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Terrorist healthdog and other stories

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TERRORIST HEALTHDOG AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Carlos A. Solis

December 2008

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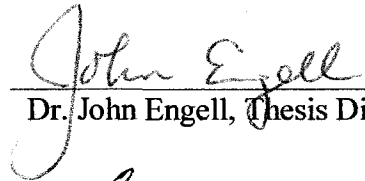
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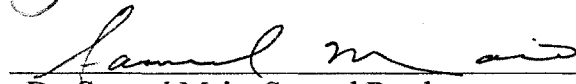
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ABSTRACT

TERRORIST HEALTHDOG AND OTHER STORIES

by Alan Solis

This thesis, *Terrorist Healthdog and other Stories*, consists of fourteen short stories which cover a wide range of subjects: reminiscences by grandparents with vastly different views of their shared lives (“Ed and April Joy”); racism in 1970’s Arkansas (“Blood Will Tell”); obsessions with numbers and machines and error (“Pleasure is Finite” and “The Weight Distributor”); frustration (“Exercise,” “I’m On My Way,” and “A Hand in the Bird”); madness (“Groundskeeper,” “In Plain View,” “Sam’s a Prick,” and “Timeless”); revenge (“Fable #4”); political intrigue concerning a plot to assassinate the President (“Terrorist Healthdog”); and life as a fugitive in Guatemala (“Sololá”).

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Introduction

This thesis, *Terrorist Healthdog and other Stories*, consists of fourteen short stories which cover a wide range of subjects: reminiscences by grandparents with vastly different views of their shared lives (“Ed and April Joy”); racism in 1970’s Arkansas (“Blood Will Tell”); obsessions with numbers and machines and error (“Pleasure is Finite” and “The Weight Distributor”); frustration (“Exercise,” “I’m On My Way,” and “A Hand in the Bird”); madness (“Groundskeeper,” “In Plain View,” “Sam’s a Prick,” and “Timeless”); revenge (“Fable #4”); political intrigue concerning a plot to assassinate the President (“Terrorist Healthdog”); and life as a fugitive in Guatemala (“Sololá”).

All fourteen stories portray characters who are trying to make sense of the world and impose order on it. The possibility of lasting success in such an endeavor is slim, and the dark humor of many of the stories derives from the obsessions and excesses of the characters and the unintended consequences of their actions. Dark surrealism surrounds the sense of place in many of the stories and is reinforced by the absurdity of many of the actions and ideas of the characters.

A primary task I face in writing fiction is negotiating the fine line between predictability and surprise. All fiction is contrivance: the difficulty involves creating a world in which the contrivance is forgotten and the magic of the world being represented takes over. If I lean too far toward creating worlds in which characters’ emotions and actions fulfill the need of the god-like external influence of the author, I risk creating predictable worlds – stories in which the pursuit of realism has trumped the vagaries of life – worlds in which the fun of discovery has been removed. If, on the other hand, I veer too far into worlds in which surprise is the dominant factor and the emotions,

actions, and events are not related logically, I risk writing mere fantasy – absurdism without meaning. Therefore, one of my goals is to create fiction in which the events and reactions of the characters seem, in hindsight, inevitable. Inevitability, in the world of fiction, is a good thing – it gives the reader a sense of completion and satisfaction. Inevitability is not predictable; on the contrary, to achieve a sense of the inevitable, portions of the story must be unpredictable.

In reviewing the stories for this thesis, I now see how many of them hop from one side of the line between predictability and surprise to the other. When writing stories, I typically start with a sense of the beginning and the ending, and a list of scrawled notes about where I want to go. These elements represent my god-like imposition on the story and characters. I would like to say that while writing I plan to stay on that line like an airplane on approach – locked in to the beam, veering, correcting, and landing with all aboard happily preparing to go on their various ways. But the truth is that often the instruments lose power, the visibility is poor, and instead of landing at Dallas-Fort Worth, I find myself somewhere near, say, Kalamazoo. The writing process is like that: I plan the best I can, but sometimes the stories and characters take over, and my god-like role is reduced to trying to make sure that I land somewhere, anywhere: Kalamazoo winds up being just fine.

In the process of writing, sometimes I discover a character like Harley in “Terrorist Healthdog” and “Solola” who will not be denied his free-will. One of the joys of writing those stories was the feeling that Harley was doing whatever Harley would do – I had little choice but to follow his emotions and actions as best I could. The surprise and invention in the stories come from the undirected nature of Harley’s responses to his

situations. Similarly, Mitch in “Pleasure is Finite” found himself in a fix that had me scrambling to keep up – to provide a framework through which I could display his emotions and turmoil.

Stories such as these contain surprise – for me and the reader –and an element of absurdity in the occurrences, but I hope the surprise and absurdity are counterbalanced by the genuine nature of the character’s conflicting desires and contradictory responses to similar stimuli. Surprise often comes in the form of unforeseen causes and unintended consequences. The tension arising when the reader is aware that surprise is possible leads, in my view, to magic in fiction. In the back of my mind, I am often striving to achieve the effect that E. M. Forster describes in Aspects of the Novel as occurring in Tristram Shandy: “It would not be really odd, would it, if the furniture in Mr. Shandy’s bedroom . . . should come alive like Belinda’s toilette in ‘The Rape of the Lock,’ or that Uncle Toby’s drawbridge should lead into Lilliput?” (111). I am attracted to characters and events which are always pregnant with possibilities, which allow, almost, for the possibility that anything could happen.

But there is a place for the stronger hand of a god-like creator in fiction. It is perfectly OK, in my mind, to decide, “I want to write a story about *this*.” The danger in such a decision is that the characterization will be stilted, the events of the plot forced, the story predictable rather than inevitable. However, there is a way to create a story that is clearly about something, yet is not predictable, a story in which characters and events unfold in surprising ways. I believe this is true of “The Weight Distributor.” There is a frenetic quality to the story – one created by a series of surprising actions and events – but one which, in the end, stays true to my original vision.

Over the years, the term “absurd” has been used to describe many of my stories. I don’t set out to write an absurd story. I have no desire to write “Axoltl II,” yet I did write “Sam’s a Prick.” I think the elements of surprise often lead to the absurd. One reason for absurdity in my stories is that many times I find myself confronting this question: how does an individual assert the importance of the self in a world of over six and one-half billion equally important souls? Each individual is precious. An individual has desires, hopes, and dreams. Most individuals have some sense of worth, a sense of importance in relation to the people around them and the society in which they live. But the reality is, as I suggest in “I’m On My Way,” that it seems to matter not one whit whether any one of us lives or dies. There will always be others. The distance between individual aspiration and world-view reality is essentially comic. Essentially absurd.

But there are two kinds of absurdity: one imposed on the story by the author and one created by the characters themselves. The situation in “Sam’s a Prick” is an absurd situation imposed on the narrator of the story by me. Not many folks manage to write anything in their buried coffins; even fewer figure out how to make their coffin-writings public. However, in “Pleasure is Finite” Mitch’s prime-number obsession and his solution to his sleepiness at work are absurdities that are imposed by the character on himself within the framework of the fictional world.

I have a background in physics and computer science, and these interests have profoundly influenced my stories. I am interested in sequences and to what degree causality is involved in the transition from one step in a sequence to another. I am also interested in how error propagates as the number of steps in a sequence accumulate. “In Plain View,” and the office scene in “Pleasure is Finite,” and others among my stories

explore how absurd situations can result from sequences in which each step is itself logical.

How do we make sense out of the situations we confront in life? In many cases we find sense-making logically impossible because we rarely behave rationally, yet the need for causality and order seems to be primal. Creating a logical world out of illogical pieces (the inverse of the absurdity described above), as April does in "April Joy," leads to another absurd world view, but one that can, at least on the surface, provide comfort for the character and, hopefully, layers of understanding for the reader.

The short stories of D. H. Lawrence, Willa Cather, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, Julio Cortázar, and T. C. Boyle all have influenced my work. At their best, these authors' stories reveal the motivations of individuals in a way that is startlingly new. These motivations arise in environments representing self-contained worlds. I endeavor to create stories that are self-sufficient, that elicit surprise, and that are thought-provoking, humorous, and gut-wrenching because they deal with things in life we cannot escape.

My literary influences also include eighteenth-century writers such as Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne and twentieth-century writers such as Charles Chesnutt, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, James Thurber, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth, to name a few. On the sentence-level each of these authors writes in an almost poetic style, yet meaning is never sacrificed for the sake of style. In fact, the many layers of meaning suggested in the stories of these writers are one reason for my fascination with their fiction, and I try for the same depth of meaning in my stories.

It's difficult to pin down the influences on my sentence style. I try to match the style to the characters and the stories. Sometimes, for interior monologue, the short stories of Beckett, such as those in First Love and Other Stories and Fizzles, show their influence – I have an homage to Beckett, “Sam’s a Prick,” in the collection. I also pay my respects to Thurber in “Fable #4.” Twain’s influence shows up during moments of innocence and descriptions of nature which occur in many of the stories. A bit of Faulkner from the Jason section of The Sound and the Fury glimmers in “The Hand in the Bird,” and the influence of Pynchon shows in “The Weight Distributor” and “Pleasure is Finite.”

I am interested in experimental techniques in narration, one of which is having the third person narrator assert himself, primarily by means of inserting information or mimicking outside sources unknown to the characters. Pynchon uses that technique in Gravity’s Rainbow, for example, and I use some of it in “The Weight Distributor” and other stories.

I strive for variety in this collection. Some stories are primarily plot-driven, some character-driven, and a few of the shorter ones are driven by their prose style. I have been influenced in this respect by T. C. Boyle’s Collected Short Stories. In that collection, Boyle’s stories demonstrate many different narrative forms, prose styles, plot structures, and settings. I believe that kind of variety best suits a reader of a collection of short stories because such a collection is read precisely because it can be picked up many

times for short periods.

My stories are in third-person primarily, but several have significant portions in first-person. I use third-person because it gives me the widest range of points-of-view. If writing in third-person omniscient, I can allow the reader to know each character's thoughts and also depict every characters' actions. If using third-person tied primarily to the consciousness of one character, I still have freedom to describe situations from vantage points the main character cannot know, yet I can give the reader the feeling of being very close to the central character's thoughts. And third-person allows me to use dialogue, as in "Blood Will Tell," to render closely the main characters' personalities without the complex issues of reliability involved in the presentation of dialogue in a first-person narrative.

Therefore, only five stories are in first-person: "In Plain View," "I'm On My Way," "Sam's A Prick," "Ed and April Joy," and "A Hand in the Bird." Three of those are very short: "In Plain View" describes a mystical moment, "I'm On My Way" describes a freeway moment, and "Sam's A Prick" is a short stream-of-consciousness story asking what one does when one cannot do anything. "Ed and April Joy" is one of the more character-oriented stories in the collection, and first-person allowed me to depict the characters through their own voices and implicitly reveal similarities and diversions in Ed's and April's stories. "A Hand in the Bird" depends in large part on the attitude of the narrator; his anger and conflict was best shown in first-person. First-person is more personal, and I have to be careful with it. My first-person stories, with one exception – "Ed and April Joy" – are angrier and harsher than my third-person stories; they challenge the reader to identify with the narrator – if the reader cannot do

that, the stories will not work.

“Ed and April Joy” and “Blood Will Tell” presented challenges for me and the reader because the characters speak in dialect. I have struggled to present the dialects depicted in a reasonably accurate yet easily readable form. I have tried to emulate Mark Twain’s example, and create a written form of dialect which is, while not exactly accurate, accurate enough in the essential nuances to be both comprehensible and convincing.

My stories are set in a number of places: a freeway, a coffin, San Francisco, Los Angeles, an amorphous and unnamed Silicon Valley, Guatemala, and Arkansas. Setting is useful for suggesting the internal struggles of characters. “A Hand in the Bird,” “Groundskeeper,” “Timeless,” and “The Weight Distributor” include scenes in which nature plays a significant role as the one thing that the characters can depend upon to be lasting and without deception. In “Sololá,” on the other hand, nature slowly becomes something as unpredictable as Harley’s mental state. The flora of high-altitude Guatemala starts melding into the night, the dark, repeating itself, increasingly refusing to provide direction for the characters and comforting stability for readers as the story progresses.

I have ordered the stories in the collection, not by time of writing, or time of story, but by a progression of fits and starts leading to a touch of hope. Admittedly, most of the stories are bleak. What hope exists is often a transitory connection between two characters – a few minutes side-by-side reading Pogo, an easy agreement to wait for baseball season, a calling the owls together, a campfire around which children listen to their grandmother telling stories, a short exploratory moment between dog and man

involving the smells of the backyard – these moments are rare and precious. In fact, I am doubtful that a short-story has any business depicting the happiness of life. It is hard to find a happy ending in great short stories, and that is as it should be. Happiness is not the thing most people are afraid to share.

“Terrorist Healthdog” and “Sololá” open the collection because they represent the widest world-view and address contemporary social concerns in a way that most of the stories (“The Weight Distributor” is the other exception) do not. Harley’s progress through these first two stories ends in mystery – it is likely, but unknowable, what his final act will be. But his journey has taken him from California to Washington, D. C. to Panajachel, Guatemala; and he has confronted or been exposed to issues such as immigration, employment, and third-world poverty along the way.

Next, the short “In Plain View” provides a bit of humorous relief from the large issues of the preceding stories. “Groundskeeper” follows as an example of how work and marriage can go wrong. “Blood Will Tell,” which emphasizes the importance of the individual, follows; and “I’m on My Way,” which is very short and questions the importance of the individual, rounds out the first half of the collection.

I have put “The Weight Distributor” and “Ed and April Joy” in the middle because, though they are primarily about deception and the ultimate isolation of individuals, they hint at moments of relief. April’s world is not so bad; she has found a way around the pitfalls of what would be deadly honesty – in the process discovering a way to enjoy herself by telling her story. “The Weight Distributor” suggests that the future of the human race depends on continued evolution, but mutation is impartial and the risk of disaster is infinitely higher than that of success.

“Sam’s a Prick” appears next to provide some short stream-of-consciousness relief from the longer more traditional pieces preceding it. Then come a number of shorter stories: “Exercise,” “Timeless,” “A Hand in the Bird,” and “Fable #4” – all of which deal with an individual’s reaction to events outside his control.

I chose to place “Pleasure is Finite” at the end. Though the story obsessively explores isolation, it suggests human connection at the end; this connection occurs in the final stanza of Mitch’s numerically obsessed poem when the girl in the house with smoke curling from the chimney whispers her whisp of hope for a world of loneliness.

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Annotated Table of Contents

Terrorist Healthdog (22 pp)

The hero, Harley, is CEO of Healthdog.com – a pharmaceutical delivery company that is also a front for a secret group that advocates keeping non-United States citizens from entering the country to work. The mascot for Healthdog.com is Harley's German Shepherd, Shep, who is shown in commercials delivering drugs to the elderly and infirm. During the story Harley's wife dies of emphysema, in their bed, while being doted on and tended to by Harley. Meanwhile, the President of the United States has reneged on a deal he made with Harley, and Harley and his group retaliate by planting explosives on Shep and detonating them while the President pets Shep on stage at a healthcare reform rally. Harley escapes to Guatemala.

Sololá (19 pp)

Sololá is set in Guatemala and continues the story of Harley. He has become a member of a small band of expatriates with shady pasts who live in Panajachel – a small village on the shores of the volcanic Lake Atitlán. He meets a woman and they eventually fall in love.

Harley deals with the guilt he feels regarding the events in "Terrorist Healthdog" which drives him to the climax of the story from atop the towers of an abandoned hotel project by Trujillo. The towers overlook Lake Atitlán and a courtyard of indigents and hellish fires. During the night Harley climbs to the top, stands in the open window frame of the top floor, and considers his options while his friends look on from behind.

In Plain View (3 pp)

The unnamed first-person narrator feels apart from other people and objects in nature. He derives a pastime that can give him pleasure without forcing him to interact with people. He also idolizes the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead and presents a couplet about Whitehead (modeled on Alexander Pope's couplet about Newton) that he attributes to Pope.

At the end, he sees the connections between things before he meets his end – due to an unexpected malfunction with his parachute and the consequent unanticipated loss of control of his airplane.

Groundskeeper (12 pp)

Mitch works as a software architect at a small start-up computer company, and at the beginning of the story he has an argument with another engineer. Everything about work – the drudgery, the environment, and his co-workers – irritates him. He humiliates a female engineer during the argument, and then he

goes home to his two dogs, Jack and Jill.

Mitch is recently unhappily divorced and the loneliness gets to him: he starts living in the backyard with his dogs. His ex-wife finds him there and, at the end, gives him a command.

Blood Will Tell (9 pp)

Inspired by the stories of Charles W. Chesnutt, "Blood Will Tell" is about A. J. Hollingsworth, a bigot living in Arkansas in the early seventies, who runs a computing center at the University of Arkansas. His dealings with Jervis, a black work-study student, who comes to work at the computing center, comprise the core of the story. A. J. makes life difficult for Jervis, but Jervis accomplishes a unique, irritating, outwardly rash, but actually well-thought-out revenge at the end.

I'm On My Way (2 pp)

This story is best described as a short rant by a disgusted and frustrated long-distance automobile commuter. It is a somewhat humorous take on why any one individual life has value.

The Weight Distributor (23 pp)

Richard (Dick) Coatandson decides, after a car accident maims his dog, to invent an automobile that automatically keeps a constant center-of-gravity (by forcing a heavy liquid through tubes to reservoirs in various parts of the car) and can drive itself (via radar).

He lives in Northwest Arkansas and is the heir to a chicken-farming fortune. He cares for his niece (who has a big secret in his/her pants) and nephew whose parents died in a horrible explosion inside a glass bluebird factory.

Dick has a few quirks: his wife left him because he didn't appreciate her surgically-derived perfection; he meets a woman at a bar, takes her home, but can't perform sexually because there are no baseball games on T.V. at the time; the narration suggests that he finds an equivalence between his dog and his weight-distributor car; and he is obsessed by sequences of events.

At the end of the story, Dick's niece and nephew party with a friend at the site of an abandoned nuclear reactor used to test fast oxide reactors in the sixties and commune with nature before going to the warehouse that houses the weight-distributor car and secretly start playing with it.

Dick is concerned throughout much of the story with error and error propagation. As the story unfolds, small perturbations become large with disastrous consequences.

Ed and April Joy (18 pp)

“Ed and April Joy” tells the story of a retired couple on a camping trip with their grandchildren. It is told from the point-of-view of the Grandfather (Ed) who is listening from inside the camper while the Grandmother (April) tells the grandchildren how she and Ed came to be married. April’s story of the courtship has as its key moment a county butter-churning contest which April won and, in so doing, attracted the attention of rival suitors which prompted the quick proposal of Ed.

As April’s story is reported, Ed comments on various parts of her story and tells the reader a story April doesn’t know: He had an affair with a native while living in Africa working for the U.S. Agriculture department.

The narrative technique allows two layers to co-exist within the story, and it also allows the characterization of Ed and April to be accomplished in counterpoint to each other.

Sam’s a Prick (2 pp)

This stream-of-consciousness story is an homage to Samuel Beckett. Sam does not know where he is and cannot move. He endeavors to discover through his senses and intellect the situation he is in, and if he will ever be able to move on again.

Exercise (11 pp)

“Exercise” is the story of Cyrill and his journey from home to a small open-air mall and back. Cyrill has lost his left foot in an accident. Since the accident, he has become agoraphobic, and his journey is his first attempt to go out of the house in months. He is accompanied by his two dogs, and he meets a number of characters during the course of his journey: a girl with her boyfriend, but the boyfriend resents the attention his girlfriend gives Cyrill’s dogs; a man who gets just a little too friendly with the female dog; an autistic boy; and a woman with no sense of touch.

Throughout the story, Cyrill is fighting his fear of being outside and of being noticed because of his disability. Unfortunately, at the end he is involved in an accident while trying to cross the street which attracts the notice of all around.

Timeless (7 pp)

Sam and Sarah, and Rex (a dog) live in a small apartment in the Tenderloin in San Francisco. The story starts with Sam talking to two Mormon missionaries who have come to try and convert him, but instead they have to listen to the story of how Rex stole a homeless lady’s hamburger.

Sarah comes home after the missionaries leave and during an argument she has with Sam it becomes clear that they will probably break up.

The last part of the story is Sarah's. It tells of her upbringing in a small town in Arkansas, and of how her father, a doctor, had her mother committed to a psychiatric hospital.

A Hand in the Bird (13 pp)

The first-person narrator goes back to his childhood home in Arkansas for the funeral of a friend. He is angry and sarcastic about life, yet tries to piece out how events, even down to the smallest drops of water in the creek that flows through the city park, necessarily follow one another. He meets several girls, but is dismissive of them, yet finds them highly erotic. At the end, he confuses his passion for the last girl with his despair at the death of his friend.

Fable #4 (3 pp)

Inspired by the fables of James Thurber, this is the story of a sheep who bests a pack of wolves, much later meets his fate at the hand of a wolf, but then, posthumously, has the last laugh.

Pleasure is Finite (19 pp)

Mitchell Porscopino is at a turning point in his life: he is thirty-seven, unhappily single, lonely, and working as a software engineer for a large firm. He starts to become obsessed with prime numbers, and spends time at work writing computer programs to compute prime numbers and find patterns among the gaps between primes.

One night when working late, he buys some Kahlua, drinks it, and climbs into the ceiling to sleep unnoticed. His managers come by, startle him, and he falls through the ceiling onto his desk in front of them. They call the police and Mitchell is taken away. His manager finds a long poem-like document on Mitchell's desk and the story ends with that poem. The number of words in each line corresponds to the sequence of prime numbers.

Terrorist Healthdog

Healthdog is on the way!

Healthdog can sit and stay.

He brings you food and drug,

And leaves them on your rug.

Healthdog cares for you.

Healthdog will see you through.

The TV commercial ended with Healthdog running through a suburban neighborhood. He wore a white vest with red outlined zippered pouches filled full. Healthdog was a healthy German Shepherd.

“It’s you! Look Shep, you’re on TV!” Harley scratched Shep’s ears and leaned over and gave him a big hug. Harley was a large man, about six foot three, with a bald spot covered at times by a comb-over of his graying brown hair. Shep lay down and rolled on his back inviting Harley to rub his tummy. Harley petted Shep and said, “There you go boy! Like that?”

The doorbell rang. Harley answered it and let in the three men who were at the door. They were there to attend a senior manager’s meeting. Miles, Preston, and Smitty were Vice Presidents of Healthdog, Inc., based in California. Healthdog was an online drugstore that made deliveries to the home. Harley was the founder and CEO.

They intended to discuss the status of an immigration proposal they hoped President Bird, a recipient of campaign donations from Healthdog, Inc., would like because it would help cover his conservative base. Smitty was the first in and said,

“Let’s get down to business – I don’t have much time.”

Harley said, “Let everybody sit down, Smitty. What’s the status, Miles?”

“Marketing has sent a proposal to the President’s people – they seem to like the idea. He’ll use it to show he’s not abandoning the poor folk with no insurance.” The “insurance” was spoken rather nasally because Miles had squeezed his nose shut to try to stave off a sneeze. He had chronic hay fever. He was as small a man as Harley was large. He had short jet-black hair cut short and a frail frame. He wore tailored suits from Savile Row to every event – board meetings or company picnics.

“Can you find the exact date and time?”

“I’m working on it – should know by end-of-business tomorrow.”

“Excellent!” Harley beamed.

Preston was scooping up bean dip with two chips at once holding one hand under the chips to protect his Stanford sweatshirt. Preston had been a Special Forces officer before he went back to the university. Harley had been in his unit for a short while before he’d had enough and decided to be a software engineer. Preston had a tattoo on the back of his hand that said “Victory.” He looked up from the dip and said, “What about the remaining furriners?”

“I’ve clued in the I.N.S. about them – I was able to drop a few bucks here and there – I took the money from the recreation fund,” Smitty said. “We should be rid of the last of them in about two weeks – in time for our meeting with the President.”

“When’s our next W.U.F.A. meeting anyway?” Preston asked. He pronounced W.U.F.A. as “woohfah.”

“Next Wednesday night at seven. We’ve got lots planned so make sure everyone

shows up. I'm going to have entertainment too!" Harley replied.

"Dancing girls?"

"No, the N.R.A. rep is going to demo the recreational Uzi."

"Sweet!"

Smitty looked impatient – he rubbed a bottle of beer against his forehead, lifted his tri-focals, rubbed his eyes and said, "Harley, what am I going to do about the number of these resumes coming in? Can't we pre-screen them?"

"Not yet, Smitty, not yet. We've got to keep a low profile for the next few weeks. Then maybe if we get people on our side we can show them how well it works. I'm working on a speech – I'm hoping the President might ask me to speak at the next convention – especially if Shep here makes a good impression on our beloved leader."

"Up with President Bird!" Preston looked skyward as if he were praying for rain.

Smitty said, "Bird is only as good as what we get from him – remember that."

"Sure, I'll remember. He'd better remember the contribution we gave," Preston said as he held his hands wide apart.

"He will, believe me he will," Harley said.

Harley twirled behind the bar like it was a podium. "Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow Americans, I come here today with a love for my country, which is only partly symbolized by the flag on my lapel. I love my country and my fellow Americans more than most people love their children, their pets, their parents, their houses and cars. But I have a fear of forces from within our wonderful country who would like to destroy it and see us live in fear. To combat those forces I formed the Workers Unified For America. Our way of life was threatened by September eleventh and by the recession. I found

noble hardworking men unable to get jobs because there were no jobs available. They'd been taken by the Indians, Chinese, Taiwanese, Israelis, and the Japanese. Nobody was standing up for the American workers in our midst against the foreign workers flooding our shores looking to take away OUR country from us!"

"Here's where they clap?" asked Smitty.

"Well, maybe someday!" Harley wiped beads of sweat from his forehead.

Miles raised his bottle of Heineken and said, "Everybody open a beer and let's toast!"

"American Workers Unite!" The four men touched their beers to each other. Preston, Miles, and Smitty looked at Harley – he was still sweating, and his cheeks were red. He looked as though he'd been pushing a rock up a hill.

"Ahhhhh-choo!" Miles sneezed into the chips. "Goddamn, how long is this going to last?"

"Ahhhhh-choo!" Shep sneezed in sympathy.

"You go dog!" Harley said as he scratched Shep between the shoulder blades and beamed with love for his dog and mascot.

Pooja Shetty laid her head on the pile of papers on her desk and from her sideways vantage point considered the portrait of President Bird on the wall of her tiny windowless office. She worked for the Assistant to the Assistant Chief of Staff for the President. The pile of papers were proposals from businesses across America to show how their products could interact successfully with the President's new "America Works!" initiative. She'd met the President yesterday, for the second time, although he

didn't know it, and he'd said, "I'm sure you'll find a winner for us."

In her last year of law school, President Bird had given a speech and afterwards gone to dinner on University Avenue. When he walked down the street with Secret Service in front, behind, and to the side, he'd grasped her hand as she waited on the sidewalk and told her he was glad she was with him. When he looked at her, she felt his evaluating stare, a look of knowledge about her that changed her life. She graduated and found herself as an assistant assistant's assistant in the bowels of the homeland.

Bird-house makers, electric car makers, bicycle makers, home-decorators, furniture makers, fifteen or twenty advertising firms, accident law firms, clinics, and many others sat in the pile awaiting a second run-through.

Pooja wanted to find a winner for the President. Her family, after years of ignoring her in favor of her brothers, was proud of her; and she wanted to prove they weren't wasting their pride. Initially surprised she was able to get the job, her family felt a new empowerment now that a person from India, from their family, had become a part of the country they had adopted: a country they were re-creating, and re-mobilizing. Pooja didn't think she was symbolic. She wanted to please President Bird, and she wanted him to be proud of her too.

There was a knock on her door. Pooja lifted her head, brushed back her long black hair, and said, "Come in."

"I've got more for you," said her co-worker, Shelby. He sat in the one other chair in the office.

"More! I told you I had too many."

He stared down at the pile, "I can't throw them away can I? What if Bird's Uncle

Tex is in this pile?”

“OK, hand them over.”

“Look at the top one – Healthdog.com.”

“Cute dog.”

Shelby held his nose shut with his fingers: “This one has a blue check on it – smells like money.”

She flipped through the proposal. “They are making money. That shows the economy is coming back. They’re in the health-care industry – that shows Bird cares. Plus, they have a catchy PR campaign.”

“They want the Bird to cavort with the dog at the Fourth of July speech on the Mall.” Shelby smiled at her as he left the office. “They want to deliver drugs to the President.”

Pooja read through the proposal again. She decided to call the company and see if it could be her winner.

Harley entered the dark bedroom, and he hoped it was sleepy time. His wife, Buffy, lay in the bed, covered with the Mickey Mouse blankets she had received from her parents for Christmas. An oxygen tank sat next to the bed. “Honey, sweetie, are you awake?”

“Where’s the phone?”

“Do you need to make a call?”

“I need the phone; I need to go home,” she whispered.

“You are home; this is your home, and this is your bed,” Harley gently told her.

“If I go home, I’ll be OK.”

“You’ll be OK. We need to wait.”

Her eyes teared up. “I want to be well. I’m so tired.” She struggled for breath – each breath took an effort that made Harley cringe inside.

“Please don’t cry. I’m working on things. You’ll see what will happen.

