



Rip Tapioca (illustration by Timothy Sparvero)

The Fantastically Baffling Story of the Greatest Time-Space Traveler That Ever Lived: Rip Tapioca, Marshal of the Time Stream and Leader of the Semi-Intelligent Cat Toys of Arcturus-5, With His Sidekick George of the Gelatin-Brains

The First Book

IN A RARELY TRAVELED SECTOR in the far reaches of outer space, there was a pair of boots. They were not attractive, even for footwear, because of the many electrodes, dials, and digital display units covering every square micrometer of the exposed rubber.

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Inside these boots was a man. To be clear, the man did not reside in these boots; he is not a tiny man who could reasonably become a dweller of boots. Rather, the boots are worn on his feet just like any average-sized person.

Inside these boots, to repeat, was a man. This was a man without a belly button, because he leveraged medical technology in every possible way to avoid cleaning lint out of a body cavity. A man with Velcro® implanted in his ankles to prevent his socks from falling down. A man with stainless steel fingernails to destructively drag down blackboards, a truly original way to annoy people and a fun conversation piece. A man named after the last words of the senile warlord of Polaris-7: Rip Tapioca. (Naturally, due to the warlord's senility he thought he was saying "blahg hubba hubba" and completely mispronounced it.)

The aforementioned boots were independently tap-dancing, buckled tightly and fastened to our hero, Rip Tapioca. With his jet-black pompadour, the deep cleft in his prominent chin, and the wraparound visor sunglasses sitting on his nose, Rip had the distinctive look of a man who desired a distinctive look. Sitting on the bridge of a vast spacecraft, Rip worked diligently using a viewscreen and a touchpad, attempting to translate a nearly indecipherable language into English: the series of grunts that James Brown used as he performed.

Just then, a man shorter in stature than Rip with a stark resemblance to someone you might ignore on the street launched into the room under a magnificent archway and smashed with a bone-rattling thud into a massive sculpture in the shape of Marilyn

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Monroe's beauty mark.

The man slid off the sculpture, and as he slithered onto the glittering floor he noticed he was in great pain.

"Yeeeeeeoowweooooeech!"

"Correct, George. My extensive research suggests that particular phrase can be translated as 'Darn, I swallowed my mouthwash.'"

"Oooooowweee! Oooooowweee!"

"Of course, that translation only applies when the phrase is used with the possessive pronoun 'hhunnnh' so in most cases the verb remains unconjugated."

"Ooglam!" George pleaded.

Then Rip turned his head. "Oh George, you're a greasy smear again. We'll have to fix that, I suppose." Rip flipped a coin, covered his eyes, and stabbed his finger down on the button-covered control panel.

An eerie glow coated the room just before the place exploded into subatomic material.

"Oops," Rip gasped.

Behind Rip's ear was a gleaming salmon, about eight inches in length, and before the onset of explosive decompression he grabbed the artificial fish, a.k.a. the Artifish, and pressed a scale. With that, the spaceship *Titanberg* reconstituted and the now-erect George of

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the Gelatin-Brains was healed. George stood about five foot four if you counted his puffy green clown wig. He had large feet wearing plaid high-tops and was clothed in a T-shirt reading “My parents went to prison and all I got was this crummy T-shirt.” His lips were white and quivering.

Getting back to work, Rip inquired, “Tell me, George: how does it feel to have flesh the same consistency as Play-Doh? I’m curious.”

“It’s a bit like being sucked through a straw,” George answered while cleaning his ear.

“Fascinating,” replied Rip. “It’s a good thing you arrived when you did. I’m onto another breakthrough in my linguistics study. I have learned what ‘ow-buh-zoo-buh’ means and may be able to link it into the main sequence of verbs.”

George scratched his chin.

“Incidentally, would you enlighten me with the reason you flew into this room with the approximate velocity of a comet hurtling through space?”

“Dunno,” shrugged George. Then his ear fell off.

“Hmmm. Take care of that detachable ear, will you?”

George picked up his ear and attempted to reattach it to his head. “I thought this thing was childproof,” grunted the Gelatin-Brain, trying to simultaneously press down and turn his ear.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” blurted Rip as he noticed one of the

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monitors on his left boot blinking with a yellow light. “It’s time for an investigative expedition through time and space!”

The *Titanberg* and everything aboard zipped through the cosmos as Rip pressed another scale on the Artifish.

“Golly gee!” exclaimed George, in a rare display of alliterative exclamation. “Why didn’t you warn me? I was planning on clipping my toenails.”

Snatching a razor-edged eggbeater out of his back pocket, Rip bounced across the room onto George’s chest and inched the device toward his nose.

“Have you become accustomed to a sense of smell? And a place to rest your eyeglasses?” Rip snarled.

“Ummm...”

“ANSWER ME!” The eggbeater moved closer.

“Yuh-yuh-yes?” George stammered.

“That’s the correct answer!” Rip flipped up, tossing the eggbeater over his shoulder into an object greatly resembling a miniature black hole.

As George started doubting Rip’s sanity, a booming voice came over the *Titanberg*’s public address system. “Today’s big winner is...George of the Gelatin-Brains! Now he must choose a prize: a box of Rice-A-Roni or a version of our home game!”

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Blinking, George repeated, “Home game?”

“A conglomeration of cardboard and plastic intended to serve as a consolation prize for losers of game shows.”

“Game shows?”

“Oddly popular broadcast content from the late 20th Century on Earth. With the assistance of hosts possessing glittering teeth, successful contestants are awarded money, cars, and unnecessary appliances.”

“Earth?”

“Yes, you nitwit! The third planet from Sol! That place with smog and Oreos!” Rip attempted to retrieve the eggbeater from the black hole.

“Now I remember! Watergate and Yugos!” George gasped.

“Quite right,” said Rip, “and game shows are only one facet in the total scope of our investigation.” Reaching down to fiddle with his galoshes, his head jerked back up. “George! The front left bottom gauge on my right Timeboot is reading 14%!”

“Does that mean...”

“Yes,” Rip answered, his voice coated with a thick layer of ice. “I forgot to brush my teeth this morning.” He pressed the Artifish once more and a twelve-foot toothbrush materialized. He grabbed the long, thin handle and began scrubbing.

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Trying hard to sort out the last few minutes, George muttered, “I’ve always wondered why your toothbrush is so long.”

“Gotta get to those hard-to-reach spots!” Rip revealed, spitting toothpaste in a disgusting mist.

“Ick,” commented George.

When the toothbrush wore down to dust on Rip’s bicuspid, Rip was finished.

“Gee whiz!” said George. “Dental hygiene makes an awful mess.” His ear fell off again.

