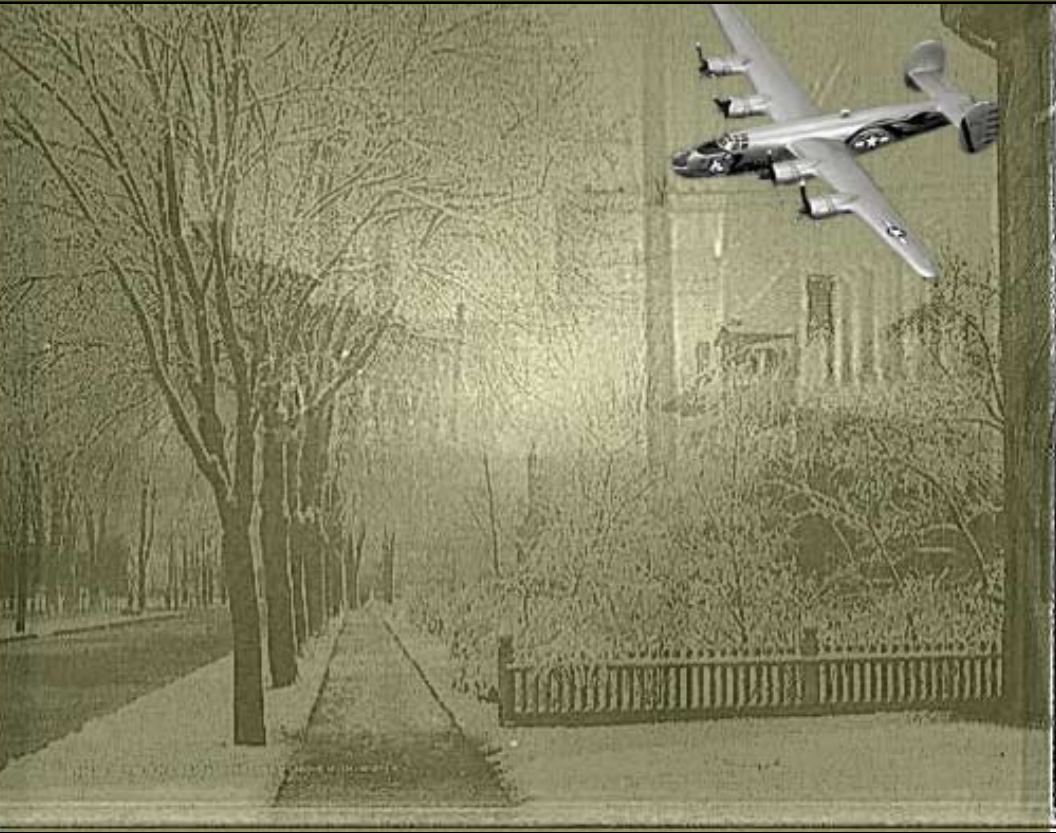


The Singing Wire and Other Stories



Frank B. Ford

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Miami and other Vices



The Purse

Strolling to think, he thought, in Coconut Grove, an arty neighborhood in Miami, Skip heard a groundglass “Get him!” from a wide woman attempting to exit a Cadillac. A burly man had grabbed her purse through the open window and was running.

Skip planted his feet: “I’m on vacation!” But nobody else chased the robber except the victim, she nearly as bulky in a trenchcoat. He trailed behind, hoping some of those at sunny breakfasts outside Angela’s Restaurant would join in. Running almost unconsciously, his long strides carried him well past the fat woman. He slowed then, not desirous of catching anyone, but sickened to see the robber trapped in a blind alley behind the Coconut Grove Theater, jerkily revolving to confront Skip amid rocking garbage cans. Skip thudded to a halt just before he felt someone leap onto his back.

“You just hold it, Handsome!” she squealed, as two officers puffed by them, one flashing handcuffs.

“Why hello there, Honeybun!” the other officer shouted to the robber, who closed his eyes

thrusting out the purse. It was soon tossed back with a "Here you go, Gretchen!" and the woman dismounted from the amazed Skip to catch it.

"Wouldn't want to lose the famous departmental pocketbook," she winked at Skip as she placed the purse on the asphalt, and removed her trenchcoat.

GRETCHEN WEBBERLY announced the bronze nametag. A muscular, hard-eyed woman in her uniform, she asked, "What do they call you?" flipping open a notebook. The flash of its aluminum cover made Skip jump, and Gretchen smile.

"Skip," he answered and her smile widened.

"Skip. Uh huh. Well, since this is for a police report, we tend to be a bit more formal—even in Coconut Grove. So let's have a last name too, shall we?" Skip moved quite close, almost a reflex when talking to a woman. He bestowed a benign grin on Gretchen Webberly, it fading as her questions went on. "Patrolperson Webberly calling Planet Skip!" she eventually yelled, float-

ing her pen across his gaze like a miniature silver spaceship.

He had forgotten the incident and almost everything else until the the next day's phonecall. "Hello hero!" Gretchen began. When he protested she defined a hero as one who gets a chance to desist and doesn't.

"Well I took a pretty long time."—Skip added to this concept by shrugging with meditative drama, as if she could see him. "Uh, that is I, whatchacallit, desisted. And I was doing some of that when I was running too."

"You're just a thoughtful person then."

"Nobody ever said that before."

"Well I'm sure of it." laughed the officer, who asked additional questions for her report.

During the next phonecall, Skip learned that "We have to do more than just a regular job 'cause this is part of a big national crime survey." Marital status came up.

"Divorce."

After a pause Gretchen whispered, "Was it a sex thing? Don't answer! How completely unprofessional! The most irrational things bite at me sometimes. It's so schoolgirlish!"

"I don't care," Skip shrugged. "Anyways, couldn't be. Anyways it's over. I don't think about it anymore."

"Then it was!"

"No! At least I don't think so. I can't see how."

"Are you uncomfortable with my asking you these things? About sex?"

"I don't think so." He held the phone with his chin and began combing his hair, pondering his image in the gummy glass covering a yachting print above his motel bed.

"Well don't worry..."—a stifled laugh—"there's a cure." Was somebody listening at her end? A woman often phoned him with another listening; with all the giggling it was frequently hard to decipher the words. Often, too, she would call back to apologize...before opening her heart for some reason.

“Say? Why not meet for lunch at Angela’s or The Pirate’s tomorrow? I mean it’s mostly social but you have a need to talk about all of this,” Gretchen erupted.

“I do? Oh. Well, yes. Of course. You’re the expert on that sort of thing I guess.”

“Masters in Criminal Science and Psychology. Your ideas could be important in my doctoral work at University of Miami.”

“My ex said I didn’t have any.”

“Well that wasn’t very nice. Sounds like she was making you up for her own sick reasons—excuse my saying so.”

“I never thought about it, whether it was or not I mean. Nice I mean. But...she did make me up a lot. She did that a lot,” Skip frowned, petulant over one blond wave, borderline frizzy.

“Whatever. I’ll have to come in drag, my macho cop outfit. The department dresses the women as boys but our hips give us away.”

Her hips give her away all right, mused Skip on a bench at the Coconut Grove Marina that

following day, an hour to kill before meeting Gretchen. He suddenly pictured the thin Betsy, his ex, carrying an armful of her clothes from the apartment just after repeatedly thumping his head while saying "My...Playgirl Bunny! You just stay lovely with nothing really gunking up anything in there. And now when I go out the waitresses and shopgirls will actually start paying some attention to me! Hey, why fight it, Skippy? You make women happy with your simple simple presence. Hey it's not your fault! It's the Sexual Revolution, and we now have the right and obligation and privilege, and especially the burden, to create our own brainless blond dollbabies, anatomically correct, with little penises that just poke out in their innocence."

That kind of talk was the trouble and it started after she took a course at that community college with some feminist bunch. "They used to just have those courses in cooking and shit like that," Skip had pouted to male friends while outlasting a one-sided game on Monday Night Football.

She was making him up all right, just like Gretchen had said.

“In fact they’re always making me up!” That’s something he resolves to think about right then and there on the bench, by reliving a few samples of the many arguments with women: forever being accused of ideas—often triggered by supposed motives of such intricacy that they trapped him, somehow, inside another’s overwhelming craziness.

He stares up to the sailboats; a chop in the water makes them roll, their ropes snapping in front of muddy clouds. “I thought I was just being Mr. Nice Guy,” he declares. A pale young man inside the marina office proffers a steaming coffee mug in the dark window. With a curt smile Skip mostly ignores him.

“Yeah, they give her away all right,” he whispers. Other hips, with a blue and white Igloo cooler, alight from a sailboat. Skip laughs, it being so easy to visualize the flesh under the sweaty shorts—the first easy thing.

Dr! Webberly, Gretchen will become with his help. Oh well, it’ll just end up sex on demand again and again. That part was easy, but for some reason they all got restless a few months after, throwing their hair around in all kinds of fits. The frame of Skip’s mind expands to accom-

modate blonds, brunettes, redheads...a file of young women stretching up the marina boardwalk all the way to the Chart House Restaurant and flopping around in the overcast light like a thousand rag dolls.

He has risen from the bench to maneuver himself into the light flaring through surly clouds, stands in trash from an overflowing barrel, pigeon-toed, a hand thrust down into his crotch: Male Venus in a seashell of styrofoam and foil, bright hair whipping.

In front of him, the girl with the cooler is asking "Yes?" He must've said something she didn't quite hear.

"Got a minute?"— Skip burns his second-best smile on her. The guy in the office window renews his offer of coffee, vapor curling up from the brilliantly white mug. The girl, reflected, sunny, is pulling up her halter with one hand; now she rests the cooler on the bench in order to tug down on her shorts with the other.

Yet another scene visits Skip: He is the robber among battered garbage cans, thrusting forth the purse to a crowd of women tossing their heads helter skelter. Oh why couldn't they just

love him for himself? Suddenly the ample Gretchen breasts the wave in the smelly alley. “Just my jumping on your back must have been traumatic. You’re not a horse after all!”

“Clothes horse, Betsy, my ex, said, and later...sawhorse.”

“That was mean!”—but this from the hazy young woman in front of him. What he uttered to an imaginary Gretchen has made sense to her also. A little smallish but cute, what with her wearing her cap backwards like a baseball catcher, Skip determines...and the type’ll believe anything.

Not long after, cardboard gets produced from the cooler. Neither has a pen. “But it’s okay!” she giggles. “My work phone is on there. Ask for Marna. It’s from a cookie package! I work for the bakery!”

“And I bet you’re the sweetest thing there!” How his ex would have been surprised at that quick one! The young man snaps back from the marina office window, a black thread of coffee hanging in the air.

The clouds have lifted and the light dazzles as Skip walks to his lunch date, playing with the

nautical cap Marna had placed on his head. "It'll end up bad with this Gretchen police chick, but not be so bad in between," he pronounces, thoughtfully.

Drunks from off a shrimp boat are kicking around a shiny ragball in an impromptu soccer game: "Whatever you say, Captain!" one yells and the others chorus, upsetting Skip's concentration.

He plays with his shrimp cocktail at the Pirates. They are hemmed in by tables of various laughs. Cars contend in the nearby street, throwing back harsh sunlight. "It's a cruel world," he informs Gretchen after deeply mulling her remarks concerning this or that study proving something or other. A tear fashions itself in his squinting.

"Yeah it's cruel all right, but we got a way of making it nice." She looms, the blinding street behind her. Shimmers from the water glasses and the cutlery roll upward to her shadowed face, her eyes twin pinpoints of ice. A horn blows, Skip shudders.



The Spoon

“Well flip a coin then!” She flung up her hands at his usual caution.

Huh! That’s the way you’d do it! But it’s a very important business decision, M’am. A subject you flunk most grievously.” He shut the drapes against the light off the blue water, his back to her.

As he turned around, she snickered at the drapes, an assortment of sunflowers and dragons. “No,” she insisted from the sofa, hugging her knees when he began fiddling with the television console, “I would just, simply, decide.”

His tuning grew agitated. “I have seen you decide! Just grab anything out of the chaos!”

“Nonsense!” she shouted with fiery conviction at his multicolored profile, the wild television picture splashing around the small, darkened apartment. “Oh it’s been that way sometimes,” she mused. “But at least I don’t wait on pins and needles for yet another phonecall.”

“Oh yeah? Well just thinking of you making some half-witted guess gives me apoplexy.” He

was bent over and talking into the TV, where electronic confetti bobbed. "You just leap at things!" He suddenly chuckled in amazement at her, and at the picture which mysteriously snapped in on the huge screen. Squinting, he revolved, basketball players flying behind him.

"You are fifty-five years old!" she informed him, and he stiffened in order to stand as straight as possible.

"Does that mean I have no future?" he pleaded.

"It keeps getting narrower." She squeezed her knees harder and her whole body seemed to diminish on the sofa. "So why flub around when time is so precious?"

He approached in mock fear and flopped beside her, his cream-colored slacks and turtleneck softly immaculate next to her jeans and sweatshirt. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"In the short run I was invited to watch the Boston Celtics on your ridiculous TV. In the long run..." she trailed off.

“It’s starting to sound serious,” he quipped, intently watching the screen.

But she continued with her original thought. “I wouldn’t even know if Harry Bird was playing with a square basketball.”

LAR-ry Bird,” he exhaled, as if that small mistake could ruin the game—though the last few moments consisted of players speeding to and fro incessantly, and with no points scored.

“Turn it off and let’s go out you damn cheap-skate! It’s the middle of the day. I’m sorry,” she told his astonished face, “but I just can’t stare at it like you do, comatose. And what’s left? Those horrible drapes that you must have gotten on sale like everything else in this suffocating apartment and life.”

He pressed forward beside her—she thought in reaction to her comment—but someone had almost scored, the ball spinning round and round the hoop before falling into the midst of anxious giants. Even in the muted sound level of the television their grunts and squeaky sneakers were audible. “What, uh, what about the long run?” he inquired absently.

“Well now what about it?” she slapped her knees in exaggerated heartiness.

“They missed again! Oh well. You, you started to say that in the long.... How can you forget things a few seconds past, and yet remember some tiny alleged hurt ten years ago? Is that female or something?”

She waved off his comments and looked to him with a face so kind he trembled. “In the long run I’m here to bury you.”

His eyes widened and he fell so far back into the cushions that she had to twist round to see his face at all. “The few friends and relatives you had you’ve absolutely alienated. I’m the only one left,” she sighed.

“Alienated! For God’s sakes,” he whispered, “we...”—he brushed lint off his sweater—“s-speak—if it’s absolutely necessary.”

“They will all flee! Flee when you keel over!”

“Alienated is a strong word,” he kept pouting, buried even more in the cushions.

“They’re all strong words when you think about them.”

Her “insights” always annoyed him who thought that no generalization could be applied to life with the least degree of certainty, although something could prove valuable if it made money. “Listen Miss Smart-Ass, I’ve just been checked by Dr Sam. He took a hundred tests and checked my orifices and...”

“Your precious orifices will last no longer than anybody else’s.”

“Everything excellent!” he proclaimed while following the parabolic three-point shot of Larry, not Harry, Bird.

She bounded up from the sofa to shut off the console.

“Just when the action is...!” he began protesting.

As the picture slowly died behind her she spun round. “Doc gave me the results before you got them—at the bar of the sailing club.”

“How wonderful! One’s intimate details discussed over light beer.” He was fingering inside his turtleneck.

“You know Dr. Sam for goodness...!”

“Yeah I do. He goes from office to hospital to sailing club. Does he even have an apartment? I know he’s never been on a boat of any type in his life, let alone sailing...” and he fluttered his hand as if it were an agitated sail.

She shrugged. “So he tells everybody everything. So what? People and their supposed secrets! What a joke!” She was pulling the drapes open, and startling light flooded past her small and somewhat ragged figure.

“Anything else I should know?” he inquired from the sofa.

“Yes. A testicle didn’t descend or something?”

“I was a little kid!” he sputtered, closing his eyes against the light and against his so-remote past.

“Yeah? Well they’re to keep an eye out for something now...men of your age? I think he said

something like that anyway—if I didn't read it somewhere."

"What? Look out for? Big C?" he squirmed.

"So say it" she hissed. "Cancer. Say it. Say things."

He didn't say it. "Oh my God!" he said.

"Anyway, not that definite. Besides, that or something has always got to get you in the end—or in the crotch even. Oh now don't put on your prude face. You weren't always so prudish I recall."

She formed his too-familiar words with her mouth as he was saying them. "Never mind all that!" He looked up and caught her. "Now please knock off the clowning and tell me what Dr. Sam said exactly."

"What I told you. Exactly. Vaguely. Whatever. Phone him. Ask him yourself. It's not a confession of weakness to do that. 'Something to look out for.' I think he said. That's all. An afterthought! You're making too much of it—at least I think you are."

“Close the drapes! I can’t even see you. You look like some low-budget Hollywood version of a saintly vision. It hurts my eyes. I fervently hope that’s not a symptom or something.”

She made a large, sweeping gesture to include the brilliant blue water and a few creamy sails just then entering the bay. “That’s home. Out there. Where we came from, where we’re going.”

“God I can’t talk to you for ten minutes without the morbid drama coming out.”

“How could the truth be morbid?” she snapped. “Truth isn’t anything but itself.”

“Another of your INsights?” He shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. “Uh, how about putting my beloved Celtics back on? I really have no money to go out. Do you?” He was raising himself just enough to turn a pocket inside out.

“Aw come on! You must have a dollar or two left over from your trip. Come on! We’ll get on your beautiful sportcoat—the only thing to my knowledge you didn’t buy on sale.” She raced to the bedroom and came out with the coat. “Hah hah! I thought so!” and she plucked out a wallet

of travelers checks from an inside pocket while waifishly dancing though pools of light on the wooden floor.

“What makes you think they’re mine? I have to turn them in to the accountants.”

““Who owns the company?” She stopped dancing to point at him. “I shall tell you exactly what to tell the accountants. You needn’t improvise. And I will take charge of these.” She had fingered inside the slim wallet, having already peeked at the denomination during her dance: five one hundreds she deduced.

“How much is there?”

“A couple of hundred or fifty. Don’t worry about it. Since your funeral’ll cost you nothing, we’ll take out a little at this end.”

“Funeral? Funeral? Please stop before you spin yet another fantasy!”

She didn’t stop of course. “You’ll be alone at one of your selfish little lunches at Angela’s or The Pirate and then FOOP! your face ends up in the crab casserole!”

“Foop indeed! Why do your fantasies always extract my dignity? And not just your fantasies either.”

“They’ll call me up. They know me. And I’ll tell them oh it’s only a spell. He’s had them a dozen times.”

“I’ve had no spells. Ever! Zero.”

“Get you across the street. I’m little but wiry,” she remarked to his incredulous face. “And as to spells I’m talking future tense, five years from now—or beginning tomorrow maybe.”

“And then...up to this apartment?”—his question indicating that it was a perfectly good place to live but...

She tried to drag him off the sofa by way of a dress rehearsal. This effort, futile, left her winded. “No, uh, not up to here you absolute lump! Right to...water. Leave you there a minute. ‘Now don’t go away, y’hear?’ Then up here to fetch hideous drapes. Then go get my sailboat—I know the winds and tides.”

“Then that’s all you know.”

"I'll get you to a spot where you'll travel out to sea for sure."

"That's enough!" he begged.

"And then," she nodded, her eyes closed, "a few personal words...release dead-you and horror-drapes to God and the wide sea-world and eternity! Eternity!"

"They'll think you murdered me. The authorities will."

"I'll worry about that then."

"Oh that's you all right!" he pronounced.

"So come on! Let's motor! Have some fun. You need a..." and she managed to shove and punch him off the sofa and onto the parquet floor..."push!"

There he sat as she draped the coat over his shoulders, resigned to the punishment she had, and would, inflict, enjoying the game of it too in his ironic way. "It all sounds expensive," he shrugged.

"Leave that to me. I'll forge."

And of course he protested all the way from the boutique (where she bought a simple daytime dress and sensible heels and they stored her jeans and ragged sweat shirt in a Wynn-Dixie bag) to the waiting limo she had arranged that morning, and especially at the Grand Cafe, where she ordered lest he see the menu.

And onto the pubcrawl all of the bright afternoon.

She lost track of the spending but smiled in the darkening limo coming back, while feeling the irregular ridge, indicating that all the traveller's checks had been ripped out. As they both looked straight ahead she found herself talking quietly and slowly.

"We live such deprived lives, you and I. We know all there is to know about each other and that's wonderful, as well as deadly at times...but a letting-go like this every few months or so... hey I need it too! I might go around most of the time looking like Tugboat Annie but..."

He waited for her to finish the thought but she just stared at the blue flow of the early evening traffic.

"I bore you, I know," he whispered. "I bore myself. But I could..." The plush upholstery all but swallowed his soft words.

She took his hand. "Oh it's too late for any changing or promises. I love you period. When you bore me or when, like today, and though kicking and dragging, you help make life a little more exciting."

"Before I die, yes?" The violet light deepened the wrinkles in his face, the tweed of his sportcoat.

He figured his question had been humorous but she nodded severely. "That's right. Loosen you and your wallet up before it's too late."

"Well I never thought I'd say it, but I had one hell of a good time! That one waiter was so snobby he didn't even want to take the whole tip!" he giggled. "Wanted to save us from being branded nouveau riches or something I guess. He pondered the red light they had stopped at."

The limo ticked away, young people in shorts crossing in one chaotic wave. "But that's what I am all right," he continued.

“Hey! Old rich, new rich, or poor. He got his tip. That was his only business with you. Take things a moment at a time.”

“Square basketball!” he laughed softly. “I could never come up with anything like that...too batty and too imaginative.”

It was still somewhat light over the bay when they returned. They sat separately as they often did, this time to watch a windsurfer outlined in weakest fire against the dark.

He disappeared for a few seconds out in the chill vastness of water. Then his sail emerged much further out, looking almost like an inverted teaspoon, its bowl holding all of the remaining light.

After a last glimmer, that, too, folded into blackness, and they could not hear the other's breathing in the small apartment, or, later, the weeping.



Leftys

Rhonda Crabshaw ranked as the last to confide in, and in the blue fluorescence shot off by the Pepsi machine, she looked even more threatening. That brow! thought Larkie, it's like a balcony. But he had to seize the moment, even to admitting his shyness "...so I just wanted to ask your advice, see, because, well the women are forever teasing me, and with all the overtime lately, the only ones I meet are on the force, but I'm reluctant to ask any of them out in case they really do think I'm some kind of nerd."

Officer Crabshaw picked up a clipboard and seemed to be reading the solution to Larkie's dilemma off it, her forehead even more massive under the boyish haircut. "If they think you're a nerd, then it's their problem. Anyway, just don't bother with them—not enough time. You're twenty six or so, right, Larkie? Wasted too much of your life being nice. Somehow got to start accelerating. Ac-cel-er-a-TING!" she drummed the clipboard with a pencil, and then abruptly ceased, shrugging "I'll...give you the course. But no tell!"—drawing a rough finger over his lips, she laughed alarmingly. "On second thought, go ahead and tell if you want! I don't know what reputation I've got left and I simply don't care. What am I here for? To be a police officer,

right? One of Miami's Finest! My personal life is personal."

"Well I wouldn't ever," Larkie started reassuring her but leaked steam rapidly. "Uh, if...you decided to...uh, ultimately..." Then he became convinced that Rhonda was aping the familiar, distressing pattern: "Uh huh! You're...kidding me too, Rhonda, am I right?"

"Nope. Never! Uh uh. No-oh-way. Nein. Nada. And negative in whatever language I'll have to take to qualify for my Master's in Criminal Justice—if I got that last word right. I don't kid; you'll find that out." Her gray eyes held twin, somber Larkies.

"But I thought you were...locked up with some dentist."

"And safe therefore? Shut up for now, Larkie!" She began smashing at the Pepsi machine with an open palm. "I thought before this that you were even too shy to talk, and now you're suddenly Officer Gabby. Anyway, that dentist knows gum disease but not how a woman feels." She rocked the machine, repeating the

sentiment. "Tell me to stop, Larkie!" she finally breathed, hoarsely. "It's only a stupid device...and not a dentist. For one, it's better looking. And I've only lost half a dollar and not a significant portion of my only life." She bounced back from the rocking machine with a smile of vengeful glee. "Oooooops! Well I guess I'm on the rebound, hey? Do you know what that means?"

"Uh. No."

"It means, my bashful one, that I'll be twice as good to you and twice as intense." In the icy emanations from all the snack machines her eyes took on the color of mercury. "Well! Judging by your look you got more than you bargained for. Wanted sisterly advice and ended up with a real woman instead! Your lucky day!" ...

Me and the poor dentist, sssss-scarred bodies by the wayside! I gave her my heart but she wanted my soul, he mouths the words of a country-western song. Actually my body!—I think that's what this is called, what's left of it. Larkie, in departmental trousers with powder blue Cuban shirt, sits on a bench at Dinner Key, half-watching the sailboats tie up.

A phone rings in the marina office, recalling the one message on the machine blinking among scattered, unpacked boxes in his Coconut Grove apartment: "Come on back. There are things I can change. I've thought extensively about all of this."

An old boat groans into its berth. "Everything aches," Larkie whispers, "body and soul hang-over." Out on Biscayne Bay, a sail dazzles against humpbacked clouds which are dark and yet brilliantly outlined. The sail, too, goes black though its edge remains sunlit. Larkie senses fire scouring his very bones.

Knees stuck straight out, a blond young man careens past him on a too-small bicycle. Suddenly he slips off backwards, lifting it above his head, wheels spinning. It's a folding model, and a quizzical attempt ensues to break it down to carrying size—which act Larkie must tune out, a pitch for attention from this apparent incompetent in droopy white shorts. After a few minutes, the sound of the bike being thrown into a shrub nearly coincides with the young man thrusting himself backwards onto the bench, enormously sighing. "Keep it simple, right?"

"If you can," Larkie shrugs.

“I can. Believe me.”

“Then you’re lucky I suppose.”

“Hope so. Say! You’re in blue and I’m completely blue, and so why not be that way together?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start with that kind of deranged thinking!” sneers Larkie. “In the first place, I do believe I come from another sexual direction.”

“Don’t even try to start. With my deranged thinking, I mean. Don’t you even try! In the meantime, while you’re not trying, I’ll just sit here like a little lamb-y-kin—very short and very funny.” The blond young man turns his knees and elbows inward, so as to diminish his size. “And if I feel any more lost, why then I’ll ask you for sexual directions.”

“You will huh? Did you get your highschool’s award for chutzpa?”

“Just...shyly...wait. Uh, at your discretion.”

“It’s a free bench—unfortunately.” Larkie shuts his eyes against the intruder.

"I'm WAIT-ing!" the young man eventually sings.

"Still here?" asks Larkie. "Then I'm to do something, huh? Is that it? Well, not bloody likely! I just came off an episode where I did things. Boy did I! May be better off not to even think for awhile."

"I know what you mean, and I have no trouble at all in that pursuit—or lack of pursuit. So...here we sit, and when you sit, you can't chase anyone, can you? Or any idea either. I'm not moving. How about you?—outside of your shaking on account of those nasty ole memories I mean." He wiggles closer to Larkie, smiling broadly, as if primed to explode into teasing laughter.

"Don't you mean it's my move? I get that strong implication. Perhaps it was the sly wink—the cheapest trick in this silly seduction game you're absolutely wasting on me. And don't crowd!"—Larkie inches away.

"It is and it isn't your move. And, golly gee, if I winked I didn't even know it—maybe it's just squinting from that damn sun coming out! I like cloudy days—more mysterious. Easier on the wrinkles too. And, say, you yourself are not

above a little teasing either, are you? In your, of course, capital-B, butch heterosexuality?"

"It is and it isn't," Larkie repeats his benchmate's words. "Like everything else, I'd say. And butch, huh? I sometimes wonder if I was Butch or Bambi in my last...demolition derby, but why on earth am I telling...?"

"Because I'm open and warm. Mhhhh!" the young man briefly embraces himself with enough force to rock the bench.

"Hadn't noticed. Agressive is more to the point, I think."

"Excuse me for saying so, but you think too much."

"I do excuse you because you're right."

"Oh I wouldn't want to make that a habit! Although a little wouldn't hurt in my case. My wrongness index is way way up there. Typical fate of the dumb blond with, ah hem, innocent blue eyes."

"I'll buy the blue part," snaps Larkie.

“Hmmmmm? I’m not sure that’ll be enough. See me wondering? I’m WONDER-ing!”—again he breaks into song.

“Oh? Still in need of guidance?”

“You could say that. Or direction.”

“Good! Then how about you go that way?” Larkie points brusquely towards the Chart House Restaurant. “And pick up some lonely businessman on Master Card. You get a lobster and give your all, and I get to stay here and continue sulking—without interference, or songs and dances with and without bicycles. Listen! If it were another time and place—and dimension—and we were two different people of the opposite sex...?”

“Nope. Can’t just split like that. For one thing, I’ve probably been sent to be a whatchacallit, medium, to relieve all your tedious anxieties, and for another, we’ve known each other too long, wouldn’t you say?”

“No! What else can I say?”

“Anything you please.”

“Then let me say that I...gave her my heart and she... ate the fuckin thing! Then started on my soul for dessert.”

“Past tense!” He smilingly claps his hands as if to dismiss Larkie’s gloom. “Past tense!”

“Again, yes and no.”

“Feeling ambivilant then?”

“Not in your sense I’m not. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t want anyone’s soul. My own’s enough of a mess. Good gosh if I could see it I’d drop dead!” The blond young man sinks his head to his chest and pretends to die, twitchingly.

“Who wouldn’t? And snap up! Don’t want anyone to think I’m sitting here with a cokehead or someone. It’s bad enough. But...why...am I enjoying myself with the likes of you?—at least somewhat. And telling you things too? It’s crazy. I never tell anybody anything!—at least I won’t ever again, not after confiding in...someone, and barely living to tell the tale. God just listen to me whine!” Larkie slaps his forehead.

“So whine a little! Who are you not to? Which of these yachts is yours by the bye?”

“No such luck as I know you know—always deflecting the real, aren’t you? Anyway, I guess I’m just going crazy. I can only hope that I’m imagining you! Especially that...eye shadow or whatever it is. Just how weird are you, exactly?—not that it’s any of my business.”

“I am an all-natural product! You can take me anywhere. And I’m sincere!”

“You fake it well, saying what you think I want to hear: your strong suit I’d guess.”

“If you cut me will I not bleed? And did you know a snake has two penises?”

“Oh? How does he throw out a line in Coconut Grove?” muses Larkie. “Excuse me Bridget, excuse me Bo.”

“Oh there are all kinds of ways! And I know the places where you see them all, believe me!” The young man nods quickly, continues nodding in a slower and slower rhythm, his bright hair rising and falling, then he stonily stops.

“Don’t you think you give things a tad too much drama?—if that’s what that is. But, I’m...maybe one tenth of one percent intrigued about hearing of these alleged places where one sees everything—at least I think that’s what this is.”

“Don’t worry. Just an emotion, I have them all the time—you can’t always name them.”

“I bet you do have them all the time, to the exclusion of everything else.” Larkie shakes his head while his benchmate shrugs.

“What else is there? Don’t answer. You know, you amuse me more than friends I’ve had for years? Mr Man-All-In-Blue whose answers are conventional but whose heart’s a bit wilder, I’m guessing.” He dons his most burnished-looking smile as cloud shadows race over them.

“Well I’m glad to be good for something,” Larkie chuckles, “such a wild heart in a square world is me! Give me a break, you...you sub-literary fraud!” The quick breeze rills their hair, swirling candy wrappers, rocking the sailboats in their berths.

“It’s called Leftys, the place I’d like to show you? No apostrophe!—ever hear the radio ad? On

South Beach." Gee it's a lovely wind now, isn't it?
Just...lifting everything, hey?"

"Nothing. Nada." Larkie shakes his head.

"Well, that's a start. What's apostrophe?"

"God but you're a perservering...faggot!"

"Oh please! I hate that word perservering.
Oooops, watch it! Caught you really laughing.
He's LAUGH-ing!" repeatedly sings the young
man, ranging from bass to soprano. Hopping
off the bench, he's soon down to one knee,
golden in a shaft of sunlight.

O De sun shine East
De sun shine West
O my dat sun
He a terrible pest!

"Not as bad as you! And Al Jolson is long long
dead," giggles Larkie.

We ALLLLLLL'S gonna be!
Dead you see!
And that there's gotta be
My only guarantee!

“You’d try to manipulate God himself!” Larkie bursts.

The young man rises to hitch up his shorts and studiously brush his knees. “As long as we all understand each other.”



The Bebop

They were all whores anyway and the younger ones just starting. Thus Randy Midden didn't feel all that bad to be without a clinging female in the vast, snow-filled parking lot of the shopping center, crunching towards the one-week old blue Dodge Aries he had parked far out from harm's way, just inside a circle of weak yellow-white light. "It's a curious—of the light. Osity. Cure-osity. Curiosity," he explained to no one in regards to the narrowness of the car he approached head on, experiencing a wave of despair as he imagined trying to explain such a phenomenon to the girls he left behind him at the Bebop Cafe. "Bends rays, something... forget it." But even in his distrust of women's general intelligence, Randy tried another illustration: "See? Looks like color of puddles, car does, like puddle stood up."

It seemed at that freezing moment the most hilarious image ever created and Randy hugged himself and giggled, puffs of dark vapor surrounding his scarlet face.

The pickup with the huge knobby wheels and enormous mirror-finish bumper was gone from atop the snowbank beside his space. It would

have been pointed up past the moon, so bright and high now, but too low for the young man trying to pose next to that truck earlier, his leather jacket ballooning and his white scarf whipping as his boots slid sideways—moon rising behind his tremulous underbelly.

Idiot, recalls Randy, as a snowy wind slams into him. “Idiot!” Randy Midden had pronounced earlier as his hand reached for the cold brass handle of the door to the Bebop Cafe. Despite his efforts to remain stock still, Pepper Stutzman, the now twice-remembered idiot, had slid entirely down the snowbank and into the blue Aries as Randy Midden was strolling to the Bebop. Pepper Stutzman spat on the car then, and pronounced “Wimp Bucket!” And, having nothing else to do, he followed the wimp who owned it into the Bebop Cafe where he met Traction, another member of the Four-Wheelers. “Stutz-my-man, this place sucks,” Traction told him. Traction sported a glass eye from a hot-rodding accident and Pepper always stared at that eye as if not to do so was rejecting a challenge.

Traction nodded towards Randy Midden who was already talking down to two blonde sisters seated on the floor amid rocking dancers.

"Talker," sniffed Pepper Stutzman. "You gotta be talker. Like that asshole.

"We don't like talkers," affirmed Traction.

"We don't deal with no lines of shit," Pepper Stutzman informed him over the throttling bass of the huge speaker they sunk next to on the apron of the empty stage, "'cause what we say we do, and what we want we take."

"Amen, Stutz-Bear." Traction pointed to the S T U D stencilled on his own t-shirt.

For the next two hours the young men sipped Old Milwaukee from resonating styrofoam cups, and watched the verbal and dance techniques of Randy Midden. Finally Traction suggested "Let's take him out and fuck him up the ass," his good eye blinking violently.

"Not classy enough," came the light, shy, laugh from Pepper Stutzman as a record changed with a clunk.

"Then what? Stutz-My-Man, our leader!"

"I'm, whatchacallit, thinking."

While incomprehensible punk spewed forth from the speaker next to them, Traction thought a moment about what Pepper had just said. Finally he blurted "I can't stand this fuckin place no more. I gotta move, Amigo." He stood up and a dancing couple avoided him drastically.

"Go fuckin home then, Traction."

"No-o-way!"

"That's an order. I'll call you and the others when I decided."

"I haven't got all fuckin night and besides, when I get there the ole lady'll whine about my never staying home."

"I gotta piss, man. Man where you piss?" a greenish youth in a pink tomahawk haircut inquired of Pepper Stutzman. Pepper threw his arm at the hundred dancers just before a wave of them engulfed the youth whose pink hair bobbed in their midst. "Anywhere, man. Like...anywhere," he shrugged.

"I aint fuckin kidding!" the youth told someone as Pepper turned back to sneer at Traction "We threw out a lot of shit about the regulations in

our constitution to let married assholes join.” Pepper’s clear eyes drilled into Traction’s glass one. “We can change that shit you know. Now give her a quick bang and stay by the phone.”

“That an order too, Stuntman?”

“Engage. And give her one for the club.” Engage meant put your vehicle in four-wheel drive, and therefore, get with it, or sometimes, in a milder tone: okay, right.

“I have to give her the gift, then. I’m loyal to the club.”

“All there is that’s worth it. And don’t forget it!

Brothers before bitches.” Pepper punched him on a bare arm in a grazing way. “Now get your coat.”

“I don’t wear no coat. Hey! I’m a Four-Wheeler!”

Randy Midden was attempting to grope a fat, drunken girl in the forest of coatracks adjoining the wall holding the telephone when Pepper Stutzman finally made his call to Traction, who knew to call the others.

“Engage?” Pepper signed off.

“Engage engage!” Traction indicated that nothing could go wrong.

