

# Without A Spark

A Novel by  
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*The Usual Suspects Publishing Co. Ltd. GmbH*  
*Kalamazoo--Minot--Davenport*

2011

WITHOUT A SPARK

George Berger

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Produced with blood, sweat, tears, Linux, and rock 'n' roll  
Printed somewhere on planet Earth... probably!

Paperback ISBN: 1466325402

First Edition: October 2011

Cover art by Michael Durinik

*Cover Design by One Blind Idiot And His Cat, Madison, WI*

Typeset in 12pt Minion

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## Chapter 1

I grabbed my roommate Maura by the arm and pulled her with me into the kitchen. Then, I sneezed, violently and without warning.

This was unfortunate—to say the least—for three fairly significant reasons.

First, it meant I was probably becoming aroused by Maura's body pressing up against me. Ever since I hit puberty, even the slightest hint of arousal has resulted in an uncontrollable fit of sneezing, which has, as you might imagine, rather significantly hampered my romantic life. Maura is indisputably beautiful in her own unique way, don't get me wrong; we were roommates, however, and my becoming excited over her was something guaranteed to complicate our already confusing relationship.

Second, our close proximity, coupled with the wholly unanticipated appearance of my idiosyncratic reaction, meant that I'd just sneezed—and it was not a dainty little sneeze, but a whole-body, from-the-diaphragm, richly saliva-laden effort—right in her face, which was something else practically guaranteed to complicate things between us. She looked more confused than angry, but I know better than to trust in appearances.

Third, and probably most importantly, my explosive little outburst had almost certainly alerted whoever was fiddling with the lock on our apartment door that someone was home. Well, probably.

I grimaced kind of apologetically to Maura, and grabbed a marker from the counter. "*someone @ door*", I

scribbled on the whiteboard next to the refrigerator, “*breaking in*”. Her eyes narrowed, and she pushed herself away from me, then started carefully towards the living room. “Hang on a minute,” I said, quietly and uselessly.

She tip-toed cautiously to the couch, bare feet making no sound, then knelt down and slid an aluminum softball bat out from underneath it. She held a finger to her lips and gave me a meaningful look, then stood and crept over behind the door, bat in hand.

I gestured helplessly at her; she pointed at me, then to the couch. I’d have complained or argued or yelled, but it wouldn’t have done any good. The lock slid open with a clunk, the knob turned, and the front door swung open.

He was fairly handsome looking, with a ruggedly weathered face and kind of unkempt hair; think John Denver, late in life, on a bad day. He was wearing rumpled khakis, a dress shirt with the collar undone, a black nylon windbreaker, and electric blue latex gloves. In one hand was a small leather case; in the other was a sinister-looking black handgun with what sure looked like a silencer on it.

“Whoa,” I said. “Be cool, dude.”

“Give me the fucking laptop and nobody gets hurt,” he said.

“What laptop?” I asked, confused, as I backed up towards the kitchen.

“Who the hell are you,” he demanded, advancing towards me, “and where’s Maura?”

“Behind you with a baseball bat,” I said, after she’d clobbered him. I couldn’t help myself.

Maura swung the door shut, set the bat down, and began a bunch of animated, angry gesturing that I didn’t really understand. The gist, I surmised, was something

along the lines of “why did this dickhead just break into my apartment, and what are you going to do about it?” Not so much because her gestures were clear—they weren’t—but because that was one of two logical reactions to have, under the circumstances.

I took her cellphone from the floor where it had fallen and handed it to her, then checked our intruder for a pulse. He was alive, which was mostly a relief. While Maura typed up a fierce little missive on her cellphone, I went through our intruder’s pockets. In the front pants pockets, a set of car keys, a tube of lip balm, and a magazine for the pistol; in the back, a wallet and a spare rubber glove. The pockets of the windbreaker held a half-used pack of peppermint chewing gum and a little multi-tool.

I was about to go through his wallet when my cellphone chirped. It was a text message... from Maura. “If u know why this guy is in our apartment share!! Also is he dead?”

Two exclamation points, and ‘u’ instead of ‘you’? Yep, she was pissed, alright. Maura’s deaf, by the way. Hence her tendency towards gestures and written communication. I wanted to blow her off and go back to the guy’s wallet, but I didn’t want to ignore Maura when she was right there in front of me. “He’s fine,” I texted her, by way of compromise, then returned my attention to his wallet.