Rip shook his head. “Did you notice...?”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it.” George retrieved his ear with a sigh.

“You would think that the Gelatin-Brains would find a more practical way to insert your brains at birth,” Rip expositioned. “Perhaps if we drilled a large hole in the top of your head and corked it.”

“Head-drilling? That’s good for slasher movies, but not nearly as efficient.” While this sounded like a reasonable comment, in truth George had no idea what the word “efficient” meant.

“It’s your brain.” Rip had once seen the word “efficient” on a bottle of disinfectant.

“Now what do we do about this mess?” George had already

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forgotten that he said the word “efficient.”

“The toothbrush dust?” Using a short sentence to communicate was rather “efficient,” as far as Rip was concerned.

“Yes.” This single word was the most “efficient” sentence yet.

“The Artifish can help us with this task,” said Rip, who recognized that the “efficient” gag was never that funny in the first place. He poked another scale on the powerful plastic salmon, causing a small door in the floorboards to be winched upwards. A cartoonish mouse creature with frizzy fur scampered from the opening, his eyes racing crazily. When he spotted the pile of powder that had once been a toothbrush, he scurried over and screeched wildly.

“Crackers the Mouse!” identified George. “How brilliant!”

“Efficient as well,” said Rip, always willing to get in one more cheap joke. Crackers stuck his nose into the heap of dust and snorted it up in one motion. Then he zoomed into his hole, which closed up behind him with a thud. Rip scratched his head in confusion.

George twisted his ear back on. “That is one brain-dead mousie,” he said.

“Brain-dead! That reminds me—it’s time to meet our first specimen. And what a specimen she is!” Rip rolled the eye of the Artifish around in its socket until it reached the proper position, then tugged its tail.

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Rip gazed expectantly at a stage that greatly resembled a boxing ring, empty except for a comfortable chair and a small table holding a steaming pot and a bone china teacup. The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there she was: a shapely blonde woman with attractive features, wearing an obviously expensive gown and holding her arms out in a pointing gesture. As George gasped at her beauty, Rip cleared his throat and spoke boldly.

“Your name is Vanna White, correct? You are a game show hostess from a television program called *Wheel of Fortune*.”

“Ummm....” Vanna appeared to be very confused.

“Can you describe your job function in twenty words or less?” asked Rip, pulling a writing utensil from a compartment on his Timeboot.

“I...I...I turn letters.” Vanna blinked.

“Excellent!” remarked Rip. He scribbled furiously into an LED notebook with a specially encoded pen: typical paraphernalia for an Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power.

At this point, George started staring.

Rip began a line of questioning. “What profession do you claim on tax forms, Miss White?”

“Television personality, letter-turners category. But...”

At this point, George started drooling.

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“Turning letters has been a fulfilling vocation for you?”

“Very much so. But...”

At this point, George started panting.

“You have a question, Miss White?”

“WHERE THE HELL AM I?” Vanna squealed, causing veins to pop out of her forehead.

Rip merely nodded and made a note. “Not as wholesome as previously documented,” he mumbled.

At this point, George gathered all his strength and vaulted himself at Vanna’s feminine form.

The game show hostess, her wrist strengthened by years of letter-turning, shattered George’s jaw. The Gelatin-Brain hit the floor with an awful thud, feeling crushed. Perhaps he had this particular feeling because he *was* crushed.

“Pardon my manners, Miss White.” Rip took a step toward his guest, oblivious to George’s gland condition. “You have been teleported through time and space to the spaceship *Titanberg*. I am Rip Tapioca, Marshal of the Time Stream and Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power. It is my duty to research important matters for the Universal Tribunal.”

“Oh.”

“I am presently studying the late 20th Century of the planet

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Earth by interviewing various humanoid creatures who made history.”

“I made history? Little old me?” Vanna blurted, who had found her wholesomeness.

“Thank you for your time. I have learned enough.” Rip pulled the Artifish from its holster. “I will now send you back to your proper place in time and space. Incidentally, I would suggest that you keep an eye out for manhole covers in the near future.”

“Manhole covers? What do you—” With that, Vanna blipped back into the past.

Checking his notes, Rip suddenly looked frustrated. “Blast! I neglected to test the legendary power of her left hook!”

“Wip! Wip!” blathered George. “Thwee bloke muh thaw!”

“Wonderful!” said Rip with glee. “You’ve done the work for me! I have proof!”

“Wip! Eye bin payne! Hep me!”

“Quit your whining, dolt. You can heal yourself with this tube of Crazy Glue.” Rip tossed a tiny packet to George and checked the scribbles in his electronic notepad. He was shocked to find that some of them were legible. George turned toward a holographic mirror and grumbled about cosmetic surgery.

“Our next subject: the immortal elf himself!”

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The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: a middle-aged fellow with a dazzling smile and hair that appeared synthetic. He had a look on his face that just screamed, “What happened to Rate-A-Record?”

“George, say hello to Dick Clark, idol of millions and host of television programs broadcast simultaneously on all three major networks!”

“Thbeeze ta mut ya!” George yelped, still working on his face. His lips were partially stuck together with Krazy Glue.

“Tell me, Mr. Clark, how does it feel to be the caretaker of a pyramid?”

“It’s like this...” Dick started.

“I’m especially interested to see how you break down the budget of \$20,000.”

“You see...”

“My sources show that your duties on the pyramid only require thirty minutes a day, five days a week. How is that possible?”

“Well...”

“And on the side, you have been playing record albums on some sort of bandstand for thirty years and also playing practical jokes! And you still appear surprisingly youthful! How do you—”

“Shut your trap!” bellowed Dick Clark. “Quit your yapping! I’m

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a beloved celebrity, for heaven's sake! You're nobody! You're barely a blooper!" Dick's thickly glazed hair detached from his scalp and a set of false teeth plopped out of his mouth. The spit-soaked teeth found their way into the miniature black hole, which only increased Dick's outrage. "Gosh dang it! Why in blue blazes did you make me lose my temper? Don't forget the power at my disposal. I could play a practical joke on you that would make your head spin!"

"I'll make a note of this," Rip chuckled.

George, who had managed to rearrange his face, picked up Dick's wig and looked at it with admiration. "Nice rug!" he said, plopping the toupee in place of the store-bought green clown wig that was usually perched upon his skull. "Let's swap, okay?"

Waving his arms frantically, Dick charged at George. The green wig landed backwards on Dick's head and he stumbled forward in a daze. Then Rip poked the Artfish and zapped him back into his busy schedule.

"How sporting of you to trade wigs with Mr. Clark!" applauded Rip. "When was the last time you had it cleaned?"

