

MindFlights

A Magazine of the Speculative

Featuring
Terry W. Ervin, II



www.mindflights.com

Issue 1

Vegetable Matters

Terry W. Ervin II

Only two weeks after graduation and I was on a jet, traveling to cover my first real assignment. During my last semester's lame internship I'd covered sizzling stories like protests over historic building renovations otherwise mistaken for loitering gaggles of senior citizens waiting on a nursing home mini-bus.

Okay, so I wasn't with a prestigious newspaper or magazine. No, I worked for the *Weekly Electron Star*, an online startup competing with the weekly supermarket tabloids.

My contact at Southwest Florida International Airport, a Mr. Dennis Sherkle, said he'd be wearing a New York Mets ball cap and a green shirt. New York was hard-charging for the worst record in the entire league; predictably, the number of Mets caps was limited to one. The tall fellow, whose Crayola-green shirt stood out more than his hat, watched arriving passengers crowd the luggage carousel. I waved and, with a widening grin, he pointed from himself to me and back.

I reserved judgment based on his attire. My loafers, blue khakis, and slightly wrinkled shirt didn't exactly shout 'hot-shot reporter.' I'd figured August in Florida was too sweltering for a tie or sport jacket.

My contact met me halfway, offering a short but firm handshake. "Mr. Sherkle," I said, smiling back, "I'm Marvin Petro of the *Weekly Electron Star*."

"Who else would you be?" Mr. Sherkle joked. With the beginnings of crow's feet and lightly stained teeth, I pegged him as a coffee drinker in his mid-thirties. "Call me Dennis."

"Great," I said, watching the crowd move on the luggage carousel like Weight Watchers escapees descending on a Chinese buffet. "Call me Marv."

Dennis made use of his six-inch height advantage. "What color's your bag, Marv?"

I pointed to my carry-on slung over my shoulder. "Black, like this, but with neon green tape around the handle."

"Good idea, the tape," he said and cut into the crowd.

Before I knew it we'd made our way through the airport and shuttle ride to the parking lot. I tried to guess what kind of car Dennis drove and decided on a clunker Honda Civic from the eighties.

Moderating his long strides for me, Dennis asked, "Hungry?"

"After the tiny bag of eight pretzels they served in coach?"

He laughed. "You a fast-food fella or a sit-down sort?"

My editor had arranged everything, telling me only that the story involved corporate theft and property rights. During her brief four a.m. call, Jenni had failed to clarify if it involved intellectual property rights or property as in land and buildings, or both.

"What's our destination?" I asked, checking my cell phone. Jenni hadn't responded to the text message I'd sent during my taxi ride to Newark Liberty International Airport.

"It's a ways," he said while unlocking the doors to a chili-pepper red Saturn VUE. "You'll see."

I stowed my luggage, except for my laptop and recording equipment, before getting buckled in. "My editor, Ms. Smyth, set this up this morning. Who will I be interviewing?"

"I know she did," Dennis said, starting the engine. "You'll be interviewing me." He shifted into drive and maneuvered out of the lot. "At least to start with." He shrugged. "Maybe only me, probably."

The way he kept adjusting his hat and licking his teeth told me to hold off on the interview a bit. Better to build some rapport first. "You said we're gonna be on the road a while." He nodded. "I trust you to pick a good sit-down place between here and there."



After traveling about two hours, mainly east, I'd learned some interesting things about Dennis Sherkle. He was older than I thought and he'd lived through some tragic events. His wife died of cancer after only ten years of marriage and left him with two children, Sammy and Janelle. Two years after that, Dennis lost both his parents and Sammy when a drunk driver crossed the centerline and slammed into them on the way home from a Disney movie. Ten-year-old Janelle survived the wreck, but watched her big brother bleed to death, pinned against her. Years of therapy did little to silence her nightmares. Dennis didn't mention much more about Janelle, other than that she was now in a vegetative state. He uttered it in an emotionally restrained voice and immediately switched topics.

He talked about his career as computer programmer and consultant and how he and his partner built their client list during the run-up to the highly overrated Y2K crisis. Dennis sold his share in the company to his partner because Janelle's medical condition required his attention. He worked at home doing web design and maintenance for former clients.

Although I kept a professional distance during our discussion, Dennis proved to be a likeable guy. We discussed old shows like *Kolchak: the Night Stalker* series, although he frowned when I asked if he had the series on DVD. He said, again in his restrained voice, "It doesn't appeal to me any more."

He changed subjects to reading and authors, but when I mentioned Stephen King, Dennis frowned and looked away. About a minute later he clicked on his VUE's turn signal. "We'll stop here." His voice shifted from monotone back to normal as he continued. "Marv, you said you trusted me to pick a good sit-down place?"

I eyed the graying shack that, with its several additions, aspired to someday become a barn. "You're right there, I did." A dozen vehicles sat parked in the gravel lot, ranging from beat-up 4x4 pickups to spotless white Cadillacs. A sign's faded red letters named the place. "Bill and Janie's Roadside Stop?"

He noted my raised eyebrow and grinned. "Never been to a mom-and-pop greasy spoon?" Dennis asked before backing in between a mud-spattered Blazer and a red late sixties model Mustang. "Trust me."

"Okay," I agreed, staring at the Mustang. "I almost forgot cars don't rust down here."

Dennis reached back between the seats and grabbed a soft-sided briefcase by its shoulder strap. "Yep. Warm weather. No snow. That's why we moved down here."

"Right, no salt," I remarked, thinking how Dennis said 'we'. I assumed he meant his incapacitated daughter, but his peculiar mood during our conversation urged me not to press the issue right then. If it mattered for the story, I'd get it.

"Might want to bring in your laptop, Marv. Great food but some of the locals are questionable. Usually those don't arrive until after sunset." He peered through the windshield at the gathering clouds. "In any case, I won't be cracking the windows."

