

# DEAD IN THIS VALLEY

By Michael Stephen Fuchs

"You'll excuse me," I note to a conference room full of marketing corpses, "but I've got to take a screaming shit." This comment results in a nice pool of stunned silence for me to wade through on my way out the door. Feeling unblinking eyes on my back, I turn and elaborate, "This is distinct from, though related to, the 'shit of a lifetime'. Only get one of those in this mortal coil. The 'hellacious piss' probably needs no annotation." I leave the door open behind me, out of which floats the germ of a discussion about whether I'm fireable, which, obviously, I'm not.

In this tech labor market? Please.

In the Valley these days you can't even go to a late-night espresso joint for fear of getting clubbed on the head and shanghaied by roving technical press gangs. One minute you're admitting too loudly that you can tell an ODBC driver from your own asshole, and the next you wake up in a cubicle at some startup in San Mateo, a half-finished piece of code on your screen and a generous options grant on your desk.

I warily round a couple of corners, traverse some sterile hallway, and swing into the shitter. My hand's under my coat, naturally; but when I see feet under one of the stall doors, I draw down. Gun held stiffly forward, I sweep the room, slip into the adjacent stall, step on the john, and point my head and piece over the partition.

"Show me your hands, buddy," I announce to the straining, and now very surprised, marketroid sitting below me. This guy's shocked expression tells me either he's not playing—

or he's very, very good. He promptly raises his hands, empty, and no weapons in evidence. I withdraw to my stall and drop trou—after placing the gun on the TP box in front of me.

And it is not just any gun. My primary sidearm is a vintage, old-style Disc Tracer. Aside from being arguably the most deadly toy gun ever manufactured (I've triggered off fifteen rounds in under five seconds, achieving a one-foot grouping at twenty-five feet), it also predates that ridiculous legislation mandating toy guns all get painted wretched shades of blaze orange, urine yellow. The Disc Tracer—my Disc Tracers, I actually carry two most of the time—are black with pearl (okay, white plastic) grips.

The gun's realistic aspect probably explains my next-door neighbor's excessive alarm at my invasion of his stall.

I contemplate the lovely device before me as I serenely grow, and then molt, a lengthy tail.

Back loose in the halls, eagle eye monitoring the corners, I cut a wide loop back toward my desk. You can't ever take the same route anywhere; you can't afford to do anything predictable. Never mind the fact I sit, in theory, in the same cube all day, day after day, time out of mind.

That's why, in the later rounds of the Assassination Game, as things have heated up, I've spent a lot of hours on the hoof, just going from one place to the other. I've also allowed myself to get dragged into an inordinate number of mind-wrenchingly pointless meetings—such as the one I unceremoniously vacated just now.

It's a tough call. Death? Or marketing meetings? I go back and forth.

I decide to hit the main kitchen. We got chips, we got dips; we got frozen dinners, thousands of cans of soda, and every manner of candy known to civilized man. This is Silicon Valley. These things are the quotidian benefits. To even raise eyebrows anymore you got to provide dry cleaning pickup, in-house massage, and a sous-chef. Give away BMWs to top engineers, and shit.

We're like Mayan high priests at this point. I'm pretty sure HR would perform human sacrifices in the TV lounge (large screen, DVD, Sega DreamCast, natch) if we told 'em our competitors were offering it.

I nuke a bean 'n' cheese burrito, grab a Diet Coke, and leave the way I came.

As for the cube (the one I'm stuck in far too much of the time), I've specially rebuilt that, so at least I sit facing the entrance. Underneath the desk hangs a Zebra shotgun, overloaded with ten rounds in the chamber—a poised locust storm of yellow, globular death. Only one shot, but a spread so wide it'll kill you, your next-door neighbor, and your twin brother back in Poughkeepsie. This is my "evener"; it greatly increases my life expectancy at the office.

A few players have private offices (yeah, there are some executives in the game; when you've got twenty-six year old VPs, some of them are going to want to play the Assassination Game, if you run the thing). These smug bastards simply close their doors all day. Peons like me gotta undertake major construction projects with cubicle panels; mount mirrors all over the damn place.

Someone suggested once that hits should be made off limits inside the building. But of course then we'd have nothing to do but work all day. Maybe surf the Net some. No, it's much better this way.

