

S. ZACHARY SCHUMER

TALES
FROM

PURGATORY



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**Dedicated to the memory of
Roland Rene Martin
He taught me how to think**

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Welcome

Our doormat says, "welcome." It says so in big black letters. They stick out of the black rubber like little pins. We are very proud of our mat. It has been in the family as far back as anyone can remember.

When he knocked on the door we invited him in. As he entered the room he stepped on the doormat. The one that is almost a family heirloom. Everyone agreed, it is one old doormat.

We all greeted him with friendly smiles and shared small talk. Everyone was warm and sociable. Everyone except the doormat.

Drinks were served and we primed him with tasteless sandwiches. We kept the better cuts of meat and condiments in a special place.

After a while his eyes grew dark and his ears grew points. We had no choice. We locked him in the spare room and unscrewed the light bulb.

We could hear him stumbling around. He broke furniture and windows.

We got out the shotgun and blew his fucking head off.

The rest was a matter of protocol.

We got out the hunting knives and dismembered his torso.

His body parts were scattered in the woods to feed the small creatures. Winter is harsh in these parts. Local folk do all they can for the animals.

We were glad we showed him traditional hospitality. We did the right thing.

Our doormat says, "welcome."

Surprise

It's been a great day. Things could not have worked out any better. I have been dreaming about this day for years. Maybe as long as I can remember.

For years I was alone. I never could find a relative. Nobody to share a common family history and joy. I remember the legend of old uncle Attila. Now, that was a man. Perhaps a man and a half. Could there ever be another person who's fat matched his stupid? There he was, a legend my mother told me about. Someone I never got to know. Just know about.

I think the trouble is my name. I spell Elliot different than anyone else. They spell the name Eliot. Perhaps along the way someone dropped a consonant. Non -scholars do things like that.

So, this morning I got up early and brushed my teeth twice. I do that when I want to make a good impression.

When you make a good impression you feel good about yourself and the ones you impress feel impressed.

Enough of this. My mind is racing and I can't seem to think clearly. Have I been drugged or I am just excited about the meeting of my relatives for the first time.

I heard about them from a friend. He told me about the name and told me to steer clear of that bunch. How could I do that? They may be blood.

That's why I came to this town and looked them up.

So, I showed up unannounced. I felt that family does not need an invitation.

There we were. A whole family of Attila clones. One is fatter than the next. If that isn't blood I don't know what is.

The refreshments they offered me lacked commitment. I didn't feel like an honored guest. However, they assured me that bologna and day old bread is a delicacy. When I asked for mustard they gave me a small bowl of crushed mustard seeds.

So, I sit here in this dark room where they sent me. I'm all excited and aglow waiting for my surprise.

Revenge

Revenge is a beautiful word. It rolls off the tongue like the brown soap your momma used to wash out your mouth, after you swore. You would gag for an hour, and then go back to swearing.

Revenge burns through me like a wooden steak burns through the heart of a vampire. Now, that's what revenge is all about. Not that crap that the weak-minded talk about. A twit would smack someone or put sugar in a gas tank for revenge. I laugh at those feeble attempts.

That's revenge with lower case letters. That's not for me. I use all capitals in bold print. Yah, that's what I want to do. Reach through the eye socket and tear out the brain. No twit business here. No sir!

I have spent a great deal of time contemplating revenge. In fact I wallow in it like a pig on an Alabama farm. Some times, I swim in it like a catfish waiting to become a sandwich at the golden arches.

Yes it's mine and mine alone.

I know that bunch. Oh, how I have studied them. Over and over again.

They live down the road. In every town in this country. Perhaps every town in the world. They are easier to find than a cold.

They have that holy grin on their faces. It doesn't matter. They are the ones to blame.

Time to focus. Set my sights and load my weapon. Shoot my blame like fire out of a hemorrhoidal rectum. I can, I will.

Their crime is the crime of self-righteousness. That whole bunch believes it is good and does good, that's righteousness. After a while they figure that what ever they do become good because they are good people. We all know who is on their side.

So, tonight I will paste on a smile and fill my flask. I'll go over there and hear about their holy beliefs and how they can save me. I'll eat their food and accept their hospitality. All I need is a minute by myself.

I'll pour out the gasoline all over the drapes and light it. We can all go to hell together.

FOG

The fog was a blanket of white uselessness that may have smothered the whole countryside. It could have been knee deep or as high as the peak of a large grey building at the end of the street. It stuck to everything and seemed to stretch and pull like taffy. It surrounded and confined me like a straight jacket, as I walked home from the bus stop.

The thought passed through my mind that something was wrong with the air. It sat in my lungs similar to a drug and forced me to breathe through my mouth (like a dog). I thought that maybe there was something wrong with my ears. The white poured in them and attacked my brain. My tongue was dry and I whistled through my nose as I walked down the street toward home.

Step after step, how many? Who cares! A service station is my only ally as I work my odyssey home. A hot cup of coffee and I have a new best friend. Seventy-nine cents is all my new best friend costs. I give the kid a buck and walk out the door. A buck is more than a fair price to pay for a hot cup of hope. My spirit is fortified for the trip home.

Only a couple more blocks of the fog before I get home. Perhaps if I walk slowly enough she will be asleep when I get home. That's the great part of the afternoon shift, if any shift can have a plus. Less people to see, less people to face. There is no one there to say, "leave me alone." I am already alone. The ones I have to see, I see in the dark tones, and they can't see me. All they see is a shadow and all they hear is mumbling and babbling from the dark. It goes on and on. Will there ever be closure? I once heard a guy at work call us "the walking dead." It matters not, we continue to do what we do every day as we lose our humanity to the machines.

What you see at work are not people. They are just part of the machines. The machines roll on and devour anyone fed to them. Nice guy, bad guy, it doesn't matter. Everyone winds up cannon fodder and the machines keep chewing.

As long as they are at work, the work will not let them be people. We all try at first, but after a while the war ends without a sound, not even a whimper. Why bother to struggle when you can't win?

You see the old timers who have worked their way up the food chain and are now management. Talking to them, talking to the machines, what is the difference? If the machine had eyes, it would have the same eyes as these men and women - huge, red and blank.

My toes are cold and I know it is time to go inside. I left my boots at work and wear my gym shoes home. I can't tell if my toes are wet from the moisture on the street or from my sweat. Perhaps I will wear my boots home when I get laid off. The machines at work take layoffs very personal. Their whole life is turned "ass over teakettle." You would think that some unknown force has singled them out and decided to tear their lives apart. Little do they appreciate the reality of not having to bow down to the other machines. For a while the human machines have broken the hierarchy of the factory, and they need it, like a junky needs a fix.

I love the lay off. I believe that it gives me a reprieve and a chance to connect with life or perhaps humanity. I stay as far as I can away from working people. They never change, not

even when they are on their own time. They kill time until they go back to work. Back to their soulmate.

Nothing to do is a great relief and food takes on a taste. Any food is worth eating and any drink is worth drinking. Sometimes people I don't know are worth talking to. Most are not worth the effort. Maybe I am not worth the effort?

I see the light from the TV between the slats of the blinds. The blue light pours out the cracks between the shade and the window. My house is the only one on the north side of the block that is illuminated. I follow the light like a dog that has been let out at night to crap. I have done my business and there is nothing more to do but wipe my ass and go in the house.

All the neighbors must be in their bedrooms screwing or fighting at this time of night. If luck is on my side I won't have to do either. I can go to sleep.

Since the neighborhood is dead quiet I figure they are screwing. Why does screwing become quieter and quieter the more you do it? When I am old will my screwing be dead quiet? Is there a difference between screwing a quiet woman and a comatose woman? Will I have to find out?

I walk slower because she may be up. Sometimes I catch a break and she is sleeping on the couch. The door opens without a sound. I keep the hinges well oiled. I will slip into the hall as quietly as I can. I will turn the TV off and creep up the stairs as quietly as I can, holding my breath. At times like this I am glad I wear gym shoes. I can shower in the morning.

She is sitting on the easy chair watching a police show and eating ice cream. We exchange greetings and a mechanical kiss. She asks me about my day and the bus ride home. I answer "same old thing." I always answer same old thing. She presses me and asks about my meal at work.

I can't remember what I ate those many hours ago. I sat in the cafeteria and ate what everybody else ate. Did I sit by myself or eat with someone? I think I ate with someone who brown bagged it, and another one who had what I had. I wonder if they can remember what they ate? All that comes to mind is the two cups of coffee, just like every other cafeteria meal. I fueled up and went back to working for the machine.

Perhaps she wants sex tonight. When she wants sex she talks a lot. Then again she talks a lot all the time. It is hard to tell when she wants sex. It seems that she wants it around the clock. Maybe just a lot more than I want it. I can't remember the last time we screwed. The truth is I don't care. Maybe we are due. I need to fulfill my husbandly duties and she needs it like a bitch in heat. The only difference between screwing my wife and work is that if I call in sick to my wife it won't show up on my check. I'll have to pay in other ways. Somebody once told me there are no free lunches. I believe they were right.

I don't think I have a choice tonight. I do not have a cold and I have not worked any overtime. It is better to save up the excuses and perform tonight. It appears that we are due and I must stand and deliver. If she thinks that I am refusing her, she cries and life is rougher than normal for days. It is one thing to live with a woman. It is another thing to live with Mrs. Dracula.

When she cries I get red hot mad. I feel like a balloon about to explode.

She wants to argue and I want to drink coffee. She pushes me until I want to ask her about her lost time at work. "Where did you go and what did you do?" I want to ask her about her other man. How much can she cry? How much can she pay? Things always get turned around, things are always my fault. How can everything be my fault? They always are. I never shacked up at a conference or at work!

The one time I confronted her she slapped me above my eye. The side of my head was swollen up for three days. At work some of the guys stared at me. The best thing is to say and do nothing at work. Maybe they thought I had been in a fistfight. They left me alone. I imagine that I earned some kind of macho respect from my fellow brawlers. That week I pulled a double shift so I could show off my bruise. For a while they thought that I had become a dangerous person.

One of the guys at work, a stocky guy with long hair, smiled at me and said "nice shot." I looked him in the eye and said "bite me." I gave him the universal factory workers reply. He said "go for it." I call this kind of talk factory Ebonics for lack of any other title. After enough time on the job it becomes your first language. You have to change gears when you are talking to non-factory people.

I wonder what it would be like to jump out from behind a machine and hit him in the head with a wrench. Watch the blood run down his face and knock his safety glasses across the floor. Just stand there for a while and enjoy the fruits of my revenge. Then hide behind the machine and fade into the sounds like the fog.

These thoughts bring the anger up and I become the anger. Thoughts and violence are about to boil over. If I could just open the door and leave, go back to the gas station, and watch the attendant ring up sales. Walk until my feet get soaked. Embrace the night like a brother and rue the dawn like an enemy.

The next best relief is sleep. But I am in the house and the easy way out is to do what I must. She says she has missed me all evening and she is not sleepy. I answer "I have no plans," and I follow her up the stairs.

I assume that she is satisfied because she falls right to sleep. The victory is mine. I am free to stare out the window at the moon. Eventually I fall asleep without a fight or having to leave the house.

She is gone when I awake, the house is mine. I feel like I have been rewarded for a hard night's work. Then I realize that like the machine, she will be making demands of me soon enough. Later I will have to return to the plant and pay homage to the machine. The time is meaningless. I take the overtime because it keeps me away from her, and eight or twelve hours is the same as one hour when I am at work. It all blends into one grey nothingness. Time filled with sounds and danger but no substance or reason. It is there for itself, to feed itself, to gratify itself, and to perpetuate itself.

The machine does the work and I sort the parts. When I use up a case, another is brought in to take its place. Perhaps some day we can trade places. The machine can sort and I can work. Probably wouldn't make any difference if we get the work done. Seems sometimes the machine is an easier partner to live with than the wife. I wouldn't wish either on anybody.

I use the cases to mark time. When eight cases are used up, it's time for a meal. The cafeteria? A machine standing at attention against the wall? How nice. Most times I choose the machine. Like a soldier it says nothing and responds to commands. "A roast beef sandwich, now, you pitiful pile of scrap iron."

Taste is never an issue. Mustard and pepper supply the taste, so everything tastes the same. No taste, no texture, a few chomps, swallow then gulp down a mouth full of coffee. Nothing ever changes. Taste texture and mud, down the hatch.

When they fuel the bus is there a difference? Standard, Shell, it is all the same. Can there be a difference between ham salad and tuna salad? It gets shoved through the carburetor and burned up. The bus rolls down the concrete and asphalt. I get up take a leak and go back to work. Fuel is fuel and the machine has all the time in the world.

One of my happiest moments was when the machine broke down last fall. When I was a kid I was told never hit a man when he is down. I couldn't help myself. I walked over and kicked it. Not because it was down. Because it could be down. I never thought it would be down and there it was, dead as my old momma at the funeral home. Only difference was the machine fired up after a couple hours and momma stayed down.

While I stood around and did nothing, the geeks worked on the machine. What fun we would have burying the machine. We could use a backhoe to dig its grave and make stupid machine noises as they lowered it in the ground. All the guys could drop their pants and piss on it to help promote oxidation. We could even erect a stone. "Here lies the worst enemy of the working man." We would all get drunk and take half the next day to sleep it off.

What is the difference between the bus and the machine? Will the bus run if the heater breaks, will I work if I have a black eye? We carry on no matter how worn out our parts are, they are only replaced when broken. The machine gets a new part and my body heals. When the machine runs out of parts and my body will not heal, they just order a new one. Some boss calls the manufacturer or the union. A new component is ordered, arrives, and is paid for. Hook up the power and we are manufacturing parts for some assembly plant somewhere.

Robert Johnson sings to me over the speakers. I crank the volume up. This is the best part of the day, my pay back for cavorting with machines. Leftovers and cold beer make it all work and the microwave never fails. It rings four times to tell me it has warmed my food. Who invented the microwave timer, Pavlov?

At times like this I think of Ella and my youth. I amaze myself that I can think of things that happened so far back. At times it seems that my daydreaming is clearer and more fulfilling than being awake. Some nights I dream about my daydreams. At times like that I question my grip on this dimension. Sometimes I wonder what is real and what are my dreams. Sometimes I cannot tell the difference. Most times I do not care. If the dreams do not care about me, why should I care about them?

She told me once that she loved me, then she left. Less than a year later she was married. I begged her to love me. I swore I would do anything she asked if only she would stay with me. I asked her a year later to leave her husband for me. I longed to share a life with her that was clear and light. Free from the emptiness in my stomach and the weight upon my back.

She cried and I would not. I knew the answer before I asked the question. The die was cast and all I could do now was follow the road that I found myself on. That night I listened to Dylan and drank Kentucky whiskey. I stay away from whiskey now. It only helps me remember the color of salvation. Black is the color I live. On a very good day I can find some grey.

I will never live in a large town. It is hard to get around, and I hate cars. Sometimes I am struck that every day I take part in a process that builds those four-wheeled monsters. That is all the guys at work talk about. I pick up pieces of their conversations over the roaring of the machines. Four-wheel drive, leather guts, and sixteen-inch wheels, is what I hear around the clock. It all blends together like brown sugar in oatmeal. I do not know what some of the auto parts are, that they are talking about. Perhaps the conversations are a type of Ebonics that I do not know. I have never taken a foreign language. Where does one go to learn the language of the factory? What degree do they issue?

This mindlessness is much better than the talk during hunting season. I refuse to eavesdrop during hunting season. A few years ago two guys got into a heated debate over the "points" on a deer that one of them shot. Since they could not settle their argument, the killer offered to bring the head of the deer to work in a shopping bag and settle the argument.

I can tell when September arrives because they start wearing their camouflage clothes to work. They appear to be camouflage macho peacocks. Do they think the foreman will not see them in their new finery? Their next wardrobe change happens in October when bow season begins. Now they appear in bright orange so nobody will shoot them. Do they think that another hunter will shoot them on the factory floor? I wonder if someone will stick their heads in shopping bags and take them home for their friends to see?

If I had anything to say to these people and wanted to speak to all of them at the same time, I would place a salt lick on the cafeteria floor. They would all gather around and wait for a clean shot. I would shoot them all!

I sat at the lunch table and shared my ideas with the walls. One of the walls looked at me and said, "It's a mighty fine idea." He said "the only problem with my plan is that it would not get them away from their old ladies." I wanted to take a rifle by the barrel and club him over the head. Not because he likes to kill, rather because he took me seriously. He would know how the deer felt and I would know how he felt, a worthwhile experience for both of us. I said nothing, he kept at attention.

The physical size of the southwestern section of Saginaw allows me to get around easily by foot. The dusting of snow was not much of a problem. My gym shoes would not keep my feet dry, so I pulled on wool socks, dressed, and left the house. The air was clear and tasted like diesel exhaust fumes. I shoved my hands in my pockets. You cannot catch a finger in a machine with your hands in your pockets!

A mile or so later I saw her car. She always drives a new car. One more thing not to complain about, and it was a small price to pay for a degree of silence. I remember Ella's car. Her dad bought her a red Mercury convertible with bucket seats and a white interior for her sixteenth birthday. It was bigger than my old Ford. When we went out she would let me drive it. She said her dad wanted to buy her a Jaguar. It was a car she did not want. I still cannot conceive that the big Merc was a compromise. In those days a compromise for me would have been the guys throwing in some cash for gasoline.

Seems that for every mile I drove that car we traveled farther apart. When it was time for her first oil change, we were through. Stiff upper lip, nihilism, and stoicism, following the teachings of Mr. Spock: nothing worked. I was just slipping into the tar pit of the blues. The more I looked up, the more down I saw. The more down I saw, the more I saw her face and the dashboard of the Mercury convertible.

Was she selling a house or talking on the phone? Was she at a closing or just talking to a man? I found an empty seat in the fast food restaurant across the street from her office, drank hot coffee and watched the front of her building.

She left the building after a while with a man wearing a blue sales blazer. He held the car door open for her and they drove away in his car. They were smiling and she slid across the Cadillac seat next to him. He put on his directional indicator and turned right at the first light.

Maybe I made some of the parts for that car. Perhaps the machine and I joined together to ensure the quality of his car. I wonder if he ever thinks about the people who built that car? I wonder if she thinks about our marriage? Do I continue to spy on her because I care, or because I enjoy the blues? When I look down, I see Ella's face driving away in a Cadillac.

I put on my shades, stick my hands in my pockets and walk home. With my shades on, it feels more like night. My feet get wet and my legs are tired. I walk by a blue two door and look it over. I do not see any parts that look familiar. It is parked in a no parking zone. Could it be that the driver is an anarchist? Is he aware that he has broken the law? Am I the only one who cares?

I would like to see the police grab the driver. Find out where he is and drag him outside without his coat and shoes. Crack him across the shins with a nightstick. Shove him in an unmarked black sedan and drive away. The only testimony to his existence would be a blue two door rusting away in a no parking zone.

A big ugly guy could question him over and over. "Why do you flaunt your good fortune? Why do you shove it in the face of the working man? Who the hell do you think you are?"

I am glad I wore my wool socks. I have walked through many puddles. It is time to change my socks and get ready for this evening's work. Perhaps someone at work and I could discuss music or fine dining. Perhaps pigs could fly.

II

The workday was a contest between the machine and me. I fed the parts to the machine and the machine ate them. They were digested by the machine, and then shit flies out of the machine's rectum. Eat and shit, eat and shit, while I supplied the fodder. We work in harmony, like an entity with one soft part and a huge pile of steel parts. My mind wants to wander and think of Ella but the machine calls and I answer.

The thought occurs to me. Does the machine work for me or do I work for the machine? Given the noise level and speed, I think we both work for the boss. My problem is that I have no idea who the boss is. Maybe an alien sits behind a console somewhere and directs the ballet of noise and manufacturing. It could be a seven twenty-four creature with a giant head and no heart. Sometimes he turns the volume up. Sometimes he speeds the process up. He is paid

with the skulls of people like me. Does he have a paneled trophy room with a pool table with twelve pockets because he has four arms?

I mumble to myself. "Who is in charge, screw you, you piece of greasy slave driving iron."

My watch says I have a few minutes, so I go to the toilet. This is the best part of the workday. The toilet is empty. I have the whole place to myself. I can pee, I can shit, and I can just hang around. It's all for me to decide what I do and in what order.

