

# MIDNIGHT IN MONACO



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MONACO

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John Lawrence Sheppard

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FOR MY SISTER NANCY.



# 1

## *Cheap Man—Boom Boom Jingle Jangle—And plenty of it.*

I'M A CHEAP MAN, from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, which are encased in Chinese slave labor sneakers. I like two-for-one specials at Buy and Bye, the big store for cheap people up the street from where I live in Sarasota, Florida: Circus City, USA.

I called up my girlfriend—who kept insisting she was my ex-girlfriend even though we both knew better—because she still had my copy of *What Really Happened at Panmonjom!* by Professor Hubert Pointer, Ph.D.

Instead of asking her about my book, I said, “You love me, Trace, baby sweetcakes, you really do.”

She said, “Carl, I wouldn't love you if the sky fell down.”

“Wouldn't love me if the sky fell down,” I said, snorting.

The red digits on the alarm clock glared 4:00 a.m.

“What do you want, Carl?”

I said, “I want my damn book back is what.” Maybe I said it too loudly. I sometimes shout when I don't mean to.

“*Is—that—all—you—want?*” she asked, gasping out the words one at a time like she was exasperated with me.

I listened to the phone crackling like bacon. I answered her: “Yup.”

“Just the book?” she asked.

“Swear to God,” I said.

“You're crazy, Carl.”

*Am not!* “I just want another chance.”

“For what?”

I thought a moment. The phone actually sounded more like a popcorn popper. "I don't know."

"You're not exactly suave," she said all crummy crusty.

I said in my best French accent: "Yooo are my leetle bird."

"Phony suave don't cut it," she said. We both knew I already knew that having been informed by my Grandmom Rita. She was staying with me now that my cousin Mel had driven her down from Ohio in his Ford Econoline van. Actually, Grandmom Rita had said, "Phony cool doesn't cut it."

Grandmom Rita was sure I looked like somebody famous but she couldn't quite place whom. She squirted my dog with a water pistol when he got too close to her.

"Look, Carl, why don't we go somewhere and talk?" Trace asked.

"Bob and Edith's!" I shouted. My favorite diner, oh yes, it is bursting with dineresque goodness.

"Can't we go someplace good for once?"

"It's the only thing open right now."

Trace came in the diner wearing a pair of fluffy slippers and a terry-cloth bathrobe. Her hair stood up straight on her head and she had a green paste (proven by science to end the aging process once and for all) glopped on her face. The thing I loved about her was the sheer volume of her. She was as big as the combined paychecks of the General Motors Corporation. She was absolutely, perfectly titanic.

"This has got to stop, Carl," she said, sitting down. She rapped her knuckles on the side of my head. "Hello, anybody home?"

"You're so damn beautiful," I said.

She rubbed her eyes with her index knuckles. "Don't start telling me about my inner lights again. I'm sick of my inner lights."

"Strung up like on a Christmas tree!"

"Coffee!" she shouted. "Doesn't anybody work here?"

The waitress came out looking too much like a waitress to be a good waitress. The hairdo looked good though. She turned our coffee cups right side up on their little plates, poured some coffee into them, then reached into one of her pockets and plunked about

ten little buckets of artificial creamer—hydrogenated vegetable oil made white by titanium dioxide—onto the middle of the table. “Nothing to eat, I suppose,” she yawned out, and sleepwalked away.

Trace said, “She might treat us different if you left her a tip every once in a while.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.” Trace pulled her Swiss Army knife out of one of the generous pockets of her terry-cloth robe, and found attachment number 47B, a pair of teeny-weeny scissors. She carefully cut the tops off three white mini-buckets of dairy product-like substance. She dumped all three in her coffee, took a sip, cut the lid off a fourth and swirled her spoon around while pouring it in.

“I love the way—”

“You’re not well, Carl.” She put away the little red knife and found my paperback in that pocket. She slid it across the table to me.

I picked it up, fanned it open to the middle, and stuck in my nose. I inhaled a good snort, drinking in the perfume I bought her at Buy and Bye, Midnight in Monaco.

“I really hate it when you do that,” she said.

“Why would you want to break up with me?”

“For starters, you gave me the worst engagement ring in history.”

“What?”

“Don’t play like you don’t know. Its stone is cubic zirconium and the ring turned my finger green for crying out loud.”

I was astounded. How could she be so clever? It was another one of the things I loved about her.

“Smooch your face up for me,” I said.

“I will *not*.”

“Honey dumpling,” I pleaded. “Sugar pie.”

“If it’ll make you shut up,” she said. She put her hands on the sides of her face and pressed in. Her lips went vertical and her eyes about disappeared.

“Oh my, oh my,” I said, trembling, blinking. Containing myself was out of the question.

She let go and her face dropped down. “That’s the absolute last time for that,” she said. “God damn it, Carl. I mean it this time.”

The sun came up over the horizon like a banana-flavored Moon Pie. Trace got up to leave and said, “And don’t call me again.” She wiped her nose with a hanky retrieved from that big pocket. “At least not in the middle of the night if you feel you must.”

“Okeydoke,” I said and watched her leave. “Mmmm-mmm!” I shouted. “You sure do look good, coming or going!”

It broke my heart to see her walk out so pretty that way, away from me. Boom, boom. Jingle, jangle. But a ring’s a ring, I’d told her directly before she up and left, diamond or not. I picked the book up off my lap, brushing my fingers across the pages as I flipped through it, touching where she had touched.

A new, not-so-waitress waitress came over and asked me what I wanted. I remembered a dangerous-driving auto wrecker I saw the week before. It was careening down the road at awful speeds, the Dodge behind it swinging back and forth enough so I could see the truck bumper, which told me that if I didn’t like his driving, I should call the 800 number listed below. I pulled right the heck over and dialed it up at a pay phone. I told the squeaky lady on the other end of the phone that I didn’t like the way that guy took the corners, that he was dangerous. She asked me what the bumper number was on the truck. I said that since I didn’t see it, it must have been rubbed out. “We can’t do anything without the bumper number,” she said, and I hung up.

“Well, what do you want?” asked the waitress, impatiently thumping her white, tooth-chipped pencil on her little pad.

“I want more,” I said, tinkering my coffee cup with my middle fingernail. “And plenty of it.”

## 2

*Hey-ho, Hux—Reading the warning printed up on the  
side—The next quart's free*

I stopped by the Five-and-a-Half Corners Auto Zone on Beneva and Clark so I could pick up a quart of their store-brand oil-like lubricant. I arrived just as they opened up at seven o'clock. "Hey there, Carl!" shouted Aldus Huxley Baines Johnson, the franchisee, while he was turning the key in the copper-plated, brass lock—which cost a little extra, but saved him money in the long run seeing how it's mere presence deterred the career criminal, who knew it was unbreakable. At least that's what my father told Hux when he sold it to him.

We've been friends since junior high chorus class.

"Hey-ho, Hux!" I shouted back. I saw a lovebug float by, the first one of the season. "Must be May," I said, snatching it out of the air. Lovebugs come to Sarasota in May and September and wander around near I-75, getting dizzy on carbon monoxide. They're black with a tiny orange head, until a car hits them. Then they become paint-destroying tan paste. Near the end of May there're thousands of them mated together by the keister, enjoying wedded bliss until they smack the chrome bumper of a mid-70's Ford Torino, for instance.

I handed the feeble black bug to Hux, who pretended to kiss it. "You don't know how much I love these little critters," he said. "They send up touch-up paint sales by fifty percent. Not to mention the lovebug nets, windshield wiper cleaner, the I Love My Vinyl protective spray . . ."

Hux is five-foot-two and has screaming red hair. He has pale white skin covered with connect-the-dot brown freckles. He's seemed to be the same height ever since I met him in the junior high.

"Got to get out of the sun," said Hux as the big yellow disk veered higher. "Same problem all the time." He waved his arm under my nose, letting the lovebug escape. There was a circular white patch pasted near his wrist. "Go on," he said, gazing up at me. "You know you want to."

I peeled back the bandage using my thumbnail and the side of my index finger. Underneath, it looked like somebody had burnt a cigarette into his thin, onion-paper flesh. "Cancer," I whispered, awestruck. It was the real thing.

"Yeah, bud," said Hux, a pinkish smile curling up past his perfect white china teeth. He yanked his arm back down and restuck the bandage. "What're you here for? More of that crappy fake oil?" he asked, pushing inside the store. A little bell rang over our heads, and the a/c gushed past us into the outdoors. The store windows were covered over in sloppy sheets of humidity. We hopped in quickly, and Hux flicked on the lights, which hummed and buzzed momentarily.

"It's just as good as Pennzoil, as far as I can tell," I said.

"I just hope that crappy Torino isn't pissing phony oil all over my parking lot," said Hux, getting behind the counter. He put on the white smock that made him look like a doctor, or a pharmacist. "Auto Zone!" he shouted triumphantly, slamming his white-knuckled fist on the counter.

I walked down aisle four, in the back of the store, where the lubricants were lined neatly up on their shelves. I found my brand and scooped up a bottle, reading the warning printed up on the side:

FIRE HAZARD. DO NOT SMOKE WITHIN  
TWENTY FEET OF THIS PRODUCT. ACCORDING  
TO THE SURGEON GENERAL, WOMEN SHOULD

NOT COME INTO CONTACT WITH THIS PRODUCT DURING PREGNANCY DUE TO RISK OF BIRTH DEFECTS. KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN. DO NOT INHALE. IF INHALED, DO NOT DRIVE A CAR OR OPERATE MACHINERY. USE IN VENTILATED AREA. DO NOT MIX WITH BLEACH, MILDEW STAIN REMOVERS OR ANY OTHER PRODUCTS AS TOXIC FUMES MAY RESULT. CAUTION: EYE IRRITANT. DO NOT GET IN EYES. USE ONLY AS DIRECTED. IN CASE OF ACCIDENTAL INGESTION, SEEK PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE OR CONTACT A POISON CONTROL CENTER IMMEDIATELY. STORE AT CONTROLLED ROOM TEMPERATURE. AVOID HIGH TEMPERATURES (ABOVE 212F). PROTECT FROM FREEZING. DO NOT USE IF PRINTED NECKBAND IS BROKEN OR TORN. DO NOT USE AS A STARTER FLUID FOR CHARCOAL.

My favorite warning is the last one. I mean to try it some day. I plunked the bottle on the counter.

“That’s all?” asked Hux, his tiny fingers dancing across the buttons on the register.

Once when we were kids, we went on a camping trip together into Oscar Scherer State Park. We jumped the fence so we wouldn’t have to pay the fees. In the middle of the night, I pulled out my flashlight, certain that if I put it up to his back, I could light up his innards, maybe see his heart beating. I took off his shirt while he was asleep, and stuck the lit flashlight on his back. He jumped awake, startled. “What the hell’re you doing, Carl?” he shouted.

“Nothing,” I said.

“You better not be a homo,” he snarled.

“If I were a homo, I wouldn’t do it with *you*,” I said.

“Who would you do it with then?” he asked, narrowing his little eyes at me.

It hadn't really occurred to me whom I would do it with if I were a homo, and I said as much.

"This is definitely the last time I'm going camping with you, *buddy*," he growled.

But it wasn't. We still go all the time.

He dropped the bottle into a brown paper bag. "Ninety-eight cents," he said.

I slid my punchcard out of my wallet, along with a buck. He nailed the punchcard with a thumbtack, pushed it back to me, along with my two cents change. "One more punch," he said, "and the next quart's free."

### 3

*The backseat used to smell like all sorts of things—But, man,  
once he got moving, he was moving!*

I tooted the Torino up Beneva Road toward home, making sure I stayed under 45. Tire wobble was heavy. The Torino bucked back and forth, swaying down the road. I bought my car from the U Guest It Cab Company, serving the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport and environs beyond.

I could feel the board someone had planted under the seat—after the springs gave out—coming up through the foam rubber cushioning, maybe getting splintery.

The backseat used to smell like all sorts of things until I used the free sample of I Love My Vinyl that Hux gave me after I got ten punches on my card the last time. “For my best customer,” he said, licking his little lips.

On my way home, I saw Officer Bob Catlet sitting in his brand, spanking new SPD cruiser, all blue and white and shaped like an oblong soap bubble. I honked and he flashed his blue and reds at me. *Wee-ooo!* went the siren.

I confess: It gave me a thrill.

I pulled over, but he waved me away. No time to talk, I knew. Police business is no laughing matter.

So I drove the rest of the way home, pulling over only one more time:

I saw an old Mennonite fellow trying to pedal his three-wheeler up a steep incline by the railroad tracks. He was straining hard; the face that showed above his white broomish beard turned pinkish gray with exhaustion. So I pulled over and gave him a push

uphill, really putting my back into it because he was some kind of fat. Once over the top, he tipped his Quaker Oatmeal hat at me and continued on his way, his geezer legs slightly exposed with every pump-pump he gave those pedals because he was wearing some high-waters that barely slipped past his ankle. But, man, once he got moving, he was *moving*. It's the kind of sight that gives a guy pause when he has to go home to face another geezer, this one a relative.

## 4

### *Fishing stories—That is, until the ASPCA shut her down*

Sarasota, my hometown, hasn't always been around, though it seems like it to me. If you shambled into town 25,000 years ago, you would have found camels, woolly mammoths and three-toed sloths hanging around where Main Street is now. Much later on, Native Americans wandered into the area and built homes and fished, and so on. Then the Europeans came. Sarasota got its name from one of them. Here's the story, as I remember it from my classroom studies:

Chichi-Okobee, the local Indian mayor, woke up one morning to find a large wooden boat with huge red crosses on giant pieces of fabric hovering over the top of it bobbing silently offshore. "That's odd," he thought.

He was a young man, though, and as a young man was more likely to accept odd things, including odd boats. He went back inside his house to get ready for the day ahead, which mostly consisted of fishing and telling stories about fishing. He had no wife as of yet, but he was young and didn't reckon he needed one much.

Chichi-Okobee kept an eye on the floor. When the sunlight reached a certain point that he'd marked with a smooth stone he'd go out fishing. As mayor, he had one of the best canoes in the whole town. As he watched the sunlight approach the smooth stone, he noticed an odd-shaped shadow overcoming it. It was a man-like shadow, but with some strange additions to it. One of the additions seemed to be a spear. The other addition seemed to be a fin on top of whoever's head that was. Chichi-Okobee got up

and walked to the door, where he was rudely greeted by a couple of bizarrely dressed men with hair growing out of their too-light faces. The guys who'd carved his canoe for him were pointing at Chichi-Okobee, saying, "That's him! That's the mayor!"

"Sheesh," said Chichi-Okobee.

The two whitish oddbodies with the peculiar headgear hoisted him up by the arms and toted him off, hustling him through the palmettos. During the journey through the forest, he protested that:

1. I'm the mayor, for crying out loud;
2. Look, I can walk on my own; and
3. You're cutting into my fishing time.

But these lugs, whoever they were, didn't seem to understand plain Seminole. Instead, they jabbered on in their strange, incomprehensible language, and threatened him with their big-ass spears, which just wasn't very neighborly, come to think about it. Who were these guys, anyway? Chichi-Okobee was thinking on getting pretty outraged.

This is how he ended up meeting Hernando DeSoto.

The journey ended at the shoreline, where Hernando DeSoto sat in a big wooden chair that was all carved up with little doodads all over it. He wore a golden cookpot on his head.

Chichi-Okobee stood passively in the morning sun in front of DeSoto. If he could have read Spanish, he would have read DeSoto's name right there on his chest, banged in relief in bronze, along with his family crest, which looked like a couple of big cats swallowing each other. DeSoto's two henchmen chuckled gleefully next to Chichi-Okobee.

DeSoto raised an eyebrow. He looked to his left, then his right.

Chichi-Okobee said: "So, you must be the leader of these two nutbar guys." He raised his hands up. They were thick with calluses. "Look, you fellows let me go and I'll catch you a fish about yea big." One of the guards conked him over the

head. As he passed out, he thought, "Maybe these guys aren't as dumb as they look."

He awoke in a stinking cloth shelter, bound hand and foot. "This can't be good," he thought.

DeSoto tromped into the tent and knelt in front of him. He seemed pretty jolly for a guy who was obviously sick, both mentally and physically. All these people looked pretty ill. Maybe it was the pallor. Or maybe it was the way they all carried themselves. Or the stench vibrating off their bodies. Chichi-Okobee could smell DeSoto's hot breath on his face as he spoke to him, rattling on in that strange foreign tongue like he could understand exactly what he was saying. "Why is this guy talking to me?" Chichi-Okobee wondered. "What the hell does he want?" And another thought occurred. "Boy, does this guy's breath stink!"

What Chichi-Okobee knew was that DeSoto had taken him prisoner, believing that the local village wouldn't have the guts to attack if he held their leader hostage. DeSoto was alone out here, half a world away from home, with the only civilized company within a thousand leagues being his daughter, Sara.

And there she was. Cue the music. Chichi-Okobee turned his head away from DeSoto, half closing his eyes because of the stench of that man's horrible breath, not to mention the close-up look at his pox-scarred face, and spied for the first time the most exotic woman in the known universe. Her hair seemed to be made of dreams, so fine and light and shiny, and her eyes were as blue as the bay he fished all day. She floated into the tent on tiptoes, wearing garments as colorful as a rainbow after a summer storm. These men were clearly maniacs, wasting an entire day grabbing him instead of fishing, but if they could produce a creature as ethereal and lustrous as this, they couldn't be all bad. Right?

So Chichi-Okobee figured he could hang out a while. Why not? Where were the fish going to go, right? He'd fallen insanely in love with this woman on first sight.

For days they traversed the countryside, toting Chichi-Okobee in a fishing net in front of their party. There didn't seem to be that

many of these men, and she was the only woman around. They weren't making good time, however. Chichi-Okobee figured that he could have told them a better route if they understood a civilized language, or had manners. But he wouldn't have told them even if he could. He was spending time with a goddess, a creature that'd dropped from heaven, and that was okay by him.

Then Chichi-Okobee fell ill. His gut felt like a thousand knives were cutting through him. It had to be the inedible food that these whacks had foisted on him, he decided. He didn't want to complain, but eventually even these slobs could tell something was wrong with him. Their medicine man trotted down to the Manatee River and returned with a jar full of leaches.

"Leaches!" Chichi-Okobee shouted. "Are you people insane?" They slapped the leaches all over his body, which quickly answered the question.

After a while, the medicine man gave up. He shrugged his big alabaster shoulders and trudged out of the tent. Chichi-Okobee fell into a sweaty sleep. When he awoke, Sara was sitting beside him, radiant in her beauty, wiping the spittle off his chin with a hunk of wet cloth. Days marched blissfully along. Sara smiled down at him. He was untied. She clutched his hand in hers.

Love healed him. I guess.

Unfortunately, sitting at his bedside day and night had felled poor Sara. As Chichi-Okobee waxed, she waned. Soon, he was up and she was down for the count, sweating great droplets of seawater, her silky hand moist in his.

Hernando wanted to kill him, of course, but was talked out of it by his aide-de-camp.

Chichi-Okobee begged DeSoto to let him go fetch his personal physician, Ahti—the best medicine man this side of the Everglades. It had even been said that Ahti had healed the dead. But everybody thought that was a fish story.

After much flailing of limbs and pantomime, Hernando DeSoto finally caught the gist, and let Chichi-Okobee go. He ran like hell through the woods, scrambling toward home. A day later, he re-

turned with the startled doctor, dragging him through the brush and woods much against his will. "These Spanish," the doctor complained all along the way, "they look like a bunch of welchers to me. I didn't even see one bit of fishing equipment on them. How do they plan on paying the bill?"

"I'll pay it, you damn cheapskate," Chichi-Okobee grumbled. "This girl's going to be my wife."

So Ahti tried out the best brews he could come up with. Palmettos berries were cooked with herbs and fish bones. Ahti checked her pulse and felt her temperature by sticking his tongue on her forehead. Chichi-Okobee cut down specified trees and burned them in a huge pyre near where she lay dying. But Ahti had never seen an illness like this, and the girl died.

Chichi-Okobee went to DeSoto, tears coursing down his cheeks, and begged DeSoto to let him send her soul to heaven in a proper manner. DeSoto, seeing that Chichi-Okobee was the only other guy in camp grieving as much as he, consented with a nod of his grandiose head.

Chichi-Okobee went back to town and gathered together his fishing buddies. He told them about the girl who'd stolen his heart. His story was so moving, they all wept with him as they got drunk sitting on the shore next to their canoes. "I didn't want to be mayor anyway," Chichi-Okobee slurred, right before passing out. His buddies carried him home on their shoulders, and then staggered home to their angry wives. The wives' anger died upon hearing the story from their drunken spouses, who told it with lots of feeling and such. And the wives consented to a night of wild abandon. Nine months later, nine kids were born, all eventually named DeSoto.

Chichi-Okobee and his nine buddies in their ten canoes took Sara's body with them out to the middle of their fishing spot. A Spanish fellow wearing flowing robes came with them, along with Hernando DeSoto, and the robed character spoke in yet another language, and waved his hand around. He mesmerized them all. The body, wrapped in painted deerhide and weighted with stones,

was committed to the sea. Chichi-Okobee stood up and spoke of his love for Sara. Her hair, her lips, her caring spirit! He rambled so much that his friends thought he was still drunk. Then he whipped out a fishing knife and skillfully gutted himself and fell, plop, into the water, dropping down, down, down like he'd been weighted with bags full of shells.

The bay was renamed that day from "The Bay" to "Sara DeSoto Bay." The fishermen told the story to their kids, who told the story to their kids, and so on, until a plague brought over by Catholic missionaries wiped them all out, but not before they'd told the story to the well-meaning men of the cloth. Anyway, that's the way I remember it from my junior high school History of Sarasota class.

Grandmom Rita was sitting in my easy chair wearing a snowy white bathrobe. The pocket said, in gamy green lettering: "The Executive Suite." She wore a pair of Doctor Scholl's orthopedic slippers that had initially been too big for her feet. The tops of them were wrapped in sticky white adhesive tape to take away roominess. The adhesive tape was actually more toward yellowish now.

My dog Beowulf was padding his way silently down the hall. I did not turn to look at him. It would have tipped her off. He and I were allies.

Grandmom Rita spotted him anyway and grabbed up the orange, plastic squirt gun on top of the *TV Guide*, and, without even looking, blasted him from ten feet away. He skittered recklessly down the hall.

"Your aim's still perfect," I said. Grandmom Rita used to be in the circus. She had an act called, "The Amazing Rita and her Darling Dachshunds!" She was a knife thrower. That is, until the ASPCA shut her down.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, making her uppers clack excitedly. "I need one of those super soakers, then that dog would be dog meat." She smiled. "Get it? You keeping up?" She dropped the pistol, which was supposed to look like a World War II German pistol,

back on the *TV Guide* and picked up the zapper. “Almost time,” she said, changing the channel. There were thousands of tiny lines radiating from the ends of her eyes to the far corners of her well-tanned face.

The local weatherman came on. “Get off!” she shouted at the screen. “Move it!”

Then Cap’n Pete came on with the fishing news. “The word this week is red snapper!” said Cap’n Pete, holding one up by a nearly invisible line. It swung back and forth like a hung desperado.

“Red snapper!” shouted Grandmom Rita. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

“‘Red snapper’ is more than one word,” I growled under my breath.

She clicked off the set and peered up at me over the top of the trifocals perched at the tip of her bulbous nose. “What? What are you muttering about now? Never mind! When are we going fishing?” she asked. “Just give me a date.”

“When I can,” I said, for the thousandth time.

“You have more time for that fat broad than you do me,” she snapped angrily, turning her head away. “And when are we getting cable?”

“When I can afford it,” I said, dialing down the a/c before the place turned into an icebox.

“*When I can afford it,*” she snorted, and then some laughter came shooting out of her. “Tom Cruise,” she said when she regained her composure, taking another guess at what famous person I might look like.

“Wrong nose,” I replied.

I stepped over to the kitchen and opened up the refrigerator. I dug around, looking for a carton of milk, then found it in the back, next to some week-old bakery items in a cardboard box with a see-through lid. I opened up the milk carton, which felt full, and upturned it over my mouth. Nothing came out. I put my nose in and sniffed. It smelled like chocolates. I closed an eye and looked

in. It was brown and solid. “What did you do to the milk?” I asked.

“Made instant pudding. Just put in the mix and shook it,” she said, now fixing her gaze on Jerry Springer, not looking up. The guests chanted *Jerry, Jerry, Jer-REE!*

“What have I told you about—”

“Don’t presume to lecture *me*, young man,” she intoned. “I predate you by about a thousand and two dog years. So don’t you dare.”

“It’s just that—”

“There you go again,” she said mimicking Ronald Reagan, and out came another burst of laughter, this time sounding like muffled machinegun fire. “I loved that guy as President,” she said. “Old Mr. Jane Wyman.”

I put the solid milk back in the refrigerator, back next to the bakery box, and went to my room, closing the door behind me.

I plopped down on the creaky bed. How many nights had it been since I slept? Three or four, certainly. The phrase “Bed of Roses” drifted through my mind. Trace oh Trace, where art thou?

I closed my eyes and remembered her the way I first saw her in the 99¢ North Trail Movierama, where I was working at that time. She asked for extra butter-like liquid flavoring on her popcorn and my heart bumped around in my chest pretty good. She was enormous, true, but she had an athletic quality that made her seem light on her feet, and a radioactive smile that could melt a stick of Black Jack chewing gum from fifteen feet away. It wasn’t just a hurt smile—it was a cancerous hate smile. When I didn’t move, she blurted out, “Step on it, will you?” and I felt a tingle gurgle up the back of my spine, turning into a helium balloon when it rose to my head.

“Is this what love feels like?” I asked her, my company-issue paper hat soaking up the blobs of greasy sweat congealing on my forehead.

“I don’t know about *that*,” she said, “but here’s what my finger feels like.” And she jabbed it in my eye.

That poke hooked me, bub.

I reached up and felt my eyelid stretched over my eyeball. It had been nearly two years now, but I could have sworn it was still swollen up. I opened my eyes and gazed around the room.

I stuck my hand in my Mr. Cockroach puppet, which I found near my feet on the floor amidst a snowdrift of crushed Cap'n Crunch cereal. "Hello," I said to him.

"You miss her," he said back, his huge, black antennae swinging circularly. "Why don't you call her up?" I placed him back on the rug where he could talk with his actual cockroach friends, who were becoming increasingly uncockroachlike due to my using a new and improved pesticide that causes birth defects instead of actually killing.

I picked up the phone and dialed. The phone rang and rang, and finally a hollowed out voice answered it. "Hi, you've reached the number you have dialed," said Trace's voice. "I hope you recognize my voice, because if you don't, then you shouldn't leave a message at the beep."

*Beep.*

"You're so clever, clever, clever! You'll note," I said conversationally, pushing my Chinese sneakers off with my toes, "that it is definitely not the middle of the night."

## 5

*Mercury poisoning—Professionalism—The Primrose Country Club  
and Estates up near the Manatee County line*

I was dreaming that I had swallowed an oral thermometer. I couldn't get it to come back up, no matter how hard I tried. Then it occurred to me that it might be stuck down there horizontally, and that if I retched too hard it might snap in half.

This would be bad. Mercury poisoning!

Luckily, Trace woke me up by kicking my bed and solved my problem. She was dressed in her JC Penney's business suit, all yellow with white trim and big circular buttons that could have been those Mr. Smiley Faces from the 1970's. My old friend Desiree had a giant one that was a bank. I can still hear the hollow muffle of change ker-thumping in the bottom of that.

I heard a buzzing-beeping sound near my head.

"Hang up the phone, Carl," ordered Trace, hands on generous hips, feet planted firmly twelve inches apart. She looked like a yellow battleship come into port, the *USS Trace* on a port call, maybe ready to fire off her guns and make us sneaky little natives behave. I imagined a Lilliputian Navy band in summer whites standing on the quarterdeck in her glowing cleavage, playing a John Philip Sousa march while explosive shells the size of miniature Volkswagens whistled out from her majestic breasts and pounded on the beach near my pillow.

I placed the phone back into its receiver. I'd bought the trailer from my ex-roomie Albert Junior for a song. The Florida heat soaked through the tin roof overhead, making my armpits drippy.

“Do you know what it’s like to listen to an hour of you sleeping?” she asked, cocking her head to one side, smiling 50 volts of cancer hate at me.

I sat up, blinking the raspiness out of my eyes. “No,” I said, perhaps too excitedly. “I sure don’t.”

She tossed a microtape into my lap. She said, “You will if you listen to every bit of my answering machine tape.” She stomped out of the room, her footsteps shaking my trailer home down to the cinderblocks it rested on. In the living room, my Grandmom Rita hooted, “Don’t let the door slap you on the backside!” And the door thudded shut.

I held the tiny tape up with both index fingers out in front of my eyes and began giggling, and giggling. I couldn’t contain myself.

Then my brother called.

“Wow!” I shouted, wiping laughter tears from my eyes, “what an amazing coincidence it is that you called!”

“Why?” he asked, “Were you thinking about me?”

“I was thinking about how just last week I was thinking about you,” I said.

“How amazing,” said Tom, in his professional, bone-dry Tom voice. “Perhaps you should become a psychic. I hear there’s money in that.”

*Money in that* rang in my head like an *echo, echo, echo*. “You think?”

“Carl, Carl, Carl,” droned Tom, “you use that *think* word far, far too often for a man who doesn’t.”

“What’ve you been doing with yourself lately?” I asked.

“In addition to writing my memoirs—lengthy, lengthy memoirs, mind you—I’ve been working and going out with this exciting new girl who bears absolutely no resemblance to either Mom or Grandmom Rita.”

“Working?”

“This girl, she is *not*, I repeat, *not at all crazy*. And she doesn’t fish, nor does she dive for golf balls at golf courses, nor does she smoke cigars, nor does she constantly repeat unfunny jokes until

you pull clumps of hair from your head,” said Tom. “Frankly, I think this fortunate turn of events has something to do with my prayers to Saint Dymphna, the patron saint of lunatics.”

“You pray?”

“Constantly, Carl.”

“And it works?”

“Apparently, Carl. I must hasten to add that I’ve only been seeing her for a couple of months and therefore she has not been exposed to what I kindly, ever so kindly, refer to as the ‘home environment.’”

“So Mom hasn’t met her.”

“You’re a bright boy, Carl.”

“Thanks, big brother. When do I get to meet her?”

“Who? Whom?”

“This new lass in your life, old what’s-her-name.”

“Carl, if things go well, you will meet her in about a year when you play best man at my wedding. Until then, don’t come over without calling.”

“I see,” I said. Then again, I thought, I’m not sure where he lives. He kept that part of his life secret from us.

Tom said, “Nothing personal.”

“And you’ve announced all this good news to Mom and Dad, I guess.”

“Mom and Dad are water-hazard-diving for golf balls today at the Primrose Country Club and Estates up near the Manatee County line, according to my personal digital assistant.”

“So, you want *me* to tell them?”

“No, no, no, oh my little baby brother.”

“So what’s this I hear about you working?”

“This job—and mind you, you must keep this top secret—is with a very large insurance corporation in Tampa that will go unnamed. I’m planning on keeping this job by not getting deluged by phone calls from my close relatives throughout the day and into the early evening. Why, I believe I just made myself clear, don’t you?”

Yes, I thought, but how many very large insurance corporations can they possibly fit into the Tampa phonebook?

## 6

*Working Grille—Liquid Smokelike Flavoring—You shouldn't speed  
if you've committed fraud—Everything is Well Below Par*

I drove to work the usual way.

This in keeping with my brand-new commitment to do things in usual ways and speak in usual manners of speaking. I would win Trace back through normalcy! But, and here's something I've been thinking about for a long time now that I had time aplenty to think, *it's our flaws that make us pretty*. I think of Cindy Crawford and where she'd be without that mole crouching on her face like a chocolate chip floating in a bowl of cream of wheat. I think of Trace without her fat or anger. I think of Hux as a six-foot-two-er with peachy skin tone. I think of Grandmom Rita not tossing knives at little doggies. Geneticists want to monkey around and make us more toward perfect. Where would perfect leave us, though? Though I can, as a cook, understand the impulse to play with ingredients. *Hmm and hmm!*

Your assignment: Write an essay of 500 words or less. Get cracking!

I worked grill in a downtown Sarasota restaurant. Or should I say *grille*? This place featured a genuine open pit barbecue flavor that was achieved through the addition of Liquid Smokelike Flavoring. Just taste some of my cooking and feel the drama unfolding in your mouth. You may see a grease spot shaped like the Angel Gabriel forming in the bottom of your plate. Hux did one time. "Look! There's his horn!" he shouted. My suggestion: Do not panic if you see the Angel Gabriel on your plate. Just swirl the plate around some and old Gabriel will become someone or -thing

else. When I swirled Hux's plate for him (my how he shrieked!) Gabriel became a Dodge minivan.

AN ASIDE: I've never been able to see religious figures such as Gabriel or Elvis in animal byproducts, but I do envy those who can.

My parents questioned my choice of vocation. How can a job such as flipping dead meat be fulfilling to a person who scored so well on standardized tests? My answer is, "Sure, standardized tests are fun, but would you really want a job like that?" Frankly, I'd rather watch chunks of some unfortunate animal carbonize before my watery, liquid-smokelike-flavoring-filled eyes. I'm comfortable with my vocation despite the occasion when one of Tom's ex-girlfriends—a Vegan, she told me she was—accused me of being the equivalent of a Nazi Death Camp Doctor. I copped one of my famous German accents (almost as good as my French) and barked happily about the delights of burning flesh. Later Tom snapped "Thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks . . ." and so on, in a very unthankful way.

Tom went to college. He was the oldest and the smartest between the two of us. He majored in math and does math things for math intensive places. He often quit jobs, or got fired, because the world is full of mediocre, jealous people. He would often vow to write a book about the universe called, *Everything is Well Below Par*. He claims to be the sane one in our family.

I parked behind the restaurant in the space marked Employee of the Month, which I was in perpetuity, almost. "I want a plaque," I once told Bill, the manager, who hails from Michigan and wears Michigan clothes that must be very hot come July and August.

"Sure," said Bill, a sneer crawling across his taut lips. "That's what I'll do! I'll spend money on a plaque! Why, that's a stroke of genius!" I thought he might break out into a rendition of "I'm a Lumberjack and I'm Okay!" the way he was dressed. That was my half-expectation.

Bill's Wife had been on the verge of leaving him since 1987. She's not a shrew, she told me once, despite what Bill may have been saying behind her back. No, she is not a shrew. She is, in fact, a good wife with plenty of good qualities (Doesn't she work the cash register?

Doesn't she do the books, mostly? Doesn't she run the damn business for him just about?) But she'll be damned if blah, blah, blah (something that I never caught because I have a dangerously short attention span). She also told me, "My name isn't 'Bill's Wife'! It's . . ." but I didn't listen because I liked not knowing her real name.

I picked Dr. Pointer's book up off my front seat and carefully locked and closed the Torino's door. If I slammed the Torino's door, sometimes the lock popped up and then anybody who wanted to could open up my car and mess up my elaborate collection of free maps that I'd snagged from every gas station in Sarasota and Manatee counties. They don't give maps away anymore. I think that's a terrible shame, don't you? I arranged my maps in a specific way and folded them in specific ways so that if I were ever lost in either Sarasota or Manatee County, I would've been able to find myself just by reaching into the appropriate section of my map bin. The section of the city or county that I am located in was prefolded out and, hey presto, I didn't have to play around with the map and possibly thump into a tree.

Inside the restaurant, I bumped into the employee of the moment, a high school kid who I called GenX Kid. He dressed just like an ad in some Generation X magazine that tells kids what to wear so they won't have to deal with the pain of conformity. GenX Kid wore vast baggy clothes and a baseball cap backwards. An almost goatee sprouted from his chin that I'm sure hoped, some day, to blossom into an actual goatee. His eyebrow was pierced with a metal loop, which made me want to scratch furiously at my own eyebrow. I don't like to be reminded that my eyebrow exists.

"Dude," said GenX Kid. His eyes neither focused on me nor relaxed. They seemed to be zeroing in on quarks and other subatomic particles that snowstormed around his head. He watched a gluon zip over my head and leap out the door. Then he followed it.

"Did he just quit?" I asked Bill's Wife, whose head reposed on the cash register. Maybe she was listening to all the little presidential portraits inside, the Andy Jacksons and George Washingtons and Abe Lincolns, and they were whispering, "There are not enough of us to

form a quorum. We need more presidents! Maybe a Secretary of the Treasury and an *Old Richard's Almanac* editor, too!" The look on her face said she knew this. A groan issued from the reposed head.

I strolled into the back. "Bill's Wife seems upset," I said to Bill.

"Well, why not? What's new? What's new under the sun?" sobbed Bill. He was very, very white—chalky white—and perspiring freely. I thought that he could use a scar, a small one, on his cheek. It would lend him some character. He said, "We open in a half hour. Why don't you set up the grill?"

I slapped the book down in front of him.

"Let me guess. It's another book by the late, great Hubert Pointer," said Bill. He narrowed his eyes, squinted down at the book, then back up at me.

I felt a glow spreading out of me. "Read and believe." I loped toward the back, then stopped, my sneakers squealing on GenX Kid's fresh-mopped floor, and said, "He's not dead!"

"Right, Carl."

"I mean it! He's seriously undead!"

"OK, Carl! Jesus Christ, Carl! Just get the goddamn grill ready!"

"Did that kid quit?"

"Not yet. He just had to go get a pack of smokes."

"Because I'm not bussing or washing dishes if he did."

"I just said he didn't quit."

"You know, you don't pay me to wash dishes. I'm a highly trained grill cook. I have a culinary-type degree."

"HE DIDN'T QUIT!"

"Bill, Bill, Bill," I said. "Caffeine is ruining your life."

"Yes, Carl. Among other things."

"And Bill?"

"Yes, Carl?"

"I'm not washing dishes," I said. "I think I've made myself clear on that, don't you?"

"So what do you want me to do? Hire a hobo to wash dishes?"

"Ah, hah!" I leapt up into the air, my fists pumping, spinning myself around.

Bill hung his head. "Carl, I'm only asking you to *occasionally* wash dishes. When I'm too busy bussing, or something."

"It'll cost you a quarter extra an hour," I said.

"Robbery!" bellowed Bill.

"Well," I said, scratching my nose with a kitchen implement, "think about it."

But I didn't have to wash or bus as GenX Kid had a change of heart. His rearrival was met with shrieks of glee from Bill's Wife who immediately offered him a raise not to leave again.

"Awesome," said GenX Kid, observing a bit of dark matter wink in and out of existence somewhere over Bill's Wife's well-coifed head. One side of that poofy coif was slightly flattened.

She clapped and hurraed herself silly until Bill grasped her shoulders firmly, holding her earthbound, while shouting in her ear, "RAISE?! NO!" over and over.

"I still get that extra quarter an hour, right?" I shouted through a liquid smokelike haze.

"No!" they both replied.

And GenX Kid laughed and laughed while contemplating the atomic structure of an oxygen molecule floating off the tip of his nose.

*Ring-a-ding-ding*, went the door-attached bell. Officer Bob Catlet arrived for his usual free coffee and chat. His beefy body was wrapped in summer cop clothes: blue short-sleeved shirt, blue Bermuda shorts, Sam Brown belt with firearm and head-knocking implement and silver cuffs, black knee socks and Patton leather shoes. His kneetops were sunburnt crispy red. He produced his 7-11 coffee mug, the one with a faded picture of Dan Marino on it. He filled it from the coffee tureen next to the register, grinned at Bill and Bill's Wife, and eased on back to me to tell me all about the day's atrocities. Not that Sarasota has many atrocities. No, no. But what atrocities Sarasota has had in the past ten, count 'em, ten years, bub, our Officer Bob Catlet has seen! Like that Pee Wee Herman. He saw! Like that guy who killed his wife and blamed it on a satellite falling out of the sky. He not only saw that, but he recognized the "satellite part" as being the carburetor out of a Chevy

big block. And he got a warrant from an actual judge and popped the hood on the Chevy out front of the guy's house and saw that it was missing a carburetor. Yes! Another case closed thanks to Officer Bob Catlet. "Hey, Carl," said Officer Bob. His armpits were sweaty, his curly chest hairs pushing out the top of his sweaty blue shirt were sweaty, his forehead was sweaty, and his crotch was wet, probably from sweat.

"Hey, yourself, Officer Bob," I said. I flipped three steakettes into the air using my ultra long spatula. Two flipped perfectly, the third landed on its side, then flopped down.

"Mmm, mmm," said Officer Bob, "I gotta try me some of that good cooking of yours one of these days."

"You're always welcome to," I said.

"Just as soon as I'm off the weight control program. Gotta keep fit and trim. Gotta keep healthy," said Officer Bob patting his belly.

"Yeah," I said.

"We can't all be skinny little shits like you," he said.

"I hear you," I said.

"So," said Officer Bob.

Here it comes.

"So, I pulled over this lady in a Ford Torino tonight," said Officer Bob.

"Ford Torino!" I shouted in amazement.

"Yes, yes, but it was yellow, you know, not anything like yours, except for the broken taillight. That broken taillight looked exactly like your broken taillight."

"So you're thinking 'GTA,' right? She stole my car and painted it freshly yellow?"

"Not exactly, Carl. She was speeding." He took a deep breath. "Turns out," he said exhaling, "that she was wanted in four states for fraud."

"Fraud!"

"Yeah," said Officer Bob.

"You shouldn't speed if you've committed fraud," I said.

"It's a lesson," said Officer Bob. "Also, you'd think that someone arrested for fraud, and now a bail skipper, might've tried handing me a fake ID, but this ID was not only her real one, but it was expired."

"Amazing," I said.

"Dude," said GenX Kid, slipping past with a bus tray full of dirty dishes.

"I'd keep an eye on him," I whispered, leaning my lips into Officer Bob's ear. "Just in case." I leaned back to cooking.

"Ten-four," said Officer Bob, and he made a notation in his little green book.

"So you seen many yard sales of late?" I asked him.

"What're you looking for?"

"Maybe a new car," I said. "The Torino's on its last legs."

"You're looking for new cars at yard sales?"

"I bought the Torino from a yard sale."

"I thought you bought it from the cab company."

"Yes, but they were selling them out front, so technically it was a yard sale, considering that they were on grass."

"Technically, shit," said Officer Bob, and a bit of spittle flew out of his lip and danced briefly across my grill before leaving existence.

"Order up!" shouted Bill in my ear. He stuck the order on the round metal order holder and spun it round. The orders flapped up briefly, then drooped.

"Well, I guess I ought to go," said Officer Bob.

"I'll be seeing you," I said, then stopped him with my hand. I peered around the corner to see if Bill or Bill's Wife was watching, then tapped out a drop of liquid smokelike flavoring on my index finger. I put the drop on Officer Bob's mustache and said, "Now you'll smell my cooking all night long."

"Er, thanks," he said, recoiling slightly.

"Remember," I said, thumbing jerkily toward GenX Kid.

Officer Bob winked reassuringly and left.

*Standardized tests—Worldwide dirt—That incident with  
the German police*

I'm kind of sorry that I missed out on college. I mean, technical school isn't really the same thing, is it? I could not be a member of a fraternity at my technical school, the Sarasota County Higher Institute of Technology. I was a member of VICA, though, which was okay, considering I don't remember what the letters in VICA stood for, but it was supposedly some sort of club for people getting technological diplomas. My counselor, Chuck Bowens, recommended it to me after seeing that I scored in the 99th percentile on Sarasota Tech's standardized test.

"You should go to real college," he advised me after perusing my standardized test results.

"Just because you *can* do something doesn't necessarily mean you *should*," I replied.

We sat together inside his dank, simulated-wood paneled office. His master's degree in psychology from the University of South Florida loomed above his head like some sort of warning. It might have said STAU, which is German for traffic jam. I traveled to Germany with my Grandmom Rita once when she was still in the circus, still tossing knives at little doggies.

"I'm not quite sure what you really meant just now," said Chuck Bowens. He wore a thick mop of hair on the top of his head. Sweat dribbled down from beneath it. People may have called him "cue ball" or "old chrome dome" if he hadn't had that hair on. People can be cruel.

“Chuck, I can repeat myself very slowly for you, if you like,” I said, crossing my legs. I popped my leg up and down and watched my foot. In those days, I wore counterfeit Converse All-Stars imported from Korea.

“That won’t be necessary,” said Chuck, watching me watch my bouncing foot. Chuck scribbled all over my academic advisement form.

I searched his walls for hidden graphics. Simulated-wood makers ingrain little pictures in simulated-wood paneling on purpose, I think. That is my theory, because I never fail to find pictures in simulated wood. I found a picture of a duck and a nuclear missile while waiting for Chuck to fill out my form, but didn’t tell Chuck about them. A psychology master such as Chuck would probably have interpreted my picture discoveries in unflattering ways. I’ve read some psychology magazines since then and am now especially glad that I didn’t mention the nuclear missile, though the potential meaning of the duck still eludes me.

“I’m signing you up for VICA,” said Chuck.

“Thank you,” I said.

“VICA will be good for you,” said Chuck.

“Do I still get to be a chef?” I asked.

“VICA will help you become a chef,” he said. “VICA holds all sorts of contests so you can win awards, which will look good on your resume.”

“Chef of the year?”

“It could happen.”

“Do I get a membership card?”

“Yes.”

I smiled broadly, showing Chuck the fancy dental work done on my incisors. I bit through an Archie and Veronica jelly-jar glass when I was a little kid and busted up my incisors pretty good. My father, during flush times, had them repaired by a specialist. “That settles it then.”

I spent two years at Sarasota Tech honing my chef skills. I was a card-carrying member of VICA, though I never went to a meet-

ing (because there weren't any) and never won a contest (because our chapter never held any). But my VICA card did get me student discounts on all sorts of merchandise, and that made it worth carrying in my wallet. As far as I'm concerned, discounts are what keep America the livable place it is today.

Germany, I think, lacks discounts, and that's why I didn't care for it much. That, and the weather. After my month in Germany so long ago, I began to wonder if I'd ever see the sun again. And I understood why Germans wanted to conquer the earth (mainly, I think, to get out of Germany). The first time I ever got bare-assed naked with a woman was in Germany, though.

Dilly was a tall German, maybe a hair over six feet tall, but not sturdy. She was limply wispy and limply blonde and promised to show me her collection of dirt samples from all over the world. She was the daughter of the tattooed lady. She was circus people. We went into the tattooed lady's trailer and Dilly took off her clothes. She was 16 and towered over my 12-year-old frame. She was all smiles and perfume. I pointed at the hair between her legs. "Hair!" I hollered in amazement.

"*Jah*," she said.

"Where's the dirt?" I asked.

"First the clothes you take off," she said.

"Okay," I said, "but I want to see you getting out that dirt."

"With the dirt, you quit," Dilly snapped, then giggled a bit. She swayed as if a gentle breeze was busy knocking her over. "Getting it now, yes, I am."

I wanted to trust this strange foreign woman, but I'd seen too many John Wayne movies to much trust anyone who came from a former Axis nation. "Let's keep moving on that dirt," I said, pulling my trousers off inside out over my shoes, then off came my shoes and socks, then my shirt. I left my briefs on in case I had to make a quick getaway.

"Here," she said, placing a clear tray—with hundreds of dirt samples contained in tiny Plexiglas boxes—on a kitchenette table that folded down from the wall. I sauntered over to the dirt tray

and gazed upon it in all its glory. The world in a tray! You could grow tiny flowers in each dirt sample! Life from the Four Corners of the Globe! I felt Dilly's arms wrap around my scrawny, little boy chest, felt her breast buds grazing the back of my head. And her perfume comes in so clear now, now across the decades since, like a radio station crackling in on a crystal set from half-way round the globe: Midnight in Monaco! I placed my hands over the Plexiglas tray containing the multicolored blobs of dirt while she reached into my Buy and Bye Boys' Briefs (only \$ .99 for a set of three). The world and flowers and perfume and the warmth of Dilly's spindly frame coalesced round me.