Two bites into the burrito and Gary Wagman breaks the plane of my entranceway. I ease off the trigger of the shotgun when I see it's him. "What up, Gary."

"What up, Ian." Gary puts his elbow on my bookshelf and gets busy looking despondent. "So what's your take on Monday's all-hands?"

"There's an all-hands on Monday?"

"Yeah. You didn't see it?"

"I'm not checking mail this week. It's an experiment. I plan to see how many people with life-threatening problems actually survive into next week, without me bailing them out. It's kind of an object lesson."

"Good on you." Gary is a Kiwi, working here on a H1B visa, and says shit like that. "Yeah, there's an all-hands on Monday. Word on the street is we're out of money."

"We're not out of money. They can go back to the trough any time."

"I heard the new term sheet fell through. Furthermore, I heard there are pink slips coming for support staff." Gary is a Unix sysadmin. He doesn't actually write code for the product, nor go out selling it, leaving him in the vaguely dismissive category of "support staff." This is why he's worried.

"You're not getting fired, Gary." I sigh. "And should you get fired, all that means is you get to go take a better job for twenty-five percent more money. You know all this."

His shoulders fall down around his waist. He says, "I'm ten days from vesting, Ian."

"Oh, shit. Didn't realize that. You been here a year?"

"Eleven months and twenty days."

"Damn."

"If I get sacked this week, I'm McFucked with Cheese. A whole year of seventy-five hour weeks—and no equity, not a single one of my options. I've sacrificed my health, never mind my sanity, to this fucking place."

I can only agree. "Yeah, McFucked with Cheese—out looking for a McJob. That would pretty much suck an entire bag of dicks."

"A bag of dicks?" he asks.

"Yeah, you know. If you had an entire bag of dicks and you sucked every one of them right in a row. It would suck that much." I sigh again. "But look. You're not going to get sacked. Nobody's getting sacked. Now go back to your desk and look busy. I've got a hit to plan here." Gary gives me a baleful look; he got killed in the second round. He walks out and I tuck into my burrito—and log into our mail server.

My target this week is an inordinately cagey wench named Justine, our documentation manager. To the best of my knowledge, Justine has not slept in her own bed in five nights. I think she found out I have her number, which understandably put the fear of God into her.

You see, I am the Defending Champion of the Game. I won the shit last year; six out of six contracts completed, and four other motherfuckers who bought themselves a farm trying to take me out. Ha, ha, you dilettante motherfuckers.

So, anyway, I'm sort of gratified Justine sees fit to take desperate measures. But the fact that she's so spooked does make my life more arduous in the short term. Still, she can

only run, not hide. I'm about to get all of her e-mail—where I'm counting on finding the information that will provide the key to her demise.

Yesterday I sweet-talked one of Gary's sysadmin colleagues into giving up the root password to the mail server. ("I've got to, uh, do some work on the backup scripts. Right, the backup scripts.") Guy gave it up like a jonesing crack whore.

I jump into the mail spool and tab through Ms. Justine's Inbox, looking for the goods. Tabby, tabby, tabby . . .

The phone rings. Who would be calling me? People know not to call me; whatever it is, put it in e-mail. Oh, yeah, I'm not checking e-mail this week.

"This is Ian," I mumble.

"Ian. It's Sid." Oh shit—Sid the CFO. I don't say anything. "Ian?" I consider hanging up; dealing with a company executive right now sounds about as appealing as eating a bowl of big fat dick. I sigh, too audibly.

"Ian, I'm having some trouble working on my financial reporting form on the intranet again. Do you know what the problem is? Is it on the blink?"

Only one thing is on the blink. "Yeah, Sid. I think we're having a small pebcam problem."

"Oh, one of those," he says knowingly. "Can you fix it?"

PEBCAM stands for Problem Exists Between Chair And Monitor.

"Yeah, give me five minutes to fix the server; then I'll also need to make a quick adjustment on your system. I'll be over in a minute."

"Thanks, Ia-" <click>

I sit in my cube twiddling my thumbs for five minutes, reciting soothing mantras to get my bile back down to a wadeable level. Then I get up and slog down the hall for the express purpose of hitting one of our senior management team over the noggin with the old proverbial clue-by-four. As I walk, I consider that what many of our users really need is some sort of intercontinental ballistic clue delivery system.

