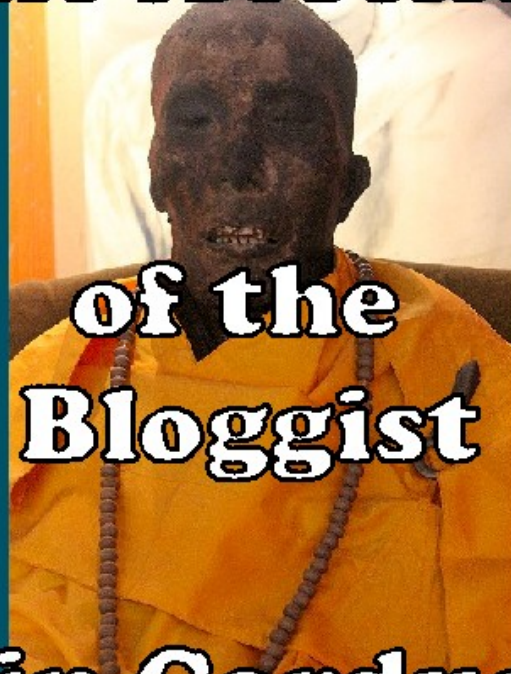


The Absence



**of the
Blogger**

Win Corduan

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It has been ten days since your occasionally prolific blogger last posted an entry, causing a certain amount of speculation among his avid readers as to his present location. Apparently a forty-five-year-old brick layer from Sydney, Australia, claimed to have seen him entering a vegetarian restaurant, but he was later arrested on charges of public intoxication. Other commentators have blamed his absence on the military-industrial-banking complex, but the military-industrial-banking complex did not return any of their calls. A minority of readers have asserted that he might have ceased writing his blog. Upon further inquiry, these same people also believed that Richard Nixon had installed spy cameras on Mars, and that the pope was a German Lutheran.

The truth is, of course, much more prosaic and factual, which probably also makes it far less interesting. But let me share with you a little bit of what happened over the last few days.

I had gone to the grocery store, as I frequently do, late in the afternoon on Friday, the day after my last entry. Everything followed the usual script. I picked up a few necessary items, some milk, some frozen dinners for June and me, and a few other things. There was not much that we needed; the bottom of my cart was barely covered. As I turned the corner out of the last aisle and started down the straightaway searching for the optimal cash register, I thought I heard a male voice say something like, "I'm pretty sure that's him," though I couldn't swear to the exact wording because I wasn't paying that close attention.

However, I was aroused from the stupor of my shopping routine when a couple of young men dressed in coats and ties materialized next to me, just a little closer than common social custom allows for one to feel comfortable. "Mormon missionaries," I thought. "They're about to tell me that they want to share with me something I didn't know concerning the gospel of Jesus." But in

the brief moment I had available to study their faces before one of them spoke, I detected a kind of hard seriousness in their eyes that their superficial friendliness could not hide. Their dress and their attitude seemed to say, "Academy"-- whether in southern Maryland or northern Virginia was a tossup. And come to think of it, taking into account the perspective at my age when the general population starts to look increasingly youthful, they probably were a bit older than the young men who come calling on your door from time to time.

"Excuse me, Sir." One of them spoke to me in the kind of smooth official tone that indicated that the last thing he was after was an excuse of any kind. Both men looked athletic and bulky, but he was maybe a degree less built-up than his partner. I surmised that he was the speaker and his colleague the doer. I definitely had no desire that afternoon to get involved with anything official, particularly if it commenced with some apparently recent academy-graduates. I like my law-enforcement straight-forward and visible and at those times that I designate as appropriate, not while grocery shopping.

"That's okay. Don't worry about it." I said courteously and continued to push my cart towards a check-out lane. I figured that wouldn't work, and, of course, it didn't.

"No wait. Excuse us, please. Could you give us a second, please?"

Again, grammatically, this was a question, but phonetically it was in the imperative mood, and so I thought I would cooperate.

"Sure, what can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"Are you Mr. Win Corduan, residing at . . ." And he recited my home address, including the zip code, which I thought was unnecessary. Do we really live at our zip codes these days? But, I got the feeling that any further cleverness on my part would be under-appreciated. I acknowledged that those facts coincided with those pertaining to my identity.

"Mr. Corduan, we need to talk to you for a few minutes." This statement was another command.

"I'm sorry, but I would like to get home with my groceries, I have no idea who you are, or what you want to talk about. And by the way, it's Dr. or Professor--or even Reverend." Another futile attempt to slow down what already was beginning to feel like an unstoppable process.

"Mr. Corduan, we need to talk to you about some serious matters, both personal and professional."

You have no idea how much I hate veiled pressure. It's just another form of bullying. Or maybe you've picked it up over the years. So, I started to think that maybe cleverness, appreciated or not, wasn't such a bad way to go after all.

"You know, I'd be happy to help you out with your personal and professional issues some time, not that I'm a trained counselor. But I still don't know who you are or why I should talk to you about anything."

The cleverness was neither appreciated nor deprecated; it was ignored. As expected, the other recent academy-graduate swung into action. He attempted to be as inconspicuous as possible as he pulled out a dark wallet-like object, opened it up, and let me get a glimpse of a gold-colored badge. The "speaker" followed suit. These little displays, so familiar from hundreds of TV dramas, have always struck me as somewhat futile. They did not give me much time to analyze the objects; I thought I saw the words "Federal Bureau of Investigation" engraved on them. However, I've never been able to get past the notion that if a bad guy was carrying out a scheme bold enough to impersonate an FBI agent, surely he would be able to secure a fake badge that would be sufficiently impressive to deceive an ordinary citizen. How could I tell that these pieces of metal were authentic?

In the men's minds apparently flashing their shiny badges constituted a sufficient response to my concerns. Assuming that they were real, the men were FBI agents, and I could rule out the Mormon missionary hypothesis. Very briefly the thought coursed through my mind that actually the two groups were not entirely mutually exclusive. After all, couldn't FBI agents be Mormon missionaries or Mormon missionaries moonlight as FBI agents? Probably not, but the thought was irrelevant anyway. Considering that anytime someone claims to be representing a national agency of any country, the matter takes on a serious complexion, I followed the routine I had laid out in my head a long time ago.

"Thank you." I said. "And I didn't catch your names."

They told me their names, but if I reported to you now what they were, you'd think that I must be writing fiction, because everyone knows how bad I am at remembering names. After they stated them, I repeated them out loud in the hope that they would stick in my brain for at least a few minutes, and pulled out my cell phone. Not that I have the FBI on speed dial, but I knew that there was an office in Indianapolis, and that their number is always listed in the phone book. So I called "information" in order to get the number of the FBI office and verify that there were such people as Agent "A" and Agent "B" in their employ. At least I started to, but I didn't get any further than opening up the phone and tapping in the first digit.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Corduan, but we can't allow you to make any phone calls at the present moment."

Oh, the officiousness of official speech! The only moment at which we can ever act is the present one. Augustine had made a pretty big deal out of that, and others had agreed. Still, metaphysics had to take a backseat to other concerns at this time.

"I'm sorry, too, Mr. A, but I'm not going to talk with you about anything serious until I have verified your identity."

"Well, we can't allow you to do that right now, Mr. Corduan. And that's Agent A, please."

Push the right button, and I get unnecessarily and counterproductively cantankerous. "That's Mr. A as long as it's Mr. Corduan. And, for that matter, I still don't know whether you even are an agent."

The trouble with agents, whether real or fake, is that they're trained to ignore Socratic dialog. The word *agent* is related to the word *act*, and at this point, they gave a practical display of the etymology.

"Mr. Corduan, would you please come with us. We have a car waiting in the parking lot."

In a way I was impressed. They didn't even bother with any clichés, such as "We don't have time for this." They were done negotiating.

"What about my groceries? And can I call my wife if this takes a while?"

"We'll see. Please come along with us."

At least he still said "please," and this was obviously not the time for me to do anything but to follow their invitation. Let there be no doubt that I had an entirely clear conscience with regard to the laws of the country and state, not to mention the local ordinances. I may forget to put out our trash some weeks, but when I remember to do so, I never exceed the permissible amount. I always make sure that I do not get caught speeding, and I have never photocopied my naturalization certificate. So, feeling highly visible, intimidated, but pristinely innocent, I let my shopping cart sit and walked out of the store with one agent ahead of me and one behind me.

