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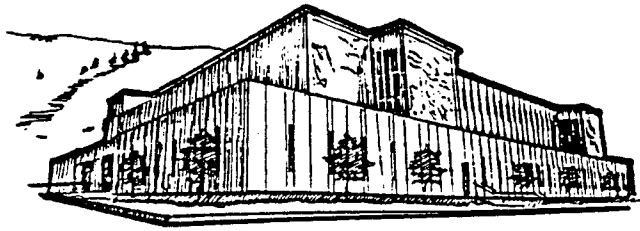
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University of
Montana

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

by

Michael Nevers

B.A., Syracuse University, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

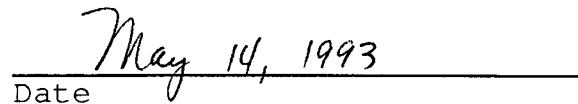
University of Montana

1993

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On The Roof

"Stay away, fuckhead." Richie was thirteen and his brother, Danny, was eight. They were in the furthest corner of the yard, near the wood shed. They couldn't be seen from the house.

"Mom says come in. I hope you're in trouble." Richie faked a lunge. Danny leaped out of striking range.

"Flinched." Richie stalked toward the house. Just keep on walking, he thought. Eat dinner at Johnny's, build a cabin in the woods. Richie imagined himself chopping down a tree with his machete.

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" His mother sat at the round dining room table, writing in her check book and drinking a glass of wine.

"No," he said. *Chop*. Richie tried to look calm, bored, or simply uninterested. He hated it when she did this. What could it be? Mail from school? Stolen cigarettes? Playboys?

"Your father called. He wants to take you and your brother for the weekend." She lit a cigarette. Richie let out his breath. She didn't have anything on him and he wasn't about to confess. "You don't have to go. Not if you don't want to."

"I guess I'll go," Richie said. They were the only divorced family in the neighborhood. People said it like part of his mother's name: Mrs. Meyers (She's-Divorced.) Richie's father left the year before. The boys spent alternating Sunday afternoons with him. They went bowling, to the movies, or played miniature golf, then went for pizza afterwards. The pizza soon became the boys' favorite part. They were allowed to pick the place and their preferred restaurant was Bianchi's, a forty minute drive to Revere Beach. There was better pizza to be had without the drive, but that was too convenient. They had never been to his house, even though he lived in Beverly, half an hour away.

Bianchi's had no dining room, just a takeout area big enough to hold a cash register and stacks of napkins and paper plates. In the winter the boys and their father ate in the car and watched the lights of trawlers slowly

disappear into the early darkness, leaving for weeks at a time to fish the Newfoundland bank.

Last month, balancing pepperoni columns on the side of his plate, Danny asked the big question. "Why can't we go to your house, Dad?" Richie watched his father slip a soggy point of pizza into his mouth and chew deliberately.

"Well Danny, your mother doesn't think that would be appropriate." Dad looked out across the harbor as cars throbbed up and down the strip behind them.

Danny divided his pepperoni into two equal stacks, then gave one to Richie and one to Dad.

Richie retrieved the machete from its hiding place, guarding a stack of moldering Playboys, beneath a loose floorboard in the shed, and set off into the woods. His place was about half a mile into the forest, which is as close to wilderness as a boy could get in a suburb on Boston's north shore. As he walked, Richie swung the heavy blade into random trees.

Thwonk.

The trees were felled in a clear cut, something Richie had been working on sporadically over the past year. The pines were the easiest; he would hack through them with less than ten swings. The result was a new field populated by spindly waist high stumps. Occasionally he would tackle a

more formidable trunk. It had been four days since Richie started the oak and the cut was still only a sore on the side of the tree.

The machete barely bit past the bark into the hardwood, but Richie kept swinging for an hour. He concentrated all his thoughts into cutting the tree. It felt like he was swinging a bat against a telephone pole.

"You'll never get that one, Meyers," said Johnny. He came into the clear cut.

"Hey, man. What's up?" Richie let the blade drop to his side.

"That tree's probably a hundred years old," Johnny said. "You can't get it with that."

Richie turned the blade up and ran his thumb along the edge. It was pitted and dull. U.S. 1945 was stamped into the metal near the green handle. "I could take your head off with this," he said.

"Yeah, and I could prune your dick with a pair of pliers, so what's your point?" Johnny sat on one of the wired stacks of the *Boston Globe*. Richie sheathed the machete and urinated on a yellowed stack of papers, the piss stack.

They were supposed to be delivered to nonsubscribers in the neighborhood as part of a promotion. The paper hired Richie and told him that they would check to make sure the papers had been delivered every day for two weeks by 7 am.

Richie overslept the first day and couldn't deliver the papers before school. When he never received a call from the Globe, he dumped the papers in the woods. On the last day of the two weeks a fat man wearing a brown suit and tie knocked at the front door.

"The man from the paper is here," Mom shouted from the living room. Richie froze. He considered various means of escape only to reject each of them in turn. He was cornered. With a final look around his room his eyes settled on the light brown teddy bear. The bear was a gift from Aunt Mary who bought it in Germany, expensive, and it was to be looked at and not touched. When Richie was four, he discovered that if rocked back and forth, the bear made a growl. Years later, in a fit of rage, he ripped Boo Bear's head off--and discovered that it was made to come off. Now, instead of the growler box and straw, Boo Bear housed a shoplifted Zippo lighter, a pack of Marlboros and three nips of vodka. Without warning Mom opened the door.

"That man is waiting, Richie!" she said. "Don't be rude." Mom waited as Richie went past her to the living room, sure that he was going to be arrested. Instead, the fat man gave him a small manila envelope containing \$36.50 cash. He thanked Richie for doing a good job.

"No complaints," he said.

"So what are you doing out here?" Richie sat near Johnny.

"Looking for a place to build a new fort. The kids from Slade Street trashed the one on the hill."

Richie suppressed a smirk. He had broken into the fort himself, two days earlier.

"No way," he said. "How'd they get in?" Richie knew the combination to the Masterlock and had helped to build the fort. He knew the weak points.

"Unscrewed the hinges. They stole the centerfolds and broke the spears. Eliot's hammer, too." Johnny stood up.

"Wow," Richie said. "We should find theirs and get our stuff back."

"Yeah, keep your eyes peeled," Johnny said. "We'll get those bastards."

"Yeah." Richie went back to the tree.

"You're not gonna get that tree, Meyers," Johnny said, continuing into the woods.

Richie looked at the cut. He had to admit it was hopeless. He drew the machete and began stripping off bark. When he was finished, the first six feet of the oak was laid bare.

"Fucker," he said.

A group of kids gathered in a circle at the far corner of the playground. Richie was feeling wobbly. He didn't trust his legs. Goreski hooked his meaty thumbs behind his belt.

Jeff Goreski was a big kid for the sixth grade. He had to repeat a year and had a scar on the back of his left hand that he made with a pencil eraser in detention hall. He was tough, wore engineer boots, and he liked to fight during recess.

"Well come on, you little pussy," he said. He grinned. Richie could smell hot dogs on his breath.

"Why don't you leave him alone, Gore?" said Johnny. Johnny was popular and athletic. Richie was neither. They weren't best friends, but they did hang around together. Mr. Pasquale had taken Richie skating a few times with Johnny.

"He wants it, he wants to fight," Goreski said. "Don't you, you goofy stooge. Pussy."

"Fuck you!" Richie yelled back, his voice jumping an octave. Goreski moved a step closer.

"I don't want to screw you, fag boy. Queer. But I hear your mother's a whore. I fucked her last night."

Richie swung his fist in a wide arc, hard as he could. Suddenly his eyes jerked open in surprise. His fist smacked solidly against flesh and bone so hard that his hand prickled and turned numb. There was a stunned silence.

Goreski broke out laughing. Everyone was laughing. Except Richie. And Johnny. He was on the ground. Richie had missed Goreski and hit Johnny.

Johnny shook his head. His lower lip was torn and a tooth, not completely knocked out, was jutting back at a crazy angle. Richie looked at the tooth. Everyone did.

Johnny got up on a shaky knee and warily touched his lip; his fingers came away bloody. Kids were laughing. Goreski, the others, they were scoffing and jeering. He should stay down, Richie thought. He should stay down.

Goreski leaped around the tight circle. "What a fucking jerk-off, he hit Johnny! This is unreal!" The taunts echoed in Richie's head. Johnny continued to get up and Richie stepped in and kicked him square in the face. He watched as his friend twisted in the dirt, and then he jumped on him, landing with both knees. After grabbing a fistful of hair, Richie began systematically slamming Johnny's head against the ground.

"Look out," some kids hissed. "Skinner's coming!" Mr. Jones, the bald vice-principal, blazed across the playground and the group scattered in a dozen directions. Richie didn't stop until Skinner hauled him off his feet by one arm.

The school nurse thought Johnny had a concussion and called Mrs. Pasquale to take him to the emergency room. Mr.

Jones called Richie's mother, but an hour later it was his father who walked into the office.

"What happened?"

Richie didn't answer. He hadn't said anything since the fight. He looked at his shoes and deliberately scuffed the toe along the floor.

"Well," Dad said. His voice was tired and he kept trying to look Richie in the eye, but Richie wouldn't have it. He looked at his shoes and listened to his rhythmic mantra. Chop. After sitting in the office for nearly twenty minutes, while his father and Skinner talked in the other room, the chop faded into a thwacking noise as the imagined blade began lopping off the heads of Richie's enemies. He made this as real as possible, visualizing the shower of splattering blood and hearing that last sucking noise from the open neck before the head thumps to the ground.

"You got to see dad?" Danny and Richie were inside the shed.

"Yeah, I guess mom called him. She was supposed to come down." Richie unscrewed the gas cap from the lawn mower.

"Was he mad?" Danny sniffed at the gas cap. Richie tilted the mower. A thin stream of gasoline poured into the small milk carton and rippled the air.

"Yeah." Richie tipped the mower back to its wheels and replaced the cap. "We went to a restaurant after."

Danny shifted from one foot to the other. "Where? What'd you get?"

