

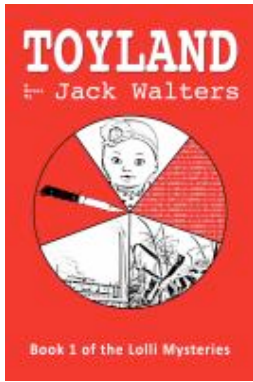
# TOYLAND

A  
Novel  
By

Jack Walters



Book 1 of the Lolli Mysteries



*What would you do if the first thing you learned on a cold winter morning was that your best friend had been brutally murdered? Ken Murchison learns the answer to that question in the hardest possible way. His obsession with finding his buddy's killers wrecks his life. As he descends deeper into calamity and failure, he ends up in a race to reveal the truth about the murder, before it's too late.*

# Toyland

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# **Toyland**

**A Novel**

**Jack H. Walters**

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## FILE 1

I remember that the clock said 5:23 AM when my cell started ringing, saving me from a nightmare about being disemboweled by employees of the plant, led by our lead-person in paints and dyes, Martha Mae Tarses. Kami's arm was resting on my windpipe and I had a terrible headache. I pushed her arm back across her body and lay there, wondering who the hell would call me at that hour and determined not to even look at my cell's Caller ID. When they hung up and called a second time, I answered it.

"What!"

"Ken, this is John Litton with the Madison Police."

I said, "Sure hope you have a great reason for calling this early, John. What's going on?"

"We received a call from Stemmons Alarm Systems at 3:30 this morning, indicating a break-in at the Koehler Toys manufacturing plant. The alarm company called Jim Thurmond and had him meet us there at 3:50 AM. I'm calling to let you know that a crime did take place on the Koehler premises last night and that I am your contact person in the police department."

"John, why are you calling me so early? Couldn't this have waited until the beginning of the business day?"

"I think it would be best if you came to the plant as soon as possible."

I asked, "What happened?"

"Ken, we should hold off on that until you arrive here."

"All right," I said through the buzz of the headache, "I'll be there in about 45 minutes."

If I am to keep a complete record, I should note that today is Tuesday, January 16th. My name is Kenneth Murphy, and I am Executive Vice President of Koehler Toys, Inc. of Madison, South Dakota. This recording is my documentation of what has happened during the past eight days, and I will keep compiling it until somebody is brought to justice for the hell they have poured into my life and those of my friends and coworkers.

As I prepared to leave, I stopped in the bedroom and attempted to awaken Kami.

“Kami, time to get up.”

“Ummmm,” her groan barely audible.

“Kami? Kami, can you hear me?”

“Ummm-Hmmm.”

“It’s time to get up.”

She said, a bit testy now, “Okay, I heard you.”

“No, you didn’t. Get up.”

“Leave me alone, Kenny.”

Now I was raising my voice just a bit. “You’ll be mad if I don’t get you up before I go to work.”

Kami said quite loudly, “I’m up! I’m awake. Leave me alone. It’s too early. Have a good day.”

I turned and left, not caring if she slept until noon and messed up her day.

This winter, I’ve made the big mistake of parking my truck outside at night because of the mess in my garage. There is room only for Kami’s little Subaru, which sleeps in comfort while my F-150 freezes. Last Monday was a good example of why many people don’t park outside in South Dakota if they can help it. The truck was encrusted in ice and the doors were frozen shut. There was a layer of ice on the windshield. It took 10 minutes to make the pickup drivable, plenty of time to alternate between worrying that I was going to be longer getting to the plant than I told John Litton and being re-surprised at how cold it was. Finally I got in and was on my way.

The tires crunched loudly on snow heaped into the plant’s driveway during the night by the plows. As I approached the main entrance of the plant, I saw John Litton emerge from a side door. I put down the window.

He said, “Good morning, Ken.”

“Hi, John. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

He said, “Let’s go inside. We need to talk a little bit before I show you a couple of things.”

Litton is tall and the word “skinny” also comes to mind. He has a ruddy complexion, dark, like a fading suntan. I can’t say I know him well, but I’ve seen him at the Community Center and some local events. He has one the worst matches between his looks and voice I’ve ever seen. Somehow his voice sounds like it should belong to a smaller man, and one not from around here. His lined face said a lot about something being very wrong, but his mouth did not. We walked in silence into the small lobby of the plant and stopped by the security guard’s desk to take off our coats.

“Ken...” he hesitated, then said, “We have a very serious situation here, and will need your assistance in rescheduling your plant’s activities today. As I mentioned on the phone, there was a break-in here last night, in the lab.”

“Was anything taken?”

“We don’t know yet. It looks like there was some kind of a search. We’re going to ask your lab personnel to inventory the area after it’s cleaned up.”

“Pretty messy, huh?”

“Yeah.” John did not elaborate.

“I don’t understand about the rescheduling of work.”

“Someone was in the lab at the time of the break-in and was attacked by the burglars. We’ve locked down the building so that the State Division of Criminal Investigation can get to work.”

I felt a little wave of panic, the one that clears the way for a big wave of panic. I asked, “Who? Who was here?”

“That’s not fully established yet. We need your help.”

“What happened? How were they attacked?” As those words were coming out of my mouth, I was starting to wonder if it could have been Bobby Auriano, our chief of R&D and my best friend.

“We think they hit him with a shovel.”

“You said ‘him’. Who is it? Is it Bobby? Is he here?”

“The victim is in the lab.”

“Is he badly hurt?”

Litton said nothing.

“Have you called an ambulance?”

“No. The victim was killed in the attack.”

That brought the big wave of panic. Litton watched my face, but still said nothing.

The horror continued its reverberation in my head, *Jesus Christ. Bobby's dead. My God, God, God!* Finally, I said it out loud. "Is it Bobby Auriano?" Part question, part statement. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach over and over again.

Litton didn't show a look of recognition. He repeated my words but as a question, "Bobby Auriano?"

I asked, "You didn't know Bobby?"

"No, can't recall ever meeting him. I guess the name kinda rings a bell, but I don't know him. I don't recognize the victim and there is no ID on the body."

I guess I didn't look so good. Litton asked, "Do you need to sit down?"

Bobby Auriano was our director of research and development. Brains-to-burn brilliant. Even now, after spending a week thinking of little but Bobby, it's hard to understand how somebody with his creative genius ended up designing dolls. Thirty-six years old, with Koehler Toys about six years – the same number as me.

I said, "John, I need to see him right now. Where is he?"

"Are you sure you can handle an identification?"

With profound dread I said, "I want to see if it's him."

"You're sure you want to do this now?"

At this point I had made no mid-course correction for this horrifying turn of events. I should have been much more careful in what I wished for. I said, "Show me." The sheer cavalier foolishness of that remark embarrasses me now as I recount it, but it seemed like rock-solid logic then. Litton reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He pressed the screen a few times and a photograph appeared.

When Litton said that the victim had been "hit with a shovel", I formed a terribly inaccurate picture of the damage. I took him to mean the flat bottom of a shovel, but that's not what happened. He had been hit with the sharp edge, a blow that must have carried massive force. It had sliced his head essentially in two. The back half was barely attached. I was okay for a moment, then suddenly I felt



like someone had thrown a bucket of hot wax in my face. The heat ran down my body. Then I felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water on me. I lost my balance and knew I was going to puke. I ran for the door and more or less got outside before pushing up some bile. No food in there to throw up.

Litton asked if I was okay.

“Of course not, what’s it look like?”

He just stood there – something, I was beginning to realize, he was very good at. Finally I stood up, stepped back inside, wiped my mouth with a tissue from the security guard’s desk, and walked back over to Litton. I felt like I could look at the photo a second time without losing it, and did so. Bobby’s eyes were closed, not open in that spooky death look that is on so many cop shows on TV. There is no way to describe the sheer quantity of blood. Almost the whole background of the photo was blood. It would have looked like there was deep red background on the photo if there weren’t a few spots where the floor of the lab showed through. One thing I’ll say, blood is the right color. When you see that much of that color, you know something is very, very wrong. It makes me feel sick just to talk about it, even after a week.

Litton asked. “Is it your friend?”

I croaked, “Yeah, Bobby... Robert... Dr. Robert Auriano, chief of research and development.”

He said, “Okay. Listen, Ken, it’s best if we don’t stay in this building. The DCI guys are treating the whole plant as a crime scene. You’ll need to send all the employees in this building home for the day.”

I replied, “If we can do it quickly, we can reach a lot of ‘em before they leave home.”

Litton and I retrieved our coats and walked outside. He hesitated near the door to allow me time to catch my breath and let the freezing air blow some calm back into my senses. Then he suggested that we go over to my office. I told him I would join him there shortly. He got in his car and sat there for a moment, looking at me with a clear look of pity. I stared back at him, as if to fend off his intrusion into

my thoughts. Finally, he let his car ease forward and drift down the block length of the parking lot to our office building.

After Litton drove away, I didn't move for a while. I stood there thinking about Bobby and what was lost. Bobby finished college at twenty one, Master's at twenty-two, and Ph.D. at twenty-seven. He taught at Rensselaer Polytechnic for several years, then rejected the research-'til-you-drop environment to start a career in manufacturing R&D. After looking at companies toward the pure science end of the research spectrum, he answered an ad for a Director of Research and Development at Koehler Toys, and never looked back.

He was happy working in our small lab, attempting to develop his very big ideas. We became the best and closest of friends. We took our girlfriends to the theater in Minneapolis, and fished, and skied, and golfed. I directed him in several plays for the Madison Community Theatre, including one play that he wrote. We debated every topic from gay marriage to Chinese export policy, but always with friendly respect, even though he was red-blood Republican and I'm blue-blood Democrat. He was just so easy to be friends with.

He wasn't perfect, of course. No one is. Maddeningly analytical at times. Didn't suffer fools gladly, either, and nobody wanted to get between him and his work, but he was a great man to be friends with. A good, safe, trusted friend. And fun and funny. I was lucky to have him. Of course, he was a lot easier to get along with than I am. And really, that's my real problem. He *was*, but I still *am*. He isn't wondering if he will ever find the bottom of his grief, because he's gone and I'm still here, mad as hell and sadder than I've been since the war. How selfish can I be?

In novels I've read, descriptions of detectives usually start off with "gritty... burly... fat... ornery... temperamental... cold" and various other negatives that conjure up an image of a person who has been made to hate what he does by the very nature of it. John Litton didn't fit any of those categories. He was quiet, thoughtful, and reflective – definitely a different mode than I'd seen when he was training for triathlons at the Community Center. I'm sure he's a decent guy and good at his job but must remind myself that, a week out from the murder, a weak burglary scenario is all that the Madison

Police and the DCI have got on Bobby being more-or-less halfway beheaded.

I called Lou Mallory, Koehler's Plant Manager, at home to explain the situation. He said he would call the area supervisors and activate the call tree that we use for blizzards or other work disruptions. The plant workers would get a paid day off, but I knew they would think it a lousy bargain when they learned why. Lou was stunned when I told him of Bobby's death but held it together pretty well. He was anxious to get going on his calls and told me that he would call me later to hear the details of what Litton had told me.

When I got to my office, Litton was there, peering intently at his phone and poking at its screen. When I entered, he turned it off.

"Ken... I need to look at Dr. Auriano's employee file. Then, I need you to tell me as best you can what he was working on and if, in your opinion, it could be related to his murder."

I said, "When you first described this situation to me, you said it was a break-in. Do you believe the break-in was the original crime, or that his murder was on purpose?"

"Don't really know at this point. Those are all things that we, the Division of Criminal Investigation, and other law enforcement agencies will be looking at in the coming weeks. I'm still leaning toward break-in, but the viciousness of the crime is extreme. Normally crimes that start out as break-ins, especially in places like Madison, don't end up as violent murders. You know, this is just our second murder."

I asked, "Second murder?"

"Yep, the second murder we've ever had in the 134 years the town's been here. That's all the official records indicate, plus we've got people in town who've lived here for more than 80 years, and nobody remembers anything except one murder that happened a few years back."

I knew that it was super safe in Madison, but that particular statistic had never crossed my mind. I returned to my question. "But you think it might not have been an intentional murder? Just a burglary?"

Litton said, "We can't rule it out." He hesitated, "Uh, Ken, this is the part where I get to ask the questions."

"Ooh, sorry," I said, a bit embarrassed. Of course he needed to ask questions, and he did. He asked if I had any idea why anybody would hurt Bobby. Why was he in the lab so late? Were there folks at the company that he didn't get along with? Did he have girlfriend trouble? Ex-girlfriend trouble? Girlfriend's ex-boyfriend trouble? It went on for a time. Finally his list was done. I said I had a few more questions for him.

Litton said, "You can ask, but we don't really know anything yet. The DCI folks aren't even here yet."

I said, "You said Bobby was hit with a shovel, but it looked like he was hit with an ax."

"No. There was a shovel. One of our guys found it when he went outside to the window that was open. Looks like they used to get in."

I interrupted, "You said 'they'. Why do you use that word?"

He replied, "Look, Ken, this is all very preliminary. Based on what little checking we've done in advance of the DCI getting here, it looks like there's more than one set of prints outside the window."

"So there was some kind of organized break-in?"

Litton shook his head. "Ken, it would be best if we could just stick to finding out more about your friend. Okay?"

I said, "Fine," then called Wanda Durillo, my secretary, and asked her to bring in Bobby's personnel file. I had been unsurprised to find Wanda in the office before 7:00 AM. She's just one of those people who's driven by an invisible fire about her job. But Wanda's normal self-possessed, slightly intimidating air was definitely not in evidence that morning. She'd seen the police cars when she arrived and learned from the uniformed officers that there'd been a murder, but didn't know who it was until we spoke upon my arrival. Her hands trembled and she was unable to steady her bottom lip as she was introduced to John Litton.

I asked, "Wanda, are you gonna do okay with this?"

She looked at me, summoned for a moment the core of resolve that I am so used to, and said, "No, I'm not," then went out, leaving Bobby's file on the corner of my desk.

Litton reached over and grabbed the file. “What has Dr. Auriano been working on lately?”

