

## The Bumper Sticker Story

“I’m Way-sian,” Gordy says to Big John. “Half-white and half-Asian.” Gordy is smiling because he meant it as a joke but Big John doesn’t realize this.

“My family is all from Czechoslovakia,” Big John says.

The subject of race came up because Gordy suggested ordering Chinese food for lunch. It’s Friday. Big John always comes in on Fridays and orders lunch for everyone. It’s his way of checking on things, keeping a pulse, making sure stuff is progressing and moving along. I think he buys lunch because he doesn’t want to seem like a look-over-your-shoulder-at-the-end-of-every-week kind of boss.

And he’s not. Big John doesn’t want to control things or overstep his place. You can tell he’s a little uncomfortable, fidgeting in a bright patch of sunlight. He’s from the artificial intelligence company. The one footing the bill for the whole project. Some tech name I can never remember, so I just call it the AI company.

According to Gordy, the bigwigs at the company don’t really care about this project. They just want to see if their AI software works. But Big John seems like he really does care. He asks a lot of questions.

Gordy came up with the nickname Big John, but Big John isn’t really *that* big. He’s six feet two or so, only a few inches taller than Gordy. Gordy has to give everyone a nickname. He should have called John “Nice John” because that’s probably his defining quality. He’s a really nice guy, all-around. He doesn’t have to buy lunch for everybody, but he does.

They agree on Chinese food. I watch Gordy order with his phone. Him and Big John are standing in a bright patch of sunlight near the Big Screen. There aren’t that many people here today on account of it being December 22<sup>nd</sup>, the last Friday before Christmas and the holiday

break. Only three of the grad students are here: Tyler, Sarah, and Nicole. They are all sitting at the long table everyone calls the Main Table, not far from Gordy, hunkered over their laptops as always. They look up when Gordy asks for their order. Over in the conference room are Allie and Diane from the AI company. They are waiting to meet with Big John. It's always the same. Big John comes in, makes his rounds and says hello to everyone, then meets with Gordy, then meets in the conference room with whomever is here from the tech company. Allie is always here and might be what's considered a work-a-holic. She even comes in on Saturday. Today a woman named Diane is here with Allie. Diane is very polite and always smiles. Gordy pokes his head in the conference room and takes their orders.

Ever since I met him as an undergrad, Gordy has been obsessed with two things: comfort and puzzles. His obsession with comfort extends to food, so I order the orange chicken, which I know Gordy loves. He gets me to go halves with his sweet and sour shrimp.

He's back, now, standing next to Big John in front of the monitors. There's the Big Screen, flanked by three smaller-but-still-big screens on each side. The data is pouring in: bumper stickers and license plate rings and images attached to rear windows. They float up, twirl and hover for a moment, and then are converted into a shape. Then other shapes that are already combined together float up, the new shape and this floating collection do a little dance, to find where the new shape fits in, and eventually it clicks with this little click sound, then the whole thing falls back down in a sea of shapes and a new bumper sticker comes in. The whole complex process is based on algorithms from Big John's company. Sometimes the Big Screen zooms out and it's like a hive of millions of millions of tiny bees swarming, climbing all over each other, buzzing and swirling. It's hypnotic, mesmerizing. Sometimes, when I'm zoning out at this hive,

a shape or pattern will begin to emerge, like a message deeply personal and meant just for me, but then just as quickly it falls apart in a swirl of chaos.

Gordy and Big John are chatting again with the screen as a background. John is asking Gordy about his roots, his white father and Asian mother. Gordy is garrulous, open, making jokes about how he prefers a fork to eat Chinese food. He's standing with his arms crossed, yoga t-shirt, jogging pants, crocs, and his ever-present visor. His thick black hair blooms out of his visor like a curly black mushroom.

He's a bull-shitter, but the best kind: honest with good intentions. Like an overgrown kid, he's never lost that childlike wonder, the curiosity, the capacity to question everything. I think it stems from being an only child.

He'll talk your ear off, especially when he doesn't know what he's talking about. He loves to argue, to poke holes in people's ideas and beliefs and assumptions. But the thing is: sometimes Gordy is right, in astonishing fashion. Most of the time he's not, but every once in a while, he pulls it off, like a trick. And he's done it just enough to convince this AI company to test their software, and for a big university like UCSD to partner with them on this project, this insane puzzle that Gordy came up with one day, sitting in traffic. Basically, his theory is that all the bumper stickers and the rings around license plates in the United States, when boiled down to their essential meaning and combined together, would reveal something profound and beautiful about our country.

