



Enigmatic Ink

Field Reporting

By

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Insurance City Gazette

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WINGNUT WINS GOVERNOR SEAT

Governor-Elect Calls 33% Plurality a Mandate for Change

INSURANCE CITY-- Elected by the narrowest margin in state history, Governor-Elect A. Wright Wingnut declared his 1% victory over incumbent Bill Blandon a mandate to change the way government conducts its business. Chief among Wingnut's goals is streamlining

the State's bureaucracy so that it "eliminates the present wasteful duplication of services and downsizes the dole to the government employee sector" by extending the outgoing administration's comprehensive three-year agency reorganization for an additional two years.

THE REORGANIZATION IS KILLING US

I've survived three reorganizations in my twenty-some years as a stranger in an even stranger land, but this is the strangest one yet. It's not your standard catapult into anomie. Not at all. It began as a Gradual Change, an Enlightened Change, an *Understanding* Change, then became a protracted phase-in whose cumulative stress fatigue has rendered the staff pliant as wilted vegetables. Even the wall office aristocrats are dropping like the dried-brown leaves off their potted ferns. A heart attack here, a nervous breakdown there . . . in this opera turned Soap Saturnalia even the Captain Hauptmanns are morphing into Wozzecks. The daily fray and frazzle docks even the best marriages on rocky shores. People who never drank more than one cocktail spend their nights plastered and their workdays hung over. Me, I stopped drinking years ago. After forty my body couldn't handle it. But these days my herb consumption begins before dinner, my trunks are meals and my sleeping pills placebos.

Each of the previous three Commissioners has paraded like a ringmaster in front of our cowering bodies, explaining Quality Circles, the Japanese marvel of non-linear management, with an enthusiasm that matches their paychecks and their sinecures as party hacks—or lobbyists—after they leave here. Some Western mind aspiring toward Zen must have experienced a faux *satori* of workers running in circles, papers flying all around them landing at random in places where someone from another Quality Circle picks them up runs in circles moving the papers forward at random till the desired result comes about through the nonlinear progression otherwise known as accident. The Quality Circles we've been spinning the past three years have only produced paper-whirling dervishes whose stress levels threaten to break the barriers of centrifugal force.

Today, newly-appointed Commissioner Vanna B. Morph will give us Governor Wingnut's update on the current state of organizational anarchy from the video screen on the wall of our new state-of-the-art office facility. What better way to get our hopes dashed and stress addictions fixed than to watch the sleek African-American appointee with Ivy League paper and a runner's physique address us with Wingnut's vicarious authority?

While waiting for the videotape to start, the managers prep themselves to make a good display. Regis George Tercero, management's token Latino, perches imperiously on the swivel chair in the front row. He pats down any stray hairs real or imagined on his black pompadour, smooths invisible wrinkles from his navy pinstripe suit and plants his tasseled wingtips flat on the floor. To Tercero's right, Roger C. Prynne of ye olde New England stock sits erect behind a gray desk. The Winds of the Future blow through chestnut waves silvering at the temples above the tortoise rims that characterize his businesslike demeanor. And John Garvey, the only good guy in the bunch, scratches the corners of his bushy mustache and pats the sweat beading his mocha forehead with a monogrammed handkerchief. Each of them has reasons other than professionalism to make his best impression. Commissioner Morph, whose sexual charisma has brought her hushed but sudden notoriety, has modeled her managerial style on several of her male predecessors who practiced Management by Penis. Call it Management by Vagina or Management of Penis . . . the gender may differ, but the same principle applies. The whispers say she put her best trick on Wingnut to win the appointment. What else is new? If nothing else, she'll have the managers making testosterone leaps through flaming hoops inside the Quality Circles.

It'll be fun to watch the side show. Except for Garvey, who worked his way through college, the others are frauds. Prynne has never passed a promotional exam for his position. Whenever he fails one, his political connections instruct Personnel to create a new job title, appoint him to the position pending his passing the exam, then postpone the exam as long as possible. He hasn't taken one in five years, two years over the legal limit.

Tercero is management's tactical blunder. Ten years ago, a Latino commissioner directed management to advance Latinos within the department. The WASP management noted that Tercero's last name was a Spanish number. They didn't know it derived from a misspelling of Tesoro, his family's Italian surname, at Ellis Island. The livid Latino commissioner couldn't reverse the promotion; Tercero has his own political connections. Now Tercero struts around the office like a *generalissimo* and shows off his bad *Español*.

In the back row, I can barely contain my contempt for Prynne and Tercero or my apprehension about which way I'll get fucked, none of them involving the Commissioner. She doesn't spread her pheromones below the top rungs. I'll be stuck working for Tercero and Prynne or commuting to some remote district office. Garvey's waiting for personnel to complete the paperwork for his last-minute transfer to the Mannamok office.

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(The video screen brightens. COMMISSIONER VANNA B. MORPH's tight curls frame high cheekbones, obsidian eyes that can flash laser hot, a wide grin with shark attack potential and a chin with a dimple so cute you want to hook it gently with your forefinger. The designer's cut of her beige business suit tastefully traces the subtle slope of her torso as it curves into the narrow thrust of hip. She stares straight into the camera while overlapping flickers of Asian, Latina and Caucasian characteristics fuzz the borders of her face and shoulders, suggesting a failed attempt at 3-D.)

We have a committee at work to revamp the classification system. In the future, staff will have a salary scale greater than the current seven steps for each position . . .

(A subtitle crosses the screen as she pauses:)

GOVERNOR ORDERS WAGE FREEZE

In addition to the annual increments, we will implement upgrading based on incentives. We believe in staff taking individual responsibility, such as signing their own letters. Responsibility motivates people to improve their performance.

We recognize that some people aren't meant to be supervisors, but have other valuable skills. We intend to reward them for taking the initiative of putting them to use in serving the Department.

GOVERNOR ORDERS POSITION FREEZE

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So much for incentive. I've been frozen at the top of my salary grade for the past five years. Forget about boosting my pay a few bucks a week with some technical writing. I could have cranked it out in a blur, then written poems stories novels at my desk as usual.

Enough. It's time to turn on the computer at my desk, pretend I'm taking notes while my thoughts drift toward a noir scenario:

A scream pierces the night.

Cut to a suburban home, split level, two-car garage. In the picture window, a man's body hangs from a noose. His tongue dangles from the left side of his gaping mouth. A bottle of Johnson & Johnson baby oil leaks over a wad of sticky Kleenex on the floor.

In a distant hideaway, headlights flick on. A siren turns to light across the moonless sky, then lowers pitch to the roar of a powerful engine revving. Sleek as a Batmobile, low lines designed for speed, the vehicle whizzes through the night too fast to leave shadows under streetlights, then screeches to a stop in front of the picture window where the hanging man's shadow twirls slowly on the wall behind him. The grieving housewife heaves sobs and tears from the edge of the sofa.

Through the door bursts *CAPTAIN NOOKIE!* blue cape flapping behind the red uniform squeezing skintight the paunch that sags over pencil legs, his white hair slicked straight back with Wildroot Cream Oil or some other hair tonic from the 1940s, 1950s, or other eras long gone. He stops at the body. His beady eyes squint through his blue mask straight up to its face.

"How they hangin', pal?"

"My husband . . . He — he's dead. He — *he killed himself.*"

"I can feel your pain, ma'am," Captain Nookie says reassuringly, then glances at the clutter on the floor. "I gotta, say, though, it looks like he went out with a bang, heh heh."

The wife sobs uncontrollably. "I—I don't understand. What was he *doing?*"

"He was just having some good, kinky fun."

"But. . . *This* — *This never* happened to him before."

A banshee wail tightens her face around the core of her pain. Desperate for a hug of support, she stumbles into Captain Nookie's embrace.

"That's the only thing you can do. Have yourself a good cry." The Man's Man of the Super-Hero Set lets her body throb against him until his member throbs against her. As her throbbing subsides, his increases.

"There *is* one other thing you can do, ma'am," he suggests, guiding her onto the couch. He sits down next to her, his reassuring touch brushing over her shoulders, teasing the perimeters of her breasts, then sliding down her waist across her belly to settle gently on the inside of her thigh.

"He was such a *good* man."

"Yes, it's tough to replace a good man. But here . . . Let me show you how."

"What do you mean . . . 'how?'"

"It's the old toothache trick. A person comes to the dentist with a

toothache, the dentist steps on his toe."

"What does that have to do with . . . with this *terrible* tragedy?"

"You ask too many questions. Let me show ya."

Captain Nookie's huge member catches in his zipper, but a manly tug pulls it out: thick, purple, oozing liquid pearl at the tip. Her mouth opens to protest, but his lips encircle her startled O. He pushes her skirt above her thighs, slides his tumescence between them and humps her against the backrest. Her protests turn to sobs, then whimpers, then moans: "Noooo . . . nooo . . . nooo! Yes . . . YES! . . . YEEEESSSS!"

Through the steaming mist of her heavy breathing, his sagging ass pumps till the gushing between her legs replaces the gushing from her eyes.

Captain Nookie lifts her ankles off his shoulders, then pulls out. "Feel better now, toots?" he says more than asks as he zips up.

Her mask of post-coital relaxation flickers trauma strobes. "What — What do I do now?"

"Depends on what you want. For him, you dial 911. For me, you dial N for Nookie."

The Nookiemobile screeches into the darkness.

A scream splits the night.

SANCTUARY, SWEET SANCTUARY

The Quality Circles I'm spinning in whirl me home, a dervish dancing stress anxiety panic. No matter what happens I'm screwed. Under Prynnne and Tercero it's Nitpick Hell till retirement. The rest of the crew isn't much better. They aren't fools I suffer gladly. I've made my enemies, no doubt about it. Everything depends on the next stop of the new administration's roulette wheel. And I'm dizzy from watching it spin endlessly day after day.

The stress in the office fatigues me the first hour I'm there. By rush hour my body's dragging as I rant my day's last energy at the traffic clogging the Interstate between the office and my sanctuary.

At least my Real Life still holds one thread of hope: the novel Axon Press accepted three weeks ago. The publisher, Harold Hauptmann, wanted me to tell him how Axon could publish an unknown author like me without losing money. I wrote back offering to do text layout and be flexible about royalties. They're a small press after all. They won't sell enough copies for me to leave my job. Even with my budding literary success, though, my nerve endings still play "La Cucaracha" in the office.

But now I'm home. To write. Be productive in my Real Life. Five poems three stories two novels all scream WRITE ME! WRITE ME! WRITE ME! I'll get to work on them as soon as I read the mail.

Well, *all right!* There's an Axon Press envelope lying on the floor near the front-door mail slot, a beacon to guide me out of my daily madness. Let's read the good news.

AXON PRESS **INDEPENDENT PUBLISHERS**

"TOMORROW'S LITERATURE WHENEVER WE FEEL LIKE PUBLISHING IT"

Dear Renard Shanach:

Your recent suggestions have convinced me that my offer to publish your novel was a mistake. I must, therefore, withdraw it. My time is too valuable to be spent as a mere accountant. Nevertheless, I wish you the best of luck in finding another publisher for your manuscript.

Sincerely,

Harold Hauptmann, Editor

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NO, VIRGINIA THERE IS NO SANTA CLAUS JUST SOME FUCKING INDIAN GIVER CHEAPSKATE BASTARD WHAT DOES HE WANT THE NOVEL FOR NOTHING CHRIST THE BOOK TOOK ME FOUR YEARS TO WRITE I'M NOT GREEDY BUT IF MY WORK SELLS I'D LIKE A CUT IS THAT TOO MUCH TO ASK THE FIRST NIBBLE FROM ANY KIND OF PUBLISHER IN THREE YEARS OF TRYING THREE YEARS OF FEELING LIKE WOZZECK WITH A SENSE OF HUMOR TO SUPPORT THIS SHIT I WORK THAT FUCKING JOB SO UNBEARABLE WITH NO END IN SIGHT

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WHAT DID I DO WRONG?

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Who knows? Who can tell in this mess? Fuck all the Herr Hauptmanns! Persevere!

But the daily uncertainty stress and now anguish all wedge between the computer screen and me . . . Fuck it. Toke commercial grade smoke, good for compulsives like me, check e-mail no messages, stoned now, pull out one of the Danish freehand pipes I've tried to quit smoking, nearly succeeded, but days like today . . . too many days like today . . . light the pipe, spend the night smoking my tongue raw. Maybe catch some jazz. No. Better not inflict myself on the outside world, just let my mind spin till it winds down. But my nerves keep me smoking till bedtime, staring mindlessly at *Miami Vice* reruns: banyans, cloudless blue sky, South Beach turquoise ocean, blonde bikini'd bods, Columbian drug lords shooting shopping malls to sieves . . . Complete escape—only my mind won't let me. With any luck my seniority will land me in Central Office, where I can sneak in writing time on the ancient computers. If C.O.'s low-tech the district offices are no tech.

Hours later. A low-slung cumulonimbus hovers a thick gaseous brick

three feet above the couch. Too wired from the day and the nicotine for the trunks and sleeping pills to do any good. Swallow another pill. Still can't sleep. Get up make toast six slices. Got to stop this, I'll end up on a fat farm. But how? Every day I don't know where I'm supposed to be, where I'm supposed to go. The only thing working in my favor is seniority.

Finally the TV reruns blur, the voices mumble. Four hours later I stumble into bed. Next thing I hear is the alarm's electric drone.

CATCHING A BREAK

John Garvey's dark eyes dart around the cafeteria, not just at the drones taking their mandatory fifteen, but at the walls, the ceiling . . . He seems to want to tell me something confidential, maybe even dangerous. Finally, he paws down the long upper lip of his thick gray mustache, then half-whispers behind the steam rising from his black coffee three sugars: "The rumors about the Commissioner, man? They're all true."

"You mean, her Management by Pussy policy is more than office gossip? I don't rank high enough to be summoned to service her."

He swallows a bite of his Danish, then — "Ouch!" — stings his lips on the coffee cup's hot rim. "You gotta watch *everyone*, man."

"What *is* this, Johnny? Parting words or paranoia?"

Another flash of darting eyes. "Let me tell you what went down, man. Last month, we were at this retirement dinner, her and me. As the night winds down, she invites me to her place for a drink. 'Look,' I tell her, 'you're a very attractive lady, Commissioner, but I'm a married man.'

"She says, 'That's the way uh-huh uh-huh I like it.'

"I'm really sorry,' I tell her.

"Don't be, Johnny. I *love* a challenge."

Garvey shrugged off her comment. A little braggadocio in the face of rejection, nothing to worry about or tell his wife.

He thought the Commissioner had dropped the matter till a Federal Housing Conference in a D.C. hotel last week where she was keynote speaker on welfare reform and he a scheduled panelist on subsidized housing. Very pleasant flight down: nothing suggestive, nothing inappropriate. But when he tried to register, he learned the Department had reserved only one room.

"The Governor's austerity budget," Vanna grinned, then waved "follow me" over her shoulder with the key card.

Should he take the couch? Rent another room? No matter; he could handle it — he thought. "That's when it got weird, man. I mean, *real* weird."

Commissioner Vanna's gym-firmed buns pressed the door shut so artfully that Johnny barely heard it click. She fastened the chain lock, then slinked against the door, her long leg curving through her slit skirt, a sultry

grin glossing her face. “You know, Mr. Johnnie B. Goode, a brother once said, ‘You can run, but you can’t hide.’”

Johnny’s sweat spattered his forehead as her appraising eyes glittered down his thick chest and past the little belly roll of middle age.

“You have to think of this as a paid vacation,” she said. “We have our jobs to do, but afterward . . . What happens in D.C., stays in D.C.”

“Commissioner, I, uh—I really don’t want to offend you or insult you in any way—but I . . . Really, I can’t do this to my wife.”

“I’m not asking you to do it to your *wife*. I’m *ordering* you to do it to *me*.”

As she teased her way to the bed, all he could see was his twenty-year marriage, his daughter’s freshman year at Smith College, those getaway weekends in Newport—not to mention the salary that made it all possible—suddenly as much at risk as a homeless family. His voice quivered, “I hope you understand.”

Stern as a dominatrix: “I don’t understand insubordination, nor do I tolerate it.”

A nervous laugh. “You know, uh, Vanna, this could be construed as, er ah, sexual harassment.”

“Not if I give you what you want, sugar. And I know you want it.”

Johnny’s eyes widen over his coffee, his mouth falls agape. “That’s when it started, man. It was. . .man, I never seen *nothin’* like it before.” Or wanted to see again, his bobbing jaw seems to add. His eyes jump from one corner of the caf to the next, black checkers on amphetamine. “I mean, it started with her *voice*, man. It was low and husky, high and breathy, all at the same time, and I swear I could. . . *see* the words coming out of her mouth, like, er ah . . .”

“Like dialogue balloons in a comic strip?”

“No. Letters, man. Not regular ones . . . Fancy. Like . . .”

“Like fonts?”

“Yeah, but *nothin’* I ever seen before.”

Then Vanna’s voice turned normal. “I’m a political animal,” she cooed. “I do what I have to do in order to get what I want.”

To get him into her bed she turned into Mae West, Bette Davis, Marilyn Monroe, Cicely Tyson, Sophia Loren, the sensuous kaleidoscope of her bodily transformations synched to her breathy cooing . . . Whitney Houston, Kim Basinger, Julia Roberts, Janet Jackson, Meg Ryan— “if you like ‘em cute.”

A gesture resembling desperate benediction whisks the steam from

Johnny's incredulous face, eyes bulging at the recollection. "Whatever she was doing, man, it wasn't *physically* possible. I mean, *real* body changes. I thought she was a sister, man. But she kept changing color, size, shape . . . right down to the nipples on her breasts. I don't get it, man. All I had on the flight down was a Seven-Up . . ." He flicks a glance at the table next to us. "Whatever eavesdropping they do at C.O., I doubt they can do it here."

"After what I saw, Rennie, I don't doubt *nothin'* anymore."

Tempting as it was, all she showed him didn't get him into bed.

"*"Think about your future,"* she tells me.

"That's exactly what I'm thinking about," I told her. "I'm thinking about child support, alimony, my daughter transferring to community college and me moving into a studio apartment."

"*That's not the future I'm talking about, Johnny. This is the future, and you can be part of it,*" said a brown-eyed blonde teasing down to her bikini thongs, who morphed into a curvy Latina whose attire showed *mucho* body *poco* suit, before returning to the original Vanna, sensually tracing her hip lines and licking her lips before spreading her arms invitingly.

Johnny shakes his head. "I couldn't believe it, man. She was luring me with babes who. . .who I guess don't even exist yet, not as far as I know. Tell me, Rennie, you ever hear of anything like that?"

"Never. But I don't rule anything out, no matter how far-fetched."

"Well, she's breathing mist all over my face and telling me I can have my pick of any of them babes right here and now. Not only that, but I can travel with her to conferences all over the country, advance my career by serving as an expert on panels. And all I have to do is . . ." His head lowers.

"So, did you?"

"It was a no-win situation." He squeezed around her—"It was tempting, I got to admit"—out the door—"Too tempting"—got himself a room in a different hotel. When he arrived at the conference the following morning, she'd removed him from the panel. Monday morning at the office a memo reassigned him to unspecified functions at the Mannamok district office.

"At least she didn't fire you."

"No, but she'll make me wish I had. I got a ninety-minute commute each way. And no assignments."

"That's dirty pool."

"Damn straight, man." An expression of disbelief broken by quick edgy movements displaces the remnants of his quiet confidence. Did he

hallucinate the whole thing? Did the Commissioner spike his soda? Or was the scenario, on the surface as plausible as a UFO sighting, something that really happened? I've always believed reality's possibilities extend beyond our customary comprehension, that truth is stranger than fiction, excluding fictions about strange truths. Whatever Garvey experienced had transformed him into someone too vulnerable to press for more details.

"Let's get back upstairs, man. I gotta pack the rest of my papers."