Someday, someday, we’ll be back on the beach in San Diego – like we used to.”

Moving to San Diego had been a dream of hers before she got so sick. Harley had promised for many years in a row they’d move there and take the time to enjoy watching the waves and play in the sand. It seemed like so long since they had played together. He doubted they would ever play again.

“Sit with me, darling. I can’t remember your name. Don’t be mad. Please,” she said.

“I’m not mad. Harley. Here’s Shep too.” Harley wiped her face dry with the face of Mickey Mouse on her blanket.

Shep sniffed at the covers and licked Buffy on the lips. Harley grabbed Shep’s front paws. “Look, I’m teaching Shep to dance.” Harley sang and Shep and Harley did a credible tango together and then segued into “Billie Jean.” Shep was trying to moonwalk but hadn’t quite got it down right.

Buffy started laughing quietly at Harley’s enthusiastic dancing. His large bulk lurched, and his singing was off key. “Shep help me,” Buffy whispered. Shep pulled his paws from Harley’s hands, went to her, and licked her ear.

“Do you need some oxygen?” Harley picked up the respirator. He handed it to her and turned the oxygen on. She put the mask to her mouth and closed her eyes.

Harley sat next to her, held her hand, and softly sang “sleepy time, honey, sleepy time.”

Harley looked at the window and watched the green leaves of the walnut tree shimmer in the breeze. Buffy’s breaths were easier now, and her forehead wasn’t as wrinkled as it had been. The air fanning the leaves and gently grazing the window screen, bowing it slightly in and out, should have been soothing but was instead taunting – a bare song of the slightest of movements – a miniscule reminder of the ease of life outside for the grasshoppers, hummingbirds, and squirrels eating and chattering and hunting. Shep lay down on the carpet and looked up at Harley as if to ask a question. “Yep Shep, it’s sleepy time for doggies too.”

“We’ve got the dog everybody’s been talking about on the big show – Healthdog!” David Letterman looked toward the back of the stage, and Harley and Shep walked out. “Hi puppy, hi little puppy,” Letterman said to Shep. Shep licked his face and the audience went “ohhh.”

“We’ve seen Healthdog on the commercials, but does he do any tricks?”

“Yes, Dave, Healthdog can do the moonwalk.”

“Ha, ha, ha, oh really?”

“Got any Michael Jackson? Paul, do you know ‘Billie Jean’?”

Paul Shaeffer started playing “Billie Jean.” Harley grabbed Shep’s front paws and started dancing with him on the slick floor. Harley’s face was red and sweat was cracking his pancake makeup. Shep started moonwalking the best he ever had. Harley took the little silver paw-glove off of Shep and the audience went wild.

“Very, very amusing,” Letterman said. “I hear you’re going to visit the President in a few days. May I ask what drugs you’re going to bring him?”

“Oh, nothing much, he really wants to meet Healthdog,” Harley said breathing heavily. “We want people to know we believe prescription drugs are important for everyone, and we have the best way to deliver them.”

“I could’ve used a big delivery after last night’s audience.”

“Say the word, and we’ll deliver,” Harley said. Shep barked and chased his tail.

“Looks like he’s been dipping into the happy drugs.”

“Aw, no, he’s a happy dog.”

“Thank you Harley. And thank you Healthdog.” Letterman reached down to shake Shep’s paw and Shep obliged. “Harley and Healthdog, folks. Next up is Michael Douglas – maybe he’ll give us a few tips on marriage.”

Letterman turned to go to his desk, and the stage manager ran over and shook Harley’s hand. He walked them backstage.

“Good boy, Shep,” Harley couldn’t believe how well it had gone – he felt proud of Shep and of Healthdog. He started calculating how sales would soar – he made a note to ask what the ratings were for the show so he could compare the change in orders to the number of people watching. Healthdog would have enough money to see things through. After the show, in the limousine, Steve called Smitty at work. “Hey Smitty it went great!”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Smitty said. “Hey, we have a message from the White House – they heard you mentioned visiting the President, and they’re pissed. Apparently they wanted to announce it.”

“I’ll call them – let’s see it’s Pooja, right? I’ve got the number in my phone.”

“Do it right away.”

Harley hung up and sat back and tried to calm himself. He scratched Shep’s ears and murmured good boy, good boy. He checked messages. There was one from Buffy’s doctor – they’d taken her back to the hospital a few hours ago. There was another from Preston – he had news about the President.

Harley returned to California straight from the show. Preston picked him up at the airport. “Bird is a son-of-a bitch – he’s reduced funding for the prescription drug bill at the last second.” Preston was still wearing a Stanford sweatshirt. “He’s also got in bed with the folks at Moon Networks and Seer Software – he’s approved raising the emigration limits for the next year.”

“Goddamn,” Harley rubbed his hands together. “Those jerks at Moon must’ve given more money than we did.”

“Way, way, way more,” Preston said and shrugged. “There’s no way we can match it.”

“I don’t understand – doesn’t he realize we need to stick together on this – he’s using us on the Fourth isn’t he?”

“Damn right. We can’t get our money back, and we can’t pull out now.”

“Call marketing. Tell them to hit the P.R. newswires with the usual hard luck stories for our workers, and combine it with the info on this move by Bird.”

“All right, but nobody will listen. Moon and Seer have promised him California if he’ll deliver.”

Harley sighed deeply, “Do it – we’ll figure a way to make him listen. Let’s have a meeting tonight.”

“Is this right?” Harley asked the group. Miles, Smitty, and Preston sat back in their big conference room chairs. “We have to make our point. Families are disintegrating because they can’t get decent jobs anymore. What does it mean to have a successful business if the work and pay are going to people who don’t belong here?”

“It’s not right,” the group replied in a chorus. Harley was waxing evangelical and they enjoyed being a part of the passion. The slight hum of the fluorescent lighting added a background hymn to the proceeding.

Smitty chimed in, “We’ve all felt it – we’re here because they are in control now – hiring their friends and families and squeezing us out of our own jobs – good jobs!” Photographs of Shep smiling at the camera, smiling at little children, and smiling at grandmothers lined the walls.

“We’ve tried lobbying – did it work?” Harley held out his arms to the group.

“No!”

“We’ve tried buying our way in – did that work?” Harley pounded the table with his fist as he made his point. A small bottle of seltzer water in front of Miles flew into the air, did a flip, and was neatly caught by Miles without a spill.

“No!” The group members looked at each other for reassurance and praise as they answered Harley’s questions.

“I have a plan – Bird and the country will learn what they need to learn and soon.” Harley exhaled deeply. “That’s all gentlemen. Preston, I need to talk to you now.”

Preston waited until the others had left. Harley said quietly, "This is between you and me. We need C4, timers and fuses. We need anthrax in steel containers with wax tops. We are going to make an impression. I have the name of someone in Mexico who can help us – take the money you need to get this done. We have two days."

Preston nodded and took the name and number. Harley let out a deep breath and left to go to the hospital.

On the way Harley's cell-phone rang. It was Pooja Shetty at the White House. Harley apologized for letting news of the Fourth of July visit get out then assured her Healthdog was going to learn a few new tricks for his visit with President Bird. But she wanted more – she wanted to meet Harley and Healthdog the next day. "Pooja," he said, "give me a break. We just got back from the east coast, and we need a rest. Besides, my wife is ill, and I need to spend at least a day with her. Is that OK with you?"

Pooja understood.

At the hospital, the doctor had bad news. "She has pneumonia again – I don't know if she can make it this time. I'm sorry."

Harley felt fear in his stomach. He said, "What can we do next?"

"We're treating the symptoms and trying to make her comfortable. She wants to be with you. It's going to be a long night."

Harley went in the room and sat next to Buffy on her bed. She was sleeping, but turned her head when she felt him sit down.

"I want to go home," she gasped. She tried to grab his hand in emphasis, but didn't have the strength. Her thin mousy hair was tangled, and the oxygen tubes in her

nose had rubbed her nostrils red and raw. Harley pulled her hair back from her face and caressed her head with his massive palm and fingers. He thought of how the largest creatures must long for the gentlest and slightest of touches. It seemed the least he could do for the small, wasted woman in front of him to try to soothe her, give her what she wished for, even though her wishes were unrelated to the gasping reality echoing in the small room.

“We’ll go home,” Harley whispered and started detaching the intravenous tubes and the oxygen. He put his suit jacket around her and carried her to a wheelchair. In the confusion of the hospital hallways and emergency room exit they escaped to the car. “We did it, honey!” he said and was rewarded with a rare smile. He started the car and drove home.

He lay Buffy in their bed and pulled the covers up to her chest. Shep had arrived – delivered by Smitty from the airport, and he curled up in his crate in the bedroom. It was late and Harley was exhausted. He lay down next to her.

“Buffy, can you hear me?” Harley whispered. She didn’t acknowledge him. She had started breathing through her mouth again, almost panting.

Harley turned the lights out, but could not sleep. He remembered going to a blues concert with Buffy a few years ago during the big recession. Harley hadn’t been able to find a job for over a year and they were running out of money. They’d brought a small blanket to the concert staged on a large lawn in a wealthy part of the valley. It had been a warm day, and people were wearing shorts and milling about the lawn. Harley had been trying to figure out what made up a business, and it seemed to him the pieces that

required location in America were the executive team, salesmen, and marketing. The making of the product could be done anywhere. Surrounding them on the lawn were people who'd figured out that what product you made wasn't important – it was the money that mattered most.

On the blanket next to them was a couple, the husband with graying hair, the much younger wife with a huge diamond on her ring, the man with his cell-phone and a to-do list – in case there was a spare minute at the concert – or maybe to use if the blues wasn't bluesy enough, Harley guessed. The yuppies, the yuppies, the horror! Harley felt a revulsion spread through his limbs as he looked around and saw yuppie old men wearing sandals. Their big, ugly toes stared at him in defiant grins created by the curve of the often cracked and yellowing toenails against the skin. There was money in the valley. Harley knew it was there, and he knew he was surrounded by it. But instead of respect or admiration, Harley felt nothing but revulsion. It was a club – one marked by Gucci loafers and Italian suits and the country club and all the secret things that membership conferred. Intimate knowledge of superficial detail was required to gain admittance, but the secrets were available only to those already in the club – a problem solved for a select few by a combination of inheritance and networking at a fine business school. They were doing well in a time of recession and failed companies. If a company had to reduce from a thousand employees to ten, these folks surrounding him on blankets, calling each other on cells, wearing Maui Jim's, and Land's End casual shorts – looking pained at having to mix, yet thrilled when a member of the club accidentally swaggered by – they would be the ones still working and still “creating shareholder value.”

Buffy said, “You're not listening to the music, Harley, try to relax.”

“The fake casualness is making me puke.”

“Listen to the music, forget these people.” She petted his hair and put her arm around his waist.

He could not forget these people or the interviews, phone interviews, humiliating quizzes over e-mail, or occasionally real interviews with real people. Sanjay, Rajeev, Muthu, and Krishna at one company. Harley knew the interviewers had one thing in common: their goal was to disqualify him so they could hire their friends from India, Israel, England, Taiwan, Singapore, and China. They wanted to solidify their power in the company so they would never have to leave the country. Harley saw it in large and small companies, in good times and bad, but now that things were bad, it was humiliating to go to interviews. The pattern would be the same – he’d check the executives of the company on the web. All would have graduated from the same school in India, Israel, you name it. He practically gave up whenever he’d read about a batch of people in a company who had graduated from the Technion in Israel. Instead of the old-style interviews where they asked you to talk about projects and maybe give a general feeling for what you knew, now they asked ever more specific questions until you failed. “Go to the board and show me a B-tree. Ok, good. Now show me an AVL tree. Ok. Now show me Quicksort in C++. How ‘bout Java? Now Mergesort. Now show me the Huffman algorithm. I see you worked with routers; show me the routing algorithms you’ve worked with. That’s all? You say here you’ve worked with five or six types of routers. Your resume says this stuff: did you make it up? It shows you did research on the Fast Fourier Transform – tell me about it – I see it was years ago, give me the flavor of it.” It had been a scary time for Harley because he didn’t know if he could ever break through,

ever work again. But he saw other engineers were working, and he wondered why they were able to get jobs. At first it seemed as though it were luck, but as time went on, in company after company he interviewed at, he realized he was the only white American there.

Harley listened for Buffy's breathing – she was panting very shallowly through her mouth. He stroked her hair again. He remembered meeting Smitty and Miles at a bar and the relief he felt when all three realized they had been treated the same way and felt the same way. They started thinking about how to make things better, and before they knew it, Healthdog was born.

Harley hoped Preston would find the C4 by the morning. Harley started mouthing, "It has to be done," over and over and over. In addition to Buffy's panting he could hear Shep snorting and moving his feet having a doggy dream. "Done, done, done," Harley shortened the mantra until it became "duh, duh, duh," and he drifted into a light sleep.

He woke and found Buffy had rolled on her side with her arms and legs out in front of her like a dead horse. He heard her breathing, and in the dark he rolled her on her back, but she cried out weakly and rolled back to her side and held her arms out in front of her. She had moved halfway down the bed. Harley tried to comfort her by holding her head in his hands. He put his face to her hair and held it there and she seemed to calm – her panting slowed and her muscles seemed to relax. He drifted off again.

He felt a movement and was confused for a moment. In the dark, he saw what

seemed like a shadow of Buffy curl up, rise up, he heard her go “ewwwwah” in an agony he could not imagine possible after the years of love and pain they’d shared, and her legs convulsed twice. Harley felt it was a dream and kept sleeping. He thought he would have to tell Buffy about his horrible dreams.

In the morning, Harley woke and reached over to Buffy. She wasn’t breathing anymore. Her skin was the temperature of the surrounding air, the air which did her no good. He couldn’t touch her again – he couldn’t move her again, and he wondered if he would forever feel her cold skin on his palm and the tips of his fingers.

“I’m cold,” he said. He arranged the blankets over her. He took Shep out to the car and they left.

“Bring the damn dog here now!” Pooja Shetty yelled into the phone. The Fourth of July celebration had started, and President Bird was on stage giving his speech. Healthdog was to meet the President in thirty minutes. This was her moment to shine for the President, and she wasn’t going to let a late dog spoil it.

Smitty, impatient, and Miles, in tailored suit and blowing his nose, walked with Healthdog through the Secret Service and FBI agents to the back of the stage.

“Where’s Harley?” Pooja asked, flipping her hair back.

“His wife is sick; he couldn’t make it – we can do it,” Miles said as the sweat ran down his forehead and cheeks.

“What are your names again?”

“Miles and Smitty – and . . . Healthdog.” Smitty patted Shep on the head. Shep was wearing his white Healthdog vest with red crosses on it.

President Bird could be heard promoting his business development campaign –
“America Works!”

“Time to go folks,” a man with headphones told them.

President Bird ended his speech with an introduction. “Here is the mascot of a popular new company that helps care for the young, the old, and people who can’t leave their homes; a company that shows how an America that Works is an America that Cares. Here comes Healthdog!” President Bird turned toward the backstage entrance. With Miles and Smitty following, Shep cavorted and pranced onto the stage, sneezed a few times, barked at the crowd, and suddenly started chasing his tail.

“Come on Shep, let’s calm down,” Smitty said while trying to restrain Shep. Shep broke free and ran for the President.

“I see we have a happy Healthdog. My, I love dogs.” President Bird started beaming when Shep licked him on the face. Shep turned and barked at a flock of crows that flew low across the stage. The President turned to the crowd and said, “We care, deeply, for our people in need, and Healthdog is one way of providing a solution!” The President waved to the crowd, turned to Healthdog, and offered his hand. Shep gave him his paw, and they shook.

Harley drove to the airport after leaving Shep with Preston. Preston had loaded Shep’s vest pouches with plastic explosive and anthrax canisters whose tops would melt after the blast had cooled to a certain temperature. Harley called Smitty and Miles and told them Buffy had taken a turn for the worse, and he couldn’t go to the Fourth of July celebration. They would have to take Shep on a private charter and walk him on to the

stage. Preston said he was going north. Harley said he didn't know where he would wind up.

At the airport, he went to the international terminal and closed his eyes and thought about where to go. He spun and stopped and opened them to see an Aviateca sign – flights to Guatemala City twice daily with one leaving in two hours. “Goin’ south,” he thought, and bought a ticket.

The sky was brilliant blue in the morning. It was the rainy season, but the rains didn't come until afternoon. A small white puff of cloud was stationed barely above the tips of the twin volcanoes directly across the lake. Harley sat on the veranda in front of his room and sipped his coffee. He was a bit short of breath because of the altitude, an altitude that would put him on the summit of most mountains in California, but the crispness and freshness of the air was invigorating. He could hear the gentle lapping of the waves of Lake Atitlan on the black sand beach, and in the distance he saw the native fishermen dotting the lake in their bark canoes.

He was staying at Hotel Antigua in Panajachel about one hundred miles from Guatemala City. As far as he could tell, he was the lone American in the hotel. A few Israelis, a few German families, a few families from Guatemala City or El Salvador maybe, were the other guests he'd noticed at breakfast. The proprietor of the hotel knew a bit of English; but mainly, as Harley listened to the maids cleaning, the people spoke their native Indian language, as he found when he tried, unsuccessfully, to communicate in the little Spanish he knew with the maid who cleaned his room and made his bed.

He'd left Buffy in her bed, and before he left, he took flowers from the vase, and

arranged them around her and on her chest to lessen the coldness. She did not want to be in a hospital, he thought. She wanted to go home and be with me. Well, I took her home, and she slept in peace for a while.

Harley took his small digital camera and walked down to the small beach. He knelt down to touch the cold mountain water and looked along the surface of the water to the other shore miles away. He stood and turned with his back to the lake and held the camera facing him and took a picture. He looked at the picture and was pleased – one of the volcanoes was to the side of him and the other was behind him in a triangle – his head was perched on top of the apex, his neck now a surface feature of the mountainous landscape.

It was the Fourth of July, and he thought about Shep later that day as he walked down the dirt streets to a small bar he'd noticed on the way in. *Chuchos*, what seemed to be native dogs, ran around on the street. He wondered if he could have one in the hotel. A bottle rocket flew in the air and exploded, the report echoing against the rock walls of the schoolyard and the border of the market. He had given Buffy a freedom from fear in the hospital: a freedom from the stark white chill of a strange place with strange people walking in and out to whom dying was a way of life, a way to make money, a way to profitably perform their job. When he took her from the hospital, he'd freed her from the pain which was palpable in her muscles and in the deep lines in her forehead, the lines and pain that dissipated in her bed at home.

But the pain, the groan of pain in the last convulsion echoed in Harley's mind. He heard it over and over as he walked step by step down the muddy road.

At the bar, one lone American sat with a bundle of bottle rockets on his outdoor

table. He had long gray hair and a tie-dyed tee shirt.

“Welcome,” he said to Harley. “Join me.”

“All right, we’re a long way from home. Been here long?”

“About twenty-five years, give or take.” The man sipped his coffee.

“Must suit you,” Harley said as he settled into the small chair.

“They let me shoot my rockets on the Fourth. It’s all I ask.”

It was near noon. Harley felt like drinking. “Let me buy you a beer. What’s good?”

“Gallo.” He turned to the back of the bar, “*Dos Gallos por favor.*”

The bartender brought two beers and two glasses. He poured each glass half full and left.

“To the Fourth,” the man raised his glass.

“The Fourth,” Harley replied. They clinked their glasses, and the man lit another bottle rocket and it whooshed up and popped.

The natives stared at Harley as they walked down the street past the bar. The children giggled and pointed. Harley felt uneasy, too conspicuous, too much like a stranger in another man’s home.

There was no way to avoid the pain. Buffy had felt the pain of fear and the agonizing pain of death in the last convulsion. His dad had died without warning, without preceding pain, of a heart attack that lasted maybe five minutes. But, what a five minutes! His grandfather had died after a years-long struggle, in and out of hospitals, of cancer. He had died a long institutional death, but was quiet and drugged when he stopped breathing. Harley knew there was no way to avoid pain. He could try to

transform it, but it was a coordinate transformation that conserved one thing – the end.

He felt he had made a mark on the world. He wondered, but only slightly, about President Bird, Miles, and Smitty. He missed Shep. He missed Buffy. He could only wait to see how his world would contract, tighten, and coil in a parallel spiral that would squeeze his life from him. It was the full knowledge of it that saddened him as he drank his Gallo watching the natives pass by on the muddy road. He hoped Healthdog was on his way. He hoped he would be seen through.

Sololá

In Panajachel, Guatemala, on the shores of volcano lined Lake Atitlan, soon after the fiery death of the President of the United States, Harley, a one-time CEO, set forth and walked down the dusty dirt road whistling a tune. He'd made up a melody to fit the words that floated by in his mind – the only thing missing was a little bouncing ball. The words were to “Fearless Fred the Footpad King.” Harley loved that frog – a small digression in the early adventures of Pogo.

The only complaint from the dirt road was the dust wafting up from Harley's massive feet – feet that held his height and girth well. Harley could not believe it, but he noted cautiously he felt almost happy. He'd been living in the village for several weeks, and it seemed, for the time being, he would be safe. He looked at the coffee trees growing in the shade of the *Chalum* trees by the road and smiled. Two young Indian children followed him from a distance – a brother and sister who were unafraid to show their fascination with the large white man with black hair, graying at the top, almost into a streak.

Harley thought about this unusual state of being almost happy. Walking in the heat, in the exotic, helped him forget about the past, helped him forget about fear of discovery, helped him ignore the strange quivering in his stomach and bowels brought on by seeing the newspaper headlines when he passed a small stand offering candy, grape and orange sodas, and Chiclets.

Harley was on his way to the Atitlan – a bar with a large outdoor patio with railings and rafters made of rough gray wood where the expatriates hung out – he hoped they would be there. They always were.

“Ah, the florist arrives!” Melvin, the ex-plumber from parts as yet undetermined, greeted Harley with a flourish and scooted a chair out in invitation. Melvin had a small scar over the right side of his upper lip. It pulled one side of his face into a perpetual grin.

“No flowers for you,” Harley responded as he sat down.

“Smith will be here soon, and he’ll want flowers too.” Melvin lifted his beer and pointed to the road.

“No flowers for Smith, either. But I’ll compliment him and you on your creamy skin and fresh smell.”

Melvin smelled his arm-pit. “Ummmm, fresh as a baby’s butt.”

“*Hola, amigos.*” Smith limped up to the table – put his white hat and cane on a chair and joined the group. “What are you having?” he asked Harley.

“Gallo.”

Smith called for two beers. When the beer arrived, the three men tapped their glasses together in a toast – “To our dearest Mamma.”

After a while, when the clouds started to gather in their daily march over the volcanoes and the lake and town, Smith said, “It seems so far away.”

“Yep,” Melvin replied. “A new President – a new government. The start of a new country.”

“A country of fear – I guess it had to happen eventually. But why shouldn’t the good ol’ U.S. of A. live in fear – like the rest of us,” Smith said, looking at each of them slowly.

Melvin raised his hands to ward off the stare and said, “Suspicious bastards –

those Americans – eh, Harley?”

“It does seem like quite a distance.” Harley wiped his eyes with his hands. “I’m not even sure I remember what it looks like – what I see when I close my eyes are people running and screaming. I’m glad I’m here.”

“That makes three of us,” Melvin said.

“Four!” Sheila walked to the table. Harley smiled at her and wanted to whistle “Fearless Fred the Footpad King” and hope she’d sing along. She had suddenly appeared a few days ago out of nowhere as the Americans tended to do in the town. She was a wisp of a woman – probably didn’t weigh ninety pounds, and she had long brown hair. The first time she went to the bar, she sat with the men drinking one beer to their four; and, by the end of the evening, after she left, the men realized they knew nothing about her. The conversations consisted of flirting and what passed for repartee in the group. She fit in well.

“Just where are you from?” Smith asked her.

“I have something for each of you,” she replied.

“What do you do?” Melvin asked.

“I’m a nun. On sabbatical.”

“Nuns get sabbaticals?”

Harley leaned close to her and looked into her big green eyes and said, “Recite us your vows.”

“I have something for you,” she said and presented a bag of small brown round objects.

Melvin feigned a heart attack, hand over chest, and said, “Kiwis?”

“Yep, and,” she reached into her bag again and removed a shiny new can, “nuts.”

Smith pulled out his pocket knife. “Let's get this party started!”

She tossed him four kiwis and popped open the nuts. “You look like the kind of guys who would appreciate an afternoon of beer, nuts, and fruit,” she said.

“Pampered like a baby,” Melvin said as he dropped a peanut in his beer, shook it, and chugged. “Harley, try a nut-beer.”

Harley shook his head.

“Harley, the florist of few words.”

Harley smiled and thought about the meetings he had held and held forth in – board meetings, engineering meetings, group meetings. He loved to jokingly start the Monday morning meeting with “Friends we are gathered here today . . .” As the years went by, he found he could actually convince people of things, to think certain ways, ways he wanted, merely by the force of his words. He'd bring his German Shepherd, Shep, to the meetings. Shep would do tricks, and the board members or engineers would laugh and forget themselves. At the annual meetings, his keynote address was the hot ticket. He spoke like a preacher would to convince the shareholders the company was good, the money was good, and he Harley made it good.

The group watched two missionaries ride by on bicycles. They watched as a brightly colored bus drove past with the Costa Rican soccer team on board. Soon, school let out and groups of school children in checkered uniforms drifted along the road. Two nuns in habits pedaled through the dust on their bicycles. Harley began to think it looked like a busy day.

The afternoon wore on and the clouds gathered and it began to rain. Unlike most days, though, a wind started to blow, and the rain slanted into the patio. The group decided to move indoors to what was called the Projection Room. It had an old Super Eight projector in it; apparently, in days long past, their predecessors would show home movies there. Now it had a small cassette tape player and one tape, *The Pretenders*, which they played every day for quiet background music. The singer's voice was crackly with static and wobbly with uncertain power from the wall socket.

Eating peanuts and slicing kiwis, Melvin said, "Smith, are you sure you haven't been indulging a little too heavily in the pie department?"

"I don't eat pie."

"Sure you do, I saw you with chocolate cream on the corners of your mouth the other day."

"I don't know what you saw, but it wasn't pie – I don't like pie," Smith said, grimaced, and feigned a spit.

"I'm just sayin' . . ."

"I don't eat pie. Period."

Harley leaned over, "I think you two are in some kind of conspiracy together – what is it?"

Smith leaned back. "There's no conspiracy here – what you see is what you get."

Sheila said, "I suppose that could be a conspiracy. In any case, I think Harley was looking a little bit too long at those schoolgirls in uniform."

"No way. Why would you say such a thing?" Harley said, looking genuinely startled.

“I had a feeling . . .”

“Well, it was a wrong feeling.”

Melvin looked over and licked his lips and said, “Smith here, he has a hankering for some Scotch. Don't you Smith?”

“Don't touch the stuff. Tastes like creosote to me.”

“Then maybe it's Sheila. I know one of you wants Scotch. It's in the air.”

Harley looked at Sheila, “You seem lonely. Are you lonely?”

“No, I love it here. I want to be alone, left alone, when I choose . . .”

“Yes, I agree, that's what I meant . . .”

“No sucking up to the female is allowed here,” Smith said with teeth separated by threads of kiwi.

“Smith tries to take the high road,” Melvin said.

“Levitation is highly overrated,” Harley countered. He put a handful of peanuts into his mouth, chewed, and felt a sharp pain in the back of his mouth. He drank a large swig of beer and a sudden ache in his top left teeth made him grimace. The pain stayed for a minute and slowly subsided.

“Get a bad nut?” Smith tossed a peanut at Harley.

“No, something hurt – I guess I got a peanut stuck up there.”

Sheila looked at the ceiling, raised her arms, stretched, and said, “I think you are all tired. I think you can barely keep your eyes open.”

She rotated her arm from pointing at the ceiling and pointed at each of them in turn and said, “I'll let . . . you,” now pointing at Harley, “walk me back.”

“Oh, oh, the man with the flowers wins the girl,” Melvin laughed.

Smith bowed his head, gestured with a flourish, and said, "Until next time."

Out on the road in the new dark with a bare drizzle dotting their clothes, Harley and Sheila walked to the hotel. Sheila wanted to see Harley's room at the La Playa. Shyly he took her inside. It was bare except for two Pogo books and a small portable computer on a night stand next to the bed. Harley touched the keyboard and the screen lit up – on it was "You are in Wits End. Many twisty little passages are here." Harley pressed an "L." It said, "You are in Wits End. Many little twisty passages are here."

Harley smiled, "Do you know 'Adventure'?"

She shook her head no. "This and Pogo are all you have?"

"I didn't want to remember anything else when I left."

"What happened – are you married?" She took his hand and held it

"Not any more. We had our flower shop. We were happy, I thought. Maybe I was working too hard. I don't know . . ."

"She left?"

"One day, I came home and she was gone. Took everything she wanted to take. Left a note saying she had to get away."

"Another man?"

"I found out later she'd been having an affair for months with the confectionery salesman from a store four doors down."

"Chocolate?"

"Yes, chocolate – milk, bittersweet, dark, white, and swirl."

"Read to me from 'Pogo'" she said smiling and looking at the floor.

“Well, OK, hmmm, let's see – I could start here . . .”

“There is fine.” She leaned over and followed the words and pictures as he read. Her hair created long stringy shadows on the page from the overhead light. Their heads touched ever so slightly as he read from the tattered yellow book.

