



MOTHER ALMIGHTY

david zane

"None of our records show this much rain falling in only two hours.

None.

And our records go back over two hundred years!"

Mayors of too-many Cities to count.

Journal entry... August 2, 2010

Promoted to the inner sanctum of The Department.

I am excited like crazy.

Was then introduced to everybody on the team... especially Ivan.

Which was both fantastic and weird.

Could hear the excitement in Dad's voice when I told him.

Mom sounded like she expected it.

Feels amazing to finally be achieving my goal.

I love her confidence in me.

Tomorrow it all starts.

Dreams do come true.

"How many S.I. sticks do you have?", turning up the volume on this damn blue-tooth.

"10 million."

Trying to get it just right... "Shit", murmuring to myself. "What's the temperature of the target?"

"The range is -2 to 6 degrees."

"Hmmm... and the wind speeds?"

"16 mph."

"Constant?"

"Rising unfortunately."

"Damn", banging my palm on the steering wheel.

"It'll be fine... the max proposed is only 25 mph."

Tell that to my pounding heart.

Honking.

My life's been full of an incredible amount of stress lately.

Trying to turn off the busy thoroughfare.

"When can the launch be ready?"

Finally on the winding streets of my neighborhood.

"John's planning for Friday morning."

Twisting and turning the leafy locale of what has quickly become skateboard heaven.

Lowering my window.

My eyes can't help but - seeing baseball games rage on both diamonds - they can't help but burn from the benign bubble of my privileged neighborhood. "What's the height of the cloud canopy?", staring into manicured greens that are light years away from my damn stress.

"Almost seven miles."

This place grates on my nerves like never before.

"Listen Ron I've gotta go see my family. I'm going to have to get back to you in an hour or so", pulling into the driveway.

Everything does since my promotion into the most secretive department of our Government.

"Ya sure Reid."

"I'll get back to you", turning-off the car. Every bone in my back has become so stiff lately... *moving to lift myself out...* twenty hour days will do that. After feebly closing the door... I stand... and remain halted next to it. I tilt my head up to absorb this clear blue sky... and those warm rays; been cooped-up in a sun-less office for too damn long.

Starting to take stock of my surroundings.

An office that doesn't exist to the outside world.

My head on a swivel... curious with this outside world.

Kids playing. Dogs barking. And mowers humming tidy lawns. A gust of balmy desert air blows against my face. Any tension for the moment has been lulled... which is amazing considering the sobering realities of my work. Like crayons in a box the McMansions line up as far as the eye can see. Considering all the sobering lives that are at stake at The Department... one could eat off the pavement this place is so neat. A fortunate world my kids live in.

I'm glued.

A very unknowing world most definitely, across the street, a few houses up, I spot my daughter Jamie with three other girls - giddy fifteen year olds who've come down with serious 'boy disease'. Giggling as they attempt to entertain Nicholas Marcus and Adam... college freshmen home for the summer, or what's left of it. When did she grow up so fast? Can see why her grades are so atrocious.

Sighing.

So much for our talk last semester about pulling up her socks.

Another sigh.

My daughter appears keener than ever about gaining their attention - the way those four are dressed I don't think studying, or socks, is going to have any place in their futures. Insecure girls getting drawn in way too early to the fickle flattery of testosterone... shunning the fertile path of what life can be to the curious mind... the ambitious mind.

Patience.

Feeling my blood start to boil.

Learn.

It's like she doesn't even see me.

Then learn some more.

Human curiosity is a road that focuses and motivates.

Then finally master.

I can't stop staring.

It repels chronic diseases like sloth, cynicism, and terminal gloominess.

And I feel myself seething from across the street.

The gift of learning... of knowing more than when you woke up that morning... is such a fantastic gift.

I turn away.

Nothing in our world is mere chance or randomness.

I start walking towards the house.

Science answers everything eventually; I should know I'm a damn Scientist!

Opening the front door.

I know I'm the father of two indifferent to my words.

"Hello."

It's my reality.

"Anybody home?"

It's today's reality.

"Hello?"

My gnawing problem is that I *get* the human condition.

"Hello."

Especially that of my own family.

Walking through the foyer of a house that looks like a builder's showroom.

"Hello", heading for the kitchen, "Hello?"

A builder's rarely-used showroom.

"Hello?"

I get them all plenty.

"Hello"... up the stairs.

Not at all like the house I grew-up in.

"Hello... where are you Randle family?"

Why the hell do we need so much space anyways?

"Hello."

I give up... making my way back to the stairs.

I take them all the way down to the basement.

I live in one of those massive McMansions unfortunately... "Energy suckers", I named it after seeing those utility bills for the first time.

