



children
& daddies

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

5, 6, 38, 39, 44. Cover art of the editor's Christmas tree in the library in 2007 (with an astrolabe in the foreground and a telescope in the background, near floor-to-ceiling mirrors to repeatedly reflect the tree).

Waste

Roger N. Taber

Orange peel in the gutter, discarded
like a waste of time

Bird droppings (clues to Nature's opinion
of progress in the world?)

Doggie droppings left by those without
a thought for anyone else

Celebrity snappers keen to make a mark
on the subhuman condition

Pages torn from newspapers, flapping
like promises at election time

Bounty hunters tracking our every move
on consumer databases

Blood stains, graffiti on a prefabricated
wall of silence

Raindrops (or crocodile tears for a family's
heart cut out?)

Orange peel in the gutter, washed away
like a waste of time

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Can Outer Space Research Lead us to Fuel on Earth?

they say extra-terrestrial trips cost a ton of money, but we learn things from these journeys, and learning how to efficiently get fuel from Mars might lead to a solution to help planet Earth...

I was watching the Science channel recently, and they were talking about trying to come up with a feasible plan for a manned trip to Mars. Because it takes a lot of fuel to get people there and back, people have been coming up with a solution for creating fuel on Mars. If we sent a small, unmanned ship to Mars first with equipment that could start using resources abundant on Mars to create fuel for a manned trip back home.

Now, that sounds like a cool idea, creating gas. I mean, if we are needing fuel for heating our homes and running out SUVs, trying to “create” fuel seems like a great idea. But I’m sure that the composition of the atmosphere or ground on Mars, that makes our red neighbor a more likely place for creating fuel like this.

I watched this show, and I looked around on line for more information about this, and, well, there is a lot of science jargon in these plans, so I’m going to give you some resources that might explain it. When I heard this mentioned on the Science Channel, I really wanted to learn more – not necessarily for a manned trip to Mars (though the science geek and the astronomy buff in me thinks that would be *so* cool), but because of the possibility of creating fuel for Earth (we *do* get a got of new scientific data based on NASA and outer space research and journeys). If President Bush has destroyed our chances for inexpensive gasoline for our cars or oil to heat our homes, maybe this is a way to kill many birds with this one solution (and to *not* kill any birds due to climate change).

Jim Haldenwang wrote in “The Human Exploration of Mars” (released 10/31/05 and revised 01/05/06, which can be researched at <http://members.cox.net/jhaldenwang/mars.htm>) explained that Aerospace engineer Robert Zubrin proposed the feasibility of a manned trip to Mars based on producing fuel for the manned return trip from the Red Planet. If a small ship flies separately in advance to the manned flight, carrying hydrogen and a small nuclear reactor, the machinery could utilize the 95% carbon monoxide atmosphere. According to the article, “The Sabatier reaction can be used to produce methane and water from hydrogen and Martian carbon dioxide.” One of the additional products of these reactions is the production of oxygen.

Steven T. Green and Danny M. Deffenbaugh agreed in their article “Fueling a Trip from Mars” (<http://www.swri.org/3pubs/ttoday/spring99/mars.htm>), by noting that “astronauts can process the carbon dioxide with hydrogen brought from Earth to produce essential rocket fuel ingredients.”

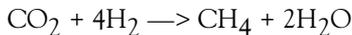
You think this is just one source? I looked further and found other sources, including an article called “Mars Atmospheric Resources” (<http://ares.jsc.nasa.gov/HumanExplore/Exploration/EXLibrary/docs/ISRU/08Atmos.htm>), by stating that “the martian atmosphere, consisting mostly of carbon dioxide, can be processed to release oxygen for life support or propellant use. Carbon monoxide, which could be a moderate performance rocket fuel, is the coproduct.”

And in article called “A Road Map To Mars” by Robert Ash (<http://www.odu.edu/ao/instadv/quest/roadmaptomars.html>), he also reiterates that “before departure of the first manned Martian expedition, a small chemical processor could be built and sent to Mars, along with solar- or nuclear-power generating equipment, to slowly convert on-planet materials (such as water and carbon dioxide) into oxygen and fuel for surface exploration.”

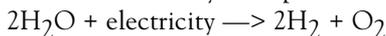
Okay, so a bunch of people can write articles (I am writing an article, someone somewhere could be using my writings as evidence to prove a point), I suppose I should try to find something that might sound a little more credible (if the scientists who have devised these plans are altogether unscientific). So I even searched for academic teachings to look for any information on this. And lo and behold, I hit jackpot. Dennis Ward taught a class (and his paperwork is copyrighted from 2000) (Mr. Ward is staff at the National Center for Atmospheric Research & the UCAR Office of Programs, which is operated by the University corporation for Atmospheric Research) wrote about Fueling Interplanetary Travel. In “Extraterrestrial Resource Utilization” (<http://eo.ucar.edu/staff/dward/sao/fit/etru.htm>), and he broke down the concept with a lot more detail:

“Mars has soil that could be processed to produce oxygen, as well as water (in the polar ice caps or in subsurface permafrost) that could be electrolyzed to produce oxygen and hydrogen propellants. However, Mars is unique in possessing an atmosphere of carbon dioxide (CO₂) that represents a potential extraterrestrial resource.

If we bring a supply of hydrogen with us, we can set up a Sabatier / Water Electrolysis process to produce oxygen and methane. The Sabatier process uses hydrogen gas as a catalyst to produce methane and water from the carbon dioxide found in the Martian atmosphere:



Some of the water is then electrolyzed to produce hydrogen & oxygen:



This results in supplies of methane, water, hydrogen, and oxygen. The methane and oxygen could be used to power vehicles needed to explore the Martian surface, while hydrogen and oxygen could be used to refuel the spacecraft for the return trip.”

And I could start talking about the human applications of this idea now, but before we do I should talk about the validity of this plan for interplanetary travel to begin with... The article “The Next Frontier” from *The Age* (<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/02/26/1014471637279.html>). This article brings up Zubrin, but NASA doesn’t immediately agree with Zubrin’s assessment. Gary Martin, director of the Advanced Systems Office at NASA’s Office of Spaceflight, talked to the people at the Age, and said that “In fact, if you gave us all the money in the world right now you couldn’t do it, you couldn’t keep people alive.” NASA is considering using the Moon as a launch point to get to Mars, and they are even considering a plasma “bubble” around the ship that would protect the manned contents of a ship from deep-space radiation.

But okay, this actually was not my point. My point is that people are talking about combining water (which we have, and is available in the Martian polar ice caps) and Carbon Dioxide (which I’m afraid we have too much of, hurting our chances of warming the earth, I hear), to make fuel. I don’t know, we talk about our dependence on Middle-Eastern countries for our dependence on oil for heating our homes and driving our SUVs (how economical of us), when people are looking to outer space for a potential solution to our problems in planet Earth.

People joke about how NASA and outer space exploration actually helps us on Earth, and I don’t know if that is usually enough of an argument for the vast amounts of money we spend on researching outer space (many would say it’s not), but what the Hell. If we are finding ways to create fuel out of the things that (A) we have a ton of on this planet (like water, in our oceans), or things that (B) we worry that we may be hurting our environment and causing global warming (you know, that Carbon Dioxide and Methane in our upper atmosphere). Granted, Al Gore started his movie *An Inconvenient Truth* by saying that humans account for probably less than 5% of the greenhouse gases on Earth, but

if there really is a problem with the amount of Carbon Dioxide on this planet, maybe part of the problem on this planet could be a part of our heating and fuel solution.



Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief



Free Healthcare and the Poor

You know, I had to write an addendum to the healthcare article I posted recently. I talked to an RN from the Mississippi named Charlotte, and she told me that in the south, poorer people will go to the ER for things like “my baby

has been crying for three days.” And because it’s an ER, they have to take care of the person and try to help. They may ask, “What is the baby’s temperature?” and the mother would reply, “I don’t know. I don’t own a thermometer.” And these same people would be the type who would ask the doctor on hand to write them a prescription for Motrin, because their Medicare would pay for it that way.

She explained to me the poor people using Medicare (at least what she has seen where she worked) don’t even understand that Medicare is insurance. A doctor might ask what type of insurance they have, and they would say they don’t have insurance, but they have Medicare.

I also heard a funny comment from one of the southern nurses studying in northern Illinois, Monica: she said something to the effect of the fact that if she has to pee into a cup periodically to be a doctor, then the same should apply for people to be on Welfare.

Then again, does that mean that we should be giving healthcare away for free? I think we’ve deduced that healthcare isn’t free (you know, that some Canadians actually pay extra so they may have access to a doctor in a reasonable amount of time, and as expensive as drugs may be in the United States, the people who create these life-saving medicines should be reimbursed for their labors). By my husband told me he heard on the radio recently that British doctors were asking to not treat the sick and infirm (and yes, the infirm are those of poor or deteriorated vitality, like people feeble from old age). So I had to actually check the validity of *that* one out, and I found a *Telegraph* article from the UK (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/01/27/nhs127.xml>) called “on’t treat the old and unhealthy, say doctors”, by Laura Donnelly, that explained that British doctors are calling for NHS (National Health Service) treatment should be withheld from patients who either are too old, or lead unhealthy lives. That means that even smokers, obese people or heavy drinkers would fit into the category with the old, that they “should be barred from receiving some operations,” because “the health service cannot afford to provide free care to everyone.”

The article went on to say that one in ten British hospitals already deny some surgeries to smokers and obese patients, especially if the hospitals are already battling debt. And the British government is also not offering cash incentives to obese people to actually get them to diet and lose weight, just so (and this is my interpretation) they don’t grow to become as fat as the United States.

And remember my mentioning that Canadians often pay for additional healthcare (in addition to that “free” healthcare they get with their increased taxes) for a chance at better service? Well, Canada isn’t the only one with national healthcare not footing the bill. “Among the survey of 870 family and hospital doctors, almost 60 per cent said the NHS could not provide full healthcare to everyone and that some individuals should pay for services.” And “One in three said that elderly patients should not be given free treatment if it were unlikely to do them good for long. Half thought that smokers should be denied a heart bypass, while a quarter believed that the obese should be denied hip replacements.”



So I don't know what the answer is, when we allow poor people to over-abuse Medicare, when we allow anyone to have Welfare, and when we have Democrats running for President who want to Nationalize healthcare. Although our system might not be much better, it seems obvious that it doesn't work in a number of countries on different continents in the world.

Janet Kuypers®

Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief

poetry
the passionate stuff

The Quiet One by Janet Kuypers

He doesn't talk much.
So I have to remember not what he says
but what he does.

I had a live performance
that he couldn't attend
but when I went to see him after my show
he was dressed alone in a nice suit
waiting for me.
When I saw him, he told me
he remembered what I thought
looked sexiest;
a man dressed in a suit,
with the tie a bit loosened
like it was the end of the day
& it was time to unwind & relax.

