

children churches & daddies

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the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-
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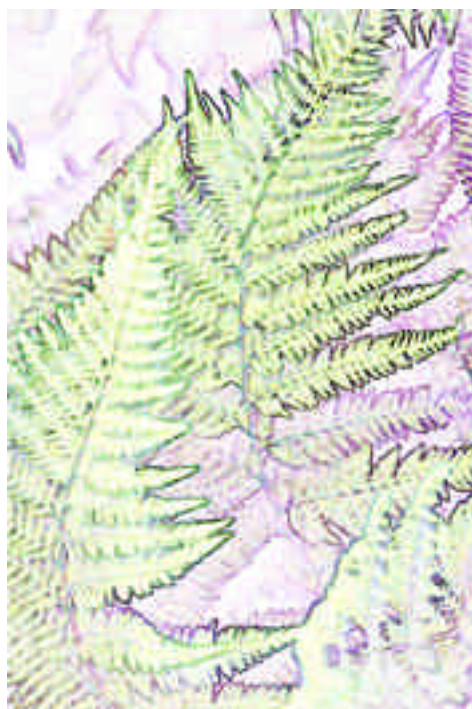
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Scars art

x. Cover art of a number of flags
in display in Kankakee, Illinois.



Kew Ferns, art
by Mike Hovancsek

the boss lady's editorial

Employment & Independence Issues

You know, I wasn't going to write an editorial this month, but I saw some notes for potential editorials scotch-taped to my computer monitor. They all relate in some strange way about looking for jobs in America and making it on your own, so I needed to share...

A lot of these little snippets are from first-hand stories I have heard, so I'm sorry if I don't back everything up with a ton of references. Think of these as grave-digger news about real life stories...

Someone who was interviewing people, looked over resumes and said about one, that they "couldn't tell what she was by her name." Meaning, they couldn't tell if the person was white, African American, Asian, Indian... And I thought it was stunning that someone was actually concerned about ethnically who this potential employee might be, and I was scared that someone might actually use that information to judge a person before they even had an interview.

But when it comes to knowing people by first impressions, I know a story of one woman who applied for a job, was highly qualified for the position, and went to the interview in her burka. Well, I'm sure that turned heads a bit since you don't often see people in burkas in your everyday life... but after the interview, she wasn't hired. The employer's explanation was that other coworkers may fear her by her dress. You know, even if there was no reason to fear her. Doesn't *that* tell you something about the mentality of the average American, that people would be afraid to learn anything of another culture. I mean, I knew a Muslim girl by birth once, and the only thing I could infer about her was that she seemed only interested in men (she even slept with a male friend of mine while dating another male friend of mine). I knew a converted Muslim who told me that he would pray to Allah for me for my wedding, too, I mean, these people are not terrorists and are nothing to inherently fear (unless one of them might try to take a man away from his woman).

Let's think about high school students worrying about getting jobs as they leave school... I have heard that guidance counselors, while counseling students before college, would see their students use their cell phone to call their parents to help them answer career questions.

Now that I've brought this up, and I have to go down this tangent and mention how the cell phone, on some levels, is becoming the longest umbilical cord. Parents help some students select classes; there is even in some colleges a "parental dorm," where parents can stay for two to three weeks while their child adjusts to being on their own. Dr. Richard Mullendore, a professor of college student affairs administration at the University of Georgia, even referred to student he has seen that would call their parents about anything from an argument with a roommate to changing the oil of their car. He was even stunned to learn that some of these students would call their parents for or five times *a day*.

Now I'm sorry, but I can't imagine my parents wanting to "help me adjust" if I went away to school; actually, I couldn't wait to get out on my own. But if kids are too scared to go out on their own for school, how will they ever be strong enough to get a job - and be successful at it? I mean if today's students — today's young adults — haven't learned how to solve conflicts, worrying about rage and religion conflicting with job opportunities isn't our only set of problems.



Janet Kuypers®
Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief

P.S.: I want to close this with a clip from the *New York Post* 08/08/07 (that I found in *News of the Weird* 10/21/07), that shows that even when people have jobs, they might not be able to keep it: "Maritza Tamayo, principal of New York City's Unity Center for Urban Technologies high school, was fired in August following revelations that she was so concerned about the unruly behavior of some students that she brought in a Santeria priestess in December 2006 to cleanse the building of evil spirits. The students were on holiday break, but workers found chicken blood sprinkled around the building, and Tamayo and two other women in white dresses were seen, chanting, with one balancing a silver tray on her head, holding 40 lit candles."

poetry
the passionate stuff

With a Lot of Spit, Blood, Love Juice & Shit

Kenneth DiMaggio

A few more hours
before you can
check the obituaries
to see if your name
is there along with
a photo of you
when you were at
your most insignificant

But if I only have
one night to live
I do not want to live it
according to my resume
which never noted
my first bliss
with marijuana
and my first
and probably
never healed loss
with a lover
who left herself
for a bungalow
then a cubicle
and finally
a prescription
pill bottle conformity

How many hours
before a new roll
of civilization
gets published
with perhaps
a crack vial size
picture
of a magna
cum mediocrity
whose twenty years
of writing memos
could never make up
one true sentence

that was only able
to get written

with a lot of spit
blood love juice
and shit

It is time now

To look for the truth

Pandora Of The Curtain Shop

Christopher Barnes, UK

She rose. Bounced
A chuckle, an avalanche-splash of satin
In yellow light. A day to fall in love.

Protestors

David Lawrence

A failure of imagination like a broken sinus.
They line up in the street
In a mélange of inarticulate complaints.
Politics.
Achew.
They have abandoned God,
Bless you.

Protestors could never imagine a poem
A painting
A song
Or some other homogenized way to topple the covenant,
The faces of their dead religions on milk containers.

John Lennon wanted a revolution.
He got killed by the middle class dream of a fan.
What's lower than a fan?
Fanatics breed fanaticism.
A group of morons chasing things as they are with signs.

I can't bicycle past their jam and toast traffic.
I can't do wheelies in my own air.
I have no space.
They are breathing my refusal and protecting
Their fake innocence,
Intersecting with my direction.

A protest is a gestalt of idiotic faces
Who think their lips deserve every other girl's lipstick.

Jesus Walks

Michael Lee Johnson

Jesus lives
in a tent
not a temple
coated with blue
velvet sugar
He dances in freedom
of His salvation
with the night and all
days bearing down with sun.
He has billions of ears
hanging from His head
dangling by seashores
listening to incoming prayers.
Sometimes busy hours drive Him
near crazy with buzzing sounds.
He walks near desert bushes
and hears wind tunnels
pushed by pine stinging nettles.
Here in His sacred voice
a whisper and
Pentecostal mind-
confused by hints of
Catholicism and prayers to Mary-
He heals himself in sacred
ponds tossing holy water
over himself--
touching nothing but
humanity He recoils
and finishes his desert
walk somewhat alone.

Someone Should Have Murdered Aristotle

Adam Joseph Ortiz

too many
people these
days are little
more than hat racks
holding costumes:

(American)
(Gay)
(Christian)
(Vegetarian)
(Conservative)
(Black)
(Intellectual)

Whatever.

The vampire
costumes come with
fangs, and the
hetero costumes
come with marriage.

pretty, packaged costumes,
classified for your convenience,

for sale at your local wal-mart.

There is a Light that Never Goes Out

Eric Phetteplace

I ask her if God exists
and she says it doesn't matter.
 The ceiling drips light
 but I'm floating face
down in toilet water.

I exaggerate out of necessity,
run outside drunk and shirtless,
 fill the cavity
 with an appendix
as beautiful as it is useless.

The next morning, language a corpse
and I carve up the cadaver.
 My apologies
 as dead as the trees
they're written on.

I'll take a few years
and cover it in clothing.
 Morrissey said *there is a light*
 that never goes out and damn it
it's burnt my retinas.

Happy Birthday to Me

Carol Hogan

I love birthday parties.
I can remember only one in my childhood . . .
And no one came.
Now perhaps that is sad
For sure it might seem so
But, I think it was the beginning of a poet's soul.

Leaving Colombia

Cristina Valencia

Among fire guns and bombs was born a dream
When the helicopter landed that day
On the field, in awe and terror our eyes
Stared at it screaming, running, crying
And then the stunning, deafening silence
That comes after panic as a dim light

Made its way through the darkness until daylight
Reigned. On that very moment rose a dream
Inside us. Protected by walls of silence,
Hidden, unknowingly shared. Hoping for the day
When our hearts and souls would stop crying
For help because tears no longer flooded our eyes

And our minds, clean with calmness would set our eyes
On landscapes of peaceful stillness where the lightness
Of tranquility replaced the burden of crying
Every minute. As of me, I nurtured my dream
As it all got worse. Ivette's dad was killed one day,
Next: our friends kidnapped. I bled in silence...

