Mia Molvray © 2002, 2010 *Analog*, Feb. 2002

## **Powered by Water**

A tall, thin, youngish man with an absent expression emerged out of the maze of machines filling the lab. He was trying to remember what it was that he'd told himself not to forget, but his mind served up nothing useful ... or even useless. It just lay there. He went in search of caffeine like a rising diver looking for air.

The pot was there, the water was there, the white powder pretending to be cream was there, but the can had neither beans nor grounds nor dust in it. Someone had shaken out the dregs without buying new coffee, in crass contravention of the law of the lab and human rights.

Norman Rathbone stared at the machine, cursing furiously but without a sound. In any sane legal system, murdering the irresponsible party would be justifiable homicide, but, knowing his boss, the man would object because terminating the staff was his sole prerogative.

Then Norman brightened. All was not lost. He headed to the Coke machine. But lesser minds than his had beaten him to it, as happened so often in his brilliant but impractical life. There were cans aplenty of sweet and fizzy stuff flavored with lemon or cola or cream, but not a single can of anything promising consciousness. Norman was faced with the prospect of managing Dr. Kriegel's lab — of tracing gel runs, troubleshooting data analysis, discussing undergraduate term papers, and making polite phone calls about missing crosslinkers — while powered by nothing but water.

His feeling that things couldn't get worse didn't last long. When he arrived back at his desk, his phone was ringing.

It was Gerry Kriegel himself, apparently in urgent need of a conference with his right-hand man.

"Where were you?" he demanded, but gave Norman no time to explain. "Need to see you." He hung up.

Norm hated working for the man, but what else could he do? It was career death to work in a small lab, and all the big labs were like Kriegel's. They were

run by grand old men who hadn't done anything but raise funds for years. With the funds, they hired people like him who were supposed to deliver breakthroughs by concentrating on their projects. And then, just to make sure the underlings weren't lazing around, they'd get more stuff to do in their copious free time, which made it impossible to concentrate. Such as managing the lab. Norman's talents did not run to managing labs, and he knew it. Managing was the opposite of concentrating. It was interruptions interrupted by interruptions, like this phone call, for instance.

He ran his hands through his floppy, straight black hair in a frazzled way and looked even more uncombed. He threaded his way out of the machines and stuck his head into the boss's office.

"Hi Gerry," he said. "What can I do for you?"

The boss waved him in with barely a glance, as if he were a steerable fly. Unlike a fly though, which carries on being a fly under all circumstances, Norman had to work at keeping a frown off his face. There was a pile of papers in front of the boss, a pile Norm just knew would be handed to him. He worked ten-hour days as it was. He needed less work, not more.

He surveyed the coffee cups, latte cups and espresso cups littering the office and knew he'd found the culprit of the empty coffee can. Kriegel's boiled-looking eyes and grey skin suggested that pickling himself in coffee wasn't helping, but that was a small consolation.

The boss lifted a few forms from the top of the pile of papers.

"Caffeine," he said shortly, waving the sheets.

Norman stiffened. Invisibly, he hoped. Had he been found out?

"Caffeine's not working. Find out why." Kriegel shoved the sheets at Norman. "Could be a Nobel in it for this lab," he added, using an almost complete sentence in honor of the idea.

Gingerly, Norman took the papers. He pretended to study them to give himself time to figure out a response. It would be funny if Kriegel's lab were covered in glory for finding the cure ... until the media found out that was where the problem originally came from. Norm could see Kriegel sputtering, saying he was shocked — shocked! — that anyone could think he would do such a thing for profit. But back to the problem at hand, and what to do about being told study caffeine.

"Not working?" Norm finally said. "That would explain a few things. What led you to that hypothesis?"

"Tested my pulse, skin conductivity. No changes, even after a double espresso. Sent the damn stuff off to a chemistry lab and it's full of caffeine. So something's happened." Even in his exhausted state, Kriegel looked rather smug at being the brains of the outfit who had figured this out.