After walking across the lot, Dennis opened the restaurant door and bade me enter first. "Second best thing here is nobody listens in on conversations."

The tall, buxom waitress with a pencil stuck in auburn curls held by a hairnet smiled at Dennis. He waved back and pointed to an open booth along the far wall. She nodded. "Have yer menus to ya in a minute, Den."

We walked past the counter filled with seated diners facing a gray-haired grill cook joking with a Hispanic teen scrubbing pans in a nearby sink. A burly redneck gently elbowed a granny-sweatered lady who laughed and added her two cents worth.

I breathed in the greasy, smoke-tainted air. "Friendly place," I said, sliding into the booth. The table's blue geometric pattern Formica matched the counter, both in age and scarring. The blue-and-white vinyl seats had various slits patched with yellowing tape.

Dennis shuffled through his briefcase. "It is. Never changes." He glanced up at the nearest picture nailed to the wood grain paneling. The faded black-and-white showed a man in hip-waders hefting a pole holding a massive snapping turtle. "That's Bill behind the grill."

The waitress handed us stained cardstock menus. "Heya, Den. What, been six hours since breakfast?" She winked at him, chewing her gum. "Who's yer friend?"

"Valerie, this is Marv Petro. He's a reporter."

"Is that so? Hey, hon, you know any restaurant critics?" She winked again at Dennis, blew a bubble and snapped it. Somehow her blue cotton-poly knit uniform and stained apron seemed natural on her. "Bill'd luv a good paper write-up on his Fried Baloney Gobbler." She laughed and looked over her shoulder at the old cook while preparing her pencil and order pad.

Valerie had a warmth about her, and discarding the fake eyelashes and heavy makeup—she'd have been *really* attractive. I shrugged. "Sorry, our publication doesn't have a food critic."

"Whatcha drinkin'?"

Dennis scratched his neck and cleared his throat. "I'm gonna tell Marv about Janelle." His voice was barely audible over the counter's raucous laughter.

The smile fled Valerie's face. "Coffee, three quarters." Her eyes shifted from Dennis to me. "You?"

"Ummm, iced tea." Then I remembered as our waitress turned. "Unsweetened." She nodded but didn't turn around.

Dennis rummaged around in his briefcase again. "Janelle spent most summers down here with my parents. Her and Valerie became close. Even after the car accident, she spent a few weeks each summer with Valerie's family through high school." After saying that he focused on his menu.

No longer smiling, our waitress arrived with our drinks. She slid a three-quarters-filled coffee mug in front of Dennis and a tall glass of iced tea in front of me. Right on cue, as if practiced a thousand times, Valerie turned her back on Dennis and asked me, "What'll you have?" The instant she did, Dennis procured a small metal flask from his briefcase and added, guessing from the odor, whisky to his drink.

I answered, "I'll try Bill's Fried Bologna Gobbler," trying to bring a little mirth back to the table.

"Chips or fries with that?"

"Do you have a salad?"

"Cole slaw weekdays. Salad Saturdays. Choice on Sundays."

I handed her my menu. "Nothing else then. May I have a straw?"

Valerie rolled her eyes playfully. "Sorry, hon. Here ya go. Den, the usual?" He nodded. She watched Dennis sip his coffee while staring at the table. "Bill's shoulder's botherin' him more'n usual today, so it'll be bout fifteen." She slipped her pencil back into her hair and patted Dennis on the shoulder. "I'll check back in a few."

I drank my tea quietly. It was bitter, but I never cared for tea with sugar.

Finally, after a short sip, Dennis cleared his throat. "I called your editor to get the story out about Janelle." He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, still not meeting my eyes. "I know you'll have questions, but let me get through this." He lifted a manila folder from his briefcase. "After lunch, on the way to see her, I've got some articles—things on gene splicing and retroviruses to read over." He finished his cup of coffee and Valerie passed by with a refill pot. "I won't answer any questions about Janelle until you've seen her." With that said, he retrieved his flask again.

"You gonna be okay to drive?"

"I'll be nursing this one." From his wallet he slid a photograph on the table, a senior portrait of a cheery brunette with deep brown eyes. "This is—was—Janelle."

Dennis sat up, then hunched back over his coffee and looked me in the eye. "My little girl. I told you about the car wreck. She never was the same

after that. Always worried. Always had trouble forming attachments. Afraid they'd die too, sooner or later."

Dennis watched me pull out my voice recorder and switch it on. "Anyway," he continued, "she kept good grades and got into college studying Art History at first, then decided to be a teacher. History major, art minor. Then she fell into a crowd of eco-nuts." He shook his head. "More than your Greenpeace or Save-the-Whale types. Total nutjobs. Heck, I still give to good organizations, ones without crazy militant agendas. But these guys were radical. They hid it well."

He sat back up. "Anyway, Janelle fell for this doctoral student, Bradley McPherson. He'd earned a B.S. in chemistry with a minor in botany before going into the graduate bioengineering program.

"Janelle wanted to switch to eco-studies at the end of her junior year. But I convinced her to stick it out, do her student teaching and get her education degree, then go back to school if she still had the desire."

Dennis snatched up his daughter's picture and carefully returned it to its place in his wallet. "She agreed, but Brad was having problems. Corporate funding was unexpectedly withdrawn from the research project he'd been working on. He, along with several other grad students—two of them his hardcore eco-buddies, were going to be left high and dry before finishing their PhD program. Janelle said the university assured everyone that something would be worked out.

"Anyway, like I said, they maintained a normal profile, but were really radical underneath. Even Janelle began talking like them. She'd insist, 'Mankind is nothing more than a parasite feeding off the earth, killing it.' She'd go into near mouth-frothing rants when an oil executive on the news discussed profits. Don't dare mention nuclear power. She tried convincing

me that farmers are near the greatest evil, destroying wildlife habitat for their crops."

