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cc@d

the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag



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Scars art

3 (a Tennessee Air Guard display plane in Nashville, and a Black Death Vodka box on a black table), 9 (Katie, who passed away 12/11/08), 10 (a glassware collection, a martini drink with spun sugar on top of the glass, the dog Wai Naie laying on the carpet, two stray dogs photographed in San Juan, and a b&w photo of a dog in Urnana).
Cover art of a pumpkin on display outside in Pennsylvania.

Cigarette Poem

C Ra McGuirt

Staring out the window
of a Friday-homeward bus,
I saw a cigarette butt
lying in the gutter,

and thought: "It's there,
but it's not doing
anything."

Then I gazed
into the window

and saw my
own reflection

looking out

poetry
the passionate stuff

Third Eye, art by Edward
Michael O'Durr Supranowicz

White Rabbit

Michael Ceraolo

His mind was a funhouse mirror,
taking facts,
taking ideas,
taking perceptions,
twisting them into grotesque shapes,
sometimes comically, sometimes not



Atlantis

Michael Ceraolo

The discovery in the early twenty-first century
of a cave where the animals had evolved without eyes
led the litany of the literal-minded to look further
for the long-thought-to-be-mythical island
And their patience was rewarded long long years later
when the island was discovered in an underwater cave
And the humans who lived there had also evolved
without eyes and with sonar for communication

The Right Eye
Has Done Wrong,
art by Aaron Wilder



Escape

Janet Kuypers

Going Nowhere

Janet Kuypers

while in the hospital, i knew my body had to recover

but for my soul
being in that hospital was like drowning every day

week after week
i was gasping for air
while looking for a way to escape

i'm in a plan
& the air is compressed
& it feels just like everything else
i'm in a plane
& it feels like
i'm going nowhere

every time i'm on an airplane
going across the country, going across the world
i'm in that coffin
that quaint little compressed tube
& i have no idea what it'll be like
until i step off of that place, outside

in that coffin, i have no idea
what my final destination will be like

when they fly you up that high
they compress that air
make it feel like generic life
that you can share with all the other generic people
& after a while
it feels like everything else
that shared air
so yeah, while you're on that plane
it feels like you're going nowhere

what will it be like
when i land



skydiving
image
by John
Yotko





Doorknob, art by
Cheryl Townsend

A Knock At The Door

Tom Deiker

We rushed him to the hospital
Delirious and drenched in sweat.
He came back powdered and pajama'd,
Tearful from the attention:

Draped on the Lazy Boy,
A thinned and pliant body
Stilled by exhaustion and gravity,
Eyes glazed, face pallid, mouth agape

-- Like the corpse he soon would be.

What About Tomorrow?

John T. Hitchner

The snap of clock hands,
the rip of envelopes,
the mounds of trash:
heaps of obsolete appliances,
severed limbs and branches,
plastic bags stuffed with God knows what
await crushers, splitters, and haulers.
So much of our lives disposed—
furniture and food, children and cars:
a boy an ash tray for his new daddy's cigarettes,
a girl a plaything for her new "uncle"
while Mommy negotiates dollars on the street.
So much to lose in so little time.



Garbage Overflow
B_amp_W_01, art by
David Matson

The Coffee House

Alex Jimenez

I

We meet every day at the Coffee House
I forget how it all started
I order black coffee no sugar
You drink a fancy chocolate something
At first we just chat shyly
You with your school girl looks
Me, reminding you of a professor
Later you tell me you slept with him
Sophomore or maybe Junior year
Makes me hopeful somehow

II

We meet before and after work
Sometimes at lunch
Depends on my case work
Or if your boss has you running errands
Flirting intensifies each day
Our arms next to each other
In the summer time with short sleeves
By winter time we are holding hands

III

One of the partners sees us
Asks me if my wife knows about you
I look at her, smile and walk away
She is a gossip so everyone will know
Yet, it matters little to me

IV

You even met my wife once
On a Saturday when I stopped by
To get a cup and she was with me
To my surprise you were there
At our table, chocolate in hand
I brought her over and told her
You were a paralegal at the firm
She shook your hand firmly
You smiled that beautiful smile
Winked at me and tilted your head



Tribute 1, art by
Rose E. Grier

The way you do to show a better angle
You swept your hair out of your face
She smiled back and lingered
I could tell she liked you
She even told me as much later
She is a bigger flirt than me

V

We begin to talk boldly
About meeting somewhere else
About traveling together

VI

Your boyfriend, I meet as well
He is a handsome young man
Remind me, bike messenger?
We could not be more different
I am jealous of his carefree ways
The tattoos on his arms
The swagger in his step
I am sure that he could not imagine
That I was once like him
Or at least I pretend I was
Always busy with school
Wishing I could be like those boys
I lost that desire in law school

VII

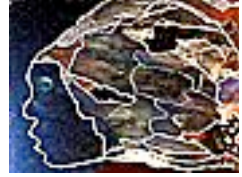
And now as a partner
My life is scripted
Except for the Coffee House
Where I find you eager to talk
You want to tell me about that movie
Or that song you heard on the way
About your best friend Becca

VIII

Sometimes I don't listen
All I see is your smile
The angle of your face
The sweet voice that accompanies me

IX

It is Spring now and we have plans
You are coming with me on a business trip



Night Woman,
art by
Mark Graham



art by Joel
McGregor



art by Nicole
Aimie Macaluso

Your boyfriend has no idea
My wife might know but does not care
She is busy with her mixed doubles partner

X

We sit side by side during our flight
We hold hands like lovers
We even kiss for the first time
We arrive in San Francisco in rapture
As soon as we get to the hotel
We rip our clothes off and make love
Or have sex, we have different stories
We spend all of our time there together
Too afraid that we may never have this again
We fly back to Virginia still acting like lovers

XI

The next day I wait for you at the Coffee House
You do not arrive and I worry
In a hurry I go to your boss and ask
He says you called in sick
I resist the urge for a while
But call you after an hour
Lars answers the phone
I ask him about you and how you are
His voice trembles
He tells me you are gone
I am confused and ask him again
He tells me all your things are gone
I promise to call him back
I call your cell phone
And there is no answer

XII

For days all I think about is you
I call Lars again and he is confused
We meet at the Coffee House
He tells me that you came home and cried
Packed all of your stuff while he slept
And left him a note that said
“Lars, I loved you!”
I want to confess to him
He deserves some sort of explanation
We say goodbye and he hugs me
I know your pain, I tell him

He calls me brother
And says that we are the same
I watch him leave the Coffee House
My eyes water as he gets on his bike

XIII

Three months later I get a postcard
It is an apology from you
You went to be with your professor
And now live in Sacramento

XIV

I seek out Lars at the Coffee House
Almost every time I go there
I see him often and we talk
But never at the tables
I now drink some chocolate drink
I am getting a tattoo next week
We are talking about doing bike races together
But we never talk about you



Untitled 3, painting by Jay Marvin

Canned Condolences

Janet Kuypers

I held her

and couldn't control my crying

we were waiting
for the doctor to deliver the drugs
to inject them into her
to kill her

once we were waiting
we knew there was no going back
our decision was made
and now only moments
were all we had left

the doctor kept saying
that we were making the right decision
that she had suffered so long already
and I wondered if that doctor

 had these prepared responses
 these canned condolences
to make anybody feel better
when a loved one's about to die

when a loved one's about to die
because of our choice
our decision to end her suffering
to kill her

we stroked her head to calm her
and when the doctor
 squeezed the syringe
 and forced the fluid
he held her head
and I could only watch

like a passenger in a nearby car
careening toward a crash
I could only watch the spectacle
from my car window
try to catch the carnage
see a glimmer of death
see what death looks like
while the car kept carrying me away



Matthew McConaughey is Single-Handedly Destroying American Film

Adam McGavin

Blonde curls, you're a character actor.
If you're ever cast in a serious role,
Gigli would instantly become the second
worst movie ever. Pair you with a hundred
pound, wavy-haired Hollywood princess
and we've got an instant classic about the man boy
who just can't get his life together! I'm not
even jealous of your six pack
and Mediterranean tan because I have two
brain cells to rub together
to keep me warm at night. You've managed
to play the same role over and over
and over until I want to carve my eyes out
with a rusty pairing knife, and even then
I'd have to listen to your nonsensical
drivel until I was forced to hack
my ears off with the same dull blade.
You're a less talented, less funnier –
dare I say— less good-looking Owen Wilson.
Do yourself – and all of us non-deaf mutes—a favor
and quit acting. Model, be a gigolo, tie a weight
around your feet and jump in the ocean, just please
quit sabotaging American movies.



Empty

Chris Butler

The glass is
half empty,
because I
was thirsty.

But the glass
is half full,
and I still
feel empty.

Old Dog

I.B. Rad

While war storms by,
recession turns us paupers,
and politicians rob us blind,
I fret
as old dog lazes
in front of our TV
and barely opens
a single drowsy eye.



prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

Eden

Mel Waldman

In a dark dream of illumination, a widower traveled to Eden and found Adam and Eve lying naked near the Tree of Life. Adam slept peacefully, but within his tranquil dream a tempest was approaching. Eve was awake and gazed quizzically at the Heavens, discovering, perhaps, something or someone of interest from a distant universe.

A snake slithered to Eve as the bereaved man's bewildered mind whirled and swirled in a state of vertigo. Intoxicated with anticipation, he removed his mask of sanity, and with much delight and an overdose of terror, he simultaneously became Adam and Eve and the toxic snake of temptation.

Inside his dreamscape, in an apocalyptic moment of insanity, he experienced a surreal life of 3 contradictory perspectives before being driven from Paradise.

Upon awakening, he feared that he might die, for his heart beat rapidly and uncontrollably, he sweated profusely, and his wounded soul was flooded with unbearable, kaleidoscopic emotions. Yet if he survived the relentless onslaught of raw anguish and revelation, his sudden expulsion from Eden might *free* him.

Perhaps, the only exit from his life of mourning was madness or death. Within seconds, his fate might be sealed unless a dark beautiful metamorphosis, triggered by a brief stay in Eden, transformed him forever.

Two Shovels

Joseph B. Cleary

Curt punched the steering wheel. It jiggled. He was going to have to get it fixed again. He put down the window of his red 1995 Sable and spit. Every turn he made got him more confused. He should have printed out the directions, but after he made his decision and found out where he had to go he grabbed his rifle and headed out the door. He didn't want to suffer for another second of the last year of his life. Still, he didn't recall the directions saying anything about turning off into a ghetto.

He stopped at a red light. An overweight teenager sauntered across the street. He had his head down and was eating something out of a plastic container. Curt was surprised that he was wearing a Van Halen tee shirt. He took off his sunglasses and rolled down his window.

"Excuse me. I'm trying to get back to Route 44."

"And I'm trying to get into Harvard so I guess we're both fucked."

"Sorry I asked," Curt said as he rolled up the window. "Shithead," he mumbled.

"Wait man," the kid said as he dropped his fork into the container. "I was just fooling with you. I'll help you out."

"Good, I was about to lose it."

"Now what you want do is head down this street here. You should see a yellow

house. If you don't see it then you fucked up.”

“But how could I fuck...”

The kid held up his hand palm out.

“Then what you want to do is go to Bobby's house and then go by Eddie's place and then... you know what? I don't think those guys are going to like you so maybe you shouldn't go that way. In fact maybe you should just get the fuck out of here.”

“Yeah, well fuck you too,” Curt said. He shoved his foot down on the gas pedal. He wanted to drive at the kid and scare him, but instead he made a right turn away from him. He went two blocks and saw a sign for Route 44 South. He shot up the ramp and headed for Centerville.

He slowed down when he hit the highway and turned up the radio. “Got My Mind Set on You,” by George Harrison came on. His brown eyes widened and he started to chew on his lower lip. He switched the radio off. He used to love the song when it came out in 1988. That was the summer he went to the shore every weekend, the summer he met his girlfriend Linda. But since it was also the summer Brandon messed him over, whenever he heard it he couldn't get Brandon's face out of his mind. It was like it was burned into his brain. Things were never the same for him after that. He never went to the shore again.