Kenneth Albert Roginsky was the name on his credit cards and drivers license. A Mud River Chemical Company, a/k/a MRCC employee, according to his insurance card, which was not exactly a surprise. He had about sixty bucks in cash, which I promptly and shamelessly appropriated for our pizza-and-grocery fund.

Why had he broken into our apartment? Well, he'd already said, hadn't he? He wanted his laptop back. That part of the problem was easy.

How he knew we had it was a much bigger puzzle, but one that would, unlike Maura, have to wait for an answer. "His is apparently the laptop of our discontent," I texted, after she started tapping her foot impatiently.

What to do with our uninvited guest? As tempting as it was to call the police, that would probably have entailed having to make long and tedious explanations about complicated things like why we had the laptop, or why I—a guy—was living in what was supposed to be an all-female dormitory. The latter was simple enough to answer, but it'd be tricky to answer the former without implicating Box, and, well... that seemed like a bad thing to do to a woman you sort of like. Ah, Box. If I ratted her out to the police...

Well, just thinking about her made me sneeze. Twice.

I not-so-reluctantly suggested we drag him outside, dump him between some cars in the parking lot, and anonymously report a peeping tom to the police. This would get him out of our hair, and we probably wouldn't have to answer any questions about laptops, since I guessed he was unlikely to admit he'd broken into a girls' dormitory while brandishing a gun. It seemed like a pretty good idea, but Maura had a better one; she usually does.

While she kept an eye on Kenneth, softball bat—and his pistol—in hand, I headed down to the second floor to pay a visit to one of our neighbors.

Cassie was practically a living stereotype of a farm girl, right down to the freckles. Heck, she was even studying to be a veterinarian. We'd met a couple times, before; she

always seemed perky and cheerful, and never teased me about my relationship with Maura, which made her a wonderful person in my eyes.

“Hey, Kevin,” she said once she’d answered the door. “What’s up?”

“Is Becky around?” I asked, asking after her roommate.

“Nah,” she replied, “she’s still at work, but she should be back a little after ten. Whatcha need?”

“Can I come in for a second?”

“I guess, sure.” We stepped inside, and she shut the door behind her. Her apartment was sparsely furnished in Clichéd Dorm Moderne—thumb-tacked posters above old and mismatched furniture. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Maura seems to think you’re dealing drugs,” I said. “Is that true?”

“N...o?” she said unconvincingly, her face pale.

“Relax, I’m looking to buy, not rat you out.”

“Oh! Really? You always seem really straight-edge to me, but if that’s the case...”

“They’re not for me,” I said. “And I was kind of hoping you’d maybe... make a free donation to a worthy cause.”

“Depends on the cause,” Cassie conceded.

“Some creepy middle-age guy just broke into our apartment, and Maura has this idea that we should dump him naked out back while he’s bombed out of his mind on a pharmaceutical cocktail.”

“Awesome. Well, not awesome, you know what I mean. Yeah, I can help. One question, though... just how messed up do you want him to be?”

“What are our options? What have you got?”

“Mostly club drugs, plus some painkillers and a few... other things.”

“Okay.”

“You want him dazed and confused? Or catatonic, but happy?”

I thought for a moment. “Dealer’s choice, pun intended. You might want to keep in mind he was armed.”

“Gotcha.”

A couple minutes later, I headed back to our apartment, small plastic baggie of eight pills in hand. There, Maura and I force-fed Kenneth the pills, washing them down with whiskey, and stripped him completely naked, though we left the rubber gloves, for aesthetic reasons. After writing ‘RAPIST’ on his chest with black nail polish and taping his wrists together behind his back, we dragged him not-very-gently down three flights of stairs, and out through the parking lot. A little bit of grunting and cursing later, he was sleeping happily in the dumpster. One of those new dumpsters, I might add, the kind with the latching lid.

After extracting a promise to eventually share all the details out of me, Maura went back to work on a computer project with a looming deadline. I wandered the neighborhood for a few minutes, Ken’s car keys in hand, and eventually found what I was looking for two blocks behind us: Ken’s distinctive baby-blue minivan.

Even after we’d broken into it once, he still left it unlocked. That tells you a lot about Kenneth right there, doesn’t it? It’s a small town and crime is rare, plus things hadn’t gotten personal—yet—so I merely let the air out of

two of his tires—again—and swapped around some fuses under the dashboard.

