

LOVED BY MILLIONS

BY

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Introduction

Why should you read these stories?

It's a fair question. And you deserve an answer because time is precious, and things are moving fast.

Our visual field has been diced into quick cuts and our auditory landscape dissolved into a scree of sound bytes, so where do I get off asking you to sit down and read stories?

It's because you need to. We need to.

Everyday, we wake up and all we do, whether we are aware of it or not, is try to make sense of life, of planned and unplanned stuff that happens, of dreams that may or may not come true. It's the fabric of our lives.

But the arc, the sheer macro – scope of the story which is our life, is too big to get our mind around. So, we try to see it in micro – scope, in bite sized pieces, in stories that we can grasp. And maybe if we begin to understand the little stories that unfold in our lives, we may be able to stitch all of them together by the end and we will have a big story quilt, and we will be able to see more of the fabric that our life has become.

Or maybe not. But we keep trying. We've always needed to hear the tale, over and over, like a mantra, like a prayer, because in the telling and the re -telling, story and reality merge, and the imagined informs the real:

“Please, Gor, (chomp, chomp)... tell us again how you snuck up on the Mastodon and stuck it ‘till it fell over.”

Or:

“Please, Daddy, I'm not tired. Tell me a story.”

And, here's mine:

Once upon a time, there was a guy who found himself in trouble in his life and he didn't know how it happened or how he was gonna get out of it, and for some reason he started writing stories in the morning, and he found he couldn't stop. There, I've said it.

One more thing before I shut up and let the stories take over. It's this:

Everything I am is in these. And I give them to you from the bottom of my heart because I love you, out there. You're my kind, and I love you very much.

Future Boy Meets Beethoven

“Please, can you work faster? The guy who sold me this thing told me there’s a limited window and I’ve got to hit it or won’t work.”

The engineer flipped his face plate up. .

“Window? What window?”

“Jerry, please, keep working and I’ll take you through it.”

He flips the plate back down, fires up the acetylene torch, and welds the last Plexiglas panel onto the cab of the timeship, which, I couldn’t help thinking, looked like George Jetson’s car in the cartoon. I could sing the theme song to this day: “His boy, Elroy!!”

“This is what I know, Jerry. Dr. Neal DeGrasse Tyson, who holds the Astrophysics chair at Princeton and is the Director of the Hayden Planetarium, told me I have five hours, twenty two minutes and forty three seconds back in 1824. That’s it. If I stay any longer, I’ll wind up waiting tables at a nineteenth century Hofbrau in Vienna till my teeth fall out, and judging from the state of dentistry at that time, that could happen quickly.

So, Jerry, will this thing hold together as it get buffeted by the winds of time travel?”

“How could I possibly know that? If you took it for a spin on the L.I.E., it could probably get you to Montauk safely, I guess. Other than that,”

He poked at the voluminous schematic he was working from.

“Other than that, we just say Mazel Tov, my friend, and hope for the best.”

I put on the biker's helmet I bought. Dr. Tyson hadn't mentioned a helmet, but I thought it looked appropriate, anyway. I climbed into the Jetson car.

I flipped the switch and everything goes swirley. Felt like Rod Taylor in "The Time Machine."

I love the scene where he's sitting in the machine and time is flipping crazily ahead. But he's still right there in his front parlor as centuries are going by. He's looking at the clothes store mannequin in the shop window across the street. One minute he's amused by the rapidly changing trends in fashion that are represented by her panoply of shifting outfits. Next thing you know, he's walled up in a subterranean tomb 'cause western civilization collapsed in 2458.

He ends up stumbling back into his 19th century dining room after surviving eight centuries of time travel and the Morlocks trying to rip him apart. His dinner party from the night before is still going strong. First thing, he asks Sebastian Cabot for a drink. Love that movie.

So now, I'm doing it.

Thing jolts to a halt.

Misty street at night. Pop the Plexiglas hood. Thank you Jerry, it held together.

I hop out. I am on the Frederickstrasse in Vienna in 1824. Pungent smell of lilac from the park across the street mixed with the reek of human waste that flows by in the open trench running down the other side.

. Welcome to the nineteenth century, where the germ theory won't be taken seriously for eighty years.

I find my way to the doorstep of Beethoven's summer residence in Heligenstad. Then, it was in the country. Now, Vienna has grown up around it, but this is then, not now.

How often do you get to say that?

I had done my homework. I knew he'd be working on the first draft of the ninth symphony. The clock face in the street, just discernable through the mist, said it was two in the morning.

I pushed open the door. I bounded up the stairs. My shoes made exactly the sound I thought they would make as I bounded up them countless times in the virtual tour I devised through web photos of the place on my home computer. I felt eerily at home and also like an intruder, which, let's face it, I was.

I stood outside his door. I fell to my knees when I realized what I was listening to. He was banging out the initial sketches of "the Ode to Joy" There were several notes in the second and third measures that were still "wrong". Oh, well, he would correct that, soon. The piece wouldn't premiere until next year.

You cannot imagine how loud the piano was. He was deaf. He commissioned his keyboards from Broadbent and beat the heck out of them. The sounding boards were built like the hulls of ships. You could hear this thing from the park down the block. Forget the neighbors, he was keeping the bums on the benches awake.

Then, another sound. An angry thumping coming up from the apartment below. And yelling. "Shut up.. For God's sake stop that or I'll call the authorities , and this time I mean it."

The guy that lived in the apartment underneath Beethoven was banging on his ceiling with a broomstick. He probably hadn't slept in weeks. When Beethoven was in work mode, time did not exist. The muse spoke most directly to him at two AM.. The dust of the workaday world had long settled. The air was cleared of the vibes of the hustle bustle of Vienna. This was his time to pick up the signals that dropped down into his brain from the other side.

Beethoven roared with laughter, banged on the floor back at him.. My nineteenth century German wasn't subtle enough to pick out the nuances of

the curses he hurled down at his neighbor but some things don't need to be translated.

When the banging stopped, I knocked on the door. No sense in letting him return to work and interrupting him. He was going to be irate enough as it was. Here goes.

Wooden shoe heels coming across his floor toward the door. Door flies open. There he is.

Whoa. No lithograph or life mask had been able to capture how bad his skin was, pocked from an early childhood bout with typhus.

His hair was not coifed in the fluffy Rock Star do that graces his busts. It looked like someone dumped something on it a few days ago.

The smell. If you want to imagine the smell of rancid 19th century Viennese hygiene, go to the bowery, roust a bum out of his Maytag box, and give him a hug while inhaling deeply. Something like that.

He regarded me with unreserved suspicion:

"I have no money. Go away."

His first words to me, historic, I kid you not.

"Maestro, I am not here to collect money. I have come from the future."

As I say, my German is not the greatest. I may have said "future" or "time ahead of now" which is less elegant, certainly, and confusing, at the very least.

Door doesn't get slammed in my face.

He repeats it to me, which is good, 'cause it lets me know I said what I'd hope to say. The future.

Then he tells me that he really has no money, but at some future time, he will make good on all his debts. And then he closes the door in my face.

I hear him walking back to the piano. He starts back on the “Ode to Joy.”

Time and tide and time travel and the rising tide that will float me back to my time all will wait for no man, my friend. I get up the nerve and open the door and walk in.

He doesn't look up from the piano. It's not 'cause he doesn't mind me being here. It because he's deaf as a post and doesn't know I'm here. I use this to my advantage.

I sneak around his apartment. I look at his bookshelf, lined with his handwritten, autographed scores of his symphonies. I take out a Mylar bag from inside my coat and begin to steal as many of them as I can, glancing furtively over my shoulder at Maestro at the piano.

Hey, I got kids in college. Just one of these on E bay is a house in Malibu and wall to wall strippers. Shut up. What would you do? And don't lie.

I must have made noise and he turns around. I pretend to be admiring a nearby bust of Corelli.

“Didn't I tell you,,,”

“Maestro, it's not the money. I'm really from the future. Come, I'll show you.”

He allows me to lead him to the open window. The April breeze is coming up the Fredrickstrasse, bringing with it all the conflicted fragrances I spoke of, previously.

I point to the Jetson car, which hums and hovers three inches off the ground at the hitching post in front of the building., content as a pony with a bag of oats. Maestro smirks and laughs:

“I know Rolph must have put you up to this, so now I'll play along so he won't think I'm a bad sport. Last month, it was a young lady knocking

on my door swearing to be the Virgin Mary. He sent her. That actually worked out very well. So, Mr. Future Man, tell me what you want.”

I flipped out a yellow legal pad with questions on it. It had been compiled, clandestinely, by scholars and eggheads from all over the world who had burning questions for Beethoven: Apocrypha, errors, inconsistencies, intangible and probable mistakes in his music that must, simply must be corrected for humanity and posterity. And I’m just the guy to do it.

I look at question number one:

“Why did you modulate to a Neapolitan Sixth chord in the third measure of the second movement of Piano Sonata 13? It would have been far more idiomatically correct to go the secondary dominant and make a transition to the relative minor at that point.”

“How many of these questions do you have?”

“One hundred and twenty seven.”

“Then we’ll need a drink.”

We install ourselves in an oaken booth in the tavern. Did you know you have to pay for your candles or you sit in the dark? Dig that. You pay more for the big candles, or you pay a few kronig for the short candles and hope it’s a brief meeting.

After three draughts of whatever it was, I was so looped that I stopped worrying about what diseases I was gonna contract from the pewter mug I sipped from that clearly had not been washed since Bach’s high school graduation party. By the third drink, we were pals. His beefy, stinky arm was around my shoulder:

“Future man... you don’t mind if I call you future man, I don’t want you to tell Rolf I was a spoil sport. I can take a joke and give one out, too.”

He burst into phlegm laced laughter and poked me in the ribs with a middle digit that felt like a billy club. You build up a lot of strength banging on pianos built like boats, I guess.

“So, future boy. I’ll play along. But before I answer your questions, I’ll ask you a couple. Ready?”

I nodded. Fair was fair.

“How far ahead in the future do you come from?”

“2009. From America in 2009”

His eyebrows didn’t even go up.

“Next question. Has my music, any of it...” He leaned in and the billy club poked at me again. “Has any of it survived the test of time, Future boy?”

I extracted myself from his grasp. If I was going to answer for generations upon generations, I thought it best to assume some kind of dignity, drunk though I was.

“Maestro, I’ll say this as clearly as I can, though you’re drunker than me and you won’t remember it in the morning, which is probably for the best, in some way.

Maestro Beethoven., no one, no one can count or measure the lives you have changed, the hope you have engendered, the courage you have inspired, or the faith you have instilled throughout the long years that lay ahead, with your music. All your music.

Though, we may be missing some pieces. And, by the way, I stole some from your shelves tonight..”

“Yes, I saw you. I was going to get to that.”

He pointed to the mylar bag by my side.

I am slurring through my tears at this point. My arm is around his shoulder, now.

“Yeah, I may have stolen some of your shit, man....”

Whoa. Who do you think you’re talking to? When did you and Beethoven turn into Cheech and Chong, Rob? I leaned in closer. I didn’t care how he smelled. He smelled like Beethoven.

“....may have lifted some of your shit, man, but, it’s all in a good cause. All in a good cause. History, posterity, kids in college. The ex.... bitchin at me. You have no idea.”

“Yes, the only wise decision I made was to remain single. My only attachment was to my nephew, and look at how that turned out.”

I made an inebriated, if ill advised decision.

“That’s it. Luddy, you don’t mind if I call you Luddy, you’re comin’ back with me. You wanna be a Rock Star. Shit. You are. You are the original rock star. I got five minutes to hit the window or I’m stuck here. What do you say?”

“Even for Rolf, I think I have been generous in allowing this fiction to proceed as far as it has. I wish you all the best, Future Boy.”

He walked away. But turned back over his shoulder.

“So, where do they find you actors? The Hungarian theater probably, which is populated by whores”

He roared with laughter and walked into the street.

I followed him and caught him thirty feet away from the Jetson car.

God help me.

“Hey, Luddy!!!”

He turned and I hit him full in the face with the pepper spray.

I dragged him toward the car, kicking, screaming, deaf and now temporarily blind, his stupid wooden shoes scuffling on the pavement. Looked at my watch. I had one minute left before the window sucked me back into the future.

Screw the manuscripts on Ebay. I was gonna come back with the real article. Get him a gig with Cirque de Soleil or something.

So, there I was. I was so drunk, I was actually trying to stuff an enraged Beethoven into the cab of the Jetson car when it started beeping. The engineer told me that was it, last call for the future. In thirty seconds I was on the bus or left behind here in Open Sewer World.

I saw it wasn't gonna work. I yanked Beethoven outa the cab. He collapsed on the wet pavement in a drunken cursing heap

I jumped into the cockpit and hit "Return" when it lit up.

Last thing I remember, Beethoven was receding in my view, sitting on the cobblestone street in the damp wee hours of the Viennese morning, flipping me the bird as the Jetson car wafted me into the misty future. And he had managed to grab my bag full of scores, damn it.

Who knew they had the one finger salute back then? Live and learn.

Strictly Taboo

What was it Jimmy Cagney called out to the heavens just before he blew himself up at that oil refinery in “White Heat”? Oh, yeah.

Harry flicked his cigarette over the edge and watched it float part of the way down to Broadway. He regarded the sun setting over New Jersey across the Hudson. He felt the wind flap through the pants of his overalls, which were two sizes too big, but that’s what they gave him. He spoke aloud, to no one.

“Top a the world, Ma.”

Would this qualify as irony? It was 1957. He had been aching to work in the Brill Building his whole life, and now here he was, having a smoke on the roof before beginning his first shift. He gave a bitter laugh and thought back to the tense conversation yesterday that landed him this plum assignment.

“No. No. Please, I can’t work there. Please put me anywhere but there.”

The manager of the Acme Janitorial Service glanced up from his clipboard and regarded him with a funny look and not funny ha ha.. Harry didn’t want to talk himself out of a job. What would he tell Marge and Bobby? It would make four jobs in five months he had lost.

“Harry, it’s all I got right now. It’s the night shift at the Brill Building or you just come back next month.”

“I can’t afford to lay off a month.”

“So? What the problem, anyway? A floor is a floor. A mop is a mop, whether you’re at the Brill Building or the Taj Mahal, right?”

“No, you don’t understand. The Brill Building has the studios of all the most successful composers in the country, Rogers, Porter, Cohan, Kern, the Gershwins, for heaven’s sake. They all had offices, there.”

The guy just looked at him. It was like talking to a wall.

“And, it’s like I’ve been telling you. I was a composer,...am a composer...uh, You might remember one of my hits, like back in ’42, “Moonlight Reverie?”

The manager’s face lit up.

“Oh, yeah, I love that song, “Moonlight Serenade.”

“No, that’s a different song.”

“Oh...”

How demeaning. What had happened to him?....to the promise he once showed. He walked out of the Janitorial Service office and slogged across West 3rd street on his way to his apartment in the Bowery. The October wind was blowing ‘cross town off the East River. Felt like your face was being stuck with a little ice pick every thirty seconds.

He tried to recall the last time he actually composed something. Oh, yeah. Last year. Christmas day. Bobby was in the next room playing the little drum he had given him. Crappy little thing. Got it at Woolworth. Kid thought it was the best thing in the world. Rat a tat tat. Rat a tat tat. Gave him the idea for the rhythm, though. Then he got Henry and Katherine to finish the lyrics. Went exactly nowhere, like everything else.

He walked down to the eighth floor and got the polishing machine out of the utility closet. He polished his way around the corner. He glanced up occasionally at the gold embossed lettering on the pebbled glass doors of the offices.

NORTHERN MUSIC

Hmm. Henry Mancini and Johnny Mercer

BANTAM MUSIC

Jeez. Gus Kahn and Isham Jones. Had a huge hit in 1924 with “It Had to be You.”

He turned the corner. Lights were on in the office at the end of the hall.

NOTABLE MUSIC

Cy Coleman.

Filtered through the hum of the polisher, Harry could hear singing and piano playing coming through the door. He polished closer and closer to it.

He flipped the toggle switch and the polisher whirred and quit. He recognized Cy’s cracked baritone, which was joined sporadically by a woman’s voice.

“Those fingers in my hair...”

“Cy, what rhymes with hair? Share? Dare?”

“You’re the lyricist, Carol, you tell me. How about stare, like she’s staring at him in a hypnotic, you know, like a hypnotic seductive way?”

Carol piped up excitedly.

“that come hither stare... That cool come hither stare.”

“Not cool. Need to find a better, one syllable word that means cool but it should be more, you know, like we said, seductive. That’s the mood we’re going for, here.”

He heard a piano bench scraping as it was pushed back. In a panic, George hit the toggle switch and began frantically polishing his way down the hall.

He took the elevator down to seven and stopped. He sat on the floor. It was midnight. He was alone. He felt dirty, creepy, like a voyeur who had been peeping at keyholes at two people making love. Music was so intimate, the composition process was so intimate, that that's sort of what he had been doing.

He began his shift the next night at 11:00 PM, once again. He stayed away from the eighth floor. But the following night, curiosity got the better of him.

He felt like a thief, a pervert, as he polished his way down the hall on 8. The light was on at NOTABLE MUSIC. Cy was croaking his way through what must be the bridge or the release of the song they were working on:

"When you arouse the need in me..."

Which was answered by Carol.

"Deedly deedly deedly dee. Yes indeedy, weedy."

Cy laughed.

"Weedy? Is weedy even a word, honey?"

She laughed back.

"You know how I do this. It's a dummy, a place holder until the right word comes along".

It's true. Twenty years later, Paul McCartney sang a song he had written to friends for a whole year with dummy lyrics before the right words came along. Finally, he changed "Scrambled Eggs" to "Yesterday."

But this was 1957 and Cy and Carol Leigh were writing a song that would become a classic, one that would make them both rich, only it almost didn't work out that way.

Harry stewed and fumed and sat up in bed, mulling over what he had in mind to do. He didn't say anything to Marge, but she knew him well enough to know that he'd tell her eventually, or it would just go away, one of the two.

He had analyzed the melody Coleman was writing in his mind, over and over. Simple, almost moronically simple progression in F. He had tried to tell himself the song was a turkey, one that would never fly out of the doors of the Brill Building.

"Those fingers in my hair. That sly, come hither stare." The melody was just D D E F F, like some five year old kid was banging out the next note that is laid out on the keyboard. But he finally had to admit it, there was stupid simple and there was genius simple. This was the latter. Who was he kidding? It was gonna be a smash. It was "Over the Rainbow" without the bluebirds. It was "Begin the Beguine" without the palm trees.

He was so jealous, he could almost feel green bile coming up his esophagus when he thought of how much money Coleman was gonna make on that damn song. What makes him so special? How does he get all the luck and Harry Simeone gets to mop up after him, literally, while his kid shivers through another winter in that rat trap in the Bowery. Screw that. It's time to make your own luck, Harry.

The next night, he worked his way down the hall on 8. There was the light. He flicked off the machine outside the door. He listened at the keyhole, like a wretch, like a thief in the night. But he'd gone beyond caring. He took the Wollensack tape recorder out of the canvas bag slung over his shoulder. He turned it on and sat there for a half hour. Then, he slipped it back into the bag and left. He was too scared to even turn it off. It made a loud click when you did that.

Marge and Bobby were asleep when he got home. He closed the door to the bathroom behind him and turned on the Wollensack.

“.....and I’ve got no defense for it.
The heat is too intense for it.
What good would common sense for it do?”

Clever, Carol. And the hook was a killer.

“Cause it’s witchcraft, wicked witchcraft
and although I know it’s strictly taboo.....”

Like every perfect popular song, it drew you into a special little world for three minutes, a private place with a mood that was so real, you could touch it. You could smell it. Yeah, and now he was stealing it.

There were no shortage of scurrilous publishers, lawyers and agents out there. This sort of thing happens all the time. He would get it out there, make a quick buck and then weather the storm when Coleman’s people went ballistic. The truth would come out, of course, and his name would be mud in the business, but he would have already made a pile. And what was his name in the business, now? It wasn’t exactly hanging from the lips of Mr. and Mrs. America as they browsed the racks of sheet music and records. All he wanted was to get his kid outa this place. Was that so terrible?

He hung up the phone and wrote down the address. He copied out the piece pretty neatly. He had to pour himself one, though, before he signed his name in the upper right hand corner. Witchcraft. More irony? What kind of curse was going to devolve onto his head from this little stunt, Harry old bean, old sot? No, don’t go there.

Overslept and didn’t have time to get to the Post Office before work. At least he was off the graveyard shift now. Got the polisher out of the closet and cranked it up at 3:00 P.M. He’s on the fifth floor, polishing his way toward the brass opening, the pneumatic U. S. mail slot that sucks your letter down to the mail room with a whoosh.

He’s standing over the slot, pulls out the manila envelope from under his overalls. He’s reaching out to the slot. It’s five inches away. This is it.

Don't get confused about what you are doing, now. Theft and fraud. You drop this thing down that tube and that's it, pal. He closed his eyes. He remembered telling Bobby his bedtime story last night and tucking him in. Kid was sleeping next to a window with cardboard in it because the landlord wouldn't pay for a new one. That's all it took. He reached out and...

"Harry! Harry for God's sake, where have you been?"

It was Henry Onorati. Jeez. Hadn't seen him in months.

"Henry, old bean. How's it goin? I..."

"Harry, did you fall off the face of the earth? We been tryin' to reach you for a month and a half. Your phone..."

"Uh, yeah. Little misunderstanding with Ma Bell. That'll all be..."

"Harry, I just came out of a meeting with EMI Mills and International Korwin. Do you have any idea what's going on...what happening with your song?"

Harry blinked twice. He shook his head. What song?

On Christmas Eve, the Simeone family, sporting their new winter coats, went shopping at Macy's. As they walked in the store, Bing Crosby's recording of Harry's song played continuously on the loudspeakers. It poured out onto 34th Street and 7th Avenue.

On December 18th, he had received a check for \$75,000 from Korwin International. By Christmas of 1968, the publishing and mechanical royalties for his song, along with the income from forty eight cover versions of it, had netted him \$2.5 million dollars.

Thereafter, the family would always look forward to Macy's at Christmastime, to seeing the window diorama with the mechanical puppets

acting out the song. There were always a bunch of kids there, peering into the window, their eyes wide, hearing it for the first time. It goes like this:

“Come, they told mepa rum pum pum pum
our new born King to see,... pa rum pum pum

our finest gifts we bring...
to lay before the king.....

Then, he smiled at me..... pa rum pump um pum
me and my drum”

A Short Essay on a Minor Historical Figure

“James, me lad, how are we today?”

The boy jumped up from his stool and went behind the stage manager’s desk to the mailboxes. He took a manila envelope out of a cubbyhole where the stage manager kept the fellow’s mail.

“Fine sir, thanks for asking. Some mail for you sir.”

“Good. I had hoped there would be.”

The actor tossed a coin to the boy, retrieved his mail, and left.

James picked up his school tablet with its swirling, marbled cardboard cover, fished out the nub of a pencil from his back pocket and scratched his head with it, in consternation. This week’s assignment from his history teacher Mr. Andrews was a puzzlement, to be sure.

As the snow melted into the muddy spring of 1865, James’s father thought it might be good for the boy to experience the responsibility of holding down an after school job, so he pulled some strings and here he was, all of sixteen and gainfully employed as the backstage boy at a theatre in downtown Washington, in the District of Columbia.

He fetched food and drinks for the actors, announced visitors, ran up and downstairs with costume pieces from the shop in the basement, and generally did whatever was required.

He liked the job. He liked the actors. They seemed so much grander than ordinary people, and they were nice to him.

It was five o’clock and there was a lull before the evening performance. The play had been running for two weeks and he didn’t really see what was good about it. The audience laughed a lot, but James didn’t

get it, something about two ladies trying to marry the same man. He thought it was silly.

He looked down at his exercise book. He had gotten a “A” on last week’s assignment. Mr. Andrews was pleased that James had correctly identified the three types of Greek columns used in the construction of the Parthenon: Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian.

But, James frowned as he considered this week’s topic, which he had copied exactly from the blackboard as Mr. Andrews chalked it out, yesterday:

“Write a short essay on a minor historical figure::

Examine an historical event and consider how its outcome might have changed had someone who was there, and who played a minor role, acted differently in some way. For example, what would have happened if Napoleon’s valet had provided him with an effective tonic for his stomach distress at the battle of Waterloo?”

James thought he might find something useful in the campaigns of General Washington, so he was up late in the public library, but could find nothing. The problem was, if a character was minor enough to have contributed little to the outcome of an event, his actions, or inactions, were not very well documented.

His ruminations were interrupted by the bustle of actors arriving for the evening performance which was sold out, and soon enough James was flying up and downstairs doing a million things at once.

The show began promptly at eight and, before long, the muffled sounds of the audience’s laughter drifted out to him as he sat on his stool, backstage. But the real laughs would come until after intermission, at around ten o’clock, in Act III, scene II, which was the climax and seemed to be the funniest. He still didn’t get it, though.

At seven o'clock, the actor who had picked up his mail earlier, and whose name James forgot though he knew he must be famous, came back and called him over. His eyes were funny. He had liquor on his breath. James knew what it was 'cause his uncle Joseph smelled like that and his father would scold him for being drunk.

"James, me lad, here's a dollar. I have a special job for you. Are you capable of doing a special job?"

"Yes, sir, of course, sir."

James was instructed to stand in the alley at nine o'clock and to hold the reins to the actor's horse, to stand there and wait for him to return, and not to be dissuaded or distracted in this task by anything. James agreed. A dollar was a lot of money.

The actor left. When he returned at nine, James went outside and was handed the reins to the horse, who was already lathered about the neck and forequarters.

The actor didn't speak to him, but went inside the stage door. James waited, holding the reins and making some notes in his exercise book under the dim glow of the gaslight which hung over the stage door. Maybe he could find some character who was close to Julius Caesar, like a servant or a captain of his guard.

At ten o'clock, he could hear the laughter at the climax of Act III, scene II. Then, he heard shouting coming from inside the theater.

The actor rushed out of the stage door. He was limping and his shirt was torn. He seemed to be looking at something far away.

He knocked James Burrows to the ground and, grabbing the reins, galloped down the cobblestone alley.

A light rain had begun by seven o'clock the next morning as James joined the crowd outside Petersen's boarding house, across the street from the theatre. When the man came out at 7:30 and made his announcement, James cried. He stood in the rain and cried, and he didn't care if anyone thought he was being a baby.

The Mary Lincoln Coterie

At four in the afternoon on a Saturday, twenty two women in twenty two dressing rooms all over Illinois began an identical ritual. They slipped out of their everyday lives and transformed themselves into Mary Todd Lincoln.

They belonged to The Coterie, a group of historical re-enactors who performed and lectured as Mrs. Lincoln. To say they were fastidious in their adherence to the details, the rigors involved in bringing her to life would be pale. They were, all of them, obsessed with achieving pure authenticity, especially today.

Because tonight was the night of the Annual 1858 Commemorative Ball and this year, 2005, marked the one hundred and fortieth anniversary of the death of Mr. Lincoln.

The eminent Civil War historian Dr. Allison Magnus would be at the head table on the raised dais here in Springfield. For the ladies of the Coterie, Dr. Magnus was a Rock Star, a Goddess. Her book: *Camp Follower: A Woman's View of the Civil War*, was the template, the Rosetta Stone for those who were compelled to understand the life of Mrs. Lincoln.

Her mission tonight in Springfield: to select one lady to portray Mrs. Lincoln in a White House ceremony commemorating Mr. Lincoln's life, which would be televised next month from Washington.

So, after tonight, there would be one nationally known Mrs. Lincoln re-enactor and a bunch of also rans. Yes, the ladies began their transformative process in deadly earnest.

Surrounded by their respective attendants, each put on her corset, bodice, petticoat, hoop skirt, and then the dress, reveling in each gesture like matadors donning a suit of light.

As the layers of antique clothing enveloped them like a cocoon, each felt her own identity quietly slip to the back of her awareness, and there began to emerge Mary Lincoln, or, at least, what they imagined it was like to be Mary Lincoln. It was like “method acting”, you become the part.

For many of these ladies, whose lives were less than wonderful, lives inundated with the petty issues of suburban existence, this process of melting into their beloved alter ego was a like a warm bath, like a spa day.

Each had labored over the construction of her dress to make it exactly like one Mary herself might have worn. Authenticity, though, is illusive and hard to achieve. Ever try walking into a fabric store and ordering a whale bone stay for a corset? Some of these ladies would do very surprising things to be perfect, to be more perfect than their rivals.

And, when it comes to making your dress stand out, the devil is in the details. There was, for example, the question of whether or not to adorn the dress with scallops. And, ironically, it would be scallops that would cause the downfall of most of them that night, though they didn't know it as they preened before their mirrors that afternoon.

Scallops were ornaments, little half circles of gathered fabric that added a lovely touch to the garment. But, out of twenty two ladies, only seven knew that scallops were not invented until 1863, and this was the 1858 Ball. Scallops were inauthentic.

That night, as the Springfield Drum and Bugle Corps played a light gallop, the ladies drifted past Dr. Magnus on the arms of their military escorts as she sat ensconced on the high dais at the front of the hall.

She smiled and nodded at each in turn as they performed their curtsies.

How could they know that she was crossing out their names in the program book she kept on her lap under the table, crossing out each one who wafted by in an anachronistic, scallop bedecked frock? Just five minutes into the opening cotillion and only a few remained in the running.

Then again, it almost didn't matter, since they all knew it would come down to the four reigning queens of Mrs. Lincoln, the ones who had earned nicknames, badges of honor.

They were the best. They embodied authenticity: "Queenie", "Princess Not Donna", and the current rivals for the top spot, "Grand Dame" who, at the age of sixty five, had been at the top of the heap for ten years, and, lastly, the twenty five year old gorgeous up and comer "Molly", whom they all loved, and so they gave her that special name. It was the term of endearment bestowed upon the real Mrs. Lincoln by her doting husband.

Molly seemed to be the very embodiment of Mary Todd in the years during which she and Mr. Lincoln were courting. Her presentation of that sweet period brought them all to tears each time she did it.

And she seemed unstoppable, tonight. Young though she was, they all knew that her research into period dress and deportment was non-pareil, without peer. Entering into tonight's competition, Molly was without flaws. She would not beat herself. Someone would have to beat her. Yes, it seemed like the end of the reign of the venerable Grand Dame. Dame was getting tired, and it was whispered that she was slipping.

The two circled each other warily in wide arcs throughout the night, each surrounded by their adherents, most of whom had fallen prey to the scallop faux pas, the revelation of which, by now, had circulated the room.

Some of them had fled to the ladies lounge and ripped the horrid little things off their dresses with their teeth through bitter tears, hoping somehow that Dr. Magnus hadn't noticed them on her. Now, knowing they were out of the competition, they signaled their allegiance to the remaining few by huddling close to them around the punchbowl and on the dance floor.

As the evening drew to a close, it was time for the last dance. The ladies withdrew their parasols from their bags like knights drawing swords. The parasol was the crowning accoutrement. It could make or break an ensemble as it was displayed in the Grand Parade.

Grand Dame (which they pronounced: Grand Dahm) headed for the ladies' lounge. With a nod to her retinue, Molly did the same. A minute later, two other ladies stood outside the door, fanning themselves and

drinking punch from little glass cups. They were the seconds, the aides de camp of the divas who had stepped inside. No one was getting past them. Inside, they knew, a high level meeting was taking place. It was the Potsdam Conference of Mrs. Lincoln.

The Grand Dame was at the lounge's right hand sink and mirror powdering her nose when Molly approached. Dame had placed her parasol on the counter to the left. Molly stood to her left in front of the adjacent mirror and sink. She glanced down at Dame's lace parasol and gave a little gasp.

Suppressing a smile, she quickly regained her composure. She took out an antique tortoiseshell make up case. The Dame stole a look to her left. Damn. It was perfect. Where did she get that? Molly looked straight ahead into the mirror as she said:

"Ethel, you know that it's down to the two of us now, don't you?"

The Dame also stared straight ahead as she touched up her makeup and spoke, carefully measuring her words:

"Shame, isn't it, about "Queenie's" dress?"

Queenie's gown had gotten caught in a perfect storm last month, consisting of: a clumsy waiter, plus a tray of hor doerves, plus gravity, at the Batavia event. There was talk that the waiter was bribed, but, then, that sort of talk was always around. The Dame went on:

"Poor dear...She had to throw together thatdress...she's wearing in three weeks, so one can't blame her for that...thing...that's crawling up her back."

The thing in question was, to everyone's horror, a zipper, which, of course, had not been invented until 1905, so Queenie was toast. Molly spoke:

"And she went to Butterick."

More horror. It was a commercial dress pattern outfit that offered period clothing fit only for Halloween. All serious Mrs. Lincolns procured their patterns from Truly Victorian. Molly went on:

“And what has happened to “Not Donna”? How much weight has she put on?”

“ I heard she caught George cheating on her.”

“No. That’s horrible. But, still and all, when she let out the back panels, why didn’t someone stop her from using polyester taffeta inserts? They’re ...obscene.”

