

In a Nutshell



Joe Ashby Porter

Ferndale was happily settling into its late October routine. Across every street Jack-o'-lanterns grinned back and forth, cobwebs festooned eaves, black cats arched their backs in windows and storefront vitrines, hand over fist the Piggly Wiggly merchandised toothsome candy, and folk of all ages chewed the rag about costumes, for simple fun and also in order to forestall redundancy, although some, including Jimmy K. Jones and Granny Jones, kept mum.

Meanwhile in the middle of the block on both sides of Zero St. preparations were underway for Thatch Newton-Moon's first birthday on October 25, his proud parents, Graciela Moon and Ikey Newton, both orphans, having themselves celebrated their respective fifth birthdays in September. Sparkling Graciela lived in her café au lait stucco ranch-style on the south side of the street at number six and directly across at number seven lived stalwart Ikey in his oxblood cypress-wood saltbox. Both enjoyed gardening, and two years in a row they had tied for first place in Ferndale's spring garden-club landscaping competition. Graciela's nipples not yet any more functional than Ikey's, the pair had nourished Thatch with an eye-dropper. At birth he was only eight centimeters long, although quite hirsute (hence his name). Now he was twelve cm. and had four

teeth. Ikey and Graciela had joint custody of Thatch and shuttled him back or forth across Zero St. in an egg basket each morning at seven. Jaime Nutmeg, Ikey's next-door neighbor to the west, who lived with his brother-in-law Pedro Nimbus in the Spanish Colonial shotgun house at number 5, enjoyed asking Ikey how the little caterpillar was doing. Jaime was thirty years old, and Pedro was thirty-six. Both were bilingual, like Ikey and Graciela, and indeed all the other residents of Ferndale little Miami except Thatch, who only whined or hiccupped so far, or sometimes giggled.

At number seven One St., in a dove-gray enameled steel two-bedroom Westchester Deluxe Lustron house, one of the approximately two thousand remaining in the US, lived impulsive Mildred Kincaid, aged twenty-seven, who worked part-time downtown at the hardware store, and who wore a pedometer for her vigorous strolling about the village mornings, evenings, and weekends.

North north-west across One St. in the shingled A-frame at number 3 lived astronomer Abigail Lincoln and her daughter-in-law Dolly Lovejoy, the hostess of the Reading Room recently installed just across Snapdragon St. in Hush Park's old skating rink, this "Room" in fact a checkerboard of sound-proofed cubicles where patrons could text or read eBooks or turn actual paper pages. Abigail herself worked nights at the new observatory, scanning with her keen eyes a computer array that coordinated read-outs from Ferndale's state and neighboring states to probe the universe for more exoplanets, and for evidence of extra-terrestrial intelligence, Tweets slipping through cosmic wormholes. When the first such communication channel opens, at a stroke earthlings will think differently. Primates, cetaceans, horses, and dogs may throw off mental shackles and sniff freedom. For instance, religions will lose their purchase. Maybe we will learn of a green planet where death can be postponed indefinitely. At the same time, Abigail and her associates take into account the disheartening truth that they themselves may not live to see that dawning.

On weekends when the observatory shut down, Abigail Lincoln somewhat altered her schedule of sleeping and waking. On Saturday, instead of hitting the sack by ten in the morning, she would drink extra coffee at her 9 am dinner and then stay up through most of the day, during which she sometimes visited Dolly Lovejoy at the Reading Room (Dolly's days off being Sunday and Monday), or shopped for groceries at the Piggly Wiggly. Abigail maintained a similar quasi-

diurnal routine Sundays, when she and Dolly in fair weather might picnic in the park, or in winter enjoy a snowball skirmish or ice-skate on Hush Park pond whose ducks had migrated south. Then at the end of her weekend, Abigail had learned how to extend her Sunday night's sleep through most of the next day, so that she was refreshed to begin work at Monday nightfall.

On the third Saturday of last October, Graciela Moon and Ikey Newton took baby Thatch in his egg basket for a stroll though Hush Park. Halfway through, they set the basket on a picnic table in the shade of a hemlock tree. In order to play a game of shadow tag they ran up a hill to a clearing, but they found that, with the sun directly overhead, neither shadow stretched out enough for easy access by the other player, and so they sighed and skipped back down to the table. Graciela retrieved Thatch's eyedropper and cup of formula. Ikey turned back the fly-netting from the basket, and then exclaimed "What the . . . !"

