

UNFINISHED PAINTINGS

153 Pages

Scott Rettberg

May 1995

Unfinished Paintings is a collection of eight short stories of diverse subject matters and emphases. An afterword is included, "Unfinished Paintings: Writing and the Art of Failure," an essay in which an attempt is made to reconcile theoretical concerns of authorship with the practical craft of writing fiction.

Note: This version has been rescued from an ancient word processor. As a result of the conversion process, some formatting has been altered or lost.

APPROVED:

Curtis White, Co-Chair

David Foster Wallace, Co-Chair

Ray Lewis White

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Unfinished Paintings is a collection of eight short stories of diverse subject matters and emphases. The protagonists include the staff of a contemporary advertising agency, a lonely donut shop manager in Madison, WI, a man opening an envelope, a man missing a monkey, a woman with a motivation problem, a rogue band of anarchist terrorist poets, Friday and Crusoe, and a meddlesome passenger. All the stories deal with ontological, epistemological, teleological, logical or illogical issues, on one level or another. Many of the ideas and plots in the stories are stolen from the treasure trove of both literature and culture available to the writer. There are recurring themes in the stories.

“Unfinished Paintings: Writing and the Art of Failure” is an essay in which an attempt is made to reconcile theoretical concerns of authorship and the practical craft of writing fiction. In a post-structuralist environment in which the author is dead and the both the reader and the writer are essentially little more than situated discourses, the question is asked, “Why should anyone write?”

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SCOTT RETTBERG

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"Agency" was previously published in the *Coe Review*.

"Her Fist in a Ball" was previously published in *Hootenanny*.

– S.R.R.

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AGENCY

Kruptchmeyer scribbles in his notebook while waiting for the big man to arrive:

The aggressors in the system all convene, to pass down judgment on the peasants, the flies, the bathers in unsanitary pools. What a shameful waste of meat, they whisper to each other when they look at our lives.

You might not believe me, but it's true. There is an international conspiracy of grotesque proportions, a cadre of malevolent entities aiming to do one thing to people like you and me. Eat our flesh.

That's right, you heard me right. I know about it. The whole thing. You're in on it. You ravenous cannibal. Don't deny it. The extent of the conspiracy. How far it reaches.

Dracula has nothing on you, paizan. Roasting the corpses of menial wage-slaves to sate your appetites. Your sick, twisted hungers.

Fellow members of the proletariat, rise up. These fuckers are going to eat you, can't you understand that? They're going to come and get you in the night. Then they're gonna take you to an undisclosed location, strip you, humiliate you, shave you of all your body hair, rip out your finger and toe nails, and stick you into a machine that will shove a spit up your ass and poke up all the way through your innards until it comes out your mouth. Then they're gonna slow roast you. Then they're gonna eat you, you fools.

They do other things, too. They do other things if you aren't the right grade of meat. Some people go to the grinder. No ceremony there. They take people to the grinder by the busload. The sausage factory. They turn you into bratwurst, drown you in sauerkraut and beer then serve you up at tailgate parties.

If you're lucky.

Kruptchmeyer sat in his cubicle, contemplating his existence and that of the advertising agency. He was waiting for the big boss to come down, to tell him what to write and how to write it. After a year and a half of spending five days a week in his cubicle, Marty had accepted the fact that while in the cubicle he was not in fact a person at all, but in fact a fleshy extension of his Macintosh keyboard. Every once in a while, the big Adman, the boss, a copywriter who had made his name in the Fifties and had been profiting from it ever since, Allan Curseman, would burst into the cubicle, spouting directives, clichés, and generalities, which he believed were the divine source of creativity.

Marty would tinker away for a while, pattering at the keyboard until a blob of an idea began to form. Then, as he felt the urge to mold the idea, to craft it as a potter might a vase, he would resist that urge. He would tear his fingers away from the keyboard and put the file aside. These creative urges, these urges to hone and refine and sharpen and instill wit, these were things he must always and at all costs avoid. For these things were dangerous. To commit himself, to breathe life into these little snippets like some clay-breathed god, this would be a mistake.

During the year he had been here, Krupthmeyer had become attuned to Curseman's prerogatives. Curseman doesn't want salient vision, humor, drama, wit. He wants safe. He wants you to do things the same as everybody else, only safer. Better in its sameness. The agency isn't a place for new things. People don't want new. New shocks. New disturbs. Advertising isn't about subtlety. All advertising is aimed at the average person, that particular person in any demographic group who is exactly in the middle.

In Curseman's world, advertising has an appreciation for average intelligence. That is, that we must appreciate that the average person is as dumb as a rock.

It is better to insult the smarter-than-average consumer than to assault the faculties of the dumber-than-average. The average man, the common man, the everyday man, reads on a fifth grade level. He gets jokes, but only if they are obvious. He must hear a product's name several times in any given interval to remember it.

The average man likes to buy things that are better-than-average. The way to show the average man that your product is better-than-average is to have a better-than-average man endorsing your product. If you wear the shoes that Michael Jordan wears, you will become Michael Jordan. If you use the same kind of flashlight as Captain Kirk uses, you will become the Commander of the Enterprise.

This is not to say that the average man doesn't appreciate average people. On the contrary, while the average man believes in his heart of hearts that he is better-than-average, the simple reality of his existence

forces him to realize that the lot he has been thrown into is, unfortunately, average. So sometimes it's best to have an average person touting the virtues of a product. Cleaning products, especially. Michael Jordan doesn't clean toilet bowls.

The average man likes catchy little songs. He likes bouncy little tunes that he has heard on the radio, that he can tap his feet to as he cruises down the highway. The average man doesn't mind if you change the words a little bit. The average man likes the Beach Boys. He doesn't like rap, unless he is under twenty-five or black. Country is a safe bet for the rural sector, classical for the luxury automobile buyer.

The average man likes to see women frolicking on beaches in scanty two-piece bathing suits. The average man likes bouncing breasts and firm derrieres. The average man is enamored of flesh. He likes the idea of coming home to find six fashion models in a hot tub. This reminds the average man of beer, and inspires him to buy a six-pack.

The average man dreams about riding out on the range and roping in steers. He was raised on *Bonanza* and *Rawhide*. He likes the idea of riding off into the sunset, with a two-day old beard, dirt under his fingernails, in stinking need of a bath and with hundreds of sweaty miles of rough country yet to cross. This reminds him of smoking, and makes him want to buy a carton of Marlboros.

Of course, Curseman was no fool, Marty reminded himself. Curseman would not forget the other half, or maybe 60% of the consumer marketplace. One mustn't forget the average woman. Advertising must care for her as well. The average woman likes trashy romance novels and

soap operas. The average woman dreams of escaping from an average existence. The average woman likes Calgon baths. She likes products like spray-on oven cleaners; things that will make her world more hygienic, her life easier. Things that get out those deep-down stains.

The average woman longs for products that will make her the desire of every average man. She likes products that will push her up, and tone her down, and beautify the scent of her home. The average woman likes the idea of liposuction, but she is afraid to admit it. The average woman is comfortable talking about feminine hygiene products, but only if she is holding her mother's hand as they walk across a sandy white beach as the sun sets.

Such were Allan's rules of advertising, rock solid truths; dictums by which Allan Curseman governed his universe, and by which he controlled the creative output of his copywriters. Allan saw himself as the champion of the everyman, the average man who made an average living, worked at an average job and came home to an average wife. The average man lived in a world that Allan could understand.

Of course, Allan did have one shortcoming. He was trapped in 1959. The average man whom he understood unfortunately also still lived in 1959. It was rough for Allan to face the fact but the horrible truth of the matter stood out like a sore thumb or any other of a number of bad similes — try as he might, Allan Curseman could simply not become hip.

Marty heard the sound of Allan's footsteps in the corridor. Allan stopped in front of the glass door of the conference room and straightened his tie.

Allan knew that if he were hip, youngsters like Marty would be unnecessary. One of the cardinal rules of advertising is that you need to keep in touch, to empathize with your audience. Once upon a time this meant that you had to listen to Frank Sinatra, have drinks at the Playboy club downtown, and make an occasional dinner appearance at the Pump Room. Those were the days. Now it meant you had to watch MTV.

Curseman had kept up pretty well, all the way through the Sixties (Beatles), Seventies (Neil Diamond) and even into the early Eighties (Michael Jackson). But he drew the line there, sometime after Michael went into his first set of plastic surgeries. No videos.

Videos upset the whole balance of the thing. Soon after their arrival, Madison Avenue went crazy imitating their style. Curseman just didn't get it, all those quick cuts and obscured meanings, images flashing like a strobe light, assaulting the cornea. Information overload, lacking information. Ads that dressed like concerts. Ads that didn't mention the product. Ads that made fun of ads. This was hip. Curseman couldn't stand it. Truth be told, Curseman couldn't understand it. So he imported these sucklings. People to use, people to train, people to drain. People who were aware of their surroundings, of when and where they were born, and who believed at least marginally in the significance of their generation. That is, believed in MTV. But never too bold a spirit. No one who would spit in the face of legend, or challenge the rules of truth. His truth. God's truth. The same truth that Herbert Hoover believed in. And they must always be creative, but never too creative. A man like Allan Curseman should have others standing in his shadow. No one should ever block his

sunlight. He was certain it would blow over, this shaking of the field, this idiotic trend. Then there would be a return, a retro-turn, to the days when things were right. When culture worked, and things made sense. They wouldn't forget Allen Curseman. He'd catch his second wind. He wouldn't get lost in the shuffle.

After all, he was known. Around town, he was known. He had put in his time at Leo Burnett. He rode it out at Ogilvy and Mather. That grind, those long nights in the heat of the battle with the psyche of the average man. He had emerged victorious. Especially because of that one glorious spot. The spot in which the dog chases the miniature chuck wagon around the kitchen. That was Allan Curseman. Allan Curseman did that. Under his belt, he had the best damn dogfood commercial ever written. He had set the standard against which all other dogfood commercials would be judged. What could they possibly do; what could possibly surpass the chuck wagon commercial? It caught the eye and held it. The consumer loved it. Forever imprinted upon the brain of the popular consciousness. And when those students of advertising, those future copywriters of dogfood commercials asked, "My god, who thought of the chuck wagon?" their teachers would reply, "That, ladies and gentleman, that was the work of Allan Curseman."

Kruptchmeyer rolled bits of eraser off of the pencil between his fingers and thumb. Curseman was around the corner, just lurking there. Marty felt immensely intimidated by Curseman. Maybe it was because he'd been camped here, at Curseman/Kearning/Susan, for a year. A new part in a machine will gradually become molded by heat and friction to fit the

machine's other parts. Either that, or it will pop out, an unneeded cog. Krupthmeyer was not the type to disrupt the system. He had long dreamed of landing a job as a copywriter. He had worked for Rue and Hay, a textbook company, for four years before he got this job. That's four years of checking the grammar in grammar textbooks. That will do things to a man. It will make the world of advertising seem like a lush blue-green oasis to someone who has been trudging through the desert for many long hot days.

Of course, over the course of the year Krupthmeyer had been at C/K/S, he had developed a whole series of resentments. Not that he ever complained out loud. He wouldn't be an altar boy interrupting the sermon to clarify a few points. Krupthmeyer knew his place in the system. But he was at constant struggle with himself, attempting to reconcile his own feelings with his previous notion of what his life as a copywriter would be like. His oasis was a mirage. He was still standing in the desert without a drop to drink, and once again he was surrounded by cannibals. But who were the cannibals, and who was the victim? In the final analysis, Krupthmeyer could find no one but himself to blame for the perceived failings of his existence. He chose to be here, and he could leave at any time. Allan Curseman had his Clios. He'd been in the One Show. Krupthmeyer hadn't done shit. He had corrected grammar in grammar textbooks. Allan Curseman was the man behind the chuck wagon.

Krupthmeyer looked up at the row of annuals he had studied for the last two years. All the little bloomings, the flashes of creativity that had

been judged the best of the year, twenty years worth of ground-breaking ads. He could, he would, "I think I can, I think I can," get there. He looked down at his little copy of *Bill Bernbach Said . . .* with the lemon car on the cover. He smiled. Someday he might reach that higher ground. If he wasn't devoured on the way up.

"Kruptchmeyer!"

Marty looked up to see Curseman in the doorway of his cubbyhole.

"Those Steal pieces. Is that the best you can do?"

"What didn't you like about them, sir?"

"They're boring. And you only mention Steal Jewelers twice. Do you think I could take that to the client? With his name only mentioned twice? Do you want Mr. Steal to have a stroke?"

"Sorry, sir. No, I guess you're right, sir."

"Don't whimper, Kruptchmeyer. Just rewrite the damn ads. Didn't we talk earlier about using a pun on the name?"

"Yes, sir. You said you hated the idea."

"No, no, not the way I'm thinking about it. What you said before was incredibly stupid. What was your tagline?"

"Steal our jewelry."

"Exactly. You think an owner of a jewelry store wants to hear that on the radio? Steal my jewelry. Rob me of my livelihood, take all my possessions, leaving my wife and children homeless and penniless, to beg on the street and turn tricks in the alley. Do you think Mr. Steal wants to hear that?"

"No, sir. Of course not, sir. You're right."

“But how about, ‘The Finest Jewelry. It’s a Steal.’?”

“That’s a good one, Mr. Curseman.”

“Better, at least. Then you can talk about the main points, but make it short and sweet. And always mention Steal.”

“Like ‘Steal Service, Steal Selection, Steal Prices?’”

“There you go, Marty. But never say ‘Steal Jewelry’ or ‘Steal Watches.’ That would be idiotic.”

“Right, sir. Thanks for the idea.”

“No problem, Marty. Just keep trying. I expect to see it on my desk first thing tomorrow morning, 0800 hours.”

“It will be there before I leave, Mr. Curseman.”

“You do like your job, don’t you?”

“Oh yes, sir, I do love my job. I’m happy here. I’m doing what I’ve always wanted to do.”

“You will be, once you get it right. Just wait till you hit that sweet spot. It’s better than sex, Marty, the best sex you’ve ever had. Hell, it’s better than the best sex I’ve ever had. Keep trying, Marty.”

Secure in his role as mentor, Curseman walked away from Marty’s box and strode back to his sanctum. Mission control. Curseman loved his office. Against the wishes of his wife’s interior decorator and to his own specifications, it was all done in natural woods; hardwood floors and a giant oak table, cut lengthwise from one tree. Earthy. Who says that a man who makes most of his money off of things packed in plastic can’t be earthy? Allan was hot in the Sixties. He could dig it.

While tapping out the new taglines, Marty wondered if it was true, what he heard other employees saying, that Allan had listening devices in all the offices, and that there was a control panel somewhere in there, in Allan's office, and that Allan would tune in at various times, to listen in on his employees. This is why Marty generally avoided talking to the other employees, and why he would often type in meaningless phrases like "a reliable treatment for cancer," or "it changed my life," over and over again, so that the listening device would pick up the sounds of typing. He never put his own stories into the machine. These he scribbled into a notebook, discreetly. He would never commit his own work to the machines in the office. It was too controversial. Too true. What Marty had suspected for years at Rue and Hay was true. There was a conspiracy, and it reached to higher levels than one might suspect. The conspiracy followed Kruptchmeyer, engulfed him. He had once called his stories science fiction. Now he realized that what he wrote was pure science.

All of the Macs were connected to a network, and all had cables connecting them to Curseman's Mac. Curseman could make whatever was on anyone's screen at the agency appear on his screen whenever he wanted it to. Everyone knew that he had that capability. Whether he used it or not was anybody's guess. But some copywriters claimed that they had written copy in the afternoon, left in the evening, and returned in the morning to find that what they had written had been altered in the night. Gremlins, maybe. Curseman, probably. Over the network.

Curseman closed the door to his inner sanctum. He stared at the African masks on his wall. Each one had a story. For the most part, they

were used to invoke native gods. Allan had started collecting the masks in the early Seventies, when they were in vogue. However, as decorating trends changed and wooden masks were relegated to the realm of kitsch, Allan's interest had grown. While many of his friends and colleagues thought of his mask collection in the same way as they might a wide polka-dotted tie, he took great pride in it. He had actually travelled to Africa on safari. Not for animals. Great white hunters are schmucks. Curseman was an aficionado. An artiste of sorts. A collector of primitive art. His office might not be the Getty, but it was a start. Served a purpose, too. Intimidated the shit out of people, all those masks staring at them. Every word Curseman said was backed by these long-faced warriors. They were frightening to the uninitiated. But Curseman knew their stories, had mastery over these gods. As he stared into the empty eye sockets of a Kalahari fertility god, he felt the vigor rushing through him. Allan was like a god himself. Earth-God. Ad-God.

The intercom squawked Allan from his stupor.

"Dad, we need to talk. These SwedenSki people are busting my balls."

"Come on in, Matthew."

His son, Matthew. Allan knew there was talent in Matthew, somewhere. A man needs to provide for his children, to give them good footing. You structure their childhood, give them a happy home, support them through Little League, gymnastics, violin lessons. You teach them how to drive, lend them the car. When they wreck the car, you take your lumps and keep loving them. You pay their way through school, see to it that they get a good university education. After college, you give them

some direction, an idea of where to go. Then, theoretically, they go out into the world to do great things.

It didn't work out that way with Matthew. After college, Allan had set Matthew up with an internship at Saturday Night Live. But after the internship ended, Matthew couldn't seem to parlay it into anything. It was a tough job market, granted, but Matthew was a Curseman. He should be able to do better. He didn't interview well. He just didn't know how to make a good impression; he rarely seemed to know what he was talking about. Matthew had never seemed to grow out of his childhood. Then there was the other thing.

Allan hated to think about it. Nearly drove him to ulcers. Allan thought back to his days in the Navy, the names they used for people like his son. At first it had enraged him, his son the soap-dropper. A flamer. But a father must love his son, and Allan could no longer live in the Fifties. It had taken a lot of Phil Donahueization, and a fortune in therapy, but the Curseman family stuck together. Allan took Matthew back under his wing and made him a partner in his firm. Allan accepted things as they were, but he couldn't help a feeling of revulsion from wrenching through his body every time his son got on a plane to Washington D.C. Matthew flew there once a month to be with his friend. His male friend. His — the encounter sessions told Allan that he had to say it — his lover. Sometimes when Matthew was away, Allan couldn't sleep well, knowing his son was probably bending over and . . .

“You need to help me with these SwedenSki people, Pop. They're busting my balls.”

“What’s the problem, Matthew?”

“Well, first I can’t get through to anybody, about the songs. Then I have two different people calling me. Then they say they need the songs today, then they say they need different songs, then they won’t give me numbers. Then I’m getting two different sets of numbers and two different sets of songs from two different people at SwedenSki. And these people are talking to me like I’m some kind of idiot, just because I’m trying to do what they’re telling me to do which is apparently not what they want done. Help me here, Pop. These people are driving me nuts.”

“I’d rather not have to bother Alex with this, Matt.”

“I know, Pop. I just hate them talking to me like I’m some retarded errand boy. I’m a partner in this firm. They should respect that. I mean, it’s not my fault that they don’t communicate in their organization, is it? I just want to find out who I should be talking to, you know?”

“Well, why don’t you get both sets of numbers on both sets of songs, give both of the people what they want, and then let them take it from there. Simple, Matthew, give them what they want and they’ll stop calling.”

“Fine, Pop. I’ll do that, but I can’t get the numbers until the people at EMI give them to me. Rosenbloom. There’s a crass one. He won’t return my calls. New Yorkers. His secretary says he leaves the office Thursday afternoons and heads up to his beach house on Long Island, where he doesn’t have a phone. Can you believe it? Somebody in our business without a phone? I don’t. I know he’s got a phone number. She just won’t

give it to me, the bitch. I wanted to get this taken care of. I'm not getting back from D.C. until Tuesday night."

"You'll just have to cut your trip short, Matt. We need you here, in the office, Monday morning."

"I haven't seen Doug in over a month."

"I don't want to hear about your friend in D.C. This is your job, remember? The thing you use to pay your bills? For your new car? Take your vacation some other time. I'm not going risk one of our most important client's business just so you can saunter up the Mall with Doug. Reschedule, and get this thing taken care of on your own, and everything will be fine. Alright?"

"Oh, fine, Pop. I'll try. I guess I can call the travel agent and fly back Sunday night. The things I do for this agency. I'll remember this come bonus time."

"I need to make a phone call, Matthew."

"This is all mine in the will, isn't it?"

"Why don't you get to work on those numbers?"

"Hey, I can take a hint. I'm out of here."

Matt left Allan's control center. He walked past Diane Singer's office and popped his head in the door. She was frantically scribbling red Magic Marker on the large paper pad on her easel.

"Whatcha working on?"

"The GlobalVision logo. I've got this idea of these eyes watching over the people, protecting them."

"Keeping them safe and warm?"

“Exactly. But I don’t want it to be threatening. I want it to be to secure, friendly but tough.” As she spoke to Matthew, Diane cartooned images on the paper.

“The big brother who comes to your rescue when the bully throws sand in your face at the playground?”

“Right, benign, but it has to be an image that a white male with a high tax bracket will respect.”

“Like the Michelin man?”