Dennis slapped his hand down on the table. Nobody at the counter took notice. "Can you believe that, Marv? I asked her what are people supposed to eat? She said, 'Brad says he's working on the answer to that.' My little girl was already emotionally fragile and that eco-jerk did his best to brainwash her."

Dennis clamped his hands onto his coffee mug. "I told myself she'd only need to make it to the end of the year. Then she'd graduate, come home for the summer, away from Brad, and I'd get her straightened out—back into therapy or something. I refused her money for a spring break trip. She said they wanted to visit the Sequoia National Forest. I suspected she was lying. Later I learned they wanted to go screw with the logging up north of there. Spike trees, sabotage equipment. Things like that.

"I hoped Brad would go with his buddies without Janelle. But, damn him, he stayed to help shut down the research project. It shocked me when, the first day of spring break, Janelle showed up at home."

Customers at the counter, laughing. Their merriment stood at odds with Dennis's guilt-ridden anger. The intentionally measured pace of his voice, white knuckles gripping the mug. Right then it was impossible to imagine him ever telling a joke, let alone laughing or smiling again.

Dennis seemed sincere, maybe too sincere. Something in the back of my mind whispered, "Is this guy still firing on all cylinders?"

I'd missed some of what Dennis had said and my eyes fixed on my recorder, verifying it was still on. I let out a little sigh of relief before finishing off the tea lurking between the ice cubes.

"It was all I could do to settle Janelle down," explained Dennis. "Her face was swollen and streaming tears. I didn't care that the university police had arrested Brad, but she did. We sat in the den and I held my little girl while she cried it out."

Rain began pattering against the Roadside Stop's tin roof, snapping Dennis from his trance-like telling. Again, as if on cue, Valerie arrived with our orders, as smooth as if she were on roller blades. In front of Dennis she slid a deep bowl of red, greasy soup containing potatoes, carrots, celery and chunks of white meat I guessed to be some sort of fish, along with a bowl of saltine crackers. In front of me Valerie placed a tall-stacked sandwich sliced diagonally and held erect with long toothpicks. Toasted white bread, a thick slice of fried bologna—the edges charred a bit, a fried egg whose yolk wasn't quite solid, romaine lettuce, an onion slice and three types of melted cheese oozing down the sides onto the plate.

"Bill took the liberty of adding a swipe of butter and mayo," said Valerie. "You good on tea, hon?"

"Maybe a refill in a minute, thanks. And a cholesterol meter?"

"Nah, the lettuce makes it healthy. Den, you fine?"

"My coffee could use a warm-up." His voice showed no sign of the intensity or distress exhibited moments before. He crushed a handful of crackers and sprinkled them over his soup. "I'd prefer to talk about something else while we eat, if you don't mind?"

"No problem. It's your story." I shrugged and clicked off my recorder. "How'd you find this place?"

"You like it?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Maybe I should wait until I finish Bill's special?" I took a bite of the gooey mess. It wasn't bad. Definitely not healthy, but pretty good. Maybe even a dash of lemon pepper in it.

Dennis stirred his soup. "My father and Bill were lifelong friends. Dad grew up down here. Inherited Grandpa's property. We live there now." His voice cracked a little at the word 'we'.

"I've only visited Florida once. Vacation," I said, politely working to change the subject. "Are there really as many old folks down here as they say?"

Dennis tasted his soup and smiled up at Valerie as she refilled our drinks. "Depends on where," he said. During the rest of the meal our discussion touched upon old folk migration, amusement parks, and hurricanes, as if his daughter's problem, if that was the point of his story, didn't exist.

Finally, Dennis pushed his bowl aside, sipped his coffee, and got that intense look back in his eyes. I switched the recorder back on.

He started right where he left off. "I guess I didn't say, Janelle showed up about ten at night and we talked for about an hour, before she'd cried herself out. I suggested she go to bed and we'd talk in the morning. Because the den where we lived back then had track lighting, I didn't notice until Janelle came down for breakfast, a green tint to her hair, starting at the scalp, extending out about a half inch. I attributed it to the eco-obsession fostered by her friends.

"She noticed me staring and replied with a scowl. I didn't make an issue of it. Instead I asked, 'Orange juice with your pancakes?'

"A big glass, please.'

"Thirsty?' I asked, grabbing the OJ carton from the fridge. She rolled her eyes and said, 'No, I just thought I'd drink half and pour the rest down the drain.'

"Janelle got up from the table and opened the blinds, letting in the morning sun. It seemed to lighten her spirits. You'd've thought it'd been a week since she'd eaten. A stack of six pancakes drenched in syrup and almost a half gallon of OJ later she slowed down.

"While cleaning up, I spotted her pale green fingernails. Just a tint, like her hair and only at the base of her nails. I guessed it to be some code for her eco group—her being new and all. She was soon to be graduated and away from them, plus the polish looked decent, so told her I liked it.

"She glanced down at her hands, apparently surprised, then stacked our dishes and asked, 'You up for a walk after I clean up?'

"Sure', I told her, checking the TV's weather radar. 'Looks like rain this afternoon.' All she said was, 'Yep.'"

Dennis's face took on a haunted aspect, like someone walking past his brother's casket, whose last exchange had been an argument ending with, "I hope it kills ya—see if I care!"

He took a deep breath and continued. "Marv, I should've known. Maybe not exactly, but that *something* was wrong. Even so, our afternoon went great, Janelle's spirits perking up the longer we were out and about. It was hot and sunny, and she put away more liquids—water, sodas, lemonade, than I'd ever seen her do.

