

WEATHER REPORT

a novel

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WEATHER REPORT: A NOVEL

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WEATHER REPORT

I

Wilson Wigham dressed like lightning and drove like the wind, on the way enjoying neither his crusty brown morning muffin nor the golden shimmer of Lake Michigan's western waters. You can get away with a lot of things in live television, but first you have to show up. You can't get away with anything if you don't show up.

And Wilson knew he had gotten away with a couple of things. He had been late before and had gotten away with it. That was one thing. It's just a one-time thing, he had said, which sounded reasonable and so he had gotten away with it. The other thing was a more permanent thing, and the station had overlooked it from the very beginning.

See, Wilson had a middle name. It wasn't the kind of middle name that a mother gives you, but the kind that your

classmates in grade school bestow upon you. Wilson's middle name was The Walrus. Wilson "The Walrus" Wigham. This had nothing to do with Lewis Carroll or John Lennon, and had everything to do with the simple fact that Wilson sort of looked like a walrus. He had girth that competed with his height, and two front teeth that could pass for short blunt tusks. The goatee he had grown during his days at the University of Wisconsin suited him, but hadn't escaped the notice of his hometown crowd when he returned to Sheboygan to take the job as daytime weatherman for KWQT, Sheboygan's only independent television station.

Of course, it said something about the Keller family that Wilson had landed the job. It was not so much a protest against modern American media's insistence that television reporters have personal trainers and good dentists, but more like a lack of protest to Kathryn Keller's insistence that Wilson get the job.

Kathryn and Wilson had been together since the beginning. Even before the beginning, if you consider puberty to be the beginning. They had dated all the way through school, and after they both got accepted to college in Madison, to the University of Wisconsin's flagship campus, they had been together for most of the four-to-six years of that phase of life.

But when you're with someone from the beginning, or really, from before the beginning, then it's hard to know if you've ever been in love with them or simply just been with them. And at some point during that four-to-six-year phase, Wilson and Kathryn had started to ask themselves, and each other, that very question: How do we know if we're in love (or have ever been in love) with each other? Shouldn't we be

comparing it to something? Shouldn't we be comparing each other to some other? Wouldn't it only be then that we'd know?

Madison is a smart and self-conscious city with a lot of very bright young and old people packed together in a wonderfully isolated space in what is very much the center, in every sense of the word, of the United States of America. And these smart questions of self-consciousness seemed appropriately central to Wilson and Kathryn during that wonderfully isolated four-to-six year phase of life.

And so they split up, all the while remaining friends, all the while talking about their experiences with others, all the while assuring each other and themselves that they were doing the appropriately smart and responsible and adult thing, all the while believing that love was exactly what they had suspected it was but feared it wasn't.

Of course, they were wrong. Love is a funny thing that isn't always the same thing at the same time, even for the same people. And so Kathryn married a Keller and became Kathryn Keller, and Wilson shrugged and sat on the bride's side at the wedding and grew a goatee.

Wilson wasn't broken or angry or sad, but Kathryn assumed he was all those things, and so even though they hadn't been in close contact since the wedding, when she heard he was looking for a job in television broadcasting, she made him a job by insisting that KWQT needed more than one person reporting on the weather. And so began the mildly popular morning segment *The Walrus on the Weather*.

But now the Walrus was late again. What made it worse was that they probably wouldn't even yell at him, let alone threaten to fire him. This was Sheboygan, after all. Every-

one remembered Kathryn and the Walrus. Their past wasn't a secret, and no one thought it should be. The arrangement wasn't inappropriate, and no one thought it to be. The husband Keller had known Wilson since the beginning, even though they hadn't swum in the same circles. The husband Keller had also known about Kathryn and the Walrus, and it was no big deal, not least because it seemed to be no big deal to either Kathryn or Wilson.

And it wasn't a big deal. Kathryn rarely came to the studio, and certainly not at sunrise, which was when *The Walrus on the Weather* broadcast. She did watch the segment though, and often sent Wilson her thoughts and suggestions. Her feedback was always positive, not so much out of niceness or guilt, but because, well, because Wilson was really quite good. To have even a mildly successful pre-dawn weather segment these days means something. After all, anyone who cares about the weather that early in the morning already knows what the weather is going to be like at that time. No, people weren't tuning in to learn about the weather, they were tuning in to see the Walrus.

Girth, tusks, and goatee notwithstanding, Wilson wasn't an unpleasant sight. They say that others will eventually see you in the way you see yourself, and Wilson saw himself as somewhat of a hero. Not a hero in the obvious way, but a hero in a personal way, a hero to himself. He took his work very seriously, but with the kind of seriousness that emerged as comical excessiveness. It harmonized well with his physical excessiveness, and the resulting package was in effect quite interesting.

Wilson knew this, and he used this. He knew his weath-

er reports should never be about the weather. In fact, Wilson didn't know very much about the weather, and he didn't waste a lot of time worrying about it. He had of course read about meteorology, and he had also audited a couple of classes at Madison during his sixth year there, which was why he didn't waste a lot of time worrying about actually forecasting the weather. Wilson had quickly understood that predicting the weather was all about probabilities, which meant that weather was inherently and necessarily unpredictable. After all, if over a twenty-four hour period the average weather report has only a fifty percent chance of being one hundred percent accurate, then why bother?

Which is not to say that Wilson didn't bother. He did. He did it for the farmers, he would say. This was Wisconsin, and there were still farms and farmers in Wisconsin. His parents weren't farmers, and Wilson didn't actually know any farmers, but still, everyone knows that Wisconsin has farms, farms have farmers, and farmers worry about the weather. Of course, no one at KWQT, not even Wilson, thought that Wisconsin's farmers relied on the Walrus for their farming plans.

And this was exactly why Wilson focused his segment on farms, farmers, and farming. The common knowledge that no farmer cared about what the Walrus had to say was what gave the show its life. It also allowed Wilson to simply make up everything. Some of what Wilson said made sense, but only by coincidence. Once, when no one was expecting hail, he spoke at length about the impact of hail on the blueberry crop before stating that no hail was to be expected. He was known for advocating the replacement of potato crops with garlic fields for no other reason than his clearly stated

belief that it was the only way to ensure the continuation of Wisconsin's recent history of voting Democrat.

Wilson was in fact serious about voting Democrat. Not because he was particularly opposed to Republicans (he wasn't), and not because he had majored in political science at Madison (he had), but because he had been named after Woodrow Wilson (a Democrat), his mother's favorite president. Wilson (our Wilson, not the president) had often asked Mother Wigham about this, but she couldn't remember why Woodrow was the favorite. He just was. It was a Wigham family tradition, and it was not to be questioned. Wilson's best guess was that the truth lay somewhere between three facts: the Wighams were of English descent; Wisconsin was predominantly German; Woodrow Wilson took the United States into World War I. Given America's history of anti-German sentiment around that time, Wilson (our Wilson, not the president), thought it best to let the truth lie where it lay.

But right now the only truth that mattered to Wilson was his looming lateness. It worried him a lot, and it upset him greatly. Remember, Wilson took himself seriously. He saw himself as a hero in some small little way. He knew he could take advantage of his standing as the Walrus, as Kathryn's Walrus, to get away with being late, and that's why it pained him to appear to be doing so.