Thatch was nowhere to be seen. "Could he have crawled out?" wondered Graciela.

Ikey said, "His legs are too short."

Graciela frowned and said, "If a raptor had snatched him, the netting would have been in disarray."

Ikey said, "Indeed, Graciela. But don't worry, anything can be explained in due time. Let me alert the police first off."

Heartsick, the children split a granola bar. When Ikey opened his phone to thumb the message, he discovered a text from his neighbor Jaime Nutmeg. Jaime said Ikey and Graciela should hurry back to Zero St., where they would find the little caterpillar safe with him. They did, and Jaime explained that Mildred Kincaid, power-walking through the park, had seen the unattended egg basket, which she recognized, having often admired little Thatch in it. Impulsively Mildred had scooped Thatch out, dropped him into her dress pocket, and hurried out of the park, across Snapdragon St. and along One St. to her Lustron house where she had deposited Thatch in an empty goldfish bowl in the parlor, crying "Ouch!" when he bit her hand. Then Mildred, very satisfied with herself, had taken a load of laundry from her combination clothes- and dish-washer out the back door to pin to a clothesline. When she returned to the parlor to gloat, the goldfish bowl was empty.

As it happened, Mildred's neighbors Abigail Lincoln and Dolly

Lovejoy had been strolling in the park with a basket of their own, a picnic basket. Out of the corners of their eyes they had seen Mildred abduct Thatch. They had telephoned Graciela's ranch house and then Ikey's saltbox, and then Jaime's Spanish Colonial where finally someone, Jaime, picked up. He had dashed around the block and peeked in the Lustron window just in time to see Thatch bite Mildred's finger. While she was hanging out her wash he rescued the baby and texted the anxious young parents.

The five conspirators, Ikey, Graciela, Jaime, Abigail and Dolly, decided that, rather than confront Mildred about the matter, they would keep mum and pretend that nothing had happened. The next morning, when she met Ikey on her walk, and there Thatch was in his basket, she almost doubted her own sanity, but in retrospect she felt relieved.

Ferndale Village was founded long ago, before the internet had even been dreamed of. The original settlers came from here and there in the US. Communicating by snail mail and land lines, they developed a mathematical formula that cranked out latitude and longitude for the site. They bought the land, part of a soybean field, parceled out tracts, hired city planners and architects, electricians and plumbers, and set up the town to be powered by solar panels and windmills. While the town charter outlawed chickens, cigarettes, and churches, and mandated quiet, and forbade repetition in domestic architecture, otherwise it resembled similar documents from other towns and cities. The founders designed a town emblem that featured a box turtle, and wrote the town motto, "Ferndale: it is what it is."

Idealistic and aloof, the first settlers had their work cut out for them, creating their village from scratch, establishing links with the surrounding geopolitical sphere, mastering the local accent and dialect so that they could blend in. Granny Jones's parents trucked their brick bungalow in from western Massachusetts. Others built anew on the virgin ground. Children, teens, and adults cooperated like gangbusters. Soon Ferndale had solid footing and prosperity.

Ferndaleans, as the residents called themselves, established siblinghoods with Plainview Nebraska, whose train depot has become a municipal history museum, and with the birthplace of Sir Ernest Rutherford, the father of nuclear physics, Brightwater New Zealand on the north coast of the South Island. Early on, the Ferndaleans

propitiously discovered an all but limitless supply of uncontaminated ground water that freed them from having to tie in to the tri-state mains. Their clean electricity powered the pumping stations and took care of all other power needs for free, with a surplus they sold to the regional grid and socked away the profit for a rainy day. Thread school quickly outshone other state elementaries in online algebra prospecting. Red Rover secondary excelled similarly in logic and in most other academic arenas, and the school regularly fielded champion teams in pocket billiards and lawn croquet.

Not surprisingly the reform school went begging, and ditto for the city jail, for misdemeanors were unheard-of, not to mention felonies. Ethnically the population lay halfway between the nation and the planet, although of course smaller ethnicities fell short of representation in the village. Demographically, Ferndaleans graphed out (again) between the older US and Western Europe age median and the younger remainder of the planet.

