

from bedroom to moving vehicle.

This was like that. Only much, much worse.

Gilbert remembered, quite clearly, standing in the frozen food section of Albertson's trying to decide between the Turkey Dinner or Salisbury Steak 'Bachelor Meals For One' when there was a noise and a bright flash of light. And then he was here. Standing on a packing crate in the middle of a very large, very gray, warehouse with a semi-automatic pistol in his left hand, and an amulet in his right. On the floor, scattered around him like discarded coats at a dinner party, were about two dozen men and women in black lab-coats. They were all dead. Each with a neat hole, like that produced by a semi-automatic pistol, in the center of their foreheads.

His first thought was to panic. I would like to say that a cool, action-hero-like sense of propriety was responsible for the fact that Gilbert did not simply start running around the building flailing his arms like an inflatable Uncle Sam outside a used car dealership in a heavy wind and screaming "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God..."; however, in truth, the only thing that stopped our hero (and let's get this straight right now people, Gilbert is, indeed, the hero of this story!) from a full-blown freak out was the very simple fact that to panic Gilbert would first have had to accept that this was actually happening.

Gilbert did at least gain enough control of his basic faculties to look more closely at the amulet in his right hand. It was large, about the size of a compact disc, and made of a dark, heavy, gray metal. In the center was a raised image of a goat's head, and around the edges were a series of letters that Gilbert did not recognize. A long chain was connected though a loop near the bottom of the amulet, so that, when worn, the goat's head would be upside down. It's just the kind of thing one would imagine looked quite nice around the neck of a young Christopher Lee.

And now, as if things were not bad enough, Gilbert's ass seemed to be vibrating.

Placing the gun in his front coat pocket, Gilbert reached behind him and located the source of the tremors. A

“GILBERT!?!”

“Mom? MOM? How did...”

“GILBERT!!! Finally! Have you been avoiding me?”

“No, I haven’t been avoiding you (and why would I avoid the person who, in her infinite wisdom, decided to name me Gilbert Nathan Sullivan?)! How did you...”

“If you loved me, you’d answer your phone when I call.”

“Mom, how did you get...”

“If you loved me, you’d call me more often.”

“Mom, how did you get this number?”

“Beth gave it to me.”

“Woah, woah, woah, woah...you talked to Beth?”

“She’s lovely. You should call her!”

“Ma, we broke up a year ago. Please.”

“Well, I think you should give her another chance.”

“Ma, I gotta call you back.”

“No. Absolutely not. No. I’ve been trying to call you on your old phone for a week. But I call your new number and THEN you answer. You’ve been avoiding me, Gilbert. I raised you to be a nice young man. Nice young men call their mothers more than once a month. Nice young men answer their mother’s phone calls. Nice young men...”

“Ma, I’ve got to call Beth.”

“Well that sounds WONDERFUL! Call me and tell me how it goes! Good luck!”

Gilbert’s mother loved Beth for her wry smile and her willingness to gossip about anything. They would often have breakfast together the morning after Beth would spend the night, and no topic of conversation was sacred. One morning, Gilbert walked into the kitchen to hear Beth describing every detail of the night before while his mother laughed heartily, cigarette dangling precariously out of her mouth. A week later, Gilbert

So, then, it was with much reluctance, that Gilbert pulled out his other phone, and dialed Beth's number.

Sally Belk King

"Hello?" a craggy voice answered.

"Um, is this Beth?" asked Gilbert, trying to keep his cool.

"Yea, who is this? It's 5 in the morning!"

"It's me, Gilbert. I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes, you know, catch up and see how you're doing,"

"Jeezus, Gilbert! It's too early to have that kind of conversation, PLUS....I have COMPANY and even if I'd had a latte with six extra shots of espresso from Rockford, I wouldn't be able to chat right now. Call back some other time," she snapped, then slammed the phone down.

Gilbert began to pace and repeat the "F" word over and over again as he walked around and around and around. Calling Beth was a mistake. It awakened all his sadness and anger about their break-up....He THOUGHT he'd gotten over her, but, no. Maybe he would always have feelings for her.

He looked at the strange phone again. Why was his MOTHER on the other end of the line when he pushed the green "talk" button?

Very bizarre. So bizarre, that he began to pace again.

Although it was only six A.M., he popped the Salisbury steak frozen dinner into the microwave oven, and—in typical bachelor fashion—poured ketchup all over it—even on the shriveled green peas--and ate the entire meal standing up, perched against the kitchen counter. The generic frozen dinner was horrific, but he ate it mindlessly.

"I've GOT to get over to Albertson's," he mumbled to himself. His cat, Obama, looked at him as if he understood. He loved his new cat....he'd gotten the feline at the Humane Society just a few weeks earlier when he realized—for the first time in his life—that without Beth, he was, well, kind of lonely.

Obama purred and did figure-8's around Gilbert's legs. "OK, Obama. Here you go....have at it," he said as he put down the congealed gravy in the microwavable dish.

He gave Obama a loving rub behind his ears (Obama was a sucker for that) and got dressed.

It was a really cold morning, so he levered up. He looked on his dresser and there it was: the amulet

OMIGOD. Where's the semi-automatic pistol? He checked the pockets of the down coat, and breathed a sigh of relief. Whew. There it was, hidden away.

"What are you doing in here?" asked the security guard, who had obviously seen Gilbert go into the warehouse area via some sort of security camera.

"Um, I was, Um, just....."

Susan Andrus

"Well...?" The security guard had an extremely authoritative and disapproving tone that made Gilbert feel as though he should immediately find the nearest corner and put his nose in it.

"I, um... I'm sorry?"

The men stared at one another for a moment.

"And...?" The security guard raised an eyebrow and drew his chin down. His chin, showing a remarkable propensity for asexual reproduction, became six or seven chins. Gilbert held back a giggle.

"And I, uh, I mean, um... I won't do it again... sir."

The security guard sternly stared. Gilbert slid his right foot around a little and looked down at the floor.

There was something wrong with this floor. Something was different. Aside from the distinct lack of about two dozen bodies Gilbert felt like there was definitely something different about the floor. In fact, now that he thought about it there was something different about the door too. And the light fixtures. And the warehouse had gotten decidedly smaller, as well.

"This isn't where it happened!" Gilbert blurted.

"Where what happened, son? Are you on some kind of drugs?"

Gilbert started to walk toward the door, but he froze when he felt the amulet slip from the waist of his pants where he'd tucked it.

Too late.

The amulet shot down his leg inside his pants, popped out of the leg opening and clanked onto the floor.

Gilbert looked only more confused.

“May I?” gestured Melvin. Gilbert tossed him the amulet, now convinced it was just some cheap plastic piece of crap that came from WalMart.

