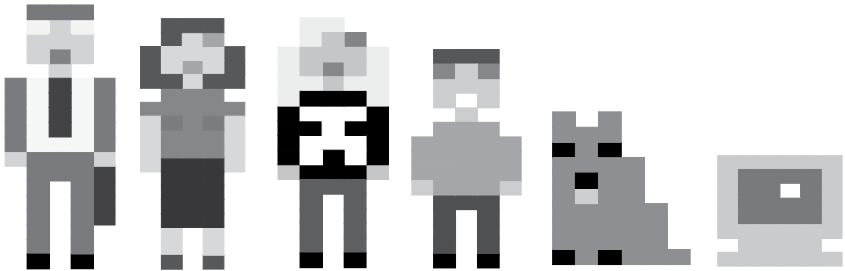


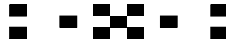
Game Quest

by Leopold McGinnis



**Read the novel in its entirety at
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Chapter 4: the big meeting

It was eating at him. Did everyone know? Did they see the dark circles under his eyes? No...they didn't seem to. He was fidgeting, he thought. *I better stop fidgeting. Or maybe, if I stop fidgeting too much, they'll notice and wonder why I'm sitting so still. Does Geoff notice? Damn, I was supposed to get those dialogue lines written last night and instead...instead I just frittered the night away. Blowing things up. Getting keys. Strafing left. Strafing right. It was amazing. It was like being in a movie. It was brilliant...*and he couldn't stop thinking about it.

The meeting was going to start soon; in five minutes, as the rest of the Madre design crew straggled in. He'd probably be called on to say something. Or they'd expect his usual witty remarks. But he had to feel free, loose to make witty remarks. And if he felt free and loose he might slip up. It might just come out. He couldn't trust himself not to blurt out **"I've been up until 5 in the morning playing Dan Destroyem for the last week! I've had a total of 12 hours sleep in 5 days! I can't stop thinking about it! When I'm at work, I can't wait to get home to play! I play all night! When I have to take a bathroom break, I rush myself, squeezing my bathroom muscles, so I can get back to the game sooner! When I get up in the morning I feel like an idiot. I promise not to play the game again – to delete it from my computer.... But by the time I've driven to work, I need to play it again! I need it...I need it and I'm sorry!!"** And all their jaws would drop open at this sacrilege and then he'd be fired.

Of course, then he'd have plenty of time to play Dan Destroyem...

Maybe they wouldn't care about it. After all, it wasn't *wrong* to play the competitors' games. In fact, it was encouraged. It made great water cooler chat. Playing competitors' games happened all the time. It kept you abreast of the industry and inspired you. Often, the programmers would stay after work to play them. What he was doing wasn't any different... at all...but yes it was. It was Dan Destroyem. Dan Destroyem was dangerous. People were worried about Dan Destroyem. Dan Destroyem went, not only against the type of game Madre made, but their very creative ideologies. Madre made intelligent, witty, clever, original games

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with storylines...at least, storylines more complex than 'save the babes' as Dan Destroyem's directive was.

Dan Destroyem was a good game, no one denied that. The people at Madre weren't elitist. They wouldn't argue that Dan Destroyem was sub-par because it was all about an adrenaline rush...about blowing things up. No, in fact, almost everyone would agree that Dan Destroyem was a great game. And that's what worried them. And it wasn't the first 3-D action game to do so. It had followed on the heels of Gloom, Gloom 2 and, now, Crypt Destroyer. All four games were record breaking sellers and in a similar vein: 3-D immersive environments, guns, ammo, explosions... maybe a puzzle or two...and no text. Dan Destroyem was a HUGE hit. And what worried Madre was...would anyone buy their games anymore? Madre's games, adventure games, were slow, low on explosions, babes and 3-D graphics... These new 3-D shooters were selling like hot cakes... and Madre's production costs were going up in inverse proportion to decreasing sales. The market flood of adventure games for the last five years hadn't helped their situation...so many bad imitations...people were weary.

