THE STANGERLILK INFORMATION ENGINE

Sargent changes his mind eight times during the night – he doesn't sleep a wink – he has been sleeping less and less as it is already, each bedtime, already crawling through the clock in an unconscious and futile campaign to forestall the insomnia, each bedtime, now midnight, one o'clock, two, finds Sargent lying on top of the covers feeling stupid, guilt, why does he need to sleep, what has he accomplished or labored on during the elapsed extended day, from which to rest?

So he doesn't sleep and ricochets from abject surrender to vinegar defiance, except for a very brief hypnopompia, vivid and fervid and horrible, one where he floated in monochrome plaid and apologized to The Chairman for making things difficult for her, with knelt promises of obedience and obeisance and fealty that ended with her in abbreviated armor, but only the top of the suit of armor, thighs and feet and calves bare beneath the steel fringe at her waist and Sargent mortified to be seeing her in lust, but her face in a helmet with a red crest and her raising a sword to knight him but instead she beheads him and he awakes. So he barely sleeps and broods it out six ways to Sunday and gets up and shaves in a mood of rebellion, which dissipates as he eats half of a grapefruit half for breakfast. Then on the way in to University he is steeled with such resolve that he pulls the car over, and calls her from her cell with a logical and calm discourse he has prepared along the lines of, maybe the Stangerlilk thing is justified, and maybe the other thing is justified, but it would be a disservice to both to artificially blend them, and a disservice to him and her and the University and the whole of Academe. But the Chairman (who he refuses to call by name or even call Chairwoman or Chairperson) gently and viciously checks him back on the course the two of them have already unilaterally accepted like a grandchild taking a man's license –

(and it isn't like he doesn't know which grandchild it will be when it's the time for that – Sargent has seen how that acne-tattooed boor looks at his Corvette and he has fended off two proposed get-togethers with that noxious lad already) –

so now seven-thirty and Sargent stands in his office, illuminated by a sleepy chisel of sunlight that reveals a standing slowly-drifting lattice of calm dust. The piles of work at different places in the room are a testimony to indecision – some have been straightened, culled, one has even been bound, but then there are others that he has disarrayed with purpose, maybe in petulance but maybe to encourage the technicians when they come, to sigh, make excuses, say that he isn't ready, we aren't miracle workers. And he also has this twinge in his heart that maybe this is the last time he will stand here, he has fought it, it isn't just maybe but probable, his Chairman and his daughter think it's definite, so it is certainly possible. Right now, standing here standing there, he could walk away, but how can he tell till he does and then it is too late?

There is a bumping out in the hall that isn't a rap on the door but might as well be, and Sargent opens the door to see the two technicians inching the Stangerlilk apparatus up a step. What he had heard were the front wheels settling over the step and now he heard the back wheels bump, sounding like the polite knock of Death. Sargent knows that opening the door has sealed his fate; before the crew arrived he could conceivably go to the Chairman and said he changed his mind, or maybe call his daughter and

say he changed his mind, and borne the sour fugue of all their collective disappointment, but it is one thing to put his loved ones and acquaintances through those paces another time – he isn't going to waste the time of strangers.

The visitors are in olive jumpsuits – the one in the lead looks Indian, maybe 30, looks studious. Sargent opens the door wider, and the second technician silently hauls in the equipment, which is on a cart stacked maybe four feet high with machinery, and trailing behind it a power generator like a caboose. The second technician is a stunning Korean woman, maybe 25; the jumpsuit makes about as much difference in concealing her beauty as putting Scarlett Johanssen in a parka. The Indian flashes a badge.

"Do you have any questions, Professor Sargent?" asks the lead technician, drawing some papers out of spotless metal form holder. "I want you to know we always take the greatest of care with our client's papers and manuscripts. You are in good hands."

"I don't have any questions now," Sargent replies querulously. "I may have some later. What can I call you?"

"I'm Kris, and this is April." Gesturing toward the woman, who was focused on attaching the power strip for the different components. She was new to this, determined not to create any kind of delay.

"I think you may have done my colleague's office, guy named Shore? Professor Shore?"

