

Signals!

“A dog only has one master.” Wade Bridges, the hero of our story, told his wife, Joy.

“At least, this one,” Wade told Joy in the rigmarole of legal separation from their marriage. Wade, who didn’t want to be alone, told Joy he planned to take Dogma, a Mountain Dog, to live with him in his old shack in Backwards, Amerika. Besides, Dogma was his dog, he argued, because he had taken care of him from the first day they got the beast. Joy said there was no reason to fight over a stupid animal: Dogma was his dog, and she knew it. With that settled, Wade had minimized his things into one large backpack, since he would be walking all the way to the old shack in Backwards. Wade was glad Dogma would be coming along on his mission. Dogma was loyal and not just another fair-weather-friend. Wade was on a Fixed Income. Even so, Wade would be volunteering at the non-profit group Signals! To inform people of the goings on behind the Gematria X Bookstore. As a “volunteer,” he would be working in the basement of Signals! Wade Bridges made his way to the Gematria X Bookstore. The X stood for the Christos, that is, the Greek X and it had a strange and despotic air to it. It was a singular concrete structure, two stories high, and with its basement accessible from the rear. Signals! a freethought society, was an open secret but was in the remote Back Woods of Backwards. Wade picked up a Sunday paper from the paper rack in front of the Gematria X Bookstore and then noticed he had to go back onto the sidewalk to get to the rear where the entrance to the Gematria X Bookstore.

The paper said: “Let Freedom Rise: One Christian Nation, Under God”. Wade wasn’t sure about the implications of ‘Let Freedom Rise.’ “What a stupid bill!” Wade said. What could he do? Wade was about to see what he could do to counter this as entered the Signals! building. There he went to the front desk, and a lady who introduced herself as Fig Fable said she would ring a Mr. Rot Worldly to come out and speak to him. Mr. Worldly would be overseeing him as a volunteer there for Signals! Mr. Worldly came out and was a pleasant gentleman of middle age, just as Wade Bridges was, who was now nearing 50 years old. Mr. Worldly introduced himself and explained that Wade would be a kind of “watchdog” for Signals! and Wade would keep up with and follow President Dump on Chatterbox, a social media website. Wade was not to post anything for Signals! which was a nonprofit organization and was not allowed to get involved in politics directly. Signals! a freethought society, kept a watch on and maintained the “separation between Church and State.” Wade’s volunteer job was simple: Report any trespass of the current administration, the State, and involvement between it and the Church or religious organizations. Wade pointed out what he had read in the paper about Prayer in School, and Mr. Worldly told him they already were aware of this fact, but good work, regardless. Wade was given a wireless internet connection, and a laptop to use there at Signals! and to take with him so he could “work anytime,” Mr. Worldly said. Wade was glad to get these things and looked forward to his monitoring of State-Church infractions.

Wade wasn't so concerned with the State-Church offenses he was to be a "watchdog" over, rather Wade Bridges was glad to be a part of something other than Joy's church where he didn't fit in at all. Wade walked back out the lobby of Signals! saying goodbye to Fig Fable, the secretary, on the way out. Wade Bridges walked out of Signals! and took out his bottle of Dr. Nostrum's Elixir and downed the rest of the bottle. It would take an hour or so to take effect, and in the meantime, Wade went by the Farmer Market and picked up some supplies. He decided to just get a few more cans of dog food for Dogma, and a few things he needed.

The rest of the supplies he needed he would order from Congo online and have them delivered. Some people made it an issue to complain about Congo being environmentally friendly, and it wasn't, but it was Wade Bridges's savior: Congo allowed him to purchase without being judged as he had been at the Farmer Market. The idea of "buying local" was a thing of the past, anyhow. The world was going to end soon enough, but not because of the Christian God, who was just make-believe to Wade Bridges, just another Santa Syndrome for adults. No, the world was going to end soon. Wade "prophesied" the Capital would fall soon, but only figuratively. The world was going to end, but only because of the apathy and inaction of people like the Evangelicals. Not because they didn't "refuse, recycle, and reuse." It was because of overpopulation due to their breeding practices, as stated above, and their resistance to birth control and abortion, as well. Wade Bridges had a feeling that things would go shit south eventually, and he just hoped it wouldn't be in his generation, which was called Generation Angst for a reason. It seemed to him narcissistic to believe such a thing, or at least he had heard it put this way. We are who we surround ourselves with, Wade's therapist, Ms. Little used to tell him. And if you strive to surround yourself with no one, you'll be nothing Wade had discovered because of his recluse personality. But he was trying to get involved, and time would tell how that went. For now, Wade was glad to have his new laptop and digital fix with the wireless internet. He didn't much care if some minimalist, environmentalist or even scientist thought that it was just a larger environmental footprint, what the hell did they stay connected with the world with anyhow, he thought, the mail (and that has an enviro-print, as well:). It all comes down to incorrectness and correctness. Not political correctness or incorrectness but being correct or incorrect in our perception of the world is fundamental in shaping our beliefs. It was not about right and wrong, which the self-righteous Evangelicals claimed to have a monopoly on...