It didn't. Under Pepper Stutzman's direction the high knobby-tired pickups formed a circle with the blue automobile in the center; then after his scarf and Hitler salute shot through his glistening truck's open window along with the shrieking “Engage!” the trucks fishtailed in furious white smoke. A few seconds later, throwing snow straight back they ploughed into that Aries with the simultaneous precision of the club's Wimpmobile Mash. After impact they careened off in different directions, later to convene near the opposite end of the shopping center at SEAR'S AUTOMOTIVE EMPLOYEE PARKING, since Pepper knew of a Camaro with a bottle of Mad Dog under the front seat.

He toasted them all with blood trickling down his hand because he had to smash the window when Traction, t-shirt stiff with icy sweat, couldn't pick the frozen lock.

“Better get that hand looked at, Commander,” the blue-armed Traction shook.

“Man it’s fuckin nothing!” admonished Pepper Stutzman.



When Everything Is Funny

On the subway with a playful mind and should he ask? Oh why not? It's innocent.

She goes ballistic, hair spiking, face a twisting horrorshow. He couldn't have guessed she was insane; had picked her, in fact, as the most normal one, her primness.

"Sorry, but it's really no big deal!"—moving further away. Rumor sweeps; he speeds.

-grabbed that woman by the tit
-hadda be worse than that, just look at her!
-tween her legs, said filthy, disgusting things!

What are you doing? What kind of pig are you?—

pummeller, black, intervening. I'm sick to death of us getting blamed for this kind of shit all the time.

-to death
-to death
-to death
(with each blow)

Lilla Darra-Rhoden had just an hour ago flung her swarthy male instructor all over the mat while shrieking empowerment mottos...but then Costanza Wong had hissed

-Grab and twist my testicles with both hands!

-Huh, I knew it! Why YOU'RE even afraid to SAY testicles!

-Might as well society keep giving YOU wall job. (Sneer.)

Here's the wall job for YOU! And I'M the wall, pervert, she does say now, karate chopping. The pummelling black and she nod, acknowledging no time for proper introductions.

Please. There's some mistake. All I really said to her was...

Reggie the transvestite is prompted to join the dialog (sold Mary Kay Cosmetics):

-Bash a gay and now you pay!

But it was a lady and I didn't touch her and she misunderstood or something. That's all. Stop!

Please! All of you. Terrible misunderstanding.
Now listen! Please just listen to me!

-bash a gay becomes gash a bay in latter services

-also ball job

-seth (sick to death)

Giddy within such linguistic faults, this three,
but blows never slacken.

-Hey. Wait a little minute. Don't kill him.
...soft voice impossible to attribute gender to

WHY NOT? WHY NOT KILL HIM? WHY NOT
KEEP HIM FROM HUMILIATING OTHER
WOMEN?

OR men even! this new person snaps, squeezing
a fist through the fury. But do let's hurry. I gotta
get off next stop. I'm a rabbi and taking grad
work.

-rimless spectacles—kind eyes, gray
Please. You. Man of God!

-Hey! and don't I get sick of that old tune!

That lady was crazy. I said almost nothing!

-Yeah! Right! (chorus)

Whereupon, they hammer in silence. (His
coverup becoming flaccid.)

-mufflyness when clothing stuck

-more melony, flesh

These sounds prove funny too. Echo. Overlap.

-a good time

-for citizens

-best, solidarity, racial and sexual

-like the many advertisements around them

-on the subway, NYC



The Surprise

Man What the bleedin' hell!

Cyclist Oh I'm so sorry!

Man Minding our own business in a quiet cemetery and over the wall some IDIOT throws a bicycle!—I don't believe it.

Woman That's what we were doing all right.

Cyclist Boys chasing me. Said they kill me! Said the rock concert was cancelled at the school, and for some reason I was going to pay for it.

Boy I can still see the light from that bike, faggot, if you think you're hiding or something!...well look at this scene! Like something from out of art class or something.

Man I hope you can run, wiseass. Boy I know YOU can't, fatass!

Man GRRRRRRRRR! ...

Cyclist Uh, cold?

Woman No.

Cyclist My jacket?

Woman It's okay

Cyclist Sorry. I mean...my intru...uh, crit- critical moment.

Woman There are critical moments and there are critical moments.

Cyclist He he won't run far, I mean, uh, like he is

Woman Yeah he will. You don't know him.

Cyclist I'll stay here till he gets back

Woman No need.

Cyclist All kinds of weirdos around.

Woman No argument there.

Cyclist Are you sure...jacket?

Woman No. I like the way I look and feel. Breeze on me you know? You would too, if you looked at me.

Cyclist Excuse me?

Woman We were only having sex. No big deal. Ooops, I do hear him coming back. I suggest you get out of here. He can be crazy—you heard him growl.

Cyclist If you think I should.

Woman Give me a call. Delky. I work at this church here. I know it's a funny way to meet, but I like biking too.



The Secret Word

Driven by insults to play touch football with them, Buzz hoped Cecily would come to the field anyway. "You're too sweet on her! Be with the fellows sometimes! Why she's making you into a regular sweetie-boy!" elbowed Josker Albright as they walked back to their side of the ball after a chaotic play, the other team jeering. The shirtless Buzz halted a moment to squint, his face green from the brilliance off the grass. He was trying to find her in the bleachers, and those jeers intensified now, with his name being hooted by players from both sides. Some began squealing Cec-i-LEEEEEEE! When Josker flipped the ball to him after another botched play, he added, winking, "Give her something to think about, Buzz, old man!"

The something to think about proved to be the uncoordinated Roger Reddington de Graf, who stopped by 16 Songbird Lane with orange mums, jerking alongside them in blinding light as the slim Cecily flung open the white doors.

Buzz had to start Lehigh University that next week; Roger stayed in Stroudsburg to help his father sell Fords. Unknown to Buzz, he devoted the rest of his time to Cecily.

Unknown to Cecily, Buzz threw himself at beer drinking and those girls of Bethlehem who shared that activity—often cleaning him up afterwards. On the verge of flunking out two months into the semester, he began sending a series of cards to Cecily, usually showing couples in fog, either among ancient forests, or on beaches crowded with driftwood. The verses of these cards his roommate, nicknamed Drunk, labeled muzz-fuzz-haiku-y-looie.

moon on the pond

and then.....

a stone.....

and many moons

my footprints

yours.....

two paths.....

one,

to.....eternity.....

a heartbeat

a shudder

a silence

of flowers

Buzz chose not just these artistic expressions,
but others of more pedestrian strain.

Thinking of You...
Just a note to say
You're one who's not forgot.
Sorry there's been some delay
'cause I care for you a lot!

I know I'm not clever.
That much I have to say.
But a true friend is forever,
For this and every day!

Towards the end of first semester, after a brutally dry period of hitting the books, Buzz catapulted back to the local girls. He had spent Thanksgiving break at Drunk's parents' house in Scranton, and for Christmas vacation had joined his own parents at an aunt's retirement village near St Augustine—zero chances to see Cecily.

No more cards were dispatched until Valentine's Day, when for some reason he sent a comic one in the shape of a gold key.

Hey why not open that trunk?
AND LET MY HEART OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

A little like a shellshock victim clamping onto an obscure faith, and after he and three town girls—an intense week each—had gone through each other, Buzz finally got around to writing Cecily his one heartfelt, if circuitous, note: somehow begging that she reform him while he, presumably, awakened her sexually. It had been immediately, too, after religion had swept in, prompted by a revival meeting in

Bethlehem which Dean of Men Brendenhof had strongly recommended to him. Buzz had been saved and afterwards met over hot cider and cinnamon donuts the one local girl, Gladys Alderfelder, who knew she could tame him.

"I told my mother about you," she informed Buzz a few days later, "and she's says you're oversexed and should see a doctor, that young men can ruin themselves and never have a good career. You'll never be a good engineer, Buzz, 'cause that's all you think about."

That one sincere note to Cecily had arrived after her elopement with Roger Reddington de Graf, and she sent it back with all the cards and a tissuey note saying Dear Dear Buzz, the reasons one marries can't just be that one and that one alone. She had written from her new home on the lake, full of the antiques Roger's mother had given the couple.

After college, Buzz worked as a designer and model maker for The Foothills Toy Company, owned, strangely enough, by the Pocono Mountain area's most flagrant Socialist, Bret Hansen, who became very fond of the apolitical Buzz.

He retained the bundle of cards Cecily had sent back and eventually rubber-banded it when the lavender ribbons disintegrated. His upfront wife, Evy, whom he had met at a toy industry convention in Harrisburg, had already proclaimed, and more than once, “Your past aint my business and vice versa—if you’re one of them gets jealous notions.” Buzz kept the cards and Cecily’s note in a locked desk drawer, and actually did get upset thinking of what Evy may have been hiding, making a fruitless search one night when she was at her canasta group.

After ten years or so, Roger Reddington De Graf and Cecily bought a one-third interest in the toy company, on the very day Buzz was hospitalized with a hernia after lifting the clay model of Monstro-Robot.

Cecily and Roger, upon reading of his hospital stay in *THE POCONO MESSENGER*, sent him a card of a cartoon man, very bony, swathed in bandages and on crutches, surrounded by broken machinery and scrawny dogs.

I might be
too old to cut the mustard seein’
all this rout,
but I’m still full of beans

and sauerkraut!

He visualized her at sixteen by the moonlit lake, and repeated quietly from his hospital bed, "How many moons? O how many moons?"

Nurse Lucille Nitti overheard. "Yeah and lots of water under the dam too, huh, Honey? You do b.m. yet, Honey?"

"I will inform you," he pronounce firmly.

"I like the sound of that, Honey!" she fluffed the pillow around his rigid head.

The years, and the moons, flew and the couples had each a late child, Gwen for Buzz and Evy, and Roger Jr. for Roger and Cecily. Both Dads were thirty-three. The children went to different schools and ultimately attended the University of Pennsylvania, but never met, either there or in Stroudsburg.

On Buzz's fiftieth birthday old man Hansen suffered a fatal heart attack, and diehard Socialists from all over the country attended the funeral. He made provision in his will for Buzz which the New York lawyer had to explain several times: "You must immediately retire, and then you receive a generous monthly stipend

for the rest of your life.” As Buzz shook his gray head, the lawyer explained further that Hansen felt that his heirs and the other owners might, he quoted him, “sell out to sharpies. And the first thing they do in the land of the brave is to raid the pension fund.”

“That sure sounds like him,” offered the shaking Buzz.

“Some West Germans did just that to A&P Store employees. We don’t have enough thieves, we have to import them,” the lawyer shrugged, a grim young man dressed Wall Street save for a blood- red cravat.

Had Buzz kept a diary the sole entry for the seventh year after retirement might have read: Roger takes over company completely and milks it, sells most of the patents to the Japanese. The one for the eighth year would read My Evy dies shoveling snow.

After Evy’s death he sold the house and contents at auction and went to Florida to live in Coral Gables near his daughter, Gwen, who taught ballet at The University of Miami.

That very year they cut the dancing program, so she's off to Tulane with her Latin lover Carlos, who she claims has only been helping her with the electric in her Coconut Grove studio. (He did, in fact, show wiring plans to Buzz who told him "You don't have to draw me a diagram.")

After they leave, it proves cheaper living in Miami Beach but the angry faces of many of the other retired people irritate Buzz. Sweetness, the black counterboy at Wolfy's consoles "They're all New Yorkers and they grew up snapping at each other about business. Only now they got tans. And no business. Don't take it serious. People are the same under all the styles."

Roger dies, and THE POCONO MESSENGER featuring the front page obituary touting that civic leader also contains an article about senior citizens sharing houses.

Buzz finally moves back to Stroudsburg to a shared house owned by a Mrs Lahr, where he is greatly appreciated, being, among other thing, Friday's cook. One of the sharers, Miss Meniffie proclaims "I always look forward to Friday!" It's nice for her to say, but for some reason things begin slipping—anybody can do Sloppy Joes and Fritos admits Buzz to himself. Maybe I'm

getting too old to cut the mustard—which brings back the silly card Roger and Cecily had sent him so many years ago.

In the back of his mind he has thought of contacting Cecily after a decent interval. Such a time has long passed when he sends a birthday card on a whim.

He had walked to the mall and was out of breath reaching The Little Card Shoppe, a franchise operation in the throes of a nationwide promotion, and therefore full of metallic balloons which moved about in the air currents and kept bumping him.

“May I help you?” inquired a gum-chewing young woman in very elevated, sharply clicking heels. Her badge read Merrie, asst mgr.

“Yeah, stop stocking all these gushy cards. And I’m coming in here with a pin next time!” She, amused, led him noisily through the balloons to a spin rack labeled TASTEFUL CONTEMPORAR-IES. He eventually chose a card featuring a black and white photo of a blind man with a cane who sported, though, huge orange sunglasses. “Hey! Long time no see I gotta say...” read the caption snaking from his mouth, and then in-

side the card, a platinum blond in a mink cape and nothing else kicked up her orange heels, a bottle dangling from one hand and a down-turned champagne glass in the other.

but feel free
to have yourself one HELL of a birthday!

She was a kind of pink soft-sculpture of amazingly elastic flesh. The day he mails the card one crocus breaks through ice on the tiny lawn of the post office. A week later a note comes back signed by Jacqueline Naismith, MSW.

We are honored to say that Cecily is a guest here at Bide a Bit now. She asked me to report that

she'd sure love a visit!!!!!!!!!!!!

He goes to see her and is confronted by a muttering, prematurely old woman in a wheelchair in front of a bright window, wisps of pale hair brilliantly vibrating, her flesh pink and purple, hands spasmodic, jumpy. Before he can speak she warns of the Pennington boys as he is holding her icy hands down. They had been stealing, he gathers, riotously digging up bulbs too, and going wild on the garden swing. Actually he had walked by that big house on the lake earlier, only to see a comic wrought iron sign

featuring two doctors over a mound-like patient and the legend THE GYNECOLOGISTS SPEISENGLASS.

Cecily stops talking and stares at Buzz for many moments, her eyes bluer, and younger, than he can remember. "Are you Roger?"

"Roger is, was you husband. I'm your old friend, Buzz." Fat Roger Jr enters and Buzz drops her hands. Roger wears a too-tight blazer with a FORD logo, open, his shirt beginning to spill out the front like laundry from a truck.

"I'm Buzz." Buzz extends his hand.

"Isn't everybody?" counters Roger Jr who storms into a monolog about not being able to depend on his new service manager. "Now don't let her pull that forgetfulness crap on you either," he suddenly shouts from nowhere. "These guerilla fighters of the Alzheimers Brigade aren't above a little manipulation."

"She's been just fine," assures Buzz.

"Say, you worked for the toy company, didn't you? I saw you in some old photographs in the mess of my father's estate. That was one lulu of

a communist used to own it, wasn't he? So you, especially, shouldn't be so rough on my Dad. He was fine until..." and Roger Jr nods in the direction of silently chewing Cecily. "Huh! She eating air again?"

"I never was rough on your Dad or easy on him or anything else," Buzz asserts. "I retired before..." and Roger Jr stares at him as if he's the one with Alzheimers. "Anyway, how's the business?" Buzz tries.

"Which one? Oh, toy company? We sold to Koreans last year and they moved it lock stock and barrel to Jamaica would you believe? They just make the one thing now, Destructo World you probably seen on TV—that flies apart when you say the secret word? Complete junk, I mean complete! And they can't make enough of them."

At that moment the sunlight amplifies frail Cecily and they both look at her. She drools but nonetheless quickens enough to pop: "Say the secret word and win ten dollars! It's something you hear every day."

Roger whispers "Now she's getting religious or something!" But Buzz tells him she had been

alluding to a TV quiz show with Groucho Marx. "If you said the secret word a rubber duck dropped down with a Groucho moustache and cigar."

"Yeah, well that's all too intellectual for me. I like sports."

(And Buzz had thought all along that Groucho was mean until he softened with one contestant, a confused man, and was completely kind—Oh well that's one on me he remembers telling his wife. In fairness to her, Evy was in the depths of her PMS and she snapped "Grow up Buzz!")

But he remains hurt, even now in this sunny room of the convalescent hospital. In fantasy Groucho says "Buzz, I would never make fun of you."

"Our toys were creative," he tells Groucho...and the alarmingly real Roger Jr.

"Yeah well, spare me that part of any business. I mean, spare me! There's nothing but the bottom line. Forget that and you're ready for a place like this. These cunt doctors bought the house?"

They wanted a rakeoff 'cause they would preserve it and all that good shit! Yeah! Sure!"

Buzz staggers a bit, ashamed he had abstracted for so long, and gotten a bit dithery himself. Cecily emits a squeal as Roger Jr hammers on, his shirt entirely out of the front of his pants: "Bottom line's the bottom line the bottom line—didn't somebody say that? Well, it's about a rose or daisy or some such shit but it's the same thing."

Now Cecily tries talking but can't, her head nodding vigorously and her hands out of control. Some hairs vibrate on her shiny chin and her son blurts "We ought to have Gillete in here sponsoring this show!"

Finally she grates out secret and starts on word. When she says love, Phyllis Heller, blocky LPN, materializes to spin her chair around. "She talking dirty again? Are you, Miriam? Ooops. Not Miriam! Sorry about that! Miriam got a mouth like a longshoreman!"

But Roger Jr. waves his hand before she can spin Cecily back around to face them again. "It's okay," he tells her. "These Alzheimers pretty much all look the same. Like the Japanese cars

my competition sells. Anyway, we're through. Stick her on the sundeck."

Back in his room, Buzz, shaking, examines the bundle of cards again. The reasons we marry can't just be that one and that one alone the faded brown ink still maintains. Two paths he reads from a card, two paths, and Buzz sees Cecily, in white, walking by the lake and murmuring over and over The reasons we marry can't just be that one and that one alone, and he grows sick with remembered moonlight and cries softly into the dusk seeping into his room through the half-opened door.

"The secret word...is love" he whispers.

Mrs Lahr interrupts. "Hey! I'll agree to anything, but let there be light! I'm not that cheap that I won't treat you to a little light from time to time." She flicks on a switch and spots the bundle of cards in his hand: "Getting rid of the evidence, hey? Don't mind me. Nosy! I know you kept them all locked up, probably because they were so naughty!"

Buzz suddenly visualizes the inside of his small Sanyo cube refrigerator, sees frosting aglint in the dark. He pushes the cards aside and rises to

fetch the Entemen's Ring Danish. In no time he is frisking to the coffee percolator also, dragging a sleeve over his face to wipe a remaining tear or two, an action quietly noted by Mrs Lahr.

"Is this the new light kind?" she inquires about the pastry.

"No calories at all," winks Buzz, "not a one." His hand is trembling as he cuts, or rather hacks at it, with a butter knife. "I know you'd never lie to me," she laughs.

He sits in his Lazy Boy recliner and she on a desk chair by the window as they eat and drink, a dark magnolia tree looming in back of her squat profile.

After she places her plate and cup and saucer in his small sink he ventures, "Why go all the way back to your chair? Plenty of room here."

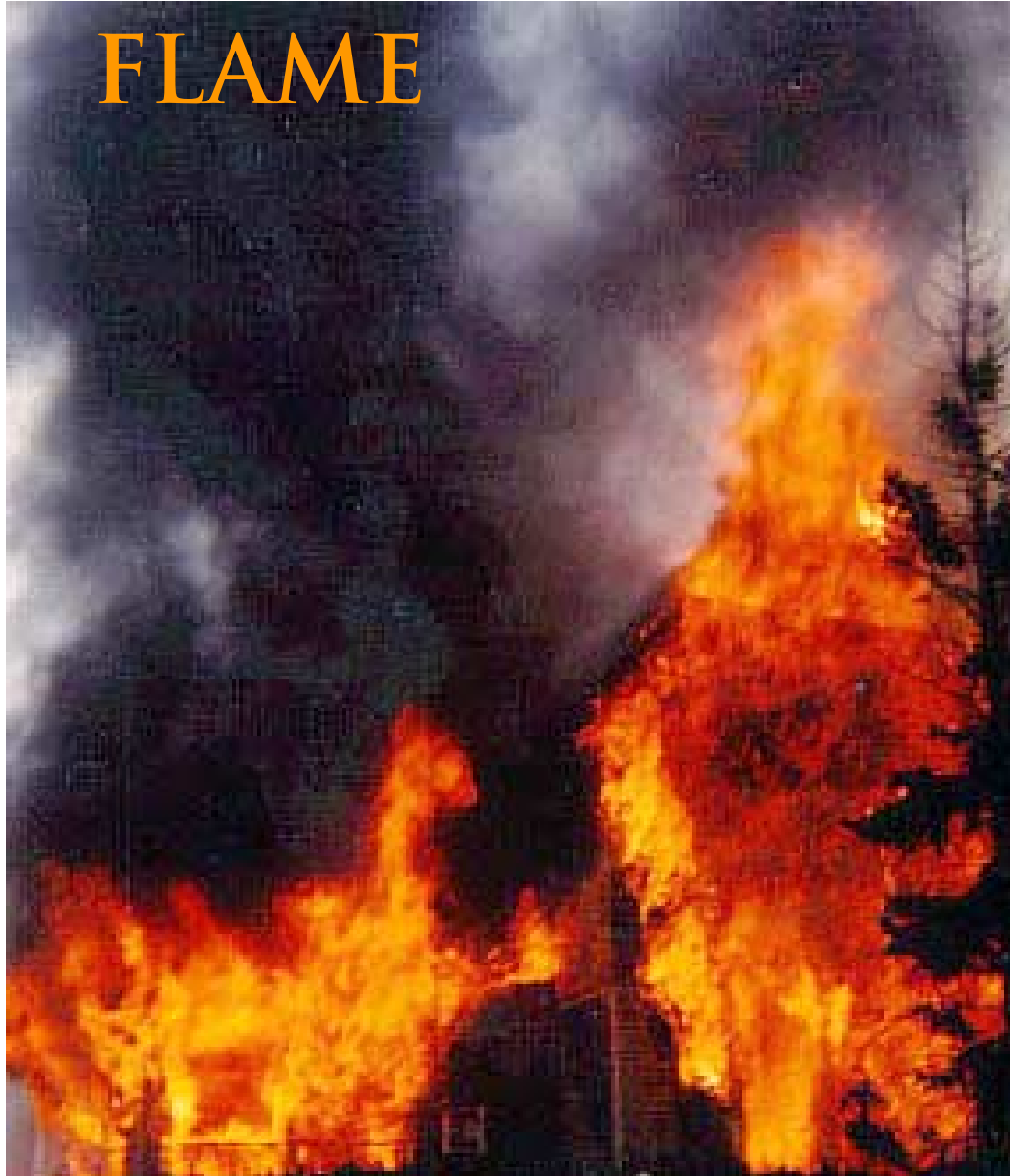
While bouncing Mrs Lahr on his knee, insofar as he can, a prelude to tugging her back further into the recliner, he will intone with a straight face, "I bet you've never done this before."

And her eyes will assume a glee which contrasts to her usual rosy calm. "Never!" Pulling off frag-

ments of his remaining Danish to feed him,
almost singing: "Let's just do the best we can,
Buzz. That's all we can do."



IMAGE AND FLAME



The Present

“Vot a lucky boy! The birthday boy!”

“You never mind who’s a lucky boy or who’s not a lucky boy!” his grandfather informed the old man. He wondered how this tattered bum even knew about his birthday. Then his grandfather announced: “This is who Gramps told you about! Your present!” immediately beating the other man around the head and shoulders. “You too!” he screamed. “Smack him good!”

The boy whaled away, but only could reach midway up the black overcoat, which shredded and unbuttoned as he pounded. He scraped across a greenish brass beltbuckle and quit, but the grandfather persisted until out of breath, then stuck a ten dollar bill in the beaten old man’s overcoat pocket.

With the boy watching from the window, the old man staggered down the porch stairs, pausing at the blinding sidewalk to extract the money. The pocket came out with it, disintegrating into a purple dust as the old man squinted.

Meanwhile the chortling and puffing Gramps was dancing, reliving in exaggerated form some of his punches.

“Grandfather, will there always be Nazis?”

“Yes!” he windmilled, scarlet, “and always us here to bop them good!” Gramps stopped to place a bony hand on his shoulder. “But look,” he panted, noticing the few dots of blood on the boy’s frail knuckles, “let’s patch that up—you know your father and mother.”



Little Candles

"It's simple. It's selfish. You help others and it makes you feel good. You do it for yourself really," shrugged Rebecca, a diminutive redhead pouring coffee into a mug. "Hey, I don't catapult out of here to a bar every Friday now."

The lanky Gerry bit her lip. "Well I'm afraid to miss my Aerobics. It's Jeannette the instructor. She whines if somebody doesn't show up. Holy God when I think of it, everybody's a terrorist in my life!" She twisted the string around her tea bag to coax a few more drops into the styrofoam cup. They dented her reflected face in the middle of luxuriant chestnut hair. "I do their will!"—she looked up from the tea at Rebecca—"to prevent emotional catastrophe! My...mother comes to mind. Her will be done or watch it! So, anyway, at any rate, after Aerobics and before Trevor I can give up an hour or two. So I will come—but I won't like it. My life is busy enough, cowardly though it be." They sat side by side now, atop a cluttered desk. "What's Trevor like?" asked Rebecca. "You have thirty seconds before my boss arrives. He's young and tries to make sure breaks are precisely

timed." Gerry couldn't reply at first, but then sputtered "He...owns things. Every time I see him he owns some more. Always the best quality and something that does...more somehow. I have a little CD player but he has one where five or so discs sit on a sort of round thing, turntable"—Gerry put down her tea and stirred a hand in the overheated air as copy machines shuffle-thumped in the room behind them—"and ...this turntable clicks around or something depending on how you clap your hands." She clapped her long hands in wonderment. "Does that sound right?" "Yeah, but he can't be that much of an asshole," answered Rebecca, staring ahead. "Well he's nice from what I can tell. I've never been out with him before but he's been in my company a few times—double dates or just a gang of the girls meeting him and some guys."

"I don't want any more of that." Rebecca was shaking her head, the thin red hair vibrant in harsh florescent light. "I'm running out of time."

"To get married?"

“To get anything. I can’t do any more of those Gulags.”

“That desperate?” laughed Gerry. They had been looking out the window at gray rain-blackened trees being shaken for the last of their foliage—but turned to each other now.

“I guess I’ve read all the wrong magazines and books—self-help, new-wave, you name it.” Rebecca affected a visionary face. “Hey! If they’d said to smear my tits with lard and watch the men pant around, I’d do it. Well I wouldn’t now. I don’t do anything anymore. I don’t have to. I help people who piss their pants, those far, far less-than-zeros to the Trevors of the world. And you know? It’s the best thing I’ve ever done: I can be myself and nobody cares what I wear.” Rebecca smoothed down her miniskirt.

“You always look nice, so petite.” Gerry said. “Whereas I sort of lumber.”

“Uh uh. It’s okay for you to be yourself in any situation because you’re tall and pretty. Well...beautiful it pains me to say. Whereas! Well let’s face it, I’m a halfpint and...well what my mother’s girlfriends call plain. Oh I

do have this natural mole and thoughtful dimples which drill in when I'm quizzical and can't fuckin decide anything." She pushed a short finger into her cheek. "Then all of life goes by, smiling through its asshole and carrying a whole bushel of self-help books." Gerry laughed lightly as Rebecca went on to demonstrate the dimples. "I fake them really, only piquant factor I got going, by sort of s-uucking in my cheeks like this, see? Chipmunk style. I can become dangerously cute! Any men around? Hate to waste this."

"Shouldn't I gather some?" Gerry flicked her chestnut hair in the direction of the inner offices. "With you here it's a wonder they're all not sucking around already," Rebecca said, bending her bare knees inward as if to make herself smaller.

"They...won't get too religious on us and the unfortunates at this soup kitchen or whatever it's called, will they?" Gerry inquired, sliding forward to the edge of the desk.

"Don't worry. Hell, I was born Catholic but don't believe a thing they say. Anyway, you'll like Sister Lucy. She's the one I prom-

ised her I'd bring along another warm body tonight—if you can understand the alleged English of that. And believe it or not she likes a raunchy story if you can get her to sit still and listen. Actually she reminds me of my father in that way. He was a church organist who carried a portable one around with him—a lay church organist. After he finally left, Mom took to watching this show *The Christophers*, where they said it's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness, you know? So that's what I do—the darkness is the area without a boyfriend."

"Well I'm in darkness and a Presbyterian to boot." Gerry drained her tea with exaggeration. "It's okay, the bums won't care. Mother became a Baptist. They deal with drunks better—she's also a drunk. The Baptists got her into a home with bible-beating souses destroying each others' ears. Thus have they made of their hell a paradise!"

Gerry, still perched on the very edge of the desk, pondered that comment with a wry smile and crossed her long legs, a balancing trick considering her position. Next to her, little Rebecca crossed hers a short beat afterwards—as if they formed a kind of

show business act. When Gerry got to the shelter's dining room that early evening, a regal if frail black man appeared in his underwear and as quickly exited when Rebecca came out from the kitchen, her red hair frazzled in the middle of a cloud of steam. "Hi! That was Mr Chostermill—Loony Tunes and Merrie Melodies." She whirled a small hand around her head.

Gerry waved her own trembling arm to indicate the scruffy room full of long tables covered in oil cloth. "Not, uh, quite the office."

"Hey Mr Chostermill is at least interesting, whereas all the people around us in that office are vapid bores. Even in my old place, deadly though it was, I at least had a hot affair," Rebecca whispered, placing a hand on Gerry's shoulder and staring up into her eyes with mock gravity.

"You never told me." Gerry, too, was whispering, but then Rebecca spoke out in a quite audible voice as individual men sidled in and sat at the tables.

“Yeah it was with Paper Cups, that’s what I called him. Life and death struggles about paper cups! He was honcho for that stupid part of the entire stupid operation. Married man would you believe?” Rebecca attempted to arrange her steamed hair with her hands. “Perhaps I’m expiating that part of it with this charity— so-called.” Her qualifier cued a bag lady to stagger in from the street and plop herself and accessories down in the middle of the floor. “Anyway he had to choose finally between the wife and me and paper cups. You know what he decided, and we both threw him out there-fore. And then the company threw him out too. Even paper cups betrayed him. We meet for lunch sometimes, wife and me— always in a fancy restaurant where we go dutch, appropriately enough, and don’t run the risk of any paper cups.”

The bag lady snored. “That...was miraculously fast,” remarked Gerry, her profusion of hair and her slimness noted even by the half-aware bums waiting at their tables. “Just Madame. Madame Marta!” Rebecca yelled abruptly. Madame’s eyelids shot up in a nest of several coat sweaters. “Germans took it, Russians took it,” she sobbed.

Mr Chostermill re-entered, still in his underwear. "Her home," he explained. "That Europe is the god-awfulest place," he confided to Gerry. "Even worse than this."

Sister Lucy materialized from the kitchen, tiny and darkeyed, wearing a sort of army shirt over her habit, wiping her reddened hands on an apron. "I don't think we need your help on this one, Mr Chostermill," she informed him, but he didn't hear her, or anything, for he had lapsed into a wall-eyed gaze.

Introductions were made and Sister Lucy asked Rebecca to deal with Madame Marta, and Gerry to help Mr Chostermill find some clothes. "He...looks dead." Gerry gasped. It was as if a fine gray net had descended on ebony Mr Chostermill.

"Just a few million more brain cells checking out," Rebecca was chuckling. "He'll snap to."

He did and they're soon at his locker in a dank dormitory room. The inside of the door holds a pinup of Betty Grable in bathing suit and heels, standing by a silvery

airplane inclined towards deepest blue sky. Her head is twisted round to glance over a pink and creamy shoulder, under which her rear resembles a plump inverted heart of salmon red. Gerry spies one pair of trousers and one shirt hanging in the locker, both crisp and clean in steel-gray light. "Let's see-eeeeee now," Mr Chostermill ponders what to wear.

Choice generally presents itself along a wider front to Trevor Tressor. He has of course many more than one pair of trousers and one shirt, but just one creamy Alfa Romeo, and, alas, one Macintosh Computer sans color. At the restaurant he dwells on this particular lack until Gerry worms in her experience with Mr Chostermill, growing uncharacteristically excited when speaking too of Rebecca and Sister Lucy and Madame Marta and the crushed men who came in to eat.

"I don't know what I was thinking of when I bought it!" Trevor must explain when she stops to breathe. He is tall, nearly cadaverous, and the immense sockets holding his dishwater eyes darken in defeat.

“What’s the problem? You want color, you get color!” she very nearly shouts at him. He peers at her with melancholy, stung by her insensitivity to his misstep in consumption. It seems at this point that all eyes in the Turkish restaurant rest on them, but as she lifts a sesame cracker dipped in hummus to her mouth she quickly fears that the crowded room is attentive only because her hands smell vaguely of urine, and she visualizes her last task at the shelter, sorting laundry with Sister Lucy. She had rushed to wash them in her own bathroom, before the punctual Trevor came, but a perfumed liquid soap called SO-OHHH SUBTLE! proved not up to life that particular day. The restaurant is a converted gas station and the metal locker in the Ladies’ Room fortunately proves to be not merely a prop, still containing the gritty powdered soap of the mechanic. She likes the pain of washing with it while making faces in mirror imitating her instructor Jeanette, the aerobic whiner, and Trevor. “PRINcess of Sweat!” she announces finally, “you must get to meet the...Hamlet of the Consumer Culture!”

While putting back the box of soap and slamming the metal door she sighs “Oh gee Mr Chostermill I want your choices! Marry me, sexy Chostermill! I’ll get my own shirt and pants and throw everything else away! All the shit I’ve surrounded myself with, so I can keep working to buy more of it. SO-OHHH SUBTLE my ass! Made, created especially for advertising. No wonder it’s lousy—like everything else in this country. Insane!” But she’s feeling guilty about making fun of Trevor since he seems decent enough. “Trev,” she whispers, turning away from the locker, “there’s got to be more to you, but for some reason I’m just not seeing it because that sexy, wily old Chostermill is seizing my attention with his dying brain! Old, dark hypnotist!”

Gerry returns to sit opposite an enormously fat, caramel-colored man studying the tall menu. She babbles “I know it ‘s the last thing you want to hear, Trev, but I’ve got to talk more about what I did today. It was just a couple of hours or so but...” She looks up a few minutes later, breathless, expecting to see Trevor’s bored, heavy-lidded eyes. Instead the moon-faced man with gold-rimmed glasses explains “You must forgive

me for letting you go on. I lost my wife recently and you're so like her in your fresh loveliness and vitality and enthusiasm—I feel uplifted, honest to God! I came here just wanting to stuff my face and get a little drunk." She mutters something she instantly forgets, and there's suddenly Trevor to escort her back to their table, like a patient who had wandered away from the ward.

He, of course, knows what she needs, and it surely isn't helping negroes in slums or restaurants; she, of course, wants to get out of there fast, so he stuffs a breadstick in his mouth.

Something quickens in her during the ride to her apartment, the only sound the spin of the wet tires, and her lungs all but burst while bolting from his car after she had bit off "Thank you and I'm really sorry for the--" Her hair flies back red and black in the faint, dappled light of a streetlamp in the midst of lurching, skeletal trees.

Sister Lucy answers on the first ring and Gerry unleashes a ten-minute flurry ending with "Do you have to be a Catholic? I must

be going crazy! But what I do in that office is so awful and so useless. Oh I am such a little asskisser! Where is my life? I mean I think it's somewhere but I can't find it! Oh I know this all sounds addled and schoolgirlish to you! But I just had to, was compelled to—" She goes on a few moments more before Sister Lucy yells "Whoa there! I'm sure as hell not Mother Teresa and neither are you. Well I shouldn't say that about you. We don't know about you yet."

Gerry begins sobbing and then gasps "Well I better hang up...I'm sor—"

"Hold on, Woman! I didn't say we couldn't talk about other things. There are a lot of them, no? Life isn't just the shelter thank the Lord! Say anything. You just want to talk is all. Don't worry, I've felt that way. We all have."

Hours later she removes the soaking receiver from her ear, hardly remembering anything she had said, only that she had to promise Sister Lucy not to come to the shelter until a week elapses. "Wired as you are tonight" sighed Sister, "you'd exhaust us

all. But most of all, Gerry, I sense what we call a honeymoon. That's when people get all benign and moony and want to save humankind right after their own canonization is instantly declared. Whereas I worry not about my future sainthood or bringing humanity up to snuff in the next ten minutes, but where my next meal is coming from, or rather where my next thousand meals are coming from for the shelter. I'm talking about the grit of this business and the grease of politics. And...well, much begging in addition—what seems the basest part to most people is really the easiest.”

“I wouldn't mind begging!” Gerry had pleaded. “I'd much prefer it to shoving away the hands of every sleazebag manager I've every worked with.”

When I say anything at all I always say too much, she whispers into a dawn filtering through the many front window panes as pinkgray as the inside of a seashell. Her eyes burning and her hair matted next to her soaking ear, she becomes aghast at how long she had talked to Sister Lucy. “Shit no I'm not going to bed!” she exclaims as if a judicious person had suggested it.