It wasn't official doctrine that you couldn't play Dan Destroyem. No one had said that. It wasn't even a subtext – an unspoken taboo - under peoples' conversation. It was just...Dan was the bullet in the coffin – the anti-Madre hero. Dumb, cool and surrounded by scantily clad women. He blew stuff up and laughed. He was crude. And Tim loved it. And he knew it was wicked. Wicked. *Wicked!*

A couple more people straggled into the meeting room. Casual, light-hearted conversations were easily struck up. The camaraderie at meetings was great. Art sat over near the donuts as usual. He was talking to Smith – one of the guys from the new Synapse Games subdivision. Tim didn't know his first name, only his last – Smith. Tim wished he could be more like Art. Art doesn't 'get' the 3-D action games. In fact, Art doesn't get most games except the games he makes. When Gloom first came out, everybody was *oohing* and *ahhing* over the technical wizardry, the 3-D environment, the adrenaline-pumping, addictive violence and scariness. Art was too, but when he played it, he said he only liked it 'ok'. Everyone else was hooked. Everyone else couldn't stop talking about it. Art thought it was a great, original and stunning game...in theory. In practice he liked it 'ok'. Mostly Art would watch – but never felt the desire, the all-consuming itch – to play himself. He just liked designing his own games and telling jokes. *If I was more like Art, thought Tim, I wouldn't be having this problem.*

Will, the big-boss man, sat across the large oak table from Art, facing the extremely large meeting room window looking out over the pristine sea of coniferous trees that was the Redwood forest, cushioned high in the Sierra Nevada mountains. It was a beautiful, clear day and the sun broke into the office at an angle just low enough that it didn't shine in people's eyes, but just high enough to line the edge of the long oak table with gold. It was hard to feel like you were in a meeting in a room like this – felt more like an outdoor picnic with friends. Will was pondering silently and writing things down with his ballpoint pen on the pad in front of him. Tim wished he could be more like Will. Will was always focused. Will wouldn't let this sort of thing happen to him.

Tim knew that Will had a copy of Gloom on his office computer. Everyone had for a while after it debuted two years ago. It was the fastest selling game on the planet...catapulting EGO Games from relative obscurity to super-stardom. For a good reason. The game was insanely good. The staff couldn't stop playing it...so much so that it started to get out of hand. Productivity had gone down. People were talking more about Gloom (and later Gloom 2) than the games they were working on. And yet, just as it was getting out of hand, somehow it just stopped. There was no memo that went around saying everyone was just too obsessed with Gloom. That wasn't Will's style. He didn't like having an organization so big that it required impersonal memos to act as constables. Somehow, Tim thought, everyone just fell into line, people deleted it off their computers, talked about other things. Everyone had just done the right thing...as if guided to greener pastures by some silent, ghost rider in the sky. It hadn't become a taboo subject...it had just gone away.

Will, though, still kept a copy on his computer. He would play for 15 minutes every now and then. That was acceptable. Others did it too. And everyone still gathered after work to play the game, but Will was never sucked in. He didn't even uninstall Gloom 1 to install Gloom 2. He didn't even have Crypt Destroyer. Will seemed happy just to play 15 minutes of the long outdated Gloom every now and then. FIFTEEN MINUTES!! That's what Tim would tell himself: *I'll just play for fifteen minutes. To relax me. Then I'll go and get started on that dialogue. The game playing will get me in the groove.* And then it would be four in the morning and he wouldn't have had the dialogue done. *I'm such a moron!* Where was that Ghost Rider in the Sky to guide him now...

Tim decided he was going to delete the game when he got home from work today. Well, maybe he would play one last game and then delete it. He looked over at Geoff, the other half of the design team of the award

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winning Sci-Fi Quest games. Tim wished he could be more like Geoff...

Geoff wondered if anyone noticed that he had been up all night playing Dan Destroyem. What an *awesome* game! Dan was soooooo cool! He kept getting this one line from the game stuck in his head, over and over. It was a sound byte: *Bite my gnubs!* What a great line. Geoff wished he had thought of that line. But he was going to have to abstain from playing tonight. He had to get his half of the work done. Otherwise, any minute now, Tim was going to finish up his dialogue lines and wonder why Geoff hadn't finished the inventory item descriptions. He really should get the work done, he thought. After all, Tim's work is always terrible – and if I do more, then more *good* work will go into the game, Geoff reasoned.

