

Baby Boom

a *Real Ghostbusters* Novelette by

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Preface

Although this story wasn't published in my fanzine *Shadowstar* until the late summer of 1989, it was actually written either in very late 1987 or early 1988 — more than a year before a particular RGB episode (you'll know which one I mean when you've read a bit farther) aired in the fall of 1989. I was in no way influenced by that story, and "Baby Boom" was actually in print before that episode aired. I have long been amused that the people who had read this first told me they liked it better than the vaguely similar cartoon — and if I'm allowed a bit of writer's egotism (something of which I actually have very little) here, I have to agree. It has its own silliness to it, but it's not *that* silly. I just want to make it clear that I knew nothing about it when I wrote this. Hmmmm, maybe I should've sued....

For Pete, my brother, who, while we were trying to teach a friend to drive a standard transmission car, sat in the back seat moaning, "We're gonna die!" Now, you and Pete Venkman have something in common.

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away....

Actually, although the time in question was, indeed, quite long ago — millions of years past, to be precise — the pertinent location was *not* in a galaxy far, far away; it was in our own galaxy and was, in fact, on Earth itself. But such comparisons being inconsequential, let it simply be said that the event (without which this particular tale could never have happened) took place quite some time ago, during Earth's Ice Age, and in the regions we now call the Arctic Circle. Had any Men been present to witness it, they might (if one was willing to be excessively generous in estimating their intelligence) have called the thing a falling star; latter-day scientists would have explained it as a meteor disintegrating in Earth's atmosphere — but both would have been wrong.

The object which impacted in the polar ice cap on that long-ago day was, in truth, a cometary fragment, the remaining lump of ice and dust and interstellar debris that had composed the core of one of those cosmic wanderers. Out of its usual orbit and doomed to die, this comet (not a very large one, as such things go) made quite the spectacular aerial show as it plunged through the atmosphere to its death. It had very nearly evaporated by the time it reached the surface — but not quite. The slightly larger than melon-sized chunk that remained produced quite a noise (not to mention quite a hole) as it plowed into the glacier which was to be its tomb. By luck, it remained intact, an orangey lump of extraterrestrial ice that stayed frozen in the glacier's heart, unnoticed and undisturbed for millennia.

Until....

The team of university scientists and researchers who came to northern Canada in the spring of '88 were there to study the peculiarities of glacial ice cores and to take back samples for further lab analysis and experiments. They were essentially chemists and physicists, not archaeologists or anthropologists; not a one of them was looking for bits of Earth's past buried in the ice — until they brought up a sample which appeared to have something orange and solid frozen inside it.

"What do you think it is?" one of the team members asked another as everyone gathered to stare at this unexpected curiosity.

"Maybe just a chemical anomaly, or an orange fruit carried north in an ocean current and frozen into the glacier," another speculated. "A lot of pollution and debris is dragged to the poles, you know."

"Not likely," was a third's opinion. "Doesn't look solid enough for that, if you ask me."

"But it's too solid to be nothing but a chemical discoloration," the first opined. "It looks more like the consistency of a Popsicle."

"Maybe it's some *thing*," a fourth mused darkly. "You know, a monster from outer space frozen in the ice, like in that old sci-fi flick...."

Several of the group laughed aloud; others scoffed at the idea; several more gulped and shuddered, having been properly horrified by John Carpenter's updated version of the film *The Thing*, based on John Campbell's tale. The leader of the expedition spoke up, putting an end to the debate. "Well, whatever it is, we aren't equipped to study it properly out here. Benton, pack it up and have it shipped back to the university lab on the next supply run. Maybe the staff back home'll be able to shed some light on the thing."

"What the heck *is* that?" one of the two graduate student lab assistants asked his companion as they stared at the weirdly-colored lump of ice that wasn't very readily melting under the examination lights in their laboratory at Columbia University in New York. "Some kinda sick joke from the guys up north? It looks like a huge Dreamsicle or something."

"Nah," the other answered blandly, unconcerned and uninterested. "Professor Anderson says it's a core sample that the research team took off one of those glaciers, and they don't know what it is, either. He wants us to melt it down and see what's inside."

The first swallowed uncomfortably; he'd seen *The Thing*, too, and fairly recently. "You don't think it's dangerous, do you?"

The second was more than merely skeptical. "Are you kidding, Brad? We're just a couple of grad-school TA's, not teaching staff. They wouldn't be stupid enough to give us any *really* dangerous assignments — or any of the really interesting ones, for that matter. Just think of what'd cost 'em in insurance claims if something went wrong."

That appeared to relieve the less confident of the two. "I guess you're right. Okay, then, Rick, let's get this thing into something warmer and see what we've got, here."

They hauled the cylindrical lump to a sealed glass unit one of the other students had devised for the gradual warming and observation of the ice samples being shipped back from the field team. It sat in the unit for a good long while without making any noticeable progress. After a bit, Rick got bored and turned up the temperature to hurry things along.

Brad, as usual, worried. "Are you sure you should do that? Professor Anderson says we should never rush things, so we don't miss anything important...."

"What're we gonna miss?" his lab partner wanted to know. "He wants us to find out what the thing inside is, right? Why waste our time waiting for the outer ice to melt if we don't have to study it, too?"

That rationale seemed somewhat flawed to Brad, but he couldn't quite figure out why, so he gave in. "I suppose you're right. Rushing the preliminaries a little shouldn't hurt anything."

With that logic bolstering them, they sat down and watched the thing melt, waiting for the dramatic moment in which the buried object would at last be revealed.

The dramatic moment never came. As they looked on, the lump grew smaller and smaller; the puddle around it grew bigger and bigger, until finally, there was nothing left on the bottom of the melting unit but a slightly steaming blob of gooey-looking orange slush.

"Did you see anything inside?" Brad asked Rick after both had spent several very long and uneasy moments staring

at what remained of the unique specimen that had been placed in their care.

"Not a thing," Rick affirmed. "Maybe there never *was* anything in it..."

"Or maybe we melted it by turning the heat up too high."

"Could be, but I like my explanation better."

"What're we gonna tell Professor Anderson?" Brad fretted.

"Nothing, unless he asks," Rick replied flatly. "It's not *our* fault this big curiosity of theirs turned out to be nothing but a big bust."

"But, Rick..."

"Just do as I say and we won't get in trouble. Get one of the big flasks and scrape that goo into it. Maybe we can at least salvage something they can analyze in the chemistry labs."

The more worrisome of the two was far from convinced that this was the right thing to do, much less the ethical thing to do, but being rather unimaginative in such matters, he went along with his lab partner's idea, for lack of a better alternative. While he went to fetch one of the larger glass containers, Rick shut down the heating elements and opened the unit's door. The moment he did, a huge cloud of orange steam came billowing forth, leaving behind not only a film of similarly-colored slime but also a singularly unusual (and powerful) stench.

"What the heck was that?" Brad asked his now-sticky cohort, who had taken the cloud full in the face as it gushed out.

"I don't know," Rick coughed, trying to get the gunk out of his lungs as he attempted to wipe it from his eyes with a damp sleeve. "But jeeze, it stinks like the East River when the sewers back up."

His nervous partner grew even more nervous. "I don't like this, Rick," he said, eyes flitting about the room as if someone or something was lurking in the shadows, waiting to leap out at them. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Don't be ridiculous," he was chided. "It was nothing but some sort of evaporation residue. It couldn't possibly hurt... us..."

His last two words left his lips in a disjointed squeak as he looked up and was greeted by the sight of something horrible rising behind Brad, like the shade of the devil himself. He gasped, gurgled inarticulately, then shouted, "Look out!" as the shrieking orange thing came swooping down on both of them.

"...and we haven't the slightest idea what it is," Professor Anderson — a short, balding man who looked frail enough to crumple like a house of twigs when the next stiff breeze came along — told the Ghostbusters some time later, when the four ecto-eliminators had arrived in response to an urgent call from Columbia Administration. They were standing just outside the research lab in which Brad and Rick had done their recent work, the same place in which the orange whatever-it-was had done *its* work even more recently. The lab was a wreck; no shelf or cabinet or table had been left unturned, and everything — walls, floor, ceiling, and debris — was covered with a copious amount of bright orange, noxious-smelling slime. While Winston Zeddemore and Egon Spengler — being, respectively, brave and almost recklessly curious — carefully checked out the lab, Peter Venkman and Ray Stantz got the lowdown from the staff out in the corridor. Anderson was doing most of the talking; both Rick and Brad were too dazed to say much anything, and sat, silent and beslimed, on a bench just down the hall.

"All we know is that it's nothing anyone's ever seen before," Anderson went on. "And it did *this* before anyone was even aware it was here." A sweep of one lab-coated arm indicated the wrecked research facilities.

"You sure it just wasn't some sort of fraternity stunt?" Venkman asked insouciantly from where he lounged against the doorframe, watching his braver (and stronger-stomached) partners as they cautiously examined the reeking room. "It smells like the kind of stink-bomb goop any kid could put together with a two-bit chemistry set."

The professor's spine stiffened. "Certainly not! Not only does this... vandalism go beyond the limits of what even the

worst pranksters would attempt, sophomoric stunts of this magnitude haven't been tolerated on this campus since *you* were a student here, Doctor Venkman."

Peter wasn't offended; he merely smiled. "Ah, nothing ever changes. This place is still full of the same sort of charming people who were here before we were... encouraged to make the career move that changed our lives for the better. Y'know, Professor, it's not nice to make rude comments about people you hired to help you. I was just making a suggestion about the fraternities, but I know they didn't do it. No frat brother in his right mind'd pull something down here. You guys are too stiff to take a joke."

From the way Anderson's expression began to twist, he was clearly preparing to launch into a retaliatory lecture. Ray spoke up before he had the chance. "Prank slime doesn't register on the PKE meters, and this stuff has definite psychokinetic traces to it. You say your students were working on a glacial ice project in here before this happened?"

"That's right," the instructor replied, visibly collecting his composure. "Brad and Rick were assigned to melt down an unusual sample we'd received in the most recent shipment from our field unit in the Arctic Circle. It had an orange shadow inside it, and we thought it might be an object or an interesting chemical anomaly they could study. As far as we can tell, when they melted the ice, they released this... *thing*. From what they told us and from what the staff saw of it before it vanished, it *must* be some sort of ghost."

"Maybe, maybe not," Ray said equivocally, shrugging. "Lots of non-spectral critters give off PK emanations and leave ectoplasm — but it's definitely supernatural, whatever it is. I'd sure like to get a look at it before passing judgment...."

A shriek from down the hall — from Brad and Rick, actually — told him he was about to get his wish. As everyone turned in that direction, they saw what had made the two students scream: a glowing cloud of mist that coalesced into a huge, translucent, and glaringly orange specter, shaped like a manta-ray with one eye, a long forked tail, and a huge, slobbering mouth rimmed with a forest of thin feelers. They got no more than the one good look at it before the apparition came rocketing toward them, emitting a high-pitched wail and an eye-watering stench as it went.

"Duck!" Peter bellowed, grabbing Anderson's belt to pull him down, since the man's reflexes were apparently substandard. The orange ugly whooshed by just inches over their heads, dripping slime in its wake.

"Get it!" Ray advised before the thing could turn and make a second strafing run. Venkman shoved the professor down onto the marginal safety of the floor (Brad and Rick were already cringing under the bench) before joining his partner in opening fire on the beast. Both shots were on-target; both also seemed to have little or no effect on the thing.

"What now?" Peter wondered aloud as he watched the specter come charging at them.

"Duck again!" was Stantz's suggestion, which both men followed. Again, they fired at it before it could reverse course; again, both were on-target, and again, the proton streams had no apparent effect.

"This is getting tired *real* fast," was Peter's impertinent observation. He briefly glanced down when Anderson huddled against his legs, presumably for protection. "Having a good time, Prof?" he remarked drolly, and just a wee bit sarcastically. "Just wait 'til the fun *really* starts."

"Winston! Egon!" Ray hollered, leaning back into the lab to avoid the orange monstrosity for a third time. "I think we could use your help out here!"

"On our way!" Zeddemore, who was closest to the door, called. He came running — very carefully; the slime on the floor made footing treacherous — and arrived in the corridor just in time to open fire in the same instant as Ray and Peter. All three streams struck the creature squarely, and, for a moment, it seemed to be pinned.

Egon joined the others somewhat belatedly, just as they realized the specter was about to escape yet again. Unlike Winston, however, the physicist did not open fire as soon as he entered the hall, but rather scanned the apparition with his PKE meter. "Fascinating," he opined as he studied the readouts, totally oblivious to his partners' difficulties.

"Uh, Egon," Peter interrupted ever so politely, "not to seem unappreciative of your efforts or anything, but do you think you could put that thing away for a second and give us a hand, here?"

The blue eyes tore themselves away from the meter to glance up at the psychologist. "But Peter, you don't quite understand...."

Venkman glared at him. "I understand that if you *don't* put that gizmo away in the next two seconds, I'm gonna forget how sweet a guy I really am and turn this thing on *you!*" He fairly screamed the last few words, giving the highly unlikely threat greater credibility.