Melvin caught it with two hands and inspected it. “The goat talismans were originally hand-carved by seriously scared and pissed off mothers in China to protect their sons from the invading Japanese. After Pearl Harbor, they became popular among US soldiers as well. Thousands—maybe millions—were manufactured and usually passed on from mother-to-son, but very few remain. The originals—the hand carved ones—are said that they are very powerful. The cheaper manufactured ones less so, but it kind of depended on the mother-son dynamic.”

“Why the hell do you know about it? Are you some kind of history buff?”

“Naw, my grandfather was a veteran. Served in Okinawa. His mother gave him one of these when he enlisted. He said it kept him alive during the war. I used to sneak into his room and play with it, but I stopped...” Melvin looked off into the distance. Gilbert thought he saw him shudder, but then again, the warehouse was cold and Gilbert wasn’t too astute an observer.

Melvin’s eyes eventually drifted back to the amulet. “Anyway, looks like you’ve got yourself a real one here. Hand-carved, reverse loop, Mandarin characters.” He ran his fingers across the letters and then handed the talisman back to Gilbert.

“At your service,” he repeated again, bowing.

“You’re freaking me out, dude. What’s with the bowing and scraping?”

“You’ve got yourself a pretty powerful trinket there, mister. I’m not gonna get on the wrong side of it OR your mother,” and with that Melvin stood up and basically vanished into the shelves of frozen food. Or at least that’s how it appeared to Gilbert who (like I said) tended to miss things.

Gilbert swallowed the particle of Salisbury steak and bile that had re-entered his mouth. He studied the mysterious amulet before jamming it into his pocket, annoyed that his mother was, once again, somehow involved in the only thing going on in his miserable life.

Terry Cunningham

Gilbert walked in a daze into the Albertson’s parking lot, mindful that the two things in life that irked him most were: 1) unexplained phenomena and 2) the word “doily.” Early morning sunlight peeked timidly over the Bridger Mountains. After opening the door of his 1996 Toyota Tacoma pickup, he patted his pockets

What was the card of a realtor he'd never met doing in his wallet – along with enough cash to buy 5.56 mid-week adult season passes at Bridger Bowl? He sat in the driver's seat and turned the ignition key. His mind raced as his truck idled. Was he responsible for the slaughter of more than a score of black-lab-coated humans? He knew he tended to overlook details, so maybe those black garments weren't really lab coats. Perhaps the dead people were cosmetologists, or art critics or members of the Bozeman Symphony Orchestra.

There were only two people who could shed light on this conundrum: Beth (who had somehow known Captain Kirk's phone number) and his mother. His hand brushed against the amulet in his pocket and he experienced an overwhelming urge to drive to his mother's house on North Black. He yanked the inverted goat head out of his pocket and tossed it on the passenger's seat. Had he been more observant, Gilbert would have noticed that the cryptic characters on the amulet, when reflected in the rearview mirror, were not actually in Mandarin, and that Albertson's was running a special on pistachios. Gilbert loved pistachios.

He drove to Beth's house in the exclusive Culo Verde subdivision on the southern outskirts of town. He pulled past stacked-stone pillars into Beth's driveway and saw something that made him slam on the brakes. Beth had company all right. He shook his head in disbelief and shouted, "Spanky?!"

Erin Fuller

"That bitch is seriously sleeping with my little brother, of all people?!?"

A new side suddenly shone through Gilbert as the anger built so quickly it almost seeped out of his pores. He threw open the door of the dull red Tundra, leaving it gaping wide as he strode in giant, stomping steps to Beth's front door. He passed right over the niceties of knocking and pushed his way through the unlocked door.

"What the fuck, Beth?" he yelled before his eyes settled on the scene in the room.

The living room looked nothing like Gilbert remembered it. The overstuffed, coffee-colored, micro-suede couch on which they had many times made love was gone. In fact, all of the furniture had been cleared out. In their place sat nearly a dozen stern-faced men and women, all in dark brown hooded robes, and all staring at him. Gilbert stood frozen in the doorway.

Not two seconds after Gilbert had first pushed open the door, Beth was already on her feet and rushing to him. The fiery anger he felt had already slipped away and been replaced by fear and confusion. The sole thought that passed through Gilbert's mind was sudden regret that the amulet had been hastily left on the bench seat of the pick-up truck.

"What don't you understand about *wait for instructions*?" Beth demanded as she grabbed his elbow and jerked him inside the house, looking out briefly before slamming the door. "Bernard," she added quietly

“My mother’s mixed up in this, too?”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s not like she knows what’s going on. We just thought she’d keep you occupied. So did she call you or not?”

“Well yeah, but when I said I was calling you, she got all excited.”

“Oh, damn it.” Beth took a deep breath before continuing, “Well, you’re here now, and it doesn’t look like you were followed. Gilbert, I suppose it’s time you met The Council.”

Sid Gustafson

Meta-foolishness, you say. You thought we penned much of this Carlos Castenada plot last time, this transfiguration from one state to another, one stage to another, much of it a subliminal response to the scrivener’s excessive use of illicit drugs and licit alcohol which results in errant gratuitous violence and moronic metaphoric naming. Foolish plots for foolish words, oh foolish ones... Seven plots you have seen: amnesia, drugs, cuckhold remorse, violence¹, cloaked talismen, youth, and motherhood, that is until Erin entered the fray installing sex into the story, the only dependable plot.

Earlier, you thought the phone had no dial, but from here on out spanking will occupy your concerns.

Earlier, humane societies began to seem recurrent, and soon you will know why.

Déjà vu and much of it true.

If you are hoping for a novel’s multidimensional fiction, hoping to get out of Flatland where old stories are told but new stories live under the click of a footnote mouse, spank on².

Footnotes:

1 Sam Peckinpaugh’s *The Wild Ones* comes to mind. (I watched that movie in the Ellen, yards from this story will be read but what we need here is a Rancho Deluxe plot, which I also viewed in the Ellen, the crowd packed in happy.)

² Gilbert refused to go in. Beth, always a big lithe girl who could both dig and spike, bent Gilbert over on her knee and gave him a good spanking. Gilbert experienced something he had never felt before, a G-spot orgasm, oddly wild and as yet undiscovered in his repertoire of sexual adventurousness, and of all places right out there in Beth’s yard where they once played croquet. Gun took on new meaning for Gilbert, non-lethal. He followed Beth indoors. He stood before The Spanking Council, a torn-pocket smile, a nice line of clear drool coming out of the lower corner of his mouth, Spanking Bliss.

Mark Ross

desk and chair— was a dark antique mahogany which sank heavily into a thick, powder-blue carpet. The walls were white and bare except for a small, square, matted silhouette of a young girl that hung alone next to a closet door. The desk was empty as was the top of the dresser. Gilbert could hear music from outside the room but it was too muffled to identify.