"When night came, Janelle lost her spark, like someone flicked her on-switch off. And the next morning I heard her in the bathroom, getting sick. I feared what I thought was the worst thing that could've happened—she was pregnant with Bradley McPherson's child. She didn't look too good at

breakfast either, but perked up again after laying out on the back deck. I noticed, but didn't mention, her bikini's tight fit across the chest and around the waist. I went to work later that afternoon, figuring if she was with child, she'd tell me soon enough.

"Her pattern continued for a couple days. Wake up in a brooding mood and get sick, read a book in the afternoon sun and cheer up a bit, return to sulking depression after dinner. She never talked about Brad or his friends, but she added more green to her hair and nails. And she'd started wearing what I thought were green contact lenses. She avoided me whenever possible, pretending to work on lesson plans, or feigning interest in a movie.

"Thursday, when I came home for lunch, Janelle was finishing off a two-liter bottle of soda. I had to say something. Her bikini had gone from snug to barely able to contain her. And she'd be going back Sunday to finish up student teaching. I tried broaching the subject by suggesting, 'Might try switching back to diet soda. That swimsuit's about to snap.'

"She calmly threw the empty bottle in the recycling basket, grabbed a full one from the fridge, and defiantly began chugging, not even bothering with a glass. I asked, 'Is there something you want to tell me?' She replied, 'No,' smugly, as if she hadn't a care in the world. She went back outside while I made a sandwich. Before going back to work I told my daughter I'd take her shopping for some new clothes after work, before she went back to school and student teaching.

"That evening, Janelle was sitting on the front porch, waiting for me. She got up stiffly, wearing the jean shorts and blouse she'd had on the night she arrived home. They fit like she'd left them in the dryer way too long. In addition to her green contacts, it looked like she'd added some sort of coloring or dye to her eyes, giving their whites a green sheen. Even if her

face was red and puffy from crying, I decided things had gone far enough. I just hoped we'd make it through the front door before any yelling or hysterics started.

"Once in the den, she started with, 'Daddy,' then stopped and cried, not knowing how or what to say next. I waited, wondering how other parents handled it when their little girls told them they were pregnant. I told myself that at least she was nearly finished with her degree.

"I handed Janelle a few tissues and, after blowing her nose, she calmed down. She started to speak several times, but couldn't find the words or courage, or both. Finally she blurted, 'Daddy, Brad and me did something.' I think the words surprised her when they came out, but it spurred another rush. 'And, I'm not sure what's gonna happen. I'm scared.'

"I tried to act surprised while biting back my anger. Brad was *not* the man Janelle should be tied to through a child the rest of her life. Until then I hadn't realized how much I'd allowed things to build up inside. I carefully chose my words. 'Tell me what's the matter, Janelle, and we'll work through it. Everything will be okay, I promise.'

"My moderated tone was something Janelle recognized, enabling her to cut right through my emotional screen. It really lit her fuse. 'What do you think this is? Some lame therapy session? You have no frickin' idea what you're talking about—let alone what I'm talking about. What I'm going through! If Brad were here, I wouldn't even be talking to you. It was stupid to even try.'

"'Just how naïve do you think I am?'

"Janelle rolled her eyes. 'What? You think you know what's going on?' She leaned back on the couch and crossed her arms. 'You're way out of your league with this, Dad, but go ahead. This'll be good.'

"I couldn't stop myself from pointing my finger at her sneering face. 'I'm not that old, and it's not been that many years since your mom was pregnant with you.' Janelle's mouth fell open for a fraction of a second while I continued. 'Sick in the morning, out growing your tops and slacks.'

"Me, pregnant? You think that's it? I'm that irresponsible?' She stiffly got to her feet. 'Just throw your drowning daughter an anchor, why don't cha?'

"Well, what is it then?'

"She turned to walk away. 'Why bother?'

"I stood, but didn't follow her. 'Because I'm your father. Because I care, Janelle. When you hurt, I hurt.'

"In the doorway she turned and faced me. 'I'm sorry, Dad. I shouldn't have come home.'

"Why not?'

"Resolve flowed into her voice. 'Brad said I shouldn't stay around school.'

"Why not? Did he know they were going to arrest him? That's what this is about?'

"She took a step back into the den. 'I should've gone and stayed with Dina or Mickey.'

"No, Janelle, your instincts to come home were right. But I still don't understand.'

"Sit down, Dad, and I'll tell you what I can.'

"I was suspicious of her 'what I can' statement, but sat anyway, hoping to get at least a few pieces of the puzzle.

"Janelle crossed her arms after failing to slip her hands into her shorts' pockets. 'Brad said his research project was too important to pull the plug on. They'd made so much progress, even up to vertebrates like rats.'

"It wasn't Brad's research, but I didn't quibble over that. 'Janelle, I don't know what the research project entailed.'

"Hardly anybody did. Brad had to sign confidentiality papers, everyone in his department did.'

"Is that why he's in jail?'

"No, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that we didn't let the research die. I'm part of it now, with Brad.'

"Part of what?'

"The future of mankind,' she said with stoic conviction. 'Of this planet? No more farming, no more slaughtering animals for food.'

"She was back to the eco-wacko stuff. 'Is this something all your eco-buddies are in on?' I regretted saying 'eco-buddies' the second the words slipped out, but at least I didn't say nutcases, which I thought Janelle was straying towards.

"She just laughed and shook her head. 'I knew you wouldn't get it, Dad.'

"Get what?' I asked. 'When we started this conversation, I thought you were scared.'

"I am. I still am, but just listening to you—Brad said you wouldn't understand.'

"I'd had it with Bradley McPherson. That arrogant tree-hugging bastard had dragged my little girl into some kind of trouble. Real trouble, and she obviously wasn't thinking straight. I was seconds from blowing my stack when Janelle's cell phone rang, chiming out the seventies tune, *Born Free*.

