

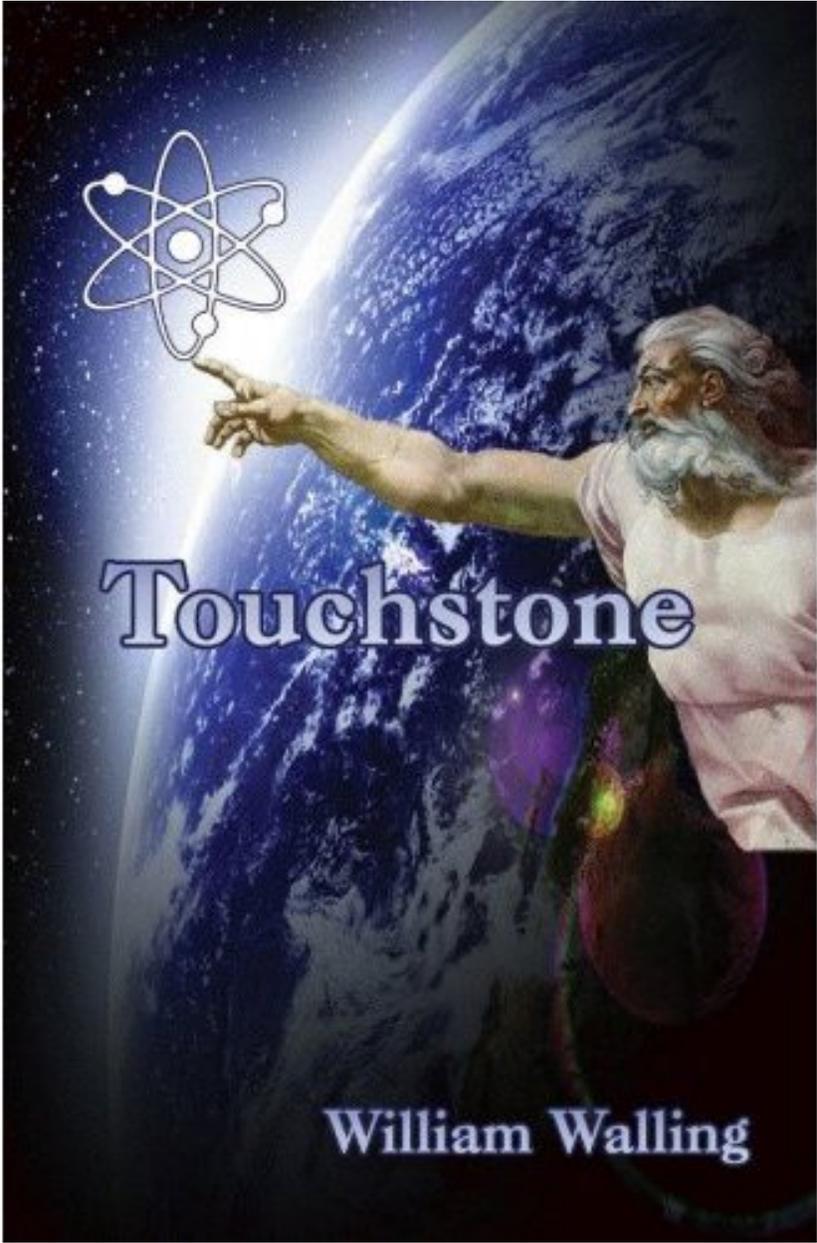
Innovative Dysart Technologies battles the petroleum cartel over energy usage.

TOUCHSTONE

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TOUCHSTONE

William Walling

*What thou would'st learn I shall make clear to thee,
Not weaving subtleties, but simple sooth
Unfolding as the mouth should speak to friends.
I am Prometheus, giver of fire to mortals.*

Aeschylus
PROMETHEUS BOUND

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one Harvest Moon

The slow-paced lunar day was waning, and so was Myron Cromwell. But then weariness was endemic after two solid weeks of harvesting.

As project operations manager, he had just finished a shut-down inspection of all surface equipment. He parked the low-slung electric jitney, depowered the open vehicle, swung the articulated legs of his pressure-suit around in the seat and planted his protective overboots in the Sea of Tranquility's well-trampled dust. Over the naked, too-close horizon, a storied event had taken place when Astronaut Neil Armstrong jumped down from the lunar Module ladder and laid pristine boot prints in the regolith. There were thousands of boot prints now, many made by he himself.

Too many, he thought wryly.

