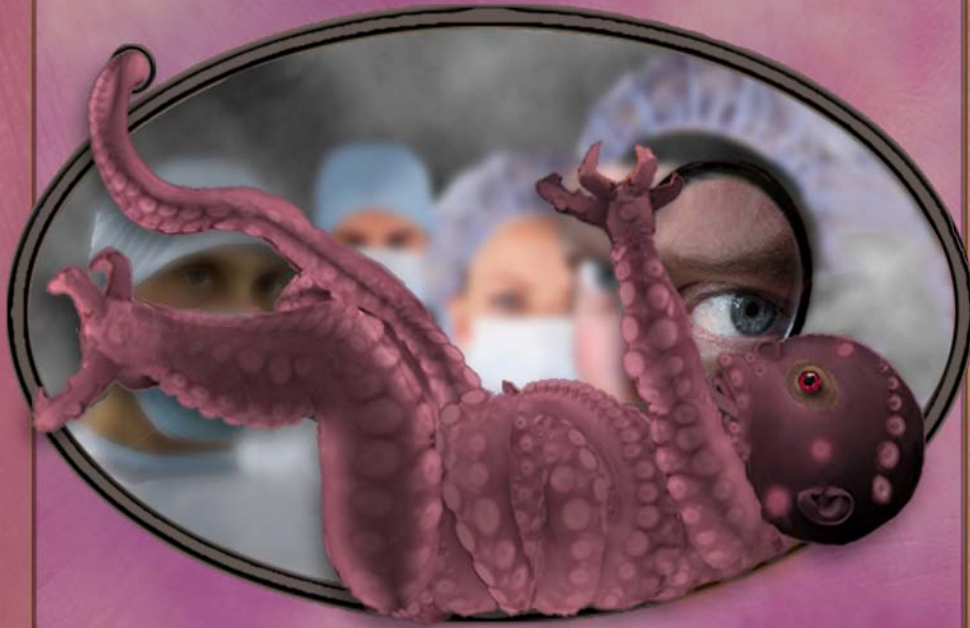


For Readers Only



Ron Sanders

For readers only





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Common Denominator

Everybody in this country knows the feeling.

Televised events are *imprinted* on the subconscious—a photogenic president was assassinated, a bunch of half-witted miscreants burned and looted a great American city, some Third-world lunatics used jets...and the unsuspecting public ...as propaganda tools.

These occurrences were not just *news*, they were Time-Life spectaculars, a dead century's standout stories.

But there's a difference between *a*) hearing about it from your buddies, *b*) mourning over popcorn and Betamax, and *c*) actually *observing* these events, in real time, with no foresight, no hindsight, no insight...*You—Were—There*, if only electronically, and so were somehow as much participant as observer.

That's *exactly* the soul-deep memory engendered by The Happening On Fifth Street. *You* remember—don't you...the talking head breaking in over Oprah—a major event in itself. The cams and copters all humping—I think it was Channel 2. But this wasn't a slow-speed pursuit. Five drunken idiots were loitering in the drive-thru lane at a Burger King in L.A.—

standing there, indifferent to the decent customers attempting to duly edge their vehicles along. They were screaming, shouting, giggling, guffawing. At a honk from a little green Aspen, one, the biggest, spun and flipped off the elderly female driver.

“Fuck you, man!” he bellowed. “I’ll kick your god-damned fucking ass, you ugly old whore motherfucker!” His friends shrieked with hilarity. One of the women—there were two, I recall—lifted her dress, yanked down her panties, and began thrusting her pelvis at the driver. The whole creepy knot just howled and howled.

But that’s all incidental, contextually; just another clip of typical Americans having fun on a hot summer’s night.

What happened next is the part we’ll never forget.

The big guy hollered, “You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

AND RESET!

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

His friends, no less exuberant, were equally caught up. The obscene woman raised and lowered her dress—over and over—her laugh ringing: “Ah-*haha*-ha! Ah-*haha*-ha! Ah-*haha*-ha! Ah-*haha*—” Her friend fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up, fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up...

The other two males, having appreciatively high-fived and butted their heads, high-fived, butted their heads, high-fived, butted...

At this point it was really funny, okay? I don’t think there’s a cat out there who wasn’t halfway to upchucking. It was Saturday night fun, man. Nobody knew until later that the live action was spliced with footage taken by some guy with a videocam in the parking lot: there was no reason for the media hoopla until it got freaky. And that’s when we all stopped laughing.

The police responded first, of course. These five misguided merry-makers had to be on angel dust or something. But the situation couldn’t be controlled with manpower. The Five were spilling all over one another, rhythmically repeating their shared sequence, and it wasn’t humorous at all. Their faces

grew red and contorted as they gasped against an unnatural clockwork, their limbs were seizure-stiff, their eyes bugged and desperate. It was all a mad implosion of thrashing arms and melding voices: “You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha. You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha—”

By the time the paramedics arrived the street was a sea of rubbernecks. The cops had to escort the ambulances in. And these guys were no less useless: injections didn't work, restraints were a mess; they couldn't even apply oxygen through that tussle. The Five were gasping and streaming, frothing and vomiting...*in rhythm*. The two high-fiving males' skulls were cracked wide and gushing, and *still* their arms jerked up feebly in unison, *still* their lolling heads begged to collide. And the cops, the paramedics, the bystanders; nobody could hold 'em down—wild stuff, man, *wild* stuff. And it was the looniest form of entertainment imaginable to pick it up on that live feed, as the BK5, as they came to be known, were wheeled in on gurneys, strapped down and muzzled by oxygen masks, their purple faces trying so hard to spew as their soaking heads banged up and down and side to side, up and down and side to side, up and down and up and down and up and down and a story like that gets a brief, but very thorough, run. You learn all about the vitals—nicknames, dogs and hos, probation officers, favorite slash films, etc.—because the heroic BK5, thank our merciful God in all His infinite wisdom, survived.

Nature is the ultimate physician. When their bodies could jerk and foam no longer The Five simply went comatose, woke to an awkward celebrity, and, once they were proven lousy commercial investments, gratefully slunk out of the spotlight.

The initial focus was on ingested pathogens. That Burger King was shut down so the Department Of Health could pose importantly without being interrupted by autograph hounds, by lowriders in limbo, or by any more damned honking old ladies in little green Aspens. Other agencies wanted to know if rap music or the Vice President was the culprit, or if perhaps the Devil Himself, paid seven and a half bucks an hour to hang out a window in a paper hat, was surreptitiously pulling the BK5's strings.

The whole thing would definitely have blown over, if not for an uncannily similar episode, four days later and not two blocks away.

Rival groups of gangbangers had spilled onto an indoor miniature golf course at the new GotchaGoin' Mall. Terrified shoppers stampeded concentrically while a couple of furheads duked it out over a vital piece of plastic turf of no importance at all only thirty seconds prior.

One beady bozo bit another's tattoo.

The second creep screamed and flailed his fists.

The first furhead bit.

The second sphincter screamed.

A bite and a scream, a bite and a scream—and both arms of the human cesspool broke on their champions like opposing waves.

That, again, was the amateur part—caught streaming by a teeny bopper fledgling reporter with a broadband Blackberry. A local news crew, covering the grand opening of Thundergirl's Dine-And-Disco, picked up the action as the looping gangs cussed and whaled in what director's-chair psychologists term *staggered sync*; an erratic-yet-redundant vacillating pattern wherein one group appears to react viciously to the other's retreat, and vice-versa. But this, as I stated, is an apparent motion. With so many close-knit individuals involved, the action comes off as almost choreographed, especially on video, when in reality a seeming cohesion is deceiving the anxious observer's eye.

Even the late-night stand-ups didn't joke about this one. It took a riot squad to contain the madness, a major law enforcement presence to control the perimeter. Tear gas only made the repetitively kicking and wheezing combatants labor for breath as they grappled and rolled about. The course was smashed to rubble in the frenzy.

But officials had learned from the fast-food episode. Emergency crews and disaster specialists created an on-location makeshift hospital. SWAT teams sealed the area. Surgeons, anesthesiologists, and blood donors were whisked into a giant ring around the action, where they simply stood stunned, like a tribe of pacifistic Indians round a knot of drunken cavalrymen.

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Because in the end that's all anybody could do: stand there with their jaws hanging while thirty-seven spasmodic malcontents jerked and wailed and gasped and spewed into the sweet embrace of unconsciousness.

By this time it was humongous news. Even though no one *really* expected it to happen again, there were individuals, aching for their fifteen minutes, motoring around the area, videocameras in hand. Some of these guys were hooked up with community web sites utilizing a nexus called Retard Watch, stationed somewhere in New Zealand, if I remember correctly. The Board Of Health taped off the Mall for analysis, and got the same reams of nowhere-data as their cronies at the now-famous hamburger slop, but it was all a great giggle for a while there; watching these lugs in space suits lumbering around a sealed-off parking lot with little bitty beakers in their big dufus gloves. Yet we weren't really all that into the aftermath. By now we were glued to the news—ratings-sweepers on all channels, across the board—as we perched on the edges of our sofas and bar stools, stocked up on drinks and munchies, waiting wide-eyed and wondering, like children on the night before Christmas—waiting for the mostest unlikeliest, for the unpromised third strike, for the bogger that blew away 'em all—waiting, waiting, waiting...waiting for The Next One.

Gilbert Flemm had it all worked out.

In a 9 to 5 suckass yellow-light bug stampede, he'd determined, as an electronics grad nauseated by the prospect of applying his talents to some soulless applications firm, to make his living online, at home, in private, at odds with the bigger picture.

He'd been inordinately successful.

At thirty-two he was, both virtually and literally, master of his own domain.

The shades were always down in Gilbert's tiny roach motel of a Boyle Heights apartment. One side of this groovy bachelor's pad was a garage-heap of miscellaneous electronics hardware, patched in to nowhere. Extension cords hung like streamers from hooks hammered into the ceiling, plugs were

tangled up in power strips leading to God knows what. The little bathroom and kitchenette were badlands, practically unnavigable due to years of tossing shipping crates, obsolete appliances, and pizza delivery cartons every which way.

The other side of the room is where Gilbert lived. His home-office was a massive cluster of milk crates, monitors, drive housings, and patch bays, all squeezed into a work console produced by a series of squared components-casings made perfectly level by a broken desk top. Gilbert had achieved this console environment not by being an artisan or handyman, but by being a *burrower*. The console came about through the constant *jamming* and *shoving* and *hammering* of stuff into place; the space for his legs was effected by repetitively *pushing* and *kicking* and *kneeing* until he'd made stretch room. Grease, dirt, fly cadavers, and dead skin cells made a perfect mortar. His work chair-bed was a ratty old recliner with a floating horizontal frame, allowing him to recline full-out whenever the pixel pixies had overdusted his eyes. His personal urinal was a funky old pee jug, one of many, *crammed*, *rammed*, and *jammed* under the desk to make room for his naked, malodorous, scratched-crimson legs. Something of an inventor, he'd devised a peeduct out of a punctured condom wired to a quarter-inch polyvinyl tube trailing into the current jug's punctured-and-wired cap. This way he could take care of vital business without having to ford the lavatory horror.

Gilbert had lots of girlfriends.

Linda Lovelace and Candy Samples were two of his favorites, bygone sweethearts now; looped into some miscellaneous folder or other to make room for recent files. Jenna and Busty and Ginger and Christy; they all came and went, but a techie's heart is not programmed to be long-broken. A man has work to do.

That work involved the remote debugging of programs, the defragmenting of drives, the importing and cleaning up of desktops. Viruses were Gilbert's best pals. Smoking out these little virtual critters made a good living possible, working from home, with mouse of steel in one hand and foggy yellow pee tube in the other. Gilbert had never met his clients—transfer of funds was electronic. In this way Gilbert also made payments;

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to the bank, to Pink Dot, to his landlord and various electronics outlets. And in this way he drifted along; a retired, sedentary commander in a fetid space capsule, passively sucked into the giving black hole of ever-imploding data, umbilically attached, metaphorically speaking, to a daisy chain of RGB viewcreens, battling aliens for points, trading services for digits, making long, hot, electronic love.

But lately he'd been consumed by a game called Common Denominator. "Lately" could mean any amount of time; Gilbert had no idea of, or interest in, the hour, day, week, month, year, decade, century...the game could be played singly or with friends, but "friend" is one of the F-words, and anyway a man has work to do. The concept behind Common Denominator is deceptively simple: the gamer sequences characters, sites, and situations; all contributing to perfectly plausible scenarios with perfectly credible culprits and conclusions—which splinter and evolve into slightly less credible culprits...into ramifications of feathered conclusions...into rationale forks and logic back roads...the butler never did it in CD; the butler's just a butler. But for drifting retired commanders willing to go the distance, the game's an intoxicating mindfuck; a master finds the common denominator in abstractions, in subtleties—in *qualities* rather than appearances. It's not for extroverts.

Gilbert was so wired in he could follow the game on one of six desktop monitors while simultaneously earning a living, ordering Chinese delivered, downloading porn and avant-garde music, shopping on ebay, and monitoring streaming news.

That news, of late, was a major draw, even for a carpal gamer like Gilbert. Those public seizure episodes had been increasing, both in frequency and fury, for some weeks now. Huge rewards went unclaimed, talk shows hosted prescient callers determined to stammer themselves into oblivion. Scientists, theists, and theorists rolled the dice—but all these players, posers, and pontificaters were sooner or later shut down by their own verbosity. Nobody had a clue.

Some of those episodes got really *intense*. Certain fighters had been seriously hurt, a woman and her daughter, innocent bystanders, critically injured in a fray. Collateral damage.

Unrelated skirmishes and spot-looting were reported. Also, one participant, seizing in deep shock while impaled on an upright sprinkler, had drowned in his own puke. That very dramatic death, amazingly, was repeatedly broadcast on regular TV as well as over the Internet, to the wailing bereavement of congressmen, televangelists, and suffering soccer moms everywhere. The BK5, dragged out of retirement to plea for peace, were getting plenty of airplay with their ubiquitous rap single, already in the running for Best Song Lyrics. A Christmas album was pending.

Gilbert was singing along right now, partitioning CD clues with one hand, balancing his bank account with the other: “Brothahs an’ sistahs,” he croaked, “don’ play da foo’. Homeys an’ hos, ya gots t’ be coo’.” Catchy little fucker. True talent surfaces in the unlikeliest of ponds. And genius will never die: new applications, new technology, new faces were emerging. Art *evolves*: that booty-shaking finger popper was the natural extension of rap’s brilliant violation of vinyl; but now digital looping was applied—studios had cleverly used the BK5’s epileptic claim to fame—the tight instrumentless vocal harmonies, satirized by the straight community as *aw, crappela*, were electronically broken up and repeated as phasing backing vocals: “Brothahs an-*play* da—homeys ya *gots* t’...” until it was almost as good as Being There.

Gilbert Fucking Flemm had an epiphany!

While the rest of us were grooving, grouching, and googling, he’d subconsciously cross-referenced a number of sources in real time.

1. The BK5 were on a *loop*.
2. The CD characters were repositioning in sync.
3. The televised image of the latest oddity was crackling in and out due to a glitch in one of the news vans’ transmitters.
4. Said televised image was a melee involving blowhard bikers and barroom boneheads. The location was only a few blocks from Gilbert’s.
5. His police broadcast receiver was cycling; whining, grinding, reacting to some kind of pirate signal. 5a. The signal and melee were related. 5b. The signal’s source was close by, but receding.

And, of course, 6. “*Yo Homey Yo*,” the BK5’s celebration of the creative spirit, just had to be the most godawful piece of crap ever recorded.

Gilbert patched the streaming feed to the police broadcast. The resultant scream almost blew out his speakers. He patched the combined input to an equalizer and manually cut out audible traffic until he had a fairly steady audio line, then adjusted it to screen. It was all white noise. In a dream, Gilbert used his joystick to move the CD players intuitively, his other hand tweaking the bastard signal. *God in heaven, he’d triangulated!* He gaped at his wall monitor for a minute, then, terrified he’d lose the signal, mapped and saved it to disk. He printed this out as a straight hexadecimal graph: every particular was established and tabulated; Gilbert didn’t need to research the results—he’d found the common denominator.

He sat straight up. The streaming newscast contained a throbbing hyperlink for civilian-police intercourse. Almost without thinking, he control-clicked on the link. His condenser mic’s icon came up. A canned voice blurted from his house speakers. Gilbert switched to console mono.

“You have reached the Los Angeles Police Department, U-Tip, We Talk Division. This thread automatically links to the State Of California’s Wireless Web Archive, and the call may be monitored for your protection. A live operator will be with you shortly. If you are an English speaker, please press *I* now. Yo tengo caca en la cabeza para todos no mas por favor—”

Gilbert impatiently pinkied the *I* on his keyboard.

Almost immediately a bored voice came in, “Detective Cummings, LAPD. U-Tip, We Talk. If this is an emergency situation, please dial 911. If this is a non-emergency situation, please dial 1-800-LAPD. If this is an earthquake-related call, please dial 1-800-OHNO. If there are communists under your bed or gays in your closet, please dial 1-800—”

“Assholes!” Gilbert broke in.

There was a tight pause. “Take a look in the mirror sometime, buddy.”

“No! You don’t understand! He doesn’t like assholes!”

“I’m not crazy about ’em either, okay? *Especiallly* when they get on an official line and interrupt police business!”

“Listen to me! I play this game called Common Denomi—”

“Well, *don't*—”

“—nator and I was—”

“play *games*—”

“—watching the news.”

“—with *me!*”

“On the side. It's not food poisoning or drugs or anything like that. Forget the lab stuff. That's all bogus. Rudeness is the common denominator. Obnoxious behavior in public. Selfishness. Immaturity. No pathogen can single out poor ethics in people! This is a case, or cases, of affronting. Somebody is revolted by these creeps and he's lashing out.”

A faint click. Now it was like talking in a tunnel. Detective Cummings's voice came back carefully. “Who's revolting?”

Gilbert ground his teeth and clenched his fists. It was too late; he was already in. “I don't *know* who it is. All I know is, like I said, the human factor's undeniable.”

“And how does your friend accomplish this feat?”

“*I just told you I don't know who it is!* He's using alpha over the ether. I just picked it up. Or maybe it isn't a male. Maybe he's a she; I don't know.”

“So tell me, does your shemale friend have a name?”

“I'm trying to be of assistance, for Christ's sake, as a private citizen!”

The gentlest ping, as hollow as the night. “I want you to understand that the U-Tip, We Talk Hotline is completely confidential. You don't know me, I don't know you. Every aspect of your identity is private, and will remain private. So now that we've got all that out of the way, Mr. Flemm, maybe we can talk.”

Gilbert's thumb jabbed the Escape button. Sweat was creeping from his hairline. His right hand danced on the keyboard while his left rolled the mouse. The streaming live inset expanded to full screen. He punched out a sequence and a MapQuest graphic became an overlay. Gilbert reduced the opacity. “Damn.” He transferred the feed to the wall monitor. The resolution was diminished relatively, but that didn't matter;

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once he'd configured his GPL to Random, the active elements in the grid translated to pixel groupings very much like churning dot matrix asterisks. The news scene was a mess. But there were isolated right-angling pixel blotches, like Ms. Pacman in slo-mo, that moved along the streets-grid with mathematical certitude. Order was the common denominator. Gilbert was looking for the anomaly.

There.

One asterisk was chugging along oddly; crisscrossing street sides, doubling back, pausing, moving along, pausing again. Gilbert tagged it: Eleventh and Willoughby. Four blocks away. He popped off his peter pal, pulled on his shirt and pants, slammed on his boots, jammed out the door.

Deep twilight. Emergency vehicles were zooming for Seventh, and plenty of cars were turning in pursuit. It was obvious everyone in the vicinity knew what was up. Gilbert dashed across alleys and yards, hopped fences and cut across drives, finally blowing out onto Eleventh and Willoughby. His emergence must have been a noisy one; lots of pedestrians found it interesting enough to avert their attention from the lights and sirens. One in particular, a man in dark pants and jacket, immediately made for a leaning tenement.

Gilbert ran puffing and wheezing; wanting to meet him, wanting to warn him, wanting to praise him, wanting to stop him. He saw the old door swing shut and pop open. It was a fire exit; abused, infested, a run-down hallway for beggars, taggers hookers, dealers...Gilbert slipped inside and the door slammed behind him. The hall wasn't lit, so he cracked the door. Only an amber street lamp provided any illumination, and that was all of a dim narrow wedge and broken pool. He paused to let his eyes adjust and to catch his breath.

"Before you take another step, I want you to know that I am armed, and that I will not hesitate to take you down."

It was impossible to make out features in the dark. There was a strong dab of light on the right earlobe, soft crescents and planes at the hairline. Gilbert addressed that area beside the lobe.

“Look, I’m not a cop, I’m not a stalker, I’m not a bounty hunter. I know why you’re doing what you’re doing, and I want you to know I’m not your enemy.”

A pause.

“What am I doing?”

Gilbert blew out a lungful of stress. “With the device. With the obnoxious people. I don’t blame you...I don’t hate you for what you’re doing...I...I admire you.”

The figure took a step back. He was now completely obscured by darkness. “Then your timing couldn’t be more impeccable.”

“What do you mean?”

The dark blew out a sigh matching Gilbert’s own. “I mean this whole thing is moving faster than me. If you’ve latched on, the authorities can’t be far behind. And I really don’t think they share your admiration.” Another pause. “I’m burned out, man. Or sated; I don’t know which. So...how’d you find me?”

“I’m IT,” Gilbert mumbled. “I’m hooked in so deep I’ll never get out. There’s a game I’ve mastered called Common Denominator. It kind of forces the gamer to think outside the box. My brain cross-referenced, and I put two and two together.”

“Did you call the cops?”

“Once. On impulse. It was a mistake. Don’t worry; I got out of there right away.”

“You sound like a bright lad. So you know all about W.T.T.”

Gilbert fidgeted. “Maybe. Initials are all over the place.”

“Wireless Trace Technology. A War Department development passed down to the police. If you tapped in for a nanosecond you’re tagged. Home, phone, credit, friends...”

Gilbert swallowed guiltily. “That’s a new one.” He licked his lips. “Sir, I want you to know...I want to make it absolutely *clear* that I took *great* pains...I’m certain I wasn’t followed. And as far as anything electronic goes, I’m clean. So, unless they can put a trace on a man’s heartbeat...”

“Not just yet, they can’t. How much do you know about my operation?”

“I know you’re working in alpha. I know you’re jamming autonomic activity over the ether. I know the signal cycles in the human brain. I know it’s directional. I know the field’s variable. I know...I know the wavelength.”

A casual movement, and an arm rose out of the darkness: brown suede jacket and black leather glove. Nested in the gloved palm was an object not much larger than a thumb drive, plump in shape, with an inch-long bulbed antenna. A red diode blinked twice. “Catch.”

Gilbert caught. It was disappointing, somehow: a crude thing of tin and staples. He slipped it into his trousers pocket.

The arm vanished. “Take that toy and tear it apart when you get home. I know you will; you’re already dismembering it in your mind. I’m out of here.”

“But what you’re doing,” Gilbert tried. “I think...I think maybe people will get the picture. About ethics. About morality. About public comportment in general. Respect for strangers...” he mumbled. “For decency...manners...”

The pause was so long Gilbert began to feel he was alone. Finally he whispered, “Sir?”

“Now is not the time,” the darkness replied, “to wax philosophical. The world is pumping out idiots as we speak. We’re tagged, you and I. That thing in your pocket’s a joke; an ethicist’s objection in a hedonist’s courtroom, a forgotten blush in a government-sponsored whorehouse.” He sucked in a huge breath, let it out with a long sigh. “Right now people are being assaulted, insulted, raped, robbed, ridiculed.” The voice faded down the hallway: “Swindled...betrayed...rejected...abused...”

Gilbert stood in the dark forever. He could hear his heart pounding; one knobby little traveler in the great human stampede. When he could bear it no longer he eased open the door and slipped out into the night.

“Hello, Mr. Flemm.”

Gilbert didn’t look around. “You’re wasting your time. He got away.”

“Oh, no, he didn’t. He is, as of right now, in custody, and if all my years as an official witness have taught me anything, he’s looking at life without parole.”

Gilbert's jaw dropped. He turned. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about assault and battery." Cummings grabbed Gilbert's wrist and swung him about. "I'm talking about lying in wait." The cuffs were snapped tight. "I'm talking about reckless endangerment and carrying a concealed weapon."

The cuffs bit deliberately. Gilbert snarled with the pain. "*What weapon?*"

Cummings patted him down with his free hand, tore the unit out of Gilbert's front pocket. "I believe it's called Exhibit A, asshole!"

Gilbert's whole face shook with horror. "No!"

"Yes!" Cummings slammed him against the wall before dragging him around the building's side to the ticking unmarked car. "That could have been *my* wife in that crowd, dickface, that could have been *my* daughter!"

"I'm the wrong guy!" Gilbert gasped. "I was just talking to him, for Christ's sake, but he took off. I don't know where he is!"

"That's okay. What's important is *we* know where he *isn't*. And where he *isn't* is in the apartment of one Gilbert Going-to-Hell Flemm, whose transmitted signals were tracked by specialists hired by LAPD, whose computers and peripheral equipment were just seized as evidence, whose hard-copy files are even now being pored over *with attitude*. You see, Flemm, your victims could've been those specialists' wives and daughters too. I sure do hope you like it doggy-style, Gilbert."

"Wait!" Gilbert dropped to his knees. Before they hit the cement he was dragged back up by the cuffs, almost separating his arms from their sockets.

"I won't wait!" Gilbert's face was slammed against the rear windshield. "Motherfucker, I *can't* wait!" Gilbert felt the cuffs unlocked, heard them drop on the asphalt. He turned, shaking head to foot.

Cummings had the unit in his gloved right hand. "You know what, Flemm? Sometimes even a predatory prick can get careless. He could be trying to zap a detective, let's say, and not realize he'd accidentally pointed the zapper the wrong way;

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right back at himself! And if there weren't any witnesses, and no prints but his own, there'd be nothing other than that poor detective's sworn testimony. After all, it's just a little tube with a button in the middle; easy mistake to make. And that would be a shame, man, a crying fucking shame. Raise your arm!"

"But I..."

"*Raise your arm!* That's right. Now hold your thumb up above your hand. Good. Bend your thumb, at a right angle. Feel familiar, Flemm?" Cummings aimed the unit right between Gilbert's bugging eyes. "Say goodnight, cocksucker, over and over and over."

The Other Foot

“Kin Ah hep you?” said the big security guard at the door. The voice was an indifferent drawl. Gus looked at the man’s nametag: CHAHLES.

“Yes, Chahles, I believe you may.” Gus proffered his paperwork. “I’ve an appointment with a Mr. Earl Maven at nine sharp.” He showed his pearly whites. “I came ‘Earl’-y.”

Chahles gestured over his shoulder at the packed waiting room. “So’d dey.” A hundred and forty-one eyes glared at Gus eclipsing the opened glass door.

“Well!” Gus didn’t lose the smile. “Where do I sign in, then?”

“Yo kin sign yo funny butt in on a empty chair; tha’s if yo kin finds one.”

Gus was intensely aware of his whiteness as he apologized his way to a steel folding chair with a collapsed back. He scrunched in between a sleeping man and the biggest, meanest-looking woman he’d ever seen. He hadn’t brought a book or newspaper, and wasn’t particularly compelled to seek conversation. He should have known he’d be out of his element when

the welfare processing office referred him to the outlet on Oprah and King, but he was new to the system, and not about to make trouble. Be quiet and polite. You'll always squeak through. Little by little this quiet, polite man found himself scrunching in while the surrounding tide just as gradually spread, until he resembled nothing so much as a squashed ivory exclamation mark in a smudgy text scrawl. Using his two available fingers, Gus pinched his paperwork into a tiny reading shield for his eyes. By eleven o'clock he'd read it over so many times it was a mantra to delirium. When at last he heard his name called he was barely able to slip from under the sleeping man's slobbering face and the big lady's glaring eye.

The clerk peered through the bulletproof glass with an expression skewed by a million threats and pleas. "You Gus Tremblen?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Say here your appointment for nine."

"Yes, that's right."

One eye rolled to the wall clock. "It eleven now."

"I realize that, sir. I was just called. I've been waiting patiently; very patiently."

"You sign in? I don't see your name on the sign-in."

"I wasn't aware...sir...I was told to take a chair, and complied. I had no idea that—"

"Who told you take a chair?"

"Well, it was the security guard. I believe his name is Chahles."

"Chahles told you take a chair?"

"He instructed me to...yes."

"You take orders from a security guard?"

"He didn't actually *order* me."

The clerk threw down his pen. "If that don't beat all." He flicked on the intercom. "CHAHLES, YOU COME TO WINDOW EIGHT."

A massive reflection grew on the glass like an over-blown balloon.

"Chahles, you tell this man he not supposed to sign in on the sign-in?"

"Ah did not tell him nothin of the sort, suh."

“You tell this man he supposed to take a chair without signing in on the sign-in?”

“We didn talk about no sign-in, suh. Ah showed him where to sit, tha’s all.”

“He say he didn’t want to sign in on no sign-in?”

“We didn talk about no sign-in, suh. Ah showed him where to take a chair.”

The clerk shut Gus’s file. “If that don’t beat all.”

A thin man in a suit slid through an adjacent door. “What’s all this hollering?”

“This man don’t want to sign in on no sign-in.”

“Actually,” Gus tried, “I’d be pleased to sign in, sir. There’s some kind of misunderstanding, that’s all.”

The thin man adjusted his severe spectacles for an iron stare. He was one of the angriest looking people Gus had ever encountered. “Why didn’t you sign in in the first place?”

“I wasn’t aware—”

The thin man slapped down a palm. “If that don’t beat all.” He flipped open the daybook. “You see all these signatures on the sign-in? How come they gotta sign in on the sign-in and you don’t gotta sign in on the sign-in? We just supposed to know you’re here and dispense with procedure?”

“I...”

“Chahles, you tell this man he don’t gotta sign in on no sign-in?”

“We didn talk about no sign-in, suh.”

The suited man’s eyes burned through the glass. “You refuse to sign in on the sign-in?”

“Sir, I—”

“Chahles!”

The balloon squeezed between Gus and the glass. Chahles’s expression was dead-serious. Gus wasn’t even aware of the next half-minute, so profoundly confused were his impressions. All he knew was he was standing in the doorway with his back to the street, and Chahles was looming like God Almighty.

“Now yo kin jus take yo crackajack bee-hind some-where else.”

“Lord!” swore the thin man, glaring through the glass.

The Other Foot

He looked daggers at the clerk. “Next time someone don’t wanna sign in on no sign-in, he trying to tell you he don’t wanna be served. Why you bothering me with all this?”

“Chahles said—”

“You take orders from a security guard? If that don’t beat all.” He slipped back into his office. The Post-its were falling like leaves, the phone already ringing. He composed himself before lifting the receiver.

“Earlsy?”

“Bunny, I told you not to call me before lunch.”

“But I miss you, sweetheart.”

“I miss you too, sugar. We’ve talked about this a hundred times. Whenever I get a call on an outside line it’s tallied, remember? I have to balance those calls against the client log.”

“But my slipper,” Bunny pouted.

“What about your slipper?”

“It got fried. In the microwave, somehow. You know the mink slippers; the pretty pink ones with the cute little diamonds that spell out I Worship You Bunny? Well, the right one got cooked, and it’s all...icky. Now I have a slipper that says I Worship You, and a bare foot that don’t say nothin. How’m I suppose to know *who* you worship, Earlsy?”

“But how did it get into the micro—”

“Don’t yell at me!” Bunny wailed. “I’ll get a restraining order, Earl Maven; you know I will. If I have to hop down to the station with one naked foot, I swear I’ll protect myself.”

“Bunny.” Maven wiped a hand down his face. “Baby.” He called up his online banking account on the office computer; another no-no. “Sweetheart.” He typed in his password and went to accounts. His face fell further. “Darlin’!”

“Earlsy?”

“We’re having kind of a tight calendar month, sugar. Must’ve been that rabbit-shaped hot tub.”

“You said you loved my bunny bath.”

“I do, Princess. It’s just that—”

“DON’T YELL AT ME!” And Bunny was in serious tears.

“I promise you, Priceless. I *promise* you. Brand new slippers when I get home. Prettier than the last. As pretty as

you.”

“You’d better not be jerking me around, Earl Maven. The front door is locked if you come home empty-handed. Smooches?”

“Smooches,” Maven said. “And when you’re all dolled-up good as new we can play Counselor. I’ll bring the Baileys. But please, Goddess, in the future try to remember that little rule about calls to the office. For right now I’ll just write this off as a wrong num—got to go now, baby; another call.” Maven punched the glowing button. His voice was instantly professional. “Earl Maven. Department of Welfare Adjustments.”

“You’re processing a claimant, one Gustave Merriweather Tremblen?”

Maven drummed his fingers on the desk. “Who’s this?”

“My name is Harvey Gerbilstein, Mr. Maven, and I’m employed by the State of California to handle complaints from welfare applicants who feel they’ve been denied fair access to resources. We’re in the building right next door. You know the one.”

“No one has been denied anything to anything, Mr. Gerbilstein. Mr. Tremblen refused to sign the day’s docket according to specified procedure, that’s all. We are, by order, disallowed the processing of unruly claimants.”

“Mr. Tremblen claims the security guard ejected him in a most threatening manner, and used the term ‘cracker’ in so doing. Now, Mr. Maven, a major part of my duties involves claims of behavior which may be construed as racist under article 749 of the State Discriminatory Code. I don’t think we have to split hairs here.”

Maven peeled off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Security is not employed by the State of California. Any complaints will have to be directed to the proper offices.” He slammed through his rolodex. “And I have the number right here.”

“Wrong, Mr. Maven. Your department and ours have danced this dance before. Sukky Security is certified by the State, leaving California liable for any monetary damages incurred by successful complaints.”

Maven dropped back his head. When he let it fall

forward it was wagging with frustration. “I can’t help you, Gerbilstein. You’ll have to take this up with my boss.”

“Way ahead of you, Maven. Mr. Killwater was notified on his car phone prior to this call. I’d like you to know our little conversation, though brief, was extremely interesting. *So* interesting, as a matter of fact, that he decided to cancel his beloved golf match and proceed instead to your office for what I can only describe as a very-quickie conference. I’m not sure you’re aware of it, Maven, but racism lawsuits regularly settle in the six figures. A man in Mr. Tremblen’s shattered condition can expect lifetime compensation. Now, I’ve never been all that hot at tabulating mileage against traffic, but, if my calculations are anywhere near correct, Mr. Killwater should be showing up right...about...*now*.”

A harumph and short bellow was followed by a tapering monologue from Chahles. Killwater, looking like he’d just swallowed a mouthful of glass, burst into Maven’s office and slammed the door. The man was in his sixties, and at least as big as Chahles, but there was a bulldog-gruffness to his demeanor that made him appear larger than life.

“Maven! I’ve just been on the phone with a Harvey—”

“Gerbilstein,” Maven sighed dismally, holding up the receiver. “He’s right here.”

Killwater snatched it as though reclaiming stolen property. “Gerbilstein? We’re on conference!”

A ping and shift in the ether. “Done,” came Gerbilstein’s voice from the speaker.

“Is that complainant still there?”

Tremblen’s voice, hard to pick up: “Um...” A scrape and throat-clearing. “Yes,” the voice came back, clearer now. “I’m here.”

“You were involved in an altercation with a member of our security staff?”

“Actually, it was more of a misunder—”

“Chahles!” The echo scraped paint off the lobby’s walls.

A timid rapping.

“Open the damn door, Chahles!”

A quirky fluorescent corona displaced the unwelcome door.

“Did you threaten a Mister...a Mister...” Killwater snapped his fingers.

“Tremblen,” came both Gerbilstein’s and Tremblen’s voices. Gerbilstein appended: “One Gustave Merri—”

“Did you threaten anybody, Chahles?”

“No suh. He don’ wanna sign in on no sign-in, suh. Ah showed him where to take a chair, suh. Tha’s all, suh.”

“Why wouldn’t he sign in on the sign-in?”

“He say he don’ wanna sign in on no sign-in, suh.”

Killwater’s steamshovel jaw dropped. Speaking as much to himself as to the room, he muttered, “If that don’t beat all.”

Gerbilstein’s voice was the snap of a whip. “Enough! Paperwork is already being processed in Tremblen vs. the State of California. Article 749.A.154,894,000-2B¹² states, unequivocally, that no applicant may be denied resources due to conditions of race, religion, gender, national origin, disability, height, weight, self-image, lack of character, hometown allegiance, or body aroma. Calling Mr. Tremblen a ‘cracker’ most definitely falls under the category of racial discrimination, and, since Sukky Security is on record as approved via the office of one Carlton Killwater, Mr. Killwater, along with his subordinate Earl Maven, are hereby notified of their status as defendants in Tremblen vs. California.”

In the deafening silence came a sound like a squeal and clapping from Gerbilstein’s end, then a very sober closure: “I’m afraid you’ll have to cancel your golf date, Mr. Killwater. I’ll be in touch. *Believe* me, I’ll be in touch.” The speaker went dead.

Killwater looked stunned. “Chahles?”

“Suh?”

“What went down between you and Mr. Tremblen?”

“He didn wanna sign in on no sign-in, suh. Ah showed him where to take a chair, suh. Tha’s all, suh.”

“Chahles.”

“Suh?”

“Get the hell out of here.”

The corona collapsed and the door whispered shut.

“Maven?”

“Sir?”

The Other Foot

“Clear out your desk.”

“Mr. Killwater, this is all a misunder—”

“*Maven?*”

“Sir?”

“Get the hell out of here!” Killwater drew open the door and shuffled out like the walking dead, his putter arm swinging listlessly.

The phone rang.

“Earlsy?”

“Bunny,” Maven managed.

“Earlsy, my pearl necklace, you know, the one you brought all the way from Budapest, with the dark and light pearls next to each other that go one little bunny, two little bunny, one little...well, it got caught in the blender somehow, and now I don’t have no one little bunny two.”

Maven was drifting. “In the...blend—”

“DON’T SCREAM AT ME!”

Maven dropped the phone. In a trance, he pushed the personal contents of his office into a cardboard box labeled Trash Only, and dragged the box to his Mercedes. He somehow stuffed it all into the trunk and drove home like an automaton. The driveway was blocked by a pile of shirts and papers and very private miscellany. His photo albums, a collection of floppy-and compact disks, that prized foul ball off the bat of Itchy Krotchenscracher. Two patrol cars controlled the street on either side of Maven’s drive. He left the Mercedes idling between cars and staggered to the curb.

An officer blocked his progress. “Are you Earl Maven?”

“Yes...I...I’ve...”

“Mr. Earl Maven, the Los Angeles Police Department is responding to a call of sexual harassment by one Bunny B. Goldigeur, a professed resident of these premises. It is my duty to inform you, sir, that if you are approaching said premises with malice intended, you will be placed under arrest for the sake of said party. That’s all. Nothing personal. If you are indeed owner or lessor of said premises you are hereby awarded license to claim any and all properties deposited upon this drive. For the sake of Ms. Goldigeur, however, you may not breach said premises.”

“My...property...gather my...”

“But no farther.” There was a rumble and whirrrrrrrrrrr behind them. Maven was too dazed to turn. “You may now claim said personal belongings from said drive. Said one last time: if you approach Ms. Goldigeur or said lodgings you will be placed under arrest. Enough said. Do we understand each other?” The whirrrrrrrrrrr became an elongated grind.

“Yes, sir...I—please forgive me if I have in any way—”

“Five minutes,” the officer articulated. “You have five minutes to appropriate your property. Not because it’s property-specific. But because you’ve been warned.”

“I—”

“Four minutes, Mr. Maven. Move it.”

The whirrrrrrrrrrr became a tearing, grinding *scream!* Maven turned. His Mercedes was being dragged up the spine of a Grabby’s Tow truck!

The officer shook his head balefully. “No parking in the street. You know that, Mr. Maven. I am, due to your circumstances, waiving the curb infraction. You may reclaim your vehicle from Venal’s Tow.” He patted Maven’s shoulder. “Have a nice day.”

The other car’s door swung open and a female officer emerged. Pretty little thing. She charged up like a bouncer on a bad night.

“Are we having trouble here, Officer Wyatt?”

“He has three minutes,” said Wyatt.

She turned on Maven, her expression fierce. “*What is your problem, sir?*”

“Two.”

“I...she...misunder—”

“One minute.”

Bunny wailed from an upstairs window.

The female officer got right in Maven’s face. “Sir, I need you to place your hands behind your back.”

“Let’s go,” Wyatt said. “It’s domestic. He’s locked out.”

The officers returned to their respective vehicles. Wyatt leaned over his car’s roof. “Your minute’s up, Mr. Maven. Get an attorney.” The head disappeared. The cars drove off. Bunny slammed the upstairs window.

Maven knelt to his pile like a sinner at an altar. His eyes fell on a shopping cart with a broken wheel, resting half on the curb. Maven used this cart to hold his belongings. He looked around for a place to store it. The garage would only open from without by way of the Mercedes' dash sounder. There was a tool shed out back, and Maven had the key, although technically using the yard might be construed as entering the premises. As though reading his mind, that female officer nosed her patrol car around the corner.

Maven grimly jerked his cart along the sidewalk, not daring to look back. First thing was to get the Mercedes back. There was room in the trunk, with a little creative stuffing, for both the cart's and the office's articles. He'd find a decent hotel. Hell, he'd sleep in the damn car if he had to—Maven's will was returning with each forced jerk of that dragging front wheel. The car continued to pace him, slowly loitering a hundred yards back. It grew on Maven: he was going to be cited for shopping cart theft; he could feel it. Just to screw him deeper. The female officer probably sided with Bunny, probably profiled Maven solely from the context of a thousand spousal abuse calls. He hunched his shoulders and gritted his teeth as he lurched along, his glasses hanging at an angle. Maven wobbled around the corner and down the short block leading to the pedestrian tunnel adjoining Parasite Park. He was forcing the officer's hand: she'd have to stop him now if she meant business. The car halted in the intersection and sat idling as he shook his way into the unlit, graffiti-riddled tunnel. The car moved on and Maven heaved a sigh of relief.

“What you doing with my cart, man?”

Maven squinted at the blur. He adjusted his glasses. There was more than one blur; several, actually, and they were moving to block a retreat.

“Yours?” Maven wondered. “My apologies. A misunderstanding—”

“Tell you what, homey;” said the first blur, now shaping up as a rather large individual with a shaved and tattooed head, “I'm sick of the damned thing. So what I'm gonna do is sell it to you, see?”

Maven was thrown into a headlock from behind. His

arms were restrained, his wallet removed. The first individual straightened Maven's tie and fluffed his hair. "On second thought, I'm gonna let you keep it. Like I said, I'm sick of the thing."

Only the cart at his waist prevented Maven from dropping to his knees. "Take the cash! I don't care; just leave me my credit cards. They're no good to you!"

The tattooed man grinned. "Are you kidding?" He flashed the cards like a straight flush. "Better than cash!"

"My I.D.!" Maven wailed.

The man shook his head. "My I.D."

And they were gone, swallowed up in the dark tunnel before the el.

Maven stood there in shock for a good five minutes. When he surfaced he realized the worst thing he could do was lose track of his wallet. That lady cop might still be nearby, perhaps even now watching the tunnel from the park side, waiting for him to exit. If Maven could finger those thugs while the crime was still hot he'd be back in business. He pushed the cart shuffling, licking his lips eagerly.

Maven rounded the tunnel's el and daylight hit him like a fist. The park appeared deserted. As the window of visibility grew he found himself slowing, knowing the worst. He stepped out into a park abounding with litter, gang graffiti, and dog waste. But no people.

Make that one person. At Maven's feet was an old homeless man with one leg, a can of Steel 211, and an empty smile. "That's a *nice* cart, friend!"

And Maven was in tears. He dropped on his butt by the old man, accepted a drink. "Don't be so down," the homeless man crooned. "Things'll get better." He admired Maven's suit. "B'sides, you look like you do all right for yourself. What's your racket?"

"Welfare adjuster," Maven moaned. "Ex."

"Then what's to worry? You know the system."

Maven sat right up and stared at the old man. Gummy or not, that was the sweetest smile he'd ever seen.

The Other Foot

At nine sharp Maven stood in the welfare office doorway at Duke and Falwell. He was unshaven and hadn't bathed. He'd slept in his clothes and gone without breakfast. But he'd never felt so alive.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked the guard, a ruddy, heavysset man with a crewcut and thinning brown moustache. Maven looked at his nametag—BUFORD—then at the rows of staring white faces. He smiled toothily.

"Ah comes to sign in on da sign-in!"

"Sir?" The guard was obviously miffed; he could feel the quiet faces watching intently. "Do you have an appointment, sir?"

"Ah gots a 'pointment wit yo mama."

The light brown eyes turned umber. Buford said through his teeth, "Sir, I'm afraid there's been some sort of misunder—"

"Well, if that don't beat all!"

"Get the hell out of here—"

"Oh, yeah?"

"—just keep your stupid ass on the street where it belongs—"

"Say *what*?"

"—and never darken our door again."

Maven rolled his eyes. "*Excuse* me? Did you say never 'darken' your door?"

"You heard me."

"Bufie, does the name Harvey Gerbilstein mean anything to you?"

"No, sir, it most certainly does not!"

Maven faced the street and bent at the waist, offering his scruff and rear. "Then let's get this train a'rollin'."

Savage Glen

On that lovely day Fate dumped me in the Glen I certainly had it coming, but, given my state of mind at the time, probably wouldn't have sidestepped even if I'd been tipped off to the grisly outcome.

I was a homeless, penniless, self-absorbed drifter. My shirt and trousers were grimy and riddled with holes, my hair tangled and unshorn. My toes, nine funky creatures that were bleeding and gnarled, poked numbly from their torn canvas homes. To top it off I smelled like a cesspool, and knew it. But I was way beyond stares and whispers, deaf to the clack of quickly locked latches, unmoved by the sight of glaring mothers. Man, I was so far gone the gulls laughed as they pelted my hair and shoulders.

I'd been working my way back down the Monterey coastline, having not seen a job or a Jackson since San Diego, maybe a year ago. My worldly possessions consisted of an old transistor radio with a dead battery, a broken hairbrush, and a pair of binoculars I'd picked up beachcombing; all kept rolled in a ratty, malodorous sleeping bag. Physically, even at this ad-

vanced stage of moral deterioration, I could have taken the necessary steps to redeem myself, but lately a particularly vile bile had come to roost in my soul. Ambition, wonder, compassion—these things were all but strangers to me. And as for the cozy, gaily motoring Beautiful People, they could go straight to Hell for all I cared. Nothing mattered any more.

Sometimes I'd hitchhike, sometimes I'd walk up or down the coast highway making camp wherever my fancy dictated. Recently I'd taken to wandering along the sand in Monterey's quaint beach communities, back and forth, day after day, until some bored lifeguard or other chased me off. I never gave anybody a hard time; I'd simply nod and split. Anywhere was as good as anywhere else.

But today, as I sat on a jumble of rocks off the promenade watching the fat sun set, I was in no mood to be pushed. My stomach was rumbling and writhing, my joints ready to seize, my hands and feet freezing. All I needed was some tightwad freak to wish me a nice day. To my right, the endless beach was quickly succumbing to twilight, and to my left a commercial pier stood over the waves like a tentative centipede, its underbelly secured from the public by a sturdy chain link fence. Behind this fence bunched a solid green jungle of lady fern, so densely packed it must have grown unchecked for years. On the boardwalk above were a small parking lot, an amusement arcade, a bait and tackle shop, a diner, and, just at the boardwalk's entrance, a little market which also did business in funshine souvenirs. The market's outer walls sported a continuous mural of long shapely ferns and pussy willows under a washed azure sky. Peeking from this idyllic dreamscape were leggy fawns, reddish-brown monarchs, smiling squirrels and carefree jays. A sign above the mural, bearing script as fanciful as the painting, read *GENTLE GLEN*. Only a few people were patronizing the place, but I knew it was where I'd be bumming my dinner. As I sat scoping it out, a curly blonde in cutoffs and frilly white blouse approached an exiting customer and began gesticulating and touching. The man—a very burly, swarthy character in Bermudas, windbreaker, and fedora—smiled and ran an arm around her waist. After a few more words they began sauntering across the parking lot. A minute later another man appeared at the

door, wearing a white apron and sour expression. He watched them leaning on the rail for a bit, looking as though he would spit, then reached to the inner wall and switched on the market's corner floodlights. I shook my head and creaked to my feet. When it came to making a buck some people were born with a distinct advantage.

Once the aproned man was back inside I picked my way over the rocks, ambled up to the market and leaned against the front wall out of the floods' glare. No one going in or out felt compelled to offer me anything other than a hard look. I was just reaching the point where hunger makes panhandling aggressive when my radar warned of an approaching cold front. That man in the white apron came back out and fixed me with a very tough stare. "No offense—" he began.

"But take a hike. Right?"

"Right."

"Just going." I bent to lift my sleeping bag, my knees and back protesting, my head swimming. I was hurting for protein. The man in the apron disappeared. Before I could leave he reappeared with a squashed cold sandwich. "Maybe this'll tide you over."

"But don't come back. Right?"

"Right."

I thanked him and slunk around the market to a wall facing the parking lot, peeling off the cellophane with my teeth. We both knew I'd be back. It was growing dark, so I sat against the market's west wall under an epileptic floodlight. I was just getting comfortable when that same curly blonde came hurrying across the parking lot, looking scared. Spotting me, she rushed right up.

"*Scuse* me," she burst out, "but if it's okay could I, like, just *stand* here with you? Just for a little while? There's some guy back there who's really giving me a hard time. He'll back off if he sees I'm not alone."

I shrugged and tore into my sandwich. Bologna. It figured. Now I could see that she was closer to forty than thirty, and that makeup couldn't hide the wear and tear on her psyche. But she must have been really pretty in her day, before the crow's feet and stress lines did their number on her face. She

kept looking back at the row of cars, where a dark figure leaned on the rail overlooking the beach.

“Doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere soon,” I remarked, finishing off my sandwich. Half a minute passed. She was starting to bug me. “Why don’t you go ask the guy in the market to call you a cop or something?”

“He don’t specially like me,” she said, sitting way too close. “I’m not real popular around the Glen.”

I crushed the cellophane into a ball and looked away.

“My name’s Cici,” she breathed. “My friends call me Peaches.” She squinted at the cars. The dark figure was getting bolder, moving our way a yard at a time. “C’mon,” Cici said urgently. “Walk with me a ways, will you?”

“Walk where?” And suddenly I picked up on an old vibe. This whole deal smelled of a setup.

“Just to where we can get away from this guy, okay? I’ve got a place he don’t know about—nobody knows about it. We can ditch him. Look, I’m *hip* to this dude, okay? He’s real dangerous.” She took my arm.

“What’s all this ‘we’ stuff? Since when did we become partners?”

“Would you just *come on*, already!” The dark figure was ambling our way. I groaned to my feet and grabbed my sleeping bag, intending to separate myself from the proceedings gruffly and with finality, but Cici, a no-nonsense grip on my arm, surprised me by dragging me around the market toward the pier’s arched entrance. The dark figure began to follow in earnest.

“Look,” I said, attempting to extract my arm, “just get out of your own jams, all right? I got problems of my own.” Everything was happening too fast.

“*Shut up!*” Cici hissed. “*Down here!*” She pulled me around the railing onto the sand. It was fully dark now, and my heart was pounding. What was I going to do, use a transistor radio to fight off some horny pissed goon? Cici hurried me alongside the fence to a spot maybe twenty feet from the waterline. There the fence continued at a right angle, leaving beachgoers plenty of room to walk below. Glancing over my shoulder as we ducked underneath, I saw a black form jumping onto the sand.

“*Jesus!*” I tried yanking out my arm, but Cici wasn’t buying. At that I realized it wasn’t some kind of setup after all. She was just as scared.

“Quick!” she whispered. “In here!”

Now I’ll have to be absolutely clear in my description, because I still get confused when I recall how we worked our way into that place. Cici led me around a soggy wooden pillar and behind a clump of tall, sour-smelling plants. We stepped up on a tiny wood platform, scooted around another pillar and squeezed behind a row of heavy standing planks, took a few paces toward the water on a sagging beam. She parted another clump of those plants to reveal a cut section of chain link fence. The section swung inward at her push, and I followed her in. The fence swung shut behind me. We were up to our ankles in chilly sand, completely engulfed by those plants.

Cici put a finger to my lips. “*Shhh!*”

It wasn’t at all dark, for long white slats from the pier’s security floodlights shone through the boardwalk’s interstices. In a moment we could hear somebody run past, pause, and continue running.

Cici took my hand and led me down a snaking path hacked through the foliage. Its density amazed me. The place was a weird, groping jungle; a hidden world.

We came to a clearing where three men as grungy as I sat around a gallon jug of cheap red wine. Considerable work had gone into making the place a home. Sodden pillars bore slats nailed horizontally to serve as shelves for found bric-a-brac, walkways had been laid using large stones and cinder blocks, crude walls were fashioned of hung plywood scraps. Tacked to these walls were a few posters, a wall clock without hands, a three-years-old calendar. Strategically placed chairs and mattresses showed half in shadow.

The man to my right rose as soon as we came into the open. Not only did he have the look of an obnoxious and felonious bully, there were aspects of his expression which gave an impression of real viciousness, perhaps even psychosis. He was physically big, and broad, and of a pasty complexion that vaguely came off as diseased, but more striking by far was the fact that he was absolutely *hairless*—and not merely shaven.

There wasn't a trace of hair on his face, upper chest, or arms, not an eyelash or brow hair; and all this was evident from ten yards away. Several tattoos showed loudly against the whiteness of his flesh, one in particular—the realistically depicted, and strategically placed, scars of a hangman's noose—plainly intended to shock and intimidate. "Who the hell's that?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"*That*," Cici retorted, half-whispering, "is a friend of mine. We was being chased by Otto." I was to learn that almost all verbal exchanges were served up sotto voce in this place. She marched us right up to the little group, pulled a twenty from her bra, and held it triumphantly under the hairless man's nose. "You know how he acts when he don't get his way. We had to ditch him."

The big guy tore the bill out of Cici's hand and stuck a forefinger in her face. "How many times I got to tell you nobody comes in the Glen without my okay?" He gave me a really bad news look meant to scare the hell out of me, but I just ignored him and continued looking around. Maybe he wasn't used to confronting people who didn't care any more.

He tried that hard look again, shook his head and muttered, "Funky-assed hooker."