Henry the composer was at the meeting too. A relatively new addition to the family, Henry joined Madre just after their previous composer, a guy from a quasi-famous 70s rock band, departed Madre about two years ago. Henry was a fairly amicable guy. His music might not be as good as his predecessor, but it was good enough. And, rumour had it, he had a Shibachi 400 monster bar-b-que at his house. That, alone, was enough to keep him working at Madre, whose employees enjoyed, with near obsessiveness, their annual staff bar-b-que. But right now Henry was worried. He was worried they were going to announce another pay cut. That's what these big meetings meant. Pay-cuts. And he was sure it was about SupraNet – that bloated piece of crap...why had Madre ever gotten involved in it? Because it was original – and no other bottom-line focused company would have the guts to risk starting something like that – but not Madre. Madre did what it wanted. Actually, it had been a good idea...but it was too far ahead of its time. Will had really pushed the idea – an Internet that people could actually use for entertainment. At the time the 'Internet' had only consisted of newsgroups – filled by families of big business executives, professors or those in the computing industry. But Will saw the possibility for it expanding further...if they got in now they could have the world's first online community. And they always seemed on the cusp of doing it...even now, four years later.

Henry had been told from the start that it was a brilliant idea. Everybody was going to jump on soon. Henry didn't think about it much at first, but it didn't take long to understand what a revolutionary idea it was. And it didn't take much longer to realize what an elephant it was. Madre had been investing a lot of money and time into it since they first started it. Building up the infrastructure alone had been mind-bogglingly expensive. And then there were the advertising dollars to promote it...

and it just never seemed to catch on. Though, as time (and money) wore on, people got more responsive to the idea of online communities – but it was the Internet that was expanding to provide entertainment...people shied away from SupraNet, for some reason. Madre lost money through the nose...building up the idea only to have Internet User Groups suck up the interest. The idea had been too brilliant. And Madre was still carrying this bloated sack of sea water...unsure of what to do with it. Henry wished it would just go away.

About a year and a half ago, realizing that people were finally coming around to networks and internets, Will made a putsch to keep SupraNet alive, life support to hold it over until the people came – any minute now. Will had to ask staff to take small wage rollbacks in exchange for stock options. It wasn't obligatory...and if they wanted to, staff could vote no and kill SupraNet right then and there. But everybody, even Henry, had voted for it. It was the right thing to do. Madre even began issuing more stocks in an effort to keep it alive...lessening employee control in the company to less than 50 percent of total shares, risking true control of Madre to keep this thing afloat. But people went to Usenet and cheaper, freer alternatives that were suddenly popping up everywhere.

Henry was sure that's what this meeting was about. Will was going to notify everyone that the white elephant had now eaten Madre up – killed all its profits. Everyone was going to have their wages cut by 50% to keep the company afloat. *God, that would happen too.* He couldn't afford another wage rollback – Kuriko was due for another baby in 2 months. *God, another one!* If they rolled back his wage, then he would have to sell his stock – which was actually doing really well. But he didn't want to do that; already so much of Madre's stock was in the hands of non-industry people. He just wanted his salary. He had three mouths to feed!

The other guy from the Synapse Games sub-division had now arrived. Synapse Games was formerly an up-and-coming game company before Madre bought them out about a year and a half ago. Adventure games had been flooding the market for nearly two years by then. All those clones ate into Madre's market share, but then again, overall, their profits were soaring, so it still had a positive effect on their account books. Synapse, however, was a lean company that hadn't produced any big-sellers...but had produced notable ones, ones that Madre couldn't ignore. They were unique, not trite, and definitely original. Unlike the swaths of other games pouring into the market, Synapse's were a threat. So Will sat down with them and hammered out a deal to buy them up, incorporate them and make them a partner/sub-division. Madre had to issue more

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shares to raise the money to do it. They really hadn't had much choice but to buy Synapse. They had to stay on top of the market...or face inevitable destruction.