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I am drinking my Coke, in a trance again, watching the Big Screen. It's like the sea or the sky and it's always the same but with subtle differences. Sometimes it's like a school of fish, coalescing, scattering—then rising and combining again just as suddenly—now into a flock of

birds, ascending, zig-zagging in seemingly random directions, before spreading apart, only to come back together again and dive into the sea, appearing once again as a school of fish. Sometimes I watch for hours, drinking Coke after Coke, only stopping when my bladder screams. When this happens, I'm reluctant to get up, to leave the ocean, swimming, or in the sky, flying: it's almost like I've become like the bumper stickers, a shapeshifter, restlessly changing and seeking.

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The Chinese food has arrived. It's loud. Everyone is talking and eating. Tyler uses his chopsticks to gesture. He has a shaved head, a long scraggly beard, and dark intense eyes. He's wearing his winter cap, along with a hood. He keeps pointing with his sticks, like he's picking something out of the air. Nicole and Sarah are nodding along, but it doesn't seem like they are really listening.

It's a good thing Veronica isn't here today. She plays third base for the university softball team and doesn't back down. When she's here, she and Tyler clash over the Project. It's hard for me to understand their relative positions, but I think the gist is that Tyler thinks license plate rings shouldn't have the same value as bumper stickers. Veronica feels they're equivalent. Not that I understand a word of the *why*. But that's the difference, as far as I can tell. Their arguments are like storms, they brew and develop and then explode, shouts like lightning, responses of thunder. Incomprehensible logic and words pouring out like sheets of rain. Tyler is eager for the battle. Veronica treats his snide comments and dagger remarks like line drives at the hot corner—she snatches them out of mid-air and lobs them back at his face. It stokes his anger further and she seems to enjoy this, glaring back under her visor.

All the other students have to choose a side, no one's allowed to be neutral. It escalates and boils until Gordy comes in and has to play the role of peacekeeper. It's like he's tucking everyone back into their laptops, back into their number-crunching screens like soft beds. Gordy's not especially good at this role, but he manages. It's like a bedtime when none of the children want to go to sleep and Gordy is the harried parent.

But today there's no Veronica. Tyler, Sarah, and Nicole chew away in silence. Tyler's legs fidget constantly—it's the energy he would normally unleash at Veronica. His leg is sort of like a lightning rod that channels energy into the ground. He's moving his sticks again, holding court in his way. It looks like Sarah and Nicole are happy to let him drone on without Veronica here to call him out on things.

Sarah is new to the team. She's a stats major and runs cross-country. Her blonde ponytail swings from a running cap. Everything about her clothes and appearance always is calculated to reduce drag and increase aerodynamics. She never seems to wear the same running shoe and always is either finishing a run or about to go on one. Her stints in the office are like an extension of a long race.

Nicole is the exception to all the stats and math and tech-software science students. She's an art student, completing an MFA in Visual Art. She has wild, curly hair. Gordy is always showing her combinations of shapes, asking how she would arrange them. Because the license plate rings and bumper stickers are all converted, through the AI software, into both colors and shapes.

This is why the Big Screen is so hypnotic. Along with the schools of data fish or flocks of license plate rings, each pixel represents some element of human expression, a belief or attitude or association. So not only is there a mosaic of endless arranging data points, the background is

also ceaselessly transitory: bright then dark, colors swirling and shifting and blending. I get quite lost in it. When I close my eyes, I still see it, like there is a kaleidoscope on my eyelids.

“That puzzle is absurd,” Allie says to me, walking out of the break room carrying a container with her own oven mitts. She has not ordered lunch today and never does. She always instead brings in her own vegan dishes, heats them up in the break room, and carries them off with her oven mitts. “Utterly,” she adds, and starts singing: “Utterly, utterly, butterfly butterfly...” The melody is “We’re Off to See the Wizard” from *The Wizard of Oz*.

