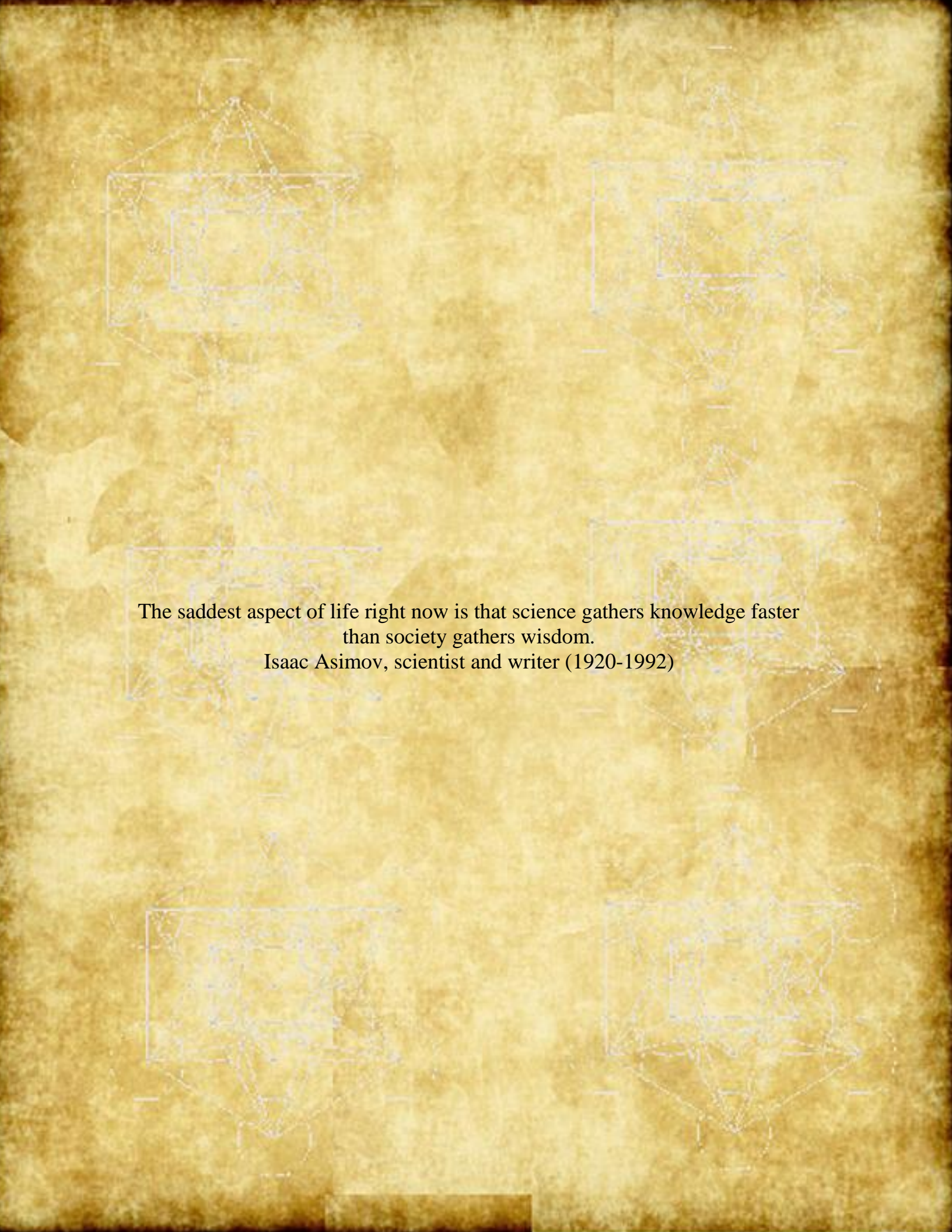


GENIUS



A novel by Rick Gadbois



The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster
than society gathers wisdom.