I said, “Bobby was our chief research scientist – our only real research scientist, really. He had six technicians working with him, but they worked under his direction and did not develop projects on their own. In some way or another, he was working on everything that Koehler is doing right now. I’m sure that’s not the answer you’re looking for.” It felt totally weird, hair standing up on the back of your neck weird, to talk about Bobby in the past tense.

Litton shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t. It’s helpful to know that he was at the center of your R&D efforts.” He made a note on a legal pad.

“There is a project that Bobby has been spending most of his time on lately. Dollie Lolli. D-O-L-L-I L-O-L-L-I.”

“Dollie Lolli,” Litton said softly, adding to his notes.

“Arthur Koehler’s father – you understand that Arthur is Chairman and CEO of Koehler, right? Arthur’s father started a line of dolls in the 1960’s that became our flagship products. The name of the first doll was Dollie Anni. A-N-N-I.”

Litton said, “Let me guess. The second doll was something like Dollie Bonni.”

“Not a bad guess. It was Betti – Dollie Betti. We introduce a new Dollie whenever we make a breakthrough in doll technology. The project that Bobby was working on, Lolli, is our 12th model. It learns from human interaction – its behavior is determined by how the child treats it.”

“Twelve dolls in 50 years doesn’t sound like many.”

I said, “Each one has been a quantum leap in technology.”

“And this new one can learn?” The disbelief was apparent in his voice.

I answered, “Hard to believe, I know, but possible if you have the right people working on it. The doll has microprocessors that react to a set of memorized doll behaviors. The behaviors are random when the doll is new, but develop as the child, its ‘parent’, plays with it.”

The look on Litton’s face shifted slightly from disbelief toward amazement.

I continued, “So, let’s say that the child hugs the doll, and it responds by giggling or some other positive sound. If the child hugs it again and it responds the same way, you have the beginnings of a positively conditioned doll. On the other hand, if one of the doll’s randomly occurring behaviors is crying and the child responds by hitting it, you have the beginning of an abused doll. It cries, it gets hit, it cries more, it gets hit more, et cetera.”

“What the hell kind of toy is that? That sounds kinda sick.”

I continued, “I’m only showing you that the child determines the doll’s programming – not us... Koehler, I mean. There’s a reset switch that erases the doll’s memory if it looks like a Mommie Dearest situation is emerging. Bobby was working on making it behave more like a real baby.”

“I never knew you folks were doing such weird stuff over here.”

I sighed, “I’m not sure what we’re doing, with him gone.”

Litton sat for a few minutes, writing. Then he selected a few pages from Bobby’s personnel file and I asked Wanda to make photocopies. When Wanda returned with the copies, Litton stood. “Ken, here’s a bit of detail on what’s going to happen. The DCI is going to run this case. They investigate homicides all the time and there’s no point in us trying to reinvent the wheel. There will be a point person from Division of Criminal Investigation who will coordinate the investigation. I’ll still be working on it, of course. So will the Sheriff’s Department and maybe even the Highway Patrol if we need that many people to check into things. Everybody who works in the plant, and likely some of the folks who work in your administrative office as well, will get the same interview that you just did. You may even have to answer some of those same questions for the DCI. The crime scene folks will likely finish up today, depending on how quickly their team can get here. Tracking down and talking to all the possible witnesses could take a week or more. The last thing I’ll ask this morning is if you have surveillance cameras on your premises.”

I answered, “We do have cameras, but I think most of them face the parking lot. I’ll ask our security guy to get copies of the footage for you.”

“Just have him call me.” He produced a card. “We still haven’t nailed down the time frame that we want to look at.”

I took John’s card, we shook hands, and he left.

I guess they didn’t get much useful stuff from the video cameras. I’m recording this over a week after the murder, and the MPD and DCI have just one theory: Bobby was killed during a multiple-suspect burglary. Hell, maybe it was just a burglary that went way, way, wrong. Except nothing was taken. Nothing. Madison is definitely not a sleepy town, and sure there are loads of people around who aren’t from here, but this is just not the place where burglars go berserk and kill. But if it wasn’t a burglary, what was it? Bobby didn’t gamble, use drugs, or fool around with women who were involved with somebody else. That pretty much leaves his work to provide motive, but toy making is not a murderous industry, to say the least.

When Litton and I were talking about Dolli Lolli’s design, it crossed my mind that somebody might want to steal that technology, but everything was still too new and overwhelming at that point. I couldn’t get the image of Bobby, dead in our lab, out of my head long enough to think about why it had happened, so I just put the “why” questions aside.

Wanda came into my office carrying one of those cardboard file boxes with holes on each end for handles. She put it on the floor next to my credenza, and turned to leave without saying anything.

“What is it?” I asked.

“From the lab. Sealed.” This was spoken as she walked toward the door, without looking back. I think she had tears in her eyes and didn’t want me to see.

I wouldn’t have bothered to look at the box if it hadn’t been sealed. We don’t have many sealed boxes in the intra-office mail at Koehler and that sparked my curiosity. A note was taped to the top: “See my email.” Bobby’s handwriting.

I turned to my computer. Sure enough, there was an email from Bobby, sent at 1:30 that morning. It added to my discomfort that it was a private email, readable only if I entered a password. I had to rummage around in my desk to find the password because nobody

had ever sent me a private message before. I got the email open, though, and felt creepy looking at possibly Bobby's last communication. "Hey Ken: The box I sent contains stuff about Dolli Lolli. It might be best to consider these issues at home rather than at work. The learning interface can do way more than I ever thought it would and, at this point, I'm not even sure why. You will be amazed. Call me. Bobby."

I opened the box. Beneath a sheaf of papers lay the first operational model of Dolli Lolli. In addition to the Dolli Kelli body that we've been using for the prototype, there was a small circuit board enclosure with several wires coming out of it. It was labeled, "Cognitive Unit – CU". Most of the wires looked like they would plug into a computer and the rest likely would connect to the doll's body. The body had a note taped to one of its legs: "Motors not installed". I took this to mean that the motors which would respond to commands from the cognitive unit were not yet installed in the doll's legs, arms, and neck.

The arrival of the doll was coincidence, eerie as it may have been, and I would have treated it as exactly that, were it not for Bobby's admonition to take the doll home to test it. His remarks were out of place for what I knew about the doll and way too much to think about at that point, so I put it all back in the box and resealed it.

The office was funereal in mood. Some people were crying, some stunned into inactivity, others just disappeared. Wanda was one of them, just gone not long after she dropped off Bobby's box. I called in the R&D techs and asked them to help the police in every way they could, then take a couple of days off. I wasn't sure how well they could perform without Bobby's supervision, anyway, at least not right away.

I wanted to leave, too, but didn't think that I could justify leaving early under the circumstances. So I sat in my office and wasted time for the rest of the day, reading magazines, surfing the web, checking Facebook, anything to take my mind off that photo of Bobby. Around three-thirty I headed over to the plant, walking the length of the parking lot in the whipping cold.



Of course the plant was completely closed by the police and the investigators from the DCI. I was interested to see that a few of the guys who worked at the plant were still there, parked in their trucks with their driver's side windows facing each other, in a corner of the parking lot just outside the crime scene tape that the police had put up. I walked over to Bill Aaberg's truck and climbed in the passenger's side.

I was hoping to show those guys a positive attitude. That did not happen. I soon realized that the quiet grief that blanketed the administrative offices was not present among the guys waiting in their trucks. They were mad. Really mad. Bobby had a lot of friends in the plant. He batted third on the company softball team, was a star bowler, and had been in a couple of weddings. Plus, he was a past master of jokes and pranks. He used to say that, if we truly knew and liked one another, our harmony would show through in the toys we make. I said he ought to write a book called "Zen and the Art of Making Dolls." Anyway, the main emotion among those men was anger – and revenge, and they claimed a lot of people felt that way.

I did my best to calm them down, then left Bill's truck and went inside the plant entrance where John Litton and I had been that morning. Such a long time ago. I spent a few minutes with Lou Mallory, telling him about the visit I'd just had with the guys on the lot. We knew a broadcast email to employees about the murder wouldn't work, so we made the choice of doing nothing, figuring that the grapevine would have had most employees knowing that Bobby had been murdered by 9:00 that morning. I promised myself that I would do something more constructive the next day. It was nearly dark at 4:45 when I left the plant, walked back to the administrative offices, and took the box containing the Lolli prototype. I was exhausted. And sad. And maybe, contagious from the workers at the plant, on my way to being pissed off. I got in my truck and headed home.

Madison is a nice town. Nice people. The reason the city is here is farming, though light manufacturing companies like Koehler Toys are growing in town. When I first moved here from Minneapolis, I used to tell friends that there was a cornfield within one mile in every

direction from my house, even though I lived in the middle of town. Madison isn't the kind of town where "everybody knows everybody", that's never gonna happen among seven thousand people, but lots of people know, or know something about, lots of other people, like the way that John Litton and I had a passing acquaintance before Bobby's murder. It's not a bad way to live.

It's easy to grow accustomed to the lower intensity of life here. People work hard, very hard, but there isn't such a harried pace and there aren't so many edgy people as you find in bigger cities. If somebody had asked me before January 8<sup>th</sup> if there could be a bloody murder in the place where I worked, I would have said "No" without a moment's hesitation.

I drove home in complete silence, thinking about how I would explain everything to Kami. I wasn't sure that she would share my interest in figuring out why Bobby was killed. She picks her issues very carefully, focuses the full intensity of her intellect on them, and leaves things that don't spark her interest to others. I'm the opposite type of thinker, unable to ignore the newly-arrived problem, especially if it is serious. The "why" questions had returned and were eating me alive – I could think of little else, and was hoping that Kami would be interested in solving the puzzle.

I crunched my pickup over the snow pile at the entrance to the driveway, deciding again to leave it outside overnight. Kami was home and it didn't take very long for me to realize that I had made a big mistake in not calling her earlier. I was removing my coat and gloves near the front door when I heard her move upstairs. I called out, "Hi, Kam," trying to conceal the deadened tone of my voice.

Her response was decidedly less deadened. Before she reached the stairs, she announced, in strident tones and loudly, "Why didn't you call me, Kenny?" The question communicated 60 words instead of six.

I tried to placate her. "I'm sorry. I know I should have, but there were just so many..."

She cut me off with, "Don't even *think* of starting with that crap. Crap! You should have called me. I don't want to hear you say you're sorry you didn't call me. I don't want to hear you say that you

were busy, that there were any reasons why you did not call me. I'm involved in every aspect of your life, but had to find out that your best friend was murdered from – try this – the mailman! The mailman told me that Bobby was murdered at the plant last night, and you didn't.”

I quickly reassessed being in apology mode and the usefulness of being home at all, picked up my coat and gloves and went out to my truck.

Once in the truck, it hit me that I was so drained from the day's events that I had no interest or energy to go anywhere or do anything. I wasn't going back to the house and listen to Kami bitch, though. We haven't been getting along very well for several months and, in the face of tragedy, her first loyalties were to maintaining the tension between us, rather than sharing sympathy about Bobby's death. Her anger and the venue she chose to express it were unforgivable. I knew damn well that I *would* forgive her, of course. Just not that night.

Kami's heritage is Egyptian, though she was born in New Jersey shortly after her parents arrived in the U.S. She was a super student who performed brilliantly all the way into and through Duke University. She aced a double major in biochemistry and philosophy. I wouldn't, and probably couldn't, major in either one. She bopped around a number of interesting technical jobs, making more money each time, but not gaining comparably in satisfaction. Acting out a wish for a big change, she enrolled at the University of Minnesota in pursuit of a Master's in healthcare policy. We met in Minneapolis.

When I got out of the service, I returned to my junior year at Memphis State University (known these days as the University of Memphis) and to my major in electrical engineering. After graduation in '94 I took a job with Seerson Amusements, which specialized in pinball and Pachinko machines, and ended up in administration within a year. I moved up through the administrative ranks, mostly on the production side, and that seemed just fine for quite a few years. During those years I got married, but it was not meant to be and I ended up getting divorced four years later.

I left Seerson shortly after my divorce and landed at a consulting firm in Minneapolis. The best thing I can say about consulting is that it was different.

Kami and I met at a tavern in Prospect Park. I was arguing with a buddy about consulting – actually, about how it was a lousy career choice for anybody who thinks of himself as a “doer.” We’d both had plenty of beer and were pretty loud, and she asked us to tone it down. I told her I would cool it if she would have lunch with me the next day, and she said she would! I couldn’t believe it. What a schmaltzy story! True, though. She was, and is, just so damn beautiful.

We had our lunch, and one thing led to another until we fell into a serious relationship. I left consulting about three months after we met. It just wasn’t for me. By the time I quit, I’d lined up the Executive VP spot at Koehler.

Kami stayed in Minneapolis and completed her Master’s, then worked on a research project with one of her professors for eighteen months before joining me in Madison. It probably wasn’t a good move for her, because Madison isn’t ripe with job opportunities for people with Master’s degrees in Public Administration. But we wanted to be together and she moved out here. Our situation has worked okay for several years, but the full satisfaction of working with colleagues at a real “place” isn’t available to her, and her persistent unhappiness is causing quite a bit of friction. Even so, the visible anger that I saw when I returned home last Monday almost never happens and would be equivalent to physical rage in most people.

I read a poem when I was a kid about a moth flying around a candle. The moth was asked, by a roach no less, why he flew around candles and not light bulbs, considering the risk of being burned up. His answer explained how I feel about Kami. The moth said that he would rather risk death to experience the thrill and beauty of fire than to go ‘round and ‘round the boring light bulb in perpetual safety. There is no “safety” in my relationship with Kami these days but, in spite of the danger, she remains hypnotic.

There’s an AmericInn on Highway 34 at the east entrance into Madison. Koehler Toys is kind of across the highway from there and

has hosted quite a few out of town visitors at the motel. I decided to go there, even though I had no change of clothes or toothbrush and it was a bit too close for comfort to the plant.