As he drove he reached into his top pocket of his yellow buttoned down shirt for a Camel cigarette. He put it in his mouth and then he put it back in the pack. He hadn't felt the need for a smoke since he decided he was going to deal with Brandon. The relief he felt told him that he should have done this years ago. But everyone had told him to forget about it. They acted like it wasn't a big deal, but he knew that wouldn't be the case if it had happened to them. He even saw a shrink for a while, who he paid to tell him to forget about it.

He ran his fingers through his thin reddish brown hair. He had let it grow long since he found out he was going to die. He chuckled. He had worried so much about losing it and now the chemo was going to take care of that. When his doctor told him he had lung cancer he decided he was going to live his last year in peace. He was going to turn a negative into a positive. It was time to put out the fire. Holding onto it wasn't healthy.

He got to Centerville around three thirty. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel. It felt like he had gunpowder in his stomach. His hand shook as he chugged down some bottled water. He hadn't been this close to Brandon in years. He started to get out of his car, but he knew how he looked when he was thinking about the guy. Sometimes he would even talk to himself. His old boss had mentioned it a few times. But while he looked crazy, he wasn't. He was just trying to calm his nerves and quell the pain in his stomach.

Since it was too early to do anything he decided to get something to eat. He found a Big Bear Burger Shop. As he waited in line at the drive-through it occurred to him that it didn't matter if people noticed him. No one knew him and he probably would be dead before they could catch him.

He ordered two Big Bear burgers with extra horseradish, but without pickles or lettuce, a large order of fries, and a large diet orange soda. He went to a park he saw on his way into town. He bit into a pickle and smashed the burger into a tree. He

grabbed the bag and pitched it into the garbage. People were always ruining his day. But once Brandon was gone every day would be a good day.

When the sun went down he headed for Brandon's street. He found the address and parked the car in a dark spot between two streetlights. The neighborhood was just like the last one Brandon lived on. For some reason the guy had to live on a tree-lined street. He laid down in the front seat. He could see out the driver's side window but no one could see him. Curt smiled at the thought of taking back the tranquil life Brandon had stolen from him.

At five thirty a white Volvo station wagon pulled into the driveway. A brunette was driving and two blonde haired girls were in the backseat. Curt assumed the brunette was Brandon's wife. He got his binoculars out of the glove compartment. The gray streaks in her hair supported Curt's assumption. So did the fact that she appeared to be scolding one of the girls after they got out of the car.

Curt put down the binoculars and spit out the window. The crud got to live with his family while he hadn't seen his in years. But once he got this out of the way the road would be cleared for a family reunion. His wife would notice the change in him, and if his wife took him back so would his daughters. He might even take them down the shore.

He picked up the rifle and aimed it at the smallest girl. Brandon's last thought would be that he caused his family's deaths. Curt breathed deep. Beads of sweat slid down on his forehead. The rifle's sight was set between the young girl's eyes. His hand shook.

He put the gun down. They didn't deserve to die. Curt was here to fix the situation, not make it worse. Besides, Brandon was not going to live long enough to suffer the loss.

At six thirty Brandon pulled his Beige Altima into the driveway. He got out of the car, smoothed his suit, and grabbed his briefcase from the passenger's seat. He looked around with a self-satisfied grin. Curt had planned to take his time and savor the event, but instead he sat up, grabbed the rifle, and fired.

Brandon clutched his throat, trying to stop the blood from squirting out. His eyes widened. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He fell backward onto the hood of the jeep and then slid to the ground. He tried to grab onto something as he fell. His head slammed onto the driveway.

Curt slumped back in his seat and sighed. His eyes narrowed and he smiled. It was almost worth getting cancer to feel this good. He didn't know he could be this relaxed. He took out a cigar, lit it, and blew smoke rings on his windshield.

The front door of Brandon's house flew open. The brunette stepped out. She stared at her husband's body for thirty seconds and then she shrieked. Her daughters slid by her and ran for their father's body.

Curt threw the rifle into the backseat and put the car in drive. The car fishtailed down the street. Porch lights went on and people came out. Curt knew there was a good chance that someone got his plate number, but even if he got caught spending his last year in jail was better than the prison he had been in.

As he headed down the highway he thought about the little prick that wouldn't give him directions. He wondered if he could find him. He rolled down the window and spit out his cigar. He started to chew on his lip. After a block he took out a cigarette and lit it.

Banging Sylvia Plath

Joshua Copeland

“I want you to get out in the world. I want you to meet people. Be like other people. *Be like* other people.”

I nodded and nodded. “Totally. That’s what I need. Meet people. *Be like* them.”

Dr. Gia Matereus Cercilious—she had Latinized her real name—had a long, thin neck like a swan. She wore a silk scarf to hide it and I didn’t know why...I liked her neck and I thought she was pretty and delicate. Her bony framework had a dainty, X-Ray quality to it: brittle wrists, a narrow, fashion model’s face, dandelion eyes, featherweight arms and legs, wasp waist. Plus, I had jerked off to her like a hundred and one times. I imagined some agitated Slovakian plumber defiling her in her office. That beat any of the masturbation fodder in the bondage mags I bought on Cahuenga Blvd. I had just read an interview in *Film Threat* with Joel M. Reed and he said that the B&D models in those mags—not dissimilar to biker chicks—were actually over-the-hill hard-core porn stars. I hated hard-core porn. Nurse Ratched, Georgina Spelvin, Eve Ellis, Liz Bathory, Lilly Tiger, Arlana Blue, Wynter Storm, Arita the Ballerina, they all got their start in hard-core. Gia, and any defilement of her, was soft-core. I looked into her eyes. Dry.

She was new to her occupation. New to the real world. I could tell. As a child: platinum rafters ran overhead, thrushes sung her awake in the morning, South American maids poured her glasses of milk, she rolled around in flower beds nude smiling a post-coital smile, rubbing the orchids, daisies, marigolds, and daffodils all over her body, petals leaking off her, through her, between her fingers, between her legs. I bet she still called her father “daddy.”

When I told her I brought meth up here with me from Cincinnati and that I didn’t know what I’d do when I ran out, she freaked—landmark of a newbie—and said with vouchsafed condescension, “Ovy, quit with the speed. It’s not cool, dude.” In other circumstances I would have smiled. But right then, right there, in that office, in that city, in that state, there was nothing funny.

“Borders Book Store—you like to go to the one in Santa Monica, right?—has book discussions every couple weeks. Why don’t you start going to those? I mean, you like to read, don’t you?”

“Yeah. That’d get me out in public more. For sure.” I wanted to say I was too scared to do anything like that. But I was too nervous to say I was too nervous to go. I mean, Gia made me antsy. I felt self-conscious around her. She was within the circle, within the realm, within the palace. I’m sure she had a boyfriend. And she had a job. A well-paying one. Dr. Cercilious didn’t live off other people.

Unlike me. My mom deposited \$700 into my account on the first of every month. I came out there to slip into the film business as a writer. But I couldn’t even hold a job at the prestigious Argyle Hotel on Sunset washing dishes with the Latinos (Everyone there was surprised a white boy took the job. Not in a racist way, I hoped. They said white persons in LA usually refuse dishwashing jobs). The cook fired me

after four days of freaking out my coworkers with my anxious tics and brick-walled, bloodshot eyes and waxworks pallor. And these were tough, working class dudes. That short one, Alonzo, he had just moved there from Guatemala. He'd watch "Sesame Street" every day to try and learn English.

At first my coworkers took pity on me. They'd ask the waiters to send me back \$200 deserts and they smiled whenever they addressed me. But the eyes belied the smile. And in the end, fear got the better of them, of everyone.

I knew nada about writing scripts, plays, novels, short stories, poems. I didn't much listen back at Dayton U. Sylvia Plath wrote in her journals that she had very little talent, that most of the infants on the planet had more talent than her, and that writing was all about practice, about etching those techniques into your skull. Well...I didn't like to practice. So I didn't. It's vertigo-inducing, the work a wannabe writer must do to be a real writer. The noun's the easy part; it's the verb that's the hard part.

Gia popped open a Slimfast milkshake. "You'll socialize, Ovy. Right now you're not getting out at all. It's not healthy. So what do you say? It's just a book discussion, not a party or a huge rock concert. Do it for me."

"No problem."

The sunshine through the elms popped like a mutiny of flash bulbs. The students giggled and held hands, their backpacks slung off a shoulder. The radios blasted in treble from the long line of open car windows on Westwood. I raced past and through it all, eyes down, head low, shoulders hunched—the Raskolnikov shuffle—to my Nissan Stanza.

Per usual, the drive back from UCLA to my studio apartment in East LA was around an hour and twenty minutes. The CD player in my car was broken and the radio stations played shit; the world had phased me out of MTV and popular culture. And the DJ's always tried to ape Stern: "Listen to Jay Davidson! He's trying to curb his auto-erotic manipulations!" Effete, effete, effete. Stern had moved to Sirius. I didn't have money for Sirius.

And that sucked. Cause I was a huge fan. He provided masturbation material, he talked people down from jumping off bridges, he was like a salve to all of us losers out there. I would fantasize myself as an intern on the radio show. The TV show on E *kicked ass*. That went off the air too. For his "Miss Amputee 2000 Beauty Contest" the winner had to chew and swallow two handfuls of live maggots. Which she did.

I passed the pregnant hooker on East Pico. She paced slowly, walking that swampy LA walk, and she looked far off in some dream. Was she high? She grinned at all the passing cars like she was. Her long blonde hair swayed like a pendulum as she trudged. Couldn't have been older than twenty. I wanted to yell out, "You'd look



Amnesia Garden, art by
Peter Schwartz

good with a lollipop!” The distant cars and people shimmered like they were behind a thick glass of fumes; the whole city swam in hot and humid glassiness.

The other day I had read in *How to Write Screenplays that Sell* that writers trying to make it in Hollywood notoriously write about writers trying to make it in Hollywood.

At the gate I ran my keycard through and parked in my spot, B-45. I walked the ten to fifteen minute walk—meandering by all the other apartment buildings in the complex with their crew cut gardens—to my building, A5. Terminus with a capital T.

In the hall I stopped beside a door. Drama: A man was screaming at his girlfriend or wife. “I WORK ALL GODDAMN DAY TO COME HOME TO THIS SHIT?! YOU SIT AND WATCH THEM COURT SHOWS ALL DAY! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU! I’M OUTTA HERE!” I didn’t start walking soon enough. He threw open the door—the knob slammed into the wall—and saw me there.

He wore a business suit and was much bigger than me. He was panting and rage contorted his face funhouse style. The eyes bulged: cartoonish, jungle-crazy eyes. That’s all that registered before I bolted. He took off in the opposite direction. I didn’t look back. Shit.

Hall after hall, rights, lefts, two flights of stairs, and I finally arrived at my apartment. I lived in apartment 303. With the roaches. There was nothing worse than coming home at the end of the day, hungry as hell, and flipping on the lights to see roaches retreat behind the sofa or into the disposal or into the trash or down the bathtub drain. Your appetite dissolved. And I saw them during the day too. That’s when you know your infestation means business. It acquires a life in and of itself. Every day I would wake up and walk into the bathroom to find a gaggle of them roosting in the bathtub. I had to turn on the shower and watch them swirl down the drain.

I unlocked the door, opened it, and switched on a lamp. A roach shot behind the couch.

I owned no TV. I owned no computer. I was too poor to own either and my mom refused to send me a buck more to buy one or the other. A walkway ran right outside my window. One night two uniformed security guards stopped to gawk. “Man. Look at that. Hardly any furniture,” said one.

“Looks like nobody lives there,” the other said. “Wow.”

There was always “what to do” trouble. I’d go to the library on Ivar and take out like six or seven books. That way, when one book began to bore after a few hours, I could start in on another, ad infinitum.

I collapsed on the sofa with *The Bell Jar*. Plath was around 19 when she won the fashion magazine contest that brought her to New York. James Dickey was around 23 when he wrote an early draft of “The Sheep Child,” one of my favorite poems. Mailer was around 25 when he finished *The Naked and the Dead*. Right there, in that city, in that room, I was 27.

