THE ALTERNATIVE

by Richard Dante

* * * *

PREFACE

Where do horror stories come from? THE ALTERNATIVE was inspired by a nightmare I suffered on taking a sleeping pill. If so, that was the force that started me writing in the first place. The work started out as a scenario for a motion picture, in fact, a movie within a movie. A friend at ABC suggested I turn it into a novel first then submit it to the Network. I did and got a note back -- they felt it was too violent for their viewers. That was a few years ago and I recently decided to update it and turn it into an E-book. Without giving away the plot line, the story deals with a future world in trouble and a grim Alternative to solve the problem-- Enjoy!

* * * *

THE ALTERNATIVE

* * * *

ONE

The Sun held its position high above Maryland. It's somber light tarnished the white buildings of the city a dirty beige. There was a dusty, gritty feel about the place. Occasional gusts of warm wind sent dust devils kicking up across dead lawns. Where grass once grew, large areas were laid bare and the baked earth was patterned with a network of fine cracks and crevices.

A river divided the city. At one time it ran cool and deep down around Mount Vernon and on into Chesapeake Bay. Now its water was shallow and still, an unwholesome shade of green. Rushes and salt grass choked the banks. Weeds dammed the brackish central channel, where not long ago boats and ships scuttled in and out of the harbor. There was little sign of life. Only a few dragonflies darted about, the plated sections of their slim bodies glinted like steel in the amber light. Some seemed to hang motionless as their compound eyes searched the murky waters.

Though it was late Spring, the cherry trees along the mall hadn't bothered to blossom this year, and between the two monuments, the reflection pool was empty.

Farther up Pennsylvania Avenue stood the Capitol Building. The bright symbol of Democracy looked dingy in the ochre light. Inside the Senate chamber, a pall of gloom hung over the proceedings.

"Missouri?" "Missouri votes, Yes!"

"New York?"

"No!"

A meandering beam of sunlight caught the polished surface of a brass plate. the name *John Shipley* was engraved upon it.

The old man sat erect at his desk, his handsome head topped with an amazing shock of white hair. One of the television cameras moved in for a tight close-up. The unrelenting eye of the camera examined the face. It was marked by creases and lines that told of the happiness and the heartaches of a great man. On his magnificent face one could almost read the last fifty years of the nation's history.

His eyes were closed.

Suddenly, they opened! Bright blue and alive! The camera remained focused on them--searching.

The clerk droned on. "Wyoming. How do you vote?"

"Mr. Vice President, the State of Wyoming votes NO on the initiative!"

The merciless camera held tight to the beloved old face. Another defeat. It could be one too many. The camera registered no change in expression except, maybe, deep in his eyes it could see a great man who's last dream was dying.

There was a visible release of breath as the Senator slowly reached into his vest pocked and withdrew a small silver box. He extracted a tiny white pill and washed it down with a glass of water. During the roar of assent and dissent following the negative and deciding vote, the old man looked up toward the ceiling.

High above the proud old head, beyond the curve of the Capitol dome, the foul atmosphere that imprisoned the city began to stir. Through most of the day, the Capitol was choked by smoke from Appalachia where forest fires burned out of control. Then, by some miracle, in late afternoon, a fresh sea breeze from Chesapeake Bay blew the smoke back toward the west, and the city breathed a sigh of relief. In the warm glow of twilight, Washington began to resemble the historic Capitol of happier days Scattered solar-charged street lights came on, and the scene took on a festive glitter.

TWO

Night poured across the city. Suddenly, beyond the lit Capitol area, in a dark, almost deserted businessdistrict, a brilliant pool shimmered like a jewel in the blackness. Fingers of light shot into the air and moved about as if searching for something in the sky. On closer observation, one could see the display lit a gigantic old movie house. A theater who baroque architecture reflected the late nineteen-

thirties, the golden age of motion pictures. The building was all white and in the swirling light became dazzling in its whiteness.

At street level, many of the small solar-electric cabs arriving at the theater were competing for space. They inched their way through the heavy traffic. Their tinny horns raised a cacophony of protest as elegant and distinguished men and women descended from them into a flood of digital cameras flashes.