"She flipped open her phone and took the call. I couldn't hear what was said, but whatever it was, devastated her. She fell back against the door frame, crying out, 'No. No!' and slid to the floor. She dropped the phone and stared ahead. No words, no noise, just tears streaming down her face.

"I knelt down and took her hands. They were cold and rough. 'What is it, Janelle? What's wrong?' She didn't even look at me. Someone was still talking on the phone so I picked it up. 'Who is this? What did you tell Janelle?'

"'Brad's dead,' replied a deep voice. 'Who is this?'

"I looked at Janelle, now staring at me. 'I'm Janelle's father.' Whoever it was, hung up.

"I held Janelle for an hour as she cried, the whole time physically cold and emotionally distant. Then we retired to the kitchen where I cooked her chicken noodle soup with crackers. We shared the meal in silence and afterwards she grabbed two bottles of spring water and wandered up to her bedroom. I followed, stopping at the bottom of the stairs and I said, 'We'll talk in the morning. Call and talk to Brad's parents about arrangements.' She only nodded.

"The next morning I woke to pounding at the front door, and with a hangover; the first since my wife's funeral. At the door I found two plain-clothed detectives. A tall redhead introduced herself as Detective Carmens and her dumpy partner, Detective Grumski.

"Grumski asked if Janelle Sherkle was home and if they could speak with her. My mind immediately raced to what lawyers I knew. Only a real-estate and a patent attorney. No criminal lawyers. When I asked why they

wanted to speak with my daughter, they said it was about the death of Bradley McPherson.

"The detectives noted my unsurprised reaction to their news, and I told them that Janelle had been with me the whole week, including last night, and that I'd heard Brad had been arrested and was in jail. I wasn't thinking clearly and talking too much.

"I let Grumski and Carmens in before hurrying upstairs to get Janelle. The whistling of bird calls from a nature CD filtered into the hall. I knocked on the bedroom door and called twice before going in. She was gone, luggage and all.

"I ran out to the garage, the detectives right behind me. My Subaru and her Cavalier were still there. I'd unhooked the battery cables from both before going to bed.

"Where is she?' Detective Carmens asked.

"I don't know.'

"Grumski looked skeptical. 'Are you sure? We believe her health, if not her life, is in danger.'

"That statement shocked me. 'What do you mean?' I asked, trying to read their faces, hoping Grumski was lying.

"Carmens pulled a small notepad from her pocket and referred to it. 'According to the coroner's preliminary report, Mr. McPherson died from seizures and subsequent respiratory failure.'

"What does that have to do with my Janelle?'

"We believe McPherson's death is directly related to a batch of experimental drugs he stole from the university. It's our understanding they're from a research project he was involved in.'

"Yes, it was shut down.'

"He apparently falsely reported the drugs destroyed, and smuggled them out from the university's secure bio-lab facility.'

"Grumski gruffly added, 'A county deputy came across McPherson's diary, indicating he administered the experimental drugs to both himself and Janelle Sherkle, your daughter.'

"I fell back, leaning against my Subaru. 'What were the research drugs for?'

"Grumski shrugged. Carmens asked, 'Do you know where your daughter is?'

"I rubbed my temples, thinking. 'I have a few names and addresses of her friends, but I think most of them are in northern California, on spring break.'

"Carmens put a short pencil to her notepad. 'Do you think that's where she's going?'

"'Yes,' I said, moving from shock to anger—anger at Brad and his cohorts. 'She got a call late last night on her cell. I don't know who, but I know you can find out. I'd bet that's where she's going.'

"The detectives nodded and watched me unsuccessfully attempt to call Janelle on her cell. They asked a few more questions while I hurried around the house, collecting banking and billing statements, and any addresses or phone numbers I could find.

"Detective Grumski scratched his head after I handed his partner a stack of envelopes and jotted down names and addresses. 'Any email addresses, online chat rooms your daughter visits?'

"'Other than the university accounts, none that I know of.'

"Once the detectives left, leaving a business card and a promise to keep me abreast of any developments, I spent a couple hours on the phone, calling friends, cousins, even Janelle's ex-boyfriend."



As Valerie came over to check on us, Dennis politely waved her off. "She was the first one I called."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"They eventually found her, three days later. Admitted to a hospital in Utah."

Dennis reached for his metal flask but, with a frown, decided against it. "I went crazy those three days. Hired a lawyer and a private investigator, to no avail. Took the first flight available to reach Janelle.

"I beat the corporate legal posse by twenty minutes. Janelle's eco-buddies scattered when I showed up in the hallway outside the ICU. After seeing Janelle, I'd've killed every one of them I could've gotten my hands on."

His voice calmed after taking a deep breath and pulling out Janelle's photo again. "She still looked like Janelle back then, but swollen like an allergic girl stung by bees. Her skin was jaundiced, with sickly green patches, kind of like a ripening peach, but in reverse." Dennis shook his head, and slid the picture back into his wallet. "No white to her eyes, only green with black pupils. Long green eyelashes and eye brows...and green lips, like Halloween makeup.

"My Janelle looked up at me when I held her rigid hand. Tears filled her eyes and she tried to talk, but managed only a gagging-gurgle.

"'Her tongue and throat are swollen,' explained a doctor in blue scrubs standing beside me. He introduced himself and explained the tubes in her nose and arms. He said they'd initially treated Janelle for an allergic reaction. I told him, 'That's not it!'

"Dr. Devada nodded knowingly and rested his hand on my shaking shoulder. 'Specialists are flying in,' he said, leading me into the hall. 'Should be here any minute.'

"I asked if Janelle would be okay. He said they'd stabilized her, but wouldn't say more.

