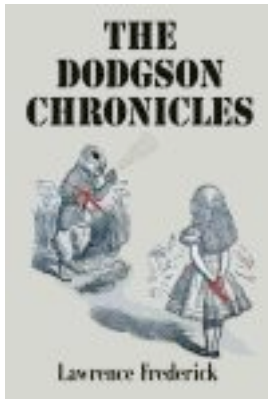


THE DODGSON CHRONICLES



Lawrence Frederick



*In the late 1800's, Charles Dodgson, a famous Oxford mathematician, hid his disturbing visions of the future from the Church of England by encoding them into the children's books *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* using the pen name Lewis Carroll. The *Dodgson Chronicles* derives from CIA transcripts produced by a secret cryptology project. As decoded, the book describes his modern day descendants' struggle to free the Earth from heretofore unknown creatures.*

The Dodgson Chronicles

by Lawrence Frederick

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The Dodgson Chronicles

Lawrence Frederick

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Authors note: Except for the Introduction and Appendix I, this Table of Contents parallels (is the decryption of) the original children's stories tables of contents.

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Dodgson was a gifted writer and noted Oxford mathematician in the late 1800's. As brilliant as he was, he might have disappeared in the dustbin of history were it not for a quite unwanted affliction. He frequently experienced uncontrollable visions he believed to be of the future. Fearing madness, he purged them from his mind using the only tools he had, pen and ink. Ironically, this both ruined his life and made him famous.

A deeply religious man, Charles's Oxford studies were largely focused on joining the Clergy. His visions eventually led him to believe that God was somehow working through him, but he also knew only too well that the Clergy believed it was their leadership that would define mankind's future. He reasoned that his dark predictions would likely destroy his reputation and end his tenure at Oxford.

He decided to simultaneously preserve and conceal his writings. Using a method far ahead of his time he hid his visions in plain sight. He painstakingly encrypted them into two books and published them under the pen name Lewis Carroll. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* achieved international literary acclaim. To this day hundreds have tried to guess what it all means.

His secret lay undiscovered in homes and libraries for over a century. None of this would likely have ever come to the light were it not for a chance event. A young government intern was assigned to a top-secret cryptography project intended to explore Dodgson's mathematics. One assumes that given the easy access to his works on the Internet, it probably made some ironic sense to process his most famous books. To the intern's amazement the output revealed the story of Alice Carroll, a heretofore unknown modern day descendant of Charles Dodgson. This book is transcribed from the original project documents.

For those interested, Appendix I contains an account of how this all came to be, including the background on Charles Dodgson, the secret Dodgson Project and some hints to the fate of Eric Morewood, the intern. As I write this, Eric is still missing. Until he is found, this

will probably remain just another conspiracy story, perhaps the mother of all conspiracy stories, but viewed as fiction nevertheless. Even so, I have changed certain names, places and times to protect the innocent, the guilty, and possibly, the fidelity of the temporal continuum, not to mention my backside.

To assist the reader, I will quote Eric. “Speaking of Alice, when reading this first chapter, you might jump to the conclusion that she’s a little weird. Hold your judgment. It turns out that the transition to other dimensions is asymptotic. That is, once started, the process doesn’t immediately complete. It gets most of the way there rapidly, then progress slows, with full arrival happening some time later. This leads to a variety of disturbing problems with not being quite there including a sort of temporary mental dementia. While Dodgson names the mental phenomenon later in the documents, knowing this up front may help those who might wonder if Alice is really crazy. She isn’t. No more than like you or me. By the way, I’ve formatted the text so Alice’s inner thoughts, *and hers alone*, appear in italics. Enjoy.”

Lawrence Frederick

Author's note: This page does not appear in the received documents and was added for clarity.

BOOK 1

ALICE'S WONDERLAND

CHAPTER I
HUNTING RABBITS

[Dodgson writes a preface here]

It is the year of our Lord 1864. I am the Reverend Charles L. Dodgson, your appointed host and guide. The truth is I never expected to meet god while I was alive. I could never have imagined I would be given a mission. Yet I sit in this candlelight, quill in hand, writing a testament to a future I have been shown but which few would believe. I have spent my life in the service of the Church but I fear this account, these revelations, would not be well received. I especially doubt that the existence of unearthly life or the subtly of God vs. god would be acceptable to the Clergy. Therefore, I pray that my mathematics not fail me and that this work never be uncovered during my tenure.

On the other hand, I should assume I am gone and that the day has come when a clever servant of god has unlocked these secrets. Therefore, if you are reading this, you should know I have a gift, or rather I was given an ability. I can see them, all of them, those Godless creatures, the devil's soldiers. And better than mere sight, I have the omniscient perspective. I have become a guardian angel, unseen by man or earthly beast, invisibly observing the farthest reaches across the gulf of time.

But the observer inevitably influences the observation. They know. They fear me as they should, yet they seem bolder now. Closing? Time eroding? Let me get to the point.

It may be a sin, but I can still see her now, Alice, as though she were right in front of me, her thoughts provided me by god. I know it is a failure of the flesh, but I believe I could reach out and touch her. Mercifully, I cannot quite do it. It is as if I am in some parallel layer of reality, some sort of purgatory, so near yet so far. At least I am that close. Thee, god willing, will have to see her through me. The theologian and mathematician must therefore yield to the scribe.

May god, bless this work of your humble servant.
May this evil rot in Hell.
May this future be only one of many.
Amen.

[Actual start of his translated work]

Lisa used her umbrella as a pointer. “That’s our bench isn’t it?”

Alice nodded. “Yes, there’s the granite outcropping. No homeless person this time.”

Lisa spread her newspaper on the bench and sat down. “Perfect, the pigeon poop’s on your side.”

“Ah, sisterly love. Sounds like something I would say.”

Lisa smiled sweetly. “You’re out aren’t you?”

Alice joined her on the bench. “Yes and it’s a great day to be free. I guess we missed the rain, but smell the air... ah, no disinfectant.”

“I love this park. It’s an oasis in the city.”

Alice looked at her wrist. “What time is it? They still won’t let me have a watch.”

“It’s just past four.”

“Then the bells are late.” *Am I too late?*

Lisa adjusted her pink knit hat. “Relax, take a calming breath. Look at the colors of the leaves.”

“Yes, beautiful, but look at the shadows crawling across the buildings. I think we got a late start. That ‘short mile walk’ from Bellevue keeps getting longer.”

A taxi’s horn blared and Lisa looked around. “Maybe we should take a cab next time. It can’t cost that much to Madison Square.”

“No, I’d still rather walk.” *I do so miss the noise of the city – life goes on.*

Across the street a small crowd of people filed out of a massive stone edifice. Its steeple loomed over them and its shadow threatened a cold darkness.

Alice shivered. “It’s cooling off. Don’t they ring the damn bells anymore?”

Lisa shrugged. “Maybe we missed them. Maybe the Supreme Court’s staff joined the strike. Who knows? It’s New York. I’m going to sit here, read and think warm. Want a paperback?”