After tossing the keys down a sewer grate, I headed back towards the apartment. As I did so, I pulled out my phone and dialed a number from memory.

“Hey, Sergeant,” I said after the voicemail beep, “it’s Kevin. Sorry to bug you this late at night, but could you send someone to check the dumpster behind my place whenever you get this, or around three in the morning, whichever is later? There may be something interesting in there. Have a good night, and stay safe.”

That should have been it. At the time, I thought it was. Sure, he’d seemed pissed, and he’d had a gun, but we’d triumphed so thoroughly, so awesomely, I assumed the matter was finished, barring an explanation of sorts to Maura and a recounting of events to Box.

Wow, was I ever wrong, huh?



## Chapter 2

Lest you get the wrong sort of ideas, I'm not the kind of person who under normal circumstances leads a dangerous and exciting life, sadly. I admit, when I signed up for the job, I knew there could be risks, and thought I had a pretty good idea what I was getting myself into. Still, for the most part, being threatened by angry gunmen is very much the exception in my life, not the rule.

Also, I'm not really a thief, most of the time. The cash and gun? I like to think of that as excising an idiot tax on Kenneth, for breaking into my apartment like that over a stupid laptop computer. The laptop? The accursed old thing that started this entire grand fiasco? I may not be completely innocent in that regard, I admit, but the lion's share of the blame for that should probably rest with Box, who I had been kind of complicatedly in love with just then.

We met at the grocery store once, purely by chance, at about one forty-five in the morning on a Wednesday. She was in line in front of me, and I couldn't help but stare. Not merely because she's striking, but because she had—has—this indefinable sort of presence to her, such that you just can't not notice her.

People who shop for groceries after midnight, in my general experience, seem to fall into three broad groups: drug users in need of calories, those afflicted with dementia or other mental ailments, and the very few people whose jobs or hobbies keep them up when the rest of the world is asleep. Trying to figure out which category

she fell into, I eyed the groceries in her basket. A package of pudding cups could go any which way; the same was true of the loaf of bread. A tub of potato salad didn't seem like munchie-fuel, though it's hard to be sure with drug addicts. The giant bottle of hot sauce, though...

"They sell Sriracha sauce here?" I blurted.

She turned and looked at me, eyes wary as I suspected, she tried to pigeonhole my status as drug user, crazy, or other. "The manager special orders it for me," she said after a moment, apparently finding me adequately non-threatening.

"That's cool," I said. "I might have to talk to him about that."

She shrugged indifferently, and that was that... until exactly a week later, I spotted her in the checkout aisle again. I glanced, I admired, I looked away, not wanting to start sneezing, or be rude and stare. A few minutes later, having made my purchases, I left the grocery store and was stepping out into the parking lot when someone silently emerged from between the soda machines.

It was Box.

"Fancy meeting you here," I quipped.

"I bet you say that to all the girls," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Only the beautiful ones."

She snorted. "Hm, shall I go stand under a streetlight for a moment, or leave your illusions unbroken? Decisions, decisions..."

"I'm Kevin," I said.

"I'm Box."

“What a coincidence! I went to high school with a girl named Box.”

“Really?”

“Nah.”

“So what’s your story?” she wanted to know. “What kind of damaged goods are you, that you shop for groceries at two in the morning?”

“Do I have to be damaged goods? Can’t I just be a normal guy who keeps odd hours?”

“The only normal people,” Box said, “are those you don’t know very well.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I conceded, smiling.

“Got anywhere you need to be?” she asked. “No? How about we go for a little walk?”

I thought about that one for, oh, a good two-hundred milliseconds or so before agreeing.

We walked; she led and I followed her to one of the little parks along the riverfront, and shared a bench there beneath a cloudless sky and a half-full moon.

“So, really,” she said, “what’s your story? You a student?”

“A freshman, majoring in English,” I said. “At the moment, anyway. I moved here last fall, from out east.”

“Yeah, you didn’t sound like you were from around here. So, English major; let me guess, you’re planning to be a novelist?”

I shook my head. “A systems administrator, hopefully. Who knows how that’ll turn out, though.”

“With computers and stuff?” she asked. “Don’t they have actual classes for that?”

“Sure,” I said. “On paper. I’m here on an all-expenses-paid four-year computer science scholarship to UMR, after all.” Ah, UMR, the University at Mud River. Proud and storied home of the Fighting Beavers, and, somewhat infamously, the Lady Beavers. Sure, people laugh, but do you have any idea how many bumper stickers and t-shirts the school sells?

