

*Welcome to the Multiverse**

by Ira Nayman

“Something unknown is doing we don’t know what.”

- Sir Arthur Eddington

* *Sorry for the Inconvenience*

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He is the lurker in the shadows of the alleyways behind the eyes of inmates in asylums for the awkward. He haunts the spaces between whole numbers. He feeds on the nightmares of those who sleep soundly because they don't know any better. He is the vaguely threatening half-heard voice that annoys you because it refuses to speak up even though it continually interrupts some moderately important task that, at that moment in time, should be getting your complete attention. Counting the cost of the compromises we make between our dreams and quality sleep time is something of a hobby with him. On any given night, you can find him in the dark dreams of vegetarian butchers. He is the ache at the center of the hole in your heart before you even know the center of your heart has a hole in it that aches. He is the pre-ache.

He has nothing to do with the story that follows.

He does not know this. In fact, he would be offended by this fact if he did know it. He is the lurker in the shadows of the etc. etc. He was born to be the antagonist of a story. He has been lurking in the shadows and all that since he was 12 - he is very good at it, perhaps the best in the universe. All of that work perfecting his lurking skills deserves the reward of a central place in a story. To even imagine that he would be a minor character in somebody else's story, mentioned in the first couple of pages and then discarded like a bad memory that hasn't quite formed a pattern in the synapses of a dementia sufferer's brain, well, given all the work he has put into his craft, that just doesn't seem right. That just...just...

The lurker in the shadows of the alleyways behind the eyes of inmates in asylums for the awkward realizes in mid-rant that he is out of toothpaste.

So he hops into his Prius (what? A lurker in the shadows of you know the drill can't have an environmental consciousness?) and drives to the nearest MaxiMultiMegaMart (a wholly owned subsidiary of MultiNatCorp: "We do retail stuff"). Okay, his environmental consciousness is selective - whose isn't? He is dressed in black with a red bow tie, because he had heard somewhere that bow ties were cool. Do not make the mistake of thinking that this is his usual lurking attire - he knew from experience that lurking in a MaxiMultiMegaMart just didn't offer the same sense of foreboding with a hint of jasmine, that, in fact, the MaxiMultiMegaMart sucked all of the lurk out of one.

It is at the MaxiMultiMegaMart, between the aisles for household appliances, not bigger than a breadbox and weasel supplies (no, the layout of the products in the MaxiMultiMegaMart is not eccentric, it is designed to maximize impulse purchasing - you know how it works - haven't you ever been looking for toothpaste and thought to yourself, "Hey! I should get some of that Weasel Chow, now with 27% more human disgustingness!") that the story truly begins.

"Boy!" a woman says. "Can I get some help over here?"

The lurker with all that descriptive baggage turns to find a well-kept, pleasant enough middle aged woman. He imagines her scrubbing a pot, really putting some muscle into it, dreading finding out what mischief the Beaver would be getting into at some time that day, maybe taking a pill to, you know, take the edge off, maybe help her keep the homicidal thoughts at bay, looking towards the time the children are old enough to bugger off and leave her to a future she couldn't imagine but had to be better than the present she was living. In short, she reminds him of his mother, except that she absently

plays with a space where her left earlobe should have been, and he is pretty sure his mother came with a complete set. Although, when you think about it, it would have saved his mother money on earrings...

“Can you tell me, please,” the woman asks, “What, exactly, the difference is between a Blendmaster 5000 with 17 levels and 12 settings, and a MixMonkey 5001, with 12 levels and 17 settings?”

He looks at the woman blankly. Part of him wonders how a blender could be considered smaller than a breadbox; perhaps the comparison was made with the breadbox on its side. But, mostly, he thinks, *Is she serious? Could this woman possibly be serious? She is confusing the lurker in the shadows of the alleyways behind the eyes of inmates in asyli for the awkward with... **an aisle rat in a MaxiMultiMegaMart store?***

“It’s a simple enough question,” the woman, impatience creeping into her voice, states. “Are you too simple to know the answer?”

“Jesus, lady,” the lurker in the shadows of sarcasm responds, “did you buy that pearl necklace or did you mug an oyster bed?”

“Excuse me?” the woman, dumbfounded, asks.

“Nice pink dress,” the lurker in the shadows of being on a roll continues. “The fifties would like it back.”

“This is outrageous!” the woman, in a cold fury (she kept it in her freezer for just such occasions), states. The lurker in the shadows of obliviousness doesn’t notice that her voice actually got softer.

“What happened to your ear?” the lurker in the shadows that you’ve come to know and love continues. “Get too close to your pet piranha at feeding time?”

The woman stares at him in anger.

Interpretations of what happened next differ. The lurker in the shadows with poor self-preservation instincts swears that he just meant to pick a piece of lint off the arm of the woman's dress. She must have felt that his reaching towards her was some kind of threat. Before the lurker in the shadows who maybe should have listened to his parents and taken that job Uncle Manny had offered him in his pet electro-shock therapy practice knows what is happening, the woman is standing behind him, bending the index finger of his right hand far enough back to cause him the maximum amount of pain without making him pass out. The Lurker in the shadows of a destiny he cannot comprehend doesn't know what scares him more: the fact that his mother is bending his finger just enough to inflict the maximum amount of pain on him without causing him to pass out, or that his mother know how to bend his finger just enough to inflict the maximum amount of pain on him without causing him to pass out.

Through his pain, the lurker in the shadows of suddenly realizing what a small fish he is in the universe's big pond, hears the woman whisper into his ear: "Did you know that there are 237 ways to kill a man with chopsticks?"

Lips trembling, the lurker who is beginning to lose faith in the shadows is about to stutter, "N...n...n...no..." - or some other cliché that people in his situation stutter - when the woman vanishes. He falls to his knees as the pain slowly ebbs out of him. A minimum wage MaxiMultiMegaMart aisle drone notices him, assumes he is praying to the god of weasel supplies and leaves him to his worship.

The lurker in the shadows of getting himself out of that damn store alive did, in fact, have a revelation on the floor of the MaxiMultiMegaMart. He realized that he

wasn't cut out to be the antagonist in a major narrative. The no longer lurker in the shadows of the alleyways behind the eyes of inmates in asylums for the awkward wondered if he could get a small part in a children's novel. Maybe if he put on a weasel suit. Yeah. That's it. He could be a weasel...

