

NEWTON'S LEGACY

D. A. BLANKINSHIP

Theodore Newton Phontaine had been peculiar his entire life. His parents knew he was unusual. His brother and sister would testify under oath that he was different. They knew he was not “normal” by any widely accepted definition of that word.

His childhood development had been erratic. He did not speak until he was three years old, but by four, he was dealing with abstractions. By twelve years of age, he was spellbound by the proposed constancy of the speed of light, Kepler's laws of celestial physics, and his fourteen-year old neighbor Linda; who was not the least bit interested in relativity, astrophysics, or him.

His mother and father called him Ted. He thought of himself as “Newton.” His middle name had been in honor of his paternal grandfather; however, he preferred to believe it signified some remote but significant association with Sir Isaac Newton. Doubtless, he had more in common with Sir Isaac than with a grandfather who managed an umbrella factory in Connecticut.

Newton's education was routine in the classroom and extraordinary in the libraries. He haunted them on weekends and throughout the summers of his youth. He roamed among the book stacks and found the vital nourishment that fed his voracious appetite to know more. He read the classics, history, fiction, non-fiction, and technical manuals on air conditioning, automobile repair, and electrical energy generation. For Newton, libraries were cathedrals of

wisdom that cheerfully and patiently shared their vast knowledge with him, asking only that he whisper in their presence.

Newton completed his public education without distinguishing himself in the slightest. He had competently assessed that most of his questions were beyond the grasp of his teachers. On too many occasions, he had shot his arm up into the air and excitedly offered his question only to be told it was a silly question. He would stare at his desk in confusion as classmates laughed and ridiculed him.

The first time this happened, Newton was in the fourth grade. His teacher stood in front of the class and explained that the Earth spun on an axis. As she spun the globe she was holding, Newton studied it and decided something was not right about its shape.

“Ah,” he thought, “if the Earth spins, it must bulge at the equator; the centrifugal forces would be the greatest there and the Earth should be stretched out around the middle.” He raised his hand and asked why the globe the teacher was holding was round; it should be bigger at the equator.

“Haven’t you been listening?” the teacher demanded impatiently. “The Earth is round like a basketball.”

“Yeah,” Newton’s neighbor in the next desk chided as his classmates laughed, “Columbus knew the Earth was round, but Newton doesn’t.”

From that moment on, Newton understood that his questions exceeded the teacher’s knowledge; yet, he was impervious to the discouragement inherent in the system. His enthusiasm rekindled with each new grade and the fresh potential he saw in each new teacher. If the fourth grade teacher did not know, perhaps the fifth grade teacher

would know. At an uncharacteristically primitive level of analysis, Newton reasoned that since the subjects were more difficult at higher grades, the teachers in those grades must know more and they will understand and answer his questions.

Some teachers tolerated him for a while; though, typically within a few weeks they grew tired of his questions. By the seventh grade, “why don’t you look that up yourself?” became their standard response. Newton decided that was excellent advice. From that point on, he answered his own questions with, “I’ll look that up myself.” That was when Newton stopped viewing public education as a source of learning and turned to libraries as his only trustworthy source of information on the important questions.

Newton enjoyed college a little bit better; he worked on projects that solved complex problems, designed new microprocessors, invented mass storage systems, held multiple patents, and quietly amassed his first billion dollars when he was twenty-nine. When he was thirty-one, he married someone who felt equally out of place on this planet. Her name was Margaret Nevin. Newton called her Maggie; a strangely unpretentious name for a singularly remarkable woman.

Newton and Maggie led a secretive life. Secretive in the sense that no one had any idea about their net worth, the depth of their intellectual interests, or their secret plan to save humanity.

1. PATRICIA HOOVER

In 1994, the United States had tens of thousands of libraries and each of these libraries received hundreds of pieces

of mail every day. Most of it was junk mail in the sense that it was mass mailed, bulk postage, and printed on cheap paper. That is why the letter from M&N, Incorporated stood out from the other pieces of mail crossing Patricia Hoover's desk that day. Block lettering across the top announced Requests for Proposals. The only paragraph was a little mysterious:

We are seeking proposals from competent visionaries interested in safeguarding civilization. Send letter of interest, including current institutional affiliation, formal and informal training, and details of other commitments (both personal and professional) that might influence your availability for the next ten years, to M&N, Incorporated, General Delivery, Nassau, Bahamas.

Patricia was intrigued. The letter was addressed to her and it was printed on 24-pound cotton paper with a watermark. The postage was the full rate and it had been cancelled in Jamaica. She tucked the letter into her purse and forgot about it for almost a week. When she rediscovered it, she drafted a polite cover letter, attached her résumé, and added a hand written note that she was interested in learning more about M&N, Incorporated.

She may not have given her letter enough consideration or perhaps she doubted M&N, Incorporated even existed, either of these would have been good explanations as to why she was surprised to receive another letter from M&N. Once again, nice stationary and a short message:

We would like to meet with you. Are you available for a luncheon meeting on Thursday, October 27?

An '800' number appeared at the bottom of the letter.

Patricia dialed the number and the message was succinct, "Hello Patricia. If you can make lunch with us press

1, if not press 9.” Patricia pressed ‘1’ confirming she could meet with M&N at a lunch appointment. A pleasant voice announced, “We will pick you up at 11:45 outside the library. We look forward to meeting you.”

Patricia spent the next few days trying to find information on M&N, Incorporated; however, nothing existed anywhere she looked. M&N did not appear in any corporate listings for the United States or its territories. No major city phonebook listed an M&N, Incorporated. The 800 number was not listed in the toll-free numbers directories.

Patricia vacillated between being fearful that M&N was a front for something sinister and just being frustrated that M&N was so new that it had not been included in the reference sources she could find.

As the Monday meeting approached, she decided to try one last time to get some information on M&N. She called directory assistance for Jamaica and asked for the number for M&N, Incorporated.

“Would you like me to connect you?” The woman’s accent was distinctly Jamaican.

“Yes, please,” Patricia replied quickly, realizing she would at last find out something about this elusive corporation.

The phone rang once and an answering machine picked up. It conveyed a short message. “Hello Patricia. Well done! We look forward to having lunch with you.”

On Monday, Patricia was standing outside the library at 11:45 as a taxicab pulled up to the curb. A woman and a man exited the cab and began walking toward the library.