"Cleaned?" said George, confused by the term.

As the twosome stared each other down in a wordless conflict about basic hygiene, a platypus strutted into the control room. The duck-billed mammal directly approached Rip, hopped into his arms and stared the Marshal of the Time Stream squarely in the eye. Then the platypus snarled, "You know what?"

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“Wuh-what?” an astonished Rip stuttered.

“I find your breath to be extremely offensive,” said the platypus. He hopped to the floor and waddled away.

Rip looked at George.

George looked at Rip.

Both men cleared their throats and shuffled their feet.

“There’s only one way to address this dilemma,” Rip groaned.

“Namely what?”

“Gargle, my soft-brained companion, I must gargle! And while performing this delicate operation, I must avoid the James Brown phrase ‘Yeeeeeeoowweooooeech!’ at all costs!” Rip bounded away, adding in mid-stride, “It’s so refreshing to apply a second language!” With that, the Leader of the Semi-Intelligent Cat Toys of Arcturus-5 popped a Certs® and leaped through a doorway clearly marked as the entrance to a *Gargling Laboratory and Sword-Swallowing Clinic*.

Shaking his head, George repeated that puzzling word: “Cleaned?”

Minutes later, Rip returned to the control room with a whip in his grasp and mussed hair. Putting down the whip and grabbing a writing utensil, Rip approached the sign marking the doorway. Using bold strokes, he crossed out the words *Sword-Swallowing Clinic* and wrote *Brothel of Amazons*. “I really have to gargle more

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often,” he thought aloud. Rip slumped into an opulent chair and regurgitated memories of the past few minutes.

George grew restless. “Can we get on with it?”

Rip looked up and grinned. “Of course we can! Is a bear Catholic? Does the Pope sh—”

Much to the relief of Vatican officials who might prefer that the Pope’s camping habits remain a mystery, George interrupted Rip. “It isn’t necessary to make pointless comparisons. Let’s continue.”

Rip arched an eyebrow and took a long breath. “Continue we shall. Now pay attention while I press the teleportation button on the Artifish while tap-dancing, juggling, and singing the second verse of *Row, Row, Row Your Boat!*”

“Amazing! Startling! Earth-shaking!” sneered George, suddenly stumbling onto sarcasm.

“That’s not Earth-shaking,” repelled Rip. “*This* is Earth-shaking.” He slapped the Artifish against his thigh, setting off a series of gravity generators that exponentially increased George’s centrifugal force. In layman’s terms, George began to spin like a turntable set to 78, his bones rattling uncontrollably. When George stopped whirling, he fell to the ground with consciousness failing him and with his final glimmer of awareness he uttered one of the most profound proverbs of the Gelatin-Brains:

“Me dizzy.”

Then George fell into a deep sleep and dreamed about kittens or

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something.

“Good help is so hard to find,” sighed Rip, who then touched the Artifish so that another subject would be teleported onto the investigation stage. He accidentally phased George away at the same time, distracted by his efforts to tap-dance, juggle, and sing simultaneously.

The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: an odd-looking boyish fellow with short-cropped hair, wearing an undersized gray suit and a tiny red bow tie. A maddening laugh echoed across the stage as he appeared.

“Ha ha! Ha ha!” The little man spotted the teapot and pranced over to pour a cup with a goofy look on his face and limbs flailing.

“...life is but a dream,” Rip crooned, watching the behavior of his subject with great interest.

The little man took a sip of tea and bellowed, “Mmmmm! La la la!” He was thoroughly enjoying himself but seemed to be mocking the tea-drinking ritual.

Rip pulled out his digital notebook. “I understand you are Pee-wee Herman.”

“That’s my name! Don’t wear it out!” blurted the bratty man-child, lovingly smelling a flower. “Ha ha!”

“I...will try to avoid that. My name is Rip Tapioca.”

“I looove that story,” said Pee-wee, taking great delight in his joke

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and collapsing to the ground. “Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!”

“Question for you,” Rip fumed. “Did my matter transferal unit erase your brainwaves, or have you always been a raving lunatic?”

“I know you are, but what am I? Ha ha!” He hopped to his feet and danced around jerkily.

“How distressing for your parents,” mumbled the Marshal of the Time Stream. “I have a few questions for you. They should be a breeze, even considering your disability.”

“Duh!”

“Is it accurate that your name spelled backward means ‘the handkerchief consumed several vegetables’ in Swahili?”

“Knock knock! Who’s there? Swahili! Swahili who?”

Rip snarled. “I can see this is pointless.”

“So’s your head! Ha ha! Ha ha!”

“You are a jabbering moron.”

“I know you are, but what am I?”

“ENOUGH!” Rip exploded in a tangible rage. He stabbed the Artfish with a trembling finger, causing a robotic sushi chef to zip into the room with two knives flailing. The hyperactive robot chopped Pee-wee into tiny bits of make-up and gray polyester, and then pattered away in search of pesky rodents.

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Rip was pleased at his handiwork. “Pee-wee Herman is dead. Suicide rates on Earth will surely drop. Civilization will no longer live in fear of that giggling idiot.” But then, upon contemplation of the bloody chunks among the residual tufts of the gray suit, Rip felt his messiah complex dissipating. A twang erupted in his heart as a droplet rolled down his cheek.

“Damn pacemaker is twanging again,” he said, wiping off his cheek as another drop splashed in his face. “And I really need to fix that water pipe on the ceiling.”

Rip analyzed the situation: “In order to prevent mass suicide on Earth, we must prevent Pee-wee Herman from continuing his foolish behavior. Gruesome murder is rather depressing and tends to result in lawsuits and black apparel. Black is not my color. I could pulverize his brain with a force blast, but brain-dead people can only function in society as paperweights or congressmen. And they’re never fun at cocktail parties. My only course of action is forcing him into a crisis situation that will ultimately make him drown in his own misery.” Suddenly joyful, Rip snapped his fingers. “It’s so simple! I can destroy his happy-go-lucky nature by finding him a wife! Marriage conquers all!”

Rip punched a scale on the Artifish again, instantly reassembling the corpse of Pee-wee Herman with incredible ease. While Pee-wee trembled, Rip approached his vast computer console and hunted through the sands of time and space for Pee-wee’s ideal mate. Finally a perfect match was located, and Rip swiftly snatched Pee-wee’s wife-to-be from history and deposited her body on the

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spaceship *Titanberg*. The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there she was:

“GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUUUUUNNNNN!”

“Great Scott!” Rip nearly went into shock.

“Pee-wee, buddy! How ya doing there, big guy?” A strong Queens accent emanated from the woman, who wore shabby thrift-store clothing and several layers of glossy makeup. Her hair was bright orange and shaved on the side into a tic-tac-toe pattern.