"You with Dilly come to bed," said Dilly softly.

"*Jah*," I said, and I even took off my briefs.

Later, when she was asleep, I stole her bottle of perfume, showing it in my pants' pocket. It was late, maybe three or four in the morning, and no one was about. I peered around, then reentered the outside world through Dilly's front door, stark naked, my soiled little weenie protruding into the frigid night air, my clothes and stolen perfume bundled up in my arms.

Oh sure, there was that incident with the German police. But I didn't care. I'd seen the world in a clear Plexiglas tray and slept with a more-or-less actual woman. Grandmom Rita and I were allowed to leave the country, after a stern warning about public nudity, a few days later on a Lufthansa jet. The in-flight movie had Robin Williams or Whoopi Goldberg in it (I honestly can't tell them apart), and he or she had a foreign accent and encouraged a sniffly white kid to follow his heart. Or something.

*Mom and Dad—The Tom situation—Dad coming up on  
the big five-oh*

Mom and Dad were especially awake and peppy for it being two in the morning. I drove over after work to talk with them about the Tom situation. You couldn't tell by looking at them that Dad had spent the whole day underwater in various water hazards throughout the Primrose golf course, or that Mom had been sitting above him in a dingy, running the air purifier that was connected by hose to Dad's bulky underwater diving suit. He'd bought the diving suit from some Greek sponge divers in Tarpon Springs, and he was licensed to wear the undersea spaceman suit by the state of Florida. After donning it, he looked just like the little man inside Trace's fishbowl. Mom polluted the air above with her dainty Hav-A-Tampa cigarillos.

After he first bought the diving suit, Dad decided that it would be fun to wear it to his Friends of Business in Sarasota meeting where he was going to pick up an award. He came clomping in the banquet room of the Bahai Hut, the weights on his shoes scraping the Carpeting by Monsanto, with his two Irish wolfhounds. Bessie and Baird, since deceased, strained at the leashes lashed by bungee cords to his rubberized gloves. "Arf!" shouted Bessie. "Arf! Arf!" shouted Baird. The two dogs were as majestic as Clydesdales. Dad arrived at the podium and the two dogs sat beside him. When it came time to eat, Dad opened the little window in his helmet and said he wasn't hungry, then closed himself off again. And he stood there, for forty-five minutes. The tiny Scotch-Irish lady who was in charge of the festivities stepped up to the podium with Dad's

award. She was struck dumb. All that she could think to say was, “Um, um, um . . .” Dad strode up, reopened the little porthole in his helmet and placed the microphone from the podium inside where his head was. Eerie, hollowed-out breathing sounds filled the room. The dogs stared at the rubber chicken dinners, strings of cable-like saliva descending from their mouths. “Hello out there!” came my father’s muffled voice. “Good business to you!” The microphone wire extended out from the helmet like an anaconda. “I love you all!” said Dad, before pulling the mike out from the helmet and closing the porthole. He placed the microphone back on the stand and pitched his award overhand directly to me, though I sat two tables away from the podium. I caught the award—brass on mahogany—and pumped it over my head for all to see. My brother Tom, sitting next to me with his latest sprayed and polished girlfriend, slumped over onto the thin, white tablecloth, his hands pressed to his face, muttering, “Well, of course. Yes. Of course. Oh, yeah,” and so on. His date lit a tiny cigar. A spontaneous cheer went up round the room as Dad clumped out. The two dogs howled maniacally!

My parents’ home jumped with music. Dad was tapping a yellow, number two pencil against his forehead along with the beat from the Dave Brubeck Trio record playing on the hi-fi. Maybe it had been a hard day underwater. “Son,” he said.

“Dad,” I said.

Mom was painting a still life that she’d arranged on the kitchen table. She still worked as a nurse two days a week at the Sarasota Sunset Assisted Care Living Facility out on Clark Road near Sarasota Tech. She referred to her patients as either “clients” or as “a bunch of chain-smoking no-codes.” No codes? “Do not resuscitate,” says Mom. I leaned over Mom’s shoulder while she painted. “Son, you know I love you,” said Mom, “but stop breathing on my paint.” She was rendering a can of creamed corn, a twisted belt, three bananas, an empty bottle of red wine and my class portrait from 8th grade on a piece of driftwood. All the items were tastefully

arranged and backlit by a Black and Decker Snake Light whose batteries were beginning to run a bit low.

“I heard Bwana Bob’s Rhino and Rumpus Room was going out of business,” said Dad. His blue gray eyes glittered with remembrance. “I knew Bwana Bob years ago, back when I was running the *Sarasota Presents* speakers’ series.” Dad stopped tapping his head and scratched his nose with the writing end of the pencil. “I got to remember to square those accounts one of these days.” Dad obtained the deep creases in his forehead from thinking too hard. He had dignified gray hair on a dignified head that made you want to respect him and give him all your hard-earned cash because you just knew that someone as dignified-looking as Dad had all the inside angles, and Dad was always quick to tell you that he did. Dad always was coming up with schemes to make money, and lots of it, quickly and with a minimum of actual effort, even though Dad loved hard physical labor more than most people. He built the house we were standing in with his own two hands, sort of, and a lot of cinderblock went into it, too. Actually, while building the house, Dad gave himself a hernia lifting more than one cinderblock. He squirmed on the ground, clutching his side. Mom, who’d been sitting in the shade of Dad’s work van, arose, put out her cigarillo and stood over him, telling him how she’d predicted the hernia. “Mmm-hmm!” lectured Mom. “See?! But you don’t listen, do you, Mister Big Shot?”

“Help,” groaned Dad. “Arg!”

“Are you a ‘code’ or a ‘no-code?’” Mom asked.

“Code!” gasped Dad.

“Well, okay then,” said Mom. And she helped him hospitalward.

After the subsequent operation, Dad successfully sued the cinderblock maker for not putting the appropriate warning labels on each cinderblock. Dad looked so dignified, yet pained, in court that the jury awarded him double damages.

“What’re you doing over here tonight?” asked Dad. “And where’s that brother of yours? I told you to keep track of him. If you lose sight of him for an instant, he disappears for months.”

“He always hid in his room as a child, studying all that math,” said Mom. Mom used to shout through the door to Tom: “Hey! Do you need an engraved invitation to dinner?”

“And look where it got him!” boasted Dad, grinning and clenching a victory fist in front of his face. “Yes! If we hadn’t been around, constantly embarrassing him with our behavior, he might have ended up a grill cook, or something.” Pause a beat here. “Oh, sorry son.”

“It was just good parenting,” said Mom triumphantly.

“I like being a grill cook. Smell my fingers,” I said, sticking my hands out toward him.

Dad walked over to me and sniffed my outstretched hands. “Say,” he said, closing his eyes, “that reminds me of the time I owned that stockyard.”

“That was a smokehouse, honey,” said Mom, not looking up from her work.

“I stand corrected,” said Dad. “I was thinking, anyway, of trying to bring you up toward respectability in this world. I’m coming up on the big five-oh, you know. I feel I should leave you and Tom something in this world. So I’ll finance it if you and your brother go into business together.”

“Doing?”

“Bwana Bob’s! Running it,” said Dad, jabbing the eraser part of the pencil into my chest.

“Tom’s got a job,” I said.

“Where?” snapped both parents, nearly breathless. Mom’s paintbrush clacked on the floor. She picked it back up and held it tight.

“A large insurance corporation in Tampa,” I said.

“Which one?” asked Mom.

“He just said ‘a very large insurance corporation,’” I said.

Dad was already coming back in the room with the Tampa phone book. “I count five,” he said, circling them with the number two pencil. “Shouldn’t take too long to find him.”

“That is, if he’s working under his real name,” added Mom.

Dad and Mom about glowed with anticipation. I decided not to tell them about Tom’s girlfriend just yet. I wouldn’t have felt right about overwhelming them. Especially with Dad coming up on the big five-oh.

## 9

*Winston Dial, New Age Psychic and Attorney-At-Law—Dispute over  
number one—As the sirens wee-ooo-wee-ooo-ed closer*

Back at the trailer, the lights glowed hazily out the windows, and Trace's rust-eaten Impala was parked out front. Could it be that Grandmom Rita and Trace finally were ironing out their differences? I decided to make a dramatic entrance, so I shut down the Torino before getting too close and coasted in. I parked as silently as possible, though the Torino was making some wonderfully disturbing gurgling noises, gently opened and closed the car door, climbed like a jungle cat over the hood of the Impala, then leapt and banged through the front door of the trailer, rolling across the carpet and ending up on my feet, shouting, "Ta da!"

Trace and Grandmom Rita sat together on the floor, playing Parcheesi. Trace's mouth was rimmed with chocolate pudding and the cut-in-half milk carton where it once was was crushed in her hand.

"Woo hoo!" shouted Grandmom Rita, clapping her gnarled, blue-veined hands.

Trace had expectorated a great deal of the pudding on the TV set, where it dripped off the face of Winston Dial, New Age Psychic and Attorney-At-Law. Through the special offer available only from his middle-of-the-night infomercial, you could get a divorce and spiritual cleansing for only \$99.95 not including any applicable sales tax. Winston, in addition to the pudding, wore a Nehru jacket and colored beads. A crystal pyramid big enough to bury a palmetto bug King Tut floated above his head, glinting lustily.

I liked his archrival “Ninja Assassin! Lawyer” much better because he threatened to cut the competition in half.

“We’ve made a decision,” said Grandmom Rita.

I picked myself up off the floor and dusted myself off, even though I wasn’t dusty.

“And it involves you,” said Trace, swallowing what pudding remained in her mouth. She placed the destroyed milk carton on top of the TV set. “Vishnu, Vishnu!” sang Winston Dial.

“And now you’re consulting with me,” I said.

“No,” said Trace.

“We’re about to order you around,” said Grandmom Rita, lowering her coke-bottle glasses so I could get a good look at the gallons of earnestness roiling in her eyes.

“Okay,” I said. “Order away.”

“One,” said Grandmom Rita. “You have to take me deep sea—”

“*Leave me alone!*” blurted Trace. “You have to leave me alone. And I mean never, ever come near me again.” The fat on her gargantuan arms rolled like waves in the Gulf of Mexico. Down at the bottom of those arms, her fists knuckled up with rage.

“Fishing!” shouted Grandmom Rita. “Deep sea fishing! Not ‘deep sea leave me alone’! God damn it! Who ever heard of that? The ‘leave me alone’ bit was number two. It was definitely number two.”

“It was number one!” roared Trace. “I won the best two out of three at Yahtzee! Or don’t you remember that?”

“I remember,” grumbled Grandmom Rita, grinding her dentures.

“So number one was definitely ‘leave me alone,’” said Trace.

I sat down on Grandmom Rita’s easy chair and watched the pudding ooze off Winston Dial’s face. He said, “Only good karma and the full unfettered force of the law will ready you for your next reincarnation.”

“Are you listening to us?” asked Trace.

“Does anyone take this guy seriously?” I asked, pointing at the set.

“I do,” said Trace, attempting to hoist her enormous body up using my particle board coffee table—which I’d stolen from a neighbor’s trash pile. He was going to throw it out merely because it was missing a leg. I carved a leg out of a hunk of two-by-four and that coffee table was never better.

Trace handed me a restraining order authored by Winston Dial and signed by an actual judge, and a free card for a tarot reading from Madame Selinka, who lived only two doors down from me. I couldn’t believe Madame Selinka was in cahoots with Winston Dial. I thought she was honest! But the reality began to set in. The piece of paper was in my hand, radiating legality. I felt like I’d swallowed a thick lump of cheddar cheese and it hadn’t reached my stomach yet, nor was it ever going to, no matter how many glasses of Phil’s Cola I chased it down with. And Phil’s Cola dissolves rust and paint on most domestic models of cars.

“This is really it,” I whispered, probably to myself.

“This is it,” said Trace. “It hasn’t been all bad, but now it’s time for me to move on and fulfill my karmic destiny, or some shit like that.”

My eyes burned peering down at that piece of paper. Tears dripped down my nose. The room blurred and I felt like a fish under the sea. I gazed up at Trace and she became a watery blur. And my chest! But when the restraining order comes, you know it’s the end.

“Carl,” said Grandmom Rita, “I know this is a bad time for you, but you know that I’ve wanted to go fishing for quite some time.” She put her bony hand on my shoulder. Her nose whistled an un merry tune.

My coffee table snapped in half from the full bodily weight of Trace, and her great body avalanched over it. She grabbed the end of the TV table and started to pull, but that broke, too, along with my pudding-enhanced TV.

“I made a reservation to go fishing for tomorrow morning, Carl,” said Grandmom Rita. “Bright and early.”

I staggered toward Trace, but couldn't see her through my tears. Oh, the sorrow! Oh, the complete destruction of my trailer! Trace managed to rise one more time, and fell out the door, and crushed my front steps, which were also made of particleboard. "Get out here and help me, you moron!" she shouted.

But I tripped over the broken coffee table and shattered TV and ended up slamming forehead first through the trailer wall. My head punctured the wall and was stuck fast in the side of my trailer.

"Nice," said Trace, staring flames up at my head, which must have looked like a trophy head in some hunter's trophy room sticking out the side of my trailer like that. The splintered remains of my front steps were beneath her.

A siren whirred not too far off.

"I called the cops on you, you creeps!" shouted the retired clown from two doors away. "I earned my sleep making retched pups like you laugh! I earned it and you blockheads keep taking it away! Away!"

"You shut up, you old clown!" whooped the retired sword swallower next door. "I can hear you snoring all night, so you ain't losing no sleep!"

"I got a pipe wrench waiting for you, my friend!" hollered the clown.

"I'll stick you with my swords, I will," bellowed the sword swallower.

"Oooo! I'm scared! I wonder if they'll actually stick in me or if they'll retract like when you were 'swallowing' them!"

"That tears it!"

And we could hear them scuffling as the sirens wee-ooo-wee-ooo-ed closer.

"I wish my head wasn't stuck in this wall," I said.

"You'll see me in court," rumbled Trace. "You can count on that." And she maneuvered herself toward her car, a great boulder of woman-flesh rolling. She grabbed the bumper, and clean-and-jerked herself up.

“The Russian judge gives her a nine-point-eight,” I muttered, afraid to say it too loud.

She staggered around the car and squeezed herself in. Her car—listing like the Andrea Dorea—vroomed to life and skidaddled out and away in a cloud of trailer park dust before the police arrived.

Of course, the man in charge was Officer Bob Catlet, pulling one of his famous double-shifts in the line of duty, bub. He broke up the circus fight, laughed at me for approximately ten minutes, then pulled on my feet until Grandmom Rita called the fire department. He found a Phil’s Cola (only 99¢ per six-pack at the Buy and Bye) in my refrigerator, drank some, spat the bubbly contents across the yard, and told Grandmom Rita a giant fish story. Grandmom Rita said, “You lie!” a couple of times during his monologue, but you could tell from the lack of force that she believed Officer Bob, and was primed for the soon-to-come bout of fishing that she was bent on dragging me out on.

The fire department guys put an asbestos hood over my head and blowtorched me out of there.

Before I went to bed, I bribed the fireman with the torch, an Edo tribesman named Ben, to solder the hole in my home shut. He welded on a cookie tin. I gave him \$25 in change and a box of Phil’s Snack Cakes (also a bargain at 99¢ for a box of twelve).

I crawled off to bed, placing Trace’s restraining orders in a shoebox under my nightstand. Beowulf, my hero dog who had lain hidden beneath my bed during the whole fracas, whimpered and puffed and slobbered relentlessly until I sang him a lullaby.

*What a hunk of man meat—Still wanted dog—And I don't  
want to know about knowing*

“Smell that salt air!” exclaimed Grandmom Rita. “Can’t you feel it in your blood? Your blood actually is saltwater, you know. We evolved from sea creatures. Read your Darwin, that’s what I say. Your granddad, God bless his soul, died in the sea, he did.”

“He drove off a cliff into Lake Erie,” I said. “And will you shut up? We haven’t even left the trailer park yet. Get in the car. I just know this is going to cost me an arm and a leg.”

“Who’d pay money for your arms and legs? They’re skinny like sticks, they are! Do I have to shout ‘hocus pocus’ and twirl round three times before I open the car door? Is that it? I forgot the routine, it’s been so long since I rode with you.”

I grabbed my hips and tried to look disapproving. Shaking head. Shaky-shaky. “No. Just be *gentle*.”

“How can you be gentle with a monster car like this? Cars should be small, not huge and useless. You don’t even have four doors and this car is as big as our house,” said Grandmom Rita, throwing open the door.

“This car has to last!” I shouted. “We have no TV set, and I suppose I’ll have to buy you a new one, right? I mean you couldn’t stand watching *The Price is Right* in black and white, could you, even though that Bob Barker is mostly plain old white now.”

“What a hunk of man meat,” mumbled Grandmom Rita, musing. She plopped in the front seat and slammed the door shut with all her might. The tip of a fishing pole that I’d shoved in the back seat twirled near her ear; a metal loop on the tip gleamed

with early morning sunlight. “You know, in Mexico, he’s known far and wide as ‘Señor Bob.’”

The Torino gurgled to life. I revved the engine a few times, trying to get it to act in a peppy manner. It sputtered like a foreign object was stuck in its throat. Someday, I thought, whatever was lodged in there would spurt out the tailpipe and maybe hit a pedestrian. All the warning lights on the dash glowed brilliantly, like a boxy little Christmas display in some cheap mall. A carbon scent wafted through the vents on the dash.

Beowulf stared out the bedroom window at me, then let loose a National Geographic TV Special howl. Perhaps it was a PLO howl, considering who his original owners were. Maybe Beowulf was celebrating the creation of the new Palestinian State. His name—when the two PLO guys who lived for a time next door owned him—used to be Smokey. The two PLO guys left him tethered to a tree all day and night and he howled then, sometimes all night long. And some nights, the two PLO guys would howl along with him. I went over to their trailer one morning after work to ask them about the dog. They were friendly enough, especially when offering me a bag of Turkish hash at half price. “You want dog?” asked Ahmed, PLO guy #1, in a near whisper. He was thin and appeared to be effortlessly kayaking through a waking dream.

“Okay,” I said. “But I think I’ll skip the dope.”

“You take dog!” said Samer, PLO guy #2, who was composed of bricks and mortar. PLO flags adorned their walls alongside pictures of martyrs draped in black crepe. Loopy Arabic writing adorned the flags and photos.

I took Smokey in, bathed him, fed him, and sang him to sleep.

Two days later, Ahmed paddled over and asked if he could play with Smokey. I said that sounded all right, but then didn’t see the dog or Ahmed for two weeks afterwards. Samer drove up to me one day as I ran down the street, away from my first car—a Buick Skylark that caught fire and burned until it was nothing but steel tire rims and blackened car outline—and asked if I still

wanted dog. “Yeah,” I said, hands on knees, puffing, “but this time there’s no taking him back.”

“Ahmed has gone back to Palestine,” said Samer, his eyes moistening at the thought of his far away home. “You take dog.” I later saw Ahmed’s face on a PBS documentary. He was sprinting away from Israeli police, who were firing humane rubber bullets at him.

I named the dog after the strongest warrior in all English literature. The original Beowulf was so strong, he ripped a menacing monster’s arm off and hung it on a wall as a trophy. Then he killed the monster’s mom, who was even bigger than the son monster.

Grandmom Rita popped me in the ear with the palm of her hand. “What’re you thinking about? It better be fishing!”

“So long, boy!” I said, waving bye-bye to my chicken dog. I clunked the car into reverse, ran over something crunchy, perhaps a dirt clod, put the car in drive and we were on our way.

“Let me show you where it is,” said Grandmom Rita, and she reached into my map bin.

I grabbed her hand. “Never, never reach into my map bin! I have all my maps specially marked and placed!” Placement is important. “And besides, I know where we’re going.”

“Sure you do,” she said, retracting her hand. She leaned her head against the passenger side window.

“I’ve lived in this town all my life,” I asserted, turning onto Beneva Road. “And the map bin knows. All knowledge is in the map bin.”

“Then it’s off to the sea! Your granddad loved the sea. That’s why he was buried in it,” said Grandmom Rita, wistfully. She was in a wistful mood, up to her eyeballs in wist.

“He was drunk and drove off a cliff into Lake Erie,” I reiterated. “How many times must I reiterate that?”

“He wasn’t drunk,” said Grandmom Rita. “He had a brain aneurysm.”

“He had a brain *tumor*. It was as big as a ruby-red grapefruit,” I said. “And he was drunk.”

“He flew up to Cleveland to see your uncle, my little boy Larry, who lived in Lorain. He was driving out to Lorain to see him after renting that Ford car in Cleveland. Larry made Fords at the Ford factory in Lorain, you know.” She unfolded the thousand-times-told story and I watched it flake at the edges.

“I know,” I said, taking a left onto 17th Street.

“But your granddad never made it to Lorain,” said Grandmom. Her voice weakened. “And Larry . . .” She choked up a bit. A gnarled hand reached into her shiny, purple-vinyl handbag and extracted a semi-used handwipe. She brought the handwipe to her bulbous nose and fired out some snot.

Uncle Larry retired early from FO-MO-CO. He decided to drive down to Houston to see the Cleveland Browns play the Houston Oilers, all by himself. This was 20 years after granddad’s death. Uncle Larry decided to pass a wrecker on a deserted stretch of highway somewhere in Arkansas and ran head-on into a Mack truck. Glass from Uncle Larry’s Ford LTD headlights pierced the Samsonite luggage in his trunk—glass that Uncle Larry may well have installed himself.

“That was an accident,” I insisted.

“Fifty years old,” said Grandmom. “The both of them. And your Great-Granddad.”

“Great-Granddad was an industrial accident. Falling into a vat of molten metal could happen to just about anyone who worked in a foundry.” I stopped, thought for a moment, then said: “But Cousin Mel, you see, was only in his thirties. Died on the toilet, just like Elvis. Thirties!” I said.

Grandmom Rita put her hand on my arm. It was icy. She squeezed hard and I felt her hand bones nearly touch my forearm bones. Nothing but skin separated us. “Your brother knows what the deal is,” she divulged to me, conspiratorially. “He’s an actuary. They know when things are going to happen, just by math. They have charts that show how long each of us is going to live. They know when we’re going to die.”

I pulled the car over at Cowher Brothers U-Pull-It—a treasure trove of used automobile parts where you can take home as many car parts as you can carry from their myriad wrecks for only \$50 a visit. I peered past Grandmom Rita, across the vast, never-moving, rusting traffic jam. “Do you think that if I worked out it would be worth it?” I asked her.

“Piffle,” Grandmom said.

“Piffle?”

“Piffle,” Grandmom said again.

“So what are you trying to say?”

“What I’m trying to say is, ‘I need to go fishing now before a 10-ton truck runs over us both,’” growled Grandmom Rita, staring out her window at the acres of destroyed, picked-over, dead cars.

I fired the car back up and stomped on the gas, nearly running into an RV with Ohio plates. They honked furiously at me.

“You’re going the wrong way,” said Grandmom Rita.

“I know what I’m doing,” I snapped.

But I didn’t. And I don’t. And I don’t want to know what I’m doing. And I don’t want to know about knowing. Honestly.

*The briny deep beckoned—Fishing fun—Still has the aim*

After a few wrong turns, we pulled into the pier parking lot. Seagulls twirled, cawing, overhead. A palm tree corpse lay in the middle of the parking lot like a giant Lincoln log, its roots dangling out, clotted with dry dirt. Its fronds were brown and crumbling. Grandmom Rita unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door before I parked. She wore her big old shorts and big old shirt, both nearly white, but not gleaming white in the sun. The charter boat bobbed sickly next to the dock. It was a 25-footer, all barnacled up, paint a-peeling, blue smoke ejecting in a vertical cloud from twin Evinrudes. The briny deep beckoned. Shit, shit, shit. Dramamine was in my shirt pocket, underneath my stitched on name. I always wore my chef's shirt because the dry-cleaning was free at work. Work! I'd almost forgotten. I hopped out of the car and twirled on my heel, scanning for a pay phone. There was one not too far away, up away from the boat slip, near Marina Jack's and Marina Jack's II. I plodded down toward it, thinking *there's no excuse, really. I will just have to be late for work*. As I closed in on the phone, I noticed it was ringing. I jogged up to it and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"You just called here," accused this voice that was somewhere between Kermit the Frog's and Larry King's.

"No, I didn't," I replied.

"Is your number 555-2112?" he asked, coughing up a lung.

I checked the number on the phone. "Well, what do you know? That is the number on this phone."

"Then you did call here! What do you want?" he asked, firmly.

“Are you Skip Caray, the Atlanta Braves’ announcer?”

“Is that some kind of joke?” he asked, then gasped for air through rusty windpipes.

“Oh,” I said, “No joke.”

He sighed. “No, I’m not,” he said, and coughed again, this time not so violently. “Think about this: A lot of thinking went into the things that make our lives so thoughtless. It’s very Zen to think like that, like the Tibetans who are right now suffering under the yoke of Communism.”

“I thought the Tibetans had Tibetan Buddhism, not Zen.”

“No,” he said. “They’re Zen all right. Eat right. Don’t smoke and stay away from acids in your diet. I ate too much citrus and smoked too much and now I’m stuck indoors with nothing to do all day but call payphones demanding that people talk with me. *Why won’t you talk with me?*”

“I have to go fishing now,” I said, thinking about what he’d said. “But I want to thank you for having such a nice chat. I promise to think about the eternal.”

“Bye now,” he said, glumly. I listened to him cough. And he hung up, *click*.

I dropped a quarter into the phone and listened to the quarter wending its way through phone guts and landing in the phone stomach. I dialed the number for work and got the answering machine. I wrote my name with my fingertip into the chrome on the face of the phone and watched it fade away. “Hello,” I said after the tone. “I’ll be a little late tonight, maybe. At least I hope not. But I’ve gotten roped into doing something with Grandmom Rita, and now, hmm. You see.” I hung up. Talking to the grille’s answering machine wasn’t nearly as easy as talking to Trace’s. I sighed heavily thinking about her. She was gone now, leaving only my half-wrecked trailer and a restraining order for me to remember her by.

I jogged back to my car and shut the doors carefully. Grandmom Rita was already on the boat, talking with Captain Desmond, the Jamaican-born boat owner, about red snapper, among other things.

I'd gone to school with Desmond's daughter Desiree who sat behind me in many classes because our last names started with the same letter of the alphabet. She kicked my chair most days, and sometimes would hit me in the back of my head with a rolled-up copy of our school newspaper, the *Sarasota Sailor*. She was a stunningly beautiful girl with full lips and round features who had a terrible lisp and stuttered, and I was madly in love with her because she was so well balanced. I asked her out a couple of times and she laughed at me, twirling a perfect dreadlock in a perfect finger, saying, "If I went out wi-wi-with you, I'd have to thoo-oot mythelf." Her skin was as brown and creamy as the milk left over after you eat a bowl of Cocoa Krispies.

I stepped aboard the boat, saluting Captain Desmond.

"Oh, no, mahn," said Captain Desmond. "You that crazy-mahn that liked my daughter." Captain Desmond wore a skipper's cap over the top of long ropes of jet-black hair that extended to his waist. A stubbly beard covered over an angular face. Bright twinkling eyes peered out from under the bill of his cap. A blinding Hawaiian shirt covered over a roundish belly, whose belly button—an outty—strained out in the gap between two buttons. Grey sweatshorts extended to his bony knees. Long toes gripped the front edges of his flip-flops.

"That was a long time ago, Captain Desmond," I said.

"I hope you been to therapy," said Captain Desmond. It sounded like "tear-a-pea."

Grandmom Rita was busy strapping herself into a chair bolted to the deck. She'd unloaded the car when I was making my call and had all her essential fishing implements arrayed around her.

I turned around and caught Desiree trying to sneak off the boat. "Say 'sunset'," I said. And she froze like a caught catburglar. She dripped beauty and style, and I told her so. I told her about my tragic love affair with Trace and how Trace had left me just the night before. I told her about technical school and my advisor Chuck's hairpiece. She began to relax. I noticed that we were in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico now. "Well," I said. "That was quick."

“Nuh-nuh-not really,” said Desiree. She wiped some sweat off her brow with the back of her hand and squinted at me through the blinding sun.

“What’ve you been up to?” I asked her.

She looked around her, out at the vast gulf, as if a frisky dolphin might jump up out of the ocean and chirp out the proper words. She never liked to speak in high school, so the next thing she said came as a surprise. “I tr-ried to be an actreth for a w-while. But I c-couldn’t get rid of my thtuttering.”

“But it’s your lisp and stuttering that make you so beautiful. Why the hell would you want to get rid of them?”

“Only y-you,” she said.

Then the second part of what she said trailed back around and caught me by surprise. I said, “An actress? That’s wonderful! Where?”

“At the Athlo,” she said. She meant the Asolo State Theatre, which doubled as Florida State University’s acting school.

“Wow,” I said. “Did you ever get to act?”

“I played a hooker once,” she said.

“I can’t imagine you as a hooker,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said. “Carl, pleathe don’t t-take thith perthonally, but—”

“No offense taken,” I said.

“You didn’t l-let me finith,” she said.

“I was about to take something personally,” I said.

She rolled her round eyes round. “Ith y-your Grandmom thtill with the thircuth?”

“She’s right there,” I said, thumbing toward her. “Go ask.”

Desiree began to walk over. She was wearing cutoffs and a tanktop. Her bare feet slapped against the wet deck. I realized I hadn’t taken any dramamine yet. And yet, I hadn’t vomited. Yet. Grandmom Rita’s fishing pole suddenly made a zinging sound. “Let it out! Let it out!” shouted Captain Desmond.

“I know good and goddamned well how to fish, Captain Desmond!” Grandmom Rita snapped back.

We ended up following a large fish around for the next four hours. If there's a lot of drama involved in following around a large fish, I must have missed it. Desiree strapped herself into a chair next to Grandmom Rita and spelled her every half-hour. Captain Desmond was supercharged and full of sage advice, which Grandmom Rita either contradicted or ignored. I spent most of the time losing mental games of tic-tac-toe, or pretending to tap-dance.

The fish seemingly finally wore out, though, and it looked like all the drama that I was unable to perceive was going to fizzle. "Tarpon!" Desiree said, looking back to her dad for confirmation and obtaining it through head nod. We were ten yards away from it, when, amazingly, it got its second wind and began to move again. Captain Desmond told Desiree to cut the line, that we weren't going to follow that fish any longer. That's when Grandmom Rita shocked everyone by pulling out a knife. She cut herself out of her straps and leapt to standing on the seat. She winged the knife at the big fish. The knife toppled end-over-end, spinning in perfect cycles out over the sun-speckled gulf, until it slammed into the fish's head, instantly killing it.

"She's still got the aim!" I hollered triumphantly, leaping to my feet.

Grandmom Rita took a bow.

Desiree unhooked herself from her chair, looked at Grandmom Rita, then me dancing wildly on the deck, then back at Grandmom Rita taking bow after bow. Desiree placed her hand over her mouth and began to laugh. She soon doubled over, tears streaming down her face, holding onto her chair.

Captain Desmond did not laugh. He was all efficiency. He steered the boat over to the tarpon, and Desiree and I helped him haul it aboard. The twitching fish seemed as big as a Lincoln Continental. It took all the effort of all three of us to flop it aboard the boat, which bobbed briefly with the weight of the enormous fish.

When I turned around to complain about my back, I saw Grandmom Rita sprawled out on the deck, her eyes closed, her arms stretched out away from her body.

I ran over to her, my pulse pounding horribly in my ears. "Are you all right, Grandmom?" I asked, kneeling next to her.

She opened her eyes and stared over at me. "I'm hot," she said. "I'm tired."

"Did you faint or something?" I asked.

"I'm tired," she said, half her face frozen into a mask. The other half was still her. "I'm tired," she said. "I think I need to sleep now."

I sat down Indian-style next to her, holding her hand and patting it. Her hand was dry and hot.

"Oh, damn!" said Captain Desmond. He got on the radio and started talking to people. The boat was moving quickly. I could perceive some ocean over the side of the boat. The huge fish wasn't even squirming. Desiree stood over Grandmom Rita holding a poncho, trying to block the sun out. The poncho struggled with Desiree, trying to break free.

I ran my fingers through the hair on Grandmom Rita's good side. I said, "This isn't true. This isn't really happening."

Her eyes opened and one focused on me. "Oh, Carl," she rasped out, a thin line of drool running down her jawline. "You wouldn't know true if it jogged up and bit you on the ass."

# 12

## *Catholic schoolboy—Frozen head fortune*

For a couple of years, I pranced around as a Catholic schoolboy. I learned to pray from Father Frank, who was as madcap a priest as could be allowed under Vatican II. When I was growing up, my father was either flush with money or broke. In the years before sixth grade, Dad was loaded. He'd invested in some offshore thing and lent money to a guy who invented a safety spring for pneumatic staple guns (which gave Dad the idea that he was a builder). And so, for a time, we were fabulously wealthy. I matriculated at Our Lady of Infinite Sorrows Catholic Day School (uniforms required). Tom went to Pine View School for the Gifted, which was free. It was the public school program for brainiacs before the days of budget cutting. Just last year, after all the budget cutting, I saw in the paper that the county had gutted it.

Father Frank was the school pastor at Our Lady, and boy was he tricky! He knew I didn't like confession (sitting in a wooden box, talking to a representative of God Almighty while outside hundreds of other Catholics are waiting—knowing that you're talking to the representative, knowing that you sinned (sinner!)—something about that bothers me. Still, a sin's a sin and there is no getting out of confessing it. But still). One day, he called me up to his office. I knocked on the door. The door sounded hollow. "Come in," intoned Father Frank.

I pulled the door open too quickly. The door was incredibly light. It had to have been hollow. Smoke gushed out of the room, flowing around and past me into the narrow corridor that led either to the classrooms or to the residence that the sisters lived in.

(They made it clear that they were *sisters* and not *nuns*. Sisters are devoted to service. Nuns are devoted to prayer. “Nothing wrong with being devoted to prayer,” Sister Mary Renter would say, though the tone of her voice said otherwise.)

I stepped into the smoke-clogged room. Little beams of sunlight turned the smoke into diagonal pillars, little columns of tobacco particles rising toward God. “Hey there,” said Father Frank, waving his hand at me. His cigarette was planted on the end of a cigarette holder. The holder jutted randily out of his mouth. His voice was full of gravel and pull tops from beer cans and shiny, ground-up, green glass. His tiny, gray eyes twinkled behind pounds of white, pinkish flesh that formed into rolls that even his loose priestly clothes could not hide.

“You’re looking like FDR today,” I said, coughing.

“Haw, haw, haw!” laughed the man of God. “Marvelous!”

“I live to entertain,” I said.

“Such cynicism!” he remarked. “Tsk, tsk. Won’t do in someone so young.” He would die of lung cancer within a year. I didn’t know that then. Neither did he.

“I’m not a cynic,” I said. “But, you have to admit it: Reality isn’t as kind as we’d like.”

“*Au contraire*, my little friend. Come closer, I won’t grab you or anything,” he said, and then grabbed my arm viciously when I got close. He pulled me down to my knees, which banged painfully on his warped, hardwood floor. His breath smelled like dirty grape juice and his square teeth looked like lemon-flavored Chiclets. “So, we’re not confessing our sins, I heard,” he said, leaning into me. His tiny eyes were wild. One pupil was as big as a frying pan and the other was a pinprick.

“Um, I’m sorry, Father Frank,” I said.

“Tell that to God!” he hissed. “Go on, tell God how sorry you are!”

“Father forgive me, for I have sinned . . .”

“Yes?”

“It’s been three months since my last confession.”

“No, no, no. ‘It has been, dot, dot, dot.’ Don’t use contractions when you’re talking to God, my boy.”

“It has been—”

“Too late! Just continue.”

“Can’t I just buy an indulgence?”

“Don’t get persnickety! Confess!”

I confessed and confessed, and confessed sins that I hadn’t committed yet, then confessed having told lies about the sins I hadn’t committed yet. Father Frank closed his eyes during most of it and I might have thought that he’d fallen asleep except that he’d grunted approvingly after my juiciest confession, which was that I snuck the Sears catalog up to my room and looked at the pictures of mostly naked women in their underwear. He told me to do the Stations of the Cross, twice, and five Hail Marys for the underwear ad girls.

“Get up,” he said, lighting another cigarette then sticking it on the end of his holder. Puff, puff. “Go on, get out of here.”

I walked over to the door and as my hand touched the knob, he asked, “How would you like it if someone stared at *you* in *your* underwear?”

I yanked the lightweight door open and said, “I wouldn’t like it much. Not much at all.” Then I leapt out into the hall and ran like hell.

I remembered all this while sitting in the hospital chapel, waiting for God to grant my Grandmom Rita renewed life, or not. God gives, God takes away. The tiny Jesus nailed to the cross stared down at me. This Jesus was particularly miserable. The nail driven through His feet crawled with rust that would probably give him lockjaw if he managed to live, the wood gnawing at His back splintered into him, and He was missing His nose. A lot of the thorns in His crown had broken off. That had to be a plus.

My brother Tom sat next to me in the chapel. My parents were in the hallway outside, waiting for test results. Mom and Dad had no trouble tracking down Tom, but if he was chagrined about it, he didn’t say. A little tear dripped down his cheek. He’d

inherited Dad's look of dignity, plus he had actual dignity, which made the tear all the more poignant.

"Tom," I whispered. "I'm sorry."

"You blew it, little brother," he whispered back. "But let's not dwell on that for now."

"I really am sorry," I whispered.

"Quit apologizing," he said, in a normal tone of voice. We were the only two living people in the little, poorly lit room. "It's done."

Just then, a policeman entered the room, walked past us, and knelt before the altar. As he turned around and headed back toward us, I realized that it was Officer Bob Catlett. "I hate to be the one to bring you bad news," he said.

"Oh my God," said Tom, covering his mouth.

"No, Tom. It's nothing like that," said Officer Bob. "Carl, I cruised by the restaurant tonight. You've been fired, bub."

"But, this is a personal emergency," I said.

"They've fired you for not calling in."

"I called in."

"They said that—"

"I called in. Period. Exclamation point!" I shouted.

"They said that leaving a message on the answering machine wasn't enough, that you were supposed to talk to one of them."

"How am I supposed to do that when the only thing that picks up the phone is the answering machine?"

"Jeez, Carl. Get a grip. I think you can do better than working for those two jerks anyway." Officer Bob gingerly rubbed his mustache with the tip of his finger. "I know lots of places that would hire you in a heartbeat if they knew you were free."

"Really?" I said.

"No, not really," said Tom, dismally. "He's yanking your chain."

"Am *not*," said Officer Bob.

"Are *too*," said Tom.

They went to high school together. Officer Bob was voted most likely to succeed. After he flunked out of law school, he joined

the force. Tom went on to high-paying jobs figuring out approximate dates of death of statistically significant groups of people for the insurance industry. One of Tom's specialties was black lung disease.

"Whatever," said Officer Bob.

"Yeah, whatever," growled Tom. "How's my grandmother doing?"

"The ambulance boys say she's going to make it," said Officer Bob. "I haven't checked with the doctors yet."

"Don't bother. In instances of this particular kind of stroke, the patient survives 85 percent of the time if she gets treatment with the first 24 hours. Though, in 60 percent of the cases, there is some collateral damage, such as loss of sight, mild paralysis, or coordination. I wrote a paper for the Society of Actuaries on this topic just last month," said Tom.

"How nice, *Brains*," said Officer Bob.

Tom was known as "Brains" when he was in high school. Pine View School for the Gifted was a pressure cooker of intellectual jealousy, Tom always told me. After college, Tom became the youngest person ever to be a lettered actuary in the Society of Actuaries. In order to become lettered, you have to take a series of tests over a period of years, sometimes decades. Tom finished them all up in five years, and sneered about the pitiful cretins and whiners who didn't pass each test on the first try. Professional jealousy kept getting him fired, but insurance companies coveted him anyway. Some rehired him two or three times.

"I don't have to be nice," said Tom. "It's not in my charter."

Dad pushed through the chapel doors. "If you're all done conferring with God, I have some good news for you. The doctors say she's out of danger, that we can all go home now."

"Phew," went Tom.

"Ha," went Officer Bob, upon seeing Tom's relief.

"Can we see her?" I asked.

"Not yet," said Dad. "You should ride with us, come sleep in your old room tonight."

“Okay,” I said, wearily.

“I notice you didn’t invite me,” said Tom. “I suppose I should feel pained.”

We trudged fatiguedly down the glaring, phosphorescent corridors of Saint Luke’s Hospital, our prayers answered, for the time being. Officer Bob walked along with us, telling us how he heard about the tragedy over the radio, how horrible he felt about Grandmom Rita, what an inspiration she was to a young man such as Officer Bob who hoped to age as gracefully as her. He had metal taps on the bottoms of his shoes that clacked as we walked. The clacks bounced off the walls until they penetrated the acoustic tiles above us. Fluorescent lights buzzed, making mechanical shimmers on the linoleum tile. Old people moaned as we walked past their dimly lit rooms, some crying out to us:

“Get the nurse!”

“I made wee-wee on myself!”

“Help me! Won’t anybody help me?”

Mom told me that a hospital was no place to get well. Nor was an ACLF, such as the one she worked in. Mom clutched her handbag tightly as we walked past the rooms full of the sick and dying. Mom hated weakness. “They’re all thieves,” she said to Officer Bob.

“What? Who, ma’am?” asked Officer Bob, hopefully. His hand automatically reached toward his holster. Maybe there’d be someone to arrest tonight.

“These Medicaid patients,” said Mom. “They’re robbing the country blind. They all go into the hospital because they think there’s something wrong with them. But there isn’t a damn thing wrong with them but age. People weren’t supposed to live this long. But people are greedy.” I looked down and saw that she was wearing her nurse shoes. Her feet moved quickly along the linoleum. They seemed to move faster than all our feet, yet we were all going the same speed. “These old people rob the young, boys like my sons here, just to try to stay alive a little longer. They think they’re cars, or something. They think we can change their oil and they’ll be good as new, but

nothing will bring back their youth. 'Oh, I ache!' they say. Ha! God damn it, they're supposed to ache. Their warranties expired 20 years ago!" Mom smiled harshly, a little curl of a smile. "You won't see me checking into one of these dumps years from now. When it's my time, I'll good and God damn go!"

Dad snorted.

"Oh, Mr. Smart Guy has something to say," said Mom. "Go on, say it."

"You think you'll have any say if you, say, have a stroke?" asked Dad.

Mom jerked her head sideways and narrowed her eyes. "You think I'm going to die first? Is that what you think?"

"Not between the two of us, no."

"You're damn right, no," said Mom.

"But the boys, here—"

"If the boys know what's good for them, they'll let me die in peace. Otherwise, I'll make their lives a living hell," said Mom. She snarled saying this.

Dad looked toward Tom and me. "It's true," he muttered.

"I have a living will," said Mom. "And it *will* be honored."

"I don't," said Dad. "I have an alternate plan."

We were outside now. Now in front of St. Luke's. Stars twinkled in the sky. Venus wobbled violet and blue. A piece of space debris ignited as it entered our atmosphere, streaking across the sky and winking out of existence.

"I love you, Mom," I said.

"Don't be such a sap, Carl," Mom said.

Tom yawned. "Will you be requiring my presence here any longer? I mean, I do have a life, you know."

"Go home, son," Dad said. Then he glanced skyward and said to no one in particular: "I'm thinking about taking up pipe smoking."

"Emphysema," Mom said. "A very dignified way to exit into the afterlife. You get to wheeze and beg for more tobacco."

"Father Frank died of lung cancer," I said.

"You're an idiot, Carl," Tom said. "Good night, everybody."

“Good night,” sang everyone in unison as Tom walked away.

Officer Bob’s handheld radio crackled. “Ten-four,” said Officer Bob into it. “I have to be going then.”

“Let’s be careful out there,” Dad said.

“Ha, ha!” went Officer Bob. He walked off into the night, out to his cruiser, no doubt.

“Gunshot wound,” Mom said. “Very gruesome. It’ll kill him, especially if it hits him in the torso.”

“Ask Tom,” I said. “He probably has a chart on it.”

“Charts are bullshit,” Mom said.

“Where’s your car?” Dad asked.

“At the dock,” I said.

“We’ll go get it in the morning.”

“What about my dog?”

“Let him shit in the house,” Dad said. “I’ll help clean it up.”

“Sure he will,” Mom said.

“I mean it,” Dad said.

“Sure he does,” Mom said.

In the car, Dad told us about his latest plan, which he had just thought up there in the hospital. As he drove us down the road in his vintage Buick Roadmaster, he told us how he would buy a giant freezer and freeze old people after they died so they could be revived in the future. “I read about it in *Reader’s Digest*,” said Dad.

“I have to hand it to you, Doug,” said Mom. “I mean, most of your plans are just plain stupid. But this one is not only stupid, it’s gruesome.”

“All that we need are some canisters and some liquid nitrogen,” continued Dad, excitedly. “Then we just freeze the heads, maybe stack them one on top of the other inside these canisters.”

“Like Pringles potato crisps,” I said.

“Exactly,” said Dad. “Why, I bet we could get ten, fifteen heads in one canister.”

“Why, Doug?” asked Mom. I could see shaking her head in the front passenger seat in the dim moonlight, then cradling her head in her hands. “Why?”

“Why? Well, honey, every business needs an edge, and if I can jam more heads into a canister, I can charge less than the other—”

“I mean, why? Why?”

“Doris, do you remember when you were the Queen of the Citrus Parade? Miss Tropicana Sarasota? Well, in the future, they’ll be able to take some cells out of your frozen head and grow a new body for you, the same one that you had when you were a girl. Then they’ll take your brain and put it in the new body! Can you just imagine?”

“Doug, why would anybody in the future give a good God damn about the frozen head of some relic from the dark ages? You know what I’d do with a frozen head? I’d put it in a clear Plexiglas box and keep it on the coffee table for when company came over. Then, when someone asked me why I had this frozen head on my coffee table, I’d say, ‘Oh, just as a conversation piece.’ No one in his or her right mind will ever revive the frozen heads of old people, much less make new bodies for them,” said Mom heatedly.

“Ah, but this is where it gets good,” said Dad. “We’ll set up a trust for ourselves, maybe just a thousand bucks. And, with interest, it should end up being a tidy sum, one that would interest your average money-grubbing physician.”

Mom hit her head on the dash on purpose.

“That must have hurt,” I said.

“Not as much as when your father cuts off my head and freezes it,” said Mom.

“You won’t feel it,” said Dad. “You’ll be dead!”

Mom peeked out the windshield, up toward the stars. “God? Hello, God? Do you have anything to say about this?”

God made no response.

“We’ll discuss this tomorrow,” said Mom. “In the meantime, pull over and get out. I’m driving. You sit in the backseat and tell Carl all about your nonsense. I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

Dad pulled over to the side of the road. He opened up the door next to me and I scootched over.

Mom got in the driver's seat and clunked the big car into gear. Dad had owned the car since the mid-1960's, when he bought it used from my dead uncle Larry, who didn't want a Buick after starting work for Ford. Dad and Larry grew up on the road together with my Grandmom Rita and my granddad. Grandmom was a knife thrower whose live targets were the family pets, tiny dachshunds who Grandmom would blindfold before every show. They went passively to their little wheel of fate, and allowed my granddad to bind them to it, to spin them. *Thunk, thunk, thunk*, went the knives, three times a day. Granddad was an alcoholic whose favorite whiskey was Jack Daniel's because of its rich, smooth flavor. I never really met him. Not when he was alive, anyway.

"Frozen heads," whispered Dad to me. "I mean, who's doing it here, here in the Sunshine State, with all our dying and dead people? I mean, mass market! Right? Am I right?"