“Are you Patricia?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” Patricia answered, cautiously. Both the woman

and the man wore faded blue jeans, old running shoes, tie-dyed tee shirts, and a denim jacket. The woman's hair hung long down her back in a ponytail. So did the man's hair. They both wore dark sunglasses. They looked like refugees from the sixties. The only thing missing was an acoustic guitar and sandalwood incense.

"Hi, Patricia," the man spoke his greeting warmly as he removed his sunglasses. "My name is Newton, and this is my life companion and co-conspirator, Maggie."

"Where would you like to eat?" Maggie asked.

Suddenly, Patricia wanted to stay close by, in a public place. She also wanted to get a couple of friends to join her. She was not fearful of these two quirky strangers; she just expected lunch to be a waste of time and with a couple of friends along, they could at least have a laugh about the 'two hippies who wanted to save the world.'

"There's a café with outdoor seating about two blocks from here," Patricia offered. "They have sandwiches, salads, pasta, that sort of stuff."

"Great," Maggie replied. "Let's go there."

They began the short walk to the café and the cab followed. Patricia looked back at the cab, twice.

"It can be a challenge to get a cab in Chicago," Newton began offering an explanation. "So we just hired him for the day."

"That makes sense," Patricia replied as she wondered what it would cost to hire a cab for the day.

They entered the café and worked their way through the lunch crowd to get the last available table under the café's awning. The cab rolled up along side, parked, and the driver picked up a newspaper. The light on top of the cab announced it was not available for business.

After placing their drink orders, Newton and Maggie looked at their menus for only a few seconds and laid them down. Patricia was still studying her menu when the server returned with their drinks.

“Are you ready to order?” the server asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Maggie responded as she studied the girl waiting on them. “Are you ready Patricia?”

“Yes, I am.”

Patricia had decided to order what she always ordered.

Newton reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a piece of paper money. He unfolded it, revealing a fifty-dollar bill, and then he folded it in half, placed it under his iced tea glass, and announced, “If our order is correct, this is your tip. I will deduct ten dollars for each mistake.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The young woman stared at the fifty-dollar bill.

“Will you get the order correct?” Maggie asked.

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

“How do you know you will get it correct?” Newton asked, sounding skeptical.

“I will keep careful notes.”

“Good plan,” Newton asserted, as he turned to Patricia and asked, “What would you like?”

Looking furtively at the fifty-dollar bill, Patricia wondered if she was missing an opportunity to indulge herself at the expense of these strangers. “I’ll have the turkey sandwich on sourdough,” she requested, sounding just a bit hesitant in her order. “Hold the pickles—but, please add a side salad with the raspberry vinaigrette dressing.” There, that would be a splurge.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll have corned-beef on pumpernickel bread,” Maggie

spoke with authority. "No condiments. Toast one slice of bread and put that slice on the bottom of the sandwich. Put fifteen potato chips on the plate arranged in a circle around the sandwich. Put three thin slices of banana on top."

"I don't make the sandwiches," their server asserted, as she started to sound discouraged.

"But, you have a vested interest in getting a sandwich made this way, don't you?" Maggie asked and continued without waiting for an answer, "Could you get cooperation for twenty dollars?"

Maggie slipped a twenty-dollar bill on top of the fifty that served as a coaster for Newton's iced tea.

"Yes ma'am, I don't think we'll have any problems getting that sandwich," the server offered confidently.

"I'm glad to hear that," Newton said. "Now, I would like to have the meat from the third sandwich on the second page of the menu, served on the fifth bread selection on the bottom of the third page. On one slice of bread, put yellow mustard, on the other put spicy mustard. I want two pieces of lettuce resting on top of the completed sandwich and nothing else on the plate."

"Anything else?" the server asked as she completed scribbling notes on the fourth piece of paper in her order pad.

"Have that to us within ten minutes and I'll add another twenty," Maggie said as she reached into her pocket to produce another twenty-dollar bill.

"I will also add a twenty," Newton volunteered as he looked at Maggie and smiled.

The server glanced at Patricia, apparently expecting her to add yet another twenty dollars and Patricia quickly diverted her eyes to the tabletop and reached for her drink.

"It will be coming right up," their server said as she turned and quickly walked away.

"Patricia?" Maggie asked. "Will she get the order right?"

"She certainly wants to get it right," Patricia replied, thoughtfully. "I think she'll get it right."

"Why are you so confident about her?" Newton asked.

"She wrote the orders down. She took a lot of notes," Patricia said, then continued, "and she appears to have very good attention to detail."

"We will know shortly," Maggie said, glancing quickly at Newton.

"Well, enough talk about sandwiches," Newton said as he reached for his iced tea. "Tell us a little about yourself; what makes you tick?"

"I was born in Chicago and I have lived here all my life," Patricia began her life story wondering when these two oddballs were going to get to their point.

"Why did you choose to be a librarian?" Maggie asked.

"I like books, I like to read. I think it is important to protect books. Libraries are our national treasures."

"That sounds patriotic," Newton said, with a hint of aloofness. "Why do books need to be protected?"

"Books deteriorate over time: moisture, mold, bindings breaking—if we read them, we end up abusing them, no matter how careful we are."

"But libraries can be destroyed," Newton said, and this time he did sound arrogant.

"That's right," Maggie rejoined. "There was some library in northern Africa that was destroyed once, wasn't there?"

"You mean the library at Alexandria in Egypt?"

Patricia asked. "That was one of history's great tragedies. The library contained hundreds of thousands of manuscripts on medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and essentially the cumulative wisdom of the ages."

"If you could go back in time and do something to stop that loss," Maggie asked, "what would you do?"

"Make everything fireproof. Make hundreds of copies of the scrolls and store them around the world—having so much in one place made it all vulnerable."

"If you were the chief librarian at Alexandria and you knew the Library's destruction was eminent—it was going to burn down—what would you do?" Newton asked.

"Save as many important scrolls as I could," Patricia replied, as she started to wonder if Newton was an arsonist. "I guess I would move them out of the Library to a safe place."

"How would you pick the important scrolls?" Maggie asked. "Would they be the scrolls that are historically significant? The ones about medicine? Agriculture? What would they be?"

"I guess that would depend on what survived elsewhere," Patricia said, beginning to wonder if she was taking an exam. "If I knew—" Patricia stopped in mid-sentence as she saw their server walking toward their table. Patricia was curious as to how many mistakes the server might have made. Did she get the orders right?