“Wasting my life that way too! Usually to sleep away depression. At least tonight’ll be different. She ends up going through old music albums, sorts them into piles after flicking off the lights because of the glare on the album covers. They fell to drugs was one category...they fell from fame and strangled in middleclass life, another. “But it’s normal life,” she sobs. “What’s wrong with it? It’s what everybody gets! Whereas I’m ravaging around my apartment in the middle of the night like a mad woman!” These fell from fame and became assholes! It comes to us all. “Yeah? Well not me. I’m getting out of this Gulag somehow!”

She ultimately falls asleep atop the albums, wakes up trembling and frightened, and then puts on a heavy, musty sweater. “Am I of any use?” she asks, staring up at an airplane, its red and blue running lights sliding along the pinkish sky. “Hey, Betty Grable! I’ve got a nice ass too, she giggles, shaped just right if short on substance. I try to keep it to myself, although I’d like to use it in my arsenal of lovin’ tools, Betty Grable, but oh the cost is so so high, to say nothing of all the bullshit you have to listen to. Did I tell Sister too much, Betty? I’m feeling too

ashamed to see her again. And honeymoon is such a curious word, Betty, don't you agree? What kind of honeymoon could you have with bag ladies and frail, frail tramps?"

The plane gone, a few stars still shimmer through the dawn sky. She goes into the bathroom to note in the lighted mirror her caved-in eyes and wild hair: You! So that's what a saint looks like? Shit you're no saint! That's for sure!

"I don't care what I am I'm going to be better!" she exclaims aloud.

Read that in a selfhelp book did you? Any more little mottos?

"There could be."

Gerry, you're just a phoney, going here and there whenever anyone asks or yells. You never had a fuckin thought before! What'd you use your head for? She is hitting it. The next moment she's slumping onto a sofa. "Go away all you thoughts now! I'm no saint and I don't have the verve to be a sinner either. Is it written, verily, that there there must be a Mr Paper Cups in my fu-

ture?" she sighs. And she sees one, pudgy and benign, leaning back towards a backyard where kids play in and out of barbecue smoke, and wife stretches out in a chaise lounge, smoking, picking a shred of tobacco from her upper lip. She shakes loose that domestic image only to see the women who run around her neighborhood Acme Market around dinnertime for something, anything, to microwave for the family: their tailored looks and drawn faces...and claws of hands.

"Sister said that happiness is a byproduct. Where's their happiness? The byproducts are in the meat they buy in those flat, frosted packages."

She rises from the sofa. "Compulsion be damned, hey Mr Chostermill and Madame Marta and Sister Lucy and Rebecca! We'll hold hands and dance in our own crazy circle, the rising smell of piss keeping all the respectable people away, all the walking-dead women in their drycleaned suits and cellular phones, all the Mr Paper Cups wanting to use me to dirty up their pallid lives." Gerry dances in the dim apartment.

Later, she wonders if Sister Lucy will eventually let her stay, and how long—and how far to take the religion of the thing. “I’m really not anything along that line...” she remembers telling Sister Lucy. “I was brought up Presbyterian, sort of. I...just don’t know...”

“You don’t know much of anything do you?” Her own voice startles her, standing close to a window and watching her haggard face in one rosy pane.

Gerry goes to a closet to get the jacket she uses on solo hikes, crushes it to her face to smell the woodsmoke and dry leaves. “J. C. he said something like you have no mother or something, or let the dead bury the dead? Well I have no mother or boss or aerobics witch or state-of-the-art gentleman caller.” She looks out on the empty street, a sheet of newspaper dancing fitfully, and imagines the lonely men lining up for breakfast at the shelter, this same newspaper wrapping around a straggler’s legs as Marta Marta, affrighted out from cluttered sleep, keens to them of her lost European home.

Stepping back, she notes her image repeated in the numerous panes; flickering, each, as a draft comes through the apartment. Puts on the jacket and massages her taut neck; then, for some reason, she laughs uproariously, eyes marvelously cool. "You are little, Sister Lucy. You can't hold me out! And don't you die, Mr Chostermill, at least not in the next hour or so!" She buttons up the jacket, rips a ski cap from a pocket.



Word

Flashes of chrome stab a sullen yellow light, and purple clouds mass behind a sudden pair of boys skidding BMX bikes to all but pin another boy to the chain-link fence he has rested his own BMX against.

“Bad machine,” compliments the larger one, his face and hands Oriental in that odd light, though he’s a freckled redhead.

“Word!” adds the smaller one to underline his companion’s appraisal. Below, traffic thunders while merging onto the highway, and the lone boy suddenly feels the fence vibrating against his back as he engages in the compulsory sneaker check with them—identical brands and models, dirty hightops with laces undone.

“You just move in dead Harry’s?” Vapor curls from the larger one’s mouth.

“I guess.”

“He guesses,” spits the small one into ash-gold weeds. “So why don’t you know?” The

two inquisitors straddle their bikes, the smaller one leaning far to one side.

“Anytime, buck each, no shit!” The big one is pointing to the large silver bottlecaps laced through both wheels of this new boy’s bike. A local brewery had attempted to promote a sort of carafe with a flat cap but couldn’t get the seal to hold.

“No big deal. My father give em to—”

“Where you come from?” The big boy interrupts.

“Parkside.”

“Stupid neighborhood. Why move here? From Parkside to River Edge. Just as stupid.”

“Word!”— again this intensifier from the small one who shifts from side to side, his bike frame too tall for him.

“My parents. My father mostly. He likes to...move.”

“Move? Yuppies and faggots move up to The Heights in Parkside. The faggots fix up

all the old houses. You move in there and you get fuckin AIDS!" gushes this small one. A few drops of rain whip at them and darkened Burger King napkins flap around and are sucked into the fence as trucks hiss below. "We lived there with my real father before all the fags. He was Italian or something. What a slum! We lived there with my real father."

"Shrimp always tells everybody too much."

"Fuck you!" Shrimp's vehemence shocks the new boy but the other laughs, and then abruptly whispers "You ride with us?"

"I don't know."

"Come onnnnnn!" this bigger one coaxes, his red hair raised up like a fan from the dark wind, the stretching intonation meaning just for now, it's no big deal, nothing to lose. "We're gonna go back of Shop Rite. It's bad! There's a blueberry pie, I know."

"Word! You should know," adds Shrimp, delighted. He has leveled his bike, his toes barely touching the pavement.

“He means I smashed it in yesterday with my mother so they’d throw it out today. She goes: Will you hurry up? Why are you lingering? Rah-AN-dol-uph! She’s hollering at me and I’m shoving in that fuckin pie box good!”

“Lingering!” the redhead and Shrimp squeal it together, an old joke, and then repeat it several times, both nearly tipping over in their mirth, but the new boy doesn’t join in.

Instead, “Randolph?” he smirks, stepping towards them, a quick shaft of weakened sunlight skimming the spokes of the bikes and highlighting the bottlecaps on his wheels.

“Rocks! call me.”

“I’m Badger,” he invents, having an uncle who helped train some of the Wisconsin football team offseason in his health club.

“My new mother don’t ‘lloow no nicknames!” Shrimp winces as if awaiting her punishment. The light darkens abruptly on their faces as the luminous rim around the thunderheads narrows.

“He’s Shrimp but near his house, Victor-Emmanuel—that’s some emperor in whatchacallit, Pizza-Pigout-Land or someplace. The new boy laughs and Shrimp reddens instantly, dropping his bike, both hands soon in a flurry grazing them: “I’ll get you both for that!” The older boys take the scant threat in good grace. Below, there’s a lull in traffic with just the occasional wheeze of airbrakes.

“Hey Badger, was that lady crying your mother?”

Shrimp couldn’t wait for a reply to his big friend’s question. “You’ll get divorced, we got divorced,” he sped.

“She always cries. We don’t take it serious,” shrugs Badger.

“Hey, mom’s cry. They all do,” affirms Shrimp. “I’ve had a bunch.”

“Word!” Rocks agrees. “Mine yells a lot more, but she cries too.”

“The same broken tiles like our last house? That’s why I left. They were just talking and

talking and talking about them, these fuckin tiles. They wouldn't stop," he shrugs again. "It's crazy! Mom sitting in the tub ripping tiles left and..." Badger stops; he is saying too much.

Rocks nods. "Yeah they get off on little shit like that and then they go on fuckin-for-ever!"

"Word! Yeah, parents. They never know when to fuckin stop talking," Shrimp underscores, vapors rushing from his mouth and hanging in the darkening air, "Was that asshole your father, one trying to fix garage door? He goes: one more minute and then I rip the fuckin thing off its... whatchacallits?" Shrimp is almost dancing, spit flying with his breaths.

"Hinges," Rocks injects.

"Word!" Shrimp becomes hysterically emboldened, his real voice hopping a wet octave before diving into imitation: "I thought I'd shit! He goes!: Had it fuckin right fuckin minute ago!"

But his basso version of Badger's angry father cracks towards the breathless, squeaky last, and now the three boys comprise a kind of menacing field within the heavy air as Badger moves ever so slowly towards Shrimp, and Rocks dismounts.

"What shakes with this `asshole' bullshit?" Badger snaps at both of them, knowing that no one can call your father that until you do first, that it's a rule everywhere.

Shrimp drains of color and Rocks steps aside as Badger approaches. The light becomes a dirty yellow flicker among them. Below, trucks shoulder in a lemony glow.

Rocks blurts "He don't mean it in a bad way. We all call our fathers ass—"

Shrimp backs away, and then scrambles onto his bike. "Yeah! Honest! Word! I got two and they're both...assholes!" Badger yanks him off the bike which jumps forward a bit and falls to the ground, its front wheel revolving slowly. Shrimp's head is forced down into Badger's crotch.

"Stop you fuckin faggot!" Shrimp screams.

Badger releases him. "What you so nervous for? Next time I'll let you kiss it!"

"I don't go for no shit like that!"

"Not yet, huh?" The three boys are scarlet as Randolph steps gingerly between the other two.

"Shit! Badger," he whispers. "We never get that fuckin mad! They must all be crazy in Parkside."

They stare at their sneaks in the amplified highway noise and don't know how to part. When the two larger boys finally look up, they see tears in Shrimp's eyes, his lip trembling as the sun breaks through suddenly.

"Some..." he starts whispering, "some people take a bath once in a while!"

"He will when he gets his old lady out of the bathtub!" Rocks yells and they all laugh, though Badger, his heart beating furiously, joins in late. In the brightness, Rocks' greenish teeth unsettle him further.

Behind the dumpster at Shop Rite, they have eaten the smashed blueberry pie and flaunt their blue hands, then perform sticky high fives.

“What’ll we call ourselves?” pops Shrimp.

“Three From Hell!” Badger screams, leaping on his bike, leading them past the loading docks to careen down the driveway and onto the sunny street in shrieking, breathless giggles.

Buster Ianucci is shocked into flattening the trajectory of a blackened cabbage. It thumps the side of the dumpster. “You hear all that noise? There are women out there!” he informs Lucy Devaney, meat department apprentice. “They want my rotten cucumber!” Swathed in rubber rain gear several sizes too big, she is hosing down the platform. Deep inside of all that yellow her violet eyes hunger as she plays the hose on Buster, forcing him back into the store.



Avia Morrisey

1. What the hell's the difference what I do? They froze me out of promotion and I'm finished! Where I have the means I'll help you, where I don't I won't, so I'm sending you to Colgate. You may have wanted to go somewhere else, I don't know, but that's where I'm sending you. And don't...oh I can't talk to women since your mother died. Well, anyway, don't...well, be careful, if you do, uh do, uh what...uh—anyway, be a nurse or something.
2. Ah, love let us be true to one another!
3. So she left me to screw some Grease-Bum, my Mother! Can you visualize it, them sliding around the greasy sheets?
4. Gee you're smart in most ways but in that way you're retarded.
5. Honey they send you right place. If you change, you betta fast! If you don't, you bettah bettah stay same! Down here, everythings go so down, even sex don't help none down here.

6. Madonna oda wombah blundada.
7. NO RECORDS EXIST FOR THE
AFORENAMED OFFICER
8. Wombah blundada automatique!
9. Madonna ada wombah blundada!
Saintah Saintah!
10. MITZ-IH-IN-KUH!-KUH!-KUH!

NOTES

1. From phone conversation, Captain Brandon Morrisey, United States Navy, about to be retired.
2. Matthew Arnold, and unnamed literature instructor, who, allusion-crammed, couldn't erect at critical juncture. For Avia, no critical juncture.
3. Avia couldn't visualize.
4. Again, Lucy Eccles, roommate.

5. Mona Many, drunken nurse in Susseluh-land who served The Gentle People. Drove a Jawa motorcycle even more battered.

6. The madonna with the wooden dick. Reference to the crude machine of monkeywood Avia cranked up with a galonna-shell handle in order to demonstrate The Rubber to Susseluh-land women as blank as she.

7. Morrisey, his captain's hat cocked, died at halftime in the bar of the Naval Officers' Club in San Diego after repetitively shouting "Go Army!" Army went on to lose 16-7. Since only the navy knew they were related, and it lost him, Avia was never notified of his decease. (Small estate ended up at Bide-a-Bit, where he had been drying out as she graduated Colgate in Public Health.)

8. In a moonswept clearing on an achingly gorgeous evening the machine very slowly elevated itself as Avia slept. Thereafter an entourage moaned after her on her rounds—scattered frequently by the careening Mona Many on her rusty Jawa.

(The automatique is a linguistic remnant from a French occupation from 1884-191

9. The madonna without the wooden dick! A double saint! What The Burning-Patch People screamed as they rushed by her to throw themselves into the volcano. Had viciously elbowed aside The Gentle People along with their obscenity-spouting nurse, sans defunct cycle. Had been forcing Avia up and up the burning slope, their charred sores smoking. When it seemed they would hurl her in, she flung away the ascension device and huge prophylactic. Despite the flare-up of sulphurous fumes, it proved the right thing.

10. Exclaim today's young women after conferring for hours on end in her hammock with Saintah Saintah Avia. (A guttural fricative-click- spit: most tortured outcry of Susseluh-landian sexual frustration.)



The Ceremony

Resembling a crowbar, the purple strip lurks in the low sky. Sharp crunching...then heel-strikes as she finds the path. Shortly he sees the vapor preceding her, the gloom behind pierced by streetlamps around which snow revolves.

When he can discern her clothes he comments, Well you're certainly equipped for the task at hand!

I couldn't get back to the apartment to change.

Still the party animal, hey?

You could say that. Her eyes blank in the dimness.

Well, at any rate, I'm glad you came, he says, this might have to be the last until the Spring thaw.

Glad? Never heard you use such an odd word. Have you gone crazy? A wet flake flops into her hair.

It must have hurt—I mean for you to leave the party without a stranger.

Oh? Still the jealous male? My my! But let me offer a discrete hallelujah: no prying bitty little questions this time—oh so very manipulative with their subtle, softest poisons. You're at least over that.

Time, he shrugs in whispering snow, the cure and the kill.

Oh yeah? Well I'm trying to accept kill, because then hope is dead. And yet, here we are once more. Stupid. We're hopeless.

Absently, he turns a hand up as if to cup the sifting snow. You never know. And when you finally do it's too late. Well I hope—modestly, not universally—that this is the last,

the woman sighs.

He had fetched the tools from a car trunk as frigid as Siberia, keeps the shovel and gives her the crowbar. They look for the right

place to start, the hard ground beginning to whiten.

Almost as an antidote to their sniping, they dig a half hour without speaking, gulping in icy needles of air and panting out dark vapors.

Soon they have dug—she, though unsteady on her heels, thrusting in with the crowbar, and he scraping away the clods with the shovel—just enough to reveal the larger outline below them: its hair frost-whorls into which individual giant flakes drift.

A...little more, he encourages—spasmodic puffs from his mouth darkly surrounding his head.

She demurs, leaning on her crowbar. C'mon now, don't be a fuss...budget in this too! she gasps.

But he wins. Listen this once! Just not enough...depth to really operate, really know when you're...s-striking home!

They again dig in the odors of frozen mud and lye, she sobbing with each thrust, the

snow arriving now in stinging, surging waves.

I'll change. If you want to change. She blinks away the tears as he offers the shovel.

So they reverse roles, he driving and twisting in with the crowbar, more deeply than she could, and she, beyond herself, jerkily scooping up after him.

The depth of the exposed form is right, they silently agree. Much more would exhaust the energy needed now, especially as the wind has begun raging, slamming icy snow into them and whirling it round the declivities of the uncovered thing below.

The tools are dropped, clattering away along the ground as the couple falls down on the form, their beating fists producing a dull, echoing hollowness. On they go far past exhaustion into a loathsome nightmare of sweat and icy slime.

As the thumps become less and less audible to them, they are retching. Then, the grating draughts after they have, finally, stopped.

After some moments they clamber up from out of the grave. In the fast-ticking hail, she on her knees and he above, hulking: the whole scene looking like some Medieval ceremony, swarthy knight and weeping maiden. Below, with matted hair aswirl in flowers of blackest ice, the horse.



Operation Dessert Form

We're best at two things as a nation. One is ultimately reconciling our differences between groups; two...well let's deal with the first, and let the other reveal itself like a print coming up through the developer.

Our opposition finally agreed to a ceremony of reconciliation—with rigid ground rules. We'd both have roughly the same amount of time: that required to have a vehicle from each group drive by. Then we'd work to prepare the show.

The drivebys ensued, noisy but effective. There followed an hour of feverish activity where displays were built, and immediately evaluated by judges with walkie-talkies, broadcasting to senior citizens of both sexes operating old manual Remingtons.

(They insisted on being included—actually threatening suit—and would hear nothing of computers.) At any rate, the silver brigade toiled so feverishly that the index cards bore several strikeovers, adding, many felt, to the charm and authenticity of the event.

I will refrain from pointing out which group prepared what among the exhibits, since that would mar the purpose of the day; besides, prizes were awarded on individual merit only.

The first honorable mention was labeled TRIPLE CHOCOLATE, the Afro-American subject being posed with a bowl of chocolate ice cream on his chest, and with that set atop a brown mohair scarf diagonally thrown. The judge's card read Interesting materials but bowl too small and scarf material oversoft.

Second honorable mention went to JALEPENO! a red pepper sticking up through a lemon custard in a soup plate between a Hispanic's teenager's legs. Simplicity! With the merest hint of sexuality.

(Here I include a non-prizewinner. Perhaps for old time's sake. It was WASP WITH WASPS, a white male wrapped completely round with wire holding fuzzy wasps. Excellent execution though idea is perhaps a bit trite—too much visible wire also. Besides, you lost theme of show!!!! To be fair, a petit four had been hastily thrust into

the nest of wires but the judge apparently missed it.)

CHEROKEE JUBILEE took third prize, an American Indian clothed in buckskin, with cherries intertwining both hands. It however contained, the judges said, too much red, literally and figuratively.

Second went to BAKED ALASKA, an Eskimo peeking from a cardboard oven, set, according to a round gauge, at 500.

too small on oven therm was the only criticism.

The display meriting both Best of Show and First Place featured a lovely blond in long white silk gown in heart-shaped box lined with a red satin dotted with the candy called nonpareils. VERY SWEETLY BLOND AND VERY VERY DEAD.

Beautiful! sang the index card, echoes of Marlyn and of love. Masking of blood stains top-notch too! (That it was, and the less said of the other displays on that account, the better.)

I should mention also the one the senators most objected to later, WHOM THE GODS DESTROY THEY FIRST MAKE EDIBLE, an oriental baby, heavily talced, in the middle of an angel food cake.

Very tasteful, though baby too large for scale of whole piece. Try again.

The crowd, mostly middle aged, came from all economic strata. They appeared to like the show, although Dr Hiram W. Jackman, retired dean of the junior college, sniffed, "Worst yet when it comes to gilding the lilly, or the flan, or whatever."

My lasting impression is not a critical but an aesthetic one...sounding now a bit like the ghostly pre-echo from a phonograph record...blood whipping across the rough-textured wall outside.



Lips Smooth As Oil

From the balcony of the church, Ted spied the backs of the women seated below, picture hats floating between their shoulder blades. Each had flanked herself with a purse and a grayish-white praybook. He had gone there, the closest church to his new apartment, to check out the ladies.

Something hit them, they'd splinter, he thought, signing the book passed to him by his pewmates, Dr and Mrs Marius Ohgo. After Ted x'd newcomer, writing his old address, the cherubic Dr Ohgo placed a beefy hand on his arm and whispered during a pause in Pastor Carruther's Psalms Never Before or Seldom Quoted, "You're to come with us afterwards for cookies. Mrs Ohgo's cookies are closer to heaven than even our seats here." Ted blurted acceptance and Ohgo winked, "From Erie, huh? Well, did you travel from Erie with any?"

Judging from Dr Ohgo's ecstatic smile, Ted's Pardon? was just the right answer. Was it his hunger and the talk of cookies made him smell chocolate?

They walked to the Ohgos through falling leaves—he puzzling over Dr Ohgo’s bizarre digs at Carruthers while Ted shook the pastor’s hand before escaping the church. Now Ohgo, his blowing hair whiter than the weak sunlight, was classifying love as Ted studied identical aspects of the neighborhood’s architecture: “...and I love Mrs Ohgo too and her wondrous baking—exemplified by this majestic stomach preceding me everywhere—and you’ll soon see my other love. And of course, as I said, I love the God encompassing all my loves.”

“Well one of your loves is different, Marius—I’ll grant you that!” rang back Mrs Ohgo from the spinning leaves ahead. She limped, Ted noticed.

At the huge hall closet, Ted witnessed Dr Ohgo as hanger meister, separating clusters of hangers meticulously before plucking out three for their coats. Mrs Ohgo donned her long-mileage smile which spoke forbearance; Ted shifted from footto foot in the vaguely chocolate- smelling air. Once free of her coat she brightened as to a “batch just ready to pop in!” and limped off.

Ohgo shepherded him into the den, first having him close his eyes. Upon opening them Ted perceived smears, pink ones against thickly varnished knotty pine. He guessed they came from a small fire in the fireplace, but what sprung to focus proved to be large paintings of barebreasted girls in silky boxing shorts and burgundy gloves. One resting on the floor, a taunting blond with eyes of indigo flame, stood taller than Ted, almost as if he could, with some boldness, shake her gloves and wish her luck.

“Did you travel from Erie with any?” squealed Dr Ohgo, his head an immense balloon floating against the knotty-pine, his white hair flaring in a sudden draft, his face even more scarlet.

“Not with any of these I didn’t.”

“The brassiere is an example of sound engineering but God, my Erie friend, has the touch of an artist,” he preached, his eyes intensely green. “Can you imagine it says in Proverbs that their lips are smooth as oil but their legs go down to hell? Well their legs are rooted right here, thank you. And make of this beautiful earth even more of a

heaven, am I right, Mr Erie? Did you travel here with any? Oh well, if you get it here that's fine too! Would you like to name that one you seem so enamored of? I'd call her that from now on if you did." Ohgo plopped into a director's chair facing the same painting.

"I uh..."

"No matter, tell me after Mrs Ohgo plies you with the other loveliness of the house." Dr Ohgo closed his eyes, knitted his hands across his belly, and sighed periodically until Mrs Ohgo entered some minutes later, ushered by puffs of, of course, chocolate. "Tomorrow, Theodore!" piped up Ohgo, "you'll remember that her cookies don't melt in your mouth, my friend, oh no! They melt your very mouth, Theodore. May I call you Theodore?"

"What did he say, dear?" interrupted Mrs Ohgo.

"That he's very very lonely."

“Well I shouldn’t wonder. Isn’t a shame we couldn’t bring these lovely lovely girls to life?”

She put down the tray of huge mugs splotted a cream and violet. Misshapen from her ceramic class, and primal to Ted as they fumed, they encircled a dish piled with steaming chocolate chip cookies, everything wildly aromatic.

“That’d be something all right, having them all here in the flesh: a heaven on earth, my Erie friend! Where it rightly belongs. Seek and ye shall find! I don’t believe in heaven as much as I believe in here. I like them when they are ever so so so slightly burnt—the cookies not the girls—the chocolate melts in the air, becomes the air, the fragrance linnnn-gering for days. Ahhhhhhh! By the way, Theodore, butter, as you’re finding out by the look of you, is another of Mrs Ohgo’s secrets.”

...

Sonofabitch is a brick short of a load! is Cliff’s conclusion that next afternoon during Ted’s phonecall to the Gannon College Li-

brary. Did you ever figure what you traveled from here with?

Dr Ohgo informed me that there comes a time when we must forget our baggage or it locks to us, like in the famous logo for Death of a Salesman.

Yeah his sons left him babbling in the shithouse while they took off with whores. Sex can make you less than human.

Don't say that!

Hey it was just cookies! We got them here in Erie too! Even the priests eat them.

Hot chocolate too! Double jeopardy! Anyway, you never know what can, uh, start you off.

I'll second that—we're at a dangerous age. But, Dr and Mrs Marius Ohgo, hey? What's he doctor of? Were the cookies shaped like tits too? I can see their coat of arms: a cross of cookies rampant on a field of breasts. Actually, he sounds like a lot of gabby, ball-breaking priests here, only they're warped by theology—I don't know their positions on breasts and women boxers. But they got

one on everything else, that's for sure. Wait a second! Some horny padre wants to check out *The Joy of Sex*. How you doing, Father? No problem: he's just checking me out actually.

I swear the spoon stood straight up in the whipped cream.

That was something else.

Elevate your gutter mind, 'cause I have real problems. Anyway, a nut and probably so's the wife and I scarfed in those otherworldly cookies for hours too long while Ohgo prattled on, but what the hell, I don't know anybody down here in Media. Well, didn't before...

Ah hah! My hungry patience will be rewarded! After the pigout, the...?

Well I had catapulted myself to a sugar high, and I figured a lot of black coffee'd calm me down?—I had an oat bran muffin too, healthy, at Dunkin Donuts. But then things took an even weirder turn.

...

"I've been waiting a whole hour! He's a rotten bastard and you're all rot—"

"Pardon?"

"And look at this!" It's suppose to be fall, pretty colors in the trees and all that shit, you know? And that total asshole on the TV? Makes up poems about the weather? He didn't make up one for this, did he?" Wet snow clumped against the window of Dunkin Donuts, refracting headlights as cars slid into the parking lot.

...

Look, I told her, I can see that you're upset.

What she say?

Then I must be the most sensitive male in this whole stupid Media, Pennsylvania—or words to that effect.

Translation: sucker.

So she asks me for a ride home, but then has to check me out with the help, which is a United Nations of giggling. You know, Is

this guy all right? They don't know of course. Toothless Cambodian woman covered in white sugar yells, Hey take chance, Letty! How you can do worse? Look! I told them. I just moved here. I come from Erie. Which was a mistake because one of them, some sort of Hispanic Negro fat girl screams Erie! Snow up the ass, that's Erie! Then, of course, my name became Snow-Up-the-Ass until we got out of there.

And thus t'will be each and every time you go back, the tool of ridicule being the only one left to the working poor in this great nation—like the gravedigger in Hamlet.

Spare me the Sociology. And especially the Literature! First thing she says getting into the car is No funny business, you understand? and I say look I want to get home myself, I've had one hell of a strange day! And then she cries and cries for miles and won't tell me how to get to where she lives.

Which is information you'd have to have.

And asks me to stop, asks me questions as to why this guy would stand her up, etc.

Maybe alien women got him. We can look for his story at the supermarket checkout.

Whatever. Anyway there we were gazing at the woods, which she had hated just before in the quote-unquote stupid snow, and now finds beautiful because God did it and not people. Uh...the...comforting, uh, gets warmer, and man! Everything just turns furious. And at the end she cries twice as much and says she's happy because God put us together at the lowest moment of her entire life!

It had been quite a religious day for you. What's she look like?

A boy.

I often thought that about you. Are you sure you know the difference?

Probably hasn't read a book in her life. And everything is immediately emotional! Like, boom, right away. You can't think.

Let me stop you before you get to natural rhythm, you typical little suburban snot-

nosed snob!—but then we already know that.

Look, I don't have time for your ten cent analysis! I seem to...have her now for some reason, and this is the even weirder part: I smelled chocolate at lunchtime from some brat ripping into a Hershey Bar at the 7-Eleven and...started getting a hardon.

Well you can't be allowed on the streets like that—not good for much but giving directions.

That passes for funny in your sealed sewer of a mind, I know, but...

Food and women! Mmmmmm! What you got to complain about? Smear her with chocolate and you can die a happy man. Anyway, all those rosy tits at the mysterious and redolent Ohgos, you couldn't reign yourself in. Ah shall I compare thee to a slummer's lay?

It it it had started as comforting, innocent, uh mostly, and went haywire and now I don't know what the hell I'm doing! We had breakfast this morning before work, but first

I picked her up at her place,
and...then...before we could get out the
door...Wham Bam again! I can't think! And
she! She doesn't even bother. I never met a
woman quite like this. No substances or
bullshit needed. Out of control.

I thought such a condition was devoutly to
be wished.

Well it's ripping the shit out of me. I mean
this new job, man, with a lot of problems,
and that's quite enough to make me ner-
vous, thank you. I have to get down to work
and knock off all this happy horseshit. I've
got to catch hold and damn soon. I don't
know what I'm doing. I'm sitting here now
in the middle of about a thousand books
they were supposed to inventory before I
took over. And I thought Gannon's book-
store was screwed up! Well this is Widener,
a university, so it's screwed up big time! Try
the personal inventory first. You're a good
guy; you just have no character.

Get in control you mean, because, like,
she's out of it, yes?

Or is it that she's very much in it, o pale and loitering knight?

Never mind the fuckin books. It's bad enough I got to peddle them. They're all shit.

...

I swear I won't even mention Letty! But the weather here! Like, Erie has the reputation for lousy...but here it pisses gray mud out of the sky half the week and all of the weekend. It drips clammy gray inside your skull. And this is the time my boy-girl starts talking about getting serious, quote unquote. I am really not ready to go to the movies with her yet—even though we've gone a bit beyond that in the few months since...but I promised not to talk about her and I'm not...uh...anymore. So! How are all the Literary Lions at Gannon College?

The same pitiful mess, and Nature is without her diadem up here too: we're about fifty-fifty mud and snow from a crazy thaw, but now it's hardening up as we're just now plummeting through zero as I speak. Looks like a grimy abstract out there under the

frozen streetlights: how I visualize purgatory.

I'm in it! Shit, I can't love her! Jesus Christ she's just a girl—which you can hardly tell by looking.

Get her a pair of boxing gloves and some flashy shorts. Or better yet, you're capable of an even more infantile image.

Cliff! Holy Jesus! I haven't had a life yet!

To be serious, Ted, friend, you're having one right now. Who ever said it suppose to consist of big ideas? Ever think that maybe you're lucky?

How can I be lucky and this upset? Cliff! What'll I do?

Who knows? Your candle is lit and you're still cursing.

Last night I...sat in a chair and cried!

Yeah we do that sometime.

You're no fuckin help!

Trade her even up for Mrs Ohgo. Cookies outlast sex anytime.

...

Ted walks past the Ohgo's, but can't ring the bell. The early evening's bluish fog eats dollops of snow atop skeletal bushes flanking their front door, a buttery mist shoulders under.

Is there another young man in there perched in all that rosiness and aroma? Did you travel from Trenton with any? From Scranton, Philadelphia? Stockholm? Zaire? Do you find our fighting blond as overwhelming as did our friend from Erie?

Speaking of Whom! And Ted sees himself in the den, sputtering "I had such a nice time, and I 'm I'm I'm thinking of joining the church and had a question or two."

By then standing under a haloed streelamp, he hears Cliff's voice saying Belay the conscious phoniness; enough will filter through your depraved personality naturally.

...

Letty is still there in powder-blue fake fur, seated on a milk crate clotted with filthy snow and smoking a cigarette, the knives of her knees wide apart. "Hey Big Shot! I was just getting ready to quit on you! Isn't this where you came in? When I was waiting for another so-called man?"

"I'm sorry. I had to go back to a place."

"What'd she say?"

"It wasn't like that. It was something else. Something I don't understand."

"Hmph! That's really overrated, that shit. What's so hot about understanding things anyway? It's what you do before you understand things that counts, and when you don't understand them. Who can't do things when they understand them?"

"What did you say? I don't under--"

"You heard me but don't understand." She flipped the cigarette away as they got in the car. "Can't. It's okay. You do your best, Snow-Up-the-Ass. That's the name for you all right."

“Well mine for you is ssss-Screwball.” He started the balky Datsun.

“That’s an easy one. For anybody. I never met anybody that one didn’t fit.”

They parked by a playground. The night had become clear, starlit. His adam’s apple and trousers bulged, with tension in between.

“Not tonight—nothing—I’m too down,” she broke the silence.

“It’s probably because...” he began.

“Whoa. Shut up! I don’t want you fuckin my mind anymore. And I don’t wanna know why anyways. Right now it’s just what is.”

They stared past the swings and sliding boards of the icy, glimmering, playground, through the pines and into the housing development beyond, the lighted houses like broken grins.

“Well I guess we better...something...” she eventually sobbed. “There’s screwing your life away and there’s...babies.” In the cold

she tucked her feet under, making herself smaller—he experienced pity for an instant.

“My God! There are so many things we’d have to talk about before...!”

“Hey! You talk! I’ll be too old by then. Old woman—not that you wouldn’t try to screw me even then. Never saw anybody had to have it more. Even that first night I could feel it like nothing in my life ever. Now shut up before you begin to apologize or explain!” She tugged at him to force herself, “Mmmmm” under his arm. “I can’t tell you how good you smell! How come you always smell so sweet?” “Ch-ch-ch-ocolate seized me one batty day.”

“Yeah! That’s what’s it’s like, a little, chocolate or something.”

“And I don’t appreciate your characterisation of me as some sort of animal.”

“Lighten up, Snow-Up-the-Ass, I’m teasing. Mostly anyways. Hey, with us it was like, instant! Explosion! So? After that? What?”

By way of answer he thrust her back into her own seat, to deliver, with all the rational will he could muster, his farewell speech, laced with the highest sentiments he had ever announced. At the end tears stood in her eyes like dimes.

...

What an insight! It destroyed me! What I discovered is that what's really really crazy is the domestic shit, that's what's crazy. I thought the way I used to live, the goddamn ravaging, wracking sexual drive and and and the horrible loneliness and the drinking all night and running ten miles the next morning and then puking and and...well, anyway, that's really not what's crazy, really crazy. Crazy is the Ohgos and all the people dying away in their snug little bungalows with all the burners and the ovens cooking, and kids pissing in every bed! It's good I met the Ohgos, 'cause they represent the so-called home in its most insane form. I mean, girls with b-breasts, b-boxing while you get fatter and fatter? A domesticated pig? This I want for my future?

And and and and women like Letty, offering everything up with this smartass Mona Lisa smile and getting you you you babbling, and then instantly purring Just step this way to Domestic Death! Uh uh!

Man I did it! I ended it and I never felt better! Like I'm burning with the feeling! Free, Baby, free! ...

About a month later Cliff had an early dinner at a German Restaurant with a priest who taught philosophy at Gannon, and they argued so long afterwards—the waitresses huddling and pointing—that he barely made closing time at Toppo's Terrific Tuxes. He cast the plastic-sheathed garment into the cancerous Monte Carlo, fistailed out of boulders of squalid ice, flooring it all the way to Media.



Fish Story

Like other fish—if, as you said, you really wish to learn—I do not like metaphors. So, as I said, I am a fish. It is a hard thing to explain to you: we simply are, and therefore need no figures of speech.

As to the current spate of fish suicides, one must discuss the deteriorating mental health of the majority offish since 1982, and even before. I have lost too many of my friends, haddocks, tuna... dolphins being the latest. Unlike those of men, these labels are not meant to prejudice or denigrate. The brotherhood among fish is legendary.

We eat each other you say? We do what is decreed by The Great Fish, no more, no less. Oh there are wilful renegades as everywhere in the animal...kingdom, so-called.

And those of us who kill to eat in the natural order of things don't write books full of circular rhetoric, or make films rationalizing acts of brutality and sexuality—where sometimes the difference between the two

is hard to tell. No sleaze, academic or pseudo-artistic, among fish.

By the way, I never really found out whether we are included in that lofty designation of Animal Kingdom by you and your species—your own just fits at a certain place in a certain chart like anything else, no better or worse, more complex than some, less so than others—whether you and all your professors know it or not.

We fish have our own ways to classify life but it is both too complex and too intuitive for you to, excuse the expression, fathom.

At any rate, our solidarity all but overwhelms any tiny tiny antisocial percentage among the untold trillions of fish in the waters of this planet. What if I told you there are as many fish as stars!

At any rate—back to fish suicides—I have seen it many times, this decline in the power to think clearly: you do too many unfish things. Then you kill yourself in water full of garbage and medical waste, or they get you with some silly lure, rubbery worm of no natural color which you would

have laughed at, herky-jerking by in your strong and healthy and clear-thinking days.

Hook you! I know you habitually say some such taunting thing, slightly different and probably just as sick. Well just think of yourself with a hook through your cheek. And yet such horror is not given a second thought.

I told a lobster "You know, they say that when they plunge you into boiling water you don't feel much, your nerves being so primitive." That's what I told him. He cried and cried. I guess that doesn't take much sensitivity. Of course I know that the image of a lobster crying is ludicrous beyond ludicrous to you. Not dreamt of in your philosophy.