“I thought you said you were an English major?”

“Turns out the school couldn’t actually put together the funding for their computer program in time. Regular students just transferred elsewhere, but a bunch of us lucky scholarship students got shuffled around into other areas. My roommate, for example, got a computer scholarship and is now studying graphic arts.”

“That kind of sucks.”

“Not really. All through high-school, everyone kept saying ‘go into computers, they’re always hiring’, but it’s a ridiculously cutthroat field to break into. There are always positions open, but they’re for people with a decade of experience, or three to five years’ experience in some obscure programming language that only became widely known two years ago. A freshly-minted computer-science degree just about qualifies you to flip burgers or be a waitress at a restaurant; at least with an English degree you can find work at a library or bookstore or something.”

“Do you have something against waitresses?”

“Nothing at all,” I said, confused. “Why? Is that what you do?”

“Nah. I’m a part-time bartender and general gopher at the bowling alley,” Box said. “I also help out my sister with her business sometimes.”

“That’s pretty cool. You go to school, too?”

“Nope. I’m unencumbered by useless degrees or student loans.”

“So, what do you do for fun, then?”

She laughed. “I like chocolate, microbrew beers, animals, and impulsive people with dangerous secrets. How about you?”

I thought for a moment. “Chinese food, good books, and honest people, I suppose.”

“Good answers,” she said, standing up. “On that note, I’d say it’s time for well-meaning people to think about bed. Can I walk you home, or do you think you’ll be safe on your own?”

I laughed. “It’s a little ways away,” I said, “I think I’ll be fine on my own. Should be sidewalks all the way, so I’m probably safe from drunk drivers.”

“Fair enough,” Box said. “I’ll see you around, then.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Time will tell,” she said with a smile, before turning and walking away. She made it a few steps, then stopped and turned. “You shouldn’t stare at people’s butts, though,” she added, “or they might get the wrong idea.” With a perky little wave, she turned and continued on along the riverfront, eventually fading into the darkness.

She was only half-right. I had been staring, just at her shoulders, not her butt. She was wearing a tank-top that night that showed off her incredibly sculpted shoulders, and the way her muscles rippled as she walked was strangely hypnotic. Her cargo pants were baggy enough that her butt was mostly left to the imagination; if it matched the rest of her body, it probably...

I sneezed a couple times, then stood and headed for home.

After that, we started “accidentally” running into each other at the grocery store on Wednesday mornings, and hanging out afterwards; eventually we dropped the pretext of the whole chance encounter thing and started calling and texting one another to hang out. We’d get together after work, or on her days off, and hang out, watch movies, play video games, whatever. We’d flirt a little bit, now and then, but I don’t think either of us took it very seriously.

Then came the Wednesday that changed everything. We’d agreed to meet after she got off of work, though we didn’t have any real plans set. I’d just gotten some money the week before, so had laid in a little surprise earlier in the day.

We met at the bowling alley as usual, and I presented her with a large brown paper bag.

“What’s this?” she asked. Taking it, she snorted. “Beer?”

“A growler of Druid Fluid,” I said, naming a popular local microbrew.

“Awesome,” Box said, “but what’s the occasion?”

“No occasion,” I said. “I just thought I’d repay you for the beers I’ve drunk at your place, that’s all.”

“Did you bring glasses?”

“No... why?”

“We could get started now, if you had. There’s always plan B, I guess.” Saying that, she handed me back the beer, unzipped the duffel bag she carried in lieu of a purse, and removed what looked, in the darkness, like a liquor bottle.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Liquid courage. Want some?”

Eh, what the hell. I took the bottle, uncapped it, and took a swig, then coughed violently a few times. “Whoa,” I muttered. “That’ll warm the cockles of your heart. What is it?”

“Sloe gin,” was the answer. “Finest kind. You like?”

I took another, smaller, sip, and handed it back to her. “It’s different,” I admitted, “but not horrible.”

She began walking, and I followed. After about a block I realized she wasn’t headed to her house, but more towards downtown.

“Where are we headed?” I asked.

“Pablo’s,” she said, referring to an all-night diner popular with college students. “My treat.”

Thanks to the city planners’ decades-long inability to do their job, getting to Pablo’s from where we were was no easy task. I’d gotten somewhat familiar with the street layout over the months, and figured we’d be zig-zagging down a couple of streets and cutting through a park for a half-hour or so.