"Here we are," the server announced as she arrived at their table. "For you ma'am, I have the turkey sandwich on sourdough and there are no pickles. I also have your salad with our house specialty raspberry vinaigrette dressing."

As she spoke, the server set the plate down in front of Patricia.

“For you ma’am,” the server continued, “I have a corned-beef on pumpernickel bread and it has no condiments. One slice of pumpernickel is toasted and it is on the bottom, and you have three thin slices of banana on top. I have arranged fifteen potato chips in a circle around the sandwich.”

“Did you offer the chef the entire twenty to make the sandwich this way?” Maggie asked.

“Well... no, not really, he did it for ten.”

“Smart move,” Maggie said as she reached for a potato chip. “You’re up an extra ten.”

“Those three people standing by the doorway, watching you,” Newton said, sounding secretive. “Are they your friends? Do they wait tables here?”

“Yes, sir, they’re the other wait staff.”

“Are they cheering you? Do they want you to be successful?” Newton asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“You told them about our deal?” Newton asked, sounding a little surprised.

“Yes. I... well, I told them I had an unusual order and that you had offered me a large tip to get it correct.”

“Then let’s see if you got it correct,” Newton announced.

“Here is your sandwich, sir,” the server said as she placed the last plate on the table in front of Newton. “A roast beef sandwich on whole wheat bread with yellow mustard on one slice and spicy mustard on the other slice. This sandwich is crowned with two of our finest pieces of lettuce.”

“I didn’t ask for your finest lettuce,” Newton said, looking at the server and not giving a hint as to whether he

was joking or criticizing.

"I thought you deserved our best," the server said with a wry smile and a slight bow. She turned to walk away.

"Wait," Maggie commanded.

"Yes?" the server asked with a hesitation in her voice.

"Is something wrong?"

"How long have you worked here?" Maggie asked.

"About two months."

"University student?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Classes started two months ago. University of Chicago?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"It's nearby. Working here would be convenient. Sophomore?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Too confident to be a freshman; too young to be an upper classman. Psychology major?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"Everyone is."

"These friends of yours in the doorway," Newton asked, again sounding secretive. "Would they cover for you for the next ten minutes for twenty dollars each?"

"I know they would," the server said, as her curiosity grew even more.

"Good," Maggie said, "go tell them to cover for you and then join us."

"Patricia," Newton said, as the server walked away.

"You will need an assistant: someone with good attention to detail; the courage to face the unknown; and a sense of humor. You will need someone like this young lady, here."

"I haven't said I will work for you."

“And we haven’t made an offer to you,” Maggie rejoined. “We want to look at you and this young lady as a team. The two of you might be a starting point—we’ll see.”

2. CYNTHIA NELSON

As the server returned to their table, she removed her apron, folded it, and placed it in her lap as she sat down.

“My boss may not like this,” she said quietly as she pulled her chair up to the table. “Everyone in the kitchen is talking about this table.”

“Maggie?” Newton asked. “Did you go to the kitchen and tell them what we are doing?”

“No, Newton, I did not speak with anyone in the kitchen.”

“Patricia, did you?”

“No. I did not tell anyone.”

“Hmm...” Newton hummed as he looked at the young woman.

“Yes, I know I made my own problem,” she confessed.

“We don’t know if it’s a problem,” Maggie said, quietly. “Your boss may not mind at all.”

Patricia suddenly remembered she still had no idea who these two people are or what M&N, Incorporated does. She looked back at the cab still waiting by the curb. Then she looked at the server sitting at their table. Is this a stunt? Is this a practical joke arranged by someone with too much time on her hands?

“Your name is Cynthia?” Maggie asked. “I assume you would not borrow a name tag from someone—your name is Cynthia?”

“Yes, my name is Cynthia Nelson.”

"I am happy to meet you, Cynthia," Maggie said, then gesturing toward Newton she said, "This is my life companion and co-conspirator, Newton. My name is Maggie. This is our friend and associate, Patricia."

"Nice to meet you," Cynthia said to each person during the introductions.

"Psychology is an interesting area of study," Newton said as he settled back into his chair. "What do you plan to do with your education?"

"What do you mean?" Cynthia asked.

"Do you want to teach, become a therapist, or work for the government?" Newton asked.

"I want to open a private practice and be a marriage therapist," Cynthia replied.

"A noble occupation," Newton observed, though he did not sound convincing. "Are you determined to keep working as a waitress for the next ten years until you complete your doctoral level studies and enter private practice?"

"What?"

"If you had to choose at this moment," Maggie interrupted. "Between your current position at this restaurant and a new position with a company you know nothing about, would you stay here?"

"What is this new position?" Cynthia asked.

"You know nothing about it."

"Is it legal?"

"Yes, other than that you know nothing about it."

"I must choose now?" Cynthia asked.

"Yes," Newton said, sounding a little dramatic. "I am afraid the choice is bearing down on you right now. Is that your boss coming to this table?"

"Yes, it is," Cynthia said as she started to stand up.

“Sit. Stay seated,” Maggie ordered her. “What is his name?”

“Mr. Galantine.”

“Mr. Galantine?” Newton called out. “Could we speak with you? We will not take more than a minute or two.”

Galantine shot a quick look at Cynthia, then smiled at Newton and said, “Oh course, sir. What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Galantine,” Newton said, sounding very important. “We need privacy, complete privacy. Would you please re-seat your other customers elsewhere? We would like the entire patio area for ourselves. While we are here, Cynthia will wait on us exclusively. We want her sitting at this table to respond to our every whim; you know what I mean: pass the pepper, get more iced tea—that sort of stuff. Could you see to moving the others? Do you have that authority or should I speak with someone else?”

“What?” Galantine asked. “You want me to move everyone out of here?”

“Splendid!” Newton announced. “That would do it. I’m sure some of your patrons have finished their meals and just need to be asked to leave.”

“I have twelve tables out here,” Galantine protested. “This is our busiest time of the day. I cannot ask these people to go. You must understand that.”

“Let’s see,” Maggie said as she looked around the patio. “We will stay, so that’s eleven tables. Looks like three or four people to a table—let’s be generous and call it forty-four people at maybe nine or ten dollars each, gross recovery. That would be \$440 for lunch today. Of course, we would include a generous tip: say 25 percent. That brings us to \$550. Tell everyone to leave now—give them takeout cartons for their orders—and we will pay for their lunches

and give you the tip. Better yet, let's make it \$600 if everyone is out in fifteen minutes and \$700 if it takes only ten minutes."