I won't go on. I ask only that you merely attempt to look at it from our side. Just this once.

Oh if you could only be a fish for one luminous, cutting second!



ORANGE, GORGEOUS ORANGE!

Not the kind of den you'd expect to see a Pumpkinhead in, club-like with its leather furniture, cherry paneling, the massive desk bathed in lamplight. But a glance from outside at the leaded windows which sectioned the huge orange head immediately confirmed the unusual fact to any passerby this early evening.

A Pumpkinhead absolutely! And not surrounded by filth and greasy formica. (Thus perhaps the "good one" that many people know or have heard of.)

He laughed, this comfortably ensconced creature with the creamy French Telephone so tiny next to his head, for he had solved the math problem just before the eminent physicist on the other end of the line could blurt the answer. Unfortunately though, before the Pumpkinhead could invent a discreet goodbye and place the ornate phone in its cradle, Dr. Lyle Anders quipped "Now don't get too giddy. Or I'll start thinking you're a Pumpkinhead. Which, of course, would be imposs..." Then the imme-

diate, seething intake of breath at the professor's end in Ann Arbor when the mechanical operator broke in with "Are you a Pumpkinhead?"

"The Supreme Court has ruled that Pumpkinheads have the same rights as..." he cried. It was no use—the question just kept repeating. "Yes," he finally whispered. The court, he knew, had also ruled that the question alone established the fact in these cases, since no one not a Pumpkinhead would claim to be one, and, as Pumpkinheads were compulsive liars, ninety-nine percent of them would immediately answer no. (The latest study from Johns Hopkins University put the figure at ninety-seven percent—"not a significant difference.")

Also, those persons unjustly asked could not sue, for the court recently held that questions absurd on their face cannot per se be injurious.)

Now another evasion took care of those guaranteed Pumpkinhead “rights”: “All outgoing lines are full; all incoming...”

He quickly hung up and then depressed his computer button only to see that R.Renfew, Pasco, WA was undertaking the half-completed chess game against Dr. Anders. The Pumpkinhead started to say that it didn’t take Dr. Anders long to get him out of memory, but he remembered that it didn’t take anyone very long the many times before this one either. “Oh well,” he breathed into the soft, warm atmosphere of the den, “I can at least put my ‘Begging Clown Bit’ on hold.”

And all of his signs insisting ORANGE POWER, and WE ARE THE LIGHT YOU HAVE SEEN! plus all the framed photos of Pumpkinhead surgeons and basketball players brought no solace—once again. He shook his huge head and whispered “There are more jokes about Pumpkinhead basketball players than there are Pumpkinheads, period!”

It was getting darker outside and the light from his desk lamp flowed more brightly,

brushing the faintest gold over the dark paneling, and making each individual pane in the large window reflect bright orange. He mused sadly as to what the nervous ticketseller must have seen when he led eleven others of his despised ilk to pick up reservations for PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. "Aren't you Pumpkinheads?" she sobbed. The manager stepped in with "I think we can safely assume they are, and that this performance is completely, utterly sold out." He clicked off his lamp and wept into the mellow darkness.



The Chastetree

Jane. Strolling the tanbark path down into the nature center, half wondering why she had ended up there for her “solo”—and a day tardy because of Dr Kasman’s muddled assignment list. At any rate, she was expected to fetch something foggily symbolic of herself for his “Seminar In Personal Re-discovery.” A leaf? she thought, a twig? Dogshit?

Just before a campus policeman began running towards her, she’d been musing that nothing connected in that class—oh to be sure, on purpose, as Dr Kasman had assailed them: “Clusters of intuitions and images, or sounds, memories. Whatever. Odors even! Let’s accept such clusters without generalizing about them, or without narrowing them to the meaning, and, therefore, to the preconceptions, ah, inherent in everything.”

Uh huh. Odors all right. Is that Dr Kasman or Gasman? She very nearly said this last aloud. It made no difference because the officer had vanished. “Probably steered

offcourse by a case of Bud Light empties in the Japonica," she laughingly pronounced.

Patrolman Ridgeway, though, craned from behind an oak, thrusting down a photocopied ***ALERT***! describing a Blond Caucasian of yesterday who had stepped from Crum Creek, naked, to invite some dawdling coed to "experience a dip with me." Ridgeway snatched back the sheet and shook it at Jane in the green light. "Never walk in here alone. Never! No time is safe."

"If women can't walk anywhere alone they might as well be men," she informed the quizzical Officer Ridgeway. "Take a dip huh? How was his dip stick?" she muttered. "Let's get a look at yours—you never know." Jane.

"Ma'm?" the tall officer questioned, the oak looming behind him.

"Oh nothing," she smiled. "I prefer not to narrow myself to meaning...a la Dr Gasman...in case I thereby find out what's wrong with me and the entire sick country.

As to you and me, I'll just take our bizarre rendezvous with its surrounding odors, birdsongs, and bawdy titillation back to the strange doctor's class—or is bawdy titillation redundant, officer? Was Bawdy Titillation covered in the Police Academy? Under Lascivious Behaviours, general? And where does it fit in the scheme or non-scheme of existence anyway? Is it...is it slime or paradigm?"

Ridgeway grimaced wryly, being used to fresh students all right...but this little muttering one now wheeling around through the dapples...? The worst yet. He blinked as she disturbed the light.

Double-checking survey results with her that last evening in his messy office, Dr Kasman had spoken of the pleasure of her company in a voice that hardly moved the air, that air where others of his hints had breathed softly and died, like decaying notes from a flood-damaged piano—actually breathed so softly and died so quickly that she couldn't be absolutely certain she heard anything at all. She was so shortly out of the convent that she wasn't sure that

she could recognize, let alone encourage, masculine attention.

But there really is no one else, small voice or large, she concluded when reaching an enclosed space called the Garden of Fragrances. Oh they'll arrest the erect Caucasian so he'll not proposition me. She sang this last in a Gilbert and Sullivan style, adding "oh no he'll not, no no he'll not. And there's the—I say there's the— there's the pity!" She kicked up the lid of a small box holding brochures describing the garden, plucked one out.

Sitting on a bench Jane read the list of plants, skipping the introduction while saying "What does anyone mean among these damn academics anyway? The ambivilancies come in thickets!" Sweet allyssum she misread as sweet asylum, immediately catching her error—and then aching in the ripe aromas, too suddenly, for the convent.

Oh well, I'll pray about it...all the confusion now. But I'll never go back: obliged to leave that clarity and simplicity, or cease breathing—no matter about my prayers.

But, no, no, she wouldn't pray now, about that or anything—so turned off for the present, and onto nothing else, certainly not academic obscurity, and hints and whispers a la Dr Kasman.

That pussy! God how pukingly sexist that word is! A cowardly man is a woman's... Oh they would of course pussy foot in Linguistics and say that the slang takes from pussy cat also. At any rate I'm sick to death of my pussy and its supposed needs. Stop saying pussy, you pussy! Give me a break! Everybody!

I could, though, urgently love Officer Ridgeway for his straight-ahead style—all nuance a stranger to him. "Like women with the rag on," he might say in response to the slightest deviation from Victorian female behavior. Half the universe with the rag on—now there's a thought. "Chastetree" she read aloud from the brochure.

"I do prefer the vulgar somewhat..." here she used the weeping silver linden to stand in for Dr Kasman..."it being blunt where you are mincing. If you could say something , well then I trust myself to spontaneously

and honestly answer. One can say, for instance, coffee? movie? dinner? destroy a bed? One can say anything! That's the beauty of saying. So say! All tiny talk is impotence, all half-wisecracks impotence—of both sexes, much as I'm in a men-blasting mood. So, too, is my own watery little bawdiness. Why the very air itself expects more of us. God—if there is one—does! But so, she sighed, had her former religious life been impotent. What she thought humility, simple timidity: afraid. Afraid to live either in or out of the convent. And fooling no one who knew her and could easily note her gradual coming-apart. Oh why do we all of us choose to spoil our lives in such a way? Quiet desperation, Thoreau said. Or do we choose?

Better an open rebuke than a secret love — isn't that in Psalms somewhere, Dr Kasman? Or are you so secularly tight-assholed an academic that you'd scorn the Bible too? Maybe the text isn't quite accurate enough for you yet, its provenance lost in Providence—at Brown University, heh heh.

All my dreary intellectual shit aside, I really might deal you an open rebuke, Dr Kasman. And I might not. What did one of those tough guys say in *The Killers*? It's something you never know at the time. Is spontaneity a vain hope in all stifling atmospheres—convents and universities and infinities upon wretched infinities of moribund businesses in this overwhelming bore of a country?

What am I doing here on this garden bench? Oh the smells are truly truly wonderful, that's for sure! And what was I doing there in the woods? Lovely, dark, and deep! I don't even know, really. And why did I leave? The woods or the convent? I thought I had reasons at the time. Faded. Forgotten. Mother Superior's firm sympathy then; Officer Ridgeway's ludicrous "Caucasian" alarm now.

Jane decided that she'd have to return to the nature center, parry this latest cowardice at least. Once again on the tanbark trail all is very silent, nearly as sealed as the convent, just the sporadic twitter of birds, but soon the officer shadows Jane on the ridge above, resembling a spavined dog against

the smudges on the sky. He hears, or sniffs, something, and instantly straightens up. A wave of rain whips through and is gone.

She improvises, giggling: Now rigid on the ridge is he/ erect to possibility./ Say!/ Ridgeway!/Bring it down here for a poke/ and I'll fuck you till your eyes smoke./ In-sane!/ Signed, Jane.

A fragment in Kasman's office swims in against the present damp fertility, her telling him what he later designated as her vision! of the survey results: "One-third liked what they liked; one-third hated what they hated; one-third had little idea of anything."

"O pray, which third are you, Officer Ridgeway? My father, Sir, was a whole man! I loved him in his young photograph, his face the very sun itself! Now I just have that reticulated picture, that's all, no matter what the fuckin sentimentalists say! He's dead! Period! And love for me is stone cold dead! Why mince around the truth? Oh there'll be plenty of Dr Kasmans, some shy, some pukingly aggressive.

But nothing ever to touch me, to really enter.”

Both have been moving, separately though absurdly: Jane sliding on the fragrant grass and yelling, Officer Ridgeway Z-ing down the slope in response to her apparent alarm. Jane stops, her shoes tilted down into mud, but manages to extract, and then run away before the officer can catch her.

Back at the Garden of Fragrances she writes a letter to her father along the margins of the brochure with her left, or non-dominant hand, as Dr Kasman had, this one blessed time, specifically assigned. She interrupts this laborious task, intrigued for a moment with the names therein which she recites mantra-like. “California incense cedar juniper Himalayan sarcococca fragrant viburnum yellowwood saucer magnolia Japanese Snowbell sweetshrub burkwood daphne fothergilla roseshell azalea Virginia sweetspire reeves skinnia white Chinese wisteria allium snowdrops grape hyacinth Siberian squill sweetbay magnolia weeping silver linden glossy avelia buttefflybush harlequin glory-bower summersweet

clethra waxmrytle bee balm catmint silver
edged thyme katsura calamintha.

“Chastetree chastree chastree,” she ends,
chanting and crying.

Then in some uncanny atmospheric sorcery, lightning-crossed darkness clamps over the courtyard, each leaf and flower instantly black, and then splendidly phosphorescent. Jane, all but leaping from her skin in the electricity, manages to utter what she had inscribed in her little girl’s printing as the brochure is gently taken as she rises from the bench, revolves in the center of a resonant golden shell where a vortex of petals makes the air a delicious cream to the Blond Caucasian, his smooth body dazzling, his long hair webbing her face: “I’ll swim with you Daddy.”



Urban Dialog

1: We got trouble: Tuk Duk got the award, and Duk Tuk was supposed to.

2: You sure?

1: Yeah, and that's not all. Tuk Duk is a real bum. And Duk Tuk, who was supposed to get it, went out and got drunk after the banquet and pissed off some rookie cop outside of The Blue Door. He's locked up.

2: Oh fuck it! Who wants to get into their shit? We only gave it to them 'cause they said niggers were hogging it all.

1: You're a nigger.

2: Watch it!



Chapters 1 and 2

The final disgust of the evening: he shows how his head is fastened with velcro straps.

She rips it off his shoulders and locks herself in the bathroom, performing indignities.



Nothing Made of Words

She found herself gazing out the window at her car under the rocking maples, a door left open. Her eyes lifted to the lashing fluorescence along the undersides of the leaves, but then she made herself focus the soaked driveway. Leaves plastered there had been fluttering their jazzy golds when she shoved off for work that morning. Now the wind shoved dark trees, the river shouldered past as rain thumped the roof in waves.

She saw herself leaping from the car some drenching moments before, bright hair flying. “I could kick you in the ass!” she told that anxious, running, daydream ghost, and she wondered once again if such images of her just lingered in the air, the ones remembered most being attitudes of defeat—which she nonetheless held overlong, as if posing.

And I thought only little Frenchmen posed!—she mused with a practiced bitterness—not romantic masochists. Oh well, I guess we hold the poses we get the most from. ‘Romantic masochists...’ such a lovely choice of words—redundant, like me.

She went to the closet only to see that he had left almost everything, each garment evenly spaced and hanging in its own soft light. “Why not? Probably a new wardrobe going on my Mastercharge this very minute. And why not? It’s fitting— excuse stupid pun.”

“You’re excused, again.” she replied to herself, “But just look at these fairy fashions!— running a hand over the tops of hangers. “In the ethereal sense that is. Hmph! that shrimpy- Frenchman-just-departed beat klutzy me in all the allegedly feminine senses and could balance on an egg. The Michael Jackson thing: a man prettier than you are.”

She wandered into the kitchen to get the white wine out of the frig, shook the bottle and held it up close to her eye in the mellowing light of that small, cidery-smelling room. “Almost full. My God he was even fastidious with...sipping with his eyes closed as I gulped it down like the wide-eyed slob from the sticks!” she declared, popping her eyes at the crookedly dismounted acrobat in the glossy photo

scotch taped to the frig door, menace smiling under his handlebar moustache. "Smile on, virulent fuckin male! 'Cause you'll never make it back to horizontal," she told him. "Can't ever be on the level, can you?"

"Impossible!" she pronounced in her highschool French, sitting down at that butcherblock table surrounded by small bins of beans and artificially yellowed posters of a pretend French circus. "Well, here's to...? To Again. That's it! Once again to Again," she toasted and giggled and trembled. "Encore encore encore!"

"YUPPIE HEARTBREAK!...and other phonies"—she became a movie director: "Take number seven or eleven, or seven-eleven," she slapped her hands together. "Roll em!"

It was logical that when the wine was gone an hour or so later, she would seek more.

Soon she was dressing somewhat unsteadily in his clothes at the bedroom's full-length mirror, the surrounding florescent tube lending her image an almost greenish depth. "Hey! What the fuck's goin on, man?" she mocked, not him, her so-recent ex, but

some archetypal male. “Phillies on the tube tonight? Last game in fuckin season aint it? What you mean you don’t know? How ‘bout I break your fuckin head? Then you’ll know. All the alleged men round here bunch of pussies! You hear me?” she punched towards herself in the mirror, and then dropped her hands and smiled. “Not too-ooooo macho now,” she criticized in her own voice, though sort of ‘pansified’—as if such camp would help make her real voice more feminine...”or you’ll scare just everybody!”

She shoved her blond hair under a Phillie’s baseball cap and then wriggled into his elasticized undershirt. “Not all that much to flatten I must admit. An area where we were about equal, little Frenchman and me—the only one. Still sniffing the residues of varous deoderants, she weaved over the ziggaraud of black and white tiles and into the dark hallway, where fuzzy corn brooms decorated the walls. “HmMMM, heap musk, Lone Ranger! Real Brut. Essense of bear crotch for sure! Anyway, Real-Man-Shit for sure! Foh-Ah! Shoo-Ah! Poor poor men: they can only have perfumes with guts!” she giggled.

Winds rattled the windows and shook the fuzzy brooms along the darkening walls. “Just take a look at this shit! Whole place looks like a cunt, man!” she swaggered, and then slid down a wall in that hallway, moaning “I know all the words but I just can’t ever really get to feel vulgar. Like shit a million times I felt, oh yes indeed, but not ever lowdown, no-class vulgar. I’ll have to work on it.” “You’ll have to work on it. Yes,” her schoolmarmy self crisply reiterated, she engaging in another dialog, playing with herself and her pain, the voices bouncing around the narrow hallway. Still seated, she dropped her head in her arms, a stray remnant of light of an antique gold highlighting her hair as she spoke. “Oh you are so very cute! So so cue-WIT! A tiny and pretentious noise in the precious, breathless, artsy-fartsy place! But more’s the pity it’s too dark to see your darlin’ dimples! Darlin’ little hammered-down apprentice whore—and a real American therefore!” she concluded, “And in all the poopy-doopy cutesy-wootsy artsy-fartsy! My oh my! Are we going to make everything rhyme in our real or affected heartbreak? Or both at once. I am Prince Hamlet—or pretend to be!”

When she got to Chuckie-O's it wasn't that much of a test, a compact man beside her seemingly intent on staring through the bottom of his scotch to the center of the earth, a melancholy, startlingly white-faced redhead sprawling under a TV at the end of the bar. In her loose summer dress, her arms looked even whiter than her face.

Big night! she told herself as the redhead absently twirled her hair. Periodic waves outside made their own washing melody of rain—caused, she worried, those acrid perfumes to rise from her clothing. Whew! Stinks I know, but from whence riseth romance? Armpit? Crotch? Soul? Are the three related? If so how so? And do they all have dark nights or just the last one?

She studied the redhead, Pvery nearly beautiful save for coarse and hungry lips. Oh you bitch! she scolded herself as he, next to her, was in the process of looking up from his scotch, red-eyed. After the young bartender poured her white wine, this man, revived, insisted on paying.

“You see that other one leave? When you came in? Sort of tricky little mincey bru-

nette?" he blinked and blinked at her, almost as if trying to stop tears. She shook her head, carefully since her baseball cap floated more than held. "Well, anyway, my good man," he informed her quite fraternally, "there went thirty-three bucks!"—he had looked away from her to tell himself this last in the mirror over the bar. "And what'd I get? Brushed up against—a brush job—tit pressed in my back a lousy second while she leans over to watch replay of a Phillies error."

"Could've been fifty, dollars that is, not errors. You're lucky that's all. Let's see..." she began musing: "Bill of Fare:

Knee Touch 12.50

Two Knees 24.99

Random Anatomical Light Squeezes 1.07 -
174.66

Brush Jobs 22

Blow—!"

"Whoa! Leave us not go crazy!" he stopped her, his hand lightly on her arm, his small stone-like eyes now level with hers. "And don't think anything about Red down there under the asshole TV," he advised, shaking his head with exaggerated slowness. "She's

trouble. Heartbreak a week, hers or the chump's." Over the spread-out redhead whose eyes looked purple from crying or lack of sleep, a confection of a girl, live, in orange froth, jumping up and down after winning a hand mixer; another set in the dining room, where the bartender now unsorted a spaghetti of cables, played a tape of the same girl packaged pink, and jumping up and down after winning a car. "Even at this distance she can spread her poison," this small man beside her added. Am I fated to be bored and used by little men? she queried herself as he turned back to stare anew into his nearly empty glass, perhaps meditating on experiences with toxic females.

Who's poison?" she abruptly asked him, "Double girl in consumer ecstasies? And thus a horny patriot, or patriots, of the times..."

"Nah!...redhead I mean."

"Why blame her? Is she jumping up and down? Hardly. Me, I blame Japan! That's where they make everything we lust for!" She quickly responded to the blank face

revolving to her by commenting "I, I've been out of touch. Problem with a girl." They both pondered the statement for some moments, watching a dusty, rocking sign announce BUD LIGHT over the cash register. "I almost thought you was one, drinking the white wine and all."

"I hate to think she's one." Referring to the young woman celebrating in two time frames.

"Some people are just winners!" he finally hissed, and his caustic tone led the frustrated bartender, all wrapped up in cables and controls in the dining room, to take it personally. "You hear any sound?" he coyly inquired to show them he was paying some attention, though all glasses now stood empty.

"We don't want to hear no fuckin sound! It's bad enough." It was her first macho outburst and no one paid attention but the young bartender, who revealed a partial shrug. She, though, was surprised by her vehemence: How drunk are you? she thought.

“That’s what she does all right,” insisted the guy next to her, “she hops up and down on the TV. I buy drinks for little teases— that’s what I do.”

“Me...” she whispered turning a book of matches labeled with the name of this dank drinking room: SECRETS. “Me I just fuck up relationships, one after the other...after the...”

“Hey that’s war! Welcome to the club. You know,” he went on sagely, his thin eyes brightening as the output of the BUD LIGHT sign lurked across them, “I’ve seen you here, but not for a while. Anyway, you’re no rookie. Though the white wine still makes me wonder.”

“Yeah...well I, uh, have to take it real easy tonight. Anyway, I’ve been in with”...and she mentioned the self-ordained “Gang of Three” females, her own name last.

“They’re a good bunch. The Albino Mouse can be a little fun at times. Yeah, she likes to hear the raunchy shit if you know what I mean—but just hear. Don’t scare her,” he winked.

"I'll try not to." How strange she was pleased to find out she represented some standard in his view...but mouse? Albino mouse? She checked the mirror to see how pale she really was, noted some light hairs spiking out from under her Phillies cap. "I...we all could use some more tan but with all this skin cancer scare blasting from the TV all the...fuckin time!" She took abrupt notice of the bartender suddenly behind the bar, his electronic career on hold. "My turn to buy!" she blurted, but her companion would have none of it, shoving his pile of money forward.

"Never mind, I have to spend all this or I'll be even more pissed off. If I got no money left you can buy then. 'Cause then I'll know what an asshole I really am."

"I salute your masochism, or it that macho-cism? Myself having education in both fields."

"It's exorcism, like in the fuckin movie."

She smiled narrowly at his wit, almost immediately regretting the encouragement, for there followed a slow and endless monolog

where she, drainingly bored, repeatedly asked herself how she could have gotten trapped into yet another of these conversations—though the first time as a “male.” This time, some hobby of his, toy trains or goat collecting or something. She injected little uh-huhs while visualizing what she labelled now as her former little bore, the Frenchman, he in a piquant pose while offering that much-rehearsed Gallic shrug to some tramp or new sucker, batting his weepy eyes at large life in general. Only laugh we ever had was over stupid circus poster !

“WOOOOOOOOO you hear that wind?”—even her flesh-and-blood bore at hand was giving up in the midst of his own massive detail concerning Lionel cabooses. “And they said fuckin light winds! They said no fuckin rain!” And he spewed on about the faulty weather forecast as if it were yet another personal betrayal. She tuned out again, the chrome tops of the bottles ranged behind the bar and repeated in the mirror blurring to one molten mass.

But started listening again when something sick she couldn't have heard, but heard,

infiltrated his tone, rendering her ill and weak.

"...and and and she goes out and hangs her little undies you know? Just about every night. Panties big as my fist. Must fit s-s-skin-tight." She observed, her heart starting to race, that he was gritting his teeth, his small eyes darting, which actions he stopped in order to sigh "Let's say we help her get out of them tonight. How about it? You and me I mean. How about it?" "Not a particular hobby of mine."

"Right on the river up a little hill. I'm going out of my mind, man! Every time I go by there, there she is, hanging those bitty panties. And this this this one little light behind her you know?" his voice had lingered on the image, stretching the words, his eyes turpidly peaceful, then quickening with "But you can see enough! Can you! Jesus! In the fog and that weird light she's like a goddess in a whatchacallit, picture book or something."

"Shadow and substance, virgin and whore," she managed to whisper. "You're drunk."

“Fuckin ripe! I call it. Her I mean.”

“Uh huh. And asking for it?”

“She will.”

“Of course.”

“Damn straight!” he struck the bar.

“Well she won’t be hanging them tonight, in the rain—to inject a measure of realism.”

“Then we’ll give her something better to do. If you’re man enough.”

She was beginning to feel seriously sober, and for some reason pictured the acrobat back on her frig, forever teetering in his practiced stupidity. “Do I...actually hear rape?” she breathed.

“Hey! Come on! I don’t never mean brute force. We’ll talk to her first and then...? Well, she’ll come cocoa...”

“The old Bananna Royale! “ she found herself enthusing, while nearly crying. She began rattling hysterically. “Well it is in any

case. She'll have to get used to those options. Famous fuckin options! 'Take up the woman's burden, slut!' as the whatchacallit, poet says."

"Fuck the faggot poetry, I'm talking some real shit here, heavy shit."

"What a stupid fuck you are!" spilled from her, but she quickly pointed to herself when he looked hurt. "Me! Me I mean! I was talking about..." When he slowly became even more puzzled, she excused herself with "Hey! I gotta piss like a wounded moose!" an expression she had heard when a child and had used once or twice to gross out the precise Frenchman. It had a different effect on the young bartender, who looked up quizzically from a VCR manual.

In the mensroom—For Studs it was named—she went first to the booth and then fled to the urinal after she thought she heard floorboards creak, indicating he might be joining her. And when she heard the door open, she peered up to yet another mirror tilted above, showing her hand shaking nothing, her face wild among the say-

ings written there responding to: HOW WD
YOU DESCRIBE YRSLF IN FEW WDS?

quick on the trigger
stud for sale
old maid's death dream
AC DC and bound therefore to please
was I here in prev life?—it all smelled like
piss then too
hung and tasteless
How long Lord oh how long?
Pushy and BAWDY she added with the lip-
stick suspended from a string, then drew a
ragged line through and wrote a girl. Be-
hind her, he threw a penny into the urinal.
She held her breath.

“Whoa! You must've caught something
pretty serious... to piss that noisy.”

“Wouldn't be surprised...all the places I've
been.” She twisted round and zipped up as
he took her place. With his slack face and
blinking eyes among all the sayings, he
laughed when he came to her entry.

“A girl! I love it! That'll get their attention
all right. Hey! I'll tell you! They can make
you into one all right, fuckin women can!”

The sound of that penny echoed in her mind. What was that all about? What if he's gay? And what if he takes me home and finds out in a typical semi-swarm of passion that I'm not a fellow?

She waited for him to finish and they walked back to the bar together. After a few minutes of silent drinking she asked "Know what I'd like to see? You were talking about a replay of Phillie's error you know? When I came in I mean? Well I'd like to see them put on the instant replay before the play. Like when a guy misses the stupid football for the Eagles and they show it again and again from every angle but up his asshole? And every time he just keeps missing it? It's just too fuckin heartbreaking!"

"Hey it's just a game!"

"There's no such thing. There are no games. None. We play at them 'cause that's all we know to do, but there aren't any. Not really."

"Shit! and I thought that's all there was," he mocked.

“Well, anyway, I’d have the replay show him catching the bloody ball...and one step further as I said—one leap for man- and woman-kind: I’d have the replay before the actual event—like with the mystic broad by the mysterious Brandywine we’re going to rape or somewhat rape...or or or invite to her raping?”

“RSV fuckin P!”

“We could see how we did, study our slick moves, decide how much she bought in or...”

“How much we had to lean on her?” he smiled.

“Right! We could watch it first and then make the actual event come out right. Make one fuckin thing come out right!” she cried, “that’s the beauty of my invention! Oh why didn’t I think of it before?”

“You’re weird!” as he was picking up her glass and staring down into it. “Whatever he’s drinking,” he told the studious bartender, “give me a fuckin gallon of it.”

Later when he picks up his large bills from the bar, leaving all the rest, a smell of coldness comes off his hands, and she notices for the first time that his small, hunched shoulders are heavily muscled.

At that point a fantasy of beating him up seethes in. "That enough?" she asks him again and again, hitting him whenever he tries to answer, preventing his answer. He drops a heavy tool kit of some kind, and with that clunk is transformed into the unbalanced acrobat on her frig, begging her to desist in heavily accented English. "Beat you back to level!" she is screaming, the redheaded barfly suddenly back of her, encouraging her in hissing French—though in plain fact she sleeps at the bar, her disheveled head in her white white arms like some discarded, rusty thing.

"Ready?" the real him asks.

"Way that river's been rising," she answers whistfully, "we should wait a bit for her to float by."

In her car following his, she intends turning off at the first chance. "It'll be bye bye

asshole!" But she doesn't turn off at the first intersection...or the second. "Forget this shit!" she yells against the wind rushing through the open windows. "Masquerade worked. That's enough! That's the bitter fun of it. I passed the test as a man and it was too easy. But how crazy you think I am? You can get real crazy-ass whacked-out in rebounding, don't I know that! But you don't destroy your sex! Do you? Oh why do I push so far? Why do I always have to push so far? Why can't I ever stop? Why can't I stop now?" And her eyes fill hotly, then become ripped-back, icy, as the wind flies in and she follows the red lights of his Bronco skittering from the wet pavement and snaking into the fog. She sees herself in the rearview mirror, her ravaged face backgrounded by reddish, smoky fog. "I'm a girl, a woman!"

"Yeah well fuck you!"

"Yeah fuck me fuck everybody. What the fuck's the difference?" she is crying and beating the steering wheel. "I'll I'll I'll tell her I was drunk. When she's all the way humiliated I'll talk to her. I'll love her. I will love her. I will love away all the pain! No-

body can love like me goddammit!" She shakes and the mirror vibrates as she screams. "I didn't know...this crazy! I didn't know! Drunk! I must be drunk. But it's not enough...say you're drunk. You are guilty. You are still guilty! And it's not that 'cause I've never been more sober. More alone. And why is it so fuckin cold? Why is it always so fuckin cold?"

The river is raging when they get there and climb the incline upto the woman's house, the bare bulb shining exactly as he had described it, fanning weakly through planes of rain and down the muddy slope into the brown, rushing water. "Hey!" his whisper pierces "you part mountain goat or something?" Then he slips, windmilling furiously. "Hey! Help!" She turns to watch him slide slowly down into the river, gazes at the speeding water as he is spun away.

When she turns back the woman is present, the single bulb in back flaring her hair, her eyes still discernable in her dark face, firm, seizing eyes. "I expected you," she says, her voice small in the feathering rain, seeming to quiet the river too. "I wanted you to express your hatred, your violence to your

sex...will you throw me in river too? Then will your ache cease do you suppose?" She stared calmly at this sole intruder, the mists between them.

"I didn't throw him in! Assholes slip it's what assholes do; first they set up their stupid asshole world and then it kills them. It's always that way." She is screaming.

Then you're the greater asshole, since it's their world you want—worshiping his cold hands or some baby thing! Hard hands. Self pity leads to such excesses, such moral stupidity."

(And he is trapped by seething brush within the hammering water, alive enough to see her dancing through planes of misted light.)

Among puddles she slowly dances, and stops to take a bow, holds it for approval. But the other woman snaps "That's dead too, that act, all your acts. And moods. Violent one moment, smashed down the next. And dimples at your age! Drilled into your face by some kind of infantile concentration."

“Not that conscious,” she pants, the vapor obscuring her view of the strange, peering woman. “At least not always. Well...do I go or do I stay?”

“Go back. Remain a man. What you really want.” She waves, her hand trailing remnants of fog.

“Yeah. That’s right, what I want all right,” she sobs, “they’re less afraid and more free, men are! They don’t even think about what they do. I had to go there. I had to try. See if I could get some of that. Oh it wasn’t to find love— that’s for sure—whatever love is...male or female...like pissing into a spaghetti strainer,” she quits sobbing to smile wryly, to listen to the subtle wash of air.

“Don’t you smile at me for sympathy! Little girl with affected trace of the vulgar. That Whore Pattern you tried first with Daddy won’t work here!”

“What will?” She steps up the incline towards her and into stronger light.

“Nothing made of words,” whispers this other woman. At that she becomes silent,

removing the baseball cap, flinging it into the river as the wind lifts up her bright hair and all sound ceases.

The cap thrusts past him just before a swaying root grips his foot and pulls him under. What he sees in that final instant is a terrific vibration as the women close, their entangling hair one, leaping fire.



BODILEEWOMPA

He/ My God is EVERYthing parody?

She/ Yes. That's the idea.

He/ Well then, what am I doing here? For one thing, I'm comparatively ancient.

She/ What else? You've been invited because you're our friend!

He/ Don't they know there was a Civil Rights Struggle, let alone World Wars, wherein rights have been preserved and won for them. Why even in the Reagan years, his going after bureaucratic fat, excising some...well, a little... was itself in a great American tradition.

She/ The civil rights thing is King and the Jig-a-Boo-Boo-Boos. World War Two is Deucey-Goosey; Reagan is Flick Dude. Hitler is Step-and-Fuck-It. Presidents Carter and Clinton are Cornpone One and Two. The Woman's Rights Movement...

He/ Let me guess. Skirt Dirt.

She/ Broadway.

He/ So what? It's just a game, like Monopoly or something. Maybe more silly, sexist, and racist.

She/ Lot more than that. BODILEEWOMPA has been translated into every important language, and Iran and Iraq and Senegal and some others are using it exclusively. That is, it comprises their entire policy, foreign and domestic.

He/ God help us! But, this too shall pass. And, in the meantime...why are they screaming? And what?

She/ SKUMPA! is the word for us to get out of the way.



The Heights

He was running his dog in what the inhabitants of surrounding developments called The Heights when his dead wife came drifting past in a golden balloon. The dog yapped and yapped, so Dick threw the ball as far as he could and off bounded Spud into thickets laced with beercans. The balloon had become fixed against a creamy cloud.

"I...don't know the etiquette for these things," he finally yelled over the hot winds, hands thrust down into his Sergio Valente pockets. "Or if I'm nuts."

"You needn't shout," she whispered. The sound of the wind ceased when she spoke from radiant gold, the clouds rushing by in back of her.

"You sure?" he puzzled in a conversational tone. Things had quieted, though not as much, for him too, and his voice sounded as if it came out of a bottle. "I don't believe this you know." Her hair whipped around as gold as the balloon when a blue patch flowered behind. "But what if I do? Believe I

mean," Dick plodded on. "I mean...you must be here to tell me something.

The gas fired and the balloon shot up thirty feet. "Whoa there!" he shouted.

It was now directly overhead and he had to shift his feet among the shadows of clouds, craning his neck to see just a slice of her chin hanging over the wicker edge of the basket. Now all noise stopped again but she didn't speak. "I...I still don't believe..." he finally started to stammer.

"It makes no difference."

"Spud has been fine!" The balloon was drifting again, this time to a region of sparse clouds. As a result he could better see her, erect as usual. Her hair a bright whiskbroom sweeping wisps of clouds, enough of the sky flowed sharply past to begin hurting his eyes. "You're looking nice," he blinked, "can you tell me anything about what it's like?"

"What?"

"You know."

"You can see."

"Nobody's bible anywhere got balloons in it." Pockets of sunlight and shadow chased each other over the windy meadow until she spoke.

"It makes no difference," she informed him. "What anything says." A shadow across the balloon relieved his eyes.

"Well you haven't changed much, that's for sure. Everything's just about as good as anything else." Two gas blasts followed and she was a hundred feet to the luminous East. "Still touchy too!"

Now Dick thought, It's a hallucination because of all the light smashing around up here...I'm seeing things...but...what can I lose? "Honey? Should I marry Stephanie?"

The question didn't bring her back but her voice carried as well as it had previously. "It makes no difference what you do. And your life will change today." But suddenly the

balloon was obviously flying back, that gold abruptly widening as the sky receded.

“Hah hah! Look at this, will you? Stephanie’s the magic name all right.” The wind took hold of that name and echoed it, hollow and loud. To Dick it vaguely recalled the feeling of coming out from under the water when someone had been shouting at him.

“You liked her!” he insisted, stepping back briefly—as if fearing that balloon would swoop down and sock him.

“You’ll do what you must.”

He felt somewhat more confident as it stopped, and then floated upwards to a black-edged, orangey cloud. At any rate, talking to the dead hadn’t really proven all that difficult. “I like the way you try to make me think that I’m the same old stupid shit again, like I can’t make my own decisions or something.”

She said nothing, where in the past she soothed him—and the whole business often ended with sex. So he grew puzzled and

mused a good while, like a man who couldn't remember playing a card.

In the interim she had very quickly traveled nearer than ever, bearing the same placid face she suffered with on earth. This shock of closeness unleashed a variation of the same objections, and some actual kicks, his last one fortunately missing a softball-sized rock. "This she comes back to say? Like...I'm a shit again and what I do makes no difference and never did?"

One huge blast of gas...and the bottom of the wicker basket was the size of a facecloth.

"Wow!" he mocked, "Blast off!" Running and dancing through the bright grass he added "I'm not impressed. It's only Prun-away ! Imagine! And I thought that dying was the last time you left me!" He was gasping for breath and running aimlessly.

"It's no use"—he could hear her just as clearly from that great height, and even over his increasing gasps—"nothing is."

He stopped running and waited to get some air. "Get Merry Sunshine up there!" he eventually whispered. "Nothing is no use nowhow nowhere! Such bullshit! Ah what the hell is the use? I'm dreaming anyway. Heaven couldn't be that stupid."