"Bennigan's," Richie said. "I got the chili pie and a Coke. Dad had a cheeseburger and beer."

"Did he say anything about me?"

"No," Richie lied. "Mostly he talked about work and how his meeting was interrupted." Richie began to feel ill. He stopped sniffing the carton.

Danny followed his brother outside. "Wasn't there anything--"

"What are you doing? Stop following me." Richie walked around to the back of the shed that faced the woods and retrieved the homemade ladder from the weeds. It was a section of white picket fencing from a house on Slade Street. He climbed to the gentle slope of the shed roof and, once on top, pulled the ladder up with him.

Richie pressed close to the black and gray flecked shingles, warmed by silent rays of afternoon sun. He drew a single crumpled cigarette from a pocket and lit it. After smoking, he closed his eyes and watched the swirling purple

and yellow behind his eyelids, carefully thinking of nothing else.

Danny wandered away.

Dr. Yost stood when Richie walked into his office.

"Hello Richie, how are you?" He walked around his polished desk and shook Richie's hand, smiling. To Richie, the doctor looked like a talkshow host.

"Fine." Richie looked around the room. "Do I have to lie down on that?"

"Not if you don't want to," Dr. Yost said. "Please, sit wherever you'd like."

Richie slipped into an arm chair and was surprised at how comfortable it was. The burgundy leather was pliant and felt good along his bare arms.

"Let me say right from the start that anything we say is confidential. I won't tell your parents, unless you want me to." Dr. Yost smiled at Richie expectantly. Richie scanned the room, looking for hidden cameras or a tape recorder.

"So, is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Not really."

"Not really? What do you mean by not really?"

"It means no."

Dr. Yost removed the pencil tip from his mouth and leaned forward. "Do you know why you're here?"

"I guess," Richie said. A caddy on the desk held a dozen pencils. Most of them had teeth marks.

"Why don't you tell me why you're here, then."

"Don't you know?"

"I know some things, but I would rather hear them from you."

"Who did you hear it from first?" Richie asked.

Suddenly the leather chair became an enemy. It seemed too comfortable. Richie wasn't used to comfortable.

"That's not really the issue, Richie--"

"Not really?"

"--We're here to talk about you." Dr. Yost leaned back in his chair.

Richie looked around the office. Mostly there were shelves filled with books with titles like The Family Crucible and The Invisible Web.

"Are you angry with your father, Richie? It's all right to feel angry, you know."

"Of course not. My Dad's great."

"Okay then, how about drawing a picture for me?" Dr. Yost said.

Richie wondered why Dr. Yost didn't ask him about the fight. He could tell him about the mistake, about how it all just happened. How it really wasn't his fault.

"It wouldn't be any good," Richie said.

Dr. Yost produced a sheet of construction paper and a set of colored markers in a plastic case from his desk.

"What do I have to draw?"

"Anything that you'd like." He tried to hold Richie's gaze. "What do you want to draw?"

"I dunno."

"Well, then, how about a house," he said.

"Does it have to be my house?"

"Not if you don't want it to be."

Richie worked on the picture for a few minutes. There was a simply drawn frame house, the top windows and front door suggesting eyes and a mouth, beside a large tree.

"What's this on the trunk of the tree?" Dr. Yost asked, pointing to the dark oval.

"A hole," Richie said, instantly wishing he could take it back. This was some kind of test. A trick to get at the things in his head. Women had a hole. He tried not to think of that. "For the squirrels," he added quickly.

"What do squirrels do there?" Dr. Yost asked. He pressed the tips of his fingers together.

"Well," Richie said slowly. "If an enemy was coming after them, and they could get to the hole, then they would be safe."

"Is there a place where you feel safe?"

"A hole?" Richie asked.

"A place."

"I never thought about it." Richie was surprised by the sounding of a single tone. He had lost track of the time.

"Well," Dr. Yost said, standing. "Our session's over for today, but I'd like to see you again next week. Will you ask your mother to set an appointment with Maureen on the way out?"

Richie shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"Well?" his mother arched her left eye brow and dropped the year old issue of *People* to rest with the others on the waiting room table. A receptionist with steel gray hair sat on the other side of a half door. Richie looked at her, then his mother.

"Waste of money," he said with a smirk. His mother formed a tight-lipped smile and they walked past the receptionist, who wore an expression of studied indifference, and out the door.

Once in the car she asked if they had talked about fighting.

"No," Richie said. He let his head rest against the door window and with every bounce of the car his head bumped.

"Well, I got a note saying that you went. Now you can go back to school." Then she added, "and no fighting. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah."

They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Richie and Danny were waiting, a bag packed, by the door for nearly an hour when Dad drove up the driveway ten minutes late. The boys ran down the steps toward the blue Monte Carlo but pulled up short of the car. There was another person in the front seat.

"Who's that?" Danny asked.

"He said he was coming from work," Richie said. He saw his mother looking out from the window, her arms crossed and wrapped around herself. He thought she looked small.

Dad got out of the car and took the suitcase awkwardly. Earlier the boys had agreed that they could both sit up front but now they had to sit in the back.

"Hi boys, how're y'all doing?" she asked in a southern drawl.

"You remember Donna," Dad said.

"Hi," they said. Donna was Dad's secretary. The few times Dad had brought the boys to the plant, Donna doled out cookies from a round tin kept in a filing cabinet. There

was a prolonged silence that Danny eventually filled with elephant jokes. They were ten minutes into the ride before Richie realized that they weren't dropping Donna off.

Dad had told Richie the year before, when he moved out of their house, that he was staying with a friend from work. Richie always assumed that meant roommates, like one of the engineers. A bachelor pad. Suddenly Richie became aware of his breathing. No sooner did he exhale than he had to breathe again.

"Do you like cats?" Donna asked. She half turned in her seat, first looking at Richie then fixing her gaze on Danny.

"Donna has a cat," Dad said. "Guess what its name is."

"Tiger," Danny said.

"Nope," Donna said. "Richie?"

"I dunno," Richie said quietly. He felt as though he couldn't catch his breath.

"Come on, Richie," Dad said. "Guess."

"Cat," Richie said.

Donna turned and shared a look with Dad. "Well, that's close," she said. "His name is Little Watch Dog."

"You named the cat Dog?" Danny asked. "That's funny."

"Are there woods near your house, Dad?" Richie asked. He was no longer sure that this weekend was such a good idea.

"As a matter of fact, we're next to a tree farm," Dad said. Richie smiled at his father through the rear view mirror.

"It's kinda weird, you know?" Danny said. They were playing bumper pool in the basement. Dad was supposed to come down soon.

"What?" Richie asked. He drew back the pool stick. The tip was blue from the cube of chalk he had carefully applied in the way the men at the bowling alley did. Aiming through the center of the ball he sent it toward the hole, only to be deflected by a rubber bumper.

"All this stuff," Danny said. He stabbed at a ball, holding the stick awkwardly. The ball bounced off a rail, grazed a bumper, and dropped out of sight through the hole.

"You didn't call that!" Richie grabbed the stick from his brother's hands. He made his next shot and the one after that.

"Is this Dad's?" Danny asked.

Richie looked at the pool table. It didn't look new. "I dunno. Maybe it's hers," he said looking around the basement. "Most of it's hers, I think."

"It's weird, Dad's stuff next to Donna's."

"It's your shot," Richie said. There were heavy footsteps on the stairs and then Dad came in.

"Can I play the winner?" he asked.

"That'll be me," Richie announced.

"Hmm, looks like you might have some competition there still," he said.

Danny made another shot, though Richie thought it was more of a matter of pushing it in with the stick. Richie took the stick and won the game.

"I'm next," he said. "I play Dad."

Donna came down the stairs with a tray of cheese and crackers. "I thought y'all might enjoy a snack."

Danny grabbed some yellow squares of cheese and round Ritz crackers. "Thanks Donna!"

Dad got a cracker and a slice of cheese. Richie concentrated on his shot.

"Off the bumper," he said. It was a difficult shot since it had to bounce to go in the hole. He missed, but it was close to going in.

"Your shot," Richie said to his father. Dad was standing by Donna.

"What's for dinner," Danny asked. "Can it be pizza?" He stood on his toes and hugged his father around the waist. "Please?"

"We can have pizza," Dad said. He smiled at Donna. "Pizza?"

"I thought we were grilling steaks, hon."

"Well, can't we do that tomorrow?" he asked.

"It was planned for tonight," she said.

"Pizza sounds good to me," Richie said.

Donna retrieved the tray. "Well, I guess I'm out voted," she said. Dad won the game in his three next shots.

"I wanna play Dad!" Danny said. Reluctantly, Richie yielded the stick.

"I need to go upstairs for a bit," Dad said. He handed his stick to Richie and walked to the top of the stairs and turned. "Pepperoni?"

"Yup," Danny said. He didn't eat the rounds, but liked the flavor that cooked into the pizza.

"Set your balls up," Richie said. Danny leaned his stick against the table.

"I don't wanna play it anymore," he said.

"Come on, Danny," Richie said. He didn't want to be standing around doing nothing.

"I'm gonna go watch cartoons," Danny said and went to the stairs.

"Those aren't on now," Richie said, but went upstairs too. Dad was in the kitchen, wrapping meat in white butcher shop paper. He put it in the refrigerator. Danny grabbed Little Watch Dog awkwardly from one end and it scratched and bit him.

"That cat's vicious!" Richie said, clearly impressed.

"Dog doesn't like me," Danny said, nursing his arm.

"He just doesn't know you," Dad said. "That's all."

"A cat can kill you when you're asleep," Richie said.
"And they carry a grudge."

"That's enough, Richie."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Richie said. Once in the living room he said, "Yeah, it can't kill you, Danny, you're too big. It'll just scratch your eyes out."

Richie left the room while Danny searched the stations on the television. He returned a moment later and snuck up behind his brother. He put the terrified cat on Danny's head, who shrieked and flailed his arms. The cat tried to leap off, but Danny knocked it out of mid air with a fist. It landed with a thud just as Donna entered the room.

