



down in the

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

v **064**

November '08

kind

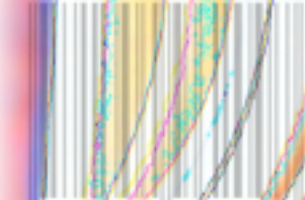
Table of contents

11/08, **Down in the Dirt**, v064

Pat Dixon	2
Kathleen Fitzsimmons	13
Lisa Markowitz	14
Mike Aronovitz	15
Devin Wayne Davis	39
Geoff Ralston	40
TS	41
Christopher Gaskins.....	42
Shaun Millard.....	43
Jean Berrett.....	44

Scars Cover art of a horse in Gurnee.

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For the Love of Wanda

Pat Dixon

4

"I want Wanda Gomez to have everything—my savings—stocks—household goods—my TV, stereo, DVD player, furniture—my paintings, my kitchen stuff—everything I have—though, of course, she'll be totally free to do whatever she pleases with any and all of it—including blowing it on some pretty young man she that fancies."

George Wilson Cathcart III nodded for emphasis and smiled at his young lawyer.

Sherri Birnbaum, whose firm had sent her to Cathcart's apartment to discuss how he wished to update his will, leaned forward and smiled encouragingly.

"I see here," she told the elderly man, "according to your previous will you left three-fourths of your estate to your daughter, one eighth to your sister, and one eighth to be distributed equally among an array of listed charities. Just for my own clarification, because my old law journal editor used to say, 'Better a stupid question than a stupid mistake'—just for clarification, Mr. Cathcart, do you mean to drop all of these other persons and charities—completely?"

"My sister died of cancer five years ago, as did my wife about fifteen years ago, and my daughter, Jean—she fell down a flight of stairs—about five months ago—and she—she died shortly after that. At this time, however worthy any other charities may be, I would rather have Wanda Gomez be my only 'charity.' My chief reason for choosing them, when I made my other will, was to honor various friends and family members who'd suffered from various—problems—conditions—fatally. Two died of cancer—my folks died of heart diseases—a friend died of MS—another was killed by a drunk driver. Since that time when my other will was written, my aunt has died of diabetes—and so on—so there's plenty of charities I could give to if I still wanted to go that route—but I don't anymore. All these people are dead—lights out—and I want to help a nice young living person—whom I know face-to-face—here—and now."

Sherri glanced up at him, startled.

"Now—? Are you—?"

George blinked twice and grinned, showing his perfect white dentures.

"No—no—no. 'Now,' meaning 'now I want to *do X-Y-Z planning* with respect to the eventual disposal of my—my estate.' Not 'now' in the sense of me dropping dead today or tomorrow to get the stuff to her right away. You probably—you have to've met sixteen tons of geriatrics who are about to drop dead from one or more of the fifty-seven 'conditions' they've been limping through their 'golden years' with—or seventeen tons of majorly depressed old coots—or their widows—who have been stockpiling their meds—with the idea of—'going gentle into that good night,' right?"

No—that's not me. I'm still as healthy as your proverbial horse, and all I mean—meant—is that this is my 'will' now—*now*—at *this* time—today.”

“I understand,” she said, smiling down at the beige living room carpet for several seconds. “What about—contingencies, Mr. Cathcart? It just may turn out that, like I said before, for whatever reason and/or reasons, Ms. Gomez cannot or will not accept your bequest. We should write your will so that—so that all the bases are covered, so to speak—not that anything will happen, of course, but just in case, by one of those billion-to-one flukes, it does. Have you no other close living relatives?”

“My daughter's son is a—well, calling him a flake is the kindest word I can think of. Jean would say, ‘Bobby is still finding himself.’ Well, I've known people to be ‘late bloomers’—I was in education for forty-five years—higher education—college level—but if Bobby Martineau were a plant—.” He paused to grin in anticipation of his own wit. “If Bobby were a plant—he'd be a *century* plant! I never told my daughter that, but I thought it often enough.”

“I see. I can understand—and fully appreciate—your reluctance. Since he is a blood relative, perhaps you could put him in for a small specific amount.” She looked up at the sprinkler that hung down near the far corner of the living room ceiling. “It has sometimes—oftener than not these days—been our experience at Reilly, Cohen, Cohen, and Levine, that blood relatives who have been left out of a will entirely—especially close blood relatives—will tie matters up by contesting the—the soundness of the deceased's mind—and have occasionally prevailed in their suits—whereas if a smallish figure is specified, they cannot say—pardon me if I use the coarse words of a recent plaintive I had to deal with—‘The very fact that I was cut off without a cent makes it clear the blankety-blank old fart was out of his blankety-blank blanking mind!’ And some courts have been very sympathetic to that sort of view—you see?”

She brushed her dark bangs out of her eyes and smiled, making direct eye contact with George. He smiled back and brushed his own longish white hair out of his own eyes. For a brief instant she wondered if he were mocking her—or flirting with her.

A moderately loud gurgling sound suddenly came from George's midsection, and his smile faded. Sherri's eyes widened slightly, and one of her eyebrows moved an eighth of an inch higher.

“Hold that idea,” said George, reaching for the hand grips of his walker. “I shall return, as General Douglas MacArthur used to say—way back in my day. Just be a moment—just two shakes of a lamb's tail.”

He took a deep breath, let it out as he rose, and slowly walked to the bathroom of his small studio apartment.

Sherri glanced around at the furnishings. The sofa, she guessed, opened up to serve as a bed. On either end of it were a pair of old Formica-top tables with ugly ceramic lamps on them. In front of it was a small scarred coffee table. The chair she sat in, at least, was comfortable enough. A tall wooden stool stood in the small kitchenette next to a cheap drop-leaf pine table. On the walls hung a pair of framed

documents and seven oil paintings done in the style of Modigliani—signed GWC 3. From her seat she read the nearer document—“Even the ‘exact sciences’ deal with averages and probabilities.—GWC 3.” She made a face expressing her disagreement, and stood up to read the farther one. It made her laugh: “Whatever the sun may be, it is certainly not a ball of flaming gas.—D. H. Lawrence.” Behind her, she heard the toilet flush and the bathroom door opening.

“I see that you’re an artist, Mr. Cathcart,” she said. “Did you teach art in a college by any chance?”

“We all try to connect dots and make sense of the world—far and near,” he said. “No, I was a professor of mathematics for twenty-two years and then went into college administration. I worked at a small state university in Colorado for about seven years after I got my Ph.D., and then I moved on to Witherspoon Academy—a quasi-military college just twenty-five miles north of us here. Painting is just my—hobby.”

“I’ve heard of Witherspoon—heard good things about it, Mr. Cathcart. Or should I now call you ‘Dr. Cathcart’? No?”

“Somebody’s lied to you about Witherspoon,” he grinned. “It’s been going down hill for the past thirty years—standards-wise, faculty-wise, morale-wise—but then so are nearly all places of so-called higher learning—and most places of lower learning as well, including law schools, I’m sure. Oop—sorry. I mean—I meant to classify law schools in with institutions of ‘higher,’ not ‘lower’ learning. No offense intended.”

“No offense taken. It’s often said that it’s impossible to insult a lawyer. And that is almost true. I’d even be willing to classify law schools with the places of ‘lower learning.’ Did you make that up yourself? I’ve never heard that expression before—though it’s an obvious gap that our language has had, now that you . . .”

“Yes—that’s one of my ‘George-isms,’ as my wife used to call them—one of my many George-isms. I used to frame some and have them in my office, and the ones that were too ‘hot’ for the work place ended up on our walls at home—at least for a time. It was sort of a rotating display, as museums say.”

“Uh-huh. Getting back to basics, sir, since you are paying me at the rate of one hundred and seventy-five dollars an hour, I’d recommend that you stipulate a small bequest to your grandson—Bobby Martineau. And I’d also recommend that you have a kind of contingency plan for your estate in the event that Ms. Gomez is unable—or unwilling—to accept your generous bequest to her. You could, for example, in the event of her prior—death—leave some share of your estate to her heirs, whomever they might be—and, in the event that she declines your generosity for any reasons, you might want to reconsider leaving various bequests to charities, to your grandson, to some college or university, or to whomever you might prefer.”

“All right—fifteen hundred bucks for shushing up Bobby Boy—Robert Taylor Martineau—and, in the event Ms. Gomez can’t or won’t get the money and property, give the bulk of it to—to the local Animal Rescue League. I think they do good

work and benefit the homeless and afflicted as well anyone else does. And if Bobby predeceases me, give the Rescue League all of it. Yes—do it that way.”

Sherri read back her notes to George to confirm his wishes.

“Now, what I need are the addresses for your nephew and Ms. Gomez. They should be in the will so that these people can readily be located, assuming they are living—after you have completed your own much, much longer life, that is.”

“You can copy Bobby’s address from this little booklet I’ve got here. As for Ms. Gomez, I don’t know her home address. I’ve never tried to learn it because I didn’t want to seem like a stalker—and I’m not sure they’d give it to me in any case, downstairs. I bet they’d give it to you, though, if you ask them, though I would not want for Ms. Gomez to know she’s in my will. I suppose you could talk with the Director of the apartment building, and she’d give it to you and would agree to keep it confidential. I—I would not want Wanda Gomez thinking I’m trying to get any sort of special treatment by anyone saying I’m leaving her something. That would be a really—a really itty-shay way—pardon my Latin—a really bad way for a guy to act—though I’ve known a lot of fellows who wouldn’t hesitate to do far worse—as far as women are concerned.”

“I quite understand, Mr. Cathcart. You’re a—a gentleman—as well as a scholar.”

“True—and there’s damn few of us left.”

Sherri reached out her hand to George and demonstrated that a smallish woman could have a very firm and frank handshake.

“Today is Tuesday,” she stated. “I’ll get a draft copy off to you tomorrow or the day after, and then, if there are no changes needed, we can schedule a signing party.”

3

Lying in bed that night, listening to the cars and trucks softly passing on the highway below his fourth-floor studio apartment, George Wilson Cathcart III smiled and recalled how he had found “my Wanda.” He had been living here in Golden Valley Apartments for over six months and had increasingly regretted heeding his daughter’s advice to move here in preference to either of the two other nearby extended care facilities which they had visited last December: The Sheltered Hermitage, with its warm, blue-tiled swimming pool, and especially The Hearth of Wellness, with its dozen slender young black aides, all attired in bright, formfitting T-shirts. Each “girl,” Jean and he were told, was “designated her own uniquely different color” to facilitate her identification. “Young black aides,” George remembered Jean whispering, “tending rich, elderly *white* ‘inmates’—for minimum wage.”

Jean had insisted that The Sheltered Hermitage’s pool was “too dangerous, for one thing—they have no life guards on duty—and, for another, the water’s so warm it could put a body to sleep. Also, they don’t trust folks to have microwaves in their rooms—or battery-powered wheelchairs.”

As for the pretty aides at The Hearth of Wellness, Jean had objected, “All that eye-candy would shorten your life by twenty years. You’d go into cardiac arrest within three days of moving in there. Furthermore, I don’t like that staircase coming to the lobby from their second floor. A person with a wheelchair or a walker could tum-

ble down and break their fool necks. That place is a deathtrap every way I look at it.”

And then, irony of ironies, within three weeks, Jean herself had fallen down her own stairs in her two-story condo—knocked herself out—reflexively vomited her late-night snack and vodka tonic—and then breathed in her own vomit, blocking most of her throat and putting herself into a coma—a vegetative coma from which he, with her son Bobby’s agreement, had released her just a week later. He grimaced, recalling how Jean, propped up in bed, had gone stark white within seconds when her heart stopped, her blood leaving her face and neck and pooling in her legs

“Bless that nurse,” he now whispered softly, just as he had often done since that day. Thanks to Jean’s living will and his own insistence, a doctor had given the order to take Jean off life support—but had inconsistently left the oxygen tube under her nostrils. After six long hours, George had suddenly noticed the tube and had told the attending nurse to remove it—please. Nodding sympathetically, the nurse has said, “I think your daughter will begin to experience oxygen thirst soon—which will make her uncomfortable, wherever she is now—and I’d like to give her a little injection of this—to ease any discomfort she’ll have—if that’s all right with you—and her son.” And he had said, “Bless your heart, nurse,” and hugged the shoulders of Bobby, who had nodded “yes”—Bobby, who quickly sold every bit of Jean’s property including the condo George had bought her, not even asking Gramps if he wanted anything as a memento—Bobby, who never phoned or wrote—except a single line of belated thanks for checks sent for birthdays and Christmases

Well, dangerous stairs or not, George remembered being tempted to move from the mind-numbing, oatmeal-like excitement of Golden Valley to the rainbow of the nearby Hearth of Wellness, with its dozen comely aides—tempted and tentatively decided and all but acted upon—until the advent of “my Wanda”

Gazing up at the blurred shadows of his blinds moving across his ceiling, George smiled and recalled that happy morning. He had been taking his new secret shortcut to the dining room with the large service elevator at the far end of the hall—and its door had opened and—“*Mon Dieu!*” he had exclaimed aloud.