They were after my father... and me. The silence
After each phone call let our eyes
Say everything. Father had to run away one day
On an evening with no stars and no light;
We couldn't see his face for the last time. My dream?
Was still alive I suppose, even as I cried

Utterly in pain for I was next, and crying
I left too, with no words to be said, in silence,
In search of something greater: my dream,
But when I arrived at the airport my eyes
Shed tears again as I stood alone under the light
Of a small room, put aside, released a few days

Later, my whole baggage broken and torn. That day
I realized what demons would make me cry
Now, and they still do, but there's a light
Far away as there always is, that in silence
Brings forth the chance of something greater to my eyes
And the possibility of reaching my dreams.

I'm living my dream, and mother's cries
Fill her eyes with tears as in silence
Pain one day became illness that'll turn off her light.

*Cristina Valencia is originally from Colombia,
but came to the United States seven years ago.*

Homebodies

Paul Truttman

It was an accepted
way of viewing family
for many years until
one day a stranger
invaded out
protective sanctum.

A guest, a lover,
the role played
in hindsight unimportant.
Destroyed
in a few short days,
harmony and security
cherished since birth.

Tenuous, illusive
words learned today.
But ready
we may still become
for the precarities
beyond a once
reclusive front door.

Apprehending

Michaela Sefler

Aspiring I await;
for I see and hold
even meditating on one reality
an axis upon which fine are the points.
Within is the truth, focused.
and within this
are paths that still
illuminates.
For reality apprehends
and contains possibilities.
and each path is a singular instruction
to be learned by the warrior.
The brave and mighty
sojourner,
the explorer and wanderer
advancing each day.

Snowy February Night

Julia O'Donovan

I remember you and me
Leaning against the rail
First hint of spring
Warm breeze blowing our hair
No words said
Gazing out the door

A moment shared
Maybe three years ago
I don't remember when
I just remember what the moment meant to me
How easy it all seemed then
How I could never go back

Ground war had just broke out
We all looked to each other for support
You and me
we did one of our dinners
Walking through the lot
Snowy February night

You found a patch of ice and slipped
I reacted quick
Ready to catch your fall
But you found your balance
We walked on you said nothing
It was a beautiful moment

Walking through the lot
On a snowy February night

Cast In Stone

Janet Kuypers

I've searched a millenia for you
and my love for you
will survive through the ages
And if they cast us in stone
it will only cement my love for you
for all to see and admire
because even if the elements
chip away our outer complexions
the marble will be smoothed in time
and my soul will still flourish
being frozen by your side.

The Slaughter of the Innocents

I.B. Rad

By the IEDs red glare,
oh say can you see
ten thousand martyred soldiers
and a million Muslim Christs
crucified for our SUVs
on a blazing cross of oil
as raging oceans rise
and savage all?

The Ball

Nicholas Trutenko

Who the fuck put me in this ball
And rolled me down the hill?
I mean, did you really think I wouldn't notice?

What did you think I would think
When I didn't show up for work?

My sudden absence should unnerve you
Like that yellow car spider that appears in front of your face
Then disappears in your car
As you are driving down the expressway at night
With your eyes closed
Trying to beat your old record of 16 seconds

Can this be in any way connected
To that Olivia Newton John song
That I can't get out of my head?
Even though, I tell it to stop?

That used to work. But now,
It's like I see a mirror in the back of my head
Reflecting what I see
In the mirror in the front of my head

Or, like watching a guy on T.V.
Watching himself on T.V.
Watching a guy on T.V.
In the mirror

If you look inside, you'll see what I mean
In my head
In the mirror
In the ball

And all the while,
The ball keeps rolling

Single

Troy Schoultz

All I'm trying to say
is that I don't miss the gleaning knives
that grew from our tongues.
I do still miss your arms after dark,
but I traded our lives
for a one bedroom apartment,
no-lease, paid water,
with appliances
and self-cleaning oven,

but tonight
I'm far gone on this brandy.

What I mean to tell you is
the moon panicked last night,
and my heart raised hell
like a jailed drunk
who even after the beatings
refuses to go down.

Your favorite color

Karla Ungurean

I'm sorry my eyes are blue
And that blue things make you sad.
I am sorry that when I shut my eyes
You can still see the blue veins in my eyelids
That quiver and vibrate when you get close enough to them
For me to feel your breath.

Black Hole

Maureen Flannery

A black hole bends space
and warps time
just like love and pain
and the empty places
where the two combine.

Late

Out of breath
Scarfig down waffles
Asking for indigestion in between gulps of
hash browns
and
“good mornings”
I've pulled the earth off its' axis
and unaligned the planets
Now Saturn will have to play catch-up
for the anext 7 hours.

poem by Jaz

Brief readings on war between people:

I wanted to put my fist through you,
open your chest
and grab your heart
to pull
you through
to me
again.

poem by Kim Koga

mary

Jimmy Nieto

walk
the spotted aisles
looking
into a man's eyes

and all
you could see
is the red
ambiguous stare
of blind lust

so you take
the green bills
spending them
quickly
to forget
you

took them

in the deep
shallow
spaces
of the streets

your dress
your shoes
your face

made up
a pretty vagabond

the cars that stop
don't want you
they want
themselves

to find grace
is not truth

when they
empty
the desire
of wasted love

the man says
no violation
no sin



Roadway to a Darker Existence
artwork by Aaron Wilder



Endgame, art by Edward
Michael O'Durr Supranowicz

I am From

Josh Oldham

I am from an unexpected womb
I am from no father
I am from knowing only my instinct
I am from a miracle
I am from lamb chops and pickled tongue at my favorite Basque restaurant
I am from hours of playing Pac-Man in a bar, waiting to go home after dinner
I am from playing barefoot in the neighborhood on warm summer nights
I am from sleepovers that could go for days at a time
I am from soft kisses of a desperate mother
I am from love and sorrow shown and not shown
I am from a mother who couldn't do what she knew to do
I am from thoughts that none should wander through or know at all
I am from stories not told to other children
I am from long nights alone, waiting for her to come home
I am from sleepless nights filled with the sob of a child
I am from homes with yards and homes with four doors and four wheels
I am from a man screaming through my mother
I am from a mother silently urging me to move on
I am from I am from a past that lingers

Balasana*

Ruan Wright

is a soft
boiled egg
roundly resting
in a warm place
listening
to the sound
of the sea
rocking
rocking
rocking

*commonly referred to in Yoga
as *the child's repose pose*

First published in *Moon Journal*

Sam Soft Isn't Listening Any More

Mark D. Cohen

I have known my best friend, Sam Soft,
For eighteen years now,
And I realize suddenly that for the past year or two he has just plain
Tuned me out
He still comes over every week, as usual,
Is still his old friendly self,
But he doesn't hear a word I say

I have two friends in Buffalo whom I call every Saturday morning—
We used to talk a bit,
But now they try to get me off the phone as soon as humanly possible

I can tell that even my brand new “nice” therapist isn't really listening
To me either

And I think I know why—

I simply dance to a beat of a different drummer
And sing in a quavering tenor to an off-beat syncopated 9/8 rhythm
While almost the entire country is dancing to
The mass media monobeat
And I think that's dangerous; and I think that's wrong

I could just shut up until the time is right for people to listen to me
But I personally think this country is in such a bad way

That pretty soon, instead of my unusual dancing and singing style—

I am going to start screaming

Because this country has to wake up soon
Before it's too late
(And it almost is)

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

The Lesser Breed

Pat Dixon

10

Ira Killebaugh scribbled a name and phone number on a page of his pocket notebook, scratched his unshaven chin with the top of his pen, and asked me if I felt up to handling a murder case on my own.

I cast a quick glance at Ira to see if he might be kidding me. We were sitting together on a white bench outside Rex Rehab, getting him some exercise and an hour of fresh air, and he had just retrieved a message on his cell phone from our office in Cary—Killebaugh & Touleau, Private Investigators.

“Depends,” I said.

“Ivy, sweetheart, I’ve begged you to please not use that word to an old man who’s recently had surgery and”

He left the rest up to my imagination and put on a fakey mournful face while tilting his head to one side.

I blinked slowly two times and stared into his eyes with an expressionless face, like a long-suffering wife pretending to bear the cross of her husband’s threadbare puns with infinite patience. After about twenty-five seconds, Ira broke first and grinned.

“It’s just a possible homicide, Ive. The grieving widow has some suspicions, but the Chapel Hill gendarmes and the County Attorney are not seeing things her way. She got our names from one of our satisfied clients and wants us to take a look at things and give her a second opinion. I’m guessing it’s probably no more than a five-hour job, but, depending on what other chores you’ve got and how you size up her ability to pay, you could work it an hour a day for five days.”