With all the time I have on the job the foreman would never write me up. I know what he looks like and what his name is. I forget sometimes and just ignore him. After he leaves, I remember who he is but it's too late. He shakes his head when he leaves. I know he hates me and he cares for the machine. I hate when he plays favorites.

If he calls in the union steward I will agree to anything as long as he leaves me alone. I do not work for him. "Go get the alien with the big head and we will work this out."

Maybe he does not hate me. Maybe it is me who hates him. It does not make a difference. He represents who he represents, and I stand for fresh air and butterflies. He has his turf and I have mine. My problem is that this factory is his turf and mine is frozen until spring. I would like to catch him sometime in the county park after work, and force-feed him some vanilla ice cream. He could kick and scream all he wants. I would keep on shoveling it into his mouth until he stopped breathing. Then I would drag his body into a stream and take a pee. "Go get your pal the alien, he is next!"

If I would have listened to people when I was young, I could have done better. They told me to get an education. They said I had a knack for the law. Ella's dad thought I could have been a businessman. I think I could have been an alien with the right training.

Four and one half years at the university, the easy way. Trying to meet women and pass tests. Dropping the tough classes and getting by on the easy ones. I was paying my college dues at the College of Education when I had nothing better to do. Bill always told me school beats the hell out of working. I cannot remember it being a good time. All I can remember is that it was the second best time I ever had.

Ella and I met in high school. She was easy and I was greedy. I stuffed myself like a beggar at a banquet. When I ate my fill, I then went back for more. My desperation showed like a silver dollar in the fog. She could read my needs and pain like a book report. We made love and listened to Leonard Cohen. She gave me her innocence and I gave her my heart. The loneliness was put on hold and the elevator music played while I happily held the receiver to my ear. One day she hung up, and I was alone.

The bus came to a stop and a burly man in a flannel shirt and vest sat down across from me. I imagined that he was a construction worker like my father. I rarely think of my father. Perhaps because when he was alive he never thought about me. He went through the motions of being a father. To me, he was a stranger that shared a house with the family. He shared the face of the foreman and the soul of the alien. I planned my time around his home time. When he was there, I was gone. I ate as many meals as I could at my friends' homes. Bill's mother would joke that I was her second son. If only I could have had such luck. I behaved myself and ate only as much as my hosts ate.

When my family did eat together I said as little as possible. I only answered questions. And given the few questions he ever asked, well, little was said. I wondered sometimes if it was because he did not care, or if he was not bright enough to ask any questions. It did not matter, because my life was mine and he had no claim on any of it. When I got a job and paid my own way we spoke even less. He lost the right to share any of my life when he refused to share a buck.

I vision Mr. Vest getting a report from his wife this evening. He would ignore the good and react to the bad. Maybe his son did not listen to his wife, or maybe the kid screwed up at school today. A report from the assistant principal or his teacher would be the kiss of death. If a conference was called, the kid might just as well take the hollow point.

The confrontation would start with screaming and threats, depending on Mr. Vest's mood. It would end in a solid crack across the side of the kid's head. The worst part of the battle would be that Mr. Vest would not let it go. It would be revisited tomorrow or the day after. Maybe another solid crack. Construction workers do not believe in "time outs."

If only Mrs. Vest could have dealt with the problems and not involve Mr. Vest. She would scream and shout, but never throw a real punch. Her punches would be easy and the kid could take them all day long. Unfortunately, usually it was no such luck. She would wait for her "torpedo" to take the contract. If Mr. Vest refused the job she would take her revenge on him. It was easier for Mr. Vest to follow the prescribed policy than not. He knew the wages of thinking.

Growing up for the kid is like taxes. You just keep on paying. Should somebody tell the kid, or is it better that he never finds out? Odds are that he will follow in his father's footsteps.

The bus has passed my stop and I have to walk an extra half-mile to get home. Good thing I wore my work boots. My feet are dry and warm. The walk is no problem. I feel better than I have felt in days. Finally I have caught a break. My gym shoes are at work, I am in a splendid mood.

The road is a mass of potholes. The water in them has turned to ice. All the way home, each one of them looks like a small-polluted lake reflecting the filthy light. At mid-block I scope out a large hole that could be the same size body of water that spawned life billions of years ago. If I hang around awhile I may see some primal life form crawl out of the hole.

The block is empty and all the shades are pulled. I walk up to the pothole and see my corrupt reflection in the ice. The thought occurs to me that I need to piss in the pothole. Then again, I do not need to go jail. Best just hold it and walk home.

Her car is not in the side drive. I can tell she has not been home for awhile because there are no tire tracks in the light snow. Did she tell me that she had plans for the evening? I do not remember. I must make it a point to write down what her schedule is. I could keep all the information I need on the big calendar in the kitchen. I bet it's probably my fault that I cannot remember if she gave me any information about this evening.

Is she hard to listen to, or don't I listen to her? She tells me she feels like she is talking to the wall. My pity goes out to the wall.

If she were my employee we could have a great relationship. She could send me E-mails or memos. I could put a limit on the number of words she could send. Twenty words would be

more than enough. I could send ten words to her on a good day. Some days I would not communicate with her at all. If we would meet in person I would make guttural sounds and point with my finger. If I could only live in a perfect world.

The lights are on and her boots are in the hall. She must be wearing her gym shoes. I sure hope she is not wearing wool socks. This is a good time to enjoy my bad habits so I leave my coat on, put on my slippers, and go out the side door into the garage. I fill my clay pipe and light a match. Gas lighters are for amateurs. Us pro's always use strike anywhere kitchen matches in the winter.

A few heavy pulls, some powerful coughing and I hear a car pull up. It must be her, so I put my paraphernalia away before I get busted. She does not care if I smoke, she just does not want to know about it. I can feel the buzz begin as I go back into the house and head towards the easy chair.

I knew this was a good day. I knew big breaks were on the menu. I kiss her on the cheek, but my eyes I are on the pizza she is carrying. The fridge is full of beer and she has not unloaded on me. These are the signs of guilt. Does she feel guilty because she has not cooked for me in a week or has she spent some time with her "friend?" Who cares? The pizza has pepperoni, sausage, and bacon. I eat half the pizza and pound down four cold ones. She watches me eat and nibbles on two pieces.

She reminds me that today was Friday. The day of the week had slipped my mind completely. No work tomorrow. She picks up the changer and turns on the TV. The stage is set. She has fed me and has been quiet. The beer was cold and the pizza was warm. I eat in peace and watch the tube. I have no idea what I am watching, but it beats the alternative.

I drink three more beers and start to slur my words. "I need to get some sleep" I tell her. She answers that she too needs some sleep and the bed sounds inviting.

I quickly brush my teeth and get in bed before her. If I can fall asleep quickly it would be the frosting on an excellent day. I could send her a memo about my plan, but a snoring husband is a quicker message. Food, quiet, and sleep: all a workingman could ask for.

At 4:16, I am awake. My stomach aches with gas. Did she order onions on the pizza? Do I have to tell her again? I love onions but they beat the hell out of me. I take a crap and go into the living room to watch cartoons on the TV. Popeye has joined the army for the ten millionth time. There is nothing on the TV that interests me so I go the fridge and eat a slice of the pizza. An hour later, I crap again and go to sleep.

III

Saturday morning never seems to end. The wife is always in bed next to me when I wake up. She lays there with her eyes open and smiles at me. Her hair is a mess and I can smell her breath. After I pee, I give her what she wants. I also ease my own tension and ensure that she will leave me alone for the rest of the morning. Not a bad price to pay for some peace.

A hot shower, cup of coffee and an old movie on the TV are my wages. After the movie, I take her car to the quarter wash. I remember the days when the quarter car wash was indeed a quarter. Mom used to have me wash her car when I was a kid. She paid me two bucks to get

the job done. The opportunity to have her car, along with a little free time, was a bonus. I would have paid for the car wash myself just to get the car and get away from my parents.

I went over to Ella's house to swear my love and faithfulness to an empty house. She was always out, her car was usually there, but she wasn't. She claimed to be out shopping or visiting her mother's grave. I believed her. I was young and, what else could I do? I got the idea that things were not right when she would excuse herself when I came to visit. She would go into another room to talk on the telephone while I sat and waited. I did not care as long as I was getting my share.

Sometimes I would get mad because she would leave me alone. When she returned and turned on her blue-eyed smile, I was captured and broken again. Things were her way, and we both knew it. Her father knew it too. He would pat me on the shoulder and encourage me to get a good education. I would promise him that I would get an education and make something out of myself someday.

After I was crushed like a bug, I was drawn to her house to see her father. It turned out to be an uncomfortable situation and I knew I could never see her father again. Not only did I lose my beacon, I lost a pal. All I could do was drive by when I had mom's car, and think about the good old days. Cruising by the abyss, smoking a cigarette, and throwing the ashes and butt out the window. If I smoked two packs of Camels a day maybe the pain would go away.

When my imagination was running wild, usually the times I smoked pot, I would picture a pretty girl waiting for me at her house. She would have cold orange soda in the refrigerator for me and her dad would call me son. She would make me scrambled eggs and whole-wheat toast. If you imagine something enough times does it become real? Does it matter if it's real or not as long as it's mine?

I wait in line at the car wash and listen to the radio. My briefs are very uncomfortable and I wiggle around on the seat. My discomfort rises as I rise off the car seat and I try to pull my briefs up. Perhaps a burger and a coffee at a fast-food restaurant will address my discomfort, so I drive to the closest restaurant. I enter the men's room and to my relief, see that I am alone. In the stall, I see the problem. I have put on my briefs backwards. The joke is on me, there is no chance I can blame this on anyone but myself. Perhaps I am an anarchist and this is a way that I am displaying my anarchy, in a Freudian way. I decide to leave my briefs on backwards and leave the restaurant. If I am a closet anarchist I probably always have been one. I think about Trotsky as I slide into the car. I wonder if he ever wore his briefs backwards?

Maybe I was caught in some kind of time warp. The early part of the last century would have been comfortable for me. I would have worn a wool cap, boots with holes in the soles, and I would have been part of some secret underground. My persona would have been the brooding intellect. I would have had my choice of lean dark haired women. Women who would make any sacrifice for my brooding intellect. Women who would never refuse, in fact, they would be glad to meet my needs. My needs: like a Merc guzzling high-octane gasoline endlessly.

Maybe, they would be ugly girls with long straight hair and large black-framed glasses. They would have burgundy turtleneck sweaters, small firm breasts, and bigger needs than mine. They would be a dime-a-dozen. Too many late night meetings with other bearded malcontents discussing philosophy. Too many corrections from those who do not think correctly. All this and having my choice of the easy women.

To cough the grey industrial morning away. Spitting up blood and delirious from a TB fever. Laying on a dirty blanket in an abandoned factory. The oily grey machine bending over my body and watching. I would die before my time. My mangled body signed by the gumshoes and goons. My legacy of unfinished manuscripts that would be worshiped like the gospel by those around me. In the future, college students would form cooperative learning groups and discuss my philosophies.

They would speak of me in whispers. Women who slept with me would brag to the unfortunate, and some women would lie about sleeping with me. The colder I got, the more lovers I would have had.

Better than ending it in obscurity. Better than dying like turning the page of a book. When they bury my wife, it will be like turning the page of a Dr. Seuss book.

Snow starts to fall on the way home. It looks like my luck goes down the tubes today. For a light traffic day there are a lot of cars on the road. Next to me at a traffic light is a young woman driving a van and talking on a cell phone. The kids are strapped down in the back seat. Next to her on the front seat is a large bag of what must be groceries. I understand why she is on the cell phone. It beats the hell out of listening to the kid's noise.

We take off from the light at the same speed. The car in front of her puts on his brakes so he can turn at a side street. She brakes and the grocery bag goes flying into the dashboard and onto the floor. Her eggs are probably broken and milk is spilled on the van floor. She is still on the cell phone. Maybe my luck has changed? Perhaps there is some justice in this world. This would be a perfect one-act play, except I am still in traffic.

I try to figure out who the anarchist is? The cell phone umbilical woman or her crying out of control kids? If she were alive during 'my time' would she be talking to Sacco and Vanzetti? Could she be a messenger bringing information to me from the underground? Does she have black-framed glasses and straight hair?

She is probably talking to her baby sitter. Find somebody to stick the kids with so she can get out of the house with the old man. This would make the hell she goes through during the week worthwhile. She can always get the old man to clean up her van. He will do what he has to do to cut down on the nagging.

The light changes and I finish my drive home.

Bill calls and invites himself over. It's inferred that he has a need. He is either out of dope, beer, food or company. It does not matter. I am glad to have his company. There is a basketball game on so we have something to focus on. I do not care who is playing or who wins the game. All I need is some action to take my mind off my mind. Perhaps I can lose myself in the game and make the great escape.

There are two great things about Bill: If I pressure him he will go out to his car and get his bag and papers, and, his old lady is an eyeful. How do some guys like Bill and I wind up with trophy wives? Sometimes I think he got himself a real bargain and sometimes I pity him.

Sheila resents my smarts and tries to put me in my place. Any conversation I have ever had with her has been an embarrassment to me. Her comments are either stupid or not worth replying to. Either way she is a new bone-handled knife that Bill brings around to show off. If

she were part of the underground, I would order her up against the wall and shot. She has too much ego to be trusted and is too empty a head to be liked. However, she would be extremely interesting if she said nothing. If she could just keep her stupidity to herself. But she cannot.

I have to get set myself before they arrive. I need to put on my reentry tiles to protect myself. Her stupidity flows out her mouth, and like the friction between air and spacecraft, it burns up anything that is unprotected. I am too fragile to allow the attack. I wonder how the others survive the onslaught. Perhaps they have reached a level of stupid that allows them to prosper and survive around her. Is there a brotherhood of stupid? Are things happening around me that are negotiated in the shadows? Do I care if there are shadows and I am not invited to join the party?

My consolation is that she is filled up with stupid, and has no room to accept any more stupid. I do not believe she can expand her stupid capacity, even with exercises. In her world, she has reached perfection. Perhaps she would like to put me up against the wall and throw a pie at me?

Bill and Sheila arrive in the afternoon. They take off their wet shoes and leave them in the hall. Bill has a twelve pack of Canadian and Sheila has the same old cream cheese and chili powder dip that is her specialty. She has been making the same rotten dip for as long as I can remember. Besides bringing a rotten dip she never supplies the chips. What am I to do? Eat it with my fingers?

It does not matter. I would not eat her dip if I were starving in my space capsule.

After they leave, I will dump the sludge in the garbage. Perhaps there are some rats at the dump that appreciate her cooking. Perhaps she could deliver the dip to them in person. They could sit around and enjoy a discussion about the philosophy of stupid and the rats could enjoy looking at her hot body.

On second thought, after getting an eyeful, the rats would be bored.

Bill sticks ten beers in the fridge and opens one for each of us. He starts talking about work. He complains how tough it is out there in sales. I wonder if thoughts run through his mind like the ones that run through mine. Does he have the urges to strike back? Does he drift into the fantasy world? I do not want to know. I have enough trouble dealing with the depths of my soul. I would rather not know about his depths.

He starts talking about the glory years. Bill spent two years in law school before he left college to be a pharmaceutical salesman. His joke must be as old as time. He made enough selling "ludes" to buy a 260 Z and spend a winter in Mexico. According to him, those were the days.

While he was enjoying the high life, I was leaching for all I could. Hanging on to Bill, and working for him, was my personal war on poverty. Life was chicken and dumplings, as long as we had a good supply of product and buyers.

Things turned to beaks and feet when Bill got more interested in product and women, than in sales. He said "you could get any babe if you had the right drug." Then he used to go out and prove it. He crashed one day in the early fall of 1979. I remember driving him to hospital. He cried and mumbled for a full day before I decided he needed to be locked up.

The hospital called his father and I was dismissed. Bill disappeared for six weeks. I remember calling his folks' house. His mom and dad hung up on me so I gave up after a few calls. I called the hospital where I dropped him off.

They would not tell me anything.

When I saw him for the first time out of the hospital, his face was ashen and his hair was slicked back. His skin was drawn and his skinny frame was skinnier, he looked like he aged ten years. He would not tell me where he had been or what was done to him. He said he flushed the "ludes" and the rest of the drugs down the toilet, and refused to talk about them. It took two weeks to get him to drink a beer. He later told me that his old man put him in a private hospital to dry out. He told me that his old man should have shot him and got it over with. We did not speak about his incarceration for years. When we did talk about it, Bill spoke in the third person. Like he was detached from himself and someone else had gone through the process. We promised each other that if in the future, one of us got locked up, the other would bust him out. The guy on the outside would pull an "Arnold" and waste all who got in his path.

Bill worked for his father after he got out of the hospital. He worked for the old man until the old man died. After the funeral, Bill and I drank half a bottle of Irish whisky and smoked the better part of a bag. Bill and his mom sold the company and Bill bought a new BMW.

Along with the new wheels came a new life style. He found a new jones. Bill would screw anything. I told him many times that he had no taste at all. He would answer, "they all taste the same." I asked him once if he found his latest piece in a dumpster. He smiled and said "poon is poon."

Those days were almost as good as the "lude" days. He changed women quite often and I hung around for the leftovers. I called that era my sloppy second days. My standards were exactly the same as his. The only standard we had was that they were still breathing. The standard was exact and the supply was endless. Many times we tipped a glass to the girls that were easy.

When Bill was in law school he got pulled over by the cops for speeding. The last thing he needed was a ticket and the higher insurance rates that go with a ticket. Bill read up on that part of the law and found his solution. He got a speedometer cable repair receipt from Louie at the Marathon gas station. He made an appointment to see the judge, in the judge's chambers. Bill showed the judge the receipt and got the ticket dismissed. The way Bill tells the story you would think he won the lottery, or got some first class poon for free.

Sometimes I envy Bill. He seems to be the luckiest guy I know. However, I am not exactly sure what luck is all about. Bill brags about his great fortune with the law and gulps down cold Canadians. I figure my great luck is that I have never owned a car, so I never have gotten a ticket. I join Bill gulping down cold Canadians. I wonder what my life would be like if I were him.

I wonder about Sheila. Not as a woman living with a man, rather a freeze-dried trophy. Fix her up, shut her mouth, and she would be a Greek Goddess. Put roller skates on her feet and wheel her around. You could show her off anywhere and you would not have to feed her. Guys would drool all over themselves. Next to a piece of ass like her, all the others would be left over poon.

The only problem could be if the freeze dry machine broke down. I could live with her thawed out for about forty-five minutes. My mother used to say to me “you drive me to drink.” If I lived with her, there would not be enough beer in Ontario to keep me going. My criteria are “easy and silent.”

Bill and I move around the house hiding from the women. We move from the basement to the living room to the garage. We use the excuse that Bill and I need to scope out my bike. As soon as we get out to the garage we burn one. Since we are stuck with both women, we decide to roll a big one, and we smoke it down to the roach. We finish our beers and torch the roach. It's too damn cold in the garage so he follows me into the house and down the stairs (back) to the basement. As soon as we get comfortable, the girls come down the stairs and bitch at us that we are avoiding them. Bill looks at me and I look at him. We roll our eyes in unison and follow the girls up the stairs.

We are driven out of our favorite haven. I feel like a saber tooth tiger being chased out of its cave by a pair of Neanderthals. The beat-up old couch and nineteen inch TV are abandoned in favor of the fancy furniture and twenty-six inch set. Since we are within walking distance of the fridge we decide to have a couple more Canadians. Bill starts telling the story about how he beat the ticket from hell. I do not want to hear the story again so I go back into the kitchen and search for the whisky. A couple shots later and a new means of escape appear. The bottle is almost empty. Our excuse arrives from above.

I go out to the garage and roll a traveler while Bill takes a pee.

Bill and I pile into the Buick and get comfortable. I ask him why he does not drive a BMW anymore. He answers, “bite me.” Perhaps Bill is a factory Ebonics scholar. I ask him if he is an Ebonics scholar? He answers, “drop dead.”

I decide to ignore him and practice my paranoia. I fire up the reefer and hand it over to Bill. He takes his time with it, and it concerns me, so I look out the window for cops. Bill pokes me with his elbow and hands me the reefer. I continue to watch out the window while Bill pops in a Stones disc. Bill says that he and Sheila are not getting along. I ask what the problem is, and he answers, “she does not want to drill any more.” I tell him “women are like parts for a Chevy, you can get them anywhere.” He nods his head and we finish our trip to the liquor store.

