

Flower 411

by Jack Beltane

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Joe is having a small problem: Everything around him is vanishing, almost right before his eyes. Fortunately, one of his co-workers is there to explain to him what's happening—and to help him escape the effects of a drug called Flower 411 that is being administered to the entire population without their knowledge. The result is Joe's journey through various levels of reality and control until he manages to attain some level of comfort with the world—and reality—around him.

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flog completed **February 17 to September 15, 2004**

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That his stapler was missing was of no real consequence. Yes, it had taken him several weeks to obtain a beige one, instead of the standard-issue black, but he did not feel his work had been for naught. After all, he could count on one hand the number of things he stapled in a month. What bothered him was the direct evidence that someone had been in his cube. Should he now log 45 minutes of "general admin" time in order to inventory his drawers to see if anything else was gone? Or was this the result of a random emergency some coworker had encountered after he'd left last night? And if so, would this as-yet-unnamed coworker return his beige stapler?

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The e-mail message read in full—and crammed entirely into the subject line—"Elisa's baklava is in the food cube." The message had been sent with high importance to the entire site. Whenever he saw a high- or low-importance flag on an e-mail, he always had to evaluate the contents for himself, to see if the annoyance of a message flag really was necessary. In this instance, there was actually no attendant message, just a subject line, which somehow made the high-importance flag all the more urgent. Here was an e-mail of such gravity that it needed not only the flag, but also its entire contents in the subject line. He decided it was best to investigate. He realized he also could look for any sign of

his beige stapler.

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He did not find his stapler and, in fact, discovered, upon his arrival at the food cube, that Elisa's baklava also was missing. She was Greek, and he was quite certain it would've been delicious, and for several moments he pondered the worth of scrounging the few honey-soaked crumbs left in the pan. High importance indeed. He saw nothing untoward about food disappearing, however, and so instead returned to his cube without so much as dipping his fingernail into the pan. On his way back, he heard tell that four people were out with the flu. He sensed something afoot, but pondered this less than he had the scroungings of Elisa's baklava.

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For the next 45 minutes he did very little, at least in the eyes of his employer. While clocking his self-obligatory hour of "general admin" time, he assumed the role of his online self and updated his blog. Online, he was simply "Joe," after Bazooka Joe, which was a long-winded literary joke of sorts, based on the famous Bazooka Joe comic fortune that read, "Help, I'm being held prisoner in a bubblegum factory." This seemed to Joe to sum up his life, and his entire non-work persona had been built upon the supposition. Today he informed the world that e-mail sometimes did have high importance, then made an untimely juxtaposition into his life outside of work.

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Last night Joe had spent in the Xenosphere, a self-styled club of the Apocalypse where he had heard the only good-looking, single girl in his office often hung out. The lights had been too dim, the air too thick with smoke, and the beer too expensive for him to last very long, but he enjoyed the dark snyth music and furtive clientele while he was there, perched, as always, alone, at the bar, just watching. She had been there, too, and she might even have made eye contact with him, except that at the moment when he realized what was happening, he had panicked and hidden behind the rim of his beer glass. She'd been dressed in a form-fitting black velvet dress with black leather accents, which gave Joe a whole new perspective of her.

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When Joe grabbed his pen and notebook so that he could look suitably concerned at his meeting, he noticed that his pen holder was missing. He never used it—his desk was simply littered with pens, pencils, and highlighters—but he was sure it had been there this morning, when he'd noticed his stapler was gone. And his stapler was still gone, even though most all of his healthy coworkers now were in the office. In fact, he saw upon closer inspection, his tape dispenser also was missing. And he'd never actually counted before, but the number of writing utensils strewn across his desk seemed greatly diminished. Pressured by the reminder from his Outlook calendar to get to his meeting,

Joe left the issues unresolved and spent the better part of the next hour instead attempting to explain to software developers that Rich Text Format was not a version-based file structure.

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On his way back to his cube, Joe was sidetracked by the only guy in the office he would consider a friend, in the sense that they'd gone to concerts and hung out together away from the office. Jerry confronted him with a small stack of CDRs containing a multitude of mp3 files he had "obtained." Joe took them, and would listen to them, and might keep one or two of the albums they contained. But mostly Joe was still of the last generation, with a full-blown guilty conscience, and the result would be that he'd end up buying too many new CDs over the weekend, which created a whole other form of guilt in which he knew he should be saving for a mortgage. Jerry told Joe that he'd found a sampler of Australian garage rock from the 1960s that was sure to open his eyes. Joe's eyes, however, already had been opened, since the girl from the Apocalypse then walked past, demurely dressed in a dark blouse and ankle-length skirt. She might even have noticed him out of the corner of her eye.

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There was one thing Joe couldn't stand, and two of them were near his cube when he finally navigated back to it: Employees whining about things they couldn't control. To his right was Al, a simpleton from the Middle Ages, bemoaning the fact that they had replaced a legacy database system with a new legacy database system, and so now he was going to have to learn three systems, two of which would soon be sunset, and all of which were effectively the same. Joe saw no real problem with this. To his left was a woman whose name he didn't know (Gina? Camille? Or was this the infamous Reggie?). She was complaining about how the sun still managed to get in her eyes in the afternoons, even with the blinds down. For some reason, they both appeared to see continuity in these topics of discussion, based solely on the word "sunset," but Joe was at a loss to connect the two. He sidestepped into his cube and tried to look busy. When he glanced back at them a moment later, he saw that Gina (Reggie?) had taken off her sweater, an action Joe felt sure he would've noticed. But not wanting to join their discussion, he didn't bother asking how she had removed it so surreptitiously.

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At 10:30 Joe dug into his lunch sack to find his morning snack, which usually was a cereal bar. The tradition had begun some years ago when he had decided such a snack was a good way to get a bit more fiber in his diet. Something deep-down told him this was merely a ruse; that the real thing killing him was not his diet, but his job. Still, at least he didn't smoke, and so considered his morning and afternoon snack breaks as a fair cop, since he didn't jump up and disappear every hour (or half hour) just to burn some tobacco. He instead began to surf the Internet to build up a list of sites for future blogs, only was dismayed to discover that as soon as a site would load, it would then reload and

declare "404 Page Not Found." It was almost like someone was dismantling the World Wide Web, site by site, based on his mouse clicks. He briefly listened for circling helicopters, then finished his snack and went about his so-called work.

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After finishing his snack, Joe got up and went to the bathroom. He saw the girl from the Apocalypse across the sea of cubes, drowning in an endless array of neutral tones, plants that fared well under fluorescent lights, and lapdog employees barking about some problem that actually didn't concern them. She seemed unconcerned. She saw Joe and offered him a Mona Lisa smile and single-finger wave, which drained all the blood from his head and all the energy from his muscles. He returned her advance with a curt and stilted gesture akin to raising his hand in class, then stumbled into the bathroom with more effort than was required. When he re-emerged, she was nowhere to be seen, and the same could be said for his chair when he returned to his cube. Still lightheaded from his distant encounter with the girl, he grabbed the chair from an empty cube and quickly sat down.