I swing into his office (hand under coat).

"Did you fix the intranet server?" he asks brightly.

"Oh, yeah, it's all better now."

"How'd you fix the pebcam problem?"

"Oh, you know. Computer black magic. I just waved the dead chicken over it for a while." I bite on my tongue while I lean over his console and type a few characters. "So, the server's all fixed and everything. But you're also going to need to remember to connect to the intranet via HTTP, with this URL, rather than across the file system." When you do it the way he was doing it, everything naturally breaks; this was the PEBCAM problem (the exact same one as last time). "I've sent the instructions for this to you in e-mail." The same e-mail he got sent three months ago; I just forwarded it back to him again. There's always the chance he'll read it this time.

I turn to leave.

"Thanks for being so on the stick about fixing this, Ian!"

I pause in the doorway. "AMF, Sid."

"AMF?"

"Adios . . . my friend."

I make my way back from this absurd errand and get back into Justine's purloined e-mail: Meetings, meetings, FYIs, spam, spam, letter from mom, spam, minor flame war with one of her staff members, spam, spam—aha, here's the good stuff: date invitation from her significant other. Heh, heh.

By way of vacating my cube during the dangerous early evening hours, I've let myself get scheduled for a 6pm with IT—and our new security consultants. I exit the building, dart through the center courtyard, and re-enter on the opposite side. When I hit the conference room, everyone's already there: the IT manager, a couple of tech support droids—and what looks for all the world like the parking lot of a Phish concert.

I mean, these guys are ragged: tie-dies, Birkenstocks, and deeply blank looks.

Also in evidence—and no one wants to believe this less than me—is the thick, rich scent of recently-conflagrated ganja.

I check the IT manager to see how I should react to this. He wears a poker face. "Hi, Ian," he says. "Thanks for sitting in."

I hold my ground, incredulous. One of the Phish fans makes a welcoming gesture between me and a chair. I snort and sit.

"So," says one of the sixties throwbacks, the one I take to be in charge, "you guys want some auditing done?"

There follows a thirty-minute discussion of the company's security issues—firewall configuration, VPN, a local certificate authority, biometric access controls. To my great surprise, the burner security consultants seem to know what they're talking about. I launch a couple of sharp-shooter questions, but they bat them back.

By way of conclusion, the burner-in-charge notes, "Don't worry, dudes. When we get done, your systems are going to be supreme . . ." He puts a thumb and forefinger to his lips. I'm somewhat beyond amazement at this point. The burners exit.

"Are these guys kidding?" I ask the IT manager.

"Don't worry," he says breezily. "They're very good. Trust me." He adds, half under his breath, "Plus, they're available."

With this, the door bursts open again and a blonde guy, who I think I recognize from QA, charges in remorselessly blazing away with a repeating rubber band gun, snapping rounds zipping over the conference table, off the walls, filling the air. I'm already under the table, Disc Tracer in hand, aiming for his kneecaps—when I realize he's not here for me.

One of the IT drones takes two in the chest; he never even got a gun clear. "FUCK," the victim exclaims. The IT manager (his supervisor) gives him a pained look.

"Yeah, bitch!" bellows the blonde assassin. "That'll teach you to publish out your calendar!" He's got that inimitable assassination adrenaline.

I duck out of the conference room, just in case the next one's for me.

Moving through the lot, cutting a wide arc around the parked cars, I run into the burner security consultants on their way out.

"Hey, man," the head burner smiles.

"Ya'll going home?" I ask, one eye on everything but them.

"No, man. We're gonna be here late. We're just going out to the lot to fire up a big fattie." I see a VW Vanagon up ahead of us. "You want to light up?" he asks.

"Thanks, no," I demur. "I kill my brain cells with CRTs and cell phones." We reach the Vanagon and pause. I can't resist: "Um, how exactly did you guys get into security work?"

"Mostly by hacking, man." He grins. "We figured out it pays better finding holes in the systems of people who actually want us to. Sure you don't want a hit?"

"Thanks for the offer. But I've got to do some laundry; clean the apartment."

"Clean the apartment?"

"Yeah. I'm trying to get it from looking, like, a cave where wolves live to, maybe, a cave where a caveman lives. Plus, you know, I've got this girl to kill."

"Right on," says the burner security consultant. But I'm not listening at this point; I'm looking into the oversized rearview mirror on the VW.