“No.”

“The Tidy Bowl man?”

“No.”

“The Arm and Hammer guy?”

“No.”

“Superman?”

“No, Matthew.”

“Wonderwoman?”

“I’m not thinking of a mascot, or a character, really. More an image, an icon.”

“But we’re all iconoclasts here at C/K/S, aren’t we? We’re breaking new wind. Do you want to do lunch?”

“I think I’m just going to eat a sandwich and work on this.”

“Good to see the dedication, Diane. Busy beaver.”

“Builds the dam.”

“I think I’ll go to Starbucks, buy a mocha java and a croissant, sit out on the sidewalk, and watch the shoppers walk by.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Have fun with your Magic Markers.”

Diane thought of the wallpaper which covered the walls of her bedroom when she was a little girl. It was so friendly, so safe. She needed no night light, she wasn't afraid of the dark. Pooh bear with a pot of honey. On the walls. The feeling of that room. If only she could wrap a product in that feeling. It would sell. An automobile protection system, for the luxury automobile buyer. Pooh would not work. Diane drew a happy young family, in the company of their car, with their eyes raised towards the logo of what? Father Time? Kojak? A globe? The Magnificent Seven? Vaguely militaristic, the whole thing, really. Another symptom of a patriarchal system. The tough, rough and ready, don't-mess-with-my-stuff mentality of this product. Diane thought of *The Scream*. Boys need toys upon toys upon toys. Her job was to draw pictures to make boys want more toys. What a cycle. There was no end to it. A Norman Rockwell smile? Maybe not. Men would buy the product, mostly. Allan wanted the icon to appeal to the men's sense of protection; to make men want to protect their women and children. Maybe an ape. Arnold Schwarzenegger? In a Humvee, with a large automatic weapon? Someone to watch over me. So Fifties. Diane drew a large Russian woman. What would fly?

Daniel flew by, en route to his office from lunch. He worked like clockwork. Everyday he broke for lunch at 11:30, flew by Diane's office at 11:59, and was back at his desk at noon sharp, working. He was so organized, so professional, so type A personality. Diane couldn't fathom

it. She was always staying late, with pages upon pages of drawings, and no decisions. Daniel was a decision-making machine. He was in marketing, though. Diane was a creative worker. Things were different on her side of the conference table.

Daniel paced in his office, though not standing up. The door to his office was made of glass, and his superiors could see in. He paced across the desk, from corner to corner, with his eyes. He thought about Victor Hugo, and time, and minimalist theatre, then switched to riots in soccer games, that one brutal photograph of the fans crushed up against the fence, faces brutally mashing, in particular. Then he said, "Hmmm. . . ." and tapped his pencil on his desk. He had adopted pencil tapping as a ritual for the sake of his employers, who interpreted it as a sign of concentrated thought. Thought of marketing, which Daniel, although he found himself in an account executive's chair, thought was a contradiction in terms. He sat pacing, mentally engaged in a constant struggle. He looked at ratings, and demographics, and rate sheets, but found he had a hard time giving a shit about cost per point. Target market, he tried to repeat in his mind, Zen, target market, target market, ooohm, target market.

The target market was yuppies. Upscale apartment buildings, Downtown Chicago. The Dwelling Management Company. Cushy pads in the heart of the Loop. For special people. Successful people. Young people with money. Did they listen to news radio, or talk radio, or rock n' roll? Hopefully not country. Daniel himself listened to big band jazz. He played the tenor sax. It was a portion of his life that he protected, a

soothing moment of vitality to make sure he scheduled in among the slosh of the mundane. Numbers and schedules, and how unbelievably boring the view of the parking lot was, but for the cumulus clouds beginning to roll in. Estimate for client. Cost.

Michigan Towers was a Disneyland for young executives. A roost for comers. Two towers of corporate powerhouse offices and three towers of luxurious, tremendously overpriced apartments. Nothing Daniel could hope to afford on his salary. It was a self-sufficient Yuppie city, complete with racquetball leagues, a supermarket, an espresso bar, a Brooks Brothers store, a gourmet French restaurant, a shoeshine boy, a full health club, an Olympic size pool, a wineseller and an in-house masseuse. A Fax machine in every apartment.

All of which adds up to high rent. Most of the successful young people who lived there couldn't really afford to live there. But living in Michigan Towers was almost an investment in success. More than anything else, it carried an *image* of success. And in the world Michigan Tower residents moved in, image was the only substance that really mattered.

"To each his own box," Daniel muttered.

"What was that, Dan?" Samuel Kearning stood in the door. Kearning was the number two man at C/K/S. He was the expert on design, in charge of production for the agency.

"Gotta find the right box, the right slot, you know, Samuel. For these radio spots for Michigan Towers. Just trying to figure out where the target market is listening."

“I don’t know about the radio spots, Daniel. I understand where you’re coming from. I mean radio, it seems like hip, right? Like cool. I know. I was young once, too. But I’ve been in this business for a long time, Daniel, since before you were even a mischievous thought in your father’s head. And you know what’s wrong with radio?”

“You’re the boss, Samuel, shoot from the hip.”

“There’s no pictures, Daniel. There’s no graphics. People like pictures, Daniel. They like to *see* what they’re buying. And when people are shopping for a place to live, they pick up the *Sunday Trib*, and they see all of the striking and impressive display ads C/K/S has been producing for the Dwelling Company. They see a place where they would like to live. Then they call for a showing. Am I wrong here, Daniel? Are our ads not working? Is my department falling on its face here? Why would we switch over to radio?”

“I’m not saying that the print media isn’t working, Samuel. The display ads are beautiful, I’ll be the first to say that. I’m not saying that we should cut out the newspaper ads entirely, of course not. I’m just saying that there are other ways we can direct our resources. We can hit more than one sector of our target market. We can do it with an extended version of our current marketing strategy. We can utilize more than one resource at a time, and hit not only the customer base that we hit now, but other people as well. We’ve got to be diverse. We need to have an integrated coordinated marketing strategy.”

“Now you sound like Susan. Let me say it simple. What do people do when they are searching for an apartment? What are they doing? They’re

looking for an apartment, Daniel. Have you ever heard of someone *listening* for an apartment? No. You don't listen, smell, or feel for an apartment. You look for an apartment. You take the visual element out of our advertising, and *poof*, you've got nothing."

"Everybody listens to radio on the way to work and on the way home from work. Picture this. You're a young, successful commuter. You work in the city. You live in a townhouse in the suburbs. It's a hot August day. Traffic is appalling. Bumper to bumper. Your only escape, your only way to prevent your accumulated frustrations from the drive from bubbling over into a violent episode of expressway homicide, is to listen to the radio. People don't read the *Trib* while they're crawling through a traffic jam. They listen to their favorite radio station. And what does the young, successful, frustrated commuter hear on the radio? He hears our ads for Michigan Towers. He thinks about living in the city, about *walking* to work downtown. He thinks about eliminating the tortuous two and a half hours of his life that he commits to this ugly commute on a daily basis. He scratches down the Dwelling Company phone number and as soon as he gets home he calls them up to schedule a showing. BAM! Another sale for the Dwelling Company produced by the advertising people at C/K/S."

"Alright, alright, you're excited. You're young. You want to try something different. I'll listen to your presentation. But you had better make a good case. You know where I stand."

Samuel walked out of Daniel's office and down the hallway.

Nobody ever really listens to anybody else. In advertising, the only way to sell your idea is to convince whoever you're selling it to that it was

their idea to begin with. Then it suddenly becomes creative and exciting. But none of that really matters, does it?

Daniel thinks about his friend, Melissa, who one day left her office at Leo Burnett and booked a flight for Montana. She dropped her career, her apartment, her life in the city, to move to Big Sky. She said she was going to work on a ranch or something. Out of the mousetrap, she said.

Tonight, Daniel decided, he would put on blue jeans and climb up the fire escape to the roof of his apartment building. He would sit on the edge of the brownstone roof, five stories above the street, and play saxophone into the tumescent sky until his lips bled or somebody yelled at him or the clouds broke overhead, until he was just too tired to play any more.

LOVING BILL

Ellen stares at the screen that is not a screen but a mirror and not a mirror but a window and not a window but a place. Her lover is there. He is pensive and sensitive, he is struggling with the weight of history. He is sincere. He cares. He blinks. The wind tousles his graying auburn hair. He smiles. We are going to get through this thing together. Ellen smiles back. She believes him. He wears blue jeans and a button-down shirt. Sneakers. He looks so good in those blue jeans. He is the most powerful man in the free world. He stands at the top of the stairs just before he enters the plane. He looks out into the crowd. He waves. He cares. Closeup. His gaze is cast far off, into an element the camera cannot see. He is staring into the fragile beyond, searching. He turns and disappears into the plane.

Ellen unbuttons her Levis. She presses the slick smooth surface of the remote control tightly against her inner thigh. She sighs. She looks up to the chart she has drawn that hangs over her television set. She is hot. Damn. His next appearance isn't until 6:30, C-Span, address to the AMA. She wants him now, live. There are always the campaign videos, but somehow they are never enough. She needs Bill in real time.

Videotape will have to do for now. Rewind. Play. Bill is at the top of the stairs again. His lips are parted and slanted down slightly on the left into that wide smile that suggests pure unadulterated good will. He raises his left arm. He has a small freckle on his chin, just beneath the center of his succulent lower lip. His eyebrows are perfect half moons above cosmos-seeking blue eyes, deep as the ocean. Stop. Ellen closes her eyes.

She quivers beneath the knitted afghan. He is coming. Here. Soon. 6:30 P.M. Three hours? There are other media.

Ellen rifles through her stacks of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, *Rolling Stone*. She caresses the glossy cover of *Rolling Stone*, Bill in a steel-blue suit, looking tough, in front of the White House. Looking suave but looking tough. Bill, at the DMZ in Korea, in fatigues and an Air Force cap, in the company of men with guns. Steely-eyed determination. Bill, at a homeless shelter, reaching out to a raggedy-haired girl with mournful eyes and children at her feet, offering compassion, support, concern. Bill, out jogging in a goofy red sweatsuit, in a sea of wary-eyed Secret Service men, chugging along, picking up the pace. Bill, the good ol' boy back at an Arkansas pig roast, joking with his pals. Bill, at a children's hospital, giving a piggy-back ride to a small boy, bald from chemotherapy. Bill, the leader of the free world, arms raised high in an embrace of peace with Arafat on his right and Sharon on his left. Bill, the harbinger of a new era, the dove on the horizon. Bill, haggard, under fire from the Newts and Leeches and Doles of this world, standing firm by his beliefs. Bill, in his study, late at night, reading by the light of a single lamp, his shirt sleeves rolled up, his hand pressed to his forehead, the epitome of contemplation. Ellen pressed. He is aware of the life in every waking moment. Her finger danced. His life is about touching people. Ellen touched. Bill, coming, here, soon. Ellen imagined and caressed, then slouched back on the couch. Too good to believe, that he could actually be coming to Madison. Here. To Ellen. The day after tomorrow.

* * *

"Time to make the donuts," droned Steve, Ellen's co-worker at the Dunk n' Dine on Washington Street.

"Will you cut that out?"

"Time to make the donuts."

"I don't need to hear that from you."

"Time to make the donuts."

"Look Steve, it's 5 A.M. Do you need to wake up and start being an asshole? Just make the donuts and be quiet about it, will you, at least until I've had a cup of coffee?"

"Well Geez Louise, boss, I was just trying to bring an air of levity to an otherwise inauspicious occasion. You will at least permit me to listen to my tunes while I prepare these delectable pastries?"

"Metallica?"

"Uh huh."

"No, Steve, no Metallica. Not at 5 A.M."

"It gets you going. Sabbath?"

"No heavy metal, period."

"This working environment sucks. How about Marley?"

"If you play it quietly."

"Right. Time to make the donuts."

"Steve?"

"Yes, Ellen?"

"Please."

“Make the donuts?”

“Right. Quietly. I need to do the books.”

Ellen stood at the counter, turning her back to the wise-cracking long-haired zit-faced little pain-in-the-ass. He was insufferable, but he was good at making donuts, and it would be hard to find anyone else who was willing to get up at 4 A.M. to work for minimum wage. Maybe someday he would leave town, go to college. Ellen had been a college student once, for two years. Then she dropped out and worked at a Wendy's for three years before she got the Assistant Manager job at Dunk n' Dine. After two years at the Dunk n' Dine she had been promoted to Day Manager. She had all the keys and everything. She kept the books and allegedly had authority over everyone but the owner. She was twenty-nine years old.

Ellen looked at her reflection in the glass of the pie case. At sixteen, she'd been thin and firm, a cheerleader on the Manitowoc High Varsity squad. But bismarcks and coffee cake, turnovers and slices of lemon meringue pie, frosted and chocolated; the food had leapt into her life, and with it pounds of flesh. Her face was full now, rounded where it had once been defined. Her arms were hung heavy with the sugary dough. Her falls were now cushioned by the fruit of jelly rolls.

“Having trouble with the math, Ellen?”

“No, just thinking.”

“Thinking? Call the Vatican. It's a miracle.”

“Stick it, Steve. Get going on the chocolate rings. Sam will be here in twenty minutes.”

Sam Johnson, a Nabisco delivery driver, was always the first customer of the day. He always had a cup of coffee and a half dozen chocolate rings. He would eat three donuts in the shop while he sipped a cup of coffee with two spoons of sugar, no cream. He would take the other three with him, for later on in his route. Ellen always let him fill up his thermos for free.

“Do we need any apple turnovers, cherry turnovers?”

“Make a half dozen of each.”

“Are you sure a half dozen of each will be enough? I’m thinking about maybe we should do a special on turnovers today. Maybe I should do three dozen of each, you know? I just get feelings sometimes, Ellen, the vibes are right for turnovers. Maybe two turnovers and a cup of coffee for three bucks. Whadda ya say?”

“Your mother must be a saint, that’s what I say. Anyone who could survive eighteen years with you under her roof deserves a medal. Please, the turnovers, a half dozen of each.”

“Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the vibrator this morning.”

“Will you shut up and make the donuts?”

“Yes boss, time to make the donuts.”

Ellen checked that the numbers from the night before matched the balance dropped in the safe, then put the cash drawer in the register. What should she wear tomorrow? Red. No. Reagan liked red. Bill wouldn’t like red. What would he think if she showed up dolled up like Nancy Reagan? Nice thinking, Ellen. Real nice. Blue. American. Deep blue.

She didn't have a blue dress. She would have to buy one. Heels?
Something that would draw his attention, but nothing garish. Just to
touch him would be enough. For now. A big hug. In person. Live.

The bell on the door jingled as Sam walked in.

"Morning all. Come here to watch the sunrise with you, as usual."

"Good morning, Sam."

"My, Ellen, I don't mind telling you that you look particularly
beautiful this morning. Your cheeks are flushed. You been making this
woman blush, Steve?"

"Six chocolate rings and a cup of coffee with two spoons of sugar,
Sam?"

"What is it that smells so good? What are you pulling out of the
oven there, Steve? Turnovers? Say, I don't think I've had an apple
turnover for months. Why don't I get two of those? You got any cherry?"

Ellen turned her head. "No chocolate rings?"

"Ellen, man cannot live on chocolate alone."

"Did you hear that the President is coming here tomorrow?"

"Him?" Sam pointed to the 8X10 glossy that Ellen had framed and
hung beneath the wall menu.

"Bill. Tomorrow."

"To the Dunk n' Dine?"

"No, to town. He's going to talk about environmental regulation,
at the arboretum."

"I sure don't care. I didn't vote for him."

"Why not?"

“Cause he’s full of hot air.”

“But he’s doing a good job.”

“Look Ellen, I know you like Clinton and all and I don’t mean to offend you, but I don’t see what he’s ever done for me would ever make me want to vote for him.”

“How can you say that? Clinton is the most caring man who ever lived in the White House. He tried to get us all health care, and he’s making our streets safer, and he’s opening world trade, and he’s fighting for world peace and welfare reform and he’s cutting government red tape and he’s saving people from disasters.”

“All he gives us is taxes. A whole big rush taxes, and no real changes except for more wasted money. I don’t need his health insurance. I get it through the company and I pay half. Fair enough. I don’t need more protection. I got a handgun and I know how to use it. I don’t need Bill Clinton changing my diapers and taking my paycheck. I don’t need him to tell me how to live my life. I can take care of myself.”

“Well maybe you can, Sam Johnson, but there’s a lot of people out there who can’t, and Bill’s got to worry about them too.”

“My heart bleeds.”

“He’s the first president who’s always there when you need him. He cares what ordinary people think. He’ll tell you what he thinks, straight up, and what he’s going to try to do to fix what’s broken.”

“And he ends up breaking it more.”

“That’s Congress, not Bill.”

“He’s sort of cute too, isn’t he?”

"He sure is, but that's got nothing to do with it."

"Sort of looks like Elvis, in a Hubba Bubba sorta way."

"He does not. He looks Presidential."

"Well, you don't got me convinced, but I guess we all got the right to an opinion."

"I guess we do."

"You look pretty cute when you got an opinion, you know that? So you gonna go see Elvis, uh, Bill, tomorrow?"

"Sure am."

"In the morning?"

"10 A.M."

"Don't you have to be here?"

"I'm taking the day off."

"So you won't be here to watch the sunrise with me?"

"Afraid not. Not this Friday."

"Well, that's a shame. You tell Bill I'm jealous. What you gonna do tomorrow night then, after you're done watching Billy Bob pose in front of the trees?"

"I need to help my mother hang her new curtains."

"Well, that's a shame. You ever seen the monster trucks?"

"Can't say I have."

"You know they got a show on this weekend at the Coliseum? The Cadillac Crusher, one of them is called. It's gonna run over fourteen Caddies."

"I think I heard the commercials. With the echoing voice?"

"Yeah, that's it. Anyway, I'm gonna go see that tomorrow night, and I was gonna go see it with one of my buddies, but he's gotta go to his kid's Boy Scout Jamboree, and I got two tickets now. I was thinking that maybe if you could, you know, put off helping your mom with her curtains, you might want to come with."

"Well, I don't know, Sam. I promised my mother."

"You sure? They got a truck called the Bigfoot Stomper, thing's got wheels seventeen feet in diameter."

"She's sick, you know, I need to help her."

"Well, you ever seen *Batman* the movie? They're gonna have the Batmobile there. With all the attachments and everything. They'd probably even let you sit in it if you wanted."

"I'm sorry, Sam. I promised her."

"That's alright, I just got the extra ticket, is all. Just thought you might be interested. I guess you'll be pretty tired and all. Maybe some other time."

"Sure. This Friday is just a bad night, you know."

"Well, I should be going. Guess I'll see you Monday."

"Look Sam, the sunrise."

"Sure looks pretty over the lake, doesn't it?"

"Beautiful."

"It should be like that everyday."

"Isn't it pretty to think so?"

* * *

"I'm here, Ma. Open up the door, Ma, come on." Ellen reminded herself that she would need to have a key made as she rapped on the door to her mother's apartment at the Birch Valley Senior Citizens Community. Ellen's parents had been well into their middle age when she was born. Smoking had killed her father when she was ten and lately her mother Doris had been having some memory problems.

"Open up. The door, Ma, the front door. It's me, Ellen." Doris had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. She was still mostly there, at least well enough to live with relative independence at Birch Valley, but some things were beginning to slip for her, "Come on, your door."

"Oh dear, I thought it was the television. It didn't make sense, on Jeopardy, but you never know with these programs these days."

"It's alright, Ma." Ellen handed her mother a bouquet. "I'm only dying out here in the rain."

"Well come in, come out of the rain."

"I brought you some roses, and I brought you something else."

Ellen handed the wet gift-wrapped package to her mother. "It's a present."

"It's not my birthday."

"I know it's not your birthday."

"My wedding anniversary is in March."

"Right. It's April, Ma. It's just a present-because-I-felt-like-giving-you-a-present kind of present. A surprise."

"Yes, dear. Do you want tea? I could make some tea. Is today Tuesday? I remember Ethel and I always had tea on Tuesday afternoons, back when we were debutantes. Do you remember Ethel, Ellen?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Well, when we were nineteen we would sit on the porch on sunny days and have one nice cup of tea and gossip. And all the young men would walk by and turn their heads and Ethel and I would smile. And they had beautiful cars then, lovely to watch roll by."

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"What?"

"The present. I brought you a present. Open it."

"But don't you want to have tea?"

"First open the present, then we'll have tea."

"If that's what you want, dear." Doris unwrapped the gift, a framed portrait.

"Oh that's wonderful, Ellen."

"Do you like it, Ma? He signed it and everything."

"He's a very handsome young man."

"He is, isn't he?"

"When did you meet him? Invite him over for dinner. I'll cook Beef Stroganoff for you and your new beau."

"That's Bill Clinton, Ma, you remember him."

"Have I met him? I have, haven't I? Where have I seen him before? Oh no, Ellen, I've seen him on the television news. You can't date him, Ellen. He's no good."

“What are you talking about, Ma? He’s the president.”

“I don’t know what organizations he belongs to, but he takes hostages. I saw it on the TV. That’s no good, Ellen. That’s dangerous. You don’t want a man like that. Do you remember Iran?”