"I don't think I can..." Galantine said as he looked around the patio. A couple at a corner table stood up to leave; another two tables had finished their meals and were lingering over coffee. "We can't close the patio for the day," he continued.

"We just want 30 minutes, undisturbed," Newton said, sounding completely reasonable about the unreasonable situation. "Think about it for five minutes. I have 12:25; let me know by 12:30 if you think our offer is generous enough or if you want us to leave, now."

"Yes. Yes, I will let you know," Galantine said as he walked quickly away from the table.

"I don't think we will have any more distractions," Newton said, then turned to Cynthia. "I want to know, so I will ask you again, if you had to choose between your current position and a new position with a company you know nothing about, would you stay here?"

"Is this company in Chicago?" Cynthia asked.

"No, but your work would be in Chicago; however, there would be some travel involved on occasions."

"Yes, I would try out the new job," Cynthia announced with an almost disorienting sense of confidence.

"Why?" Newton asked.

"I like the challenge of something new. I like adventure."

"Good," Newton said, "I like that."

"And you, Patricia," Maggie asked. "Would you be willing to leave your job at the library to work for a company you know nothing about?"

"I might," Patricia said, feeling very awkward. "Is this an offer?"

"Yes," Newton said, without the slightest hesitation.

"How do you know you want me to work for you?"

Patricia asked.

"Would we be working together?" Cynthia asked.

"First, Patricia's question," Maggie said as she turned to face Patricia. "We want you to work for us. We have been researching you for six months. We know you led the team that re-organized the acquisitions section of the library. We know your masters' thesis was on the preservation of historically significant books. We also know about your work helping to start libraries in developing countries. You are the person we want for this job. We will work through any details that need to be completed to make this successful."

"Now, Cynthia's question," Maggie continued.

"Patricia needs an assistant who is meticulous, smart, and adventuresome. You passed our screening for those traits. We would expect you to work well together."

Newton looked up from the table's conversation and said, "Oh, that's thoughtful of him."

The group watched as Galantine and his staff moved from table to table with take-out cartons and put unfinished lunches in the containers. One or two people began to protest and Galantine pointed to Maggie and Newton's table, spoke a few words, and the people at the respective tables called out their thanks for Maggie and Newton paying for their lunches.

"I knew he would find a workable solution," Maggie said, as she waved back at the patrons who were calling out their thanks to her.

“Oh look,” Newton said, pointing toward his left. “Is that the dessert cart?”

As customers were leaving the patio area, the café's chef was giving them a complimentary dessert in a take-away carton.

“That is thoughtful,” Maggie said, then turning to Patricia, she asked, “Would you like dessert?”

Patricia shook her head ‘no’ to Maggie's offer.

“Cynthia? Dessert?”

“No, ma'am,” Cynthia said, almost in a panic. “I am not permitted to...”

“Just a moment,” Newton said, interrupting Cynthia's explanation. “Let's make this formal: Patricia will you work for us on a project that you will understand better at a later time?”

“Yes,” Patricia said, fully intending to walk away at any moment she felt the job was wrong for her.

“And Cynthia,” Newton continued. “Will you work for Patricia on a project that you will understand better at a later time?”

“Yes,” Cynthia replied. “But why can't you tell me more about where this company is and what it does?”

“It must be time,” Maggie said and called out to the cab driver. The driver reached into the back seat, retrieved a briefcase, and brought it to the wrought iron fencing that marked the café's patio.

“Thank you,” Newton said, as he accepted the case from the driver. As Newton opened the case, the driver returned to his car and resumed reading his newspaper.

“This is a formality,” Newton said as he pulled a bright yellow folder from the briefcase. “Nevertheless, it is a solemn formality. I would like you both to read this legal

document. It is a non-disclosure agreement. It details that as employees of M&N, you will learn certain information that you must keep in the strictest of confidence. By signing this form, you agree to maintain the secrecy of your work, including the purpose of your tasks, the details of your activities, and any incidental knowledge you may gain in the course of your work. If you disclose any information to anyone other than one of the three other people seated at this table, we will sue you for recovery of all salary, benefits, and expenses in the course of your employment. We will also sue to recover damages that occur as a consequence of the information you disclose; it could amount to millions of dollars.”

“We are not mean people,” Maggie said gently, reassuringly. “We are passionate about our purpose and the importance of what we are doing. This agreement protects one of the most important projects ever undertaken. The project is safe only to the extent that it is secret.”

“Are you working for the government?” Cynthia asked.

“No,” Maggie replied. “We are not government employees and this is not a government project.”

“If this is so important, why isn't the government doing it?” Patricia asked.

“The government might be doing something like it,” Newton speculated. “But, I don't know of anything like it, anywhere.”

“Please,” Maggie said, speaking softly. “Take your time; read the contract carefully. We want you to understand your commitment. You cannot tell anyone about Newton or me, or about what you will be doing. You cannot tell friends, family, or even your priest.”

Maggie and Newton left the table and walked over to

the dessert cart. Galantine stood beside them and the three spoke with each other for a few minutes. Newton and Maggie returned to the table and Newton took eight, crisp one-hundred dollar bills from the briefcase and walked back to Mr. Galantine. Galantine was effusive, shaking Newton's hand and asking what else he could do for them.

Patricia and Cynthia each read their own copy of the document. Cynthia signed hers and pushed it to the middle of the table. Patricia lingered over the wording. It looked like boilerplate language to protect a company's trade secrets. What secrets would Newton and Maggie reveal to a librarian and a college kid/waitress? What kind of work performed by a librarian would be considered 'one of the most important projects ever undertaken'? She had misgivings about signing; yet, she would never know any more if she did not sign.

Newton and Maggie returned to the table. Newton had a slice of tiramisu and Maggie had a cookie. Between bites of the sweet Italian sponge cake, Newton was leaning toward Maggie and speaking with her in hushed tones. Moments later, Galantine arrived with two cups of espresso coffee. He placed the coffee on the table very slowly, apparently trying to see the paper Cynthia had signed.