Two sentences into the book I stopped to zone out. This happened often. I remembered the day I found the parking spot only three blocks away from the library and I had to walk by Bally’s Gym. It cost around 600 a month to belong. A faux-brunette swaggered out of Bally’s onto the sidewalk ahead of me with lime green platform heels and a tight red miniskirt. She walked that LA slomo walk, probably

fevered with a well earned endorphin high. Then, like she was *The Queen of Los Angeles*, like cameras were popcorning all around her, she pulled a cigarette out of her purse and lit it. I saw the outline of a thong.

I never forgot her. In the four months I had lived there my weight had shot down from 180 to 127. Gia asked me my sexual orientation and ordered an AIDS test. She thought the weight loss was too rapid. I didn't tell her I was a virgin.

I had eight or nine pages behind me after about three hours. Too many commercial breaks, too many distractions: An Arab couple kept walking by outside with loads of laundry—the woman was done up like an Eskimo and the temp was around 100. Or...a tenant down the hall blasted Metallica's "Fade to Black" repeatedly, AD NAUSEUM. Or...a tenant across the walkway blasted Selena's rendition of "Back on the Chain Gang" repeatedly, AD NAUSEUM. Or...a daydreamy ectoplasm crackled two feet above my head about teeny bopper girlies asking for my autograph.

When I graduated Dayton U, my college chum Kim Buckwalter—she was so nice to me, I always saw her as my real mom—cut out an advertisement in the back of *Ladies' Home Journal* for a poetry contest and gave it to me. So I sent a poem called "Life on the Moon" to the contest. It began like this:

I have tried through medication
And hospitalization
To feel the "sunlight."
But it's been nothing but night
And blight.
Happiness remains out of sight.

And went on for five more pages. Months later the "judges" replied. They had selected my poem to be read at their annual banquet. I would only have to pay a couple thou for a seat. Special guests David "Stringbean" Akeman from "Hee Haw" and Jon "Bowzer" Bauman from the rock group Sha Na Na would attend. If I paid \$500 more I could read my poem on the contest's public access TV show. I passed on the whole deal.

...Tendrils on my calf. A baby roach. The prehensile claws tickled in a bad way. I screamed and flicked it off. The thing darted into the kitchenette. This surfer kid had bombed and sprayed and wiped pesticides all over my apartment three separate times. He sprayed in every crevice and scrubbed down the walls, the counters, the floors, the bathrooms. It took about three hours. The dude wore a surgeon's mask and a gray suit and I had to be out of the apartment while he did it. "You take off, I spray and wipe and bomb, you come back, no more roaches." The kid was droopy and lazy and depressed and depressing, kind of like that ubiquitous, tread marked Cincinnati slush back in Ohio. He didn't walk. He trudged.

And it never worked. I remember I trekked the fifteen minutes to the landlord's office—located inside the complex—at the first roach sighting. "And who or what agencies have you told about this, sir?" were the first words out of the tall, lanky, insecure clerk. So the surfer kid—he worked for the landlord—was sent up to spray and wipe and bomb. I knew none of those treatments would work if the kernel of the infestation was in another apartment. As, apparently, it was. And they were German cockroaches. They're asexually potent breeders, the hardest type of roach to get rid of.

Enough daydreaming! I pulled myself back down into myself and thought: What to do, what to do, what to do? I usually spent my nights at Borders. I looked at my watch: 2:13 p.m. My mom had suggested I take my car to the Nissan Dealership service shop by Griffith Park after this cracker-lunk at the auto repair shop just off Gereurro said it leaked oil. He wanted to fix it. Mom said the cracker-lunk could be trying to rip me off, and there would be a great deal more probity to the Nissan Dealership. My Triple A map indicated the dealership was 40 minutes south, towards Orange County. I snorted a line of meth, shoved a Kleenex in my pocket, grabbed a book, walked that long walk all the way to the car, and took off into the perpetually heavy traffic.

“Hello sir. How do you do?” The words stewed in a thick Italian accent. We shook hands. “I’m Tony.” Yeah I know. It says it on your name tag. “I’m the head tech here.” I introduced myself. He stood at my height, about 5-foot-9, with quaffed dark hair and a fake tan. His smock shone virginal and white. Three dots peppered his earlobe. I rubbed my running nose.

“Yeah, I took my car for a tune up at this repair shop and the guy there said it leaked oil. He, um, showed me how black his fingers were.”

“Were they Armenian? Don’t trust the Armenians.”

LA had grilled an angry psycho frown into my face, but I managed a smile. “I don’t really know. I wouldn’t know their accent.”

“You look young,” he said. “Very young. Like sixteen. In this city people will try and take advantage of you because you look so innocent, no?”

“Nope. I’m over-the-hill. Been to college and everything.”

“Well, park it over there. See the three on that garage? We’ll take a look at it.”

“I’m really worried it’s an oil leak,” I said.

“It could be many things, it—”

“Uh, are oil leaks expensive to fix? I’m worried. The guy at the shop I took it to said they were, and he said that they take forever to repair.” I knitted my brows.

“Eh, yes, they can be expensive. As for time, maybe takes three or four days. You have to find where the leak is at. That can take a while.” He patted me on the shoulder. “But we must think positive. It is what will get us through life.”

The shop was roomy. Roomy and fancy and clean. Many garages, all in a row. No slovenly five o’ clock shadowed repairmen. And of course Tony was right: So many people in that city tried to rip you off. Especially when they saw my Ohio plates. Angelinos angled for just three cents. But this shop looked too bourgeoisie to try anything like that.

I pulled up into the garage. Tony was waiting for me. I stepped out and handed him the keys.

“How much time are we looking at here?” I asked.

“Eh, give us about three hours or so.”

Oh man. I panicked. Three fucking hours. The meth hangover would wallop me like Oxford dictionaries the second hour. The easiest place to ride out a meth hangover is at home, not out in public.

He patted me on the shoulder again. I flinched. “Relax. Don’t look so down about it. I will tell my boys to hurry.”

I sat down in the small waiting room with its outdated auto magazines—worth nothing to me since I didn't know dick about cars—and opened the True Crime book I brought with me: *Story of a Serial Rapist*. Some husky airport security guard in Houston went postal and raped female after female, all in their own homes. He staked out their houses during the day and slipped pencils on the sills of their open windows so when the women shut the windows, they wouldn't shut all the way. This left space to pry and push them open when he returned at night. (What the fuck? Didn't the girls notice the pencils when they shut their windows?). He forced one girl to use her vibrator on herself. When he busted through another lady's window she tore off her shirt and screamed, "Is this what you want, you sick prick?!" A sad attempt to save face. He did an older woman in the morning while she was in bed half-asleep and her husband was out jogging. She thought he was her husband and kept her eyes shut and didn't fully wake. The DA couldn't prosecute him for that one.

Andrea Dworkin reviewed the book in the *New Yorker* back in 04. That's how I found out about it. George Paine, the author, had gone out of his way to trash her in the preface. He wrote she wrongly blamed all men for the depravity of a few. He defended journalists who try to invade rape victims' privacy. The dude even added a comedic flourish to one rape. He made jest of a young woman who tried to hide her wedding ring so the rapist wouldn't steal it. She failed.

I guess Mr. George was just asking for it. Dworkin began her review, "All the victims in George Paine's new book, *Story of a Serial Rapist*, were raped twice: the first time by a hard working airport security guard named Jerry Stankoskis, the second time by the author himself, who dwells in drooling fashion on prying detail after prying detail." She called it S&M porn.

Eventually Tony walked in. "Not through with car yet." He was wiping oil off his hands with pumice. "But it can't be oil leak. The L-Ring Progenitor cap is very rusty. So it's probably just AC water leak. No big worry. Much less serious than oil leak. No major repairs needed."

I blew out like a balloon. "Thank God."

He looked over my shoulder. "What are you reading? You look like a reader of books."

I held it up. The look on his face: Victorian disapprobation?

"So how would you feel about McDonald's?" he asked. "It's just down the street. Your car will not be ready for another hour or so."

His proposal made me nervous. "Sure. Okay. Right." I got up and started walking.

"No sir, no. I mean the both of us. I'm buying." Out of the corner of my eye a young repairman grinned at us.

We walked three blocks. I felt the LA sun tunnel through the smog, right at me. The humidity burned high. I imagined the molecules as bubbles bouncing off my face. Like every public place in that city, the McDonald's was crowded, so we had to wait in line a while. A blonde teen behind us caught my eye. Tony seemed to register my attention to her. She couldn't have been older than nineteen: platform heels, tan legs—a beach tan, a real tan—with white skin peeking up under her Daisy Duke cut offs, along with a *tiny* ripple of cellulite. Her hair was long and just-out-of-the-

shower wet (the style there) and she wore a pink halter top, abdomen exposed. A belly button ring studded her flat, flat stomach. The Angelino girls stood out much more than the Cincinnati tread marked skanks; they *italicized* themselves.

When I first arrived in LA I stayed two weeks at The Palace Inn, right off Santa Monica Blvd. One day I was lying in bed and the owner's Venezuelan wife, Mrs. Jaramiello, walked in. She was mid-30's, opal eyes—lots of white around the pupils, like marbles in milk—and her dark hair cascaded like a waterfall. More importantly, she wore a see-through shirt with a black laced bra: instant hard on. Mrs. Jaramiello sensed my excitement; she looked pretty uncomfortable. That turned me on more. The skin flute orchestra struck up for weeks after.

We sat down with our food. Tony would lose his place every time I wiped my nose. He asked if I had a cold. We talked jobs. He said the previous year the want ads were packed, but, “now there's nothing but security jobs, and you are thin and not so tall. Must be like football player to get those.” We talked of our real homes. He grew up in Apia, Italy, but they were too “Christ-loving” there, so he moved first to San Francisco, then to LA. He hardly knew the language here and had no family or friends to help set him up. On Sundays he hung out the whole day at the Santa Monica beach, all alone. I didn't hear any talk about a wife, ex-wife, girlfriend, or kids. He spent his Friday nights and Saturdays in Tijuana.

“Ovy. Your forefinger. Why is it—how do you say—not there?”

I lowered my eyes to his lapel and closed my hands into my lap under the table. “Back at Dayton U I got drunk at a party and decided to prank this asshole's car. My friend Haas lent me his pocket knife to slash the tires. So I stabbed the tire thinking the knife was locked out, right? But it wasn't. It snapped back on my finger. Thus...” I shook my head. “Makes it hard to type.”

He winced. “They didn't do that where I went to school.”

I perked up. “How'd you get this job? How much does it pay per hour?”

“Per hour I don't know. Salary is about sixty thousand a year. Why?”

“Maybe it's something I could do. An auto repairman.”

“Eh, I am...” he waved his hands around, trying to think of the right words, “...many steps up from repairman. I am technician. First they must train you. School. The plant. Up near Topanga Canyon.” Something occurred to him and he lit up. “So, you want to work with cars here? I see a lot of talent in you, kid. A lot of promise. There's a load of shit to learn. But with my help you can do it, right? I know everyone there is to know.”

I leaned my face into my hand, stretching my mouth. “All my friends from college, they support themselves. They are across the moat, into the palace. It hurts to be around them. And I can't live off my mom forever. I feel like a big enough loser as it is.”

He reached across the table and—for the third time—patted me on the shoulder. “Don't talk like that. This is LA. That's all people do here, live off other people.”

I had only eaten half my Big Mac and none of the fries. I pushed the tray away and slumped into my chair. It was hard to look him in the eye. On that note, since I got to LA, it was hard to look anyone in the eye.

He pushed the tray back toward me and said, “Go on and eat, my friend. Eat

your Big Mac. I love McDonald's."

"No, I try not to eat meat. I've been an animal lover since I was born. Card-carrying member of PETA and everything."

He shook his head and said with a full mouth, "You are too thin. I could break you in two."

"This place reminds me," I said, my eyes still lowered to his lapel, "of the time my family vacationed out west when I was nine. We were waiting in line in another packed McDonald's here in LA with two big, buff, giggly Hells Angels bikers behind us. One held a shiny, silver earring dangling from his thumb and forefinger. My little brother was about seven at the time, and the biker placed the earring by my brother's ear for a second—my brother didn't notice—and both the bikers stared at each other and grinned." I looked up into his face, allowing time for my story to impress its moral. We walked back to the shop and he left me. I never saw him in the flesh again.