The guy sitting to my left was filthy and heavysset, wearing gray sweatpants, tennis shoes, an enormous overcoat, a black beret. Horn-rimmed spectacles with exceedingly thick lenses caused his eyes to appear offset. He winked and said genially, "Now as you're native, comfort your bones and draw with us one."

I snapped, "*What?*" wondering if I was being put on.

"Siddown and have a drink," Cici interpreted.

"And another thing," the big guy rasped. "You quit turning tricks out front, okay? I told you once already you're gonna blow it for us. Keep your butt up on the pier."

"And, Ci'," the genial man piped, "may I be first to express our gratitude concerning the wherewithal for this night's repast."

The big guy grabbed the fellow in the middle and yanked him to his feet. "Elf, you go upstairs and get some grub. Bread, cuts, and cheese. And another jug of grape." Elf, who

looked like his moniker, took the bill sheepishly.

The heavysset man groaned. “*Pleeease*. Not port; not again.” He rubbed a pudgy hand on his ample belly. “Mine ulcer, she sings.”

The big guy glared. “*Grape!*”

Elf nodded and made his way out, looking haunted.

I sat and accepted the jug, half-tempted to follow Elf out. But there was something about the big man’s manner that made me do the one thing that would really gore him. Casually sipping wine, I made a show of getting cozy.

“You ain’t wanted here!” he said, reading my mind. He strode through the foliage and disappeared behind a ramshackle partition.

Cici, sitting right beside me, said, “Best you don’t challenge him too much. He’s not just rowdy, he’s really off his nut. Once he told me he’s been like, you know, confined. For hurting somebody bad. And I seen him turn weird, if you know what I mean. He gets this look in his eyes like...*wow!* And he carries this great big hunting knife he likes to flash around, which he says he can’t wait to use on some big mouth. But most of the time he just gets his way with his fists.” She pulled back a handful of curls, revealing an ear that was swollen and discolored. “That’s what he done to me yesterday. And no reason, neither. Just out of the blue.”

I glanced at her ear and looked away. I’d seen worse. “Looks like it’s about time you elected yourselves a new big cheese.”

The bespectacled man sighed. “No Constitution down here, amigo. It’s the law of the jungle, both figuratively and literally. And sweet old Animal’s no more guilty of being human than the rest of us.”

I grunted. “Animal. I would’ve guessed something more like Monster.” The ferns all seemed to lean to the clearing, eavesdropping. I found myself whispering. “Groovy little setup you’ve got yourselves here. Kinda reminds be of a place I once saw in a picture book. Borneo, I think it was called.”

The man sighed again. “*Athyrium filix-foemina*,” he moaned. “Californicum Butters. Likes it shady and moist.” He glanced around meaningfully. “Obviously.”

“Crap grass,” Cici translated.

My eyes were adjusting to the contrasts of light and shadow. “What’s this Animal guy’s hold around here, anyway? Never before met a man I disliked so much so fast.”

“Rule by terror,” the bespectacled man said. “Gets his way with a gesture or a grimace.” He tossed his head. “Alopecia, along with a heavy dose of incarceration, may have played telling roles in his present behavior. But he’s too hung up to realize it’s not necessary. Here he bides, cohabiting with three of the gentlest folk you’d ever hope to meet, and still he swaggers around like there’s a mutiny threatening his little fiefdom. But it’s all a lark to me. I’m easy.” He smiled and offered his dry old hand. “Name’s Ollen. Ollen Keats Farthingsworth III. That seems a little prolix in present company, so I just go by ‘the Poet’.”

I nodded curtly. I’d always seen a handshake as an empty ritual; in more cases than not an invitation to a double-cross.

The Poet smiled again. “Like I said, I’m easy.” There was a whisper of brushed fronds as Elf slithered in, a bulky shopping bag in the crook of his arm. He extracted a gallon jug of port, a loaf of French bread, a package of cheese slices, and some cold cuts wrapped in white butcher’s paper.

Animal must have been listening for him, for he reappeared and strode right up, tore the food and wine out of Elf’s hands and sat cross-legged with it all tucked between his knees. He stuffed the change in his shirt’s pocket, ripped the loaf down the center and crammed in the cheese and cold cuts. Without a word he began wolfing down the enormous sandwich, starting in the middle and working toward both ends. The bully was reestablishing his domain.

Animal made a point of hogging the meal solely to get to me. Suddenly, mid-swallow, his eyes rose and burned directly into mine. The man was so loathsome I couldn’t help returning the stare with venom, and as our eyes locked everything around us seemed to freeze. Only as those ugly eyes grew progressively viler did I realize I’d been trapped into staring down a psychopath. Without averting his gaze Animal completed the swallow and slowly and pointedly rubbed the uneaten portion in

the sand between his knees. At the corner of my vision I saw Elf's face fall.

Still holding my eyes, Animal made a show of reaching under his shirt. He drew out his hunting knife and slowly brandished it at eye level. I could tell how big the thing was without having to look at it directly, and while our little contest went on and on he twirled the blade in his fingers, catching and passing the radiance from the floods above. The whole point of this gambit wasn't to frighten me, but to break my stare with reflected light.

"Ahem," said the Poet.

No one moved. I realized I didn't have a thing to gain by beating Animal at his game, but I was already in too far. The more menacing his stare became, the more stolid I made mine. Crazy as it sounds, this must have gone on for the better part of an hour. Cici, Elf, and the Poet fidgeted as I willed myself to stone. At length sweat began to creep over Animal's forehead. His eyelids twitched. I saw him blink twice, almost imperceptibly. The man's mouth twisted into a bitter snarl, his eyelids fluttered, his face began to quake. He grunted and, his eyes still married to mine, took a vicious swipe at my face with the blade. The tip just brushed my cheek, not quite breaking the skin.

The Poet was first to react. "Under the circumstances," he breathed, "mayhaps mine ulcer wouldst not complain all that vociferously." He gingerly plucked the jug from between Animal's legs, unscrewed the cap and drank his fill. Elf and Cici responded like children under a Christmas tree, fidgeting and giggling. They nervously passed the jug.

Animal ignored them. Our eyes remained locked, his expression even meaner than before.

"Look!" Cici squealed. "Look at the lights! Somebody's turned on the arcade!"

Someone above, the electrician apparently, had indeed lit the amusement arcade's parti-colored neon façade, and now ghostly primary and secondary spots were dancing about us, vanishing and reappearing between the pillars and ferns. The effect was extremely surreal.

"Like being in a snow bubble," Elf tittered. "You know, one of those little glass things you turn upside-down and

shake.”

Just as suddenly the effect passed, leaving only the stark, humorless spears from the floodlights.

“Shoot!” Cici pouted. “Somebody had to go and turn us rightside-up again!”

The Poet chuckled. “Never in a day,” spake he, “hast one’s going wit so trod the moment made.”

“Shut up,” said Animal.

The Poet looked at him quizzically, a patient smile on his face. “Meaning what? Meaning let the bearing quiet run the clockwork of our lives? Meaning fault the Muse for sorrow’s sake, that our—”

“Meaning shut your stupid face,” Animal said menacingly. “I’m sick of listening to your crap, you got me? So either you clam up or I’m gonna clam you up. Is that clear enough for you?”

“We need not evoke bivalves,” the Poet responded in all seriousness, “nor the product of our bowels. If perchance mine song should ring askance—”

“I said,” Animal screamed, *“shut up!”*

The Poet stared for a long minute, blinking. Wine had made him careless, and a bit slow on the uptake. He looked at us uncertainly, wondering if his speech was garbled. The faces returning his stare were white as death. The Poet turned back to Animal. “*Believe me,*” he began, “lest I seem remiss in endeavoring to—”

What happened next happened so fast and so unexpectedly we were all struck dumb. Animal grabbed the Poet by the hair, yanked his head forward, and slit his throat in one clean swipe. The Poet gawked at the blood spurting on his overcoat. His hand started for his throat, but before it could make it he pitched forward. I sat quietly, bespattered, watching the spurts taper until the Poet was no more. Cici was in a strange posture, her hands raised, her eyes wide, her mouth all agape. I kind of expected a cinematic, piercing scream, but what came out was more like a tea kettle’s piping. And, like a kettle’s song, the sound just went on and on, finally descending in pitch until it blew away as a sigh.

“Jeez, Animal,” Elf whispered. “*Jeez, man!*”

Animal glared maniacally, waiting for me to move. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or snarling, but I wasn't about to stare him down this time.

"Dump him," Animal told Elf, his eyes pursuing mine. "In the back."

Elf wobbled to his feet. "I—I can't lift him. He's too heavy." He sounded like he was about to break into tears. "What'd you have to go and do that for, Animal?" He turned to me with a look of supplication.

"In the back," Animal repeated.

Elf turned to Cici, whose eyes were rolling round and round in her head, then back to me. "Help me out," he whined, "huh, guy?" But I knew enough to sit tight. Animal's stare was searing.

Elf dragged the Poet's body through the foliage, making an awful lot of noise. In a few minutes we heard him whimpering maybe thirty feet away, and eventually the sounds of digging.

Animal hefted the near-full jug and tilted back his head, his eyes never leaving mine. He swallowed and swallowed, his face contorting. I knew this wasn't for show, he really needed that drink. At last he lowered the jug and secured it between his thighs. There was a long silence, broken only by Elf's distant whining and by Animal's heavy breathing. Cici's eyes avoided us both, and mine were fixed on Animal's knife. In my heart I knew he was waiting for an excuse—any excuse—to use it on me, and that he was only beginning to consider the enormity of his crime. Animal belched, feigning calm. It didn't take a psychoanalyst to figure out what he was up to. He was using the alcohol to steel himself, realizing he now had three witnesses to deal with.

The pier creaked and trembled with the tide as the tension wound down. Animal played out his scene with the jug, his eyes glazing, his mouth hanging open for successively longer intervals. I saw a ray of hope. If the big man managed to drink himself silly I could walk.

At last he set down the jug, having killed well over half. He stared dully at Cici and slowly moved his hand to stroke her hair. At his touch her eyes came to life, darting side to side,

lighting on me imploringly. Animal wasn't too drunk to not pick up on her look. His attention rolled back and forth between us—it was obvious he saw her less as a sexual opportunity than as a means to provoke me. He raised the knife until it was positioned before her face.

“C'mere.”

Cici didn't budge, but her eyes were all over the place. Animal grinned, casually brought the blade around to her back and used the tip to snip off her blouse's buttons one by one. He did it dispassionately, methodically, like a man removing grapefruit seeds with a butter knife.

Cici's blouse fell open. Animal used the knife's tip to draw it away from her body. Amid the spears of light and shadow the whiteness of her bra served more to accentuate than conceal her breasts. Animal rested the flat of his blade against her throat. Watching me all the while, he slid it caressingly around her neck and down her back, finally hooking it under the bra's strap. His eyes gleamed. With the gentlest flick he severed the strap. Cici shuddered as Animal used the blade to fling off her brassiere. Topless, caught in that wholly vulnerable posture amid the shadowy ferns, Cici possessed a sensuality that evoked every healthy male's wildest fantasies.

The big man's strategy was definitely working. Certain primitive urges, as protective as they were erotic, made me want to wrest that blade from him, cut out his filthy heart, and cart off my prize.

Animal smiled. “Where's your manners, boy?”

Cici watched only me as Animal pulled her face onto his lap. The knife glinted against her throat.

“I *said*,” he hissed, “turn...a...*round*.” I carefully turned away and stared coldly at the ferns. Animal wasn't content to make a pig of himself and be done with it; he had to rub my face over and over in his gathering show of excess. Hours were lost in a greasy blur of gulps and grunts and squeals of disgust. It was a numbing experience to have to sit there, listening helplessly while the morning light drew dreamy patterns on the plants and piling. Never had a night passed so quickly. Finally Cici gave a little sob of defeat. I heard Animal's voice say, “All right, get up.”

Unbidden, I turned back around. Animal was hitting the jug again, looking glum, and Cici was on her feet, naked, staring at a point equidistant between us. Animal almost lost his balance pulling up his pants. Cici turned to face me directly, caught in the classic pose of feminine abashment: right forearm covering the breasts, left hand concealing the crotch, right knee turned in. Then a really strange thing happened. She let her arms drop to her sides and looked me straight in the eye. My pulse shimmied at the mixed signals.

Animal took another long swallow, looking anything but triumphant, his drunken gaze languishing on Cici's stance. He blearily studied the way she was watching me, filled his mouth with wine, leaned forward and spat the mouthful in my face. I let the wine roll into my eyelashes and off my chin, refusing to react. He ticked the knife back and forth before me, very slowly, like a metronome's pendulum set to largo. "I got eyes," he said, and his face shook a bit. "Okay, tough guy. *You* do her, then."

I forced myself to not tense up, still waiting for that subtle drift of countenance that would show he'd overextended himself with the wine. But his size seemed to be working in his favor. Drunk as he was, he didn't appear anywhere near losing it. "Up!" he said. "Get...*up!*"

Rising slowly, I prepared to make my break. Again Animal seemed to read my mind. He grabbed Cici's calf and tenderly stuck the blade's tip in her navel. "Get your duds off—*now!*"

I kicked away my shoes, peeled off my shirt, dropped my pants and shorts. Cici and I stood face to face, our bodies inches apart. Only then did she begin to weep. The sound was soft as a whisper. I looked past her.

Animal swallowed and swallowed, set the jug down hard. He began tapping the blade against the glass, enjoying himself. The jug was almost empty.

"And," I said quietly, not really sure what made me take a stand, "so help me God, pigman, when I'm done I'm gonna take that bottle and stuff it right down your bleached ugly face."

The pinging stopped. Animal was gaping up at me, his expression an odd blend of exultation and amazement. His eyes

danced. “Elf!” he crowed. “Make room for another!”

“Just a little man,” I went on numbly, sensing his pride, and knowing I’d already gone too far. “Just a scared little man with a big, bad knife.” Animal’s eyes narrowed. His face assumed that same cruel expression that had so vexed me when I came into this place. With a grunt he plunged the blade into the sand, pushed himself to his feet, and rammed Cici aside. Before I could respond he had his hands on my throat and was choking me for all he was worth.

I can’t remember too much of the ensuing minute or so. I still see the shadows swirling about me as unconsciousness approached, and I still feel Animal’s thumbs pressing against my windpipe, harder and harder, and I still smell his foul alcoholic breath taking away what little air I could manage. But most of all I vividly see his face up against mine. And I remember how the savageness of that expression intensified, and how it became ecstatic, only to slowly lose its flame, waning almost to a look of sadness. A fuzzy spark of *just maybe* hit me—the dying man’s last gasp of hope he’ll be spared by a trace of humanity. Animal’s sad look declined in sync with my flagging awareness; the expression becoming regret, becoming weariness, becoming stupor as we collapsed. Through the coalescing shades of gray I caught a glimpse of Animal’s hunting knife protruding between his shoulder blades, saw Cici’s worried face looking into mine, and finally had a blurry impression of little Elf peering over her shoulder.

There wasn’t a whole lot to be done in a constructive vein. Elf wordlessly dragged Animal’s body to join the Poet’s while Cici and I stood silently, finishing off what was left of the wine. In a few minutes Elf was back, Animal’s hunting knife in his trembling hand.

“Only one thing to do, man,” he said. “Throw this sucker in the water and hightail it out of here. No weapon, no case.” He wiped the blade at his feet, encrusting it with sand. “You can just leave those guys in the back and let this stuff grow over ’em. Nobody’ll ever know.” He stashed the knife under his coat and looked around, searching for words. At last he said, “Man...I’m *outta* here!” and darted through the greenery.

Cici and I avoided eye contact, staring at the fronds long

after the entrance had rustled shut. My eyes, reacting to day-break, fell on the scant piles of our clothes. It was very quiet; only the murmuring of breakers and the creaking footfalls of stoic fishermen.

“Look at us,” Cici said, embarrassed. “Just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.” Her fingers brushed my thigh.

We faced each other, and I found myself staring frankly at her naked body. I swallowed. “Now I can see,” I whispered, “why they call you Peaches.” Long shafts of morning sun began to play over the foliage, bringing to life a lush and primitive arena. “Tell you what,” I said, letting my hand ride down her spine, “I’ll be Adam.”

A Deeper Cut

Devon passed out.

That's what they told him, anyway.

He'd been waiting in line like everyone else, and next thing he knew he was the center of attention for a ring of bystanders, a pair of old ladies were rubbing his arms, and the bank manager was asking if he needed an ambulance.

The worst part, initially, was the embarrassment. But on the drive home an icy fear crimped the back of his neck, made his shoulders lock up and his elbows seize, made his hands sweat all over the wheel. What if it happened again? What if it happened while driving? He could be barreling along nicely, completely absorbed in the intricacies of lane surfing, and—BAM: dead man. Or find he'd unconsciously plowed through a crosswalk full of horrified lunchtime toddlers. Splattered innocence, crippled joy. The image was so appalling Devon had a phantom episode, imagining, in one missed heartbeat, that he'd blacked out again, and was surfacing anew.

He pulled over with excessive caution; using only the rear-view mirror lest, in looking back for even a moment, some

inexplicable mini-seizure should send him hurtling into a compound bloody fireball. Perspiration bathed his face and chest. He'd always been the healthiest of men; didn't drink, didn't touch drugs, didn't over-exert. Gradually the tremors passed. But not the terror; it was a vital shadow in the center of his skull. Devon called a cab and a tow truck. He sat slumped in the back of the cab, drawing faux calm around him like a horsehair shroud. The driver was a talker; Devon let him roll on. All he could see was the cab's windshield, streaked and bespattered, a broken mosaic of shocked baby faces that never had a chance to grow.

“Your scans are clean,” Dr. Goodman beamed. The clipboard, facing away, would not elaborate. “I think we can cheerfully write off the cause of this visit as one of those little anomalies that pop into our lives, shake us up a bit to give our egos some perspective, and then pop right back out as though nothing occurred. And who knows? Maybe nothing did. Sometimes nature just drops the ball for no apparent reason. I like to compare the body to a complex harp with one or more strings always out of tune, and hard work and healthful living as the elements that retune those—Mr. Devon?”

Devon blinked at him. A low hum had just passed through his brain like a train through a tunnel. There were things in there, moving around, clattering without sound. It was as if his thoughts were loose shingles on a roof, responding to a sudden high wind. He blew over.

Devon opened his eyes to another perspective. It was a skewed view, of three vulnerable specimens frozen in a brightly lit box. The action resumed: receptionist slipping out of room, staring strangely over shoulder, doctor frowning at clipboard, planted squarely before seated patient.

Goodman's entire demeanor had changed. He tapped his pencil on the clipboard—*thuda-thuda-thud*—little alien heartbeats in rubber on pressed cork. “You've heard of narcolepsy, Mr. Devon? Once we've ruled out the obvious—epilepsy, tumor, arrhythmia—we have to rely on conjecture, which, in a mature practice, comes down to empiricism rather than guesswork. What I'm trying to say is: symptoms are tem-

plates. Narcolepsy is a known condition, but it's not a common one. I'm not going to beat around the bush here. In narcolepsy, the brain's steady-state waking electrical activity is abruptly interrupted—the subject goes to sleep on the spot, rather than drifting away naturally. Why? The current's been cut off, the lights shut down. *Why?* We don't know yet; and there's that dreadful non-answer which seems, to the anxious layperson, an evasion rather than a helpful response. But it's all we've got. That, and a medication I'm prescribing. Don't worry about the endless string of Latin syllables. Although still in the experimental stage, it shows tremendous promise in the short-term. However, there's a caveat: you must be prudent in your approach to everyday activities whenever a recurrence might prove injurious to yourself or to others, and you must curtail these activities any time you experience symptoms that are in any way out of the ordin—”

“Mr. Devon?” Goodman's smile was frayed around the edges. “Are you feeling all right now? We were discussing your prescription when you appear to have remitted momentarily. I've checked your vitals and you're good as gold. The episode was very brief, yet it absolutely confirms my immediate diagnosis of narcolepsy.” He nervously drummed his fingers on the clipboard. “Miss Aines is going to administer a single dose of your prescription, and you are thereafter not to approach the medication without my approval over the phone. As I said, it's experimental, but entirely safe. Then I want you to go home and take a load off—a load off your mind as well as your feet. I'd prefer you walk rather than use a cab or bus. Moderate exercise is always a precursor to healthful recovery.” He pulled open the door, hesitating halfway. “If you experience a recurrence, or become morbidly anxious, or entertain any weird, traumatic sense of alienation, I want you to give me a call right away. Miss Aines will produce my home and cell numbers as soon as you've received your medication and taken that single dose.” He smiled genially while ushering Devon out. “I know you're going to be just fine.”

Strangest thing.

How can a man *know* what's going on around him, behind him, within him—when he can't see or feel a thing? Devon was unconscious. The infinitesimally vague electrical discharges were unlike anything he'd ever experienced, so he had no point of reference, but he *knew* his brainwaves were somehow being manipulated—by somebody or something from somewhere bleak and far away—for reasons of cold research, for inhuman experiment, for purposes that made no sense whatever in regular terms. He could tell, by focusing, that a kind of frustrated enmity pervaded the ether connecting whoever he was with whatever they were, and that if he let go for even a second they'd—

“Sir?” A thumb peeled back Devon's eyelid. Sensible impressions were returning. The sounds of traffic. The inside of a paramedics' van, seen gurney-up. A man's face; a face like any other. “Sir, can you feel the pressure of my hand on your arm?” A pinching above the elbow. “How about now?” The full-screen thumb splintered into five fingers on a rocking hand. “Follow my hand with your eyes, sir.” The face turned. “He's receptive.” The face turned back. “You're in an ambulance, Mr. Devon. We're taking you to the emergency room at Mother Of Mercy Hospital. But we've determined this is no emergency; that's why we're not using the siren. So just relax; what's going on is purely procedural. You appear to have blacked out while sitting on the bus bench at White and Lincoln, yet no one observed any evidence of seizure or foul play. There's no indication of brain trauma, no signs of physical injury, and all your responses to outside stimuli are well within the normal range. Do you feel okay now?”

Devon's voice phased in and out. “Yes, I'm fine. I just need to—”

Two strong hands gripped his biceps. “You'll have to remain quiet, sir. Until you've been thoroughly examined you're under our supervision. It won't be long. There's the hospital now. We're pulling up to emergency. Try to stay calm.”

“I can't be strapped down. That's what they want.” Devon's mouth was too dry for more.

A Deeper Cut

The paramedic rattled a prescription bottle. “The label reads fifty. The count is forty-nine. I’d call yours a pretty extreme reaction. Now just relax.”

The van stopped with the gentlest jolt. A moment later the rear doors swung open, and the paramedic said, softly, “You’re under restraint only for your own safety, okay? We can’t have you blacking out and rolling off the gurney now, can we, Mr. Devon?”

A hydraulic whine, a rocking and settling. A new voice said, “Okay to roll.”

The bright assault of antiseptic fluorescence made Devon’s eyes burn. Faces looked on curiously as he was wheeled by; faces as indifferent as the paramedic’s, as indifferent as Dr. Goodman’s, as indifferent as that burned-out receptionist behind the glass, as—

The electrical activity, Devon realized, functioned incidentally as a conduit. They were getting into his head, and they were learning what it means to be human, but it was hard work. Through this connection he’d become electrically empathic—able to glean their drive and exasperation, to know that, through their resolution, they *were going to learn* what they needed, if they didn’t kill him in the process, or if he was unable to kill himself first. He was experiencing their excitement as well as their frustration, their urgency and their demand. He was losing hold, losing self-control. He knew it. He could feel it.

“Well, I’m taking him *off* the medication, at least for the present, and I don’t give a good holy crap what you or Lancet have to say on the matter, is that clear enough for you? As of right now he’s under our care. Your prescription arguably precipitated this patient’s arrival, and there’s absolutely no reason to believe it’s mitigating his condition in the least. Fine. You can talk to the coordinator in the morning. I’m presently handling Mr. Devon, and this conversation is officially concluded. Now go back to sleep!”

Devon embraced the room’s hard white light like a lover. He kept his eyes fixed wide, afraid to even blink, as Dr.

Grant firmly replaced the receiver and turned, hands clasped behind his back.

“Mr. Devon, you’re doing great. You’ve been through a bit of a scare, but there’s no reason to worry. Your provider has authorized any necessary procedures, though I’m confident we’ve no cause for alarm.” He raised Devon’s prescription bottle like a dead lizard. “As of this moment you’re off these. I’m going to give you a sedative to help you relax. We’re calling a cab. I want you to go home and get some sleep. You have an appointment with Dr. Randall for Thursday at nine.”

“No, please...give me something that’ll help me stay awake. They’re getting closer. If I fall asleep they’ll be right back in.”

Dr. Grant stood quietly, his expression sour. “Who’s getting closer?”

Facets of his identity were falling like flakes of dandruff. Memories were being stripped, copied, filed; Devon’s humanness was being assaulted, weakness by weakness. The excitement was palpable; he was naked, he was down, he was roadkill. His flaws were being recognized and categorized, in some universal way only a natural predator could understand. Humans were easy, they were fait accompli. Devon could struggle all he wanted, but he was pinned and purpling, a pretty bruised butterfly. He thrashed, but didn’t budge, called, but didn’t peep, screamed—

“The more you fight me,” snarled the security guard, “the harder I fight back. You *got* that?” He shoved Devon into a plastic chair, one of many lined against the wall.

“Listen to me!” Devon begged. “I can’t hold on any longer. Please. Something.”

The guard sneered over his shoulder. “*I’ll* give you something.” He pressed the intercom’s call button. “Security on floor one, east wing. I have a disturbed patient who somehow got out into the hall. Not a biggie, but Riley and Forbes, I’d like you to assist.”

A Deeper Cut

The feelers were in. He was going. A great company was in his skull; a kind of delirious clamor and buzzing crescendo. Devon was a transparent display, every nerve-ending under intense scrutiny. Ecstasy, comprehension, anticipation. His mind was being peeled open; his nightmares, his mistrust, his mortal horror.

Devon leaped from his chair, tore the guard's gun from its holster, crammed the barrel in his mouth. A bear-hug and shattering of teeth. The gun went spinning across the floor. There was a hard stomping down the hall, a flurry of shouts, the pulsing buzz of an alarm.

He was seizing. His arms were shaking wildly, his eyes bursting from their sockets. Liquid fire tore through his frame, spewed from his mouth and nostrils, set his fraying hair ablaze.

Devon hit the plate glass window like a bug smacking into a windshield. He blew out into the night, a mass of porcupine shards, blood spraying in his wake. He heard Dr. Grant puffing behind. "Mr. Devon! Stop! For the love of God! *Stop!*"

He was rocking madly, his skin blistering, his organs swelling to bursting. Devon's head snapped back and his mouth ripped at the corners, peeled off his face and blew away in shreds. His ribcage shattered from the sternum down. He was being zipped open, torn apart, dug into. With a shriek of bone his spine snapped free, his pelvis collapsed, his skull halved to expose the hysterical animal writhing within.

"Mr. Devon! Somebody call the gate. Devon!"

Devon's brain turned to cartilage, to sponge, to jelly. The cerebellum split, the cortex gave way, and they were in. Electrical energy; frying, probing, hurtling into every cell.

"Mr. Devon!"

For Readers Only

Night sucked him up like a giant straw. Consciousness was a black and wiggly thing, all-feeding, all-absorbing, all-encompassing, all

“De—

Benidickedus

In the quaint hamlet of C'erebadicio, in Northeast Italy, are two nearly identical tall hills, the Mounds of Our Lady Democritia.

On one hill stands the charming little chapel of Vita Vista, surrounded by roses, impatiens, and marigolds. The sun almost always shines on Vita Vista, and, upon the occasional cloudburst, her honeysuckles are said to fatten in the rain. The chapel, girded by a lovely ornate fence smothered in ivy and creepers, is unoccupied—indeed has rested vacant since its construction some three years prior.

Upon the adjacent hill stands the rather gothic home of Benito il Dinera, C'erebadicio's founder, financier, and de facto patriarch. Beni, as the townspeople are rumored to fondly call him, has not been visible over those three years. He's been bedridden, far too ill to resume his beloved coach rides through the hamlet's pretty little slums and cemeteries.

The community of C'erebadicio spills below the Mounds like an unfenced junkyard.

An overgrown road winds up il Dinera's hill, grooved and scattered by cartwheels and hooves.

An untouched brick path, nearly swallowed in clover, winds up the Mound to Vita Vista.

You don't ordinarily encounter *chateaus* in deeply rural Italy; those things are French jobs, famous for their elite charm. Same with Venetian cobbles, Grecian marble pools, and Chinese dwarf pines: these articles, very exotic, are all but impossible to find in that static pocket of the planet. Not so on Benito's hill. Over many years these, and other very dear objets, were imported, by grateful peasantry via mule and dog cart, across desert and swamp, on the sagging backs of hobbled children and wizened granmamas. Benito paid well: the otherwise impoverished populace were able to season their swill (ordinarily just offal) with bread crumbs, roof their shanties with sorghum and tin, and dance for Benito's pleasure in the ramshackle town square, children and adults alike dressed in homespun blankets dyed with leftovers scavenged from their master's generously tossed garbage. And, utilizing this rolling jetsam, their tambourines were made with the cuttings from *real* aluminum cans, not that discordant tin stuff shaken by their ancestors.

Padre Peste bon Bella was one of the luckier C'erebadicioanami. His hovel stood more magnificent than the rest: an 8 x 10 cardboard lean-to with a roof of tangleweed and a floor of God's own sweet dirt. Padre Peste lived in this adorable home with Cosito, his blind donkey, with Fhfrhnh, the village idiot, and with Dominique, his blessed companion and soul's sounding board. And, of course, with God, smiling equally upon the community's beneficiaries and the famous house of their cherished master, Beni.

Sister Dominique was a lovely woman, originally from the convent at Our Mother Most Merciful. God had been generous with His graceful Hand; Dominique was well into her ninety-seventh year now, and showed no sign of relinquishing the Lord's work. He had blessed her with an indomitable spirit: although rickets, extracrotcherian cancer, and compound dorsal elephantiasis had crimped, folded, and twisted her darling three-foot frame to a degree seemingly physically impossible, she

nevertheless retained the presence of mind to darn Padre Peste's sandals with regularity, and to milk Cosito whenever Fhfrhhn's giggling screams roused her from her rambling soliloquies. Fhfrhhn, born of a sign painter and a circus cobbler, was responsible for hand-lettering that cardboard sign reading FOLLOW US perpetually hung round Cosito's nappy neck, and for constructing a sturdy pair of gorgeous orthopedic shoes for precious little Dominique. These custom-made beauties, designed for stature as well as for locomotion, came with eighteen-inch heels, causing Dominique's posterior to stand level with her ash-fringed habit, her shoulders to further round the hunch on her back, and her knuckles to bobble and drag as she walked. One most blessed circumstance of this right-angle stoop was that Sister Dominique's battered yellow ukulele could rest horizontally on her spine, and thus be spared certain collisions with the multitudinous rock-and-branch crucifixes Fhfrhhn, in his blessed creative zeal, had ordered upon the cardboard walls' gnarlwood supports. It was Dominique's wont to play her ukulele with passion, at times that might seem inappropriate to any but the most worshipful of God's sheep. Dear Dominique knew but one song, heard fallibly over an old portable record player carried by a passing tourist. That song was, not so coincidentally, *Dominique*, an American blockbuster classic by the immortal Singing Nun. Dominique realized it was the Lord's way of calling her, and so made a point of singing her sweet heart out whenever His loving touch teased the humongous tumors of her thyroidally-inflated larynx. So poor had been that old record's reproduction, and so infirm were the auditory powers of blessed Dominique, that her interpretation of the lyrical content was simply:

“♪Do♪mi♪niko♪niko♪niko, ♪Do♪mi♪niko♪niko♪ni.”

This magic she would howl to the heavens on the moment, while Fhfrhhn stomped in time and blessed Cosito peed accen-tato. Padre Peste, having enjoyed this ritual far more than he dared remember, had learned to zone out like the mightiest of meditators, and so come to the Lord with a frequency far too blessed to describe.

Fhfrhhn now lifted his tatterdemalion sleeve to expose a heavy old wristwatch with a cracked plastic faceplate. It was

one of those famous American timepieces, an authentic Roleks, the kind rich men wear when driving their Leksuses to look for seks with the ladies. Our generous God had blessed kindly Fhfrhnh with this illustrious keepsake through a roving intermediary. That man had grudgingly let it go for Fhfrhnh's life beggings (good a beggar as Fhfrhnh was, he was a better saver), and had even showed the awestruck idiot how to wind it with the little insertable crank. Fhfrhnh's eyes now followed the second hand round and round, his frame tensing up, his held breath bursting. Just when it looked like his face would explode, he jumped up and stamped twice on the gorgeous dirt floor.

Peste nodded. "Yes, dear Fhfrhnh. It is time."

Wired to one posted-branch cardboard-wall support was Fhfrhnh's most beautiful three-foot bramble-branch crucifix, delicately disengaged from one of C'erebadicio's many enchanting bloodyhorror trees. Draped about the neck and arms of this crucifix, like an unimpeachable pendant to all that is good and holy, was a heavy chain closed by a red-faced combination lock. Fhfrhnh carefully removed it, went down on one knee, and offered it to the padre.

"Master."

Peste received it with decorum. "Yes, Fhfrhnh, a fine American lock company." He then gently placed the chain about Cosito's bowed neck, allowing that the cardboard sign was not in harm's way, and that the thick links rested securely between two of the larger buboes. Peste patted her gnarly rump. "Little Cosito, you are now our noble prow, the Good Book's frontispiece." Cosito gratefully dripped on the sweet dirt floor while Peste furiously scratched his forearm. There came a waist-high entreaty.

"Domino?"

Peste turned with a sad shake of the head. Sweet Sister Dominique had swiveled the ukulele round to her belly, and was poised with one talon on the strings and the instrument's neck crooked in hers. "Not now, Dominique. When the Lord's work is done."

"Domino..."

The good padre bowed, compassion further mellowing the crests of his brow. "Benedicto."

She returned the bow, eyes raised, chin scraping the ground, and swept an arm toward the entrance. “Domino.”

Fhfrhhn hauled aside the cadaver hide flap, and the four made their way to that fork in the dirt path resting in the cleavage of Our Lady’s mounds. One branch led to il Dinera’s, the other to the chapel, now standing like a fresco amidst floral watercolors.

The entire community stood grieving at the forked path’s bottom; everyone knew the planned hour of Beni’s confession. Padre Peste raised his arms symbolically, but their heaviness wore him down. He dropped his head, and the four began the long climb up the master’s road, past the crumbled columns and lewd statues, around the fungal fountains and brambly benches, all the way to the dilapidated porch of Benito il Dinera.

Fhfrhhn waited back, scavenging and chewing blessed Cosito’s salamander-sized fleas in the shade of a drooping elm.

The door was opened by Benito’s manservant Mike, bent at the sternum and tail, his gray old head dusted by webs and heel marks, his entire face afflicted with a massive case of Italian Cameltoe.

“We have come for him,” Padre Peste announced. “He is well enough to receive us?”

Mike, with an effort, took his eyes from dear Dominique’s brokeback posterior. “Hn.”

“Lead us, then.”

“Nh.”

Benito’s bed was partly shrouded by mildewed curtains of gnawed lamé. The room itself was noticeably cooler than the house proper, and downright chilly within the pall containing the passing master of C’erebadicio. Beni the man was the core of this chill: a gray and blue, liver-speckled disease enveloped in cobs. His lids parted at the pair’s approach. The left eye rested on Peste while the right followed Dominique round to the bed’s far side. He raised his arms pathetically, and each took a hand.

“Ah, Benito...” Padre Peste cooed. “It is with profound sadness that we make this call.”

The grip tightened. il Dinera's jaw dropped. "Not a problem," he coughed, "Padre. Now, you know the deal." One bleary eye rolled to the window. "The chapel's yours, on the condition I leave this world knowing I'm forgiven for any and all what you guys call sins. That's a fine little chapel there, Padre; you know it and I know it. If you think I'm simply gonna give it away for nothin then you just don't know Benito il Dinera." He groaned from the bowel. "I had my time in this world, and I'm totally prepared to make my confession." Beni feebly tried to sit, collapsing absolutely flat with the effort. His voice went hard. "I ain't perfect, Padre, but who is? *You?* You never done nothing and had some doubts later on? How's about the little princess here? You don't think there's some secrets in them panties? Kee-rist. I'll bet there's more'n one altar boy you been keeping real close, Padre, if'n you get my drift, and I'll also bet they ain't been walking the same since."

Peste laughed delicately. "Ah, *Benito!* Beni, Beni, Beni ...you were always one for the wonderful turn of wit, the playful phrase."

"This ain't no joke, Padre. Now you're either gonna seal the deal with me and the Big Guy or we're just gonna have to find a priest who can. Mike!"

"*Domino!*"

"Forgive me, Benito, forgive me." Peste's smile was aching sun. "Being so long removed from the ways of God's wonderful world, I cannot help but misspeak on occasion. Your wishes are of course mine."

"Yeah. Well, probably the first really *big* mistake I made was kicking the nuns out of Sweet Mercy convent so I could turn the place into a brothel. Now *that's* what I call a house of worship."

Dominique bit her dear prognathous lip and shook her sweet misshapen head, but the grip on blessed Benito's spotted claw never relaxed. Peste raised his eyes to the ceiling and stared until the ferocity of il Dinera's clutch made him look back down.

"Did I done wrong, Padre? I need you to tell me if I done a bad thing: right *here*, right *now*, right up front!"

Peste nodded gravely. “You see, Beni, there are... mistakes which can be construed as beyond redemption. Certain hands of the Lord are, in effect, untouchables. This means their violation amounts to an act so unforgivable in God’s eyes that any—”

“That’s a sweet little chapel, Padre. Honey of a church.”

Peste’s eye turned to the window. Even as he stared, a trestled vine, so heavy with fat grapes that it weighed low the ornate gate, collapsed in slow motion, the plump fruit bursting on impact with Vista’s rose cobbles. The juice was Chianti before it ceased rolling. Butterflies laughed in the lingering droplets.

“She is, indeed.” Peste turned back to the cantankerous old man, by contrast festering in phlegm and bile. “What is important is that a man learn from his mistakes, that they not be repeated. He who learns grows wise, and the Lord is pleased.”

“On my word!” il Dinera swore. “No more nun whorehouses! Not a one. Oh, I learned my lesson, all right. My clients was so spooked by all that religious crap that not a one of ’em could get it up. And the broads! They all start *sniffin* and *prayin* and talkin about self-esteem and junk.” He shook his head. “Good girls gone bad.” Squeezing dear Dominique’s contorted paw, Benito said, “That weren’t just a mistake, Sis, it was a total boner!” and laughed himself into silence.

Snarling beatifically, Sister Dominique grated, “Scrabble,” and raised her eyes.

Recovering, il Dinera continued:

“How’s about giving kids new names? Can’t be nothing wrong with that, eh, Pustule?”

Peste grinned ear to ear. “A charming practice. Many’s the youngster given a fresh lease on life with a nickname the gang’ll all appreciate. Dominique here loves the sobriquet ‘Dommie,’ and Fhfrhnh just delights at ‘Fffffffffffh.’ Cosito, of course, can go either way, but he most cheerfully responds to ‘Seato’.”

“Groovy. Well, I didn’t say nicknames; I said new names. You know, like changing Fianchetti to Jones. Americans never wanna buy kids with funny Latin names.”

“*Buy* them?”

il Dinera's upper body rose dramatically. His eyes were blazing. "Don't tell me I done wrong, Padre! Don't tell me I ain't forgiven! That's one hell of a chapel over there—got the works: stained glass, silver bell, rosewood floors, microwave and big screen..."

Peste's blisters crimped in their cracked hide sandals. "Rosewood?"

"You bet your ass. Smooth as glass. Polished to a high sheen by an army of grandmothers desperate to put food on the table. You just can't buy a more thorough work force."

"Well...I suppose children *are* the property of their parents. By 'silver' bell you mean?"

"I mean silver, Padre. I mean 99 fine. I mean covered by a brass cupola so it won't get any goddamned bird shit on it. Carved with a bunch of fat little flying whatchacallem angel kids. You and Dummy here can take turns ringing with Burmese teak mallets, the heads made of virgin down off of newborns' bottoms. F sharp."

Peste nodded vigorously. "Our Lord is most forgiving."

"And thank God for that." Benito fell back on the bed. "That's real Christian of you, Padre." The voice tapered to a whisper: leaves through gravel. The eyes were all but closed. "So tell me, Padre, and make me a believer." The grip tightened almost imperceptibly. "Let me know, as a man of God, that I'm punching the big UP button here; make me certain that I'm not going to hell on a hand grenade. A lovely chapel, Padre, gorgeous to behold." The whisper escaped in tiny spurts. "All the way, Padre, on your word...sweetheart of a deal...let the Boss know I'm coming; with bells on, with your blessing...step up to the plate, Padre...forgiveness...chapel...make sure I get a hottie angel...divine...whorehouse—oh, mama; here we go—it's liftoff, Padre...shaka-shaka-hands with me, Big Guy; it's your little Benito, all done and delivered...open up them gates and roll them bones, 'cause the Padre here says I'm RSVP. Who turned out the lights? Oh, *baby*, there go the bowels...Christ, what a stink; was that you, little Sister? Hear me comin', Big Fella...oil up that cross and goose the gander, 'cause this...is *...it!*"

"Benedictus—" Peste began.

The spotted claw shot up, grabbed Peste's tunic, and yanked him down. "Knock, knock, Padre. Thanks for the password. I'll sure rest easy knowin you paved my way. All the fatcats in my pocket: forgiven! All the manure I spread in the States: no problem! God, those red, white, and blue gomers'll pay right out the ass for garbage!"

Peste bent closer, his brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean money *can* buy me love, Padre! You don't think those idiots got that way by genetics, do ya? 'A three hour tour, a three hour tour'..." He was clearly becoming delirious. "Invisible franchise...Snoop Dogg to Spielberg...freaking ninja turtles? You gotta be...Beni a good boy, mia mama...take me, Barbie Twins, all four of ya...oooooh, that stings...open wide, Oprah...it's your B...it's your Be...by the balls, Padre, by the *balls!* Your Be...your Be..."

Peste pried off the hand. "You don't mean!"

The left eye shot open. il Dinera barked bloodily, "Ha! Who do you think gave 'em The Donald, Rowling, Austrian politicians, and rap music? *Ja!*"

Peste's entire countenance went black. "You! Are! The! *De—*"

"Do! Mi! *No!*"

"Seal it, Padre! Bless dese boogers! I'm a-go I'm a-go—jack me some wings, baby! Chapel of love! Let me hear it, choir boy! Spew it! Do it! Goddamn your virgin holy ass...now *...sing for your freaking supper!*"

Peste dangled a hand over that wracked and ruined face. "Si benedictum," he mumbled, "il Dinera en Christo, obladi oblada. Domino, there you go; roll me over, Romeo. Olly Ollie auction: one, two, three. Mater, mater: gator baiter. Pater, pater: waiter dater. Three, two, one...later, satyr!"

And the sigh rolled out of the loom. Rigor mortis was almost immediate in Benito's case. Dear Dominique gnawed the gray fingers wide, while Padre Peste used his knee for a crowbar. "It is done," he panted. "Come with me, my child." The two shuffled out, their heads hanging. Exiting il Dinera's room was like leaving a meat locker. Mike slithered past to attend to his master.

Outside it was still overcast, yet a veneer of lemon and rose appeared to solidify round the chapel of Vista Vente. The good people of C'erebadicio stood in a bereft pool between mounds, staring up as padre, sister, donkey, and jackass descended. At the path's fork the padre ran his hand in blessing over the throng before leading the way up. The citizens closed behind the little knot of four; flowing in ascension, as through a sieve in reverse. Sparrows sang ensemble, lilacs bent in welcome. Hummingbirds hovered ahead, displacing rays. The clover was a lush green pile, the air smelled of hot buttered cinnamon rolls. Fhfrhhn and Dominique fairly galloped up the grade, while the Padre and good Cosito strode with a stately dignity becoming the occasion.

At the gate Peste turned and again raised his arms, in every visual particular Christ on the Mount. He looked down on the paused multitude, a sweet tear forming. Buttercups blushed, nectar burbled downhill. Padre Peste bowed, and little Cosito genuflected, that Fhfrhhn might slide free the cardboard pendant. The fool flipped it round. On the opposite side was scrawled in Latin the legend: KEEP OUT! Fhfrhhn hung this sign from one of the gateposts' blueberry brambles, and the four walked inside, Fhfrhhn slamming and locking the gate behind.

The chapel was lovelier than the padre'd imagined. A sunbeam broke C'erebadicio's cloud cover to light on the hand-polished cedar door. Peste felt a tugging on his elbow. He looked down.

"Yes, Dominique. Now."

The sweet sister spun the ukulele round to her belly, clasped the neck in one claw, smashed the strings with the other, and, as the new tenants glided into stained glass splendor, warbled out her dear heart to God's recoiling Ear:

"♪Do♪mi♪niko♪niko♪niko, ♪Do♪mi♪niko♪niko♪ni..."

Thelma

Behind every shop window lies a strange and magical world; a world where half-defined shapes, busily engaged in mysterious transactions, seem to coalesce even as they pass from view. These unstable figures—customer, employee, and proprietor—are *important* people. They are not there to be rudely eyeballed, like so many fish in a bowl. Their business is theirs and theirs alone.

But old Thelma couldn't help staring, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how many times she was punished. Her head would be turning before she knew it, and sometimes, squinting against the mirrored sun, she would catch one or more of those murky shop-dwellers staring back importantly just as her hunched and gnarled reflection rolled by.

Thelma was crazy about people. Whether they pointed and whispered, or rudely laughed out loud, she always smiled in their eyes, resisting with difficulty the urge to reach out and touch. And she loved bustle. People walked this way and that, jealously guarding their personal space, but they invariably parted when she rolled down the sidewalk, as if she were a queen

being escorted through a sea of loving subjects.

The sidewalks were bustling now, and Thelma could barely contain her excitement. Her eyes devoured everything. When her chair finally came to a rest she found herself staring at a small box affixed to a pole. She'd seen this kind of fixture hundreds of times, and was mesmerized by the experience. The fixture poked out right at eye level, and bore a flat white plate with a wonderful little cryptogram of a funny black stick man hovering over a long black arrow. The stick man gave the impression of being in an awful hurry to discover the big secret that long black arrow was about to divulge. For some reason these fixtures always featured a blunt metal button beneath the cryptogram.

Perhaps it was the fascinating way people now all burst off the curb as one. Or maybe it was the intoxicating combination of crisp air and golden sun. But suddenly Thelma just had to solve the mystery, just had to push that stubby little button.

A hand whacked her across the back of her head; not hard enough to really hurt, just hard enough to let her know she'd done wrong. Right behind the sound of the whack came Gary's voice:

"God *damn* you, you ugly old witch. How many times do I have to tell you to keep your fucking paws on the arm-rests?" The hand grabbed the white bun of her hair and twisted back her head. Gary's eyes were burning. "The next fucking time you try that, retard, you're gonna go to bed without dinner. You got me? You remember what it's like going to bed without dinner? You cried like a baby all night, didn't you? Well, that's what you get when you fuck up, y'hear? So don't press your luck." He pushed her head back down, but not too hard. There were pedestrians everywhere.

Thelma craned her neck to look back remorsefully. "Pleezh no be madda me, Gehr. I be good."

Gary exhaled noisily. "My ass." He shoved the wheelchair across the intersection and rammed it against the curb, then kicked, shook, jerked, and heaved it onto the sidewalk, swearing up and down. But his demeanor changed abruptly as another old biddy, the widow Bender, approached and came to a halt directly in their path.

“Widow Bender! And how are you on this lovely fall day?”

“In the pink,” the widow lied. She stooped to smile in Thelma’s face. “Hi, Thelma dear! So...I see you and your nice young man are out enjoying the day. How’s he been treating you? Just like the princess you are, I’ll wager.”

“Oh yesh,” Thelma gushed. “Gehr gooda me. Gehr always gooda Telma.”

“That...that’s wonderful!” the widow grimaced. “I—” she managed, “I’ve got to *go* now, dear,” for in her passion Thelma had allowed her arthritic old talon to grasp one of the widow’s hands. The widow extracted her hand with difficulty, smiled breezily at Gary and winked. “Well, you just make sure you give him a big long kiss for me, sweetheart.” She looked back down. “Bye now, Thelma!”

“That was rich,” Gary said as they continued down the sidewalk. He snickered. “‘Gehr always gooda Telma’. You bet your ass I’m good to you, crone. Who else would put up with your goddamned babytalk bullshit. Who else would have the balls to tolerate your shithole stench all fucking day long. You gnarly pig. You don’t know—you couldn’t possibly imagine—how many times I’ve dreamed of just walking off and leaving you and your stupid-ass chair in rush hour traffic.”

Thelma looked back fearfully. “Oh no, Gehr! Pleezh no leave me, Gehr. Telma be good.”

“Oh-h-h—you don’t gotta worry about me leaving you, witch. I’ll be pushing your spastic ass around until the day you die. And you wanna know why? I’ll tell you why. Because you’re worth a hell of a lot more alive than dead, that’s why. The state pays good money to keep corpses like you going, and a nice piece of that pie goes into my pocket for taking care of you.” He laughed harshly. “I’m your fucking guardian, you ugly old asshole; I’m your goddamn guardian angel. I’m the one who feeds you and medicates you and makes sure you don’t slobber to death. You didn’t know that, did you—that I’m as close to God as you’ll ever get, that I’m the one who’s responsible for keeping your stinking ass in one piece? Even though I’ve told you a thousand times...you don’t know *shit*, do you dimwit? So I’ll be around forever, even though you’re, what, a hundred and

fifty years old? Even though you're ugly as sin and smell like the dead...wait a minute! What am I saying? *Like* the dead? You *are* dead. You're just a rotting old cadaver that some trick of fate keeps running. And you know *what*, you funky old skank? You'll outlive us all! Great people, *important* people, will pass out of the picture naturally. But not stupid stinking Thelma. She'll just hang in there, baby. Pissing and whining and waiting for good old Gary to do *everything* for her. Cunt! You're dirt, that's all you are. Just plain dirt."

"I do betta, Gehr," old Thelma moaned, despising herself. "I sho sharry, Gehr. I be betta, I promiss. Telma be good fum now on, Gehr. Telma be good."

Her apology was lost on Gary. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "And you wanna know *why* you don't deserve to be alive? Because you're worthless, y'hear? *Worthless!* You're not good for anything or anybody. You can't take care of yourself, you can't feed yourself, you can't do squat. When's the last time you did anything constructive, or had even one original thought? When's the last time you made the slightest effort to be of value to anything? I'll tell you when: *never!* 'Cause you're a sick old piece of shit who can't see past her goddamn wheelchair. A cockroach has more value than you. At least a fucking cockroach can get around on its own."

Gary shoved and jerked the wheelchair to make his point. "Don't you understand, shitbrain? Life is *good* to you. But what good are you to life? Where on this fucking planet is there a single life-form, not counting Yours Truly, that benefits from your being here. Name one thing. Can't do it, moron? That's because you're *worthless!* But I'll clue you in on something. When the golden day arrives that your filthy ass expires, tramp, you're gonna make a whole lot of worms real happy. Party time for Ourobouros. *That's* when you're gonna contribute."

Gary abruptly turned the wheelchair to the left, steered it across the street and into the park. "Aw-w-w..." he concluded, "what's the use."

This was Thelma's favorite part of the day. Everyone in the park was always so happy, so full of vitality. Children squealed with delight, dogs chased Frisbees, lovers drifted lang-

rously between the elms. And around them all bumped the slowly rolling chair, pushed by the mumbling and incongruously sullen man, his head down.

“*Jesus*, here we go again! Everybody and his mother out having the time of their lives. Every guy in town but me walking along with a hot young babe on his arm. Look what I’m stuck with. Oh man, am I embarrassed! You dumb lump of shit. I’m the laughingstock of this neighborhood thanks to you.”

Gary’s mood continued to deteriorate, in stark contrast to the afternoon’s waking loveliness. After wheeling her twice through the park he brought her chair to a halt next to a trash bin.

“Okay, Quasimodo. Have a last look around. I’m gonna go take a leak and be right back.” He stuck a forefinger in her face. “Now don’t you move! I’m warning you. You stay put just where you are. Don’t you dare talk to anybody and don’t you dare touch anything. I’ll be right back.” He gave her a hard look and ambled over to a public restroom.

Thelma sat stock-still, determined to be good. But her mind was rocking back and forth, chanting: *Don’t be bad, Thelma; don’t make Gary mad. Don’t be bad, Thelma, don’t be bad!* This little mantra went round and round in her head until it ceased to make sense.

Thelma heard a rustling near her feet, but fought the impulse to look. Gary had told her not to move. If she could only once do what he said maybe he wouldn’t be so unhappy all the time. Again came the rustling, followed by a tiny, frightened mewling. Thelma’s hands gripped the armrests. The mewling grew in urgency until Thelma could no longer resist the temptation to peek.

The tiny white kitten couldn’t have been more than three or four weeks old. It had one brown ear and a large brown spot on its forehead. It was obviously abandoned and extremely hungry.

Thelma fell in love with it right away. Her rheumy old eyes went teary, and her wretched old hand reached down to caress it. The kitten recoiled at her touch, then rubbed against her thumb. Every cell in Thelma’s body trembled. “Ghity,” she said.

Gary now walked back, looking bored. “Okay, fuckface. Time to wheel your stupid ass home and—*hey!* What you got there?”

Thelma looked up at Gary’s frowning face. Her cheeks were covered with tears. “Ghity,” she bubbled.

Gary grimaced. “Leave it alone, damn you! What do you want with a fucking cat, anyway? Don’t I feed you enough? No! Out of the question.” He looked around, picked up a wood slat and swatted at the kitten, trying to scare it away. All he got for his effort was a sizable splinter in his index finger. Gary howled as if he’d been gored, swore and dashed over to a drinking fountain to wash off the wound. In less than a minute he was back, but not before Thelma had managed to reach down, grab the kitten, and bundle it under her sweater.

“Shit!” Gary spat. “Look what you fucking caused, whore. Oh, *mama*, that hurts! I oughta knock your fucking head off, you know that, you old bitch? You’re good and goddamned lucky I need you alive.”

Thelma withered under Gary’s invective as he wheeled her home, occasionally bashing the chair against walls, pushing it hard off curbs. She had been bad again, but it didn’t seem to matter. All that mattered was the tender little source of warmth shifting position on her lap. Each small movement jangled her nerves. Under her sweater she gently stroked the tiny creature. The warmth hummed in response. “Ghity,” she whispered.

