

PAUL
DI FILIPPO



WIKI WORLD



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via Adige 20 - 20135 Milano, Italia

www.40kbooks.com - info@40kbooks.com

ISBN 978-88-6586-019-9

Cover by Roberto Grassilli

warehouse.robertograssilli.com

This title is also available in português and italiano

Converted in ebook format in October 2010

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Meet Russ Reynolds

Russ Reynolds, that's me. You probably remember my name from when I ran the country for three days. Wasn't that a wild time? I'm sorry I started a trade war with several countries around the globe. I bet you're all grateful things didn't ramp up to the shooting stage. I know I am. And the UWA came out ahead in the end, right? No harm, no foul. Thanks for being so understanding and forgiving. I assure you that my motives throughout the whole affair, although somewhat selfish, were not ignoble.

And now that things have quieted down, I figured people would be calm enough to want to listen to the whole story behind those frighteningly exciting events.

So here it is.

Mr. Wiki Builds My Dream House

It all started, really, the day when several wikis where I had simoleans banked got together to build me a house. Not only did I meet my best friend Foolty Fontal that day, but I also hooked up with Cherimoya Espiritu. It's hard now, a few years later, to say which one of those outrageous personages gave me the wildest ride. But it's certain that without their aiding and abetting, plotting and encouraging, I would never have become the jimmywhale of the UWA, and done what I did.

The site for my new house was a tiny island about half an acre in extent. This dry land represented all that was left of what used to be Hyannis, Massachusetts, since Cape Cod became an archipelago. Even now, during big storms, the island was frequently overwashed, so I had picked up the title to it for a song when I got tired of living on my boat, the *Gogo Goggins*.

Of course the value of coastal land everywhere had plunged steadily in the three decades since the destruction of New Orleans. People just got tired of seeing their homes and businesses destroyed on a regular basis by super-storms and rising sea levels. Suddenly Nebraska and Montana and the Dakotas looked like beckoning havens of safety, especially with their ameliorated climates, and the population decline experienced for a century by the Great Plains states reversed itself dramatically, lofting the region into a new cultural hotzone. I had heard lately that Fargo had spawned yet another musical movement, something called "cornhüsker dü," although I hadn't yet listened to any samples of it off the ubik.

Anyway, this little islet would serve me well, I figured, as both home and base for my job—assuming I could erect a good solid comfortable structure here. Realizing that such a task was beyond my own capabilities, I called in my wikis.

The Dark Galactics. The PEP Boys. The Chindogurus. Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons. The Bishojos. The Glamazons. The Provincetown Pickers. And several more.

All of them owed me simoleans for the usual—goods received, or time and expertise invested—and now they’d be eager to balance the accounts.

The day construction was scheduled to start, I anchored the Gogo Goggins on the western side of my island, facing the mainland. The June air was warm on my bare arms, and freighted with delicious salt scents. Gulls swooped low over my boat, expecting the usual handouts. The sun was a golden English muffin in the sky. (Maybe I should have had some breakfast, but I had been too excited to prepare any that morning). Visibility was great. I could see drowned church spires and dead cell-phone towers closer to the shore. Through this slalom a small fleet of variegated ships sailed, converging on my island.

The shadow of one of the high unmanned aerostats that maintained the ubik passed over me, the same moment I used that medium to call up IDs on the fleet. In my vision, translucent tags overlaid each ship, labeling their owners, crew and contents. I was able to call up realtime magnified images of the ships as well, shot from the aerostats and tiny random entomopter cams. I saw every kind of vessel imaginable: sleek catamarans, old lobster boats, inflatables, decommissioned Coast Guard cutters – And all of them carrying my friends – some of whom I had met face to face, some of whom I hadn’t – coming to help build my house.

I hopped out of my boat onto dry land. My island was covered with salt-tolerant scrub plants and the occasional beach rose. No trees to clear. Construction could begin immediately.

As I awaited my friends, I got several prompts displayed across my left eye, notifying me of four or five immediate ubik developments in areas of interest to me. I had the threshold of my attention-filter set fairly high, so I knew I should attend to whatever had made it over that hurdle. For speed’s sake, I kept the messages text-only, suppressing the full audiovideo presentations.

The first development concerned an adjustment to the local property-tax rates. “Glamorous Glynnis” had just amended the current rate structure to penalize any residence over 15,000 square feet that failed to feed power back to the grid. Sixty-five other people had endorsed the change. I added my own vote to theirs and tacked on a clause to exempt group homes.

Next came a modification to the rules of the non-virtual marketplace back on the mainland, where I sold many of my salvaged goods in person. “Jinglehorse” wanted to extend the hours of operation on holidays. Competitively speaking, I’d feel compelled to be there if the booths were open extra. And since I liked my downtime, I voted no.

Items three and four involved decriminalizing a newly designed recreational drug named “arp”, and increasing our region’s fresh water exports. I didn’t know enough about arp, so I got a search going for documents on the drug. I’d try to go through them tonight, and vote tomorrow. And even though I felt bad for the drought-sufferers down South, I didn’t want to encourage continued habitation in a zone plainly unsuited for its current population densities, so I voted no.

The last item concerned a Wikitusional Amendment. National stuff. This new clause had been in play for six months now without getting at least provisionally locked down, approaching a record length of revision time. The Amendment mandated regular wiki participation as a prerequisite for full enfranchisement in the UWA. “Uncle Sham” had just stuck in a clause exempting people older than sixty-five. I

wasn't sure what I thought about that, so I pushed the matter back in the queue.

By the time I had attended to these issues, the first of my visitors had arrived, a small vessel named *The Smiling Dictator*, and bearing a lone man. The craft crunched onto the beach, and the guy jumped out.