Spengler was about to comply when the phantom began flapping its "wings" violently, sending a tremendous, stinking wind down the corridor and spraying orange ectoplasm everywhere. The force of the gust was enough to knock down anyone standing; all four Ghostbusters went flying backward, skittering down the damp hallway like leaves before a gale. Then, without warning, the specter reverted to a cloud of mist that shot upward through a ceiling vent and out of sight, leaving behind yet another large glob of aromatic slime.

Peter was first to get up, having been the least buffeted due to Anderson's anchoring grip around his ankles. He looked the way their enemy had gone, scowling. "I just don't get this," he announced to his partner as they, too, climbed to their feet. "We had that thing pinned under three full-power streams, and it didn't even bat its eye. What gives?"

Egon spoke up without hesitation, adjusting his glasses, which had been knocked off one ear by the ghostly hurricane. Peering through them and finding them too slime-spattered to see through clearly, he removed them again and wiped them off with a handkerchief from a protected inner pocket, no small task as the goo was quite tenacious. "As I was trying to say before you started leveling threats.... The number of streams brought to bear on this particular manifestation is irrelevant, since my readings indicate it has an unprecedentedly high insulation against any form of inducted energy."

Winston wiped away the glob of airborne slime that had hit him in the eyes, then narrowed them as he looked at the blond physicist. "Are you trying to say that this whatever-it-is — it *is* a ghost, isn't it?"

"Within the more general parameters of the term, yes," he was promptly assured.

"Then you're saying this ghost is armored against our proton streams?"

Egon blinked reflectively while he replaced his glasses. "Not precisely *armored*, Winston, but definitely insulated against them. I can't be certain of this without running more exhaustive tests, but the specific nature and viscosity of its ectoplasm — which, you may have noticed, is considerably more substantial and opaque than that which we typically encounter — would appear to be non-conductive of energies such as those emitted by our particle accelerators. We could hit it with a hundred streams simultaneously, and I doubt it would have much more significant an effect than it did just now."

"Well, that's just wonderful," Ray grumped, his mood coming not so much from his tall friend's news as from the particularly disgusting puddle of ectoplasm he'd had the bad luck to land in, tail end first.

Anderson dragged himself to his feet and attempted to regain some semblance of dignity, which was more than could be said for the two students, who were still cowering under the bench. "Wonderful?" he sputtered. "Who *cares* if it's wonderful or not? Shouldn't you be heading after it?"

Winston glanced inquiringly at Ray, who glanced at Peter, who glanced at Egon. "If there was any point to it," the last of the four supplied. "But once it disappeared through the ceiling, the meter went completely dead. There seems to be an unusually short range limit to this creature's PKE emanations, and, due to the tremendous amount of residual PKE it leaves behind in the form of ectoplasm, any attempts to track it with the meters would be virtually useless. It also seems to have the ability to hide itself by transforming into a vaporous state, so there isn't much we can do until someone reports sighting it again — unless, of course, you want to pay us by the hour to engage in a stake-out, waiting for it to show itself again...."

"Ah... no," Anderson admitted, envisioning the bills that would be generated by compliance with such a suggestion. "But I want that thing caught before it destroys the entire university!"

"We'll do the best we can," Winston promised.

"And look on the bright side," Ray put in.

"There's a bright side to this?" Peter muttered under his breath, unbelieving.

Ray continued, unaware of his comment. "Considering the way the thing got annoyed by us shooting at it, it'll probably go out looking for *us* after this and leave you and the rest of the campus alone."

"Was that really supposed to be reassuring, Ray?" Peter asked as they headed back to the firehouse. "Cause if it was, I've gotta tell you, I don't find the thought of that smelly whatever-it-was knocking on our doors very comforting."

"Maybe it wasn't to you, but it was to Professor Anderson," Stantz pointed out cheerfully. "Besides, I don't really know if it will or won't, but we sure weren't going to get anything else done by just standing there — and I *really* want to go home and get out of these coveralls. There's nothing in the world worse than getting your back end soaked with slime." He made an appropriately disgusted face to go along with the remark.

"Except maybe having a bucketful of it reeking right behind your seat all the way home." The psychologist held his nose as he glared at the receptacle mentioned, then at the person who had brought it. "If the stink doesn't leave when you take that junk out of here, Egon, *you're* getting the job of fumigating Ecto-1."

The fairest of the four seemed not at all concerned. "Sometimes, science requires us to deal with small personal discomforts," he said calmly, the ever-imperturbable instructor. "I need to analyze this if we're to have any chance of dealing with the thing that produced it — and *you* were the one who brought me a container without a lid, if you recall."

"How can I forget?" the darker man sighed, pinching his nose more tightly and pushing down his stomach when an errant draft brought with it a fresh reminder. As he opened his window and blinked to clear his suddenly-watering eyes, Peter decided that if he could just survive this one trip home, he could survive anything.

Janine expressed very much the same opinion once Ecto-1 had pulled into the garage and they opened its doors, letting out both themselves and that putrid aroma. "Eeeooooo!" she squealed the moment the scent reached her and started making her eyes burn. "I thought the call was at Columbia University, not the sewage treatment plant. What'd you do, bring back last year's trash or take a scenic drive through the sewers?"

"Neither," Peter said almost mischievously as he sauntered up to her desk and draped himself across it, planting one beslimed arm right in front of her and thus giving her the full effect of what they'd suffered with ever since arriving at the lab. "Hi, honey, we're home," he teased.

"Oh, gross!" she gasped, nearly falling out of her chair in her haste to back away. "It's *you*!"

He feigned extreme hurt. "Actually, it's all of us. And is that any way to treat your loving employers? Don't we get a 'welcome home' kiss?" He made small puckering sounds in her direction.

She grimaced, still pinching her nose shut. "I wouldn't kiss Robert Redford if he smelled like that, not if he paid me. What happened, anyway?"

"We ran into a real first-class slimer," Ray explained, politely keeping his distance from her, and wisely keeping his distance from the car, from which Egon was currently removing the bucketful of orange ectoplasm. "Makes our spud look a lot more socially acceptable, too."

"You said it," Winston opined, following Ray's lead in steering clear of certain sensitive locations. "We've run into bad-smelling spooks before, but none of 'em have ever reeked like this. We didn't catch it, and if we have to go out after it again, we'd be smart to take along gas-masks, or we might pass out before we finish the job." He watched Egon close Ecto's rear door, bucket in hand. "I think maybe you'd better take that stuff straight down to the basement and analyze it there," he suggested. "I don't think I could eat or sleep tonight with it sitting in the upstairs lab."

"Amen," Peter agreed.

Janine wrinkled her nose in thorough disgust as the physicist passed within ten feet of her on his way to the basement stairs. "You mean, you actually brought a whole pail full of that... gunk home with you? Are you nuts?"

Egon shrugged. "We didn't have any other choice. We need it for analysis, to figure out how to deal with this particular entity."

"Yeah," Ray concurred. "It shouldn't take long to run tests on it and see what we've got, and I'm sure the stink'll wash out."

"I hope so," was the secretary's fervent opinion. "'Cause if it still smells like this when I come in tomorrow, I'm going

on vacation 'til you get the place fumigated."

Doing the baseline tests and inserting samples into their various analyzation equipment for evaluation took only an hour or two, as Ray had anticipated, but unexpectedly, none of the studies revealed anything of immediate use. Frustrated, Egon — who had done most of the work alone, since he was apparently the only one of them with enough scientific curiosity and a sufficiently iron-clad stomach to spend any amount of time near the stuff — was about to give up on it and chuck the horrible sludge into the incinerator when it occurred to him that, having been melted out of a piece of ice, a radical change in temperature might uncover information which had remained undetectable in any other state. He quickly found that boiling and evaporating it caused some interesting reactions, but nothing applicable to their needs. The notion of freezing it, however.... Since the two lab assistants had freed it while thawing it, repeating the process on its residual ectoplasm might be a promising route toward finding the elusive answers he was seeking.

Pleased with the promise of this approach, he decided to freeze some and give it a try. Among the various oddments they kept on hand for lab use was an assortment of lidded white plastic tubes that they had picked up at a scientific surplus shop, to use for sample storage when needed. Being a form of plastic that would easily withstand the temperatures in a standard freezer, the physicist elected to use one of the smaller tubes for the task. After filling and sealing it, he destroyed all but a small and equally well-sealed sample of the residue, then headed upstairs to clean up. Despite his scientific curiosity, Egon was by nature a fastidious person, and he was more than ready to purge himself of any and all remnants of the hideous smelling slime.

The others were either resting or engaged in other activities when he took the tube into the kitchen and deposited it in the freezer, so no one but the physicist knew that he had put it there — an unintentional secret they would soon come to regret.

An hour or so later, while Egon was still ridding himself of the last of the noxious ectoplasm (the smell, he and the others had found, washed away with the slime itself, a blessing for which they were mutually relieved, although the stuff did not dissolve as easily as they might have liked). Winston went down to the kitchen to start preparing their supper, since it was his turn on their rotating KP schedule. All went smoothly until, just before calling the others to eat, he went looking for beverages to serve with the meal and found their supplies completely exhausted. No coffee, no milk, no tea, no soda pop — nothing but a pitcher of ice-water (with less than half an inch of liquid in the bottom) was to be had in the refrigerator, pantry, or cupboard, in any form.

"Well, that's just great," he grumbled to himself as he slammed the pantry door. "Who the heck ran everything dry and forgot to mention it? And who the heck was supposed to do the shopping, anyway?"

As a final resort, he glanced inside the freezer and found it, too, barren, save for a pair of almost-empty ice cube trays, some frozen vegetables, an aging Eskimo Pie, and two small cans of concentrated orange juice.

"This'll have to do," he sighed, latching onto the juice and the near-dry pitcher from the refrigerator. "Better make both so we'll have enough." He rotated one, looking for the mixing directions, and found the white plastic totally blank. He shook his head. "Bet Peter did the shopping last time. He's always buying those bargain-basement generics...." The semi-solid orange goo within, however, seemed no different than any other frozen orange juice he'd ever used, and was perhaps even a shade more vividly orange than the Minute Maid in the other can, so he dismissed the discrepancy without a second thought. Maybe someone had just cut off the label to send in for a rebate or something.

The subject, however, came up again while they were eating supper. Ray and Egon were discussing what the latter had — or more appropriately, hadn't — found during his various lab tests; Peter was frowning at the glassful of orange liquid sitting to one side of his plate.

"What is this, Winston, some kind of joke?" he demanded, pointing to the stuff. "Don't you think we've had enough of the color orange for one day?"

"Hey, don't blame it on me," Zeddemore defended. "I wasn't the one who ran everything dry and didn't mention it to anyone. It was this or water."

Venkman continued to eye the thing suspiciously while he chewed his mouthful of vegetables. He considered foregoing any liquid with his meal rather than subject himself to yet another orange substance, but the food was just a little

too much on the dry and salty side for him to maintain that resolution for long. Lifting the glass as one might when toasting his own surrender, he closed his eyes and drank.

The look that slowly contorted his face as the liquid slithered down his throat could be described as nothing less than classic, an expression that had once, in an ad, been called "eating without swallowing."

"That stuff's *terrible*," he finally declared once he'd decided that the taste lingering on his tongue was for real and not a figment of his overactive imagination.

Winston scowled at him. "Oh, come on, Pete, it can't be that bad...." As proof, he also swallowed a large mouthful of the juice, with exactly the same reaction.

"Told you so," was Venkman's impudent retort.

Having been distracted by the exchange, Ray and Egon suspended their business discussion. "I hadn't noticed it was all that bad," Stantz confessed, picking up his own glass, which was already half-drained.

Peter snorted. "Just proves what I've always said about your taste, Ray. You'll eat just about anything."

"I hadn't noticed anything unusual, either," Egon offered in his youngest partner's defense, "though I must admit, I sometimes don't notice things such as flavor subtleties when I'm distracted." Curious, he swallowed a small mouthful of the juice, enough to allow him to render his own evaluation of the taste. He, too, grimaced, though somewhat more aesthetically. "Perhaps it's beyond its expiration date," he speculated, swallowing repeatedly in an attempt to rid his mouth of the awful aftertaste.

Winston shook his head. "I just made this up from concentrate."

"Still could be past its date," Peter said. "Y'know, freezer burn. Things can go bad if they're kept frozen too long."

"Yeah," Ray quipped, grinning. "Like that spud we fought today."

He had meant the comment as nothing more than a timely joke, but, though Peter and Winston both took it as such, Egon did not. An expression of utterly horrified realization crossed the physicist's face.

Apparently, no one noticed it. "Things wouldn't go bad if some people did their share of work around the kitchen," Zeddemore grumbled, his eyes fixed on Peter. "And next time you do the shopping, Pete, I'd appreciate it if you'd quit buying those bargain brands — especially without the labels. That's probably why this stuff tastes so awful. Not even the manufacturer wants to admit what's in it."