Gary unlocked and kicked open the front door in one move. He shoved Thelma’s chair in roughly. “Jesus, bitch, don’t fight me! You know the fucking routine. Sit still!” He kicked the door closed, heaved a sigh. After a moment he wordlessly pushed the chair to the ramp and up to the converted attic. The attic had been partitioned centrally to create a sunroom on one side and a small bedroom on the other. This was Thelma’s room. “Here you are, fossil: back in your digs. Enjoy. I’ll be downstairs in the real world. Do me a favor. If you need anything, call the undertaker. Stay out of my face.” He turned and walked down the stairs abutting the ramp.

Thelma waited until she heard the familiar sound of the television downstairs, then carefully opened her sweater to reveal the kitten's tiny crimped form. The poor thing was trembling in its sleep, and barely responded when Thelma tenderly cradled it in her arms. The old woman and kitten trembled together as the afternoon sun burnished the bedroom's bare wood floor.

"Ghity," Thelma crooned, rocking slowly in her chair. "Ghity, ghity, baby ghity."

Now sunshine began to play upon a corner of the small card table that served as Thelma's desk and dining table. She wheeled over and very gently lifted the kitten onto the warm spot. It wakened and struggled to stand while she supported it with one hand under its belly. Once it was upright it began to urgently rub its cheeks against her other hand, then attempted to suckle a finger. It was starving. Old Thelma kissed it, over and over. It was all she could do.

Without any warning Gary came barging into the room. When he saw the kitten on the table he stopped dead in his tracks. His mouth fell open as he stared from Thelma to the kitten and back again. Finally he breathed, "You *bitch!* What did I tell you? *What did I tell you?*" He took a great step forward and slapped Thelma hard across the face. "I told you 'no fucking cat', didn't I? *Didn't I tell you that?*" He scooped the kitten in his hand, stepped to the window, and screamed. "DIDN'T I TELL YOU NO FUCKING CAT?" Staring hard at her, he threw the kitten out the window as if it was so much garbage. Thelma hugged herself, horrified. Gary stormed over and grabbed her by the hair, began slapping her face back and forth, his passion ascending with each consecutive blow. Finally he caught himself, almost hysterical, but still together enough to realize the stupidest thing he could do would be to leave marks. He stepped back.

"You've crossed me for the last time, cocksucker." He tore her mirror from the wall, smashed it on the floor. He pointed a shaking finger at the shards of glass. "You see that?" he spat, indicating a piece. "That's you." He jabbed his finger at other pieces. "You see that? You see that? You see that? That's what's gonna happen to you next time you disobey me." He

knocked a picture off the wall, moved to the closet and tore Thelma's clothes from their hangers. Then his anger seemed to abate.

He walked to the door and said coldly, almost calmly, "No more privileges. Period. No more trips to the park, no more listening to the radio. This door stays locked, and you stay in." He appeared about to elaborate, but his anger was catching up with him again. Finally he stepped out, screamed, "*Fuck you!*" and slammed the door so hard it shook the walls.

The aftermath was worse than the explosion. Thelma sat in shock, wondering only how she could have been so bad. She wiped away her tears with a deformed and quivering hand. This was the unhappiest she'd ever made Gary, and the first time he'd ever locked her away from him. An exaggerated sense of lonesomeness weighed upon her. She loathed herself. Gary was right. She didn't deserve to live.

Little by little the numbness grew over her. Her thoughts slunk farther from meaningful analysis, and an almost palpable silence enveloped the room. It was in this oppressive silence that she thought she heard a familiar sound.

Thelma's attention refocused, her heart began to pound. There it was again. A tiny sound, frightened and lost, seeming to come from right outside the window. Entranced, old Thelma rolled her chair over.

She leaned out. The white kitten lay straddled over the rain gutter running above the eaves and just under her window, having hit a power line and fallen to its present position. If not for the line the animal, small as it was, would certainly have been killed or seriously injured by an impact with the cement drive below.

Thelma's brows ran oblique. The kitten was perched awkwardly on one of the wide steel clamps securing the rain gutter to the roof, a good seven or eight feet from the window's trim. Thelma gripped the rain gutter, tried to shake it to get the kitten's attention. The gutter was solidly attached and didn't budge at all, but the kitten must have felt the vibrations, for it looked up and wailed pitifully.

"Ghity!" Thelma moaned. She rolled her chair back from the window, trying to think. But she had precious little

experience in problem solving. The harder she thought the more confused she became. She must have nodded, must have dozed for an hour or more. The next thing she knew it was getting chilly, and there was the sound of a key in the lock.

Gary came in with a small blue plastic bowl in one hand and a plastic drinking glass half-full of water in the other.

“Here’s your gruel, ghoul.” He placed the bowl and glass on the card table. “That’s right. All you get is formula. No meat, no vegetables, no sweets. It serves your stupid ass right for being such a sneaky old slut. And that’s *all* you’re gonna get from now on, until I think you’ve learned your lesson.” His face twisted with contempt. “You mangy whore. I’m being way too kind for the likes of you. If I had my druthers you’d starve to death up here. Oh, yeah! I’d crank up the T.V. and you could scream your ugly old head off for all I’d care.” He crashed his fist on the dresser, then swept off Thelma’s little ceramic menagerie. “But I need you *alive*, pigface!” He took a deep breath. “There’s enough nutrition in that slime to keep you going. But that’s all. We’ll see how tough you are after a few days of goop diet.” He turned and walked to the door. Before he slammed it he said icily, “You’ll live. But so help me, bitch, I’ll live to piss on your grave.”

Thelma waited a minute, then pushed herself over to the card table. She inspected the contents of the bowl. “Formula” was a vitamin-rich concoction mass-produced for the elderly, but lately Gary had been saving pennies by preparing his own version; basically a blend of milk, margarine, and sugar.

Thelma anxiously looked around the pigsty of her room. There was trash and filth everywhere. Not only had Gary never once lifted a finger to clean the room, he seemed to take a vicious delight in haphazardly storing junk more properly assigned to the garage or basement.

Now Thelma rooted through a pile next to her bed, looking for something that would extend her reach. After an exhaustive search she settled on a grimy aluminum curtain hanger. It was the retracting kind: two nearly identical lightweight rods that fit one into the other for sliding adjustment. One end of each rod was crooked at a right angle for securing the device to a wall. Thelma found that by forcing the assembled hanger to its

greatest length she had a good six feet of extension for her arm.

She had to rest. This had been a tremendous amount of effort for a crippled and sedentary nonagenarian. She was beginning to doze when the kitten's mewling renewed its tug on her heart. Thelma continued her rooting, fished out a heavy rubber band. The band was an inch and a half wide, perhaps twice that in circumference. It was difficult to stretch.

Thelma wheeled back to the card table and placed these items before her. She was breathing hard. After a minute she drank the water from the plastic glass. The room seemed to revolve, steadied. Thelma forced the rubber band around the base of the glass, then moved it upward an inch at a time. The pressure of the band cracked the plastic in three places. Puffing and wheezing, old Thelma now pushed one end of the curtain hanger under the rubber band until the two parts were secure, making a six-foot-long handle for the glass. Outside, the kitten began to cry continuously.

Thelma lifted the bowl of formula and held it over the glass. Her hands were shaking so badly that this job—the simple act of pouring the contents of one vessel into another—was accomplished only with the greatest difficulty. A good deal of formula oozed out the cracks in the glass. Thelma wiped the bowl clean with her crooked old finger, then smeared this residue around the rim of the glass. She balanced her little device on the wheelchair's armrests and rolled to the window.

Thelma thrust out her head. The white kitten was still straddling the clamp over the rain gutter. When it saw her it began to wail and move its legs ineffectually.

"No, ghity, no," Thelma cooed. "Ghity stay." She maneuvered her contraption out the window so that the base of the glass rested on the floor of the rain gutter, then began to push it slowly toward the kitten. A lot of formula was lost in the process.

All this activity was hard on the old woman, and by the time the glass had reached the kitten Thelma's arms were shaking. Very little formula remained in the glass, but the kitten attacked the nourishment ravenously, licking the inside of the glass clean and lapping up the inch of liquid on the bottom. With the last of her strength, Thelma dragged the device back

inside and let her head fall on the sill.

The kitten was still hanging on the clamp, still straining to lap up the spilled drops.

Thelma watched it listlessly, unable to lift her head. An absolutely novel feeling began to grow in the old woman's heart; a sense of worthiness, of responsibility. Something small and vulnerable...something *unimportant*—but something very much alive—depended on *her*. Life desperately needed her, contemptible as she surely was, and Thelma found herself weeping uncontrollably while her heavy head lolled on the sill and the afternoon sun gently washed her face.

The next day Thelma slept very late. When at last she rose she became dizzy and weak from the act of sitting upright. The normal procedure of working her misshapen body into the wheelchair was an almost Herculean task.

She struggled over to the window. The kitten was sprawled exactly as she'd seen it last, and her heart skipped a beat. She passionately shook the rain gutter. When the animal finally lifted its head and sluggishly cried out she was so relieved she had to cling to the sill.

All day long she remained at the window, talking as much to herself as to the kitten, her mind slipping in and out of reality.

Gary came in late in the day. He glared and refused to say a word, plopped down the bowl of formula and glass of water. He scowled and slowly shook his head. Thelma was too weak to acknowledge him, so he walked back out and locked the door.

After a few minutes Thelma retrieved her device from under the bed, patiently slopped formula from bowl to glass, forced her chair to the window.

As soon as the glass reached the kitten it came to life. It attacked the mixture eagerly, lapping up even those drops trapped in the cracks. Old Thelma was so exhausted she fell asleep with her head and arms out the window, and didn't wake until it was fully dark and quite chilly. It took a supreme effort

to make it back to bed.

That night she came to her senses alternately shivering and sweating. Her room seemed unfamiliar. Thelma pulled a heavy sweater over her flimsy nightdress, covered herself snugly, and let herself drift.

On the third day she remained in bed, her hands and feet freezing. Gary waited until near sunset to bring in her formula. Thelma feigned sleep to avoid him, then woozily fought her way through the steps of boarding her wheelchair, filling the glass, making her way to the window.

The kitten cried frantically when it saw her. Thelma pushed the glass, which seemed a dead weight, to where the kitten could just reach it. Her arms began to shake terribly, but she managed to keep the glass in place until the kitten had finished.

All sensation passed from her left arm.

Thelma gasped. Her upper body jerked. The glass and curtain hanger flipped over the rain gutter and dropped into a hedge below the window.

Thelma's hand reflexively pushed her away from the window, the wheelchair rolling her back a few feet. There she sat quietly, wondering at the lack of feeling in the arm. It might have been made of wood. She lifted the wooden arm with her good hand, placed the arm neatly on its rest, then used the good hand to push those rigid fingers one by one into a semblance of grip.

She watched the day expire, saw the full splendor of its passing face for the final time, while shadows crept along the walls and floor, steadily dabbing up random pools of light.

The sky caught fire. Within the window's frame stray plumes ignited, slowly lost their intensity and glory, then smoldered with a dull and bloody glow. As the fire subsided these plumes turned to smoke in the deepening blue, became vagabond ghosts in the dark, lost their way in the night, and were no more.

Thelma

Death treads gently on gentle souls.

The end came for Thelma not with abruptness or horror, nor did it bring her any pain. It mirrored twilight's subtle diminuendo; measure by measure muting voice, shading tone.

It was almost an elegant thing.

Night stepped through the window not as a burglar but as a suitor, drawing its endless shroud about her, round and round, claiming her pulse one revolution per beat. It worked its way up her arms, her neck, her face.

Thelma watched the stars writhe prettily above the horizon, burning out their hearts for no one and nothing. She watched them shimmer, languidly, until a breath of cold blew out the light in her eyes.

In the wee hours there came a tiny scuffling at the window. A brown ear appeared, then a white ear, and finally two round eyes peered liquidly into the room. The kitten mewed nervously for a few seconds, then half-jumped, half-fell to the floor.

It froze where it landed, questing with its senses. In a minute it squinched and crept to where the two orthopedic shoes stood on the footrest. It climbed awkwardly over the rest and onto a shoe. There it paused to look up uncertainly. It clawed with difficulty up Thelma's leg and thence onto her lap. The old woman was cold as stone. The little white kitten threw back its head and wailed. It cried on and on and on in the darkness, rocking side to side, rhythmically digging its claws left and right into her cheap cotton nightdress. When it stopped, the room was quiet as a tomb. Slowly the kitten pushed its way under her sweater until it was all but buried. It curled up tightly, began to hum. It closed its eyes and was almost immediately asleep.

Now!

The first gob was like any other: warm, well-aimed, expressed with certitude and contempt.

The second hit his cheek, just shy of the clogged broken nose. Numbers three and four were almost on top of each other—pat, pat—on his eyelid and beard. Pat, pat, patapat. Pat. Patapata. Pat-pat. Patapatapatapata, and the rain came down for real.

He rolled his swollen eyes—once to the left, once to the right. The lids were so damaged he could manage only a periscopic slice.

He was in a field, on his back, becoming drenched even as his senses became desaturated. The sky was black, gray, and heaving. It had to be winter; late December or early January. Rainwater made him gag, but he was too logy to turn away. The pain was vicious. His mouth had been kicked in: several teeth were missing; the gums clotted and bleeding, the jaw a rusty mangled trap.

He sat up and nearly passed out. But he recognized the signs, and didn't dare: he'd drown in the rain—croak tonight,

half-buried in mud, a foul pocket of steam for Starbucks' horizon-searching crossword solvers. Before dawn the rats and possums would come for him, attracted by the blood. Once the field had dried out, the ants would get busy. The gulls and pelicans would show off the harbor, followed by crows and buzzards. A flesh hill for flies; big ones, marsh jumpers, relentless in their work. The machine would break into full gear at this one sunken, miscellaneous spot, spreading its operation like a rank growing pool, horror to horror. And the flesh would dissolve in mandible and jaw, and the raggedy clothes would gradually fall away, and the innards would rot in the warm California sun until the unrecognizable pile stank so badly someone called a low-level emergency number. Too big to be a dog or cat. Smells something awful.

He lurched to his feet and stood swaying, pressing all available energy into the one vital effort of remaining vertical. His left side hurt so wildly he had to lean right. The giddily revolving field made him stagger, until his skewed equilibrium got him stumbling along, into holes, over roots, down and up the swirling polluted ditch, toward the fence...the fence—that collapsed border between the world of crawling, sucking nature and the world of paramedics and dumpster dinners...the fence, leaning in the leaning rain, snagging in his old coat, tearing a forearm, giving way that he might pitch over and crawl through the curbside growth, off the curb and into the road.

Cars braked and swerved needlessly, drivers hammered on horn plates, screamed obscenities, hurled miscellaneous refuse. He scrambled across the road and into the mall's parking lot, but the moment he hit the ground he was socked in by pain; he had to keep moving. He stumbled alongside a few storefronts until he reached a facing pair of cast iron benches. One seated a tiny old woman, so white and wizened she looked like she'd just been fished from the harbor. She watched him liling there, hands clamped on the opposing bench.

“You're a dirty man. A dirty, dirty man.”

Footsteps on wet cement; a splat and clacking.

A new voice demanded, “What are you doing here, buddy? Are you bothering this woman?”

A chubby security guard stepped between them, his expression and posture flat-out confrontational.

“Call the police,” the woman said.

“Is he bothering you, ma’am?”

“*Call* the police!”

The guard squirmed. “Well, there’s no reason to do anything that radical, ma’am. I’ll just escort him off-property. You’ll be fine.”

The old woman’s jaw fell. “Officer. Did you just hear me? I don’t feel safe. He could come back. Now call the police!”

“I...ee-yuh...ma’am, to be honest, this isn’t really an emergency situation. But I’ll make absolutely sure that he doesn’t—”

“*Officer!* I said to call the police! Where is your employer, officer? Do I need to talk to him?”

The good arm began to tremble, the knees gave way, and he collapsed supine on the bench; a pile of rags and refuse.

“I-ee-uh...oboy.” The guard fumbled out his walkie-talkie. “Yeah, Gopher, it’s Buddy. I’m over here in front of Dimple’s. We got some derelict wandered in off the street, and now he’s all flopped out on one of the benches. Right. Well, there’s a woman here who doesn’t feel safe and she wants we should call a cop...I copy that, man, but like I’m just passing it along, okay? What do you want we should do? No, don’t roust Al! It’s not that important, and anyway he said we got to, y’know, use our own initiative. I dunno. I can’t move him, and that’s lawsuit-type action, man; you know that. Whatever you want to do. I guess. Then it ain’t on me, man. Okay. Ten-four.” He stuffed the walkie-talkie in a coat pocket, knocking out a handful of corn chips.

“The police will be here in a scratch, ma’am. I’ll be right beside you all the time, so you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“He’s disgusting.”

“We get them from time to time, ma’am. They come dragging in off the beach or harbor. This one looks like he sleeps in the garbage. But I’ve never heard of ’em actually hurting anybody, you know, biting people or stuff like that. No

reason at all to be scared. I carry pepper spray in case one should go off on somebody or something, and the station's just down the street, so you can count on the police showing up real quick if you need them, ma'am." Even as the words were leaving his mouth, red and blue roof lights showed at the drive. "And here they are now. See what I mean? No worries at all."

The car pulled up beside them. A spotlight played for a few seconds. The lone cop stepped around the car. "Who called in the emergency?"

The guard tossed his head. "That would've been Gopher, over in the shack by Sauer Dog. I think the situation's pretty much contained. This guy don't want to move. I don't know if he's wasted or what. This lady here complained about him."

"I don't like him. I don't like him at all. He smells bad and he looks dangerous. He's a dirty man; a very dirty man."

"Like I said."

The cop turned to the other bench. "Sit up."

He forced himself into a seated slump.

"What's your name?"

"Lsr."

"Loser? What happened to you, sir?" He passed a light eye to eye, gave the mouth a visual once-over. "How's the other guy? You do some damage?" The eyes flickered. "Do you feel you need medical assistance, sir? Are you having trouble breathing or swallowing?" He tucked the flashlight under an arm and extracted a sterile glove from a pouch on his belt. "Hold still." He used the gloved hand to examine the ears, mouth, and throat. "Stay put. Don't move unless I tell you to." He walked over to the security guard, now huddling beneath an overhang.

"What's your name, Security?"

"Ernie. But around here I just go by 'Buddy.' Sometimes we like to—"

"Security?"

"It's Ernest William Budd, sir."

"Do we have an understanding, Security?"

"Look, I didn't mean to come off—"

"Security. I didn't ask you if you liked me, I asked you if we understood each other."

“I was just doin’ my—”

“Security. Are you carrying your guard card? It’s required, you know, on this shift, on this property, on my time.”

“Yeah, well of course I—”

“Present it to me please. Remove it from the wallet; take it out of the little window. Thank you. This card is not well kept, Security. I need to be able to read these characters on the moment, not squint through thumbprints and cookie crumbs. I’d like you to clean, smooth, and file this little paper card very carefully; that’s if you ever get a free minute. Take a good look at it. Now take a real long look at this shiny thing on my chest. See the difference? Thank you. So what am I?”

“You’re a police officer, sir.”

“And what are you?”

“I’m a security guard, sir.”

“Now we’re *going* to have us an understanding, Security.”

“Sir?”

“Security: I like my coffee with one cream and two sugars. Not the other way around.” He grimaced. “Makes me think of mama. But *not* hot. And definitely not cold. There’s a crazy li’l *just right* in there somewhere, and I’m sure we’ll get it *just right* sooner or later. *Right?*”

“Sir!”

“Security? Don’t you have work to do? Patrol the premises, maybe do a little detex here and there so your boss knows you’re not too comfortable? Somebody could be in dire need right now, Security. Maybe some skateboarder’s running amok, maybe the supermarket’s short a boxboy. Or maybe that poor dumb son of a bitch back there needs counseling more than badgering. Maybe you could call the police when someone *needs* the police, instead of dragging me off my fucking lunch break to take down some homeless stiff who only needs a push in the right direction, instead of a bench in the rain. Get him off the property.”

“Sir.”

“I have your name and card number. Get him off the property.”

“Sir!”

“Security?”

“Sir?”

“How many creams?”

“Just the one, sir.”

“Just the one.” The cop stepped back behind the wheel, killed his emergency lights, and cruised away.

The guard came back clenching and unclenching his hands, his eyes on fire. When he reached the old lady he forced himself to relax. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I...I...”

“Don’t be too gentle with him, officer.” She raised the umbrella to cover her eyes. “Not on my account.”

“Get the hell out of here! If I see you on my lot again I won’t need a cop, you hear me? I’ll kick your a—excuse me, ma’am—I will eject you with any means at my disposal. Now *Go!*”

He wobbled up and careened the way he’d come, swung left at the sidewalk and staggered to the corner. The rain picked up momentarily, but he was too dazed to worry about shelter. It was all he could do to remain standing.

A man was melting out of the drizzle, crossing the street slowly but purposefully; bent face hidden beneath a rubberized rain cap, slight frame bundled in a trench coat under a clear plastic protector. He skipped a couple of puddles, keeping his head down, his hands clenched in the coat’s pockets. The last few steps were taken with care, that he not appear the aggressor.

“Please don’t be alarmed. I need only a minute of your time. If you’d like a clean bed and some dry clothes, a hot meal and a storage locker, I’m the guy to see. There’s showers and basic stuff; you know, radio and TV...nothing fancy. I can even put a few bucks in your pocket...here and there.” One eye showed as he skewed his head. Very old, in his seventies. Angular face. Lots of acne scars. A fair Caucasian, Midwest accent. He very slowly removed a cheap pop-up umbrella from under his coat, thumbed it open, and gently tucked the handle behind the filthy coat’s lapel, creating a hood against the rain. The umbrella cut out the back-glare of floods and neon, allowing the wasted mug to show in bleak humps and hollows. Deep compassion ran over the stranger’s face like passing headlight beams. He breathed, “Oh, my,” and squinted up at the heaving

mist. “What else? I.D., if you’ve lost yours. There’s a phone to call home...” He looked inward, at a bruise too deep to display, and sighed, “What’s your name, son?”

“Lr.”

“Larry?”

“Ltr.”

“Later? Lothar? Luthor?”

“Lsr. Ltr.”

“Lester. I have a two-point proposition for you, Lester. Option One is you can come along with us now, and we’ll get you all fixed up.” He pointed across the street, at a white van idling in anticipation, a long exhaust plume marking its tail. He pulled a business card from a coat pocket. “Option Two is you can dial the number at the bottom of this card and ask for ‘Mr. D’. It’s a toll-free number; won’t cost you a thing. The boys’ll drive out straightaway, and pick you up whenever you’re ready. I like to throw out this option in case someone is, understandably, trepidatious about the whole affair. But there’s no reason to be nervous.” Mr. D now cupped both Lester’s hands in his. He squeezed those mangled hands with sympathy, with necessity, with poetry. “Look down at our hands, Lester. Look down at our hands.” Pinched against the business card was a meticulously folded twenty dollar bill. “Many establishments simply will not serve the homeless; there are hygiene laws and all that. But this money, if used in a timely manner, may help preserve your vital existence—if only for a space. I do not dole out such a sum willy-nilly. But I find a certain potential in you, son; one that has surely gone unnoticed.” Mr. D looked down with a kind of jaded embarrassment, pearls dripping from his brim. “There’s always that Third, unspoken Option, Lester. We can turn about, go our separate ways, and this little slice of magic will have never occurred. You may keep the twenty. But I would urge you most emphatically to hang onto that card.”

Lester’s arms worked their way up, out of his control, until the squashed bill and card were nested in his palms. Again Mr. D cupped Lester’s hands, his eyes all but welling.

“Bless you, son. They are yours to keep. Come with me.” He gently led Lester across the street to the van.

Inside were a large, strapping black man behind the wheel, and a small, scrawny white man in the back. They were dressed in hand-me-downs. The black man wore a leather flyer's cap, the white man a rainbow stocking hat. The small man slid open the cargo door. Mr. D helped Lester climb in.

"Lester," he said, motioning to the black man, "this is DeeWayne." DeeWayne grinned chummily. "And this is Andrew." The little white man nodded and gave an arcing wave of the hand. "Boys, this is Lester. He's agreed to come along and get cleaned up. He'd like to enjoy our company, and I know we'll enjoy his."

"Welcome aboard, Les!" said DeeWayne.

Andrew smiled like a zoning chipmunk. "Good to know you, big guy. Great to have you with us."

Mr. D folded himself onto an upturned milk crate. Most of the van was taken up by bags and boxes. There was a smell of rain and overripe apples. "I apologize for the inconvenience, Lester, but we use this van more for the transporting of food and material than persons. Please make yourself as comfortable as the circumstances will permit. You are free to leave at any time, but I so want you to see what the compound has to offer. If for any reason you are dissatisfied with our accommodations, we will cheerfully return you to this very spot. But that would be a true tragedy." He drummed his palms on his thighs. "Now. I need to have a word with the owner of this convenience store. I promise you I shall be but a minute."

DeeWayne's smile lit up the interior. "Okey-dokey, Mr. D! I'll keep 'er revving!"

Mr. D smiled back and hopped out. He sidestepped puddles, flashing that tender grin at everyone he passed. Lester had just time to see him handing a bill to a panhandler before Andrew eased shut the door, leaving a crack to peer out.

DeeWayne spun in his seat. "*Listen, bitch!* I'm telling you once, and once alone, so you clean that fucking shit out of your ears and listen! You *best* not be holding any needles or bringing in any drugs. You got me? You *best* not be having any outstanding warrants, you *best* not be having any bugs on you. No sex-communicating diseases, no weapons, and no outlandish fucking mental problems. Do we *understand* each other? *Are*

you fucking deaf, too? That's a good man just walked into the store; that's a holy-ass righteous motherfucker, and he saved me, and he saved a whole lot of other sorry assholes who didn't have a prayer or a dollar. I *love* that man, *you hear me, motherfucker?* And I'll whip the shit out of any stand-out son of a bitch who don't have the grits to do *whatever* he says, *whenever* he says it, for no other good'n'goddamn reason except *because* he says it. I *will* make him come out *right*—if I have to violate parole to do it. *You got me?*”

Andrew laughed musically. “Sound down, Dee. Come on, man. We're all good here; we're cool.” He peeked out the crack. “He's coming back. He's carrying some stuff. Here he comes. Everybody mellow out.” Andrew slid open the door just as Mr. D reached the van. The drizzle was tapering nicely, but he kept his stuffed arms down. He hopped back inside, planting his butt on that same upturned milk crate.

“Merry Christmas, gentlemen!” In his arms were bags of chips, nuts, and jerky. He passed the treats around. “I want you guys to put out the good word on Markey's Quik-Stop. The franchise owner's a scholar and a gentleman. He was at another outlet, but he left these goodies just for us. What a prince!” He turned to Lester with misting eyes. “Eat up, son! Let this be a reminder: the world is full of good, wise, and humane men and women. Nobody has to go hurting.” He raised a trembling hand. “Markey's!”

DeeWayne and Andrew lifted their hands as one, called out “Markey's,” and slapped their palms against that delicate raised hand. Mr. D shook up and down, grabbed Lester's free hand and kissed it over and over, his breath bubbling in his throat.

“Markey's!” DeeWayne cried, and put the van in gear.

“Markey's.”

Mr. D's compound was right alongside the freeway; the offramp was their overlook. It wasn't all that big: half an acre of bare dirt surrounded by caving chain link. They could see a big old warehouse with a broad level roof, positioned forward on the lot and flanked by a number of broken-down office

trailers. Behind the warehouse were dusty cars and vans, a few sagging motor homes, an antique converted school bus.

DeeWayne whipped the van off the ramp onto a parallel dirt road. It was an adroit move, but a dangerous one. He said quickly, "I know, Mr. D, I know. I done it again. But did you see that semi bearing down on the left? He was trying to beat me out on the bottleneck. Can you believe it?"

Mr. D hauled himself back up with the hanging end of the passenger-side's broken shoulder strap. He'd been expecting as much. "Last time," he said, "I believe it was a runaway house trailer." He smiled warmly at Lester. "We kid each other sometimes. These boys are like my own sons."

Andrew leaned forward, embraced Mr. D, and kissed him smack on the cheek. "Papa!"

DeeWayne laughed and whacked Andrew upside the head.

"No matter how many times you disown 'em," Mr. D concluded.

The front gate was open on a permanent basis: a smashed-in skeleton made fast by twisted-round coat hangers. DeeWayne turned in with exaggerated care, winking at Mr. D all the while. Andrew slid open the cargo door and they all piled out. DeeWayne and Andrew walked in through the solid front's little side door, while Mr. D vigilantly accompanied the hobbling newcomer.

It was all beds and bunks and sofas and mattresses. A single row of high windows on either side provided plenty of daylight. Ranks of ceiling lights were blazing against the weather. Kitchen, showers, and office were in the rear.

Sixty-seven pairs of eyes coldly watched Lester pass. These were hungry faces, molded by years of guerilla survival in the streets, penitentiaries, and halfway houses; life streams that serve only as spawning grounds for miscreants. Mr. D, genially greeting his charges all the way, led Lester to an old steel motel bed with a scratchy khaki military blanket.

"This is yours, son. This is yours, Lester." The crowd pressed in. A lanky tattooed man on an adjacent bed watched Lester like a snake. Mr. D patted the blanket. "Go ahead, son. Give 'er a test run."

Lester carefully stretched out on his back. It was feathers and clouds. It was new-mown grass. The smell of chili con carne wafted from the kitchen, with an undercurrent of baking bread and hot cocoa. For a silken moment Lester's whole body relaxed; his blood seemed to warm, his eyelids to shiver. The moment passed.

Mr. D was delighted. "And you'll have your own locker, with a combination known only to you! There are games and magazines...TV and radio...lots of stuff. But let me give you the grand tour first. You can rest in a bit. Boys!" Only Andrew accompanied Mr. D and Lester to the back; DeeWayne was hanging with some of the rougher-looking tenants. Lester peripherally watched them huddle and glare.

"Here's the kitchen; we'll get some real chow in you in a minute. These are the showers, and I'm afraid I'll have to insist you give yourself a good hot scrubbing, Les. We've had our share of problems with vermin; nobody's fault, life can be rough. But transcommunication's a terrible thing, and I would be derelict as head of this household were I to not lay down some ground rules for the good of all. This is my office. Andrew, allow me a minute or two alone with Lester, please. The formalities."

Mr. D led Lester into his little office. Andrew closed the door behind them. "Please sit here, son." Lester took the indicated chair across the desk from his host. Mr. D removed his rain cap and wiped his forehead with tissue from a desktop box. His wispy scalp was spotted and creased, his hair so white it was all but transparent. He sniffed, wiped his narrow nose, and donned a pair of bifocals. A clipboard came from an upper drawer, a felt pen from his shirt pocket. He tilted back his head.

"There are certain preliminaries involved, Lester. No organization can long exist without careful planning and the meticulous keeping of records." He raised his eyes. "You look like you've been roughed up. I'll need to have you examined by a physician. Doctor Glover is a fine man and a good friend. He actually lives quite nearby, and volunteers his services readily. He will be by as soon as I give him a call." Mr. D winked. "Doesn't look all that shabby on his résumé, either." He looked back down. "We'll get you some fresh clothes from the

Hamper. I don't think you'll wow the ladies, but you'll be clean anyway. And it's our policy all furnished clothing be washed a minimum of twice a week. Machines are in an enclosure out back. I'd like you to shave and have a haircut, at least once. Injuries and infections can go unnoticed under a man's beard and locks. If Doctor Glover prescribes medication, you are required to follow the prescription. We are well-connected with the wonderful people at Roosevelt Clinic. And I've found vitamins to be just as important as good food and exercise. Once we get your health back up, you will be requested, but not required, to assist in food runs, basic cleanup around the property, light errands; you know, stuff like that. Let's see now. Am I forgetting anything..."

"Ahr...arru...are you Jesus?"

Mr. D's head cocked. His mouth twisted about: he was uncertain whether to smile or frown. Half a minute later his expression was dead-serious.

"Lester. My name is Mr. Dreir. Mr. Carl Dreir. I made a lot of money over the Internet, both in the stock market and on ebay. These are similar to stores; they're virtual workplaces you can manipulate through your computer. If you're a pretty savvy guy, and have a knack for getting in on ground floors—and I'll be perfectly immodest here: I am and did—you can make a lot of money, very fast and very surreptitiously. I used to be, believe it or not, a terribly poor fellow. I flipped burgers, washed windshields, walked dogs. Then I ran into some people who showed me how a man, with just a computer, a modem, a little luck and a lot of chutzpah, can buy, sell, jump in, back off—well, you get the picture. I was quite wealthy before I knew it. I bought property, I bought titles, I bought on common sense rather than impulse...this may sound unreal to you; it sounds unreal to me even now as I speak it—but in the space of three short years I went from near-penury to a state of wealth I'd never dreamed of."

Mr. Dreir rapped a knuckle on the desk. "Funny thing. All that money had no effect on my ego. Zilch. Instead of feeling more successful, all I felt was guiltier. I started seeing people—people who were hurting—as an investment in something bigger than myself. One day I gave some poor lady a

roof and a future, the next day it was a whole little tribe living under an overpass. I bought this compound and some vans, made friends with a couple of store managers—” Mr. Dreir did something that struck Lester as strange: he turned and stared with brimming eyes and a bizarre grin. There were lots of things going on in that smile—confusion, pride, awe, fear. “And you know what, Lester? It felt good; real good. *I* felt good. I was growing in ways that luxury and status can never provide.”

Mr. Dreir now reached across the desk and clasped Lester’s hands in his own. He seemed to be caressing every scar and blister as though they were nubs of exquisite worth. Lester was surprised to see that Mr. Dreir was weeping—not overtly, not shamefully, not with effeminacy. With dignity.

“Lester. When I first purchased this place it was nowhere near as orderly as it appears today. Everything has been picked up, patched up, cleaned up—all except for one little spot. That one little spot is a kind of closet we all jocularly refer to as the Confessional. It’s not really a confessional; there’s no confessing, no guy in a robe behind a screen, no religious significance whatsoever. It’s just a room where people can be alone with their thoughts for a spell, and try to figure what they’re really looking for in life. When you ask me these questions about Jesus and whatnot, I feel you’re actually addressing your personal spiritual side. That’s your space, and nobody belongs in there but you. Not me, not some proselytizer—just you. Okay?” Dreir nodded once, with conviction. “As I was saying, after I’d bought the property and everybody was moving in, I sort of locked myself away in that room and asked myself: Am I crazy? Is what I’m doing making any kind of sense? And I found something in there I’d never found before. And do you know what I found in there, Lester? Do you know what I found?” It looked like internal stress would break Mr. Dreir’s face into moist giving pieces. “I found *me* in there, Les.” He nodded again. “I found me.” Dreir abruptly released Lester’s hands. His expression became businesslike. “Ever since, I’ve asked newcomers to check it out on arrival. Not an obligation, not a rule; just a suggestion. So give it a shot for ten.” For a moment Dreir appeared at odds with himself. “I’m going to let you in on something, son.” He rapped that gnarly

old knuckle rapidly. “The man I bought this place from told me about that little room almost exactly as I am telling you now; sitting across from me at this very desk, looking into my eyes with a depth at that time unfamiliar. And he told me that happiness is only a dream. He said that sentient life, due to its subjective nature, is destined—or, perhaps more accurate, doomed—to pursue the unattainable.” He vaguely waved a hand. “Perhaps his leanings were Buddhist, or he might have been an existentialist. Whatever. The point I am attempting to assay here, Lester—and it was merely his theory, mind you—is that this hypothetical state of happiness cannot be contained, cannot be extended. The machinery of being causes a man to strive, rather than loiter. In an otherwise healthy human, a state of enduring happiness would indicate self-delusion, mental retardation...” Mr. D’s eyes burned into Lester’s. “A sleeping man approaches that state of bliss, embraces it for a heartbeat, and—” he snapped his fingers. Brittle and spindly as those old hands were, the report came, in that hushed little office, like the snap of a whip. “And he is once again in the Here and Now. He wakes to the inevitable torment, to the want, to the soul’s undoing, to the...decay.” Dreir’s whole frame sank into his chair. “In real-time existence, according to that man’s philosophy, a wide-awake individual can undergo a similar process, only so gradually as to be unaware. In other words, he may ride the crest of events, and be washed up on the shore of happiness, so to speak, only to be just as surely sucked back by the undertow. Forward, peak, reverse. Up, tremble, down. Advance, retreat...surrender. As though a man’s life were a series of waves—a tide beyond his control. Oh no no no, Lester: that undertow does not necessarily contain the precise elements as the breaking wave—the details can be different, but the process is the same...forward and reverse, growth and decay, hope and dismay—the controlling force is the Worm, son, and he is in all things.” Dreir sighed. “Predestination is a difficult concept to accept...which only buttresses that fellow’s assumption of happiness sought in a vacuum. Free will, blind chance, just deserts...forgive me, Lester. I do not mean to bring you disquietude in this loving place. Just an old man rambling at the deaf portal.” He lowered his head, leaned forward, and gripped

Lester's hands with useless passion. "Bless you, son. Bless you, bless you, bless you." Dreir leaned back. "I wish for you to experience that heartbeat, Lester. In our so-called Confessional." Mr. D now reached under the desk and came up with a shaggy old dog, its newspaper cushion still gripped in its claws. Dreir carefully removed shreds of paper before gently placing the dog on his desk for Lester's inspection. The thing was so faded it could hardly stand.

"This, Lester, is Boy." He steadied the old dog in the crook of his left arm and used his right hand to wave its forepaw. "Boy, Lester. Lester, Boy." The dog swayed, dipped, and folded into a mangy pile. Mr. D sighed clear from the grave. "Boy is blind and unable to function healthfully, as he had the misfortune of belonging to a cruel master, who could not appreciate the love of a sweet creature such as this dear and devoted animal. Due to his advanced age he is unable to hear in one ear, slow and prone to crabbiness...nature's banes...yet, despite his years, he should be able to walk normally, digest properly, sleep in peace...he does not deserve to suffer so...no...not Boy..." Mr. Dreir caressed Lester's hand and Boy's curls, his eyes melting in their sockets. "Nevertheless, son, you will encounter so many wonderful souls in this world. In this very compound—you will meet unfortunates as yourself, who are dedicated only to the comfort and succor of their fellow man." He dropped his head one last time and pushed himself to his feet.

"I've a pick-up to handle over at the Ralph's on Harrison. Andrew will show you the room. See if you can get inside yourself; do a little searching. When I get back maybe we'll be in a better frame for communicating." He cracked the door. "Andy, show Lester into the Confessional. There's somebody in there he'd like to meet." Mr. Dreir picked up the clipboard. His cell phone rang and he clamped it on an ear. "I'm coming, I'm coming." He carefully placed Boy on the floor, attached a little leash, and slowly walked him to the door. Decrepitude, high and low, passed from the room without looking back.

Andrew took Lester's elbow. "C'mon, Big L. We all gone in, and we all come out none the worse." He moved his head Lester-wise, but backed off at the smell. "I'll let you in on

the grits right off: ain't nothin' in there but a man's conscience. Don't let Mr. D spook you none. Just talk to the Man and c'mon back out." They halted outside a little door. "I'll come for you in ten." He grinned and wagged a schoolmarmish forefinger. "No sleepin' now!" Andrew opened the door and switched on the light. Lester shuffled into a room no larger than a motel bathroom. It was as Dreir said: a blank little cubbyhole, unkempt and unresolved. Andrew closed the door.

Lester came to his knees by degrees, the single dusty bulb shivering from stale displaced air. He blew caked blood onto a sleeve. He could breathe. "Sir..." The effort at cogency was just too much. Lester swung his bowed head left and right. "Sir..." He looked back up. "Sir...please help me. Please. No more. I...I—please. No." He sobbed for air and hacked, spewing all over his beard and coat. "Sir...I can't, sir...I can't." His face shook and relaxed, shook and relaxed. Lester raised his two mangy paws as abbreviated fists, the deformed digits unable to clench. "If you care, *help* me," he managed, "*please!* I can't, sir. Please. Show me." Lester coughed, almost retching. "Please, sir..." he wheezed. "*Now.* Please."

There was a knock and the door creaked open. "You still awake in there?" Andrew smiled. "Come on, man. Let's go and get you some grub."

DeeWayne stopped them in the hallway. His eyes tore into Lester's. "What'd I tell you? I said if you got any bugs you wasn't to come in here without a proper delousing." He swung his head. "Isn't that what I told him?" Andrew smiled uncertainly.

DeeWayne pulled out a pair of generic plastic surgical gloves, jammed them on up to the wrists. "*C'm'ere!*" He grabbed a handful of Lester's hair and dragged him into the main warehouse. At Lester's bed he pushed until that smashed red nose was almost buried, like a furious master about to toilet-train a diarrhetic puppy.

There was nothing to see but linen.

"Deaf *and* blind, huh? Well then, asshole, let me describe it for you. They's called lice, and they transport from man to man, you dig? Right now they could be anywhere on these-here premises, 'cause if they's on this bed they's any-

where your homeless ass been. That means in the Confessional, that means in the van, that means in Mr. D's own personal clothes for all I know."

He roared like a lion, grabbed Lester's hair in both hands, and hurled him crashing into a bedpost. "Stay out of this, Andy, unless you want a piece of me too." He punched and kicked, savagely, until Lester curled into a shaking fetal ball, then went ballistic; breaking a dustpan, push broom, and waste basket on the forearms and skull. When he ran out of weapons he gave a little shriek and began kicking the face maniacally; slobbering in his passion, falling and whaling from the floor, staggering upright, starting the process all over. Half the compound's occupants cheered from a growing ring, half scrambled for cover. Lester was battered along like a smashed snake, sobbing with fear as he tried to make his feet. When DeeWayne came after him with a lock and chain, Lester lurched to his knees and scrambled out the door.

"That's right, bitch, get out of here!" DeeWayne was an immensely strong individual. He now grabbed Andrew in one hand and Lester in the other, dragged them, pumping his arms left and right, clear across the lot to the van. "Open the damn door, Andy."

Andrew did. DeeWayne kicked Lester inside, then kicked Andrew in behind him. "Close the damn door, Andy. If he moves, brain him." DeeWayne stomped around to the driver's side, jumped in and fired up the van. He took off like a lunatic, barely able to control the wheel. Lester and Andrew were hurled into a common lump amidst bags and damaged fruit.

DeeWayne swore as he tore onto the freeway, vilely and repeatedly. He cut off cars, lane-hopped wildly, broke every law in the book. Only the stress-relief caused by time and miles saved Lester from a solid tire iron-whooping. When they reached Markey's Quik-Stop he screeched to a halt and composed himself.

"Open the damn door, Andy."

Andrew did. DeeWayne watched Lester in the rear-view mirror. "Get out."

Now!

Lester didn't need to be told twice. He scrambled out and pitched onto the sidewalk.

"Close the damn door, Andy."

The door slid shut and the van roared off.

Lester used a bus bench to haul himself up. He collapsed supine on the seat, left arm hanging over the gutter. He could tell at least one rib was broken; he had to force shallow breaths, even as every nerve demanded he savage the air. An eardrum was popped or inflamed, the same-side orbit crushed, the mouth locked up—his stomach was...twisting, he couldn't hold it, his eyes bulged as he fought against countering life-forces: those dyed-in-the-demon opposers that won't let a wracked-and-ready animal die before it has experienced agony's full measure. Unable to lift his head, Lester puked bloody bile, on his coat, over his face, out and back up his desperately flaring nostrils.

A spotlight made his private hell available to all. An amplified voice snapped, "*You on the bench.*" A car door opened. A flashlight's beam fried his eyes.

"Sir. I need you to sit up for me."

A second voice, farther off: "Medical?"

The first voice. "Sir, do you need a doctor's attention?" Something banged his smashed shoulder. "Sit up."

Lester sat up at an angle, his left arm a straight prop for his shot Pisa-tower frame. He sucked wretched life back up his broken nose. The light moved eye-to-eye. The series of questions were looped sections of the same old nightmare: Drugs? Alcohol? Identification? Address? Employer? Person to contact? General relief? Medi-Cal?

When the list was completed the light fell away. "Sir, I need you to vacate this bench immediately. Benches are not community property; they are provided for the convenience of persons financially capable of purchasing a seat on one of the lines, though frankly I doubt you'd be permitted to board in your present condition. *Do you have bus money?*"

Lester squeezed shut his eyes as another wave threatened.

"Then you have the option of walking away or facing arrest."

That second voice, with feeling: “Not in my car, Terry. I’m serious.”

“Get up.”

Lester draped his arms over the bench back and rose by walking up his butt. His knees screamed in protest.

“Keep going.” The light swung to his feet. Lester stood in a punch-drunk sway. “Get moving. Stay on the sidewalk. Do not cross the street against traffic. Use the crosswalk like everybody else. Push the button until you see the steady green hand. If you’re halfway across the street and that hand turns red and starts flashing, I want you to turn around and walk back to the curb. I don’t care what the instructions say on the little box. Do it until you get it right. We hit this corner every hour. I don’t want to see you back here again. Do we understand each other?”

“Thnk...” Lester managed. “Thkyu.”

“Get going.”

Lester clung to the pole like a drunk to a rail. He pushed the signal call button with deliberate accuracy and stared at that stern red hand forever. The patrol car cruised off. When the happy hand appeared it took Lester a full thirty seconds to peel himself off the pole, so by the time he was halfway across he was already being warned back. A bitty old lady stood on the island, hanging onto the miniature median call stand with one arm, her purse clutched meaningfully in the other. Her eyes were searing. “Get away from me,” she gnashed, “you filthy animal.” Lester staggered back to the curb. The old lady began a resolute march, against the light, while left-turning traffic waited patiently and drivers farther back, ignorant of the situation, leaned on their horns. It took two entire series, red through green, for the biddy to make the curb, one baby-step at a time, and by then the intersection was in gridlock. The moment she conquered the curb the whole mess blared past.

She stood glaring for the longest time. The walk hand glowed. The old lady raised hers in imitation, waved it in front of Lester’s fractured face. “What are you—dreaming? Wake up! You can go now. *Go!*” He stumbled off the curb and half-ran, half-staggered across the street.

He had to feel his way along the south wall to reach the mall parking lot. Lester collapsed in a doorwell, gripping his side. There was some serious internal damage; the spleen, perhaps, or a section of gut. His mouth had taken a real booting—teeth, tongue, lips. Lester wheezed away the blood. He opened his coat and gingerly lifted the shirt. His left lower quadrant was one massive bruise; just looking at it made him grind his teeth and squeeze shut his eyes. Gradually his head reclined in a whipped animal nod. Bloody saliva rolled into his beard.

His foot was kicked, then the leg. The bad leg. Lester's eyes popped open and he snarled.

A skinny brown security guard was looking down on him, his cap tilted aggressively. "Get out of the doorway, asshole. You ain't supposed to be on this property, and you know it." He kicked harder. "Don't fuck with me, mother-fucker! I'll mace your ass in a hurry." Lester's striving hands failed him.

The guard tore out his walkie-talkie. "Peepers? I got a bum down here at SweePea's. No, but he's giving me a hard time. He don't want to leave. Sure I told him, man; first thing out of my mouth. Can I juice him? But he *is* resisting!" He kicked savagely, just below the bruised quadrant. Lester roared to his knees. "He's coming at me, Peeps! Didn't you hear that? I got to protect myself, don't I? Then how about the stick? *But you heard*, damn it!"

Lester pulled himself to his feet. The guard shoved the walkie-talkie back in its holster.

"Get your nasty ass out of here! Snap out of it, punk—go do your sleeping somewheres else." Lester staggered past. The guard, attempting to kick Lester's hindquarters, slipped in a puddle and fell on his own. "*Go!*"

Lester stumbled into the road, hugging his screaming side. Braking cars swerved on the wet asphalt. He stumbled into the undergrowth and pitched over a crushed section of fence, pulled himself past the ditch and went kicking through roots and scrub. Something large darted between his flagging feet. Eyes gleamed in the brush and scattered; some were not so quick. Lester's legs gave out and he fell on his back to protect his

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injured vitals. Something moist slapped his forehead; blood from above. Another hit his cheek, and another, his nose. Half a minute later the rain was coming down for real.

Lovers

Even as a child little Celia was obsessed with self-mutilation.

The first time April found her daughter semi-conscious and frothing, Celia's eyes were rolled back, her limbs and face lacerated by every sharp object within reach. Naturally mother went right into hysterics, and thereupon devoted all available time and energy into nursing her one love back to health. But the shock, to a hard woman perennially battling guilt and self-loathing, triggered something deeper than a healthy maternal reaction. From the moment she smashed that last bottle on the counter, April's response was anything but natural.

After Celia's recovery, mother and daughter lived in a home devoid of edges and points. April's small clapboard house, situated on a lonely tract of poorly-lit land, could be modified without the inquiries of authorities or neighbors. Panes were removed, windows boarded over. A carpenter was contracted to construct gridded apertures for light bulbs, and to fit all cupboards and drawers with miniature combination locks. Then April got busy. The resulting décor could best be de-

scribed as *blunt*, as *fastidiously smooth*, and as *relentlessly contoured*, for April Winter, clad in overalls and bandanna, had methodically filed, sanded, and hammered flush every protrusion in her abusive ex-husband's seized home.

Yet there were additional gruesome episodes. April, focused only on that which openly met the critical eye, understandably ignored some pretty obvious potential hazards—simply because their projections were concealed by contours. Thus evils such as car keys and fountain pens were overlooked due to the *roundness* of their secreting handbag, and the oblong, peaked prongs protruding from the plugs of electric cords were neglected—not only because they were hidden in the parallel recesses of wall outlets, but because the plugs *themselves* were innocently smooth in appearance.

Now, April very deeply loved Celia. But there was a strong neurotic thread running through her affection, showing initially in a kind of overbearing *momminess*, and eventually in outright monomania. Because of this biochemical barrage, April blamed herself, unjustly, both for Celia's affliction and for the brutal alcoholic father's violent departure. Still, the woman was immensely strong, weathering Celia's desperate years of seizures and unforeseeable flesh savageries with uncommon courage and resolution. She grappled with depression by spending afternoons on the front porch, balancing pathos and palette while Celia slept locked away. During these imaginary sittings April painted her daughter in every setting she could concoct, with one proviso—the girl had to be smiling. April would have died to see just one of those painted smiles come alive. Her canvases were hung throughout the house, in obvious spots and in places marred by stubborn blood stains or bashed drywall.

These little hanging squares of artificial happiness became more important, and more strained, as Celia approached puberty. But April's pluck was amazing. For instance, during Celia's biting phase, mother had, after days of heroic soul-searching, resorted to having the girl's mouth wired shut, and still managed to abstain from gin and tonic until Celia discovered the exquisite tortures of manipulating stainless steel on freckled forearms and white, yearning wrists. Once the wires were removed, Celia became ferocious and unmanageable. It

was with profound anxiety that April enlisted a most callous dental surgeon to, in strictest confidence, nearly dispatch the girl with anesthesia, that he might grimly extract her front uppers and lowers, leaving only those teeth adapted for grinding, rather than tearing. Little Celia, thus mutilated by another party, withdrew completely, and for a time immediately went into seizure at her mother's approach. The sweetly smiling portraits were now too upsetting for the toothless girl. Again showing her mettle, April overcame her horror daily as she painted out teeth, canvas by canvas, solely for her disturbed daughter's sake.

Alcoholism is such an ugly, such a harsh and unforgiving word. Yet in April's case it was tantamount to emotional salvation. Through regular and liberal self-medication, she was able to remain all-giving mother first, self-indulgent masochist second. Strange that strength and weakness should cohabit with such balance. April thrived on stresses that would crush a less-adamant individual...even during those many long drunken nights with her ex, before he'd blacked her eyes and sent her gushing and convulsing to the emergency room, she had indulged in a form of liquor abuse-gratification common to women of low self-esteem: *The bastard beat her. He ripped her off, he raped her. He used her in ways that are incomprehensible to even the shallowest student of ethics.* But...damn it, at least he was *there*.

April fought down these horrors courageously, so that now the past was just a binge; one long, perilously survived stupor. The present was all that mattered. And the present was Celia. For April, loving Celia was the purest form of giving, because Celia didn't—Celia couldn't—*take*. And even a masochist is sobered by rejection.

As to the growing girl's security, April was inflexible. She would not admit visitors, *period*, unless they obeyed a single rule: at no time, under any circumstances, was a sharp object permitted indoors. Pockets were ordered emptied, with heartfelt apologies. Purses and suspicious personal articles were kept outside in a locked strongbox secured to the porch, and only then was adolescent Celia allowed to mingle with her mother's genuinely supportive and sympathetic friends. For a

time this method afforded April the semblance of a social life. Then, one Sunday morning, a fellow hospital receptionist unintentionally left behind a simple straight pin that had been lodged in the hidden seam of her recently altered pantsuit. The physical consequences of that single pin were devastating. April entertained no longer; she became a psychological as well as a physical recluse, and changed her work schedule to the graveyard shift to be near Celia during the teenager's waking hours.

It was on this shift that she met Will, an easygoing security guard with an inexhaustible patter. In the wee hours, when it seemed they were the only creatures alive, the two would sit in the hard fluorescent light and chat, and flirt, and the dreary hours would not seem so long. They shared a love of pasta, a lifelong passion for jazz, and a real fondness for stargazing. And they had something else in common. One black morning, during April's lunch break, Will came by to point out M31 in Andromeda. While so doing he nonchalantly draped his other arm over her shoulders, reached inside his fur-lined jacket, and slid forth a nearly full pint of Cream of Kentucky bourbon.

After that their working lives were inextricably entwined. They came to the hospital eagerly, and stole away at every opportunity. April now brought her gin and tonic in a plastic thermos, while Will carried a holstered flask of bourbon under his security bomber jacket. They weren't stupid. They were never recklessly drunk, and they were never caught. Week by week the consummation of their passion neared.

The effect of alcohol on Will was to rouse an irrepresible satyr; a beast diametrically opposed to the sober, affable security guard April had fallen for. He couldn't keep his hands off her; any excuse and no excuse were reasons enough to justify a grope here, a pinch there. For her part, April found it increasingly difficult to maintain her half-hearted parries. It had been so long. She giggled and blushed at his touch, and their façade of professionalism gradually crumbled, to the whispered amusement of janitors and orderlies. Alone together, they tore at their drinks.