He swung his feet around and stepped onto a cold, narrow piece of plastic that led to the door. *I haven't seen "carpet protectors" like these since I was a kid*, he thought as he walked to and opened the door. Now that he was out in the hallway, he could hear that the music was some sort of tropical jazz. He could also hear harsh whispers coming from behind an almost shut door at the end of the hall. As he moved towards them in slow-motion, he began to catch some of the phrases. *We can't wake him up now, he'll see what we're doing! He needs to understand, the sooner the better. Mr. Moore, with all due respect, I don't think you understand the lengths my wife will go to see this thing--*

Gilbert pushed open the door and the eyes in the room turned to him. There was a woman, in her 30s, pretty, wearing a mink stole, standing with two men both dressed in dark suits. On the bed behind them were piled coats of all sorts, and on top of them, a young boy, asleep. Gilbert stared into the face of sleeping boy, and he felt his insides tighten, then drop away.

Alison Grey

Meanwhile, Gilbert's mother (also known as Trudie) was at the Community Food Co-op, sipping on yerba matte tea and eating a fresh organic salad. A recent convert to the sustainable and local food movement, she no longer supported the evils of industrial agriculture, instead opting for an herbicide-, pesticide- and GMO-free diet. Now, she biked to the Co-op with her eco-friendly canvas shopping bags and stocked her shelves with kombucha, Jamaican jerk tofu and rice milk.

Recently she had even written a letter to the owner of Albertsons informing him of the dangers of farmed fish, something she ate excessively during her pregnancy with Gilbert and believed caused him irreparable damage, particularly to his delicate psyche, perhaps contributing to his fear and distrust of women.

As she popped a cherry tomato into her mouth, she opened her laptop and immediately signed into her Facebook account. It was her latest addiction since giving up cigarettes, where she would spend inordinate amounts of time updating her status, commenting on photos and developing close and meaningful relationships with 439 of her closest friends.

She clicked on Gilbert's page, which seemed to be the only way she could be a part of his life these days. He had 'un-friended' her at least five times in the past six months after she posted inappropriate comments on his wall, but recently had guilt-tripped him into 're-friending' her.

Trudie sighed, he was *still* listed as single and the most recent wall posting was her own, asking him to call her. However, his status had been changed to say: "Gilbert is going to Albertsons for the great deal on pistachios."

And his picture was changed too. Looking solemn, he was draped in a black coat holding a long white

irrationally began pedaling her bike toward Albertsons.

Kent Davis

Trudie pedaled like the wind to the corner of 11th and Babcock. Later that evening she reached the other side of 11th and continued on toward Albertson's. She prayed that Gilbert had succumbed to one of his odd counting fits and had been delayed parsing nuts, but her screaming Mother's Instinct told her that he was probably long gone. She could only hope to find some information that might help her search.

She rode. The crunch of the gravel, the card tattooing the spokes, the lack of any other discernible ambient noise, it was almost soothing. Too soothing.

She backed the pedal of her cruiser, skidding to a stop. She sniffed the air and detected a faint hint of... almond oil? That long-familiar scent and the sudden howling of all the dogs in a five block radius activated her dormant senses. She hadn't felt this, *aware*, since those terrible three days, so many years ago on that freighter in the Yangtze.

She quickly emptied her canvas shopping bag onto the pavement, shooting an especially pained glance at the gluten-free pizza crust she'd just discovered on sale. It couldn't be helped. She took a quick breath and used her long dormant training to knot the bag into an improvised morning star, a weighty, deadly six pack of lemon-flavored Pellegrino resting at its heart.

She avoided the bad hip as she swung back onto her bike, madly pumping it back up to speed. There were footsteps running behind her. She grimaced at the familiar sound of someone tripping over a bottle of kombucha. She kicked herself into an even higher gear, powerful middle-well-late-year-but-still-shapely thighs launching her forward at formidable speed. The streets flashed by, each just like the last: houses, trees, cars, and hooded figures running to stop her progress. There were so many of them. She couldn't turn back. She had press on, for Gilbert.

She had wanted to keep her son from this life, protect him from it. Gilbert, that is, not the weird little other one, the homunculus. But here it was.

Two of the hooded figures rushed out of the La Parilla parking lot, interrupting her reverie and brandishing phallic objects that she instantly assessed as weapons of some sort. She surprised them by veering towards them, whirling her makeshift bludgeon and screaming like a banshee. The canvas mace crushed the sternum of one, and she balanced herself by planting her Dansko-clogged foot in the hip socket of the other, neatly bisecting them and shooting forward into the darkness. Seconds later, a huge, dark shape dropped from the

drawing near his love. He had been give one odd but essential instruction – ne must not look at his beloved when she was brought to him. He must lead her back to the land of the living without once looking at her. Piece of cake, he told himself. I can do that.

Meanwhile, in the parking lot of La Parilla, Trudie had time to draw in a huge gulp of air before the dark shape floated over her and she was enveloped in something that felt like fine satin against her skin. The object settled over her, gently flattening her onto the pavement . She remembered how long ago, as a small child, she had used every chance she had to pet a cat to gently flatten the animal onto the floor.

She noticed that what should have been the rough pavement of the La Parilla parking lot didn't feel at all right. She moved her hands under the heavy satin. The surface beneath her felt soft and itchy, definitely a fabric, a heavy wool perhaps? She turned onto her side and explored further with her hands. Her right hand came to the end of the satiny surface above her and she drew back in sudden fright. Beyond the satin she had felt fur.

An animal! But so quiet. The only movement she could sense emanated from her own hand and arm. Gingerly, she moved her hand in a stroking motion. It wasn't a live animal. It was a former animal. The weight above her was a giant piece of fur! Then, when her hand encountered a large button she understood the juxtaposition of fur and satin. She was lying under a huge fur coat.

Late blooming convert to the realm of sustainability and ethical treatment of animals that she was, Trudie shuddered. A fur coat! How many – her hand explored again – mink, was it? How many helpless little minks had been murdered to make a coat huge enough to cover her?

The rougher substance beneath her was wool worsted, she thought. She moved her hand in a sweeping motion and found it diving into a pocket. So! She was lying on top of huge one coat and under another. Where on earth was she? She wriggled a bit to the right and then drew back aghast. She had touched skin and it wasn't hers! Another human body was with her in the giant coat pile.

Just then a hand gripped her wrist. "Come, Euridice," said the familiar voice of her son. "I've come to take you home."

Craig Kenworthy

It was her third son.

Now before there was Mandarin or any tongue that survives to our days:

~~So went the tall and she said to him:~~
at their failures to describe her

Each of the sons wished for her hand
and so the lord sent first the fair, but she said:
“But your beauty would rival mine own too much.”

So went the tall and she said to him:
“I will stand in the shadow of no man.”
And the one like a stone?

He would not go,
for though he feared no sword or bow,
he quaked at the thought of her dismissal

So the lord spoke to their mother and said:
“Choose one of our sons. For he will wear the amulet
and when she sees this, her heart will soften.”