Kris grins sheepishly. "That wasn't us, sorry." Later on, when he has established a comfort level, he might explain to Sargent that all teams are instructed by Central to call themselves Kris and April. Likewise, every team has to have a male and a female, and to represent two different ethnicities, to maximize the likelihood that the client will feel at ease. "What are you going to miss the least about the old rat race?" This conversation gambit, like the names and phylogenetic makeup of the team, was scripted by Central, as something the technician could say that would have the lowest chance of inciting resentment and regret in the subject.

(Of course, Kris had also done jobs where the subject was gone. Fired, quit, murdered, victim of overdose, autoerotic strangulation, wrong-way driver on Rte 22. It was easier, sad to say, when the subject was absent. Though once, for various odd reasons, he and his previous April had been required to operate the machine in the crime scene itself, the corpse removed but not the blood, the stencil of tape, and in one spot a fine confetti of bone. His previous April had taken a different job after that.)

"Haven't thought about that yet. I'm actually taking early retirement. The offer was made very suddenly."

A slight but distinct smile appears on the technician's face. "Early retirement, huh?"

Sargent ignores the implication. It was none of this guy's business how many years he had put on this earth, which was 80, nor were any of his opinions about it important.

Starting last week, Sargent has read up what he can about the Stangerlilk Information Engine. Apparently, Stangerlilk International has been doing academic retirements for only about a year. The technology had actually been invented for the benefit of Almighty Corporate America. After the crash of '07, so many companies were firing so many executives that this new market was born. Strangely enough, the third most common application was cooking; your most exclusive and pretentious restaurants always give Stangerlilk a call when they change chefs.

"I apologize for how messy my office is," says the professor, looking at one of the five stacks of documents on his desk. The top of the stack was a hotel bill from a conference he had attended three years ago and could no longer reimburse. This is the stack representing his current tasks – the other four are older but not old enough to be filed. The stack of papers to be filed is on his windowsill, lightly ornamented with a strange metallic dust, but he has not had a secretary for whom filing was in the job description for quite some time.

"This is fine, sir, we've seen much worse. Right April?" April nods. "We got called in two weeks ago to a document storage building for a company that was in Chapter 11 and the former owner had last been seen in Belize. The holding company wanted to liquidate the stored records without jeopardizing any assets that creditors might sue them for failing to keep. We had to work our way through the stuff in an area as large as this whole floor – took us six days. Almost nothing had any value. On the fifth day we found a safe deposit box receipt and in the box was seventy-five thousand dollars and the deed to a beach house in Guyana. The seventy-five thou helped a little but the former owner escaped the beach house about an hour before the bounty hunter got there. Some you win and some you lose."

Kris notices that the tale of a six-day job disturbs his client. "How long do you think this office will take?" Sargent asks, predictably.

"Much, much less. Maybe an hour, tops. After we get started, we ask you to be somewhere on the floor that we can reach you if we find something. "

"I'll just stay here the whole time, if you don't mind".

There is an awkward silence. "Usually people don't do that," Kris explains. "It can be a little intense."

"But it isn't against the rules?" April watches Kris' face as he processed this question – she hasn't run into this one yet.

"No, it's not against the rules. By the same token, if you change your mind at some point, let us know. Not a problem either way." He sighs, looking to Sargent for a sign that his question was just a gesture. But the professor stands his ground, clearly wanting to be around during the process. That being established, Kris nods at April and says "Ready to calibrate?"

A rare syllable escapes from April, an affirmative syllable, and she switches on a bank of toggles with a hand that had an engagement ring until two weeks ago. The handles of the toggles are coated in thick lavender rubber. The Stangerlilk Engine roars to life. "It's a bit loud," Kris apologizes. "But it works perfectly well. This thing is just the physical mechanism – its soul is in the Cloud. "

Kris takes a sheet of looseleaf from the metal box and clips it to the outside, handing Sargent a pen. "In some cases, naturally, there's no one around to calibrate with, but it works faster if we have that. Do you mind writing something on this page? Just write some kind of reminder that you think might be important for your institution to have after you leave."

"Anything? In what format?"

"Any format you like, sir. Your other papers here aren't in a consistent format, right?"

Sargent nods and writes a few symbols in Kanji, a script with which he is familiar. He shows the front of the page to Kris, who acknowledges the writing with nowhere near the reaction for which Sargent is hoping. Kris drops the looseleaf on a square orange tray like the paper tray in a copying machine, and after about two seconds, the page is suddenly sucked in a narrow slot and the machine shudders briefly.