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11:11 was a distracting time for Joe. Today was exceptionally distracting. Normally, he either saw 11:11 on a clock, or was handed a personal check with the number 1111, or was cut-off by a car with plate number 111, but today when the phone rang at 11:11 he was forced to pause his CD. Upon maximizing the player to resume play, he noticed he had paused it at exactly 1:11. He then noticed a new e-mail, which had the time stamp of 11:11 and which contained the message that "only 11 tickets are left for the company boat tour on the 11th." Never before had such a confluence of elevens assailed him. Ages ago he had looked up 11 on the Internet and had found that he was not alone in being haunted by the digits. Net wisdom indicated that 11 symbolized Infinity (capital "I") and that those plagued by the number were of a higher spiritual order than others, and were ready to embrace a doorway to another world (or dimension, or time—it was relatively unclear where the doorway led). Joe simply shook his head and realized that his stand-in chair was not nearly as comfortable as had been his original.

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Joe squirmed in his substitute chair and considered the boat tour. The Company Initiative Committee for Off-Site Employee Activities had apparently taken him under their wing. He noticed from the brief recipient list of the 11:11 e-mail that a certain Siloya Darby also had been specifically invited, as had Jerry. Siloya was the real draw, as she was the aforementioned only good-looking, single girl in the office. Still, Joe didn't want to go on the boat tour. While he would love to spend time with Siloya (and Jerry, he supposed), he could think of nothing more torturous than spending his time away from work with the people from work. But then: Siloya. And then his chance to respond to the CICOFEA was deleted for him, as were all of his e-mail messages, followed by all his open windows closing and the icons for them removed from his desktop, all of which led to his computer

screen finally going black. He had heard this was how they fired people, and Joe could only think that he should have replied to the CICOFEA much earlier.

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He was not fired, it turned out, but they did come and remove his computer, monitor and all. At least this time he saw the perpetrators take his stuff, unlike the still-unnamed thief who had made off with his stapler, pen holder, tape dispenser, chair, and sundry items too small to inventory, but which Joe felt sure were missing, nonetheless. He asked the two techies who came for the deceased machine if his computer's untimely demise could explain all the 404 errors on the Web, but neither answered with more than a grumble, which Joe chalked up to a lack of coffee. As they were wheeling away the cart with his PC, Joe noticed a small "11" on the one guy's shirt sleeve. He opened his mouth and held up a finger to ask about it, but the pair kept walking away without so much as a glance back at him.

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With nothing else to do for the time being, Joe wandered over to Jerry's cube to tell him about his adventures at the Xenosphere. Jerry unconvincingly argued that this had been a first date, as each had known the other would be there, despite the fact that Joe pointed out she had not known he would be there, and apart from a sideways glance that could have been his imagination, she hadn't ever known he was there. Jerry changed the subject to beer. Joe changed the subject to that strange, incomplete feeling he got every morning until he had watered the only his plant in his apartment. Jerry decided Joe needed to get out more, and suggested he ask Siloya to the Xenosphere that night. Joe decided the conversation had begun with no destination and had, indeed, gone nowhere, and thus returned to his own cube.

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One of the most eventful things to occur to Joe was a benign trip to the drinking fountain to fill up his bowl-sized coffee mug with metallic-tasting water. Still, it was all the place had to offer. While filling his mug, he heard a mild feminine voice behind him say, "Hi." He turned to be confronted by Siloya Darby, clutching her own mug to be filled with metallic-tasting water. In his head, Joe returned her greeting, though upon later reflection, he wasn't positive this had happened. Either way, Siloya followed her salutation with, "Were you at the Xenosphere last night?" Joe then managed to stumble through a brief smattering of small talk, which ended for him in nervous silence and for her with the words, "I'll see you later, then," which, upon reflection, Joe felt had a decidedly literal ring to it, rather than being the product of polite conversation.

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Joe had ample time to reflect upon his first auditory encounter with Siloya, as his new computer still had not been returned. He noticed with some distraction that the computers

in all of the cubes he could see near him also were missing, meaning, perhaps, there was a much bigger issue brewing. Perhaps they would close down the site for the day and let them all go home, in light of otherwise consciously paying them to sit and do nothing. In such an event, Joe fantasized taking it as Divine Providence and using the time to ask out Siloya. She, however, had more direct and ambitious plans, and appeared at his cube moments later, her coat on and her purse slung over her shoulder. "Let's go to lunch," she demanded politely, and Joe had no choice but to join her.

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Siloya insisted on driving, vaguely explaining that she "knew what to look for." Joe didn't mind, as he knew he wouldn't have been able to keep his eyes on the road. As they pulled out of the parking lot in a trendy, but compact, black hatchback, Siloya mentioned in passing that they were going back to the Xenosphere. Joe commented that he didn't know they served lunch, and she replied that "they do lots of things," which she accentuated with a sly, lingering smile that gave Joe butterflies in his stomach. She had, he realized, the most perfect alignment of eyes, nose, and ears that he had ever seen.

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As they pulled onto the highway, Siloya offered Joe an apology before turning up the stereo. A darkly ambient song swirled out of the speakers and seemed almost palpable to him. As he watched the world slip past beyond the car, he noticed with a detached distraction that the other cars on the road seemed to ripple in and out of view, like heat shimmers in August. In fact, he noticed that the heavier the music, the fewer cars he could see. He had just realized with vague horror that the city skyline also had disappeared (or so it looked) when Siloya exited the highway, slowed down, and turned off the music, at which point the world fully reappeared with all the attendant weight you would expect.

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The Xenosphere was crowded when they arrived, and Joe was both intrigued and excited by how good this meant their lunches must be. The same type of music as last night still oozed from the speakers, though at a more manageable volume. Siloya seemed to know where she was going, as if she owned the club, and led the way to a back room Joe had not seen the night before. Inside were several booths, all filled with couples (except the one Siloya claimed for them). As she sat down, she shared a furtive, conspiratorial glance with most of the others in the room. Joe got the distinct impression that now was not the time to ask her, jokingly, if she was a drug dealer.

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Siloya did most of the talking, not because Joe was paralyzingly shy, but because her discourse was eminently more interesting than his would have been. She had tales of an element of the citizenry crippled by mind-altering drugs, distilled over decades from

thousands of experiments with hundreds of genetically-modified flowers. Joe realized with great dismay that Siloya was one of "those people"—a late-night radio junkie, convinced that a shadow government was imposing its ill will on the world. He didn't imagine this bode too well for his more parochial plans of mall ratting, movie watching, and maybe a round of miniature golf.

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The experiment that had finally been successful was number 411. Subsequently, its product had been labeled Flower 411. The scentless, tasteless, and colorless distillation of this blossom—in small very doses that could be spread via food, drink, or a fine mist—rendered those who took it open to suggestion and completely unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Thus, as long as a person was fed a constant stream of Flower 411—coupled with incessant subliminal suggestions via TV, radio, well-placed PA speakers, or personal electronic devices—they could be led to believe in a reality created (and controlled) by someone else. Siloya informed Joe that he was just such a person, but that she currently was weening him of the debilitating effects of Flower 411. Joe blinked three times, but Siloya's countenance remained sincere.

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Two things convinced Joe that Siloya might actually be telling the truth. First, her eyes never wavered, and though Joe wondered if he was truly seeing Siloya's eyes, or just some fantastical representation of the same, he still found solace therein. Second, and more importantly, on the way home Siloya played some more of what she now called "specially-designed interference patterns" that sounded, to Joe, like dark ambient music. As she turned the volume up and down Joe noticed that, indeed, as she had predicted, different things wavered in and out of view, depending on the volume. When the music was loud, there were fewer signs of life: Fewer cars, buildings, busses, and people. This, Siloya said, was because in Reality (capital "R"), only the "poor working class" had to be out in the world, getting to and from various "safe houses pumped full of Flower 411 and a false reality." This, she said nominally, is what Joe and his ilk called "work" and, by extension, "life."