They had both seen Dr. Magnus’s right eyebrow raise up like the hackles on a cat as “Princess Not Donna” passed in review, exposing the back of her gown and its offending panels to the high dais.

So, here they were, neck and neck at the finish, eyeing each other, each looking for chinks in her opponent’s armor.

Ethel leaned forward, put on her glasses, and took a hard look at her reflection under the glare of the fluorescent lights. Then, she glanced over at the child to her left and she realized it was all over. This was TV they were vying for, nationally broadcast TV. The lines on her face would look as big as the canals on Mars when the camera zoomed in. No, it was a young person’s media. The kid was gonna walk away with the brass ring. She could feel it.

Ethel turned to Molly.

“This is my last hurrah, dear. Surely you must know that.”

She dropped her powder puff in the sink and fled into a stall, from whence Molly could hear soft sobbing for the next five minutes.

Mrs. Lincoln was all Ethel had. Her husband of thirty-five years had passed away six months ago. No children. This was it, and it was slipping away.

Molly glanced at the parasols, which lay side by side next to the sink. The Grand Dame's Battenberg lace must have cost \$500. She had never seen anything so beautiful. Next to it, her little purple silk umbrella looked like a washrag. She had done some research on the Battenberg but she had never seen one, before.

She picked it up, lifted it up to the light, and sighed. She put it back down, picked up the purple one and frowned at it.

Looking back into the mirror, she wiped away a fleck of powder from the lower left corner of her lip. Deliberately, she placed her umbrella down and put her hands on the cool marble countertop as if steadying herself in a stiff breeze. She closed her eyes, dropped her chin down to her chest, shook her head back and forth and said, softly: "I must be crazy."

Then, she scooped up the Battenberg and left.

When she had composed herself, Ethel emerged from the stall and saw Molly's purple parasol on the counter. Huh, she thought, how about that? I thought the girl had a bit more character. Didn't she know she has it in the bag, anyway? She picked it up and left.

As the band played Gary Owen and the lights came up, the grand parade wound its way around the hall like a huge, silk snake. The Emcee could be heard at the mic thanking their guest of honor, Dr. Magnus, for her presence there, tonight. A warm round of applause went up, but Allison was too intent on something else to hear it.

Molly and the Grand Dame had just passed in front of the dais.

Allison gave a little start. Up went the eyebrow. How surprising. What a silly gaff.

Battenberg lace had not been invented until 1892.

She crossed Molly off and circled the Grand Dame. Good for her, she thought. She deserves it.

The Ghosts of Key West

“Susan, what exactly are you saying?”

He flipped his phone into his left hand. He wasn't conscious of doing this. Maybe some part of his brain was telling him that bad news would turn to good if he heard it with the other ear.

He looked at the conductor scores stacked next to the potted plant. He felt like kicking them out the window into the pool seven stories below.

“Maestro, I'm so sorry. The Board was trying to pull this out of the fire before you left on vacation, but it's no use. It's a financial meltdown. We have to cancel the season.”

He listened and said little, which was smart. They teach you to conduct Beethoven and Brahms at the conservatory, but no course is offered on the skills you need to thread your way through the politics of a regional orchestra directorship.

And now, his season was gone. Poof. His stomach began to heave and he couldn't breathe. He made it to the bathroom, took a Xanax and sat down on the floor.

The symphony was Richard's whole life. He was single and had few friends. He woke up, studied scores, and thought about ways to make the orchestra sound better. That's it. Now what was he gonna do?

There's no point in going back to Wisconsin early, he thought. Might as well try to enjoy the rest of my week. Besides, tonight was the tour. He had been looking forward to this for months.

Richard took the walking Ghost Tours everywhere: Memphis, London, New Orleans, he couldn't get enough. He wondered why he was so fascinated by ghosts. He wasn't sure.

He walked up and down Duval Street, stopping to drink hurricanes at the bars, killing time as the sun went down.

He went to the Mel Fisher Treasure Museum for the third time.

It was lonely being here by himself, seeing everyone paired up or in families.

Wandering around town, he wondered if he was really real. Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was invisible. Maybe if he stood in someone's way, they would just walk right through him. Maybe he was the newest ghost of Key West.

The more he drank, the angrier he became. In his head, he obsessively played the same scene over and over again, the one he would enact for real when he got back. He rehearsed his lines and filled in the responses he expected to hear from his Board of Directors.

As he approached the La Concha Hotel though, he finally relaxed. He was determined to enjoy every minute of this.

"Welcome to the walking Ghost Tour of Key West. I'm Sharon, your tour guide."

She was smiling but, at the same time, she seemed kind of tense.

For the next ninety minutes, he was in a trance. First in line, first with the next question. He never wanted it to end.

When it was over, he sighed and walked away, but Sharon called him back:

"Wisconsin... Wisconsin," She had started calling him that halfway through the tour. She couldn't remember his name, just where he said he was from. He was that forgettable. "Wait a minute. There's someone who wants to buy you a beer. Follow me."

He followed Sharon without any hesitation. He was happy for the attention. It never occurred to him that there could be a band of thugs waiting to roll him around the next corner. After all, Key West was ground zero for smugglers, pirates and psychopaths of all stripes. But this never crossed his mind.

In fact, the whole town was built on thievery of a kind. Salvagers would row out to ships wrecked on the reefs offshore and take whatever was in the hold. When you visited the old houses, each one had identical spinet pianos, identical crystal chandeliers, identical linen tablecloths, all looted from the same merchant ships sunken long ago.

They came to a dark side street, far from the lights of the tourist joints on Duval. Sharon led him to a beat up, nautical looking table and brought him a beer. Before long, John showed up.

“Hi Richard. I own the tour. Sharon phoned me during a break. She says you have a flair for the dramatic, that you were asking some pretty astute questions.”

Me, thought Richard, a flair for the dramatic?

“Got a proposition for you. Sharon is leaving.”

Sharon smiles and holds up her left hand, flashes an engagement ring.

“How’d you like to be one of our Tour Guides?”

Richard blinked. Could this really be happening? A Tour guide on the Key West Ghost Tour? It was like asking a speed freak if he wanted to run a meth lab. There was nothing waiting for him in Oconomowac. He didn’t even have a house plant to go back to. Why not take a chance?

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Two days later, he was holed up in the little room John got him in one of the houses on the tour with volumes of Ghost material and lore. He had a coffee pot on a little hot plate in the corner. His first gig was in five days.

He was coming to grips with his fear of public speaking. God, he remembered when the Board convinced him to narrate the script for a Fourth of July Pops concert. He was so nervous, he finally had to ask someone else to do it in the second half. Thank God the conductor gets to stand with his back to the audience.

But, he felt sure he could do this. He had a photographic memory. He could look at a Mahler symphony and conduct it the next week without the score.

Twenty three cue cards were taped to the walls with definitions on them:

Anomaly
Cryptozoology
Ectoplasm
Light Rod
Orb
Poltergeist

The next day, he began to memorize the answers to the most commonly asked questions, like:

*“Should I be afraid of Ghosts?
Are Ghosts evil?
How can I detect ghosts?
What about ghost pets?”*

He created little rituals which he hoped would make him appear more comfortable in front of his audience.

Practicing in front of the mirror, before answering each question he would saunter two steps to the right, chuckle, cough into his hand, and smile broadly before replying:

“Ha Ha Ha. (Cough. Cough) Well, little Jimmy or Janey, There have been many stories about pets, such as dogs or cats, that die and remain with their masters after death as ghosts. Why is it strange to accept that our beloved pets would not want to remain behind to be with us? Ha . Ha.”

When exhausted or stressed, Richard would sit at the old upright piano that stood in the corner (probably salvaged from some wreck) and play the slow movement from Brahms’ Symphony No. 4 over and over until he calmed down enough to sleep.

Then, he would lie down and look at the lamp on the armoire. It was a ceramic dog, up on its hind legs, begging, paws out. He thought it was cute until John told him it was supposed to be haunted. Belonged to Dr. Porter, who lived in the house in the 1920’s.

The little dog’s tongue was out, eyes wide. A light bulb was screwed into the top of his head. A lampshade was perched atop the bulb.

“Well, Fido, I hope this works out. It’s all I have. They’ve taken away my orchestra and this is all I have, now.”

His phone rang. It was Sharon. Something was wrong with her voice.

“Just wanted to wish you good luck and, uh, also to say....be careful.”

“What? Careful of what?”

“Just...be careful, Richard. Be careful on the tour. I gotta go.”

She hung up.

“Hmm. What do you make of that, Fido? Speak, boy, speak!”

The night before his first tour, he rehearsed his spiel wearing the full costume, which included an opera cape, top hat, and black handle bar

moustache affixed to his upper lip with spirit gum. He liked the moustache. He wished it were large enough to hide his whole face.

He vomited into the toilet in the men's room of the La Concha and had to fish out his moustache from the bowl, wave it in front of the blower, and stick it back on. He splashed some water on his face and grabbed his knees and held them until they stopped shaking. He stepped into the lobby, where twenty five eager faces turned toward him. Everyone held up their tickets.

"The original Dean – Lopez Funeral Home was long ago renovated into an apartment building, but many spirits remain. The children who grew up in the house used to see "shadow people," as they refer to the many ghosts that haunt this old house.

But the house's most famous spirit will never rest in peace, due to the gruesome atrocities that were committed to her corpse. To understand why, we need to go to the beginning of this story."

He mounted the staircase with what he hoped was an ominous, plodding gait, his English riding boots creaking with every step. He withdrew a flashlight from the inside breast pocket of his frock coat, stuck it under his chin and turned it on as he hit a foot switch hidden at the base of the newel post. The house was plunged in darkness except for his face, which seemed to float freely at the top of the stairs, unattached to an earthly form.

"George Carl Tannslar, AKA Count Carl von Casel, left his wife and three children in Florida and moved to Key West in 1927 to begin a medical practice.

He soon met Elena Milagro Oyez Meso, a beautiful 22 year old woman dying from tuberculosis . He had seen her face in a dream years

before. He always knew he would marry her, this woman of his dreams, but eventually settled for his wife.

He lavished the young woman with gifts, proposed marriage, and was rejected.

He was unable to save her from the disease. She died in 1931 and was buried in a pauper's grave by her impoverished family..

The Count, though, had a beautiful mausoleum built for her. He had her body exhumed and reburied there. He would sit and talk to her for hours.

Two years after she died, he stole her body and secreted in his office here on the second floor. He constructed a life like masque of her face over her flesh made of mortician's wax and plaster.

He placed a wig on her head made of her own hair which had fallen out of her scalp. He used piano wire to hold her bones together and inserted glass eyes into her sockets.

He lived with the corpse for seven years until Elena's sister became suspicious and discovered the hideous truth.

Upon completing an autopsy, the coroner determined that the Count had reconstructed several intimate parts of Elena's body and had, in fact, consummated their "marriage".

He was brought to trial, but the District Attorney had no idea what to charge him with since the statute of limitation on grave robbing expired in the state of Florida after two years.

They failed to prove he was insane, so he was released.

The municipality of Key West put Elena's corpse on display, covered as it was with the sheath created by the Count. Over 6,800 people stood in line to view it. Children were let out of school early so they wouldn't miss the opportunity.

The Count moved back to Zephyr, Florida, to a house three miles away from the family he had abandoned.

Three hours after his departure from Key West, Elena's crypt exploded. It is widely believed to be the work of the Count, a parting gesture to Key West.

He died in Florida twelve years later. He was found in his home lying upon the remains of Elena's corpse. It has not been determined whether it was really Elena, whom he had stolen from Key West, or another reconstruction.

In her short and unremarkable life, this young woman from a poor family in Key West never dreamt she would become world famous, or shall we say, world infamous.

Thank you for your kind attention, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you have enjoyed the walking Ghost Tour of Key West."

Richard's audience stood in silence for thirty seconds, then burst into rapturous applause. He was compelled to pose with families for photos before he could retreat to his room, to the ceramic dog, to Brahms.

He pulled off his moustache. His fingers massaged the worn ivory keys of the Mason and Hamlin. He played without any conscious awareness, in the way that you might watch TV and scratch your belly at the same time.

He was grateful to get through his debut unscathed, successful, actually, let's admit it, Richard (he never called himself Rick). How in the world was he able to do that?

After the second time through the Brahms, he had a thought. Maybe it was the ghosts. The ghosts might have been helping him. Maybe they were welcoming him, welcoming him to the tour. I wonder if they missed Sharon. She was pretty.

Look, ghosts are here because they can't leave here, wherever they perceive "here" to be, which is sad, because the "here" that the ghost is clinging to, that "here" was over years ago, when the ghost was alive. That

said, if I was a ghost, I'd miss Sharon. By telling their stories every night to living people, the tour guide keeps the ghosts alive. They must know that. Yeah, they must've loved Sharon. I wonder what they'll think about me?

By the end of his second week, business had so picked up that John gave him a raise to keep him from being spirited away (pardon the pun) by the other ghost tour company across town.

Richard grew to love all the stories, all the ghosts, like the little girl who came out of the painting at night and wandered the rooms of the Audubon house, and Doctor Porter, who lived here, and who would cure half his patients and murder the other half.

Richard would stand in front of the Porter house and ask his audience if they could tell which half was haunted and they would all point to the correct one. You could sense it. Many of them took photos in which the haunted half of the house was crisscrossed with wild swaths of colored light.

But the figure that held the most fascination for the audience was Robert the Doll. It was an ugly little boy doll in a sailor's suit clutching its own toy lion on its lap.

Gene Otto, a four year old local lad, was given the doll in 1904 by a Bahamian servant girl who was said to have put a powerful voodoo hex on it because the Otto family mistreated her. Gene became possessed by the doll. Whenever he was blamed for doing something wrong by his parents, he would say: "I didn't do it. Robert did it". This went on for his entire life.

Neighborhood children reported seeing Robert waving at them and moving from window to window in the top floor of the Otto home, watching them as they would run around the block.

When Gene died, his wife, who was terrified of the doll, leased the house rather than continue to live there. There was a clause in the lease that said that Robert the Doll must remain the sole resident of the attic room.

Subsequent residents reported continual sounds of movement and footsteps coming from the attic. Upon investigation, Robert was discovered to have moved from one chair to another.

Over the years, it was found that if you weren't nice to Robert, bad things would happen to you. Finally, the doll was thought to be so evil, so toxic, that he was moved to a museum near the airport and sealed in a Plexiglas box, which is, apparently, unable to contain him.

One night a few years ago, the curator heard alarms go off in Robert's section of the museum. He ran in to find Robert in the box, but dry wall dust surrounding it with little footprints in it. Upon inspection, the curator saw Robert's feet covered in the dust.

Then, Robert just disappeared from the box and reappeared five days later with mud on the bottom of his feet.

Hearing these stories, one fellow who took the ghost tour went to the museum and berated the doll for forty five minutes in order to debunk this myth. Triumphantly, he turned to leave. Then, he felt little hands on the small of his back which pushed him so hard, he was hurled to the stone floor and shattered his left arm.

The stories go on and on. But Richard grew fond of Robert the more he told the stories. He felt an affinity for him.

Here was Richard, a human, running away from life, and here was Robert, a doll, with more aggression and lust for life than Richard the Human.

One night, he dreamed he was driving to Starbuck's and Robert appeared in the passenger's seat of his rented Ford Focus with his toy lion on his lap telling him, psychically, that he wanted a half caf mocha cappuccino and a banana smoothie for his lion, that if he didn't get it, he would crash the car. Then, Richard heard Robert laughing, and woke up screaming. He had this dream every night for a week, then upped his dose of Xanax and called Dr. Epstein in Wisconsin, who seemed unable to offer any help.

“The Marrero Guest Mansion is haunted by the spirit of Enriquetta Marerro. Taken from her in life, Enriquetta refruses to give up her home in death. Following a bitter court battle that ended in 1881, she and her eight children were evicted. A small crowd gathered in front of the home to witness her eviction. She addressed the crowd and said: “You are all witnessing a great injustice today. And though you are removing me from my home, you should know that this house is rightfully mine, and with God as my witness I will always remain here in spirit.” She has remained true to her word. House guests and employees have seen her spirit travel through the doorways between her bedroom and those of her children.”

Thank you for your kind attention, Ladies and Gentlemen. I hope you have enjoyed the walking Ghost Tour of Key West.”

Richard returned to his room that night to find his cell phone beeping.

“Susan, what exactly are you saying?”

“Maestro, Mr. Zartman from Edgewood has come through. He has agreed to underwrite our entire season. Isn’t it wonderful? Rehearsals begin in a month!”

He sat on his bed. He removed his top hat. He peeled off his moustache. He looked at the ceramic dog.

“Well, Fido, it appears as if they’re giving me back my orchestra.”

Richard gave two weeks notice. At first, John didn't believe him. He was convinced his competitor had finally lured him away to the Ghost tour on the other side of town.

Richard tapped on the Plexiglas case and pointed inside it.

"....and you can see on the wall behind Robert all the letters and postcards from people who have reported the bad things that have happened to them a few days after they were mean to him. So, whatever you do folks, don't say anything to upset him on your way out."

This always got a laugh.

"That concludes our tour of the Fort Martello East Museum and Gardens. Thank you for your kind attention and I hope you have enjoyed the walking Ghost Tour of Key West."

He walked to the wall behind the case to turn off the lights and lock up after the last of the tourists had left. That was when he heard Robert's voice in his head.

"Don't go, Richard."

It sounded like someone trying to talk through a mouth full of sawdust. And it hurt. The voice bloomed in his head with a sharp pain, like a blood vessel had burst somewhere in there.

Richard doubled over, gasping. From a crouch, he looked over at Robert in the dim light.

Wait. Wasn't he holding that lion on the other side of his lap?

That night, Richard woke up at five A.M and sat, bolt upright, in bed. . He was sure someone else was in the room. He grabbed the flashlight.

As he played its beam around the room, it fell on the dog on the armoire, only it wasn't the dog. The light shined into the blank face of Robert the Doll, who was posed as the dog. The light bulb was sticking out of his mouth and the lampshade was on his head. His little hands were held out in front of him, like the dog's paws.

"Don't go, Richard."

The light bulb dropped out of his mouth and rolled around on the floor.

Forty five minutes later, Richard's left hand could barely control the wheel of the Ford. His right hand held the cell as he left a message for John. Medical emergency. Sorry. Get someone else to do the last week. He was three blocks from the Airport.

Peering straight ahead into the misty gloom, he flipped the cell closed and reached over to the passenger side of the front seat to get his rental car contract. His hand closed over something else.

He glanced to the right. He was touching the toy lion on Robert's lap.

"Don't go, Richard."

Richard's mouth opened, but nothing came out. The pain blossomed in his head, again. Robert slid a little closer to Richard. He looked up at him with those flat, bead eyes. Robert's mouth opened. A puff of sawdust came out.

"Don't go, Richard."

The car came to rest after knocking over a municipal garbage can and crashing into a palmetto palm.

It was David's first tour and he was nervous.

"Please watch your step, Ladies and Gentlemen, as we move upstairs.

Besides the sightings of Dr. Porter's ghost here in his home, there have been new sightings reported over the past year".

He hit the footswitch and turned on his flashlight. He shined it into the room, onto the ceramic dog on the armoire.

"If you lean over the velvet rope and look to the left, you can just see the piano in the corner. People who have stayed on this floor have reported music coming out of here late at night. It is said to be Richard, playing Brahms once again in his little room, playing to calm his nerves after a long night on the Ghost Tour. And now, if you'll follow me down the hall, we'll have a look at....."

The Vials of Pythagoras

“Steve...”

He opened his eyes. He had no idea where he was. Jimmy was standing over him. He must have passed out on the floor. Where was the party? And why was he holding a hammer?

“Steven....look!”

Steven really couldn't look at anything right now. His eyes seemed to be glued shut with some kind of gritty dust. He sat up. Jimmy was across the room under the skylight of his studio with his back to him in front of the huge block of white marble that dominated the center of the floor.

What had happened last night?. His memories of it were floating up to him in hazy swatches, like mismatched patches of cloth that his mind was trying to stitch together into a quilt.

He got up. He swayed like he was walking into the wind.

Jimmy was his best friend and one of the hottest artists in town. His latest piece stood in the corner, an assemblage constructed of found objects from the street. On a table next to it was a bozzetto of the Pieta. Jimmy had told him that a bozzeto was a small replica of a larger work.

He walked over and stood next to his friend.

Jimmy's mouth was open. He seemed unable to speak.

Steve's memory quilt began to stitch itself together enough to form a scene in his mind.

He had come to the party with his new girlfriend, or so he thought. But he was left in the dust when Jimmy turned on the charm. Steven could see her eyes light up as Jimmy went on and on about the commission he was about to begin. By this time next year, a Jimmy Pearson masterpiece in white marble would adorn the foyer of Trump Plaza. Steve's heart sank as

he saw Betsy, who was an aspiring artist herself, fall into the gaze of Jimmy's eyes like a sleepwalker falling into a swimming pool.

He got so drunk and jealous that he stumbled into the adjacent studio to sulk. The last thing he remembered was picking up a hammer. Why was he still holding it? He dropped it to the floor.

"Steven....you have to tell me everything. Everything you remember.. "

"Oh," Steven mumbled, looking at the figure in the marble. "This is pretty. Is this gonna be the piece for The Donald?"

The head and shoulders of a beautiful woman draped in a light cloak stared back at them. Her right hand was raised demurely to the cowl of her gown, to keep it in place. Her eyes glanced up and out from beneath the sheath of her covering. To Jim, she seemed to be emerging from within the stone like a Goddess rising from her bath.

"Steve, a sunset is pretty. A flower is pretty. This....this..is exquisite. It isastonishing."

Steven was surprised. Jimmy was usually rather self-deprecating about his work, except when he was talking about it to chicks he was trying to impress.

" Look, look there,.....do you see how the perspective is altered?. Her head is bigger than half her chest, but it doesn't appear distorted. It just seems more alive, more luminous than the rest of the figure. It's what Michelangelo did with David. Nobody's been able to copy that technique. Rodin tried for years and gave up. The folds of the cloak...see how they seem to be lifted slightly away from her shoulder by a breeze? I've looked at it from every angle in the room. It's perfect. And the inner life... it is ...redolent with an inner life."

Steven scratched himself and patted his pockets, trying to find his smokes.

"Glad you're happy with it, man. Hope Trump likes it."

Jimmy grabbed his arm.

“I didn’t do this. “

Steve looked at him.

“What?”

“You’re covered in marble dust. You passed out with my hammer in your hand. I haven’t touched this block. You did this. “

Now, it was Steve’s turn to stand there with his mouth hanging open.

“Jim, I can’t even draw, you know that.”

“Yeah.” He looked at the lady again and smiled.

“We’re down the rabbit hole on this one, Steve. Through the looking glass, whatever. Now, tell me everything, everything you remember from last night.”

Steve walked Jim back through as much as he could recall. They went back into the room the party was in...arriving with Betsy, standing in several groups and chatting. Jim shows up and sweeps Betsy off her feet. Steve stomps off into the studio to sulk and....

The little bottles.

“What little bottles?”

“Those...”

In the corner was a very old oak spice rack hanging from the wall. It contained five tiny colored glass bottles of various shapes and sizes which fitted snugly into little holes carved in a shelf which protruded three inches from the back of the rack.

“ I forgot I still had that. My ex was supposed to pick it up a year ago. We got it during an antiquing trip in Connecticut.”

One hole was empty. A sixth bottle was missing.

“Uh, Jim, I think I drank one.”

“You what?”

“I was high. There were these two girls who were playing with the bottles and they dared me.”

“I don’t know what’s in those bottles, Steve.”

“I know.”

“Nobody knows what’s in those bottles, Steve. It could have been poison, like, from the middle ages. Do you see how old these things are?”

“I know”

“What got into you? You won’t even drink milk after the expiration date!”

“The chicks dared me, man.”

They sifted through the detritus of the party. Finally, Steve found something under a bag of potato chips. It was an empty, dark green glass ampoule, very small, with a cork rimmed stopper next to it. It was shaped like a miniature Greek amphora.

“I remember being so angry at you that I picked up your hammer and was gonna bang away at your marble. Then, I stopped. I just stared at it in the moonlight. It seemed so cold and pure, so distant. It seemed perfect just the way it was. Then, you woke me up. That’s it.”

They installed themselves at the bar at Puffy’s.

“That’s just ridiculous, man.”

“You got any other explanation, Jim? Instant mega genius, genius at a transcendent level, just floats outa the sky and sprinkles you with fairy dust and you carve something that’s better than I, or really anyone, will be able to do in this lifetime. If it wasn’t a magic potion, what other explanation can you offer?”

Jim got Steven drunk again and stuck him in the studio with the marble, a thermos of coffee and three corned beef sandwiches. He walked to Hudson street, caught a double bill at the Art Theatre and came back.

Whatever it was that possessed Steven was gone. He hadn’t even approached the stone. He had eaten the sandwiches and passed out.

Jim convinced Steven that the best thing to do was just to pretend that it never happened. He would finish the piece, claim it as his own and see if he could find a buyer. They would split the proceeds 70 /30, the Lion’s share going to the idiot savant who started the work. That was fine with Steve , who was broke. He split. He was exhausted, anyway.

Problem was, Jimmy couldn’t finish the piece. He wasn’t good enough to do it and he knew it.

He began to think of her as “Lady Emerging From Her Bath”. He brushed his fingertips along the bottom edge of the sculpture, just beneath her collarbone. That’s all that was revealed of her. Beneath that there was just the block that held her captive.

What did her belly look like? Her thighs, her mons? His hand formed a fist and he gently pounded it against the stone, as if it might somehow crack open and release her. If he didn’t find a way to finish this piece, he would go nuts. He had to go back through the looking glass, like Steve.

He took the bottles out of the rack and laid them out in a semi circle on his threadbare Persian carpet. He lit candles and incense. He popped the corks and smelled the contents. They were all foul, some worse than others.

It came down to eeny meeny miny mo.

He ended up holding one made of very dark purple glass. He tossed back his head and poured the viscous fluid down his gullet.

He lay down on his cot and waited. Nothing. He fell asleep at two in the morning.

“Huh!!”

At 3:15 A.M., he jumped out of bed. His head felt like it was on fire. His heart was pounding. His feet hit the floor and he started... dancing. He did three quick steps to the left, then two quick jumps to the right, which brought him to the door, which he flung open.

He skipped and hopped down the stairs. He couldn't stop. He grabbed onto the newel post at the bottom of the landing and hung on, but his feet propelled him out onto Prince, and he began to dance down the street. Terrified though he was, he couldn't help thinking that he must look like Ray Bolger in the Wizard of Oz or, what was that dippy ballet movie Steven made him watch? Yeah, The Red Shoes.

He shuddered to a stop, performed an arabesque, executed three rapid pirouettes and a perfect grand jete. Then, he covered twenty yards heading west on Broom in a series of bounds, landing softly, exquisitely, on the balls of his feet.

Just as unsettling as the dancing was, was the realization that he seemed to know all the ballet terms for every step. He came to the corner, looked both ways and performed an entrechat, a vertical leap with feet crossed in the air.

A homeless person sat up in his Whirlpool box and threw a bottle at him.

As he whizzed by a lamppost, he reached out and wrapped his arms around it like someone grabbing a life preserver in a stormy sea. His legs

flung themselves straight out at ninety-degree angles and his feet did a little batterie (a rapid flipping back and forth in the air). A couple came out of the Broom Street bar. They thought he was a mime doing an impression of the American flag waving in the breeze. The woman applauded and the gentleman, a veteran, saluted. This was, after all, Greenwich Village. They had heard about this sort of thing back in Dubuque. They rapidly crossed the street.

He kicked over two garbage cans and a plastic recycling bin without missing a beat. Whatever choreography this was, it seemed to have already been composed, somewhere. That's when the patrol car rolled up.

"Sir, if you don't stop kicking the door, I'm gonna mace you. Do you understand me?"

Jimmy's muffled voice issued forth from behind the Plexiglas panel in the back of the squad car.

"Officer, really.... I really can't stop. Do you think I'm doing this for fun? You think I want to go to jail at 4:00 AM for, what was it?"

"Creating a public disturbance and destruction of property."

"I didn't even see it."

"I did. You trampled through ten yards of potted plants on that meridian on Spring Street. The neighborhood committee is gonna have your head, pal. They been workin' on that all summer."

"I wasn't trampling. Actually, it was ballon. I was bouncing."

He walked out of Downtown Precinct 17 at three in the afternoon. Blinking in the weak Manhattan light, he hailed a cab on Centre Street, made a quick stop at his loft, then jumped back in:

“431 East 5th. Say, could I bum a smoke, bro?”

Steven met him in front of Jacob’s shop. The paint was peeling off the sign. Jimmy had been telling him for years that he would weatherproof it for him. Finally, he realized the old guy must like the way it was gradually falling apart. Gave it atmosphere. You could barely make out the letters:

THENSAURI VENTERI DOCTRINAE (The Repository of Ancient Learning), or, as it was known to the locals, the creepy little shop around the corner.

As they walked in, Steve told him the bell over the door sounded just like the one Jimmy Stewart rang when he walked into the occult bookstore in “Bell, Book, and Candle.” with Kim Novak, whatever that was. Steve knew all the old movies.

Jacob listened and stroked his beard. He snorted and walked into the back room and came back with a huge, leather bound tome that looked to be from the 14th century. The mold spores coming off this thing could give you allergies for years.

“They are mentioned here,somewhere here.”

He leafed his way through the rotting parchment pages. Jimmy caught the title on the spine:

MONUMENTUM ARTIS ABSCONDITUS. Jacob translated it as: “Book of the Hidden Art.”

“Ahh,,,...’*The Vials of Pythagoras.*’ He regarded the two boys.

“Pythagoras was much more than a mathematician, gentlemen. He was a wizard, the greatest magician of the old world. He claimed to have been King Midas in a previous life. It is said he was seen in two cities at once at the hour of his death.

The old ones claimed that Aristotle tells the tale of the vials in his book, PERI TON PYTHAGOREIM. The book itself is legendary, lost in the fire that destroyed the Library at Alexandria.

Pythagoras’ real work was with the physikoi dynameis, the manipulation of the laws of nature, the exploration of the human soul, the revealing of unconscious states of being and the ways in which they manifest in conscious life.

Just before his death in 532 B.C., legend has it that he hid a cache of 12 vials of different colors in a cave in the hills above Croton, in Southern Italy. The serums in the vials had taken him a lifetime to concoct. Then, it is said, the vials surfaced in Florence, at the court of the Medicis, where six were put to use for the political advancement of the family and the ruination of their enemies, who were legion.

Then, poof. Gone.”

His mangy cat jumped up and he stroked her.

“Just a story passed around in necromancers’ conventions and parties...”

He looked up at them from beneath his hooded brow.

“...until now. Please, may I?”

Jimmy handed over his army surplus medic’s bag. Jacob fondled the ampoules and put each of them up to the light. He studied the two empty ones, then the others with several different magnifying glasses before returning to the book;

“Here is the latest entry, from the 1400’s. Some say it is attributed to Nostradamus, but I wouldn’t trust anything associated with that French fraud. At any rate:

“Six are unaccounted for: In a purple vial – Saltare Elationis - Dance of Ecstasy.”

Jimmy mumbled, rather sheepishly:

“I think I found that one.”

“Conpotis Artis: - Mastery of Art”.. In a green vial..

Jimmy and Steven looked at each other.

“Found that one, too.”

*“Scientae Copiosa.” Abundant Knowledge. In a blue vial.
Praedonis Astutus – The Clever Thief. In a black vial.
Flamma Aeternus – Eternal Fire of Love – in a pink vial.
and Voluntatis Inferus – Your deepest desire – in a red vial.”*

Jacob placed the book on the counter. His mangy cat jumped up on it and the old man swatted him away.

“Gentlemen, Pythagoras believed these vials would be entrusted by fate to one man, one master magician, to be used for altruistic purposes. They are the tools of an arcane path, a compendium of knowledge that is linked in ways that are lost to us.”

The old man arched his left eyebrow.

“They are...dangerous.”

He picked up his cat and walked to the back of the store, to a room hidden by a damask curtain.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, it is time for my nap.”

With one hand on the curtain and the other holding the cat, he looked back over his shoulder.

“I were you, I’d throw them into the East River. But, then, they’re not mine, are they? They’re singing to you, not to me.”

And he was gone.

Jimmy’s phone rang two nights later. It was Jacob.

“Please listen, Jim. Listen carefully. I found another reference to the vials in another nemcromicon. There is an additional strand of lore about them you need to know. Apparently, there was an alchemist in the 16th century who came in possession of the cache. It is said he switched the serums of two vials, one into another, but it is not known which two have been tampered with.”

Jimmy looked at the rack. One was missing. Now there were four.

As Jimmy was on the phone with Jacob, Steven was bringing two cosmos to the little glass table at Betsy’s favorite bistro, “The Olives” on Houston. It was their third drink. Things were going pretty well. She had stopped talking about Jimmy and had begun to express an interest in Steve’s project, a documentary film about spells and magic in the modern world.

