

NETWORK ONE

By Michael K. Anderson

The show was entitled "Nerds on Campus". It wasn't a very popular show with the nerds it supposedly portrayed or, indeed, with the average American television viewer. But, as American television viewers are generally below average, the show became a huge success. The show dealt mainly with the wacky, zany exploits of three nerds at the Missouri Technological Institute, affectionately known to its students as 'the empty' Institute. The three nerds, named Bill, Mark, and Brad, looked like they would more likely be going to the class reunion than trying to earn a degree, and the series lasted longer than it takes to get a PhD, although they never graduated during the series run.

A typical scene went like this:

"Hey, look, guys!" Mark would yell, bursting into the college dormitory, disturbing Bill, who would be typing on a computer that was supposed to be as advanced as a Cray 2 mainframe computer, but resembled an old Apple IIe with the logo carefully covered with construction paper. Brad would also look up from his bed, where he was trying to take a nap, mumble something incoherent, and feel around for his glasses under the bed. Sooner or later, he would find them, wipe the lenses which were as thick as a steak, squint, and put them on. "Look at the boss software I got!"

"Wow!" Brad would gasp. "Space Locusts!" From out of nowhere, laughter would start up: 'Hahahahahahahahahahaha!' "Where'd you get a copy of that?"

"I got an uncle who works at the software company. I also got those new music programs: Toccata and Cricket."

"Great! Hey, Bill! Get off the computer, we gotta play Space Locusts!"

"Hold on," Bill would say, "I'm working on my term paper, and I need the computer to help me with my thermohyperphili-sophmoricarabian equations. I gotta get it done by five, or else I won't be able to go to the big programmer's ball at eight."

"Programmer's ball, hmmm?" Mark would enquire, adjusting the tape on his glasses. "You wouldn't happen to be taking Julia, would you?"

Mark would look at Brad with his 'We have something on Bill, lets tease him to death about it' look, and the two would break into a quick rendition of 'Someday My Prince Will Come', replacing the word 'princess' for 'prince'. This would be accompanied by howls of laughter and applause. Brad and Mark would join the howling by laughing their stereotypical 'nerd laughs'.

"Aw, stop it guys," Bill would say, and, as if on cue, a knock would come on the door.

"Guess who that is, you stud, you!" Mark would say, opening the door. The studio audience would laugh, hysterically. In would walk Julia, accompanied by the love theme from Romeo and Juliet. The camera would get a whole bunch of close-ups of her and Bill's eyes, and the laughter would start up again, even harder than before.

"Hi, Bill," she would say, swinging her long hair out of her face.

"Uh, hi," Bill would reply, accidentally knocking over his glass of Cola as he reached out to shake her hand. "Oops," he would apologize as he bent over to wipe up the mess it made on the floor. As he would get up, he'd bump his head on the table, knock himself out, and have to be picked back up again by Mark and Brad.

"Wake up, Bill," Mark would say, gently slapping Bill on the cheeks.

"Mbbbbbpt, I canna give ye any more power, Cap'n," Bill would say, rolling his head about in a state of semi-consciousness. Then, he would begin to realize where he was, snap to attention and say "Oh, hi, Julia! How'd you get here?" Yelps of laughter would abound.

"I just stopped by to say that I'm really looking forward to the ball tonight."

"I am, too," Bill would reply, trying to look as casual as possible by leaning on the table, accidentally hitting the computer. It would make several odd bleeping noises at Bill, and his face would lose all its color. "But," he'd stammer, "you have to go, now."

"Go? Why?"

"Uh, it's bad luck to see your date before the dance..."

Cries of laughter would erupt, again.

"Yeah," Brad would help. "7 years bad luck." More laughs.

"You know how these religious things can be," Mark would pipe in, escorting her out. The audience laughed even harder.

"Uh, bye, Bill," Julia would say.

"Yeah, bye." As soon as the door was shut, they would all huddle around the computer. Across the screen read the words 'Document Deleted'. "My paper's been deleted!" Bill would exclaim for all those who missed the message on the screen. "And it's due tomorrow! What am I going to do now?" Things would look frighteningly bleak.

But, then again, they always looked bleak at this stage of the story.

"Don't worry, we'll think of something," Mark would say to Bill, looking at him with the 'Trust me, I know what I'm doing' look. Bill would look back with the 'I trust you about as far as I can throw you' look. "Bill," Mark would finally say, "if your princess is to come, I think it's time you were visited by your fairy godmother...."

...and so on. This was the basic plot in 99.9% of all the stories of the series. Variations on a theme; just the same thing over and over. That's just the way life worked there. At least, that's the way it worked until one fateful Monday night at 8:30 p.m., 7:30 Central and Mountain...

...Bill and Julia walked down the dorm corridor to Bill's room. Everything had turned out fine, despite all the zany mishaps and plot twists that threatened to end their relationship for good and give Bill an 'F' on his paper. "Goodnight, Bill," Julia said, reaching out to take Bill's hand. "I really had a nice time."

