-1-

Noah was six hundred years old when God said to him, “Make yourself an ark out of resinous wood.”

George McBurney was thirty seven when he got the idea to reproduce the Ark, exactly and by hand, three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty high. That he didn't know a cubit from a cubicle, was rather clumsy with a hammer, and had never been to sea, not even on a cruise ship, didn't occur to George as problems--he was the sort who, inspired, just started, without a plan or a blueprint. He owned a six hundred acre farm east of Stirling, Wisconsin, next to the State Forest, and as soon as the spring thaw allowed, he staked a plywood sign in the northeast corner of his property, at the corner of County Highway D and DD, proclaiming, "NOAH'S ARK. COMING SOON TO THIS LOCATION."

Thomas Donaldson, Stirling’s mayor, lived on the west side of town, and so was unaware of the sign until a few hours after it went up. Hank Guenther, who made part of his living painting signs and happened to be chairman of the town’s zoning committee, called Thomas at his law office.

"Don't mean to bother you none," Hank said, "but George’s put up the damnedest sign. It's on his property, but it's an eyesore. The kerning ain't right at all."

"The what?" Thomas didn't know the word, and so did not appreciate Hank's alarm.

"The kerning. The doo-dads at the top of italic lettering. It's wrong."

Thomas chuckled impatiently. "Not everyone's an artist, Hank."

"That's not all, Thomas. It says Noah's Ark is coming soon. What's that mean? No way we’re going to allow no water park there. They got one over in Johnsville, and it causes one

helluva traffic jam every darn day all summer. Ugly, too. You can't allow that across from the forest. It's not right."

"Hold on, Hank. I don't know what you're talking about, but if it makes you feel any better, I'll talk to George." When he'd been elected a year ago, Thomas, a moderate conservative like most of his constituents, had thought that being mayor would give him a chance to transform Stirling and serve as a stepping stone to the State Senate. Stirling teetered on the precipice of ex-urban ruin: it could retain its small-town character and die a slow, economically-deprived death, or it could be bull-dozed into the newest, and furthest-out Milwaukee suburb. Thomas' plan, as Mayor, was to straddle these two unholy ends by designing a showplace community, a minor arts, antiques and historical destination, the sort that would draw ladies from the suburbs of Milwaukee and Northern Illinois, but he spent most of his mayoral time--it was not a paid position--resolving such intra-citizenry issues as who was awarded the contract for the town's holiday lights and whether the Rotary should get a beer and wine license for its corn and brat festival.

"Okay. But I'm telling you, Thomas, people in this town will not sit still for no water park."

Thomas put the receiver down and looked out the window of his office one block off the town square just in time to see his wife of twenty-four years, local community liberal and activist, Daphne Hotchkiss, striding up the sidewalk. Even at a distance, he could see her powerful green eyes etching the glass, searching for him, her bushy brown eyebrows high on her forehead in anticipation. She seldom visited him during the work day; she must've heard. She was always a few rumors ahead of him; people seemed to like to tell her things. Tented by unruly auburn curls, with sporadic hints of gray, Daphne's face braved the world naked, without bangs

or make-up. Her complexion was lightly tanned, but not weathered, the shade of someone who paid careful attention to the weeds of her garden, someone who didn't hide from the world and encouraged others not to, either. Thomas heard the tinkle of the bell as she walked in, and then the pleasant muffled tones of her exchange of greetings with his second cousin Shirley, his receptionist, secretary, and paralegal.

There was a perfunctory knock as the door opened. "Hi, honey," Daphne said with the mischievous enthusiasm she usually saved for a particularly juicy protest.

"I heard," he said, sighing and putting Mr. Dunhill's marital trust on top of the stack of documents that in due course would serve to dispense the man's modest estate.

"Oh," she said, deflated. "Still, it's quite something, isn't it?"

"Hank called and thinks it's an eyesore. Something about the lettering being off-kilter and the fumes from the traffic stifling the forest."

She rested her elbow on his desk. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Noah's Ark."

"I was talking about the BVM."

For the second time that day, Thomas felt as though he'd lost his mother tongue. "What?"

"Martha Downing said she saw the Blessed Virgin Mary--you know," she said, knocking on the desk as if to wake him up, "the Mother of God? Merry Christmas, Away in a Manger, Ave Maria?"