And so he drove like lightning and his car screeched like the wind as he spun the little blue Honda hatchback into the television station's parking lot. He tumbled out of the car and hurtled in through the red double-doors of KWQT's façade. When inside, he stopped for just an instant and

touched his goatee and straightened his 1950s-style eyeglasses and wrapped his brownish-green trenchcoat about him like a cape. Then he sprung back into purposeful motion and burst into the studio's interior room.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Diane. I don't know what to say. I hate putting you guys in this position." Wilson spoke fast but clearly, like a television reporter who took his job and his deadlines seriously.

Diane was a producer. The producer, actually. KWQT was a small outfit, and it only needed one producer. One producer, and two weathermen. Two weathermen. That really did say something about the Keller family, and of Kathryn's place in it.

"Meh. No biggie," said Diane. She meant it.

"Did you play a rerun?" This was what Diane had done the one other time Wilson had been late.

"No. We put through an old segment on hurricanes. We had it cheap for unlimited recasts from the Weather Channel."

"Hurricanes?"

"Yes. People like hurricanes."

"People like hurricanes?"

"Yes." Diane nodded. She meant it.

Wilson understood, but he didn't like it. People shouldn't like hurricanes, he thought. But he understood, and so he said nothing. Instead he just looked at Diane and rubbed his goatee. As the skin on his chin moved up and down, a short blunt tusk showed itself, and this made Diane smile.

"Go home, Wilson. Don't worry about today. It's no biggie." Diane smiled meaningfully.

2

The next morning Wilson was up before the sun. His little room was dark, but still bright in a way. Wilson smiled at the ceiling and quickly took to the floor, moving across it like a large creature sliding effortlessly over a correspondingly large and reasonably slippery surface. Arriving at the bathroom, the Walrus cleaned and groomed, and soon he was in the feeding area carefully unwrapping his freshly microwaved brown muffin. The crust was hot and delicious, and Wilson almost laughed as he gleefully checked his goatee for crumbs.

Wilson lived alone in a little apartment on the east side of Sheboygan. The apartment was in a little building made up of many little apartments, most of which were unoccupied. His parents were alive and well, but were doing their living in a southern state which offered warm unchanging weather and low stable home prices. They had sold their Sheboygan

home before leaving for that state. All of this had simply saved Wilson the awkwardness of telling his parents (whom he loved) that he loved them but still wanted to live alone in a little apartment on Sheboygan's east side. All in all, it had worked out very well indeed.

And so Wilson felt nice and whole as he entered his little blue Honda hatchback and turned it out into the dark morning. He drove from the east to the north, all the while hugging the banks of Lake Michigan, which was changing color in response to the approaching dawn. Soon he was at the television station and, since he was not late, he walked in slow and smooth, taking care to use only one of the red double-doors of the station's façade. His cape was flowing ever so gently behind him as he entered, and a little chill of raging excitement and anticipation burned up along his back until he could feel the tingle in every follicle on his thick walrus-like head. Today is special, he thought. Something starts today.

Diane started over to him and stopped a few centimeters away from his left tusk.

"It's Saturday," she said.

Wilson knew she meant it, and immediately he felt the tingles leave his follicles, each little spark scrambling over the next in a mad rush to descend back into the depths of its origin.

"Oh," he said.

"Wait for fourteen minutes," she said. "Then I'll buy you some breakfast."

"I ate a muffin earlier."

"Then wait for fourteen minutes and come watch me eat."

“Okay.”

Wilson waited, all the while standing, for fourteen minutes while Diane ran the morning production meeting. Saturdays were slow at the station, and Sundays were dead. Weekend television is all about live sports on the big channels, and the Kellers had wisely decided to fill those hours with cheap fillers. There was no KWQT original programming on the weekends. No *Walrus on the Weather* on Saturday or Sunday.

Wilson was troubled by his two recent mistakes, but not too much. This second one was not so bad of a mistake, and if two data points could form a pattern (they can't), the pattern would only suggest that things were getting better.

Seventeen minutes later, Wilson and Diane walked across the street and into the almost-empty parking lot of Perkins. The place was almost empty, but it smelled full, and Wilson thought maybe he could eat another muffin.

Now Wilson, girth and middle name notwithstanding, was not a particularly big eater. He had never been a big eater, a fact that surprised anyone who ate with him. There was really no explanation for his girth, except, perhaps, his middle name. After all, despite its girth, you can't call a walrus fat.

Wilson ordered a brown muffin and Diane asked for several pancakes. The muffin came almost immediately, and Wilson immediately sent it back to be microwaved and then brought out along with the pancakes. All this was done in an exceedingly polite yet informal manner. Wilson had a way with such things and such people, and his excessive yet genuine manner coupled nicely with his excessive but not unpleasant appearance to create an altogether interesting and acceptable overall situation.

Diane smiled at Wilson as they looked at each other across the table. This was not a romantic occasion for either of them, and neither the smile nor the looks were construed as such by either party. It was, however, mildly unusual for Wilson and Diane to be looking at each other from opposite sides of a table at Perkins while Saturday's sun came up over Lake Michigan. At first Wilson chalked up the strangeness to it being Saturday, but then, as Diane's smile changed form, he wondered which way the wind would blow.

"Hurricanes," she said with a smile.

"Yes," said Wilson. "I've heard of them."

"People like them."

"Yes. I've heard that."

"Can you do a segment on hurricanes next week?"

Wilson thought for a moment, but then remembered one of his rules: if you have to think about it, the answer's probably yes.

"Yes," he said.

"Great." Diane smiled again.

The pancakes arrived and the muffin was delivered alongside. Everyone smiled, and breakfast was on. They buttered, poured, cut, and crumbled, and soon the neat little Perkins table looked like a disaster area.

"Actually," said Diane, "what I meant was, can you do hurricanes for all of next week?"

"Five days of hurricanes?"

"Yes. Five."

Wilson drew a deep breath, taking a single strand of goatee hair into his mouth. He let his tongue play with the tiny hair for just a little while, and then he swallowed it (the hair).

"Is that okay? Will you do it?"

"Five days of hurricanes?"

"Yes, five."

"Would that get a little old?"

Diane shrugged. "People like hurricanes. People wrote to us after yesterday's Weather Channel filler. They said they liked hurricanes. All the e-mails said that."

"Yes, well, but wouldn't only the people who like hurricanes write and say that? I mean, if you didn't care much for hurricanes, or maybe even just found them mildly interesting, you wouldn't write in to say so, would you?"

"I suppose not."

The table was now clear, and Wilson and Diane rose up and approached the cashier's station. The cashier was also the waitress, and they had to wait for her.

"But will you do it?"

"I'm afraid it'll get old. Five days is a lot."

"Well, the idea is you'd do five different hurricanes."

"The idea?"

"Yes."

"Whose idea?"

"Ms. Keller's. It was Ms. Keller's idea."

Now this meant something. There were only two living female Kellers. One was Ms. Keller, and the other was Mrs. Keller. The latter was the mother Keller, and the former was Kathryn. So Kathryn had asked Diane to ask Wilson to do five days of hurricanes.