In an inconspicuous location of the store's parking lot, there was an inconspicuous sedan towards which we strolled inconspicuously. To my surprise, I was invited to sit in the front seat; there was none of that "watch your head" stuff. Still I knew that I would not be able to leave--at least not easily--unless my new acquaintances gave me permission to do so. A, the speaker, took his place behind the wheel, while B took the back and settled himself comfortably. Again, I noticed nothing dramatic, such as B calling my attention to a fire arm, which gave a slight amount of support to their claim to be FBI agents. As everyone knows, G-men are never supposed to pull out their guns unless they're about to use them. Then again, someone imitating an agent would know that, too, but my intuition said that an imitator would not have the patience to stick to that image too long. So, time might tell.

"Well." A said. "Thanks, for joining us, Win. Let me introduce you to my colleague Frank. Everyone calls me Bud."

"Hi, Win!" came B's voice from the back, now allegedly belonging to a "Frank" rather than a surname I cannot remember or a letter of the alphabet. All officiousness was gone from their intonations. However, if they thought that adopting this casual, back-slapping tone would make me any less wary or annoyed, they were mistaken. I did not turn around to see if Frank was extending his hand for the customary introductory hand shake. If anything, this sudden switch in attitude irritated me even further, and I did not return a greeting on this new informal level. Manipulation is also just another facet of bullying.

The man whom supposedly everyone called "Bud" had the good sense to continue without waiting for me to chime in as though I had just become the newest member of their lodge. "Now look, Win. We know that you don't know us, and that you have no reason to believe us, trust us, or anything else. You obviously realize that whatever this is, it's serious, or we wouldn't be going through this stuff, and we are likewise totally aware of the fact that there's nothing we can do to

establish our *bona fides* that you can't suspect to be faked. I will even tell you that, if you had talked to the office in Indianapolis, both you and they would only have become more confused. By the way, the number you wanted would have been. . . ." And he recited the number. There's no need for me to write it out now, but my memory for numbers is as good as my memory for names is bad.

It was time for me to make some vocal noises. "Okay, thanks, Bud. And hi, Frank! Nice to meet you. I understand what you're saying, Bud, but I'm still totally clueless what you're doing here. I'd just as soon not to have to bother about your *bona fides*, but go get my groceries and drive home."

"I know, Win. We're just asking a little patience from you. There's just something we need to follow up on."

"Yes. Yes. Just get on with it. I got stuff to do, too, you know. I haven't looked at my e-mail yet all day; I need to finish a lengthy paper; and I really wanted to get a blog entry done tonight. I haven't broken any law, and please, whatever you're about to spring on me, don't start talking about any 'national emergency.' That phrase was overused the second time someone uttered it."

"Okay, okay." Frank was speaking from the back seat. "This is probably only going to take a few minutes. We just need to verify some things, and then you can go. Things will be easier for everyone if you don't talk about it to anyone afterwards, but we know that asking you to make a promise under duress is a waste of time, so you'll have to use your discretion."

Quite a speech from someone who I thought was merely the "muscle" of the team.

"Yeah." Bud took up the thread again. "Here's the question. On Friday, October 14th of this year, just a couple of months ago, were you in Bangkok in Thailand? And did you take the tour of the royal palace?"

"That's two questions." I observed. "And they have different answers. Yes, on that day, I was in Bangkok, together with my wife and my friend Wyatt. And, as a matter of fact, we intended to take the tour of the palace, but it turned out that we did not do so." And I gave the two alleged agents a quick synopsis, as I have recounted that afternoon's events on this blog under the heading of [Temples, Tuk-tuks, and Brothels](#).

"That's an interesting story." Bud conceded. "And, of course, your wife and Wyatt will verify it."

"Of course." I had thought that maybe we had reached the end, but apparently we hadn't.

"And, do you think you can produce any other witnesses to your story, such as that driver, or anyone you met in the temples?"

"What do you mean 'my story'? And the witnesses were there. But no, I can't 'produce' them. One doesn't 'produce' people; one finds them and meets them. What is this all about?"

Frank jumped into the role of lead interviewer. "What if we told you that we can produce a dozen or so witnesses who say that you were in the palace at that time as a part of the tour?"

"In that case," I lectured towards the back seat, "you would, indeed, be 'producing' them in the sense of manufacturing them. They would obviously be wrong. But so what?" I decided to be clever again. "Why make a federal case over where I was on that afternoon? Why are you interrogating me specifically, and in this pseudo-clandestine manner?"

I'm not sure that Bud had been happy with Frank's disclosure, but he spoke up again. "This may be even more complicated than anyone thought. I will tell you right out, Win: There is a situation with someone having stolen some valuable items from the palace that afternoon, and, like Frank said, you've been implicated by some eyewitnesses."

"And . . ." Frank began.

Bud stopped him with a gesture. "He doesn't need to know that, at least not yet."

"Know what?" I was so angry, I was surprised that I could still speak.

"He deserves to know." Was Frank playing "good cop"?

"Alright, tell him." I guess Bud was playing "good cop" as well.

"Yeah. And . . ." Frank picked up where he had left off. ". . . some of the Thai people are saying that there were supernatural forces involved."

"And yes," Bud added the cherry to the top, "there are implications of national security for both countries."

I was stunned. I didn't know whether to cry or to laugh. I knew that I wanted to get my groceries and go home, but I realized that it would be a little longer before that would happen. Contrary to expectation, I did not have a thousand questions running through my mind because questions cannot clarify the absurd. My brain felt paralyzed.

"I will now go and get my groceries." I said, at least giving it a try.

"I don't think so." Bud replied.

The man whom probably few people actually called "Bud" said, "Put your seatbelt on, please." I obeyed. As purported law enforcement officials they were not obliged to wear seat belts, and neither he nor the man who called himself Frank did so. Speaking of names, I was pretty sure that Frank did not live up to his name either.

While Bud turned on the engine, put the car in gear, and began navigating out to the road, he began the litany we all know so well, though hopefully only from TV shows. "You have the right to remain silent. . . ."

"So do you." I interrupted. "So does everyone. It's a human and civil right for all of us."

"Anything you say . . . "

"Wait! I'm not finished. You guys act as though you're bestowing something on a person when you read them their so-called Miranda rights. You're not giving them anything. Law enforcement personnel was forced by the courts to repeat these lines because they had been abusing people of their rights."

I was playing to a tough audience.

"Anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney; if you cannot afford one, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights?"

As Bud had now reached the highway and was increasing the speed of the vehicle, he quickly glanced at me, presumably expecting the routine "yes."

"No." I said. "In fact, I think this statement is unintelligible."

"What?" Frank had once again entered the conversation and added an expletive.

"Let me clarify."

"Clarify?" Frank snarled. "We've about had it with your smart-ass comments."

I responded in an even tone. "Okay, if that's how you want it. I think this is ridiculous, and it's absurd for you to mirandize me, but apparently you see the need for it. In that case if that matter should become an issue, I'll be sure to mention that you did not do so properly because you refused to explain to me what I didn't understand."

Bud intervened. "Okay. Tell us. What don't you understand? We won't interrupt you."

"Thanks. It's that part about anything I say can and will be held against me. That's a conjunction of two sentences: 'Anything can be held against me.' That's silly, of course. If I say 'Good morning,' how can you hold that against me? But it's the second part that's really logical nonsense. 'Anything I say will be held against me in a court of law.' What does 'anything' mean here? Does it mean 'everything,' so that any word I speak, regardless of what it is, will count as evidence against me? Does it mean anything could be used as evidence? That's already entailed in the first part. Is it supposed to express that you really mean the first part? I don't understand what it means that 'anything I say will be used against me.'

I was still preaching to an unrepentant congregation. Neither Bud nor Frank replied. If I had been in their position, I certainly wouldn't have. So I sat in the front seat of the car and, paradoxically, stood mute as we continued down the road at a high rate of speed. I had expected that we would be heading south towards Indianapolis, but I noticed that we were on a state highway, moving west through rural central Indiana. Our ride was punctuated by the occasional small town, where the speed limit dropped sharply for a few blocks, and then picked up again as

soon as we were once more flanked by cornfields on both sides of the road. This time of year, for the most part, the fields were either empty or bore little stubbles of what once had been tall corn stalks.

About an hour into the drive, as we were crawling through yet another one of those little hamlets, Bud suddenly turned right into a little street that, from what I could see, did not extend further than maybe three small blocks. This late in the year, it was getting dark early, and it was difficult to see all the details properly. The houses seemed to be the usual scrappy buildings typical for this part of the Midwest, with large front yards, and garages equal in size to the living quarters. There were several pickups parked along the sides, and--true to form--I noticed at least two old models up on blocks. Interrupting the irregularly spaced residences was one somewhat bigger building with a large reinforced door, a few barred windows at second-story height, and a prominent sign proclaiming proudly that it housed the Indiana Rural Legal Association, an organization with which I was not familiar, but had no reason to be.