INSPECTOR TRAINING

The Computer Training room: twenty new Gateway 2000 PCs, four rows of five. Why do they train staff on them when almost all the agency's computers are at least two editions behind the Windows version that runs them? Looseleaf training manuals eight inches thick and six yellow notepads flank the VCR on the instructor's table at the front of the room. Colette, the unit's secretary, arrives, passes out the material. I wave away the pad.

"You don't want a notepad, Mr. Vortek?" her warm West Indian inflection mixing surprise and irony.

The managers and clericals agree my handwriting is illegible; I can't even read it, myself. Nevertheless, they interpret my refusal to take notes at meetings as arrogance or indifference. Without denying either attribute, their attitudes puzzle me; I learn more by listening intently than trying to decipher the scrawled and scratchy results of my arrested fine motor coordination. This time I'm prepared. I flash my floppy disk at her. "I'll use the computer."

"Don't you know dese machines don't always work?"

"If they don't, then I won't." Chuckling.

Colette grins. "You wouldn't want Mr. Tercero to hear you sayin' dat."

"He hasn't been here for two weeks."

"But he will be in a moment."

How? I wonder, watching her sparrow frame turn away from my back row seat. Tercero hasn't returned from Inspector Training, which finished a week ago. Neither has the Commissioner. I hope the Italian Stallion's enjoying his *generalissimo* mount. It won't last forever.

Colette moves to the front of the room, switching off the lights as she goes, then clicks on the VCR. Onscreen behind the table:

(Salsa music. Aerial view of San Juan Hilton. Pan beaches, pools and water bars to plush white interior. Solo pianist plays romantic ballads on the lounge's Steinway Grand. WINGNUT and COMMISSIONER whisper intimately while TERCERO stands off to one side among other well-dressed professionals, his expression edgy despite his formal posture. Close-up: the COMMISSIONER takes

two steps forward and grins into the camera.)

Commissioner: Good morning, staff. As you can see, Mr. Tercero won't be present at today's Inspector Training for the Subsidized Housing Initiative Team. After the Inspector Training Session in Philadelphia, which I personally monitored, Governor Wingnut requested that we join him in an Administrative Retreat, where we're exploring ways to provide better services while maintaining a fiscally responsible austerity budget. Mr. Tercero, however, has prepared a presentation that will train you for your important jobs as SHIT inspectors.

(Cut to TERCERO, wearing a navy blue suit and vest, standing in front of a projection screen in an empty conference room.)

Tercero: I'm sure all of you want to know what is the most important part of your job as an Inspector. The most important part of being an Inspector, people, is the image you present to our service consumers.

(Pulls a white trench coat from a transparent bag on the table, buttons it, ties the waist belt, dons a gray fedora, tugs its brim and sets his lips in a severe expression.)

Your fedora should be tilted at a slight angle over your left eye. All of the buttons on your trench coat *must* be buttoned. You *must* buckle the belt of your trench coat. This is very important. An inspector not only needs the right tools, but the knowledge of how to use them.

The Inspector *must* communicate an image of Authority. This will help you in gathering critical information, for example, the true number of people actually living in a unit. This includes boyfriends not listed on the Residence Sheet, and all income actually received, including money earned, *como dice*, under the table.

Your image can help you get more than information. There are some women who get aroused when they see a uniform.

(Cut to COMMISSIONER, scowling.)

I must, however, remind you that, as an Inspector, you work and live by a strict code of conduct. Pay attention to the screen behind me. What you read will determine your success as SHIT Inspectors.

(Onscreen behind him.)

THE INSPECTOR'S CODE

- * **Always wear your trenchcoat and fedora. In a world of instability and change, it may be your only certainty.**
- * **Assume an air of Manly Indifference whenever possible. When in doubt, say, "Fuck it."**
- * **You do not have the authority to determine the suitability of a person's lifestyle. Your only power is to invade the sensibilities, the way a writer might.**
- * **When sleeping with a tenant, you are taking advantage of the opportunity, not the tenant.**
- * **Do not dirty your trench coat in the course of your work.**

Since the Governor's austerity budget limits the number of attendees per training session, I have arranged for you to see a training film. I must warn you that this is not easy to watch. As Inspectors, you must deal with urban reality: drive-by shootings, prostitutes on sidewalks, and dope addicts nodding in doorways and dropping their AIDS-infected needles in the streets.

□ □ □

Instead of the promised urban grit we get a real-life version of Betty Furness badly updated from the mid-fifties: middle-aged, dumpy and frumpy, forty surplus pounds fleshing her hips and belly. She opens a refrigerator door, then explains how the stripping must seal the door to keep the cold air in. Mold is acceptable, an internal housekeeping matter. But if the seal is broken — *ta daaa!* — the unit must fail. Any house, condo, apartment, any rental unit that fails in one area fails in its entirety. She shows us windows: a crack in the pane is acceptable, but not a broken pane. Electrical outlets must have covers. A light hanging by a cord is acceptable so long as the cord isn't frayed. This hanging naked bulb . . . It calls to mind the Captain Nookie piece I wrote.

(Baritone voiceover)

AND NOW, UNBEKNOWNST TO OUR NARRATOR . . .

(Next morning. PRYNNE, TERCERO and GARVEY sit at the conference table in front of the COMMISSIONER's desk. PRYNNE and TERCERO exchange wary, testosterone-charged glances. The COMMISSIONER sits with her back turned to them, listening intently to a telephone conversation.)

Commissioner: *Yes, Governor. I'll meet you there . . . About an hour, I'd say.*

The COMMISSIONER turns to face the managers. Her congenial grin projects a combination of sexual satisfaction and self-assurance in the face of their tension.)

Commissioner: Now, what do you fine gentlemen have for me today?

Prynne: I believe we've found something on the staff in question.

Commissioner: And I believe this is the first time I've actually understood something you've said.

Prynne: It seems like an appropriate course of action, at this point in time.

Commissioner: Then don't go fading into obscurity before you tell me what you found.

Prynne: To gather the relevant data, it required many nights of intensive research . . .

Commissioner: No wonder I can hardly see you. Try not to work so hard. The staff is spreading ugly rumors that I've been draining your juices so dry you're turning invisible.

Prynne: There may be some truth to that.

Commissioner: If there is, you've just added another three hours to your daily commute.

Garvey: The traffic out there, it's terrible, man.

Commissioner: You know what you need to do to be transferred back, Johnny.

Tercero: This guy, he's Very Smart. Crazy like a Fox.

Commissioner: Who are you talking about, Regis George?

Prynne: Rennie Shanach, Commissioner.

Tercero: She asked me, not you.

Commissioner: Please try to remember that we're discussing official

business. Shanach . . . He's the oddball with the cute little buns, isn't he?

Prynnne: I wouldn't know about that, Commissioner. What I do know is that we have incontrovertible proof that Shanach is using agency computers to conduct his own personal writing business.

Tercero: We have him dead to rights. (*Gloats.*)

Commissioner: Before I make my decision, I want to see what he wrote.

Tercero: It's not something a lady like you should see.

Prynnne: It's very offensive material. Sexually explicit, to say the least.

Commissioner: Did any of you find what he wrote to be arousing?

Tercero: (*Vehemently*) It's grounds for *termination*.

Commissioner: You sound as aroused about him as you do about me.

Tercero: I am not, *como dice*, a *marican*. Shanach and I, we have *issues*. A *history* of issues.

Garvey: Issues or not, you fire the dude, who does the work?

Commissioner: One of the other staff.

Garvey: Who you think does *their* work?

Prynnne: I can't buy that, John. Not with all the time he spends on the issue that brought us here today.

Tercero: I say we *terminate* him.

Commissioner: Not before I read what he wrote. We have to be fair, especially in the way we fire him. We're still unionized, as much as that displeases the Governor. And me. But thank you for your input. I'll let you know when I need more.

Insurance City Gazette

December 24, 1995

WINGNUT SLASHES WORKFORCE

Cites Christmas Eve Layoffs as Show of Holiday Spirit

“It’s better to give than to receive,” said Governor A Wright Wingnut, in response to union protests over his Christmas Eve layoff of 35,000 State employees, approximately sixty percent of the government’s workforce.

“The timing of this mean-spirited act makes Ebenezer Scrooge look like Santa Claus by comparison,” said union president Ino Steward. “With a projected surplus of one billion dollars, this is completely unnecessary.” Steward expressed his suspicion that Wingnut issued the layoffs as payback for the

union’s refusal to endorse him during his 1994 gubernatorial campaign.

“I don’t know what the dickens he’s talking about,” Wingnut replied, citing a need to boost management salaries with funds freed up by the layoffs of civil service employees. “The union says its workers won’t be able to give their kids Christmas presents. None of them ever considers the pain a manager feels when he gives his son or daughter a Ford instead of a Lexus. It’s about time the rank and file employees learned something about economic realities.”

THE NUMBERS GAME

The gov's holiday gift has reduced the SHIT unit to Prynne and Tercero co-managing me. My seniority saved me from the layoffs.

If Prynne's in his office, I can't see him. He's probably taking a few extra days off to spend Christmas-New Year's week with his family. I'm off to get acquainted with the Housing Program at Golgotha Anti-Poverty Services. As I'm about to head out, though, Prynne's ghostly murmur floats through my intercom to call me into his office.

At first his Insurance City Symphony poster and potted fern are all I see. Then my eyes catch his tortoise rims hovering in the air above the gray jacket draping the pastel blue Van Heusen. Prynne looks different. Tired from the holiday parties, maybe? No. Spectral. Did the Lady at the Top drain the udder on his soap dispenser dry last night? Above his shirt collar glitter flecks hover like visual symptoms of hyperventilation, outlining his long face narrow shoulders and small flat tire. A long strip of floating glitter gestures for me to sit down. To his inquiries about holidays I don't celebrate and the family (both parents dead) I tell him everything was fine.

The figure raises itself erect in its chair and looks directly at me, eyes drained of color. "As you know," he murmurs, "the Department is going through a period of organizational restructuring with the overall objective of enhancing delivery of services to those consumers deemed most appropriate. Among those services prioritized, the highest is the dimension of need . . . "

His preamble spins motes of some indeterminate substance around the planes that shape his slight physique. The intonation and inflection of his soft phrases crack, flake and float downward, slowly dispersing his body's remaining definition. The longer he speaks, the more his green desk blotter resembles a desert of soap powder.

Prynne leans forward, a confiding posture. "As you may have noticed, Rennie, our unit received a greater than anticipated increase in staff to management ratio."

I shift back in my chair. Interesting way to view a staff reduction. Let's talk Reality. "Administratively top-heavy. So, what else is new?"

"Actually, Rennie, it *is* something new. You see, the Governor believes

we need an increase in Leadership," pauses to weight the word, "in order to bolster worker productivity."

"That should work without a hitch. I'd say my workload has quadrupled since Scrooge struck."

Prynné's skeletal facial angles sharpen at me.

"I was already doing one person's work and training another, in addition to my own assignments."

"That's what concerns us, Rennie. We're aware that this could result in lower productivity ratings per worker for this Quality Circle. We've increased our ratio of management to staff accordingly, to insure your increased productivity."

My back straightens. "I'm already one of the most productive workers this agency ever had."

"The staff to management ratio would appear to contradict that, Rennie. Therefore, I'm going to have to ask you to make a greater contribution to the ongoingness of this Quality Circle." A meaningful pause.

Did *Catch-22* and surrealism just blend?

"Such as?"

"Such as issues of punctuality," the Winds of the Future murmur strangely like the past. "This is the third time this week that you've come in at 8:36 instead of 8:30. Those six minutes have become very important in terms of unit productivity."

"Get real. I work twice as fast as anyone else . . . that used to work here."

Prynné shakes his head slowly from side to side, his half-smirk blending into his bullnosed J. Edgar Hoover profile. "If we were to pro-rate six minutes a day at \$25.00 per hour, it comes out to . . ." pauses to punch numbers into a digital palm calculator, poses for the appearance of appraisal, then looks up with cocky, low-key rectitude . . . "\$.42 a minute." Fingers x 6 into the calculator, says, "That's \$2.52 each time you're, um, tardy. There is, at this point in time, an increased demand for accountability in the public sector."

I stand up. "I could be considerably more accountable if I went to GAPS, which is where I was going, instead of sitting here."

"Furthermore, Rennie, there has been widespread public concern about the manner in which State employees address our service consumers, and the Governor has taken prompt and decisive corrective action, just as I have, in my capacity as his representative."

An aura of significance fills the space where his body used to be. A

piece of official stationery floats across the table into my hand.

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TO: All State Staff

FROM: The Honorable A. Wright Wingnut, Governor

Effective immediately, all employees are hereby directed to answer telephones and to greet consumers of public services with the following greeting:

“Hello. I’m _____ from the State, and I’m here to help.”

[] [] []

I drop the memo in my in-basket, turn to get out while the getting’s good. But Tercero swaggers out of his office, next door to Prynne’s. “Staff meeting in my office. Now! *Andalé!*”

Double-teamed again, dammit!

In his office Tercero stares past me like the ever-assessing Lieutenant Castillo in *Miami Vice*, evidence of cogs turning important thoughts toward expression through the puffy face above the suit, right hand carefully stretched across the desk blotter palm down as if posing for an instructional video: “We are the new Subsidized Housing Initiative Team. We are not a unit. We are a team. I believe in team work. Team work is *essential*. Therefore, all letters will be prepared for my signature.”

So much for the Commissioner’s decree that staff will exercise greater responsibility by signing their own letters.

“I want you to know, *Señor Shanach*, that I have an open door policy. Any time you want, you may schedule an appointment to meet with me and discuss your issues. And I will talk to you any time I want, because we are a team.”

I’m outa here.

“Before you go, *Señor Shanach* . . .” He hands me a memo on the Governor’s official stationery. Double-teamed again! Don’t these Masters of Efficiency communicate with each other?

Obviously this double notice requires a display of cooperation on my part. A few minutes with the photocopier’s enlargement buttons and a roll of scotch tape attaches an edited version of the memo to the back of my chair:

“Hello. I’m Rennie Shanach from the State, and I’m here.”

On to Golgotha Anti-Poverty Services, aka GAPS.

“And don’t forget your trench coat!” Tercero calls to my back.

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Golgotha Anti-Poverty Services began during the 1960s War on Poverty as Insurance City’s attempt to address the social and economic problems of its inner city. The State and Federal governments funded the services the agency gave to the city’s needy and the pork the politicians barreled out to their best campaign donors. GAPS President/CEO Ron Rotondi had married into a politically influential family that facilitated his two-year rise from mail room clerk to chief executive and increased his funding appropriations so that he could administer many new programs whose primary services increased his salary. A special one-time legislative appropriation renewed three times enabled him to relocate GAPS to a sparkling new facility on the outskirts of Insurance City’s wax-windowed downtown, a monument to Rotondi’s connectedness.

His connectedness triggered my contempt for Prynne, who went against my recommendations and awarded Rotondi a salary grant that reeked of pork. If he’d called it a political deal, I would have understood. But to pass it off as a policy matter when I knew better and Garvey confirmed it. . . since then I’ve had nothing good to say about him. If I’m going to do my job effectively, I need to know *something* about the backroom arrangements. Prynne’s payback for my badmouthing him comes as nitpicking. Hard to believe I liked the guy when I was teaching him the job ten years ago. A mistake in my character judgment. Given the history, I’m not crazy about running into Rotondi, but . . . Whatever. It’s got to be saner out here . . . or does it?

Up ahead of me the mound half-circling the agency crowds with people who obscure my view of Rotondi’s Art Deco Parthenon nestling in its little urban valley. Must be 2,000 people all ages races genders milling up down and around the knoll, spilling over the sidewalks into streets barricaded by Insurance City Police. Herds of hookers drag queens welfare mothers drab nightgowns buried under winter coats street dudes wool caps. It’s too cold for people to stand out there. What’s going on?

Fights, for one thing: fists, knives, girls, guys, children. An attempted drive-by jams the traffic a quarter-mile from the orange sawhorse barri-

cedes. The Latino's quick-draw flips the pistol out of his hand. It skitters across the asphalt and stops at a traffic cop's feet. Members of the rival gang stomp him. The traffic cop sets his face in a stern expression, tugs his brim, then peers above and beyond the fracas.

A clown leaps in front of the crowd, makes antic moves to divert its attention. Behind him the P.A. system's bullhorn blasts:

"HAVE FUN! EXCITEMENT! WIN MONEY! WIN PRIZES!"

What the — !

A Mickey Mouse sweatshirt shrieking and waving arms high in victory runs down the slope toward a small Ferris Wheel in front of the GAPS entrance. Her husband follows. They slap high fives, stop in front of local talk show host Bob Staley, recycled into a retro TV game show announcer. Same format as the 1950s, only Staley's hair has whitened.

"Everybody spins the Big Wheel, but not everybody wins the Big Prize. Are you ready to find out if Your Number's Up?"

The woman turns sweaty-faced despite the thirty-degree temperature. Drops of concern pop out on her forehead. Her nasal pores start to run over her fuzzy upper lip. She nods.

Two shivering blonde bimbettes—big hair, big breasts, almost identical—guide her toward the wheel. Her husband lags two steps behind, leering at their tapered waists, tight buns and trim thighs. The men on the hill hoot, holler and hurl cups, bottles and catcalls toward the blondes.

"I must warn you," Celebrity Bob says, "that any act of violence against any agency staff is grounds for prohibiting you from participating in the GAPS Housing Subsidy Program."

This has to do with Housing!

The audience's disgruntled rumble coalesces into: "Speak English, muthafucka!"

"In other words," Celebrity Bob replies, "Be nice or you don't spin the wheel. No wheel, no subsidy."

A sudden hush. Mrs. Mickey Mouse Sweatshirt stands in front of the wheel with numbers hand-painted on its seats: 1,18, 5, 24, 3, 30, 287, 574, 1148, 2296 . . .

The woman stares at the wheel, her face open-mouthed—a foul shooter's worried concentration. She leaps high, grabs Number One and swings it down so hard her momentum pulls the seat clanging against her head. She falls under the spinning wheel. Her husband rushes forward to put his arms around the waists of the bimbettes and gawk at the wheel

spinning slower and slower, so slow, too slow, come on, come on—OMIGOD!— to a stop.

“NUMBER FIVE! YOU ARE NUMBER FIVE ON THE WAITING LIST! IN ONLY EIGHTEEN MONTHS, YOU WILL BE ELIGIBLE TO RECEIVE YOUR HOUSING SUBSIDY!”

The woman raises her mouse-eared chest off the ground, shakes her head groggily. Emcee Staley continues:

“CONGRATULATIONS! NOW, TELL THE AUDIENCE HOW IT FEELS TO KNOW THAT IN ONLY EIGHTEEN MONTHS, YOU WILL BE ELIGIBLE TO RECEIVE YOUR VERY OWN HOUSING SUBSIDY!”

She revives, waves her arms high in victory, shrieks, jumps up and down, up and down, up and down. Her husband tears himself free from the identical non-twin blondes, slaps high fives with her. They run squealing past me, applause trailing them, along with fifty raging people cut off at the barricade.

This is a Lottery Process for a housing subsidy program? It looks like a TV game show gone berserk. I think the whole scene needs a

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TIME OUT!

Do you feel frayed Frazzled? Stressed beyond your limits? Do you feel you could go off like a hand grenade and not care who gets fragged? If you do, you need help. Call 1-800-FOR-GAPS and give yourself a

TIME OUT!

(Brought to you by GAPS)

“Helping ourselves by helping those who help themselves.”

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The brief commercial interlude allows me to squeeze out of the human traffic, backtrack the side streets and sneak into GAPS through its loading dock entrance. So much for their security precautions. As a matter of courtesy, though, I stop at the front desk to announce myself.

The receptionists chatter back and forth, her baby this, her baby that, the latest soap, indifferent glances in my direction turning startled at the

gear that makes me resemble a spy from 1950s TV *noir*.

Eventually a woman approaches me from the elevator: auburn hair coiled to a tight bun, high cheekbones under olive eyes, a narrow gold waistbelt dividing her curve-clinging black sheath. "Mr. Rotondi is in a meeting right now. How can I help you?"