“No thanks. I’ll just meditate.” *Or worry.*

Alice looked through the sea of yellow cars. “I don’t see a picket line. Hope whatever is going on here doesn’t affect my appeal.”

“Your lawyer would have called me. It’s OK.” Lisa pulled a book from her bag.

Alice glanced at the cover. “Self-improvement?” *Tom would say, “chick-fluff.” With him it was always “Soldier of Fortune,” tough-guy stuff. How to field strip an AK47. How to make a bomb from household chemicals. Stuff he tried to teach me. Guess he was serious. Used to think it was some brother-sister game.*

Lisa thumbed it over to somewhere in the middle. A bookmark fell out. Alice retrieved it for her. “OK, but is it good?” *I never guessed it would come to this. Maybe he did?*

“Yes, thanks.” Lisa turned a page. “You know, it’s never too late to better yourself.”

“Is that supposed to be a hint?” *I’m supposed to change? She’s the one who thinks Tom will just show up again with some crazy story. I don’t think so. Those bastards have him.*

“If the shoes fit,” said Lisa, not looking up.

“OK, but there’s more than one way to grow.” *She won’t even talk about it. This is the only way to find out. God, I wish there was some other way. Will I have the courage when the time comes? Maybe they won’t come today, maybe the next time.*

Lisa turned another page. “To each her own.”

A couple walked by, hand in hand. They both smiled.

Alice murmured, “Yea, right.” *Maybe I can just sit here and be alive. That wouldn’t be so bad, would it?*

Lisa caught it. “Be positive now...”

Alice straightened up. “OK. This has got to be my favorite spot. I love the look of weathered granite, very New York. I’ll bet we could actually sit in the carved out portion, but the stone would probably be cold, even with this coat.”

“Let’s just admire it from here,” Lisa said, still looking at her book.

A newspaper page blew along the ground and caught on a nearby bush. Alice looked at it sideways. “Statue of Liberty Closed? What’s with that?” *Guess I’m out of touch with the real world. Or is the real world out of touch with my world? Don’t know.*

Lisa watched the page blow away. “Maintenance. I don’t know. Guess we can’t go there again.”

Alice looked at her sister. “You wouldn’t visit some different place if you could?” *Is today the day I awake from the dream of their reality and begin my life as a Hunter? Tom wouldn’t say it, but he knew. Now I know. Have to face it. My destiny. Shaking. Cold? Fear?*

Lisa looked up this time. “Not a cold place.” She smiled. “Maybe Bermuda.”

Alice pointed to the walking trail. “Even just across this path, it could be a different world.” *I can’t just sit here worrying. Think of something else. Lisa, think of Lisa. The help she’s been. Hold onto her world. It’s nice to be out for a while.*

“That’s the same world, Alice. You look tired. Too much exercise?”

“No. I’m fine. Thanks for walking with me. I love to window shop. I liked those holiday displays in the Gift and Art Center, always a treat, so creative.”

“Yea, that bear statue made from blue Legos was so detailed.”

“But sitting here is nice too. Gives me a chance to think.”

Lisa didn’t respond. Alice fidgeted on the bench before finally breaking the silence. “Wouldn’t it be nice to simply make whatever you wanted? Tom would’ve liked that bear. God, I miss him.” *I just have to do this.*

Lisa looked up and turned to Alice. “Yes, we all miss him,” she said softly. “He’s in my prayers.” She closed her eyes momentarily.

Alice interrupted. “And mine.” *But I’m here for action. OK maybe right after I close my eyes too for a second. It’s the stress. Got to get some rest.*

Two of those fearless park-pigeons fluttered noisily down from behind. Alice jerked her arms and pressed down on a bulge under her coat. "Ohmygod!" *Just caught it. Almost dropped it. Can't keep it there. Dangerous. No choice.*

Lisa said, "Alice, it's just pigeons. Relax."

Alice squirmed on the bench. "Scared me." *She didn't see that. Calm down. Calm down. Should have asked for a holster. My fault.*

They exchanged smiles. Alice added. "I'm OK." *So is my little friend.*

The pigeons cooed loudly. Lisa said, "Oops, watch your feet, they're aggressive."

Alice squirmed. "Ouch! Get away. I don't have any food." *I should be aggressive. I could scare them off with a quick shot. Then what? Avoid the park police? Explain this all in less than geologic time? What're you thinking? Officer, it's only a 9mm. Sure that might work.*

Alice kicked. "Scat!" *Pull yourself together. You have bigger things to hunt. Leave the birds alone.*

She kicked again and the pigeons fluttered away. "That was close." *I could have killed somebody. That's why they gave me a "girlie" Glock. Safety's on.*

Lisa looked perplexed. "They're only birds."

"Lisa, before I forget, thanks again for all your help. You know, just in case. I know how hard the process is."

"Well, I was hoping to do this on your birthday, but between the lawyers, bureaucrats and the paperwork petitioning your release, I missed it, sorry."

"Consider it my un-birthday."

Lisa frowned. "What do you mean, 'Just in case'?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll go postal or suddenly vanish."

Lisa scowled. "Don't give me that look. I've got the kids at the sitter. It's twenty bucks an hour. And there's this judge and all that swearing. Just relax and behave." Lisa smiled. "Have a happy un-birthday. Leave the birds alone."

Alice shifted her position on the bench. “Fine.” *Thank God she doesn’t know what I did to get this gun. What’s really crazy is I don’t even know if I can shoot these things.*

She added, “Well, maybe.” *This would probably be less troubling if I really was crazy.*

“Seriously Alice, no games, OK? This isn’t about Tom again, is it?”

“No, it’s about me. They can shove me in a sanitarium if they like. They can say what they will about me. Screw’em, it doesn’t change the facts.”

Lisa closed her book. “Your facts again?”

Alice looked at the ground. “Maybe he’s dead. Maybe he’s alive. I just need some closure. Just to know, to understand why.” *I’m sure I didn’t have anything to do with his disappearance.*

“Look, he’s my brother too and we’re been all through this a thousand times. We’re all concerned, but you have to be back at six. I’ll check the case status with the attorneys.”

Alice held up two fingers. “I’ve got two hours. Somewhere that’s an eternity.”

“But not in Manhattan. Did you bring your medication?”

Alice tensed. “You never believe me. And no, I don’t need no stinking medication.” *I need answers.*

Lisa looked perturbed. “Alice...”

Alice interrupted. “Look, I’m sorry. You’re all I’ve got left. This thing has ruined my life, probably took our parents and now Tom. I’m really, really, sorry but, this is the end. It’s all got to stop.” *Except this pit in my stomach. Courage. Two hours.*

“Come on, let’s not go there today. Can’t we just enjoy being here together?”