"Mr. Galantine," Newton said as he took Cynthia's copy of the document and put it in his briefcase. "Your services and your food are excellent. I trust you are proud of your restaurant."

"Yes, sir," Galantine said as he stood by the table, fidgeting.

"We have Cynthia to get anything else we may require," Maggie said, authoritatively.

"Yes," Galantine said, awkwardly trying to extend his

stay. "She's very good at her job and she's new here, she just started..."

"We just need a little more time, in private," Newton said, interrupting Galantine and emphasizing the word 'private.' "Then we will have completed our investigation and we will be on our way."

"Investigation?" Galantine asked, nervously. "You are conducting an investigation? The restaurant? Has there been a complaint?"

"Privacy," Newton said in a forced whisper. "Remember? Privacy."

Galantine turned and walked away quickly.

Newton leaned back in his chair and studied Patricia. "Feeling uncertain?" he asked.

"I don't know what I am committing to," Patricia replied. "I'm curious; but I don't want to make a big mistake."

"Trust me," Newton assured her.

"Why not trust me?" Patricia asked, sounding a little annoyed. "Trust me with enough information to know why I should trust you."

"Good point," Maggie said as she smiled knowingly at Newton. "That's a reasonable request; I know I would want to know why I should trust you."

"All right," Newton agreed. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a billfold, opened it, and passed it to her. "There on my driver's license you will see I am Theodore Newton Phontaine. Six months ago, your library received a pledge of five million dollars to preserve original manuscripts and to establish a trust fund to support expansion of its mathematics, physics, and engineering holdings. The first installment was a check for one million dollars and

there will be four more one million dollar payments over the next two years. We made that gift on condition of anonymity and any public disclosure will cancel future installments. The check was drawn on the National Bank, here in Chicago. The memo line had two words on it: *oblate spheroid*. The signature on the check was three initials: TNP. I am TNP.”

Patricia knew about the gift—her boss had sworn her to secrecy when he showed her the check for one million dollars. The five million dollar pledge was the largest single gift in the library's long history. Her boss had let her hold that check; it was the most money she had ever touched.

“You know about this gift?” Newton asked as he put his billfold back into his pocket.

“I am not at liberty to discuss this matter,” Patricia said, cautiously.

“Good,” Newton said, then smiled mischievously. “Do you know what ‘oblate spheroid’ refers to? Are you familiar with that term?”

“Yes,” Patricia answered confidently. “It describes the Earth or any other planet that is not really a sphere, more of an ellipsoid or slightly flattened sphere—the circumference is greater around the equator than if it is measured around the poles. Essentially, the Earth is not round, it bulges at the equator.”

“Wow!” Cynthia exclaimed. “I didn't know librarians knew so much!”

“Perhaps this is a recent interest,” Maggie speculated.

“We are all life-long learners,” Newton added.

“Would I be working fulltime?” Patricia asked.

“Yes, we need you for ten years. Then you may retire,” Maggie replied.

“Will I retire, too?” Cynthia asked.

“You will need to work a little longer,” Newton said as he brushed his fingers across his upper lip to conceal his smile. “At your option, you may complete your formal education as a company benefit or you may work for us until a respectable age for retirement.”

Patricia picked up the pen from the table and slowly, meticulously, signed her name to the document.

“OK, I’m in.”

“Tomorrow evening, six o’clock, at the entrance to the Navy Pier,” Maggie said. “We’ll have dinner and discuss our requirements for the project.”

“And for Cynthia,” Newton said, “a bit of homework: get to that splendid library at the University of Chicago and research Mr. Andrew Carnegie and Mr. Georges Léopold Cuvier.”

“Yes,” Maggie continued, “We also want you to write a five thousand word essay on what would have happened if these two men had been good friends.” Maggie began to laugh, “Just kidding about the essay,” she added. “See you tomorrow and you earned the entire tip—good job.”

As Patricia walked back to her office at the library, she decided that she, too, would research these two men. She knew about Carnegie, every librarian knew Carnegie. He had amassed a fortune and used it to build more than 2,000 libraries across the country. Her library was the result of Carnegie’s generosity. She did not know Cuvier; however, she associated him with controversies during the time of Darwin. Cuvier was just obscure enough that his ideas probably held the key to understanding Maggie and Newton, and she desperately wanted to understand them.

3. PIZZA, BEER, & SNOOPING

As Patricia Hoover approached Navy Pier, she saw Maggie and Newton throwing cotton candy at each other. In the background, the carousel made its slow revolutions with horses and other plastic critters gliding up and down like waves on the ocean. The exhaust fumes from the diesel engines powering the carnival rides, met her nose and she remembered why she avoided this part of Chicago.

Patricia stopped and watched them. Maggie and Newton still wore jeans and denim jackets, and dark glasses. They both had fanny-packs. Who are these people?

She had found some information on Newton. He had published in a variety of engineering and computing periodicals. Some authored by Theodore N. Phontaine, some by T. Newton Phontaine, and yet another group by T. N. Phontaine. If these assorted works did have the same author, he had no interest in recognition for his prodigious writing. It almost appeared he was trying to avoid being associated with his work.

She had found a short reference in a society column reporting the marriage of Theodore N. Phontaine to Margaret S. Nevin in 1988. It included a black and white photograph that was clear enough for Patricia to conclude Maggie is Margaret S. Nevin.

'Margaret Nevin' or 'M. Nevin' or 'M. S. Nevin' was the author of seven articles in some of the more prestigious mathematical journals. The articles were short. Two publications were only a page and a half long. They sited flaws and proposed corrections for formulae in quantum mechanics and gravitational theory. The most recent article, a 1992 publication, was different from her earlier work. It

overviewed prevailing theory on the mathematical principles underlying the design of the Great Pyramid at Giza and proposed a progressive ratios algorithm to replace the popularly accepted pi interpretation. The article was beyond Patricia's comprehension, though she remained puzzled by Maggie's interest in the architecture of an ancient civilization. Patricia was also intrigued that a prestigious Egyptian antiquities journal published a paper by a relatively unknown mathematician.

The longest article and apparently Maggie's first publication, was a contribution to unified field theory. It had the appearance of being adapted from a dissertation. That article led Patricia to look for Maggie's name in Dissertation Abstracts International and that search yielded the information that Margaret S. Nevin earned a doctorate in theoretical mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1976—eighteen years ago. How old could she have been, then?