"I'm supposed to meet with him and the new Housing Director."

"Hello! *I'm* the new Housing Director." Tish Freedman introduces herself, briefly recites her resume: homeless shelter director, housing authority coordinator, M.A. in Public Administration, coalitions task forces committees, boards of directors neighborhood city state federal— a joiner: impressive on paper and in appearance, probably not in performance. Except perhaps in the sack, where sex and politics converge readily in this line of work.

"I'm very glad you came today," she says. "We have some concerns about the technical support we're going to need from you in order to insure the proper delivery of services to our consumers."

Consumers! The Politically Correct euphemism replacing "clients." Is she for real! I hear it so often in the office it almost makes me gag.

She guides me as though I've never been to GAPS before. Fedora pulled down, trenchcoat buttoned and belted, I tread soundless on the thick office carpet, drawing stares from startled clericals and turning their soap opera talk into silence. *The Young and the Restless* will be *The Young and the Rested* until I pass.

The sounds blaring through the open door of Rotondi's Executive Suite bear a striking resemblance to those outside: screams, squeals, fights on the knoll, the Local Celebrity Barker—the whole shmeer, only clearer. Inside, a 60" screen plays the action outside. Sounds from SenSurround speakers vibrate the walls. Rotondi peers at the screen over the beige Hush Puppies crossed on top of his oak desk, tossing popcorn and jellybeans into his mouth like a fat brat at a Saturday matinee.

"Mr. Rotondi, our monitor from the State is here," the Director says.

Rotondi turns in mid-toss. Red green orange jellybeans bounce off his face roll across the floor. Popcorn bumps a butter dribble down his chin. "Rennie!" His voice oozes oily enthusiasm. "It's good to see you here."

"Why? Am I more entertaining than the circus outside?"

Rotondi reaches for the cigar in the ashtray of his Smoke-Free empire-in-the-making. A bolt of butane cinders the tip. He breathes yellow smoke in my face. "I'm always pleased to see the Department represented here."

I wave away the cigar's cat-piss odor. "It looks more like a fiasco than a representative process."

“John didn’t have a problem with it.” John is his brother-in-law, the State’s Attorney General. “Do you?”

“If John doesn’t have a problem, why should I?”

He flashes a rodent-toothed grin, drops a slab of hand on my shoulder and flourishes his cigar. “Come on in. Enjoy the show.”

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(Interior. Bathroom. BOY sits on the edge of the bathtub and plays with a rubber shark.)

Boy: You’re not so big.

Shark: *(Squeaky toy voice.)* I’m bigger than you think.

Boy: Sure sure sure. Yeah yeah yeah.

Shark: You don’t believe me? Then just make a sling out of that roll of Bun-Rub Silky Soft Ultra-Absorbent Bathroom Tissue. That’s right. Now, put me in the middle and lower me into the tub. When the paper’s good and wet, just lift me out again.

Boy: Are we talking about how big you are, or about how much weight Bun-Rub Silky Soft Extra-Absorbent Bathroom Tissue can hold?

Shark: You’ll have to trust me on this one.

(BOY lowers the toy shark into the tub, using the extra-absorbent tissue. The SHARK grows to an enormous size, springs out of the tub, attacks the boy and devours him. Close-up: SHARK leers at audience. Voice two octaves deeper:)

When you’re dealing with Bun-Rub Silky Soft Extra-Absorbent Bathroom Tissue, you’re dealing with toilet paper. When you’re dealing with sharks, don’t be an asswipe.

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“The wheel is turning, turning, turning slowly now, very slow . . . so slow . . . will it hit– ? YES! IT’S HIT THE LUCKY NUMBER! YOU’RE NUMBER ONE! YOU GET THE FIRST AVAILABLE SUBSIDY!”

The Blonde Bombshell duo leads the weary woman, unbuttoned overcoat flashing her nightgown of tiny faded flowers, toward the registration table.

“That’s where the staff schedules the intake appointments,” Rotondi says.

While the cameras follow the woman to the registration table Rotondi explains he used the Game Show model for the Lottery, not only because it

offers “the greatest operational efficacy” for GAPS but because “the constituent population” needs relief from daily drudgery and needs positive life experiences such as jumping up and down for cardiovascular fitness which renders them better able to re-enter the work force.

“Sounds like you’ve got it all worked out.”

“I enjoy planning almost as much as implementation. But I have to give Tish all the credit in the world for making it happen.”

Tish grins, shy or embarrassed I can’t tell. Nice teeth, though. As even as a TV anchorwoman’s. Her runner’s calf swings casually over her crossed legs.

“Hey! What’s *that*?” I blurt.

Twenty hopefuls pile onto the Number One winner. Police ram through the crowd, arrive too late to do anything but call for an ambulance.

“A tough break,” says announcer Bob Staley. “We’ll have to try for a *NEW NUMBER ONE!*”

A street person, scraggly brown hair, sinewy muscles, broken nose, leaps high, swings the wheel down. Ferocious spin.

“ . . . GOING SLOWER, SLOWER, CLOSE . . . OH SO CLOSE! WILL IT MAKE IT? *NO!* Sorry, pal. Like the sign says, ‘YOU LOSE!’”

“*What!* I been livin’ five friggin’ years on the goddamn street.”

“That’s the way the game goes, and *YOUR NUMBER’S UP!*”

The loser whips a switch-blade out of his pocket. “So’s yours, mother-fucker.”

“That’s *not* the way the game goes.” Celebrity Bob looks around. Closeup: the camera catches him swallowing his adam’s apple. He backs away from the Loser, shouting:

“*GAME’S OVER FOLKS!*”

He tosses the mike away. Runs. The crowd circles him. Hookers, drag queens, junkies, welfare mothers, minimum wage casino workers, street dudes, all races, all genders, stomp Celebrity Bob, pound the GAPS staff, seize the video cameras documenting the whole display, pan the frenzied action, then zoom in on five male applicants gang-raping the blonde models.

“*HAVE FUN! EXCITEMENT! GET PUSSY! WIN PRIZES!*” the Loser shouts into the Local Celebrity’s mike.

Lust-crazed males spin the roulette wheel take a number stand in line.

“I can’t *believe* this is happening,” Rotondi says. This is *terrible!* It’s a *tragedy!*”

I stand up. Time to leave, before the rioters discover the loading dock entrance. “Just tell John it wasn’t your fault.”

“You’re *leaving!*” Tish’s tone and stare suggest that she finds my departure inconceivable.

“That crowd is getting wild out there.” And I can’t stand knowing Rotondi’s in-laws will turn him Teflon when this debacle hits the news.

“Where you going?” she says. “This is the only *safe* place to be. Why don’t you come to my office? We need to discuss our future working relationship, anyway.”

“I’d like that,” I say, following her to a glass cubicle at the far corner of the GAPS Housing Services Division. She calls it her office. I call it her Executive Fishbowl.

In clear violation of Tercero’s orders, I peel off my trenchcoat and rest my fedora on the corner of the desk opposite Tish’s overfilled in-basket. Informality is more my style. Whether the subtle sartorial change brings out the Director’s enthusiasm I can’t say; her smile has captured mine, its alabaster reflections glimmering mini-mobiles around the lower half of her face. Her explanation of the circus debacle outside, questions about SHIT program priorities, recruitment procedures and evaluation methodologies float past my focus on her shining teeth, murmurs riding a misty zephyr. My face leans over the desk to taste her moist breath. The conversation takes a personal turn. My being a novelist, even an unpublished one, piques her interest and precipitates a light rain of predictable questions: agents, submissions, royalties, followed by my polite explanations and the black undertow of Hauptmann’s quirky rejection. Her committees, councils and boards vanish into the silent movie of her moving lips and her eyes brightening beyond a professional’s enthusiasm. Yes, she’d enjoy Thai dinner tonight even though she’s never tried it before.

Thai Dinner brings curries . . . red, yellow, green . . . she’s never seen before and jokes about blue and neon ones, more conversation, blurring subjects, job, background, with laughter, little touches of the hand and an offer of dessert at my place graciously accepted. Once there, our conversation turns to kisses and caresses that supplant verbal syntax with bodily, a paragraph of auburn hair splashing out of its bun to tease the tips of the hardened nipples on the small firm breasts that seem to change size and shape under my hand as her excitement increases, a page of fingers and hands exploring flesh and bodies, rolling, rubbing, and squeezing flesh against flesh, feeling so soft, so good, the pubic bush so damp, the bodies moving so simpatico, building to the climactic sentence:

“Uh, how long have you had this problem?”

STUDS ANONYMOUS

"Sometimes periods of stress cause distractions in other areas of our lives," Dr. Jacobs says through his professional's detached grin.

"This, uh, distraction has really done a number on my self-confidence."

Dr. Jacobs nods. "Your time is up."

"Can't I at least *discuss* this with you?"

"I think a support group would be more helpful in this case," he says, scribbling on a prescription pad.

I take his RX slip. Look at his scrawl, then up at his smug face. "Studs Anonymous!"

"You don't want people to know your *real* problem, do you?"

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(Close-up. RENNIE *behind the wheel, his close-bearded face a tangle of anxiety and depression. Flashback to RENNIE in his early twenties, wavy brown hair brushing his shoulders as he sits at a 1950s vintage Royal portable typewriter. Medium shot of page over his left shoulder:*)

"THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN NOOKIE"

Funny how my spoof on that fourth-rate sportswriter keeps popping into my head. The archetypal Dirty Old Man, the kind that always bragged, "I get my nookie," whether he did or not. That was a fun idea. Too bad I never did anything with it back then. I'm not sure why I finally tried it. Maybe it's the sexual charge the Commissioner brings to the environment. The Captain represented the middle class double standard, self-styled Big Shots balling their secretaries and assistants in turnpike motels while the wives stayed home. The duplicity turned me off. The sex had a lurid appeal, but nothing I really wanted to get into; I was too young and hip for that. And since I wasn't getting any, I resented anybody who got enough in fact to brag into fiction. Back then, anyway. The past few days, though, writing it has felt like the only release I've had before or after my own failure. At least I got a laugh out of writing the first and probably last episode.

(Exterior. RENNIE's Ford sedan turns into a parking lot.)

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A weary walk down a dim hall brings me not to resolution but to choice. Do you *really* need this? It's worked just fine in, uh, practice sessions. But the lingering doubts . . .

I'm expecting the door's wide arc to reveal a room of balding four-eyed wimps: purple lips, flabby bodies, limp dicks. Instead, a white-walled room of J.C. Penney chairs modest but tasteful half-circles a monolithic television blaring at heavy metal volume. The men sitting in the chairs look like a motorcycle gang hanging out in an upscale clubhouse: long hair, greasy split ends draping over tank-topped shoulders, beerbellies bouncing against massive buckles on wide leather belts, blue denims caked enough to walk if their shit-kickers don't walk first. Smells of fresh beer and stale reefer thicken the air. A chorus of belches greets me.

"Hi. I'm here for the . . . uh . . . Studs Anonymous support group."

"So are we," says bare chest leather vest and five-day stubble. "My name's Dick."

The others introduce themselves as Hammer, Prong, Schlong, Dong and Johnson. I'm tempted to quip that they sound like a law firm, but don't want to risk wounding egos as vulnerable as mine.

I take the only empty seat, directly opposite the immense tube.

"It's good that people with our problem have a place like this to come to," I say.

"What problem izzat?" Dick growls.

"Uh . . . You know, the one that, uh, that brings us here for support."

"I don't need *no* goddamn support from *nobody*." He sweeps his beer can across his chest as though pushing away the people in the room. Everybody ducks the spray. Foam froths between the curly hairs on the back of Dick's thick hand. "Long as my bitch got her job, I got all the support I need." He takes a summary swill.

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(Onscreen, HONI POTTS, a Big Hair blonde with the jaded manner of an aging porn star, sits in the center seat of a half-circle facing the audience. Two FEMALE GUESTS sit on each side of her. POTTS flashes her grin of huge teeth. Her aqua eyes glitter invitingly.)

Honi: Did you know that one in five Americans have been celibate for at least one year? That one in twenty have sex at least every other day? Wouldn't you like to know how often *I* have it?

(Medium shot. HONI crosses her shapely legs, cased in black fishnet stockings. Her full breasts jiggle. Her grin turns coy. Voiceover:)

Honi Potts Talks About Sex That's S-E-X. If YOU want to talk about sex with HONI, dial

1-900-GET-HONI

(Onscreen CAPTAIN NOOKIE bursts in from the right in his red costume, blue cape and slicked-back white hair.)

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How the hell did he get in there? He's a figment of my imagination.

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Captain Nookie: You wanna know how often *I* get it? Just dial N FOR NOOKIE. That's N-O-O-K-I-E.

(The FEMALE GUESTS drag CAPTAIN NOOKIE offstage. He covers his face to protect it from the battering purses and self-improvement magazines.)

Captain Nookie: Control yourselves, ladies. There's a love motel right around the corner.

Honi Potts: I want to apologize to you, our TV audience, to our guests, and also to our sponsors. Somehow, this . . . *person* got past our security. The Honi Potts Show and the MegaProfit Broadcasting Company want to assure you and all of our MBC affiliates that we believe in promoting Family Values. Please accept our sincerest apologies. Now, let's move onto today's topic—

Captain Nookie: *(Off camera. Barely audible over the dull thumping sound of leather and paper.)* What are you? A bunch of S & M freaks? Control yourselves. *Ouch!* Take it easy, will ya.

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"That creep don't impress *me*. They don't call me Hammer for nothin."

I clear my throat. "Excuse me, but I thought Studs Anonymous was the code name for . . . some other, uh. . . condition."

"If this heah group ain't Studs Anonymous, we wouldn't be callin' it Studs Anonymous," says Johnson, the group's sole Afro-American.

"I—I only know what I've heard. This is the first time I've ever come—"

"I believe *that*," says Dick.

The members of the support group rise virtually in unison. They exit so quickly I'm stunned. My eyes take in the empty room, then turn from the screen. I leave while the show continues.

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(Interior. RENNIE's car. The radio repeats CAPTAIN NOOKIE's last phrase.)

Rennie: What's *he* doing on the radio? I didn't put him there, either. And that so-called support group! This reorganization . . . ! Jesus Christ! I'm losing my *grip*.

Author: (Through car radio.) Just don't lose your grip on the wheel. We've got a lot of pages to go.

Rennie: What do you mean, "we?" It's *my* book.

Author: You're not the author, you're the narrator.

Rennie: Do you have to take *that* away from me too? It's bad enough, this shit! And now I'm fucking *hallucinating* your voice while trying to figure out what to do next.

Author: Relax. That's *my* job.

Rennie: Not according to *this* book.

Author: According to *whose* version, yours or mine?

Rennie: Mine. It's *my* goddamn book.

Author: Is your name on the Copyright page?

Rennie: No . . .

Author: That should answer all of your questions.

Rennie: You mean, I'm just a pawn in your game and all the others that are going on? That sucks.

Author: Have you forgotten about free will?

Rennie: That only applies in reality.

Author: Then here's one for you to think about:

IF PERCEPTION IS REALITY, BODY CHEMISTRY CAN ALTER REALITY. WHO CAN SAY WHOSE FANTASY IS ANOTHER'S REALITY? IF ONE TRIED, ONE WOULD BE SPEAKING FROM THE STANDPOINT OF ONE'S OWN CHEMISTRY. BUT WHAT IF IMAGINATION JUICES THE BODY CHEMISTRY UNTIL IT TRANSFORMS REALITY INTO FANTASY? REALITY IS NOT ONLY IN THE BODY OF THE BEHOLDER, BUT IN THE MIND AS WELL.

(RENNIE turns off the radio, floors the accelerator.)

FIRST INSPECTIONS

Driving to the boonies through this drizzle. Nobody, not Tercero, not even nitpicking Prynne, can track me out here: no phone number to reach me. Fuck 'em. I'll finally do the Inspector shtik . . . trenchcoat, fedora . . . then stop by a friend's place to pick up some herb before I run home early to write on a Friday afternoon.

Cruising east, a novel pops into my head then another and another, a life's work filling the bookshelves of my mind in minutes. I spew the sperm of their genesis into a micro cassette, including a self-referential novel called *Field Reporting* about the lines dividing fantasy from reality, internal from external worlds, literal from figurative reality, the way the distinctions blur, even vanish, when you're alone with your thoughts, no people to attempt to impose differing definitions. The presence of others alters any context: of thoughts, of existence itself, of thoughts of existence itself.

The route I'm driving runs through my student days: lakeside cottage in Hangman's Knot, six-week summer session age nineteen, beer blasts every Friday or Saturday. Goodtime folkies . . . Where are they now? Gone except for the memories.

Driving through Boone Dock: abandoned mills, houses half-shingled, like the backroads I grew up on. Swamp Yankee country. Ozarks with hills, not mountains. Good, God-fearing white racists, Republicans staunchly opposed to Communists (i.e. Democrats) favoring the fluoridation of water in the Cold War 1950s towns no public water anyway. Nothing to do but fight drink fuck in these towns out of time, out of synch, out of synch with time.

Lots of time to think out here. No office stress to distract or exhaust me. I can almost think of Prynne as a human being, a devoted father coaching his son's Little League team: "At the plate, be sure to wait for an appropriate pitch to take appropriate action on." The Casey Stengel of the paper-pushing set. The poor kids!

And Tercero! That little weasel. I scored *Numero Uno* on the Civil service test for his position. Instead, he got the promotion when the former Deputy Commissioner overruled the established procedures. Now, the former disco lizard wears suits instead of rayon shirts while the qualified

Latinos laugh at him and I challenge his ability to do real work.

Speaking of work. . . I wonder how my appointment with the Employee Assistance Program counselor will go next Monday. After Jacobs and Studs Anonymous, anything has to be an improvement. The EAP is more last choice than first. But it's the quickest appointment I could get.

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My first inspection's a three-bedroom house nicer than most taxpayers would tolerate if they knew the tenant got a subsidy. Rebecca Clayton, sand-brown hair, lightly freckled face, answers my ring, turns to lead me inside. I follow the gray sweats clinging to the crease of her ass defining its cute little contours. Too young to sag. Nice!

Going over the Housing Inspections Checklist: hair, face, eyes pass, perky breasts a Pass With Comment. Waist passes, hips pass, legs. But not the electrical outlet behind the dining room table. "See the way the plastic is cracked? It needs a new cover."

She bends down next to me to look. Her breath fades just short of my face, but carries close enough to stir my imagination. Her three-year old's bedroom passes, ceiling floor windows outlets all OK.

On to her bedroom. The brass double bed against the outside wall must creak nicely her petite body rocking obviously not alone a man's shirts hanging in the open closet door along with her turquoise see-through nightie. Pass.

"Technically the unit fails because of the cracked outlet." I explain that GAPS, the subcontractor that administers her rental subsidy, will notify the landlord, then reinspect the place to make sure the outlet has been repaired.

If I were twenty years younger, this could be a tough job. Tercero would use his authority to try to score.

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Three no-shows. It's the old social service shtick: send the appointment letter, nobody gives a damn. After years of being conscientious, I stopped giving a damn, myself. I enjoy the feeling of freedom I get out here.

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Francoise Virgenne's doorbell rings twice. No answer. I knock on the door. No answer. Knock again. Loud, like a narc staging a raid. I turn to

leave, then hear the door creak open. A white-haired woman, shriveled, just under five feet tall, braces herself on a walker. "I'm sorry . . ." her voice quivers a hoarse vibrato ". . . I can't move as fast as I used to."

"I'll try not to take up too much of your time, ma'am." I'm already racing through her five-room apartment, wallpaper fading, paint peeling, rooms sweating-hot from steam heat, windows gray from accumulated grit, checking off my list, passing off my desire to book home as sensitivity to her frail condition.

"My husband died last year . . ."

"Sorry to hear it, ma'am." Check a box. Thanks to the no-shows I'm three hours ahead of schedule. An unexpected afternoon off is always nice.

"He died of Cancer. It was terrible."

"I can imagine. My mother had Cancer. I took care of her until she couldn't fight it any longer."

"Oh, you poor young man!"