I was half-right.

On a side-street not far from the swimming pool, we passed a plain-looking brick building with a parking lot full of cars. A discrete little sign next to the door identified it as the Beaver Den, a private club that anyone who was anybody in the city was rumored to belong to. Just past it, Box punched me in the shoulder and pointed to a blue minivan parked on the street.

“Check it out,” she said, “some MRCC flunky is schmoozing with his pals at the Beaver Den tonight.”

“MRCC?” I asked.

“Mud River Chemical Company,” Box explained. “See the decal in the window?” Sure enough, there was a little numbered sticker stuck in the corner of the windshield, though I couldn’t read it in the darkness. Looking around at the deserted street, she dug in her pocket pulled out her set of keys.

“You’re going to key some stranger’s van?” I asked, shocked.

She knelt down next to it, near the rear tire. “No,” she said, “I’m going to let the air out of his tires.” True to her word, she deflated the rear tire, then moved and did the front one, as well. “You should piss on the upholstery,” she said to me.

“Do you know this guy?” I asked.

Box shook her head. “I just like to mess with the MRCC, that’s all.”

Using my shirt as a sort of glove, I tried the handle to the rear door, and it slid open.

“Oh God, you’re really going to piss on the seats? Awesome!”

“I don’t have to go,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Anything inside?”

I looked around the darkness. “Just an umbrella, a raincoat, and a briefcase.”

“Grab it,” Box urged me. “We can pitch it in the river.”

I didn’t really want to. In fact, I really didn’t want to, even. But Box wanted me to, and caught up in the heat of the moment, I couldn’t really tell her no... so I took it.

“Shit,” I said, “it’s not a briefcase, it’s a laptop in a bag.”

“Even better.” I heard a scratching noise, and saw she was keying the paint on the passenger door.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

“Fuck you, love, EAGER,” she replied.

“You’re a member of EAGER?!” I said, shocked.

“No,” Box said.

“So, why...?”

“Let’s go,” she said, and we did.

Pablo’s apparently forgotten, she led us back to her place, where we sat on her couch, drank, and laughed about our insane little adventure.

“So, seriously,” I said at some point, “What do you have against MRCC, anyway?”

“They are,” she said, “the largest environmental polluter in the state, by far. They are, among many other unfortunate things, the reason it’s not recommended to eat anything that’s still living in the Mud River.”

“I get that,” I said, and I did. “EAGER have been targeting them for a while, haven’t they?” EAGER were a local environmentalist group that had been sabotaging and occasionally setting fire to MRCC property for a year or two; the name was an abbreviation for ‘Earth Avengers Global Environmental Resistance’. “You’re not a part of that, are you?”

“No,” she denied. “I support what they do, though. Do you think that’s bad?”

I shrugged. “So you mess with them now and then and claim responsibility on the part of EAGER, just to screw with ‘em? That’s kind of cool, I guess.”

By the time five in the morning rolled around, we’d finished half the bottle of gin, shared a lot of laughs, and were in no condition to go anywhere, so I crashed at Box’s for the first time. I expected to sleep on the couch, but it

turned out she had a spare bedroom. I hit the pillow and was asleep within seconds.

I woke up some time later, a little disoriented from the strange environment, but not too much the worse for wear from the booze. Eventually I remembered where I was, and got up to go find a bathroom and food, in that order. Before I did so, though, I couldn't help but notice the room I was in.

It was pretty small, and held two pieces of furniture—a twin bed and an old wooden dresser. One wall had an exposed closet, which was completely full. Dozens of dresses, skirts, corsets, and other very interesting things hung from hangers, many of them apparently leather or vinyl. Half the floor of the closet area was covered in boots and shoes, and the other half was shoe boxes, stacked three or four high. More cardboard boxes were piled on a shelf on top of the closet.

I'd only ever seen Box dress, basically, like a grunge fan with aspirations of hipster-ness. Whose clothes were these, I wondered, and where on earth did they wear them in this sleepy little college town?

I hit the bathroom, deep in thought, showered, and joined Box in the kitchen, where she was eating cereal in front of an unfamiliar-looking laptop. The clock above the sink said it was one in the afternoon, meaning I had plenty of time to make it home, change, and get to my 3pm class.

"That the one from last night?" I asked, nodding at the computer.

"Yeah," she sighed. "Stupid thing is password-protected, though."