Mom said, "A wire. I think I see a wire—"

We heard a whipcrack right before the garbage can came flying into the passenger's side window, transforming the safety glass into shiny emeralds. The car skittered off the road. Mom was covered with emeralds, from her hair down to her nurse's shoes. She reached across the seat and into the glove compartment, and pulled out a small, semiautomatic handgun. She jerked open the car door, leapt to her feet and aimed the gun over the roof of the car. "ALL RIGHT YOU LITTLE BASTARDS COME OUT AND GET YOUR MEDICINE!" she shouted. We piled out of the car. Dad stood nervously off to one side, his hands in his pockets, looking around. Mom sparkled greenly under the streetlights. Some neighborhood lights turned on now. Some curtains pulled back, letting interior lamplight squeak out.

"Doris Mays," mumbled Dad.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" asked Mom, turning her head toward him, keeping the gun aimed between a couple of houses.

"Um, yeah," said Dad. "But, I think it was just some kids. You know. Um, tripwires. Garbage cans."

“I could be dead right now,” said Mom. “You could be cutting my head off *right now* so you could freeze it in a bucket, so some future person could have it displayed on a coffee table.”

“You’re bleeding, hon,” said Dad.

“So is Carl,” said Mom.

My arms and shirt and jeans were covered with little pellets of safety glass. Little drips of blood coursed down my arms. Dad didn’t have a smidgen of glass on him. I must have shielded him.

“I’ll clean the car up tomorrow,” said Dad.

“Sure you will,” said Mom.

“I swear,” said Dad.

Mom brought the gun down, shaking her head. “It’s always something, isn’t it?” She laughed weakly, defeatedly.

“Yeah,” said Dad. “I guess it is.”

*Real Nature is Real Cruel—One potato, two potato—At the wings, me  
and Hux across from Grandmom Rita and Mel*

Mom and Dad live in a remote neighborhood subdivided into five-acre lots on the outskirts of Sarasota. Mom and Dad live on the front three acres of their lot and have let the back two acres become a wildlife preserve. Turkey vultures often circle above the back two acres because real nature is real cruel. Two families of deer roam their neighborhood and spend a great deal of time in Mom and Dad's back two acres, eating. Scrub palmetto and Australian pines and weeds and rabbits and bugs galore crowd the back two. At least two armadillos live back there and dig up the front three acres looking for grubs during the night. Dad keeps his two trailers stashed back there. One's a tall trailer with "Doug's Balls" painted on the side, a smiling golf ball logo underneath the name. The trailer is filled to the rim with golf balls in various states of cleanliness and usability. The other has his flat fishing boat attached to it. As we pulled up to the house, Mom pushed the garage door button on the dash over and over trying to coax the door to raise itself up. "I told you not to put the damn button in the dash. The signal isn't getting through," she said.

"You're not pushing it right," said Dad.

"Not pushing it right? It's a *button*. How'm I supposed to push it?" Mom was full of practical questions like that because she was from the Midwest. She was originally Uncle Larry's girlfriend before Dad swept her off her feet and married her. She was seventeen. Dad was twenty and had an air of prosperity about him that Mom liked. Plus, he owned a red convertible.

Dad reached over the seat and pushed the button. The door opened slowly, ominously, revealing the deep of the garage. A dim light glowed from the garage ceiling, revealing what appeared to be an alien from a 1950's UFO movie. It was Dad's diving suit, hung up to dry. Bags bulging tumorously with golf balls surrounded the suit. Mom pulled into the garage. We were both still pretty much covered with glass, even after Dad sucked off most of it using the car vacuum that he'd plugged into the dashboard cigarette lighter. He vacuumed us off as we drove. First he reached over the seat and did Mom, then he vacuumed me off. We each raised our arms so Dad could be thorough. He emptied the glass into the Keep Sarasota Clean litterbag, which was covered with pictures of palm trees, a smiling sun and an owl wearing a Robin Hood cap. I wondered if the feather in the owl's cap came from the owl himself or some other bird.

Mom parked. We exited the car, and Mom and I did *one potato, two potato* to see who would shower first. Mom won. As I waited in the garage for Mom to get out of the shower, Dad waxed nostalgic about his mother and his days with the circus. He told me about the time Grandmom Rita actually hit one of the dogs. She only nipped the side of the animal. It was only a flesh wound, but the little dog yipped and hollered loudly, shrieking almost like a little human baby, its voice sounded so pained. Granddad ran over to the pooch. The audience was hushed now. Some whispered to each other. Uncle Larry and Dad sat in the audience. An old lady behind them kept saying, "Terrible, terrible." Another lady said that it was probably cruel to use dogs like that, that human beings should be the ones getting knives thrown at them for the entertainment of others instead of dogs. "Human beings can *choose*," said the lady. Dad turned and looked at her. Her hair was done up so it looked all plastic. Her eyes glowed wetly with righteousness. Next to her, a beautiful, teenaged girl wept.

The dog continued screaming.

Granddad yanked the knife out and the dog screamed some more. He untied the little dog and unblindfolded it. Grandmom

Rita stood rock still yards away, blindfold still on, her shoulders sagging slightly. The dog, upon seeing my granddad, stopped crying. Granddad cradled the little dog in his arms and walked out of the stagelights and away. Grandmom Rita still had not moved. Dad turned around and saw Uncle Larry comforting the girl. The beautiful girl was Mom. The righteous lady was my grandmother, the grandmother that I never met.

“I think your brother is your uncle’s son,” said Dad. “I think your brother is my nephew. It’s been bothering me for a while.”

Dad turned on the car vacuum again and ran it up and down my body. Little pieces of glass clunked inside it. The vacuum roared and clunked. He turned it off again. “I’m sorry,” he said. He turned the vacuum back on but just stood there with the vacuum at his side. He was staring off into space. He sucked in his cheeks. Spider webs laced the corners of the garage. The floor was covered with dirt and oil stains and golf balls that had fallen out of bags.

*I’m supposed to do something,* I thought.

*I don’t know what to do,* I thought.

*This is where a functional brain would come in handy,* I thought.

The door to the house opened. Mom stood there in her bathrobe, a blinding light coruscated around her body, turning her into a near-silhouette. “What the hell are you two doing out there?” she yelled over the vacuum. “Don’t clean that up tonight! Get in here and take a shower!”

The vacuum clicked off. “In a minute,” said Dad distantly.

Like simulated wood paneling, all ceilings are full of surprises, if you stare long enough. The ceiling in the room that my parents reserved for me out at their little rancho was no exception. My brother and I hadn’t really lived in this house, but they insisted that Tom and I each have our own rooms, which were replicas of the rooms that we’d had as children. It made the house seem more lived in than it really was, which was nice or creepy, depending on what chemicals my brain oozed out on certain days. With all that had happened in the past 48 or so hours, the motif definitely edged toward creepy. I couldn’t sleep well anyway, so soaking in

the peculiarity of the room was a way of blowing off the time between when I went to bed and the time when I got up.

I remembered: I was unemployed. I didn't really have to get up. That fact, in and of itself, kind of put pressure on me not only to sleep, but to sleep *in*, which kept me up all night. Gave me something more to worry about while being insomnia-wracked.

"I am a psychological mess," I said to myself, alone in my room at three in the morning. "This sleeplessness is getting to be a problem," I said an hour later. An hour after that I said, "I read somewhere that if you try not to sleep, you'll fall asleep faster." So, for 35 minutes, I tried not to sleep and unfortunately was successful. "My head hurts," I said at 5:38 a.m. I dozed off for 15 minutes and woke up excited. "Now there's a start," I said.

The ceiling provided all sorts of entertainment. I watched it as the occasional car went by, illuminating it with headlights, making it stretch and contort. I looked for images in it, for atomic submarines and fish and clown faces. When I was a child, I found a clown face in the ceiling of the room that I grew up in. I'd listen to my parents argue down the hall from me, shouting at their lung tops. They spoke loudly of fidelity and infidelity, the unbalanced checkbook, old friends of my mother who happened to be in town, and so on. They yelled a lot about Uncle Larry. My father always mentioned Uncle Larry after he failed to make a point about something else. "Oh!" my mother would shout, "Go on! Bring that up again!" And I would talk to the clown on the ceiling. "Hey, clown," I'd say. "How's it going?"

He'd tell me the circus was killing him. That making children laugh was a huge responsibility. That the little clown car he rode in was giving him hemorrhoids.

"Preparation H cures most hemorrhoidal difficulties," I'd tell him. "It's the God's honest truth. Just ask the TV."

"Jesus Christ," he'd say. "Don't your parents ever shut up?"

"Try to ignore them," I'd say. "That's my free advice to you."

And my parents would become background noise for a while. They'd eventually calm down. Everything would become calm.

The clown would fade into the ceiling, become part of the ceiling again.

“I can’t sleep,” I said at 6 a.m.

My father knocked on my door. He opened it up and stared at me. I was curled up under my Adam West Batman sheets. Early morning light crept through the blinds, cutting streaks into the walls, making stripes on the posters of disgraced or semidisgraced sports figures from the 1970’s that my father’d wanted me to idolize. The posters were faded, cracked and dull now. I thought that they might crumble into dust if I ran my hand across them. A tiny, rubber statue of Cap’n Crunch stood next to a tiny, ceramic statue of Theodore Roosevelt on my dresser. The former leader of the Rough Riders said, “I didn’t get a wink of sleep! I could shoot a bear!”

The Cap’n said, “Try my new cereal with real fruit-like flavor.”

Dad said, “Do you want a ride to your car, son? Or would you like to spend the day here at home? Did you get any sleep last night? I heard you talking in your sleep. I might call the hospital in a couple of minutes and see how your grandmom is doing. Would you like to talk to her if she’s awake? My back is killing me. I shouldn’t bend down so much when I’m wearing that suit. Do you know anyone who would want to buy 500 used golf balls cheap? I bet your friend Hux could sell them in his Auto Zone store. He’s a cute little oogger-booger, isn’t he? I’m making coffee. Would you like some? I think I’ll make a full pot. It’s Colombian coffee, which is the richest coffee in the whole wide world. Maybe you’d like some eggs over easy. Maybe I could impose on you to cook some eggs over easy. I hate to impose on you, son, but you are a professional cook. Officer Bob told me that you were fired last night. Maybe you could come out and work with your mother and me for a while. Maybe you could work on the days that she works in the ACLF. Maybe you could spell her on days that she doesn’t work in the ACLF. She works awful hard, you know. That’s one of the things that attracted me to her in the first place. She and I both love the feel of hard work. It gets in your bones you know. Hard work gets inside you and keeps you warm. Don’t be a

lazy bones. Get up and cook me and your mother some breakfast then we'll go get your car. OK?"

"Okay, Dad," I said.

"Good," said Dad. "Right." He coughed. He stood in the doorway staring at me. "Your eyes look funny," he said, then he stepped out and closed the door.

The summer I turned 13, Hux and me were walking along the railroad track—me on one rail and him on the other—knowing full well that the circus train could come along any minute and thump the both of us. Hux's flaming-red hair was cropped low on his sunburnt head.

"What would you do if that train was to hit me, Carl?" he asked.

"I guess I'd have to perform CPR on you, if you were to die." I chewed my stick of Juicy Fruit thoughtfully, rhythmically.

"But what if I was to get stuck on the cow catcher?" asked Hux, losing some of his balance, and regaining it, all in a second. A cloud shadow sped across a field full of rustling palmetto bushes behind Hux and engulfed him for a second, then me, and went on.

"I'd have to chase after the train shouting, 'Stop, stop!'" I said, and I jumped off the rail and started running beside the track to demonstrate. I waved my arms over my head and barreled along, shouting, "For mercy's sake!" I rolled to the ground near an antpile and turned over on my back. "If there is a God in heaven," I whispered out of breath, my eyes half-shut, "hear my prayer, oh God."

Hux crunched over the railroad gravel and stood above me, and for once, I was looking up at him. "Then what?" he asked, leaning down, hands on knees. "Just out of curiosity."

"Well," I said, sitting up. "I suppose I wouldn't be able to eat for days."

"Weeks, I expect," said Hux. He shaded his eyes and gazed toward the horizon in a crouch, peering toward where the rails seemed to meet. "No train yet," he noted.

I hopped to my feet, and balanced there for a moment before getting adjusted to upright. "You think there's snakes in those palmetto bushes?"

Hux picked up a rock and tossed it into the bushes. They rustled slightly upon impact. "Probably," he said, watching them.

I started walking back toward home, then stopped and turned around. Hux was staring open-mouthed into the scrub.

"C'mon, Hux," I shouted. "My mom probably has dinner on the table already."

"Your mom," he whispered half-like. He closed his eyes for a moment, like he was imagining her. That got him thinking about moving. His eyes opened back up, and he twitched his head toward me, then toward the potential snake pit, then me again.

"Let's go!" I insisted.

"Jeez, Carl," he said. "You got me all turned around."

The summer I turned 13, my cousin Mel came to Sarasota to visit with my mom and dad, my Grandmom Rita, and me so he could tell his friends back in Ohio that he had run away to the circus. In exchange, we sent my brother Tom to Ohio as punishment for being overly serious.

As far as Mel and my Uncle Larry were concerned, we *were* the circus. "He's my brother, and Rita's my mother, God bless 'em, but don't let them rub off on you," my uncle counseled his son. Mel repeated this wisdom to me right before he shaved every hair off the top of his head and wrote up there, where he had made it smooth as a river stone, "See Rock City." He performed this task with a black magic marker while staring at himself in a handheld shaving mirror.

"You got the 'K' turned backwards," I told him.

"Ah, well, fuck it," said Mel, who seemed to find profanity thrilling. I could tell when he was about to swear because his lips trembled in anticipation.

"Why're you shaving your head and writing stuff on it?" I asked him.

"You'll understand when you get older," said Mel, who had turned 14 just recently. "Where's the little bitty dumbfuck you always hang out with?"

"He's in the kitchen, drooling at the dinner. I invited him over," I replied.

“So you agree he’s a—” lips quivering, shaking, “dumbfuckity-fuck.”

“Look,” I said, standing up next to my bed, “you know my mom doesn’t like you using those words.”

“Mama’s boy,” said Mel. “Sniff your fingers, sniff ‘em good, Mama’s boy.”

“I’m not sure what that’s supposed to mean, about the finger sniffing and all, so I don’t think I’ll respond just yet,” I said. “But if it’s something bad about my mom,” I said, striding over to the closed door and flinging it open, “I’m telling.” And I exited that scene nicely.

All the kids in Mel’s immediate family were named after Nixon cabinet members. His dad considered himself a patriot in troubled times, and was taken by Mr. Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia. “Some guts,” he noted to his wife while she was in labor. Two hours later, she gave birth to Mel, named for Melvin Laird, the then-defense secretary.

I found Hux out in the kitchen crouching next to the stove, trying to look in the little window that was caked with grease. “It smells like chicken,” said Hux, flicking the light on. The light made the greasy window glow.

“Today’s Friday, so of course it’s chicken,” I said. “Monday, Wednesday and Friday are chicken; Tuesday and Thursday are meatloaf. Saturday’s leftovers. Sunday is theme night, where my mom gets to go a little crazy because it’s a sit-down.”

“What did she do last Sunday?”

“Beefy macaroni and cheese,” I said.

“That doesn’t sound crazy,” said Hux.

“With Manwich sauce in it? Huh? That’s a little nutty, or at least that’s what my dad said. He said, ‘Doris, you’ve really lost it this time.’ And laughed and laughed.”

“Your dad’s got some sense of humor,” commented Hux, shuffling nervously.

The greatest day of my father’s life was the day after they came out with Heinz ketchup in a plastic squirt bottle. He’d spent years

pounding on the bottoms of upturned Kegs o' Ketchup, and expounding on the need for somebody to do something about this terrible situation wherein a man has to pound on the bottom of a bottle of ketchup after working all day long. Usually, when my father watched TV, he just would lie there on the floor because of his tender back condition. But when the ad for the squirt ketchup came on, he practically leapt to his feet. It would have been a leap if he'd been a hair faster. He ran out the door, got in the car, and sped down to the supermarket to get a bottle without saying a word to any of us. He brought it into the house in a skinny, brown paper bag, like it was a special wine from the liquor store. The next day he discovered that when scrambled eggs are cooked in a microwave oven, they puff up like cake. He squirted half an ounce of ketchup on his cakey eggs and took a bite. "Bury me now," he said, eyes closed in ecstasy, "I'm already in heaven."

The front door swung open and brought me back to the present. My dad strode in, still decked out in his everyday sales guy attire. "I'm famished," he stated with his characteristic half-smirk, hanging his sales hat on the coat tree next to the door. "Absolutely esurient!"

"Hey there, Dad," I said, waving to him from the kitchen.

"The heir to the throne and his sidekick," said Dad jauntily. "How goes the bitter lash of summer worklessness?"

"A-okay," I replied. "Pipe and slippers, oh my papa?"

"As if," he said, turning grumpy suddenly. "Your Grandmom's two Fidos up and ate my slippers sometime before sunrise." He gingerly lay down on the living room floor, staring up at the ceiling fan. "The view from here could stand some improvement," he declared. The two dachshunds, Bill and Earl, came hurtling out of my parents' bedroom right then. They jumped over a clothesbasket, weaved past the round, oak veneer coffee table, and dumped themselves on top of my father, their favorite human being on earth. "Wow, wow, wow," they said, lifting their little brown heads in exultation.

“Get off me, off!” Dad shouted. The dogs lapped his face with bologna-colored tongues.

“Now, now,” said my mother, emerging from the master bedroom wrapped in a pink towel, her long, platinum hair sopping wet. She looked over at Hux and me and said, “Boys,” then padded her way back into the bedroom, the two dogs trotting faithfully behind her.

Hux was glowing red.

“Oh, my back,” said Dad, and we heard some vertebrae clunking into place.

“Doug, I need some help in here!” shouted my mother.

“Your wish, etceteras, etceteras, my lovely lamb chop!” Dad called back. “Give me a hand up, will you, boys?” He stuck his arms perpendicular to his body.

We hoisted Dad up, each on an arm, and he moaned and winked an eye. “I regret that I have but one back to give to your mother,” he said once up, then patted each of us on the head, and staggered into the master bedroom, one hand placed in support of his hunched back.

The door boomed shut.

“Is your mom a natural blonde?” asked Hux sheepishly, his head bowed, staring at the green shag carpet.

“That depends on what you mean by ‘natural,’ I suppose,” I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

“I mean does she dye it or not?” said Hux.

“I think not,” I said, rubbing my chin as if I was giving it some actual thought. “You hot for my mom? Give it to me straight, bud.”

I didn’t think Hux could turn any redder, but he did.

“Why, Hux, you old dog!” I said hotly. “That’s why you’ve been spending endless evening hours at the old hacienda!”

“Quit it, Carl. I’m not hot for your mom, all right? Jeez, I’m just hungry for some real cooking. You know what my dad feeds us.”

“Beanie wienies can get old,” I noted, and went to rubbing my chin in mock thought, keeping an eye on Hux, whose attention was riveted on my parents’ closed door.

The front door swung open again, this time revealing Grandmom Rita wearing her rhinestone-studded cape and tiara, and holding onto a rack filled with knives. The jackboots she had on went up to her knees, which were covered over with her floral-print dress. She adjusted the black, horned-rimmed glasses balanced on the nose that is shaped, she says, like a damned turnip. “Amen and ah-lay-looo-yuh,” she said. “Home at last.”

Her dogs scratched at the bedroom door, yapping and hollering.

“I’ll let them out,” said Hux, and he sprinted to the door before I could reach him. He jangled on the knob, but luckily, it was locked.

“Whew,” said Grandmom Rita and me at the same time.

“Last time I did that, I got the surprise of my life,” I told Hux.

We heard a shoe, or something, hit the door and the dogs yipped, then quieted down.

“Put the dishes on the table, and let’s get started,” said Grandmom Rita. And she whipped her cape off like a bullfighter, twirling it around and around her head.

Her tiara dropped to the shag and bounced once, resting near the palm stump in an orange clay pot—which used to be a living, potted palm until my mom and her famous brown thumb got to work. In those days, she’d kill entire gardens with her loving care.

Frankly, Mom had about the same effect on food, though you couldn’t tell my dad that. He thought she was the greatest cook on earth, and told her as much all the way through dinner most nights. “Why sugardoodle, this meatloaf couldn’t get any better,” he might say, even though the meatloaf tasted like particleboard. “Plato might call it the form of the meatloaf, the meatloaf on which all meatloaves are predicated.”

Cousin Mel came walking out wearing ripped jeans and a torn up tee-shirt with a big red and black “DK” scrawled across the

front of it in permanent marker. Mel loved the Dead Kennedys, whose best song, he claimed, was “California Uber Alles.”

“Where you going dressed like that?” asked Grandmom Rita, who was standing in the kitchen, her knuckles pressed against her hips.

“None of your business, Grandma,” Mel said, curling a lip up in disgust.

A knife came spinning out of the kitchen, end over end, and thunked into the wall next to Mel’s head.

“Holy”—lips a-tremble—“motherfucking shit! You could’ve killed me with that!”

She smiled broadly, and turned her head slightly to the left. “If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead,” she said. “And, by the way, it’s *Grandmom*, you little Turk.” She strode out to Mel, winked at him, and yanked the knife out of the wall.

Hux and me had the table set in a dash, dropping two sets of salt and pepper on the table because of all the guests. Usually, it was just me and my parents. None of the plates matched because my father would buy them two at a time from the five-and-dime store. By the time he was ready to buy two more, the five-and-dime changed patterns, and Dad would say, “Time to start over again.” I always ate off the Martin Van Buren plate from the “Meet the Presidents” series. We had two of those. The other was Gerald Ford, the last in the cycle. That Van Buren had some mean-looking chops braided down the sides of his face. Even when half-obscured by runny gravy and creamed corn, I knew he was down there staring up at me.

“Doris, you wouldn’t believe it, but they got the table all set out here,” said my dad, who was thudding across the kitchen wearing tan cut-offs and a v-necked tee-shirt. His gut protruded out of the bottom of the shirt and the top of his shorts, just a bit, like a tongue slightly sticking out of a mouth and looking like a third lip. I watched his legs for signs of twitchiness. Sometimes he had spectacular leg palpitations, due, again, to his bad back.

He refused to go under the knife, even though Dr. MacDougald, our family physician, recommended it.

“Mmm-hmm,” said my mother, who came out wearing her housecoat and fuzzy slippers, “and what does this mean, hmm?” What she meant by asking what it meant was that she thought we had a guilty conscience about something. The “mmm-hmm” meant that she was going to get to the bottom of it, whatever it was, by asking the same question over and over. That question was: “What did you do? What did you do? What did you do?”

“I told them to, Doris,” said Grandmom Rita. “Don’t blame them, blame me.”

“For what?” asked Mom.

“The knife hole in the wall, Auntie,” said Mel. He pointed it out to her.

“What have I told you about throwing knives in the house, hmm?” my mom asked Grandmom. “Please refrain? Isn’t that it? I try to keep a clean house,” said Mom, kicking the basket of dirty clothes out of her way, “but what do I get in return? A knife in the wall.”

Mom breathed out and turned to Mel as she entered the dining room. “Well, you’ve shaved off all your hair and written something on your head, haven’t you? Mmm-hmm! Won’t your parents be proud! Heck, they might have a homecoming party for you, streamers and all, hailing the conquering hero who shaved off his hair. Bend over, let’s take a look at what you—” She stopped. “No, I’ve decided I don’t want to know.”

But Mel had already bent over. “Read it, Auntie.”

“No, no profanity! I won’t have it in my house. And what does that ‘DK’ mean? Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know.” She fluffed up her now nearly dried hair and sucked in her lower lip, then stuck it out.

Hux hiccuped.

Grandmom Rita brought the roasting pan in from the kitchen and dropped it on the middle of the table. She lifted off the lid, revealing a bird carcass with meat dripping off the bone surrounded

by unpeeled potatoes cut in half, whole carrots (complete with green stems) floating in chicken grease with two half-dissolved bouillon cubes bobbing near the surface.

“*Sooo-preme*,” my father declared, and he, and the rest of us, rushed to sit down. Dad sat at the head of the table, my mother the foot. The rest of us sat at the wings, me and Hux across from Grandmom Rita and Mel. “This is living with a capital ‘L,’” said Dad, and we all simultaneously reached for the food, our forks gripped and pointed toward the tubers we wanted.

The phone rang, and Grandmom Rita got up to answer it, fork still in hand. “It’s long distance for you, Mel.”

“Who is it?” he asked, his mouth half full of peel-covered russet.

“Your brother Spiro,” she said, waving the phone back and forth. “Hurry up, you’re wasting money just sitting there.”

Mel wiped his mouth and steered his way to the phone, still chewing.

“Yeah,” he said into it.

“Uh-huh,” he said, swallowing.

“You bet,” he replied.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said, and hung up.

“What was that all about?” asked my dad.

“Nothing,” said Mel.

“While you’re up,” said Dad, and he waved an empty beer can under Mel’s nose.

“Got it,” said Mel, and he stepped into the kitchen, past the two panting dogs, whose excitement over the food had manifested as a puddle on the linoleum, which Mel stepped in. “Fuck,” he said.

The world quieted.

The oversized tureen of bird carcass was in my unlucky hands now. I held it still, not breathing, waiting for my mother’s reaction.

“Well, well, well,” she said, teeth a-grit.

My arms were about to give out with the weight; they shook as I went into muscle failure. I set the poultry down with a thud,

and chicken remains slopped over the side and onto the red and white checked tablecloth that my mother had had since she was a girl.

“You think chicken grows on trees?” snapped my mother, turning suddenly to me.

I considered the idea for a second, then shook my head.

“And look at my beautiful tablecloth, mister.” And she went on like she always did.

Mel, in the meantime, did not emerge from the kitchen. I saw him on his knees in there, mopping up the dog mess with a paper towel.

Dad grabbed the tongs up from the center of the table and—like *he* always did—plucked the entirety of the remains of the chicken from the pan and plopped the steamy sopping clucker onto the middle of his plate. He immediately stuck his head down and sucked meat and sinew into his mouth, rising up occasionally to take a breath. And with each breath, chicken grease ran down his chin and onto the middle of his v-neck T, forming a yellow wet spot. The V seemed to point out the stain for the little dogs, who later would camp out on his chest and lap at the shirt while he lay on the carpet watching the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*.

Dad and Walter didn't get along, but that's a whole other story.

“You make the best chicken,” said Hux, over the top of Dad's slurping sounds. And he blushed again, staring into his lap.

My mother smiled, and reached over to pinch his cheek. “Aren't you the sweetest boy.”

In an instant, I went from guilty party to angry mob, and slugged Hux on the arm, knocking him off his seat.

“Oww!” he yelped from his floor position, and gripped his injured arm with the opposite hand.

“I want you to go to your room this instant, young man!” said my mother, now standing up, now pointing.

“But, Mom!” I shouted, pleading my case, “he wants to see you *naked!*”

“Liar!” yelled Hux, and he was on his feet now, tears coursing down cheeks, still hanging onto his arm. He stood shaking for a moment, his gaze wandering around the room, then settling on me. I read his face.

I felt bad for having said what I said, but just for a moment. “She’s my *mom*,” I said.

Hux ran to the front door, flung it open, and ran out into the twilight.

“Close the door,” said my mother calmly, almost imperceptibly, through the hand placed over her mouth, “then go to bed.”

I closed the door, and went to my room, shutting that door as silently as possible. I left the lights off in my room and sat down on the floor, facing the open window. Bugs glittered on the screen, and searchlights from Taylor Lincoln-Mercury Jeep stirred the night sky.

*What would Hux do if I got stuck on the cowcatcher?* I wondered. He could do nothing, I knew, just like I wouldn’t be able to do anything. I would have to ride the train to uncircus places far from Sarasota, where tidy white frost makes everything hard, and Sunday is never theme night.

I made my parents breakfast, all right. I made ham and cheese omelets with mushrooms and peppers. I made the coffee because Dad has no idea how to use his coffee maker. I went all the way down the driveway to the street and picked up the Sarasota *Herald-Tribune* and brought it back to the house. My arms and face were covered with tiny, white gauze bandages with little red dots in the middles. I didn’t eat anything, only watched my parents as they consumed the meal silently. Dad finished first and wiped his chin with a paper napkin. I put a quarter beside his plate like he used to do for me when I was a child. I was too skinny. I am currently too skinny. I shall probably continue to be too skinny. Mom finished shortly after Dad and I placed a quarter next to her plate.

Dad said, “Memorial Day’s coming up.” Memorial Day usually falls four weeks before Dad’s birthday. Mom was born near Christmas. Tom was born on Tax Day. I was born on All Saints Day.

I said, "That's true."

Mom said, "We should celebrate it. I bet Rita comes out of the hospital and is just fine. It would make a good party for her."

I said, "She sure likes good parties. It gives her a chance to show off her knife skills."

Dad said, "That's true."

We all sighed. The kitchen was warm and cozy. The coffee and leftover breakfast scents filled the room.

Dad said, "I guess we should get going."

We all got moving. I put the dishes in the sink along with the omelet pan and the omelet spatula. I squirted in some liquid Joy and turned on the tap. The soap foamed up whitely like little clouds. My eyes were hoarse like they'd been shouting all night and I guess they had been.

Sarasota is a city of circus dreams and Ringling Mansions and sugar-white beaches and trailer parks and retirees. I could have been a trapeze artist, I suppose. I could have been a high-wire artist or a magic act or a carny or a man who is shot out of a cannon. I am a cook, though, and that is good enough for me.

I turned off the tap. The dishes could soak for now.

I followed Dad out into the garage and helped him clean the inside of the car. We removed the remains of the smashed window. I helped him load the diving suit and air pump into the trunk. He backed the car into the backyard and I helped him hook up the trailer with the little boat on it. The boat is yellow and blue, and is named "SS Doris Mays." As we lifted the trailer onto the trailer hitch, Dad said, "I'm serious about that frozen head thing. It could be a real moneymaker. We could end up on TV, doing those infomercials. Your fat girlfriend could be the MC. Doesn't she sell mobile homes?"

"Yes," I said.

"She could do the talking. You have to have someone around who can talk. I bet you couldn't ignore her if she was talking to you at three in the morning," said Dad. He tethered the trailer to the car with a heavy, chrome chain.

“No, you can’t ignore her,” I said. But it was a lie. I’d spent the whole time I was with her ignoring her, and concentrating on her fatness. I never meant to be mean, but I suppose I had been.

“She’s not a quitter, your Trace. No, sir,” said Dad. “I’ve always kind of admired her for the way she handles herself. No bullshit for Trace.”

“That’s true,” I said. “Trace is pretty much finished with bullshit.” The memory of the poke in the eye played like a silent movie. I could see her doing it right in front of me. “Not again,” I said as she poked me for the millionth time.

“Pardon,” said Dad.

“Nothing,” I said.

“You just said something,” said Dad.

“I’m just talking to myself,” I said.

“Oh,” said Dad. “Sometimes, I think I’m just talking to myself. Sometimes, I don’t think anybody’s listening to me.”

“Keep talking, Dad,” I said.

We hooked the golf ball trailer on the back of the boat trailer. It was like a circus train now. Maybe people would think we had just come into town to give a show, though I’m not sure anyone would want to see the kind of show “Doug’s Balls” would be.

When we finished getting everything hooked up, Dad and I went inside to call Grandmom Rita.

I dialed up the hospital and gave the hospital operator her room number. Her roommate picked up the phone and said, “It’s seven thirty in the morning for goodness sakes. Whoever you are, you’re worse than the nurses. They wake us up in the middle of the night to give us pills. I haven’t had two hours of continuous sleep since I’ve been here. Now they brought some madwoman into my room. She thinks she caught some giant fish.”

“She did,” I said.

“Who is this?”

“This is her grandson. Is she awake yet?”

“I’m not going to wake her,” said the old lady, her voice all aquiver.

“Let her know I’ll be by later,” I said.

“I’ll do no such thing,” she said, haughtily. “I’m not some receptionist. I’m a scholar. At least I was until I was forced to retire a few years ago.”

“What did you study?”

“Medieval English poetry,” she said.

“You don’t say,” I said.

“I do.”

“I named my dog ‘Beowulf,’” I said.

“Ah,” she said. “So you’re a bit of a scholar, too.”

“No, ma’am,” I said. “I’m a grill cook, currently unemployed.”

“A grill cook, who reads epic poetry,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“I can’t wait to meet you,” she said. “Come on down. I’m working on a manuscript that you might get a kick out of.”

“I will,” I said. “I’ll probably be down in a couple of hours.”

“Wonderful,” she said. “I’ve got two boys, well, men *really*. And neither of them can stand literature. One’s a computer programmer and—I’m afraid a grill cook may never have heard of what the other one does.”

“Try me,” I said.

“My other boy is what they call an ‘actuary,’” she said.

“Serendipity,” I said.

*Glass crumbs under my ass—Set me on fire—Get him out of here!*

Glass crumbs under my ass as we trundled along through the streets of Sarasota, past palm trees and scrub palmettos and old men wearing big old shorts and past the ubiquitous golf courses. We were on our way to my car, which was where I'd left it the day before, next to where Captain Desmond's fishing boat was moored. I picked the little white bandages off my face and arms and flicked them out the missing window.

I'm certain that Dad's little rig was illegal. How could it have been legal? Every time we hit a bump it was like hitting a triple bump, with the front vehicle and the two cabooses behind all taking jolts. Dad drove at unsafe speeds for a man in charge of forty feet of locomotion and about a thousand golf balls, give or take a couple hundred.

The diving suit sat in the backseat next to Mom, its arms flopping at its side as if it were shrugging. Just another day at the old grind for Mr. Diving Suit. Mom's arms were crossed, as were her legs. She hadn't said a word since getting in the car. She lit up a cigarillo, then put it out quickly, pinching the glowing ember at the end with a thumb and forefinger. I think the deal was that Mom was fed up with men again. She hadn't said the word yet, which was when she would be officially fed up with men. "*Men,*" she'd gasp out in severe italics any minute now, I thought. We wouldn't be able to talk to her for a month.

Dad pulled into the parking lot next to the dead palm. He stared at it for a moment, as if some way to make a buck off the tree would suddenly make itself known to him. But when the

scheme didn't boil up to the surface, he looked away from the tree and toward the water. Offshore: That's where the money is.

I got out of the car and nodded at my parents. "You want to sit up front, Mom?" I asked, leaning in the missing window.

"No way, Jose," said Mom. "Say hi to your grandmom for me."

"Sure," I said.

Dad said, "Son, I want you to think about what I said to you this morning."

"Okay, Dad," I said. But I wasn't sure what he wanted me to think about. He'd rambled on for quite a bit that morning. *Frozen head infomercials? Golf ball diving? The joy of hard work? Make me breakfast?* "See you later, Dad."

The Golf Ball and Undersea Adventure Traveling Show went on its merry way.

"Hi, there, Captain Desmond," I shouted, waving. "Hi, there, Desiree!"

They both got off the boat. They came over to ask after Grandmom Rita, to have me wish her a speedy recovery. Then, after Captain Desmond ambled back over to the boat, Desiree, whose deep beauty and terrible speech impediments seemed to eclipse the sun, asked me if she could ask me for a favor.

"Fire away," I said.

"Th-there's a c-c-c-camera crew in t-town today, th-cow-ting locations for a n-new movie," she said.

"No kidding," I said.

She said she wanted to become a stuntperson now that it was plain she'd never be allowed to hop up onto the stage and act. She wanted desperately to be in show business, to be a star of some sort, and she'd borrowed an asbestos suit from her old drama coach, who used to set himself on fire at glamorous Hollywood parties back in the day. "I-I-I want you to teth me on f-fire," she said.

"Those were the very words I'd longed to hear coming from your lovely mouth for many a year in high school," I noted. "Though here, the context is different."

“W-Will you do it?” she asked.

“I’m not as crazy as people seem to think,” I said defensively.

“It’th thafe,” she said.

“I’m sure it is,” I said.

“Then y-you will do it?”

“Boy, howdy, will I!” I said.

She grabbed my hand. Her palms were as tough as leather and as rough as sandpaper, but by God they were her hands. She produced a pen from the pocket of her cutoffs and wrote her personal home phone number on the back of my hand, then kissed my cheek. “C-call me at theven,” she said.

“I will,” I said. I must have turned some awful shades of pink standing there in the afterglow of that kiss. I reached up and felt my cheek with the tips of my fingers. That kiss felt tangible, bub. Man, oh, man, it sure was better than a poke in the eye!

I remember my first real girlfriend. She worked with me at a Pizza Hut, and she was a poet. One night, I almost got lucky.

Janet read me some poetry while she wrote it. We were sitting in her parked car outside the Pizza Hut where we both worked. She scribbled and read, and scribbled some more. It was two in the morning, and we could still see Chuck the manager moving around in there. He worked on the books after we finished closing the place down, after we cleaned and put things away.

The poetry was terrible, but I liked Janet anyhow because she refused to work as a waitress, even though she’s a woman. She was twenty-six years old, which made her ten years older than I was.

She read, “This dispirited sky, floating over me . . .”

“Skies aren’t dispirited,” I said.

“It’s poetry.”

“Same difference,” I said. I clicked the light on over her head by opening the car door. Her skin was grayish from no sun. She had pale blue eyes covered over by aviator’s glasses, the lenses thick enough to be used on a long-range telescope. I looked up and saw Venus twinkling purply in the night, floating above the Pizza Hut like the Star of Bethlehem.

“It is not the same difference,” she said. “And will you shut that door? I’m getting a draft.” She was thin and ragged from too much road. She was running away from college debts and bad romance. She said that adulthood stalks you, but you can hide from it. That’s how she ended up here in Sarasota.

I closed the door and watched Chuck leaning against the counter inside, under the big red roof, his arms wrapped around his head. He was a sad man and he worked eighty hours a week. Sometimes he showed me his hands. “Look at them,” he would say. And the hands shook. “Look at me.”

The candles were all extinguished in there. I did it.

A couple of weeks before an acquaintance of mine, I can’t say friend, that everyone at school called Lizard stopped by and, sitting in a back booth, he told me about how he had terrorized a woman who lived down the street from him. He heard that she had had an abortion, so called her up day and night pretending to be her unborn child screaming for its life. Near the end of the phone call, he would turn a vacuum cleaner on in the background and make gurgling noises as if the fetus was being sucked into it. The woman called the police and had her phone tapped. The cops caught Lizard in his room as he was flipping on the vacuum, shouting “No, mommy, no!” They took him to the Sarasota County Courthouse, booked him, and released him to his parents because he was a minor. They took mugshots of him, which he told me he smiled for.

A skinny stray was sniffing at the dumpster under the streetlamp that lit the car. “What’s so great about being a cook, anyway?” I asked Janet. She was pressing hard against the writing tablet. I liked asking her that question because it always got her mad.

“What a little boy you are,” she said. She breathed out and tapped her Pizza Hut pencil against the pad. “You know, good, subtle poetry doesn’t rhyme.”

“They teach you that in college?” I asked.

“They teach you all sorts of things in college, Carl.”

“When do I get to kiss you?” I asked, then immediately regretted it. It was kind of like rhyming poetry of me to ask.

“What makes you think you’re going to get to kiss me, little boy?”

That question lit a white heat in me. The possibility wasn’t just in my mouth anymore, it was in hers, too. The part of the car I was in was unlit by the streetlamp above and I was glad. I knew I was reacting in a very obvious way. My hands were damp with sweat and pepperoni grease. I clenched them together into a big fistball. “I got to go back in and talk to Chuck,” I said, and got out of the car in a hurry. I ran hunched over across the parking lot.

The parking lot had only three cars in it: Chuck’s, Janet’s, and Dave the mechanical faith healer’s. I lived around the corner.

Dave was arrested the year before for indecently exposing himself to a woman while riding his bicycle. Dave claimed he didn’t mean to do it, that his swimsuit had no lining. The court didn’t buy his story, so he had to do community service and go to a county shrink once a week for two years.

Dave could run his hands across blenders, cars, lawn mowers, guns, microwave ovens, TV sets, and other things that didn’t work. He would touch them and say, “It’s not really broken,” and, “You don’t know how to treat things,” and, bingo, the thing would work again. He did this with a stove burner in my house, just ran his cheek across it while gripping the sides of the stove and said, “Not a thing wrong. No, sir.” He lifted his head up and winked. The burner glowed red within minutes.

Dave got the dishwashing job from Chuck despite the criminal record because he healed the dough mixer in the back room.

I opened the front door of the restaurant and that Pizza Hut smell hit me. The phone was ringing. Chuck stared at it, horror-stricken. “Answer that,” he said.

“Who is it?” I asked.

He stared at me in disbelief. “Does it matter? Jesus Christ,” he snapped, “just answer the thing!”

I picked up the receiver and said, “Thank you—” before I was interrupted by a loud human voice. I didn’t get to say the whole speech, which is “Thank you for calling Bee Ridge Pizza Hut.

Today's special is the large supreme pizza for ten ninety-nine. My name is Carl. How may I be of service?"

The human voice said, "Chuck! Is that you, Chuck! I know it's you, Chuck! I'm going to come get you, you hear me? Answer me, damn you! I've had it!" And the phone clicked dead.

"I couldn't tell who that was," I said, hanging up the phone.

"It's just as well," he said. He rubbed his too-red eyes with the tips of his middle fingers. His face sagged down into a drooping curve, but I could tell that he had once had a jutting, authoritative chin. A tiny piece of black olive hung in his graying moustache.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Let me tell you something," he said, suddenly getting energetic, his eyes focusing on me. "These drinks. You know how much the company pays for these drinks, complete with the straw and the paper cup? The syrup, the soda, the water, the ice? Huh, do you know?" He filled a paper cup with Mountain Dew, put a lid on it, and unwrapped a straw. He shoved the straw in the lid, and slammed the whole thing on the counter. The green-yellow drink sloshed fizzily up through the straw top.

"Nope."

"Four cents. Four lousy cents!" He tightly gripped his black uniform vest with both his hands now.

"Four cents," I repeated.

He let go of himself. "Yeah," he said. He went back to rubbing his eyes. He was back adrift.

"Chuck, what do you know about girls? Women, I mean?"

Chuck lowered his hands from his face and stood silently for a moment. Then he punched the cash register. It made a dinging noise and the drawer sprung out. "Nothing," he said through gritted teeth, and pushed the drawer back closed.

"For true?"

"Wait, do you hear that?" he asked. He held his hands up, cocked his head to one side and squinted an eye.

"Hear—?"

"The oven," Chuck said. He walked over to the oven and put his ear up to the bottom door, the one the blue flame lived behind. "It's out." He opened the door and looked in. "Damn it, Carl. You turned off the pilot light. Now I have to relight it."

"I'll do it," I said. I went into the back and retrieved one of the wooden sticks that the morning people used to ignite the table candles. I saw Dave back there, asleep on top of a pile of red and white checked uniform shirts.

Chuck saw me with the stick in my hand. "Put that back and use the uncooked spaghetti. It's cheaper."

When I got back up front, I lit the tip of the spaghetti and reached up to turn on the gas, but there was no telltale hiss. "Watch it," said Chuck, "that spaghetti burns fast." I cranked the gas knob back and forth. No effect.

Chuck swore venomously. He cursed the Pizza Hut we were standing in, Pizza Huts across the nation, the corporate headquarters in Topeka, Kansas, Pepsico, which owned us, and Bill Clinton.

The spaghetti did burn fast, had burnt pretty far down, so my hand was shoved far back in the stainless steel oven bottom, and my other hand jerked the gas knob back and forth.

There were footsteps behind me, it was Dave. "Can I help?" he asked, and placed his hand on the oven while leaning in to look at what I was doing.

A red ball of fire leapt out and engulfed my hand, but I ducked before it reached my face. Then I was on the floor. Chuck was beating out my head. Dave was sitting behind me on the floor, completely untouched by the flames.

"Holy mother of God," Dave said. He was feeling his face with the tips of his slender fingers.

"The oven's back on," I said. I picked myself up and shut the little door. My hand was bright red. It was beginning to hurt.

The front door swung open and Janet appeared all sweaty. She was out of breath. "What happened?" she asked.

"He almost killed himself, the dummy," Chuck muttered. "Insurance claim."

I walked over to the soda taps, and opened up the ice machine door, which was below it. I shoved my hand into the lightly packed ice up to my elbow. At first, it barely made a difference. The pain grew and grew like mercury pressuring its way up an oral thermometer.

"It was pretty cool, actually," Dave said. He swept his long, silky black hair to one side. "I mean, that fire *jumped*."

"The oven grabbed me," I said. I gritted my teeth as a pain wave coursed through my arm. "Yeah," I said. "Mmm-hmm." I tapped my forehead on the soft drink drain tray, accidentally pushing a soft drink lever. Some Pepsi sprinkled on my scalp.

Janet reached over the counter and snapped off a piece of my charred hair. "That had to hurt," she said.

I reached up and felt my hair with my unburnt hand. It crumbled into a wet, sticky ash almost all the way down to the root. My burnt arm started to feel better so I pulled it out of the ice. A moment passed, and it was on fire again. I stuck it back down.

I rubbed my eyebrows with the tip of my index finger. The burnt brow dashed like black pepper onto the ice.

"Hospital," said Chuck glumly.

"No hospital," I said. I was, and am, afraid of doctors.

"I'll take him home and doctor him up," said Janet. "I *will* need some medical supplies." And she snapped her fingers and stuck her hand out at Chuck who filled it up with ones and fives out of the register.

"I wish I could help out with the burn," said Dave. "I mean, I should be able to. We're all just meat machines anyway."

"You read too much science fiction," said Chuck. "*Meat machines*. What kind of shit is that?"

Dave shrugged. I'm sure Janet would have had an answer for Chuck if she had heard him, but she had sped out to the waitress station. She was filling a white cottage cheese bucket with ice. I saw her swaddle the cottage cheese in a wide sheet of cling wrap. She returned with the bucket and holding a white blob by the

top. It was the size of a basketball. She handed the ball to Chuck who handed it to Dave.

“Merry Christmas,” said Chuck.

“For real?” asked Dave.

“Consider it a bonus.”

Janet held out the bucket and I switched ice containers. Her thick lenses were steamed over and she peered at me over the tops of them. “I promise I won’t hurt you,” she said.

“I believe you,” I replied.

Dave cradled the cottage cheese in his arms. He strolled past us, not looking up, just staring into the blob that was conforming to the shape of his arms. He turned around and backed the door open, holding it for us as we walked out past him. He bit through the cling wrap and began sucking the contents out. His head bobbed up. A curd stuck to his lips. He smiled.

I followed Janet out to her car, my good arm wrapped around the bucket.

Chuck was standing in the open door next to Dave. “Go home now!” shouted Chuck. “Go!” He waved.

Janet popped in an eight track of the Beatles singing “Get Back” once we were loaded in her car. She revved up the engine and backed it up. It burred and bucked. Her gas pedal was shaped like a bare foot.

She downshifted and popped the clutch. We flew out of the parking lot and onto the street.

“You know, doing that is an unholy waste,” I said.

“Tell it to my stockbroker, kid,” she said. She reached between the seats and produced a bottle of whiskey. “Here, take a sip.”

I took the bottle out of her hands. I unscrewed the top and put its mouth up to mine. Just as the whiskey reached my lips it occurred to me that I was actually going to her apartment, alone. With her!

The whiskey went flying out my nose.

“Strong stuff, eh?” She took the bottle from me and took a long swig. She handed it to me again, and this time I drank. It was

like my first taste of gasoline back when my dad and I used to siphon gas out of the tank of his company truck and into our family station wagon.

We were stopped at a red light. I looked into the car next to me and saw Lizard and his pals Ernest and Junior. Junior had his face in a bag. He was a notorious lighter fluid huffer. But Lizard, who was driving, and Ernest, seated next to him, were staring into our car. Lizard rolled down his window, and motioned for me to do the same.

I did.

“Woo,” said Lizard, unsmiling and angry.

“Hoot,” said Ernest, equally upset.

“Woo!” insisted Lizard, his face growing darker with each second.

“Hoot!” shouted Ernest. He punched the dashboard.

“Hey,” said Lizard, turning to Ernest, “lay off the ride.”

“Sorry, man,” said Ernest.