I appreciate the sympathy in her voice. Cancer nailed me twice by the time I was twenty-five. It killed my mother. But I don't want to share my pain. Just give the bastards the minimum, then get out. "It was very difficult, just as I'm sure it was for you."

"We've both suffered. . ."

Her walker clomps and scrapes across the dark hardwood as it follows me from room to room, a crucifix in every one . . . "People say this program may be cut. I'm all alone. I can't afford to live here if I don't have help. What am I supposed I do?"

"First of all, don't worry. Most of the rumors have no foundation in fact."

"But all I have is my husband's Social Security."

"I haven't heard anything, myself. But I'm new to the program."

"Then, what do I do if they're true?"

"I wish I had an answer for you," I say.

"But, what will I *do*?"

Sometimes trying to be helpful seems more trouble than it's worth. I've got a Z to pick up and writing to do.

In my frustration, I envision Governor A. Wright Wingnut bending her frail body over the front of her walker and intoning, "I was duly elected by a plurality of the residents of this state for the purpose of screwing the public. You can praise me, you can complain, you can scream and moan, you can ask for less or ask for more, it's all the same to me. So, bend over."

WHERE IS YOUR SAFE PLACE?

(Frying pan. Close-up: an egg frying. The white sizzles in a bed of grease while the yolk bubbles and bursts like an erratic volcano. Voiceover:)

THIS IS THE HUMAN BRAIN

The brain is a remarkable organism, smaller and more efficient than a computer. But sometimes the circuitry goes haywire . . .

AND THIS IS RENNIE SHANACH'S BRAIN

(Red and blue veins rise symmetrical as electronic circuitry through the bubbling and bursting yolk to the egg's surface. At the yoke's center, a cluster of wires knots into the shape of a neuron. The neuron contracts, then expands, contracts, then expands. The circuitry swells to a throbbing purple knot, then explodes. White and yellow splatter the screen, congeal into RENNIE's bulging red-veined eyes and bloodless blue lips pressed against the screen in a silent scream.)

[] [] []

"Hello, I'm Hefner Gooch, and I'm here to help," the EAP counselor says, aching with sincerity. Although he runs an independent practice, he's a subcontractor on the State payroll. Hence his obligatory greeting, followed by a nod of his natural-looking toupee: Celtic highlights glint red in afternoon sunlight. Not a hair falls out of place that doesn't already hang there, meticulously natural.

"My job is driving me crazy. I can't relax, not even at home. And going out, I've stopped. It's no fun. I feel all knotted up. I mean, I try to fight it, but—"

"Each of us brings stress home from work," Gooch says, crossing one leg over the other, thin black socks, precisely creased wool trousers. "When stress begins to dominate our lives, we need to find ways to reduce it. I think I can help you."

"How?"

"We'll start with questionnaires and inventories."

“Don’t you want to hear about what I’m going through?”

“I do, very much. But the forms will help us get to the heart of the matter.”

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WHERE IS YOUR SAFE PLACE?

Hefner Gooch’s questionnaire asks. What does he *mean*? Some cozy little cubby hole snug as my dead cat’s former bed? I’ve been out of the womb so long I’ve grown too fat to climb back in. My home? If the record snowfalls caved in the roof of my snug little cubby, I’d surface as a Giant in the Earth frozen straight out of Rolvaag.

The question smacks of the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s, people getting so in touch with their feelings that they lose sight of the effects their actions have on others while they couch reality in terms more suited to the teddy bears they used to sleep with. How positive! How life-affirming! What Touchy-Feely mumbo-jumbo!

I’ll come back to this question in a few minutes.

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SO HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO MAKE A MID-LIFE INVENTORY
MY JOB SUCKS THE PUBLISHER’S REJECTION PUSHED ME
OVER THE EDGE I’M PAST THE TIME IN MY LIFE WHEN MY
WRITING CAN INFLUENCE ANYONE SURE I’VE GOT MY HEALTH
MONEY IN MY POCKET I BEAT CANCER TWICE BY AGE TWENTY-
EIGHT THOUGHT I’D BE DEAD LONG AGO BUT NOW THAT I
AM ALIVE I WANT SOMETHING TO SHOW FOR IT GODDAMMIT

□ □ □

MID-LIFE CRISIS INVENTORY

Age 20: My best-selling first novel becomes an instant Classic. I live the bohemian life in Paris, Tangier, London, Copenhagen, New York, and San Francisco. When I want to write without distractions, I rent a country villa in Spain.

Age 30: My experimental novel becomes a steady midlist seller, making me

modestly secure for life. I live in my starter home and take long vacations in San Francisco.

Age 40: An obscure publisher releases a small book of poetry or a novel. It gathers dust on a back shelf in a funky indie bookshop.

Age 50: Weekends I cart my self-published books to owners, managers and consignment clerks at chain bookstores. They assume an exaggerated air of indifference while I demean myself. I worry that behind my back they consider me a crazy old man. I redefine Success as having someone help me stuff flyers into envelopes without charging me.

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AM I REALLY ASKING THAT MUCH OF LIFE?

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“As we age our expectations diminish, the same way our energies diminish,” says Gooch.

“I’d say *both* have diminished. It’s not like I’m *dead*. But I *am* dead tired, emotionally. The job, my writing . . . all I see is frustration at every turn.”

“I could teach you relaxation and stress-reduction techniques that will help you experience a more positive attitude about yourself in relation to your work environment.”

Translation: I reduce my expectations further, accept failure in life and failure in love as the oneness manifested in a universe of failure.

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WHERE IS YOUR SAFE PLACE?

How about my car? No way. A head-on could put me in a cemetery plot. One of the GAPS inspectors nearly got whacked in a drive-by last week. Next time it could be me. How about this waiting room, comfy, cozy, soft-cushioned chairs, windows letting in the winter sunlight—and stray bullets from the drug action a block away?

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(Commercial onscreen. A man, face covered with a ski mask, approaches a sliding glass door. Sound of breaking glass. Voiceover:)

HAVE YOU PURCHASED YOUR HOME SECURITY SYSTEM?

(Cut to a vast room of computer monitors. The office staff stare at the screens as though they're giving personal attention to every home. Cut to house. A van with an ATD logo drives away from a mother holding her child. At the base of the screen, a banner reads:)

SAVE 50% with ATD (Anti-Theft Device) Security.

(Cut to POLICEMAN handcuffing a man in a ski mask.)

Man: I live here, officer. My wife and I, we got a kinky sex thing going.

(POLICEMAN locks the man in the police cruiser, enters the house through the broken door.)

Wife: *(voiceover)* There's something about a uniform that really makes me hot.

(Distance shot. The cruiser rocks. From inside:)

Man: Let me go, dammit! I live here.

(Distance shot. The house rocks. From inside:)

Wife: Oh, baby! Bang me again with that big hard nightstick!

(Cut to staff leering at the scene on their monitors. Voiceover:)

ATD, WHERE YOU'RE ALWAYS SAFE.

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Very good. Except that ATD doesn't prevent Axon Press from slipping rejection letters through my mail slot or the reorganization and its players from invading my sensibilities: the daily uncertainties, shifts of leadership, no home a sanctuary once your mind internalizes anomie. Whatever

protective barriers I used to have for making a “safe place” have been trampled, violated by Gothic Hordes posing in suits. So I say

THERE ARE NO SAFE PLACES

not even this therapist’s office where Gooch shakes his head, politely disagreeing with my assessment.

“But, you must have *some* place you consider safe,” Gooch insists. “I can’t imagine anybody not having one.”

“Well, lately I’ve been imagining this anti-Super Hero. I’ve even written a scenario involving him. It let off some steam, but I don’t know that I’d call writing about this character a Safe Place. . .”

“Perhaps the stress you feel in your work environment has caused you to regress temporarily to the ‘Imaginary Friend’ stage of childhood in search of your Safe Place. But I’d consider that an extreme reaction. By itself, the writing wouldn’t be enough to create a Safe Place.”

“Then, I’ve *told* you every possible place. All the borders have been *smashed*. I’ve been fighting like hell— ”

“— Hold it right there.” Gooch raises his hands, diverts my attention from his Only His Rug Maker Knows For Sure hair. “Sometimes, when we’re fighting with what we think is all our strength, we produce results that run counter to what we want. In situations like these, we actually need to use a *different* kind of strength. There’s a Zen teaching about the strength of the willow. Instead of fighting the wind, the willow bends with the wind, then whips back. Instead of fighting your job frustrations, Rennie, why don’t you try *going with* them?” He fixes his non-threatening expression on me, lips lightly chapped from the winter air.

“It’s kind of a tough one to ‘go with,’” I say. “I mean, how do you ‘go with’ your frustrations?”

Gooch bends forward, sets his notebook on the table between us. “Why don’t we make a contact. Rennie? From now on, this office will be your Safe Place.”

I lean away. “Because you’re a counselor for the Employee Assistance Program.”

“Your records are protected under client confidentiality.”

“Except that the Commissioner can waive client confidentiality.”

“Only in extremely rare cases. It would never become an issue. I promise.”

I lean forward, make eye contact. “Let me be subtle: I don’t trust this administration. Period. As long as anybody connected with it can look at

my files, this is not a 'Safe Place.'"

I notice his scribbling on the yellow notepad as I stand to leave. "Your writing that I'm 'noncompliant' assures me that other people *will* be looking at me. And you want *me* to consider this a 'Safe Place.' It looks like just another cage, from what I can see."

And I'm out the door without scheduling another visit, my five-dollar co-pay wafting toward the empty desk of Gooch's downsized secretary.

REPORT FOR THE COMMISSIONER

“Señor Shanach. Come with me, please.”

Tercero’s tone, imperious as King George III, draws my glower. As I rise, he turns on his elevated heel and leads me to the conference room on the far side of Prynne’s office.

Prynne’s already seated at the long gray table. Some booze-boiled flesh has returned to his jowls, enough so that their sag weights his lips into a drawn scowl. As Tercero seats himself next to Prynne, he gestures for me to sit in the one of the folding chairs across from them.

We stare across the table at each other.

Tercero slaps a manilla folder onto the table, loud flyswatting sound. *“You have some explaining to do, Señor Shanach.”*

I stare as blankly as possible at the folder. *“About what?”*

Tercero shoves the folder across the blotter. His smirk hovers over the table while I bend forward to discover the Captain Nookie hanging episode I wrote. Its serif talons rake my face to a blush. I hate getting caught. *“Apparently, you’re not as smart as you think, Señor Shanach.”*

The man is swaggering in his seat. His face lights up, but Prynne preempts him: *“As you know, Rennie, agency policy prohibits the use of State-owned computers for running employee-owned businesses.”*

“Would you call this business?”

“No,” Tercero says. *“I would call it grounds for termination.”* He savors the Power Word.

“How did you find it?”

“We have our ways, Señor Shanach. We have our ways.”

Meaning he doesn’t know. The mainframe must have a better backup system than I realized. (I’m writing this section at home.)

“Aside from your unauthorized use of government equipment for personal gain—”

“Come on, Prynne. I lose money every year doing this.”

“Regardless, Rennie, we have concerns about the contents,” the words oozing out of him like liquid soap. *“As you know, the current administration has adopted a Moral Tone.”*

But not a Moral Code of conduct, I think better of saying.

"Aside from the . . . issues. . . your writing has created for us, the contents of something like this," tapping the first page lightly, "threaten to raise greater issues that may conflict with the administration's goals."

Tercero takes over, his bovine gaze heating to a sharp-pupiled glare above his pencil mustache. "Suppose the Commissioner found a copy of this on her computer. How do you think she'd feel? She *is* a Lady."

"Really! I've heard she was All Woman. Maybe All Women. The way the rumors have been flying, I can't tell if she's becoming a legend or a myth."

Prynne and Tercero trade puzzled but uneasy glances, competitors restraining their glandular surges.

Prynne turns back to me. "As you know, Rennie, the rumors spread by staff do not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation."

"And you'll soon find out whether the Commissioner is a Lady or a Woman when it comes to your writing, *Señor* Shanach." Tercero's face beams in the morning sunlight.

"I gather there's a threat in there somewhere?" Although neither has ever carried one out successfully, their threats make me uncomfortable.

"Oh no, Rennie, there's no threat in there at all," Prynne assures me. "But there *is* a procedure."

"We gave the Commissioner a copy to review." Tercero's swollen gloat looks about to burst. Obviously he thinks he has me by the *cojones*. Maybe he does.

"And what did she say?"

"At this point in time," Prynne says, "she has other matters to prioritize. However, she did say we would hear from her soon."

"And If she doesn't like it, you plan to, uh, 'terminate' me?"

"We intend to implement the Commissioner's recommendation."

"But how many women enjoy reading locker room material?" Tercero asks through a soft chortle.

"There's a hiring freeze, and I'm the only staff you have left. If you, uh, 'terminate' me, who will you get to do the work?"

Prynne and Tercero trade uneasy glances.

"We have, uh, other resources at our disposal." Prynne's tone of calculated vagueness mists his delivery.

"And while the matter is pending, *Señor* Shanach, you will restrict your writing on agency equipment to field reports. Is that clear?"

"Got it, Tercero."

"One more issue, Rennie."

I glance at Prynne.

“The Commissioner has expressed a concern that staff provide more detail in their field reports. She thinks they will serve as a tool that will facilitate our efforts to evaluate the thoroughness of staff inspections and give us a better idea of how staff time in the field is utilized.”

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GIVE THE BASTARDS WHAT THEY WANT

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TO: Regis George Tercero, Manager of Vicarious Voyeurism

FROM: Rennie Shanach, Inspector

DATE: No thank you

RE: Close Encounter of the First Kind

Route 44 branches to the left, 101 forks right toward Boone Dock. Closest things to civilization in this little shitberg are streets of row-houses red white blue colors of back-country America all faded to a universal gray.

GO TO BACK DOOR reads the cardboard sign handwritten with lipstick on the front door. Following the dirt driveway to the back I check for cracks in the foundation. Looks OK to my training-film trained eye. Ring doorbell, no answer. Knock. Twice. A blond-haired biker type answers. A real bruiser: 6'2" or taller 260 lbs or heavier, biceps and belly bulging through a V-neck T-shirt.

“I’m here to see Cassandra Stone,” I announce.

“She’s not here,” the bruiser says.

“I was supposed to inspect her apartment today.”

“I mean, she’s takin’ a shower right now. Go ‘head and look around.”

I start where I’m standing, in the kitchen. “How many people live here?” I ask, checking the appliances. The stove works, the sink, the refrigerator . . .

“She got two kids. I don’t live here,” he adds, quickly. Too quickly? “I got me a place over to Haleville.” He nods over his left shoulder in the direction of Haleville.

My eyes do a slow roll: floor, walls ceiling . . .

“Hey, Cassie! The guy from the State’s here.”

The mid-sweep glance of my mental checklist catches her curving around a corner: long hair medium-brown frizzing around a pleasant rounded face, damp-eyed glitter of her pale blues (✓), body wrapped in a beige bath towel faded almost to off-white, the kind you find in dollar stores, covers her voluptuous body (✓ ✓), filling my frozen gaze. The damp towel clings tight enough so that the nipples of her smallish breasts raise bumps in the terrycloth. (✓ ✓) Her full thighs swing the flap forward. (✓ ✓ ✓) A flame tattoo blazes from her left ankle up her calf and around her shin. I try not to stare too blatantly; her guy is twice my size.

“Hi.” Cassandra offers a half-damp hand to shake. “I hope you don’t mind. I gotta get ready to go somewhere.”

“Get ready. I can do the inspection by myself.”

“Go ‘head. When I get dried off, you can tell me what needs fixin’.”

Her socket needs plugging, that much I know. (I’m beginning to sound like Captain Nookie.)

I step into the living room, find it’s used as a bedroom. Faded yellow wallpaper, almost the shade of nicotine stains. Queen-size bed to my left. Easy to picture myself with Cassandra, cold winter night, tucked under her wool Army surplus blankets, our fucking anything but olive drab as I drive myself deep into her frizzy crotch while her soft rounded belly rubs a slow corkscrew against mine, her tattooed calf wraps flames around the backs of my thighs, then her legs pull high her toes curl around my bobbing ass. The joys of a rural winter!

“How’s everything?” Cassandra’s squeezed herself into tight faded jeans and yellow Harley-Davidson sweatshirt.

“It looks okay so far.” She moves next to the window I’m inspecting. “Well, uh. . . There’s no lock on this. Technically, I have to fail it.”

“We got nails there. See? The landlady said we could use ‘em. For protection.” She tells me about a guy a “really *baaad* man” she dated while she was tending bar in Burr City. When she broke things off he wouldn’t stay away not even when she moved up here some thirty miles north. He just got paroled after doing time for aggravated assault on three people with a baseball bat. “The cops are trying to set him up here tonight,” she tells me. Hazy blue glitters through the slits of eyes lidded against the late-morning sun bright through the window. “This guy, he’s one of the most dangerous people you’ll ever meet.” He broke into her house with the original restraining order in effect. “He dragged me outa my house, he had me tied up in my car on the railroad tracks, there was a train comin’ . . .”

This is beginning to sound like a soap opera more imagined than real.

"I could come back tonight. That way we'll know for sure that the window is safe." I have my doubts about her story. But there's only one way to test it. Maybe we can spend the time productively. After all, the crazy ones are the hottest.

I return right after dinner and we tumble into bed, not sure who seduced who so easily. Her soft flesh engulfs me her lips plant wet teasing kisses over my face my body then slide down to my cock and over it, her button nose bobbing up and down, my hands holding her frizzy hair, raise her head when I'm ready, look into her eyes, moist glaze of surrender, guide her onto her back, climb on top, my prong prodding the slick wet heat rising to press tight against me the flame tattoo curling around the back of my thigh, it's oh oh oh it's so good, she may be crazy but she sure knows how to

BANG!

The front door crashes off its hinges, smashes through the mirror. Shards of glass fly, knives in my ass, coitus interruptus, and the bruiser from earlier in the day snarls into the room wearing prison stripes and waving an axe.

"IT'S HIM! IT'S HIM!"

We run naked through the back yard, trip over protruding roots, scrape shins, elbows, even her chin. The trickle of blood adds a cute dimension to her little round knob (funny the things you notice in moments like this, ducking the bruiser's axe swings). "I thought he was your *boyfriend*."

"He is. We like to keep our sex thing *hot*!"

"You mean, I got sucked in!"

"What're you complainin' about? You got sucked *good*."

The bruiser catches up to us, grabs us by the neck, knocks our heads together. When I come to I can't move, my arms and legs tied to the railroad tracks, the yellow eye of a train approaching. The bruiser's tying Cassandra next to me. "Try to resist me *now*, baby."

"Oh no! Please! *Don't!*"

What the hell kind of soap opera did I get myself into? Jesus! The ground rumbles beneath me the tracks vibrate my neck and spine. Our heroine's legs pedal the air while the bruiser pulls out his plastic-ribbed red prong kit fresh from the porn shop, purple tip glowing neon in the dark. A Terminal Weekday Matinee! The only person who can save me now is

CAPTAIN NOOKIE!

whose sleek black vehicle rear-ends the bruiser, sends him flying over our heroine into a maple tree and wedges his plastic hard-on into a knot in the trunk. Rustle of branches as he tries to yank himself loose.

"Help! Save me! *Save me!*" Cassandra cries, shriller than the train's warning whistle.

"Not enough time for that, toots. But I'll send you off to Heaven with one helluva bang."

Captain Nookie jumps on top of her, blue cape flapping, pulls her hair till her head turns to one side looking up at him through imploring eyes dewy with surrender, thrusts his mighty prong into her quim. She thrashes violently beneath his huffing puffing paunch, her screams moans pleas blend with the whistle blend with the crescendo of the final

BANG!

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This time, Tercero and Prynne look ready to double-team me. Each sits at one of the conference table's far ends, as though trying to block any escape route I might have.

At the end nearest the door, Tercero waves my field report like a club. "Shanach! This is *not* what we told you to write." He slams it flat against the table.