Norm skimmed some of the papers he was holding, and finally realized what they meant. He was supposed to write yet another detailed, ten-page grant application, plan and execute completely new work, and supervise yet another technician. But nowhere did it say in which universe he was supposed to find

the time for all this. Before he could come up with a polite way to ask, Kriegel carried on.

"Oh yeah. Another thing. Glass breakage," he said shortly, picking up an invoice. "Costs money. Rudi, right? Dock her pay."

Gertrude Frobisher was an older woman with grown children who was starting over in life. Norman couldn't begin to fathom why she would want to start over as a lab tech, but there it was.

"Actually," said Norman, "she's responsible for one three-dollar beaker in the last six months, which, considering she does most of the dishes, is well below average. The other stuff," he pointed at the sheet, "the distilling column, the sequencer capillary array, and the cloning shaker vessel, were all Dwayne, I'm afraid." That was thousands of dollars worth of precision-made glass equipment, which Gerry Kriegel's own undergraduate student had calmly broken.

"Ah," said the boss. Having an undergraduate in the lab was good for Kriegel since it showed he cared about education. He pondered the relative merits of brownie points versus money.

Dwayne Plotkin's ID said he was twenty-one, but Norman had known less carefree toddlers. Judging by course work, Dwayne was brilliant. He wore saggies and layered, ragged T-shirts and was the goofiest young man in three counties as far as Norman was concerned. Norman was the one who actually supervised him, since the boss had real work to do.

After some thought Kriegel added,

"Then it's an educational expense. Tell June to put it on the right account. That doesn't come out of my grants."

That solved the matter for Gerry Kriegel. Norman was about to ask whether there was anything else when the PA system crackled. June's pleasant phone voice came over the air,

"Paging Dr. Rathbone. You have a delivery at the office. Dr. Rathbone, to the office, please."

It is, thought Norman, continually something.

He picked up the package, unpacked the power supply, fitted it into the dead gel rig, and connected it. One of the new postdocs needed help with a lab procedure. Someone else couldn't figure out why his DNA amplification had not worked. Troubleshooting the amplification uncovered a problem with primers that needed to be reordered. And so it went, hour after hour, interrupted by a dreadful seminar where time stopped completely together with all his remaining higher brain functions. Lunch never happened. June, the secretary, left at the stroke of five, as always.

It was shortly thereafter that he heard Rudi in the lab across the hall heatedly exclaiming, "DwAYne!" That reminded him he still needed to buttonhole the kid to discuss his term paper.

He hurried over to the room, listening to Rudi's voice climbing higher and higher, right into operatic registers.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you have any idea of the effort,

the expense, the time--"

Norman was nearly running by the time he skidded to a stop inside the lab. Now what? he was thinking. Had Dwayne spilled acid onto the fifty thousand dollar centrifuge? Spilled a twenty thousand dollar vial of designer enzymes? But, no. It was much worse than that.

Hundreds of tiny plastic vials of samples lay quietly thawing on the lab table nearest the ultracold freezer. Dwayne still had his head in there, rooting around, shuffling other vials into a mess, looking for something.

"Well, I've gotta find it," Dwayne pointed out, muffled a bit in the depths of the freezer. "Gerry wants it, so I've gotta find it, right? It's in here somewhere. Don't worry. I'll find it in a minute."

Meanwhile the freezer's temperature was rising from -80°C to -75°, -70°, -65°. The alarm, which was so loud you felt it rather than heard it, would go off any minute.

"CLOSE THE DAMN DOOR," bellowed Norman.

Dwayne's head finally appeared, with a look of bored superiority. You guys, his eyebrows said, need to get a life. Norman pushed the door closed the moment he could do it without killing the kid.

"Get ziplocs," he ordered Rudi. "We'll get the sample tubes in bags for now and get them back in the freezer. Sort them out later. Hopefully there aren't any competent cells--" and that was when he saw it as his eyes raked over the hundreds of little vials scattered by Dwayne like a dog digging for a bone. The three vials labeled "caf" followed by numbers.