And I laughed,
because he was right
that it looked sexy,
and he knew how to act,
all without saying a word.

low-end lipo

Janet Kuypers

a September story reported that a New York man was searching for ways to lose weight effectively, wanting liposuction but not the cost, he allowed his friend to perform liposuction on him in his garage.

the term that labels his garage death was “lidocaine overdose” - which is an overdose of a local anesthetic. this overdose indicate that our at-home patient needed more and more pain relief from his friends trying to free him of his flab.

Requiem for a Dream 2

Eric Obame

December 11 1972

The crew of Apollo 17 landed on the moon
It was the last time that we stepped on extraterrestrial soil
I grew up dreaming about Mars, and the stars
About moon bases, and deep space stations
About fusion reactors, and starships using laser beams
To sail from one planet to the next at a percentage of light speed
I imagined that as an adult, my dreams would be made real
I thought—I hoped that I would get to live some of them
To experience some of them, while awake
But we have not done anything since 1972
Except take better pictures of the cosmos
None of my childhood dreams have come true
I grew up on Star Wars, Star Trek, Buck Rogers, Battlestar Galactica—
A thousand space films, cartoons, and shows
But in the approaching forty years since Apollo 17
We have not moved onto Mars
We have not even been back to the moon
We have simply boarded this international space station
That looks nothing like the one in 2001
December 11 1972
That date was the last time that we accomplished anything outside Earth
Worth watching

We Are Like This

Chris Volkay

We are like this:

Because we try to force our balloony heads
into the strictures of the pre-fabricated masks.

We are like this:

Because we believe in Godot-ey gods and
alien-abductions with equal ardor and justification.

We are like this:

Because genius is the soaring of the painted bird
among the hoards of puffing vultures,
knee-deep in cigarette butts.

We are like this:

Because we mortgage our prime lives away to the
sub-prime illusions of material “success.”

We are like this:

Because youth is wasted on the young; and
life itself on us humans.

We are like this:

Because nobody and no thing has the guts
left to be responsible for anything, anywhere
at anytime.

We are like this:

Because we insist that people are interchangeable,
mere spokes in Marx’s wheel.

We are like this:

Because we elevate and adore celebrity
nothingness as our own precious lives go
avalanching on down the hill.

We are like this:

Because we persist in believing that everything is part of some grand conspiracy, instead of random, meaningless, chaos that all life is.

We are like this:

Because, yes...as Mark Twain said, "Noah, didn't miss the boat."

We are like this:

Because we have separated ourselves from reality, opting for our own individual dustclouds of cloistering illusion.

We are like this:

Because we inherited this earthly paradise, but are only interested in living in ones that are up in the sky.

We are like this:

Because our problem is loneliness, yet we deny it, right up to the time the gasoline is trickling down the tresses of our hair.

We are like this:

Because science itself is hated, as it might further crack the already cracked superstitious crackage.

Xmas Eve in Blackjack Town

**Suzanne Richardson
Harvey, Ph.D.**

Joe the Pit Boss appeared
Like a bill collector
From the cloud of Benson & Hedges
That hung above the table
Ready to swallow
Every ace and king

Mary Kay the Dealer
Spotted a boa constrictor
Easing his way
Through the dollar slot
Behold Joe snarled
Time to cough up suckers

It's Reno now
Not Sinai or Jerusalem
Good news swings
Off balance here
From a greased palm
And an agate eye.

Family Reunion

Julia O'Donovan

'She is not looking well'
I hear someone say
Looking in my direction
Our eyes meet
And he turns away

I don't even recognize him
A cousin of mine?
Perhaps a couple of times
removed?
Maybe the husband
Of a cousin who married
During the time I was away

Every year
After I leave
I vow
Next year
I will not be here

But every year
Mother insists
And I think maybe
Things will be different
Grudgingly, I go

Many seem to know
It is better not to ask
If you nod your head
In my direction
I will nod back



Welcome Home, painting by Aaron Wilder

Brookline Avenue,
Cambridge, art by
Peter Bates



Jury Duty with Nine Inch Nails

Kelley Jean White MD

“Grow those yourself?” We’re all large women, backs to the TV, settled in for the wait to be enpanned; Day-glo Orange says she cuts ‘em with a strait razor, Mystery Book says garlic sliced thin, TV says a 350 lb.man was bludgeoned to death by cops with nightsticks for dancing in the While Castle hamburg restaurant, riots threatened, nine black men in five years: they laid him out on the floor, recall the mayor; last time was Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, forced lesson in Civics, now Bush is giving a speech about trees, I’m not kidding, he thanks a Rolling Stone for support, says he’s a keyboardist and a gardener, a tree farmer, the whole room claps when they switch GW off. Which parable is it when the last ones that show up take home the same pay? Talents?

What If the Story Were True

Fredrick Zydek

What if the story of Noah and his ark were true? What if God told him to build a boat big enough to hold thousands of animals and Noah's little family? What if it were true that it rained for forty days and forty nights until the earth

was flooded and that by the time there was dry land again, every creature except those who lived in the sea, a few birds that could fly or perch on floating debris, and an occasional human who was raised standing up and fighting back, who found

boats or rafts or some way of hanging on until the rains stopped falling. What if it wasn't a flood they traveled but a trip from one planet to another. What if the tale is all that's left of a people who had to abandon one planet for another and

took their animals and plants with them? What if the trip took forty generations? What if when they landed they no longer knew how they got into the ship or where it started out from. Would that tell us why some animals are carnivores and others

herbivores and friends of man? Would it still mean that the God of the universe can become so angry over how people live their lives that he'll try to kill off most of them again? What if the God they brought with them on the ark simply has a bad disposition?

Salt

Kenneth W. Anderson, Jr.

The sun has yet to hit my face and
it's wet and cold.
I'm waist high in the
middle of the river
with my rod and reel tight in hand.
I open my mouth and try to
swallow my breath,
ignoring the pain of flesh
pressed against the ice.

On a rocky place sits a blue heron,
stone still,
dividing the wind.
She glances at my old feathered cap, and
shakes her tail before quietly gliding down
away and out of sight.

My eyes fall below
the hunter's empty perch and
see what was lost:
a little rise, water twirling and stirring
churning green, blue and white.

I try to move
but my feet sink deeper,
stuck in silt.
And between pounding beats,
I vainly look again,
knowing she's already gone –
beyond my thinning reach.

My thoughts follow her wake,
little circles
slowly growing larger,
pushing out a little further,
but soon they too all die
along the sandy bank.

I bend down and try to touch her face,
my fingers trailing in her tears, and
as I turn to leave
I touch my lips
and taste the bitter salt.

Reservations

C.B. Anderson

Home is where a fart
goes mostly unnoticed
except when guests arrive.

Alone is not the same
as lonely, unless
it comes well-advertised.

A shadow of a doubt
can sometimes cast a light
on consequences
never intended
for public consumption.

The bottom of the barrel
is where a treasure
gets hidden in plain sight
of chronic ne'er-do-wells
and other struggling hitters.

The secrets in a bottle
appear completely shipshape
until the cork is popped.



Woman in the War, art by
Adriana DeCastro

Forever Winter

Kevin Michael Wehle

Razor sharp
You're SO hard to hold
Downward spiral in your soul
Radioactive-
To everyone but your misery
Chilly touch
Forever buried in white
Alone by choice
Yet you cry
Asking yourself why
As all you know turns to ice.

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

Brief Encounter

Pat Dixon (for E.B.F.)

We people who commute five days a week by train from the bedroom communities of Long Island into the Big Apple are often creatures who don't like our routines disrupted. At least that's true for those of us who live on the North Shore—so when the infamous El-Eye-Double-Are, as the Long Island Railroad is affectionately called, disrupts us, some vent frustrations on the nearest available scapegoat.

Usually they get away with it, owing to what might be described as most people's K.G.M.W.S. or Kitty Genovese Murder Witness Syndrome: we'll watch a person getting clobbered and may hope that somebody *else* will do something, but we don't want to get involved ourselves.

About one week after the Judge Thomas hearings when American men and women collectively thought about sexual harassment for the first time, the 6:55 a.m. commuter train arrived at my station with two cars less than usual. As we trundled aboard, it soon became evident that people were having to take pot-luck with seating instead of being able to just walk to our own special patented, copyrighted, officially deeded everyday places. In short, it was like playing musical chairs in the third grade, if you can remember that far back.

I went to my usual railroad car, third from the rear, and found a lot of people in it who normally sit in the fourth and fifth cars. I sat down beside a total stranger in a seat neither of us had ever occupied before, and opened up my *Newsday* while he looked over his *Wall Street Journal*. We glanced up, however, when a small commotion occurred in the area of the seats which are next to the doors.

A rather smartly dressed woman in her middle forties was sitting facing us in one of the seats in the corner beside the window. Standing over her and gesturing in his best New York manner was a sixty-ish, balding man whom I had seen almost every day for the past eleven years.

"Miss! Miss! Look at me! You! You're in my seat! I sit there! You have to move! I sit there!"

As he shouted, he reinforced his words by snapping his fingers two inches in front of her eyes. Evidently he wanted to be heard by at least half the car—no doubt he expected us to join him in shaming this interloper into compliance. When she spoke, we could not hear her voice, but the calm way she shook her head indicated that she was disputing his title. He continued berating her loudly until the bells rang, the doors closed, and the train began

to move. With a glower of purple hatred, he plopped himself into the aisle seat beside her and opened up his copy of the *Times*.

For the next forty minutes I watched him make exaggeratedly wide motions as he turned his pages. There is usually a special technique for reading newspapers on the train—a commuter “flip and fold”—which most of us master so that our fellow travelers’ space isn’t invaded for more than a few seconds at a time. The balding old gentleman, however, kept his paper with both pages spread fully apart, almost half of it under the face of the quiet little woman who had dared occupy his accustomed seat. As a further punishment, each time he turned a page, his right elbow apparently impacted on her left arm or her rib cage; usually her whole frame was jostled visibly.

She must have spoken to him about this after the first ten times, because he turned to her angrily and said in his accustomed voice, “I’ll read my paper the way I like, girlie! Nobody made you take that seat!”

For the remainder of the trip she evidently kept quiet. At least he didn’t say anything further to her. When we arrived at Penn Station, however, and most of us were standing with our briefcases in the aisle near the doors, she must have spoken to him again.

“No! I’m not ready to get up yet, girlie! You just wait till I’m ready!” he said loudly.

She stood up and made an effort to go around his knees, but he anticipated her move and suddenly put both of his feet up onto the empty seat that faced them, blocking her exit. Now he had a satisfied smile on his plump, smooth face. He closed his newspaper, folded his arms across his chest, and looked up at the rest of us standing in the aisle as if expecting our approval.