"Hello? Hello?"

And to think I shared a room with my brother - I stop when I spot the back of his head over the rear of the sofa. A 60-inch plasma reflects back a very life-like video game at one very still head. I start to move closer.

BOOM BOOM.

These things are the absolute worst invention for the development of young minds.

BOOM BOOM.

Seeing the repetitive movements from a kaleidoscope of visual stimuli.

BOOM BOOM.

These games are nothing but a violent killing spree that would make even Hitler blush. Pleasure receptors flooding my son's defenceless brain for so many wasted hours; I was never much of an athlete either, but this couch time is crazy. "Hey Matt, how's it going?"

Seeing that slow blinking, that contorted face and body language work the console.

"Good."

The demons have him... at least I got a "Good." My overweight son is shackled, enslaved along with an entire generation of processed food junkies. A dedicated follower of Psychology, Sociology, Physics and Mathematics... and yet here I am staring at the catatonic state of my lax progeny. "You have a good day Matt?"

It's been damn hard to watch.

"Yup." Today's version of Capitalism is so lethal because it's so insidiously committed to the study of neuroscience - chemicals released in the brain and algorithms. "Looks good Matt." I must be dedicated to my country first and foremost to succeed at my job. "I'll see you later Matt."

It's been very hard to watch; that and I'm not home enough to protect them from it.

Exiting the sliding door from the kitchen. "Well hello stranger", stepping out into a spa-like backyard my sun-worshipping wife has been solely responsible for, regardless of cost. "Hello", moving closer to her tanned body. Reaching down, "Mwa." She smells like coconuts.

Pulling up a seat after her warm greeting.

"Another day in paradise."

Tilting-up at her obvious weather report, "Yes it is", concurring with a happy expression, even though I'd rather be inside.

DeeDee, short for Deirdra, is a slave like every other living thing on this planet.

Examining the few clouds that exist on this otherwise perfect day - how they look, where they sit, wind speeds. A slave to the whims of our maternal sun. All of it is being fed into my head and calculated instinctively.

"Can I pour you a daiquiri?", DeeDee breaks my concentration.

This is the race every nation of the world is running as fast as they can to win.

"I thought we're having dinner at my Parents?"

"We are... but we've got an hour. Come on, take your shirt off and get some sun on that pale skin of yours."

Must be 90 out here today... moving my chair into the umbrella's shade.

Since 9/11 the race has become incredibly more lethal.

Making sure I'm under the entire shade.

Even though most people, and rightfully so, only see weather when they look up...

when my world looks up, and they do that every second of every day let me tell you, with some real powerful lenses - what they see is the greatest, the most powerful, the most efficient modifier of human behaviour. And they want to harness it. They'll spend anything to harness it... anything beyond the scope of the average mind. "I think I'm going to go take a shower."

This is the final race of them all.

"You sure... come on, you look so pale", her oversized sunglasses stare back.

Make no mistake this is a race to assemble the empirical data of our atmosphere.

"I'm good", fleeing back inside. I burn easily.

"Party pooper", hearing her bark before closing the door.

I've got to go wash off all this family reality.

Seated on the edge of our massive four-post king bed.
After a hot shower... I'm now staring at the television in a thick robe.
I'm also flipping the channels impulsively.

"It hasn't stopped raining here in over four days, and the forecast is for it to continue for another week at least. Roads have been washed away and villages have been cut off. The damage is quickly becoming catastrophic, 25% of Pakistan is now underwater. People are scrambling to higher ground as the rushing waters are ten feet or higher. The UN Chief has called it the worst humanitarian disaster he has ever seen."

Grabbing my phone and dialling.

"Ya Ed here."

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"I don't know, what are you seeing?"

"Flooding in Pakistan."

"Oh that."

"What do you mean - Oh that?"

"We saw that on radar."

"Does this have anything to do with what the Indians have been trying to do?"

"I'm sure that has something to do with it."

"What does Ivan say?"

"You know how this goes Reid... you add some water in one area, and all hell breaks loose somewhere else."

"I know Ed... but what does Ivan say!"

The phone goes silent.

"Ed?... You there Ed?"

The problem with messing with the weather has and always will be The Recoil Effect. Add moisture to one part of the atmosphere, and thanks to those damn uncontrollable winds that we haven't been able to fully predict yet - I mean only 10% we haven't... which is pretty darn amazing if you asked me. Unfortunately though it's either 100%... or its big trouble for some very unlucky folks. Very very unlucky sometimes. Mess with the weather 90% of the time and you're good... but that other 10% - my God sometimes another part of the Planet can experience something completely unpredictable. Calamitous even.