“Hey, Russ! Nice day for a house-raising.”

Jack Cortez – “Cortez the Queller” in the ubik – resembled a racing greyhound in slimness and coiled energy. He wore a fisherman's vest over bare chest, a pair of denim cutoffs bleached white, and boat shoes. His SCURF showed as a dark green eagle across a swath of his chest.

“Ahimsa, Jack! I really appreciate you showing up.”

“No problem. The Church still owes you for retrieving that Madonna. But you gotta do *some* work nonetheless! Come on and give me a hand.”

I went over to the *Dictator* and helped Jack wrestle some foam-encased objects big as coffee-table-tops out of the boat. When we had the half-dozen objects stacked on land, he flaked off some of the protective foam and revealed the corner of a window frame.

“Six smart windows. Variable opacity, self-cleaning, rated to withstand Category Four storms. Fully spimed, natch. One of our co-religionists is a contractor, and these were left over from a recent job.”

“Pluricious!”

By then, the rest of the boats had arrived. A perfect storm of unloading and greeting swept over my little domain. Crates and girders and pre-formed pilings and lumber and shingles and equipment accumulated in heaps, while bottled drinks made the rounds, to fortify and replenish. The wiki known as the Shewookies had brought not materials nor power tools but food. They began to set up a veritable banquet on folding tables, in anticipation of snacking and lunching.

A guy I didn't recognize came up to me, hand extended. His SCURF formed orange tiger stripes on his cheeks and down his jaws. Before I could bring up his tag, he introduced himself.

“Hi, Russ. Bob Graubauskas—‘Grabass’ to you. Jimmywhale for the Sunflower Slowdrags. So, you got any solid preferences for your house?”

“No, not really. Just so long as it's strong and spacious and not too ugly.”

“Can do.”

Grabass began to issue silent orders to his wiki, a ubik stream he cued me in on. But then a big woman wearing overalls intervened.

“Margalit Bayless, with the Mollicutes. ‘Large Marge.’ You truly gonna let the Slowdrags design this structure all by themselves?”

“Well, no....”

“That's good. Because my people have some neat ideas too.”

I left Large Marge and Grabass noisily debating the merits of their various plans while I snagged an egg-salad sandwich and a coffee. By the time I had swallowed the last bite, both the Mollicutes and the Sunflower Slowdrags had begun construction. The only thing was, the two teams were starting at opposite ends of a staked-off area and working toward the common middle. And their initial scaffolding and foundations looked utterly incompatible. And some of the other wikis seemed ready to add wings to the nascent building regardless of either main team.

As spimed materials churned under supervision like a nest of snakes or a pit of chunky lava or a scrum of rugby robots in directed self-assembly—boring into the soil and stretching up toward the sky—I watched with growing alarm, wondering if this had been the smartest idea. What kind of miscegenous mansion was I going to end up with?

That’s when Foolty Fontal showed up to save the day.

He arrived in a one-person sea-kayak, of all things, paddling like a lunatic, face covered with sweat. So typical of the man, I would discover, choosing not to claim primary allegiance with any wiki, so he could belong to all.

I tried to tag him, but got a privacy denial.

Having beached his craft and ditched his paddle, Foolty levered himself out with agility. I saw a beanpole well over six feet tall, with glossy skin the color of black-bean dip. Stubby dreadlocks like breakfast sausages capped his head. Ivory SCURF curlicued up his dark bare arms like automobile detailing.

Foolty, I later learned, claimed mixed Ethiopian, Jamaican and Gulla heritage, as well as snippets of mestizo. It made for a hybrid genome as unique as his brain.

Spotting me by the food tables, Foolty lanked over.

“Russ Reynolds, tagged. Loved your contributions to *Naomi Instanton*.”

Foolty was referring to a crowdsourced sitcom I had helped to co-script. “Well, thanks, man.”

“Name’s Foolty Fontal—‘FooDog.’”

“No shit!”

FooDog was legendary across the ubik. He could have been the jimmywhale of a hundred wikis, but had declined all such positions. His talents were many and magnificent, his ego reputedly restrained, and his presence at any non-virtual event a legend in the making.

Now FooDog nodded his head toward the construction site. A small autonomous backhoe was wrestling with a walking tripodal hod full of bricks while members of competing wikis cheered on the opponents.

“Interesting project. Caught my eye this morning. Lots of challenges. But it looks like you’re heading for disaster, unless you get some coordination. Mind if I butt in?”

“Are you kidding? I’d be honored. Go for it!”

FooDog ambled over to the workers, both human and cybernetic, streaming ubik instructions with high-priority tags attached faster than I could follow. A galvanic charge seemed to run through people, as they realized who walked among them. FooDog accepted the homage with humble grace. And suddenly the whole site was transformed from a chaotic competition to a patterned dance of flesh and materials.

That’s the greatest thing about wikis: they combine the best features of democracy and autocracy. Everybody has an equal say. But some got bigger says than others.

Over the next dozen hours, I watched in amazement as my house grew almost organically. By the time dusk was settling in, the place was nearly done. Raised high above sea-level against any potential flooding on deep-sunk cement piles, spired, curve-walled, airy yet massive, it still showed hallmarks of rival philosophies of design. But somehow the efforts of the various factions ultimately harmonized instead of bickered, thanks to FooDog’s overseeing of the assorted worldviews.

One of the best features of my new house, a place where I could see myself

spending many happy idle hours, was a large wooden deck that projected out well over the water, where it was supported by pressure-treated and tarred wooden pillars, big as antique telephone poles, plunging into the sea.