Isaac Asimov, scientist and writer (1920-1992)

Chapter Two Dr. Strand's Laboratory

As he ascended, the dusty stairs creaked out a rhythm. He held on to the worn rail, tussling with the stairway as he scaled the steps leading to the laboratory. Ruffled looking - a bit on the shorter side, the man seemed a cross between Colombo the tv detective and Einstein - if there were such a thing. Had there been someone nearby, they would have witnessed a curmudgeonly older man, mumbling and complaining aloud, "The damned Feds can't grant enough money for a decent lab. They want results, but they can't give enough to buy basic supplies. They prefer grant writing over good science."

He tugged at his worn dusty cardigan, pulling it over his shoulder to keep warm. "Dumb bastards will give the money to anyone who writes a half baked story; as long as it seems to resonate with the latest health care bill." The sensitive observer may note that this man, talking aloud to himself, was perhaps lonely "...grant proposal they call it. Anyone doing real work will dry up with nothing to show for their..."

He twisted the rusty knob, then kicked the bottom of the door with his shoe - opening the door to his lab.

"...their efforts. Science and politics are strange bedfellows indeed. Free enterprise they call it. Bullshit Enterprise is more like it." He let out a small cynical laugh then sang a tune..."And the home...of the...Bullshitters."

On the far side of the lab, a hamster hopped off his wheel, turning to look towards the doctor. His cage, balanced atop some old boxes, had been outfitted with wires and electrodes, making it look more like his own little lab than his prison. The hamster held its head up, sniffing, wires dangling from his helmet.

Making his way past beakers, lab tables, and notebooks, the doctor called out, "Henry, have you been keeping an eye on the lab?" Henry sniffed in agreement. "It was a full moon last night, did you notice?" Henry continued sniffing at the doctor, who in return waved his hand as if to shoo the hamster. "Go back to your wheel. And don't bite the wires or you'll go brain dead." Henry hopped on his wheel and ran - 'like the dickens' as they say.

The doctor pulled his chair over to his desk, the chairs' wheels making a loud squeaking sound. Bending to sit down, his thick curly gray hair flopped over and down his forehead. He sat down and began to shuffle through the piles of paperwork that lay atop his desk, seemingly oblivious to the stray sheets spilling on to the floor. Many of the notes had unfinished drawings of what appeared to be planets and chemical elements. A name plate on the desk was inscribed simply and economically 'Strand'.

Dr. Jules Strand - a long time struggling scientist...by his own choice. Not that he had too much of a struggle getting here. Science came to him easily. Paying for school hadn't been an issue, the universities had clamored for the young genius. He earned several engineering degrees; electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, and chemical engineering. He acquired multiple phd's as well. Molecular Biology, Quantum Physics. With his education and potential, his options seemed boundless. The schools wanted him to stay on, offering him professor positions. The government wanted him. Large Chemical companies like Dow offered him lots of money, houses, and bonuses. They even offered him a personal laboratory. He was truly a rising star in the science world and could have made himself wealthy working for just about anyone. But Jules wanted more. He wanted to discover. He wanted to create. On his own terms. So he had dedicated himself to a life of research. The money still came in, but not nearly as much as he could have made working for someone else. For practically four decades, he existed on government grants to fund his research. But he found grant writing a bore...and perhaps this was his weak spot, though he regretted none of his choices. He'd set the pattern for his life's work; learning to exist with what he had, getting just enough to keep his research going. Enough to keep his family going, with a little help from his wife Rose's paycheck. Gone for some time now, Rose had been his angel.

The pile on the desk began to move. Raising an eyebrow; the doctor slowly lifted his hands, just above the surface of the desk. He noticed...something... stirring beneath the papers.

With one hand, he reached under the desk, retrieving a small animal trap. He peered inside. "Empty!" There was no food in the trap. His eyes darted around the room. He bent down and opened the dingy mini-fridge next to his desk, taking out a small piece of cheese. He put the cheese into the trap and set it down atop the desk.

Sitting back in his chair, he folded his arms. "Ok little fella, come on out, I've got a surprise for you." The papers moved, rippling towards the direction of the trap. The doctor pushed the trap closer to the papers. "C'mon mousy mousy, this old doctor has something for you."