"I didn't hear you," Thomas said, mildly vexed both that a Unitarian like Daphne should think that a former altar boy like himself wouldn't know the BVM, and also that someone like Martha--one of the most conspicuous and annoying of Stirling's rather bland congregation of Roman Catholics--should be given this fuel for her evangelistic fire. Even Father Dan

sometimes admitted, after his second scotch of the evening, that Martha, shrill-voiced and adamant, was not his most seductive missionary.

"Martha was walking her dog along Morningside Drive, where it crosses under the railroad tracks, and she saw an apparition. Well, not an apparition, but an image, like suddenly there's this painting, I guess you'd call it, of the BVM right on the cement wall of the underpass."

Thomas looked at her blankly.

"Mr. Mayor, aren't you going to say anything?" He knew that Daphne used “Mr. Mayor” to taunt him, and that she was delighted to stand opposed to him on almost every political topic there was. It had been that way since the day they’d met, on opposite sides of the street--literally--when Ronald Reagan came to The Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee in 1979.

"Doesn't sound like it has much to do with me," he said. "Martha can see whatever she wants to see. Isn’t that your thing--freedom to have and to hold absurd, obscure and just plain wacky thought?"

"Don't you want to see it?"

"I'd rather get lunch."

She didn't say anything.

He sighed. "Why, have you seen it?"

"No, and I'd like to. Just to see what the fuss is about. Let's run over there, and then you can buy me lunch."

"While we're at it, I suppose we should go see the sign."

"What sign?" she asked, getting up.

Thomas took his tie from the credenza. In Stirling, wearing a tie every day was thought stuck up, or superior, although wearing one to church, while not required, was forgiven. It was

expected, however, that the mayor would wear one at public meetings out of respect for the public weal, and, unlike most of his fellow citizens, Thomas, having grown used to it when he was working his way through law school as a clerk in a Milwaukee firm, found a tie comfortable. Without a mirror, he expertly tied a four-in-hand. "I was trying to tell you. George's put up a sign on his property that says something about Noah's Ark, and Hank thinks George is going to build a water park…."

"Not across from the State Forest!" she stopped at the door, her arm holding it shut. Thomas could almost smell the oily fumes from the red paint Daphne used to make her protest signs.

"I have no idea," he said. To get her to open the door, he added, "There is nothing on any agenda for any committee in the county that mentions a water park."

A half dozen pick-ups and sports utility vehicles lined Morningside Drive where it approached the underpass. In the tunnel, they could see the silhouettes of a crowd. Thomas pulled their Buick off the road.

“Looks like the press will want a comment, Mr. Mayor,” Daphne said. She pointed to a white van with a satellite dish poised on top, which bore the insignia of one of Madison’s television stations.

“What’s there to comment on?”

“They’ll want to know if you agree it’s the Blessed Virgin.”

“No,” he said. “I don’t have to answer that.”

“You’ll look silly if you don’t. They’ll say you’re a typical politician, can’t say what he sees until he takes a poll first and sees what everybody else sees.”

"That's not fair."

"I know," she said, patting his hand. "Particularly in *your* case. You are not what I'd call a born politician."

He blanched, but thought she meant to compliment him. "Which is why people in Stirling trust you," she continued. "These people in the press—they are *not* your friends. They're here for the sensationalism of it, and if they have to make you and Martha and Stirling look ridiculous to get a better story, they will."

The way Daphne teed it up, Thomas saw the pending encounter with the press as practice for his State Senate campaign. "What should I do?" When it came right down to it, there was no one whose judgment he trusted more, no one who could read a crowd or a situation as well as she could.

"You should say that you can see why some people believe it looks like the BVM, and you respect their beliefs."

"It's a Rorschach on a wall?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"I was kidding," he said. "Sort of." He would be representing Stirling on camera, and he didn't want to come across like a country bumpkin.

"Yeah, well, in this situation, jokes can kill. Don't even attempt humor around religious beliefs."

"I'm not stupid."

She gave his ear a tug for good luck. "Shall we go then, and greet the media?"

"Sure," he said, and combed his hair back with his hand.

"Oh," she said, as he opened the car door. "I'm certain the ACLU will have an opinion on a religious icon from a public place."

He slammed the door shut again. "What?"

"If you leave it up, isn't that like a religious symbol on a public space? Like a Christmas tree in the town square? If you have a Christmas tree, you have to have a menorah, and a crescent moon, *etcetera*."