Now he screamed upwards, starlings flapping out of bushes in black bouquets. "And I will marry Stephanie! I'll show you. Hey! She's deep into recycling. So she can recycle me!" But what was intended as a joke depressed him, and he sat down on a rock, short of breath still, in order to address the dog—banking that this sudden inattention would anger her, even at that distance. "What...think, Spud...ole boy? Marry Steph? After all, she drives...like Mario Andretti too. She's another dog? Steph? And fat you say? You were always giv- given to understatement, Spud little buddy!" Dick laughed and coughed. "Like Old Moody way up yonder there in her heavenly balloon, " he ended up muttering.

But he shortly recognized a departure from his usual monolog to the dog in that Spud wasn't there, hadn't ever returned with the ball. "Come on, buddy, I can't throw that far.

Now come off it! C'mon Sp-UD!" he called. Here Spud! C'mon little buddy! There's a good boy!" he choked.

It was then, in a sudden, ringing silence, that he heard, just barely, the single, hysterical bark as if down a long tube from that balloon, and sure enough he could make out a tiny black-and-white tail trembling like a bit of string in a gap through the wicker .

"Bitch!" he shrieked, leaping to his feet. "I should have known. Oh yeah even in heaven you're a goddamn liar!" He was shaking a fist, squinting grotesquely as the bottom of the basket folded into a cream and cobalt glare.

He couldn't, of course, see Spud's ball dropping from that great, glaring height. In fact, he had turned away and was already striding off and cursing in that vast green meadow when the missile struck him atop the head and drilled him to his knees.

Somehow he ended up babbling and crawling his way to The Heights Swim Club where Raoul Pellitier phoned long-time member Stephanie at the recycling center, then

dropped Dick into a broken chaise lounge pushed against the wall at poolside, the shredded plastic webbing, burnt orange, waving round his ears, his bulging eyes like robin's eggs in the light shimmering off the chlorinated water.

Stephanie careens her white BMW into the parking lot, nearly sideswiping the arriving ambulance. In a few moments she will hold his hand in that ambulance, her green and knowing eyes.

The attendants are forced to work around her, their arms seemingly coming out of her banana-cream dress—with the whole picture resembling a lurching circus routine when the ambulance shoots down hill after hill.

Raoul extracts the keys from her car and soon fondles them like jewelry in his olive hand. And all the while turning them away from the pool to capture the right soft-lit angle, he phones Letty Ronks, recently back from Bard College. "Just picked up my new car!" he snorts, and then instantly purrs "C'mon, take a ride for an hour or so."



He Tells Me; I Told Him

Now just listen to me a minute. I was in Exton at the library there and they had this display there, old letters and documents, you know? This one's in brown ink on brown paper if you can picture it, and pretty fuckin impossible to read but I stick at it. Now listen up, I don't care how many fuckin degrees you got. This poor bastard is asking for a pedlar's license 'cause his gun "burst" and blew his arm to shit. Can you imagine the horrible pain of that?

But it fuckin destroyed me. His gun burst! I love it. Then this historical society lady goes "It may have been proper grammar at the time."

I says "You just missed another boat, lady." I mean like who gives a fuck, right? She ices away into the stacks which is what she could use more of in the whatchacallit, singular, and anyway there's another chance for adultery in the cultural suburbs lost, like more's the shitty, flat-chested pity.

So anyway fuck her my fuckin mind is seized! I see the little ungrammatical old-

timey prick, the one arm hanging down.
And he's...coming up this lane with all this
shit to sell...to a farm...

I'm getting to the fuckin point you fuckin
snob! I learn by talking but you don't learn!
Ideas not images? That's your fuckin prob-
lem—just one.

So there he was, and is, coming down that
lane with all the lurching and rattling of the
wagon. And like exPLOsions of dust!"

And here's the farmer's wife like the bottom
of a V coming at him with the kids trailing
down both arms of it in all of that dust like
a brilliant cloud, and they're crying and
fussy and falling—every fuckin thing.

And what's she see? She sees this copper
pot glimmering there and it's sturdy and'll
last fuckin forever, but then she sees this
real light fabric for a dress and it sort of
drifts there. And then the more she runs the
more it kinda...flows at her, you know?
Flowers.

Shit, she thinks, I know I should buy the pot. And the brats paddling and paddling behind and pissing the blues so how's she even gonna think in all of that?

Yeah, that's all. If you got any fuckin brains you know when a story should end. They give refunds?...all these colleges you went to?

You figure it out. It aint a fuckin AEsop's fable. I'm not gonna say another word.

...

Well now I gotta. I didn't want to but I gotta. You better not get married I'll tell you that. You won't know if you're getting the real thing or a wrinkle.

It's only that only those who have been really really crazed should sell to the rest of us...and with us being dinged enough to know what it's all about. Hey! Buying and Selling it's human activity! I mean it's as deep as any fuckin thing you can think of, man! It's not like most of the shit you see around here, people fuckin sleep-walking with credit cards and not even knowing

what the fuck they'e buying or what for. It's deep shit I tell you.

Like like like in Japan once, with the pines sort of lean-y, like they been at it forever. And behind them, the sea. There's light here and there and it's, like making parts of the water look thinner. I'm twenty so what the fuck do I know?...sand and patchy grass under...trees, and it's hard to even call them trees 'cause each one just got a branch or two sort of...floating there.

I tell you I still fuckin remember it. The point? Oh yeah the fuckin point! Shit! I couldn't forget that!

This'll destroy you: It was a Japanese print before I ever saw one in my life!

Yeah well I'm gonna go on. It's not screwing some little airhead that makes a man out of you, and laying on your phony college shit—for all of which you ought to be ashamed of and I should tell your mother about it too—it's drinking in every fuckin thing you can and thinking about it so you can't go to sleep cause your mind's burning up! With everything, with this scene in Ja-

pan and everything else in the whole fuckin world.

I know it's probably bullshit, but like with Newton and the apple? I mean how many people had been conked on the head with apples. But he puts it together. You gotta get it in here , the head, every fuckin thing in here you can, so you can put something together. No, not put together the apple, sarcastic wimp, though Wallace Steven wrote about putting a pineapple together. Yeah well you should be impressed 'cause I devour everything I can get my hands on. Yeah? Well fuck this "you don't digest it." I'll do that ten years from now. Right now it's Read, Baby, Read! Hey it's a TV nation with shit-for-brains couch potatoes! And that's who'll be calling the shots—if you haven't had your ball-chill for today.

Well it aint, and it aint a sermon neither, and you'd be fuckin wiser if you went to church once in awhile anyways. They hook back a couple of thousand years almost. That says something. Shit no, even longer when you think that religion is a continuum back to the fuckin caveman!

What does the painter do? He makes a picture. Is it there before he does? 'Cause he doesn't make the same picture that's there. He makes another one. But he makes the same picture too. It fuckin destroys me.

I pick up this Galway record, Sam Goody's. Two bucks 'cause the punk kids with the orange and blue hair, and the polyester assholes from Kodak and DuPont don't want it. They're like you: they know everything already. Anyway, it aint fuckin "career enhancing" or some such shit. Like the garbage in Daltons: HOW TO FUCK YOUR NEIGHBOR OUT OF EVERYTHING HE HAS AND GET RICH IN THE PROCESS. Hey I go to B. Daltons when they got a tableful of Penguins or something, something nobody wants—aint career fuckin enhancing or something. I got this British thing by Laurie Lee about walking out some evening or something like that. Blake, is that? What do I know? Like he leaves home a kid and plays the fiddle for pennies and gets to London and works in construction, the greasy bottom rung of that class system that's so admired here, and he gets a hardon for all the shop girls and at his age who can blame him? And then he goes "I

went to Spain 'cause I knew how to say please give me a drink of water" and that's the kind of balls you need!

Yeah it's a sentence. I talk in sentences. I talk in prose. I tell you I'm really something.

Anyway this record's called Turn of the Century Japanese Folk Melodies and I put it on in my room of clutter and filth and I gotta quart of Yinglings in my fat fist and I listen, and I'm back in that grove in front of that hotel used to be for Royal Japanese Navy and all the maids are giggling and then I'm thinking. I mean then back in my room in West Chester 'cause when I was twenty back there in Japan I didn't think at all 'cause my brain flowed down into my cock.

Anyways, I see this farmer walking through there, through that grove, long long before anything like hotels or world wars or anything like that and he's humming one of those tunes that Galway plays on his flute, you know?

And I mean he's playing back then and he's playing when I was twenty, Galway is, and

he's playing back in my room and he's fuckin playing right now! Digest that, fag-got! 'Cause it's art and art is then and now and fuckin forever!

And now, right this second as you sit there scratching your nuts I got this painter going there in my mind, and there's no more war or anything, and he's finished his coffee so he can just think about painting the sea and trees in front of that hotel, you know?

I tell you, Frank, you're gonna die if you don't just let your mind blow up! Just let it fuckin explode I tell you! Education frosts your balls! All these PhDs—capons! Parasites! Para-fuckin-sites!

So this painter, what's he gonna paint? He's gonna paint light. That's what he works in. And it's gonna be light like it's there and light like it aint, and and and and all together. I mean I'm talking about art, man!

And it don't make any difference anymore about all the freakin pain and the war and the horrible goddamn heartbreak. Not with him. Not there. 'Cause there's something fuckin spiritual with that artist there in that

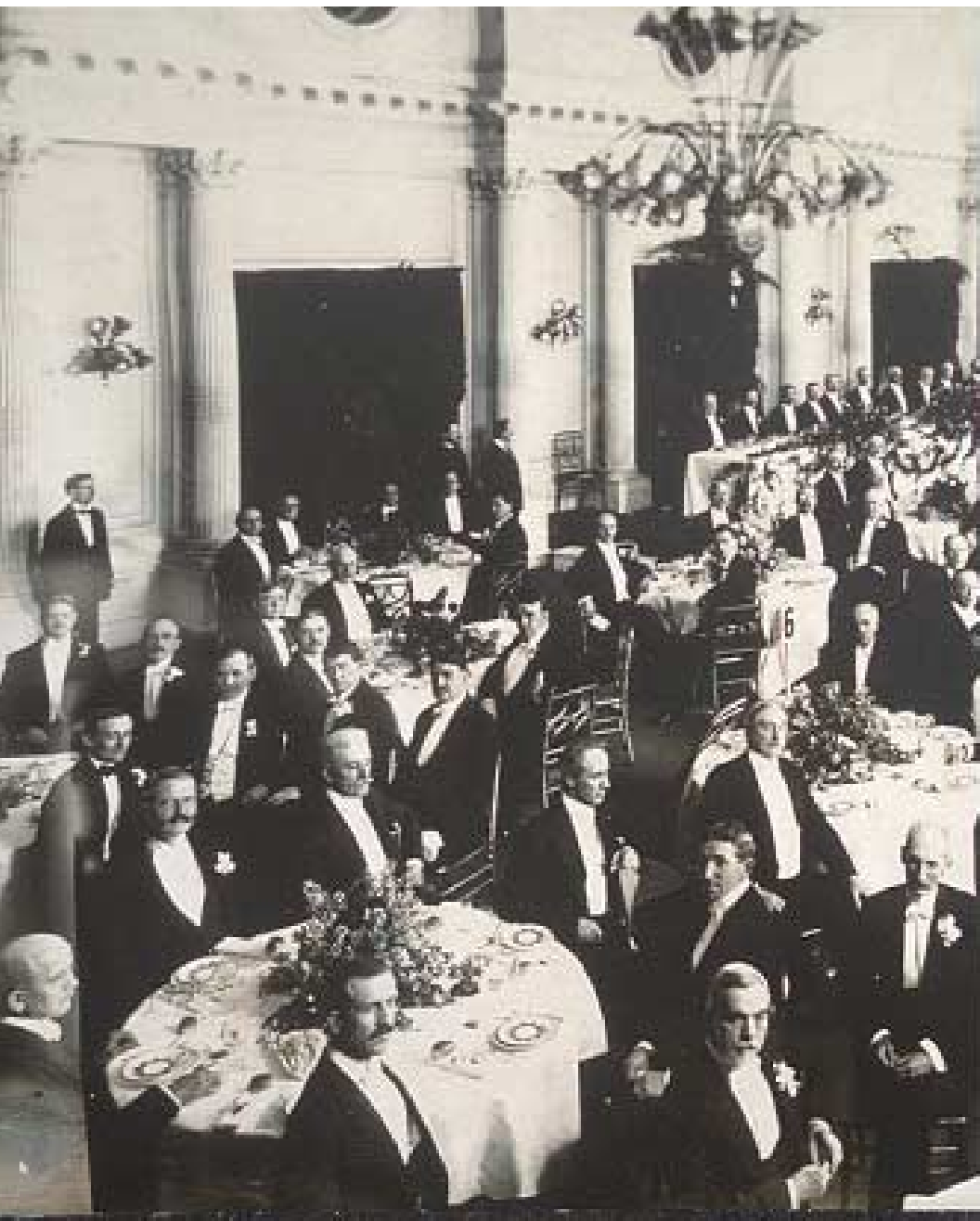
grove...and in the whole world if you can
only get your fuckin hands down into it!

...

I'm writing him a note: DEAR LOU, TELL
THE COMPOSER AT AUSCHWITZ AND THE
DANCER AT HIROSHIMA ALL YOUR FINE
IDEAS.



THE GOLD TRADE



The Morning Program

Burko-E-O zapped in that tape cartridge and Zongo's favorite word all but blew apart the smaller boomboxes flashing along the shores of the fetid bayfront city: "Zongo-O-O-O!" reverberated and overlapped, finally ending in a screeching crescendo followed by maniacal drumming.

Then Zongo, the dj, screamed his second favorite word "UnEARTHly!" and Burko-E-O, his only engineer ever, collapsed back into his office chair and wheeled around the control room bumping into everything until he reached his coffee mug, half a hollowed-out softball lined with a ceramic something and secured by a handle made from driftwood and macrame. The mug was a gift from a fan of Morning Lunacy celebrating the station's last place finish in the Radio-TV league—as did Burko-E-O's t-shirt, which featured him leaning back at an impossible angle in the springless chair while holding up the Morning Lunacy pennant.

Over frosted mugs of Pabst Blue-Ribbon of a blinding afternoon at the palm-roofed, screenless Beachbum Cafe dwarfed by the pastel stucco hotels—

Zongo: We cause the craziness or just follow along with it? Burko-E-O: I admire your dee-eeep thoughts.

Zongo: (blinking one full minute at the tar shimmering along the beach) Well I guess.

One late morning after the thirtieth playing of the Zongo-O-O-O! tape, Burko-E-O died in the springless chair, spilling coffee all over his t-shirt image of himself leaning ever backwards in that same, famous chair. All his fans were shattered and Zongo tried to take the following day off in his grief, but the youngest vice-president wrote a tribute to Burko-E-O and insisted only Zongo could read it. So Zongo read it the following morning while another vice-president substituted in the control room.

Of course he could never get the timing right as to when to slap in the “Zongo-O-O-O!” tape and Zongo told him to forget it.

When the new engineer came aboard, he was forever a beat behind and seemed put-upon and angry behind his polished glasses whenever Zongo fed him the cue: “I’m starting to feel a teensy teensy teensy little bit unearthly.” More than once Zongo saw only

kneecaps when Burko-E-O's chair proved difficult for the flustered engineer.

Zongo, depressed, took to trying to mouth the Zongo-O-O-O! effect himself but letters poured in protesting, and the three youngest vice-presidents had a meeting with Zongo and the engineer, Mr. Claude Snarrel, wherein Snarrel promised to try to be more attentive in exchange for a new chair. The vice-presidents pronounced TRIPLE-LOVELY, especially since the ad agency wanted to reshoot a tape of Zongo in earphones turning and turning to twist the chord around his body, and then corkscrewing back to unwind it, with his transported face satanic at the end—the very famous bit he had done only once since Snarrel's debut. The final upshot of the meeting was that the engineer promised to slap the tape in with more alacrity.

Which he did. But with a quicker malice behind his polished eyeglasses which ruined the timing of Zongo's other jokes and routines, and, worse, knocked his delivery of commercials for Mad Jack's Furniture Outlets off. Mad Jack himself called a vice-president: "I want, whatchacallit, energy!"

Whereupon the vice-presidents clowned "Whatchacallit energy! Whatchacallit energy! Whatchacallit energy!" actually doing a sort of tribal

dance, but in the cafeteria this time since Claude Snarrel, unlike the lamented Burko-E-O, locked the control room door.

The vice-presidents were usually buttoned-up, pinched-in, and polished, but experienced a mood swing after the mid-morning delivery of small packages by a one-eyed Mexican.

But what Zongo could mouth whenever Claude Snarrel missed the cue was what the vice-presidents repeatedly sneered at the locked control room door: "The Engineer!" Soon that expression permeated the humid town, and when Billy Laufer decided to take more than the allotted time to really tune up a battered Escort at BAYFRONT FORD-MAZDA, his colleagues chorused "The Engineer! The Engineer! The Engineer!"

The effect was that Snarrel became almost as famous as had been Burko-E-O, and the art department began designing a mean-faced t-shirt, but Snarrel caught wind and threatened suit, whereupon Zongo went to the cowardly, forty-ish vice-president to get permission to fire him. "You don't sue your family!" finally won the argument.

So the next morning after his final high-C "Uh-uh-uh-uh- UNEARTHLY!" signoff, Zongo pounded on the

control room door for five minutes while staring up through a filthy skylight at patches of mercury sky, and hearing muffled sounds of tortured metal from the not quite soundproof interior. When Zongo finally was admitted by the engineer, shiny glasses slipping down from his pale forehead, a large round spring rolled into the center of the room. Snarrel had been trying to load the spring into Burko-E-O's chair.

“How you making it, man? I been, like whatchacallit, fuckin knocking? You're fired. Hey but you're a tall mother you know that? I mean we can't work together you know what I mean? Like no... chemistry? It's fuckin UN-unearthly! You know what I mean?” Claude Snarrel reddened and stared at the lying-down chair. “Life's a bitch and then you die” Zongo informed him. “C'est la”...and here he wheeled and started skipping away...”shit!”

But the instant he turned his head back to note the effect of his farewell smirk on the engineer, he glimpsed instead the last of the scarlet rush of Snarrel, the chair descending from a snowy travel poster.

The next thing Zongo knew was nothing, although two vice-presidents would later dance around the body making levitating motions while projecting mantras out through the open door.

Inside the studio, meanwhile, earphones askew,
Claude Snarrel slowly revolved, twisting the chord
around himself and snapping his fingers more rap-
idly than anybody could have believed.



The Men

As a purple seeps into dirty snow in the courtyard below, Gloria up in 4B Ogglestone shoves down the front of a balloonish party dress with both hands: it flares in the rear. “Italian Pumpkin look’s okay but this Bo Peep shit is ridiculous!” she sneers to her image in the black window overlooking the courtyard. In back of her the console TV looms. The Great Gatsby is giving off, yellowishly, Gatsby’s whites looking Chlorox-stained. Indeed much of the production of this original cable musical has been tending towards brownish.

She turns round in a swish and squeak of orange to see Daisy stretching her arms upward, the undermanned orchestra straining for background ecstasy, and she can almost feel her own cellulite crunching—even though Dr Denslow Barrington on the health channel had pronounced “Cellulite my foot! Just plain fat!”

“Oh yeah! Proof of the crummy pudding!” challenges Gloria, his heresy in mind, pointing to the dented marbling below her armpit.

Gatsby, a blond soprano, appears terrified of the large-boned Daisy as he begins a tremulous song about “old sports” and money.

Trent's Calvin Klein's Obsession For Men is charged from the heat of his Miata. Soon he's dodging hunks of muddy ice while ridiculing the barracks-type apartments. "Such Class! `And how long have you lived in Moscow, comrade Gloria?' inquired the scented INFERNO of masculinity!"

The outside door to Oggelstone is locked or jammed and Trent seeks another. At the rear courtyard a few people peer down from lighted windows to skewed trashbarrels and a defunct basketball court, backboards rusty where the hoops had been. "And pray what means this icy dishevelment?" exclaims Trent, picking his way through rocks of frozen slush. "And whatever happened to...?"— here he assumes a radio announcer's resonance: "HEY YOU CASH-STRESSED BOYS AND GIRLS LISTENING TO FM-WHAM-O-O-O-O-O, THE INTELLIGENT ECHO ECHO ECHO OF CONTEMPORARY SOUNDS FOR THE YOUNG AND YOUNG AT HEART! SAY, WHY VACATION WHEN YOU CAN LIVE AT RESKER GARDENS?...CABLE'S FREE, AND EVEN A BASKETBALL COURT FOR ALL YOU WEEKEND LARRY BIRDS!"

"An-ddddddd when you finish the awwwwwwful, oh so s-WEATY game you can splash on Calvin Klein's

Obsession For Men”—Trent almost sings—”thereby defining yourself as The Total Asshole Yuppie Aspirant. Whoa, young Trent! Does that not mean thou also?”

“Don’t worry,” he assures himself, “I’m not that good.” He skirts the pool, its covering tarp caved in where trash has drifted into the middle. As his calfskin shoes punch through the sooty crust on the snow, Trent worries, again in his little dialog. “OOOOO! Puncturing your precious pumps, pretty boy? Be a man! I am! Well at least it’s in there somewhere.

“Hmph! Too clever for your own good. Maybe you ARE gay, as they seem to suspect high up on the corporate alp of Dressler- Maximillian Industries!

“Ah yes, that airy echelon of unquestioned Touchy-Feely Butch! Do they DRUM up there, BRAVE-ly sitting hip to naked hip while speaking of women and me, cupping each other’s genitals against the possibility of feminist guerrilla raids?

“The Corporate Sweat Lodge! Give me a break! But listen, and answer this, you dreary cynic, what exactly does turn them on except the impotence of power? And gay they say? They say gay, do they, these selfconsciously masculine men secretly desir-

ing to be queer rough trade and yet all aflutter at the bottom line? Well let me just tell the whole bent bunch of you that I will definitely prove the contrary to Gloria, master Xeroxer of the Engineering Department, this very evening!" Here he dances with an imaginary Gloria among McDonald wrappers and styrofoam fragments, eventually kicking a Diet Coke can at the end of an unintended slide over blackened snow.

"Uh, given half the chance that is. And believe me she looks like the half-a-chance type." Trent giggles and trembles in the darkening cold. Most of the lights are out in the building in front of him, though some TVs flicker. "Am I having fun yet? You silly ass, dancing with the filthy air—but I'll grant that you definitely are having a good time!" He exhales vast puffs towards the red-purple sky, a frosty elongation on the horizon like a glowing crowbar. When he finally catches his breath he states "My God I'm happy. Wonder why that is sometimes. It comes from nowhere: a gift—every reason not to be and yet I am!"

Trent finally discovers an entrance, the door held open by a brick, and walks up three flights of stairs covered with liver-colored carpeting, plywood creaking underneath. As he rings 4B, garbled voices rise behind the door. "Gloria?" Trent questions.

A shirtless man with black hair epaulets flings it open. “Gloria, yeah sure!” he screams, eyes bulging a filmy yellow. “Gloria! Sure you don’t mean Lucy? But Gloria’s that’s a nice name, hey? But Gloria’s a nice name, hey? But Gloria’s a nice name, hey?” And with each hey this hairy man strikes him increasingly hard about the head and shoulders, next spitting “Thought I was gone hey? Uh uhhhhhhh, young fella, I waited for you to show up! That’s what I did you little-squirt-faggot- honeybun!” He stops hitting a moment as Trent’s knees buckle when he flings his arms up for balance and protection.

“The baits back in there and here’s the hook!” By that time midway into the hall, the hairy man, smiling, boxes Trent’s ears, breaking through quavering explanations as Trent staggers ever more backwards and then down a stair: “Gloria! I...came... I... mistake...I...please...! I...I’m NOT who...!”

“Yeah Gloria, sure Gloria! Uh huh! You got the wrong whore is all, right?”

Trent manages to turn around and run down the stairs to the outside. This time his ankles are ripped as he punches through the snow, blood instantly soaking his socks.

He hides behind the rolled up tennis net, his fingers thrust into its frozenness. Try...stop...shaking! he finally counsels himself. A filthy cake of snow drops from the sign bolted to the building: HUMPHREY. Crazy guy in 4B Humphrey tried to kill me! I got wrong building! Trent hears himself phoning 9-1-1 from Gloria's apartment; behind him, though, the hairy man crawls over the pool tarp.

Trent has the Humphrey entrance clearly in view. I've got the cards, the visibility, he assures himself. Make my move out of here when I'm absolutely positive; the man continues to crawl, stopping periodically when wind churns the debris in the center of the tarp, causing rattles and pings. Soon the man sinks down into that center, emerging after a moment with a length of pipe which assumes a luminous outline in the duskiness floating down from the scattering of lit windows.

For some reason Trent acutely, almost microscopically, pictures his gloves on the liverish rug before 4B Humphrey; the grinning oaf, about twenty feet in back of him, stops in hammocky sway; Trent hears, calms himself: It's the wind.

Gloria shakes her wrist to see if her watch has busted or something. Goes into the bedroom to check herself in the fulllength mirror—again, and

again the orange dress flies up in front, and then in back. “Wizard of Oz,” she now concludes, “alls I need is the magic wand and ruby-red slippers. No, that little girl had them, the slippers. Judy Garland. Or did they both have them, the nice witch too?” She asks this question standing at the window. Urinous light spills down to Trent as panic issues from the TV: “Somebody’s been hit with a car, struck down!” a pebbly bass voice rumbles, proclaiming, ceaselessly, the same dire thought.

She will say later on Action-Force News! in quizzical response, that no, she didn’t know she had been looking down to her date—according to co-anchor (and award-winning news editor) Mark Moran’s question—“in fetal profile on the quilt of snow and frozen mud, blood spread out from his mouth like a speech- balloon from a cartoon character?” This conceit is later echoed by the strident Leeah Baron, a still of Gloria’s pumpkin dress and puzzled face fading at the telecast’s end. (She had phoned Mr Deedham on that unusual evening, the manager of the complex. “There’s a drunk down there in the courtyard or something.” “Oh Good-yyyyy,” exhaling very slowly..”brings us up to quota this month.”)

To Bertram Oldham, Esq., client opines that “He was one of these shy assholes didn’t talk up.”

“I see. Well, D. A. insists you didn’t give him much of a chance.”

Client circles lit cigarette stub inside paper cup, meditatively hunching in prescribed dark suit. He resembles a large smudge on the heavy air—the room itself weighing in with squat, leathery furniture. He shrugs, then hoists bright eyes. “I...just didn’t get right guy. Accident. Happen to anybody.”

“I see. We’ve gone over this sufficiently.”

“Yeah! Right! Nobody’s fuckin fault.”

“Well, you demonstrate no remorse and prosecutors’ll make a lot of that in-nnnnn...” consulting his watch, “ten minutes or so.”

“So? So what? What I pay you for? Come up with some bullshit or other.”

“Quite right. Of course, it’s, uh, against the law for me to coach you, so...”

“So you wouldn’t do that. I know. There’s a whole lot of fuckin things you wouldn’t do on your own time.”

“Whatever. Anyway, let’s practice some. Uh, genuine remorse that is: th-ROWING our hands to our face like-a-SO!”

Attorney demonstrates...tiny, popping slap, simultaneous half-sob catching in his throat. “I’ll show you when.”

“When?” laughs attentive client, leaning forward.

“I’ll touch my earlobe.”

“You mean your ear?”

“This part of it, called the lobe,” points attorney.

“Lobe-shmobe, never heard of it,” shrugs massive client.

“Trust me.”



Standup American Guy

...BLUE material, yeah, but more tasteful than most. And that kid with his FINGER in it? Ever see the expression on his FACE? See? Dirty mind! THAT's the dike I'm talking about, in fuckin Holland. Holland, asshole!

Hey looka me smelling my finger!

WOMEN! Hey I give em my best, like, at dinner, pretending to listen with great probity, uh huh! And then give 'em the great probe afterwards! Ask not what you can do for your country...

Hey, remember the Flower Children with all that LOVE and principle?... Hey I like to fuck too.

Hey but there's AIDS now, right? You know the history? Started by some fag going up a monkey's ass, and then, much much later, some traitor to the class diddled a genuine woman! So now we ALL got a chance. Rotsa ruck! Now aint THAT something to be thankful for at Thanksgiving? Anyway, that's the boring history of fuckin AIDS—written by some Jew PhD or other.

Hey! I say things people THINK! Not politically correct. Well somewhat. I mean I won't ever say

nigger, or spick, or queers or pansies. And I won't allow that Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue in the house...well maybe in the bathroom.

Hey I'd pull it out now but I don't wanna hit nobody in the FRONT ROW! Maybe I'll step back later. Promise. Look who's laughing, Chrome Dome out there, Melon Head. Hey! In Italian it's head of a prick, you know that? Hey, how you say that in English, huh? I know that you'd blow anybody for hair, but what the fuck do you really really desire? Like, SECRETLY? FEATHERS, yes? Like fuckin Indian?

Hey I'm, like, doing a war dance, notice? If I had my little hatchet I'd go after a snatch, er, scalp. This mouth of mine! Always fuckin up! Thank YOU for laughing, Chubs! Like, it's a huge EF-fort, yes? TOO FAT TO FUCK! Right, Lady? Wouldn't know if you were hitting the real thing or a wrinkle!

All right! Hey, you know what the POPE is doing...? Hey there's more to the question! So don't say yes so damn fast! ...is doing when he gives his blessing like-a so? He's saying get those dirty GHINNIES of-fa duh grass!

Okay, so it's time for a story. A story is told of a Jew, a faggot priest, a lesbian, some dollar whore, a

Bishop of Canterbury who fucked corpses, a greaseball ghinny, a drunken Irishman, a stupid, completely thick Polack, a lazy mushmouth nigger etcetera etcetera etcetera etcetera. Well, you know the rest. At any rate they all decide to assassinate Kennedy! TRUE STORY!

Hey like you don't HAFTA like this! The language has been debased by so many scumbags fucking it up the ass, that...oh what the hell! Why lecture souses? Hey! Momento! Don't turn away! Keeeeeep looking! I've given up on WOMEN except for MARY FIST here. VOILA! That's French for HOLY SHIT!

And here it IS! Finally! LADIES and GEN-der-benders, in a zip..or unzip! And almost as advertised, right? Hey I hit a little smut in the show 'cause it all in fun, but I'm an erect man. Usually.

So whattayahsay, now, I pull this big boy off, and the ladies fake groaning? Stick old glory up my ass and the men can cry too.



Reprise

When he was peeling the banana with trademark slowness, the lone woman couldn't contain. "I drove almost a hundred miles to see you, hoping that you'd be the same, not hardened or cynical like everything else, or just an actor. Had to abandon my car after a flat and tell the AAA just fix it! Then I walked here on the median, over the mufflers and blownout tires and the usual filth of beercans and worse."

She inhaled to admire the makeup, flour white face, huge cherry red lips, royal blue blotches on his cheeks. Even the slight gray at his temples had been meticulously layered, and matched the cheeks.

In front of him the teachers relented and followed the children to Bascom-Robbins for ice cream. Behind him at the mall's entrance, three striding teenage girls abruptly shrieked at a joke they had carried from the parking lot. One yelled above the laughter "Oh yeah? Well I'll tell you one thing I think! I don't care what he thinks! And you just see how I...! Anyways, if he likes me he should..."

Now it is just the woman and the performer, who finishes peeling the banana and carefully eats it while folding the skin over and over in his other bright glove. This finished, he stares at her a long

moment, eyes glassing. "I AM Skippy Diddles!" he finally announces.



Talent

Director: Let's have the talent!

Actor: Love the word, hate the wry intonation.

Director: Jussssst count to four as you're allegedly watching couple sit down. Uh huh. Good! Now be a waiter.

Actor: And what will the gentleman and his gorgeous lady have?

Director: Cut. Lovely lady.

Actor: Sorry. But georgeous sounds bet-

Director: They took surveys. Surveys said lovely.

Actor: I guess I'm talking about writing.

Director: Oh? Well don't. That's not what it used to be and never was. And be an oily sucker this next take— this here's upscale saloon. Roll 'em!

Actor: And what will the gentleman and his lovely lady have? Such meditation! Then let me suggest—!

Director: Cut! Print it!

Actor: That's it? Just what am I sugges—? What's the product for heaven's sake?

Director: I don't know. Some booze-bottle snaps in the size of Rushmore, and then we finally get to see our phantom couple worshipping the fuckin thing. That's writing too. At any rate, another crew is doing that trash. ...

Actor: Traffic's wicked! Thank you for coming.

Wife: Nothing.

Actor: Your...tone out-corrodes my director's.

Wife: English your native language?

Actor: Uhhh... Well! And what will they have me be next time?

Wife: A man. That'd be a good one.



A Decidedly Minor Canyon

He/ I see that you got snookered too.

She/ It's...interesting. Wild at least—a little anyway.

He/ The signs promised so much more.

She/ That's what signs do. Why would that surprise? It is, at any rate, a decidedly minor canyon.

He/ Do you have a name? First name?

She/ That's a question, uh, well...though not exactly stupid, is...

He/ Awkward. I know. Embarrassing. To both of us. I'm trying to break the ice, of course. You'd have to help.

She/ Not necessarily.

He/ It's a way to nudge things, be a trifle more than strangers. In the few minutes we'll have here. You can send ice back to me. I can't control that.

She/ They might miss us in the group, Stranger.

He/ No danger of that. He's just saying the same things anyway, the things he splashed all over those promissary signs up and down the highway.

She/ Crude but effective—we both drove in. Boredom creates more assholes than anything else, I suppose. I am well brought-up, and thus shouldn't say asshole to you.

He/ Crude, huh? Is that what you prefer?

She/ I guess I couldn't talk at all without striking some note you thirsted for. Has the really silly probing started? What's the difference what I prefer. In what for example? In books?

He/ In what you think I mean. Or are you afraid?

She/ No. I can see too too clearly what you're driving at. And I'm not about to discuss present tense, or you. But, since you have asked: I'd prefer a man! Not some pitiful creature who has learned behavior from television and movies, and therefore resonates the vomit of the mass culture—thinking it, as well as he, profound—and who is either sleazily hinting or bluntly disgusting! What infantile mind he once had corroded by sexual fantasy. And one, too, who

nurtures and loves and respects both the woman and the man inside him. A real man. Neither an empty macho poseur nor a pallid wimp—if you really want to know— though I do admire the way you play both roles simultaneously. And I'm definitely definitely not interested in what you prefer, so don't even start. Nor in you. It goes without saying. Or should.

He/ That was a lot to say to a stranger. I appreciate the hateful investment. I prefer you.

She/ Oh yeah! Of course you do. I guess that if you've given up on all pride in yourself, you'll say anything.

He/ Listen! uh...

She/ Don't even go on! I've listened! too much in the past. I neither want to have coffee with you, and listen! nor attempt to dissect your obvious wound—after listening!

He/ It isn't what I was going to suggest.

She/ Oh well, some clone of it. All of it double underlined by false and phoney d-RAMA!

He/ You're tough. Or impatient.

She/ That little red Escort is mine. If you want to see my dust, then...

He/ Please. I...really...I...

She/ Ooooo! Oooo-woooo-woooo! Time to squeeze out a little boy tear, is it? How about the watch, the wy-utch your mommy-wommy done give you on her death bed. Time to give that to me is it? And what else can you pluck out of your little baby blue boy's magic kit?—I mean to appeal to the maternal in me.

He/ Don't think much of men.

She/ You've noticed! Funny how you at first think someone is grossly insensitive, and then they just...why golly gee whiz they just...

He/ And you expect me to say how I'm different. I'm not. I've tried to love, sacrifice even, and I've been a pig too. So I guess I'm the man you hated.

She/ Hate. How honest! You're...

He/ Trying to be.

She/ Yeah, well once you can fake that you've got everything, haven't you?

He/ Our, uh, pal over there can surely drone: Indians who lived here...animals they worshipped.

She/ With our ten holy bucks in his pocket he should shoot up to another octave.

He/ At any rate, I do believe in opportunity, seizing the moment. Working out your fear. Even cherishing the moment for what it might offer.

She/ I'll bet you do.

He/ Especially when it's the only thing. With puke all around. Here with this silly mini canyon, back there in life.

She/ I don't read you. Don't wish to. The book's too old and the plot too shittily familiar.

He/ That little red barn...?

She/ Grandly named the Reception Center!

He/ The grass is soft and sunny on the other side.

She/ A fact like any other.

He/ Breeze from off the river..smells delicious, just del....

She/ Facts. Again. The nature trip is another old hat.

He/ Please walk over there with me, away from their eyes and ears.

She/ But not your baloney.

He/ And we'll make love. Create it. Have our few moments to soothe the pain. And walk away.

She/ Just? Like? That?

He/ Do our very very best to wring out whatever is left of sweetness in each of us. Bathe that raw spot in our...souls.

She/ I'm sailing an empty vessel, kid. Why don't you go just pant elsewhere? And let me stop you before you affect hurt eyes! The pseudo-romantic is the complete psychopath! Well, none of the seedy little manipulative tricks work with me. Even you should notice that.

He/ What will?

She/ Hmmm. I like the question. Why do I like that question? I like questions full of hope. By their very nature, they're not answerable. Oh? Pretty silent,

huh? I'm genuinely surprised. No more arrows in your skinny quiver? How 'bout one or two of your LISTENS? Tell me again about w-Ringing-g-g-g out all the sweet-tee-ness.... Or is that winging it? Or, the least likely, I know, slinging it? And that raw spot of soul, little little man, is what makes me me. I want it!