Facing him was a short, dark woman—perhaps in her late twenties—perhaps her mid-thirties.

He recalled they had stared at each other for ten to fifteen seconds, and then she had moved backwards, pulling a huge vacuum cleaner and a cart filled with cleaning equipment with her.

“Thank you—Miss,” he had said, stepping aboard the elevator.

“Thank you—Meester,” she had replied.

The door had closed, and another five seconds elapsed before George pressed the button for the first floor. While the elevator descended to the second floor where this new woman was taking her equipment, George had stood to her left and had strained to look at her from the corners of his eyes. She was very short, and her black hair was pulled back in a little pony-tail. Her profile had

reminded him of a bird of prey—a noble hawk or eagle. She was—plumpish—perhaps “stocky”—and her legs were covered with dark blue trousers with white stripes running from waist to ankle—the lower half of a nylon track suit—and the flesh of her thick little waist was exposed for an inch or an inch and a half, depending on how she leaned—and her upper body was clad in an snug, almost-matching dark blue T-shirt with a small Golden Valley logo—and she had—he thought—interesting breasts—the sort he had not seen in nearly sixty years—cone-shaped—and rather small and quite high.

Lying now on the brink of sleep, George recalled the pleasing effects created by those “bullet bras” that suddenly became ubiquitous on college campuses just when he was completing graduate school and beginning to teach as an assistant professor. “Sweaters, sweaters everywhere—an’ what’s a guy to think,” he recalled exclaiming to a colleague while they walked across campus on an April day; “Lo, the geometry of cones is very popular in my classes—have you noticed the same in your own?”

Could it be possible, he wondered now, that Wanda herself wears some of those vintage garments—leftovers from—the ’fifties? Or do they still make them in Latin America—perhaps only for Latinas? He imagined dozens—no, hundreds of brassiere factories in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay—especially Paraguay—and, most logical of all—Brazil, of course—producing millions of 1950s-style circle-stitch bras—for women who looked like Incas . . .

And three days later, at 10:15 a.m., Wanda had knocked on his open door and had glanced up at him and said, “House-ipping, Meester.” And she had then come in to change his towels and sheets and remake his bed, to dust, vacuum, mop his bathroom and kitchenette, and empty his waste cans. And when she picked up an armload of his dirty pajamas and socks and shirts and even his underwear, he had stopped her—“No, no, Miss. I’ll wash and dry my own stuff—my own clothes—in the machines just down the hall. No—thank you, no.” And Wanda, though he did not yet know her name, had looked at him with mild mute puzzlement, shrugged, and said, “Not wanting—washing—close—now?” And he had thanked her again—and then watched her, while pretending to watch his TV, as she vacuumed and mopped—and when she left, he thanked her twice more—then smiled and whispered, “Be still, my heart,” and then grinned like the boy of fifteen he had once been . . .

Could he, George wondered vaguely, at his present age, even begin to construct a formula accounting for even his own tastes? Could he explain *why* or compute *how* he himself preferred certain types of noses—hair colors—or skin tones? Or explain *why* he found facets of Wanda attractive—like her dear little Wanda-songs that she sang quietly to herself—and always unsmilingly—while she mopped his kitchenette once a week? There must be some sort of transfer of *affect*, from one factor to other factors—or to the totality—to the whole—or at least to most of it . . .

Perhaps he should take a night course and learn more Spanish? Perhaps he could somehow offer to help her learn more English to improve herself as far as wages and job opportunities were concerned? If she could become certified as a home health aide, he thought, surely she would then surely make more money

surely than as a “house-kipper” or cleaning woman—surely . . .

And, if she chose, she would be able to work longer shifts, if she chose, just as the aides did—all of them having twelve-hour shifts—and often taking two or even three twelve-hour shifts in a row without rest when Golden Valley was shorthanded. . . .

A dozen times he had almost asked Wanda if she were from Peru or Ecuador or Chile or Bolivia—but a dozen times he had shut his mouth. It would be too personal—and it would be harassment—and not a proper thing to do . . .

Just before drifting off to sleep, George smiled, remembering the clever, casual way he had learned her name after she had cleaned his little apartment the third time. He had gone down to the front desk with a handful of change and a crumpled five-dollar bill and had lied that he had found these in the corridor outside his room a short time after “the housekeeping woman—the younger one with the dark hair, you know—not the one who wears glasses” had finished her work on his floor—“I think she might have dropped it, and I’d hate to think how hard she worked for it.” And the woman at desk had thanked him and said she would check for him, and then George had asked, “By the way, I don’t even know that young woman’s name yet—do you happen to?” And the woman behind the desk had said, “Wanda—I think. Yeah—Wanda—Gomez,” and had then answered the telephone with one hand, while putting the money into a drawer in front of her with the other . . .

But whether anyone ever asked Wanda about the money, George had never ever learned—and he had never asked the woman at the desk about it, not wanting to be told—truthfully or not—that Wanda had accepted it—or (also truthfully or not) that somebody else had claimed it. Nobody ever mentioned the money to him. So be it, he thought—at least he had gained his purpose: “detecting” Wanda’s name—without setting off any “alarms” . . .

2

Thursday, ten days later, George Wilson Cathcart III met again with Sherri Birnbaum. He had received a draft copy of his new will, along with a bill for nearly two thousand dollars for work thus far done, and was now prepared to sign it before witnesses. Two officials of Golden Valley came up to his apartment with Sherri—one of them a notary public. While Sherri pulled materials from her large leather briefcase, the Assistant Director gazed around George’s living room,

“What a charming job of decorating you’ve done here, George,” she cooed. “I’ve never been up here before today, and I just love what you’ve done with it!”

“Mr. Cathcart painted those pictures himself,” remarked Sherri with a warm-looking smile.

“Really! They’re lovely! You have hidden you light under a bushel, George. Perhaps you’d like to display some of your work in the library room or the computer room downstairs—or even give lessons to some of our residents.”

“Hmm. We’ll see,” said George. “It’s something to think about—or rather *two* somethings—to think about.”

“Have you painted anything recently, George?” asked the notary, laying her

equipment out on the small coffee table in front of her.

“Yes,” said George, blushing slightly. “As a matter of fact, I have been working on three things lately. After all—this is called a ‘studio’ apartment, isn’t it? As—as—as some painter once remarked, ‘A painting is never really finished. It’s just something we finally just stop working on’—or words to that effect, if you know what I mean. And I keep going from one to another—revising—and I hope improving them.”

“How interesting, George,” said the Assistant Director.

“Well, gang,” said Sherri, “the meter is ticking for my law firm—an’ I’m ready to rumble, if you people all are.”

And so the signatures of George were witnessed by Sherri and the Assistant Director, and the notary put her chop marks on the document verifying that all the signatures were true and valid and kosher.

When the three women had left, George went into his bathroom, where the ventilator was running, set on high, and took his three newest paintings from his shower stall.

One by one, he set each of them carefully up on his window sill and then walked towards his “front” door to look at them from afar. There, with the aid of a small hand mirror, he looked at their reflections to judge better their composition and balance. Then, one by one, he turned them upside down and repeated the distant viewing process.

“No major flaws that I can see,” he muttered to himself. “Comin’ along fairly well.”

George returned the paintings to his shower stall to continue drying, making a mental note to hide them in the back of his clothes closet before Wanda came to clean on Friday. Then he put on a tie and his sports jacket and went down for his supper.

1

Sherri Birnbaum sat across from Bobby Martineau in a small Greek diner slightly more than ten miles west of Hartford, Connecticut.

“Ma’am,” said Bobby with a faux-shy smile, “I can’t honestly say I’m too broke up about my ol’ Gramps—‘cause he was undoubtedly losin’ it towards the end an’ was cranky as hell, if you’ll pardon my language. I do much appreciate your phone call, mentionin’ a—a ‘flaw’ in his will? I borrowed plane fare to get up here from Atlanta on the strength of our little conversation, an’ if you are as right as I think you think, then I’d like to give you a hundred dollars down t’ retain your services in this matter—on the books if you can be—or off the books if you can’t be. Results are what I’m interested in, an’ I figure you’re my sort of lawyer—you bein’ up north, close to New York an’ all. Heh.”

Sherri smiled back at Bobby.

“Mr. Martineau, when I drew up his will, I did so to the best of my abilities, based on what information your grandfather conveyed to me and what information I obtained from the officials in his apartment building. It is now my profes-

sional belief that his latest will cannot stand a challenge—based on the fact that it contains substantive errors pertaining to, as I’ve said, the correct name of the primary beneficiary, one—”

Sherri pointed with a finely manicured index finger to the passage in George Wilson Cathcart III’s will naming the cleaning woman.

“—so-called ‘Wanda Gomez.’ This woman, it can be argued, does not exist per se.”

“Cause of a huge problem in—orthography,” added Bobby.

“Precisely. It is both my professional opinion and personal belief that she will be unwilling and/or unable to fight your view of the matter. A woman with a somewhat similar name does indeed exist—in fact I have made it my business to have her pointed out to me. She is undoubtedly the sole person your grandfather intended to reward for—for being cute or young or—or whatever men have as their reasons—in a thousand different cases every day—here in the state of Connecticut alone.”

“But her name, you said, is correctly pronounced ‘H’wahn-duh Goh-mess’? An’ it’s spelled different? Correct?”

“Indeed, Mr. Martineau. But I am merely an advocate—one who can see both sides of any matter. If I were a man and living in the Middle Ages, I might, for my living, well have been what was sometimes in your Anglo-Saxon language picturesquely called a ‘sell-sword.’ Some with a different linguistic taste might call such a person a ‘mercenary.’ I try to keep my emotions in check and will only say I’ve heard worse—and have been called far worse.”

“Well, Ma’am, then you’re in real good company, ’cause I sure have too. An’ words never broke none of my bones either.”

“Indeed. Any transaction between us will, for the record—or more properly off the record—will be ‘off the books.’ In fact, under most foreseeable circumstances, I will totally deny ever having met with you or dealt with you in any way, should you later claim I’ve done so. But, be it known, should you try to ‘stiff’ me on any split we now agree to, I have ways of hurting you through the courts that you wouldn’t begin to understand. I will not be ‘a woman scorned’ where my cut of the pie is concerned. All I’m asking for is a forty-five percent finder’s fee from you.”

“That’s a bit steep, considerin’ I’m his blood kin an’ could testify Gramps was funny in the head ever since my mom did a header down her stairs an’ died. How ’bout we say—oh—twenny-five percent.”

“Forty.”

“Umm. Thirty-five.”

“Agreed. Shake on it.”

“Did you just—uh—New York me down or somethin’?”

Sherri laughed aloud.

“Yeah. I just did somethin’ like that. That leaves you sixty-five percent, which is almost two-thirds of nearly a million bucks for you, though—all for doing nothing but pissing off that sweet ol’ guy for years.”

“Well, I’m still findin’ myself.”

“Aren’t we all,” she replied.

Raising one eyebrow very slightly, she recalled having been denied an associate partnership at Reilly, Cohen, Cohen, and Levine, just two weeks ago.

“Any advice—counselor?” said Bobby.