The Prologue is Past

Chapter One:

Noomi's First Day At Work

“Wake up, sleepyhead!”

“Rise and shine, sunshine!”

“Well, *that* was repetitive.”

“Some people find repetition of words or phrases poetic.”

“Some people find gastro-intestinal disease poetic.”

“Oh, yeah? Which people?”

“Some...you know, some people. Uhh...some.”

“Shaddup!” Noomi Rapier mumbled. “Sleepin’ here!” She waved an arm in the direction the alarm clock would have been had she still been sleeping in her room at the Alternaut Academy. However, she had graduated a week earlier, and was now in her half-brother Davros’ smart apartment in Ottawa. There was no snooze button to hit here because the wakeup alarm was built into the furniture.

Davros was currently in Africa, trying to negotiate an intractable border dispute between Namibia and the Falklands Islands. And, of course, when I say intractable, I use the word in its original sense of ‘not being able to be ploughed because it cannot be driven over by a tractor.’ Really. Check page 237 of *Gorey’s Dictionary of Imaginary Words* if you don’t believe me. Davros allowed Noomi to stay in his Ottawa apartment for as long as he was traveling the world solving problems, which probably wouldn’t last beyond her third or fourth reincarnation.

“Why is Noomi flailing away with her arm like that?”

“Maybe she’s...dreaming of swimming?”

“Could she be dreaming she’s a windmill?”

“Maybe she’s dreaming she’s a paddlewheel boat.”

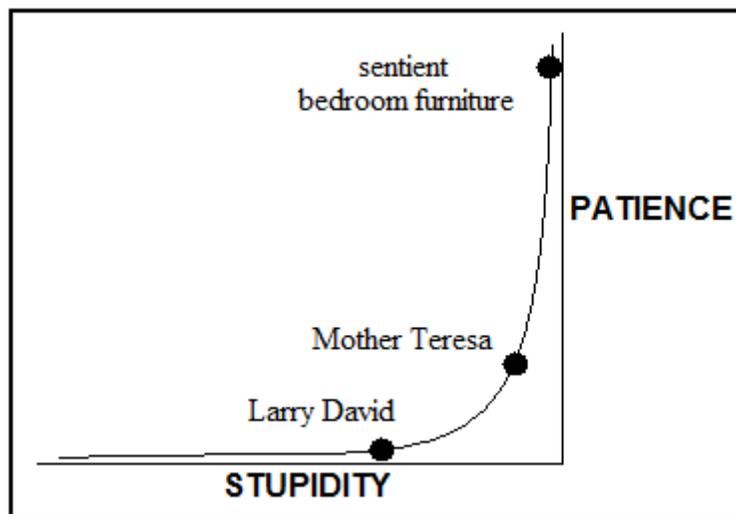
“Who dreams they’re a paddlewheel boat?”

“How should I know? I just queried the database for motions that could be mimicked by flailing one’s arms, and paddlewheel boat came up. Don’t tell me it didn’t come up for you.”

“It didn’t!”

“What search terms were you using?”

Noomi shot upright in the bed, as quickly as the beanstalk that Jack planted (which, scientists have calculated, must have grown at 2.57483 inches a second to have grown as high as the fairy tale claimed it did overnight). “Okay, who’s there?” she asked. She had done this every morning since she moved in; fortunately, the room had a near infinite capacity for patience (see Graph One).



Graph One

Asymptotic curve measuring increase in stupidity against
increase in patience. (SOURCE: *Useless Information Is
More Impressive In Visual Form*, P. Buggali, ed.)

“I’m the headboard of your bed,” said the headboard of her bed.

“I’m the foot of your bed,” said the foot of her bed.

“Congratulations! Today is the big day!”

“Yeah. Way to go.”

“You could say it with more enthusiasm.”

“Yeah, well, I would have had more energy if I hadn’t been forced to spend all
night accessing the Nature Channel!”

“It’s better than wasting our time with wrestling!”

“Uhh, guys -” Noomi tried to interject.

“Wrestling is entertainment! The Nature Channel is...homework!”

“Can I help it if I’m interested in the world?”

“Wrestling **is** the world! It’s got heroes! It’s got villains! It’s conflict at its most
primal!”

“Guys, seriously -”

“It’s not real!”

“WHAT?!”

“Wrestling is not real!”

“You...you...you take that back right now!”

Noomi dragged herself into the bathroom, leaving the cultural debate to the bed.

“Well, look what the cat modified with whale genes dragged in!” the mirror snarked at her.

“Yeah, yeah,” Noomi grumped back at it. “Everybody needs time to prepare for the day. Nobody wakes up ready to go.”

“Angelina Jolie’s 27 clones do.”

Noomi sighed. That was the bathroom mirror’s answer to everything. Boyfriend troubles? Angelina Jolie’s 27 clones all have perfect relationships with movie stars, sports stars, famous politicians, two ex-astronauts and an unemployed peanut farmer. War in the Middle East? Send Angelina Jolie’s 27 clones to the trouble spot, and they’ll have peace breaking out in no time. Not sure you believe in god? Spend some time with any of Angelina Jolie’s 27 clones and you’ll find the answer you seek. It had only been a week, and Noomi was already tired of it.

Noomi looked at herself in the mirror. She liked her smooth dark brown skin, the big, brown deceptively compassionate eyes, the way her sharp features radiated strength. Her hair was the sticking point of the deal. It defied physics. It looked like each strand had been placed at a 90 degree angle to every other strand. It wasn’t true, of course: if it had been, her hair would have had to exist in several thousand dimensional space. It was, however, one more example of scientific description capturing a poetic truth.

“You know, it would probably be a good idea to take your finger out of the light socket,” the mirror smirked. “Really. Any time, now.”

“Hunh,” Noomi half laughed, half grunted. Fully lunted. “You know, you have absolutely zero possibility of getting into any of Angelina Jolie’s 27 clones’ pants.”

“I don’t want to get into the pants of any of Angelina Jolie’s 27 clones!” the mirror screamed at her. “My love for Angelina Jolie’s 27 clones is pure and it will not be sullied by your disgusting thoughts!”

