

# AMERICAN RACONTEUR

Real American Writin' for Real American Readin'

Henry Edward Fool

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Author's Note:

Declaring the thing 'absolutely unreadable' my very dear wife has forbidden me to publish the murder mystery I was working on so diligently, with mounting enthusiasm and ascending joy, so you get this instead. Had she not intervened in such a timely manner you'd now be holding Murder at the Dull Men's Club.



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This book is dedicated to Dick Tony who has always taken great pride in being unbearable—something which is neither here nor there for me—but who, one rainy night in Paris, proved also to be childish and unforgiving. So, you know, screw that; I don't need it.

That aside, he once told me this: "I would gladly read anything you write, on any subject, any time." I will never forget that, Mr. Tony. Thank you. That is pretty much the coolest thing anybody has ever said to me.

Henry Edward Fool



DOORSTOP BOOKS  
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Give a man a fish, and you've fed him for a day. Give him a book, and you've given him a doorstep.

## INTRODUCTION

Mr. John Reese, who never overheard a phrase, witnessed an event no matter how insignificant, caught a whiff of a scent, or saw another human being in motion without it reminding him of a story, told me this tale a few years ago.

He and his good wife were walking down Powell Street in San Francisco one fine day when a sudden wind kicked up. Mr. Reese quickly grabbed for his hat to keep it from blowing away. His wife reached up to save her own hat, but too late. They spun around in the hope of (maybe) chasing it down, but the wind had already carried the hat completely out of sight. Since there was nothing they could do about it, they just went about their business.

Returning to the hotel later that evening, as Mr. Reese told it... “We discovered THAT WIND was not only quick, it was clever. It blew her hat all the way UP Powell Street, AROUND the corner, THROUGH the front door of Cornell Hotel de France, all the way DOWN the hallway to room 107, through THAT door, and deposited it neatly in the center of the bed, next to a matching pair of gloves.”

That tale inspired me to launch an online weekly called American Raconteur in 2003 (I think). I published it for about two years, maybe a little more. Most of what you read here has been exhumed from that now defunct site.

I should start by saying this. O. Henry and Maupassant aside, plot-driven fiction doesn't really work for me. And as much as I would like to believe that Life can be like a movie, for me at least, Life just doesn't move that way.

I once tried to get everyone on the #38 Geary bus to join in and sing Row, Row, Row Your Boat but, despite my drunkenness and genuine enthusiasm for the game, had to get off at the next stop out of embarrassment.

As far as cinematic plots go, I'm almost never surprised when the knock comes on the door and it's him returning after years of heroic absence. And when she finally, tearfully blurts out, "Because I'm Pregnant!" it's something I've known almost from conception. Basically, plot lines break down into two sorts: those things that anyone can see coming from a million miles away and those things which surprise us and let us down in the same turn, because they are so contrived that they really make no sense at all. Despair, deception, and murder have little part in my life, and yet I still find Life fulfilling. I have no sworn enemies trying to bring me down, and yet Life is exhilarating.

In my life, the twists and turns have all been unexpected, and can only be detected when looking backward. Even then I often find myself asking, "Gee, how did I ever end up here?"

And, I kinda like it that way.

For me Life is scene driven; it consists of individual, free-standing vignettes like the time my father took two of us kids for a ride on the back of Uncle John's brand new Harley and spilled it on the muddy, rain-slicked, uphill run between a very busy Route 10 and West 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue; and simpler matters such as the aching in your heart when your first true love is dragged away in tears in the backseat of her parent's car. But none of the things I find interesting,

and therefore worth writing about, are invented, and the only continuity in them is the fact that I was around to observe it or took some strange part in it, or heard about it so many times from a friend that I now honestly believe I was there. Or at least that's the only excuse I can offer for the way this book seems to be organized.

The very best of Life requires no plot, and very little planning. There is no better proof than my interview with bluesman, Charles Banks.

I went into that interview with my usual 24 to 30 questions scribbled and unreadable on a scrap of paper, but needed only one. After asking that first question I couldn't have driven another question in there with a stout wedge and a three-pound hammer. Once Mr. Banks opened up there was nothing I could do to stop him, and I really didn't want to. During that time he reeled out an unbroken series of tales which was better than anything I could have extracted from the man by any other means. Two hours later, full of astonishment and delight, but having run out of tape, I turned off the tape recorder, thanked him, stood up, shook his hand, and said goodbye.

"There's more," he assured me at the door.

"I'm sure there is," I said, "but I only have 40 pages."

The other option was to rename my magazine The Charles Banks Story, and for a moment I considered that.

It was about that same time that Kathleen and I bought some essential oil to increase our memory. We were supposed to put two or three drops in a glass of water and

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drink it once a day. So, as soon as we got home, we did that, with great anticipation.

About a week later, I came into the kitchen and she was standing there with a small blue bottle in her hand saying, "Remember this?"

The bottle looked vaguely familiar.

"Think," she encouraged.

I thought, but could not place that bottle.

"Try to RE MEM BER..." she said, with raised eyebrows.

We gave it a second chance, taking our medicine right then and there.

Another week later, one of us discovered the bottle sitting on the kitchen counter again.

"What the heck is this...?"

"It really looks familiar. Is there a label on it?"

"Looks familiar to me too...But, I have no idea what it is."

What it was, was Life being itself; not some writer's clever construct; not plotted, not scripted, un-contrived; every bit as funny as any comedy ever written, more entertaining, much more fulfilling, and possibly carrying a deeper meaning.

But, maybe not.



## HONDURAS

In Santa Rosa de Copan I was as sick as a man could be. For three days my life consisted of periodically tumbling out of bed, hugging the cold tile floor face down until I got my strength up, crawling on my hands and knees eight feet to a toilet where the unthinkable transpired, and after several dizzying minutes regaining my strength, crawling back to the bed on my hands and knees, where, once again thoroughly drained and drenched in sweat, I paused face down on the tile, before beginning the exhausting process of pulling myself back in amongst the tangled, sweaty sheets. I slept day and night, delirious, curled up in a ball, covered in sweat, alternating between chills and burning high fever. On the last night of this adventure I came out of my trance for a moment with two vague figures towering over me in the dark. I wondered how they'd gotten into my room and didn't care all in the same instant. If something horrible was about to happen—if, say, these two were there to kill me—I was ready; I would welcome it, they'd be doing me a favor. Instead, one of them, the female, leaned over, took me by the jaw, forced my head around to face her, and said in English, "Can you see me?"

I nodded.

"Can you hear me?"

I nodded.

"There will be a truck leaving from the bus station at 4:30 AM, and you will be on it. Do you understand what I just said?"

I nodded.

"Where is the bus station?" I asked in a whisper.

She told me, and then they departed.

At 4 AM there was a loud demanding knock on my door and I pulled myself up and gathered my few things and stumbled out the door. The guy sleeping behind the counter downstairs lifted his head and pointed when I asked in my best broken Spanish, “Where is the bus station?” When he pointed a second time with great emphasis, I went outside and started walking in that general direction.

That ride in the back of that truck was the worst trip I’ve ever had in my life. The potholes in the mountains of Honduras are large enough to swallow a large dog; the drivers are insane—enjoying nothing more than coming as close to the cliff edge as possible—and completely unsympathetic. If you are sick—and I was very very very sick—these drivers will not stop so that you might purge yourself. I was so sick that I honestly wished the driver **WOULD** just drive the damned truck over the cliff edge and get it over with. But, he didn’t. He just kept driving. And he did not stop... and he did not stop...and he did not stop. It was like riding on a bucking bronco. On that truck you either held it or laid in it until the truck reached its destination. Even though I was phasing in and out of consciousness, the trip was absolutely endless, and long before we reached our destination I had a very good idea of what Hell must be like. During that trip I looked back with fondness upon my days of delirium and degradation in a windowless hotel room in Santa Rosa, Copan.

When we arrived, four long hours later, I was jostled awake and told to get out. I did. I was still a bit delirious; still sick as a dog. When I looked around something became

instantly clear to me. I was unquestionably the biggest, tallest, palest, sickest and lostest person in all of Honduras.

After finding a thoroughly disgusting public bathroom to take care of myself I stood around near the bus station for almost an hour before the two women with whom I had been traveling showed up. When they arrived, they were clean and healthy, bright and cheerful, fresh as daisies—completely shameless in their loveliness—looking as if they'd spent their trip nestled deeply in the plush velvet back seat cushions of a Rolls Royce. They were chattering away in flawless Spanish as if they'd been sipping champagne all along the merry way. Life is but a dream. After another two hour wait, during which they yammered unceasingly about the pyramids they'd visited in Copan, we got on a bus headed toward San Marcos. It was the town nearest Mesa Grande, the United Nations refugee camp for Salvadorans escaping the completely unnecessary and extremely bloody war in El Salvador. That's where we were heading, the refugee camp at Mesa Grande.