A siren wailed and suddenly went silent. “It’s not enough.” *Ambulance. Not coming for me.*

Alice continued, “Just because I see shadows, and you don’t, isn’t proof they aren’t there. Maybe if you saw them Tom would have told you.” *Damn. Shouldn’t have said that.*

Lisa shook her head. “Don’t make me regret this. I’ve heard the ‘family secret’ story a hundred times. I’m disappointed you would

even bring it up. I thought you might be past that. The doctors said you were improving, but you're talking the same old way. Stop it or I'll never get my sister back."

"It's just that I'd learned to live with being crazy, I was content. I wasted years in disbelief. Now I've got to go and find out what these things are up to. Try to understand."

"Alice, please." Lisa reopened her book. "You and I are going to sit right here. Nobody's going anywhere. No more crazy talk. Don't spoil this moment."

"OK, OK." *Crazy is as crazy does. Sitting here with a loaded gun probably qualifies as crazy.*

Lisa turned a page. "That's better."

Alice blew into her hands. "I'm cold. Maybe we should go back." *Maybe there's another way. Who am I kidding? I'm no Hunter, I'm just me. There's nothing in this park. It's a perfectly normal afternoon in New York.*

"We'll go back in a while. OK? Let me finish this chapter."

Something with huge black eyes ran by the bench almost stepping on their feet. Alice pushed back on the bench. "Ohmygod!"

It was over 5 feet tall, it moved upright in a way that couldn't entirely be characterized as running, and it was more of an apparition than a solid creature. It had short grey fur, long arms ending in paw-hands, small rectangular ears, and an almost non-existent tail. Overall it had a familiar appearance.

"Rabbit!" *Here we go. First Hunt.*

Lisa, looked up from her book. "What?"

"Rabbit!" *She didn't see it.*

As it went by, it took something, a shiny device, out of its side, like pulling a watch from a waistcoat pocket. It waved it briefly and then hurried on. Alice jumped to her feet and shed the coat. Lisa caught it. "Where're you going?... Alice! Come back! "

"The Hunt." *Blast it, this one's fast. I'll catch it. Never seen a Rabbit with either a pocket or anything to take out of it. Just didn't notice?*

"Damn it, Alice. Don't do this."

She left her sister behind. "Crap." *Explain later. Maybe not.*

It was a foot race down the streets of New York, at least to Alice. “Hey, Rabbit, slow down!” *Paralleling 5th Avenue. Where’s it going?*

“Nuts.” *Following Broadway.*

Close behind her prey, she swerved to miss a cart pushed by an aging lady.

“Whoa!” *Stay off the sidewalk. East 23rd. Still going.*

Horns blew, tires screeched and a driver shouted something in Polish.

“Taxies.” *Hand gesture? That was probably an obscenity.*

“Mother! Where is it going?” *The old Flatiron building?*

It stopped in its tracks and aimed the device at the building. She pulled the gun and tried to get a bead. “Crap! Too many people.”

It turned and disappeared down a large rabbit-hole. “Subway entrance?” *Remember. Southwest corner of the park. Across from the Madison Green Condos.*

“Rats!” *Follow it?... Yes, down we go. What’ll Lisa tell the Institution’s staff?*

The entrance, like an artificial cave, sloped gently downward for some ways and then descended precipitously. She stumbled on the first step of a moving stairway, caught air and then violently slammed into the back of large black man in a plaid jacket, nearly knocking him down. He stumbled, gripped the rails, stabilized, turned and looked like he was going to explode – until he saw the gun. He gasped, became thin, and let her by. “Whoa! Lady, be careful.”

“Police business.” *Sort of.*

The Rabbit was still ahead of her. “Where’s it going?” *Platform. Southbound Express. Not bothered by the solidity of the turnstiles. Train doors beginning to close.*

“No! Crap! Go, go, go.”

She jumped the turnstile, knocked a young woman sideways, dodged a baby carriage and just leaped for it. She passed obliquely through the closing doors. “What?” *Southbound Express pulling into the station? Impossible.*

“Then what the freaking hell train is this?” The lights dimmed. “Oh my god! I’m suspended in mid-air. Where’re the seats? The passengers? What’s happening to me?” *Slow motion. Time slowed down?*

Everything around her went dark. “Oh freak!” *Maybe I killed myself. Am I dead?*

“I’m in deep trouble here. I don’t see the light?” *Hollow black tube. Road to Hell?*

“OK, Rabbit, you can turn it off now. I don’t feel good. You’re scaring me.” *Oh God. Calm down. Shaking. Heart’s pounding.*

“I’m not dead. I’m not dead but I can’t see a thing.” *The sides of the train. Filling with switches, leavers, knobs. Weird maps on video screens. Still shaking. It’s cold.*

“I’m not dead. I’m alive. I just took the wrong train. Casablanca going south?” *No. Star maps?*

She caught a lever on one of the mechanisms as she passed. “This can’t be good.” *Odd symbols? Wish it did something, like stop this fall. Oh terrific, the Glock.*

“I’m lucky I haven’t shot myself.” She stuffed the gun back into her jeans. “To Hell pack’n.” *Do they allow guns in Hell? Got to, right?*

She careened against a wall. “Ouch! I’d be better off sky-diving.” *How much crazier would they think I was back at the Institution? I couldn’t actually say anything about it, believability and all that. I don’t need any more “treatments” due to Rabbit tales. Yeah, the orderlies. It’s my tail they’re after. Focus.*

“Will this fall ever end? I wonder how many miles I’ve fallen?” *I must be getting somewhere near the end of the line. Let’s see. Given my rate of fall and estimating the duration, I’d say about, what? Twenty four miles from the park and Lisa. Yes, that’s about the right distance. Wonder what station I’ve gotten to?*

“Oh my God! I could fall forever. Never see anybody again.” *I’d be the woman who never returned. No. Don’t think like that.*

“OK, perhaps I’ll simply fall through the whole city and back. How weird it’ll be to come out where I started. The circularity of it all, I think. I’m glad there’s no one listening as it doesn’t sound

exactly like the right word. I may need to ask the Rabbit. Please, Sir or Madam, is this the Brighton Beach station or freaking China?" *What an ignorant little twit it'll think me for asking.*

"No, it'll never do to ask. Perhaps I'll just blow its head off." *Video screens rushing by.*

She pulled the gun, and chambered a round. "Whoa, get a grip." *What's wrong with you?*

"Put the gun away. Are you crazy?" *I'm just confused. I shouldn't be.*

"Oh god, why?" *Rhetorical.*

She replaced it in the waistband of her jeans. The tube widened for a moment and then narrowed again. "What is this?" *Huge coils on merry-go-rounds?*

"Jules Verne on speed. Crap. I can't think anymore." *No. Concentrate.*

Another long series of those screens rushed by her. "Stay alert. Keep talking. Tom says these Rabbits are dangerous, but the ones I've seen don't seem to be. They were just shadows that ignored me and everyone else. Tom claims they're thieves, but I never saw them carry anything until today. Maybe this one stole whatever that was?"