Noomi smirked through her entire shower.

“Boysenberry pancakes with chocolate covered ant sprinkles,” Noomi said as she tucked into breakfast. She was famished from her efforts to wrestle her hair into some semblance of normalcy. “How did you know they were my favourites?”

“I looked it up on your Facebook page,” the stove, without much enthusiasm, said.

“Something wrong?” Noomi asked.

“You really going to be leaving?” the stove asked back.

“I start my new job today,” Noomi explained between mouthfuls of fruity, chocolate covered insecty goodness. “I have to go.”

“We’ll miss you,” the stove simply stated.

Noomi felt like she had just kicked a puppy. A metallic puppy. That could burn the apartment down with its flames. But, a puppy nonetheless.

“I’ll be back tonight,” she pointed out.

“Really?” the stove perked up.

“Of course,” Noomi reassured it.

“Promise?” the stove happily insisted.

“I promise,” Noomi grinned.

“Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Oh, boy! I’ll make you something superspecial for dinner!” the stove told her.

“Thanks,” Noomi grinned. Uhh, even wider. It was nice to feel wanted, even if it was by a kitchen appliance.

* * *

Noomi got to Transdimensional Authority headquarters ten minutes before she was supposed to report to the front desk for assignment. She spent most of that time in the atrium, people in crisp black pants and white shirts (not unlike those she was wearing, in the sense that they were exactly like the ones she was wearing) and colourful vests rushing around her. It was like watching a kaleidoscope on heavy seas. Or, it would have been, if Noomi had been paying any attention to it; but her attention was riveted on the huge Dimensional Authority coat of arms set in the tiled floor.

The coat of arms depicted an eagle morphing into a sheep with a rocket in its talon and Blackberries in its paws. Above the animals were banners that flowed from green to blue to yellow to orange to red. Although they may have had some meaning before they were adopted by the Transdimensional Authority, they now represented the five branches within the organization. Various plants that only a botanist could love draped themselves around the animals.

Noomi had wanted to be a member of the Transdimensional Authority since she was a little girl. Some of her fondest memories were of the family gathered around the hi def computer screen in the wall of the den watching *Jack Ryan, Transdimensional Authority Police*. Her first blog was devoted to fan fiction of the series *CSI: Multiverse* and, when it was cancelled, she played the spin-off computer game endlessly. When she

was a little older, she graduated to the *Transdimensional Blues* series of games. Her favourite reading consisted of the novelizations of the film version of *Jack Ryan*, *Transdimensional Authority Police*. The pleasure she derived from playing with her Jack Ryan action figure made Barbie (who, after all, was only a doll - at best, an inaction figure) jealous. On Halloween, she went out dressed as a Transdimensional Authority Officer.

Okay, frankly, she was a little obsessed. Her parents worried. But, Noomi had gotten a job with the Transdimensional Authority, making her obsession work for her, and all had been forgiven.

After checking in at the front desk, Noomi was directed to a large but bland room. A dozen other people stood to attention in the room. They were all fire hydrants with limbs, dark glasses and buzzcuts, men with names like Bob Blunt or Barry Butts or Bill Blatt or Bobbo Bruit or Brett Blurp or Bart Bleet. They could have been clones, but she had been at the Alternaut Academy with many of them, and she knew they were not. What were the odds? (Actually, Barbara Brundtland-Govanni, Noomi's mentor at the Alternaut Academy, used to say that the odds of a universe developing the capability of sustaining life were extremely remote, so anything that you could imagine happening in such a universe was almost a certainty! She loved her mentor, but Noomi sometimes wondered if she spent more time in the spaces between universes than was, strictly speaking, healthy for a person.) Noomi took her place at the end of the line; she felt like the answer in a real life version of *Sesame Street*'s "One of These Things Is Not Like the Other" game.

Noomi realized that none of her confreres (literally: criminal brothers) from the Alternaut Academy had acknowledged her presence, but, before she could become indignant, a tall, lean man with a clipboard walked into the room. “My name is Sergeant R. Lee Ermey,” the man shouted. Over his crisp white shirt, he was wearing a red vest. He did not seem happy about it. “I will be giving you your vest assignments.,” he told the new recruits. Then, he started bellowing names off the clipboard.

Noomi thought of herself as a practical, down-to-earth, fairy tale and global-warming disbelieving kind of gal; she had to be to make it through the male-dominated Alternaut Academy. Yet, standing in this nondescript room with all of these nondescript men, she found herself...tingling with anticipation. She hadn't been this excited since Moulder Skully, who had played Jack Ryan in the TV series, came to her high school to talk about safe Home Universe Generator™ surfing! If Rod Blagorsopodd, her high school sweetheart, had excited her half as much, she might have married him. But, ahh, let us not spoil her proud moment with such sad memories - reality will do it soon enough.

“Rapier, Noomi!” Sergeant Ermey finally bellowed. Noomi stepped forward, and was handed a yellow vest.

Noomi looked at the garment with dismay. “No, wait,” she protested, “there must - this has to be a...a mistake!”

Sergeant Ermey looked at her like she was something icky that had just adhered to the underside of his ballet slippers. “We don't make mistakes,” he told her.

“But...but...but...” Noomi sputtered.

“We’re like that hat,” Sergeant Ermey calmly continued. “You know, the one that assigns kids to their houses in that magic story? We don’t make mistakes.”

“That’s crazy!” Noomi, finding her outrage, shouted. “I was first in my class at the Alternaut Academy! My investigative skills were praised by every instructor I had! I have a letter of recommendation from Barbara Brundtland-Govanni that all but demands that I be given a knighthood! Or, at least, a Nebula Award! I...I...I...” Noomi trailed off when she realized that the other newbies had started giggling.

“You finished?” Sergeant Ermey asked, sanguine.

“Uhh...yeah,” Noomi, humiliated, answered.

“Then, step back, please,” Sergeant Ermey ordered her.

Noomi stepped back.

“Rivera, Geraldo!” Sergeant Ermey bellowed.