The bus was packed with farmers on their way to who knows where. Some of them held chickens in their laps. One woman had a small goat on a string. Almost every one of them held a cardboard box or a string bag or a cage or a bundle of some sort clutched in their arms. Outside, suitcases and tarps and cages, and livestock in small pens were strapped to the front, the sides, the back, the top and the underside of that bus.

Once we got underway people started talking amiably amongst themselves and the women I was traveling with

joined right in, chatting with the locals in an elevated form of their native tongue. Before long they were all old friends. Me, I sat and looked out the window for the most part, still groggy, semiconscious, but only slightly sick. Periodically the bus would pass through an almost non-existent little gathering of tiny houses and we'd stop there to be surrounded with people eagerly, desperately trying to sell their crops; a variety of things to eat wrapped in tin foil and paper and corn husks, fresh fruit, fruit drinks, Coca-Cola or Pepsi (some towns were dedicated to one, some to the other). After days of having nothing in my stomach, I thought it was time to give it a try again and purchased a mango during one of these stops.

I noticed along the way that people would eat their purchases and then just toss the remains out of the window. So, in an effort to show that I was one of the crowd, just another human being, when I was finished with my mango I took aim and threw that big slimy seed as hard as I could. Unfortunately, that big slimy seed did not make it through the window. It ricocheted off the metal frame of the glass and flew around the inside of the bus, across the aisle and hit some poor woman in the back of the head. This did not have the winning effect I was after; by this act I won over no new friends. People were turning around in their seats to look at the gringo who thought he was so superior that he could just casually chuck his mango seed down the aisle. It was at that point I think that the women I was traveling with made a point of pretending that they did not know me.

During this trip, from time to time, for no apparent reason, the bus would arrive at a roadblock and Honduran soldiers

would come on board and make as much as they could of their slow walk through the bus, staring sternly at people, selecting someone at random and demanding their papers. The soldiers would then spend an inordinate amount of time looking the papers over with magnificent disdain, before tossing them back, with grand indifference, into the lap of the poor trembling suspect. I saw this acted out so many times that it became theatre. During these stops they always took one or two frightened people off the bus, for no reason that any of us could determine. These people went like sheep—frightened sheep, but sheep nonetheless—and when we pulled away without them, nobody on that bus, including family, friends, neighbors, myself, turned their heads to look back. What’s peculiar is that these soldiers never asked either the women I was traveling with or myself for papers. It was as if we didn’t exist; it was as if they didn’t even see us. I felt fairly secure because I was traveling with United Nations credentials, but it was frightening nonetheless whenever the bus was flagged down and the soldiers came aboard. It was theatre, but chilling theatre.

After what must have been several hours of travel, we came to a different kind of check point. It wasn’t just an armed man in uniform stepping out in front of the bus and signaling for it to stop; this time there was a striped wooden barrier stretched across the road with a little hut beside it. It was like something out of a movie.

This time the soldiers came aboard as usual and looked down the aisle as usual, but, instead of making the slow

walk down, demanding papers, they saw us, turned, and quickly left the bus.

I watched them as they went into the hut. And I watched as someone of superior bearing, presumably of superior position, stepped back outside with them. There was some pointing, and the soldiers were given instructions, and this time when they entered the bus they marched quickly right down the aisle, directly to us.

They demanded to see our papers. We each handed them our credentials, but they didn't even look at them.

"Where are you going?" the soldier demanded coldly of one of the women, handing back her papers.

"San Marcos," she said hesitantly.

"And where are you going?" he asked the other.

"San Marcos," she stuttered.

"And you," he said, handing my UN credentials back to me, "where are you going, señor?"

"San Marcos," I said.

And then that man uttered the most chilling words I had ever heard spoken.

"This IS San Marcos," he said.

## UNDER THE OLD BAGWORM TREE

It was apparent that I liked women pretty much right from the beginning. What was to become a lifelong dedication was undeniable even while I was still of crawling age.

One day my mother stuck me outside in a playpen under the ponderous limbs of the old bagworm tree. As the story goes, she came out a little later to find me no longer in confinement. Several of the solid oak bars had been shattered, and I was nowhere in sight. In the telling of the tale there's never any mention of a mother's frantic search for her dearly-loved, missing child; apparently I'd done it before and she knew just where to find me. And sure enough, I was three doors down the street, sitting in a neighbor woman's lap, calmly eating cigarette butts.

My mother says when she came upon us I was nestled up against the woman just as happy as can be, shoving the foul things into my mouth with both fists. I like to imagine that I was using the more advanced, alternating hand technique (something in the manner of the way Bubba eats ribs). And, knowing me, I probably stepped up the pace when, at a distance, I spied my mother coming.

The kindly neighbor's name was Gladys Schoelein. Her husband was a long-haul truck driver; I think his name was Phil. That's about all I know. The rest is only what I've been told. But, I can tell you this much firsthand: it wasn't the tobacco that called me, gave me the strength to shatter oak prison bars, and filled me with the necessary resolve to crawl a hundred yards of gritty, glass-strewn, broken

concrete sidewalk on my tender, puffy little hands and knees. It was Gladys. I'm told that I loved her dearly...and what's nice is that, by all accounts, she liked me too. She was always glad to see me, always offered me a lap and as many cigarette butts as I could eat.

Although I was expendable—as the second son in a family then wanting only a daughter to achieve the ideal balance—and though I'd made my own desires clear enough—by repeatedly escaping and making the treacherous journey alone—I was nevertheless unceremoniously scooped up and returned home. As said, I don't remember any of this. I cannot picture Gladys Schoelein, but at times I can almost feel her arms around me. At times I can almost taste those cigarette butts too. Maybe that's why I never took to smoking in any serious way.

Thank you, Gladys, for everything.

A bit later on in life—toddling age—because of that unswerving compass within me, I had a migratory compulsion toward the kitchen whenever I was at my grandmother's house. I recall her running me out of there because boys didn't belong in the kitchen (at least not while the women were cooking).

“What in Sam Hill are you doing in here again?” I can hear her say. “Now, you go on out there with the rest of the men; we'll let you know when it's ready.”

She thought I was there for the food.

But, I slipped back in again as soon as I could, and stood quietly, unmoving, in the nearest corner with my back pressed flat against the wall. I was hoping (that means with



rapidly beating heart) not to be noticed, because I wanted to be close to my Aunt Carolyn.

To me she was everything that a woman should or ever could be, a trim, dark, intelligent creature invested with that mysterious calm that the very best women always seem to possess. She was strong and opinionated like her mother, yet, also like her mother, she was good-natured, kind and warm; even keeled. And like many truly fine, strong and intelligent women, she had absolutely no idea how beautiful she was. That is a marvelous trait in a woman.

I adored her.

She married a line of idiots.

But, that's unfair of me. I just mean that, if she had only waited, she could have had me. And that's probably enough said about that. I probably should have stopped with 'I adored her.'

These two tales together outline almost perfectly the beginning of a life driven by an unquenchable desire to be in the presence of, impress, and please women. My very earliest memory has respect for females embedded in it. I'm walking down the sidewalk under the assistance of a kindly old gentleman. He is holding my hand to keep me upright. I'm told, "When you see someone coming down the sidewalk toward you, look them right in the eye, smile and say, 'Good morning.' If it's a lady, you tip your hat."

That is my earliest memory.

## HOT AND SPICY LEMON SOUP

I was living in a boarding house on Bush Street while being stalked by a woman I'd met one night in a flamenco bar. There's a story in that—her coming home from her father's funeral, discovering one stupid little pornographic film in my suitcase, her outrage, and my early morning departure the following day—but it can wait.

So, I was living in a boarding house on Bush Street while being stalked by a woman I'd taken Quaaludes with one weird night in a flamenco bar. And, I don't know how but somehow I'd convinced the lady who owned the café down the block that her patrons could have no greater desire—and therefore no greater thrill—than to have me in there one Thursday evening, huffing and puffing about my paintings, while showing slides of the damned stuff. It was at that event I met Mary. I think I was *driving cab* at the time, and had a few bucks. So, things being what they are, a couple of weeks later I'm taking her out to dinner. Neither one of us knows anything at all about Thai food, so we decide to give the Thai place down the street a try.

We go in and it's all very well lit and clean and welcoming, and we slip in opposite each other in a little booth. A woman in a tight-fitting silk dress of some sort comes by and shyly offers us menus. We look at the menus for a while, trying to make sense out of them, and a young man of great dignity arrives and asks, "Would you like to order?"

I say, "I'll have the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup..."  
And he says, "No."

This is a little surprising. It doesn't really fit into the typical restaurant experience as I know it. So, I smile and repeat myself. "I'll have the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup." And, he says, "No."

I say, "Do you mean you're out of the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup?"

He says, but very nicely, "No. I mean that YOU cannot have the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup."

"I can't?"

"No."

"Uh... so... you know...why not?"

The young man is very kind and extremely courteous and almost painfully deferential, and he says, "Because, you will not be ABLE to EAT the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup. Very spicy," he explains. "Very, very spicy. Also very hot."

I laugh the all-knowing laugh of a man who eats jalapeno peppers like pickled carrots.

"I appreciate your concern," I say. "Thank you. Please, just bring me the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup. I'll be OK."