"Ivan was saying this a week ago", Ed comes back to life.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"What was I supposed to do... you've been buried in your models for the President's speech."

"I know... but still", backing-off after hearing Ed's sobering truth to my present assignment.

Scheduled to speak outside the Brandenburg Gate next week, me and my team have been super-focused on making sure the weather is dry. Nothing worse than having the President and his collage of dignitaries up there on a rain-soaked stage looking like wet dogs for the entire world to see. Very un-Statesmen like... and with today's technology, totally unacceptable.

"You know the Indians are trying to control their monsoons. And the Chinese and their droughts are not going to go away anytime soon. Shit, even the Iranians are trying to get more rain into Tehran to wash that choking pollution away."

"What are the winds speeds there?"

"Where?"

"Pakistan."

"Oh... forty kilometers northwest to east."

"Jesus."

"I know."

"It could rain for a month", staring at a CNN Reporter's grimace from that pummeling rain.

"What do you want to do Reid?"

Voiceless at this looming disaster.

"Reid?"

"Ya... I need to know what Ivan says."

"Sure."

"I'm going to have to get back to you."

"Suit yourself... you get back to me when you want to talk."

"Reid? Reid?"

Hanging up on Ed because of what I'm seeing on my screen... contemplating the staggering loss of life from a country whose land is now 25% under water... 800,000 square kilometers to be exact. Holy shit this could affect close to 20 million people - *my insides shriek*. And with this happening mostly in the north, with the snowpack on those mountains... my God the runoff will affect even more in the region. Grabbing my phone and punching in my security codes.

"This is the worst flooding in over a century", announces Pakistan's Department of Meteorology.

Anxiously waiting for the connection to occur.

"We need help NOW", a shocked Prime Minister declares to the world.

Seeing the data start to pour in over southern Asia... temperature, cloud formation, height... and those dreaded wind speeds. Numbers that won't stop... numbers that scream trouble in my own secret language... my Department's mother tongue.

"The Karakoam highway connecting Pakistan to China has been closed due to a bridge collapse."

All the models are telling me this is to be a storm of biblical proportions.

"Sugarcane, rice, tobacco, cotton... all the farmland in the northern part of the country has been washed over."

Seeing wind speeds picking up considerably... which is never a good sign for clouds drenched in moisture.

"Water-borne disease and looting are going to be a big problem", declares a panicked-looking official with lots of microphones shoved in his face.

Taking in all this gloomy information has distressed my stomach. After turning down the volume, all I can hear is Dad's stern voice spewing out his favourite phrase. "Science is a balance of probabilities rooted in fact." Which is exactly what is so damn frightening from all these numbers staring back at me.

"The Indus river basin is 11 inches higher than usual."

I'm feeling queasy.

"Peshawar has had almost four feet of rain in the last twenty-four hours."

"Jesus Christ"... racing to the bathroom. My head immediately goes inside the bowl. Retching and retching. It's the first time my work has ever made me sick to my stomach.

"You ok in there?"

Trying to get back to where I can stand without the support of a sink.

"We gotta leave in fifteen", she bangs.

Staring into the mirror.

"Hey!"

My legs are still a bit shaky, "I'm fine."

"Good, because I hate being late to your Parents."

Toilet flushing in the background.

"You OK?", DeeDee attacks me on my way out.

"Fine", attempting a facade of togetherness.

"Ya well?", DeeDee stutters, not looking convinced. "You better get some clothes on. You finished with the bathroom?"

Fleeing quickly to change from my robe, "It's all yours"... into a pair of black pants and white button-down. And get out of here.

"Good", DeeDee gives a final glance at the television, "terrible storm it looks like", grabbing the remote resting on the edge of the bed. *CLICK*. Pressing her thumb down so easily. "Wrong place. Wrong time."

I've got nothing to say to that, only a flaccid snicker; my wife's apathy echoes through me like a drum. I already threw up mine... the only question is - Did I get it all?

"Your Parents said the Silverbergs, Redmans, and Wagnoskis are going to be there tonight", DeeDee chirps through the open bathroom door.

Putting on my socks.

"You sure you're ok?", she leans into the bedroom.

Standing with purpose, "Fine... I'll see you downstairs."

I need a drink.

"Hello hello", Dad's booming voice greets us at the door. Mom races in behind him, "Hello DeeDee", kisses.

"Hello Reid", more kisses.

"You don't look so good, you look pale."

"So what else is new", DeeDee quips.

Next to her I'm a friggin' ghost; and who has the bloody time? After kisses from Grandma, Matthew and Jamie run into the backyard, no doubt to get undisturbed time with their smart phones yet again. Don't want to go there, like most of today's Parents.