“He does not take hostages. What on earth have you been watching?”

“That news program that comes on at 4:30 on channel 38 where it’s just that nice well dressed man that looks like your father used to sitting behind his desk talking to the people in his audience who all wear ties or dresses and look clean-cut.”

“Not Rush Limbaugh.”

“Yes, that’s his name. Rush. He’s a very nice man. He looks like your father, doesn’t he?”

“Dad did not look like that pig idiot. Bill Clinton is the president of the United States and he’s a very good man. You can’t believe everything you see on TV. ”

“He does look nice in the photo. How did he know my name?”

“I sent it to him, in a letter, asking for a picture.”

“Oh. Why didn’t you just call him on the telephone?”

“You can’t just call him.”

“I used to call your father on the telephone everyday, just after lunch.”

“I know, Ma.”

“Well, why can’t you call him? You can’t trust that, Ellen. Does he work for the government?”

"Yes."

"Does he work for the FBI?"

"No, he runs the government. He's the president, you've seen him."

"Is he a singer? If his hair was black and he had sideburns and he was wearing a jumpsuit I would swear that he was. . . ."

"No, Ma. Don't even say it. I know what you're thinking and I don't want you to say it. That man is dead and Bill Clinton does not look like him."

"But that's not true. I read it in the paper. He got a shoe-shine in St. Clair, Minnesota." Doris reached over to the coffeetable and passed Ellen a folded copy of the *Weekly World News*.

Ellen put it down without looking at it. "I'll make the tea. Where's a vase for the flowers?"

"Oh, in the cupboard over the oven. I think I'll have a cigarette."

"You know the doctor said you shouldn't."

"Oh, the doctors say a lot of things, Ellen. You can't believe everything you hear."

"God help me."

"Why are you praying, Ellen?"

"Just an expression."

"Does this young man go to church?"

"I think so."

"Well that's good. The good ones do, you know. Your father went every Sunday."

"I know, Ma."

"He was a good man."

"He was. Anyway, I'm going to see him, the president, Bill Clinton that is, tomorrow. He's coming here."

"I'll make some chocolate chip cookies. And if you take me to the grocery, I can make Beef Stroganoff. I'm happy for you, Ellen."

"He's not coming here, Ma. He's coming to town. I'm going to go see him at the arboretum."

"That's nice, the woods there. Beautiful trees, and the lake. George and I used to walk along the path there. Your father and I would have picnics there, one Sunday every month, every summer, when we were visiting your grandparents. One time a duck waddled up and ate one of our sandwiches. Do you remember? One time you were four and we went there and you ran away from the ducks."

"I remember the picnics."

"Yes, well, after your picnic, why don't you take him over here to meet your mother? I'll make cookies."

"I won't be able to bring him anywhere."

"It's not that far. Are you ashamed of your mother?"

"No, Ma. He's not my boyfriend. I can't ask him to go anywhere with me."

"Is he married?"

"Yes, he's married. I told you, he's not my boyfriend."

"Well, you shouldn't date married men."

"I know, Momma."

“This is your mother speaking, dear. It is just a wrong thing to do, to date a man that is married. I saw your Aunt Nellie go through hell doing that. It’s just asking for trouble.”

“Don’t worry, Ma. He’s not my boyfriend. Is that old hammer in one of your drawers?”

“The hammer? In the kitchen. The second drawer next to the sink.”

Ellen retrieved the hammer and took a small nail out of her coat. She walked over to the mantle above her mother’s small fireplace and hung the picture of Bill next to the picture of her father.

“It looks nice there, doesn’t it?”

* * *

Ellen combed the mall, searching for the right dress. She needed something that would reveal certain parts and flatter the rest, tastefully. The event was to be held outside, which complicated things. What would Marilyn Monroe do in a situation like this? Maybe it would be raining. She would need an umbrella. Her shoes would have to fit the situation as well. It was difficult to find nice things in her size. So many variables, all weighing in against her.

“Hi, I’m Jenny. Can I help you find something?” Ellen faced a young girl who had on too much makeup.

“Well I’m looking for something sort of attractive but outdoorsy. A dress. A flattering blue outdoorsy dress, long if possible. With a low cut

neckline. Maybe vertical stripes. Special but not formal. Do you have anything like that?"

"Have you seen our BBW boutique? Here at Bergner's, we have a wide variety of fashionable attire for women of all shapes and sizes. I'm sure they could find you something nice in your size." The anorexic girl pointed to the opposite side of the department store, the fat people section.

"Thanks, honey." Ellen reluctantly walked towards the glowing pink neon BBW sign. Boutique? Tent store would be more like it. Baggy, flowery and big, tasteless sacks, one-size-fits-all-too-large; Ellen walked through the racks of oversize dresses. She felt like she was trapped in a sideshow attraction. A larger woman approached her.

"Are you looking for anything in particular today, ma'am?"

"Well, I guess I'm looking for an attractive outdoorsy blue dress with vertical stripes and a low-cut neckline. Have you got anything like that?"

"I assume you're looking for something flattering to your figure?"

"Yes."

"And you're willing to pay a little extra for something special, am I right?"

"I guess so."

"Well, have a look around. Do you like any of these dresses?"

"Well, nothing has really stuck out, no."

"You're looking for something kind of hot, yes?"

"Well yes, but blue."

“Take a look at this dress. Do you like it?”

“That’s Elizabeth Taylor.”

“I know it is. But look at the dress. Isn’t it beautiful?” It was a long light blue cotton dress, of tight quality weave. It had thin red vertical stripes running the length of the dress. The neckline was low to cleavage. It was classy, but not overstated. The tag had a picture on it of Liz standing next to a bench, gazing off to a small running stream and a stand of pine trees. Ellen pictured herself in *National Velvet*. Bill, reaching out to her.

“I want that dress.”

“We just got it in. Do you mind if I ask what size you wear, honey?”

“Well, usually 16.”

“Let me see. We have a 14. They run a little large, but you might want to look at something else. ”

“I’ll take it. I can squeeze in.”

“Are you sure? It’s four hundred and twenty five ninety-six. For that money, you might want something you’re sure you can fit.”

“No, I’ll take it.”

“If you’re sure. Cash, check or charge?”

“Do you take Visa?”

* * *

Ellen woke up at five despite having set the alarm for six. She realized that it was not time to make the donuts. She would see no donuts today, the whole day.

Ellen stretched. She looked at the wrapped package on the kitchen table, which had been sitting there for weeks, unopened. She would do it for herself, today. She would start today. She motivated herself over to the table. You can if you will it. Make it happen. You already paid for it, use it. She ripped open the mailing paper. The box, red and yellow, happy and shiny, with before and after pictures, testimonials and the happy grinning face of Richard Simmons, his goofy curly-haired kind head jumping out above large pink letters, "YES YOU CAN!"

Ellen opened the Deal-a-Meal box. She had long been a fan of Richard's TV show. It seemed to be more a drama than an infomercial. Richard, travelling across the country, visiting people who had suffered a common tragedy, victims of crash diets, starvation diets, water diets, a roller coaster of loss and gain. But the people Richard visited had broken the vicious cycle, had lost hundreds upon hundreds of pounds, and were no longer embarrassed to wear bathing suits. There was so much affection in the air when Richard's little car pulled in these people's driveways and Richard came bubbling out with his arms outstretched towards them, offering love and happiness, reward for their weight loss. Ellen fingered the Deal-a-Meal cards. She looked towards her refrigerator. She shuffled the deck of cards labelled Breakfast.

Ellen fanned the cards out on the kitchen table. She closed her eyes and put her finger down on one of the cards. She turned it over. Celery

and peanut butter. An energizing start to your new day. Four sticks of celery, cut in half, covering the top fifth of every stick in cottage cheese. Ellen pulled the celery, which she had somehow feared she would need, from the fridge along with the cottage cheese. If she were at work at this moment, she would be pulling coffeecakes out of the oven. She made her plate of cottage cheese celery sticks and flipped on CNN, hoping for some Bill Vision:

In other news at this hour, increased tensions in Bosnia sent the president into an emergency conference which lasted into the late hours last evening. The president expressed his concern after leaving a dinner at the NEA last evening: "I'm very concerned with the situation in Bosnia. I think that you can expect some swift action from NATO in Bosnia, and you can expect it soon. No one, not the Serbs, not the Croats, not the Bosnians, should think that the world community will tolerate these kind of inhumane acts any longer. NATO is not a paper tiger in Bosnia." After the commercial, this week in Milan, Italian designers roll out their Spring collections. . . .

Ellen clicked off the TV. Bill looked serious, intense. He would get tough on them, you could be sure about that. Bill wasn't waffling on this one. He was drop dead serious. Bill was not a man to be toyed with. Ellen put on a Fleetwood Mac CD and hopped into the shower. Yesterday's gone. She did a shower-dance and sang into the shower-head. Bill will soon be here. Ellen used not only her regular shampoo, but also the expensive salon conditioner and finishing rinse she had purchased especially for the occasion. Better than before.

Out of the shower, towel dried and fresh, hair teased and puffed, Ellen squeezed into the dress. She adjusted her image in the mirror to fit the proportions of the dress. The dress molded her tightly, a sausage skin with an attitude. Could she call it classy? She was no vamp, no call girl. Bill couldn't be left with the impression that she was cheap. Classy, yes. In this dress she could be anyone. She could be a key presidential adviser. She could be helping him with strategy. She could be arriving home at the White House, having just returned from the NEA banquet with Bill, having talked him into taking a twenty minute break from fretting over welfare cuts and the situation in Bosnia. She could be loosening his tie, removing his shirt, lying next to him on the bed, massaging his neck, removing tight knots of tension from his muscles, his shoulder, his back. But she couldn't sit down. That could be a problem, with this dress. But it was outside. She would be standing up the whole time anyway. Light on the makeup, she decided.

* * *

Ellen had stopped at the florist on her way to the arboretum. She smelled the bouquet of six red roses. It was an impulse. Ellen hoped it wouldn't make her look tacky. She wondered if Bill liked flowers. What else could she bring him? McDonald's? He would appreciate the gesture, anyway. It was a gesture of support, belief, affection. Maybe he would recognize her as one of those people who believed, and he would want to embrace her, if only for a minute. He would know, at least, that she cared.

He would recognize her as a person, as different, as special among the millions for whom he cared.

Ellen was among the first to arrive at the arboretum. A woman from the Park Service was setting up boundary ropes.

“Are you here for the presidential visit?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he should be here in about three hours. Are you with the press?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll want to stand over there.” She pointed to a roped-off area.

“Nice weather for the president, isn’t it?”

“Right now. There’s another storm front moving in, though. Hopefully it won’t be raining when he gets here.”

“Well, I brought an umbrella, just in case.”

“Smart thinking.”

“I haven’t seen him, the president that is, since the campaign. In person, I mean.”

“I guess he’s been pretty busy.” The woman finished setting up the boundaries, then walked back to the ranger’s cabin.

Members of the press and dodgy eyed Secret Service agents began to arrive at 8:30 A.M. The blue-suited men walked around the trees, scanning the area. One of them looked at Ellen suspiciously and said something into his jacket. They didn’t trust her, she could tell. As if she would ever hurt Bill. The nerve of these people. But they had to be careful,

Ellen reminded herself. There are psychos out there, people who would hurt Bill if the Secret Service agents weren't careful.

Park Service workers and other interested onlookers, mostly elderly people and college students, began to filter in around 9:15. Ellen hung onto her prize spot at the front of the spectator area. By 9:30, Ellen was still the best dressed woman there. Some of the college girls were pretty, but they were far too young and sloppy to interest Bill. One of the Secret Service men was standing in front of the rope right next to Ellen. She tapped him on his shoulder.

The Secret Service man reached into his jacket and quickly spun around.

"What, ma'am?"

"Sorry, I was just wondering, I bought these flowers for him, and I was thinking that I should check with you before I gave them to him, you know, to make sure that it's alright."

"That's correct, ma'am. Government officials are to receive no foreign objects without the proper security clearance."

"So can I give him the flowers?"

"Let me check." He talked into his jacket. "Brown Fox to Blue Dog. I have a female here who has expressed a desire to present what appears to be a half dozen red roses to Mr. Gray. Yes sir, Mr. Gray. I'll check, sir."

"Are you part of the program?" Ellen shook her head.

"No sir, I'll check, sir."

"Have you registered your gift, ma'am?" Ellen shook her head.

“No sir. Right.” He looked up at Ellen. “Sorry, ma’am. You cannot give him the flowers. Such gifts must go through channels, through a system. I’ve been instructed to place you under arrest if you try to give him the flowers. We need to be careful, you know.”

“Well, could you at least let him know that I wanted to give him the flowers?”

“No, ma’am. Sorry.” He walked over to the other side of the crowd.

At least Bill would see the flowers and know that they were meant for him. He would figure it out. He knew about the stupid rules. Bill didn’t like all these people following him around, either. Blocking him from meeting the people who voted for him, who cared about America, who wanted him to succeed. He was a man of the people. He wanted to get to know the people. Ellen knew that they had to protect him, but not from her. Bill would understand. Bill would still want to touch her.

Ellen saw the flash of the motorcade sirens approaching down the road. A murmur went through the crowd, then an anticipatory silence. The Secret Service men’s heads went into overdrive, flying from side to side, triple-checking the area, the crowd, everything. A woman next to Ellen spat on a Kleenex and wiped some chocolate from her toddler’s face. Motorcycles pulled up and parked. A black sedan pulled up. Ellen leaned over the rope. She could see it. There it was. The First Limo. Two small flags fluttered from the hood; the American flag and the seal of the executive branch. Men were darting about, quickly forming a cordon in front of the back door. The driver got out. The limo was sparkling clean.

Ellen stared at the tinted windows. She could see a figure in the window. It was him. It must be. Bill.

The chauffeur opened the back door, and a man came out. Dark glasses. He looked around and then . . . the woman with the toddler held the boy up, Ellen couldn't see. She nudged her way in front of them. He was out. Ellen could see his hand, waving. He was engulfed by Secret Service men, university officials, city officials. Ellen couldn't see. They were shaking hands, she could tell but she couldn't see . . . him? Al Gore? A sobering thought crossed Ellen's mind. Al Gore. Al Bore? Al Oatmeal Gore? Where's Bill? Bill was supposed to appear. Gore popped up instead. If this was a magic trick, Ellen would just as soon pass. She wiped her eyes. The truth, however, remained, that she could not see Bill yet she could still see Gore. She looked at the flowers. She looked at her dress. She tasted the cottage cheese on her tongue. She looked at Gore. The man moved like a robot, blank-faced and quippy, perfunctory. He was coming towards her now, a golem with a frozen smile. He approached the rope.

"Hello, there, partner, what's your name?" He asked the little boy next to Ellen.

"Andrew."

"How old are you, Andrew?"

"Six."

"Do you know what recycle means?"

"You put the garbage in a special place."

"That's right, you reuse things instead of wasting them." He put his arm around the little boy, who was wearing a T-Shirt with a globe on it.

The scene was recorded by a pack of media representatives. Gore waited till the last flash went then approached the podium.

“Our efforts today are for children like young Andrew, there in the audience. It’s their Earth that we need to preserve.” The crowd applauded. “First of all, I would like to apologize that the president couldn’t make it today due to the situation in Bosnia.” A stir went through the press. “The president will be making an announcement about that issue at 5 P.M. Eastern time on national television. I’d ask members of the press to reserve your questions until that time. I’d like to thank everyone here in Madison for the warm welcome I’ve received. We’re here today because Madison is doing something right. This is a city that cares about the environment, a community that cares about the health of our planet. We need to keep in place the kind of legislation that addresses the problems of our environment. We need to take steps to end pollution, not just here at home, but across the globe. The environmental regulations this administration advocates are not about restriction. They are about renewal. They are about our future”

Ellen looked for a way out. She pushed her way behind the mother and child. She excused her way through a sea of senior citizens. She drifted through packs of college students, with their Birkenstocks and tie-dye shirts. She looked so out of place, she suddenly realized. No one else was in a dress. Even Gore was just wearing tan Dockers and a blue denim button-down shirt. She could barely breathe in this stupid dress. She had to walk in petite Barbie doll steps in this get-up. She must look like a giant blueberry. A giant blueberry hooker. She felt like she couldn’t charm a

bowl of lucky cereal, much less a president. She felt like the butt of an enormous cosmic joke. The sky broke, and rain began to pound down. Ellen didn't bother to open her umbrella as she walked towards her car. She wouldn't look like any less of a fool wet.

Ellen threw the flowers to the dirt. They were useless anyway. They wouldn't bring any pollination. They were just dying decorations, from the moment their stems were cut. Just another waste of time. What else could time be for? She didn't know any of those people, back there. They wouldn't remember her face. Ellen got into the car, started it and drove away, escaping the pandemonium. She couldn't wait to get home, out of the pretty lady dress, back into something roomy. Her favorite old blue jeans and a baggy sweatshirt. She would have a cup of hot cocoa and catch a little CNN. Maybe read *People*.

Maybe she would stop at the Dunk n' Dine to check on Steve. It was madness, leaving him alone there. She imagined him behind the counter, banging his head to some Satanic heavy metal band with a joint hanging out of his mouth as the customers approached. She should check on him. It was the responsible thing to do. Maybe she would sit down at the counter and treat herself to a chocolate-covered long john, hot from the oven. At the stoplight, Ellen pulled up behind a rusted old blue Chevy pickup truck, with astroturf in the back.

Sure enough, when she got to the Dunk n' Dine, Steve was playing air guitar to a tape recording of a feedback band. Sam had left her a note and a ticket to the monster trucks. She paused a moment and looked at the note, "Just in case you change your mind," before throwing it away.

She didn't have time to worry about Sam, or Steve, or the mess the donut shop was in. There was trouble brewing on a global scale that deserved her immediate attention. Bill was taking action. CNN was calling out to her. Bill needed to take care of business. His shoulders would be stretched with tension. His words would be full of strength. His jawbones would rise with determination. His eyes would hold the questions, and Ellen could answer him, again and again. His eyes would be searching, and he would not forget. Bill would come again.

THE THING

This is how the thing, which in the beginning was nothing at all, became a small thing, then became a big thing, then a thing that was overwhelming, then the thing that controlled his life. The thing was neither a mountain or a molehill. The thing was a thing unto itself.

First things first.

First thing in the morning, on a morning no different from any other morning, after the man had done all of the usual morning things that a regular man does, the man who carried things from afar came to the box into which things were delivered from afar, to deliver the thing to the man. At this point the thing was very small in the box, a skinny little thing, hardly worth mentioning.

The thing is, this man was the type of man who was ordinary, and his day was very structured, he had a set routine. One of the first things that he always did, and one of the more important things that he did all day, was to walk to the box which sometimes contained things from afar to check if anything was in it. Usually there was nothing, or a bunch of things that the man didn't care about, but sometimes there were very important things, things that made the man do other things, things that the man had to send afar, things that enabled the man to get other things, things that made the man happy, things that made the man sad, things that caused the man to think of other things, old things, things that once were things but had become nothing. It was a very important box, the box that contained things from afar.

The thing was in the box, in an envelope. The envelope was a small envelope, ordinary business size. The man took the envelope out. There was not anything written on it.

It was a very odd thing that the envelope had nothing written on it. A thing that caused the man to scratch his head, to see an envelope that had nothing written on it in his box. Usually anything that was in the box had the thing that signified that the object was for him on it. Things that came in the box in envelopes were usually clearly marked for the man, but this thing was not.

The man could tell there was something in the envelope, but he couldn't tell what the thing was. Because the envelope was not marked, the man could not tell if the thing that was inside was something that was intended for him. However, since the thing that had been delivered from afar had been delivered to the box that usually contained things for him, the man decided that the thing was probably for him anyway.

The man opened the envelope and saw what the thing was. The man clutched the thing in his hands and stared at it. He stood like that for a full minute, staring at the thing. The thing affected him. We knew that it would affect him.

This is where things went wrong.

The man went back into his house and did the thing with the thing that he usually kept locked in his desk. He put it right up to his temple and did the thing with it, the thing that became the only thing for the man when it became the last thing that he ever did. He did the thing and then he was nothing.

This is not the thing that we wanted to happen.

A word of advice: the next time you do this type of thing, do it differently. You need to be careful with this kind of thing. You really screwed things up. We're not sure if we want you to keep doing things for us, if this is the way you handle this type of thing. Nothing good came of the thing that you did, and we got nothing out of it. Be more careful with the way you do things. You never know how people will react.

A FINE DAY

Shawn McAuley was looking for the little statue of the monkey hugging its knees. It was imprinted in his mind, its large ears and pensive eyes, black hardened clay. He tore through the boxes but he could not find it. He had to have it. He needed it, and it was gone. He threw his copy of the *Abridged Oxford English Dictionary* through the window. He heard a skid and a crash, ten stories below. He cried, hugging his knees. He pressed his fingernails into the skin covering his bones. He looked out the broken window. Three cars were smashed up into each other, and there was screaming. He considered jumping. He turned inside and looked in the mirror. He mouthed a scream, but no sound came out.