* * *

Once the investiture ceremony had been completed, Noomi dejectedly went to the elevator and made her way to the seventh floor. As the doors opened, she was met by a brassy, sassy middle-aged redhead. Her hair was so red, it attracted bulls from miles around. It was so red, motorists half a dozen blocks away stopped in the middle of the street although they had no idea why. It was so red, bees tried to pollinate it (and were devastated when they could not - perhaps that’s why they were disappearing). The redness of the woman’s hair was a big hello to the world that sometimes left the woman breathless trying to keep up.

“Noomi Rapier?” the woman asked with a heavy east European accent and a light Mediterranean brunch.

“Yeah?” Noomi unenthusiastically responded.

“I’m Xenia Zaifman. You’ll be working under me.” Xenia led Noomi down a corridor, adding: “Well, I don’t mean you’ll be working under me – hierarchy is such an outdated, bourgeois concept, don’t you think? We’ll be working together. Of course, when decisions have to be made, I’ll be the one to make them - lord knows, everything would grind to a halt if we had to find consensus on every little matter. But, just because I’ll be making decisions, I don’t want you to think of me as your boss. Think of me as...a co-worker with privileges. Ah. Here we are...”

Xenia opened a door for Noomi and waved her into the room. “After you...”

Noomi walked into a large cubicle farm. It only took her a moment to notice: boobs. Everybody working in a cubicle had a pair. Noomi was not anatomically competitive with other women: some of the women had larger boobs than she did, some had smaller. Overall, although she was a little short, Noomi was well-endowed, curve-wise. No, her boob-consciousness came from another source.

“This is a secretarial pool!” Noomi blurted.

“Actually,” Xenia pointed out, “it’s the Data Collection and Interpretation and Technical Support branch of the Transdimensional Authority.”

“This is a secretarial pool,” Noomi corrected herself, “with a fancy title!”

“Well,” Xenia, a bit uncomfortably, responded, “a lot of us had that impression, at first, but, if you give us a chance, I think you’ll find -”

“I was top of my class at the Alternaut Academy!” Noomi lamented.

“So was Gillian,” Xenia told her.

“Hello,” a voice arose from behind a cubicle.

“Martina, Tuvola and Barbara-Kim were second in their class,” Xenia continued.

Noomi received more anonymous greetings.

Xenia sighed. “I was only fourth in my class,” she said. “A bit of a straggler, I’m afraid. Still, I worked hard and look at me now - I’m in charge! In a pseudo-democratic, I’m happy for everybody’s input even if I have to reject it and make the final decisions myself kind of way.”

“It’s not right!” Noomi protested. “With all of the intelligence in this room, we should be running the Transdimensional Authority!”

“What makes you think we don’t, dear?”

Finding Noomi at a loss for words, Xenia took her by the elbow and led her past the cubicles to a small boardroom. “We’ve produced a little orientation video for your viewing pleasure.”

“Orientation video?” Noomi gulped.

“You know. To help...orientate you.”

Noomi was about to point out that she had grown up with *Jack Ryan*, *Transdimensional Authority Police*, and, therefore, knew all she needed to know about the organization when she was 12 years old, but Xenia had already slipped out of the room and the lights had started to dim.

FADE IN:

EXT. PRAIRIES FIELD - DAY

Wheat. And, lots of it. Waving in the breeze.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

Wheat.

Cliché, Noomi thought.

EXT. TAR SANDS - DAY

The kaleidoscopic colours of slurry.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

Oil.

Another cliché, Noomi thought.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

A POLICE OFFICER (young, rugged) jumps out of a car with flashing lights on it, pulls his gun and aims it at SCUMBAG (young, scummy), who is running towards the camera. We can see the CN Tower in the background.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

Third-rate knock-offs of American
cultural artifacts.

POLICE OFFICER

Freeze, scumbag!

How long is this video? Noomi thought.

ANIMATION

A map of the world. Arrows originating in Canada grow until they are pointing all over the place (but, mostly, towards the United States).

NARRATOR

(voice over)

These have traditionally been
Canada's exports to the world.

They can't seriously expect me to spend a lot of time watching this drivel...can they? Noomi thought.

EXT. PRAIRIES FIELD - DAY

Burned out stalks of wheat. Lots of them. Waving limply in the breeze.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

But, what happens to our wheat
when global warming makes much
of our land no longer arable?

We eat cake? Noomi thought.

EXT. TAR SANDS - DAY

The slurry has reached a waterway.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

What happens when the oil runs
out?

We use cake to run our cars? Noomi thought.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

A Police Officer jumps out of a car with flashing lights on it, pulls his gun and aims it at Scumbag, who is running towards the camera. We can see the Empire State Building in the background.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

What happens when Hollywood,
suffering from a phobia of
originality, produces its own
third-rate knock-offs...with 10
times our budgets?

POLICE OFFICER

Freeze, scumbag!

We...uhh...we...nope. No cake jokes possible with this one, Noomi thought.

ANIMATION

The arrows pointing at places around the world (but mostly the United States) shrink back into Canada (the previous animation in reverse).

NARRATOR

(voice over)

What happens to our resource-
based economy when the resources
run dry?

Film...too...banal. Thinking...like...swimming...in...concrete... Noomi thought.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

People of diverse ethnic backgrounds and genders in white lab coats, many holding clipboards, stride purposefully through the lab. ZOOM IN: on a Dimensional Portal™ along the far wall.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

We find new resources, of
course. And, gosh darn if Canada

didn't do just that!

Transdimensional Space-Time!

Must...resist! Hobbes! Nietzsche! Seinfeld! Help...me! Noomi thought.

INT. HOSPITAL NURSERY - DAY

Newborns lie in cribs and incubators, being adorable all over the place.

NARRATOR

(voice over)

We here at the Transdimensional
Authority are making the
Multiverse safe...for the children.

In a small boardroom, no one can hear you groan. But, Noomi groaned anyway.

* * *

Forty-three minutes later, Xenia reappeared in the boardroom. "So, that's us," she chirped. "What did you think?"

"Ungh bidi bidi bidi brap brap!" Noomi croaked.

“Yes, a lot of our new recruits have that response to the orientation video,” Xenia assured her.

“Gagungen hinya hinya hey?” Noomi asked.

“Not to worry,” Xenia responded. “Your ability to form and articulate complex thoughts will return shortly. Shall we go to your workspace?”