"Yeah," Bill replied, "I'm glad you enjoyed it. Goodnight, Julia."

"Bye." Julia leaned forward and gave him a small peck on the cheek, causing Bill's face to turn bright red. Then, she left for her own room.

Bill, totally dazed, let his body fall back onto the door to his room, only to find that it wasn't quite closed. The door swung open, and Bill fell squarely on his behind. He looked up at Mark and Brad, who were hunched up by the wall where they had been spying on Bill through the cracked door. A hearty laugh arose.

"All right, Bill!" Mark yelled. "I told you that European cowboy idea would work!"

Bill groaned at him, much to the continued amusement of whoever was laughing. It wasn't a groan of disgust, however, but more a groan of amazement at a strange ball of light that had just materialized behind Mark and Brad.

The ball suddenly let out millions of tiny beams of light. These beams started creeping around the dorm room, as if they were looking for something. "Oooh!" Mark exclaimed, noticing

the ball. "When did you get the disco ball? Are you gonna throw a party or something, Bill?" The laughter was abuzz with gasps of amazement and chuckles intermixed.

"That's not ours," Brad explained. "I dunno what it is. Hey! It wouldn't happen to be an ultrarossylbromeri light converter, would it?" Brad laughed another 'nerd laugh' to signify the fact that he was making a joke. The laughter also came in, but this time a bit more hesitantly.

"Come on, Brad, this could be serious!" The beams of light finally inched their way past the computer table and onto Bill, himself. All the beams then merged into a large, single beam, which enveloped Bill, completely. The beams turned slightly greenish in color, and started making a very odd static-like sound. The light beam grew in intensity and suddenly disappeared, along with Bill and the ball from which it came.

"Bill?" Mark called.

"Where'd you go, Bill?" Brad yelled.

"Where is he?"

"I guess he finally saw the light,"

"Hahahahahahahahahahaha," cackled the laughter.

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"Where am I?" were the first words Bill spoke when he came to. His sight hadn't quite adjusted from the light of the ball to the dark interior of the room, and he suspected that his glasses were missing, although he couldn't move his hands to check. He could see no other furnishings in the room, apart from the cot he was lying on, and the entire room put out a strange vibration.

"You are at Character Transference Room, number four, at Network One studios, Bill," came a voice. "Your glasses will be returned to you shortly." A vague face stepped into Bill's view. "A lens was accidentally broken during the transfer, and it is being replaced," the voice added. Even without his glasses, Bill could still see that the face was attached to a designer suit so sharp that even his blurred vision could not mess it up. "I'd just like to say what a pleasure it is to meet you, Bill!"

"Who are you?" he mumbled.

"A friend," the voice answered. "You could call me your creator." Bill tried to sit up, but found it extremely difficult, as if someone had caked his body in concrete. He heard a door open in the distance and the sound of footsteps, not heavy footsteps, but light ones. "Ah, your glasses are back. Excellent." Bill felt two soft hands place his glasses back in place, and his vision began to clear. "You may go, now." The footsteps started again, and faded off into the distance, ending with the sharp 'click' of a doorknob. Bill tried to sit up again, but his stomach threatened to do something extremely nasty if he did.

"Uh, who was that?"

"That was Kim Parker, from Research and Development." Bill looked back up at the face. It was a face remarkably similar to his own. "Wonderful woman. She has a great future ahead of her."

"What happened? Why am I here?"

"One thing at a time, Bill."

"But..."

"Don't worry, all will become clear very soon. By the way, my name is David Stevens, but you may call me Dave." Bill heard Dave turn. "All right, give him the shot."

"Shot? What shot?" Bill felt his arm being rubbed with something cold.

"It's just a small dosage of a drug that will help you adjust to life in this world, Bill. Nothing to be worried about."

"This world? What are you talking about? You're not some sort of space alien here to rob Earth of its finest mind, are you?"

"No, Bill," chuckled David, "we're not robbing Earth of its finest mind."

"Well, then you're robbing Earth of one of its finest minds, at least, aren't you?"

"No."

"You're robbing it of a pretty good mind?"

"Bill, I'm not here to rob anyone of their mind, and I am not an alien."

"That's good, I suppose. I wouldn't want my mind aiding in any evil scheme to conquer Ea..." His words were cut short by a sharp stab of pain in his arm from the needle being inserted. A numbness seemed to flow throughout his body for a couple seconds. But, when the numbness had reached every portion of his body, it suddenly abated and left him feeling utterly refreshed. Feeling better, he got up, only to fall flat on his face as soon as he hopped off the cot he was lying on.

"This way, Bill," David said, offering his hand. It was then Bill noticed something: there was no laughter coming from anywhere. No guffaws, yelps, or applause was coming at his pratfall or witty verbal banter with that Dave guy. Just dead silence, apart from the vibration of the room. Reluctantly, he grabbed Dave's hand and got back on his feet. His legs wobbled slightly, but there was no other difficulty.