Egon's face went dead white as he suddenly leapt to his feet and dashed into the kitchen. Peter watched him go with a sad shake of his head. "Now you've gone and done it, Winston, made poor Egon sick — though it's no big surprise after all that time he spent in the lab, cozying up with that slime. Besides, I didn't do the shopping this last time; Ray did. And I *may* pick up generics sometimes, but I *never* buy anything that doesn't have a label. I don't like rude surprises when I sit down to eat."

The face Zeddemore made at him was one of complete disbelief. He was about to offer a pointed rejoinder when Egon returned, the empty white plastic container in hand. "Winston, you didn't mix this in with the orange juice — did you?" He sounded very much as if he was praying the black man would say no and thus dispel all the terrible things he'd been thinking.

Winston, however, did not cooperate. "Yeah, that's the stuff I was talking about. I don't know who bought that junk, but considering the way it tastes, it just proves everything my Mama taught me about never buying things with the label torn off. I've swallowed motor oil that tasted better...."

None of Spengler's friends had ever seen him display quite the vivid shade of green he turned in that instant. "That's because it wasn't orange juice," he explained. "That was some of the ectoplasm I was freezing as part of the tests."

For what seemed a brief eternity, his three colleagues stared at the physicist in utterly shocked silence; then, they all coughed and choked and gagged and sputtered at once.

"It's *what*?"

"Aaaahhh! Ugggggh — where's the stomach pump? I think I'm gonna die...!"

"Oh, man, that's disgusting! Why didn't you write something on that sucker when you put it in the freezer?"

"Because I didn't know anyone was planning to go into it before I resumed the experiment — and I *certainly* didn't think anyone would be foolish enough to try eating something from an unmarked container."

Ray, who had passed through all available shades of green and was now looking only slightly jaundiced, attempted to inject some small amount of rationality into the discussion. "It's pretty revolting," he admitted, "but I don't think it'll hurt us. According to what Egon told me of the chemical analysis, there isn't anything in it that's even marginally poisonous to humans. And at least it doesn't smell, anymore."

"That's so comforting, Ray," Peter drawled, still looking considerably greener than his partners. "Now tell that to my stomach."

Egon picked up the pitcher containing the remains of the juice-slime mixture. "If it'll make you feel better, I could run some of this through my chemical analyzer, just to make sure it isn't harmful," he volunteered. "But I think Ray is right. It shouldn't do anything more to us than maybe give us a mild case of nausea."

"Speak for yourself," Venkman lamented, clutching his gut. "I suddenly have this uncontrollable urge for a pint of Maalox."

Winston threw him a dubious sidelong glance. "I'd listen to them if I were you, Peter. Get a good night's sleep, and I'll bet you'll have forgotten all about it in the morning."

The others readily agreed, but the contrary psychologist was not so easily convinced.

The next morning, as if setting the tone for the entire day, the telephone rang even before the sun was up, long before Janine was due to arrive for work. Although the noise woke every last one of them, not a one was willing to admit he'd been roused and thus be saddled with the job of answering the call. Eventually, after the thing had continued ringing for a solid minute, Peter spoke up. "All right, whose turn is it to answer the phone?" he muttered, his voice sleep-dry.

"Not mine," Winston answered as he pulled his covers over his head.

"Or mine," Ray added, burying his head under his pillow.

"It isn't mine, either," Peter declared. "Which means...."

"Egon, get the phone," the three called in unison.

The physicist — who had thus far done a most creditable job of pretending he was still asleep — grumbled, his morning voice half an octave lower than usual. "It isn't my turn, either," he pointed out, but rolled over and did the deed, anyway.

"It's a job," he announced when he'd finished the conversation, which had consisted of little more than various acknowledgments of comments being made by the party on the other end.

"Can't it at least wait until dawn?" Venkman whimpered. "No self-respecting ghost'd be stupid enough to get up this early."

"It didn't get up this early," Egon corrected. "It's been up half the night. It's our orange friend again, making a mess of Central Park."

The psychologist shuddered. "Don't mention that thing to me! I had nightmares all night long about drowning in slime and being chased by a demonic stomach pump." He burrowed under his covers. "Let me know when you've captured it, okay?"

Spengler reached out to yank the blankets off his reluctant partner; instead, his watch, which he seldom removed, went flying off his wrist to bounce against the wall beyond Peter's bed.

"Broken clasp?" Ray asked, having seen the accident while dragging himself upright.

His fair-haired friend thought that must be the case, too, until he picked it up and found that not only was the catch unbroken, it was still closed, holding the band in its characteristic ellipse. "Strange," he murmured to himself. A glance at the wear points on the band showed that the clasp was still in its usual position, that it hadn't slipped, as Egon had suspected. Nonetheless, he found that he could easily slide the watch, unopened, over his hand and halfway up his forearm.

Peter, who was in a position to observe the physicist, couldn't resist commenting. "Lost a little weight, Egon?"

"If I did, I did it overnight," he replied, frowning.

"And you're not the only one," Winston put in. When the others glanced in his direction — he was now standing at the foot of his bed — they saw that the pajamas which had fit the dark man reasonably well mere hours before were now inexplicably baggy. And he wasn't alone; a quick series of self-examinations found that they were all suffering from the same peculiar change.

"What happened?" Ray wanted to know. As he stood up, he had to make a swift grab to keep his pajama bottoms from taking a nosedive to the floor.

"I'll bet it had something to do with that slime we drank," Peter suggested darkly. "I *knew* it couldn't be completely harmless."

"Something seems to have caused us a significant amount of weight loss," Egon agreed, "but it could be nothing more than a case of exaggerated dehydration. From my analysis, the residue possessed a remarkable ability for bonding itself to water molecules, and dissipating them."

"So, what do we do about it?" was Winston's question. "Is it gonna get worse?"

Egon was unconcerned. "No, I doubt it. Considering the rapidity with which the substance bonds and the absolute limits of its water-carrying capacity, I would say it's already run its course and will pass out of our systems very shortly. Increasing our fluid intake through the day should rectify the situation."

"Do you think we should go out on a call like this?" Peter asked, genuinely worried. "You know what they say about how fast dehydration can wipe you out."

"In extreme cases."

"And *this* doesn't count as extreme?"

"Abnormal, perhaps," Egon felt, "but not of the magnitude generally considered dangerous. I'm not feeling particularly debilitated, and unless we start showing definite signs of weakness, we can't very well call back and say we aren't coming in to work this morning. That was the Mayor on the phone."

Venkman's shoulders slumped. "Great. Well, we shouldn't keep the nice man waiting. But I can tell you right now, someone else is paying the medical bills if we *do* pass out on the job!"

Egon's observations concerning their general well-being (if not their apparent weight) turned out to be fairly accurate. Although they all experienced some degree of difficulty coping with clothing that seemed sizes too big (a problem that hit Stantz and Spengler the hardest, since they were on the most extreme ends of the weight spectrum), no one displayed any greater than usual lack of stamina as they pursued the orange specter throughout the park.

After well over two hours spent trying to corner the stinking thing, it eluded them again, shifting into a mist that fled through a sewer grating and beyond the range of their sensors. Tired and annoyed and thoroughly frustrated, they four met back where they had parked Ecto-1, oddly grateful for the morning downpour that, though it soaked them to the skin, also washed them, their equipment, and the park clean of the odiferous slime.

"I don't know about you guys," Peter griped as he removed his accelerator and set it in Ecto's storage rack, "but I've just about had enough of this spud. We blasted that thing from one end of the park and back again, four times. Why don't the streams even slow it down?"

"I wish I knew," his physicist-partner sighed as he placed his own pack behind Venkman's. "There has to be something about it, something important we keep missing."

The timbre of his deep voice — atypically depressed — prompted Ray to glance at him, then do an immediate double-take, his original reason for looking at his friend forgotten. "Uh... I don't want to sound like an alarmist or anything, but... is it my imagination, or are you shrinking, Egon?"

The blond man looked back at him, quite perplexed. "What are you talking about?"

Ray obliged, though he seemed equally puzzled. "I'm talking about the fact that ever since I've known you, I've looked you straight in the chin — but we're standing practically eye-to-eye, now."

"He's right," Winston confirmed. "Either we're both seeing things, or you've shrunk, m' man."

Spengler frowned and gave himself a quick once-over. "That would explain why my clothes seem to be fitting so poorly," he mused. He demonstrated the problem by letting one arm fall straight at his side and be covered to the fingertips by the blue sleeve of his jumpsuit. Other than an expression of mild curiosity, he showed no obvious signs of worry over this very mystifying change. He contemplated the matter for a moment or two, then studied his three partners. "But I'm not the only one with the problem. Unless my memory's at fault, we've all... shrunk since we left the firehouse."

Peter took one look at himself, compared what he saw to the others, then screamed. "I knew it! I knew it! It's gotta be that blasted slime we drank! It's just like *The Incredible Shrinking Man*! We're all gonna keep getting smaller and smaller 'til we get sucked right down the cosmic drain!"

Winston grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him hard. "Calm down, Peter, get a grip! You're hysterical!"

"Of *course* I'm hysterical! Yesterday, I had my whole life ahead of me — fame, fortune, romance — and now, all I can look forward to is a guest spot in the next edition of *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*! I'm too young to die!" he added with a plaintive wail.

Winston shook him again; Ray tried to offer some positive thinking. "C'mon, it's not that bad. We'll pack up here, go home, and have a look at what the chemical analyzer has to say about the stuff we drank. I'll bet it's all only temporary and we'll be fine in a few hours."

But the effect showed no sign of reversing by the time they reached their headquarters; it had visibly accelerated during the trip, so much so that Janine — who had arrived for work during their absence — noticed the change the second they emerged from Ecto-1.

"What happened this time?" she asked, nearly as horrified as she'd been the night before.

"Just a little accident," Ray assured her. "We're gonna find out what to do about it right now."

What they found, however, did nothing whatsoever to assuage their worries.

"It's really a very complicated situation," Egon announced after he'd had time to study the analyzer's data. "It seems that certain highly unusual — one might even say alien — elements in the residue combined with certain common elements in the orange juice, producing a hitherto undiscovered chemical compound with remarkable osmotic and rejuvenescent properties, giving it the ability to cause a state of phenomenally rapid cellular restructuring—"

"Bottom line, Egon," Peter interrupted. "Tell us what's going on."

"I was trying to do just that...."

"In English."

The scientist hesitated, then shrugged. "We aren't getting smaller. We're getting *younger*."

It took more than a minute for his colleagues to grasp the significance of that revelation. While they stood there staring blankly at the physicist, he elaborated. "I'd suspected as much when I realized we weren't all shrinking at a uniform

rate, and that the changes in our features and proportions have reflected more than a mere reduction in size. This simply confirms it. We've been physically regressing ever since we ingested the compound. From analysis of the evidence, I'd say our current corporeal ages have reverted to... oh, somewhere in our late teens or early twenties, depending on our original ages."

"Is that possible?" Winston wanted to know. "I've never heard of anything like that outside of science fiction stories...."

"There are precedents in nature," Egon noted. "The rapid regenerative powers of certain sea-creatures, the worm's ability to regrow entirely from severed parts...."

"Yeah, but we aren't worms or jellyfish. How could just swallowing some ghost's ectoplasm do *this*?"

"That's an over-simplified statement of the facts. The chemical process is considerably more complicated; it wasn't the ectoplasm alone that caused this. Moreover, there are other possible explanations, if you're willing to accept the theory that persistent myths and legends do, in fact, have some basis in reality."

"Like all the Central American and Oriental legends about a fountain of youth," Ray suggested, seeing the connection.

Spengler nodded. "Exactly. Now, I really can't say if those stories were the result of similar accidents with an entity such as this, but in any case, our elusive orange friend isn't really a ghost, not within our definitions of the term."

That statement was met with various expressions of perplexity and disbelief. "Yesterday you said it *was* a ghost," Winston said, now totally confused.

Again, the physicist shrugged. "Then I was wrong."

"Well, if it isn't a ghost, then what is it?" Ray asked.

"I don't really know, but I'm certain it's nothing we've ever encountered before. From all indications, this creature is actually some apparently extinct form of life, semi-supernatural in nature and systemically based on a form of ectoplasm rather than the standard biochemicals of earthly carbon-based life. Its unstable molecular structure allows it to transform itself into that mist-like state we've seen it use to escape from unpleasant situations, and the rejuvenating properties of its ectoplasm would seem to be a vital part of its natural healing process, allowing the creature to renew its bodily structure from microsecond to microsecond."

"Oh, great," Peter groaned. "There's your science fiction, Winston. We've gone from *The Incredible Shrinking Man* to *Forbidden Planet*. Only we're getting eaten up by a dripping orange gooper instead of by Monsters from the Id."

"We aren't getting 'eaten up,' Peter," Egon chided. "We're becoming chronophysically restructured."

Zeddemore was no less puzzled — and no more amused — than before. "But we've got about as much in common with that... thing as a horse has got with a sponge!"

"Less, actually," Egon reflected, "since both a horse and a sponge are carbon-based life forms, and the entity isn't."

"Whatever. Why would swallowing its healing whatever-it-is affect us like *this*?"