Having again exceeded the arbitrary hours of surface exposure, he would again be forced to verbally duel an unsympathetic medic over his microdosimeter readout. Calibrated to gauge the efficacy of a pressure-suit's integral shielding, the instrument recorded a wearer's cumulative exposure to energetic solar activity, but was transparent to galactic cosmic radiation. Competitive to the nth degree, relishing argument for its own sake, he would nevertheless plead no contest. The doctor won by default every verbal battle related to a surface worker's marginal overexposure to radiation. All he had to do was recite a litany of radiation hazards: nausea, fatigue, central nervous system debility, cataracts, hair loss, general physiological deterioration, and a latent pre-cancerous condition.

Passionate about winning at anything and everything, he did not simply dislike losing; he *detested* it.

Revisiting the surface, an unlikely prospect throughout the dark lunar semi-cycle to come, meant another claustrophobic stint cooped up belowground. To the uninformed, suspending surface operations during a fortnight of darkness might seem an opportunity for well-earned rest and recreation. Such was not the case. Between obligatory workouts on the exercise machines, enjoying television piped up from the blue skies and green grass of home, intermittent contact with earthbound families and friends, canned films and music, various hobbies and crafts, or partaking of the rec room's endless round-robin of card games and chess, Selene's skeleton crew would turn to and clean the habitat, do maintenance chores and other essential busy-work. His own "downtime" would be peppered with spates of paperwork interspersed with onerous duties like bending a confessional ear to the complaints and whinings of homesick crewmen; or worse, taking his turn at playing farmer to tend the greenhouse module.

He paused at the top the walled ramp leading down to the habitat airlock for a parting survey of the stark, surrounding desolation. Unleavened by atmosphere, sun dazzle all but touched the knife-edge horizon, lighting the moonscape obliquely, turning the visible portion of the mare's three hundred thousand square kilometers into a sterile, gray-scale panorama dappled with inky, elongated shadows — an uninviting vista broken only by the prototype strip-miner's silhouette, and the upper curve of the solar mirror's dish.

Nicknamed "Selene's Chariot" by classical-minded Project Director Jean-Marie Boucher, the tracked, telerobotic harvester, shipped piecemeal and assembled in vacuum, ground along at eight or ten meters-per-hour, depending upon regolith depth and composition, or the type and frequency of obstructions, while first-processing varieties of placid and volatile pay dirt. Dual charge-coupled-device cameras scanned for non-negotiable craterlets, projecting outcrops or an

occasional large boulder, allowing remote control from within the habitat. The ponderous harvester left in its back and forth wake kilometers-long swaths remindful of a sterile, monochromatic plowed field. Dust plumes raised during collection, or cycled waste dumped as the harvester churned forward, fell swiftly to rest in Luna's airless, low-gravity environment.

Off to the south, atop a semi-portable pylon, the big metal mirror had followed the Sun with computer-driven precision, reflecting concentrated solar energy to the furnace receptor atop the inactive Chariot, its fuel-cells now depowered on the eve of lunar night. The solar mirror had turned its face downward; it and the harvester would remain somnolent for two weeks.

Myron faced away from the blinding, horizontal sunlight, and had to reduce polarization in his suit's faceplate lens. Bathed in sunset flame, the upper Palus Somni escarpment loomed above the intervening horizon; attached to its face, the spacecraft mass-driver launch system gleamed brightly in the last sunlight — a linear, shining caesura angling up the palisade's flank. At sunrise, if all went well, a space-to-space drone loaded to one-sixth capacity with ultra-precious helium isotope would slingshot up the mass-driver rails and be injected into unpowered orbit above Mare Crisium. After circling three-quarters of Luna's crater-raddled farside, thrusters would ignite, sending the drone on an automated, three-day trajectory to its destination, low-earth-orbit about the energy-hungry homeworld.

Again assuming that all would go well, the drone would rendezvous with a co-orbiting transatmospheric freighter, be taken into the stub-winged carrier's cargo bay and flown to the ground. The less-than-hoped-for quantity of helium-three harvested since the first skimpy delivery would net Dysart Technologies, Ltd. upward of eighty million new dollars, depending upon how far the price would be driven up by a handful of forward-looking international fusion community investors bidding fiercely for product, minus a few self-allocated kilograms retained to fuel the company's prototype nuclear fusion system in Nevada. Despite a booming seller's market in the ultra-rare isotope, remuneration would amount to a pittance compared to the mammoth, multi-gigabuck investment DT had thus far poured into the Selene Pilot Project

But only, thought Myron, *if all were to go well*. It was this recurring uncertainty that never failed to generate a twinge of anxiety. To date, all had not gone exactly as scripted, but there was reason to believe a turn for the better might be in the offing, depending upon what fallout fell out in the wake of an imminent visit by three "fact-finding experts" due to arrive from the cloud-draped blue marble decorating Luna's jet black, unfriendly sky. He reflected with mordant sarcasm on the cynical observation of a crewman who had defined an expert as, "Anyone from out of town."