A police cordon stood protectively around the courtyard. There seemed to be good reason for this added precaution. The activity in front of the theater contrasted sharply with the squalor on the opposite side of the street. Across from the splendor, the shop and store widows were boarded over; sealed against another element which had moved into the area. They had no business there--except survival. Dirty children played in the littered gutters, while in the shadows, their faces lit by the miraculous spectacle, transient slum dwellers stood -- watching.

Inside the movie palace, the lobby was jammed as the smart black-tie crowd milled about, calling greetings to one another. Though many of the gowns were last years haute couture, most of the ladies had managed to take a hitch here, and add an accessory there to give at least a semblance of high fashion. Movement was difficult as the crowd flowed up the wide staircase to fill the balcony mezzanine. It was a pleasant, balmy night. and many decided to gather in small groups in the spacious courtyard. They sipped champagne as waiters moved among them with hors d'oeuvres. The throng laughed and chatted, glad to be out on the town after so many months of social inactivity. Washington's elite were enjoying themselves.

Jim Paulson, UPN correspondent, clad in formal attire, stood in the center of the brightly lit courtyard, Suddenly the cameraman threw him a cue and Paulson began his coverage of the event.

"Good evening. This is Jim Paulson reporting from the courtyard of the old Orpheum Theater in Washington, D.C.. Once a giant of the Orpheum circuit the movie house has been closed for years, But it's certainly open tonight for the world premiere of THE Movie!

"Most of our nation's leaders and other celebrities are just arriving to enjoy the limelight and glamour of this premiere atmosphere. The guest list must include nearly all the Washington establishment, with only the President missing from the glittering crowd of political luminaries and their ladies.

"We're here because it's news, and because this is just about the only bright spot anywhere these days. Pantheon films, producers of THE Movie brought along their own power. In fact, due to the shortage of both power and food, they were required o supply everything in order to bring the presentation into Washington.

"THE Movie is billed as the most extraordinary motion picture event of all time. Reportedly, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent. But on what? Who are the stars? Another mystery. And why the odd title? About all we were able to gather is, it's in a new process of 3-D and there's even talk of the fourth dimension! In spite of all the ballyhoo, it's not costing the politicians or taxpayers one thin dime. Presumably, just a generous gift from the film's producers.

"Be sure to tune in tomorrow to UPN's noon news for a complete review." Paulson signed off with a blurb to continue watching as UPN anchorman, Jesse Patterson gave a recap of the days news.

The television picture switched to show a group of fisherman and other seaman. Some were harvesting seaweed The newsman's voice-over described the scene:

"Across the nation, including Washington D.C., food rationing reached a new high. this morning. The Secretary of Agriculture announced we may have to depend more and more on the sea for our food supply.

"Also in the news: Global warming has brought the world to it's knees with no relief in site. The hope to utilize water from the polar ice caps to irrigate crops and supply water for drinking and industry has proved impractical.

The picture changed to forest fires blazing and men struggling to control them.

"Water is the main priority everywhere, and the shortage has left hundreds of fires across the nation burning out of control."

The network picture dissolved to a shot of the Senate in session.

"What many consider a tragedy, occurred earlier today in the nation's capitol. The Senate defeated Senator John Shipley's initiative to provide additional funding for the Chesapeake Bay Project. This was a victory for Senator Roger Bracken's Desalinization Committee as the Bay Project suffered another setback"

The picture on the screen dissolved into a dizzying, stroboscopic blur. The camera moved back to reveal the swirling blades of a monster wind turbine, one of four clinging to the cliffs above Chesapeake Bay, Two giant structures stood nearby and seems to vie with one another to dominate the complex. The tower won easily in height as it soared nearly a quarter mile into the air, and looked like an enormous slender funnel held erect by a system of steel girders and guy wires. The building too was impressive. It's sides stretched in each direction for hundred of meters and stood a dozen stories high. It's size made one wonder what could possibly fill such a container. As the cameras moved inside, however, the viewer got the impression the architect had made a mistake and it wasn't large enough to hold the contents. It was crammed with very conceivable device. All designed to capture salt-sea water from the Bay and propel it into the sky as freshwater rain.

As the cameras moved through the plant, a countdown was heard and project manager Dr. Glen Donovon explained:

"For this test we will increase the lift factor by fifteen percent. Our calculations indicate we've been on target for each test, but possibly some atmospheric aberration has caused our recurring malfunctions."