The physicist remained blithely undisturbed. It always amazed his partners how calmly he could face the possibility of his own destruction if there was a new and intriguing scientific discovery to be had in the process. Though it could be occasionally annoying, they had long ago learned to accept it as part of what made him Egon. "Under normal circumstances, contact with the stuff — even internally — shouldn't have affected us at all, but as I said, it was the combination of the alien elements with certain common trace elements in the orange juice that seriously altered the biochemical circumstances. It's possible, even probable, that other naturally-occurring compounds in our digestive systems contributed to the reaction. Actually, it's a shame we don't have the facilities to study this in considerably greater depth. Researchers have spent centuries looking for a chemical stimulant to set off just this sort of restructuring process, and if we could isolate it, we could render an inestimable service to science and medicine."

"And if pigs had wings, they could fly," Venkman muttered, head shaking.

"Well, that's true," the physicist allowed. "Given that the only known source of the unknown elements is the creature,

and the fact that we cannot allow it to continue roaming at large, we'd have an extremely limited supply of materials we may not even be able to synthesize."

Winston sighed. "Great. We don't even know what this thing really is — how're we supposed to catch it?"

Egon seemed not at all concerned by that problem. "As far as our equipment is concerned, the creature should react like any other non-ghostly ectoplasmic entity. We should be able to trap and contain it, even though our accelerators have very little effect on it."

"Yeah, and *should* is the operative term, here," Peter observed wryly. "What if we *can't* trap it? What then?"

"More to the point," Ray said grimly, having been digesting all these revelations while the others had carried on their debate, "what about this rejuvenation effect? Will it stop before we turn into little globs of nothing?"

"Yes," Egon answered, his confidence relieving the others' worries until he added, "but not significantly short of that point. Based on the speed of the chemical reaction, I estimate that the regression will continue until we reach approximately age two, at which point the process will stabilize and, eventually, reverse."

Winston heaved a large sigh of relief. "That's not so bad."

"That's not so good, either," was Peter's opinion. "Just think what a thing like this can do to your love life."

The dark man shrugged. "So? It won't last. How long can the whole cycle take, after all?"

"From inception to maximum regression," Egon provided, "about thirty hours, with the effect accelerating the closer we come to the stabilization point. But once we've reached it, the effect will become permanent."

"What do you mean, 'permanent'?" Ray asked, not liking the sound of it.

"I mean that once this process moves beyond the regression stage, the only way we will regain our true chronophysical age is by living and growing through it all over again, at the normal rate."

Though he had thus far maintained a reasonable state of composure despite all the bad news, the sound Peter made in response to that announcement was unnervingly akin to the cry of a wounded coyote. "That's terrible! I *hated* childhood the first time around — I sure as heck don't want to go through it all again!"

"It's not really as bad as it sounds," Egon tried to reassure him. "It's only a cosmetic difference, after all. Even if we can't find an antidote in time, we'll retain everything we now know; we'll still have our adult minds and personalities, even though they'll be in children's bodies. It wouldn't be exceptionally intolerable. In fact, I find it all rather fascinating...."

"You found being turned into a ghost and zapped into the Netherworld fascinating!" was Venkman's comeback, not in the least bit calmed by his partner's observation. "And it's easy for you to say. You know how to deal with it 'cause you were *born* with a thirty-year-old brain! What about the rest of us? What about my career, my future — my suave and sophisticated man-of-the-world image?"

Janine, who had been listening in numb silence, finally spoke up. "There *is* a way to reverse it before it becomes permanent — isn't there?"

Egon nodded. "Theoretically, yes. But at the moment, I couldn't tell you what it is."

"Then we've got to get to work on it right away," Ray declared, "before time runs out on us. How much longer do we have?"

Spengler glanced at the lab's wall clock, since his wristwatch had become unwearable half-an-hour before; he did some hasty computations. "Less than twelve hours."

He didn't sound especially pleased with that; Winston picked up on it immediately. "How long will it take to find an antidote?" he asked.

The physicist shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Then quit wasting time and talking about it and get going!" Peter suggested, overwrought. "Before /end up spending the next twenty years looking for the cure to teenage skin problems!"

Egon and Ray immediately set about searching for the answer to this totally unexpected crisis. Winston did everything he could to help — which admittedly wasn't very much; his talents were of a more physical and mechanical nature, having come from Army training rather than a college education — while Janine held down the fort in the front office and Peter fretted over the horror of it all. They had done no more than two hours of relatively fruitless work when yet another call came in, this from a small medical research lab in Weehawken, New Jersey.

"It sounds pretty much like the same slimer again," Janine told the four when they'd assembled around her desk. "If you ask me, you might be better off ignoring it, considering how much good you've been able to do in getting rid of it, so far."

"She's got a point," Peter was eager to agree. "We really shouldn't waste a minute looking for an antidote — and just think what it could do to our reputations if our public saw us looking like *this*."

Like this meant significantly younger than before. Winston, the eldest of them, appeared no older than a very youngish eighteen while Ray, the youngest, barely looked old enough to be out of grammar school. To make matters worse, none of them owned any clothes that fit even halfway decently anymore, which simply heightened their adolescent semblances by making them appear to be a group of slightly out-of-fashion teenagers.

In spite of all that, Ray was unwilling to side with his psychologist cohort. "But we can't just leave those poor guys in the lurch," he insisted, blinking in surprise when his voice cracked on the last word and squeaked upward by almost an octave. He swallowed and took a deep breath, hoping to regain control of his voice. "They *did* call us for help...."

"Yeah, and a fat lot of help we've been to anyone," Winston remarked, wondering how long it would be before his own voice started to go on him.

The occultist refused to be swayed. "At least we've been able to drive the thing away before it does any serious damage or hurt anyone," he rebutted, resigning himself to the fact that his voice wasn't going to settle back into its proper tenor range.

"Maybe some of you should go, and some of you should stay behind," Janine suggested. "That way you don't have to leave the clients unprotected, and you can still keep working on the antidote."

"Perhaps, if we didn't need all four of us to just annoy the thing," Egon observed. His own voice didn't resonate quite as deeply as usual, but it was still in a vastly more solid condition than Ray's. "Unless we're gone for more than two hours, leaving now shouldn't present any obstacle to our research. We have to wait for the sample we put in the freezer to solidify, and for our current experiment to complete its precipitation reaction. Besides, I could use some dimethylsulfoxide for the next stage."

"Some... *what?*" Winston asked, not sure he'd heard quite right.

"Dimethylsulfoxide — DMSO, for short. It's a solvent with unique catalytic properties, popularly used to — oh, never mind," the physicist cut short his own explanation when his colleague's confusion seemed to deepen, not lessen. "Suffice it to say that I'd find having some on hand potentially useful, and a medical research facility would be just the place to get it."

Hearing that, Peter's shoulders slumped in defeat, weighed down with the knowledge that they were about to go out in spite of his logical arguments to the contrary. Janine frowned worriedly at her steadily youthening light-of-love. "Are you sure this'll be all right?" she asked, her eyes flitting from Egon to Ray, who seemed to be the only other person with a firm grasp of their current predicament.

"Absolutely," Stantz beamed with his best positive-attitude sunniness. "It's really just a simple flushing-out operation. What could possibly go wrong?"

On their way back, they found out, in no uncertain terms.

"This is really getting to be a pain in the neck," Winston declared as Ecto-1 stood in line in the heavy noon-rush traffic waiting to get through the toll gate and back to Manhattan via the Lincoln Tunnel. "It's not bad enough that the thing wasn't even there anymore by the time we reached the lab, but now we've gotta put up with this blasted traffic 'cause nobody remembered the exact change for the tolls. An' I gotta tell you, if my legs get any shorter, I'm not only gonna have to roll up my pants legs just to keep from tripping over 'em, I'm gonna need to tie blocks on my feet like the kid in that Indiana Jones movie, just so I can reach the pedals!"

He was exaggerating his current state just a bit, since his condition was close to that of a fourteen year old; but he also wasn't the only one in a surly mood. Peter hadn't left home in the best of spirits; discovering that they needn't have gone out at all didn't improve them, and they were made triply worse when he took a look at himself in the rear-view mirror and saw that he was heading rapidly toward pre-adolescence, now sporting the physical appearance of someone pushing twelve. The barely-moving traffic was the icing on his bitter cake and, rather than risk being seen by anyone in a passing vehicle, he crouched down in the back seat, trying his best to achieve true invisibility.

"The trip wasn't a total loss, Winston," Egon noted, considerably less disturbed than Venkman by his similarly juvenile guise, which approximated his appearance at age thirteen. "At least I was able to get the DMSO for our experiment...." Midway through the last word, his voice slipped into a much higher register, a good two octaves above its usual pitch. For a moment, his eyes widened with surprise, then narrowed again in displeasure. "Oh, crumbs," he sighed, eliciting a chuckle from Peter.

"Now you know how the rest of us feel, Spengs," he teased, having lost his adult voice shortly after Ray.

"It was kinda funny, though, the way we had to twist the client's arm to get him to believe we really are who we say we are," Ray reflected, amused by the memory, even if Peter wasn't. "If we're lucky, we won't get any more calls today, so we can just go home, get this problem licked, and worry about the slimer tomorrow."

"I think maybe we're about to find something else we're gonna have to worry about first," Winston muttered as they neared the toll both, his own voice cracking with dismay. He pointed to the policeman who was standing just outside the cashier's station, monitoring the cars as they went by to make sure people were keeping their seatbelts buckled.

Egon, who had been doing calculations on his pocket computer while they waited to get through the gate, glanced up when he heard the anxious note in Zeddemore's voice. "You know," he reflected aloud, as if the matter were of only minor consequence, "it hadn't occurred to me before this moment, but we could get in serious trouble if we get caught driving a car looking like this, couldn't we?"

"You think?" Peter quipped, sinking down to the floor of the back seat. "We're doomed!"

"Maybe not," Winston said more calmly, trying to put on his best teenager-with-a-brand-new-license demeanor. "If we play it cool, they might not even notice anything's wrong."

Venkman whimpered piteously and tried to crawl under his seat. "*Nobody* can play it that cool."

He was right.

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting in a New Jersey police station, waiting for someone to fill out the paperwork so that they could make their allotted phone calls before getting thrown wherever delinquent kids were thrown until their parents or guardians or parole officers or whatever showed up to claim them.

"I *knew* we should've stayed home," Peter told his partners under his breath for the umpteenth time. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it—"

"Okay, enough already, we get the picture," Winston hissed back. "Just keep your mouth shut before you say something stupid and get us into even more trouble."

"I don't think that's possible...."

"Heck, they can't hold us here for very long," Ray felt naively certain. "Can they?"

Zeddemore's expression was grim. "If they really think we're a bunch of JD's who stole Ecto-1, not to mention all

these wallets we've got with our money and ID's and credit cards in 'em... you bet they could. This is no misdemeanor we're lookin' at, Ray. Car theft was still a felony, last I heard, and bein' 'kids' might not make any difference."

"But it's our car!" Stantz protested — so loudly, he drew the attention of one of the officers near the main desk, who headed their way.

"That's it," Peter lamented. "We're really in for it now."

"All right, you four," the officer announced as he swept them with a very stern gaze. "We need your parents' phone numbers so we can call them down here...."

"My parents are dead," Ray piped up before thinking better of it. Peter whimpered.

The officer, however, gave them all a second, slightly less unsympathetic glance. "You're orphans? All of you? Foster kids?"

Stantz was about to say no when Winston nudged him in the ankle to shut him up. "Yeah, that's right, we're foster kids," he lied as convincingly as he could (which, considering his background in both Harlem and the Army, was pretty convincing). "And a lot *you* care about it, I'll bet," he snarled as a finishing touch.

It was just the proper amount of street-kid mouthiness needed to get the policeman to buy it. "Okay, then, we'll need the name and phone number of your guardian or social worker. And don't give me a hard time," he warned, "or you'll regret it. Understand?"

Egon, who had caught onto Winston's ploy more quickly than the others, played along. "Of course," he acknowledged, doing polite in contrast to Zeddemore's tough. "But she works during the day, so you'll have to call her there. Her name's Janine Melnitz, and the number's 555-2878."

The officer quickly scribbled down the information, then strode off. Ray watched him go, then turned to the two of his partners who weren't useless with despair. "Will this work?" he whispered, having learned the folly of speaking too loudly. "Do you think Janine'll figure out what happened and go along with it?"

"I hope so," Winston sighed. "'Cause if she doesn't, we're gonna be in a whole mess of trouble."

Egon agreed. "In more ways than one. Look at the time." He indicated the large wall clock hanging behind the precinct sergeant's desk. "We've only got eight hours left — and we *still* haven't found the antidote."

"I don't know *how* those kids manage to keep getting in trouble like this," Janine told the officer in charge of the case as he led her through the station to the room in which the "kids" in question were being held. When she'd first gotten the call from the Weehawken police, she'd been totally confused by the tale they'd babbled at her, about a group of JD's stealing Ecto-1 and taking it for a joyride, until the patrol officer who'd caught them mentioned some cock-and-bull story the delinquents had given him about really being much older than they looked. That had been enough to tip her off. Once she realized what was afoot, she went along with whatever scenario the police seemed to believe, just to get the guys out of jail before it was too late. "Confidentially," she told the officer, "I've never much liked this bunch, but hey, you know what they say about giving underprivileged kids a helping hand."

