Wonderful food, evenings of Vin in the trattoria, afternoons and nights of face time with Venoli, and even the occasional visit from Joshua. These were the times she treasured most, precious days away from Burly and the work that seemed endless and often pointless.

Alexis learned much in the village, many stories of its history, the fables from the old era and the ways of the Intuinoobs. It was Venoli, the Great Watcher and Teller, who offered so many wondrous tales about Sogni and its mostly-forgotten history. He also told her of his personal experiences with the Intuinoobs, his frequent visits to the vineyard, granted by special permission because of his welcomed hospitality.

After the fourth night line, while Burley was away.

“Venoli, that was spectacular! What was it?” Patting her belly.

“Palmo Brach stew with that unusual pasta Adam creates. He's so cranky about it! He refuses to tell me how it's made, what goes into that sauce. But, why complain? It's one of my favorites also. It's a happy time when we're eating, is it not? The happiest, I think.”

“The very best.” Nodding with exaggeration.

“Here, let me pour a bit more Vin, something to finish your meal while we wait for a sweet surprise from Adam.”

He poured generously from an uncomfortably tall, flointine-trium crystal container with a bizarre, crooked neck.

“Thank you, Venoli. You know, I'm very content here. Not very anxious to go back to work in Verona. This is so pleasant, so much like a home away from my own.”

“I'm happy, too. Happy you're here. Happy about everything! I've always felt the same way about Sogni. Truth is, I can't remember much about my home land. This is my home. It seems like it's always been my home, the village, this modest trattoria. I'm very fulfilled for an old man.”

Finishing his thought, “It's as if I just woke up one day and here I was. What a gift!”

She smiled and sipped. He put his fist under his chin and grinned lazily.

Alexis' eyes wandered across the room to a pair of Intuinoobs in a far corner. “Take a look over there,” she whispered, leaning close to him. “Are they bobbing around . . . what . . . I've never seen them move around like that?”

He concocted a sly look, very practiced, very managerial, followed by a thunderous rumble of laughter and a quick wipe of a wet eye. “I think they've had a little too much Vin, Alexis. That's what it looks

like to me.”

Venoli strained forward a bit, snooping again. “Well, yep, a little extra Vin and you know, those old stories get going.”

“You know what they're saying? How can you know . . .”

He interrupted with a quick, descending hand, a signal to keep to her whisper.

“Yes, Dear, I think I'm following their face time, pretty well.”

“I didn't think that was possible, at least when they were in that private mode they use with each other. I thought, well . . . you know . . . private is private.”

He smiled, not too carefully. “Oh, that's what happens when you stay in one place so long. You begin to hear things, even see things.”

“You know their words, Venoli?”

“Not exactly. I don't hear their words but I know what they're chattering about over there. You can always tell when they're drinking and bobbing around like that. They have their tells, just like everybody else.”

“And they're talking about what?”

Leaning back and pulling lightly on a strand of her hair. “You, Dear. They're chatting it up about you. They do it all the time.”

He leaned even closer and gave her hair another gentle stroke.

“Maybe they want you to wake up. They don't know anything about Kansas.”

## Scene Seventeen

Courier page (by beamer)  
vet only for A. Mandell, CTC  
Digipoint Locator ID: 395865665109:AA5:4015

If Please: For AM and without round play, no holotype, no archive, private.

You once asked me about the nature of Emmett Burley. It was quite some time past. Now that you are back in your home land, away from this place, I can finally answer.

The nature of Burley is Degree Absolute. You are familiar with this tale, told by one you can never know but surely understand well.

Joshua Book

## The Interview

Following the premier of *Ice Pick Soup* at St. John's, Newfoundland.  
An interview with the author.

Q: Judging by the audience response tonight, this production is going to be a smash. How do feel about all the clamor, especially since this is also your debut?

*Lucky, I suppose. It seems like a dream to me, something I'm not sure is real or not. Anyway, the feeling is certainly a good one.*

Q: The sets were among the most compelling seen on the stage. It's like . . . well . . . the roundness of each set, the easy edges, the colors. Were you behind this presentation? Did you have some kind of meaning in mind, some message here?

*No, I wasn't behind the set, I was up in the box trying to get some sleep. What happened on stage was the work of the design team.*

Q: Well, you must have had some input about those sets, eh? Some?