"Five different hurricanes?" said Wilson.

"Yes. One for each day. Will you do it?"

Wilson didn't stop to think. "Yes," he said.

3

That night Wilson was sad. It was not because of Kathryn or because of his recent mistakes or because he had been asked to do five days of hurricanes because of Kathryn and that recent mistake. No, Wilson was sad because of the hurricanes. Diane had said people liked hurricanes, but it wasn't as simple as that. People don't like any old hurricane. They only like the ones that kill people. Fair enough, thought Wilson, you can't tell people what they should or shouldn't like. If they liked killer hurricanes, then that's what the Walrus would serve. And since the Walrus didn't really know very much about hurricanes, he started to learn about them. Not about all of them, just about the ones that killed people.

Now Wilson's sadness began to make him feel less sad. See, Wilson saw himself as an entertainer and a hero, and this self-image went well with the tiny bit of sadness he felt

as he read about the people killed by hurricanes. After all, a hero is defined by the sacrifices he makes, and so Wilson thought he could stand to feel a little sad if it allowed him to entertain people for five days the following week.

Neither Kathryn nor Diane had imposed any further parameters around Wilson's hurricane segments. They knew he was good, and so they trusted him. The Walrus had always come through, although this was, to be sure, somewhat of an unusual assignment.

And so Wilson read and thought and watched and listened as he learned about the hurricanes that had killed people. Then he made a list of the five hurricanes that had killed the most people. That seemed logical, he thought. If people were interested in hurricanes that killed people, then people would be most interested in the hurricanes that killed the most people. So he made his list and looked at it and immediately he became worried.

Four of his five had occurred on the eastern side of the Indian subcontinent, around the Bay of Bengal, a salty watering hole bordered on three sides by India, Bangladesh, and Burma. This worried Wilson. Would people in Wisconsin be entertained by four days of banter about hurricanes that killed hundreds of thousands of Indians, Bangladeshis, and Burmese? Wilson's worry wasn't focused on the average Wisconsinite's lack of concern for such peoples—indeed, Wilson had no doubt that the average Wisconsinite was as, and possibly more, concerned about the average Indo-Bangla than the average Burmese was about the regular Sheboyganite. Of course, Wilson didn't blame the Bengali Indians—after

all, if hundreds of thousands of your neighbors were getting blown away by hurricanes every year, why would you care about what was happening on the shores of Lake Michigan? You wouldn't, and that wouldn't be your fault.

Still, Wilson's worry grew until it was a sizable ball of something that could almost be touched. Was there a way out? Should he adjust his logic and do five days of American killer hurricanes? But Katrina, as terrible and deadly as she was, had been done. Wilson knew he couldn't do Katrina any better than anyone else had done it. There were others, but if you had to do five days of killer hurricanes, was it right to ignore the deadliest of the killers?

And so Wilson dropped his ball of worry somewhere along the shores of Lake Michigan as he stood by and watched some fishermen bring their boats back home. He nodded to himself and began to smile as he felt a surge of heroic energy pulsate through his central girth. He would do it. The worst five in reverse order. The worst, but starting with the best of them.

Sunday came and went and Wilson hardly noticed. He was thinking about howling winds and screaming rain with trees groaning and windows crashing and some people dying and other people not dying. He read something about hot air meeting cold air and low pressure swirling around high pressure, but all that bored him. It didn't ring true, even though Wilson didn't think it was a lie. It just seemed like something was missing. If a killer hurricane formed because hot air met cold air and low pressure swirled around high pressure, then what caused the hot air to clash with cold air

and low pressure to twirl through high pressure? No. Something was missing.

Wilson stood up and backed away from the little kitchen table which was his home office. He went to the window, but it was shut. Instead of opening it, he went to his bedroom and got under the covers and made a sound that no walrus should ever make. At three in the morning, the Walrus emerged from his cave and went back into the bright little kitchen and simply picked up where he had dropped off.

As he made notes about the killer hurricanes from best of the worst to the worst of the five, he noticed something. If not for his training in political science, he might not have thought it odd. But as things were, he was a well-trained political animal, and he indeed noticed the odd pattern. And so, well before the sun was up, Wilson was out and about, screaming through the black morning in his little blue Honda hatchback. He was ready for the week.

4

The week, however, was not so ready for the Walrus. By the time he got to number three (Wednesday), the calls and letters had started to pour in. Diane had ignored the three calls on Monday, shrugged off the eleven Tuesday e-mails, and might have done something similar with the fifty-seven pieces of Wednesday's correspondence if one of the calls hadn't been from Ms. Keller.

"Diane," said Kathryn over the phone.

"Yes, Ms. Keller."

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes, of course. What do you mean?" Diane knew what Kathryn meant.

"I mean Wilson. Is he all right?"

Diane was silent.

“Diane?”

“Yes?”

“Wilson.”

“Yes . . .”

“Is he all right? Is Wilson all right?”

Diane sighed.

“I’m coming down there,” said Kathryn.

“No,” said Diane. “I can handle it. I’ll handle Wilson.”

“Are you sure? I feel like it’s my fault. I feel responsible, you know?”

“Yes. I mean no. I mean, I know what you mean. Let me handle it.”

“Okay, Diane.”

“Okay then.”

Diane hung up and looked down at the dark studio floor. It was late in the morning, and Wilson was long gone. Just as well, thought Diane. She wasn’t prepared to handle Wilson quite yet. She wasn’t sure what to say to him. But she’d have to say something. Something would have to be said before Thursday morning. But what? She sighed and went to her office and flipped on her private monitor and began to study Wilson’s first three segments.

Monday had been okay. Strange, but okay. Wilson had spent much of his slot talking about the political history of India, of all places. Something about a British trading company doing business in India, and then the company getting so big that it simply took over the country and claimed it as a possession of the King and Queen of England. And then some kind of revolt by Indian soldiers beginning with the

soldiers in some place called Bengal. And then a couple of killer hurricanes, also around that place called Bengal. Long-winded and strange and somewhat irrelevant, but okay. Unusual for *The Walrus on the Weather*, but okay.

Then Tuesday got stranger. It started with another obscure political event in that god-forsaken part of the world, and ended with another killer hurricane in that poor torn-up region of that far-off country. But right before it ended, the Walrus made it quite clear that he thought the turbulence of the times somehow made a difference to the turbulence of the tides and winds. Strange, but still okay. Okay if he had ended it there. But he didn't. Instead, he went on to say that since it was turbulent times in the United States right now, things could take a turn for the turbulent at any time. And so Wilson had warned of a possible killer hurricane. Strange, and almost not okay, but it was still the Walrus, and he had some leeway.

But Wednesday was the last day of leeway. Wilson had started off the show explaining that his own little private study had yielded the precise warning signs for an onset of a killer hurricane. No, not the same warning signs used by real hurricane-watchers. Wilson's signs had nothing to do with satellite images and weather stations. Those signs were too late and too complicated to be precise, he had said. To be precise, Wilson had said, you must keep it simple. And so he spent the segment talking about the simplest and most precise part of the weather: temperature. That's when things went from strange and okay to strange and not okay.