The churchgoers and Holy Rollers were not "wrong" about this. Right and wrong is a moral claim; correct and incorrect is a factual claim. Anyhow, Wade Bridges was enjoying his new gadget and digital connection to the world of knowledge. He made his way home to find, though, that his dog Dogma had escaped and was gone, right as the Dr. Nostrum's Elixir took effect in the twilight of the dusk of the day. Wade was too lit to go looking for Dogma. And he put a can of food outside, and some water for the beast. This was not the first time Dogma had gone "whoring around," as Wade called it. But Wade was too lit to care. Wade put on some electronic elixir music by Dr. Ostinato. The ambient psychedelic tunes hit the spot, and Wade even felt relieved he didn't have to take the beast Dogma out.

Now it was just Wade, Dr. Ostinato, and good old Dr. Nostrum. It might be relevant to point out here, that Wade Bridges used the elixir not to cure any physical ailment, but a mental one of trauma from the past, specifically corporal punishment in schools had led to his abuse. Wade got “lit” on Dr. Nostrum’s Elixir to avoid the unpleasant feelings and thoughts of Mr. Rod Stricter, his former science teacher. Mr. Stricter was more than just a “strict disciplinarian.”

Disciplined in the sense of the word of punishment only, Rod Stricter was a “Christian man,” a God-fearing man, a sadist. Wade Bridges had concluded that you couldn’t be an Evangelical Christian in the South, without being a sadist.... And perhaps even a sadomasochist, misogynist, or a general abuser of human dignity. Though there are exceptions to every rule, there are not usually many of these exceptions, if any. And Mr. Rod Stricter was no exception, but the rule. Mr. Stricter used constant diligence to make sure no kid was left behind, and that every kid got their “be-hind” beaten accordingly. And for any fraction of an infraction.

Who needs grace or mercy as a teacher when you’re armed with a paddle to assault children with Wade reasoned. Corporal punishment was incorrect, and it was wrong. But Dr. Nostrum’s Elixir was taking effect, and most of these troubling thoughts could wait until the following day. Wade built a fire, not because it was cold, but because it was still cool enough that he could enjoy one last fire in the cabin before the sweltering heat began. There was no winter anymore, just a switch from the freezing cold to blistering heat in one week if not one day. And that’s how the end of the world was looking now. Wade started the kindling, stoked it with some larger pieces of wood, and soon the fire was going...

And soon Wade realized it was already too warm for a fire in the pot belly stove. He opened the windows to the little cabin, and it was just the right temperature. Wade curled up on his bedroll on the floor and rested. There was no going to sleep for Wade, though. After the stove died down, Wade closed the window and got on the new laptop and surveyed the Capital online. He did this through the Chatterbox website that President Dump so often put in a Post. There were a few different posts, one about how climate change was a hoax, another about how the extremists in Amerika were all Liberals, and then finally the goodies Wade Bridges was looking for with Signals! Dump posted that “prayer in school would take us back to the good old days when teachers knew how to chasten a child.” This, Wade thought, wasn’t just suggesting Amerika pass the bill to enact One Christian Nation into the Pledge of Allegiance, and with protections, further protections, that is, for corporal punishment in school. The idea to “go back to old ways,” Wade had heard from his religious father-in-law, Mr. Fallow, and Mr. Fallow’s estranged wife, Dixie Fallow, both who were Conservatives. But Wade Bridges’s dad Pa Bridges, Sr., and his mother Ma Bridges, and his older brother Havoc Bridges, and his younger brother Magic Bridges... All these Bridges and his sisters-in-law were Conservatives. Wade was fed up with being a Liberal-Conservative and decided to become just a member of the all-Liberal party. But the fact that most of the people that Wade was kin, or knew, were all Conservative and had to do with Wade Bridges being from Backwards, a small-town dead center in Amerika. Backwards was home to Back Woods, Back Hills, Back River, Back Bluff, Back Lake, and even Back Bottoms. Also, in Backwards, there was the Hallowed Temple. Yes, there were a lot of places to see and go in Backwards, but it was a place of insularity and backwardness all around.

Wade Bridges had attended college University of Academia and then had a falling out with both Backwards and Academia. A person could be too shallow and too deep, either too stupid or too smart for their good, Wade had discovered. One needed to be the ideal backslider, and that's why Wade Bridges had followed the footsteps of other iniquitous and blasphemous pathfinders of thought to become a freethinker. Wade had gone to Hallowed Temple, or just plain old HT, in Backwards when he had lived there before with Joy Fallow.

Wade didn't plan on going to church anymore after separating from the religious Joy and her family. But he had learned a lot in the previous decade. Wade had been to the churches where they spoke in tongues. Joy was a "tongue-speaker" as a matter of fact. And Joy had recently recommended to Wade that he "get the Holy Ghost" and speak in tongues, but Wade could not humiliate himself by pretending to speak a language that he didn't know. It was just impossible and those who spoke in tongues were simply delusional, Wade had assumed. And this seemed quite likely from Wade's experience with "tongue-speakers," which is what Wade Bridges had labeled them to be more scientific in delineating the different subspecies of Evangelical belief, or denominations as the reader may better understand them to be. Though, science had a term for it: Glossolalia. But take the non-denominational churches like Hallowed Temple: they were, as Wade discovered, -the non-denominational church was a denomination itself, so he had been instructed by a preacher once. Wade's mother, though, pointed out the crux of the matter: Non-denominational churches had no government oversight. By documenting and categorizing the different schisms and denominations of the schisms, Wade Bridges could more easily determine that none of them were true. It was through these "mutual differences" that Wade had come to understand that he was better suited spiritually as a freethinker, and working for free, or volunteering, for Signals! a freethought society: a nonprofit nonreligious religion.