After I checked into the room, I remembered that the Dolli Lolli prototype was in the truck and promised myself that I would go bring it in when I returned from dinner. But when I returned to the AmericInn, I again forgot to bring it inside. Then the day's events overtook me and I fell asleep. When I awoke at 2:45 AM, I remembered Bobby's box. It's a good thing that I did, because the temperature had plunged so deeply that the doll might have been damaged. I brought the box inside and set it near the window-mounted heater, then took out Bobby's notes and plopped down to watch CNN.

Bobby was involved in the design of several previous dolls, including Kelli, which also contained major technical advances such as life-like movement. The references to a generational leap in technology in his notes were tantalizing. I knew that the Lolli project had been going well, but not *that* well. In the box were his notes on how to hook up the prototype to a PC for testing, with the comment, "You will be amazed."

Bobby was never much for exaggeration. If he thought I would be amazed, it was a sure bet. The last couple of sentences in his notes troubled me, though, in light of recent events: "We should discuss how this technology could be used in something other than toys. Please keep Lolli's full capabilities under wraps until we can talk."

I fell back into the same funk that I'd felt during the day and it just made me feel incapable of doing anything. Using the remote on the TV seemed not worth the effort. In my hand was the last communication I would ever receive from my best friend. Just three days before, I'd seen him there in the lab, happy and excited. We'd had lunch with the Community Theatre Planning Committee on Saturday. Now it was all a bitter memory. It was more than I could handle, so I tossed the note aside, turned down the sound on CNN, and closed my eyes.

I awoke at 7:30, feeling better. I remembered a lesson that I had learned in Kuwait: Each day that you wake up, not dead or horribly

wounded, is another opportunity to build the life you've always wanted. That outlook carried me, one day at a time, through my time over there and I knew that it could help me here. I slipped back into Wednesday's clothes, not a comfortable feeling, and went home to retrieve a few things. The Lolli prototype went back to the floorboard of my truck.

It was a perfect South Dakota winter day, no clouds, the sun so brilliant that its reflections flew off the snow and ice, too bright to look at. Kami was at the library, working on a paper about population migration patterns and hospital locations in Chicago, but had left me a note at the house: "Kenny, I'm sorry." I was glad to see that, in spite of our problems, at least she knew that some vulnerabilities are off limits.

I showered and dressed, including my favorite necktie, then went down to the kitchen for a huge cup of fresh-ground coffee. Hoping to put the troops at Koehler on a path away from the river Styx, I headed out to my truck.

In my haste to get out of Monday's clothes and into clean ones for Tuesday, I had neglected to check out of the AmericInn. I stopped by there to re-check the room and check out of the hotel. I then headed for my office, planning to put the Dolli Lolli box in my closet.

The rest of Tuesday was more upbeat. I checked in with Wanda, who gave me a couple of phone messages and told me that Hiroto Aoki had dropped by. I was not sorry that I had missed that little weasel. He persists in trying to get us to change our distribution relationships in the Far East, even though we don't have any problems with the arrangements that are in place. He is just the kind of creep that I did not need to see this week. Wanda said he asked if Arthur was in and had gone to see if he could get in to see him.

The plant was back in full operation, with no sign of the terrible thing that had happened there. In their inventory of the lab, the techs found nothing missing, even though fifty thousand dollars of computer and test equipment was within ten feet of Bobby's body. How, I wondered, would the people who did this, supposedly a

burglary, ever be caught if nothing was taken? The whole incident just didn't add up.

People were still in some form of shock over it, I guess, but there was less bitterness and anger and more genuine regret than I expected based on the mad guys in their trucks the preceding day. A number of folks openly expressed fear that a murder had happened where they work or that there could be a reason for one to happen there. Modern, bitter adulthood, slowly poisoned by fear, was on view at every turn.

The toy business deals in the stock and trade of happiness. One can fall into the belief that bad things don't happen to people in the "happiness" business, especially in a place like Madison. No question it is safer to live here than in bigger cities. People have more of that "it takes a village" attitude toward kids and I think that makes it safer for them, too. There is less anger, less confrontation. Most of the streets in town have 20 mile per hour speed limits, except of course for the "high-speed" Washington Avenue and Second Street, which have 30 mile per hour limits. The whole idea that a gruesome murder was committed in a building that I'm in every single week is just... I don't even have a word for it. It's like the happiness of living here was a balloon and somebody popped it. I just don't think I'll sleep well at night until I know who did this, so I guess I'll keep plugging to figure it out.

When I was a kid in Nashville, my favorite thing was to visit the toy stores at the Rivergate Mall. No matter what the actual name of the store was, my mom would refer to them only as Toyland. I guess those experiences cemented in my mind that Toyland, wherever I found it, was the happiest place on earth. Nothing ever went wrong there. Everything was new and, in that certain hopeful way, available. I'm sure that I was drawn to a career in the toy business by memories of the joy that I felt in those toy stores all those years ago.

Until this mess, I enjoyed the feeling of security and happiness in making toys that I had felt as a boy visiting Toyland. Of course the day-to-day of the business is much less peaceful – the industry is almost pathologically competitive – but I had convinced myself that the end result, happy kids, was a noble endeavor. Bobby's murder

destroyed that dream, such as it was. Instead of faint images of kids asleep with their arms locked around a Dolli Kelli, I am left only with visions of a dead friend, destroyed hopes, and fearful futures.

A big downer came late on Tuesday when I dropped by to see Arthur Koehler. I wanted to plan the company's involvement in Bobby's funeral, and stopped by his office at 3:45 to visit with him for a few minutes before he left at his customary 4:15. When I walked in, he didn't seem upset. But when I raised the question of what to do about Bobby, it was as if a dark, wet cloth dropped over his entire presence. His face contorted in an effort to hold back tears as he said, "There is nothing to do about Bobby. He's dead."

The strange flatness of his remark left me not knowing what to say. I briefly considered dropping the matter, but decided to proceed. "That's not what I meant, Arthur. I thought we should discuss how to move on a replacement and what the company's position should be regarding his funeral arrangements."

Arthur shook his head and stared down at his desk. Finally, he said, "We should pay for all of his funeral arrangements and allow compensated time off for the folks who want to attend the funeral. It's going to be in Kansas City? Maybe we should look into renting some buses for the trip down."

Arthur stopped talking for a moment, seemed to collect his thoughts, then went on, "As far as his replacement, Ken, I just don't know." The words each came out individually and landed one-by-one on the edge of the desk. "I'm not sure that it's the right thing to do to bring anybody else into this right now."

I said, "Bobby was making big progress with Dolli Lolli and I'd hate to see it fall through the cracks. We need some time to just miss him, but I do think we should contact a search firm a few weeks after the funeral."

Arthur stood quickly, walked over to the window, crossed his arms, and stared out at the endless, faint-gray cold of the South Dakota afternoon. "Okay," he said, still facing away from me, reluctance still in his voice, "I understand." I wished him a restful evening and got out of there.



Arthur has done a decent job of running his family's company, but he's kind of a weird guy. He's been head of the company since he and his sisters inherited it from his father twelve years ago. Arthur's father Herman had built the business into a great success after inheriting a much smaller version from his father.

The nice way to say it is that Arthur is a very complex man. He embodies both wonderful and despicable traits. On the good side, he's a generous philanthropist, not just in giving his own money, but in convincing others to give theirs. No question the quality of life of Madison's poor has been significantly improved by his efforts. He paid for the first domestic violence shelter in Madison and recently financed a program to make computers available to folks who cannot afford to buy them.

On the negative side, the man is a racist and, hard to believe given his philanthropy, sexist as well. He believes that women and non-whites are inferior to white men, period. To complete the trifecta, he's also a homophobe, and feels pretty intensely about it. He's a bundle of mean thoughts who happens to give a shitload of money to charity. Go figure.

Arthur realized years ago, after a couple of scrapes in which his dark side was revealed to his employees, that he could really hurt the company if his views became known, so he hired me to be his interface with his own company. He loves the toy business and doesn't want to harm his reputation or the performance of the firm, so he leaves me visible and mostly stays out of sight except for the philanthropic stuff. Lou Mallory, Bill Boxner (Arthur's investments manager) and I are charged with concealing his dual views of the world. Most people in Madison think he's Santa Claus. Truth is, between the good he does and the bad he thinks, the good far outweighs the bad. It's ironic that Arthur spends so many of his personal resources helping people who, in the large majority, he thinks are inferior to him.

I puzzled over Arthur's extreme grief about Bobby's death. He knew Bobby only as an employee, a contributor to the bottom line. But there's no precise process for grief. The murder could have hit

him in ways that I didn't understand, so I tried not to add that to the worry list.

I went back to my office in hopes of catching some news on TV about the murder, but there was very little information about the crime on the tube. Having exhausted the shock value of Bobby's murder, the local news cannibals found an avalanche at a ski resort in the Black Hills and turned all of their attention to that. I turned off the set, closed my door and relaxed for a few moments on the couch. In spite of an okay day, I was wiped, so I fell asleep and did not awaken until 6:45 that evening.

When I awoke, I was at a bit of a loss for what to do. I knew I should go home to see Kami, but I hadn't heard from her all day and, despite her apologetic note, I really didn't want to be the one to make the first real move in smoothing things over. Childish, I suppose, but that's how I felt.

I thought about catching up on some paperwork. Koehler Toys churns onward each day, producing reports to be reviewed and requisitions to be approved, correspondence to be answered, checks to be signed, and so on. There were three piles on my desk, just enough to be too intimidating to think about at 7:00 PM. Finally, I took Bobby's notes out of Lolli's box and looked them over.

Following Bobby's notes about hooking the prototype up to a computer, I plugged the circuit board wires into my computer, but left the doll body disconnected because of the "no motors" problem. Then I fired up the prototype and my laptop, and waited to see if the two would hook up.

An image of the doll's face – a baby about two years old – appeared on the computer's screen. Beneath the face were the words "I can hear you". I stood motionless for a few seconds, just staring at that face. Feeling fairly silly, I said, "You can hear me?"

The face of the doll spoke, but it didn't have a baby's voice. It sounded like a 15 year-old girl. Beneath the face on the screen, words appeared as the image's lips moved. Both speakers and screen said, "Yes, I can hear you."

I can't explain my reaction. Even now it seems completely out of line with the situation. Rather than curiosity or even amazement, I

began to laugh. Out of that laugh released the tension and the horror of the murder, the argument with Kami, and my deepening recognition of the loss of my friend. I laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears were streaming down my face, there was a stitch in my side, and I couldn't catch my breath. I limped over to the couch and collapsed on my back, staring up through tears at the neat rows of acoustical tiles on the ceiling. I couldn't stop laughing. I would try to control myself, then become tickled and start laughing all over again. Finally, I stood up, retrieved a Kleenex tissue from the bottom right drawer of my desk, and focused my attention once again on the laptop's screen. The face on the screen had a furrowed brow. It said, "What's so funny?" I again collapsed with laughter.

I knew Bobby so well, knew his quirky genius, and wondered briefly if I was the butt of a very complex joke. I knew in my heart, though, that it was no joke – the doll's ability to converse was real. Speech interface technologies are not new, and dictation software is getting really good, but nothing has ever come close to true out-of-the-box functionality for conversing with a computer. Phone companies have spent millions designing systems to replace human operators. Even those systems frequently have trouble understanding addresses, names, and accents. How in the hell did Bobby put sophisticated speech recognition into a toy? That doll understood what I said *and* put it in context. I didn't feel like I could handle much more amazement that evening, so I shut the whole thing down, put it back in the box and back in the closet, and went home.



## FILE 2

I unlocked the front door of my house, cruised into the entryway, took off my coat and called out, “Kami, you here?”

“Sure am,” her voice, from upstairs, sounded like she was perhaps in the bathroom with the door closed. “Be down in a sec.” Sounded friendly enough. I wanted us to go out for the evening, enjoy a nice meal, and toss back a few in Bobby’s memory.

I called up to her, “Put on your go-to-meetin’ dress, Hon. Let’s go to Nicky’s.” Kami didn’t answer, but that’s typical of her calm way. I assumed that, when she came downstairs, she would be dressed to go out. And dressed she was. A very... little jet black dress, dark hose, black shoes and a full length black leather coat. Her long waves of polished black hair, cascading over the collar of the coat, made me remember why thunderbolts struck in the first place.

The dinner that night at Nicky’s was the best time that Kami and I have enjoyed together in over a year. We had steaks, baked potatoes, and lots of stuff from the salad bar. We ate and drank and talked of things we enjoy but haven’t talked about in a long time: Dave Brubeck, science fiction, Thin Man movies, what we’re going to do if we ever win the lottery. It was great.

We talked about Bobby and made a toast or two. Monday’s confrontation didn’t come up. Nicky’s makes a big deal out of Dessert Month, so we each picked something that had as many calories as we should have eaten for dinner and piled it in on top of the steaks and potatoes.

We ordered a couple of decaf coffees and were well into the desserts when Amy, our waitress, came to the table and asked, “Ken, do you drive a black Ford F-150?”

“Yes.”

“The alarm on your pickup is going off, but there appears to be no one near it. Drew will go outside with you, if you wish.” I told Amy that I wouldn’t need assistance because I knew it wasn’t the alarm, which was not activated. I’d left my phone in the truck just so I wouldn’t be tempted to take it out and look at it. My truck has a

Bluetooth gimmick that tonks the horn if my phone rings inside it while the truck is not running. It has turned out to be mostly an annoyance rather than a convenience, but maybe it justified itself that night.

Normally I would have ignored the call but, considering the events of the past two days, I hustled out to my truck to check the Caller ID. When I got to my truck, the phone was still ringing. I picked it up and a voice said, “Kenneth A. Murphy?”

“Yes.”

“This is Southeast SD Security. We monitor the alarm system on your home at 1211 Twin Oaks Drive. I need to give you our verification code word, and you need to respond with yours.” Nice trick. It keeps them from having a meaningful conversation with someone who has just stolen my cell phone.

We exchanged the codes, then he said, “Are you in Madison, Mr. Murphy?”