Dave led him around to the door, and they left the dark innards of the transfer room for a brightly-lit, seemingly endless corridor. Each side of the corridor was lined with porthole-shaped doors with small signs beside them. There was no sign of any doorknob, or any opening mechanism at all. They just appeared to be smooth, round sheets of metal hanging on the walls.

"Uh, Dave, in the room back there, you said something about being my creator..."

"Ah, yes." Dave looked straight at Bill with his best sincerity look. "What I'm about to tell you, you may not understand at first."

"I won't understand?"

"Well, probably not."

"Then why tell me?"

"I said you probably wouldn't understand to begin with."

"No, you said I wouldn't understand at first."

"This is true. But the point is you will most likely understand eventually."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to go around for the rest of my life not understanding."

"I see."

"I'd look pretty silly after awhile. Everyone going about their business, faces taught against the wind, and me, just sitting there with a dumb expression thinking, 'Gosh, I don't understand at all'."

"You probably would."

"No 'probablys' about it. When I walk down the street, I want people to say 'There's a man who's got it all sorted out'."

"Yes."

"'There's a man who's really got it together'."

"Yes."

"There's a man who understands'."

"Yes."

"And a man who's really good looking'."

"Ye...what?"

"If they're female."

"Ah."

"Well, I can hope can't I?" Bill listened again, but heard nothing. Strange.

"This is great!" Dave exclaimed. "I'm actually standing here playing straight-man to Bill Galthus!"

"How much longer am I going to be here? I've got a test in advanced brocacorbi development that I need to study for."

"Well, that's what I was trying to explain. You see, where you come from is just a place in my imagination. I created you, the M.T.I., or 'empty' Institute as you are so fond of calling it, your teachers, friends, enemies, everything."

"Everything?"

"Well, I came up with the concepts. From there, other people took over. They gave you something to say and do, in accordance with the concepts I had already put down. From there, your character, and all the people you know's characters, came to life."

"So you're claiming you're God."

"Haha, no. I'm just a plain old human."

"I didn't think so; I always expected God to be taller."

"Anyway, as I was saying, once these concepts came together, we came up with a blueprint for your television universe."

"Television?"

"Television universes. They're the high-tech way to make TV."

"You were right, I don't understand."

"Well..."

"At least not at first."

"Well, to try to explain: you see, back when television began, it was really expensive to produce. You had to hire writers, actors, directors, set-builders, and a whole bunch of other people to play out the parts. Now, in these technologically advanced times, we skip all that. We just have the creator, in this case, me, and a few creative consultants, come up with all the characters and settings, and an artificial universe is created according to those standards."

"Wouldn't that be more expensive?"

"Not really. It is in the beginning, but after the initial cost, they take care of themselves. They all have their own economy, food supply, civilization, everything! Plus, the universes are reusable! Like a show we had a while back called Killer Sharks. Once it was over, instead of moving the universe to Syndication, we simply cut a few characters, added a couple new characters and settings, and we had Fish Assassins!"

"What's syndication?"

"Uh, look over there. There's a show I created called Lust and Passion.'" He pointed to a portal labeled with that title. "And there," he pointed to a blank spot on the wall, "was where your show was."

"Was?"

"Ah, this is the hard part. You see, your show was cancelled."

"Cancelled?"

"Taken out of circulation."

"But you mentioned something about syndication?"

Dave stopped. "Syndication is death or life for a show. If you were a good show, then you find new life in Syndication. If your show was poor, then, well, the show dies."

"And my show is..."

"Dead? No, not yet. It's still there in Syndication, but the analysts say that it will probably be dead in a couple months."

"But it wasn't poor, was it? I mean, it all seemed perfectly reasonable to me..."

"It was what the public wanted at the time. Actually, I agree with you, but I am a bit biased. That's why I saved you from death."

"But, I should be still there."

"Yes, technically, you're still there, doing everything over and over. But you're also here, because I rescued you seconds before the time loop started."

"Time loop?"

"All shows are put into a time loop for syndication. You are at this moment repeating everything you ever did, and you will continue to do so until the show dies. But, like I said, I saved you. It's an illegal process without a proper license, reserved for transfers from one show to another, like a spin-off or cross-over, but I saved you during the last few minutes of the final episode, so it went pretty much unnoticed by the Network police."

"The who?"

"The Network Police." David lowered his voice. "They monitor everything that goes on here. If they knew that I had saved you..." David shuddered at the thought of what would happen. Bill thought about enquiring about it, but the look on his face told Bill that he'd rather not mention it.

"Where are we going?" he asked, instead.

"To the cafeteria. You must be starved after your transfer."

Bill realized that he was, indeed, very hungry. "Thank you," he said. "That would be very kind."

Bill looked down the corridor one last time. Gosh, there had been some strange developments this adventure. Things looked frighteningly bleak.

But, then again, they always looked bleak at this stage of the story.