"Its content goes well beyond inappropriate," Prynne adds. He appears less spectral, more solid, an almost youthful fragility. "It not only exceeds the boundaries of appropriateness, but of propriety, as well."

Tercero cracks his knuckles folded on the tabletop. "Your conduct suggests that you *want* to be terminated."

"If I'm gonna get fucked, I might as well get fucked Big Time."

"*Señor Shanach. This is pornography. We can fire you for this.*"

I lock eyes with the little asshole. "The union will say I was following orders. If you really read what I wrote, you'd see I put in quite a bit of overtime. If you even *try* to write me up, the union will demand my

overtime in cash, not comp time. Maybe they'll want double time."

"But this . . . this *couldn't* be true," Tercero says. "It reads like . . . like *fiction*."

"You told me to write what really goes on out there. And that's what I did. I don't get you guys, I really don't. You double-team me even when I do *exactly* what you tell me to do. At some point, this becomes harassment. Actually, it has been for some time now."

"We thought it was the other way around."

"How am I harassing *you*? This is going to Commissioner Vanna—"

"— Commissioner Morph. Show some respect," says Tercero.

"Anyway, since this is going to her, she's the one who decides whether she likes the way staff spends its time in the field. You've put the matter out of your control, guys."

Prynné's expression fixes on me except for the particles that seem to disintegrate until his tight lips become a gaping hole. "You're not saying this is . . . ?" A trail of motes falls from the front of his face.

"I'm saying that I have the right to conduct myself the same way other staff does, regardless of rank. So, I don't see how she could object to the report I just submitted. You told me not to write fiction."

I rise to leave. Behind me Tercero whispers, "That *sonofabitch!*"

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I can imagine a lot of other things they're calling me.

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(Afternoon. Commissioner's Office. PRYNNE and TERCERO sit at the conference table in front of the COMMISSIONER's desk. The men exchange wary glances, then turn to the COMMISSIONER, whose frown makes them squirm on their seat cushions.)

Tercero: . . . and that's why we're asking you to assist us.

Prynné: Yes, Vanna. We've—

Commissioner: Feel free to call me "Commissioner" when you're in this office, Mr. Prynné.

Prynné: I apologize for my lapse in judgement, Commissioner. If I may, however, I'd like to add to what Mr. Tercero was saying about the employee in question.

Commissioner: You mean, this Rennie Shanach? I'm listening.

Prynne: If I were to try to describe him in one word, the most appropriate choice would be “incorrigible.”

Tercero: We showed you what he was writing on our computers instead of listening to your inspired presentation. And now, I’m sorry to say, you have his field report.

Prynne: It wasn’t our intention to present you with any obscene, pornographic, sexist, and/or politically incorrect material that might offend your sensibilities and/or the dignity of you and/or your position, as appropriate.

Commissioner: Believe me, Mr. Prynne, I know your intentions better than you do.

Tercero: We instructed him to cease and desist from writing such material and to restrict his writing to field reports that document his activities. You’ve seen the result, I’m afraid. The man is truly. . . *como dice . . . incorrigible.*

Prynne: We need your direction in this matter.

Tercero: You don’t know this man, Commissioner.

Commissioner: After reading what he’s written, I’d like to meet him.

Prynne: I beg your pardon?

Commissioner: His writing has a certain spark. And his descriptions . . . Let’s just say they’re provocative.

Tercero: He has an extremely negative attitude, Commissioner. *Extremely negative.*

Commissioner: Attitudes can be changed, gentlemen.

Tercero: What are you saying?

Commissioner: I have a question about something in his writing that I want answered.

(COMMISSIONER pauses for a long breath. PRYNNE and TERCERO hold their breath as they wait for her instructions.)

WHO IS THAT MASKED MAN?

and where can you find him? the Commissioner wants to know — badly enough to interrupt a chapter in progress that I was really getting into. And for what purpose does Commissioner Vanna want this post-pulp anti-hero cruising the LOV (Lecherous Old Venerist) lane of my mind's Interstate? Some people just don't know the difference between literal reality and figurative. Or should I say, they can't tell fuck from fiction?

Obviously, none of her managers can fill the Commissioner's torrid existential void. Sex and power is an intimidating combination in a woman, not to mention the singular gift for morphing that sent John Garvey bug-eyed into the boonies. The managers are used to male bosses fit for sports bars or female bosses who'd rather nurture than get naked. Whenever I imagine the Commissioner in action with Tercero, Prynne or some other middle-aged Boytoy of the Time—even the guv, I'm sure—her insatiable desire drains her subordinates of vital juices, leaves them limp, their jockey shorts tossed with a flip of her dainty ankle to the darkest gulag of her domain. No wonder she's looking for me to make Captain Nookie fact, born of fiction or not. Tercero, Prynne, whoever else . . . not one of them is man enough to fill the old gasbag's tacky superhero outfit, not to mention a woman's real sex drive. Since my mind lives on the line between reality and imagination, let's see if it can find out where my high-powered imaginary penile extension lurks.

[] [] []

Around the corner from the Insurance City *Gazette* building sits Phil's Bar & Grill, a little brick dive where the reporters hang out. You're sure to find a good source of information there, if you know who to talk to. Sometimes you can even find who you're looking for. . . if you know where to look.

The reporters look away when they spot me. No doubt the Inspector persona makes them uneasy: shadow-faced in his slanted fedora, white trenchcoat belted tight across his bulging midriff. They already know my probing existential stare from the nights in the newsroom when I've filled

in for the paper's jazz critic.

At the end of the bar, in the right rear corner, is Nooke's Nook, where Norbert Nooke, fourth-string sportswriter, sits alone under an autographed Frank Sinatra wall photo every night. But Nooke isn't holding court tonight the way he usually does, bragging drunkenly to the empty seat across from him, impervious to the leggy post-fem reporters putting him down just out of his hearing or the armchair quarterbacks from Features improvising parodies of his singular genius for dangling participles. Where is he? Covering some Middle School B-team intra-mural hoop contest? A Senior Citizens Bowling League?

Sully the Bartender's sodden gray-blue eyes make indifferent contact with mine. "I'm looking for Norbert Nooke," I tell him.

He shrugs his shoulders, wipes his hands on his once-white apron.

"Come on, Sully. You hiding the guy?"

"Ah, go take a leak," he snarls, then turns toward the liquor shelf.

"Thanks, Sully. I just might do that."

Across from Nooke's Nook the Mens Room's once-swinging saloon door entrance now hangs from one hinge.

Good old Sully and his streetwise way of handing you a tip while looking like he's telling you off.

Nooke is not so much standing at the urinal as leaning into it, sunken chest sagging into the porcelain curve, his Jell-O belly girth pushing his ass outward. A sodden turn of the head at the slap of my entering foot against the pisswet floor tiles, a bottle-bottom stare in my direction, enough to make the Inspector Mindlink: lecherous thoughts pour out of him like the stream drizzling out of his tool, smell of acidic cornflakes rises from the spattered tips of his wingtip shoes. Under his Wildroot Cream Oil cranial cover, slicked-back edition, Captain Nookie invades the boudoirs and bodies of the three cub reporters, skirts hiked under the table, who snickered behind his back when he came in, all three of them at once, wet and juicy, legs bicycling the air as he pumps a good hard foot of penile matter into their liquid heat, then the fiftyish receptionist with rabbit teeth and frosted hair, the dark-skinned cutie with the high ball ass ("Say what you will about me, but Captain Nookie's an Equal Opportunity Banger, heh heh," good to learn on my mission for Commissioner Vanna the old Republican redneck's not a bigot in the bedroom, only area of life he isn't) and Dixie, the retired stripper, all the action inside his head as real as

□ □ □

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON HERE?

ARE CAPTAIN NOOKIE'S LURID SEDUCTIONS TAKING PLACE IN A CONSCIOUSNESS WHICH IS JUST AS REAL AS THE BODY LEANING INTO THE URINAL?

DOES MY CONSCIOUSNESS DEFINE THE FANTASIES AND/OR REALITIES TAKING PLACE INSIDE HIS CONSCIOUSNESS?

DO HIS FANTASIES AND/OR REALITIES DEFINE MINE IN SOME RECIPROCAL WAY?

DOES THE AUTHOR EMPLOYING ME AS NARRATOR DEFINE THE FANTASIES AND/OR REALITIES TAKING PLACE INSIDE HIS CONSCIOUSNESS?

IF SO, WHY DOESN'T HE PAY BETTER?

AND IS THIS A "WORK FOR HIRE"?

□ □ □

the

question I need to ask him.

"I'm looking for Nookie," I say, the lavatory sink separating him from me.

"I don't need to look, fella. I'm *getting* mine, heh heh."

"That's, uh, not quite what I meant."

His stare turns suspicious. "You're not one of those funny types, are you?"

"No, no . . ." I watch nervously as he shakes his dick twice ("more than that and you're playing with it, heh heh") and tucks it inside his baggy gray trousers. "I mean, I'm looking *at* Captain Nookie."

His long thick teeth spread a grin. A chortle starts at the back of his throat, curls outward. "I've got to say, pal, it's flattering being compared to the Incomparable Super Hero of Sex, the Man's Man with the Prong's Prong, also known as the Human Horse's Dong, Star of Stage Screen and X-Rated Cinema, the Superman of Seduction, the King of Conquest, the Prince of Poontang, the Master of Spread 'Em and Bed 'Em, the Living Legend of

the Ladies of Lust who knows 96 Ways to 69, the— “

“I mean to say, I’m looking *for* Captain Nookie.”

Another chortle. “I’d say you came as close as you can get without actually meeting him, heh heh . . . ”

“Can you get a message to him?”

“Captain Nookie’s a Straight Arrow, pal. He doesn’t take messages from men. Only women.”

“Well, uh, this is for a woman. A very powerful one.”

“Amazons don’t intimidate Captain Nookie.”

“Well, how can I get the message from her to him?”

“It’s like *Field of Dreams*, that old baseball movie about Screwless Joe Jackson . . . ”

Shoeless Joe. No wonder he’s a bottom-rung sportswriter.

“They say, ‘If you build it, he will come.’ For Captain Nookie, it’s: ‘If you spread ‘em, he will come. And come. And come.’ Got the message?”

“I’m sure *she* will.”

[] [] []

(COMMISSIONER’s office. TERCERO stands in front of her desk, blushing.)

Tercero: Sexual Harassment! *Con su permiso*. . . I—I’m very sorry, Commissioner. I didn’t mean to do anything, um . . .

Commissioner: *I’m* not the one filing the complaint, George. The employee in question did. Apparently you said something in relation to the content of his latest field report that offended him. Especially since, I’m told, he was following your instructions.

Tercero: I was only trying to get your question answered.

Commissioner: Don’t worry. George. While you’re handling your new assignment in the district, I’ll be using *other* resources to locate the party in question.

(As he slouches out, she presses the intercom button.)

Could you send Mr. Gooch back in? Thank you.

THE SUGAR MELANIN SEX FANTASY TREATMENT

Sugar Melanin had a reputation for No-Shows. Schedule an appointment, she wouldn't be there. Call to ask what happened, she'd say, "Oh, I'm *so* sorry, I didn't hear the door when you knocked."

"That's funny," I told her over the phone. "I pounded it till my knuckles bled."

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry! Maybe we can reschedule for a more convenient time."

Her low steam-breathed voice made you want to reschedule time and again just to hear it. The higher-ups were pressuring me to inspect her place. I had no idea why. "This is a special case," Prynne said, his vagueness sounding oddly sincere, but with a quivering undertone.

□ □ □

(RENNIE stands in front of SUGAR MELANIN's brownstone apartment building on a late-winter morning. The building's concrete steps reflect the dull gloss of ice, with snow softening the edges. As RENNIE climbs them, he slips to the sidewalk again and again. Finally, he climbs them on all fours. From the apartment comes:)

Ryan Gambol: . . . And today, I'm going to take you . . .

(Cut to interior. SUGAR MELANIN sits in a black see-through negligee, fishnet stockings and spike heels on a velour modular sofa, gazing dreamily at the handsome face of the talk show host filling her television's 60" screen.)

Sugar Melanin: You can take me any time you want, sweetie.

(A knock on her door.)

Rennie: *(Mimicking RYAN GAMBOL's voice.)* Hellooo!

Sugar Melanin: That *you*, sugar?

Rennie: It's meeeeeeeee, sweetie.

(Door opens. RENNIE unbuttons his trenchcoat, stretches it wide open like an

exuberant flasher under his manic grin, revealing a white dress shirt whose handmade Magic Marker lettering communicates Governor Wingnut's mandated greeting:)

HI! MY NAME IS RENNIE SHANACH AND I'M HERE.

□ □ □

"To inspect your apartment, that is," I add with an Inspector's sober tone.

Disappointment shades Sugar Melanin's mocha face. Her soft hazel eyes, deep and inviting, lower to the floor. Her wounded-bird expression makes me want to take her like Ryan Gambol, in pricey penthouse suites or right here on her icy front steps on a mid-March morning. I'm neither rich nor proud. But none of that matters. I'm here to do a job.

"YOU FRAUD! I SHOULD HAVE YOU ARRESTED, YOU... YOU MALE IMPERSONATOR!"

The rake of her fake silver fingernails burns across my cheek. I sidestep her next scratch, duck forward and slip inside her apartment.

An Inspector does what it takes.

A deep shuddering exhalation seems to calm her down. Her slender-boned body slinks forward, the window sun glinting long-muscle calves and thighs curving to trim hips, then a tiny waist fanning to a lithe, tapering torso as she jiggles her firm coffee-cup breasts and pointed nipples an inch away from the checklist pressed tight against my trenchcoat. The delicate sculpture of her face softens just enough to flash an alluring grin at me. "Oh! You're the *Inspector!*"

A terse official nod. "That's right, Ms. Melanin. I'm here to plug your sockets—that is, uh, to make sure your sockets are unplugged—uncovered... uh..."

"Well, sugar, I bet you could make sure that just about *all* of me is uncovered." Punctuated with her slow, sinuous glide forward.

Omigod!

"I don't think that would be appropriate, given my position."

"Any position is appropriate. I'm *very* open."

"Uh... Let me ask you some questions, first."

"Ask away, sugar," she says kittenishly then stretches herself languorously across the sofa cushions. On a whisper of breath floats: "But don't ask too long."

"Nice TV," I say, impressed with the size of the screen whose image gives me Ryan Gambol Sex Fantasy Envy. "That's a pretty expensive set."

"Oh, not to *me*. My ex-boyfriend gave me that."

"Then, I take it he doesn't live here?"

"I threw him out the same day he gave me the set." She sits up, face suddenly drawn alert. "Not to offend you, but you're not one of them government guys come nosin' around here at night, are you?"

"No. I use some unorthodox methods, but not that one."

"I'm *so* glad. My ex-ex-boyfriend found some guy inspectin' for the State, wanted to know did I have a man livin' with me? He found out. Been on disability ever since, I hear."

"That was your ex-boyfriend?"

"My *ex-ex*-boyfriend. Two babies ago."

"I see."

She shakes her shoulders. Her titties jiggle again. "I'll bet you do. I'll bet you see right through *everything*."

I'm beginning to. Imaginary flash forward to Client File: on the Family Dole, four kids births nicely timed to keep her collecting till she's fifty, barring Wingnut's reform initiative, then onto SSI. Writing a steamy account, factual or fictional, won't get me fired. But I might get killed if her latest boyfriend shows up in the middle of my generating the raw material.

On to inspecting the apartment.

□ □ □

Kitchen Smoke Detector: Pass.

Comment: My body heat triggers the smoke detector when the nipple of her breast brushes my writing hand.

□ □ □

"Ok, let's go upstairs."

"Oh, you want to see more?"

"Yes," pausing to ponder the possibilities, "uh . . . the bedrooms."

"I have three. We can start in any one of them and work through the rest."

She leads me up to the next level, her tight buns swaying a foot from my nose, her calf and thigh muscles stretching with each stair she climbs, provoking eye-bulging stares and lascivious thoughts.

"My landlord takes good care of me. He says I'm the best tenant he's ever had."

"I can imagine." But I'm almost afraid to.

□ □ □

Bathroom: Pass.

Comment: I pass urine, check to see if my hard-on is strictly of the piss variety. It's of the hard pulsating variety, the kind that causes conflicting feelings of desire and apprehension; I still have to inspect her bedrooms.

NOTE: DELETE THIS FROM YOUR OFFICIAL REPORT.

□ □ □

Her buns swaying under my nose up the flight of stairs to her bedroom nearly make me faint. I contemplate evaluating the condition of the carpeting by sliding her onto it and mounting her, but conflicting urges aside, the king-size waterbed in the center of the first bedroom distracts me, then stirs thoughts of delayed gratification, however momentary.

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Level 2:

- 1 60" television (at foot of bed)
- 1 sexpot sitting on the edge of the mattress, smiling invitingly
- 1 lavender satin sheet neatly folded open

□ □ □

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP!

Not again!

The bedroom smoke detector reveals the body heat I'm trying to contain. "Well, it works," I say, my breath short, my voice quivering. My glands overheated to the verge of hallucinating—her electrical outlets seem to dance in their fixtures—I move out of range. In front of one outlet a 30" high bookshelf, four feet wide, holds Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, and Terry McMillan on the top. On the bottom records and CDs range from Whitney Houston and Aretha Franklin to Miles Davis. She definitely has good taste, not to mention a lot of other good things. "Well, uh . . . Everything passes."

"Are you sure you've inspected *everything*?" Her eyebrows raise, lips purse,

one hand rests on a hip curved so that it nearly brushes my groin. My glands are surging. *Remember your Code of Ethics!* Your job is to just do a quick in and out—*NO!* You can't even escape punning on it. Can't escape punning, can't escape anything . . . What were Gooch the one-visit therapist's words about bending like the willow?

"You forget something you got to do? Or maybe *want* to?" Sugar's tone flows sweetly over me till I feel as though I'm embedded in a jar of honey, movements slowing to mesh with the creamy sensation that embraces me as her delicate arms reach forward, one hand fingering my shirt buttons, the other lingering just below my belt.

"No, I uh . . . yes, the Whipping Willow, um, uh . . ."

"Don't tell me you one of them Naughty Boys needs to be *whipped* into line." Her eyes glint hard gold, then soften, becoming almost porous as their stare absorbs me. "No problem, sugar. I got leather outfits, whips, handcuffs, chains, anything you need."

"I mean, it's the Lesson of the Whipping Willow. It's a—"

"The landlord just planted a sapling in my yard last spring." She nods her head toward the tiny back yard. "You dig it up, I'll whip you till you learn *everything*."

"I mean, it's a Zen thing."

Her fingers tangle in the hair of my half-bared chest. "Them Zen dudes, sugar, they're Minute Men. How 'bout a little *Kama Sutra* action instead? I got a unabridged edition come with instruction videos, scented lotions . . ."

"Let me explain. See, the willow. . . uh . . . This therapist I went to once—only once—he says the wind whips the willow in one direction and I'm supposed to whip with it."

Her inquisitive expression changes to one of submission. "I guess I deserve it. I've been a bad girl, not listening to you like I'm supposed to. After you whip me . . . well, maybe I deserve a Golden Shower too."

"That's not what I meant."

"What *is* the problem with you?"

"You."

"Me!"

"I mean, it's not you. It's—"

"Listen up. You know you can get into a lot of trouble foolin' around with your clients. "

"You're right. I'm sorry, I should just leave."

"You leave and I'm on the phone to your office sayin' I been sleepin' with you 'cause you threatened to terminate my subsidy if I didn't."

"I can't win either way."

**NOTE: THE CONTENTS OF
THIS SCENE CANNOT BE
DISCLOSED PENDING
RESOLUTION OF GRIEVANCES
FILED BY THE AUTHOR AND/OR
THE NARRATOR WITH THE U.S.
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, THE
AUTHORS GUILD AND THE
INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF FREE-LANCE
NARRATORS**

Was it good for you?" filtered into my cloud of sleep, lullabying me to a dreamy wakefulness.