Three or four heaps of wooden construction waste and combustible sea-wrack had been arranged as pyres against the dusk, and they were now ignited. Live music flared up with the flames, and more food and drink was laid on. While a few machines and people continued to add some last-minute details to my house, illuminated by electrical lights running off the newly installed power system (combined wave motion and ocean temperature differential), the majority of the folks began to celebrate a job well done.

I was heading to join them when I noticed a new arrival sailing in out of the dusk: a rather disreputable looking workhorse of a fishing sloop. I pinged the craft, but got no response. Not a privacy denial, but a dead silence.

This ship and its owner were running off the ubik, un-SCURFED.

Intrigued, I advanced toward the boat. I kicked up my night vision. Its bow bore the name *Soft Grind*. From out the pilothouse emerged the presumptive captain. In the ancient firelight, I saw one of the most beautiful women I had ever beheld: skin the color of teak, long wavy black hair, a killer figure. She wore a faded hemp shirt tied under her breasts to expose her midriff; baggy men's surfer trunks; and a distressed pair of gumboots.

She leaped over the gunwales and off the boat with pantherish flair moderated only slightly by her clunky footwear.

"Hey," she said. "Looks like a party. Mind if I crash it?"

"No, sure, of course not."

She grinned, exposing perfect teeth.

"I'm Cherry. One of the Oyster Pirates."

And that was how I met Cherimoya Espiritu.

In Love with an Oyster Pirate

Gaia giveth even as she taketh away.

The warming of the global climate over the past century had melted permafrost and glaciers, shifted rainfall patterns, altered animal migratory routes, disrupted agriculture, drowned cities, and similarly necessitated a thousand adjustments, recalibrations and hasty retreats. But humanity's unintentional experiment with the biosphere had also brought some benefits.

Now we could grow oysters in New England.

Six hundred years ago, oysters flourished as far north as the Hudson. Native Americans had accumulated vast middens of shells on the shores of what would become Manhattan. Then, prior to the industrial age, there was a small climate shift, and oysters vanished from those waters.

Now, however, the tasty bivalves were back, their range extending almost to Maine.

The commercial beds of the Cape Cod Archipelago produced shellfish as good as any from the heyday of Chesapeake Bay. Several large wikis maintained, regulated and harvested these beds, constituting a large share of the local economy.

But as anyone might have predicted, wherever a natural resource existed, sprawling and hard of defense, poachers would be found.

Cherimoya Espiritu hailed from a long line of fisherfolks operating for generations out of nearby New Bedford. Cape Verdean by remotest ancestry, her family had suffered in the collapse of conventional fisheries off the Georges Bank. They had failed to appreciate the new industry until it was too late for them to join one of the legal oyster wikis. (Membership had been closed at a number determined by complicated sustainability formulae.) Consequently, they turned pirate to survive in the only arena they knew.

Cherimoya and her extensive kin had divested themselves of their SCURF: no subcutaneous ubik arfids for them, to register their presence minute-to-minute to nosy authorities and jealous oyster owners. The pirates relied instead on the doddering network of GPS satellites for navigation, and primitive cellphones for communication. Operating at night, they boasted gear to interfere with entomopter cams and infrared scans. They were not above discouraging pursuers with pulsed-energy projectile guns (purchased from the PEP Boys). After escaping with their illicit catches, they sold the fruit of the sea to individual restaurants and unscrupulous wholesalers. They took payment either in goods, or in isk, simoleans and lindens that friends would bank for them in the ubik.

Most of the oyster pirates lived on their ships, to avoid contact with perhaps overly inquisitive mainland security wikis, such as the Boston Badgers and the Stingers. Just like me prior to my island-buying—except that my motivation for a life afloat didn't involve anything illicit.

Bits and pieces of information about this subculture I knew just from growing up in the Archipelago. And the rest I learned from Cherry over the first few months of our relationship.

But that night of my house-raising, all I knew was that a gorgeous woman, rough-edged and authentic as one of the oyster shells she daily handled, wanted to hang out on my tiny island and have some fun.

That her accidental presence here would lead to our becoming long-term lovers, I never dared hope.

But sure enough, that's what happened.

Following Cherry's introduction, I shook her hand and gave my own name. Daring to take her by the elbow—and receiving no rebuke—I steered her across the flame-lit, shadowy sands towards the nearest gaggle of revelers around their pyre.

“So,” I asked, “how come you're not working tonight?”

“Oh, I don't work every night. Just often enough to keep myself in provisions and fuel. Why should I knock myself out just to earn money and pile up *things*? I'm more interested in enjoying life. Staying free, not being tied down.”

“Well, you know, I think that's, um – just great! That's how I feel too!” I silently cursed my new status as a land-owner and house-dweller.

We came out of the darkness and into the sight of my friends. Guitars, drums and gravicords chanced to fall silent just then, and I got pinged with the planned playlist, and a chance to submit any requests.

“Hey, Russ, congratulations!” “Great day!” “House looks totally flexy!” “You're gonna really enjoy it!”

Cherry turned to regard me with a wide grin. “So – gotta stay footloose, huh?”

To cover my chagrin, I fetched drinks for Cherry and me while I tried to think of something to say in defense of my new householder lifestyle. That damn sexy grin of hers didn’t help my concentration.

Cherry took a beer from me. I said, “Listen, it’s not like I’m buying into some paranoid gatecom. This place – totally transient. It’s nothing more than a beach shack, somewhere to hang my clothes. I’m on the water most of every day – “Waving a hand to dismiss my excuses, Cherry said, “Just funning with you, Russ. Actually, I think this place is pretty hyphy. Much as I love the *Soft Grind*, I get tired of being so cramped all the time. Being able to stretch in your bunk without whacking your knuckles would be a treat. So – do I get a tour?”