It was Monday morning, and Wade had slept a few more hours. This was typical of a night on elixir, especially a second night on elixir, that is. But he had a bit more elixir Sunday night compared to his first night there. Not to celebrate, but to cope with the stressors of reality. Wade opened a new bottle of Dr. Nostrum that Monday morning. He had two more pints to last him until Tuesday morning when he would visit the Farmer Market in downtown Backwards, beside the Washitall River. For now, Wade will calm down. He browsed the internet on his new laptop, looking at the Chatterbox website. There he looked up several of his old friends: Gusto Wylie, Rob Cash, and Log Fisherman. None of them knew he worked with Signals! monitoring Chatterbox, and Wade just browsed around to see what they had posted. Nothing that seemed unusual, typical off-the-grid, survivalist stuff from all of them. Wade was happy to see they were still alive. Even though he owned the small cabin on Free Bluff, Gusto Wylie lived in the Great City. He worked for Capital and Rob Cash. Log Fisherman wanted to be up North with Gus and Rob, but instead, he ran an apiary and worked growing cannabis for the Circle of Life dispensary in Backwards. And though there was some bent sentiment toward him, Wade, Rob, Gus, and Log all used to run around together roughing it, in the Back Woods, in the Back Hills, at Back Lake, and on the Back River at Back Bluff. Life happens and friends separate and go their own way. Sometimes they'd get together, and that's not always an ideal situation, nor is it the most desired outcome.

Wade was happy that he was working for Signals! It had been a month since Wade had arrived back in Backwards. Wade had reunited with Jack Retch, who still lived at the Nook, RCF.

Wade had turned to books to ease his sufferings of city life. But it was still a far better life than the institutional life at the Nook, RCF. He had gotten a position at Underground Ink, an atheist bookstore online run by Signals! to fill some of his spare time, the rest he spent reading or walking the streets of Backwards with his buddy Jack Retch. Wade walked from around the west side of Backwards, by downtown and the Washitall River, he walked from there to the East side of Backwards, near what was both the city limits, and the border of Backwards the Nook was located. It was just outside and in the city limits of Backwards.

The residents of the Nook made the news the night before, Wade had caught the piece that aired as he was monitoring things online for Signals! For one thing, the residents of the town of Backwards that were interviewed called the Nook residents “patients” of Nook instead of residents of Backwards. And even though the mental folk were residents, the Backwards News had painted a picture of them being both a patient and a danger because as one Backwards resident said: “They weren’t right in the head.” As if they could just wander into your home and eat your brain like the zombie apocalypse the Evangelicals had been calling for all these years. Yep, the end is nigh. For now, it was Tuesday morning: and Wade and Jack walked back to where Wade Bridges lived on 313 Wayward Street to downtown Backwards and then to the Farmer Market. There Wade and Jack visited the infamous booth of Mr. Poorman, again to get a few select pints of Dr. Nostrum’s Elixir. “Hello, Mr. Bridges and Mr. Retch, what will you be having today?” Mr. Poorman asked. “A couple of pints of Elixir for me, please,” Wade said. “And a couple pints of Mr. Slither’s Whiskey for me!” Jack added. “So where do you work, Mr. Bridges?” Mr. Poorman asked. “Why, at Signals!” Wade said. “What the hell is Signals!?” Mr. Poorman asked. “It’s a society for fine young men such as us two gentlemen, I would think. It is, as they say, a freethought society, at least an underground one, a kind of resistance to authority I guess you would say.” Wade told Mr. Poorman. “I like the sound of that Mr. Bridges, is it still around, Signals!?” Mr. Poorman asked. “Oh yes, it is, I believe it meets where you work at the Gematria X Bookstore. is dedicated to undermining the Capital, and I think y’all like that.” “I’ve never seen such goings on there?” “Well, it meets at night, Mr. Worldly, runs the operation now,” Wade said. And the two men were off to enjoy their bottle of Elixir each in the meantime. They were walking home and came across a lady Wade had met several times at Signals!, Fig Fable. She was Wade’s new “lady friend.” She asked what they were doing downtown and Wade tried to avoid telling her that they had come to get some Elixir, but Jack Retch blurted it right out with no shame. She seemed unmoved by it, and Wade asked Fig to walk with them. Wade and Jack discussed “the Apocalypse” a little, as President Apocalypso knew the Apocalypso was where the Conservative party met for Amerika, led by former President Apocalypso and running soon against his incumbent adversary, President Schmoe, who was a Liberal. Wade was a Liberal-Conservative: “both, yet neither,” he told Fig Fable. Fig was not as big on politics as Wade, nor elixir or whiskey, but she tagged along and had “fun with the boys,” or men as they were. All three were aware of the Malady, or Covert-20 virus, as it was made known by the scientific community over the last month. The layperson knew it as just “the Malady,” though: a virus that affects the lungs and heart, and the brain, as it alters people’s thinking during it. The thing that Wade wanted most, besides drinking elixir, was to get involved in something rather than just reading and peddling books. And what better to do than meddle in the affairs of the deviant and defiant members of the freethought society at Signals!