For a brief moment the smartly dressed woman made eye-contact with me as the train doors opened and people were getting off but the balding chap continued to sit, immobile. She handed me her briefcase and in a low, quiet voice asked me to hold it for her.

Then, to the surprise and perhaps horror of twenty male spectators, she gripped the overhead rack for balance and placed her left foot full into the expensively trousered lap of the gentleman blocking her way.

His eyes widened slightly, and he drew in his breath, but no sound came out of him. As the woman stepped down into the aisle in front of me, a dozen men pushed ever so slightly backwards to give her plenty of room.

“Thank you very much,” she said, reaching for her briefcase.

“You’re entirely welcome, ma’am,” I replied, and followed her off the train.

As she, fifteen hundred other people, and I walked towards the stairway leading to the surface, I glanced back at the train. The balding gentleman was still seated in the railroad car—motionless, alone, his mouth half open, staring straight ahead.

Xmas Spirit

Pat Dixon

At 10:30 Christmas morning, I'm speeding east on 66, almost to Miramichi. Carl, our dispatcher, radios me to drive all the way back to Tweed-New Haven to pick up the same old guy I'd dropped off at Alpha Airline's shuttle just four hours earlier. *Well, I think, his daughter'll sure be glad to see him again, whatever the reason.*

Twenty-five minutes later, just when I see him, the fare sees me and waves. I stash his three bags in my trunk while he climbs into the back seat again. We're heading northwest on Forbes over the Quinipiac before he says his first word to me.

"They cancelled my 8:30 morning flight before I turned in my bags. I finally got sheduled for another, almost the same time tomorrow—with a different airline. Best they could do, they said. Tried to get something later today. Nothing was going out of any of Alpha's terminals to Pittsburgh before 9:30 tonight, they said, and I took it—but then at a quarter past ten they cancelled that, too—along with all their other flights everywhere else today."

"Bummer," I say. "Maybe I'll be your driver again tomorrow. We'll give it another shot with better luck maybe."

He doesn't answer me. As I get on I-91 to head north, he volunteers some more news.

"At first they were telling us half their morning and afternoon flights were cancelled by a storm, an 'Act of God,' which meant they wouldn't have to refund us our money fully, but one of the ticket agents let it slip that it was just their computers were frozen up somehow and couldn't 'talk' to each other. Word of this spread through our terminal like—like—"

"Wildfire?" I suggest.

"Like nitrous oxide—Happiness Gas—Laughing Gas," he says. "No one was really 'happy' about the situation, but at least we weren't going to be getting ripped off as far as our money was concerned. We'd at least break even."

I didn't mention that today's cab fares down and back were costing him forty-five bucks each way—plus the tips.

I radio Carl and confirm I have the fare and am on my way up the interstate. Five miles farther, the old guy offers me some more news.

"They say misery loves company, even though it sounds like a cruel way for people to think. I've always tried to be different, and right now I'm a bit sorry for the thousands of other Christmas travellers that got screwed like me—and all the relatives, like mine, who won't be seeing us today—and the pilots and their crews, who will probably be screwed out of holiday pay by the company hotshots—and even the ticket clerks, who are getting a lot of crap from people for stuff that isn't their faults—but—there's *one* thing about this situation that *does* make me feel a little better—or at least makes my nasty side feel better."

He pauses, whether for effect or to try to find the right words—or because he’s having a seizure of some sort—who can say? On the trip down, he was a bit of a motor-mouth, the way some fares are just before they’re going on a holiday plane flight. He was telling me about how he’s an engineering professor at Witherspoon Military Academy and has a 92-year-old father in a rest home he was going to stop off and see near Pittsburgh—and then he was going to drive a rental car about fifty miles south and stay till New Year’s with his son’s family. Had two suitcases full of stuff for his grandkids, plus some little somethings for his son and daughter-in-law.

I drive a mile in silence and then say, “Like what?”

“Huh?” he says. “Oh—like—like poetic justice—almost. The line up to the counter was creeping along, snaking back and forth around those rope-off things. About half of us were in line for the flights that weren’t cancelled yet, and the rest wanted to find out what we could do about our cancelled flights, and we all were being pretty patient and orderly and good humored, all things considered, and finally I was third in line—behind a couple of women—one white and one black. We’d begun talking, the three of us, about seventy feet back, making little light jokes and telling each other about our big plans that were now partly crushed, but not being really sad about it. Gallows humor, I guess you could call it. You know?”

“Sure,” I say. “We did that in the Navy—an’ we do it—with my other job now.”

“Right. We used to do it back when I was in the MPs—oh—forty—forty-two years ago. Same thing. Anyway, the three of us are now at the front of the line, and there are three or four ticket agents working at the counter, dealing with the customers that were ahead of us—when a young guy—oh—about half my age—suddenly appears beside us, sliding four huge suitcases. I look him over and point him out to the two gals I’ve been talking with. He’s a fat guy with horn-rim glasses, and he has a skinny black-haired wife behind him, carrying a kid that looks to be—oh—maybe three or four years old. I’ve got a suddenly prickly feeling, so to speak. He looks like some kind of obese weasel to me.”

I smile at the thought of an obese weasel but say nothing. I weigh about two-sixty-five myself, but then I’m a pretty large guy—six foot five an’ a half. Much of it’s muscle.

“To head off a difference of opinion, so to speak,” he says, “I say in a loud voice, ‘Just for the record, young man, you know you *are* behind those of us who’ve been standing here in line.’ And he nods and smiles and says, ‘Of course. I’m just putting these bags up close so I don’t have to carry them while we’re in line, and they’ll be here when it’s our turn.’ After over sixty years of meeting weasels, though, I’ve still got a funny feeling about this guy. Turns out my instincts were right. That was just his first story.”

He pauses while an ambulance passes us, doing—oh—maybe eighty-five, I’d estimate.

“I used to pull MP duty on Christmas most of the time,” he says. “I’d hate the fights and the domestic disturbances that night, but mostly I’d hate the traffic accidents. Just seemed worse, somehow, when it was Christmas.”

“Yeah, it does,” I say, fully in agreement.

“Anyway,” he says, “the guy and his wife don’t go back under the rope and get in line. I ask him about it, and he gives a totally new story: ‘My wife was already at the front of the line, and I’m just joining her here.’ I’m in the process of calling him a liar when the next agent is free at the counter, and this fat punk hops ahead of us and hands his ticket folders to her.

“Hey!” says I. “Don’t be taking him! He’s cutting the line!” But the ticket agent is looking nervous and just takes the tickets from him. So I say to the two women in front of me, using a pretty loud voice on purpose, ‘I don’t want him cutting ahead of me, but if you two ladies are happy with him cutting ahead of you, I suppose it’s all right!’

“They both just looked away, not wanting to get involved. I was speaking loud enough to be heard, say, fifty feet away, and was trying to get some other folks to join in with me, but nobody did. I’d seen it work twice for a friend of mine, including when a big jock cut the line to register for classes back at the University of Oklahoma, where my friend and I went to grad school. Nobody wanted to join me, and this fat turd just smirked at me and grabbed one of his bags and gave it to the ticket clerk.

“I told him he was teaching his little daughter to be a pushy line cutter, and he smirked and said, ‘I’m not cutting the line—I’m just aggressive. It’s a survival skill.’ So I directed my next remark to his wife and said, ‘Ma’am, you’re letting this fat heap of infamy corrupt your little daughter. Is this how you want her to act when she is with other people? Is this the sort of person you want her to become?’ But she just looked down and away—though I think I might have planted a seed in her mind—but maybe not. He’s a real peach of a guy. I’m wondering if he’ll brag about his ‘victory’ to his family or his in-laws. I suspect he’s a wife beater, by the way. Saw a lot of them when I was in the MPs forty years ago—at least half of them were officers, too.”

The old guy clears his throat and is quiet for half a minute. I think this is the end of his big adventure, but then he continues:

“When the fat punk has put the fourth big suitcase up for the clerk, he folds his arms and smirks at me again, holding out a hand to beckon his wife to bring the kid over and follow him to a security gate. I open my mouth again and say right to him, loudly of course, ‘So much for the spirit of Christmas! You know what I think you are? Do you know? You’ve got all the morals of a—a—’”

“The guy seems to brighten up, thinking probably I’m going to use some words not fit for mixed company. ‘Go on—say it!’ he says, leering at me. ‘Say it! Say it! Say it!’

“‘You’ve got the morals of—an Enron executive,’ I say, ‘—or—a—a

Halliburton executive!

“And while I’m calling him names, I’m feeling they’re really lame, and he seems pretty disappointed, too—so off he goes with his wife and kid. By then, it’s my turn, and I’m put on that evening flight that’s cancelled later. And I go through security and start looking for a place to eat—and a few minutes later I see all of Alpha’s morning flights are cancelled, which means the fat toad and his wife and kid are grounded, too—and will now just push their way through another line of folks. So at least I’m feeling a little better about poetic justice—but really not all that much. I just wish I’d thought to say that someday his daughter would grow up and be disgusted with him—that the slimy stuff he’s doing will definitely alienate her from him.”

I think I hear him sighing back there, but I’m not sure.

Two miles later, he says, “I’m going to write a letter to the Hartford *Courant* about this character and his Christmas spirit. I’m pretty good with words. Maybe, if it’s printed, his neighbors will recognize him—or his coworkers. Maybe his wife will have some second thoughts about what bad citizenship he’s teaching their kid by his bad example.”

“I wouldn’t do that sort of thing,” I say. “For one thing, they won’t print it. For another, if they did, and if he saw it, he’d be proud that he’s got under your skin that bad. You’d just make him happy as a pig in the proverbial you-know-what.”

We drive past a wrecked car with a pair of troopers standing beside it. I slow down a tiny bit for a mile or so.

“What would you ‘a’ done, then?” he asks me.

“In this case—nothing. In my own experience, I seldom have such problems, but when there’s nothing I can do, I just let it go. I’m basically a big mild-mannered fellow. I don’t know if you noticed just how big I am.”

He says he didn’t, so I tell him. Then I add, “But sometimes stuff like this does happen, and sometimes there’s something I can do about it.”

I think for another good mile or so before giving him an example. I figure that if he was an MP the way he says, then there’s not much chance he’ll try to misuse what I might tell him. In any case, I can always just smile and deny the whole thing—and so will everyone else. Besides, I’m smart enough to change the names of all the towns involved.

“This isn’t my main job,” I tell him. “I’m a fulltime cop, working in—uh—Westfield, and one of my days off I’m in line at the post office picking up a package I need to sign for—and this little joker cuts in front of me just as I’m starting to go up to the next clerk.

“‘That wasn’t very nice,’ I say to him in a calm voice. And he looks up at me the way some little bullies do that are trying to bait big guys when it’s physically safe to do so an’ says, ‘So—Tiny—what are you goin’ t’ do about it, hunh?’