Some historians call first-generation Ferndale utopian, but the truth is not really so simple. True, the founders harbored several kinds of idealism, and yet even here scare quotes might be in order, for not one of them was a died-in-the-wool Platonist. Indeed, if an umbrella rubric seems needed, they might better be called Buddhists or Aristotelians. As with the virus that ravaged Facebook, so in early Ferndale: no one really credited gibberish, and when Osama bin Laden was finally discovered and cornered, and killed, to many he seemed an inane Plato. But there is a grain of truth, or a vector of it, in the attributed idealism, for from the beginning Ferndale stood for its own patience, its own intractable clear-sightedness.

The town lost four residents in its first decade. Three moved away, regretfully, to tend to family and professional matters, and one, L. W. Jenkins, died. While he had no friends, an infarction caused his death, not loneliness as some thought, for in fact he had no desire for friendship. In his cracker house at the northern Armadillo corner of Two St. he left a handwritten request to be buried in Ferndale because he had no close relatives anywhere. Having neglected to include a cemetery in the layout, the townsfolk walled off a half-block strip for that purpose along the western edge of Hush Park, and laid Mr. Jenkins to rest there. He bequeathed his home to the Ferndaleans, who sold it to a Detroit MD, Flint Juggle, Jr., who lived there with his wife Amelia and his daughters Mary Hart and Sissy. In time he

and his wife took their places in the Hush Park Cemetery along with other townsfolk who chose interment over cremation. His daughters, old ladies now, still occupy the cracker house. Sometimes one of them steps out to chat with Granny Jones about the glass house going up between her house and theirs, its walls made of empty bottles laid side by side. Whenever Granny empties a wine or mineral water bottle she kicks it along the sidewalk to contribute to the construction at number nine.

When Ferndale was five years old, the federal government opened an important factory to make spacecraft on vacant land far to the west. It was called Wings of Liberty, and mined iron ore and rare earths onsite. All hunky dory except for the power they needed, more all the time, and so they built a modular nuclear reactor that within a year had replicated itself, and again two years later, for a total of four. Then disaster struck much as at Fukushima and Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. A watchdog agency distributed iodine pills downwind and hazmat teams worked twenty-four seven ten months. Despite precautions, one of those workers died of overexposure and three others received debilitating dosages of radiation. Wings of Liberty closed, and the entire area was covered with lead and concrete and quarantined for three centuries.

In the fan-shaped plume downwind, the disaster swept air clean of insects and birds, as if a neutron bomb had exploded, and the clarity endured. Ferndale lay due east of that region, and prevailing winds carried a burden of moderated fallout. For a few years everyone had to wear gas masks outside. The climate tipped into unpredictability. A tornado touched down and whisked away the gingerbread house with its occupants on Two Street at number Nine, between Dr. Jenkins and Granny Jones. Autistic Jimmy K. Jones in his gas mask waved good-bye and resumed his solitary game of mumbly peg.

Not surprisingly the buoyant early optimism of the town gave way to persistent worry and even a kind of pessimism. In the Prairie Style house at Eight Zero Street Graciela Moon's neighbors the Mead family threw up their hands and tried to throw in the towel and move to Nevada, only to learn that inhabitants not only of the plume proper but also of its nimbus or halo, these including Ferndale residents, had been quarantined for further observation. As can unfold in disaster scenarios, some victims withdrew into egocentrism. Worse, some few even turned cruel and mistreated town scapegoats in misplaced

retaliation, and hair loss made everyone look uncannily like skinheads, and dogs like Chinese hairless. This stretch of time came to be known as the Ferndale Nadir. It lasted thirteen long months before the tide turned. Ridiculous new fuzz atop crania first leavened the gloom. After seven months the town celebrated with a bonfire of wigs and toupees downtown at the intersection of Four and Armadillo. Nobody minded the smell.

Recovery proceeded in fits and starts. Federal disaster relief and insurance companies tergiversated much as did BP after the Gulf oil spill, but Ferndale knuckled down and bit the bullet. Some pundits called the town's pluck inspiring. As in the old song, it picked itself up, dusted itself off, and started all over again. When the quarantine was lifted, nobody moved away. Former President Jimmy Carter applied for honorary citizenship, which the town granted unanimously. They also bestowed posthumous honorary citizenship on Albert Einstein.