Wilson's warnings were simple enough: every killer hurri-

cane was preceded by not just turbulent times, but turbulent temperatures as well. He held up a ridiculous hand-drawn chart that Diane had no doubt was made-up. The chart had many colors and was unreadable, but Wilson seemed to think it was quite clear. He pointed to a few of the brightest colors on his little hand-drawn chart, and then proceeded to proclaim that the weeks leading up to a killer hurricane were hot. Very hot, he said, relative to what's expected. Unusual hotness during turbulent times is almost certainly a sign of a killer hurricane to come.

Simple enough, and given the Walrus's history of making things up, possibly harmless if not for the fact that Wisconsin, and the Sheboygan area in particular, had been in the midst of a heat wave. The last two weeks had been unusually hot relative to what was expected.

Things still might have been okay if Wilson hadn't connected the dots. On television, if you don't draw the conclusion for the audience, you can expect that the conclusion will never be drawn. Wilson knew this, and he had still connected the dots. Perhaps that's why he had connected the dots. Or maybe there was something else going on with Wilson.

Diane was confused, and she turned off her monitor and put her head down on the desk. Soon she heard the shuffle of padded feet, and she looked up to see two blunt tusks.

"Wilson," she said.

"Yes. Sorry to wake you."

Diane smiled, and for a second she thought everything was going to be okay. But then Wilson cleared things up and she knew things were not so okay after all.

“I’d like to do a primetime segment tonight,” said Wilson. He spoke firmly but politely. He wasn’t demanding, but it didn’t seem like he expected Diane to say no.

“No,” said Diane.

“You don’t mean that,” said Wilson.

“Yes, I do. I always say what I mean.”

“Don’t you mean to say that you always mean what you say?”

“You’re trying to confuse me.”

“No.”

“Either way. You can’t have a primetime slot. Dave gets the evening slot. He’s the primetime weatherman.”

“I don’t want Dave’s spot. I want the prime primetime spot. I want the news. I want the headlines.”

“Wilson. No.”

“It’s important.”

“No.”

“Diane!”

“No.”

“Fine. I’ll call Kathryn.”

Diane was quiet. She had said she’d handle Wilson. If Wilson called Ms. Keller, it would mean that Diane hadn’t been able to handle Wilson.

Diane stood up. “What’s going on, Wilson? We’re all worried.”

“Who’s we?”

“You know who.”

“Kathryn?” Wilson suddenly looked worried.

Diane nodded like she meant it.

Wilson sighed. "Fine. Forget primetime."

Diane smiled a little. "Okay."

"But at least let me finish out the week? I have two more to go." Wilson looked up at the bright ceiling of Diane's office.

Diane sighed and looked down and nodded.

And Wilson whipped around and walked out of the studio, his trenchcoat twirling behind him as if to say he had somehow gotten what he came for.

5

Wilson finished out the week with an understated and light-hearted pair of segments on the two deadliest killer hurricanes in the history of civilization. The worried letters stopped, and Kathryn didn't call Diane again. The strangeness of the week appeared to be behind them, and the weekend arrived as expected. The storm had passed, it seemed.

But when you're in the eye, it seems like the storm has passed even though it hasn't. And when they're in the eye, the smart ones make haste to prepare themselves for the second half of the storm. And so the Walrus went underground over the weekend and prepared hasty charts of average temperatures of places in the weeks leading up to killer hurricanes. Since any political science student knows a thing or two about statistics, Wilson put things together and looked for correlations between sociopolitical instability,

high temperatures, and killer hurricanes. The correlations came out so high that he was sure he was mistaken, and so Wilson redid all his charts and reran the correlation calculations. But now the correlations were so strong that Wilson had to lie down to calm himself. As he lay on his back on the floor near his kitchen table, Wilson remembered the golden rule of statistics: correlation does not equal causation. Now he felt calm, and almost laughed at himself. No, he thought, just because these three things happen together, it does not mean that one thing causes another.

The thought led to another, and presently Wilson sat up and did another set of charts and comparisons, this time to check the sequencing of the three things that were highly correlated. If there was no causation, then the sequencing of the three things should be random—for example, sometimes political instability should be present before a hurricane, and sometimes it should emerge only after. But political instability is hard to pinpoint down to the day or week or even month. And besides, didn't it make sense that killer hurricanes only ended up being killers because they occurred in areas that were already politically unstable or socially unsatisfied and hence perhaps correspondingly unprepared to warn people about hurricanes or rescue them in the aftermath?

Wilson sighed and lay back down on the wooden floor. He pounded his fist on the boards beneath the little kitchen table, and the table shook. Wilson stared for a little while and then he pounded again. The table shook again, and now he could see the uneaten half of his brown muffin peeking at him over the edge. He pounded one last time, and the muffin dropped down and bounced on his chin before settling on the still trembling floorboard.

With trembling hands, Wilson put together a new set of charts and correlations, this time using earthquakes instead of hurricanes. Killer earthquakes, to be precise. The correlations between atmospheric temperature, societal temperature, and deadly tremors were strong, as strong as they had been for killer hurricanes. Wilson was perplexed, and then he remembered the little-known disclaimer to the golden rule of statistics: it's tough to ignore a lot of strong correlations.

Higher temperatures could have a place in accepted theories about hurricanes—after all, Wilson knew there was a lot of talk of hot air meeting cold air and what-not. But earthquakes? Those had nothing to do with the air's temperature, right? As far as Wilson could tell, people knew even less about how to predict and explain earthquakes than they did hurricanes.

Wilson sighed again and picked up the half-eaten brown muffin from underneath the kitchen table. He broke off a tiny bit and swallowed it, but not before carefully chewing it. Earthquakes had nothing to do with the weather, and what could a weatherman know about earthquakes?

Yes, he thought. He needed an earthquake man. Wilson took in the familiar (but never unappreciated) smell of heroic necessity, and he stood up and stretched his girth. It so happened that he knew an earthquake man. And he would call him. He would call the earthquake man.

It was late at night, but a hero's job is not a nine-to-five gig, and so he called.

"Hello?" came the voice from the other end.

"Bhaskar?"

"Yes. It is Bhaskar."

6

Dr. B. Bhaskar was the earthquake man. He liked to be called the earthquake man, although his parents preferred to say their son was a geophysicist (which he was). Bhaskar was Indian, and had grown up in the Indian city of Calcutta in the Indian state of West Bengal. (Yes, the same Bengal.) Wilson remembered all this, and these correlations had not gone unnoticed by the Walrus. In some little way, Wilson wondered if he would have called Bhaskar had Bhaskar not been Indian and from Bengal.

Wilson had known Bhaskar since the time Bhaskar had arrived from Calcutta to be a freshman at UW–Madison. Wilson had checked the box on his housing application form stating his willingness to room with an international student, and Bhaskar had checked the box stating his firm determination to room with an American. But UW–Madison is a

large school with many foreigners and even more Americans, and Bhaskar and Wilson had not been put together as roommates. Wilson had been matched with a Bulgarian giant who refused to shower, and Bhaskar had been matched with a South Carolina dwarf. The dwarf had no unusual showering habits, but he and Bhaskar just didn't get along.