“Yeah, absolutely!”

We headed toward the staircase leading up to my deck. Her sight unamped, Cherry stumbled over a tussock of grass, and I took her hand to guide her. And even when we got within the house’s sphere of radiance, she didn’t let go.

Up on the deck, Foolty was supervising a few machines working atop the roof. Spotting me, he called out, “Hey, nephew! Just tying in the rainwater-collection system to the desalinization plant.”

“Swell. FooDog, I’d like you to meet”

“No, don’t tell me the name of this sweet niece. Let me find out on my own.”

Cherry snorted. “Good luck! Far as the ubik knows, I’m not even part of this brane. And that’s how I like it.”

FooDog’s eyes went unfocused and he began to make strangled yips like a mutt barking in its sleep. After about ninety seconds of this, during which time Cherry and I admired a rising quarter moon, FooDog emerged from his trawl of the ubik.

“Cherimoya Espiritu,” he said. “Born 2015. Father’s name João, mother’s name Graca. Younger brother nicknamed the Dolphin. Member of the Oyster Pirates.”

Cherry’s face registered mixed irritation, admiration and fright. “How – how’d you find all that out?”

FooDog winked broadly. “Magic.”

“No, c’mon, tell me!”

“All right, all right. The first part was easy. I cheated. I teased into Russ’s friends list. He added you as soon as you met, and that’s how I got your name and occupation. My SCURF isn’t off-the-shelf. It picked up molecules of your breath, did an instant signature on four hundred organic compounds, and found probable family matches with your parents, whose genomes are on file. And your brother’s got a record with the Boston Badgers for a ruckus at a bar in Fall River.”

Now I felt offended. “You teased into my friends list? You got big ones, FooDog.”

“Well, thanks! That’s how I got where I am today. And besides, I discovered my name there too, so I figured it was okay.”

I couldn’t find it in myself to be angry with this genial ubik-trickster. Cherry seemed willing to extend him the same leniency.

“No need to worry about anyone else learning this stuff. While I was in there, I beefed up all your security, nephew.”

“Well – thanks, I guess.”

“No thanks necessary.” FooDog turned back to the bots on the roof. “Hey, Blue

Droid! You call that a watertight seam!”

Cherry and I went through the sliding glass door that led off the deck and inside.

I made an inspection of my new home for the first time with Cherry in tow. The place was perfect: roomy yet cozy, easy to maintain, lots of comforts.

The wikis had even provided some rudimentary furniture, including a couple of inflatable adaptive chairs. We positioned them in front of a window that commanded a view of the ocean and Moon. I went to a small humming fridge and found it full of beer. I took two bottles back to the seats.

Cherry and I talked until the Moon escaped our view. I opaqued all the glass in the house. We merged the MEMS skins of the chairs, fashioning them into a single bed. Then we had sex and fell asleep.

In the morning, Cherry said, “Yeah, I think I could get used to living here real fast.”

Mucho Mongo

My Dad was a garbageman.

Okay, so not really. He didn’t wear overalls or hang from the back of a truck or heft dripping sacks of coffee grounds and banana peels. Dad’s job was strictly white-collar. His fingers were more often found on a keyboard than a trash compactor. He was in charge of the Barnstable Transfer Station, a seventy-acre “disposium” where recyclables were lifted from the waste-stream, and whatever couldn’t be commercially repurposed was neatly and sterilely buried. But I like to tell people he was a garbageman just to get their instant, unschooled reactions. If they turn up their noses, chances are they won’t make it onto my friends list.

I remember Dad taking me to work once in a while on Saturdays. He proudly showed off the dump’s little store, stocked with the prize items his workers had rescued.

“Look at this, Russ. A first edition Jack London. Tales of the Fish Patrol. Can you believe it?”

I was five years old, and had just gotten my first pair of spex, providing rudimentary access to what passed for the ubik back then. I wasn’t impressed.

“I can read that right now, Dad, if I wanted to.”

Dad looked crestfallen. “That digital text is just information, son. This is a book! And best of all, it’s mongo.”

I tried to look up mongo in the ubik, like I had been taught, but couldn’t find it in my dictionary. “What’s mongo, Dad?”

“A moment of grace. A small victory over entropy.”

“Huh?”

“It’s any treasure you reclaim from the edge of destruction, Russ. There’s no thrill like making a mongo strike.”

I looked at the book with new eyes. And that’s when I got hooked.

From then on, mongo became my life.

That initial epiphany occurred over twenty years ago. Barnstable is long drowned, fish swimming through the barnacled timbers of the disposium store, and my folks live in Helena now. But I haven’t forgotten the lessons my Dad taught me.

The *Gogo Goggins* has strong winches for hauling really big finds up into the air. But mostly I deal in small yet valuable stuff. With strap-on gills, a smartskin suit, MEMS flippers and a MHD underwater sled packing ten-thousand candlepower of searchlights, I pick through the drowned world of the Cape Cod Archipelago and vicinity.

The coastal regions of the world now host the largest caches of treasure the world has ever seen. Entire cities whose contents could not be entirely rescued in advance of the encroaching waters. All there as salvage for the taking, pursuant to many, many post-flood legal rulings.

Once I'm under the water, my contact with the ubik cut off, relying just on the processing power in my SCURF, I'm alone with my thoughts and the sensations of the dive. The romance of treasure-hunting takes over. Who knows what I might find? Jewelry, monogrammed plates from a famous restaurant, statues, coins – Whatever I bring up, I generally sell with no problems, either over the ubik or at the old-fashioned marketplace on the mainland.