A shadow of something zipped by going the opposite direction. "Whoa!" *Rabbit?*

"He told me to always avoid them, but then why the training? Don't think he told me all he knew. Now I'm falling down some hole to Hell and there's nothing I can do. Look out Rabbit, I'm gonna barf." *Take your mind off it. Think of something else.*

"Jack'll miss me tonight." *Hope they'll remember his saucer of milk at dinner time.*

"Jack, you fur-ball. I wish you were down here with me. There are no Rabbits in the air just now, but we could keep looking. You might catch a Rabbit, and that's sort of like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat rabbits or just mess around with them, I wonder? Wait. I'll shoot them and you retrieve them. You know, pretend you're a dog." *Oh, God, I'm losing it. I'm going to barf. No. No.*

“Do cats eat rabbits? Do cats eat rabbits? Do rabbits eat cats? I can’t answer either question. I guess it doesn’t much matter which way I put it. I don’t care anymore.” *Gotta care.*

More switches and controls rushed buy. “Familiar?” *Am I going in reverse? No.*

“I don’t feel good.” *Head spinning. Can’t pass out. Who’d help me?*

“No, I’m alright. Visualize. I’m walking hand in paw with Jack along some beautiful seashore. Waves are lapping the sand.” *On vacation. Calm. Relaxed.*

“Now, Jack, tell me the truth. Did you ever eat a Rabbit?” She blacked out, awakening some time later. Her arm scraped a wall of switches, repositioning them at random. “Oh, hell!” *Where am I?*

She pushed herself back to the middle of the tunnel, but started to spin. A green glow rapidly displaced the darkness. “Odd? ...”

She looked in her direction of motion. “Oh Crap!”

She crossed her arms before her face, hit the end wall violently and slid down in a heap. “Ouch!” *Hurting... must be still alive.*

“Damn Rabbits. That could have killed me.” *My arm. Scrapes. No blood.*

“Thank God that’s over.” *Gun’s still here.*

She managed to stagger to her feet. *Too dark. Green lights?*

“Let’s get out of here.” *Outlining a door? OK. Lever. Yes.*

The door swung open. Before her was a dim, metal-lined passage, barely contrasting with the near total darkness of the tunnel. “I can see it.” *Dark grey shadow. Hurrying away.*

“Yes.” *Mottled fur. Glistening. Sweat? Just enough to reveal its position.*

She pulled the gun and gave chase into the murk. “Go, go.” *Running against a wind.*

“Now I’m with the wind... Wow, I’m Mercury himself... No, I’m running in Jell-O.” *Alternating density of darkness?*

“Doesn’t matter. Almost on it. Rats!” *Turned a corner? Almost there.*

“No! Crap. Lost it.” *What’s this place?*

A long hall, twice her height, glowed as if lit by a row of invisible lamps hanging from the ceiling. Two rows of eight sided ornately decorated hatch-like doors protruded slightly from each wall of the rest of the structure, including the floor and ceiling. The rows appeared to go on forever, vanishing into the distance. “Victorian design. Where’s Captain Nemo?”

She pounded on one. “Blast.” *No obvious way in.*

She banged it with the butt of her gun. “Nothing.” *No hollow sound. Solid silver?*

She went down one side, passing some dozen doors, climbed across the two rows of doors in the floor and returned up the other side. She tried pushing and pulling on every door, only to return to the start without success. “Crap.” *No chance of reaching those others with gravity working.*

“At least we’re not in outer space.” *Unless we’re rotating.*

She walked down the middle. “Rats and mice. How am I ever going to find the Rabbit?” *Going back to Lisa might be of interest too. No. Later. Shoot at the doors?*

She stomped one of the floor doors violently. “Ouch! Like that’ll work.”

There was a noise like an electric motor engaging. She turned and stumbled over a shiny yellow three-legged table rising from the floor. “Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Right in the shins.” *Brass? Beautifully engraved.*

It stopped smoothly, clicking into position. A small brass wheel protruded out at one corner. “Well now.” *Like the top of a computer mouse. Same symbols from the Rabbit hole. Instructions? Operates the doors? Don’t know.*

“Only one way to find out.” She thumbed it forward. “Whoa!” *Whole room balloons out. Must be twice its size.*

She thumbed it backward. “Right on!” *Room seems to cave in around me.*

“Way cool. I can zoom the room in and out.” She paused, looked down and jerked her hand from the wheel. “No!” *I’m not zooming the room relative to me, I’m zooming me relative to the room.*

“My God, what have I done? I’m so screwed. What’s my correct size? I’ll never get it right. OK, OK, don’t panic.” *Heart rate. Calm down. Think.*

“I can fix this... It’s not a problem... I’ll err on the tall side... See if Lisa notices.” *Nobody will notice. Stop shaking. Concentrate.*

“The orderlies might notice.” *Maybe the cook. Possibly my shrink if he stops looking at my legs. They won’t mention it. Not in a mental Institution.*

She made the adjustment. “Slowly.” *Crap, no mirror.*

“The irony. Mental note: Don’t touch Rabbit stuff.” *Now I’m tall enough to feel above the door. People sometimes hide a spare key. Rabbits, I don’t know.*

She began checking the doors. “Perhaps it’s a game. Let’s try door number 3... OK!” *Square button. That was quick? Chance?*

The door retracted noiselessly into the ceiling. The room was a rapidly diminishing passage, a funnel with an ending size not much larger than the diameter of a quill pen. She entered and the door closed behind her, plunging the room into near total darkness. “Great. Where’s the Energizer Bunny when you need him?”

A white glow from the hole formed a thin beam and reflected off the door behind her. The room returned to bare visibility. Engravings covered the walls and spiraled down to the hole. She knelt down and peered into the hole. “Dog my cats.” *Colorful flowers. Green lawn. Manicured hedges. Metal statuary.*

“Beautiful.” *Might beat Bellevue’s roses. Or is it the Thorazine?*

“I’ve got to get out of this darkness. I’d be happier with flowers around me. I could relax and wade in those cool fountains. Yesterday I didn’t care. Today I love formal gardens.” *Focus. Tom. Forget the freaking flowers. Find Tom.*

“Tom’s in there. I know it.” She tried to stick her index finger into the hole. “Nuts.” *And even if my head would go through, it would be of little use without my shoulders, my arms and my great... Focus. Focus.*

The door behind her retracted and shut again so quickly she had no time to react. It was as if the room just flashed. A Rabbit blew by

her, virtually through her. “Whoa.” *Sucked into the hole in a New York millisecond... or somewhere’s millisecond.*

“I don’t think it even saw me.” *Is that good or bad?*

She looked through the hole. “It’s getting away.” *Unharmmed? Unbelievable.*

She backed up to the door. The beam centered on her stomach. “OK, OK, OK, I can do this. Keep the faith. Time to hunt Rabbits.” *No. You’d have to be crazy to do this. They say I am crazy. Well then, what are we waiting for?*

She closed her eyes and charged the hole. She emerged in the Garden, upright, unscathed, and still running forward. She hit a hedge and abruptly stopped. “Crap!” *Kissed the shrubbery.*