The Commissary was exactly as you would expect it to be; a large, yellow room filled with dozens of perfectly square white linoleum tables and a strange smell of plastic wrappings that overpowered any odors the food might produce. At each table was seated members of the network personnel, all dressed in dark suits, not so much eating the food as trying to eat it. Bill also noted that there were no cooks in sight; only slots in the wall.

"You'll love these," Dave said, punching numbers into the food slot. "We borrowed these from Star Quest after it was cancelled in the sixties." The door slid open, and Dave removed two trays from the inside. "The 'food' is laughable...but I wouldn't advise laughing."

The two found a quiet table in the corner, away from the crowd of network executives that filled the room and sat down with their trays of food.

"Gosh, this is too weird! I still can't believe I'm actually eating at the same table as Bill Galthus!"

"I can," Bill replied. "But, then again, I've had practice."

"Practice?"

"Eating with myself. It makes it easy to believe."

"Well, you have to understand that it's like...it's like creating the perfect person in your head, and then finally meeting that person. You know?"

"I'm the perfect person?"

"Well, nobody's perfect, but you're my person."

"I always thought that I was my person."

Dave chuckled. "Yes, I guess you are. Please forgive me. Tried your chicken?"

"You mean the green stuff?" Bill asked, toying with his food.

"Yeah, that's it. We've been having a little trouble with the food coloring."

Bill tasted a bite. "Euuuch! That's not all you've been having trouble with!"

"Please, Bill..." Dave began, motioning for him to be quiet.

"This thing has less flavor than a silicon chip! How many times did you have to run it around the particle accelerator to get it to this state of 'burnt'?"

"No!" Dave yelled, too late.

There was a split second of total silence.

Then the alarms went off.

The moment Bill had registered something was amiss, the world seemed to stop. When it started up again, he could see nothing but what appeared to be the ceiling rushing past at dizzying speeds. He assumed it was the ceiling because it had electric lights on it, but, then again, it could have been a wall with light fixtures. He'd seen stranger things in his lifetime.

Just a moment before, he had been making a joke about the commissary food. A really funny joke, too. Yes, he remembered that. Now, he was being carried through some weird corridor. What a day!

Abruptly, everything became dark. He felt himself being twirled around and placed on his feet. Then, his eyesight went blurry again.

"Hey! You can't take my glasses! I have a prescription for those!"

"Look away from the light," came a cold voice as a bright light shone directly into his right eye.

"Eugh. That stings!"

"Eyesight 400/20."

A shadowy figure took a piece of encapsulated plastic and put it around Bill's head.

"Oooh! Is that bubble packing paper? Better keep it away, or I'll be popping it for hours."

Bill felt his arms and legs being bound in something akin to a straitjacket. "I guess I won't be doing that, after all." The plastic bubbles in front of his eyes began filling up with some sort of clear fluid. When they were full, Bill could see again. "Wow!" Bill remarked. "Liquid eyesight!"

"Name: Galthus, William Horatio. Occupation: College Student. Apparent age: 29. Actual age: 19. Hair: Brown. Eyes: Green." The voice droned on with Bill's vital statistics. Finally, it reached the end. "Reason for detention: Use of Network Commissary Joke without a talk show. How do you plead?"

"Me?"

"How do you plead?"

"I just made a joke..."

"How do you plead?"

"Um...not guilty by reason of incompetence."

There were a few moments of silence.
"Unknown plea. How do you plead?"
"Well, I did it, if that's what you mean..."
"Plea--Guilty. Punishment to be instigated immediately."
"Punishment? What?"
"Stand clear."
"I can't, I have these straps around my arms and legs..."
"Silence."
"Okeydokey."

The room began to vibrate suddenly, and an intense humming noise started up.
"No!" came a new voice. It was Dave's.
The humming came to a peak.
And everything went black, yet again.

"So, tell me, Super Spy! Where did you hide the secret instructions to the doomsday device?"

Bill looked up from his cell at Adolf Archenemy with a cold stare. "You'll never get the information out of me, you Nazi Communist Liberal!" He tried to shake his fist at him, but his hands were tied to a chair, along with the rest of his body.

"Sticks und stones, Super Spy! Sticks und stones!"
Wonderful laughter poured into the small bunker.

"Let us see just how you stand up to the terrible MIND ZAPPER!
HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Adolf pulled a curtain back, revealing the worst-looking death ray this side of Alien. Bill's jaw dropped.

"Um, could we talk this over..."

"Hahahahahahaha," laughed the laughter.

"The time for talking is long since over, Super Spy! Prepare to become a mindless ZOMBIE!"

'Good grief!' thought Bill, his thoughts being somehow narrated even though his mouth wasn't moving. 'It seems hopeless! I'll just have to use my super-secret plan X!'

'Little does Super Spy know, but I can listen in on voice-over thoughts,' thought Adolf while the laughter chuckled, 'and that super-secret plan X will do him no good, because I will push this switch to put into effect my counter-super-secret-plan-x-plan y!'