I pursed the lips of my otherwise still stoney face and slowly nodded.

“And,” said Ira, “the good news, Ive, is if you run into any snags, well, I ain’t goin’ nowhere soon. You know where to reach me to tap the wisdom of my long experience.”

Ira, my senior partner, had finally had that heart attack I’d been warning him about for three years, and I was paying him my daily day-brightening visit. Part of the brightening—for both of us—came from the

fact that he often would dispense useful advice and knowledge to me. I closed my eyes for a moment, picturing myself tracking one or more killers—first in high heels and carrying a huge magnifying glass like the silhouettes on covers of old mystery books for girls, and then in dark gray tights and sneakers—like some kind of latter-day Catwoman. Smiling at both these images, I told Ira I'd give it a try.

"The widow's name is Marie Coleman—with an 'e' in the middle, she says. Her hubby was Harvey Coleman. He was run down by a pair of cars two and a half weeks ago while he was getting his Sunday paper at the end of his driveway. The missus didn't see it happen, but she heard it, and she says other witnesses saw two cars go right for him, one taking him down, and the other finishing him off about five seconds later while he was lying on the sidewalk. She says the police think—well—"

Ira frowned and cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable.

"They think it was just a couple of—uh—black kids—maybe joy-riding in a couple stolen cars—or high on crack or something. Both cars were found the next day, trashed, about ten miles south of Chapel Hill—but also, the widow says, her house was broken into Sunday night while she was staying with her sister way over on the eastern edge of Raleigh—and her computer was stolen—but not her keyboard or screen—or her printer—or anything else in the house, including silver or her jewelry. Just her computer thing—the big ol' honking metal box thingy, whatever you call it—the thingy that her screen was plugged into."

"The processor."

"Whatever. And just hers was taken—from her little office in the guest room on the first floor—and her husband's nicer, newer laptop, which was upstairs, was left behind. She's convinced, after giving it some thought for a day or so, that the killing and the theft are connected, but the police are seeing it as just another coincidence in a world full of such things, and they're telling her to be thankful (a) that she wasn't home when the break-in happened and (b) that nothing really valuable was taken."

Ira ceased speaking and tilted his head, waiting for my reaction

"How's it sound to you?" I asked.

"Well, it's not as persuasive as finding a little trout in your cottage cheese," he grinned, "but any coincidences that involve criminous activities deserve some sort of second look. And these two events took place within less than, say, twenty hours. But I'd also agree with the Chapel Hill cops about point (a): yes, she was definitely lucky she wasn't still home when she was being robbed."

"Indeed," I said. Then, after about ten seconds of silence, I said, "But

what's this crap about a trout in my cottage cheese?"

"It's my own update of something Thoreau once said about watery tasting milk and circumstantial evidence. If your cottage cheese is watery—ecch, vile stuff anyway—you may suspect that the seller of adding water to it—you know, to fill the container partly with something cheaper, so's he makes more profit off customers. But if you ever found a trout in your cheese, then you'd have an even stronger reason to think he'd added some water to it—right?"

"I got it halfway through, Ira. Good point, though—and a funny analogy. So—if it turns out that I find something is—fishy—with Mr. Coleman's death—and the nocturnal theft of his wife's computer—well, maybe when you write your memoirs of a P.I., you can call this 'The Adventure of the Trout in the Cottage Cheese.'"

He smiled at this continuation of our running joke about his imaginary autobiography. I stood up and took the slip of paper from him, kissing him on the top of his forehead.

"Be careful out there," he said, imitating the voice of Sergeant Phil Esterhaus from "Hill Street Blues," his all-time favorite television program.

"And you be careful in there," I said, nodding towards the building behind him. I got in my car to head north to Raleigh and punched Mrs. Coleman's number into my cell phone. As I was driving out of the parking lot, Ira waved the leather-bound book I'd brought him from the office—the complete poems of Kipling—and mouthed the words "Thank you." I waved with my cell phone, mouthed "Welcome," and pressed the phone back to my ear.

9

Marie Coleman was a handsome, well-preserved woman of fifty-eight. I know her age because I did the math: during our initial conversation she mentioned that when she and Harvey were married, "his first wife, Sarah, who was his age, hated me with an absolute passion—partly for being fifteen years younger than she is—but chiefly for looking twenty-five years younger." From three news stories and two obits I'd read at the public library, I knew ol' Harve was five months beyond age seventy-three.

Marie also had expensive tastes for clothes and home furnishings, and she didn't even blink when I quoted her an hourly that was twenty percent higher than Ira and I had ever charged anyone else. In fact, the only hesitation she showed about hiring us to investigate for her was when she first opened the door, looked at me, and absorbed what her eyes told her. Since she must've known from my phone voice that I'm a woman, my impression was that she'd been expecting a woman of another color.

“You were perhaps expecting somebody a bit older,” I said, filling in her awkward silence after I’d told her my name and occupation through her screen door. Smiling both inwardly and outwardly, I silently counted to five and added, “As an interesting coincidence, your friend Mrs. Hudson, the satisfied client who recommended our agency to you, also had the same reaction when she first saw me. Sometimes, when I’m working under cover, I’ve made good use of a gray wig to add a decade or so. I’ve thought about wearing one when I meet clients for the first time—to put them more at ease.”

When we were seated in her living room, she repeated the story she’d left on our answering machine, adding that the three witnesses to Harvey’s killing had consistently stated that the drivers of the two cars were “dark complected, with flattish noses, certainly a couple of—Negroes.”

I have an excellent memory for details, but I went through the motions of jotting Marie’s information down on a steno pad with an expensive pen.

“For a little more than three years, Harvey’s first wife has been trying to get her alimony increased—and has threatened to take Harvey and me to court,” Marie said, introducing a new line of thought. “Her name is Sarah—Sarah Coleman. She kept Harvey’s last name—obviously. She almost remarried twice about twenty years ago, but it fell through both times. Once was when she discovered her intended out having dinner with another woman, and once was when the poor groom-to-be dropped dead from a heart attack. Harvey and I were saddened by both of these mishaps, as you can imagine—but for, well, mainly selfish reasons. Harvey’s lawyer recently sent her a very stern letter, explaining that the original alimony agreement was both fair and ironclad and that any attempt to waste Harvey’s money with additional legal expenses would lead to a countersuit for damages on our part. I personally think she’s a vindictive bitch who might have hired some—thugs to—to bump my Harvey off. And then they broke in here and tried to steal Harvey’s computer, which would contain his correspondence with his—with our lawyer, as well as details of our finances and net worth and—and such. Hell hath no fury, you know.”

Despite my own skepticism, I nodded and jotted. Then I asked her what sort of things had been on her computer—the one the thieves had actually taken.

“Oh—just my own stuff. Some recipes I’ve found on the Internet, e-mails from friends—and copies of what I’ve written to them—all pretty ordinary stuff, I’m afraid. Also records of things I’ve ordered online, such as some clothes, some nicknacks I bought on eBay for the house—I collect little china birds of all sorts—and teapots shaped like cats—and also I’ve bought some CDs—and some books. Also my letters that I type up to mail with stamps—and a little file of—of photos—photos of movie

stars that I, well, sort of—find attractive. I can make my computer run them like a kind of screensaver sequence. Actually, I have—or had—oh—maybe fifteen files—with maybe between ten and perhaps two hundred photos in—some of those files.”

“Interesting,” I said, smiling and raising my eyebrows with a friendly nod. Here was a human side to her that I could identify with. Ira had a phrase for it, perhaps a quotation, that he’d used several times. He’d say, “Sisters under the skin,” which I found very apt and insightful. I felt that within less than twenty hours Fate had dealt Marie two very cruel blows.

“I’ve done something similar with my two computers, Mrs. Coleman,” I said. “Both of them, for instance, have files with pictures of Denzel—Denzel Washington—large files.”

“He’s one of my faves, too, and—” Marie blurted out without hesitation. Whatever she was going to add just hung in the air unspoken. Her mouth stayed open for about five seconds, and closed as a vaguely worried look—perhaps even a guilty one—crossed her face.

“I’m sure you’ll get another computer soon, Mrs. C. And, if you like, I could make you a disk with copies of my own Denzel photos, just to get you started again—assuming your old one doesn’t turn up first. But right now I think I’d like to take a little look at your late husband’s computer—the one we believe the thieves were really interested in, but failed to find.”

She was leading the way towards the stairway to the second floor when her door chimes rang. Instead of telling the forty-something blonde on the front stoop that she was busy and thanking her for the covered dish she was holding, Marie invited her in, which I considered a pretty scatterbrained stunt. It quickly got much worse.

