





Maybe you haven't been paying attention lately.
Maybe you're just reluctant to face the truth.
Or maybe, just maybe, it's a whole lot easier
accepting what we've been told all along.

But this is the future.

And acceptance and reluctance
are the same dance, on the same ledge,
for the same master.

Signature

“Now us, we’s what’s knowed as butchers.”

—Micah



Signature

Copyright 2007 by

Ron Sanders

ISBN: 978-0-6151-5653-8

This is a protected work of original fiction. Not one fragment
may be reprinted without the author's blessing.

ronsandersartofprose@yahoo.com

also by this author:

Freak

Microcosmia

Carnival

The Deep End

Legerdemainia

ronsandersatwork.com

Signature's  *Chapters*

<i>The Group</i>	1
<i>Hammer</i>	17
<i>The Outs</i>	27
<i>Solomon</i>	36
<i>History Lesson</i>	54
<i>Madame Rat</i>	63
<i>Visions</i>	72
<i>The Honeycomb</i>	77
<i>Caverns</i>	92
<i>Evolution</i>	103
<i>The Possle</i>	112
<i>Mama</i>	121
<i>Signature</i>	126
<i>Closure</i>	137



Chapter One

The Group

Picture a man on a brightly lit catwalk. He'll be a black man, around sixty, dressed in ceremonial robes of blinding gold. In the background you'll see a forest of upturned faces, a frozen pyrotechnic flare, and a full moon hanging fatly in a crystalline sky.

Now pretend it's a real-time image.

See that flare get blown to shrapnel, watch the crowd rear back and roar:

"Thirteen...twelve..."

Zoom out, in your head.

Imagine a couple of screwballs, on a dock twenty feet below that catwalk, hilariously arguing physics, mob mentality, and plague stats, the way you and I would go on and on about faceball scores, chickie chambers, and a good old bare-knuckle carrier-whooping.

"...eleven..."

Grab a breath and get ready. Because there's something in the air, man. There's something about the next number that obliges you to holler in sync, as if its place in the sequence holds a magical significance for anyone who can count.

"...Ten..."

And you're in! Throw back your virtual head.

Signature

“...*nine*...”

There’s that sweet party moon, with her winking corona of satellites—

“...*eight*...”

—catching and bending the sun, reflecting it—

“...*seven*...”

—onto a thousand lunar mirrors—

“...*six*...”

—perfectly spaced, servo-aligned—

“...*five*...”

—to spell out our holiday message.

“...*four*...”

And there it is: written bright-on-white—

“...*three*...”

—and right on time. So shout it out!

“...*two*...”

Let go, pal! Howl like a lunatic.

“...*one!*”

No, damn it, *scream* it:



“And that,” said Abel, “was that.” He snapped his fingers. “Less than that. An instant, the wink of an eye, and... gone! Once again the crowd’s immortalized a moment that exists solely as a symbol of its own pinwheeling mortality. Why can’t we dedicate a day to something that *mellows* with age, eh, Doctor?” He rammed the psychoanalyst into the crowd, and someone unseen rammed him right back. The return impact bounced Abel off the throng’s opposing flank, incidentally knocking Izzy back on track. In this manner they crossed the dock like a wobbly old wheel.

Every party has its bullies. The one who came after Abel was no drunker than the rest, just uglier. He shoved Izzy so hard the doctor shot through the press of flesh and was doubled at the east rail. “You push this little freak on me again and I’ll kill you. Do we understand each other, old man?” A second later he was gone, swept up in the jostling promenade.

Abel called after him, “I’ll push the little freak on anyone I want!” and carefully stepped around the strolling families and hooting rowdies, muttering, “and I’m not yet fifty.” A few rubbernecks at the rail were slow to part. “Air,” Abel explained. “Just a little room, please. He’ll be fine.”

Now a flurry of rockets crisscrossed the night sky, momentarily lighting the Burghs a ghastly white-and-purple. Izzy raised his streaming eyes. Not two miles away lay the Colony, denuded on the surface, but peopled below by a race hidden for so many generations it was recognizable only in folk legends and bedtime horror stories. “*Hullo, megalopolis!*” he bawled. Every drunk within earshot cheered, urging him to complete the old salutation. Izzy inhaled until his eyes were popping. “*And burn in hell, you stupid plague Colony!*” Fists were raised, empties hurled, throats screamed raw.

Izzy rocked back around, his jaw dropping at the flash of gold. “Speak of burning. What in the who is that?”

The man on the catwalk looked like he didn’t know which way to spit. Fireworks were going up all over the place, but he didn’t raise his eyes. Everybody else went nuts.