When my car was done, this geeky tech with a gob of shaving cream in his right nostril told me the problem *was* an oil leak. I shook with fear. Where would the cash come from to fix it? And that's at least three days without a car, three days stuck at 330 West 33rd Street, Building A5, apartment 303. Like Ad Seg in a prison. Locked within a closet, within a closet. I told the tech I'd call to schedule an appointment to take the car in.

I walked down the hall of A5. The top notch humidity stung. Hives blossomed on my neck and cheeks: common symptoms upon returning. I turned a corner and saw the tall angry guy walking toward me, the one who caught me outside his door. My heartbeat surged in my ears. The hall carpet offered itself up, a fuck of a lot easier to look at than him. It symbolized, in turgid drama, all of Los Angeles: the green and black fibers tangled up with one another in some cosmic and inconsequential jungle. I risked looking up to say hi.

I've never seen eyes kindle more with rage and burnt out hatred. All at me. How can people live like that? How did he sleep at night? Red vessels rimmed the whites—worse than mine—and I wrote in my diary later that night, "It was like a film projector projected footage of a spastic volcano onto his face." He looked me right in the eye and mouthed something I couldn't hear. Our "encounter" reverberated inside me all night at low simmer. Not a bad idea to caption all my encounters in LA between quotation marks.

I unlocked my door and turned on a lamp. No roaches. And I had worked up a minor appetite driving back from the dealership. I opened up a cabinet for a paper plate and spotted a house centipede lounging in one of the plastic bowls. They'll scamper into my pad for the AC when it heats up too much outside. "So r yman," I told the thing as I sprayed the Raid. It works slowly on house centipedes as they *undulate*. They writhe and twist like worms and epileptics and ants under magnifying glasses.

I watched for a bit and said, "You didn't come up here to bother me." It just wanted sanctuary. It wanted AC. So I pulled it out between my thumb and the nub of my forefinger, tossed it to the kitchenette floor, and stomped it: mercy kill.

Not its intention, but it had ruined my appetite. I reached under the sofa and pulled out *Bound and Gagged*, the issue with Wynter Storm and Liz Bathory on the

cover tied to chairs back to back, a big ripe juicy apple stuffed into each model's mouth. It was a May of 2002 issue, but the photo itself looked older. By the bikini wax job—a Sumerian/French 3.5 Waxing—I'd say it was taken circa December of 97. Wynter looked like she'd been pregnant: there were stretch marks the mag didn't bother to clean up, and the blubber really bulged at tummy level, like an inner tube. I wondered why the photographer, Mr. T, chose to shoot them sitting down. At least model her standing and oblique to the camera, to trim her down. "You annoy me, Wynter Storm," I said. Joel M. Reed, the bucktoothed man with chipmunk cheeks and horn-rimmed glasses responsible for the B&D film classics *Bloodsucking Freaks*, *The Teaching of Marcy*, *Barb Wire Dolls*, *Nazi Love Camp 7*, *The Defilers*, *The Schoolgirls get Raped*, and the whole *Rapeman to the Rescue* series ("Righting Wrongs through Penetration!"), maintained in a 1998 interview with *Ben is Dead* that men who were into the male dom bondage scene—guys like me, who only liked women as subs—were actually Femdom strapon lovers and homosexual masochists with extremely debilitating mom complexes. Only they didn't know it.

It went something like: "Don't get me wrong. Gayness is great. I used to live in San Francisco so I should know. I'm not homophobic. But the thing is, many 100 lb weaklings who drool at bound babes unconsciously fantasize of dressing up in tighty-whitey skivvies after Ned Beatty in *Deliverance* or after Michael P Fay about to get it in Singapore while a big fat grouchy guy in mommy's blouse chases them around with a 16 plait 2 toned snakewhip. But they can't face their fantasies, so instead they overcompensate with B&D and S&M magazines and websites—and, of course, all the movies I've written and directed—that use women as subs. The male in question becomes—there is no delicate way to put this—a fucking psycho." Apparently he had sold out. The PC movement avalanches forward...

It took forever—I must've checked my watch twenty times—but 8:00 rolled around. Because I would be venturing to Borders, I primed myself up: black Levi Dockers that didn't sag when I bought them, a tight white Gap muscle shirt that delineated my skeleton framework, and dark, just-shined loafers. I slapped on some English Leather cologne, did two lines, checked my stash—about three lines worth left, oh no, oh *fuck*, nightmare city—and left for the bookstore: about a fifty minute drive without traffic.

The hardest steps I ever took were into the Santa Monica Borders. Everyone looked at me: a skull chattering on toothpicks. Add to that my bleached pallor, my shoulders squeezing up to my neck, and the red tributaries rooted in the whites of my eyes, eyes darting every which way ala the schizophrenic hustle.

I asked at the counter about their book discussions. The clerk said, "It's next week, on Friday the..." he checked the calendar "...the 24th. Eight to nine p.m., sir." I sucked in air.

With luck I found a chair—it was a Friday night, so customers packed the store—and sat down with the Bukowski autobio *Hank*, written by Neeli Cherkofsky. I read about a night where a young, aspiring, and unpublished writer showed his stuff to Buk. Buk was amazed. It was after midnight, but he rang up Cherkofsky and screamed, "You won't believe this kid! He's a fucking genius! Get your ass over here!"

Neeli arrived yawning, read the manuscript—he had read the kid’s stuff before—and said with airs, “Hank, What the Fuck, this is pretentious I-want-to-write-like-Virginia-Woolf-but-I-don’t-have-the-talent bullshit. Seriously. Read it again.”

So Buk did. Then he threw it in the fireplace and shouted, “That was terrible!!!” The kid burst into tears and ran out, throwing all the blame on Cherkofsky and none on Buk. Neeli scripted the scene like he himself was the wronged party.

At the Melrose Mall, the escalators and the mirrors that ran parallel to them sparked a nasty vertigo. You looked into either mirror and saw thousands of escalators.

The autobio depressed me. Plus, my life wasn’t half as hard as Buk’s. I found another book: *The Body as Machine: A Medical Glossary*. Back in Cincy, for nonfiction, I’d always *buy* the book. For years I had nursed a habit of underlining important info in nonfiction books so I could go back months later and review the highlighted items; if I didn’t I wouldn’t remember much. But you couldn’t do that with books from a library—what if the librarian found out you were defacing the books?—and you couldn’t do that with books you perused but didn’t buy at a bookstore—what if someone eventually bought the book, so it wouldn’t be there months later to review, or what if the clerks saw you defacing their books? They’d charge you and knock your dick out of place. And I was always so low on cash I couldn’t afford to buy books at Borders, so...in one ear and right out the other.

Eventually I got up to take a leak. This is what it’s like in an LA Borders men’s room on a Friday night: “JAMEY GET A GRIP!” scribbled in pink bubblegum lipstick on a mirror. A patron had tipped over the trash can and balled up paper towels sprawled the breadth of the floor. Possibly the same patron had punched or smacked or perpetrated some act of violence against the soap dispenser and smashed it in two. Pink soapy liquid was splattered everywhere like blood in a horror movie. Two toilets were overflowed. Someone had lined another toilet seat with a thick, thick, THICK ring of toilet paper, off of which dripped gobs of dark runny shit—I didn’t understand the aerodynamics of that; I mean, how did that happen? A photography book of black and white male nudes (Mapplethorpe, maybe?) sat splayed open on the floor of another stall. Something dried and splashed indented the pages. My area of expertise: sperm.

I didn’t breathe through my nose till I was out of there.

A highfalutin-looking babe had taken my seat. Luckily I found another and got back to the medical glossary. Close to closing time I looked up at the patron in the chair beside me and an epiphany struck: This Borders was a preview of hell. The guy looked around sixty and he was dressed like a professor, i.e. his clothes were mismatched as fuck, dingy white Generic sneakers, blue and white Argyle socks, tan corduroy pants and plaid button down shirt topped with the seventies emphasized collar. He snored audibly. A big, thick volume, *The Logistics of Mathematical Vector and Scalar Computations*, sat open faced on his lap.

I left for home at midnight, the Friday closing time. Back in my complex, as I wound past dinky, assembly line gardens, I met up with a tenant who spoke English (Of which there were very few; most of the tenants were foreigners who had congregated into the complex after the Rodney King riots back in the early 90’s). She smelled of Noxema, the cream my mom used to rub on her face before bed. The lady

told me that last night a young male in Building D4 had been attacked and raped while he was in bed by an unknown assailant, but the landlord was hushing it up. No bad publicity allowed.

I got home and switched on some AM talk radio. I think I was the only person in that city who listened to AM talk radio. It was terrible. The hosts desperately tried to provoke. I know they didn't believe half their rants, but they knew if they could get callers all pissed off and frothing, people might not actually turn the dial to an FM music channel.

No, wait. There was one decent and honest exchange. Rikki Rackman, back before my time, hosted "Headbanger's Ball" on MTV. After "Headbanger's Ball" went off the air, KABC-AM—an LA AM radio station—gave Rackman his own talk show. He was still at it when I moved to Los Angeles, doing talk radio and dating Liz Bathory. I guess she "dressed the part" whenever she'd come to KABC to see him, because one of the hosts of an earlier talk radio program, Ron Foster, would dis the shit out of her every day on air. Why did her apparel bother him? He screamed that Liz dressed like a slut, a whore, a skank, a ho, a manhole (a chick who's vagina has been stretched to gummy oblivion), a semen repository, a sperm bucket, you name it.

So one day Matt Stuart, a Stern wannabe, announced the topic for that day's show: violence in the workplace, and the palace intrigue accorded it. Without naming names, he said one of his coworkers had wrongly and viciously stomped another coworker. The lines opened and the first caller was Rikki's cousin. Apparently, Rikki had physically laid into Ron Foster, and the station had fired the former headbanger thusly. The cousin screamed that Rikki was the wronged party, not Ron Foster, and that the least Matt could do was to be honest about who and what he was talking about. Matt stuttered and quickly cut to a commercial, and when he was back on air the topic was: "Which supermarket do you prefer for pet food: Ralph's or Food4Less?"

I listened to the radio till eight a.m., my usual bedtime. With the sun shining through the curtains, I brushed my teeth, got undressed, and grabbed the tube of Retin A cream and squeezed some into my palm and rubbed it into my dick. I did that every morning before bed. The stuff is prescribed to burn acne off your face. But if you religiously rubbed it onto your shlong, it would burn like hellfire when you jerked off, especially if you didn't use any lubricant. The pain was immense, like thorns were curling around and hugging into your penis. It was awesome. I described it in my diary as "blowhole stimulating"

On Monday my phone rang. My phone never rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Is Ovy Boeneem there?"

"This is he."

"Ovy, this is Tony. I assure, the mechanic was wrong. He is young, you know? Like you. Not so experienced. No, what I tell, it is the right problem. It is water leak from conditioner." Tony sounded offended the technician had contradicted him.

My shoulders collapsed. "Thank God. At least I can relax some."

"And it's nothing to worry about, very little time, very little money to fix."

Some small talk followed. He sounded a tad too happy. Was he drunk? I looked

at my watch: around seven p.m.

“Have you found a job yet, my friend?”

“Nope. Haven’t even been looking.”

“Because you know, if things, they go bad, you could move in with me.”

“Uh...”

“Because...I would like to get to know you better and you to get to know me better.”

Silence.

“Do you understand this?”

“Yeah. You know who Art Bell is, right? There was some nutcase hippie caller who said he was working on time travel using a bicycle chain. I don’t understand—”

“It’s hard for me to believe, that you are 27. That’s what you said, right? 27?”

“Yeah, on Art Bell there was some dude—”

“Because you look so young, so very young, people will try and take advantage of you in this city.”

We talked on about ten more minutes.

The next night: “Hi Ovy!! It’s Tony!!” He sounded giddy, like we were old college drinking buddies.

I sighed. “Hey. What’s up, man.”

“Well, how is your car? We got to get that conditioner leak fixed, you know?”

(We?)

“Yeah...yeah...” I’d take the car back to the Armenians—or whoever they were—before I’d take it back to that Nissan dealership.

“The Angeles heat, it is killing, just killing.”

“I’ll take it down to you sometime next week.” I talked some about Cincy, then: “What’s up with you, Tony?”