He shrugs, takes Mary's order, and disappears.

He's back in a very short time and places a large bowl of clear, yellowish liquid in front of me. Then he stands there beside the table. I laugh good-naturedly. "That's OK," I say, "I'm sure I'll be fine."

But, he does not move. So I guess I have to show him.

I dip my spoon into the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup and smiling smugly I raise that spoon toward my mouth.

Three inches.

That's how far that spoon was from my mouth when my lips began to blister. I am not exaggerating in any way when I say, with that spoon three inches from my mouth, I could feel my lips beginning to blister.

I slowly lowered the spoon, put the soup back into the bowl, placed the spoon down upon the table, sat there for a while with my lips on fire, and said, "I guess I *won't* have the Hot and Spicy Lemon soup." He nodded, and quietly took the bowl away.

The Spring Roll with crab, dipped in a nice cool cucumber sauce, was excellent, very soothing.

## A GOOD OL' SAN MARCOS WELCOME

The soldiers escorted us into the hut where behind a desk sat the better-looking, better-groomed, superior officer. Like in a movie, he had a nicely-trimmed little mustache; like in a movie, he ignored us completely. He was busy reading a document of some sort, and it must have been an extremely complicated document because it took several very long minutes before he put his signature to it, with a great flourish, and placed it aside. Then he looked up and was surprised to see us there. We stood before him and waited for him to speak. He first spoke to the soldiers behind us in Spanish, and they responded with a kind of snap-to-it precision. I didn't understand a word of it but assumed it had something to do with us and our destination—the refugee camp at Mesa Grande. Then he looked at the women and demanded their passports. They complied, placing their passports gently upon his desk. Without looking at me he asked for my passport. The women were both quick to interpret—"Give him your passport," they whispered urgently. I did.

He looked at the passports one at a time and studied them carefully before tossing them upon his desk. "What are you doing in San Marcos?" he asked in Spanish. "We are here to visit the camp at Mesa Grande," one of the women said. "But to go to Mesa Grande, you must first enter San Marcos," he said coolly. We waited. "And, to enter San Marcos you must have my permission," he concluded. He smiled at the women.

We'd been standing there all this while and there were two wooden chairs sitting along the side of the wall. I went over and took the chairs and placed one behind each of the women. This was an act which stunned the women, startled the guy behind the desk, and infuriated the soldiers who both stepped back as if to prepare for the inevitable attack the placement of chairs no doubt heralded.

"Have a seat," I told the women, but they would not sit.

The guy behind the desk was glaring at me.

"Have a seat," I urged the women.

They looked to the guy behind the desk for approval and he nodded. They sat. Then he started speaking to the women at length.

"What's he saying?" I asked, and they shushed me.

"What's he saying?" I said louder, and I felt one of the soldiers behind me step in so close that I could feel his breath on my neck.

When the guy behind the desk finished his speech, my traveling companion interpreted. "He tells us that in order to go to the camps we must have United Nations approval." Nothing could be simpler. I reached inside my vest and pulled out a plastic bag that contained my UN credentials and placed them on the desk. When I stepped back, I took the opportunity to look at the guy who had been pressing the length of his rifle into my spine and he made it clear that he disliked me. I tried to pretend that I was indifferent to him, even though Americans had been known to disappear in that neck of the woods. The man behind the desk looked at my credentials casually then tossed them toward me.

He spoke.

My associates interpreted.

“He says we must get the approval of the LOCAL United Nations Representative...and she must stamp our papers... and then, we must return here.”

“OK,” I said, how do we do that? Where is this local U.N. Representative?”

“She is in San Marcos.”

“Please ask him where we should go precisely to get this approval.”

Then he opened the top drawer of his desk and swept our passports into it and closed the drawer.

When he spoke it was with great condescension, and basically a repeat of what he’d already said. I understood it to be something like this: “I will allow you to go to the U.N. Representative to get your papers stamped, but then you must come back to me to get my signature to enter San Marcos.”

This was perfectly idiotic of course and I pointed that out to my traveling companions, who told me to shut up.

“Will you do me a favor?” I asked one of the girls—the prettiest one with the best command of Spanish.

“What?” she asked peevishly.

“Will you tell this gentleman this: We want our passports back.”

“What?”

“Tell this gentleman behind the desk that we want our passports back.”

He held up his hand and said (in Spanish) you will get your passports back when you return with the stamp from the local U.N. Representative.”

“No,” I said, a word which I was sure needed no interpretation. “Tell this gentleman behind the desk that he will give us our passports back now.”

He glared at me, and the soldier behind me gave me a tiny little nudge. The guy behind the desk then rattled off a long string of things, which I didn’t get, and which my friend did not interpret for me. When he was done with his fit, I said to the woman, “Tell him what I am saying.”

She looked at me as if I might be insane.

“Tell him exactly, word for word, what I’m saying,” I said.

And she did. She told him word for word what I was saying as I said this, “We are citizens of the United States of America. The passports that you have taken from us are not ours, they belong to the United States government. You have no right to take them; you have no right to hold them. You will return them to us.” Everyone in that tiny shack was looking directly at me with the very same look—Can this guy be serious? And every one of them could tell that I was. I was very tired and had been sick for many days and had no fear whatsoever, and I’ve never really enjoyed anybody assuming they have authority over me.

You tell him this, I continued: “We are not leaving this room until we have our passports back. Tell him that!”

I honestly thought I might be facing death (delivered perhaps by the little coward who stood directly behind me). But if that were so, then I guess I thought it would be better to just get it over with rather than continue dicking around with these tin soldiers. If that’s what we’re gonna do, then



let's do it. Either way, let's stop playing footsie. That was my thinking at the moment.

The man behind the desk looked at me for a long, long while. I could practically hear the girls' hearts beating in their chests as they waited; they were horrified at what I had just said. I'm pretty sure the little bastard behind me was hoping to receive the order, "Drag this stupid son-of-a-bitch out of here and do whatever you want with him!" I think he was dying to do it. And I think the guy behind the desk was clearly drawn between giving that order and laughing it off. He did neither though. Instead, after giving it enough time to demonstrate his authority, he just opened his drawer and took out the passports and slid them across the desk to us. All the while he continued staring at me. "Enjoy your stay in San Marcos," he said in English while still looking at me. I picked up my UN credentials and my passport and we left that hut in a very quiet, very nervous little herd.

After we'd walked about two hundred yards down the dusty road, under a blistering sun, in complete silence, I said, "Wow, just like in a movie, huh?" But they were having none of it. After a few more steps one of the girls stopped and turned to face me and asked, "Are you out of your mind? Are you? Are you out of your mind?"

That was, I think, the very last thing that woman ever said to me. It was certainly a reasonable question.

## IN THE TUB

A wide variety of people have been told this tale within my hearing, and I've always felt that I am unfairly represented in the telling. So, now it's my turn.

The story's usually told, I think, in order to demonstrate what a complete goddamned idiot I was at a very early age, though why anyone would want proof of that—especially people we've just met or young women I've brought home for the first time—is beyond me. My mother usually tells it though, and since she was the only other participant in the event, she'd certainly know. The implication is that having been a complete idiot at such a tender age, I might still be one, or at very least retain some shades of that aspect within my otherwise unquestionable noble whatever.

I must have been two or three at the time, whatever age it is where you might reasonably say to a kid, 'Go get in the tub'. That's what she said to me, 'Go get in the tub', and so I did. I went and got into the tub.

Then, as the tale comes down to us, an enormous length of time transpired. So, take the time necessary to image that, if you will. Finally, after this enormous length of time had transpired, Mom thought to herself, "That kid's been in there an awful long time, I wonder what's keeping him." So, then she comes in, and there I am, sitting 'without a stitch on' as they say, shivering and crying. 'What are you doing?' she asks. "Why aren't you finished?" Then she notices the complete absence of water in the bathtub.

“Why didn’t you put any water in the tub?” she asks.  
“You didn’t tell me to,” I blubber in response.

That’s the funny part. That’s the punch line. When I blubber, “You didn’t tell me to,” you’re supposed to laugh.

“I didn’t tell you to...?”

“You told me, ‘Go get in the tub’”, I say.

“Well, what did you think I wanted you to go get in the tub for?”

“To take a bath.”

“Yes. To take a bath. And how do you expect to take a bath without putting any water in the tub?”

It goes on.

Admittedly, the way it’s told, I do look like an idiot. But there is one element my mother consistently leaves out in the telling of this sad tale: before this particular event *she* had always bathed me. Before this singular event, *she* had always come in and filled the tub.

This was the first time I had gone in to take a bath alone. I was expecting her to come in and get things underway. I’m not sure I even knew how to turn on the water. And, you know, that’s really one of those deals where, if I had turned the water on and something didn’t go right—the tub had overflowed, or I had scorched my own hide, or who knows what—accusations would have flown. “What are you doing putting water in the tub? Now look at the mess you’ve created!” There’s a reason mothers control that aspect of the bathing process.