“Okay. That’s our guy.” Abel waved his arms, showing five fingers on one hand and two on the other. Security at Gate 7 immediately began ushering patrons to adjacent gates. There

were garbled protests and a few shouted threats. Abel watched impassively before turning to study the black-and-gold gargoyle. “Lost in a crowd. Sad, really. The party’s just starting, and there he stands; without a friend or a clue.”

“Surfeit of study,” Izzy gasped. “Now you hold steady! Don’t you...barrass me.”

Head of Security rolled his forearms one over the other. “We’re on,” Abel said. “Wipe your chin.” He looked up at the catwalk and a broad smile cut his face in two. “Moses! Moses Amantu!” Cupping his hands round his mouth, he called over the crowd, “*Professor!*” and lustily climbed the gangplank. Abel swung round the gatepost and approached the startled historian like an old friend, his hand extended warmly.

Amantu’s head jerked back a notch for each step advanced. When the two were face to face, Abel panted happily, “My name’s Abel Joshua Lee, Professor, but my pals just call me Josh. I also go by ‘AJ’. We’re from Titus Mack.” He pointed at his partner, now inching up the gaily adorned gangplank. “That’s Israel Weaver there, psychoanalyst extraordinaire and my best damned friend on the planet.” As if reading Abel’s lips, Izzy gave a cheerful wave-back, then jumped and laughed at an abruptly-launched Screamer behind him. Clinging to the rail, he renewed his laborious climb, bending forward and backward like a punching clown. “Ti—Titus, that is—said you’d be expecting us. He might have just mentioned us as the other two members of a little frat he founded, known colloquially around the Burghs as the ‘Group.’ Kind of makes us sound both standoffish and regular at the same time, don’t you think? Anyways, I’m really amazed to meet you, sir.” He thrust his hand forward insistently.

Amantu considered the palm as though it were a rotting lab specimen. “And to.” The arm dropped. In the awkward pause a flash of magenta blew into a zillion falling stars.

“Well!” Abel’s grin was killing him. “My nephew’s got a big hand in particle mapping. He’s cleared us with the Director on down.” He snapped his fingers like castanets. “One View, all fired up and ready to go! So let’s not dally. We can cruise along in comfort and with dignity. Let the masses have their hoot.”

Amantu looked away from the rides, away from the merry-makers, away from all things insufferably pedestrian. “These experimental amusements. I do not approve. They are dangerous, outrageously overpriced displays. I expected a cab.”

“On *this*, of all days? No, no, no, Professor. You must be our guest. And the bill’s on Ti. He’d have it no other way.”

The black head reared. “Titus Mack demanded we ride one of these things?”

“*Well*,” Abel laughed, “of course he didn’t *specify* any particular conveyance. I mean, he spends so much time cooped up in that remote old observatory of his I doubt he’s ever even seen a View. Look, all I know is, I get a buzz only yesterday. Ti wants to show me a discovery he’s been keeping under wraps, and he’s fit to bust. Haven’t seen the man in a blue moon. ‘Bring Izzy,’ he says, ‘and do me a favor. I’ve put out a special invite to Professor Moses Amantu of Burghsbridge, and hang me if he didn’t accept. You guys hook up with him halfway and show him along.’ And so of course I was excited, and reserved us a ride. Moses Matthew Amantu! Mister Up The System himself.”

“And what,” Amantu asked icily, “would a waveman want with an historian?”

Abel blew out his cheeks. “It’s like I told you, sir. We’re just here to show you along. He’s got a surprise for us. And, if I know Ti, it’s sure to be a good one.”

Amantu’s crosshairs swerved onto Doctor Weaver, now feeling his way around the gatepost. The highly-cited psychoanalyst turned out to be a balding, portly little sot with the pout of a spoiled child. Amantu made no attempt to hide his disappointment. When all three were at arm’s-length, Izzy raised his eyes and winked blearily.

“Happy You Near, ’Fessor! What say you we all. Tickle old tonsil?”

Amantu looked away. “Thank you, no. I do not imbibe.”

“For Cry sake, man!” Izzy’s head bobbed round to Abel. “*Never?*”

The hard eyes slid back. “*Not ever!*” Faces in the crowd turned. Nostrils were flaring; a fight was in the air.

Amantu’s voice cut through the din like a buggywhip. “I

do not disdain celebration, sir. Nevertheless, I feel no urge to run cartwheeling through a vomitorium simply because my calendar needs replacing. In public, *Doctor Weaver*, it is mature behavior that separates professional men from the mob. Do you not agree?"