I join her and realize it’s the first time I’ve spoken today, besides my lunch order. I sing: *Because because because because, because of the wonderful things she does*. I don’t like the sound of my voice, even when it’s blended with Allie, who sings like a bird. But her sentiment is not about The Project, which everyone takes quite seriously. She’s referring to a 1,000 piece puzzle of the Grand Canyon that Gordy has arranged on a table in the breakroom. And Allie is right. It *is* absurd. There are hundreds of identical red, orange, and brown rock pieces; hundreds of blue sky pieces; hundreds of dark shadow rock pieces. Gordy has finished the border and two or three rows of edges. There is a cloud here, a rock formation there, a huge scattering of pieces, and a magnifying glass. No one really works on it besides Gordy.

“I mean seriously,” Allie says. “Gordy’s nuts.” She walks past with her oven mitts and goes directly back to her laptop. She’s a go-getter all right. I crack open another Coke.

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All of the AI software people, along with the college students, each chose one snack and one drink at the beginning of The Project. The breakroom has since been stocked with each person’s selection, marked with masking tape. So the cupboards have granola bars, chips, trail mix, candy, etc. each marked with masking tape and the person’s name. Likewise, the beverages are stored in

cases and moved to the fridge when there's space. It's one of my tasks. To check the fridge and make sure it's stocked. Tyler drinks Red Bull. Allie green veggie smoothies. Veronica and Sarah both drink Smart water. Gordy has an espresso machine. There's also coffee for anyone that wants it. That's the first thing I do in the morning when I arrive. Then I go back and brew more pots whenever the pot gets low. It's low right now and I think Big John might come in for a cup. So I pour out the rest of the old pot and start a new pot. While it's brewing, I close my eyes and wait for the kaleidoscope to stop. Once the pieces in my eyelids stop spiraling and it's dark then I open my eyes and the coffee is done. I open a Coke and go back to my desk and watch the Big Screen again. It's like I can't stop watching it, like I'm hooked, that I have to keep watching because I don't want to miss some kind of result.

I drink my Coke, but it doesn't really wake me up. I feel myself starting to nod so I stand up and walk around. I walk past Tyler and his leg is like a jackrabbit, moving faster than ever. Everyone else has their heads buried in their computer screen.

The afternoon has set in. I was right: Big John went back and grabbed a coffee before sitting down with Gordy and the AI people.

Sometimes being here is like one of those staircase illusions where you never reach the top or bottom, you just keep climbing with your eyes, ascending, then descending, then ascending when you think you're descending or vice versa, until it's time to go home. Most days, I dread when it's time to leave, but today, since it's a vacation, I'm dreading it even more. I open another Coke and go back to my seat.

Technically my role is administrative assistant. I keep logs of hours for both the AI software people and the grad students. I sign the forms the students need for their course credit. I order supplies and make sure the copier is working and occasionally get some other menial task like

yesterday's "organize pictures of white board drawings into a digital file." It's not a lot of work, but usually there's enough to do that I keep busy for at least the first hour or two, before I begin staring at the Big Screen.

Gordy gave me this job as a favor. I was in a hole, had recently climbed out of an even deeper, darker place, and needed something to occupy my time and help me stay sober. He's a real friend like that. So now I don't just lie around. I come to the university. I go to AA meetings once a week. And when I come home I'm tired and can sleep a little. No more vampire nights. And on Sunday afternoons I go to the beach and lie in the sand. Watching the sun go down, feeling the waves tickle my toes, I almost feel like a happy human being, even though I'm more like a beached whale.

And sometimes, watching the data swirl, I drift back down, down, down, until Gordy slaps me on the back.

"It's time to go," he says. "See you in the new year." He is going to Hawaii for a vacation.

I finish my last icy, watered-down sip of Coke. "See you in two weeks."

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We are back. It's the new year. Monday morning. Everyone is here. The place is humming. I am in place, sitting at my desk near the back, across from the break room. I crack open a Coke and close my eyes for a moment, relishing in the anticipation: the black darkness that is about to be filled.

I squeeze my eyes and listen to the din. I hear Tyler and Veronica. It's like a warm-up, a game of pepper. He's tossing things at her that she is smacking back at him.

"The bumper sticker's central tendency disperses the license plate ring F-distribution," Tyler says.



“It’s a null hypothesis,” Veronica fires back.

“It has internal consistency,” Tyler says.

Veronica chortles. “Oh, binomial boy,” she says. “So cute.”