'Little does Adolf Archenemy know that I, too can listen in on voice-over thoughts, and that I knew that he was going to put into effect his counter-super-secret-plan-x-plan y! Which is exactly what I want him to do, so that I may put into my counter-counter-super-secret-plan-x-plan-y-plan z for zebra!'

'Little does Super Spy know, but I knew about his...his zebra thingie, and I put into effect secret plan d for dolphin!'

'Hmmm. I hadn't expected that. Better go into plan h.'

'H. What is plan h?'

'H for...'

"HELP!!!!!!!!!!!" Bill yelled. The laughter piped right in.

All of a sudden, a huge hole burst into the bunker, and in popped Mark, Brad, and Julia, all decked out in combat gear.

"We're here to rescue you, Bill!" Julia said.

"Yes, my dear Sophia Sweetheart," Adolf sneered. "BUT WHO WILL RESCUE YOU???" Adolf pulled a strange weapon out of his lab coat. "Take that, you good people!" The weapon started making noises not unlike the soundtrack to Saturday Night Fever.

"Good grief!" Bill exclaimed. "He's frying their brains with seventies music! Stop, you fiend!"

"Very well, Super Spy. Where are the secret instructions?"

"American-lad here has put them in a secret hiding place!"

"Uh, Super Spy," Mark started.

"Someplace you'll never find!"

"Super Spy..."

"A hiding place so ingenious that it won't be found for centuries!"

"Super Spy..."

"What is it, American-Lad?" Bill looked down and saw that Mark was holding the instructions in his hand. He turned his attention back to Adolf. "Then again, I could be wrong."

"At last! The secret instructions!"

"Why didn't you just figure the machine out?" Brad asked. "It shouldn't have been too hard, you being the designer and all."

"Are you kidding?" asked Adolf. "That thing's worse than a VCR!" He leafed through the instructions and started up the doomsday device. "Ah, yes. Page 147: How to arm the doomsday device to blow up the world."

"You're mad! Mad! Do you hear me?" yelled Brad.

"Mad! They called me mad at the academy, too! But, I'll show them! I'LL SHOW THEM ALL! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Let's see, turn control knob 'd' one quarter turn clockwise."

"Quickly! Stop him!" Bill yelled, hobbling excitedly back and forth in his chair.

"Right-o!" yelled Mark, Brad, and Julia, and they proceeded to forcibly attack the evil Adolf Archenemy.

"Did you think that I would not prepare for such an attack? THUGS!"

From nowhere, ten burly thugs entered the bunker and joined in the fray. During the course of the fight, nearly every stick of furniture was smashed over someone's head. When the smoke had cleared, however, the thugs had prevailed. Then, suddenly, Brad jumped up and lunged at Adolf.

Adolf deftly sidestepped this attack, and Brad went smashing into the Doomsday Machine.

"YOU FOOL! You've activated the self-destruct mechanism! It won't destroy the world now!"

"Hooray!" cheered the good guys.

"It will just destroy this island and everyone on it."

"Oops," Brad said.

"FINAL COUNTDOWN BEGUN: TWENTY..." droned the Doomsday Machine.

"To our super-boat!" Mark yelled.

"We'd never make it in time!" yelled Julia.

"WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!!!!!!!!!!!!!" yelled Brad.

"No, just don't panic!" yelled Bill.

"I MEAN IT, WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"SEVENTEEN..."

Abruptly, the ceiling directly above Bill burst into fragments, as a man suspended by a rope was lowered into the bunker. "Come with me if you want to live," the man yelled over the din of the helicopter above.

The entire array of good guys rushed to the man as he hooked Bill's chair to the rope.

"WAIT JUST A MINUTE!" Adolf yelled, holding out his weapon. "No one leaves unless I leave, too!"

"Fine! Just hang on to Bill's chair!" yelled Julia.

"And, I want to go to Disneyland, too!"

"We'll take you to Disneyland, now GET ON!" yelled Mark.

"SEVEN..."

"Very well." And, the helicopter began to ascend, taking with it the man, Bill, Bill's chair and everyone who was holding on to the legs of Bill's chair.

"SIX..."

The island bunker grew smaller and smaller as the helicopter continued its ascension.

"We made it!" yelled Brad.

"FIVE..."

"Hang on, I'm not sure we can take this much weight," the mad yelled. "We'll try but..."

"What?" yelled Mark, straining to hear.

"FOUR..."

The rope creaked underneath the strain of six bodies and a chair.

"THREE..."

"Bill, if we don't make it, there's something I've always been meaning to tell you," Julia yelled.

"What?" Bill yelled.

"TWO..."

More groans emanated from the strained rope, and the chair legs began to make alarming crackling noises.

"I want to say..."

"ONE..."

Bill looked down at his friends, and caught Julia's eye. She looked up at him with a look of complete and total fear.

Then the chair-legs snapped and four figures fell earthward.

"We'll make it! We'll make it!" yelled the man. He looked down, and saw what had transpired. "I guess they don't make chairs like they used to, Bill," he said.