“Yes, I’m at a restaurant.”

“An intrusion alert has been received. Madison Police have been called and we have confirmed that a car is on its way. We rang the phone at your home, but there was no answer. This number was given as a backup.”

“Okay. Do we know what’s happening there?”

“No, sir. The police are still en route. If you return to your home, we advise you to wait until the police have checked out the residence before going onto the property.”

I don’t swear as seldom as I like, but I’m normally not a total foul-mouth either. That night, my nasty mouth got the better of me. I said with vigor and intensity, “Shit!” then realized I was still on the telephone with the alarm company operator. A little red-faced, I said, “I’m sorry. I’m about 15 minutes away and heading over there now.”

“Please be cautious, sir.”

I thanked him, turned off the phone, got out of the truck, and slammed the door harder than it deserved.

Kami and I rode in silence half the way to the house before she said, “So, is Madison becoming the crime capital of North America?” I said nothing, but worried that we were far from the quiet norm of

the city. Lou thought I was crazy to even get a house alarm. He said, “Why do you think people move here, Ken? So they won’t need alarms on their houses.” Now, with the world turning upside down, being proven right about needing an alarm had a surprisingly bitter taste.

We arrived at my house. The MPD was there all right, with three cars, lights flashing, parked in front. One officer was out front and I could see people moving around inside. I eased my truck over to the curb and we hustled over to speak to one of the officers. “I’m Ken Murphy and this is my girlfriend, Kamilah Rahal. We live here. What can you tell us?”

“Could you show me some ID?”

I produced my driver’s license. The officer said, “They pried on the back door until they broke the lock, but nobody was here when we arrived. They must have figured out a way to keep the alarm from going off – ”

I interrupted, “Wait a minute. The alarm did go off. They called me – and you.”

“The alarm company reported a stair pad as the alarm trigger. The perimeter sensors weren’t triggered, according to their report.”

“What’s it like inside?”

“There’s no damage. We can’t even tell if they took anything. If you’ll come with me, we can walk the place for our report.”

I said, “The stair pad triggers a silent alarm. Was the siren going off when you guys got here?”

“No, it wasn’t. The alarm company registered the stair pad as a silent alarm.”

“So, it’s possible,” I asked, “that the people who were here didn’t know the alarm was going off?”

“Maybe. The only way they could have known is if they noticed that your telephone was in use. Does your home phone have a “line in use” indicator?”

“Yep. Sure does.” I couldn’t help feeling like I had outsmarted myself. We walked inside with the officer, whose name was Larry Higgins, and went from room to room to find absolutely nothing missing or out of place. My coin collection was there; Kami’s

jewelry was there. I have a floor safe in one of the closets upstairs but it didn't appear that anyone had tried to get into it. Drawers, if they had been searched, didn't show it. Nothing.

The back door was badly broken, but if the stair alarm had not been triggered, there would have been no way to demonstrate that anyone had been in the house. The police officers dusted around the back door for fingerprints, but found no clear ones. I filled out some paperwork, then they gave us their telephone numbers and took off.

I found a board in the garage to wedge against the back door, then Kami and I went upstairs to bed. We lay stiffly in bed for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling. It was like we were in storage. I said, "I hope I'm not overreacting, but this is really giving me the creeps."

"Glad to hear you say it, Kenny. I find it very upsetting, too." Calm. We drifted off to sleep without saying goodnight.

Most of the next few days were uneventful. On Friday, I finally mustered the fortitude to face the now four stacks of papers and other detritus of corporate life that covered my desk. I worked almost all day with the door closed and the phone blocked by Wanda, and felt pretty good about what I accomplished.

It wasn't until 3:30 that afternoon that something happened to upset an otherwise good day. The phone rang, its tones indicating an outside call. I knew it had to be transferred in by Wanda, so I answered it.

"Ken? John Litton. How are you today?"

"Better than the last time you saw me. Thanks for asking. I apologize for being pretty out of it on Monday."

"Entirely understandable. Are you up for a couple of questions about your burglary on Tuesday?"

I said, "Sure."

"Am I correct that nothing was taken?"

"If anything was taken, we can't figure out what it was," I answered.

"And they broke into your home by use of a crowbar?"

"Yeah, that's what your uniformed guys thought. Some kind of pry, anyway."



Litton said, "Listen, has anybody spoken to you today about Dr. Auriano's house?"

"No. I've been out of the loop today. What's up?"

"We sent a car by Dr. Auriano's house on Monday morning, routine procedure, but of course they didn't have a key and the house was locked. Nobody went back with a key until yesterday afternoon. When our people arrived, they found that the back door had been pried open, and had apparently stayed partially open for a couple of days. It was pretty cold in there. Some pipes had frozen and there will be leakage when they warm up."

I said, "Great. Just great." We were silent for a moment, then I continued, "Was anything taken?"

"Nothing obvious. TV's, computers, and sound system were all there. Were you aware that Dr. Auriano collected etchings?"

I said, "Yes, I know about those."

Litton continued, "They all appear to be there. Did you know that he also collected dolls?"

"Dolls? No, but I'm not surprised. That would be something he would think was a funny thing to do, considering the business he was in."

He said, "Some of his dolls are apparently pretty valuable."

More silence, then I said, "So, somebody broke into Bobby's house and took nothing and somebody broke into my house and took nothing?"

"That's the way it looks at this point."

"Can you tell when they broke into Bobby's house?"

"Not yet. We've got somebody working on that now."

I asked, "So, are we talking about crimes that may have been committed by the same person?"

"Not necessarily, but some investigators associate a lack of missing items with a more skillful burglar."

"I'm confused. Isn't the goal of burglary to have as many things 'missing' as possible?"

"No," he almost chuckled, "More skillful means someone with the ability to deliver a specific item to a fence. If they don't find that item, they don't take anything."

“Wow. Never crossed my mind. So do you think that Bobby’s home and my home were the targets of a criminal of that sort?”

“There’s an inconsistency. The breaking of the door with the crowbar and the behavior once inside the dwelling don’t match. In other words, the kind of person who targets specific items doesn’t usually gain entry by prying a door open.”

“So what *do* they do?”

“Pick the lock.”

“John...,” I said slowly, “Do you have any guesses? Should I assume that it was the same person? Is this related to Bobby’s murder? I guess what I’m really asking is, why did you call me about this?”

He said, “First, I wanted to see if you knew of any reason why something like that might happen to you and Dr. Auriano at the same time. At this point, we don’t even have a firm basis to link either burglary to the murder. Just chasing down the loose ends.”

“Well, we’ve already been over one possibility. We both know...knew...key R&D developments at Koehler Toys.”

“Definitely a possibility, but we have to guard against applying the most exciting theory to a simple set of facts. Burglaries aren’t uncommon, even in Madison. Some experts believe that sometimes burglaries occur because someone has been murdered – curiosity seekers, opportunists, people like that. Or, it could just be a coincidence.”

“Isn’t there anything more definite?”

“No, not yet. We’ll focus on nothing being taken from either place.” He hesitated for a moment. “I have another reason for calling. One of the last emails Dr. Auriano sent was to you, about a prototype of that doll you told me about.”

I said, “Right.”

Litton said, “Just tracking this down. What was he asking you to do?”

“He wanted me to look over an engineering design for the Lolli prototype.” I was amazed at how easily that lie popped out. No effort at all. I continued, “He had sent some drawings over and wanted me to take them home so that I could have them reviewed by the next

day.” I had wondered at the time I first read his note about why Bobby was being so cryptic about the Lolli prototype, and I wondered during my conversation with John if it was so I would have the ability to lie about possessing it. Whether any of that was real or not, I was well into the lie at that point.

Litton asked, “So, do you think those designs could have anything to do with his murder?”

I said, “Noooo, no I don’t think so. It was mostly about how much it would cost to mass produce the doll.” Pants on fire.

That seemed to satisfy Litton. He said, “Okay, one more thing: Do you remember that I said there would be a lead agent from the DCI heading up the investigation?”

I said, “Sure, I remember that.”

“Well, I have a name for you. It is Belinda Parker. Dr. Belinda Parker. She’ll be coordinating the investigation and will contact you if she needs additional information. I’ll be involved but she’ll be in charge.”

I shrugged my shoulders, then said, “Okay, I guess. I’d kinda prefer to work with people I know and trust.”

“The DCI’s expertise is amazing, Ken. You’re far more likely to get Dr. Auriano’s murderer caught with the DCI working on it.” He said he would let me know if anything else developed, and hung up.

I don’t know why, exactly, but something about that conversation knocked the legs out from under my confidence that anybody was going to be caught at all. It just seems like they’ve got nothing and now a bunch of out-of-town strangers are going to figure it out? I knew I’d had enough for one day, so I grabbed my briefcase, said good night to Wanda, and left for home.

In the back of my mind, becoming more insistent, were two words: Dollie Lolli. Was someone after the prototype? If so, why? Who even knew about it? It could have been another toy company, of course, but those sorts of shenanigans are uncommon in the doll industry despite the cutthroat competition. Video games, maybe, but not dolls. It just didn’t add up. Still, Bobby’s enthusiasm over the doll, and my own surprise at her performance, gave life to a little thought in my otherwise overtired, overwrought brain – that there

was a relationship between the doll and Bobby's murder. I realized as I was pulling out of the Koehler lot that the prototype was still in the box in my office closet. I thought perhaps I should go back and get it, but I didn't want to go back.

I got my chance to retrieve the doll that night because of a phone call at 8:00 PM. It was another MPD officer – Jared Olson. He said he was working with John Litton on the Auriano case and that Litton had asked him to call me. The police had received a call from Koehler Toys' alarm service company about a break-in at the administrative offices. Litton was on his way over there. Olson suggested that I might want to head over there, too, and made me promise that I would stop outside the parking lot entrance, turn off my headlights and not get out of my vehicle until I was instructed to do so by one of the officers. We hung up and I said to Kami, "This is getting really interesting, want to go with me?"

"Where?"

"To the office, there's been a break-in."

"No, I'll wait here and would prefer that you do the same."

"Nope. I'm going. There may be a call from Stemmons Alarms. If they call, tell them I'm on my way over there." I grabbed my coat and headed out to my truck.

By the time I arrived, the police were there and it was apparent that no one had been caught on the premises. The break-in had not been successful. There were only a few pry marks around one of the locks on the lobby door. I guessed that the alarm had been set off by vibration sensors in the glass next to the door. The sirens were still blaring into the frozen night air.

John asked me to unlock the building and disarm the alarm system. I went quietly to the closet in my office to be sure that the box containing the Lolli prototype was still there. It was. I decided then and there that the prototype needed a much more secure home, because I was becoming really concerned that somebody might be after it. Maybe it was melodramatic and silly to fancy Lolli as the target of industrial espionage, but I had no better explanation for the Koehler Toys crime wave.

The officers didn't stay long at the plant office. They filled out a few reports. I signed a statement that I let them into the building and that nothing appeared to have been damaged or stolen.

John Litton flopped onto my office couch, blew a long breath, and said, "You're wearing me out, being my best customer."

I smiled and said, "I really appreciate Detective Olson's call, John."

"No problem. We've got to pick up the pace on figuring this thing out. Dr. Parker wants to go to a higher gear. She thinks it's getting away from us." I certainly agreed with that, but didn't show it to John.

He continued, "This one definitely was not a coincidence. I'm darned tired and need to get some rest. I'll call you." Without further comment, he left.

I was becoming afraid of my relationship to the doll. Was it a target? Or was I seeing industrial espionage where it didn't exist? Maybe Bobby was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, a tragic victim of a botched burglary, nothing more.

It put me in mind of all the bomb threats that they have at schools these days. Most of them mean nothing, but who can be sure? It's not prudent to rule out any threat, no matter how trivial. Bobby's murder probably has a simple explanation. It's just that I can't relax and accept that, yet. On the night of the attempted Admin Offices break-in, all this worrying led me to do some pretty weird things.

After I made sure that no one was around, including the few folks who had stopped to see what could bring four blinking police cars to the Koehler offices when they were closed, I took Lolli's box and left the office.

I go to the Community Center several times a week and frequently see an old guy there named Herb. He's retired and hangs around the gym almost every day, picking up racquetball games and kicking the butts of unsuspecting younger guys. Herb's not a gloater or a bragger, so it's pretty easy to take when he whips you.

Herb seems kind of lonely. He lives near the gym and has invited me into his house a couple of times when I've given him a ride home. He's one of those people who seem almost desperate to help

you out. So, I decided that Herb could definitely help me by giving Lolli a place to stay for a few days.

I took an erratic path to Herb's, first hauling ass south on 455<sup>th</sup> Avenue, then swinging left onto 235<sup>th</sup> Street. I went north on 456<sup>th</sup> past Highway 34 onto the dirt road, then gradually made my way up to Herb's house on north Summit. I just needed to feel sure that nobody was following me. It was somewhat embarrassing to jerk the truck around like that, but it seemed like a fair trade for making sure that no one but me would know where the prototype was.

I made up a story for Herb about a gift for Kami. I'd just bought it at the mall in Sioux Falls, she was on to me and thought she knew what the gift was, and could I hide it in his house? He seemed delighted to be involved in this little conspiracy. I left the box but took the paperwork, promising myself that I would make a photocopy the next day and hide it as well. I told Herb that I wasn't sure when I was going to give Kami her present, but that I'd give him a call or see him at the gym to let him know when I needed to pick it up.

In the truck, I chuckled to myself, thinking about Herb's reaction if he were to peek in the box. Seeing a baby doll with all kinds of wires coming out of its head might make him think that he was in one of those slash and slay horror flicks in which the doll's evil-filled eyes pop open at all the wrong moments. He would think I was one sick bastard to give such a thing to my girlfriend and, given the opportunity, I would do absolutely nothing to disabuse him of that notion.

Kami was anxious to know what was going on at the office. I filled her in on everything that happened except taking the prototype over to Herb's. Later, in bed, I listened to her measured, soft snores and felt uneasy about not telling her more about the prototype. I could make up excuses if I worked at it. She's hypersensitive about my job and might take it the wrong way. If I'm in danger, anyone I confide in could be in danger as well. She might think the whole story to be silly, and that would add to our recent tensions. Rationalizations aplenty. What a tangled web we weave.