“Yes. I’d advise you first of all to locate the woman at your grandfather’s old apartment building and get her to sign a piece of paper—it doesn’t even have to be witnessed by anybody—saying that she relinquishes any and all claims to your grandfather’s estate. Second, I’d advise you to give her a personal check for—oh—what can you afford? Can you slip her two or three hundred? You’ll find that her signature on the check will be very convincing to a jury or a judge that she had made an agreement with you on this matter. If she tries to renege on it in the future, both would tend to come down harshly on her—and she might even lose her green card and be sent back—to wherever she came from. Of course this is just advice that comes with no guarantees—law, you must know, is not one of the exact sciences.”

“How ’bout since her signature’s the important thing, I just give her a check for forty or fifty bucks?”

“That would probably do the trick. That amount is a lot of money for a person making under seven dollars an hour—it’s about a full day’s pay for her.”

Again, for some reason, Sherri laughed.

“Since there’s a choice, an’ it’s comin’ out o’ my hide, I’m makin’ it forty.”

“Suit yourself. It probably will never come up anyway—in court or anywhere else.”

“Any other last-minute advice or thoughts, counselor?”

“Just what I said before. Don’t try to cross me. Let me show you few Polaroids I took just yesterday, in prep for our meeting.”

She handed him three small photographs of three paintings.

“Your grandfather was working on these the very day he had his choking spell in the dining room—and nobody knew how to get lasagna out of his throat in time.”

“Hmm. This is the one I really like—though I don’t know anythin’ ’bout art.”

“Somehow I predicted you would, Mr. Martineau. I’m sure that that one was the artist’s equivalent of poetic license—mermaids of course do not exist, whether clothed or—like this one. I doubt he ever saw Juanda Gomes in anything but her normal work clothes—the blue shirt and blue track pants of this next little painting he did of her. It’s almost a pity that she will probably never see any of these. I suspect that he was planning to give the work-clothes painting to her as a little ‘friendly’ gift—perhaps for Christmas—or Chanukah. But the one I like best, just from an artistic standpoint, of course, is this last one—with her sitting astride a white llama, wearing a colorful blanket and a kind of derby hat, with snow-covered mountains in the background.”

Bobby studied the three photographs in silence for half a minute, and Sherri watched him, expectantly.

“Well,” he finally said, “now I know who I’m to get in touch with. Thank you, counselor. It’s been a pleasure.”

“Stop—I’ll take those back with me, thank you. They have my fingerprints on them. Just so’s you know that I’m not bluffing, young man, be further advised that, in the unlikely event that you do try to cross me in any way—”

Sherri put the three photos back into an envelope and put the envelope into her leather briefcase.

“—I have the original paintings as evidence that Juanda Gomes in fact was whom he intended as his beneficiary when he gave me his own misspellings for her name for the will I prepared.”

She smiled at Bobby, and Bobby smiled back.

“I will charge that you were attempting to con her out of her windfall by preying on her ignorance of English—and her very real financial difficulties—and, perhaps it will also come out—just in passing—that you threatened to get her deported.”

Bobby laughed good-naturedly and looked around the diner to make certain that nobody was paying them any special attention.

“You play a mean game of poker, Ma’am, if I do say so myself. Looks like you have all the cards you need to get your way with me.”

Bobby laughed aloud, and Sherri grinned amiably at him.

“Indeed. Indeed I do,” she said, standing up.

Five minutes later, as Bobby drove east back to his motel, Sherri drove north to her mother’s house, where she still lived, genuine contentment in her eyes for the first time in months.

“Perfect!” she said aloud. “Little Bobby Boy now will contest his Gramp’s will—and so it’s only right that *somebody* see to it that ol’ Gramp’s wishes for ‘his Wanda’ get carried out—to some degree—say, on a contingency basis—say, fifty-fifty? I’m sure little Ms. Gomes would be thrilled out of her shirt with that arrangement.”

Sherri Birnbaum cast a quick glance at her briefcase and smiled.

“And *you*, Bobby Martineau, you anti-Semitic little cracker prick—I’ve also got your prints on my photo of Gramp’s portrait of Juanda—a photo that I kindly and innocently showed to you when you flew north to ask, ‘Who’s this mystery bitch that’s tryin’ t’ gyp mah Gramp’s only blood kin out o’ his rightful an’ hard-earned legacy?’”

Two miles farther up the road, Sherri found herself chanting a parody of Alfred, Lord Tennyson: “Half a mil, half a mil, half a mil onward—right past what’s left to ’em—‘cause someone has blundered.”

She burst into a hearty laugh.

“As ol’ Dotty Sayers’s ol’ Montague Egg’s ol’ *Salesman’s Handbook* might say, ‘Half a mil’s far better than a measly third—or that, Chérie, is what I’ve always heard.’”

Permanent Ink

Kathleen Fitzsimmons

Tattoo-O-Rama's neon glare beckoned. Josh stumbled, his coordination blurred by liquid courage. Tanya rolled her eyes. Another Saturday night amateur.

"What can I do ya' for?"

"I wanna tattoo, the bess—choo—got."

"What's the best you can pay?"

He produced a crumpled wad of bills. Fantastic creatures danced on the walls in front of him.

"Let me know when you're ready."

Tanya retreated through the beaded curtain.

"Huggy Bear is da bomb," a waiting biker grinned.

"Huggy Bear," Josh repeated.

"Gotta warn you, they don't call him 'the Prince of Pain' for nothin'."

"NEXT!" Tanya yelled.

The machine buzzed like a deranged wasp. Muffled sobs were punctuated by muted shrieks. Josh tucked his knees under his chin and rocked. The biker emerged, his bicep swathed in damp, scarlet gauze. He swayed unsteadily and collapsed.

"NEXT!"

Josh trudged through the beads. A furry mountain of a man perched alongside a beaten recliner.

"What do you want?"

Josh pulled out a wrinkled photo.

"Delilah. Here." He rolled up his sleeve.

Huggy Bear shoved a folded belt in Josh's face.

"Bite down, I can't focus when it's noisy. Colors?"

"lack-n-'lue," Josh hissed.

The room swam, wobbly and hot. He felt himself slipping down. The cool tile soothed his cheek.

###

He awoke alone. He shambled to the kitchen for coffee. A note with her key was taped to the fridge.

"You are a dumbass. Don't call."

Groggily, he remembered the previous night's events. Delilah had been standing outside with bags packed when the taxi poured him to the curb. She tipped the cab to wait while she helped him upstairs and into bed.

He fingered the bandaged folly on his shoulder. She might be out of his life, but she would be under his skin forever.

The wind is arms is the first thing
I think, how the first thing I ever want
To write about is the wind.

Tattoos In Spring

Lisa Markowitz

Today it's awfully windy
In this long dry city,
And it blow dries my hair
Like a stylist might,
All being teased.

In the spring of things
I half expect to see a dinosaur
Walking down Maryland Parkway.
That would be great. But then,
It might stomp me out forever.

I have to eat up the wind
To be happy today
And it will go through me
Like a spring thing.
Like the song says,
You gotta get in to get out,
Like a song about the healer.

I forget that I got a tattoo
When I was seventeen.
I forget the Cheshire Cat's lips
In a big wide smile,
The light and dark pinks,
Tail winding up,
Paw picking its teeth.
I forget when it was fresh,
His mouth speckled with my blood;
Looked like he'd been feasting on Alice.

Then I see it in the mirror,
Bare naked back and it heals me
Because it's there, foreign, a little stupid
But bled into my back forever,
And outside the wind whips up
For another noisy storm.

Passive Passenger

Mike Aronovitz

She was starting in again, and he was well used to it after all these years. Same old tapes played over and again. It was all because he never got that doctorate. He couldn't finish the thesis, and his mere Masters in mechanical engineering translated to thirty years of community college work. The pay had been ok, but they'd raised the boys amongst neighbors that were better off. It was not the way of life Dorothy had pictured when she married the number two ranked student overall, first in the sciences, from Brooklyn's Washington Academy and Technical Institute for Boys. Grainy memories from the black and white days before the Beatles. She must have thought he would clean up in government work. He preferred the classroom. When they moved to Broomall Pennsylvania for his Assistant Professorship at Delaware County Community College, she stopped caring about the ins and outs of Melvin's contributions to society. When he failed to complete the Nova doctoral thesis in 1983, she assigned him the back den by the bathroom as sleeping quarters. Melvin had no real argument for this. She'd backed the wrong pony, and now they were limping toward the finish line in their golden years.

Melvin pulled the damp towel a bit tighter under his bloated paunch. The towel was cranberry red, with flower designs on it. He disliked the towel. It was a cheap, short towel that did not absorb the water well. Seemed to run moisture across the skin leaving a sheen. Dorothy had picked out the towels. She picked out everything. She demanded to do so, and hated Melvin for the drudgery of the responsibility. She cloaked her hate in a mask of annoyance that boasted only slightly blunter fangs. The mask had dug itself in permanently. Her eyes were shock blue, and red at the edges. Her hair looked like a perm, but had taken on the hard consistency of old steel wool. She was very skinny, and the veins on the back of her hands were raised like gorged bloodworms. She had not aged well. Neither had Melvin. He had a nesting of bags under his eyes, thinning hair falling in limp strands over his ears, and pipe stem arms.

He had goose bumps. It was cold in the hallway. The wallpaper just above Dorothy's head, in the catty corner between Brian's old room and the bathroom was starting to curl down at the top edge. It was an ancient, peach colored wallpaper with a repeated copy of some Impressionist painting of men with bowler hats, tuxedos and canes. The decorative scheme put the figures in alternating poses both upside down and right side up. Dorothy's taste for a dizzying show tune world of ladies and gentlemen. Melvin vaguely remembered helping Dorothy pick out the pattern, some time in the early nineties when Douglas was still in middle school learning to play the clarinet that he would give up soon after, (he much preferred smoking pot, listening to The Stone Temple Pilots on volume ten, and masturbating for what seemed like hours on end). Melvin dimly

recalled shopping with Dorothy when he had lab books to grade, shopping with a smile at the Wallpaper Plus that sat next to the Dress Barn, next to the Kids Cuts, next to the Blockbuster Video. Back then, Melvin had been good at acting interested in wallpaper, and knowing which designs to keep hesitant about. He knew just how long to play hard to get, and then zone in on Dorothy's real first choice. He knew that she knew he was faking interest, and he had long lost the talent to play that particular clarinet, so to speak. It had been a slow process of intricate, quiet protest so to convince Dorothy that their little illusions had truly worn down, but that moral victory led to constant, explosive confrontations. The price for the breath of freedom. And he well knew he would somehow be blamed for this current curling in the corner of the ceiling. This unexpectedly raised up an old, helpless anger in him, and he swallowed it. Dorothy always won those things. She was just too darned fast.

"Move over, Mel. I've got to get in there."

"Ok."

"You slept in again."

"I know, but it's the weekend."

"It's almost nine o'clock!" Melvin looked down.

"I know."

"Comb your hair."

Melvin brushed the lock that had fallen across his cheek back over his bald spot. She pushed past, and her voice snapped from behind the door.

"Wipe the mirror off, Melvin. We discussed this."

"Ok."

"And call the plumber today. That rattling heater kept me up all night."

"Right!" Melvin entered his room. He hung the towel on the doorknob. He slipped on an old tee shirt, and sagging underwear with rips and tears beneath the band. "Right-O!"

But he would forget. He always forgot. Dot was bound to come home and ask up front if he had gotten it done. Melvin would look up in guilt and surprise. "Gosh, honey. I forgot!" Then she would explode and do it herself. It was an old, familiar routine. Melvin pulled his glasses down to the end of his nose and mimicked Sigmund Freud under his breath.

"It is a vicious cycle of reciprocal punishment that dates so far back we fail to expose its very origin, silly, silly."

He reached into the closet and got out plaid trousers, and a wool sweater with tan patches on the elbows.

"Practicalities get in the way," he thought. "They work against the very fabric of creative thought." He stroked his chin. "But we must always make room for greatness, mustn't we?" Melvin turned toward his home computer and his eyes danced with lust. Was it still there? The naughty treasure hidden inside the terminal, was it still there?

Of course it was. It had to be, for Melvin had kept the computer running all

night. He hadn't dared shut it down for fear of losing it forever. He approached the dark screen, flipped the dimmer switch to bright, and was greeted by words on a electric green background,

WELCOME TO PASSIVE PASSENGER

"Melvin!"

The voice came from behind his closed door, but he still jerked up and slapped the dimmer button across so to blacken the screen. "Yes mother?"