"Yeah, until they help themselves to whatever isn't nailed down," the officer grumbled. "Some kids are just plain bad, Miss, and if you want my opinion, you'd be better off letting us throw these punks into a detention center for a while. They might've cost you your job, running off with your bosses' car like that." He stopped in front of a windowless, featureless door and fumbled for the key to unlock it. "That'd teach 'em not to go around stealing from honest citizens, then trying to lie their way off the hook with a ridiculous story about really being a bunch of adult scientists who're getting younger 'cause of some freak chemical accident." He snorted as he fit key to lock and turned it. "Hokey excuses like that belong in bad science fiction movies, not in the mouths of little kids—"

The words died in his throat and his jaw hit the floor as he opened the door and looked inside. There, he saw not what he'd anticipated — that being the quartet of pre-teen youngsters he'd confined no more than ninety minutes ago. Rather, he was greeted with the unexpected and inexplicable sight of four boys with the identical coloration and same much-too-large clothing as those he'd left behind — only now, the clothes were even more ill fitting, and not a one of these boys looked more than a day over ten.

"I don't believe this," he breathed, even though he had all the proof he needed sitting right in front of him.

"Hi, Janine," the brown-haired one said with considerably greater cheer than he'd displayed since being taken into custody. "Glad to see you've finally dropped by to bail us out."

Janine turned to the dumbstruck officer, smiling crookedly. "Now do you believe them?" she asked.

"Thanks for coming after us, Janine," Winston said a short time later as she drove them all back to Manhattan in Ecto-1.

"Yeah," Ray joined in, "you showed up just about in the nick of time. I was afraid they were going to keep us there until it was too late."

"Unlikely," was Egon's opinion. "Eventually, they'd have seen the proof of what we told them, just as they did, and they would've let us go."

"Maybe," Peter said, immensely glad to be out of there and on his way home to familiar surroundings and — much more importantly — privacy. "But by then, we'd have had to hire someone to drive us back, too." He wiggled his much-too-short-for-the-task legs for emphasis.

The secretary chuckled. "In that case, maybe I should start charging you guys cab fare. At the rate we're moving, I'd make a small fortune, with the meter running."

Spengler sat up as straight as he could to peer out over the edge of his window at the thick mid-afternoon traffic. "I hope this doesn't take too long. I may be mistaken, but from strictly observational evidence, I'd say there's a very good chance the regression is accelerating more swiftly than anticipated."

"Now try that again in English," Peter suggested, his grumpiness having made him unwilling to even try to interpret explanations containing words of more than one syllable.

Egon obliged. "We may not have as much time as I'd thought. I estimate..." He glanced down at his pocket computer, having to hold his glasses steady to keep them on his nose. "...three hours, no more."

That was plain enough to rekindle Venkman's worries. "Can't you get this crate moving any faster, Janine?" he urged.

"But why would it start accelerating?" Winston wanted to know, unable to think of a single even vaguely logical reason.

"Simple entropy," Egon replied, always happy for an opportunity to enlighten the less well-informed. "The overall effect of this cellular restructuring is toward anti-production rather than reproduction, and as the basic molecular recombination results in mass reduction, the waste heat enhances the requisite conditions, increasing the efficiency of the entire process, causing it to accelerate — and quite likely raising our internal temperatures somewhat, though, to all evidence, not so radically as to present us any actual physical danger — which in itself is rather startling, considering the amount of mass undergoing conversion and the rapidity of the process, although I suspect that some aspect of the creature's semi-supernatural nature is in effect here, causing most of the excess energy to tunnel through to some symbiotic parallel dimension in need of it...."

Zeddemore groaned. Peter grinned. "You had to ask," he teased, glad he'd required Egon to give him a more straightforward answer to his own question.

"That's not your only problem," Janine added. "While you were gone, you got at least two more calls wanting you to do something about that what'sit."

Winston's eyes rolled expressively. "Oh, great, that's just what we need, more trouble."

"What're we going to do?" Ray asked of anyone who might offer some suggestion, his boyish treble full of real concern. "We can't just ignore them. People might get hurt...."

"No one's been hurt thus far, Raymond," Egon observed helpfully. "And I don't see that there's much else we *can*

do. Right now, finding an antidote to our condition has to take top priority."

"You've got that right," Peter concurred. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I had a hard enough time just picking up my accelerator when we left that lab in Weehawken — and that was more'n six inches ago. How are we supposed to fight *anything* when we aren't even big enough or strong enough to lift and carry our equipment?"

"An astute observation," his blond colleague agreed. "Even if we *do* find a cure for this strange syndrome afflicting us, the reversal won't happen immediately. It'll take at least as long for us to revert back to normal as it took for us to regress, and probably much longer."

"Why?" Winston wanted to know. "Won't the process accelerate on the way up just like it did on the way down?"

"From all the evidence we've found thus far, no. Like I said, it's the waste heat of the mass reduction causing the acceleration, and there won't *be* any mass reduction once the entropy's reversed. If I had the antidote right here and now and gave it to all of us, it would still take at least another twelve to eighteen hours for us to grow back to a size and strength sufficient to use our equipment. As it is, we've actually been quite fortunate. Given the speed with which this process is taking place, it could easily have raised our internal temperatures to the point where it would have killed us, by now."

His partners absorbed that very sobering fact with respectful silence. Janine sighed softly. "Be that as it may, I don't think that orange friend of yours is gonna cooperate and lay low long enough for you to grow back again." There was no marked distress in her voice, no worry that an antidote would not be found; she had every confidence that Egon would find that solution before it was too late.

"So it's a dead-end street, isn't it?" Peter said glumly, sounding precisely like an unhappy child on the verge of a major sulk. "No matter what we do, that critter's gonna waste the entire Tri-State area."

"Not necessarily," Ray contradicted, the glimmer of optimism in his voice and eyes enhanced by his juvenile appearance. "I have some ideas on how we can get around the equipment problem — but I'll need some help. Egon, if you can finish the lab work by yourself, Peter and Winston can give me a hand...."

"But—" the physicist began, turning around in his seat to face Stantz, an action that made his glasses very nearly fly off his face. "—I'm not sure I can do it alone, either, Ray."

Venkman laughed. "Yeah, he needs someone to help him keep picking up his glasses. Why the heck are you still wearing 'em anyway, Egon? If this whate ver-it-is, this syndrome really *is* rejuvenating us, shouldn't your eyes have gotten better by now?"

Spengler was not perturbed. "I have congenital myopia, Peter, not degenerative. It's a genetic condition. I've been wearing glasses almost since I was born."

He said it with such detached matter-of-factness, the psychologist could find nothing to say but, "Oh."

"And in some ways, that's *exactly* why I need someone to help," Egon continued. "I can do the computer work and analyzation and actual calculations alone, but it won't be quite so easy doing the actual chemical work. I set up the lab for my own convenience when I was six-three, not three-six — or less," he amended ruefully, noting his current size. "Just getting things off of shelves will take an unprecedented amount of time...."

"Hey," Janine interjected, suddenly imbued with eagerness, "if all you need is a lab assistant to pick up stuff and fetch and carry and all that, I could do it. I got good grades in high school chemistry, an' some of my college courses required that kind of lab work, so I know my way around, pretty well."

"That might be just what you need," Ray approved enthusiastically. "She'd sure be a bigger help in the lab than any of us, right now — no pun intended."

Egon unbegrudgingly conceded him the point. He glanced at their secretary, keeping hold of his glasses to make certain they didn't fly off again. "Are you sure you wouldn't mind, Janine? It's apt to be very boring work, for you?"

The smile she gave in return was wry. "Any more boring than what you people pay me to do? Besides, I always kinda enjoyed that end of my anthropology studies, so it might actually be fun, for a change. And you know I'd do just about anything for you, Egon." She thought about it a moment, giggled softly, and, unable to resist the opportunity for teasing, added, "You little heartbreaker you."

The physicist shook his head and looked heavenward in an eloquent expression of mild exasperation; small gagging noises rose up from the back seat. "Somebody find me a bucket," Venkman quipped sourly, sounding thoroughly nauseated by the exchange, "'cause widdle Petey here is gonn a throw up."

It took them almost an hour to finally make it back to the firehouse, even with the use of Ecto's sirens and high visibility. When they arrived, Janine presented them with an assortment of child-sized clothing, somewhat worn stuff outgrown by her nephew that she'd brought to replace (temporarily, she hoped) the awkwardly inappropriate and now wholly unwearable gear they'd scavenged from among their adult wardrobes.

Peter — ever image-conscious, even child-sized — sniffed critically as he poked through the sacks in search of something he deemed wearable. "Wonderful," he grumbled dryly, wrinkling his nose at various items as he pulled them out and tossed them aside in disdain, like a kid going through his toybox and finding nothing new enough to play with. "Does bad taste run in your family? I can't wear junk like this! Half of it's got little duckies and horsies printed all over it!"

"Don't look a gift horsie in the mouth, Pete," Ray observed good-naturedly, finding the pun too good to pass up.

Venkman stuck out his tongue, mostly to chide the occultist for intruding on what he felt was his private turf, but also because it just felt like the right thing to do, given their increasingly infantile appearances. "Well, if you like it all so much, then here's something that'll be perfect for you," he said in the almost whiney sing-song of childish sarcasm. He held up an over-washed and fading Disney World t-shirt with Mickey Mouse prominently pictured in the design.

Considering the vernacular meanings of the phrase "Mickey Mouse" — all of which were singularly uncomplimentary — Peter's implication wasn't very hard to fathom. Ray's immediate reaction was quite in keeping with the current status quo: He pouted. "That wasn't very nice," he said, miffed.

"Neither is this pile of crap," Peter granted, scowling at the clothes he'd scattered about.

"Are you calling me a mouse?"

"Hey, if the ears fit..."

Ray — who looked every bit ready to fly into a genuine three-year-old's tantrum — frowned, his face reddening, flung down whatever he'd been holding, and yelled, "Take that back!"

"Why?" Peter wanted to know, thoroughly the smart-mouthed JD. "It isn't my fault if you are."

"I am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am—"

"HOLD IT!" Winston bellowed, seeming ever so much more mature in his current sevenish guise. His shout was sufficiently loud and strident to break through the screaming match and get the others' attention. "This isn't getting us anywhere, guys," he said in a considerably more rational tone once they'd started to calm down.

"I'll say," Janine quipped with a rueful shake of her head. "Looks to me like this rejuvenation whatever-it-is is starting to affect your brains, too."

"But Peter started it!" Ray protested.

"I did not!" came the instant rebuttal.

"Did so!"

"Did not!!" Peter insisted, punctuating his claim with a shove.

Ray wasn't above shoving back. "Did so!!"

"Did not!!!"

Janine groaned, aghast at what was occurring right in front of her desk. "I can't believe I'm actually seeing this...!"

Egon, who had been on the opposite side of the desk and had climbed atop it to examine the messages Janine had taken while they'd been out, looked up and studied his partners curiously. "I can," he said after a moment. "Hormonal changes are an inevitable part of the rejuvenation process, and such sudden and profound alterations were bound to cause some degree of emotional stress and instability."

"Then you'd better find the antidote quick, Egon, or you're gonna need to hire a nanny, not a secretary!"

"Did so!!!" the argument had continued, each declaration punctuated by an increasingly strong shove.

"Did—"

"Stop it!" Winston ordered, stepping between the two to break it up.

Peter wasn't the least bit fazed by the intrusion; he simply shoved Winston, too.

That was all it took to bring back all of Zeddemore's long-since outgrown street-kid instincts. With an annoyed, "Cut it out!" he pushed back, hard.

Which, of course, meant that Peter had to push back even harder, a tussle that continued for a few seconds until the petulant psychologist shoved Winston so hard, he stumbled back into Ray (who'd been looking for a good opening to take another shot at Peter), and knocked him over with enough force to crack Stantz's head against Janine's desk.

"Hey, that hurt!" the undersized occultist whimpered, his voice exhibiting the sort of pathetic tremble that any adult could recognize as the preamble to tears.

"Well, then stay out of the way!" Winston snapped belligerently, not about to sit still and get pinned with the rap.

"It's all your fault," Peter accused, suddenly taking Ray's side like a big brother sticking up for the baby of the family. "No one asked you to butt in!"

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah!"

Janine sighed loudly, exasperated by the whole impossible incident. "Aren't you gonna join in, too?" she asked Egon with the epitome of disgusted sarcasm.

The physicist was appalled, both by the situation and the suggestion. "And lower myself to the level of an ill-mannered three-year-old? Certainly n—mrph!"