There was an Alice-sized black hole behind her. “Yes! I’m alive. I did it.” A buzzing sound came from the hole and then stopped. “That was maxed weird.” *Like being sucked through a soda straw. Hope I haven’t been resized to fit this garden.*

“So Tom, I’m here. Wherever here is.” *Sky’s as blue as the park. Air’s as fresh. Some Rabbit-dream? I’m awake. Am I back? Where’s the bench? Lisa?*

“No. The pigeons are gone, so is the city. I don’t think we’re in New York anymore, Toto, Kansas either.” The buzzing sound returned and then stopped again. Alice turned as the black spot disappeared without a trace. “Weird, but I’m OK. I feel like I’ve lost 10 pounds.” *And in all the right places.*

“Tall and thin.” *Who knew hunting Rabbits would be so healthy? I’m now the right size for hunting Rabbits”*

“Or men... Lions, tigers and bears. Oh my!” *Yeah, but living to tell about it is the trick.*

“Isn’t it Tom?” She pulled the gun. “The Hunt.” *Direction? No tracks.*

“Lost its trail.” *Now what? Go back? Try another day?*

“Come on now, there’s no thinking like that. I advise you to get on with it, leave this minute, find Tom.” *Or else. Or else what?*

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.” She stuck the gun back in her jeans. *Give myself good advice. Just don’t follow it. Don’t know why.*

“I think it’s the meds. I’m being poisoned by the government. I know they’re watching me.” *Paranoia. Just get on with this.*

“You two men go that way, the rest of you come with me.” *Multiple personalities?*

“Stop it.” *This isn’t the Institution. It’s not some game. Not crazy. Not imagining this. Not some dream. This place is real. I’m here.*

“I’m here to find Tom. I just need some courage.” *Courage.*

There was simultaneously a great crash and loud roar. “Mother!” *A Tyrannosaurus being hit by a bus?*

“So much for the warm and friendly facade of the garden. Debris?” *Thrown into the sky?*

She pulled the gun. Holding it with both hands, she approached an opening in the surrounding hedgerow. “Now what?” *No fear. No fear. Steady. Steady.*

She spun around into the open. “Rock and roll.”

A ferocious growl pierced the air and rippled the hedges. “I should have brought an Uzi.”

CHAPTER II POOL OF FEARS

Alice stood in a wide green alley formed from the hedgerows bordering adjacent garden areas. “Don’t see it.” *Still hear it.*

She moved forward. “Careful.” *Maybe I won’t find it. The shrubbery blends everything together. Could be another exit or entrance anywhere.*

There was rustling in the distance, like something being dragged. She froze, but the gun waved crazily. Sweat beaded on her face and began to drip off. “Fear pooling at my feet.” *Pools of fear.*

She broke her stance and wiped her eyes. A Rabbit, turned into view. “Good grief!” *Ugly.*

Ears twitching rapidly, it closed at a full trot. White fangs glinted in the light. Its claws were red. “Ohmygod!” *Blood oozing from its mouth.*

She squeezed the trigger. “Oops!” *Safety’s on.*

“Oh Crap!” She put her arms up to cover her face. The Rabbit blew by as if she wasn’t there. As she turned, it disappeared into the greenness. “That was too close.” *Shaking. Pull yourself together.*

“It’s gone.” *Don’t they see me? Don’t they care?*

She lowered the gun and looked around. “What’s going on here?” *Maybe I’m not really here. No, I’m here. Just not myself. No, it’s more like I’m almost here.*

Her nose twisted. “Oh...” *Rancid fish stuffed with manure?*

“Oh, the smell. Wish that was ‘almost here.’”

She quickly retreated from the shrubbery alley to another garden section. A round, cast iron fountain surrounded by a flower bed of rose like flowers sprayed water over a central statue of a Rabbit wearing a crown. Green metal benches facing the fountain formed an outer ring. “What a day.” *Yesterday things were completely normal.*

She severed a large vine leaf from an abstract plant sculpture growing over a metal frame, sat down on a bench and fanned herself. “I wonder. Have I been changed?” She put the gun on her lap. “What

would mom say?" *"You used to be such a gentle girl. Be sweet now and don't kill anything that might spoil your dinner."*

She closed her eyes, shook her head and fanned harder. "No. She wouldn't say that at all." *Let's think about this. Was I really the same when I got up this morning? I almost remember feeling a little different.*

She turned sideways and put her feet up on the bench. "Damn." *If I'm not the same now, the question is obvious.*

"Who in the world am I?" *Let's consider all the patients I know that are about my age, tall, blond and athletic. Could I have been cloned from any of them?*

She tossed the leaf. "I'm sure I'm not Janice." *Her hair's longer. Goes down to her waist. Almost covers the tattoo of Betty Boop giving the finger.*

"Madeline? No, I can't be Madeline." *I know all sorts of things. She has the fried brain of a full-time crack head. Besides, SHE'S she, and I'M me, right?*

"I need a test." *See if I know all the things I used to know.*

"OK, Pi is 6.02214179 times 10 to the 23rd and Avogadro's number is 3.1415926535 or is it the other way around?" *No. That's wrong. It is the other way.*

"Crap." *OK, science doesn't qualify as real world knowledge. Try geography.*

"London is in Red Square, and Paris is the capital of Argentina, and Rome – no, THAT'S all wrong." *It's true. I must have been changed for Madeline.*

"No!" *Try English Lit. Your famous relative.*

"What would Dodgson say?" *He'd recite... "How doth the little... "*

She crossed her hands over the gun on her lap. *Voice sounds hoarse.*

"How doth the little Rabbit
Improve its shining smile,
And ooze the blood of innocents,
While moving with such style?"

“How eagerly awaits the win,
How neatly spread its claws,
And welcomes all its victims in
With warmly smiling jaws!”

“What? No.” *I'm sure those are NOT the words.*

She shook her head. “I’m in trouble here. I must be Madeline after all.” *I'll have to go and live in that crummy little trailer and what did she say? Oh yeah, make Meth and do worse with all those men. So, so many lessons to learn.*

“No! I've made up my mind.” *If I'm Madeline, I'll stay down here in this God forsaken garden with killer Rabbits. It'll be no use their putting their heads up their asses down at the Institute and saying, 'Come up again, dear. We have a nice jacket for you.' I'll only look up and say, 'Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up; if not, I'll stay down here in your ass until I'm somebody else.'”*

“But God help me, I wish they would look for me.” *I don't want to be alone here. Those Rabbits. This place.*

“It’s messing with my head.” She looked down at her hands. Some of the blood that dripped from the Rabbit was on her hands and smeared onto her jeans. “Oh yuck. How could I have done that?” *I was too close. Maybe I wasn't close enough. Maybe it was a narrow escape. Maybe I should have said something else. Second guessing. Got to stop. Find the Rabbit. Find Tom.*

“Break’s over, back to the garden party.” She checked the gun, activated the safety, stuck it in her jeans and returned to the alley. “Yes.” *Trail of blood. Convenient.*

“Thank you very much.” *Of course, some poor thing died a gruesome death for this convenience.*

“Bad luck there.” *At least the smell isn't so bad now.*

The blood trail led her through a series of garden spaces and connecting alleys. The boundary hedges terminated at a thick line of tall trees. The trail of blood ended on neatly stacked rocks that channeled a narrow stream flowing out of the tree line. Downstream, like some picturesque oil painting it meandered across a field and

into some unseen part of the garden. Upstream, a trail paralleled it into the darkness of the wood. She followed the trail. "They can run, but they can't hide."