"Stop calling me that! I'm your wife, God dammit!" Melvin stared at the carpet and made no reply. "I'm going out," she said to the silence. "I'll be back later." Her announcement did not require a response so there was no hesitation in her footsteps that marched down the hall.

"Go ahead, stay out all day," Melvin said to himself. "Out all day so Mel can play." He slid the dimmer again to bright and the letters surfaced, cat's eyes with black lids. How he had stumbled on PASSIVE PASSENGER was a bit of a mystery, all starting with a website address that he had downloaded onto his flash drive yesterday before lunch, and subsequently forgotten by dinnertime.

Innocent. That morning he'd signed on for a fellowship offered through the college by the U.S. Navy. The same as last year, the program commissioned two thousand dollars to the candidate most qualified to chart the voice patterns of dolphins. The website was an orientation page, an innocent little orientation that's all, jammed on his already overloaded flash drive, slung on his lanyard with his college ID, tucked under his jacket and out of mind as he shuffled through his daily routine. After classes, he stopped at Kelly's for a chocolate donut with rainbow sprinkles. He flipped through some science magazines at Borders, lost track of time and wound up back at the house after six.

"Sorry I'm late," he called out at the door, as if it was not standard practice.

"I'm in here," Dot said. She was watching the tail end of the evening news. Melvin stood at the edge of the room.

"Well, I'm home," he said. "Anything for dinner?"

"I already ate."

"Oh. Time just kind of passed by, and-"

"I know."

"Oh."

Melvin still had his coat on. He held his hat in his hands, fidgeted with it, and considered joining his wife in the living room for the nightly ritual in which they watched the news together and passed it off as communication. He watched his wife watch TV for a moment, the image reflecting off her emotionless face.

"Melvin, either come in or go out. You know it annoys me when you stand-"

"Hey, I know him!"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"They just said Engine 38, look!" He pointed at the television. It was a fire-fighter, dirty, tired, and at the conclusion of what seemed a strained interview.

"Here with Captain Hugh McNulty, I'm Marilyn Chang for Newswatch."

Melvin took a step further into the room. “So that’s his name, Captain Hugh McNulty! It’s his mobile unit that I pick up on my radio scanner, by God, I’ve heard his voice a thousand times!”

Dot sniffed and rubbed her nose.

“Melvin, why don’t you toss all those contraptions into the garbage where they belong? That room of yours is an eyesore.”

“But-“

“Melvin, it’s a junkyard in there.”

His shoulders sagged. He had constructed his radio scanner of parts from an ancient radio, digital clock, and Press-N-Play record player. Yes, it was locked onto one lone frequency. It was true that his electric trains only ran in reverse and he had to concede that the automatic pencil changer couldn’t be run on 110 without blowing a fuse. He sighed. Originally, he had built his scanner with the hope of picking up a variety of weather stations, and what he had gotten was Engine 38 of the Philadelphia Fire Department. It was a lot of code words, background sirens, and probable D.O.A.’s.

Suddenly, he remembered the stuff on his flash drive. He straightened up and cleared his throat. “I’m going to work on my computer.” With her eyes, Dot gave the cold permission for him to sneak back to his room.

It’s a junkyard in there.

Melvin closed the door and searched for a place to toss his coat amidst the disorder of games and gadgets that were scattered across the room on tabletops and milk crates.

Yes, but it’s my junkyard.

Melvin got his last yellow Post-It note, found a pen, and wrote the name “Captain Hugh McNulty” on it. He stuck it to the top plate of his radio scanner, the name behind the voice. Then he turned, smiled and approached his computer. His coat went to the floor, his briefcase to the side. Some things never spoke back at him. He gently pressed on the power to his electric friend and ran two fingers down the screen. It winked on with quiet obedience.

It’s my junkyard and here, my little subjects hum and buzz and radiate like music.

With an artist’s flair, Melvin inserted his flash drive. The checkerboard of files came up, but the orientation page was missing. Melvin backed out and went on line. He typed in the website address and hit the RETURN button. Then came the sudden pop and coppery smell of overloaded wires.

“Balls,” Melvin said. The screen shut down to a rude shade of black. Melvin sighed and reached down for the power strip. He flicked it off and on in quick succession and bolted upright when his computer made a shard beeping noise he had never heard before. Melvin rested his fingers on the keys, ready to log it off and start over. But some words were materializing atop a strange green background.

**PROPERTY OF THE C.I.A.
DEAD FILE / TOP SECRET
PRESS ESCAPE TO CONTINUE**

Melvin snatched his fingers off the board. Top secret? The code was supposed to bring up the Annapolis site, not the bloody Central Intelligence Agency. He looked over his shoulder, turned back and read the screen again.

PRESS ESCAPE TO CONTINUE

He stared at it and it stared back. A standoff.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he thought, “but it also helped invent the wheel.” He tapped the ESCAPE button.

WELCOME TO PASSIVE PASSENGER

“Thank you, glad to come aboard,” Melvin replied. He hit the ESCAPE button again.

INSTRUCTIONS – OPERATOR WILL ENTER HIS SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER. NEXT, ENTER THE S.S. # OF SUBJECT AND STRIKE ANY KEY TO ACTIVATE. OPERATOR WILL THEN JOIN WITH THE MIND OF THE SUBJECT AS A PASSIVE PASSENGER FOR THE LAST FIVE MINUTES OF TIME PASSED. ACTUAL TIME ELAPSED FROM POINT OF ACTIVATION UNTIL CONCLUSION IS ZERO HOURS, ZERO MINUTES, AND ZERO SECONDS.

Melvin ran his tongue across the roof of his mouth. It was unthinkable, to mentally join another for five minutes. To read their thoughts of moments just passed. He hit the ESCAPE button.

O – ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

“O” is for “Operator,” Melvin said. He entered his own number. He tabbed to the next screen.

S – ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

Melvin hesitated. “S” was for “Subject.” The letters on the screen seemed to be grinning, and defensive excuses stormed Melvin’s mind.

I don’t understand yet the extent of what “passive” means, I have no idea if the subject will be aware of the operator’s presence, and I would love to know how I pirated this thing in the first place.

Melvin shut his eyes and sorted the questions so to weigh the unknowns. He let out a sigh and rested his index finger along the crook of his nose.

The most intriguing question remains why. Why would the government construct such a thing? What purpose could it possibly serve?

Melvin escaped past the subject mode in search of footnotes or back page clues and nearly gasped at what he uncovered. It was a subject-directory, a glossary of names, occupations, and social security numbers. Melvin punched the RETURN button again and again, but it seemed an endless sea. Screen after screen, there were thousands, no hundreds of thousands loaded into the program.

God damned Republicans! They’ve invented a real life “Big Brother is Watching You!”

Melvin scanned the “H’s.” His own name was listed. For a moment, Melvin

stared at it and felt like someone had stuck a naked picture of him on Google. But soon the corners of his mouth softened. The program was his now, was it not?

Melvin fought with this question on into the later hours of the evening. Part of him wanted to shut the program down immediately, for issues of legality as well as morality. The other side of him, however, the professor, the scientist, and yes, the child, could not help but marvel at the possibilities of this invention. Could it actually work? Did he have the courage to give it a test run? And he was slightly ashamed at the personal implications of the biggest question that swam beneath the surface,

Would he get caught?

He spent the evening tabbing through the subject directory. He saw plain people, rich people, famous people, faceless people, beautiful people. What would it be like to read their thoughts for five minutes? He ran scenarios through his head of various journeys, and countered them with possible consequences. His eyelids were drooping. He needed a fresh start here. He needed to sleep on this.

Melvin backed out to screen number two, and dimmed it for safe keeping. He killed the light, and climbed into bed with the residue of fluorescent green still dancing in his eyes.

It's mine as long as I wish to keep it. I don't have to use it. I can just...possess it.

That thought tailed Melvin through the first stages of sleep, and followed him into the R.E.M. state. All night, he tossed and turned, in and out of erratic dreams in which he became a melodramatic, cartoon villain. He wore a top hat and black coat-tails. He had a thick, waxed, handlebar moustache. He wrung his hands, twisted his lips to a sneer, and gloated over his evil machine. He'd woken in a cold sweat.

Out all day so Mel can play.

Melvin cracked a window to breathe in the smell of the pines, winter's kiss on this crisp morning's breeze. He smiled and buttoned his sweater. Now that he was showered and Dot was gone, he was free to relish the mind melding time machine that sat amidst his clutter of private projects.

It's a junkyard in there.

"Oh, bug off," Melvin thought. The recurring memory of her criticism distracted him.

She was unable to share in the thrill of creation because her eyes could not see past the bald results. To her, the room was not some storybook playground laden with the very landscape of her husband's potential, but rather a metaphor for failure, a wasteland of bogus inventions that refused to function properly.

The hair suddenly rose on the back of Melvin's neck as if he was being watched. It was the computer with the words, **WELCOME TO PASSIVE PASSENGER** smiling across its screen.

"I work properly," it seemed to whisper.

"Let's find out," Melvin said. He sat down at the terminal. A final vision of himself as a fifth grader reciting the Pledge of Allegiance came into his head, and

he combated the vision of purity with cold logic.

I won't do this for gain, and I won't invade someone famous. That would be...rude somehow. I will do this scientifically and democratically.

He backed off to the Subject Directory, closed his eyes, tabbed twenty-five screens in, and pointed his finger. He opened his eyes.

"Floyd Lynch – Truck Driver."

Melvin tabbed back to screen number four.

O – ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

Melvin entered his own.

S – ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

Melvin looked at his watch. Ten seconds until 9:10 AM. He counted it down. At precisely 9:10, Melvin hit the RETURN button, and activated Passive Passenger.

It was immediate. There was no sense of travel, no supernatural feeling of exit and entry, but an instant exchange of physical presence. A moment before, Melvin Helitz had been sitting in his bedroom, but now pushed through the doors of Lucy's Bar and Grill, hungry, pissed off, and ready to drink anything that would smooth his raging hangover.

In the back of his mind, Melvin had imagined that the experience would be somehow removed, like being in a theater and watching a movie shot in first person. But he was there, not only with Floyd Lynch, but as Floyd Lynch, the finest West Virginia had to offer, thank you very much. He felt the greasy perspiration that had built up already that morning around the dirty inner band of Floyd's Mountaineers baseball cap and down the back of his underwear. He had a cut on the ring finger of his meaty left hand from breaking down cardboard and carelessly slipping with a box-cutter last week on Bay #2, and the small of his back was killing him. The thick smell of sausage, lard, and home fries doused in onions sickened Floyd in a vague, friendly sort of way that made Melvin know that Floyd isolated the smells as those of preferred breakfasts most mornings after a run. Not today. American fire-water was going to do just fine. He walked heavily past the seating area and its steel booths with maroon, plastic cushions. A busboy moved out of his way.

The place was so busy that there were a few stragglers eating breakfast in the bar at dark tables by the windows. The shades were pulled, and Floyd's eyes adjusted to the shadows. He ambled past the pool tables on the right, and approached the long mahogany bar. Three green paper lampshades hung above it with old tobacco smoke suspended underneath like veils. Though Lucy's advertised all night service, the idea of cocktails at 9:00 in the morning only seemed to appeal to an old timer at the far corner of the bar wearing old gray overalls, weathered boots, and a John Deere hat pulled over his eyes. A Garth Brooks song came from a vintage jukebox that actually played vinyl.

"Double, Jack Daniels," Floyd said. The bartender, a stiff, quiet type, set

down the pilsner glass he had been wiping and chucked down a cardboard coaster. A rock glass followed, and he filled it two-thirds.

“Two-fifty.”

“Tab it,” Floyd said. The barkeep left the bottle within reach, and Floyd grabbed his glass. He downed it, refilled it, and Melvin had a sudden, clear understanding of why alcoholics drank for the purpose of remedy. The jolt of whiskey was like dark fire, deliciously burning the throat, warming the stomach, and coursing into Floyd’s throbbing headache with kneading, soothing fingers. Everything loosened, and suddenly Melvin felt Floyd’s arms and thighs come to the forefront of his perception of personal physicality. Gone was the idea that the stomach creeping over the beltline defined “Floyd Lynch,” and the back ache from lifting fifty pound crates from concrete dock to rusty truck bed slipped far into the background like a dream. The ghost of a teenage Floyd, starting center for the Jarvisville Panthers, rose right up behind the eyes, and concentrated old feelings of power in the junctions of the knees, the elbows, the hips, and the balls of his feet. Floyd sat up straighter, and glanced to his right. A thin woman with straight black hair had just taken a seat two stools down. Her back was to the bar, elbows propped backward upon it, and she watched the game of pool that began to unfold in front of her with mild interest. She pushed out her lower lip and blew upward to fluff her bangs.