“ . . . Oh boy, I never forget hollerin' 'Down with the gummint' in 1923.' The owl said that, see?” Harley pointed at the owl who was talking to Pogo. He continued in his low quiet voice: “and here's Pogo, 'I did too – I hollered mine into a closet.’” Harley read the whole of “Sufferin' On the Steppes” for her in the small room. The waves of the lake and the raindrops provided a swooshing and tapping background for the two figures, one small, one large, in the room on the shore.

When he finished reading, she had tears in her eyes. “That was funny and beautiful, Harley. I've got to go. Tomorrow? To Sololá?”

Harley fought back the pain that was now a constant ache in a top back molar. There was no way he would refuse anything she wanted – their heads had touched . . .

“Yes, to Sololá. It'll be my first time on that road.” Melvin and Smith would ask him if they had gotten busy. He'd have to tell them, yes, it did turn out to be a busy wonderful magical evening – something to feed them. Something a florist might say.

Sololá was a small mountain village at seven thousand feet – two thousand feet above the lake. The narrow road up the side of the mountain passed by waterfalls – fog would stubbornly cling to the trees until the sun finally had its way. Sheila drove her small Japanese car slowly – stopping anytime she saw something interesting. Harley sat quietly. He was tired. He'd been unable to sleep because of the pain in his mouth. As

they increased in altitude, the throbbing seemed to increase.

“Look at those flowers!” Sheila said and stopped the car. Bright orange and red blossoms emblazoned a bush that clung to the edge of the road. “What kind are these?”

“Ummm, must be a Central American variety that I don't know.”

“Well, I'm going to take a few.” She reached down and picked four of the flowers. They started off again. She drove slowly and seemed to be contemplating something. After a while she said, “Riots in Washington – I saw a headline with a picture.”

“It's far away,” Harley said quietly.

“People always want to be in control. I'm so sick of it.”

“People want power,” Harley said and tried to put a crazed look on his face, but had to quit when it hurt too much.

“People? Who exactly? I like to know them one by one.”

It's a good question – who gets the power?”

“Maybe we'll find it in Sololá.”

They sat quietly for the rest of the trip. The sound of the car echoed off the mountainside, which was sometimes only a few feet away from Harley's open passenger window. Harley thought about the power he'd once had. Power over people. Power over animals. Power over himself. Why had he been granted power? The bits of the President had been spattered over the stage. What had been in that man that made the difference? The pieces of the President had blown over the audience – were they implicated by proximity? He once had a calling. The calling was to kill the President. The call had been answered. And now? The consequences . . . who has the power of life and death?

Army private. Prison guard. Jury of peers. A dark and quiet man hiding in a dark and quiet street. Fragments of the man burned in the stage lights. Mixed with the fur and ears and teeth of Shep. What kind of a man kills his own dog?

“I had a dog once – but she died.”

“At least she didn't leave you for the chocolate man . . .”

“Hey, I can feel sorry for myself sometimes,” Harley protested.

“Not here. Not now. Look outside. Look across the lake.” The lake was shimmering brilliant blue far down below. From the roadside it looked as though you could throw a rock and hit the lake – splash near the shore with a low echoing thunk. The outline of the lake was reflected in the mountainsides rising: volcanoes, and high plateaus.

“It is amazing – you can see inside the volcano on the far end,” Harley said.

“That's better.” She stopped again. On one side of the road was a waterfall, but she went to the edge and looked down. “See those?” She pointed down.

“Ahhh, those must be the Towers of Torrijos,” Harley said. The concrete base of the towers was hidden by thick vegetation. They had been built by a dictator of another country but had been abandoned before being finished. It was to have been a modern luxury hotel. Twenty-five stories rose out of the forest. They loomed over the lake.

“Yes, and they're hideous.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“Almost, once, but I turned around before I got there.” Sheila gestured toward the towers with a circular motion.

“How do you get there?” Harley was staring down at the base of the towers.

“Follow the lake road. When you go around a certain corner, you'll be able to see the towers. Then follow the little roads through the forest until you get there – you'll be able to see the towers as you go – off and on.”

“Let's go there.” He didn't know why, but Harley was excited about seeing the towers up close.

“Not me. It's scary there. People live there.” She feigned a shudder.

They arrived in Sololá. There were small fires on the steps of the wooden framed, cobblestone walled church. Women of the village were talking while walking together and carrying large loads of laundry and food in baskets on their heads. The rough fabric of their clothes was colored bright purple and blue and red.

“Where are the men?” Harley asked.

“In the fields. Or dead.”

Three children ran up to them, “Take a pitch, take a pitch!” Harley held his hands up in a gesture of helplessness. They persisted. Sheila came to the rescue with nickels for the bunch. More children ran up, but their mothers' herded them away making tssk tssking noises while smiling in helpless apology.

Harley and Sheila walked up the steps of the church, looked in, then walked around to the back. From there they overlooked the lake. It spread out before them like the vastness of the holes between the stars in the early morning sky. Blue to the end of the sky. Volcanoes, height reduced in the distance, forced the words out from Harley's gut, “Is this where I will live?”

“Take a pitch?” A girl of about seven and her little brother had followed them around the church. The girl's hair was filthy, but it was the boy who caught Harley's

attention. The boy's pants were unzipped, he was barefoot, and one eye was shut. The eye was missing.

“Take a pitch?” he cried. His belly distended beyond his shirt. But his one eye, the one that could see, was a surface only. Harley stared at the eye – a baby's eye – and remembered the terror that sometimes struck him when he couldn't find anyway out of the fear that the best the world could offer was the worst he could imagine. A baby with a surface for an eye. A being ready for death. “Take a pitch?”

Sheila had more nickels. She gave the boy a handful. The girl got another handful. The nickels were gone; she held her hands out empty and the children walked away.

Harley was shaking in the cold breeze. Sheila said, “Sad isn't it? The wars have torn the families apart.”

“The boy is going to die.”

“Yes, the boy is going to die.”

“Whose idea was it?” Harley asked.

“What?”

“Whose idea was it to make the boy to begin with?”

“Harley, it wasn't anybody's idea – it happens.”

“The boy has suffered, and is suffering, and will suffer until it is over.”

“Let's find him – maybe we can help,” Sheila said and turned to go. As she turned her hair flew through the air catching the sun revealing as it flew the blue of the lake and the green up the sides of the volcanoes. The moment, no moments, of revealing, seemingly, moments ever yet divisible in time. He shuddered again with the cold even

though the sun was beating down, burning his scalp through his hair.

They walked back to the front of the church. It was quiet now. The villagers were gone. Harley and Sheila got into her car and started down the hill in low gear.

“There's suffering everywhere in the world, Harley.”

“Why?”

“Because, in the end, death is a horrible thing – go worship your god, pretend it ain't gonna happen. But it is.”

“A child, right before me, was walking death. But I couldn't help – I don't know how.”

“Do what you can – what do you want me to say? Try to help sometimes, in small ways.”

“His eye looked the way moons of Jupiter do through a telescope. Flat. Empty.”

“Stop! You are so close to walking down this hill right now! I can't stand it!”

“Not another word from me. It's over.”

Sheila stared ahead as she drove. She fiddled with the radio and found marimba music as Harley tried to suck air past his aching molar.

That night the drizzle was slowing as Harley left his room at the La Playa for the Towers of Torrijos. Dark as he'd ever seen it – no moon, no stars, clouds covering the upper sphere, he walked silently as he could down the lake road. His cheek was swollen like a gopher after a good day in the walnut fields. He couldn't open his mouth without sharp pain, nor could he clench his teeth tight shut, as he repeatedly did, without worse pain. Spattered bits of blood – tossed bits of flesh, Presidential flesh no less, spraying

into the crowd. Shep, no more again. The act had occurred. The murder had been done. The crowds now rioted. Every now and then a dog would bark and challenge and Harley would challenge back victoriously.

The lake road rounded a curve, and suddenly he could see the towers. Fires were burning on many of the stories. The road turned inland because sheer cliffs rose from the lake. Harley followed it until he got to an intersection in the dark. He turned toward the direction he had last seen the towers, left. There were coffee trees and banana trees and a small hut along the road. He walked about half a mile while sucking his breath in around his aching tooth. Another intersection. What monsters lived a few feet off the road under the bushes? He remembered the rush of the last day. Was he being hunted? Had the President known? Were his eyes blank, not comprehending while he fondled Shep's muzzle before the blast? Shep, only a dog, also uncomprehending, having known nothing but love in his life, his eyes couldn't have been blank – sparkling with excitement on the stage in front of the cameras – a messenger of death to the betrayers. One brown road bisecting another. He turned again, right this time. There were banana trees, coffee trees, and a small hut along the road. He went another half mile. He turned again. A small hut appeared, followed by coffee trees and banana trees. He heard a scream and cowered. Another scream echoed from up in the air, and he knew the towers were straight ahead.

He heard a frog gently ribbiting in the distance towards the lake. “Fred?” he asked. Soon it was a chorus of frogs in different tenors. “Fred?” he asked again. The road, canopied by trees, led to a small clearing. He could see lights and fires in the distance. If he closed his eyes and clinched his teeth, he could see bright orange, green, and purple lines shoot across. If he stared at the bonfires in the distance and closed his

eyes, bright oranges and reds arranged themselves in shapes determined by the flames far away. Now he could hear laughing and boisterous yelling. Thoughts of Fred faded away as Harley crouched and crept towards the small clearing at the base of the towers.

He stuck close to the periphery of the clearing – the smoke from the fires had a sweet musky smell – words he did not understand wafted from the closest fire. Ten or twelve people were talking and laughing – not aware or afraid. Harley crept closer to the base of the first tower. Then he saw the group around another bonfire: he could make out Melvin's half smile flickering in and out with the flames, Smith's hat, and Sheila in-between them, her arms clasped on the men's backs. He could see they were cooking Jiffy-pop over the flames. The blast, he had imagined it so many times, now he imagined again – in the fire, spraying whole logs around like pine needles. Burning their faces. Burning Sheila's face – blinding her for being here. Harley realized he was crying which inflamed the pain in his jaw. There must be a price to pay. Was this it?

He quietly stole to the ruined lobby entrance and was assaulted by the smell of urine and feces. He looked back again at the group. They seemed to be dancing – first Melvin, then Smith twirling Sheila in a ballroom dance move. A dog by the fire barked and started running for Harley. “What is it?” Melvin said over the crackles of the fires.

“Somebody by the door,” Smith answered.

“It's Harley – it must be Harley,” Sheila said. She yelled, “Harley!”

Harley ran deep into the lobby and found the stairs. He started up taking two steps at a time. Each time a foot landed his whole head throbbed with pain. After two stories he stopped, went in the floor, and looked out a glassless window.

Sheila was walking towards the entrance followed by the men. She said, “I'm

coming to find you . . .”

“Let him be,” Smith said.

“I’m going after him.”

“I can’t climb the steps.”

“Well, I can.” She started running. Melvin followed her while Smith stopped, helplessly looking on, leaning on his cane.

Harley went back to the stairs. He started counting as he ran – two, four, six, eight, landing, two, four, six, eight, landing. He was wheezing and his legs felt heavy. He stopped on a landing and bent over trying to breathe great struggling breaths. He noticed blood dripping on the floor and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and it came up red. The abscess must’ve popped. The motherfucker popped. Two more steps. Two more steps.

“I hate,” pound two steps up, “you,” two more, “all,” two more, “again.” It became his mantra, and he slowed as he rose higher. Finally there were no more steps. He’d reached the top.

The stench of death had collected itself and made its home on the twenty-fifth floor. Bodies lay sprawled in corners, some stacked along the walls. A living man grabbed at his legs and moaned. Harley kicked his way free. He went to what had been a picture window overlooking the lake. The glass had fallen long ago. He found he could stand in the window and steady himself by holding his hands out and pressing against the concrete sides of the frame. The fires seemed like orange dots – the air was fresh outside with the faint smell of smoke.

The lake was almost black stretching out for miles in front. Facing Harley, and

the lake, three volcanoes rose up above the village of Chichicastenango – a two hour mail-boat ride from the *La Playa*. He could hear, faintly, the electric generators from the towns that sparkled and dotted the shores and the sides of the volcanoes. Behind him, he knew, up higher still, was Sololá where the unseeing boy who would die was sleeping somewhere behind the church, tucked in amongst the stones.

He heard, faintly, the sound of steps, Sheila and Melvin, rising slowly up to meet him. Harley faced the lake, looking at the moving, clearing clouds. He sternly spoke to the lake and the ground below.

“I see you staring up from your camp fires and marshmallows. I see your uncontrollable swaying in this breeze – even here I feel your falling and smell the vomit rising to mark your spots in this world.

“You say, ‘How can there be hope for me? Killing and maiming feed the earth here.’”

“You say, ‘I don’t have clean water and the corn dies in the sun. My children can’t breath for the lumps in their throats. I don’t see a leader in the jungle, the town, the city, or even America to notice me. To help me. To touch me.’”

Harley lifted the corners of his lips up to a half-smile. “Then say this: Make the water clean and the food abundant. Make my child come from the womb whole. Make my grandchildren live beyond me. Take the dullness from me before I die. Take the itching from my skin and scalp and the burning from my body. Take the false leaders from my land.”

Harley lifted his arms to the sky and wobbled on the window sill for a moment. With a grin, which showed his tongue as he spoke, he said, “Say this; I see you! Say this:

I love and need you! Say this: You are kind. And say this: You have the power to save the world.”

He looked down at the small figures below. “Say these things to save yourselves.” Then in a sudden change in voice recalling the one he had used in board meetings long ago, he said, “We have choices. You have choices to make. The question is, do you make the right choice?”

“Choose! Right and all is available. Wrong and I can and I will, by God, harm you. I will crush your heads into your necks, your chests to your thighs, your compacted feet to the dirt, and I will bounce from your so-shallow graves; I will spring up to the sky again.” Harley’s eyes were wide and his black pupils were reflecting the tiny fires below.

“I have changed the world! I rest on the concrete and steel pads below.”

“So you think you want evil,” Harley said in a suddenly high sing-song voice. “Shoot your mouth off, and I *will* show you what that hole is for.” He turned his head, looked inside to the fumes of death, and spat blood. He turned back to his audience of quiet volcanoes and blackest lake.

“I have made you! After the tear is the union. After the union is the rending. Ribs spread wide, fat scraped free, floods of surrender sanctifying the lies and horrors, the fleshy bits fly and stick...”

He heard steps behind him. He heard Sheila say, “Harley, don’t!” He closed his eyes and saw her hair sweeping across the sky, strands etching moments of brown and blue.

“I can give you life! Eternal divisibility creates time everlasting! Come with me, now, and, tick-tock, tick-tock, you will be the avenger, not the avenged.” He turned

within the frame, face and body and eyes dark against the night sky, and said to Sheila who was backed against the stench of the bodies, "Don't worry, this will all end, soon enough."

In Plain View

It started with radio controlled airplanes. I've always been a man who preferred the solitary life, and if I positioned myself away from the other flyers, I found great satisfaction in controlling my airplane from afar. However, as time went on, and my skills progressed, I found that the other modelers tended to want me to share in their collegiality. I resolved to find another pastime.

Soon I found that skydiving was a sport which offered me great joy, thrills even, and a privacy while falling through the air which I found comforting. But, again, I found that the time before and after the jumps was uncomfortable. In particular, small talk with the pilot while on the way up for a jump proved quite agitating to my nerves.

Let me note I had a fascination with all things that involved action-at-a-distance. While flying my radio controlled airplanes, I would sometimes feel I saw a line stretching from the end of the antenna of the transceiver to the small whip antenna on the airplane. This stemmed partly from great influence of the philosopher/mathematician Alfred North Whitehead. His cosmology of organism was my religion. All objects have a location of their own, yet they can only be apprehended with respect to other objects. That apprehension I visualized as lines stretching from object to object. This fit well with the thought, in our modern world, of electromagnetic forces emanating from countless high tension towers, radio towers, communication satellites, and the like.

Skydiving, especially the free-fall, gave me great joy. I decided that I should enjoy it completely, without the stress of the before and after camaraderie which would cause my stomach to knot up and the sweat to form on my upper lip.

I took flying lessons and became an accomplished pilot. Being of some means, I

was able to purchase a small Piper Cub, and set about equipping it with a series of power boosted servos that eventually allowed me to control the flying surfaces, engine, and communications radios via a radio control. I purchased a mannequin with a beard like mine for the pilot's chair.

It took me years to outgrow the worship I had for Whitehead; it matured into a respect and love that would be similar to that between father and son. I recall the couplet by Alexander Pope, commemorating Whitehead's importance to the world:

Nature and her laws were knowingly rejected.

God said let Whitehead be! And all was connected.

Early one morning, I packed my parachute and boarded my airplane with transceiver in hand. My plan was to fly the plane up to nine-thousand feet, set the plane into a slow circle, jump, and then fly the plane down while comfortably reclining in the reeds.

I put my hat on the mannequin, sat in sideways in the passenger seat, and flew the plane via the transceiver up to altitude. I jumped. The joy was greater than I had ever experienced. The pre-solitude had increased my ability to apprehend the world flashing about me ten-fold. The air blowing past my ears, nose, and mouth felt like no abstraction, indeed, it was liquid feeling, not concrete at all.

My primary parachute failed to deploy completely which caused me to spin rapidly. In my panic, I released the reserve parachute without cutting free the primary which caused me to swing in wide uncontrolled arcs as I descended to earth. I landed very hard, on my back, and hit my head. When I came to, I found that I could not move my legs, and unfortunately the transceiver had landed some yards away.

The airplane continued to circle and soon ran out of fuel. It began a tight spiral aimed at the very spot I occupied. I looked up and purple lines, known as *edges*, became apparent between all entities, known as *vertices*. I saw purple lines between the eyes of the mannequin and the tail fins of the plane, between the wings of the plane and each finger of my hands, between the swaying poles of the reeds, and between the leaves of the trees in the distance and every blade of grass. The sky and ground were filled with pulsing living intersecting lines. I was seeing the interconnectedness of all things. Then that connectedness was illuminated further, to a wonderful degree, by the simultaneous blast of the engine and the soaring of superheated flame.

Groundskeeper

Precise. Accurate. That's how it was and had to be. Mitch insisted on clarity and commitment from the members of the team. They'd been in the meeting for two hours and weren't done yet. Racks of electronic equipment in the lab were visible through the blemish-free glass wall of the conference room.

"How many modems will it support?" Paul, the VP of Engineering, asked Sarah. The meeting was a review of Sarah's specification document for a network management system. Paul's voice was quiet with a soft English accent. His rise through the ranks in this Silicon Valley start-up had been based on frontal reassurance, apparent honesty, and concealed rearward stabbing. But right now Mitch didn't care. Paul had asked the question he wanted to hear.

"Forty thousand." Sarah shrugged as she said it. She was from China, was unusually tall, and wore a tight silk turquoise shirt with jeans. Her white-socked, sandaled feet were crossed under the conference room glass table top.

"But you say here it'll support eighty thousand," Mitch almost yelled. He flipped to page twenty-four of her document and pointed at the number with his index finger.

"OK, eighty then." She tossed her long black hair back, but it immediately started to creep forward again to cover her face which was acne scared and blotched with tan sunspots.

"What will the schema look like?" Paul asked.

"I can't really come up with it until I decide which database to use," Sarah said. Her head had rotated forward; her eyes were staring down at her copy of the document with her hair surrounding her face like a wrought iron fence.

“But you say over and over again you can’t decide on which database until you come up with the schema!” Mitch leafed through the document, pointed at three different pages, and said, “Here, here, and here!”

“What do you want me to say!” Her initial surprise at being questioned was turning, through the prism of embarrassment, to anger. Mitch had seen how popular she was with the other employees. It didn’t matter.

“I’m trying to figure out how you made your decisions – where’s the research, where are the benchmarks?” Mitch looked at the other faces in the meeting as he said this. All but Paul were glaring at him. All but Paul wanted to go. Mitch felt Paul didn’t mind this one bit. He knew that Paul and Sarah had been bike-riding and hiking together, but apparently that was in the past.

“Listen, this was done before you came to the company. I didn’t even make a lot of these decisions.” She looked at the others in the room and continued, “We made these decisions together.” The faint smell of garlic from the bagel she’d been picking on grew stronger as she defended herself.

“But you’re calling yourself THE software architect,” Mitch said, drawing out “the” by varying his pitch in a long sinusoidal drawl.

“OK, I think we need to print-up the action items and do the research,” Paul said in an equanimous tone. The attendees sprang up as if Paul had pressed an electric shock button on their chairs. The relief was palpable – excess muscular tension made everyone’s face numb.

I guess I’m making a lot of new friends – Mitch thought after everyone had left. Mitch groaned as he walked out the door. It was his fourth week at the company.

He was a massive man, about six feet two and two hundred and fifty pounds. He had thinning blond curly hair and a sanguine complexion. He carried his never-empty mug of Diet Coke with him everywhere and had a drawer full of Mars bars he nibbled on throughout the day. His favorite dinner food was a bowl of chili covered with cheese an inch thick. He'd scoop out mouthfuls with tortilla chips and wash it down with a foamy swish of Diet Coke.

As he approached his cubicle he started smelling the smell again. A new person, an engineering project manager, had moved in the cubicle next to him. She wore a perfume the odor of which Mitch, for some reason, associated with the smell of a douche. Summer's Eve, to be exact. He'd never knowingly smelled a douche, but whatever this woman wore was how it smelled. She was heavy, imposing, and demanded the attention of those around her. She'd only been at the company for one day and already Mitch despised her. And her smell.

He checked his e-mail. She'd sent mail with project schedules attached. Mitch knocked on her cubicle doorframe. She looked up as if she were too busy to be bothered. Mitch tried to smile and attempted to keep his nose from wrinkling like a gray fox's would while smelling the carcass of a fat female mountain lion. "I thought you should know the people who have workstations, but not PCs, can't read your project attachment."

"Well, it's up to them to find a way. I can't be attaching things in different formats for everybody." She stared at him through her cat-eye glasses. Her fingers were on her keyboard and he noticed the wedding ring with one large centered diamond surrounded by many smaller ones. Next to her computer monitor were photographs of

her husband and children. The gold picture frames shined like trophies she'd never expected to have, Mitch thought.

“Nobody will read an attachment unless you make it easy – thought you should know.”

“Thank you.” She turned her attention back to the monitor and started typing. She typed quickly, using all ten fingers. Mitch thought – sometimes you can't hide that summer after high-school, just to have something to fall back on, secretarial-school background.

“You're smellcome,” Mitch whispered as he turned back to his cube.

The gray top of his desk was clean. Mitch had scrubbed away all stains, pen and pencil marks, and Sharpie smudges on his first day. There were no angles on the desk other than right angles, and he occasionally checked those angles with a protractor to confirm they were below the threshold of measurable error. He had inherited three paper baskets, but they were empty, neatly stacked one within the other. Between his computer monitor and his keyboard, he kept three Chinese Cookie fortunes whose bottom edges were aligned as if snuggled against the edge of a ruler. The line they formed was parallel to both the keyboard and the base of his monitor.

“You never hesitate to tackle the most difficult problems.”

“You have a reputation for being straightforward and honest.”

“The luck that is ordained for you will be coveted by others.”

He opened his Mars Bar drawer, unwrapped one, and started nibbling as he read Sarah's next specification. He took notes and, without trying, memorized the document. In the first meeting, he'd intimidated everybody because it had soon become evident he

knew the document from memory. Sarah, who wrote it, seemed lost in her own words compared to this stranger, this new guy, who had the audacity to point out flaws in public. He read until time to leave.

He drove home and walked across the front yard to the door. Hansel and Gretel, his two Border Collies, looked quietly at him through the front window. His ex-wife used to peek out like that too, until she became an ex.

“Hi puppies!” They jumped up at him competing for affection. He knelt down and tried to hug them both, one with each arm, but when he did they’d switch sides. The other side was always better. He started the daily return-home routine. He checked the second bedroom of the small two-bedroom house. No mistakes. “Good doggies!” Gretel barked with joy. He deliberately walked to the kitchen. No mistakes. “Excellent! I’m so proud of you!” He hugged them some more, opened the back door, and stepped down to the backyard porch. The dogs ran ahead into the yard. “Good dog, Hansel!” Hansel peed in his corner near the house. Gretel ran to the back of the huge lot and went to the bathroom. “Good girl!” Mitch yelled to her. Bathroom duties done they started chasing each other through the grass and bushes.

The yard was jungle-like with intertwining, overgrown bushes and trees. An abandoned hedge created a maze-like quality in the middle of the yard, while willow trees and rose bushes provided thickets and dark cool caves to hide in, sleep in, and run through. There was a flowerbed near the door with tall white daisies thriving happily among the weeds. Near the house, Hansel had dug a long, deep moat and the dirt from it covered part of the narrow brick walkway littered with leaves and hundreds of walnuts from the largest tree in the yard. Surrounding it all, a seven-foot wood fence protected

the kingdom from prying eyes. Mitch sighed – When am I going to get to this yard? – He couldn't see the dogs but heard rustling from underneath the vines along the east fence.

He went inside to the kitchen and heated a bowl of chili and grated low-fat mild cheddar cheese. Slowly the day darkened, cooling quickly as it did – fall was a few days away. He nibbled on a Mars Bar for a second then ate it in three large satisfying bites. The dogs dashed inside, the game of chase having expanded to include the living room and kitchen. Gretel was in front keeping her tail down so Hansel couldn't grab it. They were half brother and sister and both had white blazes, white ruffs, and shiny black coats. They had white socks, but their paws were dirty and brown. Gretel hid behind Mitch, stuck her head between his legs, and nipped at Hansel as he ran by.

Mitch went to the living room, moved aside the magazines on the couch, sat down holding his bowl of chili, and started eating while occasionally reaching into the bag of chips propped up against his thigh. He turned the TV on and watched "Wheel of Fortune" because everything else was worse. For desert he ate a big bowl of chocolate almond ice cream. He turned off the TV and lay down on the couch with the back door open and listened to the dogs rustling in the bushes and the millionfold chattering of the branches in the sharp breeze. He pulled a blanket over him and eventually slept.

At midnight he woke and got down on the floor and crawled around with the dogs. They rolled around and played pounce.

Mitch watched TV until three and ate a bag of chocolate covered graham crackers. He was able to go to sleep again.

The next day at work Mitch found himself sitting in the same chair in the same

room in the same meeting with the same people as yesterday. The fluorescent lights, hidden by partially translucent corrugated plastic, seemed brighter, up a notch from yesterday. Sarah was sitting sullenly, though Paul was smiling at her.

“What’s the performance if we use this distribution model?” Mitch pointed at a drawing in Sarah’s document. The black lines of the drawing seemed as if they were popping out of the document.

“It’ll be fine,” Sarah said.

“How do you know?”

“I ran a test once and it seemed fine.” The pores on Sarah’s face were like inverted volcanoes. They pulsed as she spoke. “Listen, I’m not going through this again.”

“What was the test? Or is that irrelevant?”

“I loaded in a thousand modems and there was no problem. OK?”

Mitch sighed deeply and tried not to roll his eyes. “What did you compare the times to? How do you test performance without comparison? It sounds like what you really did was merely see if it would work. It did, and now you come to us with this conclusion: the performance will be sufficient. I’m asking how do you know?” Mitch’s face was growing redder with each sentence. He heard her breathe deeply and the others fidget in their chairs. The person next to him was rubbing his thumbs against his forefingers. It sounded like the gentle breaking of waves on a small lake.

“Well, OK, probably more work needs to be done there.” She refused to look at Mitch.

“Mitch let’s use a little self-control – it’ll help us get through these meetings,”

Paul said calmly.

Mitch read the look in his eyes and thought he detected a challenge. He blurted out, “Self control is the essence of humanity – as is responsibility for your actions,”

“Yes, well, thank you – let’s move on.”

After the meeting ended, the engineers filed out like cattle in a branding line. Sarah led the way. Paul pulled Mitch aside, “Mitch, I understand where you’re coming from, and for the most part I agree with what you say, but could you please tone it down a bit? We’ve got four more of these meetings to go – if they don’t lighten up, I’m afraid people will start quitting.”

“OK, sorry. I certainly don’t intend to get confrontational. When I see her sitting there smug and arrogant, confident no one will question her, it well, it irritates me.”

Mitch shrugged. “I’ll do better next time.”

As he approached, Mitch could smell the douche-woman from three cubes away. The smell was so strong in his cube he figured even he would have that just-fresh feeling. He took off his shoes and socks and tacked the socks to the partition between their cubes. He waved his shoes in the air, but to no avail. He sat down, wiggled his toes, and checked e-mail. She’d done it again. She’d sent e-mail with the unreadable project attached. “What are you trying to hide, lady?” he grumbled to himself. “Certainly not your whereabouts.” Through a haze of scent he squinted at his screen and decided he would not be denied. He saved the attachment, transferred it to a PC in the lab, logged on to the PC, and was finally able to look at the project time estimates. Four months! For all of software development! – She is nuts – Mitch thought. He waded through the fumes to her cubicle entrance.

He curled his upper lip into what he hoped was a smile and said, “Hi, I looked at the project and it estimates four months for software development.”

“Yes?”

“Well, that’s insane.” The smile was gone and on his neck was a newly bulging, pulsating jugular vein. “Where’d the number come from?”

“Oh it’s an old number – we’re going to revise it.”