Hairs on the back of my neck.

I move off toward my car (parked at the rear, thirty yards from anybody else), keeping my gait casual. I look left. I look right.

Definitely someone back there. I run the data through the ole wetware mainframe. And I can see where this is going.

I reach the car and circle to the passenger side. I drop out of view and press my cheek to the blacktop. Yep. There's the car bomb, duct-taped to the underside of my gas tank. Looks like, maybe, the old balloon in the shoebox design; when I opened the door, a string would have pulled the balloon into a pin inside the box. Crude, but effective—against any pathetic amateur who gets in his car without checking it first.

I keep my cheek on the ground and look for feet. I see two.

I pop up, Disc Tracers held akimbo. Looks like Dharmesh, from development. I draw two beads, but he's a little far out; moreover, his eyes go wide, and he takes off at a flat run.

I carefully remove the car bomb, smiling. Now I know who my presumptive assassin is this week.

And I'll catch up with Dharmesh later on. Count on that shit.

After rolling it out of the parking lot, I get busy sitting in traffic on 101. Motionless and thoughtful, I recall poor Gary Wagman—and his options so close to vesting they're about to fall off the vine.

I only gave Gary the cheery spin on things, because I'm pretty sure he needs more gloomy thoughts like he needs an ass sandwich for supper. (I didn't comment on it at the time; but was that a facial tic he had going on?)

The fact is, I'm starting to worry myself. Like virtually every other startup here in the Land of Geeks and Dreams, our outfit is "one year from profitability"—and probably always will be. That is to say, our business model runs in two phases: A) Operate on venture capital money, ponied up in increasing ten million dollar increments, until such time as B) We conduct a staggeringly successful IPO and everyone goes home rich.

Along the way, there's a little noise about building and marketing a revolutionary hardware encryption product, and maybe even a bit about generating revenues (that's one of the niggling requirements for going public). But mainly it's all about getting big really fast, burning through four million dollars a month (and climbing) and, finally, condescending to let the public markets value us in the mid ten figures.

Don't hate us for it; everyone plays the game this way.

Unfortunately, recently, someone turned over the game board—in the form of the dot-com downturn, and concomitant crash to Earth of the NASDAQ (which previously appeared to be on the verge of achieving escape velocity from our solar system).

Now, nobody can go public. It's like putting out to sea in a hurricane. It's just not done by people with brain function.

So, the ten-billion dollar question is who can ride out the storm—i.e. who's got the most VC monopoly money to stretch through the famine. Only the hardest survive: consolidation; downsizing; bankruptcy; liquidation. Every week the ranks get a little thinner.

And, early next week, we're going to gather every man jack in the company together in a big room to hear the news. Which invariably makes a man jack wonder about the nature of the news.

I sit in traffic for another half hour, then take an exit two before my regular one. The surface streets won't move any quicker; but coming in obliquely will be safer. A new route, always a different route.

One of the Disc Tracers sits out on the passenger seat.

I park a mere two blocks from home and cut through a couple of back yards. I circle the building once, peek in my bedroom window, then enter, one Disc Tracer held in a modified Weavers grip.

The apartment's clean; I lock the doors, switch on the robot sentry, and lie down in the bedroom with the new Neal Stephenson.

The robot sentry is built around a kick-ass gatling dart gun I found at the Toys 'R' Us megastore. It's actually belt-fed (32 darts) and runs by hand-crank. However, it was a pretty

simple engineering project to remove the crank handle and attach a five-volt motor in its place. Then I put the whole thing on a low tripod, with a motion sensor on the front. Anybody moves in front of it and they're going to be swimming neck-deep in high-velocity suction-cup darts (with the suction cups cut off, naturally; they fly much truer that way).

A man who sleeps in the same bed every night also needs an evener.

I've been sleeping alone for about eighteen months. Tonight, I fade on the novel pretty quickly and go to sleep alone, again.

Saturday morning and I stumble down the drag to Cafe B for a little morning civilization, in the form of espresso and a baguette. I sit outside in the cool sunshine, with my back to a wall.

