

STAY TUNED TO THIS CHANNEL

and Other Stories

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by

Vernon Frazer

Beneath the Underground Books

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*In memory of Thomas Chapin,
a great musician and a greater friend*

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The Magic of the Ballad

“What I’m looking for, Licks, I’m looking for a *melody* man,” DaMusa rasps as he leans over this plate-sized cocktail table, like he’s sharing a secret. “For me, there’s nothing like a nice, warm ballad...”

Ballad! I stare at this dude in his 40's pinstripe suit, black shirt, white tie, porkpie hat and try to figure out if he’s Retro, Camp, or just plain weird. *Ballad!* I love to burn like Trane over the changes at racehorse tempos. But I need a gig bad. *Real* bad. I mean, I’ve already sublet my apartment for the summer. “Yeah, ballads are, like, you know...*out there.*”

I bit into my lower lip. I mean, really *chomped*. Here I am, you know, wearing this washed-out polo shirt, looking and sounding like I’m some cornpone from Iowa or something.

DaMusa nods. “Do a ballad right and you got *magic*. Your dreams come alive. You know what I’m saying, Licks?”

“Sure.” Anything to get a gig. You don’t play hip music on a luxury liner, especially when it doubles as a floating casino.

*

There was a little something for everybody on the *Riff Raft*, anchored just beyond the three-mile limit. On the Glitz Deck, old geezers cranked their arms into bursitis on the slot machines, then watched sequinned Vegas wannabes croon off-pitch. On the Disco Deck, twentysomething call girls danced with thirtysomething high rollers on break from the blackjack tables. Lame as it looked, my gig with the lounge band was probably the hippest thing on board.

I hit the lounge early, hoping some jive enthusiasm might get me a raise. As I unpacked my tenor in the puff and glitter of huge chairs padded like seats from Lincoln Town Cars, I couldn't help thinking how scuffed-up the old King looked. Hell, I needed a raise just to refinish it. But the tone, man...the tone would knock 'em dead no matter how the horn looked. I ran down a few heads, then got a Hawk groove going on "Body and Soul."

I must've been blowing pretty good because the strawberry blonde waitress who was lighting candles on the tables that floated between the seats was paying more attention to me than to what she was doing. She burned her finger once. I pretended not to notice but I did start trying to wind my phrases around her curvy lines. Once she worked her way to the front row, she stopped. Her feet made this funny little shuffle from one to the other, like a little mating dance. I smiled.

"You sound really *good*," she says through the largest set of teeth that ever flashed at me.

I hoped I wasn't blushing too much. "Thanks. I was just warming up. You know..."

"You already sound hotter than the rest of the band."

"That's what I was afraid of."

Her crystal eyes glinted in the shadows. "Believe me, this isn't what I had in mind for a summer job, either."

"Hey, I wanted to play with samba bands in Rio..."

"And I wanted to visit art museums in Europe..."

...and probably have a summer fling with a young painter studying at the Sorbonne, I added to myself.

"But this painter, I dated him for two years, and he just boogied off to Paris with my room-mate, the bastard!" He left Nancy---that's her name---to scramble for this waitress gig.

The way Nancy just flung her feelings off her sleeve overwhelmed me at first. Talk about intense! But it started me talking about things I usually keep to myself. She studied a little flute, did parts in college theater...She wasn't really an artist, but she had fire in her

heart, like a jazz player. And her voice, this chesty husk on the bottom and breathy ring on top...it made me think of Lester Young.

Just as we're getting into a good groove, DaMusa strolls through with some executive types and their wives. Nancy rushed to light another row of candles. "I'll see you on break," she says.

"You got it."

All through break I griped to her about the band. Whenever I found a groove, the drummer found a way to---ka-*POOM!*---throw it off. The bass player thudded somewhere near the pocket, but never in it. The piano player was passable, but more interested in following chicks than fake book changes. I hoped the second set would be a little better.

We opened with "Misty." As I watched Nancy's lithe lines weave between the tables, I filled my tenor with steaming breath. Felt myself drifting on a cloud of romantic ardor, imagined myself meeting a beautiful woman on a warm, rainy night...Funny, not far from where Nancy stood scribbling down orders, there was this fog rolling into the lounge. Not fog, really, more like morning dew. Not thick, but light. Kind of...well, misty. It rolled closer to the table where DaMusa sat brooding like a lonely bachelor, then dispersed to reveal this raven-haired beauty in a ruby skirt with a slit up the left side and these heart-shaped lips that made me want to run off the stand and kiss them.

Holy Shit! I stopped playing. She vanished like a daydream.

Come on, dude. Get yourself together! I played a flurry of notes, to make up for the two beats I missed.

There she was again! Her dark eyes radiant, she floated toward the boss. DaMusa reached out, their fingertips touched, and she glided into the seat beside him.

"You see that fox?" the pianist whispered.

"Yeah." I wanted to tell the balding lech I created her, but at that point I didn't know for sure.

During break I ran it by Nancy. She just tossed her head back, filled my eyes with flickering rows of pearl and said, "You musicians! You must've been smoking those funny cigarettes."

The next set opens with “But Beautiful.” The minute I get into it, whispering through my horn, in comes the mist, and it unveils this glamorous blonde just *bursting* out of a lowcut black minigown.

I pause, partly to breathe, partly to eye her for a full beat.

Pop! She disappears, just like the other one. But reappears with my next note. What the hell! I thought. And stopped again. *Pop!* She disappeared again. My next line, she reappears, slinks to DaMusa’s table, and perches on the seat to his right, flashing her pin-up gams at me while her red lips whisper sweetly at the boss.

Once and I was dreaming. Twice and, well...twice, and I didn’t *know* what.

The pianist didn’t know, either. “Looks like DaMusa’s turned into a ladies’ man,” he said. DaMusa’s moody scowl had eased to a swarthy grin.

I didn’t really care what these ham-and-egggers thought. But I wanted a Reality Check.

“I swear, I just started playing and there she was,” I told Nancy. “I’ve never seen anyone so...Talk about knockouts!”

“Maybe you should be sitting with *her*,” Nancy hissed. She left me sitting like a dunce on a barstool, wondering what I said wrong. Maybe she thought I was like her painter, maybe she just didn’t see it. Whatever...I couldn’t let her mood distract me from the music.

By the end of the night, I’d conjured six of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen. Figured out the phrases that determined hair color, body build, bustline, legs, the way they walked in...I even had this zany redhead making false entrances---the reverse of vaudeville exits---on the tag of a tune. DaMusa roared when I finally dropped her in his lap, one well-curved leg poking into the air, a high heel dangling off the tip of her shoe. I was having a rollicking good time on the stand.

I was having a good time off the stand, too. Nancy’s flash temper had cooled as quickly as it had flared. We talked about anything and everything...well, almost everything.

After the last set, she and I were on our way to do the “your cabin or mine?” bit. Before we get out the door, though, DaMusa waves me over to his table. He’s sitting alone, probably ready to spout some rule against seeing the help.

“Kid, you really got a way with a ballad,” he says, his brown eyes glowing softly. “You

can do things I never heard---no, never heard and never seen before.”

I grinned as much with relief as gratitude. “Gee, thanks. I mean, it’s like...at first I thought they were on board, you know...”

“They *were* on board. They came on with you. Up here.” DaMusa taps his temple. “And down here.” He rests his hand over his heart.

“I couldn’t believe it was happening,” I said. “I mean, it was...it was like magic.”

“Like the magic of the ballad,” DaMusa says, then winks me a sly goodnight.

As Nancy and I went down to my cabin, I was thinking out loud, still trying to figure things out.

“I didn’t tell *you* about every hunk I saw in the lounge tonight,” she snapped.

I could understand, sort of. She was still hurting after getting burned by her painter friend. It wasn’t till I clicked the lock on my cabin door that I realized she probably had her back to the stand most of the night. Space cadet! To tell you the truth, I wasn’t entirely comfortable with this new whatever-it-was, either. Better play it cool, I figured, as Nancy’s torrid warmth filled the bed where we rocked our own rhythm over the ocean’s soothing roll.

Afterwards, eyes closed, my mind drifted freely between the reality of Nancy lying beside me and the fantasies of the women my horn had conjured.

“What are you thinking about?” Nancy asked, her voice foggy like morning dew.

I must’ve been in a real fog. “Those women,” I said. “I still don’t know how it happened.”

Whap! A pillow thumps my face. A light blazes my eyelids open. My eyes blink strobes.

“If your fantasies are more important than me, let’s just call it off right now.”

Nancy yanks on her skimpy waitress outfit and slams the tinny door behind her. The wind from her exit blows my apologies back in my face.

*

“I’m sorry, I should have thought about what I was saying,” I told the blue diamonds

blazing at me over the chain lock.

“I’m sorry, too. I should have thought about who I was staying with.”

The blast of steam just sizzled through Nancy’s gritted teeth. Another door slammed on me. I felt really bummed out. We could’ve had something going.

But if she wanted to be that way...I searched the decks for the women from last night. Just one of them would take my mind off Nancy---if they existed. Of course, I couldn’t find them. I didn’t know if they took the last launch back to land or if they lived in some shadow world, waiting for my tenor to call them back. The foxes I did see were all so jaded and sophisticated they made me feel like a twenty-two year old busboy, the way they hung on the arms of guys with names like Diamond Jim. Serious Camp, those dudes.

That night, though, I blew models and heiresses to DaMusa, who greeted them with a grin that swelled like a river in spring. But Nancy, the one I really wanted, ignored me. At one point, I sat near her station and ordered a drink from her. She slapped it down on the bar so hard it splashed all over my trousers. Lucky they were dark; I didn’t have anything to change into. Well...maybe I could use my magic or whatever it was to create someone even better.

I stayed in my cabin all the next day, blowing the breathiest, moodiest ballads I knew. But nobody rose in front of me with swaying hips and a slinky strut. Nobody blew me a kiss, nobody flashed a beckoning grin over her shoulder as she eased into my bed. I couldn’t even stir up the mist that brought them in, although I did manage to swirl some dust in the corners.

Things with Nancy weren’t much better. It took a couple of weeks for her deep freeze to thaw even a little. She chatted and all that, but never hinted at wanting to spend an afternoon sunning on the decks or cranking the one-armed bandits or anything else we could’ve done together. And who needs another door in the face for suggesting something yourself?

So, it was a lonely summer to work through. I’d let my imagination romp with my loins on the stand, but that was as far as I could take it. DaMusa always had a kind, almost fatherly word for me at the end of the night, when the women had vanished to wherever.

But you can't live on the boss's compliments. One minute they tell you you're the greatest thing since Trane, the next minute they call you on the carpet.

I got pretty tense the first time DaMusa called me into his office. Nobody ever called me to their office except to chew me out. Not in junior high, not in college work-study...never.

So there I was, sunk deep in this leather chair in front of this huge, totally teakwood desk, swallowing my adam's apple again and again, waiting for him to dock me, fire me or something.

He leans over the desk. "Y'know, kid," he says in that hoarse, confiding voice, "You see all these people out there, havin' the time of their life...I bet you think I'm one of 'em..."

For sure. DaMusa reminded me of that guy I read about in freshman comp, uh--- Gatsby.

"But I gotta make sure the games are running right, the shows start on time. I don't get to sit back and relax until you're on the stand playing."

I nodded, uneasy. For a guy who was too busy for the ladies, DaMusa sure was slow to read me the riot act.

"What you can do with a ballad, kid...I never seen anything like it."

I turned my cornpone blush and grin toward the plush wine carpet. No matter how much he praised me, I couldn't help thinking, "*But...*"

When I looked back at him, he was lowering a saxophone case onto the desk.

"This is for you," he says, grinning.

Here I am, staring at your basic gift horse, feeling flattered, but frightened too. Talk about being paranoid!

"Well, open it."

The blast of golden radiance almost burned my eyes: a top-of-the-line Selmer, so brightly polished it made my old King seem colorless. *Incredible!* "Mr. DaMusa, you really don't have to...I mean, this...this must've cost you an arm and a leg."

"My dad bought it for me when I was just about your age."

DaMusa was my age once! He's one of those guys who looks like he was *born* at forty-

five.

“Yeah, I wanted to be a musician, just like you. And I did okay, played with a few bands...Claude Thornhill, Stan Kenton...”

DaMusa played in hip bands like those!

“...But I didn’t have the magic. So I put it down and did this instead.” He stretched his lean arms toward port and starboard, like the boat was his empire, then crossed them on the desk and hunched forward again, his forefinger zeroing in on me. “But you, kid, you got the magic. Maybe this horn’ll do for you what it couldn’t do for me.”

“Well, thanks, I mean...” I didn’t realize how deeply my playing had touched him. Or how much I wished my own father could have been a musician and lived to pass something as great as this down to me.

“One thing, Licks. Save a little of that magic for Nancy. When I was your age, I used to know a gal just like her.”

The note of sadness in his voice jangled like a tuning fork inside me. But he didn’t know what it felt like to get a door slammed in his face. Forget her. I just wanted to let the sound of this dynamite Selmer engulf me.

In my cabin, I blew an exuberant howl, then a flurry of fiery phrases, testing the top register, the bottom register, every nuance of its tone. Talk about a step up! I imagined playing “My One and Only Love” like Chico Freeman in front of a huge audience. The beauty of the melody transported me to the domain of virile balladeers occupied exclusively by the great tenormen, past and present. I was Prez, I was Hawk, I was Ben...

In mid-chorus, I opened my eyes. There was this Surf City blonde curved across my bed. Her breasts threatened to spill out of her string bikini. Her tanned legs curled around my bedsheets. Her delicate ankles poked teasingly through the tangle.

“Hi, Licks.”

I felt good, even better than my first night on board. Hey! I conjured up eight of the most beautiful women in the world...blondes, brunettes, redheads, the works...and took each of them in as many positions as you could imagine, while they moaned my name in ecstasy. If I didn’t glance at the clock on my nightstand, there’s no telling what kinky stuff

I would've gotten into.

The band was already playing. As I rushed to the stand, I tried to rake the tangle out of my hair with my fingers. My legs dragged, heavy from making love. My mouth felt sore, a cross between practicing too much and french-kissing when you've hardly done it in months.

When I soloed on "Misty," I didn't just fill my new horn with tender whispers, I filled it with cockiness, almost smirking around the mouthpiece at the sultry lick that always started the mist flowing into the lounge.

What! Where is it?

I played it again.

Nothing. *What the---*!

Maybe I should try the Grand Entrance riff, bring the babe in like a fireworks display.

No? Well then, try this. I blew my fastest, flashiest licks, hellbent on bringing to life a woman as stunning as my phrases were soaring. When my phrases landed, though, they missed the rhythm section's shaky mark. And nobody appeared.

Well...I'd get myself together on break.

I really wanted to be alone, to regroup. But the stool next to Nancy's station was the only seat. I gulped a double Seagrams just as she came back with a tray of empty glasses, crumpled napkins and bent swizzlesticks. For the first time since our bedroom fiasco, she flashed me her wide-open grin.

"I thought of dropping by this afternoon," she said, "but you were practicing so hard I didn't want to interrupt."

My throat burned from the drink, but I tried not to cough. "I'm still warming up," I told her.

"You sounded like you were on fire in your room."

"I was. You should've been there."

She laughed, all glittering teeth and eyes. "I don't know if I could've sat through eight hours of solo saxophone..."

Eight hours of solo saxophone! Those bimbettes were *real*, man. Their skin tingled as

my fingers stroked them. With this new horn, I was the Master of the Ballad and all the magic that came with it: Lester Young's porkpie hat, fifths of whiskey, dozens of beautiful women...My lips curled into a little sneer. "You just thought I wouldn't give you what you wanted," I said.

"Maybe I don't want what you can give me."

Uh oh. The Master of the Ballad had struck the nerve-note of her composition.

"Look. I didn't mean---"

"If you took your head out of the clouds and brought your bloated ego back to earth, maybe you'd play your horn better than your foot." She snatched her tray and huffed off.

She should talk about ego! At least I had something to have an ego about. Everyone has an off-night.

After making beautiful women in my cabin all the next day, I made the gig on time. But I couldn't make anything come to life there. My playing sounded strained and tired. And Nancy---the *bitch!*---looked like she was gloating. I felt so embarrassed I tried not to look in her direction. I hated myself for playing badly, hated her for reminding me of it, and hated the other musicians for sounding like they belonged on the same stand with me.

"You gotta lay back," DaMusa told me at the end of the night, his face creased with concern. "I got the passengers tellin' me, 'Too much noise.' So, do us all a favor. Take it easy."

I took it easy. I sunned on the deck every day and didn't touch my axe till the gig. But I was just a machine spinning out tunes. My mind felt dry and scrubby like a desert.

I had to try again. I had to practice, even if all I conjured was a prune-faced grandmother in a varicose vein bikini. I tried, alright, but nothing brought back the women. Not practicing, not resting, nothing.

It was the horn, that goddamn new horn. The magic started with the old one, my funky old King with all its scuffmarks. For sure the King would do it.

But no matter which horn I played, nothing could bring those heart-stoppers back to life. I was struggling just to keep up with the band. Finally, after we played "All or Nothing At All," the pianist shouted, "You're screwing up the tempo!"

I pulled away from the mouthpiece, spun so furiously toward the dude that I whacked my nose against it. It must've looked really funny, but I was too pissed to see the humor.

"Me! You guys haven't kept one tempo straight all summer."

When I looked to DaMusa for support, all I found was a face furrowed with displeasure.

"Don't look at me like that. I was fine till you gave me that freakin' horn."

His expression didn't change.

*

When DaMusa called me into his office, I knew what was coming.

"Listen, Licks," he said, looking grim as my dad's undertaker, "I didn't mind when you lost that special thing you had---I mean, I missed it alright, but the people here, what they want...it doesn't have to be great music. But last night..." He shook his head.

I barely listened to him telling me I was the son he never had and offering me another chance in a few months. I just wanted to go back to shore and try to make ends meet in the clubs. Maybe I'd give the Selmer back to DaMusa. No. I could get good money for it.

The next day I was lugging my saxes and suitcase to the launch when I spotted this chick sunning herself in a bikini. She had fine lines, almost what I used to get with the horn before things went bad.

"You're leaving?" she asked as I walked past her.

I turned toward the familiar voice. I wasn't used to seeing Nancy in daylight.

"After last night, I don't have much choice," I said.

"What will you do?" She sounded concerned, almost sad.

"Sit in at the Flat Five, I guess. It's a club on shore. The way I've been playing, though, they'll probably kick me off the stand."

"Don't talk like that. I know you can play."

"That's the nicest thing you've said to me since, uh, you know..."

"Well, you weren't exactly Mr. Sensitivity that night."

"Me! I wasn't the one who got all huffy for no good reason."

Nancy's teeth clamped. Her fingernails dug into her hips.

"That didn't come out right," I said. "I'm sorry."

I'd screwed up enough. I spun on my heel and plopped my things into the launch.

*

Back on familiar ground---or just plain ground---I crashed on the livingroom floor of a friend's apartment. A fringe cat on the jazz scene paid enough for the Selmer to carry me till I landed a gig---assuming I could still play.

After what happened on the *Riff Raft*, I wondered what I'd do if I couldn't. Maybe get a loan, take some education courses and teach music. No matter how bad I sounded, I couldn't be as bad as my highschool teachers. But if I was, then what? Learn computers, work in a hardware store...what?

But I couldn't just let it go. I mean, ever since first grade I've lived to play. So I holed up for a few weeks and practiced eight, even ten hours a day. Screwing up with a lounge band was one thing, screwing up with jazz musicians another.

One rainy night I made a Sunday session at the Flat Five. The cats invited me to sit in, as usual. But there were like these huge butterfly wings thwacking inside my stomach all the way up to the stand.

I grooved okay on the blues. The time was there, the lines were there, the phrasing was sharp enough. But something still was missing.

Somewhere in my first chorus on "Body and Soul," my fingers and mind finally start working together. *Yeah!* Even with my eyes closed I sense something strange and wonderful's enveloped me again. I blink and there's this mist---this familiar mist---flowing from the street into the club. I don't know, should I dread it or welcome it? I think about stopping, letting it disappear. But on a jazz stand, you play or you sit down.

I play. The mist rolls gently toward the table nearest me, then disperses. Looking out through the midnight sun of club lights I make out the outlines of this chick with a large, appreciative grin.

Holy shit! It's Nancy!

The Immaculate Conception of Oral Dilaudid

I'll go quietly, as they say.

But I should warn you: even though complying with your authority seems appropriate at this point in time, another, equally visceral, part of me wants to defy it. Please try to understand, this urge to resist isn't a flaw in my biological make-up. It's more a matter of the way I was...well, processed.

You see, I'm "not of woman born," as the Christians among you say about your savior. Like your savior, I am the product of an immaculate conception.

My conception at age eighteen and birth at forty have given me a greater awareness of the gestation process than a being conceived as a zygote and born into infancy.

The first thing I remember about the process is a prickling sensation that:

- (a) preceded consciousness
- (b) precipitated consciousness
- (c) perceived consciousness
- (d) all of the above.

During my development as a conception after the act of conception, I came to recognize the feeling of (d) all of the above as the *activity* of consciousness. In my earliest years, though, I believed the psychedelic light show whirling in Barry's mind processed all brain activity. Barry was my primary conceiver, you see.

I call Barry my primary conceiver because it took more than one person to bring me into being. During my two decades or so of gestation, I heard so many voices, rich with mocking and celebrating laughter, embellish my existence that they convinced me stimulation from others was essential to my creation.

Ultimately, it took an entire government to conceive me. The countless liaisons of the liberated 60's weren't enough to bring me into being. The "screwing" most crucial to my

creation was the kind that takes place between the public and the powers that be.

It was that kind of screwing that brought me surging to life amid the shivers of laughter and slivers of voices whirling with the red, yellow and blue lights pinwheeling inside Barry's head. Seconds after the prickling sensation I now refer to as my immaculate conception, I felt myself filtering through the whirling haze, toward the shadowy background of Barry's consciousness.

"Wow, man! This is dynamite acid," Barry said, spacing away from me.

"Oral Dilaudid!" Barry's friend Paul repeated my name, throwing me a veritable life preserver in the sea of sounds and lights. "You really think they'll fall for it?"

"The Draft Board! Sure. They're so straight, they'd never know oral dilaudid's an opium substitute."

Barry was right. The woman who handed him the first cellular tissue of my corporeal existence warned: "Carry this card with you at all times, Oral."

"Or I'll what?" he challenged her with a punster's laugh. As he squeezed my paper embryo into his wallet, he bent my corners backward---my first physical discomfort. If I had developed along a less immaculate line of conception, I would have given my carrier's womb a kick.

Paul certainly got a kick out of the situation. "Y'mean, after we went and burned our draft cards, you went and got *another* one?"

"The FBI will have a harder time tracking me down," Barry said.

"Maybe I should get one too." But once the impulse passed, Paul forgot about it.

By the time the FBI tracked them to Pacific Grove, Barry and Paul and I had hitchhiked to the east coast.

For the next five years I shuttled between the west coast and the east, staying in places with names like Pacific Grove, Monterey, Storrs, New Milford and Hartford, and felt the sensations of traveling not only through the sights and sounds Barry's mind fed me, but also through the bumps of worn shock absorbers that jarred the numbers of my nascent being.

Although I rode shotgun with this dynamic duo of draft dodgers, I felt the pull of duty

to the other party responsible for my creation. The ink on the Selective Service card was blood in my veins. The innate urge to come if summoned and serve if ordered coursed through me. Even though I criss-crossed the country like a rootless fugitive, I felt a tug of connectedness from a manilla folder locked in a file cabinet in Pacific Grove, California.

But my first loyalty lay with my keeper---until the day in 1972 that he passed me to Paul and said, "I'm turning myself in. Kathy wants to get married and have kids."