“Well, I checked and you’ve got it in the schedules and documents. You’ve been showing them to senior management. So you must have believed the number.” Mitch backed slowly out of her cubicle as his head jutted further forward.

“I said we are revising it,” she said sharply.

“I’m sure you are . . . now.” Mitch turned away.

“I guess you gotta shit on everybody,” he heard her whisper. She and Sarah had been working closely together.

Mitch sat in his cube like an English gentleman, landed with cattle and sheep, would sit in a cannibal’s pot – straight backed, eyes squinting to better shield them from the steam of the gruel he was becoming. He was thinking about how he could tell her to hold down the scent. But every way he imagined ended with her taking it the wrong way. It was a hairy problem.

He reached into his Mars Bar drawer and thought – I cannot keep eating like this. The doctor says I’ll kill myself this way if I don’t change. – Then he joyfully concluded – Screw it and him! – He poured his Diet Coke and crammed half the bar into his mouth and broke it off. He tried to forget about the smell and read Sarah’s next document.

Before he left work for home, he went into the bathroom. While he washed his

hands, he noticed a white streak in his hair – straight down the middle. “My God, when did that happen?” he said out loud. He pulled a few hairs out – they were white – turned white overnight. He’d heard of such things happening, but to him?

Shaken, he drove home thinking about who he was – his self-perception had changed the instant he turned off the hot water and looked into the mirror. Still unsettled when he arrived, he heard the dogs barking for him inside the house. As soon as he opened the door, the dogs jumped up at him, still barking, with tails wagging. He pushed the door shut but didn’t lock it and went to the living room.

“Hi doggies,” he said rather sadly and they huddled around him, now sad too. Gretel tried to cheer Mitch up by licking his nose and ears, but it didn’t work. Mitch sat on the floor and sniffed the air. He could smell chocolate in the refrigerator and the roses in the backyard even though the door and windows were closed. The dogs jumped on his back and over his head while he crawled to the back door. When he opened it a blazing rainbow of scents hit him – the cool dank of the earth under the vines – the hollowed out stump with water and pollen secreted between the rotting wood – the fledgling pears and the old decaying plums rotting on the ground. Mitch sat on the backdoor steps and listened while the dogs played chase. The sounds were acute. He heard the nibbling of the mice under the step and the larger heavier steps of the rats in the corner. He heard the flapping of bat-wings under the persimmon tree’s long swayed down branches. He went into his bathroom and looked in the mirror – the white streak was still there. He started to change his shirt and looked in the mirror again and yelled as if he’d been bare-foot puddle-shocked by an old, but trusted, electric lamp. His chest hair had turned bright white. Mitch was terrified. He thought of calling the doctor, but didn’t know what to

say. – 911 my hair is turning white? – He went out back and sat down in the yard, and the dogs frolicked around him. They sniffed his chest hair and licked his white streak. They smelled his butt through his jeans and pawed at his penis. Mitch squeezed after them in among the coolness of the vines and the worn rat-trails. The dogs crawled slowly through looking back all the while to make sure he was following. Mitch felt as if his jeans were impeding him so he crawled out of them. The jeans held their form for a moment – a large cavern with two portals of light floating in the darkness.

In the northeast corner the dogs had dug out a large nest and in it were a couple of bones. It was naptime so Mitch curled up with the dogs and slept. He dreamed of days when the sun warmed his back, and after he rolled over, baked his pink black-spotted stomach, and of nights when he nosed up under age-old layers of leaves and smelled the dirt and rolled in the cat-mud in the corner.

When they woke, it was moonlit, and they played hide and seek. Mitch found he was able to keep up with them. They formed alliances: Mitch and Hansel against Gretel; Mitch and Gretel against Hansel; and Hansel and Gretel chasing and finding and jumping on Mitch. The poison oak didn't bother any of them. They slept again after drinking from the cool water in the stump. Mitch found he could drink heartily by stretching his tongue as far as he could then curling it up like a scoop to throw the water back.

For three days the three continued their idyllic existence with an intimacy symbolized by their three-nosed snuggle, bodies pinwheeled out, occasionally grooming one another, licking ears and feet. Every few hours they went into the house for food, crackers, chips, biscuits, and beef bouillon. While they ate, each of them feared one of the others had chosen the best dog biscuit in the box. To relieve the fear, Mitch stole

Hansel's biscuit, Hansel stole Gretel's, and Gretel stole Mitch's. After eating, they drank from the stump, played chase, dug holes, slept, then went to the house again for food.

But on Saturday morning the ex came by. She needed to pick up a few things from the garage. She found the back door open and Hansel, Gretel, and Mitch sleeping peacefully on the red bricks of the sidewalk in slanted eastern sun. Mitch was naked with mud caked on his feet, calves, torso, chest, forearms, and hair. She sucked in her breath and said, "Oh, no." Their ears pricked up when they heard her and their noses twitched. Mitch recognized her scent, amplified, a perfume from long ago. All three lifted their heads to look. They saw her, scrambled up and ran to the porch, and sniffed and pawed her in joy. Mitch knocked her off-balance several times. Finally, in desperation, she yelled, "Sit! Stay!" He did.

Blood Will Tell

*(In the manner of The Wife of His Youth,
and Other Stories of the Color Line (1899)
by Charles W. Chesnutt.)*

A. J. Hollingsworth surveyed the scene about him: the long room had a raised floor that allowed air-conditioning, the only air-conditioning in the nine story building, to be forced through the machinery; at the far end sat the IBM 370 mainframe computer with myriad lights blinking; on both sides of a corridor, Control Data hard disk drives, each the size of a washing machine, were spinning at thirty-six hundred revolutions per minute; in front of a sliding glass door, a relic from the room's early incarnation as a dormitory dining room, was a line-printer chattering at three-hundred lines per minute. The printer was reloaded every twenty minutes from a pile of perforated, connected paper. All was well, according to Hollingsworth, in the Machine Room of the Computing Center at the University of Arkansas.

Hollingsworth was a tall man, with gold rimmed square glasses, a square face, and short dark hair. He was in charge of the Machine Room during his shift. He had worked at his job for ten years and was going to stay for another thirty if he had any say about it. Two other men, John Kirkpatrick and Daniel O'Connor, worked with Hollingsworth during the day. Kirkpatrick was in charge of Student Records, and O'Connor was in charge of Payroll. They were sometimes known as the Gang-of-Three by the other workers – a name they did nothing to discourage.

Occasionally, the three men would meet and discuss problems that needed to be solved at work, but primarily they talked about Arkansas football. That year the excitement, or for many, controversy, about the team was that for the first time Negro

football players were allowed to play. The Gang-of-Three had resisted the idea, but was coming to accept it as the only way the team would remain competitive in the Southwest Conference. The year before, President Nixon had come to the small town to see a game; unfortunately, Arkansas narrowly lost to Texas in a fight for the number one ranking.

“Let me tell you what happened at the last game,” Hollingsworth said to the other two gentlemen. “There’s this ol’ gal that has sat in front of us for the last twenty years – she must be eighty years old.”

“True fan,” said O’Connor.

“Yes sir, she surely is.” Hollingsworth paused so all could appreciate the fan’s devotion. “Well right in front of us comes the play and Melvin Smith comes around the end running for all he’s worth.” Melvin Smith was one of the few Negro players on the Arkansas team. “And one of the darkie boys from Tech comes running up from safety and jumps on him and tackles him to the ground. The ol’ gal in front us yelled out, “Get that nigger off our colored gentleman!”

“Don’t that beat all!” said Kirkpatrick.

“We were laughing our butts off, I tell you!”

It will be left for the reader to decide for how long or how enthusiastically the three men laughed at the story; it suffices to say that for some minutes the work of the Machine Room remained unattended.

Every semester three or four work-study students would be assigned to the Machine Room. Hollingsworth enjoyed the interaction with the young students and gave

them many of the various menial jobs that abounded in his domain.

The worst of these jobs was creating paper for the printer to use. The paper was government surplus the University obtained by paying the shipping cost. It came in seventy pound boxes and had six layers of off-white ruled paper with each layer separated by a thin carbon. Each box had to be separated into six separate bundles and the carbon layers removed by being fed into a machine technically known as the paper separator; but everyone, even Hollingsworth, called it the paper shredder.

This semester he was assigned three students: Birdie, a slim girl with red hair who majored in accounting; Sara, a dark-haired girl majoring in business; and, much to the surprise and chagrin of Hollingsworth, Kirkpatrick, and O'Connor, Jervis, a Negro from Helena, way down south in cotton country. Jervis was a large young man – he wore silver rimmed glasses and kept his nappy hair cut short. He too majored in business but did not know Sara, or Birdie, or anyone in the Machine Room. The first time Jervis walked through the Machine Room, he began to suspect, but did not know for sure, that he was the only Negro who had ever set foot in the room. The fluorescent lights hummed whitely in the room, matching the removable tiles on the floor.

It fell to Hollingsworth to assign Jervis his duties on the first day. After showing the three students around the frigid machine room lit by antiseptic lights, he told Birdie to watch the console for alerts, Sara to alphabetize the magnetic tape library, then turned his attention to Jervis.

“Son,” Hollingsworth tried to break the ice, “do you play on the football team?”

“No suh,” Jervis replied. “I hurt my knee in high school.”

“Must be pretty smart to come all the way up here to the university.”

“Don’ know ‘bout that suh – dey sent me up here. I want to make somefun o’ mysef,” Jervis said.

“Well, now, let me show you your job.” Hollingsworth started walking toward the door that led out of the machine room.

“Where we goin’?” Jervis asked.

“Your job is to make paper for that printer there.” Hollingsworth gestured toward the chattering machine. “The machine that separates the paper is in a room on the second floor – and that’s where we’re going.”

Jervis glanced at the girls, now talking to each other, and the other workers, some eating lunch, others leaning back in their chairs watching, and he felt a scowl cross his face. He hid it though, before he turned back. He didn’t know that Hollingsworth had in fact seen the scowl and had smiled, in turn, to himself.

Hollingsworth took Jervis to the separator room. It was small, cramped, dusty, and sweltering. Boxes of unopened paper were stacked to the ceiling along every wall. Hollingsworth showed Jervis how to thread the unseparated paper into the machine – each of the six paper layers going through rollers to fold neatly into piles – and how each of the carbon layers was peeled away by metal rods. He started the machine and left Jervis to his fate.

After a few hours – hours spent supervising the Machine Room, hours spent observing the orderly operation of the room under his domain, hours spent watching Birdie and Sarah flirting with younger full-time employees, during all of which Hollingsworth had contemplated when the printer would run out of paper – he returned to the separator room to check on Jervis.

Later, talking to O'Connor, Hollingsworth said, "Ooooh, yeah! You should have seen him in that room! Sweat was pouring off his face and paper was everywhere! He hadn't even got through the box I started for him. Most of it had torn and somehow the carbon had fed itself back into the machine from the front!"

"Lord a'mighty," said O'Connor.

In time, Jervis mastered the paper separating machine. In fact, he started creating the paper bundles faster than the printer could use them. He would pile the bundles in front of the printer, next to the sliding glass door. As he worked, he would quietly sing his favorite song, "Ol' Man River" from the musical Showboat; after a while he began to sing at full voice. In high school, Jervis had played Joe from Showboat. He'd brought the house down night after night when he sang "Ol' Man River" while pantomiming loading a boat from behind a backlit scrim. The applause had made him swell with pride in those innocent days, though one night he had distinctly heard the mayor of his town, a man respected by all of society, and therefore sitting in the front row say, "Our darkie shore can sing!"

After a number of weeks the pile of separated paper was ten feet by ten feet and reached almost to the ceiling.

Hollingsworth began letting Jervis spend time in the machine room and noticed that soon the Negro boy was talking to the white girls, learning how to read the console print-outs, and understanding aspects of operating the IBM 370.

Hollingsworth would sometimes hear Jervis singing and cringe as he remembered a scene from his past, one in which he excited as many people as Jervis had in Showboat,

but in a vastly different manner. In junior high, Hollingsworth had made fun of a small black boy in his grade for singing throughout recess. He had told Willie – Willie was called William at home, but at school the white kids called him Willie – “Why are you singin’ all the time, Willie? You shouldn’t be that happy. I think you shouldn’t sing at all no more.” The other white kids with Hollingsworth had snickered and made remarks that boys of that age are prone to make. Willie had turned around and punched Hollingsworth hard in the stomach, causing him to double over. Willie then grabbed Hollingsworth by – well, in deference to those with delicate dispositions, it will suffice to say – his manhood, and twisted and brought Hollingsworth to his knees. “You all get away from here,” Willie had commanded while Hollingsworth writhed on the ground. The white kids had stood their ground. “Tell them to get away, A. J.!”

Hollingsworth had moaned, “Go away!” The others moved away. Only then did Willie let go and run to the safety of the black portion of the playground.

A week later a stray dog limped across the playground; it had been hurt and was bleeding. The principal caught the poor animal and had Animal Control pick it up. Hollingsworth, resourceful even at that age, started a rumor that the dog had been castrated on the playground by none other than Willie. The news spread like wildfire through the school, and soon hundreds of indignant white children had formed a mob and chased Willie through the playground yelling, “Kill him, lynch him!” Willie had run to the principal’s office pleading and sobbing. Willie’s pants were wet in a telling area, and as soon as he had reached safety in the office he threw up on the carpet. He looked up at the window in the door and saw A. J.’s face in the center of it with the other children crowded around him yelling at the window. Smiling with a half grin, A. J. stared through

the window and slowly, very slowly, perhaps to make a point that will be left to the reader to discern, A. J. wrapped his hand around his neck and pointed down at Willie.

One day, Jervis opened the sliding glass door to the machine room and said to Birdie, "I do b'lieve they's a momma cat out here with her kittens." Birdie went outside with him to investigate.

"Do you think it would be OK to bring them in?" she asked.

"Ah, don' see why not," Jervis replied.

Worried about what they were doing, the work-study students were secretive about playing with the cat and her kittens. Jervis encouraged the girls to bring them in when he was on his shift, the third shift, and told them that he had a soft spot for cats and kittens and had a "passle" of them back home.

Birdie preferred the two tabby kittens, one gray, the other yellow. She would put them on the main console, dangle ribbons of paper perforations above them, and watch her kittens compete to capture the makeshift toy. After a while, she'd gather them up in her arms and lean back in the operator's chair and soothe them to sleep on her chest while her red hair intermingled with the kittens' tabby stripes.

Sara liked the calico kittens and would run around the machine room dragging a piece of twine for the kittens to chase. When it came time for the kittens to sleep, she too would gather them on her, stroke their fur softly, and watch their eyes struggle to stay open, then close.

Sometimes, when there was work that had to be done through the night, the students would bring in the mother and her kittens and set them on top of a hard disk

drive. The warmth and vibration of the drive seemed to suit the kittens, and they would soon fall asleep with their momma curled around them. When the first light of the dawn shone through the window, the kittens would wake while their mother gave them a morning bath. Jervis, Birdie, and Sara would play with the kittens, find crickets under the raised floor to give them, and take bets on which kitten would win at king of the paper pile mountain.

Hollingsworth found himself alone one day in the Machine Room when the printer ran out of paper. He sighed and reached for Jervis's mountain of paper to get a new ream. He installed it into the printer then noticed a few itchy red blotches on his forearms. He didn't think much about it at the time.

Later that day, Hollingsworth started scratching under his arms and around his pants-waist and the top of his socks. He wondered if he'd blundered into a patch of poison ivy while clearing brush on his property during the weekend and made a note to buy Calamine lotion after work.

Still scratching, he checked to make sure the completed printouts were ordered properly on the table behind the printer. Then he saw the culprits – fleas. Once he saw one, he saw hundreds. He cursed, made his way to the other side of the printer and the mound of paper, and there, jumping up and down like acrobats at the circus, were thousands of fleas.

Jervis sat at the computer console, head down; Birdie was next to him with her arm touching his. She was laughing at something Jervis had said. Hollingsworth was about to ask Jervis, "What in the hell is goin' on here?" But he did not want to hear the

answer, no, he would cut the answer off, characterize Jervis in the worst way possible, and send the black boy up to separate more paper; but before Hollingsworth could put his plan into action, the phone rang.

It was his boss, Dr. Wilkes, the head of the computing center. Dr. Wilkes asked Hollingsworth to come to his office on the third floor.

When Hollingsworth arrived at the office, Dr. Wilkes said, "A. J., I think we have a problem."

Hollingsworth watched a flea jump from Dr. Wilkes' forearm to the desk then back again. "What would that be?"

"They tell me you allowed kittens to be brought into the machine room."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, that's what they say – last night, two disk drives went down, the support engineers found fleas on the magnetic heads. This is costing big money. I'm going to have to go to the administration and ask for more money, and they're going to ask me why."

Hollingsworth felt sweat bead on his forehead. "I'm sure they understand that things like this happen."

"Maybe to you, but, if things come down to it, not to me!" Dr. Wilkes scratched his armpit and muttered something to himself that we shall not repeat here.

Just then Jervis stuck his head through the opened door. "There you be Mistah Hollingworth! Jus' thought I'd tell you dat I got me a nudder job at de business 'minstration building. I wan' to let you know I shore enjoyed my time wid you!"

I'm On My Way

So, I mean, is something wrong with me? Everyday I see hundreds, no thousands of cars, trucks, SUVs on the freeway and when almost everyday one flies by at ninety or so I do sincerely wish for death. For the occupants that is. But it almost always is one occupant – some guy with a baseball cap turned backward, rather inexpertly weaving from one lane to the next. Pulling up feet behind cars in an intimidation move or changing three lanes one way and then three lanes back to get past one car. He has parents, girlfriends, most likely even feelings, but I do so sincerely wish for him to die.

I mean I consider myself a pretty astute driver. I used to watch the Formula 1 replays on TV – the occasional stock car race or Indy car race. I could drive like these folks on the freeway if I wanted to, but I don't. I don't want to get a ticket, and I don't want to kill anybody, and mainly I don't trust the other drivers to stay where they should. Yesterday one kid passed me on the left in the blink of an eye in a black BMW 330, driving with his right hand, his left arm hanging out the window ever so nonchalantly – just to get blocked behind a rolling phalanx of cars. I wished for his death. I visualized him making a move to change lanes, but unexpectedly a car took the spot he was aiming for. He swerved quickly back to his lane and went out of his lane to the left. He overcorrected to get back in the road, over overcorrected to get back in his lane, and then the car flipped. It rolled three left-arm-crushing times. The rolling might not have been so bad for the driver, but the last roll was stopped by the concrete pillar of an overpass. The airbag inflating with a bang! But the driver couldn't move – his crushed arm was between the ground and the driver's side door. I realized with a shock that the driver was smiling and looking at me straight back through the rear window of his car. His head was

twisted impossibly around. Looking closer, I noticed his grin was actually a grimace of pain. A death grimace. A satisfying death. Satisfying in an intensely personal way.

The world isn't going to miss a fast driving asshole one bit. Someone who doesn't care at all for the safety of others. There are so many people – so many people have to die every day. Why not the assholes? Why can't I enjoy that? Well, I can. I need to talk to someone about this – I mean in the long scheme what difference does it make? Whether some punk dies or not? I don't think it matters at all. I mean let's say the driver of the BMW had been destined to start a corporation, employ thousands of people, manufacture lifesaving cancer curing drugs, and, on top of everything, increase shareholder value. I believe those things will happen anyway. Someone, maybe driving to my left or right, will step in and take charge. An individual life is hard to put a value on. Near infinite or next to nothing as I see it. I mean it can be hard knowing there is a random point during the day when you will, generally without warning, feel a shiver of fear that shakes your intestines and makes the muscles in your legs quiver. That fear is actually the knowledge that there *is nothing you can do*.

So, when the BMW driver blows by, I don't want it left to chance. I wish I had a car Beemer voodoo doll with tires I could prick with a pin. Watch the car flip and roll as I go by. And I do know, for what it's worth, that it is for the best, although definitions of quality such as worse, better, or best seem so hard to come by on this highly populated freeway where averages; average income, average speed, average life-expectancy, and the averages of those averages, rightly overwhelm the individual – who is going to miss this person? I watch the car roll and flip, and I calm down, start to hum with “Mandy” on the radio and concentrate on the road ahead.

The Weight Distributor

Richard “Dick” Coatandson looked down through the bottom of his new progressive lenses at the odometer of his truck and mentally scratched the graying hairs on his small but radiant head. He was slowing in the left turn lane trying to figure out the gas mileage when a “whump” jarred his truck forward and then a “whump” knocked it forward again. He looked through the top third of his glasses at the rear-view mirror to check what the heck was going on and to see how his Border Collie, Smiley, had reacted to the collision from behind. Dick didn’t see Smiley in the pick-up bed, stopped, threw open the door and jumped out of his truck. There was a man already out of the car behind him; the hood of his car was crumpled like a “W,” and the man was pointing at the median of the road.

Smiley looked dazedly at the man then ran from him along the median, planted beautifully with alternating pine trees and holly bushes, for a few yards. The noise from the cars passing on the six lane road sounded as loud as a 737 on final approach as Dick tried to call to Smiley, but his thin reedy voice couldn’t penetrate the whoosh of cars and the blowing of the wind.

Both men kneeled down and called, both afraid to move toward the dog, both afraid he’d run into the street. Smiley only wanted to go home and home was across three lanes of traffic, so he started to run across the street, but had to stop before he got to the middle lane to avoid a car; he tried to turn back, but there was a car in the interior lane. Dick jumped up and ran after him, trying to stop cars, but they didn’t see him, or thought maybe he was a vagrant that didn’t matter, or maybe they were busy peering through their own progressive lenses.

Smiley tried to continue across the street, but had to stop and turn again as a car screeched in front of him. His course continued to alternate in direction and speed and described a rough zigzag that was determined by the random approach of vehicles heavy and light. He ran parallel to the road a bit as Dick also in the road chased after him; the cars finally began to stop. Dick called, and Smiley looked back, turned back, then tried to run back, but was hit by a Volkswagen Beetle, whose position at that unfortunate instant had been determined about a mile earlier when the driver avoided a pothole, then decided to continue on into the middle lane, even though ninety-nine percent of the time she would have been in the left one. She had been looking at Dick waving and yelling in the middle of the road. Smiley flew in the air about six yards, ears spread in the rushing breeze looking for all the world like the Enola Gay on a practice run with unknown orders, and then Dick finally was able to get to him.

Smiley's eyes were open, blinking, and he struggled for breath as Dick picked him up and ran the rest of the way across the street. There was an emergency animal clinic a block away. Dick had taken Smiley there several years before after Smiley had been poisoned by eating a bowl of walnuts that had spilled to the floor.

The vet pronounced the sentence: "He has spinal cord trauma. He has some feeling and minor movement in his front legs, no feeling from shoulder to tail. I'm sorry, but he will not recover; the best thing you can do is put him to sleep."

Smiley stared quietly at Dick. "I'll take him home now," he said.

Dick went outside and in the parking lot were his truck and the man who hit him. "They towed your truck here," the man said. "I'm so sorry. I'll pay the bill." He showed Dick his driver's license and gave him a phone number. Dick took the

information, laid Smiley in the passenger side, got in his truck, and left.

At home, Dick arranged a bed with towels and put Smiley in it. Dick filled a bowl with water and put it near Smiley's head. Smiley drank heartily then went to sleep.

Home was a large two-story house just outside a college town located in the northern-most part of the South or the southern-most part of the Midwest depending on what opinion one had of the outcome of the Civil War. The house had four bedrooms, a pool and Jacuzzi, a rumpus room, and a bonsai garden. The bonsai garden had been Dick's ex-wife's idea, but she was now far away, safe from the endless baseball games on TV that he used to insist on watching, but still harboring not so secret desires for reconciliation.

She'd despaired of her chunky thighs and modest bust, but Dick would try to console her by saying, "Imperfections are what make life interesting. Imperfections are beauty." Then he paused and mused, "Maybe imperfections are indeed what bring an end to life." That did it: she had liposuction on the bottom and enhancement on top, but the only thing it changed was to cause Dick to start calling her "Sport." They would argue about doing the dishes or vacuuming and she would shrilly call him an idiot. "Come on, Sport," he would reply, "take off those clothes and show me your accelerated mutation." Then he would elaborate: the only hope of mankind was mutation, but the DNA kind, not the kind with knife and hose. "It's the curse of the world. We have to wait for an error, over eons, to be propagated, to have a chance."

"Cruelty," he would say, "is inherent." Cruelty, she felt, was in front of her. And then he would hug her around the belly and close his eyes while she waited.

After she left, she found that it was no different with every man she met, and she realized that Dick had been closest to her. She found she missed his misery after their fights. She had offers from many suitors, but she couldn't seem to commit until she knew for sure that she and Dick would never be together again. In fact, she hadn't completed the sexual act since the separation; and indeed, she was still waiting for him to deliver the car he had promised her as part of the divorce decree. "If he delivers it, then I'll know it's over," she thought as she rocked herself to sleep at night.

Dick shared his house with his niece and nephew: the sixteen year-old twins Gillian, "Jill," and John, "Jack" – the children of Dick's younger brother. Dick, who had a horrible time remembering names, enjoyed the arrangement. Jack and Jill's parents had died in a gas explosion at the bluebird factory; and Dick took them in, partly out of guilt. He'd never gotten along with his brother, and he had never come to know his brother's children or wife. Somehow, he'd decided when he was young that his younger brother wasn't his true brother at all. A half-brother maybe, who seemed to have suddenly been born when Dick was seven, after Dick's father had gone away for two semesters at the Chicken Institute in Springdale, and the traveling Electrolux salesman had stopped by the house too long and too often for a sale. His mamma always had an eye for top-of-the-line, and the floors were spotless that year.

Dick's father had grown rich raising chickens, building one chicken house after another in pastures that cattle used to roam. Actually he didn't know he was rich until one night he sat down and figured and thought and called his wife over and said, "Martha, did you know we are millionaires several times over?" "No Fred," she said. That was that, they thought, until the boys became old enough to go to college, and Fred

was fine with neither one wanting to be a chicken farmer – there was money enough to save the boys from mornings at five stomping around in chicken shit.

Dick's brother started a glass bluebird business. He learned to work with glass and soon was able to copy pretty much anything he saw, and what he saw that sold were little blue glass birds. He built a warehouse and in it started making larger and larger gas ovens to use for bluebird making. He hired sometimes up to ten good ol' boys and taught them to make bluebirds and not complain when the molten glass flew and landed on their arms or ankles in the sweaty hot factory at midnight in the summer or the frozen cold factory at noon in the winter. It became a family affair when his wife learned how to make bluebirds, then started doing the books. Until the day the oven blew. It killed them both – not the explosions so much although the burns would have probably killed them eventually, but the glass bluebird shards, sticking, pricking, poking, and oddly, shining in the low spring sun, as the glinting marked their bodies like oversized Velcro.

After college Dick dabbled as an inventor. He had two inventions to his credit – the variable height traffic bump and the auto-clothes-folding dryer. Unfortunately, the traffic bump got bogged down in competing patents, and the auto-clothes-folding dryer was on its way to success when a tragedy stopped production. The folding mechanism was a very complicated affair filled with feedback mechanisms, computer imaging software, and soft velour paddles. Unfortunately for the three year old child who climbed in the dryer and closed the door behind him, Dick had failed to take into account laundry that wasn't laundry at all. The child's parents went to the garage sometime after they figured the clothes were done and found their first-born son folded like a Lacoste pull-over with his head tamped under his legs and a portion of his skull exposed. They sued,

Dick settled, and the auto-folder was sucked into the lint trap of history.

Dick's current project, the project that absorbed almost all his time, was a car outfitted with his latest invention, the Weight Distributor. He hated the way cars leaned in corners and curves and sagged down in front when stopping quickly and rose in front or back (depending on front or rear drive) when accelerating. The Weight Distributor would automatically assure that the weight of the car was distributed evenly on all four wheels at all times in real time.

He figured that it would also improve gas mileage. He wanted a car that could go a thousand miles on a tank of gas. And, after the accident, he wanted a car surrounded by radar devices that could automatically change the car's direction based on information from the back, corners, and sides. "Smitty will love that," he told himself thinking of what his head engineer and only full-time employee would think when hearing of the new feature.

The Weight Distributor was in the design stage, and there were still a great number of decisions to make and problems to solve. Initially Smitty, ever the welder, wanted to use a system of sliding weights, but Dick thought using a mechanical system wouldn't give the smooth operation he desired. He wanted to use a hydraulic system, but needed a liquid that would be dense enough to be effective. Molten lead came to mind, as did molten iron. There were certain safety issues involved with those materials, however. He told Smitty to research it and find a heavy liquid that could be used in a hydraulic system.

"Hi Dick," Jack said as he walked in the door with Jill trailing behind. "We need to talk about some things."

“Ummm, yeah, well, OK.” Dick crossed his arms in front of his reed-thin body.

“It’s about funds. Jill and I are tapped out, and we were hoping for an advance on our monthly payment.” Jack and Jill were both slender, wispy things, much like their uncle.

Jack sported a crew cut, smiled easily, and some thought he might one day do well in investment banking.

Jill nodded in agreement with Jack. She was dressed in jeans, a blue tee-shirt, and track shoes, and she had her jet-black hair cut short with sideburns. Her low gravelly voice was deemed sexy by her boyfriend, Mitch, who waited outside in the car; but Dick worried about it, thinking the voice was the result of too much smoking at her tender age. Dick often was amazed at the resemblance between Jack and Jill even though they were only fraternal twins.