"My God!" she said, rushing to the injured cat. One leg twitched and it wouldn't stand. It bit Donna when she tried to pick it up. "Leon!" she yelled. Then to Richie she hissed, "What did you do, you--" she bit off her last words as Dad appeared.

"What is it," he said. "What happened?"

"Ask your son," she said, standing.

"I DIDN'T DO IT!" Richie screamed, stomping on the floor with each word. He spun around to point the blame when he grazed a large vase holding peacock feathers that fell and shattered.

"Fuck you, you fucking bitch!" Richie shouted and ran from the room. He ran through the house, pushing chairs and

throwing anything he could find on his way out. He ran to the car and flung himself inside, locking the doors.

"What the hell happened, Leon?" Mom said, opening the door. "What did you do to them!"

Richie walked through the front door and started for his room, then thought better of it and went out the back. Danny followed him to the shed. The boys could hear yelling from the house. Richie propped the ladder against the roof and climbed up. When Danny appeared on top, Richie said nothing. Danny struggled, trying to pull the ladder up.

"They're gonna come after us," Danny said. The ladder slipped from his hands and fell. "Oh-oh."

Richie walked over to the edge where Danny was standing and looked at the ladder lying flat on the ground. He thought about pushing Danny off and making him put the ladder back up when he heard the Monte Carlo peel out of the driveway. Instead he sat and lay on his back so that he couldn't be seen from the ground. He watched the wind tug at the last few leaves of fall.

"It'll be okay," Danny said simply. He sat next to Richie.

Their mother called them. Danny was wearing a pair of tan Toughskin dungarees. He looked impossibly small.

Richie remembered the time his mother asked Danny if he would like being a monkey. He was hanging upside down from one of the small red maples that lined the back driveway.

"No," he said.

"Why not?" she asked. "Wouldn't you like to have a tail?"

"No," he said, dropping from the low branch. "Richie would pull it off."

"That's a terrible thing to say Daniel."

"He would," Danny said.

Richie knew that he should say something to his brother. He was the oldest, people kept telling him that. He should say something. But even as their mother's call came closer, Richie had no idea what that could be.

Rick

Rick had to be in the apartment by 3 o'clock. His rubber soled shoes made no sound as he made his way down the hallway. People could be heard living and moving around in the apartments. Graffiti marked Presidential Courts as the home of a gang called East Coast Posse. Rick thought only of how to get in as he sidestepped a broken beer bottle and some gnawed wing bones.

The door was painted UPS truck brown, pocked with several nicks and dents. Rick stopped there and looked up and down the hallway. It was littered with broken glass, chicken bones, whole bags of garbage. He heard people moving around, living in the other apartments. No sound came from 312.

Rick looked into the outer lens of the peephole. In the center was a tiny point of light. Still looking at the peephole he casually knocked on the door. Sounds from the other apartments muffled.

A moment went by. Then another. He was considering knocking again when the point of light disappeared.

"Hey there, Roberta! How are you doing?" A quick intake of breath came from beyond the door. The point of light returned.

"Come on now," Rick said louder. "I was looking right at you. I know that you're in there. I'm through playing games, you should know that." He reached into his deep overcoat pocket and grabbed the hammer. "I don't want to start but I will unless you answer the door."

Judging from the marked door, Rick figured that she knew what he meant. Bruised knuckles had inspired the knocker. He learned to always carry something, a roll of quarters, a heavy ring, something. The hammer was his favorite. It was devastating to those inside of the small apartments. He was glad that he had it.

"Who?" It came as more as an abrupt bark than a voice. Rick relaxed his grip on the hammer but kept his hand in his pocket.

"Rick. From Colortyme Rentals."

A slight pause. "I'm here for the payment on the freezer and TV," he said.

"Come back tomorrow," she said through the door. "You'll get your money then." Rick was disappointed. He expected a fight, some kind of excuse or lie. She behaved as if she had an excuse. Not so, Rick thought.

"We had an agreement that you would settle your past due account today. Isn't that what you told me on the

phone?" Rick allowed himself a quick grin. One of Roberta's small children, a girl, had answered the phone. When he asked for Roberta, and the child realized it was a collection call, she'd immediately hung up.

Rick had looked through Roberta's file. People will tell you anything if you provide the right form. He called back. The young girl answered the phone with a playful giggle and asked who it was.

"Oh hi, Molly! How are ya doin'?" Rick asked. Molly said that she was fine. Rick could hear her mother asking who it was.

"Who's calling?" she asked.

"This is Mr. Richard Blanchard from Colortyme Rentals," he said pleasantly. "My mommy's not home now," the young girl immediately replied. Time to play hard ball, Rick thought.

"I remember you, Molly. You have pretty brown eyes, don't you?" Molly said yes, that she had brown eyes.

"Did your Mommy teach you to lie like that, Molly?" The girl said nothing. "It's a sin to lie, Molly. Did you know that? It's a sin against Jesus. Did your Mommy tell you to do that to Jesus? Tell me the truth, Molly, it will be okay. You won't get in trouble."

Roberta was on the telephone a short while later.

"I said I would TRY to have it by today," she said through the door. Actually, Roberta had sworn that she

would pay today no matter what. Rick let that pass. At this point it was irrelevant. These were only words; action was what counted.

Rick asked her what happened.

"There's this problem with my check, seein' that it din't come today--I know I'll get it tomorrow. Always, always, always, if'n it don't come on the first, then it'll be here on the second for sure!"

Rick paused a moment.

"Is that all?" he asked lightly. "I was afraid it was something more serious. After all, I know how much money you've put into the merchandise. An investment, that's what it is. It'd be a shame if you had to lose it." Rick waited for a reaction. Nothing. He would have to press the issue.

"By doing nothing you're going to lose it all. Now, I don't think that will happen--I mean haven't we always been able to work these things out in the past?"

"I guess so," she allowed cautiously. Rick checked his watch. He had to be in that apartment by three O'Clock. Time to speed things up.

"Good, it's settled," he said. "Let's work through our options."

The door didn't open.

"Why can't you jist come back tomorrow?" A question. The tide was beginning to ebb, Rick thought. Assuming a professional demeanor, Rick explained that the delinquent

accounts had been entered into the computer. If a payment isn't received by five o'clock, the rental merchandise must be accounted for. Rick knew that the computer was nothing more than an adding machine, but it discouraged questions and absolved him from responsibility. He continued with a bored, matter-of-fact tone.

"If nothing is done, your contract will void according to its terms, which are legal and binding, and which you agreed to when you signed it. You will forfeit all payments that you have made."

"What you talking about," she yelled, wildly swinging open the door to confront Rick. Roberta was heavysset and dressed only in a pink housecoat. Her hair was covered by a plastic shower cap. She looked at Rick and shook as she spoke.

"I been doing business with you people for going on two years now and considering all the money that y'all made offa me, an now you standing there saying that this is the way and that's how it is. I already paid 70 weeks on my stuff and that three times what it worth! There ain't no one gonna take that away now, you hear?"

"I hope things don't come to that, Roberta," Rick calmly replied. "It's just that we can't conduct anything out here in the hall. I mean, this is your personal, confidential business," he added a little louder than necessary. Muffled voices could be heard in the neighboring

apartments. A door down the hall opened, but nobody came out.

Roberta turned with out a word and retreated into the apartment. Rick followed, closing the door. The entrance opened into a tiny kitchen that was separated from the living room by a low counter. A thin, pilled sheet was tacked over the window. Nothing else hung on the walls, though there were little black dots. Everywhere plates, bowls, and bits of food were stacked on any available surface. Except for one. The television.

It was a Rutherford, a big floor model with speakers on either side of the 25 inch screen encased in a simulated wood grain cabinet. It rivaled the kitchen counter as the largest object in sight. A child lying on a bare stained mattress before the TV was watching a soap opera. She had a fading bruise on the side of her head. Rick wondered idly if she was Molly. Roberta sat at the counter, shook a cigarette from the pack and lit it.

Rick checked out the freezer with a quick glance. It looked okay, dirty with greasy hand smudges but no dents. The freezers, about the size of a dishwasher, were popular in Presidential Courts, thanks to food stamps. The vouchers came once a month, and those who qualified usually didn't have a car handy to whisk off to the market at a moment's whim. Instead, group trips were planned in advance, the food was bought all at once and had to be stored.

Rick stood without saying a word. He simply waited. It didn't take long.

"I just don't see why you can't come for the money tomorrow," she said accusingly. "You done it before."

"Well sure, I've tried to give you breaks in the past and I'm trying to give you one now," he began. "But there's not a whole lot that I can do without your help. When you told me that you'd make a payment today, I told the boss. He was going to close you out last week. I mean, I went out on a limb for you, Roberta. I didn't have to."

Rick paused and looked at her expectantly.

Roberta squirmed and smoked and managed to squeeze out a murmur that might have been an acknowledgment of his intervention.

"You've been Past Due for sixteen days. The boss wanted you picked up, but me, I believed in you. I still do. But now it's cash or carry time." Rick turned up his palms in a pose that made him think of the cartoon character that says That's All Folks!

Roberta clutched at the counter's edge, her knuckles turned white from the strain.

"What you say is bullshit, that's all! I only got four payments left on that freezer and it's done. Sheee-it, this here is mine!" Rick reminded her that it wasn't hers until the last payment has been made.

"Now take it easy, Ms. Jackson. Like I said, there is something that we can do." Rick opened his folder, stalling for time. Inside was a sheet of paper, a list of names, addresses, and merchandise. The only other things were a pen and a small calendar. Rick looked up to make sure Roberta couldn't glimpse the contents. They locked eyes. For a second, a chilling irrational fear sliced through Rick's heart. Roberta had pupils that were too small and they seemed to see inside of Rick's head. He wondered if she could read his thoughts. Nigger-nigger-nigger. No reaction. Rick pushed the fear away and looked back to his folder.

"I see that you've been a customer for a while, and most of the payments were made on time." This was false. Her payments were almost always late. Roberta, however, shook her head, agreeing emphatically, desperate for something positive.