“Ivy Touleau,” Marie said, taking the warm tuna casserole from the woman, “this is my next-door neighbor, Heather Whitehead. She’s the Baptist minister’s wife. Heather, this is Ivy Touleau, a very smart young detective I’ve hired to look into poor Harvey’s murder. I was just going to show her Harvey’s computer upstairs. We both think that Harvey’s killers were trying to steal it when they broke in here and stole my computer by mistake.”

Note to Self: When meeting with clients on their turf, orient them first thing about secrecy.

When I told Ira about this introduction, he grinned wryly and shook his head and said, “Word that you’re investigating is all over that neighborhood and halfway through the eight adjacent ones by now. On your way home tonight, you’d better take the precaution of picking up Betsy an’ Betsy for protection. And two or three boxes of shells. In fact, consider that an order from your senior partner, not just a suggestion.” Betsy and

Bitsy were his pet names for the pair of double-barrel shotguns concealed under the lap drawer of his office desk.

When Marie introduced me to her neighbor, I tried to make the best of a bad deal. Smiling brightly, I grabbed the woman's right hand and, using my deepest contralto voice, I said, "I'm very pleased to meet you, Heather. I've just been hearing such interesting things about you. My father was also a Baptist minister—or so my mother often told us. Of course, his congregation and his services were probably quite a bit different from your husband's."

I let that statement hang there for about ten seconds while I shook her hand vigorously, sensing fear in her limp arm and half-averted eyes. "My father's church," I said, taking her right hand in both of mine, "was on Long Island, and, as you surely know, we Northern Baptists are usually very different from you Southern Baptists—but then that's surely the main reason America is such a truly great country, isn't it? Our huge rainbow of diversity."

Marie beamed and nodded her head at this, apparently very pleased to see Heather and me getting along so well. I let Heather have her hand back and asked her whether she knew anything about the events surrounding Harvey's death and the break-in that probably occurred later that very same day.

Blinking rapidly and glancing down at her right hand to count her fingers and check it for any discolorations, she said no, adding that the arrival of police cars had been her first clue about the tragic hit-and-run business. As for the break-in, she was sure she hadn't learned of that until Monday evening, over dinner.

"What about Reverend Whitehead?" I asked. "Has he mentioned seeing or hearing anything? Sometimes menfolk are up later, working in their home offices, or up earlier, out in the yard, and, living just next door, he might have heard or seen something important."

She shook her head.

"No—Larry was just as surprised by it all as I was—and so were Cindy and Little Larry—maybe even more. He, my husband, was deeply upset that such a thing could happen in a nice—respectable—neighborhood like this one. Both times, the police came to our door and asked us all if we'd seen anything, but we all said no. Little Larry—Larry Junior—he wasn't even home at the time, and Cindy—well—she's such a heavy sleeper that—well—even the ambulance siren and all the police cars didn't wake her up."

She shook her head and stared down towards my feet. "But, anyways, detective," she added with a plaintive little grin, making the briefest eye-contact with me, "I must be getting back home to continue with my little wifely chores. Um, Marie, I hope this little bit of food will be—edible for you. Larry said you might be sitting—shiver?—or something—and not to

bother you for a few days. Otherwise I'd have made this sooner and brought it over. I know you're, well, Jewish, and it isn't kosher food or anything, but the—the dish has been through my electric dishwasher with very hot water, and the tuna is the solid white fancy albacore kind that I buy for ourselves. And our prayers—all four of us—are with you—even though—well”

“This is very, very thoughtful of you, dear. But I'm not actually Jewish, so But how could you know that? Harvey was—he was a—a secular Jew before we met—and then we got married in a Unitarian church which we went to for a few years. I used to be Catholic, myself, long ago. What can I say? People change. Your tuna casserole will be wonderful, Heather dear. I'm deeply touched by your kindness. It was very sweet of you to bring it.”

Retreating out the front door, Heather smiled weakly again and said over her shoulder, “I just know our Lord will see you through this trial.”

8

Harvey's computer was an expensive little laptop with bells and whistles I envied. His home office was in a small back room that some architect probably designed as a child's bedroom. His laptop lay open in plain sight on the top of a blonde hardwood work station, and was connected to both a photo-quality printer and the Internet. On half a dozen built-in shelves nearby were about three hundred DVDs of all sorts of Hollywood blockbuster movies and about four hundred CDs that, according to the labels of the jewel boxes, indicated a broad taste in world music, from Sweden and the Scottish highlands to the Andes Mountains and from Australia's Outback to Mongolia and Morocco. I opened a blonde-finish cabinet and found about three dozen large coffee-table-size books there, chiefly of pinup artists of the '30s, '40s, and '50s, like Petty and Vargas, but a few about the oeuvre of pinup models like Bettie Page. I smiled to myself.

On top of the work station lay an old hardback textbook on economics. I picked it up and flipped through its pages. In the margin of page 100 was a list of six user-names and their passwords; in the margin of page 200 were eight more. I looked under Harvey's mouse-pad and found taped there a list of twelve user-names and their respective passwords. I showed these to Marie and said, “Hidden in plain sight. Even before Edgar Poe wrote ‘The Purloined Letter,’ people have had just two ways of hiding their special things.”

I disconnected Harvey's computer, tucked it, the mouse-pad, and the heavy Paul Anthony Samuelson book under my arm and said, “I'd like to take these back to my office to try and find clues as to what the thieves might have wanted. Before I leave, though, I want to take a little look at your home office downstairs. I want to view the scene of the second crime,

even though it's cold now and has been disturbed, so to speak, by others."

Marie seemed deeply impressed by this sort of talk as well as my awesomely quick success in locating Harvey's access codes. I didn't mention that Ira had told me at least ten times how a widow hadn't been able to find the big hoard of gold coins her husband had bought as an investment—and how he, Ira, had found them almost immediately in her living room—seventy of them—taped together inside a hollowed-out copy of an old edition of the very same college textbook. Long live Samuelson's Economics.

7

Ira was very impressed and pleased with my story of the two bunches of passwords and user-names—and with my intelligence to put the laptop, the Samuelson book, and the mouse-pad into a large paper sack before carrying them out to my car.

He was even more impressed when I told him that every one those user-names and passwords were dummies—hoaxes—garbage—to fool naive crooks—or Marie—and that I'd located Harvey's real access info inside a document titled "Jurassic plants"—in a folder titled "Soporific science news"—in the middle of a massively huge folder titled "Screensavers: House Pets."

"I'm just thankful that ol' Harve and Marie had a relatively new house," I said. "If it had been an old Victorian-era monstrosity with his office in the cellar or attic, I might have had to look inside crawl spaces or behind stair risers or under floorboards or whatever to get this information. As it was, using various search tools, I went right to them—in only four and a half hours. Then I was able to look at his e-mail, his back accounts, his credit card transactions, and a couple other things. I still need to explore for a few more hours amongst the 'cookies' on Harvey's computer, but I've got a new angle on who might have been interested in seeing him off the face of the earth—and his computer with him."

I paused for effect, and Ira waited patiently for a full thirty seconds.

"Harve," I continued, "thought some eBay sellers were scamming him—bidding against him under other user-names to get their auction prices up. If he was outbid, they'd write him a 'second-chance offer' e-mail to say either the other buyer had reneged or they had an identical extra item they would sell to Harve for his highest bid. And if he outbid the phony bidders, well, that meant he was paying far more than he would have been otherwise."

"The process is called shilling. Do you think he was really being scammed," asked Ira.

“As you said yesterday, ‘Sometimes a trout in your cottage cheese is very persuasive that you are,’” I answered. “Harvey recently sent two sellers a bunch of angry e-mails, telling them to refund half his purchase prices or he’d file official complaints against them with eBay’s Security Division and the Attorney Generals of their home states. That seemed to piss them both off a bit—and of course they had his home address if they wanted to look for him—or send him any gentlemen callers.”

“Technically, you mean ‘Attorneys General,’” said Ira. “It’s an old French phrase that came into English probably with the Norman Conquest. The word ‘General’ is an adjective, not a noun—but go ahead anyways.”

“Go—French yourself, Ira,” I said with a little grin. “Thanks for the education. Another time, why don’t you fill me in some more about Norman and whom he conquered? I’m dying to know all about him. Anyway—angry eBay sellers. It’s a working hypothesis, is all I’m saying. Of course, where there are two recent ones, there could be a dozen more in the past couple of years that he had similar run-ins with. I think it’s a bit more likely than Marie’s favorite idea that Harvey’s ex-ux had him offed. Big snag with that—whatever alimony she was getting would be terminated at his death. So what kind of crazy woman would kill the man who—who laid her a Golden Egg every month, even a smallish one? Figuratively speaking, of course. But what do I know—yet? There are still a few hundred folders on Harve’s hard-drive that I haven’t even looked at, and I’ve a suspicion that I should probably return to his home office and check out all of this crafty ol’ guy’s CD and DVD cases just to make sure there’s truth in labeling there.”