One peaceful Saturday night there was an unexpected knock on April's door. In the bulb's sallow haze a half-tanked Will stood hunched like a punch-drunk fighter, his primer-gray

pickup parked with one wheel on the curb. April hesitated; everything was wrong. This eager event should be taking place at a motel, on a back seat, in the park—anywhere but here. But Will hadn't come to be turned away, and April was still prey to the alcoholic cycle: just the sight of Will drunk and weaving triggered an almost Pavlovian reaction. She experienced a kind of contact high, and her suddenly surging libido just as suddenly *demand*ed she fix herself a drink. This she did, in nervous spurts, while talking to Will through the door; telling him to keep his voice down, asking him to be patient. She threw on a favorite album and gulped down half her drink. The liquor warmed her blood, the music took her mood. Excited, alive again, she peeked into the black womb of her daughter's room. Celia was in her familiar sleeping posture; curled into a fetal position, eyelids fluttering, the orbs rolled back. April tiptoed in, readjusted the covers. Tiptoed out. Gently locked the door.

Will knew all about Celia from their chats at work. So, drunk though he was, he *behaved*; he was expectant, but compliant. He docilely placed his keys and all other loose objects in the strongbox, then proudly displayed the tall unbreakable Tupperware flask that held his liquor. April was brutally thorough in her physical search, much to Will's delight, and at long last, after snapping shut the combination lock on the box, she ushered him inside.

Only April's greater sobriety enabled her to keep Will at bay. For a while the man seemed indefatigable in his advances, but finally the bourbon began to work against him. He sagged, and allowed her to ease him onto the couch. April sauntered into the kitchen, returning a minute later with paper cups, a teak bowl full of ice, and a plastic pitcher filled with gin and tonic water. In the space of that minute Will had recovered completely, and was randy as ever. Their embrace was immediate. Will hauled her down on the couch, his greedy hands fumbling with her blouse and bra, his breath hot in her ear. Suffocating, April pushed him off, and they both leaned on the sanded-round coffee table with the sanded-round feet, gulping their drinks out of sheer nervousness.

She tried to forestall the inevitable—with chatter, with counter-maneuvers—but Will only grew bolder, scattering

pillows and spilling drinks. April, capitalizing on the break, squirmed out of his embrace and made to replenish the pitcher. Will wobbled to his feet and blocked her way meaningfully. For half a minute April was terrified, but Will only grinned, stole a kiss, and staggered off to the bathroom. By the time he'd returned, April had wolfed down a stiff drink and forgotten both the pitcher and her anxiety. The two fell on the couch as the music's final strains were replaced by the rhythmic *hiss-ca-chuk* of the record player's stylus at the label's paper perimeter. Behind this rhythm came a familiar scratch and rattle.

Celia's door cracked open. The girl peeked out timidly.

In a heartbeat April was wholly mother again. She shoved Will away, swayed to her feet, and held out her arms while Celia shuffled over shyly, confused and vulnerable in her floral-print pajamas. The conflicting emotions could produce only one response: April quickly broke the mother-daughter embrace and made for the kitchen and gin.

Celia was fascinated by Will; tugging at his clothes and hair while he glared. He sullenly pulled at his drink, his expression continuing to darken as April stumbled back to the couch, a fresh bowl of ice quaking in her hand. She must have blacked out for a minute, must have tumbled backward onto the couch, for the next thing she knew Will was straddling her with his face buried in her chest. He pinned her like a butterfly. April whipped her head side to side in protest, and Will went right out of his mind with passion. When her head came to rest she was looking straight into Celia's bright and wondering eyes. April cried out and tried to pull free, only inflaming Will further. He threw all his weight on her, and, so great was his demand, would probably have taken her then and there if not for a haymaker to the tip of his nose. April struggled to her feet and stood reeling in the middle of the room. Will blinked at her stupidly, his right hand gripping her rent and rumpled blouse. His other hand rose slowly, the fingers testing his hot bleeding nose. His eyes darkened.

April retained only vague impressions of the ensuing few minutes. She remembered watching Will lurch to his feet and trip headlong over the coffee table, waving his arms like a drowning man. She recalled seeing him hit the floor in a hail of

scattered ice, oscillate and bob to his knees, flail and lurch to his feet.

In slow motion Will lunged, grabbed April by the hair with his left hand, hauled back his right arm, and smashed his fist flush in her face.

The blow sent April backpedaling into the kitchen. She glanced off a cabinet, slammed against the refrigerator, slid to the floor. Through a veil of blood she watched Will stumbling back and forth in the doorway, moving like a ping pong ball jamb to jamb, sinking gradually, at last turning on Celia and dragging her kicking and screaming to the floor. Shrieking right along, April somehow pushed herself to her hands and knees; but that was all she could manage before the combined effects of nearly a fifth of gin and a broken nose sent her reeling into pitch.

April's eyes opened around four in the morning. She rolled onto her stomach, crawled a few feet, and was violently sick. Except for a narrow wedge of bare perceptibility created by streaming moonlight, the house was inky dark—and that one realization was so powerful it overwhelmed all April's physical ills combined: *the front door was ajar*. Overturned shapes projected dimly in the living room. April, fighting for air, ricocheted off those shapes to the doorway, steadied, thrust out her caked, swollen face.

Will lay spread-eagled on the lawn; face-down and unconscious. His truck's passenger door hung open, its wing window smashed. A number of smallish, dully shining objects were scattered about the lawn, leading in a winding trail from Will's body to the porch. A few of these articles showed far away, as though violently tossed.

April's puffy eyes followed the trail back to the porch. At her feet a wide, flat toolbox lay upturned amidst a number of screwdrivers, spanners, and miscellaneous small parts. Chisels and a hammer lay atop the bashed and battered strongbox—the combination lock had been scored and defaced in a fit of drunken rage. She shook from head to toe. Screwdrivers. Chisels.

April turned back and the room turned right along with her. It kept on turning while she felt her way through the darkness, barking her shins on the jumbled unseen. The black maze

became too much. Still drunk out of her mind, she pitched onto her face, striking her chin hard on the naked wood floor. Inches from her eyes, a number of half-melted ice cubes gleamed whitely. But it seemed odd, even in her muddled state, that the cubes hadn't fully melted. April's eyes burned with the strain. Unwilling to believe her heart over her mind, she picked up a cube and rolled it between her forefinger and thumb. It was cold, certainly, and slippery, but April *knew*, without the benefit of direct light, that she was holding one of Celia's bloody severed toes. In a dream she pushed herself to her feet and fell against her daughter's door, kicked it open, fumbled for the light switch.

Celia was seated on the floor with her back propped against the bed. Between her splayed legs lay several articles from Will's tool box, including a small hatchet, a large awl, and a heavy-duty *exacto knife*. The girl had chopped off her toes and fingertips with the hatchet, torn her limbs and torso to ribbons with the blade, and used the awl to make mushy pools of her eyes. Only her mouth was untouched. The same toothless grin that dominated a hundred wall portraits now smiled up at a failed mother in an alcoholic haze. Completely undone, April fell screaming on the little corpse of her love.

Alphanumerica

Hi, you've reached the website of Ace Hunter, the Man Who Can. There are no pictures or graphics up yet, but I've tons of cool stuff to share with ya—my favorite movies, oldies, and cinema babes—so I hope we can all become great and longstanding friends on this Wonderful, Worldwide, and Way-out Web.

For all the cats out there:

I'm a good old boy who really knows how to party hearty. I totally dig rapping sports. I mean football, boxing, NASCAR. Not that other stuff, like golf and soccer and twirls and mitten-making. I like *sports*. I mean, no offense or anything, but I don't want this site flooded with pictures of men in codpieces, okay? I like *sports*. Guy stuff. Are we cool here? That was "guy," not "gay."

And for all you ladies:

I'm 6'2 with deep blue eyes, a long blond mane, and no tan lines, if you know where I'm coming from (and I think you do). I wouldn't say I'm exactly *ripped*, but that's not really my call

to make. Anyway, I'm working on it. Maybe we can work on it together. My favorite books are the Kama Sutra and Fear Of Flying, but if you've got anything you wanna read to me, I want you to know I'm all ears. And a few other things. I'm not super-particular: blondes, brunets, redheads—I'm easy. And I'm not hung up, either. You can wear whatever you like when we're typing; it'll just be our little secret. Promise. I'm the same as any other guy in that respect: I like to keep my sex life private. Hell, we can even rap in the raw if you want. You don't have to worry about getting up-close and personal; not with Ace Hunter, not with the Man Who Can.

I can see it's going to take a tad to get old Ace up to speed here. I'm not seeing the rush of hits I expected; in fact I haven't picked up a single response. There must be some glitch in the receiver, so I'm gonna have to ask all you guys and gals out there to just be patient. We'll get to the good stuff soon enough. In the meantime, why don't you prepare a list of questions for the Man Who Can. You know; who I'm voting for, my favorite outfielder, what's the raddest Chevy, which starlet has the tightest—you know; don't be afraid to get personal (especially you babes). That's what we're all here for, right? Just let me roust my webmaster, and we'll be right up and running. But only ten questions per contact, please!

That's odd. They can't find anything wrong with my site. So we can all just quit playing hide-and-seek here (LOL). Ya gots me, pals o' mine—I surrender; now let's get down to some heavy conversation. Go ahead, bros and babes; ask the ol' Man Who Can anything. Blaze away.

You guys are just too, too much. So I have to go first; is that it? Real Mature! ☺ Okay, hang on to your bluteeth. I've got the inside scoop on that Ahnold and Bixby rumor: they were doing jerks in that weight room, all right! Humma-humma. And that ain't all. One of me Ears informs me that ol' Camille had the hots for Lady Die! (Sorry if I offended any of you Crowners out there, but here in the States we like to let it all hang out. Oops!

Alphanumerica

Let me stuff it all back in). So there you go! Now it's your turn. Hit me with your best shots, buds.

Hey, if nobody wants to visit my site that's no skin off the Man Who Can. I don't need you. I don't need anybody.

Just kidding. Patience is my long shot. But not with you honeypies! *GrrruffF!* I simply can—not—*wait*. How's about you?

Whatever.

Anybody out there like puppies? I sure do hope so, man. Because I'm not just giving 'em away, *I'm blowing 'em away!* That's right. I've got a cardboard box here with half a dozen of the little snotnoses, peeing up a storm on my best jogging sweats. Some old lady in the building gave them to me. Why? Because she knows I have so many freaking FRIENDS on the Internet I'll be able to parcel-post 'em from here to Timbuktu, no problem. But gee, appears nobody really gives a good holy crap about the Man Who Can. So I guess he's just gonna have to see how these little guys like partying in a sealed plastic bag. And whose conscience is that gonna be on? Not mine. Because I would have been glad to stop, if only someone had been humane enough to give me the word. So how do you want them? All together in the bag or delivered separately in shoeboxes? Here goes Snoopy right now, butt up and let down. Oh, that's right; I don't have an address to mail him to—none of my FRIENDS came through. Well I guess it's down the old bowl for sweet little Snoopster. A shame, really. But you can save him! I *can* be swayed! Just drop a dime. A nickel. A penny. A smiley face? A freaking "Hey, Bozo"?

Okay, enough is enough. I've decided if Ace Hunter isn't good enough to elicit one little response from the world, then the world isn't good enough for Ace Hunter. So this is it, friends and lovers I'll never know. I'm out of here; and I mean that literally. I'm closing all the windows in Hunter's Den. I'm turning on the gas and sticking my fool head in the oven. I'll do

it, too, dig? 'Cause nothing is too drastic for the Man Who Can. So goodbye cruel world, goodbye cruel silence, and most of all, goodbye cruel Internet. This is sayonara, babies. If I don't get a response from one of you jokers within the next five minutes I'm fairy food. I'm going for the gas now. Drop that dime fast; don't stay a stranger. This is Ace Hunter, checking out. Hasta, amigos.

Look, I've got a book on homemade bombs, okay? And I'm in tight with this guy who can get me all the stuff I need to just keep on producing. *OK?* Now, I've been doing a little work in the kitchen, if you get my drift. Anybody paying attention yet? Maybe your eyes will open when I take down City Hall. I can do it, too. Remember? I'm the Man Who Can.

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. I woud lik 2 meat you for good times. I am eighteen years old redhead with long leg and big ta-ta. Blue eye and platinumb blonde hairs. I am 38DDD-22-36 brunet. What are these detail U talk about with the bombing City Hall, Ace Hunter? I woud lik 4 U 2 talk with me about this. I lik metalica, pizza, much beer, and heavywait boxing. They say I look lik 7 of 9 on Star Trik, but she not so hot. For fun I lik to paint myself purpl, gargl cup of KY jelly, and do topless jumping jaks surounded by big and many mirors. R U fun guy, Ace? From who U get bomb material, Ace? I lik 2 meat this man. I bring my many hot girlfrend and we all have fun. But I have problem with man and hope U can help. Problem is called nimfomania but unlik regular girl I can only do with one mania, if I lik him and he cute. R U cute, Ace? Where U keeping bomb Ace Hunter?

Hi, hot69sex4U!!!!

Sorry to keep you waiting, but I got your message at the same time my agent called. We have this gig over at a swingers bar, and I'd sure like you to come along. You sound like a real cute girl and a dynamite babe. What were those measurements again? Please don't tell me you have a sticky D key. Gee, it sounds like we have a lot in common. The same taste in food,

Alphanumerica

music, and sports. What more could a guy want in a woman. That *was* "38" triple D, right? Not 36? It's easy to confuse those number keys. Not that I care so much about women physically. What's important is a woman's mind, and I can tell you're way smarter than most. Have you ever tried a trampoline with those mirrors? A *whole cup* of K-Y? Where do you live, anyway?

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. I have been wondering about this bombs U are making. I woud lik if maybe we coud C it together. I always think bombmaking man is very much sexy. I will bring my videocamra and fishnet bodystocking. I lik to wear it doggy styl and stand on head whil kissing many long objex and howling at moon. On trampoline. But C-ing bomb make me get turned on. No bomb, no ta-ta. Ta-tas, Ace Hunter, ta-tas.

Hey, hey, hot69sex4U!

No sweat. I've got the bomb right here, babe, and she's a real beauty. But, y'know, maybe we should get to know each other a little better first. Like, what's your favorite hobby?

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. My favorite hobby bombs. I lik mak long hot nasty naked sex with man who talk about bombs. I lik masage him with ta-tas all over whil he talk about bombs bombs bombs. Ta-tas. Bombs, Ace Hunter, bombs. What is Ur real name, Ace Hunter?

Well, let's just leave it at Ace Hunter, okay, babe? 'Cause he's the Man Who Can. Besides, you're not using your real name. And don't you think this is kind of cool, like that sexy-incognito song, "Me and Mrs. Jones?" Hey?

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. Yes my real name hot69sex4U. Where Jones keep bombs, Ace Hunter? I woud lik 2 mak nasty with Jones, U watch whil we mak sex with big dick donkey, Ace Hunter, on tabl. With giraf, Ace Hunter, in sink, in toylet. All night long with U and Jones. Bombs, Ace

For Readers Only

Hunter, bombs. But I not Mrs. I am black mongolyan singl girl with long tung fat ass and big ta-tas. I lik swing with Jones and bomb, Ace Hunter. Bombs. I am littl tiny japanes woman with 58DDDDDDDD ta-tas. Geisha.

Well, Gesundheit, hot69sex4U. Shucks, I don't think it's important what race a woman is, just so long as she's nice and honest and stuff. I mean, how do you keep 'em off the keyboard, for Christ's sake? That's just a joke, hot69sex4U. If anybody appreciates a well-endowed woman, it's the Man Who Can. I've been described as being a tad in the oversized department myself, so I know how you feel (that was a pun. How you "feel." Get it?).

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. All my friend well-endow. We lik box naked, make slappy-slap with big ta-ta. BIG ta-ta, Ace Hunter, all girl BIG ta-ta. We lik ride horsey on bomb, Ace Hunter, show us bomb. Bring bomb, bring plan, bring material. We ring around rosey with ta-tas on you and Jones, Ace Hunter, bring Jones. I wet for you, Ace Hunter, I wet all over. Where Jones?

Hey, hot69sex4U.

You sound really kinky. And that's really cool. But, you know, I'm beginning to think I might not be man enough for you.

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. Is OK. We can go 3way, 4way, manyway, anyway. Just mak meat hot69sex4U and Jones. Then I kiss you nasty in many naked place whil we talk 2 Jones about material. I gulp you lik fish on rufie, Ace Hunter. I dance on ta-tas upside down in vat of whip cream, shake booty lik disco girl, snap whip in high heel and panty, spank bad cowboy underpants, U name it. Look, Ace Hunter, no bra, no bra. U tell me where U live, Ace Hunter. I do naked hula hoop, I bongo ta-tas on 4head. Make pig sex in snorkles, dip ta-tas in jello, kiss good spot all night long, Ace Hunter, sex all night long.

Alphanumeric

Wow. That all sounds super cool, hot69sex4U. But this is the Internet. This is the Worldwide, Wonderful, Way-out Web. You could be anywhere. I could be anywhere.

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. Don't worry I very close Ace Hunter. Hot sex much ta-ta, just tell me address. I hurry down street topless on pogo stick. Make stink sex with you and Jones. All night long, Ace Hunter, all night long. Bombs.

Well, gee, hot69sex4U. You don't have to go to all that trouble. I live at 737 Maple, apt. 412A. It's like this big twin-building, with lots of eucalyptus trees out front. Nothing fancy, but you can see those highrises against the downtown skyline from my bedroom win Hang on a second, hot69sex4U. There's a whole bunch of official vehicles in the street. I think there's something going on in this building. Wow. You should hear the commotion out in the hall. We may have to evacuate. Gosh, I think so. They're pounding on my door right now. I've got to run, hot69sex4U. Somebody out there definitely wants to meet the Man Who Can.

Elaine

There were worms in her mug.

Tiny white maggoty swimmers that peeked through the steam before diving back in her brew. Elaine blew them away and sipped without savor, more out of habit than desire. Her morose brown eye, rippling on the coffee's face, stared back, steamed over, dissolved.

A trained observer would note Elaine performed this ritual, as a regular break from her street-watching, approximately once every ninety seconds. To an untrained observer, she would appear intent and impatient, perhaps waiting on a tardy acquaintance.

That untrained observer now looked down at his own eggs and coffee, feeling Elaine lift her eyes.

It was one of those quirky events falling awkwardly into the norm; a square moment in a round day, a sentimental misstep in a routine dance of nods and evasions.

The elderly man looked back up. Their eyes met and held. It wasn't kismet; he found nothing attractive in the frumpish and pasty, rotund little woman with the bland ex-

pression. And Elaine, for her part, was not drawn to the spindly gray gentleman.

They both smiled.

Sun didn't break through clouds, or anything like that. It was a snapshot, dingy with caffeine, phlegm, and emotional disuse.

They looked back down.

Elaine caught herself peeking. The elderly man's eyes worked their way back up.

They smiled again, this time out of good old-fashioned nervousness.

Now it was more than uncomfortable. Though in adjacent booths, the two were only six feet apart, and situated dead-on: Crazy Dinah's All-Day Diner featured notoriously narrow tabletops, forcing facing customers to sit diagonally with their personal plates and silver.

The old man's voice was like cellophane. "Forgive me." His fluttering hands were lame pigeons, desperately side-stepping his mug, silver, and plate. "I didn't mean to make you nervous."

"That's okay," Elaine mumbled.

The gentleman coughed delicately. "Well, I guess I'm what you'd call a people person." His eyes searched the sidewalk. "I couldn't help noticing how you enjoy staring out this big old window." He smiled crookedly. "I guess that makes us both people people."

Elaine studied her coffee mug. "People—" she felt herself blushing, "people are... good."

The man, still smiling awkwardly, stuck his hand across the table. Long as his arms were, it was a gap too deep. He swung around to his table's facing bench, leaned over the back and tried again. "I'm Joe. Or Joseph, actually. Joseph Carten."

Elaine blushed until it burned. "Elaine Bushnelkopf." She shook hands timidly, immediately stuffing the unpracticed paw back in her lap.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Unusual last name, Lainey."

"From...from the Pennsylvania Bushnelkopfs. The family was in fertilizers."

“Can never get enough fertilizer. Umm...the Cartens, far as I know, were never into anything.” He shrugged. “My dad was a serviceman. Air Force. He went down in Iwo.”

“Oh!” Elaine blurted. “I’m just *so* sorry.”

“Don’t be. I never actually met the guy. No bridges built, no bridges burned.”

“Then your mom must have been, well, very strong. Very dedicated.”

He smiled engagingly. “That’s what they say on the boulevard.” That crooked old grin collapsed at her look of confusion. “I’m just kidding, Elaine. Just being, well, you know, sarcastic about the whole family thing.”

“People shouldn’t talk about their parents that way,” Elaine muttered. She looked up quickly. “Not *you*, Joseph. I don’t mean to be critical.”

“Joe,” he said, drumming his palms on the seat’s greasy upholstery. “Look, I’m sorry, Elaine. You must have had super parents. Anyway, you’re probably right. I should know enough to keep my big mouth shut.” His eyes lit fractionally. “I’ve got to run, Lainey. It’s been great jawing with you. Maybe we’ll slam into each other again.”

“I’d...” Elaine managed, “I’d like that.”

“Ciao.” Joe grinned and creaked to his feet. He dropped a five on his tab, smiled back at her, and whistled on out the door.

The worms resurfaced.

“So you scared off another one?”

Elaine didn’t have to look up. Cassie was one of those unfriendly friends, functioning as both conscience and bully at the worst of times. Not that the worst of times were all that much worse than the best of times, and not that knowing someone execrable was a hell of a lot worse than knowing no one at all.

“He was in a hurry,” Elaine breezed. “An important man.”

Cassie laughed as she swept up Joseph’s untouched plates, scraping his five off the table as though daubing a smear. “In a hurry? The only thing that’d make that old guy jump is a defibrillator.” Her eyes gleamed. “But I do believe he got it up

for you, honey.” She ticked a forefinger side to side. “Don’t tell anybody, but I think little Lainey’s got a fella.”

“Stop it.”

“Seriously, sweetheart. While you were staring out the window ol’ Cassie was on the watch, as always. I think Mr. Hurry’s got googly eyes.”

“He was just being nice.”

“Don’t be so full of yourself. A girl has to take what she can in this world. And I like ‘nice’.” Facing Elaine, Cassie leaned halfway across the table, using her upper arms to meaningfully squeeze forth her very ample breasts. “If you think you can do better than these, sugar, then you just don’t know men.”

Elaine’s eyes burned into her brew. The worms circled concentrically in response, making for the rim. Elaine blew so hard her coffee sprayed the tabletop. “Joseph’s not like that. He’s a gentleman.”

Cassie cupped Elaine’s free hand in hers. “Give me a break, Lainey. All men, God bless ’em, are ‘like that’.”

“No,” Elaine whispered into her cup. “Not Joseph. Not Joe.”

Elaine brooded all the way home. How could she have been so stupid. Joseph was the first man she’d spoken to, on anything remotely resembling an intimate level in...in...how *could* she have offended him like that. “Googly eyes.” Absurd or not, the idea grew on her as she waddled across the courtyard to her tiny apartment. Like most of the building’s disability recipients, Elaine’s inability to pursue meaningful employment came from hormonally-triggered chronic despondency. But, unlike the rest of the girls, she was unable to find comfort in medication or company. Elaine was a drifting, stale dreamer, unwilling to focus on anything real.

She prepared her usual bath; lukewarm and not too full, tepid like everything else in her life. But for once she was prey to a forgotten impulse: Elaine exhumed her makeup kit and got liberal with the lipstick and liner. She added a capful of rose to the bath.

The water took her as always, yet with an extra caress. Elaine soaped herself slowly with her left hand while her right slid over a breast and down her tummy. Two fingers made way for the third. But it wasn't wrong this time; it couldn't have been more right—that was Joseph down there, that was Joe. And Elaine's depression was lifting like fog.

That was Joey.

She wasn't exactly waiting for him, not in the literal sense. He'd never show, not after she'd embarrassed them both. But Elaine was on her fourth cup, and the sidewalk had lost all its appeal. She'd dolled herself up considerably. An ex-beautician neighbor took care of the hair and manicure, another loaned her a somewhat flattering dress. Elaine's mood shift was all over the building; in a heartbeat the secret was out, and her gentleman admirer the subject of endless gossip and guesswork. Elaine stank of Tabu from five feet away. In her purse was a neatly folded love poem, sealed with a kiss; part heartfelt rain and daybreak, part saccharine Hallmark cliché. Never had she been so nervous; it took the whole building to talk her into this. Elaine wanted to die. Or to live. It didn't matter. If he laughed, if he turned away, if he gave her one funny look—it didn't matter; she'd die. This was it, and she knew it. Her one and only chance for a man. For happiness, for comfort, for company. For all those things life had denied her, and granted everybody else in spades.

She carefully wiped the lipstick off her mug's porcelain rim. And again. Elaine sobbed and caught herself. She must look a mess. She'd gnawed away half her nail polish, the dress was bunching in all the wrong places, and tears and mascara don't mix. She couldn't breathe. And now she was hyperventilating. Hard to swallow. She took a sip and sobbed again.

The door chimes rang cheerfully, followed by Cassie's girlish squeal. Elaine couldn't believe her ears.

"Joey!"

At the same moment a dark brown step van pulled to the curb. The van's deep color provided a temporary backing for the window's pane, so that Elaine was able to monitor the

goings-on behind her by their reflection. The floral delivery van's huge heart-shaped logo formed a frame for the action at the register. Around this logo was set the legend: *Life Is For Lovers*.

Cassie was all over Joseph; kissing and petting and stroking and groping. In his gangly fingers dangled a large box of chocolates with a big pink bow.

Elaine turned, against her will. Cassie had Joseph's face in her chest now, but she swiveled long enough to squeeze her breasts with her arms while giving Elaine a triumphant wink and smile.

Elaine stumbled all the way home. Pedestrians stared curiously as she staggered off curbs, neighbors blanched and retreated into the shadows of their knowing lives.

She carefully plucked the flat packets off her medicine cabinet's bottom shelf, neatly laid out her makeup items round the tub's rim while the basin slowly filled.

Her hands trembled upon submerging. Elaine whimpered against the pain to come.

"*Shhh*," the razors whispered, "*shhh...shhh*."

It didn't hurt the way she expected. The bath quickly went pink, only gradually turning red. Elaine raised her streaming arms, folded her fouled wrists across her chest. And Joseph appeared as a brooding transparency, waxing almost-real in perfect sync with the room's slow fade. She could see his mouth struggling to reach hers, could read his slow-motion lips, contorted by guilt and shame:

"I'm...Just...So...So...*Sorry*..."

"I," Elaine heard her voice reply, "forgive." But the sound was hollow, and leaning whence it came. And the air congealed, and the room dimmed, and Elaine's lips were utterly without sensation as Joey bent at the waist, passed out of passion's way, and kissed her once goodnight.

Justman

“Hermie, me hearty, by the time I get a few rufies in that little bimbo she’s gonna know the Ol’ Shaman is pure Prescription X.”

The table was bumped—*precisely* as a pair of samples were being physically juxtaposed in an A/B comparison. The specimens, thus roughly mixed on the handler’s palms, produced a stinging sensation and an unfamiliar, nauseating odor.

When Richard Dukhedd smelled that odor he looked up from his table with a most uncharacteristic snarl. His nostrils flared repeatedly, his eyes burned in haunted caves. A string of saliva rolled off his lip.

The expression was so savage both lab assistants stopped dead in their tracks. After a minute the bigmouth wondered, “Hey, Dickhead! What’s with you? You look like you just wolfed down a Mama Cass.” To his accomplice he said, in a jocular aside, “That’s our catering truck’s ham and chile releno with heavy tabasco.”

Dukhedd pulled himself together, surprised by the recent feeling’s intensity, and ventured meekly, “Er, it’s *Dukhedd*.” He

remembered he had to remind this particular lab boy every single blessed working day of his life. For some reason that stuck in his craw. Strange. He'd never realized he had a craw.

"Okay, *Dickhead*." The assistant nudged the other boy, a new face at Chemright. "Herman Wilson, this is good old Ducky Dickhead. Here he sits, slaving away every day without complaining. That nameplate there is actually his headstone. See? 'Ducky Dickhead. Born God knows when. Lived God knows why. Died facedown in a puddle of cheap perfume for some woman who wouldn't give him the time of day.' Is that what you're working on today, Dickhead? Another of those groovy little scents the boss's squeeze is so crazy about? When are you gonna hit him up for a raise, man? Tell his wife about the squeeze. Or, better yet, just walk right in and tell him you know all about it. Then watch the red carpet treatment!"

"Why, yes," Dukhedd said absently. "I was just cross-analyzing pheromone samples of a motorcycle outlaw and a ground ape. Unfortunately they seem to have become intermingled here. But not to worry. Doctor Weissman has plenty of simian semen in storage, and I can always go back to that tavern restroom for more outlaw specimens." The thought revolted him. It had been terribly difficult getting through that crowd last night, and several of the brutes had accosted him when they caught him scraping the stall walls for samples. Dukhedd rubbed the lump on the back of his head and remembered the gauntlet of pool cues and hairy bellies. Every window on his dusty orange Pacer had been smashed, and the stench of rolling troglodytes had clung to him all the way home. The dry cleaners had refused to accept his clothes.

"Well, good for you, yo-yo. You just keep mixing away there, Dickhead, and maybe someday they'll name something particularly smelly after you. Come on, Hermie, old boy, let me introduce you to the Broom Closet. It's where you go to sneak a smoke or smoke a secretary."

The two laughed and kicked their way through the swinging doors leading to Warehouse. Dukhedd watched them go with narrowed eyes. His palms burned and itched, his shoulders kept fighting to remake his posture into a headlong crouch. He rose slowly, crept to the settling double doors, and peered

through the right-hand pane. The lab boys were halfway across Warehouse, heading for a little door Dukhedd knew led to a sleepy room stocked with miscellaneous supplies and equipment. Barely aware of his actions, he slipped inside and stepped up to an in-building intercom, flicked a switch and said, "*Herman Wilson to Inventory, please. Herman Wilson to Inventory.*" Dukhedd watched as the Wilson boy looked around fearfully. He saw the bigmouth josh him confidently, and then Wilson was hurrying for the doors at West End. The bigmouth, Dukhedd suddenly remembered, was named Perigas. Evan Perigas. He stared angrily as Perigas pulled out a pack of smokes and made his way to the Broom Closet. Now Dukhedd, almost as a conditioned response, slipped between the tall racks and began following him one row at a time.

Warehouse was deserted. Once Perigas had snuck into the room and closed the door, Dukhedd was able to boldly step forward. Right then, Chemright's least appreciated wunderkind couldn't have explained himself if you put a gun to his head. He only knew his destiny waited in that room, just behind that little wood door he was fast approaching with his body in a crouch and his palms itching like crazy.

At the last moment Dukhedd stopped on a dime, turned the knob quietly, and eased open the door. As Warehouse light fell on him, Perigas immediately dropped his lit cigarette and covered it with a shoe. When he realized it was only Dukhedd his startled expression became one of contempt and resentment.

"Dickhead! You damned meddler! What are you doing snooping around here, anyway?"

"You," Dukhedd responded, his voice growing in intensity with every syllable, "are a very bad man, and unfit to be a member of the gene pool." This little utterance amazed him. He'd never spoken a harsh word in his life. A shudder ran up and down his body. The Broom Closet filled with a muskiness somehow both infuriating and intoxicating.

"And *you*," Perigas scowled, "are unfit to lick my boots. So checkmate." He lit a fresh cigarette, but in the glare of the match saw something in Dukhedd's face that made him step back. Dukhedd's expression seemed to be trying to find its place, scrunching and writhing all about before finally settling

into one of rabid psychosis. “Now hold on there, Dukhedd,” Perigas mumbled. “Richard.”

“Unfit,” Dukhedd slobbered. “Gene pool.”

“Hold it!” Perigas shot, and grabbed a heavy-duty box cutter from a table. He thumbed open the blade. Before he knew it, Dukhedd had swiped it from his hand and was advancing menacingly.

“Un...*fit!*” Dukhedd snarled, clamping a wildly itching palm over Perigas’s mouth. He slammed the assistant’s head on the floor and held it while cutting open the boy’s trousers. A brief flurry of denim and blood splattered the Broom Closet’s near wall. “Unfit,” Dukhedd swore, unaware of the shrieking gusts bursting from Perigas’s nostrils, “unfit...*gene pool!*”

The castration was very swift, very unscientific, and very messy. Perigas passed out screaming, leaving Dukhedd slumped with the blade in one hand and the lab assistant’s manhood in the other. There was blood everywhere. As rational thought returned, Dukhedd gradually became aware of his plight. He was also aware he’d taken the first step on a momentous journey. There was important work to be done—under no circumstances must Perigas be allowed to blow his cover. Grabbing the unconscious assistant by the hair, Dukhedd coldly snapped back his head, located the jugular, and brought the blade down.

“Hold it right there,” said the burly man at the door. “Don’t I know you? I think I know you.” He held a gnarly hand in front of Dukhedd’s face. Tattooed across the back of the hand was the legend, ME ASHOL. Dukhedd’s eyes followed a series of tattooed arrows leading up a fat hairy arm, across a fat hairy shoulder, and so on up to a fat hairy forehead bearing the second half of the message: YOO DED! Ordinarily the nauseating odor produced by this massive individual would have made Dukhedd dizzy and weak, but now it only engendered a snarl and tensing of the shoulders. His palms began to itch. His fingers clenched.

The brute’s head cocked backward at that snarl, and his hand shot up to study the back of Dukhedd’s skull. “Why, it’s

you, all right. I remember you from last night. You're the funny little fellow we played foosball with, all the way out into the parking lot."

"Dukhedd," the funny little fellow said out of habit. "Richard Percival Dukhedd. I'll, er, be getting out of your way now." Something abruptly straightened his back, and his voice, in that quirkily masculine tone he'd fallen into of late, said, "But not this time, I won't." Before Dukhedd could make a move, he was compelled to explain himself (after that nasty little incident with Perigas he'd come to his senses quickly, his self-preservation instinct burning red-hot. He'd cleaned himself up very carefully in the employee's lounge lavatory before returning to his desk, pontificating under his breath all the way. No one suspected gentle Dukhedd of course; he hadn't even been detained for questioning. Herman Wilson, the last person seen with a living Perigas, was presently under house arrest and close observation. Chemright had been shut down for the investigation into the lab boy's brutal murder, and everybody sent home). Without having to collect his thoughts, Dukhedd now said, "Mister Biker, because you are a deliberate insult to every standard of decency devised by intelligent men, you are about to experience the exquisite horror of waking in the emergency room. So please pay attention:

"Sin number one: you believe obnoxiousness is cool. For this snub at five thousand years of the civilizing process you will spend the rest of your life attached to a colostomy bag.

"Sin number two: you think masculinity is a quality best defined by foul and offensive behavior, and that grease, din, and deviancy are elements to admire.

"Sin number three: you feel that intimidating those less massive makes you a superior specimen. And for this little travesty you will learn to operate a wheelchair from the ground up, so to speak. So say '*Vroom vroom*,' Mister 'Big Bad Biker,' and get ready to meet your new set of wheels."

The hairy man's jaw dropped, his beady eyes narrowed. But before he could signal his lurking horde, Dukhedd had spun him around, ripped down his pants, and yanked out a good eighteen inches of descending colon. He stepped over the writhing ashol and elbowed his way inside the bar.

Dozens of similar hulking creeps were gathered in drunken packs; Dukhedd recognized many of them from last night. When the meanest loped up with pool cue in hand, Dukhedd calmly ripped off his face and threw the oozing flesh mask like a Frisbee into the crowd. He kicked the screaming man in the scrotum twice for every scream until the racket ceased.

“Now,” Dukhedd said, pulling a pair of ice tongs from under his lab coat, “one of you lucky ashols is just about to graciously volunteer a semen sample. I’ll make the collection process short and sweet. Then I’ll be getting out of your way.”

The Ford Ranger came up on his bumper again, so close the ashol’s face was right in Dukhedd’s rear-view mirror. Dukhedd grimaced as the night’s hard-won sample rolled precariously on the dash. The Ranger tried to pass at a bottleneck, almost taking out the Pacer’s right-rear panel. Dukhedd sped up and veered to the right, forcing the ashol to back off. He couldn’t help it; his rage at this dangerous display of selfishness in a social situation, at night with no law enforcement around, grew with each yank of the wheel. The Ranger began honking insistently—how dare a little orange Pacer with no glass be in the superior ashol’s way.

Dukhedd’s shoulders were hunched, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. As the Ranger pulled right up on the Pacer’s rear bumper, Dukhedd gradually slowed.

The ashol was barely able to avoid an unflattering ding on his own, finer bumper. He held his palm down on the horn, but Dukhedd only slowed further, until the inferior little Pacer was controlling the pace of the two vehicles at around fifteen miles per hour.

That continuous blare of horn was drilling through Dukhedd’s skull, but his focus did not falter. His eyes shot left and right. There were no cars around; only the few red jewels of taillights a quarter mile ahead, petering quickly as the Pacer and Ranger slowed.

Dukhedd forced a complete stop. Each adamant blast of the Ranger’s horn caused his neck to sink an inch deeper between his bunching shoulders. When he heard the Ranger’s

door slam his palms were itching so badly the Pacer's steering wheel was like ground glass. Every approaching footstep was another twist of the gonads, each challenging expletive sweet music to the ear. When the ashol reached the Pacer's door, Dukhedd came out of the driver's window like toothpaste out of a tube. He put one fist straight into the ashol's Adam's apple, felt the jelly knob sunder into mush. "For brashness are you silenced," he hissed. He crushed the ashol's spine like a beer can. "For arrogance are you diminished." He kicked and kicked and kicked the ashol's cadaver until it was impressed into the Ranger's grille. "Solely for display purposes are you here."

Dukhedd blanched at the news. He was all over AM radio, his name mispronounced and his character misrepresented. Another anchor reported that a Richard Percival Dickhead was wanted for questioning in the Chemright incident—and that one Herman Wilson, recently released from custody, had informed detectives of Dickhead's confessed strategy just minutes before the assault in question. Dukhedd pounded his fist on the Pacer's peeling plastic steering wheel cover, visualizing he and Wilson in all manner of bloody scenarios.

A ruckus to his right snapped him out of it. In Cartwheel's new Cellular Mall, dozens of loping gangbangers were chasing down a little man in a bright orange costume. Dukhedd hit the brakes even as another group cut the man off. The whole mess swarmed him; fists, feet, furheads—everywhere! Never in his life had Dukhedd deliberately enjoined an altercation, but the sight of this helpless fleeing victim, in the very process of being mauled by a fresh leash of ashols, threw his blood pressure into orbit. He was hyperventilating; tiny feral gasps whistled out his nostrils. The seatbelt refused to comply; Dukhedd ripped it from its moorings. The driver's door was jammed (one biker had head-butted the Pacer); Dukhedd kicked it free. He grabbed the keys, arranged them to protrude separately between the fingers of his closed fist, and sprinted into the mob, jabbing eyes into jelly, shredding and grating lips, making bloomin' onions of noses. A number of dullards made to retaliate and—Dukhedd lost it completely. By the time he reached the supine

little man it was a gangbanger's graveyard, and sirens were carving holes in the distance.

Dukhedd rolled him onto his back. He was a dweeby stiff, not unlike his rescuer. Dukhedd scooped him up and raced to the Pacer before the cops could make a mess out of a miracle. He laid him on the front seat, fanned the face and rubbed the limbs. In a minute the eyelids fluttered. A scrawny hand shot upward, grabbed Dukhedd by the lapel. "Gene pool," the dweeb mumbled. Dukhedd nodded passionately. The hand dropped. "I," the little man managed, "have eradicated my share of stoopuds."

Dukhedd nodded harder. "Ashols," he translated.

"It is time to pass the torch." The man's voice was wind through leaves. Again with the hand to the lapel, again with the trailing mantra. "I sought a successor; instead has he succumbed to me." Dukhedd had to move his ear right down to the man's pale rolling lips. "Long have I labored," the dweeb went on, "seeking a cure for the source of moral retardation that has plagued our race since its inception. I was this close." He held up a shakily parted forefinger and thumb. His head rolled to the side. He looked dead. "Magnets!" he spewed, and gripped Dukhedd's wrist with passion. "Oh, for the love of God—the derelects, the gayboys, the harlots, the televangelists..." He was clearly delirious.

"Gene pool!" Dukhedd sobbed, his head rolling miserably. "Yes. Yes."

"I was shittin'," the little man gasped. He shook his head in frustration. "Smitten, kitten, mitten—I was bitten, bitten by a honey badger that had previously stepped in a certain muscle-headed governor's urine. Oh, the humanity...it is pheromones! Pheromones control our every slip and brute desire. Well, perhaps not you and I, but all these barbaric marauders, all the venal charlatans who dictate our lives, all the wezls and horz yanking and cranking and shanking and watching our every weakness. Oh, the magnets!"

Dukhedd wept as he nodded. "Gene pool."

"You must take this uniform. You must wear it with pride as you combat the wezls and horz, the doprz and loitrz; the stoopuds in general."

“Ashols,” Dukhedd said. He peered at the man’s costume doubtfully, less than enthused by the prospect of battling evil while looking like a Dreamsicle.

“This is to be your guide.” The dweeb pulled a battered thesaurus from a marsupial breast pocket, handed it to Dukhedd. “I,” he gurgled, “am Justman!” A shudder ran up and down his frame. “*You...are Justman!*”

Dukhedd buried him that night, on a knoll beneath the mall’s giant phone logo. He tried the costume on and found it five sizes too small, itchy in the crotch and pits, and prone to clinging in the least appropriate places. But it was an outstanding color match for the Pacer, and this coincidence alone made him ponder the serpentine role of Destiny. The dweeb’s words glowed on his mind’s back burner: “*Instead has he succumbed to me.*” Dukhedd navigated the mean streets of Cartwheel with a whole new attitude.

That night Dukhedd hunched in a 7-11 parking lot, poring over the thesaurus under a dome light’s dimming sallow haze. The Pacer was out of gas, Dukhedd out of cash, and it really didn’t matter—he was thunderstruck; not only by the extensive marginalia, but by the book itself.

Roget did something stunningly straightforward way back in 1852; he categorized nouns in direct relation to their antonyms. Dukhedd’s ex-bookshelf consisted mainly of chemistry tomes and spiral-bound olfactory charts, and the only thesaurus he’d thumbed was one of the popular editions featuring the “arranged just like a dictionary!” bullshit. Roget’s original wasn’t concerned with the a-b-c cretins; it was designed to elucidate.

Good man, Dukhedd read, and rolled his eyes to the opposing column. *Bad man*. Dukhedd blinked. Absolutely sound. *Virtue*. And its antonym, *Vice*. *Kindness*. *Cruelty*. *Honor*, *Dis-honor*. *Loyalty*, *Treachery*. *Justice*—and here Dukhedd had to stop, squinting in the sudden seizure of overlapping addenda. Scrawled in black ink were the words: ~~Rightman~~, ~~Goodman~~, ~~Virtueman~~, and the bold and italicized, ***Justman!*** Dukhedd now noticed circled words, and a faint and wobbly, imposed skeletal

sub-frame. Beneath *Bad Man* was the scribble WEZL, beneath *Bad Woman* the legend HOR. Dukhedd nodded. The banner for the sub-frame was the coined STOOPUD. He understood. Dukhedd fingered the orange costume with a new respect.

“Yo yo yo, homey. Yo be up wit some change in da hood?”

The voice in his ear was like sandpaper. Dukhedd had to rub his palms hard on the Pacer’s abraded seat cover. His head ratcheted to the left.

“What it be cracka? Yo be in da flicky wit da bling bling?”

“Wezl,” Dukhedd breathed.

“*What?* See-it! I jus be jammin in da foo schoo, yo digs? Jus a dollah, dog.” A squeegee clattered around the Pacer’s windowless frame.

That was enough. Dukhedd’s left arm shot out and brought back a handful of Bad Man. He stuffed the screaming wezl in the glovebox, appendage by appendage, until there was only the squashed remains of its trousers in his hand. Odd: He palpated a hefty lump in a space that should have contained only air. Dukhedd peeled back the fabric to reveal a wad of bills crammed in a leather tobacco pouch. Gas money, food money, and more. Enough to launch the new Justman. Dukhedd rolled the Pacer out the drive and into the street. There was an all-night gas station only two miles up the Grapevine. He took the steering wheel in one hand, the crushed door in the other, and began to shove.

Everybody now knows the final leg of the Justman saga. Friends still argue the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, the dos and the don’ts. Bullies are prone to think twice before picking on geeks, perverts tend to keep it all indoors. The gleeful bludgeoning of religious hypocrites, we all agree, must cease at once.

Yet there are times when we can’t help but fondly recall the mechanics forced to perform surgeries on doctors, the lawyers forced to dismantle and rebuild the vehicles of mechanics, the systematic and long overdue barbecuing of Death Row in-

mates. Who can forget the thousands of shamelessly dressed horz, hung naked from street lamps over Dobermans in heat, or the endless packs of street wezls, violently indoctrinated into a lifetime of community service? The politicians dressed in leotards and rainbow wigs, the horrified low riders, strapped in bumper cars set to prestissimo...the bitch-slapped gang-bangers...all the rude cell phone yammerers with their tongues expunged...the professional athletes in silk underwear, rolling beach balls with their noses on a spectator-packed, glass-enclosed, and fittingly shallow field of dreams.

Was Justman a villain, as the hookers, realtors, and telemarketers like to proclaim? Or was he really a hero, doing what we sorry-don't-want-to-get-involved rubbernecks only wish we had the gonads to enjoin?

From that first mass return-punting of border jumpers to his final group-batoning by itchy Police Cadets, the story shall remain a mystery, for Justman himself granted no interviews, and was tightlipped about the whole phenomenon, other than the trademark pithy explanations preceding each protracted measure of Justice. He is known to have produced a single in-depth explanation on the ultimate consequence of Evil, and for this mighty exposition we have one Herman Wilson, still in shock from the sulfuric acid, the cattle prods, and that televised and oft-parodied naked citywide meat hook ride.

But Hermie ain't talking.

Home Planet

If you're reading this I have to assume you are of an enquiring disposition, can access basic computing equipment, and are able to open, close, and copy documents.

PLEASE SAVE THIS DISK!

Or make copies, if you can, and send them to any known survivors, and to any agencies—especially those expressly formed to deal with this horror. If you have a printer, print this out and distribute copies to any parties capable of plumbing it for clues. I can't print off this thing, even if I could find an AC source.

I'm not a scientist, I'm not a journalist, I'm not some hot-shot professor able to pull strings and make noise. I'm just a guy with a little solar-powered word processor. I've been retired for some time now, so I've had plenty of opportunity to take notes. Due to my analytical bent, a penchant for hoarding provisions, and a lack of family and social responsibilities, I've been able to ford the tragedies, the death and the madness, and

still remain reasonably sane and emotionally cool. Though I'm slipping, goddamn it. I'm slipping.

This entire journal shows exactly as processed, from the first keystroke to the last. What you are now reading is an addendum, cut and pasted to the page's top. If the following seems stupid, it's the stupidity of honesty. If much of it comes off as trite and ignorant, well, I guess that's the real-time scratch-and-stumble of innocence. I could proof and edit, provide a neat and cogent trail—I've learned enough from just banging away to produce a strong file. But I'm not going to polish this, for one simple reason: I could be unintentionally deleting clues—no matter how homely, clumsy, or seemingly inconsequential; clues that might be needed by some surviving researcher. Also, as I'm not a diarist, I did not include dates. For this I apologize—but who could have predicted, from those first dire whispers, the horrific reduction, the brutal extermination—this impossibly repulsive obliteration of man.

Here is my journal; unadulterated, naked, done with. It's over, you fuckers. I quit.

We pass.

I can't believe it. My first word processorrrr@ Ill get the hang of this thing soon enough. It's just like a typewriter. but it saves onto a disk, Very cool. It's solar powered so I don't need to charge it. Collapsible key Board. Stores in a fanny pack.

I bought it to record my observations on the ozone layer issue. Everybody and their mother's running around like chickens. but I don't see anybody else taking notes

Okay. I'm going to hunt-and-peck until I get good. Here's what's happening:

The ozone layer is breaking up into what scientists term Z Pockets. There's that famous one over the Antarctic. But now there's one over New Zealand, a couple over Europe, six more around Africa, and that really big one over the Pacific. The layer is undergoing an effect meteorologists label "tattering." You can see it. Kind of. Here and there the sky shows streaks,

or “rifts,” as they call them; sort of a burnt umber look, approaching maroon. But they seem to vanish as you stare, though every once in a while something resembling a crack will appear for a bit. I’m talking over great expanses of sky here. Yet from a ground vantage you do get this tectonic effect. We’re told the atmosphere is stabilizing, that’s all. I sure do hope so.

I’m getting so good with this thing I can make formatting changes on the fly. *Italics*, **bold**, or underlined. Jump to the front or back of a word, line, or paragraph: no big deal. Justification and smart-hyphenation. I did a whole bunch of practicing in non-saved documents, but it was worth it. Watch dese fingers fly, boys. I gots da mojo. “Quotes”, \$y^^b()!\$, numerals; a *snap!* Ellipses...and—*em*—dashes: (colon) each just a key/stroke away. *superguy*.

Storms are all the news. I guess that’s what we’d have to expect, what with the atmosphere breaking up the way it is. Hurricanes are common; typhoons out of season. Yesterday there was that tsunami in the Philippines; thousands dead and nobody even blinks. And we keep getting this “Earth will heal” stuff. Maybe. But it’s pretty obvious the scientific approach is a dead end.

Well, we did it, people: you and I. With our cars, with our factories, with our lousy aerosol. Just had to deodorize that room, didn’t you, homo sapiens? Just had to gun that engine. Go on, sport, have a nice day. Hey, I know! Let’s all take the tires off our cars, put ’em in a gigantic pile in the rain forest, cover the whole mess with gas and let it burn. Maybe sprinkle on some discarded plastic and used batteries for good measure. Then we can all join hands and sing We Are The World. That’s right; just you and I. The Evolved Ones. And afterwards we can all;;////

Whoops. Sorry about that. Spilled my artificially flavored instant coffee with saccharine and MSG and had to stomp the damned Styrofoam cup into the dirt. But that’s okay—I dug it down *deep*, and covered it up *good*. That’s because I *care*.

There's these weird sunsets I catch from the jetty. I'm sure a million shutter bugs are right on it, but I wish I possessed the vocabulary to do them justice. Purplish, instead of fiery...how strange is that? The spectral band is shifting, yet in ways I'd have never predicted. It's like looking through a kaleidoscope on an overcast day, but with breaks in the barrel, and with morbid dayglo stains in the glass. So odd. How can I put it...it's beautiful, because it's nature, but it's ugly because it's...wrong. I'm depressed as hell. I want my world back. And when twilight hits, you get these funny spots in the sky—I know I'm not imagining them, because I'm not alone. Even though scientists attribute the phenomenon to residual glow, we lay folk seem to know better. Ghost-specks...like miniscule eyes...millions of them...watching you, wanting you...and gone with the night.

I don't like the looks of the ocean. They say the tidal drag is waning. She broods, rather than breathes. Spume left on the sand stands for hours before dissolving—creepy. It has traces of purple, like everything else. I've begun to despise that color.

The sun, with this continuous cloud cover, is perpetually obscured; there's only a bright spot in the brown and violet quilt, moving in a heavy arc every twelve hours. Despite this cover, the world does not grow cool; the air has a sticky tropical *feel*—scientists ascribe this to a kind of greenhouse effect. I heard on the radio that crop plants aren't failing, as one would expect with the dearth of sunshine, but appear to be altering their chemical structure somehow. This is apparently through profound and complex changes in soil minerals, those weird wind currents, and air quality in general; all due to atmospheric “stepping.” We are witnessing our world falling apart: seven billion greedy, shortsighted, extravagant fools in a Petri dish. And now, all over the globe, those crops are being declared inedible: bitter, lacking texture, covered with purple blotches—as ugly, noxious, and undesirable as we've almost casually made our once-beloved planet.

Ah, this lightning—these tremendous discharges on every horizon—how does this fit in with stratospheric changes? Is the whole phenomenon “stepping” *down*? It’s the most awesome spectacle...mushrooming bursts of light, as though whole cities were exploding, pyrotechnic pockets that blossom and sag, the sky humming like high-tension wires in fog. At night the erratic displays have this iridescent beauty, with their buggywhip streamers crackling overhead...they leave a burnt odor, but odd. I can’t put my finger on it. And clouds—how strange to see these familiar puffy lands grow striated and bulbous. They remind me of jigsaw pieces, only expanding, like taffy, gradually closing gaps in the superlayer of fried amber sky. They have a new kind of transparency, an unearthly sub-opacity that both diffuses and mirrors the ghastly purple atmosphere below. It goes to show how indifferent are we vain little bipeds to that high plan of nature. Our sky, our lives’ breath, is now a polluted and failing lung. This glorious structure of earth—we tore off its skin, man. We made a wondrous hothouse an outhouse; with our fossil fuels, with our mercury and acids, with our vile refineries. We don’t deserve this place, maybe we don’t even deserve this existence. Ah but, God in Heaven, it breaks my heart to watch our poor world die.

I’ve been examining some of these plants. Creepers and other supple varieties in particular show extensive change. But they seem healthy enough—though diseased. Does that make any sense? The coloration invariably leans to mauve and purple; greens and yellows are nearly nonexistent. The smooth-cell feature common to supples is strangely spiny—not woody: scaly. Larger plants droop, giving all the visual impression of dying flora. But why don’t they die? I tried bending a stalk, intending to break it for internal study, but it snapped back, as though infused with a vital tension. It scared me in some way. I’m beginning to feel out of place.

The air’s very dense, the sun’s spectrum’s shifting. I don’t know if the shift will adversely affect this little word processor’s solar charger, but I’m going to hang with the document as long as I can.

I *hate* this air. Everybody does. It makes you angry, embittered somehow; makes you despise your neighbors, makes you want to use foul language—and I'm a pretty genial guy. Biochemists say it's to be expected: the atmosphere's oppressiveness is producing unbecoming, albeit perfectly understandable, mood changes. Don't fight it, they tell us. That only increases the body's tension-factor. Okay. Whatever you assholes say.

I'm getting skin sores. Just like everyone. Boils, rashes, fungal patches. Fingernails are turning black and green. It doesn't hurt. Maybe it'll pass. Sun screen is said to help.

Another change has come to the air.

Tiny particles—those ghost-specks, distended, now not unlike grains of salt in appearance—are just standing about in suspension. Millions of them, glinting high in this heaving damson sky. I'm reminded of those glass snow bubbles we had as kids. Turn them upside down and white flakes would drift throughout the encased water; these particles behave similarly. They disintegrate upon touch, so scientists are only able to investigate at the molecular level. Silicone is the base, and there are traces of barium and beryllium, apparently released by the soil as a consequence of organic breakdown.