Out of the melee of flying clothing that had suddenly erupted a few feet away, a wadded up blue sweatshirt intended for Winston missed its target and instead hit Egon right in the face. While he was sneezing lint out of his nose, picking up his glasses, and trying very hard not to give in to a sudden and irrationally overwhelming urge to hurl the thing back — a struggle made evident by the flare of color in his face and the flash of childish anger in his eyes — Peter laid hands on the nearest solid object — the reception desk's phone book — and turned back toward Winston with murder in his eyes.

That was when Janine decided enough was enough.

She waded in, easily pushing them apart. "All right, that's it!" she commanded, grabbing the wriggling combatants by their collars and dragging them apart. When they struggled to get loose and back at each others' throats, she put her foot down — literally. "*STOP IT!*" she shouted, her voice sufficiently loud and shrill to silence any protests.

Hostilities ceased immediately. The resulting silence was disturbed only by the panting breaths of Winston and Peter

as they made an effort to calm down, and by the quiet whimpers from Ray, who was still nursing the lump on the back of his head. Leaning over without letting go of the other two, Janine examined the injury briefly to make sure no real damage had been done. "You'll live," she assured him, then returned a less sympathetic glare to Peter and Winston. "But I'm not so sure about you two. For cryin' out loud, would you *look* at yourselves? How the heck do you expect to get anything done on a deadline if you start thinking and *behaving* like a bunch of brats, picking fights over something this stupid?"

"But—" Peter started to protest, only to again be cut short by a sharp glance from Janine.

"No buts," she said sternly. "When I brought this stuff here, I was trying to do you a *favor*, Doctor V. It'll be a lot easier for you to find all these answers you need if you don't have to worry about something as trivial as knocking over beakers with a dragging sleeve or banging yourselves up by tripping over your own pants. Remember: If you *don't* get this work done — and soon! — you're gonna be spending a lot more time in diapers. So if you don't like the stuff I brought, just think about *that* for a minute!"

Venkman didn't a minute, or even half a minute; two seconds was enough time enough to return his adult sobriety. He looked from one to the others of his partners, his expression genuinely contrite. "Sorry, Winston. Sorry, Ray." He sounded just like a subdued little boy who had indeed learned the error of his ways, realizing that he'd been fighting with two of his best friends.

Satisfied when the others responded in kind, Janine let them go. At once, Peter started sifting through the offered clothing, picking up a rumpled t-shirt and treating it with much greater respect. "I guess one should never argue with real generosity," he said quietly.

"Thanks, Janine," Ray added, embarrassed but inarguably grateful. "This'll help."

"Amen to that," Winston agreed abashedly as he helped his partners start picking up.

As soon as they'd gotten changed — a process that took very little time, since they were all but falling out of the clothes they were in — they went to work on their various assignments. While Egon hurried to find an answer to their physical dilemma before it was too late, Ray and Winston put their heads together to come up with solutions to their equipment problems. The latter difficulty seemed more pressing than ever, for they'd been home no more than ten minutes when the phone began to ring — and kept ringing, with more and more people reporting sightings and incidents involving their obnoxious orange slimer. Janine had been in favor of simply shutting off the phones until they were ready to deal with it, but both Egon and Ray insisted they needed to keep track of the thing's movements so that they could strike most effectively when there were finally prepared. To that end, Peter — whose skills in R and D were mediocre, at best — was enlisted to answer the phone, take messages, and track the entity's progress throughout the city. Some people were unwilling to talk to him, since they were certain a child would never be answering the Ghostbusters' phone, but when he started to identify himself as "Doctor Venkman's nephew," with the explanation that his unde and the rest of the staff were busy in the lab, working on a solution to the current crisis, they accepted him much more readily and left the needed information.

He had totally lost track of the time and the number of calls he'd taken when, during a brief respite, he glanced at his reflection in the computer monitor's screen and frowned at what he saw. He'd completely forgotten about the annoying cowlick that had been his grooming nemesis throughout the earlier years of childhood. His mother and her friends had called it "cute," but he would have given anything to get rid of it and the peer teasing that had gone along with it once he'd started school. If he was going to be stuck with that all over again.... He scowled and attempted to smooth it away, trying to console himself with the thought that, in this crowd, he wouldn't be alone. Winston, at the not-quite five he looked to be, had the sort of cheeks grandmothers love to pinch and loving-cup ears that would have done Dumbo proud. Ray could currently pass himself off as the winning applicant for some toddler-product commercial, one of the sort that show chubby little kids too cute for words who could get away with anything just by smiling; and when he'd last seen Egon, the regressing physicist had strongly reminded him of once-popular paintings by a guy named Keane, pictures Peter liked to call "starving waif" portraits, since they always depicted almost delicately thin children with eyes far too big for their heads. The image was only enhanced by his oversized glasses and the fact that the best-fitting clothes they could find for him were still a bit baggy, as Janine's nephew had been fairly stout at that age, whereas Egon had always been slender.

Feeling vaguely reassured by the knowledge that, if the worst happened, he wouldn't suffer through it in companionless isolation, he glanced at the rest of himself and suddenly realized that he hadn't changed all that much since he'd last looked, almost an hour ago. Fighting back a rise of panic, he wondered if it was already too late, if Egon had missed their biological deadline and doomed them all to a second round of childhood when a particularly exuberant shout of, "Yes!!!" followed by a horrified, "Egon, wait, not that way!" echoed all the way down from the third floor lab. He and his cohorts, who

had been doing their equipment work in the garage, looked up at the sounds and were about to start running to see what had happened when the physicist came to them instead, sliding down the firepole — a dangerous stunt for someone who was by now not quite the size of an average four-year-old — with an anxious Janine only a short distance behind.

Yep, Peter thought distractedly as he watched Egon touch down on the garage floor, *still looks like he just walked outta one of those crummy paintings*. Either he or Janine had apparently come up with the bright idea of attaching string to the temple-pieces of his glasses and tying them at the back of his head so that they'd be less likely to fly off at the slightest motion. They did bounce off his nose slightly when he landed, but they stayed more or less in place.

"I think I've got it!" Spengler announced, as pleased and relieved by the prospect as any of them.

"You only *think*?" Venkman echoed, ever the skeptic, even at three. "Don't you *know*?"

"What'd you find?" Ray asked, more hopeful than the psychologist, since, as the youngest, he was also closest to that dreaded point of no return. And from the look of him — at best a few months past his second birthday — he was within perhaps fifteen minutes of a head-on collision with that dead-end.

"The missing factor," Egon happily provided, as excited as a kid who has just finished his first successful experiment with a new chemistry set. "All along, I've suspected that temperature was somehow important to the chemical processes, and I was right. The bonding reaction that formed the compounds responsible for our condition occurs only at marginally elevated temperatures — ninety-five degrees and above, to be precise."

Listening to him, Peter couldn't help but smile. Even with his voice three octaves above normal and imbued with a usually more controlled delight, he still managed to sound like the same old Egon.

Winston caught on at once, proud of himself for managing to follow the drift of his intellectual colleague's explanation (an all too rare occurrence). "Like the temperatures inside a human body," he deduced.

"Right," he was congratulated. "Not only that, but I found that at moderate temperatures — such as those in a room or even outside, at this time of year — the product of the reaction changes, resulting, upon contact with air, in a precipitant with extraordinarily non-conductive properties."

Ray's eyes went round with wonder as he grasped this less self-explanatory elucidation. "Then that's why the thing's so impervious to our weapons!" he concluded. "The outer layer of its ectoplasm really *is* armoring it."

Though he had heard and reasonably understood most of the discourse, Peter remained puzzled. "But we've never run into anything like that before," he noted. "Nowhere on Earth, as a matter of fact — or even in the Netherworld."

"That's just the point," Egon replied, latching onto his timely observation. "This isn't an Earthly creature at all. As near as I can tell, it's something totally alien to our environment."

A horrible notion occurred to Winston. "Does that mean we're gonna have to worry about more of these things showing up?" He had a terrible vision of the rain of Martian war-machines in *The War of the Worlds*, which they had seen on TV a few nights before.

Ray, however, neutralized that concern without a second thought. "I doubt it. There's no PKE crossrip involved here. Remember, that thing was frozen in solid ice up in the Arctic Circle for who knows how many years, and was released by those two students at Columbia. There's absolutely no reason we should expect others to show up."

"Exactly," his blond friend agreed. "Which is our key to dealing with it. I don't know how it got that way to begin with — whether it was deliberately induced or the result of some ectological accident — but if we can return it to its frozen state, our equipment should be able to handle it."

"And if it can't?" Janine asked before Peter could.

Spengler shrugged. "Then we keep it frozen until we can either bury it back in the Arctic or convince NASA to send it off into deep space. Either way, we can't lose."

"Yes, we can," Venkman retorted, unconvinced. "How are we supposed to freeze it? Send out invitations for it to come and tour the nearest Bird's Eye packing house?"

"We can do it easier than that," Ray felt certain. He moved to the reception desk, on which Peter had spread the map he was using to keep track of the specter's movements through the city. He climbed onto the chair so that he could reach it and indicate various spots to illustrate his points as he made them. The others joined him, Peter climbing atop a stack of phone books while Winston and Egon stood on tiptoe so that they, too, could see. Zeddemore was in a slightly better position and so had little difficulty; Spengler wasn't quite so lucky. When Janine noticed he was having trouble, she picked him up without thinking about it, as she might any four-year-old under similar circumstances.

The indignant look the physicist gave her was hardly that of a child. "Janine..." he began, not quite a threat but definitely a warning.

She glanced at him, saw the veiled embarrassment on his face, realized what she'd done, and promptly sat him down on the edge of the desk. "Sorry, Egon," she apologized. "I keep forgetting you guys really *aren't* little kids."

"It hasn't been appearing and disappearing at random," Ray went on, gesturing as he spoke. "It's been heading steadily south ever since it left Weehawken. If it'll just keep moving in that direction, we might be able to catch up with it in this area, here—" He pointed to the region he had in mind, on the Jersey side of the Hudson. "—and then herd it into a flash-freezing unit at the packing facility for one of the fisheries, here."

"It could work," Winston granted, with some relief.

"It could," Peter admitted, "but only if we can get the packers to cooperate, and get our equipment to work, too. Have you guys figured out how we're supposed to pick up and use something that's heavier'n we are, right now?"

He half-expected the two with that assignment to say no, but Ray surprised him with a glowing grin that would've melted every mother's heart from New York to Los Angeles. "Sure have. We've mounted a proton cannon on the roof of Ecto-1 along with our PKE scopes, so as long as Janine's willing to drive for us, we can at least chase it through the streets."

"Will I get hazard pay?" she asked, not at all certain she liked the dangers implied by this idea.

"You'll get whatever it takes," Winston promised her before Peter could open his mouth and say no.

Venkman grumped for a moment or two, then snorted, a very odd sound in his current childish treble. "But what if we have to go after this thing on foot? The pack still weigh more'n fifty pounds!"

"The accelerators themselves do," Stantz acknowledged, "but not the throwers. We could carry *them*, no problem, so Winston and I came up with a way to temporarily detach 'em from the packs."

The shrunken shrink's green eyes widened. "Oh, sure, that'd make the equipment a lot lighter, but it'd make it pretty useless, too...."

Ray shook his head and wagged one finger, amiably scolding his obstinate colleague for jumping to conclusions before he'd heard the entire story. "Not with a microwave energy transmission link between 'em. With that sort of tie-in, they ought to work as effectively as ever — though it's still very experimental. The set-up's pretty jerry-rigged, so the links won't last for long. And we'll still have to be careful and look out for inertial recoil whenever we fire. It might be kinda hard on us, being this light and all."

Peter listened intently to his friend's explanation, thought it over, then surrendered. "Okay, I gotta admit, it *does* sound pretty feasible — though having a combat system that isn't designed to last won't do us any good if we wind up permanently pint-sized. What's the lowdown on the antidote, Egon?"

The pedomorphic physicist — who had been listening to Ray with rapt fascination and had gone over to have a look at the devices he and Winston had been adapting — blinked at him (looking more owl-like than ever behind the too-big spectacles), as if only now recalling his initial reason for leaving the lab. "Oh, it's ready, of course," he said, the faintest hint of sheepishness in his voice. "You see, once I'd isolated the immediate cause of the rejuvenescent reaction — or at least what was enabling our systems to be affected by it; I still have no verifiable reason for why it actually works — I was able to synthesize the proper compound to counteract it, which, combined with a DMSO catalyst, will be rapidly absorbed throughout our bodies and then produce the exact opposite effect of the initial substance, that being phenomenally accelerated cellular reproduction rather than—"

"Never mind the physics lecture," Zeddemore suggested.

"Actually, Winston, it's more a matter of biochemistry...."

"Whatever. Just give it to us, quick!"

Egon gestured to Janine, who removed three stoppered test tubes from a pocket and distributed them to the others. "Drink it," he suggested, "and the regression should be arrested almost instantly."

Peter eyed the viscous green stuff suspiciously, reluctant to swallow it. Its color was highly unappetizing, and it had very much the same thick appearance as the creature's slime. "*Should* be?" he repeated. "You mean, you aren't even sure this junk'll work?"