“‘It depends on if I see you outside or not,’ I tell him, again keeping my voice calm and matter-of-fact as I go up to the next free clerk. He laughs and

says, ‘There’s a traffic cop on the corner right outside here. Are you goin’ t’ punch me out in front of him?’

“When I get outside, he’s sitting in a red convertible with the top down, right near the P.O. entrance, waving at me with his engine running. I calmly walk past him and look at the back of his car, and he turns and gives me the finger—three or four times.”

“Sounds like a relative of the fat punk I had to deal with,” says my fare. “Sounds a bit like a jerk I work with at Witherspoon, too—in the Engineering Department. Drives a little red convertible and is obnoxious as hell.”

“Long story short,” say I, not liking this news, “I got his home address from his plates and found out he lives in—oh—North Cromwell. I’ve got buddies on almost all the forces for a thirty-mile radius, and the local cops—and those where he works—gave his car and driving habits a bit of extra scrutiny for me. If he was parked on the wrong side of a street or had a meter expire, he found a ticket under his wiper. If he eased through a stop sign without a full stop, he got a moving violation. All in all, in the next five weeks, he ended up with about \$4,000 in fines, plus a huge unhealthy case of paranoia and probably half a dozen stress-related ailments.”

I glance in my rearview and see the fare is smiling.

“I never saw the guy again or wanted to,” I say truthfully, “but I got regular reports from cops in five nearby towns—all of ‘em having a ball with him. Finally, just yesterday, filled with warm Christmas spirit, I tell them it’s time to lighten up on the jerk . Starting today, I say, whatever tickets he gets are not going to be connected to his misbehavior in the post office. As my Christmas present to him, I’m leashing my hounds back up. But that’s just me.”

We drive in silence for half a mile, then he says, “That’s pretty dang neat. I still wish, though, I could somehow fix that fat bastard who cut my line.”

“Well,” say I, “it’s not a perfect world. Look on the bright side. You won’t be spending Christmas with your son and his family—but you will be spending it after all with your daughter. I’ll bet she’ll be pleased, anyhow.”

“I—I don’t have—a daughter,” he says. Then after a longish pause he adds, “You’re probably thinking of the lady that said goodbye to me early this morning. That’s my wife—my second wife. We couldn’t board our dogs this year, so she’s staying home with them. She’s—well—twenty-two years younger than I am.”

“Been there, done that,” say I, remembering the alimony I’m still paying and the bills my younger daughter at UConn is running up for me. And I start hoping his second tip today will be as generous as his first one was.

Immediately the words *That was no daughter—that was my wife* pop into my head, and I almost laugh aloud. Instead, I quickly purse my lips and add, “God bless us, every one.”

Dante's Inferno

Mel Waldman

The Late Fifties or Early Sixties

When you ride split seconds, anything can happen. They were driving along a country road. The truck came out of nowhere, on the wrong side of the road.

August 1969

At 3 AM, the young couple descended the stairs and entered Dante's Inferno, a Manhattan basement restaurant on 11th Avenue.

It was dark, surreal, and empty. They passed through two sections labeled the Vestibule and the river Acheron and took a booth in the area labeled Limbo, the first circle of Hell. They held hands and waited for the waitress to come over.

"What do you want?" the tall, anorexic waitress asked.

"A tab with lemon," the woman said.

"A vanilla malted," the man added.

"No vanilla malted."

"Huh?"

"That's right. No vanilla. We got chocolate and strawberry."

"Strawberry."

"Okay."

You see, far away in the past, before this moment, in the snap of a finger, or in between, cause things happen fast, it happened.

He gazed at her and she smiled wickedly. On the table was a red candle glowing wildly in a small heart-shaped glass.

"What is it, Michael?"

"You look lovely, Maria. Your blonde hair flows like a cascading waterfall. And your azure eyes are more beautiful than the blue Manhattan sky at sunrise.

"Thank you, my dark and handsome poet."

Suddenly, the waitress returned with the drinks. "Here you are. Anything else?"

"No."

The ghostly woman scurried off, vanishing in the darkness.

They were driving along a country road.

"I don't like this place, Michael. It gives me the creeps."

"Do you want to leave?"

"Don't know. What do you think?"

"I think I'm in love. But the ambiance is eerie."

"I love you too-forever!"

"Really?"

"Of course, you silly man."

They were going down this dark road and it was late at night.

"I think we ought to go, Michael. Are you finished with the malted?"

"Yes."

The road was pitch-black and out of nowhere a truck appeared. This huge monster crashed into their Volkswagen. Head on collision.

"I'll leave a nothing tip, Maria. Don't really like this place either."

"Yes. It's weird."

And the windows blew into bits. The driver got cut up. Her mouth was ugly, with the blood gushing, and she was a Christian Scientist. Her companion was untouched. Why?

The companion told the driver, when they rushed to the hospital, to let them cure her. The Christian Scientist finally agreed.

"Waitress, how much is the check?"

They cured her. In a split second, the end almost came. It didn't though, and that was years ago. After, they went to court against the truck driver, and the case went on for a very long time, until the present.

"How much is the check?" Michael growled.

The driver almost scarred for life was not scarred. The companion, a young blonde, prayed to Saint Jude. And humbly thanked her favorite saint.

The companion believed in miracles. The driver forgot to pray, for she was obsessed with the lawsuit. But without a witness, she had no case.

A few years passed and the two women became close friends. And the driver's friend saw things clearly that moment when glass flew and faith dripped into the cellar of a cold woman's blood, with corpuscles running and flowing wild. Who knows where god was then?

The case dragged on for years. Only the driver sued. The companion chose not to.

“Hey waitress, how much is the check?”

She needed her friend’s signature to win the case. The other side wanted to pay the friend off. But she couldn’t be bribed.

Well, this life is a funny thing. Over the years, the driver got very rich, and the companion got very poor. Yet always, the lovely blonde prayed to Saint Jude. She was rewarded, I guess. She met me; we loved, married, starved together, and waited for baby. Also, she signed the paper, and the driver won the case.

“It’s 85 cents.”

“Okay.”

The driver promised to reward her with cash. However, she was going to Florida to celebrate. She nonchalantly asked her if she could wait.

We were almost starving, you know, and the driver was quite wealthy. No. I don’t think she could wait. We couldn’t.

My wife told the driver she couldn’t wait, while reminding her that the other side could have paid her off. The Christian Scientist replied: “But I thought you were my friend. If not, I would have paid you off myself.” My wife told her to wait till she returned from Florida.

The driver disappeared in Florida.

I left a 10 cent tip.

“You’re alive,” I whisper silently in the lonely landscape of my soul.

“Yes.”

“After a head on collision.”

“Yes.”

“And we’re madly in love.”

“Forever.”

“I love you, Maria.”

“I love you, Michael.”

“Light a candle for Saint Jude.”

“I will.”

“For both of us.”

“Yes, my darling.”

“And someday...”

“We’ll have a baby too.”

We left Dante’s Inferno. Yet perhaps, the eerie place never left us. In any

case, two years later, our son David was born. My love for Maria deepened and my love for my precious son was incomprehensible. At times, the love I felt for my wife and son was intolerable. My soul was theirs.

But then David got ill-deathly ill. And we watched our 2 year old boy suffer every day with a rare form of cancer. He was our soul. And when he died, we crumbled.

Maria had a nervous breakdown. I didn't. She left me behind to see clearly the injustice of this dark universe.

She's in a psychiatric hospital on Long Island. I used to visit her every day. Now, I only see her on the weekends. She doesn't know me. She's in a different world-a safer place. The doctors say she may come out of her catatonic state some day. Yet it's possible she may never return.

My soul is dead. Sometimes I descend the dark stairs and re-enter Dante's Inferno. It's a creepy place, for sure. It's dark and surreal, but I feel at home there.

I sit in a booth in Limbo and imagine Maria sitting across from me. We were madly in love and had dreams. We even believed in miracles. I suppose our love illuminated the darkness. We had hope then.

Cross Words

A. McIntyre

One of the nastier Consulate duties. Yesterday I arrived in Fackalik, a remote island in the archipelago, to collect the body of a British citizen recently killed by a mob. Attacked for no apparent reason. One minute he was walking through the square, perhaps looking for a hotel, then he was crushed under a rain of sticks and stones. Most odd. Although strictly Muslim, the region had been quiet, relations with the foreign community were very good.

The corpse was unrecognizable, the only human reminders being the empty rucksack, torn Levis, a shredded bloodstained shirt. The logo still visible PRESIDENT BUSH IS A PRICK. Then I understood. Most unfortunate, I whispered to Ali Pornfateer, the chief of police, an old friend. A strange death. He nodded, Terrible, terrible. How could the young man have known, I added, Unless he knew the dialect? Indeed, agreed Ali, passing me a glass of mint tea, The will of God. I lit a clove cigarette, inhaling deeply, contemplating the parents. The address in Surrey. A quiet couple, believe in God no doubt, the father near retirement. I'm sorry to inform you.

In the sauna heat, I wait as they load the body into the jeep. Smoking a cigarette, I stare at the Grand Mosque, the beautiful calligraphy giving praise to God Almighty. The porters wave farewell with the ritual chant, Prick yet mung. God is everywhere. Prick yet mung, I reply, Prick yet fazeer, God is Great.

Alien

J. Michael Dashiell

I'm Mr. Coil. I fancy that I'd likely have fared better or been more comfortable in Stalinist Russia, not for the sake of communism or any political creed, but for the institution that put an end to the personal life. Since a personal life or developing an acceptable one is not in my interest, I prefer an environment where one isn't necessary or encouraged. A personal life, I believe, detracts from my individual liberty. It constitutes an onus I'd well do without. With ego as its lodestone, it draws and complicates self-concern, dense as lead. A personal life only amounts to self-indulgence, a compression of the scope of all things to the size of a pea, a prejudiced lens that distorts all reality. I can also do without the public scrutiny it attracts. It's become a mark we're at least occasionally obliged to justify or explain even when the interest isn't sympathetic or sincere. We're either embraced or condemned by its content or character. A personal life only adds unnecessary friction to the business of living. It collides as often as it conforms. It can draw as much hostility as it does any approval. For these reasons I'd fare better without one, especially one as peculiar and difficult as my own.

That's why the former Soviet Union captures my imagination. The austerity of a totalitarian state, the monolith of behavior, the gray uniformity, and the ever present invasion of human or atmospheric cold, the dearth of personality, gave this period a terrible beauty. It made a society without friendliness or smiles, perfect for privacy and solitude, a land of thought and contemplation without a need to share. It despised any individual pomp. To walk amongst such severity would inebriate me. To look into a stranger's eyes that betray no interest or affection would ignite a most perverse thrill. How can I dwell in the intruding congeniality of the United States when my imagination dreams of the harsh life of poverty and Moscow cold? Only refuge in the most obscure places provides me rest from this torment, only activities remote from mainstream society make me feel excluded and safe.