"Come, I want to introduce you to some big wigs from Washington", leading us into their large Sante Fe-style family room... with many Georgia O'Keefe's, and a massive plasma hanging on the wall... all 60 inches reflecting back more of that mess in Pakistan and beyond. "Everybody, this is my son Reid and his wife DeeDee", Dad's giant smile takes control. "This is Sid and Vivian Redman."

"Pleased to meet you", reaching in with a forced smile. DeeDee however, "I love your necklace", really loves, "great shoes", to socialize. Taking mere minutes for her to ham it up with the women, and, thanks to her yoga instructor's physique, the wide-eyed men too; event planners are implacable extraverts and in-style guests at any dinner party.

Praying my stomach doesn't start up again from seeing Dad lean-in to turn up the volume. The awesome devastation has us all quickly fixed on the screen. The sound on high... it looks to have gotten worse, much worse.

"They won't send in a single soldier to help them."

Leave it to Dad to be so 'politically-incorrect'.

"No thanks to Iraq and Afghanistan."

Even though it's sadly the truth.

"Congress won't allow one soldier to land on Islamic land, and there's nothing the President can do about it." Dad's old school and so are his friends.

Sickened by what I know from my revered science, from my country's deeply-focused ambition.

Seeing a Mother cry in an unthinkable place.

My stomach won't stop.

In total despair.

It takes everything not to appear weak in front of Dad.

Graduating at the top of his class in Algebraic Geometry; Dad was a Rock Star back at MIT in '61. An adolescent savant in everything mathematics, barely out the door with a Cambridge Mass. diploma tucked under his arm, Dad was eagerly met by the U.S. Military with an offer he couldn't refuse - free tuition plus room and board at Stanford's acclaimed program in *Atmospheric Heterogeneous Processes*... with a detailed focus on aerosols, clouds, wind propulsion, atmospheric chemistry... and theoretical physics. "They paid for everything", Dad boasts with a tone of exclusivity whenever this chapter of his life comes up. My late Grandparents were, "Over the moon", Mom would make sure to add.

Back then, in comparison to now, the emphasis on meteorology was just beginning; hell most of our neighbors thought Dad was just a very intelligent Weatherman.

Ya right, a Weatherman who has the ear of Defense Secretaries, FBI & CIA Chiefs... and no exaggeration, The Joint Chiefs of Staff. Pharaohs with their fingers on the trigger of a 900 billion dollar per year industry, compounded yearly without exception, in good economies and bad... and always rising well-ahead of the tide of inflation. The American Military, for anybody in the know, is without question the most powerful Corporation the world has ever known. Think Jet engines.

Antibiotics. Satellites. The Damn Internet! They've got secret Departments working on things the average person could never comprehend, where rules simply do not apply; these Departments live in a world that's tinted opaque and opaque only. My Department sure as hell does.

"Dinner everyone", Mom bellows from the kitchen.

Everybody breaks their focus on the screen.

"Follow me everybody", Dad deftly herds us like a giant condor... into a backyard fit for an American hero.

Cactus trees rising out of the sprawling red-rock hills, an orange-hued sun is falling fast, creating a comfortable breeze for eating outside. Large candles rise up from the ground in every corner of this massive estate, flickering as they sit atop ten foot high bamboo posts. The lights in the pool show off sparkling blue water in the fast-approaching Arizona dusk.

Mom really knows how to create a mood.

"OK everybody", Dad starts to hit his glass.

"I would like to propose a toast."

Raising his goblet.

"To a safer, more peaceful world", Dad raises his even higher.

As do we all.

"Amen", adds Mom.

"Here here."

"Yes."

"Absolutely."

"Baruch Hashem."

"Semper Fidelis."

Makes the rounds.

"Now eat up everybody, so I don't have to eat this slop for leftovers", Dad jokes.

Following his blistering path at both MIT and Stanford... and only a few measly points short of his record-setting G.P.A. - just a few, which he never lets me forget; Dad's both loud and proud of my accomplishments, and it shows. I only want to make him prouder. With more far-reaching tentacles into every policy-creating boardroom than back in his naive days of the 60's and 70's, terabytes more; today's Atmospheric and Oceanic Science Department of the U.S. Military is a great place to accomplish my very lofty goals. Different from when predicting wind speeds for dropping Agent Orange bombs over the jungles of Southeast Asia was the most pressing concern of the gestating Army Corp of Meteorology. Today... with offices in every corner of the Planet and beyond... all accessible at the press of a button; Dad and his ilk know nothing of Ivan. And to put it simply Ivan knows everything.

Journal entry... August 20, 2010

Amazing what we're into, everyone runs around like their heads have been cut off.