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"The interference pattern will last for a little bit before it wears off, so you might find things out of place for a few minutes," Siloya warned as they got out of the car, back at work (a very solid building, Joe noted dismally). "I also slipped some of Flower 111 in your drink last night," she admitted. "111 negates the effects of Flower 411, if taken long enough. Here's some more." She handed Joe a small bottle of sunflower-shaped pills. "They're chewable," she added. "How convenient," was all he could think to say. He still wasn't sure whether he really trusted her—whether her music and pills were actually creating the false reality. However, when he got back to his cube, he noticed that there was nothing on his desk at all. And, in fact, nothing on anyone's desk. He wandered over to Jerry's cube and found him perched on a chair in front of an empty workspace, ostensibly

typing away at an invisible workstation. Joe didn't say a word and returned to his own area.

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Realizing he may well be in an empty building, along with 200 other people, just like hundreds of other people across the city, also in empty buildings, Joe decided the best course of action was to close his eyes and relax. As a test, he decided to start the stopwatch on his Timex and keep his finger on the button. At the first direct disturbance, he would stop the clock. His first thought after he closed his eyes (lying on the floor, since he didn't trust the reality of his chair) was how he could distinguish Reality (capital "R") from false reality (little "r"). His watch seemed Real. One chair had vanished, but the second chair had remained. Jerry was sitting in a chair, but staring at a nonexistent computer screen. The floor seemed very solid, bordering on downright uncomfortable. "Joe?" a voice said. He hit the button, sat up, and opened his eyes. The stopwatch had counted 11 minutes 11 seconds and 11 hundredths. Typical. "Good job with that report," the voice continued, but Joe could see no one there. He got up and looked around at every angle. Nothing, except a disembodied voice that finished a conversation with who it thought was Joe. Joe did not participate in this conversation and gleaned certain comfort from the indirect evidence that he, at least, was Real (capital "R").

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As Joe walked over to Siloya's cube he noticed fewer and fewer people around him, and heard a greater and greater number of disembodied voices. Voices would speak to him, and from the few conversations he tried to have, he realized that despite his replies, they were hearing another, shadow, Joe instead. A Joe that Joe couldn't see, but that seemed to be following him. And those folks who were apparently Real all were intently working in empty cubes, pushing invisible pencils and shuffling air for paper. Jerry, he noticed, was among those Joe now considered Real, as he was still physically there, which he mentioned to Siloya upon arriving at her cube. She was divvying up Flower 111 pills into bottles and taking Real notes on Real paper. "Jerry's next," she said. "But we have to go slowly or risk getting caught. Kind of nice, isn't it?" she asked. "Having an unreal you doing all your work?" Joe looked around. "But aren't... *they* watching? The ones behind Flower 411?" Siloya smiled sweetly and touched his hand, "Not literally, no. Not logistically possible. But we do have to get rid of your implant." Joe unconsciously ran his finger over a tiny bump in the meat of his inner forearm.

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"Why do we have to do this here?" Joe asked nervously. He was in the basement with Siloya and a dour-visaged man. The dour man was looking at Joe's forearm through a jeweler's glass and holding a scalpel menacingly. "The implant is keyed to the building," the man grumbled. "You leave for too long, at the wrong time, and they notice." Joe glanced at Siloya. "So we have to take it out and leave it here," she explained. She reached out and squeezed his hand reassuringly. "But won't they notice I've been here

too long? Like, all night?" The dour man looked up and grinned at Joe. "Sure. But by then they won't know where you really are." Then there was a relatively painless sting on his forearm and Joe passed out.

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Joe awoke in a completely empty room. He was lying on the floor. The dour man and Siloya were looking down on him, the former grinning maliciously and the latter appearing plaintive and worried. "Where is everything?" Joe asked. "The table, the shelves..." The dour man snickered. "You were lying on the floor the whole time." Siloya moved forward, between Joe and the dour man. "We gave you some more Flower 111..." Joe looked around at the bare walls and floor, then sat up and rubbed his head. There was a small bandage on his forearm. When Joe ran his finger over it, he heard a small tinkling noise, like metal on glass, and looked up to see the dour man wagging a tiny vial between his forefinger and thumb. "That was real," he explained. "So I have to take Flower 111 for the rest of my life?" Joe mumbled. Siloya crouched down and put her hand on his arm, smiling warmly, "Only until we get away from the cities." Joe glanced at the dour man. His countenance now was more serious and sincere. He nodded slightly and smiled.

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"We can't save them all right now," Siloya admitted sadly. "We have to move from building to building, taking a handful here and there." They were standing in Joe's cube, watching Jerry pass nothing to the thin air. Behind them, a real person was having a conversation with the invisible Joe, and apparently the invisible Joe was still as disgruntled as the real Joe remembered being. Jerry was next, but Siloya explained that it was a relatively lengthy process—after all, you couldn't just push someone into the Real world and expect them to survive. They had to be "primed," was the word she used. By which time, Joe would be long gone. He'd asked to stay and help with Jerry, but Siloya had very seriously refused to let him. "We have to get you away from here, to make sure you're completely divorced from this world, before you can return," she explained. "We?" Joe asked. "Yes." Siloya smiled. "I volunteered to make sure you get to the right place. Leave your implant here." Joe took the vial out of his pocket and considered the rice-sized device within, then unceremoniously dropped it to the floor.

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The walls were always Real, Joe noticed. Those constructs that could pen or cage were physical; objects of comfort or convenience most likely were not. Thus the office building had walls, and cube walls within the walls, but no chairs or tables or pencils. And certainly not any beige staplers. The realization that he could stop looking for something that never had existed was both liberating and terrifying to Joe. He was quiet in reflection as he and Siloya left the building. His car, he noted absently, was Real, but then it was part of what Joe now considered the Greater Cage—his car being no more than a small transport cage for the journey from one building to another. "I want to see what's Real," Joe blurted as he stood waiting to get into Siloya's car. She glanced at him and got in, as

did Joe. "What do you mean?" she asked, fastening her seatbelt and motioning for Joe to do the same. "I want to go back to my apartment and see if some things are Real. I'd like to take some things with me." Siloya started the car and turned on her swirling ambient music. She nodded once sharply. "Okay." Joe didn't bother to take one last look at his office building.

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Joe was glad to see that, unlike numerous buildings they hadn't passed on the way to his apartment, the building he had lived in was still there. Inside, it was sparse, like his office now was, and his apartment contained only the most basic furniture and necessities—though his cooking pots and pans, he noticed with detachment, were not the high-end outfit he thought he'd bought, just fully-functional tin. Most of his possessions were gone ("You never bought them"), as were his framed photographs ("The people in those pictures weren't real"). But his flower—the one he felt compelled to care for as if it was a child—was still there. His flower that seemed always to be in bloom, he assumed because of the great attention he paid to it. And a coin—a trinket he had always felt to be lucky—that was there, too. "Those are important," Siloya acknowledged when he pocketed the coin and picked up his flower. "Is this...?" he began, nodding at the plant. "Flower 411? No, it's not. We have to get going." Joe took one last look at the nothingness in which he'd been living, then left his apartment forever.