Putting all that aside though, you certainly have a highly entertaining tale of my idiocy as an extremely young and trusting child. Gets *in* the tub, *doesn't* turn on the water. What a moron! People, after hearing this tale, often nod their heads and a light comes into their eyes as if suddenly something has become clear to them.

There's really not much I can say, is there? But, the bathtub incident is only one of the many reasons I'll never run for political office.

It breaks my heart to admit it, but I haven't really advanced much since then, when it comes to taking things literally. But, I have learned. These days I operate both the hot and cold taps with alacrity and with either foot, but when anybody tells me to go get in the tub — I'm wary.

## COLLEEN

One evening the phone rang. It was a long-distance operator and she said, "I have a collect call from Colleen, will you accept the charges?"

"One second," I told the operator. I covered the phone and said, "I don't know anyone named Colleen. Do you know anyone named Colleen?"

Mary said, "No."

So I told the operator, "I'm sorry, we don't know anyone named Colleen," and hung up.

About half of an hour later, the phone rang again. It was a long-distance operator again, and again she said, "I have a collect call from Colleen, will you accept the charges?"

"One second," I told the operator. I covered the phone and said, "I don't know anyone named Colleen. Are you sure you don't know anyone named Colleen?"

Mary said "Nope."

So I told the operator, "I'm sorry, we don't know anyone named Colleen," and hung up.

About a month later, one evening, the phone rang. It was a long-distance operator and she said, "I have a collect call from Colleen, will you accept the charges?"

"One second," I told the operator. I covered the phone and said, "It's Colleen; do we want to accept the charges?" She said no, and I agreed. So I told the operator, "I'm sorry, we don't know anyone named Colleen," and hung up.

Sometime in the following month, one evening, the phone rang. It was a long-distance operator and she said, "I have a collect call from Colleen, will you accept the charges?"

"One second," I told the operator. I covered the phone and said, "Colleen..." and rolled my eyes around a bit.

"You're kidding," she said.

"No, I'm not," I said, "Maybe we should accept the call just to find out what she wants."

"No," she said, and we laughed a bit before I told the operator, "I'm sorry, we don't know anyone named Colleen," and hung up.

This went on for maybe a year. Every month or so the phone would ring in the evening, and it would be the long-distance operator and she would say, "I have a collect call from Colleen, will you accept the charges?" and we would say, "WE DON'T KNOW *anyone* named Colleen," and hang up. Eventually, of course, the calls stopped coming.

So, one evening a couple of years later, Mary was sitting in her chair reading "Donde No Hay Doctor" and I had a cat on my chest, and beer on the floor beside me, fully immersed in a Nero Wolfe novel. Suddenly she looked up and said, "You know, we haven't heard from Colleen in a while, I wonder how she's doing."

"Well, I sure hope she's alright," I said.

In the silence that followed I think we both wished Colleen well, wherever she was... and whoever she was.

## REGIONAL U.N. REPRESENTATIVE, SAN MARCOS

For some reason the Regional Offices for the United Nations were located in a small office, nowhere near the entrance to San Marcos. So we had to pass through most of the town before we found the place. During our trek, the entire local populace stopped whatever they were doing to stare at us unabatedly as we walked by, as though we might have just landed in a spacecraft. Inside the office there was a small waiting room with folding chairs lined up under the window, an open office where a receptionist sat, and an inner office where the Regional Director herself sat in plain view to us, behind a large desk.

One of the women I was traveling with turned to me and said somewhat sternly, "I will handle this. DO NOT say a word." She gave me a pretty serious look. So, I took a seat, and the other woman we were traveling with took a seat about four chairs away from me. On the other side of the room sat two people waiting, both women and both, from their looks, peasant farmers who had lived very hard lives. I wondered what business they might have with the United Nations. I really didn't know what the United Nations was or what it did, or why; I only knew that, with their credentials, I was allowed to carry medicine and guitar strings to people who needed them both desperately.

I watched as our heroine went up to the desk where the receptionist squatted, and stood there, nicely, properly, unnoticed, for a very long time. I watched as she waited. I watched as the receptionist purposefully and pointedly ignored her, occupying her own time shuffling papers and

looking at herself in a handheld mirror. Our heroine was standing directly in front of her, but it was as if she did not exist. Outside that building we could not be ignored, once inside, we were invisible. At some point during this I leaned toward my associate and said, "Quite a show, huh?" but got no response. Then the phone on the receptionist's desk rang and I could see that, just by chance, the Regional Director in the other room was on her phone as well, at that very moment. I also noticed that while the Regional Director was speaking, the receptionist was nodding and when the Regional Director hung up, the receptionist hung up as well. Then, the receptionist got up and waddled into the Regional Director's office and closed the door.

Our heroine came back and sat down between us. "How's it working out?" I asked casually.

Then the receptionist came out of that room, leaving the door open and called one of the peasant women to her desk to speak with her for - best estimate - four hours and thirty-two minutes. After that interview, the receptionist got up and, taking a paper bag from her desk, left the building.

We looked at each other.

"What's going on?" I asked out loud.

The last remaining local, an old woman, smiled and said, basically, 'She's gone to lunch.'

"What'll we do now?" my companions asked each other.

They debated what to do somewhat frantically, because it was clear from the sign we had seen as we entered that building that the office was only open until three o'clock, and it was then almost two.



I said, "I'll handle this..." and started to get up but was swarmed by my dear companions who, in sharp whispered threats of various sorts and physical intervention, prevented me from getting anything done. So, we sat.

The receptionist never returned.

However, eventually the Regional Director came out of her office, looked surprised to see us there—a very convincing imitation it was too. She instructed the old woman to come back tomorrow and turned to us to ask what she could do for us. Things were explained and, having reached the bottom of her diplomatic reserves, she said with great indifference, "You'll have to come back tomorrow, I'm about to close the office for today." (all of this in Spanish) The women sat there disappointed, asking themselves and each other, Now, what are we going to do?

I said, in English, loudly and clearly, "We're not going anywhere until we get her stamp on our papers."

The Regional Director then went into her office and picked up the phone and spoke for a while to someone we may have dealt with previously. And, when she hung up she invited us into her office where she took our documents and stamped and signed them quickly. Then looking at her watch she said, "You'll have to come back to San Marcos tomorrow. The Captain must sign these papers if you wish to go to Mesa Grande."

Our heroine asked, "We can't stay in San Marcos?"

Nope.

"Where are we supposed to go?"

She shrugged.

“You can’t stay here.”

She thought she might enjoy repeating what she had already told us, and did so. “You cannot stay in San Marcos without the Captain’s signature, and he leaves at 3:30. You’ll have to leave San Marcos and come back tomorrow for his signature.”

We all looked at our watches.

We had seven minutes.

You would not believe it if I told you how quickly three very tired people with luggage could cover the distance between that office in the middle of San Marcos and that check point under a blistering afternoon sun.

The Captain was on his feet and about to leave when I came rushing in. He looked startled to see me, and even more startled when the women arrived behind me all huffing and puffing. One of them asked, in a most courteous manner, between deep breaths, if he would sign our papers so that we could get to Mesa Grande. He smiled with wry appreciation for our athletic abilities (I think) or maybe for our innocence (or stupidity) and casually turned, went back and sat behind his desk. We followed him. Once situated in a dignified manner he took our papers one by one and signed and stamped them and handed them back to us, and then said this:

“You have, I think, missed the last truck to Mesa Grande.”

“What do we do?” asked one of the women.

He shrugged with indifference.

Then he took pity on us I think.

He picked up his phone and dialed it and spoke to someone very quietly. When he put the phone down he said. "There is a truck leaving from the U.N. Regional Office in about three minutes if you can catch it."

The women were bowing and bobbing and saying thank you in Spanish, when I grabbed them and dragged them out of that place and we hit that road running. I stopped after a few strides and ran back and stuck my face inside the hut. He seemed startled to see me again.

"Muchas Gracias, Señor," I said.

He evaluated me for a moment, then smiled very faintly, nodded and said, "You are welcome, Señor."

"Une millione de gracias," I said cheerfully, and, back outside, I ran to catch up with the girls.

You would not believe it if I told you how quickly three very tired people with luggage and proper documentation could covered the distance between that check point and the truck which sat idling and belching smoke outside the UN Regional Office in the middle of San Marcos.

## DID

One night when I was a kid, just learning to read, I was reading out loud with my father and I had a little difficulty with the word “did.” As I remember it, whenever I would come to that word, I’d stop completely. Who can explain such a thing? My father—a good, honest, and genuinely caring man—asked me, “What’s that word?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“The word is ‘did’,” he said in a kindly manner, “Start again.”

So, I started the sentence again, and again, when I came to that word, I stopped cold.

“What is that word?” asked my father in a fatherly, perhaps somewhat bemused, tone.

“I don’t know,” I said quietly.

“The word is ‘did’,” he said. “Say it.”

“Did,” I said.

“OK. Say it again.”

“Did.”

“Now read the sentence.”

I started reading, but when I got to that word I stopped.

“What is that word?” my father asked, becoming maybe just a bit exasperated.