The stream and trail inched upwards through tall ferns. Above that, heavy leaves filtered the light, giving the stream a dark cast spiked with flickering rays. The trail narrowed before disappearing entirely into moss and rocks. "To bravely go where no man has gone before." *Bravely?*

"Or woman for that matter." *Don't get lost.*

"Whoa! Slippery" The foliage thickened and the terrain steepened. The trail became a series of short switchbacks that ended at a structure covered in green slime. Water flowed over the top and formed the stream she had followed. "A dam, damn it. Lost the trail. Now What?" A rusty, leaking, pipe meandered down the precipitous hillside. Avoiding the bigger puddles, she approached the structure. Her foot slipped on the wet leaves. "Yikes..."

Down she went, careening through a bank of ferns, crushing a stand of wildflowers, barely missing two trees and ending in a loud splash. She was on her back, and up to her chin. "Crap. Crap. Double crap." *Warm, salty. Fallen into the sea? Wriggling? Red-tinted?*

"Oh! Mother of God. It's blood and it's alive." She screamed.

"OK, that was so loud." *All the Rabbits in the garden probably heard it.*

"Got to get out of this." *Not deep. Just get out.*

"Ouch! Ouch! Blast it! Ouch!" *Bitten?*

She reached into the water and she jerked her hand out, creature attached. "What the hell? Lobsters? LOBSTERS?" *Seriously?*

She shook it off and managed to get her jeans stuffed into her socks.

"I'm in deep guacamole." *No, I'm in a bloody bog, my jeans are totaled, and I'm being eaten by lobsters.*

"Not the best way to end this hunt. At least it's not my blood, not yet anyway."

Here and there, the surface was periodically broken as if some fish was thrashing about. "Not lobsters?" *Metal?*

“Oh this just keeps getting better. What the heck are those things?” *Animals? Trapped like me? Hell’s tar pit. They better not bite.*

“Sorry whatever you are. Not my fault.” *Curiosity kills more than cats here.*

The sound of violent splashing drifted across the pool. “Oh-oh.” *Something big. Rabbit? Where?*

She moved nearer the sound. The sheer number of lobsters made proceeding difficult. “Move slowly.” *Tend not to bite.*

“Who’s there?” *Given the way things are going, maybe it’s a walrus or hippopotamus.*

“It’s in my head. I hear it – the Rabbit.” *Is this real? Don’t see it.*

“It’s saying something?” *To me? Can’t understand. Imagining it? Could I speak to it?*

“No harm in trying. Right?” *Getting closer.*

“Oh Rabbit, do you know the way out of this horrible pool? I’m tired of wading about in some poor creature’s blood and being bitten by lobsters. Oh Rabbit.” *Oh crap, there it is.*

The Rabbit stood motionless. It winked a translucent film over one of its large black eyes. A sort of smile, more like a smirk, began to cross what passed for a mouth. Rows of fangs were exposed. It reached down with clawed paw-hands, scooped up a lobster, bit off the tail in a single bite, and tossed the rest over its shoulder.

She shook her head. “God, that was really nasty.” *Can this thing see me? Was that a message? A warning? Perhaps it doesn’t speak English. Perhaps it’s a French hare, fresh from the Battle of Hastings in 1066?*

“What?” *No, No, just try French. First sentence in my French book.*

“*Ou est ma chatte?*” *Where is my cat? Perfect.*

Its ears twitched rapidly. “CRAP!” *Going to charge.*

A bloody wake fanned in the air as the beast moved towards her.

“Oh, I beg your pardon.” *Did I say the wrong thing?*

It closed on her. “Ohmygod.” *Here we go.*

“OK, maybe you don’t like cats.” *Not afraid of you.*

The Rabbit was quick. Alice was quicker. She pulled the gun, flipping off the safety. She was still firing when the beast passed right through her and began to rip apart some instantaneously indistinguishable, but formerly large, blue animal near the edge of the pool behind her. Body fragments splattered in the darkening pool. “What the bloody hell was that?” *Mental note. Must not like cats.*

She stood there in the pool. A thin white smoke rose from the gun barrel. “Thought it said, ‘Would you like cats if you were me?’” *I’m imagining things. It’s the stress.*

She turned to the Rabbit. “Well, perhaps not. Don’t be angry about it.”

The Rabbit paused, straightened and sniffed the air without turning towards her.

“I wish I could show you our cat, Jack. I think you’d like cats if you could only see him. He’s such a sweet thing.” *Is it listening?*

The Rabbit resumed its feeding frenzy devouring the blue creature and many of the nearby lobsters. “The horror!” *God help whatever that was.*

She waded slowly toward the Rabbit with the Glock pointed at the sky. “Keep talking, don’t think, keep moving, no panic.” *You’re OK. This is the Hunt.*

“Jack sits purring so nicely by the vegetable garden gate, washing his face, cleaning his paws... and he’s such a great talent for catching animals. You wouldn’t think there’d be so many rabbits in the city... oh, I beg your pardon.”

The Rabbit, having reduced its prey to slurry, was bristling all over.

Alice slowed her pace. “Maybe I’ve offended it?” She spoke louder. “We won’t talk about him any more if you’d rather not.” *Quite close now.*

She lowered the gun. “Can’t miss.” She fired twice. The gun spat fire but the Rabbit was unaffected. “Impossible.” *I may as well be firing blanks.*

The Rabbit turned towards her. Color drained from her face. She backed up, still pointing the gun at the Rabbit. The Rabbit said, “We indeed. As if I would speak to such a subject. Our kind has always

hated what you call ‘cats,’ nasty, low, fitzpaw things. Do not let me hear of it again. And, while I am not officially allowed to ask this, could you please stop shooting at me, you stupid fitzpaw Human!”

She looked around. “What? Heard that.” *For real. Where’s it coming from? My head?*

“I’m *not* stupid and what happens depends on you. Are you... are you fond of dogs?” *No answer.*

She continued to back up. “It knows I’m Human. Keep talking.” *Don’t show fear.*

“There’s a nice little dog that comes to the Institution once a week. Did I mention the staff say I imagine you? I’d like to show you to them. Anyway, this dog’s a little bright-eyed terrier, you know, with short curly brown hair. And it’ll fetch things when you throw them, like sticks and then bring back dead pigeons. It’ll sit up and beg for its dinner and all sorts of things... I can’t remember half of them... and it belongs to a lawyer and he says it’s so useful; it’s worth a thousand dollars. He’s certifiable of course but still a nice guy. He says it kills all the rabbits and... oh dear. I’m afraid I’ve offended you again.” The Rabbit turned and moved vigorously away from her, making waves in the pool as it went. She waved at it with the gun in her hand. “Rabbit dear. Do come back again. We won’t talk about cats or dogs either, if you don’t like them.”