Izzy froze as though he'd been slapped. A half-grin raised one side of his face and passed. "What you say...what you trying say I—"

Abel squeezed right in. "Perhaps we're getting off on the wrong foot here, fellows. Please accept my apologies, Professor. I so wanted to meet you congenially, and maybe absorb your brilliant theories on cultural recall firsthand. I'm certain Titus'll be fascinated." He very gently took Amantu's elbow and guided him around the gatepost.

The professor bent a kinder ear. "Oh? Mack is familiar with my research?" They picked their way down.

"Absolutely familiar. The Group has its own theories on suppressed historical data, but this work you're pursuing—wherein the brain retains, actually *hard-wires* memory over generations—well, that's the kind of stuff that gets a man in trouble. And, speaking for the Group, it's also the kind of passionate research that makes a man admired."

"Yes." Izzy and Abel descended behind Amantu, who was parting the climbing file by presence alone. "And how is it that my work has become so public?" They spilled out onto the dock.

"You know how students talk." Abel clasped his hands behind his back, affecting a cosmopolitan stroll while the New Year raved around them. "But just a word to the wise about scholarly immunity, Professor. Please have the good sense to know when the Barrier's notoriously thin skin has been breached. I'd hate to hear you'd been 'debarked,' or shot in cold blood, for that matter. Don't look so skeptical. There are perfectly credible stories of healthy, sane men being labeled as carriers. Sensible men." He squinted at a magnesium starburst. "Intellectuals."

"Stories," Amantu mumbled. "Distorted, like everything else, by the popular imagination. Recall volunteers are specifically instructed to ignore plague-related material of an anecdotal

nature.”

Abel nodded sourly; the professor was hooked. He steered Izzy through the crowd, studying faces all the while, and let Amantu roll on:

“*Recollection*, sir, is fundamental to our survival as a species. Memories of powerful events are therefore retained at the cellular level and passed onto descendants. Distortions *do* occur over time, but the university’s equipment treats culled statements as outright lies, then uses an inversion program to reconstruct similarities into a cohesive picture. The greatest liar in the world could not construct a system of perfect liars; human beings are far too idiosyncratic. Devices do not have this problem.”

“Do tell.”

The professor halted. “Pardon me?”

Abel smacked his signet on the turnstile at Gate 7. The faceplate lighted, but the wheel remained locked while four softly glowing columns rose out of the deck beyond. At their apices these shafts developed horizontal limbs that extended until all four columns were linked by a misty cylindrical rail. The faceplate went dark and the wheel unlocked. Abel backpedaled through the turnstile.

“I submit, Professor, that your conveniently receptive students are in fact carriers—and it bothers the hell out of me to have to put it so bluntly. They belong in the Colony. At least under quarantine they won’t run the risk of being shot outright. Cultural recall, indeed.” His fists did a spongy drum roll on the rail. “But perhaps you’re doing a backhanded service. Weed out these individuals, sir, and report them immediately. Secure that university.” He rolled his neck and hunched his shoulders. “Secure all universities. Anyway, let’s cud some. How’s about perco and a snack? Izzy, order what you like. But for Christ’s sake let’s talk about something else. Anything else.” He flipped his hand, placing the signet and rail in direct contact. “Table for three. Destination, the Outskirts. Titus Mack’s.” Abel glowered over the menu. “Eight miles an hour. Transit time, forty minutes. What was I thinking? Well, we’d might as well get comfortable. Everybody move up to the rail. It says here the sensors need sixty-four square feet of clearance.” They stepped

back.

The map trembled with a sickly radiation. Five new columns broke the surface; one at each corner, one at dead-center. The corner posts ceased climbing at two feet, three developing foot-square seats out of their caps, the fourth broadening to form a fuzzy drink stand. The central column continued an additional foot. A horizontal plane grew out of its cap, producing a perfectly square tabletop.

Amantu tucked in his robes. "Delightful."

The View's deck commenced a gratingly slow extension from the dock, its eerily pulsing tip marking time with a tracking pulse miles away. Though the Group were soon rising gently over the Burghs, there was no real sense of being airborne; rather, cruising on a View gave one the feeling of riding uphill in a rickety amusement park train. Still, there were brief moments of an exhilarating weightlessness, every hundred yards or so, when the deck was electromagnetically nudged by a massive ground arbor. But even that exhilaration soon gave way to a kind of rhythmic nausea.

Dozens of these bile-green arcs were rising every which way over the city, most conveying parties of drunken screaming celebrants. Rented space above Views erupted with holographic pyrotechnics, with laser-driven pixel images, with briefly reflective messages of a recklessly-publicized personal nature. And now, swimming along in that wide popping sky, the good old moon was back to her familiar unadorned self.