It irked him when Daphne's thinking turned constitutional before his. "I suppose that's the law these days, whether we like it or not."

"But if you want to leave it up, an argument could be made against the state's use of its police power to eradicate religious imagery." She smiled a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't smile.

He nodded. People had a constitutional right to practice their religion and to assemble in public places. "Which side are you on?" he asked, genuinely in need of guidance.

Just then there was a metallic rap on the car window.

"Holy…!" Startled, he turned to see a blond-haired woman with a hand-held microphone. He rolled down the window, and before he could say hello or ask what she wanted, she was bending in, inches from his face. "Are you Mayor Donaldson? I'm Tracy Chase from Channel 8. Can I get a comment from you?"

"We haven't seen it yet," Daphne interrupted. "The Mayor won't comment on something he hasn't seen."

Thomas shot Daphne a grateful look, which Tracy ignored. "Oh, great, then we can shoot you as you see it—her—for the first time. That'll be terrific! Bill," she turned to her

cameraman, “we’re going to get the Mayor as he sees her for the first time.” She opened his car door and took him by the elbow. “It’s this way.”

Thomas shook free of her grip and waited for Daphne to catch up with them. As they approached the underpass, a dull gray tunnel overgrown at the entrance with weeds and stringy saplings. Thomas recognized most of the local citizens who stood in small clumps staring at the east wall and pointing, one drawing an outline, showing another where the apparition was.

The temperature dropped a few degrees when they made their way into the underpass, and Thomas breathed in the raw, earthy smell of wet cement. There were caves and a tourist attraction thirty miles west of Stirling, and the scent reminded him of the time he and Daphne had taken their daughter Laura there. He’d had trouble explaining to her why the rock walls were weeping; she’d become frightened and they’d had to come up out of the caves right away.

The small crowd parted so their mayor could view the apparition. Martha remained on her knees on the sidewalk in front of the unpainted cement wall, and as Thomas stared, he saw at first only gray and dark brown stains and smudges, long stalagmites that grew from the girders overhead. Against the wall, someone had placed a bouquet of unnaturally blue and white carnations, still wrapped in plastic from the Piggily Wiggily grocery store on the edge of town, and a fat ivory candle.

He could feel the Channel 8 camera trained on his right profile, and he squared his shoulders. As he did, the apparition came into focus. The figure was standing, her arms bent, palms pressed together, fingertips pointing towards heaven in prayer. She wore the loose robes of statues, a veil. Her face was empty and light, her features just shadows, like in some charcoal drawings he'd seen--her eyes were merely suggestions, but they pointed directly to him. He could not be certain that he was seeing what the others saw; yet, it was a haunting image, oddly

calming, and highly personal. Had he not felt so many eyes on him, he might have dropped to one knee.

The blond shoved the microphone in his face. "Do you see the Blessed Virgin Mary?" she demanded.

"I do see an image of a robed woman," he said.

"Do you think this is a sign? That she has a message? "

He caught a glimpse of Daphne's face, her tongue bulging against her cheek, her right hand on her hip, her head slightly tilted.

"I'm sure everyone who sees this will see it differently, and people who see this will take something away from it that means something to them."

"Are you going to make this a shrine?" the reporter asked.

"I'm seeing this for the first time, Miss," he said. He wished he hadn't said "Miss." Made him sound like a country bumpkin after all.

"Will you paint it over then?"

He shook his head. "We'll need time to consider all the possibilities," he said. "Thanks for coming out. That's all I have to say for now." He turned from the wall to break with the reporter, thinking to ingratiate himself with one of the cliques of local citizenry—his friends and neighbors—but they were in a reverent mood, and no one reached out to him, as if they felt it necessary, because of the spying television cameras, to give him the utmost deference, the way kids are on their best seen-and-not-heard behavior. He kept walking, and at the edge of the crowd, Hank stopped him. In his right hand, Hank grasped the bill of his John Deere baseball cap as if he were paying his last respects at a wake. Thomas could almost feel the cameraman behind him, zooming in on Hank's earnest features.

"I'm telling you, Thomas, this town doesn't like this kind of excitement. You've got to make it go away."

"Thanks, Hank, for the vote of confidence, but if you want this to go away, you'd better call a higher authority."

"You're the mayor!" Hank cried.

Thomas shook his head and pointed his index finger skyward.