Things can change in a split second, which people in Asia are finding out the hard way.

Everything needs to get done yesterday.

I think I'm used to the pace.

What other choice is there?

Board room #6 is full and ready. People talking... large coffees being sipped... we're all waiting for our Regional Director Ned Coleman to bring this meeting to order. "Did you find out what's happening in Pakistan?"

Laptop screens are being closely studied.

"I did." "Don't like what you saw?"

"I just didn't...", I catch myself, "well I'm sure there's a good reason for what they've done."

"Ya... call it behaviour modification of the enemy", Ed sounds assertive through an obvious snicker.

Ed Hoffman has been here eleven years longer than yours truly, which means he's gotten used to not asking questions; at this level of secrecy one must adhere to the chain of command rule.

"Otherwise the entire system fails", Dad would preach on the need for strict military order.

"We can't all be like the Beijing Olympics", Ed again snickers... while staring at his laptop.

In the weather business the Beijing 2008 summer is considered The Holy Grail of what's possible; the seamless convergence of the human mind with atmospheric science. It's the touchstone we all use to describe everything we stand for - optimum weather, minimal pollution... and no side effects - and are trying to accomplish every friggin' day. Tell that to the 20 million Pakistanis who did nothing... and now have nothing.

"Meeting's cancelled until tomorrow, Ned needs to fly back to Washington for an emergency", a young Associate barks from the doorway.

Everyone moves to stand... to race back to their looming deadlines.

Shutting my laptop.

Things here change fast.

Journal entry... August 29, 2010

Beijing 2008 seems to rile anywhere or anytime.
My colleagues just can't seem to accept the fact... no scratch that...
every single one of my colleagues is openly obsessed with the heart-
breaking fact that the most scientifically-advanced nation of this
world has been upstaged by the pedestrian Chinese.
Irks them all to no end.
And fuels the work to be better.
Can feel it in every meeting of every day.
Perfection is the only goal.

Three to four hours sleep is the average around here... anything more is loafing... and can easily get you shunned. Polite formality amongst co-workers is definitely not required. Stories about family vacations, stressful marital issues, even home renovation pictures are avoided, except for marathons, which plenty around here participate in religiously; nothing but the topic of work is deemed appropriate. I understand. There is a race to be won.

"Hurricane season is scheduled to be a big one because of water temperatures out here", Ned points to the eastern area of the Caribbean. "I have a briefing at the end of the week with the Joint Chiefs Administrator... he wants to know what we can expect going forward into September... both in duration and severity."

All of us feverishly writing down notes... any snippet of a possible code-red.

"That information will be helpful to the refineries of the Gulf too."

And no doubt the oil markets of the world, I cynically think while scribbling anything that will give me an edge, anything that will get me acknowledged. That's what this place does to you. Blind Patriotism; it's osmosis.

"Monsoon season is in full swing as we all know. Pakistan has been overwhelmed unfortunately." Not a word of our complicity. "If we all look up at the board, we can see the particular readings of IVAN on what happened there."

Every head tilts up.

IVAN... short for Invisible Area Networks... can read anything and everything that's going on in our earthly universe. No one... not the Russians, Chinese, Indians... not any other nation of the world has this type of advanced satellite system. It's our competitive advantage, for now.

"The silver iodide and solid carbon dioxide in these clouds here, produced freezing nucleation right here, which was five hundred miles away from our target. We know this now because wind speeds shifted quicker than we thought over this open water here, which is basically what is fucking up the northern part of Pakistan with these downpours."

"Could we not have used laser-guided rockets of hygroscopic materials to lessen the effects?"

"We could have."

Seeing everyone tilt their heads up in unison, like one giant robotic cranium; everyone's anticipating Director Coleman's further response to my challenge. My heart pounds waiting for it too.

"The temperature of the clouds were pretty close to the cut-off zone, if you see IVAN's numbers at this time here... you can see that the clouds were dropping because of all the weight inside them. By the time we'd have been ready to fire they would have dropped another thousand feet, they'd be too warm to change anything."

"But you could have still tried", I want to shout, "20 million people are more than a graph on a page", my insides gnaw.

For the life of me I haven't a clue why I blurted out anything?? Why I'm challenging what has given me and my family so much?? I hate that I know this. I hate that I can't un-know what my Government has done... all because of a winner-take-all race for supremacy... for what they pass off as science. Damn politics; hoping it'll pass.

"There was no convective lift anywhere around these thick cumulonimbus clouds. Everyone can see that Reid." Ned presses a button, and a completely new report lights up the board. "Before we get started on this next model... Ed have the dummy flares been ordered for Friday?"