The light changed, and Janet stepped on the gas. The engine roared and tires squealed.

I turned around in my seat, keeping my hand firmly wedged in the ice. I saw that Lizard and friends were an eighth of a mile back and receding.

“Friends of yours?” asked Janet.

“No, just acquaintances,” I said.

We drove around side streets and in back alleys, near where the retired circus people had to live. We pulled up in front of Janet’s building and she and I got out of the car. I looked behind us, but Lizard’s car was not in sight. Janet unlocked her apartment door, and we pushed inside. She flicked on the light.

“First time in a woman’s apartment?” she asked.

“Sort of,” I said.

A giant poster of a pig floating over an industrial park dominated the room.

“Yeah?” said Janet. She walked over to the kitchenette and opened the tiny refrigerator. She poured out two glasses of water

and walked over with them. "Take your hand out of the bucket, Carl. The only way you're going to get over this is to let your hand air out and take the pain."

I set the bucket down on her floor and took the glass of water out of her hand. She led me over to the kitchenette. She fished around in a drawer and found a pair of scissors.

My hand stung, but not nearly so much as it did before.

From behind me, Janet cut chunks of hair away from my head and tossed them to the floor. She ran her hand back and forth across my head, brushing away hair chunks. It was nice, her touching me. She came around to the front. "Very punk," she said. She reached over with the scissors and snipped more away. "Carl, what do you want?"

"Pardon?"

"I mean, everybody wants something. What do you want?"

I thought a moment, or two. "I want permanence, I guess," I said. "Something that will last. We're talking about girlfriends, right?"

The glass of water in my hand was full of tiny hairs. I handed it to her and she set it down in the sink.

She wiped some hair off my nose. "You're very sweet," she said. She took off her big glasses.

I reached over and grasped her hand in my good one. It was thin and cold, but soft. Her other hand was touching the back of my neck. Our eyes locked in that way that eyes do sometimes. She leaned down to kiss me, and did. It was a damn nice kiss, I decided.

It was nice, except for the fierce red glow out her front window. We stopped kissing and looked out at it.

"My car!" she shouted.

We ran out her door. Her car hood had been set ablaze. It was drowning in flames. I took off my pizza smock, which was charred anyway, and tossed it over her hood. I lashed it around like a matador. The flames died out quickly.

"Your friends," she said.

“Acquaintances.”

“They followed us back here and set my car on fire.”

It only made sense. She decided to take me home. She told me she didn’t blame me for the fire, but I knew she did. I told her how to get to my house. She drove up my driveway. She stared out her cracked windshield at the bubbled up paint on her hood. “Good night,” she said.

I leaned over to kiss her.

“Good night,” she said, coldly.

I opened up my door and got out of the car. My parents’ house’s outer lights were all on, and it shined hard. Her tires barked once and left black streaks on the white concrete in my driveway. The sky glowed dimly. I watched her pull away and down the street, her taillights bright red.

I took a lawnchair out of our carport and placed it in between the black streaks in my driveway, and sat down. I thought, *Maybe adulthood is all about taking responsibility for things that aren’t necessarily your fault.* You drag your feet when you walk, you pick up static electricity from the carpet. You slide through high school, you pick up bad acquaintances.

I felt flawed in some essential way.

I wanted to love. Was I so wrong?

An hour passed. Moonlight swept through the trees. My hand ached. The bushes in the abandoned lot across the street grew as high as German shepherds. Adulthood was stalking me. A light chill sprinkled me. I waited.

When the deliveryman in the station wagon came by with the newspaper I was ready. He slowed down. We regarded each other for a moment. His pudgy face bristled with a silvery five o’clock shadow. He reached over himself with his left hand and picked up a paper while steering with his right. His cigar glowed red. He tossed the paper high into the air. I leapt up and one-handed it before it could ever touch the ground, and I carried that newspaper into my house, cradling it with my good arm, like it was a baby.

Grandmom Rita was propped up in her hospital bed, surrounded by pillows, tied down with a posey and wearing a bib that said in bright pink, "Life is a very splendid thing—St. Luke's Hospital." I peered past the curtain, into the adjacent bed, but it was empty and clean, stripped of sheets. "Where's the lady next to you?" I asked Grandmom Rita.

"God damned poet," slurred Grandmom Rita.

"You look kind of woozy," I said.

"Uh, huh," she said. Her whole face was reanimated, but she looked someone had attached a hose to her and siphoned most of the life out. Her eyes were barely open and had very little twinkle. She stared hard at me. "You're my grandson," she said.

"I love you, Grandmom," I said.

"Don't—" she said. She gasped a couple of times and closed her eyes. She tried to reach up toward her mouth, but the restraints stopped her. She was poseyed in but good. "—be a jerk."

I felt a tear trickle out of my tear duct and course down my cheek next to my nose. She was going to be okay I just knew it.

"Crying," she said, rolling her eyes in disgust.

The room wasn't short on God paraphernalia. Three Jesuses were crucified up on three walls. Little Jesus leaflets littered the tables and in each one, Jesus appeared in fresh agony. A three-leaf clover painting above Grandmom Rita's bed had the Father, Son and Holy Spirit superimposed on the leaves, with the Son showing off his stigmata as matter-of-factly as an old man showing off an appendectomy scar. A rosary dangled from the bedpost next to the control box that made the bed go up and down. A Sacred Heart of Jesus pendant wrapped in clear plastic lay on the pillow next to Grandmom's head. Jesus' Sacred Heart was bundled in what looked like barbed wire. Blood gushed out of all sides of it, along with a holy glow. And so on. Jesus was dying all over the place in that room.

I walked over to the other bed and stared out the window. Cars drove round and round out front, circling for the best possible parking space in the hospital's pay-in-advance parking lot.

I'd parked a mile away on the street for free. The Saint Thomas Aquinas Fund for Higher Education wouldn't get my money that day. I thought of Father Frank up in heaven at the right hand of God, smoking a cigarette using his little cigarette holder. Father Frank turned to the Holy Spirit and asked, "How would you like it if someone stared at you in your underwear?"

The Holy Spirit said, "Hey, look, I'm always either a spurt of red flame or a dove. I don't *wear* underwear."

Father Frank licked his thin little lips.

I laughed pretty hard at that one.

"Excuse me, sir?" asked the nurse.

I turned around and looked at her. She was smiling politely at me, her teeth etched in brown. Skin sagged around her eyes. And yet another dead Jesus hung from a string of wooden beads around her waist. I asked, "What happened to the lady in this bed?"

"She died this morning. Are you a relative?" asked the nurse.

"Are you a nun or a sister?" I asked.

"I'm a sister. Sisters do charity work. Nuns pray," she said. She was wearing a wedding band on one of her stumpy ring fingers.

"Poor, tacked-to-wood, dead Jesus sure is loaded up on wives," I said.

"I don't think I like your tone," she said.

"I'm here visiting with this woman over here," I said, pointing to Grandmom. "I was just wondering about the other lady. That's all."

"We have to go to therapy in a few minutes, don't we Miss Rita?" said the nurse.

"Sock you again," said Grandmom Rita, angry and tired.

"Now, now," said Sister Nurse. She was probably only in her thirties, but all that devotion to God made her look older. An older sister would have really bitten my head off after my glib Jesus comment.

"Is she going to be okay, sister?" I asked.

"Yes, yes. Were you the one who shoved an aspirin in her mouth?" she asked.

“Yes, I was,” I said.

“She spat it out at me last night. She’s a feisty one, your grandmother,” she said. She smiled beatifically and brownly at Grandmom Rita. This Sister Nurse was as plain as a generic, white, store-brand paper plate and potentially full of cancer, I decided.

I sat down on the empty bed. “Do you mind if I close my eyes for a moment?” I asked her.

“Be my guest,” she said.

I floated backward.

An hour or two later, a cleaning lady shook me awake. Grandmom Rita was missing, but her bed was still sheeted, still covered at the head with pillows. “You go now,” said the cleaning lady, gently.

“Yeah,” I said. “I go.”

The cleaning lady handed me a prayer card. On the front was a robed woman toting a staff in one hand and a stalk of wheat in the other. On the back it said, “O God, Who in Your Kindness did give us St. Odelia Virgin and Martyr, as the Protectress of the Order of the Holy Cross and Patroness of the eyes and afflicted, grant us we humbly beseech You to be protected, through her intercession, from the darkness of ignorance and sin and to be cured from the blindness of the eyes and other bodily infirmities. Through Him, Who is the Light and Life of the World, Jesus Christ, Your Son, Our Lord, Amen.” Then it asked for a donation and told me where to send it.

I stumbled down the corridors of the hospital, staggering along as if I’d been drugged. I wished I had been drugged. My head was pounding like a razor-toothed saw was trying to eat its way out of the deep inside of my skull, but kept jamming up on my hypothalamus. I stopped next to a nurse’s station and leaned against a wall and closed my eyes. Another Sister Nurse was standing in front of me. She was a little chubette, this one, not but five feet tall and maybe a hundred and fifty pounds. “Are you all right?” she asked, her voice smooth and even. She was a pepperpot; a Hummel figurine.

"I'm fine," I said.

"I can get a doctor, if you like," she said.

"A hospital is no place to get well," I said and pushed past her, maybe a little abruptly. I staggered out to my car, but even the fresh air and long walk seemed to do me no good. I dug my keys out of my pocket. A stabbing pain launched its way through my head. An old man passed me on my first attempt to unlock the car. He was driving a Lincoln Continental, all jet black and shiny, and not a sissy-shit new one either. This one was as old as me and probably swallowed a gallon of gas every time he tapped the accelerator. The old man wore a fedora on his head and had a breathing tube sticking out of his nostrils. Blue veins bulged in his neck. In the seat next to him was a canister of oxygen.

"Freeze that head," I said, pointing. I dropped my keys, picked them up, and jammed the appropriate one in the car. I opened the door and got behind the wheel and drove, and didn't really have any idea where I was going until I pulled in behind the car in the space marked, "Employee of the Month." I was at my former workplace, blocking in the new employee of the month whose car was a new Chrysler Neon. The Torino burbled and shook and rattled. I wondered what I was going to do next. I wondered if I might get arrested. It was a definite possibility. I got out of my Torino and left the motor running and the door open. I went in through the back door and into the kitchen. GenX Kid was scrubbing the grill. "Dude," he said.

I walked past him and into the front, where the customers would soon be eating food that GenX Kid prepared. Bill's Wife was at the register. As soon as she saw me, she flung her arms around the register, hugging it like a life preserver thrown to a shot-down pilot in the Pacific Theater of operations. "Keep an eye peeled for Jap submarines, Bill's Wife," I said.

"You are *so* fired!" shrieked Bill's Wife shrilly. "You don't even *know how fired you are!*"

"I know, Bill's Wife, yet somehow I am unfazed," I said.

Chad, Thad and Tad, the insider-trading triplets were seated near the door. They were our best customers, eating at the Grille every stinking day.

“How can you eat here every stinking day?” I asked them.

The three of them looked up at me. All three had bleached hair and fake tans. All three wore white linen suits as white as whipped topping-like substance with their first names stitched in spinach-green above the left suit pocket. All three smiled at me at once, then two of them turned to Chad, who was that day’s spokesman for the triplets. He said: “We thought you’d been fired.”

Bill came in the front door just then. He was all clad in flannel and denim, and, upon seeing his wife’s frightened face, bellowed, “You better get out of here now, buster, before I call the cops!”

“I ain’t leaving,” I said, “until I get what I came for!”

“Whoa,” said GenX Kid, standing in the passageway from the kitchen. He was actually looking right at me, not staring around at the thin air.

“What do you want, Carl?” asked Bill.

“I want my damn book back is what!” I declared loudly. My head stopped pounding. It suddenly filled with helium and laughing gas. “I am King of All Grillmen” I proclaimed, stepping up onto the table occupied by the thieving triplets. They mashed their heads together and gazed up at me. I said: “I will have my book.”

Bill ran into the back and quickly returned. He held my book by a corner as if it were a boomerang. He chucked the book across the room and it walloped me squarely on the forehead. I lost my balance, fell off the table and banged my head on a nearby chair.

“Ow,” I said, rubbing the back of my head, then the front.

“Are you all right?” asked Bill, rushing over to see if I was legally injured.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“How’s your Grandmom Rita?” he asked. “You know, I didn’t like firing you, but if I didn’t follow my own rules, whose rules would I follow then, you know?”

"It's all right, Bill," I said, as he helped me to my feet.

"Look, I'd rehire you in a second, except that the new man is working for half your pay," said Bill.

"Get him out of here!" shrieked Bill's Wife.

"Dude," said the new man.

"I can understand your reasoning," I said to Bill. And I could.

The triplets continued eating, even though I think I may have stepped in one of their meals.

Bill placed my book in my hand and led me out toward the back door, past GenX Kid and past Bill's Wife, who still clung desperately to the register. I stopped at the grill for a moment and my eyes watered up. We'd spent a lot of time together, me and that grill, and it wouldn't do for me to leave without a memento. I opened Dr. Pointer's book up to the middle somewhere, then reached over and grabbed up the Liquid Smokelike Flavoring. I placed the tiniest drop on a chart proving how our government had been taken over, then stuck my nose in the book and sniffed deeply. Midnight in Monaco and Liquid Smokelike Flavoring blended together into an aroma that was both work and play. I allowed Bill to gently grasp my arm and lead me out to my still-running Torino. It shook violently, coughing and grinding. I sat behind the wheel, caressing the wheel, smiling, smiling, smiling—then drove off. The door slammed itself shut as I turned onto Main Street. I wasn't a block away from my former workplace when the Torino burst into flames, of course, and there I was again, running down the street from a car that was on fire. This time, I made sure to pull safely off the road and take my maps and Dr. Pointer's book with me before going into full gallop. By the time I got to a pay phone, the car was nothing but cinders, ashes and four badly burnt tire rims. I had to laugh.

The fire department gave me a ride home. Which was awfully nice of them considering the fire was out by the time they got there. A lanky, crook-backed fireman, who must have been six-and-a-half feet tall, doused the charred remains of the Torino with soapy water. Steam rose up. I sat next to him on the ride over to

the Circusland Trailer Park. It turned out he was a real African, an Edo tribesman named Ben. I asked him what the hardest part of becoming an American was.

“Television,” he said.

He told me about the drought back home, and about eating locusts once when he was young. He told me he used to work in the oilfields for the Nigerians and that he knew about five languages, four of them spoken only in Nigeria or in his native Benin.

I tried to imagine what it was like, to see a picture of it in my head. *Locusts! Oil!* It sounded almost like my Uncle Larry’s description of Texas. I imagined the tribesmen standing around in their oilfield uniforms saying, “Howdy,” in strange dialects. I wondered when the next National Geographic TV special would be on, then remembered that I no longer had a television set, that it was smashed flat, that it was flush with the earth, that it had, in fact, become pancake-like in its dimensions. This thought did not please me, nor did it please me remembering my now-defunct relationship with Trace, she of the yacht-like girth.

The firetruck stopped in front of my trailer park. I shook Ben’s hand and invited him to drop by anytime he wanted. He said he’d definitely think about it and smiled benignly and openly. *Don’t hurt me, mister* said the smile. I knew it by heart. All that talk from him was just to humor me, to keep me at arm’s length. What must a man from Africa think of a fellow who accidentally incinerated his car? Now two cars, actually, come to think about it. My competence in fucking things up definitely had reached a swell in the past few days. My eyes hurt: I needed eye drops but bad. My throat hurt from shouting at Bill and Bill’s Wife. My legs hurt from all the unexpected running I had to do. Away from the car, I mean. I am not a complainer by nature. I apologize for this outburst. But shit. I mean: Lookee here, my friend. You know? I think I’d pulled a muscle running away from that car and it just goes to show you the status that warming up must take in your exercise program. Still, I don’t think I would have had the time to warm up. It’s not something that comes to mind when flames leap out of

your dashboard and hood. My maps smelled like burnt insulation in my lap. I smiled at the affable Nigerian and gathered myself up from my seat. I handed him my maps. He took them, staring down at the maps in his lap, then peeking up at me to see if I was still there. I hopped down to the earth and began walking. I didn't wave back at the fire engine or shout any thanks. I began to think I looked damned scary. I thanked them by not waving, by not goggling at them, eyes full of unsleep.

The retired clown sat on his porch, a pistol in his lap. "Nobody," he hissed malevolently, "makes a fool of me!" His face was a dark yellow and pockmarked from years of acne brought on by grease paint and unhealthy circus food. The retired clown's trailer on the outside was an anal-retentive's dream of tidiness. Bright red flowers were arrayed symmetrically around its perimeter. I imagined the inside was more of the same.

"Do you have a TV set to sell me?" I shouted over to him.

"Ha, ha!" he went. He gripped his pistol with white-knuckle fury. "If I had your youth—" he said, but didn't continue. He snorted. He wore a thin, red sweater and a starched white shirt buttoned up to his collar. His threadbare pants were creased neatly and his shoes, though worn-through, were glossy with polish.

"I used to talk to a clown when I was little," I said.

"He never listened to you," said the retired clown. "Clowns don't listen. We're not *paid* to listen."

I stopped in the middle of the dirt road. "Not paid to listen?" I said, incredulously. "*Not paid to listen?*"

"Take the cotton out of your ears, boy," said the retired clown. "Being a clown is just a job. You entertain as many people as you can, then you go on. If you listened to just one kid, I mean *really listened*, then, hell, you know."

I couldn't say anything. All that I could do was just stand there in the middle of the trailer park road, a miniature loop of dirt and rock, and feel a stab run through me.

"What's the matter, boy?" asked the retired clown without sympathy. He snapped, "Get out of the road before you get run over."

“Clowns,” I whispered, gagging on the whisper. “But clowns have to—”

“We don’t have to do jackshit except entertain,” said the retired clown. “We don’t have to feel a fucking thing. Now move along before I call that fat-ass cop back out here.”

I slumped toward my trailer, listening to that clown go on and on. He was shouting toward the sword swallower’s trailer, advising him to come on out so he could feel some clown wrath. “I’ll settle your hash but good!” went one of his taunts. He’d sure enough settled mine with a few choice words. Up until then, I’d believed in the goodness of clowns, of all things circus, but something inside me began to tilt. I gritted my teeth. So this was how things were going to be!

I reached up and opened my trailer door and stood below on my smashed steps. My dog ran up and was shivering in front of my nose, staring directly at me. I opened the door wider and let him hop out and take care of business. I climbed up inside to survey the damage. Beowulf hadn’t done a thing except tear up Grandmom’s *TV Guide* and take a shit on my deceased coffee table. I shoved the coffee table out the door with my foot and sat down on Grandmom Rita’s barcalounger. Beowulf leapt in the door and stared at me. I shot him with Grandmom’s water pistol and watched him barrel down the hall, little whimpers emitting. I listened to him crawl underneath my bed. I crossed myself, slapped my hands together and prayed, “Dear Jesus God in Heaven, give us a sign, will you?”

I waited ten minutes and prayed again, “Give us a sign, will you, All Mighty Jesus?”

I watched the clock Grandmom Rita had won playing bingo tick. It hung from a galvanized steel nail jutting out of the wall. I looked at the hole my head had made and the tin covering it. I got up and strolled around the room. Ten minutes passed. “Okay, one more time. Give us a fucking sign, Jesus.” I closed my eyes and spun myself on my heel. I said, “The first thing I see when I open my eyes will be my sign.” I stopped and opened my eyes. And

who was standing there but my best friend Hux, an arrangement of flowers clutched in his tiny, thin hands. "Hello there, sign," I said.

"Carl," Hux said, "you look like shit."

"Auto Zone!" I shouted.

"Your father told me what happened," said Hux. "He also tried to sell me on the idea of being a used golf ball dealer."

"Uh, huh. I just found something out."

"What's that?"

"Some clowns are *bad*," I said.

"You just noticed that, huh?" said Hux.

"I was just informed," I said.

"Don't let it get you down, big guy," said Hux. He tossed the floral arrangement next to Grandmom Rita's big chair. He sat down in the barcalounger, then put on her facial expression like so. Then he said in her voice, "James Brown," taking a guess at what famous celebrity I might look like.

"I'm white," I said.

"Julius Caesar," Hux said.

"I'm alive."

"Keith Richards."

"Again: I'm alive."

"Will Robinson."

"I'm not twelve," I said.

"He's in his thirties now, you know," Hux said.

"The actor playing him is," I said. "But Will Robinson is not."

"What's the difference?" Hux asked.

"They are two separate entities," I said. "Like instant pudding is different from the milk that made it."

"I see," Hux said. But the way he said it said he didn't see.

"You look more like Will Robinson than I do."

"Don't start with me, Carl," Hux said. "I came over here to cheer you up."

"Sorry," I said. "Would you like a beer?"

"Is it a beer in a plain, yellow can marked, 'Beer?'" Hux asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“No, thank you,” Hux said.

“I think I’ll have one,” I said.

“Then I’ll have one, too,” Hux said.

I opened the refrigerator and found two beers. I opened the box of bakery items and looked inside. They still looked all right, but a tap on top of one of them revealed that they’d begun to petrify. I placed the box back where it had been.

“Life’s funny,” Hux said.

“Head’s up,” I said, tossing him the beer.

He caught it and pulled off the pull-top. “How old is this beer?” Hux asked. He took a sip. “I mean, I don’t think I’ve seen a pull-top since I was a kid.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I stopped asking questions at Bert Bacon’s Value Club a long time ago, when they threatened to toss me out for complaining about prices.”

We both drank our beers for a while.

The phone rang. It was the local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police. They wanted my money. I hung up on them in mid-patter.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Two o’clock,” Hux said looking up at my bingo clock.

“Drive me to Buy and Bye,” I said. “I’m getting Grandmom a new color TV.”

“One beer and he goes nuts,” Hux said.

*Dead momma's death money—Going to hell—*

Hux's success in businessland could be gauged by the vehicle he drove, which was a black, two-door Dodge Dart with a lime green interior. Hux had rebuilt the car from the ground up approximately four times, each time making it ever-increasingly, ever more grotesquely fast. He turned over the engine over and it barked out throatily. Hux grabbed my shirt, leaned over and whispered liltily into my ear, "Auto Zone!" And laughed out loud.

He'd bought the damn store with his dead momma's death money.

The Dart still had its original knobbed and big-black-buttoned Chrysler AM radio that was tuned in to WKXY, the AM station that time forgot. "Looks like muskrat love," yodeled the radio.

The hood gleamed with Jet wax, the windows were lovingly streaked with Windex and the seats were squeaky with I Love My Vinyl.

Hux was perched atop a pillow, which was placed atop the Arcadia phone book. Arcadia isn't much of a town, but it does have the rodeo once a year and the G. Pierce Wood Mental Hospital, which is for mentally ill people who don't have the money to be comfortably mentally ill, but are not yet criminally mentally ill. The hospital for the criminally mentally ill is called Chattahoochee, and it's located up near Appalachicola, home of the best seafood in the state of Florida. When I was young, the sisters at my Catholic school used to warn me that I'd end up in one of those two places, so I looked them up on a map and circled them with a cherry-scented, red magic marker.

When I worked at the 99¢ North Trail Movierama, the manager there told me I wasn't going to an insane asylum—I was going to hell. He was very solemn when he told me this. He was the deacon at a Pentecostal church. I asked him how I might prevent my going to hell and he told me that I needed to be saved by the Lord Jesus God. He invited me to come to his church one Sunday and meet people like him who weren't going to be going to hell. I said, "As long as you give me a ride down there, we're golden." So he drove me down to his church—the Church of the Redeemer With Angels and Glory—one Sunday. The church building itself was conventional: pretty, white-steepled church and in a clearing in the middle of the woods near this little town north of Bradenton named Oneco.

Oneco is where the body of John Ringling resides, pickled in formaldehyde. If you pay three dollars and fifty cents you can go inside the crypt and take a look at the dead circus man. Outside you can buy a pretty good miniaturized likeness of him floating for all eternity inside his big glass coffin.

Inside the picturesque church, people were singing and dancing in the aisles. At the Incarnation Catholic Church, where I still go most Sundays, nobody much gets riled up. Church for us Catholics is a solemn affair consisting of the same reenactment of the Last Supper every weekend of the year except Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday, we go ahead and reenact Christ's lynching, too.

In this church, the Holy Spirit came down in a beam of light and made people speak in tongues. I didn't see Him, but a lady to my left did and shouted out, "Ay-yee! Goomba, goomba!" "Shazah! Shazah!" went another lady. And so on. Then the minister asked people to come up and testify. Their stories have run together in my head like gooey strands of sparkling toothpaste squished together on a bathroom sink. What those strands tell me is that Pentecostal people usually waste the beginnings of their lives drinking whiskey, smoking unfiltered cigarettes, driving long haul trucks full of dope, and having strange sex with people of the opposite sex (and sometimes the same sex). At some point, God shows up in

their lives, like a parent coming home and finding his house trashed after an adolescent weekend party. God tells these people that they'd better straighten out or they will go to hell. At least in one case, God showed the person exactly what hell was like. He showed her a place with rivers of steaming blood pouring over sharp rocks with all the dry land shooting flames and the hot, sulphurous air full of the screams of the damned. The church had no air conditioning and it was the middle of a long, wet summer. I could feel the steam pouring off my skin and rivulets of sweat dripping from my moist underarms. The church doors were wide open. A gentle, heated, wet breeze blew through. No ornaments adorned this church; it was almost like a barn inside. The rafters above were filled with mockingbirds and they screeched and hollered in a thousand different languages learned secondhand from the Holy Spirit. The pews were carved out of cypress. The floorboards bowed up toward us.

The minister introduced the movie manager. My manager stepped up to the podium at the front of the church. He was comb-over bald and his hair was dyed jet-black. He mopped his forehead with a stained handkerchief. His armpits were soaked like everybody else's. His tie was shiny, reflecting the shimmers of light coming in through the beat-up roof. He said something. His body language suggested he was enraged. *Amen!* said the people of the church, equally enraged. He said something else. His voice ricocheted off the wooden walls, tripping here, going there. *Thank Jesus!* said the church people. Then the movie manager was pointing at me. *Me!* His arm and index finger were fully extended and shaking. His marriage ring gleamed in the musty church light. Hands pushed me, grabbed me, yanked me forward, out of my seat and up toward the movie manager up front.

*My job may depend on this,* I thought.

I stumbled up the steps and tripped in front of my boss, banging my forearm on the podium. And it tipped over. I was on my hands and knees. His hands wrapped around the top of my skull, his thumbs touching my eyebrows and his fingers caressing my

wet hair. He had a gentle grip on me. I felt my face flush and the blood run out of my brain. It shamed me to have him touch me that way, I think. I made it up to my knees before he yelled, "Out demon!" The stage we were on turned bright white and cool, and the holes in the roof overhead blazed like a thousand klieg lights. I waited for something to happen, for God to make Himself known to me. He did not. But still, it was something else kneeling in front of so many people with a grown man's hands wrapped around my forehead. I stood up and said, "Thanks everybody! Thanks for coming! And thank God!" The whole frenzied gathering seemed to peter out after that. There wasn't a formal ending of the service. Like a magic act, they disappeared. People just wandered outside, where they set up a nice picnic, complete with fried chicken, potato salad and greasy potato chips. I had a real Coke, then decided to walk home.

I hiked down the muddy road away from the church with my hands in my pockets, thinking. I thought I understood why so many people turned away from drugs and cheap sex, and to God. It's a thrilling and heady experience getting saved and I felt like I might could get addicted. After I finally tromped up to the Tamiami Trail, I managed to thumb a ride with a guy who'd just returned from Alaska, from working in the oilfields. He was the hairiest man I'd ever seen in my life, hair poured off him, floated around him, gushed from his ears and nose and knuckles—and he smelled like baby shampoo and clove cigarettes. He said, "I'm so glad to be in Florida I could shit." He asked me where the best place to pick up a prostitute was and I had to tell him that I had no idea. The only thing he would tell me about Alaska was that it was colder than a witch's tit. He dropped me off at the 99¢ North Trail Movierama and I pointed him toward what I thought might be a prostitute-enriched part of town. I waved goodbye and watched as the hairy man drove off. I'd stolen a pen from him that he'd stolen from a Denny's in Austin, Texas. I wrote my resignation on a handbill I found in a nearby trash can and shoved it through the mailslot on the Movierama door and walked the rest of the distance home.

I didn't want to see that movie manager/deacon man again. I didn't want to talk to him. I don't want to feel like I have to believe in God in order to keep a job, even though I do believe in God and I did need the job. I went down to Sarasota Tech shortly after that and signed up for the Culinary Arts program.

Hux turned the Dart so sharply into the Buy and Bye parking lot that I bumped my head against the passenger side window. I saw Tom's car and pointed it out to Hux, who parked next to it. Tom owned an antique Volvo that was once worked on by the famous army General Colin Powell. It was painted a minty-fresh green and its chrome shined brightly in the sun. Hux gave the car a hard look-see before we went into the store.

Buy and Bye was as big as a city block and had every conceivable item that any poor or cheap person could ever need within its plain, vanilla confines. Cut open crates held industrial-sized boxes of bleach or Sugar-Coated Chocolate Cereal, or whatever else you can think of. The crates were stacked one on top of the other creating shelves. Lines of these crate-shelves formed aisles. The crates went up to the high, acoustic-tiled ceiling. Walking in between them, you felt as if you were in a canyon of merchandise, most of it half price, and the original price was pretty much half price, so maybe you were paying a quarter price. Nice, nice. Hux grabbed a cart with a dysfunctional wheel and pushed it toward the automotive section. Each cart had a map encased in the plastic child seat. We navigated through the corridors of goods, past endless Handy Wipes and cheese-like snacks and spray cleaners and artificially flavored pop drinks in plastic, three-liter bottles, until we made it to the car section. "Got to check out the competition," said Hux. He pulled a pen and pad from his shirt pocket and began writing down prices. We both were studying a hard-to-see box of oil filters atop an aisle when Tom bumped his cart into ours.

"Hi, Tom," I said.

"Ah, little brother," Tom said. "Out not-spending your money?"

"Hello, Tom," Hux droned nasally.

“And if it isn’t my brother’s quixotic little friend, out tilting at the Buy and Bye windmill,” Tom said, smirking.

Hux glanced down into Tom’s cart. Tom was buying a year’s worth of auto supplies, it seemed. Hux looked up at Tom. He dropped his pen and notebook and growled, “You motherfucker!”

“It’s not my fault that you run a substandard little—”

But Hux didn’t let him finish. He pushed our cart out of the way and sprang into Tom’s shopping cart, and seized Tom around the throat.

*Gak*, went Tom. He tried to break free of Hux, but Hux was a mad wolverine. His little feet were busy, too. He was smashing Tom’s haul of auto goods to bits, stomping up and down while strangling my big brother. “Auto Zone! Auto Zone! Auto Zone!” chanted Hux.

I picked up a can of Valvoline that Hux had broken open and splashed the contents in Hux’s face.

“Eww!” said Hux, letting go of my brother, his hands reaching up to his now slick, amberized face.

Tom rubbed his throat, then checked out his suit. “Was that entirely necessary?” he asked. “After all, this is Armani.” Tom’s natty suit was speckled with drops of motor oil.

Hux stood in the cart, on top of the pile of rubbish that he’d created. “Let’s get out of here before one of us has to pay for this,” he said.

I helped him out of the cart and we three ducked off together, leaving the cart full of destroyed items behind. We navigated through the rest of the store, poking our heads round corners, checking the map on our empty, squealing cart, and getting thoroughly lost. At one point, we were mired in a traffic-jam of shoppers in the potpourri aisle, choking on the fumes given off by cubic tons of dried flora. I asked Tom after we got away from that aisle what he was doing at the store in the middle of the day.

“What do you think I’m doing here? Does, ‘getting fired for too many personal calls’ have a familiar ring to it?” he snapped.

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Tom. “Oh.”

“You got fired in one day for that?” asked Hux.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I suspect that they felt threatened by me in some essential way. I suppose it has something to do with my overwhelming backlog of accomplishments.”

“You have bright, red fingerprints on your neck,” I said.

“Serves him right,” said Hux, still dripping with motor oil. He’d managed to wipe some of it off by rubbing his face against the cardboard boxes as we passed them by.

“Allow me to clue you in on something, Mr. Business Man,” said Tom. “Strangulation does not a patron make.”

Then through a clearing, I spotted Electronics Town. “Look!” I said, breathy with anticipation. “Over there!” Buzzing fluorescent lighting gleamed off the black plastic shells of major entertainment appliances. A hundred TV sets soundlessly blazed out the opening credits of *Bonanza*.

I stepped into the lights.

“May I help you?” asked a salesman. He was wearing the standard orange Buy and Bye smock. His name was Ernie, according to his smock, and his smock also informed me that, “It’s Fun to Be Friendly.”

“Hi, Ernie. I’d like to buy a TV set,” I said.

“Oooo! That’s good,” said Ernie, oh-so-slowly, as if he was conversing with a chimp. “Let’s take a look over here.” He waved his arms toward a pile of small boxes marked with a banner that read, “Rock Bottom Prices!”

“Are those American TV sets?” I asked him.

“There is no such thing as an American TV set,” said the ever patient Ernie. He had a pencil-thin moustache, which made him look like a 1930’s cinema star. His hair was jet-black and greased and parted in the middle. His ear holes were choked with little, gray hairs that looked like clumps of Spanish moss.

“Are you sure there’s no such thing as an American TV?” I asked.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Carl!” snapped Tom. “The clod is right. America doesn’t make TV’s.”

The clod took a deep breath and thanked Tom with all the sincerity he could ooze.

Hux was playing with the antenna of a boom box on display. It had a little button on it that made the antenna automatically go up and down. "Hee, hee!" went Hux.

When we got closer to the rock-bottom-priced stack of sets, I read the side of one of the boxes on the pile: "Xhoxa Color Television. Made in China."

"Which China is this made in?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" asked the salesman.

"Red China or Taiwan," said Tom. "Take your pick, Ernie."

"Oh, um. I don't know," said Ernie, waving a hand around his face like he was swatting at some invisible fly. "I suppose I could find out." Then he looked down at my shoes. "Though I can see you're a big fan of Red China."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "How do you pronounce the name of the set?"

"Zsa-Zsa," said the salesman. "Like one of the Gabor sisters."

"Aren't they both dead?" I asked.

"I think the one that slapped a cop is dead," said Ernie.

Another salesman came over. "I see you've found our bargain of the month, the Zoe-jah color TV," he said. He looked like he'd just stepped off the cover of some men's magazine, despite the Buy and Bye smock he was wearing.

"It's pronounced, 'Zsa-Zsa,'" said Ernie.

"Says who?" asked the salesman. His name was Wayne.

"Says me, the soon-to-be new manager of this section," said Ernie.

"Like, I'm sure," said Wayne. He rolled his eyes.

"The job is mine for the plucking," said Ernie. He crossed his arms in front of himself.

"I'll take Zsa-Zsa, there," I said, pointing. I reached down into my sock, where I have my money cleverly hidden in a Velcro-enhanced, wallet-like device that wraps around my ankle like one

of those electronic devices that keeps white-collar criminals trapped in their very own homes.

Hux was whooping it up behind me. He'd found a Nintendo display and was electronically kicking the virtual ass of a pixilated Japanese warrior. Electronic blood spurted out of the warrior's mouth with every kick Hux's electronic alter ego gave him.

Wayne placed the TV in our cart while Ernie wrote up the sales ticket. As we walked away from their area, I saw Wayne lean over to Ernie and whisper, "Bitch!" And Ernie giggled.

Out front, Tom stood for a moment, arms outstretched, savoring the sunshine. "Such a day," Tom said.

"I could eat a horse," said Hux.

"Don't you have a store to run?" asked Tom.

Commerce swarmed around us. People young and old were ringing bells for charity, and selling tickets and cookies. An old man pinned a Lyndon LaRouche for President button on my shirt over the top of my name. "One dollar," he said.

"One quarter," I said.

"Seventy-five cents," he said.

And so on. Eventually, I gave him thirty-eight cents and a breath-mint.

"You left Dad in charge of your store!" shouted Tom incredulously.

"What wrong with—"

"Have you completely lost your mind?" shouted Tom, louder. He was hopping mad, and, in the sunshine, looked a lot like a young Richard Dreyfus, like Richard Dreyfus in *American Graffiti*, even though *American Graffiti* took place mostly at night.

"Well, your Dad won that business award the one time," said Hux, defiantly, though now sounding a little unsure of himself.

"He was a *friend of business*, not a *real* businessman! What about Mom? Where's Mom in all this?" asked Tom. "She's there with him, right?"

"No, he dropped her off at the hospital before he came over to talk to me. She's with your Grandmom Rita," said Hux. "Why?"

“Because she’s the only moderating influence in that man’s life. Without her, he’d be under ten feet of concrete in the end zone in new Tampa Stadium,” said Tom. “By now, he’s either given away your store, or has stolen every penny from your cash register and invested it in some offshore development scheme.”

“Guaranteed to make you back double your money,” I said, knowing all this by heart.

“Tom!” shrieked an accusingly beautiful woman from across the parking lot. “Where have you been?” She was gym and diet plan slender, about five-and-a-half feet tall and immaculately dressed, like the ladies that used to chase Tom and I away from Casey Key when we went fishing off the coast in our beat-up dingy a long time ago. “Someday,” Tom used to growl, venom-voiced.

“Stay by the car, muffin!” Tom yelled back, his voice full of maple syrup and brown sugar.

She staggered forward, quite obviously drunk, and smacked Tom across the face.

Hux and I slinked off.

I fell asleep in Hux’s car on the way back home and dreamt. Hux shook me awake, rescuing me from my fugue. His car seemed an exemplary place. He placed the TV inside my front door and helped me out of the car. I felt drunk. I pushed the TV out of my way and climbed inside my tin home. I heard Hux driving away and smelled the dust lingering in the trailer park air. The floor was covered with splinters and wood chips from my cheap table and TV stand. I resolved not to be cheap anymore, to spend the necessary amounts of money on things so they wouldn’t instantly fall apart. I crawled on my hands and knees to my bedroom and pulled myself up into my bed next to my dog, who was sleeping there. He licked my ear, trying to push his tongue into my inner ear. The alarm clock blared 5:00 p.m. I had to make a phone call in two hours and hoped that I would, then fell into a dark sleep.

*Pyro—Driving along at unsafe speeds—As any sane person would,  
I screamed and ran out into traffic*

The phone rang in my ear, waking me to another shortened sleep headache. On the other end of the line was an offended Desiree. “Cuh-Cuh-Carl!” she shouted. “Y-you were thposed to call m-me!”

The room was inky black and my head throbbed. “What time is it?”

“Uh, eight,” she replied.

“In the morning?”

“A-At night.”

“I fell asleep,” I said.

“H-how’th your grandmother?”

“I haven’t seen her since this morning. How are you?”

“R-ready to be to be thet on fire!” she declared. “We have to move up the op-operation to tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeth!”

“You’re determined to do this thing?” I asked. “I mean, I’m not all that qualified to burn people up.”

“Boogers!” she said. “Y-you can light a match, you can do it.”

“We’ll need a fire extinguisher,” I said.

“G-got it.”

“Where are we doing this, again?”

“Meet me at the Thee-esta Key Bridge in an hour,” she said, and hung up.

Siesta Key Bridge. How would I get there with no car? I trudged into the bathroom and found some aspirin to pop down my throat.

I stuck one under my tongue and let it dissolve bitterly. The other three went dry down the old gullet. There was the matter of transportation to be solved. I dropped my clothes to the floor and took a shower. There was no getting around the car issue, it wasn't going to solve itself, I decided while lathering my head in accordance with the directions on the unbreakable shampoo bottle—rinse, lather, repeat. The citrus-scented shampoo was scientifically proven to do something or other and was full of vitamins. Life doesn't get any better than that. I dried myself with a Ramada Inn towel I'd stolen from my parents then ran out of the shower all naked and dripping and snapped the towel at Beowulf. He yipped and ran away, doing a running slink down the hall toward the other end of my trailer. I saw a six-inch-tall man wearing a tiny bowler nod at me. He stood next to Grandmom's chair. "I don't have time for hallucinations," I told him.

"Maybe later," he replied, shrugging.

I put on some clothes that I found in a drawer. The blinding Hawaiian shirt was huge on me so it must've been Trace's. The pants fit okay, though.

This car problem bothered me, but I'm a man and as such I couldn't even consider the thought of calling up Desiree and asking her for a ride, even though I was preparing to illegally—I was fairly certain it was illegal at the time—set her on fire. I didn't have a car, so I walked over to the retired clown's trailer and banged on the door. I figured what the hell. He can only shoot me dead.

The door swept open violently. "What do you want?" he demanded. His face was a steamy red. Behind him, I could see an Emmitt Kelly clown painting on the wall. I wondered if it was an original.

"I need a ride."

"A ride! Ha! Do I look like a taxi service?"

"Well, you don't look like a clown, but you are one," I said.

"Oh, we're going for the funny approach, eh Jack Lord?" said the retired clown, eyeing me suspiciously. He noticed me looking past him and said, "Casing the joint? Go ahead!"

“Five-oh needs a ride, Wo Fat,” I said, meeting his sharp, dry stare, “and I know you’ll give it to me.”

“Why?” He placed his cement-dry hands on his brittle hips. He was ready to hear this one.

“Because I’m going to set a young person on fire, and I know you just wouldn’t want to miss seeing that.”

His mouth dropped open into a little “oh.” His eyes softened a bit. He blinked a couple of times, then said, “Let me get my suit.” He disappeared back into his trailer. I stepped in through the front door and stared around at all the furniture. It was ornately carved stuff. I ran my fingernail inside a bevel to see if he was an efficient duster, and he was. Not a speck of dust or grime came off on my fingernail. I tapped the wood with the same fingernail and got that el cheapo hollow sound associated with the kind of furniture that requires enduser assembly. I guessed that clowning wasn’t a high paying profession. The guess that followed was: He must have enjoyed it a little. And the one that followed that was: There must be some basic decency inside him. I enjoyed the last thought, rolling it around in my mind, savoring it like a complimentary mint.

The retired clown reappeared with a silver suit, an oxygen tank, and a fire extinguisher. “Give me a hand here, fella,” he said. I grabbed up the dented and red chipped fire extinguisher, which was about the size of a terrorist’s nuclear warhead, more or less. Actually, I’ve never seen a terrorist or a nuclear warhead. I was just guessing. “I didn’t know you were a pyro!” he said jovially.

“Huh?”

“Pyroing is great fun, isn’t it? Much better than circusing.”

“Those clown cars ever give you hemorrhoids?”

He laughed. “No! Ha ha!” He smiled. “Where to, chief?”

“Siesta Key Bridge,” I said.

“Me like. Excellent location for a pyro,” he said. “Mind if I ask Beano to come along?”

“Who’s Beano?”

"The retired sword swallower next door," said the retired clown. "We've been setting each other on fire for damn near twenty years. Ha ha!"

We moved the party outside and loaded all the gear into the trunk of his boxy sedan. He leaned over and picked up a rock. He tossed it at Beano's trailer.

"Who's throwing shit at my trailer?" yelled Beano.

"I am, you wop son-of-a-bitch," the retired clown replied, laughing.

Beano's head darted out one of his windows. "Who you calling a wop, you mick bastard!"

"I'm not ethnic at all," I said, sadly.

"You're not missing out on anything," said the mick bastard, smiling.

"Except for food and an annual celebration," said Beano. His head disappeared back inside his trailer, then he bounded on out to us. He was so full of energy he was hopping in place. "Man-oh-man!" he said, hopping. "What's doing?"

"Pyroing at Siesta Key Bridge," said the retired clown.

"Balfour, you beautiful man," said Beano.

"Balfour?" I said.

"I'm in love with the world," said Balfour.

"Me too. It's pure love," said Beano.

"Balfour," I said.

"Yes?" said Balfour.

"Nothing," I said. "Just trying out the name."

"It works," said Balfour. "Pyro time."

"Who's to burn?" asked Beano.

"Friend of his," said Balfour, thumbing at me. "If not the friend, then me."

Then they did a secret handshake right in front of me.

"I'll drive," said Beano.

"But the stuff's in Balfour's car," I said.

"It's *our* car," said Beano, smiling. "Pyro, pyro." He snickered. Balfour snickered with him.

I slid into the backseat while the two of them argued over the best way to go the Siesta Key Bridge. Driving along at unsafe speeds, they argued about where to park, about the most convenient place to make a getaway in case Johnny Law showed up.

“Let’s make it a good burn,” said Beano after all the arguing. We rounded a curve and were almost there. We’d already passed the barbeque joint that laid out smoke so thick you sometimes couldn’t see the car in front of you.

“Nighttime burns are always the best,” said Balfour.

Someone’s high beams lit the inside of the car up for a second so I could see Beano’s eyes gleaming menacingly in the rearview. His head waggled side-to-side energetically. Beano said, “Boy there don’t look too thrilled.”

“He’s an idiot,” confided Balfour. “Idiots can get too excited, then they just sit and drool. Remember all the retards we had to entertain on Cripple Nights?”

“Shit,” said Beano, nodding vigorously in agreement. “Point taken.” He whipped the car into the trolley station parking lot and killed the headlights. A dozen or so old people were standing around waiting for the trolley to roll up and take them to their retirement villas.

We parked near the trolley stand.

“Crazy!” hollered an old man, his shriveled face contorted in bitter anguish.

“Mustard and relish!” Beano replied snappishly. He shook a fist at the old people and they pretended afterward that we didn’t exist. They had milling in place down, baby. “Old people,” spat Beano with disgust. The comment surprised me. He looked to me like he’d been hit with the oldness stick pretty hard. “Angst,” sneered Beano. “Existential angst is all they got. That or religious fanaticism. Both are for pussies, methinks.”

“Look at them,” said Balfour, digging his shit out of the trunk.

We walked the tenth of a mile up to the bridge, where Sweetness Herself was waiting, wearing her own little silver spacesuit sans hood. “Who, who, who?” she went.

“Hi, there, girly,” said Balfour. He stopped next to her and started pulling on his suit. “Care for a light?” The two retired circusmen laughed horribly. Beano inspected her can of kerosene.

“This is Balfour and Beano,” I said, gesturing. “They’re old hands at lighting people on fire.”

“She’s as black as the ace of spades,” said Beano, looking up.

“Ooo, la, la!” said Balfour. “Remember Scranton?”

“Scranton, Scranton,” mused Beano, scratching his gizzard.

“Scranton! Scranton, you old shit!”

They both fell silent for an odd moment. Then “Scranton!” whooped Beano, popping himself in the head with the flat of his palm.

“Of course,” said Balfour, fully suited up by this time. He put on his fireproof headset. “Douse me good,” he said.

Desiree quickly put on her headset. “D-douth me, t-too,” she said.

Down below us, I heard someone shout, “Action!” I leaned over the railing and peered down. Two movie crews on two boats were filming each other. Maybe it was a documentary about making documentaries, I guessed. The boats were smallish for all the people crowding them. They bobbed up and down while shouting movie things at each other like “cut” and “print it.”

“That’s a wrap!” I shouted down at them.

“Hey, quiet on set!” a guy wearing a beret and eyepatch shouted back. Then all the movie people were staring up at me like I was an asshole. They were all lit up from the kleig lights they had pointed at each other.

I couldn’t think of anything directorish to say, so said, “These are the days that try men’s souls.”

They considered that for a moment, then went on with their work.

I felt some heat at my back and turned around. Desiree and Balfour were engulfed in flames and screaming their heads off. Desiree ran back and forth along the bridge, then jumped over the bridge railing into the water, arcing down like a meteor toward the

two boats. She plopped under the water and out of sight for a moment. "Did you get that?" somebody shouted below. "No! You?" someone else shouted. Then Desiree bobbed to the surface without her suit on and climbed aboard one of the boats. She had on a white, one-piece Speedo and posed on the edge of the boat, standing atop the engine, like a bodybuilder. The movie people cheered.