The grill is already warmed up, so Bill and I step out the door wall and put the burgers on the fire. The girls are busy in the kitchen taking care of the rest of the dinner. While we cook, Bill and I drink two more Canadians. We have had enough alcohol. When Sheila comes outside to see if the burgers are cooked, he tells her that she has to drive the Buick home tonight. You would think that she was being sent to Afghanistan to work for Osama bin Laden. Her face turns grey, and she accuses him of ruining the dinner and being a drunk. Bill rolls his eyes and heads off to the kitchen to get another beer. He leaves Sheila on the deck with me.

I look out over the yard and say, “nice weather, but it might rain.” She stares at me, stomps across the deck through the door wall, and into the house. If she could only walk through the door wall and into an airplane propeller the day could be salvaged. It would be worth the clean up trouble, just to get rid of her. We could put her remains in a cigar box and leave it in the factory. Let the machine say words over her.

I see Bill and Sheila through the door wall. They have their coats on and their mouths are not moving. He walks out the front door before her, a beer in his left hand and an empty burger bun in his right. A good friend does not have to say goodbye. Even if he cannot.

I look at my wife and take a pull of my beer. She turns her head and sticks her hands in the sink. The burgers are done so I take them off the grill and put them on a tray. When I enter the house she says "Sheila has a headache so they went home." I say nothing and put the tray on the kitchen table. I put two burgers on a bun, slop some mustard on, and take a bite. She goes to the bathroom and I go into the garage. I finish my burger and beer and stroke the seat of my bike. Not such a bad evening. I ate and drank my fill and now I am alone with my bike.

Perhaps she is crying or cleaning up the kitchen. It does not matter to me. If she does not clean up, I will do it later. If she is crying, that's her problem too, as long as she does it quietly. Bill and Sheila screwed up dinner, not me. Let them take the heat. I am in the clear.

Sunday is the best day of the week. I wake up alone and the sun is shining in through the window. She has gone to work or perhaps she has gone to see a friend of hers. It does not matter to me because she will be gone at least half of the day. Maybe when she comes home she will not be horny. I can only hope. If I catch a giant break she will not be home until dinner.

Good times start with scrambled eggs and fried leftover burgers. I pound down two cups of hot coffee and cruise out to the garage. My pipe is lying on the workbench. I fill it and light it up. I smoke slowly and look at my bike. A heavy calm settles over me and I put my leg over the seat and grab the handlebars of the Suzuki. The world goes by, and my troubles go up in smoke.

An open bag of cracked corn is on the workbench, so I grab it, and go outside and fill up the bird feeder. The songbirds have the life. I feed them and they pay no taxes. When things get too heavy they fly away without a forwarding address. I wonder if they can be tracked down? Can a bird tell one from another? If people had the same faces could I tell one from another?

The birds do not matter to me. The coffee is hot and I have a stash in the garage. The telephone is not ringing and the clothes dryer is not running. I am free of the machine and my wife. It does not get any better than this.

I fill my coffee cup and go down the stairs into the basement. I find the couch in the dark and it forms itself to my body. We meet in a Zen like trance and share peace and comfort. Would I trade Bill for this couch? Sure, but I have both of them, and a cup of coffee, to me this is a grand slam.

This is my piece of furniture. The rest belong to her and the finance company. I wonder how much she owns and how much the finance company owns. If somebody from the finance company wants to come to my house and use his share of the furniture, it is fine with me. Perhaps he could bring a six-pack and a stash of his own and we could become friends. It would be a strange way to make friends but it may work out.

I remember signing the papers for the furniture but I cannot remember the terms. The guys who work at the factory somewhere in the south, can they afford to buy their own furniture? Do they have safe working conditions? Do they care about the quality of my life? Those guys are between a rock and a hard place. If I buy their furniture the guys are the machine's slaves. If I

do not buy it, they cannot feed their families. When the furniture is paid off, do I become an anarchist? Or do I need to go to the nearest furniture store and buy more furniture?

Ella sneaks up on me while I daydream about her father. A rotten twist of fate, that she got him for a father and he was not mine. I push her memory aside and think about her father's bakery. He did not work like a baker. He drove his new Lincoln to work every day, and made business decisions. I would have been more than happy to become a baker. Why not start at the bottom and learn everything about the business? Ella, a new car, and a job with a future were all I ever wanted. Instead I wound up being her Merc convertible. When she got tired of it, she traded it in. The Merc eventually wound up in the scrap iron yard.

When I went to pick her up, her dad and I would talk about sports, politics, and the bakery business. He took an interest in my opinions and engaged me in meaningful conversation. I would rather talk to him than Ella. She was really good for groping, not talking.

I think he wanted me to marry Ella. More than once he asked me if I was interested in the bakery business. Once I grew a moustache and let my sideburns grow long like his. Ella never liked it when I made a decision about my grooming without her input. She commented that she liked me with short hair and clean-shaven. I cleaned up to make her happy. Anything to keep the groping going. I think that if I slit my throat with a rusty tomato can it would have been all right with her as long as I was groomed to her specifications.

At times like this I think about a sci fi book I read years ago. It was about the probabilities of alternative universes. Events can follow other paths than the ones we are aware of. These other paths are the alternative universes that exist parallel to this universe. The alternative dimensions are an endless roadmap of possibilities that take off in all directions.

In one of these dimensions Ella and I are together. I am a successful businessman and she is my loving wife. We have a large house in the suburbs and take two vacations to Mexico every year.

If I can have one alternate path why can't I have multiple alternate paths? I could have Sandy or Judy at the same time in other dimensions. These realities, going on at the same time, while I fade in and out of dimensions to meet my needs.

IV

A noise upstairs woke me up. My mouth tasted dirty and my muscles feel stiff from sleeping on the couch. The wife must be up stairs in the kitchen putting groceries away, or straightening things out in the pantry. I could not sleep any more so I figured I better let her know that I was in the basement. The last thing I want to do is come up the stairs and scare her. The consequences would last a week. She never did have a sense of humor, or showed me any mercy.

The best way to notify her is to do it subtly, so I locate an instrumental disc and load it in the player. The music starts quietly. I sat down in the easy chair and half listened. I heard a loud thump and a woman's scream that made the hairs on my neck stand up.

The scream was more piercing than the sound of a woman spilling hot spaghetti sauce on her lap. I listened again. This time to nothing, and vaulted the stairs two at a time. The kitchen was empty but the living room was a mess. Things were missing and scattered, and I felt a draft.

I looked in the front hall and saw my wife lying on her back. Her eyes were wide open and blood was pooling on the floor besides her. The handle of my favorite kitchen knife was sticking out of her chest.

I walked out of the house onto the porch, leaned over the rail, and puked. The world was spinning and I puked again through my nose. My shoes had blood on them and I slipped as I staggered back into the house. I bent down next to her and pulled the knife out of her. It dripped blood on her face and down my arm. I stood up and looked around, not seeing anything.

The neighbor's house is only a few steps away. I slowly walked across the lawn to their house. I knocked on the siding with my fist and noticed the knife in my hand. I dropped the knife and saw the bloodstain I had left on the siding.

The neighbor's daughter came to the door and looked at me through the window in the door. Her eyes are open wide and her jaw has dropped. She screams and I heard her throw the deadbolt on the door. I looked down at the bloody knife on the porch and wiped my hand on my jeans. There was no more I could do at my neighbors. No one was here to help me. I turned around and sat down on the step. My head was spinning. I leaned over the side of the porch, the air was heavy and I puked again. A siren screamed, then I heard another from the opposite direction. I sat there crying while the cops arrived.

Two clean-shaven young boys in blue ran across my front lawn toward me with their guns drawn. They yelled a command at me and pointed their guns at my chest. I ignored them and watched an ambulance screech to a halt in front of my house.

The cops put me in hand cuffs and asked me my name. Their mouth seemed to move in slow motion and I could not understand their words. Both men seemed to be talking to me at the same time. All their words blend into a meaningless goop of sounds. The younger of the two took my wallet from my hip pocket and looked through it. This offered me some relief and I attempted to sit back down. Both cops grabbed me by my arms and pulled me back to my feet. I saw the ambulance attendants race into my house as they shouted orders to two more police who had just arrived.

Four cops lead me to a police car and locked me in the back seat. I asked if they could open a window, but they ignored me. Two policemen got into the front seat of the car. The police car lights went on and the siren screamed in my ear. The cops refused to talk to me as we drove to the police station. I did not care. I was relieved to be in a clean car away from my house and neighborhood.

The landscape spun as we drove along. I closed my eyes to escape the horror I was living. This calmed me down and I could feel my heart beat slowing down. I thought about the machine. How it continued to do what it was built to do. Blood could not stop the machine and I wish I was with the machine right now. We could escape into the machine's world and drown out the scream of the siren.

We could build things. The machine and I could exchange ideas and come up with some innovations that would be perfect. Perhaps we could not build the perfect car. But with the machine's muscle and my innovations we could do a terrific job building a better car. Instead of

fighting against each other, we could become the team we should have been. We could share life and take care of each other.

I wonder why the cops were treating me roughly. They pushed and shoved me out of the car and into an old red brick building. The hall was narrow and stunk from cigarette smoke. They put me into a small room with no window and three chairs around a formica topped table. My mouth was dry and tasted of vomit. I looked around the small room and decided to walk around it. The room reminded me of the coffee room at work. The walls were cinderblock and the ceiling was cheap ceiling tile. The electrical was piped in and a p.a. speaker was mounted above the door. The florescent lights were too bright and the chairs were not padded. Perhaps the city could paint and install some vending machines in the room to make it more comfortable. I had forgotten about the handcuffs that held me. I realized that this room was not buildt for comfort and the cops thought that I killed my wife.

I sat down and thought about a story I once read about the NKVD. They likely would send in two goons to get a confession out of me. Perhaps they would beat me. At the end of the interrogation they would get a confession out of me and I would be glad it was over. They would next take me downstairs into a small cement room with a single light bulb in the ceiling and a drain hole in the floor. They would put a .22 to the back of my head and blow my brain out.

I sat there shaking when two cops in suits came into the room and introduced themselves. They removed the handcuffs and sat down across from me. The cop with the moustache asked me if I wanted to make a statement. At first I did not understand what he said. He must have seen confusion in my face and asked me a second time, if I wanted to make a confession. I asked him "about what." He told me that I had killed my wife, and it would be easier on me if I made a statement before I was arrested and charged.

I told him: "bite me."

The clean-shaven cop brought me some clean clothes and a wet towel. I was glad to get my blood stains off my hands. I asked for a glass of water and thought about asking for a joint, but refrained from doing so. The last thing I wanted to do was antagonize the NKVD. Perhaps this glass of water was my last request before they shot me.

I closed my eyes and thought that I might wake up on the couch down the basement, like after a bad dream. But the cops would not let me close my eyes. They kept poking me with their fingers and telling me to pay attention. But I refused to pay attention because there was nothing to pay attention to. If I could just hang on, I could slide into an alternate dimension and be with someone who cared for me. I thought about pulling my head into my shirt but the shirt was too small, or my head was too big.

People came in and out of the room often. I refused to speak to any of them. They all wanted me to make a statement. I wanted to tell them about my job and my home. They wanted me to tell them I killed my wife. We could not reach any common ground.

A young woman in a neat suit came into the room and told me she was a doctor. She asked me questions that I did not hear and then offered me some pills to help me calm down. I refused the pills and asked her if I could close my eyes. She did not answer so I shut my eyes and pictured her naked. I could have gone on all day like that but she grabbed me by my shirt

and shook me. I usually do not like being touched. However, I enjoyed her touch and looked forward to her touch again. I smiled at her and she got up and left the room. As she left, I asked her what her first name was, but she did not answer. Perhaps she could meet me in another dimension and we could explore the possibilities.

Perhaps we could meet in another dimension and I could be her doctor.

I have nothing to say! My hands are bloody and my wife is dead. If I could only open my eyes and wake up on the couch. If I could walk out the door and step in the puddles. Lose myself in the night and stare into the shadows. Here I am with no defense. I am doomed. They have me where they want me. The plan has been executed to perfection and they will try to execute me to perfection.

My death will be quiet and painful. Will they walk me to a quarry and stab me in the heart? Will they drop me into a machine and grind my body to bits? Perhaps they will throw me in a cell and forget about me. They will not even give me the dignity of being remembered. I will rot away like an old chunk of lettuce.

After a while a cop came into my room. I call this my room because I believe I will be in this room for the rest of my life. Since I am the main occupant I see this room as my property. He asks me if I am gay? Was I working with another guy to eliminate my wife so we could be together? He tells me that he understands my needs, and that if I unburden myself, I will feel better. He asks me if I would like to make a statement? He tells me that my feelings are only natural.

His tone is harsh, and his face is old and lined. He seems to repeat over and over the same questions. Is he human or is he a machine? Perhaps another has programmed him, and controls him. Whatever he is, and whatever he wants, means nothing to me. I ask him to send in my union steward and he leaves the room.

A young woman entered the room and sits across the table. She told me that she is my lawyer and that I do not have to talk to the police. She told me that that the police captured a young man four blocks from my house. He hit another car and was pinned in his car until the fire department freed him. The police found a cut on his hand and his clothes were covered with blood. Items that probably were mine, were found in a bloody sack in the front seat of his car. The police believe that he killed my wife because he had a history of being a gay prostitute and a criminal, and that I was his friend.

She tells me that I am under a suicide watch. Two police enter the room, read me my rights, and lock me in a cell by myself. I take a leak and lay down on the cot. I close my eyes and fall asleep at last.

I wake in the middle of darkness not knowing where I am. The dark is comforting and I think about my dream. Ella and I are sailing on a great steel ship on Lake St. Clair. I am thin and she is stacked. We lie in the sun and drink French champagne. I stretch my body to offer full exposure to the sun. The champagne turns into a guillotine and severs Ella's head. I feel a relief that I have woken up. Perhaps I need to talk to a shrink about my dream or maybe a French chef. A guard walks down the hall and looks between the bars. I ignore him and he walks on. The night is pure luxury and I enjoy all of it. I close my eyes and wait for my next dream.

Two burly Eastern European men enter the cell and tell me that they are the Cheka. "We have little time for you, you have committed great crimes against the people," they say. "Comrade, you have no choice, if you do not answer our questions we will shoot you." I stare into their eyes, which look like dials on a machine. I know that they mean business. Whatever they want me to say or sign, I will comply. I have no choice, they are the hounds, and I am their bitch.

My response has no meaning. The larger of the two removes the rings from my hand. They walk me down some stairs to a small block room with a single light bulb and a drain in the floor. One bullet in the back of my head and they can go home to their children.

The senior of the two will get my gold fillings.

They would wrap my body in an old grey blanket. The two men would carry my body upstairs through a narrow hall to a steel door. The door would be open and they would lock my body in the trunk of a black Skoda. They would drive to a used up gravel pit and dump the evidence. I would become an unperson.

No gravestone, no wake. No one to mourn for me. Perhaps the machine or the man who takes my place would remember me. One day they could bury the machine next to me and we could remember our better days and rust the centuries away.

I awoke with a startle and felt the cold sweat on my neck. Sleeping is out of the question so I paced the room. I use my left hand to feel the texture of the walls and take off my shoes to feel the cold of the floor. I want to absorb all the sensory feelings I can, while I still can.

A policeman walked into the room and tells me to put my shoes back on. He offers me a sandwich wrapped in wax paper and a paper cup of black coffee. I refuse the food and ask for pizza and beer. He leaves the food on the floor and locks the bars behind him. He looks back and asks me if I want to make a statement. I answer, "Why? You are going to shoot me anyway!" He shakes his head and walks down the hall.

He returns after a while and leads me out of the cell, down the hall, through a door, and into a busy room with a large desk. I sign for my personal belongings and Bill is waiting for me. I am told I can leave the police station but I cannot leave town.

We drive slowly and quietly through traffic. Without telling me, I know that Bill was taking me to his house. Perhaps I can spend the rest of the day staring at his wife without having to talk to her. If she could just cook and walk around looking good, I could have a very good day.

Sheila greets us at the door with a soft smile. I have never seen her face look exactly like it looked tonight, and I find it mildly stimulating. Bill goes into the kitchen and grabs two beers. He cracks the caps and hands me one. I took the beer from him and gulp a third of it down. I put the bottle on his kitchen counter and stare at the label for a while. Bill says something I do not hear and pokes me on the shoulder. His mouth was moving but I heard nothing. I finally understand that he is offering me a shot of liquor. He says, "Name your poison." I answer "arsenic." Bill gives me a funny look and picks out a bottle of whiskey that is in a kitchen cabinet. He pours me a double shot and I pour it down with one gulp.

Sheila handed me a tuna sandwich on toast with potato chips on the side. I ate the meal while I took side-glances at Sheila's breasts. This is the best that I have felt since my adventure

began. A mild buzz, good food, and a floor show. My spirits are lifted and I am ready to face what I have to face. After all I have been through, I finally catch a break.

Bill tells me that I was in the joint for three days, and the cops may want to question me again. I have no comment; I just sit and eat my sandwich, and wait for Bill to continue. Sheila caught part of the conversation and left the room. She excused herself with the excuse that she had to do the laundry. The food had no taste, but the alcohol is kicking in. I put the sandwich down and pour myself another shot of whiskey and finish it with one gulp.

Bill explains that a man named Peter Kronski is the guy who was caught with my stuff. Under interrogation, he confessed to the murder of my wife and the robbery of my house. Kronski has a history of male prostitution and break-ins. That is why the police thought I was involved with him. Kronski was involved with a guy a couple of years ago. The man's wife was murdered and Kronski was accused of being involved in the killing. Eventually the murder was pinned on the friend and Kronski was back on the streets. At the trial it came out that Kronski and his friend were lovers. The cops have been looking at Kronski ever since.

Bill said that he got information from my lawyer and that the police would be going through her when they want to talk to me. I asked him the name of my lawyer. He hands me a business card with the name "Stacy Black, Attorney at Law." He told me that there probably would not be a trial since Kronski confessed. He suggested that I find some way to put this all behind me. He told me that the cops kept me in jail while they sorted out the facts and that I should not have any hard feelings about my ordeal. I answer, "If I ever see Joe Friday again I will shove his fat ass into the machine and piss on his remains."

I go to the fridge and grab another beer. It is time we talk about the funeral so I ask Bill about it. He answers that her parents took care of the arrangements, and yesterday she was buried at the old cemetery on Central Street. He asks me if I would like to visit the cemetery. I close my eyes and picture a dark and damp clump of earth with a wooden box buried six feet down. I decline the invitation and finished my beer.

Bill tells me that my wife's car is in his garage and he has the keys. He wants to know if I want to go anywhere. I answer him that I want the keys and I want to go home and rest. He gives me the keys and we walk down the hall toward the back door. I stick my head in the laundry room to thank Sheila and take another look at her breasts. She's leaning over the dryer and her butt is sticking up. I stammer, "thanks for lunch" and go to the garage with Bill.

Bill tells me that my house is locked up and the house key is on the ring with the car keys. I get into the car and back up the drive into the street. I notice that my feet were cold, but I have no money to buy a pair of wool socks. Perhaps I can find a clean pair at home, so I forget my discomfort and drive slowly down the street toward the cemetery.

I park her car about a mile from the cemetery and get out of the car. The air is raw and cold. I relish the walk to her grave. A light snow began to fall as I near the cemetery. I slow down and let the snow fall on my hands. It pools in my hands like small lakes. I catch another break. I do not have to worry about rust. My feet are numb and I am sorry that I did not stop at home and get some wool socks. I will not make that mistake again.

The fence that surrounds the cemetery is as tall as I am and made of steel bars painted black. I walk around the perimeter of the cemetery and look through the bars at the graves. There is

no way to tell which one is hers. It does not matter to me. One grave is the same as another to me. There is a small pond on the grounds with a canopy and a mound of dirt near it. Perhaps this is the home of the cemetery's next customer? Maybe her grave is near by? It begins to snow harder so I walk back to the car and drive home.

Bill, or someone has cleaned and straightened out my house. Who ever it was, I am forever in their debt. I find a note on the kitchen table that is from my union steward and foreman. It says I can take all the time off I need. I figure I will take all the time off I can get away with. A cold beer beckons me so I open the fridge and grab one. It goes down easy so I grab another one and drink it slowly. What I need now is closure. I need to put an end to the most frightening odyssey of my life. I have only one tool in mind. Hello Holiday Inn!