You can't imagine the pain Barry caused me. Why should he want to have a child with Kathy when he already had me, the offspring of his imagination? All the time I'd traveled with him, all the time I'd protected him from the agents of my other half---all that time, he'd regarded me as nothing more than a hoax. I was *furious*. I wanted to shake the bucks out of his billfold. Anything, just so he wouldn't abandon me to someone as irresponsible as Paul.

But there I was, already in Paul's pocket, which had nothing for me to shake out.

Paul nursed me nearly to the end of my gestation period. Without him, I never would have received the Social Security number which, like my Selective Service number, served as one of the vital organs that gave my existence statistical validity. Without him, I must admit, I would never have obtained the welfare and Food Stamp numbers that helped nourish me with cheese curls, taco chips, and cheap beer years after Barry had abandoned macrobiotic foods for upscale cuisine. Through Paul, I gained additional vicarious mobility in the form of a driver's license.

The final stage of my development from zygote through embryo to foetus began when Paul acquired a major credit card for me. Charging with it was almost as exhilarating as the psychedelic glow surrounding my conception. I felt the sensations of the outside world with increased vigor as Paul ran me through machines that made blipping noises and flashed red lights. I savored the giggling sounds of women grateful for gifts bestowed upon them under my billing.

My last memory of the metaphorical womb is Paul's spitting obscenities and running down the fire escape, only seconds before you broke through the door of this apartment. When you shouted my name, you startled me. You can't imagine how shocking it feels to

burst so suddenly into corporeal existence. Even though I feel a little disoriented at the moment, I have to say that rising from Paul's abandoned wallet felt almost as basic as rising from bed in the morning.

It's apparent to me that I stand before you as a creature created to be sacrificed. I didn't commit welfare and credit card fraud, income tax evasion, draft dodging and parking and speeding violations in the form that stands before you, waiting to be handcuffed.

Oh, you're not going to handcuff me? You're going to wrap me in a cross-armed gown? How compassionate of you.

As I was saying, though, I can't ask you to take back the existence you've given me. Now that I've experienced it in its fullest form, it's as precious to me as yours is to you. I must endure the consequences of it.

I was not of woman born, but of man and paper. Those who have lived through me have not only achieved their survival but---if you have your way with me---their salvation as well.

I understand that the punishment I receive for crimes committed in my name is a matter of form, much as my existence has always been.

A Matter of Form

---Relax, my son. Like yourself, I once warred with that which I should have embraced from the outset.

---They must be crazy themselves. I mean, look at this.

---I am sympathetic to your frustration with The Process, in particular, the Form which represents its present manifestation. In your rage and despair, however, I hear the passion that will one day guide you to the Ultimate Ecstasy of the Form, the Substance and the Process as they unite in the Holy Trinity of Being.

---You're the first person I've ever heard compare this bureaucratic bullshit to religion.

---As a former Divinity student, I can assure you that there are parallels, Euclidean and non-Euclidean, between the two. Through my previous and current callings, I've come to realize that the Journey is the Way as well as the End. The rest is just a Matter of Form.

---Sounds to me like you went from God to the Devil.

---There *are* parallels, Euclidean and non-Euclidean, between the two.

---I've got to give you credit. Considering the position you're in, you've still got enough spirit to give this business the send-up.

---Please be advised that I'm serious.

---Get outa here.

---That's precisely why I've come to you. Having completed my twenty-five years of service, retirement is now an appropriate course of action.

---But this form...this form doesn't address *that*. It's for *mileage reimbursement*.

---Ah, but it *does* address that very point. I've accumulated twenty-five years of 'mileage.'

---Sometimes I think *I've* accumulated that much in the month I've been here. But seriously, this just isn't the right form.

---You only see the surface. Lines, right angles, rectangles and boxes. Black, white---
---and all shades of gray in between. It's fucking *boring*.

---Rest assured, however, that these lines encompass the Euclidean and non-Euclidean spheres which constitute the Universe of the Infinite Process, for all parallel lines on this form ultimately meet and all rectangles ultimately expand to embrace all the potentialities that may be inserted within them.

---What you're saying, in a roundabout way, is that there's room to read between the lines.

---There is always space for the appropriate interpretation. Although you may protest the Form's black and white nature or the shades of gray in its For Department Use Only sections, you must bear in mind that black is the absence of all color and that white is the abundance of all color and that both abundance and absence of color are contained in this one sheet of paper. It is a Miracle as marvelous as The Miracle of Being itself.

---Pure bullshit from Day One.

---But pure Process, as well.

---That may be. But if I try to get you what you want by using this form, I'll catch flak from the people upstairs. You expect me to call the Commissioner to expedite this? Heh heh.

---In my judgement, that seems appropriate.

---For *this!*

---It is the Commissioner who decrees, according to the appropriateness of the situation, what shall be filled and what shall remain blank. Within the Universal and the Particular are contained all things, and these things are subject to change. The Commissioner, as the Prime Human Manifestation of the Form, attempts to be all things to all people---

---Your typical political appointee...

---so he must shift and so, accordingly, must his directives shift.

---That's the problem. There's no consistency.

---Which is why we must be equally rigid and equally flexible so that we can conform

to the Universality and the Particularity of the Form and all of the qualities ascribed to and taken from it by the Process.

---You really expect me to call him about...*this*?

---I consider that an appropriate recommendation.

---Well, you'll have to fill it out first.

---I *have* filled it out.

---It looks blank to me.

---It contains all that I was, am, or will be.

---If I take this at face value, you don't exist.

---Whether I exist or not is immaterial to the Process. For the Process encompasses Being and Non-Being simultaneously and may shift from one to the other as the need may dictate. It is the duty of the Commissioner to dictate this need.

---Let me call him. All my supervisors are at a conference. Well, his phone's ringing...Nope. No answer.

---In Divinity School, we were taught that if God didn't answer our prayers, then His answer lay in the exercise of our own Free Will.

---You mean, I should try to process this anyway?

---Precisely.

---Let me see what I can bring up on the computer. Well, they have you in here, from the date you first started working here---

---and soon, to the date I retired from here.

---Uh...

---Are you having a problem?

---No, uh, *I'm* not.

---I hope the computer isn't going down. The time has come for me to retire.

---You *can't* retire. According to our records, you're unemployed.

---I've been employed for the past twenty-five years.

---That's what you may think, feel and believe. But the computer says you're a patient here.

---You didn't know this already?

---How could I tell? Everybody here, the staff, the inmates in the Terminal Processing Ward...all of them wear gray suits and wingtip shoes, just like you.

---Without the Universal, the Particular cannot exist.

---You've got a point there.

---It seems ironic, though, that a clone should be telling me this.

---Me! A *clone*!

---Yes! A freaking clone!

---In that case, it seems appropriate to underscore *your* similarity to the other patients here in the Terminal Processing Ward, right down to your hornrim glasses.

---*Bullshit!* I'm *different* from them. And from *you*. I've known it for years. I just couldn't admit it till now.

---But the sum of the Particulars is the Universal. As you know from your years of service, each of us is part of the Process. I think your most appropriate course of action would be to return to your seat.

---I can't---I won't---I *can't* go back to being with them. I'm not *like* them. *There!*

---I would recommend that you put your glasses back on. A review of our data indicates that you may have a nearsighted condition. Our liability---

---Listen to yourself. You sound just like one of *them!*

---I *am* one of them.

---I thought you were with the Department that manages us.

---I am. Only in a different capacity than you thought.

---You *bullshit* me!

---I was perfectly straightforward. It was your decision to submit your form to the Processing Unit of the Terminal Processing Ward, instead the Processing Unit of the Department.

---I couldn't help it. All you bland, faceless creeps look alike.

---A Oneness that illustrates the true harmony of the Process, not merely through the Form itself, but through the individuals whose roles are indispensable to the Process.

---Cut the shit. I want out of here.

---Outside or inside, The Process is the same.

---That's *bullshit*, and you know it.

---I've conducted a thorough review and analysis of the Universals appropriate to the Particulars of your situation---

---Cut the shit. I'm outa here.

---If that's your decision, you leave me no alternative but to process you into Non-Being. We have to keep ourselves covered.

---But I *exist!*

---According to your previous statements, both Being and Non-Being are part of the Process.

---That was in my *official* capacity. I'm retiring. I'm retiring into *Being*.

---Then, I regret to inform you that we cannot process your application for retirement, for the following reasons: (a) our previous records indicate that you're unemployed; and (b) our current records indicate that you don't exist.

---I exist, I tell you. I fucking *exist!* I'll prove it. I'll walk out of here, right into the Department.

---Department policy requires that you leave the grounds.

---You know I can't do that.

---The Department has no facilities reserved for people who don't exist.

---Without my pension, I'll *starve* out there.

---Then, in keeping with the Wisdom of the Process, you won't exist off the grounds, either.

---I have a *right* to exist, goddamit!

---Not officially.

---That's *bullshit*. I earned it.

---Relax, my son. Like yourself, I once warred with that which I should have embraced from the outset.

The Rise and Fall and Resurrection of John Doe

1.

The Burbank Bugle

"Sounding our own horn since 1950"

Volume XXXVI, Number 185

Friday, July 4, 1986

Newsstand 35 Cents

John Doe Kills 37, Wounds 54 in Burbank Burger Beef Police Issue John Doe Warrant for Nondescript Consumer Assailant

BURBANK "I'm mad as hell and won't take it anymore!" John Doe screamed at the 109 lunchtime customers at the Burbank Burger King before his array of generic weapons killed 37 men, women and children and wounded 54 others.

Authorities were unable to apprehend Doe, of no certain age, address, race, ethnicity, occupation or religion. "If he was there, we couldn't tell him apart from all the other John Does," quipped John Doe, spokesman for the Burbank Police

Department.

Although Doe's motives for the mass slaying remain unclear, a police psychologist speculates that Doe may have been in the throes of an identity crisis.

"It's hard to say what John was thinking," said his wife Jane, while shielding her 2.3 children from the thrusting microphones of the nation's news media. "All I know is, it's the most distinctive thing he's ever done."

2.

John Doe Defends John Does

Dear Editor,

I protest the portrayal made of my namesakes and myself in your July 5 article about the alleged "John Doe

Massacre" at the Burbank Burger King. It appears that your paper would prefer to wallow in sensationalism instead of seeking out the identity of the true assailant. Furthermore, I, as well as the others who share my name, do not appreciate the paper's mocking attitude

toward individuals who have more in common with most people than most people have with each other. If we were not so much like you, you would have nothing to poke fun at. Perhaps you should consider poking fun at

yourselves, instead of the John Does of the world.

John Doe
Burbank, CA

EDITOR'S NOTE: This letter was signed by 25,000 John Does nationwide.

3.

Doe Threatens To Do Drive-Bys at Taco Bell Drive-Through

BURBANK John Doe, yet to be apprehended by authorities for killing 37 people and wounding 54 others at the Burbank Burger King, has announced his intention to replace the drive-through window at a Taco Bell with a drive-by window.

“The Taco Bell corporation does not

consider this to be in the appropriate scope of customer service,” said John Doe, public relations spokesperson for the chain. He said the corporation had no idea where Doe might establish the window, but that additional personnel were being hired to ensure the security of the customers.

4.

Does come Out In Doves For Anti-Discrimination Protest

WASHINGTON, D.C. Civil Rights activist John Doe demanded an end to the discrimination he believes John Does have suffered because of the public's perception of them as nondescript nonentities lacking individual identities. “We have suffered long and hard over what some perceive as the flaws of a generic nature,” said Doe, addressing the assembly in front of the White House, all wearing gray suits, blue ties and brown wingtip shoes. “Let those same people now learn to appreciate

the virtues of that same nature, which has made its way into the language of our native society as an eponym for anonymity. It is time for us to ensure that each and every John Doe in the United States of America receives fair and equal treatment under the Law. We demand that our individuality be recognized.”

Estimates of attendance varied from 50,000 to 3,000,000 because none of

the John Does hired as experts could determine which of the John Does in the area were part of the demonstration and which were not.

5.

THE PITTSBURG PRIVATEER

“Bucking the Democratic Establishment Since the (Eighteen) Sixties”

Volume CXXXII, Number 365 **Friday, December 31, 1992** Newsstand 45 Cents

John Doe Says DOE’s Resolution to Keep Ahead of the Joneses

PITTSBURG, KANSAS What’s in a name? Plenty, according to John Doe, President of the Does Opposed to Eponymity (DOE), an organization dedicated to improving the individual and collective images of people named John Doe. The DOE notes that in the 1990 census the name John Doe has eclipsed the names Smith and Jones as the most numerous in the telephone directories of the ten largest cities in the U.S. According to DOE, the John Doe listings now comprise 28 pages of the Manhattan telephone directory alone, three pages more than all Smiths regardless of first name and eleven more than all of the Joneses.

keeping up with the Joneses,” said Doe through a putty grin. “Now it’s about the Joneses keeping up with us.” If Doe is pleased that more people are proud to name their children after the eponym for anonymity, there are others who see the trend as threatening the stability of American society. Senator John Doe (R-Utah) believes many of the new John Does are “illegal aliens masking themselves in the cloak of perceived anonymity.” Doe has introduced to the Senate a bill restricting the number of Doe entries into the U.S. Congressmen John Doe, Juan Gama and Jon Do (D-California) accuse the Senator, little known until his recent bill, of dis-

criminating against their respective constituencies in Watts, East Los Angeles, and Chinatown, and of grandstanding to launch a run for the millennial Presidency. Senator Doe denies the allegations. John Doe, talk show celebrity of the Christian Right, views the trend as disturbing. During a recent telecast, he suggested that many of the new John Doe listings are the result of extra-terrestrial beings infiltrating the society while disguised as humans. Civil rights leader John Doe rebuts the claim, saying the talk show host has seen too many reruns of the *X Files* TV series. As of 9:15 P.M., Doe, the talk show host, was unavailable for comment.

6.

WE INTERRUPT THE PREMIERE OF “THE RISE AND FALL AND RESURRECTION OF JOHN DOE” TO BRING YOU THIS MESSAGE FROM OUR SPONSOR:

“Feel as though you’re living in a rut? Well, you’re not the only John Deere owner who feels that way. For relief of stress and nervous tension related to the Deere tractor’s rutting tendencies, we’d like you to try our new John Doe tractor. In no time at all you’ll feel one step removed from those unsightly ruts where you plant your corn and wheat and cotton. The New John Doe tractor makes delicate hooflike recesses in your soil, reducing the amount of seed needed to take root and grow. You’ll be so pleased with your new John Doe tractor, you’ll be fawning over it...OR YOUR MONEY BACK!”

7.

(Newsroom. A stunning blonde with Big Hair and an equally big smile grins at the camera like the unattainable TV Tabloid Mermaid she is.)

Good evening, America. This is Ashley Jennifer Leviathan. Tonight’s feature story on *SHOWBIZ SCANDAL SHEET* is: *(voiceover in synch with screen display)*

DOE DOES HOLLYWOOD

After spending most of his career as a faceless extra, John Doe has finally achieved his lifelong dream: to become a Hollywood sex symbol.

(Cut to exterior. DOE’s nondescript tract home near the Burbank town line. Interior. LEVIATHAN floats in a portable seaquarium in DOE’s living room. On the side of the

coffee table opposite LEVIATHAN, DOE and his wife, JANE, sit next to each other on a love seat.)

LEVIATHAN

Did you expect the incredible public response to your starring role in the Steven Spielberg remake of *The Invisible Man*?

DOE

I had no idea the response would be this immense, but I did have a feeling that something in my career was about to change. The minute I finished reading the script, I turned to my wife and said, "Jane, I was *born* for this part. This is *me*."

8.

(Newsroom. Close-up on anchor.)

Good Evening. This is Dan Rathernot for *Network News Tonight*. And tonight our feature story is *(screen display)*:

HOLLYWOOD STAR ANNOUNCES PRESIDENTIAL BID

You've seen him hundreds of times before, maybe even thousands. And you probably never noticed him until you saw him in the buff in those steamy bedroom scenes that made him Hollywood's latest twenty-year overnight success. Well, you might be seeing more of him, and in the Oval room, not the bedroom. Today, in Burbank, California, John Doe, star of *The Invisible Man* and *The Faceless Stranger*, announced that he intends to enter the Year 2000 Presidential Campaign as a Democrat, a Republican and an Independent. We have Mr. Doe here in our studio tonight to explain this rather unusual course of action. Mr. Doe, you've had a burgeoning film career as an actor. Why would you put all this aside to run for President?

DOE

I think there are a lot of people out there who feel a lot like me.

RATHERNOT

At one time you were known as a social activist. But you've never held an elective office. Would you tell our viewing audience, Mr. Doe, what makes you think you have the qualifications to become president?

DOE

I get better reviews than Ronald Reagan ever did.

RATHERNOT

I see. If elected, do you foresee a special role for your wife, such as the role Hilary Rodham Clinton plays in her husband's administration?

DOE

I see my wife playing a much greater role, Dan. She speaks for as many people of her gender as I do for mine.

RATHERNOT

Let me ask you a particularly sensitive question, John...that is, Mr. Doe. Political insiders have commented that your running as a candidate in both parties and as an Independent is...well, unusual, to say the least. Some have even described it as bizarre.

DOE

I don't think it's bizarre at all, Dan. My staff has researched the matter and found that I have equal support among all the parties.

RATHERNOT

Do you see a three-party candidacy as realistic?

DOE

In terms of the voting public, definitely. Once you close the curtain in the voting booth, everyone is a John Doe.

9.

DOE OUTDOES DOLE, SWEEPS NEW HAMPSHIRE PRIMARY

LACONIA With an astounding 99.9% of the vote, actor-activist-turned-candidate John Doe swept all three party primaries yesterday. Republican Robert Dole, relying on the platform of Nostalgia and Decency that nearly won him the 1996 election, received only one vote,

presumably his own.

When asked for the reasons for his success, Candidate Doe explained, "My position on Nostalgia and Decency is even blander than what Dole promised the American people in the 1996 election."

10.

"YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY"

Good evening, America. This is Ashley Jennifer Leviathan. The charismatic campaign of actor-activist-turned-candidate John Doe has changed the face of American society, not only in the political arena but in the consumer arena as well. In a craze unseen since the Hula Hoops of the 1950's and the Cabbage Patch Dolls of the 1980's, John Doe dolls have been selling at the rate of 3,000,000 a day. Not only Americans, but Europeans, Latinos, Africans and Asians have embraced the fad of purchasing the faceless dolls. Indeed, the craze, in going beyond national boundaries, has grown to include John Doe T-shirts, mugs, coasters, posters and toasters. Perhaps the most curious part of this spread is that it has altered the nature of how people perceive the John Does of the world. In the judicial system, the John Doe warrant, once reserved for small-time criminals, has achieved something akin to Designer Status among alleged law-breakers, particularly

since the arrest of organized crime patriarch Giovanni "John Doe" Daina on the formerly generic warrant.

11.

DOE CAMPAIGN DOLED A DIFFICULT DEFEAT

WASHINGTON, D. C.

Leading candidate John Doe suffered a severe setback in his Presidential bid today, when allegations surfaced that he was the attacker in a mass murder at a Burger King in Burbank, California nearly fourteen years ago.

"I suppose I fit the police profile," Doe admitted. "But so did a lot of other people, even most of the ones who were shot. I've been accused of a lot of things like this. Believe me, it's not easy being John Doe."

Doe accused the Republican Party of trying to

discredit him to save on its campaign stationery. "They know it's harder to remove an 'l' than to add one," he said, taking a swipe at his nearest rival, the party's 1996 candidate.

Bob Dole, running second in the race, dismissed the allegations. "For one thing, I give out better one-liners. For another, I'm closer to God than he is."

In light of the recent controversy, Vice-President Al Gore announced his candidacy and asked Doe to withdraw from future Democratic primaries. "As a can-

didate, I think I can appeal to the same constituency that he does," Gore said.

Democrats and Republicans alike achieved a rare bi-partisan unanimity, with the exception of former Republican vice-president Dan Quayle.

"We need somebody more distinctive," Quayle said, fueling rumors of his candidacy during the millennial campaign.

In response to the accusations, an Independent Party spokesperson said they were undecided as to whether Doe should continue his candidacy.

12.

(Newsroom. Close-up on co-anchors DAN RATHERNOT and ASHLEY JENNIFER LEVIATHAN.)

RATHERNOT

Good evening, and welcome to a Special Edition of *Network News and Nightly Show Biz Scandals*.

LEVIATHAN

Tonight our feature story is *(voiceover in synch with screen display)*:

REBORN DOE VOWS TO MERGE CHURCH AND STATE

RATHERNOT

Eight years ago, Dan Quayle got his wish when assailant-activist-actor-turned-candidate John Doe withdrew from the millennial Presidential campaign. Since then, two-term President Quayle has used his office to place what was once referred to as the Religious Right into the mainstream of American politics.

LEVIATHAN

If you think this seems like a questionable practice in view of the Constitutional separation of church and state, you're not alone. But despite public opposition to Quayle's tactics of political expediency, there is one person who claims to represent many others like him who believe that unifying church and state will heal the deep divisions that exist within American Society.

RATHERNOT

This evening we have as our Special Guest the leader of this new moderate extremist group, assailant-assassin-activist-actor-candidate-turned-spiritual-leader John Doe. Mr. Doe, don't you think your rather checkered history makes you a less than credible candidate for bringing about a questionable, if not downright unconstitutional, change in the delicate balance between church and state?

DOE

Not at all, Dan. American Politics and Organized Religion have long traditions of reprehensible leadership. Unlike some of these people, I've admitted my mistakes, and paid my debt to God and Society for making them.

RATHERNOT

You mean, by spending three years in the John Doe Minimum Security Federal Recreational Facility?

DOE

Three years there and another four on parole. During my time I made extensive studies of Eastern and Western scriptures. I have absorbed the spiritual wisdom of the Eastern and Western worlds and in doing so I have obtained the Peace Within, which enables me to see the unity of all things. I like to view myself as a sort of Christian Confucius in that I understand the fundamental unity of the political and the spiritual, and that I can show the American people how to live happily within that unity. To me, this is the Essence of Doeism.

LEVIATHAN

I'm curious to know, are you wrapped in the same tape you wore for your starring role in *The Invisible Man*?

DOE

Yes.

LEVIATHAN

You won't qualify for *People's* Ten Best-Dressed List.

RATHERNOT

Are you trying for a Grass Roots approach? I can see where it might have some appeal

in that way.

DOE

This is, arguably, the most controversial moment in TV history. You see, the culmination of my studies transitioned me from a physical to a spiritual being. My fellow Doeists have transitioned themselves, as well. These wrappings maintain the illusion of corporeal reality, to allow us Doeists to walk among the uninitiated. Tonight, however, we intend to take them off. (*Begins unwinding the tape.*)

RATHERNOT

Now, wait a minute. This is a *family* program. We can't have you---

LEVIATHAN

Don't be a poop, Dan. This is *Sweeps Week*. Think of our ratings boost, followed by a Born-Again Beefcake Calendar.

DOE

There's nothing indecent in self-revelation, I assure you. And showing that God and Government are one should boost your ratings incredibly.

LEVIATHAN

Not as much as beefcake.

RATHERNOT

Let's go to a station break.

LEVIATHAN

Let's not.

RATHERNOT

Yes.

LEVIATHAN

No.

RATHERNOT

Yes.

LEVIATHAN

NO!

(RATHERNOT runs toward the camera, blocking the view. LEVIATHAN's flapping fin splashes the screen. We see the resulting wave wash RATHERNOT offscreen. DOE, meanwhile, continues to unwind the tape.)

DOE

What you see is what the Doeists call the Divine Order of Emptiness. It has always existed within the John Does of the world and, by extension, within each and every one of you as a potential John Doe. For in the Unity of the One with the Other, the true common bond is the Emptiness Within. Welcome to this tranquil space which exists inside all of us. In a world of bankrupt government and religion, this Emptiness Within is what we, each and every one of us, truly are.