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They were at a rest stop somewhere in the Appalachians—Joe couldn't say for sure, because he'd never before been this far away from civilization. The air was thick with humidity, but clean and rich. Had he been pressed, he would've described it as three-dimensional air, as opposed to the flat air circulated through buildings (with Flower 411) in the form of AC. "People don't realize they could all just leave," Siloya mused. "But they trap themselves in the cities." Somehow her being surrounded by trees and sky seemed anachronistic to Joe. "So why didn't you just drag me out here?" he asked. Siloya grinned sympathetically, "The implant? Individually, you have to be primed for removal..." Joe nodded thoughtfully, then turned his attention back to the mountains.

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The hills wandered along through valleys, with only birds and trees to mark their progress. The sun shone bright and warm and the car hummed apologetically. The cities and TV shows and radio blather seemed so distant and noisy; a clutter now swept beneath green leaves and obsequious stones. There was only blue air, highlighted white with clouds, and distant mists where clouds met ground in echoing honesty. When he closed his eyes, everything vanished in a way it had not before, yet remained also, in an equally original way. There was a place to which they were going, but it was distant in both dream and vision, and more real for the weight of its worth.

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He awoke sometime after midnight, emerging from the shattered remnants of a nightmare. Somehow he knew, with certainty, that they had found the device previously lodged in his forearm. Here he could hear the wind bending the trees and see the stars forgiving them their blind glory. The embers of a campfire still tinkling and hissed, glowing orange. Somewhere, something moved; rustled through undergrowth and gained the moonlight. Tomorrow, he was told, they would arrive.

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They had to walk from their campsite on. He had not been afraid at night, as if his previously-conditioned mind felt comfortable with things it could not see. But now, in full daylight, he was timid. Every unseen, scampering creature was a threat; every shadow of every twisted tree, an angry claw grasping for him; every ragged breath from a hard climb sure to be his last. In the moments when they stopped and he looked around, he felt overwhelmed with life: There was nothing manmade in sight, not even a fence post. Everything he saw was alive; breathing; and, he was sure, sentient. Even the foothills through which they scrambled seemed to doze lazily under the sun, breathing slowly in reflection of an archaic past that now was his present. He felt alone, and not even the warm hand of his guide in his was enough to dispell the fear.

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"You only see what you know to look for," she explained cryptically. Willow trees forced to grow at angles; knobby scars on oak trees; piles of stones that had not fallen by accident. These were the things they followed through sunrise and daylight, looking, she said, for a fine white pillar of smoke that would lead them to the person they sought: The first to escape of his own volition, because those who knew what was going on didn't care. It was only criminal if there was someone there to prosecute. "But you care," he said. "I escaped," she replied.

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They reached the conclave in the gloaming. Siloya was instantly greeted by everyone who saw them emerge from the woods. A large man with a sword welcomed her first. They shook hands and Siloya leaned up and whispered something in his ear. He nodded once and smiled widely. Joe stood at the edge of the woods unsure of what to do. Behind him was another day-long hike in woods he didn't know, and beyond that, the cities and their mindless denizens. But before him were strangers wielding swords and dressed in clothes made of skins and hide. Their hard lifestyle showed in their faces; and though not unkind, he could tell they were suspicious. Siloya returned and took his elbow, smiling warmly. "Come on," she said. "You have to meet him." For the first time, Joe did not trust her. As she led him through the mudhuts and log buildings, everyone seemed to be smiling at his obvious discomfort. Joe wanted nothing more than to switch on his TV and relax.

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Joe sat in a log home in the middle of the conclave looking at a man named Howard Bent. This was *the* man, he'd been told: The first to escape. His arm still showed the angry red scar from his own implant removal, which had been self-inflicted as the result of realization followed by anger. Other than this, Joe didn't see how he was any different from anyone else. His eyes seemed only slightly more aware, and his wry grin appeared only to disguise the fact that he didn't really know the answers to the questions he was asked. Those around him paid him respect and reverence for lack of anyone else to defer to. Still, there was something in the way he sat, calmly, explaining to Joe how Flower 411 had created a society and culture, and that Joe's withdrawal would be more from that than Flower 411 itself. Joe's eyes glazed. Again he found himself wanting nothing more than to turn on the TV and relax. Siloya's smile faltered. She knew she was losing him.

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Somewhere in the midst of all this, something fell. A ball of fire from the sky; a bolt from Zeus; an alien craft; a government drone. The explanations were as varied as the eyewitness accounts. Howard listened to them all, one by one, assessing them for delusion or paranoia. When the last of them had left, Joe still sat, waiting for the interruption to diminish. "It was a meteor," Howard said simply to Joe. "And rare though it might be, they do have to land somewhere. Still, they need to believe it's something else. Joe, go with Siloya and find it and bring it back, and we'll let *them* tell us what it is." Joe saw something flicker along Howard's smile and realized that he was indeed wise, just in a way Joe didn't understand. "It'll be good for you, Joe," he added. "Thank you, Howard," Siloya whispered reverently, lightly touching Joe's elbow. All Joe could think was that she should have been more respectful.

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The brambles were thickest near the conclave. Joe looked back through the trees to glimpses of thatch roofing and wisps of smoke. Conclave? Compound? Commune? He supposed it didn't matter, but there was something not quite right. Why hadn't the purveyors of Flower 411 yet invaded and shutdown Howard Bent's operation? Surely even they could follow smoke signals. If he could just find the right descriptive, perhaps he could settle the question. "He's pretty neat, don't you think?" Siloya asked. Joe didn't answer nor even try to smile. He was actually thinking "plane crash in the jungle," but didn't care to elaborate.

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"You seem quiet since we got here," Siloya pointed out as they took a rest by a stream. "What are we doing here?" Joe asked tersely. It occurred to him, out of the blue, that he never had found his beige stapler and was no longer in any position to search for it. "Looking for the meteor," Siloya answered. "I know you're... uncomfortable here, Joe, but it will get easier." Joe said nothing; he wondered if the doughnuts had ever been real.

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The thing about Howard was proximity, Joe realized. When you were near him, you trusted and respected him. But once you stepped away, the doubts crept in. In many ways, Joe thought, this sounded a lot like the effects of Flower 411. And once you find out you've been duped, the automatic response is fight. Or flight. Joe much preferred running to punching, and always had. Although he'd certainly like to punch whoever had developed Flower 411. And now he thought on it, he wouldn't mind taking a swipe at Howard. Such violence was not customary, and Joe shuddered just as Siloya reached back to offer him a hand over the scabble they were climbing. "Okay?" she asked. "Just having trouble with Reality," Joe mumbled. Siloya heard him, but allowed his thoughts to remain private.

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"We can stop here and camp, then go back in the morning," Siloya said in late afternoon. Joe was certainly tired, but he did feel the urge for completion. "Don't we have to find the meteor before we head back?" He looked around, but only could see trees. "There it is!" Siloya exclaimed. She lunged a few feet through the underbrush and resurfaced with a grapefruit-sized black rock. Joe looked at the spot where she stood. There was no crater and no signs of fire, both of which he felt would be pretty good indicators of meteor impact. "That's just a rock, Siloya," he said slowly. She grinned and brought it to him to examine. "Howard doesn't expect us to find the actual meteor," she whispered, as if anyone could hear them. Joe furrowed his brow. "We just have to bring back a rock." A handful of disjointed reactions bubbled in Joe's mind, but the one that coalesced was, simply, "And let them tell *us* what we've found."