As it had in the past, the drab surrounding moonscape triggered a flashback to the trials and tribulations of his formative years in Wales, when the semi-moribund coal industry had been in the doldrums, and miners were being pink-slipped in droves — a dismal footnote to scattered mine closures. The pang of remembrance revived his youthful confusion over the swelling panic in County Dyfed as once-rich, economically recoverable veins became ever more costly to mine. He pictured his young self picking through the slag heaps with other ragamuffins, scavenging a few usable lumps with which to help fight the endless cold, but refused to dwell on the bare necessities his family had now failed to provide — the infrequently skipped meals in his parents' company-owned clapboard house, the power brownouts and blackouts, the misery of idled neighbors left with nowhere to turn for a livelihood. Cold and hungry months had elapsed while his father schemed and planned, cajoled, threatened, and eventually finagled a family migration to Calgary.

In that bygone era, Canada's Northwest Mining Association had boasted a whimsical bumper-sticker: IF IT CAN'T BE GROWN, IT'S GOTTA BE MINED! One fond memory hinged on the elation shown by his father and older brother at the prospect of working in a deep open-pit mine instead of facing the daily hazards of being crushed deep underground, victimized by an explosion and fire, drowned, asphyxiated, or succumbing to Black Lung and a premature exit from an extremely hard existence. Then as now, a miner's routine consisted of monotonous drudgery peppered with spells of abject terror, a regimen unfortunately compounded for novice lunar strip-miners by the added threats of explosive decompression and radiation exposure.

A flicker of light high in the jet sky caught his eye. He craned, pressed his head back against the quilted padding of the headpiece. Once the flare died, sun glare extinguished the descending ship's glint. Seconds later, a quadrangle of exhaust plumes erupted, winked out, then burned steadily. The blunt space-to-space vehicle irreverently nicknamed a "boxcar" by U.S. Aerospace Forces, slowed its downward plunge, slowed still further. Balancing rump-first on outboard-cantilevered thrusters, the boxcar fell steadily to vanish beneath the foreshortened horizon.

Myron nudged his chin control, opening the Selene channel also monitored by the USAF Command Center at the foot of Palus Somni. "Cromwell, here," he said, speaking into the throat mike. "Open your ear-holes, habitat. Come in, habitat."

Punctuated by a faint dit of static, a lightly accented voice crackled in the headpiece speaker. "Myron, don't tell me you've invented another problem for me to solve." Formerly a tenured physics professor at the University of Munich, Dr. Alois Francke and Cromwell enjoyed their game of batting back and forth malapropisms and jovial insults.

"Sorry, Doc; not this time. Unless I'm hallucinating, the high 'n mighty bean-counters we've been sweating out just hit the deck."

"A true statement," replied Francke. "I'm the designated meeter-greeter out at the landing site. But, really Myron! Even for someone as obnoxious as you, referring to our distinguished visitors as 'bean-counters' exceeds the bounds of understatement."

"Nothing," quipped Myron, "exceeds like excess. They may count humongous, king-sized beans, but they're still just beans."

"Curb thy salty tongue," admonished Dr. Francke, "and get thee hence. Jean-Marie wants a word with you before welcoming our guests."

Cromwell grinned. "Tell our distinguished director I'll get back to him after I check my appointment book."

"Myron!"

"Steady, Doc. Let him know his favorite whipping boy looks forward to another dull séance. Cromwell, out."

Myron descended the shallow-pitched ramp and punched an oversized switch with the heel of his gauntlet. The airlock hatch cycled open, admitted him into the evacuated chamber, where he stood patiently, legs apart, arms akimbo, while clinging dust was electrostatically removed from the suit's protective buffer garment and the insulated overboots worn to protect the suit's integral footwear. If inhaled within the habitat, sharp-edged, micron-sized particles posed only minor health problems — principally "hay fever" symptoms — while nano-particles were prone to lodge in the lungs and induce fibrosis, or migrate into the bloodstream where long-term aftereffects could prove serious.

Pressure came up slowly in the lock chamber. When the light winked green, indicating ambient barometric equivalence within chamber and habitat, he punched in a command. The inner hatch cycled open, admitting him into the airlock service compartment's warm, oxy-

nitrogen environment. He opened his faceplate lens, wrinkled his nose at the pressure-suit's legacy: a ghostly odor of machine oil tainted with a whiff of his own perspiration. Unsealing, he wriggled free with practiced dexterity, doffing the cumbersome vacuum gear he had lived in off and on for the better part of two weeks. Divesting the suit of its buffer garment and protective overboots, he hung the ancillary items separately to await more thorough cleaning and mandatory safety inspection.