Other folks—theorists mainly, and they're coming right out of the woodwork—argue that these specks are the result of unusual oceanic evaporation; one physicist states that atmospheric dissolution has created an arena wherein consequences bizarre to our way of thinking will become the norm. Well, give the fucker a cigar. Has he been living underground all this time? There's a thought. A spokesman at Cal Tech goes so far as to suggest we're witnessing what conditions might be like on another planet. These are typical of the fools and frauds who've always capitalized on catastrophe: anything for your fifteen minutes—even if it's the last fifteen you'll ever see. There are creeps running "safe suit" swindles, hookers making purple-spotted love with sticky old men, parvenu prick preachers with their quickie flocks and stale promises. Where are the poets?

Where are the thinkers and visionaries? Same place they've always been: ground under the hooves of the shameless crowd. People will believe anything, so long as it appeals to the viscera. Now there's this video hoax with the granules. Some guy fast-motions a sunup-to-sundown skyframe. Somewhere over Baton Rouge. Yeah, we all fucking see it: granules arcing and combining with a serpentine motion, moving independently and in groups—what the media has the balls-out audacity to call “schools,” as if people aren't freaked out enough. Even though a university electronic arts class immediately shows how this video is easily effected using the crudest home equipment, it's too late. People are running around with their heads up their asses. It just makes me sick.

This is a text specimen from *Science And Sentience's* interview with that ubiquitous theorist Dr. Brigham Railer on the Granular-Cluster Theory. I'm omitting a number of technical sidebars, as well as a few snippets that, due to core impertinence on the part of the questioner, were frankly digressive.

S&S—Do you feel the Granular-Cluster Theory adequately explains this peculiar tendency of apparently random colonies to spontaneously diverge? *Is it spontaneous?*

Railer—Well, as many theorists agree, this effect—wherein granules aggregate independently, even as their radial cousins tend to gravitate—is strikingly similar to the Globular Theory, where cells colonized in the primal sea.

S&S—But, Doctor, these are not cells, the atmosphere is not a sea, except in perhaps a metaphorical sense, and you haven't addressed the issue of random divergence. Gravitation, at any level, affects all matter concordantly. What would cause these incongruous splinter clusters? Why wouldn't all granules, since they've been determined virtually identical in mass, behave identically?

Railer—Who knows? There are currents in the air as well as the sea. Radiant energy could be a factor. We need to wait for the data to accumulate (laughs). And no pun intended.

God, the air stinks. It has a putrid smell. I feel I'll swoon.

A totally bizarre thing.

That guy with the video wasn't running a hoax after all. Now that the granules are clumped to the size of golf balls, you can see how they do sort of proceed hurky jerky—what newscasters are calling “attitude.” The biggest reason for this visual factor, though—and I can see it quite clearly from the jetty—is that the process is speeding up as the clusters' mass appreciates. Clumps appear to oscillate for a second before swerving in to impact clusters—“hosts,” they're called. I swear I can see them growing before my eyes. It's awesome.

This is getting beyond ridiculous. Some stupid bitch in South Dakota claims a low level clump attacked her dog, for Christ's sake. It's these lunatics who are driving away what little sanity's left, and it's the fucking media who are supplying the leverage! Everybody knows that dogs, and especially those breeds trained as guards, have been leaping and snapping at these ground clumps all along. It's inevitable the twain should meet, and obvious reports will become more numerous as the phenomenon accelerates.

Oh, so *now* petroleum giants are being forced to curtail the distillation and sales of fossil fuels. So *now* your fucking NATO, SEATO, and goddamned PUTO are clamoring for an international “hiatus” on commercial manufacturing. So *now* microwaves are being taken seriously. GOOD! Put us back in the stone age, when men ate unadulterated food and our children weren't poisoned from birth. Keep your stupid nuclear bombs. The only weapon I'll need is a good solid chunk of basalt. Just make sure I get a scientist or two to try it out on.

This is just godawful sickening; no lesson in biochemistry could be more depressing. It shows how the senses are hard-wired to focus on the *beauty* of nature, instead of that gruesome underbelly usually reserved for a microscope or coffin's interior. The clusters are doing what biochemists call “attaching,” similar to the blind function of viruses. What this means, as far as I can understand, is that elements in our blood,

mainly iodine and calcium, are “marrying” (now scientists are calling *us* the hosts, for the love of God) non-active elements in the clump-colonies, molecule for molecule, so that the hosts’ plasma is bled out the skin surface, or “leeches.”

I positively loathe this reckless use of leading terminology!

It just kindles already inflamed imaginations. And so we get more asinine reports of colony attacks, preposterous rumors of people bled dry, wild stories of “gang clumpings.” As I say, all this nonsense only makes the situation worse. Yet, in another way it’s understandable; I’ve had to dodge a few myself. Some are the size of medicine balls. But that’s just the point: stay out of the way, assholes!

I’ve set the save function to every minute. That way, even if I’m cut off halfway through something, this journal will be very up-to-date, as opposed to the old method of entering a manual save at the close of each

It’s all a mess. A panic. People running this way and that, begging for a solution, screaming for their Maker. The heat’s unbelievable. It lashes at the skin and eyes, strangles the tongue. No one will believe the reports: the temperature dropped an average of three degrees over the last two days—it feels like it rose ten. The air is actually sour; you can taste it. The alkalinity of soil samples is on the wane, the pH all over the place.

Bael Laboratories has come up with a “peel ’n’ toss” disposable protective suit, for Christ’s sake, but what the fuck’s the point. We’re already covered with sores. God, I can’t breathe. They say going out without a suit increases the risk of skin cancer. *Assholes!* Who’s gonna live long enough for it to develop.

This is impossible. Now there’re reports of colonies smashing through picture windows and attaching to homeowners! Idiots! Alert One is ordering all civilians to don those stupid suits: they say the material will mask hemoglobin. We’re one step away from martial law. But nobody gives a

crap. People are going nuts with shotguns and flamethrowers. There's simply too many of those things; and now some are "bonding," as opposed to just "replicating." 91Radio reports one the size of a house over Connecticut.

I've had it with scientists and theorists! I'm fed up to here with their one-dimensional explanations about chemical interactions. I'll believe my eyes, not some asshole lecturer.

You fuckers tell me how a mass of "inert silicone-based clumps" can swoop on a lady and carry her off screaming!

You tell me how a couple of colonies can fight over a child like a pair of hammerheads fighting over a surfer.

You tell me how a "secondary osmotic exchange" can leave the streets littered with bloodless corpses.

Fuck you all, fuck you all, fuck you all.

I don't need some goddamned scientist to tell me our Earth's been appropriated.

I don't need a climatologist to tell me the atmosphere's been altered to accommodate an alien species, and I don't need some fucking biologist to tell me they've been adjusting plant life all the while.

And I don't need any shitface scientist to tell me that that ugly thing swooping my way is coming to suck me dry.

Fuck you. Right over here. Come and get it. Yeah, *fuck* you! That's right: carbon-based; sweet, pink, and juicy. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you. FUCK YOU, FUCK YOU, FUCK YOU. FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU *FUCKYOU* *FUCKYOUFU*

Shade

Even at this, the final hour of my overlong and entirely miserable life, I can distinctly recall the first time I encountered the apparition...the stranger—what shall I call it—the *thing* that has haunted my every waking hour of this one dogged existence, and taken full possession of even those few hours per day I ruefully describe as sleep.

I must have been, I think, five or six years old when the first intruder appeared, approaching calmly as I sat by the little whitewashed picket fence girding our home's buttercup-bordered front lawn. I remember him as a man of perfectly ordinary appearance; that is to say there was nothing singularly remarkable about his countenance or carriage. But he came sauntering up to me then, running his hand casually over the dull white points of the pickets as he made his way along the sidewalk, and, in the most straightforward and intimate of tones, hailed me by name. I was too young to do anything but gape with complete innocence, expecting to see a neighbor, or to recognize one of my father's many successful friends. But the looming figure was unknown to me, although his words and

demeanor indicated a relationship both close and (odd from the perspective of a child) *enduring*. And this man told me, quite pleasantly, that he'd been keeping a very close eye on me, and would be maintaining his surveillance. So saying, he smiled, nodded, and continued on his way. Startled, yet still too ingenuous to know any impulse more complex than wonder, I at length gained my feet and peered shyly round the gatepost. And I can still remember watching him strolling down the walk, admiring the azaleas and rhododendrons, all the way to the little market on the corner, where I lost sight of him in the shadow of a billboard. I never saw the man again.

This, I say, was only the first encounter with the macabre fear that has never ceased to pursue me. My parents, outside of encouraging my unease with strict admonitions about not talking to strangers, provided no enlightenment whatsoever as to the amiable man's design. So I commenced performing, as frightened children will, unnecessary searches of closets, the space beneath my bed, and other likely hiding places, but with a most uncommon zeal. No bogeymen were to be found. Yet it was through the persistence of these searches that I eventually found myself paying closer attention to areas *naturally darker* than their surroundings. And one July afternoon, while for the thousandth time surveying an alcove of dense shade created by the convergence of tall hedges and a handsome sycamore in our expansive back yard, I began to entertain a most unsettling notion of being...watched. I stood there paralyzed, or rather I should say hypnotized, for the better part of half an hour, sweating freely in the hot summer sun, yet far too timid to seek comfort. And such is the power of the human imagination that my eyes, steadfast and unblinking, in time began to perceive a kind of form where no form existed. My mind *sculpted* a presence out of nothingness. And I saw, or fancied I saw, what appeared to be two dull orbs suspended some six feet off the ground. From these imagined specters it was easy to induce what could only be a pair of eyes. And my fancy, fueled now by a very real fear, continued to extrapolate—I seemed to perceive pupils in those orbs, and, at last, a kind of contour, or *mantle*, that surrounded the vision. When I finally lost all courage and slunk away, I was absolutely convinced that those “eyes” followed

my every move. And yet the most arresting particular of this experience, and therefore the most memorable, was not the actual instance of those imagined eyes, but something unfathomable in their aspect. To this day I have endeavored to find word or words which will aptly convey their overwhelmingly morbid, inflexible, bruised-yet-bloodless expression. No such word or words will relieve me. No such model exists.

The next visitation occurred upon my entering junior high school, at that tender age when peer pressure impresses itself so adamantly upon the psyche. This time the intruder was a youngster of my own age, and of generally similar build, but in no regard of similar disposition. That is to say he was a bully, and an ugly one at that, and an intellectual coward, and a common, soulless egoist, and a cur, and the last person on the planet I'd want as a companion. Still, he was always *there*, wherever I went, as if anticipating my evasions, and teasing me while claiming we were friends, and engaging me in his confidence while, at the same time, subtly threatening me. I'm sure every teen has suffered at least one episode mirroring mine. This boy confounded me to tears! For instance, were I to develop a crush on a girl, it was *he* who would badger her affections, and not relent in his advances until the girl had shied and my frustration was complete. Were I to pursue a quiet weekend, it was *he* who would show, as out of thin air, to spoil my peace. I positively loathed this boy, and found myself entertaining fantasies of trouncing him. In my dreams, too, would he appear, yet always presenting a much different temper; that of a silent, persistent, and thoroughly gloomy companion. I could not shake him in these dreams; whither I turned he was there, saying nothing, his face downcast. And always this somnolent game of turning to and fro would terminate with my facing him, unable to move. And as I would be standing, spellbound, he would be slowly shaking his head; with apology, with finality—I could never know. For as he would begin to raise his face to mine I would invariably wake screaming, and spend the rest of the night disturbing the slumber of whichever parent would have me. I began sleeping in a room where many lights were kept brightly burning, and even then slept but fitfully. At long last, my nerves in shreds, I resolved to confront this boy in a physical contest,

although his natural aggressiveness made the outcome of such a confrontation a foregone conclusion. No matter. I was determined to be rid of him, despite the obviously bloody consequences. I well remember the hours spent on that smelly spit of beach beside that sodden, sagging pier, challenging myself, while unconsciously developing a muttered mantra of "*Go for the throat, go for the throat!*" Catching myself at this I desisted, and then took a strange kind of heart. Right now, from the vantage of many years, it is as if I can see my younger self through another's eyes, and observe that queer twist of the lips that is the killer's smile, on a momentarily finer boy that once was me. And so even now my withered lips convulse, and my rheumy eyes gleam, and a wan, rasping voice that is mine and is not mine whispers, "*Do it! Do it! Go for the throat!*"

I determined that this altercation would take place at the earliest opportunity, as I wanted to confront him while my courage soared. It seemed that no sooner had I made this determination than my enemy appeared walking from beneath that dank old pier, his hands thrust in his pockets, a mischievous gleam in his eye. With my blood up, I immediately lashed into him, demanding he respect my privacy, accusing him of breaches both real and imagined. To my surprise he did not become heated, but merely looked all the more mischievous. Upon that look I saw only red, and did what I had so thoroughly prepared myself to do: I went for his throat.

It was in no sense of the word a fight. Whether I overpowered him or he simply gave me free reign I can't say, for all I remember is opening my eyes to see his livid and breathless face next to mine, the gleam in those eyes nearly extinguished due to the ferocity of my chokehold. When I realized what I was doing I immediately released him and backed off. I had nearly killed the boy.

In a minute he staggered to his feet and stood looking at me oddly, struggling for breath. Finally he managed to cough out a few words, to the effect that he would get me; that I would never elude him. Thereupon he turned and rushed back under the pier. I swayed there trembling, and was quickly overcome by shame. I saw myself then as an animal, as a vile creature who pounced without provocation. I had all but murdered some-

one, someone whose only fault was wanting to be my friend. Brimming over with guilt and compassion, I ran across the sand into the darkness under the pier.

I expected to find him, frightened and spent, but the space under the pier appeared to be uninhabited. Calling out his name with a tone of profoundest apology, I proceeded to search the area, only to discover that I was indeed alone. I then walked to the other side of the pier, studying the sand for footprints that would establish an exit into the sunshine. Finding none, I followed up on this idea and retraced my steps to the very spot where he and I had run under the pier. *There* were his prints and mine in the glare without the shade, and *here* were mine coming into the dark and doubling back—but of his further progress there wasn't a trace. I will confess to a space of wool gathering, and then I found myself turning back to search once more. This was a silly enterprise, but the impulse was irresistible. Again finding myself alone, I stood listening to the beating of my heart, while the tide lisped softly behind me.

Then—how shall I frame it—a species of qualm that was not altogether new shook me like a dog. I mean to say that I trembled head to toe in one long excruciating wave, as if a block of ice had just rolled down my spine. I could not turn, I could not move, I could not think. And I stood there in the dark letting my eyes adjust, and *feeling* the presence of another. It was not a sensation of touch, but of the coldest scrutiny. I don't think I took a breath for the better part of a minute, while this presence slowly moved around me, as though taking me in from all sides. At last I broke, and ran back out into the summer glare. I remember standing there blinking, trying to put two and two together. I had an odd impression that something was stirring under the pier, but, whatever it was, it was as insubstantial as the wind. This impression of activity seemed to work its way to the very edge of shadow, and again I had that chilling sense of being observed. I stood transfixed, staring at nothing. Then I supposed I perceived, again, a mantle; a ghostly outline, but more detailed, and further extended than that similar apparition which had so thrilled me as a child. I was aware of a fleeting *intensity*. And all at once I felt I was being strangled. I might have been dangling from a gallows. In a minute the feeling

passed, and left me peering into a space of unoccupied shadow.

This experience shook me for years, and while I never saw that particular boy again, I was very reserved in subsequent relationships. Time always heals. It dilutes feelings, rearranges memories. But at the subconscious level something vital *remembers*. Odd patterns, strangely familiar, strike deep chords. The self-preservation instinct never rests. And it keeps me watchful. Trust is for the godly and the guileless.

In this way have I kept my mind intact over all these years. I have learned to sleep in the daytime, and only then in wide open spaces, lest even one long finger of shadow sneak upon me. Nights are spent indoors, with all lights burning.

Of course I was considered eccentric. And, later on, even mad. Those sent to interview me always showed their hand; none dared meet my challenge, none dared speak with me away from edifice or mound—away from things that will *cast*. And so have I endured.

The state's awkward advances have actually worked in my favor. They have decided my mind is unbalanced, and so awarded me monthly checks and medication. Their neatly prescribed poisons I flush immediately. Their saccharine representatives I have worn down; I will be interviewed only in this open expanse of public park, and only on this very bench.

I had a wife. For the space of a year. And during that restless year the woman grew sicker almost daily. I watched the light *seep* from her face. I was not an altogether obsessed man in those days, and still had essential needs and pursuits. But even *she*, in due course, became suspect. She had supposed me insane. Perhaps she was right in stating that I took whatever she said out of context. But I knew she was tainted. At length I could not bear her to sit in the dark. The woman was tainted. Thank God we had no children.

When she was buried I stipulated that her gravesite should not be in the proximity of willow or statue—of anything that might throw a shadow. I am not mad. I need not state this emphatically, for I have a lifetime of empirical proof to stead me. I am not mad—I am punctilious. I plainly see that which any man, should he look hard enough, will easily be made to ascertain. And so I can very *reasonably* state that that woman

was placed, and that she most certainly *was* tainted.

Do not misapprehend me here.

There are precisely two aspects, no more, to this intoxicating thunderclap we call reality.

One is that acknowledged world of surface and substance; absolutely familiar, brightly lit and amenable to perception.

The other is a cold and thirsty place, discernible only to the blind. It is no less real than the sensory world we accept, and is as deep as the cosmos. It is the unseen. It leaches us all; continuously, insidiously, surely. It is vital entropy, lurking in every lost moment, in every broken heart, behind every fixed idea; waiting to reveal itself at that single horrible, drawn-out moment when we are no longer dazzled by the light.

We are too involved to realize we are, fundamentally, masters of nothing. Only our arrogance allows us to accept this instantaneous *affront* of light, of life, as a matter of worth. Only ego makes nonchalance possible. We are being snuffed, you and I. But so gradually as to be unaware.

And now, as I sit on this bench in the giving sun, what bothers me most is that I alone should be privy to this duality, this presence, this...this outrage. Other men are inspired by a variety of muses. Other men, in appearance no different than I, labor after strange appliances, build empires, surrender their selves to families and friends. Only I, it would seem, have been cursed with this dark insight.

But I am not mad. I only wish I were. At any rate, this argument is academic. I have looked long enough, and looked hard enough, to determine the full lineament of that which resides in shade. It peers from the depths of a million misgivings, and whispers in that soft pad of approaching steps.

I am old—so old. Why have I had to wait *so* long for the inevitable...why be born at all? To merely pass from the prenatal state of nonexistence into this brief and draining glare; to exist for a blinding heartbeat, only to pass back into shadow...I will not look. I do not have to. For, I tell you, I am not mad! And I *hear* those footsteps. And I *see* that coming shadow. And I *know* the face behind that cold hand on my shoulder. It is you; it is you who watch from the doorwells, you who venture in the

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night. You, you, and you; the selfish, the venal, the hard of heart. May you burn in the light I am leaving. May you find shade enough in the grave.

Sympaticus

Mondays are always the worst.

In any occupation, white collar or blue, starting the work week means dying anew. Those urgently needed extra hours seemed only to rip off Saturday morning, and Sunday, far from being a day of rest, quickly became a grueling countdown to tomorrow. Weekends are over before they begin.

And for Fartian counselors beginning a new week at the Bureau of Terran Grievances, Monday's just the first bump in a long slide to nowhere.

The waiting room is always full, the clientele never pleased. After courteously blowing their minds trying to figure who should get to watch what, Fartians had magnanimously overhauled the entire building, adding sets, satellite dishes, and routers, so each Earthling could channel-surf to his or her heart's content. But Number 231's TV got better color than Number 175's, Number 19's was way too loud, etc. EatThis and UpYours, two of the kindest and most amenable Fartians to ever wait on a crowd, were recently roughed up over an improperly heated croissant, so now, with two staff in Recovery, YoMama

was responsible for Monday's first shift all on his lonesome.

Patience is not just a Fartian virtue; it's a way of life and manner of thinking, as deep and irrevocable as the urge to assist and comfort. Earth had to be appropriated. *Had* to. After making their own solar system an atomic junkyard, Terrans had set about turning the rest of the quadrant into a radioactive wilderness. The first emissaries from Fartia, coming in peace to beg for reason, were blown to smithereens by a quickly assembled International Guard, forcing the Fartians to subdue the planet by nullifying long-range weapons via microwave transmissions. They *had* to. It was that or write off the quadrant. After accepting effusive apologies, the United States president gave the conquerors the keys to the planet, free season tickets to Annie, and a signed CD of Bruce Springsteen's *Born In The USA*. It was YoMama's practice to play a loop full blast whenever jingoism transported the clients.

"Number One," he said pleasantly. "Serving Number One."

Number One was a scrawny old woman with hair dyed the color of mercurochrome. YoMama recognized her from last week; he still suffered auralaches and an occasional nasalbleed. Number One immediately jumped on a table, lifted her skirt, and began thrusting her pelvis in YoMama's direction while clacking her false teeth and wiggling her tongue. The grievance made no sense to YoMama, but the roaring clients, banging their foreheads on chairs and tables, were clearly pleased by the gesture. YoMama, nodding and smiling, reached down to switch on the CD.

"*Bohn* in da USA," the Boss sang, right on cue and over and over and over and over. "*Bohn* in da USA! *Bohn* in da USA!" The crowd went wild. A youth with purple and green spiked hair smashed his face into the unbreakable glass separating YoMama from an imminent, much-supported, and long overdue Earth-whooping.

"You got that?" the youth screamed. He raised a victorious middle finger. "Number one, farthead, number one!"

"Serving," said YoMama.

The woman pulled her dress completely over her head, did a rapid stuttering flamenco on the tabletop, and spun onto

the floor.

“Number Two,” YoMama called. “Serving Number Two.”

There was a terrible biting scuffle to his right. YoMama raised a flipper and hesitated. He prudently switched off the CD player. A raggedy man stepped free of the raggedy tussle and made his raggedy way to the window. “That’s me, man. What I got to do around here to get some bus tokens? How’m I suppose to find a job walking all over the city? You wanna see the blisters on my feet, man?” He hauled a half-shod horror onto the narrow shelf beneath the glass.

YoMama pouted compassionately. “An abundance of jobs are to be found right here at the center, Number Two. Merely fill out this form and you will instantly be eligible for the occupation of your choice.”

Number Two let his foot slide off the shelf. “I knew it, man, I just knew it. You had to get personal, didn’t you? What you gotta know all about me for?”

“Merely for records, sir, and for the processing of payments. Your government insists that all accounts be scrupulously itemized.”

“Who are you, man, the flipping F.B.I.? Jesus. A guy comes in asking for a little help, and you give him the third degree. And what’s all that got to do with tokens, anyway?”

YoMama pulled out a roll of fifty. “Here are your coins, sir.”

The man licked his lips. His eyes rolled back up. “What’m I gonna do with tokens, man? My car’s sitting outside, and it’s dry as a bone. You’re telling me you want me to put a bunch of damn tokens in my gas tank? Ah, for the love of—”

YoMama placed the roll back in the drawer and pulled out a twenty. He slid it through the small opening at the bottom of the glass. Number Two snapped it up and raised it triumphantly. He was mobbed before he made the door.

“Number Three. Serving Number Three.”

Number Three rose with the deadly certainty of a cornered cobra. Not since Betelgeuse had YoMama witnessed eyes so fixed and intense. Three wore an ankle-length mop of a trench coat over God knows what, and his hair and beard were

so long and tangled it was difficult to tell where one began and the other gave up. Three's eyes held YoMama's all the way, his right hand repeatedly hurling down something unseen. When he reached the window he looked the little Fartian up and down before heaving a breath that fogged the glass lichen green:

"He-e-e-e shall riseth for your sins."

YoMama nodded energetically. This would be one of the messenger Terrans, come to retell the fable of the man who flew up into a cloud. The Fartian pulled out a twenty and slipped it into the stainless steel tray.

Number Three, gravely insulted, snatched up the bill and stuffed it in a pocket. "Render unto Caesar..." he muttered viciously.

"Yes, yes," YoMama breathed, "that which is Caesar's!" He placed his chin on his folded flippers and looked on dreamily.

Number Three seemed to swell in his rags. "Let His Word come unto thee, that the inequities of the righteous brothers shall not be laundered in vain!"

YoMama sighed, gazing up at Number Three like a schoolgirl admiring a bubblegum dreamboat. The messengers were some of his favorites. They had the uncanny ability to orate for hours on end, reaching dramatic peaks and building again, never tiring, never varying. But after thirty-five minutes YoMama realized his hour was almost up; YouPrickYou would be coming on shortly, and YoMama was one-shy of his four-Terran first shift quota. He hated to do it, but it was unquestionably cut-off time.

"That was absolutely lovely," he said. "Thank you so very, very much. The universe is actually a boundless entropic abstraction containing only polarized impulses in equipoise. The resultant impermeable electromagnetic spheres aggregate to a density appreciated by the senses as matter." He blinked affectionately.

Number Three's piehole worked round and round, seeking a center. His eyes gradually clouded, and his hand again hurled down the unseen; first with uncertainty, then with vicious comprehension.

"Number Four," YoMama called. "Serving Number

Four.” From the corner of his eye he saw an identical Fartian through an adjoining door’s glass. YouPrickYou smiled encouragingly. YoMama returned the gesture.

Number Four was a giant of a Terran, with an arid and inflexible expression carved by years of loitering in the victimhood. He came, bless him, right to the point.

“How many hoop you spect me t’jump troo t’claim mah benefis? Ah wantsa know why Ah don’t get no specs round here, an don’t you be gibin me no innastella jive bout fillin out no goddam foams neither, cause Ah’ll kick yo little greenman butt alla way back to da little greenman projects, an Ah ain’s gonna need no Blew Crue to do, too, so *you*, foo, kin jus be *gibin* me mah benefis, right *now*, cause Ah ain’s gots *time* to be playin yo spacemans games. Now you jus *opens* dat funny-money drawer, *sticks* in yo little retard flaps, and *Gib—Me—Mah—BENEFIS!*”

YoMama, smiling graciously, killed the speaker. One hand fell on the CD player, the other on his cubicle’s mental survival kit: a microdot copy of the Fartian Ethical Code, a Sav-on photograph of a mindlessly cheerful Earth family, and a glowing lozenge-shaped vial containing the only dose of Infinity a self-respecting Grievance counselor would ever need. They say the sentience continuum’s severance is instantaneous and painless. The original producers even claimed a kind of fuzzy ecstatic release. YoMama tapped twice on the kit’s lid, the corners of his perpetually-cherubic mouth rising. He genially flipped the OPEN sign to its sweet dorsal side and hit the PLAY button. The Boss laid it down:

“*Bohn* in da USA! *Bohn* in da USA!”

YoMama beamed patiently at the contorted faces and deflected spit, his head gently rocking side to side, his whole damnable countenance an infuriating beacon. There was a soft tapping on glass. YouPrickYou was smiling charmingly while pointing from his left flipper to the wall clock and back. YoMama rose and eased open the door. The two embraced with extrastellar tenderness while the crowd blew kisses and showed limp wrists. YouPrickYou took the vacated seat, switched on the speaker, and turned the sign back to OPEN. One flipper killed the CD player while the other caressed the survival kit. A

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Terran hurled a folding steel chair directly against the unbreakable window.

YouPrickYou smiled raptly through the glass. It was, after all, only Monday.

Pluribus

“Ladies and gentlemen...*the Fartian Ambassador!*”

Spotlights searched wildly while the orchestra struggled through the Fartian anthem. It was a tough work, written as it was for a seventeen-piece ensemble of bowed genitalia and wind-breaking choir, but the theme had been transposed by the Pocoima Pops to an arrangement featuring synthesized piglets over symphonic kazoos. The strutting Ambassador appeared genuinely rapturous, while the Terrans had difficulty humming along and feigning enjoyment. But the audience got positively silly as soon as the orchestra picked up that good old English drinking song, the American National Anthem. So ugly was the Fartian Anthem, in fact, that our own agonizing anthem seemed downright lovely by comparison.

The Ambassador slapped his flippers up the podium's concealed steps, cleared his gasbox, and pressed his rubbery lips right up against the microphone.

“Gerkils and plissyfogs. I deeply thank you for your attendance. As arranged by this forum's coordinators, the program will proceed as follows: a brief statement composed by

our First Fartian, a regulated interrogation from the esteemed panel, and a question and answer session with the audience.

“Now to the First’s Address, in flubschaum may he bifurcate.

“Wonderful people of Earth. It has been our great fortune to serve you, and with boundless excitement we look forward to your continued ridicule and abuse. However, there remain wide dissimilarities in our cultures, and we therefore humbly and repeatedly beg forgiveness for any and all trouble we may have caused. Assimilating as your grateful slaves requires an adjustment to Earth customs we still find puzzling. Like your practice of treating restaurants, cinemas, sidewalks, and roadways as personal living rooms, bedrooms, and lavatories; this strikes us as most peculiar. We Fartians behave respectfully in public, and are literally incapable of giggling, guffawing, or bellowing in the faces of strangers. But we are working on it. Your diversity astonishes us; you come in so many colors and types. Speaking frankly, yet with the utmost admiration, we must inform the host nation that we do not understand how this “melting pot,” as you call it, can contain so many persons, with so much good fortune, who nevertheless voice a common plaint of victimhood—but rest assured that our interstellar convoys are even now bringing vast cargos of wealth and luxuries beyond your imaginations. We can only hope it will be enough. Then there is your Earthling insistence on a cosmological creator, who made you, us, and everything else... honestly, people of Earth, we look and we look and we look, but...nothing. We simply can find no trace of this entity. There is almost too much to ponder. Such as the predisposition of your females to paint themselves like circus performers, run around near-naked in public, and titter in the manner of developmentally challenged children; this is most foreign to our way of thinking. Yet you will be quite pleased to learn that our Fartian plissyfogs, in an attempt to emulate their astounding Terran counterparts, now proudly flaunt their danglepumps and vile-trenches, and perform slop-and-pierce operations wherever and whenever possible. And thank you again and again, but we sincerely do not urgently require, as you so earnestly reiterate, insurance policies and monster wheels for our spacecraft, ad-

ditional toner for our nonexistent printing equipment, in-vessel family tanning spas, or one-of-a-kind, won't-last-forever, get-it-while-it's-hot lakeside acreage smack in the middle of the Mojave Desert. Your Terran consideration for our well-being never ceases to amaze us. And your leaders! Most regal they are, to be sure, and most gracious...yet, on our home planet, leaders are selected for their wisdom, compassion, and eagerness to serve. All over this gorgeous globe we encounter premiers, kings, and presidents, all chosen for their photogenic qualities and ability to intimidate. Most peculiar. Also, there is this ubiquitous and absolutely mystifying Terran preoccupation with cell phones. The ability of humans—even adult males—to “make chitty-chat” ad nauseam, in restaurants, in automobiles, in hospitals and morgues, originally struck us as so rude and unbecoming even a Fartian slimesweller would flumpergaggle with shame. Thankfully, our Department of Terran Analyses has reached its long-sought conclusion. By noting the striking similarities between social humans, dung beetles under duress, and Fartian spore squatters in heat, we have inferred a biochemical catalyst causing a kind of brainleak only remedied through electronic venting. So you will surely be pleased to learn we are responding to the eighteen billion-plus tally from your famous WishList Foundation; the identical wish from everybody from little Suzie Sunnymuffin of Clinton's Folly, Arkansas, to Muhammed-Mash Muhammed Muhammed Comma Muhammed Osama-Obama Muhammed Comma Ramalama Muhammed Slashan' dash-Muhammed Muhammed Muhammed of New Rubble, Iran. And *so-o-o-o*...(here the orchestra recreated a Fartian drum roll using perforated mahogany oars on vats of semi-congealed oatmeal)—*stereo cell phones for everybody'!*”

The crowd's roar made an instant celebrity of anybody green, rectally-gilled, and multi-flipped. Terrans, immediately dialing up audience members to either side, slapped their personal cell phones temple-to-temple in anticipation, launching endless urgent dialogues on everything from American Idol to Wheel Of Fortune to just whose turn *is* it to take out the garbage, anyway. Women glazed and ran on and on without breath or forethought, men squealed and stamped their clodhoppers with delight. A great “chitty chant” began in the front

rows, picked up quickly by the room: “Chitty-chat! *Chitty-chat!* *Chitty-chat!*”

The beaming Ambassador gave a downstroke with his flipper. The Fartian Anthem began and the crowd died on a dime. The orchestra shrieked and farted to a close.

“Thus ends our First’s Address.” The Ambassador, looking to the monitor with embarrassment, raised a flipper to his forehead before placing it politely on his chest. “It states here that, having reverently saluted this forum’s host nation, I am to gratefully gush green over...Exxon, a distiller of liquid carcinogens...Avis, a noted hard-trier...and the McDonald’s Corporation, proud purveyor of the exciting new Flavor-Free[®] McMulch Burger and sucrose-smothered McGooey Pie. In flub-schaum may they liquefy.”

The Fartian turned to a trio of podia on his right. “I will now joyously accept questions from our sincere and erudite panel.”

Moderator One’s question was up and out before his colleagues were halfway through their “Mister Ambassador”s.

“How long have we been promised this convoy, Ambassador? And why the big secret about its contents? You are obviously aware of our trepidation concerning the possibilities of an insidious takeover.”

The Ambassador raised a hand, though the audience was hushed. “Kindly allow me to entertain your queries in the order they were delivered. According to my Terran chronometer, the duration of this promise is, as of this check, two minutes and thirty-two seconds. Secondly, there are no secrets regarding the convoy’s cargo; as usual we are importing precious stones and metals, with an accent on diamonds, gold, and silver as per your demands, along with an abundance of the Fartian schlemburgers and fizzpops your people so urgently crave. And as to your charming notion concerning a ‘takeover,’ as you term it, our vessels, officers, and records are entirely at your disposal, as always.” He smiled angelically.

The center moderator, a hard-boiled lady anchor from Earth Only News Network, raised her voice so stridently the first moderator was forced to back down. “*Mister* Ambassador! These are simple questions; there is no need to be evasive.

Furthermore, I have irrefutable data proving children at Obama Elementary were taken ill after gorging on these ‘fizzpops’ of yours. How do you answer this charge?”

The Ambassador’s whole face pursed. “This is unbearable news! They will be all right? Certainly we will recall the fizzpops.”

“I hardly consider tummy aches and missed classes ‘all right,’ Ambassador!”

There was a scuffle in the audience, and a man with a bullhorn called out, “*Indian giver!*” Immediately a nearby party of Native American businessmen began hacking at the troublemaker with pickets. Secret Service agents mauled their way to the spot. Pockets of unrest formed rapidly in the crowd.

“Please...” the Ambassador tried. “We are doing our very best.”

Moderator Three thrust forth an accusing forefinger. “The market will not bear a glut of gold and silver! How long, Ambassador, before these precious metals are no longer so precious?”

“Forgive us,” the Ambassador wept, “for our unconscionable insensitivity and egregious misinterpretation of your magnifi—”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Fartian Ambassador has been shot! Ladies and gentlemen, the Fartian Ambassador has been shot! This is Dick Strickly on your morning driveby with the news, weather, sports, and a crib full of goodies. Apparently a heckler at the Schwarzenegger Convention Center splattered the Fartian Ambassador from here to Andromeda before being taken down by a drunken contingent of Secret Serv—HONK HONK—what’s that? Appears we have a winner on Strictly Dick’s Gangbanger Gazebo. It’s Li’l Snoop from Compton, California. How they hangin’, Snoopster? Get off your feet, grab a ho and a seat, ’cause you’re the eighty-seven thousandth caller to correctly identify Hillary and Bill Clinton as a couple of complete—hold on a second, this just in. Ladies and gentlemen, the Fartian Ambassador wears a shirt! Ladies and gentlemen, the Fartian Ambassador wears a shirt! We go

straight to our live feed with Rusty Carbunkle at the Center. How they hangin', Ruster?

Dick, it's pandemonium here at the Schwarzenegger. Apparently an Art Bell devotee, claiming his gang-raped great grandmother was teleported into a Fartian wormhole, produced a handgun, shouted "Bring back the King Sisters!" and took out all mankind's frustration on that little girly worm from the big green apple. Panic swept the Center. Don King threw in the towel, Stephen King spun off a pointless Haunted Convention Center trilogy, guest speaker Rodney G. King broadsided the ambulance rushing Larry King and B.B. King to Martin Luther King Hospital, and the Gay Scouts Marching Band has been postponed indefinitely. The city is in flames. Right now Bono is furiously organizing the entire Western hemisphere for a Full Day Of Really Bad Music, Donald Trump is urging the Fartian Four Hundred to join him in a Sweet Deal Seminar, and, and...I can see Paris Hilton fighting off her admirer, Dick, and it looks like she's heading our way. Paris! Paris! How do you think this bodes for world peace? Can we get your thoughts on the obtuse ramifications of intergalactic telemetry when digitized according to Euclidian—Dick? Dick? The crowd is taking the stage! I see flags, Dick. Old Glory, the Blue-Green Globe, the Turkistani National. I think this is it, Dick. We're coming back! There's Gallagher and Oprah and the Hulkster and Stallone, fighting for the camera. There's Imus and Rush and Leykis and Stern, fighting for the microphone. This just in: Governor Schwarzenegger is riding his stationary bike down from Sacramento, and President Bush has declared complete victory for Fartia. Oh my God, Dick, here come the big guns! There's Siegfried and Roy with the ghost of Liberace. Sharpton and Sandler and Big Bird and Barbra. They're holding hands, Dick, it's working—no, wait; there's a roundhouse from Oprah to the chin of Rickenbacker. Orville's down, but he pops back up. Now it's all Pauly paling in the spotlight. A ruckus to his left and—*No!* Mike Tyson just bit off Pee Wee Herman's ill-used body part. They're carrying him off screaming. Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! *It's Michael Jackson*, leading an

entourage of little blond boys in fishnet! The crowd's going *insane!* Oprah and Sally, scrabbling to meet him. Carrot Top and Potato Head, struggling to be heard. There's Marcia and Johnny and Goofy and Waldo...the audience erupts—it's a mindless rush; a mad river of posers and wannabes. I can't see what's happening—the multi-talented Moonwalker is being mobbed. But there's Stern, towering obscenely. He shoves his way through, and now it's King meets King, Dick! Stern grabs The Glove and jealously guards his prize. What's he doing with it? He's pulling down his pants and—dear God, Dick! They're calling out Security! Now they're hosing him down with fire extinguishers! The show can't go on! But put away those remotes, people, 'cause here comes Gilbert and Bobcat and Tyra and Star. Ryan and Rosie and Rodney and Regis. The Verizon Geek, Mr. Rainbow Wig, Subway's Jared, and Shrek in drag. They're line-dancing, Dick, they're kicking up their heels—it's Earth's finest hour! Paparazzi swarming like flies on doggie don't! Cameras flashing! Spotlights spinning! Mother of Mercy, Dick—*Tyson's gone bananas!* He's snapping at Snoop Dogg, spitting on Spike, stomping on Stevie...*he's breaking his chains!* No more cameras! No more cameras! Somebody kill those lights! Somebody call the Air Force! Oh, the humanity. The stage is collapsing, the curtain's coming down. Wait! Wait! There's an enormous gasp from the crowd. The spotlights swerve, the cameras swing...*it's Elton John*, dressed in a stunning rainbow-patterned mink-and-nylon body stocking with rhinestone-studded peacock feathers, floor-length see-through diamond-dusted condom hat, platform-heeled pink suede elf boots, and swirling gold lamé bridal train. He waddles across what's left of the stage to Jackson's side. Their eyes meet and sparkle. Jackson drops his best boy, John's glasses fog over. They throw out their arms. They reach in and embrace...and now they're...they're...oh for the love of—who knew two people could actually do that...but these aren't just regular guys, Dick. No-siree, Betsy. This is talent at its most entertaining. The crowd whoops and whinnies. They want an encore. But how do you follow a performance like that? Well, color me crimson and kiss my fat aunt Fannie—here come the Rockettes on walkers, the Spice Girls in straitjackets, the Blue Man Crew

on unicycles, butting their heads and slapping their thighs. I'm more than proud, folks, I'm patriotic-proud. And it just makes you want to shake your head and ponder your—Dick! Dick! There's a fanfare from the pit! The giant TV screen's coming down! I can't believe it—it's live from the White House. The crowd falls hushed. The whole world holds its breath. There's the Oval Office, and the Stars and Stripes. The President's at his desk. He's looking around. He's staring at something on his hand. I'm not sure he knows he's on camera, Dick. Mr. Bush! Look straight ahead! No, over *here!* Mr. Bush...they're going to commercial, Dick. But that's okay; who could ever get enough Cal Worthington. And the crowd is definitely in favor of the moment. It's toy flags and cell phones, it's corn dogs all around. There's Latifah and Latoya, Osama and Cher, Milli and Vanilli with Mr. Bean in between. The crowd is just ecstatic. They're flicking their Bics in acknowledgement. What's that? A commotion in the back...*it's O.J. and Tyson*, Dick; they're going toe to toe! Kill those lighters! Ban those Bics! A roar and a scream—dear God in heaven—somebody call a veterinarian. It's on, it's on—the screen's on again! We're back live at the Oval Office, Dick! They've fixed the problem. There's the Stars and Stripes. There's the President at his desk. He's looking all around. Now he's staring down at the carpet. He seems to have dropped his cookie, Dick. The camera zooms in. The President raises his head and knocks himself sillier. He stares at his hand. Now he's looking all around. They're going to commercial. But that's okay; who could ever get enough Larry Miller. Rosanne grabs her crotch and makes for the mic! The band breaks into To Hell With The Chief. It's toy flags and cell phones, it's Slurpees all around. What an inspiration—the whole crowd's standing at attention; they're making chitty-chat while saluting the screen! We're back, baby, we're back in control. Do you hear that great big cheer, you puny green invaders? Are you following this? Well, you'd better get ready for Round One, because, damn your nasty little hides, the Fartian War has begun!

Victorious

Scotty Skatbord hauled his head out of the dumpster, his bleached-blond locks wagging. “Two cans and a plastic liter!”

“Awesome!” Sackageegaws handed the treasures to Suki, who placed them neatly in her heavy-duty garbage bag.

“No, *bi-och!*” Eye Bee plucked out the items and flattened them with monster stomps. “How many time I gots to tell you? Make...*space!*”

Roach shuddered, staring up at the night. “Space...” He looked back down. “And how many times *you* gotta be told, homey, to *not* use *that* word?”

Eye Bee nodded grimly and showed his fist. The Klee-shaes all matched the gesture, extending their arms until knuckles met in the gang’s secret street salute.

“To kicking greenman butt!” Roach vowed.

“Hallelujah!” Sackageegaws breathed.

Eye Bee stopped dead. “Say *what?*”

Sackageegaws bristled. “It’s a sacred term. One my people used to fight off the damn Pilgrims, okay? Suddenly *you* don’t know all about prejudice?”

Suki stepped between them. “Come on, you two! We not lose sight what we fight for!”

“Against,” Scotty amended.

“What—*ever!* Klee-shae a unit, baby, and we never forget that, or we lose before begin!”

“Right on!”

The Klee-shaes punched fists again. Their gang name was an amalgam: “Klee” from a popular brand of tissue, and “shae” from a New York baseball stadium now being used as an arms warehouse in the Fartian War. Since Kleenex[®], the tissue named, was used for nose-blowing and wiping up residue, the gang’s credo proclaimed: *We gonna blow away the greenman like the snot he be, wipe him to da moon and back, and trow his funky little space ass in da trash where it belong!* The Klee-shaes were not to be confused with Da Branededz, a loose assemblage of peripatetic Christian proselytizers, or the Starry o’Types, a Mickey’s-swilling conglomerate of steel drummers and bongoheads—all ex-rival gangs, now united in the common war against the despised Fartians.

“Jam!” Scotty swore. “How we supposed to fight those radical little dudes with these pickings?” He raised a plastic 12-ounce Coke bottle in either hand.

“Sometime,” grated Suki, stamping a foot, “I just get *so* anger! Fartiaman give us two thousand buck a month, some cheap-ass condo, and a crapload of food stamp ain’t no good whatever on street. How we suppose to meet cost of living? When we gonna get another raise? This terrorism bo-sheet gotta end. It *gonna* end!”

Roach drop-kicked a trash can. “They want us soft, homegirl! Don’t you get it? That’s why they give us so much—so we’ll get lazy and won’t be able to fight back.”

“Klee-*shaes*,” Eye Bee proclaimed, “ain’t soft! And Ichabod Bartholemew Tawkins ain’t about to lay down fo no alien hijink. You all stiff?”

“We stiff!”

“Then let’s do it!”

“I’m with ya, dog!”

“Mazel tov!”

“We ready!”

“Far out, dude!”

And with that the real war, the war of the streets, was on. The Klee-shaes splintered on Main and reconnoitered at Minor, bivouacked on Major and surfaced at Admiral. This was no haphazard assault: they’d group-fantasized overthrowing the Fartian’s Earthfare complex countless times. The grounds surrounding the complex extended a good square mile. It looked like Woodstock—if Woodstock had been lit by a vast ring of streetlamps, peppered with carnival rides, daycare centers, and concession stands, and littered with over three thousand portapotty outhouses, most used as living quarters by homeless and substance-dependent Terrans; silently suffering soldiers in the guts-and-glory war with the Fartians.

The Klee-shaes pimp-strutted purposefully up the long walk leading to the building’s main entrance, their cylinders a’clickin’. Veterans of ease flashed their bedsores and plaque, mothers of war raised their fat children high. This was it; the real thing. Men poured along the Klee-shaes’ flanks, chanting “Oof-oof-oof!” in the manner of Cheetos[®]-snarfing Rose Bowlers, women shook their moons and udders hysterically. As they approached the steps the Klee-shaes could hear a Terran favorite over the great building’s Public Address system—it was Neil Young warbling *Keep On Rocking In The Free World*, but a Fartian host, misunderstanding the moment, transferred the track to Mollify. Instantly The Boss was belting it out, right on cue and *over* and *over* and *over* and— “*Bohn* in da USA! *Bohn* in da USA!” The mob went gablivaschnocketyboogle. Klee-shaes vaulted the steps and kicked in the doors, stormed down the main hall demolishing anything green. The huge lobby was socked in, but the crowd intuitively cleared a path: this was serious business, baby; this was genuine Earth business at last.

The tension produced a drug-like euphoria as the Klee-shaes stomped across the lobby. Eye Bee acknowledged his familiars with macho nods and glares: there were Logy and Wheezil, Sfinkter and Lee Mur, Stickypawz, Shrieking Violet, Gangho and Boilpuss. In Eye Bee’s camouflage pockets waited a cattle prod and brass knuckles. Maybe it was time to spill a little funky green blood.

Their Fartian smiled politely upon opening the door. “How may I please you?”

“You can start,” Eye Bee hissed, “by kissing my shiny black ass.”

The Fartian blushed kelly green. “Forgive me, special sir, but there are moral considerations—”

Suki restrained Eye Bee with a steadier arm. “Enough with make stalling, you little poof. How come my TV don’t get no freaking satellite?”

The Fartian hopped about nervously. “But my dear, it was most necessary to ground those satellites. They were emitting gamma—”

Roach showed a threatening fist. “Gamma, yo mama!” Cheers rang in the lobby.

The Fartian looked like he would faint. “Counselor YoMama is currently unavailable, sirs and madams. An accident in Charity Center. Apparently YoMama’s face encountered a flurry of anxious clients. He is in Recovery, and will be back in service with manifold apologies.”

Roach rammed him aside. “They ain’t gonna be no recovery, slimeboy. Where you hide your head honcho?”

“Sir?”

“The Jolly Green Giant, you quivering turd! You know *just* who I’m rapping about.”

“I...I...”

Sackageegaws stepped in. “Back off, Roach. This here situation calls for a woman’s touch.” She rubbed the Fartian’s trembling round crown. “What’s your name, sweetheart? What do they call you?”

“Terrans,” the Fartian managed, “have generously honored me with the lovely appellation ‘DieBitch’, which I graciously respond to whenever—”

Suki threw him into a headlock, a fist pressed against his nasal apertures. “I gonna show you woman touch! Now you listen up, *Die-Beech*. We Earthman ain’t gonna take no more of this bo-sheet, y’hear? So you gonna take us to your leader, *right now*, you gots me, or we gonna smash you into gooey little pile of kiwi jam.”

Eye Bee pulled out his brass knuckles.

Their Fartian squirmed free of the headlock and slapped his sissy-ass flippers against his cheeks. Scotty rode circles around the knot of Klee-shaes as their prisoner was cattle-prodded across the floor and into a huge storeroom. Here an elderly Fartian, no less wimpy than DieBitch, was meticulously ordering parcel allocations—shelves were overflowing with returned televisions, blenders, stereos, and microwaves. Over-sized tags could be seen hanging from the articles, with labels reading: WRONG COLOR, LOUD TIMER, STICKY BUTTON, etc.

Eye Bee didn't waste time on introductions. He marched straight up to the head Fartian and knuckle-dusted him right in his just-begging-for-it face. "That's for Earth!" Whoops rang in the lobby. It was obvious mustered Terrans were re-appropriating their beloved planet.

Roach scooped him off the floor, slapped him once for good measure, and sat him back in his chair.

"Now you gonna listen to the Klee-shaes, you little booger, and you gonna let the whole damn human race know we means business. You gonna put us up on that..." He snapped his fingers. "...on that..."

"Times Square screen!" blurted Scotty.

"That's the one! Just like the Klee-shaes planned." Roach shoved Scotty forward. "You tell him. And make him knows we stiff."

"No bo-sheet!" said Suki.

"Jam, dude!" Scotty got right in the First Fartian's swollen gushing face. "We're up for a hairy 360, you radical little hodad dude, and it's like you're airborne if you're not totally awesome, you dig?"

"No *bo-sheet!*"

Eye Bee zapped him with the cattle prod. The First squealed and slapped his flippers against his newly-indented face.

"Do him again," grated Sackageegaws. This time the First yelped and leaped from his chair.

Roach shoved him right back down. "Klee-shaes knows you can do it, cause you done it befo'." He looked around. "And you done it from right here, in this very room. I recognizes it.

This is where you announced all that free chocolate peanut butter toffee ice cream.”

Sackageegaws grabbed the First by his pencil-thin neck. Her eyes were blazing. “I gained six pounds offa that damned ice cream!”

Eye Bee meaningfully smacked the brass knuckles against his palm. “Move it, fart-boy, or we gonna do a little Rambo dance on your pussy green head.”

The First pressed a button under his desk. A video camera dropped from a ceiling recess, and a wall panel rolled aside to reveal a 6 x 4 screen. A red light came on below the camera’s lens. The First appeared onscreen, surrounded by quickly repositioned Klee-shaes. He pushed another button and gagged, “Thank you so much. You may now speak.”

“Yo yo yo,” called Eye Bee. “Lissen up, peeps of Earth. We is I.B. Tawkins, Roach Arroyo, Suki Kukinuki, Scotty Skatbord, and Jusplain Sackageegaws. We is the Klee-shaes, baby, here to say we done taked back the planet!”

“No bo-sheet!”

“Right on!”

“Gnarly, dude!”

“Top o’ the mornin’!”

An insert appeared in the screen’s right-hand corner, showing the Square in real time. It looked like V-Day. Folks were leaping, handguns blazing, sailors necking with...well, *sailors*.

“Now,” Eye Bee said, “for a little payback.” He began pulling merchandise off the shelves. “Where you keep the big screens and the high defs?”

“It just like Fartiaman,” Suki fumed. “Hide alla good stuff.”

“My people,” grunted Sackageegaws, “have suffered long enough.” She and Scotty tore open the tall doors leading to a closet containing control panels for the Fartian vessel chargers. They staggered back out dragging masses of insulated cable.

“Come *on!*” Roach snapped. “What we gonna get for all that space jive?”

“Jam!” Scotty said, shaking his head. “It’s *copper!*”

This has been only one story, of many heroes. What's important is the Fartian War is history.

The extrastellar menace is behind us.

We can all rest easy knowing our children are secure, our ethos reborn, our constitutions intact. One future day another invader may make the mistake of testing our God-given will. Let this record be a warning; a warning sent gloriously streaming into the cold alien depths—encased in an *Earthling* space capsule, shot from an *Earthling* launch pad, and with a very *Earthling* caveat:

DO—*NOT*—MESS—WITH—*EARTH!*

Punk.

Piety

Old Malachi raced down the grade like the Devil was after him. Halfway to Piety he whirled and posed menacingly, all fang and fire, but the big staghound's glory days were history. He stood panting on trembling legs, his eyes glazing, and for a moment seemed hypnotized by the rising moon. In his imagination he snapped back at those pink staring eyes, reared at that gray hairy frame, bristled at that odd, not-quite human smell. Hacking ferociously, old Mal continued his skid in a flurry of tumbling pebbles and rising dust.

Abel's eyes popped open.

There it was again. All that racket could only be Job's squeamish hound. Still fully dressed against the cold, the boy hopped out of bed and threw open his window to another crystal clear West Virginia morning. Abel saw what appeared to be a pack of lanky ghosts moving dreamily up the pine-lined grade connecting Piety with the Shepherd's Mound valley overlook. The ghosts were lost in trees, reappeared writhing in moonlight, were lost again. The sound of hounds after prey was just beginning to carry when Malachi staggered into the settlement

making enough noise to raise the dead. In seconds light was streaming from every window. Abel pulled on his heaviest coat and gloves, tiptoed downstairs, and gently disengaged his father's Winchester from above the mantel. He would have stepped outside but for a hairy hand on his shoulder.

Saul spun his son around, slowly unclenched his poised fist. He ran the hand up and down his face, gradually washing the fury from his expression. His eyes, still puffy with sleep, swept the faces gathering outside his door. "You maybe fixin on runnin off with the only rifle I got, boy?" He snatched the Winchester, grabbed the jamb and leaned out. "*Somebody shut that animal up!*" Malachi was heard gagging in a chokehold.

Saul would have reached for a lamp, but the full moon was tearing up the black morning sky. He studied his neighbors from the doorway's hollow, spat, and called, "*Boy!*" Abel's older brother limped through the crowd, fighting to keep tall.

"Dogs treed a bear, sir." Gabriel had to force his voice above a whisper. Saul's first-born lived in a ramshackle shed behind the house, out of view of healthy men and women. Piety's patriarch made certain, long ago, that the settlement's forty-odd residents were perfectly clear on genetics: blame for the young man's condition fell solely on the mother's side. Gabriel raised a deformed arm against the inferno in Saul's eyes; his father could whip his sons like dogs in public.

Saul swatted the arm away and shook the Winchester in Abel's face. "Next time you try that, boy, you'd best not let go so easy." He waited. "*Hear?*"

Abel looked away. "I hear you."