"Then I looked around, and told Dr. Devada that those college kids hanging around, to get security and have them arrested before they got away. It was their fault, I told him."

Dennis sat silent for a moment, sipping his coffee while I considered what he'd said. The grease had congealed on what was left of my sandwich, and I wasn't hungry anymore anyway, so I excused myself to use the restroom.

"Good idea," Dennis said. "I'll take care of the bill, then hit the head too." He pointed to my computer satchel. "Valerie'll watch your stuff."

I didn't think it was worth arguing over who was paying so I put a twenty on the table. "Interviewer pays, but if you insist, leave it as a tip for Valerie."

Thinking about Dennis's bizarre story as I walked to the men's room, I fought the temptation to look for a hidden gotcha-camera, like they have on gag TV shows. His story felt that weird. That far fetched. I shook my head,

laughing at my paranoia. The man sounded sincere, but more likely he was just way out there and my first real story'd end up a bust.



Once in the car, Dennis pulled three colored file folders from his briefcase. "A little light reading. We've got about ninety minutes to drive and the last part is kind of rough, so read quick."

Too much was bothering me to just sit quiet and read. "I'd like to ask a few questions first."

Dennis frowned. "Said I wouldn't answer any about Janelle until you meet her."

"I know. It's not about her." His right eyebrow twitched upward as he started the car, so I kept talking. "You were kind of vague, not naming the university or the corporation behind the research."

"I know," he said. "A good reporter like you can dig that up independent of my assistance."

"True," I agreed, scratching my head. "I'm not lazy, mind you."

Dennis pulled out onto the highway. "No, I get you. Imprecise details sorta drains the credibility of a pretty uncommon story. Let's just say that my lawyer feels I'd be infringing on a gag clause in the settlement if I divulged that information."

So, this did go to litigation, I thought. "You can tell everything you did, but you can't reveal something like where your daughter went to college?"

"My lawyer counsels that I'm on very shaky ground speaking to you, and definitely am barred from naming the defendants. But with respect to

my daughter's condition, in general I am not allowed to divulge such information, directly or indirectly to any news outlet, either broadcast or in print and associated electronic editions. Your news magazine doesn't have a print edition, correct?"

"That's the exact wording?" I asked, wondering how his side got that past a team of corporate lawyers.

"I believe that is exactly what I agreed to."

He believes? Sounded like a formula promising trouble for Dennis down the road. He'd consulted a lawyer, so who was I, a reporter, to worry about what he divulged? Still, I asked, "So, why now?"

"Read first," he said. "The blue file is on gene splicing and suppressing genetic instructions while activating others. The yellow contains excerpts from several articles covering retroviruses. The orange one holds two articles, one on *Dionaea muscipula* and the other on *Mimosa pudica*."

"Dion what?" I asked.

Dennis looked straight ahead and concentrated on the road. "Just read."



My journalism degree required a 100-level chemistry and a 200-level biology course. Even with Dennis's highlighted information and margin notations, I still struggled to understand the articles. I got the information on Venus flytraps—I'd had several as a kid—but the Sensitive plant, a creeping herb whose leaves folded upon being touched, was totally new to me. I knew about genes, chromosomes and DNA, and their effect on

determining the makeup of a living organism. But the complex explanation of gene splicing and using retroviruses to introduce genes to an organism's already established genetic code was a half-step beyond me.

Dennis turned off the main highway and wove his way through bumpy back roads. I observed water-filled ditches. Some held alligators floating on green surfaces. Others extended into marshy expanses filled with dense tree stands or islands of ferns and flowering weeds.

Dennis's story about Janelle. Bradley McPherson's university research and his death. Janelle's hair and nails, eyes and skin turning green. I leafed through the folders again. "So what you're saying," I said, snapping Dennis from whatever thoughts consumed him, "is that Brad McPherson's research had to do with splicing plant genes, specifically Venus flytrap and Sensitive plant genes into animal genes, in this case human. Your daughter's?"

He spoke with a straight face, but his eyes held excitement. "I'm not saying anything. At Bill and Janie's diner, I related my experience which took place when my daughter came home during spring break three years ago. And provided you with some interesting articles."

I remembered the fine line Dennis claimed to be walking. "Right, can't tell me too much?"

Dennis turned off the back road onto a shallow-rutted gravel road built upon a piled dirt brim. On the driver's side sat stagnant water littered with trees and lily pads. On my side, more vine-tangled trees. "We're on property that's been in my family for four generations, and would continue except for the Everglades Reclamation Act that's pending, and near sure to pass."

Mention of the Everglades Reclamation Act caught my attention. How did that fit into the story? Dennis continued talking so I committed the act's name to memory while clicking on my recorder.

"When I was a kid, water was on both sides of our causeway. Grandpa'd bring out more rocks and gravel to fill in depressions and erosion every spring. His dad built this causeway. Now it doesn't take much maintenance, except when a major hurricane comes through. When Grandpa was a kid, the causeway wasn't more than an elevated wooden platform. They used boats more back then."

I watched a white crane spear a fish. "Expansion and population demands on the fresh water have taken their toll?"

"Some would call it a toll. I might too, under different circumstances."

Looking at the murky water and thick foliage, while pondering the files on plants and gene splicing, the campy 1980s movie, *Swamp Thing* came to mind. "Dennis, you've really got me confused."

"Not for much longer," he assured me.



Once off the causeway, Dennis sped through a tunnel formed by intertwining branches and vines overhead. "I really love that part," Dennis said as we shot back into sunlight. He pulled to a stop in front of a formidable steel gate that was part of an eight-foot perimeter fence topped by razor wire. Three menacing dogs, a Doberman, a pit bull, and a German shepherd, raced toward the gate. Snapping fangs and snarls melted to wagging tails once Dennis stepped out of the car. He looked back in at me. "Security. Stay in the car until we're in the garage."