"They're scheduled for two hours before the real ones ignite."

"Good."

Dummy flares are what make IVAN our *King of the hill*. Scrambling all the data of every other hill out there; this politically-motivated culture does take some getting used to.

Journal entry... September 12, 2010

Every day I come into work scared.

What science am I going to be asked to work on?

Flabbergasted at the scope of technology being used in our department, seems money is no object.

Think the Russians, Indians, and Chinese aren't too far behind from seeing their own minimal successes.

Where are humans going with all this?

Can the public handle knowing this?

Should they be involved in our work?

How much is this all going to cost?

Some days it's just too overwhelming.

I just want to be a Scientist.

Ed talks a lot.

Pulling my laptop out onto the board room table next to him.

Even when he's glued to his screen the man can't help himself.

Plus a notepad and pen.

Probably the last one picked in the yard for any team, which was aptly validated at our annual summer softball picnic last week - my strategy with Ed is the same as with my own kids, or even DeeDee.

"Good Fellas was the best Gangster movie of all time."

Just let them talk themselves raw.

"DeNiro is the best Gangster Actor of all-time."

Spewing out meaningless statistics and facts.

"Although Pesci is a close second."

Rambling Ed always mixes up Scorsese and Coppola.

"Gandolfini's up there too."

Bone thin. Long-limbed. And yet strangely with such muscular vocal cords. "Tony Soprano is a legend."

I hear little... just keep focusing on my tasks; I've met plenty like Ed. Big ego on the outside, insecure on the inside; silence is a frightening state to some people.

"OK everybody... I want us all to focus as one", Ned storms into the crowded board room. "We have a very important task in three days. I will not tolerate any mistakes." Our broad shouldered Director seizes control. His energy always takes over the room. Fiddling with his briefcase. Pulling out files.

A room full of eager Scientists awaits.

He lays them out on the table slowly.

Click.

Every head points towards the screen.

The overhead show begins.

A pin could drop and we'd know how many times it bounced.

"Now IVAN is telling us that wind speeds for this Friday are going to be something we need to carefully monitor. At 5 a.m. they're going to be around 10 miles per hour, make sure you input that into your projectile terminal Ed."

"Yes Sir."

"By 7 a.m. launch time they could be as high as 20 miles per hour, which I don't like at all." Fidgeting with his notes. "The budget for this project is 20 million, I do not want to have to add even one more rocket to this mission", his tone rises.

"Everybody PAY ATTENTION to these wind speeds right up to the second we launch." Twenty-four Scientists thinking the same thought circulates a powerful soberness into the room. "IVAN is projecting cumulonimbus clouds over the Indian ocean. We need to drain those clouds of their moisture so they can be ready to accept our flares when they get over land. Reid, what is the size of our hygroscopic payload?"

"12 kilos per cloud is what our models are requesting."

"You're preparing back-ups I hope?"

"5 kilos per launch if needed."

"Great... that's great", Ned continues to move about the room in no particular pattern. "Douglas, what are the temps of the clouds in question?"

"Optimum temps for retention in this topography is +4 degrees Sir", wide-eyed and stiff-necked while responding.

"Good."

Click.

"This is the convective lift we've been seeing over Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tibet, and Xinjiang Province. What do we need to make sure of in order for our flares to safely hit their targets? Reid?"

"IVAN should be able to read the swirling ratio at 5,000 feet. Then we just use the fraction equation over the base line to make sure the clouds are not set to warm too quickly."

"Good answer... you are a Randle indeed." Ned moves confidently back to his desk. The room feels ready... which usually means Ned's about to address the more political objectives of the mission. There always needs to be Politics, since they sign the checks. "We're attempting to extend the monsoon seasons of Pakistan and Afghanistan by two weeks... most especially in their mountainous regions here... where un-friendlies tend to migrate. If my calculations are accurate that means four more inches for both. Now if we schedule a jet-propelled explosion for a week from now exactly here... that should guarantee a total release of everything in these clouds, and will also blow all that moisture over India and North West China, flooding their fields that much longer."

"And raise the price of corn and soybean!", I could yell.

This world of mine may not be science fiction. Market repercussions have never been mentioned out in the open in *The Department*. But it definitely is way-out-there science.

"If these clouds drop too low I want a contingency plan for glaciogenics. You hear me!", spraying out a direct order to all of us. "Ed!" "Yes Sir", Ed snaps back with a straight spine.

Glaciogenic Agents are a last-ditch contingency plan... and a crude one at that - introduce them into the atmosphere... any atmosphere, and at any height, and most certainly nature will recoil. Angrily more times than not. Probably what happened in Pakistan. Nobody cares about Pakistan in here. With so much poverty in the path of our delicate work... *Jesus*, there goes my stomach again from just the thought.