“I don’t know,” I whined.

“Did,” he said, “The word is ‘did’. See, D. I. D., ‘did’. Say it.”

“Did.”

“OK. Now read the sentence.”

I couldn’t. I didn’t. I sat there in silence.

“What is that word?” he asked encouragingly.

“I don’t know!” I wailed.

“The WORD is DID!” he said sharply. Then he took a deep breath and calmed himself. “What is the word?”

I cowered. “Did,” I said meekly, tentatively... hopefully.

“Say it again!”

“Did...”

“Now, read that sentence!”

I tried, but stopped cold when I came to that awful word.

“The word is DID. Goddamn it. Say that GODDAMNED word. Say it!”

“Did.”

“Say it again,” he commanded.

“Did.”

“OK. Now you read that goddamned sentence, and you’d better not stop!”

I read with some hesitancy but, out of fear for my life, I did not stop.

“OK. I think that’s probably enough for tonight. Look at that word. What is it?”

“Did.”

“What is it?”

“Did.”

“Stop crying. This is nothing to cry about. Next time you see that goddamned word you’ll know good and goddamned well what it is.”

That certainly proved to be an understatement.

## The WORST MEAL I NEVER ATE

The worst meal I never ate, I'd also made. This is the precise moment at which I learned that, when it comes to food preparation, simple is better.

In those days I did general home repair and enjoyed work, though I can hardly recall what that must have been like. For the most part I worked by myself, set my own hours, and set my own hourly wage—which my regular customers encouraged me to raise three times in as many years. When I wasn't working alone I worked with my friend Bob Easley, a good and honest man whom Life held with almost no regard. When he and I worked together we had a motto, "Four hours a day, four days a week, no matter what!" That's more diligent than it may sound though; after years of doing the hard work of carpentry, we knew that somewhere around the four-hour mark, concentration waned and production fell off markedly. If you're a carpenter and can look me in the eye and tell me you're still doing good work after six hours on the job, you're a better liar than a carpenter. So, we worked at our optimum for maybe five, sometimes six hours, and found a likely place to call it quits for the day. It was an excellent way to work.

Occasionally, we worked under a contractor, also named Bob, and were known as Los Dos Bobs and that other guy. I was that other guy. As an aside, almost every man involved in construction in America in those halcyon days was named Bob. I can't explain why that was, and I don't know if that has changed or not. But one time, we were doing a high-end kitchen in the Upper Haight and

everybody involved in that job was named Bob. The plumber was named Bob, the electrician showed up and his name was Bob. His assistant, though he didn't look it, was named Bob. When a kid was brought in to clean up after us for a day, I interrupted the introduction by saying, "Let me guess..." That job was both confusing and hilarious.

Whenever anyone would shout, "Hey, Bob..." everyone on that job site would look up and shout, "Yeah?" ... 'cept me. One time, someone shouted, "Hey, Bob..." and I stood up and said, "Yeah?", and that went over pretty well. So, I don't know what that has to do with anything.

At any rate: "Four hours a day, four days a week, no matter what!" That was our motto, and it worked pretty well.

But Mary had no motto to guide her labors as a nurse. She worked long hours for one of the world's most highly renowned urologists, and a great many of his patients were Statesmen and Diplomats. These guys were continually in a hurry, on their way out the door, heading off to some exotic land for a wifeless junket. After a hard day's work injecting these humans with virility enhancing vitamins, Mary was tired. She was equally tired after a day of injecting them with other stuff upon their return. So, because I was a free man, I made dinner, and I enjoyed it. I didn't know a damned thing about cooking, but with the help of a book on soups, I soon gained recognition among our friends as a pretty damned good soupier. (Bouquet Garni is the answer)

I also made a pretty good apple pie. Pastry is MORE THAN half of a good pie. Don't overwork it; keep it fluffy. Use the least amount of ice cold water necessary. Roll it out quickly, don't fuss with it. Apples, sliced and peeled,

couple pats of butter, some sugar, a healthy spritz of lemon, close ‘er up.

So, I got myself in the position where I thought I knew enough about soup to go beyond soup, and create a signature dish of my own. I don’t remember the details, but it was probably something involving pasta. There was a sauce too, and that’s where I went wrong. I started out with the standard stuff, sage, rosemary, garlic, a little thyme, but thought I’d give it my own twist. We had an entire spice rack at our disposal, a gift from someone. So, I started adding and tasting and adjusting and adding more and tasting more and adjusting maybe just a little more. After a while I’d tasted that sauce so many times I no longer knew what it really tasted like. Still, during all of that I was convinced that I was one pinch away from culinary immortality. By the time Mary came home my new creation was ready. It had to be, I’d run out of both time and patience.

She sat down and I dished it up.

She said, “What do we have here?” in an expectant way.

“Oh, you know, I kinda invented it myself,” I said proudly, pulling up a seat opposite her.

“Well, it smells good,” she said. We both took a fork-full. We tasted it.

Then we each put our fork down, and sat back.

After a moment of silence, Mary, who is both kind and generous, said this, “You know I love you, and I think it’s really wonderful that you take the time to prepare dinner every evening and have it ready for me when I get home...



And, please don't get me wrong, but... I can't eat this."  
"Yeah," I said, "me neither."

The stuff was inedible.

"I'm glad you said so," I admitted.

"I had no choice," she said, as I carried the plates away.

On that evening I made a solemn, near-sacred, vow that, from that day forward, I would strictly limit herbs and spices in any dish that I made to no more than three.

That Christmas, Mary's sister gave us a Thai cookbook. I was delighted; I love Thai food. I've never had any Thai dish that I didn't really enjoy. I couldn't wait to get started.

Pawing eagerly through that book, my heart sank. There was not a single recipe anywhere in there which didn't require thirty-seven spices.

## LILIA

When the rain came down on Mesa Grande, it came down in buckets. One moment the kids were all playing soccer in the dust, with balls they'd made themselves out of anything available and held together with rubber bands, and the next moment, everyone—well everyone except for the tall Gringo—had disappeared, taking shelter where they could. Suddenly, the refugees had all left their fields, abandoned their wash tubs and open-air ovens, to stand around chatting under any overhang, as the makeshift streets ran with rapidly-flowing creeks.

This happened every day at 3 PM. It was like clockwork. I don't know the how or the why of it. At 3 o'clock the clouds would roll in over the refugee camp at Mesa Grande and the refugees would take shelter and it would come down in Biblical quantities.

It was my first afternoon there, after having arrived the previous evening, and I was walking between the camps. There was a couple hundred yards of open space there, in which the kids played soccer, and I was about halfway to wherever I was going when the first drops hit. The kids picked up their ball immediately and ran. I stood there looking up at the sky, dumbfounded by the sudden change in things: the darkness, the drop in temperature, the rain which came down with incredible force, the appearance of washes where there was only dust a moment earlier. Torrential rain, chill winds, flash flooding.

Nobody had told me about this.

I was dazzled, like a deer in the headlights. Once I recovered my senses, I began to think I should take shelter.

That's how I ended up under a lean-to of some sort with Lilia and her friend. They were both, I don't know, maybe six or seven years old, dressed in rags, all smiles and sparkling eyes. As I ducked and ran toward them they both waved me in, jumping up and down and giggling at the big stupid gringo who stood around looking up into the sky, before taking shelter.

The three of us stood there in silence for a while watching the rain come down in sheets. When it became clear that this was going to go on for a while I asked the kids their names, in Spanish. The little one was too shy to answer. She just giggled and covered her mouth and hid herself behind her friend. Her friend smiled and joyfully told me, "Lilia."

I repeated it, "Lilia," and they looked at each other aghast, as though they could not believe my inept pronunciation.

She corrected me, "Lilia!" she said with some emphasis. So, I tried again, "Lilia," I said, and they looked at each other with even greater astonishment. They looked at me and together said, "LILIA!"

I thought I'd give it one more try. "Lilia," I said, and they both laughed so hard that they had to cover their mouths. "LILIA!" they shouted.

I just looked at these two charming little kids and smiled. How many different ways can you pronounce Lilia?

"Lilia...?" I said tentatively, and they laughed.

"Lilia...?" I said, and they just looked at me.

“Lilia...?” I said trying to reproduce the word exactly as I had first heard it. They shook their heads and rolled their eyes heavenward before breaking into laughter.

So, by this means, the kids and I passed the time until the rain stopped. At that point I stepped out into the sun and all the people appeared again as if by magic; the farmers in the hillside fields, the women at the wash and tending the ovens, the kids playing soccer. I looked up at the sky and down at the earth with its fresh cut, rapidly drying runnels.

As I started out on my way to wherever it was I had been heading, I passed the oven where Lilia and her friend clung to their mothers’ skirts. They were obviously talking about me; Lilia no doubt telling them what a dumb bastard the big gringo was, completely incapable of pronouncing Lilia.

The women shushed their little daughters as I passed and smiled the most genuine smiles... and Lilia and her friend waved. When I smiled and waved back, they giggled.

I’d learned something that day.