Spengler shrugged. "Science has very few true absolutes. Preliminary analysis indicates a ninety-two percent probability that this is the correct compound needed to reverse the process."

That did very little to relieve Venkman's worries. "What about the other eight percent?"

"The worst that can happen is that it won't work, and we get thirty years to live all over again."

Peter shuddered. Not that the idea of living a very long life wasn't appealing; he just hadn't ever wanted to do it in quite this fashion. "Just what I've always wanted."

"At least you can be relatively certain it won't kill you," Egon told him encouragingly. "I've already taken mine, and it hasn't produced any adverse effects, thus far."

"Why doesn't that make me feel any better?" the skeptic asked of no one in particular. "What if it *does* kill you, Egon? Who's gonna figure out the answer then?"

"I doubt very much there would be any need, under those circumstances. There isn't enough time left to test the compound to better determine its accuracy, much less begin experimentation on different chemical combinations."

Peter felt his throat close up, listening to his friend speak so calmly about even the possibility of his own death. It wasn't that he didn't have faith in the physicist's scientific abilities; it was just that Spengler was sometimes just a little bit too willing to take chances by being his own lab rat for Venkman's peace of mind. But he knew equally well that while Egon might happily place himself in harm's way in the pursuit of science or the protection of his partners, he would never knowingly gamble with their lives — which meant he'd said what he said as an obscure joke, to prod the balky psychologist into doing what had to be done.

Winston elbowed the psychologist. "C'mon, Pete, quit givin' the man a hard time and just drink it," he recommended, having already done so.

"And I'd hurry up if I were you," Ray added mischievously after he'd swallowed his own dose, "'cause the way you're looking, I'd say you've got about ten seconds left before your time runs out."

That was enough to shut Peter's mouth, open his throat, and prompt him to comply.

Just as he was tossing off the awful-tasting stuff, the telephone rang.

"Bad news, guys," Janine announced when she'd finished taking the call. "Looks like your slimer's decided to change its flight plans."

"What?" The startled question came from several mouths.

She elaborated. "It seems that it took a left turn before hitting Bayonne...."

"That's no surprise," Peter, ever the arrogant New Yorker, quipped. "Bayonne's not exactly the sightseeing capital of the Eastern Seaboard."

"That must've been what it thought, too, 'cause it made a beeline straight for the Statue of Liberty, made a mess out of things and scared the hell out of a bunch of tourists, then buzzed the Staten Island Ferry, panicked everybody in Battery Park — and now it's headed for the World Trade Center."

Winston bit his lower lip. "That's not very far from City Hall, is it?" he said, knowing the answer full well.

Janine nodded. "That's what's got the Mayor worried, too. He wants you guys to do something about it — *now* — and I don't think he's gonna be very happy if he has to wait long for results, this time."

"This is terrible!" Ray lamented, picking out each of the landmarks on the map as she mentioned them and thus tracking the creature on its new northward heading. "We'll *never* be able to coax that thing all the way back into New Jersey...!"

"Perhaps we won't have to, Raymond," Egon said quietly, having climbed back onto the desktop to study the map still spread across it.

Stantz found nothing reassuring in his comment. "What other choice do we have? Where're we gonna find a freezing facility that big in Manhattan?"

Spengler smiled — almost secretively — then tapped a specific spot on the map so briefly, only Ray saw what he had indicated. The occultist's brown eyes widened, accompanied by a small gasped, "Oh!" Ray blinked, then continued. "Do you really think that'd work?"

"It should. The ectoplasm is extremely sensitive to temperature changes. Once it's crossed a crucial threshold, it doesn't take long for the alteration reactions to occur."

"What are you two talking about?" Winston demanded, feeling mildly offended by the way in which the two scientists were leaving the rest of them out of the conversation.

"But how do we get it there?" the occultist asked his physicist friend, totally oblivious to the layman's question. "That's an awful long way to go without losing it."

"Are you listening to me?" Zeddemore insisted. "What's going on?"

"With our standard weapons, yes," Egon agreed, equally inattentive. "But if we do some minor alterations to the system you mounted on Ecto's roof and maybe to one of the throwers, adjust them to produce extreme cold rather than extreme heat, we ought to be able to guide it along like cattle under a prod."

Winston was about to grab one of them by the shoulders (or throat) and throttle the answer out of him when Peter intervened. "Forget it," he advised. "You should know by now that when they're off on Planet Science, you'd never understand the answer even if you could get it out of 'em."

From his miffed expression, Winston wanted to try anyway, but Ray cut him short by exclaiming, "You're right, Egon, it could work!" then picking up the map and jumping down off the chair. "C'mon, let's get going. We can make the equipment changes on our way there."

Making the changes in a moving vehicle turned out to be rather more difficult than Ray had anticipated. Aside from the fact that doing fairly delicate alterations bordered on impossible in a car with stiff heavy-duty shocks, Janine's kamikaze style of emergency driving added the elements of unpredictable bumps, jolts, and other serious motion problems. Within the first six blocks, Ray, who was up on the roof working on the exterior cannon, was nearly thrown off three times, while Egon eventually was forced to remove his glasses, which bounced off his nose so often, he was beginning to get a headache. Compensating for their lack resulted in bruising it, since he needed to hold the thing six inches from his eyes in order to see what he was doing.

"I'm really getting the feeling this wasn't the best idea in the world," Peter opined as he tried to help Spengler steady the device he was working on. "Anyone care to second that?"

"Make a right, Janine," Winston — who'd been monitoring the police bands along with their PKE detectors in hopes of getting some sort of fix on the critter's current location — instructed. "The cops're getting reports of our gooper bugging traffic coming out of the Holland Tunnel."

"Got it," she complied, happy to be so actively involved in a bust for a change. "Hang on!"

Everyone did so immediately, knowing from sorry experience what would happen if they didn't. The ambulance went screeching around the next available right-hand corner. Winston screamed almost as loudly as the tires the moment they made the turn.

"Not here, Janine, not here!" he howled, in fear for his life. "This is a one-way street — and we're goin' the wrong way!"

Peter heard him, took one look at the traffic bearing down on them, then dove straight for the floor. "Oh, jeeze," he wailed, "we're gonna die!"

The redhead, however, was not worried. "Hey, no sweat, guys. Don't worry, I can handle it."

"That's what I'm afraid of!" came the whimper from the floor behind her.

She paid him not the least bit of attention as she deftly detoured from street to sidewalk, sending a few pedestrians flying for cover and knocking over part of a newsstand. On Ecto's roof, Ray clung to whatever handholds he could find, hanging on even tighter when paper and magazine debris threatened to rip him off. The obstacle course nightmare lasted only briefly; at the next available cross-street, Janine took them back into the proper flow of traffic.

Several moments of relative silence passed while the four Ghostbusters found their wits (and/or stomachs). At length, Peter croaked, "I think maybe we *should* tie blocks to your feet and let you do the driving, Winston. I'd feel a lot safer."

Janine scowled at him in the rear-view mirror. "I'm doing the best I can," she defended.

"I rest my case."

"Done!" Egon announced, having picked himself, his glasses, and the thrower he was working on off the floor while Peter was grumbling about their receptionist's driving skills. "Ray, are you finished yet?"

"Not quite," Stantz reported as he just then braved opening one eye to see whether or not he was still alive. "Give me a couple more minutes."

"Uh..." Winston, who had gone back to observing the various monitors, looked up and out to the skies ahead of them. "I don't think we're gonna have that much time to waste," he reported unhappily. "Look."

The others followed the line indicated by his pointing finger and saw an all-too-familiar orange bat-shape go screaming by about twenty feet overhead, dripping foul-smelling slime behind it as it moved uptown.

"Fast little sludge-bucket, isn't it?" Peter observed as Janine swerved to avoid a large patch of falling goo that would have completely inundated them. "Made it all the way here from the Village in just a few minutes, and against traffic, at that. Maybe we should tell the Mayor to put it to work in the Rapid Transit Commission...."

"Well, at least it's heading in the right direction," Ray said from above.

"That depends on where you want it to go," Winston noted. "If it keeps on that way, it's gonna be making a stop at the Empire State Building."

"We can't let it do that," Egon insisted. "If it gets above the range of our weapons and stays there, we'll never be able to herd it where we want it."

"And where's that?" Zeddemore asked, still looking for an answer to that particularly nagging question.

"We could always use Ecto-2, if it came down to that," Peter suggested helpfully.

The notion was promptly negated. "Not until we've gotten back at least a foot of height, and that might not be until some time tomorrow afternoon. We've got to deal with it *now*, before the Mayor decides to give up on us and throws us into jail for good."

The psychologist sighed regretfully. Though he was always quick to beg for their help in an ectological crisis, the Mayor could be equally quick to turn on them if he felt they were bungling the job, or had caused too much damage to public property. Staying in his good graces was something they always did their best to achieve. "You've got a point, Egon. Okay,

then, if that thing's ready, give it to me and I'll see what I can do about giving our friend out there a special Ghostbusters' Guided Tour."

Taking the recalibrated thrower, Peter opened the window on his side of the car, then climbed up and seated himself on its edge. "Just hang onto my legs and don't let me fall out," he told his blond partner before targeting the critter, which was now behind them. "Look out, pond-scum," he warned. "Pete Venkman's about to bite back!"

His aim was true. The shot slammed into the creature, causing it to emit a most satisfactory, if unearthly, shriek. The blaster's backlash also caused Peter to lose his footing (or, rather, seating), and very nearly sent him flying out into traffic. After a moment's panic in which he was certain he was about to end up on the pavement and under the wheels of an oncoming truck, he managed to steady himself. "I never realized what a kick those things really do pack," he muttered as he dragged himself upright. "And I thought I told you to hang onto me, Egon."

"I was hanging on!" the diminutive physicist protested.

"Then hang on better, next time! What were you when you were a kid, anyway, a twenty-two pound weakling?"

Any possible response he might have gotten was lost when Ray hollered down, "Done! Janine, get us turned around and headed north. We've gotta herd that thing uptown!"

"Got it," she called back. "Where're we supposed to be going?"

"Incoming!" Peter bellowed. The not-phantom, which had circled around after Venkman's one successful blast, changed course and dove right for them — a trajectory that brought it directly into Ray's line of fire. A shot from the newly modified roof-mounted cannon hit the thing square in its ugly maw. It reared back, unappreciative of this now-painful assault; before it could flee in any other direction, Peter added a second stream to the barrage, urging it to take the course they wished.

"Nice shooting," Winston lauded, steadying himself by hanging onto his seatbelts as Janine performed another gut-churning maneuver to get them through traffic and headed the way Ray had instructed. "If we can just keep it up, we'll get that thing...." He paused, uncertain. "Where *will* we get it, anyway?"

"Rockefeller Plaza," Egon provided. "This entity's ectoplasm is highly sensitive to extreme temperature change. If we can—" He hesitated as they rounded another corner, forcing him to hang on tightly. "—get it there and pin it against the ice of the skating rink for even a minute, the contact cold should begin the freezing process enough for our standard throwers to confine it and trap it."

"Good idea," Zeddemore had to admit. "Why didn't you tell us that sooner?"

The blue eyes blinked at him, utterly ingenuous. "You didn't ask."

Winston groaned, exasperated; Peter clicked his tongue. "Geniuses," he sighed. "No wonder they have so much room for brains. Everything else goes in one ear and out the other. Heads up, Ray — I think it's making a move for the Chrysler Building."

"Not if I can help it," Ray said, gritting his teeth. Another shot — well-placed, despite the fact Janine chose that very moment to perform a wrenching series of evasive maneuvers — discouraged the creature from its chosen heading and rerouted it onto the eliminators' preselected path. After several similar engagements, their ultimate destination finally came into view.

If they had anticipated any difficulties in getting the rink's patrons off the ice, they quickly found that they need not have worried. The sight of the huge and stinking orange apparition which preceded the four paranormologists was enough to send everyone who saw or smelled the thing running for cover.

Janine brought Ecto-1 to a halt on the street overlooking the rink; her radically reduced employers jumped out almost immediately. "I'll stay up here and keep it occupied," Ray called down from the roof. "Peter, you get across to the other side of the rink, and we'll try to catch it in a crossfire and trap it against the ice."

"You've got it," Venkman acknowledged, and took off.

"Anything we can do?" Winston asked, even though Egon was already fetching the remainder of their gear from the

cargo area.

"Get to the other two sides of the rink and be ready to shoot once we've had it pinned down long enough," the occultist answered anyway. "And pray that this doesn't take too long. I'm already starting to get minor shorts in my system." As proof, a small shower of sparks shot out from the cannon's hastily rigged wiring and sprayed against his knee. Winston needed no further encouragement to collect his thrower from Egon and comply.