Betsy excused herself and went to powder her nose. She actually said that. So endearing. Steven immersed himself in old movies and and the culture of Hollywood in the 30’s. How many girls would give that expression? Another reason to love Betsy, he sighed wistfully as he poured the serum from the pink vial into her cosmo. Flamma Aeternus. A guy could use a little help.

His head was swimming and it wasn’t the cosmos. What the hell? She was turning into Mr. Hyde before his eyes. One minute, they’re strolling arm and arm up Broadway and she’s admiring the fall collections in

the couturiers' windows, then he feels her shudder in his arms and she goes all clammy and pale. She's staring at a cocktail dress in a show window.

"No, Steve, what I mean is I need that dress."

She reeled and swayed on the sidewalk.

"I don't need it six months from now when I've squirreled away some more money. I need that dress now and I'm gonna get it now..."

He had no way of knowing that he hadn't dosed her with Flamma Aeternus, the love potion. Instead, her current performance was brought to you by Praedonis Astutus, The Clever Thief, courtesy of the creep in the 16th century who had switched the vials.

She grabbed him around the waist. Jeez, was she a wrestler on the weekends? She planted one on him and her tongue went down his throat like a python after a mouse. He gagged and she came up for air. She turned on a smile, but it looked odd in the blue light from the neon sign above their heads. She cocked her head and rubbed her foot against his ankle. She giggled. It was a stage giggle, like the chick in the tunnel of love in "Strangers on a Train."

"So, how much do you really love me, Stevie?"

When did he become Stevie?

"I love you completely, Betsy, but you know, it's getting' late and..."

"Prove it to me...." She grabbed his ass. "Prove it to me now, or lose me forever."

She dragged him around the corner and convinced him, God knows how, to stand guard as she picked the lock at the back of the store with two nail files. In a flash, she was inside, dragging him behind her. She found a bag and began stuffing the most expensive dresses into it. There was a weird light in her eye. He thought he could hear her humming to herself. He wanted out. Out of there and away from her. What was he thinking?

The cops turned on their flashlights and started screaming at them the second they stepped back into the alley.

Jimmy visited Steven at the Manhattan Correctional Facility every week. He had fired two public defenders ‘cause they had no idea what they were doing. What he and Betsy, who were to be tried separately, really needed was a courtroom killer, like Ron Kuby, someone who could woo the jury with a tale of artists gone awry, forced into a desperate act after being ground down by years of neglect at the hands of the unfeeling pundits of the art world. Blah, blah, blah. Kuby could whip out that little violin. But they had no dough for Kuby and the trial was two weeks away.

Two days before Steven’s trial, Jimmy sat in the window seat of his studio. The moon loomed outside like a cheesy billboard over the Hudson River. He opened his fist and looked down at the blue vial: Scientiae Copiosa, Abundant Knowledge.

“I don’t suppose this is what you meant it for, Pythy, but my boy is in deep yogurt.”

He raised it up to the moonlight. The liquid in the vial shimmered and sort of bubbled. It had been waiting so long to be let out.

“Here’s to swimmin’ with bow legged women.” And he chugged it.

Knowledge, as a concept, can be defined rather broadly. Knowledge of things seen and unseen. There is knowledge that can cure cancer and knowledge that can predict the trifecta in the fifth race at Belmont. But nothing could have prepared Jimmy for the twisted

knowledge that flowed through him like mercury as he walked from the subway to the law library on 45th street.

The judge had agreed to Steven's request to let Jimmy represent him in court. God knows why.

Jimmy and Steven both assumed the serum would turn him into Clarence Darrow overnight, but nobody counted on this, this rush of occult knowledge that coursed through his brain like a bad acid trip.

As he walked the five blocks to the library, it soon became apparent to him that he could look at people and see who they were in previous incarnations, many, many, previous incarnations.

A young woman, probably an actress or a dancer, approached him heading west as he walked east on 42nd. When she was ten paces away, she morphed into a tall Watusi warrior. When she was five paces away, she turned into a Danish sea captain from the 19th century, then an Egyptian slave.

He saw two people walking in different directions on either side of the street and he knew they had been married to each other in Poland in the 12th century.

A man was buying a newspaper from a vendor on the corner and he knew that those two men had murdered each other in two successive lives in Rome in the century before the birth of Christ.

He couldn't turn it off. He was being flooded with this arcane data faster than he could assimilate it. He looked into his reflection in a store window and he saw himself as a WWI soldier in a doughboy uniform.

It was so dizzying that he ducked into an alley and heaved into a dumpster. After a half hour, that phase of knowledge, blessedly, faded away and he just saw things in the present.

He found he could absorb the substance of issues pertinent to Steve's case by just opening law books and flipping pages. Everything went in and collated itself. He had become a mega law computer.

He filled out five yellow legal pads with the outline of his approach and went home. He roughed it out and rehearsed his speeches to the jury until sun up.

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, it becomes clear, it becomes obvious, in spite of the smokescreen of bile and obfuscation that the state has thrown up, that Steven, besotted by love, did the only thing he could do. Upon reflection, would he have behaved in another manner? Perhaps, had his life been different up to that point, had his upbringing been more commensurate with the values that obtain in our society. But, let us consider this....."

Johnny Cochran, on his best day, would have reveled in the arc of his discourse. The jury voted unanimously to acquit. Two weeks later, same thing with Betsy.

Contrite and chastened, Betsy and Steven found solace in each other's arms. They were married in Jimmy's loft a year later.

A week after Betsy's trial, Jimmy showered, made coffee, and turned off his phones.

He stepped into his studio wearing a clean shirt. He had gotten a haircut and some new aftershave. He approached "Lady Emerging from her Bath." He took Volunta's Inferus out of his breast pocket, Your Deepest Desire.

He stood before her, frozen in her block of stone. He pictured her, freed, down to her toes, to the perfect foot that would come up out of the bath, dripping, sweet, a foot that would be placed upon the soil of a new earth, a fresh world, recreated in beauty, in purity.

He drank deep. He put the vial back in his pocket. He reached for his hammer, for his chisel. He approached the stone.

“Hi, baby. Can I get you a towel?”

He raised his hammer. He placed the chisel on the block. He was in love.

The Drunken Actor Olympics

“It’s not fair! I’ve worked too hard to end up like this. It’s not fair!”
Lee brought his fist down on the bar so hard that the drunks on both sides of him snapped out of their stupors and looked at him.

“Lee, you’re doing it, again.”

“Doing what again? If you mean getting ready to get on a plane to do another crappy gig for short money, another humiliating slide down the tunnel of what used to be my career, which you’re supposed to be managing, by the way, Ed, if you mean that...yeah, I certainly am doing it again. Whee! Here I go. Wheeee!”

“No, I mean this, this rant. You do this every time you leave town to work. Are you drunk already? Are you at the airport bar yet, or is this the tune up drinks at a bar near the airport?”

Lee looked around him. How did he know that? The bar was, in fact, the Gaslight Club. It had posters of old movies on the walls. He saw a younger version of himself hanging over a player piano in the corner. The glass on the frame was covered with years of smoke and grease, but you could still make out White Hunter clawing his way through the underbrush in a pith helmet and jodhpurs, two steps ahead of a tribe of ravenous pigmies. The scrip spelled out the tag in red bamboo letters.

“DANGER COMES AT HIM FROM ALL SIDES IN THE BRUTAL, UNFORGIVING JUNGLE. DON’T MISS THE LATEST INSTALLMENT IN THE ADVENTURE TALE THAT IS LOVED BY MILLIONS.

LEE EDBURG IS.....WHITE HUNTER”

“Lee, you don’t have to do this.”

“I got no choice, as you know. I’m broke. I have to...”

“No. Not the movie. We both know you have to do the movie. What I’m saying, you don’t have to do this...ritual. You do the same crazy

ramp up to every gig... It's like a sporting event... It's like you're in training for the.... Drunken Actor Olympics. You don't have to...."

Lee hung up, walked across the room, took the poster off the wall and smashed it on the piano, which was playing "Peg O' My Heart." He was out the door in two steps, dragging his bag behind him. Its plastic wheels made a whining sound on the wet pavement.

The flight attendant shook him awake and told him to fasten his seat belt. Bitch, cutting him off after two drinks. Never woulda happened in first class.

The A.D. who was holding up the cardboard sign looked about fifteen. Assistant Director. There were several of them on every movie set. The important sounding title disguised the actual job, which was: go fer. Pick up donuts. Pick up pizza. Pick up the actor.

"Please to meet you, Mr. Edberg."

"It's B U.R..G, by the way."

Kid looks at the sign.

"Oh, yeah." Tosses it into the garbage and grabs the suitcase.

The kid, of course, told him about his screenplay on the way to the Ramada. Trying to get it funded. Could Lee help him out? No, he has never seen a White Hunter movie, but he's heard of them.

"....so, the Slime Creatures have got you backed into a corner, see?"

Why was he explaining the scene again? Why did directors assume he hadn't read the script or looked at his lines? That was happening more and

more. But, he had. He'd looked at them on the plane. He knew where they were. They were on page 12:

Swiftly and Pummelina are backed into a corner of the station. They've stayed too long in their quest to find the plutonium rods and now it's nighttime and the Slime Creatures are crawling out of every nook and cranny, coming closer to them.

Pummelina screams as one drops down from an overhanging beam. Swiftly dispatches it with two short bursts.

"Quiet on set!!", bellows the first A.D. This cry is taken up by the second and third A.Ds down the line and out into the parking lot, where the zombie extras huddle around a fire in an oil drum, eating yesterday's donuts.

"Picture is up!!!". It's not a rehearsal. They're filming. The voices of the A.Ds. bounce off the brick walls of the rotting, abandoned train station as the sun goes down.

Pummelina

"Swiftly, what are we gonna do, they're everywhere? What are we gonna do?"

Lee/ Swiftly

"Do? ... Do?..."

He turns to her. The camera peers at him over her shoulder, where it is held by the D.P. (Director of Photography, who is, in some ways, a more important person than the director. He films the movie. If he is happy, the movie looks good. If not, not. He's the first one to get lunch and the first to get paid.)

Lee turned on his signature enigmatic half smile. He called it his million dollar smirk. He delighted starlets at parties by showing them how

he could do it with either the right or the left side of his mouth, depending on where the camera is. “You might say I’m ambi- smirk- sterous, honey.”

His upper right lip curls up. On the screen, it would be as big as a carp, wriggling in the pale movie light. That is, if this piece of crap makes it into theaters, it would be, he thought.

“Honey, there’s nothin’ to do but kick ass and take names.”

Christ, he thought, must’ve taken the local Paddy Chayevsky all night to come up with that.

He mows down a whole row of rotting slimers. They disintegrate in a cloud of green gas and filthy bandages. He looks down at his fake machine gun. Jeez, I hope this thing looks more real on film than it does right now.

“...and the rhino was so cheap, it just melted in the sun. They’d forgotten how hot the sun gets in Nairobi, and the plastic rhino was melting a little more every day. By the last day of filming, they had two guys standing behind it just to prop it up!!”

This always got a good laugh, and tonight was no exception. The kids all roared at this. He wondered if they really thought it was funny or if they were laughing to be polite, to be able to say they hung out with an old movie star. Hard to tell. They were actors. They could laugh on cue. Cry on cue, too.

Actors always closed down the hotel bar no matter how early their call was the next day.

“So, Lee...” It was his costar, Michelle (Pumelina). She sat next to him at the table in the center of the room. The others were spread out around it in a circle. She was in a skin tight plastic sheath and black nylons.

“So, who was White Hunter’s favorite leading lady? I bet it was Eva Marie Saint. She was always so cool. She was really cool in North By Northwest.”

Norf by norf wasss. She was drunk.

Lee felt a stockinged foot slip under the bottom of his pant leg. A nyloned toe started wiggling on his ankle. He looked at Michelle, who was smiling across the table at something someone was saying and twirling her ice with her plastic straw. It was like her foot was attached to another person, someone else somewhere who was flirting with him. Maybe it was. Maybe Pumelina was giving him the toe job while Michelle was laughing with her friends. Or maybe it was the other way around. Hard to tell. Wiggle. Wiggle.

Michelle was the captain of the Buffalo Women’s Roller Derby team, the Saucy Sadies. There were four of them in the cast: Pummelina, Stormy, Bella, and Kryptina. They played a group of Slime Creatures that tormented him throughout the film. They were built like wrestlers, sinew and brawn, Mohawks and raccoon eye mascara. They had so many piercings Lee wondered if they could pick up radio signals with their noses.

It was a tough racket. He recalled what Stormy had told him over lunch earlier that day at the bar across from the train station.

“Yeah. Canadian girls are fast but American girls hit hard.. At least we’re really girls.” She snorted as she tore into her burger.

They all had bruises from last night’s game. They lost, and they were pissed, especially Kryptina, who had a shiner.

“It’s not fair, but there’s nothin’ we can do about it. That huge Canadian girl was a guy three months ago. Got the operation in Sweden, joins the Toronto team, nothing you can do. I saw her undress...largest vagina I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Huh? What?” He sat up in bed. He had no idea where he was. Someone was knocking at the door. The glowing red numbers on the radio alarm said 2:30 A.M.

He fumbled for the light switch. He had stayed in so many hotel rooms that he had a tendency to reach out on both sides of the bed at once to find the light. It was on the left in Cleveland and on the right somewhere else.

She was in the room before he could say anything. She had on a kind of raincoat.

“OK. Do me, White Hunter.”

Which sounded like “Why Unner”.

It took him five minutes to convince her he had a girlfriend back in Chicago and he didn’t cheat on her. She was getting annoyed.

Then, she whips off the raincoat. She was wearing her costume.

“Alright, if you don’t like me, it don’t matter. I know you like Pummelina, so just do me and think of me as Pummelina.”

It took another five minutes to nudge her out the door and toss her raincoat into the hall after her. She was really angry. How could he tell her the truth? There was no girlfriend back in Chicago. He was sixty four. It took two hours notice, two Viagra and a running start to get it up. He couldn’t just wave a magic wand. Not like he used to. Abra cadabra, baby.

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“.....so, you’re up against the luggage cart and the Saucy Sadies have you surrounded. You pull the trigger but you’re out of bullets. Don’t throw the gun though, like it says in the script. It’s the only one we got. Stormy will take it out of your hands and then she swings you around...”

They were walking through the fight choreography. Stormy slowly swung him around and he blocked out exactly how he was going to fall backwards onto the stack of cardboard boxes with balsa wood underneath them. The cracking of the balsa gave it the right sound, like his vertebrae were popping like firecrackers.

The other Saucy Sadies were huddled in a corner under parkas, sipping from paper cups, looking at the rehearsal. Michelle was whispering to them.

“Quiet on set!....Picture is up!!!” The calls boomed out.

“And.....” The director hunched over a video monitor a few feet behind the camera. “Action!!”

They surround him. He grimaces in disgust when he realizes he’s out of bullets. He waves the gun at them like a club. Stormy rips it out of his hands, throws it down. Grabs him around the waist in a bear hug.

Swiftly (his face is up against hers)

“What’s the matter, honey? Not getting any at home?”

He laughs derisively. His lips sneers to the left, which is where the camera is. Stormy grabs his right arm and swings him around in a circle. The camera follows the action. She twirls him around like a cowboy with a lasso, then flings him into the wall two feet south of the cardboard boxes. His back makes a sound like a fish being dropped onto a butcher’s block. He bounces off the wall and falls onto his face.

“Cut!.. No, Lee. No... We need to have you face up for the close up...Lee....Lee?”

He was out of the hospital in a day and a half. They were able to shoot around him a bit, but it put them behind schedule. The director was apoplectic. They had no money to begin with. If they didn't make up time, they might not even be able to finish the movie. They had to get his final shot the next night. They had to get it in one take. The light was fading when the camera rolled at 6:00 P.M. His plane left at 7:30.

‘.....so it’s a tracking shot... We follow you as you run down the platform. Then, you turn that corner and scream. Ok, Lee?’

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We see Swifty being chased by the Slime Creatures through the station. Just as he thinks he is getting away, he turns a corner. More Slimes are waiting for him, though. We can't see what's happening, but we hear his blood curdling scream and the sound of their jaws snapping as they rip him apart.

He sprinted around the corner and fell to his knees. He threw back his head and let it all out: his career, his life, his two kids that didn't talk to him anymore, everything.

There was pin drop silence on the set as his scream faded down the long platform and out into the Buffalo night. It was a masterpiece. White Hunter didn't even scream that good when he was in the cannibals' cooking pot.

“And...cut! ... And that's a wrap on Mr. Edburg.”

Scattered applause, which fades out behind him as he bolts to the car.

He changes out of his sodden costume in the back seat. He makes it to the United check- in counter. The girl glances up at him from her computer and the blood drains out of her face. She reaches for her walkie talkie and she don't look like she's gonna order a pizza. He forgot about the make up. His face was smeared with Slime and dirt. His hair was standing straight up like a porcupine.

He flees to the Men's Room. What stares back at him in the mirror was not something he would be able to forget, soon. He gets enough of it off to where he was pretty sure children would not run screaming down the hall when he came at them on his way to the gate. He re-wrapped the ace bandage that held his ribs together and hit the bar.

After his third one, he found himself staring at a horseracing poster on the wall. One of the jockeys was wearing a pith helmet and jodhpurs as he whipped the hell out of his mount. Lee chuckled darkly into his drink.

And it's White Hunter on the rail, neck and neck with Oblivion and Failure. Around the far turn. Yeah, baby, the Drunken Actor Olympics.

La Vida es Sueno

Pop!

“Waaaaaahh!!”

“No. No. Don’t cry, honey.. See, the funny clown’ll make you another ducky, won’t you, Mr. Clown?”

Paul did a little hop in his huge orange shoes, smiled a clown smile, reached in his polka dot bag and pulled out three blue balloons and a purple one, at random. Forty two seconds later, he bowed ostentatiously and handed the little girl her new swan.

“Waaaaaaaah!”

“Honey, what’s the matter now?”

“It’s blue. I want it to be red like my other ducky. Waaaaaah!”

Paul Shatzkin was putting himself through Emerson. This was his second summer at Grossinger’s resort in the Catskills. For some reason, the humiliation was getting to him much more, this year. Thank God, this was his last day. Tomorrow, he would do the volunteer gig at that hospital and then point the Toyota west, to Oregon. Gonna trade in these clown shoes for a new pair of Red Wing hiking boots, man.

Going table to table in the main dining room, he had fifteen minutes more of this before the lights dimmed and the first comic came on.

“And what is your favorite animal, little boy?”

“A rhinosceros!”

It turned out looking like a horse with a bulbous head, but, thanks to the power of mental projection and no great expectations on the child’s part, he was able to slide relatively unscathed to the next table over. Thank

goodness for Occam's Razor, the scientific principle that obtained, here, that is: the simplest explanation is the best. If I present you with an object which I represent to be a Rhino, it's simplest if we all buy into that reality.

He had agreed to do the gig Mercy Hospital in the clown suit, but he just couldn't make himself get into it again. Screw it, a couple of balloon animals, a few jokes, and he was out there.

He walked up to the front desk to sign in, but the nurse or whoever must be on a smoking break. He put a stick on name tag on the left hand breast pocket of his corduroy sport coat, and proceeded to the psychiatric ward.

He had agreed to have lunch with the patients before his show and was assured they were all non-violent patients in the this ward.

As he looked around the cafeteria, he saw a young man who smiled and motioned him to an empty seat across from him. A tray with an egg salad sandwich and a paper cup of Cool Aid was already there. The young man smiled again, a pleasant but, clearly, medicated smile. He grasped his Cool Aid cup in both hands, solemnly, like a priest offering the communal chalice to the faithful:

"Ay! Misero de mi, ay, infelice."

"Sorry," said Paul, politely, "I don't speak..."

"They haven't covered Calderon yet at school?"

Paul shook his head. Removes his jacket, places it on the back of the chair.

"Pedro Calderon de la Barca... 'La Vida es Sueno', a seminal existential work. Seventeenth century play. Spanish. Life is a Dream and all the dreamers are, themselves, dreams."

The fellow leans in, conspiratorially, a bit of egg salad depending from his lower left lip.

“The king is forewarned that his firstborn would bring down his throne, so the boy is raised in solitary confinement from birth. Gets let out on his twentieth birthday for one day, during which he commits murder and attempted rape. He is then drugged and placed back in his cell. When he wakes up the next day and asks about his new memories, he is told it was a dream. It didn’t happen. So, what is a dream? What is reality?”

Pops a piece of carrot in his mouth to punctuate the last word.

Wishing neither to offend or to engage this fellow, Paul goes to the bathroom, splashes water on his face, comes back, finishes his Cool Aid and goes into his act, the sooner to hasten his departure to points west.

“So, dear, what is your favorite animal?”

And, he’s making the poodles, swans, the cats, the birds, and then, something sort of shifts inside him, in his mind.

Everything, well, expands, exponentially. The room, while ostensibly maintaining its previous dimensions, seems suddenly to be able to hold a third more space, somehow, like a Volkswagen is able to hold ten clowns in the circus. This observation leaves him feeling rather light headed.

He wafts over to an elderly fellow who is still working on his sandwich.

“And what is your favorite animal, sir?”

Paul stands by, hand in the polka dot bag, ready for whatever pours out of this fellow’s mental menagerie. But, he can’t help noticing that the fellow’s skin is very beautiful. The pores are large and fulsome. The skin tone is what Nefertiti’s must have been, regal and sleek. But then, the skin of his cheeks slips and drains down his neck into the collar of his shirt, as if he had just been painted by Salvador Dali: Person as Melting Watch.

“I don’t really have a favorite animal.”

“Then, perhaps, a favorite subject, hobby, avocation of discipline?”

“Well, I used to be a molecular biologist.”

Paul produces twelve balloons of all colors. He pulls and tweaks and breathes into them, like an alchemist smithy into the fire of transformation. He finds he is giggling to himself and sweating profusely.

Two minutes later, an object stands upright on the cafeteria table. It is four feet tall. At its core are five intertwined little balloons. Wrapped around them in ascending spirals are two huge balloons, reaching upward like intertwining vines toward the sunlight.

An elderly African American lady sitting next to the gentleman asks:

“Are they sausages?”

The gentleman shakes his head.

“It is the conjoined double helix of a DNA molecule. It’s pretty accurate, actually.”

Paul turns to the lady.

“And what can I make for you, dear?”

As he speaks, a feathered headdress appears on her forehead. He has seen it before. Yes, in a picture of the great African American expatriate chanteuse who took Paris by storm in the ‘20s, Josephine Baker. Men would swoon at every show.

“Gee... I always wanted to go to Paris.”

Paul looked at the balloons in his hand. Inadequate medium for expression of this kind. He looked around the room. Were the walls a swirling riot of multi colored paisley designs when he walked in? Hmm . Hard to say.

The catering staff at Grossinger's had dropped off several large platters of chopped liver and crackers. In the center of each was a bas relief of a chicken. It lacked dimensional perspective. It was Chicken Little as he might be portrayed on the wall of an Egyptian tomb.

Paul scooped up the dun colored food stuff. It was cool to the touch, and pliant. As he worked, he grunted, softly. In two minutes he stepped back and wiped his hands on the thighs of his Sergio Valence jeans. He extended an arm.

The lady mounted her walker, hobbled over. Her mouth dropped. She wept softly, tears of joy. It was an exquisite replica of the Tour de Eiffel.

You could see the pendants of French office in the upper reaches. You could see tourists waving to their friends on the ground.

Rising to subsequent requests, Paul transformed the other platters of chopped liver into: "Washington crossing the Delaware" and "Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg address." You could see the speech Abe was holding almost flapping in the chicken liver breeze.

But it was for the catatonic fellow in the purple turban with the red dot on his forehead that he created his masterwork. The patients could hear the slopping sounds coming from the last tray of chopped liver in the corner as they moved the Indian gentleman's wheelchair close to it.

Paul stood back to reveal the Taj Mahal.

"Look, Jugdesh, it's perfect," said his attendant. "The reflecting pool is like glass and the four minarets on the corners of the outer wall are exquisite."

Then, Paul's eyes glazed over and he became lost in his inner dream. Someone led him back to his seat. The young man was gone, as was his jacket, along with his name tag, wallet and car keys. On the table, next to the rind of the fellow's sandwich, was a hospital wrist ID that had been cut off with a plastic knife.

Ten minutes later, as Paul sat in a drug induced stupor and drooled (yes, the fellow had dropped a tab of LSD into Paul's Kool-Aid.), a helpful porter placed the band on his left wrist and led him to the room whose name tag in front corresponded to the name on the band.

It took four days to clear up the mix up.

His Toyota was found at a truck stop in Indiana with his clown costume duct taped to the roof in the form of Christ on the Cross. His clown shoes were impaled on the hood of his car with roofing nails.

He finally got to Oregon, but his view of reality, balloons, chopped liver, and show business would never really return to normal.

I Wish That I Could Give You This Beautiful Moon

Kathy twizzled her twizzle stick in her scotch rocks. She didn't realize she was twizzling faster and faster until she noticed the banker next to her in first class was giving her the hairy eyeball.

"Oh, Jeez. I'm sorry", she said, head down, "Must have been wool gathering."

He smiled. No harm, no foul. Flipped the pages of his Wall Street Journal up with a crisp snap. Went back to saving the world from the poor.

She was conflicted about this trip to Philly to see Larry, the sports medicine Ph.D. she had met six months ago at a convention, there. Kathy lives in Monroe, Wisconsin. Their long distance relationship had become as bumpy as this plane ride, she noted with a lurch.. She looked at the paper bag that winked up from the pouch on the back of the seat in front of her. This might be the flight in which she actually uses that thing.

He seemed so engaging when they met. They were both Bi Athletes, health care professionals, single parents. So much stuff seemed to align. But then he, like, tripped out. A month into the relationship, he was pressing her about marriage. Maybe it was a cultural thing. He was Puerto Rican. She didn't know much about that culture. Now might be a good time to bone up on it, Katherine. She always called herself that when she was internally berating herself, which, she noted while biting her lip, was something she was doing more these days. Must monitor that.

She was a logical person. A good, logical approach to life minimized the random chaos that could come at you from all angles. At least, that paradigm had worked, so far.

Larry had been at loose ends for the past six months. Out of work, doing a little consulting, crashing at friends' apartments, not really desperate, but he could smell that in the air, that summer. "Desperate"

might be on the grill with the burgers by August if he didn't land something soon.

Kathy wasn't a materialistic person. She was spiritual and compassionate. As a psychologist, she tended to view people holistically. She tried not to find fault. She tended to just analyze her way into a compassionate view. It usually worked.

But her patience for Larry's thing was wearing thin. Come on, I don't expect a suite at the Ritz (she had gone online. That was the Waldorf of Philly), but, boy, inviting a girl for a weekend of crashing on a futon in your buddy's pad? How romantic.

Larry met her at the baggage claim. Remember when you could meet your sweetie at the gate, before 911? Along with everything else, International Terrorism had taken the romance out of air travel. How romantic was it to hand over a single, long stemmed rose to your lover in the midst of a throng of harried travelers all flipping the same black bag over and over on the belt? "All these bags look the same!!", was the hue and cry.

Anybody have a gun to your head when you bought the same bag as everyone else, bunky? Maybe you should commission a starving artist to paint a woodland scene on yours, Japanese cranes flapping over the beach at Hilton Head. That'd make your bag stand out.

Gee, why was she being so pissy? Larry was going on and on and she wasn't really listening. Daydreaming about murals on suitcases while he is, forgive the pun, making his case:

"...and I bought the greatest set of steak knives and all my stuff is in the storage unit in boxes and, I'm really energized by this new phase I'm in, where I'm consolidating all my stuff and"

What is it about guys? How many times had she told him that it was far to soon to even discuss him moving out to be with her in Monroe.?

He kept bringing up this image, this ideal evening that he was sure, really sure, was going to come about, as if by repeating it over and over like a mantra, he was going to pull it down from the world of thought and it would manifest itself in the physical world.

“Kath, I can just see us now, you and me and Alice (her daughter) and Chad (his twenty year old son), kicking around a soccer ball in your backyard at sunset while the burgers are on the grill. Then, I see us flopped down on your couch and we all sort of fall asleep while watching “Hook”!”

It was his favorite movie. Dustin Hoffman as Captain Hook and Robin Williams as a middle aged Peter Pan. Grow up, Peter, thought Kathy. Grow up. Grow up, for God’s sake. It’s not gonna happen.

He didn’t listen. Guys don’t listen. It was like he had an internal cork bulletin board stuck to the center of his brain. On it, there was a picture of her face, stuck there with a yellow push pin. Next to that was a picture of Larry crossing the finishing line, coming in eighth last year at the Philly marathon. In a pyramid descending downward, various pictures of his son and her daughter were added to this internal collage.

But anytime she said anything that didn’t fit into that image, he would tell her to calm down, stop panicking, like she was some dizzy dame that would turn into a flibberty gibbet at a moment’s notice, and it was Ranger Larry that would have to come around the bend on Old Paint to scoop her up and ride her over yonder ridge into the sunset. “Don’t you worry your purty little head ‘bout that, little Missy, Ranger Larry’ll keep those rattlers and accountants and lawyers and injuns away from your front door. Yee Haw!!”

God, Kathy, where did that come from? Note to self. One scotch, not two on the airplane, from now on.

Then why was she here? Katherine, why are you here? She found herself berating herself, internally, again and biting her lip.

“And there’s the courthouse where the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, and there’s where they used to keep the liberty bell, but I think they moved it and...”

His manic tour guide routine in the cab was both charming and unsettling. He had a tendency to rattle on as a way to avoid dealing with troubling issues. All the new steak knives and historic landmarks aren’t gonna put Humpty Dumpty back together again in this relationship unless

we face some facts, and pretty quick. She bit her lip again. So why did you come, Katherine?

Kenny, his pal, was trekking in the Himalyas for a month (how cool is that, thought Kathy) and Larry had the place to himself.

As he talked and threw together some stir fry in Kenny's wok, (he had a wok. Gee. Most of the guys I date don't know where the kitchen is in their own homes), she wandered around and tried to get the lay of the land, as it were.

Something caught her eye in the corner. It was a diorama, a miniature scene constructed in a cardboard box. It had a small spotlight over it. It was a night time scene from medieval Japan, bathed perpetually by the light of its own little moon, which never waxed or waned. Oh my God. She knew this. She recognized it from that scene in the movie "Ronin" with Deniro and Jean Mireau (what a hunk).

Deniro was working undercover for the CIA on some caper in France and was wounded. He was recuperating at the house of an eccentric millionaire who constructed perfect little worlds in these dioramas. This one depicted the true story of the Forty Seven Ronin. They were Samurai whose liege lord had been murdered treacherously by a rival warlord. A Ronin is a samurai who has lost his allegiance, in some way, to his master. He is a drifter, an outcast.

Disgraced, the Forty Seven Ronin wandered the countryside, pretending to be bums and wastrels. They wheedled their way into the employ of the lord who murdered their master. Then, one night, they took their revenge. They killed the evil lord and all his retainers. Then, in the moonlight, in the courtyard of his palace, they all committed seppuku, ritual suicide, for they had fulfilled their life's purpose.

What must it be like to be so certain you are fulfilling your life's destiny, even if it is a dark destiny and you are drawn, inexorably, to it?

She peered into the box from every angle. The little Ronin were exquisite. Every sword, every topknot and sash was unique. I wonder if Kenny had given them names, had given them histories and families. They

looked like they might come rushing out of the box at any minute and attack! Who was this Kenny, anyway?

Larry and Kathy made love that night on the futon, with the Philly moon peeping through the window over Chestnut street. It was a bit awkward, unfortunately. I wish he would just relax, thought, Kathy. It's like he's trying to be Arnold Swartnegger and King Kong all in one night.

The next morning, they finally talked about their situation over coffee. Larry was wearing his running gear and Kathy had slipped on a Japanese robe she found in Kenny's closet. This robe was so cool.

Larry was ramping himself up into a froth. Why didn't she just see they were meant to be together? It was all so perfect. Alright, work was an issue, but he had two interviews next week. He'd be on his feet again in no time. Why was she having such a hard time seeing that? Why couldn't she take the long view, for heaven's sake?

He got up to refill his glass with tea. Larry never drank coffee. He drank some expensive tea from Whole Foods.

As he walked over to the teapot, her hand slipped into the right side pocket of the robe. She touched a folded piece of paper. She took it out. It had one line printed on it, in carefully penned script:

"After the snow, the fragrance."

She made a little gasp, then bit her lip.

"What? Did I say something wrong again, Kathy?"

"No, honey. No. Uh, excuse me."

She went into the little bathroom, which was a poster perfect advertisement for Crate and Barrel.

She flipped the toilet seat down, sat on it and withdrew the slip of paper from the robe. She spoke the words, aloud:

“After the snow, the fragrance.”

It was the last line of her favorite Zen poem. With a single brush stroke of words, the poet, whose name was lost in the anonymity of time, had crystallized the essence of perpetual rebirth and the reclamation of the soul in the aftermath of tragedy, of life, of the ravages of time. There would always be the fragrance after the snow. But you had to still be standing, still be alive, in order to breathe it in.