We pulled up to the front of this building that would have looked ominous even in bright light. "Home sweet home!" Bud stated, his first words since our, well my, discussion on the logic of the Miranda rights.

I stared.

"Time to get out and make ourselves at home." Frank tried to make it sound cheerful.

I moved the little lever and was surprised that the door actually opened. Here I was, supposedly under arrest, but unshackled and unaware of any fire power in the hands of my captors. Time to attempt a quick get-away? Nothing ventured, nothing gained. In the evening twilight, I should be able to find a half-decent hiding place within just a few dozen feet. Bud and Frank would probably think that I had run a long way, move a farther distance from the car, and--with a little luck--I might even be able to drive away. I wouldn't need to get far, just to the nearest legitimate law enforcement office so that I could get some straight words on this absurd situation, and maybe some protection, if necessary. I just needed to pick the right moment.

"Don't get any bright ideas." Frank put a quick end to my plans with this trite expression. He now held in his hand the object whose absence I had remarked on earlier--a standard issue of whatever make and caliber hand gun was popular among federal agents these days.

Obediently I followed the two supposed G-men to the door. Bud pulled a key out of his pocket, unlocked the door, and held it open for us to enter. I expected to come into a dark cold building, rife with cobwebs and providing little evidence of recent human occupation. Instead, I found myself in a clean, well-lighted office space with several desks and a handful of people in the process of closing down for the evening.

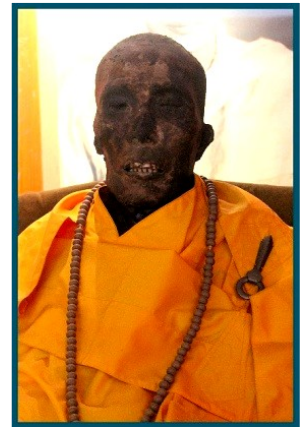
"Have a nice evening, folks!" Bud proclaimed congenially. Then he added to no one in particular. "I assume he's still in?"

Several people nodded and two or three said "yes" or "yup" or something similarly affirmative.

"Follow me." Bud commanded me. We crossed the office space, went through another door, and entered another room. I blinked. Did I really see what was before me? I blinked again. Sure enough. There it was, right before me.

First of all, let me tell you what did not particularly shock me in the back room of the supposed Indiana Rural Legal Association. There was a file cabinet and another stand-up metal cabinet. There was a desk with a chair, and that chair was occupied by another man, who looked as though he could have been Frank's or Bud's older uncle, conveying the same impression as they had, of being the graduate of a federal academy, though having served in the bureau a while longer. He exchanged perfunctory greetings with my two guards and then fixed his eye on me, though undoubtedly not nearly as intensely as I was gazing at the object that filled the rest of the room.

There was a glass case, and inside of it was the mummy. What mummy, you ask? [By all appearance it was the same mummy I had seen not that long ago at Wat U Phai Rat Bamrung in Bangkok](#) . It was the dried-up corpse of *Chao Phra Khun*, a prominent Buddhist teacher in his day. What was it doing here? For that matter, what was I really doing here?



I turned to the man in the chair.

"Hello. I'm Win. Please don't bother telling me anything about yourself other than maybe what you want me to call you because it's all going to be lies anyway. But I am interested in the latest version of the story."

His response did not seem to be hostile in the least. "Well, whether my name matters to you or not, it just so happens that everybody calls me 'Bud,' and . . . What's the matter? "

The first alleged Bud looked as though he had just swallowed an arthropod that would not descend to his stomach, and he was breaking out in a fit of coughing. Frank was standing still as though he were a mummy himself, and I couldn't help but burst out in a gale of laughter. In fact, I couldn't stop laughing. What a silly thing to happen to people, who, whoever they were, did not appear to be amateurs!

"What's going on?" The second Bud was obviously seriously annoyed.

I finally stopped laughing and said. "Sorry, but that one has been taken already. This gentleman on the left has already informed me that everyone calls him 'Bud.' Of course, I have no idea what anyone calls any of you, but it might make future communications easier if you can think of some name that maybe not everybody, but a handful of people, call you."

"What the . . . ?" No doubt Bud 2 would have some serious words with Bud 1 concerning pseudonym protocol later.

"Tell you what." I tried to be helpful. "There are more important things to worry about right now. I will just call you 'Joe.' So, Joe, let's get back to the bigger issue. The previous stories didn't have any mummies in them, so it is incumbent upon you to issue a revised version of the previous mummy-less ones."

Joe looked to Frank and Bud. "Does he always talk like that?"

"Yeah." Bud was still trying to restore his respiration to normality, so Frank was answering. "He's a professor, and he's always lecturing."

"Retired professor." I threw in. "And, whatever the purpose may be for your bringing me here, I can't do you a whole lot of good if you don't give me a new so-called explanation. Not that I expect you to have much use for 'good.'"

I gazed at Joe, expecting an answer, but he was evidently stalling as he was trying his best to throw meaningful looks at Bud and Frank. It became clear to me that Joe was in no position to revise his colleagues' story because he obviously did not know what it was. There must have been some serious rewriting of the script in his absence, as evidenced, first, by the confusion of the names, and now, because it was apparent that Joe was to all appearances not apprised of what had been said or done earlier that afternoon.

Bud, finally having cleared his airways, leaped in, even using the name I had proposed to address his superior. "Joe, as you know, we have placed Win Corduan under arrest in connection with the thefts at the Royal Palace in Bangkok. Despite [his story to the contrary](#), he was seen in the palace at the appropriate time by a number of witnesses. We let him know that there was an alleged supernatural element, and that international repercussions were a possibility. I might add that the subject has been verbally derisive, but has not attempted any physical resistance. We did not tell him about the mummy because we did not think that it would have worked as an inducement to have him come here."

Joe looked puzzled. Even though earlier he had not reproved Bud and Frank in my presence, apparently this was too much.

"Ah. So you were inventive; you thought that the stick would be easier to use than the carrot. Sounds like you created a little bit of a mess that we have to straighten out now. Look-it, if you need to use a stick, use a real one. We need this man's help, and by making up this nonsense, you've undoubtedly made him less cooperative. "

He turned to me. "Professor Win, I apologize for my younger colleagues. They're recent graduates of the academy, and they're a little overzealous in their methods. You're not under arrest. There was no theft at the Royal Palace--at least not any that we give a rip about-- and whatever witnesses they invented, they can un-invent. We have brought you here because we need your help."

I felt myself breathing a little easier and letting my body relax a little. But I could hardly forget that this scenario was not what I had had in mind for the evening, that I still had no reliable information as to who these persons were, that, "arrested" or not, I was still under their physical

control, that I had no idea what they wanted from me, that I was exhausted and hungry, and that the presence of the mummy here was doing things to my nerves.

"Well, thank you, Joe. That's good to hear, and, if I understand matters correctly, I'll be happy to cooperate to my fullest potential."

Smiles all around. I continued.

"So, let me make a proposal. I don't know about you, but I'm really tired, and I'm pretty hungry. So, let's pick this up in the morning. In the meantime, would you please drive me home, and maybe we can stop some place and get a little food along the way."

The smiles faded all around. I tried to bolster my attempt.

"Oh, you're worrying about the 'international repercussions' and whatever. That's no problem. I know how to keep my mouth shut when it's really necessary."

The men contorted their faces to make them look as though the smiles were returning, but their acting was not particularly convincing. Joe was about to say something, but Frank spoke up, apparently fearing that Joe might make a mistake.

"Earlier you agreed with me when I said that you wouldn't consider a promise made under duress binding. You probably still think of yourself under duress. So, we don't believe you. You're probably lying to us now, and so we need to keep you here."

Not that I had really expected them to go along with my suggestion, at least not without a lot of added conditions, but Frank's comment still felt like a bucket of ice water flowing down my back.

"Yeah," I said, "I forgot that you gentlemen are the paragons of truth. It is a fact that habitual liars tend to expect other people to lie habitually as well. So, you want to hold me here, though--heaven forbid!--I'm not under arrest, and you want me to do 'I-know-not-what,'" which will serve my country, though the country is not allowed to know about you or the 'thing.'"

Not even attempts at smiles now. I added one point.

"Let me say this. First of all, I'm not going to do or say anything unless I get something edible first. And second, ditto unless I get a plausible, rational explanation. You still haven't changed your story so that mummies come into it. In fact, you don't have a story at all now. But I really don't care to hear it unless I get some food first."