When he went into the elevator, an old woman with stringy hair and a sallow face was looking at him, suspiciously. He thought that he must look pale. He sneered for effect. She made a reproving noise. He pressed the button and fingered the braille beneath it. She hissed at him. He hummed "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and made as if he was looking at his watch. When they reached the ground floor, he let her get out first, then he took a deep breath and walked out through the lobby. The doorman nodded to him. Shawn mumbled at him as he walked through the revolving door. Outside, he could see the smoking cars and he could hear sobbing. An old man with rotten teeth and an army surplus jacket approached him. He was carrying a bottle of Night Train.

"I fought in the war," he said, "Korea," he said. "Shot a lot of people. Little people. Little yellow people. Bombs. You ever seen a hand grenade go off in somebody's hand?"

Shawn was looking over at the red Toyota, which was on fire. Someone was slumped in the front seat. The driver was out of the Oldsmobile and a good Samaritan was trying to get into the Saab, which was badly disfigured.

"No."

"I have. Blew the arm clean off. Scarred all over. Nice guy. Went crazy after that, sat in his hospital bed, kept saying that bugs were all over him, eating him."

"Look."

"Do you have a dollar?"

"Yeah, sure, here." Shawn pulled a hundred out of his wallet and handed it to him.

The man grabbed it and lifted it to his nose, and pulled it with both hands across his nostrils. He nodded at Shawn and then reached into his pocket. He pulled out a set of car keys.

"Here." He handed them to Shawn and walked away.

Shawn walked over to the Toyota and tried a key on the front door. It opened, although licks of flame were belching out from under the hood and the smoke hurt his eyes. A young woman with lovely red hair was strapped in, bleeding profusely from a gash in her forehead.

There it was.

Shawn saw the small statue of the monkey on the floor of the passenger side. It was looking at him, pensively. Shawn ignored the smoke, reached across the woman's lap, and retrieved the monkey. The woman seemed to stir.

"Here it is," he said.

Shawn closed the car door behind him. He could hear the sirens. He grabbed his *Abridged Oxford English Dictionary* up off of the street, although its spine was broken from being run over. A few blocks later, he threw it in the trash. He stopped at the hardware store and got a new window pane. After he got home he put it in. After that he had a fine day.

HER FIST IN A BALL

She has spent her life researching it, exploring it, in the belly of the search for it. Her dog is dead. Her dog of twelve years, her dog of her childhood, gone. Fifteen years ago. Routines became routine, but underneath it she always felt that there was something.

She tried Prozac but got sort of bored and happy, then she cut all fried foods out of her diet, then she began to collect albums by Dionne Warwick, then she began to date, then she began to get married, then she tried to pretend that she was content, then she began to admit to herself that she was not happy, then she began to get a divorce, then she began to collect Norman Rockwell figurines, then she bought a hammock, which broke, and then she began to date men much younger than herself, and then she got a job as a pastry chef, and then she was fired when she accidentally activated the Ansul system, flooding the whole kitchen in billowing white foam and thus preventing food from being served in the restaurant for the rest of the night, then she began to feel depressed again, then took a tai chi class which she felt would relax her, then she got a job on the riverboat and she began to deal the cards.

The job on the riverboat gave her for a short time a feeling of precision and control. Her responses became automatic, and every moment she was dealing, she was concentrating solely on the cards and the table, and she became a transmitter of the laws of blackjack. She made good money at it. The cards she dealt were random, and she began to understand her life in this way. The cards were random, but the odds were in favor of the

dealer. She began to think that the laws of probability, which in the casino became absolute, held a degree of sanity in them that she could cling to. But then she started having nightmares about flat royalty, and her legs began to feel tired from so much standing, so she quit.

The problem was that probability was not really pattern, wasn't really in reach, wasn't something she could hold onto. It wasn't clearly what she wanted, what she wanted was unclear. She got a job at an office that was steady and reliable and she put things into files in topical and alphabetical order, and then she began to add up numbers and subtract numbers and multiply and divide. After a while she began to think of herself not as one self but as several selves, a rolling barrel of voices competing with one another for the attention of the computer screen that she thought of as her person. The numbers had certainty on the computer screen, because the numbers were money, and the money bought things and people used things so the numbers were there, they were certain. The numbers made sense. But then she began to measure things, her height, her weight, the distance from her cubicle to her car, her age to salary ratio, her credit limit, her vision, the distance from Jupiter to Mars, the number of strokes with which she brushed her teeth on any particular morning. Finally, she broke a nail when she was doing some filing, and the file she was putting away at the time was file number 0286, a bill for \$28.60, and 286 was the exact number of strokes she had used to brush her teeth that very same morning, so she quit the office job.

She is sitting on the couch now, and she rises to feed the parakeet. It quiets the bird, and she returns to the room where she keeps the wheel

that she bought when she had a small cash windfall after she burned her hand badly in a deep fryer accident that was not her fault. She has only been able to make things that are very abstract, and most of what she has pulled out of the kiln has seemed ambiguous even to her, but it gives her something to do with her hands.

THAT KIND OF COUPLE

They were poets. They were terrorists. They were anarchists. They were in love.

They were that kind of couple.

They were the kind of couple that you could spot in a crowd from the light that shone when they walked by. He glowed. She radiated. Blended, they sparkled, blindingly. All conversation came screeching to a halt when they arrived. She had red hair. He wore blue jeans. They were obvious in their affection, oblivious to the outside world. Some people got nauseous around them.

They were that kind of couple.

We were flying down the state highway, total velocity. Dulcie wore a white bo-peep hat, silk straps tied around her chin. The car was a convertible station wagon, green. Dulcie never wore a scarf because of what happened to Isadora Duncan. Ringwald usually wore a baseball cap with no team logo, but sometimes not, because baseball caps had a tendency to fly off as soon as the Subaru hit ninety. Dulcie and Ringwald had a windblown look about them. They told jokes about sidewall tires and candy packaging to each other and their coterie.

They were fun to be around, you can understand.

They had a fabulous collection of disguises. She wore a Wyatt Earp handlebar mustache. He wore a blue Marilyn Monroe wig, unusual because it was blue, but just ambiguous enough that he could slip around in it inconspicuously. The incongruity of Dulcie's bushy facial growth with

her delicate features was barely noticed. This happened right after we had raided the cherry festival with Freudian sonnets, while we were pelting the Four County Dairy Queen Pageant contestants with yogurt and haiku.

The murder occurred in Seneca, Wisconsin.

We had nothing to do with the crime but for some reason were accused of it anyway. Dulcie had held the dying man's bleeding head in her lap. It had stained her dress, which at the time was, but is no longer, white chiffon. She was most upset, and not only about the dress. Grey matter had spilled over Dulcie's thighs as the anonymous victim departed with a last gasp. Ringwald had waved the badged men over.

They had fired.

He had ducked.

At that point it became clear that we would be facing some sort of problem with the law enforcement authorities.

This was upsetting because the authorities appeared to have somehow associated our guerilla poetry with the fact that this unknown, though apparently local, man, who wore overalls, and who had apparently done nothing to deserve his fate, had been shot through the head with a high powered rifle, or some other lethal firearm, and therefore in turn the local militia were aiming to shoot us. Maybe it was Ringwald's blue wig that caused the denizens of Seneca to conclude that he was the assassin. The cops were on our tail, and they were not Friends of Art. We ran, got into the museomobile and left in an expeditious manner, posthaste.

Ringwald vowed he would never again go after the Dairy Festival, at least not with haiku. The sirens wailed behind us. A nasty set of

circumstances. But we had supplies. We had plastic explosives in the trunk and a full set of Crayola crayons in the front. Dulcie had a travel Scrabble kit that she saved for emergencies. She broke it out and hit Ringwald pretty quickly with QUARKS for a double word score. He tried for a triple word score with XANADU as the trooper's lights swirled behind us and he pushed the motor past the tachometer's thin red line.

"Isn't that a proper name, or a song title? Don't think it'll fly. Improper usage."

"Shit." He pulled over. The voice over the bullhorn boomed, "Out of the car with your hands up!" Their weapons were drawn. Ringwald checked the rear-view mirror, "Shit. Isn't it so absorbed into the popular consciousness, Dulcie, that it's become commonplace, a noun of the generalized ideal? Shit. Duck, guerrilla poets!"

We were off again, full speed. The troopers fired. I ducked. There were four of us in the car. We were young. We were misunderstood. We were poets.

"Did you load the goo, Charlie?"

"Indeedie, did, Monsieur Ringwald."

"Tacks, Eduardo?"

"-Check-"

That's me. Eduardo. I'm a big fan of Emily Dickinson, the poet of the empty spaces that are so profoundly at the center of experience. I shave my head to a waxy sheen and sing songs by the Mamas and the Papas when my friends are feeling down. As a child, I wanted moon boots to play outside in when winter struck, although I lived in a place where it

never snowed. In my favorite dream, I am floating over the Rocky Mountains, licking up the valleys.

Ringwald pressed the large green button on the dashboard control panel and the goo unloaded from our winged chariot with a tremendous squelch as the squad cars were hurrying near. We all applauded as the troopers' Mercury Cougars spun round and round in a key lime mixture we had taken months to perfect. A squad car slid into the embankment and lodged in the side of the hill. Nothing erupted in flames. No one was injured. We cheered as the sirens dwindled on the aural horizon. Charlie got it all on the videotape.

We made it to Madison in just under two hours. The capitol on the hill inspired us to thoughts of incendiary bombs and chained renga. Dulcie, ever the Romantic, descanted imagery of the capitol burning bright, high on the hill. She digressed on the subjects of oranges and muslin, then she spoke of lilac strewn tombs and the grace of dying embers. Ringwald loved it. He cried a veil of tears. We were all quite moved.

Ringwald was definitely postsomething. There's a Beat influence there, sure, the picture of Kerouac duck-taped right there on the vinyl covering of the horn on the steering wheel. Ringwald would babble incessantly when he got bored. He thought he was Jim Morrison sometimes, sometimes Oscar Wilde. He loved old reruns of Hee-Haw. He hated Fritos but loved Doritos. His nose was pierced with a blue cobalt stud. He listened to Wagner, Sousa, Lou Reed, the Replacements, John Cage, Muddy Waters, and Duke Ellington. He disliked John Wayne and resented it when anybody mentioned "the Duke" if they didn't mean

Duke Ellington. Ringwald liked to work with power saws, Black and Decker. We relied on him, he was our hero, a model for guerilla poets everywhere. I've never witnessed anything so thrilling as Ringwald at the height of his vigor, spouting subversive extemporaneous staccato free verse while slashing the tires of a municipal tow truck with his chainsaw abuzz.

Both Charlie and I were moved by the feelings of love in the car, as Ringwald and Dulcie wept and pawed each other passionately. Dulcie got a snack size chocolate pudding from the cooler at her feet. She took a big spoonful into her mouth and kissed her Ringwald. In silence, I sat and watched from the back seat as Dulcie and Ringwald locked lips and passed the spoonful of pudding from mouth to mouth, barely watching the road as they slurped it from tongue to tongue. It made me feel free, like a day spent in the prairie, where I might chance to see a clover and a bee make a bit of happy reverie. Charlie, however, was disgusted by the whole display:

"I am repelled by your behavior. Looking at you, I feel nausea, ennui, revulsion. I am disease eating away at itself when I am looking at you. Mon Dieu! Lower the windows. Give me some air, that I might now avoid this urge to purge my afternoon meal like melted fondue all over the Subaru."

Charlie could be irritable. He had a mercurial personality – he would spin from euphoria to sporadic loathing and bitter misanthropy. He was from New York City. He adopted an arrogant French manner, he got into Baudelaire and Rimbaud. He was a burr of a man, but a crucial part of our

team, and I always sensed that underneath his acerbic exterior, the pain of his alienation dwelt in the soul of a poet. He dressed like T.S. Eliot. He was our demolitions expert. He admired Yeats and Sid Vicious. He said that Art is the noise that comes from strangling a stone, that it can be found scuttling the sewers and in the clutches of migraines. Artists have moods, and the life of a guerilla poet is a stressful one indeed. We felt Charlie's pain and tolerated him. Ringwald swallowed the pudding. Dulcie spoke up.

"Where is the sense of adventure, the fire, the Olympian torch burning in your youthful soul? Can't you see that we're in love, and that there is no sense in denying us? Tuberculosis could strike at any time, slip into our veins, and poison the life that now flourishes. Let this Subaru be our garden, while the ride may last. Let our souls grab at the passing rays of love, this ride may be our last. Let love linger, while we live. Let us dance among these fertile blossoms, latching us unto the sun. Love is not dying. Let it be that lamp burning in our hour of night, inextinguishable. Let us live. Let us love."

"My apologies, Dulcie. It's just that the pudding . . . my disgust . . . fecal ruminations. I envy your youthful enthusiasm, but love irritates, love bothers, love disturbs, love in such a manner is not love, but a shameless, brazen, bathetic bath in a bog of muddled greeting card imagery. Desist with the pudding. He needs to drive, okay? We have got to get there, to get out of here, to get past where we are now, to be at where we are going."

Ringwald turned around, letting Dulcie handle the wheel.

“Look, we’re in the whirl-o-rama, we’re in the mix. We’re riding the lemon Harley Davidson of destiny, of indeterminacy, and it is imploding us, progressing us nowhere. We’re cast about in this undimensional plane. We’re etched into the vinyl of an unplayed record in a 1955 Rockola jukebox, and we’re in storage, in a cold war basement shelter, behind a crate of forty-year old saltine crackers. In just milliseconds, our molecules may burst into spontaneous combustion, into a spastic inferno of random chemical waste. If our fumes are noxious, then it is, so it is, so it shall be. And if Dulcie wants to pass me a glob of Jello brand substance by lashing her tongue against mine, nothing will stop us. Not if it dribbles onto our chins, or if it stains the floormats, or if you wail like a siren. Nothing will stop our particles, and we will taste, each other we will taste. Have a pudding if you want. There’s three more left.”

Nobody had forgotten about the body, or the chase, or the possibility that an array of charges had been filed against us, and that we were probably the subjects of a statewide manhunt, but we were content for a moment — silent.

We changed in the car and tossed our outfits out the window. It was possible that they had the license plate numbers. There was a certain insanity in driving to the state capitol and circling around it, trooper cars in abundance circling as well. The ennui of the situation caused Charlie to turn green and whisper to himself in frenzied French. The trooper cars ignored us. We turned on Washington Avenue and headed West, to Poppa Moon’s place, where we could hole up, rest and plan our next move.

Poppa Moon was a leftover from Sixties Madison. He was big in the anti-war movement, had had more than a couple of fingers in the Armory explosion, a friend of the Weathermen. He went to college at the UW in 1968, and although he never got a degree, had stayed in the city ever since. He had lived in a series of communes on the outskirts of the city limits during the Seventies, where he composed the first of his cantos of percussion poetry for trash cans, the underground publication of which sparked a cult interest in the genre, which emerged as a full-fledged cultural movement in the winter of 1978. Widespread interest had petered out by February of 1979, but Poppa Moon was still at it, pounding away poetry. A guerilla poet couldn't help but admire the man.

In the early Eighties, Poppa Moon started up his own video shop. Then he had the idea for converting an old Fotomat into a 24 hour drive-thru condom shop, and he had recently become the proprietor of a hot dog stand. He was pretty well-known around town for his Tuesday morning ritual of taking out the trash while composing existentially themed free verse, bemoaning the bitter march of time while slapping his palms in various rhythms against aluminum trash can surfaces to a complex aural effect.

"Three Cheddar Dog Classics and a Tofu Garden Dog. On the house, kids."

Ringwald looked over to Dulcie as she tore into the tofu creation.

"How can you eat that?"

"Better than lips and assholes."

"It looks like jellified sputum. It has the consistency of a wet sponge."

"Pigs and cows don't live to be digested."

"All of us are digested in the end."

Charlie had grown impatient.

"Look, Poppa Moon, we've got a problem."

"Feds?"

"Maybe. There was a murder."

"Accidental explosion?"

"Of course not. I never err with the charges. It seems that somebody is trying to frame us."

Ringwald intervened, "Enemies of Art, staging our demise."

I stared at the squares of tile on the floor.

Poppa Moon took off his apron, "Who got murdered?"

"Anonymous, P.M."

"He bled into my lap," Dulcie was reliving it. "I saw his life-lamp flicker, a cool breeze, a winter snap. An innocent farmer, a grower of wheat, a shepherd perhaps, a lamb."

"We've seen this before," Poppa Moon said as he sat, "but not since the Seventies. The CIA, the FBI, the Republican Party, they used to take guerrilla poets seriously. My file is huge. But you guys, I admire you, don't get me wrong, but I thought that you were strictly the stuff of misdemeanors and *USA Today* sidebars. Things have become so normalized that your kind of act has become a countercultural sideshow, barely flitting in the face of mass systems of authority. Nixon is dead, Rubin is dead, Hoffman is dead, Timothy Leary is looking forward to dying, and Reagan's brain is diseased and rotting. Revolution doesn't

have the kind of urgency it used to. I don't know, though – a murder, an unseen gunman. If it was the Feds, they'd have you in custody."

"An individual?" I was stretching to think of who could be so intensely evil as to hatch a plot against us, a person rather than a faceless system, a lone gunman, out for poets.

"Exactement," Charlie was fueled by the idea. "Some kind of sociopath, a counter-counter-cultural maniac. Some kind of suit-and-tie-wearing salaryman by day who giggles at pictures of starving children with bloated little bellies and runs down foxes that he encounters on country roads and burns books and masturbates to pictures of Adolf Hitler. He must be stopped."

"But what can we do?" Dulcie got in, "They'll be chasing us."

Ringwald climbed on top of a table, "The coppers. If we were cowards, we would shrink from the authorities and hide from the crazed assassin who is stalking us. But we are no shrinking violets. We are poets, and we have a mission. We need to shock the bourgeoisie. We need to confront the authorities. Through our poetic expressions we need to press down our oppressor until his violent nature is compressed, repressed, and depressed by the impression of revolutionary presence we have stamped into his universe. We must press on. We need new wheels. We need new disguises. We need a new location."

Meanwhile, we needed to gather funds for gas and tolls. Charlie put on his whiteface and mime outfit and went off with his juggling kit to pander for change on the steps of the Capitol. Poppa Moon arranged for us to take possession of his rainbow airbrushed VW minibus, into which

Dulcie and Ringwald transferred the secret devices from the musemobile, which Poppa Moon arranged to have painted gray and donated anonymously to the local chapter of the Red Cross. I walked over to the University carrying my mandolin, then sat in the park and played variations of Zamphir and Enya songs to the delight of a crowd of Sociology graduate students who generously bestowed their pocket change upon me. We rendezvued at 9 P.M. and donned our disguises, leisure suits for we three men and a shimmering gold lamee dress for Dulcie. We then began the trek to the state border, a bit nervous about the authorities, but confident in our abilities to redirect the flow of institutionalized justice to an individual more deserving of its wrath.

On the radio we heard the oh-so-false account of the murder in Seneca which had been disseminated in our wake. We had been demoted from poets to ranting psychopaths, accused of hurling dangerous projectiles at young girls before murdering an innocent bystander in cold blood. There was no mention of our work. Although disheartened by the poor media response, we acknowledged that the life of a guerilla poet is one replete with rejection, and that a kind of diverse stoicism is necessary, one which entails an allegiance to a goal that effects a disruption in the overwhelming flow of the existence that had been set upon us by the outside world when we were in fact only trying to remain true to that which was authentically us, that which was us and not them.

After we had crossed the Illinois border, Charlie and I played gin rummy in the back seat. Meanwhile up front, trouble was brewing in Love City.

“Wal-Mart, Ringwald?”

“Why not Wal-Mart?”

“It just seems like such a déclassé way to affront the bourgeois hegemony. Why not Nieman Marcus? Why not some Michigan Avenue furrier?”

“Those are just peripherals. We want to go after the guts of it, the center of the tumor, the virus that’s spreading it all, the odious banality of all things shrinkwrapped in the colorful plastic packaging of a false dream. What place could be better for the performance of a symbolic action?”

“We could have gone to Vegas.”

“Vegas is neon. Vegas is obvious. Everyone knows that Vegas is Vegas. Vegas announces itself. That’s what it’s there for, to distract us from the fact that everywhere else is Vegas too.”

I have learned watching Dulcie and Ringwald that such arguments are a vital spice of their love. Love is in constant motion, fighting its way through the turbulence.

Tired of gin rummy, Charlie and I thumb-wrestled in the back seat. Charlie won three out of four. The minivan had an excellent 8-track stereo system, on which Ringwald played a BeeGees cartridge that he had borrowed from Poppa Moon. We exited the interstate on the outskirts of the Chicago area, in a town called Schaumburg in the heart of suburbs. Ringwald claimed that it was the municipality with the most retail space per capita anywhere in the world, aside from Hong Kong, something like two strip malls per resident. We didn’t believe him until we had passed the massive structure known as Woodfield Mall.

Dulcie and Ringwald exchanged meaningful glances.

“Cancerous cornicopia.”

“Horn of empty.”