“I just came back from Ralph’s. Did shopping for the week.”

“Huh. I got to Food4Less.”

“So you must tell me Ovy: You live alone? No girlfriend?”

“Nope. Single with a capital S.”

He giggled. “LA is a lonely place,” he said. “See, these people, they move to big cities because they want—how do you say—lights and parties and action. They want to be around people, meet people, go out. But take it from me kid: Many in big cities are lonely.”

“Yeah...” I drifted off, lost my place, and came back “...I’ve seen all the billboards that say, ‘Are you lonely? Do you need help? Do you want to connect and meet people? Do you want friends? Find them here: *The Yellow Pages*.’ I know what cities are like, I mean, look where I grew up. But I wasn’t expecting this. Not this.”

“And the area you live in. It is a bad area.”

“That it is, that it is.” Actually the gang members were pretty polite.

“Lucky you have a car. Too dangerous for you to take walks.”

“That’s what the tenants here say...”

“Hey! I just thought of something! Me!” He was practically shouting. “Your mom stops sending you money, you can move in with me! You’ll never be lonely with me!”

Gadar (Gay Radar) is usually on point. I've seen men think I'm attractive, but unless they're mentally ill, or in Tony's case, desperately desperate, they usually leave me alone.

He was on a roll: "You know what you remind me of: '*Fidanzata!*' Say it with me!" He spelled it out.

"What does it mean?"

"Just come on! Repeat after me: '*Fidanzata!*'" He enunciated each syllable.

I sighed. "Okay. *Fidanzata*. What does it mean, man?"

"Hee hee hee. It means 'my friend.' 'My *lady* friend.' Hee hee." There's that one B&D mag with Nurse Ratched on the cover sitting atop Liz Bathory. I got to save up for that one.

I said I had to go, I said I needed to pick up meds from Walgreen's pharmacy. A lie. I had already picked up my Prozac...and my Zoloft and my Risperidol and my Zyprexa and my Ambien and my Xanax and my Buspar about five days ago. Gia doled out my meds on a weekly basis so I would never have enough to kill myself.

The next night Tony of The Dotted Ear called. And the next. And the next. Always around 7:00, 7:30. Some uninviting sixth sense told me he fondled himself as we talked. The last time I ever heard his voice was the Friday night of the book discussion. I couldn't think of much to say. Most of my sentences trailed off into ellipses. Finally I said I had to go.

"But, but, your car. You must bring it in, the leak, it must be fixed. Or else the AC will break down. The filter caps will rust and fall off. And it will be up over a hundred next week. You must."

I squinted: Was that a baby roach running all over my Ragu-stained ladle in the kitchenette sink? "Um...what? Yeah, I heard. About the weather. I'll call to make an appointment. Right now I got to go to a book discussion."

"Uh...uh...okay. But it is serious."

"Gotcha. Talk to you later."

"No, no, but hold on...These...these...drugs...I do not judge, you know? If you would move in with me, anything about you would be okay. And Manuel at work, he will sell me cocaine. Like your Tony Montana. And I love to drink, like at your college parties you miss so much, so the same as you, I am user of drugs. Just not cocaine. A user of alcohol."

I kept quiet.

"And Manuel will sell good stuff, not talcum powder, not rip me off. And I could buy for you too. Free of no charge. I have plenty saved up to spend on this cocaine."

I didn't say a word.

"My house, it is your house too. Right at this moment I am watching TV. I am doing nothing. You can come over. I live right off 800 block of Sepulveda. And Monday I'll talk to Manuel."

"I got a book discussion to go to. No can do."

His voice rose. "Okay. You choose. To be happy and fun or this book discussion. If it's really true and you're not lying to get rid of me. This is the last time I can call. I can't keep calling. I'll get in trouble. Where ever you take the car, make sure to tell

them it leaks oil, not water. I lied. I lied to please, because you seem burdened. Much luck with your life. *Buono fortuna.*” Click.

I hung up, kept my hand on the receiver, picked it up again, and dialed my mom. “What do you think about me coming home?”

“Jesus. I don’t.”

My mom did the amateur nights at the Cincinnati comedy clubs—Go Bananas, The Funny Bone, Dave and Buster’s—for a year after she graduated Dayton U. Then she gave up the scene all together because, in her own words, “I just wasn’t too funny. I bombed every night.” She moved on to do post baccalaureate work.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to. Too painful a prospect. For your *own good*, it’s best you stay out there. Pound the pavement for work. Things come up. You’ll find a job, become your own person, no more dependence on mommy.”

I ran my hand through my hair. “Mom, what the fuck? I came out here knowing no one. I didn’t know my way around. It’s like a totally different country. And this city’s fucking huge. Everything, my friends, my college, my family, my whole life, is in Cincinnati. The only life I live can be in that city. Everything inside of me revolves around Cincy. Right now I’m out in the boondocks.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, woe is me, the same old bullshit. I don’t see what the problem is. You know what? Where’s our laugh track? You remember when you were just a little kid, at Colfax Elementary? How I used to rip you a new one with that tape? I had that audio-cassette of canned laughter, and you’d give me some sad sack sob story, as you always did, it was always about kids teasing you at Colfax, or some other dumb shit, and I’d bring out the recorder and press Play at all the right moments, all the moments you were like, ‘Mom, I feel so awful!’ and getting all choked up. Ah, those were the days.”

I felt like Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens II*, locked in a soundproof room, screaming for help at the remote cameras no one was watching and trying to throw chairs through the bulletproof windows while spidery facehuggers scurried and tap danced across the floor toward me.

“Mom, it is not that hard to understand. I cannot, CANNOT, hold a job here. Even in Cincy, where things were more laid back, I had trouble with jobs. I don’t see how I’m going to be a part of things on this planet. I don’t see how I will make it here or anywhere.”

She laughed uproariously. “How Shakespearian!”

“But—”

“Boohoo. Don’t act the artsy-fartsy doomsayer stereotype.”

“Mom I’m not—”

She sucked in and screamed: LIGHTEN UP! STOP FEELING SORRY FOR YOURSELF! BE SOMEBODY! What’s your friend Bumsy from Akron doing? The other day your sister said she saw him on Bloomsburg TV. And Misha Kapler, she’s an LCSW now, and...

I footslogged into Borders heart rate up, head low, eyeballs somersaulting. A Christian Science band played away upstairs in the coffee shop. I searched around and found the book discussion right by the B Section. I was familiar with this cor-

ner of the store: every book by Burroughs or Bukowski you could ever imagine, even shelves and shelves of nonfiction books *about* them; they had *Speed*, the book Burroughs's son Billy wrote about drug addiction before he died a homeless bum.

The "discussion" was two men and two women sitting and laughing. No table to hide fidgety hands. I stood there and watched about a minute. They were Angelinos with a capital A, with all the heinous mannerisms: the smug, pretty face, the well-defined physique, the hyper-expensive clothes, the regal arch of the brow, the "social" laugh, the overly elevated diction, the goody goody two shoes demeanor, the traces of hard-core, Type A Personality. Sterile as hospital bed sheets. "Ill bred crackers" I called them in my diary. I surrendered to my worst half and bolted.

Gia will be frustrated with me. And she'll be pert about it, too. I mused on the doctor: She was not as innocent and pink and girly as she had seemed. I've seen other shrinks before, and she's much more stone-faced and derisive than the worst of them. And always anxious, always surreptitiously checking the clock above me. Our appointments ended at the exact second they were supposed to; when it was time, her nodding became phony and she came pretty close to cutting me off mid-sentence. A few times she had even forgotten about our appointments: Once I walked in on her while she was going at her sushi lunch.

I drove home a little relieved, but only a little. I mostly felt down and weak and I wondered how I was going to make it in the world—how I was going to make it in life—if I couldn't even join a stupid little book discussion. On Haspurita the tall, scrawny, axe-faced hooker was slumped all over the curb like a long legged insect, sky blue heels off, rubbing her feet, staring the Thousand Yard Stare. She was cloaked in a transparent plastic sheath, with only a bikini on under that. She looked up and tried to make eye contact. I looked away. But it reminded me: I said aloud, "One of these days I'm going to do what Holden Caulfield did, hire a hooker just for conversation. I reiterate: just for conversation. I don't want to be pissing pus."

Fumble through my glove compartment for my keycard, the gate screeches open, park in B-45, hike past all the other buildings into A5, break out in hives, up two flights of stairs, down long empty halls, open my door, the roaches retreat. Someone was, again, playing Metallica's "Fade to Black" over and over. Some serious shit to torture me with the song, in that city, in that neighborhood, in that apartment. Goddamn them. Made me mad.

I closed the curtains and undressed and checked my watch. Eleven hours till bedtime. What to do? I needed to do something, something to forget about my failure at Borders. I didn't feel like *Helpless heroines* or *Hogtied* tonight. "Lily Tiger, Liz Bathory, Darla Crane, Arita the Ballerina, Georgina Spelvin, I'm on to ya. You're not as innocent as you pretend to be, with your ga ga eyes." From my collection deep under the sofa I pulled out Newlook Magazine—a quasi-nudie mag, not a bondage mag—and paged to the layout of the nude blonde.

I always theorized you could tell the desperate, geeky, or testosterone-addled male authors who cheated on their wives and fucked their Creative Writing girly students by the way they construed women into their writing. In fact, all guy writers and failed guy writers, if they're single, or if they're sleazy, or if their dick acts as a

compass needle, their words will indict them. So check this out:

The blonde posed on all fours. Goose flesh bespeckled her derriere. Her breasts were real and hung like teats. The Montgomery's Tubercles stood out on her areolae. She had the tramp stamp: a mean Luftwaffe hawk tattooed in blue right above her gluteus maximus furrow. But was she a hard-core porn star like some of the other ladies in Newlook? The magazine—despite its English name—was German, so I couldn't read it to find out: I took four years of German in middle and high school, but I had forgotten most of it. Not much gynecological detail to her—graphic genitalia and rectitude are inversely proportional: the really pretty and guiltless chicks don't do hard-core shots. The girl definitely looked better than the weather-worn babes in *Tied Toys*. I decided her seraphic, soft-core. "I proceed to dive into your open arms," I told her.

I kneeled, as if to an altar, placed the publication far enough back so I wouldn't spurt all over it, and began, and...nothing happened. After many minutes I was still at half-mast. "Fuck! Shit! Goddamnit! Can't I think of anything arousing?!" I let go, sat back, and drifted. I remembered back to my family vacation out west when I was nine. In Wyoming, we stayed far off the highway in a hilly mountain town with no streetlights. We would eat out a lot at Elvira's, a dinky hick restaurant on the town's outskirts. One night I wandered away from the table and into the barroom. It was dark and empty of drinkers save for one dude, definitely the quintessential hillbilly. He called me over. I pulled myself up onto the barstool next to him. I couldn't see my family or anyone else in the eating area. The hillbilly smacked the bar with his palm and yelled, "Another Schlitz! I'm thirsty Grady! Get off that shitter, pronto!!!" Then he cackled and elbowed me and said, "Hey kid, wanna know what we do in our spare time up here in Oree?"

"To fuck sheep," he said, "you need a pair of high galoshes and a tennis racket with the webbing cut out. You sneak up behind the sheep, slip both its back legs in the high galoshes so it can't run away, and—listen up, this is the good part—from behind, you pull the racket over its head and neck, and you mount." He gyrated his hips on the barstool. "Keep holding the racquet the whole time. For leverage. Oh, and make sure you're a good ways away from the house. Cause them sheep holler like a motherfucker."

I wasn't in LA anymore. I was in Oree. At night. Tony was nude except for steel toed cowboy boots and a white, Western Straw Stetson. I was kneeling naked on a bale of hay. My dick was chafed and raw and burning. The Cardigans played on my Discman. The sheep was gently chewing on grass, ignorant to the both of us. Tony rubbed Noxema all over his face and chest and legs and penis. He tiptoed commando-like to behind the sheep, slipped its back legs into the black, thigh-high galoshes, winked at me, put the webless racket over its head, gripped the racquet tight with one hand while he maneuvered wincingly into the orifice, and started grinding away. The sheep groaned. I began to jerk off. With no lubricant. The hay poked and needed my legs and the balls of my feet in tandem to my rhythm (Useless double major, Film Studies and English). Tony's ass was perfect, his stomach was washboard, his chest and arms and legs were contoured like Greek sculpture, and his bristly mustache glistened in the moonlight. I could smell the Noxema. "This is great, is it not, Ovy?" The sheep struggled and bellowed. Tony's bounce quickened. The animal began to pant out a litany of staccato, rhythmic grunts. That made me harder.