He remembered what it was he'd forgotten. He'd forgotten to relabel those vials to something cryptic. They had the crucial bits of DNA he was going to need when it was time to make an antidote. He'd had, from the outset, every intention of making an antidote.

He tried not to look at the three vials. He tried not to look at Rudi to see if she'd noticed them. She would probably make the connection in a heartbeat and then she had the know-how to track it down and prove it. After all, even Kriegel had noticed that caffeine in larger and larger doses was having less and less effect. But engineering an anti-caffeine gene was easy. Norman's genius lay in coming up with the perfect vector to carry the gene into everyone's cells: a modified cold virus that was entirely symptomless and perfectly catching.

He'd made himself immune, so everybody else slowed down while he did not. Now he usually headed home by six or seven instead of midnight, but he wanted to hold off on the antidote until he could go home at five. He wanted a life as well as a job.

He busied himself sorting the vials into groups as Rudi ran up with the bags. The caf vials were on her side of the table — if only there were some way to palm them before —.

"Hey, what are these?" Rudi said, as she slid them toward a bag. "C.A.F? We don't have anyone whose initials are C.A.F., do we?"

"Just keep scooping," muttered Norman. "We'll sort them out later." He just

hoped he'd be able to find the three little vials in the mess before anyone else did.

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Time ticked by.

The lab techs left. Dr. Kriegel himself had long since powered off to an important dinner engagement. Various diehard postdocs and graduate students showed the usual signs of working into the wee hours. Norman planned to wait them all out. He was feeding his tropical fish, swimming in their brightly-lit parallel universe on a shelf near his desk, when the doorbell blatted like a demented fire engine. That was the after-hours volume, just to make sure it could wake the dead.

After Norman clutched the lab bench in the usual bell shock, he stood, indecisive. If he opened the door, a black hole of wasted time would be waiting for him. If he ignored it, he might miss something crucial and get in no end of trouble. He forced himself to go to the door.

When he saw the FedEx truck, he started to hurry.

"Nessie!" he threw open the door with what may have been his first smile of the day.

Vanessa Delaney did that to people. She wasn't exactly beautiful, but she was pleased and cheerful and somehow shared her state of mind with the people around her. She wore shorts in sleet or sun and was fit enough to join the astronaut corps. Norman suspected her of enjoying cold showers. She seemed to enjoy everything. For instance, she looked delighted to be there, working late, delivering boxes.

"Heya, Norman. How come you don't just give up your apartment and put a cot in the hall here?"

"That would be too convenient. There are regulations against that. And you're obviously still running all over town at all hours," he added.

"Beats sitting still," she returned as she handed him the data pad to sign for the cross-linker. It was not a large box, but it held seven thousand dollars' worth of equipment that he knew Kriegel wanted yesterday. He signed carefully.

She was turning to leave, so he started babbling just to keep her there a while longer.

"Nice to see someone who's still awake," he said. "Most of the folks here, from the secretary to the boss, can't seem to do much but sit still. With their eyes closed."

"Tell me about it," Vanessa agreed with a smile. "Some places, I'm starting to wonder whether I should start carrying those electroshock defibrillators."

When he looked puzzled, she explained,

"You know, to apply to comatose people's chests like they do in the movies, while the emergency medtech yells, 'Clear!'"

"That'll be the next thing," Norman shook his head at the funny idea. "People will be carrying around their little biofeedback boxes and giving themselves wake-up shocks."

"Well," said Nessie, suddenly serious, "lots of them are carrying around their little purple pill boxes and doing just that."

"Purple pills?" asked Norman. What purple pills?

"You need to get out more," she said, smiling at him. "Everybody who can afford them has been buying them. They're speed. Got to really watch out for people coming down off that stuff. It's mostly meth but also some designer stuff that I understand is right out of this world."