“Baga...bahootiga...k.”

“See? You’re getting better already!”

Xenia took Noomi by the elbow once again (this habit was why her department had a rate of Repetitive Elbow Stress Syndrome that was 27 per cent higher than the Transdimensional Authority average) and walked her through the maze to a cubicle that was bare except for the necessities: a desk, a chair and a computer.

“Think of this,” Xenia enthused, “as your home away from home.”

“Do I geraff to?” Noomi grumped.

“I’ll assume that’s the orientation video talking,” Xenia cheerily chirped. “Give it a couple of months, and you’ll have this Personal Office Environment (POE) feeling like home. Now, let me show you how to log onto the system...”

Xenia set Noomi up with a password. Then, with a brassy sassiness that Noomi was beginning to resent like hell, Xenia opened several long files that outlined the different forms that the Transdimensional Authority used and the circumstances under which they were to be deployed. Long files. Waiting at the dentist for a root canal long. Listening to a Parliamentary debate on telecommunications policy long. Watching a Jim Jarmusch film long. Noomi settled in for a long day’s reading.

“Dahlink!” a voice quietly boomed some time in the afternoon, “How are you?”

Noomi looked up from the section on the document on how to file accident reports that dealt with hazardous waste spills across dimensions to see an aging bottle-blond head peeking over her cubicle wall.

“Been better,” Noomi told her.

“Furst day blues?” the woman stated. “We all have dem.”

“I graduated at the top of my class at the Alternaut Academy,” Noomi complained. “Top of my class. I was a better investigator than any Barry Butts or Bill Blatt! But, what did I get for all my effort? A yellow vest!”

“Dahlink, dat’s terribul!” the woman oozed sympathy. “What -”

Before she could get any further questions out, a voice from the end of the cubicles boomed, “INDIGO!”

“Have a good day, dahlink,” the woman grinned and disappeared.

A moment later, Xenia, slightly out of breath, appeared in the doorway of Noomi’s cubicle. “Uhh, Noomi, that woman,” Xenia asked, somewhat less chirpily than she had been, but making a game effort at it, “did you tell her anything?”

“N...no...?” Noomi, confused, replied.

“Good. Good. That’s alright, then,” Xenia said to herself.

She started to leave the cubicle when Noomi asked, “Who was she?”

Xenia turned back to face Noomi. “That was Indigo Haphazastance,” Xenia explained, “trolling the newbies, as usual. Indigo is a reporter for the *Alternate Reality News Service*. Bad news. Never talk to any of them - vipers. And, I mean that with all due respect. ARNS reporters are only happy when they can get somebody in trouble. Stay away from them. Of course, that’s not an order. It’s more like a piece of friendly advice

from one colleague, who has decision-making power, although she doesn't like to undermine democratic decision-making in the organization by exercising it, not in an arbitrary fashion, in any case, to another. A colleague who hasn't been around for very long and would be wise to accept the counsel of somebody who has, but in a purely non-hierarchical way. Understand?"

Noomi nodded. She hadn't said anything wrong...right?

Chapter Two:

Noomi Rises to the Level of Her Incompetence

The headboard was in a tizzy. “Ooh, she’s going to be so upset when we tell her.”

“So, let’s not tell her,” the foot of the bed responded.

“She should hear it from a friend.”

“Friend? We’re bedroom furniture!”

“Friendly bedroom furniture!”

“Speak for yoursel - rise and shine, sleepyhead!”

“Time to wake up and face the day!”

“Five minutes, k?” Noomi asked.

“You don’t want to be late for work.” the foot of the bed told her.

“Especially not today!” the headboard added.

Not catching the headboard’s implication, Noomi dragged herself out of bed and into the bathroom. She had only been living in her brother’s apartment for a week, and it was already a morning ritual.

“Well, hello,” the mirror snarked at her. “Did our Princess leave her tiara at the Wash ‘N’ Wear Launderette?”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Noomi responded, brushing her teeth with new and improved Dentadont 2300 (“Your complete home dental solutions system in a biodegradable tube!”).

“Be sure to spend more time in the shower than you usually do,” the mirror nastily advised. “You want to be squeaky clean today.”

“Why?” Noomi asked, knowing she was likely going to regret the answer.

“Oh,” the mirror coyly told her. “You’ll see.” As she took her shower, Noomi wondered how anybody could make coyness sound so cold-hearted.

“You’re back! You’re back! You’re back!” the stove shouted when she entered the kitchen. Noomi felt a pang of guilt: she had stayed late at the office reading documents, had eaten take-out from the Duke of Random pub and had crashed as soon as she had gotten home.

“I told you I would be,” Noomi gently said, pouring syrup on her pancakes. Rationally, she felt that she shouldn’t owe her kitchen stove an apology, and yet...

“I made your pancakes 27 per cent fluffier this morning,” the stove told her.

“Why?” Noomi asked.

“Oh...no reason...” the stove evasively answered.

Noomi was starting to get suspicious of the motives of the smart furniture in her apartment, but the pancakes - pineapple and asparagus - were delicious, so she spent the rest of the time before leaving for work discussing the finer points of degreasing heating elements with the stove.

* * *

How Do You Blow Out 27 Dimensional Candles?

by, INDIGO HAPHAZASTANCE Alternate Reality News Service

Transdimensional Traffic Writer

We want their fusion reactor technology; they want our bendy straws. We want their uranium; they want our used EEGs and EKGs. We want their funny looking action figures with five glowing appendages, realistic blowhole action and colourful costumes; they want our brains. Transdimensional trade has never been better.

And, on the 50th anniversary of its founding, we have the Transdimensional Authority (TA) to thank for that.

“Oh, Tosh,” said TA Secretary-Specific Nicodemius Fitzhuge. “Without the Transdimensional Authority, there would still be trade between universes. It would be dominated by shadowy, quasi-criminal organizations that would cut off your snottswazzle just as soon as look at you. It would deal in products that could only be sold in the shadows of the alleyways behind the eyes of inmates in asylums for the awkward. It would be difficult to tax. But, it would exist.”