"Three...Two...One!" a technician pressed a button.

A whirlpool began to form in the bay as water was drawn into the system. Another camera moved to take a dramatic, low angle shot of the tall tower silhouetted against the sun. All at once a great gray shape rolled forth from the high tower's funnel opening. In seconds it formed what looked like a massive thunderhead. More clouds were born in the same way and began to extend away to blot out the sky.

Then -- without warning -- a bolt of lightening roared down the tower, into the plant and shot just above the the heads of the shocked technicians! The cameras showed the Project personal, so triumphant moments before, staring around in bewilderment -- deafened by the roar of thunder that followed the flame from the sky. The report ended with a tight close-up of a discouraged looking blond man with the name *Dr. Kirk Miller-Bay Project Director*, supered lower screen. Jim Paulson had also reported the earlier *Bay Project* disaster. Standing in the UPN broadcast van watching his report, he tried to digest the implications of what he'd just seen. What would the next year bring: or even the next few months? His news assignments had taken him to the far corners of the world, to cover a multitude of tragedies. In recent months he's stared famine the face. He'd seen pain and the vacant stare of death--More horrible than any war, with no *cease fire* solution. He paused and looked down fondly at Sally Merriwhether, the assistant director. He was concerned about her. About both their futures. Still, though there might be hardships and rationing, at least in Washington, there was a chance for survival.

Meanwhile, celebrities continued to arrive. After leaving their taxi, Kirk and Sharon Miller pressed their way into the theater lobby. Kirk looked uncomfortable in his tuxedo as he craned his neck to see over the mob.

"I...don't see them," he told Sharon, who was below his field of vision.

"Kirkland, my boy! Sharon!" Senator John Shipely and his wife approached them with faces beaming. After an affectionate greeting, the old statesman stood beside the scientist only half listening to their wives' banter.

The boy looks mighty tired, thought the old man. He reflected on how much he'd come to admire this brilliant young physicist. The scientific community knew Kirk Miller as a dreamer of great dreams. Both the Senator and the scientist had become slaves to a common goal, and had submerged themselves intirely in their work. Their devotion to duty had cost them both a great deal. The aging leader looked around at the laughing faces and asked himself, *What on earth are we doing here? Are we just grabbing for a moment of fun? How could there be such frivolity in the face of the obvious future.*?

The entire world faced impending ruin. It was always there, lurking in the background or blazing in the sky, devouring the very will to live. To compensate for the daily privation, there was a desperate grasping everywhere for a taste of pleasure. Those here tonight, the sophisticated, worldly Washingtonians were driven to near madness in search of anything to make them forget the trouble threatening them.

Mrs. Shipely asked Sharon if she'd like to join the crowd. The social lions were growling and it was a great opportunity to socialize.

Sharon begged off, saying she'd rather stay where she was and watch the show. She studied the crowd and although she nodded to some of her acquaintances, she made no move to join them. She recalled when she and Kirk had first come to the Capitol, the were invited everywhere and met everyone. But she found most of the Washington crowd to be either dull or stuffy, or gross and boorish: ordinary people, no better or often just a little bit worse than anyone else.

She did feel close to the Shipleys. they were interesting, intelligent, down-to-earth people, and she and Kirk often spent an evening with them.

She was shaken from her reverie by a voice speaking next to her.

"Mah goodness, isn't this somethin'?

Sharon turned to see an elderly black lady standing beside her. The woman looked a bit out of place. Not because of her color, for there were many blacks in Washington's inner circle. It was only her, dress which contrasted sharply with the high fashion that flowed around her. The little woman was tastefully clad in a simple

dark -flowered acetate dress. There was a small flowered hat perched on her almost white, woolly head, and her white gloved hands clutched a patent leather purse. Her bright eyes sparkled as she looked first at Sharon and then at the dazzling crowd in the lobby. Sharon was immediatly drawn to the woman, who was so obviously awed, and at the same time delighted by the scene.

"Ah'm sorry my deah, but this is so excitin'. It's almost like a dream," and as she spoke she gave Sharon a friendly, confiding smile.