"Bummer."

"You're good with computers, right? You can have it."

“What? You sure?” I asked. “I’ve already got a laptop.”

“You took it,” she said, “you should keep it. I have no real use for a laptop, anyway.”

Well, whatever, I figured. Maybe Maura would have an use for it, could add it to the small army of computers in her bedroom.

“Not to pry into your personal life,” I said, unable to resist, “I couldn’t help but notice you have some quite interesting clothes in your guest bedroom...”

“They’re not mine,” Box said. “Well, not really.” Seeing my raised eyebrow of disbelief, she went on, “I told you I help my sister with her business, right? She runs an online fetish clothing and toy business down in Florida, and I write reviews on some of her products for her website; all that stuff is samples she or a manufacturer have sent me.”

“That’s a pretty cool job. I’ve got to ask, though... how do you review, like... a corset, or whatever? How well it fits? Or...?”

She grinned. “No, it’s like... how well it’s made, how durable it is, how comfortable it is, stuff like that. How consistent the measurements are—that’s why there are two or three of most things—how stain-resistant they are...”

“Stain-resistant? You mean, like...”

“Mm-hm.”

“That’s got to be an interesting test to perform.”

“Not really, no,” she said, laughing. “Administer bodily fluids, or a substitute, wait, attempt to clean following manufacturer’s instructions or common sense, evaluate results. It’s subjective, but important to a certain percentage of customers.”

“Substitute bodily fluids? Really?”

“Tapioca or egg whites seem to be the materials of choice.”

“Huh. You learn something every day.”

“By the way,” she said, “thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being so cool about... well, everything. I got kind of caught up in the heat of the moment last night, and was afraid you might freak out over the thing with the van and whatever. And I thought you might be really weird over my sister’s business, which is why I hadn’t mentioned anything. A lot of guys would be all, you know... So, yeah... thanks.”

After a moderately awkward silence, I took my leave of Box, stolen laptop in tow. I got home and gave it to Maura, who is easily a hundred times better with computer hardware than I am. After that, I changed, headed to class, and pretty much forgot all about the laptop... for the day and a half prior to Kenneth’s uncouth little burglary attempt, anyway.

## Chapter 3

Following Kenneth's ridiculous intrusion, I made dinner for Maura and I—prawn fried rice and hot dogs—and slipped out shortly after sunset to pursue my principal source of income.

Dressed in old jeans and a sweatshirt, I strolled along railroad tracks for about a mile, just another anonymous delinquent in a sleepy college town. I hopped a fence into the back side of Beaver Lake Park, and walked by moonlight down a gravel service road along the perimeter until I found what I was looking for—a manhole cover. A neat little trick with a length of rope and I had it open; after a moment to contemplate the functional strangeness of my life, I climbed down inside and entered a small part of the labyrinthine subterranean maze that is the Mud River Stormwater Management System.

The storm sewer, in other words.

I know, it sounds fairly horrible at first, but it's not as bad as you probably think, really. Hollywood's idea of what a sewer is like might have some foundation in fact, somewhere, but for most of the world they're well wide of the mark. The most important thing to know about storm sewers is that they're designed to carry stormwater—rain, in other words. When it hasn't rained for a while, they're pretty much just empty tunnels crisscrossing the world deep beneath the feet of the largely oblivious masses, and contain little more horrible than the occasional mouse, rat, or raccoon. Or, indeed, college students, once in a while.

Guided by the yellowish beam of my flashlight, I waddled awkwardly through the four-foot high concrete tunnel for about a quarter-mile, before I wound up in a rectangular, standing-height chamber about the size of my bedroom; a junction chamber where several sewer tunnels met. Exposed steel beams supported the ceiling, and stuck to some of these beams with powerful neodymium magnets were a couple surplus ammunition cans. I didn't own the place, and I had no real right to be there, but I'd spent enough time in that room over the last couple months that I'd started to think of it as my office. There wasn't much of a view, I admit, but there weren't a lot of distractions, either.

I stood around for a few minutes, standing upright and stretching my back, then took a black rubber gas-mask and filter from one of the ammo cans, and a pair of latex gloves from another. Stashing both in a small backpack I'd brought with me, I made my way down another too-short tunnel for a couple hundred feet, eventually coming to a manhole shaft with a set of fiberglass rungs leading up.