“Ha ha! Ha ha! It’s my old friend Cyndi Lauper! I hope this space guy doesn’t ‘lop her’ head off! Get it? Cyndi ‘Lop her’? Get it? Ha ha!”

“What’s wrong with you people?” Rip exclaimed. “How come you had no adverse reaction when you were transported millions of light-years from home by my awe-inspiring technology?”

“Come now!” said Pee-wee. “I spend most days with a talking chair and a refrigerator packed with animated food!”

“And when you dress like this,” Cyndi explained, “you expect weird things to come your way.” Rip’s two subjects squawked in delight, sounding like insane schoolgirls.

“ENOUGH AGAIN!” Rip slapped the Artifish against his elbow and shot a few million volts through the nervous systems of his guests. Pee-wee twitched awkwardly while Cyndi’s hair looked slightly frizzier. “Do I have your attention now?”

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“Absolutely,” Pee-wee whispered through clenched teeth.

“Hey, space guy! Why is Pee-wee’s little toe stuck onto his earlobe?” Cyndi blurted.

Rip sighed. “Reassembly is a delicate art. Mistakes are easy to make.” He used the Artifish to put the toe back in line. “Incidentally, do not refer to me as ‘space guy.’ My name is Rip Tapioca.”

Cyndi and Pee-wee looked at each other and erupted in gales of obnoxious laughter. It sounded like a crate of Canadian geese had fallen off the back of a pick-up truck and caused a hundred car horns to blare at once. Rip aimed the Artifish at the chuckle cousins and they stopped immediately.

“You have been brought together today to be joined in the bonds of Holy Matrimony.”

“Married? Why would we get married?” asked Cyndi.

“Trust me. I know what I’m doing.” Rip poked through a drawer for his copy of *The Big Book of Solemn Ceremonies*.

“We barely know each other! Like, duh!” spouted Pee-wee.

Rip let out a long sigh. “Keep in mind, please, that this room contains several hundred gadgets that could easily disembowel you within seconds.”

“I see.”

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“Where do we stand?”

Opening *The Big Book of Solemn Ceremonies* to the “Fake Marriages” chapter, Rip rattled off the whole speech about love, honor, sickness, health, and all those other marriage-type things. Pee-wee and Cyndi nodded appropriately and Rip pronounced them man and wife. “I can’t stomach the thought of you two kissing. Begone!” The Artifish sent the newlyweds back through space and time to their familiar surroundings on Sol-3.

In their place appeared a very perturbed George of the Gelatin-Brains with torn clothes and large bloody gashes on his arms and chest.

“Where have you been, Georgie-boy? You missed the wedding of Pee-wee Herman and Cyndi Lauper. What an occasion! It’s a shame that we didn’t have a marriage license, a blood test, or two witnesses. And my station as an Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power doesn’t give me the authority to perform a wedding.”

George looked quite agitated.

“You must understand that I had a duty to whisk them away as soon as possible. Legends state that if those two freaks say the same words simultaneously, all molecular bonds within earshot will be destroyed by the resulting vibrations.”

George’s eyes steamed up with rage.

“I hope they settle in a nice secluded home in the country. What would the neighbors think if—”

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“WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?” George detonated. “How could you be stupid enough to zap me into the middle of a gladiator battle in ancient Rome?”

“Oh! That’s where you wandered off to. I had been wondering why you were dripping blood all over my nice clean floor.”

“Your nice clean floor? You heartless bastard. I was just mauled by a lion and stabbed by a guy named Polonius, and you’re concerned about *your nice clean floor*?”

“Don’t be so selfish, George. Blood can make a horrible stain.”

George clutched the remains of his novelty T-shirt, weeping openly. “And those lions destroyed the only memento I have from my parents.”

“Come now. Your parents were cruel people who wanted you to eat Brussels sprouts. It was my duty to send them to prison.”

“And all I got was this crummy T-shirt!” George blubbered. The sight reminded Rip of a video game junkie who lost his last life on Pac-Man after going three straight days on a single quarter. To be concise, George went bonkers.

“It’s not fair, it’s just not fair!” cried George. His ear fell off again.

“Pick up that ear and—”

“I don’t care, I just don’t care!” snapped George. He buried his

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face in his hands.

“Hey, that’s a pretty good rhyme. It could be a song! ‘I don’t care, it’s not fair, la de da da da...””

“Let’s make a deal,” the Gelatin-Brain sniffled. “I’ll stop crying if you bring Vanna back to the *Titanberg*.”

Glancing at a gauge on his Timeboots, Rip shook his head ominously. “It may be too late for Vanna. Let’s see what we can find out.” He swiftly entered the precise coordinates into the Artifish and started the teleportation process. The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: a Latino gentleman with a thick moustache and a wardrobe that made a bold attempt to be hip and conservative at the same time.

“Welcome to my spaceship, Geraldo Rivera. I should make it clear that I am only willing to stoop to your level for the sake of expediency. As an Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power, I could investigate and report a hundred times before you even had a chance to blink.”

“I am aware of your abilities, Rip Tapioca.”

“You know me?” Rip said, genuinely surprised.

“I know a lot of things,” Geraldo waggled.

Rip disregarded Geraldo’s irreverent attitude and continued. “We wish to know the status of Vanna White since our recent encounter.”

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Quickly infusing his voice with a professional tone, Geraldo started his report: “This morning at the NBC Studios in Burbank, California. Calm? Tranquil? Not today. Not after an event that rocked the very foundations of—”

“Just the facts, man.”

Geraldo cleared his throat nervously. “Vanna White was killed today when a construction worker became distracted by Miss White’s buttocks and jackhammered a manhole cover until it became airborne.”

George moaned, “Those buttocks....”

“The manhole cover flew directly at Miss White, flipping end over end like a hockey puck of surreal proportions, when destiny showed its dark face—”

“The facts,” Rip reminded him.

“Ahem. As she was crushed by the great weight of the manhole cover, she screamed one name—your name—Rip Tapioca.”

“Astonishing! History has repeated itself in two different solar systems. Vanna White and the senile warlord of Polaris-7 shared the same final words. Mom and Dad would be so proud of me.”

“Millions of devoted fans are devastated by this loss and are holding a candlelight vigil in the streets of—”

“You’ve served your purpose,” said Rip, using the Artifish to blip Geraldo away before he could spout any more purple prose. “How

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tragic that Vanna failed to heed my advice. If she had been more careful, she might still be turning letters today. Isn't it sad?"

George had fashioned a noose around his neck and was looking for a place to string himself up.