Wade had gotten into a duplex, and as he returned, he saw Page Neighbors on her porch, the lady who lived next to him. She quickly went inside at the sight of Wade and Jack and Fig approaching. She was a nosey and noisy neighbor, loud and foul-mouthed. Currently, she said she was on a “no-dick-diet,” whatever that meant. Page Neighbors lived beside Wade in the adjoining duplex, and next door was Dick and Jane Hagggle, who lived in the duplex that adjoined with, yet another neighbor, Frank Manners, or Mr. Manners as Wade called him. Wade and Jack and Fig all sat around Wade’s living room. Wade told stories of Backwards.

Stories were born in the Free Hills and at Back Lake and Back Bluff on the Back River and in all the Back Woods of Backwards. And even a story they hadn’t heard before about the Pig Hunt in the Back Bottoms. Wade talked about Gus and Rob, along with Wade’s old friend and now rival, Log. Wade told stories about how he and Gus, Rob, and Log all used to hang out and run all over Backwards together. Along with a girl named Devine who they all were “familiar” with, who was now married to another old acquaintance, Ward Hollows. Wade and Log were friends once, too, but that had gone shit south, as well. But Wade was not concerned about it anymore, he had moved on from his old acquaintances and associates to live independently in Backwards. Wade liked how Jack didn’t give him a hard time indulging in Dr. Nostrum’s Elixir. Gus and Log had given him slack about it. Gus and Log gave Wade a difficult time, as I said, but not so much did Jug. Although, it was Jug who had told Wade to leave Joy. Wade had since separated from Joy but remained married to her. Wade was just enjoying hanging out with his “lady friend” Fig for the time being, and his buddy Jack Retch. The separation from Joy Fallow-Bridges was seemingly over religious beliefs. But it was Joy now accusing Wade of having sex with Page Neighbors. Joy was just a bit jealous. Wade didn’t let Joy’s jealousy bother him too much. But he and Joy didn’t see eye to eye on religion, because Wade was agnostic. Wade also felt being agnostic was an “academic” way of being atheist since it attributed the possibility of Judeo-Christian beliefs being true. But to Wade Bridges, this was improbable, and a downright absurd possibility, and Wade was quite certain of religion’s untruth. At least the one held by the Evangelicals in the South. And Joy was an Evangelical, which Wade had known when he got with her, but Wade had just recently come out about his atheism and agnosticism after years of marriage to Joy. People would tell Wade that “the past is the past,” and “it is what it is,” and that all that had happened was just “water under the bridge.” But Wade didn’t have much use for the irrelevant and useless sayings. He attributed the use of such phrases to idiots or at least shallow people. And Wade liked to use the expressions, though, to fit in, and seem normal. “But what is normal,” some would say, and again Wade would point out that it was normal to be an idiot, obviously, and to ask such idiotic things as, “But what is normal, anyway?” For now, Wade was an “underground writer.” And he wished to go further beneath the social circles in Signals! Wade and Jack discussed what they thought went on at Signals! and Fig said she already knew. “What goes on there then,” Wade asked. “Well, your neighbors Dick and Jane Hagggle... well, Dick Hagggle, anyhow, is a member, at least he was,” Fig told them.

“Don’t know why he got kicked out.” Fig said, then added: “But Dick’s a dumbass and a big fat liar, so no-telling if it’s true or not.” “Yeah, are his pants on fire?!” Jack kidded. “Anyhow, he said they were planning on ‘undermining the Capital,’ that’s how he put it,” Fig said. “Yep, he said they were undermining the Capital, so he quit the organization, that’s what he says anyways,” Fig said with a smile. “Well, glad that idiot ain’t with Signals! anymore, and you’re right, he’s a dumbass. One time I had him so pissed off that Ms. Dick accused me of killing him.”

She said: You’re going to give poor Dick a heart attack! That’s because he was pissed. After all, I told him that his idea about Shakespeare writing the King James Version of the Bible was nonsense and non-verifiable, which meant that it was not true. It was bosh.

“Well, poor little Dick couldn’t take that and threw a tantrum right there in front of me, Joy and Ms. Dick.”

Wade and Jack and Fig talked a little more and Wade finished his first pint of Elixir. It started to have its effect on him, and Jack Retch was getting lit, or at least feeling better, after his first pint of whiskey.

Fig said she was going to go since they were having so much fun without her, when Wade asked why they didn’t go down to the Underground Ink Bookstore and Fig could look around the bookstore some. Fig and Jack agreed, and Wade grabbed his other bottle of Dr. Nostrum’s Elixir, and Jack grabbed his other bottle of Mr. Slither’s Whiskey seeing that they were “packing,” as Wade called it, and the three of them were off. They walked down Wayward Street to Underground Ink. Wade and Jack stumbled a little due to the intoxicants. Wade opened his other bottle of elixir, which inspired Jack to open his other bottle of whiskey, and finally, the three made it down to the end of Wayward Street into midtown Global where Underground Ink was located. Fig, Wade, and Jack Retch went around back and down to the basement of the bookstore and knocked. After a moment, a man came to the door and introduced himself. Wade asked Mr. Worldly about Dick Haggle and asked if it were true. Mr. Worldly said Dick had joined them but had left the organization “over differences in opinion about the author of the King James Version of the Bible.” The three men laughed as Jack said he wrote it, and that he was known as “King Jack” where he was from. “Why, you might be of some help to us, even if you don’t want to be a freethinker, and I promise we won’t try to de-proselytize you from God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost!” “Oh, I just believe in God, not the other two. I’m not too much of a Holy Roller...I’m not even a Bible thumper, I just have a feeling there’s a God, that there’s something more to all this, and that’s about it.” “Well, I guess there’s no law against that, especially since you authorized the protestant version of the Bible all by yourself!” And the four laughed together. Wade and Jack and Fig mulled around for a while, but then just headed off, as well, back to Wade’s place.