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They returned to wild elation and an impromptu parade to Howard's hut. Objective witnesses would have assumed some great, conquering victory, or at least a highly successful hunt—none of the villagers seemed unsatisfied by the rock. Joe refused to touch it, they assumed out of reverence, and Siloya proudly handed it to Howard Bent, who held it high for all to see. Joe coughed—he must've caught a cold in the woods—and slipped away before Howard could implicate him in the discovery of the rock.

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In many ways, the rock upon which Joe sat was more interesting than the rock which, even now, was being elevated to some astronomical status. His seat had furrows and marks that could be made to conform to the basic outline of a head, for example. Perhaps a skull. Joe imagined that image was too dark for most of these people. They certainly seemed happy, all things considered, and he didn't want to bring them down. "You have a cold," a timid voice said. Joe looked up at a young girl—maybe 12 years old—coming toward him, brandishing a dull orange, plastic cup. "This is a potion of slippery elm bark," she said. "It'll soothe your throat." Joe didn't know if it was her age,

use of the word "potion," or tangled hair that immobilized him; nevertheless, he decided his best defense was to hold very still, which he did quite well.

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The girl was actually 10 years old and her name was Cindy, which was a fortunate abbreviation of her full given name, Cinderella. Her mother had been starry-eyed and pregnant at 16 and had assumed the name would afford her daughter a fairy-tale existence. Cindy's father was not here, but her mother was. Her parents had separated after high school, but apparently her mom continually mentioned "going back for Daddy" one day, even though they already had been at the commune for seven years. Cindy, like her mother, felt that clean living in the country would bring the family back together in a way that was not possible in the city. Joe listened attentively and finally drank the potion. His dry, hoarse throat felt better almost instantly and an hour later, he realized his cough was gone.

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"You met Cindy," Siloya noted later. "She's pretty much the town doctor." Joe looked up at the stars, half hoping another meteor would fall. In fact, he hoped one would burn through the roof of Howard Bent's hut and plop, smoldering, on his bed, giving the townsfolk a firsthand look at a real fallen star. "Cindy seems to me to be the wisest person here," he finally replied. "She told me that no good could ever come of lying, even to save someone's feelings." Siloya gazed into the trees. "You're still upset about the meteor..." Joe allowed his silence to speak for him. "We aren't lying, Joe. We're allowing these people to believe what they want to believe. That's freedom." Joe stood up and shook his head. "Freedom would be telling them that a meteor did fall nearby, but all we found was a normal Earth rock, but that they were free to believe it to be the meteor, if they wanted. You've not given them that choice, and without individual choice there is no freedom." He left her without another word, determined to continue this point with Howard himself, though the proximity this would require unnerved him.

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Joe's decision to leave was predicated by his inability to argue with Howard's logic. Howard maintained that all someone had to do was question and they would discover the truth. No questions, no true freedom. Lessons by example and all that. And in lieu of wonderers, Howard advised faith. The meteor story stayed until someone asked. So Joe found himself in front of Cindy's hut being introduced to her mother, Jessica, an astonishingly attractive woman, had she been able to strip away the years of worry. Physically, she was in excellent shape, she just looked tired. Very tired. Joe felt bad asking her to trek with him through the woods, back to the city, but her eyes glowed brightly and she readily agreed. "Are we going to get daddy?" Cindy asked excitedly, bouncing in place. "We'll try, honey," her mother said. "If we can find him—and if he wants to come along."

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Joe knew Siloya would be upset when she found him gone, and figured most of the commune would be ready to lynch him for taking little Dr. Cindy away from them, but he left anyway. He had the feeling Howard was right about asking questions, but he also felt there was no one in the commune to ask. Howard had let Joe know that *his* questions could not be asked, because *he* knew the Secret (Joe had the impression the word had a capital "S"). The teacher, Howard said, shouldn't ask the questions else the students won't learn. "What are we doing?" Jessica asked after they'd been in the woods for four hours. "And where the hell are we going?" Cindy took her mom's hand gently. "It's okay, Mom." Joe kept walking, not wanting to stop when she felt like quitting. "If we haven't found Siloya's car in another hour, we'll stop and go back in the morning." Jessica grabbed Joe's arm and turned him to her. "This isn't like that stupid meteor, is it?" Joe could tell by her eyes that she knew everything. "No," Joe promised.

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It wasn't until Joe sat behind the wheel of Siloya's car that the fear began to creep in. Would *they* (whoever *they* were) be waiting for him, when he got back? Had Cindy and Jessica removed their implants? And could he ask such a question? He also considered Destiny: Siloya had given him her keys because she didn't have any pockets. But what made her forget to ask for them back? And what made him not voluntarily give them up? He took a deep breath and turned the key. The car started, its soft rumbling engine scaring a few birds. Joe glanced over at Jessica, who sat hopefully in the passenger seat. Behind them, Cindy was still trying to dig her seatbelt out of the seat. "Let's go..." Jessica whispered. She reached out and cranked down her window. Joe saw a scar on her forearm and put the car in drive.

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The attendant at the gas station gave them an odd look when they pulled in. In the distance, beyond the trees, the city's buildings poked up over the horizon like the ribcage of a massive, degraded creature. For the first time, Joe thought they should have waited for Siloya. "Where are you headin'?" the attendant asked Joe suspiciously as Joe handed him some cash (he was relieved to discover that at least the money was Real). "Into town," Joe replied, trying to sound natural. The attendant nodded, but remained full of suspicion. Joe left before he found out whether he was watching the road in or out of town.

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The moment they stepped out of the car, things began to shimmer. In the car, they'd had the comfort of Siloya's music, but on the concrete, they had nothing but powerful subliminal suggestions, albeit crippled by a lack of Flower 411 in their systems. "When we step into a building, we'll get a blast of Flower 411," Joe mused aloud. Jessica looked at him, but said nothing. Cindy held up a small bottle. "I have a potion," she declared with

a wide grin. Joe looked quizzically from her to Jessica. "It'll work," Jessica confirmed, though Joe could tell she was unwilling to elaborate. Joe considered again how his cold had vanished in just over 24 hours, thanks to Cindy's potions, took a swig, and led the way to his apartment building. The shimmers eased as the others caught up to him. If it turned out his address book had not been Real, he wouldn't know where to find Jerry.

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The address book was Real. Now all that remained to be seen was if the physical location was Real. Joe had never been to Jerry's place—they always met at bars or at Joe's place, which hadn't seemed particularly odd to Joe, until now. Cindy's potion appeared to be working quite well, too. Joe had seen the flitter of shadowy figures in the hall, but only because he was looking for signs of the unreal. Not wanting to spend too long at his apartment, he grabbed the address book and headed back out to the hall. On his way, he noticed with a start that the table in his entrance alcove was Real (none of his other "unnecessary" furniture being so), and that on top of it sat a nondescript beige stapler. Jessica seemed more alarmed than Cindy by his expression as he grabbed Jessica's wrist and hurried them from the building. "I'll tell you in the car," was all he said.

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Either they'd known he was coming back or they were bluffing, just in case he came back. "They knew what was happening the whole time," Joe decided. "My beige stapler didn't vanish because it wasn't real, but because they took it." Jessica sat silent for a minute, then gave Joe a sidelong glance. "Have you ever felt like all the events in your life have been piling up to one moment? That everything has been put in a specific chronology to allow for some final end game?" Joe didn't answer. If what she was thinking was true, then would that mean someone had been controlling the whole thing? That coincidence didn't exist, but karma, destiny, and conspiracy did? "So if this is all planned, would giving up and driving back to the country now be part of the plan?" Jessica said nothing and stared out the window at the sporadic buildings. Finally, Cindy piped up from the back seat: "There's no way to tell. But it would still be giving up."