I enjoy a fantasy where I wine and dine a samizdat dissident whom I hold in utter contempt. I smile with his every smile, laugh at all of his jokes, listen attentively to his rapid personal tales, compliment his state heresy, and insist he have more wine, enjoy more delicious food, and then abruptly turn him into the secret police to be executed by a firing squad. At his execution I'd sit preferably far away, as in a grandstand, enjoying a candy bar or even a brownie, and as I watch his lifeless body collapse like a rag doll, I hardly notice because my attention lies elsewhere, thinking every possible unrelated and trivial thought, taking an orgasmic delight in my snack. All this done to assert I don't care about his life, his accomplishments or cleverness, all excelsior!

You may wonder why I've become such a monster, perhaps? If traditional theory has weight and relevance I could say it was due to my cruel home life as a boy. My father, a sociable golf pro, the darling of locals, declared brutally to me when I was age ten that he hated me. My brachycephalic head, too extreme and awkward for comfort, com-

pelled him to withdraw all interest. He declared to all he knew that I was a “pumpkin head” not fit for golf or a country club life of any kind. My brother connected immediately with this definition and soon had everyone in school calling me “pumpkin head”. My sister seldom spoke to me, and acted as though I was unfit for any type of humanity. She prejudiced all of her attractive girlfriends to scorn me as well. Thus I retired to a life of reading and contemplation, and that’s when my psychotherapist mother attempted therapy and laid sharp criticism to attempt to change me into a different type of individual, the type who’d enjoy a local popularity, who’d possess keen “interpersonal skills”. Instead of living a “studious” and “withdrawn” existence, she urged me into articulation and “socially acceptable activities”, to be “outgoing”. She even scheduled regular “appointments” with me that I felt more as a client than a son. Even when I needed to present a pressing concern, she often complained, “Can’t this wait until your next appointment?!” If this set the foundation for my future existence, I accept it. I also eschew any self-pity or sentiment because I believe my own independent action has shaped my life as well. I’ve developed my own format, a way to live and present myself. I assume responsibility for any faults or failure. I accept myself because I’m not somebody else, you see? How can I accept a fantasy of myself?

With this format established, I explore the world of mathematics, science and ideas. Numbers and ideas are impersonal-enough qualities for me to accept and enjoy. They invite a universal understanding of life rather than a personal reduction or outlook. Here I find liberty from self, from anything personal, from the problems most people suffer and lament, and even enjoy grandeur. With the breadth of my imagination, and this format I lead a bohemian lifestyle, likely to no surprise. I’ve shaped and welded my format to the point that nothing really troubles me anymore. It serves as my shield and fortress against any invasion or contrary assault. Before any emergence into the world, one should best have his format determined and prepared for implementation. Since I’m prepared, I suffer no ignominy or concern for my actions because they lie within the format.

With the failure of home life, I knew I needed escape and a fresh start. I explained to my mother what I proposed to do. Much to my elation, she whole-heartedly supported my endeavor, as though I was relieving the family of a burden. After I received from her a cashier’s check for \$100,000 and stole my father’s extensive collection of Krugerrands and rare coins (I’m sure he accepted the reason, equally glad to be rid of me), instead of traveling to California, as I mentioned, I took a bus trip directly to the east coast, and without ever a telephone call home or letter, at age nineteen, I began a supremely anonymous existence in New York City.

For the first couple of years I merely rented a single room at a Motel 6, and meanwhile prudently invested my funds (at this time the stock market was on a rapid vertical ascent much to everyone’s euphoria), and when I determined I’d accumulated enough funding to last me at least thirty years, I liquidated my gains and placed it all in a bank savings account. I bought a modest bungalow in Queens, and experienced an ecstasy of freedom and security few could match. I bought a flivver, drove into Times Square, parked in a garage, and dressed in the plainest, least provoking attire, with a pistol and pepper spray in my coat, I began my 3 AM walks about the

city, completely enjoying the bleak desertion, the gritty streets, the void of silence, the pointless advertising in lights and on billboard, the swallowing of skyscrapers, and in effect discovered the most obscure, and forbidding of spectacles and places few have ever seen. My isolation became complete. My solitude exalted me!

I eventually met a street prostitute who offered me any type of sex I wanted at a thrifty price. Though not facially attractive, and thin and effete from narcotics and hunger I surmised, I noticed an asset few men would. She invited me to her simple apartment where I explained my sexual needs and preferences, as I'll mention here. Though I'm not in anyway homosexual, I'm not attracted to the female vagina, and find it distasteful to behold. Instead I find myself attracted to almost any other part of a woman especially her lowest one. For instance, in keeping with my peculiarity, I've a powerful foot fetish, and only enjoy performing sodomy upon a woman instead of traditional coitus. I also enjoy mesmerizing fellatio as deep into a woman's throat as my penis can pervade. That's why I managed to do business with this whore.

First I began licking her soles, sucking on her toes, and experiencing a mad intoxication at their erotic odor, a cocktail of perfume, grit and sweat. They wrinkled perfectly when she flexed her soles, revealing a washboard of crevices and ravines fit for the exploration of my tongue, the ribbed texture even extending through her heels. The deep red gloss of her toenails excited me to erection. With my taste and tongue satisfied, we began a substitute sexual intercourse where I pressed her soles together at her ankles to create a most sensational vaginal cup in which I climaxed without restraint. This promptly ended my prolonged virginity and sexual drought. I promptly paid her fee and exited without a word.

The following month I enjoyed her services again. This time I brought two grotesque clown masks I'd purchased, and performed anal sex upon her. These masks provided a sense of detachment and strangeness to our intercourse I found exciting. On the third visit she had a couple of her prostitute friends join us where I reveled in a waterfall of feet. Later a neighbor informed me the primary prostitute died of a crack cocaine overdose, and thus I engaged others as liberal as her self in my peculiar sex practices.

This type of impersonal sex without affection or familiarity worked well for me. It dwelled safely within the perimeter of my format that sanctified the perversity most would abhor. That's all I sought of sex, only regarding it as a biological function, completely physical and finite, not worth the amount of attention and importance it is normally paid. Sex holds no fascination for me, no positive or morbid curiosity. It's no more interesting than the hunger for food and sleep, as a desire produced and specified by my body.

As I either walked the predawn streets of New York or became indistinguishable in the maze of afternoon crowds, I continued to discover obscure places, intriguing or bizarre. A dive bar on forbidding Canal Street became a place for me to visit. It seemed to specifically attract street and homeless persons, degenerate alcoholics, lunatics galore, and even subterranean residents all whom I observed as I sat in a booth at the back. I smoked frequent Camel non-filters and nursed a gin and tonic, as I watched, and enjoyed no confidence the glass was clean. For some

reason, I felt comfortable in there, even soothed by what I saw. When I went to visit the restroom, an equally bizarre inclination arose. I loved its complete neglect, its seedy quality. The toilet had feces stains and residue on its rim, even missing a seat. The interior was completely rusted and revealed a long swirl of waste that made it utterly repugnant. The smell within this tight chamber was pervasive, and pungent to the nostrils. The trough urinal equally stained and neglected was choked at the drain by vomit and cigarette butts. Of course, diverse graffiti and mindless scribbles lined this restroom's plywood walls. There was no soap or toilet paper available either, the desecrated floor not fit for a dog. Here I felt strangely at ease. It became the completely obscure and avoided place I'd longed to find, a fulfillment of my vision. I stood against the wall, and began to greet the unsavory patrons who entered. I shook their filthy hands and bid them well. It's as though I became a temporary restroom host. Nothing threatening took place. My sense of comfort prevailed. Within three hours I witnessed the most curious cavalcade of humanity than I had in my prior lifetime, listening to their vulgarities and complaints as they came and went. When I had my fill of handshakes and contact with New York's worst, instead of a desire to wash my hands, I licked them clean, as a holy ritual, having consumed whatever God forsaken remnants these outcasts handled or touched, anywhere in the city, anything imaginable, drawing it all into my system, yet transformed into a nutrient by my format's redefining structure. The only consequence I suffered was a sore throat that lasted two days.

This odd desire to find solace in the obscure and avoided places even invaded me occasionally while at home. Though I keep my home fairly neat and well maintained, usually sitting in my study, reading a book or two a week, one strange night the familiarity, the inviting and self-reflecting nature of my home began to oppress me. My bedroom felt too comfortable, too commonplace a place to sleep. I tossed and turned when an idea emerged into my head to sleep somewhere else, a place never known for rest, as alien an environment and obstacle to tradition as I could conceive. I promptly left my bed, fetched my sleeping bag, and went outdoors in the middle of the night, a rather frigid late October evening. I opened the cover to the crawl space beneath my house, and crawled inside. With my flashlight I looked about the desolation of the area, and found it ideal. Thus I spread out my sleeping bag, entered it, and lied in pitch darkness on the callous floor. The utter eeriness of this environment provided me profound rest.

I lied there with a renewed sense of well-being, and listened to the slight, nameless sounds particular to this environment. I turned my flashlight back on to scan the entire crawl space available. Much to my amazement, not far away, I saw the rotting corpse of a dog, likely a stray and hapless intruder from months or years ago, unable to get out once he entered. Instead of finding this frightening it only bolstered my comfort, my security. It seemed right. An unseen spider quickly traversed my face, but I let it go. I even spied a gray mouse, investigating for food I suppose. The filthy shreds of paper, an abandoned realty sign, the scattered bricks and rocks, the canopy of cobwebs, the malodorous smell, and uneven pitch dark ground finally provided me such tranquility that I soon fell into a profound

slumber. I didn't waken until about noon the following day, I suppose, when I crawled out with my sleeping bag, only to encounter the startled postman.

Yet not long after that I pursued the opposite extremity! I'd seen a few mysterious lights of orb-shaped objects hovering above the neighborhood on a drive home from wandering in a gravel pit one night. The neighbors stood outdoors watching them with utter awe or wonder as well. This intrigued my imagination. Though I really didn't believe aliens from other worlds were visiting our planet, still I'd heard the compelling stories abductees told with such sincerity. This amounted to the type of experience I desired as well. I envied these people, hoping past hope that these experiences were genuine. I couldn't resist the opportunity to attempt to become abducted myself.

I once again fetched my sleeping bag, positioned the ladder, and climbed up on top of my house. I found a possibly feasible area in which to rest and watch. It was a not too steep an incline that rose from too small a flat surface of roof. This happened to be a frigid January night, but I hardly felt the chill, my eyes searching the skies for a sign of these celestial objects. I wanted any abduction to be as easy for the possible UFO aliens as possible. I could be directly levitated unobstructed into the interior of their craft. I figured that if they were actually searching for a human being to test and study, I made the most obvious, easy picking choice. I watched the stars, the passing stray clouds, and the half-moon, and imagined what I desired.