"Then, damn your eyes, *don't forget it!*"

As Saul tromped into the night the crowd immediately halved, leaving him plenty of room to stride. A muscle worked convulsively in Abel's jaw. He stepped outside with his heart in his fists.

Saul paused in a dirty pool of moonlight. He took his time filling and tamping a pipe, smoked thoughtfully for a while. There was very little eye contact. Aaron and Matthew, as always, were armed with family Bibles. Saul smiled back coldly, his nod almost imperceptible in the bowl's gentle flare. In this lull Gabriel slipped around the house and reappeared almost

immediately, a pitchfork in one hand and a five-pound sledge in the other. He thrust the tines against Abel's chest. Abel snatched the handle and stared hard at his father's back.

Saul commenced a measured assault on the grade, flanked by his sons. Neighbors gathered in a loose trailing mob. The distant wailing of hounds was fading, but it was hard to tell whether they were receding in relation to the men or had been cut off by the pines. As the pace picked up, Saul cocked the Winchester and fired a single round. The hounds, recognizing the report, quieted immediately.

In less than a minute the first brown shape came whimpering downhill, quickly followed by four others. The dogs swam miserably around Saul while he tramped, snapping at one another and gnashing the air. No additional commands would be necessary.

That one blast dramatically increased the party's excitement. Men bunched into a hard driving line, their breaths puffing out like the steam plumes of racing locomotives. Saul pushed the pace harder still, the sides of his opened greatcoat swinging back and forth as he marched.

Something pale passed between the trees. The men and dogs swung around a stand of sage, and so came upon a bare patch of hillside. Now Abel was certain he saw a ghostly shape hurrying through a copse of immature pines. There was a reddish double flash as it turned back its head. The apparition vanished.

"Git!" Saul spat.

The hounds broke uphill and disappeared in the trees. A minute later the men stormed the copse and burst upon a rocky alcove nestled in pines. There the hounds had cornered their prey.

The body of men automatically fanned out in a crescent, sealing off the alcove. Although the hounds lunged ferociously, they were in no mood to attack. Whatever they'd pinned had them too confounded to leap.

It certainly wasn't a bear, though it was broad enough, and furry enough, to give that impression. The coat was a dull gray, covering everything except the mask, feet, and palms. Abel thought it behaved a lot like a man; in the way it stood

upright without rearing, and in the way it swung its arms as it paced. But its hunched carriage and small head were absolutely unlike any human he'd encountered. As he watched the milling hounds he was reminded of the biblical Daniel, complacent in a den of lions.

Saul's impression couldn't have been more to the contrary. He was picturing himself as the central figure in a swirling display; a fearless superior in complete command. From this vantage he looked down on the scene, saw himself raise the rifle and draw a bead. When he cocked the Winchester the creature started. Every man expected it to rear or bolt, so there was complete surprise when it looked passively into Saul's face and meekly lowered its head.

Not a man imagined Saul had the guts to arbitrarily perform what amounted to an execution without provocation. But there he was, stepping forward deliberately, each pace marked by a blast from the Winchester.

Abel caught up before the echoes had died. "What'd you go and shoot it for, Pa?" He'd never seen such a coldhearted act.

"So help me, boy..." Saul lowered the rifle as the hounds bellied up, sniffing and crying oddly.

A voice in the crowd called, "Still kickin." Saul jabbed it twice, noting critically how it squirmed. Three shots had penetrated the chest, yet the escape of vital juices was mild.

Abel went down on one knee and sniffed. He closely studied the pink frothing mask. "What in the name of God *is* it?"

"Old Man," Gabriel whispered. "The Old Man of the Woods."

Saul's shook his head sardonically. "If my guess is any good it ain't nothin made in the name of God." He turned on the pressing bodies. "Now, you all get back. I *mean* it!" Curious white faces, moonlit crucifixes, brandished Bibles. Saul said with condescension, "Now, now, now—we all seen what we seen. This Thing creepin about. Good dogs actin like a bunch of women." He poked it with his rifle and snorted, "Name of God..."

"But it wasn't *doin* nothin!" Abel protested. "Didn't

come at us, didn't try to run."

Gabriel shook his head bravely. "You listen to Pa." He raised the sledge like a blacksmith and cocked his head. "You aim to finish it off, sir? Or you want me to?"

Saul cocked his head and draped a casual arm over the stunted boy's shoulders. "You run home, Gabe, and you fetch me a box of rail spikes, just the sharpest you can find."

"Sir?" Gabriel swallowed, looking from the prone Unknown to that familiar fire in his father's eyes. He dropped his head miserably and lowered the sledgehammer.

"Well, well," Saul cooed, "ain't we all sweet and soft now, little Gabriel? Just like your poor, disappointed Mommy would have wanted."

"Sir, I—"

"Do it!" Saul spat. "And don't you be tardy! I'm comin on mighty mean in my old age."

The Old Man thrashed wildly as the first spike ripped into flesh. Abel and Gabriel, clinging to handfuls of fur, would have been hurled aside if not for the quick support of half a dozen shouting men. The crowd swirled around the action hungrily, their moon-washed faces passing from bone-white to deep shadow—as Saul *again* raised the hammer, and *again* slammed it down. The final blow drove the spike solidly into wood. The Old Man whipped his head side to side and bowed his back. A shudder ran up his length.

When the crowd piled on he flailed hysterically. A fresh spike was driven through his left calf. The Old Man threw open his mouth in a long, wrenching shriek. The other leg was quickly impaled. He ceased screaming and froze in a wretched arch, favoring the wounded areas. The least move produced unbelievable agony.

Saul stood sweating, slowly clenching and unclenching his fingers, sucking saliva from the corners of his mouth. The

primitive thrill passed from his eyes, and he relaxed.

“By God, sir,” Gabriel managed, “that oughta—that *should* oughta show who’s boss!”

“Look;” Abel whispered, as a series of spasms contorted the thing’s pink, pug-like face, “it’s still alive!”

Gabriel clamped a claw on Saul’s hammer arm. “Needs a couple more whacks, sir, is all. Just a couple more.”

Saul slowly turned his head. The full moon made Gabriel’s face a ghastly mask of morbid excitement. Behind him, a dozen others displayed a gamut of expressions; from shock and revulsion to anticipation and bloodlust. By his quick and intuitive appraisal, Saul knew just where his support lay. He addressed those squeamish faces frostily, his heart brimming with contempt. “Lord,” he said evenly, “I don’t make no claim as to knowin everthin what goes on. I’m a simple man, and not above basic corruption. But I knows sin when I sees it, and I hereby grudge all them cowards what defies your bidding.” He shook the hammer, flicked blood from his fingers. “God gimme the strength to do what’s got to be done.”

Saul draped his arms around his sons’ shoulders. “Now I want you boys to stand this critter up in plain sight, so’s everybody can see what I’m doin’s right.” He squeezed their arms affably, a kindly coach trying to drum up a little enthusiasm. “Somethin *special*’s happenin here, boys! Somethin important! The Good Lord is testin us with this wicked monster—no other explanation possible.” He gently steered them to the pine’s rotted base and nudged the pitchfork with the toe of his boot. “Dig.”

Saul relit his pipe and smoked patiently, facing the nervous crowd while Gabriel and Abel dug out a hole to post the pine. A nightmarish scream as his boys stood the tree upright, a round of moans from the neighbors. Saul smoked with affected nonchalance, for the first time in as long as he could remember battling a troubled conscience. It was that damned animal; wilting instead of defending itself, making him look bad in front of everybody. He turned back.

The thing’s feet just touched the ground. A series of sobs escaped in irregular spurts, tapering to wet, hacking coughs. Gravity was pulling at the Old Man’s length, stretching

his wounds. Saul watched, fascinated. But as moonlight played over that flat twisted face, the cinched lids peeled apart and their opposing eyes locked. Saul shook from his widow's peak to his pinched, curling toes. Was this really *It*; that half-seen, scurrying creature of legend...sasquatch, troll, bogeyman, troglodyte; the fabled relic caught somewhere between man and subman...and would his god have created something so hideous and furtive, so *passive*? His words came back to haunt him—*was* this some sort of test? Just as blind ego was coming to his rescue, the thing's eyes rolled up and it renewed its moaning, but now with depth and continuity.

A hail of rocks battered the creature up and down. When the stoning ceased, Saul picked up Gabriel's hammer and a single spike. He guessed where the animal's heart should be. As he began his slow approach his doubt pursued him relentlessly. *Lord, give me courage. Guide my hand, guide my heart.*

Each new blow brought on a fresh convulsion, until the Old Man's frame crimped in a steady head-to-toe tremor. Eventually there could be no more pain. Nerves relaxed, violent contractions became feeble spasms.

The blows stopped.

Through a veil of blood the Old Man saw Saul step back, saw him grab a Bible from one man and a pitchfork from another. Saul weighed one against the other; the book in his left hand, the weapon in his right. He raised the pitchfork and held it high, hesitated.

The Old Man stared into eyes that glistened with an unfathomable rage. He stiffened and looked away, to where the tops of pines cut a jagged pattern in the false dawn, as Saul aimed the pitchfork for his throat, and with a grunt drove it home.

Just before sunrise Saul trudged back up the grade, bleary-eyed and uniquely troubled, the Winchester cradled

loosely in his arm. Every time he'd begun to drift, the white cramp of conscience rocked him right back up. He needed to face his demon in the flesh, rather than have it stare back meekly in his imagination—and this time without the presence of all those skittish neighbors. More than this, he needed that mocking gray monster as a trophy, was fully prepared to tear it down and drag it back to Piety. With each boot's crunch he grew in confidence, and by the time he stormed round the copse he was his unshakeable old, jerky-tough self again.

Dogs, or some other big carnivores, had made quick work of the intruder, and now there wasn't much left; just a knot of gristly strands still fixed to the pine. The anticlimax was so unfair Saul froze right where he was, reduced to a minor observer in a very dim big picture. And, as he stood nonplussed, dawn's first ray burned down the hills, brilliantly lighting the scene. An unprecedented, overwhelming pang of shame dropped him to his knees.

For a while his mind was blank. Only gradually did he become aware of the stench of his sweat, of the crushing ache in his head, of the oddly sour taste of cold metal. With a most unmanly cry, Saul tore the Winchester's barrel from his mouth and dropped the rifle between his knees. He struggled to his feet. In the warming wash of sun Saul was a tempest of conflicting emotions, at war with himself as much as his environment. The pine's leaning shadow fell across his eyes. He looked up. Black with rage, Saul went ballistic on the affixed remnants; ripping the strands free with his nails, trying to tear out the spike using only his hands. When that failed, he grabbed the Winchester by the barrel and smashed the stock repeatedly against the spike, succeeding only in rocking it aside before shattering the stock completely. Saul collapsed with the effort, one arm clinging to the pine, the other dead at his side. When he again found his feet it was a bright new day. Saul pushed off and, embracing his chest, staggered back down the grade to break the news.

ScanElite

“Yeah, yeah, Ernie, I got a good one here. Says he spent twenty years on the damn thing; can you believe it!” The Beamer leaned back, receiver locked in shoulder and chin, hands free to rattle the keyboard. “Calls it *Search And Rescue*, and claims it’s mystery, adventure, and psychological suspense all rolled up into one beautifully polished package. No, I’m not kidding. Nine-freaking-hundred and seventy-two pages, man! I’ve got it right here. It’s on a floppy, straight off his hard drive. And get this, get this, get this...the guy—are you listening, Ernie? Yeah, well, he inserts a copyright symbol, right under his name! Uh-oh, it’s Superman! Boy, when I seen that I just knew he was serious...sure, sure...I copied the whole thing straight onto our drive. So what do you think? I’m hearing you, Ernie. ScanElite’s just the ticket for this fish. How’s about Norway? They love ‘psychological suspense.’ *What* better market? Spain? Espanol’s almost too easy. Whatever. Sure I’ve got the code.”

The Beamer rocked side to side in his chair. It was a lovely gray L.A. day; even the graffiti appeared to sparkle in the

mist. He leaned over, squished and smeared a spider on the pane. “Then give me one he’ll appreciate, Ernie. That’s almost a thousand pages, for Christ’s sake. Ten-four; here it comes now.” The Beamer adjusted the zoom on his screen. “Let’s see. The William Morass Literary Agency, Agency To The Stars appreciates your contacting us...blah blah blah...overwhelming number of submissions...impossible to judge every manuscript on an individual basis...considers your work of the highest quality—good, good; I like that part...hopes you will continue to submit your manuscripts on a regular basis—you got that right—and, of course, will never accept a cent in payment for any service or subjective evaluation. Et-freaking-*cetera*. This one’s a goer, Ernie. Right away. I’ll get back to you on it. How’d that casting call go? No! She did it how many times? Okay, okay, my lips are sealed. Too bad hers weren’t. Just joshing you, big fella! All right; I’ve gotta get on this Search And Rescue guy anyway. Ciao, baby.”

The Beamer replaced the receiver and bent to his work. *Dear Author*, he typed. He copied and pasted the rejection, and under this typed *The Very Best Of Luck, W. Morass, William Morass Literary Agency, Agency To The Stars*. The Beamer then opened the ScanElite program on his drive, peeking round the room as he typed in the pass: an old literary agent habit; he was the building’s sole occupant. The screen showed symmetric halves. The Beamer loaded Search And Rescue. The text appeared running down the left side. Above this he typed *English*, and above the opposing column *Spanish*. The Beamer hit Connect, and the right-hand side immediately translated Search And Rescue. The Beamer now hit Indigenous.

The beauty of ScanElite is that it doesn’t just translate verbatim. It’s loaded with idiomatic guides, thesauri, map features, governmental agencies, histories, cuisines...when the Beamer hit Indigenous the program introduced samples of locales similar to those in Search And Rescue, altered dishes to those popular in contemporary Spain, overlaid rural maps matching the square mileage of entered sites while adjusting street names accordingly, altered weather patterns, host affiliations, slang phrases...the Beamer shook his head admiringly. Search And Rescue was now a novel written by a

Spaniard, in a mode and tense only a Spaniard could appreciate. While the original author continued to beat his head on agency doors, his novel would be on the imports carousel, finding its way to airports, gift shops, and candy stores before finding its way to permanent obscurity. By that time a hundred others would be hard on its heels. The Beamer hit Send and wagged his head once more. Technology is a beautiful thing.

Instantly an email icon appeared on his screen. The Beamer looked around the room again. If Ernie'd changed his mind it was too late now. He opened the message and squinted thoughtfully.

Please take heed. The ScanElite program has a bug that can be traced to senders and associates. I have developed a con-program that will not only disable electronic eavesdroppers, but will enable users to increase profits exponentially by automatically cross-referencing to desaturated global links. This message is new, and if you are reading it now you are the first to view. If you do not respond, the message will migrate to every literary agent in the book. Beat the feeding frenzy. I am willing to take you on as an equal partner, no questions asked. Click on the link below. Now.

The Beamer's forefinger was an epee. The link opened on a phone number; very near, same area code, same prefix. He picked up the receiver and dialed, his eyes glued to the screen.

"Go ahead."

"I got your message," the Beamer whispered, "and I must say I'm impressed with your enthusiasm. However, the William Morass Literary Agency, Agency To The Stars is a perfectly upright organization, and we do not engage in practices that are not one hundred percent aboveboard." He licked his lips. "And, of course, we never accept a cent in payment for any service or subjective evaluation."

"You got to the phone fast enough. Come now, Mr. Morass, we're both men of the world, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Of course, of course. But you weren't all that generous with the details in your message."

"We obviously can't discuss business over the phone. You're familiar with Chez le Encountre?"

“Sure, I lunch there all the time. You’re pretty close by?”

“On the patio. I can’t sit here forever without looking suspicious. It’s starting to rain.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll tell my secretary to send the staff home early.” The Beamer gently replaced the receiver, grabbed an umbrella, and sprinted for the door. It was starting to pour. The *Chez* waited only three blocks down. He couldn’t afford to fire up the Ol’ Lexer and make a stately showing; time was running against him. The Beamer hopped puddles until he saw the familiar wrought iron rail. He turned up his collar, righted the umbrella, and paced the slurping cement steps with decorum.

At a storefront table, under an anodized steel umbrella, hunched a raincoated man, gloved hands folded on the glass. The Beamer couldn’t tell anything about him, other than that he was thin and Caucasian, due to the coat’s floppy drawn hood. The Beamer shook rain off his umbrella as he took the facing seat.

“Pardon me, sir. I believe we have an appointment here.”

The stranger didn’t raise his head. “I prefer to keep my identity secret, at least for the time being. The business we are about to discuss, you understand, carries certain extralegal ramifications.”

“Certainly, certainly.” The Beamer scooted forward; out of the rain, out of the security cameras, and intuitively lowered his voice. “You mentioned something over the phone about a collaboration. Of sorts—you weren’t definite either way. I’d like to hear more.”

“SEG: the ScanElite Guard. I’m the inventor. I’m also a handyman, investor, programmer—I’ve a long and quilted history. At one point I ran a very successful literary agency, making good money on editing services, promo packages, quickie covers, fonts and letterheads, bylines and boondoggles.”

The Beamer fidgeted defensively. “We got those too.”

“The Guard simply functions as the next-generation Elite. It not only outperforms ScanElite, it seeks out sources incidentally encrypted by what I call misnomers. In other

words, there are literally hundreds of thousands of potential sucke—clients—open to Internet voyeurism...but only when a sophisticated program culls incidentals. Okay? Every author wannabe isn't wooing Herman or Literary Marketplace; the genuine novices are purchasing learner programs, taking classes over the Internet, peeking in on conventions...these are the ones we go after; the ones who've yet to feel the sting. SEG can smoke 'em out."

"Brilliant! But where do I come in?"

"Fifty-fifty. I've burned all my bridges. You've got the connects, the name, the network, the clientele. We do this together. If it busts, we slip out of the light and swear we've never met. If it flies, and I know it will, we buy an island and sell watered-down Margaritas to the tourist rubes."

The Beamer's initial trepidation was now fully replaced by awe. "Mister, you are one savvy customer." He offered his hand.

"I'm using my cell phone." The stranger faced it toward the Beamer. "That, Mr. Morass, is the power of the Internet. A man can send and receive messages electronically, anywhere over the globe. He can send text and graphics as attachments; even whole manuscripts. A smart man can even encrypt those messages with tracers; microscopic munchers that will tell him, instantly, if his stuff goes anywhere it's not supposed to go. Not only that, his encryption can run on a floppy and thereby infect another's hard drive, exporting a trace signal the original sender can monitor. And not just at home, Mr. Morass; this kind of activity can also be transmitted to and from a properly outfitted cell phone."

"No kidding," the Beamer mumbled. "And I need to know all that to sell Margaritas?"

"Not everything. But if a signal should get lost, somehow, we might have to perform a search and rescue operation before the authorities catch on."

"Huh. You think we could be traced over the Internet?"

"Not readily. There's just too much traffic. Any kind of search and rescue would leave one of us hanging, and I'd sure hate to be that guy."

“You don’t say.” The Beamer backed his seat a foot or two. “I can’t say I feel all that comfortable with the operation as you lay it out. Maybe there’s still some bugs.”

“No problem. We just do a search and rescue and stomp the little creeps before they run.”

“Look, I gotta go,” the Beamer said. “Lit. Convention; all the biggies...Harris...Fine...Herman...Gooder Books...Agents R Us...Flybi Nite’s...Auther’s Junkchun. Maybe we’ll pick up this little talk some other time.”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

The Beamer rose. “I don’t think I have to take that kind of behavior, Mister. I have friends in this town.”

“I’m sure you do.” The stranger rose also.

“What’s your problem, buddy?” The Beamer moved off, looking over his shoulder as he walked. The stranger snapped shut his cell phone and stepped off in pursuit.

“Jesus!” There was no one around; the rain was coming down too hard. The Beamer ducked between shops, saw the figure picking up pace. The Beamer raced awkwardly down the dreary aisles between stores, twice nearly falling in puddles, hearing the splashes coming on hard to his rear. He stretched out flat behind a trestled planter, half-submerged, and listened as the splashes approached, paused a few feet away, and slowly moved along. He was shivering like a dog as he snuck around the building. His mind was halting, his pulse stumbling. The Beamer pasted himself in a haberdasher’s doorwell, wiped the rain from his face. Gradually he grew aware of another presence. That second party, not at all mysterious, morphed by degrees from an amber lamp-generated shadow; looming brick by brick on a facing wall, the frame and demeanor fully anticipated, the coat and hood, even in the transparent, absolutely unmistakable. The hand was rising with deadly certainty; slowly, slowly, the swelling shadow seeming to bear down until it all but grazed the Beamer’s cringing own. The ballooning shape topped the wall and the Beamer’s heart stopped. Funny thing about nature: even at the very jaws of death, the cornered animal may refuse to turn and face its stalker—that long-suppressed image can be so mortifying as to

dwarf the moment itself. Yet just as the horror was upon him, the Beamer managed to catch his breath and whirl.

It was a gummy old bum in a trench coat, bonnet, and shades, whacked out on speed and booze and God knows what. He thrust that determining hand in the Beamer's trembling face. "Take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and be—"

"Christ!" The Beamer rammed him aside. "I'm a literary agent!" He found himself stumbling in circles; well as he knew the mall, his self-preservation instinct had produced a profound sense of disorientation. He slunk shop to shop for perhaps fifteen minutes, retracing his steps half a dozen times before passing headlights gave him a fix.

The Beamer scrambled slipping and sliding on the slick cement, barking his shins on cast iron table legs, breaking his nails on the shops' gray brick walls. The street was deserted, the rain pounding. He stumbled off the curb and almost lost it in the street; but a streamlined, medium-sized moving truckvan was barreling his way. Very high-tech, ultramodern; an imported job, eggshell-white, super-smooth lines. Wipers accelerated, high beams flashed twice. The truck stopped six feet shy, on hydro-grooved tires, barely having to swerve. The Beamer staggered up to the passenger side and the window hissed a crack. He clung to the pane's lip, his breath fogging the glass.

"Help me out, buddy! Be a pal! There's some nut chasing me down, man, and I think he's trying to kill me."

It was impossible to make out features in the dark cab. The voice was gravel and phlegm. "Well then, call a cop! Jesus, man, *I* coulda killed you! You oughta have more sense than to jump out in front of a moving truck."

"I'm desperate, friend. Really! I'll make it good to you. Promise. But for Christ's sake, let me in!"

The click of an electrically triggered catch. The window hissed back up. The Beamer yanked the door and squeezed inside. "Bless you, friend." He slammed the door. "Let's get the hell out of here!" The truck moved off.

The Beamer ran a sleeve over the glass. "Anywhere you're going. Just get me away from that kook." He leaned back, gulping the A/C. "Oh, mama." The Beamer rolled his

head. “You’re a life saver. I mean that literally, and I’m a literary agent.” He extended a hand. “William Morass, Agent To The Stars.”

“I’m using the gearshift.”

“Right, right. You just go ahead and do the driving; we’re both cool here.” The Beamer looked the cab over appreciatively. “This is some vehicle, cousin. The works. What you got in the back?”

“Just stuff. Go ahead and take a gander. Door’s unlocked. Lift the latch and give her a shove.”

“Yeah.” The Beamer pushed the door wide. Heavy as it was, it slid soundlessly and almost without effort. The driver flicked a dash switch and the rear was brilliantly illuminated.

“Wow!” The Beamer’s eyes were alive. “It’s like a hospital back there! Sink, tools; everything stainless steel. And what’s that big goober you got hanging in the rear? Looks like a meat hook.” The Beamer grinned at the driver. “What are you, friend? Some kind of a mobile butcher?”

The door latches locked with resounding clicks. “Something like that.”

This part is kind of difficult to describe for readers who may be, understandably, more sensitive to the gut, rather than the psychological, accounts of a written narrative—but it wasn’t the actual *pain* of the trapezius-ripping hook that brought the Beamer screaming into consciousness. It was the *horror*. The horror of *knowing* what his flickering subconscious had been *insisting* was all a dream.

The driver stood just before him, dressed head to toe for surgery; cap, mask, sterile gloves...the truck wasn’t moving, and only the immediate area was lit, lending the place a morbid, suffocating mien.

“Sorry about the medical getup, but I’ve a feeling things are about to get a tad on the messy side.” The Beamer screamed some more. “Please feel free to articulate most vociferously. While you were sawing logs we were on our way to a remote part of town. Your complaints would only prove music to the ghetto’s ears, and anyway the walls of this truck are completely soundproof.”

“Please, friend,” the Beamer gurgled. “All a mistake. We don’t gotta do this.”

“I see. You just *accidentally* took my life’s work, my heart and soul, and zipped it off to Barcelona for a few quick bucks. You raped my muse, asshole. But maybe you’re right. Maybe she was ‘just asking for it’.”

The Beamer whipped his head side to side with outrage, sweat and foam glancing in the light. “I’m a literary agent, for God’s sake! We do this all day long. Countless submissions. You’re special, is that it? *Christ!*” Comprehension dawned in his working iris. “You’ll get your damned money, okay? All profits are digitally tabbed through Paymaster!” A shudder of hope. “Reach in my left pocket, friend. Grab my cell and let me make a call. We’ll get cash in your hand pronto, and I’ll make sure to slip in something nice on the side for your trouble.”

“Gee, I’m sorry, but your phone’s been confiscated, along with your I.D., keys, and address book. Wink-wink, Mr. Morass. I think you understand: we’re both men of the world.”

“Keep ’em! Take my Lexus and my credit cards. They’re yours, guy! Just let me go!”

The stranger nodded wistfully. He folded his hands at the waist and raised his eyes in the shadows. “Just before you so abruptly encountered slumber, you voiced a curiosity as to the particulars of this truck’s cargo bay modifications. Now, I’ve always admired men of an analytical bent, so it’s with some pride I hereupon share our most interesting arena.” He disengaged a rolling office chair from a wall clamp and moved it directly before his squirming guest, leaned pensively against the sculpted leather back, and, with his free hand, tenderly removed from an arm fixture a rectangular steel contraption. It was about the size of a videocassette. “This is a remote control unit.” He got comfortable in the chair. “It instigates, and regulates, the various equipment and paraphernalia about us.”

The flick of a switch, and scores of colored lights popped out of the darkness like the eyes of ever-patient predators. The Beamer had never witnessed an environment so patched and daisy-chained anywhere outside of Metro-Oscar-Mayer Studios.

“This little lever,” and the speaker tilted his device for inspection’s sake, “controls the vertical inclination of your pointy spooning friend. It can be nudged up” —the Beamer shrieked as the hook raised his heels— “and just as gently lowered.” His soles returned to the floor. The Beamer’s host slipped on a pair of noise-canceling headphones and bent over his remote control. “Up. And down. Up. And down. Up and down and up and down and up—”

“Son,” frowned the Vice Principal, “we’ve been over and over these occupational evaluations, and I’m frankly stumped. According to the State’s best experts, you have the morals of a child molester, the spiritual leanings of a Worm occultist, the ethics of a special education bully, and the IQ of a kumquat picked out of season. And, according to your mother here, you show zero familial aptitude and nil ambition.” He thumbed the pages irritably. “Based on everything we have to go by, the only careers open to you are auto mechanic, Tupperware hostess, literary agent, gay porno actor, and petting zoo rodeo clown.”

“He ain’t got no carwork sperience,” Ma chimed in, “he don’t look good in a skirt, he’s pony-shy, can’t never get it up less he diddles first, and never could read or write worth a damn.”

The VP signed the top page with a flourish. “That settles it then.”

Oh, Jesus: a donkey had him cornholed and a lamprey had him by the weenie. Worse, worse; it was way worse. The lamprey was going all the way, its electric lips a red-hot vise round his beebies. And the darned donkey—well, he just didn’t know when to quit. The Beamer flapped and foamed with the agony and ecstasy, and now Ma had him by the spine, had smashed her paw right through the skin to work him like a puppet. Wake up. She had him jangling this way and that, had him hopping and popping and peeing in time. Wake up. He was on fire; his eyes were coals, his tickle-tank a furnace, his dinky dork a fat purple poker.

WAKE UP!

Never rouse a sleeper in REM. Consciousness is an ungraspable balloon, sensation merely novocaine's initial blush. But the Beamer did have real sensation, and very focalized at that. Eyes, back, ballsack, and buttole: that just-dreamt fire would not abate. Or is consciousness really an extension of dreaming, or the other way around...his eyelids burned, but not only from waking. With a tearing of tenderest flesh, the Beamer hit reality screaming.

"Remain perfectly still." The voice was a therapist's monotone. "Struggling only makes it worse." The Beamer watched his host through a crimson veil. "The pain at your eyes is produced by a pair of fish hooks, one inserted in each upper lid. These hooks, attached to fishing line, are also controlled vertically by the remote unit. Observe." The Beamer squealed and shrieked like a Campfire Girl. "This way I am assured of your continued attention. We have much to discuss." He depressed a lever and the hooks' tension diminished. "Fishing line is also very useful anywhere finesse is required. For example, line is securely wound about your scrotum, just where it meets the abdomen. That line is made taut by a ring affixed between your feet, and this arrangement produces a *squeezing*, rather than a tearing, effect." He wagged his head. "I do so want to apologize for taking liberties with your apparel, but there was no other way to get you all prim and proper. And you were very messy. Plus, I'm absolutely certain you're aware of a profound sense of rectal invasion. This can be attributed to an upright steel rod, bolted to the floor and terminating at waist-level, resting squarely in the most-becoming recesses of your dorsal region. The cap on this projection contains cross-terminals for producing mild electrical stimulation. Again, observe."

The Beamer almost hit the truck's roof with the pain. All that stopped him was a tightening line round his nethers. Halfway to a eunuch, he trembled and danced against opposing forces.

"Anything, man! I'll do anything! Let me go! What do you want? Name it! Oh please let me down!"

"In the mood for a chat, are we? Well, why don't we start with a heartfelt discussion on ethics? I'll go first. Let me present you with a scenario. In this example, a decent, creative

man has labored a decade to produce a work of real literature, only to be ambushed by one of those marketing maggots known as literary agents. Having dealt with their caliber before, he encrypts data which makes his work traceable, records copies with the Library Of Congress, and organizes a Watch group databank. But, as a genuinely creative and therefore essentially virtuous individual, he finds himself utterly incapable of dealing with abject venality, at least not in a manner our spoonfed society would term rational behavior. He realizes the ponderous and indifferent legal course is no recourse: no course at all—there is no justice for a victim; the very existence of victimhood obviates, if not downright negates, the very notion of justice. Mutual exclusivity aside, this hypothetical individual decides to take matters into his own hands. To wit: vengeance and heroism are synonymous. As a literary agent you are surely aware of this. For a hero to exist at all, it is imperative the villain get his just deserts. Your rebuttal?”

“God I’ll do anything! I agree! You’re right and I’m wrong! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, sorry, sorry!”

“Wrong answer.” Levers were moved like fades on an equalizer. The Beamer, butt up and balls down, became an electric marionette screaming bloody murder. The levers were returned to zero. “Why did you do this to me? How could you do this to a man’s work?”

“I’m a freaking literary agent, I told you! It’s what we do! Mouths to feed, bills to pay! Mommy! Let me go, let me go!”

“How could you do this to me!”

“Oh, God! Oh God, oh God oh God! I’m dying here. My confession! Forgive me! I do take the holy Jesus into my chest place. I repent, I tell ya, I repent!”

“Talk to me!”

“Mama Mary! Mother Jesus! Oh let me into your heavenly halo...I...Kee-rist! I’m spewing here, God. He’s making me bleed like Jesus all over—take me up to your cloud home, O savior me. Mommy, I’m dying, dying, dying...forgive me if I done any sins but we all done some, Ma, dear Jesus God, let me go, let me down, oh mama I’m sorry, so help me God, help me Jesus, help me mommy, oh Mary Martin, oh Luther

and John, oh Moses, Manny, Moe, and Jack, I confess; all of it, I'm sorry, man, I'm sorrysorrysorry, pass the hat and crucify the choir, oh God it hurts, it hurts but I love you Jesus, the kids, the little woman, all of ya, the Beamer done his best, fellas, and he never squealed a once, oh Jesus, God, Mary, Christjesus, mamamercy, oh please oh please oh pleaseohpleaseohplease..."

"Enough already!" The Beamer's host killed the remote's master switch and the whole apparatus collapsed. The Beamer, squealing, hopped free of his anal pal. The smocked man reached to the stainless counter and brought back a pair of shears. While the Beamer slouched weeping, he carefully snipped the fishing line, high and low, and reached around to gently disengage the meat hook.

In one move the Beamer was on him. He grabbed the throat, tore the shears from the hand, went absolutely ape on the man, shrieking and shouting, cussing and cutting, slicing and hacking and chopping and stabbing until there was only a bloody pile. The Beamer tore through the man's clothes. Wallet, pen and pad, Juicy Fruit, penlight, miscellaneous papers...but no car keys. The Beamer tore out the cash, unlatched the door, tumbled up front. No keys in the ignition. Frantic, not thinking, he leaped naked out the passenger side and ran off into the rain.

It was the black ghetto, all right. He recognized it from last year's Morass-sponsored Irish Limerick Competition. The money stuck out of his fist like a swollen green thumb. The Beamer bent at the waist and inserted it in the one place no sane man would visit. He then ran flapping up the street until he saw a long black limousine easing out of a tenement's drive. The Beamer puffed on with a passion, and when the limo attempted to swerve he deliberately leaped in its path. The car stopped with a squeal and splatter. The Beamer stumbled round to the rear window. The pane hissed down a crack. Inside was an immaculately-dressed black man, looking more amazed than frightened.

"Lord, son! What happened to you!"

"Long story," the Beamer panted. "Help me out, friend. Drive me somewhere, anywhere. I can pay you. Cash." He proffered his backside, took a deep breath and pushed.

“That’s all right! We can settle later. Who did this to you?”

“Crazy guy. Didn’t like me selling his story.”

“No! So you’re telling me he actually *physically accosted* you?”

“Look at me!”

A beetling of brows. “We just may be talking lawsuit here. Do you have any inside friends? And where is this individual? I would like to interview him.”

The naked man’s eyes slunk to the asphalt. “Oh... around. You know, I been thinking maybe I *could* use some legal help.”

The rider drummed his nails on the glass. “I’m going to be perfectly frank with you here, son. You impress me as a man with the wit and wisdom of a salamander, the scruples of a penitentiary snitch, and the moral restraint of a hooker during shore leave. You wouldn’t, by any chance, have ever worked in a petting zoo?”

“Are you kidding? I’m a literary agent!”

“Saints!” The latch was released and the door swung open. The dark figure extended a sticky hand. “Johnny Cock-run, Defense Attorney To The Stars.”

Boy

Despite the old song's lyrics, Southern California rainfall varies widely between *never* and *pours*. The January through March stuff tends to sploosh and drizzle, to pound and peter. Arthur could be allowed out with only his little crayola raincoat, even on evenings, if he didn't wander too far, and if the air was not overly nippy. He liked to leap small puddles, and sometimes to come down hard in their centers. When he got to the mall he enjoyed the way its antique streetlamps glowed in the mist. Spooky and cozy all at once.

As he came in off the sidewalk he noted few shoppers about; rough weather for Angelenos. But that's a positive; crowds just show you how small you really are. The youngster hopped a few more puddles and huddled in a candy store's doorwell. To his right stood a pair of facing cast iron benches, adrift in an amber pool. A frail figure sat crumpled on one of the benches, bent into a rumpled trench coat with a clear plastic protector. On his lap shivered a soggy old dog, gray and white with a dirty mussed coat. The boy inched along, as children will, moving well to well, until he stood between benches. After

Boy

a minute the old man's head rose, weighed by the rain and years. His jaw shuddered as the lids peeled apart. His rheumy old eyes fell on the boy.

"Son. Son...what is your name?"

"Ata."

"Otto?"

"Arta."

"R2? R2D2?"

"Artr."

"Arthur. Do you like animals, Arthur?"

"Yesr."

"Dogs?"

"Yesr."

"Do you like this dog, Arthur?"

The boy leaned in. Sensing him, the dog dazedly lifted its head.

"Yesr."

"His name, Arthur, is Boy." The old man gave the animal's paw a little shake. "Boy, Arthur. Arthur, Boy." The effort cost them both. The hand and paw dropped. "Boy is well along in dog years, Arthur, and has difficulty with many basic functions. Also, he is all but blind and can no longer run. He cannot speak because he had a very bad master long ago, but he is a good dog, son, capable of giving a caring master as much love as he receives."

"Yesr."

The old man folded forward. "Would you like to have Boy, Arthur? Would you like to take him with you and give him a good home? I can no longer care for him."

The boy watched politely as the old man very gently lifted the dog and placed him between their feet. "Yesr."

The old man cupped Arthur's hands in his own. His eyes were pinched barnacles, his mouth a closing cave. "Bless you, son. Bless you, bless you, bless you." His shaking old hand fumbled with the trench coat. "Here is his little leash. He must be walked on this leash at all times, for he is sightless, as I mentioned, and unable to follow commands as you might expect of a much younger animal."

Arthur obediently clipped the leash onto Boy's tattered collar. He stood patiently, waiting to be told. At last the old man said, faint as the drizzle, "We must part now, son."

Arthur carefully walked Boy home, minding obstacles. It was slow going, as the dog proceeded in a most ungainly fashion, and several times stopped to whine in confusion. Twice Arthur had to stoop and bundle him up for carrying. The dog stank, badly. It was not a healthy smell.

The closet door cracked open. A wedge of light grew and grew until it stabbed the curly gray mass trembling in a milk crate by the water heater. Two tiny eyes peered up fearfully.

"That's it," William said.

Jeannie's brows knit. "Where did he find it?"

"Said some old white man at the mall gave it to him. Don't worry; I made sure he got an earful. He won't be approaching strangers anymore. Not as long as he's my son."

Jeannie kept her eyes on the dog. "He looks real sick."

"I don't think he'll last the night."

"Well, Arthur can't keep him."

"I know he can't, Genie. Breaks my heart, but it's got to be done."

Jeannie folded her arms and nodded grimly. "Breaks your heart. And now I guess it's my motherly duty to break Arthur's."

"I already made my speech. And if you think my job's easy, then you just don't know squat about men."

Arms ran around waists in an exclusive human circle. Thus entwined, they looked long and regretfully at the dirty pile of dog. Jeannie nodded again, patted her husband's rear. On exiting, her instinct was to further close the door for privacy's sake. William gave her a minute before removing a length of coiled clothesline from an upper shelf. The dog's eyes glinted against the dark. William looked down. Their eyes remained wed while he looped and knotted one end of the line. He pressed the loop forward and gradually went down on one knee.

"Good boy."

“Arthur.”

The head shook beneath the covers.

“Arthur?”

The head shook harder.

“Arthur!” Jeannie yanked down the covers. “If you’re going to behave like a child, I’m going to treat you like a child.” She leaned in, kissed his hot forehead, and whispered, “*Child.*” Jeannie smooshed him all over, nibbled on his little nose. When that didn’t work she sat up straight and spoke in a businesslike manner. “This has to be done, Arthur. The dog is too old for a young boy. Daddy is taking him to a place that gives old animals to old people who are better suited. That’s the fair thing, for both the dog and for you. You never told us you wanted a dog, honey. We’ll take you to get the one you love. That’s a promise, from both me and daddy.”

Arthur pulled the covers back up.

“Sweetheart.” This time Jeannie peeled gently. She looked him straight in the eye. “Life doesn’t always work out the way we want. You’ll find that out when you get a little older. But if you’re good, people will always treat you well.” She kissed him. “That’s a promise.” And again. “And that’s a guarantee.”

At what point do we realize our lives are set in stone? There’s a treadmill of weeks and weekends, a slow parade of faces and names. Those faces become a blur, and Everyman morphs out of his pose. The names are all the same, or similar, or unpronounceable, or contrived. We burn out our youth in unreachable dreams—we plan, certainly, we muster and micromanage. We flirt with discipline...somewhere in there we lose it all; we let go, without intending, generally without knowing.

Maybe it’s marriage. Maybe it’s the job. Calendars grow yellow and dog-eared, pinup girls are replaced by National Parks. And the rut owns us before we know it.

For a genuinely sweet man like Arthur, that rut, or its realization, does not bring about a psychological crisis. The old shoe has always fit. He’d never really had a school crowd; he was more wont to lose himself in hobbies and daydreams. Too

shy for a real relationship; the girls he fell for were being swept off even as he rehearsed his lines and avenues. Chemical engineering: a trade that started out loftily enough, only to taper to contracts with soap manufacturers and cat litter companies. The apartment was nice, the condo nicer...but somewhere in there he became *implanted*; not just in space and time—in destiny. And he would watch the bugs driving up Lincoln, glazed in their cellphone stasis, lost in a verbal melee unknowable to a blank smiler like Arthur Beyer, whose butt was made for blues and benches, whose eyes could reflect but never shine. He was an extra in his own lame movie, dining alone, dancing solo. As people lost interest, his reciprocal energy decreased. A fixture anywhere he went; the death of the party. And so, at some indistinguishable juncture in his thirty-seventh year, Arthur Beyer just died in place.

That's when he met Angela.

It was a shareholders' merge at the Ritz Carlton in Marina del Rey. Even technical men, and even minor engineers like Arthur Beyer, were compelled to show; it was on the agenda. These reservations are unbelievably dull, but they're pretty well catered, and the rooms are nice. After forum and presentation, employees are free to wander around the lobby or pool, or to stand outside on the walk overlooking the yachts and dinghies. For a homebody like Arthur, this imposition was a blue-moon opportunity to kill another party.

Strange that the lonesome heart should pummel itself further. People such as Arthur are no good in a crowd; no good at small talk, too shy to run with the ball, out of touch with the news and the lowdown. They're wallflowers, they're lousy décor. Stranger still: even wallflowers don't like each other; there's no such thing as a growing pocket of bores, no franchise on disenfranchisement. Drop by drop, drips enforce their own isolation, smiling emptily at the guffawing and giggling circles of men and women, carefully sipped drinks half-raised.

Angela was what another drip nudgingly labeled a Lounge Lady. Arthur was moved that a woman would frequent these lobbies and bars out of lonesomeness, especially one so attractive and outwardly aggressive with men. She was able to circulate with an air of complete confidence; Arthur recognized

that effrontery as the pause-and-slither of desperation. The harder they fall, the harder women like Angela try. She was dressed all in blue; Arthur's favorite color, and she wore her hair natural the way he liked it; that type of allure is exclusive to African-American women too proud to cop out. She was sleek, with high cheekbones, and wore very little makeup, another big plus in Arthur's book.

Her eyes flashed across the room. Arthur colored and stared into his drink. When he looked back up she was smiling like an old friend. He blushed furiously, and took his first real drink of the evening the moment she began sauntering away. He kept his eyes on the ambered ice: Seven and Seven. As the pianist broke into *Unchained Melody* a pocket of unsung crooners formed spontaneously, leaning round the eighty-eight like a barbershop quartet. One guy was so offkey the rest were forced to dredge tonically; they'd get him right up to scale and he'd sink like a stone. It was an oddly magical moment; full of sentiment and society and barely dampened humor.

A voice like honey was humming along. Arthur looked up, almost guiltily. She was prettier than he'd imagined, and her eyes were sparkling into his; it took him a second to realize she was misting: the magic had her, if only for the space of a wobbly pace in time. "My favorite song," she hummed.

"Mine too," he hemmed.

"I'm Angela."

He might have known. Angel. Are parents prescient?

"Arthur Beyer. I'm, um, can I buy you a drink?"

"They're on the house, sweetheart. You're not a party crasher, are you?"

"Oh no! I'm a chemical engineer. Lab man. We just sat for the conference and had to wait in the lobby but it's pretty nice really because it's really pretty homey but more like home away from home if you see what I mean."

She giggled, angelically, and gripped his forearm just below the elbow. Ten thousand electric lunatics scrambled up his arm. Angela massaged his back between the blades and Arthur almost fainted. "I'll have what you're having, sugar."

Arthur ordered a similar. What a turn-on. Buying a pretty lady a drink and the guys all watching. He'd be the talk

of the office mañana, no doubt about it. But right now he was all Angela's.

Almost as soon as the drink was in her hand a voice broke in from behind. "Beyer!" Arthur looked around. "We're on, Beyer. Get it out, man. Let's go, let's go. No drinks inside."

Arthur apologized effusively, just as uncomfortable as uncomfortable can be.

Angela saved him. "I'll call you, honey." He fumbled a magic marker from his coat pocket, she gave him her cocktail napkin. An awkward moment: with nothing to write on, the woman did the unthinkable—she hiked up her dress, placed a high-heeled foot on a chair's seat, and offered her thigh for support. He couldn't back down, couldn't look up, could only scrawl his number, with one wrist resting in fishnet heaven. Nobody saw, nobody knew; and that made it even more special, even more intimate.

And the bubble popped. The crush of bodies pressed him backpedaling into the conference room, but their eyes never split, and her look, her allure, followed him inside, and pursued him home.

Arthur waited three interminable days for that damned phone to ring. He had a variety of speeches prepared, a number of mantras tucked into one corner of his subconscious, a desk littered with crib sheets and hints. At the first chiming he swept in and down, sat on broken glass, wiped a hand, nonchalantly picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"I'm looking for a certain lab man."

"Angel! I was just thinking about you."

"Ditto here, sweetheart. So are we on for tonight?"

"Gee, let me check my schedule. Well what do you know about that? The whole night free."

"We won't need the whole night, lover. I'm back at the Marina R-C. Shall we say ninish?"

"With bells on."

A smooch in the mouthpiece and the line went dead. Arthur looked at his watch. 7:10. He moved like a forward guard: bathroom, wardrobe, hall mirror, car. Jesus, she'd called him 'lover.' *Jesus*. He drove like a maniac, then like an

automaton. This part, the nerves, wasn't written into his fantasy. What happened to that suave, loquacious son of a bitch...he tipped the valet before the man had his keys; and only then realized he was flat out of cash. The credit card looked good, but a winner flashes the bills in front of a lady. He'd been told that since junior high. Unfortunately, he'd been told a lot of other things. Arthur glanced in the gift shop with rhinestones in his eyes. Generous, but not flashy. Soon, but not quick. He licked his lips. Cash first. Arthur made his way to the outdoors ATM, nestled like a cement altar in an ivy niche. Three hundred dollars would be padding enough, for show's sake. Dinner and tips on the card. Drinks and tips with cash. Promises and prayers on bluff and bravado. Card in the slot. Three zero zero. Yes.

Arthur never had a chance to reach the dispenser. He was grabbed from behind and yanked out of the camera's field. A Latino man wearing dark shades and a watchcap snatched the bills with his left hand and stuffed the right like a psychotic crab in Arthur's face.

"What did you see?"

Arthur whipped his head as those fingers made for the sockets. "My eyes!"

"What did you see?"

"Nothing!"

"You're damned fucking straight you didn't see nothing!" A knee caught him directly in the scrotum. The pain was so great, and so immediate, that he went down without witnessing his assailants' departure, without feeling his body crash on cement, without realizing he'd curled up on his side with his hands tucked between his knees like a half-dead tramp.

He didn't move for five minutes, trying to get his wind back. Nobody responded to the incident, nobody else came to visit the ATM. The camera's red light winked cheerily.

Arthur pulled himself up using the stainless steel shelf below the dispenser. His first instinct was to remove his bank card, lit by a pulsing yellow light. The screen thanked him, and reminded him to take his receipt. He made his way slowly, using walls and fenders for support. Skeptical women: This unique pain has to be monitored, not fought. Nature, in her

infinite wisdom, has placed man's chief governors outside the body, where they can dangle like a couple of tender sponge balloons with KICK ME written all over them. No pen is adequate...but by the time Arthur made the hotel's lobby he was able to feign normality with a few scooted steps at a time; to pause at the magazine rack, to rest a bit on the couch. An ice machine provided cubes and a plastic container; Arthur made his way to the men's room, eased himself into a stall, and sat for fifteen numbing minutes before checking his watch. He pulled himself together and swayed in the wall mirror. Just cleaning up and going about the routine of grooming did wonders. His mind was clearing, his thoughts zeroing in on the real world. He hurried to the gift shop, used his card to buy a dozen roses and a box of Swiss chocolates. This was all new to Arthur; he was as uncertain as he was excited. But suddenly he was drunk with testosterone—there were pendants and frilly things; stuff women were supposed to like, a delicate diamond watch, cutesy cards, individual liqueurs. What if it looked like he was coming on too strong...but what if he looked like a cheapskate—and how did he suddenly know she was here, in the lobby right now, looking for him. Arthur took his deepest breath. The pain was gone. He picked up his roses and chocolates, turned robotically, walked into the lobby.

She was lovelier than he remembered, lovelier than each successively-lovelier fantasy, lovelier than he deserved. A black Venus in red, his all-time favorite color: evening dress and heels; gold-sequined purse and black velvet gloves. And she'd done her hair soft and wavy, just the way he liked it; how could she have known. The gold hoop earrings were perfect; exactly as he'd have specified.

She was standing by the big front window. When she saw Arthur's reflection she whirled and smiled like the sun. She gasped and laughed at his gifts, took them into the crook of her left arm, took Arthur's waist in her right. Angela pulled him flush against her womanness, molded his body flush to hers, kissed him flush on the lips. No woman had ever...no feeling could be so...you could have wrung out his palms. Arthur stood with his mouth hanging open, speechless.

“You're sweet, Artie. So where do you want to do this?”

His voice caught in his throat. "I thought maybe dinner and a drink. The restaurant in this hotel is supposed to be pretty good. There's live entertainment."

She giggled and gripped his arm. "You're cute."

Arthur froze up, and a voice that was not his own mumbled, "You're pretty."

Her eyes laughed into his. Something happened and passed.

Arthur found himself leaning in, body and soul caught in a stupefying gravity. His hands floated up her arms. "You're my dream," he whispered, and cupped her shoulders in his palms. He smelled her all over; not trying to, a stranger to his own timeless receptors. For an instant he was swallowed up in that animal fragrance, too deep for the mask of Chanel.

"Then let's never wake." Her cell phone rang. "Damn." She slipped from his embrace, plucked the phone from her purse and held it to an ear. Her brows knit. She dropped it back in her purse, pulled out a compact and lipstick. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I really have to run. Something's come up."

Arthur's face fell, the tender expression replaced by deepest concern. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine." Arthur felt something moist run over his hand. He looked down. A line of red numbers blushed knuckle to wrist. "Call me." She kissed his cheek and hurriedly made her way through a plain little side door, doing her lips while watching him in the compact's mirror.

He stood there far too long, staring at that uncompromising door. A knee-high table on either side held a beige rotary telephone; the left table a house phone, the right an outside line. Arthur dragged over a red leatherette chair, looked at the numbers behind the dial, then at the numbers on his hand. How desperate would that look—separated for three minutes and he's ringing her up like a teenager pestering a heartthrob. But Arthur was desperate. His past was closing about him like a fist.

He pushed through the door expecting a side lounge or secondary reception hall. What he got was a boxlike room: black-on-gold paisley wallpaper, ruby shag carpeting, a facing door blocked by a man perched casually on a padded wood

chair. He'd been reading something; a pocketbook. "Looking for somebody?"

"A woman," Arthur tried. "Black, tall, pretty. Red evening dress. She just came in."

"Who you with?"

"I am," Arthur said uncertainly, "alone."

"I can see that. Who sent you?"

"Look...I just need to talk to that woman who came in. Her name's Angela."

The man slowly shook his head, watching Arthur with care. "Nobody came in that door, pal. Nobody but you and me."

"I was just with her, for goodness' sake."

The man put down his book and stood up. He appeared quite strong. "Do I stutter, motherfucker? Is there shit in your ears?"

Arthur shrank back. "What in the world's going on in this hotel?" He licked his lips. "Who are you? Who do you work for? Who is your employer?"

Something animal flared in the man's eyes. "Isn't that what I just asked you?" He reached for an inner pocket of his coat.

Arthur slipped back into the hallway. After half a minute he leaned his ear against the door. The voice was muffled, but he heard all he needed:

"Guy coming out, probably through the front. Black. Five-ten or eleven. A hundred and eighty-five. Cheap suit..."

Arthur went through the kitchen to the employees' parking lot. Most of the lighting came from floods positioned along the hotel's eaves. The aisles were unlit except for occasional lamps under steel cupolas. He zigzagged the rows of parked cars; suspicious-looking, certainly, but better than glare-exposed.

A hard blow took out his knees. Two pairs of hands hauled him to his feet. One pair locked his wrists behind his back, the other pulled his face forward by the lapels. A fist caught him hard on the jaw; Arthur would have gone straight down if not for those strong cuffing hands. A second punch caught him in the solar plexus. The breath whistled between his teeth. He doubled forward with his eyelids squeezed shut. His

head was yanked back up. One after the other—crushing blows, well-placed, perfectly timed. This was no mugging, not even a warning. It was a professional, methodical ultimatum. As Arthur sagged, the pauses between crashes to the skull grew longer. Now his chin was raised on a fist for inspection. He felt, or imagined he felt, a column of air proceeding that massive black fist before a wrecking ball and white light threw his entire weight into a drooling supported heap. The hard-breathing fulcrum behind him hauled him roughly vertical, using one knee at the tailbone and a sideways shove of the shoulder. Arthur's body sagged to the other side. There was a grunt in his ear: "Shit." The opposite shoulder and that knee on the coccyx again, this time with real attitude. Fingers in his hair steadied Arthur's head. The column of air, now a wide wall, whooshed in like a wave. The detonation of his skull, the hiss and crackle of cartilage. Hands dragged him up, almost from the asphalt, by an ear and lapel. A combined effort, front and rear. The man behind embraced Arthur in a propped full nelson, using his locked hands to push the mangled face forward as a shield for his own, lest that approaching tsunami take errant aim. Arthur, quite literally, never saw it coming.

When the male voice picked up it was all Arthur could do to force a breath.

"House."

Arthur pressed the receiver against his ear; unable to respond, unable to hang up.

"You got exactly three seconds. Three...two...one..."

"I'd like to speak with Angela. Please."

"Who is this?"

"My name is Arthur. Angela knows me. We were about to have dinner when something called her away." He nursed his fractured jaw with cracked and scabby fingers. "If I could only have a moment of her time, I'm certain we could clear this up."

"What needs to be cleared up?"

"I don't know. Something."

The voice was redirected. "Angie? Come here, baby. You know some guy named Arthur; owes you dinner?" The voice came back. "She don't know you from nobody, pal."

“Please.” Arthur had to squeeze the word out. “Last night. At the Marina Ritz Carlton. We were dating. Just the once. Something came up; an emergency. I’d like to offer my condolences and try to make it up to her.”

There was a male-female exchange. Angela’s voice melted all over him.

“Arthur?”

“Angela!”

“This is the last time I want to hear your stupid-ass voice, creep.”