Nowadays townsfolks' attitude toward their future is guardedly unpessimistic. The metric system governs all measurements, and idle chatter is somewhat frowned on, along with rumor-mongering. Jimmy K. Jones's autism handicaps him less and less because no one pats his back or head, or tries to plant a wet smack on his cheek, and no one tries to force his mind to think in banal ways. Granny Jones has developed intermittent Alzheimer's on top of her erratic heart and yet she breezes through the days as if there were no tomorrow.

On Halloween morning in the brick bungalow at number seven Two Street she perked coffee and cooked porridge for Jimmy K. When he stumbled downstairs and into the kitchen, she winked and said, "Lights out tonight, young man." He nodded. According to a simple Ferndale tradition, if you forgot to buy treats or merely didn't want to participate, you just kept your house dark, so that trick-or-treaters knew not to waste their time leaning on your doorbell. In Ferndale, by the way, the choice the nocturnal visitors offered had no real substance. In all the municipal history none, turned away however empty-handed, had ever overturned a garbage can or drawn rude faces on windows with soap bars.

"Ahem, Sally," remarked George Inchworm in the Cape Cod at number six Two street, at four-thirty Halloween afternoon. "Where have you hidden the treats for tonight?"

"My stars, George," replied Sally Icebox. "Nowhere, because I thought you had bought them. We'd better high-tail it to the Piggly

Wiggly while it's still open.”

In no time at all the pair filled a grocery bag with individually wrapped hard candy sour balls and sticks, half of which they emptied into a plain colorless glass salad bowl. “If you ask me, it looks like a bowl of pirate’s treasure,” remarked George.

“Or a king’s ransom,” replied Sally. She set the back-up supply on a pantry shelf.

Just then the doorbell rang. On the Cape Cod’s lighted porch stood a brown-skinned blonde boy in black tap shoes with white knee socks, green lederhosen, a white dress shirt with an H monogram on the pocket, and a green felt Tyrolean hat with a white leghorn tail feather stuck in its band. Beside him stood a lighter-skinned blond girl in similar shoes and socks and hat, and a black dirndl with a white blouse and apron. Both wore black domino masks and carried egg baskets. “Trick or treat,” they trilled in unison.

“What have we here?” Sally inquired, scratching her head.

“Let me hazard a guess,” offered George. “Has your stepmother mistreated you?”

The children nodded.

Sally continued, “Has your father abandoned you in the woods, maybe the Black Forest of Germany?”

Again the children nodded.

“Remind us of the rules,” begged George. “How many guesses do we get?”

The little girl held up an index finger.

Sally responded, “And if we guess wrong, what’s the penalty?”

George continued, “And if we guess right, what’s the reward? Do you have to fork over some of your treats?”

The little girl’s finger waved back and forth. The little boy barked, “Nein, nein! You misunderstand, folks. This is no kind of guessing game at all. In fact costumes here are optional, right?”

“But wait,” Sally insisted.

The children waited cooperatively.

George continued, “It sure looks like a guessing game, and in fact a two-stage one. If you have dressed yourselves up as particular people known to us as well as to you, then your disguises practically cry out for recognition and acknowledgment. Assuming we pass that first hurdle, then a second question presents itself: but who are you really? Because it’s not as if you have explained, ‘Here we are, your own

neighbors X and Y, pretending to be people we aren't.' Are you with me?"

"Plus," continued Sally, "whose furry little head is that peeking over the edge of your basket, Miss Gretel? It looks like Thatch Newton-Moon to me. Couldn't you find a blonde wig for him too?"

Everybody had a good laugh, including Thatch, even though humor was lost on the little fellow. George held out the bowl. Ikey and Graciela each selected a bright treat, and they stepped off the lighted porch into darkness, to be followed by half a dozen other apparitions pounding the Ferndale pavements under a yellow harvest moon, all more or less elaborately disguised, as a Sherpa, an in-fielder, Mercury, and so forth, except the penultimate, whose token costume consisted of the large magnifying glass he carried. "Gracious to Betsy," exclaimed Sally to the boy, "either your disguise is perfectly impenetrable, or you're an out-of-towner! The latter, I imagine."

"You got it," the boy concurred. "Tonight I'm pretending to be Sherlock Holmes, but my real name is Brent 'Stinker' Utley. Trick or treat."

"Sally," confided George, "this young gentleman looks to be quite a pill. I think he means business."

"There you go," growled Brent. "Candy corn is my favorite, but I'll take whatever you dish out."

"That's a relief," sighed Sally, holding forward the bowl of treats. "But where did that black eye come from? Have you been in a scuffle with Professor Moriarty?"