As she approached the two mysterious intellectuals, Newton and Maggie turned to greet her. "Patricia!" Maggie called out. "Good to see you. Have you seen Cynthia?"

"No."

"I'm sure she will be here, shortly," Newton said as he flipped a chunk of cotton candy toward Maggie and then asked, "Do you want to eat around here or go into town?"

"There's a pizza place—"

Patricia's suggestion was cut short by Cynthia's greeting, "Hi!"

"Hi," Newton and Maggie returned her greeting in unison and again Newton posed his question on where to go to eat.

“Newton, pizza, seriously, pizza,” Maggie said enthusiastically. “We do not get to Chicago enough. Just think about it: hot pizza and cold beer.”

“Two blocks from here,” Patricia said gesturing to her right. “This way.”

They arrived at a crowded pizza place and worked their way into a booth in a back corner. Lots of noise, lots of laughter, the aroma of pizza crusts browning on hickory wood-fired bricks, and the ubiquitous red plastic tablecloths created the perfect pizza place experience. As Patricia sat down, she wondered if Newton would ask everyone to leave so he could have some quiet and privacy.

Dinner was not to be business. Maggie and Newton ordered three pizzas each, they encouraged Cynthia and Patricia to order several pizzas, too. During the evening their table was graced with at least seven pitchers of beer—some light beer, some lager, some dark beer. Newton wanted one pitcher of each type of beer they served. He drank little—a sip of this one, a sip of that one, searching for the best tasting pizza/beer combinations. The mushroom, artichoke, and feta cheese pizza with the dark beer was good. The spinach, zucchini, olives, and gorgonzola pizza was a perfect match with the lager. For Newton and Maggie, the entire meal was a quest for subtle taste combinations.

“Patricia?” Newton asked between bites of his pizza. “Do you make your own pizzas at home?”

“No,” Patricia replied. “I usually pick up them up at the grocery store or get them delivered.”

“Cynthia,” Newton continued, “I suppose you typically order out or come to a place like this?”

“No,” Cynthia said. “I usually fix them at home.”

“That’s great,” Maggie said. “What do you usually make?”

“Whatever is left over at the restaurant,” Cynthia said. “At close of business, employees can take left-over pizzas and calzones home.”

“That’s nice of them,” Newton said, smiling a smile that only Maggie would understand. Newton was serious about his pizzas.

At the end of the meal, Maggie had all the leftover pizza boxed up. It was an eight-box stack of at least nine different pizzas. Newton called the waiter over to the table and said, “There is a Salvation Army mission three blocks from here. Do you know where I am talking about?”

The waiter nodded ‘yes.’

“Take these pizzas to them. When you come back, tell me the name of the Major who is on duty tonight and I will double your tip.”

“Yes, sir, I will be right back,” the waiter said as he left the table.

“I cannot imagine a better way to spend the evening than eating in a noisy pizza joint,” Maggie said as she reached for her beer.

“Was there a good place for pizza in Cambridge?” Patricia asked, tentatively.

Maggie sipped a little beer, then asked, “You mean near that school that is there?”

“Yes,” Patricia replied.

“Careful Maggie,” Newton said in a mock whisper. “You are being investigated.”

Maggie looked at Patricia and smiled. “No Newton,” she said, “I have already been investigated. Patricia is try-

ing to confirm her information.”

“You went to Cambridge?” Cynthia asked.

“No,” Maggie replied. “I attended a school that is in Cambridge, just across the river from Boston.”

“You attended M.I.T., didn’t you?” Patricia asked.

“Yes, but I was young and foolish then,” Maggie said as she sipped a little more of her beer.

“How young?” Cynthia asked.

Patricia wanted to know, too; however, she would not have been so blunt.

“Eighteen,” Maggie said. “I finished college when I was eighteen.”

“You earned your bachelor’s degree when you were eighteen?” Cynthia asked. “That’s mind-boggling!”

“OK,” Newton said as he leaned back into his seat.

“This will keep getting in our way until we satisfy your curiosity. Maggie completed a doctor of philosophy degree in theoretical mathematics when she was eighteen years old. She is really, really, really smart.”

“What did you do?” Cynthia asked Newton. Her youth was refreshing even if she clumsily stumbled through interpersonal discussions.

“I went to college for a while, and then I invented things. Nothing most people would find useful; I did not invent toilet paper or those nifty little things you stick into the ends of corn-on-the-cob. I did find out how to speed-up storage and retrieval in computers, and how to reduce heat production in microprocessors—that makes them faster.”

“Newton likes to solve problems,” Maggie added.

“Let’s go back to Navy Pier,” Newton said. “We can talk there.”

4. NAVY PIER & CUVIER

The group walked back to Navy Pier. Night had descended on Chicago and the carousel and the Ferris wheel lights lit up the area. The pier was busy. Children ran ahead of their parents. People pushed strollers along the walkways. Chicago was alive and happy.

The foursome found an area that was relatively quiet; it was in the shadow of the grand building at the entrance to the pier. This massive brick structure blocked the lights and sounds of the carousel and Ferris wheel. They sat on park benches next to water displays. People on this part of the pier were searching for quiet or they were just passing through on their way to the excitement; either way, the area was suitable for a meeting.

“Cynthia,” Newton said as he leaned back on the park bench and stared up into the night. “Tell me about Carnegie and Cuvier—what made these two people so extraordinary?”

“Yes,” Maggie said. “Give us a book report. What did you find out?”

“Andrew Carnegie,” Cynthia began, “is a classic American success story. He was a poor immigrant who—”

“I think she read the Cliff Notes on these guys,” Maggie said, interrupting her.

“What did Andy Carnegie value?” Maggie asked.

“He was a successful businessman,” Cynthia said. “An industrialist; he was the richest man in the world. He valued money.”

“Nope,” Newton said. “He made money, that doesn't mean he valued money. If we applied that same logic to you and you make flatulence, that would mean—”

“Newton! Shut up!” Maggie snapped. “You’ve made your point.”

“Cynthia,” Maggie continued. “Think about it. This man, this rich man, gave away his money. He gave away more than 90% of his wealth. Does that suggest that he valued money or perhaps something else?”

“He valued libraries and he valued peace,” Cynthia answered.

“Right!” Newton declared. “When you have the resources to meet your basic needs, the rest of your money can be dedicated to what really matters to you.”