It's a weird way of earning your living, I know. Some people might find it morbid, spending so much time amid these ghostly drowned ruins. (And to answer the first question anyone asks: yes, I've encountered skeletons, but none of them have shown the slightest inclination to attack.)

But I don't find my job morbid at all.

I'm under the spell of mongo.

One of the first outings Cherry and I went on, after she moved in with me, was down to undersea Provincetown. It's an easy dive. Practically nothing to find there, since amateurs have picked it clean. But by the same token, all the hazards are well-charted.

Cherry seemed to enjoy the expedition, spending hours slipping through the aquatic streets with wide eyes behind her mask. Once back aboard the *Gogo Goggins*, drying her thick hair with a towel, she said, "That was stringy, Russ! Lots of fun."

"You think you might like tossing in with me? You know, becoming business partners? We'd make good isk. Not that we need to earn much, like you said. And you could give up the illegal stuff."

"Give up the Oyster Pirates? Never! That's my heritage! And to be honest with you, babe, there's just not enough thrills in your line of work."

Just as I was addicted to mongo, Cherry was hooked on plundering the shellfish farms, outwitting the guards and owners and escaping with her booty. Myself, I knew I'd be a nervous wreck doing that for a living. (She took me out one night on a raid; when the PEP discharges started sizzling through the air close to my head, I dropped to the deck of the *Soft Grind* (which possessed a lot of speed belied by its appearance) and didn't stand up again till we reached home. Meanwhile, Cherry was alternately shouting curses at our pursuers and emitting bloodthirsty laughs.)

Luckily, we were able to reconcile our different lifestyles quite nicely. I simply switched to night work. Once I was deep enough below the surface, I had to rely on artificial lights even during the daytime anyhow.

Several nights each week, you'd find us motoring off side by side in our respective boats. Eventually our paths would diverge, signalled by a dangerous kiss across the narrow gap between our bobbing boats. As I headed toward whatever nexus of sunken

loot I had charted, I'd catch up on ubik matters, writing dialogue for *One Step Closer to Nowhere*, the sitcom that had replaced *Naomi Instanton*, or monitoring border crossings for an hourly rate for the Minute Men.

Cherry and I would meet back home on my little island, which Cherry had christened "Sandybump." We'd sleep till noon or later, then have fun during the day.

A lot of that fun seemed to involved Foolty "FooDog" Fontal.

A Portrait of the Con Artist as a Young FooDog

During all the years we hung out together, we never learned where FooDog actually lived. He seemed reluctant to divulge the location of his digs, protective of his security and privacy even with his friends. (And recalling how easily he had stolen Cherry's identity from my friends list, who could blame him at worrying about unintentional data-sharing?) FooDog's various business, recreational and hobbyist pursuits had involved him with lots of shady characters and inequitable dealings and he existed, I soon realized, just one step ahead – or perhaps laterally abaft – of various grudge-holders.

I should hasten to say that FooDog's dealings were never – or seldom – truly unethical or self-serving. It's just that his wide-ranging enthusiasms respected no borders, sacred cows or intellectual property rights.

But despite his lack of a public meatspace address, FooDog could always be contacted through the ubik, and me and Cherry would often meet him somewhere for what invariably turned out to be an adventure of the most hyphy dimensions.

I remember one day in November....

We grabbed a zipcar, FooDog slung several duffels in the interior storage space, and we headed north to New Hampshire. FooDog refused to tell us where we were heading till it was too late to turn back.

"We're going to climb Mount Washington? Are you nuts?" I picked up the feed from the Weather Observatory atop the peak. "There's a blizzard going on right now!"

"Precisely the conditions I need for my experiment."

The normal daily high temperature atop the peak at this time of the year was thirteen degrees Fahrenheit. The record low was minus-twenty. In 1934, the Observatory had recorded the biggest wind ever experienced on the planet: 231 MPH. There were taller places and colder places and windier places and places with worse weather. But Mount Washington managed to combine generous slices of all these pies into a unique killer confection.

Cherry said, "C'mon, Russ, trust the Dog."

I grumbled, but went along.

We made it by car up the access road to 4300 vertical feet, leaving only 2000 feet to ascend on foot. With many contortions, we managed to dress in the car in the smartsuits FooDog had provided. When we stepped outside, we were smitten with what felt like a battering ram made of ice. We sealed up our micropore facemasks and snugged our adaptive goggles more firmly into place. Cherry had a headset that provided a two-way audiofeed to the ubik. We donned our snowshoes, grabbed our alpenstocks, and began the ascent, following the buried road which was painted by our

ubik vision to resemble the Golden Brick path to Oz. FooDog carried a box strapped to his back, the object of our whole folly.

I won't belabor you with the journey, which resembled in its particulars any number of other crazed climbs atop forbidding peaks. Let's just say the trek was the hardest thing I've ever done.

We never even made it to the top. Around 5500 feet, FooDog declared that he could conduct his experiment at that altitude, with the storm raging slightly less virulently around us. He doffed his box, unfolded its tripod legs, spiked it into the snow, and began sending an encrypted command stream to the gadget over the ubik.

"Can we know now what we risked our lives for?" I said.

"Sure thing, nephew. This gadget messes with the quantum bonds between the hydrogen atoms in water molecules, via a directional electrostatic field. I've got it pointed upward now. Good thing, or we'd all be puddles of slop."

I took a nervous step or three away from the machine, unsure if FooDog was kidding or not. But I should have trusted him not to endanger us – at least via technology.

I looked toward Cherry, to make sure she was okay. She gave an exclamation of awe. I looked back toward the machine.

There was an expanding hemisphere of atmospheric inactivity above the gadget. It grew and grew, providing an umbrella of calm. Some snow still pelted us from the side, but none reached us from above.