This is Round Four; we're basically down to the quick and the dead. At the beginning of the week, each surviving assassin receives his next assignment via e-mail. Kills can be made with disc guns, dart guns, Zebra guns, rubber band guns, Nerf missile launchers. No water guns; too drippy to carry around, too indistinct a projectile. Special attack privileges—letter bombs, booby traps, the kiss of death, etc.—are allotted with each successful hit. Kills are logged on a special area of the company intranet. You can also get scores and rankings there.

I understand side bets have gotten common, to the point of actual handicapping. Am I the odds-on favorite, you ask? Does Rose Kennedy have a black dress?

And as for my current target, Miss Justine—well, she gets what she deserves for sending unencrypted mail with her dining plans in it. The weekend's terminal stop: Il Fornaio—Sunday brunch reservations for two, at 11am.

Make that for three.

Saturday evening and I slump in the comfy swivel chair in the corner of the living room. I flip the torch lamp on and off, playing the trick with the light-catching photo. I have a photo of the ex-love of my life, a brilliant, light, airy thing in a golden frame with blonde matting. I discovered one time that it somehow catches light, and glows for like a second and a half after the lights go out.

The ex-love of my life is also pale blonde, with perfect fair skin.

These last few years, I've developed this very dubious habit of dating neurotic programmer chicks. But this is the Valley, what are you going to do? It's neurotic programmer chicks, or insufferably hyper-professional marketing chicks. Or nothing.

I spent a long time routinely going with what's behind Door #1. Don't get me wrong, I love them all, the neurotic programmer chicks. I mean, they're great—very smart, usually freethinking and adventurous, and often starkly beautiful.

They're just all quite mad. Off around the bend, three sheets to the neurochemical winds.

I attributed this pattern to coincidence, until the last one—the big one. After that emotional apocalypse I had to give more critical thought to maybe whether this industry does something to females. Maybe whether the machines do something to females; did something to the ex-love of my life.

I flip the light some more.

I consider the light-catching trick to be emblematic of our ex-relationship. Glow brilliantly; then lights out; then a way-too-slowly fading afterimage. Someone told me the algorithm is .5T. Whatever the length of the relationship, it takes half that long to get over it.

Just another few months to go.

Of course, there's the question of whether I'll still be here a few months hence. The all-hands on Monday morning might fill in some of the blanks.

One never really knows quite what to feel, as a cubicle farmer in this Valley. The combination of the constant first-round draft pick treatment . . . along with the castles-on-clouds fragility of the company, and of the whole industry . . . and, finally, the real (however unlikely) possibility that the options you sit on could end up being worth millions . . . well, drinking this witch's brew day in and out leaves you with one strange buzz. You feel kind of mercenary—but also kind of hunted. It's all greed and fear, and you somehow never really get to relax. It's just not a nurturing situation.

One thing I have figured out: Although the company has determinedly failed to pick up on this, ultimately loyalty isn't a function of spiraling salaries . . . or in-house masseuses . . . or catered dinners every night. People give loyalty in exchange for just two things: knowing that the work they do is appreciated; and believing that the people they do it for genuinely care about their welfare.

And still, somehow, most of us just keep our heads down, loyally shoveling seaweed against the tide. Despite the fact that any one of us could go out and get another job, for more money, in about .005 seconds. Heck, there are probably literally ten thousand open jobs I'm qualified for within three miles of where I sit this minute. But, the problem with virtually

unlimited job opportunities is that they all have jobs attached to them. And nothing will change.

I prop my novel on the end table, jam a Disc Tracer under the pillow, and call it a night.

Later, in the wee hours, I dream of frantic gunplay—the real sort? or just the game?—erupting in the halls at work. I run in action movie slow-mo, looking for a gun.

Gang violence is not a big theme around here. They're certainly not accustomed to gangland style hits at Il Fornaio—the storied Valley holy spot and watering hole for dealmakers on the hoof. I don't even want to imagine what the maitre'd is thinking on Sunday morning as I lope confidently by in a trench coat and black ski mask. I give him a little nod as I pass.

You have to put the ski mask on before you enter the room, if you're going to use it to do an end-run around the witness rule (no more than five witnesses may see your killing, normally, or it doesn't count).

I do keep the dart rifle under my coat, for the moment. This one's fluorescent green, alack, but still modesty bids me to not go into the restaurant looking any more like a SEAL team leader than is strictly necessary.

I walk the middle of the room scanning faces; no Justine.