Random Me and You

Zhanna Rohalska



Justin, Sewer Surfing,
art by Joel McGregor

You know who I hope will read this piece? You.

It is not an ode or an elegy- it is just a means to ease the unstoppable throbbing pain of my soul. I am still not sure if I am going to send it to you or not – but at this very moment I am revealing my deepest helplessness and it seems, that you are gently holding my hand. In reality you are probably asleep or working on your current earnings' report for Yahoo Inc or

some other blue chip company. Good for you. And for me too. Otherwise I would be with you physically, undergoing the worst pain of verbal misunderstandings and twirling in the agony of bodily aggression. By being distant, I have a perfect chance to cage my overblown dreams and frame them into the most romantic and detached visions. Sometimes I start thinking that you do not exist in actual form and even if I send an e-mail with these confessional thoughts of mine, I will never get any response. That makes it easier to write.

Now I am almost near the end of the page and I cannot see its top where the title is because the Word Microsoft has an option of scrolling down. What is it anyway? How did I start my writing? When you get to read it- you will let me know, because I have no desire to go to the beginning now. OK?

I will never reread this piece again. Moving forward, always forward. No paying attention to heavily breathing smelly labor men riding with you on the train and envious looks of wrinkled matrons thrown onto you as fishing nets. Never edit or correct the written- it cannot be changed in spite of the illusion of painless recreation, which is deceitfully cast over us by MS Word.

Today I came to a discovery, that I have a very clear set of conditions in order to be able to produce something worth leaving behind on paper. I need first of all: your support. Your attention- at least a daily dosage of it. You have to water me as a flower, which still has substantial prospects of blooming. The second thing of primary importance is the stimulation methods. There are a couple of them. And they are also subdivided into several categories: 1. To boost the imaginative stream; 2. To prolong the creativity span; 3. To switch off the outside world affect. The answer to the first is a chocolate intake or some inspiring meeting/movie/song. The latter two are much healthier and longer lasting. The second condition is executed by means of either drinking some caffeine-based beverages- cappuccino for instance or a significant emotional trauma/positive stress, which keeps you safely and firmly from falling asleep for a while. The third requirement is the hardest to follow through since the outside reality is deeply encrusted into our

inner world. The lights of the actual surrounding are always on and it takes a lot of self-discipline and will to turn them off on a regular basis. It is especially exhausting to achieve if without any helping methods, such as drugs or alcohol. As a writer, you want to be sober as much as possible, because you need to use every possibility to observe life in its most detailed and decomposed aspects.

So far I am somehow managing all three things, though sometimes I fail. I still feel the piercing need in reality, because that is where you are available. Even my past is connected to the real world, that is why when you say good-bye to me, you will still live in my mind for days. It is inevitable – as soon as you touch me with your look at least once, you are captured in my memory labyrinths for good. I call them so because those passages are endless and very confusing - just imagine how many looks, touches, cries and smiles are stored there...

I am pulling out of my mind the recollections of me and you. They are so random - random me and you...

Beware of a Hug

Ray Shoop

After three marriages, none of which were short term, I wondered if I had ever been in love. What was the difference in loving someone or being in love with someone? I married my high school sweetheart; a have to situation and we both dropped out of school to support our unexpected family. Four kids and eighteen years later, we decided we weren't meant for each other.

My second wife, Marge introduced me to her cousin, Beth just after we returned from our honeymoon. I was struck by Beth's beauty, youth, and exuberance. She looked like a high school cheerleader, and I was surprised to learn she was married with two school-age children.

Fifteen years from the first time I met Beth; we became reacquainted after she divorced her second husband, a Miami lawyer, and moved back to to live with her aging mother. My marriage to Marge had failed, and we were in the process of getting a divorce while making a big show of still being happily married. Marge was big on show as most hypocrites are. We lacked agreement on dividing the property, the same old story; she wanted it all and I only wanted my fair share. My second marriage produced no children, thank God, and I was determined not to lose another fortune to an ex-wife. So proceedings were bogged down.

I came home one evening after a grueling day at the shop and a one and a half hour



Halsted cta,
art by Nick Brazinsky

traffic-jammed commute to find no dinner waiting; all a normal part of a daily routine.

“Are we eating out, again?” I said, adding more hostility to my tone than I intended. “Can’t we have a meal at home, once in awhile?”

“Not tonight!” Marge said. “Aunt Elma invited us to dinner. I told you that the other day.”

“I really don’t feel—”

“Beth is back from Florida and Aunt Elma wants us to come and welcome her home.” She cut me off, but then, I was used to being cut off, in more ways than one. I didn’t feel like spending an evening with them no matter who was returning home. I had a hard day and looked forward to spending a peaceful evening with my big screen. The only thing in the house I didn’t mind spending an evening with.

“When did you find this out?” I asked, adding a touch of interest in my tone, trying to make up for my hostility.

“Last week. I told you that, too. What’s wrong with you, you have your head in the sand, or someplace else?” Her attitude didn’t sound any better. Why did I bother?

“I’ve had a lot on my mind. It’s been a hectic week at the shop; I just forgot.” I headed for the shower. It was true, and it pacified her; she didn’t follow me to the bathroom to continue her diarrhea of the mouth.

* * *

Beth greeted us at the door. She looked as I remembered her from fifteen years ago, lost her baby fat but hadn’t aged a day. She hugged and pressed cheeks with my wife.

“You remember my husband, don’t you, Beth?” Marge said.

“Why of course I do. Rodger, it’s been a long time.” Beth replied and beamed a smile. She embraced me and squeezed me tightly. I felt a little uneasy. Marge had always been intolerant of any females getting close to me, even family members, and I felt uncomfortable embracing her, keenly aware of her young body pressed against me, but I matched her exuberance. There was a difference of about eleven years in age between us. It seemed like more because of her youthful looks, and I thought of her as a young mother even though her children were married and had kids of their own. The hug seemed to me more than a familial greeting. But then, it had been a long time since I felt the softness of a woman pressed into me; maybe I read more into it than I should have. I glanced at Marge. As usual, her mouth ran on.

* * *

“Well, I’m surprised your eyes are still in your head,” Marge said. She smiled sweetly and waved goodbye to our hosts as we drove away.

“What?” My standard answer when I didn’t have a clue what the woman referred to. It could have been something that happened a week ago, and she expected me to know right off what she meant. Besides, I still contemplated Beth’s goodbye hug. It too, felt more intimate than appropriate. If anyone had watched, they might have noticed it lasted a tad longer than it should have, and that we both caressed each other’s back. We stood in the shadows of the porch, so maybe they didn’t notice. I still felt her lingering warmth as we drove off.

“They have been bugging out all evening. You couldn’t keep them off Beth.”

“They have not!” I truthfully couldn’t remember that I *ogled* Beth. I looked at

her only when she talked.

“You embarrassed me. What will Aunt Elma think?”

“She shouldn’t think anything. For crying out loud, I admit I was engrossed in Beth’s stories. You have to agree she is articulate and comical.”

“Well, she certainly held your attention.”

I kept quiet. I suffered enough stomach cramps over the years arguing with her. I didn’t know why at the time, but I felt too good to get into an argument over something so mundane.

During the following weeks, Beth and Marge kept company on a daily basis; shopped, went to breakfast, or did lunch. Marge brought her by the shop several times on their way to and from somewhere. Of course, I got hugs, with Marge looking on. I still felt there was more to them than a warm greeting between family members, or maybe it was hopeful thinking on my part. I began to feel like a school kid in heat and about as bashful. I reminded myself repeatedly to enjoy it and keep my over active imagination at bay.

* * *

Again, Marge surprised me when she announced at the last minute we were taking Beth out to dinner. I think my heart raced a little. I watched Marge to see if she noticed my gusto. It appeared she hadn’t.

They decided on something Italian, and I knew of a little family restaurant tucked away on a back street. One of the three sons meandered among the tables and sang Italian love sonnets. We sipped red wine and sampled each other’s food. They talked of childhood days and I slipped in my usual one-liners every so often. Under Marge’s scrutiny, I tried to remain obscure, but Beth’s voice lulled me into a peaceful almost hypnotic state. I nearly forgot there were three of us at the table. Beth’s smile radiated with warmth that lit up our little corner.

Throughout the evening Beth and my knees touched under the table concealed by the tablecloth. Not wanting to appear crude I pulled back, but after our third bottle of wine I lost my timidity. We both became bolder, and carried on a serious game of kneesies. Of course this left no doubt in my mind she was serious about her flirtation.

As Beth and I did our little goodbye hug in the shadows of our driveway, we stumbled or staggered and I fell back against the car. She leaned into me. We held to each other a little longer and pressed a little closer. Her pelvis unmistakably pressed firmly into mine. The wine rushed through my veins as I pushed my thigh between hers. She dug her nails into my back. This all took about a second and a half, no more than two. Marge had her back to us.

I still felt her warmth against me as she steered her little red Volvo onto the street. I walked into the house misted in her fragrance. Then, I felt it, an arousal I haven’t felt in many a year, a tingling sensation, a rush of blood I had long ago given up hope of ever experiencing again.

As I relaxed in my recliner, in front of my big screen, a buzzing startled me from my daydreams.

“She’s my cousin for God’s sake. Can’t you control yourself?”

“What are you going on about now?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Your ogling Beth all evening. It made me feel terrible.”

“Well, excuse me all to hell! I hardly said two words all evening.”

“You didn’t have to say anything. Your eyes said enough.”

“So *what*, Marge. Our divorce is almost final. Why are you so upset over me, making eyes, as you put it, at some woman?”

“She’s not some woman. She’s my cousin! And as for our divorce, it’s not final yet. Remember that! We still have unresolved issues, *mister*.”

“And would it make a difference if she wasn’t your cousin?”

“Of course not. After we’re divorced, if we do divorce, I don’t care what you do. Until then I expect you to act accordingly, and that doesn’t mean carrying on a covert relationship with Beth, or anyone else.”

“I am not carrying on a covert relationship, or overt, or any other kind of ve rt, with Beth or anyone else.” My stomach knotted and I suddenly became sleepy. Arguing with the woman was lunacy. I went to bed, my own. We still slept together most of the time, separated by a wide space, in our king sized bed. But when she upset me, I went to the guest room. That happened with an ever increasing frequency.

For five years our sex went on a downhill spiral. The first year, it was once a month. Then once every three months. For the last three years it didn’t exist. I suspected impotency. We tried a few times, nothing. I lacked interest in seeing a doctor. That night put that hypothesis to rest. I had definitely been awakened down there.

* * *

The following weekend was Easter Sunday. Marge invited Beth to sunrise services and breakfast after. I only went to church on special occasions; dinner on the ground, singings and such, mainly to keep Marge off my back. This was a special occasion, so I didn’t hesitate when Beth asked if I was going, I said sure. As that day slowly approached, I became more apprehensive. I couldn’t get that last evening with Beth out of my mind.

It finally arrived. Between pacing around the kitchen and looking out the window, I sipped coffee at the counter. The doorbell chimed. I jumped spilling my coffee. Marge answered it.

I stood in the kitchen doorway, looked across the living room as Beth entered. She wore a stunning pink outfit with a vest and jacket. Her beautiful blonde hair was piled elegantly on top of her head. A new look I hadn’t experienced, a sophisticated look. Propped against the door jamb, I paused hoping Marge didn’t take all day to finish her greeting. She talked forever, I could wait no longer. I sauntered over and took my turn while Marge went to the bedroom to get her hat. Having grown used to our familiar greetings, I now looked forward to it, lavished in it, I nuzzled my face against her neck. She was a tall woman, and with heels on, she stood as tall as I. Her fragrance hypnotized and lingered on me all morning.