The three comrades arrived back at Wade Bridges’s place and Wade immediately broke out two more pints of elixir. Jack was semi-enthusiastic, but Fig was a bit worried because now Wade had an addiction to both elixir and whiskey. But she shrugged it off. Wade was more excited to have met a fellow atheist or “freethinker” such as

Mr. Worldly. Fig was more a free spirit than a freethinker, as was Jack. Meanwhile, Wade Bridges made the three some oatmeal. And as he did, Wade thought of his father-in-law Mr. Fable who would go on "oat fasts," which was just an all-oatmeal diet for a week or two. The thought of this made Wade chuckle because this was one of the favorite memories he had of Mr. Fable. Not that eating an all-oatmeal diet was beyond him, for Wade had done it several times, also, but only because he was out of money. And Wade had only done this since he found Mr. Fable dead one morning from a heart attack. The death was tragic, but the oatmeal now only seemed to remind Wade Bridges of a good memory of Mr. Fable.

Mr. Fable would not approve of Signals! for not only was he deeply Conservative, but he was also a devout Christian as it is said, and deeply religious, too. Wade Bridges was not worried what his deceased father-in-law or his estranged wife Joy thought of him that moment, because he was sauced up on Dr. Nostrum's Elixir at present. And he was infatuated with Fig right at this time, and entertained by his buddy Jack Retch, who himself was "sauce" on Mr. Slither's Whiskey. Jack was telling Wade and Fig stories of his days as a drifter, riding trains, and drinking pint after pint of whiskey, a real grand spectacle he had made of his life, he said. But Jack soon passed out and Fig was tired of all the drugs and alcohol. Gibberish Wade said he would refrain from talking about it if she would stay, and she agreed.

Wade let Fig use his laptop to get online and look around. She wanted to learn more about "how to be a witch," she joked. And Wade said he was going to read a book that Mr. Worldly had given him at Signals! Wade read about the new organization Signals! that he would be joining. It told how to join a person just needed to give 10% of their earnings, just like the Christians did, but for a better cause: one of atheist and agnostic solidarity. Wade was quite content to pay 10% of his Fixed Income to "a good cause," he told Fig Fable. Although now Ms. Fable was hardly paying any attention to Wade, and simply said "Um, okay." And was looking at the Chatterbox website on the internet. She was investigating the Capital for herself after all the talk of it that evening. "It says here that former President Dump will for certain be running again in a year," Fig told Wade. "Well, everyone already knows or at least thinks that anyhow. Anyways, is there anything new on there about him?" Wade asked. "Yeah, it says Dump is looking at boycotting anyone associated with your new buddy, Mr. Worldly," Fig told Wade. "What? What the hell is that about?" Wade was curious, "Says here, President Dump is allied with the Evangelical group Amerika's Faith Radio or AFR to combat disbelief in Amerika, and Dump says he promises to add 'One Christian nation, Under God,' to the Pledge of Allegiance." Fig said. Well, I do say, he's the biggest jackass I've ever known." Wade laughed. "I'm glad I'm joining Signals! they help to fight things like this in court, Mr. Worldly says," Wade added. "Well, I guess I'll stay the night. Is there somewhere I can sleep besides the loveseat with Jack?" Fig asked. "You can sleep on my extra mat on the floor. I have an extra pillow, also. That's where I sleep, too, on the floor. Don't worry, you can have the bedroom, and I'll sleep on the floor in the living room, far enough away from Jack that he won't step on me or fall on me when he wakes up." "Okay, but if I get scared, I might as well sleep in here with you guys," Fig said. "That will be okay with me, and Jack, too. I'm sure he won't even notice." Wade kidded. And the three of them slept in the living room. Jack was on the loveseat, and Wade and Fig were on the living room floor away from Jack. Wade gave Fig enough space that she was comfortable. And she felt safe since Wade and Jack were there to protect her. At least Wade was conscious enough to put up a fight with an intruder, but as for Jack, he was out.

Fig was most uncomfortable with the idea that Dick Haggles lived next door, as Dick was constantly hinting at sleeping with her, saying that it was too bad Fig wasn't married because he and Ms. Dick were "swingers." Fig had not made the mistake of telling Dick or Ms. Dick that she was bisexual, as that would have made the situation worse, she deduced. This was something she had shared with Wade Bridges, who had told Jack Retch, but had since then agreed with her to keep the information undisclosed. Wade Bridges was awake most of the night, lying on the floor reading about Signals! Because it was not that there was much to read about Signals! in "the little black book," as the introductory guide was referred to...

Wade was reading most of the night because the elixir made it hard to focus and remember what one was reading while on it. But by the time daylight came, Wade Bridges had read the pamphlet 3 times, "the Gematria standard," he called it. The number 3, that is, was "the Gematria standard." Mainly because it was like the Trinity, or vice versa. Fig woke and Wade was already up and having a morning bottle of Dr. Nostrum's Elixir. She didn't condemn him as Wade thought she would but asked if she could have a drink. "I didn't think you drank elixir, ever?" Wade asked. "Only on Sundays." Fig jokes. "Yeah, I've drank it before, you know that, just once though and it made me feel all weird and shit." "And cussing this morning, as well. What, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?" Wade asked.