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Jerry's house was smaller than Joe remembered, but at least it was Real. It was after five o'clock when Joe pulled into the driveway, so he was sure he'd be home. As he understood from their conversations at work, until Jerry hit the bars around nine, he sat at home and collated his latest downloads. "Should we come, too?" Jessica wondered as Joe killed the engine. Joe shrugged. "Sure. It might help convince him." They all got out and stood for a moment in the looming twilight. Either Jerry lived on a very quiet street or there wasn't anyone else Real around for miles. "I hear helicopters," Cindy whispered nervously. Joe hurried to Jerry's front door.

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Jerry was indeed at home. And if his face stiffened with fear at seeing Joe, it verily fossilized with terror when his eyes lit upon Jessica. For her part, Jessica, too, seemed overwhelmed by emotion and actually staggered to catch her footing. "You better come in," Jerry managed to breathe. "But you can't stay for long." His gaze lingered on Jessica when he added this. Cindy and Joe shared a suspicious look, but neither spoke as they stepped into Jerry's house.

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"So he's my father?" Cindy asked pointedly. She sipped her iced tea, but it seemed more so to be polite than because she wanted it. The revelation of her sire had left her decidedly unimpressed. Jessica, still too dumbfounded to speak, nodded vaguely. "Not by choice," Jerry replied sheepishly. His eyes flickered to Joe. "I'm sorry. That didn't sound right. I wasn't ready to be a father, and I'm still not." Cindy weighed the comment, apparently found it lacking, but also unworthy of a response. "Don't you see the... the... *karma* here?" Joe inserted. He was the only one who seemed the least bit happy at the turn of events. "What are the *chances*?" Jerry cleared his throat. "I don't have time for your New Age crap right now, Joe—no offense." Jumping at a sense of unity, Jessica added, "And it's not really karma, anyway. Westerners always misuse that word." She shared a smirk with Jerry that quickly faded when each realized again the strange situation.

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"I don't want to leave," Jerry said. "I don't think we should stay," Cindy said. And so the conversation went for the better part of a half hour, with brief, injured interjections by Jessica and feeble justifications from Joe. The thing is, nobody had come out and said it plainly: No one had told Jerry about *Them* and about the implants and Flower 411 and the commune and freedom (or some semblance thereof). No one had mentioned any of that until Jerry finally blurted, "Look! I don't have an implant and I *like* it here!" A cliché such as "stunned silence" would only go so far as to illuminate the sudden mood change in the room. Even the composure of young Cindy cracked. Jerry showed both his arms, grabbing Joe's hand and forcing him to run his fingers over the skin and veins. No scars, no bumps, no odd asymmetries. "I take a pill every morning to counter Flower 411," Jerry said softly. "I like my life. But I refuse to spy for them." He said this sharply to drive a first (and final) nail into any such argument. "And I'm the one who began crushing the pills into your drinks, Joe." Joe's throat clicked dryly as he swallowed. "What about Siloya?" he whispered. "Who?" Jerry asked.

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Jerry was one of the workers, in the truest sense. He helped keep the Engine of the World turning. He was one of the few whose job actually meant something: His job was to do his tiny part that, combined with all the other tiny parts, maintained the Grand Illusion. He didn't know specifically what his tiny part was, just what he had to do. It was all very compartmentalized. And he didn't need an implant because if he didn't show up for work,

they'd know—and they also knew he'd show up for work. Jerry liked the sense that he was in the Know, though he grudgingly admitted he wasn't sure what he Knew. Which is to say, he didn't know what it all meant or why They kept up the illusion. Was it money? Power? Control? All these things? Or was it just a complex game—something to do just to see if it could be done? "I thought you'd stay, once you knew," Jerry admitted to Joe. "So what about *Siloya*?" Joe wondered with increasing exasperation. "Who?" Jerry asked again.

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He would not come, and he advised them they should not stay. Those who ran the System had no problem with people leaving, but they didn't appreciate people coming back and taking others away with them. It would adversely reduce the work population, if allowed to continue unchecked. Jerry did not see Joe's exasperated point that the workers were thought of in terms no greater than cattle or slave. Jerry said the implants were not designed—or used—"to watch our every move," but to ferret the "interlopers from Beyond" who had come back to "steal the workers." They only alerted *them* if a worker—off on vacation, say—got too close to Beyond (as the country outside the invisible fence now was known), so that they could send out people to cajole them into not going any further. "How do they know we're here, if they aren't tracking us?" Joe asked. "Oh, they've been following *you* since your car tripped the detectors at the border," Jerry replied calmly. "Aren't you afraid, because we're talking to you?" Jessica whispered, momentarily in love (or was it just like?) with him again. Jerry did not answer, but said instead, "You have your choice: This world or Beyond. If you come back, I recommend letting Flower 411 do some of its work, otherwise you'd go insane. I don't take the pill every day."

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"Shouldn't everyone have that choice?" Jessica charged angrily. Now that they were away from Jerry, she seemed to have released the stopper on her emotions, though Joe wasn't sure if the flow was directed at him, Jerry, or the System. "Just come clean! Let everyone know they can live off the land in dirt huts, or they can stay here and enjoy the illusions of Flower 411!" Cindy sat forward in the back seat and said softly, "Funny thing about illusions: People don't want to know they're fake. Let them in on the secret and it's no fun any longer." Joe smirked wryly at her, then added, "They do have a choice, Jessica. What's Beyond is not kept secret. It's not removed from the illusion. They can go Beyond if they wish, and they'd be free—but they don't. Like Jerry said: They let themselves be talked back into the cities. Over and over again. And even if they *do* go Beyond, they still come back. Because they have more faith in metal and plastic than wood and stone. More belief in computers than Nature. A greater desire for money than salvation."

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At the border to Beyond they stopped for gas—a carefully crafted ploy, as it turned out.

"Where ya goin'?" the station attendant asked naturally enough. "Just getting away for a spell, you know?" Joe replied. The attendant snuffed a laugh through his nose and smiled strangely. "Never understood why people want to head out there, myself. No A-C? No TV? Can't see how that's too relaxing. Bears...?" he added, looking Joe in the eyes, and suddenly Joe realized what this was. This station attendant was the modern-world equivalent of the vast open spaces on 13th-century maps that were marked, "Here there be monsters." Joe paid him for the gas and chuckled amiably, "We'll be all right—but thanks for the concern." And it was that simple. Nobody swooped down in black helicopters to stop them. No one asked for I.D. No one called the cops. And, most important, no one followed them.

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Somehow, they found the exact spot where Siloya had originally parked before hiking through the woods to the commune. It wasn't the first time Joe considered the possibility of Destiny. They all had decided to return to the commune, though Joe did privately wonder if he could get the same sort of Real job that Jerry had—no implant, Real work, freedom to come and go between the Real world and that created by Flower 411. Joe could at least understand why Jerry stayed, but Jessica quite obviously could not, though her vision may have been clouded by the feeling that she had been jilted. And little Cinderella appeared completely nonplussed. She was happiest wherever she was, in the way children are as long as the ones they love are with them.