Had Kenny given this slip of paper to his girl one night? Had she put it into the pocket of the robe? Had they read Koans and Haikus to each other, then made rapturous love on the futon in the corner? She wiped off the enamel rim of the sink and placed the paper on it, folded it out and stood it up like a tiny book.

As she stared at it, her left hand drifted to the left hand pocket of the robe. There was something else there. She drew it out and held it up to the Crate and Barrel light. Huh. It was a tiny origami paper crane.

She placed it next to the haiku poem. She looked at little tableau. The two pieces formed a little icon. A tiny waterfall provided by a perpetually dripping faucet in the background completed the scene. Where’s my camera on my phone when I need it?

What kind of synchronicity is this? I was just thinking of cranes, Japanese cranes at the baggage claim. Katherine, you wouldn’t know a Japanese crane if one bit you on the nose, but that was the image you had. It was so clear. A painting of Japanese cranes in the sunset on your suitcase. And now, this. Was this some kind of cosmic sign? Who was this Kenny?

When she emerged from her reverie and walked out of the bathroom, Larry told her it was time for their run. They always ran together on their visits. And this morning, Larry was especially keen to run around the reservoir. It was up there, at the twentieth mile of the Philly marathon, that he had somehow lost the picture of Kathy and Alice that he had taped to his wrist for luck. He was sure he could find it if he just poked around for a bit..

“Honey, that plane ride has really wiped me out. I’m gonna pass for right now. But you have a good one. I’ll be here when you get back.”

That hang dog expression. She could read his mind. He was ticking off items on an internal check list that he was implementing. It was called : “The Big Weekend, the one where I pop the question” If anything she did deviated from the list, which, hello, how was she supposed to know what that was?, he would sulk and simper for, like, an hour until she said something to snap him out of it. “Wanna fuck?” usually worked, but not always.

He didn’t actually slam the door behind him, but it was close.

Five minutes after he left, for some reason, her tension headache, which she had had since mid-flight, went away. Thank you.

She wandered around the place. In another corner was a marble collection. There were at least a hundred, all sizes and colors, some chipped from marble fights (is that what they were called?) some pristine and elegant. Some looked like they were rare and expensive and some were “Cat’s Eye”. Her older brother had those. You got a bag of fifty for a few bucks. They were cheapies, but they had pretty green and blue and red swirls in the center, none the less.

In the front of this display, Kenny had placed five of his current favorites. I bet these changed and rotated with his mood, she thought, like little planets orbiting their own little solar system.

The five on display now were under a light, like the diorama.

“Won this offa Billy Kuberchek in third grade. Won it fair and square, but he didn’t see it that way. Popped him a good one in the kisser. First and last fight I was ever in. I felt ashamed and disgusted with myself, that I hit my best friend in third grade over a marble. Never again. Violence ain’t the way, man.”

Whoa. She realized that this was the external manifestation of an internal healing process. As a psychologist, she encouraged her patients to make collages, pictures, anything that would clarify and objectify their murky internal confusion of neurotic waves and impulses. This was that.

There was a very good possibility that no one, not even Kenny's girlfriend (girlfriends?) had seen this. This was what Kenny was doing to heal Kenny.

Near the window was an old fold out portable phonograph. There was an LP on the turntable with a purple label. The LP jacket was placed on the window seat next to the phonograph.

MUSIC FOR ZEN MEDITATION – Tony Scott

She turned the plastic switch to the right. The tone arm swung obediently over and dropped onto the outer groove of the disc.

The room was suddenly awash with the simplest music she had ever heard. She learned, from reading the liner notes (whatever happened to liner notes?) that, in 1958, the American Jazz clarinetist Tony Scott had made a pilgrimage to Kyoto in Japan, to jam with musician/ monks in a Zen monastery. The recording was a spontaneous interplay between Tony's clarinet and the Koto (a kind of zither) and Shakuachi (a kind of transverse flute), played by the monks. Breaking with an ancient tradition, they had consented to allow Tony to record the proceedings. The music sounded like it was floating down from heaven, but not the heaven of her childhood. This was a benevolent heaven, one that overflowed with an other worldly bliss of a kind she could scarcely imagine.

She found herself at the refrigerator. There was circular picture of the Dalai Lama which was made into a magnet (they had those?). It held in placed the following Zen story , called a koan:

IF YOU LOVE ME, LOVE OPENLY

“Twenty monks and one nun, who was named Eshun, were practicing meditation with a certain Zen master.

Eshun was very pretty, even though her head was shaved and her dress plain. Several monks secretly fell in love with her. One of them wrote her a love letter, insisting upon a private meeting.

Eshun did not reply. The following day, the master gave a lecture to the group, and when it was over Eshun arose. Addressing the one who had

written her, she said: “If you really love me so much, come and embrace me now.”

Oh. Oh. Kathy had to sit down. This was such a powerful confirmation for her. It was exactly what she wanted in a man. Unfortunately, there were aspects of it that were exactly what Larry was not, but that couldn’t be helped.

The loft was old and had a fireplace, which didn’t work, but which still had a hearth. Taped to the shelf above the hearth, like little Christmas stockings, were a series of photos.

Kenny, stripped to the waist, blond and gorgeous, splashing water from a trough onto a Himalayan looking man who was laughing.

“Me and Judgesh, my Sherpa guide. First time up Everest. Little celebration on making base camp on the first day. Right on schedule!!”

The muscles in his back undulated like snakes as he bent over the water and reached into the trough, scooping it up in both hands. The triceps in his upper arms looked like he could have been a blacksmith in some previous incarnation. A blue bandana tied around his head just kept his messy blond hair from falling into his eyes as he squinted into the sun, off camera. The picture could have been taken yesterday or in 1967.

The rest of the weekend went pretty much according to Larry’s plan, except for the part in which he proposed marriage.

Kathy became upset, then, actually.

“Is it possible that I have been speaking in a foreign language to you, Larry? Do you recall me employing any of the following helpful phrases:

Let’s go a bit slower.

Let’s just see what happens as some more time goes on.

And here’s a good one, if a bit hackneyed. It’s always on the top ten list in these situations. Do you recall me, saying, more than once...

I need some space. Do I have to send you a pamphlet or will you just please, once, just LISTEN TO ME?"

Well, you know, campers, that came out way too harsh. Yikes.

And, you can interpret, translate, whatever, that speech any way you wish, but it all boils down to this:

It very well may be that I am not the one who fits into the picture you have of soccer and burgers on the grill and falling asleep with our blended family as we watch Dustin Hoffman try to capture Peter Pan.

I've done everything I can, Larry, to tell you, in as many ways as I can, that I may not be that girl. And I'll just say this: it is, at the very least, unsettling that my concerns and my reservations about how this is going have just sort of flown over your head. Do you not hear me, or do you just decide to ignore everything I say that doesn't fit into what it is you want?

That didn't go very well. Not much was said as he drove her to the plane the next day.

Larry moved out of Kenny's place not long after that.. And yeah, they broke up a month and a half later. How much of a surprise is that.?

Kenny came back from his trek to the Himalayas two weeks after Kathy's visit to Philly.

He awoke on his first morning back in his place, stretched, turned on CNN, made coffee. He flicked on his Tony Scott record. God, he had missed hearing that in the morning.

As he reached into his coffee jar, his hand closed around something.

He pulled it out. It was a piece of paper, folded in half. He opened it.

In a very careful, tiny penciled script, was written:

“ A monk sat in the moonlight on the veranda outside his wooden cottage. As he stared at the moon, a thief snuck into his house and began to put all of his meager belongings into a sack slung around his shoulder, glancing furtively at the monk from time to time.

The thief, in his haste, knocked over a bust of the Buddha.

The monk, hearing this, turned his gaze from the sky to his parlor. He smiled at the thief, who stopped, frozen in his tracks, one hand still in his sack. The monk gestured to the night sky:

“I wish that I could give you this beautiful moon.”

Betty

Betty kept her head down so her co-workers couldn't see she was crying. She tried to keep her mind on the assembly line of Parker pens that drifted by endlessly, and not on her soon to be Ex and the disastrous New Year's Eve Reconciliation Dinner. Welcome to 1969, which, unfortunately, did not start off with a bang. So much for the new black negligee from Victoria Secret.

Through her tears, Betty did her best to do her job, which was to weed out defective pens as they floated by. The clicker told her she had approved 382 so far, today. Oops. Bent nib on number 383. She had to decide whether to toss it or put it in the bin next to her marked: REPARABLE. It didn't look too bad. She dropped it in.

As the lights winked off down the line at the end of her shift, she had just enough time left to repair a few. The last one she got to was 383. Yeah, the nib straightened right out with a brisk tweak of her pliers. She tossed it into the shipping box, closed, sealed, and signed it with her initials and her employee code number. Time for a drink with the girls, a few of them, not girls, drinks. Men. Jesus.

The fork lift guy slid the prongs under the palette the following morning. The truck left the loading dock an hour later on its way from Janesville, Wisconsin to Baltimore, Maryland, to the dispatch center, where the pens would be routed to customers up and down the Eastern Seaboard. 383 wound up in a warehouse in Florida. Three weeks later, it was one of hundreds shipped to NASA at Cape Kennedy.

On the morning of July 19th, the Apollo 11 Astronauts finished their pre-flight briefing. Buzz Aldrin followed Neil Armstrong out of the room.

Oh, he thought of a question for CAPCON that wasn't covered in the briefing. He walked back to the table and grabbed 383.

Betty had given up on the reconciliation by March. By May, she had a new boyfriend. She sat on the bedspread in room 19 of the Northern Motel in Janesville drinking a Vodka and tonic and waiting for him. She was nervous. Today was the day she was gonna confront him. Either leave your wife or they were through. She glanced over at the black and white Philco in the corner. Grainy images of the Apollo Astronauts bouncing around the lunar surface flickered back at her. What do you know? They actually did it.

Buzz and Neil finished their moonwalk and re-entered the LEM (Lunar Extraction Module). They went down their checklist in preparation for lifting off the surface and their rendezvous with Columbia. The crucial thing was starting the Ascension Engine. It was designed for one purpose, to fire just once and lift the LEM off the moon. They were nervous about this for weeks. It had misfired in tests so often, the tech guys figured they had a fifty percent chance of it working, but no one actually said that. If it didn't, the crew joked darkly, Buzz and Neil would become part of a Permanent Lunar Monument to Nasa.

They began the countdown to liftoff. Buzz looked down to make sure his footing was secure and he noticed a silvery, cylindrical object, like a peg from a child's pegboard, lying on the floor in the moon dust. It was the switch to the circuit breaker that controlled the ignition to the Ascension Engine. Out of twenty other switches positioned in a row, Buzz had somehow managed to break this one off on his way out the hatch in the bulky space suit.

If they could not repair the switch, they would not leave the moon.

Buzz looked into the hole where the switch had been. He reached around to the side pocket of his suit and flipped open the Velcro seal. He extracted 383 and pulled off the cover. He stuck it into the hole. It fit. He looked at Neil. He pulled down on the pen. The engine roared to life.

Thanks, Betty.

By the Light of the Silvery Moon

“But we already have the aprons printed up that say “Friends of the Orchestra”. If we have new ones printed up that say “Friends of the Oconomowoc Orchestra” that’ll cost, what, Alice?

“Four hundred and twenty dollars.”

“ Four hundred and twenty dollars. And can we afford that?”

Another voice from across the room:

“But our organization needs an identity. “Friends of the Orchestra” can be any orchestra. We got to get Oconomowoc in there, somewhere.”

Yet another voice:

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Ethel, we’re right here. We’re not in Milwaukee or Chicago. Nobody who comes to our bake sale is gonna confuse us with the Milwaukee symphony, so why change the name? and besides that.....”

On and on it went. The Annual Spring meeting of the Friends Committee, the boosters of the Oconomowoc Community Orchestra.

If there happened to be a wall being painted in the next room, it might be of more interest to watch that than to be here.

“Here” was a musty rec center tacked on to the Oconomowoc Public Library. Coffee (half decaf, half regular) and pastries were laid out.

The minutes from the last meeting were read out and now this, this seemingly interminable debate about the prospective name change..

It was finally tabled and now it was time for the Treasurer’s report.

“I’d like to call on our Treasurer Esther Schleigel to give her Treasurer’s report.”

Esther, who was seventy and a bit hobbled, moved to the podium. Something seemed to be wrong with her hair, which was usually impeccably coiffed. And her makeup, which was always tasteful and pristine, seemed today to have been applied with a spray gun.

The other ladies were just noticing this and beginning to mumble and click about it to each other when Esther reached the podium. She took an inordinate amount of time to fiddle with the microphone before speaking, which drew further funny looks. What was wrong with Esther? She stood up there every month for twenty years and talked into the same microphone.

The thing was, it wasn’t Esther. Esther was asleep in a storage closet somewhere else in the library for which she had served as Head Librarian for the same twenty years.

What was at the podium was a passably good replica, an illusion that was convincing. If the Alien had had a bit more time, it would have been a spot on version of Esther: limp, glottal hitch, sibilance and all.

But the Alien who had taken over Esther’s identity and put her to sleep in a closet was a bit pressed for time and had to improvise.

In the parking lot of the Oconomowoc Library, an Alien craft had landed at 3:23 AM. the night before. Cloaked in an invisibility program, it couldn’t be seen.

But those who parked their Priuses and Aleros near it noticed a faint humming sound coming from an empty parking space. Actually, it wasn’t really parked. It was hovering six inches off the ground.

Alien Esther finally spoke into the microphone. Due to an information mix up, she sounded exactly like David Niven because that was the linguistic template she had hastily called up on her database. It didn’t matter.

“cro..cox.. per... stat stat...ben ze con”

All the talking in the room stopped like someone pulled a plug. Ladies dropped their lemon squares back onto their paper plates as the muscles in their hands went slack.

“cro cox per stat stat ben ze con”

A few heads went down on the tables and were fast asleep. Some people tried to get up, walked three feet, lost the use of their legs, and were now twitching on the floor.

Alien Esther was here to take the group on a kind of test drive.. Let’s see, now. She spoke again, sounding even more like David Niven from the period of “The Bishop’s Wife”.

“You four gentlemen at the back table. It might be nice to have some entertainment. You are a barbershop quartet. You have been rehearsing every Monday night for fifteen years. How about a little bit of “By the Light of the Silvery Moon”?”

The four gentlemen in question, who were standing and smiling in a wan, sort of dazed way, were not really friends. Two were husbands of ladies who had dragged them there and the other two were library patrons who were drawn in by the lure of hot coffee and free pastries. But these things didn’t matter, now.

A short, bald man reached into his pocket. He was searching for a pitch pipe to give the opening note. Not finding one, he realized that he suddenly, spontaneously, had been endowed with perfect pitch so he quietly hummed the first note, an Eb. The others hummed their harmony notes and they were ready to go.

They turned to each other and sang the song at the level of genius:

By the light of the silvery moon
I want to spoon
To my honey I’ll croon love’s tune
Honeymoon, keep a shining in June
Your silvery beams will bring love’s dream
We’ll be cuddlin’ soon
By the silvery moon

It is unfortunate that everyone else in the room was absorbed in their own internal dreams, which were being inputted by Alien Esther, so that no one heard the lovely rendition of that timeless classic, so no one applauded.

The four gentlemen remained standing. In their minds, they saw themselves onstage at the National Convention for Barbershop Quartets. They had just been awarded first prize. A happy fellow with a handle bar moustache in a straw boater and a red and white striped blazer was pinning blue ribbons on each of their chests. They beamed at the ecstatic audience that lay before them. A tear formed in the corner of the right eye of the little bald guy. It was the proudest moment of his life.

“You five ladies back by the coffee machine. You can take off your aprons, now.”

Like zombies, they did. It took them two minutes of fumbling to undo the bows of the apron strings they had easily tied on a half hour ago. As they worked at the strings, their brows were knit with concentration.

“Now, then, you are Hopi Indian Shamans. The valley has been without rainfall for six months. The corn is withered on the stalks. The tribe is starving. Now might be a good time for a rain dance.”

The ladies looked at each other and nodded solemnly. Karen Arbuckle, the wife of the Mayor of Oconomowoc, who was so slender in high school but has since let herself go, waddled to the corner. She overturned a metal wastepaper basket, depositing crumbs, napkins, and half full cups of coffee on the floor.

She walked back to the others and sat down cross legged in the middle of a circle that formed around her. She began a slow, rhythmic pounding on the up turned bottom of the garbage can. From deep within her gut, a soft, keening wail emerged in the form of a chant, an authentic Hopi sacred song.

The others picked it up and began to shuffle and dance in a circle around her. After five minutes of this, a soft crack was heard above them. The fluorescent lights embedded in the acoustical tile above their heads flickered and went out, then other lights went out in their portion of the

room. Then it started to rain. Just on them. Just over where they were. They danced on.

“Hmmm, “ said Alien Esther . She pointed to a twelve year old boy, the son of the vice president of the Friends, Amber Sveneveg. The poor lad had been dragged along today when no baby sitter or play date could be arranged. He looked terribly bored.

“Hmm. A brief display of magic might perk things up.”

He stood , bowed gravely to all assembled. He pushed his sleeves up to his elbows, offered his hands for inspection to the audience. No gimmicks. No tomfoolery here, not in this act.

He reached into his oversized Oconomowoc Middle School hooded sweatshirt and produced first one, then three more, white doves. With a flourish, he released them one by one into the air. They flew exultantly around the room.

He pulled a short black wand from inside the other part of his sweatshirt. He casually waved at it and a three foot tall plume of fire burst out the top. It burned red, then blue, then purple. It kept changing.

Alien Esther watched as all this happened simultaneously. The rain dance, the barbershop quartet, the magic act, all went on and on, the performers happy and oblivious of everything but what they were doing.

To these displays Esther added: a snowboarding competition in another corner, a rugby scrumb, and a rather awkward impression of a group of Egyptian slaves hauling eight ton blocks up the side of the Great Pyramid at Cheops.

Ten minutes later, Esther had saved and stored the data she needed. She walked out of the room, boarded the craft, and left.

The real Esther woke up in the storage room, looked in the mirror and was horrified that her hair was a mess.

The participants in the annual meeting of the friends all woke up.

The five ladies in the corner wondered why they felt wet and clammy.

The boy had difficulty in stopping his magic act. He kept trying to pull things out from under his sweatshirt, to no avail.

The singers stopped singing. They were hoarse. None of them could actually carry a tune in a bucket under normal circumstances.

No one knew what to do, so they resumed the debate on the name change and nothing was said about the “incident” until Joan Carhart, who had been there and was a bit of a show off, marched down to the Oconomowoc Journal and tried to get the story published. But her friend Marge, who was the editor, couldn’t understand anything she was saying, so they gave up and went out for chocolate martinis at the Oconomowoc Tap.

The twelve year old boy bought a book on magic and, a year later, began picking up pretty good money on the side at local parties.

The members of the quartet, much to their astonishment, developed an interest in taking singing lessons.

The ladies in the corner raided every book on Native American culture they could get from the real Esther, who made a solemn pact with herself that she must get more sleep at nights. After all, she wasn’t getting any younger.

Bukowski Slept Here

“Don’t even start. Don’t even start with that, again,” I said, and pushed the vodka across the table so hard, some almost spilled out, which, on our budget, would’ve been a crime.

Yelled at him above the Charlie Parker CD he played non –stop. Apparently, it sounded best to him at two A.M., the jazz witching hour, ‘cause now was when he turned it up every night.

Jimmy intercepted the bottle just before it hit the floor. Poured himself one in a Flintstone jelly jar he found on a shelf in our flea bag hotel . He yelled back at me, above the roar of “Ornithology.”:

“So now I can’t even bring it up? You refuse to even engage in the conversation? Yeah. And I know why. You know I’m right and you won’t admit it.”

“Okay. You’re so damn sensitive. Go. Run it down for me once again, genius”.

He leaned back on the chair, which was a brave thing to do. The dowelling was suspect and rotten. It creaked and groaned. It might give way and deposit him on his ass at any moment. But I knew he liked that. Liked pushing the envelope to see where the thin air turned into a black vacuum. As he talked, he rocked back and forth. Each trajectory of the backward motion of the chair brought him a tiny bit closer to the tipping point, to falling over, to finding the edge of the envelope. Dig him. Dig my pal Chuck Yeager. He goes on:

“Alright. When we decided to come out here to research the screen play, it was because we both agreed, correct me if I’m wrong, that we couldn’t write authentically about the skid row scene in LA unless we experienced it, firsthand. Ok so far?”

I nodded. I’d heard it all, already.

“But Joey, we been out here two weeks, our dough’s almost gone, and it must be clear to you by now that the scene that Bukowski wrote about, and Hammett before him and all those guys, that seedy romantic side of LA , it’s all gone man. Or someone stuck it in a closet somewhere, ‘cause we been to every bar and flea bag on the row, and it’s seedy, alright. I got the chigger bites to prove it, but the romance, the juice, the mojo’s all gone. Vanished, man.”

Now that he said it again, now at two in the morning with our dough about run out, I too began to give up hope of something cool happening to us out here.

Of all those LA writers, Bukowski was the bitch of the bunch. Had the bona fides, the bloody stripes of dues paid in full that bestowed upon him the mantle of Doyen of the filthy backstreet world that so fascinated two soft suburban white boys like us.

Bukowski had survived the systematic brutality of a father who was cruel in a grand Dickensian way. Had to mow the lawn in front of their mean house every week. If he left even one blade of grass standing, he would be beaten severely in the family bathroom by Dad.

Reviled in high school, unprepared for anything normal, he hit the road for a couple of years, returned to LA and worked in the Post Office for twenty years, sorting mail, walking a beat, fending off dogs and irate housewives, all the while sucking it in, getting the stink of LA in his nostrils. When he wrote his first novel “Post Office”, he knew its ontology like Melville knew the sea.

The thing he was proudest of was that some denizen of some terrible bar once pronounced him: “a good duker”. Means someone who can hold his own in a bar fight.

And here we were, two corn fed nubies, faces unmarked by anything worse than acne, yearning to find out what was really down there in the

cracks, in the interstices of society. Truth? More bullshit? Cast off relics of a paradigm that was bankrupt long ago? Who cares? Lemme at it.

But, Jimmy was right. Not to be. Ah, well. We tried.

Just then, there's a massive pounding on the door. We jump up. Look at each other. We knew who it was.

It was the crazy guy from next door, been hassling us all week, scrawny guy, musta been about fifty.

Jimmy shrugs, opens the door. Guy bulls in to the middle of the room and he's screaming:

"That's it, you pukes. I been tellin' you to turn it down all week and you wouldn't listen, so that's it. Who wants it first?"

Without waiting for a reply, he swings quickly to his right and catches Jimmy with a roundhouse to the jaw. I could hear the sickening crack. Jimmy's head cocked quizzically to the side for an instant. He seemed to be studying a stain on the guy's shirt, then he went down faster than Bush ducked the shoe.

I'm stunned. Can't move, which was a mistake, because he reaches across the table, grabs me by the back of the head and smashes my face into the table top three times, bam, bam, bam. I slide down the leg of the table, licking it with my tongue, and pass out.

I hear a scuffle up above, drag myself up in time to see Jimmy on the guy's back. They're waltzing around the room. The guy's flailing with both arms, but can't land one. Jimmy has his left arm around the guy's neck and is wailing on the right side of his face with his right fist as fast as possible. Bip, bip, bip. No punching power, whatsoever. So embarrassing. Might as well be whispering sweet nothings into his ear.

I'm able to rise up and, gauging the path of their next orbit, place myself in its way and punch the guy as hard as I can in the stomach. He can't double over with Jimmy on his back, but it stops him. I move in for an uppercot and he kicks me in the nuts. See what I mean about bar fights?

I drop to my knees, head down at the tip of his brogues. I remember thinking they could use a polish before puking on them and passing out, again.

He flips Jimmy off his back to the right, walks back over to me and kicks me in the head. So humiliating.

Jimmy brings a skillet down on his noggin. Bong! But it's a glancing blow. See, when it comes down to it, when we actually get into the shit, turns out he and I don't actually have the stones to go for the jugular. Too much manners, too much soft upbringing. Nurture and nature, both let us down in the clinches.

I look up to see them with their hands around each other's throat, each one shaking the other's head like it's a maraca on the Cinco de Mayo. Ole!

Something pops out from the guy's face and bounces on the floor. It's like, a big marble. Jimmy stops shaking the guy and backs away with a ghastly look on his face. The guy seems to be winking at us. With one eye.

The other one, which was glass, was rolling on the canted floor toward the stove. The guy bends down to retrieve it. Has no depth perception. Grabs for it four inches to the left of where it was. Jimmy puts one Doc Martin on the guy's ass, pushes hard, and bangs his head off the stove.

Guy jumps up, but it's too late. Jimmy scoops up the eye and tosses it out the window. Guy straightens up, stunned. Jimmy claps his hands twice, then holds up his palms like David Copperfield: "Nothing up my sleeve."

Guy bolts out the door.

Worth the trip, after all. Hemingway had his corrida in Spain. I had my flophouse fight in LA.

Bloodied in the trenches, we went back to Akron and got to work. Whenever my inspiration flagged, all I would have to do is lick the corner of

my busted lip. The taste of my own blood, fairly spilled in stupid, meaningless combat, was all I needed to give me the courage to go on.

The Advent of Crazy Train Jesus

“You know the song? You know the song, Jerry? You say tomato and I say tomahto? Good. ‘Cause I wish I could call the whole thing off, but it’s a little late, for that, isn’t it?”

Bob was on the phone poolside at Andy and Diane’s Bel Air mansion talking to his stock broker and erstwhile best friend.

“It’s a metaphor....uh, analogy, Jerry, whatever.... I am making... acomparison. You say “correction”, stock market correction. I say disaster, financial Armageddon..... Yeah, Jerry, but it’s my portfolio, isn’t it? It’s my money that’s was a half a mil six months ago and now I’m sucking wind. I’m screwed. “

He threw his margarita glass across the pool. It glanced off the diving board and shattered on the tile floor.

“Me, not you....no...shut up... you listen. I’ve been listening to your mumbledy mouth double speak for a year and a half. You told me it was gonna come back up and now I’m broke and you’re still playing that little violin.... correction... I’ve got a correction for you, you freaking fraud.... If you were here right now, I’d correct you in six ways to Sunday, my friend..... what? Don’t even start.... Screw you, Jerry.”

He threw his cell phone down. He curled up in a fetal position and rocked back and forth. What was he gonna do?

He had flown out to LA three days ago from Chicago. His friends we’re throwing him a birthday party. He just turned 58, yesterday. This morning, his hosts left town for Ojai. They’d be back sometime tomorrow. He was house sitting.

He watched the sun set behind the Hollywood hills. He’d been drinking since noon. He was too embarrassed to tell Andy anything. Kept hoping his broker would pull a rabbit out of a hat. But somebody ate the rabbit and the hat was in hock.

If he could get his hands on a couple of hundred dollars, he could get a ticket back to Chi and deal with the situation hands on. He could, at the very least, reach across Jerry's mahogany desk and strangle him with his Three Stooges tie. Jerry thought that tie was so droll, his last remaining link with their college days. Who knew it would come to this when they were coming up? Bob made money in the family business and Jerry invested it.

Then the family furniture business went belly up and Jerry lost his mojo. I'm gonna kill that freaking little twerp, thought Bob.

But first I gotta get back to town.

He drained the rest of Andy's primo tequila from Cabo, then switched to beer. By ten he was so freaked, he was shaking. The pomeranian and the collie kept coming up to him, then backing away. They knew enough to stay clear of an unstable humanoid.

By midnight, he was ready to do the Dutch. Maybe raid the medicine cabinet, take everything in it and ease into the Jacuzzi. Open his veins like a roman Consul who bet on the wrong horse, like Franky Pentangeli in the bathroom in Godfather with the FBI guys playing cards in the next room.

No, he didn't have the stones for that.

He looked around. When he realized what he was gonna do, his stomach lurched. But he was gonna do it anyway.

Forty five minutes later, he pulled out of the driveway. His rental car was stuffed. Two wide screen TVs, two computers, Diane's jewelry box, Andy's Calloways, the good silver, a bunch of other stuff.

He drove as carefully as he could, but how good that was he couldn't really reckon. He'd found two Nembutals and three xanax and washed them down with vodka. A good diet consists of all the major food groups. He'd seen a chart in fifth grade.

He was headed to a hock shop in Compton that a junkie friend told him about. He somehow made a wrong turn (how could that happen?) and wound up careening up into Mulholland Drive at three AM. He almost made it through to civilization on the other side of the hills. The panic attack took him by surprise.

Panic attacks don't really announce themselves.

"Hello, bob, you might want to place a popsicle stick in your mouth to keep from swallowing your tongue, because in the next twenty minutes, you're going to feel like you're dying. You won't know what you're dying of, you just won't be able to breath, think, or move around very well. Cheers. Here it comes."

He had just enough time to pull the Dodge whatever it was over to the gravel shoulder. Just enough time to bolt from the car and vomit into the dry scrub. Everything came up and out. He gave up the totality of his consolidated being.

He knew he had just irrevocably turned down an alley so dark there would be no going back. His friends would come back to a ravished house. The birthday cards and little gifts were still on the table on the patio, a Seal Beach Tshirt with sharks mooning the viewer, three bars of good chocolate from the beautiful redhead director, half a cheesecake from the founder of that wildly successful restaurant franchise.

Why hadn't he just reached out for help? Anyone, anyone at that party would have helped him. Was that more humiliating than this? No, the advantage to ripping off your friends was that it gave you a psychological certainty about who you were. It left absolutely no room for speculation about what kind of an asshole you really were.

Yes, indeedy. This was the best way to serve notice that you have officially launched yourself on a downward spiral as rapid as a flume ride at your (estranged) kids' favorite water park. It served a murky purpose so twisted that it didn't really bear thinking about.

When there was nothing left inside him, he wiped off his mouth with Eucalyptus leaves and tried to stand. He made it on the third try.

No, I'm not going down like this.

Twenty minutes later, he was sneaking back into Diane and Andy's . He was halfway through putting all the stuff back. He was standing in the driveway between the car and the front door, struggling under the weight of a flat screen TV, when the gate flew open and he was nailed in the headlights of Andy's BMW.

He dropped the TV and it shattered on the gravel.

Diane and Andy got out of the car and approached him. It occurred to him, in a moment of surprising clarity, that he had seen the look on their faces before. Yes. On the history channel, when re- enactors were approaching a UFO that had landed in the woods.

Halfway through their two day spiritual retreat on Mount Ojai, Andy and Diane abandoned their mosquito infested pup tent for the percale sheets and air-conditioning of Bel Air. They weren't prepared in any way for this twisted floor show at 4 AM.

Bob scampered into the house. He leapt around the room like a Ritalin crazed tot. His wiring was wonky. He was mad in a classic way.

Andy and Diane entered the house. They kept moving toward him but they couldn't form any words, yet. A new language would have to appear from somewhere. Words to the effect of: "Why are you, our best and most trusted friend, stealing our stuff?", could not yet rise from their throats.

Although most of Bob's brain had festered and shut down, part of him was actually trying to form some explanation. His mouth opened and closed like a guppy's.

As the couple continued to move toward him, he happened to notice something on the wall behind them. There was a large Russian Orthodox icon of Jesus on a cross hanging on the wall. Next to that was a signed poster of Ozzy Osborne: "To Diane and Eddie, cheers, Ozzy."

Thank you, Prince of Darkness. That was it. It was time to board the crazy train.

Bob rose up to his full height and inhaled, deeply. He walked in between both of them, to the Jesus icon. He turned, faced his friends, and assumed the icon's pose of Christ on the Cross. He let his head drop to his chest. He let his eyes roll up till the whites showed. He imagined the nails, the spear piercing the side, the ascension of consciousness into an ethereal realm. When he was ready, he spoke from that place:

'Diane, Andy, it pleases me that you have responded to my inner prompting, that you have abandoned your ill advised foray into false searching, that you have come home... to me....'

He smiled a benevolent smile, as one might smile on mischievous children who have seen the error of their ways.

Andy and Diane exchanged ghastly looks. Bob continued his discourse:

"Yes, my ministry begins here, with you...here... in this house.. this house which we shall sanctify...now"

Andy found his voice:

"Bob, how much have you had to drink?"

"Enough to quench the thirst of the world."

Diane spoke:

"Bob, why is our stuff in the back of your car?"

"Oh, perhaps...yes, Diane... perhaps you are right. I had thought it necessary to begin the great cleansing at the ocean, but perhaps we'd needn't go that far."

He walked to the car and scooped up a Mac Power book G4 and three Nintendo WIs.

He passed back into the house and out to the patio. He turned to them, smiled wanly, and tossed all of it over his head into the pool.

“I am come, lo, even now I am come ...to release you from the filth of your mean existence.... All this....”

He waved his arms,, gesturing broadly at everything.

“All this must go if you are to receive me in your heart.”

He began leaping about once more and spouting half remembered bible verses at the top of his lungs.