FooDog's box was quelling the blizzard.

FooDog undid his mask. His black face, wreathed in a wide grin, stood out amidst all the white like the dot of a giant exclamation point.

"Hyphy!" he exclaimed.

The ubik was already going insane. Weather-watcher wikis frantically sought to dispatch entomopter cams to our location, to supplement to reports of the fixed sensors located at some distance, but were frustrated by the surrounding storm, still in full force. But I suspected that if FooDog's bubble continued to expand, sooner or later a cam would get through and ID us.

Evidently, FooDog had the same realization. He said, "Brace yourself," then shut off his machine.

The blizzard socked us with renewed vigor – although I seemed to sense in the storm a kind of almost-human shock, as if it had been alarmed by its interruption.

FooDog resealed his mask, and we headed down.

"Aren't you worried we'll be ID'd on the way down the mountain?"

"I hired the zipcar under a spoofed name, then de-spimed it. Cherry's untouchable, and you and I have our denial flags on. Once we get down the mountain, anyone who manages to get near us in meatspace will have to distinguish us from a hundred other identical cars on the road. We're as invisible as anyone gets these days."

"So your little invention is safe from greedy and irresponsible hands."

"Sure. Unless I decide to open-source it."

"You're kidding, right?"

But the Dog replied not.

So that's what the average outing with Foolty Fontal was like.

Of course, I had certain thrills in my own line of work.

One day my not inconsiderable rep as a salvage expert attracted an offer from the Noakhali Nagas, a wiki from Bangladesh. That unfortunate country had suffered perhaps more than any, due to oceanic incursions. The creeping Bay of Bengal had submerged thousands of shrines. Rescuing deities would provide me with a significant chunk of lindens. And the challenge of new territory – the Cape Archipelago was starting to bore me a little after so many years—was a plus as well.

I sat with Cherry on our favorite spot, the deck of our house on Sandybump. It was late afternoon, our “morning” time, and we were enjoying brunch and watching the sun go down. I explained about the offer I had received.

“So—you mind if I take this job?”

“How could I? Go for it, babe! I’ll be fine here alone till you get back.”

I emerged from the warm waters of the Bay of Bengal on a Tuesday afternoon two months later to find a high-priority news item, culled from the ubik by one of my agents, banging at the doors of my atmosphere-restored connection.

Cherimoya Espiritu was in Mass General Hospital in Boston, suffering from various broken limbs and bruised organs, but in no mortal danger.

I blew every isk I had earned in Bangladesh plus more on a scramjet flight back to the UWA. Four hours later I was hustling through the doors of MGH.

Cherry smiled ruefully as I entered her room. Vast bruises, already fading from subcutaneous silicrobes, splotched her sweet face. Various casts obscured her lovely limbs. Wires from speed-healing machines tethered her down.

“Damn, Russ,” Cherry exclaimed when she saw me, “I am so sorry about the house!”

Wormholes and Loopholes

Looking back at this narrative so far, I see that maybe right here is where my story actually begins, or should’ve begun. After all, it was Cherry’s accident that precipitated my run for jimmywhale of the UWA, and the subsequent trade war, and that’s when I entered the history books, even as a footnote. And that’s what most people are interested in, right?

Except that how could I possibly have jumped into the tale right here? None of it would’ve made any sense, without knowing about my backstory and FooDog’s and Cherry’s. I would’ve had to be constantly interrupting myself to backfill.

And besides, aren’t most people nowadays habituated to ruckerian metanovels, with their infinite resortability and indrajala links? Even though I chose to compose this account in a linear fashion, you’re probably bopping through it in a quirky personalized path anyhow, while simultaneously offering planting advice to a golden-rice grower in Bantul, contributing a few bars to an electrosoul composer in Los Angeles, and tweaking the specs of some creature’s synthetic metabolism with an alifer in Loshan.

So:

I rushed to Cherry’s side and grabbed her hand.

“Ouch! Watch my IV!”

“Oh, babe, what happened? Are you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. It was just a stupid accident. But it wasn’t really my fault...”

Cherry had been sunning herself on the deck yesterday, half asleep. As the sun moved, she got up to shift her chair closer to the deck’s edge. The next thing she knew, she was lying in the shallow waters surrounding Sandybump, buried under the timbers and pilings of the deck. Her head projected from the waters, allowing her to breathe painfully around her busted ribs. But lacking personal ubik access to summon help, she surely would’ve died in a short time from the shock of her injuries.

Luckily, the house itself knew to call one of the 911 wikis. Within minutes, an ambulance service run by the Organ Printers had her safely stabilized and on her way to MGH.

“The deck just collapsed, Russ! Honest. I didn’t do anything to it!”

My concern for Cherry’s health and safety began to segue to anger. Which wiki had built the deck? I started to rummage through the house’s construction records, at the same time pulling up realtime images of my dwelling. The tearing-off of the deck had pulled away a portion of the exterior wall, opening our beloved house to the elements.

The Fatburgers. They were the wiki who had built my deck. Bastards! I was in the middle of composing a formal challenge suit against them, prior to filing it with a judicial wiki, when FooDog contacted me.

“You’re back stateside, nephew! Great! But there’s information you need to know before you rush into anything. Drop on by my offices.”

“Can’t you just tell me over the ubik?”

“Nah-huh. C’mon over.”

I gingerly kissed Cherry goodbye, and left.

I pooled my public transit request with those of a few dozen other riders heading in my direction, and I was over the Charles River in no time.