I see several wait staff presenting alarm. The maitre'd has the phone in his hand.

I've probably got about thirty good seconds to work with here.

I exit the rear onto the patio; there's my girl, working on a cocktail with a strapping young lad by her side. She looks none too jovial; that's not going to improve.

I walk up and bring the rifle to my shoulder; but then pull up. Is she crying? She startles, then looks me in the eye. Her slump is soulful.

"You can't kill me, Ian," she says. "I'm terminated."

Finger still on trigger—this could well be a trick—I ask, "Somebody already got you?"

"No. Not the game." I see a pair of hot tears run down the outsides of her cheeks. "Not the fucking game. The company. I've been fired."

Oh, shit.

I pull my mask up. "Shit, Justine. Don't I feel like the fuckin' asshole."

This does not bode well for Monday morning.

I slink back out the door with ski mask in hand.

The remainder of Sunday passes like a watermelon. At last, I tuck in me and my guns—and sleep fitfully, the specter of Monday morning lying upon me like a heavy, scratchy blanket.

I look for Gary in the morning, but don't find him. Instead I walk down to the all-hands with Igor, another developer type, Russian, and a generally reasonable guy. On the way to the training amphitheatre (it still holds the whole company, if we stand to the back wall) we pass one of the glass-walled conference rooms. We can see the CEO's in there, along with several other C-level people. The door is closed, but the scene looks grim—and through the glass I can hear what sounds a great deal like the company's leaders foully abusing one another's female relatives.

I grimace and ask Igor what he makes of that.

"Perhaps they are arguing about how to break the good news of moving up our IPO filing date."

I look sidelong at Igor and raise a single eyebrow.

"Okay," he shrugs. "We're fucked."

At the door, as usual, a guy is handing out Marketing-Speak Bingo cards. Igor and I take ours and shuffle in with the growing trickle of comers. We take seats near the middle of the auditorium and review our cards. I've got "leverage synergies," "take that offline," "strategic fit," "at the end of the day," "core business," "open the kimono," "being on the same page," and "value add" on my three-by-three matrix. Not a bad lineup for an all-hands meeting. Albeit this all-hands might turn into something other than the usual buzzword- and pabulum-fest, with which we've all become way too familiar. (Hence, Marketing-Speak Bingo—sometimes the only way to survive the deluges of meaninglessness.)

Here's the Big Fish, our CEO, stepping to the lectern, as stragglers straggle in. I crane behind me right, then left, and spot Gary—standing alone in the back corner. He doesn't look good.

The presentation gets underway. "Hi, everyone," the CEO says genially into the mic. "It's great to see all these faces together again—and many more of them every month! As you all know, it's been an interesting quarter. We've continued to grow the company at a rapid clip, and we've made great progress in developing our primary product line—and being proactive and on the ball about keeping pace with the market."

I see Igor beside me marking his card.

"The market, on the other hand, and as many of you have noticed, has been a different animal. The tech indices are way down, making access to capital markets very difficult—and

as a result we're seeing rolling up of some of the smaller players in our space, by some of the bigger ones. At the end of the day, our core business is a great one to be in." I mark two of my squares. "But we're having to face some market realities."

Here it comes now. People are practically covering up their heads.

"With the paradigm shift we're seeing, including substantial disintermediation and consolidation in the marketplace, fairly drastic steps are going to have to be taken in order to future-proof the organization." With that, we can hear pens and pencils scratching out X's up and down the room. Everybody's attention is pretty evenly divided at this point, between the bingo game, on the one hand—and, on the other, steeling ourselves for the thundering shit-storm we can all sense rolling on in.

"The Board of Directors and I have thought long and hard about how we can be results-driven and still display thought leadership in this industry."

"BINGO!" An Asian guy in the fifth row leaps to his feet, jumping up and down a couple of times and pumping his arms. I tear up my card.

The CEO waits a respectful interval, then begins again: "The conclusion we've come to is that, given the consolidation in the marketplace, as well as the precipitous drop in the public markets, we've had to consider merger and acquisition opportunities. After very careful discussion and negotiation, both internal and external, we've decided that the win-win decision is to join forces with our friends at Solar Temple Systems."

Oh shit. We're being acquired. Our chief competitors have just become all of our bosses. I try to recall how recently I've updated my resume.