To be in company of these inhuman but I suppose supremely intelligent creatures would make for an ultimate fulfillment of my taste. To see their large, wasp-like eyes, their extremely large white heads without any hair, their long hands and extended fingers, and their UFO cosmonaut space suits would surely create a state of ecstasy for me. I'd be placed on a study platform, beneath a large eye like apparatus, and have specimens of my nails and hair taken. I'd have my navel pierced by a long, painful needle. They might find it odd that I experience no fear of any kind, that I smile serenely, delighted to be in their company.

But the zenith of this experience would be sex with a female alien. I'd likewise heard these disturbing testimonies, though not troubling to me, where these creatures telepathically transmitted irresistible erotic images to their human selection, and consequently caused him a complete erection that culminated in sexual intercourse, orgasm and the emission of semen in order to impregnate the female alien who'd return again, months later, to reveal a hybrid child, a cross of alien and human, the offspring of their intercourse. This experience would truly fulfill me as a human being! It's level of strangeness impossible to surpass! Thus I waited for hours on my roof, dosing off briefly at times, not seeing the mysterious lights, but too soon dawn appeared and I climbed back down, thinking to myself that these creatures had blown a golden opportunity to abduct a more than willing earthman.

My fetish for the bizarre, my penchant for the obscure, my love of an impersonal life even plays a part in my future plans that I began conceiving the moment I abandoned my long forgotten family in Pennsylvania. As I might have mentioned, I wanted to accumulate enough capital to last thirty years, and exactly

thirty years. At this time I'd attempt to die. I hope my heavy cigarette smoking will eventually cause me emphysema, a disease that killed my grandfather, and my maternal uncle. I envision myself using a portable oxygen dispenser, still smoking cigarettes with the plastic nozzle up my nostrils. I always found the appearance of this stunning, and highly unusual.

If no lung disease developed, my alternate plan would be to have both my legs amputated and replaced with prostheses, perhaps one for an arm as well. The abandonment of my natural flesh and bone for artificial appendages I think would likewise appear stunning and bizarre. Their artificiality would enamor me with delight. I've always favored the sight and sensation of plastic to anything natural. Its chemical-base, its seamless smoothness, and completely sterile quality I prefer to cloth or wood. Most of my furniture is plastic, (I adore vinyl), my indoor flowers plastic, and even a fabricated rubber tree plant adorns my bedroom. This is the only way it seems I can enjoy plants. I find the sight of natural trees and flowers on my solitary walks obscene. If the price was reasonable, I'd even have my lawn replaced with Astroturf.

I've already selected the spot where I wish to die. I recently found it in upstate New York in a heavy forest, very difficult to reach and remote from any established path. It's on top of a hill surrounded by heavy brush and a swamp. This is where I'll either die naturally or succumb to self-administered poison or a gunshot wound, far from humanity, utterly isolated, where I figure it'll take years before my remains are discovered, perhaps mistaking me for an old serial killer victim or unfortunate hiker, but only the specific note in my pocket would serve to identify who I was and the location of my memoirs, if the interest exists.

Him &
Her,
painting
by Cheryl
Townsend



That Silly Place

Ruth Innes

George was her first college boyfriend. When they met during freshmen orientation Karen felt an instant, overwhelming physical attraction toward him. Their first date turned into a wrestling match.

"I loved you as soon as I saw you," he insisted. "I want *all* of you." He was determined to make her his own, which meant having sex with her. Karen fended him off as she was still fairly innocent—a virgin—and girls in the 1950's were constantly reminded to save themselves for marriage because "nice boys wouldn't want damaged goods." But the physical attraction was strong and Karen grew weaker as George grew more insistent. Each date brought them closer to GOING ALL THE WAY.

It almost happened one beautiful fall afternoon when they went for a walk on the hillside to "admire nature" and, when they stopped to rest in a grove of maple trees, he admired her naked body instead. The thick blanket of leaves on the ground would make a good bed, George declared. Karen, with only token resistance, allowed him to remove her clothes. When he took his pants off she stared frankly at him as she had never seen a naked man in living color before. The crackling of dry leaves made a strange accompaniment to their grappling. They did not quite have intercourse as Karen managed, against her own desire, to stop him. George ejaculated on her leg and Karen was amazed at the amount of sperm which spouted out. She could feel dead leaves stuck to her skin and semen dripping down her leg all the way back to campus.

"I'll love you forever," he told her. "Soon I'll make you mine—all mine." But Karen had different ideas. She knew if she kept on dating him they would eventually GO ALL THE WAY and she hated the idea of ending up pregnant and having to get married, which was almost the only option open to girls then. The pill had not been perfected and the social stigma of having an illegitimate child was very real. Abortion was only hinted at. No, it was just too dangerous. When she told George they would have to break up he actually cried. "I moved too fast for you," he said. "I should have waited. But I wanted to have you before anyone else. I wanted to be your first and only lover."

Although the freshman prom was months away, George made Karen promise that she would go to that prom with him—no matter what. "Maybe by then you'll realize you love me," George said. He cried again when he kissed her goodbye and she always remembered the slump of his shoulders and his downcast head as he walked away from her. Karen cried, too, after George was out of sight. There was a quivering sadness inside her, but she knew she had done the right thing.

A month before the freshman prom George called Karen and asked her to meet him. "I can't take you to the prom," he said. There were tears in his eyes. "Helen and I are going to be married next week."

"What?" This from the man who was going to love her forever!

"She's pregnant." George looked sheepish—and anguished. "Honest to God, I can't even remember making love to her. I got drunk one night and stayed with her. She

says we did it and now I have to marry her.” George shook with sobs as he hugged Karen. “You’re the one I love,” he said.

George married Helen and, although Karen saw him around campus a few times after that, they never spoke except for a casual hello. George accelerated his studies, graduated and left town with his family a year before Karen finished school.

And then—the letter. Last year Karen had finally joined the alumni association of their college and the newsletter had published her address. George said in his letter that he had tried to find her for years but his letters were always returned to him. His words were charming—full of bullshit, Karen had to remind herself—but charming. She was enormously pleased that he had written. He said he and Helen were divorced and he had married again. He said he knew that someday he would find her because she was his only true love. p;

Karen felt a curious stirring in her breast and she had the silly notion that her heart was singing. She wrote a polite note to George saying it was a nice surprise to hear from him. She told him a bit about her travels and troubles, her divorce, her children and how she was finally living alone and loving it. She wished him the best of everything. Perhaps that will be the end of it, she thought. But inside, in that silly place in her chest that quivered and sang, she knew she was starting something instead of ending it.

When the phone rang Sunday morning, Karen was not surprised to hear his voice.

“Is it you?”

“Yes,” she answered, out of breath for no reason at all.

“This is George.”

“I know.”

“When can we see each other?”

“George, you’re married.”

“There’s nothing wrong in two old friends getting together to talk over old times.”

He was right, Karen assured herself. She was anxious to see him, too, and agreed that he should come for an overnight visit the next week.

At the airport Karen worried. Of course he’s changed. *I’ve* certainly changed. How will I know him? As she sucked on a breath mint and dried her hands again on a tissue, she was afraid that, even if she did recognize him, she might not want to acknowledge him. What if he had become grotesquely fat? Her mind raced with all the terrible possibilities and then turned to her own shortcomings. She still looked good people told her, but she certainly showed her age with gray hair and wrinkles and she longed, if not to *be* at least to *look* young and slim again. This whole thing is a dreadful mistake, she told herself, I should leave immediately. She wanted to run away but curiosity kept her from rising from her seat as passengers began streaming into the lounge from the plane. Karen scrutinized each man and began to hope, but fear at the same time, that George wasn’t coming at all. That place in her chest quivered again. Then she saw him and there was no doubt. He had hardly changed at all and she would have recognized him anywhere. His eyes met hers instantly. “Hi,” he said, and before she could speak he put his arms around her and kissed her.

Karen took him to one of her favorite restaurants for dinner. The applejack chick-

en, a specialty she always enjoyed, was tasteless that night and she hardly touched it. At her recommendation, George ordered the same thing and said it was excellent, but ate very little. They drank white wine, exchanged confidences about their lives, and did a lot of gazing into each other's eyes as they sat side-by-side on the banquette. George touched her hand frequently as he kept exclaiming about how wonderful she looked and how her eyes were still as deep and blue as they had been in college. He seemed not to notice her gray hair and extra pounds.

After dinner she drove him home and showed him the bedroom she had made up for him—the opposite end of the house from hers. He left his bag in that bedroom and after she showed him the rest of the house they talked some more. George told her a little about his present wife, who was much younger than he. "It can be taxing at times," he said, "She likes a more active social life than I do these days."

"Is she your trophy wife?" Karen asked.

George smiled. "Perhaps. After Helen divorced me, I was lonely. It was flattering that a younger woman found me attractive."

"Do you get along well?"

"Mostly. Sometimes it's annoying, though, having to explain things to her that I expect her to already know."

By midnight Karen was tired and ready for bed. She said goodnight, kissed him, and went to take her shower. She really was not sure what she expected—or hoped. When she came into her bedroom, wrapped in a towel, George was in her bed.

"You didn't really expect me to sleep in the other room, did you?" he asked.

She didn't answer—just dropped the towel and got in bed with him.

George's lovemaking was tame. His penis was very small. As soon as he entered her he asked, "Am I hurting you?" She couldn't feel a thing. Then he asked, "Am I big enough for you?"

Karen murmured, as though contented. In her mind she had always assumed that George would be a fabulous lover. She couldn't help feeling a sharp disappointment at the reality. "I prefer the missionary position," George told her as he heaved and grunted on top of her. Karen comforted him by saying that she did, too. During the night his snoring kept her awake. In the morning George rolled over, and repeated the performance of the night before.

After breakfast she drove him to the airport. He looked soulfully into her eyes and promised to love her forever. While driving home Karen thought about the night before and she felt that silly place in her breast begin to shake in a new way. "No wonder he tried so hard to be my first and only lover," she murmured to herself, and she laughed uproariously all the way home.

The Death of the H-man

L. Burrow

“Tell us about the H-man,” the boy snapped giddily in his Long Island accent. He was still chewing his cheeseburger and gnawing the mash with his retainer. This kid wore his swim trunks pulled up to his solar plexus.

“Naaahhh,” I replied, stoking the campfire. “The H-man is lame, that trash isn’t even scary anymore. You know why we tell you that story?”

“Why?” The boy asked, a bit of burger falling from his lips.

“Because we know you can handle it.”