When the EMT guys pulled him feet first and screaming from the doghouse next to the Cabana, he was invoking all the saints and angels upon their heads. He wailed and prophesied until the doors shut and the siren came on, and still Diane and Andy could sort of hear him as the truck moved out to the street.

A week later, the staff physician in the psych ward gave him back his cell phone:

“Jerry, are you serious?.... Forty two percent?... it’s come back forty two percent?Hallelujah... yes. Yes.. ..all is forgiven... and, may the blessing of Crazy Train Jesus descend upon your head...I said...Crazy Tr.. forget it....Go make me money... Get all my beanies back, baby.”

Charlie O’Gill and the Little People

Sign on the pebbled glass door: “Rineheart Collection Agency, Los Angeles.”

Inside, the boss pulls out a file, slams the drawer shut, and turns to me:

“Circus is in town.”

“So?”

“So, you’re goin.”

“No, I’m not.

“Yeah. You are. Comes around less often than Haley’s comet. Now’s the time.”

“I hate clowns.”

“How about midgets?

“Huh?

“Two midgets....

Flips through the file. It probably looked better when it was new, in 1958. Five years later, it was thumbled over and wilted.

“Arnold Klaus and Jeffrey Roy, owners of the Big Top Carnival. They’ve owed the county \$12,500 in illegal land use fines for the past three years. They tend to just pitch that big tent anywhere they want. Original fine was \$10,200, but the vig keeps growin.”

“Funny how that happens. Please, boss, put Jerry on it or somebody. Circuses make me, like, ill. Just the smell, even.”

“You see anyone else around? Put in a chit for gas. You’re going to Barstow.”

I pulled the Studebaker into the dusty parking lot at sunset. The Sunday matinee was almost over. Show my ID to the guard at the back of the Big Top tent. Walked in and almost puked.

All those animals, the smell. You could almost see the stink waves comin’ up off the ground. Isn’t there a little guy with a white hat and broom who takes care of this? There certainly is in the joke:

Guy walks into a bar every night.. Whines to the barkeep about how terrible his job is, sweeping up after the elephants.

“So why don’t you quit?”

“What, and give up show business?”

Sorta how I felt about my job at the moment.

Found the midgets’ dressing room. They were seated at two tiny makeup mirrors applying pancake makeup, getting ready for the finale, the elephant parade.

The usual whining and excuses ensued. Finally, I agreed to have the drink they kept offering so we could get down to brass tacks. If I could just get ‘em to part with a coupla grand, I could get outa there. The agency was gonna get stuck with a cleaning bill. The stink was seeping through my best suit.

They weren’t such bad guys after all, turns out. At least, after a few drinks. that is. Sad life, that, always on the road with a flea bitten carnival that was on the verge of collapse, like the patched and moldy tent that loomed over us.

Tough bein' a little person, too, as you can imagine. That's the term they preferred, little person. Although there was the occasional twisted thrill when some drunken woman wandered back there with a hankering to find out what it was like to do 'em.

I started to feel queasy. Then, dizzy and queasy. It's this bad rye. Probably all they can afford. Thought I could hold my liquor:

"Alright....alright...you guys, I...gotta get back...so fork it over...gimme a grand or I'll be in Dutch with the boss."

Just before I passed out, I remember being on the ground looking straight up at the top of the tent where a naked light bulb seemed to be pulsating.

Then, I come round and see the little persons talking to a guy in white overalls and a black helmet. Has: "The Amazing Mandrake" in red flowing script embroidered on his back. Then I pass out, again.

The midgets, assisted by the Amazing Mandrake, managed to get Charlie on his feet. They frog marched him to the entrance wing. The elephant parade was half way around the ring. When the band played Mandrake's entrance music, they walked him into the spotlight, to the general acclaim of the crowd.

The midgets cavorted and danced as Mandrake opened the breach of the modified 1879 Naval howitzer and pushed Charlie into it like he was a Christmas turkey in Grandma's oven.

He put an extra bag of powder into the breach and jammed it up against Charlie's brogues.

Then, the midgets leapt away from the cannon and stuck their fingers in their ears, ducking and grimacing, so that the audience knew a big bang was coming. The conductor cued the drum roll.

Charlie awoke, briefly. First, he thought he had died and gone to hell Hell, apparently, was a suffocatingly narrow metal tube. Or maybe he had been mugged and placed in a culvert somewhere. He was so loopy, he

didn't care and, actually, didn't mind. Whatever the little people put in his drink, it made Charlie think that everything was hunky dorey.

The music swelled to a big climax. A cymbal crashed. Then, a sound erupted from somewhere south of his shoes. It was like a giant belching out the word: "Fwoop!!"

He hurtled through the air in a graceful arc that wafted him into the upper reaches of the tent. He passed two pigeons who were sitting on the trapeze rigging. He and the pigeons exchanged quizzical glances. What are you doing here?

When gravity tugged at his sleeve and his trajectory began its descent, he didn't mind, he wasn't upset. "Gee," his pickled brain reasoned, "What goes up must go come down."

The midgets hoped the extra charge Mandrake put in the cannon would serve to splatter Charlie against the upper tier of the grandstand, eradicating both him and their debt.

But I guess it wasn't Lucky Dwarf night in Barstow. Charlie sailed twenty feet over the safety net, puking in mid flight, and smacked into an elephant in mid stride. He slid down the side of the beast and was knocked out cold on the dirt floor below. Then Charlie's shoes, which arrived three seconds later, hit the elephant in the ear and the trunk, respectively.

Both legs of his pants were on fire at the cuffs, and the one remaining sock he had on was smoldering.

The elephant was about to bring his foot down on Charile's face when he was yanked to safety by two clowns. This was the moment, he would always say, when he got over his hatred of clowns.

He crawled across the sawdust ring (to resounding applause, by the way.) Dragged himself up into the Studebaker, he made it two miles down the road before pulling over, crumpling to the gravel shoulder, puking again, and passing out.

The state trooper who shook him awake four hours later regarded him with a jaundiced eye. His ID and license were in order, but the dried puke and sawdust patina that covered him were credentials of a different and unsettling order. And he appeared to be wearing Bermuda shorts that had been hemmed with a blow torch.

The trooper leaned over him and spoke to him as you would to a retarded person or someone from Albania.

‘Sir,... sir.. please look at me... Thank you... sir.. where were you?... what happened to you?’

Charlie was still drugged:

“...just visited some friends at the traveling circus, officer.....some little people.... They prefer to be called little people..... Did you know that?’

The cop tossed the ID onto Charlie’s ruined suit front, mounted his motorcycle, and left. It was gonna be a long day on this bad stretch of road.

Downtown Pogrom

Ed Arnstein was a creature of habit. He found it comforting to him to repeat things in a certain order. He had many little rituals and this was one of them.

He walked into the Korean deli on the lower East Side. He put things in his basket. He browsed. He hummed to himself. Handel, sort of. He had a list.

Then, he found himself in a section of the store where there was a blind spot. No camera coverage. He knew where the five surveillance cameras were. He hadn't intended to memorize their locations, but, over the past year, he just sort of knew.

It started. First, the sick feeling in his stomach. Then, sweat on his forehead and hands. His heart raced. His leg twitched.

No, damn it. No. How many times do we have to go through this? No means no. Just walk away.

But, he couldn't walk away. His brain went dead. He saw himself slip a little can of something into his jacket pocket, as if it were someone else's hand, someone else's pocket. When he got home, he found out it was WD-40. But that didn't matter, now. What mattered now was that, after he lifted it, his pulse normalized, his leg stopped twitching, and he was able to go about his business. When are you going to address this in therapy, Ed? When?

He placed the stuff (except for you know what) on the counter: Two cans of Purina mixed grill cat food, which was Matisse's favorite (not the artist, the cat), three Frozeefruit popsicles, and a six pack of diet coke. While waiting for Mr. Lee to ring it up, Ed glanced at the front page of the Village Voice:

*COURT RULES IN CITY'S FAVOR. 11 RIVINGTON STREET
GOING CONDO.*

In a move that sounds the death knell to yet another collective of artists' studios and living spaces, the city has won its seven year battle with "Art Group Zero" at 11 Rivington Street. The artists, who have lived and worked there, some for as long as thirty years, are being evicted and the lofts will be converted to condos. Nothing, it seems, can stop the gentrification of the lower East Side. Goodbye art, hello more yuppie invaders.

If you want a sign of the times, you better get a machine to make it for you, 'cause the artists who paint them are going the way of the Dodo.

"So," Steven told his friends, "they finally got Group Zero. That means they're gonna come after us, next. You guys know that?"

They were the last ones in Puffy's as the rain came down outside. They were also the last members of another artists' collective: "Studiolo", named after the carved wooden room from the Italian Renaissance, the one that had representations of all the arts sculpted into its walls.

Ed juggled the ice in his glass, looked back at him and said:

"Yeah. Unless we do somethin' to stop 'em."

"What can we do?" said Jeremy. "Group Zero fought for years. They wound up in hock to lawyers and still lost their studios."

"Well," said Ed. "If the system is stacked up against you, maybe you have to go around the system."

The other two looked at him.

“Seriously. Group Zero played according to the rules like nice, middle class white boys and where’d it get them?”

Jeremy put down his beer.

Steven lit a cigarette.

“So, what are we talking about, here, Ed?”

Ed leans in.

“Just think for a minute. What was the last part of the city to be gentrified.”

“... uh...Harlem, I guess.”

“ And why was that? What took them so long to convert those rat trap tenements into yuppie showplaces?

“No one would go up there...”

“Because of....” Ed formed his hand into a little gun, his index finger pointing right between Jeremy’s eyes, his thumb jiggling up and down like the hammer as it fired. Jeremy’s eyes crossed as he looked at it.

“Highest crime rate in the city.”

“Ah... give the man a cigar.” He taps him on the forehead with the index finger. “ Something to think about, isn’t it?”

Two weeks later, they were standing behind Crate and Barrel at two A.M. in ski masks with crow bars and canvas sacks. Jeremy and Steve tried to back out but Ed made them go through with it.

“Ed... Ed. That’s it. Time’s up.... Hey... Hey”, hissed Steve, but Ed seemed not to hear. He was pounding stuff into his sack like Santa in reverse.

Jeremy finally went over and had to shake him. Ed looked at him like he was seeing a ghost. The other two hustled him out of there.

Two nights later, they hit a shoe store near Mulberry, the Italian side not the Chinese side south of Canal. Lifted twenty boxes of imported loafers. Ed went into a little trance, again.

“Jeez. Ed. Are you okay? You’re sweating.”

“Just a little nervous, Steve. Aren’t you? It’s not like we’re Bonnie and Clyde. It’s not like we do this every day.”

But, with each score, Ed’s collection of twitches and ticks became harder to hide from the others. A dark ecstasy flushed through him with every illicit piece of contraband that went into the bag. Didn’t matter what it was.

Two months later, there was a story on page three of the Voice:

CRIME WAVE HITS ORCHARD STREET

An unprecedented series of robberies has left the residents of the lower east side reeling. Up until very recently, the four square block area known as “Little Orchard” has been among the most stable and peaceful in the city, but no more.....

Matisse (the artist, not the cat) looked down from within his frame over the potted plant with a slightly bewildered smile at the twenty five shoe boxes that were stacked up almost to his eye level. The other Matisse jumped up on the sofa, knocking over a pile of CD's. The apartment was stuffed with enough goods to open a small department store.

Ed threaded his way through the mounds of stuff and plopped down on the couch with his English muffin and cup of coffee. His cell phone was ringing, somewhere. He fished it out from under a pile of ties and shirts from Burberry's.

"Yeah..." He sipped the coffee. "Now, I guess.. Yeah, Steve. Come over."

Jeremy and Steve threaded their way through the stuff and sat across from Ed at his kitchen table.

"Ed...that's it, me and Jeremy can't do this anymore."

"What are you saying? It's goin' great. Look at all this stuff."

"That's just it. We been lucky, but it's bound to run out."

Jeremy chimes in.

"Also, Ed, it ain't working. There is no indication in any of the papers that the investment groups who are eyeing our buildings are backing off from this neighborhood. Our little crime spree is just annoying to them. That's all...And, well, there's something else..."

Jeremy falters and turns to Steve, who picks up the thread:

“This is kinda hard to say Ed, but, well....it’s getting weirder and weirder to do this stuff with you. You sort of”

“Change... you change. You just go into outer space mode, or something. It’s not good, so it’s in all our best interests to...”

Ed jumped up.

“Alright. I get it. I knew you two didn’t have the stones to go through with this. So, now you’ve made your little speech and you can go.”

A brief verbal scuffle ensued. The door slammed and Ed was left brooding to himself. He would show them. He’d show everyone.

Later that night, he sat hatching the next phase of his plan while staring at the tube.

“Lord of the Rings,” for the fiftieth time. Golem, formerly Smeagle, clutches the ring, rapt in its spell: “Oh, my precioussss. My precioussss.”

Two A.M., a few nights later. He walks into the Korean Deli wearing a paper mache mask he’d made. The glue was still wet. The face was a fair representation of Mayor Michael Bloomberg. His little statement. What the hell. He was still an artist.

When he slipped the mask on, he felt the familiar rush, the twinge, like slipping into a Jacuzzi, but in someone else’s body. He was way past therapy.

Picks up some stuff. Walks to the register. Takes out a gun he’d lifted from the pawn shop down the block. It was slightly bent and had no firing pin, but so what. He had already decided to disguise his voice, so he did the only impression he knew:

“Put the money in the bag...in the bag, precioussss”

Mr. Lee, nervous but not terrified, takes out the cash from the register and throws it in the canvas sack. He begins putting the grocery items in, too:

Two cans of Purina mixed grill. Three Frosefruit popsicles. A six pack of....

Mr. Lee freezes.

They say a shoe salesman can recognize a whole family of steady customers by looking at their feet. This was kind of the same thing.

“Mr. Arnstein... Mr. Arnstein.. is that you?”

Ed froze.

“I know it’s you... You always buy same thing... same thing all a time. Why you want to rob Mr. Lee.... I been good to you.”

Ed runs out the door. He was ashamed. What had happened to him? How had he come to this? He throws the mask into a dumpster and heads home, where the cops are waiting for him on the stoop.

THIEF OF ARTS SENTENCED TO FOURTEEN MONTHS

Ed Arnstein, or, as he has come to be known as a Cause Celebre on the downtown scene, The Thief of Arts, was sentenced yesterday to fourteen months in jail, to be followed by one hundred and thirty hours of community service.

Arnstein’s supporters ringed the courthouse at 1 Centre Street in Manhattan in protest of the verdict. Although unsuccessful in his bid to be exonerated, Arnstein and his lawyers did manage to draw considerable attention to the plight of the East Village’s artist community, who are being forced out of their studios by the gentrification of... ..

One perk of celebrity was that he was allowed to have paint and canvas in his cell. The series he created, entitled “Downtown Pogrom,” was selling like hotcakes in three Soho galleries. They depicted himself and other recognizable artists being roused out of their lofts by Cossacks, in the style of the persecution of his Jewish ancestors in 19th century Russia. One wag on the New York Post dubbed him “Fiddler with the Loot”.

His Studiolo pals, who had snitched on him and gotten off, didn’t get any art shows or articles in the Voice. Ha Ha, you louses!

“That’s better,” Ed said, looking over Miguel’s shoulder. “Try to create a sense that the moon in your painting has a certain weight, a certain density, a presence.”

Teaching art in prison wasn’t too bad. Better than working in the laundry.

When he got out, he began a new project inspired by the first article in the Voice: “Signs of the Times”, a series of placards for the fronts of downtown businesses, as part of his community service obligation.

Mr. Lee especially liked his, which depicted him being held up by the Mayor of New York, who was holding a gun in one hand and a popsicle in the other, an image captured from the surveillance cameras and which had gone viral on Youtube.

Ah, as Saul Below said upon learning he had just received the Nobel Prize for literature: “One gets famouser and famouser.”

Me and My Buddy

Eugene Birnbaum's life was perfect, but now this.

Mr. Oxfeld recruited him out of college and had brought him along with great care. And now, Eugene was preparing to take the C.P.A. exam next week. With Mr. Oxfeld tutoring him, his confidence, which was not his strong suit, began to perk up.

Eugene was a skinny, meek young man. No one knows why his high school acne never went away. When he became nervous, shy, or flustered, all of which could occur simultaneously, his face would erupt like Krakatoa east of the Java machine in the corner of his little cubicle at the accounting firm of Oxfeld and Cohen.

And, wonderfully enough, after six or seven dates it looked like he might actually score with Cindy Metzger, the cute nurse from the Health Clinic on the fourth floor.

Everything was perfect.

But yesterday he walked into Mr. Oxfeld's office and found him slumped over in his Office Max swivel chair, his head plopped onto the desktop. A little bit of dribble had oozed out onto a printout of some actuarial tables.

Mr. Oxfeld had a pocket calculator in his left hand and a bagel, loaded with a generous smear of cream cheese, in his right. (What had Dr. Epstein told him about cholesterol?)

In the same way that the King of England is portrayed holding the scepter and orb, the symbols of British Sovereignty, so shall Mr. Oxfeld remain in Eugene's mind in this final tableau, clutching these twin artifacts, his emblems of office.

Eugene joined the family sitting Shiva at the wake. Mr. Oxfeld's wife was wondering how much was in his retirement fund. His son was thinking about the Mustang he was going to order tomorrow.

Eugene, though, davened and wailed. Alone on a bench in the back of Temple Beth Shalom in Great Neck, his life was falling apart. If he had suddenly awoken to find himself in a pup tent on Neptune, he could not have been more disoriented.

It was Mr. Oxfeld who increased his salary last year so that he could move out of his parents' home.

It was Mr. Oxfeld who prodded him gently into asking Cindy Metzger out after learning of the five months of furtive flirtation in the building's elevator as they found themselves smushed together sometimes in the morning. She would always smile back at him when she got off on four.

And it was Mr. Oxfeld who convinced him he could summon up the nerve to take the C.P.A. exam, to storm the battlements of the Bailey of accounting. Anointed as a Certified Public Accountant, the doors of life would yawn wide before him: Cindy, a partnership, anything was possible. But now, this.

If Eugene drank, he would be drunk. If Eugene had friends, he would seek consolation. But he was a teetotaler and friendless, so he sat in his apartment at one AM and watched the science channel and wept quietly to himself. The cold he had picked up two days ago had worsened. He popped Tylenol like M & M's.

It was a show about the occult, a practice called automatic writing. Apparently, if you could achieve the proper mental state, you could receive communication from a departed spirit who would control your hand and write the answers to your questions for you on a piece of paper. Eugene determined to give it a try. What did he have to lose?

He got every book he could find on the subject. He bought a Ouiji Board and crystals that were supposed to tell the future, and CD's of trance inducing music. In a week, he had transformed his living room into something you might encounter with a sign in front that said: "Psychic Readings. \$10."

Every night, he called out to Mr. Oxfeld to “come through” from the other side. He heard no answer, only the hum of his refrigerator and a car alarm going off on Flatbush Avenue.

Then one, night, after popping three more Tylenol (when would this cold go away?), he tried again. And that’s when it happened.

He had fallen asleep over his notebook, the pen still in his hand. Suddenly, he felt an electric thrill racing up his spine. Then, something like a Fourth of July fireworks display exploded in his brain. His eyes teared up. His face flushed. His acne boiled to the surface. His right hand took up the pen with a force that was uncharacteristic of him. It began to move across the paper. He had no control of it.. His arm felt like it had a thousand volts going through it. His fingers clutched and cramped around the pen. Words formed on the paper like a spider crawling across the page. It wasn’t his handwriting.

Hello, Eugene.

He threw down the pen like it was a hot poker. He got up and walked around the room, accidentally kicking over the little display of crystals and unicorns he had laid out on a blue velvet carpet on the floor.

He put his hand to his forehead. Felt like he was running a fever, again. He looked at the table like it belonged to someone else in a different apartment, somewhere.

Sat down. Closed his eyes.

“Mr. Oxfeld, is that you?”

Two minutes go by. With an almost audible rumble, the energy comes up his spine again, and out through his hand, through the pen, onto the paper.

Yes. It’s me.

Tears of joy well up in his eyes. He has to take off his glasses and wipe them.

“Oh, Mr. Oxfeld, I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed you. I feel so lost without your guidance. Please, please tell me you’ll help me.

Another minute passes. Like a time delay on a bad overseas email connection.

Of course I will. But first, you must do something to help me.

Eugene noticed the writing deteriorated badly by the time it reached the end of sentences. It must take an enormous amount of energy to move that pen from the other side.

“Anything, Mr., Oxfeld. I’ll do anything.”

. Open you mind. Wide open. Open it to whatever might come along. No expectations. And just wait.

He did. After a few minutes, he felt a rumbling. This time it seemed to be coming from deep in his lower intestine. He burped. He farted. He had to stand, to walk around the room. He was being taken over by some other energy. He felt bloated, like he had just eaten three turkey dinners in a row. Then, it hit him.

Something entered his body from the back and spread itself out inside him. He felt like a balloon that some kid was blowing up to see how much air it could take before it burst. The veins in his neck stood out in cords. He shook. He hopped around the room on tiptoe. There was no escape. Then, he collapsed and passed out.

When he awoke, his glasses were next to him. He had drooled onto the polymer remnant carpet his mother got him. His back ached. He had to move his bowels. He looked at his swatch watch (he bought it in 1989, but it still worked) and his mouthed dropped open when he realized only five minutes had gone by. That can’t be right.

He stumbled to the bathroom sink, turned on the tap. Closed his eyes, splashed water in his face. Opened his eyes. Looked into the mirror. His blood ran cold. The face that peered back at him looked like his face if it had been sketched by a child, a retarded child. He saw the corners of his mouth pull back in a kind of grin, but his brain wasn't sending any signals to his facial muscles to congeal themselves into a smile. Nothing struck him as funny, right now.

His jaw popped open. It felt like a dentist was prying it open. He saw himself forming soundless syllables into the mirror. Then, he heard the voice:

Hi. Let's be friends.

He put both hands over his mouth. His eyes were wide. He looked like that wispy figure in that painting "the scream." He clamped his mouth shut. It was as if he had just caught himself screaming out a curse word in school.

Then, something pulled his hands apart so quickly, he banged his left arm on the towel rack and overturned his Wal-Mart soap dish.

I said hi. Let's be friends.

Still looking in the mirror:

"Mr. Oxfeld. Is that you?"

A minute goes by. He's staring into the reflection of his own eyes so hard that his vision telescopes into a little point straight ahead of him.

"Not exactly."

This is what has happened, according to the very expensive new age therapists that sorted it all out, eventually.

Above our normal realm of awareness there are, apparently, other, higher realms that move to the tune of vibrations so accelerated that their existence cannot be discerned with our corporeal senses.

One of these is the Astral Plane. It's a kind of constantly flowing river of souls who no longer occupy physical bodies. Ghosts, if you will. Saints, kings, known and unknown figures from the past, all floating around up there. They share one thing in common. For some reason, they have been unable (or unwilling) to pass through whatever membrane will transport them to the next life or the next level. They hunger for the sensate experience that they miss from the earthly life. It is a hunger unabated and unsatiated, a thirst that can only be slaked through the medium of the senses. And you need a body for that. Any body.

Along with the kings and the saints on the Astral Plane, you have the ghosts of killers and miscreants of all stripes, of psychos who died screaming with popsicle sticks between their teeth, of bowery bums who sucked down one too many tins of sterno in a frozen gutter long ago.

And, you have Joe "Buddy" Saterfield, who was put to death in an Alabama electric chair in 1942 for killing a bank guard in a botched robbery. But Buddy wasn't floating around in the Astral wash, anymore. Buddy was inside Eugene.

As Eugene was later to learn, we all are equipped with something called an Akashic Shield. It's like a door that God keeps shut to keep all that stuff from flowing down into us. But, by a combination of his nocturnal efforts and, believe it or not, a massive dose of Tylenol, the Akashic shield above Eugene's head was pried open just a crack.

Unfortunately, it wasn't Mahatma Ghandi or Louis Armstrong who happened to be passing by at the time. It was Buddy. He saw the crack, applied a kind of psychic crowbar to it, and parachuted in.

He was happy to be inside Eugene. Besides being a violent sociopath, Buddy was an alcoholic and a sex addict who hadn't had a drink or gotten laid in seventy seven years. It wasn't much fun floating around like a manatee up there in the Astral Wash, but Buddy was gonna make up for lost

time. . He had been planning this trip to Disneyland since 1942, and he knew just where the cotton candy machine was.

Buddy jerked Eugene's body out of the bathroom and out the door of his apartment. He careened down the stairs to the street below so fast, he was sure he was gonna break his neck. Eugene found himself, quite against his will, bustling along the pavement on Flatbush Avenue like a little steam engine. He gasped, he whimpered, he pleaded with "Mr. Oxfeld" to stop, but the train kept a rollin' all night long, as the song says.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the showroom window of a Prius dealership, cast in the pale light of a nearby street lamp. His limbs moved unnaturally, like the sinews and ligaments had been taken apart then put back on, wrong.

At first, his gait looked to him like something you might see on the Nat Geo channel, like arachnid movement or the spindly prancing of a Praying Mantis. Then, with a chill, he realized where he had seen this walk before. In Pinocchio. He was moving like the little wooden boy being yanked along by a puppeteer who pulled the strings from above.

"Plesase, Mr. Oxfeld. Please stop. What are you doing? Where are you going?"

The voice in his head took on a gravelly caste that hadn't been there before:

"Time for a little celebration, Eugene. Time for a little drinky winky. I been a good boy and so have you and don't you think we deserve a little drinky winky?"

Every two minutes or so, Eugene would muster all his strength and try to hurl himself out of step, down to the curb, anything to break the inexorable tide of motion that compelled him forward. But each time, he would be snapped back into stride so forcefully that he felt like a Pekinese who tried to make a break for the tulips and gets yanked back on the side walk by its irate master. "No, Fifi, No."

Bangs through the door of a bar. Eugene had never been in this or any other bar. Plops down on a bar stool. Place is heavy with smoke and the piquant aroma of those who have failed at everything.

His head snaps back. His mouth opens like a carp.

“Barkeep. Double Jack and Coke, beer chaser. Keep ‘em comin’. I been away. I been outa town. Got some catchin’ up to to.”

The first drink comes. Buddy grabs it and tries to toss it down Eugene’s throat. Eugene, who for some reason, still seems to be able to control the left side of his body, grabs his own right wrist and struggles to keep the glass from rising to his lips. Were anyone watching, it would appear that he is arm wrestling himself with a drink in his hand.

But Buddy’s too strong. Chugs the drinks. Raps on the bar. Chugs two more.

Eugene jumps up, knocking over the stool. Runs to the back. Pukes in the men’s room toilet. Stands up. Doubles over. Pukes some more.

An unseen hand yanks his hair back. His right hand starts slapping his right cheek, then his left cheek, over and over again. Like Faye Dunaway in Chinatown with Jack Nicholson: “My sister, my daughter, my sister, my daughter.”

Only that’s not what’s coming out of his mouth. It was this, each word accompanying another slap:

“This....will ...teach...bad ...little ..boys.. notto waste... good... liquor.”

Something releases him and he collapses on the tiled floor, banging his head on the toilet paper thing.

Yanked up again. Marched back. The stool has been righted.

“Now, then, let’s try this again, shall we.?”

Three more Jack and cokes. Three more beers. This time they stay down. Eugene is sick but Buddy is feeling no pain. He turns to the few other, sullen patrons of the joint.

“Hey, who died? Why so glum? Come on, let’s liven the party up?”

He clears (Eugene’s) throat, takes a deep breath. Eugene realizes with a sickening gasp that whatever is inside of him (he had long ago given up the fiction that it was Mr. Oxfeld) is about to sing.

Eugene has a long standing horror of singing, or of any kind of public display that would draw attention to himself. In fact, he was sent home in the fourth grade for steadfastly refusing to join Miss Pras and the rest of the class in singing “ Make new Friends, but Keep the Old. One is Silver and the Other Gold.” He was humiliated then and he is humiliated now.

It didn’t matter to Buddy. Buddy loved to sing. Buddy has had a tune welling up inside him for seventy seven years and it was a bustin’ to come out. And come out it did, with a drunken exuberance so infectious, that a few of the other zombies actually managed to chime in at the second go ‘round.

*“I’d like to dedicate this next number to my brand new friend,
Eugene. Eugene and me, we’re gonna be spending a lot of time together,
ain’t we, pal?”*

And here’s what Buddy regaled the patrons of the Flatbush Tavern with, that night at one in the morning:

Life is a book that we study,
Some of its leaves bring a sigh,
There it was written, my buddy,
That we must part, you and I.

Nights are long since you went away,
I think about you all through the day,
My buddy, my buddy, no buddy quite so true.

Miss your voice, the touch of your hand,
Just long to know that you understand,
My buddy, my buddy, your buddy misses you
Buddies through all the gay days,
Buddies when something went wrong;
I wait alone through the gray days,
Missing your smile and your [song](#).

Nights are long since you went away,
I think about you all through the day,
My buddy, my buddy, no buddy quite so true.
Miss your voice, the touch of your hand,
Just long to know that you understand,
My buddy, my buddy, your buddy misses you

His effort was met with a desultory round of applause.

Then, Buddy (Eugene) turns to the barkeep.

“Psst. Psst.”

Motions him over. Cups his hand over his mouth. The guy leans in.

“Say, pal. Where can I guy get a piece of ass around here?”

That’s it. Horrified, Eugene bolts for freedom. Buddy yanks him back. Eugene strains and struggles. He is careening around the room. It appears as if he is doing some dreadful ritualistic dance from another, more savage, culture. Then again, the juke box was playing “On the Road Again”, so it could have appeared to all assembled that he was just another methamphetamine addict being jacked around by his tweak. No one cared,

at any rate, except for one drunk at the end of the bar. There was always one smart ass. He doesn't even turn around to when he says:

"Jeez. You dance just like a sissy."

Leading with the right side (the Buddy side) Eugene launches himself along the length of the bar towards this guy, who's back is to him. Resisting like hell with the left side (the Eugene side), Eugene is actually tugging himself by his own shirt to try to pull Buddy back from the brink.

Forget about it.

Buddy doesn't even break his stride as he picks up a beer bottle and smashes it into the right side of smart ass's head. As he's going down, Buddy kicks aside the barstool, the better to tee off on the guy's noggin. Good thing Eugene is wearing his Dr. Sholl orthopedic Moon shoes, or smart guy would never have recovered from the brain hemorrhage.

Buddy soon got frustrated kicking away with rubber shoes. What's he doin' with these freakin' things on? Has the government outlawed leather shoes in 2009? Shit.

Smart ass clambers to his feet. Uncorks a right. Unfortunately, it's a punch that has to be blocked with the left arm. As this was Eugene's side, that arm was at his side, twitching in terror. The right connected with Eugene's lower lip, popping it open like a shrimp at a wet bar. Blood ran down his new oxford shirt front.

Buddy counters by jamming the jagged bottom of the beer bottle into the guy's chest and twisting it around like a skeleton key in a rusty lock. Guy goes down. Stays down. Doesn't want any more of that noise.

"Need an all night drug store"

Eugene was trying to stall for time, but Buddy saw the Seven Eleven Convenience store on the next corner. Eugene, by this time, is so exhausted Buddy is dragging him around like a rag doll. Eugene can hardly keep up.

Slides in, strolls up the aisle, grabs a roll of Pillsbury Doughboy frozen rolls from the case, stuffs it in his coat pocket, walks to the front, up

to the Pakistani manager. Points it at him through Eugene's Members Only plastic windbreaker coat pocket.

"This is a stick up. Cash, no coins. Don't reach for no buttons or you're a dead man. Got me, Gunga Din?"

The manager is petrified. Doesn't this guy know he's being filmed from three angles? Is he crazy? He didn't even bother to put on a mask.

Ah, but he did. He put on a Eugene mask. It walks. It talks. It's very lifelike.

This clearly, was no druggie from the park. The manager decides, wisely, not to mess with this guy.

Eugene bolts out the door, his pockets stuffed with tens and twenties. He was panting and gasping at this point.

"What did you do that for? I have a job. I have money."

"If you have to ask, you'll never know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Wasn't about the money, Eugene. It was about the jolt, the buzz. Felt good to get back in the saddle, again. You did good, kid. Just keep goin' limp like that. It's like draggin around a sack of wet potatoes but at least you didn't cramp my style. Tomorrow we graduate to banks."

Eugene dug in his heels. Buddy scraped him along the pavement for three yards and then had to stop. It was like drivin' a bus with the parking brake on.

"What the hell is the matter, now?"

"You listen to me. This has been the most humiliating and insane night of my life. I'm sick. I'm exhausted. I think my asthma is acting up. I should have picked up an inhaler at our recent heist, but it somehow slipped my mind. But if you think you're going to drag me through a bank robbery, you're nuts, you hear?"

Next thing Eugene knew, Buddy walked them into the lobby of a high-rise apartment building. Steps up to the concierge, who had just enough time to say: “May I help....” when Buddy clocked him with a short, stiff right. Guy goes down, talking his Sony portable TV and aluminum tin of Korean take out with him.