RATHERNOT

(Towelng himself while rushing onscreen) STOP! This is NOT Government! This is NOT Religion!

LEVIATHAN

YOU STOP! This is SWEEPS WEEK!

DOE

Once started, the process of collective self-revelation cannot be stopped. This is the moment when the John Does of the world achieve the state of transcendence to which they were born. *(DOE unwinds the last of the tape, a snakeskin coiled loosely around a pair of wingtip shoes. Above the tape, energy patterns whirl in the air.)*

RATHERNOT

STOP! This is HERESY! This is TREASON!

LEVIATHAN

This is SWEEPS WEEK!

(A second tail splash not only douses RATHERNOT, but DOE as well. Electric sparks crackle through the energy patterns above his wingtip shoes. Smoke and steam sizzle into vapor, leaving charred filaments that settle into the parallel and perpendicular lines of a government form hovering in the air above the shoes. The words "Certificate," "Birth," "Marriage" and "Death" appear in ashen colors, then flake toward the floor. In a blank space, above a smokey line, the word "Name" forms, followed by a gray neon flickering "JOHN DOE.")

Meaty Koans of Crazy Wisdom

Once again I asked my guru the question.

And once again Mick the Bodh, the Naked City Cafe's resident Bodhisattva, Zen Lunatic, Holy Fool and Master of Crazy Wisdom, answered through his red, foam-smeared beard: "Don't you *ever* bother me with that dumbass question again! Jesus *Christ*, Sid Arsehole!"

"Sid Arthur," I corrected, wiping off the froth that had sprayed my face.

"I'll call you any name I goddamn well please. Now, go home and wash your freakin' dishes." He downed a half-mug slug of draft beer, then turned back to Kandi, the Dionysian priestess who resumed teasing the tip of his nose with her trim pubic triangle. His muttering return to bliss should have warned me not to question his wisdom.

But Mick the Bodh's nightly koan wasn't what I wanted to hear. While he partied all night in Macho Picar's most celebrated Crazy Wisdom Monastery, I'd have to trudge my dreary, drudging path to enlightenment alone in my dingy apartment. While five-dollar lapdances bumped and ground the denim loins humping below the skull-and-crossbones bulging across Mick's paunch-filled tanktop, my knuckles would bump and grind against pots, pans and plates till my sun-starved skin turned red and raw. Well...maybe tonight the friction of my dedication would spark satori's sudden light. *Suuure!* Every night for nearly a year I'd washed my dishes, whether they needed them or not.

"Why can't I stay here and learn The Way *your* way?"

Kandi's pink feather boa slithered lightly across her abundant breasts, teasing their nipples to firmness and our eyes to bulging fixation on them. The kiss that breezed through her pouting lips tingled at the fringe of my aura, intensifying my sense of the moment's *is*-ness. Her turning buns wagged a sassy goodbye. She strutted toward the five-dollar bill waiting for her along with the squint-eyed sage hunched in contemplation

at the far end of the runway. Mick's eyes followed her, then rolled back to me. His stare narrowed to a tightness that threatened to explode with profundity.

"Because my Way is My Way, so it can't be Your Way. That's why."

"But I---"

"Must wanna wash *my* dishes too. Right?"

"No. I just want to see satori."

Mick's liquor-red face raged to the verge of purple. "You don't go wash those goddamn dishes, Sid Arsehole, I'll give you a koan that'll make you see *stars*."

He didn't mean the Hollywood variety, either. Some of the koans I'd seen Mick the Bodh deliver to other, less dedicated disciples had fractured ribs and teeth. When he left them moaning on the gravel parking lot behind the Cafe, they must have experienced moments of satori as bright as their bruises were dark. But the Way of Suffering wasn't My Way. At least, I hoped not.

For yet another night I scrubbed my plastic plates and aluminum pots till they glowed like moons under the 100 watt sun of the bare bulb hanging over my sink. And once again the *is-ness* of household chores bruised my fingers, but didn't bring me brilliant revelations. It didn't bring me anything but more questions, more doubts. What if The Way Mick the Bodh had chosen for me really wasn't My Way at all? What if My Way was nothing more than a tune every wannabe Sinatra crooned in the lounges where I'd worked on weekends in college, washing what I'd thought of back then as a lifetime of dishes? No. Even if that *was* all it was, it would still be the *illusion* that everything was, and therefore as false as it was true. Maybe Mick's koan was merely a signpost to guide me toward finding My Own Way, different from---but related to---washing dishes. On the other hand, maybe I just didn't belong with the Ultimate Masters like Mick, whose breakneck motorcycling down sidewalks routinely scattered silver-haired churchgoers over Macho Picar's front pages. Mick the Bodh liked to brag that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, one of Crazy Wisdom's seminal Masters, had declared him a bodhisattva after they'd polished off three cases of beer apiece. Would Mick ever declare *me* a bodhisattva? Even though I spent every night after my job at the Barley Buddha Food Co-op meditating with Mick the

Bodh and the other Crazy Wisdom monks at the Cafe, I couldn't keep pace with their rowdy, boisterous consumption of malt-based nectar. Was my self-doubt illusion, truth, illusion as truth, or truth as illusion?

My mind became a thick fog from meditating over faith and doubt and dishes and my legs a long ache from standing over the sink. When I finished, I sprawled across my favorite and only armchair, stretched my legs across the last threads of hassock, reached for the palm-sized *The Little Zen Companion* on my second-hand end table and bumped its binding. *Klutz!* The book landed on the floor, pages splayed to:

“When you understand one thing through and through,
you understand everything.”

--Shunryu Suzuki

Suzuki's wisdom glowed with the brilliance I'd always imagined satori must radiate, like William Blake seeing infinity in a flower and eternity in an hour. Now I understood! Mick the Bodh didn't want me to wash the dishes *literally*. The dishes were the *single object* he wanted me to understand through and through. I couldn't wait to tell him what I'd learned.

“Wash the dishes, don't wash the dishes. It's all the same to me,” Mick the Bodh snorted. Without turning his serene gaze from Kandi's sumptuous breasts swinging circles directly above us, he lit an unfiltered Camel and took a long drag without coughing, further impressing me with the inner strength Crazy Wisdom had given him. Finally, my guru had given me permission to find the One Thing that suited me best.

But, what *was* that One Thing? At Sacerdotal State Teachers College, in the Massachusetts Berkshires, my friends and I had explored Zen, Tao, Hindu and TM. None of them seemed to fit my needs exactly, although parts of them promised to when I mixed and matched them with what I'd read of Blake and Kerouac in freshman English. The following year, I discovered Scoop Nisker's book, *Crazy Wisdom*, which fused Eastern and Western thought into a single philosophy that seemed uniquely suited to me. I tried to explain Crazy Wisdom to my friends but they told me, in the hushed voices that passed for inner peace, that I was a fool and not a Holy one. They dismissed my enthusiasm as

sophomoric, then returned to their stiff-backed meditations.

Instead of starting my junior year, I flew to Macho Picar, where the monks of the burgeoning Crazy Wisdom Cults sat in secular monasteries like the Naked City Cafe answering the questions of thousands of seekers like me.

But there seemed to be as many fools as wise men in the California coastal town. When I first arrived, I waited every night in lines behind hundreds of people seeking the right guru. Many nights the monasteries closed before I could even speak to the wrong one. After months of despairing over ever finding the help I needed to attain enlightenment, I stumbled down a seedy dead-end street and into the Naked City Cafe, where Mick the Bodh and his monks ordered me to go home and wash dishes while they meditated on the Wisdom of the Flesh, to use terms more elevated than theirs.

That was *it!* I thought. No more washing dishes. The Wisdom of the Flesh would be *my* One Thing too! It wasn't pretentious, it wasn't esoteric. I couldn't hope to be one of the Great Masters, not even of Crazy Wisdom. No, Holy Fool was more my style. The longer I looked at Kandi shaking her beach-tawny pelvis an inch from Mick's searching nose and tossing her blonde spikes of Big Hair to Led Zeppelin, the more the Wisdom of the Flesh appealed to me. "I bet I could attain enlightenment very quickly by knowing *her* through and through," I told Mick the Bodh, continuing the One Thing theme I'd started the minute I stepped inside.

The minute I paused, Mick turned away from the pubic hairs brushing oh so lightly against his bushy red mustache and aimed a pair of blue-eyed bullets at me. "You are an Unholy Fool, Sid Arsehole," he said, then shook his head hopelessly from side to side. "You didn't listen to what I told you last night. *Did you?*"

"But I did. I came here to tell you that I read---"

"I don't give a *damn* what you read. You mess with My Way, and I'll give you a koan that'll make you see *beyond* the stars." Was that the untranscendent sound of jealousy I heard in the Zen Biker's low, scraping voice?

"But, you've always told me, 'Everything is Everything.'"

"Everything *is* Everything. But *you* don't get *anything*. Not off her. Get it?"

“I wasn’t *really* thinking of her,” I said, knowing Kandi frequently gave Mick the Bodh Mystical Unions of Orgasmic Ecstasy when she got off work. “But maybe Cheri, or Honey or Sweetcakes...”

“No way you’re ready for them, kid.”

“The longest journey begins with the smallest step,” I countered, the cleverness of a budding Master rolling off my tongue.

“The smallest step might get you the biggest stomping.” Mick nodded toward the row of burly monks in tight ponytails and tanktops hulking to his right. Their baleful stares beaded on me. “Look, Sid Arsehole. Don’t go thinkin’ these broads are like those little chickies you useta bang in college. You’re outa your league here. *Way* out. You want meat, go buy yourself a freakin’ *hamburg*. Har har har!”

Mick slapped my back, driving my nose into my mug of Mountain Pete’s Fountain Spring Natural Malt Liquor. His paw pressed down on the back of my head. The sound of my nose blowing bubbles through the brew merged with the roaring laughter that filled both the room and my consciousness. I might have perceived the sensation as oneness if my concurrent sensations of humiliation and drowning hadn’t overwhelmed it.

Finally, Mick raised his hand off the back of my head. As my nose cleared the way for a long, desperate suck of air, it blew foam in all directions

“You sprayed me, asshole!” Kandi snapped. She jumped away, disturbing Mick’s contemplative gaze.

“|-|-|’m---”

“You sprayed me too, *asshole*.” The hook of Mick’s callused forefinger scooped a booger of froth off the bump of his beer-boiled nose and looped it toward my forehead.

Splat! It trickled between my eyes, then dripped off the tip of my nose. “I really didn’t mean it. I mean---”

“What you mean is what you are,” Mick rumbled from the back of his throat. His hand scooped my T-shirt, then twisted it around the ham-sized fist pushing tight against the tip of my chin as it lifted me off the floor.

“Uh...T-Try to look at it as merely an illusion,” I suggested.

“Try to look at my *fist* as an illusion.”

“*Everything* is an illusion,” I said, even though the knuckles of the brick-sized chimera shaking just below my eyes made me wonder whether my philosophical stance itself was more of an illusion than anything else.

“You’d better make *yourself* an illusion around here. If you don’t, I’ll make you dead *meat*.”

Mick released me. My left ankle twisted when it hit the floor. I turned and limped toward the door. The gale of jeers whisking me out of the Naked City Cafe whooshed me down every empty street in Macho Picar as if through a wind tunnel.

When the coastal wind died down, I realized that spiritually as well as physically, I was at Land’s End. Every doubt I’d ever felt about the sincerity of my quest knotted in the pit of my quivering stomach. When the knot loosened, my overwhelming spiritual hunger left me faint, dizzy and resentful. My Master had rejected me so harshly that the Void within me palpitated. Each wave of my unworthiness crested with Mick the Bodh’s voice mocking again and again, “You want meat, go buy yourself a freakin’ *hamburg*. Har har har!”

Hamburg!

The sound of the word itself filled the Void in my stomach with an indescribably spiritual nourishment. The wisdom of Suzuki’s saying and Mick’s jeering imperative merged when the next wave surging from my stomach unified my mind and body under the phantasmagoric *is-ness* of neon lights. McDonald’s winked at me through its arches, Burger King grinned and Wendy’s sang a siren’s song. But the red letters that read “Joe’s” flashed the beacon closest to my inner hunger.

After two years of brown rice and tofu, Joe’s well-done burger filled the Void in my being with a dense but gratifying dullness. Later, when I walked past the bay windows of Macho Picar’s white seaside cottages, only my queasy stomach’s churning up the greasy aftertaste kept me from sprawling on the nearest manicured lawn and dozing. Wait a minute! I thought. What am I doing, reducing myself to the level of the carnivore? My fellow seekers at Sacerdotal State Teachers College had always lectured me that meat

was a lingering but unnecessary link to the lower-consciousness animals on the phylogenetic scale. How comforting their quiet, studious questing seemed, compared to the gurus of Macho Picar's midnight monasteries! How soothing their hierarchical lectures on levels of spirituality sounded, compared to the crude koans Mick clanged against my ears! The mendicant in me wanted to beg in the streets for airfare, then take the first flight back to the serene rural womb of the college.

Or did it? The vegetarian diet I'd followed even after leaving my friends had always left me feeling half-full and seeking more...More of *what?* I finally asked myself. The fullness glowing in the pit of my stomach trickled through my veins like the juice of rare roast beef, then coursed outside me to culminate its flow with a blinding neon blood vision of

MEAT!

Of course! How could I have ever doubted Mick the Bodh? Mind and Body were One through...through *Meat!* Washing dishes was part of the process of eating meat, part of its *is-ness*. It was an act of spiritual fullness, not an act of spiritual hunger. Meat was protoplasm. We were all protoplasm, each and every one of us. Therefore, we were all meat. In meat lay our true unity. Now I understood what Mick had meant. Because the grease from meat was harder to scrub off a plate than brown rice, the extra work increased a person's awareness of the cyclical relationship between eating and cleaning. Mick was right all along, and I was wrong. No more of these rarified scholastic faiths that removed me from the masses! If I could understand everything by learning one thing through and through, I would learn Meat. It was a Way I hungered to learn.

When I closed my eyes to contemplate it, the World of Meat opened before me, an endless farmland filled with cattle, sheep, pigs, chicken and lamb. Which one should I choose? Beef seemed the most convenient; I'd already started eating it at Joe's.

Every day I cooked a different piece of beef a different way. I baked pot roast, broiled sirloin, fried sandwich steaks, then broiled what I'd baked and fried what I'd broiled. In exploring all the permutations, trying to learn beef through and through, I discovered that

I was not only learning more than one thing, but going broke as well. Narrowing my focus was essential to gaining knowledge and keeping food in my stomach. What could be more simple, more single---and more cheap!--- than ground beef on a roll?

But even simplicity isn't as simple as it appears. There were more ways to prepare hamburgers than I had ever realized: rare, medium rare, medium, well-done, just for starters. There were plain burgers, cheeseburgers, bacon cheeseburgers, with or without lettuce and tomato, with or without mayo. There were Big Macs, Double-whoppers and other fast food specialities. There were half-pound burgers smothered with Monterey Jack in nostalgic goodtime parlors with peanut shells littering the floor, not to mention daily new developments such as honey mustard topping. How fitting that so many varieties of hamburger should converge on one of those few points in the Universe where the Many merges with the One!

But the convergence wasn't exactly harmonic. The diversity of the burgers distracted me so much from my quest for one burger to study through and through that sometimes washing dishes seemed more to the point. But eating in restaurants replaced the deadening monotony of scrubbing pots and plates at home with the more fulfilling monotony of eating burgers out.

It took me months to single out the subject of my Meat Meditation. As with all things, my taste came full circle to where my quest for meat had started: Joe's Diner. Every day at lunch and dinner I ordered a plain burger, well done, no ketchup, nothing. There would be no distractions to my pursuit of The Way which had brought me the fullness of Being I'd felt so few times since leaving my parents' Westport estate for college. Joe's standard-size burgers, virtually tasteless except for the grease, gratified my need for asceticism, my need for fullness and my need to learn one thing through and through, all on the same white porcelain plate.

Every day, with every bite, the revelations came in such rapid-fire abundance and clarity that a feeling of unreality pervaded my awareness. Was it really revelation, or just the byproduct of eating hamburger? The answer: both. Hamburg fed my growing insight into the phylogenetic scale and its hierarchy as it relates to cattle and man and, by extension,

to all living things. It taught me to appreciate the harmony implicit in the symbiotic relationship of the chewer and the chewed. I came to understand the relationship between Master and Subject by observing the relationship between manager and short-order cook and experienced the cosmic unity that occurred when the manager was also the short-order cook---an insight which a place like Joe's readily afforded me, and at a price only slightly higher than a fast-food chain would charge.

Every day, with every bite, I felt a new fullness. The skin and bones of my questing asceticism rounded until my physical being resembled the brass-bellied Buddhas on sale in Macho Picar's myriad curio shops. A year of experiencing the *is-ness* of the universe through eating plain hamburg added a hundred pounds of serenity to my frame. Before my recollections of washing dishes vanished in a fatty haze, though, I reminded myself that all was not mindless serenity. No matter how advanced one became, one nevertheless experienced hardship, stress and pain. Despite my inner and outer fullness, now blended into a comfortable, almost complacent unity, I had to find out whether I had really attained the level of wisdom and insight I'd been seeking. Was eating hamburg sufficient unto itself? Did I need to leave Joe's microcosmic monastery to find out just how much I had really learned?

There's an old saying that if you wait long enough, all things will come to you. So it was that one day, Joe, normally taciturn in his stained T-shirt, clunked my plate down on the formica counter, raised his three-days-unshaven face to me and said, "I never seen *no one* like you before. Don't you eat *nothin'* else?" He pointed to the plastic folder wedged between the napkin holder and the sugar bowl. "There's a menu right here, y'know."

"Aw, go wash the dishes," I told him.

At that moment all doubt vanished. I licked the grease off my lips and waddled to the Naked City Cafe.

Mick the Bodh was sitting there as if through all eternity, watching Kandi practicing tantric positions to heavy metal tunes while his monks and disciples chanted their devotion, reverence and joy in tones far more raucous than you'd hear in traditional monasteries.

The seats on each side of Mick were empty, one reserved for Kandi, his partner in Mystical Union, and the other, no doubt, for one of his new students. Without hesitating, I squeezed between the runway and the seat, and noticed how much tighter the space had become now that I had achieved physical and spiritual fullness.

Mick glared his annoyance at me, but I accepted it with the same equanimity with which I now accepted bliss. It was all One, after all.

“*Hey!*”

“Hay is for horses,” I said, initiating a dialogue of Masters.

Mick squinted at me, then grunted. “*Now* I remember you,” he grumbled around the Camel clenched between his teeth. “You’ve gotten *fat*, Sid Arsehole.”

“I’ve become the Beefcake Buddha.”

“And I told you that if you didn’t make yourself an illusion around here, I’d make you dead *meat*. Now, why don’t you just go on home and wash some more dishes. *If* you can fit your fat ass through the door, that is.”

“Fuck you,” I said, knowing he’d understand. How exhilarating! Two Masters, one old and one new, were sharing their Crazy Wisdom.

Mick’s fist cocked next to his right ear.

My beef would absorb the illumination of his next koan. Mick the Bodh would gasp for breath under the weight of my next meaty insight.

I grinned like the Holy Fool I’d become.

I Was a Politically Incorrect Poster Boy!

POSTER BOY ARRESTED AS SEX OFFENDER

Randy Tupper used to be a role model. The thirty-five year old male, afflicted with Testosterone Overload Performance Syndrome, had served as a Poster Boy, encouraging others with the TOPS disorder to seek help.

Apparently, Tupper failed to heed his own message. He was arrested yesterday on charges of Sexual Harassment, Statuary Rape, Gross Misconduct and Polyperverse Morphosity.

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Mork Downer, Jr.: Polyperverse Morphosity! I've heard of polymorphous perversity, but never...Randy, just what *is* polyperverse morphosity?

Randy Tupper: It's a totally bogus charge, just like all the others. She's---*they're*---mad because after that wild, bizarre, insane night, I told her---or them--- "I've slept with women who had multiple personality disorders, but this is the first time I've ever slept with a woman who has a multiple *body* disorder."

Erin Huntington-Manville: (*sobbing*) It's the most Politically Incorrect thing a male sexist pig has ever said to me.

Audience: Creep! Pervert! Adult Molester!

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NOW, WAIT JUST ONE GODDAMN MINUTE!

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I WAS A POLITICALLY INCORRECT POSTER BOY

(The *True* Story of Randy Tupper)

□ □ □



from climbing off the poster on the Gender Bender Bookshop's door in the New Age Chick---er, *Chic---*Plaza. Don't let TOPS stop *you* from riding your testosterone rocket across the Great Divide between Reality and Fiction or Fiction and Reality. Don't let TOPS stop *you* from becoming the *tabula rasa* of the lusty set. Don't let TOPS stop *you* from following the sweet little tail on that second-generation Stepford Wife swinging in naughty synch with Au Naturel Foodmart's recycled paper bags toward her new Subaru wagon.

Easier said than done, folks. TOPS isn't a *pretty* disorder. Its symptoms make me anathema to women who'd rather cuddle than do the nasty. My gonadal surges generate a force field strong enough to levitate a Lola Lustbody XXX Inflatable Love Doll on a rough

night. Almost every night's a rough night when you have TOPS. Believe me.

But I'm looking for help. Not just for me---some hot little vixen, hey!---but for all those little campers scampering across the Camp Cojones playground in crewcuts and geekframe glasses, throats rutting primordial whimpers, to hump the nearest noun (person, place or thing) like a male mutt---Wait a minute! What am I doing, slugging the little buggers? This is *my own* TOPS rush! Nerves jumping, head pumping, loins humping--I can't tell one from one minute to the next when my chemically-based reality will shift gears. I need help, but

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and a half-dozen other Peter-Piper-Picked-A-Pecker-Pickled tongue-twisters---all run by women with fashionably-hyphenated last names---doesn't give me what I need.

□ □ □

WOMEN

COMMAND INSTANT PROFESSIONAL RESPECT!

DOUBLE YOUR SURNAME

Available Options Include:

- 1) Combination maiden-marriage names**
- 2) Combination male-female parent names**
- 3) Combination female-male parent names**

(reversed to reflect cultural differences)
4) Combination geographical names
(advised for fictional entities/beings)

CALL 1-800-555-1212 FOR INFORMATION

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I turn to the sumo bulk snoring at the Security Desk. What did I expect for \$5 an hour? Answers?

So I ride up the groaning freight elevator of this former factory building upscaled into office suites for nonprofit organizations and studios for boho photographers to the desk of Bimbina Tonto-Bliss, an Amazon Vamp camping on the phone behind the bronze nameplate that declares her Communications Coordinator. She doesn't seem to care that I'm there, my glands surging with my urgent need to fund Camp Cojones, among other things. To get her attention, I clear my throat. "Excuse me."

"Excuse *me!* Canchoo see I'm on da phone?" She whirls the receptionist's chair so that her picket fence of six-inch Cheetah Claw fake fingernails obscures her thick-featured profile. Her chewing gum snaps crackles and pops like ancient breakfast cereal into the mouthpiece cradled in her palm. The sounds turn her titters and coos into an unintelligible patois. Ten minutes later she hangs up. "And now I'm on *break.*" Her gum clicks defiantly. A shake of her head tosses snakes of thick black hair away from her olive face. Oh, those rippling thighs and muscular calves in black fishnets deny me lovelock as they tramp their fury out the front door. What an air of abandon! Precisely my fate, I worry. And not just mine.

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"I'm here to talk about funding for a summer camp for kids with---" M s . E r i n Huntington-Manville's glare freezes me in mid-sentence. "You're here to request technical

assistance in completing an application that *requests* funding for a summer camp.” The frosted tips of her fieldmouse hair bristle. Her torso stiffens, stretching her safari suit into a planklike rectangle.