I stuff my small suitcase carelessly with toiletries, a few clothes, and a swimsuit. The only thought in my mind is the pool and sauna at the motel. I have always loved sauna baths. I can close my eyes, sweat and dream. My money stash is in the garage in a cigar box under my dope. Why bother counting it? I have a pocket full of plastic and a money clip packed with my stashed green. Life is looking better than it has looked in a long time. The future is full of possibilities.

The hell with her car. Just another thing to think about. I grab my bag and head back out to the garage to get my dope. I walk out the front door toward the motel. After walking a while, I realize that the motel is too far for me to walk to, so I head for the nearest bus stop.

I have the correct change in my pocket so boarding the bus is no problem. I do not know how I got change in my pocket. I cannot remember ever having the correct change for the bus. Perhaps it was in my jeans all along. Maybe the police gave it to me at the police station. Nevertheless, things are going my way. I believe my luck has turned for the better. Maybe I am on a roll.

The bus is mostly empty and clean. I choose an isolated seat and stretch out. A used newspaper is on the seat next to me so I pick it up and look at the front page. The headline reads "killer confesses." The story is about the robbery of my house and the death of my wife. The second paragraph talks about Kronski's accident and confession. The story says the husband was implicated in the killing but later cleared.

For the first time in my life, I see my name in print. Perhaps all the reading public in town has read my name. I have finally reached notoriety. People all over the state, perhaps all over the nation, have read my name. All the people who ignored me in high school now see that I am somebody. Best of all, the entire story says nothing about my failures or the machine. Perhaps I should go to my next high school reunion. I have never had any interest in high school reunions. Next time I might be a celebrity at a reunion. I will refuse to dance with the cool chicks that wanted nothing to do with me. At last glory has taken a crap on my head.

The future is getting better minute-by-minute. I see it as a banquet of pizza and Canadian beer by the keg, in a cave of ultimate quiet. Now I can tell the world "leave me alone." I close my eyes and see butterflies flying around a lake. A machine rises out of the swampy end of the lake and rotates 360 degrees, as if it is looking around. It stops and looks at me, then it turns into a mound of corrosion and sinks back into to quagmire, never to be seen again.

The Inn is bright, neat, clean, and cheaply built. The assistant manager informed me that they have a four-day special at a reduced price. I accepted his deal like a beggar being offered a free meal. I sign the register. He accepted my plastic and assigned me a room near the sauna-pool area. I am glad I took the initiative and asked for what I wanted. Perhaps I need to be more assertive in the future. Maybe not, it could be that I am tired and do not want to wander around the inn, lost in a fog.

The thought crosses my mind that today is Thursday or perhaps Friday. Until that moment I had no idea what day of the week it was. That is because I had no interest in the day of the week, time of day, or season of the year. I drop my suitcase and walk to the picture window facing a courtyard. The small trees are naked and the benches are covered with snow and ice. The sun is shining and the snow is turning to water and running off the roof. I look at the clock on the wall. It reads 4:16.

How things change quickly and dramatically. I will evolve from the great unwashed, to the great well scrubbed. All it will take is some time, money, and soap. I pick up my suitcase, fish around my pocket for my room key and follow the door numbers down the hall to my room.

The room is clean and tidy. I put on my swim trunks and head back down the hall to the sauna. The facility is empty, but the temperature of the sauna is too cool for me. I find the thermostat and call for more heat. There is a bucket of water on the floor and a wooden ladle. I scoop up water and pour it slowly on the rocks. A cloud of steam billows from the rocks and I do it again.

The bench is made of wood and the walls match. I climbed to the top bench and close my eyes. Ella looks back at me. The thought crosses my mind that her face may be printed on the inside of my eyelids. I chuckle to myself and let the images continue to flow like a cartoon on a TV screen.

I am back in my suite, laying face down on the bed. Next to the bed, on a table, is champagne and lobster. Sixteen-year-old Ella is standing next to me wearing a white terrycloth robe and sandals. Her sandy blond hair catches the summer sunlight. She squirts lotion on her hands and rubs it on my back and shoulders. She stops and sips champagne as she works. When she gets tired a steel robot that looks a lot like her continues the massage while she eats and drinks. The hands of the robot are soft like her hands and I cannot tell the difference.

Ella finished a piece of lobster and takes her turn rubbing my back while the machine picks up a quart of oil, it pours some into a champagne glass and drinks it. She begins to sing to me. I mouth the words as she sings, "And when we meet again introduced as friends, please don't let on that you knew me when. I was hungry and it was your world."

I feel myself losing my balance and I bump my head on the wall behind me. I wake up startled and shake my head to clear out the cobwebs. Perhaps I have been in the heat too long. I leave the sauna and go down the steps into the pool. The shock of the cold water wakes me fully and clears my head. I would rather be back in my room with Ella.

I felt clean and refreshed. I scratched my stomach and recognize the hunger pains. A cold shower and clean clothes are all I need to face the rest of the day. The assistant manager at the desk recommended an Italian restaurant a block south of the Inn. He told me the food is very good and the atmosphere is pleasant and private.

The walk south is all I could ask for. The sky is clear and the air tastes like country air. I take my time and enter the dining room with some reluctance.

An old man with a thick accent meets me by the desk and orders a young woman to seat me. The way he talked to her I assume that she is his daughter or niece. I asked her, "is he is your old man?" She answers sarcastically, "how can you tell?" She was a little plump but she had a pretty face. I have always believed I had a talent for finding gems in a coalmine.

She recommends the pasta with seafood sauce and Pinot Grigio. The pasta sounds good so I ordered it with a bottle of Italian beer. While I mindlessly eat bread sticks and enjoyed the waitresses figure, I notice two young women across the small room. They seem to be non-stop talking while they cut and eat their meat and spaghetti. They do not seem to notice me, but I think I can smell their perfume. The odor of the food mixed with the perfume makes me light headed. Perhaps the combination of fine Italian food and these two women is the equal of pizza and beer?

When my dinner arrives I ask the waitress to send a bottle of Chianti to the women's table. The pasta is good and I have a mouth full of shrimp when the two women wave at me and call out "thanks." I answer, "my pleasure" and go back to my food and drink. For the remainder of my meal I ignore the other patrons and finish two more beers. The waitress recommended the spumoni for desert and I agreed with her choice. The ice cream is a delicious finish to a delicious meal. I felt warm and content. The bill was reasonable and I pay it with cash and I leave the waitress a big tip.

As I leave the restaurant, I see the two women talking in the parking lot. I can't hear what they are saying but I can see their lips moving. Rather than follow the sidewalk north to the Inn, I walk through the parking lot near the women. When I get close to them they smile and thank me again for the wine. Their names are Sue and Lee and they ask me what I am doing. I answer that I have no plans and I was open for anything. After some small talk they tell me that they are party girls, and ask me if I would like to spend some time with them. We settle on a price and I gave them my room number at the Inn, with an agreement to meet at my room in an hour. I remind them to bring their swimsuits and I promise to supply the refreshments.

The liquor store on the next corner is my next stop. Two bottles of red wine and a twelve pack filled the bill.

In the Inn lobby, I hit the ATM machine and then go directly to my room. The girls arrive four beers and a joint later. After a swim and group shower I enter orifice heaven.

At 4:00 am the girls collected their well-earned money and leave me to enjoy my exhaustion. I cannot remember ever sleeping that well. When I wake up, I find a business card on the night table. It read "Susan and Lee Enterprises" and a phone number. I put the card in my wallet and go to breakfast.

I spent the remainder of my time at the Inn smoking, feasting, and bathing. The family at the Italian restaurant got to know me. They greeted me warmly and offered me fine service and food. I took a vow over my Chianti, I would return to the restaurant once a week for the rest of my life, or until I screwed the owners daughter. Which ever comes first.

Her first name was Gina. I never spent the energy to learn her last name. She reminded me of Ella. I reminded myself that every young woman with black hair and fair skin reminds me of

Ella. Perhaps after I conquer Gina, I will feel I have conquered Ella in a symbolic way, and it will be like some great accomplishment. Then again, did I miss my golden opportunity so many years ago? Perhaps fate offered me a tease instead of an opportunity. Is the remainder of my life just a casual walk through a torture chamber? Am I the victim of the Spanish Inquisition?

I stop thinking about my misery. This reflection can do me no good. Thoughts of the two ladies of the night take hold in my mind. I choose to relive that wonderful night over and over. When I choose to change the subject Gina becomes my fantasy.

The car is waiting for me. It starts easily and I find a car wash as I drive around with nothing to do. Bill left me a note on the kitchen table that listed instructions for me to follow. Next to the note was a copy of my wife's death certificate.

A bracer seems in order, so I find a bottle of rye, and pour myself a stiff shot. I have work to do so I need to stiffen up. My wife's important papers are in a cardboard box that is in the hall closet. I located the box and find a life insurance policy neatly folded in a manila folder with her name on it. She once told me that she was going to take out life insurance for us. I paid no attention to that conversation. I ignored the policy with my name on it.

After a boring afternoon on the telephone with the home office, a manager informs me that I will receive a \$350,000, death benefit. The check will be cut in about four weeks.

Life has dealt me a royal flush. For the first time ever, I know how truly lucky people feel, and I like it better than sex. I mean, I want to make the best of an extra large pizza covered in four leaf clovers. Perhaps somewhere there is a jeweler that could make me a mojo made of gold. It would be a pizza covered with four-leaf clovers that I could wear around my neck; to keep away the evil and the dark. When you have money anything is possible.

I figure I do not have to work for the rest of my life. All I have to do is control my expenses. The car is leased and I never signed any papers for it. The smart thing for me to do would be to drive it as long as possible. Sometime or another, somebody will figure out that I have the car. That's their problem. When they pick it up, I will come up with a new plan.

First thing is to call the phone company and order an unlisted number. Next, I will start keeping the car at Bill's house. The walk will do me good. If I bring Bill a bag once in a while he may let me keep it in the garage. Is this what it takes to be an anarchist? Could I write a book, "Anarchy of the Wealthy?" Have I hit on something or am I losing my mind? I guess only time will tell.

My free time, which is all my time, has taken on a new focus. Susie and Lee and their magic lips are all I think about. I tell myself a joke when I see a pretty young woman. Who is Ella? One time when I was driving down Wilson Street I laughed so hard I had to pull over and gain control of myself. I felt so good that I bought a six-pack and finished it before I got home. Imagine what a laugh I would have had if I had rolled one?

The girls have been kind enough to introduce me to some of their friends. The variety of women and exploration of new combinations is all I crave. I can have a party any time I feel like it. I can party with the partners of my choice as long as I give them forty-eight hours notice.

The house is a mess and I pay my bills when I feel like it. My utilities still work and no bill collectors bother me. As long as the girls get their cash they are as happy as clams. This is what freedom must be about.

Sometimes I think about the machine. My feelings are less hostile. Perhaps it is because the machine no longer holds me hostage. Have I turned into the machine? Am I holding the girls hostage? I reflect on these thoughts for a moment and then remember what the Godfather taught us: "It is only business."

Perhaps from machine to hooker, and everything in between, we all are held hostage by the greenback.

For all those years, I worked for the machine and received a check twice a month for my sweat. Now I stay at home and eat and screw. I receive a check once a month from the union retirement fund not to work. I know the check is from the benefits office but it feels like it's from the machine. Given a choice between the two there is no choice. Could life get any better?

The first thing I gave up after acquiring my fortune was my job. The second was cooking. If I did not eat a sandwich or takeout leftovers I would eat beef jerky that I had bought at the beer store. I would chew it until my jaw ached.

One day I could not face the few morsels of food I had in the house. I decided to prowl the neighborhood for something to eat. I walked around until I discovered Dave's Diner, breakfast any time, \$2.99. The Special.

I finally found a place where I could eat and see a floor show.

Dave cooked the food, filled coffee cups at the counter, and worked the register. At my first \$2.99 banquet I noticed that my fried eggs were floating in a clear yellow liquid. I said to the waitress, "are these eggs fried in margarine?" She answered, "no Honey, motor oil."

I went to Dave's almost every day. I would load up on the Special just before the lunch customers stormed the place. The Special would stay with me most of the day.

Sometimes I would sit at the counter and listen to Dave talk to the customers. On his kindest day he was as surly as an alley cat in heat. He called all his customers, "the latest Iraqi to defect." Always behind their backs, but always in front of all the others. His "have a nice day" had absolutely no sincerity. He could just as easily been thanking the Devil for giving him the plague.

I never complained or left food on my plate. I found Dave's and I dared not trifle with my good fortune. I got to recognize some of Dave's customers and I would nod my head, hello, to some of them.

One guy caught my attention the first week I started going to Dave's. His face looked like it belonged on a bottle of lye. He wore only camouflage clothes and combat boots. His eyes seemed to roll around his head when he talked to Dave or a waitress. I sort of looked forward to seeing him, perhaps I could even talk to him.

A couple of weeks after I started looking for him, I was sitting at the counter by the register. He came up to the register to pay his check. Dave took his money, looked at his bill, and said,

“you’re seventy five cents short, Mohammed. You gotta pay or I’m gonna reach into your chest and pull out your heart.”

Dave smiled for the first time that day. It went from ear to ear.

The guy just stared at Dave.

I reached in my pocket and pulled out a buck. I gave it to Dave and told him to stick the left over quarter up his ass. I paid my check and left the restaurant.

The guy was standing by the curb. He asked me my name and why I covered for him. I told him my name and explained that I did not like seeing Dave get upset.

My answer satisfied him and the seventy five cents was forgotten. We talked for a while. He told me his name was Marty, and although he was not a survivalist, he agreed with much of their beliefs. He kept 1200 pounds of dried food in his room and a bulletproof vest in his car. He told me you couldn’t be too careful.

I saw him again a few days later. He looked at me like he did not remember who I was. A few seconds passed and he greeted me with “want your money back?” I said no, and offered to buy him the Special. He sat down across from me and proceeded to tell me that there are a lot of good people in Afghanistan, but they would all have to die. I took his comment in stride and asked him if the livestock had to die along with the people.

Two things were apparent to me. One was that Marty had some kind of learning disorder. He would flip from subject to subject as quickly as a sprinter draws breaths; and he could not follow a conversation directed by someone else.

The second thing I discovered, is that I may have learned something in Psych 101. After about a month of hanging around with Marty, and learning a great deal about assault weapons, I stopped seeing him. Our association was a milestone in my life. I finally met someone more nuts than I was.

Sometime later, Bill called me and told me that a man representing the auto leasing company was looking for the car. Bill said that I needed to find another place to keep the car because he did not want to get involved. I told him that I would move it tomorrow.

Overnight, a plan came to me. The weather was mild so I could get around on my bike. I would worry about four-wheel transportation in the fall. The girls have wheels and they deliver on time. Piss on the car and my wife’s credit rating. I do not care if she minds or not.

I picked up the car first thing in the morning along with some supplies. Two joints and three Canadians later I was north on I-75 at the Eagle State Park. I drove around until I found the perfect spot.

The hole I dug was not very deep; it did not have to be. I tossed in the hole my electric phone answering machine and a cheap sandy blond wig.

There were two more joints in my pocket. I sat on a fallen tree limb and smoked them both. There was no need for me to carry any contraband. I finished the six-pack and enjoyed the buzz while I waited for nature to call.

After a while, I peed in the hole, placed a ten-dollar bill on top of the puddle and covered the hole with dirt. I placed the ignition and trunk car keys under the floor mat of the car, closed the door, and walked away.

The trip home took most of the day. I walked for two or three hours toward Saginaw. When I felt sober enough to thumb a ride, I stuck my thumb out. Four rides later I arrived home.

V

All the players are in place. The weather has gone down the tubes, and a wet and gloomy fall is a memory. The sky has been grey for weeks, maybe months. Streets have been slick and the potholes have been full of water. I have been wearing my wool socks since the leaves fell off the trees. I believe it is time to either wash them or discard them.

My feet seem to feel better than the rest of me. If only I could feel as good as my feet. Strange, that the things that you walk on could feel the best to you.

I went to the lumberyard and bought wood planks and screws. I built a bench the right way. The ends of the boards are cut square and sanded. I put my pipe away and used Philips head screws to hold the bench together. Wood filler, more sanding and stain, urethane finished the project.

I filled the pipe with a large rock, grabbed a Canadian and admired my craftsmanship all night long. When sleep attacked, I lay down on the bench and slept until dawn.

The next morning I moved the bench against the paneled wall so the players would have some place to lean against during the proceedings. I would not want the group to be uncomfortable. Perhaps, they would have to spend some time sitting on this bench.

The cooler was full of ice, and the Canadians and the bong were loaded and ready to go. I bought a new lighter so we can all spend our time in the basement with our focus on business.

I brought two lamps down the stairs, so everyone will be able to see everything. We might as well expose everything to the light of the bulbs. We will leave nothing uncovered!

Everyone was seated but me. I couldn't help myself; I paced across the floor in front of the bench. I kept my face toward the bench as I paced. I wanted to see the eyes of the players and I wanted them to see my eyes. Perhaps face-to-face we could clear the air and settle our differences. Perhaps I can find some peace.

My father is the first to speak. His voice is larger than it needs to be. As he speaks, his body seems to inflate like a zeppelin. Perhaps some tire company could advertise across his stomach!

He bellows, "What a piece of shit," and sits down. Mom throws an elbow into his ribs and he seems to deflate to normal size. She urges him to explain like a human, and not act like an animal. He rises again more slowly and complains, "My son never gave me any respect. I went to work every day and made a living for my family, and what did I get from this kid? Nothing but shit."

Mom leans over and gives him a kiss on the cheek when he sits down. A smile spreads across his face and he beams. Mom sits back on the bench and puts her hand on his thigh. They both

inflate like zeppelins that are about to lift off the earth from Europe and head for New Jersey.

I reply, "Did I not try college, get a job, get married and build you this fine bench?" I look away and state, "I did my best." But I do not believe my last remark. I start again, "I tried for a while, until I ran out of juice."

After a short pause, I drink a Canadian, and take two tokes from the pipe. My wife stands up with her head lifted and speaks to the ceiling. She has tears in her eyes and her left hand over her crotch. She speaks quietly. "I tried my best, but, I was always so horny. I did not want other men, but, you did not satisfy me. If you had what I needed I would not have gone after designated hitters. I would have stayed with the first team." She sits down slowly with her legs crossed.

I increase my pacing and stare at her breasts. I ask her, "Why did you have to leave when you did, and where did you go?" She answers with an edge on her voice, "I went to prepare for you and you will find out where I am soon enough."

This unnerves me. I go over the bench and sit down between my mother and father. I put my right hand on my father's hand. It goes through his hand as if it were smoke. I put my left hand on my mother's hand and it feels like ice. They are both staring forward. I hate being ignored so I get up and finish the half beer that is still on the workbench.

The whores are next. Six of them sit on the bench, and they refuse to stand. They speak with one sing song voice: "Why bother us? Our time is valuable, why waste it? Don Corleone taught us that it is only business." Their faces are ashen.

I ask them, "What about orifice heaven?" They answer, "What makes you think you have anything that anybody else does not have? You are just a poor little man cruising down the road with his magic wand, just like everybody else. You filled our holes and you filled our pockets. Can we leave now? We have a living to make, and we have bills to pay."

I answer, "No, you just sit there. You have had your say. Now you must sit there until this is concluded. All the players must ride the bus until the last stop, because I bought the transfers."

The last players on the bench are the machine and Ella. I look at her and quietly tell her that she could have saved me. Not only did she wreck my life, but she also destroyed her life. We could have been the Brady Bunch. Instead, I am damaged goods.

Ella and the machine stare at each other while I stare at them. They slowly slide toward each other and blend together into one machine-woman. It looks almost like a man with woman's movements. It is made of metal and he has pipes for arms. Electrical wires are hanging from its hands and they are links from a conveyer belt. His head is a large switch and the handle of the switch goes up and down as he speaks. It has Ella's eyes. It rises from the bench and speaks: "I reject this bench. The wood is organic and is contrary to the material that my ass is made of. It has never been smelted or primed. I would rather stand and say my piece."

The machine-woman speaks in a grey metallic voice: "Perhaps you remember us? We have always dealt with you with dignity and directness. We have never used fraud or deceit. We are what we are! What are you? You know exactly what we are and how we work. What we have for you, is what you have for yourself. Look next to the workbench, and you will see a large bucket. Inside it is a piece of sturdy rope. You put it there yourself. It is time to enter the Fog."