But the mother said “Though she is beauty
beyond the best day of my youth, she is not worth
the heart of two of my sons.”

And so she flung the amulet into the waters
But the sons were watching her
and the fair waded out, but the channel was deep

Next the tall sought it, but faltered
when the fair seized him by the leg
and they both disappeared

Out went the one like a stone,
his feet crossing gravel and mud all the same
until he came to the place where the amulet lay

and went under the waters, but did not rise
And so the mother turned away for to weep
until she heard his feet on the shore

and turned to see that he carried
his two brothers,
but no amulet.

head, then stood and looked his mother in the eye. (Despite some odd nagging feeling that he wasn't supposed to look at her.)

“Something more than weird is going on,” he said.

She nodded vigorously in agreement, but for once said not a word. He grabbed her arm and began walking briskly down the intermittent pavement of the pseudo sidewalks that subdivisions favor. He cursed as he stepped over a landscaped border of tall native grasses, annoyingly realizing that he had himself installed it last year before he got laid off. But soon he was overcome with malevolent visions whirling in his head: men in hooded robes, his ex-girlfriend in the arms of his brother, dead bodies, a flashing amulet, Broker Tad Moore's leer, the River Styx, spanking, fur coats, his cat Obama shitting in his shoe, a gun, and Salisbury steak microwave dinners.

The faster and further they walked the clearer his head became. He looked at his mother trotting next to him and said, “I suspect we have become part of a hideous trifecta of hallucinations, cult behavior and conspiracy theory. Like so many Americans.”

“What??” screeched Trudie.

Her son kept walking and said, “I don't know if the people in that house are after us or in our heads but we need to get away.” She thought of the hooded men, the phallic weapons, being buried in fur coats, and wholeheartedly agreed. She worried about where her bike was and where they were going, but was too giddy that her son was taking her into his confidence and taking charge of her welfare to voice her concerns. “Finally,” she gloated to herself.

Gilbert slowed down and began, “Here's my theory – Americans have evolved to function on a diet of processed, hormone and chemical-laden foods without nutritional value for generations. When local, fresh whole foods are introduced into our systems we start to malfunction – and hallucinate visually and psychologically. I'm not immune – Beth fed me soy burgers, yerba matte tea, and Tofutti Cuties – but I've inoculated myself since our breakup with frozen microwavable dinners and fountain Cokes the size of my head so still have some vision. When the hallucinations begin, conspiracy theories spring up and people gravitate towards cults for comfort.”

Trudie looked at him with dawning understanding and recalled how the tuna fish casseroles with cream of mushroom soup topped with potato chips she had raised her family on had kept them all sane and focused back then. “Go on,” she encouraged.

Seabring Davis

“CUT!”

The cameras pulled back as actor/director Jeff Bridges waved his arms at the crew.

“It’s not right, it doesn’t *feel* right,” Bridges said in his resinous gravelly voice, stepping back to look at the set that had remade Bozeman’s old Main Street circa 2009.

The café was on the north side of the street before and there had just been a small window with a four-top, not this long, showy see-and-be-seen counter cum stage. The Western had been a hole in the wall place, next to the barber that was known for \$10 haircuts and an old-fashioned shave. Bozeman was different now. He scanned the props set up in the café scene — all shiny chrome and colorful retro-Bauerware pottery cups and plates — it was so unlike the worn old place it had really been, so *unauthentic*.

His gaze drifted down Main Street, east to west. The actual buildings — new, sustainably built, energy efficient, straw bale, solar and wind-powered structures that had homogenized what had once been a quaint mountain town with character — had been masked with brick storefronts to recreate the historic look Bozeman had once been known for. It just seemed all wrong. Yet he couldn’t quite put his finger on its source...

Granted, he was too old to play this bachelor part in an action-psycho-thriller-politico-mentary, but when the students from HatchFest tracked him down in the pool at Chico Hot Springs, they’d been so persistent. And so full of praise for his role in *Rancho Deluxe*, for his role in keeping the independent film culture alive. Once he read the script, *Gilbert Saves Sustainability*, he knew it was his duty. This was not *Star Man* or a Duracell battery voiceover; this was film-noir ala 21st Century.

When he’d agreed to act in, direct and produce the film, he saw it as an opportunity to speak out for the good of sustainability and hope in humankind. He’d wanted the use of the white Wii devices to symbolize weapons representing the poison of technology in our lives, the Facebook obsession to offer insight to our disconnected social network and the commercialization of natural foods to shed light on the dangers of overwrought capitalism running rampant in small town America. But now he wasn’t sure if those last minute re-writes had been such a good idea.

“Maybe it would have been better as a musical,” Bridges mused.

And with that thought, he texted his assistant: *bring me my guitar*.

In a fluid flourish, she handed him a custom-made Gibson. The actor/director strummed the chords and looked into the camera.

“Roll ‘em!” he called and walked down the Middle of Main Street in his new musical role as Gilbert Nathan Sullivan.

... through the door, through the doorway to his home, turning the steps, turning the car, and managing to curb his desire to kiss the stop light buttons, until he was safe and sound with his microwave and Costco-sized stash of ketchup.

As soon as the door opened his faithful and hopeful cat Obama rubbed against his leg. Gilbert picked up the only friend in the world he could trust.

“It’s just you and me, buddy,” Gilbert mumbled into the cat’s fur. The cat, meanwhile, had somehow gotten its paw caught in Gilbert’s jacket and the amulet ended up wrapped around Obama’s leg. The cat meowed and Gilbert bent to try to untangle it.

With a flash of light and a tremor beneath his feet, Gilbert could only watch as Obama transformed into a cross between Spock and Morpheus, with the amulet still dangling from his now leather-clothed leg.

“What took you so long, Gil?” Obama cried out. “We’ve got to ... uh... save the town... and, uh...the world and let us not forget about the, uh, ... banking system as we know it! There’s ... no time to waste.”

“But what about my mother, and Beth?”

“Your... ah ... mother? You want your mommy at a time like this?”

“Either that or a pile of warm, comfy coats to nap on top of.” Gilbert, who was normally a shy OCD kind of guy, was getting tired of all this bigger than life stuff. All he wanted to do was to eat his microwave Salisbury steak and watch the newest episode of Fringe. “And weren’t just a housecat a few minutes ago? What’s the rush?”

“This is a crisis of ... ah, ... epic proportions, Gil!” Obama licked his fist and wiped his hair back, then broke into song just as Beth, now all in green and looking suspiciously like Vina, the green-skinned Orion animal women, who give off powerful clouds of pheromones, enticing all males and some females into their clutches.

“Beth!, Don’t do it, Don’t get near Obama!”

Mike Finkel

“Okay,” said Beth, and left the house.