Hits the top button on the elevator. Up to the roof. Walks to the ledge, twelve stories above Bushwick, reaches his right hand around the left side of Eugene’s head and grabs his Brooks Brother shirt, ripping it and popping off both collar buttons in the process. He shoves the top third of Eugene over the edge. The air smells of the dead fish floating in from Long Island Sound. A drunken tugboat Captain blasts his horn going under the Verrazano Narrows bridge just to piss off the motorists on their way back to Staten Island, which is where they belonged.

“ Here are your choices. There’s only two, so don’t get confused. You either get with the program and go along for the ride, which, as far as I can see, is the closest thing your pansy ass has ever had to a life, or we go over the edge right now. It’s very simple, toots. We both go over. One of us hits the bottom, the other ejects five feet before detonation and goes looking for a another pigeon. What’s it to be, sweet cheeks? The meter’s runnin.’”

Twenty minutes later, Eugene falls face forward on his Ikea couch with the matching throw pillows. The last thing he remembers before oblivion overtakes him is how shoddy the Swedish workmanship is at Ikea. The dowels don’t fit into the slots, and there are always a few pieces left over.

He awoke the next morning to the sound of the Levys in 6W arguing about whether Cheryl should go to Vassar or Wesleyan.

He flicked on CNN, then puked in the scotch plaid slippers his sister had given him for Hanukah, which happened to be at the foot of his couch. His head throbbed. His lip felt like it was as big as a bialy.

He was drinking his second cup of drip ground Starbuck's when the good news hit him like he had won the lottery. He felt normal. He was all Eugene, from stem to stern. God, what was that? You know, I've heard that the twenty four hour Asian flu could produce hallucinogenic symptoms if you've been on medication. That was it. That must have been it.

He stood under the shower until the hot water turned cold, which, in his building, took three minutes. He could actually time it, and did:

"Four, three, two one, time to freeze my tucus off Mr. Finkelstein, you cheap son of a bitch." The cold water came spritzing out right on time, like Old Faithful.

He brushed his teeth. Then, he extended his magnifying mirror on the goose neck stand he got from Sharper Image for \$49.95. Took out his little scissors from their plastic case. Trimmed his nose and ear hairs, and the one crazy hair that grew straight out from the center of his forehead.

For some reason having to do with a genetic anomaly, this freaky hair grew five times faster than any other hair on his body. If he didn't trim it once a week, he'd look like a Jewish unicorn.

He splashed on some Williams Lectric Shave and flicked on his Norelco triple action electric razor. He had just shaved two swaths on the right side of his chin when he felt his mouth yank open.

He screamed in terror at the top of his lungs, only it wasn't him.

He drops the Norelco, breaking the plastic shielding on the front.

His legs give out. His ass hits the floor like a shot-put. The jolt of pain coming up from his coccyx clenches his jaw shut.

He sees himself crab walking on his ass backwards, back into the corner as the Norelco, now on the floor and buzzing furiously, creeps forward on its own like a pissed off Cobra.

An unmistakable voice in head whimpered, pleaded:

"Make it stop. For God's sake, get that thing away from me."

He scrambles up from the corner and flicks it off. The voice immediately recedes into a distant echo, crying and wailing in the distance as it fades away inside his mind.

Oh my God. It wasn't a dream.

He stuffs his dirty laundry into a duffel bag from the Korean War, which was stamped in front with a fading stencil: "Arnold Birnbaum, Private, first class."

He stops by Cindy's on the way to Seder dinner at his parents' house. Unfortunately, he arrives just after she hangs up the phone after a screaming argument with her mother over practically nothing, as usual.

He was talking as she opened the door to her apartment.

"Cindy, I'm in serious trouble. You have to help me."

"Eugene, what is it? You look terrible."

He looked at her. How could he possibly make her understand?

"What would you say if I told you I was possessed?"

She looked at him with marked skepticism. She didn't think he really had a sense of humor, but maybe this was the set up for some Saturday Night Live type of "gotcha joke". Well, he wasn't gonna make a fool out of her.

"What ...do you mean, like, Exorcist possessed....projectile vomiting, head spinning possessed?"

"Actually, yeah."

"Eugene, I have to tell you, this is rather disappointing."

“What?”

“I’m saying that, although we don’t know each other all that well yet, surely you must know that this sort of humor is not something I find attractive. Am I supposed to be all taken in and gullible and then ambushed by some punch line that will make me look foolish? Is that what’s up here?”

The rest of the conversation didn’t go all that well, either, so he left with it hanging in the air. Great, now his relationship, which was shakey even before this, is now headed for the dumper, as well.

Gets to the family home five minutes before everyone sits down to Seder dinner. He had this down to a science. He arrives like a jet touching down at La Guardia. By minimizing the time from his entrance to the beginning of the Seder ritual, he had become a genius in circumventing his mother’s harangue, her monologue on the eternal subject of what he should have done with his life. It was a little victory, but you had to take what you could get.

Dinner was going fine. The bitter herbs were on the plate and the door was open for the prophet Elijah. .

He had just finished his turn at the reading and his sister Shelly had just served his mother’s award winning brisket. He was dipping an egg in the bitter herbs. His father was revving up his second consecutive speech on how Bernie Madoff was setting Jewish culture back one hundred years, when it happened.

Shelly, who was nineteen and secretly screwing the Goy captain of the High School basketball team, screamed. Her big brother’s eyes rolled back in his head, revealing whites like two ping pong balls bouncing around in the blower at TV lottery drawing.

“What is this, kike food? Heeb food? Can’t a man get a steak around here?”

Eugene (Buddy) threw a latke and hit Shelly smack in the forehead. He then picked up a bowl of borsht and clocked his kid brother Jeffrey over the head with it. That would leave a mark.

He took the prayer book and threw it at his mother's smoked glass dining room mirror, which had come over from Warsaw. It the only thing she had from the Old Country. The mirror shattered like it was hit by a bomb.

Eugene and Buddy once again went into their frenzied dance, just as they did at the bar. Eugene was screaming at Buddy to get out. Buddy laughed and laughed. Eugene threw himself on the floor and cried. Buddy laughed some more, called him a sissy and told him to get up and find them some real food somewhere.

His father stood up, pointed his hand in the sign of the Devil (no, it wasn't invented by Ozzy. It is much older than that). Extending his arm before him, and wrapping his prayer shawl tightly around his shoulders, he pronounced, calmly, but trembling with an inner terror:

"Dybbuk. Dybbuk.. My son is gone. He has been taken by a Dybuk".

Mr. Birnbaum left the room.

Of everything we know about this, perhaps Mr. Birnbaum's assessment of the situation borders most closely on the truth:

In Jewish mythology, a dybbuk is a malicious possessing spirit, the dislocated soul of a dead person, escaped from Gehenna, or hell, a soul so damned that it has been turned away from Gehenna for transgressions too serious for the soul to be allowed there. The word "dybbuk" is derived from the Hebrew word for "attachment". The dybbuk attaches itself to the body of a living person and inhabits it.

The Dybbuk is a soul that has been unable to fulfill its function in its lifetime and is given another opportunity to so so . It will leave once it has accomplished its goal.

Eugene fled the house, jumped in the car.

The family stopped in the SUV behind him at the light at 21st Avenue and Queens Boulevard looked into the rear window of Eugene's car. The poor devil must have Tourette's, offered the Dad. Why else would he be trying to beat and choke himself? Maybe we should call 911. But then the light changed and Eugene sped off.

Eugene bounds up the stairs. He runs into the bathroom, grabs the plastic pharmacy bottle and tosses thirty Nembutals down his throat.

Washes them down with a bottle of Glaceau Vitamin Water. At least he would check out fully hydrated and replenished with all the essential vitamins and minerals, he chuckled darkly. Healthiest corpse on the block.

He lies down to await the arrival of death. I wonder if it's the guy in the hood and the scythe. No, that's antiquated. Too European. This is Fltabush. It's gonna be a fifty five year old Latino lady dressed like a city Meter Maid who will hand him a citation: "Earth Residency Permit rescinded. There is no appeal."

Just as he is drowsing comfortably off, his right hand whacks him on the forehead. Bap. Bap. Bap. Buddy drags him to the bathroom. They do their famous arm wrestling number. Buddy has three of the fingers on his right hand extended and rigid into a kind of twisted Boy Scout salute. The fingers inch toward his mouth. His left hand can't hold them back. Buddy jams the fingers in. His right hand is pushed down his throat until his knuckles touch his front teeth.

"Gack...gack... gack....Come on, you bastard. What did you think you were doing?..You thought you could get rid of me that easy?Come on. Give!....gack ...gack. Gack..

He pukes for five minutes, then sinks down next to the toilet bowl and cries, again.

But he wasn't crying because he was possessed. He was crying because he was beginning to like it, and that scared the hell out of him.

At one point during the bar fight, he just let himself go and experienced a disgusting but satisfying jolt of something in the back of his brain as his fist crunched into that guy's nose.

At the Seder dinner, he retched when he felt a dark adulation as he threw the prayer book at the mirror. Do you think he likes being a little Jewish Nebbish? The pimply kid who never gets laid and can't stand up to the Goyim bullies?

He was sick when he recalled what it felt like to merge with Buddy's mind. Just a glimpse into that dark hole was enough to send him to the medicine cabinet. And now he had failed with that.

. He called his mother the next day. He explained that Dr. Epstein had put him on a very strong antibiotic for his cold, which might be turning into pneumonia. Dr. Epstein warned him of possible severe reactions. I guess that little display qualifies as that, alright.

As he spoke to his mother, he could hear his father upstairs in his study, moaning and praying. It took two days for his wife to convince him to come out.

Eugene went to work. He had no idea what to do about this. The C.P.A. exam was in one week. He should be studying a few hours a day. He was lucky if he could concentrate for five minutes.

Time to man up, Eugene. This body ain't big enough for the two of us and I got here first. So, how to give Buddy the old heave ho?.

He needed information. He had to get him talking. He had to know who he was dealing with, as distasteful as it might be to engage him in conversation.

Out drinking again at another bar, he took a different tack. After a few, Buddy opens up:

“You think it’s fun? You think it’s swell floating around in that soup up there? Lemme tell ya, kid. It ain’t.”

. Eugene was struggling to keep the jack and coke down. He would be damned if he was gonna go through another slapping session over the toilet, thank you very much. After a few more, Buddy gives it up, finally:

“So, there I was, a guest of the state of Alabama, right up until the time the bastards poured \$7.37 cents worth of juice through a wire into the top of my head. That’s what it costs. Did you know that? Amazing, the information that floats around death row. \$7.37 worth of Alabama Municipal Power and Light’s finest. Zappo. Melts your eyeballs while you’re still alive. “

He knocks on Cindy’s door again the next morning. She lets him in and regarded him, suspiciously. They never really had a fight before their squabble about his “joke”, and it left a bad smell in the air.

“Cindy, please. Listen. Sit down and look at me. Really look at me”.

She did. She dropped the puss. He was right. This was not someone who was pulling a practical joke on his girlfriend.

Last night’s revelries had ended, once again, with a proper dust up, only this time Buddy picked on a guy who was a duker, that is, someone who can hold his own in a bar fight.

Eugene’s left eye was blackened and swollen almost shut. There was a bruise on his chin and a cut over the other eye.

“Cindy, I’m just gonna say this once ‘cause and I never know when he’s gonna, you know, show up.

“Alright, Eugene. I’m listening.”

He began to lay it out for her as clearly as he could. Halfway through, with a sick gasp, he felt the now familiar hot rod of dark energy race up his spine. His head snapped back. His eyes rolled in their sockets. When he opened them, he looked at Cindy. He was flushed. And parts of him were more flushed than the others.

“Oh God. Cindy. Cindy, run!! Get out. Get out now!!”

“Eugene, get out of where. I live....”

He leapt on her, pinning her on the couch.

“ What are you doing? Stop... Stop. Eugene, how could you do...”

He held her face between both hands. He leered at her from two inches away. His eyes turned dead. His breath turned septic.

“Tonight I follow the rainbow, my dear. Perhaps we could follow it, together.”

He ripped her mauve Donna Karen knock off blouse straight down the front. He flipped up her skirt, ripped her panties off with one sharp tug. She was wailing and whimpering, kicking and pleading, but he was too strong.

He straddled her. He unzipped his fly. He was about to mount her when his left hand slipped into his coat pocket and pulled out Eugene’s Norelco razor (it’s portable, batteries not included). He flips it on and jams it into his chest. Buddy wails, jumps up, bolts for the door, falls over the cat, goes down on hard on the linoleum floor. Doesn’t move for two minutes.

Five minutes later, Eugene shakes the cobwebs out of his head, rolls over. Cindy’s still on the couch, holding the shredded remains of her favorite casual blouse up to her neck, pulling the pieces together like they will knit themselves back into place if she just keeps them like that for awhile. She is staring at him. Her eyes are wide with terror. But there is something else in there.

He sits up.

“Now do you believe me?”

Two night later, Eugene is watching TV at one A.M. He told the commission that he was postponing taking the CPA exam until next year. He has taken a two day sick leave at work. He cracks open the twist top to a fifth of Jack Daniels, pours a healthy jolt into his coke and ice.

Takes a sip. Takes another one. Flips the channels on the remote. The pale images on the TV play across his face, which is drained and exhausted. Anyone watching the scene in the room might wonder if the pixilated images on the tube weren't more vibrantly alive than the face in the chair that reflects them.

Spencer Tracy's gravelly voice barks from the little speaker. His Neanderthal brow is knotted with lust as he leers at Ingrid Bergman. She's pouring champagne at his table in a Paris dance hall. It's the 1941 "Jekyll and Hyde". Ingrid hasn't looked at him ,yet. She's still humming the song she's just performed:

“You should see me dance the polka.
You should see me cover the ground.”

Setting his snare for her, he entwines his arm in hers.

*“I make my own luck, my dear. Tonight I follow the rainbow.
Perhaps you'd like to follow it with me.”*

Buddy drops down into Eugene, down through the top of his head. Eugene instantly has a splitting headache. Screw it. He would never take another Tylenol in his life. Must remember to write to the manufacturers and inform them of an unfortunate side effect: spirit possession.

“My favorite drink and my favorite movie. How could I resist? Got any popcorn, Eugene ol' buddy, ol' pal o'mine?”

Cindy eases open the closet door and creeps forward.. She has something in her hand that looks like a toaster.

“Tracy’s Jekyll is much better than Frederic March’s, don’t you think ol’pal? More finely etched, more elegant, if you will.”

Cindy reaches the back of the barca lounge. After Buddy’s arrival, Eugene had slowly pressed the recline button. He was stretched out almost flat on his back with his feet on the foot rest.

“Ingrid Bergman couldn’t sing for shit, but who cares? Look at those tits”

Eugene closes his eyes tightly. In a voice barely above a whisper, he says:

“Now. Do it. Just do it.”

Cindy brings the twin paddles of the defibrillator down hard on Eugene’s chest. They are coated with some goo which acts as a conducting agent and sticks the things to his body.. She hits the red button on the machine.

There is a sound like “Fwomp!” and puff of ozone in the air, like a bat just flew into an electric bug zapper.

Buddy screams bloody murder. Cindy hits it again. Then, twice more. The hairs on Eugene’s chest smolder and curl into crispy wisps.

The screaming stops.

By the time the EMT truck arrives, Eugene’s barely breathing. A crash cart meets them at the hospital doors in the rain. Two nurses and an orderly race with the thing into the nearest operating room.

As Eugene's clothes are being sliced off and two doctors try to get an ocular response from his pupils, a different scene plays out in the Astral world above their heads.

Perhaps it would be easiest to picture a replica of Mr. Oxfeld's office.

A hand in the hallway pushes the door open. Mr. Oxfeld is ensconced in his Office Max chair. His emblems of office, the bagel and the calculator, are held aloft in greeting as his visitor enters the room.

Buddy sits down in the chair facing him. He is dressed in Alabama State Penitentiary fatigues. His left pant leg is cut up to the knee. He has a fresh red welt on his exposed ankle.

His head has been shaved and tonsured like a novice's. Most of his hair is burned away. His eyes bug out and blink into the light of the fluorescents that shine down from the acoustical tile above them.

His hands grip the arm of the chair. He can't speak, yet. In his mind, his execution occurred moments ago. Time is different, here. Events can become unstuck and spontaneously reoccur at random.

Mr. Oxfeld speaks through a mouth filled with bagel. They really need to do something about the cream cheese up here.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Satterfield. This audit is mandatory but will be brief."

He holds up a thick manila folder and shows him a chart. He points to the bottom of the page with the calculator. A bit of cream cheese from his right hand rubs off onto the top left corner.

"This is the balance sheet of everything you've done that has been, shall we say, rather dreadful. As you can see, this is quite an extensive

account. We haven't arrived at the final tally, but that doesn't matter for the purposes of this audit."

He tosses it onto a pile of other folders. It teeters precipitously on top. The whole thing looks as if a puff of wind would send it off the desk, entirely. Mr. Oxfeld seems unconcerned. His attention shifts to a very slim folder.

"This is the balance sheet of every altruistic, selfless, or self effacing thing you've done."

He brandishes this in front of him into the pale light. Buddy squints. His eyes focus. He clears his throat. His voice croaks like he has swallowed sandpaper.

"There... there ain't nothin' on it.. There's nothin' there..."

Mr. Oxfeld tosses it on to a different pile and nods.

"The which point has caused your account to be terribly imbalanced, from a fiduciary as well as a moral standpoint."

Buddy blinks. His mouth opens and closes. A bit of spittle forms above his lower lip.

"Could I get some water?"

"Do you know what a dybuuk is, Mr. Satterfield?"

Shakes his head. Tries to swallow. Mouth too dry, though.

"It's a ghost that attaches itself to a human. Stays bound to him until he, the dybuuk, does one redeeming action, a good deed, if you will. This releases him to move forward to the next portion of his destiny.

You are being presented with that opportunity. One good deed will bring your balance sheet to zero, and you will move on. Interested?"

Buddy nods. He'd about had it with the fun and games, anyway. Might as well see what lies around the bend. I make my own luck, my dear. Tonight I follow the rainbow.

Mr. Oxfeld flicks on a TV set in the corner. Looks like it's a hospital show. Two nurses are shaving a patient's head in preparation for brain surgery.

"Eugene suffered a stroke due to a brain aneurism from a congenitally weak blood vessel lodged at the base of his skull. It snapped like a rubber band during Cindy's, uh, exertions of earlier this evening.

The doctor who is scheduled to operate on him in three hours has been on shift for twenty two hours. He will make a mistake that will cost Mr. Birnbaum his life. That is, unless Dr. Emil Rosenblatt of 331 York Ave in Manhattan can be located, placed at the scene, and induced to do the operation, himself. Dr. Rosenblatt literally wrote the book on this sort of procedure."

Mr. Oxfeld leaned back. The Office Max chair creaked and complained.

"Here's what I suggest."

Five minutes later, Jugdesh Narapta, a Pakistani cab driver living on East 5th street, settles down to his daily prayer practice. Mr. Narapta is a Sikh, a member of an ancient and proud warrior sect from Pakistan and the North of India. He bows and lights incense in front of an illuminated color portrait of the spiritual guide of the Sikhs, Guru Nanak.

His hair, which has never been cut, is wound into a topknot on his head and covered with a purple turban. His beard is tucked tightly beneath his chin in a hairnet.

Mr. Narapta's mind is as placid as the surface of a frozen lake in winter. Then, Buddy joins the party.

Thirty minutes later, Jugdesh's yellow cab races up the FDR drive to the upper east side. Truth be told, it's only going about forty five because the last time Buddy drove was in 1932 and anything over forty makes him dizzy.

Ten minutes earlier, Jugdesh (Buddy) spoke into his cell phone, reading from a script Mr. Oxfeld gave him.

He spoke slowly and as clearly as possible. His voice, a raspy whisper, was modulated into a passable imitation of Spencer Tracy as Hyde. It was the only impression Buddy could do.

Dr. Rosenblatt, an inveterate insomniac, was propped up in front of his TV at two AM with a glass of milk, watching the end of "Jekyll and Hyde".

He listened to the voice on the phone. It seemed oddly familiar to him.

"Yes, this is he.... What?....Who are you? Isn't Dominic head of Neurology at Roosevelt? Retired,.... when? (It was a lie).

Buddy (Jugdesh) explained the situation.

"Who have you got operating on him?.....What?....Are you kidding?..... Benson's an idiot.....Man's a total idiot.... He shouldn't be allowed to open a can of peaches, let alone that boy's noggin..... I didn't even think he was Board Certified in this state.....Yes, of course, I will....Good, I'll wait for it downstairs.....In the mean time... get me your best ramrod nurse...get Grundig to assist.... And for God's sake... take all sharp objects out of Benson's hands, immediately!"

Eugene passed the CPA exam one year from the day he was released from the hospital. He married Cindy a year after that. They are expecting their first child.

Buddy signed the papers which were laid out on Mr. Oxfeld's desk, shook his hand, walked down the corridor. He turned a corner into a verdant field. There was a rainbow over a little hill at the far end. Buddy didn't look back.

Some people make their own luck, follow their own rainbows. Have another smear up there, Mr. Oxfeld. Cholesterol can't get you, now.

Reality

Lester Romanov was sweating so badly he had to take out his pocket handkerchief (yes, he still had a clean one every day) and wipe the palm of his right hand, tucking the phone under his chin as he did so.

He had a habit of raising his left hand and shaking it briskly about every thirty seconds or so because the links of his gold ID bracelet got caught on his hairy wrist. It looked like he was having a sudden tremor. It occurred most often when he was nervous or upset. At the moment, his wrist was shaking almost constantly. He looked like he was waving goodbye to a friend aboard a departing ocean liner. It unnerved people. He knew that, but seemed unable to stop. He must do something about it. He made a mental note.

“Kathy, I know it’s been a tough patch....Yes, ...I know....but we’ve weathered these before. It’s the biz, you know that darling.....Remember when I got you “Misery”.. you know what I had to do to get the meeting with Stephen King, the meeting with Rob Reiner?It takes time to put these things together, darling. I....what?....well, let’s talk after the weekend....yes, I’ll call you when you get back from Phoenix.....alright, sweetheart.... Much love...love and kisses...”

He placed the phone back in its desktop cradle. The old phones were so much more solid, more substantial. When you hung up, it made a satisfying “clunk”. But, then again, car doors used to make a better sound when you closed them. I remember my father’s old Ford, now there was a....

“Snap out of it, for God’s sake, Lester. This is no time to play “remember when”. Are you nuts? You’re in trouble, here.”

He had developed a tendency to berate himself aloud, as if he were someone else standing across the room and shouting back at him. He had to do this just to get his attention. When the voice in your head dwindles to a whisper and you have to employ outside help, you might be in trouble, old boy. He picked up the new digital voice recorder his granddaughter had

given him for Christmas. After finally mustering the patience to read the instructions, he found it helpful.

“Note: Talk to Finkelstein about the voice across the room.”

He walked to the front of the office, looked out at the chemical plant across the street. Things really took a bad turn when he had to give up the place on Sunset and move out to this terrible little hole on Pico. But it’s only temporary, Lester.

Old Hollywood was dead and buried. All the new agents with the hot twenty year old clients, all of them were kids in brand new faded jeans with hundred dollar bowling shoes and spiky hair.

No one wanted a sixty seven year old agent with a comb over in a suit.

“That’s right. Keep telling yourself it’s only temporary, Lester.”

Damn, he had said that loudly. Jeez, Lester, there’s no one here but you. You’re not announcing the next Toreador entering the corrida, for God sake.

Finally, he had to face what just happened. He was down to three high visibility clients. And now, Kathy Bates was gonna walk. He could hear it in her voice. She’s gonna bail.

He used to represent thirty stars. Had a wall of photos in the old office that looked like the back booth at Carlos and Charlie’s. All signed:

“To Lester, with my undying gratitude. You made it happen, baby.”

“To Lester, your special magic is the wind beneath my wings. Love you to pieces...”

But the photos were gone. At least now, in this new office, he didn’t have to look at the dingy rings on the wall around the empty spaces where they used to hang.

Get a grip, old boy. You got to do something, fast.

The phone rang again. It was Diane White. Oh, no. Here we go with this one, now.

He had made her a star when she was twenty three when he got her the secretary part on “White House”. But now she’s forty five and there is an expiration date stamped invisibly on the head of every girl in this town on her thirtieth birthday. It’s like a law, a cruel, immutable law.

“Yes, darling, I know... yes, darling but listen...(he swallowed hard. He always did that before lying)...but I have a marvelous new project I want to run by you... no, it’s too exciting to talk about on the phone.. Yes, tomorrow... lunch at that little salad place on La Brea. Yes, dear... you’re gonna flip...I swear... yes. See you then...kisses. “

“That went well, old boy”, sneered the voice from across the room. “Now you have to produce a project out of thin air, overnight.”

He picked up the shark paperweight from “Jaws” and threw it. It made a dent in the dry wall and bounced three times before coming to rest. The shark looked at him, accusingly.

“Abra cadabra, you fucking fraud!”

This was bad. Bad. He never threw things, and rarely cursed. He picked up the voice recorder thing.

“Note: talk to Finkelstein about the cursing and the throwing.”

At one AM, he was still propped up in his easy chair with a glass of scotch, watching nothing on TV, flipping channels with the remote in his right hand and shaking his wrist with the left. I should join a circus with an act like this. What does my daughter call it? Oh, yeah. Look at me. I’m multi tasking.

He flipped to a rerun of “ER”. God, I almost had Clooney. I was so close, I....

He stopped. He dropped the remote.. His left hand froze upright in the air. He looked like a painting of Jesus blessing the multitudes.

The next day, Diane threw the door open and swept into the little salad place like she just saw Kathy Griffin holding a microphone at the other end of a red carpet.

Beautiful as ever, thought Lester, but she's not smiling. Suck it up Old Boy, you better make this good.

After a few minutes of rather perfunctory pleasantries, he swallowed hard and dived in:

"Here's the pitch, darling....the new thing, as you well know, is reality shows...."

She snapped at him:

"As I well know? As I well freaking know? Are you kidding? Lester, all of the actors and most of the writers in this town are well freaking aware of this disturbing new trend."

Venom dripping from every word. Jeez.

"We've been put out of work by the reality shows, Lester, if you've noticed. They cost nothing to produce and, wait for it, they do not... require.... Actors... or.... writers."

The last five words of this bitter scree were accompanied by a staccato tapping on a margarita glass by her blood red nail extensions which were filed to points, like little pirate swords.

Lester remembered picking her up that night at the county jail after she went after her shitheel boyfriend with those nails. They settled out of court and she had to pay for plastic surgery to fix the scars on pretty boy's face.

His smile never wavered. He'd been in tougher meetings. Violinists wake up in the morning and practice Mozart. He did meetings.

"Darling..listen.. this is the beauty part...We get you a reality show....You...the star of your own reality show....it's solid gold"

She looked at him directly for the first time. She nodded her head, slightly. Go on, lester. Let's hear it.

A week later, Lester sat in his office and watched the banner crawl across the bottom of the CNN screen:

BRITTANY: LATEST MELTDOWN. DIANE WHITE REPORTEDLY ILL: UNDERGOING TESTS AT MOUNT SINAI. OBAMA VISITS BUCHENWALD. VOWS: NEVER AGAIN.

He held the phone to his right ear. He looked at the ID bracelet on his arm. A bit of pale sunlight caught it. It didn't shake. It sat as still on his wrist as the brass plaque in front of Le Cirque.

"Reggie: Go....Yes, now...not next week.. go.. go!"

Same time the next day, he flicks on Entertainment Weekly. Shakey, hand held shot of Diane being whisked from the back entrance of the hospital that morning at four AM to a waiting SUV. Her head is covered demurely by a white scarf. Her oversized Jackie O shades reflect the glare of the flashes from the Paparazzi, who strain at the rope like a wave of pulsing lust. They are baying at her to look their way. Each glance, sucked into each digital camera, is like a gold doubloon pulled up from a wreck.

SONY INTRODUCES LATEST SUPER NINTENDO WI. FLASH REPORT: DIANE WHITE'S CONDITIONS WORSENS. MYSTERY ILLNESS FELS "WHITE HOUSE" STAR. GINGRICH: REGRETS RACIST REMARKS. SEN. CLAIMS THEY WERE TAKEN OUT OF CONTEXT.

The “doctor” stepped to the podium of the obscure private clinic in San Pedro that Diane had checked into the day before. His craggy face, framed by a head of carefully messed up black curls, leaned into the microphone. The gooseneck pipe that attached it to the podium creaked as he pulled it up to his chin. He removed the stethoscope from his neck and slipped it into the large side pocket of the lab coat. He and Lester had practiced the gesture for a half hour. It had to look like something he had been doing every day for twenty years. The stethoscope had to be as seamless an extension of his hand as the cigarette of a lifelong smoker.

Watching still from his office, Lester nodded.

“Good boy.”

There was a brief squeal of feedback.

“Thank you for coming today, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am Dr. Ghezzeau, Director of the Haven clinic. I have a brief statement, which was been prepared by Miss White, and then I will have a short time for questions:

“Two weeks ago, I was diagnosed with stage two lymphatic cancer. It has metastasized and spread to my left lung. Dr. Ghezzeau, the eminent oncologist and trusted family friend, has determined that we are going to fight this disease with total commitment. I will make a complete recovery with the help of Almighty God.

To all my fans, I have never needed your prayers as much as I do now. I have never relied upon your support as much I am called upon to rely on it, now. Thank you. I love you all.”

The room erupted into a wail of yelled questions even before he had finished folding the half sheet of paper and placed it in the plastic protector in his breast pocket, where it just fit between a digital thermometer and a an eye examination light.

Lester poured scotch. Stroked his cat on his lap. It was midnight. He had seen it five times on Tivo. He clicked it again. Its flickering light bathed his placid face. He was Svengali. He was the Maestro, once again. This was his Moonlight Sonata.

Doctor Ghezzeau was an Rumanian actor, the cousin of a friend, who had been flown in the week before. The clinic was real and easily “rented” for this stage of the project.

The next press conference occurred at the end Diane’s circular driveway in front of her home in Brentwood. The statement was read aloud to the assembled press by Katina, her twenty five year old assistant, who was a bit overweight and had a nose ring and a streak of purple in her auburn hair. Katina was flanked by Jaco, Diane’s major domo. He was thirty two, handsome, an actor who threw in the towel before he was ready to throw himself off a bridge. Katina spoke, a bit too softly to be heard, but that was OK, thought Lester. It’s an intimate family moment, after all.

“Diane is happy to be resting comfortably at home ,now. She wants to thank everyone for all your love and good wishes. She has read all of your letters. She treasures each little stuffed animal and memento you have sent. They surround her in her bedroom and give her the good healing energy she needs to achieve her victory over this illness.”

She blinked into the lights and brushed back her hair. Her nervousness was the only thing that wasn’t staged. She really was way out of her comfort zone. She faltered and looked to Jaco, who stepped forward and gently relieved her of the paper.

Nice touch, thought Lester.

Jaco piped up confidently, above the roar of three leaf blowers wielded by their neighbors' Mexican gardeners.

"At this most private of times, Diane has decided to respond to the heartfelt wishes of her fans who want to share in her struggle. In order to facilitate this, she has agreed to allow the Viacom Company to create a reality television series which will air on Showtime entitled "Lifeline". It will be comprised of weekly episodes of her life. The series will also feature an interactive simulcast on Diane's website and twitter account.

"Lifeline" will document, week by week, the greatest role of Diane's life, her victory over this disease. Thank you."

Bingo, thought, Lester. Outa the park.

They went with the same production company that did "Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew". Same quick cut, stock new wavy music. Hand held. Rough enough to put you in the room, but slick enough to keep the attention of the target audience, which was projected to extend down to twelve year old girls and up into the range of ladies well past middle age, a demographic that hit the sweet spot in Diane's fan base.

The first episode opened with Diane, looking good but a bit pale, trimming back some roses in her garden, gleefully breaking up a fight between her Siamese cat and her Chou with a garden hose, and, finally, breaking into tears when she had to confront the fact that she no longer was able to focus long enough to design the week's menus with her cook.

Diane pulled her buff colored kaftan close to her.

"It's these drugs they're giving me. It's these damn drugs", and she threw two plastic pharmacy bottles at the camera, ran crying out of camera range, had to be coaxed back into the room by Katina and the director.

The episode ended with Diane, Katina and Jaco sitting on her bed giggling and throwing popcorn at each other as they watched reruns of “White House” on Fox.

“Oh, my God. Look at what they did to my hair?” squealed Diane, and threw some popcorn at the screen. Fade out.

Opened strong, not fabulous, but strong. As the weeks went on, though, and her condition deteriorated (thank god for make up artists who could be paid to keep their mouths shut), the ratings went into the stratosphere.

Each episode ended with some crisis that was overcome through prayer and a deep core of inner strength, which Diane attributed to the love of her fans. By this time, the menagerie of stuffed animals she had received so thoroughly covered her bedroom and adjacent sitting room that you could no longer tell what color the carpet was.