"How's it hanging, George?"

"You killed Vanna!" condemned George. "Some Marshal of the Time Stream you are."

"I didn't kill her, you dolt—I tried to save her."

"You could have tried harder. All you did was give her a vague warning that meant nothing."

"Be serious," snapped Rip. "Don't you remember how this spaceship got its name? I used an iceberg to show the *Titanic* it had been drifting off course and look what happened! I attempted to fix a gas leak on the *Hindenberg*, and it didn't end well at all!"

"Oh," said George, putting on a new shirt while wondering where his detachable ear had gone.

"As you know, our Turbo-Charged Intangibility Drive is powered by the souls of those hapless victims, providing us with cost-free transportation throughout the cosmos. But even though I profited handsomely from those needless deaths, we must never interfere with history."

"Please forgive me, Rip."

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“I’d rather bottle up my anger and take it out on you at a later date.”

“I can live with that,” said George.

“Break time!” announced Rip. He summoned refreshments by pressing a scale near the Artifish’s dorsal fin. A bell tinkled in the distance and a slimy three-eyed alien slithered into the room with a tray of liquor. Rip poured himself a stiff drink, noted the alien’s thick eyeglasses, and gave a nod of approval. “Thanks, Six-Eyes.”

With a look of disgust, the alien squirmed away after filling the teapot on the investigation stage with Everclear, a high-proof grain alcohol that could also be used as lighter fluid.

“You really shouldn’t insult the aliens,” warned George. “You’ll start another intergalactic war.”

“Don’t fret like that, you pathetic schlub.” Rip took a seat and sipped his drink. “I believe that the majestic beauty of an intergalactic war is lost on most species. There’s nothing as lovely as an exploding planet in the distance, or glittering laser beams pulsing through the sky. I have recently learned that residents of Earth pay good money to watch muscle-bound goons called ‘boxers’ pound each other into ground beef rather than mastering interstellar travel. Quite sad, really.”

“So very sad,” agreed George, rubbing his bare scalp.

“What ever happened to Dick Clark’s toupee?” Rip asked.

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George gasped. “I must have lost it in ancient Rome!”

“Excellent! It’s possible that you have caused the invention of the toupee. Temporal anomalies are fun, aren’t they? Let’s cause another one,” Rip said, punching a scale on the Artifish.

The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: a muscular Italian hunk with a swollen black eye. “ADRIAN...!” the man bellowed.

“Sylvester Stallone, welcome to the spaceship *Titanberg*.”

“Who the hell are you?” Stallone grunted in his Philadelphia-flavored accent.

“Here’s one of those muscle-bound goons, George. In addition, Mr. Stallone will serve as our current subject.”

“Hello there. Want some Everclear?” George offered.

“Mr. Stallone, you have been characterized as an ultraviolet beefcake without subtlety. How do you respond to these perceptions?”

“It’s pretty cool, I guess.”

Making notes, Rip remarked, “You really are quite brainless, aren’t you?”

“I’m smarter than I look. I have a couple of Oscar® nominations to my credit, including one for writing the *Rocky* screenplay.”

“Which was cribbed from every sports movie ever made, and

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then recycled in *Rocky II*, *Rocky III*, *Rocky IV* and countless other films.”

“See? My influence is immense!”

“Your *ego* is immense,” mumbled Rip, turning to his faithful sidekick. “George, would you like to see Mr. Stallone’s talents in action?”

“That would be neat! The investigation stage is just about the same size as a boxing ring.”

“You don’t want to see me act?” Stallone scoffed.

“I said ‘talents,’ remember? Acting is not your strong suit.”

George looked closely at Stallone’s pectoral muscles. “He looks pretty tough, Rip. Where will you find a worthy opponent?” Meanwhile, Stallone was admiring his own biceps.

“No problem,” said Rip, a clever gleam in his eye as he tugged a fin on the Artifish. The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: a Sylvester Stallone look-alike wearing Everlast shorts and boxing gloves.

“Rocky Balboa?” Rip checked.

“Yeah,” sneered the fictional character.

“Let the match begin!” the Marshal of the Time Stream shouted, ringing a convenient bell. The two Italian stallions stood

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motionless. “Why aren’t you fighting yet?” yelled a perplexed Rip.

“Don’t be angry, Rip. The poor man is beside himself in confusion.” George laughed so hard at his own pun that he fell over a guardrail and began a long experiment proving the existence of gravity.

“Uh...can I go home now?” asked Stallone. “I broke up with my wife a few months ago and just met a gorgeous girl named Adrian. We have a date tonight.”

“What are you talking about? Adrian is my wife!” cut in Rocky.

“Different Adrian, punk. Mine is a blonde bombshell with boobs you can see from space.”

“Mine is a brunette who has stood by me through thick and thin. We have a kid together. She even came to Russia to support me. And I think we ended the Cold War as a result.”

“My Adrian is better,” Stallone scoffed.

“You take that back!” demanded Rocky.

“Make me.”

And so it began. The jabs, uppercuts, and bodyblows flew, and soon the boxing ring was moist with blood, spittle, and sweat. Before too long, Rip became concerned that a fight between two men with identical abilities might never end. When George dragged his way up from the lower decks, Rip asked him for a suggestion.

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“You need to find someone who can break up the fight,” George offered. “Someone just as strong as those two.”

“Yes! Another perfect match!”

The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: a longhaired man, shirtless, bloodthirsty, holding two machine guns and wearing military pants. He greatly resembled both combatants.

“Go get ‘em, Rambo!” Rip ordered.

The articulate soldier let out a primal scream and pointed the weapons at the two dueling figures. As he pumped them full of exploding lead, Stallone and Rocky called it a draw and fell to the ground with a thud.

Rambo was quite pleased. He pointed the guns skyward and wildly shot everything in sight. Commenting on his joyful state, he said, “RRRRRRAAAAUUUUGGGHH!”

“Clearly, this idea was not among my most clever.” Rip scratched his head as the spaceship *Titanberg* crumbled around him. “I’ll try one more perfect match.”

The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: another look-alike wearing leather and dark sunglasses. This one was also well-armed.

“Lieutenant ‘Cobra’ Cobretti?”

“Yeah? What’s your problem?” Dripping with attitude, Cobra didn’t seem to realize that almost no one saw the movie in which he

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appeared.

“Assassinate that man!” said Rip, gesturing at the reloading Rambo.

Cobra looked at Rambo and his eyes narrowed. “You’re the disease, and I’m the cure.”

“RRRRRRRAAAAUUUUGGGHH!” replied Rambo, as Cobra shot a bullet through his brain.