Kris reads from a display on a handheld device that is tethered to the larger engine by a black rubber cord, coiled like a spring. "Nothing of value." He looks at the display again. "According to the readout, the characters you wrote translate to, 'Men have become the tool of their tools.' Is that a Chinese proverb?"

Sargent says no, grinning slightly. "It was said by Henry David Thoreau. And if your machine finds that to have no value, that proves the point, doesn't it."

And again Kris' eyes are on the display. "According to this, your campus library has thirteen volumes on Thoreau, so it doesn't need the information saved on this paper. Doesn't mean the concept doesn't have value." He hands the display over to Sargent, who scans the many lines of information, including readouts for "practical value" and "personal value" which give miniscule readings and one for "redundancy" which reads 100%.

"How does the machine know if the information on a paper is true?"

"It doesn't have to – that's up to the organization to determine. The Stangerlilk technology can only determine if the information is valuable. Here, write something that isn't true but would be important for the college to know if it were." Sargent reaches for another blank sheet, but Kris urges him to use a piece of scrap paper to demonstrate the versatility of the process. Sargent takes an empty envelope with a clear window and writes on the back. He shows the front to Kris; he has written "the deadline for the Jacoby fellowship has been moved up to Tuesday September 5th."

A moment later the two men watch the envelope sucked into the slot, and then Kris consults the readout. "Redundant," he says.

"Impossible. It isn't true that the deadline has been moved up – how can that be redundant?"

"That isn't what was redundant. Did you have something written on the other side of that envelope, like 'the chairman is a bitch?' That was what was redundant. The information about the Jacoby fellowship is tagged as inconsistent with other stored material."

Sargent smiles more modestly. “And where is the first redundant information stored in the University’s memory banks?”

Kris looks at the handheld component. “That’s blacked out – privacy.”

The men agree that they are ready, Kris first looking wistfully at Sargent’s face hoping he may have changed his mind. April is perspiring, nervous about her inexperience handling the machine. But she would much rather handle the machine than deal with the person who is retiring. She wonders, and doesn’t know, if the team will be expected to swap roles from job to job. She would rather work at a crime scene than talk to a client.

Kris sizes up a stack of papers about as tall as the space from his thumbnail to the end of his first finger, which he knows is the ideal size for quicker operation and reduced chances of jamming. April toggles her toggles, and Sargent stares at the stack like it’s his car keys spiraling down an inappropriately-flushed toilet. The feeder coughs and rattles, sucking in some papers smoothly, sometimes hesitating. A newspaper clipping gets rasped sideways and accordions into the feeder but then disappears with a jerk. Kris watches the stack shrink to a familiar height, then measures out the next stack to be processed.

“Nothing?” asks Sargent.

The technician puts down the second stack with irritation – if the feeder gets on a roll and then the intake runs empty, it makes a godawful noise which the clients always kvetch about. He picks up the display and answers, “Not yet.” The screeching starts but he is able to mollify the machine with a fresh stack. Sargent doesn’t blink.

It takes four more handspans to churn through Sargent’s first pile, and the yield is one hit, a reprint of Sargent’s first publication that comes up with 41% for personal value. “Are you sure it’s set right?” Sargent asks. “You don’t have to adjust the threshold?”

“This is a pretty normal rate,” Kris answers, trying to find the next pile before the feeder squeals. “It did pretty well to catch your first paper.” He resumes with a towering dusty stack from Sargent’s windowsill, which includes glossy brochures, old carbon paper, and old-fashioned long pinfeed paper the color of faded jade. The feeder balks at one of the brochures and April has to tear off a stuck piece and re-feed it. The intake has no trouble with the pinfeed but once it inhales the top sheet the rest billows out like a celebration, consumed sheet by pea-green sheet with a musical wheeze.

The machine stops suddenly, and Kris consults the display. “Some of that old computer stuff was FORTRAN programs?” he asks. When Sargent nods, he grins. “Congratulations, we have a hit. It says there was some code on one of those sheets that is 15% more efficient than the prevailing code being used in one of the HR systems. According to the readout, the University could save seventy-five thousand in three years by implementing your code.”