Housed in a nondescript building in lovely, scenic Stittsville, a suburb of Ottawa, the Transdimensional Authority monitors all traffic between universes to ensure it is in compliance with the Treaty of Gehenna-Wentworth. Where violations are believed to occur, the TA sends its own investigators with full powers of interrogation and arrest. Part James Bond, part Professor John I.Q. Nerdelbaum Frink, Jr., Transdimensional Authority agents are true heroes.

“Oh, now, you’re just being silly,” Secretary-Specific Fitzhuge demurred. “Mostly, we make sure the Gygaxian Brood Guild doesn’t flood the Castonguay System with pirated copies of *Ghost Town*, thereby destroying the market in Ricky Gervais artifacts. Sure, we sometimes have to investigate anomalies in interdimensional traffic. But, they don’t happen that often. That’s why we call them anomalies.”

Security has been tight in the city of Toronto, which has been chosen to play host to the anniversary celebrations. “Oh, great,” Mayor Ryan Reynolds enthused. “Now Ottawa can screw us in 27 dimensions!”

Not everybody was as thrilled with the Transdimensional Authority as Mayor Reynolds. One recent employee - who asked for anonymity because she didn’t want to be fired on her first day on the job - complained, “I graduated at the top of my class at the Alternaut Academy. Top of my class. I was a better investigator than any Bobbo Bruit or Brett Blurp! But, what did I get for all my effort? A yellow vest!”

We’re not sure what that means, exactly, but her tone of voice suggested that it wasn’t good.

“Oh, pi-shaw!” Secretary-Specific Fitzhuge scoffed. “Nobody likes their first day on the job. You have to memorize new passwords, pretend to like new people who are clearly idiots and spend hours just to find out where the coffeemaker is, because, lord knows, everybody in the office has better things to do with their time than to tell you where the coffeemaker is! Still, the

Transdimensional Authority has a better first day suicide rate than the American Environmental Protection Agency, a record I am especially proud of!”

According to historian Oliver Stone, the 50th anniversary of the Transdimensional Authority is “as improbable a success story as putting a man on the moon or making Larry the Cable Guy popular.”

Canada developed the technology that allows people to travel between dimensions, Stone explained, and, despite the best efforts of successive governments and, let us not forget, the private corporations that owned patents on various aspects of the technology, to sell it to a foreign country, such a sale never happened. Thus, when Dimensional Warping™ technology opened up new frontiers in trade, Canada, much to everybody’s surprise, became an international powerhouse across dimensions.

“Of course, everybody knows that the whole reason for developing Dimensional Warping™ technology was to look into other dimensions to determine who really killed President Kennedy,” Stone stated. “I mean - no, wait - what did I say? No. That was wrong. That would be paranoid of me, and I am a respectable historian. What I meant to say was...was...CONGRATULATIONS TO THE TRANSDIMENSIONAL AUTHORITY FOR ITS WONDERFUL ACHIEVEMENT!”

“Oh, that Oliver Stone!” Secretary-Specific Fitzhuge stated. “He hasn’t written a great historical treatise since *Wall Street*, but we love that crazy paranoid bastard just the same!”

What can we look forward to in the next 50 years of the Transdimensional Authority? Secretary-Specific Fitzhugue was cagy in answering this question, but he did, finally come out with: “You know how everybody said we couldn’t find a basis for trading with the seven-dimensional gas giants of Omicron Crumbly? And, it turned out that they were willing to give us fusion energy in return for David Bowie’s entire back catalogue? The future of the Transdimensional Authority is going to be just like that, only squishier!”

* * *

While she waited for her computer to boot up, Noomi placed her first piece of personalization in her cubicle: a fridge magnet with an image of an adorable kitten sitting on a toilet with the caption: “This, too, shall pass.” Oh, kittens, is there no limit to the power of your adorableness? Unfortunately, her cubicle was not made of metal, so she had to tape the fridge magnet to the wall above her monitor. Noomi had barely started reading a description of the forms that have to be filled out to authorize sick leave for Transdimensional Authority agents who had crossed the Reality Threshold when Xenia appeared in her doorway.

“Noomi, sweetie,” Xenia chirped with an undercurrent of severe disapproval, “Your presence has been requested on the third floor.”

Noomi gulped. “The third floor?”

“You are to report to Alfredo Buttinsky in room 327,” Xenia told her. “Right away.”

“But,” Noomi protested, “I’m only halfway through the file on Reality Threshold claims.”

“The file will be here if you get back,” Xenia assured her.

So, Noomi went to room 327.

It was a small, impersonal office. Alfredo Buttinsky was the small, impersonal man sitting behind a small, impersonal desk. Over his crisp white shirt he wore the red vest of a Transdimensional Authority administrator. Somehow, he managed to make the corporate issue clothing seem small and impersonal. Buttinsky had such a serious look on his small, impersonal face that Noomi didn’t dare imagine him wearing ducky underwear under the table; she assumed it was standard crisp black pants. (Noomi found that imagining most people in their underwear was better at relieving her discomfort than imagining them naked because ewww!)

“Roomi Napier,” Noomi said, sticking her head in the door. “I mean, Noomi Rapier. You wanted to see me?”

“Ah, Napier,” Buttinsky said in a small, impersonal way. “Come in and have a seat.”

Noomi sat in an uncomfortably small, impersonal chair opposite Buttinsky. She was surprised to find that a large and nicely personable man sat in the chair next to her. He was wearing the blue vest of a senior Transdimensional Authority investigative agent. It matched his eyes magnificently. Noomi knew that she should probably be concerned that a TA investigator was sitting in the room with her - she hadn’t done anything that required investigation...had she? - but...oooooooh, those eyes!

Buttinsky looked for papers on his desk to shuffle because he had seen one too many movies where people in positions of authority shuffled papers on their desks in order to increase the discomfort of their underlings, and he had learned that shuffling papers on your desk really does increase the discomfort of underlings. Unfortunately, the Transdimensional Authority was a leader in the paperless office movement. After a few seconds, Buttinsky started randomly typing characters into his computer, hoping that the people sitting across the desk from him would notice. They did, of course, but neither felt in a position to comment.