Bhaskar and Wilson did get matched, however, in the fall semester's Introductory Geology class. They didn't work very hard, but they did get along. And so, beginning sophomore year, Wilson and Bhaskar became roommates.

By the end of that second year of that phase of life, Wilson and Bhaskar had begun to find their respective academic directions. Wilson had soaked up the self-consciousness of Wisconsin's capital city, and this had led him to the squishy field of political science. Bhaskar had almost failed Introductory Geology, and the experience had led to his own peculiar self-consciousness.

Bhaskar had seemingly arrived in the United States with no doubt that he would major in physics. But after the near-miss with geology, Bhaskar felt somehow drawn to the world of rocks and tectonic plates, perhaps because he had something to prove. Or perhaps because he felt the gravitational pull of destiny. Of course, as Bhaskar had explained, geology is not a prestigious field in India, and his parents would not be able to show their faces at the Calcutta Club again if he majored in it. So he found this little sliver of academia at the intersection of geology and physics, and having found it, Bhaskar planted both feet firmly and straddled that intersection like a short brown giant. And now he was the earthquake man.

Bhaskar, like Wilson, saw himself as a hero, but in a more direct way. He had been raised in an insecure intellectual family—one of those families where the parents were not as educated as they thought they should be and hence pushed their kids to make up for it. To the senior Bhaskars, education was a goal in itself. And so, once Bhaskar received his PhD from Stanford University's department of physics, his parents were pretty much done. Now just one more thing left, his mother would say: get married. And so Bhaskar got married to a nice Bengali girl and his parents were done. But in his mind, Bhaskar was only just getting started.

See, the self-consciousnesses of Madison and Palo Alto had seeped into Bhaskar's subconsciousness, and he began to have those particular and peculiar feelings that urge someone to live his life as a hero would. Being around the other physicists had led Bhaskar to believe what most physicists believe—that since they are the only ones who truly understand the world, they are the best equipped to save it. Of course, most physicists stop right there with the argument, but Bhaskar had taken it one step further: if one is best equipped to save the world, thought Bhaskar, then doesn't he become obligated to do so?

That isn't logic, said his bright ex-classmates who were now in the corporate and industrial research labs of California, that's loneliness and insecurity and maybe too much of that Indian fellow Gandhi. This is America, and you should just get married and join a corporate or industrial research lab. Then you'll be rich and busy, and you will forget about loneliness because you will be secure.

But Bhaskar hadn't read much Gandhi, and he tried to explain that his heroic self-consciousness was perhaps coming

to the fore *because* he was in America. The physicists, most of whom were Eastern European or Asian (which includes Indian), laughed and said good luck and to call them if he needed to set up an interview at Intellisystems or Oracular Technologies.

Instead Bhaskar did his interviews at a tiny earthquake research shop in Pasadena on the outskirts of the Caltech campus. The tiny research shop had been built by a group of scientists, geophysicists all, who had decided to ignore the cut-throat corporate ladder of modern American academia in favor of a chance to think about and study whatever they saw fit. They were all heroes in their own ways and in their own minds and in the minds of their spouses and children and close friends. Bhaskar was pleased at their heroic tendencies, and he wanted to join them at their tiny research shop in Pasadena. Unfortunately, he wasn't offered the position. The group hired a Caltech grad student whose dad's university and government connections engineered a grant for the tiny group. The grant was big enough that the tiny group could chase its heroic but unprofitable ideas for several more years. There would also be some money left over for each scientist to buy a jet-ski for the beach house. (Heroes gotta eat too.)

Bhaskar had shrugged it off. Not so different from what happens in India, he thought; at least it means that in some little way India is as free and fair as is America. But although Bhaskar's shoulders did the shrugging, his heart was heavy and angry and disillusioned. He felt alone, possibly because he was alone. Although he had been married for many months by then, without a job he could not apply for a US green card, which meant his wife Shoma could not get permission to

move to America to be with him. The American consulate officer in Calcutta had said that given Bhaskar's temporary status in the US, it seemed quite likely that Shoma and Bhaskar would simply go underground when their visas expired.

Of course, Bhaskar could have just moved back to Calcutta and to his wife, but it was a complicated matter. See, Bhaskar and Shoma did not know each other very well. Their betrothal had been arranged over a meeting at the Calcutta Club just three months before the wedding. Photographs and bio-data sheets had been exchanged, and negotiations were concluded even before the mango ice-cream was served. The only sticking point for Shoma's parents was the lack of a US green card, but the senior Bhaskars had assured them it was only a formality. It is like the green card is already there, they said, only the paperwork is outstanding. And so, under the gaudy bulbs of the Calcutta Club's lawn area, the four parents nodded and smiled and ate mango ice-cream and breathed in the warm moist Bengal air and thanked the goddess Durga for helping them seal the deal. After all, this meant their jobs were done. Now the four parents could spend the rest of their days visiting the Calcutta Club and talking about Stanford PhDs and green cards and grandchildren with US passports.

So it was a complicated matter for Bhaskar. Heroism be damned, he needed a damn job, and he found it at the place where it all began—the self-conscious center of the heartland of the melting pot: Madison, Wisconsin.

And that's where, early on Sunday morning after the late night phone call, the Walrus pointed his little blue Honda hatchback.

7

Wilson drove with the sun on his tail and arrived at UW–Madison’s junior faculty housing complex just in time for breakfast. Bhaskar met him outside the main entrance, and the two brothers hugged and walked into the large common area where a breakfast buffet had been laid out.

“Eat, my friend,” said Bhaskar. “Anything you want.”

Wilson nodded and carefully selected a brown muffin. He looked around the clean cafeteria for a microwave, but did not see one. There was, however, one of those bagel toasters with a metal grill that moves like a conveyor belt, and so Wilson carefully judged the height of the toaster roof and sliced his muffin accordingly before placing it on the hot steel mesh.

“So, my friend,” said Bhaskar as they waited for the muffin to emerge, “it is wonderful to see you. But I must admit, all that stuff you said on the phone . . .”

The muffin halves slid out from beneath the toaster and Wilson snapped them up and dropped them onto a plate. He placed the dish on a tray, and then waited for Bhaskar to lead them to a table.

“As I was saying, my dear friend,” said Bhaskar. “I mean to say . . .”

Wilson nodded and chewed, as if to say he was listening.

“I mean to say . . .” Bhaskar sighed. “See, marriage is a funny business.”

Wilson stopped nodding but continued to chew.

Bhaskar shifted in his chair and touched his mustache. “See, my friend. Marriage and love are funny things.” He shifted in his chair again. “See. Love is about physics, and marriage is about politics. So until the physicists are ruling the world, you cannot expect a correlation between love and marriage.”

Wilson finished his muffin and dusted the brown crumbs from his goatee and sat back. “Are you talking about Shoma or are you talking about Kathryn?”

Bhaskar leaned forward and grabbed Wilson’s arm. “Neither. I am talking about you, my friend. I am talking about you.”

“What about me? Are you saying that since I majored in political science, I should not expect to love the person I marry?”