In the church yard during the service, I listened to the preacher preach; I listened to the birds chirp; I watched the wind bow tree branches; I watched the clouds scurry across the early morning sky. Never once did I look at Beth. I hoped it made Marge proud. On the way to the restaurant though, my gaze wandered only slight-

ly from my rearview mirror which perfectly framed Beth's pretty face. I smelled her perfume as it drifted from the rear seat. Once, Marge raised her hand toward the mirror as if to reposition it to check her lipstick, but quickly withdrew her hand. I never flinched and continued watching Beth as she and Marge talked. Her eyes were watching each time I looked in the mirror.

Beth had the most captivating smile, and every time she caught me watching, her smile grew and her eyes slowly blinked. It made me feel like a teenager on his first date. Marge seemed to take no notice, but I knew better. Later, I felt the wrath of her scorn. I pretended Marge wasn't there.

Several days later I literally bumped into Beth at the bank. I fiddled with my deposit not watching where I was going. She just left the teller's window and we brushed shoulders. "Excuse me young lady. I'm . . ." I looked up and was speechless for a second.

"Hey, Roger." She said with a big smile.

We talked as I walked her to her car. It was the first time we were alone together and I wanted to declare my feelings for her, but hesitated. I was sure she also felt something for me. We came to her car. I opened the door for her, still uncertain. I knew I was going to make a fool of myself. Suddenly, I blurted out. "I guess you know I've fallen for you in a big way." Right away I knew I had screwed up. The look on her face was vague. She looked up at me squinting as the sun bathed over her lovely face. I took her smile as being matter-of-fact, as in, no I didn't. That's just what she said, but her smile softened. I stepped to the side to block the sun from her sweet blue eyes. I saw nothing new in them.

I had really screwed up, and didn't know what to say. I thought of all those hugs and wondered how I could have considered them to be anything other than what they were; a friendly greeting. "I'm sorry, Beth. I misread you. Forget what I said." I shut her door, turned and walked away. I felt like the old fool I was.

* * *

Her car was parked in our driveway when I got home. I parked and went to the back door. I touched her car as I walked past it. Why? I couldn't rightly say. They sat in the living room talking. Beth reclined in my lounge chair and looked frazzled and worn out. I greeted Beth not bothering with the hug thing; she looked too relaxed. I kept going to the bedroom to shower and change clothes. My big screen waited. A while later Marge called telling me to come say goodbye to Beth. I put my slippers on and followed them out to her car. They hugged and I gave Beth a brotherly hug. I wasn't paying too much attention to what they talked about. The last thing I heard Beth say was. "No. I better not. I've already hurt someone's feelings today." Marge didn't have time to ask who, because Beth took off. I knew she said that for my benefit, but why?

For the next couple weeks, it went as before; with the familiar greetings and good-byes, the dinners out or just visiting. I looked forward to her daily visits and I knew now I wasn't reading more into the way we hugged at the dinners when we played kneesies, the walks through the mall brushing against each other every chance we got. It wasn't easy. Marge never left us alone for more than a minute and always in the company of others. Finally Marge and I had a blow out fight that lasted all day.

Our first discussion went calmly and I thought it was resolved, but like an ambi-

tious bulldog, she would not release something until it lay in rags at her feet. We had four discussions, each more heated and more scaring than the last. I finally admitted I had feelings for Beth, but there was no way I could convince her that Beth and I were not having a full blown relationship. I gave up. I had never won an argument with Marge. I gathered a few belongings and moved into a small apartment a couple of blocks from my business.

* * *

Three long years later, tired, weary and on the verge of losing my sanity, I surrendered to the shrew and bought myself out of bondage.

The divorce part of the three years was pure hell. If it hadn't been for Beth I don't think I would have made it. We had an almost blissful relationship nearly to the end. I was head over heels in love with Beth and it grew, on my part. She didn't have



January 22 2005 19-00-33,
art by David Matson

the deep feelings for me that I had for her, and for some reason, I couldn't accept that. We discussed it often. She admitted she loved me, but? After our third little breakup near the end, I knew we weren't destined for the long and happy life I first thought we were headed for.

With divorce papers in hand, I gathered my meager belongings and headed south, saying goodbye to neither ex-wife nor her cousin. Marge got the house and property, the business and property, all debt free, but she had no one to operate the business, because I *was* the business; such a small victory. I managed to salvage a small pension I had from serving my country. I survived with my sanity intact, and my health improving. It was an expensive but enlightening experience.

I had a wonderful two and a half years filled with passion and longing with Beth. Did I learn anything? You bet. I experienced falling in love. It was both scary and exhilarating, something I treasured. It was also frustrating and often exasperating. How does that old saying go? You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it love you. I'm not an intelligent man, but after three failed marriages I know that a lopsided love relationship hardly ever lasts. I learned the difference between just 'love' and being 'in love'. The latter never fades. If she wanted me back on equal footing I'd be there in a minute.

Did I apply what I had learned? No, I'm afraid not. Three months after I had gone south, I met, wooed and married my third wife. Hey! I wasn't impotent.

Facing A Wild Lion

Raghubir Dhillon

On November 10, 2007, I was visiting my daughter in Phoenix, Arizona. In the evening, my grandson, Sammy, and I were taking our stroll around the man-made lake in the development. Suddenly, the conversation turned to wild animals.

“Grandpa, have you ever seen a wild lion in a jungle?”

“Yes, I saw it twice,” I said.

“I’d love to hear that.”

“All right, let’s sit on that bench, and I’ll narrate my experiences.”

We sat on the wooden bench and admired the reflection of the setting sun in the lake. The whole place was covered with golden dust, and the distant tall cactus were wearing golden necklaces. I took a deep breath, released it through my pursed lips and said, “Sammy, my first encounter took place, while I was working as District Engineer with the Indian railways. I had to take care of the railway track which traveled through thick jungles.”

“Grandpa, how many miles of the tracks did you inspect?”

“Three hundred miles. I was provided with a gasoline powered motor trolley. And I’ve to check every foot of the rails once a month and have to inspect all the culverts, tunnels, and bridges once in a year. I saw the first wild lion, while I was checking a culvert.”

“How did it happen?”

“I stopped my trolley, and the trolley-men removed it from the tracks. At this location the drainage culvert was fifty feet below the tracks. I took my torch, the testing hammer, the measuring tape, and the note book, and one trolley-man followed me.

“Sir, be careful in entering the dark tunnel,’ the trolley- man warned me.

“Why should I be cautious?”

“Sir, in the hot weather, this cool tunnel provides a nice resting place for the lions. We might face the king of the jungle.’

“Ramu, I have no other choice but to go in, since I have to check the masonry for the cracks.’

“Sir, the previous engineers never went inside it.’

“Look, I can’t cheat the records, and we’ll be careful.’

“Ramu touched his sacred thread and chanted a mantra. Slowly we moved down the embankment, and in twenty minute, I faced the barrel of the drainage culvert which was more than three hundred feet long. As I stood near the opening and flashed my torch, I saw two blazing fiery eyes and heard a thunderous roar. I shut off the torch, twisted my tail, and sprinted out. Ramu was far ahead of me, and I noticed his dripping pants; the poor fellow had lost control of his bladder. Ramu shouted to his men to put the trolley back on the tracks and start the engine. We jumped on the trolley and flew out of the area.”

“What about your inspection?”

“Sammy, like my predecessors, I fudged the figures. Luckily, I was transferred to another place and had not to inspect that spot again.”

“Grandpa, when was your second encounter?”

“It happened six years later at another place. I was posted in the Central India in Baikunthpur State to link the capital of that state with the railway line. The maharajah of this state opposed all efforts to bring the railway line to his town, since he was proud of the jungles in his state, and he was worshiped by his people as the champion hunter in the world. However, after Indian Independence, his state was annexed by India, and he couldn't stop the railway connection. After setting up my camps, I went to pay my respects to the old ruler of the state. The secretary conducted me to the living room, where I saw a huge muscular old man seated on a throne-shaped chair.

“Your Highness, I've come to pay my respects to you,” I said with folded hands.

“Engineer, come on and sit on that chair,” he said. “I hate the destruction of my jungles, but can't do anything.”

“Your Highness, we'll be careful and avoid unneeded damage to the jungles.”

“Good, look, I've the largest number of lions in my state and have been taking good care of them.”

“Your Highness, I see many stuffed lions in the palace,” I said. “Why did you kill them?”

“They turned man-eaters, and I had to shoot them.”

“Your highness, how a lion turns into a man-eater?”

“Engineer, lions are not man-eaters, and the foolish hunters make them eat humans.”

“Your Highness, how can a hunter do this?”

“The dumb hunter fires at a lion. The lion gets hurt. The hunter forgets the fundamental rule of hunting: if you injure a lion, never leave the jungle without killing it. The injured lion can't run fast and catch the animals, and it prays on the easiest pray, the humans. Moreover, when the lioness feeds the human flesh to its cubs, they grow up as man-eaters,” he said. “Can you hunt?”

“I shook my head.

“Engineer, then be careful. If you see a lion, don't disturb it; it is the ruler of the jungle.”

“Your Highness, I'll be careful. Thanks for the advice.”

“I paid my respects to the maharajah and returned to my camps. We started building the earthen embankment for laying the tracks. One day, my assistant engineer reported to me that he faces a lion, while he goes to a certain construction site. I thought the lions would never come close to the heavy earthmoving machines, and he was making up a story to avoid the night shift. I told him, ‘All right, Diljit, I'll take care of your night shift.’ He was delighted. After three nights, as I was driving my jeep, I saw a huge lion right in the middle of the road. To avoid mosquitos and flies, it had dragged its kill on the road and was enjoying its dinner. I stopped my jeep, but kept the engine running. The majestic lion was nearly twenty feet long, and acted like a ruler. The traffic froze from both directions. After one hour, the lion finished its food, gave a loud roar, and vanished into the jungle.”

“Grandpa, were you scared?”

“Certainly, I was. But, if the lion ever made any move toward us, I was prepared to shoot out the jeep,” I said. “Sammy, let's head home. We are getting late for dinner.

The Only Way

Ronald Brunsky

Raindrops were starting to collect on the windshield, as Larry turned on to state route 33. He wanted to get home and unwind after another stressful day at the office.

When a favorite tune of his came up, he smiled and turned up the volume: “We never thought it would go this far”. Singing along, He wished Carson Lake hadn’t left us so soon. Larry owned every CD of his, and just couldn’t believe it had been five years already, since that fatal plane crash.

The rain came down harder. He switched the wipers to high. This weather front was due later—not now—not during rush hour. Boy! Meteorologists, what a life—have they got it made. They get paid even when they miss their forecasts. All the technology they have at their disposal: Doppler radar, high powered computers even satellites you’d think they could change the weather not merely predict it. Why weren’t they held accountable? He could be looking for a new job, if he made a couple mistakes.

Recently the topics of discussions in the lunch room have left him depressed—you know—health care, Iraq, gas prices etc. Why were there so many problems?

Technology was one big reason. Although giving each new generation a better standard of living, it also created many problems. Atomic energy, the automobile, air travel, medical advances, computers etc., all have a negative component. From a high tech tool for predators and thieves, to polluting our environment, exhausting our natural resources, overcrowding the planet, to the potential destruction of all life at the touch of a button, could there be any doubt that technology has contributed to the world’s problems?

So, was technology the biggest problem? Hardly. By far the greatest contributor to the world’s problems was man’s treatment of man. In the name of religion, race or personal beliefs, men have killed, enslaved or dominated other men. Despite some 5,000 years of civilization we have failed to learn how to live together.

Was there any hope? Were we headed for global catastrophe? Has the world already started to spiral out of control? Could we turn this hopeless situation around? Not likely—our leaders simply don’t have the answers. Solutions must be found and found fast if we’re to save this troubled dying planet.

What would it take to put the world on the correct course of action? Larry suggested giving the right person unlimited authority. Implying we needed a dictator really put people off. He then countered that the person wouldn’t be like Stalin or Hitler, but someone like Lincoln or Kennedy. Someone who was concerned about the welfare of all the people, not just the special interest groups, with total power could change things for the better and quickly. Despite the saying about absolute power, Larry was positive the right person unencumbered by the concessions, and games of law making, would be able to make the most effective decisions for every circumstance.

Democracy, he argued was overrated, in that things happened too slowly, and relied on unselfish, principled leaders getting elected which certainly wasn’t always the case.