And here’s what I learned that evening:

If you have two chickens to your name, and you kill and cook one of them to honor the presence of a complete stranger in the camps, that stranger—a vegetarian for almost a decade—will be reintroduced to the warm, endearing archetype of humanity, through music, laughter and fire-roasted chicken. No translator required.

## DEEP REGRET

Cast into the depths of that lake by my own ineptitude, my Grandfather's rod and reel sank like a stone, and could not be retrieved. My big brother dove for it several times and could not find it, or could not dive deep enough, I forget which. I remember him bobbing beside the boat, between dives, sputtering, "It's just too dark down there, I can't see anything." And then he would dive again. It was getting late in the afternoon, and even though it was summer and we were in the middle of a large lake, the surrounding trees reached out to cast us into chilly darkness.

And my father... I remember almost nothing about him during this horrible event. I could not look at him. I do remember that much, however. And I recall him telling my brother to give up and climb back in the boat. And, I know this much for sure, he had not handed me that reel saying, "Here you go, this rod and reel belonged to my father and it means a lot to me. Now cast it, with all your might into the depths of this goddamned lake." I'm fairly sure those weren't his instructions, but that is what I did.

If I had to come up with an excuse it would be this: I was little. But, not so little. Maybe I was seven years old. Maybe I was nine. Either way, I had no idea of the weight of the thing or what laws of physics might be called into play when I tried to duplicate the casting motions I'd observed, first, by my father, and then by my brother.

They'd made it look easy.

It didn't go far. The rod didn't go far. It just sorta dropped over the edge of the boat, just clearing the oarlocks, and I watched in horror as it wavered from side to side just under the surface before turning tip downward and disappearing rapidly into the dark waters forever. My father, who'd been sitting beside me, could not believe it. I could not believe it. My brother laughed, or began to laugh, but cut it short seeing the look on my father's face. He couldn't believe it either.

As said, this rod and reel meant something to my father. It had belonged to his father. Wrapped up in there somewhere also was the grand concept that he was about to pass something on to us, his own boys. I suppose up until that point my father'd had no idea that one of his boys was a complete idiot.

That was not the last time I let my father down.

In my own inept way, I have cast many cherished rods and reels into a variety of deep lakes while someone I loved looked on aghast. They have all proven irretrievable. And, of course, I have regretted every one.

But, that has not stopped me.

## FISHIN' ALONG 101 Northbound

The average speed between San Francisco and Santa Rosa is probably something pretty close to 80 miles per hour. Some parts of that stretch are posted 65, but no one without car trouble ever slows down that much. For your own safety you keep up with the crowd. These folks are all desperate to get away from work and anxious to get home, and only a fool would get in their way. Believe me, they want to get there.

My friend, Peter was flying along with the flow of traffic on this route one evening, on his way home from work, when a Highway Patrol officer pulled him over. As Peter tells it, that cop came out of nowhere (an ability of which the CHP is justifiably proud).

Documentation is demanded with empty courtesy, and handed over with a somewhat sheepish smile. While the officer fills in the blanks, Peter feels compelled to offer an explanation, saying, "I wasn't going any faster than anyone else. And," he adds, "other cars were passing me."

"Sign here," said the cop.

So, Peter signs.

Despite the officer's overly obvious lack of interest, Peter is driven by curiosity to ask, "Why did you choose me?"

The cop smiles and says, "If you were shooting fish in a barrel, which one would you shoot?"

## MARY

The couple across the hall had invited us to the motorcycle races at Sears Point, but we declined because, frankly, we couldn't afford it. "That's OK," they explained, "You can *work the corners*, see the race up close, and get in for free." So, that's what we did. Our job—working the corner—was to run to the edge of the track and raise a flag if there was an accident, so that approaching riders would slow down and avoid becoming part of the mess. It was a two-part job. One of us was to hold up the flag and, if necessary, the other was to assist the fallen rider. Naturally, we both agreed that, if an accident occurred at our corner, Mary would hold the flag and I would rush out onto the track to help the rider. Our corner was at the top of a steep climb, where, as soon as the riders hit the top, they had to take a sharp right turn. So, imagine these super-motorcycles flying up that hill at full speed, hitting the top, slamming on their brakes, down-shifting, and immediately leaning into a turn. It would be almost impossible to design a situation better suited to create wipeouts.

Once the race was underway, Mary and I stood off to the side and marveled at what was going on in front of us. The bikes were loud and smelly and unbelievably fast. From where we stood we could hear them as they made their way around the circuit and could hear them climbing the slope toward our corner, but we couldn't see them until—BAM—they appeared in front of us, rear wheel skidding as they braked, and then leaned over so sharply in order to make the turn that the rider's right knee—heavily padded in leather—actually touched the pavement.



I don't know what speed they were doing, but they disappeared from our sight as quickly as they appeared, and we waited with our eyes bugged out and our jaws on the ground, until, 10 minutes later, we heard them climbing our slope again. Then—BAM—they flew around the corner in front of us, cranked up to a higher gear and disappeared over the small bump that followed. You would not believe the noise; it sounded like ten thousand angry hornets. I remember shouting at Mary, “What the hell is going on here?” and she just raised her eyebrows, shrugged, and smiled a giddy little smile. It was the most amazing thing either of us had ever witnessed.

The race had been going on for almost a hour and we were both pretty damned tired of it—the noise, the exhaust, the fear that there would be an accident, the relief as each bike sailed on safely beyond us, then listening to them change gears as they made their way around the course again. So, Mary and I were sitting down on the grass—which I seem to recall we were instructed specifically not to do—when the bright yellow Yamaha, with a big black #1 painted on it's sides, came up the hill, hit the brakes, fishtailed a bit and crashed right before our startled eyes. The bike went skidding on its side maybe 30 feet beyond the corner with the driver still astride it as it came to a stop. Smoke began to appear as he struggled to extricate himself.

Mary immediately ran out onto the racetrack and up to the fallen rider. I didn't know what to do, but watched as another motorcycle barely missed involvement. So, I grabbed the flag and ran to the top of the slope and started waving the flag furiously. Riders coming up the hill started

down shifting, and each drove very slowly around the accident. Meanwhile, Mary—all five-foot-two and 90 pounds of her—was trying to lift the bike enough that the rider could crawl out from under it. I'm standing there waving that stupid flag, while Mary is out in the middle of a racetrack lifting a smoldering motorcycle. Since there were still other motorcycles on their way up the slope I was stuck there, and could only watch as Mary helped the driver limp off the track, to the grass, lowered him gingerly down unto his back, knelt beside him, and started checking him out for injury. I have no idea how it had come to that.

That night, neither one of us could sleep, whenever we closed our eyes we heard those bikes as they shifted and roared their way around that racetrack. The sounds of that day had carved a groove in our minds.

One evening at dusk six years later, we were driving through Golden Gate Park, going home. The road is three lanes wide in both directions through there, with a series of sweeping curves, and a concrete barrier between north and southbound traffic. The darkness was overcoming us fairly quickly. We were moving at a good clip despite the fact that the tailgate of our truck sported a nice, large, highly readable, hand-painted sign saying, "JUST RELAX, YOU'LL GET THERE".

That sign always seemed to inspire people. Many felt the need to respond with horns, fingers, flashing headlights, others by cutting us off, or braking suddenly in front of us.

As we were entering the first of these sweeping curves a huge motorcycle—what people in the internal organ recycling business call a donor bike—went flying around us at a ridiculously dangerous speed—what people in the sanity business call Tempting Fate. He cleared my left front fender by (my guess) three feet. I don't mind being cut off as much as many seem to, but the closeness forced me to remark aloud to Mary about the stupidity of the act. I was still going on about that, ranting, as some might put it, when a second bike of the same sort flew around us clearing the front fender of our truck by (my guess) less than a foot.

“Did you see that? The stupid son-of-a-bitch is endangering everybody on the road.” I said testily. Though not yet thirty-three at the time, for some reason I found myself speaking like a man of eighty-three.

As we began to enter the next curve we saw the two bikes side by side for an instant before the first bike took off like a rocket. The second rider sped up to catch him, but the tail of his bike wobbled a bit, then the machine swayed wildly before tumbling over on its side. It skidded, with sparks flying, for 60 yards or so before crashing into the concrete lane divider. The rider had been catapulted into the air, and crashed into that same barrier twenty feet further down the road. He landed in a particularly lifeless looking clump, crumpled up in an awkward position on his back, his head resting against the concrete divider.

I looked at Mary and, being a devout Catholic, she had both hands covering her mouth. I came to a quick stop behind the bike, purposefully straddling two lanes and turned on

my emergency blinkers. Mary got out of the truck and ran up to the rider. Meanwhile, the other biker had come back, slowly, wrong way, toward the scene, looked, turned his bike around and, as an indication of true friendship, sped off, never to be seen again. I stood in the very middle of the only remaining open lane of traffic and tried to flag down the first car that came by. The driver mouthed something vicious and drove on. The second car slowed down long enough to shout, "Get the fuck out of the road!" So, I placed myself directly in front of the next car and when he came to a screeching halt, I pointed at the injured rider and commanded him to go to the nearest phone to call for an ambulance. (Perhaps you should know this: In those days there were no cell phones, and I could be quite imposing when I allowed myself to be.)