“Maybe, but that is not what I am saying.” Bhaskar sighed again. “Wilson, all that stuff you said on the phone to me last night. It worried me, my friend.”

“Good. It should worry you. That’s the point.”

Bhaskar shook his head and smiled as if he was trying to

act calm and condescending to hide that he was wild with panic. “No, my friend. My worry is that perhaps you are not thinking straight these days. Perhaps there is no one close enough to you to help you see when your thinking gets crooked. And this means it is my responsibility to keep a check on your obliqueness of thought.”

Wilson sighed. “So this is why you insisted I drive down? You thought I was losing it?”

Bhaskar smiled. “No, my friend. I thought you had lost it.”

Wilson laughed for a bit and then settled his face into a smile. “Well, in that case I’m glad you invited me here. I’d do the same if I thought you’d lost it.”

“Good. Good.”

They finished up at the cafeteria and went up to Bhaskar’s apartment. It was small but adequate for one person. Wilson looked around.

“How’s the green card situation? When do you think Shoma will be allowed to join you?”

Bhaskar shrugged. He had been doing a lot of shrugging over the last year or two.

Wilson nodded. He took a spot on the loveseat and looked up at Bhaskar’s only attempt at decoration: a wall-mounted three-by-five map of the world’s tectonic plates. “How’s the earthquake research going?”

“Slow. I’m applying for another grant, but for some reason the bastards only want to fund earthquake scientists who live in earthquake-prone areas.”

“Imagine that. A research grant process that tries to use common sense and logic.”

“I know. Quite unusual.”

They both laughed. Wilson was well aware of Bhaskar's disappointing rejection in Pasadena, but heroes tend to shrug off their failures, and so they both laughed once more.

Bhaskar went to the kitchen and returned with two glasses of water. He placed them on the small coffee table and sat down across from Wilson. He took a sip and looked at Wilson and sighed.

"So I suppose we should at least try to talk about what you were telling me on the phone."

Wilson nodded. "I'd like that."

Bhaskar dragged his chair over to the desktop computer that occupied the prime position in the makeshift living room. "Well, I did run some numbers earlier this morning."

"And?"

"And, although your conclusion is ridiculous, your initial analysis is correct. Given your method of quantifying political instability, there are strong correlations between unusually high temperatures, natural disasters, and political instability. But, as I said, your conclusion is ridiculous. There could be a million other variables involved. In fact, I almost guarantee there are a million other variables. Remember, correlation does not equal—"

"—does not equal causation. Yes, I remember. But did you look at the sequencing of these factors? Number one is the undercurrent of political instability and social dissatisfaction. As the intensity of the dissatisfaction increases, average temperatures begin to rise. After a certain period of rising temperatures, a natural disaster occurs and many people are killed. The disaster triggers a change in the political and

social conditions, which begin to improve. Then temperatures return to normal.”

Bhaskar shook his head and swiveled his chair so he faced Wilson. “But sequencing things like that is problematic. The interactions are complex, and you cannot say which one truly comes first. It is like the chicken and the egg. Who can say which came first?”

“The chicken and the egg problem has been solved by the theory of evolution,” said Wilson. “The egg came first. The first chicken was hatched from an egg laid by the chicken’s evolutionary ancestor.”

Bhaskar stared. “That is actually quite good. Yes, that is a good solution indeed.” He swiveled his chair to face the wall map. “Well.”

Wilson turned to face the wall map as well. They stared in silence for a while.

“Okay,” said Bhaskar. “I will help you then. You said you have access to the temperature databases?”

Wilson nodded and rolled over to the computer. He punched a few keys and stared intently at the screen as a login page for a proprietary weather data site popped up. KWQT paid for a subscription to the site. Wilson rarely used it because his segment rarely focused on the real weather, but now he was using it, and as his paws hit the keyboard with razor-sharp precision, he got that feeling where he once again knew he was proceeding along a path that had been determined for him perhaps even before he came into being.

Once Wilson was in, Bhaskar took over. After scanning the available views of historical temperature data, he designed

a script to extract several decades' worth of daily temperature readings.

"The extraction will take a few hours," said Bhaskar. "In the meantime, I can start to prepare the analysis algorithms. Did you bring the list of what analyses you want me to run?"

Wilson nodded and handed Bhaskar a neatly folded sheet of paper covered with brightly colored messy handwriting.

Bhaskar laughed. "What is this? You wrote this with some child's felt-pens?"

Wilson shook his head. "Sharpie. Permanent markers. Unfit for children."

Bhaskar placed the list on the table near the keyboard. Wilson wanted him to run the data and look for incidents where average temperatures over three weeks were at least twenty percent higher than over similar three-week periods in recent years. The list also contained additional runs of data where Wilson wanted the three-week period changed or the twenty-percent threshold changed or the historical range changed. He had assigned a relative weight to each combination of input parameters, and once Bhaskar's analyses were run, Wilson hoped to be able to get a simple list of the places with the most out-of-range temperatures. This would be the beginning of the study.

Although political science is too squishy to be considered a real science (hard science is what they call the non-squishy sciences), Wilson did have some knowledge of and respect for the scientific method. He accepted that before one runs around making ridiculous conclusions, one should attempt to verify those conclusions through standard accepted objective methods (as the scientists like to call their methods).

Granted, talking about all that stuff on pre-dawn television may have been jumping the gun a bit, but it was pre-dawn and no one really expected him to be serious anyway and so no one could have really taken him seriously. And had Wilson been up-to-date on the real weather, he would have known of the Wisconsin heat wave and perhaps toned down the rhetoric about high temperatures being related to political turmoil and killer hurricanes. Like a sick body must endure rising heat until the fever breaks, he had said. Or something like that. See, Wilson didn't remember exactly what went on in those pre-dawn sessions. Not just this morning; it was like that every morning. Wilson lost track of himself during those segments, and since it had always turned out okay, he never worried about it.

For a moment Wilson feared he was starting to worry about it, but it was only a half-dream and he woke up on Bhaskar's loveseat with Bhaskar poking him.

"Wake up, my friend. You are making funny noises."

Wilson sat up and blinked and straightened the hair on his goatee. "What time is it?"

"Time for you to go home, I think. You have to work tomorrow morning, correct?"

"Yes. But what about the analyses? Are they done?"

"Forget about the analyses, my friend."

"What do you mean? Are they done?"

"Yes, my friend, they are done. And so are we. With the analyses, I mean. We are done with the analyses. There is nothing here, as I told you. Nothing to worry about."

"Let me see," said Wilson. He stood up quickly.

"What is the use? It is nothing."

“Now I definitely have to see.” Wilson caught a whiff of patronization and took it as condescension and this got his goat. He let go of his goatee and surged ahead in the tiny room.

Bhaskar bounced off the Walrus and fell into the loveseat, and Wilson crinkled his nose and furrowed his wide brow in concentration as he scanned the results of Bhaskar’s analyses. He let out a cry and turned back to Bhaskar, who was trying to look disinterested and nonchalant on the loveseat.

“Duluth,” said the Walrus.

“Yes. I told you it was nonsense.”