“How is this binomial?” Tyler responds, incredulous. And so on. I take a big drink of Coke and open my eyes. The flocks are swirling in a new pattern, like they are writing invisible letters. I lose myself in the morning, sipping my Coke, until Gordy comes by and pats me on the back. It’s ten o’clock.

There are six screens along the Big Screen, three on each side. On the left top screen is the international data. The AI company and university have partners in Europe, Australia, Asia, South America, and Africa. “It’s superfluous,” Gordy said, when I first asked him about it. “The numbers are astronomical. It’s like trying to scale a mountain on Mars. We’ll never reach a critical point, we just don’t have enough people, but the AI people think there’s a value to the failure. So they’re collecting what data they can.”

I look over and Seoul flashes 17% collected. Cape town 8%. Tokyo 14%.

Gordy’s theory depends on a critical value of license plate rings and bumper sticker and car window stickers being reached, collected, converted, combined, all to reveal some profound human truth. This is Gordy’s idea.

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All the chairs in the office have good lumbar support, are adjustable, and have different settings for massages. The furniture is all moveable and adjustable. There are whiteboards everywhere, with formulas and equations and graphs scribbled and scrawled about. Sometimes there are little messages like DON’T ERASE. THIS MEANS YOU TYLER!!

There's foosball and pool and ping pong. All of these games ordered by Yours Truly, per Gordy's request, paid for by Big John.

It is lunchtime. I'm watching Nicole chew on a pencil and twirl her curly hair, working on a folder of shapes that Gordy has handed her.

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The second screen on the left is for anomalies. These are the license plates that don't fit into the other formulas and categories. Each is assigned a number and grad students or AI people take stabs at them. I am watching as two AI people I'm not familiar with, Brad and Susan, debate the different probabilities of the following bumper sticker: "One must endure the cocoon to glorify in the butterfly." They are struggling with it. I get up and retrieve another Coke. The drink pops and fizzes in my tumbler full of ice, making them look up.

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The third screen on the left is called MSC, which stands for Multi-Sticker Condenser. Any vehicle with more than three stickers must go through the MSC. Each is assigned a number and you can watch the condenser do its thing, converting each sticker to a shape and color and combining each shape/color into the larger shape/color that will represent this car. Sometimes a grad student or AI person will challenge the result of the MSC, point out an inaccuracy or another possibility, and basically improve on the computer's model. When someone does this, they get a tally on the MSC whiteboard. Right now, Tyler and Veronica are tied for the lead with nine tallies. An AI person that everyone calls Pikachu is second with seven. A bunch of people have between five and two. I can remember a Volkswagen bus that once took over a week for the MSC to process, with practically everyone on the team taking a crack at it. Pikachu ended up getting it right: it turned out to be a simple blue circle.

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I am watching as *IDK anyone but Trump* is converted into a yellow “L” shape.

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I listen as two grad students near a white board debate whether a car with two Biden stickers is diametrically opposed to a car with two Trump stickers. A third grad student is sitting in a chair near them. He appears to be listening, but I can’t really tell because I can’t see his eyes beneath a Salty Crew baseball hat. The two are arguing vehemently and there is language that is mathematical and statistical and way over my head. There are some graphs in front of them that are being used in the heated discussion. One of the standing arguing grad students points to a curve and claims that this is the point that an individual needs a second sticker for the same political candidate. It’s at this point that the third student speaks up, asking, Does that mean there’s a point where they need a third? Neither student responds. Sarah walks by, moving fast, cutting between them, wearing neon running shorts. One of them stands with mouth ajar, marker hovering. It’s like they never thought of this possibility.

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It is late afternoon. I am sitting in Gordy’s office on his chaise lounge. He randomly selects a Rubik’s cube from his shelf cluttered with various puzzles. He tosses me the cube, which I fiddle with.

“I don’t know the first thing about solving these,” I say. “Every time I line up some squares, when I try to line up more, I undo what I’ve done. Isn’t there a YouTube video I could watch?”

“Certainly there is,” Gordy says. He is twisting his cube as he talks, his hands moving swiftly and his eyes intent. “Certainly. There’s a YouTube video for everything. But I implore you not to take the easy way. Think in terms of layers. Think more of questions than answers. True

problem-solving is often not in finding the solution, but in asking better and better questions. Truly, an exquisite question is a thing of beauty.” He solves his cube and holds it up.