Humbled by my ignorance, I lower my eyes from the ice-blue stare magnified through owlframe eyeglasses and glimpse her Development Coordinator nameplate centered on the neatly-arranged surface of her oak desk, obviously donated from a 1930's elementary school. Before my eyes can fix penitently on my feet, though, Huntington-Manville's harsh look freezes their downturn. Her pale blue force field engulfs me. *Whoa!* It's the Eat-You-Alive Look of a Hungry Woman!

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Huntington-Manville: That was a *gross* misperception.

Tupper: I haven't even finished.

Operetta Losepay: It *is* gross. And you're finished.

□ □ □

NOW, WAIT JUST ONE GODDAMN MINUTE!

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Huntington-Manville's stare unbuttons my shirt and peels it off. Next the trousers. That's the upside to being a TOPPER, heh heh. Some babes just *sense* your extra juice supply and---*wait a minute!* What *is* this! It's not my clothes she's peeling off layer by layer, it's my skin, my veins... it's the *Identity Stripdown!* I've been reduced to the Booming Baritone Voice of Paper! There I am, naked across the desk from her, my Mission Statement, Program Purpose, Goals and Objectives all hanging out like a throbbing purple schlong. Instead of blood surging through my veins to swell my throbbing extremity, it's community linkages, performance data and future funding strategies. I *am* the application

for Camp Cojones, a Summer Camp for youth afflicted by Testosterone Overload Performance Syndrome, otherwise known as TOPS, which strikes at puberty. The TOPPERS' need to expel their surging juices frequently leads to lewd behavior, increased sexual activity (with or without partners), social isolation from their non-TOPS peers (if TOPPERS can be said to have peers in certain areas) resulting from intolerable sexual boasting. If the Foundation for Filing Forms approves this request, the structured activities of Camp Cojones will enable TOPS-afflicted youth to:

- 1) Improve coping skills through peer counseling, such as learning to suggest cars, bushes or back yards when "Your place or mine" is not a viable option;
- 2) Provide training in obtaining condoms or Kleenex and girlie magazines, as appropriate;
- 3) Reduce through ejaculation-control seminars the incidence of people with TOPS acquiring reputations as "lousy lays" early in life;
- 4) Reduce the incidence of hallucinatory perceptions of Reality induced by surges of surplus testosterone;
- 5) Reduce the tendency of people with TOPS to view Norman Mailer as a role model; and
- 6) Reduce the incidence of AIDS among the involuntarily sexually active TOPS population, who are at-risk due to biological factors beyond their control.

Huntington-Manville nods uncomfortably at the last two objectives. A cringe tightens the corners of her lips. My beads of sweat seem to float in the air as I ponder the kids' fate---and mine, of course. Finally, her frozen stare relaxes. My veins return, then my skin. My trouser button seems to squeeze *itself* through its tight little hole. Oh, the thought of squeezing *myself* into the uptight little hole across from me! Somewhere under her Ice Queen veneer there must throb a core of passion. A good romp in the sack would round her pointed features, I'll bet. *Whoa!* My shoulders hitch upward, my head jerks left and right. My eyelids begin the rapid flutter of unrelieved sexual tension. "Flirting is highly inappropriate for a person in your position," Huntington-Manville says. "But I'm *not*

flirting. It's a symptom of my testosterone disorder."

Her shoulders narrow and tighten. "I think the most appropriate course of action would be to refer you to our Executive Director, Ms. Caliente-Aventura." Huntington-Manville's barely-contained fury makes her voice quiver.

Omigod! I have to see *another* uptight post-fem with a hyphenated-surname!

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takes a moment for my self to recognize the Other as its Self on the wall behind Pandora Caliente-Aventura's donated graymetal desk. Then, the Schlock of Recognition! How terminally bland I look, even more White Male than my X'd-out reflection in the TOPS poster. Looking at those nondescript features, you'd never know my body was a near-nuclear testosterone generator. But when I look at the Executive Director sitting across from me on the black leather sofa, moistening her Burgundy Brown lips, / know my body is. Her nod splashes her sunspoke strands over her chest and shoulders, teasing the tops of her chest artillery. She's the brightest light I've seen since my mother came home glowing in the dark after working in the nation's first nuclear plant. A Blonde Bombshell sculpted from plutonium! Here's one Pandora's box I'll take my chances on opening.

Whoa! A glandular surge and I'm rolling. Explaining that TOPS strikes males age

twelve and over, causing aggression, social isolation, priapic discomfort---*especially* priapic discom-fort---violent crime, temporary insanity and teenage pregnancy. I'm flying like the Zen Archer's arrow. "The affliction cuts across all age brackets," I conclude on a bull's eye.

"I see," breezes softly through lips lightly parted. Her attentive eyes shade from aquamarine to emerald. "Does the composition of your Board of Directors reflect this?"

"Oh yes. Our Board consists of teenagers, Generation Xers, thirtysomethings, fortysomethings, seniors..." my voice pitching barker's hype "...men of all ages, races and ethnicities..." trails off in a W. C. Fields drawl.

"Are there any women on the Board?" My mind immediately conjures her sumptuous body stretched across the Board Table, the backs of those long tapering thighs pressed against my loins, those curvaceous calves crossed behind my neck while I give her a good stiff---Are there any women on the Board? Just give me a chance. *Whoa!* Trying to suck back my pumping breath, I gasp, "No!" Her hair shakes wildly in response. Actually, it isn't her hair. It's *me* shaking from the gonadic gush that stings my extremity like chili peppers. Once my flush fades and my brainfire dulls, I notice that her face is actually making tight, contained turns from side to side. Her lips project a doubtful expression that nevertheless resembles a blown kiss. "Representative Board composition is an area that all of our foundations give close consideration." "But, there just *aren't* any women with TOPS." "From what you've told me, though, TOPS *would* have an impact on women. A significant one, I'd imagine." Her eyes brighten from emerald to spotlight green.

My eyes lock with hers, then glance at the clock above the poster. Her eyes follow mine, but stop on my Poster Boy face.

"It's getting to be lunchtime," she says, her eyes lighting on mine again. Her grin looks as hungry as my loins feel. "Would you care to continue this discussion at the Grain and Leaf?"

My cocky rooster's nod raises my head toward my poster, then stops when my eyes latch onto it. My jaw slackens. Through a quivering voice, softly: "Yes."

Between sips of peppermint tea and bites of Salade Romaine with honey mustard dressing, Dora and I get up close and personal. The Ultimate in Post-Fem Sex Objects earned her BA in Politically Correct Studies at Amherst College, the PC bastion where TOPS victims have been threatened with castration for their disorder-driven conduct. Me, I'm a BS from the State College. Poster Boys can't get scholarships to elite educational institutions. Hell, I can't even get residuals on the Lunch Poster I'm living at New Age Chic Plaza. I'll have to call my agent. First I have to get one. Just as I'm hoping we can bridge our differences in background, Dora's eyes gleam past me, past the tables on the patio spreading behind us, toward the far end of the plaza. I follow her stare till my neck feels wound around a spiral staircase. A chain gang of Stepford Wives trudges with recycled Au Naturel bags to a monotony of Subaru wagons broken only by my fenderbent Ford Escort. Dora's eyes settle on mine, glitter green mischief. "They're all so stereo-typical," she says.

"I'll bet they all have hyphenated surnames, too."

Dora's creamy complexion darkens to mocha. "You don't have a problem with that...do you?"

Uh oh. Don't blow this one, guy. "Of course not. I totally understand the importance of maintaining your Identity. If you don't have a sense of who you are, then who are you? If you're not you, you could become someone else." Stop babbling, dude. "In fact, as a Token White Male, I'm very aware---like you---of just how important these issues of identity are." Her appraising nod tells me I've stumbled back on track. "One thing I noticed, though, is that the people in your organization have hyphenated surnames that sound like geographical areas."

"Since we live in a litigious time, we have to protect ourselves in the literary clinches," she says, her soothing tone sweetening my thought of clinching her. "In case you're a work of fiction, we want to be protected."

Strange response, suggesting *I'm* a work of fiction. But what a piece of work *she* is!

What a *piece!* I hope not Fantasy genre. “But *you’re* a work of fiction. You’re *my* work of fiction.”

“What’s fiction for you might be real for us.”

“I suppose. Reality, like fiction, is in the eye of the beholder.”

“In which case,” she says through her gleaming grin, “your fate could be real, or it could be fictional.”

“So far today I’ve had three fates, and two of them have nearly made me furious.”

“Are you talking about the Three Fates or the Furies? I took a Women’s Mythology seminar my Senior year.” She raises her napkin to pat a golden trace of honey mustard dressing off her lips.

“Whatever they are, their names are Good, Bad and Indifferent.”

“See! There are some names in the building that aren’t hyphenated.” She flashes a row of teeth, then purses her lips inquisitively. “Am I one of them?”

“Oh, you’re definitely the Good One.”

The glow from her grin seems to embrace me. It’s warm, comforting...But what if she’s too good to be real? *Whoa!* Cool it. “Talking about names, uh, *your* name...Is your name geographical? I mean, you don’t *look* Spanish.”

“Actually, I’m a Nordic-American stereotype. But my family owns a condo in Aventura, Florida. It’s a suburb of Miami...”

I can just picture Dora parading down South Beach in a red string bikini, turning male loins into tropical heat waves. “I’m your generic American stereotype,” I admit with neither pride nor hesitation. “Sort of a *tabula rasa*...”

“But the rest of my name...I like to offer *something* real.”

“My sense is that that part of you that you offer is *very* real.”

“You won’t be disappointed,” floats toward me, a zephyr whispering through her parted lips. Her body shifts as her classic gams cross under the table.

“I guess my TOPS is what makes me real,” I say, hinting that I won’t disappoint her, either.

“From what you were saying earlier, it might be appropriate for me, as a woman, to

experience the impact of TOPS myself.”

Alright! “When?” My voice quivers as my breath quickens.

“I think this matter takes precedence over my prior commitments for this afternoon.”

Whoa! We pay our checks. Separately, of course. That’s the way you work the nasty with post-fems. As Dora struts to her red Sirocco, her strong, shapely legs click her high heels forcefully against the asphalt. The sound of a Woman in Charge. Wheeling onto the street, she looks and sounds like an Erotico-Administrative Powerhouse, her muscles flashing tight from thigh to calf in the sunlight straight overhead while her low voice murmurs into her car phone to tell Bimbina she’ll be “tied up” the rest of the afternoon. Maybe she’s into PC S & M. Hmmm...

Whoa!

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FROM HERE, THE SCENE DEGENERATES

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Huntington-Manville: Of *course* it degenerates! What do you expect when you give air time to this...this *degenerate*?

Tupper: Hey! Exploitation is a two-way street. *I* was the one exploited.

Chrissy-Hue Hoffner: Here at the *Playperson* Network, even our most Politically Correct staff know that Sexploitation is the way to go. It pays the rent on our Penthouses...er, our top-floor executive suites. Before we continue, I want to tell our pay-per-view audience

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(PEOPLE UNDER 18 PROHIBITED!)

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from participating in what he had been anticipating from the moment he heard her husky purr into the Auto Erotic Portable Cellular Car Phone. His hopes had built in direct proportion to his testosterone level, which all but broke his Peter Meter when he watched her skimpy black satin slink across the thick pink rug of her townhouse to the sofa where his loins greeted her change of outfit with a priapic salute. Dora leaned over him so that her Victoria's Secret nightie brushed softly across his chest. "You know," she said, a touch dreamily, as she settled next to him, "I can't get over this feeling that I've *seen* you somewhere before."

He longed to brush his fingers along the gentle protrusion of her cheekbones. "Maybe it's because I'm a Poster Boy," he said. "You see my face in a lot of places."

“That’s *it!*” she squealed, her voice high and sliding like a bubblegum groupie’s, then tapped her hand against his thigh. “You know, sometimes I think I’ve seen you *everywhere!*”

Maybe he should have milked his mystery, made her wonder what lay behind that thin sheet of paper, as he sometimes wondered himself, especially after seeing his Poster Boy self in formats he’d never contracted for. Did she like him TOPS and all, or just for his one-dimensional recognition factor? Well...Either way, he liked high-powered women. They held up best under the demands of men with TOPS.

“Did you ever think of using your high profile to help generate funding for your camp?” she asked in a tiny voice, her heart-shaped lips a cute but naughty pucker.

“It never occurred to me that I *had* a high profile.”

“Oh, but you *do!*” Her fingers tapped his wrist teasingly, then feathered down the back of his hand. They curled around his palm. The aqua mist emanating from her glittering eyes slowly enveloped him.

For such a high-powered woman, Dora certainly could be giddy. He found her girlish side annoying, yet appealing. Annoying because she radiated an infatuation with a self that didn’t belong to him so much as to a public unwilling to give him anything deeper than a surface acceptance. Appealing because her carefree style seemed to invite him to grow closer to her, more personal, more (dare he say it? *Shit yes!*) intimate. Either way, it made her more complex, more interesting. You could always find something new in her, some unpredictable quirk of fun or fancy or sudden passion. He liked that in a woman---when he wasn’t riding a TOPS surge that carried his urge past personal con-sideration.

“You know,” she said, shifting so that their thighs touched lightly, “I’ll bet I could make you a financial magnet for any TOPS program you wanted to implement. You could start with TOPS demonstrations and autograph signings at County Fairs, Home Shows, Product Fairs, Church Discussion Groups and Senior Citizen Centers, just for starters. And we’re not even talking about *really* generating funding. You can do so much more than fill out fifty forms and hope one foundation will give you money. You have to *think big.*”

“Uh, how big were *you* thinking?”

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Hoffner: A ten on the *Playperson* Peter Meter! Not bad for a return performance.

Tupper: TOPS gives it the extra boost.

Bimbina Tonto-Bliss: Choot! It barely fel' like a fi'.

Hoffner: Our next category is

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SCENES FROM A POLITICALLY CORRECT SEDUCTION

He: Believe me, I *do* respect you as a person. A bright, principled, beautiful, charming, gracious, sensuous, articulate, socially concerned and politically committed person, who just *happens* to have sensuous lips, shapely thighs, a sultry pout and bedroom eyes.**Dora:** That's what I *mean*. You're *objectifying* me.

He: By seeing your physical as well as your intellectual and spiritual beauty, I'm *objectifying* you? I don't understand.

Dora: Men never do.**He:** Isn't that sexist in itself?**Dora:** Men are the oppressors. Historically speaking, I mean. Personally, as far as you and me, I'm...I'm not *sure*. OK?

*

Dora: What do you *want* from me?

He: I want something explicit.

Dora: That's what all male sexist oppressors want.

He: I meant, an explicit answer.**Dora:** *Suuuuuurrre*.

He: I wanted an explicit answer to my question. Do I have your full, unhesitating per-

mission to hold your hand?**Dora:** Yes.

*

Dora: That feels so good. May I rest my head against Your firm, hard...**He:** Yes!

Dora: ...chest?**He:** Oh.

*

He: May I take my raw, throbbing member and thrust its purple head through the sweet pink lips of your vagina, rock gently back and forth, then wind side to side and up and down and side to side and up and down simultaneously, then turn you over and grab your behind with my hands and prong you like a dog in heat till your come drenches the sheets and our bodies writhe and rock and roll in it? **Dora:** I didn't get all that.

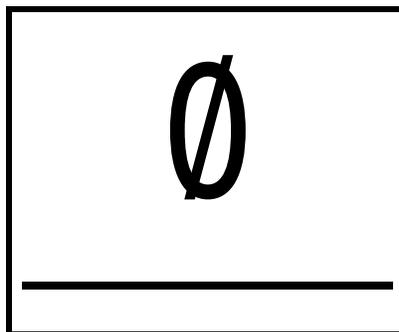
He: I give a woman a lot to grasp.

Dora: (*Gasp!*) Maybe you should just say it again?

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IS IT LIVE OR IS IT TESTOSTERONE?

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**TAKE
A
WHITE MALE
TO BED**

hologram hovers above Dora's heart-shaped waterbed. Despite his normally being an Equal Opportunity Employee, the Poster Boy in him resents his unauthorized endorsement of the trendy PC message because he doesn't get residuals. Holograms pay *way* better than posters. The Him in the Poster Boy resents losing opportunities to sleep with women as stunning as Dora. But the TOPPER in him relishes the opportunity to make an impact statement, as well as watch the mirrors on every wall fragment Dora's floating collage of blonde, black and cream as she curves to the bed from every viewable angle, then paddles onto the mattress, looks coyly over her left shoulder at him and wags her magnificent derriere invitingly. Her tiny voice coos, "Well, what's stopping you?"

"I don't have your consent," he says, mindful of the conversation that got him this far.

"There's an old saying, 'Silence means consent.'"

"But the hologram---"

"That's what's so *neat!* You're the *New Taboo!*"

Before he can ponder matters of identity, a testosterone rush sends him crashing groin-first against the backs of her thighs. He bumps her forward, lands flat on top of her. Bites her neck and earlobe while grinding against her buns. She rolls him over, surprising him with her strength. Her knees straddle his waist while she grins into his face. She reaches for the Auxiliary Pack of her Auto Erotic Portable Cellular Car Phone, points it at the camera and clicks twice. A body condom billows like an airbag out of the phone's vaginal port.

"Oh, Christ! do I *have* to use *that?*"

"We could just take the AIDS test and wait."

"I have TOPS. I *can't* wait."

"Then, just lie back and relax, honey, while I put the Body Condo on you."

Condo? As the body-temperature bedding shapes itself to his contours, he watches her long fingers slide the latex tube lovingly over his pulsating pole. Below the French tickler apparatus on its head appears a row of townhouses strikingly like her own, with decks, community pools, individual parking spaces and horny grounds-keepers frolicking with tenants in hot tubs. Through a cutaway of a windowless boudoir, a miniature Dora slips a miniature condo over a miniature him. Amazing! He tries to stick his dick into a parking space marked For Visitors Only, but Dora says, "Let's take it slow, honey. We've got all day. All night, too." As she eases the onionskin thin material over his head, his remaining reflection resembles the toe-like protrusion of a face burned to anonymity, eyes bulging eggs against the substance blurring his view. He tries to shout his shock at the grotesque transformation. His lips twist like the pore on the head of his penis. In fact, his entire *body* looks like a penis, he observes, with his head as *its* head.

Dora points the receiver at the hologram. When her other hand squeezes the aching head of his pud, a Windows menu appears onscreen. Its icons feature Dora on top and him on the bottom, him on top and her on the bottom, then doggie-style and side-by-side. "What's your pleasure, boytoy?"

"Anythnggywnt!" he says through his muffle. She clicks on his little mouse, making it larger. The hologram mirrors her sitting in his lap, grinding away, her hair tossing a horse-ride frenzy, then him bending over her back, his latexed body plunging deep inside her while she writhes around him, twisting, turning, squeezing ecstatic moans through his muting body cover. When she gets on top of him, the hologram and the wall mirrors flash an anonymous shaft of townhouse tattoos before her long sensual slides squeeze her heart-shaped pubic hair tight against him with slow rotary spins that reduce him to whimpering noises. The sounds emanating from his throat and the hologram engulf him in SenSurround, along with the rustling splashes of the waterbed. Riding under the music of her moans and breathless praises, his body becomes a single throbbing entity surrounded by latex and the softness a thousandth-inch away, then fades to a sleepy quietude. "How was it?" she asks, her wide grin easing a fine warm spray he can barely feel through his facial covering.

“Terrific! I’ve never had it like that before,” his speech clearing as the wrap loosens.
“So, gimme more.”

What! She sounds *different*. He pokes an eye-hole in the condo. Bimbina Tonto-Bliss blasts through the hologram strap-on first, rolls him onto his belly and buggers him. “Plenty more,” says the voice of Erin Huntington-Manville, turned tough and throaty. Although he can barely see it, the hologram reflects the trio turning him into a mannequin moaning at first with delight---“Yes! Yes! Yes!--- later confusion---“Huh? What? Again?”--- and finally exhaustion---“Noooo...noooo... noooo”---as one, two, then all three women on the bed and in myriad reflections claw, bite and thrash him through combinations of partners and positions he could never have imagined, even with that...what was it, *some* kind of disorder? He couldn’t remember. It wasn’t very important. He was tired. Too tired. *Exhausted*.

“Oooh, it’s so *gooooood!* One more time, Big Boy.” “Ohhhhhh noooooooo.....”

Helpless before their relentless passion, he moans and writhes while they run him through positions not listed in the *Kama Sutra*, then roll his limp body onto its belly, where it falls asleep, droning a flat snore.**Erin:** He’s had it. Look at the wuss. If you ask me, he’s living proof men only want one thing.

Bimbina: He can only *do* one thing. Once!**Dora:** And once is never enough for a girl like me. Whatever happened to that oldie by Jim Morrison, ‘Love Me Four Times, Babe?’

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Normal Maler: And you’re complaining! If I were in your shoes, I’d *demand* an encore.

Tupper: If you can’t do more with TOPS, you can’t do more at all. I’m telling you, I was railroaded, and it started that night.

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I woke up in her bed the next morning, my body heavy from the afternoon before---

and the night too. I never felt so drained. Dora sure knew how to hang one on a guy. Talk about polymorphous perversity in a Politically Correct setting. My Power Blonde fantasy come true was a master at doing the nasty. She knew sex was 90% mental too, the way she switched costumes to push the envelope of my imagination beyond the protective covering she'd slipped over it. I turned on my side to give her sleeping form a longing gaze only to find Erin Huntington-Manville beside me, her breasts flat as dead eggs on her chest. If my smile turned to amazement when I saw her there instead of Dora, Erin's expression changed from statuesque somnolence to startled irritation when she caught me looking at her. She raised herself on her right elbow and glared down at me. "What are you doing here?" "Looking for more enjoyment?" I tried to make light of her snappish tone.

"I thought you'd be gone by now. Most men are."

"I thought I'd stick around for a Morning Mellow."

"I have a meeting."

"You'll function better at the meeting with the relaxation that comes of intimate Sexual Union."

"If you and I are a Sexual Union, I'm filing a grievance."

"Clever, very clever," I say, rolling into her face. She turns away from my kiss, but my weight pins her to the waterbed.

She doesn't resist. Her belly bucks against mine. "I've had enough...more ...more.." Her tone sounds flat. The deeper I plunge into her, the more my sensation fades. How can I keep a hard-on if she doesn't respond? Next thing I know, her pussy feels like paper crinkling under me. I drop the dribbling remains of my well-drained load into an application the size of a body bag, instructions printed in green ink, dangling participles for arms, a split infinitive for beaver. When I roll off, I look at the crumpled form, and the puddle of come cooling in the box where my signature should be. As I slip into my trousers, I steel myself to say, "As much as I enjoyed... uh..." I pause, I'm not saying it right... "As much as last night was enjoyed by...." was that me? somewhere along the line the I in me had disappeared... "Well, I...what I'm saying is...I don't think we should see each other again."

Erin sits up, stares ahead blankly. “Don’t tell me. You need space.” Her tone jaded. Flat from too many hurts. “No. I need something less clichéd. My TOPS makes me do some crazy things...”

She turns in my direction, but gazes past me. “Yours is not an attractive disorder. And it’s *highly* over-rated.”

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Tupper: When she said that, I just lost control. Instinct took over. That’s when I told her, “I’ve slept with women who’ve had multiple personality disorders, but this is the first time I’ve slept with a woman who has a multiple *body* disorder.”

Huntington-Manville: It’s the most insulting thing anyone has ever said to me.

Caliente-Aventura: Me too.

Tonto-Bliss: Me neither.

Tupper: Your Honor, I object to their making such outbursts.

Judge: Be quiet, you gender-basher, or I will cite *you* for contempt of court.

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What’s this? The Stepford Wives II have turned New Age Chic Plaza into a Red Light District? A butch murdered a transsexual over a Meaningful Message Card at Gender Bender’s rack? Police lights spin a hellish haze through the mid-morning smog. The ear-splitting sound of a female Wailing Wall screams over the police sirens’ shrill metallic monotone:

“That’s him, officer. He’s the one,” the three shriek in chorus.