She wore a sleeveless, black tee-shirt and cut-off blue jean shorts. She had those silver and turquoise injun earrings and a braided ankle band. Black mascara, purple gypsy eye shadow, no lipstick, she had the face of a thief and the legs of a hooker.

“Oh, let this get good while there’s still time,” Melvin thought.

“Hey there, sister,” Floyd said, as if in response to Melvin’s plea. “When I wake y’all up tomorrow morning, should I nudge you or call you?” She looked over, and let a half-smile tug at the side of her mouth.

“I don’t know, baby. The day is still young.”

Floyd felt his mood brighten, and he was glad for it. This morning had been a shit-poor experience, and he wanted nothing more than to forget about it. Melvin laughed silently. It was like that old joke, “Tell someone not to think about pink elephants, and that’s all they can think about,” for the morning Floyd wanted to push out of memory projected through to their shared present like a technicolor movie. The flash took but a moment, barely enough time to equal a breath, but Melvin was amazed at how well it familiarized him with the heart and soul of Floyd Lynch.

The day had started fair to middling considering the raging drunk Floyd hadn’t quite slept off from the night before. He had shown up bright and early at the Red Arrow Trucking Depot with a pounding headache, a steaming cup of black coffee, and dark glasses. He got double overtime on Saturdays, and he needed to make these two deliveries so to cover some bad on-line bets he’d made on college hoops the week before. The rig was pre-loaded, and Floyd had headed toward Clarksburg with nothing on his mind but making it through the run.

“Base to Lynch, over.”

Floyd grabbed the radio mike, stretched the curly cord and pressed in the button. “Lynch here, over.”

“Ahh, Floyd, uh y’all got to double back here right away, over.”

“What the fuck for!” Lynch shouted into the radio despite the F.C.C. violations he had been warned of. He could almost feel the dispatcher cringe on the other end.

“Uh, Scutter Drywall called the vendor for the pro number of that ceiling wire that come in late yesterday. The guy chewed me a new butt asking where it was, over.”

Floyd smashed the mike back into its holder and looked for a place to turn around. This was bad news three times over, first, because Scutter Drywall was in Glenville, a hick town that sat at the tail end of Route 33 West, the twistiest, turniest stretch of back road in all West Virginia. Second of all, Floyd had spied the Scutter invoice back in the warehouse and noticed that the rig assigned to it was #3, an old 1982 International cab-over shitbucket with a 6V-53 Detroit engine and two speed rear end. This meant a trans so full of slop that finding gear was like sticking a cold virgin with a limp pecker. And third and most finally, the Scutter order was still piled by load dock 5, and since Floyd wasn’t union, he’d now have to help load five hundred bundles of twelve foot wire like an African slave-boy.

Things got worse quick. Route 50 Westbound was under construction and cut to one lane. And the moment Floyd pulled on he got stuck behind an old Toyota Starlet that refused to break forty. Floyd ran right up its butt, close enough to see the weather stains on the bumper stickers. One said “Save the Trees,” and the other said, “Lick Bush.”

Floyd bristled with rage since this flatlander got to display dirty shit about our commander and chief whilst he had been forced by a statie to scrape off his own that read, “I shoot Muslims on sight.” He squinted and saw the frightened eyes stare back at him in the rear view. The kid had small circular wire frames and hair all over the place. The little fuck was probably the type to parade the White House steps and hand out leaflets defending the rights of faggots to marry each other, adopt little Asian rug rats and collect benefits. Floyd suddenly ached to spy just one piece of left lane so he could sneak up, run the little shit off the road, blare the horn and yell “God bless America” as he passed. When the kid turned off exit seven in fact, Floyd almost followed him to carry through the urge. Almost. After all, he was a professional.

The rest of the run was a slushy haze. The extra labor, the back and forth, and the complaints and questionings and demands of the given warehouse managers receiving his shipments blurred in a vision of a headache that had began as a hot needle in the middle of his forehead and spiraled out to a massive pounder. But he had made his runs without puking. At least he had that. After all, as long as a man could hold his liquor, it never really had a hold on him, now did it?

With that thought, the memory faded and Melvin found himself once

again with the present tense of Floyd Lynch. The big trucker downed another shot of J.D., hauled up, adjusted his trousers and plopped himself down by the thin woman's left elbow.

"What's your name, darling?"

"What's yours?"

"Floyd Lynch, ma'am."

"Well, mine's Elaina Mayberry. My friends call me "Lay-May."

Floyd winked.

"Lay-May, your legs are so purty I'd drag my balls through a mile of broken glass just to hear you piss in a tin cup." Her full smile revealed a gap between her two front teeth.

"You're a dirty ole' dog, Floyd." She punched his arm, and it was the opening Floyd was looking for. Any woman who initiated physical contact was a piece of fair game. He shoved his stool closer, slung his arm around her shoulder and with two fingers, fiddled a bit with a partly exposed bra strap. If Melvin had been connected to his own mouth it would have been frothing. "Oh boy! If you're going to shtoop her, I'll pop in through Passive Passenger all night until I catch the moment you do it!"

"We got trouble, Floyd."

Lynch removed his arm and looked around. The pool game had stopped, and one of its players was leaning on his stick, staring. He was a tall, haggard man in red untucked flannel. His long hair was in a ponytail, and his red, deep-lined face looked like weather-hardened leather. Floyd reached back to pour another drink.

"Is that your boyfriend or your brother?"

"It's my husband." Floyd did not return her grin.

"Now why would you be flirtating me with your husband standing right there?"

"I'm mad at him," she said.

"Why?"

"He's losing the game."

The skinny dude obviously disliked being talked about as if he was not in the same room.

"You'd best move on, fat boy," he said. Ain't your woman to groping like." Floyd turned to face him and put his hands on his knees.

"Now looky here, boy. I'm gonna take your wife and I'm gonna do her. I'm gonna do her right here on this bar. You get to watch." For emphasis, he grabbed at her bra again. This time, he yanked the strap over her shoulder and she slapped at him, the joke now dulled in her eyes.

The song on the jukebox faded to its conclusion. The machine ejected the record, and its motorized shift was a lone cry in a room gone dead quiet. A waitress stood by the entrance to the front seating area with three plates balanced up her arm. A pair of pool players wearing wide rimmed Stetsons set down their sticks and moved their drinks. One fumbled to snuff out a smoke. A couple at a four-top scrambled for their coats, and the bartender stood by the cash register,

phone in hand, ready to dial 911.

The jukebox flipped the next record to the turntable. An amplified scratch turned into the first notes of "The Gambler." The man with the ponytail bared his teeth and snapped his pool cue in two across his knee. Melvin tried to read Floyd's next move, but it was impossible. His mind had gone a cool, predatory blank.

Ponytail spat on the floor and tossed the light end of his pool stick into an ash can that doubled as a chaw bucket. Heavy end up, he two-fisted his weapon and came on. Floyd let him approach, almost counting the steps. Their eyes remained deadlocked. At the last possible moment, Floyd sprang up and danced to the side, dragging his bar stool with him. He swung it back across in an arc, and dead air hissed through the oak legs.

Wood met skull. Ponytail moaned as the pool cue flew behind the bar along with three of his teeth and a chaser of bloody spittle. He hit the floor, and Floyd dropped the busted stool next to him.

Another broken bat homer.

Lynch reached back for his drink, turned and raised the glass to propose a toast.

It never came out. Someone punched Floyd in the back of the neck, (and fucking hard too), before it could be vocalized.

"What the hell," Floyd tried to say. Instead, a hideous gargle escaped. He tried to swallow, but his throat was blocked by something. There was a thick spurting of blood driving up against the roof of his mouth. Melvin shot out of Floyd's body, and hovered unseen by a ceiling fan.

Wait! I haven't been here five minutes. The exit is too early!

He calculated it so to be sure.

Walked in, ordered a drink and chugged it, one minute at most. The flashback was instantaneous, then we talked to Lay-May and fiddled the bra strap, another minute. We smart-mouthed the husband and bashed him, another sixty seconds maybe, if that. That makes three minutes, so where are my other two?

Melvin realized that he was not alone. He was still connected to Floyd Lynch who for the life of him, could not figure out why he was floating up in the air. The trucker looked down then, and Melvin silently shared his disbelief. The body of Floyd Lynch lay in a puddle of his own blood with Lay-May's switchblade stuck out the back of his throat.

"Get up!" Lynch soundlessly shouted down at himself. "I ain't ready to die, please!"

None of the patrons had moved. Floyd and the ponytail man were huddled in a rag-tag pile of arms, clothes, and hair, a strange embrace, but Melvin did not enjoy this dark humor.

Is time ticked off the same in the hereafter? What if one second of human time equals a thousand years of spiritual time? I had two minutes left.

A deep brilliance of color with a hue indescribable by the blunt tool of human vocabulary closed in from the corners of Floyd's perception, a flood from

beneath, behind, and within. It quickly became everything, save one point of dazzling light in its center.

“Looks like a headlight on Route 9,” Floyd thought. “What’s next, drag racing?”
Floyd shot toward the bright sphere.

“So you do actually shoot toward a bright light,” Melvin thought.

It was some kind of doorway. Floyd could not see it, yet he perceived it, like eyesight, but fuller. Like touch, yet more intimate, as if all the senses were combined in a new kind of vision. It was a circular cascade of fragrance, of warmth and absolute beauty. It was the thunder of a thousand voices in harmony. It was a shimmering storm of waterfall colors that formed rivers and rainbows.

Floyd burst into the sphere and joined its powerful warmth. It was a sweet flotation, the loving embrace of the beginning and end of all things. He had felt it before, once in his mother’s womb. He had entered his world kicking and howling. Now was his exit of silence and wonder. He passed through the sphere.

Floyd was at the far end of a long corridor, and he had been given back his sight. It was not a gift. Erected through a thick fog of bluish mist were two white pedestals, and atop each sat an entity, not alive in the earthly sense of the word, but present in forms Floyd understood on a fundamental level. The beings began to take form as wavering outlines, the inverse of images in the visual sense, existing on the periphery of what Melvin would consider “perception,” and filling in the grounded center of focus with suggestion. For a moment, Melvin tried to describe this phenomenon in scientific terms, but the best he could come up with was, “It is what it is, and Floyd manufactures his version of what it is so to fill in the stuff between the lines for the purpose of base recognition.” It was a crude rendition of the experience, but here, the human was a crude slave in the palace of his betters.

The entity on the left pedestal spun itself into a tornado red flame that turned and twisted at the edge of Floyd’s version of a nightmare. It tossed sparks, spit lightening and slowly opened its eyes, terrible orbs that were slanted with rage. They were bottomless caverns of agony that held reflections of torment, ageless and unforgiving. Floyd looked away and was made to look back.

The flames hardened into a body that formed around the slanted eyes. It was a huge jackal with fangs as long as the pedestal was high. Its tail was a whip with razor quills and its tongue was a serpent.

Floyd was suddenly allowed to break the glance and he silently thanked it as if it was God.

“No, not God,” Melvin thought. “That thing cannot be the Almighty because it does not know that I am here.”

Floyd was allowed to look at the pedestal on the right. It was bliss. It was a warm, white cloud that seemed to ebb and flow with the very fabric of tranquility. It opened a pair of eyes that sang to Floyd in a chorus of voices that defined its outline as the glorious shape of a dove. It reached out its huge wings to Floyd in a glorious gesture of hope.

Floyd was not comforted. The dove and the jackal merged colors and com-

bined for a moment in a tone that by the power of its own design was capable of cracking Floyd's very being.

"*Bladnestannabellshannah,*" they said, in a reference to what must have been Floyd's name before a human mother reconfigured the title into that generic, shared form that began the long, inherited process of re-shaping the individual into the stagnant patterns contributing to the more advanced, though universally barbaric, concept of "culture." Man's decorated prison, his savior and his tragic flaw.