Abel rapped his signet on the table. "Order."

A life-sized projection appeared; half mannequin template, half pretty brown-eyed waitress. The template-side scrolled through a spectrum of sample types before adopting a mirror copy. Pen poised eagerly over pad, the recovered Pj gave Abel its full attention. "Blonde," he said. "With pigtails. Blue eyes. Native blouse." These details applied immediately. The projection's posture and expression remained in type.

"Perco all around, please. Blue Mountain in china. You may leave the pot."

Izzy rolled back his head. "None of your blasted greasy brown beans for me, Josh! I *mean* it, man! Your embarrass us. We're aluminaries, damn it. So let's...*get* aluminated!"

Signature

“Make that a Lazy Sun,” Abel drawled, “for our glowing friend. And a plate of sweet cakes. Something luminous.”

The Pj made as though deleting a line.

Izzy threw an exaggerated wink at Abel, reached around cagily, and slapped the likeness on its apparent bottom. “*Okay*, ‘Sweet Cakes’?” His hand, passing through, skipped across the tabletop like a stone on a pool. Izzy pitched off his seat and landed on the fat of his back. His tough little skull bounced hard on the deck.

The waitress appraised him uncertainly, then took in the table in general. A second later she broke into a mosaic of interlocking facial samples, and was immediately replaced by the image of a towering policeman, its entire head locked up in a shiny black helmet and visor. The telepresence stared hard at Izzy, ignoring the rest of the Group. “Signate?”

Abel sat right up. “That would be me, officer. Um, Happy New Year. I’m responsible for Doctor Weaver here. He’ll be fine.”

The Tp only intensified its study. In a minute it was replaced by an equally-grim apparition in medical smock. A ruby beam lanced out of this image’s mock ophthalmoscope. For a wild instant Izzy’s sprawled body became a living anatomy chart; every nerve, every blood vessel, every bit of cartilage beautifully delineated. The beam dimmed and the medical Tp vanished. The cop reappeared in its place. “Signate?”

“Here.”

“This individual requires monitoring. Be wary of further impairment.”

“Done.”

The Tp was displaced. Abel bounced his forehead repeatedly on the table.

“Eminent,” Amantu muttered.

Izzy had just found his stool when the waitress reappeared, a misty chest in her hands. Abel touched his signet to the lid’s imprimatur. The chest waxed solid and the waitress dissolved.

Pressing the lid released a thin tail of steam and the bland aroma of instant coffee. The cups were disappointing little inverse cones of disposable lined plastic, but Abel laid

them out neatly, and made a show of savoring the odor as he poured. The cakes, flat dry cookies that had shattered with the release of pressure, boasted the Escalateur Company's arcing View logo in green sugar sprinkles.

Izzy gloomily unzipped his pouch and poured the vodka-rum mixture into one of the neat little plastic glasses. The accompanying pouch of freeze-dried ingredients revealed lemon-flavored seltzer powder, a packet of chipped honey, and a petrified cherry with a hollow sulfur-tipped stem. These items he poured into the liquid, then lit the floating cherry's stem with the included striker. The brandied drupe flared and sizzled, causing the bubbles of bicarbonate to glimmer and the honey to glow. He studied the sorry concoction for a few seconds before knocking it back.

"We three grown men," Amantu said through his teeth, "have just been admonished, in the space of only five minutes, by no less than two officials!"

Izzy hurled down his glass. "To hell with 'em!" The plastic tumbler didn't crack, but sprang back feebly. "To hell...to hell *alla* them!" He turned on the professor. "And to hell with—"

"Doctor Weaver!"

Izzy glared one to the other. He tore the flask from his vest's pocket.

The professor pushed his coffee aside. "Perhaps our confluence was ill-advised."

"Bladderdash!" Izzy wobbled to his feet. "The time is right!"

"*Izzy!*"

Corrected, Izzy cried, "The time *izzy* right!" He then appealed, at the top of his voice, to anyone within earshot: "Time to *celebrate!*" Cheers rang from proximate Views. "*See?*" Izzy screamed, losing his train of thought. "It's time! It's time! It's time, time, time! It's *time* we celebrate; it's *time!*" He snarled down at that jet-black, unflinching face. "Why *izzy* every jackman on planet understand but you?"

"You celebrate," Amantu seethed, "and you *celebrate.*" He slapped his palms on the table. "Doctor Weaver, why an individual of your stature should celebrate, rather than cerebrate,

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