I felt a tap on my back and turned around. "Booga! Booga!" shouted the still-burning Balfour, his fiery hands waving above his head.

As any sane person would, I screamed and ran out into traffic. I felt myself getting chopped in the knees by a bumper, then saw an expanse of hood. My hands slapped the windshield, and framed between them was the face of Trace, who looked about as shocked as I felt.

*PRISONER, SARA. CO.—I could see all his unpretty teeth and up his enormous, pear-shaped nose—Summer in the Hamptons*

Jail is a lot like real life, except it's more organized. At seven A.M., there's wake up. By 7:15, you're eating breakfast. You return to your cell around eight and spend some time cleaning up. At noon sharp you eat lunch then go into the exercise yard and shoot hoops. At five you're showering. At six you're eating dinner and then you go in the TV room and stay until nine, when they send you back to lockup. The first meal I had in jail was corned beef hash with buttered bread, which wasn't really bad. There were only ten of us locked up there.

They only issue you two candy-orange jumpsuits with PRISONER, SARA. CO. stenciled on the back, so you try to keep them clean.

I was in jail for Violating a Restraining Order and for Causing a Public Nuisance. Trace cried in front of the judge causing the judge to lean over the bench, peering at me through a pair of pink-tinted spectacles. She winced, as if what she saw pained her to no end. As for my accomplices in Causing a Public Nuisance, they hustled away, and I refused to rat them out. Thirty days, the judge said, and a wake-up call.

I had a cell all to myself. There were only bars between the cells so I could look at my neighbor, and my neighbor could look at me. In the next cell was a hulking, enormous man who enjoyed reading highbrow magazines out loud and slowly to everybody who could hear him, which was me. He didn't say anything to me,

directly to me, until the third day, when he glanced up from a Padgett Powell short story in *Harper's* to say, "Name's Lud."

"I'm Carl," I said.

"Hey," said Lud, standing up and looming monstrosly over me. I was glad for those bars. I could see all his unpretty teeth and up his enormous, pear-shaped nose.

Four days later, Lud asked me if he could ask me a question.

I said sure.

"If I give you this here magazine, will you suck my dick?" Lud tried smiling at me from his jail cot and failed miserably.

"No, Lud," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Ah, shit," said Lud amiably, now actually smiling and showing off his horror show teeth. His mouth was open so wide I swear I could see down his esophagus, down, perhaps, to the delicious (no kidding!) shit-on-a-shingle they'd fed us that morning. "I din't spect nothing anyway." He picked up a *New Yorker* and began to read the "Goings on About Town" section to me, and that was that, I thought.

But two days later, after making me laugh with a witty interpretation of a *New Republic* cartoon, Lud asked me if he could fuck me in the ass when we went to the shower room.

"You're a veteran of jail," I said.

"You ain't?" he went.

"Never been before."

"I'll cut my shit out, I promise," he said.

Halfway through my jail stint, my brother came to visit me. Tom interrupted a game of HORSE I was playing with Lud, who wasn't really a bad sort once you looked past a few things. My brother and I viewed each other through Plexiglas and spoke on heavy, plastic telephones that made everything we said sound tinny and distant.

"Bust me out of here, Rocko," I said.

"You *idiot*," snapped my brother, pinching up his face.

"Ha ha," I went, Balfour-like.

"You were in the *paper*," said Tom, all business.

"Nobody reads anymore," I said, "except maybe the guy in the cell next to me, and he already knows where I am."

"Julie's parents read," said Tom. "I'm changing my last name."

"Ah," I said. "Julie's the name of the fiancée."

"Shit."

"Was my picture in the paper?"

"I'm going to kill you."

"So it was."

"Yes, you annoying little sparrowfart."

Tom hung up the phone and stalked out. I listened to see if a dial tone might come on, but none did. A guard tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Come on, Carl."

I got up and went with him, as tethered and will-less as a kiddie's balloon.

When my thirty days were up, I said my good-byes to Lud, who was busy reading me a William Bennett column from *American Spectator*. "Bye now," said Lud. "See you on the flip-flop."

In jail, I'd put on twelve pounds and had slept something like 240 plus hours. I was refreshed and renewed. Plus, I hadn't spent a dime the whole time I was in. Except for the knot on the back of my head, a reminder of my former job which refused to heal (unlike the knot on the front of my head which had healed), I left jail feeling damned good, like I'd spent a summer in the Hamptons.

*There's no reason you can't be a productive citizen after time in jail—House dressing—gravy, gravy, gravy*

“Well, look at you,” said Officer Bob.

“I can't look at me,” I said.

“Don't be that way,” Officer Bob said. “There's no reason you can't be a productive citizen after time in jail.” But the thing was, I didn't have access to a mirror. It was nothing to do with pride. I did notice that Officer Bob's frame had become less blubber-laden in the past month.

I said, “I'm looking at you and you look like a new man.”

“I feel like a new man. I've been on the vinegar and grapefruit juice diet for a month. I think I have halitosis, though,” said Officer Bob. His thumbs were looped into his pistol belt.

“Is that all there is to it?” I asked him. “I mean, drinking that stuff?”

“No,” said Officer Bob. “There's also an entire regimen. It has to do with changing the way you think about food.” Officer Bob was inside a cage. Inside the cage with him were everybody's personal effects. He shoved mine through a little slot in the cage and I caught them before they hit the floor. “I'll be back out on the beat in no time. Maybe next week, if I lose another ten pounds by then.”

“I have every confidence in you,” I said, signing the sheet on the clipboard that he slotted out toward me. He yanked it back in using the medium-heavy chain that was strung through the metal hole through the clasp thing.

“If it had been me that arrested you, you wouldn't have ended up in jail, you know,” said Officer Bob. I could smell him through

the steel fencing. He smelled like the house dressing at this restaurant that Trace and I used to go to when she'd decided that we had to be classy. That was right after she got the job selling mobile homes.

I took off my orange jumpsuit, then a guard behind me checked out my rectum using a gloved hand to see if I'd smuggled anything out of jail. After he was satisfied that I wasn't a thief, he let me put on my civilian clothes. They felt funny. Something wasn't right with them, other than the Hawaiian shirt, then I figured it out—it was the waistline on the pants. It felt bindy. I thought, I'm going to get me a jumpsuit at Buy and Bye.

"Why?" asked Officer Bob.

"Am I thinking out loud again?"

"Yes," said Officer Bob.

"I like the feel of this prisonwear," I said. "Maybe I'll get my name stitched over the pocket and an American flag on my sleeve. Maybe I'll start my own business."

"Doing?" asked the officer who'd stuck his gloved finger up my ass.

"I don't know yet," I said. "But now I'm a man with a criminal record, so I probably won't get a job too quick."

"It's true," noted Officer Bob, changing his mind from when he'd tried to cheer me up. "Maybe next time I have to be Officer Friendly, you can come with me and tell everyone how crime doesn't pay."

"I used to do those school presentations, you know."

"Oh, yeah?" said Officer Bob.

"When I worked for that pest control company. That's how come I got that Mr. Cockroach puppet."

"I wondered about that," said Officer Bob.

"You're free to go," said the officer behind me.

After additional processing, I stepped out the front door of the Sarasota County Jail and was met by a process server. He was a tall, spindly fellow wearing jeans that didn't quite reach his ankles. He handed me a summons to court. Trace was going to sue me, appar-

ently. I said, "I know a place where you can get name-brand jeans for tall guys such as yourself, and cheap."

"No kidding," the tall process server muttered, then walked away. He walked down to the corner to wait for the light to change before he crossed, so I followed him. He snuck a look back at me and tried to blend into the crowd at the corner, but it was no good. He was too damn tall.

"Look," I said to him, when I made it to the light.

"Go away," he said.

"It's not going to cost you anything, and I hate to see you going around in pants that are clearly too short," I said. I tried to sound normal, but my voice was heading toward whiny. When my voice gets whiny, I sound like a resident of a helium balloon.

"I handed you the summons," said the process server. "Now it's over. Go away."

I could have said something about having every right to stand at the same stoplight as him, but I didn't. I sounded it out in my head and it was trite. So I pointed at him and said the first word that came bubbling up to my mouth, "Gravy." And I walked away, thinking this is the last time I'll probably ever see that guy in my life and he'll always think of me as that "Gravy Guy." He'll forget my name, but he'll remember the gravy. The thought pleased me greatly.

A woman tapped me on the shoulder as the light changed and the process server skidded across the street, thinking, I hoped, *gravy, gravy, gravy*. She said, "Did anyone ever tell you that you look just like Bob Crane?"

"That's it!" I said, amazed. *That's who I look just like!* I couldn't wait to see my Grandmom Rita again, and tell her. I'd talked to her once on the phone when I was in jail, and though her voice sounded slurry, she was full of pepper, still.

I put my arms around the woman's neck and kissed her on the lips, pulling away with a slightly metallic taste in my mouth. She didn't kiss back, but didn't struggle either.

When I unembraced her, I said thank you about a dozen times and walked away humming the *Hogan's Heroes* theme song in duh-duh-duh-dah format. You know.

Now it was my turn to be followed. She strolled behind me for about half a block and watched me get onto a Sarasota County Area Transit bus. I knew the guy driving from high school. His name was Mike Olivero and he was so flexible that he could put his leg over his head without using any hands. His folks weren't circus at all, strangely. I said, "Hi, Mike."

"Hi, Carl," he said.

I sat down next to one of the vagrants I used to give half-eaten meals to when I cooked downtown, which wasn't all that long ago, come to think of it. He said, "Carl."

I said, "Hi, Mr. Vagrant Person." His name was somewhere back in my head but didn't come out when called for.

"That's me," he said. "Mr. Vagrant Person." He laughed. He sniffed at me. "County lock-up," he noted.

I shook my head in assent.

The Bob Crane girl who I'd kissed was running alongside the bus. At the next stop, she hopped on. She sat behind Mr. Vagrant Person and me.

Mr. Vagrant Person turned and looked at her.

"Is she right behind us?" I asked.

"Who?" asked Mr. Vagrant Person.

"A girl," I replied.

"There is a girl behind us," Mr. Vagrant Person said.

"Ah," I said. I continued looking forward, toward Mike Olivero, who was piloting the bus and looking in his very large rearview mirror at me and the other passengers. He turned the corner onto Orange Avenue without taking his eyes off us. Those eyes roved. Mike is a short fellow, but not as short as Hux, who is the shortest non-dwarf I've ever seen. I wondered if Hux would go to the Very Large Machinery Auction up in Tampa with me. Hux had an "in" there. I figured I could get a good minimum buy on an old police

cruiser that too many people had low-balled and so hadn't gotten auctioned off. The girl tapped me on the shoulder.

"Look, I'm sorry," I said, turning around—and then I saw what I had been trying not to see before, which was that every orifice of her body had a piece of metal hanging out of it. She even had Allen wrenches jammed through her earlobes. It was a dizzying array of metal, and the turn onto Orange Avenue had brought a new sun angle down on it, tossing off glares all over her face, which might have been pretty underneath for all I knew.

"Is something bothering you?" she asked. "I can tell when something's bothering someone. I am ultra-sensitive like that." And as she talked, I heard tiny rattling noises coming from all over her face.

As I stared down at the dogtag chain in her lip as she spoke, my eyes began to water uncontrollably. I said, "Huh?"

She crossed her arms and stared out the window, emitting a barely audible *hmpf*.

Mr. Vagrant Person said, "Now you've exasperated her."

"Isn't this your stop?" she muttered, not looking at me. The bus hit a pothole and her face metal jangled.

"My stop?" I said.

"Your *stop*," she insisted.

I looked out the window. It wasn't even remotely my stop, but I stood up and pulled the cord and got off the bus after Mike glided it to the curb.

"Goodbye," said Mike Olivero. I turned around to say something, but Mike already had pulled the door shut. Mike's eyes met mine. "No," he shouted over bus fumes and through bus glass, "I'm not going to put my foot over my head." And he drove off.

Everybody in this damn town thinks they know me so well.

*A chat with dead grampa—Sober as a judge*

The bus pulled away from the curb leaving behind a gunmetal-colored haze. Just across the street, the ghost of my grandfather stood waving at me. He wore an inner tube around his neck. Little pieces of detritus clung to his wet business suit, which slapped around as he waved. Grampa died after driving off a cliff into Lake Erie. He waved a half-empty glass bottle of whiskey at me. He wanted me to come on over a have a nip.

“I suppose I should be surprised,” I said to the woman next to me.

“Your breath stink,” she noted. “*Boy* do your breath stink.”

“Not every day you see dead grandpa waving you over for a drink,” I said.

“Dead grandpa done climbed down your throat and died all over again,” the lady said. She was much shorter than me, wearing a tan trenchcoat from a Phillip Marlowe flick. Her hair was pinched up painfully close to her head, ending in a hard little bun in the back.

“Grandpa always liked his whiskey,” I said.

“I ain’t got time for your sorry bullshit,” she said. She turned her head away from me, anticipating the direction the next bus was going to come from. “And your breath smell like you just got out of county lock-up.”

“I did just get out of county lock-up. I got thirty days for jumping onto the hood of my ex-girlfriend’s car while two old men and a friend of mine from high school set themselves on fire on the Siesta Key Bridge. Don’t worry. They wore asbestos suits. I didn’t,” I said.

"Ain't got time for no jailbird. No time at all," the lady said. A bus squealed up to the curb, hissed its brakes and opened its jaws and swallowed up my ladyfriend, and closed its maw, and hissed, and skiddaddled.

"My word," I said. Modern times! So much friendship, even fleeting friendship, is possible. "I shall miss our moments together," I said, hoping I meant it. Sometimes saying things can make them true, especially if *feeling* is involved. I told myself day-in and -out that I loved my ex-girlfriend Trace until it became true, even though she was full of cancerous hate that ate through even the most maudlin of sentiments. "I love you, love you, love you," I'd say to her on the beach, or at her mobile home, or to her answering machine, and I meant it after a while. I wanted to be in love. That's the thing. You can make it happen if you try hard enough. I read that in a magazine. Magazines are good for so much. After you read them you can roll them into little tubes and set them on fire in your fireplace, if you have one. Which I don't.

Grandpa said, "Get over here. I need to listen to your silly shit for a while. C'mon, boy. Don't be so damn coy with yourself. Step on across the street and say howdy."

Sarasota my home is full of old people who won't give up their driver's licenses. It's full of palm trees, too. Streets are clogged with them, these old drivers, and the sides of streets are clogged with palm trees, which the old people crash into. It's a convenient combination, if you think on it.

I have been known to think on these things.

I took one step off the curb and was nearly run down by a lemon-colored Lincoln Continental piloted by a codger older than air travel. He didn't even tap the brakes, just whisked by me nearly silently. Those cars sure are engineered well.

"Don't be shy! Step off that curb and get over here!" said Grandpa. Jack Daniel's whiskey is his favorite. It sloshed around in that bottle as he waved and waved. A ghostly wet spot formed around him. His penny loafers were all squishy.

“You want me to die, don’t you?” I shouted to him.

“Nothing of the sort,” he said, lowering the bottle.

“You want my company in the afterlife,” I said.

“Pish-posh,” Grandpa said, staring down at his feet.

“This is no way to treat the living,” I said, and walked purposefully away, alongside the road that separated us.

He followed me in a parallel fashion, kicking the occasional pop can on his side of the road, hoping to get my attention or pity. He walked through a woman and a child who were heading the opposite direction, or they passed through him. The child looked back at him in wonderment. The mother was too sober to notice him.

He finally tired and gave up. He sat down on a park bench beneath a statue of Chichi-Okobee, the Native American who used to be the tribal chief of Sarasota. I stopped and peered through the traffic at him, watching as he faded slowly from view, like an old black-and-white photograph.

I took some pity on him and crossed the road in a safe manner.

“It’s not so bad in the afterlife,” said dead grandpa, fading back in.

“I suppose you’re perpetually drunk,” I said, sitting down next to him.

“You can’t get drunk. That’s the hell of it. I can drink all day and be sober as a judge,” he said, angrily. He was staring down at his wet shoes. “Your grandmom popped up all sudden-like a few weeks ago, she did, and give me a scare.”

“A scare?”

“She never did forgive me for thinking up throwing them knives at little doggies. It was my idea, you know,” he said.

“I didn’t know.”

A woman strolled up and sat down inside him.

“Say hi to her when you see her. Tell her the doggies is safe here in the afterlife.” He buzzed like an insect for a moment, then became a tiny flicker of light, no bigger than a matchhead, and disappeared. The woman waved her arms around her head,

then stopped. She looked at me all solemn and said, "Sober as a judge," and stood up, performed an exact right face, and trotted away like a soldier doing double-time.

## 20

### *Lift—Say old timer*

I walked.

I walked twenty blocks, which is most of Sarasota, I'll have you know. Twenty blocks is a lot of walking, and at the end, I grew breath-tired and foot-tired. I sat on the curb and pulled out Trace's court summons. I read it. It was soaked through with my sweat. I placed it back in my pocket and pulled off my shoes. I rolled over on my back like a doomed turtle and waved my poor footsies in the air.

A fat Mennonite man on an adult tricycle loomed above me. His nostrils seemed like open missile silos from my perspective. "Looks like you could use a ride," he said down to me.

"I know you," I said.

"You gave me a push," he said. "Such kindness from the outsiders seems impossible to many of us."

"Let me slip on my shoes," I said.

I shoved my feet back inside my shoes and laced them up nice and tight. I stood up and stretched, touching my shoe toes, then reached into the sky. I figured I'd probably have to give him a few more pushes uphill, maybe have to pedal him around, too, until I took a gander at the bottom of his big tricycle, and saw an electric motor the size of a motorcycle engine. "What, ho?"

"Ah. The engine. A birthday gift."

"But I thought—"

"We're Mennonites," said the fat little man with a wink. "Not Amish." It seemed enough explanation for him, so I didn't push it. He thumbed toward the rear of the vehicle, toward the basket

part, currently empty. I plopped myself down in it the best I could, with my feet spilling out of the basket and my head lolling around the old man's buttocks. He gunned the little tricycle and soon we were up to about 15 or 18 miles per hour. The engines made almost no sound, most of the sound was whistling winds and tire buzz. The sweat that covered my back began to dry and my teeth felt rusty, like they could use a good cleaning, even my good teeth up front (which had been rebuilt from scratch in my childhood) were crummy. We kerthump-kerthumped over the railroad tracks and I near about flew out of the basket, landing awkwardly back in it slightly askew.

"Say old timer," I said. "Where about are we going?"

"Buy and Bye," he replied, not looking back, his beard flapping in the speed breeze.

"Drive on, MacDuff," I said, lacing my hands behind my big dumb head.

## 21

*Mr. Cheese Whiskers—A deep, cleansing breath—Put your head back on*

A person wearing an orange cat uniform stood out in front of the Buy and Bye waving to passersby and tossing silly-gloved handfuls of cheese-like snacks at people who were trying to slip past him unnoticed.

I heard his muffled voice down deep in that costume. “I’m sweating like a son-of-a-bitch in here!” he shouted. Then he tossed more snacks at a couple of teenagers, who cowered and ran from him. “Bastards! Take your snacks you bastards!”

The old Mennonite stopped right in front of the costumed man and said, “This is where you get off, English.”

“Don’t take any wooden nickels, old timer,” I said cheerily. I pulled myself from the basket and waved as the old man drove off. The costumed guy chucked a 20-ounce bag of cheesy snacks at the back of the old man’s head, and instead of boinking him, shot a perfect basket.

“Nice shot,” I said, turning toward him.

“Fuck you, Carl,” he said.

“Right,” I said. “Wait a minute.” I knew that voice.

“Go away, Carl,” the cat man said.

“Bill?”

“Carl, for God’s sake . . .”

“And does Bill’s Wife know you’re moonlighting as a spokesproduct person?”

“Carl,” said Bill’s muffled voice, “I don’t have time for this. I could get fired if I talk to patrons. I’m going to have a heatstroke inside this awful costume. Why aren’t you in jail?”

"I'm free as a bird, Bill," I said. I sniffed at the mouth of the costume. "You're all sweaty in there. I'll take over for you if you give me my job back," I said.

His big cat shoulders slumped. He growled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

His big silly-gloved hands reached up to his big silly head and popped it off. He slumped down to the curb. "I lost the restaurant." His hair was greasy with sweat, his eyes hollow and dejected.

"Poker game?" I asked. He didn't answer. I sat down next to him. It was actually kind of thrilling. I'd never spoken to a man in a theme-park type costume before, though I'd tried once at Disneyworld when my parents took me. To be honest, I tried to talk to every Goofy, Mickey, Donald, Minnie and whatnot that traipsed by, but my mother kept yanking me away from them, yelling loudly that the only people who were desperate enough to wear such humiliating costumes were either escaped lunatics or drunken vagrants. She'd said it loud enough for the poor guy/gal in the suit to hear it, which was the whole point, I think. My mother just loves bringing everyone down about a notch-and-a-half. "What happened?"

"We were always on the thin edge there, anyway," he said. "Even that quarter raise we were threatening to give you that one night might have cost us the dump."

"Is that right? I had no idea," I said.

"There's a surprise." He snorted.

"So what happened?" I asked again.

"So," he started, then found himself becoming enraged. He pulled himself to his feet as quickly as he could in the costume and pitched an 80 mile-per-hour snackball at a passing soccer mom sprinting with two soccer juniors next to her. He pointed down at me. "*You* happened! They weren't coming in to *eat* at my goddamned dump! They were coming in to *laugh* at you! And then you left, and nobody came anymore. Two customers, maybe three a day, tops. Even those weirdo triplets stopped coming in. There, I said

it! And I feel much better now. Yes! Much, much, much better now! At-a-boy, Bill,” he said, talking to himself now. “A deep, cleansing breath now. In,” he said, breathing in. “Out,” he said, breathing out.

“That’s interesting,” I said, pretty much to myself.

“Oh,” Bill declared, waving his big cat arms dramatically to the people streaming past, who were doing their best not to attract his attention, “He finds it interesting! My failure is interesting! I’m so *damned* glad to be interesting to you. Maybe I’ll be interesting to others. Call in the documentary makers! Call the *Today* show! Call my agent. Get him on the phone. My business went bust! That’s why I’m dressed like this! You,” he said, pointing to a little granny. “Don’t run. Watch me! I’m *interesting*.”

“Don’t pay any attention to Mr. Cheese Whiskers,” I orated to the crowd from my seat on the curb. “Mr. Cheese Whiskers is currently under a lot of stress. Mr. Cheese Whiskers blames me. But the Mr. Cheese Whiskers will survive,” I reassured them. “As God is my witness.”

Some people clapped for me. Most just moved on. Bill sat back down next to me. “I’m sorry, Carl,” he said.

“Put your head back on,” I said, standing up. “For God’s sake, try to be professional.”

*Free—It's not so much the food, but the ambiance—*

I felt a cool blast of air as I entered the double set of doors and on into Buy and Bye. A sign up front announced their new department, the Buy and Byte. Back there—according to the flyer shoved in my hand by a gap-toothed, ragged old gentleman—Bert Bacon, the owner of the Buy and Bye chain, was giving away computers for free. Next to “free” was an asterisk. Down at the bottom of the page next to another asterisk the flyer informed me in tiny type, “Free with purchase of one year’s subscription to Buy and Byte Total Internet Access.”

The ragged old gent smiled at me. I smiled back at him. “You want a cart?” he asked me.

“Not today, thanks,” I replied.

“My piles are killing me,” he said.

“And I smell like county lockup and have bad breath, so there’s that, too.”

“Yep,” he said, then turned and started handing out flyers to all the other people pushing into the big discount store. Out front, on the curb, my former boss continued to rant.

My father’s birthday was a week off, I reckoned, so I had to get him a present. In the bank, I had four thousand seven hundred and eighty-two dollars and some cents. Seventy-six cents. I had twelve dollars in the wallet strapped to my ankle. I still didn’t have a job. I don’t have a credit card to my name, nor will I ever (twenty-four percent interest!). I needed some food in my stomach. The morning’s county lockup shit-on-a-shingle had already partially digested. It was somewhere in my intestines now. My stomach

was crying out for more. I turned to the gap-toothed man and asked, "Is there a restaurant in this place?"

"You could call it that, if you had a mind to, which I don't," he said.

"So the food isn't that good, is that it?"

"It's not so much the food, but the ambiance," he said.

"I see," I said.

"You will. It's all the way straight back, all the way back, back, back, about a mile or so back there, all the way down this aisle, then veer around the paper towel mountain, but keep your heading, and keep going until you can't go no more. Then you're there, in this place that may be a restaurant, if you wanted to call it that, which I don't," he said. He handed out a couple more flyers. Flicked his eyes at me. "Go on with you," he said, his smile turning sly. "You'll see."

So I walked. The Buy and Bye is a big store. You could fit a couple of Kmart's in one and still have room left over for a Sears Auto Center or two. Bert Bacon wouldn't expand his chain out of Florida, though. He said in an interview that he'd rather die than open a store in Georgia or Alabama. I think that's probably because Florida has lax labor laws, and that if he had stores in more than one state, he'd have to follow federal rules and regulations, which would probably make him pay an almost living wage to his hundreds of workers.

Enough.

I was walking along thinking that, and about my father's birthday, the big five-oh, his fiftieth, his half-century mark, and about my brother Tom and what he might be doing for a job, and about maybe going back and talking to Bert Bacon about paying living wages, and maybe asking him for a job for myself, maybe in his negative ambiance restaurant. I passed by a mountain of paper towels, all taken out of their boxes and stacked like a pyramid so they rose up toward the ceiling. I passed by jars of baby food, and the baby food inside the jars was clear, and how do you do that, make something like baby food clear? And I passed by some dolls

that were tributes to the Big Bopper in G.I. Joe sizes. Did I lose my way? I wondered. Have I somehow gotten turned around in this store so I never made it to the back?

When I was about to despair, I spotted the back wall of the store, and there on the wall was written, in huge script, "Phil's Mama Loves You Restaurant and Grille." There was so much product stacked high around me I almost didn't see it. I had to navigate around crates of animatronic birds and a forklift someone had left parked in the middle of an aisle. I bumped a bird's box and it squawked at me, "Adam and Eve on a raft!"

The first thing I noticed was that everything in the restaurant had a price tag hanging off it. Even the waitress. I thought it might be a Minnie Pearl-type thing, but it wasn't. And the restaurant furniture wasn't restaurant furniture, but lawn furniture, the white plastic kind that's all molded as a single piece, and it was for sale. The counter was for sale. I sat down on a stool, which was molded out of a single piece of pink flamingo pink plastic, and it was for sale.

"What're you sitting there for?" asked the waitress, Dottie, it said so on her snug dress, which was for sale.

"How much is that dress?" I asked her.

"Fourteen ninety-nine during my shift and my shift only," she said. "Sugar, get to work." She stared right at me like she meant it.

Me, I was still wearing my Hawaiian shirt, see. The Hawaiian shirt had a price tag hanging off it. Perhaps I'm part of the scenery. I was going to disagree with her, but she didn't look like she would take disagreement well, so I bounded around the counter and got to work.

"You're a half-hour late, new man," she said, handing me a couple of orders.

"Sorry about that," I said.

"Try to be on time from now on," she said.

"I'll do my best," I said.

"You'll have to fill out all your paperwork after your shift," she said, touching my arm. I looked at her. She had chocolate eyes and wispy wheat hair and her skin was almost translucent white, and

she had a nearly perfect round tiny hole through the middle of one of her incisors. "I'll help you out, sugar," she purred.

"Thank you," I said. I shivered a bit when she let go. I was under a cooling vent and it was blasting a solid column of cold air down upon me. I picked up a long spatula, which cost nine dollars and eighty-eight cents, and got to work.

An hour later, our lunch rush was over, and Dottie sat down on one of the plastic stools and stared at me. "I didn't think you'd make it," she said, chin resting on palm. "But here you are."

"Actually," I said. "I *didn't* make it. Not really. I just came back here to eat lunch."

"But you just got out of county lockup, didn't you?"

"I did."

"And the Hawaiian shirt with the price tag."

"True enough," I said.

"But your name's not 'Lud,' is it?" she asked, looking at the name stitched on my pocket for the first time.

"No, but I know Lud, and Lud won't be getting out until a week from tomorrow."

"I'm sure they'll find a new place for Lud," Dottie said. "You're mine now, if you want the job, that is."

"I don't like being jobless," I said.

"If you don't mind my asking, what did they lock you up for?"

"Violating my ex-girlfriend's personal space," I said. I picked up a grill brick and began grinding the burnt meat clusters off the grill. I stopped. "That, and setting two people on fire." I continued sanding down on the grill.

*Dottie's sad story and Bert Bacon—The beaming shoppers' clothes  
turn bright and shiny—Boy howdy*

Dottie's head slumped on down to the counter. This was due to the immutable laws of physics and emotion and exhaustion, I guessed. She boo-hoo-hooed some, too. I am a man, and as such, the weeping of women rips through me like a fish knife.

I crouched down and looked up at her, peered past arm and hair and caught a glance from her. I said, catching her peek, "Do we get an employee discount?"

She sat up. I righted myself up. She wiped a tear away. "Do you know why I was crying, just now?" she asked me.

"Bad teeth?" I guessed.

"No," she said. She took a tissue out of her "for sale" dress and blew her nose. "My husband. We're *stuck*."

"Stuck," I said.

"It's an old story, you know," she said, lower lip aquiver. "Get me a cup of coffee, sugar."

I poured her a cup of coffee. She stared into the cup while her red-painted thumbnail scratched absently at the price sticker on the side. "Cream and sugar?" I asked.

"Just cream," she said, a bit of tremolo sneaking in.

People have these sad stories. I got used to them working grill. I have learned to be patient and let them stutter and not get the details right, then right themselves and fill in and backtrack and refill in. Names shift. People do one thing, then another. I do the nod. Make sure I nod. I can nod reassuringly.

I reached under the counter into a tray of ice and pulled out a tiny bucket of hydrogenated vegetable oil made white by titanium dioxide, and set it gently next to her hand. I smiled solicitously at her. It was an understanding smile. I've seen the same smile a thousand times, and have given it out a million times.

"I guess I seem foolish," she said. She tissueed away the tears that didn't exist anymore.

"No," I said. "Well, maybe a little."

Then Bert Bacon stormed into our area. He's an enormous man, maybe three hundred pounds, just like he is on TV commercials when he floats around the inside of his stores, tossing quarters and dimes down to the people shopping, who beam up at him, and magic dust floats down with the quarters and dimes, and makes the beaming shoppers' clothes turn bright and shiny. "Hello there, Buy and Bye family!" he boomed at Dottie and me. "Smiles, smiles!" He wore bib overalls and a crisp, white button-down shirt and shiny jewelry all over his enormous, blunt, hairy hands. His blue-black hair was greased back away from his forehead, and liver spots blossomed all over his face. Radios crackled all around the periphery; his security people were hidden around the stacks of merchandise. I thought about snipers, maybe, or SWAT teams, Marine recon, and Army Rangers. Helicopters!

"It's an honor, sir," I said.

"Coffee, grillman, and black," he said, and sat down next to Dottie. She recognized him and leapt to her feet. I delivered the mug of coffee to him.

"Oh, Mister Bacon," she said breathlessly.

"Please, please, take your break," Bert Bacon said magnanimously. He swept his big arm across the stool she'd been sitting on. She wiped at a few more nonexistent tears with the backs of her hands.

She sat down next to him, but not too close, like maybe he was radioactive. She peeled open the little bucket next to her coffee and almost poured it in, but Bert Bacon stopped her by grabbing her little hand with his monstrous hand. He daintily plucked

the tub away from her and said, "I thought I told them to stop putting these abominations in our store." He held it up to eyelevel, pinched in thumb and pointing finger, and studied it. "Why, this is just *paint*, I tell you! Titanium dioxide is paint!" He stared at Dottie. She cringed uncontrollably, leaning back away from the immense, powerful man. He did not move. I did not move.

Dottie continued to lean back, vibrating now. I don't guess she'd ever been this close to someone this important. Sitting next to her was the alpha male of bargain basement goods. If we had been a bunch of baboons, he would have smacked the living hell out of me by now. "Paint," she said, gasping, her eyes widened her pupils as big as frying pans. She swallowed. I thought she was going to faint. "I didn't know that," Dottie said finally.

"Well, it is," he said, haughtily. He chucked the bucket into a nearby trashcan, on sale for eight ninety-nine, and boomed to me, "Didn't you read the company letter? Last week's company letter?"

"I was just hired today," I said.

"I specifically stated that we were only to serve Half and Half at our Phil's Mama Loves You Restaurant and Grilles, Florida-wide." The big man glared at me. "Who is your supervisor?"

"I don't really know. I just started—"

"This won't do at all," he said, standing up now. At full height, he was much shorter than at stool-sitting height. And yet he still seemed the giant. He strode off purposefully, disappearing behind a row of indestructible sponges. The background radio chatter disappeared with him.

"I should have asked him about that employee discount," I said. "I should have asked him who the hell this 'Phil' is."

"I hope we're not fired," Dottie said.

"We're lucky to be alive," I said.

Then Dottie glided around the counter on tiptoes, grabbed my shoulders and kissed me hard and full on the lips. Boy howdy.

*Dottie's sad story continued—Shhh! Here she comes—\$10.13 an hour*

She pushed me away, of course. I was hoping for a slap, but no slap came. It never seems right without a slap. She shuffled back around the counter and sat down. Her breathing returned to normal. She slumped down in her seat, her slight elbows poked down on the counter. “Get me another little bucket of that white paint,” she grumbled.

I reached below the counter and retrieved another one. She peeled up the lid and dumped the paint into her now-cold coffee. She slugged it down in three huge gulps and plopped the mug back on the counter and pushed it away like she just did me. “Where was I?” she asked me.

“Your husband and you are stuck,” I said, showing off my listening skills.

“Right,” she said.

I remembered how hungry I was.

“So Jeremy, that’s my husband, works at the Eager to Please car wash and video store out on the Tamiami Trail. That is to say, he used to work there—he can’t work anywheres now, now that the accident took place,” she said, then stopped, making sure I was keeping up.

So I asked, as I was obligated to ask, “What accident?”

“Hot wax cycle,” she went on. “They don’t have any accident prevention procedures, and whatnot. Honey, you look awful hungry. Why don’t you fix yourself something?”

“Did his skin peel off?” I asked.

"It was *terrible*," she said. "Now I'm *serious*. You need something to eat. You barely fill up that little flowery shirt you're wearing."

I turned around and slapped a beef patty on the grill. It sizzled as beef patties do. And she continued on, but I kind of tuned her out until she said, "Customer!" and I turned around and there was Hux.

"Thought I'd find you here," Hux said, tapping his little fingers on the plastic countertop. "So," he asked, his pink eyes narrowing, "gonna get that employee discount?"

"Don't know just yet," I said. "You didn't visit me in jail."

"I was afraid I'd find you thriving," Hux said, turning his head to watch Dottie's ass wiggle. "And that would be frightening, wouldn't it?"

"Well, you seem to know me," I said, flipping my burger over. "You want one?" I asked him.

"I think you put on a couple of pounds in jail," Hux said. He blushed when Dottie caught him looking at her, then turned his head completely toward me.

"Her husband is in the hospital now," I confided to Hux in a whisper, flat hand bladed to cheek to add to the confidentiality factor.

"Ah," he said, allowing a little disappointment to wriggle through.

"She kissed me," I whispered.

"No!" he went, then calmed down. "Kissed you? How?"

"Lips on lips," I said. "Shhh! Here she comes."

"It was a friendly kiss," Dottie said. "Nothing meant by it." She leaned on the counter to allow Hux a view of her white, white breast-cleavage—breasts floating beneath her dress like a pair of peeled, hardboiled eggs pickled in brine. "You're a cute little ooger-booger," she said, smiling at him.

He blushed some more. "When're you gonna be done?" he asked me.

"Ask *her*," I said, placing my burger on a bun.

“Another fifteen minutes and our relief gets here. Soon as all the paper plates get tossed in the dumpster you can go,” she said. “Do either of you have a car?”

“I do,” Hux said.

“Can you drop me off somewheres?” she asked him. She reached over and mussed his red hair, massaging his scalp. “You are so cute.”

“I can—” He gulped, looking like a little monster for a moment, gulping. “I can drop you off, sure.”

“Got to visit the burn ward, see the hubby,” she said. “Make sure he isn’t catting around with all the nurses. You know where that Catholic hospital is?”

“Sure,” Hux said. He perspired freely, what with her hand massaging his scalp, that hand hadn’t left scalp, wasn’t leaving scalp.

“It’s a sad story,” I said. “That husband.”

“Very sad,” said Dottie. “But you can’t let life get you down, can you?”

And so, that’s how I lost my ride. Dottie and Hux left while I took out the trash, and a homicidal-maniac-looking fellow took over for me at the grill, growling to himself and glaring around. I went in the very back of the store, into a storeroom, and filled out all the paperwork (labeled “Lud”) and made sure that all my hours were on the timecard. No one questioned that I should be there, and no one questioned that I was employed, or whether or not I was Lud. They didn’t ask, I didn’t tell. La-dee-dah, I was employed at \$10.13 an hour, and all was right with the world. I called my father, the *pater familias*, and he came to pick me up in front of the store in his vintage Buick Roadmaster, all bursting with smiles for me.

*Screw the expenses—Museum of Crime!!!—*

“I got the canisters on order, son,” he said to me as I slipped into the big car.

“Canisters?” I asked him. I’d forgotten.

“Frozen heads, remember?”

“I remember,” I said. “So what does Mom have to say?”

“I didn’t tell her yet,” he said. “Don’t want to spoil the surprise. Gonna spring it on her at the birthday party.”

With all the excitement of getting a job, I’d forgotten his birthday again. Funny how things slip in and out of your mind, isn’t it?

“Big birthday planned?” I asked him.

“Big enough,” he said. He liked to plan his own birthday surprises. For the big Five-Oh, I expected a real soiree, something gangbusters. Something with toasts, and banquet tables and waiters. Screw the expenses. “I rented Bwana Bob’s Rhino and Rumpus Room.”

“I thought they were going out of business,” I said.

“Who told you that?” he asked. His chin was almost on the steering wheel. He squinted at the road.

“I forget,” I said.

“Whoever told you that is an idiot,” he said, sneering and steering badly. “Bwana Bob’s Rhino and Rumpus Room will never go out of business, not as long as there is a Sarasota.”

“Right, Dad,” I said.

He turned the boat of car right onto a sidestreet.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“How the hell should I know? You’re the one who told me to turn right!” And I laughed. Dad laughed, realizing his mistake, and then Dad ran into someone’s orange rubber garbage can and smeared its contents all over the road. “Whoopsie!”

And we both laughed again.

“Turn left up here,” I said. And he turned left at the corner. Eventually we made it back to the trailer park, and pulled up to my lot, which was empty. My trailer was nowhere to be seen. When we exited the vehicle, we walked across dirt and a cracked cement pad. “This can’t be right,” I said.

“I thought I paid the lot rent when it was due, but I may be mistaken,” Dad said, running a hand through wavy salt and pepper hair, then scratching his scalp vigorously. “No, wait.”

“Wait?” I asked, standing on the pad. I found my old front steps busted into a million pieces, and felt the legal papers in my pocket.

“Um, I spent the money on your future,” he said, my dad said, the old con man said.

“Future?” I said, dazed. “Future? All I want is a little piece of my past.”

“The future is in the past. Well, the present gets frozen, which then becomes the past in the future.”

“Frozen heads,” I said. “You spent my lot rent money on frozen head canisters, didn’t you? Why? Because Mom wouldn’t let you near the checkbook again is why. And there’s probably a good reason for that.”

“Don’t get huffy with me, boy,” he said. “I may only have a week to live.”

“That old Five-Oh death stuff isn’t going to cut it, unless there’s a trailer in it for me,” I said. I kicked the steps that Trace had fallen on. I felt the puff of anger blow through me, and out the other side. “Where do you think they drag delinquent trailers?”

Dad squatted, sat down on his haunches, tried to think. He scratched his important-looking head pretty good with one hand, and drew pictures in the dirt in front of him with the other. “Does this place have a manager?”

“Probably the guy I pay rent to,” I said. “I’ve never seen him. He tells me to shove the money under the door.”

“The guy you pay rent to,” Dad said. “You didn’t set that guy on fire did you?”

“Entirely different guy,” I said. “Not Balfour, not Beano. Like I said, I’ve never seen him.”

“Then we should talk to him,” Dad said. It was an entirely reasonable suggestion. Sensible, even.

We marched down to the front of the place, up to the trailer that had the little fake duck pond with the little rubber duckies floating around in it. The little rubber duckies had faded to almost white and were, I’m sure, as brittle as my mother’s temperament. Those duckies floated there in the diminutive, half-buried, kiddie pool like little battleships of the line. Dad bounded up the steps of the trailer and rapped sharply on the door. “Not bad for a dead man, eh?” he shouted back to me.

“You’re not fifty *yet*, old timer,” I said.

“It’ll happen to you someday,” Dad said.

“What is it?” a voice shouted through the door. “Who are you?”

“I’m Carl’s father,” Dad shouted through the door. “I’m almost fifty.”

“Good for you. Carl’s been evicted,” the voice shouted back.

“Evicted?” Dad said, putting on an astonished voice.

“Tell him to read his lease,” the voice shouted.

“He just wants to know where his trailer took off to,” Dad shouted at the door.

“I sold it,” the voice told him. “Read the lease! I have every right—”

“What?” Dad shouted loudly.

“Sold it! I sold it,” the voice shouted.

“To whom, may I ask,” Dad shouted.

“Hold on a sec,” the voice went, now muffled up.

We heard some hither and thither thudding around in the trailer. A folded note ejected from the bottom of the door. Dad

picked it up. He brought it over to me. “Yoshii Nakamura,” Dad read off the lined, beat-up note.

“State Road 72, Arcadia, Florida,” I continued.

Then Dad read the zip code.

“The nuns always told me I’d end up in Arcadia,” I said.

“Those nuns,” Dad said, rolling his eyes. “That’s where the nuthouse is, right?”

“Some fun,” I said. “Let’s go to Arcadia.”

“Tonight?” Dad asked me. “It’s almost night.”

“What? You got a hot date?”

“Hot date? Heck no!”

“Then what’s holding you?” Our heads were right next to each other.

“Nothing, I guess,” Dad said, beaming. “Arcadia. Sounds like a place a man could rent up some cheap warehouse space.”

“And how, old timer. And the clock is ticking, too.”

“Don’t remind me,” Dad said, nudging me in the ribs. We stood there, regarding each other. I realized that I really liked him. I didn’t necessarily respect him, or consider him a good father, but I liked him, and it seemed enough to fill my ribcage with joy. I considered hugging him for a moment, but if jail had taught me anything, it was to avoid physical contact with persons of the same gender. Instead, I tilted my head toward his car.

“To the car!” Dad shouted, and happily-hopped down the road. I ran after him.

Arcadia is home to the Arcadia Rodeo (Motto: “It’s better’n a picture show!”); the G. Pierce Wood Mental Hospital, which is for mentally ill people who don’t have the money to be comfortably mentally ill, but are not yet criminally mentally ill; and an Army general who got himself kidnapped famously by a gang of Italian red communists back in the ‘80’s. I’m pretty sure that general guy got himself released and wrote a book, or something.

The sign on the road read, “Museum of Crime!!!” with the three exclamation marks in sloppy red splatters. It was a hand-made sign of the variety that usually advertises Tomaters or Sweet

Corn. It was the kind of sign I used to steal when I was in high school and place on rich people's lawns as a joke of sorts. I also used to steal big capital letter O's off of signs around town—most famously, off the Sarasota Center for Oncology (Sarasota *Herald-Tribune* headline: "O Thief Strikes Cancer Center! See page four!"). My mother found the O's under my bed and made me return them, anonymously. She told me that if she ever caught me with O's under my bed again I would have to return them all unanonymously, which she assured me would end any hope that I might hold for a normal life. The last sentence of her lecture went: "Then when you die, your obituary in the Herald-Trib'll read, 'O Thief Dies! See page 18.'" She thought that sounded like an unattractive prospect to a boy like me.

As we pulled into the Museum of Crime's unpaved long, long driveway, I said to Dad, "I was the O Thief, you know."

"Yeah," he said, "your mother ratted you out to me." He took his chin off the steering wheel and smiled over. "She smacked me in the head because I said I thought it was kind of neat."

A deer bounded across the road in front of us. Dad swerved into the drainage ditch and we got stuck tight in there. *Whiz!* went the old car's tires.

"Stupid deer!" Dad shouted. He pushed open his door—we were near about resting on my door—with his feet, and I pushed him out, then climbed out after him. The deer stood admiring his handiwork. Mrs. Deer and Deer the Younger bounded across the road after him. "We don't even hunt!" Dad protested at the deer. The deer seemed to consider that for a moment, then bounded off with his brood into the palmetto brush and Australian pine forest.

"There's no reasoning with deer," I said.

"They hold a grudge against all humanity," Dad said sorely.

Light was dimming. It had been a 30-minute drive toward the Cracker heart of Florida, the center of our state, where no Yankee tourist ever ventured. We were alone out there, with our borrowed West Coast of Florida Midwestern accents and silly car stuck in a ditch. Mosquitoes swirled around our big, dumb heads

and lit upon our arms and necks with relish. “We’d better get to that Museum of Crime,” I said, swatting furiously at myself.

“It could be six or seven miles from the highway,” Dad said. “You know these Crackers.” The highway was State Road 72. It’s a two-lane melty blacktop.

“Then we’d better start now,” I said. And the sun disappeared into Myakka Swamp.

*A Japanese Cracker—They got locked up by Roosevelt during the war—just because a man boards something, doesn't mean he loves it*

I pulled out the crumpled note. “Yoshii Nakamura,” I read again. “What kind of Cracker name is that?”

“A Japanese Cracker,” a voice drawled at us from up ahead. “Now you hold up right there.”

We stopped. We raised our hands. We squinted at the dark figure coming toward us. “Our car got stuck,” I said.

He pounded up toward us. “You ain’t from round here,” he said. He had an ax handle in his hands and a dog following closely behind him. The dog threw his paws up on me and slobbered and whimpered.

“Beowulf!” I exclaimed, and tossed my hands around him. “Dad!”

“I knew I forgot something,” Dad said. He dropped his hands.

“So that would be your trailer, I reckon,” Yoshii Nakamura said. He had on a feed hat with the brim rolled into a tube, and teeny-tiny Red Wing boots. “Well, I bought it fair and square. But you can *have* this here dog. He ain’t worth a shit.” He spat on the ground next to us.

“Thanks, mister,” I said as my dog continued slobbering on my face and moaning gutturally.

“You all are circus trash,” he said, matter-of-factly. “Fuckin’ trailer was full of your circus shit. I put it in a box for you.” I stood up. In the dim moonlight I made out a squat, sunburnt Asian man with a Fu Manchu mustache and Elvis-like sideburns. His gut protruded over the top of his faded jeans. He didn’t have a shirt on.

“Thank you,” I said again. I wasn’t really expecting to get the trailer back. I just like to drive around with Dad.

“Cleant out the frigerator and put it on my porch,” he stated. “Fuckin’ mess, the whole trailer. Knew you damn circus people were peculiar. Cheap-ass color TV in there was from China. Took me a while of watching it to realize that it didn’t show green. I mean, *goddamn*.” He spat again. The side of his lip was swollen with snuff. He tossed the ax handle up on his shoulder and turned away. “Reckon I ought to pull your sorry Yankee circus asses out of that ditch,” he said, and began walking down the road away from us.

My dog and I finished our reunion and followed after him. “How much do I owe you for boarding my dog?” I asked after him.

“Aw hell,” he said, and that was the end of discussion.

We rode with him in his pickup truck back to Dad’s car. Yoshii brought a chain with him. We sat three across in the cab, while Beowulf slid around in the bed. Yoshii said, “I’ll bet my yellow ass you got a peculiar car.”

“Nothing peculiar about it,” Dad said.

Yoshii spat out the window. “We’ll see,” he said.