Ira was silent for about half a minute. He seemed concerned.

“Since that whole neighborhood is probably onto you, Ivy, you might want to show up in a different car—like mine, for instance—and wear one of your disguises—maybe one that puts a new—complexion on matters. Totally your decision, of course, ’cause I know how you dislike going places an’ doing things in whiteface.”

“Shut up, you ol’ redneck reprobate,” I said, affectionately.

6

Around 9:00 a.m. the next day, I phoned Marie Coleman and told her I wished to come by her house again in the early afternoon. We agreed that 1:30 would be a good time for me to show up. Then I drove from my office in Cary to a discount electronics store along Highway 40, between Chapel Hill and Raleigh, and bought the cheapest laptop I could find to serve as bait. With the assistance of one of the young clerks, I created a couple of small documents and put them in plain sight on its desktop.

With just over two hours to go, I parked my car in the visitor's lot of the high school nearest Marie's neighborhood and went in search of the guidance counselor, the librarian, the head secretary, and any relevant teachers I might happen to run across. I deliberately didn't call ahead to make appointments for a couple of reasons. For one thing, I had a short amount of time available to me and needed to try and find out several things almost all at once. Depending on what I learned or didn't learn, my next step would be taken or not taken, and I didn't want to tie myself to a fixed sequence dictated by any of the school administration. More important, though, was the fact that schools usually have strict policies against giving out "unwarranted" information about their students, and I wanted to improve my chances of getting answers by catching at least a few people off guard with my questions.

Wearing my white linen suit with my plum-colored silk blouse and white pumps, and carrying a large manila envelope under one arm and a large lambskin handbag under the other, I looked like some sort of state official—or maybe some sort of sales rep. Either way, I would have no trouble getting past security.

Looking him straight in the eyes, I told the guard I needed to see several people and asked the way to the school library. When I got there, no librarian was in sight, and so I asked the three students who were present, working or hiding out or whatever, where I would find copies of the school's latest yearbooks. After staring at me for a few seconds and at each other for a couple more, two of them pointed towards some shelves under the farthest windows.

"Next to the Britannica, I think," said one of them.

"Thanks," I said.

Fifteen minutes later I was ninety-nine percent certain I was on the right track. As I walked down the corridor to find the main office, I passed a tallish woman coming towards me, who might have been the librarian. I nodded a vague greeting to her, and she replied in kind.

In the school's office, the head secretary, a large, fifty-something woman with ginger freckles and hair dyed an unnaturally bright red, was eating three sandwiches at her desk behind the counter. I asked her if the guidance counselor was around, and she replied by pointing to her full mouth and shaking her head in the negative.

"Oh darn it all," I said softly, as if to myself. "This just is not my lucky day. I need to see a few other people on the other side of Chapel Hill in about half an hour and can't wait around. Perhaps I could get your professional input on this so that I haven't driven all the way up from the army base in Fayetteville for nothing."

I held up my manila envelope, stamped “IMPORTANT” in red ink, and walked behind the counter towards her desk, adding, “No need to get up, please. I’ll just bring this over to you, ma’am.”

“Well,” she said, swallowing, “it wouldn’t be an official school opinion by any means, but show me what you’ve got.”

I opened the envelope and poured out fifteen enlarged head-shots of a young woman with pink curly hair and a dozen others of the same woman with long, straight, jet-black hair.

I pointed to a name that I had printed in 14-point Helvetica type on another sheet of paper and asked the secretary whether she knew by sight the young woman who bore that name.

“Yeah. And this one—or these two—could be her twin—or triplet sister—sisters—except for the hair, o’ course. Looks like fake hair to me.”

“Indeed. I thought so, too,” I said. “Could you tell me where I might find one or two of her teachers to—well—to firm up this conclusion?”

“Uh—you’d have to clear that with our Assistant Principal, Ms. Auburn. I couldn’t send you to see anyone without her authorization, you understand. She’ll probably be back in, say, half an hour—at the earliest.”

“Hmm,” I said, looking at the ceiling tiles as if considering my schedule. “You’ve been a huge amount of help just yourself,” I said. “I am tempted to wait for her, but I really do have to keep an appointment with those other folks across town. I very likely may, if I have time later this afternoon, come back here and get Ms. Auburn’s authorization. Thank you so very much—and bless your heart.”

5

For different reasons, I didn’t tell either Ira or Marie most of what I’d learned by poking around on Harvey’s hard drive and following trails onto the Internet. Whoever wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes was at least partly right: “He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” But sometimes dirty jobs have to be done to catch killers and other malefactors, and I suspect that, with my knowledge of computers, incomplete though it be, and my intuition, flawed though it also sometimes be, I was the best person for this dirty job. I doubt that Ira, for all his experience, could have gotten anywhere alone with this one. I may be wrong.

There are a lot of things I don’t know and don’t care to know about the Internet’s teenage porn market—its purveyors and its consumers both—but in one long night I uncovered many of the connections Harvey Coleman once had with it—and pretty accurately deduced how one of these connections had cost him his life.

Forget about his problems with his ex-wife and with the two or more

possible con-artists of eBay. At some point in his life—probably during his final four or five years—ol’ Harve became an Internet-pornoholic. I gave Ira the abridged version of my investigation, and he told me it is his educated guess that, if a computer is available to every male over age twelve, virtually all of them will look for—and generally find—some type of Internet porn.

“Like kids in a candy store,” he added with a shrug.

“Yourself included?” I asked, squinting slightly.

“Am I male? Am I over twelve? Do we have a computer in our office?” he said with an annoyed expression.

Let me try to be fair to the dead. Harvey Coleman was not an evil, predatory man—but. In fact, giving him his due, it was his better, more altruistic side—his genuinely avuncular side, Ira said—that brought about his death. Now let me try and get through this with some sort of clarity, though I would frankly rather turn over two dozen old logs in the woods and devour whatever pus-filled white grub-thingsies I might find there.

Perhaps it was the emotionally detached, selfish-hungry-infant part of Harvey’s brain that led him to follow the trails of the thousands of pop-up windows that appeared and, like the proverbial mushroom, multiplied on his computer’s screen once he had stumbled onto his first hard-core website. In one of his hidden documents, he listed in alphabetical order roughly fifteen hundred females—alphabetized according to their first names, whether real or fake—each followed by annotations about her hair color (or colors, for many have a wide array of wigs), her facial type (detailing his views of her supposed assets and flaws), her measurements and/or body type (ditto the above, including references to all tattoos, piercings, scars, moles, and/or other marks), and any personal data he found, like age/DOB, birthplace, favorite sexual positions, turn-offs/turn-ons—whatever.

For each of these fifteen hundred or so women, by the way, Harvey had one or more files of j-peg pictures, squirreled away on his hard drive where few men’s spouses or lovers would ever have the patience or ability to locate them. After sampling these pictures randomly for less than five minutes, let me just say just two things, hoping I don’t sound like either a prude or a member of the uptight faction that wants to restrict everyone’s rights about reading and viewing and acting.

First, Harvey’s preference, for better or for worse, seemed to be exclusively for photos of young Caucasian women. I don’t know if that means he was some sort of racial bigot or he was just narrow in his tastes. In the files I viewed, using Harvey’s screensaver program set on five-seconds-per-photo, these females were either half-clothed teasers or totally nude showoffs. The clothed ones usually were costumed in stuff that a twelve-

year-old might wear: flannel pajamas, gym suits, undies with animals printed on them, short plaid skirts with white blouses and white ankle socks—with their panties deliberately showing—and so on. Both these and the unclothed women in Harvey's collection claimed to be eighteen or nineteen, but some looked about eight and others looked about twenty-eight or so. What do I know? Many of them—both clothed and nude—had juvenile hair styles—pigtails, ponytails, bangs, braids—and juvenile props with them: lollypops, balloons, large stuffed animals. As for the nudes females in Harvey's personal collection, all were giving solo performances for the camera—no “guy-on-girl” or even “girl-on-girl,” though four of his five paysites had plenty of these. About a quarter of the photos I sampled in Harvey's collection—again, both clothed and unclothed—revealed one of his current tastes, at age seventy-three: girls/women pretending to make love to themselves.

Second, considering what I saw during three of those five minutes of investigative research, I strongly felt I should be granted a graduate degree in advanced comparative gynecology.

In Harvey's annotated master-list, some of his remarks were rather brutal—“she has a killer body but a face that would shatter a Pyrex mirror”; “great rack & cute face, but horribly deformed by her inverted nipples”; “whatever made her think people would pay to stare at her boobs and never notice that ugly red birthmark on her arm?”—and the only redeeming thing I can see is that, mercifully, he never informed any women of his negative judgments. I can state this based on a thorough reading of Harvey's e-mail files.