“Why did Carnegie build libraries?” Newton asked. “Patricia, why do you think he built libraries?”

“As a child he borrowed books from the library of a gentleman in his town. Public libraries were not common then; books were typically kept in private homes and loaned to friends.”

“I believe,” Newton said, slowly, deliberately, “Andrew Carnegie knew that information is the foundation of the human race. What we know determines our options, our options set the ceiling on our success, and our successes determine whether we survive—as individuals and as the human race.”

“Newton likes ideas,” Maggie said. “Books hold thousands of ideas, and libraries hold—well sometimes they hold—millions of books. You can just imagine how he feels about libraries.”

“Cuvier,” Newton said. “Cynthia, tell me about Cuvier and not the Cliff Notes version. What did this guy tell the world?”

“Cuvier was a geologist who proposed Cataclysm Theory,” Cynthia said, expecting Maggie or Newton to inter-

rupt her at any moment.

“Was he right?” Newton asked.

“I don't know,” Cynthia replied.

“Did he prevail?” Maggie asked.

“He had some credibility,” Patricia said. “He was a preeminent geologist in his day, but he proposed that life on Earth does not progress through gradual transformations—as Darwin proposed—but through cataclysmic disasters that arbitrarily wipe out life in some areas to the advantage of life in other areas.”

“Survival of the lucky,” Maggie mused.

“Was he right?” Newton asked.

“Time will tell,” Patricia replied. “There has been some evidence in Siberia that—”

“Stop!” Newton shouted. “Stop thinking about what you have read and start thinking about what you know.”

“Newton,” Maggie said softly. “A little patience would not hurt just now. This is one of your passions, give people a chance to catch up with you.”

“You are right,” Newton replied. “Thank you. Sometimes I get too concerned that we are not moving forward fast enough.”

“This is what I think,” Newton continued. “Carnegie and Cuvier were visionaries; they were our ultimate role models. Cuvier looked at the geologic record and he saw the writing in the walls of fault lines, in canyons, and in mountain ranges. He told us the world has been a violent place. Volcanoes have erupted. The planet has split into continents. Ice has ravaged the land. And—this is the most important part—these things have happened without any regard for whether people were living there at the time.”

“But that was a long time ago when the Earth was

forming,” Cynthia announced confidently.

“Oh?” Newton said. “When did it stop? Is it finished? I missed that article in Newsweek. Has all of the tectonic tension of trillions of tons of granite crashing together along the Pacific Coastline come to an end? Can we shut down all the seismic monitoring stations in—”

“Newton!” Maggie snapped. “We are not at the student union debating Pangaea Theory or the Gaia doctrine after four cups of espresso; get off your high horse and make your point.”

“I’m sorry,” Newton said. “Old habits; but, it is a lot of fun to debate this stuff. OK, I will get to the point: it is all still happening, everywhere. That’s why we have earthquakes, volcanoes, and the geysers at Yellow Stone Park.”

“Why didn’t Cuvier prevail?” Patricia asked. “Why isn’t he a household word today?”

“Because of the anti-religious paradox,” Newton replied. “It was—”

“I’ll take this,” Maggie said, interrupting him. “You need a quick explanation and this always pushes his buttons—do you mind, dear?”

“No,” Newton said, sounding just a little annoyed. “Go ahead.”

“Here is the crux of the issue,” Maggie said. “Cuvier told us that life as we know it is shaped by just one disaster after another—floods, pestilence, plagues, and the end of the world as we know it. Darwin’s view was that life in all of its variety, changes slowly and methodically over time and the bad stuff really does not have that great an impact on the way we do business. Now think about this: Darwin has the kinder theory, a theory consistent with a benevolent universe; but he was labeled anti-religious. Cuvier’s posi-

tion is pretty tough, but he is thought to be supporting religious zealots; cataclysm theory is very biblical.”

“This is about religion?” Cynthia asked.

“Yes and no,” Newton said, unable to stay out of the conversation any longer. “It depends on what you want to believe about our planet. What makes you feel better? The Earth loves you and certainly would not erupt, explode, rip apart or spin out of its orbit while you are here, or the Earth’s destiny may or may not include you?”

“It is a religious question,” Patricia asserted.

“No it’s not,” Newton contradicted her quickly. “To believe Darwin is correct or to believe Cuvier is correct does not preclude believing in an ultimate intelligence that governs the Universe. It does require that you be arrogant enough to believe that you know the plans of this divine being.”

“I told you this stuff pushes his buttons,” Maggie said, smiling.

“Is what we are talking about covered by that paper I signed yesterday?” Cynthia asked. “I would like to tell my brother about it; especially the part about the Earth doesn’t care if he lives or dies.”

“Don’t tell your brother anything about this conversation,” Maggie said. “It will save you from accidentally getting into related topics that you cannot talk about.”

“Wait a minute,” Cynthia said, excitedly. “Carnegie and Cuvier! I have it. You think the world is coming to an end and you want libraries to tell people about it.”

“Half right,” Newton said, glancing quickly at Maggie.

“We think Cuvier was probably right that global disasters have significantly shaped life on Earth,” Maggie explained. “We know that someday the planet will change so

dramatically that life will be threatened. That change may come from an object in space striking the Earth or our moon. The change could come from within the Earth itself from shifts in the magma or tectonic plate rifts in the oceans. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union have all the weapons necessary to destroy our planet; either by accident or by intent, just pushing a few buttons could kill most of us.”

“So,” Patricia asked. “How does all of this relate to Carnegie? What’s the connection?”

“We must save the libraries,” Newton said. “Every piece of information that survives the cataclysm will accelerate the recovery of the survivors.”

“Computers,” Cynthia said. “That’s what it’s all about, right?”

“No,” Newton said. “Computers are the problem here. Storage and retrieval of information is too fragile in a computing environment. A thermonuclear blast emits a pulse that wipes magnetic memory banks clean.”

“You know something about a war?” Patricia asked.

“No,” Newton replied. “I don’t know anything about a war, an earthquake, or about any asteroids hurling toward the planet. I believe books and other paper documents are the only reliable way to store and transmit information to those living in a future without electricity, computers, running water, or vending machines.”

“Beginning next week,” Maggie said. “We want you both to begin identifying and collecting the books and other publications that will help people to recover after they survive the next planetary disaster.”