A small nose peeked out from the papers. A gray mouse, sniffing at the air, looked towards the doctor. The doctor pointed at the loaded trap, it was ready to snap. The mouse cautiously moved towards it.

"There you go, good boy."

The mouse nudged the trap to the edge of the table with its nose, carefully so as not to set it off. The trap fell to the floor and snapped shut. The mouse ran from the table and down the doctor's leg, retrieving the cheese. Grabbing the cheese in its mouth, the mouse took its place on the doctors' shoe, eating the cheese.

"See! I told you it was a surprise, it's guda! Ha Ha Ha."

The phone rang. "Strand here" A pause, "That's what I said... this is Doctor Strand. No, I-" Agitated, he looked at the ceiling, shaking his head. "Go ahead."

"Yes, right. Ok." he impatiently tapped his fingers on the desk. "What? Have I heard of you?" He chuckled, it was that Madruger fellow, the one that wrote the letters. He'd been bugging Strand for some time, writing notes and emails, leaving messages on his phone. Strand was tempted to hang up, but... he'd already picked up, perhaps a quick chat would get rid of him for good.

Madruger was full of questions, rubbing Strand the wrong way, “Who pays for my research? The U.S. government pays, that information is on public record...What business is that of –“

He was cut off, the voice on the other line apologizing. Strand continued, “Look, it’s not really any of your-” Cut off again. “My money matters are-”

He paused for a moment, listening. The voice on the other end...Madruger, continued on, telling Strand how he could facilitate ‘help’. Strand thought Madruger sounded more like a salesman than a scientist.

Dr. Strand took off his glasses and leaned back in his chair, speaking in a tired and sarcastic tone, “Ok...so you’re calling to help me. I’ve been hoping someone would call to help me and now, it’s finally happening. Fantastic“ Madruger kept talking, ignoring Strands response.

Strand sat upright and barked into the phone, "Look I don't have time for your-" then he stopped himself. Madruger had said something that caught his attention. He moved forward in his chair. “Did you say Perceptics? Yes, of course that’s me, but how do you know I am-” The voice on the end of the line continued. Strand held the phone a foot or so away from his ear for a moment, shaking his head. “Yes, ok. Look, Doctor *Madruger*, that’s your name, correct? Perceptics, it’s my work...a work in progress. Bringing it to fruition as you say is not necessarily my goal-“ Cut off by Madruger yet again. “What? Listen, the very essence of this research is...research.”

Perceptics – Strands code name for his semi-secret project. He’d used the name when applying for funding, but not much beyond that. No one really knew about Perceptics. He wondered how Madruger had found about it – not that he had to be too worried. No one knew what the project really was – only Strand. Still, Madruger knew the name – curious.

His foot tapped nervously on the floor, the mouse still atop riding as though it were a bucking bronco. “Well, of course I could use more funding, we all can. Doctor Madruger, I don’t understand what you want so let me make it clear, I have nothing to offer you, nor am I interested in working with you. I work alone.” This didn’t seem to slow Madruger down. Strand nodded impatiently into the phone, “Yes, I understand. Do you-“

Madruger continued.

Exasperated, Strand put the receiver down on the desk. The voice at the other end of the line continued on. Strand was tempted to hang up. But...though he wouldn’t have admitted it, Madruger’s persistence was working – to some degree. And Madruger knew about Perceptics – perhaps a quick meeting was in order after all. Strand took a breath, stared at the phone for a few moments longer, then picked it up.

“Shut Up. Stop!” The voice on the other end of the phone abated. “If I meet with you, will you stop calling and put an end to sending those letters?” He told him Friday was open, in the afternoon. “I have some business downtown. I’ll meet you in front of the FDA building, at the fountain, 3 o’clock.”

He hung up the phone, turning his attention to the mouse. The mouse had managed to stay atop Strand’s shoe the entire time. “So Algernon. That was the Madruger fellow, the one that sends the letters. Selling some sort of new-age snake oil. I trust him about as far as I can throw a linear accelerator. But he seems to know a few things. Algernon, maybe you can give me a few tips before I meet up with him, what do you say?” The mouse peered back at him, sniffing.