"WILL YOU DO THAT?" I shouted.

"Yes."

"Can I count on you to do that?"

"Yes, I think I know where there's a pay phone."

"Thank you." He sped off.

Meanwhile cars were backing up and there was a lot of beeping and rubbernecking as they went slowly around my truck, but no one, not one—stopped to ask if they could do anything to help.

I ran to Mary, who was on her knees beside the guy, holding his wrist in her hand. She looked up at me and recited a list of things concerning his pupils, his breathing, his pulse, the possibility of internal injury—stuff that I knew nothing about.

"But, he's conscious?" I asked.

"Yes," she told me.

“Do you think he can hear me?”

“Yes.”

I leaned over the guy.

“CAN YOU HEAR ME?” I shouted.

“I’m in a lot of pain,” he wheezed.

“CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

“Yes, yes, but I’m in a lot of pain, man.”

“I want to tell you something,” I said.

Mary assured him, “An ambulance is on the way, just try to relax and don’t move. An ambulance is on the way. I know it hurts but try not to move.”

I leaned over him and said, “Listen, I want to tell you something. Are you listening?”

“Yes. But I’m really in a lot of pain.”

“Here’s what I want to tell you: You’re going to be in the hospital for a long time. And while you’re in there I want you to think about this. You got what you deserved. Think about that while...”

Mary screamed, “EDWARD!”

I ignored her and continued, “You were driving like an asshole and you got EXACTLY what you were looking for.” I said loudly to the man in pain.

“EDWARD!” Mary shrieked, “Go get in the car.” She was furious with me.

I guess she thought that there is a time and a place for the truth.

“Think about that while you’re lying in the hospital!” I shouted as I turned to go back to the truck.

Henry Edward Fool

I was furious too; we could have ended up playing our own painful part in that guy's goddamned mindless idiocy.

So, you know, it made perfect sense when Mary left me. It seems like a reasonable response to the sort of thing she had to put up with. In fact, it's always been a mystery to me why she stayed with me as long as she did.

## THE PERPETUAL NEW KID

From the beginning I was always shy, painfully shy. When I was young and handsome and in college, my shyness was taken as a sign of arrogance. These days, as an old man, it is often taken as a sign of bitterness. Make what you can of that. I've never been arrogant. And if I harbor any discontent these days, I sure as hell have earned it.

When I was a kid I was so shy that it was perceived at times, by some, to be a sign of idiocy.

"t's wrong with your kid?"

"Oh, he's just shy that's all."

"Shy? You need to get him over that horseshit right now."

"Oh, I think he'll be OK."

"He'd sure as hell be OK if he was my kid. I'd kick him square in the ass until he straightened up and looked me right in the eye."

Did I mention we were an American family?

We were also a somewhat nomadic family. My father designed cement plants for the huge international steel corporation which, after he'd given them more than 40 years of dedicated service, tried to screw him out of his well-earned pension. But during those years when he still believed in that corporation, he worked on the design of a plant to be built later elsewhere, while we lived near a plant under construction which he had previously had a hand in designing. If that's unclear to you, don't worry, it's been unclear to me for as long as I can remember. And this proves that charts are sometimes helpful.

At any rate, we found ourselves in one place for a year or two and then everything was packed up in boxes, loaded onto a moving van and hauled to a new city, where it was unloaded and the pieces the movers found absolutely irresistible, or they thought their wives might like, were discovered missing. These mysteriously vanished items were listed on claim forms, then talked about calmly, first with the driver—who denied everything in a challenging manner—then with his boss—who denied everything in a casual, offhand, irritatingly indifferent manner—and then with increasing animation and growing hostility on both sides until... until the uselessness of such a debate was driven solidly home yet one more time.

Unfortunately, there was no way around this. There was no way to avoid it. We had stuff; it needed to be moved; dealing with thieves who called themselves movers was just part of the process.

I recall one time at the beginning of one of these moves, as the movers were packing things up, my father appeared in the center of the room, got their attention and announced, “If there’s anything you guys see that you’d like to steal, why don’t you just take it now? Just take it now and let’s forego the charade of boxing it up and loading it onto the truck and hauling it all over the goddamned place just so it can end up in your living room.”

My father may have issued this declaration with detectable bitterness, but it was the voice of experience speaking; he’d made countless such moves, and there was always stuff missing on the other end. In short, justice drove him to it.



As I recall, that statement didn't go over too well with the movers. It also added a little heightened anticipation to the arrival of our stuff at the other end of that trip.

Wherever we ended up—Ohio, Alabama, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Grand Bahama Island—I was always the new kid. Add my shyness into the mix and if we ended up staying somewhere long enough that some other poor kid arrived to strip me of my title as the *new kid*, I was demoted to the strange kid, the awkward one, the loner, the one who didn't fit in... and never would.

This explains a lot. For anyone who knows me, this, when they hear it, explains a lot.

To get a complete picture you'll have to imagine skinny, pale, and awkward of movement; the crew cut didn't help. Imagine broadly striped T-shirts and hand-me-down jeans and combat boots. Imagine both hands shoved deeply into those front pockets and no ability whatsoever to look up, let alone to look someone in the eye. Imagine all of that and you'll be on the right track. Oh, and later, you'll have to imagine that crushing shyness compounded by the gleeful addition of bad skin—which in those days I took as a sign of God's great love. Without imagining the humiliation of a face chock-full of glaring red, flaring and oozing repulsion, you'll only have a sketch. For the full festering portrait imagine a sensitive, possibly by this time overly sensitive, child waking up each morning to face that horror in the mirror; imagine spending each endless day scuttling quickly down the hallway between classes, head down, hoping that nothing slows you up long enough that anyone might get a look at your ugliness. Imagine sitting in class

awash in the knowledge that your presence there sickens everyone around you. If you can imagine Disgrace, then you can imagine me between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, when every whisper was about me, every snicker was about me, and that raucous laughter behind my back... about me. Meanwhile, all around me in every direction, others, like angels, unflawed, clean, brilliant, joyful and free, are living the best years of their lives. Imagine the hours spent in anguish. Imagine the tearful hours spent in prayer, pleading in deepest sincerity only to die.

I spent most of my teenage years begging to die, that's what I'm hinting at. I don't think I've wanted anything as earnestly since. Well, not for myself anyway. I did not want to continue living. I did not want to face the day, school, people, time, life. So, it's reasonable then, I think, that I don't recall too much of what happened during those wonderful formative years, and that which I do recall I refuse to talk about.

My mother, observing what I was going through at the time, asked me, "Why do you continually alienate yourself?" I think she'd been reading too much Reader's Digest. Did she really think the other kids would welcome me into their joyous clique? "Hey, I know, let's get that pimply kid to come to our party!"

Before I was stricken or, depending upon how you look at it, before I began to alienate myself, while I was still an unmarked kid at any rate—eight or nine years old—there

was a time when looking in the mirror never even occurred to me, and for awhile there, I was happy.

In my own quiet, awkward way, I was happy. I spent a lot of time alone, and I had a pet turtle, and I was happy. Soon that would all change, but for a short time I'd be deliriously happy, almost insanely happy, because I was girl crazy.

## LESSONS LEARNED AT MT. MADONNA

In those days we went camping quite a bit. It was typically Mary and me and Peter and Cathy, and, sometimes Tim an' Ann. Tim an' Ann always had the best equipment. And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't envious. One time they showed up and Tim had this tent which, packed, was about the size of a wallet, and when he tossed it up into the air it came down assembled. An' I ain't lyin'. Unbelievable. Unbelievably cool too. So, you know, screw Tim. If I had such a tent, I'd also have the decency to keep it to myself.

We used to go for two nights, sometimes three, and it took us almost that long to prepare for these outings. I could never figure out why it took two days to organize and pack up one tent, two sleeping bags and a Coleman stove; or why it took more than two hours running up and down the stairs to get one tent, two sleeping bags and a Coleman stove in the back of an old Dodge pickup truck. In those days I was a complete pain in the ass when it came to things like that—these days I'm a pain in the ass about almost everything else. But that's not really relevant to this tale, and I don't have time to list all the things that set me off these days, but *please* do not ask me to move a picture, which has been hanging in the same place for seven years, a quarter inch to the left. WHY, suddenly, after seven years... But I've drifted.

I also never figured out why one tent, two sleeping bags and a Coleman stove filled up the entire bed of that truck, and threatened to overflow the sides if we didn't tarp it and

tie it down securely enough. But, Mary was a genius at organizing our camping stuff and through her oversight we eventually whittled the camping preparations process down to an almost bearable day and a half, if we were willing to work through the night without taking any breaks.

So, here we go then. One time we went to a place called Mt. Madonna State Park. I don't recall exactly where it is, but I remember it as a small scale Yosemite: magnificent granite cliffs overlooking an unending panorama, the camp sites below situated in a lush green valley. Picturesque is the word. We arrived there in a herd, and while the women folk and I off-loaded the equipment and began to set up camp, Peter and Tim decided they'd go for a little afternoon walk in the sunshine.