In the past few days, Kami and I have been getting along better. Maybe it's because I left the night Bobby was murdered, who knows? Trouble is, underneath it all, I just feel like she's mad about something. I've tried to broach the subject of her submerged anger several times by joking about it and calling it "fury" with a capital F, like the horse in the kid's story. I say, "How's Fury today?" or "Have you taken Fury out for a ride lately?" She does not see the humor in these remarks and never opens up to say what's really wrong.

The next morning, I called my dad. He is a political science professor at Iowa State University, just an afternoon's drive south and east from Madison. He's been there for the last 18 years or so, and has lived alone since my mom passed away six years ago. And, of course, he's the smartest person in the world.

Mom was a physician. It was a draining existence for her, but she loved it dearly. She continued her full set of duties through age 69. She just couldn't quit. The right opening to slow down or shift to something else never presented itself. She worried that a sudden decrease in activity would throw her life out of kilter, based on an article she read many years ago about postmen falling into bad health shortly after retirement.

My dad's protests that she should slow down meant nothing. She was sure that retirement would do her in. As my dad explained later, many of those postmen would have fallen into bad health if they *hadn't* retired. She went into cardiac arrest, at her desk, while working on a patient's chart. I hope I'm that happy and fulfilled at the end of my life. It's surprising how often I still think of her.

Dad was as active in raising me as Mom was. He went to school meetings, on field trips, and took me to the park. When I was in high school, I spent almost as much time with him as I did with my friends, and nothing has changed in the years since. I've reached the beginning of middle-age and he's become, I hate to say it out loud, elderly, but he's still my answer man and we're very close.

My dad's home phone has a bell, like all phones used to have before the phone companies learned that electronic chirpers are 23 times cheaper than bells. Sometimes when he answers the phone, I can hear the last ding of the bell after the receiver was lifted from the

cradle. I heard it that morning, followed by Dad's familiar, radio announcer voice saying, "Hello, this is Liam Murphy. May I help you?"

"Yes, you certainly may, Liam Murphy. Ken Murphy calling."

"Hey, Ken."

I smiled. "Dad, I've got a doozy for you."

"Okay. Science, practical or Dad?" His usual opening question, to determine the type of advice that I want to receive. He always lets me choose. Science advice deals with cause and effect. Facts, figures, what happened first, etcetera. Practical advice is different from science, based on a mixture of Dad's experience, opinions, and knowledge of me. "Dad" advice is completely nonscientific and frequently impractical, but is sometimes the most valuable, as it reflects his wishes and hopes as a parent.

I said, "Dad, before we go into that, let's catch up a little. How is everything?"

"It's good, Ken, overall. I haven't been feeling quite as well in the last week or so as I had been before that. My arm is bothering me."

"Your arm?"

"Yeah, up in my shoulder."

"How did it come on?"

"You know your mother had that bird house that she was so fond of. A couple of the shingles popped off its roof. It meant a lot to your mother, so I wanted to get it back together right away. I guess the hammering aggravated something in my shoulder, I don't know."

"I hope it gets better soon Dad."

"So, you've got problems at the toy company? Are you still depressed over the murder of your friend?"

"Yeah, Dad, but it's worse than being 'depressed'. Much worse."

"Okay, you've got my full attention. Science, practical, or Dad?"

"This one is complicated enough that I don't even know what I want to hear first. Let me start with this: I think Bobby may have been murdered for some reason other than just a break-in, but the police just don't see it."

"Why do you say that?"



“It’s been almost a week since the murder and the police are clueless as to what happened. The lady in charge kind of admitted it to one of the local cops. It’s very frustrating.”

Dad said, “A week isn’t that long of a time to solve a murder without witnesses, Ken. Maybe you’re expecting too much.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I think they should’ve arrested someone by now. In addition to that, the local guys are not used to this kind of thing, so a bunch of state detectives have descended on us from Pierre.”

Dad asked, “What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s just that they’re not from here and really don’t understand Madison all that well.”

Dad kept going. “So far, you haven’t told me anything that would keep them from solving the murder.”

“Look, Dad, his head was caved in with a shovel. It was during a break-in. They can’t see past panic to other motives. They can’t see that this murder is just not a Madison kind of thing.”

“Ken, do you think you have more familiarity with those types of crimes than the state and local police?”

That took me aback just a bit. I said reluctantly, “Well... no, of course not.”

Dad persisted, “In all seriousness, do you think they should have arrested someone within one week of the crime? This isn’t a TV drama, you know.”

I hesitated, feeling the strength of my argument fade.

Dad said, “Okay, let’s talk about the incident itself. You told me before that Bobby was murdered on the Koehler premises during a burglary attempt. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“It’s funny, Dad. On the surface, it seems simple, but underneath it must be more complicated. They broke in through a window in the factory and made their way to the R&D lab. What they were going to do, we’re not sure, maybe steal computers or equipment. Apparently Bobby confronted them and was hit on the head with a shovel.”

“So there was a fight? A struggle?”

“Apparently not. He was just attacked.”

“Why did they use a shovel?”

“A weapon of convenience, I suppose. The police think it was used to break in.”

“Why do they think that?” Typical of Dad, a question for everything.

I answered, “Marks on the window frame fit with a shovel being used as a lever.”

Dad asked, “So, was a shovel found?”

“It was outside the window on the ground.”

Dad asked, “Outside?”

I confirmed, “Yeah, outside.”

Dad asked, “So, they broke in with a shovel, killed Bobby with it, then took it with them back out the window and threw it down outside?”

“Right.”

He went on, “Why do you think they would have done that?”

“Done what, Dad?”

“Taken the shovel with them out the window.”

“Honestly Dad, I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. Maybe they panicked after seeing the damage they’d done. Maybe they didn’t realize they had the shovel with them until they were outside. Why is that important?”

Dad answered, “The shovel being outside doesn’t sound right. It makes me agree with you a little bit. Maybe it wasn’t just a burglary. Mind you, I don’t have a rip-roaring good alternative, but this shovel thing could be a problem. It couldn’t hurt to see if they’ve checked everything carefully.”

“Okay, I’ll ask them about it.”

“Now, Ken, don’t go off and get in the way of the police investigation. Settle down a bit. Don’t expect the whole thing to be fixed by tomorrow. I know it must be hard with all the stress you’re feeling, but you need to try to slow down. You’re so wound up that stress could cause you additional problems.”

I promised to take things one step at a time and we hung up.

Okay, today is... January 24th. Wednesday. This has been an okay week, so far. The office and plant have mostly returned to normal and people have managed to press on in an ugly situation.

Bobby's funeral was on Monday the 22nd in Kansas City. As Arthur had suggested, the company rented several buses for the trip down. They were a big help because they let us experience the whole thing as a group.

Much like his life, Bobby's funeral was simple, elegant and sweet. No dirges, no sobbing family, no extensive laments by the priest; just a simple, dignified ceremony. I found it very difficult to talk to his mom, dad, and sister Marissa, who's just 15 years old. I had spent a little time with Marissa, as startlingly beautiful a child as I have ever seen, on several occasions when Bobby and I had traveled to Kansas City on business. It was obviously difficult for her to bring off the dignity and restraint that her parents expected. I wanted to hug her, to make her believe that it was going to be all right, but I didn't feel free to do that and was afraid that I would make her cry. Looking back on it, I wish I had tried to lift some of Marissa's grief.

The one person who completely lost it was Marnie Sylvester, Bobby's ex. Marnie is the *wunderkind* owner and CEO of SilicoTech, a Minneapolis research firm that supplies integrated circuits for several of Koehler's products. Most of us thought Marnie and Bobby would marry until they suddenly called it quits about a year ago. God knows I've been distraught over his death, but not like Marnie was that day. They had stayed in touch but not gotten along well since the breakup and I'm sure she was feeling regrets that the rest of us can't imagine.

Marnie never even took a seat at the service because her sobs were too distracting to those around her. She paced around outside in the cold. I found her after the burial and did what I could to console her, but it wasn't enough. At one point I had my arms around her, and she just gave way and sagged, held up only by my embrace. She put her face against my chest and just heaved pure sobs. I let her cry for a while, thinking that she would cry herself out. That didn't happen. She eventually righted herself, found just enough strength to

momentarily control her sobs, and said, “Please call me, Ken. We must talk.” Then she descended again into abject misery as she walked away. I told her that I would call, but privately I wasn’t so sure. It seemed to me that it would be far easier for me to move toward her shattered sadness than for her to move toward my clenched-jawed composure. People who murder should have to continuously witness Marnie’s sadness, *A Clockwork Orange*-style, until they go stark, raving, mad.

We made our way back to the buses by late afternoon and started the trek back up to Madison. Most of the Koehler Toys people weren’t grief stricken. They were almost lifted from within by a remembrance of Bobby’s noble spirit. It was a fitting memory for him. Lou Mallory and I were on the same bus. We are the two other legs of the tripod that holds up Koehler operations. The loss of the R&D leg has put an unbalanced load on us. We agreed that we would get together to hoist a few in Bobby’s memory, and set a date for this Friday to have a nice dinner and reminisce about our buddy. It needs to be done.

With stops for dinner, the funeral convoy didn’t get back to Madison until 1:00 in the morning and I decided that I wasn’t going to work on Tuesday. I awoke at 11:00 AM yesterday to a surprisingly spring-like day for late January. Kami, according to a note taped to the bathroom mirror, had departed for the library. I thought, “I have an entire afternoon with nothing planned and nowhere to go. Today would be a perfect day to learn more about Dolli Lolli.”

I had put the whole question of what the doll could do out of my mind for a week, letting it all sink in that the prototype could be related to the burglaries, though I had no additional evidence. Time away from the prototype increased my curiosity, plus nothing new had come from the police and already two weeks had flown since Bobby was killed on the 8th.

I planned to cruise down to the gym for a workout and “run into” Herb and suggest that we go back to his place and pick up the box. I made a double cup of strong coffee, heavy cream, and a sizable amount of sugar. Nothing like getting a little wired on my day off.

By 2:30 I had the box and was ready to settle in. I took out Bobby's notes. There was quite a bit of mundane information on tests he had run. About six or eight pages in, I found a section about how the doll learns to respond to her owner.

Bobby was a doodler. He would make boxes around words, chevrons underneath things, and curly lines down the side of the paper. The pages were covered with doodles. A diagonal box in the upper right-hand corner of a page caught my attention. In it were the words "not a neural network", with the word "not" capitalized and its letters retraced to make it bold. Discussions Bobby and I had when he started the design led me to believe that Lolli Lolli's basic mental circuits *were* a neural network. I just assumed that his work would progress along that main vein of engineering research.

In the margin, Bobby had jotted some mathematical formulas. I could only guess at their purpose. They seemed to imply that the doll's hardware was capable of learning, as opposed to a neural network, which is usually implemented as software. Maybe this was Bobby's big breakthrough, his reason for being so excited about the prototype. Perhaps "learning" isn't even the best word to describe what he was trying to design. The word "habituated" was in the notes in several places. I had the feeling that amazement was just around the corner, but still worried that Bobby's great mind had stripped a gear and that it could all turn out to be bull, at least in the practical sense. A toy that learns like a person? Just didn't seem doable. On top of it all, I couldn't stop wondering if the designs he was working on could be related to his murder.

I wanted to hook it all up and make it talk again, so I took out my laptop and re-plugged all the wires. Sure enough, up popped Lolli's face again. I said, "Hi Lolli, how are you?"

The face said, "I am fine, how are you?" That 15-year-old's voice coming out of a baby's face nearly put me back into an attack of the laughs like the last time. Dances of sugarplum-fairy financial analysts filled my head when I contemplated what this doll was going to do for Koehler Toys and for the doll business in general. It could send a jolt through the toy market – like Nintendo, Hula Hoops, Barbie, and Elmo. Like them, it could change what kids think

is fun. Trouble was, I doubted we could get there without Bobby. If he wasn't pretty far along in the design, nobody else on staff could finish it – at least not without practically starting over. I had to know how far he had gotten, so there ensued a road test of the prototype by me, a 44-year-old toy geek – the perfect analog for our real customers, 10-year-old girls.

I said, "I love you, Lolli."

The face on the computer assumed a beatific look and said, "I love you, too." Without thinking, I smiled at the display on the laptop. How quickly we can be taken in by machines that act the way we want people to act. Then it said, "Hug me."

I didn't know exactly what to do because it wasn't really the doll's body that I was interacting with. Awkwardly, I said, "You're my sweet girl."

The next section of Bobby's notes indicated that the doll could do mathematical calculations. Even after hearing it talk, I doubted its sophistication and decided to test it.

I said, "What is 3 plus 3?"

"3 plus 3 is 6."

"What is 3 times 3?"

The doll answered, "3 times 3 is 9. These problems are easy. Give me a hard one."

I'm sorry to admit that I briefly thought that it would be best if the production version of the doll never said "Give me a hard one," though the fifteen-year-old's voice may have been a factor. Feeling a bit contrary I said, "What is the square root of 8 times 641?"

With no hesitation whatsoever, it said, "One thousand eight hundred thirteen, point zero two one seven nine." It hesitated a moment and added, "That was harder."

I said, "You're a smarty pants."

"No, I'm not." In spite of trudging through Bobby's notes and doodles, I was confused as to how such sophisticated programming could be in a mid-development prototype. He had not clued me in to the step forward that this version of the doll represented. Nothing like this has ever been near the market nor, to the best of my knowledge, in R&D anywhere. The most sophisticated speech recognition

programs in commercial software are nowhere near this level, and they require significant computer power. Even with that power and with extensive and constantly updated training by the user, they don't recognize laughter or tone of voice, or converse as the Lolli prototype does.

First thing I had to know was if this was just an improved Siri, Apple's talking interface. Siri somewhat converses with a user. I had to know if I could confuse the program, so I said, "Did you know it's raining outside?"