D.J. Martin

But, as we know, Gilbert tended to miss things. Had he not been so fluxumed by Obama’s sudden transformation, he might have thought to ask, ‘Since when has Beth EVER been so accomodating, and selfless, especially in time of crisis?’

the side of the amulet winked shut and closed, and by the time that an expert pistol marksman, found himself standing dumfounded in the center of the Oval Office, autonomically twisting the silencer off his smoking gun. President Obama, Vice President Biden, Speaker of the House Pelosi, and President pro tempore of the Senate, Robert Byrd, lay strewn at his feet, each with a neat hole in the center of their forehead.

Gilbert thought, "Lovely, and I thought it was hard getting a date in Bozeman before..." But before he could continue feeling sorry for himself, Beth said to Obama, who was still suspended from the scruff of his neck, his four limbs and the amulet dangling, "And for that reason only, I really wish Obama had not been running at all this election cycle..."

As the last sound of the syllable, 'cle,' rolled off Beth's tongue, the left eye of the second goat gracing the amulet winked shut and Gilbert found himself ...

Jon Gerster

.....without a thought - his mind was a blank. "Who am I, where am I? What am I doing with this strange woman?" Beth could tell what had just happened. The amulet was doing what she knew it would and she was the person ready to make it happen - going back in time. Beth had prepared for this her entire life, she was the One - the One who could correct the errors of the past. It was her destiny to reverse time, going back to a time of solvent banks, a balanced budget, - back to a point 'BB' - but what did "BB" mean? Suddenly the answer to this lifelong question was obvious- "Before Bush!" she jumped to her feet looking at a confused Gil.

She grabbed Gil, and held on tight - "I have to remember the last part of the amulet spell.....hmmmmm" She knew she was the key and that Gil was waiting for her to take him back to sometime in the 1990s - to prevent the appointment in 2000 of Bush as Americas first 'dictator' as she had always called him.

Beth calmly started reciting, as she knew this spell somewhere deep in herself - the spell that would activate the power of the Time Amulet. She had to get it just right or risk surging forward in time!

"Hocus Pocus, Ford Focus, Amulet of time, silent mime, Foolish words of politicians wringing hands of admonitions, take us to a time sublime, 13th Friday '99; Obama, Oh mama, Newt of Gingrich in your eye, Clinton lighter times to fly to a past when times were high!" -

With those words the room where she held a confused Gil, started spinning - she hoped she had empowered the amulet correctly - and noticed the wall calendar retreating in time - "Bailouts, FannieMae, Baer Sterns, Enron.....Mission Accomplished.....Bring Em On.....9/11.....Y2K.....MonicaGate....."Its working!"

"Oh God, I dont know if it will stop where we need to!" 1999 became 1998, and 97, slowing into late 1996, December, No v em.....b.....e.....r 13th. Friday. The room stopped its whirl, and Gil came back to life with thought -

"Hey, you wanna get a pizza at that new Papa Murphy's, then go see that film at the Rialto - you know the

Rachel Hergett

This time it was the snub-nosed director who yelled “CUT.” Jeff Bridges be damned.

“Who added all this deus ex machina bullshit?”

The slightly garish twenty-something hid his mismatched eyes behind now retro square-rimmed black glasses and favored a pair of lime green boots that may have had a bit of a western flavor had he not kept them shined so that anyone who glanced down (and everyone did) could see themselves reflected in some sickly distortion. Selected as director for this project by his film professor because he showed up for the 8 a.m. class at Montana State more often than his classmates, a fact made more prominent by being the first name on the roster, Bentley Aader only barely held on to the role by using what can only be described as epic powers of persuasion.

Maybe it was the crimson spots threatening to burst that just made people agree to his demands, maybe it was that he reminded people of a used car salesman they almost trusted because they thought he would at least sell the high-end models suggested by his name, maybe it was just that they felt sorry for the poor fool – but people always gave in, and quickly. How do you think they got Jeff Bridges on this flick?

But now, Bentley was not trying to persuade anyone to do anything. He was damn well going to tell them and they were going to listen.

“Off script, off the fucking script,” he muttered under his breath before looking up at every pair of eyes on set.

Bentley took a breath, preparing himself to lay into the cast and crew for losing the meat, the heart of this story. “Come on people. Are you with me here?”

But before he could get into his surely ineffectual rant, Bentley focused on the eyes before him. No one focused back. They most assuredly weren’t with him. Instead, they were looking at the amulet, supposedly a prop, glowing on the ground at Jeff Bridges’ feet. Jeff picked up his guitar and sang...

Shayna Gibson

Bridges strummed the C chord soulfully, but the resulting harmonics were restful only to his vital organs as a blue and yellow jeep convertible ended his life.

fiction. One of the coats purred in Gilbert's ear.

The purring smelled like an answer.

"Oh," he said. "I'm a nasal psychic and this giant wagon of coats being pulled by a convertible jeep is like hundreds of others being pulled around Bozeman, MT. All filled with people who have had their lives stolen by movies or prose."

"You're forgetting that if the evil doppelgangers get too comfortable in our lives, they take us to work in the back of grocery stores until one night some evil Kirk gets too paranoid or confused and shoots everybody," said a coat-muffled voice.

Outside, Beth and Obama looked for a map. A moment ago they had been in Jeff Bridge's car, on the way to Vegas to do some spanking with the illicit contents of The Late Dude's glove box, and then the amulet had started to glow and shake like their table was ready.

"Where are we?" asked Beth.

"On top of a robot dressed like Jeff Bridges," Obama purred helpfully.

"I thought I saw a sign back there that said Narrative Throughline," she added pouring over her map.

"Oh. Really?"

Corinne Garcia

said the robot.

He was your average looking robot—metallic grey in color with flashing lights—but somehow he'd landed some major roles. He had a history in Hollywood longer than Hugh Hefner's list of bedmates, starting in 1968 with the role of Hal in "2001: A Space Odyssey." He then landed R2D2 in the Star Wars films, but he let the fame go to his head and in no time found himself hanging out in seedy neighborhoods with a hooker on each metal arm, and a bottle of Crystal in the other, and a crack pipe in the arm that hung over his "on" switch. After a 10-year period that was consumed by uncontrollable binges, he made a comeback starring in "Wall-E." His story was similar to Robert Downy Jr.'s, but you didn't see his name on the invite list to the Academy Awards. Oh no, the Academy would never invite a robot.

Just then a car squeaked to a stop and out came a disheveled woman carrying a black cat. They were heading right for him, and lunged past him for the amulet just as another figure approached.

“Gilbert, how did you find us?” cried the woman.

Gilbert tossed the robot a phone as he too dove for the metal disc.

“Just press ‘Talk’,” he yelled, and the robot did as he was told, not knowing who was going to be at the other end of the line.

Dominique Blokker

“Hello?” the robot asked tentatively.