STENCH

Yo, college boy. What the hell are you doing around here? Lookin all serious, in your clean cloths and haircut. I'll bet you even smell good, brushed your teeth and all. Sometimes I notice how rotten it smells around here. I'll bet you smell like flowers, or soap, or bacon and eggs. Could you come a little closer, so I can get a whiff. No, OK. Have it your way. I always liked to keep some distance too. Say, about that bacon and eggs. Did you have toast and strawberry jelly? I always liked a piece of coconut cream pie with breakfast.

Dave's, huh? Never heard of it. Maybe one day we could share some haute cuisine at your favorite bistro. Enjoy the fruits of our labors. Bond over quiche.

Yah, I had a fine breakfast. I ate what people like you throw away. Have you ever dined at the Dumpster Bistro? No, some time you must allow me to treat you to a meal. We can bring our ladies and have the daily special. You know the menu is different every day.

You can wipe that smirk off your face. Food is food and we both have to eat. Just because some sucker of a waitress refilled your coffee cup doesn't make you better than me. She whored herself for a fifty cent tip. Does that make you feel like a big dick?

You make me sick to my stomach. All you yuppies make me vomit. You should spend some time in this torture chamber. I can tell, you need an education. Not just an education, a real education. The kind money can't buy.

So, that's how its going to be. Keep your condescending bullshit smile to yourself and we can talk.

So your paper wants you to write about the homeless. Well, you came to the wrong place. What makes you think I am homeless? I have a pad right behind me, below that railroad bridge. Would you and your lady like to drop by for an aperitif? Perhaps canapés and Pinot Grigio?

Pile some cardboard boxes on top of each other and you have a poor man's Serta. You have no idea how comfortable my bed is. The bonus is, when the top piece gets worn, all you have to do is switch it with a middle piece. There you go, a brand ass new bed. How much money did you waste on your fancy bed? How old is your mattress? I get a new one after a good rain.

Look pretty boy, if you wanna write about me you gotta pay. I don't work much, but when I do, I don't work for free.

That will be just fine. Just make sure it's all in singles. I like to carry big wad in my back pocket. Kinda balances things off what I got in my front pocket.

No need to get huffy. Just a little joke among us guys. Cut a poor workingman a little slack. I'll watch my mouth.

So look, I'm around here almost every morning, unless I have an executive conference. I wonder if this area smells bad to anyone else. It's something you just don't get used to.

Sometimes I'm not so good the morning after. You gotta back off and leave me alone. We can't talk when I am sick. One time I went to the mission clinic when I was sick. They told me to go the hospital and have my stomach pumped. Could you believe it? I can puke on command. Why the hell would I go to the hospital? Home medication is always the best medication. I just walked out to the street and let 'er fly. Those fancy doctors could learn a lot from me.

I ain't got no time for any hospital. Service stinks, even if you have Blue Cross. Unfortunately, my policy has elapsed. I got things to do and responsibilities. I got property to protect. If somebody moves into my territory we argue, then we fight, and then the cops beat the crap out of us. Ever been beaten up? No? Not so bad. Beats the hell out of the cure.

You heal fast, you heal slowly. What's the difference? Time has no meaning.

Ever shake for two days? Believe me those do gooders are no friends of mine. When you dry something out it crumbles.

Yah, I know they are trying to help.

My ass. If they really wanted to help, they would open a free saloon. Hookers, gambling, the whole nine yards. Now, that would be a contribution to the community. Give us a good reason to get up in the morning.

OK, I will answer your questions. First, let's see the color of your money.

You could give me all of it now. I won't rip you off. At one time I was the employee of the month. OK, I'll time you with my Rolex. When the time is up, you pay.

My name? You can call me D.M. What the hell is the difference if that's my real name or not? That is all you need to know. If you need more information check with the CIA. Maybe they will declassify my file. You know national security is important these days.

All right, OK, don't push me, I'm very sensitive. You think I'm here because I'm a psycho or down on my luck?

First things first. No, I have never been in a nut house. Look if you keep interrupting me this interview is over.

Honest, sure, hasn't everybody been in the slammer? At least everybody I know has been locked up. In fact, everybody I know, and everybody in this hood has been incarcerated.

Do you like that word? I am the master of a great deal of impressive vocabulary. It comes in handy at corporate meetings. Hank Ford gets jealous when I use big words. Maybe that's why he dodges me.

As far as my luck is concerned. Why assume that luck took a crap on my head? Did you ever think that I maybe I am up on my luck?

I thought so.

You punch a clock and swing from the meat. Who do I answer to? Who chews me out? I live something you only dream about. I know freedom. What the hell do you know?

Would I rather be you? Depends. What does your old lady look like? Let's talk for a while about her talents. Does she like men with an aura of mystery about them? How about a big wad?

OK, OK, I'll let it go. What next? Yah, you love your wife. I once had one of those. I also had a Pinto. Wouldn't have either of them again. Both had high mileage and rust when I got them. Maybe a model with less mileage would have been more dependable.

I'll tell you why.

Say, have you got anything to drink?. A glass of white wine would be appropriate refreshment. I would look kindly upon your donation of a bottle next time we meet. Call it an added incentive. Perhaps a bonus for work well done.

Gimme my money and perhaps we can talk tomorrow.

2

Yah, I couldn't make it yesterday. Sorry you made the trip down here for nothing. Did you do some shopping a block over? They have a nice assortment of drugs at reasonable prices. You have a choice of some of the finest vintage wines in the world. A large selection of rotgut at Ted's beer and wine. And the broads, can't beat them with a stick. Somebody already did.

Not interested huh, how about a lottery ticket? Your passport to wealth and happiness. I could share my expertise with you. Drugs, alcohol or luck?

Not interested. Well, maybe you will change your mind. When you get my age your outlook may change. "What's bad is good, and what's good is bad." Things just hafta shake out. You will have a different angle, mark my words. Just give yourself some time, and time will give you a kick in the balls.

So, you want to start with my background? We can start with my mother and father. They are still dead. Natural causes. Rest easy, I didn't murder either one of them.

They were all right. I think the best day in their lives was when I went to college. They were into themselves. Getting me out of the house was their ticket to the good life. All they did was throw a few bucks at the system. They no longer had to deal with my shit. My shit was my shit. It was far away from them. When I moved into the dorm they turned my room into a den. The sign was clear as water. You don't live here any more.

I hated school. School-school-school. Clowns talking at you and testing you. Talk and test, test and talk day after day.

Eastern University. Three years of drinking and drugs.

Sure I dropped out. Actually I was asked to leave.

Yah, academic ineligibility. Fancy words for flunked out.

If it weren't for going to class it would have been excellent. I always told the chicks that I was pre-law. You're half way in their pants when they think your gonna make big bucks.

How many? Plenty. The best was Susan. She wanted to get married. Could you imagine a beautiful woman married to me? I could get larger pieces of cardboard and make a king size bed. We could vacation on the French Riviera and ski in the Alps.

Say, did you bring a bottle? All this yakking has dried me out.

Oh yah, some cash up front. Straight business.

Just like I like it, all singles.

The last payment is gone. What do I look like, The Bank of England?

That's my business. What the hell did you do with your last paycheck Mr. Ivy League?

Oh, Thee University of Michigan. Perhaps I should call you Brain Boy, from now on.

Well, call me impressed and molest my momma.

How many times did you get laid in college?

OK, back to me.

So, she wanted a ring and I wanted to play video games, get high, and pork. Looking back, she took the best care of D.M.'s old love pole.

Screw you, I can cry if I like. That was one girl worth crying for. If I weren't so unlucky I would be married to her today. We would have a place in the suburbs and kids. Her ass would be as wide as a Buick and I would be lookin to screw the baby sitter.

I gotta pee. Be back in a few. I'm lookin for a place with a bidet.

I feel a lot better. The old bladder ain't what it used to be. You know in the large scheme of things it makes no difference if you pee on yourself. All that matters is that you make room for more juice.

No, you can't drink too much.

Yah, video games and a buzz. Believe it or not I had quite a body in those days. I weighed 190 pounds back then. You know I thought that body would last for ever. I guess everything eventually turns to shit.

You know, even if this old body is on its last leg, it's my leg.

Racquetball, twice a week. I figured it balanced off the drinking and smoking. You know in those days I smoked two packs of Camels a day. Now I smoke what is on the ground, sometimes with lipstick on the butt. Talk about lungs. I thought they would last forever too. Now I only got one of them damn things. Oh well, one will get me by.

Say, lets play racquetball or squash some time. Call my secretary and she can squeeze you in. Hank will have to wait his turn.

I have not seen her in fifteen years. I see her face in the night sky. It takes a bottle or two to chase the stars away.

Now you got me thinking about booze and the sky.

Go away!

3

Well, well Mr. College Boy. Would you wear that blue and green tie you wore, was it yesterday? I liked it very much. Perhaps when you are finished with it you may like to donate it to the D.M. relief fund. You probably could use the tax write-off and a man cannot have too large of a wardrobe. I don't even care if it's not a designer tie.

You show a little generosity and everybody is a winner.

I'm feeling pretty good today. What would you like to talk about?

I once had a job in the automotive industry, a long time ago. The machine and I were best pals. We held hands like best friends. Well, not exactly hands, but close.

We worked side by side in harmony. The machine and I were waiting for a chance to stab the other in the back.

"It's the machines fault," was my motto. The machine never denied its guilt. But, I couldn't win. The machine had my number. It stayed up night's thinks about ways to hurt me or at least make me look impotent. Wrong word. I mean incompetent. If I ever find some dynamite I swear I will blow up some machine.

Yah, I really hated that job. Come to think of it I hate all work. Although, this job ain't too bad.

No, I never got used to it. I hated every day I went to that factory. After a while I just hated everything. That's when I dove into the sauce. Drugs and alcohol were my only friends. At least the only friends I knew I could count on. It's strange that people just change their minds. They're your pals, then they're your friends, and then they are strangers you used to know. None of those bastards have come to visit me at my new abode. You would think someone would at least send me a Christmas card. Maybe it's better to be forgotten.

Well, back to the days of drugs and booze. Days and years seemed to blend into each other. When things went rotten is beyond me. Maybe they were always rotten and I just didn't notice.

Oh, maybe ten years, then my wife died. You know, I never cried for her, not even today. I don't know why. I can't remember ever crying. It's not in my make up. I can take it.

No, it's not that I never loved her. It's more like I never loved anyone. Thinking back, I don't believe I have ever loved myself.

I go along tolerating things. Like you tolerate me. The toughest one to tolerate has always been old D.M.

Maybe that's why I cut my wrists when I was a kid.

Now don't start me crying, like you did before. I told you I'm very sensitive. And you hit on a nerve.

Sure, just give me a second to get a grip.

When it finally hit me between the eyes that Susan was through with me, it was more than I could take. I felt like my whole system was on overload. The pain was just too much for me to

handle.

You know I can take a ton of pain. You could put me on stretching rack and crank the sucker up. I wouldn't say a word. I would probably spit in your eye and laugh. That's the easy kind of pain. Sometimes it's so easy it's almost fun.

The hurt she put on me was too much.

Down the basement at my folk's place. They found me crying with blood on the floor and a razor blade in my hand. I should have finished the job. Too bad they cut me off. Now I lost my nerve. If I wanted, I could shave myself and hardly think about the blade. Maybe I have not lost my nerve, just my ambition.

No I can't remember all that much about it. I recall some of the time in a hospital and a lot of pills. When I left that place I felt like a dishrag. That was a whole lot better feeling then when I went into the hospital.

Say, I'm talking up a storm. Got anything to drink in that bag?

Coffee!

What the hell do you think I am? Some yuppie, latte-drinking homo?

OK, OK, I'll take your stinking coffee. Oh yah thanks, Mr. Starbuck.

Anyhow, somewhere along the line after the hospital shit, I figured that self-medication was a whole lot better than having your heart torn out the hard way. The hard way is through your asshole.

First it was pot and beer. A six-pack, a joint, and a fat broad were all I wanted or expected in those days.

Because fat broads were easy. I guess they still are.

Now can I go back to work?

Say, next time could you bring me a large coffee?

You know, I gracefully left college and went to work building cars. I guess I have a pension setting somewhere. What the hell? A guaranteed income would probably kill me.

About that time, I met my wife. She was a sexual athlete, when we were dating. She couldn't wait to get her pants off. I couldn't wait to help her. It was like a year and a half orgy. We would go at it every night, and mornings on the weekends.

Being young, stupid, and horny I married her. The first couple of years were fun. The longer we were married the closer her knees got together.

By the time the union signed the '97 contract I threatened to buy myself a goat. You know, goat's back legs in the boots.

That was my way of telling her I needed some.

No, I don't know why she iced up. Maybe that's the difference between a girl and a woman? I don't know.

I think it's because she found another man. I know because I followed her one time.

What I saw was none of your business, you nosey bastard.

That's it. Give me my money you bitch, or we are through talking.

4

Well, College Boy, how long has it been?

I have been distributing the wealth. You know you can't count on the politicians to bail out the economy. The workingman has to do his fair share of spending. Me, I up and paid my dues.

I'll tell you how I am. I'm just fine. Couldn't be better. I had a fine vintage breakfast, that must have been only a few hours old, and my dick still works.

Yes sir, this morning I'm a rich man.

I mean I feel as good as I felt when I had money. No, better!

Do you hear anybody nagging me? Telling me what to do and how to do it? Telling me how to do things that I know how to do? I can just mosey on down to the park and stretch out in the sun light. A big shot in Aruba and me. Two of a kind, enjoying the hell out of life.

If you give me that coffee I will tell you about my dream.

Good! Just the way I like it. You know, when things go your way the whole world seems to fit. The coffee is just right. Just like a fourteen-year-old hooker.

Well, I think it was after our last meeting. I decided to celebrate your good fortune. I understand that you work for a living, just like me.

You make the big bucks and live the large life. Why not? Get your share I always say. It would be kinda nice if you were a bit more generous. Sometimes the nights get cold. Have you ever shivered all night long? A flannel shirt would keep a body toasty warm.

Maybe not. Things like that you gotta fight for in this neighborhood. A warm shirt would be more trouble than it's worth.

So, anyways, I went to work on my modern Stone Age artifact.

You wanna see it?

Here, you can hold it if your careful. It's a pipe made out of garbage and a piece of screen I borrowed. That's a green been can, for the bowl. Just the right size, for a guy on the go. That hole in the side I punched with a nail. I got a straw at McDonalds. Crumbled up bags from fast food joints have all kinds of treasures in them. I ate the fries and used the straw for a stem. If you ream the hole just right the straw is a perfect fit. Just like that good old fourteen-year-old hooker.

So, you see, I am the sultan of recycle. A man for all seasons. A man before his time. All of you suburban button down collared bastards are out there in a spending frenzy. Throwing your bucks at imported Turkish hooks. While I apply a little brainpower and there it is. A marvel of modern technology combined with the simplicity of the caveman. All from trash. Kinda like me.

Anyhow, I bought a rock and retired to an empty building.

You know, a rock doesn't last long. But as long as it lasts, it's a trip to the stars. You become Buddha and Superman, all at the same time. Too bad I didn't have enough money to buy another hit.

So, I went looking for some brothers who were having a party. I found the boys drinking behind the Chinese restaurant on Congress Street. I passed on the eats and waited for my turn with the bottle. You always gotta show wino etiquette.

Because, if you don't, one of the brothers will just cut ya.

I have never thought that Chinese food and apple wine was a proper marriage of food and spirits. I passed on the eats and took a long pull of the bottle each time it came around. I tossed in the change I had in my pocket for the next bottle. I kept my mouth shut. No reason to share too much with those guys. Be a man of mystery, and mind your manners with the brothers, I always say.

It was kinda gross when Little Pete took a crap in the ally. The ally had a stink about it. I don't know if I can blame that on Pete. Maybe it was just a shitty ally. You gotta cut the boys some slack when they contribute to the refreshment fund.

No, I don't know how much we drank. Although, I do know that we left no wine for the rats. They can eat the lousy Chinese food. Maybe they wound up in the chicken fried rice. Wouldn't surprise me if they found a place on the menu along with Fluffy and Rover.

Then, I cruised on home and retired for the night. This ghost came to me in a dream. He was clean and smelled like lilacs. In fact, he looked a lot like Richard Nixon. Remember him? The ninetieth president of this here union.

Remember when he died? I told my wife I had to fly out to California for the funeral. I explained to her that I needed to pound a wooden stake through his heart, so he doesn't get back up.

Pretty good one, huh? I always was the wizard of wit. The prince of puns. The czar of comedy, like Peter the Great meets Curley Howard.

OK, Sorry, back to Richard Nixon, the ghost.

That Bastard was creeping around in the dark looking for trouble. You know about trouble? It's the easiest thing in the world to find.

So, old Tricky Dick sees this fancy car. All clean and shiny, parked all by itself on this side street of mostly abandoned houses. The fool didn't bother parking under a streetlight. He just parked it there in the dark.

Old Tricky Dick aims this brick he has been hauling around, and smashes in the side window. You know those crazy new cars. The horn goes off and Dick wets his fruit of the looms.

He rifles the glove box and receives a gift from heaven. Dick finds a vile of smack and all the goodies that make up a "happy meal."

The ghost disappears with the junk and lies low for a while. No need to advertise a score. The brothers expect you to share.

Good old Dick trades his bounty for six rocks. That equals just a fine time.

Yah, you gotta give him credit. That old boy sure knows how to live.

No stinking Democrats. No cops. No Watergate bullshit.

Yes, sir, a fine ass day. Why don't you pay me and let a rich man go on his way.

5

I'm sick today. Don't stare at me. Get lost you little fag.

6

So, Mr. College Boy. Look at you there. Looking all clean and shiny. Checking out the slum. Eyeballing the street for me. Looking for something, and finding nothing.

Well, here I am. Afraid to come over here, into the shadows? A super hero like me, invisible to a shit like you. Amazing what can be done with a plan. At times like this I'm a ghost.

I'll just sit here in this empty building and watch. I got some chicken and rice. If I had a pot of tea I could be Chairman Mao.

When you get tired of wasting your time, we can cruise on down to the train and find out where you work.

I can take the L to the White House. Nobody sees anything on the train. One time I spent three days on the train. I even slept on the train. Not even the cops saw me. I guess if you pay cash you can be transparent. If it wasn't for the smell I could spend my whole life just traveling around town.

After work we can find out where you live and get an eyeball full of your lovely wife. My guess is that she is as tight assed as you. Looking down her plastic nose at working citizens like me. I'd like to bash her in the face and tell her to move along. Move along. Not good morning. Not have a nice day. Just move along.

Let's just see if she has what it takes.

You know all about my life, little man. What the hell. Now I get to learn all about yours. Today, I lose the mega-bucks you toss into the gutter. We go on a road trip and I learn all about my best friend.

This town is just perfect for us international spy types. We use the L and the crowd to accomplish our stealth assignments. Oozing from shadow to shadow without a sound. You can call me the Sherlock Holms of the stinking world.

So, I waited all day to see your crummy apartment building. Not even a doorman. Well, well, well. A ghost would have an easy time getting into that building. He could come and go without a trace. A job that would do the Cheka proud.

All old Dick would have to do is check out the tenant names on the mailboxes. Find out which apartment his old amigo and wife live in, just sit back until dark.

Some homemade tools, a little nerve, and Dick is out of the elements and into the lobby.

A knock on door 2B. A quick entrance, the little tart is the treat of the day.

Now captain, I am in the driver's seat. You dance to my tune, and it's the rumba.

Your old lady and you are going out to dinner? Perhaps, out to visit friends?

It doesn't matter. You make a handsome couple.

I see why you bust your balls. It costs a lot of money to have a woman like that. Back in my days you had to be a doctor or lawyer to get that grade of merchandise. You had to keep the money flowing like water, or she would slide over to the next highest bidder. Whoever said owning a Vette is an easy job. Great ride. But the upkeep is murder.

Good thing a test drive is free.

Yes sir, old buddy, a banquet is about to be served. I am the guest of honor and you are catering the affair.

Champagne for the guest of honor!

7

Good morning to you, young man. If you turn over that coffee, before it gets cold, I will sing like a bird.

I am fine, thank you.

I just walked away from it all. The fingers pointing at me. My friends turned into my acquaintances. Acquaintances forgot my name and face. I'll bet they didn't forget who I was when I came to the gossip mill. The whole phony world turned its back on me

Screw them. I leave them a hot turd in the alley every morning.