He/ Just...what I've said already, and with no names and numbers exchanged and no false promises to keep in touch.

She/ Too bad. Hallmark will lose out. So! Boom! And it's over! Wow, Mr Rogers! Merely grinding up the heart and soul, again for nothing. Watching Life sneer, and spit me out again. And then to...drive away blankly...dead...watch my dead eyes in the jiggling mirror, my face soaked with tears for miles and miles and miles and miles.

He/ I hope not because...

She/ And you will drive away very nearly feeling that dull space where your heart used to be. Maybe even wondering about what authentic people could actually be like. Sorry, but our existence simply cannot be that stupid and useless. Whoops! Please excuse the laughter. It comes from out of life. From absurdity. From doing absurd things. From missing

the vital train and then finding myself immersed in shit, surrounded by shit. And shits!

He/ There's a something left inside of you that isn't funny...and I'll say ouch later for that last...detonation.

She/ Could be, some sort of something left. But I'm not the subject. It! is the subject. It! Or, in other words, you just want to fuck, yes? Want me to be the bum you are?

He/ Ouch! You finally may have gotten there.

She/ And not wring out any precious sweetness, nor pour your shattered little life into mine, thereby saving and restoring both of us as the angels sing a mighty chord! Just. Fuck. And I'm the convenient hole. Barnyard.

He/ There's a better part of me, or was I guess, but, right.

She/ Well, you've should've said so.

He/ I get it: I've waited too long, is that it? Uh huh.

She/ A little.

He/ Oh well then...uh...

She/ Not enough to worry about.



The Hamburger

Diane is returning to the buzzing car when a trailer truck roars and shimmers. She halts because she can no longer hear her clogs on the gravel of the parking lot, then raises binoculars to see the driver hunched behind the sun-smearred glass...huge blue letters of the trailer shaking by.

“It’s like a desert,” she announces, squinting as the binoculars fall on their swinging strap when she whirls round to look through the windows of Harry’s shop. Everything there seems jumping and coated with mercury, and Diane jams her eyes shut in order to think about her teacher.

What if he made that face if she said that things shook in the heat like things on a desert? Well then she would just tell him, once again, “I’m only in Seeing ‘cause Yoga is closed!” If he didn’t like it, someone else could take The Long World and go around looking through binoculars at everything. Of course Diane couldn’t drop out if Olla didn’t. Olla had The Short World but didn’t come. Diane and a few hippies met with Liege that first night to hear Liege discuss what seeing wasn’t. He informed the class, too, that he had chosen his name just for this course, and that he used different names in every-

thing he did. He asked Diane what she thought of this idea. Diane didn't think anything.

Now she decides to let Harry fix the buzzing of the car, and walks towards the shop again. There the open door frames a cold greenish light which floats like a balloon.

She stumbles in her clogs, remembering how mad Harry got when a door was left open by his partner Dirk, or Olla whenever she brought Dirk's yogurt.

Two visions flash as she clunks onto the concrete and past the blinding dayglo motors, one red, one blue, flanking the doorway: Harry's head is caught in a machine; he's hanging from a tree out back.

Smoke from that truck still drifts in the glassy brilliance as Diane enters the shop. Nothing seems wrong at first—a belt flaps silently and pools of oil-colored light repose on the concrete floor. But...a sound like someone beating a rug in the housing project behind the shop. A dot bounces across the green screen of an oscilloscope upon the bench but Harry isn't there to watch it, small tools between the fingers of his right hand as he delicately turns something with his left.

He would often snap up from his concentration to find out who stood in the doorway, his brow fiercely wrinkled under the ceiling's florescent rods. (Seeing? A course in Seeing! Everybody sees except maybe fruity instructors with one name.)

Why had he been so angry? thought Diane, plucking a five-dollar bill from her hair; carbon paper and money swirl around her as that beating from the outside takes on an insistence. She places the bill under a glowing wrench on the shredded workbench, her binoculars atop the wrench.

It's blinding in the shop, both open doorways swollen with sunlight, windows floating, reflections dashing everywhere as the wind snaps the greasy tags on the motors awaiting repair, and paper money whirls.

The entire shop becomes a loudspeaker amplifying those muffled, beating sounds from out back. Now there's stillness; after a bit, shaking leaves and...panting. And then the thumping anew.

Diane goes to the sound, blinking when she gets outside. What she can make out is a vertical string of blotches pushing at a larger blotch. After a while she realizes that her Harry comprises most of the vertical string, and that he is smashing a motor

against a tree. The motor low in his big hands, he swings upwards into the trunk, staggers when the motor bounces back. In the brightness everything looks green except for the multicolored wires vibrating from the motor, and the brownish dust around his glistening head.

“Is it brushes?” she asks, whereupon he smashes up into the tree with greater force, and hunks of bark shoot into the bushes. The trouble often was brushes and Diane had visualized them as little plastic-handled potato brushes. Each head like Napoleon’s hat, they whirred in the oil-smelling darkness inside the motor, keeping everything clean.

“They’re made of carbon but never mind,” he had told her—or is he saying it now? Diane’s not sure as she strolls over. The motor hanging low in his arms, he pants and gurgles. She lights a cigarette and puffs out into the dust around his head. “Picked up the new car!” she laughs, and the motor leaves his down-fanned hands to land on his foot and roll away into poison ivy. Diane blows smoke straight out as Harry stares down at his foot, a bright drop of green sweat pendant from his nose. A hotrodder screeches by in front and they both close their eyes in the mad shaking of leaves.

He looks like a man who has been dug up when she leads him over rusty beercans. "Everything's all right!" she maintains, stiffening him further.

At the buzzing car Diane scolds "All work and no play!" as Harry jerks his arm away, walks into the front end, bending half onto the hood. She leaves him there, saying "You find out what's making that awful noise." He drops his fingers on the glossy hood, pulls them back to watch his prints disappear. Diane is passing between the dayglo motors when Harry says "Nice machine..." but so slowly he can study each syllable forming a vapor on the hood.

Once inside the shop she closes both doors and the money and carbon paper and receipts float down everywhere. After stuffing it all into her handbag, along with the requisite binoculars, she sits down to write.

DIRK.....HOW IS OLLA AND MALCOLM....TOOK
ALL THE
MONEY...DID YOU ENJOY YOUR VACA.....LOVE
DIANE.

She phones the auto club before her PS....TOOK
HARRY SICK

TRIP PA DUTCH.

The sun has been cut off as she gets back to the car, and Harry stares behind the cloudy black windshield, looking like the truckdriver she had seen through her binoculars. The car buzzes flatly on but now Diane can see that the parking lights are lit. Once in the car she punches all the knobs until the buzz stops. "It's their fault," she announces as he tries to shudder. "Why don't they tell you about these buzzers and everything?" Harry gazes quizzically back to the shop. "Now don't you worry—I locked the doors." He starts to nod but forgets before the middle, sits there half erect and deeply puzzled.

"All work and no..." the car comes throatily to life, drowning her words, surprising her so much that she forgets to let go of the key and the starter grinds.

Searching for the brake release: "Dirk'll just have to take over. Olla's all right again and she's got The Short World in Seeing Class and so her life'll mean more. Dirk wouldn't let Malcolm go back to Rutgers, he's going to Glassboro State—but I'm sure they got drugs there, too, don't you think? Poor old Dirk! Can't keep Olla from trying to kill herself, least pretending to, so he's always got to have time off and you got to do it all. And Olla even thinks she's in Yoga and it's closed, and imagine her and Malcolm

smoking marijuana in that new kitchen! Mercy me it cost Dirk almost ten thousand to do it over and they're smoking marijuana in it. Oh why don't they tell you how to let go of the stupid brake? I got this pants suit half off at Leaders for the new car—Pink Fire's name of the color— and the clogs everybody's wearing. Pretty nice, hey?" She punches his arm and he falls instantly asleep. The sun returns to flare his few hairs brushing the soft ceiling.

She finds the lever to release the brake, and the car jackrabbits out of the parking lot, forcing a motorcyclist onto the shoulder. Behind his full black visor he seems to have no face. Harry grinds his teeth and snores; Diane drives fast.

After about ten minutes she wonders "Where can you pass? Lines I mean?"

"Nice machine," whispers Harry, his eyes like small eggs. A throb works around his temple, reminding her of the dot hopping across the green oscilloscope back in his shop.

"Just over the bridge and get on the expressway. That's what the man at the AAA told me. That goes right to the turnpike. You'll like it Harry. They still have horses but no electricity. They have beards too but that's not important with all the damn hippies."

The throb slides down from his forehead and into his cheek. When she spies it fluttering near his mouth she digs into the accelerator. “Is eighty all right? Goes way past a hundred— eighty don’t seem much.”

The trees click by faster and faster. Harry’s jaw hangs in the whipping green, the wind whistling through his teeth and resonating in his mouth.

“Did you say something, Honey?” She is all but embracing the wheel when passing four thundering trucks, nips in to miss a skidding sportscar. “They’re not safe I don’t care what anybody says!”

Harry stiffly rocks to change the sound of the wind in his mouth. “Now you just relax,” she counsels, remembering those little potato brushes swooshing around inside one of his motors, in the oil-fragrant darkness where everything’s just perfect. Diane can even smell it in there.

Harry had folded his arms and closed his mouth, precisely when the speedometer needle split 9 and 0. Blood vessels pump around his jammed-shut eyes now. He tips his head like a swimmer trying to drain water from an ear, then moans as his eyes flick open. Showing more terror than pain, they glaze as

if to allow the green and white day to speed up over them.

“Now now...a second is all it’ll take to get you okay. Okay?” And she shakes out her handbag onto his lap in order to find the aspirin, but has to stop when the car catapults into a picnic area, eventually ramming an overflowing barrel. “They should tell you!” Diane insists when they finally lurch leftward to a stop. “It’s no fair just to have the road come in here like that.” Near the entrance an extended Hispanic family hurriedly clears two tables and throws everything into the trunk of an old Buick. They’re launched before Diane can find a cigarette.

She wrenches her new sedan back onto the highway after a few thoughtful puffs. Harry snores, but mumbles when the springs bottom “...all workkkkkk... Jack.”

“I know what you’re saying! My father said all of this was coming and we laughed at him.” Harry sinks down as if shot. He can’t know that Diane is summarizing Olla and Malcolm smoking dope in the new kitchen, Harry, himself, smashing a motor up into a tree, all the damn hippies on television, a car that persists in buzzing at you, and a road that becomes a picnic area hosting mobs of foreigners. “And we laughed at him. Imagine!”

Harry brightens “Nice machine.”

You always did like my father,” she encourages.
“Now sit up and see how pretty everything is.”

He tries but collapses against the door when she screeches up to a toll booth. She shifts among the money between them on the seat. “Just fifty cents, lady,” the swarthy, heavy-set collector says, and she dreams about marrying him on TV—Dirk, squirming and cursing in a tight tux, would give her away, and Olla and Malcolm would be there too, coked up among the flowers. There would be a short memorial service in the middle for Harry, his love for motors etc.

Later on the Pennsylvania Turnpike she chooses her first flower girl, cracking jokes with Merv Griffin as the speedometer reads 100, and she looks fondly to Harry, almost as if he could see her TV fantasy too. But her turning to him makes all the colors bleed off her television and race across the windshield like multi-dyed water. “You had a shock! Little, whatchacallit, stroke or something.” Harry sits up until his sparse hair hangs straight back in the tremendous wind.

“Oh my doesn’t it go by just lovely when it’s there? A hundred. It all goes by like water, everything like

ziggley blurs.” His jaw swings open and the wind pops repeatedly in his mouth. Then his eyes close for a long while; they crack slightly as she propels the car past a rattling shipment of Volkswagon Beetles—then the light streams across his eyes like a green liquid. This sight catches Diane’s breath and she slows to ninety to look for aspirin again.

“Get...couple in you. All work and no play...makes Harry...” But she forgets the aspirin to speed up again. Soon she’s well past 100 and musing “Malcolm’d say uptight, but Dirk made him transfer to Glassboro. Marijuana in the kitchen! There’s no perfect crime you know, Harry. That stink on the cabinets?”

He is gripping the upholstery as if riding a sled, his yellowgreen face expressing waves of near-comprehension from time to time. Just before the Morgantown exit he jerks around, trying to remove his terrorized image from the windshield.

“Well well well! We have a tail wind or something?” The tall man leans from his booth into the car after taking the toll ticket.

“It’s a mistake!” She tries to get the card back.

“Uh uh,” he’s shakes it. “This is a new record from your entrance, and time’s punched right here! Plus, state police says I’m supposed to—”

This man was the minister when she married the previous toll taker on TV. She often put in personal appearances with people before she met them. “Aw c’mon now!” Diane pouts,” noting in the mirror that the cream station wagon behind bounces up and down with kids, the driver resting his head and arms on the steering wheel. The toll collector momentarily turns his long head towards them to scowl, then looks back to Harry as Diane bursts “Getting my husband...doctor!”

“Gee Harry,” as they turn onto 23, “maybe you should be going to a hospital like he yelled about. But I thought a Holiday Inn? Oh you’ll be all right. Forget all those lousy brushes screwing up your stinking motors, and Dirk and his crazy wife. Oh she’ll screw up The Short World and I’ll have to do it. Honestly, what a pair!” He nods stiffly, getting more of what she says now and thinly smiling his triumph.

Under a fan-shaped tree of orange, a doctor in whitest white proclaims “You’ll have to go on with your own life now, make your own plans.”

“Harry is my life and I don’t have any plans. Oh I am taking a course in the night school. Seeing it’s called for some reason.”

“Hold on to anything you can because the world’s going by a hundred miles an hour. Now what’s this seeing people before you see them? Can we talk about that?”

But before Diane can fully answer, this doctor launches up through the orange, feathery tree.

“I know!” Diane tells his white, disappearing shoes, and her reflection in the windshield. “Everything’s changing and the hippies want it all. They don’t want to work.”

Farms with quilted fields soon give way to billboards. They pass one billboard featuring a huge red W surrounded by coils of little w’s. The next billboard, just before the car plunges into a valley orders STOP! AT THE WWW AND ASK FOR THE WORLD FAMOUS TOOFER-ONE!!!!!! So Diane stops there.

Bending Harry out of the car is difficult but they must travel only a few feet to a table next to the hamburger fountain. This device is about twenty feet across and made of early plastic. A rusty pipe sticks

up in the middle and water slides down its outside to wash over the rounded surface of the bun, wrinkling at the pocked meat, branching into dirty tributaries just before it arrives at the skirts of gray lettuce. Diane slaps the plastic hamburger and it pongs. “Isn’t this cute, Harry?”

“Half...a horse,” he answers as she releases him to fall into a metal chair which springs down to touch the ground, rises slowly up with Harry regal throughout.

She knows, as his wife, that he is referring to the size of the motor. “Is that a big one? Like the ones in front of the shop?” He rounds his mouth but can’t push the word out just then; instead he leans over in the springy chair and drums a finger on the plastic hamburger like a doctor at a body. Diane stands aside to look through her binoculars. She discovers that three highways descend through mazes of wires to this home of the Dutch Wonderburger, and she studies each in turn. They’re almost the same: gas stations and diners, all with blinking and revolving signs, but one has a Dutch Pretzel-teria, above which an immense Dutchman leans over the valley holding a glowing pretzel with salt grains nearly as big as Harleys; further on down the hill she finds that Lil-Al’s Ceramics features the world’s largest ashtray. Diane focuses in a sign leaning against a

farmhouse off another highway. It promises FA-
MOUS MURDER ENACTED DAILY.

She puts the glasses down and licks her lips and staggers. "It's all coming down on you! It's all tumbling down on you! I can't breathe!" Then she feels that all the sun-slicked wires are going to spark and explode, and therefore turns to Harry for solace and breath.

He is presently crawling over the slippery hamburger, trying to peer inside, near the rusty pipe but slipping gradually back down the murky orange plastic. Diane pleads with him to come back, but he has now scabbled up to catch hold of the pipe. Water coats his hand. She crawls after him, her binoculars clunking and her clogs producing drum-like sounds. He can sense her reaching for him and furiously swings his free arm back in an attempt to knock her away.

They eventually land together at the feet of a boy who seems to have steel wool pasted on his pink face. "Vill you eat?" he inquires. "Our cooking is vunderful good and kissing vears out but our cooking don't." The steel wool proves to be pasted on a flesh-colored mask which covers all but his cheekbones. The antenna of his walkie talkie whips in the mellowing sun, the back of that instrument covered

with an order pad above which he is holding a pencil. But Diane drags on that arm to pull herself up. She smoothes her hot pink slacks and directs a begging look at Harry to get him to assemble himself. After a minute she manages to get him back to his chair, while the waiter stares blue-eyed above his patchy steel wool beard. "Whole horse!" insists Harry, riding his chair up and down.

"Sir?" the boy jerks the pencil back.

"He means under the hamburger. Motor. It's his business." Chair still plunging and rising, Harry winds his arm as if mixing a stiff batter. The waiter crunches up his face, causing some steel wool to detach and float away in wind flung off a passing tour bus.

"Oh really Honey! Well can you beat that?" she asks the waiter, who Ma'm's her just before her revelation: "That hamburger turns!"

"I don't know. Never turned since I been here."

"Must've been pretty. Well leave it to Harry." Diane is implored to order and finally does, the waiter writing fast. Harry's a bit smug now, his arms crossed and his chair calmed down. She orders two Dutch Wow-Burgers with french fries and two va-

nilla milkshakes. “And that’s a Toofer One!” the boy crows into his mouthpiece. “On a Toofer One you only pay a half!” This last word echos from a circle of loudspeaker horns above the florescent cube of a kitchen under the WWW—ONLY HOME OF THE DUTCH WONDERBURGER sign. An enormous snap, then, as the waiter still broadcasts, “Vunderful good!” blasting the horns, causing the salt and pepper shakers to dance on the couple’s table. “Wow whirl wiggle!” the waiter continues.

Now the speakers snap and snap machine-gun fashion as the waiter experiences trouble with a switch on the walkie-talkie. “Wuh wuh wuh!” completes the extraordinarily magnified message.

“Well isn’t that a lot of fuss for hamburgers?” Diane inquires of a brooding Harry. “For mercy’s sake I wish my father could be here ‘cause he saw it coming!—now don’t you worry Honey ‘cause I’ll get you back to all your lovely motors again. But you gotta play too, you know. Don’t wanna be one of those dull old boys now, do you?” Some hunters amble by, their weapons pointed down, smiling at the waiter’s shaking of the walkie- talkie.

The chef’s hat bobs vigorously in the kitchen, obscuring for a moment the lights running green and blue and red on the steel wall behind him. At any

rate, all is understood in the bright sealed cube—
despite technical difficulties.

Still puffing the steel wool from his mouth, the waiter notes that the hunters are settling in at a table on the opposite side of the hamburger from Harry and Diane, next to a fence against which they can lean their rifles.

Diane dips a napkin in a puddle in the middle of the off-white table, wipes in a growing spiral as a boy in a porkpie hat and a fat, bearded man belly-flop onto the hamburger and start slapping each other in a game to to force the opponent off.

A standoff as both slide off together into a giggling heap resembling a pile of rags. When they finally extract from each other and go to sit to the left of the hunters, the boy in the porkpie hat raises it with both hands and sticks out his tongue at Diane and Harry. Diane stares frozenly and goes back to her table-cleaning; Harry begins a shrug.

Leaning back against the fence now, their feet up on a table, the boy and the man make faces at Harry and Diane. The bearded man squeezes his belly through a tie-dyed sweatshirt with the head of Che Guevara inside a peace sign. At this point the hunters are circling the waiter and the antenna of the

walkie-talkie whips around in their midst. Orange patches appear to migrate from their clothing into an afternoon of strangely diminished light. Their orders are transmitted to the loudspeakers after a screeching “Wonder wonder wonder whirl whirl whirl...wuh wuh wuh!” introduction.

“Honestly!” Diane exclaims as Harry claps his hands over his ears and the fat man, who still rubs his belly, laughs. Diane decides to look past them all with her binoculars in order to study a sign in an adjoining lot poking up above the fence. She closes one eye since the glasses have become misaligned from the thumping they got when she crawled after Harry over the plastic hamburger. The sign proves to be a big fish and Diane notes layers of wood in its mouth. “L-laminated wood sculpture!” she pronounces, using her Art Around You course from last semester.

“No-O!-shit?” the fat man hisses. Diane lowers her field of vision towards him...but first some fluttering cardboard signs intercede: WATCH FOR ANOTHER FISHFACE RESTAURANT OPENING HERE. Now she has him in view, by aiming just over the hamburger, and he, in turn, is pointing back at her. “What did it do for you?” this fat man shouts. “I mean for us it was only a ride on a slippery hamburger.” Purple bubbles in his mouth obscure these

words and she leans forward, letting the binoculars drop on their strap. His companion in the porkpie is punching him on the arm. "I mean no soul experience and we didn't make love to it." Diane ignores them to rewipe the table, this time from the outside in. Who can understand hippies anyway? But the new motions of the boy distract her. He is performing an antic dance on the gravel, windmilling his arms and shrieking like a jungle bird, the bearded man trying to seize him by his t-shirt. "I try to keep him off the grass," he pants, his mouth a golden purple in disintegrating, lavender-tinged darkness, "but he won't fuckin listen!" He manages to stop the boy and then lift him onto a chair. Harry's head falls to the table and Diane wipes absently around it.

Though the bearded man talks to the boy, whose hat has slipped completely over his eyes, he intends that Harry and Diane hear. "Don't let it shake you! They're just America. No use going into a shit fit about it. Anyway, the only way, my tyro, my amorous hick, to appreciate real art, I mean real American vomit-inducing art is to crawl over it." Very flushed he pumps up and down in his chair, his extraordinarily hairy head periodically blocking out most of the Fishface sculpture behind. "Don't you know, Arthur?" he continues, "Iron Mac and The Dutchess over there are true Americana. Let's bring them back to the college and seal them in plastic. Better

yet let's bring the plastic here and seal them in with their beloved hamburger. We'll even throw in some itchy-kitchy koo Pennsylvania Dutch souvenirs. Wuh wuh wuh! Dutch Wonderburger! So eat a little and die in tourist heaven! Right, Iron Mac? Right, Dutchess?" Harry has awakened and attempts to rise, vibrating. "Ho ho! Iron Mac is c-RANKING up!" The fat man spits on the hamburger, then hoists his eyes to survey the upper rim of the valley. "Hey its gets a little gloomy up dere—hope it's not anything I said. Chust wait a bit ve get some BIG light real soon! And-ddddddd! not a little heat, incidentally. More heat than light—if that isn't unAmerican. And if you chust wait a little, Iron Mac, you can cut out a cube of air and take it home to poison the dog."

When the bearded man screams "This is Tourist Heaven! Die in Tourist Heaven!" Harry's elbow slips off the table in an attempt to propel himself over the hamburger to get at the tormentors. The boy, fully recovered from his dance spasm, lifts up his hat again, revolves it over his head while wiggling his ears. "Look at that Arthur! Look at that!" stresses the fat man as Diane attempts to lift Harry's elbow back onto the table, "It's the Silent Majority in peace and war."

"Big deal. Big-IG deal!" Arthur comments, flicking his hat into Che Guevera on the fat man's

sweatshirt. “Anyway this anthro- and -pology is your bag, Professor.”

“It ‘s everybody’s bag Arthur. Now listen! I used to laugh at fools, tolerate them—little like I tolerate you as a matter of fact.” Slapping the boy’s hat away: “But now I know that they have to go! The quicker they’re...VAPOR, the better for the rest of us.” Harry starts banging the table. “Well Iron Mac doesn’t want to hear, hey? But I will make you hear, Iron Mac! MAKE you, you middle-America cretin!”

On their left, the hunters shoot disgusted looks to the professor and Porkpie. “Poof! and it’s all over. Poof poof poof!” continues the professor at Diane and Harry’s expense. “I mean Arthur! Hey, can’t explain a revolution to them! Right? They worry too much about the new car, and crawl over vomit-inducing art whenever that particular lust seizes them. In fact they’re vomit-inducing art themselves. Ugh!”

“May be right, Doctor,” Arthur spins his hat on a finger, “but what’s this tolerating Arthur jazz? Wouldn’t call it that myself—don’t know what the Dean’d call it.”

“Not another threat of blackmail? Lover?” On the opposite side of the hamburger Diane leans forward. She has made Harry put his hands into his pockets.

The boy stares inside his hat. “My only blackmail would be...go away.”

“Then go away or don’t go away—it’s the same thing. It’s all play. All we do is play. Really! All I ever do is play!” He has shouted this last to Diane, adding “Better than Truly Truly Screen Romances, right Dutchess?”

“...could tell Dean,” mutters Porkpie.

“Oh Arthur Arthur Arthur! Not again! You’re so corrupt you reach a form of beauty, like Iron Mac and the Dutchess tight up to their beloved hamburger over there—like our own beloved college down the road, like our wonderful America herself. The professor sings “From the MOUN-tains, to the PRIV-legged, to the O-cean red with blood, God bless...”

“Wonder if they hear everything,” Arthur snorts from the ground. He has thrown his hat onto the gravel, and has slid down to roll back and forth over it.

“They hear and don’t hear and it’s all the same to them. Typical Americans I tell you.”

“They don’t play I suppose.”

“No,” and the professor gazes upwards into the odd darkening as if for inspiration, “they work! Until they go crazy like Iron Mac, or hysterical in menopause like the Dutchess. Then they become tourists.”

“Hoo hah! Hoo hah!” Porkpie rolls around more actively on the gravel, the approving professor smiling wetly, his beard purpling in the quicker-falling light.

“Play? Play?” squirms Harry in his flexible chair. Hands fluttering in his pockets, his face shows hatred in comprehending the word.

Arthur sits up and points over the hamburger. “Hey Iron Mac is really, like, whatchacallit, stirring. But why play pocket pool when the whosit, Dutchess, can do it for him?” Harry leaps up and flails his arms in their direction.

“Don’t pay no attention, Harry!” Diane pleads, embracing him. “The young one’s gonna tell the whochacallit, dean.”

They seem to be performing a scruffing, shuffling dance—to the professor’s and Arthur’s hoots. While she is wrestling him back into his chair she cries “Where’s those hamburgers?”

“In HEAVEN!” the professor squeals. “Where they droppeth as a gentle rain upon the great shopping mall of Middle America beneath!” A hunter next to him along the fence shakes his head, and the professor shakes his head in imitation, working up to a furious pitch. When he stops, bug eyed, he steps up onto the flimsy, rocking table and proclaims “For the nonce Iron Mac has been quieted, but soon he’ll join these hunter-gatherers and kill us for truth and beauty, right wing version—as visibly represented by this egregious hamburger fountain. Aesthetic embodiment of American Capitalism. And it doesn’t work! Beautiful! Iron Mac doesn’t quite work either, except to shake all over every seven minutes. He’s programmed by the Dutchess.” Harry flicks his head from side to side trying to understand the professor’s speech, looks of vague comprehension, anger, blankness, waving over his scarlet face.

Porkpie tugs the professor off the table by a leg, and the fat man escapes to spreadeagle onto the hamburger and bounce loudly off. He sits on the gravel now, Porkpie standing over him. “Come off of it

Professor! Leave the guy alone. There's something wrong with him."

"Precisely what I've been saying, brilliant one." The professor springs up as efficiently as his bulk permits.

"Oh you been saying all kinds of things, all of them fuckin mixed up!"

The professor sits on his chair and brushes himself off. "Mixed up? Yes and no," he whispers. A dark breeze carries his words over the hamburger. "I am sort of a smorgasbord—Buddah and Machiavelli, Eastern religion and Western Logic, love and..."

"Yeah yeah sure!"

Diane suddenly pipes "And the farmer took another load away. My father knew about you! And why don't they turn the lights on?" While Harry applauds methodically, the professor smiles on the opposite side of the hamburger, nodding at them in a benign, paternal manner, his hands over his belly, looking really quite peaceful now, as if the confrontation he and Porkpie had provoked had run its course.

The waiter finally serves the married couple, his false beard looking more purple than black, the

antenna on his walkie-talkie like a corposant in the strange heaviness of light.

“Arthur,” the professor continues in this over-early, strangely falling dusk, “you do have a kind of common sense. I’m impressed with your logic.”

“You’re tutoring me math—least that’s why Mom’s paying.”

“Tutoring me math? You’re illiterate, thinking skewed and syntax screwed.”

“Anything you say.”

“A provincial. In ten years or so you’ll likely acquire enough polish and taste to admire this horrid Fishface sign behind me.” In the darkening his surprising tone seems almost prayerful.

“Do say?” Porkpie weakly kicks pebbles against the fence.

“But keep watching old Fishface, Arthur. I wanted to give you a nice surprise for so long. It’s going to be rather an historical point.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Won’t be long. I envy the Dutches with her powerful binoculars...sing her eyeballs.”

They both must attend the hamburger, where a something has plopped, grayish, and now slides down the enormous bun. Diane is dabbing her blouse with a napkin.

“Milkshake Honey, milkshake. You get two for just paying for one. I know you don’t like milkshakes but you don’t have to throw...”

“No-o!” his fist comes down on the table and a few glowing french fries fly up against purple light.

“She that?” the professor asks the shrugging Pork-pie. “It’s a horror movie. I tell you they’re surrealistic. Must be alumni of that institution down the road to which I’ve dedicated my life!—well the last few months anyway. Dedicated!” he screams at Harry, who begins ingesting handfuls of the incandescent french fries.

The hunters sneer at all of them. “Slobbo professor and the nut-cases,” one whispers.

“Dedicated! You don’t scare me, Iron Mac. People like me are beginning to stand up to people like you.

Dedicated!” and he leaps up and wrenches his arm at Harry as if throwing a ball.

“Well good for you!” Diane all but sobs.

Porkpie is pulling at the professor. “Sit down you fat freak! Will you sit down?” He pushes him into his chair which scrapes the fence behind him. “You won’t last out the semester if you keep this crip-crap up.”

“So?” The whites of the professor’s eyes glisten in the nearly dead light. “Look around you. This is hell! The apotheosis of kitchy witchy koo in the bitsy-precious bark canoe. And here are the tourists! Iron Mac and the Dutchess—America’s lowlife on the move. Watch the murder! Watch the murder, Iron Mac! Buy a replica of the knife with blood that’s guaranteed not to come off! Oh and here’s a naughty doll, two really. A TOOOFER ONE! Dutchman and his wife screwing—made in Japan.” He is sobbing now, the bubbles in his mouth black. “And here I tried to bring music, here I tried to light up mean lives.”

“With pot I suppose!”

“A one-time thing!” the professor recovers, “I’m high on culture!” Behind him the merest orange-y sliver

of exhausted sunlight brightens the glue between the layers of wood in the dark mouth of the Fishface sign. Harry and Diane eat mechanically; Porkpie pings stones off the plastic hamburger while saying “My Pop, he don’t want me hanging around with you no more.”

The professor covers his face with his hands, rubs his beard, and then finally whispers “I’m your passport from the Dutch Wonderburger you’re hitting with those rocks. World’s largest ashtray, ugh! If it weren’t all so tragically awful it’d be funny.”

“You two disgraces!” Diane rejoins, “are the funny ones.”

The professor is too far into his description to take notice. “That plastic grinning idiot standing up there and blessing us with his monster pretzel like the Pope! And ALL the winking, blinking, turning...ugh, and the WIRES! STRANGling you!” He has put his hands around his throat. Knuckles phosphorescent he gasps “This is the bottom of hell and I’m the devil trapped in ice!” grasping his throat and choking himself at the end, his sweatshirt darkening under the arms.

“Never thought devil be so fat,” Porkpie sneers as the professor’s eyeballs bulge, the whites appearing

to float. "He thinks he's kidding, but he may be killing himself," Diane informs the sudden policeman, a young, husky man who laughs "He's at the college."

"Well they're hippies or something—and awful mean." Harry slowly nods in assent, french fries in his mouth like cigarettes.

"That's not breaking the law, Ma'm."

"Law and Order, Law and Order, lock up your daughters!" comes the professor's cracked and husky voice over the hamburger. Porkpie shuffles away when this young policeman points a finger, but the professor responds "I know...that's enough. Everybody's always telling me that but..." he glimpses at his watch, turning it to see in the marginal glow, "last laugh's due in three. Synchronize your...consciences!" He tilts his chair back to lean against the fence, stares up into the nearly black sky. "Going to rain. See it up there? Local rain...no water. Hope it doesn't spoil anybody's parade."

"My husband's sick and we're on vacation—that's why I went fast," Diane tells the chubby policeman who has been shrugging at the professor's act—which continues to merit the locked-on stare of Harry and of the hunters.

“I’m just suppose to check everyone’s i-dents,” the policeman laughs. “Driver’s license or something?”

“Is is anything about Olla,” she inquires.

He rubs the protruding stomach of his uniform shirt and wrinkles his forehead as she searches the pocketbook, money fluttering darkly out at her wrists. “How you spell this here...?” consulting his notebook. “No this one is E-u-l-l-i-a...can’t read the rest.”

“Olla’s O-l. Her husband’s Harry’s partner.”

The waiter comes by, appearing moulted now. “Wonder whirl wiggle not once but twice! It’s a double Toofer-One!” squawk the loudspeakers out into the gloom.

“Is such a MIRACLE possible?” The policeman jumps since the professor’s question is keyed high-C or thereabouts. Diane drops her purse and she and the policeman, and even Harry, dive under the table after it.

“I bet it’s going to be a demonstration!” enthuses Diane in the new intimacy on the gravel. Any warmth is dispelled by a purple hatchet of a man who joins them under the table. “What in hell are you all doing? You got these people’s idents?” The

young policeman begins straightening up as the chief plucks Diane's license, shakes the gravel off and squintingly reads it, tosses it back into her purse. The rest rise—Harry banging his head on the table—a beat after the young policeman does. “KILL IT! KILL THAT WONDERBURGER!” the loudspeakers command.

Ashes are falling out of a liverish sky, Harry tasting one and convulsing. “All's I need,” the chief retreats as he says it, the policeman following. “Who these people?” Chief demands while brushing ashes from his uniform. “They Quakers or something?” He looks to the young, fat officer as if no answer from him would be possible. “Anyways I gotta go grab that idiot Chinaman or Turk or whatever the hell he is, make him stop burning that shit right now! Said he wouldn't do it on weekends too. Council's gonna have to do something about him and I mean yesterday. Can't have tourists coming through this pukey crap.” Diane is brushing off the dancing Harry as the professor almost sings “Quickly! Quick-uh-LEE! Cover the plastic hamburger! It's an historical treasure!”

“Who the hell's that foolish hippy with the kid?” The chief has been truly startled.

“Bearded one's at the college.”

“Well who’s the girl?”

“Boy. High school boy.”

“Well I’m not sure of anything in this gluk but I’m damn sure you aint getting around to get those idents. Now hop to it—and get weapons from those stupid hunters and put ‘em in trunk of your patrol car. They can come by later and explain to yours truly why they’re hunting around here—another thing I’m taking up with that lazy council.

Everything’s changing around here and they’re sitting on their fat ass.” It’s almost black now and the wind is comprised of swirling ashes. The chief holds his nose against the sulphur smell.

“You’re just nervous is all. I got it here.”—as the policeman waves a loosely-muscled arm to indicate the whole establishment.

“You just be careful. Hippies’ll say you hit them when you don’t.” Then the purplish chief peers up through the gloom. “Upwards of twenty men on this, State Police sending. We knew about it last week. Where were they then, hey?” He blows out a nostril towards the gravel. “That there college trained ministers...that’s all they fuckin did years ago! Well I gotta get back and pour the mayor out of some gin mill or other.”

“Goodness!” and Diane prods Harry’s ribs. “It’s just like on TV.” Harry thrusts a fist as if looking for someone to fight, but stops abruptly to stare profoundly close into a luminous cut on his hand.

Inside the kitchen cube within the wide, strange, gloaming, the chef throws a switch and arc lights flicker all around them, but can only radiate a few feet with any authority. Everyone is weakly brushed by a sick bluishness. The policeman is approaching the group of hunters next to the professor and Porkpie along the fence separating the Dutch Wonderburger from the soon-to-be-built Fishface. In a second he seems swallowed by them, mystical red blotches from their clothing agitating in the sickly light. They all possess their rifles and are evidently arguing with the policeman. One hunter leaves the group to rest his against the fence, squat there to guard it.

Now the waiter is among them, the silvery antenna snapping madly and making transient, chrome-colored fans as he is pushed and pushed. Soon another hunter abstracts himself to pull sticky steel wool from his fingers, but the professor shoves him back into their roiling midst where he actually gets punched in the face by one of his fellow hunters when the professor appears in their midst yapping “They’re going to seize the hamburger! The cops

are! It's World War Three and this is the Hamburger Sarajevo, the Hamburger Sarajevo!" The young, sweating policeman shoulders his way through the hunters to get at him, but a slim state trooper has grasped the wild-eyed professor round the chest and is backing away from the group, dragging him. This new officer whirls him round; another has a spacey Porkpie by the elbow. More troopers are pouring in on both sides of the hamburger and now the hunters are anxiously surrendering their weapons.