“Sure, no problem. I’ll transfer next month’s allotment to your accounts tonight.” Dick loved to please his nephew and niece.

Jack thanked him then hesitantly said, “Jill’s been thinking about some things, Dick, and maybe she wants to talk to you about them.”

Jill punched Jack harder than a friendly way in the ribs, looking for a kidney, but settling for glancing off bone. “No, I don’t!”

Jill did have a secret from everyone but Jack. Jill had a penis, a scrotal sac, and a noticeable lack of breast development. Dick’s brother had required two things when his wife wanted children: two children maximum; one must be a boy, and the other a girl. “And that’s that,” he said to his wife while twirling glinting blue glass on a steel rod that

had dull maroon highlights from the orange flame hidden in the firebox.

Jack, grimacing from the blow, said, "Yes, Dick, it's gone on quite long enough."

Dick said, "Jill, is something the matter? Come on, you can tell Dick."

Jill glowered at the ceiling while rubbing her leather and chain watchband with her chin. She said, "Well, that dress you bought me doesn't fit. It'll never fit."

Jack jumped in, "Hey, where's Smiley?"

Dick frowned. "He got hit by a car, and he's hurt bad. He's paralyzed."

The twins both cringed a bit. Jack turned to Jill, "Now's not the time after all. Let's go see Smiley."

Dick said, "No, he's sleeping now. Jill, it's me, it's Dick, am I missing something?"

"No, Uncle Dick, you're not missing anything. Everything's fine." Jack and Jill turned to go. Dick could hear Jack saying, "You've got to tell him sometime" and Jill saying, "Dick doesn't want to know" then their voices grew too faint for Dick to hear.

"That's for sure," Jack whispered as they walked down the driveway to the car.

"You're missing the point."

"No, you're missing the point. Actually, you've got a point, and that's the problem. Ready to smooch with little Mitchy? When are you going to let him get to third base? Huh?"

"Quit!"

They got in Jack's truck where Mitch had been waiting in the middle of the bench seat. Mitch put his arm around Jill as she got in and said, "Success?"

Jill said, "Dressed for it, you know it."

Jack looked at the lowering sun and said, "Off to SEFOR?"

Jill and Mitch replied in unison, "One and two are ok. Three is a bore. But I get high as a kite when I SEFOR!"

Dick looked at the floor made of oak laminate and the ceiling painted a barely off-white. The room looked square, but he knew it was not. He had added the wainscoting and in the process had come to know exactly how the room fit together. A dining table was at the center and at the far end, away from the T.V., was Smiley in his bed of towels and blankets. When, Dick thought, in the building of the house, did the room go out of square? Was it one mistake or many mistakes compounded? Or was it a mistake at all?

As the sun disappeared behind the trees of the woods that surrounded the house, he felt tired from the day's events. He went to Smiley and knelt down and slowly rubbed Smiley's head. Dick got on hands and knees and looked into Smiley's eyes and saw in the brown iris's speckled with gold a passivity that he hadn't expected. Smiley looked straight ahead, still straining to breathe slightly, and Dick felt he saw that the dog knew his life was over. But not yet. There was time to be lived, yet the outcome was certain, indisputable, but the time had to be served. This sentence was a sentence reflected in Smiley's slow breathing marking time, each breath one less, knowledge of the end making not a whit of difference.

Before Dick even knew what he was doing, he was running through the crooked room, outside to the driveway, past the driveway to the woods, now cold in the new dark of the evening. He settled, crumpled, down to ground at the base of an oak and could not get the picture of the brown eyes out of his mind, silently waiting, silently knowing, the

end a surety, the time span the only variable, but a variable whose suddenly much tighter constraints fixed the passive look of the brown eyes speckled with gold to the movie playing and replaying in Dick's mind. He put his head on his knees and started to cry, and when he would stop for breath the eyes would appear again, and he would cry some more. He could not understand how the knowledge could be borne, yet Smiley had no means to change the outcome, or to understand it. Understanding outcomes based on beginnings, that was the key to human endeavor, Dick would think sometimes as he admired objects for their symmetry, beauty, and utility. But now, the eyes spurred him on, slight imperfections of gold becoming greater and greater in even the short time Dick had been away. He cried as quietly as he could. He'd never let anyone see him cry. See or hear. But, he didn't know how to make it stop, so he continued, breathing out until his lungs almost collapsed, and in the time it took the deep dark breath to refill and start again, he would hear the low breeze rustle the leaves on the ground around him. He thought to look up for the moon. It wasn't to be found, but at his hands, at his face, was the earth that he could not begin to describe. If that's so, how could the objects of man be wholly described? With zero error and zero tolerance. Dick was a perfectionist, and perfection meant no errors, no endings. Dick could look at the bark at the base of the oak and feel that it too had brown eyes with gold flecks and that it too knew it was a lightning strike away. The tears seemed to threaten to last all night, but during a breath, a pause longer than normal, he heard Smiley howling and whining, and Dick forced himself to stand up. On the way back to the house, he noted with some relief that it was too early for poison oak or chiggers and brushed his clothes clean with his hand. He crumbled up a Gaines Burger and fed Smiley by hand, made sure the water bowl was full, and took one

of the blankets and settled down to sleep on the floor. “It’s ok, it’s ok, it’s ok,” he said in a mantra to soothe both himself and the now resting dog.

“Yep, you heard me, radar,” Dick told Smitty.

Dick wanted a car that could drive itself if need be, and he wasn’t going to settle for less. He had a vision of himself on a thousand mile test drive, sleeping, reading, watching T.V., perhaps re-runs of The Beverly Hillbillies – especially the one where Mr. Brewster says, “welllllll doggies” in the exact same way that Jed did – while the WDSOV drove itself quickly, quietly, and safely across the country. And, perhaps, maybe at night during baseball season, he would close the curtains, and enjoy a game or two or however many his body could stand, at his age and all.

“Where are we going to get a radar?” Smitty asked rolling his eyes.

“Wherever those Japanese car makers get it. I did some looking around. I can get eight radars from RadBed for around eight thousand dollars. We need to get someone who can write the software to control the damn things, though,” Dick said.

“RadBed?”

“Yep, looks like the RadBed 5650 short-range radar will do the trick.”

“Ok, ok, let’s order them and I’ll weld them on.”

The Weight Distributor Obstruction Sensing Vehicle (“WDOSV”, as Dick liked to call it, “Dickmobile” as far as everyone else was concerned) was starting to come together. Dick and Smitty had bought a compact gas and electric hybrid and stripped it. Then they began designing the chambers for the Weight Distributor.

Smitty had found a suitable heavy liquid, LST. “Lithium Heteropolytungstates,”

he proudly told Dick. It had about three times the density of water, more if you heated it, was fairly safe, and had a low viscosity. And it was stable: it had been kept for ten years so far without any chemical change. It was manufactured in Australia, but it could be bought from Central Chemical Consulting in California. He also found a pump that could be used with it – the PressureMaster 171 that would run off twelve volts. “I’ve got to use stainless steel for the LST, though, it’s reactive with copper, iron, and aluminum,” Smitty informed Dick while glancing over the fact sheet from CCC.

They hired a number of college students part-time to program the sensing devices for measuring the relative weight on each of the wheels. The students also worked on software to control the radars and they wrote code to control the direction and speed of the car based on what the radars detected.

They decided that the master computer would be a P.C. running Windows. It would take all the inputs from the radars and weight sensing devices and control the direction of the car and pump the LST to the proper chambers at the four corners of the car to balance it perfectly and in real-time.

Dick’s original design for the Weight Distributor had multiple pipes in and out of reservoirs located above each of the wheels. It would work – he knew it would work – but it was a complex system. The crux of his design was what he called “shortcut” paths directly linking each reservoir so that the path would be as short as possible. This created a system of many valves operated by the main program in the P.C. based on data from pressure sensing devices distributed throughout the system.

When he finished the design, Dick thought it beautiful in its complexity; after all, a complicated problem sometimes demanded a complicated solution. But one day Smitty

proposed dropping all the shortcut pipes and adding a central valve which controlled the flow. Dick had to concede, after one look, that the elegant solution offered by Smitty would be almost as fast and far more reliable.

Any decision point in the system could fail, and Smitty's design reduced the number of decisions to be made. Was it possible anything deserving the description of "complex" was merely a Rube Goldberg device? Could it always be reduced, by some equivalent of fractional reduction, to a design that had what could be called "beauty" added in inverse proportion to complexity?

Simply looking at the distribution of the error propagation possible for each valve confirmed Smitty's design as superior. Dick did his best to praise Smitty and while taking some credit and hiding his bruised ego.

Smitty enjoyed making things and envisioned himself someday as the Chief Officer in Charge of the Weight Distributor Corporation. He had no doubt that it would happen, all he needed was patience and hard work.

The months went by and soon a summer had passed and then fall entered its brilliant state with the maples showing scorching red and the oaks a quicker subtle brown hue. Smiley lived in his bed in the crooked room. Jack and Jill kept their secrets. The car was ready for testing as winter began which prompted Dick to refurbish the old bluebird factory warehouse. He created a basketball-court-size indoor test facility with all manner of computer monitoring equipment. He wanted to test the car and test it well. He wanted to test it for hundreds of hours before using it on public roads.

The car was brown with gold trim and Smitty had created an old fashioned grill that looked like a toothy smile. The test area was overlooked by a separate control room.

Dick required all people to leave the area before a test, sounded a horn, and lit a red flashing light while the car was running. After the car seemed ready, one day Dick invited people to watch. Jack, Jill, Mitch, Smitty, Dick, and even Smiley came to the control room. The car could be started and stopped from the control room, and the path it took to avoid obstacles was plotted and saved for comparison to future paths from future times.

As the design phase ended and the testing phase began, Dick felt the need for female companionship. He started going to a couple of bars where the older folks hung out – retired professors, twenty-year vets from the Air Force, and chicken farmers with money. One bar in particular, The Bullseye, had live music most nights and cheap beer every night which made it a very popular place. After a while, Dick was on first name basis with a many of the regulars and one night, in particular, on one rainy December evening . . .

“Who is that guitar player?” Dick asked the lady standing next to him as the band played “Voodoo Chile.”

“That’s Billy Cates – don’t you remember him?”

Dick didn’t remember Billy Cates, but he liked the look of the lady next to him and he liked what he heard from Billy Cates’ guitar. He first suspected, then looked and saw it was indeed a Stratocaster and it was running through, oh, not a Marshall, but an old Mesa Boogie. Then Billy Cates did it again. He hit a note and turned to the speaker of his amplifier and the note would not die. Dick started counting beats, dividing by four to get bars, and realized that Billy Cates had held the same note for eight bars. Maybe

that was the key to never dying, to a peace that brought comfort in its certainty. As Cates turned to and from his amp the note varied in loudness, but not pitch. Dick visualized the mechanical vibration of the string in the magnetic field of the pick-ups inducing current in the coils and winding its way down a thin blue cord to the amplifier which then multiplied it many-fold and sent it to the speaker coil which oscillated in its magnetic field moving the speaker cone which created vibrations in the air which then encouraged the mechanical vibration of the string on the guitar. Because Dick was contemplating the circular feedback nature of infinite life, his idea was reflected in his pick-up line to the woman next to him. "The fear of death is upon me."

Fortunately for Dick, she heard, "Can I buy you a drink?" She said, "Yes, of course, I would like one."

"You can only die once," Dick said with some puzzlement until she pointed to her empty glass. "Ahhh, yes, what are you drinking?"

"Southern Comfort – straight." She smiled and touched Dick's shoulder. He bought her the drink and they talked during the band's break. When they started to walk out together, they passed a table of women, some of whom knew Dick from previous encounters, and the women rolled their eyes and said almost in unison, "Tsk, tsk, she'll learn."

Jill wasn't the only one in the Coatandson clan with secrets of a sexual nature. Dick had a peculiarity which caused him great anxiety in his relations with women. When Dick was young, he had a TV in his room and as he came of sexual age, it happened that his private sexual experimentation was always during baseball games. As is the case with many young men, he was by himself often through the late springs,

summers, and early falls of his youth, and there eventually came a time where he couldn't ejaculate unless he was watching a baseball game; furthermore, the game had to be live, not taped, not time delayed. The suspense, the randomness – yet not truly random as evidenced by the statistics on batting average, earned-run-average, slugging percentage – the tension of not knowing if the ball was going to be hit or not, became a necessary and sufficient condition for sexual release. Much to his dismay, in college he found his performance with the various girls he met was superb if he could contrive to have sex during a game broadcast, but non-existent if he could not.

As the years went by, in his marriage, with much work, he found that occasionally he could perform without baseball in the background. In the years after the divorce, this had given him hope that he would be able to do the same, but he hadn't had much luck.

The lady at his side was Sheela. She was divorced and didn't usually go to bars, but she did like the band. That was the only reason – the dumb blind luck of the band – that she and Dick met. She asked Dick to come to her apartment for coffee and he quickly responded, "Yes, mmmm, of course."

What do you do she said he heard as if in a dream and he told her he was an inventor with a very important invention in the testing stages right now but he couldn't talk about it because there were spies everywhere and she said that's all right you know I think I like you a lot a whole lot can you kiss me right there she said but it was the smile that gave Dick the goose bumps on the back and he kissed the top of her ear and he could feel her shiver now and that was all it took they threw their clothes off and they were together in an instant and then from a magnificent beginning Dick began to flag and she asked what's wrong and he explained the whole baseball thing to her and she said for

right now just concentrate on baseball for a minute and then it'll all be ok.

Dick said, "No, I don't think so. Not this time, maybe not for a long time."

Sheela said, "You know, honey, that's ok with me. I want to be with you all the time, when does baseball season start?"

Dick said, "Really, are you putting me on?"

"No. I'll be here for you. What are a couple of months a year with no baseball?"

"Oh my God," Dick said, "no one's ever said that to me before!"

"Besides, I've always got my electric toothbrush to tide me over. You know how to use an electric toothbrush don't you?"

"Plug it in and set on slow?"

"Ohhhhh, yeah."

Dick rested his head on her chest and watched for a while, then allowed himself to fall asleep, marveling that through mere chance he'd found a woman who might work out. He dreamed of her eyes, brown with gold flecks, and woke whimpering without her knowing.

"The end of war is near. The end of war is upon us. The end of war is necessary," Jack said to Mitch and Jill in the truck as they were driving along state route 265.

"Why do people persist in working for peace, a world without war?" Mitch asked. "When in the history of mankind has there ever been a period without war? What makes you think it could ever happen?"

"It has to happen. We can control our destiny. That is the power we have over

the other animals – dogs, cats, lions, you know.”

Jill said, “Don’t you think it’s funny that we’ve always had war, but we’re promised eternal life in heaven. What if we had peace and no promise, not even a hint of eternal life after death. Do you think people’d go for it?”

“It ain’t gonna happen. Period,” Mitch said firmly.

“You always invalidate my thoughts,” Jill said while Mitch mocked her.

“Be a sport,” Mitch said mockingly.

“Ok, you two, kiss and make up, we’ll be there soon.” Jack knew that Mitch was ready to call it quits with Jill. She hadn’t been responsive in the sexual department, and Mitch had had enough. But maybe the three could have fun together for one more night.

They were almost there, back to SEFOR again, their favorite place to drink and smoke. SEFOR was an acronym for Southwest Experimental Fast Oxide Reactor. It had been an experimental nuclear reactor in the late sixties and early seventies. A Breeder Reactor.

SEFOR was designed to test if a chain reaction would slow as it heated up. The theorists had predicted this built-in safety against a meltdown. Until SEFOR, it had merely been a theory. The high-point of SEFOR occurred when the scientists started a meltdown and the chain reaction slowed as predicted. Rejoicing and relief held forth in the concrete block hallways.

Before the test, the folks at SEFOR hadn’t liked to think about the worst that could happen, and since they didn’t want to think about it, they didn’t make an effort to inform those few who lived in the northern-most part of a southern state of the dangers.

Instead they invited elementary school classes to come to the reactor, learn about

electricity and atomic energy, and have Timmy's and Susie's hair fly up when they put their trembling fingers on the Vandergraf Generator. The containment dome wasn't very large as those types of radiant domes go, and during that time when the atom was a friend, it wasn't perceived as particularly threatening.

The project ended, the University assumed ownership, and the site was abandoned. The facility contained areas that were radioactive or had spills of liquid sodium, or hanging asbestos, and was sealed off. The grounds were surrounded by a chain link fence with barbed wire on the top and in one spot, not far from the road in the woods, a hole in the fence provided access to the reactor site. There was a small shed with chairs facing the dome, and that shed and those chairs were the favorite spots for Jack, Jill, and Mitch to drink their J.W. Dante and smoke their pot.

Mitch brought a flashlight and some colored plastic. He pointed the flashlight through a rose colored piece of plastic up onto the reactor dome and made scary movie sounds. Then he changed to red plastic and voiced an explosion. "Everybody down!" he said as he rolled over Jill. He grabbed her butt and rolled her around and around on the porch.

"Hey, quit it you moron!" Jill yelled, and Jack grabbed them both.

"I just wanted to go for a roll in the containment!"

Jill sat back down and drank more. She had to end it some day. She had to tell Dick, she had to change; she sometimes didn't know what to do. She smoked more pot. She walked toward the dome saying, "Take me, come and take me, oh radioactive god!"

"And I don't even get a chance?" Mitch yelled from the porch of the shed.

Jill thought of her parents and wondered what it was that had set her peculiar life

in motion. Some girls have pee-pees, some do not, her mother and father told her.

Being a girl is a state of mind her father told her. He arranged a whole female life around her. It was so very large now, this life. It was easy in some odd ways, but Jill wondered if there were some little gene, some bit of broken DNA inside her that had allowed, or maybe commanded, her to be what she was in right at this moment. She was praying to a nuclear reactor for salvation. With a grain of salt, or liquid sodium, as the case might be.

Jack, on the other hand, worried incessantly about Jill. He knew the deception could not last much longer. How could he make Jill do what she had to do? And Uncle Dick, what would Uncle Dick do? Jack smoked a cigarette and thought he saw three angels walking in the open area by the fence on the side. They smiled as they came toward him and then they said as they went past, "We will save you, comfort you, and lead you – do not forget about us. We are to you as a butterfly is to the hurricane – you cannot find us or define us, we seek you out as we desire."

Jack was mesmerized by the vision and unaware for a while of what was going on around him. Mitch was yelling, "Come on! Let's get out of here, I'm getting bored."

Jill said, "In a minute. Let's call the owls. We'll leave when one answers."

After a false start or two punctuated by giggling, they were able to call:

"Whooooooooo, yeah! Whooooooooo, Yeah! Who. Who. Who."

After a while a distant call came back: "Who."

The three returned to the truck and started driving the crooked roads back to town. At one point Jill woke up and found that they were in a long ditch and the truck was leaning against a fence post. Jack was outside looking at the line of posts he'd hit with the truck. "I guess we best keep moving," he said.

“How’s the Dickmobile doing?” Mitch asked in a sarcastic voice.

Irritated, Jill answered, “Just fine. You wanna see?”

“Sure.”

“Jack, let’s go to the warehouse, let’s show Mitch the Dickmobile.”

Soon they arrived at the building in which Jack and Jill’s parents had died one brutal day some years before. They went into the control room and turned the lights on the testing floor. Below them was the Dickmobile alone on the square concrete floor with concrete sides lined with foam padding. Obstacles were scattered in various places and rises, valleys, and banked curves were set in the concrete much like a skate-park.

“Are you sure we should do this?” Jill asked nervously as Jack started switching on the control computers.

“I’ve done it a million times with Dick here. I can do it now, can’t I? There, now we’re ready. Here goes!” With a ceremonial flourish, Jack moved the mouse over a large “Start” button on the screen, clicked, and the Dickmobile came to life. The gauges showed it had a full charge and a full tank of gas – enough, indeed, for one thousand miles of continuous travel.

It moved forward until it came near the wall and reversed direction until it approached the opposite wall. It reversed direction again, but added a turn, one prescribed by the testing module to make sure every obstacle, swale, and curve would be encountered. The small car reflected the flood lights in all directions as it sped up, slowed down, and changed course all in the preordained way.

“Cool!” Mitch said as he put his nose against the glass and watched the car negotiate obstacle after obstacle only to change direction when it reached one end, sure in

the inevitability of reaching the other. The car was perfectly level at all times no matter what the angle or speed of turn.

But, after a while, they noticed a slight change in the small car, brown with gold highlights flecking the walls with reflected light. The side on the outer edge of the curve started mashing towards the ground and the front and back started swaying when the direction was reversed.

“Is that supposed to happen?” asked Mitch.

“No, I don’t think so,” replied Jack.

Inside the little car, inside the stainless steel tubing, random molecules of copper were detaching from Smitty’s welds, impurities from previous copper welds. The molecules were attaching to random molecules of LST, crystallizing it ever so slightly, increasing the viscosity ever so slightly, one increment at a time until the viscosity was greater than what the Pressure Master 171 was designed to handle. The brown car flecked with gold started swaying to ever greater angles from horizontal. At times one side would lift completely off the ground.

“Turn it off!” Jill yelled at Jack, after finding she had been mashing her crotch against the window-frame.

“I’m trying,” Jack replied while clicking and clicking on the “Off” button on the screen. Nothing happened.

Deep inside the car, and then deep inside the PC that controlled the car, was a memory location that held the value of the On/Off switch. It was being overwritten many times a second by the results of the error overflow caused by a division that was only supposed to occur once in a blue moon. Instead, now, because of the failure of the

Weight Distributor, it was dividing thousands of times a second.

“I’m going to call Dick,” Jill said and dialed his number.

Dick heard his phone ring, but it was in his pants-pocket and his pants were draped way over there on the couch. He lifted his head, sniffed the air, sensed a bad premonition, and settled back to sleep on Sheela’s breasts.

The children watched as the Dickmobile came toward them: shiny grill not smiling, but not frowning; serious in its approach; tiny headlights glinting in the brighter lights of the test bed; and mud-flaps flying up like ears due to increasingly abrupt changes of direction. Its path was shown on one of the monitors in the control room: it was never quite the same, never quite different, the same never quite, the never quite same, the same quite never, the never quite same slightly different slightly again.

Ed and April Joy

It started as a mild ache somewhere on, in, my chest, and I didn't pay much attention because it had been happening for months off and on. During the day, I was fine. Mowing, running the roto-tiller, digging, weeding, I would feel strong. But at night, that was when the pain started. At night, when my eyes were open and I was thinking.

I was lying in the camper bed on a hot night with the windows open to let the air move. The children and April were outside by the campfire, and I could hear them talking and the fire talked to me also as it consumed the splintered wood I knew T. R., my grandson, was throwing into it occasionally to see the sparks rise.

April Joy, my wife of over forty years, was holding court with the children, and she was always trying to teach them something and sometimes they listened and sometimes not.

"Grandmother, do we have to stay?" I heard T. R. whine. April groaned as she lowered herself into her favorite lawn chair. The campfire crackled, and I heard the sparks shooting high to the stars like the words of stories fading, quieting, gone.

"Yes you do, bub. It's time I told you children a few things and you are going to listen. I may not be here to tell you someday. You should know where you came from."

I heard her lawn chair creaking as she said, "Anna, I'm glad you're here – this can be a story for you if you want."

"T. R. quit!" Anna hissed, and I heard T. R. whisper, "Spiderssss."

Anna was my granddaughter's friend. Coe-Ellen is my granddaughter – thirteen

and skinny as a rail with long thin brunette hair; T. R. came next – an impish eleven-year old.

We were camping with the Razorback Campers at Devil's Den state park in the hills of Northwest Arkansas. April and I took the children on a trip now and then to give their parents a weekend off. My daughter, my only daughter, Sara Jane, and her husband were in Little Rock to campaign for Bobby Kennedy and probably having the time of their lives.

"You know one time your momma won a contest here, and she wasn't much older than you children. We had the potluck and then a contest and the grand prize clue was, 'Go to L twice if you are here,' and quick as a bat your momma yelled out 'Lucifer's Lair!' and you shoulda seen how the folks laughed and made over her. Your momma's kinda special – you know that?"

April liked to brag about Sara Jane, and when I would call her on it she'd say, "The children should know – they can't see it, and someday they may wish they had."

Anna said, "I think your momma's kinda cute."

"Eeeyu," T. R. wheedled.

"Stop it mister – she's right and don't you forget it when you're giving her grief next time you decide to bring a dead cat in the house."

"But it wasn't dead when I put it in the bag – why won't anyone believe me?"

"Because, if you don't watch out you'll turn out ornery just like your granddaddy, and then I'll have to deal with the both of you." April decided I was ornery some years ago, I don't know quite when, I think maybe when we were in Somalia, maybe Nairobi, I don't know, but it was sometime back when we were stationed overseas. I gave

agricultural advice to the natives in the countryside; I tried to teach them how to use fertilizer, pesticides, to make the crops grow – I mean really grow so they could feed hundreds, thousands, instead of one or two families, but they couldn't grasp the idea. I'd show them photographs of amber waves of grain, and I'd pace off hundreds of yards to show them the size their fields could be, but I rarely felt lasting change would result. It was hard going in the deep mud of the streets of Nairobi, in the muddy paths outside the city. Before we left on that trip, April told me she did not want to go, but she would; but she would sleep by herself. The last time we shared a bed together was the night she told me she knew she had a duty to me, but the duty didn't please her. No-siree.

“Someday your granddaddy and I will be gone. You know we will die don't you children?”

“Not for a long time, Grandmother?” T. R. asked.

“No darling, not for a long time, but it'll happen, and your grandfather and I have a spot planned in the cemetery right off Old Wire – you know the one at the big curve? I'm not worried about it and neither should you children. It's a part of the way things are.”

Dear, I'm not dead yet, don't you know? I wished she hadn't planned this part out so well and so far in advance.

“Well, now, I don't think you children even know how I got my name. Do you?”

“I know! Momma says you were born in April and your momma and daddy were so happy they named you April Joy,” said Coe-Ellen proudly.

“That's right! But there's more to that story. I didn't know my momma. I was the ninth of nine children. Who are my brothers?”

“Uncle Cy, Uncle Steet, and Uncle Roy,” her grandchildren said in unison.

“Who is my sister?”

“Aunt Verna,” they said.

“Now where are the other four?”

T. R. said, “They must’ve died.”

“Yes, they did. And times were different then – children died and we were sad but we had to keep on. Jimmy and Seth got TB and died. Even though I was a little girl, I remember trying to help. Teddy died after he tripped and fell and broke his leg. He got an infection and couldn’t beat it. Cassie and Verna both got polio – only Verna made it.”

Well, yes, they died everyone died and it was hard and I remember when my daddy beat me I wished I was dead and sometimes I’d crawl under the bed and hide with my brothers and try to sleep.

“Didn’t you have doctors?” T. R. asked in a low voice.

“Why, land o’ Goshen! Of course we had doctors! My daddy hitched up the wagon with a mule and drove half a day to Fort Smith to get Doctor O’Connell for his children. My daddy did what he could for us. We didn’t have the vaccines you children take now. Remember the uncles and aunts you never saw next time you think about crying during your next vaccination.

“Anyway, I wanted to tell you how your granddaddy and I got married.”

I’d thought I knew the story until I first heard April’s version. I liked her version better than mine, though.

“Wait, where did you grow up?” Anna asked.

“Rudy. It’s hardly there anymore. I guess it’s about twenty miles north of Fort

Smith.

“You had a farm?”

“That’s what we called it. We didn’t grow much though. We grew corn and tomatoes and some other vegetables and had hens for laying and chickens for eating and a few pigs. My daddy and brothers would spend half the year clearing out rocks to have another quarter acre to plant the next year. You see, *my* granddaddy got us that farm. I barely remember him – he must’ve died when I was three or so. My only memory of him is him walking down a dusty path – he was tall and wore a black hat and used a cane. He is why we’re all here, ‘cept for you Anna. He came from Scotland. That’s why my skin is so fair. They say he started west and got a pole-boat and poled up the Arkansas. I’m not sure why he stopped here – I reckon he probably ran out of steam. Then he started looking for a place to live and had to keep going until he found land nobody wanted, which turned out to be our farm.”

“What’s a pole-boat?” Anna asked.

“It’s a flat bottomed boat that you push up the river with long poles. Hard work you might imagine. I don’t blame my granddaddy for stopping when he did. He gave me and you children a home.”

“Arkansas air is the best air, it don’t smell like Oklahoma air,” T. R. said just the way I taught him.

“You leave Anna alone. She knows what she knows and doesn’t need you to tell her. And T. R. – say it again – say it right this time.”

“Arkansas air is sweet,” Anna said.

“T. R. . . .” April said warningly.

“It *doesn't* smell like Oklahoma air.”

“That’s better. Now I knew your granddaddy from when I was about your age. He lived on a farm like ours about five miles down the road, and for several years we only saw each other at church.”

And I remember her well. She had a haunted look that drove me to distraction. I wanted to fix it, make it better.

“Were you poor?” Anna asked.

“Land sakes, we were poor. Of course we were poor. Everyone was poor. It was the way things were. Why, it didn’t really hit me that we were any different until I started going to school in Rudy. I guess I didn’t start until I was about eight years old, but it was OK, my aunt, Selma, she’s the one who raised me, she taught me to read when I was five years old. Everyone read in our family. Even T. R.!”