Rick continued looking into the folder. He thought about going to the Syracuse Chiefs game at 7:30 that evening. They were playing Pawtucket, the Red Sox AAA team. That should be good ball. He looked at Roberta but she was just staring at the glowing tip of her cigarette. The only sound came from the TV, something about rich people having a problem with their dinner party. The window was open but there was no breeze. The sheet hung still.

"If you don't have any money we'll have to pick up the rental merchandise. How about a partial payment?" he asked, watching her carefully. Roberta said no. Rick believed that her public assistance check was indeed late and she had no money.

"Okay, this is what we do. You return the TV and freezer today, and when the check gets in we redeliver them back. The same ones. They'll be in the warehouse with your name on them. As soon as you're ready, call us and we'll be here the same day." Rick was on a roll. "It's really a form of customer protection," he said expansively. "It keeps people from falling too far behind and losing their stuff for good."

"You'd just have to bring it all back tomorrow, you know," she replied. The fight was out of her and Rick repressed a smirk.

"That will be okay," he said. "You'll be okay," Rick said, gently touching the back of her hand. It will be okay if the phone would ring, he thought.

"What are you gonna do, carry them out y'self?" A faint glimmer of hope rose in her voice. Before he could reply, the phone rang. As Roberta moved toward it, Rick checked his watch. Right on time.

"Who is it?" she demanded. Roberta's eye brows arched and she cut a sidelong glance at Rick. "It's your office."

"Oh really? Just tell them what you decided to do and they'll take care of it." Rick watched as violent emotions played across her face. She spat the words into the phone.

"I guess you'll just have to pick 'em up, then. They just for holdin' cause Rick says you'll be bringin' them back tomorrow, ya hear." She slammed the receiver down without waiting for a reply and turned on Rick.

"Now you get outa my house. This is my house and you're leaving, you bloodsucker. You're just like them's out there on the corner, keeping us folk down. Now git." Rick knew that if the door closed behind him without the freezer and TV, it would never open again. He wasn't worried. He closed his folder and went to the TV, stepping over the girl who seemed oblivious to the discussion.

"Don't you touch that TV," she hissed. "We can watch 'till they come for it, but you be waitin' outside."

Rick smiled and said that would be fine. Roberta marched to the door and flung it open. Heavy steps could be heard down the hall. Rick just stood there, grinning at Roberta.

"I said GET OUTA MA FUCKIN' HOUSE!" she screamed. Some of the spots on the wall began to crawl.

Rick watched as his movers, Scott and Mark, pushed their way past Roberta without a word. Scott had called from the repo van in the parking lot outside. Each of them pushed a dolly and Mark carried a crowbar. They didn't

waste any time. Before Roberta could say another word, Scott began tossing frozen dinner entrees on the floor from the rented freezer.

"Scott, what do you think you're doing?" Rick snapped. Turning to Roberta he said, "it's so hard to get good help." To Scott he said, "You know that you have to wheel that thing out of here, so pile that shit out of the way."

Mark fought his way to the TV, kicking debris from his path with his boots. On the soap, the caterer arrived at the last minute to save the party from social disaster. Instead of turning the TV off, Mark pulled the cord from the wall with a quick snap. The picture imploded to a bright pinpoint that faded away leaving a giant blank green eye. The bruised girl on the mattress began to cry.

Roberta started to say something but then dropped into a chair and lit another cigarette. Her hands shook and the pack fell to the floor. Rick bent over and picked it up before Scott could wheel over it and tossed them on the counter. They were Virginia Slims.

"Hey Rick," Scott asked when everything was loaded into the van. "You want me to put her name on this shit?"

"What, are you fucking high? This is the rental business. Lose her paperwork and rent that shit out to someone else." They all laughed.

"I bet we could say that the TV is new, there's not a scratch on it," Scott said.

Rick looked at the TV and smiled. "We can rent it out another 78 weeks. Good Hit!"

* * *

"That was a hard pick up, that gas range," said Mike. He looked blotchy and shoved his hands into his pockets only to pull them out again. "They were cooking their dinner and she wouldn't take it out so we had to."

"Who's this?" Rick said as he came into the office. Bob Hardesty, the regional manager, was behind the desk looking over the store report.

"Patty Skimpole," Mike said.

"White trash," Rick said.

"I guess. She wouldn't do anything, just sat there crying that we were killing her, you know. Then all them little kids started right along with her."

"It's all a game to them," Rick said. "They probably have family rehearsals."

"I just wanted to get outa there, but the gas line froze and I had to get the Stilson wrench from the van. I

come back in to see fuckin' Galen whaling on it with a prybar. Coulda blown us all away and that fat bitch just sat there watching him like she didn't care if we all went up in flames."

Galen had walked in at the tail end of the conversation. "Roaches," he said.

"Yeah, so as we got it strapped on the dolly and start wheeling for the door all these roaches start fluttering out around the grease square on the floor. I just want out, but we gotta take the door off the hinges and they're all still crying. Once we got outside I looked back and they were still sitting there and the roaches were swarming on the chicken or whatever had been in the oven, licking antennas and rubbing legs. Skimpole just sat there, watching."

"It was disgusting, that fat cow," Galen interjected, hoping the prybar incident would be overlooked.

"I couldn't take it another second. Just had to get outa there. We didn't even put the door back on." Mike's face was flush as he stood under the gaze of the other men. No one said anything. They were waiting to see what Bob would do.

"You didn't bring that in here yet, did you?" was all that Bob said.

"No, they're spraying it down out back." Galen answered, though the question had been directed at Mike. Mike looked up from the floor.

"Does it ever get to you guys?"

"What?" Rick said.

"Everyone hating you the second they see you coming."

Rick knew exactly what Mike meant. Rick kept a firm distinction of Us and Them in mind at all times.

"Mike," Rick said, "you're going soft." To Hardesty he said "I want some of his route when he cracks."

Brain Clog!

Prologue

After some time the rough tunnel, with concrete walls exposing iron rebars, gives way to a windowless tile floored hallway. I can tell that the floor is tiled because of the regular thumping of the wheels, although I can only see the ceiling and some of the walls. The lights are bright, and I wish that I could go back to the darkness of the back void. To go anywhere but here.

"I'm gonna rip her cunt off," a tortured voice screams. I try to look around, but my head is held firm to the gurney by a leather strap. The lights are rushing by, blending into one another like cars at night when you squint. I try to close my eyes, but I still see the light. We turn a corner and bump through a set of swinging doors and are once again on cement floor. The light is blinding. It smells of antiseptic and cold pinching metal.

One of the men unlock the posey buckles with a little key and I sit up. A nurse in a starched white uniform takes my blood pressure and pulse. Then she times my breathing. She has grey hair with a wire-like quality that had been sentenced to a bun, tightening her face, but not the wrinkled skin. I think about putting my thing in her hole. The two attendants are standing on both sides.

"He only gets a local so he can respond to the treatment. Hold him down." The nurse never looked at me, just at the syringes. I think she smelled like urine, but it was hard to tell. It could have been anyone. The attendants put me in a chair, like the dentist's only with manacles, and I got a painful shot in the neck and a big one in my back. After a moment, I couldn't see one of her hands.

"Feel anything?" she asked. I spit a huge lungy that had gelled somewhere between the liquid and solid states of being that I had been saving under my tongue. I wanted some eye, but she moved fast for a dry old bag. I caught part of an ear and her hair with my venom. The Nurse spun away, bringing into view her bloodied hand.

The fiend.

One of the men punches me twice in the face, but it doesn't hurt. I begin to laugh and throw my head around the room like some kind of human mace, smashing into anyone within reach.

I stop.

Although I can't feel it, I fear that I have damaged myself in some way. With the added confidence of painlessness, I slammed my head against a heavy cabinet where upon my vision began to blur. Seizing the opportunity, the two men try to find a part of my body that has not been anesthetized, but then they are ready so we go in.

I am held securely in place by a series of leather harnesses. They are lined with a soft, cotton-like material, but I cannot feel it. My head has been isolated most securely by wooden pegs in an adjustable frame. The Doctor walks in with others. They all wear white smocks, many with old brown stains on the sleeves.

"What's his level of functioning?" he asked. "Can he hear me?"

"Yeah, he can, but he's an uncooperative one a lot of the time, doctor." answered the attendant. Suddenly I felt as though something important was taking place and that I had better say something to the Doctor.

"Hello," I said.

"Good," he said to the bright room. "Then we will begin." The Doctor then stripped down to a sweat stained

undershirt. It was the old kind, with thin bands arching the shoulders and a half moon of chest hair. "Scalpel."

The dour Nurse hands him a small steel knife with the slightest hint of a self-satisfied smirk behind her impassionate gaze. I wanted to have something in common with the Doctor, something to let him know that it's okay. "I strapped a knife on my prick," I said. An avulsion of skin flopped over my left eye like an old baseball that had come unstitched.

"Leukotome," he said, dropping the little knife on a tray. A piece of blue cloth darkened slightly around the crimson blade. The nurse handed over an instrument of science. It was gleaming chrome, something between an ice pick and a crowbar. The first several inches was the width of a pencil, then it gradually thickened into a heavy handle, for better leverage.

Doctor's arm is out of sight.

A wooden mallet.

Cool darkness.

* * *

Doctor Abattoir pulled slowly down on the handle, the ridge over an eye serving as a fulcrum. "We create a lesion through the cingulate gyrus," he said. "Then back up through the amygdala and hypothalamus, if it's a violent

fellow. Think of it as shifting into second and then third." There erupted a good natured chuckle from the small gallery. As in any field of specialization, those on the cutting edge are the ones that the journals want to publish. In this case a new technique, which does not require extensive patient preparation or post-operative care.

"I designed this approach specifically for our state facilities, those with shortages of every nature, with the sole exception of patients, of course." Nods from the team of observers. The Doctor pauses while the newspaper photographer prepares his flash. "One surgeon can perform up to 40 transorbital lobotomies in a single day with my new technique. It will change the face of mental disease. A tool of humanity, ladies and gentlemen!"

More applause.

Pictures.

"You," he said to the attendant. "Get him to say something."