Off with the backpack, on with the gloves and the mask. A quick check of the latter to make sure it was functioning properly, and I was up the ladder, quietly heaving the manhole aside, and back out in the mundane, above-ground world we all know and love. More specifically, I'd emerged in the back alley of a small business park on Route 8, directly behind Dagger Polytechnic.

Who or what are Dagger Polytechnic? I had no real idea back then, to be honest. What did they do? That one was even trickier. They claimed—depending on who you asked—to do something involving electronics, or metals,

or polymers, or maybe metallic electro-polymers, if such things exist. At that time, there were some reasons to doubt their honesty in that regard, but no obvious reason for alarm. All I really knew was they were a tech firm who didn't own a paper shredder, something which made my job substantially easier.

Some people who dumpster dive as a lifestyle—and yes, they really exist—have developed all kinds of strange and inventive tools to help them with the task, but I never bother with that stuff. Part of it, to be sure, is the challenge inherent in maneuvering a five-foot pole through a series of narrow sewers, but for the most part, I'm just not proud, and don't mind getting a little dirty, if I have to. Besides, introducing unneeded complications just adds new opportunities for failure.

So, up with the dumpster lid, a quick check to make sure there's nothing particularly horrible or offensive on top, and I then spent the next several minutes hanging over the edge of it, rooting through Dagger's garbage by hand.

At the risk of sounding like a television character, you can tell a lot about people by what they throw away. For example, about a third of what Dagger employees threw away, by volume, was what I'd characterize as routine day-to-day food waste—lots of water bottles, lots of instant noodle packages, lots of corn chip bags and salsa jars. Another third was fairly mundane stuff that I liked to think of as “office waste”—empty cardboard boxes and cartons, empty cleaning-product bottles, the occasional toner cartridge, used ballpoint pen, and so on. The rest was paperwork, a jumbled mix of computer printouts,

hand-written notes, letters and envelopes, and faxes. Very little of it was in English.

I gathered up as much of the paper material as possible and stuffed it into my backpack, then rearranged everything so it looked reasonably undisturbed, and dropped back down into the sewers, closing the manhole cover behind me. From there, another short back-breaking walk to my office, and the real work could begin.

Off with the gloves, which wound up on a concrete ledge, then off with the gas mask, which went back in its ammunition can. On with a new pair of gloves, open the backpack, and an hour of fairly tedious sorting was underway. I could stand up straight, the chamber was well-lit by a couple of flashlights, and it was very quiet and peaceful... just immensely boring. Distractions are only bad when you aren't doing tedious work.

What I did was basically triage the papers into two piles—uninteresting and maybe-interesting. The former was about what you'd expect—obvious junk mail, for the most part. The latter was essentially everything else, running the full gamut of written detritus from printed-out e-mails to letters and envelopes to phone bills and credit-card receipts. Anything that, to put it bluntly, might have had potential intelligence value to someone who read the language, whichever it was.

The uninteresting stuff went in a small plastic garbage bag drawn from one of the ammo cans; the maybe-interesting stuff got placed in a clear 11x14 plastic envelope with an adhesive seal, which I closed and dated using a permanent marker. The first pair of gloves went into the garbage bag as well, which I tied shut; both bags then went into the backpack, everything else got returned

to the ammo cans, and, one quarter-mile walk later, I was back up out of the sewers in Beaver Lake Park, quietly closing yet another manhole cover behind me.

Traveling through sewers will never catch on as a popular form of transportation, but it has some advantages, such as privacy and secrecy. There are downsides, though; I'm not really prone to claustrophobia, but after spending an hour or two down there, in an environment pretty much free of stimuli—the tunnels are fairly uniform and featureless, the slightly damp smell never really changes, and the only sounds are those you make yourself—returning to the surface world, with all its routine if overlooked joys, is strangely enjoyable.

Being once again able to stand up to your full height and stretch your aching back is pretty good, too.

I sat in the grass for a few minutes, watching the stars and listening to the crickets, then reluctantly got up and gathered my things. I walked on out of the park, depositing the garbage bag and the rubber gloves in a dumpster along the way. My mind filled with vaguely philosophical musings about the surface world and its dubious pleasures, I wandered back to the apartment, where Maura was still up, apparently working hard on some project on her computer. I took a shower, browsed the web for a while, and fell asleep, another peaceful and productive day behind me.

I had no idea then just how crazy my life was about to get, but my blissful ignorance on that score didn't last nearly long enough.