"Nah," muttered Brent, scooping up a handful of treats and stuffing them into his hip pocket, "I ran into a doorknob by mistake. Nice village you have here, by the way, including your jail, where I spent last night."

"Whatever for?" inquired Sally.

"Playing a trick," admitted Brent. "I lost track of time and thought it was the thirty-first when it was only the thirtieth."

"Wonder what that trick could have been," chuckled George.

"Can you guess?" asked Brent.

"Setting a shed on fire?" inquired Sally. "We don't have any outhouses."

"Nope," boasted Brent, "and you don't get another guess. Later, turkeys."

Scarcely had Brent sauntered away into the dark when the Cape

Cod's last Halloween visitors materialized, hand in hand, the same height as the earlier children, i.e., 9.1 meters, and both in full-face masks. On the left seemed to be a witch princess, in a black floor-length dress with a long train behind and a witch hat, with a wig of stringy witch hair. Her companion seemed a chunky green goblin.

Sally scratched her head and whispered, "Who in the world can this be, George? Can we possibly have another case of out-of-Ferndale children?"

"Statistically impossible, Sally," returned George sotto voce. "And yet for the life of me I can't see who this well-costumed pair might be, unless Graciela and Ikey could have done a quick change for a second sweep. Let me try the direct approach." Turning to the patient little pair, George blurted out, "Whoever can you two be?"

The witch princess shrugged. Then she shook her head. Taking his cue, the goblin followed suit.

"At least tell us this," wheedled Sally, "are you Ferndale residents?"

The mystery pair nodded.

Sally and George stared at each other. Sally sputtered, "You wouldn't lie to us, would you?"

The masked faces shook back and forth.

George's jaw dropped and he scratched his head. "Have you somehow been hiding," he expostulated, "holed up somewhere like a cave or an attic, living among us all unbeknownst?"

Again the masks wobbled back and forth, and now each enigma extended its plastic Jack-o'-lantern receptacle.

"Okay," capitulated Sally, holding forward the bowl of treats, "we're stymied big time. Go ahead and fleece us."

The witch princess coaxed a sparkling treasure over the lip of glass into her Jack-o'-lantern, and the goblin ditto. Then the two pretenders stepped backwards and apart from each other. Then simultaneously both executed a forty-five degree turn to the right. Speechless, Sally and George watched the goblin point to his companion's black train, which proved suspiciously lumpy, as if it covered long spurs, or half-skis, that now moved of their own accord.

"What in the world!" exclaimed George and Sally.

The witch princess twisted her torso counter-clockwise, reached back, and hitched up her train, to expose lying on the floorboards dusty black oxfords, old white naked ankles and calves, and the backs of gray plumber's kneepads.

“Wait,” cried Sally and George, as they struggled to understand what they saw, “wait,” but instead of waiting, together the puzzling emissaries slid their masks up, and revealed the gleeful visages of none other than witch princess Granny Jones and goblin Jimmy K., neighbors from the brick bungalow directly across Two Street at number seven. They swiveled back to face George and Sally. Granny, steadying herself with a hand on Jimmy K.’s shoulder, stood and shook the wrinkles out of her dress. “Ha ha,” she exulted, “this is one for the books.” Tails between their legs, George and Sally retreated into their Cape Cod.

Granny and Jimmy K. returned to their bungalow across the street. She slipped off her kneepads and they combined their booty in a salad bowl of their own in the parlor, and sat there to sample it, still in costume. The occasion prompted Granny to recount a memory.

“Once upon a time I was younger than you are, Jimmy K. Can you believe it? My bedroom was the one behind yours, that we use for storage. Yours belonged to my older sister Ellie. Each October we made our own costumes, and we trick-or-treated together, until she went away to an annex of dairy Cow University in a neighboring state.” And married there, and had three children, and became a pediatric surgeon, and travelled to Burma and China, and was laid to rest in Mongolia, without ever setting foot in Ferndale again. “Our last Halloween together we dressed as Annie Oakley and Dale Evans. Hush Park Cemetery was new, and we thought it would be a hoot to creep in and hide behind old Mr. Jenkins’s grave, the only one at the time, and then scare the wits out of anyone who came sneaking around there. There was a crescent moon that year, and a screech owl. We waited the longest time, and were about to fall asleep, and then clump clump, like Bigfoot clumping through the underbrush. We jumped up and said, ‘Reach for the sky, pardner.’ When all he did was freeze we drew our cap pistols and fired. Land o’ mercy if he didn’t return fire, and with live ammo. It was Sheriff Mead doing night rounds. Lucky he only grazed Ellie’s lariat. Those days are gone forever though. Well, nighty-night, Jimmy K.”