It was gone. She stuffed the gun back in her jeans. “I can insult ‘em, I just can’t kill ‘em.” *Is that right?*

“I mean, really?” *Maybe it is. I should have asked it about Tom. Shivering. First, get out of this pool.*

The silence was short lived, replaced by a series of high pitched whines ending in splashes. Crap. “Now what?” *Bats? Metal bats?*

One impacted the pool with such violence that pieces of lobster hit her like so many tiny projectiles. “Ouch!” *Don’t want to be hit.*

The creature blew back out of the water with almost the same violence. She raised her arms like a shield, but still was drenched in spray. “Bats, why is it always bats? I hate bats.” *Ah, crap.*

Another high pitched whine caused her to look skyward. “Incoming!”

CHAPTER III

A DIMENSIONAL RACE

They were certainly a weird looking party that assembled on the bank – pseudo-birds with bedraggled metal feathers, proto-metallic animals with synthetic fur that clung close to them, and all dripping wet. They milled around shaking and making noises that seemed to convey a rising unhappiness.

Alice began talking with them, in English no less, as if this all were perfectly normal and she had known them all her life. “The first mutual question is, of course, how to get cleaned up?”

This generated quite an animated discussion. Alice held her own, but eventually became entwined in quite a long argument with a penguin-like thing. At last it turned sulky, and would only say, “I am vastly older than you and must know better.”

“Give me a break,” she said. “I’m 28. How old are you?”

The Penguin responded, “28 what?”

“28 years.”

“What is a ‘year’?”

“You know, 365 days?”

“What is a ‘day’?”

“You know, Sun up to Sun up, 24 hours.”

“Sun?”

“OK, I get your point, different world. What are your units?”

“Lubricant refreshes based on viscosity breakdown. We do not do astronomy.”

“And so...”

“It is personal fitzpaw!”

“OK, fine, forget it.” *Well now I know I’m in the freaking Twilight Zone.*

She screamed, “Hey! Can we please move on? Does anyone have a clue how we can get this horrible blood off?”

The group appeared shocked at this violent outburst and fell silent. A large rodent-creature that seemed to be a figure of authority

among them called out, "Sit down, all of you, and listen to me. *I will soon make you dry enough.*"

They all sat down at once, forming a large ring with the Rodent in the middle. She checked her gun. "Loaded." *Not giving me the comfort it did earlier. Going to catch a serious cold if I don't get dry soon. Does blood dry or coagulate?*

"Ahem!" said the Rodent with an important air, "Are you all ready? This is the driest thing I know. Silence all round, if you please."

It began a verbal lecture on some science. Alice perked up. "I know this. Physics?" *Possibly quantum mechanics or gravitational theory? But even a crazy rocket scientist can't follow this verbally. I need a blackboard.*

"Fitzpaw!" said a rusting penguin, with a shiver. "Could you not just beam it to me?"

"I beg your pardon," said the Rodent, frowning, "Did you speak?"

"Not I," said the Penguin.

"I thought you did," said the Rodent. "I proceed," and it went on, "Einstein found it advisable... "

"Found *what?*" said a shiny brass-colored duck thing.

"Yes what?" she said. *Looks like an ugly bath toy.*

"Found *it,*" the Rodent replied, "of course you know what '*it*' means?"

"I know what '*it*' means when I find a thing," said the Duck. "It is generally a neutron star, a wormhole or a trans-dimensional anomaly. The issue is what did Einstein find?"

The Rodent ignored this question and went on, " Found it advisable to unroll these hidden dimensions quite carefully."

It turned to her. "How are you getting on now, my dear?"

"Me?" *Speaks with a perfect British accent. Oxford?*

"Yes, you. See any other 'my dears' around here?"

"As bloody wet as ever," she said. "This lecture, dry as it is, doesn't seem to dry me at all. I think I'm starting to smell."

“In that case,” said a spitting image of a silver dodo rising to its feet, “I move that the meeting adjourn for the immediate adoption of more highly energetic remedies.”

“Say what you really mean,” said a tin-like bird with checkered feathers. “I do not know the logic in half of these long equations, and, moreover, I do not believe you do either.”

The Bird bent its head and smiled. Some of the other mechanical birds clicked audibly. “What I was going to say,” said the Dodo, “was, that the best thing to get us dry would be a Dimensional Race.”

“What *is* a Dimensional Race?” she said.

“Why,” said the Dodo, “the best way to explain it is to do it. I’ll set it up.” Pulling out the same type of device the Rabbit had used, it marked out a sort of glowing circle. “The exact shape matters not.”

“Really?” *Looks pretty small for a race course.*

The Dodo placed each creature along the course, here and there but always seemingly taking up no space. Regardless of who was added, it all looked just the same size as before. On joining the ring they shimmered in a way that suggested they were ethereal. Alice hesitated. “You want me to step here?” *Looks dangerous.*

The Dodo pointed a wing. She stepped forward, joining the shimmering ring of creatures. “Looks like my old High School track.” *I think I see Coach Billy -bob. Can’t be. He was killed... this is an illusion... not reality... not reality.*

She put her hands over her eyes. “Oh god, what have I done. This better work.” *What was I thinking? Billy-bob has metal feathers?*

There was no “One, two, three, and away.” Each simply began running. When Alice took her hands away, the race had started. She began to run. They seemed to pass right through one another. “Mother!” *This is most unnerving. I’ve never experienced passing a bath toy, in any sense that can be taken. This is probably life-threatening dangerous. I’m definitely missing a dimension, but which one? And worse, I’m now afraid to stop. Without some way to measure time, I might lose another dimension and not exist at all. I’ll count my strides. Keep moving.*

“This is ridiculous,” she said. “637 Alice-strides, enough already. Hey, when do we stop this?”

The Dodo called out, “Fine! The race is over.” The track vanished and they all burst from nearly a point, pushing each other aside, like an explosion in an over-capacity lift. She struggled to keep her balance.

“I’m alive!” *Mental note: NEVER, NEVER do that again. Use a drycleaner.*

They were all dry or at least the blood no longer appeared on their clothes, feathers or metal surfaces. The metallic ensemble crowded around the Dodo. Many voices asked the same thing. “Who won?”

This question the Dodo apparently could not answer without a great deal of thought. It sat for quite a while with one metal wing almost touching its metal forehead, while the rest waited in silence. Sparks flew in the gap. At last the Dodo said, “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.”

“But who is to give the prizes?” said a chorus of mechanical voices.

“Why, *she*, of course,” said the Dodo, pointing to Alice with one wing; and the whole party at once crowded around her, calling out in a medley of voices, “Prizes! Prizes!”