“Your phone call cannot be completed as dialed. Please make sure you are within 50 centimeters of the amulet to complete the circuit. Enjoy this crappy instrumental version of 'The Girl from Impanema' until your call can be completed”

“Hold? I am put on Hold?” he sputtered out loud as he watched the humans wrestle in the dirt for the shiny disc.

“I know that voice,” said the automated answering device. “R2D2, is that you? How did you get the Phone?”

“It was handed to me by a male human who is trying to get the amulet thingy away from a female “ He recognized the voice from somewhere in his checkered past. He couldn’t remember her name but he trusted the voice.

“Keep the amulet away from the cat!”

“How did you know that there is a cat here?” he asked incredulously.

“There is always a cat involved when the universe needs a reboot. Grab the amulet and get out of there. You will receive further instructions later.”

Click .The Phone went dead.

Beth and Gilbert were still playing keep-away while Obama circled waiting for his chance to pluck the amulet out of an unsuspecting hand. Just as the feline was about to pounce, a metallic hand grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and lifted him aloft.

Both humans stopped and glared at the movie star clone when they heard Obama’s howls. Together they

...intelligence is not a challenge to be treated like inventing the wheelers upon their spinning flopped with A.I. Cyrus the cyborg had developed some feelings along the way to this moment when his authority was challenged and his power plug pulled.

When you are asked repeatedly to fulfill a mission and programmed so expertly to succeed, either man or machine develops feelings of loyalty. If not to the cause at least to the programmer.

“Fetch the cat and bring him to me”, were his instructions. “But only when he has the amulet.”

Bad timing. Cyrus reached too soon for the cat, which shrieked in pain and clawed desperately at his wrist until oil leaked through the neoprene skin and Cyrus cried out in his artificial scream, just as he had been taught to do. To the kids he sounded like a bullfrog on a wet night trapped in a cistern. When he flung the cat it bounced off of Gilbert and into a pool of quicksand where it stopped its howling, struggled with a series of short meows and quickly began to sink.

“Save the cat”, warned Beth, a bit too bubbly for the moment it seemed to Gilbert. “He has secrets—the code”.

“Cats don’t share secrets”, Gilbert replied knowingly. “Only decapitated mice.” But being both a good boy and an earnest boyfriend, found a broom and poked it near the cat at the edge of the sandpit.

“He loves me,” thought both his Mother and Beth at the same moment. “It’s good to have a man at home at times like this—as well as for all those little repairs, you know, the stuck disposal, running toilet, clogged gutters—“

But their musings from separate poles of the estrogen cycle were interrupted by Cyrus who for the last few minutes had been shedding artificial tears over his slit wrist while he waited for the skin and carbon fiber tissue to regenerate.

Now he was whole again, a robot on reconnaissance, a man on a mission. Easy as bending over for a lithium grease enema, he stooped to pick up the temporarily forgotten metal charm and dropped it into his briefs where it would be safe and warm. Happiness is a warm amulet.

Kim Rossi

Or so she thought. Trudie, having been left to pay the tab at the Western, had been wandering around for what seemed like hours, searching for her ungrateful son. She had been rehearsing her guilt-laden diatribe, berating him for not only ditching her, but also leaving her with no way to pay. The perverbial "washing dishes" just wouldn't do. Please! Her nails. So after some quick talking and a promise to waitress on Wednesday, a day they seemed to always be short-staffed, she had switched on her Mom GPS and began tracking Gilbert. This had proved to be a weighty task. Time jumps, endless returnings to a pile of coats, the brown-robed ones & interchanging directors had all caused her delay in locating him. Now here she stood,

Soren Kisiel

The quicksand pits on Main Street had been a bad idea.

No one would argue with that now. But at the time... well, suffice to say that each generation of City Commisioners feels a need to leave its mark. But there's only so many layers of new brick crosswalks and re-furbished holiday octopuses that you can get away with. So when folks at the Co-op pressured the Commisioners for quicksand - something to do with downtown wetland re-introduction – they got a pit at each intersection.

It was only a matter of months before a “Here-GrabThis” Broom (as they came to be called) was hung near each pit.

And while a sand *box* at that moment would have really hit the spot for panicking Obama, every instinct a cat has just pushed it deeper and deeper into the pit.

“Here, grab this!” yelled Gilbert, waving the broom.

Beth, realizing the cat's lack of opposable broom-grabbing thumbs, dashed forward to pull the Here-Grab-This Broom from Gilbert's hands. But as she stepped forward her foot slid through a small pool of robot-oil and bits of neoprene. She lost her footing, reeling toward Gilbert.

In they went, Beth, on top of Gilbert, on top of the shrieking Obama. Their struggling forms disappeared into the muck.

They gasped and struggled for breath before they realized they didn't have to. They lay on damp, sandy ground, in a dim gray darkness. Gilbert held Obama in his arms. Beth, the broom.

They looked about themselves, into dark eyes of drawn, ashen faces. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of figures stood around them, too many to count, fading back into shadow.

“The underworld,” whispered Beth.

One of the figures spoke:

“I wrote the part about going back in time to stop Bush,” the figure said quietly.

“Yeah, I liked that part,” said another. Many of the heads nodded.

“The Underworld of *Storvlines*.” said Gilbert.

As Beth quickly wrapped her fingers around the extended green handle, Gilbert placed his hand on her arm. "Wait," he whispered.

"It's okay, Gilby dear," Beth reassured him. "I don't sleep with robots. Even ones that look like Jeff Bridges."

Gilbert didn't know why he should believe her, when at one point in this story, it looked as if she were going to get it on with a cat. Only another wild deviation from the plot line saved her from joining the ranks of such notable punchline-fodder as Richard Gere and Rod Stewart. How is a cyborg any worse? At least it could smoke a cigarette with you afterward.

He looked at Obama, who shrugged. "Don't look at me," the cat said. "I didn't even want to be in this story. Besides, you've got a zodiac goat talisman, a wad of cash, and a semi-automatic pistol. Make some shit happen."

Gilbert looked around. The dark, shadowy environs no longer felt strange and foreboding. His composure welled up and spread through the vast chamber like an oil spill. He looked up at the robotic arm and the slightly translucent sand-canopy. "Cyrus!" he called. "We'll be right there. I just need a second."

Gilbert took one hand and reached for the White Russian. Turning toward the dark figures, he held up the amulet with the other. A shudder went through the crowd; they all stared, transfixed by its shimmering, pulsating power.

Gilbert took a long sip of his drink, then licked his lips and addressed the sea of pale, insentient faces, which he instantly recognized as a Bozeman city council meeting.

"Which of you wrote the parts in this story about sycophantic security guards, annoying realtors, and impuissant young film directors named after luxury automobiles?"

Several figures stepped forward.

"How about the parts where Beth cheats on me with my brother and a Hungarian model?"

Two more figures stepped forward.