"You heard the Doctor." The attendant shook the arm and the head fell forward, grey egg-like puss flowed from the new hole like snot from an obscene third nostril. More follows, like rats from a sinking ship it steams out of the hole to be pushed down the drain by rivulets of blood and water. The body is slung onto a gurney and pushed away. Those fragments of reason are soon caught by the fuzzy hair

of bacteria that line the inside of that particular drain. Who can say if it started with the first operation, or by any of the thousands that followed, but as with any other nutrient, the fungus adapted itself to feed upon the brain food that flowed with a steady precision. Before long, the drain pipe was sealed completely where it ran along side of a steam pipe for several inches.

Just before the drain overflowed, something remarkable occurred. Something that scientists could never replicate in ten thousand trials with a controlled environment, even if it was sanctioned by society--which it surely could not. Between the steady temperature provided by the steam and the most recent flow through the drain, a lower common denominator formed and it began to absorb that which went down the drain and excrete the unnecessary wastes on the other side of the clog. It was a spontaneous mutation into a new form of being. It grew.

And hungered.

More operations were carried out. The clog sucked in every precious drop with the blind greed of a desert plant. For it was part of the vegetable world yet still there was a salience to it even at the early stage. Not so much a cognitive operation as a form of base instinct. It started gradually, so nobody would have questioned it. The procedure became incorporated into the treatment plans for certain patients. The Staff ran through their paces like

automatons and, in the end, chose not to notice the strange greenish grey tint that covered the room that some thought was the original paint, especially beneath the chair. So many small minds were no match for the pulsing hunger, an appetite that had known nothing but compliance with its will. In the closing days, three surgical teams rotated 24 hours a day implementing the procedure until the supply of patients lacking relatives or close friends on the outside was exhausted. The momentum, however, was past the power curve, as it continued to pull others into its depths.

Doctor Rene Abattoir thought of himself as a rising star, a man, quite literally, on the cutting edge of psychosurgery. While many found him insufferable, he attributed his less than satisfactory social interactions to the jealousy of his peers and the growing influence of others who spurned true scientific inquiry. Those "others" took the form of Molly Greenwald et al. Greenwald was the organizer and leader of a grassroots movement called the Alliance For The Mentally Diseased. The Doctor had had a few run ins with her over the past several months and often entertained the notion that she was certifiable herself. *What that bitch needs is a few slaps and a little hydrotherapy* he thought, images of the back ward firehose

blasting her to reality squirmed through the intricate corridors of his mind.

"What's so funny, Doctor?" Larry Spencer was his current assistant. They never seemed to last long, burning out after a few months, he was the third replacement this year.

"Oh, just food for thought, Lawrence," the good Doctor replied. "Food for thought."

They were seated in a diner, a long stainless bullet not unlike a railway coach, on Route 1. On the other side of the grease streaked window families in bright automobiles laden heavily with summer supplies made their way north for summer holiday in Maine. Abattoir insisted on being seated by a window so he could keep a sharp eye on his car, a new Packard sedan. It was clearly the finest piece of machinery in the dirt lot. It wasn't concern for the car itself that kept Abattoir at the window, but rather he enjoyed watching those looks of longing on the faces of sad sacs as they pattered by in sorry jalopies. It was a simple thing to watch, their faces open to the Doctor. The sharp twist of the man's head, then perhaps pointing it out to the wife, slowing ever so slightly to gawk in awe. But that wasn't what Abattoir looked for. It was that look of the man just before they sped up again, a look so forlorn, almost beaten, that telegraphed to Doctor Abattoir the man's gut wrenching realization that such a luxury would be forever out of his

reach. He would speed up again, heading for a vacation that took a year to save for, only now there was a grim set to his face that was not there a moment before. There were certain advantages to being a doctor, you see.

"It's like a potato, a tuber of sorts."

"A potato?" Spencer asked. "What?"

"The subject of my procedure. A brain, if you will."

"How so?"

"No such thing as a bad potato. Not like an apple."

Abattoir took a huge bite from his hamburger and Spencer watched as the juices streamed down his chin, presumably staining the trousers below. The Doctor made no effort to wipe his face and Spencer began to wonder if he was cognizant of this fact but his thoughts side tracked, as they often do, and he pondered the difference between meat juices and blood. Was there a difference? Yes, he decided. Blood becomes juice when cooked. "An apple?"

"Bad apples, when they rot it goes right to the very core. The potato, however, just gets a soft spot. A good sharp knife and a flick of the wrist, voila, as good as new." Doctor Abattoir takes another bite.

"Just like new?" Spencer asks him.

"Ah, you're a sharp one Lawrence. No, it can't be served baked, you see. Any civilized man prefers one served baked, of course. People wouldn't want one with a conspicuous hole in it."

"I should think not," said Spencer, wondering privately how much of this he would have to put up with in order to be mentioned in the up coming article in the New England Journal of Medicine.

"So those get whipped, mashed, or french fried. Ha haha!" Abattoir forced the rest of the food into his mouth and continued his monologue. "No one ever thinks of how they got that way or how it was before."

"Like apple sauce," Spencer agreed, his eyes trying, unsuccessfully, to avoid staring at the reddish brown grease surrounding his mentor's mouth.

"No, no, not at all!" he snapped back in an irate tone, spewing tiny morsels of meat across the formica. "You obviously haven't been listening to a word I've said. If it's already rotten, making a sauce of it would only leave a bad taste in your mouth."

Larry Spencer paid the check and was relieved to see him wipe his face, finally, on a dish cloth. The redness lingered, though. Must have been the ketchup, he reasoned.

The Medical Building was closed the day they found him, dead on the floor. Doctor Abattoir had returned to retrieve a smock which he had removed in his surgical frenzy. They found him, the victim of a vicious mutilation. One eye had been gouged from its socket.

It was later determined that a great deal of his brain was missing.

The building was sealed during a spectacular, though fruitless, investigation, and, with the flow of food shut down, the bacterial consciousness receded. The Medical Building never reopened. That was nearly 30 years ago, and it may have stopped there had it not been for one constant factor. For some unknown reason, the steam heat was never shut off. That made a big difference. As rarified air is sometimes found in certain caves and crypts, producing a super preservative effect, the steady tropical steam heat provided much the same effect for the bacterial brain clog.

Still strong on the blood and thought of the preceding months, the clog began to move. It moved slowly, extending cells through the network of pipes like an inch worm, growing and pulling, vertical then horizontal, palpitating, with one mission, the sum of all those bits and pieces welded into an overriding imperative. Thought and emotion and instinct combined to form its sense of existence.

Food.

There are echoes here. People think of this place as old and outdated, though it was not always that way. The buildings, spread over a few acres, were constructed in the late 1800's with the same red brick that distinguished the great river mills of Lawrence and Lowell, a few miles to the north. The incessant thump-thump-thump of the heavy looms have long been silent, the means of production moved south, and eventually abroad, to exploit other huddled masses. This left sprawling empty red shells along the river and an echo seldom heard by any save a few gnarled, arthritic old-timers leaning out tenement windows, fingers jerking involuntarily to a rhythm only they can hear.

The echoes are here, too. Bad places have a malaise that lingers much longer than the people themselves. Defeat of the human spirit has a magnetic quality, a gravitational pull, that once set in motion continues to draw and seek out the negative. Coalescing, swelling, waiting patiently, it is like a deep cycle battery within these walls. The echoes here are echoes of despair.

Like the mills, many of the buildings are abandoned now. In the late forties, Metropolitan had a capacity of 5000. It was an entirely self sufficient colony. A working colony. Now it is all but closed, a drain on the public

coffers as well as on the spirit of those who remain. They should have torn the buildings down, but no one individual called for that, fearing, with good reason, that they would be held to account for what had taken place. No one who had that kind of authority wanted to be accused of engineering a cover up, so the buildings were sealed and gradually the media and advocacy groups found other causes and it was all swept quietly away.

Not everyone can tune into them, of course, and that may be why I am here. I'm not sure whether I can hear those tormented voices because I have lived inside of these walls for so long, or if I hear them because I am the type of person who must be at Metropolitan. Schizophrenics can hear voices in their heads, and I see them here, talking ragtime to unseen specters, their eyes blank and unfocused. But it's not the same as what I am talking about. I am not a schizophrenic, but an alcoholic, a drug addict of the highest degree. I am plagued by demons that make it impossible to survive on the outside for more than a few weeks at a time without encountering grave danger. So I live here, for lack of caring family or comprehensive health insurance.

While some of the patients have been wards of the Commonwealth for as long as they could remember, others had been productive, taxpaying citizens. They were neighbors and co-workers, family members, people you passed on the

street with a nod and a smile and seldom a second thought. But then something happens, an event or crisis, a series of stressors pile on one after the next, over and over again, faster, much faster than they can be resolved, until it becomes not a series of issues to be addressed, but one ugly mental traffic jam, a congestion with no clear beginning or end, no sane way to pass through.

As the pattern of maladaptive thought spreads, everyday living skills fall beside the way. Washing, appearance, remembering not to talk to one's self (in public), these things that most need not be overly concerned with become grueling exercises of will and determination. Employment has long been impossible. Eventually even the most caring of family and friends become exasperated through the constant interaction with The Afflicted One, secretly questioning their own mental stability, and the odds of maintaining it.

In the end, we wind up at Metropolitan State.

"The trays are here!"

Harry is the closest that I have to a friend. A mild man of 42 years, he reads four different newspapers each day. While most people begin with headline stories, Harry always turns first to the weather. One of his papers runs a listing of weather information for major cities around the world and he attaches great importance to the daily climate in Lisbon. No one knows why. But he reads the other articles, too, and makes inferential connections between events that go unnoticed by most people.

"The S & L poster child, the poster child. Neil Bush, President Bush's Neil: His Son. The President's son. You know him? What about that judge, the new judge. David Souter. Are they related? They look a lot alike. Did Barbara Bush know that judge? It says here that he's a bachelor. Maybe they met in Lisbon in the fifties. If you knew when, I could look up the weather that day in my files."

"Shut up, Harry," said Yvon, without looking at Harry. "That's just crazy talk."