The buy-out had been rather amicable, however, with most of Synapse's employees honored to become members of the great pioneer of computer games. And Madre had no interest in destroying the company. What Madre Games Entertainment really cared about was making good games. Incorporating Synapse was an excellent way to not only bolster Synapse's success, but to make that success part of Madre's own...and, most importantly, help them keep their jobs. Synapse management was very pleased with the deal. They basically retained their own management structure and autonomy, and had creative and financial control of their organization, even got to put their own name on their products. Only, now they were part of the Madre network with more resources at their disposal. Sure, they had to justify everything to Will at the end of the day...but as long as they made good games and didn't lose loads of money, they basically remained their own organization.

The only real change was that Madre and Synapse had to meet every now and then to coordinate and ensure they weren't stepping on each other's toes. Although the majority of contact between the two was over phone or email, Will would sometimes make visits down to Southern California. When there was a really important meeting, the two main reps from Synapse Games, Smith and the other guy (as they were known around the office), would come up, as they did today.

Today, everyone was here: Geoff and Tim, Will, Art, Henry the game composer, Smith and the other guy, Ron...the Madre family...others were still straggling in. The other major players at Madre, the infrastructure guys – accountants, lawyers, etc... - weren't around. They'd have another meeting later. This was a family meeting. The Madre family always got to hear the big news first. And without the infrastructure guys it was handled on a much more personal level. Less talk of bar charts, market analysis, gold doubloons, etc... Will was the only one who really paid attention to that stuff...and even he hated it. It seemed so antithetical to the art of making games. It was a necessary evil...and it needed to be dealt with in its own realm. This was the family realm; the heart of Madre. They were the kernel. All in all, there would be about 16 people at this meeting.

Kendra Roberts was the next to come in, her Danish Quest having been interrupted en route by the arrival of a code-busting concern idea that required her at her computer. Only a few of the other game designers,

working on final touches, were yet to show up. Kendra sat down next to Will, smiling at him.

GET SUGAR, Kendra thought.

You reach across the table for the sugar.

PUT SUGAR IN COFFEE

What coffee? You didn't bring any from the kitchen and the specialty meeting coffee hasn't arrived yet. How are you supposed to relax without coffee? You curse to yourself and wonder if you have enough time to quickly run to the kitchen and make a fresh pot...but no, it's not possible.

TAP FINGERS WITH IMPATIENCE

"You might want to pass that sugar down to Tim and Geoff when you're done with it," suggested Art, motioning down to the end of the table. The family turned their heads towards Tim and Geoff. Their faces were gaunt. They had dark marks under their eyes to put football players to shame. They looked so beat that, even though the coffee hadn't arrived yet, it seemed as if they needed a couple of spoonfuls of raw sugar just to keep them alive. Everyone laughed. They looked like hell. *Fuck!* Tim and Geoff both thought simultaneously, *They all know!*

"Why do you guys look so tired, anyway?" asked Kendra.

"We were working on game dialogue," said Geoff.

"Yeah," added Tim desperately, "Until really late!" *Was that too obvious?* wondered Tim. *That was too obvious.*

"You know," said Ron, co-designer of the wildly popular HomoSapien Quest. "Why don't you just, like, let the Transvernacular Obfuscator write the game, then you guys could get all your rest?" Laughter burst out around the table. Tim blushed. He'd never live down the Transvernacular Obfuscator puzzle. How he regretted ever even thinking of it in Sci-Fi Quest II. One of the inventory items you picked up was the so-called Transvernacular Obfuscator. At one point in the game, you needed to use it as a translator. At another point, it was a screw-driver. Later on it used its power to spy into another room. The bug testers nearly revolted when they got the first version of the game. None of it made sense – everyone accused Tim, creator of the Transvernacular Obfuscator. "It's

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a cheap way out” they said. “A bad puzzle...a *really* bad puzzle.” It was a generic do-everything object. Not only was it confusing, because how was the player supposed to know what it did in the first place and then think to use it in that way, but it was like a skeleton key to any puzzle in the game. It was lazy game design. “It was seriously lame,” as Bill had said. And Tim knew it, but he resisted.