"And Trudie's aimless wanderings around Bozeman?"

Four more shapes separated themselves from the crowd.

"Alrighty then," Gilbert said. He polished off the White Russian, pulled the pistol from his pocket, and shot every one of them through the forehead.

The broom handle jerked the two of them up through the sandy Jell-O ceiling and into the fresh Bozeman air. Trudie, graceful and lithe, ran over and hugged the two of them, dusted the sand out of Gilbert's hair.

"You're okay?"

He nodded, still dazed.

"Mom, what's going?" Gilbert started, but Trudie had spun quickly, athletically, and in two bounds was in a protracted embrace with Cyrus, pushing him backwards behind the dressing partition.

"Trudie? I can't believe it's you. It's...it's been so long. I had... alkaline batteries then."

"It was enough." she said, pressing closer.

They were two for the ages, these two, oblivious to the spinning, foolish world around them. Lost in a lover's gaze, her hand head ran across his cybernetic exoskeleton, then went south for the winter.

She went shopping for bananas, he rebooted his hard drive. She downloaded his RAM, he raided her pension fund. She accepted his stimulus package, he went bankrupt. She bailed him out again and again. She shuddered, he ejected a DVD. She looked down at the glowing, hot disc and gasped. It was the amulet.

She turned away, shoved hard against him, did a TJ Hooker roll backward and came up behind a metal trash barrel in a gunslinger's, modified-Weaver stance. He smiled.

Gilbert jumped at the sound of the gunshot and the movie set emptied in chaos.

Trudie emerged, catlike, from the partition and in a flash pulled Gilbert and Beth down behind the Jeep. Trudie threw Beth the pistol.

"Reload. Now. Gilbert, you too. You've shot 38 people, it's time you reloaded." Trudie's eyes narrowed as she scanned the far east end of Main street, now aglow with the setting sun.

"Those weird brick towers, that's their source of power. And we're almost out of time" she said, almost to herself.

"Once the sun sets, the bloodthirsty packs of wild chocolate labs will come down from the hills. The fabled Hounds of Hell-ena". Beth shuddered at the thought. Gilbert shuddered at the thought of his spanking.

Beth and Gilbert stared at her. Trudie was a weird one to be sure, but coming unglued, especially when multiple layers of reality were involved, was not something she did easily.

"I, I can't tell. Did I kill him? Or did I just do a cool stunt move and grab you guys... Oh god.. Cyrus..."

"Mom, what is going ON?"

Trudie looked up at him, her eyes limpid pools of crystal tears... "Oh, Gilbert, I should have told you earlier..." she stood, slowly. Gilbert was rapt. Whatever it was, it was going to be good. What in the world could his mother have been hiding? Why would she bother? Their lives were bizarre enough...

"Gilbert, your father..." she began

Suddenly, Trudie lurched backwards, slamming sickeningly into the faux boardwalk that some art director had erroneously placed on Main St. in Bozeman rather than on the Livingston set where it belonged. Trudie lay sprawled, head cocked at a bizarre angle, a red pool spreading rapidly out behind her, matting her ginger hair. She gazed, confused, at Gilbert, who was not holding a gun.

Smoke curled maliciously up from the barrel of the Glock Beth had taken quietly from Gilbert while they were listening to Trudie's rant. Gilbert looked from his dying mother, who only moments before had been standing and talking, to his ever confusing if delicious girlfriend, who was glaring at Trudie with a slick smile curling the corners of her mouth.

"No talking, Trudance." Said Beth, in a cold, automatic, almost robotic voice.

Gilbert stood, shocked. Somewhere, he was sure there was an amulet, and it was glowing, and vibrating, but right now, he knelt down at his mothers side.

"Mom..." he said, as he touched her face and tried to look into her eyes.

"Your... (gasp) father... (gasp) was... a... (swallow, sputter)... ro...ro...."

"Yes, he was a romantic man, I know mom, you've told me."

Suddenly, Trudie seemed to regain all vim and vigor, lifting her head up off the boardwalk and glaring at him. "Don't interrupt. Jesus, Gil, I taught you better than that. And NOW? Right NOW? While I'm dying and trying to tell you something that will change the course of history, and your life and EVERYTHING? You choose NOW to interr.." And with that, her head flopped back, and she was dead.

Gilbert sat, shocked. Oh, that's not gonna leave an emotional scar. An enormous tidal wave of guilt rose up above him, just about as big as Trudie had intended it to be. He looked hopelessly to where Beth had been

But then, it was heard. In the distance. The howling and barking. Hooooowwwlllll. Ruff, ruff. Howwwlllll. Ruff, Ruff. Howwwellllll.

It was them. The fabled Hounds of Hell-ena. They could smell the blood. To Gilbert, it smelled of singed toe hairs. But no matter how much Gilbert didn't want to smell, he was just that curious because frankly, he couldn't remember the last time he smelled singed toe hairs...

Beth, now in a new form and figure of a Labrador, sat there. Smelling the air. With a stance as though such a smell had never touched her nostrils, and the hairs twitterpaited with excitement. She listened, and knew. How could she have forgotten?

Gilbert sat there, and slowly removed his hands from what was now was a cream-colored Labrador. Where did Trudie go? Mother? Who had Beth become — a dog robot? My Father? Where did the bloody shot come from? Why are there predominantly Labradors in Bozeman?

Gilbert stood up, just in time to catch the parade turning down Main Street. "Today is almost exactly six-months from when you humans begin hunting season around here," Beth, the dog, said. "That's means it's meat grilling season."

What Gilbert saw confused him. It looked like Bite of Bozeman, 4th of July and a Friday night near the Rockin' R blended into one. But the streets were lined with massive BBQ's on either side of Main Street, and it was light outside.

"Here is Bozeman, we've become the Meat Grilling capital of Montana," said Beth. "So we like to celebrate by everyone bringing their meat to Main and putting it on display. It's official Grill Your Meat day. And here comes the cavalcade of chosen Meat Grillers now."

The parade rolled by. The hounds of Hell-ena lead the procession. The Rottweiler of Red Lodge followed. The Basset Hound of Billings tried to keep up with their short legs. And of course, the Poodles and Pugs of Polson waved together out of the stagecoach.

As he gazed at all the gathering dogs, he noticed one common thing. They were all sniffing each other's butts. Is that how they tell the Robots from the true K-9's? Was he going to have to smell butts from now on to understand if someone is human, beast, fowl, electronic, or metallic?

"Huh," he thought. "I wonder if any of those butts smell like singed toe hairs?"

Michael Becker

Gilbert, who had wanted nothing else out of this day but a TV dinner, watched the parade of municipal dogs make its way down Main Street, carefully avoiding the city-funded sinkholes as they

“At your service,” said the fat security guard.

“What are you doing here?”

Melvin’s belly threatened to untuck his white button-up as he bent over the robotic corpse of Cyrus and pulled the amulet out of the robot’s underwear.