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Everyone in the office operates on another stratosphere, mentally, than I do. Software engineers, grad students completing doctorates, gurus and wonks, math wizards, statistic fanatics; they speak in tongues, argue over concepts, use terminology belonging to another world. I dwell below them, eavesdrop on their mental gymnastics, and restock their cabinets. I can’t even fill in when they need a fourth for ping pong.

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It's almost time to go home and that feeling of dread, the one I haven't felt in two weeks returns, and it surprises me how the feeling is mixed with a sense of pleasure. Maybe because it's familiar.

The three screens on the right randomly shuffle through the states. Mississippi eight percent needed for CV (critical value). New York nineteen percent. Tennessee 32 percent. Sometimes it shows live feeds of cars that are driving around taking pictures of the backs of vehicles, the license plate blurred out. It's easy to get lost in these screens, too.

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Five days later. It is evening, early January. I am on the porch talking with Big John. He has a stutter that manifests when he gets excited. He's had quite a career in data analytics. Intel. General Atomics. IBM. Microsoft. A stint with the San Diego Padres. These places he talks about without stuttering. What gets him stumbling verbally is discussing his patents. He has seventeen patents with various companies and eight of his own. This particular patent, from this

project, he calls the Big Kahuna. Or sometimes he calls it the icing on the cake, his *Mona Lisa*, his *Moby Dick*, and once, the one he will be remembered for.

We are looking out toward the coast. The sunset is spectacular. “Why bumper stickers and license plates?” I ask.

“They’re human,” he says. “They’re observable. And they contain patterns. Check, check, check.”

We watch the sky changing imperceptibly. A sea gull flies across the purple and pink clouds. My understanding is vague, general, but I’m not sure what to ask next. I see Gordy inside, eating yogurt covered raisins, going over equations on a wall with several grad students.

“The clock’s ticking,” Big John says. “We need a result, by June, at the latest. A clear result. No ambiguity. We have six months.”

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Three months later. Gordy sits in the afternoon, reclining and sipping espresso. He lets one of his crocs dangle and flips it with his bare foot. I am watching him watching the Big Screen in a trance. He stares, his lips forming half words and his eyebrows like a balance that keeps shifting. Then suddenly his mouth, very slowly, forms an: Oh. My. Gosh.

I look and part of the Big Screen solidifies, connects, crystalizes. It’s now like the Grand Canyon puzzle in the breakroom. Parts of it has formed. The frenzied school of fish now swim through a maze of coral and seaweed, instead of an open sea. And the flock of birds cascade through a canyon instead of empty sky.

Slowly the din and noise dies down. Tyler stops mid-sentence: “There’s not even a marginal likelihood of . . .”

Everyone crowds around the Big Screen and there's a long moment when everyone just watches. Then the reaction comes: people are patting each other on the back, high-fiving, clapping, laughing. There's like this mini-celebration, then everyone rushes back to their laptop or white board or study room with renewed energy. Veronica shouts, "How do you like my marginal likelihood now."

I go to the breakroom and pick up a diet Coke. They belong to a grad student named Trent, but he has not been around in a while.

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It's late. Only Gordy and I are left, except Allie, who is singing different Imagine Dragon songs in one of the conference rooms. My theory about Gordy is that while he stares at the screen, he's actually looking at things inside his head, scanning through layers of problems and equations and questions that keep forming. Like he says all the time, "Every answer begs another question."

The stats for all the states to reach CV are now all under ten percent. I get up to leave. "Wait until Big John sees this," he says.

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And Gordy is right. When Big John comes on Friday, he can hardly form a sentence he's so excited. He goes overboard on the lunch order, a Greek spread of lamb and salmon and chicken and beef. There's salad and rice and cookies for dessert. Even Allie goes for the salad.

Now, watching the swirling fish, you can clearly see one, two, sometimes three, break off from the school and join the sections of solid, formed, solved, puzzle.

The mood in the office is one of quiet confidence, balanced with tantalizing anticipation. It's in the air: something good is coming our way, something really good that will change all of our

lives. After the big Greek feast, that Sunday, instead of laying on the beach and letting the waves tickle my toes, I go for a walk.