“Nighty-night, Granny.”

Alone in the parlor, Granny felt a crushing sadness overtake her. She shrugged and took off her witch hat and sat on her favorite stool, twiddling her thumbs. She heard Jimmy K. upstairs climb into his bed and turn out his light. Granny’s thumbs stopped moving and she sat

like a statue. She couldn't think where her sadness came from, or how to resist it. In a while, though, when it seemed to have forgotten her and moved on, she stood and danced herself a noiseless jig.

Under every third or fifth granite bench in Hush Park lies a metal disk twenty-five cm in diameter and four cm thick, its walls broken with six slits, as if a fleet of flying saucers for a race of miniature extra-terrestrials have taken refuge there. In fact these are speakers. If you sit above one, you hear, just at the threshold of the audible—and similarly should you crawl under and bring an ear close as possible—the voice of a woman talking to a confidant or to herself. What with the low volume and her quiet matter-of-fact delivery, you make out only occasional words and phrases, so that you can't (you quickly realize) determine the occasion or even the subject of her monologue. It must be a loop, yet of so long a period that you may never hear a repetition.

In the placid muttering you hear “cascading blips,” and then “Think” —or is it “Trick”? —“our way back, yes or no, with the wherewithal to telegraph,” and “Impossible”—“Imponderable”?—“in the dark fluid, except for another resonance,” and “I had no idea, me,” and “worldly wise singularity,” and “an unfolding lunch”—“punch”?—“line,” and “action at a dishwasher,” or “. . . at a distance.” On Halloween some topical content has been folded in: a whispered “Boo,” and “gooseflesh,” and “chicken feed,” and “pulled the rug right out from under him,” and “a trapdoor spider.” Even park-goers who normally might prefer silence may find themselves oddly soothed.

On November 1, a Saturday, the Halloween programming gave way to a single phrase surfacing repeatedly from under the Hush Park benches, “Welcome to Ferndale, Stephen Hawking.” Abigail Lincoln caught a nap early that morning on a cot in the observatory before rousing herself to ready the auditorium, with the help of her daughter-in-law Dolly Lovejoy, for the afternoon festivities, a talk by the famous cosmologist and his acceptance of an honorary Ferndale citizenship. At the podium before a full house, Professor Hawking, recently cured of his motor neuron disease, and with a new voice simulator, spoke about M-theory and entanglement, and then graciously thanked the village for the honor it had bestowed on him, as Abigail herself presented him with the certificate.

After the ceremony, at a reception in the auditorium lobby Professor Hawking chatted with townsfolk and autographed copies of some of his books, for children as well as for adults, over cookies

and champagne or fruit juice. One fan, Sonny Mick, rolled himself forward in his wheelchair with *The Universe in a Nutshell* on his lap to be signed. “I have admired you almost all my life,” he said. “When I read online about your physical recovery I was overjoyed.” And of course also envious, and wondering whether I might dare hope for implications for my own case. Probably not, but there you are. “Thanks for weighing in on weighty subjects in the public discourse with your tonic voice.”

Back at home in the conch house at number two Zero Street, however, after Sonny slipped the book into his bookcase, his mood changed to exasperation. While he had read Professor Hawking’s book four years ago and discussed it with pleasure in the Ferndale Library Reading Club, in the ensuing months not only had the book slipped his mind but so too had the universe itself. Worse, it seemed certain that, despite his best efforts, in a few weeks or even days he would have forgotten it again. Even if he tied a string around a finger to remind himself, after a while he would think, who needs the string, and then in a few more days, no more universe, only Ferndale. Incommensurability in time and space between the universe and Ferndale aggravated the situation to be sure, and furthermore the difference in scale gave rise to other imbalances. In Sonny’s view reality seemed not remotely fractal; rather, focusing in (as with GPS or Google Earth) on this village and its local history gave rise to real emergent properties that remained only faintly potential at the scale of the universe, and probably even at the planetary or indeed continental scale. In contrast to statisticians’ beloved “truth of large numbers” stood the truth of a small number, and the two kinds of truth seemed wretchedly incommensurate.