"*You are in the corridor of deeds,*" they said.

Then began the construction. Every, single thing Floyd had done in his twenty seven years of service on the land surrounded by the seas, one at a time and with deafening speed, shot toward the pedestals. It was not difficult to figure out the purpose of the activity. What was viewed as "good" went to the dove, and the "evil" actions were consumed by the jackal. The deeds were filling in the wavering lines, and Melvin had pretty much come to the conclusion that the dove and the jackal were finally to fight for Floyd's soul.

Some of the deeds were recognizable, and some Floyd had no memory of. Most of his early childhood actions filled in portions of the dove, yet the insignificance of the given action was measured proportionally in reference to the amount of fortification it provided to its host. At six months, Floyd was in the dirty powder blue car seat stuck in the dark corner of the living room inside mama's mobile home on Burnt Lick Road. He usually behaved himself in the car seat, yet now he cried out in a passion of hunger, small arms jerking and flailing at the cold, silent darkness. At three and a half, he hid in the broom closet underneath a low shelf that supported a few weathered pairs of work boots, a large Rayovac security flashlight, and a red toolbox with its top tray littered with screwdrivers, hammers, dented steel tape measurers, and an array of homeless fasteners. He hid in the dark closet because his uncle Jimbo was watching him today, and Uncle Jimbo thought it was funny to chase little Floyd around the yard with a steel tined rake. At five, Floyd sat on a sloping, uneven stone wall and tossed pebbles into the creek that ran below him. His head itched and he had no socks, because Mama had to work a double at the mill, and she didn't have the time to throw in a wash. At seven, Floyd got a game winning, inside the park homerun in little league that was called back to a single because it nicked the pitching machine. At eight, he read aloud to his class a poem about the shapes clouds make, and at nine he crashed his bike into a willow tree because Freddie Smithers dared him to ride blindfolded.

The dove grew and fattened with each instance. Still, the balance of Floyd's years seemed to hold more weight, and most of those actions went to the other pedestal.

When Floyd was twelve, he stole a fishing rod out of the back room in Gorton's general store, and at fifteen, he robbed the same place blind as its cashier, hitting "No sale," writing up dummy receipts on a spare pad he kept under the drawer, and pocketing the cash after the customer exited the premis-

es. At sixteen, he and Bubba Nichols regularly bullied Harvey Wallson, finally making him lick toilet water in the handicapped stall in the second floor bathroom, and at seventeen, he hit ma the first time. The contributions to the jackal seemed endless. The drinking, the fighting, the reckless driving, the cursing, the side-comments to co-workers, the endless stares at women even in church, all culminating with the argument he had with his common-law wife Jessie last year, right before she threw him out for good.

Two final images danced before the dove and the jackal, then shot forth. Though the circumstances leading up to Floyd's murder belonged to the jackal, the act of the murder itself greatly enhanced the intensity of the dove. Still, the conclusion of Floyd's all night shouter with Jessie was devastating. It was 3:09 in the morning, and Floyd had her by the hair. He had her bent over the kitchen sink with her nose scraping into the dried remains of some baked beans on the plate on top of the pile. He was leaning over her, and yelling into her face, and grabbing a spoon, and threatening to dig her eye out with it.

The jackal took this last image in one swallow and then devoured the fragile white head of the dove. The spiritual victim beat its wings and the jackal snapped the white body from side to side. It smashed its prey against the right pedestal, leaving dark blue spatters of blood and feathers. The sound was deafening.

The jackal dropped the lifeless body of the dove and gnashed at the hot blue mist that poured from its wounds. The coarse hairs of this beast stood straight and lathered, like wet knives. It turned to Floyd with blood dripping off its teeth.

"Come with me, Bladnestannabellshannah. For now, you are mine. Your deeds have given me the right to escort you to the hall of thoughts. It is the second of many..."

Melvin began to exit Floyd's consciousness. The retreat was achingly slow. The jackal tensed on its haunches and looked. Its ears whipped back close to the head, and it bared its teeth showing spotted gums.

"It sees me!" Melvin thought. "Oh hurry, please!"

The jackal howled. It snapped at the air and clawed at its own nose. Melvin was almost to the archway. The jackal screamed and elongated its face. The jaws stretched and chased Melvin the length of the hallway by themselves and Melvin felt its scalding breath. Then it was gone. The whole corridor was gone.

Melvin was back in his bedroom, floating behind the version of himself that was about to press the button so to initially activate Passive Passenger. The clock ticked right up to 9:10 AM, but just before the rejoining he heard something. A voice, faint like an echo on damp cobblestone.

I'll be waiting for you...Melvin.

The joining was complete. Melvin shrieked, shoved his chair out of the way, and crawled under his desk. He curled to a ball and jammed his knuckles into his mouth. His eyes stayed wide open.

He did not come out for a long, long time.

1:40 PM

Melvin reached for the carton of Tropicanna. He would simply go back to his room and unplug the computer. End of conversation. He popped the bird-beak of the container of orange juice and brought it to his lips. He wiped his moustache on his sleeve. The side door opened, and he heard Dot come in. He heard the crinkle of brown bagged packages being thrust onto the kitchen table a few feet behind him, and he slowly took another swig of juice.

“Look at you,” she said. “How many times have we talked about leaving the refrigerator door open? And if you are going to drink your juice, the rule is to use a glass, remember?”

He heard her start reaching into the bags and then heard her stop.

“Did you call the plumber like I asked you to?”

Melvin kept his glance focused into the fridge. The door shelves boasted a museum of crudded Dorothy shit; old Balsamic Vinaigrette, a quart of soy milk with dried wavery stains around the opening, a six pack of Promise Activ peach drink that actively lowered cholesterol, and a Tupperware tub filled with salmon croquettes floating in two levels of oil, one gray and the thinner one on top almost maroon with small white fat-bubbles skimming the surface. Melvin took another slow swig, the spoke at the fridge.

“Fuck the plumber, fuck the orange juice, and fuck, y’all.”

“What?” she said. “Wha...what did you just say to me?”

Dorothy’s voice was a symphony, an auditory kaleidoscope of emotions, all the colors. There was anger, frustration, righteous defense and absolute disbelief, but also undercurrents of doubt. Melvin liked that texture very much, but he was filled with complex emotions of his own. Clearly, Floyd Lynch had left a residue. That was a concern. Slowly he turned to face his wife.

Her mouth dropped open.

“My God, what happened to you?”

Melvin looked at her in disgust and her right hand flew up to her face. It fluttered around her cheek.

“What?” he said. He pushed an impatient whistle through his teeth, slammed the fridge door, and bent to look at himself in the reflection of the toaster. He nearly gasped. The image was warped and slanted like a funhouse mirror, but the distortion did not alter the facts. Some of the little hair he had left hanging over his forehead was simply lost, and his eyebrows had gone from graying to bright white. His wrinkles had deepened and his eyes were sunk back in their sockets. He looked insane, like he had recently seen something not meant for human eyes.

“I want you out of here, Dorothy. I don’t care where you go or what you do, but I want you gone now. I want to be alone today.”

She put her hands on her hips.

“You know, Melvin, this is all a result of the way you feel about yourself. If you had stuck with engineering and dismissed these silly ideas of becoming an academic-“

Melvin's eyes got huge.

"Don't y'all try that ole' psychologic bullshit with me, girl! I said get out, so git the fuck out!" He reached into the sink and grabbed a tablespoon. "Just don't make me use this, you hear?"

Dorothy retreated to her bedroom, eyes locked on Melvin, feeling her way like a drunk. She slammed the door. Melvin could hear the nervous bumps and shuffles of clothes being yanked from hangers. When she emerged, she was wearing an older, heavier winter coat than she had used for the trip to the supermarket. Probably going on an outdoor shopping spree now. The witch. She brushed past him toward the side door, and he growled at her. She slammed that door behind her, oh yes, a great ole' door slammer was she. He watched through the laundry room window. She backed out of the driveway haphazardly, and then she was gone. He tossed the spoon on the counter and stomped back to his own room.

I'll get some order around here, just wait and see!

He opened the bedroom door and the computer was waiting for him.

You'll have to get past me first, you leach!

Melvin shook his fist and stormed through the room. He dumped drawers, upended boxes, and routed the shelves in search of his Stanley claw hammer. He crawled on his hands and knees and swiped at the piles of National Geographic and Scientific American stowed under the drafting board. He shoved over a few Hills Brothers coffee cans that threw splashes of bolts and ball bearings to the carpet. He spied the hammer stuck under a snaked pile of twelve gauge extension cord, and gripped the handle. Face red, he backed out and stood up. His knees popped. He approached the computer and raised the hammer over his head.

You paid two thousand dollars for that computer, don't smash it. Be sensible.

Hard breath swelled in his chest and he dropped the hammer.

I'll unplug it right now. Boom-boom, out go the lights, Passive Passenger gone for good.

He did nothing.

Suddenly Melvin threw back his head and laughed like a stoned junkie who had just gotten a crazy urge to go straight and dump an ounce of prime blow down the toilet. But Melvin knew better, hell, he'd seen all the movies.

You don't quit until the stash is gone.

Melvin sat in front of the terminal and let his mind wander the path it truly desired. It took all of three seconds.

What's next? No, who's next? Who is my next subject?

But that was not quite right either. Entertainers, daredevils, politicians, pick a card, any card, they all seemed insignificant. Hell, who's next was not even the right question.

The right question was lurking beneath the surface and Melvin almost dreaded its acknowledgement. Almost. True, this morning he had been frightened straight through to the marrow, but the events had been a surprise. Now, he was better prepared, that was a cold hard fact. And was he not a symbol of education? Did he not stand right here, right now at the very state of the art, at the cutting

edge, at the brink of greatness? Did not the movers and shakers of history press on through the unexplained until it was reshaped by their genius into manageable terms? It was his duty to press on. It was his duty to ask the question,

How many corridors are there, and then, what's beyond the dove and the jackal?

He put his hands on the desk so to push up, go get the newspaper, and scan the obituaries. His face went red hot. He fought a dark urge to strike something.

I can't use the names in the paper because they will have been stiff at least a day already. Passive Passenger only goes back five minutes in time. That leaves twenty three hours and fifty five minutes of post mortem that I'll miss.

He grabbed both his earlobes and pulled.

A true scientist observes the entire process from front to back. A true scientist returns to the experiment at the exact place he left off!

Melvin balled his fists and rubbed his knuckles in his eyes.

Think! We left Floyd Lynch at the point of two minutes into the hereafter. To logically continue the process we need someone freshly dead, seven minutes dead to be exact. But how will I know when the right moment hits? I'm not clairvoyant.

An old, buried exasperation washed through him. Melvin turned and swept a wild glance across his collection of inventions. In disgust, he went to shove at his radio scanner, and noted the yellow tag on it. Captain Hugh McNulty.

He knows.

Melvin froze.

McNulty can show me "who."

Melvin smiled, and turned back to his computer to tab through the subject directory of Passive Passenger. He found Hugh McNulty's social security number and entered it into the Subject mode after entering his own in the Operator space.

The scanner will tell me "when."

His system was ready. He fired up his home made radio. He sat. He listened. He patiently waited for someone to die.

"Box 2173, Five Star Refinery. Reported to be oil tank on fire. The following companies will respond. Engines 38, 44, 29, 32, Ladders 15 and 23, Medic 4, Battalion 6, Deputy 1, respond, over."

Melvin bolted upright in his chair. It had been a two hour wait, but the fire at the oil refinery was perfect.

"Engine 38 responding to Five Star Refinery, second in, over."

"McNulty," Melvin whispered. He scrambled to the computer and hovered over the RETURN button. The scanner was silent for twenty minutes.

"Engine 38 on location. We have a heavy fire, one tank. Unit has been ordered to Northwest side to lead off with master stream devices, over."

Ten more minutes ticked by. Melvin was salivating. McNulty's voice suddenly shouted over the tinny speaker,

"Fireman down! Northwest side! Send rescue squad now! Fireman is down, respond!"

Melvin silently cheered.

I'll see it happen all over again through McNulty's eyes. I'll know the circumstances of the accident and the severity of the injury. And if the poor guy does kick the bucket, I'll know that dead man's name!