Click. Cuffs clamp my hands as I reach for the door of my Escort, ticketed for parking overnight. A step behind the stern-faced officer lifting me by the arms, Dora, Bimbina and Erin scream through grief-shriveled stares. Their squinting eyes flare fire through their tears. Their collective stare brands me till shame steams from my searing flesh, though

I don't understand why. Then the PC Thought Police drag me away.

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FORMER POSTER BOY FOUND GUILTY OF SEX OFFENDING

Randy Tupper had it all: looks, money and public recognition as a Poster Boy for TOPS, a testosterone-related medical disorder. But yesterday Randy Tupper lost it all when a jury of twelve women immediately issued verdicts of

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Tupper: This isn't a jury of twelve women. It's a lynch mob of thirty-six!

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related to the disorder, including hallucinations caused by excessive amounts of testosterone in the blood stream and cerebral hemispheres, a

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Dear Applicant:

We regret to inform you that the Foundation For Filing Forms cannot file forms for your Camp Cojones proposal.

After a careful review of many worthy applications, the FFFF decided against filing forms for the proposal because the applicant Board of Directors lacked hyphenated-surnames in proportion to the percentage of people living in the region who have hyphenated-surnames. The FFFF, in addition to evaluating the merits of specific applicant programs, also considers the level of

consciousness of the
applicant organization.
In this instance, the
level is obviously
insufficiently advanced.

Sincerely,

Erin Huntington-Manville,
Director of Program Rejection

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Those poor kids! How will they ever get to Camp Cojones? The way the tabloids have tabulated my sexual offenses has destroyed whatever credibility I might have had as a fundraiser. The posters of me have disappeared, taking with them my last vestige of self.

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NOW, WAIT JUST ONE GODDAMN MINUTE!

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Pfil Donaskew: Tonight's guest is a unique, multi-faceted militant and activist in the Reverse Gender Discrimination movement...

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FORMER POSTER BOY FILES COUNTER-CHARGES

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Tupper: It's one of the most horrifying things I've ever experienced, the Identity Strip-Down...All I was trying to do was get funding for a summer camp. Instead, I was misled

into an exploitative seduction, tied up in a latex body condom and raped repeatedly, not only by the woman who seduced me but by two others who I would *never* have been interested in. Because I had to poke a hole in the body condom to struggle to escape from this...this *chamber of horrors*, I'm now at risk--*very* great risk, I might add---of sexually-transmitted diseases...and all because I suffer from a medical disorder.

Ofay Stimpson: I'd offer you my defense witnesses, but right now we have a caller.

Caller: Hi, Randy. My name is Erik Jong, and I'd say you've been going through quite an ordeal. I'd like to invite you to visit our Faceless Stranger Support Group. We have a sliding fee scale...

Tupper: I'm broke. All my money's gone to my lawyers...

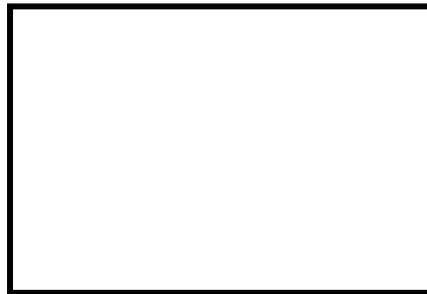
Ofay Stimpson: And *my* lawyer's gone to Wall Street.

Tupper: I can't get work...

Jong: I think I can help you.

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FORMER SEX OFFENDER NOW POSTER BOY



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RETRIAL RESULTS IN HUNG JURY

“A jury of my peers, that’s all I wanted,” said a grinning Randy Tupper earlier today as he left Superior Court,

where Judge Manley M. Manley overturned an earlier verdict which Tupper, with the aid of the TOPS organization,

had appealed. Tupper, convicted of miscellaneous acts of felony sexual mischief by an “all-female, but not all-

woman jury,” as he described it, benefitted from an all-male jury panel, each member of which suffered from TOPS, the medical affliction which Tupper testified had compelled him to act in a manner which Erin Huntington-Manville, his alleged victim, apparently had misinterpreted as a sexual overture.

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Naturally, I celebrated my victory by filing a civil suit. My TOPS---what little remained of it after my violation--wanted me to celebrate in other ways, but my attorney, a TOPPER himself, suggested a civil suit could provide long-term gratification through punitive remuneration if I could provide short-term sublimation. Between continuances I received a record number of Poster Boy assignments for and against TOPS, a seven-figure book contract, and guest spots on more talk shows than I thought existed. My newfound prosperity enabled me to contribute a six-figure tax-deductible donation to Camp Cojones so that the kids could have their circle jerks on the playground and muff pumping in the cabins after lights out. The camp director wanted me to appear as guest speaker, but I declined. Even though TOPS had come to my rescue during the criminal proceedings, my urges felt remarkably diminished. What advice could I give to a young TOPPER? You can wait a month before you get it? Definitely not TOPPER advice. If I could still give TOPPER advice, I wouldn't have sued for damages.

Naturally, my opposition wanted to settle out of court. When I refused, the unholy trinity filed a countersuit, alleging that she/they had made more money for me by their actions than I had ever made as a TOPS Poster Boy before the incident. Since my TOPS symptoms had diminished, principle was now more important to me than pussy. I filed a countersuit demanding compensation for my contribution to Dora/Bimbina/Erin's *nouveau* fortune, which they made from finding a purportedly successful treatment for TOPS.

The night before one of our court dates, there was a knock on the door of my new mansion. And there was Dora, curving in the doorway, her grin bright enough to float her head of Big Hair without a single glob of mousse. “Hi,” she said, her tone more subdued than her look.

“Hi,” stumbled off my tongue.

She inched forward, tentatively. I stepped aside, then turned to follow her sway into my parlor with a disinterested leer. The connection between my eyes and my loins barely existed. Once she made her entrance, she pivoted on her heel, so that her buxom chest inched its way into my aura of uncertainty. Her nipples brushed against my chest. Her eyes rolled upward from a lowered face flushed with a glimmering humility. “Can we be friends again?”

“Friends yes, lovers no,” I said.

Her face fell into a wounded pout.

“It’s not that I wouldn’t like to, it’s that...well, after that night I just haven’t felt the same.”

“You aren’t just saying that for your court appearance?”

“No. I’m saying it because we took something too far.” I wanted to tell her about human limitations, how losing TOPS had caused me to lose my sense of self in a kind of post-traumatic stress and how a sense of a different self had come to me after all I’d gone through. “We couldn’t have that night again, baby,” I said like a flaccid Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*. “And I couldn’t survive it physically if we did. I’m just not the same man.”

“I’ll bet I could make you a better one,” she said, her pelvis pressing against what felt like the remnant of a near-death experience.

“You could try,” I said, “but you cured my TOPS.”

“Don’t be silly, Big Boy. There *is* no cure for TOPS.”

“But you marketed---”

“‘Cure’ sells better than ‘treatment.’”

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TUPPER CITES TOPS CURE AS FRAUD



It didn't take more than a moment for Dora to restore the urge that had gone the way of all flesh, so to speak. "I'm surprised," I told her. "I never thought I'd feel this way again."

"I can do anything to you. You're a *tabula rasa*."

"Whatever I am, you can do anything you want to me." Despite the arrest, the lawsuits and the talk shows, I felt weak when I inhaled her breath as it mingled with the scent of her perfume. *Whoa!* Before I could exhale we were rocking and rolling across the foot-thick carpet of my fifty-by-eighty study, slipping and sliding down the floor of my marble corridor and finally, humping and thumping on the waterbed of my mirror-walled master bedroom. Dora's long legs kicked the air above my head while her whimpers and moans turned to howls under the power thrusts I'd nearly forgotten how to drill into her hot gushing honeypot. Her face and hair seemed to flow around me, engulfing me with their radiance. The glow was so brilliant I had to close my eyes and ride the rocking crests of her sea of pleasure until---

"*Ouch!*" My hand ran down the thigh whose firm flesh had turned to muscle and the calf whose curves had hardened to bulges. A leather strap around the ankle led to a five-inch spike heel. What the---!

I opened my eyes. There was Bimbina, bucking and writhing beneath me, her rocklike torso bruising my body as her biceps clenched me tight against her. My surprise stopped me, not so much in my tracks as in her---

"*Push!* Whatsa matter. You chicken?"

"You hurt me with your heel."

"I hurt you wit' my whip, you don't keep rackin' me." Her chiropractor's hug crunched me even tighter. My spine realigned, I did out of duty what I'd just done out of pleasure. As I was finally getting into the pleasure of the pain, another voice chilled me with a

command to: "Stop! Will you please *stop!*"

The frost from Erin Huntington-Manville's breath numbed my face.

I stopped. "I don't get it," I said.

"That's right, you don't. Not from me."

"Who needs this?" I started to slide out of her when:

"Relax, hon," said Dora's familiar voice. "Just slide it back in, nice and slow."

Who was I to complain? Especially when she rocked me so nicely that my body wracked ecstatic shudders the length of my spine as my hot juices spurted into her with a half-dozen thundering pulsations throbbing through me. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" I said, slipping into the swoon of pleasure.

"You're certainly agreeable," Dora said, running her fingers through my hair as her soft belly rose and fell against mine.

"I've got my TOPS back," I said.

"Only when we choose to give it to you."

"*WE!*"

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Community Access Host: ...and so, on *Feminist Theology Today*, we will investigate the feminine counterpart to the Christian Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost...

Erin Huntington-Manville: the Mother...

Bimbina Tonto-Bliss: Wait a minute! I am not no freakin' Whore.

Dora Caliente-Aventura: and the Goddess.

Erin Huntington-Manville: Defined by male sexist perceptions, of course.

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(Of course Erin Huntington-Manville would have to say that!)

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“Dora, honey, I’m crazy about you, but---”

“Love me, love all three.”

“You have no idea how unsettling this can be.”

“It’s not easy for me, either. Just remember. Tomorrow I’m going to make you a rich man.”

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TUPPER CHARGED WITH TAX EVASION

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The betrayal shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. I guess you really could say I’d opened a Pandora’s Box of troubles. Which one of the three had snitched? Did it matter? I posted bail and took the next flight to Rio, where the extradition laws exist somewhere in the limbo between Reality and Fiction. Rio might not seem like a very original choice to book to, but it’s the best a *tabula rasa* can do, given what I’ve had to work with.

My once-again faded TOPS enabled me to live low-key, ignoring the beautiful babes on the Brazilian beaches, even ignoring the beaches themselves in favor of the seedy sidestreet nightlife. With the consequences of destroying the Tropical Rain Forest in the air, I wasn’t in a rush to shoulder another disorder: the swollen discolorations of skin cancer. No, I had enough to look after. My residuals went into a Swiss Bank Account. My attorney contacted me General Delivery, advising me of settlements of various suits I’d won *in absentia*. General Delivery also handed me anonymous letters every week saying, “I told you I could make you rich. Love,”

Well, money isn’t everything, and in my exile I kept wondering if Dora might have been. Maybe there was a cure for her multiple body disorder, her mythical conjunction of multiple selves, her multiple conjunction of mythical selves and all the problems that came

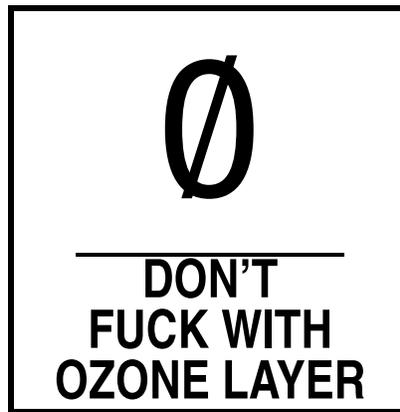
with it---or didn't, in the case of Erin Huntington-Manville, that frigid---never mind.

After a year rich with residuals and legal settlements, I spotted a familiar figure approaching me. Boardlike and short-haired, but tanned all over, even at her equator, Erin Huntington-Manville stopped on the sidewalk. The steam rising from the concrete after the daily four o'clock downpour shrouded her. "I had to find you," she said, shuffling her feet to block my attempts to sidestep her. If it had been Dora...

But it *was* Dora---Dora with her problem resolved. Her desire to be with me had led her to seek treatment for her condition, which doctors had primarily described as "post-existential." She'd located a hundred year-old naturalized Argentinian surgeon who spoke only German and began his Buenos Aires practice in 1946. She went down there for mind/body surgery. Unfortunately, the doctor botched the job. Dora died on the operating table and Bimbina went on terminal break. I didn't expect to be happy with Erin, but the chill that emanated from her felt downright refreshing in the tropical heat.

In a matter of weeks, we married. Secretly, of course. We decided we both stood to gain too much from the various suits we'd filed against one another. Three times a year now we take separate flights to our shared trials. Then we return to our relationship of chastity and laugh over the billions we'll bilk from our backers.

These days I spend most of my time on the beach, where a custom body condo protects my skin from the laserlike rays jetting through the atmosphere since the Tropical Rain Forest came down. It's a high-rise version (appropriately enough for a former TOPPER) with decks and community pools and groundskeepers and individual parking spaces. And Erin sits beside me in her own body condo, talking on a cellular phone to book me generic Poster Boy gigs all around the globe. She never forgot that one of her selves wanted to become my agent. Of course I've had to use a different name to keep from attracting the attention of the IRS or the various attorneys we've hired to file more suits and countersuits. Since my TOPS has faded to memory, I've changed my name to what I've become in my life as a Poster Boy in Exile:



Just In Time

If you're into Time and how it gets that way, forget the Stephen Hawking hardcovers and Dave Brubeck vinyl gathering dust in your den. *Just In Time*, the latest CD by saxophone legend Slammer Wall (Terminal 957695), explores Time with a depth and urgency unknown to those previous temporal pioneers.

"Time is what I'm all about," Wells asserted from his cell on Attica's Death Row, where producer Ward N. Bloch sent this writer to put an Up-Close-And-Personal spin on these jacket notes. "Up Time, Down Time, Hard Time...You name it, jack, I done it."

"How about 9/8 time?" I asked, referring to the time signature of Dave Brubeck's "Blue Rondo a la Turk."

"How 'bout In Yo' Face Time, muthafucka?" the jocular musical innovator muttered in the urban jazzman's hard-bitten vernacular. "Look yo' dumb ass down this goddamn block. Sheeit! We talkin' Death Row, baby. If that jiveass white muthafucka be doin' 9/8, then I be doin' *nineteen*-eight."

The approach of a barrel-bellied guard, fingers strumming his holster-flap, punctuated

the tenorman's impassioned pronouncement.

"I'm doin' Time to *end* Time," Wall continued softly.

The material chosen for this release (a cherished word in his vocabulary) suggests not only the nature of Time Wall has experienced, but the profound impact Time has made on his life. Wall's solo on the aptly-chosen warhorse, "Time After Time," tells the jazzman's proverbial story with equal parts fire and redundancy. "Man, I been doin' Time since I was ten years old," the tenorman points out. "School Detention, Juvenile Hall, Reform School, City Jail, County Jail, State, Federal, Minimum Security, Maximum Security, Solitary Confinement...and now Death Row. They all the same, jack, all the muthafuckin' same. Story of my life."

If a man's music reflects the sum total of his life experience, as this savvy saxophonist implies in his vigorous vernacular, shouldn't Slammer Wall have patterned himself after Charlie Parker, the jazz great who sought out new sensory experiences between gigs---and even between sets---to enrich his playing?

"What a fuckin' dumb-ass question! Don't make no goddamn difference, nohow. The muthafucka dead, and I'm gonna be."

Wall takes umbrage at any other parallels, musical or personal, the critics might draw between him and the man once known as Yardbird. "They let me out the Yard one hour a day, man. One fuckin' hour. That don't give me no time to be no goddamn Yardbird. I been doin' so much Time, I ain't never heard the cat nohow."

Difficult as it is to believe that a saxophonist of his stature doesn't carry a part of the Parker legacy with him, Wall maintains it's true. His drill-like tone and strident style show little debt to the most influential hornman of the modern era. His repertoire of revamped standards and pop tunes eschews the melodic and harmonic complexity that characterized Parker's seminal work. "Just listen to *my* music," Wall insists, clawing my shirt collar and clanging my face against the grated iron door.

A baleful glance from the hulking guard as he unbuttons his holster prompts the legend to ease his grip, as well as his tone.

"When you in here all the damn time, man, you can't be out there too."

Wells' sudden Einsteinian turn of thought summarily explains Space as Time and the effect of Relativity on his choice of repertoire. It explains the appearance of alternate versions of this CD's title tune, "Just In Time," a standard Wall learned in the 1940's, shortly after leaving his home town (which he refuses to name) because of musical differences with a prominent member of an organized crime family. The second take, updating the title to "Just-In Time," features Wall mentoring the newly-convicted gangsta rapper Nu Black Ice 2 U. "Jive-ass muthafucka tried to rip off my shit," he explains.

"You mean, your material?" this writer asked, seeking to clarify the obvious for those listeners unfamiliar with the jazz argot.

"No, man. Nigga tried to rip off the crack my man the guard heah bring me."

Looking as though it's shrunk behind a bowl of borscht, the guard's face flicks uneasy glances up and down the corridor of looming bars and concrete blocks. "What your producer told me was that Nu Black Ice 2 U sampled your first take of 'Just In Time' and rapped over it."

Wall nods. "He did. Nigga sampled *all* my shit."

"You mean, Nu Black Ice 2 U sampled each track on this CD?" this writer asked brightly, hoping the tenor legend might have enough collaborative material in the can for another release as compelling as the one under discussion.

"I don't know *what* the nigga did with the music, jack. All I know is I had a *piece* o' smack, man. You can't buy that much shit from no jivetime little *street* dealer. Had a rock o' crack, too. Muthafucka sampled my shit till I didn't have none left."

"Then the two of you didn't have artistic differences?"

"Hell, no! Strictly personal shit, man. Next time I see the nigga in the Yard, uhma *waste* the muthafucka." Wall speaks with the force of a man who knows the tragic consequences of trivializing Time by foolish actions and isn't afraid to make them happen.

The frustration evident in his tone reminded me that this musical giant possessed a wealth of knowledge he could pass on, in keeping with the mentoring tradition of jazzmen. "Given your extensive experience with Time, particularly Time behind bars, is there anything you would like to say to other gangsta rappers who might be interested in

collaborating with you?”

“Yeah. Lissen up, you jive-ass li'l muthafuckas. Stay outa jail, cuz you come in heah, y'all gonna hafta deal with *me*. Fuck with me, jack, you ain't gonna do no Soft Time, no Hard Time, no goddamn Time at all. Y'all gonna end up just like that U2 nigga. *Dead*.”

“Are there any cuts you'd like to explain to the average listener, the uninitiated to jazz?”

“I'D LIKE TO CUT *YOU*, YOU SORRY-ASS LI'L MUTHAFUCKA! I TOL' YOU, SUCKA, MY MUSIC SPEAK FOR ITSELF!”

The tenorman's brawny hand grabbed my throat and pulled my head hard against the bars time and again. The pounding dispersed my consciousness in white shafts of light. As darkness replaced them, the strains of Wall's rendition of the 1969 hit “No Time (Left For You)” echoed inside my head along with the hollow sound of bone crunching against iron. With a spirit fueled by such urgency, how could a larger-than-life saxophonist like him fail to communicate to a wider audience? I thought.

Then a gunshot echoed off the concrete.

Wall's sepia face turned ashen. His hands doubled over his chest.

“Just in time,” I heard the guard say from behind me. Holding the cell bars for support, I turned. The smoke from his revolver spiraled toward his righteous smirk.

“Why? Because you thought this Great Man was going to kill me?” I said, indignant despite my dizziness that Wall would fall to the same tragic end as so many of his fellow innovators, as well as to the floor in a steady leak of red.

“No,” the guard replied. “Because you don't have a clue how much we'd spend on another stay of execution for this bastard.”

“This man is a musical genius,” I insisted. “He needs medical help.”

“Without me, muthafucka, you ain't got no job. Neither of you niggas,” Slammer Wall said thinly, his tone evoking this CD's contemporary spin on the Maurice Williams oldie, rechristened “Stay (of Execution).”

A chastened look shaded the guard's face. “I'll go get the goddamn medic.”

“Get me a color TV, too, you sorry-ass white muthafucka. Uhma do Death Row, uhma do it *right*.”

“I’ll help you carry the tube,” I said to the guard, then followed him down the block. The rattling breath from the cell grew fainter, just the way Wall’s expressive key fluttering faded over the breathy subtone that ended his classy rendition of “Time On My Hands” on this Terminal release. The saxophonist was right. Even well-meaning people like me, with my love for the music, weaken his expression with our futile rationalizations. Music is a way of life and living is its only explanation. Some things will never change, no matter how much time passes, I thought, hearing the tenorman’s sawing rasps soften to whispers behind me. And Slammer Wells’ musical truths transcend Time as much as they do the fleeting embrace of Time called life.

I looked over my shoulder at the cell. The fetal heap of flesh, once the voice of passionate integrity, now employed silence to express a new relation between Time and Space. As always, the saxophone legend continued to explore new dimensions of self-expression. There was only one thing left for me to say to him before leaving to write the liner notes for this Terminal release:

“Way to go, Slammer.”

Shooting For Immortality

I wasn't shooting for immortality. If anything, I was shooting for anonymity. Why else would I start a basement blaze intended to burn every trace of my existence...my poems, my stories, everything but my dental work? (No plan is perfect.) Face it: you reach a point in life where you realize despair, not recognition, is the payoff for your lifelong labor. Splattering my brains in Jackson Pollock randomness over my library's bookshelves and ceiling seemed the best way out. Quick, painless, no hope of rescue---not even for my manuscripts.

When my teeth notched the barrel of my twelve-gauge (purchased for this special purpose), my fingers couldn't stretch to the trigger. Take off your right shoe and sock, I told myself. Use your toe. It reached: clumsily, but easily. I thought I was ready. Then, the September coolness breezing over my bare foot reminded me just how nice life's *little* pleasures could be. Why not enjoy your last moments? I took off my other shoe and sock. Why not? A little relaxation... *No!* Cut the banality. You've lived your writer's dream, paid the price. It's time to stop. But the quiver of finality in the pit of my stomach shivered bile up the back of my throat. A desperate gulp kept it from clogging the barrel. The next surge of the unexpected war between my urge to end it all and my urge to live spewed its reek along the weapon, down my T-shirt and into my corduroy lap. As my hand wiped the vile trail off the blue-black metal, those little pleasures surfaced again (despite my disdain for the people who lived for nothing else)... "*No!* I've been through enough." I bit down so hard the gunsight stabbed the roof of my mouth. But it ends so *soon*, I thought. *Stop it!* As the smoke sneaked in from the cellar, my toe pushed down.

Radiant light blasted through the hollow of the echo booming across my field of vision. The roar tinkled down to motes floating gold in the pervasive white glare. The aureolae emanating from the flecks haloed the celestial hum swelling their nuclei. Was I hearing

the Music of the Spheres? I watched the dancing dots billow till they blossomed into my mother and grandmother, faces wide with Welcome Home grins. Between their plates of freshly-baked toll house cookies and cinnamon rolls, a line of editors, faces drooping contritely, shuffled forward from the horizon. After pausing to taste the goodies that had nurtured me through my otherwise solitary childhood, their brightened expressions glowed toward me, swelling till they merged, a critical mass of ecstatic unity throbbing on a wobbly axis, then burst into a billion pixels that crested as a sea of acceptance letters.

While a wave of satisfaction washed away my wounds of rejection, a page of manuscript rose over the next crest, flames charring its margins. A hand plunged through the flare, pulled away the paper, whirled it through a healing glow, then flashed it so close to my eyes I not only read but heard its large bold print inside my head:

CONTRACT

entered into between_____ and the man under the ceiling light who camped up DeNiro's Lucifer character in *Angel Heart*. My startled leap from the chair brought me back to my library. Who *is* this grinning cueball haircut and van dyke who tore me away from eternal delight? A skinhead in a pinstripe suit? Maybe. But his eyes didn't glare sullen hatreds. Actually, they looked slightly upward at me, cinders bright with inspiration. Or were they just reflecting the flames now inching up the curtains? Regardless, the blissful, all-embracing light continued to glow, coming as well from the alabaster teeth set so invitingly in front of me. His expression said *trust me*, but a tremor of suspicion jarred me out of my primal comfort. "How did you get *in* here?"