Norman frowned. He was trying to slow things *down*, damn it. Sometimes it seemed that no matter what you did, things just got worse.

"You 'understand'? You haven't tried any of the ... um ... performance enhancers?"

"I've never been that big on drugs. Even coffee and tea and aspirin and stuff like that. I guess I'm just used to living without them."

"Ah," he said. It figured. Her happiness always had seemed part of her.

"My failing is beer, you know," she continued, nodding as if this was something everyone knew and was kind enough to understand. Norman was amazed. He wouldn't have pegged her for an alcoholic in a thousand years.

"You — ah — don't look like someone who drinks lots of beer," he mumbled.

"Oh, I don't drink lots of it. I just like it and wish I could brew it." Vanessa lowered her voice so it sounded like she was telling him a secret. "I'm going to start a brewpub one of these days." Her tone implied it was all settled except for the minor matter of picking a specific day.

Norman was often at a loss with people, but not with Nessie because she was so comfortable to be around. Now, however, he opened his mouth but no words emerged. Nessie was a wonderful girl who delivered packages. He'd never thought of her as a beer-drinking businesswoman.

"Well, go for it," he finally managed. "I bet you could do anything you wanted to." That was certainly true.

Nessie shook her head.

"There's only one problem. I tried brewing some, you know, but I had to set it free. The result didn't require an environmental impact statement, but that was all you could say for it."

"Oh come on," said Norman. "It's dead easy. I mean, I brewed beer all through college for my fellow geeks' club."

"You brewed beer?" Vanessa cried. To her, this clearly ranked with the greater accomplishments of humankind. "Was it any good?"

"Well, sure it was good. All it takes is careful attention to temperature and sterility, so you don't get wild yeasts." Inspiration struck him on one of its rare forays into his interpersonal relationships. "I'll show you how, if you'd like."

Before Nessie drove off, Norman had promised to spend Saturday with her starting a batch of beer, after buying supplies at the microbrew store.

Dawn broke to find Norman still carefully going through freezer bags full of randomized sample tubes. The caf tubes had disappeared.

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Things never work out quite as expected. June missed filing Norman's payroll form, one of an ever-increasing string of things she forgot. Kriegel had grown quite manic, a situation easily explained by the bottle of purple pills Norman had spotted on his desk. Norman's landlady had slapped him with a late fee, deaf to all reasoning that her rent would arrive the moment his delayed paycheck did. Logically, Norman should have been miserable. Instead he was walking on air and smiling at small children. He had never realized before that beer could be such a powerful euphoriant, especially since it wasn't even ready to drink yet.

He came in to work humming softly, only to find Gerry Kriegel standing in the foyer, where June and the receptionist had their empire, with his eyes bulging like a lobster's and his face the color of one on the boil.

"This is the third draft," he threw a sheaf of papers down on June's desk. "There's a typo on page three, there's a typo on five, there's a typo on ten. There's a typo in the goddamn budget! Do you realize what that could mean? Do you realize how much time it takes to proofread all this damn incompetence? This is your job. I shouldn't have to waste my time making sure you're doing it. You," announced Gerry Kriegel by way of finale, "are fired."

Norman chuckled slightly to himself in his fizzy state of mind. This boss, the one firing the secretary for four typos, was the same one who hadn't seen what the fuss was about when Norman had missed his paycheck. Still, it would probably be just as well to edge out unobtrusively and come in through the side entrance.

But it was too late. Kriegel spotted him at the door.

"About time you got here. Need to talk to you." He marched off toward his office, barking at the receptionist over his shoulder, "And call Dr. Pulitzky. I need a prescription filled immediately."

Norman hurried after him, wondering if it was purple pills the boss had run out of. Norman barely managed to squeeze in a "Hi," before Gerry Kriegel had a full head of steam.

"Right." He marched to his desk, picked up a cold box, whisked the top off, and shoved the box under Norman's nose. "What's this?"

Norman's world stopped.

The three caf vials. He'd been found out. His mind raced.