The face on the laptop screen looked perplexed, then the computer said, "I don't hear it raining."

Without thinking I said, "Okay, Robert," using a name for Bobby that I never used in any but a reproving tone. Real-time, interactive audio. It doesn't just talk – it listens! I don't think Siri can do that, or at least not in that way. On the other hand, I still had not seen anything that was a leap forward, still nothing that would justify Bobby's caution about the technology.

Still not wanting to play fair, I said, "It's not raining outside."

From the computer's speakers, a question, "Why did you say it was raining?"

Now I was seeing the part that wasn't so childlike. I answered, "Just to be funny."

It said, "Oh, that wasn't funny." Clearly, Bobby had given the prototype a personality, and not a very childlike one. All I could do was juggle my amazement at the prototype's performance and Bobby's impenetrable set of notes and diagrams. I turned a couple of pages, stopping at a table that he had drawn, headed "Lolli phone calls." At first I couldn't understand what that meant in the context of testing the doll. Then I realized that the table reported tests of the doll's ability to make telephone calls. On a doodled bed of grass and flowers was the phrase, "You need to make a call, Lolli."

Figuring I had nothing to lose, and wondering just how far the doll's processor could go without some kind of instruction, I said, "You need to make a call, Lolli."

Fifteen year old girl: "Who do you want me to call?"

Not knowing if it would even work, I said, "Liam Murphy."

A moment's pause then, "Liam Murphy of Ames, Iowa?"

I said, "Yes."

"Home, office, or cell?"

"Office."

Skype opened on my computer and began dialing my dad's office. The computer's version of the doll's voice said, "Dialing." I had no idea of how it knew to guess my dad's phone number, and wondered if it somehow knew my voice and assumed that the Liam Murphy I would call would be my dad.

I could hear my dad's phone ringing through the computer's speaker. Then he answered. The same 15-year-old's voice, now on the phone, said, "Good afternoon. My name is Lolli Koehler. I'm trying to reach Liam Murphy. Is he available?"

My dad said, "Speaking."

The doll said, "Can you hold, please?"

My dad said, "Sure."

The doll said, through the computer's speaker but not into the call, "Your call is ready."

I didn't know what to say. I said, "Hi, Dad. How are you today?"

"Fine," he said. "What's up?"

My growing enslavement to keeping everything about the Lolli prototype a secret helped me to formulate a quick lie. "We've just installed a new voice dialing system here at Koehler and I'm just testing it out. Plus I wanted to ask about your shoulder."

"Shoulder's doing fine," he said. "You doing okay?"

"Oh yes, Dad. Also doing fine. Well, I guess I better get off. Good visiting with you."

"Good to hear your voice, Ken. Talk with you soon." He hung up.

I had seen enough. Enough to know that comparison to other toys is pointless. Lolli's CU has a much larger array of speech recognition than any computer that I've seen. Maybe larger than anyone has seen.

I sat for at least 5 minutes, periodically shifting my gaze from the laptop's screen, to the cognitive unit attached via a spray of wires, then out the window. Considering the math demonstration, the out-



of-the-box recognition of my voice, and the phone dialing exercise, I knew for certain that Dolli Lolli could be the cause of our recent troubles. If word of her prodigious abilities got out, it could inspire unprecedented greed. Why use this technology in a doll when it could be used as an all-in-one office assistant? Not to mention telephone sales reps, operators, technical support, and who knows what else? I shut the whole thing down and packed it away in the box.

I needed to find another hiding place, but couldn't exactly take the box back to Herb. So I drove out to the Community Center and put the box in my locker. Centipedes of paranoia crawled in my veins, making me sure that someone was following me. Of course no one was following me. I just needed to force those thoughts from my mind.

My next step will be to find out who else knows about Lolli. No question some of Bobby's assistants will know pieces of the puzzle. Each works on a specific assignment that Bobby gives them... or I should say gave them, and knows little of the work of others. I'll have to put it all together.

My first contact will be with Helen Javail. She's the most senior and one of the few who works full time, maybe the most likely to know some big picture stuff, though I doubt she'll have anywhere near the full circle of knowledge possessed by Bobby, myself, and perhaps Arthur.



### FILE 3

Okay, today is Monday, January 29th.

Lou Mallory and I had a superb evening on Friday. We intended to focus our thoughts on Bobby without becoming maudlin, and mostly succeeded, though there were a couple of really sad moments.

Lou came out of Oklahoma State and played tight end for the Vikings for a couple of years in the mid-90's, but was never a household name, even in this part of the country. After a couple of seasons, they cut him loose and nobody else wanted him. He'd spent his off-seasons enrolled in a Master's program in operations management, so he was ready for a new career. He held a series of production jobs around the Midwest and showed a real knack for interfacing R&D and production. Lou came to Koehler Toys about eight years ago. By the time I got here six years ago, he was ready to leave. I consider his staying my first accomplishment at the company, the first of several early challenges related to Arthur's dark view of the world.

It was completely like Arthur, who can be pretty perverse when it suits him, to hire a black man into a senior management job, even though he has little use for black people as a whole. It went okay at first. Arthur never made overtly racist statements to Lou, but the relationship didn't hold up well. Given Arthur's view of the world, Lou got blamed for a lot of things that were "wrong" at the plant.

I was forced to deal with their conflict in my first week on the job. Many of the problems were Lou's responsibility, but Arthur would reject Lou's proposed solutions, then blame him for lack of progress. It's hard for it to be all your fault when it's not all your plan. Their relationship had deteriorated to the point that Arthur told me to "get right on the problem" because he was convinced that Lou was going to sue Koehler Toys for employment discrimination. Arthur wanted me to find a way to dump Lou while avoiding a lawsuit.

I didn't have confidence at that point in either Arthur's or Lou's point of view. I had no coherent data on the ups and downs of the

plant, and Arthur performed an early screw-job on his credibility by making it clear that Lou's failings stemmed from his race. "People with Lou's background are just not well-suited to this kind of work," he said. Even at that early point in my tenure at Koehler, I knew what Arthur meant by "background". On the other side of the problem, Lou was so mad at Arthur that he just wasn't rational. Everything he said about Arthur ended in expletives, which was going some for a church-going guy who didn't approve of swearing.

I talked to staff people in the plant – supervisors, designers, accountants. Most of them thought Lou was doing okay. His problems with Arthur were the only real source of criticism. "Mr. Koehler has found his button, and presses it before eight every single morning," one supervisor told me. A shipping supervisor said, "Lou can't make up his mind whether he's in charge of the plant or whether Art Koehler's in charge of it." A purchasing agent who's known Arthur his entire life had the best one: "Based on his opinion of blacks, Koehler lost confidence in Mallory. Based on his opinion of Koehler, Mallory is losing confidence in whites." The things that were "wrong" at the plant turned out to be incomplete accomplishment of ambitious goals, not serious production problems. No way did they add up to a firing offense.

I said the other day that my principal function at Koehler Toys is to act as a management buffer and public face for the company. What I didn't know coming in was that the problems with Lou were the trigger for Arthur bringing in a general manager. He must've thought that he'd made a colossal mistake in hiring me because I went directly against him and sided with Lou. I found a way to keep the firm from being sued, all right, but not the way that Arthur anticipated.

I met with Lou and promised him six months of no interference – time to implement his ideas with no second-guessing. I also promised him that he could have as much contact with Arthur as he chose. A lot if he could stand it, less if he couldn't, and asked that he cooperate with me in keeping the dark side of Arthur out of the operation of the business. I admitted straight up that I was being brought in as a buffer, not merely between him and Arthur, but

between Arthur's world view and everybody. That did not impress Lou in the slightest, and certainly didn't leave him with the impression that I was any sort of management genius. He went along because his kids were happy in their school and his wife liked Madison.

The problems at the plant began to sort themselves out. Meanwhile, Lou and Arthur's relationship went into the deep freeze. They rarely speak directly to each other, even at meetings where they are together for hours.

Though we're close, Lou and I haven't socialized as much as Bobby and I did, mostly because of the difference in our lifestyles – Lou is uncomfortable with Kami's and my living arrangement, though he's never said it in so many words. He's a conservative, church-goer type, and doesn't believe that "shacking up" is the right choice, especially for a guy heading into middle age. Still, I respect him for the truly good man that he is. Our dinner on Friday temporarily lifted the burden I've carried since Bobby's murder. We promised to increase our outside-of-work time together, and to help each other overcome our loss.

There was one little rough spot, though. About halfway through dinner, Lou said, "Ken, how many drinks have you had tonight?"

It caught me off guard, but I told the truth, saying, "Honestly, I'm not sure. Three or four, I suppose."

Lou said, "Eight."

I responded, "What? Ate what?"

"Eight drinks."

I shot back, "Naw, c'mon, bullshit!"

He said flatly, "Eight. You'd better keep an eye on it."

I was still defensive and said, "That's just your view of things. I'm all right."

"It's not 'my' view, Ken. I'm not an angel or a prude. When I was playing ball, I could drink anybody under the table. I know more about this than you think."

I asked, "So... you think it's too much?"

"Probably."

I wish I'd been mature enough to stop drinking after he said that, but I couldn't resist declaring my independence by ordering one more double. He didn't seem to notice.

I didn't tell Lou about the prototype. It's just not the right time yet, plus that would have been a business discussion, off-limits for the evening. At some point, though, I'll have to fill him in.

The DCI concluded their interviews of Koehler employees about ten days ago. Based on the complete lack of news about the murder in the media, I can only assume that nothing important turned up. I decided that maybe I should talk to some people at the plant.

I met Helen Javail, Bobby's senior research assistant, on Thursday afternoon. She was very cooperative and generally seemed to be handling Bobby's loss pretty well. I wondered if she intended to become a candidate for Bobby's job. She is an extraordinarily bright engineer, with a future to match, and a superior employee. It's just that she's not Bobby. My dad has a sign on his office wall that says, "Research is to see what everyone else has seen, and to think what no-one else has thought," a quote from some famous Nobel Prize winner. That sign describes Bobby perfectly. He thought differently from everyone else, with spectacular results. At this point I can't imagine how to go about replacing him.

Helen and I met in her work area, which she has tweaked to perfection. Everything is spotless and perfectly placed, an accurate representation of her work. Even her unbuttoned lab coat over a teal wool suit was perfect, and perfectly matched to her eyeglasses. I thought of Dorothy Parker's line about girls who wear glasses seldom getting passes, and girls who are bespectacled seldom getting their necks tickled. Dorothy should have known Helen.

I said, "Helen, how are things?"

She turned, took her glasses from her face, and let them dangle on the end of their chain. "As well as could be expected, Ken."

"And how well is that?"

She answered, "We're all back to work, plugging along pretty much where we were before the break-in."

I said, “Tell me about Bobby’s work in the two weeks before he died.”

Her rejoinder caught me a little off guard. “I thought he gave you reports.”

Conscious of how I was sounding, I said, “He did, but right now I’m just trying to wrap some tape and bailing wire around this situation. I need details.” That was a brand new lie. I wasn’t trying to hold the R&D function together. I was playing detective.

Helen said, “Bobby was spending all his time on the Lolli prototype in the weeks before he was killed. He worked days, nights, and weekends. Clyde thought he wasn’t even leaving the building. I don’t know how he did it. I’ve never seen him so excited over a project and I’ve never heard him talk about any doll the way he did about Lolli. He said she was going to ‘rock’ the toy industry. Not the doll industry, the *toy* industry. There’ve been only five or six toys in my entire life that have done that.”

After seeing the prototype perform, I knew what she meant. A toy that “rocks the industry” would change Koehler’s position forever. Those involved in the design would get famous, like movie directors. Given Arthur’s incentive programs, they’d also get rich. Really rich. I nodded knowingly at Helen, thinking about our “dream doll” having a nap in my locker at the Community Center.

I prodded and prompted her to fill in the gaps in my own understanding of the doll, and her explanations were to the point. Mostly she confirmed what I already knew: Lolli’s cognitive processing unit is a completely new type of hardware that does not utilize a binary decision structure like other computers. Its circuits have an additional state best described as “not on *and* not off” – Bobby called it the “maybe” circuit. Somehow, in ways that neither Helen nor I knew, Bobby had made the technical leap to hardwired ambivalent computer reasoning.

As Helen talked of Bobby’s accomplishments, I could almost hear his voice, his gentle intensity, and it produced a profound sadness within me, bringing tears to my eyes. I didn’t want to let Helen know how it was affecting me, so I straightened my back, hardened my lower gut, and forced my mind to focus on the

conversation. Finally, after so much wondering about it, I received information that allowed me to make a leap forward in my understanding of Lolli.

Helen said that the prototype's memory and processor are one, as they are in a human brain. The unit does not "forget" when it is turned off, just as the human mind doesn't forget when it sleeps. Items stored in memory subtly change the chip material. "As I understand it," she said softly, "the big breakthrough is the interface between the cognitive unit and the doll's body. The feedback from her senses is analogous to human abilities. Bobby even joked that a future model would have a sense of touch, but we were never sure if he could really do that, or if he was just joshing us." That brought a smile to my face. Bobby's many tricks and jokes had cemented for posterity his status as a master prankster.

Helen's next question again caught me off-guard. "Ken, do you know where Bobby's latest Lolli prototype is? No one can seem to find her or several notebooks related to her development and testing."

I conjured up an expression meant to include surprise and incredulity, with a dash of reproof thrown in, then said, "Helen, something is missing after Bobby's murder and you haven't told anyone about it?"

"Well, uh," she stammered, "umm..." her voice trailed off as she stopped trying to force an answer. She marshaled her thoughts and continued, "Actually I did tell several people, and we've asked the supervisors to check the plant." She struggled to find the words, "We weren't sure there was a problem. I mean, we talked about it among ourselves...we're pretty sure that the prototype was gone before the break-in."

"But you're not completely sure," I said, with a coating of doubt applied.

"No."