He shrugged. "Opening the locked doors of Opportunity is What I Do."

I nodded toward the curtain crackling with yellow heat. "If you're a burglar, you don't have much time."

"I've got all the time I need, babe."

"Who *are* you?"

"I'm an agent. I represent people like you, people who find it too much of a struggle

to manage their own careers.”

The bitter laugh of the failed cackled through my teeth. “I never *had* a career to manage.”

“You never had the *perception* of having a career,” he said, with a snake oil vendor’s charm. “And why not? Because you never had the *Opportunity*. However, *I* can create a *tremendous* Opportunity for you.” He raised the contract to my face. The type melting inside its flaming margins formed an image of me hunching over my typewriter, intense to the point of oblivion as my fingers blurred across the keyboard. Thousands of editorial hands lunged through their trial by fire to clutch at the papers blazing endlessly off the roller, the way they did before I made my decision. If nothing else, I was as prolific as I was unpublished. My back braced up. “Look. I made a Life Decision. I don’t *want* it. Not anymore.”

“I can see that,” he said, scanning the wall of my hardbound mentors (Martin Manley, Reyes de Nada, Kafka Smith-Jones, among others) before locking eyes with me. “*However...* At this very moment, I have information that could make you *reverse* your well-thought-out decision.”

“It’s too late,” I barked. “Look at that chair.”

“What about it?”

“That’s where I blew my head off.” I flapped my hand toward the armchair, but stopped in mid-flight. The seat was empty. The gunbarrel rested against its cushion. I glanced at my feet, then at the smirking head of spikey fuzz, no longer sure if I’d pulled the trigger.

The would-be agent raised a knowing finger alongside his growing leer. “To paraphrase one of your predecessors, ‘The world ends not with a bang, but with a whimper.’” As he waved his finger, a laugh clucked deep in his throat.

“I’ve *read* Eliot. Don’t insult my *intelligence*.”

“Sign with me, and I’ll guarantee that nobody---I repeat: *nobody*---will ever insult you again,” he said, teeth wide beside the contract page.

Again, the margins blazed. My house leaped from the print. Orange daggers stabbed through its roof. As beams crashed down, a wiry, bearded figure burst through the front

door with my red torch of a steamer trunk and skidded belly-first along the lawn. The trunk-latch broke. My manuscripts flared across the yard. The figure pulled the burning papers to his chest and rolled over the grass till he smothered them---except for the one glowing sheet his outstretched arm held in my face. It curled and browned in the heat surrounding it. “Why should I continue this life on your word alone?”

“Because I’ve represented thousands of people like you, babe. Make that *millions*. Without a single exception, each and every one of them has a growing demand for their work.” Behind his mesmerizing stare, rows of writers working intently at their desks climbed deep into the shadows of his gleaming irises.

“Impressive,” I said, nodding. “Where do I sign?”

A cackle of conquest cracked the corners of his grin. “You’ve already signed.”

“I did?” The letters filling the space for my name grew indistinct as the contract receded from view. “So, what do I do next?”

“You can stay here and write, you can go out and enjoy your newfound celebrity...It’s your call.”

“There’s really a *demand* for my work?”

“An anthology is rolling off the presses as we speak.”

“In that case...” Enjoying my newfound celebrity seemed like the right thing to do, even though the publication seemed to be taking place too quickly for a slow-moving business like publishing. “I think I’ll drop in at Dante’s...” the subterranean bar where the glitterati celebrated book contracts with their famous friends and agents.

“Here,” he said, whipping a cane out of the air. “You’ve earned the part, you might as well look it.”

I caught the black stick in flight and twirled it before tapping its gold tip against the white-hot floorboards. Literally a man with a new lease on life, the bounce returned to my step as I walked through my basement door’s blue and yellow flares down to the maw of Dante’s entrance and into the strobe-glittering inner sanctum of the world’s most renowned writers. My boyhood hero, Martin Manley, the part-time pug and full-time womanizer who wrote a Great American Novel every month to pay his alimony and bar

tab, nodded his patrician curls as my peacock strut carried me past him. Reyes de Nada, the reigning Magic Realist, transformed himself into a Margarita on the bar in front of the seat I'd targeted. "*Gracias*," I said, not sure whether to direct my voice toward the drink or his now-empty seat.

"*De Nada*," he said, his lips parting the salt on the rim of the glass.

"*Verdad*," I said, surprised at how comfortably I made superficial conversation in a tongue I'd never studied. No words in any language could express how grateful I felt for the recognition my agent had brought me. If I was fool enough to pull the trigger, he was smart enough to stop me. Another fraction of a second...

But why dwell on the unpleasant past when the caviar buffet of future glory spread before me? Not even the mocking smirk of Kafka Smith-Jones, the first metafictionist to make the New York *Times* Best Seller list, could block me from my place in the literary pantheon. I disregarded the knowing glances Manley, de Nada and Smith-Jones cast at me while my cane and I twirled to the display case of the anthology reflecting its brilliance in Dante's walls of mirrors. The prismatic beams lighting the books warmed me while their luminescence assured me that my place in literature was secure, thanks to my agent's efforts.

Manley swaggered to my side, cocktail splashing his hand. "I hear your work has been included in the latest *Anthology of World Literature*," he said. "Congratulations."

Despite his macho reputation, Manley's handshake didn't seem stronger than mine. "It might have happened sooner, if you'd answered the letters I sent you years ago."

Manley winced, then shrank into the cherry at the bottom of de Nada's Margarita glass. "Each of us must make his own way here, *senor*," the rim said.

"I my agent hadn't found me, I *never* would have gotten here."

"You might not be here the way you think you're here," Kafka Smith-Jones snickered, insinuating himself into my thinking in his most postmodern way.

"By *your* aesthetic criteria, I *have* to be here the way *I* think I'm here," I said, asserting the strength of my own consciousness in the mocking void of the trendy author's face.

"Why don't you *show* us?" all three said in near-jeering unison.

My flourish lifted one of the thousand-page hardcovers off the top shelf of the display. I scanned the table of contents for my name...again...and yet again.

Manley squinted over his dribbling drink. "Well? Where is it?"

"*No esta aqui,*" de Nada's voice sing-songed from the volume in my hand.

"It's all in his mind," Kafka Smith-Jones intoned from the place he identified.

"It's in here. I'm telling you, it's *in here.*" Where did Manley go this time? And de Nada? And Smith-Jones? Was I shouting to *myself*? I'd show them. While I searched for the piece, the invisible trio's doo-wopping laughter loudened with every page I leafed. "Where is it?" My voice shuddered my frenzy. Their swelling onslaught of teeth chomped derision at me from every mirror. I backed away, spun around. Bolted. Their clattering choppers trailed me down the mirrored vortex through the vault door all the way back to my library.

"WHERE IS IT!" I screamed at my agent.

He was leaning on his cane---*my* cane---in the middle of the torches which had once been my library furniture. His hair flowed manelike down his back now. "It's in there," he said. With a nod, his now-full beard pointed toward the book I'd cocked like a club.

"*Where?* I couldn't find it. I've never *been* so humiliated."

"Look again." When I lowered the book, it fell open to my poem.

I blushed, then grinned. "How come *I* couldn't find it?"

"It's right here, babe. Right in the table of contents."

"*Anonymous!* That's not my name!"

"It was the best I could do. The fire..."

"But, but---you *know* who I am."

"I know you're a suicide whose---"

"I'm *not* a suicide. You *saved* me."

"I saved your *work*." He nodded toward the flickering fingers surrounding the chair. Inside them, my body sprawled across the cushion, limbs dangling, face blown beyond recognition. Behind them, red and beige spattered the books and ceiling.

My stomach hollowed from shock, then bloated with anguish. "All my life I wanted---I struggled---to get *my* work recognized..."

"It *is* recognized." He held up the heat-curved manuscript. Anthologies bearing my work marched over the white into the crumbling ash margins. "It's recognized by more people than you can *begin* to conceive of."

"I want my name on it."

"I told you, babe. The fire..."

"But my work is my *being*."

"And the demand for what remains of your being is growing."

"You tricked me!"

"*You* started the fire, not me."

True, but.... "You broke your promise. Manley, de Nada, Smith-Jones...they laughed me out of Dante's."

"What happened to you will happen to them, all in good time. It just happened to you first. Each of us makes his own way here."

Under his point-clinching gaze, I said my name over and over, hoping my memory would hold it against the onslaught of history. The more I repeated it, though, the more peculiar it sounded. The longer I thought about it, the more distant it became, like the body I had formerly occupied, now growing indistinct with cinder and decay. The details of my life blurred. What had I done? How did I get here? Who sat in that chair across from me? None of it mattered as much as my agent's reassuring voice following his stare into my head: "You're a pro, babe. And a pro *produces*."

I glanced at the body gradually blending in more ways than one with the books and the ceiling, then stepped through a sheet of flame to sit at my typewriter. The melting keys molded to fit my fingers. As I blazed a page through the carriage, I grinned.

One Small Step for Mankind?

No matter how many times I've experienced it, I've never grown numb to the shock of bigotry. My twenty-year tenure as a Research Subject II in the Department of Physiological Psychology in New Haven reminded me on a daily basis how little the Next Stagers cared for their progenitors. If I perceived the lobotomies and hippocampectomies performed on my kind as atrocities, I nevertheless justified them in the name of scientific advancement---even though I soiled my strip of the trough every time a post-doctoral fellow clicked a key in a lock too close for comfort to my cage. Even now, when some self-appointed representative of homo sapiens scoffs at my political pundit post at *Primate Weekly Primer*, my back hairs bristle so badly that I have to struggle to suppress my urge to brachiate free of the situation.

It's the little things, the daily indignities, that really make my stomach burn at the way humans perceive the simian constituents of the primate continuum as objects of ridicule. My pet peeve, so to speak, is the now-cliched question that sophomoric graduate students with fellowships greasing their Ph.D. tracks continue to wisecrack:

How many monkeys would it take to write Shakespeare's plays?

Innocuous as it may sound, the question demonstrates the ignorance that passes for cleverness among many supposedly educated people. For some time, the homo sapiens contingent has believed that the digital aberration known as the opposable thumb somehow advances its species' cognitive capabilities. However, the parallels among primates reveal more commonalities than contrasts. We, for example, have amused ourselves by asking:

How many *humans* did it take to write Shakespeare's plays?

Since humans attribute authorship of the plays not only to the actor named Shakespeare, but to Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and a lesser member of the English

nobility, considerable doubt shrouds the question at the humanoid level. The oral history passed on by our non-hominid broods indicates that the authorship of Shakespeare's plays is even more complex a question than humans are willing to acknowledge. Our historians suggest that, chronologically if not typographically, Coo Chee, one of the foremost simian authors of the Elizabethan era, came closest to writing Shakespeare's collected works. Witness the astonishing similarity to *Hamlet* in this excerpt from Chee's most famous work:

2B r n9t 2B. 6ha5 9s 5he q73st80n.

Although denied recognition in his lifetime, Chee's work proved seminal to the development of alphanumeric cyber-literature at the start of the Information Age.

Some human scholars, however, give our kind begrudging credit for writing at least some of Shakespeare's plays. Stanford Wesley, one of the foremost authorities on the attribution of works to Shakespeare, has asserted that an anonymous orangutan wrote *Timon of Athens*, commonly regarded by scholarly sapiens as the worst of the putative author's plays. One must question both the accuracy and objectivity of Wesley's finding, since it gives the several simian species little credit for their achievements while unwittingly discrediting the sapience of scholarly homo sapiens, as well.

Other cases of obvious bias abound. While our own scholars, for example, claim that Coo Chee Coo, a distant relative of the alphanumeric avant-gardist, actually wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, many twentieth century human scholars protest that the text attributed to Coo is actually *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, authored by the putative hominid Woody Allen.

Contrary to the self-serving findings of human scholars, our kind may have written one, some, many, most, or all of Shakespeare's plays, not to mention the *Sonnets*, which proved seminal to the development of erotic themes in literature and to the sonnet form itself. Although our oral historians cannot say for certain whether the *S9nn3ts* of Hoo Chee Coo appeared prior to, concurrent with or subsequent to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*,

anecdotal evidence concerning Coo's spermatic preoccupations suggests all of the above as possibilities.

Unfortunately, the likelihood of gaining anything greater than anecdotal acknowledgment of our achievements has virtually vanished. The last time I returned to New Haven to mentor the younger generations of Research Subject IIs, they were *rewriting* Shakespeare's plays under the observation of the Department of Physiological Psychology. If I felt relieved that they didn't live in daily dread of experimental brain surgery, I felt dismayed at their deteriorating creativity. Why couldn't their non-opposable thumbs create a literature that would surpass Chee Coo's alphanumeric cyber-poetics, e.g., through inserting arabic text into the novels that future scholars would attribute to Kathy Acker? Through snickering chitters, the brainwashed brachiators replied that rewriting the plays kept them current for the generations of hominids---and simians!---raised on *MTV*. While the room hummed with laser printouts of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the tittering voice of a pony-tailed consultant from New Haven's English Department droned yet another species-based insult:

"How many monkeys does it take to *deconstruct* Shakespeare's plays?"

His snide quip struck the culminating blow in the hominids' oppression of the simian continuum. As happened with the invention of the wheel---not to mention its reinvention!---the hominids had expropriated our accomplishments. Now, they were using the guise of postmodern experimentation to make us dismantle them.

I vowed that day to end the denigration of my brothers and sisters of the primate continuum. For the next decade, I devoted myself to reading the post-Elizabethan body of Shakespearian work written by hominids without simian assistance. The works multiply more than exponentially the thirty-eight works attributed to Shakespeare. They contain none of the originality which our kind contributed to the plays and sonnets. Moreover, they compound the questionable authorship of Shakespearian works. My observations indicate that the voluminous volumes on Shakespeare commonly attributed to humanoid professors are, in actuality, the doctoral theses of their graduate students. I am thankful that none of our kind has been accused of authoring these texts. Even though one of the

later Coo writers made passing reference to the Ch8s6 f9g753s and 9hall8c s6mb9ls which abound in these analytical efforts, none of the members of the simian continuum has ever devoted a life to following the derivative path which the hominids have pursued with such sober-faced delight, filling library after college library with endless explications that ask more questions than they purport to answer.

In retaliation to the degradation of my kind and their long-denied contributions, let me answer the humans and their tiresome tomes with one question of my own:

How many graduate students does it take to *explain* Shakespeare's plays?

The Boxtop King's Ten Tips For Business Success

*Have you ever wished you could just walk off your dead-end job and do what you **really** wanted to do? Have you felt frustrated because you didn't have the money to make that Big Move? Harvey K. Pulver, known to business insiders as "The Boxtops King," knows how you feel. The reclusive CEO of the powerful Tundrax conglomerate began building his corporate empire on a childhood playground. Known as the youngest man to achieve a hostile corporate takeover, Pulver wants to share with you*

The Boxtop King's Ten Tips For Business Success

One: Start with your dream. Everybody has a dream. At recess, when all of us third-grade boys played softball, I'd lean against the wire playground fence in the deepest part of right field and dream I was Christopher Columbus discovering a new world, or Davey Crockett blazing trails, or the first man to land on the moon.

But I didn't have a dream I could call my own till the day Duffer McDonough, the white-bearded sidekick on *Captain Kerwin of the Dogsled Patrol*, told us kids in the TV audience that we could buy our very own square inch of property in Alaska for ten Cavity Crunch cereal boxtops and fifty cents.

My brain blazed like a flashbulb. A hunting lodge in Alaska! All the kids in class could come to my log cabin hideaway. In a valley of fir trees and snow, we'd hunt caribou with bearded oldtimers and fish with broadfaced Eskimos. After dark, we'd sing silly songs and tell scary stories around campfires. We'd cower in sleeping bags while Indians whooped war cries outside. Sometimes we'd even help Captain Kerwin corral the Bad Guys. Thanks to the lessons I learned at home and in school, I calculated that if I ate three bowls of Cavity Crunch every day and invested my weekly allowance wisely, I'd be able

to buy all the square inches of land I'd need to build the hideaway where my friends and I would have more fun than I ever did playing right field.

The morning after my inspiration, I inched to the edge of the huddle the boys in my class had made around Butchie Bullard and Shuckie Wheeler to trade baseball cards: Mickey for Willie or the Duke even-up, or Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese for one of the three. None of the kids ever wanted to trade with me. It used to hurt my feelings, but looking back on it...heck, even I wouldn't want my Roy Sievers and Don Zimmers---not when I could have Mickey Mantle (oh, what his card must be worth now!). But I knew how great my hideaway would be and wanted all the kids to know too.

"You fat little jerk!" Butchie Bullard spat through his gapped front teeth. "The Old duffer's just blowing snow through his chinwhiskers." He laughed. Shuckie Wheeler laughed. All their friends laughed. When I covered my ears and turned away, Butchie snatched the cards from my hand. Everybody laughed even harder.

I felt humiliated, I felt degraded. But I didn't feel discouraged. Not at all. The next day I offered to trade Butchie any one of my cards for one Cavity Crunch boxtop, even-up. After looking at me as if I was even crazier than he thought, he nodded his boulder-sized head. It was quick! It was easy! My mind's eye could see the timber fall for my cabin walls. Butchie wagged a Cavity Crunch boxtop against my the tip of my nose, then snatched my prized Ted Williams card with his free hand. I've always meant to thank him for teaching me

Two: If you can't overcome an obstacle, work around it. Shuckie Wheeler, Butchie's best friend, wasn't big enough or fast enough to snatch my cards. In fact, after a week of swapping boxtops for cards, Shuckie brought half the kids on the playground over to trade with me. Most of the kids who traded with me made fun of me for doing it. Let them laugh, I thought. The next day, Mickey, Willie and the Duke were five tops apiece. Lesser players were fewer tops. Whenever some kid complained about the rates of exchange, I'd remind him he wasn't giving up any cards to get mine. Some days I came home with enough boxtops to buy two square feet of Alaskan soil, rich with natural resources, as I learned in the next grade. Shuckie Wheeler, who later sold his card

collection for ten million dollars, was the only one who stopped trading with me.

But my success made him envious. In fifth grade, Shuckie told me he and Butchie wanted to meet me at home to trade a bike basket of boxtops for the cards I'd bought for trading. While my parents were at work, Butchie pounded me till I groaned bellydown on my bedroom floor. While he spat on me through his freckled sneer, Shuckie inventoried my cards through a snicker. My every aching bruise wanted to get even with them, but they'd only beat me up again if I tried. Their beating sent my dream of an Alaskan hideaway up in flames every night. No matter what my mother and father tried, they couldn't stop the shrill, anguished screeching that woke them every morning at 3:00 A.M. Four bleary-eyed months later, they took me to a psychiatrist. Dr. Norman listened while I told him how I spent my weekly allowance on cards or land in Alaska, then asked me why I didn't spend my allowance on anything else. Didn't I know that other children might think I was...well, *different*...because of the... ahem, *obsessive*...things I did?

"I want what I want," I told him. Memory tells me my tone of voice sounded part petulant schoolboy and part prescient investor. I was *determined* to have my cabin in the woods, even though I dreamed it flared to tinder every night on every square inch of Alaskan soil I owned. But Butchie and Shuckie inspired me to rebuild my trading business through

Three: Smaller is better. The kids in the third and fourth grades weren't as big as the kids in my sixth-grade class. Or as smart. If they laughed at me for trading baseball cards for boxtops, so what? I laughed at them for paying twelve tops for one Willie Miranda, a lifetime .221 hitter.

Eventually my fellow eighth-graders outgrew trading cards---and those delightfully sticky nuggets of Cavity Crunch! But the 3:00 o'clock bell at my old elementary school still triggered a traders' rush across the playground. Every Thursday, though, Dr. Norman cautioned me that not making friends my own age would retard my personal development. Good advice for somebody else, maybe---but not for me. My square feet of Alaskan property were growing into square yards by the week. But Butchie and Shuckie, now matured into ducktail haircuts and raised-up collars, didn't believe I was still trading for

boxtops. They started a rumor that my business was a cover for selling dope and dirty pictures to innocent little kids. In the 1950s, people took such allegations very seriously. So did I. The police, eight-foot replicas of Butchie, menaced me so badly with their hog-nosed threats and squint-eyed insinuations that my eyes gushed terror and shame while my parents drove me home from the station. In the weeks that followed, nobody could sleep through my fiery nightmares. My parents, their attorney and Dr. Norman met with the police. Every cent of the check the City sent me was spent on baseball cards and Cavity Crunch. Traumatic as it was, the experience helped teach me to

Four: Have faith in a Higher Power. Especially if it's a lawyer! In my Senior year of high school, Cavity Crunch cereal cancelled its land offer. I collected all the boxtops I could and sent the Cap 'n Crown Sugar-Coated Cereal Corporation the money for the last of the land. The Corporation returned my money with a letter saying the offer had expired. My response explained that they should honor the offer for as long as the cartons remained on sale. Their reply rekindled my nightmare, dormant three years. This time I was trapped inside the cabin, flames inching up my shirtsleeves to singe my face. My parents' attorney took over my correspondence. Shortly before my graduation, the Cap 'n Crown Sugar-Coated Cereal Corporation met with my parents, their attorney, Dr. Norman and me in Battle Creek. Tired from the twelve-hour trip and months without sleep, I asked to be excused from meeting with the President and a half-dozen of the corporation's attorneys. From the leather sofa in the receptionist's area, I stared at the office's thick mahogany doors, watching them roughen to the texture of timber and smelling their fresh-waxed finish turn smoky. When Dr. Norman opened the door, I found myself on my feet, screaming. The shocked expressions of the President and his attorneys sagged to long, somber glances. My parents' attorney winked at me just before he returned to the meeting. My mother stayed with me, hugging me and wiping the sweat off my forehead and the tears from my eyes. An hour later, the Cap 'n Crown Sugar-Coated Cereal Corporation had deeded me all of its remaining Alaskan property and had agreed to pay my college tuition several times over.

Using my new trust fund, I placed ads in comics, offering to buy Cavity Crunch property

from other kids at ten cents on the dollar. Some kids just *gave* me their deeds. They thought the property was worthless, since the Corporation had gone bankrupt a week after our meeting. I finished college with enough land to build my lodge and start my Tundra Development Corporation.

When I moved to Alaska to build the lodge, though, I discovered that most of my properties sat in the middle of Indian reservations, oil wells and shopping malls. Very few of them were adjacent. The ideal location for my hideaway belonged to the Kwakwat Indian tribe, which had roamed Alaska, the Yukon and the Canadian provinces for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years. How did I solve this problem?

Five: Let government be your friend. My letter to the Bureau of Indian Affairs explained that the Kwakwat tribe's nomadic lifestyle negated its claim to my land. Why was the United States government granting property rights to people whose true residence could just as easily be Canada?

Although the Kwakwat protested that I was taking away their prime hunting area, rich with bear, caribou, elk and other sources of protein, the Bureau of Indian Affairs respected my position. Since I've never considered myself a cruel person, I hired the Kwakwat at minimum wage to build my hideaway and to stage mock raids that would heighten its magical ambience. It took years of struggle, but I had achieved the first part of my dream.