*Some. The producers and I talked a bit about the set design. I told them what I experienced and what I remembered from the important places. I'm not the one to be thanked for that work, though. Look behind the stage for your heroes and your villains.*

Q: Was any of this real? I mean, how much of this production was fact, how much fiction, how much allegorical, you know, how do we describe or categorize this production?

*It was all real, I assure you. What couldn't be real about it? Those were real actors saying real words, and doing it all in a real theater, right? So, real is real. It was all real. As to categorizing the production, I have no idea. Perhaps you should ask Burley, or Joshua.*

Q: Perhaps we should. Do you know how we can contact them, maybe set up an interview?

*If you wait long enough, I'm sure Burley will come to you, one way or another. I wouldn't wait around for Joshua, though. He doesn't stray far from home.*

Q: Home, yes, you mean Verona, don't you?

*Sure. Verona.*

Q: And where exactly is Verona?

*(no response)*

Q: Do you hear that? They're still laughing and whooping it up in the auditorium?

*(no response)*

Q: It seems you had a special relationship with the Intuinoobs. Is that right? What was that relationship?

*In a word, complex. They carried me along, looked after me when I got into trouble, provided everything I needed while I was away. They were the connectors, always connecting it together. When nothing made sense, they made sense out of it. I suppose you know I'm very fond of them. It's difficult to describe having a relationship with their species but, if you ever get the chance, don't pass it up.*

Q: Was Smiley your lover?

*Oh, yes, and much more. In fact, after I leave here tonight, that's where I'm headed. Right to Smiley. I suppose you could say we have a standing date.*

Q: I just have to ask, was Burley also your lover?

*My God, no! That whole idea is disgusting nonsense. If that's what you're thinking you must have slept through the play.*

Q: Do you really live in Kansas?

*No, not any longer. That was eons ago. That's not my home these days. At least, I don't think so.*

Q: Where is your home then?

*Anywhere I wake up is home these days. It makes for a simple life. After Verona, I really appreciate the simple things.*

Q: What about Venoli? What was he to you?

*I suppose, nearly a friend. There was everything to love about his place. His food, his stories, his constant attention. Those were good days, happy days. Most of all, it was about the food for me. That was Adam's doing, not his. I liked them both.*

Q: Adam, the Intuinoob?

*That's right.*

Q: Did you speak with Adam, thank him for his culinary skills, you know . . . get to know him?

*I ate his food. I thanked him. I even drank a little Vin with him after the dinner hour. We weren't that close but he had a few tales to tell.*

Q: Would you share one of them now?

*No.*

Q: Later, perhaps?

*Probably not.*

Q: Why?

*(no response)*

Q: What's next for Alexis Mandell? You're obviously riding the crest now with such a stunning piece of work. What are your plans?

*I've always wanted to meet Dorothy, you know, Dorothy from near my home. I think I'll look her up and we can chat about old times, maybe write something together. Before that, I want to take Smiley on a long vacation. He's earned it, eh? I think so.*

Q: Do you have plans to follow-up on *Ice Pick Soup*? Can we look forward to more of your characters in the future?

*God, I hope not. All I want to do is wake up, go to sleep, and visit the library one last time. I want quiet most of all. You can give me that, if you want to. Just give me some quiet.*

## Night Line Kansas

Alexis sensed a familiar voice from the far, aphotic night line of her own design. She moved her head reluctantly, snuggling comfortably against her warm arm resting on old wood, trying to not awaken too soon, to hold the moment a while longer.

“Alexis, wake up, OK?” he whispered, softly tapping the back of her hand.

She gradually opened her eyes and looked up at him, grinning.

“Oh, God, sorry. I fell asleep, again.” she murmured.

He chuckled easily. “Yeah, and you left your cellphone on the mantel again.”

“Sorry. Oh, I'm really sorry. What time is it? Were you worried? Hope not.”

“No, I wasn't worried. I knew you'd be here. Anyway, it's a beautiful night for a walk. But it's nearly eight. You know, old Mrs. What's-her-name . . .”

“Rileumsome,” she interjected.

“Yeah, Ri-lum-something. Looks to me like she wants to close the library for the night. I know you two are friends but she gives me the creeps.” He twisted his head in her direction.

“She's fine. Pretty nice, actually. She just has the rules stuck in her head and, well, you know how that goes. She's probably eighty years old. Been here since I was a kid.”

Smiley pulled her scattered papers together and piled them on the corner of the old library table. Alexis stuffed them under her arm.

“Listen, Alexis, are you as hungry as me?”