Yet, with the human side of his brain, as if he had a Jekyll-Hyde split in him, Harvey could show remarkable compassion and understanding at times—“great smile, great eyes, but her plastic surgeon should be sued & have had his license suspended for the horrible botch he made of her poor little boobs”; “this poor thing looks so unhappy, even drugged in most of her pix—what sort of life is she leading?”—but such comments are few and far between.

Another file contained copies of his 428 e-mails written to thirty-four young women, five of whom appear to have replied. Most of his e-mails, like his annotations, are the grunts of an old goat, and they compliment the women on their faces and/or bodies and/or tastes in underwear. A few of his e-mails, sixty-three to be exact, advised the pornsite women to pursue other careers, to stay in school or go back to school, and Harvey occasionally quoted Judge Judy's line “Beauty fades, dumb is forever” as part of his argument.

I found, with the help of his access codes, that Harvey had “joined” five of the women's porn sites, paying around \$150 a month for them with a credit card that Marie knew nothing about. Ira's comment about this was: “Apparently he

was often a lonely man, and this corner of the Internet is designed to attract lonely men and then separate some of their money from them.”

It was one of this last type of Harvey’s e-mails that caught my eye. A series of fifteen of them were addressed to a young woman calling herself (or called by her site pimp) Camilla Toe. Here is the first note he wrote to her, which set the theme of the other fourteen:

My dear Camilla Toe,

You look a little bit like somebody I know—the 16-yr-old daughter of a minister, who lives next door. Of course your hair is different but I believe that most ‘internet teens’ use wigs as well as fake names and fake bios—just like those fakey sounding questionnaire answers that supposedly were handwritten by hundreds of Heffner’s playmates down through who knows how many decades. You look so very very sad or stoned in almost all your pictures! I hope your [sic] not shooting up dope. I notice what looks like a bunch of bruises on your arms & left cheek in some of them & can’t help but wonder. If YOU are running your website to make money for some worthy goal, such as furthering your education like Jamie Lee Curtis’s character in the film TRADING PLACES, I wish you well but I humbly suggest that you need a better quality camera or a better photographer. But if somebody ELSE is forcing you to do this site for their [sic] financial gain, I HOPE you will be able to get yourself free from that person! Who knows? Chances are you will never even read this note. Almost all human communication is like putting a note in a bottle & taking a chance that somebody will read it & answer it. I strongly suspect that 95% of the e-mails people get from websites like yours are ghostwritten by somebody else, possibly by some woman who got ahold of somebody else’s photos, but most likely by some man—and possibly somebody who gets violent with the woman in the pictures. I read someplace that an [sic] laid-off engineer made thousands of dollars posting nude photos of his pretty wife at a pay-site he set up! We seldom get the full story about anything, but I sure do wonder sometimes!

Best wishes anyway,
Oldkingcole.

When I showed Ira a copy of this note and three similar e-mails of Harvey’s, he smiled each time at the girl’s fake name but wouldn’t tell me why. He did admit that Harvey had the makings of a human being in him and said, “If there’s a heaven and a just system for getting there, Harvey

has a good chance of making it.”

Harvey’s last two e-mails to this young woman indicate that he was becoming more concerned about her welfare. In recent days, he noted, her bruises and apparent sadness seemed even more noticeable than before, most especially in the photos and webcam “shows” of her having sex with two or three or four nude masked-men, “which I for one do NOT enjoy in the least & all the more so because your groans & moans sound like real pain instead of pleasure to my old & experienced ears.” Near the ending of his final e-mail to Carmilla Toe, he mentioned that one of her “partners” appeared to have a very distinctive jagged scar on his upper back:

I’ve seen just one similar looking mark & that was on my neighbor’s son, maybe a couple years ago while he was washing his car in the driveway on a summer afternoon. I HOPE this is NOT the same young man! I see that this ‘partner’ also has a panther tattoo on his lower back. I’m half tempted to ask my neighbor if his son has such a tattoo now. Young lady, if you have any parents alive, WHAT in God’s name have they done to YOU? HOW have they failed YOU?

I remain your friend that cares what’s to become of you,
Oldkingcole

The next morning, while retrieving his Sunday newspaper, Harvey was run down by a pair of stolen cars. Was there any way to explain the trout in the cottage cheese beyond a reasonable doubt?

4

After leaving the high school, I drove directly to Marie Coleman’s house. Carrying the Samuelson book, the mouse pad, and the cheap laptop under my left arm, I walked up to her front door and pushed the button. When no one came to the door, I pushed it two dozen more times, hearing the bing-bong of the chimes through the heavy door each time. Standing on tiptoe, I gazed into one of the living room windows and then walked to the garage and peer through its side window. It was empty. Shrugging, I walked next door and rang the bell of the Whiteheads’ house. Heather came to the door almost at once, and I asked her if she would please see that Marie got the book, mouse-pad, and laptop—onto which I’d taped a subtle note reading “Harvey Coleman’s computer.” Heather nervously promised that she would do so and set these items on the floor just inside her front door.

“Maybe your son or your daughter could try Marie later,” I suggested as I turned to leave, and she agreed.

3

Ira says that I showed a serious lack of uncommon good sense that night, and I admit to that deficiency. And yet, with him still down at Rex Rehab Center, I don't know who I could have deputized to help me out that night. Certainly Marie Coleman would not have been a proper choice—she who spent all that afternoon and half the night in a cozy hotel room north of the Raleigh beltline, as per my instructions. I could not very well have asked the Cary police or Chapel Hill police for back-up, could I? Or the N.C. State Troopers? So I sat at my office computer, waiting for an e-mail reply that never came.

On that cheap laptop I'd left with Heather Whitehead, I'd put a document titled "read me first" that said, "To the killers of Harvey Coleman (with an 'e' in the middle): Your identities have been detected. To get a 'stay out of jail' card, please read the other message. Yours, Midnight-the-cat."

My second document (cleverly titled "read me second") offered them Harvey's real laptop in exchange for them all being interviewed by me for a thriller novel and screenplay I had a contract to write—about a perverted minister and his depraved family. "Your case far outshines the pathetic cases of the 2 lustful televangelists, who were publicly disgraced, & that of the Kansas minister who recently murdered his wife with his lover's help—& got caught. In MY book & screenplay, the chief unique twist will be how the family totally gets away with it. I say 'family,' because the WHOLE FAMILY will be involved & working together as a team in my story—father, mother, their 4 kids, & some in-laws. My working title is RICH WHITE TRASH, & after each outrageous crime the momma gives a prayer of thanks for their continued success & the son giggles & says: 'Who knows what rich white trash are capable of?'"

I ended this note with a copy of my e-mail address so they could contact me about how and where we could all meet safely.

I never expected them to believe any of my offer, but I did expect them to try and set up a meeting by e-mail, perhaps to try and stall in order to set their own trap for me.

Around 2:15 a.m., I was almost asleep at my keyboard when I noticed three masked male figures stalking around the street below our Killebaugh & Touleau office, carrying what appeared to be bottles of gasoline with cloth wicks poking out of them. Two of them were already on fire. I suppose that almost anyone could have foreseen how, with the help of Marie's Coleman's introduction, half of Chapel Hill could have found their way to our office in Cary, with or without the assistance of MapQuest. Luckily for me, I was a woman with that kind of foresight.

I left my computer running, opened the heavy glass door, and walked

across the street to deal with them. As the first hero cocked his arm back to heave his lighted bottle through our second-story window, I shouted for him to freeze. When he faced me with some sort of pistol in his other hand, I let him have it with one of Betsy's barrels, dropping him and his burning gasoline onto the street.

The remaining two likewise spun around to face me.

"Leroy! Oh ****ing Christ Almighty! Bro!" said the one with a flaming bottle in his hand.

"Put out those flames with your shirts!" I shouted. "Maybe his life can be saved!"

The one who had just spoken hurled his bottle into a high arc in my direction, and I blew it out of the air with Betsy's other barrel, showering the street with burning gasoline.

"That was her last shell! Rush her b'fore she reloads!" shouted the second hero, racing towards me. His companion was close behind him but less certain what to do, since he still carried a bottle of gasoline and parts of the street between us were blazing. He may have begun to recognize that their plan had developed a few holes, not the least of which was the location of Harvey's real computer, which they so dearly wished to destroy.

With my adrenaline now at full throttle, I tossed Betsy onto the street beside me and pulled Bitsy, her sawed-off sister, from the deep right pocket of my polyester slacks. The hero in front was about to bowl me over when I put a load of buckshot into his face. Several weekends of practice had readied me for the fierce recoil of the gun. They had not readied me for the sight of his brains on the dark surface of the street.