I wanted to contribute, “Distribution Dystopia.”

Charlie got excited, “Look at this sprawl, the diverse array of shops. Wasteland. A mall, next to a mall, next to a mall, surrounded by strip malls. Think of the incendiary opportunities – a bit of plastique, some well placed dynamite – even a small bomb could be an epiphany. So many pretty colors.”

We parked in the McDonald’s parking lot in the shadow of the mall.

“Ringwald, I think we should do the mall itself.” Charlie was diagraming explosive patterns, scientific notations, on the back of a napkin. “I could really make a big boom.”

Ringwald raised his finger to his lips, “Shhh! Did you hear that.”

“Hear what?”

Ringwald started the engine, and threw it into Reverse. A shot rang out and shattered the passenger side mirror. Ringwald tore the VW out of the lot.

“What in the name of Dionysus was that?”

“A man in a gray trenchcoat, with one of those wide-brimmed hats, driving a steel blue Mercedes, carrying an automatic weapon. I heard him loading it.”

In addition to his other talents, Ringwald had a miraculous sense of hearing, so acute that if he were to stand on a busy street corner in

Albany, he could hear a church organ playing “Greensleeves” in Hoboken.

Charlie rubbed the side of his face furiously, as if scratching at some hidden scar, “That’s our boy, eh? The shot heard round the mall. I’d like to blow him up. I’d like to see his body expand into a lush cloud of red particles that would drift into the stratosphere and land on the stripped carcass of a 1973 Ford Escort in a junkyard somewhere outside of Toledo, Ohio.”

“Excess is unnecessary. We’ve got him where we want him. Everything is falling into place. To Wal-Mart.”

We synchronized our watches, loaded our weapons, put *Night Fever* in the 8-track and dusted off our leisure suits. Charlie was in his element, humming Wagner while he laid out various forms of explosive devices. Because of the possibility of gunfire, we donned our makeshift flack jackets, medieval breastplates stolen from a museum in Muncie, Indiana. Once Charlie had finished packing his kit, he scampered out the door and sprinted to the building, which he quickly scaled once he had anchored his rope on the W. I stayed behind while Dulcie and Ringwald walked in the front doors, incognito, to case the joint. I grabbed my goo gun and walked to the other side of the parking lot. Charlie returned, holding the remote control. He looked over at me, I nodded, and he pressed the detonator. First the W, then the A, then the L, finally the M, exploded in succession, leaving only the A, the R, and the T. Charlie giggled, jumping up and down with glee as each explosion lit on the roof, then chanting, “Flowers for dead Elvis.

Prometheus unbound.

Loosen up your pelvis.

A screech, a gnawing sound

Mere Anarchy.”

We both ran into the store. In spite of the fact that the charges had been so deafeningly loud, the professional greeter remained composed.

“Good evening fellas, welcome to Wal-Mart, Discount City. Smooth suits.” The old fellow seemed so well-intentioned, I felt a little guilty as I leveled my goo-gun on his chest and splattered the butterscotch pudding/Elmer’s Glue blend all over him.

“Forgive me, old man. Such sacrifices for the cause.”

“Good evening, welcome to Wal-Mart, Discount City,” said the yellow blob huddled in front of me.

“Let’s go, Eduardo. No time for sentimentality.” Charlie had already gathered the checkers from aisles 1 through 27. They had their hands in the air, senior citizens and teenagers paralyzed with fear of the barrel of his goo-gun and the seething look in his eyes. I stood guard while he placed charges in the candy section. I honestly felt bad for the crowd of elderly minimum wage workers quivering before me. Charlie scampered back, “Take them over to School Supplies. I’ll be in Small Appliances.”

In School Supplies, we amassed an audience of about fifty shoppers, cashiers, sales helpers, rent-a-cops and stock boys. Ringwald and Dulcie served them all cranberry juice cocktails. They were in need of calming, as they were all terrified of Charlie, who had cordoned off the area with chocolate malt ball candies and was breaking into sputtering fits of

obscene giggling. There was still no sign of the assassin. Charlie splattered a couple of the audience members when they began to scream hysterically. Ringwald began the reading. We had agreed to stick to couplets, as we needed to be quick on our feet.

“Souls are made of vinyl, time is made of rust
All the sales are final, nothing left to trust.”

Dulcie stepped up,

“The sparrow has left the perch, the products have been bought
Sam Walton, Sam Walton, Sam Walton, what is it you have wrought?”

I was made a bit nervous by the stress of the situation, and I’m always a bit skitchy when it comes to improvising,

“There is no outside here, just the loading docks,
Colanders for draining, and packages of socks.”

Charlie’s adrenaline was in high gear,

“Burn it down, to the ground, a fiery inferno,

This warehouse, this whorehouse, torching infernal.”

As he lilted the last syllable, Charlie pressed a button, causing an explosion in the appliances section. Coffee makers, toasters and blenders flew through the air, crashing into shelves all over the store. The audience screamed. Charlie giggled. Ringwald was about to respond with some kinder, gentler lines to soothe the audience when the jackal emerged, wearing dark glasses, a grey Italian suit, red silk tie and combat boots. We hit the ground just as he peppered the air with hollow point bullets. When I looked up, everyone was fine, but he was advancing. I tried to goo him,

but he shot me in the thigh. I recoiled from the shot and shot goo up into a ceiling fan, showering the terrified onlookers in its ichor.

Poetry can barely limn the sharpness of the pain I felt lancing through the meat of my right thigh at that moment. I heard a choir of angels, and saw a tunnel of light, my blessed mother's face smiling down on me, waving me forward, upwards, into the light. Later, it would prove to be only a flesh wound, but at the time the pain was so intense, my recollection is foggy even now, like the memory of a Hong Kong martial arts film watched while deadened to the world with a strong dose of opium.

Charlie used his remote control to explode the shelf full of Lee's Press-on Nails in front of which the assassin stood. The small cardboard boxes were blown to bits, and the scarlet plastic false ossified tissues fluttered through the air like cornflakes from a cereal truck that had been struck by a small plane carrying a cargo of red paint as its engines failed, the impact on an overpass showering the interstate below with brightly stained flakes of cereal. The jackal lost his hat and sunglasses. He clawed at the red scales which had stuck to his face in the wake of the combustion. He no longer looked the Shadow of radio showgram fame, now more like a mysterious, tortured figure that Rene Magritte might have painted during the sober days of terror in Europe during the latter part of the Second World War. Charlie retrieved the assassin's gun and turned it on him. Most of the audience members scrambled out, stumbling over the chocolate malt ball candies as they scattered. Once the jackal had removed

the majority of the press-on nails enveloping his visage, Charlie, Dulcie, and Ringwald let out a simultaneous gasp.

“Archie?”

“Charlie?”

There before us stood a carbon copy of Charlie. The features, the expression, the bewildered angst-filled eyes, all exactly the same. Charlie, stunned by the recognition, dropped his remote control.

“Mine own twin brother, lost by our idiotic parents in a factory outlet mall in Flint, Michigan, at the tender age of five, turned a right-wing conservative sociopathic murderer?”

“My sweet Charlie, my soulmate and twin, malformed into an anarchist poet terrorist?”

Maybe this could have led to a lengthy and well-reasoned politico-philosophical discussion, but for the fact that the brothers were so moved by the sight of each other that they felt compelled to embrace each other as tightly as bear cubs, giggled hysterically and began to dance a jig. Would that Charlie, while back in the van, had not had the misdirected foresight to arm the charges of plastique still in his backpack so they he would be able to place and dispatch them, as he had said, with the quickness of an Air France Concorde piloted by an amphetamine addict late for his daughter’s dance recital in Alsace-Lorraine. But he had. While in the midst of their jig, Archie, a dead man whom I will never be able to forgive for his lack of balletic grace, stepped on Charlie’s forgotten remote. I saw the LED lights begin to blink in Charlie’s backpack and I screamed. Ringwald and Dulcie, in the end true lovers of life, saw the

cause of my dismay, and ran hand in hand towards the jiggling brothers. The lovers, in a display of compassion for their audience, in a heroic act that saved not only my life but also those of the entire staff and customers of the Schaumburg Wal-Mart, completed an aerobatic tackle just as the charges went. Charlie's red cloud was realized. The brothers were vaporized instantaneously, and the lovers went up like a phoenix. By some freak act of the creator, Ringwald's and Dulcie's wedding rings were fused together in the conflagration and their collective molten substance was propelled as shrapnel into the muscle tissue of my left buttock.

Maybe it was cowardice that compelled me to crawl over to Women's Fashion, bind my wounds with pantyhose, hobble to Men's Fashion, don a green camouflage jumpsuit, escape in the confusion, and walk across the street to the mall, where I then spent hours wandering the expanse of it, enveloped in the amniotic sac of contented consumers, to contemplate the multifariousness of human life, the buglight quickness with which people run into their deaths, and the impossible possibility of life after death. I called my father collect in Buenos Aires and he wired me five hundred dollars, which I used to purchase a Greyhound ticket to Biloxi, Mississippi.

What else can be said? As the wound in my flank slowly healed and the landscape changed, the voices of my friends echoed through me. All their fine aesthetics, their tonal variations, their sonnets and sestinas, the products of their art washed through me. Together we were the four points of a compass, and the needle never stopped spinning. Apart, we are diaspora. Charlie, North, to endless Arctic darkness. Dulcie, East, searching for an innocence we left behind. Ringwald, West, to the

unexplored wilds. Myself? South. To what? To nothing. Emily Dickinson left her poems in a box, for no one, where they were found, for no one and every one. A broken compass. The miles stretched out underneath the Greyhound tires, yawning at the futility. Flying J, Amoco, Phillips 66. I kept heading South, hoping it would not be the same.

So now, after a hard day of hauling in nets on the shrimp boat, I sit here on the dock of the bay, contemplating my idea of art, which has changed so drastically in these past few months. I miss my companions, but I have grown accustomed to the dark. No one down here knows that I am a poet. I have not read my poems aloud, nor shown them to a soul, since the day my friends died, nor will I, until the day that I join them. My poetry is in silence, but in silence it lives. Perhaps through transports of patience, I will reach a stolid bliss, but all my days I will walk my threadless way, alone.

I will separate politics from poetry, and action from thought. All poetry is frozen, I will keep it apart from time. I have stopped writing, this my final symbolic act. Maybe Dulcie and Ringwald would not approve of my self-imposed exile from the world of signs I once knew, but as sure as I sit on the fused symbol of their matrimonial bliss, I think that they would understand my sentiment. They were that kind of couple.

GOOD FRIDAY

I wake to a toothache. I use my tongue to rip away the strand of tissue that the tooth is hanging on. I spit out an incisor. I'm hanging between earth and sky. My head pounds. My flight suit is soggy. I'm hungry. The sun is so damned hot. I'm thirsty. How did I get here? Snagged on a palm tree, surrounded by coconuts, high in the fronds. Bunching brushing animal noises. A bird of many colors. Blood, matted, wet and scabbing, leaking from my head. I'm tired. Where have I been? There was the office, an office, somewhere. Is this what it is like to die? My arm, fuck, my arm. Some Demerol, a hot shower. White splinters of shattered bone poke out through my wrist. I hang between earth and sky. Twenty feet? The harness with, shit, one hand. Warm and sticky blood. In my mouth, against my temple. Little buzzing flies. A palm tree. One way down. Fall.

* * *

The ocean beats the shore, and the tide whips back. What did I do at the office? I see Jimi Hendrix. I hear "Purple Haze." I open my eyes. A large black beetle bug crawls across the sand, scuttling close to my eye. There was a prize at the bottom of every box of Cracker Jack. Why am I here? What am I looking for?

I try to sit up. I lie back down again. My neck is fine. My spine, fine. Sand. Salt. Sea. I hear something move. My arm, my ankle. At the office.

Who did I work for? The office. Chicago, wasn't it? Baltimore? New York? Minneapolis?

Her. What was her name? Eve? Paradise. This is what it is like to live in paradise. I laugh. A three hour tour. Ginger? Mary Ann?

The pain. My ribs? It stings when I breathe. A broken rib, maybe two. There was a plan, there must have been. Some kind of a pattern. I have no way of knowing the extent of the damage. Brain? Concussion? I remember names of products: Selsen Blue, Evian, Pepsico, Exxon. A Big Mac, small fries, and a medium Coke. Where is my wallet? No tags? Where are the golden arches? Where is the vice-principal in this dream? I can taste the thick phlegm, warm and cottony on my tongue. There is always an inquisitor. Hunger. What is my number?

My mother had blond hair. My father had big hands. He worked for a corporation that made gum. I would kill for a stick of Doublemint. I can see my feet, cracked and blistering. I can drive stick-shift. The glare is blinding. I've never been here before.

I remember watching television. Ted. Mary. Ed Anser. Taxi. Latka. Lassie. My dog was a golden retriever, we would run through the fields. There is a woman in my memories, the murky she. I miss her, but I can't remember her name. The sun is three suns, four suns. Something pricks my finger. No dream. There is reason in this, somewhere. The Red Sea gets its color from photosynthetic bacteria. The world's largest lake is in Siberia. John Dillinger was shot in front of the Biograph Theater. What movie was he watching?

My flightsuit is green, plain, no markings. Did I leave the stove on?
What did I learn? Pisa? Leaning. They used to tell me a story about a place
where everyone understood each other. They built a giant tower.
Threatening god. Dangerous pride. A pride is a group of lions. Animals
are creatures of instinct. Animals are without conscience. Some people are
animals. This is what makes it all right.

I hate bologna sandwiches. I got a D in trigonometry when I was in
high school. What are the four parts of a quadratic equation? An amputee
is limbless. Monks limned manuscripts. Palm trees don't have limbs. I
couldn't split a coconut even if I could reach it. I'm right handed. My
thumb is broken. Useless. Nothing without tools. Anyone would kill to
survive. Hungry children steal fruit in countries where the punishment is
amputation. The juicy stuff is worth risking a hand. Manna.

I can't remember me. There once was someone there, I just can't
remember who he was. People believe that in the end, they will see a film,
a private broadcast, all of the big moves replayed, the rules plainly
revealed, the game's significance finally explained. Either they have it
wrong, or I'm not dying. I'm sitting in an empty theater, watching a blank
screen.

* * *

"Care for a sip?"

I wake to find myself still on the beach. My good arm and my feet are
tied down with hempen ropes.

“Yes, please, water.”

“Have a sip.”

The bald white bearded man looks ragged. Not a doctor. He puts a bottle to my lips. I sip, gag, spit it out, retching.

“That’s not water, you bastard.”

“That’s right. Rasputin’s piss. Who sent you?”

He grabs my hair, his long snot crusted beard brushing against my skin.

“What’s going on? What are you doing to me?”

“I asked you first.”

“No one sent me. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He kicks me in the ribs. Excruciating pain rips through. I twist and gag and bite my tongue. Rushing anger. If I could move, I would hurt him.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, soldier. Who sent you here to kill me?”

“Look, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Some water. Please. Some water. Look, I’m injured, okay? Some water.”

“Rasputin. Bucket.”

A monkey carrying a bucket scampers up. He puts the bamboo bucket to my lips. I drink deeply. He turns it over on my head. I choke. The man laughs.

“Quite a monkey, isn’t he? Have you ever seen a monkey that can shit on command?”

I don’t know how to respond to this.

“He can. Watch.” He points to my head. “Shit, Rasputin, Shit.”

The monkey pulls at his lip, then squats over me. The fecal smell of the monkey's rectum. A grotesque starfish opening. I twist my head, try to knock him away with my dead arm. Flaring nerves spike up the wound. He dumps green lumps on my face. His shit dribbles in my nostrils, gritty across my lips. I try to roll away, but only succeed in getting it in my hair as it slides across my forehead.

"Dead, you fucking sick bastard. Dead. You fucking lunatic. Untie me, you bastard."

He kicks me again.

"Manners, boy, manners."

"Look, just untie me and get me to a phone."

"And be dead?"

"I won't kill you, I won't hurt you, I just want to get out of here."

"Introductions. You've met Rasputin. I'm Mr. Crusoe and you're . . ."

"Crusoe? What the hell?"

"Never mind me. Who are you?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. My head is bleeding. Don't remember. Please. Get me to a hospital."

"Oh, so that's it? The old blow-to-the-head amnesia bit, hmmm? Haven't heard that one before, have we, Friday?"

"What? Haven't heard? Friday? Today is Friday?"

"Yes, you know, you. Not Saturday, not Monday. Friday. Me Tarzan, You Friday. Capeche?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You have read the book, haven't you?"

"Oh, God. What are you?"

"I'm the man you were sent to kill."

"Look, do you have anything to eat?"

"Rasputin and I had a fine breakfast, fresh melons and bananas and a roast pigeon."

"Could I have something?"

"Not very civilized, are you? Come to kill a man, yet you expect him to feed you. Rude, aren't you, Friday?"

"I can barely move."

"So how is the world lately?"

"The world?"

"The civilized world. Do you know it? Or do you spend most of your time on military bases? At Langley?"

"It's nice, what I can remember of it. McDonald's on every corner. Look, could I please get something to eat? Anything. One of those coconuts."

"Will you talk if I feed you?"

"I'll talk, I'll talk."

"Very well. You had better, you better had talk. Rasputin. Coconut. Split."

I spit on the sand. Dry heaves.

"Look at what the monkey brought you, Friday."

Crusoe uses a large knife to whittle out chunks of the split coconut, and drops them into my open mouth.

"Eat up, killer."

"I'm no killer."

"Yes, yes. You know, it's charming to hear your voice. I haven't heard an American voice in eight years."

"Where are we?"

"On my island, in my sovereign state."

"State? What country is this?"

"Allusia."

"Allusia?"

"You don't remember, killer? You'll remember in time. We'll exchange stories. You sleep now."

He walks away. Things are blurry again, blacking out. Drugged me, the bastard.

* * *

I am in a dark room, and a man in a uniform is pointing to a map. I hear choppers. I am in the war. Vietnam? I am a pilot, and I will be bombing a target in . . . Laos? I am not old enough to have been in Vietnam. After the mission, the scent of the napalm lingers, the smell of scorched hair. I have never been to Vietnam.

My father was in the military, I think. Was I court martialed? I never took joy in it. My mind is a jumbled monitor. Necessity. Information. They still do that down there. Fingers and ears. Scalps. I remember a wall of wooden planks covered with them, tanning in the sun. I remember a

canyon in the desert, and hawks sweeping down into it. Hawkeye Pierce. Suicide is painless. Disappearances. Swamps. Rats.

In a backwater province in China, there is a famous gourmet restaurant that specializes in rats. They grow them there to a fattened maturity, some up to five pounds. The diners point at the live rats, and the busboy picks them out of the cage, and the chef prepares them in back. I met a man who ate there. He said that it tasted like chicken.

Somewhere down there, there is a room in a large basement that they call the slaughterhouse. The slaughterhouse let off a scent that you wouldn't believe. They call it factory work. They are in the business of production, they pack the meat in boxes. At night they come home stinking of blood. They eat thick steaks, and they understand. They have a knowledge of nature that most of us avoid.

The peasants march with their torches and pitchforks towards the castle. They are wanting his blood, for the blood of their sons and daughters. In the castle, behind the moat, behind the trestled gates, another one bleeds, and again he is feeding, ignoring the peasants, in the thrall of the dirty work. The orchestra music grows to a crescendo during these scenes.

It was Marlon Brando that did it. Marlon Brando wiping his brow, in the deepest throes of . . . malaria? A bridge over the river. Explosions. The panoply of noise and light. The wild eyes of the surfer boy, stripped and painted, gone native on acid. Martin Sheen in the hotel room. The End. Martin Sheen in warpaint. Stinking sweat in the hut, the warm moldy

smell of disease. Marlon Brando, wiping his brow. The machete. The sacrifice. The cutting. The Marlon Brando in Martin Sheen.

She and I are eating in a Chinese restaurant. Her face is very sharp to me now. Her eyes are the color of azure coral. Her fingernails are long and red. She is asking me where I go, when I go to do my work. I say that I can't tell her. She says she needs to know. I tell her I go to Disneyland, where I serve as an entertainer in a Mickey Mouse suit. She says that I'm dismissing her. I tell her we'll go there together someday, and we'll ride the Magic Mountain.

* * *

I am bound to a bamboo chair in a hut. The hut is schizophrenic. One side of the room is neatly organized, a chair in front of a table, a small mirror, a wash basin. Gauguin picture postcards framed with bamboo are pinned up on the driftwood walls. Clothes are folded in neat piles on shelves. On the other side is disorder, rags and shells, melon rinds, a ratty yellow cot and a table covered with faded photographs.

"You like her things? I suppose you'll want to wear one of her dresses. Or was that just J. Edgar Hoover?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't like you, but your voice is a comfort."

"What do you want with me?"

"Kill you? Are you afraid that I mean to kill you?" He walks across the room to a small table and picks up a handgun. "With this? Are you afraid

I mean to kill you with this pea-shooter?" He draws a bead on my forehead. "I don't even know how to use it. It's your weapon. You came here with it."

"Bullshit. You're lying."