Because, I screwed up. All right, I'll tell you the truth.

I copped a ton of money on an insurance scam. Cashed in a life insurance policy. The company did some digging and later claimed it was under fraudulent circumstances. Had to give back the money after I spent a chunk of it. As far as I know the insurance company is still looking for me. Like looking for a ghost.

No, I will not tell you the details. Make them up. Who will know the difference? Just like a master's thesis or term paper.

I'll never tell. Loyalty is my strongest trait.

You can bet that I had my fill of that family crap.

Yah, a brother. The worm became an anesthesiologist. You know, he knocks people out. I guess it runs in the family. He does it his way. I do it mine.

No, I don't knock people out that way. I knock people out with my brains and wit. In fact. I used to have knock out looks. A hard life left me looking like this.

Anyways, he took his fancy degree, wife, kids, and hit the road. Last time I heard he was knocking them dead in Kansas City.

No, I have never been there. It's not like I have an open invitation. He would probably slam the door in my face. I guess he never cared much for me. Come to think of it. Why would I want to go to the dust bowl when I have all this? I can live on garbage, I can't live on dust.

Maybe my brother can live on dust. That guy would suck up to the old man. The little shit was the old man's favorite. He couldn't get into a spot that the old man couldn't bail him out.

Paid for his schooling. When his car took a dump, the old man bought him a new one. Can you imagine, a brand ass new car?

When he graduated the old man sent him on a vacation. Three weeks in Mexico. I'll bet he even got laid.

The closest thing I ever got to a vacation was two weeks at a work camp.

What the hell. He is OK. The old man called him Lefty because he always put on his left shoe first. The old man gives him a cool name and it sticks with him his whole life.

Nobody ever gave me a nickname. I think I will have my associates call me Lucky from now on. Yah, Lucky. Why not? It sounds better than Unlucky.

Ya know, the old man always said I would wind up a bum. Sometimes he would call me Bum. Maybe he could read the future. Maybe he sent me to the torture chamber.

Well, I may be a bum but he is dead. Who is the joke on?

I like the name Lucky. It seems to be a perfect fit.

I got a slick new name and a hot new woman.

There is electricity between us. She hasn't figured it out yet. All I have to do is make my move and she is mine. Just turn on the old charm.

She is probably your type. I'm sure you would be jealous.

8

So, you want to know what I'm doing for Thanksgiving. All the guys are going for the do-gooder's free dinner. Not me. They can keep their stinking road kill and mashed potatoes. I'm employed. I'm going to work my way uptown and hit a dumpster at an upscale restaurant. A fine dinner under the stars. Accompanied by a good bottle of wine. Maybe I'll find a donut shop and have coffee and a cruller for desert.

I sure got my share to be thankful.

Look at my body. Look here under this cashmere coat, not an ounce of fat. I got my health. The old body is rock hard. I once belonged to a gym. I worked out three times a week.

Believe it or not, I was a health food nut. I feel better now. I improved my health by eating garbage, rather than pounding down greens. I used to grow my own sprouts and eat cashew butter. That stuff tastes like shit. Probably gives you cancer.

Go figure, smoking camels and eating greens. Doesn't seem to fit, does it?

Well, things have sorted themselves out. My body is fine and my mind is sound.

I had a long discussion with Little Pete yesterday. He said he believes that god created man and the way to heaven is through the church.

Pete eats their food and sings their songs. That doesn't mean he has to buy their crap. There he is, spouting out the company line. Does he think that they will make him a bishop?

Give me a break. Anyone with a brain knows that babies come from drillin, and there ain't any heaven. The closest thing there is to heaven is here, under the bridge with a pipe.

I believe that and I told him so.

The little fart and I ran around and around until I had enough. He would not admit that he lost the argument. So, I pulled out my nail. Remember the nail used to make my hookah?

So, I pulled out my nail and held it against his throat. Nothing gets a man's attention like a nail against the throat.

All of a sudden, he is my bitch. Pete agrees with all my arguments. I could have told him I was the Pope and he would have agreed.

One rusty nail and Pete embraces a whole new religion. You would think he was a politician.

OK. Take it easy. I really didn't attack Pete. I was just making up a story that I thought you wanted to hear. You know I'm a man of honor. I wouldn't lie to my old confidant.

I'm just an old hippie. Peace and love brother.

Do you have to go now?

Well, happy holiday; give my best to your wife.

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Yah, I'm OK.

If it weren't for this damn rain it would be a fine day.

Sure, I saw a doctor. I even saw a nurse. They looked great. Wish I looked that good.

I spent the whole damn night at the clinic. The way they treated me you would think I had a social disease. Those bastards wouldn't give me a thing for pain. I guess they figure pain comes with the territory. Poor people get pain. Rich people get drugs, all the drugs they want.

I'd like to see a doctor get run down by a car. I would run right over to him. I'd tell him to suck it up. If you're still alive, "call me in the morning."

It doesn't hurt too badly if I speak slowly. I'll bet in a few days I won't feel a thing. They said the stitches will dissolve in a week. I don't have to go back to the clinic. They just fix you up and show you the street. Reminds me of the assembly line.

Ribs. Just a little discomfort. I broke them before. That breathing thing is overrated.

I figure I'll have to give up ice hockey for a while. In a couple of days I'll be throwing those big time body checks like I used to. First check I throw will be on a doctor. Second one on a nurse.

Well, I'll tell you. I could use a drink or two about now. You drink the coffee. My affliction calls for a more powerful balm. Preferably one that comes from California grapes.

I'll tell you how. Some damn spades jumped me for no reason. Can you believe it? They jumped me in my very own home. Is nothing sacred?

They didn't say a word. They just beat the crap out of me. I didn't get one punch in. Those rats kicked me when I was down and kept on kicking.

They tore up my stuff like they were looking for something.

I'm OK. I get a little light headed.

It only hurts when I speak quickly. Although, slow talk has never been my style.

Sorry about spitting blood. I'll speak slowly.

So, what will it be today?

I was doing great when I was a teen. Football was my only love.

Look at this chunk of raw meat. You would never know I was an athlete. I took great care and pride in my body.

No drinking or smoking. The weight room and track were my hangouts.

Believe it or not, I was the leader of the conditioning program.

Ha, I was something in those days. I was a leader.

Ya know it only takes an instant for things to turn to shit. Then you have to live with the smell of shit the rest of your life. I guess if you have the stink of shit up your nose long enough you eventually turn to shit.

Driving with the guys one night. That day we kicked the stuffing out of Flint Northern, in a scrimmage. I felt like Mike Ditka, nothing could hurt me.

A dose of bad luck and I felt like an old bologna sandwich.

Norm lost control of the car and we slid off the road and hit a school sign. Good old Norm sent me flying through the windshield like Mighty Mouse.

I staggered out of the wrecked car into the path of some jerk that drove through the dust cloud. He clipped me in the back of the leg and put me back in orbit. My final touch down was head first on the pavement.

I found myself in the hospital the next day with a fractured skull and a face full of thread. You know, I didn't mind messing my face up. My looks were never anything to write home about. What tore me up was that I couldn't play ball any longer.

The one thing I was good at and it got taken away.

I believe that was the turning point.

My one shot to do what I wanted, and it turned to shit.

Sometimes, I dream about how my life might have been, if that night never happened.

I could have been a college jock. Could you picture me a yuppie? Suit and tie and mortgage. Living in luxury like you.

How about you pay me now and let me address my discomfort?

Give me a couple of days off boss.

10

I know it's been a week. I got nothing to apologize for. If you don't like it, get the hell out of here. Go back to the stinking suburbs, college boy.

Yah, OK. We both better calm down. We got business to conduct.

I'm all right. The stitches went away. Not a bit of pain the last few days. I'm getting around just fine. You can say that I'm just as fine as a new package of cigarettes. Yup, things are on the upswing.

I'll tell you what happened. I went to church and saw the face of God. Him and I are on a first name basis. Hand in hand.

You know him, don't you? That's the guy that keeps the suburbs safe from guys like me. He blesses your kids with private school and gives you a big bonus at Christmas.

Yah, the truth be known, God is a republican.

So, I went to church, just because I had nothing to do. Looking around, but finding nothing.

I sat down to see what was coming my way and do some crying. It came to me. Maybe I was asleep, maybe I was awake. I don't know, it doesn't matter.

A face, kind of like my high school vice principal appeared before me. He told me that I didn't have to be a lump of shit in the septic tank of life. With a little effort I could have a life worth living. He told me to try. He told me to be happy.

So, I thought about it for a while. I walked out to the street and puked.

When I returned to the church I saw a Brother. We talked for a while, I told him what I had seen. I told him I was ready to try. Really try.

That afternoon was the best afternoon I have ever had. Can you believe it? No sex, drugs, or booze. That was the best afternoon I have ever had.

I got a job washing dishes at a restaurant. Dave's, ever hear of it?

The Brother gave me clean clothes and a pair of shoes. Not exactly new, but leather. I even took a shower, with soap. You know, the world smells better after a shower.

Will you just look at this? A chin. The first time I can remember. I put a blade near my throat and didn't think about finishing the job. Can't be doing that unholy stuff when Mr. Wysmith has been talking to you. Those school guys always meant business. They could make your life hell by accident.

Well, I still eat out of dumpsters. I enjoy the variety and the company. They feed me at work. The hotdogs and fried eggs are real good. I guess old habits are heard to break. Anyways, I am saving up my funds to get a room.

Didn't I tell you?

I no longer reside at my former castle. I now enjoy the fruits of the mission. With winter coming on, don't think I don't appreciate the joys of a furnace.

Ha, can you picture me looking as slick as you. Driving around in my new Eldo. Pulling over and eating out of a dumpster. Do you think I could take a date to a dumpster?

This time I agree with you. I'm better off keeping that quirk to myself.

Anyhow, my head is clear and I took the pledge. I figured, if I kept sliding, I would slide right into a hole in the ground. No matter what a man says, that's the last place he wants to bed down.

What about the beating I took?

You know, before a man moves to the next level he must tie up his loose ends.

I mean, paybacks are hell.

No, I didn't attack anybody. At least, nobody important. Machines don't count.

I did some damage.

The car that volunteered that vile of smack. I found the damn thing. We got a kind of underground around here. If you ask enough people, you can find out anything you want to know.

Stealth is the word. I got me a piece of pipe and used it like a crow bar. A pop here and a crack there. I believe there is not one chunk of sheet metal or plastic on that heap that is not bent or cracked.

Yes, all is right with the world. Loose ends are tied up and I have moved upward on the social register.

Perhaps we can respect the changes in my life. How about an appointment schedule?

Let's meet Tuesdays at sun up. I still don't own a watch.

Good morning. I feel like talking today.

Sure, I'm OK. Think I have gained some weight? I guess that eating on schedule puts meat on a man's bones.

My new girlfriend? Well, I haven't spent any time with her recently. She lives on the other side of town. I'll just let the whole affair simmer for a while. See how things shake out. She will always be there for me. That's the mark of a good woman and a loving relationship.

Anyhow, I'd like to tell you about the year from hell. Thinking about it. That was the most bizarre and rotten year anyone could have, not just me.

Need I say more? I substitute taught in the inner city.

I haven't thought about it in years. After today, I hope I don't think about it again. Just talking about it raises my stress level. I guess that's why young people substitute teach. Old people would drop dead right and left.

I suppose that's why they don't allow guns in schools. They figure substitute teachers would blow their brains out or shoot the kids. Could you imagine? All that college and you wind up in an inner city school.

Is there any justice in the world?

To begin. I spent a whole year. I worked mostly in middle schools.

In Detroit, they hire you to substitute teach, if you have any college. The old warm body routine. They can't get enough certified substitute teachers.

Please, no certified teacher in his right mind would teach in Detroit. Remember, they got this thing called the suburbs.

Where would you rather work? With snooty preppy kids or in the guts of hell? Especially, for the fantastic amount of fifty-five dollars a day.

Believe me, when I got out of college the money seemed good. Today, you couldn't pay me five hundred bucks a day, to teach in any inner city school.

Ever been to Detroit? Great town to leave.

Pass over that coffee. Federal law requires breaks every hour. You have to obey the law.

Yah, that's better.

So, I thought I had an easy job.

They would call me at 6:00 am and tell me which school to report to. Because the work was not steady I took all assignments. I guess I should have been more discriminating. Some of those schools made North Korea look good.

You know, when you see roaches jumping down the hall, you are in trouble.

In my day they called them junior high schools. Now they call them middle schools. They should call them hell-schools.

Because the kids don't want to be there.

The kids just don't want to be there.

Why don't they just chain the doors and go home? Everybody would be better off.

I'll tell you the worst of the bunch. Hands down, Fouch school near Belle Isle. Named after the WW I French general. If he were alive today he would blow that school off the face of the earth. He would wait until the kids and teachers were in the building and then do all of them a big favor.

To give you an idea. They have a terrific tradition at Fouch. The last day of school they bust all the windows. The cops stay in their cars and watch. They probably include new windows in each year's budget. The cost of doing business.

Anyways, I would go to my assigned classroom and pass out the assignments.

No way to keep order. What do you do when a kid says, "stick this paper up your ass." You don't know his name. You get no help from the principal or any faculty.

You watch it slip into the pool of anarchy.

At first I tried working with the kids. That lasted about two days. After that it was all about survival. My survival.

One time they chased me out of the school. Never confront a hoodlum. They have nothing to lose. I learned that the hard way.

I don't know if it was because I am white or because I was a teacher.

It doesn't matter. I understood that I wasn't welcome.

The only good part of those days was my survival kit. I kept aspirins and a joint in the glove box. I didn't always need the aspirin. I always needed the joint.

That school year was the end of my innocence. I took a factory job that March.

I called the board of education and told them that I was no longer available. They kept calling me through May or June. I guess it's hard to find warm bodies to go into those schools.

For a while the factory job was a relief. The pounding of the machines in my head numbed me. In fact I stopped smoking dope for a while.

No, I never think about those kids. I figure they are dumpster people. The system runs them through until they are old enough to drop out and run the streets. Degree or not, they wind up in the dumpster of life.

Why should I care about them? They don't care about themselves.

What can be done?

I came up with the solution a long time ago. Pay the kids to go to school. Turn it into a job. It's the American way. Use the universal language, money.

How do I know if it's feasible? I'm not in charge of feasibility. I got enough problems taking care of myself. Let the politicians take care of the kids, those guys know what they are doing. Look at what they have done with Detroit.

Do you know what I would like? A slice of pizza. We can talk while we cut through the alley.

You know, I used to shit and piss in this alley. Now I use a toilet. Hey, I even wash my hands, with soap.

Dave has a sign in the can that says, "All employees must wash his or her hands."

Far be it for me to buck the system.

I got a sponsor. His name is Ken. He is taking me through the steps. Funny thing. He tells me to smoke dope when I get the urge. He didn't have to tell me twice.

Pepperoni or Deluxe?

12

Today I want to talk about Father Dale. He has taken a personal interest in me. It's almost like he is my guardian angel.

Not only has he set me up in my own room. He sent me a large box of clothes. My size, all folded up and clean. I believe that if my father were alive he wouldn't do that. In fact, I don't know anyone who would do that for me. You never brought me any clothes.

Everyone else flushed me down the toilet long ago.

He sends me notes about meals at the mission, even though I work at a restaurant, and eat for free. The notes tell me what's to eat and reminds me to go to my meetings.

Step by step, brother. One day at a time.

When I stop by for services he meets me at the door and walks me to a seat. I see him looking right at me while the service is going on.

I think that I have finally found a friend.

Yesterday he suggested that I work for him at the mission. As part of my rehabilitation I can work at the mission part time. He says it would give me a chance to give back to the mission, and him an opportunity to guide me.

What about my girl friend?

Well, things are at a halt. I have decided to put romance on a back burner.

It's not that I'm too busy. It's that I have focus.

That's what Father Dale says.

I need to get my life in order before I take on a new project.

When he talks I listen.

My next day off is a week from today. How about then?

What would you like to talk about today? Why don't you tell me about your article about me in the newspaper?

One of the boys told me he read about a homeless person in the paper. Pete claims that the person in the paper is good old D.M. You know, I'm no blowhard, but the boys know about our deal. In fact, now they believe me. I'm a celebrity in the slum.

Really, they are picking up the story in out of state papers. Do you think you will get a nice Christmas bonus? Perhaps you and the old lady will spend some time in Aruba, enjoying the fruits of our labor. I have never been to the Caribbean. Like to see it some time. I hear they make lots of fancy foods and drinks down there. Do they roll cigars in Aruba?

So, now we both don't know.

How about me? This is what you could do. Find me a nice clean hooker and pick up the tab. Better get a couple of hookers and we can have a party.

It would be a real Christmas bonus. Your wife doesn't have to know. Maybe she would like to join in.

OK, no more about the little lady.

Father Dale? He is like your wife. He needs to know a selected amount of information. You know what they say. Ignorance is bliss.

Sure, he still is my guardian angel, but he isn't God.

You know it's nice that we now meet at this donut joint. Far better than our old meetings in the alley. I believe the both of us are through spending time in the gutter.

Things with me could be better.

Dave and I have gone our separate ways. Father Dale said I couldn't collect unemployment insurance. Dave paid me under the table. Next time straight business.

So, that asshole Dave kicked me out. Besides washing dishes, I was helping Tim the cook. Tim has the personality of a rattlesnake with hemorrhoids.

You know, boiling noodles and turning dogs. All that while, I kept the dishes spotless.

Anyhow, the cook went to the storeroom and brought out a jar of salsa. The jar had no label. Seems that the salsa was homemade.

When the cook wasn't looking, I took a sniff of the stuff. I told the cook it smelled rotten.

One thing leads to another. A little shouting and a little shoving. I didn't know Tim knew those kinds of words.

Anyhow, Dave comes rushing into the kitchen. He listens to the cook. Didn't even give me a chance to tell my side. Lays one up on the side of my head. The bastard snaps my poor head back. My ear was ringing.

Dave reaches into his pocket and hands me my day's pay. He grabs me by the arm and puts me out the back door. Back into the alley.

Maybe the alley is some kind of Einstein universe. You begin and end in the same place.

My only hope is that the salsa is full of poison. I hope a hundred people die. Starting with Tim and Dave.

You know, given the quality of Tim's cooking I wouldn't be surprised if a hundred people die, even if the salsa is OK.

You would be proud of me. I didn't lose my temper.

I went to the mission and spent the day with Father Dale. He found time for us to pray. We must have prayed for over an hour.

Father Dale promised me he would find me another job. A better job. He also gave me some money. All I had to do was promise I would come to the mission every day.

As we see it, I'm between jobs. Only a minor setback until a better job is presented to me from heaven.

14

I hate the stink here. First the cops, and then you. This is just one fine ass day.

Yah, some of them are broken. They cut the inside of my mouth when I talk and eat. It's a wonderful thing, being on an I V drip. They could be pumping you up with piss and you wouldn't know it. Around here nothing would surprise me.

It must be the foot of fate kicking me in the nuts. For a change.

You just sit there and tell me about your weekend.

Can you believe that I took a leak while you were talking? You just beat your healthy pink gums together while I let it rip. It just flows right – ouch. I'm talking too fast.

Damn the bad luck. Bank my bucks and come back in a couple of days.

15

Yah, I'm feeling better. If you got a couple hours we can inventory my busted bones, bruises and stitches.

What exactly happened?

Well, I'll tell you.

I got a new job. Father Dale found me a maintenance engineer position at the Flame Theater. You know, the soft porn dump on North Street. All I had to do was sweep up, vacuum, and mop up the puke. Not a bad job for an educated young man of the world.

It's two dimensions to the left and one up.

Besides all the spilled food I can eat, I also get to see the movies on my days off. The smell of popcorn covers the body odors and the chairs are comfortable.

So, I decide to catch a film Tuesday night and get some sleep in a comfortable chair.

Say, are you OK? You look a little green around the gills.

Sorry, I can't help spitting blood. Seems that every time I talk or eat I bloody up the insides of my mouth. Really disgusting. Can't blame you if you lose your lunch.

Let me wipe myself up. All right, is this better? You Clark Kent type reporters need to have nerves of steel. Or at least aluminum.

If you need to puke, you can use this pan. I always like to share my bounty with my pals. Stick around a while and we can share my painkillers. It looks like they may do you some good.

You know, one time like this I took a handful of painkillers. I couldn't get it up for a week. That was just fine. I had no place to park the old love pole.