That male voice came back. “You don’t have this number. You don’t know this number. We never talked. Capiche?” The line went dead.

Arthur cradled that receiver in his hand for the longest time. The hum became a peal, the peal a series of clicks. A canned voice droned on. The peal was renewed and the sequence repeated. And the shadows and webs of desuetude recast their workaday pall, sucking the billion-and-one Arthur Welles into that heaving gray mist we all fit, by sleepy interconnecting currents, by degrees too subtle to fathom.

From the matching bench he could see the long line of headlights spilling down Lincoln, see the long parallel line of taillights crawling on up. Bugs. Fire ants on a biochemical rollercoaster, soulless things unaware of the big picture, just sucking along. Only in the weest of hours would there be a break in that routine—a break just as much a part of the pattern as the crush itself. For an exhilarating moment, captured whole during some miscellaneous red light, no lancing beams would bugger that cusp: the intersection capping Lincoln’s bleak incline would remain static. Something Arthur could not see would be holding its all-polluting breath right along with him, and an icy silence would contain a world caught like a droplet suspended over a snowscape. Then the light would change to green. In a moment a double-damnyou would roll over the cap, soon followed by another. Then a pair, a pack, a swarm, a stampede. The ants would pour down the slope, antennae waving, and they would find him, as they did every morning, and they

Boy

would tromp him with their sticky rubber feet, reduce his corpse in their cold chromed mandibles, fry his trammed useless being in their numberless halogen eyes.

“Arthur.”

The haze was congealing.

“Arthur?”

The muscles of his neck kicked, gently.

“Arthur!”

Arthur’s lids peeled apart. That was the voice of sweet Nurse Beatrice.

“Arthur, the wonderful people over at Jefferson Chapel have set up a program to assist ill and bedridden people; you know, so they won’t have to lay around doing nothing all day long. But instead of just magazines and puzzles and stuff, they’ve decided the best thing anyone can have is a little company.” Nurse Beatrice turned her head to the side; Arthur could tell by the way her voice changed planes. “Miriam.”

A chorus of squeals outside the room. There was a scuffing of rubber heels, a flutter of skirts.

“Arthur, there’s somebody here I want you to meet.”

Arthur’s head rolled to the side, pulling a trailing tube taut. Nurse Beatrice gently tugged it free of the collapsed lobe. In the crook of her left arm was a shaggy gray pup, nervous as all get-out. The animal peed a trace down good Beatrice’s elbow, and the girls all laughed. She cupped the little guy in her palm; no bigger’n a tennis ball, and just as round. Nurse Beatrice sniffed back a sob. “He’s a good boy.” She set him on Arthur’s bulbous belly. The pup swayed like a novice seaman.

Nurse Ruth glided round behind the bed, cradled Arthur’s fallen head in her hands, tenderly rolled it aright. She wiped the tears from her eyes, bent in to kiss his cooling brow.

Angel.

For a paralyzing moment beast and man faced one another, as awkward as first daters. Nurse Beatrice gave the dog a little pat on its rump, causing it to wobble forward, to slide down that heaving slope, to stagger onto the wide splayed breast.

The puppy grew like a funhouse image in Arthur's rheumy eyes; a flattening, rounding, comical thing, all wet nose and sticky grin.

"Oh my God!" Nurse Esther squealed. She slapped her palms to her cheeks and hopped about like a schoolgirl. Then all the standing nurses were hugging in a giddy huddle. Nurse Beatrice gave the pup another bump. All Arthur could see was a crazy convexity of big eyes, shaggy ears, and flaring runny nose. Nurse Miriam popped out a camera as the puppy licked away old Arthur's salt tears. The breather fogged over and his eyes rolled back. The girls all squealed. It was a Kodak moment, a slice of American pie, a Rockwell oil fading to black. Nurse Beatrice moved aside for the camera, and, before her voice could break completely, whispered:

"Smile."

Why I Love Democracy

By

Enrique Batsnuwa LaCzynevitch McGomez

In researching this paper I could not help but be struck by how very much we take for granted in our wonderful country. Less than a century ago this was a different nation indeed; a nation where femepersons were unbearably repressed, where mascupersons were allowed to perpetuate their myth of gender dominance, and where demopersons of diverse ethnicity were perennially humbled and brutalized. I speak, of course, of the reign of terror concocted by that notorious agent of subjugation, that swaggering bully, the White Indigenous Male Protestant (WIMP).

Ever since the great, all-encompassing movement we know as Progressive Liberal Reform prevailed, beginning with the effective dissolution of our borders (“Illegal Alien” Anti-Discrimination Act, 2011), the changes have been sweeping and dramatic, and today it is crystal clear that the concepts *freedom*

and *liberty* can only be interpreted as *absolute rights*; and that finding objectionable the behavior—no matter how egregious—of any person other than a WIMP is de facto prejudice. Now once-suspect demopersons have the run of our streets, and law enforcement walks a very fine line between apprehension and lawsuit.

But before PLR became the single, imperative interpretation of our beloved Constitution, our great nation's political atmosphere was divided into two basic camps. These two continuously bickering factions, originally known as *Democrats* and *Republicans*, grew even more estranged after the Unutterable Depression of 2033, evolving into those defunct camps still generally described as *Left Wing*, or Government Instituted for a Meaningful and Merciful Economy (GIMME), and *Right Wing*, or the Grand Old Trustee Commission for a Humane America (GOTCHA). Not until the so-called "Minority Revolt" of 2039 did the infamous conservative arm of our government see the light, disband entirely, and free itself of its barbaric ways.

To document The Transition, I hope my use of subtitles in this paper will assist in manifesting our nation's tremendous advances.

The Economics of Compassion

Our country's political progress has been nothing less than spectacular, for time and again PLRs have demonstrated just how relentlessly *caring* they can be. I could devote pages here to the dauntlessness of those liberal American femepersons, the renowned *Screaming Sheilas*, who selflessly breast-fed platypus ducklings during the Tasmanian Drought of 2019, pages more to the intrepidity of the venerated *Poor Dearers* of the 2030s, who risked life and limb to reach a golden eagle's aerie, there to nest-sit the eggs in freezing weather for days while the crippled mother recuperated, an entire document to the valor of the old *Greenpeace* organization, wiped out in a bloody confrontation with the Upper States' Yukon "Eskimos" over the Constitutional rights of the arctic char.

But the noblest case in point—and the most striking example of how even zealous PLRs can go awry—would of

course be the Great Drive of 2045, when it was discovered that that rarest of rare birds, the Funnytailed Pucebreasted Slugsucker, had in fact become an endangered species. Overnight an unprecedented national campaign was undertaken on their behalf. Parades stocked with municipally-sponsored, appropriately costumed Funnytailers raised hundreds of thousands of dollars, while entrepreneurs of every sort made fortunes by dyeing their wares puce for the Conscientious Consumer. The public was *besieged* by Slugsucker minutia, over every medium, around the clock. *Millions* were raised for the birds' preservation through cuts in defense and astrophysical research, while homeowners everywhere became proud members of the nationwide Adopt a Sucker Society (ASS).

The results were fantastic, inspiring, heart-warming.

The Funnytailed Pucebreasted Slugsucker began to multiply in numbers that were absolutely staggering, their little fuzzy-faced offspring popping up in cornfields, backyards, nurseries, freighters, supermarket produce sections—you name it. However, one unfortunate consequence of this marvelous application of liberal engineering was that, with so many Slugsuckers about, the slug population began to diminish at an alarming rate, until slugs likewise became an endangered species.

Reformists lost no time.

“*Save The Slugs!*” they cried, “*Save The Slugs!*” and this became a Progressive Liberal anthem which galvanized the nation. Soon “Slugfests” were all the rage, and teenagers were “doing The Slime” from St. Petersburg, New Haiti to Los Angeles, New Central America. Cruising was out, oozing was in; the Ughmobile caught on like wildfire. The slug quickly became our Poster Pest, and *billions* were raised for its welfare. In no time slugs had not only made a comeback, but were absolutely ubiquitous. The slugs were happy, the Funnytailed Pucebreasted Slugsuckers were happy, Progressive Liberal Reformists were happy.

But, with a superabundance of slugs, the state of American Follaceous Health began to deteriorate at an unbelievable rate. Scarcely any leafage was safe. Finally, in a desperation move, proud Americans tightened their belts even further to finance the genetic crossbreeding of a number of supple garden

strains with a hardy, fast-growing variety of African swamp grass, which was cultivated over wide areas to give the omnipresent slugs an alternate and plentiful food source.

The tragic result is known to every Liberal American schoolperson. The swamp grass trapped so much rainfall that vast areas became wetlands, the wetlands became spawning grounds for alligators, and the alligators ate all the Funnytailed Pucebreasted Slugsuckers.

“Let there be no misunderstanding here!” PuertoGeorgia senator Lolita Wang-Ho Kumba-Sanchezski said angrily as she, resplendent in Mourning Puce, confronted the Congressional Budget Committee. “Until we learn to stop throwing money away on defense programs and industry, and begin devoting more capital to the interests of meaningful domestic problems like the plight of the Funnytailed Pucebreasted Slugsucker, this kind of horror story is doomed to be repeated!”

Penal Rights

Modern, open-minded demopersons now understand that there are no bad human beings; there is only bad legislation. The realization that murderers, embezzlers, and arsonists were once actually *punished*, instead of treated with the love and compassion they deserve, still leaves many of us with an acute sense of embarrassment. This evolution—from the barbaric to the enlightened—can perhaps best be shown in the Penal Paradox Proposition, as served by Baja Louisiana senator Imran Wendell O’Mikosovitch: “They’ve lived lives of corruption, debauchery, promiscuousness, vandalism, indolence, socioeconomic subterfuge, compulsive predation, and, in more than a few cases, unprovoked and ungovernable savagery...and now you want to put them *in jail*? For goodness’ sake, haven’t they suffered enough?”

Of course, Penal Rights has always been one of the major issues of Enlightened Liberal Reform. Ps. Helga Spatsznsteinski, in her groundbreaking work, *Serial Killers Need Love, Too* correctly pointed out that an overabundance of affection can have the same adverse effect as no affection at all. For example, in the early years of reformism a number of unlucky and

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misguided souls—formerly disparaged as “criminals”—were forced to sue the Federal Government for the right to privacy when highly competitive and overly arduous femepersons persisted in deluging many incarcerated rapists, compulsively assaultive misogynists, and child molesters with marriage proposals. As famed debutante dismemberer Ps. Muhammed-Fritz Olgafenritz (The “Hacksmith”) complained, “They only love me for my genetic makeup, not for my mind.”

And just as intrusive were the lucrative contract deals from filmmakers and biographers, the unending requests for speaking engagements and intimate photo sessions, the toys-to-cologne endorsement proposals, the seemingly infinite queues of fawning dignitaries and celebrities. “Being a superstar,” Ps. Gorbafyoo I. Zeimensch-Umbawi proclaimed bitterly from the Tampa Federal Resort and Spa for Violent Repeat Offenders, “just ain’t what it’s cracked up to be.”

Even before The Transition, the curse of capital punishment was mercifully on the wane. It is now no more than a slew of ugly memories, perhaps best typified by that powerfully patriotic moment when Raul Ignacio “Little Nate” Ivenski Deng-Foo berated his executioners even as he was about to be administered that despicably *lethal* dose of HGSN (early Reformism’s short-lived but well-intentioned Happy Go Sleep Now pill). Umbrageous at man’s mistreatment of his fellow man, Deng-Foo heroically and famously proclaimed: “You can take away my kiddie porn! You can rob me of my drugs and electro-orifice stimulators! You can deprive me of my God-given right to whip the tar out of my children, my grandmother, and even my Bichon Frise, but, damn you, you’ll never take away my dignity!”

Or, of course, that shocking moment when six of the early adherents of Progressive Liberal Reform burst into the “Death Chamber” and clung tearfully to convicted cannibal and rapist David Hartford’s body while chanting the chorus to Danny and the Democrats’ 2009 hit *Love Them Everlasting* as Hartford was insensitively murdered by society in that notorious instrument of evil, the “electric chair”.

The odious death sentence’s abolition ensures us all that these precious individuals live to a ripe old age with dignity and

in comfort, resting assured that their constitutional rights will be adamantly protected by every attorney we liberals can possibly afford.

Semantics

Nomenclature has powerfully affected our nation's political evolution. Symbiotic Domestic Partners, for instance, used to suffer terribly under their humiliating appellation "pets" (Faunal Emancipation Agreement, 2047). Efflorescing Abode Enhancers were finally granted the dignity they deserve by abolishing their former embarrassing cognomen "houseplants" (Floral Rights Act of 2051). In the social arena, it is now of course unthinkable that Ejaculation Engineers could actually have been demeaned as "*prostitutes*", or that Ecobraves were once variously demeaned as *thugs, hooligans, deadbeats, junkies, and muggers*. Nowadays it is painfully obvious that such unfortunates would never have been forced to sink to their unhappy state had our nation previously been compassionate enough to bestow the tremendous grants they presently receive. Yet some throwback radical extremists, generously allowed by our great country to express their outmoded views, continue to point out that the more money our tax dollars provide for these poor victims, the more they indulge in the very behavior the policy is intended to alleviate.

What could more clearly demonstrate how lack of compassion can befuddle the thinking process?

These continuously suffering souls are of course martyrs, willing to maintain their grievous condition for the sake of preserving a cultural phenomenon which has long been the whipping boy of the Haves.

And even our own precious American childpersons have been the target of slurslingers. When Ps. Mongo Le Ramalama Deng-Hwong had the audacity to publish her viciously titled book, *Our Kids, Our Treasures*, the national outrage was phenomenal. "Our children are not goats!" cried millions of offended parents. Ps. Mongo LeRamalama Deng-Hwong was ostracized, and the quickly formed Attorneys Vying for Adolescent Rights Involving the Curtailment of Epithets (AVARICE)

found themselves entertaining more lawsuits than they could handle.

Once we the people were made aware of the insidious subterfuge of negative semantics maintained by WIMPs, it became evident that all heterosexuals are really homophobic, and all homosexuals heterophobic; that all mascupersons are in actuality femophobic, all femepersons mascuphobic. These irrational fears and prejudices, we now understand, come from a deep underlying envy of one's *opposite pole*. Enlightened Liberal Reform has allowed us to realize that, since all persons are created constitutionally equal, one's opposite pole is in actuality one's *Natural Counterpart*. Just as mascupersons and femepersons are Natural Counterparts while being diametrically opposite in nature, so too are atheophobes ("theists") in reality the Natural Counterparts of theophobes ("atheists"). Finally, after decades of dealing with bestiphobes, dementiphobes, prostiphobes, narcophobes, politiphobes, lucrephobes, penuphobes, *ad infinitum*; of legaphobes fearing crimiphobes and crimiphobes fearing legaphobes, of natuphobes living in mortal terror of urbaphobes while the urbaphobes lost sleep worrying over natuphobes; while illaphobes dwelt in horror of wellaphobes and wellaphobes locked doors against the encroachment of illaphobes; while necrephobes anguished over vitaphobes and the vitaphobes, presumably, were turning in their graves due to the necrephobes, PLRs were struggling to find a truly democratic solution. This solution eventually came to light in the national acceptance of *Phobophobia*.

Progressive Liberal Spirituality

That old paper tyrant, the "Bible", was originally sullied by references to the deity as "He". Such an obvious disparaging of femepersons was first solved by the inclusion of an "opposite-but-equal" deity, which resulted in the infamous "Mrs. God" trial of 2034. This quandary was democratically solved by the admission of an androgynous deity, the very SheHe now worshipped nationwide. Then there was the matter of the former "Old" Testament, so offensive to senior citizens—vividly expressed in the great coast-to-coast Walker Brigade. Step by step,

each WIMP-enforced bias has met its demise.

And there were of course great difficulties involving religious symbolism. Public displays of Nativity scenes, stars of David, etc., have all gone the way of the dinosaur. *No single religion shall have visual dominance in our great democracy!* A “Christian nation,” indeed! Our sole Yule symbol is now a giant one-eyed Buddha wearing a crown of thorns while sitting on a tortoise-shaped prayer rug before a serpent-entwined cross. From the arms of that cross dangle a crucifix, chakra, incense burner, and menorah. And on every Nationally-Integrated Non-specific New Year’s (NINNY) all we Progressive Liberal Reformists take a neutral breath in unison and “Thank Blank” that no group has cause to be offended.

Sexual Liberty

Certainly, the alienation of homosexuals has always been a tremendous social blight. Their persecution knew no bounds. So, in today’s truly liberal democratic society, homosexuality, bisexuality, and transvestism are proudly taught to all schoolpersons as upstanding, wholesome lifestyles. Once a small percentage of the overall population, homosexuals now occupy over half the legislature, and it was one of the finest moments in our country’s history when, only last year, we elected our very first transsexual president. Now every National Gayday celebration features long lines of self-flagellating, terribly repentant former heterosexuals, while our military divisions proudly mandate co-sexual bunks and showers, and many thriving businesses devote themselves wholly to the production of lingerie for pre-adolescent mascupersons. Our founding fatherpersons certainly would be no less proud than we.

The Renovated Constitution

Of all 437 Amendments to the Constitution, the earliest retain most value, for the integrity of the Amendments tend to resolve seemingly unrelated problems.

For instance, the Second Amendment worked in harmony with the First. Once the *right* to bear arms was firmly estab-

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lished, and virtually every American had become a walking armory, the Federal Government was successfully sued on the grounds that it most certainly *is* a guaranteed *right* of free speech to yell “Fire” in a crowded theater. Ps. Boris Q. de Little Feather courageously put this to the test by abruptly standing in a packed theater and yelling “*Fire!*” at the top of his lungs. Ps. de Little Feather’s bullet-riddled body will forever be honored in the Heroes of Progressive Liberal Reform shrine in Allah Akbar State Park.

Compassion For The Masses

Arguably, the greatest breakthrough of Enlightened Liberal Reform came about with passage of the Victims’ Relief Bill of 2077. What a glorious, emotion-packed day it must have been when those 170,000,000 Progressive Liberal Reformists linked arms across all 103 of the contiguous United States and chanted, “*Subsidization, Not Subjugation! Subsidization, Not Subjugation!*” until the very walls of the Rainbow House shook in the District of Vespuccia. And what an uplifting experience to be part of that gigantic assembly, tearfully escorting the hundreds of thousands of Aromatically Diverse and Morally Deprived unfortunates as they shuffled and jabbered into their tax-subsidized apartments to freely and democratically express themselves as Excretory Artists and Sensuality Scientists.

Freedom Of Expression

In closing I must again remark upon the stimulus for our awesome national pride. Only a truly liberal society such as ours would have the greatness to demand that every televised newscast crew include at least one Practicing Octogenarian Nudist, that every church sermon devote equal time to the oration of an atheist, and that every Intelligence Agency be made open to the General Public. It is *we*, the Progressive Liberals, who have exercised the vision to ensure that every major league team contain at least one paraplegic outfielder, that the Pentagon employ a fair quota of narcoleptics, and that, some rosy future day, the meek shall indeed inherit the earth.

For Readers Only

Ps. Antoni-Levonitschstein, I understand it is my legal obligation to inform you, prior to your grading this paper, that any mark below passing would compromise my sense of worthiness, and possibly result in a case of Student Afflicted by Misguided Educatory Officer Leading to Despair and Broken Self-esteem (SAMEOLDBS), a gross violation of my precious and hard-won Civil Rights. Please have your attorney contact mine if you have any questions.

“E.B.” La Cszynevitch McGomez

The Book Of Ron

(Being a Highly Authorized clarification of events surrounding
the Creation and early development of man)

—By Way Of Introduction—

I am one of the few lucid individuals to have actually seen and heard God—an honor He no longer bestows lightly.

He is not particularly ravenous for company—embarrassed as He is by the blunder of humanity—and now limits His interviews to those possessing a certain stolidity of constitution. The bungling-humans Headache has persisted for thousands of years now (thanks a bunch, scribes, for a convoluted spirituality, an ever-splintering credo, and a mangled and incomprehensible testament), so I was approached with caution.

Here was the Great and Wonderful God's dilemma: The most important, meaningful, and profound document in the universe—the Word, the History of all that Is—was set down millennia ago in a turgid, incredibly overdrawn, wholly unread-

able style. How in the world was He to win over an endless stream of increasingly sophisticated seekers while saddled with a work that guaranteed the rapid zoning-out of even the most avid reader?

What God needed was a contemporary writer—someone attuned to the easygoing, near-glutted appetites of modern Americans—but one with an attitude. What He needed was a cynic, a thinking man; someone not so susceptible to the emotional pitfalls of faith as to immediately revert to ecumenical gobbledygook; *you* know, all that outdated stuff that makes the Old Bible so hard to get into.

But man, was I a tough nut to crack.

In the first place, I've never bought into magic, metaphysics, or mysticism. The universe works according to physical laws that cannot be undone by our pathetic imaginings—and, highly desirable as an afterlife may be to we vainglorious little mortals, a whole cosmosful of parroting adherents doth not a mutable reality make. As a matter of fact, *it makes no f---ing difference* what one knows, believes, or wants...erase sentience from the picture entirely and the universe will proceed as-is.

So imagine my surprise when I learned there really *is* an Omnipotent, Magnanimous, and All-loving God!

Talk about having Egg on your face!

All my life I'd been disgusted by a perceived intellectual cowardice on the part of virtually every encountered human being, and here I'd suddenly become a fellow babbling weenie.

But, as I said, my soul didn't come easy.

—As to profane images and descriptions—

First, let me make it *amply* clear that God is *not* some silly caricature or phantasmagorical personification! He is most certainly *not* a kindly old man with a long, flowing, snow-white beard. Nor is he plump, rosy-skinned, and obsessed with jollification. In no way does he resemble incendiary shrubbery.

Even attempting to describe Him, in all His Wonderfulness, brings on a play of reverent emotions which absolutely befuddle the process. Already my quill quivers. Console yourselves, then, in knowing you'll find out soon enough...*maybe!*

Now, I realize a lot of this will come off as blasphemous to those of you still adhering to antiquated beliefs. Worse, it will sound like malignant untruth, sick issue, antisocial heresy...and I offer my apologies in advance. Be all that as it may very well be, it's the truth. Swear to God. It's no fun writing all this down under the pressure of such a mighty Taskmaster, for the sake of a posterity that will no doubt blast it as lies and the ravings of a deranged mind.

So be it.

You opinionated gophers, you oh-so fabulous conformists—you *think you know it all!* But you're laboring under an illusion.

You *think* you think.

All your smarmy conclusions are merely worldly wisdom, and God and I spitteth upon you. Go ahead, hang onto your smug and hypocritical heresies, wallow in your fornicating, sacrilegious lifestyles while you can...boy, do you have a comeuppance waiting for you! But I digress.

Your worldly wrongheadedness is really the residue of one of God's early projects. As He explains it, intelligence was something that, like gravity, at first didn't occur to Him, and a truly working brain seemed like so much supercargo on a paradise of a planet where sexual reproduction is a perfect perpetual motion machine. However, intelligence—before The Lord realized how it could backfire—seemed *such* a clever idea. What *would* these creatures do with such a gift? That's what fascinated Him. It was no fun watching the "lower" animals slurp, gallop, and reproduce all day. These new beings couldn't even gallop. They were damned good reproducers, however. Apparently the brain's installation had an unpredicted side-effect: humanity was in heat all year-round. Only one thing to do: leave their played-out carcasses to rot and refurbish the soil, and take the souls, which are very light and compact, and store them up in Heaven. He can't leave our souls "down here" because we are, after all, His children, and you don't keep up a reputation of being Wise, Witty, and Wonderful without a long-term benefits package. But after thousands of years even souls can take up a lot of room, and Heaven's better acreage is already grossly overpopulated. And old souls never die. They just

hang around. Naughty ol' Satan, confined as he is to the interior of this embarrassing little rock, has solved the problem. He fries the souls until they resemble crunchy little pork rinds, puts them on a diet of coal dust and bat dung, and makes them listen to Jesse Jackson discourses throughout all eternity. Just for the Hell of it.

—But still the question remains: why *me*?—

Why, out of McBillions of far more likely prospects, did the Good Lord God Almighty pick a stubborn atheist to revise this greatest of books? According to The Lord, there was an unwavering pattern in His interviews, so reliable He considers it a rule: *the feebler the belief, the milder the reaction*, or, inversely, *the more devout the subject, the more hysterical the response*. His past attempts invariably brought on reactions ranging from hysteria to heart attack, making accurate communication impossible. It took The Lord a nerve-wracking night of cajoling, conjuring, and outright bullying to make a believer of me—consequently, when I finally came to my senses and saw The Truth, the typical frenzied reaction was considerably dampened. But at least I was doable—the reaction of all previous candidates was so wild they on the instant became monomaniacal zombies. You're skeptical? Ignore the impotent tracings of my pen. Witness, instead, a planet crawling with visionaries, prophets, and messiahs—all stricken failures of The Lord in His frustrating campaign...and here I sit with my quills, my earplugs, and my Tylenol...quite an honor you think? To be The Lord's personal scribe...but I tell you, the pleasure is most assuredly not mine. The Lord beats a mighty Drum, and I can row only so hard. And His rages are tempestuous, His moods mercurial and infectious. And now another goose-stepping headache is on the way, an all-too familiar sign announcing the Dictator is, once again, getting Impatient. This fate, mine, I wouldn't wish on the lowest sinner, not on the meanest fool.

But it's back to work. Let's see now...

—In the beginning—

The Book Of Ron

Right from the start of the Old Bible The Lord has grounds to be upset with humanity's early poor performance at dictation-taking. There *was* no beginning, He points out, and if there had been, it surely would have been His conception that *was* the beginning, for He couldn't have created all this if He Himself hadn't already been in operation, unless of course, He concedes, the original authors meant in the beginning of His activity, which, He notes irritably, would imply a sort of vegetative Deityship activated simply for the future gratification of egotistical little men. "In the beginning," in short, is too vulnerable to misinterpretation, so God has ordered The Book Of Ron to have a better opening; an opening that will more clearly set the pace for what theology is all about:

—Once upon a time God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep—

All this about jumping right to work on this remote hunk of rock really infuriates The Lord. Typical of the mad vanity of our species, to allot our insignificant planet priority in the sequence of universal events. Is it possible that a couple thousand years ago men were so backward? The general tone of the Old Bible is heavily patriarchal, and suggests the pontification of a hard-nosed old Bastard in His mid-fifties given to random acts of sadistic violence, but the mental content of the work brings to mind the slapdash constructs of a bright six year-old with a wild imagination. In actuality, according to God, Earth is one of His more recent projects, and certainly one of His least successful. First on the agenda was some light to see what was going on, and where He was. He recalls "Just sort of floating there" for a "Real long time" with nothing much to do and no one to talk to. Then getting "Kind of paranoid" and wanting to "Do something about it." As anyone who has lived totally alone for an extended period realizes, eventually you get to the point where you begin to vocalize your thoughts.

—And God said, *Let There Be Light*—

He wishes it could have been that easy. In the absolute vacuum of space no sound was generated, for there was no medium to carry waves. But God found that by twirling a Forefinger He was able to create a spiral that generated both heat and light. This first nebula was formed (to give some perspective on our high and mighty attitude toward Earth) so far beyond our present scrutiny of the heavens that it will take our technology, even at its headlong pace, another thirty-two thousand years to develop instruments sophisticated enough to breach the gap. Now, one nebula gave plenty of light, but only enough to See that there really wasn't a whole lot *to* see, and that, wherever He was, it was an awfully big place. So God set about hanging new lights, but no matter where He went it was the same old thing. Pretty soon there were star clusters all over, and The Lord, bored almost to inertia, sought to amuse Himself by positioning stars and galaxies to play connect-the-dots. These were whimsical designs: a bowman, a bison, a big or little dipper here and there. Just so were the heavens created; a bit at a time, with patience and great expertise, with insight and, yes, with Love.

But there just didn't seem to be an end to the void, and, since The Lord had eternity on His Hands, He threw Himself into His new hobby with truly deific enthusiasm. After a few billion years it became like a mania, and what was born of simple boredom grew to be a desperate endeavor, a passionate attempt to fill up all this emptiness with enough light to See that there was more emptiness needing light fo fill up the emptiness so He could See there was more emptiness needing light to See the continuing emptiness. Eventually this got to be rather silly and exhausting. There had to be a nobler way to expend the creative energy of what was obviously a very productive and gifted young God, so He got into *detail*. What He had in Mind was some kind of little orbiting system of planetary bodies around one of the lights, a sort of concentric ring-around-the-rosie. Just what shape these satellites should take was an absorbing and delightful puzzle for The Lord in those ages. God became more than a Dabbler in physics. He found that if He zinged a spark just *so* at the light He'd chosen, that spark would whiz around all on its own. He tried it out in lots of places, and

had a whale of a time for a few gazillion years, but there becomes a certain *routine* to whinging sparks that can grow to be unsatisfying and, even to the Mighty Lord, wearisome.

So it came about that God found Himself plodding lonesomely through endless fields of stars, and thinking what a mess He'd made of the place, and wondering just what the heck there was to do *now*.

And slowly formed a glorious Idea, a scheme for building a little working model of a self-perpetuating environment He'd visualized way back when He was still hanging lights. So gung-ho was The Lord on this new project that he managed to finish it in less than a week.

The first couple of days went into thinking up neat new names for light and darkness and so forth.

God then set about creating a firmament to divide the heaven and earth. This was some fancy Doing. What He Did was part the ocean and sort of flip the firmament into a horizontal position so that half the water was above and half below. Then He moved all the nether water around, exposing land above the seas. He confesses to a certain lapse in Planning here, for He could have saved Himself a lot of Trouble by simply introducing gravity first and allowing the seas to form naturally. The important thing was the thrill of the creative process. God saw that it was Good. But it took all day.

The next step was to give the place a little life and color. He was getting so good at creating He didn't have to use His Hands to whip up any miracles; all He had to do was speak to make it So. He never did quite get the hang of telekinesis...but just by Saying He wanted it—*whoosh*—there were grasses and herbs and fruit-bearing trees everywhere! It was wonderful, it was magic, and boy, was it *Good*. But the details took all day.

The Old, pre-Book Of Ron, Bible is confused here, stating that God now began hanging lights, with the implication that He made earth and grasses and whatnot working blind, and that He *saw* how Good everything *was* in the dark. As I've previously recorded, the sky was already riddled with stars, but God decided His little terrestrial experiment needed a couple lights of its own. So He slapped together a sun and moon, and had a deuce of a time setting them in place. It was dizzying

work, making the moon zoom around the earth every twenty-eight days while adjusting the earth to travel in a more stately manner around the sun, then having the sun barely drift through the Milky Way, which was in turn configured to revolve in immense light clusters...but it sure was Good! Yet it took... all...effing...*day*.

The next morning God decided His handiwork could use some locomotion. So He spake into existence whales and fowl, and blessed them and told them to multiply. It was really Good, man, but it *still* took the whole goldurn day.

On the sixth day The Lord, indefatigable as ever, was whale-and fowl watching when it struck Him that there was lots o'planet still to be filled. Whales can make pretty boring pets, and fowl are noisy and smelly at best. Still, the whales got into some interesting antics caused by slow starvation until The Lord *whooshed* some plankton into the seas—one thing led to another, and The Lord just had a ball creating everything that came to Mind. He made cattle and other beasts, and all kinds of creepy things. It's absolutely mind-boggling to imagine the burst of creative Zeal taking place on that sixth day. The number of species on this planet seems almost uncountable, but God was really on a roll. Man, it was *Good*. He designed the thorax, the pulmonary system, the proboscis, the carapace—faster than you can say *whoosh*. Annelids, insectivora, reptiles, amphibians, primates—it was a whirlwind of activity. The platypus, the wombat...then, in a burst of Vanity, something that, in miniature, would resemble Himself. This creature He called man, and this creature He made top dog over the whole earth. Then He kicked back, exhausted. He looked over His experiment and Saw it was *very* Good.

Modesty is, in this instance, a truly deific virtue.

It was spectacular.

—Man alive—

Next day God was totally bushed. He blessed and sanctified the day, but that was about all He felt like getting Into. He was even too tired to make rain, but fortunately a mist that was hanging around warmed, rose, and fell to wet the ground. This

little observation got God's creative Spirit back in gear. The damp dust, He found, could be molded into all kinds of shapes, but the one He really liked working on was a male figure. When finished it just lay there, so God decided He'd try to inflate it.

Talk about Finesse!

The Lord's Lips are wider by far than the largest supergalactic cluster, but He managed to blow life into the dust man's nostrils without even shattering it.

Lord God then planted a garden, called the place Eden, and put His little man, spot-named Adam, in charge of all the luscious trees therein. God told Adam to go ahead and eat from any tree save the tree that bore knowledge of good and evil. Lord God was dead-serious about this, and threatened Adam with certain death if he dared, if he essayed, if he even *thought* of disobeying. God, His Wrath resolved, went back to sculpting wet dust, creating a whole neat menagerie to keep Adam company.

But something was still missing. God put Adam to sleep and looked about. There was plenty of dust around to make another person, or even a whole planetful, but Good Old Lord God, prey to a reckless whimsy, decided to fashion this mate from one of Adam's ribs. So He tore open Adam's side, and He *r-r-r-ripped* out a rib. That woke Adam fast enough. Adam lay there howling while The Lord concentrated on the rib, and God admits the howling got on His Nerves and messed up the whole blessed experiment. This new creation was a laughable failure, all rear end and sagging pectorals. Whereas Adam had the potential for strength and prowess and a certain animal cunning, this *Eve* couldn't possibly be good for anything. But, since Adam just gawked at her, The Lord decided to forget all about her for the time being and focus on getting Adam to move around and maybe perform some tricks. Here gravity was the real poser. The Lord, intrigued, inflated Adam a little more and was rewarded by the sight of Adam rising arse-upward into the air, where he hovered like a rag doll with a slack jaw and empty eyes. The Lord putt-putted Adam around for Eve's amusement, but after blankly watching Adam bank and circle for a few minutes she slipped into a heavy sleep. So The Lord dropped Adam and tried to Think of another means of locomotion. There

was still a whole lot of space between the ears that wasn't being used for anything, yet God was beginning to develop a strange fascination for Adam's legs. He had, after all, created Adam in His own Image, but He Himself had never encountered a solid surface. He had no Idea what His own Legs were for. Once He managed to stand Adam upright, the little dust man could be prodded along quite nicely. It may seem curious that the idea of a snakewise slither didn't occur to Lord God at that time, but He confesses that slithering gives Him an uneasy Feeling. This Feeling gets validated pretty soon, when a famous snake does something really rotten.

Anyhow, now that things were beginning to take shape, The Great Lord God Almighty looked down with Delight on His creatures and saw they were Good.

And Adam somehow attained the ability to utter his thoughts (which were, understandably, pretty vague) through the unlearned, instantaneous use of speech.

Think of that!

Barely out of the dust stage and he's already putting sentences together.

Not only that, he's taking control of his environment. He calls Eve "Woman" and acknowledges himself as "Man." Then he's dictating that man and woman should live as husband and wife. This intellectual upstart and his woman—the dust man and the rib lady—were a peripatetic pair, and naked as jays.

—Enter The Snake—

Let this be a lesson to all you silly, irrational, embarrassingly unrealistic Darwinists out there...back when homo sapiens originated, *snakes could already speak as articulately as you and I!*

That's right.

Believe it or not, they were vocal and wily as all get-out.

Nowadays, it's true, snakes haven't gotta whole bunch to say. But back in Edentimes this crafty old viper just slinks right on up to Eve and convinces her to disregard Lord God's edict about avoiding the good and evil tree. The snake tells Eve she and Adam will themselves be gods if they get the inside

scoop on good and evil, and won't die at all. The snake was saying, in effect, that The Great and Goodly Lord God Almighty didn't want any competition and so was trying to keep the two in the dark.

So Eve ate of the fruit of the tree and turned Adam on to a piece.

Apparently the fruit caused them to see their nudity as evil, for they were abashed enough to sew aprons out of fig leaves.

But then they heard God's Voice somehow walking in the garden, and had to hide in the trees.

God busted Adam semi-nude.

Adam fessed right up, ashamed as he was with the image of God.

Then, after a quick grilling by The Lord, Adam narked on his mate, setting a precedent for all humanity to come. He fingered Eve, hoping to save his own skin. Eve, catching on quick, pointed her fruit-spattered finger at the snake, who didn't have a finger to point.

God blew it.

He cursed the snake up and down, damned Eve to woeful childbirth, and doomed Adam to hard labor and easy death.

You don't mess with The Great and Goodly Lord God Almighty.

Then God made them suffer the further humiliation of wearing skincoats as He kicked them out of the garden. Realizing the snake was the only genuinely guilty party, The Lord decided to let him hang out, and even *whooshed* in some rather tacky ornamentation—your basic whirling flaming-sword-and-chubby-angels display—to add a little life to the arboretum.

—The Duo Incurrible—

Once they were out in the real world, the pair went straight from bad to worse. Adam discovered that new people could be produced biologically, which was not only a lot of fun,

but a tremendous relief. The last thing he wanted was to lose another rib.

And they named their love child Cain.

Child-making was so much fun the pair got right to work producing another; a boy they named Abel. This Abel grew to be a shepherd, while brother Cain worked the soil.

Eventually the boys decided to get on The Great Lord God's Good Side, so they agreed to bring Him gifts. Abel brought sheep fat, but all Cain could manage was veggies.

Lord God was more than happy with Abel's homage, but fit to be tied over Cain's humble offering. Where was the fat?

Cain was crestfallen.

The boys went into a field and had it out.

When the dust had settled, Abel lay dead and Cain stood vindicated. The phenomenon of sibling rivalry was off to a murderous start.

But God's rage over Abel's death, and over Cain's pathetic gift of all he had, was undiminished. Lord God heaped unbearable punishments upon poor Cain.

Cain was stunned. The Great Good Lord God Almighty had just doomed him to the life of a fugitive and vagabond, with no crops to tend and a price on his head. God then marked Cain for easy assassination, and booted him out into the cold, hard, unforgiving world.

Cain then took a wife, which is pretty strange, since the only woman on the planet was his mom. The oedipal insinuation here is too delicate to broach, but suffice it to say that things began to get a tad on the kinky side, culminating in polygamous doings by Lamech, Cain's great-great-great-great grandson.

—Noah—

Life expectancy was like, *super* high back then. Adam died at 930, while Seth, his third son, lasted until he was 911. Lives this long gave folks the opportunity to reproduce a'plenty; the trend to overpopulation was well on its way.

Lamech was another of the multacentennarian heavy-weights proliferating so widely in those days. He lived to the ripe old age of 777, but sired a boy when he was only 182. This boy—who was to play such an important role in the global shenanigans to follow—young Lamech named Noah, prophesying the boy would comfort humanity, even though The Lord had cursed the ground and was in no mood to parlay.

Now Noah was in his prime, scarcely five centuries old, when Lamech finally passed away, and Noah decided it was time to concentrate on a brood of his own. The result was Shem, Ham, and Japheth (a.k.a. Larry).

Anyway, about this time God's sense of humor was nearing depletion, and He was really sorry He'd ever begun the whole project. So He decided to destroy the works; not only that demented poser man, but the innocent beasts in the fields, the inoffensive winging birds, and all the creepy things. Especially the creepy things.

But God liked Noah. So God gave old Noah ample forewarning of the Calamity He'd dreamed up, and iterated explicit instructions for building an enormous Ark out of wooden gophers. This was to house not only Noah and his family, but a pair of every living creature on the earth, one male and one female. This was because The Lord, like all artists, couldn't bear to see all His Handiwork destroyed.

Noah was a rather simple fellow, and didn't pause to consider the magnitude of his task, but just got the Mrs. and kids packing and set to work. It took poor Noah almost a hundred years to get the job done, but by the time he was finished he appeared to have aged a thousand years.

He caught malaria and various spotted fevers sweet-talking alligators and king snakes into his clever swamp traps, went half-blind one day luring a squirrel out of a tree, got mauled wrestling a brown bear into captivity. Noah, indeed, was in poor humor after a hundred years of butterfly chasing, grunion hunting, and peeking under various tails. But somehow he got them all together and crammed into the Ark.

What a zoo! As if the stench of the place wasn't bad enough, Noah was soon to discover that hungry tigers and wolves, for instance, don't cohabit well at all with fat yummy

ducks, for instance. Also, rabbits and rats and many of the lower animals were very fruitful and *multiplificate*, though not quite so proliferate as the fleas, flies, mites, ticks, tapeworms, and mosquitoes. Giraffes, even in dry dock, were seasick around the clock. Poor Noah's manifest included a hypertensive sloth with the hots for a spider monkey, a hyena with insomnia, and a Tasmanian Devil whose idea of a good time was to sneak up and scare the daylights out of him.

For a whole week the Ark remained grounded while The Lord aggregated hydrogen and oxygen molecules into a great liquid atmosphere. Making rain is no quick trick, and God was beginning to Think it would be just as tough to destroy life as create it, when the seventh day passed and the deluge began.

—Captain Noah—

For forty days and forty nights it rained cats and dogs, and everybody was perfectly miserable, what with the cold and damp and the howling and braying. Noah, who was a ripe 600 years old, suffered through the constant sniffing and aching joints with the quiet humility of a willing dupe.

And still it rained. And rained and rained. The sodden Ark was borne up and drifted out on the face of the waters; up, up, fully fifteen cubits above the land. Naturally, every living thing on dwindling terra was exterminated, and for weeks the water was littered with the carnage of fowl and cattle and creepy things. But old Noah and his brood just drifted on, week after week, month after month, futilely searching the horizon while resolutely accepting their dreary fate.

Meanwhile The Lord was busy hanging new lights in the firmament of the heavens, amusing Himself by flicking away bits of energy to create comets, playing a sort of cosmic tiddly-winks with galactic matter.

After tooling around the heavens for a few months He remembered Noah and Co. bobbing around down here, so He turned off the tap and blew away the clouds to see if anything was left.

Sure enough, there was Noah, soaked to the bone and still scraping the Ark's rank mushy deck; a creaky old codger

given to mumbling and grumbling and the scratching of imaginary bites.

The Lord got busy right away, but it took Him over ten months to blot up most of the mess. The Ark got stuck on Mount Ararat when the earth finally dried to its present paradisaical state.

—God Makes An Announcement—

Seeing His work *was* Good, The Lord told everybody to pile out and multiply.

And the entire menagerie wobbled, pitched, and staggered off the Ark, old Noah and his dung-crustad spade dragging the rear.

Noah, half-crazed, built an altar to God, then flipped out completely. He ran amok with his spade and barrow, slaughtering the clean beasts and fowl and barbecuing them on the altar.

“That does it,” said The Lord. “Here I’m stuck with nothing but dirty beasts and some old nut who’s a pain in the Holy Neck. But I can See what good it does trying to straighten things out. This time,” vowed the Great and All-forgiving God Almighty, “I won’t curse the ground or pick on these puny living things. Noah, I bless you and your boys and grant you the right to eat anything you want, excluding relatives.”

With The Lord’s blessing, Shem, Ham, and Larry took their wives to town and started bonking like crazy.

—Noah Ties One On—

Meanwhile Noah, with time on his hands and grieving his lost occupation, husbanded the first vineyard. He mastered the art of wine-making and whooped it up by himself in his tent all night. There is some uncertainty about Noah’s activities during that night-long bacchanalia, but in the morning a shocked Ham found his father naked and out like a light. Shem and Larry then put a cloak over their father, for a buck-naked 601 years-old man in a drunken coma is not a pretty sight. Noah woke hung over and in a terrible mood. Since Canannan, his grandchild by Ham, had absolutely nothing to do with covering

him up and enraging him so, Noah put a curse on the boy and doomed him to familial servitude. The Lord was delighted to see that old Noah still had his sense of humor, and left him alone in his tent with his booze and his funky spade. The common ancestor of all winos, Noah clung to his shattered existence for another 350 years, finally passing away in withered, sniveling ignominy.

—The Plot Sickens—

The generations passed rapidly, and it became pretty obvious that man was here to stay. Already he could postulate sillily, dance like the dickens, and carry on rudimentary conversations. And boy, could he come up with some wild names for his kids! Some of Larry's children were stuck with real doozies, like *Magog*, *Dodanim*, *Ashkenaz*, and *Togarmah*—Yeah!—while Ham, not to be outdone, was responsible for beauties such as *Phut*, *Cush*, and *Mizraim* (and of course poor *Canannan*, the family fall guy), and indirectly responsible for gems like *Asshur* and *Rehoboth*.

—SRO—

Now, coprolalia is no laughing matter, but in practically no time the whole planet was inundated, and this phonetic awkwardness had evolved to a fine art. And everybody journeyed to the east and settled in Shinar.

Why?

That old, obsolete Bible doesn't tell us why, but The Great And Marvelous Lord God Almighty demands it be noted in The Book Of Ron that, when He sincerely tried to fine tune the aimlessly milling multitude in Shinar, everybody at noon abruptly stopped and said to one another in unison: "*Go to, let us make brick and burn them thoroughly.*" God wanted to be sick.

And everybody suddenly had the same bright idea: they would build a tower to heaven, which was a mere 205,000⁶⁵⁵ light years distant. God came down to check out this latest act

of mortal lunacy and, Almightily embarrassed, scattered 'em all right back out of Shinar and splintered their common language.

—One More Try—

Now, it's true that everybody so far had turned out to be a holy flop, but The Lord was a Diehard at Heart, and firm in His belief that *someone* out there wasn't beyond help. So it was that, after glumly watching a few more generations of humans breed, The Lord started looking about for a ripe pigeon. He picked Abram, son of Terah, and promised him celebrity and protection if he would only ditch his family, country, and home.

That all sounded pretty good to Abram. So Abram took his nephew Lot and his shapely wife Sarai and they headed for Canaan.

In Canaan Abram built an altar to God, then traveled to a mountain east of Bethel, where he built another. Abram had the situation pegged. The Lord was crazy about altars. Sensing he was on a roll, Abram continued south, but ran into a famine which forced him to cool it on the altar-building and head for Egypt.

This posed a huge problem for wayfaring Abram.

He was about to confront one of the great trials that hit men who marry for looks.

You see, Sarai was a real corker. And Abram was hip enough to the Egyptian brand of testosterone to realize that, once they got a gander, his goose would be cooked.

Abram managed to pass off sweet Sarai as his sister, which meant Pharaoh could get his greasy elite paws on her common luscious beauties without having to disembowel wily egocentric Abram first. The plan worked out *perfectly*. Abram got the royal treatment in exchange for his toots: servants, sheep, oxen, and even asses!

The sly old fox! He comes into Egypt a vagabond, pawns off his hot little honey to the high muckety-muck, and next thing you know he's related to the richest guy in town. Lord knows, literally speaking, which of the many feminine plagues lovely Sarai brought upon the house of Pharaoh, but

Pharaoh did what any obscenely rich guy would do and sent her packing, Abram and Lot in tow.

—The Continuing Adventures Of Abram—

Now Abram was *loaded*. He'd come out of the Egyptian affair a rich man; with cattle, with gold and silver.

He, Lot, and the oh-so comely Sarai returned to Abram's mountain altar.

Both Abram and Lot had so many tents, flocks, and herds that there wasn't enough land to support them all, which caused their respective herdsmen to have a falling-out. Abram and Lot decided to divvy the place up between them—Lot taking the Sodom side and Abram taking the Canaan side.

Abram knew which side his bread was buttered on.

Seeing a touch of mortal competition, he wasted no time. He settled in the plain of Mamre and built an altar *pronto*.

—Slimepits And Shoelatchets—

Worse even than to want is to have. Abram was finding out that, just as the Egyptians coveted Sarai's gorgeous goodies, so his new neighbors had an eye on his garish goods. Smiters smote, folks got carried away, arrogant little humans set precedents everywhere. After the dust had settled, Abram was richer than ever and the friend of kings. God was certainly making good on His end of the deal.

—After The Lovin'—

But time was catching up with Abram, who now found himself in the grip of some pretty wild hallucinations. He went star-tripping with God, Who, ever the Showman, got off on tearing live animals in half for His and Abram's amusement. This went on all day long until the night came and Abram crashed, for some reason paranoid of the dark. Somebody must have slipped him Something. He dreamt of God talking to him about what great good buddies they were, and about all the blessings that were to come to the progeny of God's favorite

little altar builder. Abram woke to more hallucinations, this time to some supercreepy visions of smoking furnaces and burning lamps. He was in no mood for altars.

—The Old And The Restless—

Things were swinging in the house of Abram. With Sarai's blessing he got it on with her Egyptian handmaid Hagar. Everybody got bent out of shape when Hagar got knocked up, and Hagar felt horrible. She took off into the wilderness. So Good Old God of course put a curse on her. It was a doozie. Hagar was doomed to perpetual childbirth and to submission to kinky Sarai. So it came to pass that, at the age of 86, virile but burnt-out Abram had Hagar bear him a wild young boy. This was Ishmael.

—The Agony And The Agony—

Thirteen years passed.

Now Abram, even though he was only 99, was no spring chicken. He tended to laugh at inappropriate times, and was constantly falling on his face. God was not amused. He made poor Abram walk in front of Him, demanding perfection every step of the way. But down went Abram again, flat on his face. The Lord took umbrage. There was just no way to get the bugs out of these recalcitrant little humans, no matter how hard you trained them, no matter how well they were rewarded. So God decided to make an example of Abram. He picked him up and dusted him off, renamed him Abraham, and cursed the old man into stud service. Abraham just laughed and fell on his face. God's rage was Immense, but His sense of Humor was indomitable. He had to come up with something really, really, *really* good. And He did! He decided—now get this—to order every boy be—it's difficult to be delicate here—every boy have his...that is to say, have his member, if you can believe it...*sliced away around the head!* Old Abraham just fell on his face, laughing insanely. But he wasn't so senile he didn't fear The Great And Kindly Lord's wrath. Abraham got his blade and went to town, slicing like the Devil was after him. He even went

under the knife himself. These were some pretty gory times, and God was pleased.

—XXX—

Incest, drunkenness, and a general good time were had by all. Sarai, renamed Sarah, caught Abraham's laughing disease, but was still canny enough to appreciate the power of denial. The couple were now senior citizens, and Abraham was way too far gone to fulfill God's stud curse. He did, however, love his wine. So The Lord sent a couple of Lot's horny daughters into Abraham's tent to get him wasted and laid and give Sarah a giggle or two. I won't go into details (you can read it yourself!) but, man, those were the days.

—The Sucker Trade—

Abraham now pulled the old Pharaoh trick again. He went south and passed Sarah off as his sister to king Abimelech (no kidding) of Gerar (no kidding!). Even though the king didn't score, cunning Abraham got sheep, oxen, a thousand pieces of silver, servants, *and* Sarah back! You don't have to teach an old dog new tricks.

—Gall In The Family—

At an even 100 years old, with a little help from God, Sarah birthed another boy, named Isaac, by Abraham. Eight days later, slipping in and out of reality, old Abe pulled out his trusty mutilation knife and got to business while Sarah watched, shrieking with hilarity. But she stopped laughing soon enough. Once little Isaac was weaned, he began mocking her for not being his true mom; Isaac, you'll remember, was a product of Abe's and Hagar's whoopee-making. Sarah, seeing red, made Abraham kick out Hagar and their love child. Fearing he'd be seen as a bad provider, Abraham rummaged through all his gold and silver and masses of wealth, finally settling on good old, practical bread and water. He heaped kid, bread, and water on poor Hagar's shoulders, and kicked her out into the wilderness.

The Book Of Ron

—The Ghoulies—

Sarah finally died at well over a hundred; Abe hung on until the big one-seven-five. Even so, after he'd buried Sarah, he still had enough in him to remarry and sire six more kids! When at last he croaked, Isaac and brother Ishmael buried him in a cave, then dug him up and buried him in a field next to Sarah.

The gazillion-year spate of boredom was irrevocably dissolved: God had created an insane and irrepressibly horny playground for generations to come. He foresaw cell phones and low riders, televangelists and garage bands, tailgate jocks and shamelessly-public pregnant soccer moms in spandex and heels. Fatcats and posers and pop stars and pinheads and oh God, oh God, was it ever *Goo-oo-ood!*

—Thus Endeth The Book Of Ron—

He hath an almighty headache, and his Merciful God doth grant him a break. So he riseth now, layeth down his quill, and slammeth shut The goddamn Book Of Ron. Unto The Lord's people he goeth, that they may worship his Master's Word. Fall flat on thine faces, ye sheep, and bless yourselves, your loved ones, and the innumerable sons of all your crucifix-hawkers to be: it can only get deeper, for the slaughterhouse is boundless, the worm is on the rise, and our Wise, Witty, and Wonderful Shepherd hath all the time in the world.

Vote For Me

With the election nearing and the campaign coming to a close, I feel it's incumbent upon I and my staff to express our deepest gratitude and dearest affection for all those constituents who've made this grueling effort such an inspiring and invigorating experience. Old Glory just never gets old, does she?

Before I get to the body of my speech, I'd like to congratulate my worthy opponents on a great contest. Now that the flames are dying down, the smoke'll clear up soon enough, and we'll be able to put all those charges and counter-charges behind us. Honestly, folks, politics is no place for dirty fighting, for unsupported allegations, or for attacks on the personal lives of contestants, so I'll be first to ignore any future claims of electioneering, money laundering, or infidelity aimed at these fine gentlemen. Plus, we're all aware of the awesome opportunities for pederasty in this field, and I'll never suggest specific acts or implicate particular candidates, but when I kiss babies that's as far as I go, okay, Senator?

This is as good a time as any to put to rest those spurious charges of misused campaign funds—and once again

I'm not going to point fingers here, left or right, Republican or Republican. I feel it's beneath the dignity of my candidacy, and that gorgeous flag under which I stand, to name names, field nonsensical charges, or make excuses. But gentlemen, we must be leaders of men, not merely politicians! Higher office is an honor demanding those virtues of honesty and forthrightness becoming of statesmen! Enough said. So, as you all very well know, it has been central to my cause to apprehend that notorious ne'er-do-well, the Shame of Islam, Mr. Oscar Ben Laden. Now, while my rivals have been primping and posing, I have been diligently vigilant. Upon learning of rumors that Mr. Laden was holed up in the French Riviera, I and my staff immediately obtained an air vessel by which to seek him out and bring him to justice. The charges from my opponents reek of mud-slinging and political opportunism. Of course a deluxe jet was hired out—good patriotic men don't long remain incognito arriving in Bordeaux in a crop duster, for heaven's sake! And if the vessel happened to be named *Page Boy Paradise*—what of it? I don't name planes, friends, I have work to do. As it stands, we narrowly missed bringing Mr. Laden to justice, but are following up on reports he has shifted his operations to Tahiti. And *yes*, Senator, Hummers are indeed military vehicles, no matter how fancy their paint jobs, no matter how plush their interiors.