* * *

A poster-sized watercolor depicting a stylized version of the pilot project logo graced the honeycomb-sandwich partition behind the director's utilitarian plastic desk. Goddess Selene, clad in filmy, rippling gossamer, reared defiantly erect in a golden chariot, blonde hair streaming in the wind, a curling whip held high in one dainty hand, her other hand clutched the reins of a pair of prancing white Arabians.

Myron sipped black coffee from a squeezebottle, studying the poster with an expression of skeptical indifference. While admiring the endeavor of an amateur painter among the crewmen, he considered the logo itself a piece of artsy-fartsy dreck. "It's pretty, the Devil said," he quoted, "but is it *art*?"

Seated at his desk, the director did not look up.

Accustomed to dealing with Boucher's crusty manner and warm heart, Myron remarked drily, "Hope the half-dressed filly knows how to handle the Ben-Hur rig she's driving."

Dark eyes lifted, locked for blinkless seconds Myron's gaze. The director's far-from-secret weapon, a Medusa-like stare, was something much more effective than executive bluster.

The ensuing silence threatened to drag on. Myron shifted restively. "Doc Francke," he said to break the refractory spell, "said he was going out to meeting the nosy experts."

The director's cool stare persisted. "La belle Selene," he declared, "commands her steeds with consummate authority, which is more than one can say for the slapdash manner your controllers drive the Chariot. A moot question of great concern to me is not how you handle your duties, but whether you will be able to handle your mouth."

"Aw, no word games, Jean-Marie," pleaded Myron. "I'm too bushed for banter."

"And perhaps too outspoken as well."

Myron's heartfelt sigh was purposely theatrical. "Guilty as charged."

The director's stern gaze persisted, though it dimmed from force four to force three. "I often delude myself into believing I'm able to cope with your impudent tongue and spiny disposition. During the coming visitation, however, those, er . . . sterling attributes will not be tolerated."

"The . . . inquisition?"

"The inquisition," affirmed Boucher. "While our guests are with us, you must keep one singular fact in the forefront of your consciousness at all times. Among the three 'experts' we are about to receive is a gentleman of truly spiny disposition."

"The U.N. bigshot who —"

"No, no," denied the director. "Energy Secretary Llancolm and I share an acquaintance dating back to my Quai D'Orsay adventures in the diplomatic corps. Lanny is intelligent, inordinately capable. Unfortunately, his heritage quite often deludes strangers into picturing him as the sort of individual a transplanted Welshman like yourself might consider, well . . . rather stiff."

"A stuffed shirt?"

“Yes, thank you; ‘stuffed shirt’ says it nicely. We shall get no static from Llancolm; his U.N. post automatically places him in our camp. More to the point, he’s intimately acquainted with the staggering problems we have partially overcome. His report is certain to have a positive impact, if only within the U.N. hierarchy proper. Do not be duped by the crusty, oh-so-British muddling through facade he presents in public. Be patient, and you’ll discover Llancolm to be a thoroughly accomplished gentleman.”

“I hear you.”

“I’m gratified,” said Boucher. “Our second guest, Senator Kyle, while prominent in America, is rather an unknown quantity elsewhere, and therefore an unknown hazard. It behooves us to treat each of his statements or questions, be they meaningful, astute, simplistic, asinine, whatever, with exaggerated caution.”

Myron dared a grin. “Diplomatically?”

“Oh, diplomacy by all means! We shall accord the distinguished legislator every known diplomatic nuance in existence, and shower him with every fawning tribute in the lexicon. Allow me to remind you of a galling truism: international schisms led to the controversy raging between the moneyed power-bloc headed by the conventional energy cartel and its lapdog, Vonex International, and the respective American and U.N. leaderships. To our misfortune, it placea our lunar enterprise squarely in the middle, catching heat from either side. If American congressional support fails to materialize, the follow-on Selene II and full-blown Prometheus Project could easily founder in turbulent waters. The key to winning over Senator Kyle will be to show him more deference and respect than he probably deserves.”

“Sorta like drowning a cat in cream?”

The director gruded a sympathetic blink. “In a manner of speaking. Pithy aphorisms aside, however, it is the third inquisitor who justifies extremely wary walking. Upon first acquaintance, Vonex Board Chairman Reichert may strike you as a kindly, docile, grandfatherly type, a gentleman of the old school who worships the deity each Sabbath, decries tax loopholes and pays every centime owed, never exceeds the speed limit, and cares for family, friends, pets and casual acquaintances with enviable diligence. Nothing could be further from the truth.