“Excellent catch-phrase!” cheered Rip. “It appears that I have stumbled upon character with intelligence and stability.”

“Who else do you want me to kill?” asked Cobra, lighting a cigar with a butane torch.

“Get them all out of here before another movie comes out!” pleaded George. “I think he sings in *Rhinestone*, and nobody wants to hear that!”

“Already done!” said Rip, phasing all four men into their various realities. “Now tell me, George, do you understand the philosophy behind the sport of boxing?”

“Yes,” George lied, hoping Rip would be impressed enough to give him a cookie.

“Splendid,” Rip stated. “Explain it to me.”

“Hey! They spilled the Everclear!” George scurried to the fallen

teapot, worried about the potent alcohol.

“Well said,” an enlightened Rip droned.

At that moment, Crackers the Mouse blasted through his door and sent metal fragments flying everywhere. He hastened to the puddle of Everclear and vigorously slurped it up. A cartoonish belch followed, and then a fully intoxicated Crackers the Mouse stumbled back to his home with a hiccup.

“I’m starting to worry about that mouse,” said Rip.

“For what reason?” George asked.

“I will consult the Timeboots for some advice.” Rip bent over and began conversing with his galoshes. As he did so, a tiny parachute floated from the upper heights of the control room to Rip’s computer console. The small passenger landed, detached the parachute, and could then be seen as a cockroach in a three-piece suit. (It bears mentioning that insect anatomy is different from human anatomy, so a three-piece suit for this cockroach would be barely recognizable to most readers. Insectwear normally consists of one garment for each set of legs, so bugs wear three-piece suits and centipedes wear fifty-piece suits. Ties are optional. On second thought, maybe none of this bears mentioning.) The elegant cockroach smoothed the pinstriped silk, cleared his thorax and began speaking.

“Greetings, gentle reader. My name is Eekillit and I will be your guide through this work of literature. I have been observing the characters during the course of this narrative and can share

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important background information with you. I hope that it will enhance your reading experience.

“The man known as Ripley Tapioca has been designated as an Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power. While he was born on the far side of the universe, he is essentially humanoid and maintains an unyielding devotion for the legends of the third planet from Sol, which you call Earth. This explains his unerring reliance on Earth-based clichés in his speech patterns and the focus of his studies. Pain and simply, Rip Tapioca is an Earth junkie.

“Our hero is also the Marshal of the Time Stream, and as such he utilizes many tools in his trade. Rip could not perform the tasks demanded by his position without the help of the sentient galoshes on his feet, otherwise known as the Timeboots. They allow him to travel anywhere in time when they reach the point in space corresponding to that moment according to *The Beginner’s Guide to Time/Space Travel*. Look for it in your local bookstore.

“The Black Hole Trash Relocator is another distinctive possession. This device harnesses the power of a hyperspace warp to teleport any waste material placed within to a random spot in the universe. As an example, Dick Clark’s false teeth were automatically relocated to an uninhabited island a few hundred miles west of Hawaii. Considering the relative proximity, he should have no trouble retrieving them.”

Just then, Rip burst into a fit of laughter as the Timeboots reached the punchline of a dirty joke.

“The Artifish is the most significant of Rip’s possessions. This

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computerized salmon is made of artificial materials and has been designed so that every scale directs a particular function. These controls are activated by touch, as you witnessed when Rip pressed various scales. The rolling eyeballs allow Rip to locate a subject with pinpoint precision, so that—yeeeeeaarrgh!”

George stood over the well-dressed cockroach with a can of Raid, morbidly spraying the corpse with insecticide. “Kills bugs dead!” he said, being both redundant and repetitive.

At that point, Rip stood erect once more and felt a vertebrae snap in two. He briefly reflected on finding a better way to speak with footwear. “The Timeboots believe we should have Crackers committed to an institution.” Pressing yet another scale on the Artifish, Rip summoned a squirrel and a lizard wearing hospital scrubs and carrying a stretcher. They plunged into the doorway of Crackers the Mouse, scuffled briefly, and soon burst into view carrying the prone body of Crackers strapped into a straitjacket. They hobbled offstage and were never heard from again.

“The Timeboots claim that we have two more subjects to examine in this sequence.” Rip rolled the eyeball of the Artifish and dialed up another celebrity. The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: a poorly-shaven heartthrob in a pastel-colored suit jacket. The fashionable fellow looked terrified, and he ran around in little circles briefly before swooning and fainting.

“That was neat!” George yelped. “Was he supposed to pass out like that?”

“Not really. Records describe Don Johnson, star of *Miami Vice*,

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as a macho stud. Apparently he is a weak-willed wimp.” Rip scribbled that down. “Are you okay, Mr. Johnson?”

Don said, “Ubba.”

“Should I slap him?” George offered.

“I have a better idea,” said Rip. He strolled over to a computer console and made intricate adjustments to various dials. Then he yanked the Artifish from its holster and tapped the same scale twice. In the span of three seconds, Don found himself at the bottom of a boiling tar pit in some prehistoric age, stranded in a frozen wasteland wearing nothing but a linen suit, and hanging from the wing of a starship in the depths of outer space. Then he appeared back on the investigation stage.

“Help me, mommy!” he bawled, shivering and twitching.

“Welcome to my spaceship, Mr. Johnson. I have a few questions for you.”

“Mommy...mommy...”

“Do you believe that you are somehow entitled to vast wealth and superstardom?”

“Definitely!” said Don, wondering if this had anything to do with the drugs he took in college.

“Why?” prodded Rip.

“Just because.” Don’s gravelly voice and macho demeanor had

fully returned.

“More information, please.”

Don scratched his temple. “I’ve got a cool car.”

“And....?”

“I dress nice.”

“And....?”

“I’m an entertainer. I sing and I act.”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” Rip smirked.

“I have a gold-certified album and a TV show viewed by 15 million every week!”

“Success is not evidence of talent, Mr. Johnson. Your fan base is reported to consist wholly of lust-ridden females.”

“You’re right about that!” blurted Don.

Rip gave him a dirty look and continued. “Do you have any other evidence that can prove you worthy of your wealth and superstardom?”

“No, that’s about it.”

“Are you certain?”

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“Yup.”

“Words fail me.”

“Me too,” George interjected. “You didn’t even mention your keen hair!” Don was inspired to proudly run his fingers through his sun-bleached hair as George applauded.

“Incidentally,” Rip said, “you neglected to shave this morning.”

“I did?” Don cried, reaching up to feel his rough face. “Dang it all! I keep forgetting to pick up shaving cream at the drugstore and nobody on the set seems to notice.”