It had taken weeks of constant haranguing before he and Geoff finally backed down. Not because they really believed in the Transvernacular Obfusculator – but more because they knew everyone else was right. They were both deeply embarrassed that they had put it in; deeply embarrassed that it had come so far. If they took it out, it would not only prove that they were wrong, but be even more embarrassing – and make them the butt of jokes for the next millennium – which it had. But, they both knew the Transvernacular Obfusculator had to come out eventually. Everyone was right, it was the lamest puzzle ever. It was a cop-out. Now, whenever someone wanted to make a joke about an easy solution, they had the Transvernacular Obfusculator to fall back on. Tim wished he had a Transvernacular Obfusculator to make everyone shut up about it.

It’s funny to think how he and Geoff had both agreed on putting that thing in at the time...and then on taking it out. Now they couldn’t agree on anything. Well, they always disagreed, only now everyone knew they were disagreeing. Even arguing in front of other employees.

“Here, have some donuts,” the other guy passed the box down to a grateful Tim and Geoff. That diverted conversation away. *Maybe they didn’t know*, both Geoff and Tim thought.

“Sorry about the coffee,” said Will. “I forgot to order it soon enough. It should be here soon.”

It was good that people were feeling at ease at these meetings. There had been a disproportionate number of these ‘special’ meetings over the last year. Though the final outcome was usually good – and sometimes great – these big meetings always meant big changes. And because the industry was booming, especially the adventure game sector, Madre was changing faster than anyone could imagine...let alone keep up with. It had only been 4 months since their last ‘special meeting.’ That was when they opened a new division in the northwestern United States. They needed more programmers – and yet their head office was in a less than ideal location for the quick round up of new talent.

Berney, the nearest town, was quaint and small, set amongst the lush, quiet and expansive forest of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Here was a great place to *live*. Even to work. But a locus of hi-tech workers it

was not – and not everyone wanted to live in a small town, even for a paradise job. And so, over the last three years, they had opened a couple of smaller sub-offices across North America. Sometimes this involved bringing smaller game companies under their umbrella, sometimes it meant starting from scratch. It was exciting and fun for Will. But he was getting tired of the faceless expansion and eager to settle back into a niche...to focus on making games again. Though he was a good business guy, he'd gotten into the industry to make great software. Madre made games – and they made the games they wanted to make – not to maximize profits, but to please themselves and their fans. Business expansions were a necessary part of staying alive – to keep doing what they wanted, but Will looked forward to it settling down again. Expansion couldn't last forever, he knew. He hoped.

Will had driven these cattle a long way...over treacherous rocky mountain terrains, waist deep through muddy raging rivers, through thunder and sunshine, he'd driven them on to find greener pastures. And it had gone incredibly well, but the journey was not over yet. Today, they were going to ford another set of rapids. But on the other side, no doubt, lay the greenest virgin pasture ever imagined. A cow heaven. Now they sat silent in the field, quiet in the grass knowing today was another step forward...they awaited Will's move.

"We're moving the head office from Berney," Will said abruptly. Will was a master at guiding smooth transitions from office banter into serious meeting discussion. But he found it harder to do that with these special meetings. "Yeah, that was a great party. By the way, we're hiring 100 more people." "That's a funny joke. Reminds me of the fact that we'll all be taking pay cuts, and introducing stock options." It just couldn't be done smoothly. In fact, there was something deceitful about doing it smoothly. These things demanded abruptness. And so far the cattle hadn't mutinied. They trusted Will, and when he spoke of the reasons, they ultimately agreed that each and every change had to be done. Still, Will was always unsure when he dropped the bombshells...

There was silence around the table. Although this move didn't affect anyone's wallets, it was a big shocker. No one had really expected it. Even Kendra didn't know. She was staring at him now. Usually, he would have told her – but in the midst of cramming this game out she either didn't listen to him when he started saying something about the business or really didn't want the burden of knowing. Also, he'd kept tight lipped. With the big moves, he didn't want things leaking out ahead of time. Still, the game family's reaction was worse than Will had imagined.

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People's jaws were hanging open. He could see the donut bits in the back of their mouths.

"We've all got to move?" Art asked bewildered.

"No. no. No, certainly not. No." Will blurted out, relieved that this might be the only fear behind their obvious shock. "Nobody here has to move. I should rephrase. Just, the official headquarters is moving. We'll be buying office space in San Francisco and hiring some company executives. A few of our lawyers, accountants and managers will have to make the move out there...but they're the ones that always complain about this location, anyway. All the game designing - your jobs - will stay here. Everything will be the same, except executive decisions will now be made from San Francisco. Well, starting in September, anyway."