The audience hung on every word, and especially relished watching as her relationship with Dr. Ghezzeau deteriorated (they got a good spike every time he came over) along with her prognosis.

“Dr., you know, maybe western medicine isn’t the answer. Maybe there is greater healing than the kind that comes out of these freaking bottles you keep giving me”. And she threw one in his face. Popped him right on the bridge of his nose.

Good girl, thought, Lester.

Six weeks in, Lester saw the writing on the wall. The ratings were going down. The constant rant of hope and strength was wearing thin. He had to bribe two Honduran cooks and one maid to keep them from spilling

the beans. Had to pay for their whole family to come to L.A. Had to find them work, but it was worth it. So much for the signed confidentiality agreements. Guess they didn't hold much water south of the border.

"Reggie... go to phase two.. yes, now... do we always have to have this discussion? Now means now, Reggie."

The teaser at the end of last week's episode ended with a shot of Diane's face giving the camera a ghastly look and accompanied by a minor chord from the composer's synthesizer. Time to deliver.

Ghezzeau: "Diane, we can no longer avoid facing something, here."

Cut to Diane, biting her lower lip, forcing back a tear. She was propped up against her bedboard, hugging a pillow a fan had made with an embroidered representation of Diane's pet Siamese. It had an inscription in gold thread beneath the lopsided appliqué of the cat: "Here's hoping you have a purrrrrfectly wonderful day!!!"

"Diane, I've just come from the clinic. I've been looking at the numbers from the new charts. I'm sorry. There's nothing further we can do. I think it's best to..."

"You mean there's nothing further you can do, don't you Dr. Ghezzau."

The music comes up. Shot of Ghezzeau. Looks queasy, Sheepish. Diane lifts her chin, bravely:

"Here's what I can do."

She pulls herself upright, wincing at what appears to be a bolt of pain running up her spine.

“Here’s what I can do. I can reach out to my fans,,, my fans, who have never given up hope (she looks at the camera). I can reach out to my community to help me search for real healing, real healing based on higher principles than those that govern western medicine, Doctor. There are higher laws that supervene the little ones you know about in your tests and your charts. There is a higher court to which I will appeal. So, now you can just take your pills and your....”

Too overwrought to finish that sentence, she broke into tears and threw the cat pillow at him. It caught him full on the face. The audience didn’t miss a thing. Of course, Lester hoped no one would realize it was a cut away shot. It took three takes to get the pillow to the Doctor’s curly head. Diane had greater accuracy with medicine bottles, apparently,.

Although Ghezzeau scored well with a certain segment of the audience, Lester had to lose him to get to phase two.

In the weeks that followed, there appeared at her doorstep a coterie of Shamans, psychics, holistic healers, homeopaths, vegan nutritionists, and about every kind of new age character you can and cannot even begin to imagine.

A subsequent barbeque (all natural, no meat) in her backyard resembled a cast party with a road company of “Hair”.

And it worked. Ratings popped. The bloom gradually returned to fair Diane’s cheeks. In two months, she was pronounced in complete remission, then completely cured.

The gloating that emerged from her troop of quacks was only equaled in audience appeal to the bitter sniping that emanated from remote shots of Ghezzeau, who somehow was losing most of his patients.

Now, it was time to come to Papa. Lester sat back and fielded book offers, specials, and QVC contracts for a line of Diane original kaftan sweaters, like the ones she wore on the show. Two movie deals were in the

works, and a follow up series, tentatively called “Tugging on your own Lifeline” was almost green lit.

Seated at a Borders in the Valley, signing the first copies of: “Who would have guessed it would turn out like this?: the true story of Lifeline”, the movie deal was announced. Quentin Tarantino stood by her side and pumped her hand for the cameras. With his characteristic manic stutter, he ranted about the film, whose working title was “Painkiller”.

With Diane’s career in orbit, Lester was able to turn his attention to his twenty new clients. He was back on Sunset, but at a bigger office. He had a staff of twelve, now. He was on the cover of Variety: “Old Hollywood Makes a Come Back: The miraculous resurgence of the old school.”

Diane was walking back to her trailer on the set of “Painkiller” chatting excitedly to her makeup up girl about last night’s date with that hot actor half her age when the first twinge hit her. Came up from somewhere south of the solar plexus and doubled her over. She straightened up and just made it back to the trailer before the next one hit.

She was rushed to the hospital. Tests, the whole nine yards. Kept her in for three days. Tarantino was apoplectic. Had to shut the show down. Was losing a fortune. The lawyers and the insurance company were going to have him for lunch.

Lester was at her bedside almost immediately. Diane was scared. The doctors had no idea what was going on.

After a few days, she was well enough to go home, but not to work.

It seems that all the holistic crap and homeopathic medicines had triggered some kind of massive stimulation of her endocrine gland and her liver was on the ropes from a massive ingestion of vitamin A over the three months of her new age “treatment”. Who knew that was even possible?

Six months, later, pale, bed ridden, she had run up a hundred and fifty thousand dollar medical bill. It was time to rev up the show.

“Lester, it’s Diane.”

“Darling, I’m so sorry I haven’t gotten back to you. You know how it is. It’s a madhouse around here.”

“Lester, we have to get the show back, I’m broke, I’m in debt up to my eyeballs and now they’re talking about a liver transplant.”

“Diane, anything, darling, anything for you, you know that. But, listen, sweetie, I got your message about this from my assistant when you called last month. I’ve run it by Viacom and Fox and two others and ...I don’t know how to say this... I can’t get it to go.”

“What do you mean? It was the most popular show on TV for six months”

“Darling, I know how this is going to sound, but I’ll just say it...they all say: We’ve seen it. It’s been done. We can’t go to that well, again.”

Stunned silence on the other end.

“That well? That well?...Lester, I’m dying...”

“Diane, please, I’m sick, sick about this...But there’s something else.. I think the beans are going to be spilled on “ Lifeline”. I hear through the grapevine that the AD has a tell all book deal and good lawyers.. Says to hell with the confidentiality agreements. You remember dear, we talked about this, about this possibility”

“Yeah, about it happening a year from now when I’m rich again, not now...now freaking now”

“Diane....there’s something else....one of the producers actually used the phrase: “The boy who cried wolf” No one thinks the public is going to buy it, again”

“But it’s happening...Lester, it’s really happening this time and I can’t get anyone to believe me.. You bastard, you want a story about a wolf ?.. How about the wolf in sheep’s clothing, which is what you are, you traitor, How about throwing me to the wolves, which is what you’re doing, you...?”

He held the phone six inches from his head and looked at the sun setting over the Hollywood sign. When she had exhausted herself, they sort of hung up a bit more amicably, but not much.

She died three months later. Lester's speech at the wake was reprinted by news services across the country. Sales of her kaftans spiked on QVC after her death, making a pretty good dent in the medical bill.

Lester was tooling along in his new roadster when the Michael Jackson song came on and it was announced that he, too, had died. It was "Billy Jean." He had never really heard that line before, the one about "when the lie becomes the truth"

"I guess that would be irony, or was it sarcasm?. I always got them confused".

He said it to himself as he pulled up to the Paramount Gates for his three o'clock with Spielberg. He wasn't talking out loud anymore when he was alone. Finkelstein was pleased with his progress.

Thank You for Shopping at L Mart

Dottie Enfield complained to her husband Joe the whole way over to the new L Mart on the edge of town. He just stared straight ahead and drove. She would talk herself out, soon, like always. The kids were in the back of the rusted out Dodge van hitting each other over the heads with Tickle Me Elmo dolls they had received for Christmas, last year. It's a miracle the damn things had lasted this long, thought Joe, as some stuffing flew into the front.

"If you two don't stop that right now, your daddy's gonna wail on the both a you soon's we get home. Do you hear me?"

She turned back on Joe.

"And another thing....."

Dottie had to drag the kids past a little petting zoo that was set up behind a chain link fence near the entrance. It had a goat, a lamb, and a box full of rabbits, all happily munching straw. Three families were crammed into the little menagerie as it was. Dottie promised the kids they'd stop by on their way out.

Joe saw a printed sign on both automatic doors as they opened before them:

L MART WILL BE CLOSING FOR MAINTANANCE TONIGHT, OCTOBER 31ST, AT 6:00 P.M. WE WILL RE OPEN AT 6:00 A.M. THE FOLLOWING MORNING. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE AND FOR SHOPPING AT L MART, WHERE THE L STANDS FOR LOW PRICES!!!

As the Enfields walked into the cavernous store, the first thing they noticed was the smell. At first, it smelled just like it should, like the inside of a new car or a new mobile home, the chemical, plastic smell of freshly laid linoleum and paint, but there was something else, something musty underneath that. Dottie couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Over in a corner, above housewares, the fluorescent light panel embedded in the acoustical tiled ceiling flickered on and off. Joe heard a pop as he pulled a shopping cart from a bunch at the door. He looked over there, again. A puff of white smoke came down from the ceiling, then that whole row of lights went out. One of the store workers, a kid who couldn't be no more'n eighteen, set up a ladder, ran up it, popped up a tile with a screwdriver and sprayed a chemical fire extinguisher into the hole until the smoke stopped.

Joe smirked to himself. He was an electrical contractor. His company had lost the bid to wire this sucker to some out of town outfit he'd never even heard of. Hope they were happy, now. Probably Mexicans. Couldn't install a toaster.

Old Zeke Casterton, who had a farm nearby, saw the light show too. He was just getting a couple of bags of ice for his family cookout, tonight. He sniffed the air. Gee, open less than a month and they got dead rats in the walls, already. How 'bout that?

The Enfields were coming around the corner into Aisle 13, home furnishings, when they passed an elderly lady store employee who was talking into a walkie talkie. She smiled at them and waved at them, only it was a funny kind of wave they'd never seen before. Then, she did it again and kept on walking.

Forty five seconds later, the Enfields stopped dead in their tracks. Their eyes sort of glazed over. Joe's left hand twitched and slipped from the handle of the cart. The kids shook a little, like they were cold. Then, whatever that was, passed, only maybe not completely.

Joe turned to his family and spoke. His voice sounded like it was emanating from the bottom of a well, but the others didn't seem to notice.

"You know what might be nice, kids? How 'bout we roast us some marshmallows?"

Five minutes later, the Enfields were settled comfortably in front of a large electric hearth in the home furnishings department.

They sat on kitchen chairs taken from a display nearby. They held arrows the kids had lifted from sporting goods. Marshmallows were stuck on the ends of the arrows and pointed at the video picture of flames roaring in the electric hearth. From a little speaker imbedded in the front, there came the sounds of the popping and hissing of logs burning in a real fire, recorded some time ago.

The four sat like that for two minutes. Their eyes had glazed over again. Dottie finally managed to speak:

“Uh,... like... is this right?”

She felt dopey, like the time she took too much Nyquil when she had that cold.

“Joe, does this seem....”

A wall of flame flashed out of the electric hearth and consumed the Enfields.

“Thwock!”. An arrow tipped with a blackened marshmallow flew out from the heart of this conflagration and stuck into a bag of fertilizer in the corner, a little of which seeped out onto the floor through the hole in the bag.

A smoldering lady’s tennis shoe flopped from under the flames and bounced two times on the Astroturf floor. Its laces burned like the wicks of candles.

The sound of the virtual fire coming out of the little speaker was drowned out briefly by the sound of the actual fire that was roasting the Enfields.

A fire alarm went off overhead, then stopped. From somewhere high above them, a little shower of water dripped onto the flames, but the fire was so intense, the water turned to steam with a sibilant hiss and evaporated. A little wisp of the steam floated south over the clothing department. It was

grey. Two minutes later, another, darker wisp of smoke floated the same way. It was black.

The lady store employee with the walkie talkie who had waved to the Enfields rounded the corner. She wore the L Mart uniform, a red polyester polo shirt topped with an oversized blue felt vest which was festooned with little buttons of rank and merit, along with several small plastic kitties and a big round badge: “Welcome to L Mart, where the L stands for Low Prices!!”

She regarded the scene before her. The flames had died down enough to reveal the Enfields, or actually, the charred outline of the Enfields. They had formed an interesting tableau. She couldn’t decide if they looked more like plaster casts of the citizens of Pompeii or a bad imitation of Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima. Oh, well.

She raising her walkie talkie to her lips and spoke into it.

Ten minutes earlier, seventeen year old Ricky Jacobs had pulled up into the employee parking section in back. He was about to begin his shift on the last day of his second week here, and, although his dumb ass boss didn’t know it, it was also his last day, period. In his back pocket rested a carefully worded letter of resignation that he had written on his computer, last night.

Screw this, thought Ricky. There was something wrong with the vibe of this place. It wasn’t just the surly managers and the shitty pay. There was something else. Just walking into this place felt like you were biting into something that’s supposed to taste one way then turns out to taste completely different. That’s it. The place had a chalky under taste to it. Time to spit it out, pal.

He walked into his boss’s office near the back entrance and picked out his time card from the rack. He looked at the panic bar behind the desk. Strangest thing. Never heard of that before. Boss had given him a tutorial on it, his first day. For security purposes, they had installed a panic bar in

the office of the manager. You hit the bar and all the doors lock. Have to punch in a code in the keypad under the bar to open 'em up again. He had to learn the code by heart. 6854. 6854. Boss asked him once a day to repeat it. Weird.

Arnold had told him. He had visited him here last week. Arnold looked around and scrunched up his nose:

“Rick. Something about this place ain’t kosher.”

Arnold Spitzer was his best friend. He was also a member of the only Jewish family in Monroe, Wisconsin. Ricky was proud of the fact that his best friend was Jewish. It made him feel worldly, liberal, expansive. The Jacobs invited him over last night for dinner and served him stuff he had never heard of. Some of it was pretty good.

Yeah, Arnold, thought Ricky as he changed into his uniform in front of the brand new locker, whatever kosher is or isn’t’ Arnold, this place ain’t.

As Ricky stuck his card into the time clock and heard it clunk, he walked toward the swinging doors that led to the cavernous floor of the store, itself.

He had just gotten his maintenance cart out of the utility closet when the call came over the overhead speakers:

“(click) (feedback) Clean up on Aisle 13. (click)”

By the time Ricky got to Aisle 13, all that remained of the Enfields was a pile of dark gray ashes and soot. He had seen so much strange stuff over the past two weeks that he had stopped wondering what it was that he was sweeping into the cart.

Just as he was finishing up, the speaker squawks to life, again:

“(feedback) Clean up on 5.”

He wheels the cart over to automotive and turns the corner on five to see the entire floor at the dead center of the aisle covered with a thick, black viscous goo. He looks up to see several tin containers of motor oil have

been punctured and drained onto the floor. Freakin' kids. It's those gangs from the West side, again, damn it. Didn't they catch this on the surveillance cameras/ Funny, he hadn't noticed any surveillance cameras.

Gets out his industrial sized plastic jug of solvent you're supposed to put on messes like this to break it down and disperse it before you mop it up. As he pours it onto the huge puddle, smoke begins to rise up from it and big bubbles come up from somewhere underneath it. The bubbles burst and pop, emitting noxious clouds of dark smoke and fumes like you smell when you pass by a road crew laying down asphalt on a highway. Jeez.

Something catches his eye off to the left. He looks at it, blinks, rubs his eye with the hand not holding the jug, and looks again.

There were three eight inch tall elephants wandering around the upper rim of the little black lake on the floor of aisle five, only they weren't exactly elephants. They had long, shaggy hair and their tusks were curled up at the ends. Wait, wait. He had seen pictures of these things in sixth grade. Mr. Frankel had a book. Cave Men. Prehistoric stuff. They had a name....mastertons...mastiff...Mastodons! He was looking at little Mastodons walking around a black lake of pre historic goo in L Mart. His mouth was working but he couldn't really say anything. He looked up the aisle to see if anyone else was seeing this. He pointed at them. When he looked back, they were gone.

He was dizzy. Damn it. You know what? It's the fumes. The fumes of the solvent and the goo had just cooked his brain. He had, like, tripped out for thirty seconds. Great. Just great. Place is freakin' toxic. Another good reason to get out. His letter of resignation felt warm nestled in his back pocket. Boom. Right on his snotty boss's desk at the end of this shift. Finito, daddio, as he grandpa would say.

As the solvent hisses and spreads out in the lake, the bubbles stop and the steam subsides enough for him to begin to mop it up.

He extends his mop into the outer edge of the lake. He pushes it into the puddle. It keeps on going. He gasps. How could it be more than two inches deep. He was standing right over it. There wasn't any dip in this floor. He had been up and down this aisle every day for two weeks. He pushed the shaft of the mop deeper into the lake. He was leaning way over

on his tip tows now. The mop was extended two and a half feet down and he still hadn't touched bottom. He leaned a bit farther over and looked down the shaft to see if he could make out anything beneath the jet black surface and something grabbed the shaft and pulled from below. Ricky didn't have time to let go. He was yanked into the black gooey lake and vanished beneath the surface. Three bubbles rose to the surface. One popped and out belched the letter from his back pocket. It floated for a minute, then sank.

While this is happening, over in the deli department, Joey Fuller reaches across the greasy counter and takes the huge bucket of popcorn chicken from the pimply girl in the hair net and disposable gloves.

He pries the lid off and grabs a couple of nuggets, pops two in his mouth. Then, the wife pipes up.

"Jeez. Couldn't you have at least washed your hands before we came out here.? Look at you. You got axle grease all under your nails. You think I like bein' seen out here in public with you like that? What if we run into somebody from my church group? You ever think a that?"

His eyes narrowed to slits. He dropped the bucket into the empty shopping cart. A couple of pieces of chicken plopped out. One fell through the bottom of the cart and onto the floor. He walked over it, squishing it onto the bottom of his tan work boots.

"You are just disgusting, you know that?"

He wasn't gonna give her the satisfaction. He knew what this was really about. Yesterday, she comes home three hours early and walks in on Julie Peters hopping around trying to get the other cowboy boot on. Shit. Wouldn't of caught her if they put back doors on trailers. That's what he should do. He could make a fortune. Design a line of mobile homes with back doors attached to slides that extend ten feet down into the parking lot outside. Call it the Cheater Special. "Order yours, today." The Floosie Ejector Model from Trailwind. "Don't get caught without it, or you'll get caught without it, get it?" He actually chuckled to himself.

“You think this is funny? You think what you’re doin’ to me, to our life...it’s comical... it’s..”

He didn’t mean to. He didn’t plan on it. He wasn’t even angry. It was like somethin’ swooped down inside him from somewhere and took over. He found himself calmly watching, like he was lookin’ at someone else, as he cracked Doris a good one. When her head snapped back to center, her mouth flopped open and she looked stupid, like a fish. Oh well, he thought, since you’ve turned the other cheek.

So, he cracks her across the other side of her head. Left a smear of axle grease on her ear.

Interesting. Her face flushes like a beet. He should say something.

“You happy now, bitch? You want some more? Keep raggin’ me.”

Tears formed in the corner of Doris’s eyes and dripped down her freckled cheeks. She never took her eyes off him.

“Don’t you dare start to blubber in here. Don’t you dare embarrass me in this freakin’ store or I’ll really give you somethin’ to cry about when we get home.”

Her mouth closed. Her right hand came up and rubbed the side of her face. She looked down at the black grease stain on her palm after some rubbed off from her ear. Joe looked at her sternly:

“I’m gonna see if the truck is done. I’ll meet you at the front door in fifteen minutes. If you ain’t there, you’re walkin home.”

Doris was numb. Numb and done. That was it. She was callin’ her lawyer Monday mornin’. She was shaking, she was so mad. Then, she did see someone from her church group coming toward her. Didn’t think she recognized her, yet, but she was comin’ this way.

She noticed she was standing next to the clothes department. She grabbed an ugly purple blouse off the rack and got the girl to unlock a dressing room. She locked the door behind her, threw the blouse at the wall,

sat down on the little bench behind her and sobbed so hard, snot came out both nostrils. Even through her tears, she couldn't stop castigating herself,

"That's charming Doris", she thought. "How dainty. How ladylike? Remember when you used to have some self respect? Some self esteem? Yeah, back in the stone age. B. J. Before Joe."

She stopped to catch her breath. She was dizzy. The little room was spinning. She grabbed the bottom of the bench to steady herself. Her hand touched two dried up wads of chewing gum stuck underneath it. Don'cha hate that? Sheesh. Place ain't even been open a month.

In the sudden silence, she heard a soft, sibilant voice come from the little booth next door.

"Aw, sugar.....You don't even got to tell me.... Only one thing can make a girl cry like that?....What's the bastard done, now, honey?"

Doris was not normally disposed to engaging in conversations with strangers, especially a stranger she couldn't even see in the next dressing room over, but today her defenses were down.

"You don't even want to know...." And she cried again, softer, this time, now that she knew somebody was listening.

"I can guess....."

The woman next door was the one who phoned in the spill on aisle 13. She was sitting cross legged, smoking a cigarette and filing her nails. Her legs were crossed at the knees. She absent mindedly clicked the back of her right Birkenstock sandal up and down against her heel. Her walkie talkie squawked and hissed in the corner, where she had thrown her smock over it. She had removed the nine volt battery from the smoke detector over her head.

"I know what you need, sugar." She slipped an employee gift certificate, good for five dollars, under the crack between the booths.

"Esther just made some apple turnovers in the deli. They're not bad. Go get yourself one and a cup a coffee. Fix you right up".

“You know what? That’s the nicest thing anyone’s done for me in months. How can I turn down an offer like that?”

She reached over the same counter that Joe had been at to pick up the bucket of chicken. Esther, the pimply girl in the hair net, smiled broadly and handed her coffee and a turnover.

Doris thanked her and sat down at a table in the over lit, clinically cold lounge area. Flies hovered at the overstuffed garbage can in the corner.

As she sipped her coffee, she put the turnover down on the little piece of waxed paper it had come in. She looked across the store and thought about what she was gonna tell her lawyer. She didn’t see the surface of the turnover move languidly beneath the glaze of icing, like a snake.

She took a bite. It was OK, not great, but she was hungry. She took two more bites, then she was seized, that the word she would use at her trial, seized by what seemed to be the single greatest idea she had ever in her life had.

She stood up, knocking the coffee over, and walked purposefully toward the other end of the store, towards sporting goods. She didn’t notice she had spilled the coffee all over the floor, but the people at the next table over did. They gave her a dirty look and scowled. Where was she brought up, in a barn?

She got to the sporting goods department and looked at the guy behind the counter. He wore a zip up camouflage hunting vest with about twenty five cartridge loops sewn into each side.

He didn’t even glance at her as he unlocked the gun case and walked away.

She came around the counter, pulled out a 30 ought 6 deer rifle, broke open a box of shells, loaded five in the magazine, opened her purse, emptied the rest of the shells in it, and slung the purse over her shoulder.

She walked into the aisle and looked around for the automotive department.

“On second thought, screw the lawyer”, she murmured as she pulled back the bolt.

Joe was chatting up a salesgirl who looked about seventeen. She had greasy dyed blond hair showing an inch of black roots. She was giggling and blushing. They were eating chicken from the bucket. He smiled and laughed, spitting out a little chunk of chicken onto the front of his Metallica shirt that he got off his cousin who had seen their last tour.

Doris stopped twenty yards away. She slipped the purse from her shoulder, dropped to one knee, lined him up in the sight, which was accurate up to 300 meters. Magnified in the cross hairs, Joe’s head was the size of a beachball, but she wasn’t going for the head shot, not yet.

The shell tore through the front part of his thigh. The bucket flew five feet in the air. He went down hard and howling. The girl jumped back instinctively. Good reflexes. She was on the Monroe High. cheerleading squad.

Doris put one into his side. He howled again and crawled across the floor, leaving a smear of blood like the slime trail of a snail.

She walked over. Stood over him. He looked up at her in stark crazy unbelief. The blood had drained from his face and raced to the vital organs. “Must protect the organism,” the brain called out to the blood. “Flee south.” Too late, brain. You should have protected the organism by not getting caught with the chick, yesterday. Oh, well. Doris leaned down:

“Sorry to break up the party with your new little friend. Truck ready yet, honey?”

Shot him between the eyes.

It was 5:45. The store was closing in fifteen minutes anyway for maintenance, so the cops were easily able to evacuate the remaining patrons as the EMT truck roared up to the front.

The only thing Doris asked the cops that escorted her into the back seat of the cruiser was what color state prison uniforms were.

“Please don’t tell me they’re orange. Orange makes my face look green.”

At midnight, the employee locker room was filled. The lady with the walkie talkie, the kid on the ladder, and fourteen other employees changed out of their uniforms and donned dark gray, hooded, sackcloth robes with knotted ropes tied at the waist. The knots in the ropes were signs of office, of seniority, of deeds done for the order that did not bear the scrutiny of the light of day.

They walked onto the floor of the store in a procession and stood in a circle around a pentangle that had been spray painted on some flattened cardboard boxes. Mumbo jumbo was mumbled. The scene was illuminated by candles which were placed in an outer circle to approximate the shape and scale of Stonehenge.

At a signal from the one who had the most knots in his rope, the circle parted, and the kid from the ladder led the goat from the petting zoo into the center.

The goat was swathed in red paint that formed runes and mystical signs between its horns and on its chest.

Another elder appeared. All kneeled. Their hands extended upwards in supplication to whatever dark God held them in his sway.

The elder pulled the cord on the brand new Black and Decker Chain saw, tethered to the wall by an long orange extension cord.

As the saw kicked into life, the elder eased back on the choke. The saw hummed evenly as he approached the goats.

A spark flew out of the wall socket the extension cord was plugged into. A tongue of flame leapt out. Another raced up inside the wall to the ceiling. Once there, it sought the oxygen of the open skylights and spread in all directions.

In the manager's office, an alarm was tripped that alerted the Monroe Volunteer fire department. And then the wiring flared and the panic bar activated, locking all the doors.

Zeke Esterton was just pulling into the parking lot at ten past midnight. He hadn't seen the sign on the doors about the store closing, and was just stopping by after the party to pick up Pepto Bismol to ease the stomach cramps with which he was afflicted due to his sister Ellie's potato salad, which was, apparently, toxic.

Zeke got out of his car. The place was engulfed in flames. Unfortunately, the Monroe Volunteer Fire Department truck was still back at the station house. Most of guys were still at a Halloween Benefit Haunted House. They did it every year, for the kids with cancer at the local hospital. By the time they got here, L Mart would look like the remains of the Enfields.

Zeke thought he heard some banging and yelling coming from the store, but he couldn't be sure. His stomach was so distressed, he left home without his hearing aid and he was deaf as a post.

"Damn it, " he thought, " Now I got to drive all the way to Clinton for groceries, again.

Privacy Issues

“She’s here!! She’s in Wisconsin. I just got a call from the P.I. My God, what should I do?”

“Look, Kathy, I think you’re over...”

I heard a scream and the sound of breaking glass, then the line went dead.

That was six months ago. Seems like a world away, a life away.

Growing up, my mother would never knock. Always walked right into my bedroom. So, I developed privacy issues. Privacy is like gold to me. No phone calls, no visitors for days. It’s my cabana on the beach. Except for Kathy. Being with her is like being alone but with someone cool to talk to.

The two hardest things about prison are: no privacy and no Kathy. But it’s Kathy that got me here, so what’s that, irony?

I broke up with someone a year ago and Kathy and I became friends. She’s a psychologist, so she’s great to talk to. We would spend hours over coffee. She would help me get over Sally and I would help her with Larry.

She met him at a convention in Philadelphia, where he lives. He is Puerto Rican, and very family oriented. He told her he has a twenty year old son from a previous marriage and Kathy has a ten year old daughter, Alice, from hers.

Soon, though, she began returning from her visits to Larry with reservations. He was needy and clingy. He would cry when she demurred about making a deeper commitment. Still, she really cared for him. He was the salt of the Earth, an old fashioned guy, reliable.

Then his ex- wife entered the picture. They've been divorced for seven years, but she doesn't see it that way, apparently.

She's quite a piece of work. Once, Larry came home to find another guy in their house in his shorts. Chased him around the yard with a baseball bat.

Kathy called me, badly shaken. I went over. She was standing over her laptop looking down at it like it was a snake, which, in a way, it turned out to be.

She had responded to a message on Facebook from Larry's son, Chad: "Hi. Hear you're going to be in the family, soon."

She wrote back about how cool Larry was, and how much she's heard about Chad, and how proud his father is of him.

Only it wasn't Chad. It was Tracy, the ex. She had gotten a hold of her son's Facebook account and was posing as Chad, probing Kathy for info.

See what I mean? Welcome to the internet, where anyone can pretend to be anyone. It's like sticking your hand into a box of snakes.

Then, the phone calls started. She played a couple for me over margaritas at our favorite Mexican place. Gave me the willies.

"The jig is up. I know about you, sister."

The jig is up? She's seen too many Jimmy Cagney movies. Then, this:

"Larry has had three wives. I'm the fourth. He cheated on all them, including me, to get to the next wife. Is that what you want? You wanna be number five? You wanna go down that road in life? Think about it."

But Larry was only ever married to Tracy, and was never unfaithful. That's what he told Kathy, and she believes him.

In Kathy's estimation, Tracy has BPD, borderline personality disorder, probably as the result of harmful early childhood experiences. People with this condition have a distorted self image. They feel worthless and fundamentally flawed. They may see themselves as evil or bad, and, in some cases, they feel as if they don't exist, at all.

They have a tendency to idealize someone one moment and then abruptly shift to fury and hate over perceived slights. They have difficulty identifying gray areas in relationships. Someone is either good or evil. It may be the same person and the perception shifts from day to day.

Common symptoms include: Inappropriate anger, which can easily escalate into physical confrontations, suicidal behavior, and fear of being alone.

Tracy is an eminent Pediatric Cardiologist, now living in Winona, Minnesota.

Two weeks ago, Kathy walked into the Monroe Medical Center, where she's a counselor in the Psychiatric Care Unit. Dr. Wang calls her into his office.

"Kathy, I've received two disturbing phone calls in the past two days. I felt it only fair to inform you of the nature of these before doing anything else. They were from a Dr. Laurent in Minnesota, who I know by reputation. Very well respected in her field.

She claims to have information that you've falsified your work history when applying for this position. In fact, she says she has proof that you actually do not hold a Masters Degree in Psychology from UW Madison, or any other institution, for that matter."

It took Kathy three days to straighten that out. She actually had to produce her diploma for Dr. Wang. Things are rapidly veering towards some vertiginous tipping point of crazy, and she doesn't know what to do about it.

Then, in a tearful, late night call from Philly, Larry drops the bomb about the twins.

Two years after he divorced her, Tracy had herself inseminated with Larry's sperm, which they had preserved for some reason while they were married. She gave birth to twin boys, and only informed Larry about this when she was eight months pregnant. She did it to get him back. Gee, for some reason that didn't work.

So, Kathy has really stepped in it. What else has Larry been keeping from her? But that's a minor issue when one considers that she's being stalked by Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde. One minute, Dr. Laurent is on your TV dispensing fun facts child health care, and the next minute she's boiling a bunny in your kitchen.

Kathy tells Larry she needs space. She needs time to sort it out. He cries. She stands firm. She tells him to tell Chad, casually that they are no longer together, in the hope that this will filter back to Tracy and the craziness will ramp back down again. Kathy just wants her life back and if she has to lose Larry to get it, so be it.

But Larry's a mess. He refuses to tell Chad, or anyone, that they're through. He can't live without Kathy. He insists on flying out to Monroe and spending the weekend so they can work on their relationship. Kathy gives in.

She shows up for coffee Monday morning. I take one look at her and I don't even have to ask. It was a disaster. The cying. The pleading. Come on, Larry, I say to myself. Man up, for God's sake. That ain't gonna bring her back, bro.

Then, everything goes quiet for two months. Sometime in there, Kathy and I go from being friends to being lovers, which, I think, we both always knew was inevitable.

Then, the crazy train comes around the bend, again. It always comes in a phone call when you least expect it.

"Kathy, it's Mark."

Kathy's ex.

“I got a phone call from a Dr. Laurent. Says she has proof you’re using again and Alice has been around you and your friends when you’re doing it. You got two minutes to convince me it’s not true before I call Child Welfare.”

Kathy had a substance issue, but that was during a bad patch in her marriage to Mark years ago. She’s been clean for seven years.

I realized we were being too passive. We were just sitting here watching as Tracy escalated the craziness. We needed information. Information is the ammo in the gun. We needed to find something we could use to make this go away.

I hired a private investigator from Chicago. He went to Winona and snooped around, bugs her phones, comes up empty.

The Mr. Hyde side never comes out on her own turf, only Dr. Jekyll: Rotary, PTA, active in the Church. We got nothing.

He goes back to Chicago, promises to monitor her phone traffic.

Then, it happened.

“She’s here. She’s in Wisconsin. I just got a call from the P.I. My God, what should I do?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The P. I. just tracked her on her cell. She’s on call at the hospital and has to check in every four hours. He traced her last call. She’s in Wisconsin.”

“Look, Kathy, I think you’re over...”