Maybe I can catch a break and get hooked on pain pills. Maybe even a bigger break and die. At times like this a hollow point sounds good. Come to think of it, most times a hollow point sounds good. Beats the hell out of the torture chamber.

You wanna read the police report or do you want the truth?

Like hell, the cops can kiss my ass. The last thing I'm gonna do is be straight with the man. The last thing they care about is me. If they got the chance they would lock me up until the sun burns out. It would probably be easier for them if I croaked.

I'll take care of my own business.

Like the smile? Well, look at me. I'm not Count Dracula. You weak- stomached homo.

If a man can't be responsible what good is he?

Responsibility is what separates us from the apes. You should know that.

So, after the last show. Sometime after the last show, I left the theatre. I headed down the street with nothing to do. You know me. I decided to go look for something to eat. Italian food sounded good so I checked out the dumpster behind a good Italian bistro.

Out of nowhere, bam. A bat or a 2x4, smacks me across the back of my shoulders. I go down to my knees and the bastard plays Tiger Woods, with a driver, on my back.

By the time this guy gets done with me I feel like a bowl of oatmeal.

What else do you need to know?

How do I know what he used? I was lying face down on a pile of garbage.

No, that's not all. He raped me

What do you think I'm going to do? Send him a thank you note.

You can bet I'm going to pay my respects to that fellow.

Tomorrow, that's when I limp out of this dump. I could spend another week in this bed. Good food and pretty nurses. They are going to throw my poor ass out, into the street. Would you know a reasonable four-star hotel?

My head still rings. When I close my eyes and grit my teeth I can hear the echoes of time beating my brain. Thump, thump, as things flash across my vision.

How many times can a man be cut down to his knees? Why bother standing when you know you are going down? Smashed again by the boot from hell.

I think I'm going back to my pad under the bridge. Enjoy the good life in the fresh air. Get back to freedom.

Yah, that's what I'll do. I'll get back to nature.

You know what? I've had better food out of a dumpster than this hospital slop. So here is the deal. I'm the modern Thoreau. Back to Walden Pond.

Ya know, life is a bucket of shit with a whipped cream topping. A little good stuff, and the rest dropped out of the business end of a horse

Father Dale? The same as the rest of those phonies. What would you have me do? Kill him. I have no stomach for that and no heart to deal with the cops. Would you have me wind up in stinking hell?

So, you say our business is concluded.

That's just fine with me.

My name? Dead Man.

KEY

Hey Bubba. How you doing brother?

Yah, it looks like we both made it through the tunnel of shit. They threw me in the box for five days. How long was your vacation?

So, just you and me again. Just like the good old days. Good thing the good old days were last week. Any longer and I would probably forget them.

The brotherhood of suffering has been reunited. The days in the box never happened.

Yah. Maybe it is discrimination. Preferential treatment for the white bitch. I get dragged out of the Plaza first. Poor old Bubba has to wait his turn, and they throw him in the back of the box. Looks to me like nothing has changed since Selma.

No, Selma is not my momma. She is a bitch from Detroit.

Solitary ain't so bad. You got nobody to talk to but yourself. That's not so bad. You just talk and talk. Nobody listens and nobody cares, including the guy who is talking.

Like chasing your tail when you don't have one.

It's almost like a religion. We have rules, procedures and beliefs.

What do you say, Bubba? We can create our own religion. You can be the number two guy. I will be the Pope and you can be the Popette.

How's that?

We can collect all kinds of money and dress up like Kansas City faggots. You know, white suits and white shoes. We can even dye our hair white. We can get the holy look.

We can teach the faithful what we have learned. How to survive.

What's that?

We can write a holy book and collect all kinds of money. That's a good idea. We can call it The Book of Moron. Maybe not, let's think about that for a while.

We can load up on bitches and bucks. We can be the authority in this joint.

The Chaplin would cry like a baby, with a diaper full of shit. His business goes down the tubes. Maybe he can get a job as a guard?

I'll tell you. This has to be the best place on earth. No kidding, this is the cat's ass.

What do you mean by that?

We got sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Yah, that's what I mean. The more you want the more you get. Can you tell me what needs we have that are not met?

Yah, we can call it Zen-jailism. The one true religion of the faithfully incarcerated. Best of all, we have a captive audience. Where the hell are the meatheads going to go?

The Muslims preach control and accountability. About as appealing as an abscessed tooth. Certainly nothing designed for prison life.

The Chaplin tells you to reform, suck it up and believe. That will get you to heaven. Who cares? It sure won't get you the hell out of here and back on the street.

What do you think? All we have to do is recycle what the meatheads already have. Sell them their own shit. Wall Street here we come.

That's the key to everything. We sell them what they own. Just like every other successful religion.

The greasy leading the blind.

So, what was it like in the box?

I don't know. Maybe my box wasn't hot enough.

What's your problem? Do you mind sweating?

Not me. I love to sweat. Just open up the pours and let the juices flow. Just like sex and preaching.

So, we paid our dues. The Great Spirit has been appeased. Zen-Jailism has brought about equilibrium in the universe. All is good in the world. Hallelujah!

Doesn't it feel good to make all things right?

Screw you Bubba.

You know sometimes I think that you don't pay any attention to me. Do you think I'm talking for my health? Here I am, sharing my knowledge and creativity with you, and you scoff. Since you only have me, I think that you would pay me some attention.

Never mind. Talking to a bowl of gumbo beats talking to myself.

That's what makes us pals. A big mouth and a bowl of soup. If it works, don't fix it.

One for all and all for one. True blue to the end. We rule.

Yah, I know our domain is twelve foot by eight foot. We do the best we do.

Fate has tossed us in a cell together. You could tell me what's on your mind. You gotta have something on your mind. Even a bowl of oatmeal has a thought. Your brain works just fine.

It was functioning OK when you covered my ass. You know, I would have done the same for you.

We are a team. Like Abbot and Costello, Batman and Robin, syphilis and the clap.

2

Bubba, that was some fight. I have known a whole lot of people in my life. From yuppie to bum. You're the only guy who ever put it on the line for me.

We were out manned and out muscled all the way. We could have been killed or worse.

Screw it. We fought our way out of that mess and right into stir. Given the choices, stir looked good.

Yah, I agree. Time in stir beats the hell out of a telephone pole up the ass, or a box in the ground.

The bastards would have passed me around to every lowlife in the block. The end would have been a blade between the ribs. The infirmary would have been a well-deserved vacation.

So what!

The drugs wouldn't have been worth it. I talked to a guy who cut himself just to get painkillers. That guy had some real problems.

Did I ever tell you what they do to prisoners in the infirmary? They make lab rats out of them. The doctors give you a disease like VD or aids. They try to find a cure by experimenting with poisons. They fill you up with arsenic or hydrogen.

No, they don't cure you.

Your dick falls off, and then you die.

They used to do it only to black guys. Now days everybody is game. Aren't equal rights something great?

You have the right to life, liberty, and medical experiments.

Big joke, Mr. Comedian.

How about we switch places? You be me and I'll be you. You walk around with your head pulled down between your shoulders for a while.

Your tune would change with the shoe on the other foot.

You don't look so bad for a guy that had the crap beat out of him. Your good looks may be gone but you will always be a movie star to me.

Yah, Hannibal Lecter. Well at least he had his day. That's more than you can say for us.

That beating was nothing. I have been beat a whole lot worse than that. One time I kissed a 2 X 4. Ever dance with a 2 X 4.

You did. Well, goddamn. We are brothers of lumber. There must be something cosmic about us being pals.

I'm OK. There is only one difference between my former life and this dump. In the old days, when I got the crap beat out of me, I went to a clinic or a hospital.

Here you let nature take its course. We mend the old fashion way. Just like primitive man cruising through the jungle.

So what? Scars give you character. Have you ever heard of anybody getting out of prison without scars? Some never make it out alive.

Brother, you gotta go with the flow.

Yah, it would be funny if they beat the crap out of you the first day in prison. Get it out of the way. That might be the key to state sponsored incarceration. We can make it part of our religion.

A Bar Mitzvah with a busted jaw.

How much longer you got?

I know, I ask you the same question every day.

That long.

You aren't going to get any sympathy from me.

Some day you are going to be sipping a Canadian and porking a fourteen-year-old hooker, while I will be rotting away in this cell. I'll be ducking the brothers and breaking in a new bubba.

Remember this, there isn't a man that can take your place. I'll always remember what you did for me. I wouldn't trade you for a woman. Not even a good-looking woman. Not even an easy woman.

So, here is the deal. Come lunch, you hide some bread or something in your shirt. Bring what ever you can back to me.

I'll stay here. I'll tell the guard that my jaw hurts too much for me to eat. That way I'll keep a low profile. I will stay out of sight for a while. Maybe the brothers will forget about me.

They can find a new bitch.

3

Look at you College Boy. You never looked better. Put on a few pounds?

You wear them well.

How is the wife?

Yah, I guess I am looking lean and mean. Maybe, more lean than mean.

So you want to interview me after all this time. Where was it last time we met, in an alley? No, maybe Dave's restaurant?

Where was my best buddy when I was hanging from the hook? I could have used a familiar face back then. I felt like vampires surrounded me. They moved in for the kill. Me, with no benefactor. Who took my side?

That lawyer was no fiend of mine. If the state paid him minimum wage, they overpaid him.

Ever hear of teats on a bull?

An appeal? That's what you get from an apple when you make pie.

No kidding. Do you think I would have a chance?

What can I do in here? I can't even get Bob Dylan to write a song about me. I ain't no Hurricane. I am not even a Catfish.

You are the only contact I have on the outside. If you were my real pal you would help me. The key to my survival is getting someone to go to bat for me. There is nothing I can do for myself. Around here even if you have some balls you can't use them.

Find me a lawyer that is worth a crap. If you get me a legal aid mouthpiece, you may as well put a bullet in my brain. Why don't you do a follow up story on me? Get your cheap paper to pay for a real lawyer. Do you know a mouthpiece that is competent? There must be one of them out there.

Sure, I believe you will do your best. Just like you did your best during the trial.

You know, talk is cheap. It seems to be losing value by the minute.

Life here is just fine. Remember when I used to sweat my next meal? No more dumpster hopping for me. Three times a day I sit at a table and shovel it in. Although, the ambience has not improved.

Health care couldn't be better. They have a doctor and nurses. All kinds of beds, shots, and restraining belts.

Ever hear of tranquilizers? Now days they call them antidepressants. The Doc passes 'em out like M&M candies at Halloween.

The best part is the flowering of capitalism. The system works better in here than on the outside. I can purchase most anything, except for a woman. At least the female kind. Here we have the other kind.

Drugs are no problem. In cellblock D the whole bunch of them shoot up. Yah, they even have clean needles. The boys say it is much better than the outside. You don't have to duck the man. He is your supplier.

Sure I use. What else have I got to do? It's either that or read War and Peace.

No I don't shoot up. It's not that I wouldn't. It's a matter of finance. So, my poverty reduces me to powder.

The money? Not everything is exchanged for money. Sometimes a little body warmth is worth more than the green.

So soon? Am I freaking you out?

What about a series of follow up stories about me? How about shouting my side of this travesty to the public. Get me out of here.

All right, you come back any time.

Oh, bring cigarettes and don't forget me.

Say Bubba. Where did you get the smokes? It looks like a full pack. I haven't seen one of them in a couple of weeks.

How about that? I thought that guy had it in for you. Do I have to give you a history lesson? I told you to steer clear.

Go figure. Now we can do business. The triumph of capitalism over emotions. Ain't America great?

Instead of the bone, we get Salem Lights.

Here is what you do. Tell Crunch that I have six R.G. Dunn cigars that I want to deal.

Yah, they are fresh.

None of your business where I got them.

Tell Crush that if he wants the cigars he has to meet me in the exercise yard, and negotiate with me. One on one.

What I want is a peace treaty. You know, an armistice. The Treaty of Versailles, like after WW II. You know, when the Czar gave up, and ended the war.

We can work out a tribute. You know, a bribe.

Peace always has its price. I'm willing to fork over my best treasure for a good deal.

No, I won't give you one. I'm doing this for you as much as for me. Your butt means as much to me as it means to you.

What about the newspaper guy that came to see me?

This guy is a chunk of meat. I'm going to play him like a video game.

Because I hate the bitch. He is like all the other yuppie dogs out there. He thinks I am his ticket to a Pulitzer. He is going to play me until he uses me up. Well, the worm turns.

An old fishing saying. If we ever get out, I promise to take you fishing.

Yah, we can cook and eat the fish.

Sure, we can use corn meal.

Maybe he can get me an appeal. I'd give my left nut to get out of here.

The road to freedom requires an advocate.

Bubba, you learned a new word today. An advocate is a do-gooder who is straight, but wants your ass.

5

Yes sir, I know who you are. You are the prison shrink. Sorry, I mean psychiatrist.

I'm wrong again. Sorry, Mr. Psychologist. OK Dr. Psychologist.

What the hell is the difference? Sounds about the same to me.

We can start there, if you like. I got nothing to hide. You just ask away and the truth shall set me free. What will set you free?

I'll talk about anything if it gets me out of my cell. If I see any more of Bubba's face I think I am going to puke.

My old man? He had rough gnarled hands. The bones that made up the back of his hands and his knuckles stuck out like the metal caps on a bottle of beer. Us kids would call him Mr. Knuckles behind his back.

My brother came up with that name. That was the most creative thing he ever did. That and marrying a broad with money.

Anyway, when the old man threw a backhand, it was like getting smacked by a tire iron.

Whenever he felt like it. Come to think of it. It was usually when my momma told him to throw a punch.

She would start complaining about her nerves being shot. Then she would tell the old man to kill one of us kids. Sometimes she would yell, "Kill them all." I think he bashed us kids just to get the old lady off his back.

OK, the old man. Yah, we can talk about Mother Theresa some other time.

He loved to eat. When he came home from work, the first words out of his mouth were, "What's for dinner?"

That reminds me. No one was allowed to talk during dinner. He was worried about biting his tongue while he chewed. So, not a word was allowed at the dinner table. We would just reach or point to what we wanted. If you wanted something from the refrigerator, or off the counter, you had to get up and get it.

If you were trapped, and couldn't get out, too bad. You learned to live without jello.

That was the quiet time. It was the best time. The key to dealing with my old man was to be quiet and invisible.

He had a knife and fork in his hands at all times. He even picked up his bread with his fork. He was a surgeon at the kitchen table.

He would fill up his plate first, because it was his house and his food. Then he would go to work. That was the signal for the rest of us to fill our plates.

If anyone acted up, the old man would pound the shit out of him with the back of his hand. His knife or fork would still be in his claws. The man could chew and smack at the same time, without missing a beat.

Did you ever see a stamping machine in a factory? The old man could have come from the same womb as a stamping machine.

Sure I believe it. Remember I lived with him and I lived with a stamping machine. I like the stamping machine a whole lot better than my old man. The damn thing never punched me.

One time I was eating a piece of sausage. I can't remember what I did, but the old man threw one of his patented punches into my shoulder.

I dropped my fork and got sausage and mustard all over my shirt.

My brother thought that was the funniest thing he had ever seen. Righty, my kid brother, started laughing with a mouth full of soda. He started choking and the soda sprayed out of his nose.

It was spontaneous anarchy. All us kids busted out laughing.

The old man reached across the table to throw a punch and drops his knife in the baked beans bowl. The bowl broke, beans and tomato sauce splashed all over the table. Us kids were covered with sauce and laughed ourselves sick.

At that point WW III broke out. My momma starts screaming at everyone. She starts crying about how hard she works and what a bunch of animals we were.

That was the only time I ever saw my old man put down his fork before he finished eating. He tried to grab me but I was too fast for him. My brothers were also laughing and moving out of the line of fire.

He came after me and cracked his leg on the chair I had been sitting on. That brought out a curse that started us laughing even harder.

The old man finally spoke at the table and it was a curse.

At that point his face was beet red with anger and he had tomato sauce drooling down his chin.

He reached down and pulled the belt off his pants. He saved his belt for special occasions. It was brown patent leather, all cracked and worn out.

So, he takes a couple of steps toward me and his pants start to slide down. He had to grab them with his free hand. I fell on the floor laughing.

Do you get it? That was the best beating I ever had

Sure there could be a best beating. It was worth it. The lumps are gone but I still laugh when I remember the old man standing in front of us kids holding his pants up, ready to explode. The only thing that would have been funnier would have been if he had a heart attack.

I remember what I told my brother at the old man's funeral. "Lets pull his pants down around his knees, that's the way I want to remember him."

6

God damn. It was another tough night. I must have been in a sweat most of the night. I hate when I wake up and I don't have any idea where I am. It takes me a while to recognize home.

Yah, I remember, it was the snakes. The snakes again and again and again.

This time they were yellow and blue. Just like the tank of the Harley I'm going to buy when I get the hell out of here.

Didn't we work that out?

I promise to chrome the hell out of it. Just like you like it.

OK, can I finish my story? You know I feel better when I tell you about my dreams.

There was this guy. The world's first shrink. His name was Jung, Sigmund Jung. He invented head shrinking.

Anyhow, he believed that all mental problems could be understood by analyzing dreams.

Maybe that's what I need. You know I got my share of mental problems. I probably could have kept that guy busy for his whole career.

So, you never heard of him. It would do you some good to pick up a book. They are good for more than smashing roaches.

No, I'm not badmouthing smashing roaches.

Yes, the only good roach is a dead roach.

Yah a shrink, like the jerk I'm working.

You know, all those guys are easy. The whole bunch of them are mush heads. If they weren't shrinks they would be cheap whores. Maybe they would give it away.

The snakes. Well, they were coming out of a cloud that was floating above me.

I could tell I was asleep, but I couldn't wake up.

I just sat back and enjoyed the show until I saw their eyes.

Yes, I know snake eyes make you a loser.

So are you Bubba, so shut the hell up.

Anyhow, I'm looking at the snakes and their wormy bodies change to women's bodies.

I don't know. Can a woman turn into a snake? Can a snake turn into a woman? Can you turn into Sigmund Young?

7

So, what would you like to talk about today? Perhaps I can expound upon my time on the Seine. You know, art plays an important part in the advancement of civilization. I might even say that art is civilization.

No, well then how about you? Let's see. I can bare my soul to you. You can write a best seller and get the hell out of here. The state can kill me.

That's a good plan

This place is beginning to smell like death.

Is your plan to have me dissected and sell my body parts to a rich Arab? If you are into necrophilia you can write a follow up book about my liver or spleen and love.

Any idiot can write a book. Why not you?

All right, I'll sit down. Sorry I got carried away. You don't have to call the guard.

A cup of coffee would help me get a grip.

Yes, I understand you are not in the catering business. I can wait until lunch. The cappuccino machine in my cell is out of order.

My momma. I don't know if she is dead or alive.

Sure, I care. I care about as much as she cares about me.

I don't remember getting any Christmas cards from her. I never sent her a card. I didn't even remember her birthday.

My years with my momma remind me of how I view life.

It's like I always say. I got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I have Alzheimer's. The bad news is that it's going to take a while to kick in.

Maybe her brain is fried. I figure she may have forgotten everything and everyone.

That would be the upside. More likely, she got herself a Puerto Rican stud and porked herself silly.

You know that industrial strength drilling makes you forget about everything else. I figure I am just one more thing to forget.

Yah, we both figure she didn't love me a whole hell of a lot.

I'll tell you why. She was stoned around the clock. She had an amphetamine jones.

Can you believe that her complaint was that her "nerves were shot." All she did was shoot her own frazzled nerves.

Remember those fat doctors? My aunts and her made those quacks rich. Not just one. Over the years she went from doctor to doctor.

I remember her taking diet pills all the time and screaming at us kids and the old man. I remember lots of screaming and no talking.

They must have been powerful because it seems like she never slept. I thought she was having an affair with Johnny Carson.

She would wash the pills down with buckets of coffee. Just like I like it, hot and black.

There was this electric coffee maker on the kitchen counter. The damn thing was always on. I remember because once I burned my fingers on it. She screamed at me. She called me a fat cow.

How do I know why? She called everyone a fat cow, even my skinny brother.

Funny, you make me remember. She was the fat cow.

Anyways, besides the pills, she would wash down pastry with the coffee. Cookies, cake, and donuts. I don't think it mattered. When she was out of pastry it was toast with butter and jam.

The last part of her health food diet was two packs of cigarettes a day. Remember L&M soft pack, without the filter?