The fence encompassed a two-acre plot of perfectly manicured grass, trimmed trees, and blooming flower beds. Right in the center sat a sprawling

ranch-style home shaded by several tall pines. The structure reminded me of the old diner, a section being decades-old wood construction but expanded upon with yellow brick construction and with a glass-framed geodesic dome rising above its center.

The dogs chased along side the red VUE, barking until we made it into the garage and the door closed. "Does everyone have such formidable security out here?" I figured drug dealers in the boonies might.

With a straight face, Dennis replied, "Privacy is a valuable commodity."

I made sure he saw my recorder was on. "But you're inviting me in, and telling me all that you have?"

He led me past a mud-splattered F-150 pickup, a riding mower, and a host of garden tools. "And I've made plans to supplement current security measures, should your story run." A keypad-locked steel door opened into a utility room leading to a modern, sparkling-clean kitchen. "I'm not normally this tidy. It's kinda rare for me to have much company these days."

"I can see how the fence and canine greeting committee might support that trend."

Dennis laughed. "Just set your gear down on the table."

I considered joking about the emergency sprinkler heads in the ceiling, especially the one above the stove, but decided to focus on the point of my visit. "We're going to see Janelle, right?"

"That's on the agenda." He reached in a cupboard for a pair of glasses. "Something to drink?"

"No, thank you. Mind if I get my camcorder?"

Dennis stared at nothing for a second. "Guess I'm a bit nervous. Might want to bring your camera too."

I glanced out the window while checking my equipment. The Doberman was sniffing along the fence. "Me too," I said, feeling a bit trapped.

"One last thing," Dennis said in an ominous tone. "No hint that you're a reporter. No hint that our homestead here is in danger of governmental confiscation. No questions. I'll do all the talking."

I held up my camcorder and camera. "If I'm not a reporter, then who am I?"

"You're with the study group, here to do nothing more than provide a digital update. It's happened before."

"Study group?"

"A double-edged sword," said Dennis. "Part of the settlement. They get to observe and collect data. In return, they monitor Janelle's health and provide technical and environmental expertise."

Dennis led me down a wide hallway which ended in a pair of steel double doors, again keypad-locked. "Remember, no questions. Not until we're back in the kitchen." I nodded and he blocked my view before entering the code.

I followed Dennis through a passageway lined with hoses, squeegees, and other equipment. Soft music filled the air and natural sunlight lit an interior garden.

"*Looking for Space*," commented Dennis. "John Denver's one of Janelle's favorite artists. Mine too."

A wooden deck ran along the octagonal atrium's wall and a narrow run extended out toward the center, ending in front of a weird, cactus-like plant. It reminded me of a stout saguaro cactus, the kind in *Road Runner* cartoons, except that this one was draped with dangling, green-noodle vines. Ivy

clung to the walls, trimmed short of the reinforced glass above, and a carpet of ground ferns reached deck level.

"Watch your step, Mr. Petro," warned Dennis, resting a hand on my shoulder. "I haven't watered since midnight, but sometimes the deck stays slippery."

I nodded and maneuvered my camcorder in a slow, left-to-right panning shot. I knew where I should go. Maybe it was cowardly of me, but that same hair-raising feeling I got as a kid alone in a dark house watching *Kolchak* took hold. Dennis was still there, and the upbeat music was still there, and the sunlight was still there. Yet I couldn't step forward. So I allowed the camcorder's zoom lens to advance in my stead, humbled by my timidity when faced with truly bizarre circumstances.

The stringy cactus—Janelle, if all Dennis told me was true—and somehow my gut said it was—had a knoblike head the size of a bowling ball covered with dangling green vines, some hanging over her face. It was as if Janelle's visage had been stuck into one of those photo-morphing programs, transforming from beautiful college coed to a pine tree, but had frozen up halfway through.

"And as you can see," said Dennis, pointing to a wall-mounted environmental control panel, "despite the outdoor fluctuations, the temperature and humidity have been kept within the mandated parameters. And the pest barriers and protocol have kept vertebrate, arthropodic, and fungal concerns from gaining a foothold in the controlled habitat."

He'd apparently been talking the entire time I'd been filming. I let out a sigh, knowing it was all recorded. I pulled out my digital camera and took a few steps forward before focusing again on Janelle. The flash went off with

my first shot. Feeling amateurish, I deftly switched it off, took another step forward, and trained the lens on Janelle once more.

Unprepared for what I saw through the viewfinder, I stumbled backwards, fumbling my camera. I'd've fallen off the deck if Dennis's firm grip hadn't steadied me. "As you can see," he said, "my daughter is awake."

Her eyes, deep like a pair of emerald wells, stared at me. I forced myself to exhale and inch a few steps closer. I nodded back at Dennis, not sure I could speak without stuttering. While I took several more photos, Dennis said, "Janelle, this is Mr. Petro, here to keep the study group abreast. He'll be here but another moment or two. Right, Mr. Petro?"

I pulled out my camcorder. "R-right." I moved around the atrium, getting all angles of Janelle, as well as quick shots of the monitoring equipment. Like a hawk, Dennis watched my every move.

Now, sure of my composure, I said, "I think that's just about it, Mr. Sherkle."

"Of course," said Dennis, moving toward the control panel. "One more thing." He switched off the music, an Enya score, allowing the droning hum of ventilation fans to fill the auditory vacuum. Until that moment the background music didn't seem important.

I started to ask Dennis what his 'one more thing' was, but he put a finger to his lips, shushing me. Right then, I caught the sound of tiny flutes chirping out notes. Dennis switched off the ventilation unit, making the faint, staccato whistles easier to hear. The chirping was too dispersed to be Janelle, so I double-checked to see if Dennis had indeed turned off the sound system. He smiled knowingly.