"It was *incredible*." I whispered, my eyes opening to the glowing eyes and grin on—"Huh! How did you get here?" — Commissioner Vanna's face. Is this a taste of what Garvey was telling me about?

"You don't expect me to show you all my secrets, do you? And the Mysteries of the Feminine Principle...uh-uh. Forget it. Let's just say I'm interested in Quality Control."

Her Brush Script MT font reminds me of Garvey's shock at first experiencing it. "Commissioner . . ."

"Call me Vanna, sugar."

"You gave me Quality Out of Control, Vanna."

She grins down at me, Sugar Melanin's hazel eyes now Vanna's black diamonds. *"There's plenty more, if you want it."*

"Oh, I do, I do. But . . . I'm confused. I don't mean to offend you, but I, uh, I thought you were . . . well, hazel-eyed and more of a mocha complexion."

An inquisitive expression. "Does it matter?"

"No, I'm just curious . . . and, like I said, a little confused."

"I'm a political animal. Let's just say it goes with the territory."

I laugh. "Part chameleon, you mean?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that."

Do I feel a shape-shift starting?

"You feel like a hot-blooded woman to me. But with all your power and influence, why are you interested in a grunt like me?"

Vanna's smile turns as welcoming as Sugar Melanin's. "Most of you workers think I'm only interested in the managers. But I'm *very* interested in staff performance. Especially *your* staff." Which she fondles as she slides off me and onto her back.

I sit up. "I could get in trouble for doing what I did to a client."

"You did it to *me*, Rennie. I'm not a client."

"My supervisors insist that I give them written reports of my field activities."

"I think you'd better write this chapter at home, sugar."

"I'll do that."

"That's not the only thing you'll do." she breathes into my ear.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

charges!" Tercero screams, his phone voice crackling through the intercom, a bad connection from the Mannamok district gulag to which Vanna has reassigned him. "Why, Rennie? What did I ever do to you?"

"You *insisted* that I write the sex reports, then tried to censor them."

"Vanna—I mean, the Commissioner—insisted, not me. I was just following her orders, Rennie. But, *como dice*, respecting her as a lady, as well."

His first-name chumminess doesn't fool me. "You were following your dick and using my writing as a sexual aid, Tercero. Be grateful I'm only filing sexual harassment charges. Copyright infringement carries much stiffer penalties."

I slam the phone hard enough to send him to a hearing clinic—assuming he can find one out there in the boondocks.

As the plastic against plastic reverberation fades, I hear: "Sounds like you got that sucker good." I wheel my chair around to see John Garvey's gap-toothed grin stretching under his bushy mustache.

"Johnny! Good to see you, man. But, uh. . . The Commissioner trying again for Special Duty, so to speak?" My laugh sounds a little uneasy.

"No. She's got her eye on *you*, man. Those reports you wrote, they got her . . . well, you'll find out soon enough."

"Johnny, I *did* find out."

"That doesn't surprise me. I hear she really got off on them."

"And I really got off on her. She's *incredible!*"

"She's as incredible as she needs to be," Johnny says, his tone cautionary.

I'm not quite sure what he means or if I'm ready to hear it. "So, you going back to the gulags?"

"No way, Rennie. I'm replacing Tercero here as the Quota Man." He explains that an obscure group of ethnic activists had protested to the Governor that the Department didn't hire enough of their kind, which fell into the racial-ethnic category of Other. "They brought me back here because they needed an Other."

Johnny tells me he's one-quarter Cherokee and one-eighth Filipino.

"They can't eliminate Affirmative Action, so they've made me the utility player for their quota-filling team."

"Does that bother you?"

"After what they've put me through here, man, this ain't shit. I made sure the Commissioner gave me an upgrade, though." His dark eyes fix on me emphatically. "But I'm history, man. It's *you* she wants now."

"Terrific. One wrong word and I'm sitting where Tercero is right now."

"Or Prynnne."

"In his *office*?" I'm confused.

"No, when they moved Tercero out to the boonies, they moved me into his office."

"That's a big relief for me." And a very nice surprise.

"You'll get *lots* more relief from the Commissioner, man. She's after you. Big Time."

□ □ □

What is the most appropriate response for the protagonist?

- (1) Look forward to his next orgy with the Commissioner?
- (2) Express his concern over whether he retains the rights to his written work or whether it becomes a work for hire?
- (3) Note the irony that his long-ignored writing talents are getting him somewhere he never thought of going?

□ □ □

**ARE YOU READY FOR TOE-CURLING EXCITEMENT?
STAY TUNED FOR THE LATEST LUSTY EPISODE OF**

THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN NOOKIE

brought to you by

THE INSPECTOR

(Close-up. RENNIE.)

Rennie: Hi. My name is Rennie Shanach. I'm an Inspector. My job involves a lot of public contact.

Voice: (*Offstage.*) Did you say *pubic* contact?

Rennie: I said *public* contact. In my line of work I deal with all kinds of people, in every strata of society, from the bottom to the top. If there's one thing I've learned from my job, it's that

THE IMAGINATION IS A POWERFUL TOOL

The more you use it, the better your life will be.

Voice: (*Offscreen.*) That's not the *only* powerful tool, heh heh . . .

(CAPTAIN NOOKIE *bursts into the scene, blocks RENNIE from view.*)

I'm Captain Nookie, star of stage, screen and sex fantasy, not to mention pulp fiction sagas passing themselves off as high art. Take a tip from me, toots. Even better, take the whole nine yards!

(CAPTAIN NOOKIE *unzipshis fly. Before he can unravel the awesome serpentine weapon rumored to be wrapped around his waist in the guise of a midriff bulge, RENNIE rushes in front of him.*)

Rennie: They're supposed to read between the lines.

Captain Nookie: Let 'em read between the sheets, heh heh. It won't stop *me*. My ex used to read *Ladies Home Journal* whenever I put the boots to her.

Rennie: Let 'em read about you in some cheap novel.

Captain Nookie: They already are, pal. They already are.

Rennie: Without me, you're strictly pulp fiction.

Captain Nookie: With or without *me*, pal, you're still an unpublished wannabe.

Rennie: Why, you fourth-rate—!

(*Springs at CAPTAIN NOOKIE, who, during the ensuing altercation, vanishes. RENNIE continues thrashing at air, then stops, his face blushing.*)

He made me blow my cool.

(SECURITY *guards rush onstage, drag a resistant RENNIE into an elevator. The elevator door closes. The red "up" arrow flashes. The elevator shakes as it ascends.*)

Cut to interior. The elevator door opens on a double-glass door bearing the name, "COMMISSIONER.")

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The force of the shove sends me stumbling through the door. My hands hit the desk and break my fall. But in my attempt to regain balance my torso spins so that I land sprawled in the studded leather chair in front of Vanna's desk.

"That was a very impressive landing, Rennie." Vanna says, crossing her left leg over her right.

Her flash of thigh turns me breathless with its promise: a wild ride of desire fully gratified, leaving me drained on the endless white beach of her tropical heat, leaving me helpless before the riptide of her resurgent passion pulls me out to sea or, judging by the sudden change in room temperature, a wild slide off a dissatisfied body hot with temper into the saltwhite chill of her northernmost gulag . . . all starting with a reverse replay of the scene that sent me there.

"I must say, though, your little performance wasn't very impressive."

Her tone makes frost sting my face. I never knew such a warm font could feel so cold.

"I take pride in my writing. He insulted me, that jowly, paunchy, hack of a sportswriter."

"Not to make you jealous, Rennie, but I happen to like the way his participle dangles. Aside from that, your little display of temper has embarrassed this administration."

"I'm sorry, I would never knowingly do that to you. All I did was write it."

The Commissioner hits the stop button on her VCR's remote control. "I think you'll agree that little incident had a larger viewing audience than you expected."

"I wrote it for you to read."

"Sometimes you have to be careful about the medium you use." Pause. "In any event, this is an incident I have to deal with. The Governor certainly wouldn't approve. And whatever else I may do, I do represent the Governor, personally as well as professionally."

Clearly a downside to her. Anything representing the sleazebag guy is something I don't want to be associated with—except for Vanna—whose singular attributes offset the governor's corruptness, mean-spirited nature,

promiscuity and overwhelming desire to screw the public.

"You're going to have to be held accountable, Rennie."

"In what way?" This could get me shipped to one of the gulags if I'm not careful.

"Your display of temper just now was inappropriate behavior for a paid employee, especially one doing personal work on company time. Perhaps doing a Public Service Announcement on Anger Management with Mr. Tercero would cool your temper."

Omigod! I'm ready to grovel on the floor, drool all over her shoes, kiss her feet. . . anything but that.

She pats my head like a dog. My eyes roll upward to the face hovering high above her kneecaps. "Then I have another PSA in mind, but you'll have to deal with your anger issues through our Employee Assistance Program. I believe you were seeing Mr. Gooch—"

"That was *supposed* to be confidential."

"And our computers are *strictly* for company business. What you've been doing for me is technically a violation of that policy."

"I could file a grievance."

"And I could file transfer papers. Would you like to work for Mr. Tercero again . . . in our Mannamok office?"

□ □ □

(Interior. Basement. Closeup: a used condom on a grimy concrete floor. A gloved hand picks it up. Cut to RENNIE.)

Rennie: As an inspector making my daily rounds on the mean streets of urban, suburban and rural America, I see it all. Drug abuse, sexual abuse, child abuse, adult abuse, chastity abuse—you name it, I've seen it. And whenever I see some little bugger bugging some other little bugger, I take out the extra condom I've carried since my sexually deprived days in high school, college and adult life, and I give it to them or to their mothers.

(Enter COMMISSIONER wearing a hot-to-trot nightie under a faded salmon bathrobe with small white flowers. RENNIE hands her the condom. She unwraps it.)

In the Age of AIDS that we're living in, it's important to make Politically Correct statements in support of AIDS prevention. It's important to tell the nation's sexually active population, from infants to senior citizens, to

practice Safe Sex. Now, I know all the arguments people make against it. You lose sensation, you feel like you're wearing hip boots, you feel like you're making love to latex, not to a person. As an Inspector, I've heard it all. Now I want you to hear *me*: think of what could happen if you didn't wear one. For starters, you might enjoy it. And *that's* where the trouble starts. You can complain all you want, but these (*close-up of Wingnut UltraSkin Condoms*) are for your own good.

(*Medium. RENNIE removes the condom the COMMISSIONER has slipped onto his penis and tosses it onto the cellar floor. He spreads her legs on the wooden stairs. Just before he enters her, he turns to the camera.*)

Remember: do as I say, not as I do.

THIS HAS BEEN A PUBLIC SERVICING ANNOUNCEMENT

[] [] []

"That was very good, Rennie." Her smile has returned, gleaming high quality cosmetic dentistry.

"It made me feel a little like a hypocrite." A lot is more like it, but I'm in enough trouble already.

"There's nothing wrong with a little hypocrisy in public life. People expect it," she says. Then adds with assurance: "Hypocrisy is one thing, unbecoming conduct another."

"I never thought of it that way."

"You could think a lot about it that way in one of the districts. Or, Mr. Gooch can help you sort through your thoughts."

"I'll call him ASAP," I assure her.

She rests a hand on top of mine before I leave. "Thank you, Rennie. And just so you know, I don't *plan* to broadcast that PSA, except at home."

[] [] []

Gooch: How do you really know? Your fantasies are intruding on your reality.

Rennie: Or extending it, depending on the situation.

Gooch: What you're describing as reality. . . I can't say that it sounds plausible.

Rennie: If it was fantasy, I wouldn't be in danger of doing the Boytoy

Shuffle. That's one reason I followed the order. Aside from the obvious.

Gooch: I'm sure Management has its reasons for allocating staff resources the way it does.

Rennie: Spoken like a true shill of this agency's EAP.

Gooch: I am not a shill of this agency's Employee Assistance Program.

Rennie: Then, what is *your* problem?

Gooch: I don't have a problem. I'm taking a new EAP position with this agency.

Rennie: Missionary?

Gooch: You need professional help.

Rennie: I always thought you were an amateur.

Gooch: What you say today might affect where you work tomorrow.

□ □ □

"I'm very pleased that you've complied with my requests, Rennie." Vanna says, gesturing for me to roll my chair to her side of the desk.

"Did I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice. The question is whether you like the alternatives."

"I don't think I would."

"Well, I think I have one that you're going to enjoy tremendously. Consider it a reward for good behavior."

Her eyes close, long lashes curve upward, grinning face tilts slowly back, moist teeth glisten under lips full, soft and red, cute dimple tiny chin, just enough to cradle with a curved forefinger. A long stretch, arms over her head, legs straightening. . . thigh muscles, calf muscles . . . pulling septa skin tight, elevates her torso, a slow circular tease with an upward belly bump, fingers snap! She settles back into the chair,

Her face levels back to mine, radiating anticipation.

The office ambience changes: a vast cinematic background exotic palms sleek reptilian creatures slithering along the ground.

"Where are we going?"

"It's not the journey, Rennie, it's the ride that gets you there."

Am I entering the Valley of the Shadow, the Land of the Little Death? Wait and see. What I see first: Tercero and Prynne naked except for loincloths and sandals, out-of shape oxen pulling a canopied wooden cart carrying Garvey, then: Cassandra Stone and Sugar Melanin, topless, wearing string bikini bottoms and bearing palm fronds. "How did they get

here?"

"Yours isn't the only reality, Rennie. "Are you ready to go for a ride?"

"I have a confession to make, Vanna. Er, Commissioner."

"I hope it's a good one," her voice husky, low and dusky in my ear, her flesh, at once firm and soft, undulating against me.

"The reports were fiction. I made them up. They were fantasy."

"Maybe so. But not Sugar Melanin. You crossed the line between fantasy and reality on that one."

While I'm pondering the aesthetic implications, eyes closed, she mists my face with her breath, kisses me lightly, little nips and smacks over my face and neck, my chest, thighs, every part of my body at once while her flesh rubs over the places she isn't kissing.

My eyes open on Tish Friedman straddling me. The shock nearly turns my dick limp again. I haven't seen her since that unsettling night. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Making sure you get it right this time?" Her corkscrew hand motion hardens my pole.

"Maybe the question is really, How? Or, Why?"

Vanna, now a blonde anchorwoman flashing a bland grin, strokes my hair gently. "Let's just say your reputation preceded you."

"No wonder I never saw Tish at GAPS again. I thought she just took a better job. So . . . that was *you* seducing me without my even knowing it. That's dirty pool."

"I bet you like it better than pocket pool."

"I'm just saying . . ."

Vanna draws back a few inches. *"Can't you be like a regular man and think about only one thing?"*

Another corkscrew.

"I can. You just showed me."

"What I want to know from you is

WHO IS THAT MASKED MAN UNMASKED?

she asks again and again and again, steamy whispers in my ear supercharging my loins while Cassandra and Sugar kiss my lips, my face, my neck, my chest hair, brushing over me, helpless under the female power wielders turning me wilder with every nip, nibble, thrust, maneuvering my trust, too clever a ruse to refuse or deny her whatever she wants under penalty of losing the hot sweet thrust hovering over my aching pole.

"So, sugar, you ready to answer my question?"

"Question? What" — suck breath—"question?"

"The Secret Identity?"

"Ohhh! Ohhhhhh! OOOOOOHHHHH!" GASP! *"That question!"*

"Yes, sugar. *That* question."

"Promise not to tell anybody?"

"Promise."

"It's me."

"I'm sorry, Rennie," she raises herself off of me. My rod throbs at the ceiling. "I just don't buy that."

"You mean, not after my temperamental performance?"

Her hard-eyed stare makes my sex monster shrivel. "It's not *your* performance I'm after. It's *his* performance."

"In other words, I've been used . . ."

". . . but not abused. Not yet, anyway."

"Not yet. And not unless I tell you who he is, right?"

"That's right, sugar."

"He's a figment of my imagination."

"You've got some imagination. So, tell me. Who is he?"

"It's all in the last report."

"Norwood Newcombe?"

"Norbert Nooke. The 'e' isn't silent, by the way."

"A name like that! Come on, sugar. Lance Thrustman, Dick Rodman . . . If you're going to lie to me, make it a good one."

"I'm not lying."

"You'll tell me the truth. I have ways."

Gooch: Rennie, I really think your refusal to reveal this other person's identity is your way of trying to create a Safe Place for yourself.

Rennie: I've already told you, this "other person" is my fictional creation, nothing more.

Gooch: For most people, the "Imaginary Friend" goes away by age six.

Rennie: I'm a *writer*.

Gooch: Really? Is that how you make your living?

Rennie: No. I work as an inspector in the SHIT unit.

Gooch: We'll discuss your negative attitude toward your career in our next session. Right now we have more pressing questions to deal with. Why won't you reveal this person's secret identity to the Commissioner?

Rennie: I told you, dammit! He's a *fictional creation*.

Gooch: As I understand it, most fictional creations have some basis in reality. Does this character have any basis in reality?

Rennie: Well, yeah . . .

Gooch: Then, what's your problem?

Rennie: Why are you so interested? My, uh, firm grasp of the obvious is telling me that the Commissioner's agenda is affecting your so-called objectivity as a therapist.

Gooch: As a politically correct, non-sexist male, I appreciate her attributes as attributes, but my professionalism would never let me place myself in a conflict-of-interest position.

Rennie: In other words, she's never hit on you.

Gooch: No, she never has.

Rennie: Then, what is *your* agenda?

Gooch: To help you find a Safe Place. In my professional opinion, finding this man for the Commissioner will generate the kind of good will that can reduce your stress in the workplace.

Rennie: But that means giving up what I'm getting. And what I'm getting is a strong dose of Pig Paradise daily.

Gooch: Sometimes you have to give it up to keep it.

Rennie: Not if she gets hold of this guy. She's obsessed with him."

Gooch: I think you're being short-sighted. The Commissioner is more than a political animal. She's a complex individual, not just some vapid administrator with a great costume and makeup department. From what you've described she may have a rare condition known as Multiple Body Disorder, she may embody the Feminine Mystique, or maybe she just

possesses a natural surplus of pheromones that causes you to project images created by your overstimulated hormones onto her.

Rennie: You make it sound like I'm way overmatched.

Gooch: Maybe there's a reason why she wants this sexual superhero.

Rennie: Are you saying I'm not *man* enough?

Gooch: I'm saying, if you really want to find out, you have to give it all up to see if you get it back.

□ □ □

Narrator: Do I *have* to?

Author: You put yourself in the situation.

Narrator: *Me!* You're the author. I'm only a character. As such, my powers are limited.

Author: That's not what you said earlier.

Narrator: This isn't something I want to give up.

Voice: You don't have to give it up if you don't want to. She'll give it up for you. And I'll be the proud recipient, heh heh.

Narrator: And *who* are you?

Voice: Nookie's the name and nookie's my game.

Narrator: Are you going to let this bogus character invade *my* fiction?

Author: Not only that, I'm going to let him invade your *reality*, as well.

Voice: Thanks, pal. This guy's done a *lousy* job of portraying the Old Nookster.

Narrator: That's a lie. I've portrayed him *exactly* as he is.

Captain Nookie: Shows how much you know. "A fourth-rate sportswriter! Let me tell ya, pal, you couldn't find your way into a love motel if someone dropped you in the luv tub.

Narrator: No, that shows how much *you* know.

Author: Excuse me. I'm tired of all this infantile bickering. You can work it out on your own.

□ □ □

The call of feminine distress, I can hear it anywhere. And when I do, it's time to get down to brass beds—brass tacks, I mean—and I never forget to bring the old hammer along. A man always prepared to do his bidding in the servicing of others, is me.

The costume's laid out on the bed, waiting for me like the babe at the end

of that whining moan far across the city night. "Time to give the damsel her nightly dip-sticking," I tell Ronnie the Shnook, my humbled assistant. He's learned from hard experience—and soft, heh heh—his place. "Just spread the costume open, like a pair of legs around a wet quim."

He does my bidding, and I jump into it. *Sonuvabitch!* "You held it backwards, you blob of ground-up turkey neck."

"I'm sorry, Captain Nookie."