My job, in the summer and after school, was to take thirty-five cents to the gas station and feed the cigarette machine.

No, I never saw her without a pack of smokes.

Screaming, smoking, and guzzling coffee. You call that a fine environment?

The final pieces that made up the mosaic that I called my mother were the telephone and the tube. She always had the receiver up against her head. When I was a little kid I thought the phone was part of her skull. She was always on the phone. She could smoke, drink coffee, and eat Twinkies, while talking on the phone and watching a soap opera.

I doubt if she knew who our mayor was. She knew the characters in a whole lot of soaps. I could almost see her doing her "jones" while on the phone. Talking about one soap while watching another. Doing everything but paying attention to me.

I'll tell you this. I'd rather see Lucifer than my momma without her jones.

She was pretty bad, but she could have been a whole lot worse without her stuff.

The only thing worse than being wound tighter than a watch spring is getting unstrung.

Did you ever get yelled at for just being?

I thought not.

Would you like to hear about the calm time?

OK, I can tell you about it.

Have you ever heard of mahjong?

Yah, this goofy Chinese game where the women bang tiles and yak.

So, my momma and a gaggle of her pals would play at two tables in our living room. Smoking cigarettes, banging tiles, and talking non stop.

All this mayhem while I'm trying to sleep in the room next door.

Do you think I could sleep?

I would lie in bed fantasizing about violence, until I fell asleep.

In my fantasy, first I would jump out of bed and take my pajamas off. Then I would run into the living room and kick the tables over. The room would burst into screaming and mayhem. I would calmly pee on the mahjong tiles and slap my mother. Go to the kitchen, get milk and cookies, and then go to bed.

So, I ain't so crazy about women. Could you blame me?

I don't feel bad about those years. They were the dues I had to pay in order to become the fine citizen you see before you.

Life could have been tougher. I could have lived in Detroit.

Should I tell you about my stupid relatives? How about my momma's brother? Yah, Uncle Mo, he was something.

In a family of droolers, this guy shined. He was the moron at the top of the heap.

Do I sound proud?

Yah, well I am. You don't reach the top of the mountain by accident. The climb requires hard work and concentration.

There is something to be said about being that stupid.

Because I used to work for him.

He was a plumber. Over summer break I would work for him. He had a service truck and a crummy little business. Most of the time he would do half assed repairs in rental houses. "Ignore the roaches and get it working," was his favorite saying.

That and "I gotta go check the plumbing" at a bar. I sat in the truck while he drank himself sloppy. I didn't care and either did the roaches.

He wasn't just an incompetent drunk. He was also a crook. Not just an over billing blue-collar contractor. What ever wasn't nailed down belonged to him. He would steal things and then throw them away. I guess he just helped himself to keep in practice.

I was a kid that hauled around tools for drooling idiot with sticky fingers and a dry throat.

The son of a bitch would have me carry his stolen stuff to the truck. I was part of the crime but I never got to keep any of the loot.

Let me tell you about the best job he ever got.

We had to install new supply lines in a drug store. Can you see what I'm getting at?

We could only work at night. We were all by ourselves in a drug store. Mo had gone to heaven.

I would cut and thread pipe while he read dirty magazines and sipped beer. Once, when I was working on a scaffold, I saw him use the pharmacist's tray to count out pills.

I think he studied the porn magazines so that he could steal the best filth.

I just kept cutting and threading pipe.

Working for that guy taught me all about management. It's the golden bridge to the good life.

Well Bubba, we did it. It has been just one hell of a fine day. The best I can remember in the joint.

This morning I did the dance with the shrink. That guy is as dumb as a rock. Maybe dumber.

All I have to do is convince him that I am the victim. Just another person that went bad because of a horrible environment. They warped me into what I am today.

Blame the women and the family. They are all dead anyways.

What do you mean, what am I today?

Bubba, I'm a monster. Through no fault of my own.

I thought you knew that.

Well, now you know.

Anyhow, all I have to do is convince the shrink that I have no free will. He has to believe that I had no choices. Get it, no choice. I can't be held responsible for what I did. I couldn't help myself.

This is the best plan since Mussolini invaded Russia.

Listen to me. That's the heart of the appeal.

With a little luck and my plan, I may yet be a free man.

Judgment day is rolling down the pike. Bubba, old buddy, you gotta position yourself. You gotta be ready for what's around the corner. You gotta create your own reality.

Yes sir, when you are on a role you gotta roll with it.

That bitch Crunch was in the right spot at the right time. Paybacks came around and he didn't have a plan. Remember what I just said? You gotta have a plan. A plan, you empty headed bastard.

Try to pay attention or I will devise a plan for you.

The fool comes around for six cheap cigars. Six damn cigars, not even a box.

He walks right on over to us, all alone. What the hell does he think? Are we his pals?

Right in the throat. He expected a stogie and got a fist. Ain't life full of surprises?

The bitch went down like a ton of bricks.

Yah, stomping the shit out of him was fun. Christmas and New Years rolled into one.

He won't talk. How can he talk with a mouth full of thread? I sure hope he enjoys his oatmeal. That's all he will be eating for a while.

God Damn. Is it really you? After all these years I recognize you, just like it was yesterday.

Get closer to the glass. Let me see your eyes. I always loved to look into your eyes.

Your mouth and skin are just like I remember.

I gotta calm down and stop blubbering.

You, and everybody else in the state, have been reading about me in the newspaper. I'm a celebrity, and you, a housewife?

How do you like reading about yourself?

A lot of people are divorced. Don't think anything about it.

You probably spent your time thinking about me. So tell me about your fantasies. Do you have any regrets? You know, if you played your cards right. You could have had a good life with me.

Wouldn't that have been a life? I'll bet you spend your lonely nights thinking about that possibility.

Tell me about yourself.

I figured your daddy was dead by now.

Too bad, heart attack isn't such a bad way to check out. Around here there are a lot of worse ways.

You know, I never stuttered before. Just listen to me. Stuttering and mumbling like a damn fool. Makes me ashamed of myself.

Do you remember when we were kids?

Tell me what kind of car you drove up here. Was it a red Mercury convertible?

Don't tell me what kind of car it is. Some things are better not known.

What do you mean you never had a red convertible? Am I nuts?

A Buick? And it wasn't even yours? It was your daddy's Riviera?

Well damn, how can that be? Aces and eights.

Maybe I am nuts.

We never made love? We just made out once?

We were just friends?

Why do you remember it one way and I another?

So, you came all the way here to get me to change my story. Clarify things for the press.

Clear things up according to you. You want me to save you from guilt? Maybe you drove me to a life that makes your skin crawl?

I have lived a life that makes both our skins crawl.

You drove all the way up here to gut me like a rabbit. You're not happy until you hang me up like a duck at a China town grocery store.

According to me, the truth stands.

Listen here. Once my life was worth living. Once I had dreams and ambition. I had a future. I had you, on your knees.

That was a long time ago before my life turned to shit.

You took my life and peed all over it. I have been sliding down hill since then.

If you could look into my heart you would see nothing but a pile of scar tissue. The only gift you ever gave me was pain.

I have my memories. Good memories. Pure memories about a girl that loved me. Let me drive her car.

Here you are. You take the little memories that sift through the remainder of my brain and try to steal them. Like a thief in the night.

You can't leave me alone with bread and water. You have to take my bread.

Haul your thieving lying ass out of here and get the hell away from me.

Take your made up history and your dried up skinny ass and drop dead.

Guard.

10

Yes, you are the first administrator I have spoken with. I guess the shrink doesn't count.

What do you mean that I have no chance for an appeal?

What about the psychological angle and public support?

What about the press?

I am a victim here.

Crunch, sure I know him. Everyone knows that bag of crap.

How is it my fault that he is down and out? I don't care if he is in a coma. He belongs in a coma.

We all belong in a coma.

So Bubba talked. He cut his deal and got his parole. Bubba is on the outside. You lock me in a cell and throw away the key.

OLD

Well, old pal, here we are. You know, I never thought that it would turn out like this. Here we are. Me, an old fart, talking to a big grey rat. Maybe both of us are rats. Here we are, birds of a feather.

This relationship is a good thing. I like to make friends everywhere I go. That has always been the strong part of my personality.

So, lets talk.

I have no one else to talk to. I am damn tired of talking to myself. You know, the answers I give myself, and the conversations I share with myself, are not all that rewarding. So, as long as you are interested, I may as well talk to you.

If you get bored, or have some place more important to be, feel free to excuse yourself. I quite understand.

Thinking about it. You remind me of this young college fella I used to talk to. He was a pretty good listener. Just like you. You two even have the same eyes. If you ever write a newspaper column, I'll be the first to read it.

Anyhow, we both do the best we do. That's all that we can do!

So, here we are. We are twins in a way. Twins not clones.

Both of us got smart. We figured out that the only way we could survive was to leave the city. Just pack up our stuff, call the moving van, and discover country life.

I figure all rats come from the city.

The only thing left for us in the city was rat poison. If you pound down enough of that stuff you are dead. Stone cold dead.

Not ready for that amigo? Either am I. Now we can live off the fruits of the earth and enjoy the seasons.

As you noticed I arrived at this barn maybe two weeks ago. I'm still waiting for my furniture to be dropped off. The moving company is taking its own sweet time. They probably scratched the good pieces. I hate to see the Chippendale beat up. It was a wedding gift from the Nixon's. I was always a favorite of Laura and George.

So, here I am, a former city slicker. Now I am a down home country boy with a country friend.

Yesterday I took my morning walk and guess what? I discovered a field of lettuce. I filled up my shipping cart. When I paid the cashier she gave me a pile of stamps, and I trucked on home.

There is nothing healthier than fresh vegetables. You know, if I could have found a pig wandering around, I could be eating a BLT right now.

The only thing better than that would be having a winery for a neighbor. Oh well, we can't have everything.

Remember, we shared our bounty. You eat your fill; I figure you took some home for the family. I respect that. A family man that lives up to his obligations is something I could never be.

Let me tell you about my marriage. The secret to a fine marriage is communication. You should have none. Just grunts and "what the hell do you want."

The more talking the more yakking. The more yakking the more fighting. Just pull your head in like a turtle, and do whatever you want.

Take it from me. I know.

You're thinking, what the hell does he know?

I know because I was married for a while. Funny, I can't remember her name, but I can see her face at night.

I figure that's why I have nightmares.

Weird, I think her name was Rose, like the wine. She had eyes like the landing lights on a B52. Her hair was like an oil slick. She was something. Something to fear.

I think she ran off with my best friend. I used to hate Bill with every fiber of my body. If I had ever ran into him, I would have ripped out that bastard's liver and eaten it.

Then came the revelation. You know what that is? That when the peons string up the king and take over.

Not much of a joke? I'll try harder to entertain you.

So, I figured out one day that Bill did me the favor of a lifetime. He took that bitch off my hands. If I ever run into him I will buy him a steak dinner, a bottle of Bordeaux, and a head of lettuce.

Keep eating old pal. I would like to see you get nice and fat. I may have to eat you this fall.

2

Hey, big grey rat. Where have you been? I guess you found another source of food. Used up your stash? Now you are back here with me.

Some people may call that two faced. Not me. I call it survival in postmodern America. It doesn't take a genius. It takes a big fat grey rat.

So, here we are. I got the goods and you got the appetite. Here you are. Eat some cucumber. If it's good enough for me it should be good enough for you.

Do you realize that with a few more veggies and some fancy dressing, you are eating at the Four Season?

You and I at the Russian Tea Room. Hobnobbing with Putin and Pushkin. That was the life.

Do you remember when I used to live in that pretty red dumpster? I enjoyed that life. I believe that dumpster was a first rate example of art deco trash.

Your family and I, enjoying what other people dream about.

Tuesday night, at the box, behind Midtown Pizza. Feasting on leftover bread and burnt pizza. The Chinese joint almost any night. All you could eat fish and chips, Friday night, at Crazy Dave's Diner.

We ate good and often.

Germes you say. I have never seen a germ in all of my life. Have you?

Just like God.

If you can't see it with the naked eye, it does not exist.

Remember when the truck came to empty the dumpster, and I was asleep on a plastic garbage bag? Did you ever see an old geezer move that fast?

I guess being professionally unemployed has its hazards.

Maybe I should have taken a ride in that garbage truck? Living in the dump may have been a step up.

On second thought, I hate gulls. And don't believe what they say, gulls do not taste like chicken. Chicken tastes like chicken.

3

Glad to see you, old pal. I have been wondering how you have survived?

It seems to me that you have changed. I remember that your body was brown. Today it appears to be grey. Could you have aged that much since we last spoke?

I don't know. Many things in life are strange to me.

However, I can't just call you rat. That almost sounds like an insult. Believe me, the last thing I want to do is insult you. Good friends are hard to find.

Our relationship has blossomed. I believe that I need to give you a name. Therefore, it shall be refined and respectful. As of this second you will be called Elliot.

Yah Elliot, that suits you just fine.

So Elliot, you seem to be making your visits daily. Although, you seem to change your outfit often. Can't blame you for that. If you got it flaunt it, I always say.

How is the family? Perhaps you could come by with the wife and kids. I would very much like to meet them. You have a family, don't you?

Let me tell you something about the old lady. They are all the same. They have two eyes. I want and I need. That's all you need to know about women.

You deal with that pal. I'm flying solo. I am on a voyage. You may even call it an odyssey. A trip to a higher state of mind. No peyote for me. Just good old fresh air.

I will transform myself into a crow and fly with the eagle.

Yah, leave this drab old life behind and leave bad luck flopping in the mud like a stuck pig.

That's what I'm gonna do.

Just wallow around in reality. Groceries and the pay check for the old ball and chain.

Not me. I tried that. Believe me once is more than enough.

The only person I need to make happy is the fellow whose food you are pissing on. Please find another place to relieve yourself.

Elliot, when you remember your manners I will toss you a carrot. If I were you I would stash the treasures I give you. That's because winter is in the wings. That crappy weather has got your name and address.

Let me tell you why I am smarter than you.

Two days ago I liberated these fine clothes. Yah, I'm wearing them right now. I would save them for a Bar Mitzvah, if I had an invitation to one.

Thank you. I agree with all my heart. These clothes are quite a fashion statement.

Anyhow, eventually the local KGB will figure out that Zapata is in the neighborhood. If they have any brains at all they will pick me up.

The fools, they think they are protecting the neighborhood. The reality is that they are securing me a suite in the Holiday Inn.

You, my friend, can spend the winter in this barn. I'll be thinking about you every time I use the indoor plumbing.

I figure it this way. I am cashing in my pension.

4

WHERE THE HELL AM I? CAN ANYONE HEAR ME? WHERE AM I? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH ME? YOU BASTARDS, WHERE IS ELIOT? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO HIM? GET THESE DAMN ROPES OFF ME.

All right, calm down. Get a grip on yourself. You have been in tough spots before.

Look around, figure things out.

MY HAND. MY GOOD RIGHT HAND. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME? You bastards, show your selves. You bastard cowards.

I know what that needle is. YOU'RE GOING TO EXECUTE ME. Death for trespassing and stealing vegetables. All right, I admit it, don't kill me. Save my hand.

Calm down. Control your breathing. Look around.

You are still tied down and wrapped in white. This place must be a hospital or lab. A clean place with doctors and stacked nurses.

The lights are dim. It must be night outside. That means they will leave me alone for a while and give me time to think. Think about my bandaged hand and these damn straps holding me down.

I remember the sheriff's car pulling up with the lights flashing and the siren screaming. You would have thought Barney Fife was after Dillinger. I figured he was after me because Eliot never broke the law as far as I knew. So Eliot and I took off under a big pile of hay. I told him to be quiet; I guess his yakking gave us up.

That damn cop grabbed me by the collar of my good coat and beat the crap out of me. What did I ever do to him? Were they his damn vegetables?

He didn't lay a hand on Eliot. I guess he was after me.

Yah. He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me to the cop car. The prick slammed my good right hand in the car door. My fingers were hanging by a thread.

Me, standing there, crying like a baby. The cop shoving my busted up bloody ass into that car. Now I know why they use vinyl seat covers in cop cars.

Can this make any sense? Eliot, the conduit of disease, he is the prince of the bubonic plague. He goes back to lunch and I am busted and locked up. At least one of us is free to be free.

Now I'm getting worked up. Calm down. Don't let them get to you.

Maybe it's those drugs talking to your brain.

My toes. I can't feel my legs. Nothing is moving down there. They have me pinned down and laying in my own crap.

I think I'm shorter. Those bastards must be aliens. Yah, aliens dressed like cops and doctors. This has got to be a space ship.

Alright, come to grips with it. Aliens must have abducted you and they are experimenting on your body. Are they going to take my hand and replace it with a tentacle or a blaster?

The facts are clear. Now its time to figure out an angle. I need a plan to get me out of this mess.

That's it. Tell them you work for the CIA. Trade information for freedom. Tell them all they want to know about ICBM missiles or star wars or anything.

How smart can they be if they kidnapped me? Don't they know that kidnapping is a federal crime? These guys are really looking for trouble.

Damn, I hate being short. Go figure, if they can make you shorter they can make you taller.

Just my luck. Fifty-fifty chance and I get the short end.

I sure miss Eliot.

Vomit is the worst way to start a day. It's even worse than waking up in your own crap. All you can do is try to spit the taste out of your mouth. It just won't leave. It lays in your cheeks and sours every breath.

Alright Mr. Sheriff, prosecutor, alien, whoever the hell you are. What have you done to me? Look at my legs. How the hell am I suppose to get around on these little stumps?

OK, I'll calm down.

Yes please, take off the restraints. Of course I know where I am.

Jail, of course I'm in jail. You can call this place anything you want to call it.

A nod is the same as a wink to a blind horse.

So, if what you say is true and I am really in your jail there must be some charges against me.

Trespassing. You bastards beat the hell out of me, smashed my hand, and made me shorter, sold me to aliens just because I was trespassing.

Why the hell didn't you tell me to leave?

Alright, I'll calm down.

Now you want me to sign a release. How the hell can I sign anything? My good right hand is bandaged.

You feed me first you bastards then we can deal. First food then you give me back my height.

Go figure. Here I am. Cleaned up, bandaged up, well fed in a space ship. Aliens want to cut a deal with me. They must figure that I know something big. Why should I let them down? Perhaps I'll sell Earth down the river if the deal is right.

Maybe it's a ploy. I'm dead and this is the afterlife. Could be they shot me with a space weapon and sent me into another dimension. Only one way to tell.

Damn, I can't pass through that wall. So I'm not dead. I still have my secrets to trade. You can fool some of the people some of the time. You can't fool the CIA.

6

Alright Mr. lawyer. What do you have to offer?

No I don't want a lawyer. What are you going to offer next? You must be Satan himself.

Alright, alright. You want me to make my mark on this paper and this notary guy will sign it. That's all I have to do and you bloody assassins are off the hook? Just like the Black Hole of Calcutta never happened.

How much? Five thousand dollars to sign. I just promise not to file suit against this town and leave the county. How much for my secrets?

OK, I'll keep my secrets. Just take me back to Earth and set me free. By any chance could you make me taller?

Well Sarg, can you believe my good luck? Here I am with five thousand dollars cash in my new coat. I have a healed up right hand and a bottle of wine. I even have a police officer driving me around like I am a big shot.

Nice seats. Ever been puked on?

Not so bad Friday? Did you check out that nurse? I bet you did.

The past two weeks have been like being on vacation. I had nothing but drugs and women. If that isn't heaven, I don't know what is.

I'm goanna miss you old pal. I'll bet as soon as I put my old self on that dog I'll think about the good times we had together. You and me like Pauncho and Cisco.

All right, play the stoic. All a man like you wants is the facts. It doesn't matter. I like aliens.

So I'll tell you some interesting facts about me. Could you believe it? I used to piss like a racehorse. You would have thought a dyke busted when I let the old yellow water flow.

That was the good old days when a piss was a piss. I guess I never appreciated that gift.

Now days I tinkle like an old woman. My piss is so weak I was ashamed to pee when a nurse was in the room. I was afraid she would hear the little tinkle.

What the hell, as long as I can piss I know I am still alive.

You know life through the neck of a liquor bottle is no picnic. I'm just saying pills, booze and drugs can't be it. There has to be something else.

Friday, why are we stopping here? I don't have to piss. I don't want to get out of the car.

OK, OK take the money. DON'T HIT ME.