"Right," repeated Kriegel. "Didn't think you'd have a lot to say for yourself. It

had to be you. You're the only one with the background and the skills." Then, returning apparently to his theme for the day, he added, "You're fired."

Norman's thoughts, still running a hundred to Kriegel's one, cascaded through his brain. Denial was useless, contrary to the rosy scenarios he'd believed until about thirty seconds ago. But what could he do? Throw himself on the mercy of Kriegel's heart? He wasn't sure he could find the man's heart with a microscope. Promise to whip up the antidote instantly, if he gave him a second chance? Kriegel had too much political sense to even want the antidote now.

And as he thought about political sense, an idea mushroomed in his mind like a gas bomb.

"I don't think so," said Norman, with the sudden aplomb of a skydiver whose parachute just opened. He eyed his boss's pop-eyed, purple response. "You ordered me to make the antidote just a few days ago. In writing. There'd be a lot of money in an antidote at this point. For a problem that started in this lab. I could see the media jumping on a story about the poor principled postdoc who blew the whistle and got fired." He smiled.

Kriegel sputtered, speechless.

"You-you-"

"Yes?" said Norman. "You think it'd work to say you didn't know what your lab manager was doing, but you just happened to want me to find the anti-dote?" He wondered in a detached way how long this strange fugue state would last and what kind of gibbering idiot he would become when it dropped him. Best to wrap this up while he was still flying.

"You-you wouldn't dare." Kriegel clearly didn't believe the hopeful thought himself.

Norman bared his teeth in something that was not a grin.

Kriegel swallowed.

"Look, maybe we can work something out," the boss finally managed.

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As Norman walked back to his desk, the feeling grew on him that he was swimming through soup, thickening soup. He was going to have to sit down somewhere, in a place with fresh air, not at his uninspiring desk hemmed in by humming machines. Kriegel had shoved the cold box at him on his way out, as if getting rid of the tubes was important. Norman rubbed the labels off, now that it really did not matter any more, substituted qtr1, qtr2, and qtr3 instead, and put them in with some archived samples in the freezer belonging to a long-departed postdoc. Then, moving more and more like an automaton, he stopped by his desk and collected the now all-important instructions from Kriegel to find the antidote. He folded the papers precisely and placed them

carefully in the inner pocket of his lab coat. One last task, before he collapsed in his quiet, private space on the back fire escape, was to swing by the Coke machine and hope for the best. It was early enough yet that he was in luck this time.

Norman sat on the cold metal bars of the emergency stairs, feeling them digging into his rear, and sipped the sweet, fizzy stuff. He leaned his hot head against one of the cold uprights of the railing and just breathed for a time. The minutes melted together, uncounted.

Then the door opened. Rudi knew his hiding places simply by means of careful observation and would root him out when sufficiently dire emergencies threatened. But this time she just sat down on the step below his.

Norman tried to pull himself together, as if this was merely an ordinary break.

"So. Now what?" she asked without preamble.

Norman stared. Did she somehow know? Or was she just asking what he was having a fit about? He needed to think of something —.

"It's about the caf tubes, right?"

Norman stared again. There was little else he could do with a mind as blank as his.

"Kind of a neat idea," she said, looking dreamily out over the trees and blocky roofs of the campus and the city beyond.

Norman's repertoire of responses was limited to staring.

"Everybody just slows down and starts acting rational and having a life, instead of trying to find the cure for cancer while faxing letters to the President and talking to their divorce lawyer on their cell phone."

Norman nodded numbly. That had been the idea.

"It could never work, you know," she continued companionably.

No, he saw that now.

"So you told Kriegel," stated Norman. It was all over. He might have a hold on Kriegel. He certainly had none on her.

"No-o," she said slowly. "He was showing some honchos the nerve growth factor which is kept in my freezer and spotted the caf tubes." After a pause, she continued, "You keep track of the news at all?"

News? What did the news have to do with this? When would he ever find the time to fool around watching news?