Daphne caught up with them and grabbed Thomas's hand. "Don't worry, Hank," she said lightly. "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

Thomas and Daphne dashed to their car, leaving Hank to ponder her exact meaning. Thomas turned the key before buckling his seat belt, and revved the engine harder than he intended. "How about the Dairy-Doo for a burger and a vanilla shake?" He was relieved that for all of her left-wing radical socio-political-enviro cause making and rabble rousing, she hadn't yet joined the ranks of the vegans or the animal rights activists. She'd only been arrested once, and that was in Chicago, an afternoon in jail, in support of the right to gay marriage.

"That sounds good," she said, but he could tell her heart was only half in it.

He stopped at the sole stoplight in town, at the south east corner of the Square. "So, what do you think?" Thomas braced himself for Daphne's answer, which he expected to be coy or condescending or both.

"I see what they mean," she said, her tone surprisingly neutral.

"You sound disappointed." The light turned green and they passed a row of two-story brick storefronts, two of the five unoccupied. Just last week, the movie rental store had closed, complaining of competition from mail-in services, the internet and the bigger stores in Janesville.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you'd get a kick out of a band of religious crazies worshipping a dirty underpass wall."

"They're free to do as they please." Her chest heaved once, the way it did sometimes when she was in her deepest thought. "I mean, I see what they think they see; they're not blind, just wrong."

"Wrong?" Thomas noticed that the granite fountain in the middle of the square wasn't working, and made a note to call the Public Works Department.

"It just feeds into the wrong sort of religion."

"Oh?" He let a little challenge enter his voice, as if ready for a fair game of political ping-pong. On matters religious, he and Daphne had agreed to disagree. The BVM on a cement wall was both political and religious: it could go either way.

"All the miracle, touchy-feely stuff. It's not rational." When pressed, Daphne described herself as a "Rational Christian, reformed Roman Catholic," disagreeing with nearly every church teaching on women. She was now Unitarian because of it.

"What's wrong with a little miracle now and then?" Although not one hundred percent aligned with Rome, Thomas was devout, and permitted himself a secret belief in miracles. If nothing else, they offered a welcome antidote to the demands of the law.

"False hope," she said flatly. "Absolves people of responsibility for themselves."

"How judgmental! I'd say there's a certain entertainment value to miracles. You have to get the attention of the masses to teach them anything." He used "masses" to irritate her.

"You're such an elitist," she said. "The masses are perfectly capable of taking responsibility for themselves and acting in a rational manner."

"What you're missing, my dear, is that Christians are *supposed* to be irrational! To act in irrational, self-effacing and self-sacrificing ways for the good of the whole! Christ was a holy socialist!" She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, and he read this as surrender. To indicate he'd won this round, he asked, "Want to split some onion rings?"

Splitting an order of the Dairy-Doo's shoestring fries or onion rings was a strategy they each had developed with Laura, by way of avoiding the teenage (and middle-age) obsession with being skinny while warding off obesity. "I wonder how she's doing," Daphne said.

"Hopefully something," Thomas said, preoccupied with giving their order to the teenage girl at the ordering window.

He'd been so proud of Laura when she'd gone off to Yale, the first student from Stirling High to be admitted there in seventeen years. She'd planned to major in biology and maybe become a doctor, but had graduated (magna cum laude), with a double major in religious studies and the history of art.

"She'd probably be intrigued by the BVM."

"To say nothing of the Ark!" He laughed, not wanting to get a lecture about self-discovery from Daphne, but in truth he was worried about Laura. He was of the old school, and still was of the opinion—despite Daphne's criticism—that college should prepare a person to do something useful, and preferably something remunerative as well. In his view, ringing a cash register underutilized Laura's expensive education, even if the register rang in a bookstore.

Thomas brought their white paper sacks to a picnic table under the Dairy-Doo's bright pink canopy, and they listened to the conversations at the two other tables.

"I've got to learn Spanish," Daphne said. The immigrant population in the surrounding farm communities was growing; the next town over even had a Spanish grocery and a Spanish-

language Mass. Stirling, being the oldest town, and most stable in the area, wasn't necessarily inhospitable, just out of room.

"They've got to learn English," Thomas said.

"You should learn Spanish."

"I was here first."

"Doesn't mean you're entitled," she said. "We made the Indians learn English, and *they* were here first."