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Howard Bent look baleful. The commune had been "under much strain" at their sudden disappearances—though they all were so very glad that they had made it back alive. Tut, tut; shame, shame; don't do it again. But something in his eyes told Joe they wouldn't have the option of doing it again. And something in the way Siloya toed the line later, in private, made him wonder if it was better the commune you know. She just would not accept that, despite Flower 411 and the implants, people could leave freely, even when Joe pointed out that one of his favorite pasttimes (before) had been watching illusionary shows about hiking and camping on an illusionary TV set. Do people have to be told explicitly that they have a choice before they then can choose? Joe thought not. Siloya disagreed. Joe decided to see if Jessica and Cindy—and maybe some others—wanted to join him for a walk in the woods. A long walk that would never find its way back.

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Over the next two weeks, Joe managed to assemble a ten-person "hunting party," plus himself, all with averted eyes and nervously shuffling feet. Jessica and Cindy would add two more, but they would meet up with them later to dispel any suspicions. Ironically, it had been easier for them to travel to and from the city than it was for them to sneak out of the commune. Joe was quite proud of the number that had joined, and noticed with a wry grin that, like Noah, he had managed to gather pairs: Five men, five women. A total accident that again had him thinking of such things as Destiny and Providence. The only

thing that hurt him was that Siloya was not among them. In fact, she had left two days before their own departure, heading back to the city to "rescue" someone else. She wouldn't even stay at the commune with him, when Joe had asked her. But it had been only an act; Joe honestly wasn't sure he liked her very much any more.

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The route they took had been devised by Cindy, at Joe's request. It was a safeguard to make sure Cindy and her mom could find them, since they weren't planning on stopping at all the first night. There was no pressing reason to travel at night, but Cindy had suggested they follow Ophiuchus, as she would lead them west at this time of year. "People gravitate to the rising sun," Cindy had said. "So if we want to get away from people, we need to head west." Joe wasn't sure the reasoning was perfect, but he had no better plan. Abe—known throughout the commune as Old Abe Twister, because of his penchant for twisting leaves together to build fires—was sent to explain to Howard why they were leaving at night ("because the best predators throughout the world hunt at night, so they must know something"), and all was well. Everyone was sleeping when the men set out, to be followed surreptitiously by the women a bit later, but Joe noticed that Howard's hut was still brightly lit by candlelight. He could see shadows moving on the walls.

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"I don't like to think of them out there alone," Abe said in a hushed tone to Joe. "You're so old fashioned, Abe!" a voice piped up from behind them, with a few chuckles. Abe glanced direly at Joe. "They'll be fine," Joe said. "People tend to act how their society expects them to act. Out here, all bets are off. They'll pull it together." The moon was burning brightly upon them, just as Cindy had foretold. Abe turned to the other three men and told them to "hush up, now" so they could listen. Unlike Abe, Joe was more concerned that Howard had caught the women, rather than some nocturnal woodland predator. "We've got to find a clearing and get our bearings before Ophiuchus sets," Abe whispered, changing his tack. "I know," Joe replied, letting the whirl and buzz of the night insects fill the rest of the silence.

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By the time the women had found them—after ditching what they presumed to be agents of Howard Bent, but lately had come to surmise was actually an animal that only appeared to be following them—Ophiuchus had set, or at least dipped below the treeline. So they stood in the clearing and looked for the moon instead. She was waxing, Cindy had told Joe, and her crescent horn pointed to the west. So with the moon to their left, they walked in silence through the underbrush and night.

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Jessica and Cindy were honored to be joined by Howard Bent on their walk the next

morning. His demeanor was one of quiet disagreement; the parent who disapproves of what their child is up to, but wants the child to reach the same conclusion independently. "Why did you go back to the city?" he asked calmly. "We went to see if Jerry would come here with us," Jessica replied, hoping she didn't sound ruffled. She thought again of what Joe had said, about how they never had to explain themselves to anyone in the city. "I assume he didn't want to come?" Howard asked rhetorically. "That's why we have the program Siloya set up. It convinces people." Jessica held her tongue, and gave Cindy a stern glare when she looked about to respond herself. "I think some of the ladies went out to find our hunting party," Howard said, his tone edging along accusation. "I'm surprised you didn't go with them. You seem fond of Joe..." His voice faded, but still neither Jessica nor Cindy responded. "I like the birds," Cindy finally said. "You can hear so many of them at the commune." Howard looked down at her and smiled warmly. Jessica could just tell he imagined himself to be a father figure with an ally. And she also could tell that's exactly what Cindy had intended.

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"I think we should keep moving," Abe said dourly, meeting Joe's eyes. The rest of the hunting party stood at the western end of the clearing, talking jovially, like children on a field trip waiting to go inside the museum. Joe looked at them. He had brought them this far... but he didn't feel right leaving Jessica and Cindy to Howard. "I'll go back for them," Joe replied. Abe shook his head. "No. You go, we all go." He glanced at the other nine people, then added, "Or at least a couple of us should come with you." Joe gazed off into the eastern woods again and narrowed his eyes, searching for any signs of movement. There was nothing, save the rapid flit of birds and the dozing gait of summer-bloated insects. "If some can wait here for us to return, we all can wait here for them to arrive." Abe opened his mouth to argue, but Joe finished his thought. "Cindy's a very smart girl. If she can't get them out, no one can." Abe shuffled his feet and sighed twice heavily. "All right. I'll set up some look-outs, then." And he hurried back over to the rest of the group.

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They didn't arrive until after nightfall, which Jessica admitted wasn't such a bad thing, since they'd been able to follow the firelight to find them. (This revelation caused Abe some discomfort, and he began mumbling about how to better shield the light.) Cindy explained that Howard thought they'd gone berry picking, and they'd been sure to leave—loudly—in the exact opposite direction from where they had to be. This was why it had taken them so long to finally arrive—the outing and backtrack loop added a good three hours onto their walk, not to mention leaving a half day later than planned in the first place. "You must be exhausted," Margaret, the last woman to join the group, said, emerging from the shadows and bending down in front of Cindy. "I made an energy potion," Cindy said, holding up a bottle with a few swigs of a cloudy liquid swirling in the bottom. "Well, come and get something to eat, anyway," Margaret replied, standing and smiling at Jessica. They didn't have to be asked twice.

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Cindy had other, more complex ways to keep them heading west—the sun's position, she said, was relatively unhelpful at this time of year. So they walked during the day now. Sometimes they would hear airplanes droning overhead, or the far-off howl of a train, but so far, they hadn't run into any other person or sign of people. "How do you know all this stuff?" Joe asked Cindy as they trudged through the sundappled woods. "What stuff?" It was the innocent question of a child. "You know—direction and your potions and all that." Cindy smiled energetically up at Joe. "My grandmother teaches me." Joe's step faltered. "Your grandmother?" he asked. "You mean, we left her back at the commune?" Cindy skipped ahead a bit, bent down and picked up a leaf which she showed to Joe, then discarded unceremoniously. "Nope," Cindy chided. "She's a ghost. She visits me all the time. I never knew her when she was alive." Joe's step faltered again. He looked around for any sign of a ghost and took in a deep breath. "But ghosts aren't real, are they?" he asked. Cindy fell back in step with Joe and slid her hand into his. They walked silently for several seconds, then Cindy finally replied, "I don't care. Grandma's real, and that's all that matters to me." Joe considered her potions and found himself unable to argue.