Then, the scream and the breaking glass. The line goes dead. I’m five minutes away doing the speed limit. That night, I made it in two.

Jump out of my Trans Am. Screaming coming from back of the house. I run down the driveway and turn the corner into the patio. That’s

when I saw them through the back window. Kathy was on her back on the kitchen table. Tracy was standing over her, choking her.

“I told you I was gonna kill you if you didn’t leave him alone, but you didn’t believe me, did you, bitch? Believe me, now? Huh?”

I tried to pull her off. Didn’t work. I tried again. Still didn’t work. Kathy’s face was turning blue.

The frying pan was hanging from a hook on the copper hood over the stove.

So, here I am. Kathy says she’ll wait. But they tell me that’s what all the girlfriends say for the first six months or so, then they move on with their lives.

So, no Kathy.

Now, if I could only work on the privacy issues.

Honor

Bill Esterhazy lifted his right thumb off the butterfly trigger on the Ma Deuce. Everything went quiet except for the ringing in his ears and the occasional moan of the Japanese who were still alive in the clearing. Oh, yeah, and the whimpering of his fox hole mate, George Stephanopoulos.

“Mama.. Mama. Please...please make it stop....Please, Jesus... please...”

Bill looked behind him. George was curled up in a ball, hunched into the jungle foliage that lined their hole. He had been that way for two hours. Jeez, thought Bill, as he changed out the belt on the Browning, I guess no one wakes up and thinks: today’s the day I become a coward.

Bill had held off three attacks that night and two the night before. It was easier then, with George feeding him the belt and spelling him on the .50 cal. But, feeding himself the belt tonight with his left hand and firing with his right, he was worried the gun would jam and he’d be in deep kimchee, my friend. Ah, so. Sayonara, yank.

The next attack came at dawn. When it was just about over, a grenade landed in the hole. Bill was blown to bits. George, who was hiding under the corpse of Jack Friedman, survived with shrapnel to his shoulder, but he was bleeding badly. When the smoke cleared, he managed to crawl up to the front, leaned over the Deuce, looked out into the field, and passed out.

He woke up in a field hospital with a morphine drip and a very plain looking nurse hovering over him. Lieutenant Fox was there and a full bird colonel he had never seen, who removed his cap and leaned over him.

“Private.. Private, can you hear me?...”

George nodded, weakly.

“Good, ‘cause I want you to hear this...”

Two weeks later, his arm still in a sling, Marine Corps Commandant Petersen fastened the Congressional Medal of Honor around his neck. It was heavier than he thought it would be.

The P.A. echoed off the hills that ringed the airstrip on Corregedor.

“....did, single handedly, hold off four successive Japanese attacks over a twelve hour period, allowing reinforcements to arrive in the surrounding positions. This heroic action prevented the enemy from taking this airfield and encircling three regiments of Marines.”

The flashbulbs startled him, even though he was told to expect them, as he stepped onto the platform at Grand Central Station. After a press conference in which he repeated his carefully rehearsed lies, his Mom and Dad drove him back home, to Weehawken.

“Son, the bank was gonna take the grocery store. We were six months behind. But, after what you done, the neighborhood committee took donations, and we got the back rent paid. How ‘bout that?”

In the back seat with his kid brother Nikkos. Kid could barely talk when George shipped out. Now he can’t shut up.

“How many Japs did you get, Georgie? How many?”

Kid was hoppin’ up and down.

“Hey. Hey, Nikki. Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

He placed the medal in the child’s palm and folded his little fingers over it. He reached over the boy and cranked down the window of the old Studebaker. He hoped the damn thing would going flying out the car somewhere in the middle of the Lincoln Tunnel.

He didn’t even have to lie, really, when Colonel Jacobs asked him. All he had to do was shake his head once, up and down. Yeah, that’s what happened, sir. If he had just used his sideways neck muscles instead of the up and down ones, he’d be able to live with himself now, instead of this.

Maybe it was the letter from Pop about the store being in trouble which came the week before. Maybe it was the nights without sleep, the constant barrage, the screaming waves of Japs. Everyone has their breaking point, he guessed. Shell shock, they called it back in the big one. Now, it was battle fatigue. In twenty years, it would be Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Call it what you want. The ones who turned yellow and cracked always did the same shambling walk, shaking and blubbing, all the way to the ambulance. Only good thing, most of them were too out of it to see the looks of derision on the faces of the men they passed.

He'd had three good opportunities to come clean: the first debriefing by the brass at the hospital, the formal inquiry with the Commandant, and the heart to heart talk with the regimental chaplain. The first one would have been the easiest. After that, the lie got heavier inside him. And he held on to it after that like a life raft, like if he let go, he'd sink, which was true, sort of.

Over the next thirty years, he expanded the family food store business. They owned three Grand Union supermarkets, Weehawken Hoboken, and Jersey City. Nikki managed one, he managed two. Pop retired, fished off the Kills over in Staten Island.

He married Josie, had two kids. Had a hobby: he followed the career of Audie Murphy. Kept a scrapbook on him: the most decorated soldier in the war, thirty three commendations and the medal of honor. Killed over two hundred and forty Germans in nine major campaigns.

Murph did twenty six movies. Worst actor he ever saw. Wound up careening through endless bar brawls in Arizona, whacked out on booze and Placidyl. Jeez. Murphy really was a hero and he still lost it. What chance has a fraud like me got, thought George.?

One in the morning, Sunday before Easter. He and Nikki were cashing out at Pop's desk in the office of the Jersey City store. Two guys come in heavy through the back door, ski masks, pistols.

One covers him, the other follows his kid brother as he opens the safe. As he is getting it open, Pop comes in the back door. One of the guys raises his gun and points it at Pop, who's too scared to move. Bang. Nikki shoots the guy with the service .45 George kept in the safe. The other guy shoots

Nikkos, then George. Kid goes down, shoots the second guy while lying on his back. Pop is slumped against the wall in the corner. He's in shock but he's alright. Nikki is breathing shallowly, but he'll make it. George wasn't so lucky.

George pulls himself up at the desk. He takes Pop's paperweight that depicts the raising of the flag on Iwo. He uses it to smash the glass on the frame that Pop has hanging over his desk. He takes the medal out of the frame.

He crawls over to Nikki, takes the gun out of his hand, places the medal in his brother's palm, closes his fingers around it.

For the first time in thirty years, George takes an honest breath, and his last.

The Playground of the North

Adam Lamberson lifted his head from the table. There was a bit of drool congealed at the lower left corner of his mouth, but there was no one around to be embarrassed in front of. He had driven his friends away hours ago with his rant:

“Authenticity...I’m talkin’ authenticity, here.Integrity. Integrity of purpose... Let’s admit it....”

The faces of his co workers at Collins Advertising, who stared back at him over the table at “The Library,” said it all. Do we have to listen to this, again?

“No, let’s admit it... we’re whores....over educated whores.... Look, is there anyone here still kidding themselves that the great American novel that each of us have languishing on our laptops is ever gonna see the light of day?. Because, no one has the strength to finish the damn things. Am I lyin’? By the end of every day, whatever sap of creativity the muse has doled out to us has already been sucked into the ravenous maw of the products, the products....”

He pointed an accusatory forefinger at each one at the table, in turn. They shall be known by the products they represent.

“Diapers,... lawn chemicals... antacid (which doesn’t work, by the way, Joey, have you noticed that?)

He saved the most vehement finger for last. How dare she dump him?

“....and leave us not forget, fertilizer... fertilizer, Julie... Which is worse, the aesthetic or the actual stench of your account?”

He brought his hand down on the table hard enough to spill over the basket of popcorn and to pop off a very expensive cuff link, which landed in Julie’s drink. Jeez, she thought, did I actually go out with him for two weeks last summer? And is that one of the cufflinks I gave him? Damn.

She stood up and walked out. She had been telling them for months that Adam was slipping loose from whatever frayed, provisional mooring had been tethering him to the dock of sanity. Now, maybe they'd believe her. He needed help. Serious professional help. She winced when she realized she still cared about him. There was still a little glowing coal somewhere inside her with his name on it. God knows why. Must be a chick thing.

But now they were all gone, having mumbled excuses and bugged out long ago. Traitors. Milquetoasts. How often do you get to call someone a milquetoast? Hah. Damn skippy.

As he made his way to the door, through the phony English club interior with the fake book spines lining fake walnut shelves, he bumped into a globe. For some reason, two countries in Scandanavia caught his eye. He rocked the globe back and forth, back and forth, as he looked at them. Hmmm. Dig that.

The next day, the Come - to - Jesus - We -must -Save- This- Account meeting with Mr. Collins ("Call me Jimmy". No one did.) was not going well. The president of Collins Advertising may have made millions on Madison Avenue in the halcyon days of the 1960's, but he never lost the Carny Barker's roar that brought 'em in to the Big Top in Kentucky, where he started out in the '50s. He was at full voice, today.

"Ah don't want to hear about your...(he actually sneered) reservations, your (sneer) sensitivity issues regarding racial and ethnic stereotypes associated with this campaign. Do you think they were havin' this discussion at Leo Burnett in 1985 when they signed Ray Charles to sing: "You got the right one, baby, uh huh?" That ad kept that firm afloat through the crash of 1987, dear hearts. That one...freakin' ad..."

He threw a bagel down on the table. A smear of cream cheese flopped onto one of the agenda sheets his secretary had distributed, earlier. Nobody had looked at them, though. They knew what the real agenda was gonna be. This. Their collective asses slow roasted over a Kentucky campfire. Yee haw.

“So, why am I unable to coax from this august assemblage, this very expensive brains trust, the one killer slogan that this campaign, and along with it, the viability of this firm, hinges upon?”

As is sometimes the case, the most hungover, or the most disgruntled, don't care anymore and exec is the first, and only one to take the bait. Adam qualified as both.

“Because the client has rejected all the good ideas, Mr. Collins. “

When all the carefully coifed heads had turned to him at the end of the table, he went on:

“Because the client has an underdeveloped sense of aesthetics, Mr. Collins. If this client owned McDonald's and we came up with “Where's the beef?”, he would throw it back in our faces, not the burger, the slogan.

Ebenezer's Pork Rinds? What was wrong with: “It's time to pork, baby?” I thought that was particularly piquant.”

Ordinarily, Collins encouraged this sort of effrontery. He liked a show of balls from somewhere in the midst of this sea of Wharton pussies, but, today, this kid was just pissing him off.

“The client objected to the crude sexual reference, Adam. And you damn well know that.”

Julie saw something go really wrong behind Adam's eyes. She always liked his eyes. They went misty and sentimental when he was making love with her last summer. Then, he shut down, so she left.

“Then how 'bout this? “Ebenezer's Pork Rinds: Who knows what they really are?”

Adam didn't plan to lose it, but then, is that something you plan? Is that something you jot down into your daybook? He jumped to his feet, overturning a full bottle of Evian water.

“Or, how goes this grab you?.. Ebenezer's Pork Rinds: They're disgusting.”

He threw open the doors and strode to the elevators. You could hear him yelling as the elevator doors closed.

“But here’s my favorite....Ebenezer’s Pork Rinds: It’s the snack you choose

They all heard the ding. Julie found herself wondering how he was gonna complete the next slogan. Maybe she would call him on his cell on the park bench he would be living on in two weeks and find out.

“....the snack you choose...(he sniffed).... The snack you choose... (he dropped to his knees)....when life has lost its meaning...”

He broke down and cried like he was five. He let himself cry from the eighth floor to the ground floor. Then, he pulled himself together.

He came out the front door of 521 Madison Avenue. He ripped off his Jerry Garcia tie. He threw his \$500 Mark Cross briefcase into a garbage can. He hailed a cab.

“Kennedy airport.”

Twelve hours later, he emerged from the Reykjavik Airport blinking into the muted Icelandic sunlight. He told the cab driver to take him to the cleanest hotel he knew of. It was a Novotel, French. For the French, it was pretty clean.

Somehow, through whatever bravado and gift of gab he possessed, he wheedled his way into a ten minute appointment with Johanna Sigurdardottir, the world’s first openly gay head of government in modern times.

He walked into her office. He gave her a box set of the complete recordings of Melissa Etheridge and began his pitch:

“President Sigurdardottir, may I possibly call you Johanna, because life is short and your name is long... (She smiles and nods. The old Lamberson charm is working, even on jet lag).. Johanna, here’s the thing. Why did Iceland’s economy collapse on October 10th of last year? The

Icelandic Krona is now worth about as much as Confederate money, uh, sorry... jet lag...it's worthless, right?

And on February 26th of this year, the Governor of your Central Bank was escorted from his office. He was lucky not to torn apart in the streets, you ask me. “

...(A terse nod. This had better be good. She liked the brashness of Americans, like that comic Conan O'brien,,, but there was a limit),,,

“Why is it that you have a population of 320,000 and Greenland has a population of 57,564 and their tourism is up 25 per cent and yours is down 15 per cent from last year?

Her eyes opened a bit. Oh, he has done his homework.

“Madame President, your country has much more to offer than your snow bound neighbor to the right. But you are suffering from what we, in the advertising industry, call: an impediment of perception. In my business, Madame President, we live and die by one axiom, one alone;

Her eyebrows went up even a tiny bit more.

“Perception is reality.”

On the plane, he had taught himself to say this in Icelandic, a North German language descended from Old Norse, and he did. It worked.

“The world sees “Ice” in your name and it shudders, it shivers. Think of all the world travelers who call their travel agents and say: “Me and my husband, Morey, who suffers from the chills, where should we go? We're sick of Monte Carlo and Nice. What, Iceland? Are you crazy?

Rhymes with “Stick a knife in your eyes, land” Rhymes with “Kick me twice, land”.

So, why is everyone visiting that shit pile to the right, Greenland, which is sinking under the weight of of its own glaciers. Why? Because it has green in its name, not ice, for heaven's sake. “

Here, he gave up the turn, the flop, whatever. He put his cards on the table.

“I have come here, Madame President, because I want to be the Director of Public Relations of your country. If you will create that position, which, I know, is an extraordinary request, and give me a staff and a budget and a good media liaison, I will turn this thing around in six months. In six months, no one will visit big rock pile over there. Everyone will be flocking here to, are you ready: to “Meadowland: The Playground of the North.”

She grunted, involuntarily. Maybe she had had a little Icelandic orgasm in her tweed business suit, he couldn't tell.

“But Iceland really doesn't...”

“Sorry to interrupt Madame President, but I wonder if you would humor me? For the next five minutes, can we please refer to this country only as Meadowland? I think, if we do, you might begin to sense the emollient effect this new moniker possesses. I've given it quite some thought, as you may imagine.

She gave an embarrassed nod.

“But, we, we don't have any real meadows to speak of.”

“That's why our first phase will be to launch the National Meadowland Reclamation project. What better PR photos could there be than thousands of happy Meadowlanders chipping away at the tundra with picks and blowtorches? We'll begin by expanding the acreage of Meadowland's four national parks Jokulsargljufur, Skaftafell, Snaelfellsjokull, and Pingvellir. Think how lovely they will be, ringed with all the new meadows.

Then, we place a meadow every twenty miles on the Ring Road that encircles your country and links the major cities together.”

In another five minutes, his time was up, but she seemed a bit intrigued, amazingly enough. Desperation at the height of power creates strange bedfellows, indeed. He knew that going in.

She invited him to join her and her cabinet at a State dinner that evening.

Seated three chairs away from her on the dais, he reintroduced the topic. Wine was flowing freely. Meadowland was met with a cornucopia of responses, ranging from barely concealed derision from the Minister of Parks and Recreation to hysterical laughter from Bjork, who was plastered when she walked in and kept drinking. Jeez, for a five foot one inch tall elf, she sure can put away the Jack and coke.

She was seated next to him. He couldn't decide if the loopy, sideways glances she kept giving him were lascivious, or just a cultural by product of inebriated elf behavior. Then she grabbed his left thigh under the table. Her little hand was like a hawk's talon. Well, that cleared that up.

He was in his room at two AM on the phone to Chuck in New York.

"I think I almost got her sold, man. She's giving me twenty minutes with the cabinet tomorrow to...Chuck, I'll call you back, someone seems to be knocking."

Bjork was through the door and flopped on the bed in the twinkling of an eye, a bottle of Jack Daniels clutched in one elfin paw.

"OK American guy...get over here."

Adam was flummoxed. This was not just anyone. This little Rock Star was a national treasure. The tax revenue that devolved into the country's coffers from her record sales and tours alone were probably the only thing keeping this place going.

"Uh, Bjork...perhaps we'd better...."

She was up on her knees, kicking off her shoes, flipping up her party dress. She launched herself at him and they went down on the floor in a

heap. She started kissing his right ear and then she sunk her teeth deep into the side of his neck. Blood dripped out onto her chin. He tossed her off.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, you crazy bitch?”

She giggled and licked his blood off her chin like a kid with an ice cream cone. Came after him, again. She jumped on him and bit in on the other side of his neck, grunting deeply as her fangs sunk in to his flesh.

He yanked her head back with his left hand, drew a bead on it from a foot away, and let her have the right. Whap!

Out cold. Oh, God no. He grabbed his Sat phone and bolted for the bathroom. Locked the door and sat against the tub.

“Chuck... Chuck.. thank God you’re there. No questions...no questions...just tell me...tell me everything you know about Bjork.”

Great thing about Chuck, he could turn on a dime, knew a dazzling array of seemingly useless facts, and had been around Adam for long enough not to be thrown by this sort of thing,

“Let’s see...she came to the Grammys in a swan dress so ugly it became an instant anti fashion icon... Two years ago, she violently attacked a paparazzo at the LA airport for no reason....and her boyfriend owns a fleet of whale fishing boats....”

He held a wet washcloth to his neck.

“Anyone ever mention she’s a vampire, or at the very least, thinks she’s one of the undead... Anyone ever mention she probably sleeps in a coffin lined with the soil of her native land?”

When he peeked out five minutes later, she was gone. The bottle of Jack lolled on the bed where she dropped it.

He was awakened by a brisk banging on his door at 6 AM. Two National police officers and the hotel clerk were evicting him from his room. He had four hours to leave the country before formal charges were filed for attempted rape. Bjork had gone ballistic, apparently.

He threw his two suits into his bag and fled for the elevators. Upon reaching the lobby, he was horrified at seeing his photo next to hers on the front page of the Reykjavik Times. He couldn't read a word of it, but the shiner on the right eye of the elfin visage spoke volumes.

The entire line of cabbies outside the Novotel all got in their cars and drove off as soon as he emerged. He started walking in the direction of the tram station, which would get him to the airport. The sun was coming up as he walked along the canal that ran through the heart of the central district of the city. The bag was getting heavier. Two blocks to the tram.

He heard a boom, then a "fwok" as something whizzed by his head. A harpoon was stuck into a maple tree two feet to his left. The shaft quivered, angrily. He turned in the direction it had come from. Bjork was standing on the quarterdeck of a whaling vessel which was steaming up the canal, re-loading a harpoon cannon and screaming incoherently in Icelandic, which, he noted wistfully, would now never be known as Meadowlandic. Pity.

He dropped his bag and took off at a dead run for the tram station. Unfortunately, the only way to get there was along the path next to the canal. She got off two more harpoons on the way. Thank God she was hung over. It most certainly affected her aim.

He emerged from the plane at Kennedy badly shaken and drunk. He was stunned to see Julie waiting for him at the baggage claim. She must have called Chuck.

"Adam, thank God you made it back. Mr. Collins ..."

She gasped.

"What happened to your neck?"

"Don't ask."

"Mr. Collins has been going bats trying to reach you,"

"What? Do you mean I'm not fired?"

“No. no. I mean, I hope you don’t mind. I took the liberty of changing a word in your Pork Rind slogan and the client went nuts for it. How about that?”

“Huh.. What did the slogan turn into?”

She shrugged: “It’s time for pork, baby”

He approached her and gave her a long hug.

“Sorry for the obvious and terrible pun but,....”

He looked her in the eyes. He had such lovely eyes, really.

“...thanks for saving my bacon, baby.”

He took her to dinner at Smith and Wollensky’s. It was where they had their first date.

“Julie, what do you know about Lichtenstein? Would you visit a country with a clunky name like Lichtenstein? What about if they changed it to

The end.

Yellow Bird, High in Banana Tree

Jack (anglicized from Giacomo) Badliano, stood inside the last phone booth in Las Vegas. He didn't know that's what it was but by this time next week Ma Bell would be jacking it out of the ground like a rotten tooth. Verizon had cut off his cell two days ago.

He was more concerned right now with being heard over the roar of the dancing waters of the Bellagio Fountain which spurted and spritzed for the tourists about fifty yards to his left.

"Mrs. Heidegger, I told you yesterday, I'll have the rent... honey, my hand to God, all of it in two days. Please, dear....no you don't want to do that. Dear, you don't want to throw my clothes in the pool. ...The boy will have to re chlorinate... Don't' be rash.... Don't' be....(click)

Could life get any better? He lit a cigarette and watched the fountains frolicking in their computerized display. He had seen it so many times he could set his watch by the time it turned from purple to green. Five, four, three, two.....there we go.. freakin green...casting an eerie pallor on the goobers from Columbus who went wild and snapped away with their disposable cameras. You'd think Venus on the Half Shell was rising out of the mist spitting out meal vouchers.

He had to be back onstage at the lounge in ten minutes and he had to come up with a plan B , a plan to survive.

Had it really come to this? Everything seemed so good when he moved here from Jersey. The lounge scene was booming. He was working five nights a week and picking up late sets at Caesar's on the weekend, He was pulling down a hundred grand a year. He was on the phone to Hoboken, gloating over all those Zhadrools who told him he was a fool to go out west.

"Hear that...hear that ? ...that riffing sound in the background, you Strutz? That's ten thousand dollars, Paulie. Yeah. ... It's a stack of Benjamins. Paulie, you're my cousin and I love you but screw you if you

can't admit when you're wrong.....Yeah? You wish, chaloots.... If you're nice to me, maybe I'll call you when a gig opens up out here. Eat your words, baby! Be a man!"

Soon, though, live bands were cut back to three nights a week, studio work dried up, and Karaoke was king.

And now, here he was, eating saltines and ketchup in the cafeteria until the Pakistani manager threw him out at midnight. Jesus, God, how had it come to this?

Ricky Esteban, the jerky singer of the week Jack and the band were accompanying, oozed his way into "We've Only Just Begun", mincing and skipping down to the lip of the stage to suck up to a table of Red Hat Ladies from Des Moines who hadn't missed his act all week. How would they survive back in Iowa without their Ricky baby?

He hated this guy. He hated all the creeps the management stuck us with, week in and week out, but this guy, Madon! I would stick a bic pen in his eye in the alley if St. Anthony came down in a flaming pie and told me I could get away with it, Jack thought. He had no respect for me and the band. Treated us like Puerto Rican bus boys. No, check that. The manager couldn't afford to lose a bus boy. Guitar players, apparently, Jugdesh could find on any corner.

He noticed an old lady alone in a corner banquette who never took her eyes off him the whole set. Great. Time was he could charm them all. Now, apparently, he appealed only to the geritol set.

She came up to him afterwards as he was zipping up his beat up Strat into his gig bag. What did he charge for guitar lessons? Hell, a buck was a buck.

Next day, she shows up at the Desert Resort Motel carrying an ancient hardshell case. Now, there are old guitar cases and really old guitar cases.

Formatted: Indent: First line:

0"

Jack's bore the battle scars of a life misspent in countless dives. He could give a world tour with that thing, pointing out dents of historic interest:

"This ding here I got when I had to clock some Bohunk over the head with it during a bar tab dispute in Bucharest. This latch on the bottom busted open when some chick threw it down a flight of stairs at the Plaza in New York."

Hers was old, all right, but didn't have a knick on it, anywhere.

Room was so small; they had to sit facing each other on twin beds. Creepy.

She puts the case next to her on the bed and opens it.

Jack looks at what's in there and swallows the gum he had been chewing all day.

It was The Golden Eagle.

If Moses's tablets from the Mount woulda been in there, that might have been a little more startling, but not much.

Every guitar player knew the story of the Golden Eagle. And, like Sasquatch and the Loch Ness Monster, debated raged on between two factions, one that swore it existed and one that swore it didn't.

Guess what, he thought to himself as he wiped his forehead with a cocktail napkin, it did. It does. It's here. Santissima Maria. Jumped up Judas Priest in a Side Car, it's here, in a case on a polyester flower print bedspread in room nineteen of the Down and Out Inn.

In 1957, so the story goes, Les Paul was said to have accepted a commission to create a one of a kind custom solid body electric guitar at the Gibson factory. He flew out to the plant in Michigan to make it, himself. It was to be uniquely different from the standard gold top Les Pauls that Gibson turned out in the hundreds, that year. The assembly line models had gold colored finishes on the face of the instrument and on the face of the

headstock.

But, The Golden Eagle was said to have been made of some impossible to find Brazilian teak wood, hand selected by Les, and was finished in gold all over, back, side, neck, binding, all over, all gold, with thousands of dollars of gold flecks mixed into the paint, then fitted with solid gold, custom cast, hand burnished pick up cases, tuning pegs and tone control knobs.

They say he finished it at midnight and handed it over to two armed guards, who were to deliver it to an Arabian potentate who had a teenage son with a birthday coming up. Never got there. End of story.

Jack puts on his poker face and, over the course of the next hour, coaxed the story out of her, in between teaching her G and D7.

Ruthie, who was seventy-five, had a brother who passed away three years ago. She went through his house in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, threw out all the crap and stuck anything that might be of value into a U Haul and drove it town to Appleton, where she lived in a trailer just outside of town.

Last month, she saw an old movie that had Trini Lopez in it, singing “Yellow Bird”, her favorite song, and playing his Gibson. Decided she wanted to learn how to play it. Why not? She had that shiny old guitar she’d found in Ted’s attic just sitting in its case collecting dust in the corner. And, she figured that the best guitar players were probably in Las Vegas, like she saw in those Elvis movies and the Ladies Auxiliary had their annual trip to Nevada comin’ up, anyways. Why not take a coupla lessons? So, she put the guitar on the bus, came out to Vegas, and checked out every guitar player on the strip. She’d asked two others for lessons before seeing Jack. They were both too busy, apparently.

And yeah, she could come back for her next lesson same time tomorrow. Then she goes back home. Promised to make her famous apple crisp for the Corn Boil and a promise was a promise, she figured. And, thanks anyway, but not interested in selling Ted’s guitar. Yeah, it was old, she guessed, but it still worked. Why get rid of it if it still worked, was her motto. But she thanked him for his generous offer. \$700 was a lot of money

for an old guitar, even a shiny one like this was.

Jack waited two minutes after the door clicked behind her, then raced to the phone next to the dancing waters and called Norman's Rare Guitars in Tarzana, California. Norman knocked over a Martin when he managed to grasp what Jack was telling him. Didn't even hear it hit the ground.

"My hand to God, Norm," Jack roared as the waters turned orange..."mint condition. There isn't a scratch on the pick ups or the pick guard."

"Jack, I can get you two million, five right now. But, if I dig around, I can get you eight mil in about a month. I can have a guy on a plane to you soon as you give me the word."

"Ruthie, dear, you'll have to speak up....yes...yes it does sound like a waterfall...Now, dear, it seems that particular model has some historical value. Might have been played by Eddie Cochran or something, so I can offer you \$1,500."

"Well, gee Jack, that's a horse of a different color. I sure could use that money. My propane burner just went belly up on me, yesterday."

He borrowed forty grand from a local shylock. The vig was three and a half a week, but who cared? He was gonna drive down to Appleton to pick up the guitar in six days.

He dropped the Lexus off at the valet circle at the MGM Grand. He liked the clicking sound his Alfredo Scardino loafers made on the marble floor as he walked to the VIP elevator, followed by a boy carrying his Charivari bags.

Room service came in with his meal on a silver cart. He tipped the boy, who turned to leave as Jack looked down at his plate.

“Hey, buddy.” The boy walked back to where Jack was sitting by the window looking at the pyramid down below as he prepared to operate on his lobster.

“I never wanna see any of these again.”

He tossed four packets of saltines to the kid, who shrugged and left.

He pulled up to Ruthie’s trailer five days later just as the last sliver of sun slipped below the pine ridge to the west.

“Jack, I’m so sorry. I tried to call but you ain’t at that Resort place no more. My grandson phoned and said he wanted it, so how could I say no? He ain’t got the kinda money like you got, but he’s my daughter’s kid, for Pete’s sake. He’s gonna drive up and get it next week. He’s in one ‘a them rock bands down south. Has his heart set on bein’, you know, a entertainer.”

The Lexus purred through the Smoky Mountains at three that morning. He kept his promise to himself and took only his third Valium in twenty-four hours, washing it down with Gatorade and glancing at the GPS.

He had three approaches that he would employ in successive order. One of them had to work, probably the one with the biggest dollar amount attached to it, but this was no time to be a piker. He was already kicking himself for blowing it on the cheap with Ruthie.

He stumbled into the punk club in Auburn at ten that night, bleary eyed and goofy, trying to keep his nerves steady. The place was a massive converted warehouse. He could barely see the stage through the haze at the far end as he stood at the back of the crowd of kids, who jumped up and

down constantly, pickled to the gills on God knows what bitch's brew of Ex and percocets they had cadged from Mommy's medicine cabinet.

The band was whipping themselves into a froth. He couldn't understand what they were singing about, but they sure sounded pissed about something.

He could see a kid on stage left banging the hell out of The Golden Eagle. So much for mint condition.

The lead singer, who looked like he weighed about a hundred and three pounds, got hit by a beer bottle, so he threw the mic stand into the crowd and it was on.

The drummer came out from behind the set, did a swan dive into the mosh pit and was immediately stomped by some bikers.

Three guys climbed onto the stage and rushed Ruthie's grandson, who slipped The Eagle off his shoulder and swung for the fences, crumpling the first one in half like a fortune cookie.

The second one got him on the floor and went to work on his head like he was trying to open a coconut on a rocky beach.

The third one grabbed The Eagle by the neck, lofted it high over his head and brought it down onto the stage floor like the Hammer of Thor. "Whang!!", over and over, like he was channeling Pete Townsend, then threw the biggest remaining chunk at three security guards who came at from the back.

Jack kicked the side door release bar and was propelled into the alley by the crush of punks behind him that were fleeing from the fetid room as the cops showed up. He ducked in between a dumpster and a pile of broken down cardboard boxes, tucked himself into a fetal ball, and wept. He couldn't really form complete thoughts. But his feral, reptile brain throbbed with the certainty that he was screwed. How could he have been so dumb? He didn't know which was worse, letting the ax out of his sight or offering so slight a pittance to Ruthie.

“Greedy...andstupid,” punctuating each syllable by banging his head against the dumpster like he was ringing a broken dinner gong.

The first week he didn’t come up with the shylock’s vig, they would slap him around. The second week, they would begin to fiddle with various important parts of him.

“Arr...o...gant... and ...stupid.” Bong, bong, bong.

He managed to get the car back to the dealer and actually did alright, there. He pawned some rings and stuff and came up with the first week’s vig. No slapping. He made out at the track and came up with the second week’s vig. No fiddling.

Somehow, he got out from under the shylock over the next six months by working two shifts at a deep fryer across town where he wouldn’t be recognized, and, luckily, scoring an album session backing up a Tom Jones clone who took a million takes to get anything down, so that was a good payday.

He was back where he started. Back at the DR, room nineteen. He got drunk and stared at the spot on the bedspread where it had been, like he had seen it in a dream he was remembering in a hazy way. He thanked Saint Anthony for keeping him in one piece. Maybe he’d learned a lesson from all this.

**

Six months later, he sees Ruthie at same banquette in the joint. Whadda ya know? Back again with The Ladies’ Auxiliary annual trip. Yeah, Ruthie, sure, why not. Come over tomorrow and we’ll teach you a couple more chords.

She walks in the next day with a cheap nylon gig back, unzips it on

the bed, and pulls out The Golden Eagle.

He managed not to swallow his gum this time.

“Uh...wha....uh.. Ruthie....”

His mouth was open. She realized he was staring at the guitar.

“Oh, yeah Jack. Sorry. Forgot to tell you. My grandkid called me back. Said he found one in Auburn, same kind, but cheaper. So, instead of drivin’ up to Appleton, he got that one.”

Jack’s chin dropped down to his chest. He chuckled to himself. Laughed and giggled like he was being tickled by the Cosmic Jokester. He got out a new stick of gum and poured a couple of shots of Canadian Club into styrofoam cups. Straps on his Strat.

“Ruthie, this one’s E minor.. That’s right dear.. It’ll get easier.. Yeah. Pretty soon you’ll be playin “Yellow Bird” good as Trini. Won’t nobody be able to tell you apart.”

She strummed the chord.

“Hey. How about that? I’m doin’ it. Who knew an old broad like me could learn a new trick? Maybe my luck’s changin’ “.

“Well, lemme tell you honey, you live in this town long enough, you start to see who’s walkin’ around lucky and who ain’t.”

She looked up from the guitar. She was happy. She was smiling. He handed her one of the cups.

“Sit back, Ruthie, and let me tell you a story. Yeah, dear, your luck is about to change.”