“M’sieur Reichert’s perch at the apex of the Vonex conglomerate,” continued Boucher earnestly, “coupled with his demonic unpredictability, wealth, prestige, and behind-the-scenes political influence, allows him to wheel and deal in the loftiest financial circles, where he consistently showcases an outstanding virtue: his total absence of conscience or humility. With the fate of not only our pilot program, but the immediate future of nuclear fusion technology hanging in the balance, think of Reichert as the most dangerous man alive. If you seek Torquemada among the inquisitors, look no farther.”

“Seek who . . . ?”

“No matter,” said Jean-Marie quickly.

“If this fatcat’s such an all around bad ass,” Myron wanted to know, “how’d he get himself appointed to the snooper team?”

“An informed guess,” replied the director, “is that a number of palms were successfully greased.”

Nonplused, Myron said, “Okay, so why do I want to meet Mr. Moneybags, or for that matter the other snoops?”

“Because,” declared Boucher, “I have convinced myself of the necessity. Absent yourself during the welcoming amenities if you wish; I know how tired you must be coming off surface duty. But when we convene for the first inquisitory session I want Alois on hand to answer every

technical issue that arises, and you standing-by to respond to each query pertaining to surface operations that I may put to you.”

A puzzled squint. “That *you* may put to me?”

“Queries,” emphasized the director, “that I may put to you. Between times, you will sit on your hands and pretend to interest yourself in the proceedings. You are not to interject any salty comments, or respond directly to questions posed by the inquisitors. Is that clear?”

Myron grinned. “Not even diplomatic responses?”

The director’s underlip curled. “Dedicated operations overseer that you are, have you ever heard the proper definition of a diplomat?”

“No, but you’ll relieve my ignorance.”

“So I shall, to the extent an ambitious feat of that magnitude is possible. If a diplomat says yes,” explained Boucher, “he means maybe. If he says maybe, he means no. And if he says no, he’s no diplomat.”

Cromwell chuckled.

“I sincerely hope the gist of my lesson penetrated your fertile mind.”

“Fear not, Jean-Marie; message received.” Myron rose and stretched. Yawning gapingly, he asked through the yawn if The Stockholder had made the last-minute call he knew Boucher was expecting

“No, not yet,” denied Jean-Marie. “M’sieur Dysart may not bother to call; he doesn’t rely on pep talks, and rarely stoops to micromanage business affairs. Every facet of the inquisitory sessions will be encrypted and down-linked in real-time to San Francisco and Geneva, where the Dysart executive committee and U.N. leadership will appraise the reactions of our visitors to the rationales, justifications, pleas, show-and-tell graphic data and whatever else we choose to lay before them. The recorded data will then be reviewed, dissected, regurgitated, analyzed, picked to pieces a second, third, and perhaps a fourth time.

“No slips-ups during the coming sessions will be tolerated,” he warned. “Two of our visitors *must* depart convinced that we have done, and are doing, our utmost with the tools and skeleton personnel provided by the gentleman we jocularly refer to as ‘The Stockholder.’ I want our visitors, except for M’sieur Reichert it goes without saying, to depart sympathetic to our problems, fully cognizant of our accomplishments, and willing if less than eager to recommend pursuing the near- and long-term goals of nuclear fusion technology. Moreover, I want Lanny and the senator to leave thoroughly dazzled by the first tottering steps we’ve taken toward industrializing Luna.”

“Count on me,” said Myron.

“Oh, I shall!” Boucher sounded as if he meant it. The intercom’s insistent buzz cut off whatever else he meant to say. The director stretched, touched a button. “Yes?”

“Mr. Dysart, Jean-Marie. Voice only, the secure lasercomm channel.”

“Thank you.” His trust in Myron implicit, the director checked to assure himself multi-level encryption firmware was activated before switching the call to speaker. “*Bonjour, Lyman.*”

The transmission lag seemed to stretch longer than the usual few seconds. “Hiya, Jean-Marie,” drawled the wealthiest individual in the world. “Dead air time in these back-and-forthings annoys me worse than a giant hemorrhoid, so let me have my say and get off the horn. You’re no doubt set to pipe groundside everything that comes down up there, and we earthbound bystanders are itching to take a long, hard look and listen.

“Catch is,” continued Dysart, “you’ve got to reset things to square one. Minutes after we learned the nosy threesome had touched-down near your dig, a king-sized horsefly flew into the

ointment. It's a switcheroo you need to know about beforehand. Seems that upstanding friend of the working man, Belkin Reichert, has suddenly taken ill, or so we're told. Very suddenly, maybe too suddenly. Appendicitis is the story bruited about in a Vonex news bulletin, but who knows?