"Sorry." Joe stated. "Work comes first. Maybe getting some dinner later, maybe even as a little celebration, will induce you to apply yourself a little harder. But I will give you more context."

Bud had gone into the front room several times and come back with a chair each time, so we all sat now as Joe started to spin the new version of the story.

"I'll keep this brief," Joe promised. That's always a good idea when you don't want to tangle the web too much. "You recognize the mummy here, of course, as the one you saw in Bangkok. You don't need to know how it got here."

"Maybe I do," I interjected. "A jury might not believe that I did not know it if you get me into trouble and I should have to stand trial with you. They're not much into that 'need-to-know' business."

"Would you please shut up and listen!" Frank roared. "You wanted to hear what this is about, now give the man a chance to tell it."

"Okay, I will." I responded. "I will not utter another word. I will keep my mouth shut. And let me clarify that when I say this, I sincerely mean it. However, and I'm now speaking with a heavy heart, I will not sit here and listen to garbage without making a verbal response. A verbal response, I'm sure you realize . . . "

I guess I had asked for it. Frank smacked me in the face. I said nothing, but that act on his part had said more than he probably should have meant to say, whether I was being an irritation or not. Joe looked concerned, but he picked up his supposed explanation, which would potentially not explain much if he decided what I did nor did not need to know.

"We picked you because of your knowledge and qualifications. So, I'm sure you know that this is by far not the only case of a natural mummification. You may even know that these processes have most often occurred with deeply religious people. Saint Francis of Assisi is another example. Now, some people, and I don't even know who, have made some secret experiments with these natural mummies and have made some amazing discoveries. Back in Egypt they used to take all of the insides out of the body and then stuff it and treat it with chemicals and wrap it; so there wasn't anything vital present in Egyptian mummies. But natural mummies still have all their organs, connective tissues, brains, nerves, everything. You can't resuscitate them, because they're dead. But what these scientists have discovered is that there's still life force hovering around them. It's possible to interact with them on a mental or spiritual level."

My own mind was divided at this point. Half of it was listening to Joe tell science fiction; the other half was conceptualizing double-cheeseburgers with extra ketchup. I forced myself to suppress the cheeseburger vision because what Joe was saying presumably would be crucial for me to attain that cheeseburger in the near future.

"So, you're saying that people can have telepathic conversations with the spirits of natural mummies?"

"Some people. Something like that." Joe said. "They have to be in tune with the spiritual world or the supernatural or something. We'll get back to that. That's not all that these researchers found. They first assumed that there were just little traces of life force hanging around these mummies. But then, when they worked with some mummies of really religious, you know, "holy," people, they found that they had accumulated huge amounts of power. Maybe because of their lifestyle or just because of who they were, their bodies had served as capacitors, storing energy over a lifetime. Then, when some of the scientists doing these studies actually made contact with the spirits of the mummies, they found that they could direct that force and use it for

destructive purposes. Can you imagine that? This guy sits there and talks to this mummy. He's speaking; the mummy's also talking, but only the guy can hear it. After a little while, he asks the mummy to cause a chair to lift, and the chair goes up in the air. Then the scientist tells him to decimate that chair, and--poof!--the chair is gone. In one very unfortunate case, a scientist accidentally had the mummy destroy the house next door, which sadly was an apartment house, and the whole thing went up in flames. People and all."

Joe attempted to look sympathetic and sad as he recounted this last event, but he also communicated something along the line of pride, whether it was simply from knowing the truth about the event or from being someone who was involved with it, I couldn't tell. He went on.

"So, the locals started to search for a bomb, for an accelerant, for some reason for the conflagration, but they couldn't find anything because nothing was there. The idea that it was started by the supernatural power of a mummy next door was not considered for obvious reasons. Now you can understand where the international concern comes into play. Natural mummies are purely organic. They can't be detected like metal or even other materials, such as plastics. I mean, it's absurd to think of it, but, no matter how ridiculous it sounds, a natural mummy and its, shall we say, 'handler,' in the hands of terrorists can be a real threat. We don't know where the limits of their power are; we don't even know whether there are limits. I mean, like I said, it's spiritual power. So, they could conceivably destroy the White House or small towns, or whatever."

"That's certainly interesting. Of course, it's not verified or anything, but if you could invent this, you could also invent the verification. I still don't see what you want from me. I know virtually nothing about mummies, and I have no ambition to become a 'mummy handler.'"

"Right. But here is the hitch. I said earlier that I didn't know who those people are who have made these discoveries. That's true in the particulars, but I do know a little bit in general. They're not citizens of the United States or of Western democracies. Our sources have discovered a lot, but not the specific identity of the persons involved. It appears to be a coalition of several nations and ideologues, whom we would not consider to have a friendly attitude toward us. So, even though we know much about the results of their studies, we don't know the process. Once we know the process, we can then maybe find a way of protecting ourselves from it."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Well, Win. After doing some thorough searching for someone who should be able to carry out that kind of communication with this mummy, your name came to the top of the list. You're a religious, spiritual person; you're an expert on Eastern religions; you can speak Thai; and people say that your spirit kind of goes out to that of other people, so to speak. You're the natural person to do this for us."

How many times in a span of a few hours can a person stand to be shocked? I protested vehemently. "First of all, I don't speak Thai. I'm working through the first few chapters of *Thai for Beginners* right now. Then, my spirit, whatever you understand by that term does not go visiting other people, nor is it a tool for anyone to use. Yes, I know a little bit about Eastern religions, but I'm neither religious nor terribly spiritual; I'm a Christian."

Joe was a little flustered himself. "I don't know what you mean by that last part, but it doesn't matter what you say. We've done our research, and we know what you're capable of. You believe in spiritual power, don't you?"

"I believe in God, the Holy Spirit, and that he is all-powerful," I answered.

"Same thing," Joe decreed. He seemed to be awfully weak in theology to assume such a papal attitude, but he had obviously made up his mind that I would be his man for the job. "So, we want you to establish communication with this mummy. Speak with it. Listen to it with your ears and mind and whatever part of your brain houses your religion. Then tell us what you learned."

"I don't think I can do that." Nor did I think that I could get away with a simple statement like that, but I owed it to my conscience to give it a try.

"Oh yes, you can."

"What if I refuse?"

Why do events in a person's life have to wind up looking like cheap fiction? Sure enough, Frank pulled out his hand gun again.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I said. "What's the point of threatening me with a gun? You want me to do something. I don't know if there's any way of forcing me to do it, but I do know this: If you shoot me, I definitely will not be able to do it. So, put that stupid gun away, would you?"

Frank did not comply with my request. "Look at it this way," he said. "If you absolutely refuse to cooperate, we have no more use for you, and you know too much now, and so we need to eliminate you."

"So, start talking to the mummy!" Bud must have felt the need to be involved in the conversation.

What could I do? I would not really be engaging in any spiritist activity. I would give a demonstration that this theory was a farce, and that a mummy was just so much carbon.

I put my hands together in the traditional Thai gesture, inclined my head no more than I would to any human being, and felt like a fool addressing the mummy.

"*Sawatdī krap.*" I greeted the lifeless mass politely.

No response.

"*Sawatdī krap.*" I repeated the standard way of a polite Thai man saying "hello." Nothing happened.

"*Sabāi dī rū?*" Asking a corpse whether he is fine or not should have been futile, and fortunately for my sanity, it was. The remains of the late Chao Phra Khun did not bother with an answer.

I have no idea what the three alleged agents expected to experience. All three of them seemed to be holding their breath as they switched their eyes back and forth between me and the mummy. I turned back to them and said, "We could turn this into a real experiment. I could alternate between talking to the mummy and talking to the wall and see which answers first."

Joe answered without rancor, "Well, we have time. More specifically, we'll make sure that you'll have time to think about this. Bud and I are now going to get some food. There's a little side room here, where you can spend a little while, and we'll bring you something to eat. Frank is going to stay with you. And, like he said, if it becomes obvious that you're no longer of any use to us, he already told you what we need to do."

I thought, "What about after I've been of use to you?" but did not say it. It was becoming apparent that I was ultimately disposable for them. Joe opened a door to a small room, which barely held a rectangular table that would maybe hold eight people, three on each side and one on each end. Frank dragged in two of the chairs. He had me sit at one end of the table, while he casually sat sideways on the chair at the other end. Then he made a very deliberate gesture out of drawing his weapon and laying it on the table right in front of him.

As Bud and Joe left, Frank said to me. "Why do I get this nasty feeling that before they're back you'll have shown yourself to be unusable?" He chuckled in a way that no federal academy would have tolerated.

I said nothing, hoping to avoid the confrontation that he was apparently looking for.