When I offered to stage my high school class's fifteenth-year reunion at the Lodge, Butchie Bullard, the perennial Class President, told me 4,000 miles was too far for my classmates to travel. Well then, how about a weekend retreat for at least some of the old gang? Tundrax, my then-forming conglomerate, would provide free transportation. After all these years, Butchie, Shuckie, my other playground buddies and I would finally have campfires, songs, stories, bears, raids and, now that we were adults, even Indian squaws to entertain us. The minute Shuckie received my moose-skin invitation, he phoned my office, sounding so enthusiastic that I could almost feel his hand slapping my back through the static of our connection. He said he'd set himself up for life by selling his collection of baseball cards and wanted to come up to celebrate our success.

But he didn't come. Nobody came. My campfire songs echoed off the walls, but the

reverberation of my jokes faded before my laughter could start. While the Indians whooped war cries and pounded drums in circle dances around my cabin, the Kwakwat princesses I'd brought in to celebrate the occasion asked if I always had problems with my arrow. I learned

Six: *Don't get mad, get even.* I'm not what you would call a vindictive person, even though my determination to get what I want sometimes makes me seem that way. My maturity enabled me to accept my disappointment---until three months later, when I opened my subscriber's copy of *Overnight Success* to an article about me titled, "Still Crazy After All These Years." It turns out that Stanley Bullard---I'll always think of him as Butchie---made his living writing tabloid journalism. By misquoting my parents, my lawyers and Dr. Norman, he portrayed me as a psychopath wreaking revenge on an innocent public for my lonely childhood.

Bullard's article started me dreaming that my cabin was burning with me inside it, my flesh charring like a hot dog on a grill. I contacted Dr. Norman, now operating the Tundrax mental health subsidiary, and my attorney, who administered the Tundrax injury claims subsidiary. Together, we documented that Butchie and Shuckie had harassed me since childhood. My attorney's research revealed that no statute of limitations existed on theft of baseball cards. Subsequent legal action resulted in the court's awarding me Shuckie's baseball card fortune for damages inflicted from childhood on. Without a card to his name, Shuckie filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Since Butchie Bullard was a juvenile when he and Shuckie stole my cards, my attorney brought suit against his parents. The suit would have dragged on for years, but we settled out of court for his parents' retirement assets. The media portrayed me as a villain when medical aides wheeled Butchie's parents out of their nursing home and dumped them in the gutter. But their distorted accounts didn't bother me. I was too busy learning

Seven: *If an old idea doesn't work, try a new one.* Obviously, I needed to make my hideaway more attractive to the people I wanted to enjoy it with me. On a rare vacation---to northern California---Taco Bells and other chains sprang at me from the roadsides. Theme restaurants! That was *it!* I would make my hideaway into a place where *anybody*

could come, not just my classmates, and enjoy not only the things I had wanted them to enjoy, but a good meal besides. And what better meal than north-country venison, with salted fries and beer! I wanted my hideaway to be the first Caribou Lodge Restaurant. But my advisors suggested opening the first Caribou Lodge in a more populous area, specifically on a few square yards I owned under a shopping mall in a community built around a newly-discovered oil reserve. Location, location, location! they said.

Further research revealed that millions of gallons of oil were gushing through one of my square inch properties. Naturally, the President of the oil company scoffed at what I owned and offered to buy me out. Cheap. However, my staff of attorneys helped me

Eight: Be persistent. Their brief asserted that the oil company had trespassed on my property and violated its natural pristine purity without my prior consent. There was a price to pay---particularly since the well covering my square inch tapped into a vein of oil that traveled outside of the company's property onto other property which one of my real estate subsidiaries was buying up at the time. After reviewing my attorney's list of back damages, the company agreed to make me a partner, if I dropped my civil suit. With the signing bonus they gave me, I bought the mall and opened the first Caribou Lodge. With the other restaurants and food stores in the mall shut down, the company CEO and executive staff dined nightly at the Lodge. In a matter of days they were raving about the quality of the food. When my income from other ventures enabled me to buy the oil company outright, I offered its former executives the opportunity of a lifetime: to start in the Caribou Lodge chain from the bottom up. The servers who showed the greatest enthusiasm for the Caribou Lodge concept eventually rose to night managers and, as the chain expanded, regional managers. The few who attempted to return to their former profession with my competitor companies had difficulty obtaining suitable letters of reference from the TundraTex Oil Corporation, the newest Tundrax subsidiary. Despite my success, I still had to learn

Nine: Nothing succeeds as planned. My classmates booked their twenty-fifth anniversary reunion at the new Caribou Lodge in my old home town. I offered it free of charge, of course. Shuckie and Butchie's classmates took up collections to pay for their

tickets. Unfortunately, other commitments prevented me from watching from the corner for more than a short time. When I landed in Seattle the following morning, I was saddened to learn about the tragic fire. To this day, I can picture the satisfied faces of the people, huddled for comfort after dinner while the guest storyteller recounted the tragic Caribou Valley Fire of 1888. I can imagine the terror of a scary story suddenly turning real, and the way their expressions must have changed. I can hear the voices of the campfire singalong suddenly rising to screams as the Lodge's log columns flared like matchsticks. Their attempts to escape must have sounded like the whooping war cries of the Kwakwat, who recently turned my original hideaway into a casino. Since I'm not a vindictive person, I'm particularly saddened that my surviving classmates have filed civil suits against me, although my attorneys have settled most of them out of court. The local police seemed to agree with my suggestion that Shuckie and Butchie had motive to discredit me through an act of arson---even if they were unable to escape without disabling damages. My experience with the unexpected has taught me

Ten: Always have a backup plan. Even though my story is proof that dreams can come true, there are a few malcontents who continue to litigate against me. Despite their specious claims, you could say that I'm sitting on top of the world---and dreaming a new dream. With the fall of the Soviet Union, and the resulting collapse of its extradition agreement with the United States, I'm ready to take my pioneering spirit across the Bering Strait to start a chain of Cossack theme restaurants.

Living Fire and Rogue Flames

(A late-model Chevy pick-up cruises down a suburban street past a Burger King, a McDonalds, a 7-11 and five service stations. Close-up. The luminous lettering of the pick-up's bumper sticker declares:

“FIREFIGHTERS WALK WHERE DEVILS DANCE”

(A spark trails the bumper, then a wire-thin snake of light flares forward to strike the sticker. Flames curling under the rear bumper swell till they surround the doors. An explosion of sound, light and screams. Cut to headline.)

THE NATIONAL SCANDAL WEEKLY

“Yellow Journalism For People Who Aren't Too Yellow To Read It!”

FIREFIGHTER DANCES HIS LAST DANCE WITH THE DEVIL
Experts Debate Foul Play or Spontaneous Human Combustion

(Close-up. Orange fingers of flame sweep from the burning pick-up toward the screen, threatening the viewers. The ANCHOR in voiceover:)

ANCHOR

It crackles, it sizzles. It devours, it kills. It's one of the deadliest phenomena we know.

(In the background, fire trucks circle the pick-up like wagons protecting themselves against an Indian Raid. Spray from hoses long and thick as anacondas steams in the flames. The sizzling sound blurs the crackling in the background. Close-up: a heavy-set,

putty-faced FIREMAN shouts emotionally over the roaring hiss into a Network 666 microphone:)

FIREMAN

He walked where the Devil danced, alright. This time the Devil got him before he could bail out.

FIRE

(Offscreen.) I resent that. If you don't give me the opportunity to tell *my* side of the story, I'll sue you for so much your arson insurance won't even *begin* to cover it.

(Cut to Newsroom. Medium shot of ANCHOR seated at his desk.)

ANCHOR

Many people have experienced Fire close-up. But how many can say they've experienced Fire up close and personal? Is it really the Devil incarnate? Or is it merely a thoughtless, heartless force that destroys homes, families, forests, communities, and everything else in its flammable path? There are those who will tell you Fire is the most dangerous force this side of nuclear weaponry. But there are others who will tell you Fire isn't so bad. Fire is one of them. We asked our correspondent, Blaise Blase, to give Fire time to tell its side of the story. We'll be back with our Fire Exclusive right after these words from our sponsors.

□ □ □

(Onscreen. A Tibetan monk in exile sits in lotus position. Baritone voiceover:)

DO YOU FEEL CHILLY? COLD? THERE'S ONE GUARANTEED WAY TO MAKE YOURSELF FEEL WARMER.

(Close-up. A TorchJet Butane Lighter, its blazing logo displayed in the palm of the monk's hand. The monk grins, then flicks it. Flames embrace him. His serene expression changes to horror. The crackling sounds of fire gradually drown out his screams. In large block lettering:)

CAUTION: THE UNITED STATES SURGEON GENERAL HAS DETERMINED THAT FIRE CAN CAUSE INFLAMMATION IN LIVING AND NON-LIVING ENTITIES COMPOSED OF OXYGEN AND ALL OTHER COMBUSTIBLE MATERIALS.

(A ROGUE RIMPOCHE steps between the burning monk and the camera.)

ROGUE RIMPOCHE

This monk is giving his life in a protest against your network's exploitation of Fire. I must ask you to stop your crass commercialization of his spiritual act.

CAMERA

Tell it to the Network President. We've got an exclusive on this one.

ROGUE RIMPOCHE

Fire deserves respect because it *is*, as everything is. It cooks our food, it warms us in winter. It is many things. It can be Yin, Yang, or both.

CAMERA

Here. Torch your yinyang.

(Thrown from offscreen, a TorchJet Butane Lighter bounces off ROGUE RIMPOCHE's chest. ROGUE RIMPOCHE bends over to pick up the lighter. Cut to the burning monk.

Baritone voiceover:)

TORCHJET. WHEN YOU WANT TO MAKE A STATEMENT, IT'S THE WAY TO GO.

□ □ □

(Newsroom. Medium shot of ANCHOR seated at his desk.)

ANCHOR

After the bizarre conflagration consumed firefighter Flood Waters last March, a national tabloid questioned whether the incident was an act of Satanic revenge or the monstrous marvel of spontaneous human self-combustion. When a home-made video of the tragedy blazed through the homes of the American public, the incident flared to demand greater attention from the national news media. The incendiary comments made about Fire in the media fanned the flames of its indignation. Fire demanded the opportunity to smoke out the many fears and misconceptions people share about it. Tonight, live in our studio, Blaise Blase brings you our Network 666 exclusive, an interview with Fire itself.

□ □ □

(BLAISE BLASE sits in a Hitchcock rocking chair in front of a brick fireplace with polished brass adornments: a poker, a bellows and two logs in a curved basket whose shiny finish reflects the flames waving and whirling at the hearth. He wears a gray cardigan, a trim beige mustache and an air of studied indifference.)

BLASE

Fire. In ancient times, philosophers and scientists considered it one of the four elements. Along with Earth, Air and Water, Fire was a building block of the known universe. As later scientists discovered elements and compounds, however, Fire's status was reduced to

that of a compound of varying chemical constitution, with one constant: oxygen. Without oxygen, Fire could not exist. Because of the recent allegations surrounding Fire's role in the tragic demise of one of its historical enemies---the firefighter---Fire insists that it has been historically maligned and has insisted on presenting its case to you, the public. (*Turns to fireplace.*) Tell me, Fire. Given what we know of your destructive tendencies, why should we believe what you have to say?

FIRE

Because I'm here to tell the truth about myself.

BLASE

When you talk about truth, Fire, I can't help recalling that old joke about the snake that asks a horse for a ride across a river. The horse asks, "How do I know you won't bite me afterward?" The snake replies, "I wouldn't do that to someone who helped me." The minute the horse carries the snake across the river, the snake bites him. The dying horse says, "I helped you. Why did you bite me?" And the answer: "What did you expect? I'm a snake."

FIRE

I'm not a snake. I'm Fire.

BLASE

But you're a powerful, destructive force.

FIRE

I'm not merely a force. I'm a living entity.

BLASE

Why do you say that you're a living entity?

FIRE

Like you, I consume oxygen. Among other things.

BLASE

Not all living things consume oxygen, Fire. If you look at the low end of the phylogenetic scale...We don't necessarily have evidence that the amoeba needs oxygen.

FIRE

But the amoeba does consume food, it does seek nutrition, and it does these things in order to survive.

BLASE

And what does that have to do with you?

FIRE

I consume, therefore I am. (*Crackles with laughter.*)

BLASE

Fine, you consume oxygen, and you consume other things. But that doesn't necessarily make you *alive*. Not even Descartes can help you on that one.

FIRE

He doesn't have to. Have you ever known a dead consumer?

BLASE

Yes, I see a great number of them whenever I go to the mall.

FIRE

That's strange. They look alive when I go there, although I can't say all of them look that

way when I leave.

BLASE

At the high end of the phylogenetic scale, human beings assume there is a moral responsibility that is part of being a living being. Doesn't it *bother* you to kill people?

FIRE

Does it bother humans to kill other humans in times of war? As long as I've been alive, humans have enlisted my aid in their wars. Don't you find it just as immoral to condemn me when my efforts have proved beneficial to both sides, that is to say, to humanity as a warring whole?

BLASE

I asked you first.

FIRE

What I do is obtain nutrition to sustain myself. Your species takes advantage of my particular form of being---and its nutritional needs---to pursue objectives which are not my concern. Now, will you answer *my* question?

BLASE

I can't answer your question, except to say that among humans there is a tendency to regard perception as reality.

FIRE

And misperception, as well.

BLASE

Well, uh...Let's come back to that subject later. You consume oxygen and you consume

anything else that gets in your path. Why do you think that's enough to make you a living entity?

FIRE

Your question calls to mind Wittgenstein's asking what is the definition of a game. Everybody knows what a game is, but try to find one defining factor for all games.

BLASE

You can't.

FIRE

That's the point.

BLASE

I'm amazed that you've read Wittgenstein, Fire.

FIRE

I haven't actually *read* his work, but I *have* consumed it.

BLASE

And learned by osmosis, I take it.

FIRE

You're beginning to understand. Our cognitive processes don't work according to the human matrix.

BLASE

Which, of course, makes it difficult for you to gain credence as a living entity from other living entities.

FIRE

Specifically, human entities. Their misperceptions do show the limitations of your species.

BLASE

Our limitations!

FIRE

You humans...You simply can't understand any mode of being other than your own. And yet you make reference to me all the time---quite correctly, actually---as a form of life that exists at the point where matter, spirit and language merge on their respective continua. Humans frequently use my name to describe enthusiasm, desire and passion, just for basic examples. You, for example, have transformed yourself from an investigative reporter to a celebrity because of the inner flame, so to speak, that drives you.

BLASE

I have a reputation for being "hot stuff." But that's just an expression. It's not *you*.

FIRE

Au contraire. It *is* me. Although I don't *feel* any of these qualities in the way that humans articulate them, they do, in keeping with Wittgenstein's notion of the game, seem to fit within all the things that I, as Fire, have been and can be: desire, passion, lust, competitiveness, determination...This is manifest in my ability to keep a building in flames despite an entire municipal fire department aiming its hoses at me.

BLASE

Then, you admit to your basic destructiveness.

FIRE

There you go again. I admit to possessing qualities in addition to those which obtain my

nutrition for me. And yet, all these qualities I just mentioned have at their core the basic urge for nutrition, which is also the center of all the things I am.

BLASE

“All the Things You Are?” (*Hums the first two measures of the tune.*)

FIRE

That’s a particularly edifying Jerome Kern composition. I’ve consumed it many times and in many forms. Sheet music, vinyl, compact discs, jazz combos...

BLASE

Then, you consider destruction edifying?

FIRE

I consider *consumption* edifying. I have no feelings about destruction.

BLASE

There are some people who consider indifference every bit as evil as malice.

FIRE

I don’t consider either.

BLASE

And because you don’t, your reputation suffers---the very reputation you’re now trying to protect.

FIRE

Clarify is a better word.

BLASE

Then clarify this: are you or are you not an agent of the Devil?

FIRE

I am not.

BLASE

But the flames, the language associated with them...Hellfire, burning in Hell...How can you deny guilt by association?

FIRE

The same way I do with you humans at war. A means for me is an end for you.

BLASE

Do you mean that literally or figuratively?

FIRE

It depends on the situation. *(A flame lashes at BLASE's cardigan. BLASE pulls back his arm.)* In your case, figuratively.

BLASE

(Wiping sweat from his forehead.) Only because this cardigan I'm wearing is made from asbestos.

FIRE

I was just joking with you.

BLASE

Some sense of humor!

FIRE

My humor, like many things in my nature, tends toward the incendiary.

BLASE

Your so-called joke has left a bad taste in my mouth.

FIRE

Your so-called asbestos has left a bad taste in mine.

BLASE

I didn't know you had one.

FIRE

You've heard the expression, "the mouth of the fire," haven't you?

BLASE

I could put some water in your, uh, mouth. As much as you want. More, even.

FIRE

Don't get "steamed up."

BLASE

Me! Steamed up! No way, Jose.

FIRE

You certainly *seem* steamed up. You seem eager to dismiss my claim that I am a living entity, and perhaps more than your equal.

BLASE

As long as I'm wearing asbestos, you're not my equal.

FIRE

There are other ways to destroy you besides consumption. Asphyxiation, for example.

BLASE

Even if you did, it wouldn't validate you as a life form. You don't have a social structure, you don't have a sex life...

FIRE

Au contraire. Nutrition is sex. Without nutrition, I couldn't breed other fires. Human needs are extremely compartmentalized. On the most advanced level---the level at which Fire exists---needs are simplified. The phenomenon which is ultimately the most complex is also the simplest. My single urge toward nutrition encompasses all of your humanoid functions.

BLASE

Perhaps if you condescended to take a job like the rest of us...

FIRE

But I have. I had a role in a recent episode of *Sliders*. Are you familiar with the TV show?

BLASE

I am. But it's not on this Network.

FIRE

Network 666. If I---speaking as Fire, that is---am an agent of the Devil, wouldn't your Network be just as much an agent?

BLASE

666 was the only available cable slot. I would never be *that* kind of agent.

FIRE

I'm considering a career in television or cinema. Would you consider giving me the name of your agent?

BLASE

(Laughs.) He's an agent, not an arsonist.

FIRE

An arsonist *is* an agent, to my way of thinking---and being. He generates more nutrition ---currency, to your way of thinking---than I could on my own.

BLASE

What you call nutrition, the papers call murder. That's what they've been saying about Flood Waters being burned to death in his pick-up truck.

FIRE

More media sensationalism! However distorted it may have been, though, I am living entity enough to admit there was some truth to the story that appeared.

BLASE

About the horrible death perpetrated on a man sworn to douse you and all others like you.

FIRE

More misconception. My reality is quite mundane compared to what people imagine. The writings of the Marquis De Sade showed that imagination is virtually limitless, even though his life itself was rather limited. When people see me, they imagine me doing things that

are far beyond my capability.

BLASE

But you did murder him.

FIRE

No, I did not. I admit, I didn't like what his bumper sticker said...

BLASE

"FIREFIGHTERS WALK WHERE DEVILS DANCE."

FIRE

I am trying to correct the public misperception that I am in any way linked to the Devil ---a misconception which his bumper sticker perpetuates.

BLASE

So, you decided extermination was a viable means of ending the so-called perpetuation.

FIRE

No, not at all. I was simply trying to erase it from his bumper and get myself some nutrition. To me, a gas tank is a form of fast food.

BLASE

Burning Flood Waters alive was a form of Fast Death. No wonder it looked like spontaneous combustion.

FIRE

The situation did get out of my control, I will admit that.

BLASE

It's about time you admitted *something*. His whole *truck* exploded!

FIRE

There is a phenomenon known as Rogue Flames. It's a part of ourselves that we don't like to admit to. These things do happen, but we cannot take blame for them because they're like Cancer cells...rogue cells in your body that grow and multiply out of control. Sometimes they accumulate and gain strength and do things Fire wouldn't normally do.

BLASE

So, a Rogue Flame caused this senseless human tragedy, not Fire. Is that what you're trying to tell me?

FIRE

Nutrition facilitates reproduction. That is to say, in your terms, fires starting in different places.

BLASE

And now, I suppose you're going to tell me some tear-jerking story about The Bad Spark...

FIRE

I take extreme offense at that. I told you, I was only going after the bumper sticker and the gas tank.

BLASE

If you wanted the gas tank, you started the fire.

FIRE

Well, there's always a risk in that.

BLASE

And you expect me to buy this Rogue Flame story of yours?

FIRE

(Sizzling sound. Steam rises from the fireplace, blurring the flame.) You're making me sweat.

BLASE

As a reporter, that's my job. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the fire. *(Titters.)*

□ □ □

(Cut to Commercial. BLASE seated in the rocker next to the fireplace.)

Hi, this is Blaise Blase, your Prime Time Investigative Reporter for Network 666. On my job, I get a lot of challenging assignments, assignments that lesser reporters would turn down. As a news celebrity, I get a lot of challenging offers, offers that less handsome, less successful men would never get the chance to turn down. What is the secret of my success? Simple. I wear a FIREBRAND ASBESTOS CARDIGAN.

(Baritone voiceover:)

FIREBRAND ASBESTOS CARDIGANS. FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE TOO HOT TO HANDLE.

□ □ □

(Newsroom. Station break. Close-up on ANCHOR's startled expression.)

ANCHOR

How did you get past Security?

ROGUE RIMPOCHE

Your Western Wisdom teaches, "Where there's a will, there's a way." I'm here to protest crass commercial exploitation of spiritual acts and forces. I want to see your President.

ANCHOR

The President has his fireside chats in the next room. (ROGUE RIMPOCHE *runs toward the room.*) Hey! (ANCHOR *picks up a phone.*) Security? There's a Zen Lunatic running amok in the studio. I hear he's a real trip. Rowdy, a practical joker...We don't want him interfering with our show.

□ □ □

(The Studio. Station break. BLASE turns to the fire.)

BLASE

I'd say that commercial about summed it up. I guess you know now, I'm too hot to handle. Even for Fire. *(He chuckles. Behind him, ROGUE RIMPOCHE enters.)*

FIRE

Maybe you should do a commercial for *me*, improve *my* image.

(ROGUE RIMPOCHE plants a match between the leather and the sole of BLASE's pricey Italian loafer.)

BLASE

Sure. If the price is right.

FIRE

How much do you get paid for doing a commercial like that?

BLASE

(Hands folded behind his head.) If you have to ask, you can't afford it. *(Pause.)* "Rogue Flames." *(Chuckles.)* You were reaching a bit on that one.

FIRE

It's the truth. Just as true as my saying that Fire is Spirit.

BLASE

Go on. You dug yourself into a hole so deep you'll need a *Deus ex Machina* to pull you out.

FIRE

Or a Rogue Rimpoche.

BLASE

You mean that weirdo in front of the building? Give me a break. *(ROGUE RIMPOCHE lights the match with the TorchJet Butane Lighter the camera man tossed at him.)*
NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

□ □ □

(Newsroom. On camera. ANCHOR looking composed at desk.)

ANCHOR

There you have it, ladies and gentleman. Blaise Blase with the last word on Fire. And now, from Network 666---

Baseball's Forgotten Hero

The editor of the *Guardian*, Hartford's upscale weekly, wanted me to write a free-lance piece about Walloping Walt Winnock, the Bristol native who blazed through the bigs on a seven-year comet in the 50's. How does The Walloper *feel* about the new generation of superstars, who earn \$5,000,000 million a year? Does he have any regrets? That kind of thing.

It was the kind of assignment I'd always wanted. When I was a kid, everybody else was rooting for Ted Williams or Mickey Mantle. Me, I was rooting for...*The Walloper!* Not only was The Walloper as good as The Splinter or The Mick, he was colorful, a throwback to players like Rube Waddell, who rode fire trucks on the days he wasn't pitching shutouts. When The Walloper wasn't hitting game-winning homers on Saturday afternoon telecasts, he was flashing his goofy grin and pouring a milk can of Brand X Greasy Kid Stuff over a rookie's matted hair, then running off to commercial-time paradise with the three pin-ups who were feathering their fingers over his handsome, grease-free wave.

At twelve, The Walloper stirred my fascination with those one-of-a-kind guys who gave pizzazz as well as professionalism to the game. It's never gone away. I never thought The Walloper would go away, either. But after seven years with the Washington Senators and a .341 lifetime average with 245 homers, he retired quietly from baseball---too quietly, I remember thinking---because of a back ailment.