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"How old was Cindy when her grandmother died?" Joe asked Jessica that night. Cindy herself was curled up with a couple of the other women, sleeping near the fire. Before going to bed, Cindy had constructed a six-inch "bug catcher" for each member of the group to keep with them—it looked like three sticks in a tripod with a wad of old cotton hanging by a thread in the center. She'd doused the cotton in something, though, and while Joe could see mosies buzzing around it, he had yet to be bitten by one. "Cindy never knew her grandmother," Jessica replied, gazing through the trees to the stars. "She died when I was fifteen." Joe scuffed the dirt beneath his feet with his right foot. "You know, Cindy says she knows about all her potions and everything because her grandmother teaches her...?" It was an open-ended question, and Jessica decided to close it. "Her grandmother is dead, but I know her ghost visits Cindy, if that's what you're asking. I've spoken to her through Cindy. It's real. *She's* real." Joe let the conversation go. He knew they'd have much more time in the future to discuss such things.

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On mid morning of their third day in the woods they reached a farm. Not a huge, elaborate farm, but more of an old fashioned, mom-n-pop homestead, with well-formed and detailed farmhouse and barns, all painted a sparkling red and white. The field the woods bordered onto was planted with something low to the ground that Joe didn't recognize, and on the other side of the farmhouse and barns Joe could see another field filled with some bright red crop that waved slowly in the breeze. "How far do you think we've walked?" Abe asked. His eyes said he feared Cindy had led them in a circle and that Howard Bent's commune may actually still be close by. "I'd guess we walked at least 20 miles," Joe figured. "I don't think even Howard Bent would bother trying to follow us this far." As the so-called hunting party filed down the rows, careful not to step on any of the plants, a man came out of the nearest barn. Joe watched as he shielded his eyes, taking in the people traipsing across his field, then turned and hurried toward the house.

Somewhere a dog barked -- the low, rolling bark of a large farm dog -- and then at least two others joined in. There was a sharp whistle and the barking stopped. Then the man came back around the corner of the barn, four dogs at his heels and a shotgun held firmly in his right hand.

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The shotgun turned out to be a sham. He hadn't cared a whit about the people in his field ("Seems like every other month someone comes through there," he'd explained). What had caught his attention was a possible venison entree in the woods behind them. In fact, he apologized profusely for frightening them, took a head count, thought for a second, then invited them all to dinner—which turned into an impromptu community potluck. There were twenty farms within a five-mile radius, though the nearest phone was "up the road a piece, in Shiloh." By evening's end, Joe's hunting party had been split up among the farmers for lodging, leaving Joe, Jessica, and Cindy at the original farm. "You're all very kind," Joe said to their host—Rob Darby—as they sat with him and his wife on the porch, watching the sun set. Rob shrugged. "We're sort of used to it now. Seems like folks end up here a lot. Most move on, but some stay." Jessica leaned forward. "And where is 'here'?" she asked. "We call ourselves the Red Bell Farms," Mrs. Darby replied kindly. "We raise Red Bell flowers." She indicated the field that dazzled a silken red in the light's last rays. "City folk call it Flower 411," Rob added casually, yawning and stretching. Joe felt like a deer in headlights.

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"We can't stay here," Jessica said, keeping the overt drama from her voice. Joe had since come to terms with the farm community's produce, and while Cindy explained to Mr. Darby why a small area of his farm remained fallow, Joe tried to explain these terms to Jessica. "They think it's used as a drug to help people cope with severe trauma, by controlling their memories of the event," Joe said. "But we know the truth," Jessica replied. "We know how it's possibly being *misused*," he agreed. Jessica shook her head and sighed. "I still can't contribute to something done to people without their knowledge." Joe finally played his ace. "But don't you see what it means? The system has failed. All that's left is this kind of life, or the false reality of the cities. But the very fact that they have to make up urban living says that such a thing is no longer real. Can you imagine what would happen if that many people suddenly realized their lives were meaningless? That their work was imaginary, as well as most of their friends? That the cities they've always known are crumbling to dust? So is it better to fool them into thinking their lives are going on just as before, with just as much meaning, or to pull the rug out from under them and leave them with nothing?" Jessica shook her head again, but more thoughtfully this time. "So the cities are just massive trauma wards and these farms help keep the patients alive and sane?" Joe sighed deeply. "Yeah. I guess so."

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That night Jessica finally met her mother's ghost. It was a strange, sparkling dream,

replete with light and shadows and a latent warmth that belied sincere affection. And solace. Her mother smiled and hugged her and told her everything would be okay, just like she'd always done. Jessica cried. "Why didn't you visit me sooner?" she asked. "You didn't need to see me," her mother replied calmly. "But now you do, even though I have always been there, even though you didn't know it. I watched. I cared. I stepped in if I had to, to protect you or push you in the right direction." Her mother stepped back and smiled widely. "And I brought you here. You need to be here, for them." Jessica awoke suddenly with a gasp. Everything now seemed like a dream, but there was something about it she couldn't shake. Who would should be helping by staying at the farm—Cindy and Joe, or the people in the cities? And should she tell them, or just make them happy?

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The hours passed into days, which bled into months, destined to become years. Somewhere along the line, Jessica and Joe succumbed to the happy ending—perhaps for Cindy; neither stopped to question their motives—and got married at a small community ceremony. They built their own small farmhouse on land bequeathed to them from the Darbys, and Cindy told them what to plant and where to plant it and when to harvest it. And so they were able to live at the Red Bell Farms without raising a single sprout of Flower 411, and Cindy was able to reprise and expand her role as a "doctor." Not one of the others from their so-called hunting party stayed with them. Abe hung on the longest, but even he eventually gave in to the lure of the horizon and the promise of something better, just over the next rise, out of sight of the present. And the whole thing came full circle on a snow-covered mid-winter day, when Jerry arrived at their doorstep, ostensibly on a winter vacation, but holding a box addressed to Joe. Within was everything he'd ever lost: a tape dispenser, pencils, a pair of socks, sticker notes, and his beige stapler. There also was a trowel—from "them," Jerry explained—with "Good Luck" engraved on the front in a wildly excessive font. Jerry didn't stay for coffee.

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And so it was.

Author's Note

The original inspiration for "Flower 411" is at least 10 years old by now (2004). Driving from Cincinnati to Cleveland one day I saw the car in front of me had license number FLR 411, which in my head said "Flower 411." That was enough to make my mind wander as to what this flower could be, and why it would be numbered.

A year or so later I jotted down an idea for a story in which the protagonist finds that everything around him is disappearing because it is not, in fact, reality. That story was to start in our hero's office cubicle and, by day's end, conclude with him in a field, completely alone.

The final piece of the puzzle came when I realized that, instead of wasting time writing a conventional blog, I could be using that 20 minutes a day to write fiction, bit by bit. Reading an Edward Gorey tale to my son (then four) made me realize that good fiction doesn't, by definition, have to be completely fleshed out, planned, and written traditionally. It could, in fact, take the form of a Gorey-like "slideshow," written slide by slide over however many days it took—and so was born my fiction weblog (or "flog") idea.

Thus was unearthed the idea of a man whose world is vanishing around him (then titled "The Disappearer," after the Sonic Youth song), and when considering reasons for his slowly vanishing world, I imagined it to be detox from some kind of drug that the man wasn't even aware he was taking—a drug known only by its quasi-natural creation: Flower 411.

—Jack, in Ohio
February 19, 2005