"Point is," added Dysart, "switching riders this close to mid-stream strikes me as unlikely at best, and at worst plain weird. Ever since he busted a gut and spent beaucoup new dollars to invite himself along on the 'fact-finding' junket, Belkin's been frothing at the mouth over a chance to poop your Moon party with a double-ration of bellowing, ranting, raving and carpet-chewing. Apparently the ringer dispatched to run his errand for him is Vonex Corporate Chief Counsel Aaron Beebe. I was warned to pass along word that it'd be wise to count your fingers after shaking hands with Beebe. A super-sharpie by reputation, he's apparently being groomed to one day step into Reichert's tasseled, custom-lasted loafers.

"As for how to handle Belkin's stand-in and the other pair of fraud and treachery sniffers," concluded The Stockholder, "you're on your own. You need no eve-of-battle speeches from me. The bottom line is short, unsweetened: do not, repeat *not*, take a single microgram of guff from Reichert's errand boy. No sass of any kind, hear? Not so much as a nuanced slight.

"Okay, that's it, sum total," said Dysart. "Hang tight, up there, and tell Myron Whatsizface, the number one goof-off I see trying to hide at the rear of your office, to mind his manners with the visitors or I promise to shoot the Moon and spank him myself. *Adieu, mon ami. Bon chance!*"

Boucher switched off, a shadow smile tickling the corners of his generous mouth.

Feigning acute indignation, Myron uttered a caustic snort. "Spank me, hah! No way will I bend over for *that*, not even from the The Stockholder."

"Should M'sieur Dysart decide to withhold the prescribed punishment," drawled Jean-Marie, "I shall be delighted to do the honors."

* * *

An hour and twenty minutes later, Dr. Francke ushered U.N. Energy Secretary Llancolm out of the habitat airlock chamber trailed by an older gentleman Boucher assumed to be Raymond Kyle, while close on the senator's heels was . . .

The director froze.

Succumbing to an affliction common among first-time lunar visitors — the unsure footing in a gravity field roughly seventeen percent of what they'd been accustomed to all their lives — Vonex International Board Chairman Belkin Reichert shuffled unsteadily into the habitat.

Caught up in the hypnotic, riveting scrutiny of ice-blue eyes that looked out of place in the portly gentleman's ruddy Santa Claus countenance, Jean-Marie felt like a slice of live bait being sized up by a hungry predator.

two

The Stockholder

For all practical purposes a prisoner in his own castle, trillionaire Lyman Dysart lived and worked in the spacious penthouse atop forty-story Dysart Tower, the crown jewel in a mixed business-residential district situated between the former U.S. Army Presidio, and Golden Gate Park. Scant difference existed between one section of the penthouse and the other. Except for lacking a trio of bedroom suites, a kitchen in which any cordon bleu chef would be proud to work, a formal dining room, a sauna and small gym, the “office” resembled artistically decorated living quarters rather than floorspace devoted to the conduct of business.

Of average height and rugged though fairly commonplace appearance, the husky gentleman a legion of Dysart employees knew as The Stockholder lounged in his “uniform” — a tailored, belted jumpsuit of light tan that featured larger than average slash pockets. Concluding the lasercomm call to Luna, he slumped in an armchair, propped bare feet shod in hand-stitched leather sandals on an oblong slate coffee table, and contemplated Chairman Reichert’s aborted lunar venture. After a few minutes’ reflection, he rose and went to his desk, woke the integral computer and resumed reading an article in the elex edition of *Forbes* interrupted by notification of Reichert’s sudden, mysterious illness.

Bylined under an obvious pseudonym, the piece strewn with worn adjectives and subtle pejoratives characterized him as an even more a radical revisionist than had been his paternal grandfather, who also exhibited the sterling qualities of a selfish, greed-driven teratycoon, a gadfly dabbler in high technology he did not completely understand, and a grandstanding pseudo-politician. The poor-mouthings, an old story to Lyman, caused him no more pain than had other, non-adulatory references to his personal and business attributes.

But could anyone, he wondered, possibly outdo his grandfather as a radical, revisionist crier in the wilderness? He frankly doubted it, although the tag certainly had applied to Willem Dysart. During the final decades of his paternal grandfather’s long, ultra-productive life, the family patriarch had become the septuagenarian critic nonpareil of the American political system. Old Willem been had been a radical revisionist worthy of France’s Reign of Terror, not a conventionally retired gentleman numbering among America’s foremost industrial giants.

But were the anonymous writer’s sneering critiques marginally attributable to he himself? After further introspection, he rejected the notion out of hand. Whoever had authored the piece — some obscure tool of the international petrochemical juggernaut guided by Belkin Reichert — the wordsmith had earned a substantial premium for creating the fanciful article. Yet daring to compare him to the aged reprobate his paternal grandfather had been amounted to abject nonsense. In that respect, no one could come within light-years of equaling outspoken Grandpa Willem.