There was a deafening explosion, followed by a lone cry of despair.

"Stimulant administered."

"Wha..." Bill groggily awoke from his dream sequence. It was just a dream, he repeated to himself.

"You stand on trial for Accusation 4.306295: Illegal existence in a reality plane, and Accusation 2.1: Use of Network Commissary joke without a talk show."

Just a dream.

"Sir! That's not fair! He had no idea..."

Just a dream.

"Be quiet, Mr. Stevens. You are in no position to make allegations."

Just a...no. Not just a dream. The Network had cancelled their show. Mark was dead. Brad was dead. And Julia. The situation was different in reality, but the fact of their death still remained.

"But sir!"

Dead. All dead.

"Mr. Stevens! Do you realize the gravity of your crime?"

He saw her die in his dream. And couldn't do anything.

"Sir!"

She looked at him before she fell, as if he could save her.

"Accusation 1.0004! Illegal abduction of a character from a universe marked for termination!"

Her eyes pleaded with him not to let her go. And there was nothing he could do.

"I...I thought it was right..."

Nothing.

"Right? What if everyone did what you did? Characters running everywhere! What with the population crisis being what it is and everything..."

No...not entirely nothing.

"Sir, one character..."

Syndication.

"We have strict rules about the separation of the universes. He is in the wrong universe. And you brought him here."

Dave said something about Syndication. Julia might still be there.

"But..."

But how to get there? The universes must be controlled somehow.

"David R. Stevens. You are an employee of Network One."

Computers. That's how they'd be controlled: by computer.

"Yes, sir."

He'd always been good with computers. There wasn't a computer he couldn't figure out.

"You are subject to the rules of conduct established by Network One."

But that was in his world. The world they had created and destroyed.

"Yes, sir."

They had given him this talent there. Would it work here?

"You are aware of the penalties for breach of said conduct rules."

It had to.

"Y..yes."

Bill knew what he had to do.

"Very well, Mr. Stevens."

He knew.

"Stand back."

A harsh noise sliced through Bill's eardrums. He snapped back into reality immediately and tried to comprehend what was happening, but all he could see was an intense light and all he could hear were the screams of his creator.

"Dave?" Bill asked. He tried to move, but the shackles were still on him. "Dave!"

There was no answer. The blinding light abated, leaving Bill in total darkness, with the exception of a small pool of light around him.

"Dave!" Bill called out once more, before he collapsed.

"Dr. Fixx? What is the matter with subject Galthus, William Horatio?"

"Hard to tell with a character," Dr. Fixx replied, stroking his goatee. "Could be he just fainted. Could be that his system has taken in too much. Or it could be some undiscovered side effect from transfer. I'd have to look him over at the lab."

"Does it matter? It's pretty obvious what the Network Head is going to do."

"Please! We've never had a character out this long. This is an opportunity one doesn't get every day."

"Very well."

A door slid open and light flooded into the chamber. Two medics entered and rolled a stretcher into the center of the room. They picked up Bill's body, placed it on the stretcher, and covered him with a sheet. Then, the first medic hit the control stick on the left side of the stretcher, and it began to move on its own out into the corridor.

The ceiling was moving again, Bill noticed when he groggily came to. He made sure not to make too much movement, as not to make the medics notice his consciousness. Dave was gone, as well. His one tie to this world was no more. There was no turning back.

They wheeled him into a dazzlingly white room filled with electronic equipment of every size and description. The medics brought Bill's stretcher into the center of the room, directly under a huge array of sensors.

"Remove the subject's jacket restrainer," Dr. Fixx instructed the medics, and they began to unbuckle Bill's straitjacket. Bill made certain to remain as limp as possible as they did this, as not to arouse suspicion. As soon as his hands were free, he surreptitiously felt around on the sides of the stretcher until he found a large control stick with a number of buttons on the top. Experimentally, Bill pressed the first button.

The back of the stretcher suddenly shot up, colliding with the first medic's cranium with a resounding 'BONK!' The medic looked dazedly off into space for a few seconds, before falling face-first on the ground.

"Ouch..." he dreamily stated.

"He's awake!" the second medic yelled. Bill pulled back on the control stick, sending the stretcher straight back into a particularly expensive piece of equipment. Dr. Fixx and the remaining medic ran to his stretcher, but Bill had shoved the stick to the extreme left, causing the stretcher to rotate wildly catching Dr. Fixx and the medic on either side!

"Stop! Stop!" yelled Dr. Fixx. Bill obliged them, sending them both flying into more expensive pieces of equipment. Quickly, Bill removed the rest of his restraints, and moved over to where Dr. Fixx was sprawled.

"Do you see the birds?" Dr. Fixx asked as Bill took off his lab coat.

"Um, yeah, er, they're saying that you need a shave..." Bill stammered, eyeing Dr. Fixx's goatee.

"Are they? I thought they were saying 'Tweet tweet tweet'," Dr. Fixx said.