So there we sat, Frank at one end of the table, I at the other. He had placed his gun before him on the table like a place setting, ready to be put to use. Neither of us said anything. I figured he intended to provoke a reason for using his weapon, and I was not going to give him occasion for it if I could help it. But after a while he was done making like a Trappist monk.

"You don't have much respect for authority, do you, Win?"

I pretended to be the mummy a few minutes earlier and remained quiet. Of course, he would not let up.

"What do you have against federal agents, anyway?"

I maintained my silence.

"Hey, Win! I'm just trying to have a polite conversation with you."

I made no comment.

"You know, I'm getting annoyed by your lack of courtesy."

I couldn't let that pass. "People who slap others in the face have forfeited their right to courtesy. And I would appreciate it if you would not call me by my first name, Frank."

Well, that remark gave him an opening, not that he was particularly clever. "People who disrespect federal agents deserve to be slapped."

"The problem is," I countered, "even if that statement were true, I seriously doubt that you are a federal agent. Just that idiotic remark, not to mention your keeping your gun in front of you, looking at it as though you're expecting it to hatch, makes it pretty obvious."

"So, what do you think I am?" Oh, what an invitation! I restrained myself and answered in as sober a manner as I could.

"Well, all three of you look to a certain extent like you've been to the FBI academy or something like it. So, you must have had some training. You could be drop-outs, or you could have been turned. My guess is that all three of you were somewhere along the way involved, not with the FBI, but with the 'agency,' and couldn't make the grade. So you let yourself be bought by someone on one of the many other sides. I trust you realize that they're going to drop you into oblivion the same way you're planning on getting rid of me once I've done your bidding. Make that 'were I to do your bidding.'"

"Are you calling me a failed CIA operative who turned traitor?"

That's a good way of learning: paraphrase the teacher's point and ask if you've understood correctly. But this was not a case study in pedagogy since the point of getting me to repeat what I had said was simply to bait me. So, I just said, "You asked me to guess, and I gave you my guess. If I'm wrong, so much the better."

That response left Frank a little confused again. He wanted a reason to be offended, but wasn't quite sure whether he had it.

"Well, you're wrong," he said lamely. Then, suddenly, his eyes lit up, and he added with more enthusiasm. "So, if that's what you're thinking you're not really going to try to help us out, are you?"

It looked as though I had been right in my earlier analysis. He really was looking for a reason to shoot me.

"I can't help it if the mummy won't talk back to me. You saw me try. I'll try again. But I would be dishonest if I told you that I expected any success."

I thought that was a fairly safe and reasonable answer. But people often hear only what they want to hear.

"That's it, then." Frank stood up and picked up his gun. "You're saying that you're set on not making it work. You heard, ah, Joe's instructions. I was supposed to interrogate you, and if it turned out that you would be useless to us, I was supposed to eliminate you."

Frank obviously had heard Joe say something different from what I had heard. For some reason the need to use his weapon on me had become a genuine fixation. Having left his chair, he walked up towards me. I figured that he wasn't secure enough in his marksmanship to try

anything but a direct execution-style shot. I, too, rose from my chair, placed it in the little space on the side of the table, and backed up towards the wall behind me. Trying to dodge under the table or anything else athletic would have been silly. My body was far too stiff and shaky to attempt any quick, flexible moves. I stood still, except that I put my left hand on my right shoulder, making it appear, perhaps, as though I was involuntarily trying to shield myself.

Frank came up to me, pointing the gun directly at me. At first he had held it with both hands, as they teach you in the academy, but he used his left hand to move the chair out of the way, and now he was only a foot or two away from me with the weapon in the hand of his right, outstretched arm. It was almost in my face.

This was serious. If I had had the mobility and the training, I might have been able to take advantage of his mistake of holding the gun too close to me by making some fancy Chuck Norris move, but, as I said, my athletic days were long over, and it looked as though all of my days were about to be done. Still, I had to try something, and the only thing I could think of was to attempt some diversion, even if it lasted only a fraction of a moment.

"I wouldn't shoot that gun if I were you."

Frank grinned. "Yeah, I know. You're too righteous. But I'm an agent, and I can do this." This obviously wasn't the time to comment on that ridiculous "agent" business again.

"No, really, I wouldn't shoot that gun; it's defective."

"Nice try."

"I'm serious. Look at that loading lever." I had no idea what I was babbling about, but that wasn't the point. "If you pull that trigger now, it's not going to shoot me, but the gun is going to blow up right back into your face. Just look at it."

There it was--the moment of distraction. Ever so briefly, he took his eye off me and focused on the gun. That was enough time. My left hand was still on my right shoulder, and I simply let it go to swing as hard as it would go into his gun hand.

I can't imagine that there was all that much power in my swinging fist. What I had done would probably have been totally ineffective if he hadn't made his next mistake. As soon as he saw what I was doing and felt the impact of my hand he pulled the trigger, probably as an automatic reaction. That's what saved me.

Heavy caliber guns have a lot of recoil. That's why real agents are trained to shoot with both hands, and even then they do not find it easy to keep the gun steady. It is more likely to be influenced by Newton's laws than by the intent of the shooter, and it will dance in your hand unless you keep a firm grip. Frank was holding his weapon in just one hand, and I unsteadied it with my fist while he was reacting by squeezing the trigger.

The bullet went off and buried itself in the wall, several feet from me. But more importantly, given the gun's recoil, lack of support, and my interference, it went flying out of Frank's hand, landing on the floor just behind him.

And then he made another mistake. Again, it was just a brief moment, but it was enough. He quickly glanced totally away from me to see where the gun had landed. As I stated already, I was in no shape for a wrestling match, but as soon as I realized that he was letting himself be distracted again, I curled myself up and threw myself at his legs. There was not much room. He toppled over backwards, and his head hit the wall pretty hard before he went down on the floor--hard enough that he passed out. I grabbed the gun and got up.

With Frank out cold, should I just leave him lying there and find my way out? I've seen too many movies where the good guy leaves the bad guy in such a condition, moves on to deal with the next bad guy, and suddenly there's the first bad guy again, ready to kill the good guy once more. It doesn't make sense. This man had attempted to take my life, and I had the opportunity to make sure he wouldn't do so again. I had the gun in my hand, and my reason told me to use it.

But I couldn't shoot a man just lying on the floor. I stuck the gun in my pocket, raced through the back room with the mummy and from there into the main room with the office desks, saw immediately what I was hoping for, namely a large roll of packing tape, snatched it up, and pulled the gun, ready to try to use it, as I returned as quickly as I could through the mummy backroom and into the side room with the table. Fortunately Frank was still out.

Remaining with the mummy motif, I proceeded to wrap up Frank with the sturdy tape, beginning with his arms and legs, then proceeding to his mouth, and then his entire body. The end product was not nice and even, but I was forced to work in a hurry, and when Frank came back to consciousness he was unable to move or to make a sound. Pleased with my product, I did not say good bye to Frank as I left the side room, shut the door, and once again walked through the mummy room to get to the main office space where I would use the phone.

Just as I was at the door to the office area, I heard a voice.

"Kun chü arai?"

Somebody was asking me in Thai what my name was. It was a thin, raspy voice. I want to say that it came from behind me, but I'm not sure I could really ascribe directionality to it. Still, I could not help but stop, turn around, and stare at the mummy.

The voice came again.

"Pom chü Chao Phra Khun. Kun chü arai krap?"

His name was that of the mummified person, the voice claimed, and again it asked me what my name was, this time a little more politely. And--was I beginning to hallucinate?--I could have sworn I saw the black circle that once had been his lips move.

The other day [I had said light-heartedly](#) that, when confronted with questions about mummies, I always stop and ask myself: What would Howard Carter do? No doubt about it, Carter had his share of adventures in connection with his excavations. In case you're wondering, he was the lead excavator of the team that unearthed the tomb of King Tutankhamun, commonly known as

"King Tut." But I don't think that Carter ever had the experience of thinking that he heard a mummy talking to him in Thai, asking him his name. So I was on my own.

Should I respond? "Joe" and "Bud" could be returning any second by now. Of course, talking to the mummy was what they had kidnapped me to do, but Frank would undoubtedly spoil any good feelings that might arise, and besides, I was quite sure I would not live after they were done with me. Also, I just wasn't sure I wanted to have any part of their machinations. I needed to get out of that place now.