“No, you never said nonsense. Is that what you think?” Wilson didn’t wait for an answer. He turned back to the neatly formatted results on the computer screen and looked down the list. “Nothing else even close to this extreme in correlation.”

“Exactly. Nothing even close for this point in time. So this is just an outlier because of some mistake or bad data or something like that. Any number of things could be wrong with it. But no, my friend, I did not mean to say nonsense. I admit the historical correlations are intriguing, and I cannot blame you for seeing patterns that look significant but are in fact meaningless. After all, this is squishy science.”

“Squishy my foot,” said Wilson. He stood up and gently kicked a beanbag. “We must warn them.”

“Warn whom? About what?” Bhaskar looked at the beanbag and then at Wilson.

“The people of Duluth. About the danger they face.” Wilson turned back to the computer screen. “How soon will it hit? Have you run the time-lag regressions yet?”

“What hit what?” Bhaskar was talking fast and his words

were getting garbled as his Palo Alto accent became more pronounced.

“The hurricane. These regressions are for hurricanes, right? You’d better run the earthquake regressions too, just in case. Duluth is hill country. There may be fault lines that have been ignored because the people of Duluth have been so nice and stable for so long.” Wilson was bouncing up and down on the squeaky swivel chair, and the sight was unusual and alarming enough that Bhaskar stood up and went over to him.

Bhaskar put his hand on Wilson’s shoulder to slow the bounce, and Wilson calmed himself down and nodded. Bhaskar ran a few analyses with just the most recent Duluth temperature data cross-referenced with the curiously squishy list of political events that Wilson had categorized as earthquake-inducing versus hurricane-causing. The correlations came up high, and Wilson squealed in terror and victory, and Bhaskar stood back away from both Wilson and the computer screen.

“There could be both. A hurricane and an earthquake. We must warn them.” Wilson was on his feet now and pointing at the sky and shouting.

He took up his trenchcoat and wrapped it about him and grabbed Bhaskar’s arm and started to drag him towards the door.

“Stop it. Are you mad?” screamed Bhaskar. “They will put us in jail. We cannot just go about shouting that a hurricane and earthquake is about to strike a place that has never seen a hurricane or earthquake.”

“That is why we must shout,” howled Wilson. “Else they will not hear us.”

The Walrus pointed once more at the sky (or really, at the

low gray ceiling of Bhaskar's state-issued apartment) and used one of his hind paws to try and dislodge Bhaskar's leg that was wrapped tightly around the base of the computer cart. But the leg was wrapped too tight and the paw was too soft and squishy to manipulate an unwrapping, so when Wilson tugged once more at Bhaskar's arm, the computer cart could resist no more and came down hard on the tiled-and-uncarpeted section of the government-assigned apartment.

Wilson pulled Bhaskar out of the way and then did a graceful dive-roll (out of reflex and habit and not necessity) into an empty corner of the room and came up in a heroic pose that bore no small resemblance to one of those statues in Athens or Rome.

"Get out," screeched Bhaskar in his Palo Alto accent. "Out, I said. You are a bloody madman."

"Never!" shouted Wilson in spontaneous response. Then he twirled his trenchcoat tail and barreled out of the room like one of those barrels that move on their own.

Bhaskar surveyed the damage to his room and computer and gently curled up on the cold floor and sobbed away as he thought about his wife and parents and the Calcutta Club and mango ice-cream.

8

Wilson drove home slowly with all the windows down and thought about the fine city and the stable people of Duluth, Minnesota.

Duluth is an old port city on the banks of one of those great big northern lakes. Over time its port was overshadowed by the large state university campus and an even-larger restaurant called Grandma's. The restaurant is what Wilson remembered, and he suddenly had a vision of a fault line opening up through the center of the place and sucking in the happy stable people of that old port city.

Of course, Wilson assumed the vision was just his imagination and not something put there by the mystical powers that put visions into the minds of heroes, and so he just drove on with the windows down until he arrived at his little

parking lot in his mostly-unoccupied apartment building in East Sheboygan.

Stable people do not have political crises, he thought. There must have been something wrong with my squishy political stability index categorization.

He looked for his colorful notes on the political index-ization categories, but they were not in his little blue Honda hatchback. Although he did not remember noticing the scene at Bhaskar's when he left, now Wilson was able to play back the images in his mind and he stopped on a visual of the multi-colored notes strewn on the yellow-tiled floor as the computer shattered into millions of variables on that same yellow floor.

So that night he tried to go back over his tracks in the snow and figure out what it was about Duluth and its ostensibly stable people that had resulted in a listing on the political squishiness index. There really didn't seem much to it, and Wilson finished his brown dinner muffin and cleaned the crumbs away from his office table in the kitchen and brushed his tusks and went to bed somewhat less enthusiastic than when he had awakened that morning.

The next morning he woke up on time and got to the station on time and did a reasonably standard broadcast of *The Walrus on the Weather* and trudged home again before noon. His trenchcoat tail hung behind him like a limp sail, and he glided back into the kitchen with just a little less wind at his back.

Maybe I am a madman, he thought.

Maybe I do need someone to correct my obliqueness of thought, he wondered.

Maybe love is not exactly what we had hoped it wasn't, he reasoned.

And this confused him and he whimpered a bit and scurried around the kitchen table a few times to bring up his heart rate before lying down on the floor and wrapping his trenchcoat tail about him to shield himself from the chilly howling wind of that feeling when you wonder if you let go of someone or something that should have been held on to.

9

Bhaskar held on tightly to the thin rope that marked the edge of the starting area for the world-famous Grandma's Marathon up in the hill country of Duluth, Minnesota. Of course, Bhaskar was not actually running the world-famous marathon. He was just doing the quarter-circuit. Maybe someday he would run the full 26.2 miles, but not today. Today the 6.55 miles seemed like it would be enough to prove something to someone, if not anything to no-one.

Naturally Bhaskar had not said anything to that madman Wilson about running the quarter-circuit up in Duluth. Who knows what the madman would have done to him. Broken his legs? Tied him to the computer cart and thrown ice-cubes at him?

Bhaskar wondered for a moment whether his own anger with and resistance to the Walrus had something to do

with being defensive and self-conscious about running the quarter-circuit race. Bhaskar had not even told his wife or students or the breakfast-maker down in the common area of the junior faculty housing complex in Madison. Why not, he wondered. Was he embarrassed about it? Or was there some other deeper psychological mechanism at play here?

But psychological considerations have no place in neo-classical geophysical theory, and so Bhaskar re-tied his laces and focused on the external environment.

And the external environment appeared to be quite tumultuous that day, the day of the world-famous Grandma's Marathon. Apparently this day was also the focal point of protests by what seemed to be many different student-run groups and organizations. At first Bhaskar could not understand what they were protesting; then he asked an angry young woman who angrily explained what was going on.

The problems had begun several months earlier when a super-smart group of researchers from the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Minnesota at Duluth released the shocking results of a groundbreaking study of average body-lengths of underground mammals that lived under the ground in the Duluth area. Apparently, over the past several years, the average body-lengths of moles, mole-rats (different from moles), gophers, and groundhogs were decreasing at an increasing rate, a result that was even more alarming because, listed under the "Arbitrary Extrapolation" section of the report, was the prediction that within the next several hundred years, most of these creatures would be no larger than a thimble designed for a child's pinky finger.