Lyman skimmed the article’s final paragraphs, and deleted it, unaffected by its semi-slandering rhetoric. Or so he thought. But for some reason the “radical revisionist” label gnawed at the limbic edges of his mind.

He stewed about the notion analytically, verbally commanded the computer to go back to sleep, and prowled along the floor-to-ceiling glasswall, its tinted, multi-pane polycarbonate panels bathed in late afternoon sunlight. Shielding his eyes against the filtered glare, he paused a meter or so from the spot where his father had fallen victim to a sniper’s bullet, and bequeathed to his one and only offspring an inheritance of truly astronomical proportions.

Forty floors beneath the penthouse, curving, tree-lined Park Presidio Boulevard slashed through the checkerboard of green-bordered parkways separating a forest of lesser structures. Beyond a cushion of pines on the rim of the rise behind Presidio Park, the orange span of the Golden Gate Bridge arched toward the Marin headlands now partially obscured by late afternoon fog creeping into the bay on little cat feet.

No, thought Lyman, the summer fog stomps in wearing combat boots, and turns San Francisco into what a beloved columnist of yesteryear liked to call The Cool Gray City of Love.

On impulse, he stepped to the wall safe concealed by a commissioned knockoff of his favorite painting — Woman of Majorca, from Picasso’s blue period. Letting the sensor scan his iris patterns, he commanded the portrait to slide aside, spun dual combinations and swung open the safe’s tool-steel door. Withdrawing a plain manila folder, he extracted a yellowed clipping wrapped in plastic, plopped down in an armchair and gazed for the umpteenth time at the yellowed article titled BUREAUCRAZY! Dated in early 2007, it had been the first sharply opinionated piece penned by Willem Lyman Dysart. Re-reading the article never failed to move him, reviving as it did the warm, fuzzy feeling after each well-remembered heart to heart chat with his grandfather.

But this re-reading no longer seemed a labor of love. The piece was a tirade of yesteryear; it had little or no bearing upon the present. It was a keepsake, and he meant to keep it. Presently, he thrust it aside.

* * *

In a reminiscent mood, he took his time returning the clipping to the wall safe. Willem’s vilification of things as they’d been had started long after the youthful scion of a wealthy Bruges family and his wife, a Lebanese sculptress, had abandoned the ancestral home in the second year of the third millennium and emigrated to America. Acquainting themselves with their new homeland through a round of extensive travel, they had settled in a Pacific Heights mansion overlooking San Francisco Bay, with neither having much good to say about the ringmaster then in charge of what Willem considered “The clumsy, inefficient American political circus.” Later, after a community newspaper had refused to print the article Lyman just put away, Grandpa Willem had gone through a proxy and quietly purchased the newspaper. His succeeding vitriolic articles soon began drawing interest from all the right wrong people. “None,” he had raged in print, “are so blind as those who will not to see!”

The focus of his grandfather’s technological inventiveness — energy in its diverse forms, derivations and usages — had been the original driver inspiring him to research potentially innovative, more efficient means and methods of improving energy usage. Subsequent to an incisive review of worldwide fossil fuel reserves, he had concentrated on proven, potentially renewable energy alternative usages — hybrid vehicles; electric and compressed-air-driven vehicles; advanced fuel-cell technology; biomass-derived ethanol; diesel from soy; solar, wind and geothermal sources; coal-derived synthetics, et cetera, et al. The first New World patent granted to tiny Dysart Research & Development, Ltd. pertained to a complex automotive carburetion system based upon a principle of physics, “The heat of vaporization.” After undergoing several design iterations, plus exhaustive testing, the ingenious carburetor proved itself capable of creating an authentic, molecular fuel-air vapor, roughly ninety-four percent of which combusted in an engine cylinder, all but eliminating greenhouse gas emissions.

When the breakthrough was quietly announced, the automotive industry had dizzied itself laughing uproariously at the “exorbitant expense” of equipping voluminous production-runs of

millions of vehicles with costly, ultra-complex Dysart Carburetion Systems. The laughter had subsided, turned into reluctant wonderment, and eventually died in open-mouthed amazement when Dysart-equipped, off-the-shelf hybrid test vehicles of various makes and vintages repeatedly averaged 150 miles-per-gallon in city driving, and nearly 190 mpg cruising the interstates.