Laura, co-designer of HomoSapien Quest and wife of Ron looked exasperated. "But why? Will you and Kendra be moving there?"

Will sighed. The rapids were wider and wilder than he had feared, twisting and turning like loose sails in a hurricane beneath the vast expanse of sour clouds looming above. Will, with furrowed brow, sat in an overwhelming silence that seemed to haunt the air, considering the best way to cross. Finally, he spoke. "There are, like all the previous weighty decisions we've made in the last year, several reasons for doing this...and several reasons for me not moving to the new headquarters. The rapid expansion and number of changes that we have gone through in the last two and a half years have been mind boggling. Personally, I would have liked to have remained an incredibly successful, but small, one-building operation in the wooded hills of Redwood forest. I would have preferred for the days of '85 to last forever. However, the game industry has boomed, fully revived since the console crash of '83, and now computer gaming is the darling child of the stock markets - god, I want to gag every time I hear an investor talking about multi-media like they've been in the industry for twenty years just because they bought a couple of stocks on the advice of some trend-following columnist in the Financial Journal." There was laughter around the table. It was a sentiment shared by everyone here, hardened pioneers of the gaming industry, but perhaps made funnier by the fact that Will, the business guy, rarely shared their sense of distaste for the financial aspects of the industry. Yet, there was no denying it, the landscape now seemed suddenly saturated with people in it to make a buck - not to make a game, not because they were interested in the technology. But that's what happens when industries take off, Will supposed. Morons jump on board: Insufferable people who bought a piece of the 'hipness' by owning

a share or learning a few key terms which they didn't understand but bandied about like a designer logo: Multimedia! GUI! Internet!

"Well," Will continued trying to keep the cattle calm as the thick gray plumes of storm clouds churned overhead, thunder rumbling deeply yet forebodingly quietly out from under those thick, curdling swells. "The company, out of necessity to stay alive, has become so big and hired so many new people, it is no longer really possible, nor convenient, nor practical to run it from this little back-water town. And most importantly, Madre is in desperate need of upper management." Will was preparing to drop the other bombshell. "Even if I wanted to run everything, with the size Madre has become, I couldn't do an effective job – not without hiring some more managers. And managers, usually being the type they are, like big cities and money. Money, we can offer them. But cities we cannot. And so we have to go to where the managers are."

Will took a deep breath before continuing to the other scary news. "I won't be moving to San Francisco." There were sighs of relief and a few 'goods', and 'greats' around the table. "But I'm not interested in running a large company. I don't enjoy teleconferencing. I enjoy hands-on work. And so, when we begin to hire new managers for the San Francisco head office, I will be looking for one to replace me."

There were audible gasps around the table. Will could see the donut bits again. "Mind you," time for damage control, "I'm not stepping down. I'm just divesting the parts of management I don't like. I'm not giving up control of the company. I'll still have the ultimate say if I don't like the way things are going. But there are a lot of mundane everyday decisions that need to be made that I don't enjoy doing or even feel qualified to be making. I'm not a manager. I started off as a programmer. I managed out of necessity to produce good software and great games. This office has always been the head of our creative operations and that's the job I love. I will stay on here and remain in basically the same capacity you people are used to – in fact, more like when everything was sane, five years ago. I'll still be your boss. But we will have someone down in San Francisco to handle the more unpleasant bits – worrying about stocks, expansion, distribution. I'll still be the *de facto* boss – but my focus will be on things up here in Redwood."

These assurances seemed to provide some relief around the table. They weren't losing him as a boss but...still, it was a big shock. Art was relieved Will was staying but a little worried about what these changes all meant... Henry was caught. He was relieved the 'big news' hadn't been about SupraNet – or pay cuts. But this was...a big change. Smith and

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the other guy looked, perhaps, the most shocked in the group – which was surprising since they had only been with the company for a year and a half and didn't spend much time at this office anyway. But, in a way, it affected them more. Pretty soon, someone else was going to be in charge of their division. Not cowboy Will, pioneer of the computer gaming industry, but stock-broker Dick – some high-society, WASPy, stock-broking peckerneck. They were comfortable with Madre as boss – but San Francisco corporate headquarters was another thing. The cows had made it across the stream, but were frightened...didn't know what lay on this side of the river.