"No, the right side of the bed this morning, because I slept so well being over here at your place. So I thought I'd show my gratitude and get fucked up with you for a change." Fig said. "What about old Jack, does he indulge in Dr. Nostrum's finest ever?" She asked. "Not really, he's anti-elixir like most folks are," Wade said. "Folks? There's that Backwards talk coming out of you again." Fig teased Wade. "What are we going to do today, Mr. Bridges?" "Well, remember, I have to go to Signals! meeting at noon, but you can either go, which I don't figure you will, or you can stay here with Jack, or..." Wade was saying. "I'll see if Jack wants to go to Wayward Park while you're at your meeting and then we can come back here, can't we?" Then Fig added. "But I have to go meet Gabby Babble at whatever time it gets dark this time of year." "That would be around 7:30 or 8:00. But who's Gabby? You haven't told me about her yet?" Wade asked Fig. "She's my girlfriend. Not my 'girlfriend' girlfriend, yet, but will be my girlfriend soon, possibly." Fig told Wade. "I understand," Wade said. "Say, can we come over here tonight, or can she just meet me here tonight?"

I mean, is that okay?" Fig asked and took another swallow of elixir. "Sure, it's okay. But Jack will probably be here, and we can't get anymore Mr. Slither's Whiskey until Tuesday at the Farmer Market, or even regular whiskey we can't get until first thing Monday morning." Wade told her. "Yeah, he can be a pain in the ass when he's sobered, but I'll tell Gabby, she keeps stocked up on alcohol so I'm sure she has some of the hard stuff." Fig joked again. "Well, I like this side of you, but as far as your friend Gabby Babble, better just find out if maybe she can just bring some beer. Retch will be better behaved under the influence of it, rather than the hard liquor." "Okie dokie," Fig said. "It's a plan?" Wade asked. "Sure, just let me call her and I'll make the necessary arrangements for our little sleepover," Fig said with a pleasant smile. The actual reason Fig wanted to bring Gabby Babble over was that even though Fig was now 30 years old, she still lived with her parents, who were not Evangelicals or religious but did not fully approve of their daughter Fig Fable's "lifestyle choice" of being bisexual. And even though Fig had assured them it was not a choice on her part, they still frowned on the notion of her having a girlfriend, and downright wouldn't allow any "lesbianism" in the household.

And so, Wade didn't mind Fig asking him for this favor, as it was. "That's the herd for you," Wade said. He was known for repeatedly saying that "the herd goes herd fashion over the edge of the cliff." Wade was careful to say that: "A philosopher guy used to call the Christians the herd." Therefore, Wade was not ripping off the words of the dead. And then they were off to Wade's duplex again at 313 Wayward Street in Freewill, Amerika. Fig was rushing Wade and Jack's steps to make sure they made it time to meet Gabby, whom she had told to come around 3 pm because Wade said it was the afternoon "witching hour." Gabby didn't understand, and Fig told her she didn't either, but that it sounded cool, and she was into witches and stuff nowadays.

Gabby would be there at "three sharp" she had said, and she was more punctual than even Wade, Fig told him, and Jack, which was quite punctual. Wade had not been late as long as he could remember, but he knew that this had not always been the case. But after years of dealing with his mother-in-law who was in "a perpetual state of lateness" Wade had developed an obsessive awareness of being on time. The three made it to Wade's apartment, and it was "right at the daylight witching hour," Wade told Fig. It was minutes earlier, but Gabby was already on the porch. She was a pleasant-looking little thing, Wade thought. But this was about all that crossed his elixir-soaked mind at that point. Gabby Babble was tall, too, taller than Fig, anyway. But this was no spectacular thing, as Fig was only five feet even.

But Fig was about five foot 8 inches tall, which seemed tall for most girls, much less compared to Gabby. Wade was only five foot 10 inches tall and Jack Retch stood a towering six foot even. But even to Jack, Gabby seemed taller than she was. Jack would give Fig a tough time about her height, which anyone could do for that matter, and she was unaffected by his joshing around with her. Gabby stood up and greeted Fig with a hug, Wade with a handshake, and Jack with just a simple fist pump, to delineate the pecking order, Wade suspected. But it made him feel good to get a handshake instead of just a fist pump. Jack Retch was too concerned with whether Gabby had brought any whiskey. Wade had gotten another bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey but hadn't told Jack, at least not yet. Wade was waiting to see how it went with whatever Gabby had brought with her to see when he would have to ration it out to Jack, or perhaps even to Gabby. But "Lucky Jack" got the good side of the coin of fortune once again, and Gabby had brought some beer, just as Fig had instructed. And if Jack behaved, she might even have brought a bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey, as she was informed this was his favorite liquor. After hearing this, Wade went and stowed the now extra bottle away for later. Gabby Babble was a humorous lady, two years younger than Fig, but seemingly more mature.