"That was then; this is now. The world speaks English. They can't expect to come here and fill our schools and take our jobs and not learn our language."

"Which jobs have they taken that you want?" Her eyes bulged at him and he could feel the sear of her anger. He knew he'd overstated his argument, as he had a tendency to do when his head and his heart split the internal vote on a matter. He'd never been good at languages and didn't like being reminded of it.

Around them the chatter persisted, sprinkled generously with "Marias" and quick gestures over the chest. Stirling was only five or six hours into the sighting and already Hank's fears were coming true: people were flocking to town.

Dropping the argument, Thomas finished his burger and wadded the paper wrapper into a tight ball. He aimed at the trash barrel and arced a perfect shot. "Nothing but net," he smiled. "Next?"

"Onward," she smiled, handing him her own ball.

"Two for two," he pumped.

Their arguments never lasted long: it was the brinkmanship that energized their relationship, and neither of them would risk going past that irretrievable point that they each

sensed would turn their intellectual game fatal. They were both independents, when it came right down to it. Thomas believed in a minimum wage legislation, for instance, especially if it helped to keep mega-stores out of Stirling, and Daphne could be pressed into a belief that certain mentions of God, as in the Pledge of Allegiance and on the dollar bill, were just too entrenched to be taken literally, and thus didn't violate the First Amendment. These little compromises allowed them to live with each other's politics, because what made their relationship possible were shared political goals--independence and freedom, equal opportunity and the elimination of poverty, national strength and peace—and, more importantly, shared personal ones, primarily the happiness and welfare of their highly educated but directionless daughter. Agreeing on the problems, they espoused different ways of fixing them, and as long as the problems persisted, neither one of them could claim total victory. It didn't matter if he was "wrong" about the image on the wall; in Daphne's own words, he was free to see it differently from his wife and to take away something—although he couldn't say what—that meant something to him.

A half-mile east of town, George's sign was visible several fields away, although neither Thomas nor Daphne could read it until they were much closer. There was lettering on both sides of the sign.

"Kerning looks okay to me," Thomas said, and explained to a puzzled Daphne.

"Hank's right. It's hideous," Daphne said without apology. "This is your biggest problem, Mr. Mayor. The BVM is small potatoes compared to this."

"I'll drop you back in town and then come back and talk to him," Thomas said, mindful that official business was always better done officially and not in public, even if the public was one's wife.

He made an efficient three-point turn at the entrance to the State Forest and as he was completing the left hand portion to head west again, George McBurney, in his ten-year-old dark green Ford 250, blasted his horn in three short spurts and a long, as if he were celebrating a victory by the Packers. Thomas tooted back, and raised his hand, but George screeched to a stop and swung open his door, pointing up behind him at his sign, as if by chance they'd missed it.

"Duty calls," Thomas said, and pulled his car off the road. He, too, left his engine running, and then crossed the street to George.

"What's it mean, George?" Thomas asked. They stood together, looking up at the glossy white plywood. There'd been other wording beneath the white, and Thomas thought he saw "BO," which made it more likely than not that it was the Lions' Lobster Boil sign, which the club usually stored in George's barn.

"I finally got me a Big Idea." George had translucent blue eyes that always looked as if tears were about to overflow.

"What are you going to do, sail around the world?" Thomas asked.

"Only if it rains a whole, whole lot!" George answered, obviously pleased with himself for being able to make witty conversation with the Mayor. Thomas sensed that that's what having a Big Idea meant to George, that he would be recognized as someone who could till his own field, as it were, not just follow nature's orders: plant when the soil is fifty-five degrees; harvest when the moisture content is under twenty per cent. Other than four years in the Army, George had spent his entire life on his family's farm.

Thomas laughed a loud, politically-motivated laugh.

"Seriously, George, what gives?"

"I'm going to build an Ark. An exact replica of Noah's Ark."

He didn't mean to, but at that moment Thomas felt an itch above his left ear, and he scratched it with his index finger. But for Thomas' tie, they could have looked at that moment like a couple of hayseeds, studying the unsown but tilled corner parcel, a farmer and his insurance agent, worried over a spring that had been too dry, or too wet, an infestation of corn rot or soybean wilt. Thomas didn't know what to say, but he knew that if he were patient, George would reveal more. He wouldn't risk insulting him by asking "why."

"I think it would inspire people, don't you?" George said. "You know, remind them that they can be saved?" As if reading Thomas' mind, he added, "I think people have kind of forgotten that, you know?"