“I’m going to send you back to Miami now, Mr. Johnson. Don’t eat any gas station sushi for a few weeks, okay?” Rip zapped Don away before he could say a word.

“Hey!” accusingly spat George. “I thought you were going to stop warning people about their impending deaths!”

“Stop whining, George. Your point is well-taken.” Rip plopped down in his opulent chair.

“Who’s the last person on our list?”

“He’s not exactly a person. I suppose he could be described as an ‘it,’ but not really because he has the personality of a man, even though he...it...he...kind of...” Rip began to tug out his hair as he searched for the proper words. “Let’s just summon him to the *Titanberg* and see what happens.” Rip adjusted the Artifish and started the teleportation process. The air grew fuzzy, and there it

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was. (The air didn't buzz. This is an important detail. Keep in mind that the air didn't buzz.)

"A television set?" George laughed. "That's our subject?"

"I b-b-beg your PARdon?" defended the television set.

Baffled beyond belief, George took a few steps in the direction of a nearby padded room.

"Where the DEvil am I and WHAT am I doing HERE-here-HERE?" stuttered the humanoid face on the screen.

"I have your name as Max Headroom—do you prefer to be called Mr. Headroom?" Rip had never encountered a comparable lifeform and wanted to remain as polite as possible.

"Just M-M-M-M-MAX will be OKEY-dokey, Smokey. HA!"

"M-M-M-M-MAX, you say. Could I amend that to simply Max? The other way makes my teeth rattle."

"WhatEVER trip-trip-trips yer trigger, PARTner!"

George saw that Max had a seemingly computer-generated face. The screen rendered him with slick sunglasses and a flashy tie, as a psychedelic display of color and light flashed behind him. George wondered if Max ever had to shower.

"Please describe yourself, Max."

"WHY? U can see ME, c-c-can't U?"

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“Indeed, yet I have reason to believe that your perspective is unique.”

“Oh KAY then! I can HANdle that. Once upON a t-t-t-time there LIVED a man named EDison Carter who KRISH-krush-CRASHED a motorcycle and NEARly bought the FARM! EDison’s mind was STORED within a compUTer and the REsults were astonishing-ing-ing. Just LOOK at me! I’m GORgeous!” Max grinned widely, and a white light flashed from the screen.

“Quite unique,” said Rip, making notes in his electronic notebook.

“Now M-M-M-M-MAX has a question 4 U, buddy BOY. I was FILMing a commercial for new-new-new Coke, and now I’m STARing at YOUR ugly mug. Who ARE U people?”

“Pardon my poor manners. I am Rip Tapioca and my friend here is called George of the Gelatin-Brains.”

Max’s wisecracking image suddenly tensed up. He growled and bared his perfect white teeth.

“You have been teleported to the spaceship *Titanberg* so that I could apply my objectively impressive skills as an Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power. The Universal Tribunal requires that I verify moments of history in various slivers of our shared reality. For instance, our last assignment involved meeting people with cruel and unusual names.”

Max began to electronically snarl. George noticed this and

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shivered, then looked around for a parka.

“Joy Payne, Jay Byrd, Mike Hunt, Ben Dover and his lovely wife Eileen, et cetera. I also recall a young woman named Pumpkin Pye.”

Max was now having computerized convulsions.

“Is something wrong, Max?”

“That’s M-M-M-Mister Headroom 2 you, SCUMbag!” Max bellowed, as four limbs of solid energy sprouted out of his television set. He took a few hesitant steps on his new energy legs, and cackled. “NOTHING sets my chips in a t-t-tizzy MORE than someONE named after a dessert-ert!”

“Quite unique,” blurped Rip, making a few more notes.

Max stuttered his way through a berserker snarl and carved a swath of destruction across the lab. Laser beams of ominous power pulsed from his eyes.

“Heavens! Tapioca is a dessert!” realized Rip. He leaped under his computer console.

Meanwhile, George of the Gelatin-Brains was trying his best to reason with the unhinged TV screen. “You don’t need to kill me. My name is George, and that’s not a dessert item.”

“KILL the GELatin-BRAIN!” crackled Max. The insane robotic beast seized George around the neck using his newly sprouted arms and bonked George’s sloshy head against the floor. This experience

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served as a detailed illustration of the phrase “crushed skull.”

Rip poked his head over the computer console and witnessed the violent abuse. He howled in a valiant tone, “Stop this madness!”

“NO!” grunted Max.

“Okay,” returned Rip. He went to the refrigerator and rummaged around for something to munch. The blueberry yogurt looked particularly tasty.

George grew more and more miffed, for his recently fixed face was being ground into powder. He made an objection: “Why [bonk] are [bonk] you [bonk] bonking [bonk] my [bonk] face?”

Max let out a sinister laugh. “It is MY des-ti-ny 2 kill EVERYone who is named afTER a dessert-ert-ert-ert!” As this plot device was now wearing thin, Max suddenly vanished and George fell to the floor. His face was healed and the spaceship had reverted to its normal state.

“What the—”

A brilliant light shone through every nook and cranny of the *Titanberg* as a cold and forceful wind blew relentlessly across the room, an obvious forerunner to pure evil entering these time/space coordinates. An apparition appeared, as they often do, floating above the floor in a very apparition-like fashion: a shapely yet shapeless female form, wearing an obviously expensive mist and holding her arms out in a pointing gesture with supernatural fire blazing from her wrists.

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“Uh-oh,” commented George.

“I AM THE GHOST OF VANNA WHITE!” This unearthly voice would surely cause insects to become sterile.

“Hello,” said George.

“YOU WILL BE TORTURED WITHOUT MERCY AND THEN SLAIN BY THE MOST PAINFUL METHODS IMAGINABLE!”

“Seen any good movies lately?”

At this point, Rip looked up from his yogurt and saw a transparent game show hostess threatening George with a lovely parting gift. “Welcome back, Miss White! Sorry about that business with the manhole cover. You should have heeded my advice.”

“HEEDED YOUR ADVICE?”

Discreetly pulling out his notebook, Rip jotted the words “hard of hearing.”

“I’M NOT HARD OF HEARING, YOU DOLT!”

Rip crossed out those words and wrote “omniscient” instead. Then he said, “I would venture to guess that you were the cause of Max Headroom’s irrational rampage.”

“ISN’T THAT OBVIOUS? THAT WASN’T THE REAL MAX HEADROOM! DIDN’T YOU NOTICE THAT THE AIR

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DIDN'T BUZZ WHEN YOU ZAPPED HIM ABOARD?"

"It didn't?" Clearly Rip had not been reading the parenthetical notes in this narrative.