"Pretty dilated," the slim trooper says of the professor's eyes.

"The light's bad, not to say corrupt, and I got the virus."

"That's what it is, hey?"

A lurching car, its tires spitting gravel announces the return of the local chief. "Let's everybody finish up their food," he shouts from the open window. And getting out as the car still slowly moves: "Gotta clear this place and I mean now!" Diane is thinking that all the new policemen look thin and kind, and so she asks one when the demonstration will begin, but he leaves to go over to the fence where she notes that several policemen have the professor and Porkpie leaning, and are patting their behinds.

Though the ashes no longer fall, the sky is still liver-colored, pulsing red from the spinning lights atop the police cars. Diane lifts her binoculars to see even more of these red lights sliding down all three roads and into the valley. Because the binoculars are misaligned, the dim policemen seem flat and doubled, as if four sit in each car's front seat. These twin cars fatten past doubled gas stations and diners to sort of elbow down through the matrix of wires.

The chief flies back to Diane and Harry, knocks the binoculars from her eyes, and goes on. His back turned, the scarlet chief can't see Harry trying to butt him with his head. He whips around puzzled after Harry has missed and fallen. "No time to play with you two this time! Move it! And I do mean now! And you just better watch it!" he bellows at Harry, teeth chattering in his small face. Harry, seated on the gravel, bursts into tears.

Every few seconds another police car wheels into the parking lot. Most of the state troopers have on what looks like motorcycle helmets with black visors hiding their faces, but the officer with the bushy moustache who directs traffic wears a downy Smokey the Bear style hat. "Don't let them get behind me so I can't get out," instructs Diane. "I wanna go see the demonstration on TV."

“Taking care of that, lady. but you vamoose right now.” Studying Harry he adds “‘cause we don’t know what-all’s gonna happen.”

He has pointed to the brim of his hat in some kind of a salute, and now his hand seems coated with a kind of phosphor dust as it drops so slowly at the general shriek. Everything seeems to hop a little, the air washing up against everybody with a fuffffff, pushing all the policemen and diners back. There is immediate silence now, but the loudspeakers continue shrieking because the waiter has thrown the walkie talkie against the fence and it lays there buzzing and squawking and whistling.

“Oh my God too late!” whispers the trooper who had grabbed the professor. He says it as if he himself is to blame. Diane is walking towards the fence and is jostled by the boy in the porkpie hat who tears past her emitting a kind of humming sound. He bounces off the hood of a late-arriving police car, sits down and drools. His hat rests up near the windshield when the car stops. Inside the restaurant the chef’s face pours down the glass, the lights running red blue and green behind him. Harry folds into the car like the good boy Diane had a moment before described in her request.

Before Diane arrives at the fence she can see that the Fishface is spitting fire, a sooty liquid rolling from its mouth. Then she's close enough to see a few tongues of flame scattered along the vacant lot, a heap of blankets vibrating in fire under the Fishface.

The center of all the fire and shaking is a sitting form of a girl, stiff yet shriveling, that finally settles down inside itself like an ancient doll which has been dropped. In all the fuff-fuff sound once can almost hear a sigh; then a cloudy woosh as a policeman plays an extinguisher, and white powder falls upon the blackened mass.

Diane spins around to check that Harry is safe and he grins back from the car. Her hair has become hot, and she puts her hand to it and shivers. She turns back with a sigh to see smoke rising the same color as the black air as The Fishface spits liquid and flame. Most of the cops are clambering over the fence now, chalky handkerchiefs held under their visors.

"But I didn't know it was going to be like this," a girl's small voice floats in monotone as she is led with others to sit against the fence with the professor. She says it again and again as she flops down into her army clothes and chokes. A small black

youth in an immaculately white t-shirt jumps up. “Oh my God did you ever?” he croaks. “Wuuuuffffff! and that was it! She went right up!”

The professor seizes his hand and pulls him down. “Cool it, just cool it, Hasan. Eullulla made the sacrifice concomitant to her revolutionary aims and objectives.” Now a fat girl in a sari retches and the professor hisses something like not being stong enough to make a revolution. As these revolutionaries draw in tighter from the surrounding policemen, the professor asks to read something when the TV crew arrives.

Diane is backing up when they do, so they leave their van on the highway and rush in. “You blew it! I gave you the right time and you blew it!” the professor spits. “Dumb fucks everywhere! But,” he waves a paper, “I still got something here for you.” Suddenly laminations pop apart in the Fishface’s mouth and white grains puff out. The professor’s group laughs in the tension but he scowls. “Okay then, one second,” he directs the cameraman already sitting on the gravel with a bulky camera on his shoulder. The professor slides an Afro comb through his beard for a musing interval, then gravely smiles.

Diane hears a little of his statement because her car has stalled and the key refuses to turn for some

moments. "Our sister, Eullulla in her
pyroconsumation...rare courage...horror
hypocrisy..killing Asian-Indian-
Blacks...Vietnam...pseudo-moral
constructs...revolutionary..."

"All dull and work play," Harry states as they fish-
tail in departure, benign, both, in the dim light from
the dash. Diane grinds a fist into his crotch.



The Last Book

This late word from Bridgeport, Connecticut where the last known book in the Eastern United States has been bought at auction by Keshio Hirwarati, whose Galaxy-Osaka Enterprises includes the worlds's largest chain of All-Universe Dimensional Video Stores. The book, PAwakening the Real You , by Dr Randall Eccles, evidently one of the masters of the period, originally accompanied an old-fashioned audio cassette.

We have some Hologram! We...don't have some Hologram. We...? Oh I see it's live, but Flat Format for some mysterious reason, so don't touch your depth controls. Repeat: do not! And...too!..instead of Infinite-Angle Immersion Sound we seem to have none at all.

What good is the latest...if it doesn't work, you may ask?

Well at any rate, we see Dr Hirwatari paging though, showing us, I think, that each page has a number.

And I can, our tech-wizards inform me, reach Dr Hirawatari on Reverbaphone. Thank the OVERAROUNDALL! First, congratulations.

“Thank you. You see page, number. Is real book, even though little audio cartridge with it one time. Funny little cartridge... real antique!—if you can buy.” Yes indeed. Tell us, Dr Hirwatari, to what do you attribute the near extinction of the book. One hears—quaint sounding notion today—of the nearly total diminished need for lineal literacy, and of course we know that the creaking technology of book-making had to prove prohibitively expensive.

“None of reason. Was this.”

You’re holding up a remote control? Excuse, Dr H., but my picture’s breaking up.

“Primitive..they have when you have still, the many books. Could access not much—audio, video, and tapes-have-both- of-them... computers, other things. We laugh old equipment today but never mind. But no book you access! Impossible access book with old-old- generation remote, and so...?”

But you could actually go then, at that dim time, that is physically transport yourself, to repositories called... libraries?

“No, no such thing. Li—how you say?—berr...? No suchhhh...”

We’ve lost Dr Hirwatari once again, both the Flat Format picture which we should have apologized for—and do now—and the Reverbaphone link. But I can tell you he promises that the new acquisition will go on display next month in the Madison Avenue store. Repeat: next month! Mad Av.! And now we Tele-Satellite- Zoom into the typhoon in progress in East Borneo. That...person has just this instant been, uh, rendered dead.

These are scenes of Natural Violence so we deem no warning to children to be necessary—those of you with life-sized screenbowls just might want to exercise some judgement with the little ones nonetheless.



Introduction

I'm writing a short story. Fine, written a hundred or so, but having just read a critical work on deconstructionism, I need to change something, although my feeling is that I 've always deconstructed—smashed up the calcified bourgeois everything, or tried to. And must continue. 1995 and never more necessary.

Is what kind of short story valid? Question sounds academic, icy breezes through a skeleton. Hear 'em?—how can you not? Old people wheeze, and young people craving A's.

New Yorker type, long on soft-pedal suggestion? Let's say a guy stares at his crotch while things happen peripherally for thirty pages or years—like neon reflections in rainy blacktop being processed by a drunk. Hero's future, as they used to pronounce, is assured. Determined. Character is farts.

Something modelled on TV or movies? Perhaps a clownish dude who ultimately charms an independent lass with her independent ass. The touting of the screw as they fight, fuck, fight, fuck, and marry. Marry!

Staying with the inspiration of film, something happens at the end of the black 'n white archetype akin to the crescendo termination of a pop singer's most depraved single, elevating the banal to the insufferable. There's a corollary in fiction of course. The O'Henry ending had a certain flapdoodle charm, but this modern dodge resembles a literate grope towards your privates.

And ending a more recent pastel-color movie-y version: steam a-gurgle and carrying acceptable flotsam—no rubbers—as indeed we are all artily carried etc on the etc of LIFE etc. (Or willows wave as they are wont to do...rustling-sound up BIG. Oh wouldn't Adolph gravely nod assent?)

Not relevant, either one, unless we want PHILOSOPHY in our story.

So accept a tale most acutely modern wherein a woman, don't call her girl, gets the crap kicked out of her by abusers she has prudently chosen to do the job right, then snaps to, sick of being a "cunt!"—whereafter a sweet hello from accountant Clarence will provoke a reply threatening to cut his balls off.

In another version of this horseradish, a gross macho-mouth actually beCOMES Clarence! after

INsights burn through the insanely driven everyday brute-fantasy of Capitalism.

Of course you can't sustain any of this stuff, even to the modest lengths of the form. Well I can't. Actually, can't stand it.

The strength of the greatest practioners of most art in our time is that they can keep performing their schtick without puking. They deserve everything they get.

(When you know your work is truly vomit-inducing, then I guess you keep heaping it up. What else, in our time, can you do?)

There is padding, telling detail to stab some cretin's heart; there is repetition in every mode—somewhat cloaked if one pretends to craft. Also, most writers hint around, except Jack London and religious types. (Well...must be SOMETHing here, reader puzzles.)

Let's see. Other types of stories? Of course, but why survey? We're both lazy enough.

If the short story were a turkey and it is, and is full of shit, however drizzly-inclined upon occasion, then it surely has been raised for Christmas.

How many times was Eugene O'Neill's father the Count of Monte Crisco? THE COUNT OF FUCKIN MONTE CRISCO!

And yet the most abjectly disgusting ploy is: I'm writing a short story. Oh if only I could kiss my own selfconscious ass! Mount-fuckin-Olympus. Well, then, I'm a crud? You? Both? Why do we have to ruin everything? And why not?



Little Things Mean

Host I agree. Sometimes the little things can make us human. And, by the way...I always wanted to see YOUR little thing.

Sidekick I've heard him say that.

Guest Oh come on now!

Host This instant? Hey! Let me tell you: I am READY!

Sidekick He's all ready!

Host And able.

Sidekick Well, that's open to debate—in this quarter, anyway.

Host Hey the Christmas Party! I was bombed.

Sidekick Do you have any hobbies, dear?

Host Okay, okay. We want the vast radio audience to find out more about our lovely guest—as you clunkily remind me. Say? Who's running this show anyway? By the way, Doll, this is radio you know—

nobody sees. I'd give anything to peek under that lovely blouse. Filmy, didn't they used to call that?

Guest I'll bet you would.

Sidekick Don't.

Guest It is a trifle sheer, m'dear.

Sidekick Just a bit. Sensational, I'd say.

Host Lucky we don't have a bra sponsor but never mind. Listen!

Guest We will!

Sidekick Not!

Host Whattayuh say? It's not like it's NOTHING in return—I mean like you'd get from MOST sleazeball dates in this town. Let me tell you, I don't pray, but if I prayed, I'd thank God I didn't have a daughter because of them.

Sidekick You'd LOVE a daughter and you know it! Your heart would rise!

Host Yeah I would! But like I was saying to our GORGEOUS guest here...and just pronouncing that

word makes something else rise.

Sidekick Oh oh!

Host Which begins with p.

Sidekick I'll take a chance and say penis.

Host I know you gals got some infantile something like it, but, like, there AINT no substiTUTE for!

Sidekick We don't buy that!

Guest No way.

Host Look! Honey! I know it's ART and everything. I know that! But you're getting a halfhour of national time here! What do I get?

Guest Well, let's finish the halfhour, and then we'll see.

Host You hear that? Sounds like a promise to me! So, how about, first, that peek: see what I'll be getting into, either in the balcony or d-OWN! in that s-WEEEEEEET basement?

Sidekick Alas! All hanky-panky must wait as the excruciatingly beautiful...

Host Excruciating all right! I got another word for it.

Sidekick ...holds up a tasteful T-Shirt which says-uh? LUST AND FORGIVENESS.

Guest Luigi Barstoli did the design.

Host A knockout! Okay, so let's get into the, excuse the expression, MEAT here. Title of your novel, right?

Guest Not a novel, autobiography.

Sidekick That's when you do it yourself.

Host Yeah? Well let me tell both of you that I've had too much of that! That's one of the things our guest is here to cure.

Guest I'm not a doctor. I'm a whore.

Host You hear that? You hear that REFRESHING candor?

Sidekick Don't I?

Host Honest to God that's great. That's great! I can't tell you the number of whores I had on this

show who...

Sidekick never came out of their sluts' closets.

Host You got it! And of BOTH sexes! I'm no sexist!

Sidekick Of course you're not! That's one thing we both know about you.

Host Of which I am damn proud!

Guest Thanks, both of you. At any rate, my book is being finished, and just is waiting for one, uh, ingredient.

Sidekick Which would BE? Fanfare please!

Host Like, don't bother with any cues. They're playing with each other in the control room—as usual. Maury! Don't let us disturb you, now—faggot! I didn't SAY that! Slipped out. Please, no cards and letters and phone calls. Like, believe me, I'm a supporter of everybody's rights. I mean, I gotta be.

Sidekick But...?

Host He's still a faggot. But I mean like a faggot'd say the word for God's sake! I'm truly sorry, Darling, the so-called staff around here sidetracked us.

Guest We got the t-shirt, the album, the miniseries, the tabloid installments. All ready to go.

Host So? Like? Whatsaproblem?

Guest I just haven't chosen the bigtime pig.

Sidekick Haven't bedded him yet, you mean?

Host Note how women get to the point. WE'RE the romantics. Men!

Guest Right! Bedded! That's the shorthand for what I do—like saying Mickey Mantle was a baseball player.

Host You mean you've got the t-shirt, the album, the miniseries, the tabloid installments, all lined up and ready to go? You just haven't nabbed Mr. Bigtime Pig yet?

Guest Book's really all written, just left blanks for his name.

Sidekick And it's all gonna be true!

Guest The only way I'd have it.

Host You mean you're just gonna manoeuver ole Mr Bigtime Pig into...?

Guest I have a feeling I just might be able to.

Host Blows (excuse the expression) me away! But let me get this straight now. You mean you've got the t-shirt, album, the the miniseries...

Sidekick Anybody hear echo around here?

Host SHUSH A MINUTE! The tabloid installments, too, all ready to go. And you REALLY haven't just picked the bigtime pig, excuse me, MR Bigtime Pig! As of this moment?

Sidekick Better look out!

Host Holy God, Honey, I love it! I just love it! And you don't have to do ANYthing to me! Either during the show or after. I'm giving you, like, absolution!

Sidekick He's MOVED!

Host And everybody's saying where are the ideas anymore in radio? These numbnuts! Or anywhere for that matter.

Sidekick Amen!

Host Hey, next time I wanna bring a lesbo on with you. Think of it! Triple-header!

Sidekick Let me say “excuse the expression” for you. That last could be misintrepreted too.

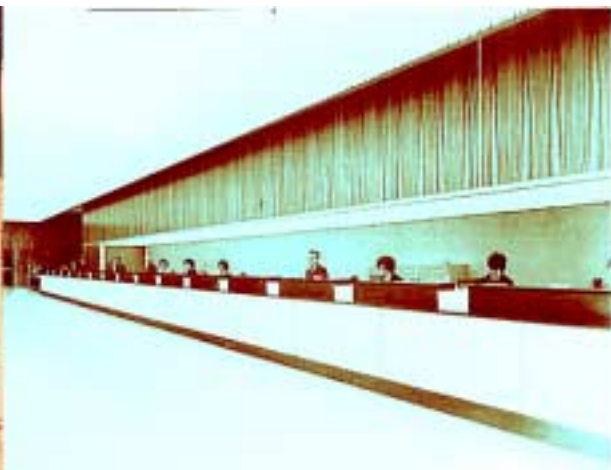
Host Hey! Eye of the beholder, am I right?

Guest Certainly, and thank you. Both of you. I don't mind telling you I was scared to come on here, but this has been perfectly lovely.

Host Hey! Believe me! You can COME...oops we gotta go to commercial, always when you're getting into something fascinating!



INSTITUTIONS



Transactions

*****3/21/
95*****PLEASE LOGON WITH
YOUR CODE WORD

*****//caesar

GO AHEAD CAESAR

//my goodness its ten years to the
day you started putting up

with me,,,,,,,,,or so my computer
blinks

WHAT IM HERE FOR SIR

//well im all bolloxed up again

ALL RIGHT IRA I DONT HAVE TO
LOOK UP I REM THAT AS

TEN THOUSAND GIVE OR TAKE FEW
CENTS CHECKING AS OF YESTERDAY

CONTAINED FOUR HUNDRED TEN

//oh thats good

REM OUR DISCUSSIONS ABOUT OUT-
STANDING CHECKS

//oh yeah god i think there may be
one or two

SAVINGS ELEVEN HUNDRED ON
THE BUTTON RT ON THE BUTTON

UNUSUAL

//youre not kidding,,,,well after all
these years god youve been

so helpful,,,,wish there was some-
thing I could do

NOT AT ALL

//are you there,,,,i mean right there
in that building where

bank is hope you can open
window,,,,springs exploding all

over

SECOND FLOOR

//i can almost hear your voice even
though we just type i can

hear your voice

AND I YOURS I CAN ASSURE YOU
CAESAR

//and i can hear you laughing now

I WOULDNT

//no i dont mean sarcastic laughing

WELL YOURE RIGHT

//for once in the ten years well
as I said if theres

anything anything at all

*****THIS PART OF TRANS-
MISSION ENDED;;;TYPE MORE! FOR

ADDITIONAL,IMPORTANT INFORMA-
TION*****

//more

RESPONSE INCOMPLETE RECHECK
ADVICE MESSAGE,,CAESAR

//more!

WHY DONT YOU JUST COME DOWN
HERE AND SCREW MY SOCKS OFF

//



Two Documents

Well, Diary, these are the human problems.

H. became very nervous about her daughter's Holy Communion dress, it not being white enough, dressmaker passing off more of a kind of cream color, she felt. (Naughty dressmaker!) So she snapped at L. over a bit of bookkeeping, something L. had always done that way. L. cried, and then I, Uncle Peacemaker, entered the woeful! scene.

But now, my door open a few inches, I'm viewing them in the outer office, backlit and looking ethereal and altogether lovely in the soft light of this Spring afternoon. Ah now! H. is opening the box and showing the dress, and L. assures her that it is quite quite white indeed!—while pouring another cup of tea for both.

The steam, green and glowing, wreathes them round and makes me think that life itself is beautiful—however troublesome, at times, our duty. Well, once a romantic...

At any rate, diary, business! I'll let the ladies talk all the more, writing my letter by hand instead of dictating to H.

Dear Dr. G.,

Perhaps you would honor us with another visit. With all respect, I believe the gas to be too slow—I'm not a chemist but suspect the concentration too minimal—or just a faulty batch(?) Please phone to make an appointment. (I write you by hand because my ladies are healing a tiff, and I choose not to interrupt.) Ah the human aspects of our work!



“No Sexual Intercourse Aloud”

It’s a curious guilt, this being amused while knowing better.

At first, I was part of the humoring process, concurred at least. I’ll back up. For two or so hours a day I sit in a sunny alcove at a magnificent state library, all marble and aromatic oak, and full of musty, pleasant tradition (the library that is). There I commit research, the subject of which is interesting only to some one hundred experts, so-called, in the world.

We actually meet sometimes and, as human nature would have it, develop solemn friendships and dark hatreds over immense trivialities—frequently in some sin-bucket city where we manage looking bemused while terrified. New Orleans was the last place for this hyper-stressed voyeurism.

At any rate the particular citizen I laughed at in our coolly moral library was meticulous, richly dressed, aglow in health, and unable to put the simplest thought directly.

A typical verbal dance of his, and there were many...well let him wend his torturous way as he speaks to the chief librarian, a man of some presence, not to say girth. "I need, uh, when a person who has the knowledge and facilities, uh? Is...asked?"

"That would be help, information. Why I'm here." The chief librarian is a florid fellow and one, not surprisingly, of great appetite, who often was eating something or enjoying the memory of it—in any case he had looked the latter way that particular afternoon just before the approach by the fidgety, inarticulate one.

And there they remain in memory, surrounded by rosy marble and comprising what the TV boys call a two-shot. But I should stick to the subject: "Of course. Where's my...uh, mind?"—he asks our librarian while fairly tapdancing along the marble floor, black shoes flashing. (Well I don't have it, thank the Lord! I think, seesawing on my own feet in front of the card index.) "Anyway, the one fellow... and the other?" he dances on, "Instrument involved. He. The first. Wooden. Though

they're metal, uh, aluminum now...some. Not relevant to my...?"

Finally standing still, he begins sweating, his profile a blue shimmer against the rosy marble. "Your question?" smiles the chief librarian, hands on ample hips, and lifting an eyebrow at me as if we two formed a compact of mild toleration against this vague and silly man. It's an idea I don't like—didn't like then. A good person, one with courage, will let no one assume he is uncritically going along.

"But not at all levels," this uncertain man plods. "The highest...forbidden. Aluminum, that is."

"Uh huh," nods the benign librarian, seeming to increase in girth in his rootedness as this flibbity-gadget again begins circling through the dusty slants of sunlight, and firing his asinine comments and questions from all angles. Aluminum indeed! Well, getting the actual question from him was like digging aluminum from out of that marble floor.

"I see," says the librarian, his British tweeds deepening in afternoon light—perhaps his

beginning to “see” in the midst of the other’s verbal and physical dance being a mellow function of his few luncheon Heinikins rather than patient erudition.

Still the doltish wanderer hasn’t found his precise ground: “After the striking of one, why then another, uh, of an opposite, uh, faction, has the obligation to to to to to..?”

“To catch...a ball! It’s baseball!” the fat librarian affirms.

I’ll spare you the five, scraping minutes, with the minor librarians, female all, going in and out of the stacks while shaking their gray heads, until their hearty chief extracts the final question: the career fielding average compiled by Babe Ruth.

Hallelleulah—a rare something the fat and florid librarian didn’t know outright. He told the dancing bumbler to look in *The Baseball Fact Book*. Of course.

The other performance I remember most, of a rainy, swirling afternoon when autumn leaves plastered the windows: “Structure... people living in...he’d been Princeton president

too...but but but a side...kick, SIDEKICK!...political... IMPORTANT!" he finally blurted— well most of his utterances could be classified as blurts but this was, in the words of archival TV's Ed Sulllivan, a really big one. "Rank! Army!"

At any rate the question (?) eventually proved to be in reference to Colonel House, paramount advisor to Woodrow Wilson. I'll bet you came close to guessing that. (Strange such a game can prove addictive. Way of showing off? How smart we are in decoding confusions? I suppose, but what do I know?)

"Well...we got there! Goodness!"—the first time I had heard the chief display any impatience, but for some reason strange young people had begun hiving around, dressed in the latest fashions of sexuality and rankly wet from the rain.

At that time, I still held the memory of his knowing glance at me during the Babe Ruth episode, and felt my guilt both renewed and amplified, for I sincerely desired the approval of this large, gregarious man ever since I had witnessed the impromptu party at the Ole New England Inne (actually an Italian restau-

rant, mostly). As I shaved a hunk of Vermont cheddar and sipped white zinfandel at the bar, he bestowed small gifts brought back from England after his yearly trip to buy clothes. To be truthful, I profoundly envied the warmth the waitresses and the bartender revealed towards him.

Never unfortunately one of the boys, I nonetheless shared the raucousness at the immense vulgarity of a blownup rubber woman he fetched from his sportscar at the last, and which held a tray for drinks atop giant breasts. This prize went to Shorty the delivery boy, a man of sixty. I laughed, as the expression goes, until I cried.

But then wondered at my tears, as construction equipment gouged and roared nearby and my white wine vibrated in the glass, wondered what more there was to them. A loneliness wider and deeper than I had suspected. It had to be faced, of course.

As you can see I know no reason to spare myself: in the pursuit of degrees and minor honors, I should have become a better human being. No excuses.

At any rate I often marveled as to how he could be so educated and cultured and yet so daringly vulgar? And so so warmly open! I had observed him many times around the restaurant, huggy-kissy around the women, and like a ruddy locker room comrade around the men who, at least the ones rougher-edged, called him all sorts of whoremongers and faggots. (The restaurant attracted a wide clientele.) Anyway, the whole Italian-Colonial place brightened when he set a chubby foot inside. In his English shoes, of course.

And yet he remained a learned and cultured colleague in the sacrosanct confines of our library. Truly A Man For All Seasons.

I am a stick, as I said, inward, shy nerd who, given the chance, is liable to say the wrong thing in mixed company, or the right thing at the wrong time. Or to say nothing when all look to me.

Or, even worse yet, most often attempt to say nothing somewhat eloquently. Oh well. You know me I dare say. My name is legion, that lame, educated, legion of the perpetually half-fearful.

I therefore could never be like my librarian in the scene I often picture: large red-checked napkin tied round his neck to shield his tweeds from the lasagna and from the oversized goblet of ferocious Cianti he gestures with, he's laughing with everyone. A little wine flings off the rim and hangs in vibrant air. (For some reason, too, those red drops reappear to me from time to time, by themselves, abstracted from the convivial scene.)

But...I'm happy enough. What life offers most of, I have had. Now much of it is over, with my wife ill. It comes to us all at some point, the hand impossible to play.

Anyway, the librarian had a perfectly lovely life, taking as it did from scholarship and epicurianism and warm friends.

Okay, you ask, where's the dark cloud?

In a shipment of television tapes. As far as I knew, not a modern electron ran about any instrument in the marble library—old books and index cards, and banker's lamps radiating dust down from cracked green shades. (Even the phones were those black prewar thumpers which could withstand a direct bomb hit.)

Therefore had you popped in a few weeks ago after fifty years absence, you'd be pretty comfortable in the fact that nothing had changed, inhaling, ah, that venerable oaken fragrance. (But don't we need some such place in the fury and slash of our instant world?)

"There's a mistake." My heroic librarian kept smiling at the wiry trucker who was methodically piling the boxes of television tapes between them on the floor.

"Nope. And I leave it all here whether you sign or not. It's no skin off my nose. I do what they say. It's easier like that, believe me."

The shame of it, and that's exactly the right word, is that this driver would never bring his son here, which I as small-d democrat lament—and yet the place is a treasurehouse for all the world, let alone this city. I guess I'd have to fault the chief librarian there. Oh there had been the occasional grammar school group herded in, but every citizen could have found something of value—even latent criminals anent the exhaustive law holdings.

At any rate if you're excluded from something, or feel you are— the same thing, no?— it's virtually the same as being a criminal anyway. But there I go being hyper-critical again—trump card of the impotent.

The cartons stayed unopened while he tried to get the library board to remove them, visiting each member at his and her place of business. But, no go, since the governor himself had decided. It seems that the silvery-sleaze media center of the capital had burned down—fast. (It had been named The Grafton Reece Center and was popularly known as Graft n' Grease). At any rate something called the MY MOTHER THE CAR FESTIVAL was rescheduled, instead, at our holy library! I felt the entire project had been conceived as a joke since I vaguely remembered the TV show as a weak one, but intense young careerists with bottle-bottom glasses had mobilized behind it. And they found little that was funny.

My last gastronomical view of the librarian was his snapping something to his favorite waitress, whom he called Beatrice, as to the quality of his veal parmigian: "Metallic cheese!" he sneered—so unlike him. Yet...he was right. The standards at our favorite res-

taurant were slipping, as soggy crackers in front of me on the bar testified.

Around this time, too, Cross Punks appeared with their hair, their walkmans and loose muscles. As you know—and know—from tabloid television, the boys dress as girls and vice versa—as if anyone could tell. I believe they did all of the setting up of the VCRS that the state, in the person of an earnestly demanding young woman, had delivered in a jumble of machines and cables. The grayheaded librarians would have nothing to do with her—technology and those connected to it smacking of sin.

Presumably the Cross Punks checked out the tapes from the old show and watched them—such activity comprising the “festival”—actually they watched pornographic ones they had carried in.

I had no trouble with their playing with sexuality. After all, we had already gotten better acquainted in recent nights, my watching them on latenight talk shows after my wife had lapsed into fitful sleep. Kids...that’s all. They’d assume the role society expected of them sooner or later. Right now they could

flaunt their hatred for the uptight rest of us. To tell the truth, the violence associated with their “movement” bothered me more. It always does, but it’s always manifesting itself, and in all eras. Why in Sam Johnson’s London, as an example, delinquents calling themselves Mohawks would thump the bejesus out of any stragglers between taverns.

The chief librarian had done his best to give some class to the My Mother the Car Festival, flanking the circulation desk with posters executed by a leading Japanese graphic artist, and showing a ghostly black-and-white collage of mothers of all races, along with foreground autos, mostly Ferraris of a walloping red. The kids giggled at the posters the same way they giggled at the confused questioner when he went into one of his vague dances. As a matter of fact, it was they who witnessed the one concerning Woodrow Wilson’s Colonel House their very first day on board.

Oh well—fools of the old and new orders.

The vague man took to lodging in an empty alcove and muttering out the window at construction materials being unloaded across the narrow street. I joined him to see where a

hole in the ground attested to the departure of THE INSTITUTE FOR THE NEW...whatever. Only a portion of the old sign stuck up from the dumpster. When they uncrated a greenish gold statue of Delilah cutting Samson's hair, I deduced we were in for another S & D Healthclub. This great leap forward in reasoning was followed by the huffing up of the chief librarian and the whole tribe of acned crossdressers carrying VCRS and monitors. "They have to come in here now!" he all but screamed. We didn't inquire as to why, hearing the sobs of an assistant librarian retching out somewhere in the middle bowels of the building.

We settled ourselves at a desk across from the kids and they ran a tape which popped up on the largest monitor. It showed what I took to be a French sailor. He wore a top of horizontal red stripes and bell bottom pants, and everything about him was sunken, his chest, the hollows of his cheeks and eyes. Was he ill, addict, what? Then a Brunhilde rushed in and tore down the velcro front of those trousers and, of course, the extraordinary sprung forth, explaining the spavined look: all the energy had drained down into the thing.

IT MADE HIM AN INTERNATIONAL STAR! crowed the whiskey voice of former blond leading man Ty Merrick. Thousands went in the training of that voice, ravaged but still resonant even in that marble with its horrible acoustics where you couldn't hear the person beside you at times—a fortunate case now, since my vague desk partner launched into a Panglossian movie review, decrying the poor lighting would you believe? Ty's voice kept repeating, as did the whole fantastic vignette—the kids had spliced the business into a loop. (Shouldn't our own stupid acts be depicted thus?—the repetition'd help us truly see ourselves.)

Suddenly all the construction guys across the street shrieked and cheered at once, somehow catching a ghost image reflected back off the glass of a dusty print of Robert Fulton's steamboat on the wall above our heads.

The kids turned the monitor around for them while putting hands into each other's blouses and pants for our benefit, one young person staring and staring at me. The only look I've ever seen absolutely empty of emotion. Blank is too woefully inadequate an adjective. The construction boys continued leaping up and

down like loose electrons and I began encountering a monster headache.

This is when I, shy as I am, complained, and the entire “festival” was again moved, this time to the basement, and therefore I and the other resident bookworms didn’t have to bear the ambivalent young anymore, nor hear the cheers of the construction workers.

We didn’t miss either; we worked on, our own small nonsense a barricade against the world I suppose.

Meanwhile the staff lurched into a public relations mode. This policy was instituted one bright afternoon by the chief librarian upon the advice of a local politician who promised to intercede with the governor—insinuating that the librarian could perhaps do something for him someday. He also advised him there’d be more clout if the library became more visible, and that he’d therefore have to train his staff to greet the bound-to-widen public with some warmth.

My first intimation of profound change was a circle of the gray librarians surrounding what looked like a huge, florescent lime. This latter

proved to be the sartorial version of the politician's advice in the person of the chief librarian in a green leisure suit which looked like it had been cut with a machete. His pep talk lifted the other librarians off reserve and they positively radiated towards any request, later that afternoon hedging in the vague man who more brightly danced in their collective regard. His subject...well they never found out since smoke flew up the semi-circular stairwells, packing the angled sunbeams, and we all observed the chief streak greenly past.

Upon return he burst "Practically a marijuana bonfire down there! But that's not the worst of it. Oh no!" Spastically fetching a piece of poster board and a black magic marker from beneath the main circulation desk, he made a sign reading NO SEXUAL INTERCOURSE ALOUD

When he was taping it up over one of the now-straggly My Mother the Car posters, I had to approach him. I knew he meant allowed and not aloud, and puzzled how such a literate man, however distraught, could make this mistake. The worst thing was that try as I might I could not make him understand, and thus the sign remained. I did hastily persuade

him—it was thank goodness closing time—to join me for a drink at our restaurant.

Which...was gone. We picked our way atop a steaming heap to a bulldozer parked with its nose up. A whipping banner attached to it boasted S & D WEST WILL SOON JOIN S & D EAST! “No one told me. Why would no one tell me?” he repeatedly asked, stumbling through the autumnal vapors of his own voice, the leisure suit taking on a bronze patina in the smoky light.

“A hellish circle this,” I sighed, knowing his love for Dante.

I stayed away from the library for a couple of days and then one late morning while I was serving my wife her herbal tea laced with a little cognac, in bounded my friend on her little TV. He still hadn’t jettisoned the leisure suit which took on an unearthly green glow, or rather pulse, fitting the angry ambient of CONFRONT!.

Gary Withers, in that most damning of phrases a local broadcast celebrity, began by taunting him, “I understand you’re trying to

throw young people out of that fancy library of yours."

"We are open to all persons, all subjects, all research, all knowledge, but I don't have enough room for the material I—"

Gary Withers interrupted him. "So many shows from that whole dumb era and you choose Car Mother! Why not Peter Gunn? At least there'd be decent music!"

But my friend could not be turned from his sterling selling job "...happy to see many more people, every man woman and child of the community...the library is our collective pride. International reputation!" (What the appeal realized the following week was a trio of old maid retired schoolteachers, all blue hair and bounce: We didn't know this place exISTed!)

Gary Wither's other guest was a newly self-ordained "Activist of Disgust": "What you doin' down there, man? We gonna open it to the people! Go down there and piss on the floors. Wake yo' ass up!" I could feel the chief librarian's heart seizing under that stupid suit. "Can't say piss and ass over the airwaves!" smirked Gary Withers.

In the only lucky break I can remember from this whole degrading time, that following week a chartered bus took the activist's group to the wrong institution, and they made their odoriferous statement at The Transportation Hall of Fame.

In the ensuing weeks the vague man took to hiding in the stacks. I think it was because the youngsters had taken a perverse interest in him, often performing little comedic scenarios imitating him and the chief librarian—both of whom they depicted as surrealistically hyper and hopelessly confused.

The appearance of Buster Nevers, though, brought him out from the stacks. It all but overwhelmed me too. Buster, a few years past his retirement from the National Football League, established a massive presence in the lobby of the library, his own color and his beige Italian suit blending so magnificently with the rosy marble as to make the rest of us uncomfortable. But he too became quickly agitated when the vague man commenced asking him his oddly slanted questions, beginning "He kicked it and caught it! Another sport. Not football—" and on and on...

"I don't have the least idea what you're saying! No clue, man!" Buster ultimately roared, and our old dithery friend turned on his heel and walked out the door forever, sucked into blinding, mercury noon.

"Welcome to Blitz Day!" announced Buster Nevers when he had gotten himself back together. The librarians huddled around, the chief still in the green leisure suit, alas much looser, the right breast featuring the sheen of a tomato-y stain that had probably come from a gobbled meatball sandwich after the television show.

Buster had a dual charge from the governor, to move kids and equipment to a new library opening in a shopping center, and to introduce a bar code system into the circulation process.

"Hello. How are you?" he observed the niceties several times as each kid departed, holding equipment under one arm and squeezing genitals with the other. "Now would your mother approve of that?" scolded Buster finally, which led to greater excesses and some hyperbolic grunts.

“Well thank God that’s over,” sighed Buster as the last girl (?) turned round darkly from the brilliant doorway to give us the finger. “If a kid of mine...!” and he slammed an enormous fist into his looseleaf notebook. “But back to business...”

I couldn’t help thinking that the knot of them resembled the scene when these same gray librarians surrounded the chief as he introduced his now-rusting green leisure suit to the literate public. But this time the confidence from the richly brown center of the group was fairly stinging the air: “Tomorrow we bring in the machines; today we learn three key words! That’s all.” I can’t remember the words now, and they couldn’t learn them then.