“I have no prizes.” *What do I do?... Got it. Ammunition clip?*

She put her hand in her pocket, pulled it out and provided them each a live round. There was exactly one apiece. The duck said, “Unbelievable! What an honor. Prototype seeds of what is surely a heretofore unknown, metallic based life form.”

The Dodo joined in, “Yes, quite astonishing.”

“But she must have a prize herself, you know,” said the Rodent.

“Of course,” the Dodo replied. “What else have you got?”

“I have an automatic handgun?”

“Hand it over automatically then,” said the Dodo.

“Certainly.” *Safety on.*

They all crowded around her once again. The Dodo presented the gun, saying, “We beg your acceptance of this elegant effigy.”

They all cheered and smiled in their mechanical way. Alice looked around. "Damn." *This whole thing is dangerously absurd. They all look so happy. It'd be a shame to break the mood. Who knows what would happen if I upset them?*

She bowed, took the gun and stuck it in her jeans, behind her back. "Thank you all." *Breathe now. That was close. Packing again. Glad Tom didn't see that.*

The ceremony was apparently over as the creatures seemed to lose interest in her and began to drift away. The Rodent said, "Wait!" It motioned and they all sat down again in a ring. Some begged the Rodent to tell them something more.

She jumped in, "I'm trying to find someone and I don't know where to look. I don't suppose you could tell me, with all due respect, what's going on here? Just curious. It would help me a lot."

The metal Duck said, "Tales bring understanding."

The Rodent responded, "Mine is a long and a sad tale to tell." It turned to her and sighed mechanically.

"It *is* a long tail, certainly," she said, observing the rodent's exaggerated metal tail, "but why do you call it sad?"

The Rodent ignored her and began.

A Rabbit said to a
Rodent that it
met in the
garden,
"Let us both
go to claws:
I will puree YOU.
Come! I'll take no
excuse. We
must have a
trial by fury.
For reality's
sake this
time. I've
nothing else

to do."
Said the
Rodent to the
Rabbit, "Such
a trial,
dear thing,
with no
grievance
or grudge,
would be
wasting our
time and
your blood."
"I will hold the
grudge, I will be
the grievance!"
said the
cunning
old Rabbit:
"I'll
judge the
whole of
existence,
and
condemn
you
to
dimensional
ambiguity."

"You are not paying attention," the Rodent said to her. "What are you thinking of?"

"I beg your pardon." *Tom, I'm thinking of Tom.*

She continued, "It's a metaphor. You've got to the fifth bend in the space-time continuum, right?"

"I have *not*," cried the Rodent. Synthetic fur bristled.

“A knot,” she said. “Oh, do let me help to undo it.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” said the Rodent, getting up and walking away. “You insult me by talking such mathematical nonsense.”

“I was just trying to help,” she pleaded. “Really.” *I should remember this stuff. It was probably on the Institute’s course list, let’s see, maybe right after making leather wallets. What did it read? Oh, yes: Topology, String Theory and Trans-Dimensional Analysis, M.W. F. 3 to 5 pm, PhD required.*

She went on to the Rodent, “I’m not an expert in topology and you seem so easily offended. I just need some help.” The Rodent ground its teeth in reply, metal on metal. It started to leave. “Please come back and finish your story,” she called after it.

The others all joined in chorus, “Yes, please do.” The Rodent only shook its head, and scurried a little quicker. Soon as it was out of sight.

“What a pity it left,” said the Dodo.

An older penguin took the opportunity of saying to its child, “Ah, my dear. Let this be a lesson to you. Never lose your temper.”

“Consider holding your tongue, Mother,” said the young penguin. Its mother cast a wary eye, obviously displeased by this impertinence. It continued, “Sometimes *you are* enough to try the patience of an iceberg. Do you remember when we put that berg in the way of that gigantic metal ship? You wanted it to the left, then to the right. It made us all crazy. They will not pay us for lost tempers. We will always be Clinkers. We will never get out of these fitzpaw gardens.”

The older penguin slapped the younger one so hard it knocked it over.

Alice winced. “I wish I had Jack here, I know I do.” *He’d sort out these creatures, mechanical or whatever.*

“And who is Jack, if I might venture to ask the question?” said the Dodo.

“Jack’s our cat. He’s flesh and blood, not metal. Not a robot. And he’s such an expert at catching mice like you can’t believe. And I

wish you could see him go after the birds. Why, he'll snatch a bird as soon as it looks at him, rabbits as well.”

This unintended but probably inappropriate speech caused quite a stir among the party. Some of the birds hurried off in a huff. One of the old penguins began wrapping itself up very carefully in some metallic fabric. It remarked, “Robot indeed. I really must be getting to my assigned garden. The air in this region does not suit my manifold.”

Another called out in a trembling voice to its children, “Come away, my dears. It is high time you were all were lubricated.”

On various pretexts they all disappeared. The Dodo was the last. “Well, back to work. Good luck. You should feel better soon.”

She was left alone. “God, am I screwed up. I have no idea what that was all about. Nightmare in FAO Schwartz? Now what?” *I wish I hadn't mentioned Jack. Nobody seems to like him here, and I'm sure he's the best cat in the whole world. Well, in my world anyway.*

“Oh, my dear Jack. I wonder if I will ever see you again.” *No, that's not right. I wonder if Tom will ever see you again. I wonder if I will ever see Tom again. Come on, Alice. Get it together. Go back.*

She retraced her steps and before long returned to the garden. She seemed to be wandering aimlessly. “After a while, it all looks the same.” *I've got to find Tom, but I seem to be just a shadow of a stranger here, a remembrance of reality in a rose garden. Maybe it's a memorial garden? Mine? A kiss by a rose...*

“NO!” *Despair later. Red paint? That's different.*

The grass had been painted just outside the entrance to an otherwise indistinguishable garden. “I thought they were supposed to paint the roses red, not the grass.” *Letters?*

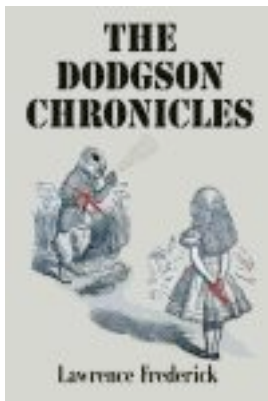
She walked in and turned around. “Saint Thomas lives?” *What the hell? Wish it had said Tom lives.*

She walked out then stopped. “Maybe it's special?”

She went back in and looked around. “Footsteps?” *Maybe the Rodent changed its mind, followed me, and is coming back to finish its story.*

“Oh, God. Rabbit!” *I can hear its words in my head.*

“It's really angry. I'll hide here. Thanks St. Thomas.”



*In the late 1800's, Charles Dodgson, a famous Oxford mathematician, hid his disturbing visions of the future from the Church of England by encoding them into the children's books *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* using the pen name Lewis Carroll. The *Dodgson Chronicles* derives from CIA transcripts produced by a secret cryptology project. As decoded, the book describes his modern day descendants' struggle to free the Earth from heretofore unknown creatures.*

The Dodgson Chronicles

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