Foolty Fontal maintained an occasional physical presence in a building on Mass Ave in Cambridge owned by the Gerontion wiki, whose focus was life-extension technology. Jealous of their potentially lucrative research, the Gerontions had equipped the building with massive security, both virtual and analogue, the latter including several lethal features. Thus FooDog felt moderately safe in using their premises.

But the building knew to let me in, and I followed a glowing trail of virtual footprints blazoned with my name to a lab on the third floor.

FooDog stood by a table on which rested a dissection tray. Coming up to his side, I looked down at the tray’s contents.

I saw a splayed-open rust-colored worm about twenty inches long.

“Eeyeuw! What’s that?”

“That and its cousins are what brought down your deck. Shipworms. *Teredo navalis*. Molluscs, actually. But not native ones, and not unmodified. This particularly nasty critter was created in a Caracas biolab. They were used in the hostilities against Brazil ten years ago. They’ll even eat some plastics! Supposedly wiped out in the aftermath – dextinct. But obviously not.”

I poked the rubbery worm with a finger. “How’d they get up north and into my deck pilings? Is this some kind of terrorist assault?”

“I don’t think so. Now that we know what to look for, I’ve done a little data-mining. I’ve found uncoordinated, overlooked reports of these buggers – enough to chart the

current geographical dispersion of the worms and backtrack to a single point of origin. I believe that a small number of these worms came accidentally to our region in the bilge water of a fully automated container vessel, the *Romulo Gallegos*. Looks like purely unintentional contamination. But until I know for sure, I didn't want to broadcast anything over the ubik and alert people to cover their tracks. Or rouse false alarms of an assault."

"Okay. I can think of at least three entities we can nail for this, and get some damages and satisfaction. The owner of the ship, the traders who employed him, and the jerks who created the worms in the first place."

"Don't forget our own coastal biosphere guardians, wikis like the Junior Nemos and the Aquamen. They should have caught this outbreak before it spread."

"Right! Let's go get them!"

"The conference room is down this way..."

Ten empty chairs surrounded a large conference table formed from a single huge vat-grown burl. FooDog and I settled down in two seats, and then we called the offending parties to our meeting.

My SCURF painted onto my visual field the fully dimensional realtime avatars of our interlocutors sitting in the other chairs, so that it looked as if the room had suddenly filled with people in the flesh. Men and women scattered around the planet saw FooDog and me similarly in their native contexts.

Most of the avatars seemed to represent the baseline looks of the participants, but a few were downright disconcerting. I couldn't help staring at a topless mermaid, one of the Aquamen, no doubt.

FooDog smiled in welcoming fashion. "All right, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself..."

Everyone nowadays claims that instant idiomatic translation of any language into any other tongue is one of the things that has ushered in a new era of understanding, empathy and comity. Maybe so. But not judging from my experiences that day, once FooDog had spread out his evidence and accusations to the mainly South American audience. We were met with stonewalling, denials, patriotic vituperations, counter-charges and *ad hominem* insults. And that was from our English-speaking compatriots in the UWA! The Latinos reacted even more harshly.

Finally, the meeting dissolved in a welter of ill-will and refusal of anyone to take legal or even nominal responsibility for the collapse of my deck and the injuries suffered by poor Cherry.

I turned despondently to FooDog, once we were alone again. "Looks like we're boned, right? All our evidence is circumstantial. There's no way we can redress this through the system. I mean, aside from convincing any wikis I'm personally involved in to boycott these buggers, what else can I do?"

FooDog, good friend that he was, had taken my dilemma to heart.

"Damn! It's just not right that they should be allowed to get away with hurting you and Cherry like this."

He pondered my fix for another minute or so before speaking.

"Seems to me our problem is this. You got no throw-weight here, nephew. You're only one aggrieved individual. Your affiliate wikis are irrelevant to the cause. But if we could get the whole country behind you, that'd be a different story."

“And how do we do that?”

“Well, we could mount a big sob campaign. Get all the oprahs and augenblickers talking about you. Make you and Cherry into Victims of the Week.”

“Oh, man, I don’t know if I want to go that route. There’s no guarantee we wouldn’t come out of it looking like jerks anyway.”

“Right, right. Well, I guess that leaves only one option”

“What’s that?”

FooDog grinned with the nearly obscene delight he always expressed when tackling a task deemed impossible by lesser mortals.

“If we want satisfaction, we’ll just have to take over the UWA.”

Starting at the Top

I had always steered clear of politics. Which is not to say I had neglected any of my civic duties. Voting on thousands of day-to-day decisions about how to run my neighborhood, my city, my state, my bioregion and the UWA as a whole. Debating and parsing Wikitustional Amendments. Helping to formulate taxes, tariffs and trade agreements. Drafting criminal penalties. Just like any good citizen, I had done my minute-to-minute share of steering the country down a righteous path.

But I never once felt any desire to formally join one of the wikis that actually performed the drudgery of implementing the consensus-determined policies and legislation.

The Georgetown Girls. The Slick Willy Wonkettes. The Hamilfranksonians. The Founding Flavors. The Rowdy Rodhamites. The Roosevelvet Underground. The Cabal of Interns. The Technocratic Dreamers. The Loyal Superstition. The Satin Stalins. The Amateur Gods. The Boss Hawgs. The Red Greens. The Rapporteurs. The Harmbudsmen. The Shadow Cabinet. The Gang of Four on the Floor. The Winston Smiths. The Over-the-Churchills.

Maybe, if you’re like me, you never realized how many such groups existed, or how they actually coordinated.

By current ubik count, well over five hundred political wikis were tasked with some portion of running the UWA on non-local levels, each of them occupying some slice of the political/ideological/intellectual spectrum and performing one or another “governmental” function.