"That's right. You're right, Yvon. You don't need me to tell you what's going on, the scoop, the real deal, the

way it is, what's happening, because you're Staff. You're Staff, so you know. Right?"

"That's right, Harry," Yvon said, still watching Divorce Court on the TV behind the locked plexiglass shield. The cabinet was kept locked as were most things on the ward. Every once in a while something that they thought didn't need to be locked up would end up having to be. The roll-on antiperspirant was the latest example. They didn't allow the spray kind because people would breath in the vapors. But then Alex, who heard you could get a buzz from drinking mouth wash, smashed open the plastic container and drank the liquid. He probably wouldn't have been caught if it weren't for Harry forcing the roll on ball too far up one of his nostrils on a dare. Harry had the biggest nose I had ever seen. He was also open to suggestion and eager to please. The ball was slippery and when he couldn't get it back down he panicked and ran into the day hall. Thereafter the deodorant was locked up and they were going to have Alex's stomach pumped but he threw up before a State car could be called to take him in.

"The trays are here!" Harry saw the cart through the plexiglass square in the door at the far end of the hall by the elevator.

The trays come at 7:20 each morning. They wheel them in stainless steel carts through the tunnels from the Central Kitchen out to the nearly fifty wards. They prepare

4300 meals a day. I know this because I worked there for almost a month. When we made scrambled eggs, I poured two fifty pound sacks of powdered egg (Institutional Use Only) into a deep turning vat. Carl, our Breakfast Team Leader, blasted into it with the fire hose (Emergency Use Only). The trays come at 7:20 and that's our breakfast. But we call it the trays.

That's when I learned that all the buildings were connected by a tunnel system. They were built to accommodate the steam pipes that heated the wards. Theoretically, you could go from one building to any other without going outside, but many of the tunnels have been sealed off. The massive steam pipes, which spew hundreds of tiny hot vapor jets at loose fittings, drip water constantly and erode the concrete walls. Heavy iron gates are locked across the old, disrepaired tunnels as well as those that lead to the closed buildings. I overheard Carl, the kitchen man, saying that nobody has the keys and it doesn't matter anyway because the gate to the old medical building was welded shut back in '59, for safety purposes.

I wonder if these are out of body experiences. I have read of such things. Is there a difference between hallucinations and visions? Sometimes I can feel one coming on, others take me by storm, swirling out of nowhere with a violence that cannot be accounted for. I remember the visions with a surrealistic vividness. Remembering is not the correct word--it is as though I am a participant within someone else's remembering. Blackouts are as common as a headache. I am alive in my hallucinations and the 'real world' is only a blurred dream. Pain is the only reality.

The echoes are becoming clearer now. I am convinced that they are external, not organic as Dr. Beetle would have me believe. There is something brewing, a mental fermentation, and I have the unshakable notion that I am to be part of it. Unlike Oprah, who always knew she was destined for greatness, I called not for this burden.

The echoes, which I have heard most of my life, began as a sort of background static, like a radio between AM stations late at night. That's why I drink. Getting faced was a means of muting that static. Gradually, however, it became less effective, though no less necessary, and I

turned elsewhere. Marijuana, an excellent weed, kept me from irrevocably losing my mind as an adolescent. My other experiments in self-medication proved less successful. A single hit of blotter acid had the opposite effect of the relief I sought. Instead of quieting my head, it heightened my perception to an unbearable degree. No longer static, the echoes became crystal voices. Hundreds, thousands, more, so many more all talking at once. Demons. And I heard every single one. Within ninety minutes of taking the LSD, I would have been dead were it not for the intervention of a few passing motorists, the police, and the Emergency Room at Mercy Hospital. I have been in and out of institutions ever since.

The medication that I receive has, for the most part, been effective. When it stops working, they switch me to something else. I went from Thorazine to Haldol, then to Stelazine. It's called chemical therapy. There are many things for which there is no cure.

They fade in and out, and sometimes those words ARE meant for me. I am a rational man and cognitively, I know that this cannot be, yet it is as though rational thought doesn't carry it's weight here as it would on the outside. I wonder how such thought weighs there?

"Harry," I said. "What's it like?"

"Today will be mostly sunny with a south southwesterly breeze at five to ten miles per hour. A high of about

sixty-five degrees, rather pleasant for this time of year, you know." I agreed that it sounded like a fine day in Lisbon and found out that it would rain all day here. He asked me for a cigarette and I gave him one. He took it between his fingers, stained brown from years of smoking Tops Tobacco, which he rolled himself. Any patient could get two packages a week of Tops by filling out a special form. It is kind of like Welfare or something, because only the most financially neglected choose it. Harry got a light from Yvon, who flicked a lighter attached to his ring of keys without turning from the TV.

"Go to the smoking area," he said.

I followed Harry, lighting mine off his because I didn't want to bother Yvon. He was watching Santa Barbara, a soap that he never missed. And he didn't like interruptions. I knew that today he would have to write a progress note in my chart, and a bad one could curtail my privileges. I needed to have good things in those notes because the medication seemed to be losing its potency and I began to feel that a good binge would set my head back to a more manageable order. That meant either a Discharge or Escape. A discharge would be preferable, and was likely, since I signed myself in on a Voluntary.

To be discharged you must first sign a Three Day Notice, then your Doctor reviews your chart--the progress notes, to make sure that you're not a threat to society.

There are, however, risks involved in this bureaucratic procedure. A patient is never allowed to see what is written in his chart. If they determine that it would be against your own interests, and those of the surrounding residential community, you could be committed for the next 18 months, subject to annual review, that can be renewed indefinitely.

Escape, on the other hand, will have the police after you for safety purposes. It's not very hard to go on Escape, as long as you aren't Restricted to the ward. All the wards are locked and Staff let you in and out. I have a Full Grounds Pass, which is pretty good. I can go anywhere on the grounds, except for the water tower, for up to an hour twice a day. There are no walls, physical ones, or fences, and you could just bolt if you wanted to. Your privileges are adjusted according to the progress notes. So I got my light from Harry's, so as not to jinx it.

There were seven of us in there smoking a blue cloud. Knox was there and I tried to keep away from him. He was Restricted and had been in the Seclusion room for most of the day before. Knox had a Mutual Pass, which meant he could go out with Staff or a selected Full Grounds patient. He and Ben walked all the way out to the water tower. Although technically part of the hospital grounds, the water tower was off-limits. It was Restricted. Ben, too.

"Heard that you got caught at the water tower," Harry began immediately. "What were you doing out there?"

Billy interjected that he thought the water tower was a wholly owned subsidiary operated by the Mafia. When Knox didn't answer Harry kept on going. "Staff saw you. How was the weather on top? They saw you going there. Staff." Harry was agitated, his speech came in short sporadic bursts. He had been acting high all day.

"Shut up, Harry," I said. The Staff didn't actually see Knox and Ben until Harry half dragged Yvon from the TV to one of the small windows.

I accused him of cheeking his meds but he denied it.

Knox just sat there, breathing. His smoking fingers twitched through the coffee can looking for shorts. The coffee in the can had gone to the Staff. Patients were only allowed decaffeinated and Staff drank the real thing. The idea was that caffeine was incompatible with the preferred treatment mode, namely down and quiet. It would disrupt the ward. This induced black market conditions involving patients and Staff both. Certain Staff, be they kind-hearted or purely mercantile, would bring in instant coffee crystals and sell them to a trusted patient. That was how Pedro made his Escape. He was a Puerto Rican kid who stood less than five feet tall. I call him a kid because he looked like one and acted like one, but he was 26 when he left and no one knew what he was doing until he was gone.

He was a Section Eight court committal because he dropped a brick from a freeway overpass through the windshield of a tractor-trailer rig. The driver wasn't seriously hurt, though if there had been a passenger, that person would not be here today.

Each morning before Meds were called we would get our Requisition money and steal down to the back sinkroom and see Pedro. He would be waiting with a ziplock sandwich baggy filled with a reddish brown powder and a plastic spoon. You couldn't bring glass on the ward. We queued up like communicants, each receiving however many spoonfuls we had paid for of the energizing elixir directly under the tongue. Dollar apiece.

Within six weeks Pedro was At Large. They never found out how Pedro got the crystals to sell in the first place, since he wasn't allowed out. Staff denied it, of course. A few days before his Escape, Yvon sold Pedro two cartons of Marlboros for a grossly inflated \$46. This should have raised some eyebrows, since Pedro was the only one on the ward, patient or Staff, who didn't smoke. But no one really cared. Two days later, George (The Animal) O'Malley punched the Charge Nurse in the face as she returned from lunch, while Pedro leaped through the open fire door (Emergency Use Only) and out to Escape. That door was the only one that didn't have another security door beyond it, for safety purposes. The summons for Male Help went out in the form of

a frantic phone call and in a few long seconds as the Nurse lay in a small crumple on the floor and The Animal standing there, looking a little lost, five Staff burst in from the Admissions Ward next door and help Yvon and Reginald, who was in the bathroom at the time, beat the shit out of George and locked him in the seclusion room. He didn't get to keep the cigarettes. I think Staff sold them.

Pedro must have made it across the river and into the trees to the neighborhood to the west because the police told Staff that he bought a used car an hour after Escape for the asking price of \$1350. The man called police after he heard about Pedro on the TV news. Pedro paid the man in ones. When the man asked him if he was going to drive it way without any license plates, Pedro just grinned and drove away. He never came back. Other patients went out on Escape for a night or two or until the police bring them back, but Pedro was smarter than anyone gave him credit for. He didn't tell anyone what he was doing. When you live with the same people for months and years at a time, not telling a delicious plan is a difficult ordeal. He avoided with a child-like attention to detail those signs Staff were supposed to look out for. He didn't give away any presents and nobody realized that he had been squirreling away all that cash. He didn't lurk around the firedoor looking suspicious, or like Andy, stand there with a packed suitcase

like he was waiting for a train or something. He was just gone.

"Can't cha get it on one!" This erupted from Old Zed, a wild eyed man in his seventies. His white hair was cut every tuesday within a quarter inch of his mottled dome. He was referring to the two radios in the room. There was one on the floor and most people were going along with that, but Harry carries a transistor radio so he can listen to the news and weather reports. He likes to get reports from as far away as possible, so he turns it up.