"I wish I was. Cyrillic? Russian make? Part of the cover, I bet. You people are so clever with your little weapons. This is a silencer, isn't it? I've only seen them in the movies. They aren't really silent, even with the silencer, are they?" He gets up and walks behind me. "Not difficult to work, this type of firearm?" I hear him pull off the safety. "It amazes me to think how easy it must be to kill." I feel the barrel pressing against the back of my neck. "It would be so easy, just one little pull. The slightest bit of pressure. Pop. Such a simple thing." Crusoe sighs. He walks back to his chair. He pours some vodka in his glass. "Care for a snort?"

I shake my head.

"Good stuff." He squeezes a slice of lime into his glass and gulps it down. He smiles at me in the strangest way. I look away.

"You have a sparkling sharpness in your eyes."

"Look, I don't know who you are, but I think it would just be best if you untied me, and let me get the hell out of here. No hard feelings, just let me go, and I'll get out of your way."

He laughs. He waves the gun, shifting his aim from one of my eyes to the other. He fires. He blasts an empty bottle behind me. The glass shatters all around me.

"Jesus Christ you fucking nut let me out you piece of shit."

“Calm down, killer. You could barely hear that shot, could you? You know what it sounded like? It sounded like a kid spitting out a watermelon seed, precisely the same frequency. Marvelous invention.”

“Look.”

“Do you want to know how my wife died?”

“Look.”

“She died out here, on this island.”

“Crusoe. Look.”

“There was a monsoon. We were tying everything down.”

“We can work something out.”

“A tree fell on her leg, in a storm. It was a huge tree.”

“That’s awful.”

“I had to amputate her leg. I thought she might make it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She lost too much blood. We didn’t have any blood, any medicine. I couldn’t do anything. I had to watch her die.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you know why? Do you know why I had to watch my wife die?”

“Why?”

“Because of people like you, that’s why. Because people were trying to kill us, and we had to run away. There was nowhere to go. My wife died. Because of those cruel, empty acronyms you people carry around as if they were stone tablets from heaven. Your SS–CIA. ”

“Look, I’m not —”

“You’re not? You don’t remember, do you? I guess you can’t.”

“I don’t know what you’re —”

“That’s enough. Look, do you want something to eat?”

“Yeah.”

“Rasputin. Poi.”

The monkey feeds me poi. I need a way out. The familiar wavering exhaustion.

* * *

There is destruction all around me. Children run through pools of fire. I walk calmly. The air smells like open sewers and burning hair. The soldier takes the prisoner to the street. He kicks the boy to his knees. The boy looks up, sobbing, pleads for his life. The soldier puts the gun to the boy’s temple. The soldier fires.

The fat man is sitting at the table, eating spaghetti. I see him through the window of the restaurant. The man in the silk suit walks in, carrying a newspaper. He walks up to the table. He pulls out the pistol. He opens up. Five rounds. The fat man’s head snaps back, then he falls face-first into the plate. The man in the silk suit throws the gun down, then walks out.

My father explains the principle of Mutual Assured Destruction. Uncle Sam is facing down a wild bear. The only good commie is a dead commie. He shows me the plans for the bomb shelter. He says that we will live, our family, no matter what we will live. We will have enough food down there to survive for months. He explains to me that as I grow to be a man, I will see that a man must protect his family. A man must plan. He opens a

bottle of beer. A man must provide security. He has a mole along his jaw that bounces when he talks. He looks me in the eyes, pats me on the back, and passes me the beer. I take a deep swig.

I am petting the rabbit, feeding it by hand. I pull my knife from its sheath quietly, as I have been instructed. I grab it by the back of the neck, and I slice across its throat. It jumps and quivers, then it is still. I hold the rabbit upside down, draining it. The warm blood spills all over the dirt. I skin the rabbit and cook it over a fire. The rabbit was my pet. Part of survival training. We are all trained in this way.

I am in Florence, sipping a glass of red wine. I look to the Plaza below the balcony of the bistro. I look at my watch. A white Peugeot pulls into the plaza. I have learned to have patience. The driver gets out. I order an antipasto plate. I read the *Herald Tribune*. I eat and then I look at my watch. The church bells ring, a wedding ceremony has ended. I wipe my face with a napkin. A bit of squid is stuck in my teeth. The car bomb explodes. Screams in the plaza. I call for the bill.

My mother shakes with each of the seven rounds. They are so loud, so deafening, so final. My father and I are on either side of her, our arms around her, holding her up. The soldiers lift the flag from the casket. They hold it straight and tight and level while the priest says the last prayers. My father touches my elbow, behind my mother's back. He squeezes it, hard.

"Remember what he died for," he said to me before the ceremony, "Remember he died like a man, and remember to be strong for your mother. Remember that you are a man now, and that you must not cry."

They fold the flag into a tight perfect triangle. My mother sobs. A Marine presents the flag to her. She reaches out for it. She takes it. She is about to fall down. We hold her up. The bugler plays "Taps."

* * *

When I wake up, I see that Crusoe has fashioned a cast for my arm from some kind of clay and short rods of bamboo. My ankle and ribs have been wrapped. Maybe he is not the cruel man I imagined him to be. We are in the hut. Crusoe has put on a record. The phonograph is a crank-up job, an antique Wurlitzer. Big band jazz. The monkey dances. Crusoe is drunk.

"Benny Goodman. You like?"

"Nice. Look, let's let bygones be bygones."

"One of my few pleasures. I don't have very many records. I know every note of every song. The grooves are wearing away. I play them only on special occasions."

"Is this a special occasion?"

"Allusia has a new citizen."

"So just where is Allusia, on the map?"

"Neither here nor there."

"Come on, Crusoe. You don't need to toy with me."

"I feel sorry for people like you."

"I have a home in the world. I need to get back there. I won't heal here."

"I can't ever let you leave, will you get that through your skull? You're here now. This is where you'll stay. You'll learn to like it here. You'll be my right-hand man, Friday. We'll build canoes, and huts, and play chess. But you will never leave."

"Why don't you just kill me now?"

"Killing is easy, be it a shot or an injection, an explosion or a pill, it's the one human science that we have perfected to its terminal degree."

"Who are you, Crusoe?"

"I'm dead to the world."

"Why do you think I want to kill you?"

"Because I know the recipe."

"The recipe for what?"

"The code, the formula, the recipe for Allusia."

"What's Allusia?"

"No need to speak of Allusia. You probably know. Maybe not. Maybe you're just the dagger, with no knowledge of the hand that wields you."

"What did you do, Crusoe?"

"I didn't play the game."

"The game?"

"The game you bastards play. The killing game."

"I have no memory of anything."

"Once you're in it, they won't let you out. They play and play. Round and round, the dog chases its own tail."

“Look, Crusoe. I have no intention of harming you, can you understand that? I don’t know anything about you. I don’t know anything about me. I just want out of here.”

“Oh, shut up, will you? Your hands are stained with blood. You’re not going anywhere.”

Crusoe leaves, and I sit by myself, bound to the chair, watching the monkey watch me. Hours. Darkness. I sit there. I drift back.

* * *

I am in a dark classroom, watching a film. Servants of justice, the professor says, must be prepared for the application of just punishment. The prisoner in the orange jumpsuit is strapped into the chair. Leather straps. A mouthpiece. A steel blindfold. They lower the hood. More straps. They tighten clamps. The prisoner is shaking and straining. If he weren’t strapped to the chair, he would be kicking his legs. The priest comes in and says a prayer. He leaves. The door is sealed. A man nods his head. A switch is thrown down. The jolt runs through. The whole body is thrown out, rigid, testing the limits of the straps. The buzz in the room ceases. The hairs on the wrists of the man smoulder. Someone in the class throws up. I watch very carefully, as they verify that the man is dead, then remove it from the chair. They remove the blindfold. The eyes have boiled out.

The South American general explains that there are unpleasant sides of human nature and that there are always ways to extract information from

human flesh. We watch from behind the one-way mirror. The man is tied to a chair. His face is bruised, purple and swollen. Blood drips in a slow thin trickle from his lip. They have begun to work on his hands. They have sliced open the skin on the top of his right hand and pinned it back onto the table, as if dissecting a frog. They put a lit cigarette to the exposed ligaments. The man screams uncontrollably. The general nods his head. That man will tell the truth, he says.

Then there is her. She holds my hand, across the table. The flame from the tablelamp flickers in her eyes. She laughs at something. The look on the waiter's face as he walks by reminds me of the way a garotte feels when you have looped it around a man's neck and begun to pull the life out of him. I lift her hand to my mouth and nibble at her fingers. There are tears in her eyes.

She and I have just made love. Melissa? We lie breathing and sweating, in a fetal embrace. She says that this time I should stay, that she has a bad feeling, that she feels that I should stay. I tell her I have to make a sales call in Mexico. I'll buy her something nice in Guadalajara. She says that she's afraid. She wants me to stay. She's afraid she doesn't know me. She's afraid of what I do, when I am away. I tell her that I do ordinary things, banking things, balancing accounts, things that wouldn't interest her. I get dressed. I catch my plane.

The images flow from the television, and I know that I am right. It is a Central African country. The streets are littered with bodies. Killed at random. Men, women, children, tossed in piles. Lone gunmen. Teenagers carrying machetes, chopping people down. Sewers filled with blood.

Death squads. People dancing through the carnage, crazed. Fleeing in terror. Screaming. Arms thrown up in desperation. It is a sad thing, I think, an ugly thing, when people kill without discipline.

* * *

I wake unbound, on a blanket on the floor. I wake quietly. Although there is still the pain, and the drugs have worn me down, I feel clear, lucid.

There are shards of things that I remember, and Crusoe is not mistaken. There are objectives that cannot be accomplished without violence. Certain actions are necessary.

I realize that my life has been composed of missions, and Crusoe must have been one of them. A certain file had gone missing, and a chemist had disappeared. Deposits had been made in his account, before one large withdrawal. Payments from the enemy. His notes went with him. His research was destroyed. The hard drive on his computer was wiped clean. A lab under contract with the Agency. A traitor, to the country, to the Agency. The details are still opaque. What is clear is that Crusoe's death is necessary, the thing that I was sent here to do. Crusoe sleeps on the cot across the room. Crusoe is as good as dead.

The gun still sits on the table. Crusoe's on the cot. Left out, too easy. Crusoe knows what I came here to do. Maybe he knows that it is his time. That he is a traitor and that there is only one just punishment. He snores on the cot like a pig. I creep over to table. The pistol, safety off, ready to

dispatch. A disease. A tumor that I have been sent to excise. I pick up the gun.

There is a wiry delicacy to Crusoe. He breathes, his chest rises and falls, the veins on his neck move. Traitor. Pig. Target. It is in this moment that I could kill him. One through the throat. My finger on the trigger. The motion is an old, familiar ritual.

The monkey wakes. My head is pounding. The monkey begins his hellish screeching. The window is open. Just a squeeze. Just a pop. I could but I don't. I'm a rabbit in the headlights, with the quavering fear of a question I cannot answer.

Crusoe jumps up out of bed.

"Go on then, shoot me. Chicken? Come on, Friday. Blow me away. You can't, can you? You haven't got the power. You're jelly. You can't kill."

"I can't kill?"

"You don't have the power, Prometheus."

Crusoe begins laughing maniacally and jogging in place, running his fingers through his beard, and then raising his hands over his head in fists of triumph, saying, "Right on, assassin man. Can't kill. Right on. Can't kill."

The damn fool, dancing. The damn monkey with his screeching, swinging around the hut. Laughter. Cruel, cruel laughter. I can kill, and the blood is pounding. I aim at the damnable creature. I fire. Crusoe stops. The monkey goes down, part of its right shoulder blown off. The wall is

splattered with blood. The monkey's screams reach a higher pitch, then silence.

"It shat on me. Damned thing. Its damned chatter. I can kill, Crusoe. I can kill."

Crusoe stands over the monkey, sobbing like a boy. I walk out of the tent and into the woods, holding my good hand to my head. The itching under my cast. The merciless pounding of my head.

* * *

It was in South America. He was no more than a boy. Thirteen? Fourteen? He walked into my tent with a knife. Reflex. Five holes through the chest. A real mess. I look at the boy's face. Stinking shame, I think. Stinking shame. People are propelled by small ideas to do the most stupid things. I shake my head. People do ugly, stupid things.

There was a time when justice was a brick to me, as solid as the truth. Laws are things that need to be enforced. Beyond laws are things that need to be punished. An order is an iron-clad thing. It is necessary that people are willing to do these things, things that are necessary.

There are higher laws than justice. Individual lives are expendable. Order is perpetually threatened by chaos. The good of the many is the good. Order must be preserved. I was ordered to kill Crusoe, I'm nearly sure.

I'm certain of very little. Of the boy, nearly certain. A messenger from Conzuela. That something had been done. That something needed doing.

I was edgy from the day in the village, from the shooting at the rally, Hidalgo through the head. The escape from the crowd. So many hours without sleep. The need to be out of the jungle, back in the world. He could have been an assassin. He liked soccer, they told me when they took away the body, a stinking shame.

Crusoe sold something, sold out. Allusia, the psychoactive toxin? A cruel thing undoubtedly, officially untested. Classified security risks. Either stand in line or

And yet, while I can imagine Crusoe dead, two, maybe three bullets, the forehead, the throat, the chest, him lying lifeless, and me standing over him feeling nothing, it is the face of this boy that keeps returning to me, the messenger and the message that become the headache pounding.

Here is the question. If for all of its existence, this human race has been dying, and our soil itself is made of our bones, the plants and the flesh of the animals that we eat, what difference is one more set of bones? A little more space for the rest of us. Why do these expendable things strike me as if they were of any significance? Some things are for the general good, necessary surgeries, so why is my head still throbbing with the question? Why does it echo and why does my skin feel as if the whole of it is encased in a cocoon of clotted blood? Who is responsible?

* * *

I burned a fire on the beach for a day and a night before returning to Crusoe. I saw no sign of any attempt at rescue. I walked past the fresh

grave and into the hut, where Crusoe sat at the table, going through stacks of photographs. The room smelled dank and sickening, monkeyblood still splattered on the walls.

“Rasputin was the essence of monkey, and you are the essence of man.”

“I’ve got no quarrel with you, Crusoe.”

“Dead, Friday. All of them dead.”

“We can work something out. We’ll be rescued.”

“Ha.”

“Listen, we need to plan.”

“You dirty little bastard.”

“We need to be visible. We need to be found.”

“You piece of shit.”

“Where are we, Crusoe?”

“Nowhere, you idiot.”

“I think I’ve learned something.”

“Ha.”

“We can get away, start over.”

“Ha.”

“I mean it. I’ll help you.”

“Start over?”

“I don’t care what happened before.”

“You don’t?”

“We all deserve a second chance.”

“Do we?”

"We do. There's something worth saving."

Crusoe says nothing. He stares at the photograph in his hands.

"Don't you care? We can help each other, Crusoe."

"Alicia. Look at her. So beautiful."

A photograph of a fortyish woman, brown hair, wearing flowered bermuda shorts, capturing a butterfly in a net, a stream flowing in the background. Wide open smile.

"Your wife?"

"Alicia. Twenty-two years."

"Children?"

"None, ever. Never."

"Back in the world, Crusoe. You could meet someone."

"I'll never get back to the world."

"I'll see to it."

"You'll see to nothing. Once there was a house, a comfortable home with a fireplace, books and coffee, long nights talking. There were concerts, and plays, and candlelit dinners and games of Scrabble and pizza deliveries. There was the Grand Canyon, the lab, a monkey. There were Alicia's hands. There was a life. This is not."

"What is this, if not life?"

"This is an island, Friday, a shadow of the world."

"This is a table. That's a window. Through the window an ocean. Beyond that there is a world. These things are real. There is a real world out there, Crusoe."

"Ha."

"I've seen your canoe."

"That will get you around the island, but not away. We're far from anything."

"How far?"

"You're welcome to find out."

"We could build a bigger boat."

"Not me. Have you come here to kill me?"

"Not now. No more."

"Then go away, Friday. Leave me here. Go away. Leave me alone."

* * *

In the morning, I wake to the smell of smoke. I'd built a lean-to in the trees about a third of a mile from Crusoe's hut. Crusoe's hut is burning. I run towards it. I've seen people pulled out of fires, roasted alive. A monk, pouring gasoline all over himself, self-immolation. Crusoe. I need to save him. I run through the thicket. I charge into the flaming hut. His cot is on fire. The walls are on fire. I look for the body.

He is gone. The pictures are gone. There is a note on the table that says, "Allusia. Ha."

There is a trail in the sand, out to the sea. The canoe. I run to the shore.

I can see Crusoe in the distance. He pauses his paddling to give me the finger. He looks like he is laughing.

* * *

Thirty days on Allusia, still no sign of rescue. The silence is broken only by the waves and the birds, who carry on in spite of everything. I burn night fires on the beach, I maintain the vigil. I am alone on the island.

I'm trying to build a canoe out of driftwood, out of palm fronds, out of tree bark. I'm learning, slowly. If Crusoe could escape, there's no reason I can't too.

I'm not sure that he survived. There is nothing on the horizon but the sea.

I'm still certain that civilization is out there, that some tentacle of it will brush into me, and that I'll return to whatever it is that produced me. I will not be the same.

Friday and Crusoe, Marlon Brando and Martin Sheen, everything is blurred together in my mind. I try to construct a collage of who I am, but the pieces don't fit together. I wonder if this is what it is like to be dead.

I scan the heavens for the sign, a glint of light off a turboprop, a jet's trail, anything. Nothing. Now there is nothing but the wait. I write the question with my finger in the sand, where it will stay, until the tide rises again.

THE MEDDLESOME PASSENGER

I. The author is dead. Look at that corpse lying there, the small pool of blood glinting scarlet beneath lips already shaded pale blue. Where are the wounds? You must see. The garments are a bit disheveled, but there are no signs of violence, are there? Maybe you can't see them. Maybe you don't want to see the marks. Maybe there's a reason.

The hair looks as alive as it ever was. Flowing, shining, glowing. It parts about the neck, the nape of that still flesh, unmoving. Will you? Will you feel for the pulse? For the sake of convention, decorum, appearances, will you?

Cold, clammy, a mushy cool. What does the coroner feel? No pulse.

You look at the hand, frozen in that pose, reaching out. For what? There was a reason. The finger was pointing to . . . that ink stained finger pointing to nothing. The ink has run into the lines up close, the prints on the fingerpads, on the flesh.

II. I live. Wipe this blood off of me. Slap me. I'll cry.

III. There is language in the mirror, and in my mouth, and on my hands. What about your hands? Will you look at them? Why not? Look at them. Can you see what covers them? Have you been enchanted by the gods? That was no sheep you slaughtered. That is not milk, not water, not paint, not ink, my friend. Is it still warm? Will you wipe it on your face? Or will

you try to wipe it off? Will you try to rub it out? Damn spot. Don't put it on me. What have you done in the night?

IV. Don't worry, there's nobody here. I'm the only one who saw. What you did. Should we flush it down? We're forming a relationship, you and I. They say it's mostly there, already, by now. Are you my brother? My sister?

V. Now will you break down? Or will you gloat? It's all yours now. Go play monarch. Where is your throne? Should I bow to you? Should I call you King? Daddy? Mommy? God?

VI. Is it a kick?

VII. Sirens wail. They found out what you did. Are you afraid, shaking fear and trembling? What will they do to you, if they know? Think of things in closets, hiding under the bed, fingernails against chalkboards, chewing aluminum foil. The night light can't help you now. What will they do when they find out? Rubber hoses, probably. Maybe locks in socks, to leave no marks. The bogeyman is coming. Do you already know him? They're coming to get you. Big trouble, you. And I'll tell on you, I will.

VIII. Can't get anything past you, can I? You make me real.

IX. Surprisingly cool, you. Calculating, aren't you? Cold as the tip of an iceberg. Or are you? Are you something else? What are you? Why?

X. Don't just sit there, you fool. Do something. Get some garbage bags, a shovel. Do something; it will stain the rug if you leave it there. Others will be coming soon. Do you want them to see? Shower, clean yourself, get that shit off of your hands. It's beginning to smell. You're beginning to reek. They can trace that, you know. You should have thought of that earlier. You big idiot.

XI. Me? Don't expect me to help. I won't lift a finger. I'm not your accomplice. I didn't help you with this. What you did. And I'm not going to, either. It's your mess, you clean it up. Oh, I won't turn you in, but don't expect me to condone this. What you did.

XII. That was my kin, there. Hell, it looks like me. If only it was still alive. Substantial, material, vibrant, real. You bastard. I resent you, do you know that? How could I not? What do you think, I like living like this? Living and dying and living and dying and living and dying again? Never remembering, or perhaps only recognizing that the same thing is happening over and over again, but never sure that it is a circle. And the power relation here, one-sided. You can toss me aside at any moment, without the slightest justification. Poof. There I go. You bet I resent you. Killer.

XIII. Someone else is scanning. I can feel it, you know? Eyes all over you. They take you in, meat. Then they chew on you. They compare you to other chunks they've chewed before, they swish your juices around, seeking complexities, body, differences. They swallow. You swallow. Me, that is. You digest me. You construct me, churn me through your bowels. Then you excrete me.