"That too," Bill said. He tried a few different compartments in the room until he found what he needed: a pair of scissors and some paste-like material. Then, he did the best he could do to cut off Dr. Fixx's goatee and affix it to his face. When he had finished, he still looked almost entirely unlike Dr. Fixx, but enough like him to fool any people looking at him from about twenty feet away in a foggy room. As long as no one got any closer, he'd be fine.

Bill surveyed the medical room for one last time.

This is how things are supposed to work.

Bill removed the plastic liquid glasses from his head and placed them in his pocket before he left, leaving him looking at the world through a blurry haze. Then, he locked the door behind him, hoping that no one would discover Dr. Fixx and his medics until he had completed his task.

He walked down the corridor into a large lobby-like place. There were some people milling about, but no one seemed to pay him any notice. On the far wall, Bill noticed what looked like a rather large picture...no, a map! Quickly, Bill rushed up to about three centimeters from the map and took a look.

He had found the Network Control Room on the map within a few minutes. He turned to go towards the elevator, but ended up looking directly at the torso of a rather large man.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Fixx," the burly man said.

Bill sheepishly looked up at the blurry hulk. Although he couldn't see definitively, he did see a shiny badge on the man's suit. Network police.

"Um...hello, officer," Bill said.

"You don't sound yourself today, Dr. Fixx."

He didn't notice that he wasn't Dr. Fixx! Bill realized that it was foolish to think that the officer would see through his disguise. He had gone disguised dozens of times before at the MTI, and no one had ever noticed, not even his closest friends. Not even the time he disguised himself as Jacques Baker, European Cowboy.

"I've...um...been having a cold."

"It is the season. It's very cold out, today."

"Hmm. Cold. And hard."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I must be off. I'll see you later."

"Be seeing you."

Bill walked in the direction of the elevators, only to miss the mark by about a foot and walk directly into the wall. He turned to the officer, smiled nervously, and entered the elevator.

Once the doors had closed, Bill whipped out the liquid plastic glasses and pressed the correct button. After a few seconds, the elevator arrived at the required floor.

Bill hurried through the myriad of corridors, each one looking, more or less, like the one before it. Finally, he reached the control room and hit the door control.

The door slid open, revealing a small room covered on all sides with television screens. In the middle, sat a single man at a computer console.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked.

"Well...I...WHAT'S THAT UP IN THE SKY?"

The man looked, and Bill clobbered him with a summer sausage that he had found in Dr. Fixx's pocket. Really, Bill thought, some people just don't understand the simple things in life. Like not to look down when someone says your shoelace is untied, or not to look up when someone says that there's something there.

Bill took the man's place at the computer. With lightning speed, Bill searched through the computer's memory, until he had located his show, "Nerds on Campus." It was still in Syndication and hadn't been deleted, yet! He accessed the maps to the Syndicated shows; technically, they were still there, it was just that the doors to them in the long hallway that Dave had showed him had been removed. It was only a matter of reopening them.

Bill hurriedly formulated a plan. However, his concentration was soon broken by blaring sirens.

"Alert! Character Galthus, William Horatio is loose in the Network. He may be impersonating Dr. Fixx. If you encounter him, detain or eliminate him."

It had to work. Bill typed furiously until he had finished, then ran out into the now-reddish corridors. Stomping feet could be heard everywhere, no doubt the Network Police who had so efficiently detained him before. They weren't going to do that, again. Not if he could help it.

Bill reached that floor's lobby and hurried onto the stairs. Which way were the portals? Bill scanned his memory for some remembrance of where Dave had showed him his show. They were near the commissary, Bill remembered. Once he found that, it would be no problem.

The stairway door to the main floor burst open as Bill ran through it. He remembered enough of the map to know that the commissary was on this level, but where? Bill smelled for any odors of food or plastic, but couldn't detect any. Instead, he ran off in a completely random corridor.

Halfway through it, the sight of twenty black-clad officers appeared at the far end of the corridor. He looked back, but around three scientists in white lab-coats appeared there. Bill looked around furiously, and ran into the first door that he saw. Inside the room was a ladder leading down, and seeing no other alternative, Bill grabbed onto it and descended into the murky blackness.

He tripped as he reached the bottom, and landed flat on his face, bursting the right "lens" to his glasses. Not now, Bill thought, please, no pratfalls. He got up and began to look for a place to run. There was a lot of machinery all about, gleaming despite the gloom, and Bill had to consciously watch every minute to keep from hitting anything. From behind him, he heard the stomping feet coming closer.

Bill darted around a few corners, and through some tight squeezes, before he had a chance to take a quick glance around where he was. The machine right next to him was labeled 'Food Vending.' Great! He was closer to the commissary than he thought! Then, Bill noticed a food slot in the side, and quickly punched in a few selections.

"There he is!" yelled an officer, about fifty yards from where Bill was standing. Suddenly, swarms of black-clad men were converging on Bill. The food slot popped open, and Bill grabbed its contents:

Cream pies.