"Do it, you fucking duck," said Old Zed. He reached over and tried to wrestle the radio from harry. I began to edge away for the door. I don't need this type of thing in my progress notes. But things settled down when Harry went out to the porch for better reception.

It comes on as I am walking down to the back sinkroom. A high pitched whirring noise. My eyes are open but they no longer see. I feel as though I am falling. I fall a thousand falls as I crouch to the floor. My hands on the floor, or is this a wall? My hands on the floor, they push through, and I descend into the void beyond.

Harry wandered across the grounds with his paper bag. He was going to a secret place. It wasn't that secret, only people didn't usually go there because it was messy. But Harry liked it. Once he even found some money there, enough to buy some packaged cigarettes. It was a long walk because you had to go around the bottom of the hill. There was a drainage ditch from what Harry thought was the water tower, though that wasn't so. All he knew about were the mushrooms. They flourished in the shadow of the hill and Harry was formulating a theory that would yield a reliable correlation between the local flora and impending meteorological conditions. He liked to look at them. They weren't just old toadstools, but majestic hoary growths. Harry always felt like taking a shit when he went out there, but never did.

There were few avenues that were open to the clog at this larval stage. Since nothing came down from the room, it set out in the other direction. Every inch was mental agony as the loose conglomerate of aborted cells struggled to work in unison. Time was a dimension occluded by periods of what can best be described as hibernation, usually between the rain that irregularly found its way through the pipes. The warm, moist darkness was its protector. Sometimes mice or rats took a wrong turn into it. Some water, a few rats, and long naps. This was time.

On the outside, wars had been won, lost, and ignored. Anyone who had been in a position to suspect what had occurred in the Medical Building has long been dead or are senile themselves.

* * *

Water comes rushing down, pushing down, around and past.

Warm.

Pain. Searing cold they scream in frantic secretions, though in the matter of a few short seconds they all feel it

and fire receptors in agony and dismay. The clog falls from the face of the world.

Harry had never seen anything come out of the pipe before, so when the water poured out, he went over to it. There he saw a disgusting, though curious, glop slide out. It sat there, still retaining its cylindrical shape, like an extruded meat-vegetable loaf. He had a sudden impulse to touch it. This wasn't out of the ordinary since Harry had a habit of hiding food against an impending world famine. This was comprised of food from the trays. The Staff searched him once a day, once a shift in the summer.

"Rabbit ears!" Yvon ordered. He motioned Harry to the table. Harry emptied his pockets of sundry edibles, some carefully wrapped, others sported a kaleidoscope of pocket lint, and other less identifiable substances. They searched his shoes and socks, all pockets, and recently beneath his Red Sox cap. But they had underestimated Harry's capacity for concealment. You see, he found a place where they would never look.

Harry thought that it looked like an omelet, only it was brindled with tumors and cancers that ran its length. It had stiff green bristles, like those on a sea urchin. Harry had a color poster of a sea urchin that the counselors at Metro Day had given him. They were different from

regular Staff. They were paid extra to be nice, for an hour a day. College kids. The poster was to personalize the dorm. Staff said that everybody had to agree on one to put up but there was a great deal of dissention so it remained rolled in a tube. But Harry looked at it often. But this was better. It was real. Harry reached down and tenderly lifted the clog and sniffed it, unaware that the initial impulse had not been his own.

The green spines pierced his hands and for a brief moment of lucidity, Harry had doubts as to whether or not this was a good idea. The paralyzing effect of the superconcentrated neurotransmitters came swiftly and he collapsed, still holding it to his face. Two tendrils appeared and snaked their way up each of Harry's oversized nostrils.

The clog turned pink and began to throb.

It bathed itself in the sweet nectar that had been denied it for so long. When finished, though, there was nowhere for it to go. It became immediately suspicious of the hostile environment. Survival is programmed into every cell in both plants and animals and this case was no exception. It found a convenient vacancy and maneuvered inside.

Yvon was looking through the help wanted section of the Boston Globe. A common enough problem, his bills were too high and his weekly check not enough. He began to feel that his debts were piling so fast that his payments only went towards the mounting interest. His temper, already short, grew shorter and both patients and other staff began to avoid him.

Sitting in the dayhall, an island amidst the ragtime players, he read his paper, and the more he read, the more frustrated he became. He felt the tiny beginnings of a gurgled cry in the pit of his chest. The paper fell to the table with a deafening whisper.

"You don't know how lucky you are," he said to anyone, most of whom suddenly became interested in something else. Some people looked up from their wringing hands, other Staff exchanged nervous glances.

"Uh, Yvon, What's up? Are you okay?" Reginald and the others had enough to worry about without having one of their own going off. He wondered if Yvon had a liquid lunch. That had happened before, more than once and it was always a sticky situation. There was a revolving door at this place, a line that could be crossed. Former patients

became Staff. Staff became patients. It's not an exact science.

Yvon held up a hand to Reginald, palm out, a signal to back off. "Zed. Old Zed, come here." The oldest resident on the ward stopped pawing through the trash can and shuffled across the room. He wore brown corduroy pants with bellbottoms, too short, over his laceless slipper/loafers. His velour shirt had a wide collar and zipped up the middle. They were from a laundry cart filled with donated clothes. The result was a man, a grandfatherly type of man, dressed like a 1970's sunshine child.

"Yeah, waddya want," he said. Old Zed stood in front of Yvon and, for some unknown reason, seemed to be the only calm person in the room. Yvon then did something so out of character that everybody noticed, even the wall bangers, rocking in arrhythmic sutra. He reached into his pocket and withdrew his cigarettes. He grudgingly shook an Old Gold half from the pack and held it out to Zed. The man took it cautiously, wary of any sign of a trick.

Staff don't give out smokes. Everyone on the ward smokes. Many of the patients have little or no money to buy their own. If Staff started giving out freebies, it would lead to a complete breakdown of the day to day order and operation of the ward. Yvon lit the cigarette, but when Zed turned to go to the smoking area, he said "wait."

Zed filled his lungs with the smoke, so smooth when compared to the acrid butts he rolled in newspaper when his Tops ran out.

"Sit down. Here." Old Zed looked quickly at other Staff and Yvon snapped, "I'm the one talking to you, now sit." He sat.

"How long have you been here?"

"A long time," he said, sucking on the cigarette. He kept flicking the ash into his cupped palm in a nervous gesture, so the end was always red.

"What's it like?"

"What?"

"To be crazy," Yvon said. "What's it like?"

"Don't fuck with me, Yvon. I'm an old man. Leave me alone." He made as if to get up and Yvon's arm shot out like a snake and grabbed the man's frail wrist. He was shaking like a leaf in a stiff breeze.

"We're not done yet." Old Zed remained seated. Then they got up and went out to the porch. They both talked a while, Old Zed most of the time. It lasted several smokes and Yvon eventually left the pack with the old man.

What Yvon learned didn't really answer the questions that posed themselves to him. There is a line between being morally responsible or not responsible for your actions. Some people can cross back and forth over that line, almost at will. Others can choose to cross once, like getting on a

one-way street. Others are pushed across. You don't know in which category you fall until the line has been crossed.

You just might find that you can't get back.

Mary Ann was the Charge Nurse for the Sunday shift. Yvon and Reginald stood there, fidgeting, while she spoke to them. Harry was overdue to return from pass.

"Veronica just called and said that he was headed for the water tower and that he looked drunk. She said he fell twice trying to climb over the fence. You'd better take Reggie."

"Whose gonna cover the ward?" Yvon asked. Staff could get fired for leaving a ward unattended.

"I'll stay here, and have Eddie sent over from Admissions. Now go after him." The two Staff left in a rush and ran until they turned the corner by the parking lot, then lit cigarets and set off on a more leisurely pace.

"You never fuckin' know, man," Reginald said after lighting a cigarette. "These guys, they're crazy, nuts. So Philippe--over on R-3, he got this patient who does your fucking taxes for a pack of smokes. Itemized deductions, schedules, the whole ball of wax. Just smart that way, you know."

"So," Yvon replied. He was angry because he was missing Santa Barbara and would probably miss the lunch

trays, too. "That bitch will probably save one for Harry and none for us." Technically speaking, the staff are not entitled to a tray, though there are usually extras and they eat them because they are free. Reginald, who spent several months at the Deer Island Correctional Facility due to a few too many beers and an unlucky, he rationalized, pedestrian, flashed back to when he and several other inmates all circle jerked onto the Guard trays in the kitchen.

"So I was reading in Jack Badge's chart," Reggie began, silently renewing his pledge not to eat there.

"Why'd ya do that?" Yvon interjected. "You browning up for that MHA II position?"

"That's not the point. Did you know that he went to Yale? That's the fucking big time, man."

"That's a little hard to believe. I mean, that guy's a fucking dufess." Jack Badge was one of the strangest patients Yvon had ever handled. He was in his early forties and wore a dress shirt and ties and sat in the day hall next to a window, hiding behind a dirty yellowed curtain. He almost never spoke. Yvon remembered one time that he did, though. It was when they had to close the west wing and D-2 had to absorb five of them even though it was already well over capacity. They had to sleep on mattresses on the floor of the wash room.

"They don't belong here," Jack said out loud as they were filing past him down the hall. This attracted the

attention of the nurse, as well as Yvon, and caused a slight commotion, for Jack had not spoken in years. Some had assumed that he could not speak at all and had tried communicating with elaborate, though ridiculous, hand signals.

"Why do you say that, Jack?" The nurse tried to sound casual, already composing her report to the doctor on how she brought him out. "They're patients, just like you."

"But they're retarded." The distinction seemed lost on the nurse. "Don't you understand? Retards never get better!" Jack was standing now, the safety curtain forgotten. He was shaking.

"That's a terrible thing to say." The nurse looked over her charges, wondering if what Jack had just said registered with any of them. From the blank smiling moon faces, she assumed not. "You have a problem with the truth." Jack raised his clenched fist. Veins stood out on his forehead, his face gleaming with the sheen of new sweat. "That's truth with a capitol T!", he screamed as Yvon and some of the other males put him in a seclusion room.