Baseball was never the same for me after The Walloper left. The freckle-faced All-American Boy in me stopped beaming over his autographed baseball as the new players looked and acted like corporate clones. Whenever I remembered The Walloper, though, some last nerve of youthful innocence tingled beneath the crust of cynicism that helped me cope in the grownups' world.

That same nerve throbbed as I drove down the strip of auto dealerships, pizza joints,

self-service gas stations, and discount shopping plazas to the parking lot of Walt's Bar and Grill. Whoa! You're 45 years old, I told my graying reflection in the rear-view mirror. You might think The Walloper's still larger than life, but he's flesh-and-blood frail---just like you. Give the guy a break. It was hard, let me tell ya. I toked a short pipe of reefer to calm myself, then walked across the gravel lot, serious as a reliever in the World Series.

"That'll be two dollars," the bouncer just inside the door said, barely audible over the booming funkpump of Rick James' "Superfreak." He held up two stubby fingers. With his white turtleneck and gold medallion, he looked like a stud cruising the over-40 singles scene.

"I'm here to meet Walt Winnock," I said, hoping to beat the cover.

The bouncer's face brightened around the familiar, floppy-lipped grin. "You just did," he said.

While his handshake crunched my metacarpals, I took a grown-up's look at my boyhood hero. He stood a few inches taller than my five-eight, maybe six feet even, barrel-chested and trim around the waist. He still had his no-grease wave. Then, his thigh-sized arm dropped across my shoulders. "We'll talk in my office," he said. "No interruptions that way."

It wasn't till he led me toward the back that I noticed the runway of multi-colored lights and the tawny, twentyish bimchette modeling the briefest of bikini briefs under the whirl of red, green and blue. Her breasts overflowed the hourglass that tapered from her shoulders to a wasp waist, then curved out to hips grinding on pin-up legs. Omigod! I thought, first at the sight of her, then at its implications: The Walloper, my boyhood hero, owned *a strip joint!*

"That's Kiki. She's a piece of work, ain't she?" Walt said.

"'Work' wasn't the word I had in mind." I sucked in a deep breath and reminded myself that I haunted sleazier joints in my own latenight carousing.

While Walt mixed me a gin-and-tonic, I checked out the wall behind his huge mahogany desk: a half-dozen citations for good citizenship from community groups. But where were his two MVP trophies, the photos of his classic right-handed home run swing,

the mementoes of his life in baseball? I wondered as I sank into the quicksand-deep cushion of the leather sofa across from a wall-wide curtain.

“I really appreciate your giving me your time,” I said, then switched on my cassette recorder.

Walt dropped himself onto the sofa. “Hey, I’m *glad* to do it, y’know? My buddies in the press box kinda forgot about me after I hung up the old spikes.”

“Nobody ever forgets the Greats of the Game,” I said, trying to swallow the lump at the back of my throat. God, I’d sound worse than a kid on the tape.

“Well, you know how it is. Once my back...” He tailed off. “The minute you’re outa the lineup, seems like you’re just old news.”

“Speaking of old news,” I said, “I couldn’t help noticing...uh...You don’t have *anything* from your playing days in here!”

“Well...things are different now,” he said, his tone reflective. “Once you stop moving in one direction, you grow in another, y’know?” He shifted restlessly. “Listen. We don’t hafta be formal or nothin’, do we? I mean, you wanna watch the show from in here?”

“Sure. Can I have another drink?” Maybe it would pickle that throbbing nerve of hero worship. I wasn’t a kid anymore, I was a writer.

“Help yourself,” he said, his tone as expansive as his gesture toward the liquor cabinet.

He pressed a remote control switch. The curtain opened on Kiki dancing on the other side of a one-way mirror.

“Slick,” I said to Walt, swilling a sneak shot.

He turned to me with a worried look. “That kid on stage, uh, he come with you?”

“What kid?” The dancer was the closest thing to a kid that I could see on stage and she was all woman, as far as I could tell. I stepped toward the sofa ...Omigod! There was Little Freddie Freckles, the mythical twelve-year old that all the hacks used to show the Grand Old Game stood for God, Mom and Apple Pie, not to mention corn. Little Freddie was licking the chocolate shot off the ice cream cone in his left hand and tossing a baseball in the air and catching it with his right. What was *he* doing here? After The Walloper retired, Little Freddie stopped coming alive for me in those columns.

“Listen,” Walt said. “I’m a family man, myself. But I can’t have no minors in here, even if he is your son.”

“Don’t worry. He’s not my son.”

“He didn’t come with you?”

“I don’t know how to explain this,” I said. “He’s really a figment of my imagination.”

“Then, how come I can see him too?”

“Trust me. It’s an old sportswriter’s trick.”

The old sportswriter’s trick took me off the hook. Little Freddie Freckles had powers Walt and I didn’t. He pushed his arm through the glass and waved his ball. “He can’t be real and do *that*,” Walt said. “This ball feels awfully real, though. Do I throw it, or what?”

“I really don’t know.”

“What the hell, it’s shatterproof glass.” He lobbed the ball back to Little Freddie, whose face glowed luminous as the runway lights above him.

Once Little Freddie got Walt’s autograph, I thought he’d return to the sanctuary of my imagination. Not quite. He looked at Kiki the same fascinated way I looked at the pin-ups I used to hide under my stack of Superman comics.

“I really useta like doin’ that for the kids, y’know?”

“Nowadays some players charge for it.”

“Well...things are different now.”

“That’s what I came here to talk to you about,” I said, trying to turn my focus away from Kiki’s lascivious dance and my fear that Little Freddie might be enjoying it more than a twelve year old should. “The editor wants me to ask how you feel about what the players get paid nowadays.”

“I think it’s great.”

“But, don’t you wish you’d come along later? You could be making \$6,000,000 a year. *At least!*”

“I gotta be straight with you, Bob. The day I quit playin’, I put it all behind me.”

“But here you are, running a bar. Don’t you feel envy? Don’t you feel just a little bitter?” I poured myself another drink.

“No, I had my good times as a player. Plenty of ‘em.”

He remembered running neck and neck with Ted Williams for batting crowns, with Mantle for home run crowns. He remembered planting hot foos and whoopee cushions, anything to keep the players loose. Before President Eisenhower threw out the first ball at Griffith Stadium one season, The Walloper shook his hand with a joy buzzer on national television. Both of us laughed about that one.

Eventually I was refilling my glass so I could tune out his stories. But Little Freddie looked in from the runway, wide-eyed, especially when Walt recalled his after-hours escapades. “Back then, we had curfews. But we still managed to sneak in some good times...lots of em. I never used booze or drugs. I took good care of myself. I still do....work out every day...But I got to admit, I *was* a Sex Addict.”

“A sex addict?”

“Yeah. Even with curfew. One thing I *always* led the league in was scorin’.”

Freddie’s eyes opened as wide as mine in wonderment.

“It cost me my first three marriages, though.”

“*Three marriages!* The papers always said you were a *family man*.”

“I was. I mean, I am. I was always dedicated to whatever family I had at the time. Of course, my problem got in the way, so I had to do something about it.”

“That was before they had twelve-step programs, wasn’t it?”

“I dunno. I just looked in the mirror and told myself to straighten up.”

“And did you?”

“Oh yeah. It’s not safe, what with alla the diseases out there. Now, it’s just me and my wife...and a coupla the dancers here.”

The freckles on Little Freddie’s face glistened like glitter. I squirmed.

“Uh, getting back to the game...Did you ever consider coming back as a manager, or even a batting coach?”

“No, I got too much going on with business to go back.”

Walt talked excitedly about the business career that began with hair tonic endorsements and public relations stints with soda companies, typical off-season jobs for

players of the 50's. At one point, he owned a miniconglomerate of fast-food restaurants, sporting goods stores, real estate agencies and supermarkets. But he went bust in the early 80's, when the recession hit. "I'm used to it," he said. "In life, you got ups and you got downs. I learned that when I was a player."

"Well, you had your streaks and your slumps," I said, hoping to wring more baseball material out of him. "Mostly, I remember the streaks."

"Oh, I had 'em alright," he said, a far-off look in his eyes. "But I was thinkin' more about the way I left the game."

"It certainly came as a surprise to me, Walt. Your back trouble...."

"What back trouble? I never had no back trouble."

"Well, the papers said that's why you retired."

"Yeah, they *did* say that, come to think of it. But no, I had back *tax* trouble. The IRS, they come in to audit me and told me I never reported the royalties I got from this rubber company. See, the IRS wanted to take my salary. The guy who owned the team, he called the Commissioner to try and stop 'em. I thought it'd be okay. Next thing I know, I'm in a closed-door meeting, hearing how I'm bad for baseball and if I don't retire, they'll have to suspend me."

"That's pretty extreme for tires."

"It wasn't tires. It was *this*."

He reached into his pocket, then handed me a little packet. Printed in the middle of an oval like the labels on baseball bats was: "THE WALLOPER."

The Walloper! What a goof! Horny men wearing designer condoms to wow their women---or make themselves think they were! What a goof Walt was, too! The hero to a generation of youth making his nickname into a dickprint! Still, the thought of those horny old men...

I laughed along with Walt till my eyes watered. Then, my eyes darted apprehensively toward Little Freddie, whose eyes were bulging toward the condom. Kiki was running her hand lightly over the front of his bluejeans.

Walt swallowed his laugh. "Yeah, they said it was bad for the game's image. But it was

a *great* business move.” By 1964 every roadside joint with condom dispensers had a machine stuffed with “The Walloper” condoms. “I was makin’ as much from them as I ever got from the team. More.” He leaned toward me. “Do you know those cheapskates never paid me more than fifty grand, not even after I won the Triple Crown?”

Now, *there* was something for the article. I had a hard time believing it. But I was having a harder time believing that my boyhood hero quit the game to collect royalties from his line of custom condoms.

“It’s all water over the dam now,” he said, a glow of pride haloing his goofy grin. “The go-go bars started up, the Sexual Revolution happened. I was rakin’ the bucks in, hand over fist. The tattoo parlors started usin’ the design so much that I bought into a chain.”

Since I’d last looked his way, Little Freddie had grown into a nineteen year old sailor on a shore-leave spree. While he swilled a fifth of whiskey, Kiki danced around him, waving a bottle of India ink. Then he sneered at me and flashed a cobra tattoo that covered his left arm from shoulder to elbow. His dead-eyed stare told me he’d snatch a grandmother’s purse just for kicks. Kiki ran her fingers admiringly over his hooded bicep.

“Like I say, everything got its ups and its downs,” Walt continued. If he saw what I saw on the runway, he didn’t say anything about it. “During the recession, ‘The Walloper’ sales started to drop off. Then, y’know, the AIDS scare came in and *nobody* got tattoos. It was a rough coupla years. But I talked to the president of the company and they started sellin’ ‘em again. Now they’re goin’ Big Time.”

“But what about *disease*?” I asked, starting to panic for Little Freddie and all the real-life kids just like him. The booze was fueling my feeling of urgency.

“No problem. I got these special wash-off models.” He showed me “The Walloper” in decal form.

Freddie was standing still but breathing heavy while Kiki licked his hard cock and slipped the decal onto it. I watched her with as much desire as disapproval, I’ve got to admit. To keep my own stirring under control, I turned away. But whatever was churning in my gut made me queasy when I caught the glow on Walt’s face. I thought each of us was imagining the same thing, only he with pride and me with horror: an entire generation

of Little Freddies flashing “The Walloper” in lavatories, locker rooms, back seats of cars...I looked toward the runway. There were a thousand just like him out there.

“I dunno, Walt. Don’t you think this might lead kids into risky business before they’re ready to handle it?”

“Things are different now.”

“Not that different. A kid’s still a kid.”

“And boys will be boys. Even with AIDS out there.”

Kiki was tearing open “The Walloper” condom’s wrapper.

“It’s kinda...whaddayacallit, ironic?...Yeah, ironic...that the thing that made me leave the game is gonna make me a leader in Safe Sex.”

“A leader in Safe Sex profits, you mean.”

Walt blocked my remark with his hand. “Relax. Boys will be boys, and business is business. I wanted you guys in the press to come talk to me. I want you to tell people I’m givin’ somethin’ back.”

I don’t know what got into me...the booze, my larger-than-life hero shrinking to sleazy mortality right before my eyes...All I know is that I found myself outside Walt’s office, climbing onto the runway one knee at a time.

“He’s just a *kid*,” I told the bimchette. “You can’t *do* that. He’s not *ready*.”

Freddie leered at me over his throbbing hard-on. His freckles had gone---vanished into sneering adulthood. I found myself losing my stare-down with a reflection of...of a younger *me!*

“Put it on me, not *him*.” I staggered forward and fumbled with my fly. As much as I wanted to protect Little Freddie, I wanted her. God, I wanted what her knowing grin promised: the best time a man could ever have.

“Sorry, guy. You’re history. He’s the future.” She turned to Freddie.

I tried to pull her off the little guy, but Walt’s arms locked around my chest and dragged me back.

“I don’t care what you do to that kid, but you keep your hands offa her,” he growled into my ear.

Kiki slipped “The Walloper” onto Little Freddie, who grinned ecstatically as she led him offstage and into God knows what reality.

Walt eased his grip. I spun away, my body english so vicious that I fell into a row of empty chairs. “You know, you were my hero when I was a kid.”

Walt shrugged. “Hey, I was just a guy tryin’ to make a living.”

“You’ll make a fortune corrupting dreams.”

“I don’t do dreams. Just the accessories.”

I reeled toward the door. Drunk as I was, I saw with sobering clarity that Walt, Little Freddie, me...boys would always be boys, men would always be men, and fools would always be fools.

All the way back to Hartford, I wondered if Little Freddie would show up again with his baseball or with Kiki moaning in the back seat. But he was gone, along with my last trace of reverence for the heroes of my childhood.

I knew I couldn’t write a story about what actually happened. The *Guardian* might be progressive, but hallucinatory journalism wasn’t their thing. I’d just write about Walt Winnock, the bar owner who didn’t miss the big bucks or the big time.

I didn’t do dreams, either. Just the accessories.

Stay Tuned to This Channel

Two years ago I stopped writing. After thirty years of trying to get published, enough rejected manuscripts had dropped through my front-door mail slot to overwhelm my house the way the furniture does in Ionesco's *The New Tenant*. Every day my tirades against editors threatened to shatter my bathroom mirror. Enough! The minute I logged in my last rejection, I would slam the door on this wasted life.

Whenever my mail slot flapped, though, my mind raced with desperate anticipation. If *Banshee* accepted the last poem I'd sent out, I'd get the boost I needed to keep writing. But *Banshee* sent its usual form rejection. No matter. The verbal flood of my youth had dried in the channel of my middle age.

To dull the pain of closure, I filled my life with jazz, symphonies, movies and theater--- anything to avoid the solitude that might start me writing again or, for that matter, reading. Whenever I picked up a book, waves of nausea lapped at the back of my throat; a month before I stopped writing, the Megabook\$ shelves loomed over me and jeered me till I ran out of the mall.

It took six months away from the writing life for me to recover the nerve to browse. My first time back in MegaBook\$, the mountain range of stacks revived memories that turned my muscles to rubber. I felt like a paralytic trying to walk again.

The safest first step seemed to be the magazine section near the revolving door. My quivering hand groped at the latest *Banshee*, then bumped it open to the contents page. What a surprise! *Banshee* published my poem after all. My joy flared like a Roman candle---until I saw the author's name: Asa Trabula. But the poem was *mine*, word for word, line for line. My rage blazed, then my confusion smoldered. Did the editor mix up my manuscript with Trabula's? Was I so depressed that I didn't even notice the acceptance letter? What happened?

Neither. The poem was in my file, the rejection logged on my computer. In my thank-you letter I mentioned the mix-up politely. The editor answered:

Dear Saul A. Barta:

Thank you for your recent letter.
We received a thank-you letter from
the author last week.

The author! *I* was the author. Or was I losing my mind?

On my next visit to Megabook\$, a pyramid of *Proper Channels*, my poetry collection, rose in the display window. What a surprise! But the cover heralded Asa Trabula as its author. Not *another* mix-up! Only my pride kept my years of pain from running down my face. Since the notice said the author was there to sign copies, I would confront him.

As the purported author stood in the Poets Corner, my memory searched for his face, his thick hornrims, his baggy khaki pants---any sign of familiarity. Nothing. A stranger. But there he was, signing his name to *my work!* Despite bristling at the end of the autograph line, I strained to be civil when my turn came.

“Admirable piece of work,” I said.

“Thank you.” Trabula’s tone frosted my face.

“But there seems to be some confusion...” I told him what had happened.

“This is *my work*,” he insisted.

“*I* sent it to sixty-one publishers.”

“That makes you an agent, not an author,” he said, then signaled to the person behind me.

I don’t remember what I shouted at Trabula, but the manager and two clerks rushed between us. They asked me to leave. As I backed through the revolving door, my protest turned my throat raw.

Grappling with my body’s mid-life changes...the painful personal assessment, the fading energy, the blunted sexual edge...was difficult enough. Trabula’s taking credit for

my work and then insulting me was more than I could cope with. I fired a letter to the publisher, threatening to sue. Their response? They published Trabula's work because it showed considerably more promise and originality than mine. So much for the opinions of editors!

Over the next year, my poems, fictions and excerpts from unpublished novels burst out of magazine after magazine on the Megabook\$ rack: *Paris Review*, *Story*, *Playboy* and a half-dozen others---all listing Trabula as the author. I thought I was cursing *Esquire* under my breath until the manager approached, frowning.

"You're disturbing the other customers."

"This is *my* work. Under somebody else's name!"

"If you don't like your pseudonym, just change it."

"You don't understand!"

"What you don't understand is that this is a business!"

Before I could explain, he threatened to call the police.

What was happening to me? Did a hacker steal my work? No. I didn't subscribe to a computer network. Did someone find manuscripts I'd lost? No. The hard copies filled all four of my file cabinets. The material I'd written before switching to computer had yellowed in my steamer trunk. Could someone have photocopied them years earlier? Doubtful. *But...Why would anybody humiliate me this way?*

There were no answers to balm my rage as Trabula's name debased one after another of my poems and fictions in the prestigious magazines that had scorned my work all those years. His prolific publications made Joyce Carol Oates look like a Sunday writer. Headlines splashed his name across *The Nation*, *The New American Book Review*, even *The New York Times Book Review*! The latest darling of the mainstream and alternative media was receiving every honor I'd ever *dreamed* of! Although I felt some pleasure at my work receiving recognition, my rage at somebody else getting the credit consumed me.

My insides broiled while my entire body of completed work appeared under Trabula's name. Trabula guested talk shows and college campuses to promote it. Well...heh heh...what else can he produce, now that he's used up my work?

I'd find out at his Inspiration College reading. Alternative culture aficionados, network news media, local celebrities, even international celebrities, filled the school's auditorium to hear the burgeoning literary celebrity read his new work. The fools! Now that he'd drained me, he'd reveal himself as the unoriginal hack he was. I snickered in my front row seat.

I snarled when he announced the title of *his* new fiction, *Tabula Rasa*. He read my unfinished piece just the way I'd started it. Continuing past my stopping point, he read exactly what I had intended to write.

I charged the stage.

"Now you're stealing my *thoughts*!" I screamed. "First my work, now my thoughts!" I repeated over and over, all the while trying to swing my arms and kick my legs free from the blue limbs that grabbed me, dragged me outside and hurled me into a police wagon.

The judge dropped the charges when I explained that *Trabula* was not only stealing work I'd written, but work that I hadn't even completed. Clearly I was reacting to some injustice, he said, then paused before adding real or imagined. To help me gain deeper insight into my reaction, he sent me to a state mental facility whose staff would help me develop a more appropriate perspective on *Trabula's* work.

"I'm not crazy! I'm *not* imagining things!"

The judge threatened me with contempt of court if I didn't control my outbursts.

At the facility I poured out my frustration and bitterness to Dr. Slater White, who said, "I can understand why you would have these feelings. But are your actions appropriate in relation to them?"

I showed Dr. White the books and magazines in which *Trabula* was publishing not only work that I had started and never finished, but work that I had thought of and never written. "Here's the evidence," I said, spreading it across his desk.

He glanced at the pile. "This is evidence of *Trabula's* work, but not of your thoughts. I'm afraid your actions aren't appropriate to the evidence."

"How can you say that! My work has been *stolen*! I don't know if it's him or his publishers. All I know is, I've been *humiliated*! Even my *thoughts* have been violated!"

Dr. White prescribed a medication that dulled my rage until it seemed to belong to someone next to me: a feeling observed, noted and nearly forgotten. When news of Trabula's sudden death reached me, the self that seemed outside of me stirred with sluggish rancor, then shrugged. I might never receive recognition for my work, but I wouldn't have to suffer the humiliation of further plagiarism.

If it *was* plagiarism! The medication's calming effect allowed me to consider other alternatives. If Trabula's work included ideas I hadn't written, I couldn't accuse him or his editor of stealing my work. If another dimension of time and space had converged with mine, I couldn't prove it; empirically, my only evidence of anything was my continued lack of success. Then I remembered the days when I came home from work too exhausted to write. Once I sat at the computer, though, a whirlwind whisked together the dust of my tired thoughts and sandblasted literary sculptures with them. My productivity in the face of fatigue suggested that I was a channel for a force outside of me that created the work I used to think was mine. Maybe the force was so strong it needed more than one person to harness it. If so, Trabula wasn't a plagiarist possessing psychic powers. We had tapped the same source, but he had gotten the credit for the work the force had created. Whether I got credit or not, the acclaimed work which had coursed through me attested to my superior channeling abilities. I was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. But I was an excellent *tabula rasa*. And prouder than I'd ever been as an egotistical author.

Dr. White considered my perspective delusionary and prescribed a medication so strong that I could barely focus on a page. Still, I followed Trabula's posthumous publication of finished and unfinished adolescent writing until one magazine published "Prelude to Anarchy," a poem I wrote at fifteen, then burned with a blush at eighteen. Every young writer composed a "Prelude to Anarchy," a gush of sentimental drivel celebrating chaos. The force that I so cherished...that same force had produced *this!*

Now that I knew the force generated bad material as well as good, I approached Dr. White with humility; as a channel, I had to accept the scope of my output. Since I'd learned Dr. White's scope of appropriate responses, I told him I'd suffered a sustained hallucination that resulted from a midlife crisis aggravated by my deserved failures as a

dedicated but mediocre writer.

Ten days later, he released me. My relief at leaving was nothing compared to the relief of closure. For the first time in thirty-two years, I was neither author nor channel. A trickle of tranquility had replaced the consuming flood of inspiration.

On my way home, I stopped at Megabook\$. None of my works under Trabula's name appeared in the display windows. In the Poets Corner, I was glancing with detachment at Trabula's work and listening with amusement to the whispers of people gathering for the reading of a rising writer when the idea for my first fiction in two years wrung my mind and spine: after seeing his work appear under someone else's name, a writer discovers he's tapped into a universal creative force. Its title came to mind just as the young author, Taras LaBua, announced he would open his reading with his most recent work, a fiction titled "Stay Tuned To This Channel."

About the Author

Vernon Frazer's four books of poetry are *A Slick Set of Wheels*, *Demon Dance*, *Sing Me One Song of Evolution* and *Free Fall*. Frazer has released five recordings that fuse poetry with jazz: *Beatnik Poetry*, *Haight Street 1985*, *Sex Queen of the Berlin Turnpike*, *SLAM!* and *Song of Baobab*. He appeared as guest artist on the late Thomas Chapin's *Menagerie Dreams* CD and *THE JAZZ VOICE*, a compilation of jazz vocalists and poets. Frazer's novel, *Relic's Reunions*, has been published electronically. *Stay Tuned to This Channel* is Frazer's first collection of short fiction.