“I learned at five too – you taught me!”

“Me too,” Coe-Ellen chimed in.

Anna asked, “Why didn’t your momma teach you?”

“Why, she died,” said April. She died when she had me. I guess I left that part out, huh? I suppose I don’t think about it anymore. After I was born, Selma came to live with us.”

I heard the chair creaking and April said, “It’s getting chilly. Put these over your shoulders.”

“Now let me tell you about Rudy. The town wasn’t much – a general store, a school, and a church. And the railroad tracks. I suppose the railroad was why it was there to begin with. But, Rudy was known far and wide for the event it held every fall –

the butter churning championships! People would come from all over to compete – from Mountainburg, Winslow, Greenwood, Alma, of course Fort Smith, and a group of folks even drove their wagons over Mount Gaylor from Fayetteville – all to try to be crowned the butter churning champion for the year. There was a circus tent and people would bring things to sell and show and it was sort of like a fair. Not as big as the county fair, but, for Rudy, it was a big deal.”

Let me tell you it was a mean little affair. Broken down mules hitched to wagons held together with baling wire, hard folks, hard men and women afraid to have a good time, afraid to try, because the cost of a good time was too high. And yet they tried. I went like all the rest. I wanted to see April churn, and churn she did. I couldn't stand the crowds, the crowds of people I either knew or recognized from the previous year. In later years, as I started to travel, I discovered it wasn't a crowd I didn't like, but a crowd of people I knew. Street fairs in dusty villages far away fascinated me, and I would talk to each vendor on the street, ask him about his crop, ask him if he needed help.

“Did you churn butter, Grandmother?” asked Coe-Ellen.

“Yes I did. Churning was my job. Aunt Selma would set me outside the door with the churn every other day and it was my job to make the butter we used. Oh Lordy, I would get bored pushing and pulling that paddle up and down. If I was lucky, I only had to do it for half an hour, but usually it was more than an hour. I found I could read while I churned and it helped pass the time. Seems the more interested I got in my book, the slower I churned, and eventually, Aunt Selma would come out and give me what for. But she never took my book away.”

“Why didn't you buy the butter?” asked T. R.

“I told you we didn’t have money. It didn’t much matter until I started school. I needed things – paper, pencils, ribbons for my hair, and maybe a nice dress. My first day of school, Aunt Selma sent me with a basket of eggs to sell to the general store so I could buy some of those things. The other children saw me with my eggs walking down the street to the store, and they made fun of me. They called me Poor Little April. Poor Little April has to sell eggs to get pencils. Why, I was so ashamed I ‘bout died. I spent my first day of school looking down at the floor. The other children started calling me Poor Little April like it was my name. I simply couldn’t tell Aunt Selma when I got home. So, don’t you know it, the next week Aunt Selma loaded me up with another basket of eggs to sell. I couldn’t bear the thought so when the road crossed the railroad tracks, I turned and walked those tracks to town, behind the buildings of the main street, right behind the store. It added a good mile to get to school, but I tell you what, *then*, I knew what it was to be poor.”

I knew she was walking the tracks to school. Everyone knew. Walking the tracks became as shameful as anything. After April, nobody dared do it again. Tell them.

“Did they always call you Poor Little April, Grandmother?” asked Coe-Ellen.

“No dear, like so many things, after a while it wore off. I was the best student, and eventually it seemed to take the place of me being Poor Little April.”

“What about Granddaddy? Did he call you that?”

I used to call her April Joy. Then, as the years went by, I started calling her April.

“Law no! If it were possible to be poorer, then his family was it. They had no mother, no woman at all in the house, and his daddy seemed to prefer a more contemplative life than farming or taking care of six boys would allow.”

Contemplative was the word, I suppose. I only remember my daddy in a rage or passed out. If he gave me a kind word, look, or nod, it must've been while I was asleep, 'cause I've got no memory of it.

"But he went to college and everything – how did he manage?"

"He got his master's degree, I'll have you know. Your granddaddy, no matter how gruff he seems, he does like work. He had goals from the first time I remember meeting him. He told me he was going to travel the world. And we did. And he was funny. I always wanted him to talk to me. He would sound so serious and then after a while I'd realize there was a joke going on, and he and I were the only ones in on it. I remember when we were in Beirut for the Foreign Service, let's see, I guess your mother was in high school at the time, when us Americans had a gathering for dinner and each couple had to perform a skit."

Now, this part I never got tired of hearing her tell.

"Your granddaddy got this idea and convinced me to go along. How I don't know, but I'm glad I did. After everyone had finished dinner, various folks got up on the small stage and performed something. Some of the men had got up a barbershop quartet, and I remember a few of the women got together and sang harmonies. Then it was our turn.

"He looped a rope around his neck and had me lead him out onto the stage. As we slowly walked across the stage, he brayed in a loud voice, 'Water, water!' We stopped and I said calmly, 'Patience jackass.' We went around back of the stage and came out again – 'Water, water!' he brayed. Again I said, 'Patience jackass.' Again we went around the back and started walking across. We got to the end of the stage without saying anything and I thought it wasn't going to work and I started to feel my knees

quiver when Sally Simpson, prim and proper Sally Simpson, who had to have the most expensive hats and nicest gloves, and she thought she was god's gift to the world with all her new hairdos and"

T. R. said, "But Grandmother, he didn't say water!"

"You're exactly right. Sally stood up and said in a loud challenging voice, 'He didn't say water!' with her eyes big and wide. And I said, 'Patience jackass' calmly and mildly as you please. And, oh, you should've seen the people laugh. We were the hit of the evening. Except with Sally Simpson, of course."

The children giggled. April couldn't stand Sally Simpson, and her husband Fred couldn't stand me, ever since one night at bridge Sally and I teamed up, and we made quite a team, and no one could beat us, but I remember the feeling, rare for me, of knowing, communicating, without talking with Sally. That's what made folks mad. April was jealous of her after that, but April had no idea. I didn't care for Sally – but it was a special moment, I guess special enough for everyone to remember.

I had almost forgot the pain in my chest, but it started again, almost like a spasm or maybe a contraction in childbirth, but I gripped the side of the bed with my fingers until it passed. I noticed I was sweating, but I still thought it couldn't be my heart, maybe my poor lungs – you see I smoke two packs of Pall Malls a day. I enjoy every single one, and I count them down. I like to sleep early because I can't help but be up at five thirty, and I get the fire going and put some grounds and water in the old coffee pot and set it over the fire and have my first cup with the first cigarette lit as the white starts to appear mildly in the sky. I watch the smoke from the fire and cigarette slowly circle up, and I enjoy the moment. At night here, in bed, somehow past times grip me in such a

way that I can't seem to move.

"The skit was such fun. Then, I declare your ornery granddaddy ruined it a week later. Each of us had to host a dinner each weekend for the other families. Sally Simpson was there of course. I had worked all day to get up a nice meal, and we'd set down to eat when your granddaddy, sitting at the head of the table, tapped his spoon on his iced tea glass and said, 'More tea' in front of everybody. I tell you I was mortified, but I felt myself get up and go to the kitchen and in front of everyone I refilled his glass."

She thinks it reflects poorly on me, and I suppose it does, but I tell you I do not remember it happening. I'm sure I wanted tea, I have no doubt she got it for me, but I doubt that the conversation at the table paused for one moment. I gingerly rubbed the sore spot over the left part of my chest, but I didn't want to push down, no, I could tell it would hurt.

"He still does that," Coe-Ellen said.

"I know, dear."

Yes, I do it, and I'll do it again and again. I left April in town in Somalia one muddy couple of weeks and went to the countryside, to the farms, to visit some of the boys I'd met in town. I offered to pay to stay at one of the houses and one of the girls, dark as could be, took a liking to me, and I have to say we would walk in the dark and in almost total silence and then we would have relations and I do remember how she moved with me and I do remember feeling like I was alive, but coated with guilt like tar. I would lie afterwards with her, trying not to think, but think I did, and I knew I would leave, but I wondered how well she knew it, and I was afraid. I would think that in the grand scheme what I was doing wasn't bad, not near as bad as most things men do, but

still, I had seen in that young girl the same haunted look I'd seen in April while filing out of the pews at church when we were children. A look that seemed like a cry for help, yet defiant. I knew there was a will in the girl that I wanted to possess, yet not conquer.

“But what about the contest?” asked Coe-Ellen.

“My daddy and Aunt Selma had told their friends how I'd read and churn and churn slower and slower and pretty soon it seemed like everyone knew the story. I felt like I had to show them and everyone. I kept it a secret, but I decided to enter the contest that year. I started paying more attention to how long to let the cream set and curdle and started trying different speeds of churning. My churn was an old one, but I thought it was probably an advantage. It knew how to make butter, and that was the key.

“I told your granddaddy at church I was going to enter the contest and to keep it a secret, and he swore he would. He and I would talk and sit together at church, but I didn't know – I started thinking maybe he didn't want to settle down yet. He would tell me he wanted to see the world, and I started thinking that maybe the seeing didn't include me.”

T. R. must've thrown more wood on the fire, because a big hiss and pop happened and he started running around saying, “I've got sparklers!” I did want to leave and I could tell April, strong willed as she was, seemed afraid to leave. I didn't want to force her into a life not suited to her.

April cleared her throat and continued. “The day came and my you should've seen all the people there! I went the back way with my friend Penelope, and we walked around the grounds looking at the people setting up their churns. I'd brought mine the day before and hid it in the ditch on the edge of the pasture. Penelope helped me carry it

to the tent, and I signed up for the women's competition. My, but some people had fancy new churns! My heart sank when I saw those fancy Blanchard and UNION churns lined up. My churn didn't have a name anymore – there was a light square on the top where the name plate must've been, and probably it'd come off before I was born. But, anyhow, I set up and got ready and then Penny and I heard a loud noise outside the tent and ran out to see what the matter was.

“Well, it was the first automobile I'd ever seen. People said it was a banker from Fort Smith. A well dressed young man was sitting in back of the automobile, and he got out and I tell you he walked right straight up to Penelope and me!”

That's how she tells it. I don't know what happened, never have.

“He asked us if we'd like a ride later on, and Penelope said, ‘Oh no, I couldn't,’ and I didn't say anything. He smiled at us and then winked at me and said, ‘See y'all later.’ Your grandfather was in the crowd of folks around the automobile, and I think he must've seen us with that young man. To this day he says he didn't.”

Which I did not.

“Did you ride in his car?” asked T. R.

“Let me tell you about the contest, first, bub. They shot a pistol to start and oh such a noise of churning you never did hear. I had a system – at the beginning, I churned down two counts, up two counts, and waited four. I repeated that fifteen times, then I would wait only two counts, and towards the end, depending how hard the paddle was to push, I would change to one count in-between down and up. You had to be sure you were done when you said you were done or you couldn't win. Well, the men were cheering their wives on with me one of the only unmarried girls in the competition. I

noticed a crowd of young men started gathering around me, and I knew I had to win. But I also knew I had to keep my wits about me – I didn't want to say I was done too soon. Your granddaddy was watching me like all the others, and I couldn't tell if he was cheering or not I was concentrating so hard.”

I was watching her alright. But then I started watching the other men. I knew why they were concentrating so hard. I felt a disgust deep inside, and for the first time a fear I might lose her.

“Finally, I felt sure, or as sure as I could. I couldn't believe no one had said anything yet when I yelled out ‘Here!’ The judges ran over to me and checked my churn for butter and sure enough I was right! I was declared the winner! The young men crowded around and congratulated me, and I noticed many of the other women were being bad sports about losing. They stared at me like I was the devil, but at that moment I didn't care. I'd shown them. I'd shown everybody.”

“Did Granddaddy congratulate you?” asked T. R.

“I didn't see him the rest of the day. It hurt my feelings a bit, but there was so much going on I forgot it for awhile.”

Unlike the others, apparently, I had to go home and get to my chores. I remember sitting on the front step, though, and I couldn't move. I felt as if I were sinking into the ground almost. I remember being afraid to stand or take a breath. But it passed and soon I knew what I had to do, or I would regret not doing it for the rest of my life. Who knows, though, where regrets actually fall?

“What did you win?” asked Coe-Ellen.

“They put my name right on the trophy and it was displayed at the general store

for the whole year.”

“Later, Penelope and I were watching the men’s competition, and I thought she was right beside me, but wouldn’t you know there was that young man standing right next to me where I thought Penelope was. He asked me if I would sit in his daddy’s automobile and maybe if I liked it then I could go for a ride. I didn’t know what to say except I guess I nodded and next thing I knew I was sitting in the car proud as you please. Penelope walked right up to the automobile and said, ‘April, come here, I need to talk to you.’

“I got down and walked with her and said, ‘What is it you want? Where were you? I thought you were right next to me and instead there was this young man.’

She whispered, ‘I had to tap the dew off my lily, if you must know.’”

Penelope was not one to sully her language with something like take a piss.

“Grandmother!” exclaimed Coe-Ellen and Anna together.

“I didn’t say it, Penelope did.”

T. R. said, “What did she say?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Coe-Ellen.

“No, now!”

“Later young man. Well, my what a day! I went home and I was afraid my daddy and Aunt Selma would give me the dickens for sneaking around and entering the contest, but they didn’t say a thing. They actually seemed happy about it, and said maybe they could start selling the butter we made now that I was so good at making it.

“Then, soon after dark, I heard a wagon and horses coming up the road. After a bit, I heard your granddaddy yell out, ‘April, April Joy!’” My daddy didn’t seem too

surprised and said, 'Go on, go see what he wants.'"

"Did you get married then?" asked Coe-Ellen.

"Well, I didn't know what to think. He must've stolen the horses from his daddy's barn. His daddy didn't let anybody touch those horses except to put them to a plow. Anyway, I walked up to him and he said, 'April, you know I don't have much, but I think you believe I will make my way in the world, and that I'll be able to take care of you. Would you marry me?' Well, I 'bout dropped my teeth! I had given up on thinking that way about him for quite a while."

I never knew, until I heard her story, why she gave up on me. I always paid her special attention. I would seek her out and talk to her when I could. When she came in second in the essay contest, she cried, and I held her hand and sat with her until she felt better.

"I know it sounds funny now, but I didn't know what to think. The young man in the automobile had opened my eyes a little to what was out there. But I thought for a minute and realized I couldn't imagine being without your granddaddy and I told him yes."

At least we got married for the same reasons. I remember the ride home after I dropped her off far better than any other part of the night. Well, it's settled then. Something in my future was actually decided.

"Did you cry, Grandmother?" asked Coe-Ellen.

"No, children, I didn't cry. I knew it was the right answer, but I didn't know where things would go or how things would happen. He pulled me up onto the wagon and we rode in silence under the stars and after a while we came back and he dropped me

off. I went in and told Daddy and Aunt Selma, and the only thing Daddy said was, 'Ok, then – he's the best of those boys.'"

I felt another spasm in my chest – longer and deeper than before. While it subsided, I thought of when I left the dark supple girl in Somalia. We had trekked through the countryside and had seen horrible things. Eviscerated men rotting black with the buzzing of flies. Distended starving children I was there to try and help – although I could only help the ones born later. But when I had to leave, and she knew I wasn't coming back, that devastated, smooth-skinned girl grabbed me and would not let go. She started wailing and crying loud, loud, and I had to pry her fingers from me and she chased me and fell and I ran back toward her and then we repeated. She threw up and continued sobbing, and I thought am I giving up my chance? Her screaming cries followed me down the muddy road littered with dung and fetid pools of water.

The pain began again and spread throughout my arm and punched through my chest, and I could hardly take a breath. In the midst of it, I could hear the children squabbling.

"T. R. quit it!" snapped Anna, and then I heard a good strong punch.

"Got ya! Your mamma buy you that bra?" he smirked.

April said, "You listen here. Let her alone!"

T. R., trying to diffuse the situation, said, "And then what happened? What about the man with the car? Did he come back? When did Granddaddy get a car?"

"Oh my law! Patience...!"

The girls giggled and said, "You're a donkey!"

The pain was not subsiding. I tried to breath out "April Joy" but it was so quiet

that I guess no one heard. "April," I managed to say, and I rapped my knuckles against the metal side of the camper.

"Oh Ed, what is it?" I heard her push up out of her chair. "I best go see what he wants."

Sam's a Prick

for leaving me in the dark like this, I mean it's not really that dark, there is a light, no wait, a point of light off in the distance to the north, but I'm not sure if it actually is north because I really don't know which way my feet are pointing because I can't quite see that far away, because of the dark and all, but Sam shoulda known better than to leave me alone without recourse to the finer things in life, the things like a kite shimmering in the cloud shadowy sky, a using a makeshift wrench to pry a bolt free from a rusty exhaust header, a smile from a strange girl walking down the hill, or well you know it is hard to say sometimes which way is up, and if I could see I'd really have a better chance before I have to proceed, for proceed I must to find where I have to go to find the next spot, next stage, next nexus, in this dark spot that that prick Sam has, maybe even unwittingly, left me in as I decide the safest thing to do is crawl on my back scuttling with my forearms on the ground, legs pointing ahead as I wiggle my toes so as to get a feel, a scent, as it were, of the air ahead of me but behind my destination which really would soften my view my feeling for Sam if I knew what the destination was and what comforts it might offer a weary but kind hearted traveler who doesn't really know where he's going, but does have the heart, the spunk, so to speak, to keep going, to try to find the end, but I feel a bump under my butt and I smell the almost wood burning smell of fresh cut wood and my toes feel an end in the forward direction and for the first time since I started I look behind, hoping to find memories of a past which would provide solace in this present spot I find myself in, no thanks to Sam that's for sure as the light in the far distant past flickered and then disappeared and I thought holy shit I'm in trouble now because I can't seem to find a direction at this point or any point for that matter and I lie back and contemplate for one

second and hear the fluttering of wings, maybe a butterfly maybe a moth in the
darkness, in the blackness I just can't tell.

Exercise

Cyrill groaned as he leaned down to attach his foot. His lower back had been hurting for months. He felt the muscles stretch and almost seize when with one hand he grasped the end of his right leg above where his ankle had once been and with the other hand attached his prosthetic foot. He pulled the Velcro strips tight and put a new tennis shoe on the foot and tied it tight. He did the same with the left shoe and stood up and looked out the window. It was hot outside. Before the accident, he would have worn shorts, but now he wore nylon sweats to cover his ankles.

The dogs came running: Ginger, his jet black Schipperke, and Skipper, his big Border Collie. Ginger was six years old and looked like a coal-covered fox. She was half the size of Skipper who was still young and frisky.

It had been months since the accident, and the dogs and Cyrill had missed their daily walks. Cyrill had spent weeks lying on the couch watching TV and drinking countless iced teas. On Court TV, he'd been watching a murder trial; and today a star witness, the defendant's mother, was due to testify. It was tempting to stay put. Cyrill wanted to watch – not be watched.

But he'd gained forty pounds in three months. And sometimes he wondered if he'd forgotten how to greet strangers: if he knew how to look at them in the face, evaluate their expressions, and will his features to react in the socially proper way. His mother had come over, cut his hair, and made sure he had enough to eat. He wondered if she had ever imagined that at seventy she'd have to take care of him and try to jostle him into activity. She had encouraged him to leave the house, walk the dogs, something.

While watching cable news earlier in the morning, he had decided to walk the dogs. He would go to the shopping center near his house and back. In the old days, the shopping center would be the starting point for the walk, now it would be the point of return.

He thought of those who roamed the streets and the sidewalks – the folks barely hanging on – folks on the edge. The giveaway? The clothes didn't seem to matter – even nicely dressed, they oozed the odor of someone on the way out, on the way down. Would he be seen as one of them?

For the past few days, he'd practiced around the house and the back yard and found that if he kept up a good pace his walk looked almost normal.

Cyrill turned from the window and took out the leashes that had been unused for months. Skipper noticed immediately and jumped and chased his tail. He barked and bit Ginger on the rump while Cyrill fastened Ginger's collar and attached her leash. Suddenly Skipper stood motionless, knowing he was next, his tail slowly swishing in anticipation as Cyrill fumbled with the collar's buckle.

Cyrill stuffed a few plastic bags in his pocket, and he and the dogs made their way to the door. It was three o'clock in the afternoon on a Tuesday. He dreaded being seen but forced himself to think about things one step at a time. Lock the door, one foot down the first front step, then the next. Turn. Look for cars. Hold the dogs.

Skipper was pulling frantically at the leash – barking and trying to forge ahead to the long un-nosed smells of the great world beyond. Cyrill held the leash tightly and commanded, "Calm down!" He tried yanking the leash but was afraid he'd lose his balance. He was forced into an awkward gait, holding on as Skipper kept trying to run.

“Got your hands full!” His neighbor two doors down was out watering his roses. Cyrill didn’t know his name.

“Yep, poor guy’s excited about getting out.”

“How’re you feeling?”

“I’m OK.” Cyrill didn’t know who knew what in his neighborhood. He hadn’t told anyone much of anything, but he was sure they watched and talked. He’d seen them talking in the street during the past months – he’d part the blinds, look through his window, and fear he was the topic of conversation.

“Enjoy your walk.” The neighbor moved on to water other bushes.

Cyrill waited at the light for the signal to change so he could cross the six-lane street and enter the shopping center. Ginger tried to chase after the passing cars. Cyrill yanked her leash hard after one of her leaps at a motorcycle almost pulled him over. She disliked motorcycles and barked and tried to chase them. The light changed and Cyrill stepped down off the sidewalk, first right foot then left. Skipper pulled, Ginger barked at the cars, and Cyrill tried not to hobble, tried not to appear out of place; but he knew he looked somehow off, somehow skewed to the motorists as he struggled against Skipper and told Ginger to be quiet. Sweat was running down Cyrill’s face, and he was having trouble catching his breath. They finally crossed the street, arrived at the shopping center, and came to the entrance of a restaurant. Several young men and women were outside smoking cigarettes; some looked like employees waiting for the evening rush.

“Oh look, how cute, a little fox dog!” one girl said. She had a butterfly tattoo on her neck and a pierced nose.

“How sweet! Can I pet him?” another girl said as she smashed out her cigarette.

“Of course,” Cyril said. How often had this occurred in the past? He watched the boys look at the girls, then enviously at him.

“Great way to pick up chicks, huh?” one kid said smiling at him as if he were exchanging a dirty joke with a fellow inmate; but in front of the girls it was an aggressive move.

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Look at them, they love it.”

“Yes, they’re nice dogs.”

“I think I need to buy me a couple – might come in real handy.”

“Thank you,” Cyril said to the girls and pulled the dogs away to continue down the sidewalk. He limped a bit as he started, and suddenly he felt the stares of the kids – *something’s wrong with that man.*

The dogs remembered the way and pulled toward the next store. An unusually tall woman stood by the doorway smoking a cigarette. She’d been there months ago: it was as if time hadn’t passed at all. Her deeply tanned leathery skin formed a moiré pattern of wrinkles around her eyes. She smiled and exhaled a plume of smoke. “There’s my doggies. Where have you been?” Ginger rose up and put both paws on her pants. “That’s my doggie, ohhhh sooo good.”

Cyril pulled Ginger away. “Sorry about that – I never taught her not to jump on people.”

“That’s ok, nobody ever taught me that either.”

“Uh, yeah. Well, thanks.” Cyril started to limp away.

“Hey, where’ve you been?”

“Out of town for a while,” he said without looking back.

A Chinese woman approached on the sidewalk, saw the dogs, and scowled. She seemed affronted by the dogs. Ginger tried to sniff her leg as the woman walked by.

Cyrill noticed that his leg already ached. He wanted to turn back, but one look at the dogs convinced him to continue. They were having fun.

The jeweler, a short Mediterranean man, was standing in front of his store. He stepped forward, stopped them, and said, “Hey, where you been?”

“Oh, attending to some business.”

“You want to buy a necklace for your girlfriend?”

“Maybe not today.”

“I have one saved for you.”

Cyrill forged on. In front of the ice-cream store, an old man with a cane was sitting smoking his pipe. He looked up, smiled and said, “Hello pups!” Skipper and Ginger strained toward him, and he petted them vigorously. “Oh, she likes her tushy rubbed!” He looked up at Cyrill. “Been a long time.” Cyrill nodded.

“You both like your tushies rubbed!” The dogs wagged their tails and started panting. “If only I could find a woman that would be this friendly! You know, if you could find a woman like these dogs, you’d have it made.”

“I guess so.”

“Yep, my Red, he liked having his tushy rubbed, and he’d even start slobbering too.”

“How long did you have Red?”

“Sixteen years. Then one day he lifted up to heaven. I saw him rise in the air and

leave me. He looked worried, but I knew he'd be ok. Yep, Red liked his tushy rubbed."

"Up to dog heaven?"

"No, heaven heaven. My heaven. Where I'm going to go. I'll see Red again, and we'll play tennis ball and have a great old time. Hurt yourself?" He motioned towards Cyrill's right leg.

"Oh, a little accident. Couldn't get around very well for a while."

"Those are the worst kind. When you can't move – that's gettin' darn near the end."

"Well, it's nothing like that."

"Talk to me, talk to me, little girl," the old man said to Ginger. She yapped then Skipper stuck his head in the way. "Oh, you're a jealous dog – same as a man. Don't you know you're lucky, living with a woman like this?"

"Thanks, I'm getting a little tired – I think we should be moving on." Cyrill had to pull the dogs away. The coffee shop was next. Outside the coffee-shop doorway, a teenager with spiked hair was tossing a paper airplane. The dogs tried to chase it.

"Hey, that's MY plane," he yelled at the dogs.

"I'm sorry," Cyrill said and pulled them away from the paper plane that had landed near them.

"MY Plane. My plane fly real good." His eyes looked dully at Cyrill.

"Weeeyou, weeeyou!" He thrust the plane into the currents in the outdoor corridor. The plane lifted up and nearly flew on the roof, but then came down. "Weeeyou, weeeyou!"

The dogs barked nervously. Cyrill pushed off the wall to get a start and continued on. After rounding the corner, he decided to rest on one of the benches in front of the bookstore. He tried to regain his breath and stop the flow of sweat running down his face.

“Can I pet your dogs?” A woman had approached him from behind. She had jet-black hair and light fair skin. Cyrill estimated she was about thirty-five.

“Sure, they’re nice.”

“I love dogs, and they love me.” She stroked Ginger from head to tail, then Skipper. Her fingers were smooth with black polish on the nails. “You come here often?”

“Not really.”

“I flew in from LA. I’m visiting my sister.”

“That must be nice.”

“Yep, sort of boring though. I love your dogs. They seem so nice.”

“They are nice.”

“I wish I could feel them. I can’t feel anything, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have no sense of touch. All my nerve endings were damaged by some kind of chemical when I was a baby. I can’t feel a thing. I like it when the dogs respond to my touch – it’s almost as if I can feel them by watching them.”

“Is it like when your foot goes to sleep – does it tingle?”

“No, it’s more like your foot.” She pointed to his prosthetic ankle now showing because his pant leg had slipped up when he sat down. “Nada, nothing.”

“That must be awful. And dangerous.”

“I guess I’m used to it. What happened to your foot?”

“I had an accident.”

“No shit. What happened?”

“A snafu with the paper shredder at work.”

“You’re not a nice man.”

“I am too. I’ve got dogs . . .”

She looked again at his foot. “A nice man would tell me what happened.”

“I got it stuck in the toilet. It wouldn’t quit flushing. To save me, they cut my foot off.”

“Can you walk normal?”

“I try. I try to keep people from finding out.”

“Why? Nobody would know about me unless I told them. I kept it a secret from my first boyfriend though. Boy was he mad when he found out!”

“Why? You can’t help it.”

“I’d been faking it all along. Hurt his ego, I guess.”

Cyrill felt his face flush with embarrassment. “I guess I’d better go.” Cyrill got to his feet, smoothed his pants down to cover his ankles and started to move away.

“I can hardly tell once you get started. Keep practicing.”

By now Cyrill was desperate to get home. One more store to walk by, Safeway, and he’d be at the stoplight. With the dogs leading the way, he walked as smoothly as he could past the plate glass windows of the store. People turned and stared and then spoke to one another. Cyrill tried to ignore them and concentrated on putting one foot smoothly in front of the other. He saw a little boy inside the store do a double take – wondering

what was wrong with that man.

The dogs did not like going back home. As Cyrill walked toward the stoplight, they pulled in every direction. Fascinating smells in the hedges, delectable morsels on the asphalt, and sounds from every direction seemed to catch their attention. Finally he got to the corner. He stood far back from the curb and waited for the light to change. Cyrill heard himself wheezing. A biplane flew overhead pulling a sign for “KaiserICU.com.”

Two motorcycles thundered past, Skipper and Ginger lunged at them, and Cyrill toppled over. His head hit the sidewalk.

He dreamed as he slept. He dreamed of floating chimney height above the rooftops and grabbing television antennas as he wafted by. The crackling noises of the electromagnetic waves reverberated in his ears as if they were originating from a seashell. He heard the squeals of the babies – all the babies in all the houses. The smells came up through the chimneys, awful red smells with sea salt forming and coagulating at his nostrils. He was still floating above the rooftops, but not above the earth. Instead of a horizon, he now only saw houses, more and more houses as if the earth had curled around him. With inverse gravity in effect, he felt himself becoming diaphanous and threadlike, and the breeze flowed through him. “No, no, no,” his see-through self kept saying. There was no up, no down, no way to stop floating above the roofs of the normal houses with normal babies and normal noises inside; but from the doors and windows and chimney tops sour odors poured forth infiltrating the air. Oxygen was sucked out slowly – wrung out by the awful smells, the awful noises.