This revelation rocked the campus, and since it was fall

and the students had just returned and were starting to use the university's tunnel system in anticipation of the Duluth winter, the students bonded together to ask the collective question "Why?"

Many suggestions and accusations and theories abounded, but none found universal acceptance until, one day, a super-smart history major tweeted that it was curious how the decrease in mole-rat (different from moles) sizes began the year after the first running of the marathon. Grandma's Marathon.

And so came the "Subterranean Vibratory Hometown Blues" theory of the mole-rat. (Bob Dylan grew up near Duluth.) The annual repetitive pounding of the pavement and roads of Duluth during the marathon sent vibrations down under the ground. These vibrations were out-of-phase when compared to the natural vibrations (all living things vibrate at different rates) of the mole-rat and its neighbors, and the lack of phase-harmony resulted in clearly measurable feelings of depression and oppression in the poor little underground creatures.

Depressed and oppressed creatures eat a little less and sleep a bit more and don't "do it" with as much gusto, and these effects build up over the years and through the generations, and now the mole-rat and the mole and the groundhog and the gopher were all just a bit smaller. And this just would not do.

So in an unprecedented bonding of every student group on campus, the protests got to a scale where classes had been cancelled for weeks, the entire janitorial staff had gone on strike, and the university was now on its third president since the release of the groundbreaking report.

And as the protests and anger and confusion rose to a fever-like pitch, no one had noticed that average temperatures were on the rise even though summer was ending and fall and winter were on the horizon. No one thought it odd that the protests had begun with bearded students in hooded sweatshirts and were now characterized by shirtless bodies and ice-cream vendors. Nobody noticed the gentle swirling of low pressure air over high pressure wind out across the large northern lake. And not one person thought it odd that on the day of Grandma's Marathon, before the runners had started to pound, a low rumble could be heard and felt across the hilly streets of Duluth.

Luckily Duluth is a technologically advanced city and Grandma's Marathon is a well-funded event, and so when the ground broke open and the waters rose and the winds tore in from the north and the east and the runners and protestors and ice-cream vendors were swallowed in and swept away and ripped up, there was a neatly-formatted list of names and social-security numbers and emergency contacts available via the backup servers (located in Tucson, Arizona) for the first-responders from the neighboring town of Hibbing (which experienced a sudden influx of mole-rats, moles, gophers, and groundhogs earlier that very same day).

IO

The Walrus got the call as he was sunning himself in his sun-room (living room window). Although he had not expected it, it did not surprise him. Wilson had known something was amiss. Two old friends should not have fought so hard over the small and stable town of Duluth. There had been some deeper psychological mechanism at play there, and Wilson suddenly became furious at himself for ignoring it. After all, political science is squishy precisely because of psychological considerations, and Wilson should have known that. He should have stayed with his friend and poked around until he found the root of the discomfort.

He was responsible. The Walrus had not acted in time. The Walrus had passed on the chance—nay, the call—to be a hero, and now Bhaskar was dead.

Wilson put down the phone and stepped up to the window and let out a low moan of anguish and sorrow, a moan so low in frequency that it was only picked up by the super-sensitive mole-rats in their new subterranean homes in Hibbing, Minnesota.

Wilson was still mired in guilt and desolation when the second call came in. It was the University of Wisconsin.

“Mr. Wigham?”

“Yes,” Wilson moaned.

“This is Sally from University Personnel Services. I’m sorry to bother you at this terrible time. I understand you have already been contacted by the marathon organizers and first-responders?”

“Yes.”

“And so you know about Mr. Bhaskar.” The voice was respectful.

“Yes.”

“Again, I’m sorry to disturb you at this time, but it appears that Mr. Bhaskar has only listed you as a contact even in the University of Wisconsin’s records.”

“Yes.”

“Does Mr. Bhaskar have any family? Parents? Spouse? Children?”

“Yes.”

Sally hesitated. “Which ones, sir?”

“Parents. Wife.”

“Okay, great. I mean, okay.” Sally hesitated again. “Would you happen to have their contact information?”

“They are all somewhere in India. Calcutta, I think.”

Another long pause. “Do you have a way of contacting them there?”

“No.”

“Okay. I will go ahead and get in touch with the Indian Embassy in Chicago and see if they can track down Mr. Bhaskar’s family. Thank you, Mr. Wigham, and I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Yes.”

Five days later, Sally called back.

“Mr. Wigham? It’s Sally again. From University Personnel Services?”

“Yes.”

Sally sighed. “The Indian Embassy was able to contact Mr. Bhaskar’s parents and wife. They informed them of the tragedy, and then they informed us that they had informed them.”

“Okay.”

Sally sighed again. “But there is a small problem now.”

“Yes?”

“You see, there is a small matter of a university-funded life insurance payout. Well, the payout is not that small, and that’s why it’s a problem.”

Wilson was silent. He felt a tingle and a swish of energy, and he let it build up as Sally sighed again and went on.

“You see, the policy can only be paid out to the next of kin, which would be Mr. Bhaskar’s wife.”

“Shoma.”

“You know her?” Sally sounded relieved.

“I know of her.”

“Oh.” Sally sounded like she was about to sigh again. “Well, we asked the Indian Embassy to provide us with Ms. Shoma’s full name and address so we could send the payment, but the Indian Embassy discouraged us from sending such a large amount via the mail. They suggested we use an American courier service.”

“Okay. There are many fine American courier services.”

“Yes, of course. That isn’t the problem.”

“Okay.”

“Well, you see, the Indian Embassy called Mr. Bhaskar’s home in Calcutta again to get Shoma’s contact details, but it appears she is not in Calcutta.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, sir. The man from the embassy said she has gone to an ash-ram.”

“An ashram?”

“Yes. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes.”

Sally paused, as if she expected Wilson to explain what an ashram was, but Wilson wasn’t sure if her question had been rhetorical, and so he just kept quiet and sat very still.

“Well, anyway, whatever this ashram is, it is a place that does not accept any incoming mail or courier services.”

“Okay,” said Wilson. He could feel that tingle once more, and his follicles stood up like the crown on a king walrus.

Sally was talking fast now. “We were going to send the check to the parents, but we do need to make sure it is

delivered to Ms. Shoma herself. And the Indian Embassy discouraged us from sending the check to the parents anyway, although they wouldn't say why."

"I see."

Sally let out a loud sigh. This really seemed to be weighing on her, and Wilson wanted the conversation to end so he could moan in peace.

"Anyway, sir," she said, "you don't happen to know anyone who is traveling to India and could possibly hand-deliver this check to Ms. Shoma, do you?"

The tingles in his follicles were now a raging mass of hair-buzz, and Wilson knew the universe was giving him another chance, another shot, one more opportunity to answer the call. He thought about his old rule that if you have to think about a question, you should probably just say yes. That is the credo of the hero. You run towards the fire, not from it.

"Yes," said Wilson quietly. "Yes, I do."