Melvin struck the RETURN button.

Captain McNulty hopped out and watched Zac pull a five inch hose from the back of the truck.

"Tie it tight, kid," he said. Signal when it's firm." The young fireman ran to put a wrap on the hydrant and Tommy Green followed with the wrench. The kid had forgotten it. McNulty turned to his driver.

"Eddie, once the hose is secure drive straight eighty feet up to that big black gate valve by the cooling tower there. Get parallel to it." Old Eddie waited for a thumbs-up from the kid and McNulty turned with the stiff wind to eye the tank of crude that was active. It was the worst fire he had ever seen. Oily heat blanketed the air in ripply waves, and flecks of black ash swirled in the sky. Melted snow ran down the gradual three inch grade and made small whirlpools under the grid work of piping. The oil tank towered over it all and was speaking in smoke signals.

It's my party and I'll bitch if I want to!

A football field high and ninety feet across, "Crude #43" vomited upward a furl of black smoke thick as chocolate mousse. The two inch thick steel at the top was melted, split and bent inward with the iron spiral staircase swung out to the side like a loose strand of hair.

The wind shifted and a dense wave of smoke splashed the equally large Naphtha gas tank thirty feet to the left. The thick plume stained it spotty black.

"Just in time," McNulty thought. It was their job to protect the exposure of that tank of Naphtha, so close to #43 that they shared the same dike. Seven engines were already on the front side of #43 with deluge and foam units and McNulty had been ordered to put up a defensive stream on the neighboring tank. Fast.

McNulty spun around to check the progress of his two field men and glanced up to the Rt. 95 overpass. A news van had pulled up on the shoulder and its crew was setting up tripods.

Great. To the uneducated eye it will look like we are spraying down the wrong tank.

It should not have bothered him, but it did. He still had a foul taste in his mouth from being selectively edited on channel nine and his boys deserved better. Tommy Green had been with him for fifteen years, he was family. Old Eddie was six months from retirement and though Zac could be a bit of a wildcard, he listened pretty well under pressure. They were a rare collection of men that this business hadn't turned sour. They all deserved better than this, and they were heroes just being here.

Melvin agreed. Though he felt relatively safe inside the brave exterior of Captain McNulty, there was something absolutely terrifying about that smoking tanker. It was a God, and Melvin could draw enough from McNulty's experience

to know that the neighboring tank of Naphtha was the angel of death.

Still, the scene was mostly chaos to Melvin's unpracticed eye and the old professor understood only parts of it, especially as McNulty began running his drill. McNulty's mind was far advanced when compared to that of Floyd Lynch, and much of his decision making was based on an instinct of expertise rather than a visible hierarchy of principles. Melvin went through the motions and only caught some stuff on the surface. Time flew.

Eddie drove the truck and that motion unsnapped the hose. They set the pressure at 220 P.S.I. With help, McNulty struggled a thing called a "Stang Gun" off the roof of the truck. Zac went to set up the water cannon and Tommy Green shouted orders at him concerning locking devices, wheel locks, and pins.

McNulty was checking off Tommy's commands in his head, and he stole another peek at Naphtha #2 and Crude #43. The conditions had not changed, but the sloped eight foot dike surrounding the bottom perimeter of the two seemed awfully full. McNulty went up on tiptoes. The water and foam units from the other engines had been over-pumping Crude #43 and the collected water in the dike was far too high. It was five feet deep at least, with a layer of foam floating the top.

It seemed significant for some reason, but McNulty could not nail it.

"Pressurize," he ordered. Eddie worked the controls and the hose fattened with water. Thirty feet East of the truck, a burst of spray suddenly came through the nozzle in Tommy's hands. Zac helped him stabilize and McNulty looked at his watch.

Four minutes. Battalion Chief Romonosky would be proud.

"Four minutes," Melvin thought. *"Here we go, oh boy, oh Jesus."*

Commotion. Tommy and Zac were shouting in each other's faces and fighting for control of the live nozzle between them.

"Report!" McNulty yelled into his radio. The plea was ignored.

"They're not fighting for control!" Melvin shouted to no one. *"Tommy's trying to hand it over, and Zac won't take it. Oh boy, which is going to get it, the vet or the kid, oh Lordy!"*

Zac lost the argument. With obvious protest, he took hold of the nozzle and fought for a moment to keep it controlled. Tommy broke away to a run and made straight for the tanker, his boots kicking up dirty splashes. McNulty looked to where Tommy was headed and frowned. A refinery yard worker in brown coveralls was crawling atop the lip of the dike.

"Damn it Tommy, hurry," McNulty thought. His best fireman reached the foot of the dike and pawed up the slope. The yard worker cradled a scorched hand and made his way along the crest in a three-legged crawl. Disoriented, he went up on his knees. His hair was matted with blood.

Tommy straddled the lip of the dike, ran along it and reached out his hand. They clasped palms and that is when the top of Crude #43 exploded.

There was a WHOOSH and a huge THWACK. The ground shook and an orange, mushroom shaped flare rocketed up against the gray sky. Then came a hearty BANG which pressed McNulty's eardrums and rattled his skull. A tremen-

dous wave of white heat followed and he fought to keep his eyes open against it.

Shrapnel flew everywhere. Small pieces whizzed overhead and a star shaped hunk at least twenty feet square spun across the parking lot like a jagged Frisbee. It smashed into a guard shack and turned it to splinters.

A boiling sheet of black crude rained down over the dike area and ignited the ground in a ring of blue flame. The yard worker was toast. Unprotected, he went up like parchment and rolled down the slope. The hot blaze swarmed the crest of the dike, grew and caged Tommy Green in a wall of combustion.

The very air was on fire. Tommy's dark outline of headgear and long black fire-retardant coat danced and jerked within the orange shroud and even back where McNulty stood, each breath tasted like a hot spray of Quaker State. He gave a desperate look back to Zac and saw the young man working the Strang gun to an alternate position.

"Yes," he thought. *"It's our only chance."*

"No!" Melvin thought simultaneously. *Whatever it is, futz it up please! We are so close!"*

Zac aimed the bullet like spray and hit Tommy square in the chest. It knocked him into the dike and he haphazardly splashed through the foamy surface of water. But what happened next made no sense to Melvin or McNulty. A flame at least thirty feet high shot up from the water where Tommy had broken the surface. It whooshed up like a huge torch and then vanished.

"But water and foam are not flammable," McNulty thought.

He dropped the walkie-talkie and threw his hands on the stepladder.

"There's a leak in the Naphtha tank! There's a layer of flammable gas in the dike between the water and the foam!"

McNulty mounted the top of the truck and shaded his eyes. Tommy came up for air and broke the plane of foam. He'd lost his helmet and mask, he was exposed, he became a fireball and McNulty caught a glimpse of skin melting on bone just before Tommy went back under. But the Captain's mind did not allow him to move toward sorrow. Not yet. He was steel, he jumped off the truck, he twisted his ankle, he threw Eddie aside and reached for the engine radio.

"Fireman down! Northwest side! Send rescue squad now! Fireman is down! Respond!"

McNulty fumbled for the dashboard controls. He hit the siren, threw on the flashers and put the high beams on alternate blare. An audio-visual epitaph.

Tommy was gone. It hit him and he fell to the ground on his butt. He felt his throat closing with grief.

Melvin left McNulty's body and began his ascent. At the top of the raging tanker he looked down and silently applauded. Tommy Green was floating face down. Fire pools still burned the ground all around like jungle death candles.

The scene disappeared.

Melvin wiped away the tears that flooded his scalded eyes. His hands felt as

if they were greased and his tongue held the taste of a crudded dipstick. He looked at his watch and it read 3:45 PM. He took his kitchen timer, set it on seven minutes and hit the ground running, his fingers in a mad chase across the keys to hunt down Tommy Green's social security number. At last, he found it.

It did not make him smile. There were hundreds of Thomas Greens, and eighty nine of them were listed as firemen. The vein in Melvin's forehead throbbed. He clutched at his hair and some of it came off in his hands. His watch read 3:48, four minutes to go.

Melvin squeezed shut his eyes and tried to force his mind to march in a pattern of logical thought. It was not easy. Anger and frustration were a bright red blockade and it took a supreme effort for Melvin to guide his brain toward the one identifying factor at hand, the social security number. He put both palms against his temple and tried to rush his thoughts through the tangent they were trying to explore.

My students are listed in my grade book by their social security numbers. Most of them are local and the first three digits are common to this geographical area. By god, I've seen the exchange a thousand times! 223 through 302!

Melvin's eyes flew open.

Chances are that Tommy Green was born and raised here. I can identify him, ha!

He scanned the screen and blinked. His jaw dropped and he crashed both fists to the desk. There were two Thomas Greens with the common exchange and a third just one digit off. All three were firemen. Melvin shut his mouth. For a moment his mind soared to calculate the sorry odds of actually finding three Philadelphia born firemen with identical names.

Time Melvin, time!

He looked at his watch. 3:50 PM and thirty seconds. A minute and a half until kick-off and his mind was an angry traffic jam. He scratched his head furiously.

I've got to do all three! Passive Passenger doesn't burn any real time. It's instantaneous. The only seconds I'll lose are those used to punch in the numbers. I can do this, but I've got to move fast.

Melvin took his last index card, wrote down the three social security numbers and checked his watch. 3:51, one minute to go, he made himself punch the keys with care and backed out to screen number four.

O – ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

Melvin entered his own and hit the RETURN button.

S – ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

Melvin glanced down at the first number on the index card and raised his fingers above the keyboard.

"Melvin! It smells like smoke in here. What on earth are you doing?"

Melvin whirled in his chair. Dorothy's eyes widened in response to his appearance, but she looked ready this time. She took a step forward.

"We have to talk."

"You're in my room," Melvin whispered.

“Yes, and it stinks in here. What have you been doing?”

“You have interrupted me.” Another whisper.

“You bet I have, and it’s high time-“

“Get out! Get the fuck out of here, now!”

Melvin was on his feet, body shaking, fists clenched, tears flowing. His ankle hurt where McNulty had twisted it and he shifted his weight to point a finger.

“Out!” he roared. It hurt his throat.

“No, I will not.”

“I said-“

“No.”

The alarm on the kitchen timer sounded. Melvin looked at the device and then at Dorothy. His mouth made babbling motions and the rage in him was so hot it felt religious. Dorothy was oblivious.

“Melvin, there is something wrong here. There is something terribly wrong with you and I’ll be God-damned if I am going to let you-“

She stopped in mid-sentence. Something had changed, something new in the air, thick and heavy. The room still held the aftertaste of distant smoke, hot voices, and something else.

Melvin was smiling.

“Dorothy, I want you to assist me in a scientific experiment.”

“What?”

Melvin shuffled past her and into the hall.

“Wait here,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“But-“

Melvin put up his hands, gave his head a gentle shake and re-lit the smile.

“The situation is under control. Wait right here and we’ll talk, I promise.”

He hobbled through the kitchen and out the side door. The cold felt good. He laughed into the wind and made his way to the back yard shed.

To get his ax.

Dorothy Helitz felt the pang of danger, real danger the moment Melvin left the room. Her mind told her to flee the house while she had the chance, but she fought it. This was her house too, damn it, and hell if she was not going to get in the last word. Besides, she was dying to tell Melvin face to face what she had done, dying to see his expression when he was informed that she had phoned Gentle Giant Movers, that she had pre-paid by credit card for a pair of brutes to pack all his mechanical crap and cart it to the dump. She looked at the room and rubbed her arms.

I feel soiled just being here. And where are those moving men? I called them an hour ago.

It was too quiet and Dorothy had a sudden apprehension about confronting Melvin alone. It was a childish, yet real sensation that bordered on terror. She tried to shake it and couldn’t quite do it.

Weak men are the one’s who cause the worst domestic crimes, I’ve seen it in all the

magazines. *And I really think he has gone crazy. Maybe face to face isn't such a hot idea.*

Dorothy smiled.

I'll write him a note and go straight back to the car. If I see him in the hallway, I'll run right through him.

She approached the desk and took up Melvin's pen. It was slick with a oily film of sweat, and she frowned. No tissues in sight, no paper, and the index card file was empty. On the floor was a lone card with numbers on it. She picked it up, bent to write on the back of it, and looked up at the computer. She giggled.