“Anyway, these aren't overnight changes,” Will continued. “We've been working and planning this for about a month or so and put up bids for office space in San Francisco. In a few days, notice will go out for the hiring of managers. Of course, everyone here and within the existing company will have priority in applying for these positions. They'll be posted on our intranet in the next few days. I don't imagine that we will even be ready to move into the offices until September sometime, and the head office infrastructure wouldn't be worked out completely until some time after that.”

There was silence all around the table as they waited for Will to continue. “That's all,” said Will with a sheepish, slight tossing of his hands into the air to drive the point home. Scanning around the table it looked, despite the bright, beautiful sunny day behind them, as if all these people's families had died. The crossing had been bad. Maybe even a little worse than expected, but Will could tell that he had gotten them through it. They would come around. By the end of the afternoon, they would be resigned to it. By tomorrow they would accept it. And by the end of the week, they would be excited about it.

“I'd just like to say to end this that part of my intention in all this is to accommodate both mine and other people's desire to get back to a simpler and more family-oriented Madre...as well as meet the need for Madre's expansion. In a way, things should be better. Here, at the Berney branch, things should be even more like they were three years ago, before this boom...before the expansions. And I'm excited about that.

“As usual, I have an open door policy and welcome...*encourage*...you to come talk to me if you have questions. This is another big step and I know you have things you want to know and talk about. Does anybody have any questions now?”

Nobody did...but Will knew they'd come. The questions were now hitting them so quickly and suddenly, fuming, swirling, mixing and

brewing inside, stunning them with a tumultuous, boiling rush of neuron activity that none could come out. But as they thought more about it, they would come, Will knew. They'd come individually, each with their individual insecurities and insights. Will enjoyed this one-on-one, hands-on management. It was like friendship, or peer counselling. He even looked forward to it now that the old pastures were slowly receding into the distance and he could weave tales of the new land.

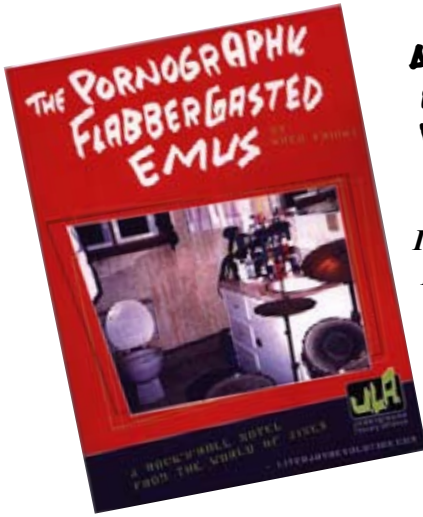
“Can you pass the donuts?” Will asked but before someone could pass them there was a knock at the office door. Will stood up and opened it to find a young woman in a green apron holding a big box and a plastic bag.

“They told me to bring the food here?” she said.

“Ah yes. The coffee and pastry.”

As the young woman from Naughté Latte, Berney's infamous corner coffee shop, placed the food on the table, faces brightened. The pastry was passed around. Someone made a joke and they broke into casual conversation about their weekend. Everyone was relaxed again – for the moment. Questions would come later.

Indie books the author isn't getting paid to recommend



**A ROCK AND ROLL
NOVEL FROM THE
WORLD OF ZINES!
BY WRED FRIGHT**

*It's not rock n' roll man. It's a
BOOK about rock n' roll!*

When a house fire puts Theodorable in the market for a new room days before college begins, he has little choice but to accept the offer for a spot under the couch at the home of a fledgling college rock band. He can't move into his room yet, because the person they've evicted (who his roommates are convinced is a witch) hasn't left, and only sneaks out a night to eat the other housemate's mac and cheese. Banding together to oust this pest, the room mates decide to come band mates and forevermore the Pornographic Flabberghasted Emus shall rock this sleepy college town. Or, at least for a few zany months.

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