Through the first half of November maple, aspen, beech, oak, and other Ferndale tree leaves lost chlorophyll and changed from summer green to autumn red, yellow, orange, and bronze overhead. On the seventeenth they clattered to the ground, leaving gnarled branches sticking up toward the cold sky, or sticking out horizontally for squirrels to scamper along and jump from. Acorns and hazelnuts dropped onto every rooftop and pavement and car, and clogged gutters and downspouts. Thrifty squirrels packed them into their cheeks and buried them in Hush Park Cemetery, and over the wall in the main park, and in human residents’ lawns, and then forgot most of their caches, but luckily remembered enough to see them through the

coming winter. No Feed Pond's twenty-eight ducks and two white swans flew away south.

Ferndaleans raked the leaves and piled them on street corners, and then the city garbage trucks hauled them to the park and made a bonfire for roasting wieners and marshmallows. A kazoo band played sprightly tunes, and everybody sipped hot spiced cider and played guessing games, and many laughed, without rowdiness.

In subsequent years different sorts of luck befell various villagers, and lives took expected and unexpected turns. Thatch Newton-Moon reached 1.5 meters in length and then didn't grow more. While he never learned to read or write, or even talk, he understood what was said to him, and responded to yes-no questions with a nod or shake of his fuzzy little head. He was an only child, and he seemed not to age even as his parents Graciela and Ikey shot up into adolescence. When they reached eighteen they married each other. Ikey's next-door pal Jaime Nutmeg helped Ikey and Graciela dig a tunnel under Zero Street connecting their two cellars so that they could visit back and forth between their houses without stepping outside in blizzards.

Sonny Mick was dumbfounded to learn that he had an alter ego in Apalachicola Florida. The Ferndalean debated with himself about contacting the Floridian and came close to taking the plunge before deciding that it would better to let sleeping dogs lie. Ferndale Sonny learned to pilot his wheelchair by mere thought.

Sheriff Mead and his family from further east on Zero took a cruise through the Panama Canal, and brought back a caged silver sloth. While they were away Jaime served as deputy sheriff, and for a joke jailed Ikey one afternoon for a quarter hour.

When Abigail Lincoln noticed her sight failing she handed the observatory keys over to her daughter-in-law Dolly Lovejoy, who then persuaded Mildred Kincaid, who had taken early retirement, to sign on as hostess of the Reading Room, where Abigail became a devoted patron, having learned Braille to follow SETI in the cubicle for the blind, where she also amused herself with building imaginary crossword puzzles. Her new diurnal schedule allowed her and Dolly to take meals together, and to discuss world and local events of the day.

Down on Two Street Granny Jones invited Sally Icebox and George Inchworm to adopt Jimmy K. as their legal son. Then, to dot every I and cross every T, Granny adopted Sally and George as

her legal children. Jimmy K. continued to reside in Granny's brick bungalow with her while she was still living and then by himself as he grew up in the custody of his parents in the Cape Cod across the street. Construction on the glass house next to Jimmy K. slowed to a halt. In the cracker house at number eleven the Juggle sisters ran a family history blog.

Black Oliver Lothrop, Ferndale's fifty-three year old stay-at-home mayor, lived in the gambrel house at nine One Street. A stickler for decorum, whenever Oliver channeled the community's wishes into law, he printed a gilt-edged copy for each household. One day when he was doing Reading Room research online from the privacy of his upstairs home office, he struck up a chat with the Room's hostess Mildred Kincaid, his neighbor from the Lustron house across the street. One thing led to another and seventeen months later these two signed a marriage license on the dotted line, even though neither had any intention of moving in with the other.

With time the population of the village began to decline from attrition. Despite the relatively high life expectancy and retention, and despite the best efforts of a PR firm, Ferndale crossed a Rubicon when it woke to the fact that in five years no immigrants had moved in and at least eleven businesses had failed. Buildings and dwellings fell into disrepair, and now finally residents began to pull up stakes and seek their fortunes elsewhere, first the newer ones and finally the native-born. The last to leave, Graciela Moon, Ikey Newton, and their Thatch, moved to Boston where they could find better medical treatment for Thatch's special needs. All the homes, trees, and buildings were bulldozed and plowed under, and the land was seeded with ecological prairie grasses.