The tension in the room was so thick, you could cut it with a knife, place it on a fork and pop it into your mouth. Of course, raw tension doesn't taste very good and can make you sick if you are a child, old, infirm or of Swedish ancestry; in any case, you'd look pretty silly cutting the air. I prefer to cook my tension. To give you a sense of what I'm talking about, here is one of my favourite tension recipes (taken from *The Literary Metaphor Cookbook*, by Irma Brokeback):

TENSION BOUILLABAISSE

Ingredients

5 c. of tension from a moderately to highly tension-filled room

3/4 lb. of fresh shrimp - peeled and deveined

5 lb. of sea bass

3/4 lb. of mussels - cleaned and debearded

2 sliced onions
2 sliced leeks
1 cup of moral outrage
3 tomatoes - peeled, seeded and chopped
4 cloves of minced garlic
1/2 c. freshly minted disgust
1 sprig of fennel leaf
1 sprig of fresh thyme
1 bay leaf
1 tsp. of orange zest
3/4 c. of olive oil
1 pinch of saffron threads
5 c. of boiling water

Instructions

Add some oil to a large pan over medium flame. Sauté the onions, leeks, chopped tomatoes, garlic and moral outrage; cook for several minutes, letting veggies get tender. Then add fennel, thyme, bay leaf, orange zest and freshly minted disgust. Next, add the shellfish and the tension to boiling water and stir. Raise the heat for 3 minutes, then add the fish and reduce to medium, letting it cook approximately 12-15 minutes. Salt to taste. Feeds 20 people with small appetites, or four people with normal appetites. (But, in a

room full of enough tension to make the dish in the first place, expect people to have small appetites.)

“Naomi Rapier?” Buttinsky finally looked up and said.

“Noomi?” Noomi gently corrected him.

“I beg your pardon?”

“My name is Noomi. It rhymes with...gloomy. Or...or, Gitchigoomie.”

“Right,” Buttinsky responded, making a small, impersonal gesture with his left hand. “Needless to say, nobody was happy with the quote you gave the Alternate Reality News Service yesterday.”

“The quote was anonymous,” Noomi pointed out. “How could anybody trace it back to me?”

“How many people who graduated at the top of their class at the Alternaut Academy do you think we hired yesterday?” Buttinsky asked. In its own small, impersonal way, the question was actually quite sarcastic.

“Erm,” Noomi responded. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the lips of the man sitting next to her curl ever so slightly upwards.

“So, if you would be so kind as to hand me your vest...” Buttinsky demanded.

“I...I’m being...divested?” Noomi asked in disbelief.

“Please.”

Noomi reluctantly took off her yellow vest. How reluctantly? It took her ten minutes just to undo the top button. Buttinsky pretended to check his Twitter feed while

she was doing this; the man in the blue vest sitting next to her seemed indifferent to her plight.

As she was working on the second button, Buttinsky impatiently said, “Okay, look. If it were up to me, we would have taken the vest off of you forcibly and had you thrown out of the building. You made the Transdimensional Authority look bad. Have you not read the Ten Demandments?”

“Yes, sir, I have,” Noomi stopped fiddling with the middle button and responded.

“You certainly didn’t act like it. So, to recap: Naomi talks out of turn, embarrasses service. Ordinarily, I would take great pleasure in busting you to nothing. But, as it happens, you have friends in high places.”

“I do?”

“You do, indeed,” Buttinsky, chagrined, told her. “Your friend Barbara had a little chat with Secretary-Specific Fitzhugue, who had a little chat with Director Mentalbaum, who had a little chat with Chief of Operations Slough-Loerner - there were, in fact, ‘little chats’ 12 links down the chain of command, until I was finally given my own little chat. By little chat, I mean, of course, 20 minute lecture, in apoplectic - or, possibly, apocalyptic - I can never tell the difference - tones on the proper assignment of female graduates of the Alternaut Academy who were first in their class. So, it was suggested - loudly and most insistently - that I give you this.”

Buttinsky opened a drawer in his desk and removed a green vest. Green! The colour of Transdimensional Authority junior investigators! Noomi removed her yellow vest and put the green vest on faster than the half-life of a charged pion!

Ignoring the fact that Noomi was hugging the vest to her chest and rocking ever so slightly, Buttinsky continued, waving a hand at the man sitting in the chair next to her: “This is Transdimensional Authority Investigator Crash Chumley. You will be partnering with him until further notice.”

Noomi turned to give her new partner a hug, saw the mildly disapproving look on his face and kept her arms to herself. For a man with such beautiful blue eyes, Investigator Chumley seemed to be rather...dour. Gloomy, really. Downright glum. With a touch of severity. But...oooooooh, those eyes!

* * *

In the first decade of the Transdimensional Authority’s existence, Multiverse travel on official business was wild and westerly. In the second decade of the Transdimensional Authority’s existence, the sheriff and the school marm moved in, and a set of rules governing TA agent behaviour slowly codified (which is not to say that it became a fan of food fish - the other definition of the word). This came to be known as the Ten Demandments. This name was chosen because the Ten Commandments had already been copyrighted by the estate of Cecil B. Demille and, in any case, the term could be considered blasphemous in this context. Why Demandments? Why go all Biblish on Transdimensional Authority employees? These days, with so much information promiscuously parading about like a Vixen in a Russ Meyer flick, you have to be emphatic just to get people’s attention.

The Ten Demandments

1. It isn't an alternate reality. It isn't *their* universe. It is their home. Respect it.

Remember: in other universes, **you** live in the alternate reality!

2. Alien species have a right to develop their own laws, customs and hair grooming technologies. Do not under any circumstances interfere with the development of alien cultures. Unless circumstances force you to, in which case, go for it.

3. Information is sacred. Not, we hasten to add, in a way that would threaten anybody's deistic beliefs; more in the sense that it is the lifeblood of the organization. Not, we hasten to add, in a way that would threaten anybody's medicalistic beliefs, either. Look, we're trying to tell you that information is really, really, really, really, really important, and that's five reallys, so you know we're serious. Treat information with five reallys of respect.

4. Towels? Really? Towels are for Alternauts who have no tolerance for proper bed linens!

5. Moonlighting is discouraged. Transdimensional Authority investigators who do moonlight must get to the scene of a crime within 30 minutes of taking the call, or the pizza is free.