Why does my goal of being a patriotic Scientist have to weigh so damn heavy?

Journal entry... September 15, 2010

Stayed up all night glued to a screen going over every responsibility I have for this major launch.

Feel confident I have all my bases covered.

It's killing me how well prepared I am, because I'll probably get a promotion or something.

My palms won't stop sweating.

I know people will die.

I can't sleep a wink.

A bowled-shaped room massive enough for a hundred seats and an IMAX screen - the launch center is straight out of a Hollywood Apollo film. The tension just keeps rising on this pre-dawn morning. Each one of us manning our battle stations, so to speak, laptops and headsets ready as we prepare for what easily could be seen as a form of war - the reality of *our* form of war. Voices echo the walls... bouncing back a single-minded focus. Everyone is hooked up to IVAN's central command.

Korean Peninsula. Vietnam. Bangladesh. Nepal.

It takes everything not to peek at the accidental participants.

Bhutan. Tibet. Turkmenistan.

The unfortunate targets lit up in red on the big board.

"Everybody man their stations!", cuts the tension like a knife.

I only see them because they're in the way of the job I need to do, the job I must do. "Everyone ready!"

I take being a Randle seriously.

Our Director marches straight to his chair in front of a giant screen with various numbers popping up... changing... both up and down... providing every type of information on a second to second basis. "Game time!"

Both my palms and armpits start to leech stress.

"Ed, I want you to launch in eight minutes."

"Yes Sir."

"Douglas, what are the temps of the clouds?"

"+8 and falling Sir." "Good." Nobody's surprised that our leader can't stay seated.

"You ready Reid?" Ned locks eyes with me as he begins to pace.

"I am Sir."

This place feels like it's hosting the Championship game.

"I know you are", strolling away after a friendly pat on the shoulder.

Losing is not an option.

"I don't think we've spent a full day together since before you went to college."

"You're probably right", holding her hand the entire time.

"It's nice to spend more time with you", Mom squeezes back with a warm smile, "I just hope I'm around a little longer so we can do more of it." Courageous when she heard, Mom's cancer has returned. These weekly chemo treatments have slowly been sucking the life out of her upbeat nature. "How's the new job?"

"It's good."

She keeps a long gaze into my eyes... "Patriotism challenges one's morality, doesn't it?" I turn away into the hollow landscape of lost health. Still don't know why I can't face her, since Mom knows everything... especially after fifty-two years with Dad. "I'd like to tell you it'll get easier... but for some souls it's like walking on hot coals."

The day after our Asian mission... where everything went so damn perfect, "Thank you for your calm professionalism Reid", Director Coleman congratulated me in front of the entire team. Only spirited accolades followed from my Peers.

Had a heck of a time trying to get to sleep last night... just laid there stiff as a cadaver, listening to DeeDee snore, staring at the ceiling, wondering if the RECOIL is going to kill?? And how many??

Mom couldn't have been more right; since yesterday's great success I haven't felt myself, like I'm possessed with a culpability that makes me foreign to my own body.

Country. Family. Ambition. That's what I was raised on.

"Come on Reid... Reid? Come son... let's go home."

Breaking my trance at so many others getting their dose of poison, Mom squeezes my hand.

Hot coals are right; what is happening to me??

Journal entry... September 18, 2010

Getting lots of love from The Department.
Everyone wants to have lunch with me, or buy me a drink.
Been taking Mom for her treatments instead, my time
with her is special, but that doesn't take away the pain.
Ned informed my team this morning we have a new plan,
and that I'm going to lead it.
200 million of the world's poorest are at risk if we
do everything right.
On top of not sleeping, this new reality is stealing my appetite.
Even water makes me throw up.
Who am I?

A twisted Stephen King horror piled on top of a Hitchcock suspense; it's getting to the point where I can't even look at myself in the mirror. Falling with no end in sight is how this all feels. It takes every fibre of steely Randle Patriotism. Never did I see any of this coming. How could I... I'm a Scientist for God's sake. Which means the spiritual world doesn't exist... that's for manipulative Charlatans in their ashrams to describe to the weak and huddled masses.

"Suck it up Reid and do your job", hearing Dad's earth-shaking tone every time I close my eyes. "It's all in the mind", he keeps it up, "every Scientist knows the emotional soul can't be measured. There's no data to collect. No controlled experiments to plan."