Three different heads in the room process that figure by three different calculi. April’s previous job had resulted in no payoff to the organization whatsoever, and the administrators had been angry, which she

thought was very unfair. She and Kris were not responsible for the material with which they had to work, and the technology had been tested on thousands of cases and was unimpeachable – they had not missed something and the disappointment was because the retiree had not produced anything. She was also frustrated at the indifference to the most important results of all, the gentle reclamation of the space occupied by the papers, the respectful restoration of order, the recycling of so much wood fiber into a form where it could reincarnate, and have another chance at utility, as it were. For her, the first payoff is a great relief, and assures her they were not in for another angry client. Kris is also pleased – he has seen many of these, and seventy-five thousand is above average. Anything else of value is gravy.

To Sargent, seventy-five thousand does not sound like much.

They work through two more piles on Sargent's desk; the Engine hiccups slightly on a plastic overhead slide and later on a tattered manila folder (the folder had a phone number scrawled on the back that would cost the University eight dollars' worth of labor to find again if lost); the second pile has nothing in it that slows down the Engine either mechanically or informationally. Sargent paces grimly and Kris asks twice if he wouldn't be more comfortable waiting somewhere else – most other people do.

When they set to a towering stack that had rested on a file cabinet, April observes a tensing in Sargent's face, a thousand thoughts and protests that he struggles to hold in, and as the feeder chews through the pile without pause she sees a thousand peaks and valleys of the struggle. Kris does not notice but April can see that there is something special about that pile. "Those are my theoretical papers," Sargent says when there are only a few pages left. "Something is wrong with the machine. You cannot tell me that there is nothing of value in those papers."

Kris nods at April to hit pause. "Sir, our machine can't say if theoretical findings are of value. Only if these copies are of unique value. I can see that most of these have been published, so the copies that we are processing now are not essential to preserving the theories."

"But your machine couldn't possibly tell if future generations might need them for historical value. Sometimes scholars need to analyze the progress of an influential concept."

There is a pause, heavy as fog.

"Sir, before I answer that question, are you sure you want me to?"

Sargent changes the subject. "Some of those manuscripts were unpublished."

Again he looks at the readings. "There is one that was unpublished by you but anticipated by Hughson and Holtzworth in 1969. Don't worry, based on style and wording, the algorithm shows that the similarity was coincidental, not plagiarism. Still not publishable."

Kris looks at Sargent's face for a moment, then nods to April to reactivate the machine. They start on the file cabinet, Kris explaining that it isn't cost-effective to separate the folders because their re-use value is much less than the efficiency gain by processing the folder and its contents together. The

durability of the machine is tested a moment later when a CD shivers out into a reject slot. “Hey, John Coltrane,” says Kris. “Love him.”

A beautiful student appears shyly at the door – the sun is a halo through a plate glass window behind her head and her corn-colored hair. It is hard to see her face and Sargent would not remember her name anyway. He has noticed that the greater the age difference between his students and himself, the greater the percentage of his female students who are beautiful. He suspects there has not really been a biological change.

She has a question about the final exam in two days and seems stressed about it, oblivious that the exam that is final for her semester, is final for his career. But she shouldn’t have to know that, so Sargent tolerantly explains the concept that bothers her, she looks relieved, she says goodbye. “Looks like your office is getting a makeover,” she says on her way out. Sargent feels like he sees Kris noticing her.

After the interruption, they proceed through the file cabinet, finding a dollar here, some items worth pocket change, many that just stream through Kris’ monitor as static. It is slow going just for physical reasons – it is awkward to harvest sheaves of folders from their hanging racks, square them on the feeder, clear the reject window. Sargent stares at the process and Kris fumbles like someone who doesn’t like to be stared at. But Sargent does admire on some level, some residue of his agricultural forebears, the steady industry of the quiet milling of the papers. There is a long unbroken quiet until an adder rattle and fourteen dollar bills arrive at the reject window. “Oh,” says Sargent, his memory retrieving the tale of the fourteen dollars at incredible speed.

Kris makes a stack of them. “Why did you have small bills in a file?”

“Years ago. We had a field trip and I upfronted the money for the tickets. I told the students in no uncertain terms that they would need to pay me back in exact change, but I relented when this one student had nothing but a twenty. By the end of the day I had her change but she had already left. So I put it in an envelope to return to her the next class. But she stopped coming to class.”