His companion, the unlighted bottle still clutched in one hand, extended both his arms over his head and begged me shrilly to please not shoot him. I could hear the sounds of sirens approaching and suddenly felt majorly relieved that somebody else would be taking charge soon. Then I became aware that a shadow was moving in the doorway of the building next to where Ira and I have set up shop together, and I realized with a cold sinking feeling that I only had one shell in the hole but two folks to deal with.

"Stay where you are!" I commanded. "Take another step and one of you gets this!"

Her voice was almost a whisper, but it carried surprisingly well. Ira later suggested that the acoustics created by the buildings of that spot on the street were like those he'd once heard at an old stone theater in Greece, but I don't know.

"Please—please finish him off, detective," she said, beseechingly. "My brother—he—he deserves to die. Or finish me off. I hate—I hate—my life!"

I retrieved Betsy, reloaded her, and then dropped poor faithful little Bitsy onto the street and booted her down the nearby storm sewer just before the first police cruiser came into view. The cops and I would have enough to talk about without the subject of a sawed-off shotgun being one of them. I doubted either Cindy or Little Larry Whitehead would be bringing that topic up.

2

Of course the Cary police made me set Betsy down on the street again, and one of them took her into custody, while others took charge of the rest of us. It was a wild night, with four fire trucks, two ambulances, hours of intense discussion, and lots of local and long-distance telephoning. Ira was awakened and consulted at his Rehab Center, Marie was awakened and chauffeured to Cary from her Raleigh hotel room, and the Reverend Lawrence Whitehead and his wife—and the parents of Little Larry's and Cindy's two deceased male cousins—were awakened by the North Carolina State Highway Patrol and, as a courtesy I believe, brought to Cary as well. It all took just over ten hours before I was released—with the grateful thanks of a very sleepy County Attorney.

For perhaps five of those hours, Heather Whitehead insisted that she knew her own children and swore they were the innocent victims of some sort of Godless, insidious trap. Finally, her husband, Big Larry, having heard his son's tearful confession and his daughter's tearful accusations, told her to be quiet. I wondered what he thought his flock would make of all this and wondered whether he would be big enough to accept some responsibility for what his son and daughter had become.

Marie was probably the greatest surprise to me of all of them. Around the ninth hour, she went up to Heather and Big Larry and gave them both hugs. Then she said, "I want you to know you're in all my prayers, and I just know the Lord will see you through this trial." Even seven months later, I still don't quite know how to take this remark. As much as I hate unsolved mysteries, I can't bring myself to ask her.

1

Ira has recovered very well, although he now spends more time with armchair detecting of various sorts, including detecting additional evidences of genius in the works of his beloved Rudyard Kipling. He has assured me that my father and Dr. King and Harvey Coleman and millions of other men were and/or are "basically good folks" who from time to time have problems dealing with the "strong natural appetites" that their bodies have. He adds that many women have the same sorts of problems, and I can agree with that, although I don't buy into most of Ira's highly detailed theorizing about us.

As for Little Larry and his late cousins, Ira has been a bit more judgmental, recently calling the three of them “reprehensible instances of a ‘lesser breed without the law,’” adding pedantically that “the word ‘without’ in this context means the opposite of the word ‘within,’ namely ‘outside of,’ and not ‘lacking,’ as the word ‘without’ normally does.”

Feeling happy that the Whiteheads’ trials, at least in the legal sense, were finally over—with Little Larry being convicted and sentenced to twenty-five hard ones and Cindy being acquitted and getting some family therapy with her parents—I told Ira that there were no lexicographical hairs worth splitting there: both “withouts” amounted to the exact same thing. I said this partly to tease him, and I think Ira understands that I did so with affection.

“I didn’t invent the phrase ‘lesser breed,’” he said, refilling my coffee mug with his lightly rum-spiked eggnog, it being Christmas Eve—at long last. We tapped our mugs together yet again and “quaffed” (my word, not Ira’s) at least half of their contents without either of us drawing a single fresh breath of air.

“The phrase was one I first came across in my senior year of high school, when the new music teacher was getting our chorus ready for graduation day,” said Ira, squinting with the effort of thinking that far back into his past. “We were taught an old song by some guy with the whacky name of Reginald—Reginald de Koven. It was a kind of prayer against imperialism and misplaced national pride, and I might just be the only person alive that still remembers it—and sings it in the shower, truth be told. It’s called ‘Recessional,’ and of course the words to it were written by—guess who.”

“Kipling?” I said.

“Bingo! The duck comes down and pays you a hundred bucks. Kipling—of course. And I started reading other things by this man—the first Englishman to get the Nobel Prize for Literature, by the way—and decades later I’m still finding new meanings in what he’s written.”

“And how are—how were these people a ‘lesser breed,’ Ira?” I said, hoping to put him back on track, for the sake of informing my possibly lesser brain.

“They killed Harvey Coleman in cold blood to conceal their gross abuses of Cindy—and to prevent him from stopping their abuses. And they tried to do the same to you as well—except that, apparently, sometimes the Lord lets fools live. Hark—hark—Ivy’s Guardian Angel was watching that night. And it’s close to midnight now. Ho-ho-hopen your Christmas present, young woman, and be civil to your senior when you do.”

I took the large package he thrust towards me and handed him a smaller one I had wrapped for him, not caring whether I had spent more than he had on our gifts. “It’s the thought that counts,” I recalled, and we had both had a good and fortunate year.

"You go first—please," I said.

He did, and found dear little Bitsy—all professionally cleaned, blued, and reconditioned.

"I was afraid you might try and give me another Kipling book this year," he said with a grin of relief and pleasure. "Now kindly open yours."

Inside my package were a pair of shotguns, the long one with a tag reading "Big Dick" and the sawed-off one with a tag that read "Little Dick."

"Those are definitely not phallic terms," Ira insisted with poorly masked amusement. "A girl needs a little of her own protection sometimes. Feel free to shoot 'lesser breeds' full in the face whenever you get the chance—or the urge. Get it?"

I nodded. Then we formally exchanged words of gratitude and a couple pecks on the cheeks.

After that, Ira studied his little shotgun with new interest for almost two silent minutes, and I imagined that I heard dozens of little wheels or gears spinning inside his head.

"I won't ask you who had to be bribed to get Bitsy out of the sewer, but I'd like a straight answer about something that never came up with the police or the lawyers that grilled you. How did you see them coming that night, and how did you get the drop on them all?"

"Oh, that," I said mildly. "I slipped a General Grant to the manager of that 24-hour self-service laundry that's diagonally across from us to let me use her phone line as a dial-up connection for my e-mail. I just wish I'd had foresight and intelligence enough to buy a pair of those cheap laptops for that case—but then I'm just a fool and had to rely on the Lord and my Guardian Angel to give strength to schlep our monster computer—and monitor—and keyboard—down there by myself. Still, I did learn something from that night's experience, namely, I paid a couple kids five bucks each to haul it all back up here the next afternoon."

"Glad to hear it," he said, nodding his head slowly and smiling slightly.

"Indeed. By the way, I more than half expected to discover that Big Larry was totally immersed in the dirt—right up to his stiff neck—eyes—whatever. And I bet you did, too."

Ira nodded, without a smile this time.

"So, Killebaugh," I said in a bright, cheerful voice, "it's time now for you to regale us both with a few verses of this 'Recessional' song-thingy of yours—if you're man enough—and sober enough to remember it."

She'd made sure she was squeaky clean. Knowing that I liked that intolerable American cleanliness that her European ancestors would have bulked at. I enjoyed watching her skin shine and look almost polished by ardent loofing. The texture would be so buttery, her arms glowing, her thighs, impossibly soft and plump like fruit lain in summer grass. Her hair always smelled of strawberries, just like the mark underneath her ear, where I liked to kiss her and turn it into a long suck and finally a bite. Her skin was so sensitive even sitting on a hard surface would leave rings around her bottom, red and embarrassing to her, but I liked that she was so tender, delicate in ways that I was not.

I let her in, my starched clothes sat on me like feathers, I felt weightless in her presence, freed of anxiety and anger. I'd put the fire on, dimmed the lights the way I knew she enjoyed, and the day, thundery and raining sat outside like a spectator wishing admittance, as I closed the door and the warmth ran out momentarily. Her cheeks were red, her lips stained with the plum lipstick she wore that tasted of apples and her saliva. Her eyes were bruised with nights of unrest, I could feel her small body tremble as I took her in my arms and enfolded her close to me. Between us her heart beat like a wild rabbit, her neck smelt of perfume that only she had discovered, a spicy smell that was both impossible to trace and lingering in a light, sensual way. I realized as I held her to me, her face buried in my shoulder, that she was like her perfume, impossible to trace fully, to truly know, and yet, around me like a mist, even when she was absent.