Each political wiki was invested with a certain share of proportional power based on the number of citizens who formally subscribed to its philosophy. The jimmywhales of each wiki formed the next higher level of coordination. From their ranks, after much traditional politicking and alliance building, they elected one jimmywhale to Rule Them All.

This individual came as close to being the President of our country as anyone could nowadays.

Until deposed, he had the power to order certain consequential actions across his sphere of influence by fiat; to countermand bad decisions; to embark on new projects without prior approval: the traditional role of any jimmywhale. But in this case, his sphere of influence included the entire country.

Currently this office was held by Ivo Praed of the Libertinearians.

FooDog set out to put me in Ivo Praed's seat.

"The first thing we have to do," Foolty Fontal said, "is to register our wiki."

The three of us—myself, a fully recovered Cherry and the Dog – were sitting on the restored deck of the Sandybump house, enjoying drinks and snacks under a clear sunny sky. (This time, concrete pilings upheld the porch.)

"What should we call it?" I asked.

Cherry jumped right in. "How about the Phantom Blots?"

FooDog laughed. I pulled up the reference on the ubik, and I laughed too.

"Okay, we're registered," said FooDog.

"Now what? How do we draw people to our cause? I don't know anything about politics."

"You don't have to. It would take too long to play by the rules, with no guarantees of success. So we're going to cheat. I'm going to accrue power to the Phantom Blots by stealing microvotes from every citizen. Just like the old scam of grifting a penny apiece from a million bank accounts."

"And no one's going to notice?"

"Oh, yeah, in about a week, I figure. But by then we'll have gotten our revenge."

"And what'll happen when everyone finds out how we played them?"

"Oh, nothing, probably. They'll just seal up the backdoor I took advantage of, and reboot their foolish little parliament."

"You really think so?"

"I do. Now, let me get busy. I've got to write our platform first"

FooDog fugued out. Cherry got up, angled an umbrella across the abstracted black man to provide some shade, and then signalled me to step inside the house.

Out of earshot of our pal, she said, "Russ, why is FooDog going to all this trouble for us?"

"Well, let's see. Because we're buddies, and because he can't resist monkey-wrenching the system just for kicks. That about covers it."

"So you don't think he's looking to get something personal out of all this?"

"No. Well, maybe. FooDog always operates on multiple levels. But so long as he helps us get revenge"

Cherry's expression darkened. "That's another thing I don't like. All this talk of 'revenge.' We shouldn't be focused on the past, holding a grudge. We came out of this accident okay. I'm healthy again, and the house is fixed. No one was even really to blame. It's like when those two species of transgenic flies unpredictably mated in the wild, and the new hybrid wiped out California's wine grapes. Just an act of God...."

In all the years Cherry and I been together, we had seldom disagreed about anything. But this was one matter I wouldn't relent on. "No! When I think about how you nearly died – Someone's got to pay!"

Shaking her head ruefully, Cherry said, "Okay, I can see it's a point of honor with you, like if one of the Oyster Pirates ratted out another. I'll help all I can. If I'm in, I'm in. I just hope we're not bringing down heavy shit on our heads."

The door to the deck slid open, admitting a blast of hot air, and FooDog entered, grinning face glistening with sweat.

"Okay, nephew and niece, we're up and running. Even as we speak, thousands and

thousands of microvotes are accumulating to the wiki of the Phantom Blots every hour, seemingly from citizens newly entranced by our kickass platform. You should read the plank about turning Moonbase Armstrong into the world's first offworld hydroponic ganja farm! Anyhow, I figure that over the next forty-eight hours, the Blots will rise steadily through the ranks of the politco-wikis, until our leader is ready to challenge Praed for head jimmywhale."

Suddenly I got butterflies in my stomach. "Uh, FooDog, maybe you'd like to be the one to run the UWA..."

"No way, padre. The Dog's gotta keep a low profile, remember? The farther away I can get from people, the happier I am. Nope, the honor is all yours."

"Okay. Thanks – I guess."

FooDog's calculations were a little off. It only took thirty-six hours before the Phantom Blots knocked the Libertinearians out as most influential politco-wiki, pushing Ivo Praed from his role as "president" of the UWA, and elevating me to that honor.

Sandybump, a speck of land off the New England coast, was now the White House. (Not the current museum, but last century's nexus of hyperpower.) I was ruler of the nation – insofar as it consented to be ruled. Cherry was my First Lady. And FooDog was my Cabinet.

Time to get some satisfaction.

Wikiwar

The day after my political ascension, we reconvened the meeting we had conducted at Gerontion, this time at Sandybump. All the same participants were there, with the addition of Cherry.

(Lots of other important national matters were continually arising to demand my attention, in my new role as head jimmywhale, but I just ignored them, stuffing them in a queue, preferring not to mess with stuff that I, for one, did not understand. This abdication of my duties would surely cause our charade to be exposed soon, but hopefully not before we had accomplished our goals.)

FooDog and I restated our grievances to the South Americans, but now formulated as a matter of gravest international diplomacy. (Foolty showed me the avatar he was presenting to the South Americans and our coastal management wikis, and of course it looked nothing like the real Dog.) This time, with the weight of the whole UWA behind our complaints, we received less harsh verbal treatment from the foreigners. And our compatriots caved right away, acknowledging that they had been negligent in not protecting our waterways from shipworm incursion. When FooDog and I announced a broad range of penalties against them, the mermaid shimmered and reverted to a weepy young teenaged boy.

But the South Americans, although polite, still refused to admit any responsibility for the Great Teredo Invasion.

"You realize, of course," said FooDog, "that you leave us no recourse but to initiate a trade war."

One of the Latinos, who was presenting as Che Guevara, sneered and said, "Do