"June got fired this morning, you know. She's a good kid. She's just asleep with her eyes open. It's happening everywhere. Unemployment's up over ten percent."

Come to think of it, he had seen some headline to that effect.

"And crime is up. Too many people needing too many purple pills. And the stock market whooshed down 1000 points yesterday."

The stock market was always leaping and diving like a gaffed fish. Civilization wasn't really going to collapse just because he'd wanted a little time.

Was it?

"I assume you were planning on spreading an antidote around once you were happy?" She sounded less companionable. He'd better have an antidote planned or she would know what to do about it.

Norman nodded and almost said yes, ma'am.

"Well," she said. "Do it." She stood up. "That's my price."

This time he did say it.

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled thinly and went back inside.

Norman knew he was impractical, but he was not totally lacking in sense. He'd blackmailed Kriegel out of turning him in, even out of firing him, but he couldn't keep working for the man. On the other hand, he had to make the antidote, and outside of a lab there was no way he could do that.

Most irritating of all, like a sand grain in his eye, was the fact that if he made the antidote in Kriegel's lab, that shark would be one of the first to get it. That just wasn't right. The whole problem was the fault of the Kriegels of the world. They should wait till last.

Then the next problem loomed up. What was he going to do after he left Kriegel's? His whole training, his whole life was doing science surrounded by machines. What else could he do? He leaned his head against the cold railing again.

Of course, there was Nessie insisting he would make a great brewmaster. He smiled faintly for the first time in this new life of his. All she needed, she said, to start her brewpub was another \$30,000 in capital to add to her own hoard and mental capital in the form of a brewmaster. She had grinned at him expectantly, but he had had doubts. To begin with, they were \$30,000 short and to go on with, there was just too much to do for a couple of people to run a whole brewpub. It was a wild idea.

Suddenly he sat up straight. One wild idea led to another until he had a whole web of them proliferating in his mind, like yeast in a brewing vat at just the right temperature. He could make the antidote, he could become a highly successful brewmaster, and the Kriegels of the world could be the last to get the message. He could do it all.

He stood up and went back inside.

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Norman's final week at Kriegel's lab was not an easy one. He knew his keys would be taken away the minute the boss realized he was leaving. So Norm spent every waking moment in the lab, and most of his sleeping moments there, too, propped up in the best chair he could find. He was trying to engineer the antidote DNA he needed into an excellent strain of beer-making yeast. Then all he'd need to make the antidote would be a few brewing vats. The only

problem with his brilliant solution was that the stupid yeast refused to cooperate. It kept reverting to its original, undoctored form after a few generations and he had the whole weary process to do over again. Babysitting yeast cultures was the sort of work a tech would normally do, but Norman could hardly assign this particular task to anybody else.

Rudi stopped by on the second night as she was leaving to go home. She had obviously been planning to say something, but stood and looked at all the tubes and flasks and amplification machines instead. Then she took her coat off, put on a pair of rubber gloves, and started transferring yeast from one culture plate to the next.

Norman gave her a grateful nod and together they kept right on going till two in the morning. Kriegel did nothing to interfere in all this activity. Maybe he thought Norm's hands were just as tied as his own were. Hopefully he'd stay convinced of that for a few days. If the miserable yeast ever cooperated, a few days was all Norman needed.

What made matters even worse for Norman was that the usual interruptions didn't stop merely because he needed them to. Dwayne's daily arrival around lunch time was heralded by the Goony Boys or some other nasty noise blaring from his computer speakers. Each day Norman ground his sleep-deprived teeth a little harder. Then came the day Dwayne downloaded about a hundred gigabytes of music videos onto the server. The whole network went down for several hours and Norman heard Kriegel himself yelling at Dwayne about keeping his goddamn personal files on his goddamn personal computer.

"Well, hey, my disk isn't that big and the server can take terabytes," said Dwayne, clearly wondering why something so obvious needed to be explained. "I'll get them onto my own disks real soon." Norman heard Kriegel stomping off.