"DID YOU REALLY THINK THAT A COMPUTER-GENERATED PERSONALITY WOULD SPROUT ARMS AND LEGS BECAUSE HE WANTED TO KILL PEOPLE NAMED AFTER DESSERTS?"

"I wouldn't know. Max is the first computer-generated personality I've ever had the pleasure of meeting."

"I CREATED THAT DUPLICATE OF MAX HEADROOM WITH MY BOUNDLESS POWERS!"

"Letter-turning isn't exactly a power. It's more of a craft, a skill that can be learned with time and practice."

"YOU DIE NOW!" screeched the ghost of Vanna White, releasing bolts of lightning from her fingertips.

Rip said, "Aaaaauuugh!"

George said, "Oooooooooowwww!"

Thousands of semi-intelligent cat toys said, "ATTACK!" Battalion after battalion swarmed on Vanna's mistlike form as she screamed in horror.

"Holy deus ex machina!" cried Rip. "It's the Semi-Intelligent Cat Toys of Arcturus-5! They arrived in the nick of time to save their

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legendary leader, namely me!” The Marshal of the Time Stream shook off the excess electricity and beheld the exciting exhibition. Dozens of wind-up mice were viciously spinning, causing the ghost of Vanna White to dissipate. Countless balls with bells charged in waves of vicious fury, hurling an inescapable force into her ethereal face and making a cute dinging sound in the process. Using the strength of their vast numbers, the cat toys slowly drove the ghost toward the Black Hole Trash Relocator. Vanna shrieked loudly, chilling the spines of all who had spines to be chilled. The brave cat toys gave one final shove and the apparition found itself consumed by the Black Hole Trash Relocator. After a tremendous flash subsided, the ghost of Vanna White was gone forever.

“Is it over?” asked George, getting up from the floor. He obviously had no idea that when the enemy is instantly transported into the depths of space, it’s usually over.

“Yes, noble Gelatin-Brain. The threat of Vanna White has been eliminated.” Rip turned to the cat toys, which were enthusiastically rallying around his legs. He vigorously shook his legs to disattach some of his loving subjects. They got into formation and awaited word from their leader. An adorable cat toy murmur arose.

Rip hopped onto the investigation stage and used the Artfish to levitate it above the floor. The Timeboots giggled with glee. George came up behind Rip and whispered, “Why don’t you say a few words?”

Rip cleared his throat and began. “Railroad, cantaloupe, androgyny, copyright, extinguish, perfume, filibuster, anthrax,

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barbecue—”

“Maybe I’m stupid,” George interrupted, “but I think ‘a few words’ usually indicates complete sentences.”

Rip slapped himself forcefully. “That’s right! I’m rather new to this whole leadership thing.” He started over: “Honorable cat toys, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart, and conversely the heart of my bottom. You were the Gatorade™ for my thirst, the Tylenol© for my headache, the Pepto-Bismol® for my heartburn. I was grasping for straws, and you gave me big old telephone poles, which are much bigger and therefore better. These metaphors are getting tiring. Please titter appreciatively if you understand any of this.”

Most of the cat toys tittered appreciatively.

“Well done. Thank you, my precious cat toys. Thank you so very much.” Rip bowed in gratitude and noticed that the floor needed a good wax job.

The cat toys cheered as their leader completed his speech, and those who had legs gave him a standing ovation. Soon they made a beeline to their lightspeed transport so they could return to their home planet. (It bears mentioning—just barely—that cat toys are universally accepted as the worst drivers in existence. In one legendary incident a pack of cat toys ran a red light, grazed a dozen bag ladies, collided head-on with a comet, and caused a binary star system to go nova. All this carnage was achieved on one tank of plutonium hydrate. Did this really bear mentioning? And did we mention the bear?) Cat toys swarmed over the steering wheel and

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gearshift while others operated the accelerator and brake pedal, and they all worked together to wreak havoc all the way back to Arcturus-5.

Rip watched the transport zip away at lightspeed until it was a tiny dot in the far reaches of space. This took about three hours, so George took a nap while Rip's neck slowly cramped.

As soon as Rip decided that he had been staring into space long enough, he went back to the computer console to renew his work on the infernal language of James Brown.

“Snnzzl uzk,” droned George.

“I believe that phrase means ‘to trip on shoelaces,’” said Rip. Suddenly realizing that George was not present for his extensive James Brown studies, Rip took a gander at the dozing Gelatin-Brain.

“Tsk, tsk,” muttered Rip as he pressed a worn-down scale on the Artifish.

The air grew fuzzy, buzzed, and there he was: wearing the garb of the Chicago Bears, the immense man-mountain rookie known as William “The Refrigerator” Perry. “Wazzup, Rip? Did George fall asleep without permission again?”

“Unfortunately so, William. Would you mind kicking him into next week once more?”

“No problem, buddy.”

Rip approached his computer console. “I’ll set the controls and

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you can put George into position. Be careful not to wake him up!” Rip warned, fiddling with some widgets.

The Fridge gently lifted George and propped him into a sitting position. “Guess what, Rip? I gained twenty pounds this month, and my trainer thinks that some of it might be muscle!”

“That would be a pleasant surprise, wouldn’t it?” Rip finished his calculations and a dimensional interface resembling a vertical puddle of glittering water appeared a few meters ahead of George and the Fridge.

“Now?”

“Now.”

The Fridge dropkicked George into the time-warp puddle. A mere instant before being transported to next week, George returned to consciousness with one thought racing through his skull: *Now I remember why I flew into this room with the approximate velocity of a comet hurtling through space! I was dropkicked by—*

Then he was gone.

“Cool!” cheered the Fridge. “By the way, how come you keep forcing a memory loss? George won’t remember what he did wrong, so he’ll probably just do it again.”

“The punishment is subliminal. His subconscious mind gets closer to figuring out his sins with each censure.”

The Fridge checked George’s trajectory and frowned. “We forgot to aim him at Marilyn Monroe’s beauty mark like last time.”

“I’m certain that he’ll find some other large object to be

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shattered upon,” Rip reassured. “Shall we adjourn to lunch? There’s an excellent sushi bar two galaxies over...”

The Fridge glared.

“Or we could go to your favorite place. It’s called Gluttons Galore, correct?”

A smile crawled across the Fridge’s lips, which he started licking in anticipation of the Side O’ Beef Special. “What are we waiting for?”

Tapping the Artifish, Rip stuttered, “Th-buh-th-buh-th-buh-that’s all folks!”

“Porky Pig impressions when you’re standing next to a fat guy? How insensitive.”

“Never mind the subtext, William. Let’s go eat.”

As the twosome faded from view, the Black Hole Trash Relocator trembled just enough to anticipate a sequel or two.

END