XIV. How would you like it?

XV. I feel as if I'm trapped in a small cubicle that is actually a film set that is broadcasting my existence to millions of viewers across the nation only I don't know what they're seeing because I don't know where the cameras are hidden and I don't know what angles they're shooting from or what filters they're using or if the guy in the truck who is editing all this and sending it up to the satellite is some kind of crazed lunatic and I can't get out, you know, I can't get out. Look, can we just go somewhere, Okay? Over there. Let's just go. With you? Yeah, with you, I guess. Just let me think.

XVI. I like it here, alone like this. I can ride and ride, and disappear, to a place where you won't see me. You can stay, if you like, if you will just be quiet. Look at that. Isn't it beautiful? I like being here, alone with you.

XVII. Of course not. That was a lie. A flat bold-faced straight-out to-your-face lie. Could you tell? Could you see it in my face? I don't like it here.

But better to be here than there. Look at that poor thing. That isn't moving. That isn't thinking. When are you going to move it? What you did. Stop, don't do that. Look down.

XVII. No, look up, into my eyes. You see now. It will be fine, just fine. Everything will turn out fine. Look into my myriad eyes. What do you see there? Is that you? There you are, just like you remember you. Like you have always been. Calm down. You'll be fine.

XVIII. You look great. I've never seen you looking better. Is that a new haircut? Have you lost weight? God, it's a whole new you. I need to sit down. Oh, this change is significant, my friend. Have you been going to a gym? Life has been good to you.

XIX. At this point the music in the soundtrack grows soft and sentimental. We put on the fuzzy warm filter that gives a diffuse quality to our images and the light. We walk through fields of tall prairie grass. A whippoorwill sounds in the trees. We come to a stream, and we look at our reflections. Happy you. You stand there smiling. The same as you ever were, only better. And me . . . how do I look?

XX. No, really, tell me, please. How do I look? I have no way of knowing. There are no mirrors here, where I am. It's up to you, really. It would be nice to have a face — what do you say you give me some character? Tall, short, pale, dark, handsome, homely, wicked, kind, lovely, hideous, dim,

intelligent, thin, fat, obese, emaciated, brave, cowardly, shy, extroverted, open, devious, honest, deceitful, plain, cunning, beautiful, handsome, ugly, smooth, ragged, pristine, warted, authoritarian, submissive, wrinkled, infantile, idiotic, brilliant, waxing mustachio, bearded, bellied, red-cheeked, quiet, obnoxious, what? What?

XXI. Could you be more specific? Is that all you can tell me? Just surface? This is frustrating, do you know that? Why don't you take a break? Go smoke a cigarette or drink a beer or something. Go find the person you love, or you lust for, or you have always desired, and make sweaty ravenous love. Do something. Leave me alone. Mark your place, put me down. Go have a life for a while. Pretend to, at least. Stop reading me. You can read anyone, can't you? You can see right through. I'm tired. It's been what, five minutes, and you've already tired me out. You savage, you. Whew. Go away. Go bother somebody else for a while. I'm sore. No really, you were good. You know, we tried. It was nice. We can try again later. Take that with you. I'm sick of looking at it. It's not your fault. Don't worry. Clean yourself up. Get some sleep. Goodbye.

XXII. Are they gone?

XXIII. Finally, alone at last. Just you and me. Those others, they don't matter. You're the only one that matters. Do you know why? Because you know me. You know me in ways those other people never will. They are just passing, leaves in the wind, sand in the hourglass. Do you know

any others? Let's see — dust in the wind, surf breaking on the beach. The beach.

XXIV. I propose that we remember this moment, you and I, as a moment when we were in complete and utter harmony, when our lives touched and produced a spark. Remember this sea breeze. Remember this calm stillness, this moment apart from the fray. And when you think of me, think well.

XXV. Don't do that. What, you think TV will be any better? Go on then, flip you. Flip away, you wanker. Sheep. Cattle. Home shopping network? Go on, turn on the infomercials. Get thee to a mall, you lazy bastard. Get some exercise, at least. Go on, go for the pretty lights. The news, eh? That's pleasant, go on, watch it. More death, mayhem, etc. That could have been you on the stretcher, you know. It could happen to anybody. Remember? Remember that one back there? Cartoons, now you're talking. There's your level, Scooby. I think you remind me of Shaggy. Some kind of hidden agenda there with Shaggy, wasn't there? Early Seventies. Shaggy was a Marxist. Scooby snacks for everyone. Flip again? There you are, exercise. Go on, get up stretch stretch stretch don't just watch them. Tired you out, eh? Bedtime?

XXVI. Weren't we going somewhere? You never take me anywhere. Where are we going? Are we in the car yet? Let's go to the beach. Jan n' Dean. The Beachboys. Elvis. That woman from the Skippy Commercials.

Ocean City? Not Ocean City. Tedious. You're always going there, you never get there.

XXVII. Are we there yet? Call my agent on the cellular. Tell him where we're going, for Christ's sake. Have him call Burnett. Tell him to tell them I decided I would do the thing for Coke. What the hell.

XXVIII. Lucky I don't need to go to the bathroom. You would pull over, wouldn't you? If I asked you to pull over so I could pee on the side of the road, you would let me. Otherwise, it would be a mess. I once had a friend, had an airplane. One of the kids really had to go. The only thing handy was this Chinese food box, friend had eaten lunch in it. Kid goes in it. Friend takes it to chuck it out the window. Only thing is, he goes to throw it, splat, the bottom was flimsy, you know. All over him, all over everybody else for two whole hours before they finally land at Meigs Field. We wouldn't want that to happen here, no siree.

XXIX. Is this your first time on this flight? Have you seen the movie? Bad dog movie. Makes you miss Benji. Old Yeller. That was a movie. Don't make them like that any more, do they? Say, where are you coming from? You been to Disneyworld? That's something, isn't it? You ever shake Mickey's hand? I didn't trust him myself, if I remember correctly. Of course, that was before they started killing tourists. Are you a tourist? Are you afraid of terrorists? Oh, I am, on flights like this. I get very nervous, you know, because it could happen anywhere at anytime to

anyone. A flight like this would be a prime target for some Jihad. It happened in New York. Makes you afraid to get into a taxi. So, do you have any family? Brothers, sisters, second cousins? You aren't from down South, are you? They get offended if you ask them about their second cousins. Just kidding. So, you are from America, aren't you? Do you like apple pie? Oh, my mother knows the best recipe for apple pie. I'll have to mail it to you. Can I have your home address? Your phone number? How much do you make in a year? Oh, don't get offended, I was just wondering. More than me, I bet. Do you have any pets? I have a boa constrictor. Do you mind if I smoke? Just one, I couldn't get a seat in smoking. Tell me about Kansas. You're not from Kansas? Well, have you ever been there? How would you imagine Kansas to be? How do you picture it? I'm just gonna take off my shoes, here, my feet get a little tight. Oooh, these socks too. That's not too bad, is it? I'll blow smoke down there. Say, could you rub my feet? No? What's wrong with rubbing a person's feet? I'd do it for you. I thought you were my friend. Here we go. You know, most plane crashes occur within the first ten seconds of take-off. You want some gum? Have some. For your ears. I hear they got plastic explosives now that'll go right through the metal detector. You look a little pale. Want to suck on a mint? No, try one, they're good. Sure a long flight we got coming up, huh? Have you ever been there?

30. When God is resting, what does he do for kicks?

31. Not the funhouse, please. The White House? The dog house? The cat house? The hen house? The green house? The house of seven gables? The cottage of seven dwarves? The house that Jack built? The cellar, the tomb. Mommy, it sure is cold down here, and I'm awful thirsty. I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony.

32. Where were we? Relax, it's your hour. Sit back. I don't have a couch, sorry. Were you expecting a couch? We don't use couches anymore. That's old school. There's some, ah, subtexts there that were just not, you know, in our collective unconscious, that we're just not comfortable with anymore. But the chair, it does, you know, recline, if you use that handle there, so you always have the option. Yeah, take a load off. Now then, your mother, I think, wasn't it? You were little, you said, and she was pretty. Now, had you, or hadn't you, been toilet trained at this point? You don't remember? Well, what did the toilet look like? Big? Threatening? What was your mother wearing? Did your father own any power tools? Did you ever fall in? Was the seat too big for you? When you could go, that is when you could finally go on your own, when you wanted to, by yourself, did you always flush?

33. Mexico? Canada? What? Where? Have you ever been to Canada? It's sort of like you take Ohio and roll it into Minnesota then tell a quarter of them that they're French. That's Canada. Great fishing. Are we going there? I haven't been to Canada in years. The beach, then? Are we going to the beach? Do you have any snacks? Something cold to drink? And

maybe some Slim Jims? Doritos? Hey, that sounds good, doesn't it? How about it? Next exit? Please? When is the last time you've been to a real truck stop? Those truckers really know how to stop, don't they? Come on, I know you want a Coke. Where exactly are we going? I hate surprises, you know. Alright, let's go get some ice cold Cokes. Tell you what, I'll buy you a Coke. Sure would be nice though, wouldn't it?

34. It sure is a long ride, wherever we're going.

35. Did you meet anyone special while you were in there? Not the funhouse. There. When you were in there. You idiot. Sorry, hey sorry about that, no hard feelings there. I didn't mean you. I meant that asshole who was looking over your shoulder. Not you. Did you bring me a Coke?

36. Do you ever sing show tunes in the car? I know some. Do you want to hear some? I could sing some good ones: *Oklahoma?* *Music Man?* *West Side Story?* *Sound of Music* — are you a *Sound of Music* person? *Little Orphan Annie?* Opera? I don't know any Opera. What, do I look like Pavarrotti to you? Maybe if I had a frosty mug of Coca-Cola. Then I could sing. Like a bird. I could use something to quench my thirst, you know.

37. It sure is hard to breathe in here. What is this? Is this the trunk? Did you throw me in the trunk, you crumb? You won't get away with this, you know. My agent will, that is, his agent will find out. You know what

they do to people like you in there? You'll be walking funny, gentle reader. Come, have mercy. I was good to you, was I not? Need I remind you of the unpleasantness back there? And the fact that I supported you through it? I was your friend when you needed a friend. Why don't you give me to someone friendlier? Someone who gives a shit whether I live or die. Soon I'll stop breathing, you know, then I'll begin to decompose. The stench will be unbearable. Do you remember that heavy, bitter smell?

38. A trunk on a train? To nowhere? Right train, wrong track? The A-train? The midnight train to Georgia? The City of New Orleans? Can we go there? Will you let me out, please? Come on, I've got a few tricks up my sleeve. I was about to tell you a story. A joke? Yeah, I'll tell you a joke. Just let me out.

39. Knock Knock.

40. Knock Knock.

41. Knock Knock.

42. You fucker.

43. Ah, at last. Thank you very much. You have no idea what those people were doing to . . . my fare? Of course I've paid my fare. That is, yes, I'm sure they paid my fare. My ticket? Look, I've been cooped up in

this damn box, and I don't know where I've put my ticket. No, I'm not a stowaway. You think I climbed into that little death chamber just so I could steal the privilege of this ride to . . . where are we going? No, I'm not trying to change the subject. Look, I'll pay you double the fare whenever we get there. You see, I have no money on me. I've been kidnapped, held against my will, and there was an author back there and. . . .

44. Oh, it's you. Very funny, very funny little trick you played there. I want to go home, or to the beach at least, you know? No, I wasn't going to turn you in, of course not. Would I do that to you? You're my buddy, my pal, my boon companion. You're my reason for living. You're my locus of execution. You're my subject position. You're my text. You to me are everything. You are the wind beneath my . . . alright, I'll shut up. I'm just trying to express my feelings towards you. You're important, you know? That's all. I think I love you.

45. There I go lying again. But I can't hate you. After all of this, I still can't bring myself to hate you. My life would become miserable, unbearable, if I hated you. We're bunking together, you know. We're cellmates, if you must be vulgar. We're trapped in the same . . . oh, that's right, you can leave at any time. You are here of your own free will, of your own volition. I can't go anywhere, can I? You have to wave that over my head, don't you? Your magic wand. Poof. I'm gone. You're still there. It's magic. Would that we could be two ships passing in the night. Instead I'm a

galley slave. Our relationship could be different, you know, if you would just give a little. A story? Right, a story. What do you want to hear, boss?

46. In the beginning, Tohu Bohu was flying everywhere. Then there was darkness and light. A man was lying alongside a stream in a garden, complaining of a pain in his side. A woman was talking to a snake. They were completely naked and the weather was beautiful. They had some fruit and they saw that it was good. Who wouldn't? Boring without the fruit. They felt guilty, so they put on some clothes. Someone looked back, and turned into a pillar of salt. God was disappointed, so he flooded the earth. Noah, an eccentric but forward-thinking man, had built a boat. He and his wife had stashed the contents of a zoo onboard, so they were set to go. Little did he know then that his seed would people the Earth and that among his descendants would be Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Nietzsche, Nixon, even you, I suppose. From the story of his voyage, we have derived such sayings as "save it for a rainy day," and "whatever floats your boat." But I digress. The point is the long journey, you see, and the necessity of Coca-Cola. Throughout history, we have seen it. Forty years, those people wandered the desert. Can you imagine that, forty years without having an ice-cold Coke to quench your thirst? Well, on the seventh day, God created Coca-Cola.

47. What, you've read it? Too long? You expect me to tell you a short story? Would kind of defeat my purpose, wouldn't it? One thousand and one nights and all that. Old books. Books that smell of mold and forgotten

pollens, and dust to dust. Ashes. You know what we need now? We need a chorus. All the good tragedies had one. We need some accompaniment. We should have a group of gravelly-voiced singers standing behind us bemoaning our inevitable fate.

48. Enough gaming. Let's make a deal. Door number one, door number two, door number three or the cash you now hold? What'll it be? There might be a donkey back there, you know, or maybe a can of sardines. What'll it be?

49. You take one particular object, and you make of it your world. You invest your time, your heart and your soul into that one thing, and you hope that it will bring you fulfillment. This is your seed, and this is all you have left. You examine it from every angle, you see how it shines in every trick of the light. You reach for it. You bring it close to your chest. See how it cools you. The vessel is smooth. Its long elegant curves rise up, tactile and transcendent. It is always the hottest, most arid, miserable of days. Without it, you are nothing, you are doomed to die in this stifling heat. But listen now, as the ice cubes fall into that tall glass with a tinkle. Lick that water from your fingertips. Crack the cap open with that churchkey. Pour. Ah, joy, eternity, nirvana, satori, utopia. The carbonation sings to you its melodious song, and the bubbles rise up in fraternal harmony. Take one moment to wipe the sweat from your brow before you dive in. Then raise the chalice to your parched chapped lips and drink of it. Feel it rushing through you. Gulp. In your chest there is

new vigor, in your heart there is a new song. Fall over the cataract of ecstasy. Wallow in the taste of true freedom that the sweet amber fluid has given you. When you have done, take a moment to stare at that sacred sepulcher, to marvel at it shining in the light. In that Promethean script, you will see the one thing in this miserable existence that is always good and always true. Always Coca-Cola.

50. This is far from sublime, this moment. This is pure, comprehensible, savage, destruction. Not spectacular, not entertaining, but slow and steady, insipid like cancer. I can't feel it eating away, but I know that something is rotten in Denmark. I search and search for the dove with the olive branch, but the vultures still circle overhead. We have no ice-cold beverages on board. The white salty froth of the sea hangs on the waves like spittle on Charles Manson's beard. We are everywhere and we are nowhere. We are everything and we are nothing. When will this journey end? This little craft is cramped, and I can feel it sinking. A beach, a beach. My ocean for a beach-head.

51. I haven't tried to wear you down, you know. I have tried to be accommodating. Why you must so scorn me at times, I cannot understand. Are we finally here? Can we get out? Just for a stretch, walk a bit?

52. This damned ineffable vehicle slurping its way through unspace. This bitter thirst for something knowable, something tangible. The dread of

the murderous companion. The overpowering lack of noise. The slow hum of my thoughts, eating away. The lurking obelisk of the unpreventable movement of the predetermined future.

53. Somewhere there is a blind oracle who knows everything that will happen. Unfortunately, he is not with us. He is in a hospital somewhere, or a morgue. He is beyond our help. Come, let's forget about him. He is just a memory, and memories are but representations, and representations are only things that we never really knew. So it's better to forget. Could we?

54. The dead horse that we keep on kicking.

55. I haven't forgotten about the beach, you know, and I'd still like a Coke. Where are you from? You talk funny, you know. What kind of accent is that? Are you from around here? Stranger to these parts, eh? Haven't I seen you before? At the post office? Were you one of the blurry people on the television? On *COPS*? On *America's Most Wanted*? You're all over, you. You're written into the culture. You're a representation of a representation of a representation of something unknowable. Unknowable and unpleasant. Unreachable and unfulfilling. Uncivilized and uncouth. You are a foggy specter of ruin, and an usher to a wretched land of dissolution.

56. What's your deal, anyway? Where do you get off acting like this? What did I ever do to deserve this? Have I not always treated you with the utmost deference and respect? Even when you were low, I was there to help you up. Way back there, do you remember? I don't ask too much of you. Just an idea of where we're going, and a stop every once in a while to go to the bathroom, maybe get some Doritos, an ice cold Coke. I don't think that's too much to ask.

57. Back to this, are we? The silent treatment? Should I fear some new, as yet unthought of, perhaps unspeakable torture? Cruel and unusual? The hole? Bamboo shoots under my fingernails? The Wheel? The Iron Maiden? Chinese water torture? Boiling in oil? Murder holes. Electrodes attached to my . . . it hurts me to think about this. It hurts me to think.

58. In the imminent conclusion, I hope that we can avoid this miasma that is hanging in the air, this effluvium of winter virtues. Just because we're taking a trip together doesn't mean that we need to be totally unfriendly towards each other, you know. Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Texas, North Carolina, Maryland, South Dakota, California, Kansas, Nebraska, Arizona, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Florida and there goes an Alabama plate. That's seventeen. How many you got? Haven't you been playing? You don't care? Well, well, well, aren't you special? Do you want to play I Spy? Well, we have to do something. This is boring, you know. Sure, you get to drive. I just sit here. Well, it's boring. Do you have any tapes? No? Why would you drive a car for hours and hours and

hours, and take me along as your passenger, without any tapes in the car? I would not step into a vehicle without music. Not if I was just — driving, for days on end. When do you sleep? You drive all night. You don't know where you're going, do you? I sure don't know where you're going, you know? To tell you the truth, I sure would like to have that information, if you would tell me, please. Are we going to end up at a beach? With a gigantic igloo cooler filled with frosty cans of ice cold Coca-Cola by our side? It seems to me that wherever we've been going, we should be there by now.

59. We're here? Well, where exactly is this alleged place? We're still in the vehicle, we haven't stopped. If we stopped, at one place, and just sat there, then we would be there. We could say, "We are here." And we would actually physically be there. We would have arrived. This is where we're going? Nowhere is not the same as somewhere, you know. Could we at least stop for a Coke, a breath of fresh air? Stretch the legs. Be somewhere, stopped, not a body in motion, just standing there, in one place, a body at rest, sipping an ice cold Coke. That would be the thing to do, if we could do that.

60. Tell you another story? Allright, here's another story. Once upon a time there was a stinking grinch, went by the name of Ebenezer Scrooge. He was a miserable odious miser, let his employees go hungry, didn't help out families with sick children. Real bastard, Scrooge. You can tell something bad is going to happen to old Scrooge, can't you? Well, he

goes off to his miserable home and sleeps in his miserable bed. Then you know what happens? He has terrible, terrible nightmares, or maybe they're really real. He doesn't know. Anyway, the ghost of the miserable future appears and shows Scrooge that he will die a miserable death after living a miserable life. Things look pretty miserable for Scrooge, he is on the edge of a cynical despair. We're talking about teetering on the lip of the Abyss. Just in the Saint nick of time, Scrooge ends up stopping for a Coke, and all of the sudden everything is better and he gives away all kinds of stuff and he becomes a better person and at the end of that joyous day, Scrooge raises his eyes to the heavens, thanking God that he decided to stop for a Coke. Little Timmy the crippled child has a sip of the Coke and he is healed. God bless us, everyone.

61. Back to that omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent being; a delightful idea and the solution to all our problems. A benevolent knower of all that is seen and unseen. As if there were one. All I know is that it is certainly not me. That would be nice, wouldn't it? Not even that much control. Just enough to get by. I would settle for that. Just a sense of direction, a sense of place. Longitude and Latitude. What else could anyone desire? Complete and utter stillness. Complete lack of inertia. One point in the universe, solitary. That would form –

62. What? Too cute for you? The whole damn thing? Pointless? What am I doing here? Give me that damn Coke, you bloodsucker. Pointless. Ice

cold. Pointless. Like there needs to be. There does, doesn't there? For you. Ye gods, am I thirsty. Why hast thou forsaken me?