When his headlights found the car in the ditch, he said, “Peculiar and old.”

“Old,” Dad said. “Not peculiar.”

We wrapped the chain around bumpers and after much scraping of tires the old car yanked free of the ditch. It was getting on toward the middle of the night. “I’m a miss my stories,” Yoshii said. “I specially like that one with the little fat Polish feller who beats the shit outta criminals.”

“Sorry about you missing your stories,” I said.

“You fellers want to come back and crack a beer with a fat ole lawyer?” he asked us.

“I could stand a beer,” I said.

“Me, too,” Dad said. “I’d be grateful for a beer.”

Beowulf yelped and sniffled from the truck bed. “Man,” Yoshii said, “that dog like about pisses me off.”

Yoshii's house was ample, and all cyprus. It smelled tangy and sweet in there. He had framed diplomas tacked to the walls, and a photo of a Japanese couple standing in an internment camp. I stepped along his walls drinking it in.

"Them're my parents," Yoshii said. "They got locked up by Roosevelt during the war. Didn't have me 'til twenty years later, after they moved down here to get away from the damn guy-jeans." Yoshii sidled up alongside me and handed me a cool can of Pabst. Central air blew down on us. "I built this here house my own self."

"It's a great house," I said.

"I can afford it. I'm an attorney. You probably seen me on late-night television," he said.

I stared at him for a moment. Then, "Ninja Assassin! lawyer!" I shouted.

"That's me, not that new-age knockoff feller. This here's my diploma from Georgia Southern," he said. We sidestepped along the wall like we were at an all you can eat buffet. "I been cutting crime stories out the paper since I was a little kid. Figure I can open up a nice little museum out here, maybe put it in my TV ads and get me some of that Yankee tourist money."

"Good plan!" Dad shouted from the couch. We turned and looked at him. He had that gears-spinning-in-brain look on his face.

"Frozen heads, Dad," I said.

"I got the canisters," Dad said.

Yoshii scratched his chin a moment. "Cryogenics?"

"You got it, Yosh," Dad said, leaning forward, hands flat on knees.

"I think I recognize you," Yoshii said. "May have litigated against you oncet or twicet."

"Could be," Dad said. He and I and Mom have lost track of all his lawsuits.

"You was that cinderblock feller," Yoshii said, pointing at him. "With that damn sincere face."

“That’s me,” Dad said, sitting back, now with concern in his voice.

“Bet you could turn shit into gold,” Yoshii said.

“I’ve been known to,” Dad said, smiling, hopeful.

“We could go in together on the Museum of Crime,” Yoshii offered. “Say yes and we’ll pound out the details right now.”

“Yes,” Dad said, now beaming with pleasure. “But you got to help me out with the legal aspects of my frozen head venture.”

Yoshii walked over and shook Dad’s hand with both of his. “Let’s do business,” he said, pulling up an ottoman.

I elected to go outside where my dog stood on the porch, puffing and whining. Mosquitoes lit upon me immediately. I hate business. I’m not too fond of money, which I think should surprise you right about now, now that you know me pretty well. But just because a man hoards something, doesn’t mean he loves it.

I’ll let that sink in while I tell you what I saw next.

I saw my trailer out behind Yoshii’s cypress mansion, all painted up with black and white stripes, like it was wearing a prison uniform. Yoshii must have taped it up carefully because the stripes were perfectly horizontal and all the same size. You couldn’t even tell where I’d put my head through the wall. “Have you been in there since it became the museum?” I asked Beowulf. He jogged over to a bush and urinated on it. I smacked mosquitoes. “I say we go on in there and see what’s what,” I said. I hopped off the porch and strolled toward the trailer, drinking it in. I missed my trailer, suddenly, like it was a dead person. But dead people can come back to annoy you, can they not? Dear dead grandpa is a prime example. And this trailer hadn’t really died; it had become something entirely different. And I liked what it had become, so far.

I walked up the steps—new steps, every other step being either black or white—and pulled the door open slowly. Air conditioning poured out past me. I didn’t even hear it running. Yoshii must have installed it on the other side of the trailer so as to obscure it, I thought. I reached around the corner and felt for a light switch, eventually finding it, and flicked it on. Track lighting

beamed halogenically throughout the trailer revealing newspaper walls that curved up and down, coated with clear shellac. The walls were designed so that someone of normal height wouldn't have to bend over or tilt his or her head up much to read six feet of solid newspaper clippings that ran along all the walls.

In the middle of the trailer was a diorama of the capture of Bill "No Thumbs" Gould at the Five-and-a-Half Corners Five and Dime in Sarasota back in 1937. I pushed a button and tiny Sarasota cops and tiny FBI agents gunned Bill "No Thumbs" Gould down just like they told me it happened in my History of Sarasota junior high history class.

Little voices came out of itty-bitty speakers, too. "You won't get me, G-men!" Tiny Bill bellowed right before they got him. "Argh!" he went afterwards. I think Yoshii used Christmas tree lights for the gun flashes.

I had no doubt that a better sign than the one by the road was in the works. Yoshii was an artistic genius.

My dog scratched at the door. I let him in. He tromped inside, became entirely confused by the changed trailer and ran around in circles, not knowing where to hide. He finally ran toward what used to be my bedroom, where my used-to-be bed wasn't around for him to hide under. Instead, I found what appeared to be a full-sized electric chair with the legend, "Old Sparky" written above it. "That isn't the real 'Old Sparky,'" I said out loud.

"It is," Yoshii said. He'd come up behind me. "They tore it out of the State Penn at Starke last year. I bought it at an auction for a song."

"Incredible," I said breathlessly. I could see the urine stains in it. I could see its age etched into the grain of the chair, into the leather straps, into the thingie they'd put over your head if you were condemned to die. It was imbued with death. I stepped back from it in horror and fear. The back of my neck seized up tight. Eventually, I found I was hugging the wall.

"It's powerful," Yoshii whispered, probably to himself. "It's justice incarnate." He walked over to it, it was lit up with lower

wattage lamps than the newspaper clippings. It was almost subdued, sitting there under sixty watt bulbs. Yoshii ran his hand along the terrible armrest.

I stumbled backing out of the room, tripping over my dog, which could sense my fear, and over my father, who was completely oblivious of anything like fear. I tripped over his feet. He leaned down to me, me all sprawled out on the floor of the Museum of Crime, and he declared, "We're going to make a mint!"

*Yoshii offers a hand up—*

“This is the real Florida,” my father said. “Not like the *fake* Florida you live in, Yankee boy.”

“When did we get separated?” I asked him. “How do we live in two different Floridas?”

“Get up off the floor,” Dad said, not offering a hand. “Where’s Yosh?”

“In there,” I said, pointing toward my old bedroom, “caressing the electric chair.”

“Don’t judge,” Dad said. “It’s not nice.”

I wonder.

What is it about ambitious people that makes them so smug? We all judge, but here’s my father telling me not to judge—which is really a judgment of me, if you think about it.

My father has always considered me lacking, not in the noggin but in the heart. When I was nine, he ordered me out to the Sarasota Little Redskins football league (I played for the Apaches) so I could have the opportunity to learn heart. He sat on the sideline watching me used as a practice dummy, tumbling head over intestines across green, green crabgrass, and never losing my lack of competitiveness. He found it humiliating that I wouldn’t, couldn’t, inflict much of any damage on the other kids for the sake of moving an inflated pig’s hide back and forth across a chalked up field. Most of the other kids on the field were pretending like they were hitting the fathers who had forced them out onto the field when they ran headlong into me, what with all those fathers standing on the sidelines bellowing—save one. After an entire season of this, Dad told me that I didn’t have to go out for

football the next year if I didn't want. I didn't go back out, and that was that, I assumed. But, every once in a while, Dad would bring the whole thing back up as a sort of parable about ambitionlessness. And I would shrug and think about my ribs.

I wondered, as I lounged on the floor of my old trailer, now the Museum of Crime:

What would Dad do if he ever made that mint he kept talking about?

I reflected that I would live to be ninety because I don't live a stressful life. That the curse of fifty wasn't real. That my grandmother is full of hooey connecting dots that don't exist. That if my brother Tom backed her up with statistics, he would turn out to be a bigger fool than he thinks I am.

"Look at *me*," my father said to Yoshii. Yoshii turned his head and stared. "This one can't even manage to pull himself up off the floor. And the other one, jeez! He can't hold a job, for crying out loud. What am I to do?"

"Tain't nothin'," Yoshii said.

Yoshii had drawn road maps all over the ceiling with magic markers. I could see his green and blue and red lines from where I laid. There were bright X's all over the maps, where crimes occurred, I'm sure.

*I'll get up when I'm good and ready*, I thought. *I'll get up when it suits me*. I'm no pantywaist, no yellow belly. I studied the objects in the room good and hard. I thought about the universe, like I saw all things all at once from there on the floor. Thoughts were buzzing through my head like barnstorming biplanes. I thought about waving to each one of the pilots of those papier mache meditation planes, about seeing worn leather helmets and goggled eyes and white-gloved hands.

"Son," Dad said. "We have to go home. Your grandmother's waiting up for you, and for your miserable dog."

"I look like Bob Crane," I said.

"Who's he?" Dad asked.

"Hogan on *Hogan's Heroes*," Yoshii said. He offered me a hand.

*My brother has explained the physics to me—Manhattan—She turned and looked at me with a horrible sad expression on her face*

The ride home featured a lot of bugs splattering all over the windshield and my dog puffing next to my ear. That was it for sound. Dad had decided that I was worthless, again. Such is life.

I like the drive across to Arcadia during the day because of the heat shimmers in the road. They're mysterious, I think. My brother has explained the physics to me time and again, but physics is just as mysterious, if not more so. It sounds magical coming out of Tom's mouth, like strange music, that physics stuff. Last time, when he realized that I still wasn't getting it, just grooving on his spiel, he hummed in exasperation a few bars out of "Modern Major General." He likes Gilbert and Sullivan. We both do. It's something we agree on, that makes the both of us smile.

As we pulled into the driveway, Dad said, "Your grandmom's different, you know."

"I figured she would be," I said.

"She's very different. You can't let on that's she's different, though. It upsets her," Dad said.

"I can't do that."

He stopped the car, turned off the ignition without going into the garage. We were parked on the big concrete apron that surrounds the house. He said, "You're going to have to try."

"No, Dad. I can't be dishonest with her," I said. "She'll know if I'm dishonest with her. I won't, can't, do it."

"She's my mother," Dad said.

“This is my way of being respectful,” I said. “She knows me. She’s the only one of you who really does.”

He directed a strange look my way, then said, “Try.”

“Let’s go inside,” I said, and pushed open my door, which was covered with swamp mud and clumps of ditch grass. “I want to see her.” My dog leapt out the door and chased an armadillo across the lawn until the armadillo ran out of gas and turned on the dog, letting loose a queer hiss. Beowulf yelped, ran back toward me, then a stream of urine poured out of him without his lifting a leg. I shook road fatigue out of my legs, first one, then the other. Beowulf studied me doing this, puzzled at my behavior, then lost interest and attacked the garden hose next to the house. Moths flitted near the dull-lit windows. The air was juicy with pre-thunderstorm moisture.

I opened the backdoor. A familiar sugary scent filled my nostrils. I thought for a moment I was a child again. My mother was bashing a plastic ziplock bag full of icecubes, just like she used to when I was a kid. She’d sit and drink and watch the TV while I cavorted around the yard. I felt the scar on my forehead, and thought back.

When I got home from school that day, I noticed my grandmom’s two wiener dogs slurping out of the Apollo 13 commemorative glass, again. They were standing on their stubby hind legs on the barcalounger, their front paws next to the drink, which was situated on the Map of the World TV tray somewhere near Southeast Asia. Their little tongues worked in tandem, each rhythmically popping up and down into the brownish liquid at the same hurried pace.

They stopped for a moment when I came in the door, and regarded me with their steely dog eyes, before going back to work.

“Mom! I’m home!” I shouted. I dropped my bookbag to the slick linoleum foyer with a thunk. Tom was never home as early as I. He liked school. I couldn’t wait to get away from it.

She came out of the master bedroom in her flowerprint housecoat and pink, push-off slippers.

The two dogs immediately leapt to the floor and curled into balls near the green-cloth easy chair.

“Come give your mother a hug,” she said, unfolding her arms from her chest and spreading them out like she was ready to catch a falling baby.

I walked over to her cautiously, not wanting to upset her because she was in her nightclothes, always a bad sign. “Hi, Mom,” I said.

She pinched my nose and turned my head to the side, then grabbed my ear and kissed my cheek. “Mwah!” she went, letting go.

I could smell a thick, sugary scent on her breath, like a nectarine gone bad.

She trod over to the TV tray. “I don’t remember finishing this,” she commented. “Oh, well.” And she took the NASA souvenir into the kitchen so she could fix herself a fresh one. “Come in here,” she said. “I want to show you something.”

“Can’t I go outside?”

“Get in here, I want to show you this,” she said in her very patient voice. “I’m trying to be nice.”

She had the little silver meat-tenderizing hammer clutched in her hand, her knuckles a little whitish. She had filled a ziplock sandwich bag with blocks of ice, and now, when I got into the room, she lifted the little hammer above her head and brought it down on the bag. It busted open and tiny slivers of ice streaked across the kitchen, some over my head. “This is how we make a drink, make a drink, make a drink,” she sang, then hummed some more of the song under clenched teeth, as she gathered the ice that was left on the counter into a pile, then scooped it up into the palms of her hands. She turned her hands over above the glass and most of the ice clinked in. In the refrigerator she found two bottles—one big, and shaped like a wine bottle, and the other small, like the tabasco sauce bottle except it was a different color. She took out a jar of candy red cherries, poured a little juice from the cherries into the glass between her fingers, which she used like

a strainer, and put the jar down. She tipped some liquid from the little bottle, then the bigger, into the drink, and swirled her index finger around in it. “Done,” she proclaimed. “You know what this drink is called?” she asked, shaking her fingers dry like she was resetting an oral thermometer.

“No, I sure don’t,” I replied.

“It’s a Manhattan, named after part of New York City.”

“Can I leave?”

She sighed and said yes.

Outside, it was a coolish fall day, and crisp for Florida, not quite so damp as usual. I found my frisbee in the back yard, hidden in the tall crabgrass and the cabbage-sized weeds that Dad said he would definitely get around to pulling one of these days. Mom’s theory was that Dad was waiting for the first freeze of the year so he wouldn’t have to. The frisbee was pocked with tiny toothprints, a sure sign that those crummy little dachsunds weren’t just invading my mother’s private space.

I tossed the plastic play disk up into the breeze. It arced up, and stopped for a moment, spinning in place like a plate at the end of a stick. It dropped back down to my outstretched hand. I threw it again, and harder, and again and harder still, but that last harder was just too hard. It went way high and when it came back, it curved over my head and onto the roof.

“Well, that just beats all,” I muttered to myself.

I waded through the grass over to the aluminum ladder that had been tilted against the house in the same place longer than I could remember. Near the top of the ladder, where it leaned against the eaves, was the spot where Dad had given up painting. I could see the last brushstroke clearly, where the old tan gave way to new green. “That stucco sucks up too much paint, see, son,” he explained to me one day. “So I ran out of paint, so I went to the Sherman Williams and they had run out my color, so what was I supposed to do? Right? So I put it on order and they were supposed to call me the minute it came in, but, you know those factories,” he said, and left it at that.

Dad was sure that the “Sherwin Williams” store was named after some guy named “Sherman,” and that there was some sort of typo made and nobody had the guts to say anything to the printer. He assured me that he, my father, was no grim-faced corporate automaton.

I climbed up the ladder, which was nice and steady because it'd had so much time to settle into the ground and wear notches into the side of the house. The world changed slightly when I got up there, so I stopped to admire the view. I could see the neighborhood pond two streets away, and all the fresh cut lawns, and the little neighbor lady feeding the ducks that pecked at each other and beat their wings vying for her moldy crusts of bread. I could see old Charley, the escapee alligator, cruising the pond near the ducks, waiting for one of them to come closer so he could bite it in half, leaving bloody feathers to gather near the edge of the pond.

That Charley always came back no matter how many times the game wardens took him away.

I pulled myself up onto the roof and, leaning against its tilt, stepped carefully over to where my frisbee was. Beside my toy, the roof had bubbled up, and the shingles about stuck into the air. I didn't think it was right, so I stomped on the dome shape. I did not realize that the roof there was rotten.

I dropped through the roof and through the drywall ceiling and landed in the living room next to the oak veneer coffee table, a bucket half-full of water attached to my foot. I was more surprised than hurt, I think.

Mom, reclining in her command chair (that's what Dad called it), did not look terribly surprised. I had caught her in mid-sip, and she finished her swig. She put her glass down on the TV tray and said, “I told him to fix that leak and look what he did. A bucket!” She pushed the lever on the chair down, and the little footstool retracted. “Are you all right, honey?” she asked, getting up.

I thought, *she's not mad, so I better start crying to keep her that way.* Unmad, that is. I wrinkled up my face in a bold effort to cry,

but the tears wouldn't come. Instead, I looked down at the bucket on my foot and began laughing in great snorts. I squished my toes around inside that wet shoe, and howled so hard that the tears did come, and a little mucus out of my nose.

She took this as sad crying, and stepped through the chunks of plaster, drywall, shingles, tar paper, rusted staples, and rotted particle board and hugged me close to her. When she pulled back, I saw a blot of blood stuck to her housecoat like a 2-D tomato. She saw the blood oozing out of my forehead and said, "This'll need stitches. Take your foot out of the bucket, honey."

My frisbee had landed near our feet.

"So this is what you were after. That lazy bum," she declared, picking up the toy. "Oh, sure! I guess I have to leave him a note." She went into the kitchen as I pulled the bucket off my foot. She came back out with the frisbee still in her hand. She had written on it, in black magic marker, "Doug—Took Carl to hospital. Dinner in freezer. Love, Doris." She turned the bucket upside down and placed the frisbee on top of it, and we left.

I thought of Frankenstein's Monster while I was spread across the tissue paper sheet on the clean metal table. Or, I felt like cold cuts at the deli. Maybe the stitches in my head would look like someone had inserted a new brain. Maybe I'd turn green. The possibilities were staggering.

The doctor wore a blue smock and had a mask hanging around his ears. He felt my body up and down, and squeezed my legs hard. His smooth, long hands nearly wrapped around my thighs.

My mother stood nearby in her bloodstained housecoat sucking on a knuckle. "How is he?" she asked, her voice strained.

"Nothing broken as far as I can tell, but we can X-ray him after I put some stitches in his head," said the doctor. He had a pointy beard and bristly moustache wrapped around too-red lips. He put his hand next to my head, his thumb next to my ear, and peeled off the bandages that the attendant in the emergency room had half-circled my head with. "Nice one," he said.

“How many stitches, you figure?” asked Mom. She pulled her coat up around her throat tighter with one hand, and hugged around her waist with the other.

The doctor stared over at her, and regarded her with his medical-school-trained, medical eyes. He stepped over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, his index finger about touching her collarbone. “Were you ever a cheerleader?” he asked solemnly.

“What?”

“Were you ever—”

“No! What are you talking about?” she snapped, her patience jarring loose.

“Nothing,” he said, and picked up a bedsheet with a square hole cut near the top. This he placed over my head. “What you will feel is a needle,” he told me. “Don’t be alarmed.”

And I closed my eyes as the first pinpricks touched me. I drifted off to a leaden sleep.

I woke up in the backseat of the station wagon. A sterile bandage covered over the doctor’s stitchery. “Where are we?” I asked.

“Almost home,” said my mother. She looked back at me and smiled. “You go on back to sleep,” she said. And she turned her attention back to piloting the auto.

I stretched my back, squeaking the vinyl, and tried to close my eyes. It was pitch-black up between the streetlamps. Those lamps cut streaks of lightning in my eyes as we passed beneath them.

At home, not a word was said in front of me. I was stared at by Tom, and by Dad. And I went meekly to bed.

From my bedroom that night, I heard the argument:

“Why’d you let him on the roof?” he shouted.

“I didn’t. You left a ladder next to the house, Dougie-darling,” Mom snarled.

“You’re kidding me, right?” he said, volume boiling down to half-shout.

“Oh, no,” she said, her voice slightly muted, but going in for the kill, “Remember that paint job you meant to finish, and didn’t? Hmm? You didn’t put the ladder away, did you?”

“Well,” said Dad, defeated. “I meant to.”

The next morning I was awakened from a sound sleep by the banging of hammer on roof. My head throbbed and I felt dizzy. Wasn't it a school day? What time was it? I looked out my window and saw that a new day was approaching, stars began to fade. I put on my bathrobe and slippers and went out to the side of the house where the ladder still leaned.

My father was fixing the hole in the roof. He glanced down and saw me standing next to the base of the ladder. “Oh no you don't,” he called down to me. “No more climbing for you!” He clomped down the ladder, and stood next to me. He seemed like a giant to me then, like the kind of man I might want to be.

“What were you doing up on the roof?” asked my father. He was wearing his businessman uniform. He kept a grip on the end of the hammer with one hand. “How many times—” he began, then stopped himself. “Okay, maybe I never told you not to go up on the roof. But, I mean, common sense would dictate, right? Not to?”

“Jeez, Dad. I'm only eight.”

“Sometimes, I think, me too,” he said. He dropped the hammer next to his foot. “Let's go inside.”

And we went inside.

And we made my mother breakfast, as if that would be enough.

And there was Mom, twenty years more or less later, in the kitchen, pounding the shit out of some ice again. I said, “Here I am, out of stir!”

“There you are,” Mom said. She turned and looked at me with a horrible sad expression on her face. She spread her arms out, and dropped the little hammer to the tile floor. “Come give your mother a hug,” she said.

And I did.

*Grandmom Rita has no regrets—They seemed so close to me*

She was over in the corner, sucking on her lower lip. Her teeth weren't in her mouth, and she was all shriveled up.

"You're all shriveled up," I said to my grandmom.

"That's great," she said, and tried to smile through her stroke mask. Only the one side of her face could manage some movement, though. They had her in a wheelchair, and her little arms, which used to hurl knives at incredible velocity, now gripped the armrests weakly.

"You have to admit," I said, walking over to her, "that it was probably worth it."

"What was worth it?" she asked. A little spittle formed on her thin powdery lips.

"The fishing trip," I said, kneeling so I could look her in the eye. "*You're alive in there,*" I whispered to her, seeing the twinkle.

"*Quiet you,*" she whispered back, that little twinkle becoming saline.

I grabbed the arms of the wheelchair near her hands. "That last throw," I said. "That was the throw of your life. My God, I've never seen you throw that hard or that accurate."

"Look at the wall," she said, her cheeks puffing out and sucking in. Her eyes pointed the way.

I turned my head. The big fish was mounted on the wall, complete with knife sticking out of its massive head. A card thumbtacked next to it said, "Get well soon, Cap'n Desmond."

"Oh, man," I thrilled. "The aim!"

"I still got it," Grandmom Rita stated. "But it's all locked up in here." She reached up to tap her head with a shaky little hand.

"I can't be sad over you," I said. "I can't be sad over anyone who has the aim."

"Come here," Grandmom Rita said.

I walked back over to her.

"Lean down," she said.

I leaned down.

"*I know you,*" she whispered.

"*Maybe you do,*" I whispered back.

She reached up and tapped me on the forehead. "Tag," she said. "You're it."

My father said, "That's enough. You both need some rest." He was standing next to my mother in the kitchen, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

"She's been driving me crazy all day," Mom said, swirling her drink with her finger. "She kept asking about that one. But there are always detours when you're driving, Doug. Aren't there?"

"Please, not in front of the boy," Doug said.

"Go ahead," I said. "Don't let me stop you." I departed the room swiftly, and clomped upstairs to the mock up of my boyhood room, leaving Grandmom Rita stuck with my bickering parents.

I'd slept well in jail, but here I didn't know how things were going to go. I felt a thrill of panic race through my chest, and tried to smile, and instead found that my teeth were a-grit. I closed the bedroom door, felt the ten o'clock shadow on my otherwise smooth face. It was dark this room, no moonlight crept in. The room had a deep, corridorlike closet. I felt my way over and opened the closet door and turned on the light in there. The closet was filled to waist high with boxes. I crawled to the back over boxes filled with my boyhood mementos, each marked in my childhood handwriting. I found the box I was looking for and opened it up. Inside was a Chinese junk model that Tom had assembled out of pieces of wood we'd found while floating around on the raft he'd built. I

carefully pushed it aside and found the picture of my grandfather, the last one taken in which he was alive. It was an 8 by 10 glossy black and white of a man and his wife and their little doggies. I blew dust off the gloss and stared at it under the maddening yellow light bulb up above that sent streaks of light across their faces. I tilted the photo. I wanted to see the two of them together and happy, my Grandmom and her paramour. Was he Bohemian? Was that the story? His parents were from overseas, I knew. They were some variety of Austro-Hungarian, running away from Europe's constant wars. And Grandmom, what was she other than circus?

I peered into the faces of the nice married couple. They seemed so close to me. I was stretched out across the boxes. I rolled over onto my back and hugged the photo over my heart, and stared up into that harsh yellow bulb like it was the sun and I was trying to go blind.

## 30

*An arm above the door—What the hell is a “genitive”?*

I awoke the next morning with yellow light in my eyes and the photo still clutched to my chest. I blinked several times, and rolled my eyes over to the box marked “Books!” I put the photo up on a high shelf. I dug through the books box until I found my old favorite, *Beowulf*. Underneath the original Old English was my scrawled translation:

980 Da wæs swigra secg, sunu Ec[g]lafes,  
Then was silent man, son of Ecglaf,

on gylpspræce gu?geweorca,  
in boasting-speech of warlike deeds

sif?an æflingas eorlas cræfte  
since noble warrior’s strength

ofer heanne hrof hand sceawodon,  
over lofty roof hand looked at,

feondes fingras; foran æghwylc wæs,  
fiend’s fingers; before each-one was,

985 sti?[r]a nægla gehwylc style gelicost,  
firm nails’ each steel likest

**hæfenes handsporu hilderinces**  
heathen's claw warrior's

**egl[u] unhearū; æghwylc gecwæ?**  
hateful monstrous; each-one said,

**fæt him heardra nan hrinan wolde**  
that him heard no touch desired

**iren ærgod, fæt ?æs ahlæcan**  
of iron good\*, that the monster's

**990blodge beadufolme onberan wolde.**  
bloody battlehand harm would.

In the margin, I found written in my own childish handwriting, "The genitives are hard to attach to what they are possessing." I thought *What the hell is a "genitive"?*

A kind teacher had lent me the book, knowing my interest in strange fiction, telling me that this was the strangest thing ever written, and one of the first things ever written in what was to become English. This teacher also lent me a Modern English to Old English dictionary. I apparently had never given the two books back.

I thought back.

Those were the days when everyone talked about my *potential*. This teacher also insisted that I get tested for Pine View School for the Gifted, the same place my brother went to school. I went in for a battery of tests, doing well in all of them, I suppose, considering that I made it to the final test—the psychological battery. A nice gentleman wearing scholarly robes and a mortarboard on his head entered the room holding an orange lap dog. The dog was real, but had an unreal air about it, like it was a plush toy. I instantly became obsessed with the dog, kept playing with it instead of talking to the man. He wasn't very interesting, I decided, unlike

this unreal real dog. I finally asked him what kind of dog it was and he told me it was a mutt. He wanted me to tell him what was in some pictures, to make up stories about people in some pictures that he handed me. I wasn't interested. The pictures were boring, I told him, unlike the dog. Now that dog was interesting. It had an interesting tongue with big black spots all over it and an interesting growl that was almost like a real human baby. I told him that.

"Forget the dog," the robed man snapped in exasperation.

The test was all over before I knew it, and I had flunked. We received a letter in the mail to that effect signed by the principal. I shrugged it off, but my mother became obsessed, and finally took me down to the man's office. Pine View was really a bunch of utility buildings, each with names of famous smart people scrawled over the doors. The principal's office was located in "Oppenheimer." I sat in the waiting room, across from a student who was busy chewing gum and reading a book with "Thermodynamics" written in bold print across the cover. *Neat trick being able to chew gum and read physics at the same time* I thought.

I heard my mother arguing with the man, the principal, loudly through the door. Finally, the door flew open. "Out!" he commanded.

My mother backed out of the room, her face set like so.

The principal, a great bear of a man, came striding out toward her. He pointed over at me and declared, "THAT CHILD DOES NOT WANT TO LEARN!"

My mother grabbed my hand and pulled me out the door with her. In the car, she said, "I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of telling him he was right." She glared at me. "But he is right, you know. You have no *gumption*." She said it like there was something wrong with having no *gumption*.

*Bippy eats cow pucky—A long walk—Everything is  
changing too much*

Before I worked at Bill's restaurant, I used to work a graveyard shift at the Waffle House near the interstate. The job and I didn't get along, hours wise. Being an insomniac is one thing, but working a graveyard shift is another. If I couldn't sleep during the night, I sure as hell wasn't going to be able to sleep during the day. And so, one day, I discovered I'd gone sleep driving.

When I awoke, I found myself sitting on a toilet staring down at my beige pants, which were hanging around my ankles like an apron around a Christmas tree. There was a terrible urine scent in the air, and happy tunes were being piped in through speakers in the ceiling. I stood and pulled up my pants. Some graffiti in front of me claimed, "Bippy Eats Cow Pucky." I stepped outside the stall and over to a mirror. There were dark rings around my eyes and deep cuts in my face where I had shaved. The blood running out of those cuts was dark brown and crumbly and streaked down my chin and throat. My hair was wild. I had a five o'clock shadow.

I was in a Stuckey's in North Carolina.

In my car, I found dozens of pecan roll wrappers and crushed, empty pop cans. Apparently, sleep had caught up with me in a dangerous way. I left the stall, stumbled out into the parking lot and started the Torino, and began my journey back to Florida by pulling out in front of a Mack truck. The trucker honked his horn and flipped me off.

No one was up yet, not even Grandmom Rita who had always been an early riser, so I decided to go for a walk. I was

walking toward the Five and a Half Corners, ten miles away from my parents' house, when I was accosted by a Labrador retriever. He was a beautiful dog, and happy, too. He had something to show me, and spat it out on my foot. It was a baby shoe, one of those white, hard numbers that people often bronze. The lab sat down. I guessed what he expected me to do, and I did it. I tossed the shoe as far as I could. He bounded after it and that the end of our transaction.

A little further down the street, I saw a Ford station wagon containing three people: Mom, Junior, and Baby. Junior had the window rolled down in the back seat and was shouting, "Buster! Buster!" He gazed over at me as I walked by. "Have you seen Buster?" he asked me.

I pointed behind me.

"Thanks, mister," he said.

And as the mom turned the car around, I peered into the back seat at the baby's feet. One of them was, indeed, missing a shoe.

Down the street lived Violet McCready and her ex-husband Jimmy, who lived behind the house in a converted garage. Violet had a baby by Jimmy. Jimmy was once in the Peace Corps, but was thrown out after he committed crimes against people he was supposed to be helping. He drove a jeep into this small town and began running over people's houses, just smashing them down. He was a drunk. He is a drunk. He will continue to be a drunk.

Thing is, he and I got along great.

So as I walked down the street toward the house, I kept an eye out for Jimmy. And there he was, on the front porch.

I shambled up and stood next to him. He opened his eyes and stared over at me. "Hey Carl," he said.

"Hey Jimmy," I said, crouching down, hands on knees.

"You want a beer?" he asked, and without waiting for my answer, he opened a small refrigerator next to him and fished out two cold ones.

We lounged on Violet's front porch and sipped cold beers and talked. I told him about the dog and the shoe and he loved it.

He told me all about running over those people's tar paper shacks for the umpteenth time. "Nobody appreciates nothing," he said. "We were helping those poor bastards out but we couldn't get one damn *gracias* out of them."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"I mean, if just one of them would have said hey thanks, that would have done it for me." He paced up and down the porch and got himself another cold one, then sat back down. He sat across from me in a big wicker chair shaped like a satellite dish. In the good times, I'd sit in that chair with huge Trace on my lap and say, "Calling Venus. Venus, come in." That's back when Trace thought that I was a riot, before she decided to sue me and such.

"You were saying," I said. I leaned on the rail surrounding the front porch. The whole house was a tinderbox. Paint flecked into my fingernails.

"So I drove into town," he continued. "Town was full of people, but nobody was in the streets, see." He took an unhealthy long swig of beer. I imagined his liver dancing out of his gut in a St. Vitus' limbo. "I shouted hey you bastards, come on out and give me a kiss!"

"No response?" I asked.

"Not a one," he said, disgusted. He rolled his eyes right then left. "I see ghosts in the corners of my eyes sometimes," he whispered. He pursed his lips. He said, "So I start to knocking down them damn homes. One by one, I just backed into 'em." He made a creaking sound and held his forearm up perpendicular to the ground. He dropped his hand and it smacked his leg. He spat in the corner. "God damned people." He closed his eyes and fell asleep. I watched him sleep for a bit and finished my beer.

I shook him awake. "Hey Jimmy," I said. "Hey, *Jimbo*." That was his real name and the baby's, too.

He woke up and looked at me as if he'd never seen me before. "Woo, shit," he said. "Sparklers."

"Time for me to go, bub," I said. I always tried to be nice to him. He appreciated it, seemed like.

“Time flies,” he said. He dropped his half-empty beer to the porch floor. The thirsty boards sopped up the foam and all.

The sun painted the sky phosphorically with big streaks of purple and orange as it burst over the horizon. I walked from Jimmy’s to State Road 72, then continued on. I was walking toward the Five and a Half Corners section, toward Hux’s Auto Zone. I passed by two nascent golf course communities cutting their way into the hot Florida soil. They were in the first phase of going up, when the scrub palmettos are burnt out of the ground. Big signs announced the intention of the builders. Piles of dead palmettos were stacked on the corners of the properties, like giant burnt cockroaches. The land was scorched. Soon it would be doused with insecticide and covered over with foreign sod, and everything Florida about the land would be expunged. Water hazards would be dug. Homes that looked like boxy pastries would spring up. Oldsters from the north would move in.

These new people, these oldsters, they didn’t like the circus much. A move was afoot by these oldsters to cut the railroad lines coming into town, to pull the railroads up from their roots, so that the circus couldn’t come back for the winter. The oldsters liked this idea. Circus, they said, cheapened their land values. They didn’t move to Sarasota for the circus; they moved here for the sun and golf.

I tried to chase these thoughts out of my head. They were unthinkable, these thoughts. Yet there they were. I stood in front of one of the big signs and stared up at it. It had a map of the proposed neighborhood on it, and proposed prices for the houses, and an outline where the wall and gate would go. It had a medieval look to it, this map, but instead of a castle there was something called “the 19th Hole.”

There would be security guards, too.

The alligators would be extinguished. No old Charleys for these moneyed folk.

Someone’s arm would have to go, I thought. Someone’s arm would have to be yanked out of its body.

I continued on my way. The heat was already beginning to make itself felt. Steam rose up from the soggy roadside ditches. The blacktop emitted heat shimmers. My cook's smock was soaked through by the time I arrived on Hux's doorstep. He wasn't in yet, so I sat down next to his door and waited.

An ancient Volvo pulled up, and out popped my big brother Tom wearing an Auto Zone smock. "Hello, little brother," he said jauntily, strolling up jangling keys in his hand.

"What's this then?" I asked him.

"When was the last time you took a shower?" he asked me.

"Jail," I said.

"Then you better get inside. Hux has a little apartment in the back. You may want to make use of the facilities," Tom said. He had a strange, happy look to him, like a man who may have found a moment of contentment.

He unbolted the door and the bell above our heads ding-a-linged. A cool blast of air conditioning rushed past us and into the outside.

Tom pulled an Auto Zone tee-shirt off a for sale rack and handed it to me. "Wear this," he said.

I took the shirt from him. It was fire engine red with an Auto Zone logo emblazoned on the left breast. I stared at my brother for a moment. But before I could ask him a single question, he waved his hand in front of his nose, then pointed toward the "Employees Only!" door.

After my shower, I dressed and walked back out into the store area. Tom was cheerfully waiting on a customer. After the customer departed, I said, "What the hell?" and threw up my hands.

"I'm a fifty percent owner of this store," Tom said.

"What?"

"I've always venerated cars. You know that, oh my little baby brother," Tom said. He tapped his well-manicured hands on the countertop.

"When?" I asked him.

"Oh, last night. Seems Hux is out in Vegas with some floozy he met yesterday and needed some working capital to make the

trip back here. And here I am with all this extra cash from my severance package from that very large insurance corporation in Tampa whose name will go unsaid," Tom said. "Of course, he wanted a loan, and that was out of the question."

"But you have keys! And a smock?"

"And Hux leaves his residential key under the doormat," Tom said. "My Lilliputian partner is going to have to think more about security. Keys under the mat, for heaven's sake! This won't do! And did you see that copper-plated, brass lock he has on the front door of this place? Where did he get that? Dad?"

"Um," I went.

"Um, indeed," Tom said. He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Yes, things will change around here. Proper bookkeeping procedures will be employed. A service garage will be installed. And Volvo parts will be ordered."

"You look happy," I said.

"You sound disappointed that I look happy," Tom said happily.

"Everything is changing too much," I said.

"Good thing, too," Tom said.

*Hitchhiking to work—Dottie and Hux had run off together*

I left Tom in the store and walked myself down the road toward work, another two miles. Smiling Tom! It was unnatural, is what it was. He was ruining everything. Him, and everyone else who was changing right before my eyeballs.

About a quarter mile into my trip, I decided to thumb a ride, which you probably think is a mistake if you watch too many real life TV shows wherein madmen pick people up and hack them to death for sport. I don't watch those shows, but I've seen the commercials for them. It's more stuff not to think about, if you ask me. I managed to thumb a ride with a guy who was returning to Alaska, to working in the oilfields. He was the cleanest shaven man I'd ever seen in my life, not a spot of hair on him, including eyelashes—and he smelled like baby shampoo and clove cigarettes. He said, "I'm so glad to be leaving Florida I could shit."

"I can imagine," I said. I like to humor the people I catch rides with just in case they turn out to be the same as the monsters from real life TV.

"I mean, where the hell are the whores? You tell me, pal. Where the hell are the whores?"

I shrugged. I really don't know where the whores are, and I'm not likely to in the future.

"How's a man supposed to live?" he asked me. "I mean, there're no jobs here for a *man*, are there? Just little sissy-shit jobs like cooking in restaurants and otherwise serving the goddamned elderly, who run this shithole state. Am I right?"

I threw up my hands and did a little hurky-jerky motion with my head, which might have been shaking my head yes, and might have been shaking my head no.

"I completely agree with you, pal," he said, and stomped on his brake right in the middle of Beneva Road, which was, as usual, under construction. We slid across freshly laid blacktop until we came to a stop almost in the drainage ditch by the side of the road. "This is it, pal," he said. "The end of the road."

I thought sure he was going to kill me, until I saw the Buy and Bye out his driver's side window. I tipped my nonexistent hat at him, pushed open the door, and fell out into the drainage ditch. The drainage ditch was dry and weedy.

"Take care, pal!" he shouted, then sped off with his door swinging open.

I stood up and dusted the weeds off myself. A dragonfly lit upon my arm, then took off and splattered on the headlight of a purple Pontiac Sunfire hatchback. The backbreeze from the speeding car felt good. I traipsed across the street and on into the store while Mr. Cheese Whiskers Bill had his back turned.

I worked a full eight-hour shift without seeing Dottie once.

She was *sooo* fired, according to the lady who replaced her, who had chrome-like hair that glittered under the not-so-hot heatlamps mounted on the white plastic counter. Yesterday's counter had been sold, apparently. The heatlamps cost \$19.99 plus applicable sales tax.

I figured, while I cooked, that Dottie and Hux had run off together. I wasn't far off, as it turned out.

*The happy couple returns—Little snuggle bunny*

I entered the steamy outdoors through the big glass double doors coated with perspiration like a frosty glass of Coca-Cola, and snuck on past Bill, who was busy being kicked at by four teenagers wearing identical, fancy, electric-blue jumpsuits, I walked smack into Dottie and Hux. Dottie waved her ring finger at me, which had a ring on it. The ring looked to be a wedding-type ring, except the stone was sapphire. Or maybe plastic.

“What do you think, huh?” Dottie asked me.

“I thought you were already married,” I said.

“I was, and am,” Dottie exclaimed happily, then leaned down and grabbed poor little Hux around his little head. He was all sunburnt—not a good condition for him to be in.

“Las Vegas,” I said.

“He run off, my husband,” Dottie said. She was wearing a low-cut dress that was composed of patches of differently colored cloth. Looking at the dress was like looking into a kaleidoscope. Her hair was dyed jet black. She may have been getting ready to star in a remake of “Touch of Evil” as the Marlene Dietrich character for all I knew. She slanted her eyes down at Hux, who seemed unreasonably happy. Some baby powder from Dottie’s cleavage was smudged on his nose. “My *ex*-husband, that is.”

“It happened so quick,” Hux said.

“Look at my little snuggle bunny,” Dottie said, and she wrapped herself around him again, much to his delight. I could hear him giggling through her multicolored dress as she pressed her big

breasts into his face again and rubbed the back of his head like he was her favorite toy poodle.

"You sold Tom half your business," I said.

"Is that what he said?" Hux said, after Dottie released him.

"That's what he said," I said.

"We're gonna make a go of it," Dottie said. "Me and my little precious." Her hand was on the back of his head, caressing it. Hux leaned into her. It was kind of sickening.

"I guess if Tom said it, it must be true," Hux said. "You need a ride back to your parents' place?"

"I guess I do," I said.

"C'mon then, Carl," Dottie said. Hux turned away and headed out into the parking lot. Dottie didn't move, just winked at me then reached up and touched my lips with the tip of her index finger. Her nails were glued-on, long, blood-red talons.

We stood frozen like that for a moment, our eyes locked. She was sad.

"Let's go!" Hux shouted from the beginning of the parking lot.

She turned and ran toward him. "Coming baby!" she shouted.

In the car, Dottie did most of the talking. She said:

"So, did you know that Bert Bacon has most of his stores bugged? Did you? He sure does, and he heard me talking about my husband, that rat, and how he was stuck in the hospital and all that. Bert Bacon wears these headphones, I guess, and he can switch from department to department like switching channels on the TV. I think he's a little paranoid, maybe. But his heart's in the right place! He heard about my husband, my *ex*-husband, and went with his entourage right on down to the hospital and paid off all our medical bills right then and there. It was like a miracle, or something. Then he handed my husband, my *ex*-husband, a big old giant check while some folks from his publicity department took pictures. The nurses, they were all excited. Especially one nurse who'd been giving my husband, my *ex*-husband, sponge baths and all. Well, you can guess what a man like my husband,

my *ex*-husband, would do with a whole big ton of money like that. That's right, you guessed it! He run off to Vegas with that nurse!

"I don't suppose it makes sense for good people like you and me to suffer like we suffer, but you have to trust in the Lord our God to provide, and that's what He did all right, in spades."

She stopped and took a breath. Then:

"By the time we got to the hospital, it was all over but the shouting. And boy howdy did I shout! I shouted at the top of my lungs at every nurse and doctor and hospital administrator in sight when they told me what happened. And my little angel here come to the rescue, didn't you pudding? You sure did! Why I bet you just dropped from heaven instead of being born like actual people, didn't you? Didn't you pudding? He is the sweetest man I ever run into. The moment I stopped shouting at everybody, he offered to fly me out to Vegas, to go track down my husband, my *ex*-husband, and put an end to his spending spree and get some of that money for my ownself so maybe I could start up a nice little country kitchen of my own. Didn't you pudding? Didn't you?"

She mussed his hair while he was driving.

She turned around and stared right at me now, like she was confessing to a priest. "Not an untoward thought in his body, this one doesn't have. He was like a knight in shining armor, and had only known me maybe three hours at the most, but that didn't stop him from pitching in, did it? No sir! So we booked two seats to Vegas and flew on out there without an idea of how we were going to find my skunk husband, my skunk *ex*-husband, and get that money out of him."

She turned back around and moved across the seat to snuggle up next to Hux. She pressed her big red lips on his burnt neck and sucked hard.

"Oww!" Hux went.

"Sorry, sugar dumpling," she said.

"So you flew off to Vegas," I said.

“We surely did! On the way there, there was a scary moment when a big old tornado or something was whooshing up all round the plane and we bounced and I got scared, but not my little man, so sir! He don’t scare. He held me tight and cooed to me and made me feel better, and after we landed we headed off for the strip and drove around in a rental car for maybe half the day, scanning around looking for my husband—”

“—your *ex*-husband,” I interjected.

“Right as rain,” Dottie said. “And then we found him just as he was losing his last ten dollars playing blackjack with that hussy nurse standing right next to him looking over his shoulder like some gangster’s girlfriend from the late, late show. Sugar pie tried to pick a fight with him, but there was no fight left. He said to Hux, he said, ‘If you want her, she’d all yours,’ referring to me and not his nurse friend. So we all went off to Mexico and me and my-my *ex*-husband got divorced. Then we all drove back to Vegas and got married in like a double ceremony. The end.”

“You forgot the part about the rental car getting stolen in Mexico,” Hux said.

“That’s not so important, sugar plum,” Dottie said.

“Maybe not to you,” Hux said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dottie shouted.

“Nothing,” Hux said, and reached over at her.

“Don’t touch me!” Dottie shouted, and pushed herself back over to the other side of the car.

“So where will you honeymoon?” I asked.

“Nowhere if he doesn’t get his attitude straight,” Dottie said.

“The Keys,” Hux said. “It’s full of lunatics, but the snorkling’s okay”

“I never been to the Keys,” Dottie said. She scooted back over to Hux and kissed him above the hickey she’d created for my benefit.

“Stick with me, baby,” Hux said, piloting the car into my parents’ neighborhood.

*Blame—The reflection I caught was frightening*

I met Hux in junior high school.

Hux sat next to me in Mr. Bight's first period Junior Chorus Class. Mr. Bight asked each one of us to stand up and explain why we wanted to be in the class. "I like to sing," said Hux, when he stood up. We were sitting in the tenors' row. Behind us were the altos and sopranos.

I joined the class because I'd heard that the chorus had gone on a trip to Czechoslovakia the year before. My dad kept telling me that we were Czechs—Bohunks, he called us—and he said that my great-great-etc-grandfather was a famous Bohemian general who had invented camouflage and had his eye poked out. "Good Old One Eye" is what his men called him," said Dad. Before the Second World War, the future communists built a statue of him. Then the Nazis tore it down. Then the communists became communists and put the statue back up, and built a huge, ugly mausoleum to keep famous communist corpses in. A concrete recreation of "Good Old One Eye" was outside sitting on his horse next to a cannon, protecting all those dead guys. I wanted to see that.

"I like to sing," I said when I stood up, and sat down.

"I like to sing, I like to sing!" sang Mr. Bight. "You already sound like a chorus." Mr. Bight was not a happy man. He'd shaved his head bald like Kojak and wore a dark suit from the 1960's. Jack Webb could have worn that suit. He looked at us as if we made his teeth hurt.

An aroma like burning socks and pickles filled the air. Mr. Bight tapped a blonde, wooden stick on his black, metal podium

which was stamped with: "PROPERTY OF BROOKSIDE JUNIOR HIGH. DO NOT REMOVE."

"La la la la, la la la la, laaaaah!" sang Mr. Bight in his gigantic, baritone voice.

We all looked at each other, confused.

"Sing after me," he said. Then he sniffed the air and ran to the back of the room where the emergency fire exit was. He pushed the door ajar and revealed two of the big kids smoking pot. The fire alarm went off and we all had to file out to our assigned positions in the middle of the football field, under the legend: "Brookside Junior High School. Home of the Fighting Barracudas." There was a frightening-looking fish professionally painted next to that, and an unprofessional bubble coming out of its mouth that said, "Holy shit, I'm a giant turd!"