“Hmm, yeah, I'm starving!”

“Why don't we stop at Venoli's on the way home? I can tell you about my day, you can tell me about yours. What do you think, baby?”

“That sounds perfect. On the way, I've just gotta tell you about this dream. It was amazing and, well, you were in it, too. Gotta tell you.”

“I hope I was the good guy this time. Was I?”

“Yeah, you were the good guy, for sure. You were a spy and . . . well . . . we can talk on the way, OK?”

He nodded, smiling. All the time, smiling.

They walked toward the door, hand-in-hand, past Mrs. Ri-lum-something and her ancient metal desk

piled high with books waiting for the stack.

“Good night, Alexis,” the old woman offered in a basso grumble.

“Good night. See you tomorrow.”

“You see, Alexis,” he whispered. “She really doesn't like me, does she?” with a feigned pout and passing scowl.

“Don't worry about it, Smiley. She's an Intuinoob from Verona. They're all a little strange back there.”

“Verona? Intu-or-boobs? What's that all about?”

## The Players

**Orion Smiley.** Trade craft master, spy, editor, writer, friend of Alexis Mandell. Part-time guide in the home land.

**Joshua Book.** Intuinoob, translator, early companion of Emmett Burley before the break. The other friend of Alexis Mandell.

**Lyndon.** Ear puller, babbler, sorrowful historical character. Unaware of his own bubble. Mostly vanished from the archives. Progenitor.

**The Beagles.** None were hurt during this production. Uncomfortable, to be sure, but unhurt.

**Poet Randall.** Household figure of historical importance. Artist. Word master. Visionary.

**Wee Folk.** A collective that hid, raged, kept it ease and easy, and arrived.

**Science Man Heisenberg.** Of the left brain with questionable politics. Brilliant, not a stumbler. With little work, discovered gods, then left it all behind.

**SAMan.** A hero who remained untarnished. Artist and word master. A chance bubbler. Generational guide.

**Alexis Mandell.** Overcame a youth of severe pigeon-toed hobbling to eventually publish something. Her own best friend. Orion Smiley's protege and, for a time, his lover.

**Emmett Burley.** Bubbler and long-time resident of Verona.

**Ear Police.** All gone now, thanks to the Banishment.

**Papa.** Obvious, in each incarnation.

**Floppers.** Those who prowled the Palace halls and whispered nastiness. Short-strokers. A well-forgotten, ultimately unimportant collective.

**The Banker.** Ran out of coin, ran out of secrets, hung himself. Or, was it by another hand?

**Mooley Maddercough.** A pointless hero turned villain. Not for comic relief.

**Venoli Bernatucci.** Permanent resident of Sogni and proprietor of the village trattoria. Great Watcher and Teller. One of her protectors.

**Writer Man Jung.** Historically significant, overly-wordy, difficult, inspirational but not especially useful to the typical bubbler. Adored by the Intuinoobs, who apparently adore nearly everything.

## Production Notes

We would like to express our enduring appreciation to the magnanimous folk of Verona. Without you, this production would never have seen the light. Sadly, the Verona Visitors Bureau has been long closed and reliable transportation is no longer available.

Vin, the traditional drink of Verona, was kindly provided by the Holy Apostate Vineyard. We each enjoyed ourselves because of your omnipresent generosity. We still wonder if Vin is considered a sentient being or something else. None of the Intuinoobs are talking.

Thank you, Elvis, for the tour of San Francisco, especially the North Beach District. We were enlightened as well as eminently entertained.

We are in debt to a man who cannot be named. We will call him Evanston. He was able to help us gain entrance to the Catacombs and actually (secretly) watch the Floppers at work. None of us would have believed the bubble had we not seen it for ourselves. Hopefully, Evanston, your risk was worth our reward.

Soon after the premier, rumors began to circulate that a hefty prize was available to anyone who could properly organize the scenes and chapters into their original order. Your producers did not offer this prize and had nothing to do with its genesis. However, we did proffer an application, given the substantial rewards. The details do not require vetting and are open. Refer to Digipoint Locator ID: 397865765179:AA5:4719 for an application.

To the staff at Forgetful House, thank you very much.

To my evil Grandmother, take that! Burley is always watching.

Many of the characters appearing in this work are fictitious while others are not. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, may be coincidental, or not.

*How many times can you make the slice? How fine can be the cut? Isn't there always something left over, no matter how hard you try to make it not so?*

– Intuinoob proverb.