The officers soon found themselves being pelted with around a dozen pies. A few of them slipped on the whipped topping that had scattered on the floor, causing the others to trip over them like a bunch of dominoes. Bill smiled inwardly at the mess, and ran off to the nearest ladder.

He emerged on the main floor, right outside the commissary. More officers had appeared, on that floor, realizing, perhaps, what his goal was. Bill ignored his fear, and started the last sprint for the Television Universe gateways. He looked at his watch, his plan should be coming into effect about...now!

The corridor in front of him exploded into a burst of light. Every portal, current or Syndicated, had opened into the real world! The officers behind him gasped, but still kept up their relentless chasing. A few shots rang out over Bill's head. They were serious, now.

Bill ran into the Portal corridor and collided with a man dressed in a completely white suit with an arrow through his head. "Well, excuuuuuuuuuuuse me!" the man said to Bill.

"Sorry," Bill gasped, starting to run again. He hadn't expected anything to escape from the portals, but they had...he looked down the corridor, it was all filled with people...He had no time to waste, now...he had already wasted too much time. Bill started to push his way through the crowd.

However, his collision had given the Network Police a chance to get a bead on Bill, and a high-pitched whine filled the air. Bill felt an enormous stab of pain as something hit his back.

"The devil made me do it!" yelled another character.

The pain spread from the small of his back outward, like an intense burning sensation.

No! It can't happen, now! Bill slammed his back against a wall as he ran. Then again.

And again.

"Just the facts, Ma'am."

Bill slammed his back into the wall, once more. Each time, it seemed to ease the pain a little bit. Finally, he stumbled violently onto the ground, losing his glasses in the process. His hand felt where the burning had been; it was damp.

He couldn't just lie there. The portals wouldn't be open long. He had to move.

"Are you lost?" said a greenish shape in front of him. "Tried Hare Krishna?"

The stomping was coming closer; Bill pulled himself together enough to get on his feet and start running again.

Bill thought of everything he was making the journey for. His home. His world. His life.

"Wellll, doggies!"

Images of Julia flooded his brain, as he fought his way through more blobs. 'I don't want to lose her, again.'

"To the moon, Alice!"

'She pleaded with me. There was nothing I could do...'

"I am here to pump-- you up!"

Sweat poured down Bill's brow. His body already felt unnaturally cold, despite all his exertion.

"I looked it up in my Funk and Wagnall's!"

The blobs grew more indistinct. They all seemed to reach out at him, to stop him.

"But NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

'Julia. My Julia.'

"Book him, Dan-o!"

"There was always so much...'

"You are a member of the Village! You are a unit of Society!"

His feet continued to push onward. He felt consciousness flit away.

"No!" he gasped.

"One Adam Twelve. One Adam Twelve."

No.

"This must be where pies go when they die."

Nooooooooooooooooooooo

"I am not your father, Eb!"

oooooooooooooooooooo

"Hello, I'm Mr. Ed."

oooooooooooo

"DYN-O-MITE!"

ooooo

"My 11!"

ooo

"He's dead, Jim."

o.

A white light enveloped the corridor. When it abated, the corridor was empty.

* * *

"Hey, Bill! Whatcha doin'?" asked the first mate as he bounded onto the beach.

"Nothing much."

"That's a really neat story that you told me, last night! Especially the bit with you running through all those other shows, zip, bam, boom!"

"Hahahahahahahaha!" laughed the laughter.

"Telling you a story is the least I could do after all you've done for me," Bill replied, fingering the newly-made glasses he had received, made from two coconuts, two bamboo shoots, and spare glass from the castaway's ship. "Your professor is a genius."

"Lucky for you he also knows emergency medicine, or you'd be a gonner."

"I give him my greatest thanks."

"Who knows, maybe someday you'll find your world."

"Kinda looks like I'm stuck here for the moment."

"You won't be for long."

"Won't I?"

"No one ever is. Not that Wrongway Guy, or the Broadway Producer, or the guy who looked just like me, or the guy who looked just like the professor, or the mad scientist who tried to turn us all into mindless zombies..."

"I think I understand."

"Or the time we were visited by the famous butterfly collector, or the time we were visited by the Japanese submarine captain who thought World War II was still going on..."

"Enough already!"

"Hahahahahahahaha!" laughed the laughter. Bill chuckled along with it.

"Okay, Bill."

"Look, you go up with the others. I'd like a few moments alone."

"Right-o."

Bill skipped a stone across the lagoon. Perhaps he was right; maybe he will get off the island. To his world, perhaps. Or, perhaps not. All he knew was that once he reentered the system, he became a rogue element; he was no longer strictly a character. As long as he remained in a universe, new things would happen, rather than the same things repeated in a time loop. Perhaps he would find a way back to his universe, eventually.

Perhaps.

He looked out at the setting sun over the lagoon. Right now, he was stranded with seven castaways on a deserted island. Things certainly looked bleak for any chances of getting home.

But, then again, they always looked bleak at this stage of the story.