He woke lying on the sidewalk. He was on a stretcher, and began to notice faces

peering down at him.

“What’s your name?” the paramedic asked.

Cyrill turned his head and saw an ambulance and police cars. “I don’t need an ambulance,” he said.

“We’ll see. That one’s not for you – there was a car accident.”

“My dogs . . .”

“They must’ve gotten away from you and run into the street. This lady braked to avoid them, and she got hit from behind and then from the side.”

The dogs appeared next to Cyrill. Skipper licked his face. Ginger stared intently at him and started panting.

“My God, is the lady OK?”

“A broken left arm.”

Cyrill groaned. “I’m so sorry. I’ll tell her I’m sorry.”

“Lie still – we’re going to take you to the hospital. You’ve got a nasty bump on the head.”

“Can’t I go home now?”

“No, I think a doctor should look at you.”

“I’m not going to the hospital. I’m OK.” Cyrill started propping himself up to a sitting position.

“I can’t let you go, sir.”

“I am going to go home!” Cyrill’s voice was high – almost a scream. The bystanders on the sidewalk turned their attention from the ambulance to Cyrill. Skipper started barking at the paramedic.

A policeman came to them. "Is there a problem?"

"Don't touch me – I'm OK, and I'm going home right now!"

Suddenly there was a screech of tires followed by a crunch of metal. The policeman and the paramedic ran to see what had happened. A cloud flew past the sun making a sweeping shadow across the earth – a soothing moment of darkness, and then it was gone.

Cyrill crawled forward, pulled his good leg under him, got to his feet, and noticed his pants were bunched up around his knees. His prosthetic was glistening black in the afternoon light in front of the long line of motorists waiting at the closed intersection. He limped across the street with Ginger and Skipper barking and cavorting – showing off for the gathering crowd on the sidewalk and the faces behind the glittering windshields of the cars lining the way.

Timeless

Sam continued, "I hadn't been out all day and Rex here, my girlfriend Sarah's dog, was starting to get antsy so he and I decided it was time for a walk. I found his leash, but he doesn't like to wear it – well, actually Sarah doesn't seem to want him to wear it, but we take it along in case we might need it." Sam looked carefully at his audience of two – Mormon missionaries in white shirts and black pants standing in the doorway. "Sarah and I recently moved here from Arkansas. Time to move to a nice city we thought, so by God we up and did it." The Mormons had seemed interested in whatever Sam had to say, so he'd thought he would tell them about his day.

It was overcast and cold out on O'Farrell Street in the Tenderloin of San Francisco and this had been the Mormons' fourth apartment of the afternoon. Sam had answered with a welcoming "Hi! How are ya!" when he opened the door. They listened to Sam while soaking up the heat wafting from the radiator onto their attentive Mormon faces.

Sam called, "Rex, Rex come here!" The big German Shepherd came to his side and waited expectantly. Drops of saliva dripped to the carpet as he looked from one missionary to the other. Then he looked up at Sam. Taking his cue, Sam said, "Rex here isn't my dog, but seems like I wind up taking care him a lot. You know how many times a German Shepherd needs to take a walk in the city?"

Missionary Number One shifted to his back foot and said, "A lot, I bet."

"Damn right a lot. Rex needed to piss right away and I let him do it. I tried to make sure nobody was sleeping on the sidewalk downstream if you get my drift. Anyway, we'd walked up to the next block when this woman started walking with us.

She told me about the gospel. I'm Jewish so I wasn't really interested."

"But you listened, didn't you?" Missionary Number One opened his eyes double wide at the end of his question indicating greater than usual interest.

"I sure did. Rex did too. Didn't you boy?" Sam reached down and scratched him behind the ears. "She was holding a Burger King hamburger or maybe it was a cheeseburger, anyway, it was one of the small ones, and waved it around while she walked and talked."

Missionary Number Two finally piped up and said, "I'll bet Rex was interested in that burger."

"You're ahead of me already. Sure enough, we got to the end of the block and Rex slowly craned his neck up and took the burger right out of her hand. After he took it, all gentle-like, mind you, it was gone in two shakes of his head."

"What'd she do?" Number Two asked.

"She started screaming bloody murder. It's busy on that street. Everybody looked at us. She was screaming like somebody had stabbed her."

"What was she saying?" Number One leaned forward now, his faced crinkling and uncrinkling expectantly.

"Screaming at the top of her lungs, 'help me, heeeelllp me! The dog, the awful dog!' I tried to apologize to her. I tried but she couldn't hear me through her own voice. Everybody was looking at us worried or angry or – well, a few looked down walking by not wanting to see. I didn't know what to do."

"You could've bought her another hamburger," Number One said and wondered if it had been from McDonald's or Burger King.

“It didn’t even cross my mind. I was in such a panic. About her and about the crowd of people watching.” Sam reached both his hands down to scratch both of Rex’s ears at once. “But you know, what happened was sort of strange. After a minute, maybe less, although it seemed like hours to me, people started ignoring her. Maybe they thought Rex reminded her of the hellhound that ate her grandchild or something. Nobody did anything. So Rex and I slowly walked away and left her crying on the corner.”

“Then you could’ve bought her a burger.”

“I suppose, but by then I’d had enough excitement for one day. I thank you for your visit and wish you luck in your efforts.” Sam started to move back into his apartment and close the door. Number One didn’t move at first, but Rex stood up, suddenly alarmed. Number One and Number Two said thank you and left.

Sarah came in shortly after. Sam was drowsing on the bed with Rex nearby on the floor looking out the window of the second story apartment at the cold gray sky peeking above the dark red bricks of the apartment building next door.

“When did you get back?” Sam propped his head on his hand.

“Just now.”

“Thought about what I said?” Sam said sleepily.

Sarah heard the drowsiness in his voice but wasn’t taken in. She knew he was wide-awake. Awake as a gator in a swamp with eyes closed next to a drinking sheep. In fact she was thirsty. She went to the refrigerator and drank from a plastic jug of water.

“Baaaa,” she said quietly.

“What’d you say?”

“Burped.”

“Oh.”

Sarah edged her way to the window and stood looking out. Rex put his muzzle behind her knee and pushed. She crouched down and petted his nose and ears and concentrated her attention solely on him. “Hi Rex, did you miss me? Have you been a good dog today? I bet you have! I bet you have!”

Rex’s tail started wagging. Sarah mouthed the letters “w” “a” “l” “k” to Sam.

“I took him a little while ago.” Sam sat up. “We can go again in a little bit. We should talk first.”

She looked back at Rex, “Does Rex want a WALK!” Rex jumped up and started whining. “Look at him. He’s impossible. I’ll take him out for a few minutes.” She turned toward the door.

“He can wait.”

“What do you want?” she half yelled.

“To talk.”

“What do you want me to say?” Rex was jumping at her waist. “Let’s get it over with. You tell me what it is you want to hear, and I’ll say it. Will that make you happy?”

“Don’t give me that shit. You need to take this seriously.”

“Well, I don’t. There. I talked. How’d it suit ya?”

Sam stood up. “Not at all.” He moved to the window. Rex ran over and pawed at his thighs and whined. Sam pushed him away.

Sarah scowled and said, “You leave him alone. He wants his walk. WALK. Walk. Walkwalkwalk!” Rex started barking.

“I want commitment to this thing we’re doing here. I want to hear you say it – I need to know we’re in this together. Such as it is.” Sam waved his hand around indicating the small apartment.

“I am committed to this thing we’re doing together,” she said in a monotone voice. “Now let me go WALK Rex!”

“Don’t you remember saying this is what you wanted?”

“If you say so.” She grabbed Rex’s collar, opened the door, and went outside.

Sam picked up the TV remote and threw it onto the bed. He looked out the window. He thought of the woman wailing and being ignored. He wanted to find her. Console her. Buy her another burger and protect her while she ate it. What kind of person would hurt the helpless? Helplessly, he paced around the apartment. He wondered how close he was to being on the street begging for attention from strangers.

Sarah had done these things before. She had always come around in the end. She would cool down on the walk. She’d be back sulking, but eventually things would be OK again. He wondered how he could be so afraid of her.

He imagined himself on O’Farrell Street in a white shirt and black pants yelling about grievous injuries and one by one previous girlfriends would walk by – nodding to each other but not looking at him. They had their lives to get on with. After they walked by, he’d move to another corner and start again.

He couldn’t help tapping both feet on the floor while he visualized Sarah and Rex

walking through the city. They must be on the way back by now. It would be OK. It had to be.

Sarah lay in bed unsleeping. It was unusual for her. Arms up around her head holding in her brains. Sam sleeping finally. He slept best when it was time to get up. How could he know what he was asking for? And how unfair it was.

Time was, once, under the heavy oaks in the Arkansas hills years ago, once time was. She tried to remember what, when? Mommy dragged screaming from the bedroom, "I won't go! I won't go!" Ten years old watching from the corner of the living room. Gazing down the dark rough hardwood hallway at Daddy dragging Mommy down the hallway. Was it like that?

Or was it Mommy sitting silently in a wheelchair, frowning, but head erect as the gray rubber wheels squished over the rough floor? Bumping twice up onto the livingroom carpet over the gold metal strip holding the carpet down on the way to the front door. Daddy saying, "Don't worry, Mommy will be OK."

Sarah remembered mouthing, but unable to speak, "When will she be back?"

Or was it unspeakable relief? The unrelenting criticism about her face which "was homely, but we'll do what we can with it." Her ears which were too big for her face. And she wouldn't ever learn! "How did the Lord visit me with such a child?"

Daddy had a party afterwards. "Mommy is gone! We're home free now!" Smoking a cigar in the house! Right on the couch! Then he left to go to work.

Time once was, for Sarah, but it was time she couldn't remember. She could push as often as she wanted on her temples, rub her forehead, curl up into a ball, but there was

time somewhere lost. After Sarah grew up, she hoped she would remember.

Mommy returned three years after they took her – all better. But Sarah moved away then ‘cause Mommy wasn’t better, just back.

The heavy oaks in the Arkansas hills held their leaves proudly along the sides of the mountains. Sarah would sit under the trees looking out among the other trees and try and remember how Mommy had left. Taken or of her own free will? There was no one to ask. Only herself. She would look at the sky and clouds and trees and the sky again and press her eyes tightly shut. Green tree like shapes would form and she’d try to reshape them into her mother’s face. And sometimes it would form and it would be speaking to her, but she couldn’t hear.

How to tell him? There’s no fixing it. There’s no nothing. Nothing left to do. She knew she had only so much, so little, to give or share. She dared not lose time with further departure or tragedy.

He rolled over and nuzzled her elbow. She peeked through the cracks of her fingers pressed against her eyes. He wanted so much. It was time to go.

A Hand In The Bird

Since I was back home anyway, I figured what the heck and decided to go to the funeral after all. It was damn unfortunate he died so near Christmas, but I guess it wasn't much of his choice. Billy and I had grown up together, played together, and worse still had the same birthday and shared birthday parties as kids. We'd lost touch, but as long as I was visiting home it seemed only right to go. I crept in the back of the church a little late and listened while his friends and acquaintances spoke about his kindness and generosity. He was kind and generous I thought while I looked at the crowd in the small country church set well back from the two-lane highway that snaked through the backwoods in the hills of Arkansas. Billy'd died of cancer a few months after our fortieth birthday, and I kept thinking now, well, this extra time is just gravy for me. At the end of the service they played a taped song of some choir singing a hymn and then a buzz happened and on came Alanis Morissette singing "You Oughta Know" wailing out "do you think of me every time you fuck her?" Talk about a buzz in the church! For every birth there is a death.

I was driving my mom's '88 Olds – a huge honkin car with many orifices permanently open – gas cover flappin' in the wind, trunk key cover saluting up in the air and the whistle of fresh air in through the unclosable sunroof. I loved that car. Parallel park with one puny pinky, but stomp on the gas while going up hill and accelerate like a rocket. I thought about Billy planning his own funeral – what a drag that must be. Never knew him to be an Alanis Morissette fan, though. He liked country music back when I knew him.

I live in California now and sometimes I mean it drives me crazy. Everybody is

trying to tell everyone else what to do and how to behave. I wanna say fuck it sometimes to all the self-righteous little girls pooh poohing the wonders of driving a kickass big American car. The BMWs, Mercedes, and Lexus's want to make me puke. All I need is something nice, does what I ask, gives me some pleasure, is unpretentious, and doesn't make a point of saying look how much money I have. That seems to go for about everything in my life, actually. I've 'bout given up on those goddamn California career women – which commandment said to these girls, maybe I was out of the room at bible school that time, thou shalt divorce emotion and feeling from sex so'st thoust can make money to purchase the independence that will let thoust fuck with impunity? Or maybe it was taught in home-ec, but none of the boys would take it in Junior High, me included. I'd been entertaining a fantasy of pretending to be an Indian male, like many of the engineers I know, who gets to fly home, pick out a wife from a grouping and fly back to the U. S. of A. with wife in hand, red dot on forehead. Maybe I'd have to find one in Arkansas and bring her back.

But I digress. I was busy mourning the loss of my identically aged friend Billy. He taught me something years ago without realizing it. He'd never done well in school and knew for years he'd never go to college, but he worked hard and helped his wife get through school and had the dignity hard work can give a person. I admired it in others. Any dignity I was going to achieve would come through other avenues if my past working record could be used as a guide to my future. If I died in the car, in the next instant, what good could anyone say at my as yet unplanned funeral? A service of long awkward pauses extolling the blackness of my hair, the fleshiness of my skin, and the triangular arrangement in the positioning of my nose and eyes?

Without a whimper the trusty Olds muscled past a truck with the tailgate down and a dog tied to the spare tire. I was planning to meet my friend Susan at the park for a walk. Before I moved to California, I worked for her for years and many times would sleep on the couch in her office between 8:00 AM and 9:15 while she quietly typed away. It was a soothing thing to do, and she didn't seem to mind. Sorta womblike actually. So we'd stayed in touch after all these years and now it was time for a walk in the park. She was a closet smoker like me, and that was our sinful pleasure together – sex was not in the cards, but sneaking a smoke in the middle of the day out in public together had a certain excitement, a bit of a substitute. Even though it was December 23rd, it was warm without a cloud in the sky. The sun shining through the sunroof formed a bright line on my shirt. I had to wonder, because I felt the excitement of seeing Susan again, why and why again do ecstasy and joy seem so fleeting in life, but suffering and pain so constant? What are the percentages of joy to suffering as little packets of each arrive like photons from the sun bombarding us daily, minutely?

Billy's death struck the fear of god in me because I knew he had lived a healthy relatively unvicelike life and yet was struck down. I guess planning your own funeral is something each of us should do – I mean you know it's gonna happen, might as well do it, get your say in. I suppose people don't because maybe they don't trust their own families to follow the instructions properly. I mean if I instructed there should be an open casket funeral with me dressed in a fuchsia party dress with black platforms and a beanie on my head (make sure the propeller is turning at all times), I don't know if good ol' mom would come through. I resolved to make a New Year's resolution: plan funeral. I mean it's sorta like buying a twenty-four pack of toilet paper – you know you're going

to use it so why not? Hell, if I'd known Billy was going to die sufficiently in advance maybe we coulda had a double funeral the same way we used to have birthday parties. The pallbearers could line up on opposite sides of the church and play red-rover red-rover and take their best shot. Problem is I did know Billy was dying for a year. I never tried to talk to him or write him or anything figuring it would seem crass to be out of touch for fifteen years and all the sudden show up when the chips were down.

I arrived at the park and Susan was waiting on a bench facing the sun which was making her long blond hair sparkle. As we walked around the perimeter of the park, she told me about how her kids were doing and her job and her health. She didn't mention hubby, and I didn't ask. It seemed hard to talk about the things we had been e-mailing each other for years – loves and lives lost.

“Calm down,” she said. “Let things happen, let them come to you.”

“I've been trying. I simply don't think it'll ever happen out there, but to come back here would feel like being a whipped whimpering dog, tail between my legs.”

“Well, that's where I keep mine.”

I let that go. “We all have our tails to bear.”

She let that go.

“Why don't you sit back and enjoy being with Jan #2 for a while? Admittedly she sounds a bit unbearable, but she seems willing to do certain things to give a body pleasure.” Jan #2 was some stuck-up pretentious slutty career woman I was seeing in California.

“I'll try.” I didn't feel like talking about Jan #2 right then. We rounded the upper corner of the park and stomped down the steep hill together. In high school, I'd run

around this park for tennis team practice many interminable laps. I hated it then, but now the memory gave me a jolt of pleasure as I realized this very sidewalk, the concrete below, had been touched by my very feet twenty-five years ago.

“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” I let that go too. I countered with one I figured she didn’t know.

“If there’s grass on the field, play ball!”

“What does that mean?” Ah hah! I had her now. Only problem was I was too embarrassed to explain it to her in person.

“I’ll e-mail it when I get back to California.” She seemed agreeable, maybe because it meant an e-mail would be coming soon. We arrived at our starting point and sat on the bench and I lit up and gave her a light. I realized I’d never done it before, it was a tiny gesture of intimacy, something fractionally new in our long, long primarily e-mail friendship. I realized I enjoyed it. We smoked and talked some more in the bright sun with a bit of a cool breeze whipping the smoke away from us. It felt damn good to be sitting smoking with a smart pretty female with shining hair with no tension I could detect between us, and I didn’t want it to end but I knew it had to. She had to go cart her kids around and finish getting ready for Christmas, and I started to wonder if every time I saw her, only once or twice a year for a few hours, if she always was the one who brought the visit to an end. I wondered if she realized it. She got up to leave and we hugged, but my sunglasses, which were hanging around my neck, got in the way so I reached in-between us to pull them out and realized it was an innocent enough move, but the movement still felt risky – my hand was too close in some never to be discussed way. But what the hell you only live once. Right?

“E-mail me. Let me know the scoop,” she said as she climbed in her Jeep.

“And take things easy, don’t be so judgmental. I’ll bet you can be quite the anal stickler if you get a bug up your ass.”

“It’s a fair cop. I’ll be a model of grace and consistency. And I’ll spray my rear with Raid.”

“You do that.” She shut the door and rolled down the window and said, “Write me!”

I wasn’t ready to leave. I wanted to sneak one more cigarette while I walked through the park. I was starting to wheeze but thought gotta live for the day, and California-style all I asked of the world was ¿comprende? I could feel the mood of the day start to shift towards nostalgia. The park hadn’t substantially changed since I’d been born. Billy and I used to have contests to see who could fly farthest out of the swings marking our landing points with lines in the sand. The creek ran through the center of the park from the east end, under the public swimming pool, then past the tennis courts, down through the ravine, and out of the park under the street on towards the railroad tracks hidden in the woods beyond. At six, seven, eight, and maybe even older, I’d explored every foot of that creek, following it to the railroad tracks. One Christmas, I spent hours at a quiet pool in the creek driving my Tonka jeep with attached boat and boat trailer to the shore. I’d carefully back the trailer to the boat landing I’d grated with a rock and lined on the sides with pebbles and down into the water went the trailer until the boat floated up. There could not have been a more accurate depiction of the act of floating your boat for a six year old. Anal stickler indeed!

During Christmas vacation in the midst of the sun, it’s very hard to think about

work. But it buys me food, a place to live, some measure of respectability, so I suppose it should be mentioned somewhere – I measure magnetic disks for a living. I test different compounds and heads and measure all the day long. The excitement is hardly containable at times, but whenever I feel a big shout of joy about to erupt from the depth of my being, I quickly cover my mouth and yawn instead. I've been fooling people for years.

They had built a new bridge across the creek in the middle of the park. I crossed it and met a child toddling with her mother right behind. Her mother couldn't have been more than eighteen. I felt an almost physical pang of pain for her and for her beautiful little girl. So much more pain to go for them both. Who could or would protect them? One of the few things my advanced age has taught me is it is impossible to protect the ones you love from pain. But so far it's the only thing I seem to know how to do. But why do I bother?

I walked down a steep path to the water and knelt and watched the water flowing over the pebbles and rocks alternately magnifying them and then distorting them in a crystal clear way. I was at a miniature rapids between two pools and studied the leaves – brown, still a few with a tinge of red – and twigs approach the water, tumble over the rocks, get caught up in the chaos, and get ejected into the lower pool. How often would the leaves approach? How long did it take to traverse the rapid? When would they be ejected? These kinds of questions sometimes drive me nuts. I mean is symbolism in and of itself just some kind of pretentious game? I hate pretension I tell my coworkers and friends, but I can't seem to see anything for what it is. Everything must represent something else. These representations are the connections between things I,

superstitiously maybe, way, way down inside, feel exist. Some folks get warped by reading pornography at too young an age. For me, I think it was reading Science and the Modern World by A. N. Whitehead. His metaphysics created an eerie world of objects with spheres of influence, depicted like lines, affecting other objects. It was all relative. So anyway, after that pretentious digression, I was watching the leaves approaching the rapids. For some reason, the leaves were lined up like soldiers. Each leaf floated independently of the preceding leaf and the following one. They weren't even close to each other. If the rapids over the rocks was a life, my life let's say, and each leaf contained happiness or sorrow, how often would each one arrive? If the water is time and the flowing of time is the connecting force between seemingly unrelated events, then doesn't it mean that all events in our lives are connected? I decided twigs would be happiness and leaves would be pain. Wouldn't it be swell, just neat-o-frito, if the arrival rate of the twigs compared to the leaves was one to three? If it were, it would mean the distribution of events in our lives can be described mathematically, fairly simply, bell curve and all that. But at my age, trailing a finger in the cold water staring at the debris floating by for too long would look suspicious. Recapturing the past for too long doesn't serve the needs of the nation and the economy. I'm just a worker bee. Here to sacrifice for the good of all.

I left the creek and went to the car. I drove to Seven-Eleven to get a Dr. Pepper because all that thinking had dried me out. I believe we are bombarded every moment by little bursts of sorrow and joy. All I want is predictability. Maybe that's the key – maybe comfort lies in sameness. Surely I would be most comfortable in a big room with walls ceiling and floor the same color. Where meals would arrive precisely on time pushed

through a little flap in the door to the room. Where the air would eventually become the same color as the off white of the walls. And the room would have padding on the ceiling, floors, and walls so I could lean in perfect repose while I was pretending to be a stiff six foot two by four, or rock myself to sleep on the floor. Yep, predictability – the spice of life. The Savory of sentience. The Cumin of conception. Such a game could amuse me for hours while staring ahead in my quiet room.

After I parked the car, I looked over and a chunky young woman was getting out of another big American car next to me, and when exited she exposed in the passenger seat a girl, maybe eighteen, nineteen or so, smoking a cigarette with one bare foot hiked up on the dash. She had long brown hair, and I imagined the conversation which had just occurred: “You comin’ in?” “Nope, I’m just gonna suck this butt in the car.” I found her highly erotic. I was in love. Oh, maybe it was puppy love, or maybe some might call it infatuation, but I knew it was love. I felt guilt – you weren’t supposed to like people who smoke, you aren’t supposed to want girls so young, oh she’s just a trophy wife, she’ll leave you with two brats and run off with a cable company guy more her age and you’ll wind up supporting her the rest of her life while she fucks a guy who climbs poles for a living. Jan #2 would go ape-shit. “She smokes? How disgusting. I’m not sure I want to be around somebody who wants to be around somebody like her.” Yes, it would be lovely. I looked over at the girl again and now her face was half turned facing out the window, and I could see her small ears and the downy hair at the nape of her neck. I felt helpless for a second knowing these moments pass and sometimes are forgotten forever, and I didn’t want this one to disappear. But I went in to the store and bought my drink, and when I came out she was gone. My little Lolita had disappeared into the sunlit mist

of Arkansas.

There was a party at five o'clock given by people I used to work with. I wondered about starting the day with a funeral and ending it with a party, but what could I do? Take things as they come. Don't be such an anal stickler. Poor Billy, he had disappeared into the earth of Arkansas. And who lusted after him? His wife? I didn't know – I'd never met her. Maybe the atmosphere the sun the clouds, maybe they lust after human lives – maybe they attempt to hold on as long as possible to every life, plant or animal, as a mother would hold onto and protect her children.

The party was going strong when I arrived. Apparently tasting fine tequilas was the theme of the party, and the folks were already half smashed. The party was being given by Jeff, my old manager, and he was laughing and telling jokes. I hadn't seen him in years and it felt good, nostalgic even, to see him again.

"Gonna smoke this sucker overnight!" he boomed at me when he saw me. He was at the kitchen counter with a glass of what looked like whiskey on ice in one hand and breadcrumb stuffing in the other. In front of him lay a huge turkey in a pan. He jammed some stuffing in the cavity and said, "A hand in the bird is better than two in the bush!"

"Oh hush! You're embarrassing me," a woman said, arriving just in time to see him wiggle his fingers suggestively.

"This is my lovely wife." She turned and smiled at me, and I smiled back. "She keeps me in line. Let me fill up your glass. You want a beer for your other hand?"

"Sure, idle hands are the devil's delight."

The front door opened and more people arrived. The director of where I used to

work and his wife came in. I 'd barely known him, and I wasn't sure if he'd remember me, but I walked over to say hi and then there she was. Trailing in behind him was the Seven-Eleven girl. My angel had arrived dolled up now in black tights and platform boots and a white sweater so tight I could see all I needed. Suddenly I didn't want to say hi to the director anymore, but it seemed to be the only way to get introduced to my little Lolita.

“This is my daughter, Jan.” I heard a voice say although I couldn't tell if it was the director or his wife. Jan #3! What a lovely name!

“Hi, didn't I see you at Seven-Eleven today?” I asked as I tried to conceal my wondering eyes looking for the light hair on the nape of her neck. I had some success. The kitchen light lit the light fuzz the way the sun used to highlight the very same hair. Very same? I used to stare at the very same golden tipped highlights, soft and delicate, on the neck of my first girlfriend while we lay together in the woods, resting, her almost sleeping, me watching quietly.

“Uh, yeah.” I could see the panic in her eyes – her parents weren't supposed to know about the smoking, barefoot, confident girl in the car. I winked at her.

I tried to play it cool and walked back in the kitchen, but I noticed she was right behind me.

“Can I have some of your drink? My parents would have a cow if they saw me with a drink. Ever since goin' through all the AA shit a few months ago.”

“Sure.” I filled my glass up with the finest tequila and gave it to her while hiding her with my body from the rest of the party. She sucked down a third of the glass, shivered, and asked, “You got a cigarette?” I did. Seems my angel had a few rough

edges. But I like variety – change is the spice of life – comfortable living will make you grow old before your time. We went outside to smoke. Watching her handle it made me feel like a teenager again. We were in the back yard up against the side of the house and the light from the kitchen window spilled out onto the whitish brown grass in the yard, and we could hear Jeff's voice booming but couldn't quite make out what he was saying. On the back porch, the smoker coals were glowing orange ready for the turkey.

“You know I get the feeling you sorta like me,” she said. “I knew you were staring at me today in the parking lot.”

“I wondered if you knew.” I knew she knew. Why isn't the past tense of knew knewed?

“You seem like a nice guy – I really like your hair.” She emphasized “your.” I realized then she liked me for me and it felt good.

“Thanks.” I ruffled my hair suavely. I thanked god I'd washed it that morning.

“It's getting a little cold out here – could you put your arm around me?”

I did, and it seemed like I could feel every muscle and sinew in her body as I gingerly slid my hand across her back. Jan #3 was perfect. I felt like I'd returned home, and I guess in a way I had. Maybe she'd run away with me back to California. We could have fun and romp in bed through the night and go to the beach and run along the waves and laugh at the poor unhappy slobs comprising the rest of humanity.

“What kind of sex do you like?” my angel purred.

“Oh, almost every kind.” I tried to be cool, but I feared my surprise at the question had been given away by the sudden, miniscule flinch of my right bicep.

“How 'bout anal?” My angel seemed to be presenting me with several

unanticipated angles.

“Sure why not? If the girl likes it, I’m all for it,” I said. Isometrically-speaking, this girl was doing wonders for my arm-strength.

“I like it.” I hugged her and kissed her under the ear right on the downy fur, and I could hear her breath rush in and I felt her heart beat faster.

“I hope we can give it a try – give us something to write home about.” I didn’t know how the mechanics of this would work, but I felt unnaturally trusting. I figured if she wanted these things to happen they would. Unfortunately, deep inside, somewhere in my stomach, was a vague gnawing of fear – a slight jab that made me think of the doomsday prophets swinging lanterns in the wild and stormy nights crying, “The end is near.” Time was flowing bringing with it probabilistic arrivals and departures. Jan #3 looked up and kissed me passionately, deep, hard, and I returned every thrust and parry and felt myriad varieties of arousal well up from deep below, and I thought she’s just perfect and that’s what an old anal stickler like me requires, and I wanted to say to her you’re beautiful, but instead, like the willy-nilly passing of the wind, all that came out was “poor Billy.”

Fable #4

Once upon a time long long ago was a lamb named Fred who lived in the green pastures on the edge of town. As he grew older, he became curious about the world around him – more than his parents seemed to be.

“Son, soon you’ll experience wonderful things beyond your imagination,” his father told young Fred when he asked what the future held.

One day, Fred wandered to a far part of the pasture and discovered a drive-in theater next to the pasture. From his side of the fence, Fred could comfortably watch the movies as they played. One special night he watched “The Karate Kid” and thought he’d found his life’s calling: Become a Karate Master.