Kippy Watson told me that my soul came pouring out of my eyes like water out of a firehose. She wanted to me drop acid with her and talk to her lifesize black velvet portrait of Jimi Hendrix. "Jimi answers all questions, big and small," Kippy told me. We were in Mr. Forest Rogers' American History class. Everybody called him "Trees."

Trees was telling us about the American involvement in China during the early 1900's. "Apparently, some people don't care about our history. Apparently, some people think they can talk all the way through class," he said.

Kippy said, "Sure, Trees. You bet."

It was a badge of honor to get detention, but Trees never gave it out, knowing this. "Don't smart off to me, young lady," he said. He had a little dog named Bippy that he sometimes brought to class with him and put up on the podium. The dog was brown and threadbare. It shivered and sometimes let out a tiny yip.

Trees had a head that was as square and solid as a block of granite.

"What're you going to do, Trees?" a punk near me asked.

Trees wouldn't lower her grade because getting a "D" was considered a mark of distinction, and getting an "F" made you a folk

hero. "Maybe I'll give her extra credit work to do," said Trees. He was pretty as a purple mountain's majesty, and had long, flowing hair that cascaded down his back when he unknotted his ponytail. Some of the girls were in love with him, which made the guys want to kill him, or at least pour sugar in his gas tank, or rig M-80's up in his desk.

Trees would say, "I know all of you by sight."

And, "I have a fingerprinting kit. Watch out."

Kippy wasn't in love with Trees, though. She was four foot two and weighed seventy-eight pounds. Kippy was in love with Hux, my best friend. He was too cute to talk to, she said. She wanted to run her fingers through his sparkly red hair, and kiss his tiny, pink lips. I think she hoped I'd mention this to Hux in English class, or during lunch hour, when we sat together inside the school cafeteria and ate out of our brown bags.

Trees went back to teaching, and we went back to talking. "Do you really drop acid?" I asked her.

"All the time," she said. She opened up her Sinatra Family notebook and pulled out a piece of paper full of squiggly lines. Her hands were covered with rings out of gumball machines. The gold paint flecked off them, and I could see the white plastic underneath. "I drew this last time I dropped acid," she said. "It's a picture of Jimi's soul."

She must have drawn it with one of those pens that had four ink cartridges.

"That's what a soul looks like?" I asked.

"That's what Jimi's soul looks like," she said. "Yours is completely different."

"What about Hux's soul?"

"It's bright orange and green," she said. "Like a pumpkin."

Hux had second period gym and, because he was small, he had to run for it when the bell rang. The gym coach, Mr. Withy, had painted a huge white line where his responsibilities ended and others' began. "When that bell rings," he told all his classes, "you're on your own." One of his legs was shorter than the other

due to a college football injury. He liked to play foursquare with the kids and wing the ball as fast as he could. "Bruises make the man," he was fond of saying.

Hux had to stand right on the line, his bag slung over his shoulder, waiting for the bell to ring. The big kids would stand a few paces behind because that was sporting. When the bell rang, Hux would take off running. So would the big kids. If they caught him, they would pound the daylights out of him.

I'd like to say that this experience made Hux so fast that he became an All-State track athlete, but that would be lying. There's only so fast a guy the size of Hux can go. He was often caught halfway between the gym and the English classroom, and beaten with fists and feet. He'd curl up into a ball and eventually even the meanest guy would have to stop kicking and get on with the rest of the day's atrocities, like shoving little kids' heads in toilets, and tossing them into mud puddles.

Hux begged me not to help him. "I must try to be a man," he said, all bruised up.

I was standing in the doorway to the English classroom when I saw Hux huffing his way toward me. The big kids were losing ground, and a couple dropped out of the race, probably due to heavy smoking. I held the door open for him so he wouldn't have to slow down, or get caught trying to open it. He zipped past me and into the classroom with one of the big kids on his tail. The big kid stopped in front of me and peered around. "See you tomorrow, champ!" he called, and went on his way.

I went in and sat in the desk next to Hux.

"I live to see another day," said Hux, puffing and red.

"Kippy Watson has the hots for you," I said.

He gasped in for a second. "Not Kippy the Hippie," he said.

"The one and only."

He plunked down in the seat across from me. "What did she do? Read her tarot cards and decide that my moon's in Venus, or something?"

"Hey," I said. "A girl's a girl. Be thankful, dumbass."

He looked up at the acoustic ceiling tiles. "Thank you, God."

Mr. Sciezka's voice boomed over the loud speakers. "Dean of Students, here," he said. "Fourth period classes are cancelled due to a pep rally. All students must attend. I say again, attendance is mandatory. That is all."

"My life's a living hell," said Hux, full of dread.

And Mrs. Mancini, our English teacher, gave Hux detention for swearing in class.

The pep rallies were always announced the period beforehand so none of us could plan something awful for during them. We all dutifully filed into the gym under the watchful glare of Mr. Withy, who never let his guard down even for a second. He said he could hear us whispering during health class about how we were going to get him and make him pay. He knew us, he told us. He knew us better than he knew the terrain of his wife's body. A lot of the films he showed us had to do with acne and its prevention and treatment. "Masturbation!" he'd shout during those oozing, puss-drenched films.

Once the entire student body was jammed in the gym, Mr. Sciezka walked up to the lonely microphone planted in the middle of the barracuda's eye. "Stop that," he said in a dull monotone. "You know what I'm talking about. Don't try to look innocent."

Hux was looking all around, trying to figure out where the next threat to his life would come from.

"Let's give a hand to the cheerleaders," droned Mr. Sciezka. The microphone rang shrilly, causing him to back up a step and look at it.

The cheerleaders ran out and did backflips and splits. The big kids yelled, "Take it off, bitch! Take it off you little whores!"

Mr. Withy, who was always at a slow boil anyway, exploded in rage. He ran to the microphone and pushed Mr. Sciezka out of the way. "You want to go back to class? Huh? Is that what you want? Because we can send you there right now! You hear me? Either applaud, or keep quiet, or it's back to class."

He stepped away from the microphone. Somebody behind me coughed into a fist. A little kid sniffled five rows down.

The cheerleaders did that two bits, four bits cheer and then asked everybody who was for the Barracudas to stand up and holler.

At first, there was nothing but silence. “Yay,” muttered a guy behind me. Someone else dropped a pencil under the bleachers, and it pinked against the metal supports as it dropped down below us.

“You know, you all should show some support,” said Missy Watson, Kippy’s sister and the head cheerleader.

“Take it off,” said Johnnie Lee Levitt, head tough guy, and head banger.

“Screw you,” said Missy, who seemed a lot more mature than just thirteen. She could have been a waitress at Bob and Edith’s Diner, by the look of her.

“Come and try me, baby,” said Johnnie Lee Levitt. His hair was as big as a bush, and black as Joey Ramone’s, and he was dressed just like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. Sarasota was always ten years behind the times. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with a Bic Clic.

“I wouldn’t touch you—” she said, hands on hips.

But Mr. Sciezka ran up behind her and clapped his hand over her mouth. She was an honor student and he would have none of that trash talk out of her.

Mr. Withy waded up through all the kids—who had by this time gone berserk—and snatched the cigarette out of Johnnie Lee Levitt’s mouth and stuck it in his own. He grabbed Johnnie by his white, polyester collar and dragged him out of the gym. “Rock and roll!” shouted Johnnie, stumbling after the angered coach. He was doing that thing with his fingers that is supposed to look like devil’s horns.

“Go to lunch!” shouted Mr. Sciezka over the noise, his hand still tightly gripped around Missy’s mouth. “Go on! Get out of here!” And the mob scene struggled to the outside and on down the sidewalks between all the buildings that composed our school.

Before I entered the lunchroom, I felt a pull at the seat of my pants, and turned around. I thought a girl had pinched my butt,

and I planned to thank her for it. Instead, it was one of the big kids, and he was holding a pair of pliers in his hand. The orange Levi's tag from my back pocket was gripped in its teeth. "I got it now," he said, and took off running.

"What did he do that for?" I asked Hux.

"The word is that if you get eighteen of those, they give you a pair of jeans free," said Hux.

"Drag," I said, suddenly lamenting the loss of the little tag.

Hux turned around. "They already got me," he said, waving his tiny bottom at me.

"Got the point, got it," I said.

We pushed through the side entrance of the lunchroom, the non-lunchline side. The lunchroom was already packed, except for the middle table where only the toughest kids sat. It was self-segregating. All the black kids sat on one side, and all the white on the other. The least threatening kids sat as far as they could from the center. There were five long tables stretching across the lunchroom, all parallel to each other. The middle table was always a toss up. Whoever got there first, white or black, could claim bragging rights for the day.

Augustus Hightower was the first big kid to come into the room. A hush fell over us for a moment. Hux and I sat down on the farthest edge of the far table and watched. Augustus was thirteen-years-old and five foot ten inches tall. He shaved. He was wearing flared designer jeans and a silk-type shirt depicting a riverboat. His head glittered with afro-sheen and his eyes sparkled with malice. A tiny, black hand rose out of his back pocket, which was probably attached to an angel food cake cutter, as my mom liked to call those combs.

Augustus walked along the lunchline staring out at all his lessers. They parted before him, black and white alike, as he carried his green tray along the line collecting spoon after spoonful of inedible food from the disinterested lunch ladies whose hands and heads were wrapped in clear plastic. He nodded to a couple of his lieutenants, who got up from one of the safe tables and moved to

the middle one. Augustus sat between them, and began to carefully examine his meal with the tines of his fork.

Johnnie Lee Levitt came in after Augustus, picked up a fork, and walked over to the table. He stood across from Augustus, on the white side of the room, and was clearly in a bad mood. "You're in my seat, *nigger*," he said.

"What you talking about, you crackerass motherfucker?" said Augustus. He placed his palms flat on the table and slowly rose to his feet.

The white kids stood up.

The black kids stood up.

Johnnie stuck the fork through Augustus' hand, pinning it to the table like a butterfly. Augustus shrieked in rage, and soon food and utensils were being exchanged in a wild barrage. When the heavy weaponry came out—knives, chains, and straight razors—Hux and I stood up and ran out the door. We abandoned our lunches, which for me was just as well, considering that mine contained a cold leftover spamloaf sandwich. Others, both black and white, also abandoned the lunchroom, and many of us found ourselves in the place we were trained to go to in case of emergency—the football field.

Kippy ran up to Hux and me. She made Hux look tall, even in her clear, Plexiglas high-heels. She was wearing a peasant dress, but didn't look at all poor. "Come on," she said. "Let's go."

Mr. Sciezka's voice boomed out over the school, we could hear it even in full gallop. I had to keep slowing down for the two tiny people. I had to fight the urge to put one under each arm and run. The voice urged calm. "We know who to blame," the voice said. "We are rounding up the usual suspects."

We stopped running when we got to Bee Ridge Road, and casually walked up to a bus stop. An orange and white SCAT bus stopped. We dropped the exact change into the little hopper and sat down. The only other passenger on the bus was an old man wearing Bermuda shorts and a golf shirt. "I'm not an actor, but I play one on TV," he said, then chuckled to himself.

We got off the bus five stops down and walked the rest of the way to Kippy's house. She lived on a six-acre estate secluded in the woods away from all the busy traffic on Bee Ridge. The house was huge, hidden between trees and shrubbery that resembled farm animals. One was a cow, another a chicken. A small pond was behind the house. A small, wooden pier jutted out into the pond.

Kippy took off her heels and shrank another six inches. She walked in front of Hux, who was now a full head taller than her. Hux turned his head toward me and smiled strangely. I thought for a second that he was full of static electricity and that if I touched him I would be electrocuted.

We walked in circles around the estate single file along a narrow dirt path. "What's with all the farm animals?" I finally asked.

"What farm animals?" asked Kippy.

"The shrubs," I said.

"They're not farm animals, Carl. They're circus animals. My dad's a supervisor for circus operations in Sarasota."

"So what's that cow supposed to be?" I asked.

Kippy stopped walking and stared at it. We stopped behind her. "Lion, I guess."

We followed her up to the house. She opened a bank of sliding glass doors. "Dad? Dad?" she called. "Good, he's not here," she said. The room we entered was as big as a basketball court. You could have set hoops up at both ends and played. The mantle looked like an avalanche of boulders with a fireplace hole cut into it. Ceramic circus clowns danced on top. An Emmett Kelly original painting hovered above them. The walls were shod in posters. Elephants danced while girls in tights spun impossibly above them. A man in a tuxedo and top hat shouted into a bullhorn. The walls sang sweet circus dreams to me, a bullwhip here, a performing seal there, and there was my Grandmom Rita and the dogs, and clowns all around.

"I know," said Kippy. "Gross, right?" She was behind the bar, mixing up some drinks.

Hux hoisted himself onto a stool while Kippy poured various liquids into a blender.

I walked around the room and allowed it to dazzle me. I touched the bullwhip and the frames around the posters. I couldn't imagine living this close to it all.

Hux said, "His grandmother was in the circus. That's her right there."

"Oh," said Kippy. She disappeared into her room, and came out a minute later with three postage stamps. She handed me one that had a picture of Mickey Mouse on it. Mickey's eyes spun round. "Lick it," she said.

Hux licked his. Kippy licked hers.

"Here goes," I said. I licked mine.

Kippy poured our drinks out in frosty beer mugs she retrieved from below the counter.

"Nothing so far," said Hux.

"You have to wait," said Kippy. She sipped some of her drink.

I lifted my mug up to my nose. The smell was familiar. "What is this?" I asked her.

"It's called a Manhattan," she said.

One of the ceramic clowns asked the time. "I don't have a watch," I said.

"So what?" said Kippy.

A few minutes later, I stuck my hand through the counter and touched a squirming fish. "There's a fish in your counter," I said. "Reach down and touch him."

We all touched the fish.

"There's a lesson in this," said Hux.

Kippy was in her room. We could see her through the wall. "She's talking to Jimi," I said.

"Jimi's playing the guitar," said Hux.

And so he was.

Outside, the sun turned on and off. God was up to His little tricks. The sun was gone. The shrub lion mooded. "I knew it," I said.

"What?" asked Kippy. She was sitting under the avalanche of rocks. I dove down and saved her. "Your soul burned a hole in my

skin," she said. There was a round hole in her arm. "Careful, careful," she said.

Hux cried. "The cars. They're alive, man. They're on their rubber feet, and they dance and live and are warm. But we kill them, they die when we turn them off." He wept. His tears formed a river that flowed out to the Gulf of Mexico. "Cold," he said.

We decided to go swimming. We took off our clothes and were naked. Air particles touched us, prickled every square millimeter of our bare skin. We joined arms and formed a triangle. We waded into the water. The water slept around us, it didn't know we were there.

I was standing next to a tree near Bee Ridge Road, stark naked and covered with tiny cuts that stung. "Oh my God," I said. What if my mother found out? I put my hands over my tiny penis and ran back toward Kippy's house. My mind raced furiously. Where exactly was the house? It was dark. Twigs snapped under my feet, and rocks dug into them. I saw lights up ahead. I lost my balance and regained it.

Every light in the house was on. I went around the house to the back, where the pond was. *Something about the pond?* I found my clothes back there mixed in with Kippy's and Hux's. Her little dress was picked up by a gust of wind and blown a few feet away. I put on my underwear, and pants. I put my socks on backwards, but got my shoes on the right feet. I tugged my tee-shirt over my head. I tried to tie my shoes, but couldn't remember how.

I picked up as much of Hux's clothes as I could find, and chased down Kippy's dress.

I could see people moving around in the big room. I stumbled up to the plate glass window, and was amazed by what I saw inside. Johnnie Lee Levitt was kissing Missy. They were rolling around on the couch, and one of Johnnie's hands was up underneath Missy's micro-cheerleading skirt, yanking down her panties. I could see it all. His other hand was over the "B" in "Brookside." I turned away from the window, and blinked my eyes. I touched the wall. The wall was real. I looked back inside. They were still in there, still doing the same thing. Johnnie's cuff was bloody. He had

Missy's panties around her knees now and was trying to unzip his pants with one hand, and not very successfully, while jamming his tongue into Missy's mouth.

I turned away from the scene, and ran around the side of the building, trying to remember which room was Kippy's, and hoping that she and Hux would be in there, and not out in the woods.

The ground rose up and smacked me in the jaw. I got back up on my feet. I grabbed a windowsill and chin-upped. The room was dark. I ran to the next. I chin-upped again. I saw Jimi Hendrix floating purple on the wall. He was almost playing his guitar. Down below him I saw, through dim light, Hux and Kippy. They were seated facing each other, the soles of their tiny bare feet touching, their hands joined. I banged on the window, lost my grip, and fell on the dewy grass. I pulled myself back up. They were still in the same position. "Hey," I shouted. Neither moved.

A pair of headlights illuminated a giant sheep near the window I was hanging from. My hands were empty. I didn't remember what I did with all the clothes. I must have dropped them, I thought.

Keys jangled. The front door clunked. There was no saving anybody now, I thought. Except me. I ran off toward Bee Ridge Road through the trees.

"Mom," I said. I was at the Gate Food Post near Kippy's house. My voice shook uncontrollably, as did the hands I had wrapped around the pay phone. A bum nearby was throwing up on the side of the building. I felt sick.

"Is that you, Carl?" she asked. "Where have you been? Where are you? Are you all right? You didn't get hurt in that riot, did you? It's been on the news all night! Where are you? Tell me you're not hurt!"

"I'm fine," I said. I told her where I was.

"What're you doing way out there? Why didn't you call before now? We have the police out looking for you, you know that? Your father is very upset. Here, talk to him. I'm coming to get you. Don't hang up," said Mom.

“Hi,” said Dad.

“Hi, Dad,” I said.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said.

“*Hardcastle and McCormick* just ended. You missed a good one,” said Dad.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Well,” he said.

“Um,” I said.

“Goodbye,” said Dad. And he hung up.

I put the phone back in its cradle, and walked over to the plate glass windows surrounding the convenience store. The reflection I caught was frightening. Spider webs hung off my uncombed hair. My torn shirt was half-tucked in. Tiny cuts bled on my arms and face. This would be hard to explain, but not impossible.

I wondered how Hux and Johnnie would fare. They were in the same boat, and that boat, by this time, had sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Drowning, drowning, oh!

The sidewalk surrounding the Gate Food Post wobbled down under my feet and changed color. It went from white to black. It was a trampoline! I stopped shaking and started bouncing. The first jump got me as high as the roof before I drifted back down. I flexed my knees, allowing the trampoline to fully dimple downward before my next jump. I timed it perfectly. I vaulted up into the air and closed one eye, soaring above the store, over the roof. I spread my arms apart, and formed a cross like I was almighty Jesus. “Scuse me, if I kiss the sky!” I sang. I was the one-eyed human cannonball, flying up to feel the face of God.

*Beer nuts and diet Pepsi—Fifty Candles*

“I brought some beer nuts and diet Pepsi for the party. Do you think that’s enough?” asked Dottie.

The light changed. We drove past some fat girls. I could see them out of the corners of my eyes. “What party?” I asked.

“Your dad’s pre-birthday party and extravaganza,” Hux said. “Didn’t your parents tell you?”

“No,” I said.

“Do you think they’ll like what I brought? This is my first time meeting them, and Hux says they’re like his own parents.”

“Dad will thank you,” I said.

When we got to the house, I spotted the Buick Roadmaster in the driveway. Next to it was my brother, who was painting something on the side. Hux parked the car up on the grass, a habit Dad likes because he figures it kills off the grass and then he doesn’t have to mow it.

“Hey, Tom!” I shouted. I got out of the car. “What’re you painting there?”

“Little brother. Huxley,” he said. “And Hux’s wife. Come take a look.”

Hux and I and Dottie got out of the car. We walked over as a threesome.

Tom was finishing up the “g” in “Doug.” “It’s going to read: ‘Doug’s Construction. You Bet We Can Build It!’” said Tom. He was wearing a long-sleeved Cub Scouts shirt and khaki trousers. He wiped his pale forehead with the freckled back of his hand. He had a wolf and a bear patch on the shirt. “I am parched.”

Dottie went to the car. She fished a cold diet Pepsi out of the red cooler, closed it, and brought the can to Tom. He popped it open and took a swig. "Beer nut?" asked Dottie. She shook the can at him.

"Better save them for the *pater familias*," he replied, and went back to painting.

"Oh, the baby!" shouted Mom from the front porch. She was wearing her tan housecoat and a pair of flip-flops. Her once blonde hair was up in rollers, and her face shined with petroleum jelly. "Come here," she said, waddling out toward us.

She threw her arms around me and kissed me on the chin. She regarded Hux and Dottie. "Oh, hi Dottie," said Mom in a more subdued voice. "You are Dottie, aren't you? How are you? How old are you?"

"I'm—"

"That's nice. I see you brought your little love child, hmm? And how is the little love child doing," she said, tickling Hux's chin.

Hux displayed the same excitement he always did with Mom. And standing there together were Mom and Dottie with their dyed hair and outlandish costumes, and I saw what may have been Hux's inspiration for marriage.

"Come on in," she said. "You, too, Tom. It's almost time for dinner, and I've made something special, this being a theme night and all."

Tom shot me a terrified glance. "I think—"

I grabbed him by the collar. "No, no," I told him. "Come in and enjoy the hospitality just like the rest of us."

"But the paint—"

"No squirming out of this one, my big brother." I turned to Hux and said, "You always *liked* my mother's cooking, didn't you?" Actually, no one but my father liked my mother's cooking. Hux pretended to like it as a child because he had a crush on my mother, which I suppose I will never forgive him for. We followed Mom into the house.

We could hear the dog barking around in there with my Grandmom Rita. “Get your bunny, honey!” shouted Grandmom. “Go on, Doris, get the damn bunny!”

“Will you quit calling that stupid dog Doris!” shouted Mom. “You know very well that’s my name, and I’m not sharing it with a big slobbery dog.”

“Don’t get yourself in an uproar,” said Grandmom Rita.

My big chicken dog growled with a fuzzy pink stuffed rabbit clutched in his mouth. He hopped around, smashing the rabbit on the floor. Dad had surgically removed the squeaker in the rabbit at my mother’s request.

I kissed Grandmom on the forehead. She had perked up somewhat from the day before, was almost her old self. “Oh, it’s you, Carl. Mr. I-Can’t-Hold-A-Job is here! Mr. County Lockup is here! Three cheers for the prodigal.”

“I missed you, too, sweetheart,” I said.

Strands of white hair flew wildly out of her head. She seemed to be swallowed whole by the wheelchair she was sitting in. “Look at my hands,” she said. She held them out for me. They were gnarled and spotted. Her nails were thick and yellow. “Can’t hold a knife anymore.”

“It’s just as well,” I said. “You could never top the fish kill.” I nodded toward the big fish on the wall.

The dog plopped his head into her lap, the bunny clamped in his massive jaws.

“Carl, come here,” said my father Doug. He was standing in the doorway to the garage. He waved his hand at me. It was covered with white bandages that had pictures of dinosaurs on them.

I followed him out to his garage, to what he called his workstation. It was a lop-sided bench made out of pieces of wood found on the fairways of golf courses and alongside the roads. He clicked on a lamp. On top of the workstation was a car battery and strands of brightly colored wires connecting the battery to a motor of some kind.

“Watch.” He clamped an alligator clip to a fuse box and started the motor. A stump of metal spun round. “Magnificent.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“An electric breathing tank motor for the family business,” said Dad proudly. “And your mother says I can never finish anything.”

We watched it spin a while, then Dad turned it off and we went into the house.

Hux was setting the table while Mom and Dottie broke beans in half. Someone had brought in the cooler. It perspired in the corner of the room.

Mom saw me see her with Dottie, being nice and all, and rolled her eyes. She went into the kitchen.

Grandmom Rita barked out, “So you’re the one who stole the midget man’s heart!”

Dottie sniffled a bit. She told Grandmom Rita she was mean. Dottie said we three should leave because no one in my family liked her.

“I like you,” said Grandmom Rita.

Dottie stared over at her. “That’s only because I irritate your daughter-in-law.”

“Good call,” said Tom who had pitched in on setting the table, placing the last dish on the table and sitting down near the head of the table, near where Dad sits.

“Time to eat,” said Dad. He sat down at the head of the table.

“Let’s not get riled,” Hux told Dottie. “I mean *look*.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said, resigned.

I sat next to Dottie. Grandmom Rita managed to roll her way over to the table and sat next to Hux, across from me. Mom brought in a huge, black pot with shiny, chrome handles. She plunked the pot in the middle of the table and sat down.

“Well, how-dee!” said Dad. He stood up. “Father Christmas!” he declared staring into the pot. “I’m a human fly!” he said, spooning a heaping glob of red mush onto the center of his Andrew Johnson commemorative plate.

“Keep your comments to yourself, Mr. Fix-It,” said Grandmom Rita. “Let’s see what today’s monstrosity is.” She grabbed the front of the dining room table to steady herself, and wobbily rose to her feet. It was a sight. I didn’t know she could do that anymore. But here she was, all animated and all. She glared into the pot, and then, as if she could not endure the sight any longer, clamped her eyes shut. Her hand rose to her face to rub the bridge of her nose; she lost her balance and plopped back into her chair. “Damn it,” she said. “Holy Christ.”

“Cut the melodramatics, Rita,” said Mom.

Mom believed in adding in all the ingredients at the same time. In the case of her spaghetti and tomato sauce, the ingredients included the tomatoes, canned and whole; the garlic, whole; a quart of water; a tree’s worth of bay leaves; and the uncooked spaghetti, one box. Let simmer for four hours and serve.

For a while there, Mom was a member of the Everything’s-Better-With-Canned-Whole-Tomatoes school of cookery.

Dad’s head hovered over the top of his plate while he spooned the spaghetti into his mouth. His lips turned red. We could hear him sucking it down.

He brought his head up once and said, “By golly, yes!”

Mom ate salad. She was watching her figure. The rest of us ate as little as we possibly could, then feigned fullness.

Dad hopped up while we all sat back rubbing our stomachs. “I hope you saved room for dessert!”

“Oh, Doug,” said Mom, her face warming into a smile. “You shouldn’t have gone to all the trouble to buy a cake! Your birthday’s next week.”

“Buy?” asked Dad, with genuine puzzlement. “Why buy when you can make it yourself?”

“You didn’t,” three or four of us said.

Dad was perplexed, taken aback for a moment. “It’s out in the garage,” he said. “Under my work station.” He stepped out the door.

“Carl,” said Mom, her hand rising to her mouth, her head shaking. “Stop him. Oh, God, please stop him.” She was tittering, laughing.

I got up from the table, pushed open the door to the garage and saw my father out there. He had on welder’s goggles, and, using a butane torch, lit the tips of a forest of pastel candles planted on the rough terrain of a brown-frosted cake. The cake, bulging with tumorous growths on all sides, sloped away from him. It might have been Los Angeles during fire season, with dozens of pastel buildings aflame sliding into the Pacific Ocean on a wave of mud.

“I didn’t believe you could get fifty candles on a cake,” I said.

He turned off the torch. “Me, neither,” he said. “Your mother’s lived most of those years with me. She’s *earned* them, Carl. She has a *right* to them. She should get to watch me blow them out, in case anything should happen to me before next week.”

The candles were half-melted down already. Pink and violet rivers coursed through brown frosting. “Go on, Dad. Take it in,” I said. I held the door for him.

Dad proudly carried the cake past me. I watched fifty tiny flames devour fifty tiny candles leaving black, ashen wicks in their wakes.

Grandmom Rita started to warble “Happy Birthday to You.” We all sang along. Dad made a wish and, with a mighty exhale, blew out most of the candles, then plopped the cake onto the table.

The doorbell rang out the William Tell Overture. “Lone Ranger’s coming,” said Grandmom Rita.

I went to the front door. It was Jimmy, wobbling on unsteady feet. A little bit of blood oozed out of the corner of his mouth. “I want you to thank me, you ungrateful bastard,” he said.

“Huh?”

“For the beer this morning! I want you to thank me!”

“Thank him, Carl,” said Grandmom Rita. “Then come tear off a piece of this chewy cake.”

“Um,” I said.

"I've had it!" he declared. He turned and stumbled out toward his car, jangling the keys in his hand.

"Thanks!" I shouted after him. "Thank you very much!"

"Too late!" he howled back over his shoulder. "Not enough *feeling!*"

He got in his car, and it burbled to life. The car sat still for a moment, shaking in place as he revved the engine harder and harder. Finally, he ground it into gear and backed it through the garage wall, then drove away with a piece of aluminum siding dragging sparks behind him.

"Fifty melted candles," said Mom.

"It's not all that bad," said Dad. He was standing in the doorway to the garage, staring out at the damage. "It's not that big a hole."

Beowulf ran between Dad's feet clutching the pink bunny in his gigantic maw. Dog and bunny disappeared out the hole in the garage wall.

"Come back," Dad mumbled, almost whispering. He whistled after the dog like he was a little bird.

An hour later, we found Beowulf humping Buster in the parking lot of the Gate Food Post some 10 miles away. They seemed taken with each other. A garden hose attached to the outside of the store took care of that.

*God knows—Middle-aged trollop siphoning—I wasn't even what  
I thought I was cracked up to be*

I may have never been in love, but God knows I've tried. I am not a fall-in-love guy, I suppose. Perhaps that is tragic. I don't know.

I live in a three-dimensional movie that I only play a bit part in. I watch, I observe, I make my observations. I lose touch, occasionally. But I regain touch and see more. It's hard for me to process all that I see.

I wish people wouldn't keep barging in and making me act, though. Sometimes, I get stuck in the plot and it takes a lot of joy out of the watching. I know my limitations. I know I'm not the guy who steps to centerstage, grabs the spotlight. I'm just one of the lugs eating popcorn.

Dad and I brought the dog home just in time to watch Hux and Dottie depart. I waved to them from Dad's partially painted car. Dad said, "They seem like a nice couple." Beowulf licked his ear. "Down, boy!" Dad said laughing.

"He's a fool," Tom said, opening the driver's side door for Dad. Dad stepped out of the car looking like a movie star president. Such comportment! You just don't see someone as dignified as Dad everyday, unless you're Mom and she's used to it.

"Fool or not, she's some honey," Dad said. He reached into his pocket and produced a pipe and clenched it in his teeth. Dignity! Like a college professor or some such.

"He'll be broke before too long with that middle-aged trollop siphoning off all our earnings," Tom said. "She'll break the Auto Zone in half!"

“Protect yourself now,” Dad said. “Lawyer up.”

“That’s not altogether a defective notion,” Tom said.

I got out of the car. The dog bounded out after me. “Lawyers? This is Hux we’re talking about here.”

Tom shook his head at me in dismay. “Oh, Carl. Let’s not let sentiment get the better of us, shall we?”

“Sentiment?” I said. It was not a question. I stomped away. Trollop! Sentiment! Something else was bothering me, too. I reached into my pocket and fished out the papers that Trace had had me served with. They were smeared with my sweat and unreadable. I had no intention of going to court. She could go to court by herself. She could sue me to kingdom come. I wanted to call her up and apologize, to beg for her forgiveness, to wallow in the depth of her contempt and her ocean of flesh. Perhaps I was in love. Maybe there was hope for me. Maybe I had potential that *had* been realized, though not in monetary ways.

Life: It’s sneaky. Love is too, I should think. One day you’re a grill cook and going along fine and talking to your beloved on the phone and eating with her in a good restaurant while perusing fine paranoid literature, and a couple of days later you’re in county lockup with no job in sight and she’s pretty much put you there. I turned to Beowulf. “Where’s your bunny?” I asked him.

He sat down and farted, staring up at me expectantly.

“So much for bunnies,” I said.

I walked down to Jimmy’s house to see if I could make amends. Beowulf ran alongside me, sniffing at turds and other things, unleashed. When we got there, I found Violet mopping up the front porch. Vomit, by the looks of it. “Where is he?” I asked her.

“I could give a shit,” Violet said. Jimbo Junior was bawling inside the house.

“I’m worried about him,” I said.

“Too bad for you,” Violet said.

She had put on a few pounds, or was pregnant. I didn’t ask. I walked around the side of the house and out back to the detached garage. No lights were on in there, just what light could seep in

from the late afternoon sun. Jimmy was in the garage holding an M16 rifle in his hands, sitting on a third-string couch. The rifle was pointed in my general direction.

Jimmy said, "I have no 401k."

I said, "Neither do I."

"Are you my first sergeant?" he asked me.

"No, Jimmy. I am not," I replied.

"I always wanted a first sergeant," he said.

"I don't even know what a first sergeant is," I said.

"It's in the military!" Jimmy roared. He stood up. "Aren't there any patriots left anymore?" he bellowed at me.

"It's a great country," I said.

"But not great enough to *defend*," Jimmy said, accusing me of something.

"Are we being invaded?"

"We could be," Jimmy said.

"I'm sorry about not thanking you for the beer," I said.

Jimmy lowered the weapon to about waisthigh, still pointing it at me. "What did you say to me?" he asked in a little boy's voice.

I thought I could hear a bird flapping its wings up in the rafters. The garage was dark and strange smelling. "I said I was sorry about not thanking you—"

"I heard you," he snapped. "Don't patronize my ass, Carl. I know you."

"I think I'm sincere," I said. "I know I'm sincere."

"The hell you are," Jimmy said menacingly, raising the rifle again. "Ten, nine, eight . . ."

I backed out of the garage. My dog was waiting for me by the street. I trotted past him and he struggled to keep up with me as I ran down the road, back toward my parents' house. It was fear that made me run, but not the kind that comes from the barrel of a gun. It was fear that maybe Jimmy was right, and I wasn't even what I thought I was cracked up to be.

*Investigating a disturbance—Dismissed, I went inside—A  
recreational vehicle aerodynamic enough to ascend into the heavens*

So you're a cop, and you see a red t-shirted twitch running down the center of the road with a slobbery puffball trailing behind him. Now. What do you do? You turn on your flashers is what you do if you're Officer Bob Catlet.

"Hey, Carl!" he shouted from his soap bubble cruiser. I slowed down to a trot, and he drove beside me. "What's the rush? Where's the fire? And so on?"

"No rush, no fire, Officer Bob," I huffed out, and stopped and plunked my hands on top of my knees. I hadn't run that much in a while, and my legs were still some kind of sore from all the walking I'd done that day.

"I'm coming out here to investigate," Officer Bob stated.

"So you're back on the beat," I noted.

"I am."

Beowulf plopped his big furry paws up on the windowsill of the cruiser and puffed and slobbered at Officer Bob some. Officer Bob scratched him on the head and told him what a good boy he was.

"It took us a long while to chase him down after Jimmy crashed into the garage," I said, regaining my breath. "He's not so good a boy, I think."

"Oh, he's okay," Officer Bob said. "Get in the car, the both of you. I'll take you the rest of the way home."

"To my parents' house," I said, opening the back door and scooting in after Beowulf.

“Home,” Officer Bob said. And he drove me home.

We pulled into the driveway as the light dimmed over where the Gulf of Mexico is, and turned the sky all manner of colors.

“So there’s the hole,” Officer Bob said.

“That would be the hole,” I said. He had to let me out of the car. Beowulf bounded out and reentered the garage through the hole instead of the front of the garage, whose guts were all exposed to the world. Dad’s diving suit hung on the wall, and he was still fiddling with the breathing motor on his pieced-together workstation. Twinkly twilight suddenly engulfed us and the mercury vapor light that dominates that backyard flicked itself on, and was immediately swarmed upon by bugs and insects and larger things with wings, all devouring each other in an orgy of natural selection.

“Glad you could come by,” Dad said, dropping the motor on the workstation and wiping his hands with a greasy maroon rag. He shook hands with Officer Bob.

*Officer Carl*, I thought. *What would that have been like?*

“Maybe we should step up patrols in the area,” Officer Bob said.

“Thanks for bringing my boy back home,” Dad said, nodding toward me. “He tends to run off some times.”

“That’s all right,” Officer Bob said, slipping his thumbs into the waist of his Sam Browne belt.

“You run on inside,” Dad said, dismissing me. “Help your mother clean up, or something.”

Dismissed, I went inside.

Mom shooed me out of the kitchen and dining room, told me to go upstairs. I clomped upstairs to my simulated boyhood room. I sat down on my simulated boyhood bed and stared at the flaking posters up on the walls. I stood up, and walked down the hall to Tom’s simulated boyhood bedroom. I knocked on the door, which had a sign scotch-taped to it written by him when he was seven: **GO AWAY**. No one answered, so I pushed my way in.

See, he could be dying in there. He could be dying and incapable of speech or movement, so I had to push my way in. It was

my duty as a brother. I was investigating a nondisturbance, so to speak.

Tom had moved back in. This was unexpected. He had built himself a platform out of unfinished two by fours. On top was a mattress. Below was a tiny office, with a glowing, candy-colored computer humming away. I sat down on the desk chair and rolled it up close to the screen. I read:

*I was born under mysterious circumstances that I shan't go into for the time being. Suffice it to say, I am diligent, studious, deliberate, measured and well-bred and abnormally intelligent—and my family consists of circus freaks and subnormal lunatics. Obviously, something is off kilter, rotten, amiss! I have maneuvered myself back into a domestic status with them for scientific purposes. They must be studied rigorously!*

Was this *Everything is Well Below Par*? I was tingling with excitement! What next? There were hundreds of pages. I scrolled through them and stopped.

*. . . an obvious manic-depressive with an adroitness for clogging my ears with insipid banter. "What time is it?" he'd ask every ten minutes. "Where did you put the MacGruder file?" he'd ask after I placed it on his desk with a label clearly spelling out what file it was. "Why don't you ever smile?" That was the question that broke this camel's back! Oh, yes . . .*

Tom's memoirs! All his grudges! I had to see what he said about me. I searched for the word "brother" and found on page 10:

*And my brother—this Carl fellow! His constant yappings and bleats and rants began to seep into my unconscious meditations (my mind, unlike the minds of my lessers, never stops churning out conspicuously clever ideations). What species of blather was this? An anecdote: When he was nine, he skulked out to see "Escape from Witch Mountain" at least fifteen times, and upon his reappearance from this celluloid fixation, he'd*

*glare over at me while I tried to consume my mother's preposterous version of meatloaf and yapped, "Flying RV! Flying RV!" My cerebrum, which should have been spitting out differential equations at an alarming rate, instead riveted on the problem of devising a recreational vehicle aerodynamic enough to ascend into the heavens.*

"Ahem," went Tom, behind me.

"Ah," I said.

"Do you like it so far?" he asked me. "Or are you just looking up references to yourself?"

"The MacGruder file," I said.

"Bastard!" Tom shouted. He held his grudges close to his heart.

"Flying RV," I said.

"You always were an annoying little sparrowfart," Tom said. His hand grasped my shoulder gently. "Now get out. I have work to do."

I stood up and hit my head on the underside of Tom's bed/platform. He smiled wistfully. "Right on cue," he said.

*Palms on cheektops—Trouble abrewin’—A Volvo can’t really  
be excited, though, can it?*

I went to my room and sat by the window and watched cars whiz past, their lights streaking across my darkened room, my eyes turning bleary, until the last car of the evening, now early morning, careened past. I listened to the insects croon to me, my window cracked just so. Sometime around dusk, they stopped proclaiming and the air began to taste dank. I rubbed my face with my hands, my palms on my cheektops, my fingertips on my forehead—kneading, kneading. I am a small thing. I admit that. I’m willing to confess much, especially at this time of day or night, nightday, dawn.

Look at me now, will you. Will you look at me?

I stood up. My hair felt greasy. My soul felt greasy, like all that hamburger fat that sputters and pops in my face all day had seeped right through me, through every pore in my body down to where the real me hides.

Right then, my ears popped ever so gently. I remembered the flight home from Germany with Grandmom Rita so long ago. I said to her at the time, “We never got to see the one-eyed guy statue.” I was disappointed.

“You shouldn’t go wagging your wienie in public,” Grandmom Rita said to me ever so lightly, her voice like flower petals.

“It would have been something to see that stuated ancestor, looking all regal in front of that commie gravebox joint,” I said.

“It’s not so great,” she said, touching my arm. She dug into her purse and produced a photo of my dead grandpa stand-

ing in front of it. The statue was a gray smudge. So much for communist art.

“I guess I didn’t miss out on much after all,” I said hopefully.

“Statues—ha! Making your mark isn’t such a big thing,” Grandmom Rita said.

I shut my room window, smiling. I thought I’d go downstairs and recall the time to Grandmom Rita. She liked hearing about herself, about the clever and not-so-clever things she’d said to me when I was growing up. Then my ears popped again, and I thought I’d better turn on a TV and find out what was going on. Something weatherish was happening.

I found Dad downstairs sitting on the couch in his yellowed underwear reading the *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*. He didn’t notice me. He was staring at a photo of a proper pot roast. A tiny groan emitted from him. I thought that he might begin masturbating at any moment, so I coughed, and he snapped the book shut and stared up at me, momentarily frightened.

“Thought I’d turn on the TV. Figure out what’s what,” I said.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” Dad said, smiling precariously.

“I didn’t think it was what it looked like,” I said, and picked the remote control up off the couch and flicked on the tube, which buzzed and crackled before tuning itself in. The weatherman was doing one of his little dances in front of a satellite image, and he was performing some sort of Kung Fu move with his hands. Something was out in the Gulf of Mexico. An overturned cruise ship was mentioned. A fluffy spinning doughnut was shown in real 3D motion while the weatherman continued his odd dance. His bright tie flipped up and disappeared briefly, absorbed into the background. Part of it must have been green like the background green they use on those background sets so they can superimpose the giant 3D images on top of them, make them look like they’re really happening behind the weatherman, when, in fact, they really aren’t happening at all. Not behind the weatherman, anyway. Computers!

This tropical disturbance now had a name. It was Arosamena. Arosamena had potential, according to the weatherman, whose zeal was beginning to wear him out. The sweat snail-trailed down his forehead. Then he announced that it had indeed been upgraded to a hurricane, and showed us its eye and told us the eye's coordinates, which put it halfway between Mexico and us.

"So. Hurricane," I said to Dad.

"Shall we panic?" Dad asked me.

"Water?" I asked him. "Plywood? Ammunition?"

"Soda pop," Dad said, winking. "Fill the bathtub, boy, then head off to the Buy and Bye in search of the hurricane essentials. I'll get the natives riled." He stood up and shoved the cookbook under one of the cushions on the couch. There seemed to have been a slot created for it under the cushion.

I turned the TV way down and went in search of car keys. I found Tom's on a shelf behind the cookie jar that was supposed to look like a clown, but looked hideous instead, its gaping ceramic maw filled with crushed ceramic pecan sandies. Grandmom Rita had made it at her advanced pottery class when she lived up in Ohio with Cousin Mel, who, despising her, dumped her off daily at the Senior Fun Times Recreation Center, which was filled, most days, with embittered ex-autoworkers whose sole reason for continued existence was to screw GM and Ford out of more retirement pay. One of them, who attempted to woo Grandmom Rita, admitted to her that he got a weekly high colonic just because it cost Ford Motor Company *mucho dinero*, baby, and then made with a conspiratorial wink.

An hour later, she made him do a William Tell bit—with her blindfolded, and him shouting, "You don't ever miss, right?" And she shouted back, "Sometimes, yes! Sometimes, no!" And then she chucked a knife clear across the room and split that red delicious right in half, me boyo.

The lesson: Continued existence is tentative, at best.

A Volvo. I'd never driven a Volvo before that day. This would be fun, I decided. A nondomestic car! I ran outside with the car

keys, forgetting all about filling up the tub. To the Batmobile! I did a circuit of the parking apron around the house and found Tom's ancient Volvo, not a speck of dust on it, waiting for me. It looked excited. I felt excited. A Volvo can't really be excited, though, can it? Not really? I yanked open the door and started the engine. Tom's head poked out his upper story window. He shrieked all girly. It was like when Mom made him loan me his sneakers once when we were on vacation at Jungle Larry's African Safari down in Naples. I'd lost my sneakers after jumping out of the car to chase down a real live monkey (I didn't catch him, the scamp), and there I was without sneakers, the sneakers having been sucked off by mud, and Tom always took an extra pair wherever he went because that's the way he's hardwired. So Mom made him loan me his. When we got home, he made a point of never wearing them again, even after repeated washings, like he might catch something awful from my stinky little feet.

Tom shouted down at me, "No! No! Nooooo!" It was a thing of beauty, really, a controlled person like Tom going nutso. And only *we* could do it to him, me and my little family. We'd made it our life's work. There was pride in workmanship there.

I revved the engine and stomped on the gas, and away we went, Tom's car and me. Careening off through the little neighborhood, past Waikiki Lane and such, and out onto SR 71, a two-lane melty blacktop of excitement, and off toward the Buy and Bye, my enchanted workplace, to buy some hunkering-down-from-the-storm-type equipment, supplies and vittles. Oh, Tom, the joy! It was like some kind of beautiful commercial during the Super Bowl.

A man stood waving at me on the side of the road. The handpainted sign next to him said, "Right Now!" He wore a shirt full of chromatic thrills, and I slowed down to pick him up, but he waved me off. He was just out there waving, maybe saying goodbye to all the world. Maybe daring the endtimes to come and get him.

The sky was still Wedgwood blue with clouds all stuck to it and spinning, spinning, like some giant plate on the end of a stick.

Oh those feeder bands whipping above us! Hurricane season, welcome! This Arosamena (is that a girl hurricane? a boy hurricane?) was still not yet a Category Two, but it was out in the Gulf of Mexico picking up speed, sucking water up and churning it through the sky, flexing itself and puffing itself. It was a familiar enough pattern for a Florida boy like me.

Most of these storms start over by Africa, spin across the Atlantic and chew up some islands, then bounce up the eastern seaboard until they run out of breath. We knew those storms were coming sometimes a week in advance. But the Gulf of Mexico storms were different. They just hopped up and came at you.

I'm here to tell you.

The Buy and Bye parking lot wasn't even half full yet, which meant that no one was panicking yet, which was good, and yet not so good, if you catch my drift. That meant most people would do their hurricane shopping at the last minute.

Of course, I bought every gallon of water I could fit in Tom's car, and batteries of every sort, from triple A to a car battery. I bought a watermelon for 50 cents. I bought a Florida tourist t-shirt for only a buck. I got my employee discount so it was even less than that. I bought a bag of those little puff pastries. I bought road flares. Tom's car tilted a bit away from the driver's side. It listed like the Andrea Doria. I didn't weight enough to counterbalance the 25-pound sacks of instant pancake mix that I loaded in the passenger side seat. I drove over to the Chevron station and gassed up the car with unpremium unleaded.

I drove home, and saw the guy with the colorful shirt again. His sign slogan had changed to "Sooner than now!" and I honked at him and waved. He was doing his level best to warn humanity, and that was okay.

A terrible thought occurred:

We have no pancake syrup.

I prayed.

*Tony turn around—Arosamena cometh—It doesn't get any worse—See  
you in hell!*

“TONY, TONY, TURN AROUND! Something's lost and must be found!” I shouted out the car window. It wasn't an appropriate prayer, but I hoped it would work. It is the only prayer I can consistently remember other than the Hail Mary, the Lord's Prayer and, um, one other.

My brother was probably going to beat me up, or something. Or maybe have me arrested for stealing his car. He might have to burn the car, considering that I used it. I'm not unused to burning cars, having incinerated two myself.

Oh—the prayer? That's for St. Anthony of Padua, who is the Patron Saint of Lost Things. His tongue is virtuous, never uttered a foul word or told a lie, and because of that it's on display at the Vatican in a little glass box, so I'm told.

Sister Mary Joseph told me all about him, after I asked her what saint was in charge of finding lost things. I'd lost my G.I. Joe. We Catholics have all sorts of saints to help us out in times of crisis, and most of them died horrific deaths, which I think is supposed to give them their heavenly powers.

St. Anthony helped me find that G.I. Joe after I prayed to him.