So, not intending to be discourteous to the mummy-spirit-thing, I still chose to turn my back to him/it and head through the door into the main office section. But when I tried to turn the door handle, it wouldn't move. There was a little locking device on my side of it, but, regardless of which way I switched it, the handle would not budge, and the door remained locked. I suspected that the mummy was interfering with my plans. Well, I consoled myself, if the door was sealed, then it could keep my two self-appointed employers from entering as well. So, I turned around again to face the mummy and take up the rather thin conversational thread. Was this engaging in necromancy? I had not called up this spirit, and it didn't seem to give me any choice.

He had said that he was what remained of Chao Phra Khun, now mummified by nature, and he had twice asked me for my name. At least his question was easy to answer.

"Pom chü Win. Sawatdī krap." ("My name is Win. Hello.") I definitely was thankful for chapter one of *Thai for Beginners*.

"Sawatdī krap. Pom yū tinai?" ("Hello. Where am I?") This question, communicated with that thin raspy voice, took us to chapter two, and I was still okay.

"Kun yū tī pbratēt amērigā krap." ("You are in America.")

My answer provoked a few moments of silence, then the voice came again. Oh, I might as well just say it as it appeared to me. The mummy spoke again.

"Kopkun krap. Kun pben kon tai?" ("Thank you. Are you Thai?") It couldn't have been a real voice, because a real voice requires air, and mummies do not breathe. Still, it sounded like a real, though not pleasing, voice.

"Mai chai, pom pben kon amērigān." ("No, I'm American.")

Another few moments of silence, then, when the mummy "spoke" again, it was in English. He was being accommodating. But you need to understand something. In many science fiction stories the characters find some means of communicating exact thoughts that lie deeper than their language, whether it's with pure telepathy or thanks to a divine creation, such as the Babel fish. These narratives ignore the fact that all of our articulate thoughts, viz. those that convey content, are shaped by the concepts in our minds. We have access to those concepts only through the language we have learned, and that's the only way we can express them. So, even though the ensuing conversation went fairly smoothly, I'm fudging a little by leaving out a few false starts and misreads because not every thought came across clearly at first. Regardless, it was a good thing because I'm not sure how much further my Thai would have carried me.

"So, Win, Sir," the voice picked up again, "why did you not kill the man?"

"I am a Christian, Sir. I must respect human life as God's creation."

No sooner had I uttered those words than I thought, "Oh, dear, now I did it. We're going to be debating theology, while Bud and Joe are probably almost back with whatever food they found."

"Don't worry, you're safe," the mummy said. It occurred to me that he had picked up that last thought just as much as my spoken words. "I also understand your point. You do not practice *ahimsa* ["non-injury to any living being"], but you respect created life to honor its Creator."

"That's correct. 'The fish belongs to the person who wants to preserve life, not to anyone who wants to take it.'" Since he had shown understanding of what I believed, I thought I would return the compliment and use a famous line out of his tradition from the story of Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Mercy.

"Don't make too many assumptions, Win. I've learned a lot since I died, so to speak. It's hard for me now to think that I spent an entire life time teaching that there was no Creator, among other things."

I beheld the mummy, attached to which was this rather conversant spirit, with a whole new degree of interest and wonder. Less kind people might have said that I gaped. The mummy carried on.

"But we can talk more about such things later. I just wanted to know what kind of person you were. Right now, we need to get both of us out of here."

That statement definitely complicated my plans, loose as they were. I was no longer looking at just my own escape, but at my escape along with a life-size black mummy wearing a bikhu's robe in a large glass case. That thought prompted me to raise the question again, which Joe had refused to answer.

"How did they get you here in the first place?"

The mummy actually knew. I had a hard time imagining Chao Phra Khun having much technical knowledge, but his post-mortem representative did.

"Quantum computers. They replicate each particle of the item they're sending, and then the item reassembles itself at the designated point. -- Yes, they're a lot like transporters in Star Trek, except that the original leaves a copy of itself at the point of origin. So, nobody misses my mummy in Bangkok."

This was getting weirder and weirder. "Now how could you possibly know anything about Star Trek?"

He had a logical answer. "I didn't until just now. When I mentioned the quantum computers, your mind immediately brought up images of an entertainment narrative called Star Trek, and I saw those mental pictures and recognized their similarity to the quantum computers."

"This is fascinating stuff. The idea of "entanglement" of particles contributed to the rift between Einstein and the Copenhagen school. Once it shown to be real, some scientists immediately started to try to put it to the use you're describing. But we need to get back to reality. I don't have a quantum computer. I didn't even know that anyone had actually succeeded in making one with any degree of functionalit, let alone to move an object, oh sorry, I mean, a person, like you."

"You got it right the first time. What you see here is an object, not a person. Strictly speaking, I'm not Chao Phra Khun either, just his life force hanging around this pile of carbon, as you thought earlier, and this part of me doesn't weigh anything. Still, as long as these circumstances prevail, I can only move while this mass of material moves."

"So how do we get you back to Thailand and me home?"

"Hold on! If I go back to Thailand, there will be two of me there, which would really not be helpful. Nor do I want to be a part of the plans of these people who have brought me here. At least I now know what country I'm in."

A thought occurred to me. "Doesn't it stand to reason that these people might have the quantum computer right on these premises?" I certainly would never have dreamed of having this kind of conversation with a mummy. How quickly one adapts!

"Yes, that's possible. I will open the door for you to search in the office area. It must be fairly large. I will use my power to keep the outside entrance closed in case our captors return."

"*Kopkun krap.*" I thanked him, and if there is such a thing as a hard, grating, raspy chuckle, I heard it.

This time the door opened immediately and easily, and I started to go around the office area. I counted twelve desks, at least as many computers, and a large server in one corner. Though impressive, that technology did not add up to a quantum computer. There were some other office machines, but nothing that would even come close to fitting the bill, disguised or not.

"Looks like I'm going to have to search for an attic or a basement, I thought," and immediately I heard the mummy's reply.

"I haven't seen anybody go up or down in the days I've been here, but it's worth a closer look."

I stood there in the office area, feeling exposed and vulnerable, trying first of all to think rationally on how to discover an entrance to a basement or attic before just looking around chaotically. Then it occurred to me that I had overlooked an obvious place.

I went back into the mummy room and walked up to the tall metal stand-up cabinet I had noticed and ignored earlier. It was not locked, and, as I swung open the doors, I was looking at a

large piece of electronic machinery. I did not know what it was, but nothing that I saw ruled out that it could be a quantum computer. Furthermore, since we (the mummy and I) had thought that maybe there was such a thing on the premises, the probabilities seemed high that I was staring at our potential instrument of escape.

"*Nan yū tīnī!*" ("It is here!") I shouted. Unnecessarily, of course, when the one you're addressing knows your thoughts anyway.

"And now?" the mummy rasped.

"That's a good question. I have no idea how this thing works."

"Well, I believe you plug it in," the ghost of Chao Phra Khun suggested.

Great! So here I was, fighting for my life by trying to figure out a piece of technology right out of science fiction, and my sidekick was the mummy of a South East Asian monk who would entertain me with wisecracks along the way. I had the machine, but it could just as well have been a cement mixer for all the good it would probably do me. Sometimes it seems as though success only takes us one step closer to futility.

Before going on with figuring out the machine that I thought was the quantum computer, I decided to check on Frank, whom I had left lying on the floor of the side room. I assumed that, as trussed up as he had been with packing tape, he would still be there just as I had left him. When I entered, the young man greeted me with a horrendous volley of curses. At least I infer that that's what they were, though I couldn't understand a word he was trying to holler. Having several layers of tape covering your mouth can do that to you. I made sure that everything still held together and went back into the mummy room. As I closed the door, I looked at the mummy. It really made no practical difference whether I addressed his blackened, desiccated corpse, the life force that was supposedly surrounding him, his ghost or spirit.

"Just to be sure, Venerable Chao," I ventured. "Could you maybe put one of those locking spells on that door?"

"An excellent idea, Rev. Prof. Dr. Win," he replied. "Consider it done." I got the feeling that he was enjoying his newly-found way of speaking with a slightly teasing attitude.

I went back over to the hypothetical quantum computer that might transport the two of us out of this place, plugged it in as the mummy had suggested earlier, and started twiddling with various controls on it. Of course that was not exactly a bright thing to do since at best I could only make an educated guess what they were for, but I couldn't help it. It's deep in my nature to try out buttons and switches. I once put a stop to all of the reproduction of tests, hand-outs, manuscripts, and so forth in an entire academic building for a whole afternoon by pushing a red button on a copy machine, and a number of people were unhappy with me. Anyway, there I crouched looking at the gadgetry, trying to make sense of it. Perhaps fortunately, the machine had been used not that long ago, and so it was not dismantled for storage; it looked to me as though it were pretty well ready to go if someone knew what he was doing. I confess that I did

notice a rather large paperbound volume in the cabinet, probably the instruction manual, but I wasn't sure that by trying to read it, I would not just be trading a difficult job for an impossible one.