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It is May. The level of expectation has ratcheted to a fever pitch. The Big Screen is now like something turning inside out, or outside in, a loose object spinning, like it needs one more click. In the pattern there's always one small amorphous section floating around that is blurry, like rain. All the states are now less than one percent, except for Montana, which is stubbornly at three percent. The international screen froze last week. I overheard Diana, from the AI company, saying that the screen froze up when data from Venezuela suddenly poured in on the heels of a large transmission from South Korea. Seoul, I believe. The whole international system froze. The AI people are trying to restart it; it alternates between a spinning wheel and a bar that gradually fills up above the word "Initializing...". The grad students are told not to bother, to focus on the states.

"We're close," Gordy keeps saying. "So close."

When Big John visits on Friday, he rubs his hands together in excitement and there's a little glint in his eyes. "What about pizza?" he says.

I go to the breakroom and instead of diet Coke, I grab a Smart water.

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It's June. This is it. We have one week, but the final data has proven problematic. People have been pulling all-nighters. Tyler and Veronica went toe-to-toe in a shouting match and are now not allowed to be in the same room. It escalated out of nowhere. Suddenly Veronica was crying and shouting, "Fuck your z-score. Fuck your entire z-test. Take your tiny little p-hat and put it on your tiny little penis." Tyler responded with, "It's because I'm a man, isn't it?" That's

when she lunged at him and Sarah had to use her speed to get in between them. Nicole was able to calm Veronica down, but Tyler stormed out.

Gordy is as tense as I've ever seen him. The Big Screen is now like the surface of the sea with a large creature rising, ghostlike, before vanishing. When Big John comes he's silent and nervous.

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It's excruciating watching the Big Screen. I glance at it, pacing back and forth, averaging over ten thousand steps a day. A car will appear on one of the little screens, get converted, and trickle onto the big screen. It will flutter like a fallen leaf, swaying back and forth past this small opening, a tiny slot, only to fall by the wayside. This happens over and over again. Sometimes it appears to fit, wedging in for a moment, only to get squeezed out. It's madness. *My real boss is a Jewish carpenter. I'd rather be sailing.* A family of five represented with *Star Wars* figures. *Honk if a kid falls out.* But no. Each shape misses entirely, and the Big Screen remains an inscrutable surface of unimaginable depths, a revolving sphere of darkness.

Everyone is on edge. Big John is in the corner, disconsolate. Gordy is like a man lost at sea. He's hopeless. He fidgets with his visor constantly. Tyler has rejoined the team, but he seems like a bomb that could blow at any moment.

And then it happens. *My kid is an honor student at Nichols Middle School* fits perfectly in the space like a hand into a glove. The dark sphere gives birth to a tiny point of light, which grows into a dazzling, whirling wheel. As it rotates, it appears at times like a diamond, a snowflake, the constellations, and an atom buzzing with electrons. It's beautiful. Everyone stands, speechless. Gordy's jaw is slack and open. Veronica and Tyler hug. Finally the sounds: gasps and



exclamations and tears and laughter. Big John is crying. Gordy comes over and they at first high five, but then laugh and embrace like little kids.

“A question of astonishing brilliance,” Gordy says. “It’s perfection. Creation. A fingerprint of humanity.”

No sooner do the words leave Gordy’s mouth when one of the small screens flickers and comes to life. A transmission from Nevada. A license plate ring: *I support National Public Radio*. Everyone holds their breath. The transmission flutters down, but narrowly misses the dazzling diamond. The relieve is palpable. Someone laughs, but it is a nervous laugh. Then comes another transmission, a bumper sticker from a convertible in Ohio. *Sometimes I Go Topless*. The data point is converted to a purple inverted triangle in agonizing slowness. Big John turns away. The upside-down triangle hits the Big Screen and falls in what again feels like slow-motion agony. The diamond is spinning, flashing constellation-like patterns, but it is like a magnetic collision course with the purple triangle that is *Sometimes I Go Topless*. The triangle strikes the diamond like a bullet to the heart. It is catastrophic. The spinning wonder shatters on contact. It feels inevitable and tragic all at once. It is like we are back at square one: there are flocks of fish, swimming in the sky. Texas is suddenly back to eight percent. Virginia, Louisiana, Oregon all come back online. Big John holds his head in his hands. Gordy stares, blinking, and says out loud, to no one, “Another layer to ponder.”

I go into the break room and open a Coke. The ice snaps loud and clear in the quiet office.