St. Anthony was born in Spain or Portugal, although he spent most of his life in Italy haranguing heretics into becoming Catholics. He'd decided on this life for himself after he heard about how five Franciscan monks in Morocco got their heads chopped off and their bodies mangled for teaching the Word of God. He was called

the “Sledgehammer of Heresy” because of his easy, one-step technique of teaching the Catholic faith. The secret to his success was to say—over and over and over—“Hail Mary Mother of God!” when speaking to heretics. Of course, the heretics eventually boiled him in oil and shot him full of arrows. I’m not entirely certain what this has to do with finding lost things, but he did find my G.I. Joe, and I’ve been grateful to him ever since.

“Tony, Tony—!” I started to shout, when I saw a cardboard box on the side of the road. This is usually how praying for things brings things about. I’d found the G.I. Joe in the bushes behind my house with a parachute attached to him after repeating the prayer a few times. “That’s got to be the maple syrup,” I said and pulled the car over onto the side of SR 72, tilting it into the drainage ditch. I walked over to the box, which was dented and soaking wet. I tore at the cardboard, shredding it wetly, and inside found scads of tiny military fatigues, all as soaked through as the box. You can’t say that saints don’t have a sense of humor. “Good one, Tony!” I shouted, and went back to the car and drove the rest of the way home.

Tom was out front pacing and pacing. There were so many cars around the house that I had to park in the front yard next to the Holly bush that Dad had bought one year instead of a Christmas tree and insisted that we decorate it like a Christmas tree. “It’s a potted plant,” Dad had said. “It’s useful.” So we decorated it with lights and tinsel, yet it just didn’t give off the same thrill as a chopped down tree. Plus it wasn’t the right shape. After Christmas, Dad half-buried it in the front yard, and despite Mom’s tender loving care, it flourished. It still had a string of lights on it, though they weren’t plugged into anything and nobody could really see them until you pointed them out. “So, my dear little brother, you borrowed my car so you could drive it into the maw of a hurricane.”

“Maw?” I thought *I’ve got to use that word, fold it into conversation chance I get.*

“Maw,” Tom said. His hands were wrapped around himself in indignation. “The Volvo’s sitting too low! You’ve overburdened it. General Powell will have me shot!”

“General Powell understands emergencies, I think,” I said.

“You *think*,” Tom said. “That’s what you *think*, you say. Emergency, you say. Destroy the car for a storm, you say.”

“I seem to be saying a lot without saying it,” I said.

“I should punch you in the stomach, is what I should do. But that’s not something that grown adults do, is it?” He walked over to the car and peered in. “What is that? Dog food?”

“Pancake mix, industrial size.”

“The proletariat do love their mixes,” Tom said. “Speaking of which, they’re in the house.”

“Who would that be?”

“Your absurd friends and former lover,” Tom said.

“Trace?”

“She’s destroying the couch with her superfluous bulk even as we stand here jabbering.”

“Get thee to a nunnery!” I shouted.

“What?”

“Um, I don’t know why just I said that,” I said.

“Go in the house, Carl. Just go. I’ll unload the supplies. Enough hijinks for one day.” I ambled toward the front door. “Stop! Keys!” I tossed him the keys.

I have to admit that I was a little scared to go in there, Trace being Trace and all. The last time I saw her, when she had had me locked up in the hoosegow, she informed the judge that if I ever came within ten feet of her ever again, she’d knock my block off. Just like that. I like my block where it is, thank you very much.

Hux was sitting next to Trace who sat dead center on the couch. Hux was astride one of the bubbled up sides. Hux made her look even bigger than she was, him all tiny like that. Trace was eating out of an economy-size bag of barbecue-flavored Fritos. She was wearing one of those flowered, queen-sized-sheets-sewn-together-type getups. “What brings *you* here?” I asked her.

“It wasn’t my idea!” she bellowed, red powder puffing out.

Hux slid off his couch bubble and walked over to me. “I have to talk to you,” Hux whispered.

"Your father called me up and asked me over!" Trace said. She rolled the top of the Frito bag shut and tossed it on the coffee table in front of her. She licked her fingers daintily.

"Let's go in the other room," I said to Hux.

"I have my rights," Trace said between finger licks.

Hux and I walked into Dad's office and stood there like two conspirators in a closet. Hux said, "She left me."

"Jeez," I said. "Already?"

"I can't believe it," Hux said. He was stricken with grief, maybe. Stricken with something grief-like, anyway.

"I will not be ignored!" Trace shouted from the other room.

"I guess it could be worse," Hux said. His red, red hair was greasy and uncombed. "I *suppose* it could be worse."

"No," I said. "It doesn't get any worse."

"Where'd she go? Do you know where she went off to?" he asked me.

"I didn't know that she'd left, so I have no idea where she might be. What about that ex-husband of hers? It seemed like she hated him just a little *too* much," I said. "Maybe that's some sort of residual love."

"Christ," Hux said, stricken. He ran his little white hand through his hair. I saw another bandage on it. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Is that more cancer?" I asked him, pointing at the little bandage.

"Um, yes," he said. "Nothing to worry about."

"I'll go ahead and worry anyway, if you don't mind," I said. I reached over and touched his scrawny little shoulder. "I'm incapable of not worrying about you, so don't ask me to do impossible things."

"Give me some of those puff pastries, Tommy Boy!" Trace shouted in the other room.

"Get them yourself, you ludicrous vat of flesh!" Tom snapped back.

"I will not be insulted by the likes of you," Trace roared.

"In a way, I guess I'm lucky she left *now*, instead of later when I would have been more attached," Hux said.

"You should have married Kippy Watson," I said. "You dated her all through junior and senior high school."

"I wasn't artistic enough, or something," Hux said. He rubbed his chin. "She said I was too pedestrian, or something like that."

"Well, I'll just have to get them myself!" Trace went, and the couch groaned.

"I think she's gained weight, maybe," Hux said.

"Kippy?"

"No, Trace," Hux said. "Now it's my turn to worry about you."

"Don't worry about me," I said.

"I'm incapable of that, Carl," Hux said, letting himself smile a bit. "You know, I wouldn't miss Dottie at all if it weren't for the sex."

I laughed. And Hux laughed. We both laughed.

"YOU BETTER NOT BE LAUGHING AT ME IN THERE!"

Trace shouted, and that made us laugh more.

And everybody was there at the house that my father had built with his own two hands, sort of. Even Jimmy and Violet and their belching baby, and another swimming in amniotic fluid in Violet's belly, were there. The TV was on and the hurricane was all it could yak about. There were reporters all over the area beaches with their hair blowing all over the place because even hairspray can't beat nature. Jimmy sidled up to me, said, "I'm so sorry, Carl, if I insulted you the other day," and he said he was a drunk, and Violet snorted, and he said he'd get help one of these days, and Violet snorted a little louder than the time before, and he said that I was always a good friend to him and never judged him like some people he knew. I told him that I was sorry if I acted like a creep sometimes. "When did you ever act like a creep?" Jimmy asked me. I said I wasn't sure, but I must have, because otherwise he, Jimmy, wouldn't have gotten so mad at me. He said, "You Eastern European sorts are chock full of Catholic guilt, or some shit, ain't you?" I said I didn't think about it that way, even though I have an

Eastern European surname. He asked me if we were gypsies, since we were circus folks and all, and said that he was sorry about what Hitler did to our gypsy relatives back in Europe during the war, and that he was sorry about all the rich, old people and Florida Crackers like him getting ready to toss the circus out of town, which was kind of Nazi-like, if I knew what he meant.

I didn't.

Doug my father built the entire house out of cinderblocks. Part of his settlement with the company over his nuisance lawsuit stipulated that they come out and build everything out of cinderblocks and concrete. So, technically, Dad didn't really build the house. The structure, save for the garage that Dad had added on after the house was already built, was the sturdiest in Sarasota County. It could have taken a direct hit from a Scud missile, if Saddam Hussein had bothered to fling one at us during that Gulf War.

There was a reporter woman filling up the TV screen now. Beneath her, in bold red letters, the TV said, "Live from Siesta Key Beach." It sure was Siesta Key Beach. I'd recognize that sugar white sand anywhere. Gulf of Mexico water was slopping all over it, and sucking all that sugar white sand back out to sea, where it'd come from. The reporter woman shouted above the din of the storm, "The full fury of Arosamena will be here in scant hours, Roger!" The way she pronounced Arosamena made her sound like she was born in a foreign country, but the rest of the words didn't match, sounded all dully American. She had a hand over her earpiece so she could listen to Roger asking her questions about how rough it was out there in all that weather. And her other hand was wrapped around a microphone that looked like it could double as a miter. Before she could answer Roger's question, a big old wave leapt up out of the Gulf of Mexico and snatched her and dragged her out. We could see the top of her head out there in all that froth and motion. The camera panned over artistically. Then she disappeared out of sight, and they cut back to Roger in the studio. "I hope she's all right," Roger said to the woman next him, who nodded meaningfully at Roger.

Grandmom Rita said, "You'd think that cameraman could drop the camera for a second and go out after her."

"And lose the shot of his life?" Tom said, sneering.

"Where are those Fritos?" Doug my dad asked. "I'd die for a Frito."

"Briny deep," I said, and everyone stared at me funny, even Ninja Assassin! Lawyer, who was drinking a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer.

Then Dad announced that he was going to go outside, so when God-via-the-storm came to claim him, he wouldn't take all of us with him. He said he'd made up his mind and that no one was going to stop him. He said it so he would seem noble, and he did seem noble. Mom told him that he was an ass and he wasn't going anywhere. Grandmom Rita said from her wheelchair that Dad had a point, and that maybe he *should* go outside, what the hell.

"He's not going anywhere," Mom said. "Trace, you sit on him if he tries to go anywhere."

"Always with the fat jokes," Trace said, now whipping up some pancakes in the kitchen. "Where's the maple syrup?"

"It's no joke," Mom said. "You're not going anywhere, Dougie-boy." Mom was dressed in her nurse's whites, glowing like in an ether hallucination, hands on hips, ready to take on all comers.

"I say we let him go outside," Grandmom Rita declared loudly. "I'm still the matriarch around here."

"You act like you don't love him," Tom said. He was sitting off by himself reading an actuary book, which was full of confusing numbers and nonnumbers.

"*Love?*" Mom said. "I think that's the first time I ever heard that word come out of your mouth."

"It did sound strange," Dad said. He was pulling on his deep-sea diving suit.

"Where do you think you're going in that suit?" Mom snapped at him.

"Out front," Dad said. "I'll wear the weights so I don't blow away. Have a big funeral for me. Make sure everyone blows a lot of

money on flowers. I'm a sentimental fool. Make sure everyone wears black and all the ladies go, 'Boo hoo hoo.' I was in the Air Force National Guard during the big war, so I want something Air Force-like to show up. I want to be cremated and then buried in a big plot. I bought the plot already. Okay, I didn't actually buy it, but it belongs to us. Long story. Long story short, I won it playing poker. Boys strap some weights on me. I don't want to fly away."

I zipped him up in his suit and strapped on weights while Mom glared her disapproval over at me.

"Does anyone want to lick the bowl?" Trace asked.

"That Trace, she's a pistol," Dad said. "Give me my helmet, boy."

I gave him his helmet. I said, "Well, maybe all of us wouldn't die if you just stayed inside. Maybe a telephone pole would shoot in through the roof and smash you flat while the rest of us, just feet away, would say, 'That could of been me, but for the grace of God.'"

Dad's muffled voice said, "What was that you said about love, son?"

Tom said, looking up again from his actuary book, "Nothing."

"All right then," Dad's muffled voice said. "This wait for death is like about to kill me. Onward, ho." And onward, out the front door he clomp-clomp-clomped to meet his Maker, with 20 people sitting around watching him go, barely looking up, none offering to stop him, not even Mom by this time.

"I asked for that maple syrup like about an hour ago," Trace said. She was so delightfully touchy.

The front door slammed shut, and Dad was gone.

Later, Trace said, "I'm going to lose weight for you, Carl."

But I didn't break up with her, or injunction her, or have her tossed in jail! "But I don't like you without the weight," I said.

"Exactly," she said. And I heard the familiar sizzle of grease in a pan on the propane stove brought in from outside. She was still in the kitchen, cooking up pancakes for all the troops. She hadn't eaten a one.

The wind howled outside, the TV antenna broke off and flew away and we didn't even have that anymore, then the power went off, which left us only with each other to talk to, a gloomy prospect. No one said a word, just listened to the great outdoors trying to bust its way in. Candles were lit.

Finally, I said, "I going out to see if Dad's okay."

"No!" they all went, a Greek chorus of disapproval.

"You'll let the wind in!"

"You're not dying, too!"

"Don't leave me alone with these jackals!"

"You're not getting out of going to court that easy!"

"Eat something, you'll feel better!"

"You'd be missin' out on seein' m'daughter!"

The last one was Captain Desmond.

I looked around the room. "Where's Desiree? She's here?" I asked too excitedly.

"You're definitely not getting out of going to court that easy," Trace growled. So did her stomach.

"Eat something," I said to her.

"No fucking way," Trace said, seething.

"Desiree, she got a job with the circus," Captain Desmond said. "She'll be coming back with the train."

"I wouldn't count on that," Jimmy said, but before I could ask him about that comment, his kid started crying and the one still inside Violet started kicking, and everyone went nuts over both.

I walked over to Captain Desmond. He made faces at the crying child, who'd never seen anyone with dreadlocks in his short life, I guess, because he quit crying and grabbed at one that swung too close to him. Captain Desmond let him grab hold. I said, "I thought you didn't like me. I thought you thought I was crazy."

"You *are* crazy," he said. "But you the only one other than I that likes my daughter as she is, with her terrible speech problems. Everyone else want to change her, including her."

"Why don't you want to change her?" I asked him.

“Because a woman that pretty need something to be humble from,” Captain Desmond said, right before he went *Ow!* and his head tilted way over so I couldn’t look him in the face anymore.

“Glub!” went Jimbo Junior, yanking.

Trace, her face tender, maybe, had her hand over Violet’s tummy.

Captain Desmond extricated himself and said, “She talked about you, too, Carl.”

“What did she say?” I asked.

“No need to be bothering yourself with that,” Captain Desmond said. “It’s enough that she say your name.”

“How many times did she say my name?” I asked.

Trace took her hand off the tummy and said, “You’re pathetic!” She stormed out of the room. “See you in court!” I heard over the howling winds.

Ninja Assassin! Lawyer said, “Seems to be like she’s got your nuts in a vice.”

“Crazy mahn!” Captain Desmond shouted.

And the babies commenced kicking and screaming once more.

I’m a cheap man from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, onto which I slipped a pair of expensive boots, which belonged to my brother. He didn’t know I was up in his room. I couldn’t see out because plywood covered all our windows. But if I could see outside, I’d probably see Dad standing near the Christmas holly bush waiting for his Maker to take him up, up and away. I had a huge lantern with me so I could see. I put on an expensive name-brand rain slicker, also belonging to my brother. I found a rosary in one of his bureau drawers and kissed it and placed it in my pocket—*his* pocket, to be accurate. I found a pair of swimming goggles, probably expensive, and put them on, along with the accompanying noseplug. There was an upstairs backdoor in my parents’ bedroom.

I walked into their room, pried open the exit door, pushed with my shoulder, and managed to slip outside. I stumbled forward, and fell all with way down to the ground. Our patio was gone, and so were the sunporch that roofed the patio, and the stairs that led to the

patio. I landed on my face in the pushup position next to where our gas grill used to be. There was nothing but concrete there now, not Astroturf, not patio, not sunporch bits and pieces. My face probably hurt along with the rest of my body, but there was too much wind to care. I could see something as big as a piano stuck in the tippy top one of the lean, tall Australian pines in our wilderness preserve out back. The yard was a nightmare of overturned vehicles.

“Tony, Tony . . .” I started, then felt myself flying up and up and I was on the roof of our two-story house, and down, down and I was dropped lightly onto the hood of Tom’s car, then rolled off and stood in front of my father. He stood stock still in that diving outfit for a moment, then took two heavy steps forward and wrapped his arms around me, picked me up under my arms like a child, while the wind blared around us. I grabbed hold around his neck.

“Don’t let go,” I think I heard.

I yelled something back, but I couldn’t hear it, and forgot what it was I said. Hours went by. Or five minutes went by. The wind died. Dad let go. I stood up in front of him. He opened the little porthole in the helmet. I was expecting him to chew me out, but instead he said, “This is the eye. Get back inside the house.”

“Okay,” I said. I ran around the house, realized that the only door back there was up and out of reach, and ran back to the front of the house. I ran over to Dad and said, “So long, Dad.”

“*See you in hell!*” Dad shouted.

I leapt back.

“I always wanted to say that!” Dad said laughing. I laughed, too. He shut his little porthole.

I ran over to the front door and banged on it until it opened, and there was Trace, startled to see me in the condition I was in. One hand went up to her mouth, which gasped in horror, and the other delivered a loud slap to my face. I spun round with the impact and fell down in a twist. Tom and Trace each grabbed an arm and dragged me in as the big hole in the middle of the hurricane finished passing by our house.

*The whole family—Post Arosamena—Him and that spawn of  
William F. Buckley*

Tom pulled the boots off my feet and the rain slicker off my back and tossed them in the fireplace. The fire wasn't lit, but he'd made his point.

Trace asked, "Why would you go outside?" She towered above me like a zeppelin. "Am I so terrible?" And she kind of wept.

Well, maybe she was so terrible. But I told her the reason why I went out, looking at Tom. "Because I love my father," I said.

"You can't do anything to help him," Tom snapped. "The whole family is hopeless." He smirked. "Including you. In fact, *you* especially." Tom continued: "Love! I should have never mentioned the word. I should never utter another word to any of you. Why do I bother with you? What's the matter with all of you? You're all touched."

I closed my eyes. My head spun on my shoulders. I felt rollercoaster sick. Tom's Volvo's hood was probably bent in half because of me.

I opened my eyes and all the candles in the room dimmed suddenly as if the air had gone whooshing out of the house, and then all was black.

I awoke in Tom's car. We were speeding along SR 72, past where the man proclaiming the end had been, past where the people who sell watermelons, tomatoes and spaghetti squash usually set up, and past the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus, where the members had set up an emergency pancake stand and were serving all comers. The K of C'ers were wearing full medieval

armor and bright red capes with crosses on the back while they flipped pancakes with broadswords on the little gas stoves they'd set up. I was propped up in the front seat of Tom's car. My eyes felt sticky. I saw myself in his sideview mirror and realized the stickiness was dark, burgundy blood. I shivered slightly. "I want some pancakes!" I heard myself warble. "I want them now! I want Trace to stop suing me! I want to be a circus cook!" My voice lurched toward shriller. Even I couldn't stand it, but it kept going on. "I want a double-wide for the off-season! I want—"

"Son! You're okay!" Dad shouted in my ear. He was sitting in the backseat with his diver's suit on with the helmet off.

"I want some soft tacos!" my voice went on, careening into a shriek. "I want a tray with all the dirt from the seven continents! I want a—"

"I think he's hysterical," Tom shouted above my din. "He must be going into shock!"

"I want a suit of armor!" I caterwauled.

"He's gone nuts," Dad said. "His brain's damaged. I mean, more than usual."

"Ball peen hammer!" I screeched. "Root beer foam!"

Dad's hand clamped around my mouth. I was glad for it. I was ready to punch myself, and I'm not a punching-type person. But Mr. Big Mouth had to go. The car slowed down. Muffled stuff came out of my mouth, not even words. I was hyperventilating now and black spots floated around my head, all of them expanding until they became one.

Then I was on a table, and a doctor with a greased down mustache smoking a filterless cigarette was sewing up my head.

"I've acted like a fool," I said to him.

"You have a concussion," he said. "This whole hospital is littered with people with concussions." Some cigarette ash flaked off and dusted down toward me. I closed my eyes. "I've got you all numbed up," the doctor mumbled. "We've got plenty of painkillers here. Nothing but painkillers in stock," I heard him say, my eyes closed. "You'll be good and goddamned numb for days. Hell,

weeks if you like.” He laughed horribly. “Yes, oh yes, we wouldn’t want any of our precious oldsters to feel a moment of pain, would we? They might head back to Illinois or Michigan and we wouldn’t want that!”

“Can I go home now?” I asked him.

“Your dad and I used to golf together,” he said. He grunted from some effort and I felt a slight pull on my numbed up forehead. “Yes, and he convinced me that all the money is off-shore, the fucking bastard. Son of bitch shows up here looking like goddamned Jacques Cousteau with you bleeding all over the place and you yelling about the Knights of Columbus with pancakes at the end of their swords. Man that is some hilarious shit. You should be on TV,” he said without laughing. “I’d be retired right now if it weren’t for your pa. Done!” He slapped me on the shoulder. “More people than you here, aren’t there? Tons more. But your pushy-ass father got you to the front of the line, didn’t he? Him and that spawn of William F. Buckley. Get out of here!” he yelled, grabbing me violently by the shoulder, pulling me to my feet. “There are sick people here! Sick people! Fucking privileged bastards like you should be shot! Out! Out!”

I stumbled out into the hallway. I turned and looked at him. He was drenched in blood, some of it mine no doubt. My father and brother each took an arm.

“Businessman of the year my ass!” he shouted. “Who the hell’s next?” And the remainder of his cigarette sparked to the floor, bounced once and rolled to a dirty, beaten-up man who picked it up and took a long drag. The halls were filled with people, all of them moaning and crying. Catholic Sisters were everywhere. This was their golden moment to do good works and they weren’t going to blow it. They were comforting people left and right. Heaven was theirs for the earning.

*My childhood is gone—*

True to his word, that doctor. I was presented with a small, stapled, white bag bursting with pills as I left through the automatic doors. A sister jogged up and presented me with it, along with an itemized bill. She blessed me in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and ran off. People were moaning all over the place. The world outside looked like nuclear war, or at least the version from that TV movie that starred Steve Gutenberg and that was supposed to scare the wits out of us back in the roaring '80's. What was the name of that movie? *The Last Day?* *The Final Day?* *Day of the Dreaded Nuclear War and It's All Reagan's Fault?* Powerlines were down all over the place. All the treasured Sarasota landmarks—The John Ringling Hotel, the Circus Museum, the Ca'd'Jan—were missing. In their place was rubble. The radio said that Siesta Key had been cut in half. The city council was busy trying to decide what the name of the new key would be, or if they'd make an effort to fill in the space in between the two keys and make them one again. National Guardsmen stood on the street corners all in their battle gear, with black plastic rifles on their hips, grimacing like they meant business. Wrecking balls swung. Bulldozers plowed. Signs had already sprung up announcing new golf course communities to replace the destroyed circus retirement communities. The Ringling Museum complex was gone entirely. Turkey vultures circled over it.

“Opportunity!” Dad exclaimed. He was in the front seat. I was sprawled across the back, watching what was left of Sarasota zip by. I reached into my little bag, found a bottle marked Percocet

and took two dry. I swallowed hard. There were other bottles marked Vicodin ES, Darvon compound 65, Fiorinal with codeine, and Lortab ASA.

“Not much left,” Tom said, awed by the destruction.

“It’s horrible,” I said.

“Boys, boys—”

“Shut up, Dad,” Tom growled. “My childhood is gone. Let me mourn it.”

“But—”

“Shut up, Dad,” I growled.

And he shut up. Maybe for the first time in his life.

*A round robin of narcosis—Clown Court—That's a wrap*

Oh yes-yes-yes. Sometime in the week that followed all our guests went back to the remains of their homes, including Trace. We tore the plywood from the windows. I spent my days up in my room, rotating my pills, taking only one from one bottle every time I felt pain, moving from one bottle to the next. I figured that this way, I wouldn't become addicted. I was on a round robin of narcosis. Of course, we ate nothing but pancakes and drank water out of jugs. The windows were wide open and the whole world was muggier than usual. The sun heated the soaked earth, boiled the hurricane water into our noses and mouths and lungs. I read a book about the digging of the Panama Canal, waking-dreaming that I had yellow fever and typhoid and syphilis and malaria, and my narco pills pushed those dreams along. The mail started coming in again and I found that I had been pre-approved and that I may have won. The telephones came back on and Buy and Bye called and told me that the Grand Reopening would happen in a few weeks and wouldn't it be lovely if I could return to work considering that I'd overused my health insurance. Besides, all the survivors would be getting big promotions if their betters didn't show up.

My father cancelled his annual birthday bash.

And one day Trace came by to see me and brought me a present rolled up inside a tube. She stood smiling at me, wearing her JC Penney's business suit, all yellow with white trim and big circular buttons that could have been those Mr. Smiley Faces from the 1970's. I pulled a very legal looking sheet out of the tube. I was

about to read it when the power kicked back on. My digital clock beeped, VCR's all over the house whirred and flashed 12:01, and the TV downstairs kicked back on and immediately began shouting out sports scores. But, most blessedly of all, the twin air conditioners kicked on and blasted their cooling relief from the vents in the ceiling. "Shut the windows up there!" Grandmom Rita hollered up to us. "Pitch in, chubette!"

Trace gritted her teeth. There was plenty of room in her JC Penney's business suit, I noticed. "Shut up, you old battle ax!" Trace shouted back. She still had the anger. You couldn't diet that away.

"How much weight have you lost?" I asked her.

"I could live the rest of my life on the weight I still have," Trace replied. "Read your scroll." She closed the windows in my room.

"Hear ye! Hear ye!" it started. The watermark in the background was a big top.

I said, "What is this?"

"Read it," Trace demanded. She finished her window closings and stood in front of my bed, hands on hips.

"You are hearby summoned to *Clown Court*, weekday afternoons at 2 p.m. on Channel 58, Cable Channel 6," it continued.

"Clown Court?" I said.

"It's a new show," Trace said. "I thought you'd like it. We're going to have our case heard by them instead of the regular courts because the regular courthouse blew down during Arosamena. We don't need lawyers, and everything will be settled in a half hour. Then we can get on with our lives."

"I see," I said.

"We'll be on next Tuesday, if you can make it," Trace said.

"I guess I can make it," I said.

"You'd better," she said, and she trudged out of the room. I listened to her clump down the stairs, then threaten Grandmom Rita with death at the bottom of the stairs. I heard the front door slam, her car door open and shut and music coming out of it that sounded like cats being tortured, and her car roared off.

Downstairs I stumbled, past Grandmom Rita at the foot of the stairs in her wheelchair. If you weren't quick enough, she'd run over your toes. I skidded past her quickly. The TV said that the city had sold the naming rights to the new key to a very large corporation for \$10.5 million and that the new key would now be known as Uniphos Key, which is short for Union Phosphate Corporation. Dad said that Uniphos sounded very mystical, or Greek, and Mom told him to shut up, that they had to get to work.

"You can take care of Grandmom Rita, now can't you honey?" Mom asked me.

"Or she can take care of me," I said.

"Either way," Mom said. "Are you taking your medicine?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good boy," she said. "If you run out, I have a stash in the upstairs medicine cabinet." Mom stole meds from the old people's little cups sometimes when they were asleep. Our house and the old person's home where Mom worked were two of the 20 structures in Sarasota County that managed to survive the hurricane. Everything else was getting hauled away to the scrapyards, or recycled. The golf course water hazards were filled with valuable crap. Tom and Dad had helped all our friends turn their cars right side up.

Oh, and that piano that I saw in our Australian pine in the backyard wasn't a piano at all! It was a very fat Englishman who was alive. It took two days to get someone to come out to get him out of the tree. He'd been staying on the part of Siesta Key that no longer existed. Now it was part of New Pass, the watery chasm between the old key and the new key. He decided not to evacuate during the mandatory evacuation until it was too late and the bridge was already up. So there he was, trying to get away, and then up, up and away and floating free above Sarasota proper and down, down in our tree. All very frightening *indeed*, he shouted down to us. We made him sandwiches and shot them up to him with a slingshot made out of two-inch thick rubberbands from Mom's old exercise kit, "How to Get Fit With Rubberbands!" The

fire department arrived one day and up went my old friend the Edo tribesman named Ben in a little basket at the end of a hydraulic beam. The fat Englishman wept and wept and thanked us for the sandwiches even though the mustard we used was a tad bit bland. “Cheerio!” Dad shouted as they heaved the fat Englishman into an ambulance.

And yet. Even though I was constantly coked to the gills on prescription drugs, I couldn’t sleep properly. And dead Grandpa was visiting on a regular basis now, advising suicide every chance he got. Grandmom Rita could hear him upstairs talking to me, kept telling him to shut up with that suicide crapola, that boy was going nowhere, and boy howdy how dead on can you get?

“The afterlife is like a big tilt-a-whirl,” Grandpa told me, adjusting the soggy spare tire that hung around his neck.

“I DOUBT IT!” Grandmom Rita shouted from downstairs. She and I and dead Grandpa hung around the house while my parents worked. I sat up in my room, popping pills and listening to dead Grandpa’s afterlife hype and Grandmom Rita sat in her wheelchair downstairs listening in, angry at the old specter still. She was angry that she could only hear him and not see him, too. She asked me from downstairs what he looked like.

“The same as he always does,” I said. “Tire around his neck, drenched in Lake Erie water, bottle of booze in one hand. You know.”

“Bastard!”

“It’s not like I wanted to drive off that cliff,” dead Grandpa said.

“Liar!”

“I didn’t die out of some sort of maliciousness,” dead Grandpa said.

“Drunk!”

“Just keep it coming, Rita,” dead Grandpa said. “Keep it coming, baby sweetcakes! I love you too, dollface!”

“Ugh!” went Grandmom Rita. Her wheelchair’s rubber tires squeaked against the linoleum in the hallway as she motored herself away, disgusted with a dead man, and me too I’m guessing.

"She's disgusted with the both of us," I said.

"Women are from Mars and men are from Mercury," dead Grandpa deadpanned. "Scratch that. Men are from the moons and dust particles that whirl around Saturn."

"Saturnalia," I said.

"Saturnine," dead Grandpa countered. "Saturn V rocket."

"You've got to quit bugging me all the time," I said. "Saturn cars with dent resistant doors."

"What else should I do? Take up bowling?" dead Grandpa asked, throwing his hands up. His bottle dropped out of his hand and shattered on the ground and disappeared in a dust devil of gas. Another bottle appeared in his hand almost instantly. "Saturnism. That is, if you eat some lead-based paint. I'll go work on your old man. His time's up anyway." And he walked off into my closet, disintegrating into dust as he went, and left me.

I presented myself at the Channel 58, Cable Channel 6 TV studios at the appointed time. A man smoking a stogie checked me off a clipboarded list and pointed the way down the hall to the studio.

I was disappointed, first of all, by the cheesiness of the set. Everything was made of cardboard. I expected, at least, particle-board. There were two podiums that slanted slightly to the right, and painted up like Wonder Bread packaging. The bench was the same. The jury box was all old barstools with a facade in front. The concrete floor was clumpy with wetish sawdust. I wore my Carl uniform, of course. I am a professional cook. I wanted to maintain a professional appearance for when Trace attacked me for whatever it was that I did.

I didn't know what I did. Sort of.

A monkey wearing a sailor suit ambled past, holding in one hand a snifter of brandy, which he swirled like a pro. A Cohiba protruded from his mouth, lit, the embers trailing a red streak across my eye. He stopped in front of me, tipped his little sailor hat with his free hand, replaced the hat, and continued on.

"Are you one of the litigants?" a burly man wearing a pro-Perot tee-shirt asked me.

"I'm today's defendant," I replied.

"Here's the drill," he said, and dragged a backhand across his forehead wiping away sweat. "What you need to do—"

"What's with the monkey?" I asked him.

"Chimp! Say 'Chimp!'" the man barked.

"Chimp," I said.

"They're very sensitive," the man said.

"Not after a couple of brandies, I'm guessing," I said.

"I don't come to *your* house and tell *you* what to do with *your* chimps, do I?"

"No," I said.

"Have a little respect, pal," he said.

"Sorry," I said.

"Here's the drill . . ."

"LAW, LAW, LAW, LAW! WE GOTTA HAVE SOME LAW!"  
blasted the title song.

I jogged out to the piece of adhesive tape that marked my place, and Trace jogged out to hers. She'd lost something like 20 pounds since the last time I'd seen her, and was wearing her yellow business suit again, now hanging on her like a big top tent.

The announcer said, "He's cooking up insanity, and she's a big fat pain in the neck! And you're watching Channel 58, Cable Channel 6's Clown Court!" The audience erupted with popcorn and streamers and hoots and woos. "And now, his high honor, the Chief Justice of Whoopie Cushions, the High Potentate of Hi-Diddly-Hi-Yo, Balfour the Clown!" And my grizzled old clown friend came bounding out of the dark beyond and into the klieg lights with a gavel that looked like a combined watermelon and baseball bat.

"Nobody gets out of line in my court!" Balfour bellowed.

He ran over to me and whacked me over the head with the giant mallet, which was as soft as a lover's kiss, and I mock-fell to the ground as I had been told to. And I shouted my line: "WHUD I DO?"

And the audience of kiddies screamed with laughter and threw peanuts and confetti at me.

Trace, who'd skipped the pre-trial briefing, stood transfixed in front of the crowd and TV cameras and painted judge, her mouth slightly agape. What the hell did she expect? Hadn't she ever seen an episode of Clown Court?

Okay. I hadn't either. But I could guess.

"What kind of farce is this?" Trace asked no one in particular.

"The legally binding kind!" Judge Balfour replied from the bench. "Bailiff! Seltzer that woman!"

The drunk chimp in the sailor suit skittered out with a bottle of seltzer and let Trace have it right in the kisser.

"This is—" she bubbled.

"I wouldn't finish that thought—" I said to Trace, right before getting a mouthful of seltzer.

"—hideous!" Trace shouted, her fists all balled up.

"Speaking of hideous," Judge Balfour quipped, "where'd you get that dress?" Which was followed by a cacophony of sound effects and the laughter of children. "Bring in the jury!" And a clown car filled with husky little people in white face with colorful bowlers careened into the center of the courtroom, skittering in some wet sawdust. The sub-subcompact emptied out.

A little person wearing a sign around his neck that said, "Foreman," doffed his hat and bowed deeply in front of the bench and said, "If it pleases the court!"

"Oh, it does!" Judge Balfour replied.

"Then shall we?"

"Oh, you shall, you shall!"

And a whipped cream pie fight commenced in the jury box. Whistles were blown and fake cops with whiffle bats broke things up. The jury sat with whipped cream dripping from their mugs. The foreman rose from his seat and shouted, "Guilty!"

"Not yet," Judge Balfour stage-whispered.

The foreman sat down.

"Speak your piece, chubby!" Judge Balfour said.

"I'm—" Trace said. "Hey!"

“Out with it!”

“Yeah,” I said, turning to her, “out with it.”

“That’s right,” she said, gritting her teeth, staring knives and hand grenades at me. “Egg me on. That’s all you do, that’s all you ever do. You want to see me mad? Do you really want to see me mad?”

“Yes!” the children in the audience shouted in unison.

“Yes!” the jury shouted.

“Yes! Yes!” Judge Balfour shouted.

“Eep!” the bailiff shouted. He reached into his diaper and then heaved a clump of dung into the center of the courtroom set.

I said nothing. It had come to me despite my best efforts. I had known it all along and had kept it snug within the heart of me. *Her grievance*. I gazed over at Trace and suddenly felt profoundly sad. *Enough*, I thought. But I couldn’t say a thing. All I could do was stare at her and feel a grief. She wanted normal love, and she ended up with me. She wanted to be loved, and she ended up with me. It had to be humiliating. I felt wrong.

She walked over to me and poked me in the eye, the unpoked-before eye, then slugged me in the gut, and down I went to my knees, not from the blow but from the twisting coming from the deep inside of me, and I fell to the sawdust-covered concrete feeling *her* humiliation unreeling out from the center of me, where it had lay hidden from the beginning and now, here, finally at the end, came chugging out of my stomach, up my throat, out my mouth, and onto the ground at Trace’s feet with the force of a freight train. There was nothing left for either of us now, not my reveling in her fatness, not her accepting me as her last ditch boyfriend, not loathing, not a thing but sticky yellow vomit soaking into sawdust.

“I find for the defendant,” Judge Balfour declared. His was the only voice in the courtroom, the only sound but my retching, which echoed off the walls and ricocheted around us.

“That’s that,” Trace said quietly, almost sweetly. Her shoes,

like Dorothy's shoes, red and sparkling, clicked together at the heels three times. Click, click, click.

The klieg lights popped off.

"That's a wrap," said the man in the Perot shirt.

*Dad bows out—Tom has been too careful*

I don't know how long I knelt on the ground there in front of my puddle of puke. It was long enough for everyone to leave—Trace included. I would never see her again. I will never see her again. We brought out the worst in each other, or something like that.

The chimp in the sailor suit, diaper off, hat cocked at a rakish angle, brought over a portable phone handset. Officer Bob was on the other end of the line.

“Carl,” Officer Bob said.

“Hello, Officer Bob,” I said.

“Carl, I have something terrible to tell you. Awful. I'm coming by the studio to pick you up.”

“That's good,” I said. “Because I walked here. I vomited on TV.”

“This is awful news. Stay still,” he said. “I'll be right there.”

“Patch me through to McGarrett,” I whispered, clutching my stomach.

“Stay where you are,” Officer Bob said flatly. “Don't move.”

Click. Beep. I pushed the little button labeled “Talk” and the phone beeped off. I stayed stock still. I did not move a muscle. A mop swung in front of my face, whipped through my yellow vomit and absorbed it. Dry sawdust was applied.

“Yo, dude,” I heard. I looked up. GenX Kid was working the mop. He was staring right at me, not staring around me, not zeroing in on the quarks and other subatomic particles that snowstorm around his head. “Man, that was righteous,” he commented. “What did you do to her?”

“I—”

“Dude,” he said, discontinuing that thought and starting a new one, “you gonna move, or what?”

“I’m not allowed to move a muscle,” I said. “The long arm of the law is coming to get me.”

“*Killer*,” he said, staring a lightning bolt right through me. The goatee was gone. The eyebrow was no longer pierced. His jaw was set. And he wore giant, floppy shoes and polka-dotted pants and a fat red nose. But no whiteface. And he wore an XTC tee-shirt. He was an incomplete clown, but closer to being circus than I guess I ever will be.

Cop shoes appeared eventually. A pair of hands pulled me to my feet. “Carl,” Officer Bob said. He was almost thin now, too! “Carl,” he said solemnly.

“My father’s dead,” I said.

“Yes,” Officer Bob said. “Come with me.” I followed him out to his SPD cruiser, all blue and white and shaped like an oblong soap bubble. I sat shotgun next to him. He turned over the engine and cranked the car into gear, barking the tires some. “It was the breathing motor in his diving suit,” he said after a spell.

“But he worked on that motor himself,” I said.

“I wouldn’t say anything about that to anybody,” Officer Bob said. “Not a word. Your father took out a lot of insurance on himself in the past year, for you and for the rest of your family. You’re all gonna be rich if you keep your mouths shut and let me handle things like your father asked me to.”

“I—”

“Not a word, Carl. Just for once, not a word,” Officer Bob said.

The radio said, “Two-eleven in progress. Code three.”

The man of the shirt of chromatic thrills stood waving to me by the side of the road. The handpainted sign next to him said, “All will be revealed.”

“Fucking lunatic,” Officer Bob grunted. “I ought to lock him up.”

I didn't own a suit. Tom decided that I had to have one for the funeral, so I was driven to Sarasota Square Mall to search for a suit. On the way to the mall, Tom, driving, turned his head and peered over at me from the corner of his right eye, keeping the other one on the road. "I've been too careful," Tom whispered.

"Careful," I said.

"Dad," Tom said. "I didn't want to be like him. A Mister Thrill-A-Minute. He was less a father than a cautionary example."

"Example," I said.

We drove over the railroad tracks. They'd miraculously survived the hurricane. Much of Sarasota Square Mall hadn't, but some had. The rest was walled off and under construction. We pulled up to the massive parking lot. Some of the mall hadn't been touched. Other parts were minced, but hidden behind large barriers with "Coming Soon!" signs neatly painted on the sides. A sidewalk around the mall had been hastily poured. Some stores had set up outside, like an old-fashioned bazaar. Banners were erected on poles. Half Off!

We walked around on the sloppy sidewalk, looking at the fare. Tom felt the suits, rubbing the material between a thumb and index finger. I stood off to the side, a spectator. Tom picked out a dark blue suit. He said, "You could use this for a job interview someday."

"Someday," I said.

"That's the stuff," Tom said.

I was sent into a changing tent. I reemerged. Tom liked what he saw and produced an einsteinium credit card, which had just replaced platinum as the upper echelon of credit card. It glowed in the summer sun.

We drove home. Tom took his odd posture again, half-cocked toward me. He said, "Maybe I can learn something from you, little brother. Your casual indifference to achievement. Maybe I can make a decision without thinking about it ten times over."

"Over," I said.

"Maybe," Tom said. He stared out at the road, but he wasn't driving anymore. We continued straight on through a red light,

miraculously unhit by speeding cars as we zipped through the intersection. Tom started driving again. He said, "I'm going to Thailand."

"Thailand," I said. "Thailand?"

"You don't believe me?" Tom asked me.

"Why Thailand?" I asked.

"Why not?" Tom said. "It just occurred to me. First impulse. I like Thai food. Why not Thailand?"

"Thailand," I said.

"You can have this car, by the way," Tom said. "You can have my computer, too. I finished my memoirs, and sold them to Little, Brown and Company. They tell me I'm the new Celine."

"Salt water in the veins?"

"Celine, the Frenchman. I've never read anything by him either. Maybe I should. When I get to Thailand," Tom said. "You're welcome to come if you want."

He'd never spoken to me this way in his life. "What's gotten into you?" I asked him.

"Only 20 more years to 50," Tom said. "I'm more than half-way there. I don't want to die like this."

"Like what?"

"Like this!" Tom insisted, sweeping his hands across himself. "Miserable like me! Now are you coming to Thailand or not?"

"Not right away," I said.

"Enjoy the car," Tom said. "Treat it like all your other cars. I insist that you treat it like all your other cars. I want it to explode. The computer, too."

We had a big funeral for Dad. Everyone blew a lot of money on flowers. We all wore black armbands and all the ladies went, "Boo hoo hoo." Some Air Force National Guardsmen showed up and blew taps and gave Mom a folded-up flag. Dad was cremated and then buried in a big plot that he'd won playing poker.

After all his debts were paid off, the four of us—Mom and Tom and Carl and Grandmom Rita—all had a cool quarter million apiece. Ninja Assassin! Lawyer helped us out with all of it.

Dad's frozen head canisters showed up one day, too. We sold them to a medical supply house.

I bought a little plot of land near the railroad tracks and dropped a prebuilt home on it. I moved in with all of Tom's possessions, including the computer. I thought about getting stuck on the cowcatcher and carried away.

I quit my job, too, giving my old jailbird friend Lud—who'd become the restaurant manager in the absence of other qualifying people—my two-week's notice.

I sat listening for the train, any train, but none came by.

I drove Tom to the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport, where he caught his Air Bangkok flight, and I watched the plane arc into the cobalt, blue sky, leaving a thin, white vapor trail behind.

Mom and Grandmom Rita and my dog Beowulf became so damn close. I can't explain why.

I turned on the computer one day and began writing.

I am writing now.

And now.

And now.

*The end*

*Dear Mom and Grandmom Rita,*

*How are you? And you? I'm fine.*

*I suppose I should explain. It started with the clanking sounds I heard one night while sitting up in my bed, Tom's old bed, thinking about trying to sleep. I was listening to the crickets chirping one minute, and to some clanking the next. At first it was faint, but soon the sound filled the night, like someone was dragging a thousand wheelless bicycles behind a semi. This, thought I, was not a natural sound. So I pulled on my clothes and went to investigate. I walked over the top of the golf course that was built next door to my ranchette, past a water hazard (which made me think of you Mom, and Dad) and past a putting green with a nice little flag on a stick sticking out of the hole flapping in the cool, dank night air.*

*Dank! You like that?*

*And I came upon a rise on the golf course and saw down below me thousands, or maybe just hundreds, of people in plaid pants and white shoes. They were swinging rods at the railroad track, and the rods turned out to be golf clubs upon closer inspection. The whole scene was lit by the headlights of dozens of Cadillacs, their engines idling smoothly. One of the oldsters swinging at the track may have had no effect, but the thousands, or perhaps hundreds, of them had managed to chip through the rails, make little dents, and sparks flew up from the heads of their golf clubs as they swung freely and angrily at the rails.*

*"What's going on here?" I shouted above the din.*

*Din! You like that?*

*They all stopped for a moment, hushed, and swiveled their heads up to look at me. When they saw I wasn't the authorities, they continued on as before. They were deliberately destroying the railroad tracks, thousands or hundreds of them, swinging their clubs in great broad strokes like a gaggle of Carl Henrys.*

*"What the hell are you doing?" I shouted.*

*"Quiet you!" an old man shouted back. "It'll be here any minute!"*

*"What? What'll be here any minute?"*

*"The circus train, you fool! We aim to stop it!" the old man shouted back.*

*"I'm through!" another old man shouted.*

*"He's through!" the old-man-in-charge shouted, and golf clubs were dropped to the ground and an excited rush forward to the through-old-man ensued.*

*Ensued! You like that?*

*Chains came out of Cadillac trunks and were wrapped around the cut-through track. I could not stop them. I couldn't even try to stop them. Cadillacs hummed forward and the chains were attached to them. Engines roared. The crowd roared. Silly pants jiggled. Dirt flew up from tires. Golf clubs flew into the air, and spun and oscillated with the light from the headlights glaring on them.*

*A train horn blew. I could see its headlight in the distance. I could see that it was slowing down. I heard an elephant. I heard a lion.*

*And the train track was curled up now. A guttural cheer rose up out of the old men. "A toast to our land values!" the old-man-in-charge cried.*

*"Hurrah! Huzzah!" the old men went.*

*Hurrah, huzzah. I did not like it. I was by the tracks now, in amongst the old men. The old-man-in-charge clapped me on the shoulder. I glanced down at him. I recognized him. I would have recognized him anywhere. It was Hubert Pointer, Ph.D., the author of all my favorite conspiracy books. "We've held the line!" Hubert Pointer, Ph.D. exalted. A lather of sweat covered him, soaked through all his golf togs.*

*"You've stopped the circus!" I shrieked at him.*

*"A fellow traveller," he said, staring at me. "You! You're a fellow traveller!" He pointed at me and let loose an otherworldly squawk, like some sort of evil hawk.*

*The old men stopped their celebration. They all turned to look at me. "I recognize him!" an old man said. "He's one of them!" It was Beano, the old sword swallower, dressed in a pink polo shirt and teal and yellow polyester trousers.*

*"But you—" I said.*

*The train stopped 25 yards short, hissing loudly to a halt. I turned away from the old men and stared at the train, shielding my eyes from its bright headlight with a hand.*

*"Carl!" I heard from the direction of the train. "Hurry!"*

*"What?" I asked.*

*"Juh-Carl, run for the train!" It was Desiree. My eyes had adjusted. I could see her now, waving at me. She was wearing a glittering singlette, and glowed like an angel. She was an angel.*

*The old men were clapping each other on the back. They started to sing. They sang Auld Lang Syne.*

*"We're only th-thopped for a th-thecond!" Desiree called out to me. "Run!" she hollered, hanging out the door as the train hissed back to life and started, slowly, to back up, to head back north away from Sarasota, maybe forever. "Run!" Desiree shouted. "You don't belong there anymore!" And she wasn't stuttering now. "You don't belong with them! Run!"*

*I ran.*

## ABOUT ME, THE AUTHOR

I was born in Lakewood, Ohio.

I am the son of a retired cardiac care nurse and an occasionally employed salesman.

During my early years of constant epic-heroic struggle, my family moved around the Midwest—Cleveland, Akron, St. Louis, and Lincoln, Nebraska—before heading to Florida in the mid-1970s.

I spent four years in the United States Army as a Combat Artist until I was honorably discharged, then I went to the University of Florida, from which I received an MFA in Creative Writing in 1994.

For a while, I wrote junk mail for hospitals.

For a while, I taught at a junior college.

Now, I'm a civil servant. I live in Chicago.