"Of course, I wouldn't be heah at all if it weren't' for mah son. He's Henry Jackson, the Undah Secretary of Agriculture ya know." She'd take a small liberty with the title. Henry Jackson was only one of the many undersecretaries, yet she wanted everyone to know she thought her son was the most important.

At that moment a handsome, middle-aged negro man joined them saying.

"I can't find the Senator anywhere, Mother. he may already be in the theater. I'll try to catch up with him later."

Mrs. Jackson proudly introduced Sharon to her son. A bit aloof, he mentioned he'd met Sharon and her physicist husband at a reception several years earlier. Sharon smiled as he made vague compliments about her husband's genius, before he excused his mother and himself and led the charming old lady away.

Alone again, Sharon elected to remain where she was, and watch the crowd. As she scanned the throng, her casual inspection came to a sudden, jarring halt as other eyes gripped hers. The dark brooding stare dared her to look away. No one had ever stared at her in that way before. The extraordinary eyes seemed to speak to her, and what they said disturbed her deeply. They promised, they urged, they demanded. Then her field of vision widened to encompass the handsomest face she'd ever seen. He was tall, broad-shouldered--the epitome of the dark handsome stranger in the fortune teller's crystal ball. The eyes held hers for longer than was really respectable. Then the full lips smiled as he lifted his champagne glass and saluted her.

Just then she felt someone at her shoulder and turned to find Kirk beside her. He was looking toward the man in the crowd and there was a strange expression on his face. She glanced back, but the tall dark man had disappeared into the crowd. His presence had thrown her mind into a state of confusion. Sharon felt the blood rise to her face as she fought to compose herself. Trying to deny what had just happened, she took Kirk's arm and smiled up at him.

"How did the *summit meeting* go, darling?" she asked.

"Things are looking better. The senator has been talking to some of his money friends. It looks like there may be more funds available after all. Enough to keep us going."

His smile made him look more at ease. More like his old self.

"Too bad we have to stay for this *spook show*, but I promised John we'd join them later."

"I think it might be fun," she replied. "we haven't had a chance to get out much these days."

"Okay, honey, I won't spoil your evening. I know how this *goulish goulash* turns you on. I suppose I'll survive a little lightweight entertainment.":

"A little lightweight entertainment, young man?!"

Kirk and Sharon turned to face a tall, slim man who appeared to be in his mid sixties. There was an amused smile on his full lips as he regarded them. He appeared very friendly and outgoing, yet there was something almost bizarre about his looks. His head was so narrow, it had an almost skull-like quality. A dab of rouge on each cheek added a touch of color to his otherwise pasty complexion. His thinning, obviously died, black hair was pomaded to his skull, and glistened like patent leather--accentuating the high widow's peak. He was impeccably dressed, but his tuxedo looked a bit out of style. Kirk decided he was certainly an unusual looking man, yet he smiled engagingly as he continued:

"It's obvious you haven't read much about this particular film. Oh, I *am* sorry, My name is Parker...Amos Parker."

Sharon offered the stranger her hand. "How do you do Mr. Parker. We're Kirk and Sharon Miller.'

Kirk chuckled to himself. Sharon had put on her pseudo-sophisticated manner she used when she first met someone. Actually meeting new people was one of the things she enjoyed most. If opposites attract, this was one more reason why the blond scientist and his dark haired wife were so well suited to one another. He was always shy and uncomfortable with strangers. *She* loved a good party and was usually the center of attention. While he usually found a quiet corner and a drink to nurse through the evening, he watched Sharon play her social butterfly game. Actually *moths* might be more accurate than butterflies. Men seemed to flock around her like moths around a flame.

The courtly Mr. Parker made a slight bow over Sharon's hand.

"A pleasure, my dear. I hope you won't mind an old man butting in? But I do get enthusiastic when a really interesting horror movie comes to town. I'm a real buff you might say. I've seen them all."

Score a big one for you, Mr. Parker! thought Kirk. Sharon had an almost childlike love for horror melodramas. As a young girl, she'd preferred ghost stories to fairy tales, and as she grew older, she read books on the occult and witchcraft. She could sit for hours watching some antique horror film on TV while Kirk dozed beside her.

"Mr., Parker, I'm glad you're here this evening. Horror films are a passion with me too, but I'm afraid that's one thing my husband and I don't have in common.

Parker eyed Kirk, who was trying his best to appear friendly and at ease.