6. When interfacing with the public in an official capacity, identify yourself as an agent of the Transdimensional Authority. When not, don't. To take just one example where the boundary seems to have blurred: do not write at the bottom of your tax return: "I am a ferking member of the Transdimensional Authority, jerkwad! If you do not accept the cleaning bill for getting Antropian camgoose spit out of a leather jacket as a business expense, I will make life miserable for you across 27 dimensions!" Not only is such behaviour against Transdimensional Authority rules, but it's really tacky.

7. The Transdimensional Authority is a quasi-arm's length public-private-porcupine enterprise whose purpose is to maintain orderly transdimensional traffic. You may be tempted to enter into an economic treaty with a new species. **Resist this temptation!** That would leave diplomats with nothing to do, and they will get jealous. Trust us, nobody wants to deal with an emotional diplomat protecting his turf.

8. Write reports of your activities in a timely fashion. Nobody likes to write reports; well, nobody with a life likes to write reports. Yes, we're looking at you, Buford Buffalonitz! Still, a record of Transdimensional Authority activities will both give your descendents something to talk about and remind payroll that you exist. If you do not fill out the proper forms on time, you will have to fill out forms explaining why you didn't fill out the first forms. If you do not fill out this second set of forms in a timely fashion, you will have to fill out a third set of forms. Many a good Transdimensional Authority agent has been lost in this Eternally Recursive Paperwork Loop - **don't let this happen to you!**

9. The first rule of Transdimensional Authority is that you never talk about Transdimensional Authority. The Second Rule of Transdimensional Authority is that you never talk about Transdimensional Authority. When you embarrass the Transdimensional Authority, you embarrass yourself. The Transdimensional Authority is a big boy - it can take it. Can you?

10. Eat lots of fruit. You'll thank us for this one later.

Excerpt from *The Field Manual for Transdimensional Authority Employees, Fifth Edition*, Karl Rorschach, ed.

* * *

The layout on the fourth floor (Investigations) was very different from that on the seventh floor (Go Back A Few Pages If You Have Already Forgotten). Where there were dividers on the seventh floor to isolate people in order to get the maximum amount of work out of them, the fourth floor had an 'open air' design that seemed to exist to get the maximum amount of horseplay out of the people who worked there. This immediately ceased when the elevator doors opened and Investigator Chumley walked out with Noomi.

Noomi, aware that all eyes were upon her, quietly asked, "Is it usually this quiet in here?"

“There hasn’t been a female investigator in a couple of years,” Investigator Chumley told her. “I’m not sure they remember what species you are.”

Noomi didn’t give this a second thought. After all, she was just so gosh-darned happy to be there.

“Let me make some introductions,” Investigator Chumley told Noomi. Clearing his throat, he loudly said, “Everybody, this is the latest addition to our team, Noomi Rapier. She will be working with me. Noomi, over there is Bert Battson.”

“Hey, Noomi,” a voice belonging to a fire hydrant with limbs, dark glasses and a buzzcut said from the other side of the room.

“Hey, Bert,” Noomi responded.

“This is Barack Boatswain,” Investigator Chumley pointed to a man sitting closer to them.

“Welcome to the monkey house,” another fire hydrant with limbs, dark glasses and a buzzcut said.

“Oh, ah, thanks,” Noomi replied.

“Then, we have Brett Blurp,” Investigator Chumley stated.

“Oh, I know Noomi Rapier,” Blurp said with a nasty laugh. At the Alternaut Academy, Blurp had put a VasGenDric Delusionary Scorpion in Noomi’s bed; it took doctors three days to convince her that she wasn’t the king of generic medication.

“Good to see you made it,” Noomi cheerfully told him. Blurp, not expecting that reaction, coughed up his coffee with its custom-made blend of 27 different herbs and spices.

Investigator Chumley, noticing the interplay, continued, “You probably know Barry Butts?”

Oh, Noomi knew Barry Butts. He had hacked into her Facebook account and posted pictures of a teenaged Barbara Brundtland-Govanni in a blue-bottomed bikini that he had found on the *Wayback Machine*. That caused much consternation at the Alternaut Academy for several days, and put a slight dent in Noomi’s relationship with her mentor, until the truth had been uncovered. Unfortunately, Butts was a legacy student - his father, Babalonium Butts, was Ambassador to the Gackle Substrate of Earth Prime 5-8-3-7-2-4 dash theta - so his discipline consisted of attending 20 hours of seminars on “Gender construction in the novels of Louisa May Alcott and Brett Easton Ellis.”

“Hi, Barry. Looking good,” Noomi enthusiastically told him.

“Uhh, yeah, Noomi” Butts warily responded, almost blushing behind his dark glasses. “Thanks.”

“Others are out working cases,” Investigator Chumley told Noomi. “We can do more introductions when they’re around.”

Noomi beamed. What a swell bunch of guys!

“So,” Investigator Chumley said after everybody went back to their business, “We have this orientation video -”

“I’ve seen it,” Noomi, still beaming, said.

Uneasy with this unexpected ray of sunshine, Investigator Chumley continued, “Each department has its own orientation video.”

“Oh,” Noomi said, her beam not faltering at all. “Do I...have to watch it?”

“I could, uhh, give you a DVD,” Investigator Chumley allowed. “You could watch it at your leisure - as long as your leisure occurs within the next 48 hours.”

“Sure,” Noomi agreed.

Investigator Chumley led Noomi to her desk. She beamed at it. “So, what now?” she asked. “Do we track down Hibernian glouck pelt smugglers? Maybe bust a counterfeit Smurfs operation?”

Investigator Chumley almost smiled. Somebody had watched too much *Jack Ryan, Transdimensional Authority Police* when she was a youngster! He said, “Now, we grab a coffee and wait for an assignment.”

“We grab a coffee?” Noomi asked.

“Hey!” Barry Butts shouted. “If you’re going for a coffee, can you get me one?”

“And, me!” Brett Blurp shouted.

“Well, if you’re already going...” Bert Battson, who didn’t know Noomi at the Alternaut Academy, politely shouted.

“Yeah, sure,” Noomi responded. “Let me get a pen and paper.” She decided that she could afford to be a good sport about the coffee. After all, she...she was just so gosh-darned glad to be there! Right?