They arrived at the gate and unlocked it, closing the sturdy cage behind them, they started up the hill.

"So he want to some fancy-pants college, big deal." Yvon said.

"Don't you wonder how he ended up here?"

"God punished him. That's why he's here."

"So you do know! I just can't fuckin' believe it. He was in his third year and got out of his seat in the middle of a class and just walked out. The cops arrested him two days later in New York after he started whipping on his prick in a fuckin' church!"

"Yeah, so?" Yvon began to huff as the slope became steeper. He scanned the road for any sign of Harry.

"So he had everything going for him. Then, whamo, he turned into shit, his whole life changed forever. You never know, I mean, like it could happen to anybody."

They walked a while in silence, each of them absorbed in their own concerns and private fears.

Reginald had enrolled at the community college for night class, and for the first time, he thought that he might be able to get more than what life was dealing at the moment was beginning to take hold. He had been able to transfer some of his continuing education credits from Deer Island to Bunker Hill Community College. But there was always that unknown factor, that wild card of fate that kept things just out of reach. He was considering letting a drunken Harry, the sober one being no threat, get a smack in when they caught him, so he could go out on IA. While he collected injury pay, he could drive a cab in Cambridge under the table. That would hold those vultures off for a . . . his thoughts were interrupted by a flash of red near the top.

"There he is," Reginald said. "By the tower." The water tower was cylindrical with a point on top. The giant MSH was faded but still readable.

"I'll go around and cut him off," Yvon said. "Just keep going up the road."

"Okay, man."

It was passing the tower when Yvon and Reginald saw Harry from the road below. It was having some trouble with

motor skills, and Harry fell to the ground many times. With clothing ripped and filthy, it continued past the tower and into the woods beyond. The young forest was a tight barrier as Harry blundered in, thrashing through the undergrowth, pushing himself off of trees. A branch poked into an eye. With great concentration, it pulled the stick out and continued. A yellow fluid seeped from the ugly gash. He was about to go deeper when he sense food. Food was coming closer.

He came upon Harry just standing in a clump of trees and knew right away that something was wrong. Harry looked as though he was the victim of a vicious attack.

"Harry, what happened to you?" Reginald started towards him then stopped in his tracks--really stopped, body swaying forward while his feet clung to the ground. This was not the Harry that he knew. Something was wrong about this. Something deep within him urged a cry to Yvon, but he found that he had no breath with which to yell. Harry lurched towards him and Reginald became confused. His thoughts became unreasonably elongated and then distorted beyond all comprehension, the way a color TV reacts to a powerful magnet. He could no more move than scream. His mind felt such paralyzing fear that it were as though if he could concentrate enough, he could get away from this abomination. But he couldn't. Adrenaline dumped into his system at an alarming rate, seeming to have no effect other than as a shock to his heart.

Vision darkened and faded away, starting at the edges and swiftly closing into the end of a tunnel. The last thing that Reginald saw was Harry, coming at him with a smirk on his face and two huge worms oozing out of his nose. They were the color of guts and had awful little rows of

yellow teeth-like hooks. Somewhere, in the far reaches of his immobilized mind, Reginald sought a final refuge. With his heart burst apart like an overinflated tire, and his mind reeling from an unfathomable intrusion, Reginald searched for his final peace. During the slightest fraction of time, as he felt one nostril fill with a swelling presence, he wondered why his life wasn't running before him. It was supposed to play like a movie, or at least a video. He saw none of that. He felt only revulsion and fear. Raw fear that played on his very nerve endings like filed teeth. He saw nothing. He didn't see the other feeder worm, finding that his nose had only room for one, poised to strike though an eye.

Yvon had second thoughts about his idea to split up and come from both sides. The sun hung red and low in the sky, obscured by heavy soot clouds. As the world hurled through the immensity of space toward a cycle of darkness, a darkness perhaps older than light, Yvon made his way to the other side of the closely wooded hill. He was in the shadow and thought about where he was headed.

The old pauper's cemetery was on this side. More like a mass grave than a patch of hallowed ground, it had not been used since the dark days of psychosurgical precision, when thousands of mistakes--the correlation between those without family and experimental surgery being almost perfect, were interred. The patient cemetery was the minimum required by law. Once the hill was put off limits, and there were no visitors, the forest reclaimed the land and thrived in the loamy, well fertilized soil. Yvon stopped by a medium sized poplar and caught his breath. He hadn't heard anything from Reginald, so he thought Harry might be close by. He began to creep quietly toward the top.

Yvon felt suddenly so alone that he wanted to cry. This was no longer just a distraction, a chance to get off that urine stinking ward. Harry wasn't a trouble maker, but

any patient could be unpredictable. And those things that Reggie had said. They began to bother Yvon. He considered calling out to Reginald when all of a sudden the hair on the back of his neck stood painfully on end like so many electrified needles. He turned slowly to see Harry, sporting a lopsided leer beneath a mask of blood and gore, standing a few yards behind him.

Yvon was born, and spent most of his life, in Haiti. He came to the United States, like so many others, to escape Papa Doc and the Ton-Ton Macoute death squads. One of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, Haiti was oppressed by poverty more than any political structure. Yvon's passage and complicated immigration paperwork was the result of the Vadnais family pooling all they had in exchange for a foothold in America. Yvon was that foothold, and a good one, for over the next ten years he sent enough money to bring fourteen others--getting jobs for most of them at the hospital.

Far from Port-Au-Prince, Yvon grew up in a small village in the hills to the north. It had no electricity or running water, and everyone worked the cane. Whole families worked side by side and the old grandmothers, their feet evading the curved blade always at the last moment, told the stories that sufficed as education. Yvon listened to those stories as a boy, though he pretended not to. The

intergenerational learning was rich with local heritage, the product of several cultures. The stories were filled with serpents and wicked devils, fortune tellers and soothsayers. Voo doo. Catholicism.

To Yvon, Harry was a zombie, not bad for lack of a working definition. As the first intrusive thought tried to penetrate Yvon's will, he took a mental step backwards and visualized a strong heavy door slamming shut. Yvon was a believer. He repeated this exercise for what seemed to be a lifetime, a thousand years, though it was only a second before he could break off from the approaching manifestation. Yvon didn't hesitate at all, he spun and bolted through the woods.

It was ready for the chase. Reginald's healthy brain had increased the parasite's ability to maneuver the Harry vehicle. But more than that, it had a taste of pleasure as it fed on Reginald, munching contently on his inner most thoughts. That pleasant state of being, however, went away. The clog wanted it back. Then there was the problem with the Harry vehicle. It really was dead, and the tissues began to loose their natural elasticity.

It was time to move on.

Yvon ran fast through the tangle of roots and trees all growing so closely together. He could hear his pursuer closing in "her cunt off!" on him. He could hear spastic fragments of thoughts in his head. In his confusion, he turned his head to look, and in that moment caught his foot and sprawled to the ground. His head struck one of the thousands of tiny white bricks that dotted the back side of the hill, corners peeking out amid the twisted ground clutter. The small brick, a monument to an unwanted and forgotten soul, had a five digit number on it.

No name and no date, just a number.

The clog fell upon him. Yvon was still alive, but unconscious. It was careful not to hurt him. No, not this one. The clog was careful. As careful as a lover.

With a deft turn of the key, he opened the fire door and walked on to the ward. His face swam before my eyes, shifting and changing, it melted into other faces at once distinct as fingerprints only to dissolve onto another. Yvon's face was a constant window of motion. A storm of sorts, it had a focal point, the eye of the hurricane and locus of control. Every face had it in the exact same place. A puncture hole over the left eye socket.

No one else seemed to notice, and I could only see it from the corner of my eye. When I looked at him directly, it looked just like Yvon. I began to seriously question the reliability of my perceptions when a group came upstairs from Metro Day. Old Zed took one glance at Yvon and went off like nothing I had ever seen before.

"It's Mr. Fucking Potato Head!", screamed Zed. The wiry old man bolted out of file and charged Yvon. In that second, Yvon's face changed to that of a startled, hunted creature. For a split second I saw a nest of some kind, squirming like slugs on salt.

Zed never made it to Yvon, though. He clutched at his chest and stumbled and finally collapsed. There was no mistaking the smirk on Yvon's face as he calmly walked over to the elderly patient. Pandemonium ruled as the other

patients screamed or just stood there, milling aimlessly like automatons without a function. The Metro Day counselor found her voice and called down to the Nurse, who sized up the panic scene with the efficiency of a trained professional and hit the Emergency Code Switch in the Nursing Station.

And promptly threw up.

A tone and a small light flashes. "C-2's coding," said Colleen. "Oh, my god, I bet it's Tony. The last time he was in he almost killed a nurse."

"No way! A patient?"

"Yeah, he really tried to kill her. She was out for almost five months."

"Paid time?", Colleen asked.

"Of course." Pressing a button on the switch board, she says "Code Blue, Code Blue on C-2. Male Help C-2, Stat." The woman's fingers trembled as she released the code button. "I hate this shit," she added to no one in particular and lit a cigarette.

Code Blue was taken seriously at Metropolitan. Staff dropped whatever they were doing, the phone, a tray, whatever. Male Staff raced down the bowling alley wards and the female Staff waited at each set of doors to open them so they don't have to slow down. Coding cuts through all interStaff rifts and disputes, it boils down to a very binary situation: Us or Them.

Anthony Dobrynski watched as Yvon started to kick the frail old man in the head. It wasn't supposed to be this way, he reasoned slowly. Staff were supposed to help. This was wrong. Acting Out was wrong--that's what they had drilled into his head since he was a confused little boy. In many respects, Tony was still that small boy, terrified by an abusive father. However, now Tony was a six foot four, 230 pound angry, resentful retarded adult male. His father, somehow now with black skin, was beating on grandpa. No.

"Nooo!" Tony bellowed with a force that reverberated in the hollow of your chest and seemed to shake every window. At that moment, the door burst open and a gang of Staff poured onto the ward.