They continue implacably, ritually, down the drawers of the file cabinet. Sargent experiences a strange energy, a duty-drawn strength that reminds him of nights up with his daughter when she was an infant, and he has a flash of another off-kilter parallel. He transferred to his current University when his daughter was three, and he and his wife had hoped for another, so his wife put together an elaborate process to empty their daughter’s closet of baby and toddler things and store them with great order and care. The two of them stored the bunches and bunches of hangered garments with the same sort of pacific repetition, closet to box, closet to box, gently and diligently, while their daughter quietly drove toy cars over the spectacular tan landscapes of cardboard. Sargent smiles and hopes the smile wasn’t seen, but he can not help himself from imagining his wife if she were still alive, attending this Stangerlilk ceremony and correcting Kris and April for any disorder or disorganization in their process. Kris and April are not looking at him, but focus intently on the folders, which Sargent can tell is some kind of a sore point or hazard for them. When the last folder is gone (some potential historical value to some

notes from a conversation with Niklaus Wirth when he spoke at the anniversary of the Computer Science department), Kris and April look visibly relieved.

The three of them look around themselves. Cabinets, desks, chairs, shelves, all show clear. On some there are dust parallelograms, askew and indistinct. On some are scraps of tape, bosons of paper. "Anything else, sir?" asks Kris.

Sargent puts his hands in his pockets and scans the room. "Not much," he says. "There may be some stuff in the flat drawer of the desk". He crosses there and pulls out an irregular collection, dominated by a copy of the floor plans of the building reproduced on double-length paper. The long paper jams the machine temporarily, and April has to tear off a stubborn piece for the rest to be consumed. The conventionally sized pages sort themselves after this obstruction. Kris consults his readout.

"There's a poem," says Kris. "The machine isn't really tuned to value poems or other creative work, but it has ascertained that the poem is unpublished."

"That's impossible," says Sargent. "I'm not a poet. I can't even think of the last time I read poetry."

Back to the screen for Kris. "Personal value, 97%. Like I said, it can't calculate practical value but the algorithm calculates that 82% of the poetry published in the current twenty-five most influential journals are inferior to this poem in terms of originality and effectiveness. Is it possible that you used to write poems for your wife, or for a girlfriend? I don't want to read it aloud, but I could read the first line."

"That's not necessary," says Sargent, "I remember it now."

Kris confers with April and they enter a code that causes a reproduction of the page to issue from a slot that Sargent hadn't seen used before. He recognizes the poem, and the page of hotel paper it was written on. The Stangerlilk machine doesn't recreate the card it was kept in, but Sargent can see that, too, and he can see the gift onto which it was taped, and he can see the dark table by the kitchen where he and his wife had an anniversary dinner, he can see the crab cakes he ordered and the wine, he can see the lemonade she drank, his wife beaming, heavy with their daughter, the night heavy with promises. And he can see that the night did make good on most of the promises, not a bad record. The restaurant is gone, swept away by the Frenchtown floods, his wife is gone, but here is the poem and his daughter is still here, busy with her Fortune 500 job and his grandchildren, impatient sometimes, impetuous sometimes, and unaware of the hope and ignorance and youth and cheerful sacrifice and affection that went into her unborn attendance at an anniversary dinner at a bad table at a long-gone restaurant.

"Because of its potential external value, the database keeps a copy, but we can override that if it's too personal," says Kris.

"No, you don't have to override," says Sargent, "the database can keep it. But I didn't write the poem, my wife did. Her name was Ann Storrow Sargent. Can you make the database record that?"

Kris indicates that he can, and gets Sargent to spell out his wife's maiden name.

There isn't anything more for Kris and April to do but prepare the machine for transport, which April does with intense concentration because people sometimes get angry about that as well, if it takes too long. Sargent is tolerant however, and turns to the long window, watching the students bustle by, some with their noses in books, some chatting, some with headphones growing out of their ears, some dragging their feet.

When the Stangerlilk technicians leave, Sargent sits down at his desk and finds a pen. He takes out the copy of the poem, turns it over, and tries to write a poem of his own. After a little while he has made a good start, and is ready to walk down the hall and interact with his colleagues.