"The stock options program will be taken over by Solar Temple Systems. All of you will continue to vest in STS options, on the same schedule as now, with the size of your

options grant to be determined once we finalize the acquisition terms." He pauses—and I swear I see him gulp. "Job roles in the new company will be discussed and decided upon in the next few days. There will naturally be some shifting of roles, based on the needs of the combined organization, as determined by the STS Board and senior management."

None of us mistake what's happening here: Our investors and senior management have pulled the eject handle. Yeah, we the little people will get a small nibble of cheese out of the deal—as well as the opportunity to keep chasing our dog track rabbits. But the real players in the game—the VCs, angel investors, and VPs with options packages in the hundred thousand-plus range—are all floating to Earth in lovely lamè parachutes.

And the most unmissably bare fact hanging out there in the choked air above our heads, floating in all the stunned silence, is that there will be blood on the floor. We know what consolidation means. We can do math: one company, two marketing departments; one company, two IT departments; and so on. The hardcore developers and technology people are safe, but the tangentials—including all "support staff"—are just about to be shown their seats for a short ride to a long shaft.

I think of Gary Wagman.

And as I think it, I see Gary—fast-walking down the aisle toward the podium. He leaps onto the stage and, before the startled CEO, pulls out a gun.

There's a tremendous tumult as about a fifth of the audience pulls guns and hits the deck. From over the seatback in front of me, I can see the other outstretched arms pointing various weapons at the podium. (One guy's got a Nerf missile launcher on his shoulder; now that's being prepared.) Then all the gunmen suddenly spot each other and begin pivoting left and right, covering one another balefully. It's a twenty-person Mexican standoff.

Gary turns and pans his gun across the audience; heads go down.

"I'm not fucking around!" he shouts.

Yeah. Nobody's fucking around. Business is business, but the Game is the Game.

You've just got to question the guy's timing. I'm trying to figure who he's going after—when I remember he got eliminated two weeks ago. He levels his gun back on the CEO, who laughs nervously into the microphone and says, "I'm afraid you've got the wrong guy, Gary.

Regretfully, I'm not playing."

Gary fires a shot into the floor.

It's a real fucking gun.

Gary pans it across the audience now—and heads go down like White House interns at the first strains of "Hail to the Chief." He brings it back to bear on the CEO and grabs the microphone from the podium.

"Three hundred and fifty eight days," he says. He's breathing very rapidly. "A year of my life. How do you value that in your acquisition terms? What's a year of my life worth?" He wipes his nose with his forearm. "Nights. Weekends. Neglecting my wife, my daughter. Busting my ass for this company. And what do I get? What am I going to get?!"

Somebody yells from the audience, one of Gary's colleagues I think, "A three month severance package! If you're lucky!"

"Right!" Gary says. "Right! I am one fucking week from vesting! Fuck that!"

Suddenly his New Zealand accent sounds very shrill. He looks back out at the crowd.

"Where's Sid? Sid! Stand up!" No one stands. Gary scans faces and, kind of remarkably, finds the CFO. He points the gun at him. "Stand up!" Sid stands. "Now. No one is going anywhere . . . until I get my stock certificates. Sid is going to go down to legal and print them up." Sid

begins to tremblingly leave. Gary shouts at him: "Here! Take this!" He hands him a small slip of paper; looks like a personal check. "I'm exercising," he says, calmer now. "Seventy-five hundred options. My strike price is forty cents a share." Sid takes the check. As he scurries away, up the aisle, Gary says, "Sid! If you don't come back—with my certificates—the whole financial team's going home in body bags!"

We sit in perfect silence for almost twenty minutes. I hear distant police sirens. Every single person in this room has a cell phone; I guess someone finally remembered to dial 911.

Sid comes back with the stock—twenty seconds before uniformed officers storm all the entrances. Gary drops the gun—but clutches the bouquet of stock certificates to his chest, and cackles maniacally as police drag him from the room.

I shake my head in genuine sadness. Poor Gary. Yeah, he got his stock. But it's not about the equity; it's not even about the salary. Gary should know by now that if you don't keep your cool . . . if you don't stay light on your feet . . . if you're not always ready to jump from one sinking ship to the next . . . if you refuse to learn these basic rules, by heart—then you are dead in this Valley.

We all trundle back to our cubes, feeling just slightly more jaded than we did before.