It was not hard to find the "power switch," but, knowing my impulsive nature, I actually did not fire up the machine. I was still analyzing which mechanisms were necessary to touch, which were helpful, and which would put the wrong sort of ending to this adventure. Suddenly a thought came to me that was not directly related, but surely extremely relevant to our situation. Once again I addressed the mummy.

"*Kun Chao Phra*, are you not able to move inanimate objects with your spiritual powers?"

"I can do so, as you know."

"Also, did we not agree earlier that your mummy, your former body, is now merely an aggregate of lifeless carbon. In other words, an inanimate object?"

I'm not still not sure whether the mummy actually changed expressions when he talked. It's certainly asking a lot of a mummy to look startled, but I thought that maybe he did.

"I know where you are heading with this."

"That's right. It seems to be an elementary thought; I don't know why we haven't seen it before. If you can move inanimate objects, then you should be able to move what's left of your arms and legs and whatever else may be necessary, get out of that glass case, and come over here to help me. You don't have any real muscles left, but that doesn't matter. Your strength comes from your life force anyway."

"Let me see."

I watched with great fascination as he slowly moved one arm, then the other. He paused for a moment. The glass case suddenly turned a brilliant white and then disappeared.

Now he began to move his legs, again trying them out one at a time. He experimented with them alternately in various positions. After a few minutes, he had the hang of it enough to stand up, though he was a little wobbly. Then he took a step, just a few inches forward with his left leg. He brought the right leg in line with the left.

"It seems to be working," he rasped with his sandpaper voice.

"You're doing great." I didn't know whether it was really appropriate to praise a mummy for learning to walk, but that's one of our traits as Americans. We can't help but praise even the smallest signs of progress someone makes, and if we don't notice any, we still praise their attitude or something we invent. "Careful with that step down off the platform."

"I got it." The mummy sounded as pleased as he could with that voice. He navigated the step down and then walked the ten or so paces toward me. You need to understand that by now I had

utterly given up on what I once had considered reality, so, I was just taking the vision of a mummy walking towards me as a normal part of life.

As he stood by me, I perceived a distinctive odor, reminding me of a lumber yard. Since he was mummified, there was no question of the smell of decomposition. It was not shower-fresh, but neither was it unpleasant.

"Now what do you want me to do?" Of course, since he was talking without breath or air, his speech did not add any further aroma either.

He had asked a question that arose out of my own earlier suggestion, but now I wasn't sure what to tell him.

"You could read that instruction manual over there and then guide or correct me as I'm working on figuring out this machine."

He hesitated. "Just because I can communicate with you in such a way that it sounds more or less like English to you does not mean that I am very good at reading real English."

I grinned. "That doesn't matter. Like I said, it's an instruction manual. They're never written in real English. They have English words in them, but you may find that the syntax is a whole lot more like Thai than like English."

"Ok, then. I'll give it a try."

He wobbled over to the cabinet, took out the manual, and scanned it. He would turn to a page, gaze at it for a second or so to absorb the various marks on it--letters, numbers, diagrams--and then go on to the next one where he would repeat the process.

After just a few minutes he was done with the rather large volume. "Do you understand it all?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "But I can project the relevant symbols and pictures into your mind as needed."

"An interesting idea," I assented. "Hope it works. I think I understand the basic algorithm of this machine now, but I'll need a lot of guidance in figuring out how to make it work in the specifics, even if I'm right on the basics."

And so we began working cooperatively, the mummy and I, going through the process step by step on how to turn on the correct switches, how to regulate the power properly in proportion to the items intended to be transported, and how to set the coordinates. Since neither one of us was an expert on these things, we needed to make sure we got it right, including specifying a location that would not land us right in the middle of a rock or a building. That subject brought up another couple of issues.

"By the way," I remarked to the mummy. "Have you figured out a way that we can operate the machine and travel out of here together?"

"That's no problem. You know I'm good at moving switches and levers with my mind."

"Sure enough. But there's another matter. We can use this machine only once since we can't carry it with us. I would really like to go home. You said that you did not intend to go back to Thailand. But where do you want to land? We should probably compromise since I'm not sure you'd be all that excited about staying in Smalltown, U.S.A."

"Oh, I'll go with you," the mummy said. I can always move on from there on foot or with some other means of transportation. Do they have tuk-tuks there?"

"No, they don't. But if you're willing to come with me, I'm sure you'll find a way to move on from there if you care to. I must tell you that it's not easy to set up a household as a mummy in north-central Indiana, and I'm not sure June and I can host you for too long. You might try the Miami area in Florida, where you might not be noticed, and you could probably even get a driver's license there."

"I see. You'll have to explain all of that to me later." Obviously, as expected, my attempt at humor was totally lost on him.

For the last few minutes there had been quite a bit of noise outside of the building, which we had ignored. Joe and Bud had returned and had found that they could not enter the building, which the mummy had sealed with his powers. They banged on the door, cursed, hacked at the walls and windows, threatened, and just made an all-around nuisance of themselves. However, since we were safe, we did not pay attention. After a while, when they found out that nothing was working for them, they left again. I was sure they'd be back, perhaps with some huge weapon, but I hoped that we had transported out of the coop by then.

After another half an hour or so, the mummy and I had figured out how to work the machine, and we were getting ready to avail ourselves of its services. We even thought that we had turned on a setting that would prevent any duplicates of us to remain behind. Please don't think that I wasn't filled with anxiety. It's easy to feel superior to uninitiated people on a TV series who are afraid of being shipped off via a transporter. It's another thing to attempt it yourself, particularly if you don't know whether you followed the instructions properly.

There was a large mat on which we had coiled a fairly thick multi-strand wire numerous times. The diameter of the circle we had created was about seven feet. We stepped into it, the mummy and I. What a bizarre experience! "At least he is dead already," I thought about my companion, though that whole phenomenon had become confusing to me, and it didn't bother me to know that he probably knew what I was thinking.

"Geronimo!" I said.

"I beg your pardon?" Chao Phra Khun asked.

"Let's do it!" I explained.

The mummy said, "Right."

And then the lights went out.

Were we transporting? It did not feel like it. The mat underneath me felt the same. I don't know what molecular dissolution is supposed to feel like, but I didn't feel anything. Neither did the late bikhu.

"A second too late," my *post-mortem* partner observed.

This was a set-back, though silently I had to concede that our two antagonists had made a good tactical move.

"They turned off the power on us." Chao Phra and I said or thought simultaneously.

The mummy still had all of his power. But so much for the quantum computer and transporting ourselves to safety.

"So, I suppose you're now going to command me to use my powers to start destroying things?" The mummified remains of the late Buddhist teacher, Chao Phra Khun, asked me in his dry, raspy voice. I noticed a definite note of reluctance in the way he spoke. After all, he had wanted to leave the premises intentionally in order to avoid committing acts of violence.

I was glad to give him reassurance, though I was at a momentary loss for what we were going to do instead. "That's not going to happen. Remember that I had said right from the beginning that I would not be a 'mummy handler.'"

"Right. Thank you. We can trust each other then. That's good to know."

We were silent for a few minutes. Then, once again, the same thought seemed to occur to both of us at the same time, and we expressed it simultaneously, each in his own manner.

"But they don't know that." I spoke and the mummy thought into my brain.

"Care to go for a walk?" I asked my crumbled ally.

"It's a nice night for it," he agreed.

"What if they don't run, but shoot instead?" I was not going to back out, but I wanted to know if the mummy had thought about it.

"At whom?" He asked in return. "I'm dead already. Just stay in my shadow, though they have to see you for a few moments so that they will assume that you are my 'handler' and are ready to use my powers on them. Are you going to take Frank's gun with you?"

"I'd rather not," I said. "If it comes down to the need to use a high-caliber hand-weapon at any distance in the dark, I'm likely to do more harm than good. Besides, I'd just as soon get out of this without creating further complications."

"Please, Win, be honest. You don't want to kill anyone. You said so earlier."

"In so many words. Anyway, let's go. This might get to be fun."

"Just a moment," Chao Phra said. "We need to pay a visit to our third antagonist."

With that, he turned and walked unsteadily through the dark into the side room. Frank was still lying there, nicely wrapped up with packing tape, reminiscent of an exhibit at the Cairo Archaeological Museum, though I couldn't see much of anything in the dark, and neither could Frank. The darkness was no problem for the mummy, of course.