Now, when all this slurring, slinging, and sniping gets down to the familial level, it becomes increasingly difficult for a candidate to retain his professionalism. I am, after all, a man—and that comment is in no manner intended as a slight, Congressman—so when a patriotic American's loved ones come under attack, this teddy bear is liable to show some teeth. In the first place, I'm getting absolutely sick of the tabloids' pre-occupation with my wife's so-called "drinking problem." Topsy is a wonderful woman, completely devoted to motherhood and the micromanagement of this pulse-pounding campaign. And I *will not* tolerate abuses heaped upon my children! Little Sally, like any young lady, is attracted to men in uniform, as are we all. Her very deep appreciation for our fighting men is a matter for patriotic pride, not slander. Great Americans have a long history of entertaining our troops. The next time I hear that

execrable phrase “Seventh Fleet Sally” applied to my lovely daughter, I...I...well, let us move on.

Jeff is a perfectly normal, healthy teenaged boy. All youngsters like to experiment, so we’ll be dismissing those highly-colored charges right here and now, okay? Okay. I didn’t raise my son to be a liar. If Jeffrey says he accidentally sat on a gerbil while his underpants were being laundered at the Punk-n-Go Cafe, well, I believe him. Those Internet emergency room photographs should be engendering waves of sympathy, not laughter. But...this is precisely the kind of filthy gossip every decent politician must endure—it’s part and parcel to public exposure. Let it go, let it go, let it go—if Gramma Hydra does indeed talk to angels, how much finer is that than verbally consorting with demons—and again, Senator, no reference intended. If Uncle Willy is occasionally found outside elementary schools wearing only a towel, well, this man needs guidance, not censure. You won’t catch me bringing up a certain Supreme Court Justice’s penchant for wearing ladies’ underwear beneath those most becoming robes, or suggesting the Speaker’s mob connections are anything less than honorable, or wondering just who put the “vice” in Vice President, anyway. Also, I’ve consistently and passionately fought for the Constitutional right to exercise one’s own sexual preference, no matter how bizarre, unbecoming a national leader, or dangerous to the very voters he’s sworn to protect, so I’m not about to impugn a sitting president now.

This is why it is *so* important for politicians to keep abreast of the issues—we all need to do our homework. “Special” interest groups—what, you don’t put your pants on one leg at a time? Let’s get our facts straight. These people for the treatment of ethical animals, for example. Call me stupid, folks, but in my book an ethical animal doesn’t need to be treated; let him do his own thing, he’s not hurting anybody. It’s the selfish ones we have to worry about, and please don’t take offense, Tribune. What’s that? But I just got here. What kind of people are we becoming, anyway? The *issues*, folks, the *issues*. Bring our boys home. I don’t care where they live, damn it; bring ’em home. Fair housing? I can’t even get reasonable landscaping. What do you mean my time’s up? Nobody made

Vote For Me

the Janitor or the Congressman sit down. People! People! Remember to stop by our kiosk on the way out. Buy yourself a calendar or two before they expire. And bear in mind that my bookmarks, bumper stickers, and toy balloons are made right here, in factories painted red, white, and blue. Hidalgo, Singh, and Chin-chin will damn-well-better be happy to give you the lowdown. Our brochure explains, in fun and easy graphics even the kids can enjoy, just how you-and-yours can order wholesale for picnics, parades, or post-election parties. *And* we cater.

You've all been great. So I'd like to take this opportunity to—just let me bring out my damn family, will you? Sally? We're *going*, for Christ's sake! Sirs! I'll have you know that young lady is not yet of legal tender. Jeffrey? Oh, for the love of—*Jeff!* Would you take that—all right, all right, I heard you the first time! Don't forget to catch us on Letterman! Take your God da—Hi! Good to see ya! Great to be here. Repeal Preparation H; it's just not working! Get your hands *off* me, damn it! Topsy, come on out for the final...*Topsy?* Hey, it's been a long campaign. Maybe it's time we all got some rest, eh, "Rear" Admiral? Well, I guess that's about all, folks. Remember, when you slink into that voting booth your bullet really counts. I know mine will. Good to see you. Thanks, thanks. Yeah, right. God bless America to you too.

The Other Side

The whole gang pressed in when Michael began foaming. His eyes rolled back, flickered a bit, and seemed to squeeze into his skull. A great breath filled his lungs. Sherri and Whiz grabbed the arms, Dale and Cindy the legs. Michael's back arched and his hands clenched. Two seconds later he was thrashing wildly. A long shudder worked up from his toes, tightened his sphincter, and snapped back his head. He lay absolutely still. No one said a word; all eyes were on that wracked face. Slowly a bloody spume formed at each corner of the boy's mouth. A red ooze broke from one nostril and rolled down a cheek, shiny in the amber haze of streetlamps. The gang looked up simultaneously. Their eyes all flashed, and their common sentiment was spontaneous:

"Cool!"

"So tell me what it was like," Sherri prodded. "I mean, tell me what it was really like."

Michael hemmed evasively. But he'd always been shy; a distant boy with a sweet interior. Sherri liked him that way. The

other girls went for the jocks and the jerkoffs, but Sherri found it more fun cracking the shell than buffing the surface.

“It was like they say,” Michael mumbled. “‘You’ve never really lived’—”

Sherri completed Morté’s most popular catch phrase, “—‘until you’ve seen the other side.’ So what was it like? The other side. Were you dead?”

Michael turned. “I couldn’t have been, Sher. Or I wouldn’t be here. Nobody comes back.”

“I know, I know. But what was it *like*? Did you *feel* you were dead?” She giggled at her own notion. “Dead people don’t feel.”

“I felt...” In the car’s half-light Michael’s face was not unlike that rictus under the streetlamps. “I felt...things I wasn’t supposed to feel. I saw things I wasn’t supposed to see.”

“Like *what*?”

“Like...things.”

“Okay, Mikey.” At that most unmanly nickname the blue hollows of his face turned purple. “Okay, *Michael*. I’ll just have to find out for myself.”

“No, Sherri. You can’t do that. You mustn’t!”

She gave him her patented peeved look. “Don’t play control-freak with me, Michael. Everybody’s doing Morté. ‘What’s good for the goose,’ right? Why should guys get to have all the fun?”

“It’s not fun! Not fun. Only...”

Sherri turned away. “Christ, Michael, you look like something out of George Romero. If it’s no fun, the hell with it.”

“Only...”

“Only?”

“I’m going back in.”

“Michael.”

He kept his eyes shut. There was no way to close his ears.

“Michael.”

That was what he hated about life. How do you tell an adult, before he gives you all that crap about having so much to live for, that there's just so much to die for—

“Michael.”

He opened his eyes. The stupid shrink was watching him as though he were a fish in an aquarium. Stupid pince-nez. Stupid little goatee. Stupid folded hands in a stupid brown suit.

“If these questions are making you uncomfortable, we can start with something fresh. But you should know your father is paying a lot of money for this session, and will only be that much harder to live with if he feels we didn't make progress.”

“I realize that, sir.”

“Now, Michael...peer pressure can cause youngsters to make decisions that are not in their best interest. This drug, with its ability to temporarily mimic the cessation of life, is achieving notorious popularity among the young.” Dr. Vies closed his eyes and drew his sensitive fingers to his lips. He rocked his narrow head and those arched fingers like joined pendula, saying, “Tch, tch, tch.” It was an effete move. A stupid move. “Interviewed participants invariably describe an episode of complete darkness, soon followed by a gradual, and most agreeable, return to full consciousness. They claim a profound and powerful sense of resurgence, of being born anew. They claim, too, that this interlude of mock demise is without sensation, and figureless. But you, Michael, according to your father, girlfriend, and two paramedics, claim to have experienced a sort of visitation, which you have difficulty depicting verbally.” Vies's Mona Lisa smile fell flat. “Now, I have always found the argument for an afterlife, or an out-of-body experience, intensely provocative. I'm sure you have too; you are an intelligent young man. You need not feel pressured here; not in this private room, not with me. Understand that my profession's ethical code ensures complete confidentiality between doctor and patient, or, as I like to portray the relationship, mentor and friend. So please feel free to be just as forthcoming with me as with your young comrades. Our conversation, I assure you, will not leave this room.” He leaned forward, causing Michael to just as

levelly lean back. “So what did you experience, son? What did you see or feel? In your own words, please, and take your time.”

Michael froze, weighing his options. He could stall, he could lie, he could tell someone what he’d been through. Someone who wouldn’t laugh. He licked his lips and leaned forward.

“First I got real sick,” he whispered. “Then I felt cold and numb; I couldn’t move, sir, not at all.”

Vies nodded. “The drug’s effects impersonate rigor mortis, but with a semi-conscious twist.”

Michael relaxed his shoulders. His voice approached normal volume, and Dr. Vies leaned back. “Everything stopped. I was dead, sir, not ‘like dead.’ It was over. I stopped being alive.”

“Yet you perceived this. You were ‘aware’ of being dead. Do you not see the contradiction?”

“Of course. But I still died. I mean, the conscious thing you’re talking about was the old me. I left that. Honestly, sir, I couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t see anything, couldn’t smell or taste anything...what happened was different. But it was still happening.”

Vies removed his pince-nez and fastidiously polished the lenses with a silk-embroidered kerchief while staring at his knees and nodding apologetically.

Worse than effete. A nancy-boy. A damned fruit was trying to get inside his head. It was obscene; more obscene than the stickiest locker room banter. Good old life, right back in the saddle. It became important to keep talking before that horrible anal-retentive cartoon resumed control of the conversation.

“There was someone else in there...over there...wherever. Someone who was talking to me—but he wasn’t speaking. It was scary, but it didn’t matter, because I wasn’t there. I mean *it* wasn’t there. Am I making any sense?”

Vies’s nod was encouraging. Michael’s narrative had achieved a monotonic caliber, a quasi-hypnotic state clearly suggestive of catharsis. At this point it’s important an analyst become as motionless as possible, prod only in the affirmative, and fade to black. Teenagers like Michael—insular, diffident, sensitive—are excellent subjects when afforded retreat.

“I knew he—it—was speaking to me, because he called me by name—even though I didn’t actually *hear* him. He didn’t want me to come in. He said—he said when the body dies the consciousness goes on, but it’s not like what everybody says it is.”

Vies was careful. “You were encountering a ‘soul,’ then? An angel, perhaps, come to lead you to the afterworld?”

Michael jerked back to the real. “No! What did I just tell you, doctor? I said he didn’t want me to come in. I said it was different. I’m not talking about some white light at the end of a tunnel.”

Vies sat perfectly still. The room submerged imperceptibly, the air seemed to clot, the tension was gradually replaced by that same low hum of subtly intimate pause.

“Michael. I would like to perform a kind of experiment now. Do not be alarmed. I am going to diminish the amount of visible light in this room. The purpose of this procedure is to reduce distraction, thereby enabling your closer approximation of that state you so urgently wish to recover.” The phrase *urgently wish* was a seed, planted with an almost sultry undertone.

“I’m...I...I don’t want to be in the dark...not with another man.”

“Do not be alarmed,” Vies repeated. “I shall remain seated, and so shall you.” He rose and turned a dimmer behind the bookcase, returned to his chair. “There. The atmosphere is much more amenable to free speaking.” The room was bathed in a sedative drear. Michael could still see, but Vies was more like a ghost than an analyst. Now they were both dead men.

“He said,” Michael went on, in that prior drone, “he said that being on the other side is an elecatro...eleckamagnets...”

“Electromagnetic?” Vies wondered, one nancy brow arched. “You are a student of physics, then, Michael?”

Michael appeared to wince in the dimness. “No. He said it was that electric magnet jive you just said. A phenonemon, if I got that right, that was the opposite of life—negative activity, he said. I don’t know science junk, sir, I can only tell you what he told me. And that was that when the physical body dies, the electrical stuff that kept it going ends up in another place; a

place where regular-life things don't apply. You have memories, you have feelings, but you don't have thoughts or goals or anything like that."

Vies's voice was soft and even. "This is most understandable, Michael. One would have little use for goals without a corporeal vessel. But you speak of feelings. They were warm? They were peaceful? What did your friend have to say about feelings?"

Michael's mouth fell open and his face took on a ghastly pall. "Not my...friend."

Vies wanted to kick himself. "This visitor; the apparition. What were its feelings, its impressions?"

"Worms," Michael intoned. "Worms and maggots, eating you...forever. Horror. Pain. Sickness. Screaming all around. But no sound. Worms. Always worms..." The youthful contours passing from his face were just as steadily replaced by planes and crags of an indigo hue. The eyes now goring Vies were arid and fixed. The analyst's nostrils twitched at a nauseating odor.

Vies tore at his collar. He coughed, rose, and stepped to the dimmer. Michael's body was stiff and scrunched in his chair, his face drawn, his eyes hollow.

"Michael." The boy didn't respond. "Michael!" Vies opened his office door and leaned out. "Miss Carter. I would like you to dial 911, please." He looked back into the room. Michael appeared to be surfacing; the blast of light was calling him back. "Hold that command, Miss Carter." Vies reached in and turned the room lights up to full. Michael blinked rapidly. A moment later he was looking all around; a nervous teen unhappy with his surroundings.

Vies stood thoughtfully in the doorway, caught between two worlds.

"Michael."

The boy looked up.

"Your session is over, Michael. I told your father you would call him at home when we were done. He is understandably anxious. I would like you to make that call now. Miss Carter, will you please buzz the door so Michael may phone home." He allowed a lot of elbow room for the boy's exit. "Do

not be worried, son. Your father loves you very much, and agrees it is best you have plenty of space after this session. You are free to walk home rather than be picked up. He only wants to hear your voice, and to know you are feeling better. As do I.”

There was a long electrical buzz. Michael hesitated, took a few steps. The buzz was reprised. Michael stepped into the receptionist’s office. Miss Carter looked through the glass. At a nod from Vies she walked into the back room and made for a file cabinet. Vies gave Michael a little nancy smile before sliding into his office. Michael dialed the number and cupped the mouthpiece with his free hand.

“It’s Michael. I know you are. But I can’t talk now. Just be at Cindy’s in ten minutes. I’ll be on foot. Yes. Bring me a hit, man, and I don’t want to get burned. Yes, yes, yes. I’m going back in. Yes.”

The Gloaming

If I live to see another tomorrow, I swear—never again! I don't care how many times I've made that promise, or how many times I've broken it, this hangover will be the last. Unto that vow I hereby dedicate this unbelievable headache and what's left of these sinuses. I waive my right to the pursuit of happiness, and bequeath my folly to the next poor sap with a strange chick's waist in one hand and the debris of his paycheck in the other. I'm done, man. I surrender. Hand me an AM radio and a good book. From now on it's green tea and whole wheat toast.

Let's see. There's a foot; still got one, two, three, four—all five toes. Then that must be my other foot in that crusty shoe with the bloody sock. Simple enough: swing the leg with the bare foot off the couch, like...so, then follow it with the other leg. Now we just sit up and—

No! Don't try that again. Regulate your breathing. What was that you once read about drunks drowning in their own vomit? Relax...roll onto your side...draw up your knees. Now very carefully pull your upper body into a sitting position.

There you go. Rather like being on a tilt-a-whirl, but that'll clear up when you open your eyes...one, two, three, four—go!

Christ, what a mess. I live here? I've been robbed! Who tore down the curtains? My TV! Who kicked in the screen? I'll kill him, I'll murder the whole lot of 'em! There's the other shoe. Slide in a throbbing foot; can't commit mayhem gimping all over town with only one shoe. But oh please; just let me lay down a bit first. Let me get my strength back. Not that—not the puke again! Can't lay down. I'll die, man, I'll die. Take something quick. Pepto Bismol. Baking soda. Something for the gut. In the bathroom. In...the bathroom! Fast!

I'm sure I can remember making it to the bathroom doorway. I still see myself weaving there, balancing the odds of finding the sink and losing it right where I stood. And I vividly recall a crazy smash as the living room window blew in. I turned in amazement, and in that one brief glimpse I've never been soberer.

The thing that lurched over the TV was wild, man, was worse than any nightmare. I saw a skeletal frame, hollow eyes, fiery hair...it was hysterical—it was screaming like a bobcat.

I did what anybody would do. I slammed and locked the door. I slid trembling to the floor. I began to blubber like a child facing his first dentist. A second later fists were frantically hammering up and down the door. It occurred to me even then, freaked out as I was, that the knob wasn't tried. I leapt on the bureau beside the basin, kicked out both foot-square panes, and shot out the window headfirst.

I took a mouthful out of the carport's gravel roof. But before I hit I saw a world gone mad; creatures identical to that thing now breaking in the bathroom door, houses and apartments on fire, savaged bodies scattered amidst cars and dragged-out furniture.

A man doesn't do a whole lot of analyzing under these circumstances, and anyway, in my case nature wasn't all that generous with the gray matter. I was no great shakes as an athlete either; I twisted an ankle and almost broke my neck shimmying down a drain pipe. Was it only yesterday I was bragging about what a hot jock of a salesman I was? Fat lot of good that did me now.

The Gloaming

Ducking into the carport brought on a wave of ambivalence; I felt both shade-secreted and hopelessly socked in. A number of those things were visible in the street—and now two more were loping across the drive—but they couldn't stop half a ton of screaming metal. I crept on hands and knees to my Accord's door, silently turned the key in the lock, and slipped inside.

The creature that got right in my face nearly stopped my heart. As the wave of hair lashed my eyes I threw up my arms against a hail of fists and snapping teeth. I felt those teeth tear into my hand, and had just time to see it was a young Latina—a real human, like me, but one making an awful lot of noise—before my good hand balled into a fist and doubled her over the seat into the back. She was out before she hit the upholstery.

At the sound of the engine turning over, the things in the drive whirled and made right for me. Thank God Accords don't need to warm—I punched it out of the carport and scattered the first two like 7-and 9 pins.

On the road I was the going attraction—every vehicle was dead, crashed, or a smoking ruin. Those things came running out of buildings and leaping from fire escapes, screaming strangely and throwing their arms. It was still too hectic to get a good long look at one, but they were all skeletal and blood-red, with plentiful scalp fur, and with tufts on the forearms, backs, and ankles.

Downtown was a fresh vision of Hell. Mangled and mutilated people all over the place, a dog torn to ribbons still protecting its master's corpse, an overturned school bus full of screaming children trying to fight off a dozen monsters hammering on the undercarriage like gulls on a barnacle. Fires everywhere; in stores, in theaters and churches. In less than ten minutes I was on the backroads.

A groan behind me took my mind out of the whirl. I pulled over.

The woman was nursing her swollen jaw. I must have knocked out a molar; there was blood tamping the inside of her lips. I yanked her up by the hair.

“Do you speak English?”

She moaned something unintelligible.

“Do you speak English?” I showed her my fist again.

“Yes, yes! Si! Don’t hit me!”

“What’s going on around here? What are those things?”

“I don’t know. I woke up and they were everywhere. Don’t hit me!”

I unballled my fist and tried to relax. “What do you mean you ‘woke up.’ How could anybody sleep through all that?”

Her expression fell. “I...I wasn’t asleep. I took some pills. To help me.”

“To help you sleep?”

She pushed my arm away. “To help me stop living. ¿Comprende? Is that kosher-clear enough for you?”

I turned back, bristling. “Next time try carbon monoxide.” Every other radio station featured a self-repeating alert, full of pings and droning mayorese. A few were so disorganized it was impossible to tell what was taking place at the stations. One gave a monotonous human patter.

“What’s he saying?”

“I don’t speak freaking Farsi.”

I glared into the rear-view mirror. “But you freaking recognized it as freaking Farsi, didn’t you?”

“*This* time,” the woman hissed, “black my eyes! That way I won’t have to freaking look at you.” She turned her head. “Puerco.”

I blew out a sigh. “Look, I’m genuinely sorry I socked you. You were making enough noise to get us killed. And you bit the hell out of my hand.”

“You sneaked up on me.”

“You were in my car.”

“Yeah? Well, this is where I get out of your car.”

I reached back. She swatted my arm as I yanked the handle and threw open the door. “Then freaking *get* out.”

She looked around doubtfully, and for a quirky moment was just a girl without a daddy. When she turned back the fire had retaken her eyes.

“You’d really kick me out? You’d leave me to die? What are you, an animal?”

I slammed the door. “Two things. One, you said you wanted out. Two, you were all set to die anyway. I’m glad

you've had a change of heart. Let's see if we can work this thing through together." There was an uncomfortable pause. "What's your name?"

The eyes burned up at me. "Chiquita. What's yours?"

I turned back to face the road, my hands clutching the wheel. "Hymie," I muttered, and rammed the car into drive.

The city's outskirts contained far fewer of those gaunt furry things. We saw the occasional stalker prowling the fields like a plains hunter, going after field mice perhaps. They only showed in pairs where a kill was in progress, and stared dumbly at the passing Accord. My hangover was back. I was trying to piece together the paucity of available data; nothing was conclusive. I noted a burnt umber cast to the noon sky, a high-pitched drone that went on and on just at the threshold of awareness, a vaguely rotten-egg stench all around. My lips tingled. Finally I got a broadcast that was certainly in Spanish.

"There! What's that lady saying?"

No answer.

I looked back as I drove. "Come on! We're in this together."

She glowered in her slump. "She say Jewboy pack uno mean punch."

"Damn you!" I stared straight ahead.

After a minute she appended, "And she says Jesus Christo has come to lead us home. That was a rosary you just heard. No news. Just prayers. Who do you pray to?"

"You know damn well who I pray to." We were coming into a little town. It appeared deserted. "Look, I don't know about you, but I've got one hell of a headache. I'm going for the hair of the dog; there's a market right up there. Besides, we'll need food, gas, and some kind of weapon. I'll dash in while you wait in the car with the motor running." Immediately I was struck by the folly of this little notion. "Look who I'm talking to." I pictured myself coming out to find the car long gone. "I'm taking the keys with me." I blinked rapidly, now visualizing her laughing inside with the doors locked, holding down the latch while I furiously tried the key. My brain was a tender bruise. "You're coming with me."

"I don't get a vote?"

“No, you don’t get a vote. You’re coming along or this ride is history.”

We opened our doors simultaneously. “Don’t lock it,” I whispered. “We may need that extra second.”

The odor and whine were much more pronounced once we’d stepped out. Also, the air burned our eyes. The market was vacated, the shelves and freezer intact. We were loading up on essentials when I found the shopkeeper’s remains behind the counter. It was so bad I threw up there and then. The woman poured water on my head while running ice cubes along the back of my neck.

“Don’t look at it any more. Drink some of this. Little sips! Don’t take big swallows.”

I got down some water, rinsed and spat.

She leaned over the counter, said, “He put up a fight,” and came back with a bloody crowbar. “Maybe we can use this.” While I slumped getting my wind she went through the hardware section in the back. When she returned she was carrying a couple of propane torches and extra canisters. “Weapons.” She picked up a butane lighter.

A scratch and clacking outside.

In two seconds I had the door closed. Half a minute later I’d barricaded it with everything from a steel shelf to a keg of nails.

“Loo...” called a voice. In the distance rose a high-pitched reply. “Loo?”

There was a similar clacking within the store, just inside the little back room. I swear my heart stopped at that moment; it’s not just a saying. Somewhere between the last beat and the next, the ajar back door flew inward and one of those things shot in screaming.

If not for that woman I’d be hamburger right now. Without batting an eye, she lit the torch, cranked up the gas, and stuck it right in that death’s head face. The fur went up like balled confetti as it staggered out the way it came.

I grabbed the stuffed bags and kicked away my amateurish little barricade. It might seem strange we were so quick to head into that freak show, but there’s a weird underlying component to human nature—no matter how worse the subsequent

The Gloaming

situation, we simply had to get *out* of that store.

They were all over the place; stepping from behind bushes, roosting on my car. The woman went at them with a lit torch in each hand, stabbing the flames in their faces, mirroring their screams. In this way we made it to the Accord. She really went at them at the door; I had to plead to get her inside.

“They don’t like fire!” I exulted as she slammed her door.

“Nobody does.”

I threw it in drive and swerved on out of there, recklessly, and probably needlessly; they were wary of moving vehicles.

We hurtled through the little town. At length I relaxed. “I see you’re still on your suicide trip. But you’ve got balls for a skirt; I’ll give you that much.” I tried to come off conversationally. “You never did tell me why you took those pills.”

She grabbed my arm. “Stop! Sign!”

I shook off her hand. “I know what a stop sign looks like! *Never* touch a man’s driving arm.”

She punched that driving arm so hard I’ll have a bruise if I live to see Chanukha. She knew just where to connect, too; it was that tender spot on the right bicep invariably selected by bullies. She probably learned it from scrapping with her chicken farm hermanos. I despise tomboys.

“Not a stop sign, you retard. Look!”

Tied to a leaning gnarly oak was a home-made banner, proclaiming,

IF U CAN RED THIS COM TO FORTH STRET AND ABEL
STRET. WE AR HERE FOR U. FOOD AND SHELTR. JESUS
IS THE WA.

“Turn here!” she commanded.

“I *know* where I’m going!”

The closer we came to Fourth and Abel, the heavier grew the presence of those predatory creatures. At the address—a Chevron station—there was a mob of ’em. In a blaze of retaliatory machismo, I shot straight through a broad gap and screeched to a halt at the office door, ready to peel right back

out as soon as that uncharacteristic little blaze had been properly snuffed. All the windows were smashed, but the repair bay's steel sliding door promptly rolled up on protesting pulleys. Out sprang an elderly man and woman. They grabbed us and hustled us inside. The steel door slammed to the cement.

The interior was illuminated by a hundred candles; some free-standing, some scented votives. The brick walls were now finger-painted murals of crucifixion scenes in colored chalk, interspersed with Christian clichés scrawled in used motor oil. There were maybe two dozen nervous citizens huddled centripetally. They ran the gamut—everything from truck drivers to welfare moms.

“Bless you!” breathed the old man, eagerly echoed by frantic nods from his wisp of a wife. They clasped our hands with the wont of their genders. “We were beginning to fear we were the sole survivors. But come; you must be famished. Sit with us and freely partake of the Lord’s beneficence.” He motioned to a table peppered with the contents of the station crew’s break room. I saw Oreos, pretzels, and two six-packs of Diet-Rite. Cheetos and Top Ramen, a few pouches of instant hot chocolate.

“We’ve got stuff,” I mumbled, “in the car. You’re welcome to it. More important is news. Like, what’s going on? How did this all come about? What are those things out there?”

“These are questions,” the old woman said, “which must be put to Jesus.”

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed my worse half, shaking her head emphatically while resting a palm on her head to imply a yamulka.

“I saw that!” I bowed to our little white-haired host. “You’ll forgive my friend’s problems with basic communication. English is her second language. Now, what news have you? And why no lights?”

“The power is gone,” the old man grieved. “Still, we have the light of our Lord.”

“What about the emergency generators?”

The old couple traded timid looks.

“¡Ay, caramba!” came a voice at my side, and my shotgun walked into the break room to pry open a steel wall panel.

The Gloaming

In a minute there was a muffled kick and surge. Artificial light flooded the room. She strolled back in. “Okay. The pump switches are on. This place isn’t a church; it’s a crypt. You people will starve to death in here. At least outside you’ve got a shot.”

Our hosts began to argue feebly, but there was no doubt they were outvoted. The whole crowd grabbed their belongings and lined up at the big sliding door.

“You make things look easy,” I muttered, with a grudging admiration I couldn’t disguise. “Too easy.”

“I try harder. Can you handle this mob?”

“I guess. What do you want me to do?” Did I just say that?

“Listen up,” she called. “This is the man you want to hang with.” She inclined her head. “No offense, mamacita and papa. We’re all gonna stay bunched in a group. It’s what little fish do when they want a bigger fish to back off. There’s trucks and trailers in the parking lot. We’re going to blast our way out of here like gangbusters and look for a safer haven. This is not a random suggestion being put to a vote. Grab your gear and get ready.”

“What about weapons?” I maundered. “If those critters catch us in here with the gate up—”

“Get away from the door.” She stood on her toes, grabbed the chain, and gave it one long meaningful yank. “Blow it on out of here!” As the door rolled up, everybody hunched, squinted, and inched out in a tight group.

The things were all ringed at a respectable distance; I got the impression they were sick of beating themselves silly on that impenetrable sliding door. As they watched us proceed, a common clacking and cooing filled the air.

There came a familiar light thrumming high overhead. We all looked up. It was a small plane, maybe a Cessna, winging west on an updraft. The brutes all craned their gnarly necks, and a great cheer went up on the ground. The plane appeared to dip in acknowledgement. A minute later it was a speck.

“Maybe he’ll be back,” someone cried.

The woman at my side turned sarcastically. “Would *you* be coming back?” She was really starting to bug me; in the way she intuitively took forward steps, whether in deed or in patter. I

guess it was simple envy—me crouching there with my panties all in a bunch—but that kind of alpha behavior doesn't typically cross genders. As if to accentuate our relationship, she shove-punched me in the shoulder blade.

"That guy's got the right idea. We have to get off the ground. There's a poquito airport over there." She smacked me upside the head to make sure I was following.

"I *know* where it is!"

"You get in the Accord." She turned to address the crowd. "Everybody pile into that U-Haul. Homeboy, you're driving. When I give the signal, you U-haulass out of here. Head for the sticks and keep on heading."

"What signal?" called a little woman in the back.

"This." She yanked a nozzle off a pump, held it high in one hand and the disposable lighter in the other.

Tough to describe the compound squeal that went up as those church mice fell over one another in their scramble for the U-Haul. She watched them pile in the back like border-jumpers prodded by a coyote. I shivered at the wheel. When the truck's sliding rear panel slammed down she turned and blew a kiss at the approaching creatures.

"Come on, babies. Mama's waiting. Come here, my sweet little ninos."

I didn't turn to see if any were converging on me or the U-Haul. I was mesmerized by the little lady with the big chutzpa. A ring of screaming began. When they were all over her a wall of flame blew out in a broadening spiral. The things lit up and scattered, but she didn't stand there trembling. She *chased* them, round and round, as far as the hose would allow. Half a minute later she dropped the nozzle and let it burn. I floored us out of there and never looked back.

The little airport had been hit bad. It was burned out end to end, and bore a peculiarly ominous black-orange pall. Worse, that rotten egg stench was so bad it left us retching. And that shrill, steady whine upset the equilibrium; it was no longer just an annoying background noise, it was a very real and jangling pitch. Our eyes watered and our sinuses drained furiously.

We broke into the main office. While she watched the door I tore all the keys from their pegs and dropped them in a

The Gloaming

little tin pail behind the counter. We hurried on foot to the first row of two-seaters.

There was a protracted cooing behind the office. Another across the runway. In half a minute the stinking air was filled with calls and replies.

I rooted through the pail, chattering, “That one’s labeled 72-A. And here’s the keys, on this big old ring. One’ll be the cockpit door, the other’ll certainly be for the ignition. If this one doesn’t work I’ve got a whole can of ’em.” I fumbled the ring into her hands.

“What do you freaking want me to do with them?”

“What do you freaking think? Fly us the hell out of here!”

“Well, I hate to be a party-pooper, but I’ve never been in a plane in my life.”

“Don’t mess with me, man! You directed us here; *you led me on!* So what were you thinking? Like maybe you’d have your pick of bored pilots?”

She cuffed my forehead. “You’re cute when you talk stupid. Don’t worry. *Okay*, Violet? Papa was an air traffic controller. He told me all about it. All you have to do is hold onto the joystick with one hand and cross your heart with the other.”

“Thank God for that. Well let’s go, then. Just get us in the air and across the border. I’m not looking for a particularly smooth ride.”

“And then what?”

“I dunno. Try to get things back to normal. Build us a homestead. Repopulate the race.”

She looked like she wanted to heave. “What in hell would we name it?”

I thought for a bit. “If it’s a boy, how’s about Jack? And if it’s a girl—”

She nodded ruminatively. “I’ve always liked Jill. Not too ethnic.”

I grabbed the pail in one hand and her soft sweaty palm in the other. “Okay, Indiana. Here goes nothing.”

Bill & Charlie (a love story)

William Bergal wasn't exactly a survivalist. Nor was he really an outdoorsman. He had something to prove—to himself, to his God, to his pretend-posterity; he felt it vital to repay, in his own way, the gift of life itself. This urge came from a lifelong disdain for the crowd, for its icons and manifold plastic distractions, and from a very deep affinity for nature in her staggering totality. Bill hurt and he didn't actually know why. He only knew that it was a sweet pain, and nobody's business but his.

But seekers *should* be outdoorsmen, minimally, if their spiritual calling outweighs their good sense to the point they're willing to tackle Washington's Mount Rainier, at the onset of winter, with nothing more than street clothes, a backpack full of trail mix, freeze-drieds, tin heating cup, notepad and bruising literature, and a fanny pack containing *utter* essentials: compass, disposable lighters, flashlight and extra batteries, multi-vitamins...Bill also brought along a good strong hunting knife, though he'd never used one, and a silly philosophy defining the only real food as that which is self-attained. To support this idea

he carried a pouch holding fishing line and hooks: he'd heard fishing was the easy part; throw in your line and relax over instant coffee and Disraeli. Salmon are known to leap right into frying pans.

Odd.

This sure wasn't the cherry-cheeks cold of snowball fights and toboggan races. This weather dug into nerves, stinging them stiff. It tore simultaneously through mouth and nostrils, strangling a man from the inside. Bill was seriously ill on the second night out, and his unexpected staple diet of trail mix and ice water was taking a further toll. The fish must have seen him coming, the salmon had to be hopping into somebody else's pan. But Bill's sights were irrevocably set on a strangely sedate hill—he reckoned three thousand feet up; a soft peaked snowball amidst streaked majestic peaks. The view must be staggering.

Yet it just kept on getting colder; it seemed to drop a degree for every hour he pushed on. And there were dangerous drifts, minor crevasses, lurking stones and roots. The stately white pines were gorgeous, of course, though they appeared to close behind with impenetrable resolve. The third day found him hopping and slapping his thighs, building fires that quickly petered and died, quoting King James, Herman Hesse, and Eul Gibbons. He must have made a most comical impression on the small band swinging up from the northwest.

The lead man strode right up, looking Bill over.

“You see a wounded animal come by here? Brown bear, maybe three feet high at the shoulder. Hit once in the left upper hip.”

“Hit?”

“Shot.” The man raised his rifle symbolically. “We're hunters. It's season.” He swung that rifle in a lazy arc. “I'm Russ Vaden. This is Derrin, there's Sam, and that's Jacques.” The mentioned men watched with barely contained amusement. Vaden squinted curiously. “If you're lost, mister, just bear downhill. Always remember that. Folks don't settle in the hills.”

“No,” Bill returned after a hard moment, “I'm not lost. I'm up here to find myself. There is great beauty in the mountains...everywhere.”

“Nature boy,” Jacques sniggered. Derrin sniggered back. Sam laughed snot out his nose. The huntsmen relaxed.

“Come on,” Vaden grinned. “We’ve got hash and fresh salmon.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re not a vegetarian, too, are you?”

“No,” Bill mumbled. “Not a vegetarian.”

“What he *means*,” Sam appended as they made for a flat space between trees, “is that sometimes guys who go off on the whole nature thing, well, they go off on the *whole* nature thing. Politics, womenly rights, ecologee whiz—save the animals, kiss the babies. Stuff.” He looked like a man retaining a mouthful of castor oil.

“Each to his ever-lovin’ own,” Derrin said, shaking his head.

The salmon and hash were sizzling bliss. Bill swallowed guiltily, but the fire in his hole let him know it was right. He’d probably lost five pounds; not superfluous weight in the wild. The blaze between their feet was shared at a primal level, not to be dismissed by pigheaded valor. The coffee was heaven, the chewed grounds exquisite.

Vaden watched him eat with a twinkle in his eye. “Friend...”

“It’s William. Bill.”

“William Bill. I don’t know anything about your leanings and whatnot, but I think, as a man among friends, you just might find that this fulfillment you’re seeking is right back home where you left it. Makes no sense at all for a fellow to be up here suffering if he don’t have to. For profit, sure. For sport, maybe; that depends on the individual.”

“There are things,” Bill tried...“deeper.” He knew he was desperately out of place. “Things bigger than me and you. Abstract things. Immortal things.”

Derrin spat grounds in the fire. “So you’re hoping to find God up here, is that it?”

Jacques jumped to his feet, spread his arms, dropped his jaw and rolled his eyes. “There he goes! There he goes! Zhoom!” He flopped back down grinning.

Bill studied him drearily. Jacques was one of those annoying class clowns whose sole claim to friendship was

weary tolerance. Six centuries ago he'd be talking his way out of another round in the stocks. "No. Not as you put it. God, nature, beauty, life, death, friendship, this fire, that turkey buzzard—it's all the same thing. I suppose I just had to get out of the city. Traffic, greed. People running around with their heads up their rectums. The soul wasn't designed for such an arena."

Sam sighed. "Sentiment in the mountains..." He gave Bill a dour look. "I give you a week, maybe two. It takes a certain constitution, neighbor, to grit your way through another day. A man don't need God or poetry. He needs to know who he really is, and where he actually stands in the real world."

"Mountain Law," Vaden said. His eyes lit. "And I wouldn't do too much talking about rectums around these guys."

The men all laughed.

Off to Bill's right, Jacques made a series of obscene movements, his eyes bugged. It wasn't all that subtle. Bill dropped his eyes.

"Nothing wrong," Vaden said, wagging his head, "with a man trying new things, so long as he keeps his mind ordered the way nature intended. We've seen your bright sticky dens, Friend William Bill, and we know exactly what goes on in the cities." Derrin scooted to Bill's far left. Vaden and Sam were anchored at ten and two o'clock.

Bill studied his clasped hands, feeling very locked in. "I'm not gay," he said quietly.

Jacques, batting his lashes, cried, "I'm not gay! I'm just *experimenting!*" Sam laughed and gave him a good manly sock on the bicep.

"Leaning," Vaden said.

Derrin ran his fingers up Bill's calf. "Y'know, Willy, you get less wind resistance when you shave 'em down."

"Cut it out," said Vaden. He rose and, hands cocked aggressively on hips, looked off at the broken crystal skyline. After half a minute he looked back down and kicked Bill's thigh. "You got any ideas about getting friendly with my friends, friend?"

"I am," Bill snarled, "*not* gay!"

“What are you then?” Vaden grabbed him by the hair, yanked him to his feet. Derrin and Jacques took the arms while Sam walked a tight circle, looking menacing.

“Who are you?” Vaden shouted, and delivered a savage kick to the scrotum. “*Answer!*” Before Bill hit the snow he was being mauled by Jacques and Derrin while Sam maneuvered for random kicks to the head. Vaden’s demands were furious and spewed without pause for breath. “Who sent you? What are you doing up here? Who do you work for? What you got on us? How much do you know?”

“Nothing!” Bill gasped. “I don’t know anything!” He scooped snow between his thighs. Sam and Derrin got to work with the fists while Jacques danced all over him.

Vaden yelled, “Cut!” He dragged Bill a few feet off and slapped his cheeks. “Just to show you we’re not the bad guys, I’m provisioning you for the comparatively easy trek back down to your tea rooms and opium dens.” He hauled a backpack from the hunters’ common pile, heaved Bill to his knees and strapped it on. “There’s a good ten pounds of jerky and dried salmon in here. Anything’ll keep in this cold; anything except people. Now I want you to march downhill until you get to civilization. You didn’t see nothing up here. You tell your faggot friends this is no place for a soul-searching sissy. Do your searching in the gay bars. If I see you again I’ll kill you.”

Before he’d descended five hundred feet, Bill knew he was going back up, knew he was pressing on. The human animal was the very thing he was evading; he had to get higher, to that place too desolate for his sick social species. He gave the hunters’ site wide berth, and began to watch for tracks and anomalies: this activity gave him a bizarre pride—he was learning the wild. He continued to make for the white hill. And it just kept getting colder. The wind picked up; snow and ice were progressively more treacherous. Bill’s hair and beard froze over. His naked hands showed a purple-white gradient fading to blue, his legs and arms stung, went numb, stung some more. He pushed his limits, halting only long enough to realize that to pause was to die. The little hill seemed to beckon. He managed a hundred feet, reeled, managed a dozen more. Bill, forcing

each step, sank and recovered, sank and recovered, made the hill's basic slope, pushed himself on.

The cold was unbelievable...and now it had stopped being cold. He wasn't just numb; he was—Jesus: Bill stamped his feet and felt nothing. His hands were locking up, his eyes swimming, his breath searing. The whole world went white...snowblind, frostbitten, dying in step...Bill hopped around, trying to feel his blood, and found only floes. He wheeled his arms, fell in a hollow. No! An ice grave. No. He banged his way out, saw a black recess in the blue-white field. A cave, a hundred feet up, a hundred miles away. And he swam for it, flailing way; hope's madman—a place to lie down, rock instead of snow. The animal instinct was there...to crawl...a place to die out of the open. A cave, a vault, a tomb, and he reached it, somehow, fell inside, struggled along a surface that did not yield, found a space between facing boulders, and passed.

There came a sibilant, rhythmic noise to his left; very close, very direct. Like a bellows pumping, but faster. Gasping. Bill was too dead for fear; he jacked his torso up with an elbow and came nose to nose with a panting brown bear.

"You," he managed, "startled me." The animal's lids parted and closed. "A pair of stiffs," Bill groaned, and again reclined. After a minute he pushed himself back up. The bear was stretched out exactly parallel, on its side, its scarred black nails just grazing his coat. He could see the source of its distress: the bear had taken a shell in the back just above the butt, where the left hip joined the flank proper. The action of infection was monstrous; a great festering mound rose out of the fur. The bear was battling both terrible pain and massive hunger.

"You don't need to suffer in stereo, friend." Bill gnawed some life back into his hand and fought out a huge hunk of jerky, held it before the animal's peeking eyes. The nostrils quivered. The whiskers trembled, the jaw creaked open, the tongue extended like an unfurling carpet. Bill's fingers stung from the wet warmth. No sane man would allow any part of his body to loiter between those stiletto teeth, but he knew the animal probably lacked the strength to manipulate the food

otherwise, and anyway a frozen corpse with one hand is as good as a frozen corpse with two. He fed the bear one mouthful at a time, and his hand, while gently masticated, was never harmed. The warmth of that mouth kissed his fingers with life; Bill found himself feeding with greater facility...pushing the jerky down, reaching into the pack for a new fistful of salmon, pushing the salmon down. When the meal was done Bill whispered, "Thank you," clasped his hands above his heart, and laid back down to die. He gradually grew conscious of a heaving presence, spreading along his legs and flank, slowly taking his chest...the bear was easing on top of him, heavy but not crushing, warming, warming. Bear's breath in his face, noxious, suffocating...warming, warming...fur in his hair, paws on his arms. But softly. Warming, warming...human nature's latest victims locked in a long and warming embrace; odd bugs in amber, pinned in a lost, but no-longer-lonely, naturally refrigerated morgue for two. A strange way to die.

Bill dreamt of calving glaciers, melting upon impact. His subconscious sketched fingers and toes that no longer belonged to him; pus-yellow dragging coals fastened by lichen-green ligaments. He dreamed his way into a grayscale grave nestled in stone, and woke in a rank pool of sweat. The bear opened its eyes at the same time. Bill rolled his face from under that heaving muzzle, tried to flex his fingers. There was sensation. He ran his hands through the bear's warm fur, rubbed them into the hot skin. The fingers began to sting. "Thanks again," he hissed. He made to wiggle his toes. The feet, smothered in bear over the night, were absolutely numb. But it was the good-numb. He was able to bend his arches and crimp the toes at their bases. The bear moaned. Bill could have kissed it: he'd survived frostbite intact.

He worked his way out by degrees; lifting the bear's arm over his head, sliding out his legs an inch at a time. When his limbs were his again, he gently placed his hands on the bear's side and leaned over the wound. "Listen, girl. I'm not some fancy naturalist or anything, but I can tell from a casual glance that no vital organs are involved." He followed the flank down, inspecting further, and at last blew out a sigh. "I neglected to

tell you that I'm also not a biologist, and one thing you're most certainly *not* is a girl." He shook his wet head. "Doesn't it figure...here I am, stuck with a pansy panda. Maybe those mountain creeps were right. I was gonna name you Charlotte, or something like that, but—hey, how's about Charles? Can you deal with that?" The bear groaned from the depths. "Charles it is, then. William and Charles." He arched his brows. "Too formal for outcasts? Okay, mon ami. It's Bill and Charlie." He gently ran his hand uphill. The bear's respiration quickened. "Er...*listen*, Charlie. There's one other little thing I failed to mention...and that's that I'm no veterinarian. But I'm letting you know, right up front and just between friends, that you've one hell of a humongous infection. That's what's causing the pain, not the bullet." He very tenderly worked his hand toward the festering wound. Charlie's groans elongated. "The bullet must come out, Charlie. There's no two ways around it. Kindly remain seated." He limped outside and came back with his arms weighed by virgin snow. "Ice to numb the pain." Bill eased out his hunting knife. "Technology to reverse the damage." Some instinct made him show the blade, made him turn it above the bear's laboring muzzle. Charlie's eye rolled up, rolled back down. Bill made two hills of the ice. Into one he plunged the blade to further the chill. The other mound he scooped onto the hot purple wound. The bear sucked air, relaxed. Bill now sat as for yoga, eyes closed, palms smothered in fur. One hand found the chilled knife's shaft, one eye opened to further its course. Bill bent to his task like a researcher to his lens. "Good Charlie."

January was much harsher, rarely climbing above 5°F. Sometimes the wind-chill factor made sedentary activity life-threatening. But Bill recovered from his ordeal, and Charlie from his wound. One irony of the wild: hardship makes a steady physician—the single-minded pursuit of day-to-day brute existence causes the entire system to perform at peak levels, regardless of the patients' resolve. And *genuine* cold heats the blood. A healthy animal keeps moving or dies.

Bill and Charlie turned the little cave into a home as well as a survival chamber. Bill insulated the rock walls with

dirt and dead branches, Charlie showed Bill where to fish for the fattest salmon. Charlie did the rounds as watchdog, Bill demonstrated the fine art of fire building, and even constructed a highly efficient flued hearth. Charlie, habituated to snoozing right in front, was ever loth to give up his spot, though Bill made it plain that room need be made when cooking. Bill liked to tell long boring stories of his childhood; Charlie followed as best he could, prone as he was to nodding. They had songfests; Bill took lead while Charlie harmonized, sounding more like a drunken sea lion than a rightful accompanist. The hard winter was much less so at Bill's & Charlie's.

They took hikes in the afternoons. Charlie knew just where to find the best berries; Bill dreamed of yeast. And it was on one of these brief walks—a pair doesn't dare loiter in sub-zero weather—that Bill, fighting to build a baby fire, grew increasingly annoyed at Charlie's typical whining dissertations on the high-scented outdoors. He tried a snowball or two, but that didn't work; Charlie only became more vociferous, and somehow Bill wasn't really surprised when Vaden's voice poked out of the pines:

“Anybody for beans and weenies?”

Somebody laughed—it may have been Sam—and then they were all oozing into the clearing. They came from four corners: bear and man were surrounded.

Bill quickly stepped to Charlie's side, ran a quieting arm around his neck. “We don't want any more trouble.”

A bullet almost took off Bill's hand. He stared aghast, every cell in his body cringing. Charlie lay bleeding, half-buried in snow. Vaden tucked the pistol back under his belt.

“We don't either.”

Vaden, looming against the false dusk, stirred the small fire with a branch, sporadically watching his bound and seated prisoner. Maybe twenty yards away, three silhouetted ghouls were busy round a larger blaze.

“You know, to be perfectly honest, I have to admire a man with the gumption to come out here all on his lonesome, at this time of year, with nothing more than the grits God gave a gopher.”

“Let the bear go, mister.”

“Russ.”

“He’ll live if he gets a chance to recuperate. I sincerely do not give a good damn what you do with me. I’ve seen enough.”

“That’s a shame. But we’re hunters. And that’s a bear, not a waif.” Vaden looked off pensively, aurorae in his eyes. “So did you find Him out here? God, I mean.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious what I found out here. Let the bear go.”

“You sound like a guy talking to his son’s kidnappers.” Vaden rocked the rifle on his thighs. “Tell me something, Friend William Bill. How can a fella have the guts of a man and the stomach of a sissy? How does a man, armed with the iron gonads forged by fifty thousand years of goddamned evolution, end up playing canasta with a brute capable of chewing his oh-so civilized heart out?”

“That’s a mammal. It will respond to compassion as well as to maltreatment.”

“That’s a wild animal.” Vaden, rifle in hand, criss-crossed his arms over his head. His friends whooped and hunched over Charlie.

Bill’s voice caught in his throat: “Listen, sir, I didn’t see anything and I don’t work for anybody. I don’t know or care what you’re doing up here. It’s none of my mortal business. Tell them to let the bear go. I’ll head back home like you want and wipe this whole scene from memory. I swear. I don’t care what you guys are up to. Just let the bear go.”

Vaden stared hard. Determined to try again, he came down in a hunching crouch; forearm resting on extended left knee, right leg facing out at an angle. He looked inward, at peaks locked in solid by winter, and said, meditatively, “You know, you shouldn’t be all that surprised by those boys’ behavior. It’s not only unnatural, it’s downright *wrong* for a fellow to carry on about a dumb animal. You don’t act like a man; why do you expect to be treated like one?”

“Get it over with, then. Kill us both, but be quick about it. You talk about men—what kind of man torments a helpless creature?”

Vaden cocked his head. "What kind of man treats a varmint like a damned woman?"

"Get it over with, you bastard."

Vaden pushed himself back up. "Don't be in such a hurry. What kind of man executes another without first giving him a last supper?" His expression was odd; not vindictive, not humored, not angry or sad.

Indifferent.

"You like bear?"

Bill screamed each time Charlie roared in agony. The torturers weren't laughing any more; that was only at the start, in response to Bill's bellowing pleas for mercy. The prisoner's screaming took all the fun out of it. But not the thrill, and certainly not the camaraderie. They'd laughed hysterically while jabbing out the bear's eyes, hooted and howled with each application of torch to fur. Now the clubbings and stabbings were waning in response to Charlie's abbreviated calls. The party was closing down. Vaden, standing midway between the action and his captive, swung his rifle side to side to indicate a halt.

Bill wasn't only screaming with horror. He'd used his feet to scoop a large ember from the fire, and managed, through a herculean effort of contortion, to jam this ember up between his wrists and their hide binding. The leather and his flesh were breaking up at roughly the same rate; he could smell his skin burning through the tears.

Vaden walked up casually, a liting figure made spectral by firelight before and behind. He let the rifle swing down until the bore was positioned directly between Bill's streaming eyes.

"I told you once, friend, that if I saw you again I'd kill you." He nodded, more to himself than to Bill. "Mountain Law." He scrunched up his nose and looked around. "Something stinks something awful."

In a heartbeat Bill was on his feet. He tore the rifle from Vaden's hand, clubbed his skull with the butt.

Shouts of surprise from the men. Bill saw Derrin and Sam go for their rifles and dropped them flat. Jacques stood splayed, torch in one hand, air in the other. Bill was just getting

a bead when a grunt from Vaden caught his ear. He whirled and shot the man in the throat even as the pistol was rising.

Jacques yelped and bounded into the drifts. Bill grabbed Vaden's ammo pouch, stalked across the clearing, clenched his fist, stopped. He stood over Charlie without looking down, the breath gurgling in his throat. The bear whined pathetically. "Oh God," Bill said, and let the barrel descend until it snagged in the fur above Charlie's ear. "Oh God, oh God. Oh God oh God oh God." He wept like a baby. "Oh God oh God oh God ohGod ohGodoh—" Bill squeezed the trigger and stepped over. In a trance, he watched the world quaking round him.

But there was a bug floundering in white. Bill shook away his tears. The bug cried out at a turned ankle. Bill took his time reloading. "Whatsoever a man soweth..." he puffed, and raised the rifle like a torch bearer closing in on the finish, "...that shall he also reap." Closing his mind to it all, he gripped his coat against the weather and began to march.

It was tough going; far tougher for Jacques than for Bill, for this was dead-familiar turf. Every time Jacques stopped to get his bearings or wave surrender, Bill got off a shot or two. And if passion could afford room for self-analysis, Bill would have had to admit that he was aiming more to inspire terror than to kill. Yet the shots kept getting closer, and his blood brought him focus despite the cold. The course was relentlessly uphill: Jacques's fear caused him to mindlessly recede from the steadily stalking automaton—his entire mentality was blind to anything resembling an intelligent retreat. He scrambled and thrashed like a drowning man, trading the obvious proximate hazards for a long snowy grade offering sporadic cover round a friendlier keel. But this particular slope was intimately familiar to Bill; he'd traversed it, in good company, a hundred times and more. He took a shot at Jacques's head. His aim was wide; he followed up with a trio, then with a volley. Jacques screamed at the dusk-bound figure pausing to reload. He stared at the graying hilltop, squealed once, took a terrible breath and scampered up insanely.

Bill was weeping as he fought the grade; he could tell by the quick bite of new ice on his cheeks. Jacques lost his footing in a drift and clambered out, close enough to exchange looks.

There was genuine horror in his eyes. “Mister...no! Mister...
mister...NO!”

Bill wasn't taking real aim now. He cocked and fired with one hand, cocked again. A white nova appeared a foot from Jacques's shoulder and passed. The man shrieked and kicked frantically, waving his arms as though to ward off a blow. A cracking report preceded a puff of snow between his feet, and another, eighteen inches higher. “*No!*”

Bill's whole face was contorted by ice. He couldn't stop the tears, couldn't keep his mouth from shivering. Jacques disappeared behind a bank of glistening boulders and Bill stopped to shake the rifle. “Mountain Law!” he bellowed. He plunged the rifle's stock into the snow, using it for leverage as he clung to stunted branches with the other hand. Up to his waist in white, Bill nevertheless stormed the dimming hill, saw Jacques thrashing above, saw him look around desperately, saw him scramble into the cave.

A strange quiet came over the hill. Bill could hear his heart beating; he'd never heard it before. Animal business was at hand: his senses were sharpening in direct relation to the cave's proximity. At the entrance an extrawordly echo escaped into the chill. He could sense things he'd never felt, feel things he'd never sensed. Bill smelled prey. How better was he, then, than the basest of animals—in what secret way did this very private experience rightly become an evolved man; a man of intellect, of spirit, of self-analysis and compassion. Bill listened some more. Inside were a scuttling, a whimpering, a stifled cough. He cocked the rifle, mumbled, “Father, forgive me, for I know not what I do,” and kicked his way inside.

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