The storm was really intensifying as he exited on to Station Street. Lightning could

be seen in the distance and black clouds resembling a monstrous wave were rapidly rolling in. It was a very strong electrical storm and Larry hoped to get home ahead of it, because he had left several appliances on in addition to the computer and TV.

The rain became a downpour the wipers were barely keeping up. It was becoming very dark—almost black except for the frequent lightning strikes. Larry turned on his headlights and was debating about pulling over, when his street finally came into view.

Turning into his driveway, a deafening explosion occurred that rattled his car accompanied by an intense blinding flash of light. A bolt of lightning had struck the old maple tree, with such fury that it left nothing but a big smoking hole in the ground. He was stunned. In a matter of a split second, this huge tree was completely history.

He pulled into the garage and ran inside to check the house. The electricity was off, and he feared the damages would be extensive.

After the storm passed over, Larry went next door to talk to his neighbor. Bob was a good friend and also a licensed electrician who worked for the city.

“Boy that lightning strike did a number on me. I think I may have some major problems. Do you think you could check it out?”

“Sure thing—I wasn’t home when it happened, but my wife was. She said she never saw a lightning strike that powerful before. I can’t imagine that big tree gone—just like that.”

“Yea, it was awesome.”

“Larry I think you’re the only one without power on the street and that’s not a good sign, but we’ll take a look—be about an hour.”

“Really appreciate it Bob.”

#####

Starting at the circuit breakers Bob quickly moved through the house. Larry knew from the way that he was shaking his head that the situation was not good. The damage was substantial. Bob said that a tremendous surge of current must have traveled through the ground pipe and overloaded every circuit in the house. All the appliances, the TV, most of the wiring and the circuit breakers were all fried and would have to be replaced; the walls were scorched as the house almost started on fire. In his twenty years of experience he had never seen that much damage from a lightning strike that hadn’t actually hit the house.

Luckily, the house insurance would cover everything but the deductible. Bob said he would do the job, but Larry needed to be out of the house for about two weeks.

Larry told his parents what happened, and they insisted he stay with them. He had been out on his own for ten years and to tell you the truth the thought of a home cooked meal every night sounded pretty good.

####

Finally, everything was ready. The electrical work was completed and all the new appliances had arrived. He appreciated his parents putting him up, but after two weeks he was more than ready to get back home. So on Friday morning he moved back in.

The electricians had done a good job, but left a real mess to clean up. After all the dry wall work that was done, there was dust everywhere. The carpet had to be vacuumed, the walls washed down, the windows cleaned, where did it end. My par-

ents offered to help, but he thought he had put them out enough. He assured them that he could handle it, but after a few hours he was overwhelmed. He needed help. So Larry called his girlfriend, Molly. Luckily, she was available and came right over.

They must have worked non-stop till almost nine P.M. to get the house back in a livable condition. They were both exhausted and starved.

After some pizza and a glass of wine, Molly left and Larry got ready for bed. He couldn't remember being so tired. He could barely keep his eyes open as he showered. It was then that he realized he never replaced the computer—better call my insurance man first thing in the morning and add that to the list.

Since garbage pickup was tomorrow, he might as well set it out by the curb tonight. As he entered the computer room and started to gather the components, he thought. What the Hell! Maybe the wiring blew before the surge got to the computer. He didn't know? He wasn't an electrical expert. He gave it a try. Sitting down in front of the computer, he pushed the start button. Low and behold it lit up and then the screen came on, and when he double clicked on the internet it too immediately popped up, faster than it ever had before. It apparently wasn't damaged, but how could that be? He didn't understand—everything else was fried.

Larry decided to check the weather forecast for Saturday before he went to bed. Bringing up the weather site for Ohio, the forecast was for sunny and temperatures in the low 70's. Looking at the national radar he noticed a strong storm front approaching Florida from the Gulf. This front was capable of dropping up to three inches of rain on an already saturated area. He thought boy could they use that rain on the west coast where they are having a drought and forest fires.

As he went to close out the site, he accidentally clicked the mouse with the cursor pointed at the storm front. To his amazement the storm cell moved. He did a double take—did that really happen? He tried it again. He clicked and dragged the cursor to the left and the storm front followed. Larry couldn't figure out what was going on, maybe the computer wasn't alright. He put the storm front over California, and left it there—at least he had good intentions. Puzzled, he closed out the site and went to bed.

#####

Saturday morning Larry met Molly and his parents for breakfast. His parents couldn't stop talking about the freakish weather events that occurred last night.

“Larry, did you hear how the heavy rain in Florida changed directions and in a matter of hours was over California,” asked dad.

“The weathermen were beside themselves, they just can't figure it out,” mom added.

“Yes, it's true, said Molly,” and the forest fires are almost out. It's like a miracle.”

“No, I didn't hear.” I said, thinking to myself—boy what a really strange coincidence.

Larry was kind of oblivious to the rest of the conversation that morning. All he wanted to do was get back to that weather site. Had he caused what happened, or was it just a weird weather phenomenon?

#####

Molly and him spent Saturday afternoon at Bottleneck Point, a popular spot on the lake, visited gift shops and flea markets. It was after eight when he finally got home. Although, he always enjoyed Molly's company he was very anxious

to get back to the computer.

Going into his office, Larry's body was tense and excited as he brought up the weather site. Now he'd find out. Had that lightning bolt created some kind of super computer? Did a genie get into my monitor who could grant my every wish? Oh, get real this weather thing was just a very rare natural occurrence, that's all.

For days now a tropical depression had been forming just north of Venezuela, and it was now becoming a legitimate category four hurricane threatening the Puerto Rican coast. In a matter of hours it was scheduled to hit. This would certainly be a good test. So, he moved the cursor on to the hurricane and left clicked the mouse. As he held his breath, he moved the mouse, and to his amazement—the storm followed. It was happening again, he was controlling the weather. Carefully, Larry moved the storm into a safe mid-Atlantic position well away from the Florida coast.

Quickly, he turned on the TV and went to the weather channel. They were all a buzz—trying to make sense of another very unusual weather event. All across the news channels, it was all anyone was talking about. He was in shock. What should he do? Should he tell the authorities? Yea right. He'd get locked up as a nut. No, he decided to cool it on the weather changes, while trying to make sense of it. He certainly wasn't doing any harm—was he?

####

As the weeks went by the unusual weather events became less and less in the news. The weather channel finally chalked them up to sunspot activity or whatever to ease the public's mind.

He wondered, was this power in my computer limited to the weather or was there more he could do? Could he change things that were unfair? What would be a good test? What things really irritated him?

One was the salaries of today's professional athletes. He brought up an article about a superstar baseball player who signed a ten year multi-million dollar deal. It was the equivalent of a city's budget—for just one player! This indeed was a very sore subject with him: overpaid professional jocks. Receiving that kind of money for playing a kid's game, while police, firemen and teachers were being laid off. In recent years they had distanced themselves so far from their fans, and very few had put anything back into the game. Time and time again these prima donnas left their loyal fans in the dust to make more money in some other city, and when it got down to it, who were they without their fans—nothing—nothing at all.

Larry wondered if this headline could be altered. It read Jose Managua signs 250 million dollar deal. He highlighted the headline and pressed the delete key and poof it was gone. He then replaced it with: "CONGRESS APPROVES PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TAX LAW".

After typing in the new headline, the attached article automatically adjusted, reading: Congress decides professional athletes' salaries were way out of line and should be reduced dramatically. They cited the vast income differences between middle income America and professional sports players, the loss of the original intent of professional sports as an affordable pastime for the general public, and the out of control use of performance enhancing drugs to help attain these high salaries as the

major reasons for passing the bill. The bill passed by an overwhelming margin and was expected to be approved by the President.

The bill would tax any professional athlete at a rate of 95% for any and all income that exceeded 100 thousand per year. This money would then be contributed directly to the city's budget where that athlete plays.

Larry was on his way to the TV—had it made the news yet, when the phone rang. It was Pete a friend from work. They have had many discussions in the past about player's salaries, and Pete knew how he felt about the subject.

"Boy, Larry you must be thrilled."

"What do you mean?"

"Turn on the TV the news is on every channel. Congress passed a 95% tax law on professional athletes' salaries."

"Wow that's great news. Somehow I feel I contributed a little."

"Larry, maybe you did."

"You know Pete \$100,000 plus was still a lot of money, considering all their expenses during the season are taken care of. If some of them quit—so what—you gotta know they weren't in it for the game anyway."

"Yea, I agree, but Larry, who would have ever thought it would really happen."

####

When Larry said, the only way to solve the country's problems was to have the right man with total power, he never believed in his wildest dreams that he might actually be that man. But for whatever reason he was, and now he must make the most of it.

Although important, the weather and big business in professional sports weren't the only problems that faced the world. So what should be next? What would really make a difference?

He thought about changing history. What would have happened, if Hitler had been somehow removed before he came into power, Kennedy's assassination had been prevented, or the major wars avoided by peaceful negotiations?

Though very tempting, he decided against it—something told him that changing history was an area he shouldn't tamper with, although he couldn't resist altering one small headline from the past.

He decided to concentrate on the current problems of the world. Looking at the front page of the Sunday paper he found two good ones. "GAS PRICES SOAR-RATIONING NEXT?" he changed to "SOLAR CARS NOW AMERICA'S TOP SELLER", and "DEFENSE BUDGET AT ONE TRILLION" to "MILITARIES DISBANDING AS PEACE CONTINUES".

Once again the attached articles magically revised, to fit the headlines. And over the next few days one by one from global warming and religious conflicts to Healthcare and the lawyer driven world, he converted negative headlines to positive ones.

Although, he felt the effect of these changes immediately, strangely, everyone else responded as if these headlines were the culmination of years of constructive policies driven by involved citizens who had taken back control of their country. From this inspiration at the grass roots level, several great leaders came to the forefront, and responded with revolutionary solutions to domestic and foreign problems.

The relief and satisfaction from these changes were evident on the faces of everyone. People, even strangers met you with a smile, they all seemed so content. Like despair and hardship had been lifted from their shoulders, and replaced with hope and happiness. At work, no longer were complaints about the President, healthcare, crime or gas prices the common topic. There were no more racial slurs or sexist remarks. Everyone was upbeat and positive. It was so unreal how things could have changed so drastically so quickly.

Instead of shootings, drug crime and mismanagement of public funds by city officials the local news highlighted incidents of people who helped others and the continual improvements in all aspects of society. Even on the national news, reporters had nothing but praise for the decisions and programs of our world leaders. Countries that had been long time adversaries were now working jointly together on constructive projects.

He might never know why this glorious gift was placed in his hands, instead of a world leader. And although recognition was never his incentive; he'd always be grateful to have been a part of this miracle. The gratification he felt was almost indescribable. The world was finally without religious conflict, war, and prejudices, instead was filled with peace, equality and prosperity—just as GOD had intend ...

“Ring...ring...” My head bobbed forward. “Ring...ring...”

“Larry, pick up its Molly.”

His eyes opened to see a blank monitor screen. He moved the mouse, and still a pitch black screen. Then the shocking reality hit him—the computer had obviously not worked since the lightning bolt had struck, and all this had been a dream. A dream that might have been, the only way to solve our problems. Indeed, it was a dream that might have been the only way to save the world.

He gathered his senses and went to the phone. As her message continued he still tried to resist the overwhelming reality of the situation.

“Molly, you still there?”

“Larry, sorry to call you so late, I know it's almost midnight. I wanted to ask you something earlier, but after we started cleaning I totally forgot.”

Well, he thought, that statement certainly dashed his last hopes.

“You know, I really feel stupid you must have been in bed.” Molly continued. “It can wait.”

“No, it's ok. I just dozed off in front of the computer. I'm wide awake now. But, boy what a dream I had—a real doozie.”

“What was it about—was I in it?”

“Yes a little—it's kind of involved—you know how strongly I feel about certain subjects.”

“You can tell me all about it tomorrow.”

“OK I will, so anyway Molly what did you forget to ask?”

“I just wanted you to keep Friday night open the 23rd were going to a live concert.”

“OK, fine with me, anybody I like?”

“Yes Larry, he's your favorite—Carson Lake.”



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