All Frank could tell was that someone was entering the room, and he assumed it was me again. Once again, his volley of curses was obstructed by the tape, but Chao Phra stepped up to him and ripped it off his mouth. Immediately the noise ceased. Frank must have been too shocked to continue. Then the late monk created just a little illumination with which he surrounded his carcass. The glowing mummy neither would nor could communicate with Frank, who was now shaking with fear, but he rasped to my mind, "Please be so kind as to tell him what he needs to know."

I was right there with him. "You have the right to remain silent," I quipped. "Furthermore, I advise you strongly to avail yourself of it until you are speaking with some real law enforcement people and are telling them the truth. As you can see, your stolen property has become my ally. I think I now understand your plan, namely the very evil you had ascribed to others. But your plan has failed, and you will help yourself most by creating as much distance as you can between you and your former partners. Go seek out the real FBI, tell them all you care to, and hope that they will protect you from Moe and Curly and your sponsors. Whether you get protection or not, or whether such protection will be in an asylum, in a federal prison, or as an anonymous parking lot attendant in Beaver Falls, I have no say, but it's your only chance if you're quick about it. I can guarantee you that your former associates will terminate you with prejudice, as they say. In the meantime, always remember that the Venerable Chao Phra Khun may be in your immediate vicinity, and that he may not be as kind to you the next time you see him as he is tonight. You tried to use him and me with the intent to destroy others; be careful, you're on the verge of having destroyed yourself. Help the FBI put an end to your self-destruction. Do you understand?"

"Yes." He barely managed to get out the word, he was so frightened.

"Someone will find you here in a few hours. And by the way, here is your gun." I placed it on the table. I wondered if he realized that, in connection with all of the other matters that would come out, the gun would contribute to his incrimination. Chao Phra and I both left the room, walked one last time through the back room, crossed the larger office area, and opened the door. By that time, he had turned off the eerie glow, for which I was thankful.

Flashlights are not always the best pieces of equipment to use in tricky situations in the dark. They have a limited range, they conceal whatever is outside of their cone of brightness, and they easily reveal your location. As we stepped into the open, with the mummy leading the way, two lights popped on across the street. They were separated by about fifty feet, each one sending its beam at a diagonal angle directly to the door. I immediately threw myself on the ground a few

feet to the right (I'd like to say "jumped" or "bounded," but I need to be honest; it was more like I "dropped").

No sooner had I done so, than I heard a gunshot and some heavy splintering in the strong, reinforced door. Fortunately, the bullet stuck in the wood. If it had hit enough metal, it might have rebounded. I continued to crawl on, and, since I now was outside of the cone of their flashlights, the men had lost sight of me temporarily. Their lights were going back and forth trying to locate me. In the meantime, Chao Phra continued stepping right towards the source of one of the lights, moving slowly in his controlled mummy gait.

Now the light towards which he was heading focused on him, and then the other one followed suit. It was time that I called attention to myself.

"I guess this is where I give the command to the mummy to destroy the enemy," I said in a loud voice. Crack! Another shot went off, aimed into the dark where it lost itself with no harm done.

"Don't shoot, you idiot!" That was Joe's voice, reprimanding Bud. "He's controlling the mummy now. Don't you know what he can do?"

"In that case," I rejoined, stepping forward to find my place in the weak light right next to the mummy, "I suggest you drop your weapons and come out with your hands held high, palms facing me. My partner and I are both extremely tired of your nonsense, and, as you can see, your plan has backfired on you. Please come out to the middle of the road."

Who says that there's never anything going on in the little towns of rural Indiana? Two shots and loud voices were enough to wake up the neighbors, who, in turn, woke up their neighbors, and in a miraculously minuscule amount of time already there was a small crowd gathering. Bud and Joe both came out of the bushes and stood in the middle of the road, about ten feet from us.

"Now, would you please do us a favor and take off your jackets, shirts, tee-shirts, and anything else covering your upper body?"

They still obeyed, but Joe grumbled at me, "I know what the mummy can do, but I don't think you would just let its power loose with these innocent people standing here. You could kill them all."

"Oh, how we are concerned with innocent lives all of a sudden!" I said. "But Chao Phra Khun-'Phra' means monk, by the way, and he's a 'he,' not an 'it'--is a good marksman. He can pulverize you without the person next to you feeling a thing." I was laying it on fairly thick. First of all, I still wasn't entirely sure which grammatical gender--masculine or neuter--was really optimal, and second, I didn't know whether he really could do what I had just said. But again, neither did Joe or Bud.

One can't expect a really large crowd to gather in a street in a town of this size (there is no official designation of "village" in Indiana), but by now there were about two dozen or so Hoosiers surrounding us. Several of them had brought flashlights, and two people had driven over with their pickups that were illuminating the scene with their headlights. The

townspeople saw two men in the center of the road baring their chests and a very peculiar-looking man standing by, evidently not a Hoosier. He must have appeared to them like a mummy, but they would have known that living mummies aren't real. I assumed that they also noticed me when I spoke up again.

"Now your shoes and socks, please."

Bud and Joe obediently removed them.

"And now your pants." Who knows what the spectators were thinking? The scene was rather bizarre, but none of us looked like we were somebody's wife's aunt's cousin, so no one interfered. As the two impostors did what I commanded them to do, both of them revealed a second gun strapped to their calves. I nodded at Chao Phra, and he shuffled forward and removed them. The onlookers gasped. That thing, they realized, sure seemed to be a real mummy, and it showed extraordinary dexterity in removing the leg holsters, despite his gnarled fingers. (I realized that he was using his powers in doing so, but he concealed that fact quite nicely.) Several people emitted screams and moved a few steps back, but the fascination factor kept them close enough to be able to see the show. I could have sworn I heard someone say, "I know someone who went to high school with him."

What was taking the police so long? You realize, of course, that there wasn't anything I could actually do with these two pretend-agents, and that I was simply stalling. Since they weren't wearing anything but their boxers now, I really didn't want to take the next step. Fortunately, right about then I heard the sound of sirens and not just one, but two sheriff vehicles came to a screeching halt, just short of hitting somebody in the crowd. Two uniformed deputies leaped out of each car, their attention totally focused on the two men, who were standing in the road providing a rather dubious display. The crowd, such as it was, had turned to watch the deputies step up to the men. The mummy and I took advantage of the development, slipped into the darker recesses of the street, and hobbled away unnoticed.

Before we were completely out of earshot, I heard Bud yelling, "I'm telling you. The mummy made us do this." He wasn't helping his cause any, that was for sure.

So, how were we going to get home, or, for that matter, wherever Chao Phra's spirit wanted to settle? Once again he had read my mind before I could put my question into speech.

"I cannot do anything destructive without your direction. But I'm not totally powerless when it comes to helping." His voice was still grating, gravelly, and unnatural, but I had gotten used to it, and it would be a good memory.

"And where will you go?" I asked.

"Oh, I will be around. We may meet again. Are you prepared for a little air travel?"

"I suppose. *Sawatdī krap.*"

"*Sawatdī krap.*"

We both inclined our bodies slightly towards each other. No, we did not hug. People and mummies don't hug each other. Instead, I started to feel myself lift up from the ground, rise to a considerable altitude, feel my body turn, and zoom eastward like a missile.

I don't know whether I would have preferred traveling with the quantum computer, but I really did not like this mode of transportation. I know that many people dream of flying. I want them to know that I have flown, and that I did not care for it. I will concede, though, that my attitude may have been influenced by the fact that it was cold and late at night, that I couldn't see much of the scenery, even if it had been worth seeing, and that my movements were utterly beyond my control.

Still, the late bikhu had perfect aim, undoubtedly based on the location he had discerned from my mind. I landed safely in my backyard on a prickly surface of grass and fallen willow twigs. When I walked around to the front door, June greeted me in the company of a local police officer and someone whose dress and attitude seemed to say “Academy”—whether in southern Maryland or northern Virginia was a tossup. I made an appointment with the officers to tell them my story the next day or so. The agent disclosed that they had already been aware of some bizarre activity going on.

I found out that after I had been gone for an hour or so, June had gone to the grocery store, heard what the clerks had seen, and went to the police from there. They, in turn had called in the FBI, who were not as totally confused as Bud had told me they would be. Still, she could do nothing then except to wait for a sign from me, while the officers kept her company and presumably were ready to protect her. As it turned out, June didn't get any sign, but she got the whole of me back, a little worse for the wear, but--needless to say--she was as happy with that outcome as I was. I spent the next few days alternating between discussing the matter with various agents and sleeping, which left no time to write any blog entries.

And that's what really happened. As I said, reality is not nearly as interesting as fiction, but all I can do is to narrate the facts.