"Do it again. And get it right this time."

But he can't. Twice more I jump in and he's got it wrong, my big "N" hanging off the cheeks of my derriere, where my chest should be.

"Let me try it one more time, sir."

"Forget it." Robin to my Batman, this guy isn't. If I wait for this twerp to get it right every time I go on a mission, those poor broads will writhe in the throes of their misery. They need me to make them writhe in the throes of the pleasure that comes from a manly prong coming after a manly pronging. And I'm going to go there to make them come, just as soon as—

"Jesus Christ, fella! You didn't put fresh batteries in the remote."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"I don't have time for your apologies. There are women out there in crying, moaning, *shrieking* need of my servicing. Now, go out there and open up that garage door."

Good thing I don't let my servant handle all my batteries. While he's grunting and straining with the garage door, I fumble for the remote that gets my engine going. My car engine, that is. Wrong one. That's the remote to the news room. Where is the damn thing? *Come on!* Got it.

The headlights beam on. Now the engine's revving full throttle. But the "N" that's supposed to light the sky is reflecting off the garage door like stick figures in a funhouse wrestling match. Hell with this! I have a job to do.

The Nookiemobile plows through the garage door and into action, right along with me. The door follows, its splintered wedges dragging like beer cans on the back of a car heading off to a honeymoon. I don't give a damn about the moon, I'm heading for the honey. And Running Snot is hanging onto the rear window frame, whimpering about sliding off the trunk. Sounds like he's in heat, the wimp. Enough about him! I've got a *real* woman waiting for me, right in the love motel just up ahead.

What's this? Hourly rates! Forget it. The Captain's a Minute Man when money's on the line. I'll make 'em pay another way. Thanks to my assistant, bouncing with the boards off the rear bumper, I'm running late. Besides, Captain Nookie doesn't need to register as John Doe or John Smith, like

your ordinary, garden-variety philanderer. He just needs to get to where he needs to be to satisfy his own needs and the needs of those who summon him with their desperate, plaintive cries. So, I close my eyes and floor the gas pedal. The Nookiemobile soars through the glass double-door entrance, sending shattered fragments flying through the tiny lobby. The night clerk ducks, an especially wise move since in the rearview mirror I see Remnants Shattered skidding across the registration desk, his face slamming hard into the Ring for Service bell. Let him take care of the messy details. I hang a hard left down the hall. My fenders tear the walls and doors off both sides of it. Men with pot bellies hiding their hard-ons wave their hairy fists at my dust. The women behind them wave hello. Sorry, ladies. Your turn will come some other night.

Up ahead of me is the Sweet Luxury Suite. My finely tuned hearing picks up the helpless and hopeless howling, an urgency that should never fall upon deaf ears. With my speedometer trying to push beyond the red, I plow through the door and into the room, tearing out the toilet, sink and plumbing fixtures. The Nookiemobile screeches to a stop underneath a cold shower. "Don't mess with me, pal," I tell the water, then jump out of the spray before it can dampen my enthusiasm. "Hold your horses, toots. I'm coming."

"Don't come before you get here," the voice says.

"Me? Never."

She's lying there, in languid wait for me, on the bed that's practically outside the driver's side door. In the dim room, her lines shimmer under the glow of my "N" radiating its golden aura. And they're some lines, let me tell ya. Those curves could glow in the dark without my ambient lighting. And that blonde hair, swept over her left shoulder, mirrors a sheen that throws light even from the small of her back

"I've been waiting for you," she whispers into my ear, a combo of sound, breath and moisture that gets the old tool ready to go to work.

"So have a lot of other women." No point in false modesty, heh heh. They say women want a man to make them feel special. Well, in my book, a *real* man makes women feel *he's* special. Every last one of 'em.

Her arms curl around the back of my neck.

My tongue starts doing wet wheelies in her ear. The motion gets her going so much she turns away from me, giving me more angles to tongue from, while I slide up against her hot apple buns. She rolls over one more time, too far for me to give her more ear, onto her back, and looks up, adoration moistening her blue eyes. "Actually, I had my staff make a

concerted effort to find you.”

“Your staff and their rods, they’ll never comfort you.”

“One came pretty close. The guy with the closest ties to you.”

“You mean, my literary caddy?”

“I like *you* better.” She pulls me down to her, swallows my mouth and tongue, a long French kiss sucking me into her throat.

“And I know what you’ll like best, lady.” The Old Sperm Whale begins Moby Dicking while her tight wet pussy squeezes and glides around it in the storm-tossed sea of her juices. A little harpoon work gets her butt thumping the mattress and when I spear her good, she turns the mattress into a trampoline. She’s a hot one—with energy to burn.

In the afterglow, her face radiating lovelight, her curvaceous thigh and calf curving around the back of my thigh, she whispers, “*There’s only one thing I’d like more.*”

“You name it, toots, I’m game.”

“*Do it with your mask off.*”

“Sorry, Vanna. But’s that’s like Delilah cutting Samson’s hair.”

“*I don’t think it would change anything.*”

“You’ve got your Identity, I’ve got mine. Let’s keep it that way.”

I close my eyes to savor the break in the action, then all of a sudden she’s getting busy. Whoa, baby! What is she *doing* down there?

I don’t believe this. There’s *three* of them. Not just Vanna the Dish Commish, but one with frizzy hair licking the vein running the bottom of the Great Serpent and a honey-colored woman lazily rolling hazel eyes as she twirls the tip of my cock from one corner of her mouth to the other, sending come squirting against the left side of her face. These babes can certainly tire out the Captain, who’s never been known to refuse a *menage a quartre*, just that even he’s never had the good luck to be offered one before this.

I’m having more good luck than I ever bargained for, especially this honey-colored cutie who calls herself Sugar. And she is sweet, omigod! I’m lucky the Squirtmaster Deluxe can squeeze a dribble, with her tight little twat twisting to suck me dry. When she’s done, I roll over onto my back.

Captain Nookie has met his match, let me tell ya.

Before I can tell you anything else, Vanna’s back, black this time, climbing on top of my shaft, raising her quim to the very tip of my pole, then teasing down ever so slowly to its base, not a touch of her outer flesh against mine, just pure pussy, up again and then down.

“Ohhhhh . . . !”

"Would you like me to keep doing this?"

Jesus Christ! I'm too old to be doing this. "YES. . .YESSSS . . .OHHH!
OHHHHH! . . . YEEESSS! YESSSS! YEESSSSS!"

"Then let me see your face."

"OHHH! . . . NOOOHHH! . . . NOOOOHHH! . . . NOOOOOHHH!"

She slides her pole almost all the way off, leaving just enough to toy with my throbbing tip. *"Would you like me to stop now?"*

"NOOOOOHHH! . . . NOOOOOOHHH! . . . NOOOOOOOHHH!"

"Then, you know what to do, don't you?"

Her sweet grin broadens as she starts to slide ever so slowly off of me. My hand tears the mask away, tosses it to God only knows where. But revealing my secret identity is only a diversionary tactic. As soon as I get my breath back, about three or four months from now, I'll roll the Dish Commish onto her back and let her know who's boss.

Captain Nookie always finishes on top, heh heh.

"I don't think we're anywhere near done yet," she says, in a tiny voice that cuddles me, but not enough to cure my drained body's dread. *"Do you, Norbie?"*

Norbie! Oh, shit!

NOTES FROM THE GULAG

Vast sky thick with clouds. Wind shrieks across boondock steppes, chills me to the marrow. April is the cruelest month they say, especially out here: no leaves to slow the freezing howl of the wind machines the Commissioner ordered placed in front of my desk, office empty but for me, a phone and the laptop I purchased to survive in this no-tech zone and protect me from any managers who might monitor the mainframe— if I ever get transferred back to C.O. Only my trenchcoat protects me from the indoor gale. Holding the fedora tight against my head leaves me one hand free. My punishment for giving her exactly what she wanted (not me): outposted with nothing to do, no duties, no assignments but to sit. Standard bureaucratic thinking, standard bureaucratic error. My thoughts and my words go with me, isolation no matter—and now the laptop too. While digging myself out of the grave of my despair, my words continue to bury me. At least I got back some control of this narrative, such as it is—a tug of war between the author and me, with a few characters coming more to life than I wanted. At least I got my narrator’s gig back from the Dirty Old Man. That’s about the most I can manage, stuck out here. Traveling an hour and a half each way turns my mind to nighttime tube mush. And my libido?

□ □ □

NEED TO RELIEVE THE ITCH THAT ACHES?

DIAL 1-800-COMMISH*

Hours: Mon-Fri 8:00 A.M.-500 P.M.

***Access from gulags unavailable.**

□ □ □

To add variety to my workday I take a book to the crapper. Well, well . . . There’s *The Gulag Gazette* on the floor near the bowl. Maybe I should take a break from postmodern avant-pop magic realism metafiction,

read what the locals are doing . . .

COMMISSIONER GIVES NOOKE DEPUTY POST *Former Sportswriter to Head Agency Servicing Slots*

In a major shake-up, Welfare Reform Commissioner Vanna Morph announced the appointment of former fourth-string sportswriter Norbert Nooke as Deputy Commissioner of the agency spearheading the Tough Love attitude toward getting people off the public dole.

"I like Nooke. His primary thrust is to get recipients off their butts and into other positions," Morph said.

"What I like to do is to get them off our backs and onto theirs," Nooke inserted. "They moan at first, but when I get done with them, they're purring."

Governor A. Wright Wingnut added, "Nooke's long background in covering women's amateur sports and in his recreational activities on and off the field give him layers of experience that will enable him to penetrate years of resistance."

WINGNUT TO VISIT GULAG OFFICE TODAY

GULAG Governor A. Wright Wingnut, in keeping with his campaign promise to monitor State employees, will visit the outermost regional outpost of the State's Welfare Reform agency. Wingnut said, "I'm going out to the Gulags to show the

public that I intend to keep the campaign promises that I made to our citizens."

Commissioner Vanna Morph and newly-appointed Deputy Commissioner, Norbert Nooke, will accompany the Governor as he makes his visit today.

□ □ □

Coming back from the lav, I spot a head of wavy red hair sweeping over the desk's front corner, blue eyes blazing a devouring stare from my office chair, gray skirt hiked to flash a classic gam, delicate ankle and the flicking tip of a black spike heel. Who's this? I don't get visitors, not here. I've never seen her before, but I could look at her all day.

"Hi, Rennie." I can't help but recognize the voice. Then the glittering grin.

"Commissioner! You look so different!" Calling her Vanna seems risky, given my current status. There might be more remote gulags I don't know about.

"You have to be flexible in my position."

"She's very flexible, let me tell ya," says a voice to my left. It's Norbert Nooke, gray pinstripe suit barely holding back his burst of belly fat. Next to him stands Governor A. Wright Wingnut, pig eyes squinting over the

somber set of his mouth.

I stifle my urge to mutter "I know" through gritted teeth.

The Commissioner moistens her lips, her tongue lingering in the right corner of her mouth. "As you know, Governor Wingnut is here to provide Quality Control with a personal spin."

"And I'm here to get welfare mothers on their backs," Nooke says through a grin of thick, nicotine-tinted teeth.

"That will come later, Norbie," says the Commissioner.

Norbie! Looks like the Commissioner pussy-whipped Captain Nookie while he was writing his own narrative. Nooke's jowls sag with disappointment. It's not my problem.

The Commissioner's sparklers spread a circle of blue light around me. If I surrender myself fully to her – if I haven't already, that is – maybe she'll transfer me out of this terminally gray pit, where even spring leaves bud ashen. I'm beginning to relax with the notion of selling out. Maybe there's something to gain from it.

"I must say, Rennie, I was very disappointed that you weren't at your desk when we arrived. It doesn't create a good impression of my staffers."

"I was in the Men's Room, Commissioner."

"And what were you doing in there, you naughty boy?"

"I was reading that you and the Governor . . ."

Her gaze doesn't soften.

"And, uh, that you hired a new, uh . . ."

Not a blink.

I swallow the lump in my throat.

"All of these are excuses, Rennie," says the Governor. "We're going to have to make an example of you."

Wingnut shoves me from behind. I stumble forward, off-balance. The desk breaks my fall. While my arms brace me so that I can stand up, a hand tears at the back of my trousers.

"Bend over, dammit."

Wingnut's brutal entry reflects in the full-length mirror the Commissioner holds in front of me. My ass feels his ripping, tearing thrusts. I see my gritted teeth, blushing face, the bastard's smug grin, Vanna's statuesque indifference, and hear: "I, A. Wright Wingnut, the Governor of this Sovereign State, duly elected by a plurality of its residents for the purpose of screwing the public, am screwing you on behalf of the State's electorate. You can praise me, you can complain, you can scream, you can moan, you can ask for more. It's all the same. It's not just my job as Governor, it's my mandate."

□ □ □

"Hi. I'm Rennie Shanach from the State, and I'm here."

□ □ □

Before I can rest my aching hemorrhoids on my seat cushion, the Commissioner glances at the sign, then up at me. Her eyes linger, but with what thought behind them? "Now that the Governor has made an example of you, you won't be here much longer," she says, softly.

"Why? Is he taking my ass on tour." Wingnut and Nooke are checking out the gulag's other offices, all empty since the Christmas layoffs.

"No, Rennie, the truth is, I need you." Her azure eyes grow large and moist as though imploring me.

She's a tough offer to refuse, but being stationed out here has hardened me. "Don't you have enough Boytoys at your disposal?"

A small sweep of her hand. Oh, *those!* No, Rennie, I need you for a *special* purpose."

"Yeah. To bring that slovenly old fart with the slicked-back hair to life."

"Please try to understand. I've always viewed him as a father figure, from the time I played girls basketball in high school."

"Really! If you knew him before, I'd say your heart belongs to Daddy, not to me." I thought this fantasy character was *my* creation. He was real all along?

"Try to understand, Rennie. I was young. He gave me what I needed."

"I'm sure your hormones were very precocious."

"Well, yes. *there is* that component." After scoring the lay-up that won her team a state championship, the city's sportswriters bombarded her with questions about the shot, the game and her future. One man, obscured by the reporters in front of him, couldn't seem to finish a question because the others shouted over him. Her coach swept her away from the gaggle before she could let the man ask his question.

As she climbed into her blue Toyota, a voice from out of nowhere croaked, "I got just one question to ask you." She turned toward the voice only to find herself blinded by a whirling blue cape as a paunchy red-costumed body climbed onto her and insinuated itself inside her while she braced the back of her head against the automatic transmission shift. Some display of tenderness on his part turned her mood consensual, if confused, before tidal waves of carnal force rocked her across a vast ocean of all-consuming pleasure. Moments later, as she lay there, eyes closed, legs draped over his costumed shoulders, she heard: "Here's my question, toots:

Is that the fuck of a lifetime, or what?" before the follow-up "heh heh" faded back from her. At that moment, all she knew was that she felt somehow. . .changed. Later she would feel violated and outraged, but transformed and gratified, as well. Even now, her feelings remained conflicted. "But," she concluded, "whatever he did, he gave me the tools that made me what I am today."

"A divisible human chameleon?"

"No, Rennie. A person who has the resources to adapt successfully to any situation. And to achieve whatever goal I want, no matter how lofty."

"You sound as though you're *bragging* on behalf of this clown. He does enough on his own, believe me. And he's not *that* good."

"But the trauma of that one time gave me the coping skills I need. Some people might call it a shattered personality, but I've come to consider it an expanded identity."

"So, the Dirty Old Man not only fucked your body, but your mind as well."

"I'm very disappointed in you, Rennie. I thought you were way beyond those antiquated notions about the Mind-Body split."

"Whether I am or not, your heart still belongs to Daddy."

"I only saw him once, and never knew who he was, in costume or out."

I let the comment hang in the air without replying. I'm playing it tougher than she wants, mainly because my learning that my fictional creation filled a role in her real life has left me dangling numbly over the line dividing fantasy from reality with no clothespin to hold me in either place.

She rests a hand on the corner of my desk, lets her weight settle on it, looks downward one solemn moment, then raises her eyes to me, a No Games This Time look. "Please don't ever repeat this to anyone," she says, a quiver in her voice. "The reason I'm bringing you back is because Norbert needs a ghost writer."

THE OFFICE NEXT TO EXILE

beats hell out of the gulag. It's a more convenient coordinate on the time-space continuum: a desk facing a video screen, watching Captain Nookie's sagging ass pump between thighs long and curving, listening to the old fart's heavy wheezing and the Commissioner's moaning or watching the face shots, his mouth sucking air through a desperate leer, hers gasping ecstasy through pearly teeth glistening saliva, or the come shots: purple-headed planarian hard-on squirting Wildroot Cream Oil jissom into her face. Some ghost writer gig! I'm writing the equivalent of bottom-budget porn.

{} {} {}

TO: All Subordinate Staff

FROM: Norbert Nooke, Deputy Commissioner

DATE: Not Necessary, Just Spread 'Em

RE: New Appointments

It is with great pleasure that I announce the hiring of Hefner Gooch as Executive Assistant to this Deputy Commissioner. Mr. Gooch, or "Hef," as he is affectionately known to his clients and many of their wives, will provide technical assistance in the area of internal affairs. A man's man if there ever was one, in the Nookster's opinion, thus qualifies him for any affairs this administration needs to put a policy thrust on, along with his twenty years of bringing unflagging servicing to numerous people in need of it.

Hef will be making the rounds this week, so when he comes, make sure he doesn't dribble out.

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I'm taking a familiar position in the Bend Over Brigade, only less literal after Wingnut, Gooch now swaggering through the friendly spaces alongside the Caped Crackpot. No visible improprieties here although I've overheard five secretaries, great bodies no brains, schedule lunch-hour motel liaisons. Can't read, can't type, follow the soaps every day, pancaked faces listening avidly to headphones, thighs flashing from spinning chairs as they talk about the affairs of the heroes heroines villains, shins swinging back and forth as they size up Gooch and size down the old Nookster, object of ridicule wherever he turns—except inside his own head or the Commissioner's. Gooch passes by my desk, a professional's strut: each step jiggling a thigh or knee socket as if shaking a testicle free of velcro sweat. He's too well-adjusted to need a superhero identity. For now. When the Commish gives him full frontal assault with her protean identities he may need some help.

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"Ooh, baby! You're a regular Superman!" the Commissioner moans in her alluring Brush Script MT font.

"I regard it as a matter of penetrating insight, myself," Gooch's voice carries through the door. They must be doing a desktop quickie. No matter to me. Ms. Brush Script MT used her wiles, all of them, including racial and identity transformation, to ply out of me the secret identity and whereabouts of the pulp anti-hero now fuming jealously outside her door. I've been used if not abused enough to file Sexual Harassment charges against her, myself—if I dared risk reassignment to some gulag more remote than the one my ghost writing skills just brought me back from. I know better. But old Norbert doesn't.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON IN THERE!"

Nooke rams shoulder-first through the door. Sure enough, Gooch, wool trousers tangled around his ankles, is pumping Vanna's Thailand Beauty Queen identity: thick black hair coconut oil brushed to a brilliant shine on the carpet. "Oooohhhhh! Oooohhhhh! Oooohhhhh!" While she gasps an urgent breath a spark of electrostatic shock travels the rug from her hair to Gooch's trousers and up his wooly ass, sparking a pullout orgasm that spurts over her flat tummy, then a wildfire gob that splatters Nooke's lenses.

Vanna sighs a whisper of gamelan aftertones. Her eyes, black and glassy, roll toward the irate anti-hero. "We were just holding a meeting concerning staff deployment."

"His staff, but not *mine*, I see." Nooke's hrumph raises his sunken chest then drops its medicine ball mass over his belt, bouncing rubbery against the borders of his Power Suit.

"Perhaps this environment is too closed in for you, Norbert. If you like, I'm sure you could be of great service in one of this agency's rural offices."

"That won't be necessary."

"There appears to be a need out there. And if I say it's necessary, then it is necessary."

Nooke removes his glasses, wipes the jissom off the lenses. "I hope you'll consider my need to be here . . . even when the going gets sticky, so to speak."