“We have a few ideas that we can get to you on the basic materials,” Newton said. “There is a lot more you will

need to find and purchase. Lease a warehouse for the initial collection. We have identified a manufacturer for the storage containers; they are air and watertight. We will check in with you from time to time to assess progress and help you with any problems you encounter.”

“This should take care of the early problems,” Maggie said as she reached into her fanny pack and pulled out a credit card. “It is a company credit card in your name Patricia. It has an initial purchase ceiling of \$100,000 per transaction and cash draw down privileges of \$25,000 per day. The credit card company did not want to go higher because they fear their liability if the card is stolen.”

“Within the next two days,” Newton said. “You will each receive a book of checks to spend against your new accounts at the First National Bank. I have made deposits in each of the accounts. Consider them advances against future salary. Cynthia, we know you have student loans that require that you enroll fulltime—pay them off next week. There is plenty of money to cover them in your account. Patricia, we know you were planning to go on vacation next month. Please postpone that trip for two months and then plan to come to Jamaica for a month. We will have meetings during the first week; but, the balance of the month will be yours.”

“We are not the only ones, are we?” Patricia asked.

“No,” Newton said. “There are others.”

“How many?” Patricia asked.

“You do not need to know that information,” Newton replied, almost tersely.

“Oh, stop playing secret agent man,” Maggie said. “We will have about two hundred people doing what you are doing.”

“Will we all be linked together?” Patricia asked.

“No,” Newton said. “Everyone must work independently.”

“Why?” Cynthia asked.

“We are setting up one hundred sites, resourced by many bright and capable people,” Maggie said. “Not one site, copied ninety-nine times.”

“Is there a master list of the locations?” Patricia asked.

“Yes, there is,” Newton said. “And I will burn it when everything is deployed.”

“Why would you burn it?” Cynthia asked.

“We need one hundred chances to improve the survival of a group of people,” Maggie said. “Not one group of people monopolizing one hundred sites.”

“How do we contact you?” Patricia asked.

“You already have,” Maggie said. “The number in Jamaica will find us, no matter where we are.”

“I was just wondering about something I saw this morning,” Patricia said, very tentatively.

“This should be interesting,” Newton said. “Why would we know about something you saw this morning?”

“It was an article written by Maggie,” Patricia said. “A short piece about the mathematics used in the Great Pyramid.”

“You have been busy!” Maggie said. “Did you agree with my premise?”

“I didn’t understand it,” Patricia said. “But, it seemed odd that you would be studying and writing about pyramids. That’s not your field of expertise, yet you published in an Egyptology journal.”

“The editor agreed with my assessment of the design principal underpinning the pyramid,” Maggie said. “Many

people think that the value of pi is being communicated; I disagree. It's really a matter of repeated ratios in the triangle, and..."

"O'Hare, dear?" Newton asked.

"Yes, we can't miss our appointment," Maggie said.

"Perhaps later, when we have more time, I can tell you why every great civilization has left us symbolic messages about their most sophisticated science—I hope we will be the first civilization to protect the books that hold the complete stories of what we know."

Patricia and Cynthia watched a shiny black Rolls Royce pull up to the curb. The chauffeur jumped from the car and ran to open the back door.

"Patricia," Maggie said. "We need you to help us save civilization. I know it sounds corny; but we cannot lose. If there is a disaster, we are ready for it and we win. If there isn't a disaster, life goes on and we win. Understand?"

"Yes," Patricia said. "I do. When did you decide to do all this?"

"Four years ago when our daughter, Sarah, was born," Maggie said. "We are doing this for her, and her children, and her children's children. We are doing this for all the people who will live in a future we will never know."

Patricia and Cynthia waved goodbye to Maggie and Newton as they entered the limousine. As Patricia watched them drive off into the chilly October night, she saw a small child in the back seat waving to her through the rear window, and she waved back.

As Cynthia rode in the taxi going back to her apartment, she thought about writing the check that will pay off her student loans, perhaps she would buy a car. She thought

about her kid brother, Robert. She had to think up some way to talk about Cuvier so she could tell him that the Earth does not care if he lives or dies. She also needed to find some way to tell her parents that she is going to go to school part-time; her dad would not be happy with that decision.

As Patricia walked to her apartment, she thought about animals boarding an ark. She thought about the headlines in yesterday's newspaper reporting the massive oil spill in Russia's tundra region. She thought about OPEC and people waiting for hours to buy gasoline in the early 70's. She thought about the civil wars in Africa, earthquakes in California, and then she wondered about the people living in Amboy, Washington on the day before Mount Saint Helens erupted.

She had never thought about creating a time capsule that would save lives and help people thrive in some post-apocalyptic future. She had always thought of disasters as local, with the people from the unaffected areas rallying to help the survivors; however, what if the devastation was global? What would people do if they were completely on their own? Would they know how to find safe water? Would they know how to build shelters? Could they start fires for cooking and heating? How would they grow food? What would they need to know about medicine and health-care?

Patricia spent the next ten years of her life compiling, cataloging, and storing the information that would help people survive. She retired when she turned 50 years old and she spent her retirement years as a consultant on preservation. She helped to evaluate the integrity of the storage contain-

ers. She worked with a group that excavated a test container that had been buried for eleven years in the highest elevations of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. The contents were in perfect condition; extreme cold and frost had not damaged any of the materials. Another test container had been sunk just off the coast of Japan, two miles beneath the ocean's surface. Five years in the crushing depths of the salty ocean had not damaged the container or its contents.

She helped design and conduct many experiments to determine how much abuse the containers could endure and still protect the contents. Every container stayed air and watertight under the most extreme conditions. Their work would be safe for decades. Patricia was convinced the plan would work.

On January 23, 2017, just three weeks after her 62nd birthday, Patricia died from complications following surgery to remove an abdominal cancer. As she felt life slipping away, she smiled enigmatically and asked the nurse for a book. The nurse told her she would get her a Bible. Patricia said she did not want a Bible, just a book, any book. She did not want to read it; she just wanted to be holding a book when she died.

Patricia died knowing she had achieved all she ever dreamed of achieving. She had dedicated her life to giving the human race a chance for eternity. Within her casket, beneath her crossed hands, she held a small arrangement of three bright red roses. An Egyptian papyrus scroll held the roses together. On the scroll, inked in the dark red dye of the cochineal beetle, was the simple, handwritten message: Dear Patricia, *Thank you.* M & N, and S.