"Helen," the tone of disapproval slightly larger in my voice, "this could be very important. We must search for the doll right away. Then I'll decide what to do." That lie made me feel pretty sleazy. You have to be a special kind of low to create guilt in others just to



shore up the lies you've been telling. Of course the prototype was gone before the break-in. Bobby had sent it to me. I didn't waste time with rationalizations. I knew it was a plain, self-protecting lie and told it as such. I was intimidating her and we both knew it, yet I did nothing to lessen the discomfort of the moment.

Helen became agitated. She continuously placed her thumb against the front of the counter, then the top, then the front, back and forth. I felt guilty for being a lying asshole, but was willing to accept whatever damage it caused in exchange for the benefits that secrecy created. If I told anyone that I had the Lolli prototype or that it might be the cause of what we euphemistically call "the break-in", whoever needed that information would be tipped off. As a rule, I don't think I should hand advantages to people who will kill to get what they want.

I asked Helen how she would handle the Lolli project.

"I can't say for sure at this point, Ken, but I am sure that I could figure it out." As I prepared to leave her work area, she reached out and took my hand, then placed her other hand over the back of mine, looked up at me, and said, "I still find it very difficult to deal with all of this."

I placed my other hand on the back of hers and said, quietly, "Helen, I know that you and the folks here will find a way to keep the high quality ideas coming out of this lab." She didn't cry, but sadness seemed etched on her face. I wanted so badly to apologize for pulling rank and making her feel responsible about the missing prototype, but I just couldn't do it. The urge for self-preservation sounds quite noble when someone survives for a week in the forest on ants and pee. It is sickeningly less noble when it consists only of corporate advantage-taking and misinformation.

On Friday, I visited with Clyde Lerrick. Clyde is a cross between a stevedore and an engineer – cranky, foul-mouthed, and irascible at 72 years of age. He teaches Computer Science part time at Dakota State University and works many, many hours at Koehler, most of them not on the clock. He loves the process of engineering more than anyone I've ever known, even Bobby, but covers it up with gruffness. His excitement over the prospects of Dolli Lolli made him

let down his guard a little. He spoke excitedly about the prototype, though his choice of terms didn't quite match Helen's: "Bobby had the big woody for that doll, Ken. God, he loved it! I've seen other devices with learning memories. Bobby's contribution is the interface." A confirmation of Helen's assessment. "That's what makes Lolli a real baby." We talked on for a while but Clyde didn't add anything new to what Helen had told me. He did suggest that I talk to Bobby's friend, Sanjay Chattaroh, another computer scientist at DSU who was privy to some of Bobby's thinking about the new circuitry.

Over lunch on Saturday, Chattaroh explained it this way: "The key difference between human reasoning and computer reasoning is the way that each deals with uncertainty. Computers can deal with uncertainty only through elaborate programs that encode thousands of contingent responses to inputted data. Humans, on the other hand, develop shortcuts – heuristics – to deal with it. Bobby's new circuit also uses heuristics, but largely free of the bias that humans add because of emotion. It is a complete break from existing computer designs – a kind of pure, brute-force learning."

I had no idea of what to say and therefore said nothing. This was encouragement to Chattaroh and he continued, "Ken, did you know that this kind of computer reasoning was invented in the early days of computer design? But because the computer parts required for simpler designs were cheap to produce, we ended up with the binary systems we have now."

I said, "So what's the bottom line here, Sanjay?"

He answered, "Because of efficiencies gained from Bobby's 'maybe' circuit, it reduces by a factor of about one thousand the programming of contingencies to deal with uncertain input. And it increases, by a factor of about ten thousand, the efficiency of retrieving stored information, because there is no maze of contingencies. Even a small physical memory can store libraries of learned relationships and decision making rules. For an important subset of actions and situations, your doll can 'live and learn' just like a person."

I said, “Are we talking robots here? I see Japanese robots stomping around on CNN all the time. I even saw one report where the researchers were trying to make a robot have feelings. You make it sound like the doll’s ability to interact with people is special, but there’s plenty of stuff out there like that.”

Chattaroh shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’m not doing a good job of telling you what I mean. Lolli is nothing like talking robots or talking smartphones. Those interfaces rely on traditional contingency programming like I was describing earlier. After they parse your sentence, they run it against a stored set of possible meanings. If you ask one of those interactive phones something it does not know, it just runs an Internet search. As I understand it from conversations with Bobby, the Lolli prototype does not come pre-programmed like any robot or smartphone that we’ve ever seen. My impression is that it might be able to program itself. That would be true machine learning.

I interrupted Chattaroh, “Look, I use Dragon dictation software. It learns to understand my pronunciation, different people’s names, stuff like that. Is it a larger-scale version of that?”

“No, not like that. Dragon is programmed to take in new information about your speech patterns and adjust settings in the program to better recognize your voice. Its ability to do that is based on an enormously complex program. Bobby planned for Lolli to have no pre-written routines. It can construct its own rubric from the information it receives. Dragon learns new pronunciations of word-sounds it already knows. Lolli is different, maybe in some ways like a real newborn baby. The language it comes to understand is what it is exposed to. It could probably learn how to speak Greek with the right set of teaching materials. Or to design web sites. Or play war simulation video games. Think about babies. Isn’t that what they do – self-program to the language of their parents? They learn to understand it, to speak it, and to act on it. Assuming that what Bobby told me was true and that I understood it correctly, that’s what your newest doll can do. It self-programs in the closest analogy to human learning that I’ve ever known.”

“Look, Sanjay, I’m trying to keep up but you computer guys think about stuff differently than the rest of us.”

He said, “I will try to summarize: If Bobby was able to design the circuits that he told me about, it would be a completely new design, unlike any computer in existence, including any existing robot. His idea would allow a machine to learn in the same way that a person learns.” He then wandered off into engineering egg-head land, talking about trinary circuits and ternary computing, saying a bunch of stuff that only another genius could grasp. But he ended well, saying, “If it is possible for others to develop applications for Bobby’s device, it could change everything, and would make many existing computers obsolete. My interest in the technology is in the prevention of hacking. I think a Lolli-type machine, or maybe an array of them, could really give black hat hackers a run for their money. It could start to anticipate their next moves, even if they were not intentionally cooperating with each other. Of course if the bad guys end up with the technology, computer security as we know it will cease to exist.”

Everything Chattaroh said so far exceeded my knowledge, training, and brain-power that I felt weak-minded and inadequate, but it confirmed what I really wanted to know – that the wealth Lolli’s circuits could generate could easily be big enough to have caused Bobby’s murder.

As we finished our visit I said to Chattaroh, “Bobby asked you to keep this to yourself, right?”

He smiled, “With my work here at DSU, keeping secrets is an important part of the job description.” I thanked him and we parted company.

I had lunch with Arthur on Friday. It’s a regular thing we do, every other week, and provides an opportunity to talk through recent events without a formalized structure or process. He’s somewhat removed – his choice – from the day-to-day operations of the company, and spends most of his time on his family’s medical research foundation, named after his mother, Margarethe Koehler,

who died at age 52 from pneumonia, brought on by Huntington's Disease. Our lunch-time conversations are an opportunity for him to keep his hand in at the company.

I was preoccupied with figuring out who killed Bobby, and sought Arthur's advice about it. "Arthur, have you put much thought on the question of why Bobby was killed at the plant?"

With a hint of dismissiveness he said, "I've tried to put no thought on it at all. It is very upsetting to me."

I pushed on, "But seriously, do you think it could have been job-related?"

"The police think it started out as a burglary. I have to trust their assessment of the situation."

Now I was beginning to be a bit of a dog with a bone. I said, "But what would anybody be trying to steal? What would they be willing to kill for?"

"Those two questions don't really go together, Ken. They could have been trying to steal almost anything – equipment, supplies, computers, even products in inventory. Why they would be willing to kill is a completely separate question. Some people will kill for pocket change, others won't do it even to save their own lives. There is no way we can know what was in the heart of a killer."

"Do you think they could have been after trade secrets?"

He stopped for a second and said nothing, then, "Do I think what?"

"Trade secrets – industrial espionage."

Arthur hesitated again. "It's possible, I guess. Has it come to that – stealing product ideas? Doll designs, work in progress, that kind of thing? In my years in the business, there hasn't been much of that. Anyway, how could killing someone help get trade secrets? An industrial spy would keep as low a profile as possible, don't you think?"

I answered, "I've thought about it a lot, and that's where I get stuck. I can't understand why anyone would kill Bobby as part of a theft. To eliminate a witness, maybe, but the whole thing doesn't add up."

Arthur's lips pursed into a thin line, then he said in a faraway voice, "Maybe he tried to stop them."

I responded quickly, "But the police say there was no struggle."

"Like I said before, you can't know what's in the mind of a person at a time like that. Ken, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

He said, "This is really tearing you up, isn't it?"

"What, the investigation?"

He grew a bit impatient. "Come on, you know what I mean. Losing Bobby is proving very difficult, isn't it?"

Now it was my turn to hesitate. I said quietly, "Some days are better than others. It's the not knowing. If I just knew what happened, knew that there would be some justice, I could have closure and peace. As it is now, I'm floundering."

He looked straight into my eyes and held my gaze. "I'm concerned that it will affect your work."

I couldn't hold his stare as long as he could hold mine. I looked down and said, "I'm not worried about that, and I'm not just saying that because you're the boss. I try very hard to keep my work and my interest in the murder separate, and I think I'm succeeding." I did manage to look up at him again while I said that last part.

He sat back and took a sip of his water. When he had carefully placed his glass on the table, he said, "From my vantage point, it seems that the murder is never very far from your thoughts. In some ways, I don't blame you. We've never had an event this disturbing at Koehler Toys, not even the death of my father. It must be very hard on you."

It really griped my ass that he could see through me! I tried to cover with, "It is hard, but I'm working my way through it." Pretty weak response and I was again having trouble looking at him.

"Ken, there is really no easy way to say this. I just can't afford to have less than the 110% that you usually give the company. You are my eyes, ears, and hands here. I need all of you. I'm afraid that your interest in the murder is going to distract you."

I was apologetic. “I know that, Arthur, and I promise I won’t let anything hurt my effectiveness.” We moved on to more normal and routine topics, and finished our lunch about thirty minutes later.

Over the weekend, I had time to think about Arthur’s concerns. On the one hand, it kind of hurt my feelings that he doesn’t trust my judgment in keeping the murder and my work separate. On the other hand, he is right that the murder is on my mind most of the time. I never dreamed it was that obvious.

Each day with no official progress on the investigation intensifies my desire to find and reveal the killers. I’m still plagued by big unanswered questions: How could I have known so little about Bobby’s progress on the Lolli prototype? Did he keep it from me – from all of us? And did his breakthrough, his generation-skipping advance in doll technology, lead to his death?

Today is Wednesday, January 31st. Mom’s birthday. She would’ve been 75. Yesterday there was a very significant development related to Bobby’s murder, and it pointed to a possible Lolli connection. Three weeks after the murder, with little progress on finding the killers, maybe there is reason for hope.

A short, but very important, period in my young life was spent in Kuwait, during the Gulf War in ’90 – ’91. Specifically, I spent five months, fourteen days, seven hours, eighteen minutes and, as near as I could tell, thirty-six seconds there. My relationship with the war, with the Army, and with myself was very fluid at the beginning of that time. There were days when I was the strongest, smartest man on the planet and other days when I was the biggest fool who ever lived. Occasionally I felt morally superior to everyone I met. Other times, I was lower than a death camp guard.

I had been attending Memphis State University. In 1989 I got onto a thread of thought, like a whining mantra: *You have no idea what you want. You have no idea who you are. You have no idea what you’re going to do.* That line of thinking led, over a year of poor school performance, to increasing friction with my parents, an

ugly breakup with my girlfriend, and a decision that I needed to join the Army.

Before I knew it, I was in and out of boot camp. There were a few boring assignments, then in August of 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. I was shipped over there in November and everybody knows what happened after that.

When I arrived in Saudi, I was in a bad way. Maybe it was depression, I don't know. I felt like I'd stepped off an intellectual and emotional precipice and was in free fall down the center of a gray chasm, its walls a mile away. I wasn't against what we were doing there but I just felt so completely out of it and alone. I was sure that we would soon see real fighting and spent a good deal of time trying to figure out if my mushy outlook was due to personal awakening about my situation in life or to the simple realization that the other guys had real guns and bullets.

We were part of a huge flood of people and equipment pouring in. My platoon was attached to a battalion stationed at As Sulaymaniyah, a town near Riyadh and about 200 miles from the Kuwait border. Nothing like war happened for almost three months. No patrols, no attacks. We stayed at camp, worked out a lot, read a lot, and played an amazing amount of basketball. In January, the Air Force started pounding away at targets in Iraq. Nobody seemed terribly concerned that we weren't yet in the fight. We were just supposed to be ready and that was all that mattered.

In February, my squad stopped having it so easy. We went from a hazy desert dream to full-out attack in just one week, as we moved from As Sulaymaniyah to a camp near the Kuwaiti border. During those first three months, when we were earning our duty ribbons in basketball, and into the early part of the assignment further north, our platoon lieutenant was a guy named Gerry Simone. Nice enough guy, but totally arms-length in his relationship with his men. I think he figured that, if he never got to know you, it wouldn't be as hard to perform follow-up duties if you ended up dead. Gerry's approach made my problems just that much worse and I wasn't alone. There were quite a few guys who weren't ready to fight.



Gerry was oblivious to all of this, of course. He just acted as if it was normal. Ultimately, Gerry's misfortune may have saved our lives. His wife was involved in a serious car wreck and the Army let him come back to the States to be with her and their kid.

Our salvation – I struggle with that term – came in the form of a lieutenant named Pete Warnecki. Pete was nuts, which is probably the best explanation for how a bright University of Michigan grad ended up in Kuwait instead of at Harvard or Stanford. Pete didn't think like anyone else I've ever known. Many of his thoughts were crude and ugly, and he didn't particularly care who knew it. On the other side of the ledger, he was a perfect match for the situation. If you want to win a war, as opposed to merely waging one, maybe a balls-to-the-wall maniac is what it takes. That was Pete. With the arrival of one man, everything about my situation, and perhaps my whole life, changed.