"How can that be, young man? Why this film is in a new 3-D process. You don't even have to wear those annoying glasses."

Almost rubbing his hands in anticipation he continued. "Why there's even talk of throwing in a little of the 4th dimension. And the new rating they made up...DG for *Doctor's Guidance recommended!* it makes the whole thing sound absolutely delicious!"

A strange premonition about this *friendly* man suddenly passed over Kirk. Although he couldn't put a finger on it, an eerie coolness invaded his body despite the warmth of the crowded lobby.

He realized Parker and Sharon were looking at him as if waiting for some sort of reply.

He stammered awkwardly. "You...you seem very sure of that."

"I'm sorry you don't share our enthusiasm, Dr. Miller."

"Not Kirk," Sharon broke in. "No imagination for this sort of thing, poor dear. He's a scientist with nothing in his head but numbers." Then she looked up admiringly at Kirk before adding. "It's a nice head though, don't you think so, Mr. Parker?"

"Charming," Parker agreed. You make a most handsome couple."

Outwardly, Kirk was trying to appear friendly toward the foppish old movie buff, yet inside he grew more and more uneasy about the older man who seemed to be making such a hit with is wife. Amos Parker's manner exuded warmth and charm, but there was something-- something in his face that disturbed Kirk. His eyes protruded slightly and were light gray in color with the look of cut glass. It was Kirk's habit to think only the best of everyone, yet his good sense now warned him to be wary.

"THE Movie, such a mysterious title." continued Parker, "... and what's it all about? The story content? The stars?...It's all been kept a deep, dark secret."

Sharon looked around her. "I simply love this old theater. Really baroque" "Yes, I remember it in it's heyday, back when Bela Logosi portrayed Dracula. "A real classic," murmured Sharon.

"The Orpheum was certainly lavish at that time. Of course you know they reopened it because it's the only theater in Washington large enough to house the new special effects. I must say, they've done a beautiful job of restoring the place. But did you notice what's happened to the neighborhood? I guess they couldn't restore that, eh?"

The hubbub in the lobby had softened somewhat as the crowd drifted into the auditorium. Now there wa a persistent chiming sound.

"Well, it's been pleasant talking to you folks, but I believe they want us to take our seats," Parker said. "In case we get separated, I do hope I'll see you at intermission. I'd particularly like to hear your reactions to it, Mrs. Miller."

"That would be nice. You seem to be such a connoisseur of the *finer things*." laughed Sharon as she extended her hand in farewell.

Kirk said nothing, but forced a smile.

"Au Revoir, then," said Parker, but instead of going to the nearest auditorium entrance he want off toward the front doors to the theater itself.

Sharon looked up and kirk and her eyes were sparkling with humor.

"Such a nice man. A real gentleman."

Kirk could find nothing to say. He was still aware of the feelings he'd experienced in the man's presence. The lobby was almost empty as he took Sharon's arm and led her to the auditorium entrance.

THREE

The double doors to the auditorium were situated in a deep archway, and as they stepped through it, Kirk and Sharon were bombarded by bright spot lights. the brilliant lighting seemed excessive to the young physicist and he shaded his eyes until they adjusted to the glare.

In the entryway stood a very straight, very correct middle aged usher who held a heavy velvet rope barring their way.

"Just a few moments, please," the man said a bit patronizingly. "The seating must

be done very precisely."

Kirk and Sharon stood patiently in the pool of brilliance. Inside the auditorium they could see other ushers seating other guests. Again Kirk had an uneasy feeling. So far the evening had been filled with odd premonitions--something he wasn't used to.

What they couldn't see was everywhere around them: in the eyes of the statues, the guilt moldings and even in the folds of the red velvet draperies were the lenses of hidden cameras. Cameras which were trained on the couple from every conceivable angle--studying them. The images of the young couple were reflected in the lenses of the cameras--cameras of an unusual design. They resembled neither television nor motion picture paraphernalia.

Finally the usher spoke again. "May I have your names please".

Puzzled by the unusual request, Kirk offered: "Mr...uh...and Mrs. Kirkland Miller. "Doctor. and Mrs. Kirkland Miller," Sharon corrected him.

Kirk ignored his wife's amendment. He preferred to leave titles to others. "Not *THE Dr* . *Miller*?" gushed the usher, making an attempt to look impressed.