Around the fire a small group of five kids and three counselors gathered for the final festivities of the night: the ghost stories. The H-man legend was thoroughly ingrained in camp lore---every kid knew the story and wanted to hear it on every overnight camping trip. It was the tradition of our expedition: paddle the kids out to Hinckley Island, stuff them full of burgers and hot dogs, then lay down the myth so thick that they cry themselves to sleep, huddled in their sleeping bags with flashlights on and at the ready. Surviving the night was an honorary badge to wear the next day; a prideful, heartfelt bonding experience between the campers.

“Look, what does the H-man really do anyway?” I addressed the group. “Leave H’s carved on trees to freak kids out” What’s up with that?”

“Well, actually, he used to live in the Pine cabin,” another boy began in a scholarly tone. He had glasses thicker than triple pane windows, and smiled at his own authority on the subject before another boy interjected.

“Yeah, and, uh, there was a fire, and he, uh, uh?” This kid gasped and wheezed with the thrill; his hands shook at the wrist with nervous energy. He persistently scratched his bug bites, awaiting the story.

“He died, his body is horribly burnt to a crisp, he blames it all on a camper,” I recited. “Then he comes back every summer and leaves his mark all over camp. H’s here, H’s there. But he never does anything.”

Grim tales were frowned upon since there was a thick history of kids going home at the end of the summer, staying up all night long, dripping cold sweats and gripped in terror, screaming, “Mommy, mommy! Daddy, Daddy! Make the fear go away. The H-man! The H-man is coming to get me!” But the H-man lived at camp, and unless a counselor was willing and creative enough to spin a wild yarn involving the H-man sidestriking his horribly mangled body across a quarter-mile expanse of water, the story was, in effect, null and void. Essentially the island was a pure

sanctuary, a place the H-man couldn't get to, a late-night copout when the trouble came too close. "Don't worry. The H-man is afraid of water; he can't get you here. It's safe."

Being a native of the Adirondack region, I found the myth bland and generic; it contained no local color. The H-man could exist in any number of forms in any number of camps all across the country. He was a bit player; a former counselor bent on revenge, a mild spinoff of the psycho-killer who cannot die. Through yearly revisions and remodeling attempts, his origins were so unkempt, so unstable, that it was impossible to decipher who told what to whom; the story was spread entirely too thin. The veteran campers knew this and became experts on the subject, so that they might be able to catch a green counselor in the process of fabrication. For that the myth of the H-man had to die, and I, a counselor bent on revenge, had to do it. From burnt remains of the H-man came the foundation for Old Hinckley Prison.

"We all know you couldn't handle the story of Old Hinckley Prison," I introduced.

"Old Hinckley Prison? What's Old Hinckley Prison?"

"Nothing. Go to bed."

"Come on. Please!"

"Nope, nope. Bedtime! Fire's out!" I jumped up and directed them to their tents.

"Come on! Come on! Please! Please!" they chimed in chorus.

"All right, then, listen up!" I yelled then continued. "I'll tell the story, but if I gotta hear about this when we get back, you're on my list. Nobody wants to be on my list. Now, you all know that this lake is man-made, right" It's a reservoir. The dam is over there to your right. This island here used to be a hill before the dam was built and there used to be a town at the base of it. Now, old town Hinckley was a thriving mill town; loggers chopped down trees up in the forests over there, dropped the logs into the West Canada creek and rode them right down to the town, where they were milled into lumber or firewood.

"Now you gotta understand that lumberjacks are a rowdy bunch, especially after a night of drinking at Hinckley Tavern--fights, brawls, rapes, murders; you name it. The whole area was plagued with crimes of all sorts. So they built a prison that served the whole North Country area. They stocked it with the meanest of the mean, the cruelest of the cruel; every wild hellion that fought the law and lost. I mean the place was just bars and cement, holding back the worst humankind could offer.

"So when the milling business began to slow and the city of Utica

began to boom with industry, the call came for a reservoir to bring water to the city. The logical place to start this was in Hinckley. They started drafting up plans, but there was one problem: where would the town go? Since people were already moving down to the city in search of factory work, there wasn't a great population to move. So Niagara Mohawk bought out the rights to the property, moved the town to higher ground and began constructing the dam.

"However, nobody made plans to move the inmates at the prison, and let me tell you, the prison was packed to the gills. I mean, they were living on top of each other, ten of them to a ten foot square cell, ten cells in all, beating the crud out of each other and eating nothing but rats. After the dam was built and the town moved, there was no money left over until the dam started generating utility revenues. So what do they do?"

"What?" asked a boy bundled up in a Pokemon towel.

"They start letting the water rise; they start creating the reservoir, leaving the inmates in the prison. It took days, weeks almost, and the water started slowly rising over the foundation, then filtering into the cells, just rising and rising. And the prisoners are screaming and crawling all over each other, beating on the doors and yanking on the bars, trying anything to get out. But nobody did, and the water kept rising and just covered them up."

I looked up from the fire, and caught the eyes of the campers; each a glimmering orange reflection of the heat. Their mouths hung open, exposing grisly, silver braces; bits of potato chips hung in their teeth. They stared, keeping quiet, pulling at the cuffs of their over-sized sweat-shirt sleeves, anticipating a climax.

"Supposedly, if you listen real close on a quiet night, you can hear their muffled screams from below the water. I've never heard it, but I know people who have. They say it sounds like nothing you've ever heard in your whole entire life."

"HAAAAYYYYY BAAAYYYYYBEEEE!!!!BRRRRRRRRRRPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!!"

Everyone's head shot towards the waterline, trying to decipher what could be hidden in that distance, in that darkness. The shriek seemed to disseminate from below the depths, shrill yet stout, a dampened and muddled jumble of incoherent and unintelligible words. In reality, it was not a time for horror; it was a time to party. From across the lake, someone was lit, stumbling down the beach, beer in hand, gesticulating his elation to the world, not knowing the trauma he caused.

"It sounds kind of like that," I brooded. "Now, go to bed."

i am the new generation

Meghan Frank

i may not dress to impress not stressing bout the way i look or what i say before i say it but why would i care? if you hatin and discriminatin youve already judged me and dont say its cause IM different cause nobody is like you.

look at me. i am the new generation.

im not gay-ish so what if im bi datin a girl and a guy why? why not? he thinks hes the luckiest guy in the world so does that make me a whore damned to hell? cause if you sat that you need to get off that preachers box on the corner condemnin me sayin you hate me because before you knew i was your shoulder to cry on sigh on so dont tell me that god hate me or i hate god cause i know he doesnt.

look at me. i am the new generation.

tolerance is the religion i teach i preach never backing down weve been killin each other for hundreds of years thousands of years measured in blood sweat tears and fears over religion sayin that the other is wrong but guess what were all wrong none of us have got it right were livin this life lookin for sin and taking it in never looking at the consequences of our actions did it ever occure to you? that we got a little bit right but most of it wrong basing out religion on a book and a song now i aint pickin on any religion but hey from the crusades of yesteryear to the wars of today weve been killin for religion why not take tolerance as our religion?

listen to what i have to say.
making assumptions makes fools
prejudices makes asses
religion makes idiots and hypocrates
and to think

i am the new generation
i am today and tomorrow
i am the future

kinda sad aint it?





Expired Meter

Derek Devere

Regina never called that ninth night of waiting. Vernon stayed up until 3am, watching “Rush Hour 2” at 9pm, the 11 o’clock local news, then Jay Leno, then Jimmy Kimmel, then a few hours of a “Dukes of Hazard” marathon. He made a late night TV dinner in the middle of Jay Leno’s interview with Jesse Jackson. Vernon always thought Jackson misrepresented black folk. Vernon much preferred that one black judge on the Supreme Court, who he could never remember his name. But that was a black man he could be proud of. As Vernon watched the tuna casserole spin around inside the microwave, he thought about Regina. Why did she leave? Did she really think he was as possessive, jealous, and insecure as she said? So he hit her co-worker Brendon’s car with a baseball bat. He only hit it twice. That’s all. It wasn’t as if he hit Brendon with the bat.

Vernon reminded himself not to think about it too much. A person could get lost swimming around in thoughts. He knew he did nothing wrong and that was it. There was nothing more to do. She was supposed to come back. He had to stand his ground. His mother taught him to do that well. If you compromise, that shows weakness, and it turns the other person off. Weakness isn’t attractive. Regina will see his strength and come back.

The next morning and Regina still hadn’t called. He was sure by the tenth day she’d call. That’s okay, he thought to himself as he put on his parking enforcement uniform. She’ll come back. He needed to stop worrying.

Once his uniform was on and he was ready to go, he noticed a car in his neighborhood was parked in a red zone. If only he had his parking enforcement vehicle and ticket machine ... he’d give that god-damn car a ticket. Didn’t people care about the Law? Were people really always that reckless? Did they look at what they were doing and not care? Or did they have no clue? He couldn’t give this car a ticket. He could remind this driver, though, just how irresponsible this was. A *red zone*. Vernon went back to his apartment, found a pen and paper, then wrote a note to the driver. Outside, he put the note on the car’s windshield, wishing it was a ticket. The note read,

“You’re lucky I wasn’t on duty when I found your vehicle parked in the red zone. This irresponsible action of yours could’ve cost you \$60. I don’t know about you, but \$60 is a lot of money to me. Think about what you’re doing the next time you park your car.”

The rest of the day was horrible for Vernon. He had to give twenty-five parking tickets in Santa Monica, eight people disputed their tickets, and four of those either yelled or honked their horns at him. It was a busy Sunday afternoon in downtown Santa Monica, on one of the hottest, driest, September days. People complained he was heartless, cold, even soulless. He had a soul. He also knew his soul was going to Heaven god-damn it, unlike these scum who didn’t know how to

park their cars. Why were people always so angry with him? He was just doing his job. That's all. In fact, he was a softy sometimes. If he felt compassionate, he'd wait five minutes after a parking meter expired. Five minutes was a long time.

What a stressful day, and, unfortunately, a lot of days were like that. It was a hard job. He was doing his duty and he was good at it. His boss told him so. His boss never saw anyone so good at keeping track of time. Vernon's eyes were always on those parking meters, his eyes were always on his watch when he marked those tires. So what if he had the highest number of complaints from the city? People couldn't appreciate his efficiency. His boss did, and that's why he got a raise last May. The city of Santa Monica should thank him. How many thousands of dollars did he bring in each year? He joked to himself that maybe he should change his job title to tax collector. That always made him laugh.

Vernon came home and there were no messages on the answering machine. Regina didn't call. Then the phone rang. This must be her. He ran to the phone and picked up the receiver. It was his mother. She wanted to know if Regina had come back. He had to tell her the truth. She called every day at the same time and found the same answer from her son: Regina hadn't come back. Vernon thought of the unthinkable ... call Regina. No, his mother said, don't be a weakling like your father.

The phone conversation soon ended. His mother was right, Vernon thought as he poured Orange Bang into a glass. Don't show weakness. Don't show vulnerability. Regina will come back.