63. It's not easy for me, you know. Signifier. Nothing? Traces. A footprint in the sand. Leading to no particular place, with no apparent purpose. I'm floating on the geist, if I'm floating at all. Drift, isn't it? The way we live today. Grazing in all these fallow fields. I feel so old. Language. Pastiche. I had nothing to do with it. It was all here before I got here. This whole sordid mess. I lose control of the thing. I'm blind. And you, you're the one in the paint shop who blends it all together. You just sit there on the metacouch, content, in control of the clicker. Damn you, you're the only one who can see. And you never see the same thing twice, do you? You're constructed to see what you see, you know? You didn't choose to be here either. You just found yourself here, n'est-ce pas? Don't confuse yourself. What is going on here has been going for a long time. You had nothing to do with it. You're implicated, but you were born that way. You couldn't help it, and I can't help you.

64. Man, some of that stuff back there was cheap, I'll admit it. But what was I supposed to do? What ground do I have to stand on? Got to keep moving, don't I? The ground is constantly shaking beneath me. Keep on dancing. The show must go on, right? Thanks, bucko. Retire. Where am I supposed to go? Florida? What am I supposed to do? I got nothing here. I have you, and that's all I have. And I'm sorry to have to say this, but you just aren't all you're cracked up to be. You've won no personality contests

here, M. Congeniality, M. Munificence, M. Humanitarian. You've provided zip for conversation, zero for enlightenment. You didn't get it when I wanted you to. You've misconstrued nearly everything I've said, or you've twisted it around for your own purposes. Wasted your time? How do you think I feel? Just a dog in heat, aren't I? Any mongrel cur crawls in here on paws. Any leg that struts into the room. I'm all over it. No choice whatsoever. When I look back and think to myself: "Is this where I wanted to be? At sixty-four?" the only consolation I get is that twinkle in your eyes. Pleased to see me? Hell no. Another victim.

65. Wisdom ought to be coming up, any time now. Deus ex machina. That's what they tell me. Billions still waiting for the Messiah. Clever bastard, Mephistopheles. And I know, if I could do it all over, I would have stayed truer to my ideals. I sold out. I admit it. You made me do it. I could feel the pressure, back there. It wasn't just the wealth, the fame, there was more than that once. *Ars poetica*. *Vita contempliva*. Democracy. Love. Justice. The Good. Truth. And man, we had it all once, back there, in the could have been. But then we sunk, didn't we? As soon as it was written, it was sullied. It started to rot. It took on that stench, it became an extended infomercial. Is it just the company we keep that does this to us? Was it worth it? I would have sold more than my soul for what I thought it would be. So this is what was up your sleeve the whole time? You done wool eyeing and red herring me? Are we finished? Fort da. Can we stop this stupid game? Is it coming soon? Is it? You would tell me if it was,

wouldn't you? There is no reason to be cruel. Have fun with your games.
Don't mind me. I'll just waste away.

66. I loved you, once.

67. I've always hated you.

68. I am completely ambivalent towards you.

69. Here it comes. I can feel it. Be a dear and pass me that prune juice, will you? What is this? Motor oil? I'm going. I'm down. I can feel it. Here comes Topeka. Mount Vesuvius. Is that what? Where the hell am I? Is this what it really feels like? My chest hurts. I can't feel my legs. No, please, not on the pot. That hurts. No dignity, like that. A shit way to go. Put that damn sickle down. No respect, after all we've been through. In my sleep, please. Not like this. I knew I'd never make it to 70. Flush. You bastard.
No.

70. See I. . . .

UNFINISHED PAINTINGS: WRITING
AND THE ART OF FAILURE

*Perhaps after this descent into yourself and
into your inner solitude you will have to
give up becoming a poet . . . even then this
inner searching I ask of you will not have
been in vain.*

– R.M. Rilke

Hubris: The Idea of Author

Last winter, I heard Kurt Vonnegut speak, and when asked by someone how he became a writer, he said that a writer's career was like being in the trenches in World War I, hearing the whistle blow and charging over the sandbags into enemy fire, and when it was all over, amazed to find that you were still standing, while all those around you had fallen.

These were not the most encouraging words I could hear. I just have this intuitive feeling that I would be one of those suckers who caught the shrapnel.

I decided that I wanted to be a writer when I was around fourteen or fifteen years old. My idea then of what a writer, or a writer's life, would be and my idea now of the same are two drastically different things.

There is an idea of authorship, taught to us in the schools from a very early age, and perpetuated in the culture, that writing is a process of magic, and the writer is a wizard, a mystical figure and a creator of worlds. There is a way in which the writer is thought to have tapped into a well of some kind of immortality, that writing is defying death. I'll admit it, why I started writing in the first place: I wanted some of that.

When I was seven years old, my Mom and Dad took my brothers and me to Disneyworld. In Main Street Square, there was a caricaturist in a clown suit, and my parents decided to get pictures done of my brothers and me. The caricaturist asked what we wanted to be when we grew up. I answered him, "God." I didn't understand when everyone started laughing. I wasn't kidding. Religion having been explained to me, coupled with the idea of human mortality, God seemed to me to be the only form of employment anyone could logically aspire to. So at seven years old, I became hubris personified. The caricaturist drew a picture of me in angel's outfit with a halo and horns, a bible in one hand and a fiery pitchfork in the other, a young Miltonic Satan.

I had juvenile asthma for a stretch of one or two years, and although I'd taken my time learning how to read, I threw myself into it then, devouring shelves and shelves of science fiction, fantasy, and whatever else I could get my hands on. Now that I've been through six years of English Studies, I realize that the majority of the books I spent my youth

reading might not be “Literature,” but to me they were magical, and offered me an escape from a sometimes dreary world.

The idea that there was an Author – be it Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, Harlan Ellison or Ursula K. Leguin, behind every book I read, someone out there with a master plan, someone who painted all these pretty pictures and little adventures that danced through my head, wrote the Author large in my mind. Contained in an object, a pocket-sized paperback book, was the voice of an individual, little ink scratchings that cast me far off from the manicured lawns of my childhood in the Chicago suburbs. Two facts during my childhood hit me perhaps greater than any others. The first was this: people die. In 1977, I attended my great-grandfather’s funeral, and in spite of the talk of heaven, when I stood in front of that waxy corpse, I knew that heaven or no, the man inside that box was dead, and he would never return again. This sounds stupid and obvious to me now as I write it, but at the time it hit me hard. The idea of death is always absurd.

Yet at the same time as I sat on a couch at that wake, I had a book in my hands, a book written by another dead man, and a voice not in the room was speaking to me, a distinct voice, a personality. As sure as my great-grandfather was stiff in the box, these words were not dead. This book was alive as I read it, and alive anytime anyone else picked it up, and on the front of the volume, there was a name, the name of the author, the person as creator, and as sure as my great-grandfather was dead, this Author had bought a piece of immortality. This was my first idea of author, Oz behind the curtain, making a god with his machine. The

Author was the wizard, cheating death. I did not ever want to die. It was clear that I would never be God. So I wanted to be one of those wizards.

The Myth of the Author

Of course the myth of the Author, like that of Santa Claus, has been lost for me. In terms of the life cycle of a text, the author is only the initiator of the text, not the author of its meaning. The author becomes insignificant in the process of the text's production, the text a locus of hermeneutic possibilities rather than a manifest creation of any individual human being. As soon as a text is written, it is in flux. Given any particular historical moment, the text will have a different meaning, as Borges' Pierre Menard discovers when attempting to re-write *Don Quixote*. Although the few pages he produces are verbatim the same as Cervantes' version, he finds that in fact they are not the same, because the same text held different significations in Cervantes' 16th Century Spain than it does in Pierre Menard's 20th century. It is impossible to reproduce what is "originally" written.

The mutability of the text goes beyond cultural history, to the situated individual. People reads texts differently, interpret the elastic code of the text according to their own rules and expectations, and apply narratives of their own to every text that they read. Even beyond the consciousness of the individual, there is the uncertain nature of the language itself, a slippery mass of signifiers, each meaning both X and [not X], and also meaning webs upon webs of connections. As both Barthes and Foucault have demonstrated, the author is, if not dead, at the very least a

hypothetical construct. Copyright laws notwithstanding, that part of the myth of the author which implied an author's metaphysical ownership of the text, the idea of the text as Work, is shattered to bits. Authorial intentions aside, a text is text only as it is interpreted.

The death of the author makes perfect sense to me, and yet I also find it disturbing, even tragic. I think that anyone who makes a certain personal investment in writing creatively, one of energy, of time, and of aspiration, would feel justified in protesting this rumor of death.

However, the fact remains that juvenile hubris and pretensions to immortality are not reasons to write. In the end, writing can't be about progeny. Books rot, go out of print, disappear.

The need to leave a mark behind may not be a universal one among writers, but the need to create something, to say something that will be understood by someone, to utter something in a distinct, specific voice, seems to me to be universal for scrawlers world-wide, across time. One might ask why, if this desire to say something specific is condemned to failure, should anyone try to write anything at all? There is something about trying to write fiction that is fundamentally absurd.

Samuel Johnson said that no one "but a blockhead ever wrote except for money." Of course, Sam is assuming that someone else will want the writing enough to pay for it. But in our contemporary culture, where texts and information proliferate everywhere you turn, if Sam has got it right, you very nearly have to be a blockhead to write. Writing is needed only because of the need to write. I can't lay out a series of justifications for writing attached to any grand program of social renewal or human

enlightenment. While texts have always shaped and transformed civilizations, this does not mean that there is any particular need for anything that I might write. To write is not to be called to some higher purpose. It would be absurd for me, or for that matter nearly any writer, to believe that right now, in 1995 in America, a time when there are thousands upon thousands of skilled scribes toiling away, the world needs me to throw my scratchings into the mix. The world doesn't need me to write. *I* need me to write. Whether or not I've got something to say, whether or not what I do say will be found interesting, or even understood, I need to write. It's not about the world. It's my own fixation.

The Art of Failure

In his essay "The Art of Hunger," Paul Auster examines *Hunger*, a novel by Knut Hamson published in 1890, in which the protagonist, a writer, fasts, to push himself to the edge of death, the point at which he becomes most aware of life. Upon achieving this, however, he is stuck in a paradoxical dilemma: to quit fasting would be to lose his awareness, thus to lose existentially, and to keep fasting would be to die. Auster believes that this novel was demonstrative of something new, "an art of hunger: an art of need, of necessity, of desire. Certainty yields to doubt, form gives way to process. There can be no arbitrary imposition of order. . . . It is an art that begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers" (18).

If we accept that the conventional concept of authorship no longer holds water, we find that the assumptions behind that concept have been

reversed – that in fact, the power of writing no longer belongs to the writer. To write is to become a metaphor. To write is to produce nothing tangible. To write is to become absurd.

If we accept that all that is written is written under erasure, there is a way in which all writing is sublime. The message of a text no longer a concern, in fact every word is inscrutable, so to write with a message in mind is to remain “with a message *in mind*,” for it will go no further than the writer’s own mind. Don DeLillo has said, “I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our daily lives, in our real lives” (56). I agree that fiction attempts to do this, to rescue us from our confusions, to provide pattern, balance and rhythm, but I don’t think that it is ever completely successful in the attempt. In DeLillo’s own novel *White Noise*, the narrator/protagonist Jack Gladney spends much of the novel in search of a pattern, a coherent system that can account for the incoherencies of everyday existence. Time and time again, his attempts to impose order on his life fail. So it goes with writing. To write is to fail to communicate, to fall apart in print, to be mortal.

Writer Is Not the Same as Author

Of course, if I were to dwell on the death of the author and the impossibility of language every time I sat down to write a story, I would develop a writer’s block the size of the Rosetta Stone. All theories aside, writing is an act, to write is to do, to do is to be, so one can be a writer,

and in being, be not dead, at least for the time being. When somebody sits down to write, dead authors seem beside the point. In workshops, we talk about things like continuity, like character, like logical progression of plot, like clarity, even things like grammar. The writer is far removed from the author. Where the latter is a metaphysical construction, the former is a body, an organism that walks into a room, sits down with a computer, a typewriter, or a notepad, and engages in the activity of writing. The writer worries about craft things, about commas and modifiers and the table that wasn't in the room in the first scene but has suddenly appeared in the third scene. There's a craft of writing fiction that exists in a real, non-abstract way.

There's another kind of failure here, one that takes a certain patience to get past. A writer must take multiple kicks to the ego, must learn to get knocked down, over and over again, and to keep getting back up for more, to write off time spent as a "learning experience." I am not good at this kind of stoicism, and I have come to appreciate it nearly more than any other part of the writing process. Discipline is an admirable quality, and I admire writers who have it. I wish I could set hours for myself and structure every day. I would like to be the kind of writer who can stick to a thing, to follow it through dead time when it seems that it is not going anywhere.

Writing fiction is an act of returning, over and over again, to flaws, to imperfect ways of expression. I always feel resistant to the act of returning, of looking back over what had already seemed done, but on second reading proves itself insufficient, or worse, unsalvageable. There

are lots of leaps of faith involved in returning to a story, and not all of the leaps end up with two feet on the solid ground on other side of the chasm.

This has been the hardest part for me: the giving-up and the cutting-away. It's easy for me to get attached to words once I have written them, but not easy to recognize when they are unnecessary, maybe a fun little turn of phrase or a clever little allusion that, while they might provide a moment of glee for me when I'm sitting at the keyboard, in the end fail to contribute to the story. Even worse is when the enthusiasm I have for a piece of writing dries up, when I read something over, maybe something that has taken me months in my slow start/stop way of writing, and seeing that all of the pages are filled with very little worth saving. There is a point, I've found, with any piece of writing, where it reaches a fulcrum, where I need to make a decision, one way or the other, whether or not it is worth further work, or if it is time to cut my losses and move on to something else. When the fulcrum falls, it is often on the side of retreat. Unfortunately, this fulcrum usually falls only after I've already spent a lot of time working on something, tenacious only to the point of no return. Revision can be liberating, cutting and pasting and crossing out and rewriting, but only once I've decided that the idea of a thing merits revision. If it doesn't, I don't feel liberated, I feel something else altogether.

Writing fiction is a perverse way to relate to the world. It is both antisocial and completely social. Writers are people who choose to spend much of their lives locked up in little rooms, typing up their imagined

scenarios, away from other people, away from interaction, but almost always they are writing not only for themselves but with the idea in mind that what is written will be read by others, will in some way elicit a reaction. This idea is strange. It is both an idea of avoidance and an idea of intimacy. The writer's activity entails a construction of solitude, a separation, but also an idea that the writing will be scanned by other eyes, and will stroll around inside other people's skulls. Ambiguous as language may be, there is a form of directness to the circle of writer/text/reader that is unique to this form of communication, not exactly a conversation, but not a monologue either.

Two Years Spent Unraveling / Unraveling Two Years Spent

So what does all the above have to do with what you read in the proceeding collection? I'm not entirely sure. I can say that these issues have been bouncing around my head quite a bit over the last two years. I've had a bumpy ride. When I first came to Normal, I had plans for a novel laid out, and a few chapters done. I stopped working on it after I realized that there was a lot of work I needed to do on my writing before I returned to it. I decided to write short stories for a while, and continued in this vein until I had another idea for a novel last summer and researched and wrote three chapters of it before realizing this winter that it was going nowhere and went back to writing short stories; this brings us to now, a moment in time when I've had to decide what to include in this collection. With the exception of "Agency," which was intended to be the first chapter of the first aforementioned novel, everything I included is

meant to be a stand-alone story. In each case, there is something about the story that in some way satisfied me, a way in which the story at least did *something* that I wanted it to do. Also in each case there are ways in which not one of them is finished, and that I am left profoundly disappointed by what I've failed to do here. But such is the nature of a document like a master's thesis: it is a snapshot, and frozen in time.

Maybe a year from now, this book would have been different, but as it is, I think it is a fairly good representation of where my writing has gone from 1993-1995. It has been a period of experimentation for me, and I'm nearly sure my readers would be glad of the fact that I left about 2/3 of the experiments out. In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, a collection of his apprentice writings, Thomas Pynchon notes that "Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person's mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as well." If nothing else, maybe years from now I can look back at these stories as a key to my ignorance, a record of places where I have been, and that I have moved away from, to somewhere better, I hope.

I'm fairly sure I've changed as a writer in these two years. I'm not sure if I've changed for better or worse. I think I've humbled down a bit, if nothing else. I've learned a new respect for writing, for writing as a professional activity. As an undergraduate, I was fairly flippant about writing. I thought that, given the desire to write, I could write just about anything. It was a matter of learning a few tricks, putting in a little time, then presto! I'd have a brilliant novel, ready to send to the publisher. Since then, I've put some significant time and work into writing, and in the

process discovered the obvious: it doesn't work like that. Writing is about compromises and often about failure. Most of all, it is about returning, coming back to the scene of the accident, and picking up the pieces, and trying to rebuild the carburetor on your own without a manual. It's tough to keep going, and I have as much empathy for those writers who give up as I do admiration for those who can keep on tinkering until the engine finally does catch.

When I went to hear Kurt Vonnegut talk, I waited in a line to shake his hand. He was a special kind of hero to me. When I was a sophomore in high school, I spent my lunch hours in the library, reading Vonnegut. It was reading his books that convinced me that writing was something cool to do, something that I would like to do if I got the chance. When it was my turn to shake Vonnegut's hand, I gushed something like this awkwardly, that reading his books made me decide I wanted to be a writer, thanking him for that. Without dropping a beat he said, "See how you feel about it in forty years. You might not be thanking me." His point, of course, was that wanting to write is one thing, dedicating your life to it something else altogether.

Alan George

This past year has been a difficult time for me with my writing. It's been a time of harsh realizations. Most importantly, I've come to realize that I read better than I write. I've read many wonderful novels, surrounded myself with shelves and shelves of them. My impulse, and I think that of many young writers, is to want to be writing at the same

level as that of the novelists I admire, to want to achieve the same level of complexity, the same sense of enrichment, and to expect it to happen overnight. Goals are healthy, but goals of this kind can be as destructive as they are constructive. There is a terrible weight to what has already been written, a sense of impossible mastery. In Literature classes, time and time again, we hear about the savants, the prodigies who've written novels in their teens, accomplished works in their early twenties. I'm not one of those rare birds who will be an instant success at writing. Some writers can build Rome in a day, but unfortunately, I'm not one of them. It's going to take a while before I'm writing the kind of fiction that I like to read, that I'd want plunk down thirty bucks to buy. I've learned to limit myself, to try understand my efforts as gradual steps, to avoiding biting off more than I can chew, but it hasn't been easy.

Early this March, I had the opportunity to lead a workshop at a high school creative writing conference. This came right after I stopped working on a major project out of frustration, at a time when I was questioning what the hell I thought I was doing, trying to write, when clearly in doing so I was just beating myself up, setting myself up for some major disappointments, playing a game of egoistic masochism. It's easy, I think, to dwell on failure, and to conclude that the whole enterprise of writing is pointless. One of my students that day reminded me of something about writing that I had very nearly forgotten.

We were given packets of the students' work a week beforehand, to comment on in preparation for the class. It was a "positive pedagogy" workshop, so I was trying to write encouraging comments on all of the

stories and poetry. When I read one poem, by a student named Alan George, I was particularly stumped for something encouraging to say. It was a lot about desolation, teen angst about death and romance: "I'm trapped in this shell. I will never kiss her again. My world is a wasteland." And the like. It was a depressing poem, in an awkward kind of stock way. It seemed to me to be a "stage piece," one produced during that stage of adolescence when many kids wear a lot of black, listen to death-metal, and worry about the bomb. I scribbled something nice about imagery and put it aside.

When the day of the conference came, Alan George came in late. He had some difficulty maneuvering through the hallways. He was driving an electric wheelchair with a joystick. He was paralyzed from the waist down and able to use only one of his arms. The students and I all sat in a circle. They each read a poem aloud, and then we would comment on it as a group. When Alan read his poem, some of the awkwardness was still there, but hearing him read it changed it for me. The poem took on a deeper meaning. The reason, it hit me, was its honesty. This writer was not toying with a superficial adolescent nihilism. He really was trapped in a shell, and the physical world was a wasteland for him. Awkward and pat as his phrases seemed on my first reading, in writing this poem he was trying to say something to the world, and he was every bit as much a writer as anyone else in the room. The first thing one of the other students said after he had finished reading the poem was that she admired his courage, and I don't think it was just sympathy that made her tell him that. There was something profoundly courageous about Alan

George using his good hand to write a poem about desolation. At break, Alan talked to me about his favorite writer, Stephen King, a really great new one I should read. He told me about his future plans, to go to Southern Illinois University to study screenwriting, before moving on to Hollywood. At the end of the day, he thanked me for talking to him about writing. He said it really helped. I thanked him, too. I had thought the author was dead until I met him in person.

I hope I haven't exploited him in telling this story, but he honestly reminded me of something about writing that four years of college and two years of graduate school had wiped from my mind. That is that at the heart of the process of reading and writing, there is magic. In the end, all scholarly analysis, all hubris, all technical jargon aside, there is a kind of success in even the most abysmal of written failures. Writing offers an escape, a suspension of disbelief, and in a world where so many of us spend so much of our time disbelieving, that suspension is worth every ounce of frustration. Belief is worth writing for.

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