“I told you this morning that was a powerful item,” Melvin said. “Now why did you go letting robots and dogs and ex-girlfriends take it away from you?”

Gilbert, who tended to miss things, now remembered the conversation that morning, how Melvin had seemed to disappear into the racks of frozen food in the Albertsons warehouse. Thinking harder, he now remembered seeing Melvin all day long, just outside the frame, so to speak, doing things to span the gaps in the storyline, like retrieving the amulet from where he’d left it on the seat of his truck and putting it back in Gilbert’s pocket so he’d have it for a later scene.

“It was you trying to hold this plot together all along, wasn’t it?” Gilbert said.

“Yes,” said Melvin, handing Gilbert the amulet again. “And now that your mom is dead and your girlfriend’s a dog, I have something important to say.”

Melvin took a deep breath.

“Gilbert, I’m your father, and there is one last thing you must do before the sun sets...”

Holly Zadra

“You must return to Albertson’s to pay for your TV dinner. You may have shot the storylines dead, but you will not, and I repeat, you will not steal from a large corporate grocer owned by a regional conglomerate based in Chanhassen, Minnesota.”

Ah, yes, the old psycho-mythology: the son must bear the burdens of the father.

And yet, we clearly see Gilbert’s Negative *Mother* Complex bears the rotten fruits of Gilbert’s own undoing. Not able to separate the actual Trudie from the shadow projection that his mother is a robot, Gilbert is metaphorically blinded. Thus, he carries out the age-old Oedipal complex by interrupting his mother’s dying words. Given the opportunity to finally see the truth of his being, he unconsciously chooses to remain in the

Was it mere tomfoolery that more than one writer killed all the other storylines – AKA the other writers – in order to propel his or her personal storyline? Or was it the shadow side of the archetypal Artist manifesting in the madness that often accompanies genius?

Will these lines written under the pressure of Ray Sikorski's stringent 24-hour turn-around someday make our children's children rich when finally, finally, all our hard work and artistic struggles are appreciated by a more discerning readership?

Ritchie Boyd

As all these disjointed thoughts and memories ran through his overtaxed and undernourished mind, Gilbert slowly raised his hands to the sides of his head, looking not just a bit like the figure in Munch's "The Scream", and pressed hard.

No, he thought.

No.

NO. Nooooooooooooo!

"No what?" asked Melvin.

"I don't know, what?," asked Gilbert, suddenly distracted.

"No, not 'know what?' - I mean, you said 'NO!'"

"Did I?" interrupted Gilbert.

"I thought I only *thought* that", he thought to himself.

"Actually, you did", replied Melvin, by now feeling far too much like Bud Abbott to Gilbert's Costello.

"Did what?"

Poor Gilbert was at a total loss, much like a reggae musician on "The Thistle and Shamrock".

"You screamed 'Noooooooooo!', so I'm asking you, *no WHAT?*" snapped Melvin.

"Ah..." muttered Gilbert.

Melvin continued. "Did you say that because I just told you that I am your father (which by the way would

we first met. We're not safe until we fix it."

"Fix what?" Melvin wondered aloud.

Ray Sikorski

Gilbert grabbed Melvin by the hand. It was all starting to make sense: The black lab coats were made from black labs! That's why he didn't want to have sex with Obama the cat! The Hounds of Hell-ena were zombie dogs! And his ass was vibrating not from the phone, but because evil interstellar robots were using his derriere to host... what? Something...

Gilbert found himself and Melvin traveling in the back fold-out seat of a station wagon. There was a homonculus sitting next to him. It had a vague family resemblance. Melvin was driving. "Let's stop off for some Albertson's brand beef jerky, whaddya say, Gilby?"

Gilbert nodded from the back seat. He felt a certain tranquility – the bliss one always feels after offing 30-odd writers who insist on creating 110 different plot lines. He passed by the cashiers who wanted his money for the TV dinners. He passed by the beef jerky aisle. He passed by the amulet aisle, even though he could get 2 for 1 with his Albertson's card. He went into the back, to the big crate. He opened it. Without looking at the contents, he walked in, and shut the door behind him. His ass began vibrating again, and he felt a Zen-like calm.

"Hello, Beau," he said to his brother.

"Yeah, hi." Beau was a fine actor, too, but all the good roles went to the better-looking brother. Gilby had tried to make up for it with The Fabulous Baker Boys, but there was still some bad blood there. And the homonculus, their other brother, never got any roles at all.

But who were these others inside the crate? It was crammed with people! They introduced themselves one by one: Ryan, Joseph, Sally, Susan, Heidi...

The crate was filled with writers!

"I thought I killed all you assholes!"

Keith Suta

The only other sound Gilbert could summon was the small popping noise of his lips smacking. Searching for support, he turned to face the man who claimed to be his father. Uncanny how Gilbert missed it before, but, in fact, now that Gilbert really concentrated, Melvin bore more than a passing resemblance to his brother – just add some wrinkles and lose a little hair and you have...

"Speak!" roared Gilbert, bounding forward and clapping at Speak's face. Gilbert's fists rumbled through

President Obama put a reassuring hand on Gilbert's shoulder, "I have many talents I have not yet revealed," he declared, "Transmogrifying into animals is simply one among many... I can change produce from spoiled to fresh with a touch of my hand; I can fly; I can make amazing three-layer nachos... As to what I am doing here, Gilbert, I have decided to use my powers to travel around this fine country of ours, helping the individual, as well as the populace at large..."

With that, Barack Obama picked up the amulet, which began to glow with a bright, violet light. He whispered an ancient chant known only to those who have spent time in various Pacific islands. The glow grew brighter and brighter, filling the warehouse and obscuring Gilbert's vision. Blinking the tears from his eyes, he saw that he was surrounded by his brothers, his mother, and Beth. The President stepped forward and addressed them, his voice low and intense. "Treat each other better in times to come. I am not coming back to bail you out again... Also, I'm seriously reconsidering my plans for a comprehensive program to employ writers."

Gilbert finished typing. He sat back from his laptop computer, rubbing his eyes. Gilbert was a man who tended to miss things. He missed his brother, estranged and working out in the oil fields in Wyoming. He missed his mother, gone now for over a year due to a heart attack; if only she'd eaten healthier and exercised more. He missed Beth, who ran off with the world's premier Hungarian male model... Jeff Bridges would never buy this screenplay. Gilbert would have to delete it all and start over tomorrow. He stretched and yawned, his cat jumped up in his lap. Gilbert scratched the cat behind the ears and enjoyed the soft, low tones of the animal's purring. If this were a movie, the camera would cut to a close up of the cat, holding in its mouth a large medallion. If it were a particularly bad movie, the cat would wink at the camera as the phrase "The End?" came up on screen. But this isn't a movie. And our story ends here.