Late in the evening, as Norman checked the computer for the latest yeast sequence results, he noticed that the huge download had actually crashed part of the system. File allocation tables had been swept up in the music, which overwrote most of the virtual drive he'd used for the caf work. All traces of his files were gone without any criminal destruction of evidence on his part.

Norman leaned back and boggled at the strangeness of fate. To think how many times he'd nearly strangled Dwayne, how many times he'd regretted his inability to complete that simple task, and how well it had turned out after all.

Rudi was also there, still helping like a trooper, plating out the newest generation of yeast. He showed her the computer analysis.

She broke into a smile.

"Looks like we finally have a stable insertion of antidote into yeast." She stopped smiling. "On to the next problem. How do you plan on getting it to people? Nobody's going to inhale yeast if they can help it."

"Oh, but they will," said Norman. "They will." Then he stopped. "Always assuming that I don't wind up fully occupied holding a tin cup on Main Street."

"Yes," said Rudi. "What are you going to do? Do you have anything lined up?"

"Um. Well. You know Vanessa Delaney? The FedEx girl?"

Rudi nodded. She was the one signing for deliveries if Norman wasn't around.

"We're, um, starting a brewpub." Now Rudi would start telling him all the reasons why this was a stupid, young thing to do, like his mother had.

"Oh!" said Rudi instead. "Got it all worked out, huh?"

"Um, well, Nessie has. She's going to handle the people and I'm going to handle the yeast." He made a slight face. "Unfortunately, we're thirty thousand dollars short, but we've got to try to get it started."

"Thirty thousand dollars ...." Rudi mused. "Not chickenfeed." She started asking him a whole series of detailed questions about the eventual brewpub while they checked the latest yeast generation for the quality of antidote it carried.

Then she took a deep breath.

"You know, Kriegel was never my favorite boss. I got a settlement after the divorce. It wasn't really enough to do anything with, and it was too much to just spend without feeling like an idiot. What I'm saying is, well, what would you and Vanessa think of me coming in as a third partner?"

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The pub was doing a roaring trade. Jovial workers lined up at the bar for more blue Bronco Brew. Orders for crates of it were coming in from as far away as Hong Kong. It was such wonderful beer they said. It had a marvelous effect on the whole system, it toned you up and made you feel on top of things. Why was it blue? asked reporters once the beer made the news. It was an old Romulan recipe, answered Norman with his best postdoctoral face. Vanessa arranged a contract with one of the largest names in brewing for facilities to make the stuff by the tanker ship. Money poured in. Rudi invested hers in the nicely recovering stock market.

One day, Gerry Kriegel came into the pub together with a flock of suits he was entertaining that night. Norman was pretty sure he spotted Kriegel's pet congressman in the group. The pub had become quite the new attraction in town.

"You seem to be doing pretty well for yourself," he said to Norman, who was taking his turn as barkeeper that night.

"So far, so good," said Norman, repressing the urge to have his bouncers take care of Gerry Kriegel.

"Sure," said Kriegel. "It's easier to make beer than do science."

Norman smiled whitely and said, "Have some of our Bronco Brew." He pushed a bottle toward him.

Kriegel looked down his nose at the brightly colored label showing a sozzled horse drinking at a trough full of something blue.

"I'd hire somebody who knows something about marketing, if I were you," he said like someone who was just trying to help. "What do you have that doesn't need to be covered by a brown paper bag?"

"Well, here's the nonalcoholic version," said Norm, misunderstanding him on purpose. This one had a picture of an alert, blue thoroughbred nosing past the finish line.

Kriegel's party face started to look as if it was held up by pins.

"Congressman Maloney wanted to come here. You gotta have something worth drinking."

Norman offered him some nice and expensive white wine. Kriegel bought that. He bought four whole bottles of it.

Later in the evening he and his cronies ordered coffee. Judging by the resemblance between them and the wasted horse on the Bronco label, it wasn't doing them any good.

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