One hour passed on this tenth day of waiting, then two, then three, then four, then five. It was 10:20 pm and he was watching a re-run of Dr. Phil. Dr. Phil was a man of conviction, of values. Regina thought so herself. She'd soon realize that he, Vernon, was a man of conviction and values, too. She'd come back.

Several days later and Vernon finally accepted Regina wasn't coming back ... She meant what she said. She was leaving for good ... Vernon looked at himself that morning of acceptance, looked at his lighter tone of African American flesh, his gut that never went away, his thick glasses ... Did Regina find him repulsive? She wasn't model material herself, but they didn't have sex much. When they did, she didn't seem to enjoy it a whole lot. Did she secretly resent him for being a "lighter-skinned" black? Regina always thought Vernon's mother had something against her for being a *black* black.

Vernon and his mother went to listen to the Lord that Sunday, to an Episcopal church near Crenshaw and Adams, not far from where Vernon's mother lived. Vernon never liked the neighborhood. He much preferred Mid-City, despite the crack whores and street scum on La Brea and Washington. He could never understand why most other black folks could never pick themselves out of the gutter, pull themselves out of the slime and filth. Did they forever want to be low-lifes? Look at himself, he thought, he grew up in a bad neighborhood. He turned out okay. Parking enforcement in Santa Monica.

"Why didn't you talk more with that girl?" Vernon's mother asked while they drove in his car to her house.

"Ma, you know me. Things like that have to be done a certain way."

“Your ‘certain way’ has kept you single most of your life. Sometimes you have to be open-minded.”

“She asked if I’d ever been married.”

“So?”

“You know that’s an embarrassing question, ma. I’m 42 and I’ve never been married. To most people, that tells them something.”

“What, that either you’re too scared or too smart to get married?” she said with a large chuckle.

“That’s not funny.” Vernon said with serious intent, almost an unnerving, trembling, quiet violence in his eyes.

“Don’t give me that look, boy.” She shot back in defiance, yet uncomfortable. “That’s your father’s look. A weak-minded look of scared craziness. Don’t be acting like your father. I prayed and prayed for him to have a sense of humor but he never got one. Do I need to start praying for your serious ass to get a sense of humor, too?”

“No, you don’t.” He said with a complete switch of gears, as if the mention of his father brought the whole world’s guilt onto his shoulders.

Vernon could never understand women. Even his mother. They were supposed to be delicate creatures, yet they could be so insensitive. He wasn’t his father. He obeyed the law. His father, as mild-mannered as he appeared to be, didn’t respect the law. His father was uncivil and uncouth. Vernon punished people like him – careless people – not with a gun or with a judge’s verdict, but with parking tickets. It may not seem like much to most people, but it was something. He was a positive influence on society.

Weeks went by and nothing changed. Vernon never heard from Regina and he never called her. He continued to go to church every Sunday with his mother. Vernon could never strike up anything dating-wise with the church-going women. He had to admit to himself: he was in a rut. Then again, wasn’t he always in a rut? And now he was 42. What did he do with his life? If Regina could answer, she’d say “nothing.” Well, damn it, he had done something. He was a law-abiding citizen, a Christian, and an American. That was something to be proud of. Unassuming, polite, cordial, respectable in his working-class way. Sure, he never ruffled any feathers (except that time he hit Regina’s co-worker’s car with the baseball bat), but not being a feather ruffler was a good thing, wasn’t it? People like him were going to Heaven, or at least inherit the Earth. “The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth,” so sayeth the Lord. But when was that inheritance coming? Vernon just had to wait and see. In the meantime, he’d busy himself with being Meek.

One morning he woke up late. 6:45 a.m. His alarm clock broke. He was supposed to be at work in 15 minutes! He was never late. This was wrong, very wrong. Why couldn’t the alarm clock break on his day off? Damn it all to hell, Vernon thought as he rushed to put on his parking enforcement uniform on. Eight minutes later he was in his car. Could he make it to Santa Monica in seven minutes?

No. There was too much traffic. Both the 10 freeway and the city streets were jammed. What was going on? Oh, Monday. Of course. Mondays were always

bad. What would his boss say? Well, probably he'd be forgiving. He knew what a good worker he normally was.

Thirty-five minutes later and he made it to the Santa Monica City Hall main building. After going through the security at the front, he ran down the hall. While rushing down the hallways and turning a corner, Vernon bumped into a man and a woman. The couple got knocked so hard they dropped their briefcases and their coffee flew onto their clothes.

"God damn it!" the man yelled, with hot coffee on his suit and tie.

"Jesus Christ! Watch where you're –" the woman began to say, then realized who she was talking to.

"Regina ..." Vernon said in utter mystification, despite his panic to get to work.

"Vernon ..." Regina said, trying to get over the shock of seeing him. "You need to watch where you're going."

"What're you doing here?" Vernon asked, still not believing it.

"The law firm I work for has a civil trial here in Santa Monica."

"But –"

"I was promoted. Marshall and I are partners now."

"We're also dating so ..." Marshall said with a teasing smile, standing next to her. He was a middle-aged white male with a gut and wearing thick glasses. He put his arm around Regina firmly but affectionately. "... don't plan on smashing up my car!" Marshall laughed harshly. "It's a Mercedes for one! And two, I'll have your ass thrown in jail! I'm not as forgiving as Brendon."

"Marshall, please." Regina said quietly.

"I'm sorry, Vern. Can't help it. I've got such a wicked sense of humor. I'm also wicked in other ways!" Marshall said, continuing his laughter.

"Stop it." Regina said with an uncomfortable laugh and smile.

"I ..." Vernon began to say.

Vernon couldn't stand this. This was too much. He wanted to explode. Regina noticed Vernon's extreme discomfort, but she said nothing.

"... I'm late for work." Vernon was eventually able to say.

Vernon rushed past Regina and Marshall and continued to run down the hallway until he got to the parking enforcement division. Inside was Vernon's boss, who was displeased with Vernon's entrance. It was not that Vernon was late that caused the dissatisfaction. There was another complaint made to the City against Vernon. Vernon's boss' superiors had to put their feet down. One more complaint about Vernon and he had to go. However efficient Vernon may be, the large number of complaints lodged against him was just too much. He was becoming a stain on the City.

"A stain?" Vernon asked in exasperation.

"I know, I know, you're just doing your job, Vern, and I have to admit, you're good at it. But this decision isn't made by me. It's over my head. Guess you gave a ticket to the wrong guy."

"Who?"

"Herb Reese. One of the key architects to the Third Street Promenade's rejuvenation, so to speak. He complained to the right people that you were overly zeal-

ous in your job. Sorry, but you gotta be careful now.”

A stain? How could that be, Vernon thought to himself as he walked to his parking enforcement vehicle. What was he going to do now? How was he going to avoid complaints? Sometimes there was nothing to do. People just complained, whether he was nice or not. He couldn't stop giving tickets.

This simply was not fair, Vernon thought as he drove his parking enforcement vehicle around his usual area. Not fair at all. Maybe some people were conspiring against him. But who? He was such a cog in the wheel. Who would even notice him enough to be considered a “stain”? It had to be someone who he knew or knew him. But he didn't know anyone and he couldn't think of who would know him enough to want to hurt him.

Then he thought ... no that couldn't be. But then again, maybe? Regina. Regina and her new lawyer partner/boyfriend, Marshall. He knew Regina hated his guts, and after seeing Marshall this morning, he probably did, too. Regina despised Vernon. She said so the day of their break-up. This morning she tried to cover it up with politeness, but he could still see it. “Watch where you're going!” she yelled at him. And that Marshall guy obviously despised Vernon. It didn't cross Vernon's mind, though, how those two could ever get the City to come down on him. Nor did it dawn on him that perhaps his boss was telling the truth. Herb Reese complained.

And how could Regina choose a white guy, Vernon thought to himself while giving out a parking ticket to a car who's meter had just expired 15 seconds before. After him? An over weight, middle-aged white man who wore thick glasses. All the things he thought she disliked about him – skin color, weight, thick glasses – this Marshall guy had in spades. Wasn't Regina interested in a younger, fitter, blacker black man? Damn her, damn her to hell. She spited him. She hated him. She wanted him to suffer. All that waiting Vernon did, all those days and days, hours and hours of waiting ... and she never even called. She did it on purpose. She wanted him to feel pain. Fuck her. She's a bitch. Damn her to hell.

Vernon's inner rage could not subside. It was 42 years of pent-up hostility. He was meek. He was always meek. What did being meek get him? Everyone hated him. They all hated him, especially Regina. He thought about quitting his job, but no, he couldn't do that. He had to keep working.

While putting a parking ticket on a black Mercedes, Vernon heard someone calling his name. He looked up and saw Marshall and Regina on the sidewalk, rushing towards the Mercedes and Vernon.

“Fancy meeting you here.” Marshall said sheepishly. Vernon didn't respond as he stood on the other side of the car, on the street, while he typed into his parking ticket machine. “Look, we're late getting back to our car because the waiter at the restaurant was so god damn slow. Couldn't –”

Vernon slapped the parking ticket on the car's windshield before Marshall could continue. Vernon would hear of no excuses. He walked back to his parking enforcement vehicle, which was parallel parked next to a car two cars behind Marshall's.

“Well fine, fuck you too, then.” Marshall snapped.

“Thanks a bunch, Vernon.” Regina shot out sarcastically.

How dare they? How dare they say that to me, Vernon thought as he got back into his vehicle. He turned it on, but didn't move. He just stared at Regina and Marshall, who were talking to each other as Marshall took the parking ticket from the windshield. They continued to stand next to the car on the street as Marshall was about to open his driver's door.



Regina was consoling Marshall, right there in front of Vernon. She then began to hug and kiss Marshall. ... How could Regina be so cold? After everything? After the great love they shared?



Damn them, Vernon thought, damn them to hell. Especially Regina. Damn her to hell. May she rot and burn and suffer in hell. In Vernon's blind inner fury, he thought of the unthinkable. Maybe he could send her to hell. Send her cold soul to hell right now. She was standing there, kissing Marshall, holding him next to his car door, in the street. They were sitting ducks. They weren't moving at all, stuck in their embrace. Yes. Send her to hell, where she belongs. No one in church talked much about hell or sending people to hell these days, but they used to do that, back in the old days. Back when people had respect in their souls. Fuck her. Yes, do it, Vernon.



Vernon slammed his foot on the accelerator, flooring the parking enforcement vehicle. The vehicle screeched, and in seconds, just as Regina and Marshall turned to look, the vehicle slammed into their bodies. Vernon was so enthralled in his bloody rage to not even notice the screams of pain. Regina and Marshall's bodies crashed onto the pavement and car, banging around recklessly ... both of their heads smacked against the pavement, cracking their skulls ... Vernon stopped the vehicle and turned to look over his shoulder. After a few moments of their bodies twitching, they stopped moving.





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the **UN**religious,
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