Her eyes glittered in the dusk of the room, I let her go and went to collect the bottle of wine and two tall blue glasses. She liked to drink in tall glasses, those elegant stems colored the deep blue of nightshade, turning the wine a bloody liquid impossible to discern. She held the glass to her lips, those lips that spoke of a hundred desires within me, not least the desire to bite them and watch as they bled, just enough for me to lick them and feel beneath my tongue the swelling of softness and flesh. She smiled at me, shyly and without thought but the pleasure of seeing me again. I always missed her much more than I ever told her, but somehow she knew, felt it perhaps in the way I gathered her coat and put it ever-so-carefully in the closet, the way I unbuttoned her tall shoes with their thick ribbons, and set them by the stairs. She knew by my ministrations, my attention and my silence in seeing her, an object and yet not an object of such allure that I had no words to do justice to her.

It is enough that I hold her like this, it is enough that when she asks me, I take her further and leave on her flawless skin the marks of my love, the bruises of my desire for her. Words cannot elaborate on an ache that penetrates a week, or the stinging of my strike on her bare flesh. Her dress today was thin and wrapped around her dancer's body like a scarf. Her childlike legs were sucked into long silky stockings that rose up to her thighs like tongues. I knew she would be wet already, she always was. It was a miracle I felt, that her wetness knew no beginning, no end, and existed it seemed, for me alone, tempting me further than I knew I could go, into her, losing myself in her smell and her moans and her longing for the love I alone could give her.

She followed me to my bedroom. It was dark as always, the tall candles illuminating enough to see the thick velvet ropes on each bedpost. The wooden bed was heavy and smelt of cedar and ancient things, the bedsheets were equally heavy with hand-stitched sheets of gold and black threads. Over-all the feeling was that this was a room for pleasure, for secrets to be folded and hidden in the linings of the heavy sheets, and screams to be purified in the embrace of two who knew in each other, that dark love and set it free.

Her white skin glowed against the candlelight, I undressed her with the tips of my fingers, barely brushing her skin as I undid the numerous velvet buttons, silk chamisoles, and delicate undergarments of her dress. They fell lightly to the carpet, like tiny dolls clothes they lay there harmless and lonely for her body. She stood upright in that effortless grace of a dancer, and watched me silently, her eyes unblinking and intoxicating. In the air I smelt the wax of the candles, the warmth of the fire in the other room, and her perfumed hair, falling down her back in thick rivers.

"get down on your knees" I commanded her. She obeyed, dropping to her knees with the lightness of her form, and keeping her head down.

"look at me" I said, and pulled her chin upwards, to stare into her eyes. She did not smile, her face was still and I thought, a flicker of fear, the apprehension she always experienced, danced across it for a moment.

"put your hands behind your back." She placed her thin hands high on her back making her small back arch slightly as she contorted her shoulders. I withdrew a long silk scarf from my velvet pants and proceeded to tie her arms together at the wrists, tightly so that it cut into her skin enough to see. She winced slightly as I tested the tightness, and bowed her head down once more.

"I told you to look at me" I said again, and I pulled her arms up from behind her, causing her to lift slightly off the floor in discomfort. She moaned slightly and turned her face up to me again, this time the look of fear had intensified but I saw something else too, an excitement...

Unforeseen Circumstances

Marc Tamargo

Bang! The sound echoed loudly throughout the large house. As far as Maria was concerned the sound could have originated from a gun shot aimed at her head, for the results were similar. The sound indicated the crushing of all her hopes and dreams and that her misery would never end. The colour had drained completely from her face, her breathing stopped, and her heart pounded vigorously as she stared at the thrown box that had made the horrible sound. Spilling out of the now broken box was all the money she had been planning to use to make her escape from the endless abuse at the hands of the man who had thrown the box; her husband Danny.

She could tell from the intense burning in his eyes that he knew exactly what the money was for and that no amount of lies or excuses could prevent the severe beating that she was about to experience, but she cared less about her imminent thrashing and more about the fact that her well laid plans to live a happy life away from pain had just been completely ruined. "What is that!?" he screamed loudly while indicating the shattered box. She didn't bother to answer him; she wasn't sure why he was prolonging this; they both knew what was going to happen next. And then there it was, the familiar sting in her cheek, the pain that she had grown so accustomed to, but it didn't stop there; it continued much worse and for much longer; the worst beating she had ever had.

Danny wasn't always like this; he used to be a very sweet and loving man when she first met him. He had saved her from her poverty stricken life in her native Argentina and had brought her back here to the Catlin Coast of New Zealand where life was good... for a while, but Danny slowly became a monster who would not only beat her but also isolate her from the rest of the world.

The only joy she derived from this life, her main purpose for living came from Bernard, her beloved horse. Ridding him was one of the few pleasures Danny allowed her and their bond was greater than he knew. She would have left earlier if not for Bernard; she couldn't bare the thought of life without him. One day a secret friend she had made while on one of her few trips into town had lent her the money to escape after learning what she had to endure. She had enough money to take Bernard away to a farm in the North Island which she had arranged work on. Her ferry ticket to the North Island now laid on the floor covered in her blood

along with the rest of her money.

She lifted her head up from the floor and watched the blood drip down from her face. Danny was no longer in the room, she had lost track of time, she was unsure of how long she had been lying there alone. Her whole body throbbed in pain, but she no longer cared, now that her escape had been ruined there was no point to anything. A loud click made her look up to see that Danny had returned and he was holding his revolver. *This is it*, she thought, *he's finally going to do me in*, and she was almost happy at the prospect. But instead of hearing a gunshot she felt the fresh pain of her long black hair being viciously pulled as Danny was trying to yank her to her feet. "Get up!" he shouted.

He then pulled her by her hair outside in the cold rain with the sharp rocks scraping her bare feet and talked endlessly about what a failure and horrible person she was and how she would need to be punished. She didn't really disagree; she knew that she deserved this. She realized with horror where it was he was taking her: the stables.

Before she knew it he was standing in front of Bernard holding the gun to his head. "See what you're making me do!" he shouted. Outraged, Maria found strength she never knew she had to elbow Danny in the stomach. Unprepared, he fell to the ground in pain. Not wasting a moment, Maria jumped on the horse and rode away as quickly as she could.

She was frantic and still dazed, she didn't know where she was going, she just wanted to get away as fast as she possibly could. Before she realized it she was deeply entrenched in the thick forest, which Bernard could barely pass through. She could hear Danny shouting profanities at her; he was getting closer. She tried desperately to get Bernard to go faster but in the darkness she failed to notice that they were headed straight over a cliff. She pulled on the reins hard, trying to get him to stop, but instead was thrown off the back of the horse onto the wet ground. She could only watch in horror as Bernard fell to his death.

Maria was so overwhelmed with grief that at first she could not move, but then she heard Danny approaching so she quickly hid in the bushes. She watched as he approached the cliff and looked over the edge. He fell to his knees crying and calling out her name, he thought she had died with Bernard. This would have been the perfect time to make her escape, if Danny thought she was dead he wouldn't be looking for her, but all she could think about was that Bernard was dead and it was all Danny's fault.

Rage surged within her like she never knew was possible and when she saw the gun lying unattended a couple of meters from Danny she saw her opportunity. She emerged from the bushes, quickly snatched up the gun and

aimed it at him. He didn't seem to notice the gun at all; he just seemed relieved to see her. "Maria! You're alive! Thank God!" he knelt in front of her, "I'm so sorry for everything I've done. I promise to change. I love you."

Bang! This time the sound was more pleasant to Maria. She watched as her husband's lifeless body slumped to the ground. She looked at him lying there with a hole in his head and noted that it was the only time he looked peaceful.

After a few moments of staring at his lifeless body she returned to house and began to hide all the valuables she could find. Although she was pressed for time she took care to find absolutely everything of value, including all the money in the house. She took them out to one of the nearby cottages that would be used by tourists during the summer, but since it was late autumn they were all vacant. She discreetly broke in and hid all the valuables there.

After she returned to the house she then called the police. When they arrived she explained to them how they had been robbed. "Two big men broke in the house and caught us off guard. Danny tried to get his gun to defend us but they beat us down and found the gun first. I managed to escape on our horse but they got Danny. They chased me on the horse and in the process I almost rode off a cliff. I managed to jump off the horse before he fell, but the thieves didn't know that, they thought I was dead. Then they took Danny and shot him with his own gun." She expertly managed to let out some very convincing tears and sobs. "You did the right thing," they had said. When they left she let a small smirk cross her lips. Getting away with murder was a lot easier than she thought it would be.

She had made enough money from selling all of Danny's valuables, that along with the money she got from Danny's will gave her enough money to move back to Argentina where she bought the farm she had always wanted as a child. She never thought about Danny again, but every once in a while she would shed a tear for Bernard.



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by Cheryl Townsend

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