"Are you an atheist?" Wade asked. "Yes, I am atheist, at least I think I am," Gabby Babble said to Wade Bridges. "What about you? Are you atheist or agnostic?" Gabby had more verbal aggression than he had anticipated. Wade that is, had been warned by Fig that Gabby was a "firecracker." Fig had taken this from what Jack had said about Joy. Jack referred to Joy as a firecracker. Gabby reached into her backpack and retrieved a beer. Jack laughed but took the beer and said, thank you. "It's 13-point beer, Jack," Gabby told him. "Ah!" Jack said. "That's called a Gematria standard, around here," Wade added. "Gematria, like as in numerology?" Gabby asked. "That's right, I figured you might know what it was," Wade said. "Well, kind of, I've heard them talk about it at the Easter service at Hallowed Temple." But Fig was getting a little jealous of the two sharing such a common thing. "Yeah, and remember I'm married?" Wade said. "Yeah, but separated," Fig added. "Married, huh? Well, you're in trouble. I know you like my friend Fig here..."

"I might like you after all," Wade said. "After all?" Gabby asked. "After the fact of y'all's 'lesbianism,' you know?" Wade laughed, as he was thoroughly lit on elixir and was unaware if this comment would be inappropriate. But Gabby laughed, as well, along with Fig, who got the allusion to her parents' prejudice, but not Jack Retch, who was not even paying attention but rather reading the beer bottle label to make sure it was 13-point beer. The four went inside and had beer and elixir, and they had "chit-chat" Gabby said. Gabby Babble was indeed a firecracker, Wade thought, and he secretly liked her already.

Jack Retch didn't understand anyhow as he was "straight as an arrow," as the saying goes. But Wade was too for that matter, but could appreciate the complexity of the situation, but that was merely because he was involved in it. Retch on the other hand wasn't emotionally invested in the situation, other than his love of alcohol, to which Gabby said he might need EA or Elixirs Anonymous meeting before the night was over. Wade drank his extra bottle of elixir around the time Gabby arrived, or around the time that arrived to find Gabby on the porch waiting. And now it was getting dark, and the elixir was going full force. It was the experience of another world, "a parallel dimension" Fig called it. It was also a bit cathartic and cleansed the emotions, and that's why Wade had grown so fond of it lately, and addicted.

But either way, the elixir had its hold on him now, and he drifted off by himself and started reading over "the little black book" of Signals! again. Gabby noticed what Wade was reading and tried to ask him about it, but Fig told her: "He's lost in it, love." And Gabby left Wade alone and was just glad to have Fig for herself for a while. But then Jack Retch got involved in the situation because he had run out of beer. Gabby told him that was all the alcohol she had brought, and he would just have to settle for some elixir. Jack told her he didn't drink "the hard stuff" because elixir was really "the hard liquor" to him. Gabby told him after this, that she had one more "witch's beer," he could have, but after that, it would be an "elixir of nothing." Wade laughed at this, and Gabby and Fig were surprised he even caught the remark, being how he was so entranced by Signals! "literature." But Wade said the phrase "witch's beer" had somehow broken the spell the pamphlet had on him. And he was wondering if Gabby had given Retch her last "witch's beer," if she wanted some of "the hard liquor" herself? And Wade assured her this wasn't any kind of sexual innuendo. To which she smiled and said: "I know Mr. Bridges. And thank you, I would like some of the hard stuff, please." And then Wade and Fig laughed. Wade was too intoxicated to get the pun. Regardless, Wade got out another pint of the sinister Dr. Nostrum's Elixir and handed it to Gabby, who downed a little over half of it. "Damn, woman, save me some," Fig said. "I thought you didn't much care for elixir, Gabby?" Wade asked. "No, I don't. I'd rather have some Mr. Slither's." Gabby added. "Well, I might have a bit put back for a rainy day," Wade said. "What?" She whispered. "Don't let Retch find out." Fig insisted.

"Retch is too busy reading another bottle label of witch's beer to notice." Wade pointed out. "I thought you said you would rather have that than elixir?" Wade asked. "Well, I lied. Just like Gabby did to Jack, and you did to us, Wade!" Fig was teasing, but Wade didn't fully catch it.

“Whatever.” And Wade had already forgotten about saying he had a bottle of Mr. Slither’s. “Well, when Jack over there passes out, we’ll go find it, Fig. I saw him go back into his bedroom when I first got here, and I’m guessing that’s where he put it.” “But what?” Wade asked, but he was oblivious to Gabby and Fig’s plot against him. Jack Retch soon passed out as Gabby and Fig had anticipated, and Wade was too lit to notice as the two ladies said they were going to the bedroom to chit-chat and give him time with his reading over and over of the little black book of Signals! So the two ladies were gone sometime before Wade noticed their raised voices in the bedroom and he wandered back there to see what was going on. And he was coming off elixir. It was about to be the real witching hour he went to tell the gals. And he went to tell them and found that they were “jacked,” as he liked to call it: crossed on elixir and whiskey. For the two ladies had downed all the Mr. Slither’s Whiskey and were too lit to feel any remorse toward Wade or Jack. But Wade told them that he wasn’t upset at them and wouldn’t expect any less out of a couple of witches.