As they stood there chatting, suddenly elsewhere in the fabulous old building, surprising things began to take place. The young couple began to divide like cells. In two's, four's, eight, sixteen--and continued to separate and multiply into dozens of Sharon's and Kirk's. Images that revealed every conceivable view of the young physicist and his wife. Some of the images were close up, others full length. Some were individual and some together: backs, fronts, sides and three- quarter shots. Each picture apparently served a particular and unique function. The couple was not only shown realistically in three dimensions on hundreds of view screens, but in some cases they were viewed in the abstract. There were close cropped pictures of skulls in silhouette. These forms reveal no recognizable external features, but were more like highly detailed X-rays. They seemed to concentrate on the modulations of the sense organs and even the brain itself inside the cranium. Within the brain pan, strange and mysterious colors glowed. bright reds, blues, greens and yellows pulsated within the minds of the young couple.

One of the view screens showed a greatly magnified reproduction of the young Nobel Prize winner's right eye. It was huge and exceptionally detailed as the apparatus set about learning not only *what* the young man saw, but exactly *how* he saw things.

Almost as astonishing as the equipment itself was the huge darkened room that contained it. One end was taken up with hundreds of view screens. In front of the screens, shadowy figures worked at a mammoth console. At the moment, the multi-images of the physicist and his wife seemed to be their only concern.

From somewhere in the darkened room, a voice whispered delightedly,

"Ah, yes...yes! most assuredly, those two!"

A finger pushed a button and elsewhere in the room amazing and exotic computers and recorders began to whirr.

The voices of the trio on the screen took on an amplified quality, as if their words were issuing from ultra high-fidelity speakers. Other machines read out the electronic impulses of the voices and words being uttered by the threesome in the entrance. Oscilloscopes and meters jumped and wavered as each word was spoken.

"What have you heard about our movie, Mrs. Miller? questions the usher.

"She giggled slightly. "Just that THE Movie is the movie to see."

The voice whispered again. "Perfect!"

As the pictures moved and changed there was the constant impression that all these unusual instruments combined to plumb the very s souls of this man and his wife. Searching out the most suppressed or enshrouded thoughts or memories of the individual under study; recording, analyzing, digesting the privileged information being fed into the computers by the miraculous equipment

"I'm certainly looking forward to tonight's showing" continued the wife of the young scientist.

"We're certain you won't be disappointed," the usher replied with an odd smile. "Oh, I think we can seat you now."

Another usher had come to the entrance and the head usher lowered the rope and let the couple pass.

The commanding voice in the darkened whispered again.

"Yes. They 'll do very nicely!"

FOUR

Kirk and Sharon were directed to seats near the center of the auditorium. They resembled armchairs and looked soft and inviting. The arms, however, where of an unusual metallic material, but when they had settled themselves, they found the arms soothingly warm to the touch and perfectly contoured for comfort. The remarkable seats produced a feeling of well being.

Many in the audience were gawking around them. There was no sign of the antique splendor that had surrounded them in the lobby. In fact, now they were encircled by a curved wall that was completely curtained. The immense round room had a domed ceiling that appeared to be fabricated of a silver-white cellular material.

The lights began to dim and the large audience quieted expectantly. Sharon hugged Kirk's arm and snuggled closer to him. The curtain before them split open part way. the brief credits were shown on a curved, two dimensional screen, similar to that of conventional Cinema scope.

Other than the title, THE Movie, and that of the production company, Parthenon Films, only a few production names were shown. There was no mention of a cast of characters or the actors to play them.

The brief credits concluded and the screen and room faded to black. The audience heard the curtain open slowly with a soft swishing sound as it unveiled the screen that surrounded them. There was a moment of black silence.

Then out of the darkness appeared a miraculous scene! The audience gasped! The three dimensional realism was so astonishing, had they not known better, they would have sworn they were seated in the midst of a splendid forest. The verdant wood was lush and green, with ferns growing everywhere. Birds sang in the trees, a sound few had heard lately. The afternoon sun sent slanting rays through the tall treas.

A doe and fawn appeared to run down the right side aisle and pause to drink from a deep pool fed by a small waterfall. Then they trotted on into the trees.

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