I'm not sleeping. And I'm really scared. After another night of staring at the ceiling, I gently slide out of bed to avoid waking DeeDee. Better she doesn't see me... even for a second; I have no idea what my eyes would say?? Haven't felt clean in days, despite taking a daily shower... and shaving without using a mirror is a heck of a trick; that Randle Patriotism is really running dry. Within twenty minutes I'm out of the house like it's on fire.

Heading for my usual Starbucks drive-thru at the Blue Cliffs outdoor mall... this early Phoenix's streets are empty... eerily empty. Maintaining a routine that's been pre-set in my mind for years... stoplights flicker in the pre-dawn darkness; my mind shifts quickly... to a mind that I'm not familiar with?? Why was I checking in on Jamie and Matt?? Why was I sitting and staring at them as they sleep?? Why did I lean in and give them a kiss to their cheeks - which I never do?? Suddenly I realize that I'll be standing in front of my entire team and Ned in less than three hours... churning out detailed schemes and approaches to facts and figures that me and IVAN have assembled... numbers that have been painfully parsed for completing a mission I know full well I can pull-off with my eyes closed. It's that damn *Recoil Effect* I can't stop seeing. The Women. The Children. The Old and infirmed... and their screams of desperation against The Mother Almighty... against the very accurate IVAN... accurate thanks to my Leadership... and my Patriotism. I take a small sip after pulling out from the drive-thru with my usual double-double... then put it in the holder. I feel the need to find a spot in this very vacant lot... and stay put for a while. I'm not ready for the office just yet.

Undoing my seat belt after putting the car in park; I'm so calm... so incredibly calm. I stare at the sky... fixed at the arriving dawn starting to illuminate the red-rock expanse. I really do appreciate my coffee... glued into the wonders of nature's paintbrush. I know I can't go into work today... taking another slow sip. Down to the tips of my telomeres I know I can't go into work today.

Seeing a big blue desert sky begin to emerge.

I know I just can't.

The Phoenician is one of the finest resorts in all the southwest, visitors from all over the country come to enjoy its' gluttonous standard for luxury and relaxation.

"Good morning Sir", the youthful concierge greets me pulling up.

Dropping my keys in his hand, "Checking in", I reply calmly.

Why am I here?

This place isn't me?

Clearly someone other than the Reid Randle I'm familiar with is in charge.

"Park it overnight."

And he seems to know what he wants.

"Yes Sir."

I turn and, along with only a briefcase, enter the ranch-style bungalow that fits perfectly into this setting of exclusivity for the one percent'ers. The foyer's detailed wood-panelling validates that great taste even further. "Good morning Sir, how can I help you this fine morning?", a young brunette with a white and warm smile declares. "I need a room please... Jennifer."

"Yes, of course Sir, let me check here for you. Would you like a suite or a room?"

"A room will be fine."

"Ok then... deluxe or supreme?"

"Whichever's easiest."

The old me would never say such a thing. "What does each one cost?", would surely follow.

"Ok Sir, if you have a credit card for imprint?"

"Here you go."

"Great." She begins her routine. "How long will you be needing the room for Sir?"

"Just the one night."

"If you would like to play a round of golf at our championship course, you can arrange that in the pro shop."

Reaching in to retrieve my credit card, and sign the blank invoice.

"Here is your room key Sir."

"Thanks", taking it... then reaching for my briefcase.

As I head through the lobby... through an outdoor garden of blooming colors... then into the west wing; I know I'm feeling strange? It's hard to explain? It's definitely weird? There seems to be nothing I can do about it.

BING - the elevator doors open in front of me.

Not having any luggage doesn't even cross my mind... stepping into the elevator with another couple. Well groomed he is... along with a much younger blonde, a pretty blonde. Both of them dressed as wealthy people do when on vacation in the desert.

BING - the doors close, and I stare straight ahead.

Being on the top floor means I don't need to look up.

My only thought - *BING* - is how I've spent my entire waking life dreaming about one goal.

BING.

And how that one goal was supposed to make me feel once I got there.

BING.

And how there'd be no problems once I did... only whipped cream and cherries, I presumed.

BING.

Nothing prepares you for what dreams are really going to feel like, look like, or even if they're going to be good for you?

"Randle's don't do self pity!", Dad's phantom voice recalibrates.

BING.

I exit swiftly.

Clutching tightly on my briefcase's handle, in it are sealed envelopes addressed to everyone in my family... personally addressed explaining my actions, and begging for forgiveness. Wrote them this morning while watching the sun come up... when the real Reid Randle was still alive.

Entering my hotel room.

Hanging up my jacket in the closet.

Opening my briefcase on the desk, pulling out a Colt pistol; the real Reid has everything in order.

Lying down on the bed.

Putting the gun in my mouth.

Soulless Reid has a job to do.

The pain immediately stops.