"Needs may change according to employee attitude," rolling onto her side in the sultry manner of Eartha Kitt purring "C'est Si Bon" from the 1950s, long leg teasing with every muscle, every curve.

The former Captain Nookie gets on his knees.

[] [] []

TO: All Female Staff

FROM: "As Vanna As I Wanna Be" Morph, Commissioner

RE: Hiring and Promotional Freeze

Due to staff lengths and shortages, it is imperative that I issue a freeze on all new hirings and promotions. Effective immediately, no female staff will be hired or promoted unless they have a documented history of frigidity. All male staff hired and promoted must continue to measure up to the requirements as set forth by me upon my appointment to this office.

[] [] []

The Commissioner sits straight-backed behind her desk, her face matching the faded battleship color of the agency's government-issue furniture. Without some sign of allure I have no idea why she wants to talk to me except to transfer me to a remote region for some offense real to her but imagined to me with consequences real to me but imagined to her. The prolonged silence evokes a terror in me that does nothing to reduce the midriff bulge of middle age; instead

of turning my fat tissue to sweat, it turns my muscle tissue to sweat.

“The reason I called you in here today, Rennie . . . ”

What! Not even a breathy subtone of her fancy Brush Script MT font! This is not a good sign. When she’s strictly business, I’m in trouble.

“ . . . is that I wanted to express my appreciation to you . . . ”

For what? For weeks of servicing? For suffering punishment in the gulags at her whim? For humiliating myself by writing her numerous sexual adventures?

“ . . . for your role in bringing Hefner Gooch into the employ of this organization. As you’ve already witnessed, he has proved to be invaluable in providing servicing essential to this office.”

My head remains lowered as I try to absorb the information. Nooke hired Gooch, not me. I raise my head slowly, trying to keep my expression blank enough to conceal the feeling of confusion starting to tingle from the pit of my stomach to my extremities. When my face raises high enough to look at hers, I see her cage of teeth grinning at me.

My stomach plops like pancake batter against a grill, sizzling rage and spattering disorientation. *I’ve been used!* By whom I’m not entirely sure.

On my way to my desk, Nooke, pushing cartons of photocopy paper on a gray dolly inquires

WHEN DOES IT END?

and how? I'd like to know myself. I'm losing my grip, slipping out of Reality as I know it, even its permutations. The endless reshuffling reshuffles my perceptions endlessly, stress-induced dopamine surges intensify perceptions, even this antique diningroom table I'm refinishing, grandma's round oak table, grain rising 3-D off the surface, dark, the storm cloud outdoors giving the basement a shadowed ambience even with lighting overhead. The Inspector, reduced by an endless run of circumstances to fume highs, rubbing finish remover on off on again, endless job like the reorganization, wear and tear bound to tell sooner or later. It all catches up with you—the good, the bad—this table, my metaphorical identity: unfinished. In process, to use officeseak. The shifting scenarios smeared in the surface rotate: Tercero Prynne Garvey Gooch Nooke the Commissioner in all her manifestations at the center giving way occasionally to Governor A. Wright Wingnut's pig-eyed squint. I scrub each one away, but the remover just isn't strong enough to eat their grit, individually or collectively.

Shit! I'm out of remover. Out of gas too, just about. A weary Wozzeck plodding a step at a time toward the millennium and its rumored apocalypse, so weary from all of this. I've won most of my wars of attrition through the engine of persistence. But this one . . . it's become some kind of madman's lottery, I think, pulling alongside a red Dodge pickup truck in the parking lot of Mauss Hardware, the only local hardware store that hasn't sold its nuts and bolts to Wingnut's corporate magnate minions. There's got to be an end to all this, just as there will be an end to refinishing this table: a little handiwork to relax by, a little sense of accomplishment.

I step out of my car onto the sidewalk . . . *WHAT!* . . . a circus, a carnival . . . what *is* this going on at the curb? Ferris Wheel poking up at the edge of the sidewalk, must be some kind of charity. Hmm. . . what are those *numbers* on the front? Looks familiar: 23 . . .196 . . . 6 . . . 47 . . .893. . . stops on GAPS.

Oh! This is the same Wheel GAPS used for deciding who got what spot on its housing subsidy waiting list. What's it doing *here?* in affluent

suburbia? What's it doing at the end of the hardware store's parking lot, only the sidewalk separating the lot from the wheel filling Main street? GAPS doesn't have any subsidies out here. This is the home country for the Insurance City Executive crowd: massive dwellings, pricey and remote. The poor don't even come here, just interlopers like me living near the town line. A quick hop out, then back home to work on the table. But this wheel . . . what's the deal here? Where's the Talk Show Host? Isn't that his voice? " . . . And now, ladies and gentleman, we have another contestant who's just arrived. . . " No, it isn't, but it's familiar. . . *annoyingly* familiar, more annoying the closer I come to its source: Governor A. Wright Wingnut, squinty eyes blinking as his dumpy body attempts dynamic movements around the cordless mike. "Let's give a warm greeting to *REEENNNIIIEEE SHAAANAAAAACH!*"

My face flushes the heat of surprise. Other faces light the air around me, hands clap raucous applause, shifting bodies clear a path for me to meet him face-to-face instead of face-to-butt.

"Tell me, Rennie. Did you ever in your life expect this to happen?"

"No, I can't say I did," feeling the color in my face changing with the heat. "Uh, just what *is* going to happen?"

"The girls are going to show you." Wingnut puts an arm under my elbow, turns me toward twin Vannas, one black, one blonde, both awesome in their thong bikinis. Had I known, I would have worn something nicer than my biker's tanktop, skull floating above a phantasmagoria whirling red green yellow blue. I've lived most of my life indifferent to externals such as dress, ironic that I suddenly care about them.

"No, Rennie. Stop gawking at the girls, and look at the wheel."

The Vannas make a unison arc, long fingers at the end of their respective hands gesture under face-wide grins toward the numbered seats containing Tercero, then Prynne, then Garvey, Captain Nookie, Gooch, then clients appearing ever smaller as the wheel rises to invisibility above the smog umbrella that spreads from Insurance City over the outlying suburbs. Always a gray day, even when the sun shines.

"The numbers on this wheel, Rennie, tell you what prize you'll get. So, why don't you just step between our Vanna twins and put a New Spin on your life."

I grab the empty bucket seat an arm's length above my head. To get this thing to move, I'll have to yank hard enough to pull the weight of bodies over the top, then rely on their momentum to carry the wheel down and around, and hope it lands on a lucky number. Memory flash: the housing subsidy lottery degrading the contestants, each hoping the wheel lands on

the spot that makes them lucky, fools hysterical with hope. Suddenly I'm no different. Nowhere to turn. Surrounded by people. I grab the seat, pull my body weight down, land on my knees, spring back up to my feet, head nearly grazing the lumbering wheel. I've given it a good spin. It circles twice, then slows, rocks from 6 to 7, then back, wavers between 6 and 7 again, then sinks to a stop at:

YOUR NUMBER'S UP

Next thing I know, it's Rennie Goes Gothic: The sky blackens. The clouds thicken and lower. Leaves from the curb whirl in winds suddenly surging to hurricane speed. To my left, maple oak hickory and ash trees thrash the ground, whip back for the wind's next rush. The sound of an engine bursts through the wind's howl. I glance over my right shoulder. The pickup from the parking lot with DODGE white across its red tailgate backs toward me. No time to leap sideways or dive under the wheel. It crunches my back—"AAAAARRRRGGGHHH!"—into the lowest seat. Overhead the boxes wiggle, faces. . .Tercero, Prynne. . .leer at me. The Vannas pose on each side of me, layers of teeth set appropriately vacuous between the upward turns of Revlon ruby lips. My scream swallows the sky's last hint of light, the red of ultimate pain, leaving the shadowy echo of Wingnut's voice proclaiming:

"YOUR NUMBER'S UP!"

THE PITCH OF MY SCREAM

could be higher, I thought, even though its volume drowned out the carnival around me. If the pick-up had crushed me any harder, I might have screamed an operatic octave. Why isn't this guy pulling away from me? He must hear me. I reached my right arm back—good! I'm not quadriplegic—slapped his rear fender again and again with a flat hand, trying to make the loudest noise I could. Finally, the pressure eased from my back, my groin and my legs. During my body's downward slide, I wondered whether I'd be paraplegic. My left leg, the one crunched the hardest, landed first—and buckled. My right leg landed next, and I shifted my balance onto it. Good. I wasn't a cripple. But my left leg buckled again. I fell backward and landed in a tangle of cursing bodies. My pain was too severe for me to grasp what they were screaming. I hobbled toward an open space, but the pain grew sharper, my leg weaker.

A volunteer ambulance rounded the corner, red lights spinning. When the cop arrived, I told him I wanted to go to the ER; there was always the possibility of a hairline fracture. No sense taking chances with my back.

"You want me to call your wife?" the cop asked.

"I'm a bachelor—AH SHIIIIIT!"

"Your girlfriend?"

"Oh, JESUS CHRIST! I don't have one."

"Friends?"

"I'm a loner."

"You don't got a friend? You're gonna need someone to drive you home, mister."

"OUCH! GODDAMMIT!"

"You don't watch your language, you'll go downtown instead of the ER."

"I'm in PAIN!"

Before he said another word, the paramedics loaded me onto the stretcher.

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POLICE REPORT: ". . .verbally abused officer and refused all help . . ."

FREAK INJURED IN TRAFFIC SIDE SHOW

Call it accident, call it destiny. Either way it was a freak event. Rennie Shanach, the Evel Knievel of housing inspectors, pinned himself between a pick-up truck and a Ferris Wheel yesterday. Amid screams of concern and hysteria, the disgruntled State employee maneuvered his body to simulate a crippling accident which disrupted the grand re-opening of the Honeydip Donut Shop and Love Motel, where Governor A. Wright Wingnut and Commissioner Vanna Morph were leading a ribbon-cutting ceremony. The deranged employee emerged from the apparently staged accident with a "DODGE" imprint on his back and a "YOUR NUMBER'S UP" imprint on his chest as he dove into the circle of officials cutting the ribbon, knocking the Governor and the Commissioner to the ground in a tangled, writhing heap.

"An employee's disrupting such an important event is both unacceptable and

deplorable," Morph declared, straightening the wrinkles in the skirt of her pinstripe business suit while straddling the black thong underwear between her feet.

"Compromising the integrity of public officials cannot and will not be tolerated," Governor Wingnut assured the audience, while struggling without success to raise his zipper over his protruding member.

Wingnut and Morph were at the Honeydip Donut Shop and Love Motel to commemorate the facility, which offers minimum wage jobs to servers, bussers and house-keepers as part of Wingnut's Beat the Weak Welfare Reform campaign. Shanach, a twenty-two year State employee, apparently disagreed strongly with the Governor's campaign promise to end welfare as we know it.

"I can assure all of you that the employee in question will be dealt with summarily," the Commissioner told those in attendance at the ribbon cutting.

SEX SCANDAL ROCKS GOVERNOR'S WINGNUTS

Lead Official Blames Thrusting Pick-Up, Commissioner

"You're number's up!" the sign warned. But Governor A. Wright Wingnut ignored the sign at his own peril. Seconds later, the most popular Governor in state history found himself in a compromising position with Commissioner Vanna Morph, one of the prime architects of the Governor's popular Beat the Weak agenda for welfare reform.

"It was a pick-up move," the Governor told reporters gathered outside the Mauss Hardware Store, referring to a truck which, he said, while striking an off-duty State employee in a freak accident, latched onto the Governor's suit jacket and dragged him on top of the

Commissioner and an unnamed assistant, compromising his integrity in an alleged *menage a trois*.

"The Commissioner, unfortunately, is a very disturbed individual. She appears to be in the throes of an identity crisis," the Governor added.

Commissioner Morph denied the incident was a crisis. "It's simply Governor Wingnut's way of staying on top of things. He's stayed on top of me for his entire term."

Morph has vowed that she will make the State employee an example of the effectiveness of Governor Wingnut's Beat the Weak reform program.

THE SIX O’CLOCK NEWS

(Newsroom. A nondescript MALE ANCHOR sits next to an equally nondescript FEMALE ANCHOR with blonde hair.)

Male Anchor: Good evening. In a major administrative shake-up today, Governor A. Wright Wingnut called for and accepted the resignation of Human Services Commissioner Vanna Morph.

(Cut to film clip.)

Wingnut: Given the controversy this administration has experienced in recent days, and its impact on my credibility as moral leader of my Beat The Weak campaign, I have been forced to take drastic measures.

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NOOKE NAMED COMMISSIONER *Governor Appoints Gooch to Deputy Post*

In an unexpected move, Governor A. Wright Wingnut appointed Norbert Nooke Commissioner of the State Department of Human Services and Hefner Gooch Deputy Commissioner. The news of their appointments has further stirred the controversy which has besieged the Wingnut administration ever since the Governor allegedly found himself in a compromising position with key staff at the site of a freak accident.

“I use a lot of positions, but not a one of them is compromising,” said Commissioner Nooke of the direction the department will take under his administration. “When I say ‘Spread ‘em,

toots,’ I mean ‘Spread ‘em, toots.’”

The appointment, coming on the heels of former Commissioner Vanna Morph’s resignation, has aroused the fury of feminists across the state.

“I can’t believe that he would actually say something like that,” said Bettina Fredonia, the spokesperson for WOIC, the Women’s Organization of Insurance City.

“The Commissioner mis-spoke himself,” explained the new Deputy Commissioner, himself a former therapist who admits that, despite Morph’s departure, he still “keeps a hand in it.” Gooch said, “What he meant to say was ‘Spread ‘em, toots,’ in a tender, non-aggressive fashion.”

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whatever he meant the bastards fired me but except for the bread what have I got to go back to once I get my head together post-traumatic shock simple things so hard to do cross a street look both ways five times body trembles every step every drive to the chiropractor I get lost can't find the street pass it three times a week visions of trucks zooming through tunnels of darkening skies hickories thrashing stray papers whirling circles Ferris Wheel real or hallucination what matter the public scandal nothing I could see impact jarred me memory lines blurred still blurring a week after

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NOOKE LAUNCHES SAFE SEX CAMPAIGN

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with a photo of Wingnut bugging Françoise Virgenne bent over her walker, her crucifix dangling in the foreground. Nooke's slogan:

PRACTICE SAFE SEX. DO IT WITH YOUR GRANDMOTHER.

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GOVERNOR GETS NOOKE OUT OF OFFICE *Dismissal Completes Lengthy Agency Reorganization*

Governor A. Wright Wingnut, his administration embattled by improprieties both real and imagined, today fired Human Services Commissioner Norbert Nooke and Deputy Commissioner Hefner Gooch. "My staff must not project even

the image of impropriety," he said, adding that he could never condone the public education campaign that not only used but smeared his public image without his authorization. In an unprecedented move, he appointed a rotating administration of

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Tercero Prynné Garvey thrown in for cameos I can't believe it years of confusion established as standard operating policy his 70% approval rating I can't don fedora and trenchcoat to earn my daily bread except the union's hired a lawyer to fight the agency's decision and help get

EMPLOYEE REINSTATED, WITHDRAWS SUIT

Rennie Shanach was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Shanach, a State employee terminated by former Commissioner Vanna Morph, was on his way to the hardware store one Saturday when fate interrupted his plan to refinish a family heirloom. A freak accident not only injured him, but attracted the attention of a nearby reporter to the presence of Morph and Governor A. Wright Wingnut, who were leaving a nearby love motel.

"I needed eye witnesses. Instead, they fired me," Shanach said, after winning his union grievance for unlawful termination. "I wasn't even working that day."

Wingnut asserted that State employees are always working, in the sense that they represent the government, even on their days off.

"If that's true, then I should get paid twenty-four /seven," Shanach said.

"There's some question as to whether Shanach works at all," the Governor responded.

"If you believe what the Governor says, then how can I be fired for doing something I wasn't doing in the first place?" Shanach retorted.

Union officials insisted that regardless of the Governor's opinions regarding State employees as full-time representatives of the State or Shanach's job performance, Shanach was entitled by union contract to receive a weekend break from representing the State.

Governor Wingnut denied that the controversy caused by the motel incident was a factor in Shanach's termination or in his reinstatement. Morph, the former Commissioner now undergoing residential treatment for an alleged sexual addiction problem, was not available to comment on the matter.

RELAX!

The show's over or close enough for government work, as they say. Living and fictional realities end, arbitrary as the points may be. No matter how many fake vaudeville exits, the hook comes sooner or later. I'm back where I want to be: on the road away from the rotating commissioners, a wild-eyed bureaucrat abusing company time to live the most important part of his life on the run: writing, reciting into micro cassette recorders, sneaking words into computers on company time. What do they care? I'm out of their hair. They've got their own share of headaches. I've achieved resolution simply through recognizing its lack — even if it took a pick-up truck to drive it home.

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WHY SHOULD FICTION BE ANY MORE REAL THAN A LIFE THAT SEEMS UNREAL WHEN YOU'RE LIVING IT? THE ACT OF PERCEPTION IS AN ACT THAT PERCEIVES ITS PERCEIVING AS REAL. BECAUSE IT IS A CONTINUOUS PROCESS, ITS FUNCTION WILL BE PERCEIVED AS CONTINUOUS. THE END OF WHAT IS PERCEIVED IS ONLY AN END TO THE PERCEIVER. WHAT IS PERCEIVED CONTINUES INDEFINITELY THROUGH OTHER PERCEIVERS, A PROCESS TERMINATED ONLY BY THEIR ABSENCE.

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rocking, rolling, thrusting, poling the soft wet quim, sliding in, sliding out, riding without worrying: no Commissioner to pull me into her sex= power machinations, nothing but a new lady (no relation to work) and me sliding out, pushing in, thrusting away the residual lower back pain from the accident with the glide inside. Memories flicker, spice the action, her leg curving around me hot as the flame tattoo on Cassandra's leg, no bondage on the imagined tracks, just the ride, the turnover, new flame on top grinning down at me, huge dugs flailing my face. My tongue flicks her nipples. She raises herself to the tip of my pole, glides down oh so slowly oh oh oh up again, down again, up again, down, then I turn her around

doggie style, slow glide, pick up speed pick up force till she's head down on the pillow face turned to the side her funky come smell curling under my nose moaning then me back on top, nothing but sensation the building sensation rising swelling rising feeling about to burst about to oh my god yes so close so close it's coming it's coming there it is three waves throbbing six a drowsy feeling falls over me like a shadow curtain sunset and I relax

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ARE YOU POWERLESS

IN THE FACE OF EXISTENTIAL REALITY?

THERE'S HOPE.

JUST DIAL

1-800-FICTION

(Ask for Rennie)

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The chiropractor suggested I limit my traveling to local stops for a few weeks. So, I've scheduled an inspection close to home: a familiar street though I've never traveled to this end or near-ending. The trees seem taller here, the sidewalks shadier. The houses look larger, must be old mansions chopped into apartments, just like the Victorians in the state's eastern boondocks. Regardless, I've got to say very nice place as far as subsidized housing goes. I pull to the curb before entering, look over the appointment letter. Typical: the listing didn't specify the apartment number. I suppose I'll have to knock on every door.

"She's expecting you," the guard says at the gate, a knowing grin breaking his stern countenance.

The long driveway winds around a half-circle to a brick porch, massive Doric columns, oak front door, skull-sized brass knocker—a weapon in the wrong hands. The door opens on a jaded servant type. . .tall, formal, austere. . .and a living room the size of an auditorium, winding wood staircase just to the right.

"Hello. I'm here to inspect an apartment located at this address."

"There are no apartments here, sir."

"There must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake, sir. This is the Governor's Mansion."

I show him the appointment letter. "This is the address I was given." Interesting...why would I inspect the Governor's mansion? He's supposed to get free rent among the other perks and bribes that offset his modest salary. He's grabbing up a housing subsidy too? The old bureaucrat in me smells something fishy wafting down the staircase under the servant's discreetly sniffing nose. Then the voice follows, riding its familiar Brush Script MT font:

"Hello, Rennie."