In fact, Thomas did not agree with George. He saw plenty of evidence--in a blockbuster Jesus movie a few years back, on bestseller lists, and even in the politics his wife railed against--that more people were being "saved" these days than ever before. At this very moment, scores of true believes were gathering in an underpass across town.

"An exact replica? It would have to be huge, wouldn't it, to hold two of every creature?"

A gleam passed through George's crystal eyes. "I wasn't planning on animals, but, that's great, Thomas, that would really be something to see."

Thomas waved his hand in front of his nose. "And smell, I imagine."

"Oh," George said. "I could wait on that, see how it goes without the animals. Let people use their imaginations. We could ask people, 'if this was yours to fill, how would you fill it?'"

"An early version of a time capsule?"

George bit his lower lip and bowed his head. “Your personal world. What would you save for the future? Bring what you want or need or love and leave the rest. That’s the idea, I think. How much should I charge?”

“Admission? Like it’s Disneyworld?”

“I’ve got to pay for it, Thomas. Recoup my investment.”

“You know, George, you might need to look into the legalities, like the zoning. I’m not sure you can run a business on this corner, being so close to the State Forest and all.”

“It’s not a business, Thomas. It’s a hobby. I won’t charge admission if that’s what makes it a business. I’ll take up a collection, like in church.” He beamed. “Call it an expression of my religious beliefs.”

Thomas felt his spirits, calmed and soothed just an hour ago, sinking. It was one thing for the Virgin Mary to appear out of nowhere and attract crowds of the curious, the religious and a few stray insane; it was quite another for the town of Stirling to sanction the purposeful building of something meant to attract that same crowd. “I’m not sure, George, of the ramifications, but we don’t need to go into all the details today. It’s certainly a big idea, as you say. Why don’t you send your plans over to the building department and we’ll see what happens from there.”

“Building department? What for?”

“For a building permit, George. You know that.” Thomas pictured the permit posted to a tree on George's property, the town’s imprimatur for George's Big Idea, and he felt doomed.

“I don’t need no permit to express my religious beliefs." It was almost as if George was itching for a fight. "Is that your wife in the car, Thomas? Ask her! She’ll back me up on that. I bet she’ll organize one of her—organizations--on my behalf.” They looked over at the car,

where Daphne appeared to be on her cell phone, her right hand jabbing the air. Thomas noticed that, environmentally conscious, she'd turned the engine off.

"I'm sure she would, George, but there are other things to consider here, too. Like proximity to the State Forest, and traffic."

"Don't be such a spoiler, Thomas," George said, and without more walked around to his truck. The gravel crackled as he pulled away.

Irritated, Thomas watched George go. He knew the people of Stirling well enough to know that if George wanted this to be a big problem, it was going to be a big problem. The people of Stirling were known to have recalled a mayor a few mayors back, and Thomas was still garnering electoral support for his own grand plan to save Stirling, Project Heritage. Thomas' idea was to preserve the architectural character of the town, which was not particularly remarkable except that it was, by Midwest standards, old, and therefore charming. Johnsville could have Wal-marts and Home Depots and McDonald's, but he wanted Stirling to be different, to hold fast to its history and its identity as a community. You can't be much of a community, he'd said during his mayoral campaign, when you don't know the sales clerks in the stores, the cooks in the kitchen or the mechanics in the garage. Daphne'd agreed. She'd said you honored those workers more when they had names. In a small town, she said, everyone had a role, and it was pretty clear that none was that much more important than the others: the doctor and the trash collector lived on the same block, volunteered with the same fire department, and served up pancakes side-by-side at the same church breakfast. To Thomas, Project Heritage was about nurturing the independence of its citizens, who could work for themselves in antiques, arts and dining businesses, tell the salespeople what to stock, tip their service people with a pie. Still, he

could only do so much as mayor. He thought he could do more as a State Senator, but an Ark would brand the town as eccentric, if not reactionary. It could make Stirling a laughing stock.

"Looks serious," Daphne said when Thomas got in the car, her voice a gleeful half-note above normal.

"Not too bad," Thomas sighed. He hated controversy, government interference and fanaticism, in that order, while his wife thrived on the same, measure for measure. What an odd pairing they would've made on Noah's Ark, he thought. He felt six hundred years old already, and the rains had not yet come.