After a half hour, Buster turned to me as I pretended to browse through a drawer randomly extracted from the card index. “Am I a bad guy? Do I look like a bad guy to you?” I shook my head as the assembled librarians glazed. “Walls! I got walls here! Welllllll... we’ll write it down!” He yanked a pencil from an inside pocket but it snapped in his hammy hand. All the librarians shrieked at once, bouncing echos about the marble lobby.

“Whoa! I got another! Save the upsets for the big things. Please!” He handed another pencil to the oldest librarian, a lady as crushed and sunken as had been the French sailor, but with no latent potency of any kind.

He instructed her to write the number one on the reverse side of a Mother the Car poster, but she looked back with such fright that he gently transferred the pencil to the chief librarian. “Sir! Don’t let us down in this! Unnnnnnn-LESS it’s some sort of joke? Did Lukey Maxwell out of the Cultural Affairs Office...?”

Our chief librarian held the pencil fiercely posed. “Well, never mind then. Do you suppose that you could make the number, the Roman numeral, one?” The chief librarian emitted a sort of high-pitched mewling sound and attacked the poster with the pencil but...I don’t know quite how to say this...couldn’t bring the point in contact with it in order to write, instead slapped the pencil sideways again and again, the flat of the instrument that is, against the cardboard. It sickened me, has ever since, and even as brusque as he was, Buster Nevers found tears in his eyes.

Chief turned to me, his face as loose as his green suit, and thrust the pencil towards his baggy throat. "Inside...press up! Up! Jam! Hard! Mur—murder! What?"

"You're angry. Hurt. It's been...too much." I softly took the pencil.

"Yeah?" shouted the alarmingly reassertive Buster Nevers. "Well it's all too much for me!"

As he stomped out I found the chief librarian practically in my armpit. "Crap TV," he began, "bar code shit...horror kids!"

"Yes."

"Where friends? Restaurant? Why? Presents. England! England!"—his face ashen.

"That was grave. How they could sell out to developers with nary a word to you, I..."

"Scum politics, ugh!" he shuddered.

"Not a place for you or me. Not that we're pure—but relatively we certainly are! Naive for sure. We can't sense the greasy wheels within wheels—don't have a clue."

"My beautiful library and then then then smoking g-g-grass."

"Terrible."

"Fucking!" The other librarians left.

"I...don't know," I touched him. "You get comfortable and then the bills come in, and the dues must always be paid eventually. Anybody happy can't be left that way I suppose. Not for long anyway."

"Books?"

"Yes? Books?"

"No more," he sobbed, grabbing my arm, his eyes skidding beyond terror, the two of us fronting the ancient wooden cabinet. "No more books. There'll be no! Nowhere!"

His face went fish-belly white and seemed to be melting downward.

"Oh there'll be one or two left," I encouraged.



The Three P's

"Well! Then! Who do we have here?" Turning a corner onto the sunporch, he played the upbeat young doctor but the "patient" proved to be a cauliflower sunk into the canvas seat of a wheelchair. C. Flower noted the chart hanging from a chrome arm.

"Is this the joke on the new hand?" he sniffed to the head nurse as they stood in her airless downstairs cubby . "Not exactly," she reached slightly into his jacket. "This belt buckle is so unusual. Difficult to undo?"—an old-fashioned nurse featuring starch noises when she moved.

Marched he to the hospital administrator, a person roundly comfortable without him. "Ah yes, you've gone and discovered C. Flower then? She has been a model patient." He managed it all in a sigh.

"She?"

"We've gotten used to referring to her as a she. One thinks of cauliflowers as feminine, don't you think?" He had never thought about it and didn't now, the memory of nurse's

noisy moves still fuzzing him. "Well now!" the administrator brightened, "You'd like an explanation!" In an immediate slash of dusty sunlight, his granny glasses opaqued on a pink face.

"I insist!"

"Of course, since she's your patient. Your others will be much more nettlesome, believe me."

"I'm not trained to treat..."

"Of course not. But, then again, we're not trained to do much that the world requires, are we?—the newer things especially. There's a...personal world, a professional world, and a political world. The three P's you might say."

His own personal world revealed itself in color photos of three little girls—the doctor could see the administrator's soft facial features in each. One black and white picture presented a woman—wife, the doctor deduced—with something like the administrator's blurry face too, plus strain, greeting a robed African

"My wife is also a physician. We are physicians. Like you." Behind the blank glasses no eyes were evident; the young doctor did not answer. "At any rate, C. Flower, was born in response to the political. As a kind of joke at first. You see we have the minimal number of patients under state regulations. If we lose one, another must come in. Last month we lost one, and had no one to admit. They would close us down!" He waved a fat arm expansively, as if to include his wife and daughters among employees.

So, we admitted C. Flower. She's temporary— 'll be chucked into the dumpster at the appropriate moment. At that point in time, I'll put her down as transferred to a private convalescent home," he sagely nodded to himself, his glasses only somewhat gummy in the office's quick darkening—slumberry gray eyes now visible. "Will it rain or what?"

"No. Not supposed!" the younger doctor snapped, sulked, recovered. "She's my...patient! How can I partake in such an an an immor...a crooked game?"

"Do be careful, Doctor. Many have lost professional standing by being pigheaded in these

or similar circumstances. I'm asking you to be a mensch ! All life isn't diagnosis, treatment, and lab tests on stool samples."

"ComPLETELY absurd! I don't beLIEVE this!"

"My young friend, every institution forces one to perform absurd tricks," he stared over playful hands. "A kind of power dance. That is, the higher-ups conduct us with the most benign of smiles," he smiled, "and we dance. I guess it's how you use your baton in this world that counts, yes?...sort of joke." His wink stuck.

"Well not ME dancing! I'm going to HAVE to write a report before..."

"Don't bother. The inspector will be here in an hour or so, and want to talk to you as the new physician. Ah if done 'twere best done quickly! Everyone in the hospital, including you, out on the street! Including me—with three in college. And, God, the poor people in the kitchen! They don't just send resumes out like you can. Carlos is so proud of that cancerous Thunderbird!"

“No alternative! Such corruption defies everything!”

“Well, many things, I’ll grant you that. Uh, well, more than a few anyway.” The administrator, in ritual weariness, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes as the young doctor bolted.

That afternoon, the agrieved physician saw his clear duty as simply pointing things out to the skinny inspector—wanting to feel not responsible after that point. So on their walk to the state car, he merely stated “Before you leave I want you to meet C. Flower .”

“No thanks, I’ve seen enough.”

“But, this is quite important.”

“Hey! You’re here to treat the Alzheimer’s Brigade. More power to you, but I don’t have to look at it and think of myself with the drool running down. No way!” The inspector would not be moved into the contrived scenario.

“But this particular patient is a cauliflower!”

“Hey! So you got a few vegetables here; I didn’t know you differentiated.”

“I really must insist!”

“Hey, Doctor! I’m really Finance.” And, leaning over it like a mincing question mark, he opened his laptop computer and punched in a formula which blinked on the screen. “See that? This’ll show them! My invention, and the whole system’s gonna eventually use it if it kills me!”

After his shift (his relief, Dr Kong, giggled yes to all his complaints) and with his head abuzz with newer strategies, he headed to nurse’s cubbyhole again, beginning to consider thinking about seeing her as his sole potential ally. At the least, he hoped she’d take a few moments to listen to reason.

Oh she’d try her discrete SEXY business—he wasn’t naive—it still wrinkling his mind with alarming starch: as had the inspector defensively crunched his beloved NUMBERS, and before him, the administrator dispensed SCHMALTZ.

Personal, professional, and political indeed! A whole world of corruption.

He was fathoming, descending into her atmosphere, how he'd set up once again his moral heart.



All a Dither

We all started avoiding him because he made us nervous. I had never thought of how to label his actions until my secretary says "This new printer dithers; I mean it's supposed to, fills out each little individual letter better that way."

"It cost enough! Dithers, hey? Like Dagwood's Mr Dithers in Blondie, hey?"

"Yeah," she winks, "or somebody else."

Well that somebody else was our Mr Dithers, so as his supervisor, I finally sweettalked him into early retirement. Well, I mean, you couldn't see him! He'd make you blink and blink.

On his last day we took him out to the best of the city's second tier of restaurants and our waitress squealed at him "Well look at you! Wow, you're the best one yet!"

"He sort of...dithers," I whispered.

"Yeah, right. Whatever. Everybody does, really. I see everybody's. Everything."

“No kidding. Mine too? I do? I have one?”

“Sure! You should see a rose! Experience it!
Awesome!”

“Make sure Cookie doesn’t overcook my
steak.” I wanted to make sure.



Tug

Sees her in a construction bucket being hoisted up against the sun to a traffic light outside the dental school. Her darkly yellow helmet. Flees to Houston Hall where friends discover him shrunk into a triangularity of Espresso Cart, Arby's Roast Beef, and Philly Cheesesteak.

"She's here! My mother! Red light!" They convince him it's impossible, to lighten up.

Back to his room to fetch books for Political Science, he departs the dorm through a crew raking leaves. Checked flannel shirts, shafts of dusty sunlight. Her. Quite round and singularly benign, looking a bit like the pope about to bless with a glowing rake.

Jettisons books and papers, all, into the crunching leaves. Past his friends catapults he—who try to intersect Hey! Runs to exhaustion, then staggers onto the Philadelphia Art Museum's steps, collapses—at the top of which she's doing a Rocky imitation in capacious bra above boxing trunks of snaking iridescence.

His second wind cuts in and he bolts to the campus.

That evening the university opens a new folk center, and he, chosen by a student committee to give the address of welcome, introduces afterwards a troupe of mummers, designated a "Cowboy Comic Brigade." A sequenced twenty surround him, twirling ropes while performing the famous mummer's strut, a kind of zig-zagging stompabout as if wearing snowshoes.

Lasso slaps his shoulder, flops round his head. Down to his waist. He doesn't look up.



THE PROGRESS OF THE BREAST

"You're welcome, but it's Jerry. Mr Blenheim is my father." He had been thanked by Jill Ann Ilg for retrieving a rolling lipstick from under his computer table; its gold, he noted, matched the highlights in her chestnut hair.

"What with you being a vice president 'n all, well..." Miss Ilg was going on.

"Well here I'm the class dummy," he interrupted.

"Not while I'm around," Dr Monogham stagewhispered off to Jerry's right, his own computer screen rolling off calculations with wildly increasing decimal places. "I don't even know how I got into this stuff!" he laughed. "My business is words."

"I'm told it's all really numbers there, even when they turn it into words. Or the machine does...or something," shrugged Jerry, the vice-president, to Dr Monogham, this silvery, puzzled Irishman.

Dr Alfred, the Instructor, minced behind Dr Monogham to push the button to the frenzied monitor. "We shall let it work in the dark for the nonce, yes?" Jerry thought Dr Alfred's small hands were suitable to the work.

"Oh...nice! The dark!" Jill Ann teased them, that generic teasing appropriate to her age and station. Nonetheless, Jerry wondered if he blushed. Dr. Alfred slid back of the silver Dr Monogham to him, class dummy, self-proclaimed.

"Well, you've done it all right, Mr Blenheim. And in what? Twenty eight lines? Example of what we call Brute Force!" (The name too of a men's cologne Jerry recalled from some massive billboards.) "That is, you instruct the computer to do every bitty-witty thing, step by step, without taking advantage of the shortcuts of some minimal math. Therefore, Brute Force! But we need a bit of cunning in life, yes? Oh your program'd run as it's so laboriously set up, but why bother? I mean we all would've gone stark raving mad if your way is the only way we could program computers, hey, Mr Blenheim?" Jerry managed to conceal only part of his disappointment as this too-emphatic and pursed-mouth teacher

moved—step by tiny step—from the down-cast vice president to most fashionably slim Jill Anne Ilg, who had littered the top of her console with makeup-stained tissues, the gold lipstick case standing up among them. She was using the screen as a mirror to neatening her blush. (Had he stressed Mr because the other two men in the room were PhDs? pondered Jerry.)

Dr Alfred whistled. “Beautiful! Well, from Gattling Gun to poetry! Three-line program! Like a little poem, Miss Ilg! Wow! Run it! I think we have a computer natural here, gentlemen!”

How could she, she who wincing Jerry had seen exfoliating tissues and gum wrappers around the hallways and in the employees’ cafeteria, brushing on her makeup while studying herself in her down-twisted rearview mirror when his company sedan crawled behind her weaving Subaru of a gray, dripping morning in the long line into the plant... how could she...?...with her high school education...when he...?

The class not insufferable enough, Dr Alfred proved to be one of these New Age instruc-

tors, for at the break he asked the three pupils to bring back anything from outside the training center which symbolized them in some way. Jerry went immediately to a shivering maple and picked up a fallen leaf. He would decide what to say about it when Dr Alfred asked, never having forgotten the words of his curt old mentor Pick Hallen, newly retired to Duck Key: "Throw the dart and then draw the bullseye around it."

"Whattayagot?" It was Miss Ilg, he knew from the one-word quality of the question.

"A mystery not ready to be revealed." And, palming the leaf, he turned round to fall in beside her, he in his bluegray suit, she her denim miniskirt, unsteady on her heels in the mid-morning thaw of the frosty grass. When they came to a stream, she insisted on trying to inch down the steep embankment to fetch a smooth red rock for the appraisal of the diminutive computer guru. She started falling, and reached back to Jerry who seemed abstracted, thrusting out his hand late.

Jill Ann in zigzag pellmell stumble finally slapped into the water and hit her head on a much larger rock than the one she had de-

sired. Her dress flowed as best it could for its short length and blood trickled thinly into the current from her splayed-out chestnut hair. Jerry yelled and the nearby Dr Monogham, who had been digging up something with his toe, came running. Together they got her up onto the windy meadow, her head bleeding profusely by now, and Monogham ran to phone the company ambulance.

“I saw you.” Monogham sighed later at his machine. “You reached out for her but, alas, a second too late.” He nodded to her computer, atop which artifacts remained, his white hair still aflame from wind and excitement.

Jerry felt his palms sweat, seeing that image of her small hand reaching to his own, and he nearly knew he had decided not to help her. Oh it was petty and cruel to punish her for outshining him in class, immature too—but he felt, if true, no one would ever know.

He glanced to Monogham in fear of being observed, of giving something away with his face. What he saw was a message blinking
LOVE YOUR CROOKED NEIGHBOR WITH
YOUR CROOKED HEART.

"That's not the program I'm working on," Jerry recovered.

"Shhh. Oh god I forgot you were a vice president. You caught me." But Monogham said it as if he had done the catching. "I'm working on the poetry of Auden. Certain lines I mean." His blue eyes were blinking in rhythm to the green line on the screen. "It's a kind of hobby of mine, something to carry into retirement. This is the second time I've taken the course and I know all the solutions to the programming problems. So I sock them out in a minute or two and bring up Auden from another disc I've been working on."

"How about that mess of numbers earlier?"

"Little red herring," Monogham smiled thinly. "He doesn't know I took the course before, Dr. Alfred—nor much of anything else. Why, I bet he even forgot where he parked his butterfly."

"I see," Jerry saw in his way. "But, whatever, he does know something about comput..."

"Company money wasted? Is that what you're thinking?" Monogham's eyes became a stiller, icier blue.

"Not necessarily. My management style, so-called, allows a little elbow room. Auden's poetry might just help the company somehow in some obscure way, that is you become a broad...and and happier employee and thus...if I'm not stretching it too..."

"Broad?" winked Monogham. "That word on your mind is it? Or on mine?"

They both became momentarily embarrassed. Looking down to notebooks on his desk, his forehead shading beyond its baby pink, Dr Monogham yelled "She's in Mercy hospital but she's all right." The comment was directed too at Dr Alfred who shrieked over the phone.

"But her purse is here I tell you!" The voice on the other end of the phone was loud enough for the two men at their computers to hear a verbal shrug.

"Oh I'm so glad that she's okay," Jerry whispered. "If I wasn't so damn slow...even at

this." He waved an arm at his computer.
"Both symptoms of age I guess."

"You get it faster than anybody else I've seen take this course."

"Oh? Miss Ilg wrote a three-line program that accomplished what took me twenty eight!"

"Her bodyfriend's in Systems!" Monogham slammed his notebook closed, not in anger for he smiled merrily. "He wrote the program out on a notecard. That's what all the crap is on top of her monitor. She had to find it. Dug it out from all the noxious crap in that Black Hole of Calcutta purse of hers."

"She cheated? Why? It's...not the purpose of the program... and there are no grades or anything like that. I don't get..." Jerry was slowly, genuinely, shaking his head.

"No stakes at all. Not really. Some time off from the routine and maybe the exposure to personal computers and dummy-programming'll help you down the line."

"So why cheat?" Jerry repeated the question as if it embodied a profanely tragic mystery.

"Habit. That's the difference between the generations I think. They cheat habitually." Monogham lent his voice a scraping resonance: "We always had a dark, darrrrrk reason for doing so."

"We're better, not worse. You make it sound..."

"Initially we're all of us just scared I guess, but after a few dozen times its just a way we've learned to behave. Programmed, if you will." Monogham typed ROMANTIC US!!!!!!!!!!!!!! NIHILISTIC THEM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
"Wouldn't Jill Ann Ilg be just astounded to know she was nihilistic?"

"Are you...from Personnel?"

"Guilty. But you don't have to be afraid. I can't haul you in for any tests or evaluations, only the secretaries and low level engineers and other clerks of such subterranean ilk."

"I'm not afraid." Then Jerry laughed. "Actually I was for a ridiculous moment." After he gushed this last it surprised him that he could be so intimate with a stranger; Monogham somehow brought him out, and not solely

because of his vague guilt over Jill Ann Ilg. (How hurt, really, could she be? he had been asking himself.) "I forget I'm an exalted vice president sometimes. I feel that's healthy for me, to forget that is. Thus I didn't mind being the class dummy—even in dummy-programming!—a kind of double indemnity." Jerry found his own humility disarming, warming.

"Ah but you did mind. You didn't want to. That's not quite the same" winked Monogham. "And the recently battered Miss Ilg was, of course, really the class dummy—unless you think it bright of her to get the quick routes from her boyfriend."

"But how do I handle it administratively?" Dr Alfred squealed, hopping a little, her absence assuming near federal proportions.

"Old Brute Force there," nodded Monogham, "can't get the message and can't handle it when he does." The voice on the other end of the phone attempted to reassure Dr Alfred. These two at their monitors remained content to be without their teacher, both manfully on station even though somewhat wet from the rescue of the academically fickle Jill Ann.

"You may have a point there, uh, my partially not wanting to mind being class dummy," Jerry allowed, a bit more archly than he intended. "Any, uh, more secrets about me?"

"Just that I thought I saw you hesitate...that you had a chance to grab her?"

"No way! Just too damn slow I told you!"

"Well maybe you're not that sure. Maybe a...more of a mixed picture in your head than that. Our motives can befuddle us at times. And at so many times we only have an instant to..."

"I can assure you that I...!"

"Well, chalk it up to my usual distrust, nothing personal. I guess it's that I should love my crooked neighbor with my crooked heart. Uh, well, you're my honest neighbor so nothing applies to you." Monogham pressed a key combination and his screen blanked.

"God look at my hair! That wind was a mixmaster out there during the emotional mission of transporting the maiden ever up-

wards from the water, the white-haired elder and the heroic chieftain. Sounds like a myth.”

“I’m not Goody Twoshoes, believe me,” Jerry was fretting, a sort of chemical smell coming off Miss Ilg’s spent tissues. It annoyed Jerry almost as much as Monogham’s wild hair and pseudo-literary nonsense.

“All right then, I’ll believe you, Jerry—if I may truly call you that—when you can’t believe yourself. At any rate she’s not the angel who couldn’t quite fly down the embankment, and you’re not quite the devil who programmed the chaotic results from his graybeard experience. And I am not the assured professional since I was afraid that you as a vice president’d report my fudging the computer course with my work on Auden’s poetry. A kid’s feeling, isn’t it? Afraid of being told on.

“Thus and so we are our calculating selves and we are our driven selves and we are our unknowing and confused selves trying to do something right as we see it and not seeing it for vast stretches at a time....” To Jerry, Monogham could have staunched this breathless collation of “insights” at any time.

And Dr Alfred should take hold and resume the class! Monogham sucked up a quick breath, going on to "...and often figuring something out much too late after all the hurt...and always always always capable of doing something petty and cruel, not planning it or anything but when the situation arises...?" The effort cost him a scarlet face.

"Guilty—at least in some of that...rush I would guess, but not in the situation of the lately unfortunate Miss Jill Ann Ilg—or should I say Ms Jill Ann Ilg? Say, are you a psychologist?" Jerry wondered too—resting an elbow on the keyboard, his screen thereby sporting a repetitive garbage—if Monogham was a drinker.

"Yes."

"That why the line about...or rather lines about..."

"I know I run on. Anyway...what I perceived. I don't maintain it's right. I talk to get a fix on things. What counts for you is your view."

"No, no, I...was just slow in grabbing her. That's tragic enough. I'm at the point where I

might have to move fast soon. Make the right decision or it'll be made for me. I might have to leave...choose to leave the company." He was giving Monogham too much; Dr. Brute Force still babbled over the phone.

"My! Worried is it? That's as close as you'll ever come to a revelation I do believe! Oh good! I made you laugh! By the bye, in the office presidential sweepstakes pool, odds on you are dead even."

"Hmph. No kidding? Better than I deserve." That's an odd word to choose—I deserve to be president."

"That's the spirit!—for you."

Late that afternoon they met by chance in the hospital gift shop, and then proceeded to the elevator. The same plastic package of carnations in each right hand, they ascended.

"I was so stupid and awkward," Jerry began in her unlit room as Jill Ann sat upright in the bed while smoothing down the powder blue shorty nightgown on her slim thighs.

"You were nice. And you're nice now so that proves it!" She tossed her head slightly, the blond highlights now dim strawberry. He was stopped by her comment, standing by the widow and observing the glossy traffic in the blue light outside while puzzling over how such a sweet logic could square with her cheating in the course.

"What they had left. Why we both got the same." Dr Monogham, jerking as if sexually possessed, his voice climbing an octave, shoved his flowers right atop Jerry's on the bedside table, next to the tissue box. Jerry saw a lovely, very young girl with thin, almost boyish legs.

Strangely, the blue light from outside intensified, blooming. This is where she laughed, throwing herself back on the bed, and when he experienced a moment which would come back, standing at the window and hearing the laughter and seeing the light in that room, sniffing the slight aroma of past-fresh carnations from the sealed boxes...her starting to turn towards him, the sheer nightgown of an almost-white blue, and under it a breast shadowy and yet faintly creamy, the dark dark nipple the color of a black cherry.

The next month the board in a surprise move selected him as president, and the laughter and much else abruptly ceased, though the image of that breast persisted. Whether studying blueprints on the plant expansion he was shoving through, or walking Clancy, their Springer Spaniel, through the snow and soot park near the condo, the breast would hove into view, creamy white and lovely.

Once it superimposed on one of his wife's as she awaited his tennis serve during a stolen short weekend in Florida. She rocked side to side; the breast followed. "What are you waiting for?" Carla snapped, puffing her black hair from out of one eye, "Inspiration?"

Both of them panted under the lid of one dark, humid cloud, his ears hammering, his eyes diffuse and hers darkly fierce, the top of the net assuming an unearthly white glow. At his further delay she announced "And you'll never beat me again!"

A year into the obsession he reasoned it would help to see Jill Ann, but was too hedged in by flunkies when he dropped by Maintenance, and he couldn't get to the Dispatch Section with any grace.

Once some whimsey entered in at the wedding of Treasurer Peter Lapides' daughter: the breast swathed in a Virgin Blue playing peek-a-boo behind the brocaded chief priest—no hint of flesh revealed, though, not even in pinpoints.

Some vague time after that, Carla rented *Citizen Kane* in order to disprove its claim as the greatest American film. Jerry was busy with papers in his home office and the only fragment he overheard was an old character musing on a youthful sighting of a girl in white on the Staten Island Ferry, saying that never a day went by that he didn't think of her. He slid the Treasurer's preliminary report towards the green-glowing desklamp and softly moaned.

On his next walk with Clancy while fleeing a condominium dispute, one faction of which was spearheaded by his wife, the dog's eyes pleaded as Jerry addressed the beautiful image lurking in the bluegreen gloaming above the first snowdrops to break bud that sopping spring.

The breast was this time a peach-and-cream confection, stock still as the wind began throwing itself around the sky.

But no amount of warning or of fierce concentration would free him, so he concluded "Your gumcracking Venus! Just...work harder! You're lazy!"

"Damn Fraud!" he excoriated himself while yanking the leash as he spun round. Clancy whimpered back to him, the wind slamming both their voices together.

"Love your crooked neighbor, hey Clance?" he queried the dog while removing his leash, the sound of the acrimonious meeting penetrating his walls from the nextdoor apartment of the eminent gynecologists Spirungold. "Actually she was built like a boy! Pipecleaner! Can you imagine? Me with my taste for the bulbous in that strangely opposite sex! That that little breast that haunts this middle-aged ass was hardly bigger than a boy's! would you believe? I'll...have to give in soon and see a shrink." Clancy scabbled away to his bowl of gaseous-smelling dogfood; the resigned Jerry, still bent over with leash in hand, noted Carla's whining intonation from next door.

“Oooops...she’s beginning to smell blood,” he whispered.

Nearly a year later at Personnel’s sedate, candlelit retirement dinner for Dr Monagam and three others, held on a wintry, stinging-white night when most events were cancelled, the two men joked about computers while standing under a homemade banner attesting THE PIONEERS.

“I didn’t know they’d get to run my whole life! How’ve you been doing with...Frost was it?” Jerry asked, knowing it was a mistake, that Dr Monogham would know he remembered the poet had been Auden.

“Remember whatsherface, Joanne? Practically naked in that hospital!” Monogham elbowed, his face firing up with Scotch, his eyes like blue water. By this point in Jerry’s mental life, the breast had, of course, almost completely abstracted itself from that late afternoon in Jill Ann’s hospital room, but the whole cream and blue scene began assembling, even to the odors of the carnations.

“No, can’t say I remember.”—but why should the president play? Let the others play he

chided himself. This bold thought propelled him to want to tell of the haunting breast, since he couldn't, finally, submerge it the way he always had everything thing else internally disquieting. Besides, Monogham had already gotten to resemble, in The Town and Country's flickering isle of candle glow against what had become an outside blackness, windswept and thrillingly cold, a benign priest behind the confessional grill.

But he could not so confide, especially as president: Discretion always had to be the other side of that coin. "Auden! I remember it was, something about all of our crooked hearts. Well I've met a few of them in the ensuing years. And Jill! uh, Jill Ann was the girl's name."

In his mind he heard Monogham saying "Give us this day our daily breast, hey?" and he held his breath in the waxy smell, then released it in self-congratulation as candle flames bent horizontally when the draft carried the funereal smell of bouquets paid for by the various departments.

He hadn't seen a psychiatrist—too risky as he calmed the many palace disturbances, forcing

early retirements in the process. "I'm getting the young people ready. They must take responsibility earlier," he reported to the board. "They simply make too much money just to stand around and watch. This passivity becomes habitual, and when we do let them step forth they're all but infantile. The chief leadership problem in this country is the prolonged wetnursing of its youth! And there also must be some, uh, more women," he weighed in with an afterthought.

But he finally did get his chance to tell someone. At a special seminar for the board and a few shareholders and an officer or two with facts and figures, at Blackwater Falls in West Virginia. He had trudged back to the lodge with a group after again witnessing the breast, this time adrift ghostly white through brownish fog in back of the dark, falling water.

Intoned the guide back then, a fuller-figured woman, "This whole valley was covered over, bridged actually, with thick thick rhododendrum. The Indians walked on top, and panthers...in the darkness black as a cave underneath...what? What do panthers do?"

Slither? Moved with no sound anybody could hear on top I would guess."

"Don't fall in, that's all," quipped Rissley of Accounting. "In the primal, eeeevil dark the panther's eyes are fires of desire!" added 'Belly' Lauder of Publications.

Even though his shoulders mysteriously pained him terribly once back at the lodge, Jerry fetched his mini computer from his attache case and punched out a little piece of adding machine tape which he then left for conference coordinator Maureen Persky at the desk: WHATS BELLY DOING HERE?

Turning round to resume his sunken way to dinner, he encountered his old mentor arriving and they left Pick's bags to go for a walk.

The obsession burst from him on a white oak bridge fairly swimming in moonlight. He walked to and fro through the vapors his frantic words had left.

"Nearly two years. That long?" the seated Pick asked softly from a shadowy nest of worn-smooth clothes. "Well, now you've given it to me you can forget it. It's mild stuff,

Mr President. Everybody has more demons than that. Things, uh, visit me...uh, even at my age. Anyway, you can really get on to the job now. Without this...you can really get on with it. Get rid of even more deadwood at the plant! You got the guts for it. I can tell how wearing it's been—even without this floating...thing. Hey, I don't know..." and here Jerry winced—people who sought to help him always managed to say too much— "there's a pain in what we do, much of it, a cost. We get married, we...work. Nobody gets off scot free. You seemed crazy to yourself but it's just life." Pick lit a cigar just when clouds started past the moon. As the far sound of the falls washed into shuddering breezes astringent with pine, Jerry sat down next to him. The men remained some buffeted moments in warm silence.

The moon reasserted itself brighter and larger and Jerry felt love for Pick, who immediately rose and started walking back to the lodge, his body looking bent and all but crushed by moonlight. The glow of the receding cigar tip reminded Jerry of some vague something but he never saw the breast again.



The Experiment

She is given an entire life in four hours though
programing with accelerated hormones, will
die of lung cancer at equivilant thirty-one.

I arrive, late, missing the birth and more, but
get to observe her gangly first kiss. Sweet.
The boy too.

When she proved a whiz at math I applauded,
the roboteacher waving clawfuls of A-papers,
but then in college she wrote politically cor-
rect poetry, wretched by any standard, usu-
ally beginning something like

The pigs decline
to sniff the slime

and ending in the wimpiest pseudo-intellectual
"romance."

Your own aroma
redolent of these
thesis-innocent lovers
intertwined like leaves
of ancient, neglected vines.

I wanted to scream: Stop wasting precious
time on this blather! There are always modes.
Think! Forget what all the asshole careerists
say!

Embrace yourself and your ideas!

I guess she was a bit sexually slow, quarter hour or so anyway, and I couldn't watch at first, uh...well I'm shy at any rate, and the knowledge she would die in ten years...well, a couple of hours actually.

I could sense he was a nice young man, though a bit macho-mouthy, and I started crying. I didn't need that.

My section leader laughed to the other ones about me and the lovers.

"Such an old-fashioned display all round! Let me tell you I wouldn't trade our drop-of-the-hat fucking for anything! Drop of the PANTS anyway!"—she always topped herself.

I wasn't required to watch our young woman die—though the muddy X-rays remain in my consciousness, slapped up for viewing too fast to really discern. The section leaders had ordered in beer and wanted to get to it; me, I couldn't wait to dive back into my TV-Bowl.

"You've seen pure science!" my section leader crowed as I left.

Why is it always so unsatisfactory?

The Singing Wire

Jerry found the toy in the old bureau just as the phone rang in the frozen attic, a Boy Bombardier Set with cross-haired scope, and wooden bomb the size of a penlight battery.

“How nice to hear from you!” he told Ben. I hope you and Renata are cozy on this ferociously white evening. I’m up in the attic and it looks like a Christmas card down there on the street. Am I breaking up by the way?— little portable phone.” The Boy Bombardier toy in one hand, he held the phone in the other, its vibrating antenna forming and reforming a ghostly fan among the large wet flakes pasted on the window.

“I can hear you fine,” Ben answered, “It’s a shame you can hear me.” Instead of following up his puzzling remark, Ben shouted “Alone with all the memories in the attic, huh? I don’t know if that’s good or bad! Sorting out things, what to throw away what to...?”

“You got it! I only started moving in my stuff a few hours ago but already I find I can’t live with the clutter Mom did. But, you were about to say something else...?” Silence from

the other end as snow hissed through a cracked pane, topping a little pyramid on the sill.

Jerry wondered about the phone, shook it. "Ben?" he questioned. Red air darkened in the attic.

"Whoa! Don't shout. I'm here! Just had to find a way... tell you Jerry...uh, sit down on a stair or something and, yes, let's do cease the small talk."

Jerry put the phone and the toy on a dusty cardboard box and then dropped a hand down a few inches behind him, bent at the knees to lower himself into a sitting position on the threadbare oriental. He took his time: what could it be that he had not already heard in a lifetime of work?

Ben waited for the exertion to stop, and then said "Sorry to be bearer of these tidings, especially since your mother has so recently... Anyway, Jerry, the short and dirty of it is you're out. It's just a question of when. Hirwatari Industries has taken over." Jerry's

racing heart made the reddish snowlight bloom colder.

“Hirwa...never heard of...” he managed to whisper, his white shirt ballooning in a draft, floating in the inclined mirror atop the knobby-legged Victorian dresser—the drawer still thrusting out which had held the toy.

“Yeah, Charlie Garrity sits on both boards, in Boston and in Kyoto—a real frequent flier. He tipped me. They’re mostly in Brazil and Argentina is why you never heard of them, and of course Japan. Chief lawyer, believe it or not, was one Hector Gozales from Rio. Anyway, Charlie said you should start bargaining now for pension. They promised to give you golden handshake but the amount of gold depends on you.” Outside, more snow wheeled from out of a purpling sky, almost obscuring the streetlight. Sleet ticked against the old house. “Expect it to take a good long time the way the Japs bargain.” Ben’s voice, quieter, seemed itself to tick. “They know we’re mostly in a hurry and they exploit that.”

Jerry stared at his hand, scored from the rug. He managed to gather himself. “Well I, I don’t have to squeeze the last cent. My Jookie is

well launched into his own career now and my ex is

remarried. So I'm the old bachelor...middle-class-rich— almost." "I should be so fortunate," laughed Ben, "still a few mouths to feed, and two in college you don't hear from except for money! Hey I've been trying to extract from my own company for good and proper reasons. Golden handshake? I'll take a brass one, anything! But, never mind me! Hey, you'll do all right, but it's still awful. Hell you only gave that company a life! That's all. Is Jookie still the baseball player?"

"I don't think so. Can't do that forever."

"Too bad. But anyway, Jerry..." Ben was trailing off at the other end until a stronger tone suddenly asserted "Hell in my company we're only a quarter or so Japanese owned! And don't believe these stories about these extraordinary Japanese managers. The firm runs on in the same incompetent way. The only difference is that we were actively incompetent under Harley Olchuff and now under the simplistic Ryo, so lately rammed into place, we are passively so." Jerry was half-listening, trying to clamp the pain. A door

banged somewhere in the drafty interior of the house. "Listen to this, Jerry! I tried to sell Pecky Warren of Rich industries in Buffalo, and he told me to come back in three months 'cause they were way over inventory? Well let me tell you about the soft way my Japanese supervisor treats what he regards as failure by repeating it: Way over inventory, ah yes. Way over inventory, ah yes. Then the last time he says it, for that particular day I mean, he laughs like it's the greatest joke ever, you know?"

Jerry hadn't heard it all but offered "Inscrutable"— his voice resonating with the raking sleet.

"Inscrutable my ass! Just another way of grinding your balls. I'll take old spastic Harley's hopping and yelling and screaming anytime. Besides, everything is business is scrutable really. Too much so."

And later that odd form, scrutable, rasps Jerry's mind amid the shuddering waves of sleet and hail and snow. The little toy with its tiny wooden bomb still rests on the cardboard box, and Jerry can't reconstruct, eyes jammed shut, whether the Japanese ships

were depicted flatly on a sheet of cardboard or had been small wooden models. But when he opens his eyes, a tiny ship flickers, made three-dimensional by the threads of the old rug. It vanishes but has delighted him in his sadness, his childhood imagination returning somehow. He clicks on the brute of a floorlamp, and the sudden yellow light makes the attic look more ancient and mellow, more deep along its shadows, and smell more sharply cold.

When he looks through the bombsight at the lamp, the lenses are gummy, the crosshairs inside fuzzy. He breathes on the lenses and pulls out his his shirttail to wipe them . Snow splotching blue-black against the window, his shadow becomes an agitated monster when the tiny bomb suddenly falls to the floor. Jerry looks up to see the figure of a boy crossing the drifted street. He can hear faint crying, and holds his breath to listen, willing his huge shadow to stop vibrating.

The snow under the streetlamp swings to became a vector connecting their pain, traveling each to each as if along a singing wire.

Jerry turns the scope around, trying to see the diminutive figure against the snowrush. What looks back, haloed by fuzz, dotted by frozen tears, is his own young, gold face. He fumbles and drops the scope, and the boy is gone. Jerry's heart seizes and then fairly bursts. Soon he's punching numbers on the phone, his fingers speckled by sweat. Outside the plow rumbles by.

"Be home!" Jerry shouts. No rings are audible at the other end.

But Jookie has heard his voice. "Dad? I...I thought you were really tied up by Grandmom's estate."

"Jookie!" he cries in that old masters' glow of the attic, the bureaus and tables and boxes suffused by dusty lamplight and appearing to swim inside their shadows, the sound of the snowplow receding to a whisper. "I don't know how even to ask: but what can I do for you? Is there anything, Son? Is there anything?"



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