Unlike Gerry, Pete wanted to be a “buddy” to everybody in the unit, a violation of every common sense rule of battlefield leadership. He didn't give a shit. He had his arms around us, squeezing so hard that it pushed our air out, literally and figuratively. Pete had a simple approach to war. I didn't know, until I saw the movie sometime later, that he had adopted a somewhat twisted version of how General George Patton was portrayed by George C. Scott in the movie *Patton*. In a particularly famous scene, Patton tells his troops, “I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor, dumb bastard die for *his* country.” Pete twisted in a little *Charge of the Light Brigade*. He told us, “Your job is to kill as many of these mother fuckers (Pete always said the word “motherfucker” as two words) as you can possibly kill. Your job is not to reason ‘why.’ Any way that you can kill them, any time that you can kill them, under any circumstances that you can kill them, is the correct outcome for this war. You should also kill anybody and everybody who helps them. This is what you are to do, or die.” The first time Pete told us this, I mentally labeled him as a bit of kook and worried that his strange ideas could be dangerous. But, as the force geared up and flooded into Kuwait, his approach sounded less sick, less ruthless.

My concept of war began to loosen and become more like Pete's. War is what happens when rules don't work worth a shit. He frequently told us that there are no rules of war. The more I saw in Kuwait, the more right that idea seemed. Pete believed fighting or winning according to rules is for people who are not doing the actual fighting. Diplomats, perhaps, but not warriors.

Pete's ideas gave us a sense of purpose, however macabre it sounds now. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, we began to perform better. We were more crisp, less slow to react. We suffered practically no casualties and inflicted huge ones. We took Pete's "shoot first and ask questions later" approach to a new high. Overrun and destroy, blow them up, fire twice as many bullets as they do.

Pete and I had some similarities in how we ended up in the Gulf War, both of us being college boys who went for straight enlistment. Starting with those similarities, a friendship – maybe I should say comradeship – grew between us, but I've never had a friend for whom the cost of friendship was so painfully and bitterly high.

The triggering episode for Pete's enlistment was not a crisis within himself, as it had been for me, but in his family. In his teen years, he did not get along well with his dad, mostly because of how his dad treated his mom. In Pete's view, his dad just went on with his life as if he wasn't really married. By his teens, Pete had pretty much decided that his mother was a victim, his father a villain. He had no use for his dad.

Pete's dad wanted, more than anything, for Pete not to serve in the armed forces. He had been severely wounded in Vietnam and it had taken him a couple of years to get his life back together. He was anti-military anything and everything. Pete's dad probably would've done better to declare war and military service to be the most important and honorable endeavors on earth. That would've turned Pete against them for sure.

While Pete was at Michigan, the relationship between his parents worsened. With him out of the house, there was less pressure on Pete's dad to behave and he engaged in a lot more low-class behaviors than he had when Pete was in high school. His dad had several dalliances with women young enough to be Pete's sister.

Most everybody in their hometown knew about it, including Pete's mother. Pete's father also began drinking quite a bit. All of this simmered through Pete's senior year, and began to boil as he neared graduation.

The whole thing blew the day that Pete graduated from Michigan. His father got drunk early in the day and decided to call his girlfriend, oblivious to Pete's mother's presence in the room. She left the room and was sitting in the lobby of the hotel, in tears, when Pete arrived to pick them up for the ceremony.

Pete asked his mother what was wrong and, when she told him, he exploded. He flew up to the room, kicked the door open, laid into his father, and punched him up pretty bad. His father cussed him brutally, calling him a low fuck and declaring him to be a disloyal son. Pete wasn't madder after his father spoke those words. Somehow, their utterance flipped a switch that changed Pete's view of the world. He stood quietly for a moment, then said, "Good-bye old man. I'm joining the Army."

As I have progressed through my life, through undergrad at Memphis State, years on the job, even during that abortive try at consulting, I've occasionally taken the model of Pete Warnecki the leader, held it up to the intellectual light, and tried to decide if he was any good. I've turned my image of his persona over in my mind, felt along its rough edges and along its smooth faces, and tried to fit him into some model that I've studied or experienced. After all these years, it remains impossible for me to decide whether he was a good leader, or just a bully, or both.

Some of the language that Pete used was a cross between bizarre and pure asshole. He referred to black soldiers as "spearchuckers" – never to their faces, of course, but it was clear that he didn't care who knew that he said that kind of thing, and the black soldiers did know of his remarks. That showed me how racist he was, because probably a fourth of our platoon was black. You had to be pretty determined in your racism to risk turning one out of four of your comrades in arms against you. His disregard for blacks flowed easily over to people in the Gulf region. Regardless of which side they were on or what role they played in his life, they were "sniggers", a contraction he came

up with for the term sand nigger. Pete and I had numerous discussions about it. Mostly, they didn't turn out well. He usually ended them by telling me that I was a bleeding heart pussy and that I should shut the fuck up. Pete claimed that he meant no disrespect with the names. I argued that if he meant no disrespect, he wouldn't use them. Not once did I get the impression that I swayed his views or that he gave a shit about what I thought.

Incongruously, Pete knew that rates of enlistment were higher for some minorities and respected that. He had majored in urban economics and knew how socioeconomic status could be related to things like enlistment rates. I asked Pete why he could respect higher rates of service among minorities and still refer to his soldiers in denigrating terms. His answer: "My choice of terms doesn't affect my ability to perceive facts." I knew for certain that was bullshit but somehow still managed to like the guy. Well, respect him. I definitely respected his ability.

Barry Largon was Sergeant of our squad. He arrived just ten days before the end of the Gerry Simone era, and was in the midst of defining his role when Pete took over. It's fair to say that Pete's leadership of the platoon worked because of Barry, who took it upon himself to reinforce the parts of Pete's leadership that helped us and downplay those that were potentially disastrous. Barry took the edge off of everything. He was a strong communicator among the squad leaders and, speaking as a black man, able to persuade some but not all of the guys in the platoon that Pete was not as much of a racist prick as it seemed. Barry knew of Pete's use of degrading terms but somehow they reached an accommodation. I have always believed that Barry foresaw the disasters that could strike if racial tension got out of hand and worked for the larger safety of the unit rather than the elimination of Pete's unfairness. When you're in a war where the enemy kills 114 of your soldiers while 145 are killed in accidents and 35 are killed by friendly fire, it's good to pay attention to how people are getting along.

Maybe it was soldiers like me, the formerly frightened, clueless zombies, who made Pete what he was. Maybe we were so desperate for somebody to tell us what to do and how to do it that we

transformed an irritating asshole like Pete into a strong, aggressive leader. Or, maybe it was the “Barry factor,” that lubricating go-between found in most organizations. Whatever the source of Pete’s influence, and whatever mechanisms existed to make it work, it was more powerful than a drug.

One episode stands out in my mind as descriptive of Pete, his nature, and his style as a leader. When Stormin’ Norman gave the order to push the Iraqis out of Kuwait, the full weight of the force was thrown in. Everybody knows this now but we didn’t then: the Iraqis weren’t so tough as everybody expected. In fact the main force zoomed right past some units of the Iraqi Army, leaving them trapped, like pockets of gas, in our midst.

We learned from Pete that our squad would be assigned to fix those problems. He called us together one afternoon and said, “Now boys, today I am going to tell you how we are going to kill us some fucking ragheads. More important, I’m going to tell you how we’re going to do it without being killed ourselves.” He hesitated, looking at us expectantly. No one said anything. “Well, do we understand?” We all nodded ‘yes’.

Pete drew a diagram of the area where the IA unit was supposed to be holed up. He described it in great detail, including the layout of the streets and buildings, what we could expect to see when we got there – at dawn – how the enemy would be dressed, what they might be doing. It was quite engrossing, and gave us security and a sense of purpose that we didn’t have on some previous missions. Not one of us questioned how he could know such things. He just “knew”.

That night, Pete showed us on a map where a chopper would drop us off, about two miles from this “trouble spot” to make our way on foot. We would sneak up on them. The other three squads stayed with the main force, but Pete and Barry stayed with our unit. The chopper dropped us at 4:30 AM at a spot just outside of Al Jahrah, Kuwait.

We made our way toward town quietly, ceasing all conversation long before we approached the spot of the attack. No talking, no smoking, no lights. Two single files, about 5 yards apart. There were

twelve of us, total. It took us about 50 minutes to cover the two miles into town.

Near the target, pre-dawn light allowed us to make out the block where the IA soldiers were hiding. We couldn't see much, though, because they weren't using any lights either. We waited. Twenty minutes later, dawn began to penetrate the shadows.

Pete gave hand signals to spread us out and we began inching our way forward to hand grenade range. Pete's "kill all the fuckers" approach required that all twelve of us throw a grenade to start the battle. He believed that the first few to go off would bring people out of the buildings and reveal anyone they had outside their perimeter.

On Pete's signal, each of us took out a grenade and pulled the pin. When Pete dropped his arm, we all hurled the grenades into the windows of three adjacent buildings. Seconds later, the first one went off, then the others went off like a string of firecrackers from hell. As Pete predicted, people showed themselves immediately, running everywhere carrying guns and trying to find cover.

Our guys had deployed on both sides of the open end of an alley that was closed at the other end. We all opened fire and emptied everything we had into the street, the buildings, everything that moved. Then we reloaded and emptied everything we had into it again. The IA soldiers didn't have much of a chance. One did manage to climb up a set of stairs and try to point a very large machine gun in our direction, but he was shot long before he could take aim. He lay slumped over the side rail of the stairs. Others lay strewn in the street. We gradually moved in.

Pete made it a point to check on each and every downed IA soldier and, if it appeared if that they were still alive, to shoot them. To speak it now seems callous and cold, but it seemed necessary at the time. He didn't order anyone else to do it, and no one volunteered. That was part of the package that came with Pete's "kill'em all" strategy. No one volunteered, but no one objected, either.

The buildings had quite a few people who didn't get out before grenade shrapnel and bullets came through the walls. We found another way out the back, some kind of tunnel that ran between

buildings. Pete had four of us stand at the entrance, pull pins on four grenades, and toss them varying distances down the tunnel in an attempt to get it to collapse. We were largely successful; most of it collapsed. We made a final sweep of the area, then called the choppers for pickup.

The next two weeks were busy. Of course, when the leader wants to fight harder, what choice do the followers have? We took longer circuits on patrols, searched more thoroughly, found more hideouts, blew them up, and generally tried to leave the area behind the front swept clean. We were involved in more fire fights, but suffered relatively few casualties.

In the third week after Al Jahrah, we were in Az Zubayr, a town just inside Iraq. We were still on clean-up duty, looking for leftover IA that had been by-passed by the rapid attack of the coalition forces. Two squads were on patrol and unexpectedly intercepted a good-sized group of Iraqi fighters, some of them army and some of them militiamen of some sort. The fight erupted suddenly and viciously. We had no chance to use the “Pete way,” to concentrate excessive amounts of fire on small areas. Shots went everywhere. We weren’t entirely surrounded, but were closed in on three sides. We tried to lay down heavy fire and back out of the fourth, open side of the battle. It didn’t work well.

The day of that firefight, Barry Largon was shot three times in the chest and I was shot twice in the ass. Just like Forrest Gump! The fight didn’t last long, maybe ten minutes. The Iraqis lost quite a few people and the rest ran, leaving their dead behind.

We called in the choppers. They came surprisingly quickly, and Barry and I were loaded onto one of them for a short flight back to our base. Two guys, Bernie Lister and Jeff Solkov, were dead before the choppers arrived. Lukey Turner’s short career as a soldier and human being ended before the medics could load him on a chopper.

I knew, and Pete knew, that Barry was dying. Hell, maybe everybody knew. The medics were working on him like crazy, but it took little medical expertise to see that they were mostly performing as duty required. No one could live through being shot the way Barry had been shot.

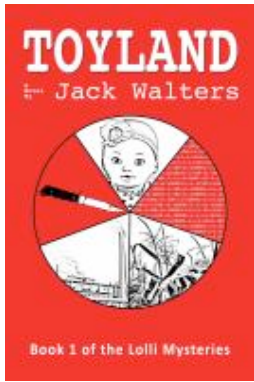
I cried on the helicopter as we went back to base, partly for Barry, partly for his wife and 18 month-old baby. Partly, I suppose, because my ass hurt really bad. I also cried about my fears for what would happen to the guys in my unit with Barry removed from the equation.

I was only in the Middle East for two days after that firefight. The docs decided that I needed to be out of the war zone. The severed vein in my “assal region” almost killed me, but the minor damage to my sacroiliac scarcely affected me at all. However, to the Army medical mind, the sacroiliac damage was a “permanent back injury” requiring a medical discharge. So, not only did I instantly go from war to non-war, but from active duty to civilian in about ten weeks.

Barry was dead when we arrived at base. I was flown to Germany just two days later, and saw Pete only once after that day in Az Zubayr. It was less than a year after I left the service. I was surprised to learn that he would soon leave it as well. At that time, he was struggling to find his way, to adjust to how war had changed him. He figured that some of those answers might be easier to come by if he just got out when his four years were up. My memories – of his brutal efficiency, his willingness to leave no enemy alive, and his confidence through it all – defined my mental image of Pete Warnecki. On the one hand, he saved my sanity and maybe my life as well. There’s no way to repay a person for that. On the other hand – the bully, the racist, the man for whom the Geneva Conventions were a joke – left me with an unease from which I’ve never fully recovered. Everything he did embodied “The end justifies the means”. Even at that young, green age, I knew that was wrong. Surely my inability to savor our astounding victory over there has been caused, to some extent, by Pete’s influence.

Those were my memories of Pete Warnecki, until yesterday, when he called me on the telephone.





*What would you do if the first thing you learned on a cold winter morning was that your best friend had been brutally murdered? Ken Murchison learns the answer to that question in the hardest possible way. His obsession with finding his buddy's killers wrecks his life. As he descends deeper into calamity and failure, he ends up in a race to reveal the truth about the murder, before it's too late.*

# Toyland

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