The chirping's volume and intensity increased, making it easier to determine its origin—the fern bed. A low, resonating hum emanating from

Janelle mixed with the whistles. Fronds from several scattered ferns quivered. I held my breath and steadied my camcorder as I focused on a reed-like plant rising through the sea of ferns. Except for the two branching arms ending in Venus flytrap-like leaves, and a bulbous top, the chirping plants looked like the ancient line of horsetail plants I'd studied in high school ecology. The one I zoomed in on rose fifteen inches above the ferns, and appeared vine-like and flexible. I couldn't see where, or even if, it was rooted to the ground. What I did notice was a six-inch stretch near the top expanded and contracted. A small orifice, the size of a pencil's eraser, stretched to an oval when the stem contracted. And each contraction corresponded to an increasingly shrill whistle.

Dennis placed a hand on my shoulder. The surprise contact unsettled me, but no where near as much as his revelation. "The five of them," Dennis whispered into my ear, "are my grandchildren."



Sitting in the kitchen, Dennis continued to nurse his beer. I set my second empty aside and waved off his offer of a third.

"So you see," continued Dennis, "they're behind the drive to reclaim these wetlands. It'd necessitate a move only they're capable of pulling off safely."

"And Janelle's offspring, your grandchildren, weren't part of the legal agreement." I still had trouble wrapping my mind around the notion that those chirping creatures were some sort of human-plant hybrid, and related to the man sitting across from me.

He slammed his fist on the table. "And the bastards are demanding rights to two of my grandchildren, or they won't help relocate Janelle and the rest."

"If they're able to get the Everglades Reclamation Act passed," I reminded Dennis.

"That's where you and your story come in, Marv. It'll appear on the internet, and the bloggers. Once they get a-hold of this, you know their growing influence."

"It'll be more than a shot across their bow," I warned. "A real roll of the dice, with no idea where things might end up."

Dennis grunted, got up, and went back out to the atrium. A minute later he returned and handed me a zip-lock bag holding several strands of Janelle's noodle-like hair. "Here's the samples you wanted."

They were for a friend working on various genome projects at a respectable lab. "It'll help with the story," I assured him.

"It's my grandchildren they want." Dennis downed the rest of his beer. "And I'll be damned if they get any one them."



Jenni Smyth okayed my story with only a few minor edits. Tech support really came through, cleaning up my video clips and hyper-linking them to the story. Once my story hit, it'd get attention, maybe get my name going in the right circles. I wasn't sure how, in the end, the story would affect Dennis and his family. How long would it take for people to discover exactly who and where he was? Would the ploy keep his family intact? Our

legal department, all of one lawyer on retainer, estimated it'd be less than a week before Dennis was back in court for breaching the settlement's gag clause.

The only thing that delayed the story's release was the lab results. A few colleagues around the office were skeptical, but I wasn't worried. Finally, my college roommate's fiancé called. The first thing she said was, "Marv, where'd you get that sample?"

Anxious to get my story released, I said, "Did you send the results?"

"Yes, Marv. Just emailed the file, encrypted like you insisted. And summarized the results with small words so you and your readers can understand. Now, where'd you get it?"

I opened my email account and saw the message waiting. "Got it." I smiled to myself, imagining Denise in her professional white lab coat, adjusting her glasses, tapping her foot.

"We thought at first you'd sent us some rare colony-forming species of euglena. Then the DNA and other tests that you requested—"

"It's all in the report, right?" I asked, interrupting her.

"Where'd you get that sample?"

"My paper's payment transfer for your lab's services cleared, correct?"

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

How many times had Denise looked down her nose at me for studying journalism? "A professional reporter always protects his sources."

"Are you serious?"

"Just bookmark the *Weekly Electron Star* on your computer. The answer will be on tomorrow's front page."



Copyright 2007, *Terry W. Ervin II*

Terry W. Ervin II is an English teacher who enjoys writing Science Fiction and Fantasy. His fiction has been published in *The Sword Review* and *Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine*, and he is a regular contributor to *Fiction Factor*, an ezine for writers. When Terry isn't enjoying time with his family or writing, he can be found in his basement raising turtles.

For more, including market and writing related information, or to contact Terry, visit his website at: < www.ervin-author.com >.



Cover: "Sentinel"

Framed against the bluest of skies, the Sentinel stands guard. What does he wait and watch for, and shall its coming bring the storm?

Karl Eschenbach's 3-D art captures the imagination and appeals to the eye.

Copyright 2007, *Karl Eschenbach*

Karl Eschenbach was born in 1950, right in the middle of the last century. He was raised in a military family and traveled throughout the United States. He survived college in the 60's and 70's, and is now a grandfather in Albuquerque, NM.

He has had 22 illustrations (which includes two for *The Sword Review*), 15 short stories, two essays and one poem published.



MindFlights is a publication of Double-Edged Publishing, Inc. It is available at < www.mindflights.com > and updates are published several times each week. Issues are completed monthly.

MindFlights (ISSN Pending)
9618 Misty Brook Cove, Cordova, Tennessee 38016

For more information visit < www.mindflights.com >. The above items appear as part of Volume 1, 2008, Issue 1.



Support MindFlights

MindFlights is a publication of Double-Edged Publishing, Inc., a nonprofit corporation designated as a 501(c)(3) public charity. Double-Edged Publishing believes the written word is a powerful tool, capable of shaping ideas and changing lives.

Mail checks to:

Double-Edged Publishing, Inc.
Development
9618 Misty Brook Cove
Cordova, Tennessee 38016

Online donations can be made and more information can be found via the *MindFlights* or the Double-Edged Publishing websites:

< www.mindflights.com >
< www.doubleedgedpublishing.com >



www.mindflights.com