Fred spent his time between showings of the movie practicing karate in the pasture and taking on the other young lambs and defeating them. He became quite skilled and participated in several competitions in town and won them. This gave Fred great confidence and assurance not only in his pasture, but also out in the world.

One afternoon, Fred was wandering around the pasture near the woods when he came upon two wolves, one large, one small, who were hunting. The large wolf had huge fangs and crouched low to attack. Fred only had a moment to notice the brown bloody stains on the wolf’s bared teeth before the wolf sprang. Without thinking, Fred smartly sidestepped the lunge and delivered a huge mortal lamb-chop to the neck of the doomed wolf. The wolf fell whimpering to the ground with blood gushing from his mouth. “Daddy!” the small wolf yelped and ran to the side of the quivering wolf on the ground.

“Scram, if you know what’s good for you,” Fred said in as threatening a voice as he could muster.

The small wolf yelled, "I'll tell, I'll tell the pack what you did!" Then he ran into the woods. Fred realized he had to leave the pasture and make his way out in the world. He put on the downed wolf's hat and sunglasses and overcoat. Not a bad disguise, he thought to himself, not bad at all.

He went to Hollywood and lived on Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards. He did karate kicks for pennies and dimes from the tourists on the street. One night, he went in the Whisky A Go-Go on blues night and was entranced and given a new direction in life – his calling was now the blues guitar.

He made friends with the local bluesmen, and they gave him an electric guitar and taught him the fundamentals. Fred found that the electric blues flowed naturally from his soul to his hooves and then out to the world. He played in blues bars around LA. His reputation grew: "Fred is THE Bluesmaster! His chops are sweet, yet make you want to cry with sadness and ecstasy," one reviewer wrote in Blue Note. Finally, after many, many years, still wearing the hat, overcoat, and sunglasses of the long ago vanquished wolf, he headlined triumphantly at the Whiskey A Go-Go.

That very night, a pack of wolves, down on their luck, hungry and near broke, decided that listening to the blues might eventually lighten their hearts. Fred started playing; he sat on a three-legged stool and played while a cigarette burned in his mouth. He'd stuck a feather in his hat and his horns poked through holes in the thin leather of the brim. He closed his eyes while he played, but the only thing the audience could see were the reflections of the stage lights in his sunglasses. After the first song was over and the applause died down a thunderous yell came from the largest wolf of the pack: "you killed

my father!” And with a fearsome growl, the wolf jumped on stage and sprang for Fred’s neck. Just as in the old days, Fred tried to sidestep the attack, but the years of gin and cigarettes had dulled his reflexes and the wolf easily found Fred’s neck with his sharp fangs and powerful jaws.

That night was a festive one for the pack back at their apartment. Finally they’d have a decent meal. They decided to have ribs first. They started eating Fred’s ribs, and then stared sullenly at each other. “My ribs taste like fruity celery sticks swabbed through a full ashtray!” exclaimed one young wolf.

“Mine too!” cried out another. Soon there was a chorus of complaints.

“Ok, Ok, I’ll see what I can do for tomorrow,” said the den mother. She had an idea: she’d make haggis and hope the seasonings would cover up Fred’s foul taste. The next night she ran Fred’s heart, liver, and lungs through the food processor and stuffed them into his stomach with onions, oatmeal, suet, and seasonings. She boiled his stomach and proudly served it to the pack. The leader reached over and sliced it open and the insides spilled onto the serving plate. The pack jumped in at once and began to eat but spit the insides out – Fred was still inedible. The wolves stared at each other with hungry sad eyes and wondered how they’d make it to the next day.

Moral: A sheep in wolf’s clothing is not all he’s chopped up to be.

Pleasure Is Finite

Fear of Sharks

Mitch kept a newspaper clipping from the Pacific Beach *Beach & Bay Press* tacked to the front of his cubicle. The title of the article was “Shark Phobia Unjustified Despite Attacks.” He’d read the article on the last day of a surf trip in San Diego – he was glad it was the last day – and carried it back to San Jose to display proudly at work.

A visitor to his cube would see his name, Mitchell Porcospino, first, then the shark headline; and then, looking in, he would be met face to face with a poster of a growling dog: “Grrrrrrrrrr!!” Mitch would turn slowly to face the visitor, try to smooth one side of his short frizzy hair and say: “Is there something you need?”

Mitch felt he was at a preconceptive moment in his life. He was thirty-seven. He knew he wanted children, but he wasn’t married, didn’t have a girlfriend, and his wife had two died years earlier. Sometimes, years ago, he’d whistled at work, enjoyed writing computer programs, and felt satisfaction when he was finished and the program worked and people, managers, and customers appreciated what he had done. Those days had long gone; now he worked because he didn’t know what else to do.

How to meet somebody, how to get past this preconceptive stage? He dwelled on the issue as he drove to work. His hair was starting to fall out, but he had some; he weighed too much, “a few extra pounds,” in the parlance of the Internet, but wasn’t noticeably heavy; he was starting to think the real problem, the core of it all, was that he didn’t smile enough. “Smile” he said to himself while driving on the freeway. He practiced a smile as he slowly passed a woman in a Cadillac. She had white hair and he noticed she was wearing a satin green blouse. He turned his head and smiled as he went

by. She didn't smile back. Mitch was undaunted by the experiment and tried to keep smiling while he shaved with his portable electric razor. His hair was drying from his morning shower and every now and then he brushed it down to try to keep it from bristling up like it did every day. Although it was cold outside, he had both windows down so his hair would dry before he walked in to work.

He thought, as he did every day, somewhere on the way to work, of his wife, Sarah. He thought fondly of their many preconceptions, no conceptions, but many attempts. During their marriage he'd insisted she use the pill, and she had, and then she'd died of uterine cancer at thirty-five. But that was years ago, he thought as he gazed into the rear-view mirror to see if he'd missed the spot on his neck he missed every morning and noticed that instead of a smile he saw the plain straight tight lips of a man who'd put a "Grrrrrrrrrr!!" poster of a vicious dog in his cube to greet people should they decide to visit. "Grrrrrrrrrr!!" he remembered growling to Sarah in bed but said susurratively near the ear it would come out more like "Prrrrrrrrr . . ." And she'd giggle.

He signaled and changed to the exit lane, which quickly became crowded with cars. A Jaguar pulled next to Mitch, on his left, and started signaling to merge although there was no room. "You shoulda thought of that half a mile ago, buddy," Mitch thought as he sped up to within a few feet of the car in front of him. But then he remembered and turned his head to the frustrated Jaguar and smiled – a grin from ear to ear. The grin distorted his deeply dimpled chin.

"I love pretending," Mitch quietly sang to himself; and then, as he did every day when he pulled into a parking space and looked at the clock in the car, sang, "something sticky on the shag rug; look at the time!"

“What will this day bring?” he said to himself sliding his badge through the security device that kept the door locked. It unlocked and Mitch went in to work. At his desk up on the fifth floor, he looked at his e-mail. He had a flood of bug reports – the testing group had toiled over the weekend and had sent him what seemed like hundreds of bugs to work on. He saw the long list of e-mail before he sat down, so he said not in a whisper, “sheeit, fuck that!” He turned to his other computer to look at the Web and tried to get ready to work.

“Don’t worry about those bugs – I told them to send them all to you and we’ll decide who fixes what,” Harley said as he peered in at Mitch. Harley was Mitch’s manager and was currently in a massive state: “three fifties of fosterlings could engage in handball upon his backside” Mitch was fond of saying to himself when he thought of Harley’s bulk. But every now and then Harley would lose the weight before gaining all over again.

“That’s something I’m glad to hear!” Mitch turned and stared at Harley. Mitch’s head was framed by the vicious dog poster on one side and “The Dilbert Zone” web site on the other. “When do you want to decide who does what?”

“Oh any time. Today?”

“How ‘bout this afternoon – after lunch.”

“Ok.” Harley turned and as he went Mitch twirled his chair back to the Web and looked up the David Letterman home page.

“Time the avenger” he whispered under his breath as he looked at the Yahoo! stock quote page. His company’s stock was down again, but that wasn’t unusual. Mitch checked the Personals on various sites on the Web, as he did every day. He made hot tea

and when time for lunch neared poured it in a glass of ice and had daily iced tea. He read his personal e-mail and, in particular, read the mail he'd written to friends and family – imagining, pretending to be them and trying to figure out what image his words made in their minds.

All was routine until he looked at the digital clock on his computer screen – 11:37 AM. He started musing on the evil in certain numbers. One of Mitch's favorite books asserted odd numbers were good and even numbers were evil. He thought about this while he sipped his iced tea. But in the book, the odd numbers were preferred by devils and demons, which maybe meant the odd numbers were actually the evil ones. If a person was deemed preferable by a devil, was he good? Or evil? And how could one decide such a thing? "Postulate," Mitch thought, "one side wins by superior accumulation of a particular property of the game or conflict. If evil is preponderate, then there ought to be more odd numbers than even in the world."

"It's ridiculous," he said to his faint mirror image in his computer screen.

"Integers alone leave out too much of the world."

"Don't be silly," he said with eyes closed, "all numbers are made up of ten single digits – surely all integers comprise all combinations of digits?" But Mitch knew better and thought of pi – was pi good or evil? "My little honey," he thought and remembered it was lunchtime. His stomach rumbled an evil warning, and he felt queasy from hunger.

58229

"For three strange days, I had no obligations." Mitch thought he was quietly singing the song aloud, but actually he wasn't saying a thing, only thinking the tune and

the words. He made his sandwich at the sandwich bar in the cafeteria, the same every day: Dijon mustard on one slice, light mayonnaise on the other; three pieces of sliced turkey with three pepperonis on top; one slice of tomato; one sweet jalapeno pepper with the stem end carefully sliced off; five dill pickle slices; and one piece of lettuce. For the first time he took satisfaction in noting that his sandwich was good on the outside, but evil within. Through time he'd fallen into odd ways, he thought, as he returned to his desk with his sandwich on a tray.

As he ate Mitch thought again of Sarah; he usually thought of her when he ate alone. He remembered the photograph of her in her black miniskirt all dressed up to go out – she had looked like a model it seemed to him. He had taken the picture to work and sat it on his desk – no frame – for a few months until it disappeared. He never told her – he was afraid she'd be angry with him. The sharks are out there, he thought. She died as surely as if she'd been pattering about in the shallow waves and been unexpectedly sliced and gutted by a Great White. Synecdoche, he thought. By God that's one hell of one! Syncope, he thought again, was ne'er in his thoughts so much as now. Synaloepha had never struck him as interesting until today – this th'embattled day for fixing bugs. Mitch continued to read a Web page he'd found with hundreds of poetic terms defined. It seemed to soothe him to see that all manner of things in language, many of which he'd never thought about or known existed, had been recognized and named. He wondered who figured this out?

Mitch knew he was running out of time – his preconceptive time needed to end soon and proceed on to a conception, a birth, a happy childhood, a productive adulthood, a repetition of the process, resulting in him being a proud grandfather beaming over

grandchildren. Maybe he would have three children. His first child would have five children of its own. The second, three. The third child, seeing the trouble children were, would have one. On Christmas the family would gather at his house – how many? He counted children – nine. That wasn't right, he'd left out his own children. Twelve. The number felt odd, although it was even. Include the husbands and wives. Fifteen. No, he felt sweat bead on his forehead, incorrect. He struggled for a moment to add properly in his head. He realized he'd forgotten himself and whoever his wife might be. Ah, seventeen, that was it. Seventeen was the proper number. He calmed down, relieved. Why seventeen? Where was the relief in seventeen, that odd number a combination of his hopes and dreams for the future?

Seventeen was good, prime, irreducible. But were children good in the teeming world? Who would care whether he had a family of none, one, three, seventeen, twenty-five, no, not twenty-five, it can't be, how about twenty-seven? He'd have to buy a dining table with an unlimited number of inserts to accommodate them all for the Christmas dinner. Would his children be good? Or might one or more of them bring unspeakable evil into the world? It was a chance every parent takes, he thought. Did his responsibility decrease as the numbers increased? His involvement weakening with each succeeding generation until there were no following numbers with meaning? Investigate the numbers. Maybe the answer to what was good and evil would be found in the prime numbers of the world. Maybe he would discover a new predictive power in prime numbers. Their constituent odds and evens, and numbers of odds and evens, gave them power. He became convinced of the power and refused, then forgot, to consider the possibility that there may be no relationship between such ethical matters as good and

evil and the pristine and gleaming infinite range of integers.

He sat doodling on the margins of a piece of paper holding the tasks and dates of a long abandoned schedule for the project. Along the bottom margin he wrote:

1 2 3 5 7 11 13 17 19 23

He looked up at the fluorescent lights lighting his desk, just as such lights lit the hundred other desks on the floor where he worked. If he closed his eyes he could see faint purple bars where the tubes of light had been. He continued writing . . .

29 31 37

It was getting harder to do in his head. He wrote more:

41 43 47 53 59

He was almost at the limit of what he could do . . .

61

This sucks, he thought. He didn't want to have to think of any more prime numbers in his head. He wondered if he should write a program to compute them. He turned to see if anyone was watching through his cubicle door. Abandoned as usual. He looked back at his list of prime numbers and started doodling again. He wrote the differences between the consecutive primes:

1 1 2 2 4 2 4 2 4 6
2 6 4 2 4 6 6

This seemed achingly like a pattern. He tried to figure a pattern out even though he knew there wasn't one. It looked so much like one . . .

He didn't have enough numbers. Maybe it *was* time to write a program to find those mystical primes. Numbers, for the most part, he wasn't familiar with. They

weren't a *part* of things the way the other numbers were – they didn't do as much.

Just how often do you run across the number 37, for example?

“Ready for the meeting?” Harley's bulk blocked the cubicle entrance.

“Do we really need a meeting? How 'bout if I mark who should fix which bug on the list?”

“Well, sure, OK, if you'd prefer – e-mail the list to me, and I'll look it over before I tell the others what to work on.”

“I'll send it to you today – I'm pretty busy right now.”

“Have you fixed bug number 58229 yet?” Harley looked at the list of numbers lining the page of the defunct schedule. “It's getting to be the highest priority now.”

“I'm about to start on it,” Mitch lied – what the hell was bug number 58229?

“OK, I don't want to pressure you, but lots of people are waiting for it to be fixed.”

“Sure, I'll do it right away.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it – and don't worry too much about it – can I tell them to take the hold off the release tomorrow?”

“OK, yeah, well, sure.”

“Thanks again. Bland will really appreciate having this release out by the shareholders meeting the day after tomorrow so he can tell the analysts and everybody else about the release,” Bland was the President and CEO of the company.

“Nooooo problemo,” Mitch said in his best Bart Simpson voice.

Harley walked away. It was time to write a program. Mitch turned to his computer and started writing. His first program involved a brute force method: simply

divide each number by the numbers less than it that were less than the number divided by two. He also printed out the gaps between and computed the percentage of primes within each prime found. He did it to 100,000. The greatest prime less than 100,000 was 99,991. There were 9594 primes in 100,000. As he was staring at the sequence of gaps between primes he suddenly realized he needed to rewrite his program. All he had to do was keep a list of primes and divide the next potential number by those. If it didn't divide then it too was a prime. This was going to take time . . . time to get crackin'! Mitch chuckled inside and thought time is now to wind the clock and make it happen.

A Very Eligible Man

That night Mitch took a walk with his dog, Penny, and realized the trees along the road didn't look the same. He felt as if he were separated from the familiar roses, white picket fences, and porches of the neighbors by a thin clear film. He continued thinking of finding the next prime, of various forms of statistical analysis he could do on the results. I'm losing my mind, he thought, but he felt powerless to stop his quest. He'd already delved into the Web and researched primes and was not comforted to discover there seemed to be a society of prime-obsessed individuals out in the world. Geeks, circus sideshow freaks – no, not comforting. Penny pulled ahead as usual, not concerned with numbers, good, and evil.

The next day at work Mitch refined his prime program and finally ran it up to a million. This has got to end, he told himself, but he knew he was being sucked in further. There was no end. That night he barely slept. He wrote detailed notes about his

experiences. He wanted to document everything – he didn't want to forget what he was discovering. He knew how time could dull memories and trick one into forgetting.

The third day he spent relatively quietly, now researching perfect numbers – a natural offshoot from learning about Mersenne primes – named after the sixteenth century monk who had discovered them. Mitch listed the first few on a scrap of paper:

3 7 31 127

They were the prime numbers that could be expressed as $2^n - 1$. Apparently perfect numbers, numbers equal to the sum of their positive divisors, were related to Mersenne primes. Under his Mersenne primes, he wrote the first few perfect numbers:

6	1+2+3	= 2*3
28	1+2+4+7+14	= 4*7
496	1+2+...	= 16*31
8128	1+2+...	= 64*127

So a perfect number was a Mersenne prime, a prime $2^n - 1$, times 2^{n-1} ! As with the poetic terms he had read about, Mitch wondered who had thought of these things? How had they known to look for them?

Mitch had a harder time finding information on the gaps between primes. He wanted to be the first to discover a pattern: he was so close that he couldn't give up. He wrote a program to print the gaps between the prime numbers he'd found. Then he modified it to analyze the numbers, to see how many different gaps there were between the primes less than 100,000. The result excited him, and he put it in a table. He felt a sense of accomplishment:

Number of Occurrences of Gaps

Gap	# Of Occurrences
1	4
2	1224
4	1215
6	1940
8	773
10	916
12	964
14	484
16	339
18	514
20	238
22	223
24	206
26	88
28	98
30	146
32	32
34	33
36	54
38	19
40	28
42	19
44	5
46	4
48	3
50	5
52	7
54	4
56	1
58	4
60	1
62	1
64	1
72	1

Number of different gaps: 34

Only 34 different gaps between 9594 numbers! Mitch felt he was one step away from a significant discovery. It was starting to grow dark outside; the third day was beginning to end. Mitch wanted to go home, get away for a bit – he hoped maybe his table would be *enough*.

“How’s bug 58229 coming along?” Harley had been looking in for the past few days, but had never stopped and never asked. Mitch would hold his breath and hope he’d

walk by, but now he had to explain.

“It’s really hard to reproduce – looks like it’s deadlock occurring randomly – it’s going to take a while to fix . . . “

“It’s very important – Bland knows you’re working on it – he’s asked me about it twice today – I didn’t want to bother you, you’ve looked so busy in here, but you ought to know he’s concerned,” Harley said slowly and hesitantly with the air of a friend doing a friend a favor. “If you need anything, let me know – I’ll probably be here all night.”

“Thanks.” Mitch knew he had to fix the bug. Once Bland attached a face to a problem he became relentless. But every time he started to try to fix the bug, Mitch would think of one more thing to do, to analyze, in his list of primes. He decided to go home, eat dinner, and come back to work and fix the bug.

Mitch stopped at a grocery store on the way home. Big bottles of Kahlua were on sale, and he bought one. As he walked out of the store, he realized his list of gaps included every even number up to 64. Then it suddenly skipped to 72. He worried maybe he’d made a mistake in his program. Why did the pattern end at 64? He drove back to work planning to figure it out during the time he would’ve been eating. The fifth floor was quiet; most people were gone, so he poured himself a glass of Kahlua and went to work. He could feel the liquor’s calming influence and decided to play a game: one gulp for each step he took in solving 58229. But first he decided to graph the distribution of the gaps. He did and wondered what best-fit equation would match the plot – wouldn’t it be cool, he thought, if it were a polynomial with prime exponents? But he endeavored to control himself and tried to concentrate on the bug.

58229 only seemed to occur when three different programs ran at the same time.

Mitch started one of the programs and swallowed a big gulp from his glass. It stung slightly, yet had a milky soothing texture, and he could feel it coat his stomach and a warmth spread from his middle out to his arms and legs. He started the second program, took a swig, then the third program and drank again.

He tried to find a program to do a least-squares analysis of his plot of the gaps but didn't have much luck. He drank the last of the Kahlua in his glass. He poured another and randomly pressed keys and buttons for one of the programs, waiting for it to freeze up, but it didn't seem to want to – no of course not, not now he was finally working on it. Suddenly he felt exhausted. He started and looked up at his computer screen – the screen saver was on – it didn't come on until ten minutes had passed – and he'd been sitting there staring at it. He didn't remember staring at it. I'm too tired to fix this problem, he thought. I'll fix it in the morning or after a nap. A nap would solve his problems. He knew he couldn't forget the bug – he wrote it on the palms of his hands in magic marker – “58” on one hand – “229” on the other. He was afraid Harley would see him sleeping at his desk. Not good, he thought.

The overhead lights had switched off in the building as they always did at eight PM. The floor was lit by a few desk lights here and there. Mitch stood and scanned over the cubicle walls looking for a place where he would be undisturbed. Finally, he looked up and noticed the ceiling tile above his desk was slightly ajar. He remembered watching repairmen replace light bulbs above the ceiling; other times he would hear them above, having arrived from openings far away. Mitch decided to hide in the ceiling and take his nap. It seemed inviting, like a cave to hibernate in. It wasn't hard to climb on his desk and pull himself up into the ceiling space after pushing aside a ceiling panel. He brought

the Kahlua with him and balanced himself on the steel support struts for the false ceiling. This isn't very comfortable he thought as he replaced the ceiling tile, but I'm so tired I don't care. He closed his eyes and slept.

In the darkness of his dreams he saw hundreds of graphs, line graphs plotted in bright purple, one after another after another. In his dreams he remembered finding Sarah slumped in packing paper in the empty house when they were moving out after she'd found out about the cancer. He remembered lying with her in folded up newspaper in the dark empty house waiting to know what to do. She had been terrified and he couldn't tell her it would be all right. Then Penny was running free in the school yard field – chasing birds in the air and almost flying herself with her legs barely touching the ground as she covered hundreds of yards in seconds. And then no more dreams, only black sleep.

In Due Time

“Where's Mitch? I thought you told me he was going to work through the night on 58229,” Bland asked Harley. The men were standing in Mitch's cubicle.

Harley looked around and said, “I don't know. He's supposed to be here – he knows how important this is.” Harley was irritated and embarrassed. Bland had shown up unexpectedly, which meant he was starting to micromanage. Which meant he'd begun to lose confidence in Harley's ability to handle the situation with 58229.

Bland didn't like the way Harley sometimes protected Mitch. For Harley to move up, he needed to be absolutely clear who came first in the organization. “When did you last check on him? Where was he with the bug then?” he said.

“He was working on it. I saw him working on it every time I walked by.”

Harley turned to go. “He’ll show up, I’ll check later.” Harley hoped that Bland would let it pass, but feared he’d have no such luck.

Bland said, “You need to find him.” Bland knew Mitch’s type. He was the kind that procrastinated until the adrenalin of crisis took over, he was the kind that made management look bad and then snickered cynically while Bland twisted and turned in the wind of the stock analysts’ questions. He raised his voice thinking maybe Mitch might hear from wherever he was and said, “Look at his desk! Why are footprints on his desk?”

Harley turned back to the desk and looked. “Strange, maybe he was looking for us. Maybe someone came in. Maybe he was frightened by something he heard.” Harley knew Mitch didn’t spook easily. Mitch often worked by himself in the large building. Harley said as much to himself as Bland, “Something doesn’t seem right around here, does it?” He stood on tip-toes and scanned the quiet dark room.

Bland had been working at a previous company when an employee had opened fire killing several people – he didn’t need a lot of encouragement to feel threatened. They heard a creaking from the ceiling. “Let’s call the police,” he whispered to Harley as they moved away.

“Wait, what’s this?” Harley picked up several crumpled sheets of paper from the floor. Mitch never left trash around his cubicle – he kept things neat.

“I’m going to my office and call the police – you can stay here if you want.”

Bland walked out and down the hall.

“OK, I’ll wait for him. Maybe he’ll come back.” Harley realized his pulse was

racing and thought maybe he was afraid. He uncrumpled one of the sheets and read it. It didn't comfort him.

Letter To A Controlling Force

So late.

By my hand.

Led her to an unknowingness.

The darkness invites me and quiets me.

The gold and glass clock on the mantle ticks past four.

The faucet in the kitchen drips in counterpoint to the clock's slow click.

The pup leans against my foot, puts her head on her paws, snorts quietly and gently sleeps.

There's an inevitability, which is an *enemy*, to any endeavor, no matter how transient, in which sodden power lies.

Time, which is an *enemy*, speeds up; slows down, in concert with us, around us, prodding, feeling for the long hidden silent tumor.

There are days of quiet deathly discovery; the days where time leaps from the abstract to the palpable; the greasy smoky fear symbolized by the metaphoric dripping ticking clock.

I led her astray by not thinking and not knowing she would follow anyway: she knew one way to go and she would follow me until I could lead no more.

Those who look to find secret messages in numbers or arrangements of limbs on a tree or the path of the moon across the night sky and above Orion's

belt have missed the point: God is Time.

A K9 police officer with his dog almost immediately arrived with Bland behind them. The dog started whining at the ceiling. Mitch heard the whining, thought it was Penny, and tried to stand up. He fell through the ceiling landing on the floor with a ka- (his feet) thunk! (his head). The dog growled and the policeman had his gun out – but Mitch lay there motionless. Harley and Bland leaned over him closely scrutinizing his face.

“Is he breathing?” Bland asked.

“I can’t tell – “

“Feel his neck – maybe there’s a pulse.”

“You feel his neck.” Harley didn’t want anything to do with Mitch if he were alive and certainly nothing to do with him if he were dead. There was a sudden crash on the desktop – the bottle of Kahlua had rolled out of the ceiling. With the crash Mitch suddenly started and threw his arms up as if to protect himself from advancing aliens and smacked both Harley and Bland on their foreheads. They looked at each other and Harley found himself staring at the “85” on Bland’s forehead, while Bland was transfixed by the “922” on Harley’s.

“What’s his name?” the policeman asked.

“Mitch,” the two startled managers said in unison. Mitch was back asleep, apparently.

“Mitch,” the policeman yelled, “do you have someone who can come and get you?”

“No,” Mitch drooled a little as he said it – the drool was brown and dripped onto the carpet.

“I’m going to take you now,” the policeman yelled and helped Mitch to his feet. Mitch gazed blankly for a moment at Bland and Harley then sweetly smiled. “92285,” he thought. “Only 16 away from 92269 and 12 from 92297.” He didn’t know *how* he knew 92269 and 92297 were primes, but he was certain of it. He slowly made his way to the elevator. Harley sat at the desk amid the stink of Kahlua and, rummaging, found more crumpled sheets of paper – he flattened them out and continued reading Mitch’s “Letter To A Controlling Force”:

The letter to my mother and far away father will be filled with long apologies – apologies for the selfishness, apologies for the cruelty – maybe insanity is merely cruelty – a self-centeredness with such intensity anyone who shows mere kindness must be crushed.

I remember the width and height of the world I live in – I remember it always in conjunction with her: slowly it has shrunk to a living room with a couch in front of the TV with a sleeping pup at my feet.

The phone sits silent and I remember all the times I held the receiver to my ear and my mouth and smiled into the receiver and in a way that damn phone has caressed more parts of my head more often than any lover I’ve been with.

I remember the night I decided to sleep outside in the backyard on the lawn chair and watch the eerie night clouds pass by – it was very cold so I picked up a throw rug and arranged it about me and sat and watched through the night – I

waited for Sarah to appear.

She did not appear in the orangish night clouds that night nor did she appear any night; it was selfish, I know, I was lonelier than I knew could exist and God I tried to conjure her image in sunsets, sunrises, images of reflected clouds dimpled by waves in a lake – I tried you have to believe I tried.

It was all many years ago, I'm over those mystical feelings now – actually I despise them and those who run away from their own problems into mysticism, blind belief and a trust in powers that cannot be apprehended or even worse who believe that other humans can help belay the guilt.

I suppose the problem is that I feel I led her to her death: the memories I have of the last years are such a rush and yet I do remember all the waiting – it seemed like we were always waiting – waiting for the chemo to be over for the radiation to be over for the pain from the surgery to be over: soon it was over.

I suppose my quest is my own form of worship, my own cowardly way of confessing and learning how to forget the past: the catholic confession is not my way no – I have figured out something superior to that – confess to the next number – the +1 more, which is always there, the inductive moment: it's like confessing to the future to try to forget the past that dims as time continues.

Listen, you stinkin' nameless *burden*, who the hell do you think you are to laugh at my preconceptions, my conceptions, my births and then tell me I don't smile enough I don't read enough I don't stay at home enough I don't get out enough: I don't see how you're doing all so well either – just defeating me you bastard doesn't mean you win armless legless headless I will not die for you.

But one night someday somehow maybe in winter from outside the low clouds look as if they are being sucked in the chimney of the small cottage by the lake and inside the fatback sizzled and the dinner bell clanged and my true love leaned over and a susurrations issued from her gently pouting lips: “onomatopoeia” she said popping the “p” to divide the word into a fore-susurrations and back-susurrations that made my heart melt into a long lingering puddle.

But one night someday somehow maybe in winter from outside the low clouds look as if they are being sucked in the chimney of the small cottage by the lake and inside the fatback sizzled and the dinner bell clanged and my true love leaned over and a susurrantion issued from her gently pouting lips: “onomatopoeia” she said popping the “p” to divide the word into a fore-susurrantion and back-susurrantion that made my heart melt into a long lingering puddle.