Even though Ray did his best to keep the dripping entity from either attacking the locale or attempting to flee, he could not keep the thing involved with him to the exclusion of all else. Angered by the painfully cold fire of the adjusted particle stream and afraid of the cold it sensed below, it decided to vent its fury on the first moving thing to catch its eye: Peter. Venkman was having enough trouble making it across the ice with a pair of four-year-old's legs and the poor traction provided by his worn tennies; when he saw their orange nemesis come swooping down in his direction, he shrieked, tried running even faster, lost his footing entirely, and, in a display of slapstick worthy of the best silent movie comedians, went sliding across the rink and straight into the skate rental stand off to one side. Those already seeking shelter there screamed and tried to hide themselves as the creature, howling in its efforts to dodge Ray's fire, gave the place a thorough sliming before being driven off by a stinging blast to its backside.

"Keep going, Pete," Winston shouted when Venkman pulled himself out from under the fallen signcard that had protected him. "You're doin' just fine!"

Peter clambered to his feet again and headed off across the ice; the orange ugly launched a second attack against the movement it sensed in the rental shack. The people taking refuge there dove back under cover; in the meantime, Peter finally made it to the side of the rink opposite Ecto-1, where he braced himself against a convenient bench before opening fire.

"We've got it!" Ray exulted when their streams at last held the slimer trapped between them. "Egon, Winston — get down there!"

Spengler had taken off even before Ray's instruction; Winston hesitated. "Make sure you've got a good hold on it," he cautioned, not liking the way the thing was writhing and bellowing.

"Don't worry," Stantz assured him. "We'll get it pinned against the ice. You just make sure you're ready to trap it."

Winston was nowhere near as confident in the success of this plan; nonetheless, he followed Egon down the stairs to the rink. They were out on the ice and not far from the imprisoned specter when a disturbing, "Uh-oh," from Ray made Winston's skin crawl.

That distressing exclamation was swiftly followed by a very unhealthy sputtering from atop Ecto-1. A second later, Ray's stream cut out. In response, the creature struggled against Peter's beam and broke free long enough to plunge toward the pair on ecto-eliminators still on the ice.

"Hit the dirt!" Winston shouted as he did so, unconcerned by the inappropriateness of the cliché. He hit the ice just in time to avoid getting bowled over by the slimer, though he landed hard on his weapon in the process. Egon, too, was lucky enough to just barely miss being steamrolled by the thing, but he fell less gracefully. He came down not on his weapon but on his stomach, so hard that he went flying across the ice while his loosened glasses popped free and flew in the opposite direction.

"Ray, do something!" Janine cried, feeling uncomfortably helpless to intervene as the not-ghost set itself up to attempt a second run on the downed pair.

"I'm trying!" Ray yelled back with considerable frustration. His attempts to repair his malfunctioning weapon had been fruitless thus far; annoyed by his failure and desperate, he kicked it in a childish fit of pique — and it cooperatively responded with a gout of cold fire. Relieved, he grabbed hold of the controls just as Peter got a bead on their target. They both opened fire and once more, the thing was trapped.

"Start moving it down to the ice," Stantz instructed when their hold on it was firm. "Egon, get out of the way!"

"But my glasses — I can't see a thing without them!" There was a quavering note of very real — and singularly child-like — panic in the scientist's usually phlegmatic voice.

"Worry about that later," Peter yelled. "For now, just do what the man says!"

"But you don't understand—!"

"Oh, yes, I do — an' this is no time for you to start blubbering like a two-year-old, Egon! Move it!!"

From his expression, the physicist was disinclined to comply, but Peter's crack about crying like a baby was, he abruptly realized, horrifyingly accurate and thus instantly sobering. Without his glasses, he couldn't see well enough to find them, so he gave up and scuttled off on all fours, crab-like, as Ray and Peter lowered the unphantom and pinned it against the ice. The creature thrashed and struggled at first, pained by the cold, but the longer they held it in place, the less vigorous its resistance became, until Ray felt fairly certain the critical threshold had been reached.

"Now!" he ordered his eldest partners. "Hit it with the containment field!"

"Where?" Spengler wanted to know, squinting hard to achieve some vague semblance of focus.

"Come on, Egon," Peter protested, his exasperation immense. "Even you can't be *that* nearsighted!"

"Just aim in the direction of my voice," Winston called out, "and you can't miss. Ready?" He waited until he could see the physicist nod — more of a shrug, actually; Egon wasn't sure this would work, but he was as ready as he would ever get. "Fire!"

Simultaneously, they hit the appropriate switches. It should have resulted in the usual spectacular two-pronged assault, but only Egon's weapon produced the familiar stream of sparkling energy. Zeddemore pushed the firing stud again and again, hoping it was just a finicky connection, but the device stubbornly refused to respond.

"Damn!" he swore quite vehemently, raising a few eyebrows among the braver onlookers who were watching from under cover, and who also knew nothing about him being in truth an adult in what looked to be a child's body. "The blasted thing must've broken when I fell on it!"

"I told you the adjustments were only jerry-rigged, Winston," Ray scolded without malice.

"Well, that's just great!" Peter grumped from where he was braced most uncomfortably against the park bench. "My hands are freezing, my legs're about to fold, and something's poking me in the back. What're we supposed to do, stand here and hold this ugly spread-eagled in the ice forever? The owners won't like it, not to mention the Mayor...."

The stalemate continued for several long seconds; then Egon called, "Janine, throw Winston a trap."

"What good'll that do?" Zeddemore asked, confused and anxious. "Ray and Pete'll have to cut out their streams when we open it — and you've seen how strong that critter is. One containment field won't hold it for long."

"If we're lucky, it won't have to. Even under the heat from a containment stream, it'll take at least a couple of seconds for it to thaw enough to revive and break free, and if we time our actions precisely, we should be able to get it into the trap before it can escape."

"It's our only shot," Ray agreed.

"Do it!" Peter chimed in. "And hurry!" And they did.

Winston deftly caught the trap Janine tossed to him, as gently as she could for fear of damaging it, too. The cold from the altered streams was too intense for Zeddemore to get close enough to set it, so he was forced to wait until the beams were cut before he could throw it into place. It took him only a matter of seconds to do so, once they were deactivated, but in that short time, the creature's highly volatile ectoplasm began to melt under the heat of Egon's containment field. As it began to come around, it struggled against the stream, a last, desperate effort to break free that nearly pulled the tiny physicist off his feet. It almost wrenched itself loose, but Egon's aim somehow remained true, and the grip of the trap finally settled firmly around it, sucking it down into its portable oblivion.

"Got it!" Winston crowed in delight as the trap closed, crackled with energy, and went still.

Egon shut off his thrower then collapsed flat on his back, spent. Peter was not about to blame him, for he knew exactly how his partner felt.

"Y'know, it was really great to see the four of you out in the field, working together like that," Janine was saying later as she drove Ecto-1 around a corner and onto the street just outside the firehouse, at a much more decorous pace than before. She pushed the button to activate the mechanism that would open the doors to the garage. After a bit of tricky maneuvering, she had the converted ambulance backed into place, continuing her monologue all the while. "I mean, I know you do most of your jobs together, but this one was a real good example of teamwork, everyone pitching in to make things come out right — even *you* for a change, Doctor V. No arguing, no egos getting in the way.... Don't you think it works out a lot better when everyone cooperates?"

No one answered; she turned off the motor, ever so faintly miffed at having her question summarily ignored. "I said," she repeated more firmly, turning around in her seat, "don't you think—?"

The rest of the query remained unasked; she blinked at the sight that met her eyes, surprised. She didn't know exactly when it happened, but at some point on the ride home, every last one of her employers had fallen asleep, and thus, her question had fallen on unhearing ears.

She smiled. "Well, guys, I guess I can't blame you," she said, bemused and amused. "If I'd done all that running around in a four-year-old's body, I'd be pretty worn out, too. But," she added as she undid her seatbelt and opened her door, "don't start thinking I'm gonna make a habit of this. There's nothing in my job description about tucking you in for the night." With a shake of her head, a sigh, and another, more rueful smile, she climbed out, dosed the garage doors, and, one by one, carried the four of them up to bed.

"In retrospect, It seems rather strange," Egon told the others early the next afternoon while he, Ray, Winston, and Janine cleaned up the third-floor lab, which had been left in quite a mess in the hurry to come up with the cures for their various dilemmas. Although the four Ghostbusters weren't by any means fully recovered from the effects of the orange juice incident, it was clear that they were all well on their way, having regained a good ten or twelve of their lost years since taking the antidote. They all looked to be in that awkward, gangly early-to-mid teens stage, a phase they would pass beyond by late afternoon. Since it would probably take most of the afternoon to put the place in proper order, the three engaged in the task seemed not at all disturbed by their current — and blessedly temporary — gawkiness. What chagrin they had felt had come when they'd awakened, and discovered that Janine — very sensibly and with what she assured them had been complete discretion — had changed them out of their child-sized clothing and into adult nightwear before putting them to bed, correctly anticipating that they would grow through the night and wouldn't be happy with the notion of being roused early because they were being strangled by their own clothing.

Egon, who was washing up the dirty glassware, continued as blithely as ever. "But somewhere along the line it occurred to me that, pointless as our regressions may have seemed from an immediate internal standpoint, in actuality it had significant positive repercussions that, without a catastrophic event acting as a catalyst, might have taken considerably longer to ascertain...."

"Whoa, whoa!" Winston interrupted, his head spinning from the unexpected onslaught of polysyllabic words. "Are you saying something *good* actually came out of this whole rejuvenation mess?"

"Precisely."

"Like what?" Janine asked, unable to see any possible benefit that could have been derived from that sorry accident.

Egon had no such trouble. "Well, most importantly, we wouldn't have found the answer we needed to capture that menace to society quite so quickly if we hadn't had the deadline for finding an antidote hanging over our heads. And even though I was on the right track, suspecting a link with temperature, it was our internal reactions to the ectoplasmic compound that provided the vital clues concerning the creature's thermal volatility. Without it, we'd probably still be looking for a solution." Mid-word, his voice, which through the night had lowered from its earlier boy soprano to something slightly closer to the alto range, slipped unexpectedly and rather dramatically by at least an octave. Relief brightened his face, for some small part of him had worried that the antidote might not be one hundred percent effective, and any new proof that they were on the correct road to full recovery was welcome.

Neither Winston nor Janine were entirely certain they understood his supposed clarification any more than the original statement, but they caught enough to get the general gist of things, and knew better than to ask any more questions. The secretary exhaled softly. "That just proves the old cliché, I guess: Every cloud's got a silver lining. But I really think it was you guys working together that was most important. You did a great job, yesterday."

"You didn't do so bad yourself, Janine," Ray congratulated, sweeping up the last of some broken glassware. "You handled everything pretty calmly."

She sniffed. "Not if you listen to Peter."

The occultist dismissed it with a gesture. "That's just the way he is. I think you did real well."

"Hey, no trouble," she said, smiling in appreciation of his gratitude. "I was just pitching in, like the rest of you, doing whatever I could to make sure everything pulled together in the end. I've always said that cooperation is the best way to solve any problem. But once in a while, you guys need to be reminded of that — especially Doctor V."

"Oh, we all believe in cooperation," Winston assured her. "And we know that it's the teamwork that really counts. It's just that some of us remember it more often than others."

She chuckled softly, acknowledging his jest, which she knew referred to Peter and his occasionally obstinate nature. "It was nice of those newspaper and TV people not to make a big fuss over this whole 'chemical accident' story you gave them. I'm really surprised they listened when you asked them to ignore it, or play it down in their reports."

"They didn't," Egon corrected, drying the last of the labware he'd washed. "Not all of them, at any rate. Peter had to promise the ones who wouldn't exclusive interviews, or call in every favor they owed him to keep their mouths shut." He shook his head. "A waste of effort, if you ask me."

Janine shrugged equivocally, though her eyes were laughing. "I guess it's worth it to him, to protect his image. You know how much that means to him."

"That's what he thinks, too," Ray said as he swept the bits of dirt and broken glass into a dustpan. "But it was still a waste." The chuckle he added was positively wicked.

The redhead blinked at him, puzzled by the statement and surprised by his atypical mischief. It almost seemed as if the mild-mannered occultist was in on something juicy and was deliberately keeping it to himself. "Why? You guys didn't go to the media behind his back, did you? Doctor V would never forgive you...."

"Of course not," Egon assured her, pretending aloof indignation in that she would think them capable of behaving so treacherously against their friend. He set the flask he'd finished drying in a storage drawer; as he slid it shut, a buzzer sounded, calling attention to a guest's arrival at their front door. "But there were at least fifty people at the rink who saw all of us there and have absolutely no reason, moral or otherwise, to keep quiet about what they saw..."

"...and besides," Ray added, snickering, "Pete's just really asking for it by not being honest and owning up to things right away."

This time, Janine was sure he knew something she didn't. "Why? What's up?"

Stantz grinned. "He's got a date to go to the zoo today, and he didn't tell her about the 'accident,' either. I wonder what she's going to say when she gets a look at the new Peter Venkman?"

A feminine shriek two floors below answered his question in no uncertain terms. The plaintive and cracking-voiced, "But, Jennifer, it really *is* me...!" that followed merely confirmed it.

The four listeners glanced at one another. They all tried very hard to be noble and civilized and sympathetic, and not lower themselves to finding humor at the expense of their unfortunate friend; they all failed miserably, and, as one, dissolved into laughter.

The End