Irreverent of authority in every guise and shape, technology-minded Willem Dysart had adopted as his watchword the motto of a fictional Northwest lumbering family depicted in a favorite film: “Never give an inch!” Never giving a millimeter, much less “an inch,” he stubbornly resisted all entrepreneurial requests to license third-party Dysart Carburetion System manufacture, and even more stubbornly ignored manifold petitions to go public with an initial stock offering that would have allowed investors to participate in his company’s resounding successes. Dysart R&D had rapidly quintupled in size, spawning a major manufacturing facility, and later reinventing itself as renamed, still privately owned Dysart Technologies, Ltd.

Lyman suppressed a grin; the Dysart brand of stubbornness was a family attribute the *Forbes* writer had failed to mention.

Grandpa Willem's ensuing decades had been strewn with products of equal importance and profitability. Improved hydrogen-oxygen fuel cell stations were vended to power electrical substations serving communities in outlying and remote locales, thus eliminating the need for extensive power transmission lines. Refusing to rest on his laurels and count the money rolling in, Willem had spurred his scientific and engineering staffs to develop a succession of lucrative products, including a method of duplicating photosynthesis in the form of an artificial molecule capable of sustaining polarization long enough to react usefully with other molecules. Undeterred by a reach often exceeding the grasp of his expertise, Willem eventually discovered a practical application, and Dysart Technologies had mass-produced super-efficient Synthocell solar panels, revolutionizing the transformation of solar energy into electrical energy.

His motto “Research will always pay for itself,” Willem had been aware that energy was energy, all forms of which, including geothermal, derived directly or indirectly from the Sun. He had diversified, laboriously screening and hiring a cadre of youthful specialists unfettered by preconceived ‘facts,’ and turning them loose in a remote, isolated laboratory. The result of three and one-half years of intensive research and experimentation had been the award of a half-dozen additional lucrative patents accompanied by key proprietary processes.

But it was not until semi-retirement that the truly radical, revisionist phase of his grandfather’s amazingly productive life had begun. By then a billionaire several times over, the owner of a medium-sized newspaper, an Internet technology news service, and a San Francisco television affiliate, he’d begun pouring private capital into hard-sell campaigns, persuading the electronic media and few remaining print dailies to publish his self-syndicated columns. Preaching sermon after sermon, proposing one “outrageous” argument after another, he had advocated not only balancing the national budget, but demanded the issuance of debt-free currency. He had harped persistently on what, to him, was an inarguable fact, namely that local and national elections had degenerated into ‘auctions’ paid for by multiple, artfully crafted fundraisers and campaign contributors who chose to remain invisible, and had steadfastly insisted on federally-funded elections as the logical answer. He had dared to suggest that any lobbyist who came within fifty feet of a sitting United States Senator be shot on sight by the Capitol Police, yet in the next breath had absolved those lobbyists brave enough to petition congressmen and women *only* if they themselves were legal residents of the same congressional district.

By turns, Grandfather Willem had worked very, very hard to thoroughly antagonize and enrage certain segments of the population, principally the legions of old-money elitists and captains of industry who had been entirely satisfied with things as they then were. On the other hand, he'd become the object of veneration to a great cross-section of less well-to-do, middle class Americans who had gradually begun viewing matters in a light similar to his own. In short, as a reward for his time, trouble and reckless expenditures, his grandfather had been ridiculed, investigated, accused of sedition, and consistently pilloried as a rabid idiot by pols, power brokers and privileged potentates.

Damned as a head case whose skull was stuffed with money rather than brains, he'd lost most battles for the hearts and minds of Americans — no major surprise — yet in the end had more or less triumphed in the overall war. Why? Because as payback for all the thought, money and effort expended during his crusades, Willem Lyman Dysart had achieved something truly radical and revisionist, if not in fact revolutionary.

He had induced the American voting public to do some astute pondering.

* * *

The intercom chimed twice, erasing Dysart's reverie. He punched a button, lampooned a thick German accent. "Schloggenheimer's Delicatessen, Hermann schpeaking."

Immune to The Stockholder's quirky sense of humor, Dysart Technologies Chief Executive Officer Benjamin Clay announced that the encrypted feed was beginning to come in from Luna.

"Good. Be downstairs in minutes, Ben. Any word on Reichert?"

"Nary a peep, *nada*," replied Clay. "If Tubby was indeed stricken with appendicitis, he's being treated at home, not in any public or private hospital our people have pulsed. Who knows? If the gods smile, his appendix may burst."

Dysart grinned. "Not a chance. Belkin's too mean to allow anything life-threatening. To me, this sudden illness song and dance smells like another of his end-runs. Don't fret, Ben; sooner or later we'll learn the snapper."

"That," said the CEO, "is what I'm fretting about."

Innovative Dysart Technologies battles the petroleum cartel over energy usage.

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