Now there's poetic justice. I'll type him a message on his precious computer. That will show him.

Melvin reached for the ax and yanked it out from under the wheelbarrow and aluminum step ladder, that which had spider webs floating between the rungs. The weapon in his hands was a long handled affair with old smudges and paint drops splattered up the shaft. A long split in the hickory just beneath the steel head was bound with old frayed duct tape and the micro-finished cutter was dotted with rust. Except at the tip. The keen edge was roll beveled and sharp for added strength and increased splitting ability.

"The right tool for the right job," Melvin said. He hefted the ax, left hand at bottom and his right up at the head. His smile had not faltered.

I'm going to kill you in the name of science, my sweet, and follow wherever you may go.

Melvin limped back to the house.

Dorothy look up at the screen and cursed. She had just typed "Dear Melvin," but the letters were not showing. Aiming carefully, she hit the "D" key again, but it did not take either. The cursor just jerked in its place below the words,

S – ENTER SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

"Ah," she said. "It doesn't take letters. It's a code. I've got to log on just like in the movies." She read the screen again and smiled.

Oh, you're not so clever, Melvin. All I have to do is enter your social security number. And it's just like you to come up with such an easy password, too.

Dorothy typed in Melvin's social security number. She snickered and raised her index finger above the RETURN key.

Melvin tiptoed up the hall. The element of surprise was key and the splat of wet feet on hardwood would be a dead giveaway. He heard Dorothy snicker and quickened his pace, careful not to bang the ax head along the wall. He rounded the corner of the doorway and geared his muscles for the rush, the set, and the downward stroke.

I'm going to put my legs and back into it, Dorothy. I'm primed and ready for sport, Dorothy.

Melvin loped around the corner and froze. Dorothy's back was turned, that was good, but she was also bent over the computer keyboard, and that was very bad.

“Dorothy, don’t touch that! You don’t know what you’re-“

Dorothy had not heard him coming. His harsh call from behind was startling, but her mind had already commanded the motor function of her finger. It was on its way down and there was no stopping it now. She hit the RETURN key.

The ax in Melvin’s hands vanished. His feet were not cold or wet, and he was limping back down the hall to the side door. For a moment he was disoriented, as his body had been magically turned ninety degrees left and five feet to the East, set in motion against his will. Still, the overall sensation was familiar. It was the eerie feeling of becoming a Passive Passenger.

Melvin felt himself open the side door with his thoughts from five minutes before on replay. A keen anticipation of grabbing the ax was at the forefront.

“I’m in myself!” Melvin thought. “I’m the Operator and the Subject!” He tried to shout a warning to himself as he crunched out barefoot into the snow, but of course, he was “passive.” The original Melvin had taken his sweet old time.

Melvin re-experienced pulling out the ax, appreciating the craftsmanship of the head, running his hand along the crude shank; it seemed to take hours. Finally, he was back inside, limping up the hall and quickening the pace upon hearing Dorothy’s snicker. He rounded the corner, raised the ax and felt a new panic.

Why aren’t I floating behind myself for the re-entry? Why is this journey not completing its cycle?

He felt himself shout at Dorothy. He saw for a second time, her finger punch down at the RETURN key.

One of the flaws in the program must be that you can’t do yourself! Oh please don’t hit that button!

Dorothy hit the RETURN key, and Melvin found himself back in the hall, axless and limping toward the side door for a third pass. This time he could feel the thoughts of two Melvins, the first tickled with the thrill of the hunt and the second obsessed with the five minute old fear of becoming his own Passive Passenger.

The thoughts of the first two Melvins clashed and overlapped. They made harsh echoes and squealed against each other like electric feedback caught in a closet. Back outside, back inside, up the hall and around the corner. Dorothy again struck the RETURN key as he knew she would.

Again, Melvin joined himself and he howled into the deafening roar of three Melvins plus one. His head had become a torture chamber, overcrowded with multiple, dizzying, collisions of thought.

Melvin endured the cycle fifty-eight times.

On the fifty-ninth, his heart exploded.

Dorothy struck the RETURN key and spun around. Melvin was in the doorway with an ax and for a second, she just could not buy it.

You may as well show me an infant smoking a cigar and driving a tractor.

Dorothy gasped.

Melvin is in the doorway with a God damned ax!

He screamed in agony. To Dorothy, it sounded like a vast number of voices in unison, and again, she questioned her sense of perception. She brought her hands to her face.

Melvin turned in his hands to clutch at his chest and the motion turned the ax blade inward. He fell over face forward and the butt side of the ax met the floor first. His forehead came in a close second place.

There was a loud THUNK and a wet SHUUCK as Melvin Helitz became one with cold steel. The computer whined, sizzled, and gave a loud POP. Its screen shut down to dead black.

And Dorothy screamed. She screamed and screamed and...

Melvin shot out of his body and watched his wife scream.

"I never filled out the life insurance forms at school, Dorothy! I forgot! What do you think about that! I forgot!"

The deep and brilliant colors of Melvin's final journey began to close in. He opened his arms to it.

"I'll finally know," he thought. "I'll finally know."

And somewhere off in the distance, a jackal was laughing.

Fallin Gout

Devin Wayne Davis

goldfish flop
in thin water
with flecked carp,
up from the deep
black stream—
slippery & soft
as anchovy bones
... on a wet walk.

A Change Meeting

Geoff Ralston

“Well, I see you’re living well.”

I didn’t even bother to look at her. My concentration was fixed on the blank wall across the room. Averting my gaze, a hackneyed self-defense tactic I had picked up when dealing with women. It was a bad habit. I lay cross-legged upon the bed, my head tilted back with a cigarette protruding from my lips. The cherry burned crimson and cut a hole into the blackness.

“What’s it to ya?”

She shifted her weight and sauntered over to the bedside. My eyes were drawn to motion and my focus shifted away from the wall and onto the shady woman who penetrated my world. Her silky, black dress hugged her hips tightly, and I could barely make out her slender features through the dark veil of the night.

Her hair, blacker than midnight in a snowless winter, hung down past her chest, flowing like an open vein despite the stillness of the room. The only source of color found in her visage was her lips; a gentle, yet misleading hint of mantling rose in an otherwise blighted existence. She continued to drift around slowly, lingering every so often to kick through piles of dirty clothes and shift the rummage that blanketed the carpet.

“You always were a slob, Jer.”

I took a long drag on my cigarette. The bitter sting of the tobacco cut into my lungs as I breathed sweet release. Rising from my position, I slowly exhaled as I stubbed out the butt in a silver ashtray on my bedstand. My gaze never tore from her face. Not because of how beautiful she was, oh no. I’d seen it. It’s not every day that something as perfect as her walks into your life.

I just didn’t trust her.

“I mean, God, this place looks like Hell.”

The clock on my nightstand read 11:48.

It was almost midnight. I was out of time. She had always been rudely concise and I hated her for it. But why did she come back now, so close to the end of my pathetic existence? What were the fates trying to tell me? I rose from the bed, slouching with deceit as I put on my jacket and grabbed my gloves. I had to get out of there.

“Most people never been to Hell, sweetheart.”

Finally, she turned to face me. Her response was cold and blunt, like the blade of an old knife.

“And you have?”

We were no more than three feet apart. I could feel her attempting to radi-

ate intimidation from her features. It always sickened me; however, this was no occasion to be bludgeoned by a woman I hadn't seen for almost two years. Who was she to think I would succumb to such gestures after all this time?

I guess physical presence can be a necessary element for fear, I thought as I smiled. The spell was broken. The lines were redrawn in my favor. I held all the high cards. I admit now, that at that moment, I had never felt so alive.

With a halcyon-like pose, I slipped past her and headed towards the door. But I wasn't finished. There was no way she was going to have the last word. Turning abruptly, I stared into her bitter eyes. They were like ice.

"Well Alice, I was married to you..."

Y & K

writing by TS

Yusuf and Khatiza were flying to Australia for a two-week vacation to celebrate their 40th anniversary.

Suddenly, over the public address system, the Captain announces, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am afraid I have some very bad news.

Our engines have ceased functioning, and we will attempt an emergency landing.

Luckily, I see an uncharted island below us and we should be able to land on the beach.

However, the odds are that we may never be rescued and will have to live on the island for the rest of our lives!"

Thanks to the skill of the flight crew, the plane lands safely on the island.

An hour later Yusuf turns to his wife and asks, "Khatiza, did we pay our quarterly dues check to the bandra jamaat yet?"

"No, sweetheart," she responds.

Yusuf, still shaken from the crash landing, then asks, "Khatiza, did we pay our wajebad?"

"Oy, no! I'm sorry. I forgot to send the check," she says.

"One last thing, Khatiza. Did you remember to send a check for the installing the lift in the bandra mosque fund," he asks

"Oy, forgive me, Yusuf," begged Khatiza. "I didn't send that one, either."

Yusuf grabs her and gives her the biggest kiss in 40 years.

Khatiza pulls away and asks him, "So, why did you kiss me?"

Yusuf - "They'll find us."

Demons

Christopher Gaskins

Daddy, we never talked
about Marjuan -
your coworker, friend, our neighbor or whatever
he was
to you; to me
he was the man who took
my clothes
off when I was eight years old.

Even now, daddy,
your wrinkled-up, snickering face, the
days
when you drank and cared
about nothing
stil block my periphery. I can't
bring to mind
what Marjuan really looked like or any expressions

he might have worn
if I'd have scratched his surface.
I only see
in shades of tan his full-
length cock, I
only feel
his two dirtied hands pushing me eagerly
towards it,

I only smell
the salt of sweat and glistening
precum,
a tangle of pubic hair
catching my tears.

When against my will and thinking of you,
your reluctant fathering,
I believe you both

were not much different.
I only taste
the dick-flavored vomit still burning
its way upward, I
only hear
the names you called me when I finally
left.
But I try to forget.

Concerto no. 3

Shaun Millard

Two fallen knees made pillows,
of town square.
The desperate remains equidistant,
from any facade.
Rags weren't meant for vanity,
but tatters failed to keep him warm.
Gaping holes may be fashionable in Milan,
but not when fires ignite from inedible refuse.
Church bells sang midnight,
and his harmonies bawled.
Bellowing ravenous agony,
throughout the borough.
Two unchaste knees,
settled in the middle of World,
supporting Man's liberation.
Enthralled to dispense poverty,
his arching back,
arms of wings,
crestfallen neck,
eyes to obscurity,
heart to leaping chest.
The square
birthing an angel.

Camping In Colorado

Jean Berrett

I was sitting alone by a dead campfire when suddenly the mountain shook. Just before, I'd been watching a small gray spider crawl over pebbles and jagged stones. It crawled very fast, then stopped when the mountain shook, then crawled very fast again. I remembered curtains blowing in an easy wind as sun fell through an open window and made my babydoll's blond hair shine and her blue glass eyes light up. Daddy will be home soon. Mother has put something on to cook. It smells good. I am hungry. Maybe I should go outside and look for Robbie. Maybe he will let me be Little Injun with him as cowboy Red Ryder. My hair is dark, almost black, cut short and straight like an Indian's. How special I feel because he will play with me, only a sister, only a girl. Again the mountain shakes. They are dynamiting the rock so that another road can be laid all the way up to Independence Pass. Aside from me and the tiny gray spider I wonder how many things alive must take somehow into account the shaking of this mountain. Now the spider is crawling up a stoolsized rock where I sit and drink coffee each morning. The rock is amazingly red, splotched and speckled all over with green and yellow lichen. The side of the mountain above this site looks like huge rocks stacked haphazardly and about to topple over. Everywhere up there at every angle, dead trees lie about. What killed them I wonder? From down here they look like small tossed sticks. I fall asleep on an armybrown blanket spread over the grass and dream again of my father's death, how his beaten body fell out of the boat where his brother was sleeping drunk. And how we brought no charges because surely his brother did not kill him, for surely he too was drunk and even so had no intention and besides, even if it were so, who were we to multiply horror upon horror? I have flown in other dreams, riding the stark and intimate wind, maneuvering gusts over and under my wings. When I woke I'd remember how small we are who crawl and wonder and weep down here beneath the flight of everything.

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