Gabby found this funny and laughed uncontrollably, which upset Fig, who tried to leave the room. But Gabby warned her she better not leave her alone with Wade in this state. And Fig stayed and Wade, sobering up while the two lovely ladies were hammered, decided it was best if he left, and he told Gabby and Fig such. But nothing happened between the three, as Jack Retch came stumbling into the room on his way to the restroom. He went into the restroom and Wade was quick to hide the almost empty bottle of Mr. Slither’s Whiskey. Jack Retch came out in a minute. “

Gabby joked that she had prophesied this moment of Jack walking through the bedroom. Wade said that wasn’t too hard to prophesize considering how much 13-point beer Retch had drunk earlier that evening. Jack got his beer and was unaware of the shot of Mr. Slither’s that lay underneath the bed. The four conversed until the ladies sobered up enough to go to sleep, and by that time it was Monday at 7 am and daylight. The ladies, neither of them who worked regular jobs, went to sleep on Wade’s bedroll that he slept on regularly, and Jack went to sleep on the loveseat, again. Wade had been up 48 hours at this point and knew it was time he had some rest. But as he was putting the spare mat down on the living room floor, Gabby came in and sat down beside him. Wade figured between the fact that Retch was in the room, even though asleep, and the fact that Gabby was as Fig said, “straight-lesbian,” that this would be okay. However, Wade had a wife that he wasn’t separated from at one time in the not-too-distant past, and Joy would have been furious if she had caught him in the room in this situation. He explained this to Gabby, who merely asked why he wasn’t with her now, then. “That is complicated, as the saying goes,” Wade said. “Well, I’m not here to hit on you, Wade.... No, I wanted something different, I wanted to fix you up with Gabby, she likes you, aren’t you aware?” “Yes, but I thought you liked Fig?” Wade was lost. “No, not like that, but she likes me like that.... I thought, anyhow, but after last night I could tell she liked you, even though she doesn’t seem to be aware of it herself.” Gabby told Wade. “I’m still technically with my wife, though she has a boyfriend I suspect. But I’m not certain.” “Well, get certain of it my fellow atheist.” Gabby kidded. “You’re not into guys at all, Gabby?” Wade asked. “Just as friends, Wade,” Gabby said. “I understand,” Wade said. Gabby wasn’t sure the reason why Wade asked about her interest in men. But typically, it inferred that a guy liked her. But in this case, Wade wasn’t your typical guy.

Besides his seeming loyalty to his estranged wife, Wade was abnormally interested in the little black book of Signals! rather than flirting with “the ladies” like most guys would, and last, there was this fact about his atheism, which Gabby wasn’t sure if Wade was as much an atheist as her, and Wade was uncertain of this, as well. But the two discussed some atheistic ideas together and then talked more about Dr. Nostrum’s Elixir and Mr. Slither’s Whiskey than anything. Wade was curious which out of elixir and whiskey Gabby was fond of. And she said: “Both, but whiskey is more socially accepted so I try to stick with it.” And Wade was not too surprised, but it made him happy to find someone with a matching vice. Gabby finally went and laid down with Fig on the bedroll in the bedroom, and Wade at last got some rest. The whole house was asleep by noon on Monday until dark, around midnight. Wade woke up about 20 minutes before midnight. He sneaked through the bedroom, the shower, and back out again, but Fig was waiting for him as he came out of the door. She told him good morning, and Wade explained that it was around midnight. Fig asked what day, and Wade told her “Monday night or noon Tuesday.” Fig was surprised but seemingly unmoved by her loss of time, or the fact that everyone was now waking up at midnight. First, Jack came through and used the restroom after Fig was out of it, and then Gabby got up and went to the restroom, but then went to lie back down and begged Fig to come back to bed. Fig said she was getting up and going into the living room with Wade and Jack. Fig simply got up and came and crawled into Wade’s spare “bed” he had made on the living room floor. Fig asked Wade if this was okay, and he said he was breaking open Dr. Nostrum’s Elixirs, to which Fig knew Wade would not be going back to sleep anytime soon. Elixir had a leg on it and worked like a stimulant, though it wasn’t one. Either way, Wade was awake, Gabby went to sleep, and Fig curled up between Wade and Jack on the loveseat. Because she was so small, she could fit even not too uncomfortably between the two normal-sized adults. The three shared the bottle of elixir, and Wade got another one out seeing how Jack was making an exception to his alcohol-only policy. Another elixir day and friends, Wade thought. But he couldn’t help but get the little black book of Signals! shortly after polishing a second. Wade drank most of the second bottle. But regardless, he studied the little black book some more, and Fig finally had to ask what was so interesting. And Wade simply replied: “I don’t know... I keep forgetting because I am so wasted on so much Dr. Nostrum’s Elixir.” Fig suspected he would answer this way and added: “Maybe it’s time to take a break, Wade.” And Wade then told her she might be right, he had been drinking a lot of elixir lately. Fig, though, said she meant to take a break in front of the little black book of Signals! Wade said: “Oh.” And he went to the bedroom and got another bottle of Mr. Slither’s Whiskey for Jack Retch. Jack told him he was thankful but that it would have to wait a while as he didn’t get “jacked” like Wade, Fig, and Gabby were last night. And all of them laughed, including Gabby who was not asleep, and who got up and said she would like the bottle of Mr. Slither’s. Wade Bridges, who felt more like a freeloader rather than a freethinker... Wade had been accused of being a freeloader once upon a time.... But Wade Bridges claimed he was a “reluctant achiever,” rather than a freeloader.

All this debacle and the fiasco at the Capitol had put a strain on society, but a watched pot never boils, and still, there were no End-Times. Jesus did not return. There was plenty of religious hatred to go around. Dogma came back eventually to Gus’s cabin. Wade let Gus keep the dog. Wade had stopped going to Signals! and retreated into his own space as a recluse.

Wade Bridges, though, disappeared into the woodwork... no one has seen him since.