We'd just gotten the second tent pitched and tied down when Peter and Tim came running into the camp, shouting, "Take everything down and throw it into the cars, we gotta get outta here!"

"We just got this tent set up..."

"Take it down, take it down," shouted Tim.

"We really gotta get outta here," said Peter.

They started frantically undoing what we had just done.

"What's happening?" someone asked.

"Look, just get this stuff in the car, we got to go and we got to go right now. PLEASE. We'll tell you later."

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that whatever had happened, or was about to happen, was pretty serious. So, we scrambled and got everything together and loaded up, and we left that place in a hurry.

We drove off to one of our usual sites, many miles away from Mt. Madonna—Big Basin—and, after we'd set up camp there, Tim and Peter told us this tale.

They'd hiked up into the hills and were standing on the edge of a high cliff overlooking the valley. They were trying to determine where the campsites were and if they could see us slaving away down there, when a pickup truck pulled up behind them. They were surprised because, having hiked up there on a steep trail, they had no idea that a road even existed. They turned and looked at the guy as he exited his truck. He waved, they said 'Hi' and returned to examining the landscape below.

The guy from the pickup came up beside them and asked nicely, "Would you two guys do me a favor?"

Tim and Peter both smiled and said, "Sure."

Tim said, "What can we do for you?"

The man then said this: "You can turn around and face the other way, and you can get down on your knees."

Tim said, "What?"

And the man said, "You can both just turn around, face the other way, and get down on your knees." Then he produced a gun. Tim and Peter did as they were instructed. The man then said, "Now I want you to lay down, face first, on the ground." And Tim and Peter both did that.

And they stayed there, face down, stretched out on the ground. By sound they monitored every move that guy made for the next eternity. They heard him walk back to his truck to get something, and they listened to every step as he returned. They listened to his breathing as he stood over

them for a while. Then they heard him walk back to his truck again, and they heard him open the squeaky door, and they waited. After a very long time, they heard him start the engine, and they waited. And, after a thousand years, they heard him shut the door to his truck, and they waited. And after another thousand years, they heard him drive off in reverse.

And they still waited.

After another eternity of silence, one of them turned his head cautiously and looked up, and confirmed the fact that the man was truly gone. Then, they descended that trail as fast as they could and arrived at our campsite shouting, "Take everything down and throw it into the cars, we gotta get outta here!"

That night I told them, "There is no way on earth I would have turned my back on that bastard and ABSOLUTELY no way on earth I would have gotten down on my knees." They said, "Yeah, well you weren't there."

I said, "Some son-of-a-bitch's gonna shoot me, he's gonna be looking me in the eye when he does it."

They snorted and said, "Yeah, well you weren't there."

I said, "Bullshit. That son-of-a-bitch is gonna shoot me, he's gonna have to look me in the eye when he pulls the trigger."

They said, "Yeah, that's nice, but you weren't there." And that seemed to mark and end to conversation for a while.

I could see their point, though.

“Believe me,” I told Mary later, “if I *had* been there, there is no way on earth I would have turned my back on that bastard.”

She said, “You sound like somebody who’s trying to convince himself.”

I said, “Well, of course, that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

So, that all leads to this, which takes place 30 years later.

We’d been on the beach with the dogs—my very dear wife and I—and it was late afternoon in winter. The sun was going down; it was rapidly becoming a typically chilly San Francisco evening. When we got to the car, it wouldn’t start; the battery was dead. I fast-talked some other nice evening dog walking woman into driving my dear wife back to the hotel, so she wouldn’t be late for work, and I remained behind with the dogs.

I left the dogs in the car and walked to the nearest whatever to call my insurance company and ask for emergency service. The customer service representative told me it would be between one and two hours to get anyone out there. I snorted, “You call that emergency service?”

And the clever rep. for that fine company said, “Do you wish to cancel your request for emergency service, sir?”  
Game, set and match.

While waiting for the emergency service to arrive I thought I’d better put up the hood, to signal the guy where we were. So, I did that. According to the thermometer, which drew only millivolts, it was 53 degrees out at that time. And as the night got darker and the winds kicked up, it dropped



steadily. Soon it was 50 degrees in that car. The dogs, who took it better than I did, kept looking at me like, “Say, uh, Sir, just wondering, but, uh, you know, what are we doing? I mean, like, why are we just sitting here?” I found myself incapable of explaining the situation to them in terms they’d understand. In that way they were like devout Buddhist monks, and I was like the indifferent wind.

The guy who drove by slowly one time, looked at me, circled the parking lot and drove by slowly again, struck me as being unlike the devout Buddhist monks in my back seat, and I was anything but indifferent to him.

I am not unaware of the fact that to some people I look like an old man. I have grey hair and wrinkles, and though the checkout chick at the grocery store pretends she can’t believe I’m old enough to get the old man discount, my presence is unlikely to trigger in her that same dreamy hope that it once did in other young women.

So, here’s this kid scoping out the old guy and, on the third time around—old guy, vacant unlit parking lot, dark night, no traffic—he stops right beside me and rolls down his window. “You need help?”

“That’s OK, there’s someone on their way,” I say, and, for reasons I cannot explain, Mt. Madonna flashed through my mind.

“You sure?”

“That’s OK. Thanks, there’s someone on their way.”

He sits there and looks at me for a long time. I sit there and look him right goddamned straight in the eye.

When he leaves, it is not a casual departure; there's gravel thrown everywhere, and I have the feeling that I may have called that one right.

As much as I hate the *everybody's a victim* society we're all struggling steadily and so mightily to build, I strongly believe that in doubtful situations we should go with our gut feelings. Everybody is not our friend. Still, I don't know whether I've insulted an innocent man or not, but, I know this: There was no way on earth I would have turned my back on that bastard, and if he meant me harm, he'd have to look me in the eye first.

And... anyone who has ideas about taking me on had better hope that my very dear wife hasn't asked me to move a picture, which has been hanging in the same place for seven years, a quarter inch to the left on that day.

## MARY, FOOTBALL, LIFE and DEATH

None of us had ever been to a NFL game. I'm pretty sure none of us really cared to go to an NFL game. For me, watching football every weekend was easily and by far the most excruciating, boring, utterly mindless ritual I had ever been swindled into enduring as a child. And, one of the greatest days in my life was that Sunday when I stood up in the middle of the third quarter and finally admitted it.

Twenty years later, Mary was working for one of the most highly respected urologists in the nation. He dealt with people like the Secretary of Defense of the United States, and the somewhat wobbly old patriarchs of the richest families in San Francisco. They all liked Mary. Apparently she could give an injection without dis-settling their lofty position in any way, and small gifts came from that. One of these gifts was 4 tickets on the forty yard line at an NFL game. As I recall it was an important game between the who-knows-whos and some other guys, and we (Mary's sister and her husband, Mary and I) went to observe the phenomenon that is professional football at close range. It was quite an honor; the tickets had cost more than I earned in a month.

If my memory is correct, the score was kept to a minimum throughout the grinding ordeal, and though inevitably somebody won, the action was sporadic at best, and the game was nearly endless. It was exactly as I'd remembered it, a tedious affair with 3 seconds of action followed by 4 *minutes* of standing around; then 4 seconds of action followed by 6 *minutes* of standing around; then 2 seconds

of action followed by a time out; then 8 full and glorious seconds of action, during which the entire crowd rose to its feet and went absolutely berserk until one of the guys in a striped shirt nullified all that by throwing down a flag, at which point they all collapsed back into their seats, groaning in disappointment. Whenever a flag was thrown there was a lot of screaming, profanity, and large paper cups half full of beer were thrown out onto the field. Who wouldn't pay \$300 to surround themselves with that?

Every goddamned play required a whistle and a gathering of referees—and the response from the crowd was always the same: obscenities and threats and beer thrown out onto the field, and high-fives all around in honor of those heroic acts. After penalties were assessed and applied, the game got underway again, with 4 seconds of action followed by 12 minutes of inactivity of any sort whatsoever. Tomas de Torquemada could not have devised a more torturous experience. The perfect metaphor for my entire existence here on this planet, I found myself surrounded with 80,000 people who were, for reasons I will never understand or attempt to, ecstatic with the event.

One moment which I have firmly fixed in my mind was when the referee wandered around on the field with his whistle raised almost to his lips, and decided at last not to blow it. I distinctly remember that because, for those few seconds, every single person in that stadium was deeply involved; a silence had come over the field. Then he was approached by another guy in a striped shirt and they talked, and the whistle was finally blown, and they were instantly surrounded by members of both teams, some of

whom threw their helmets upon the ground. There was some outrage from one bench and outrage in response from the other side of the field and somebody was carried off on a stretcher or driven off the field on a golf cart, I don't remember which, but the crowd was outraged as well.

I honestly had no idea what was going on, despite having watched football every Saturday and Sunday, all day, throughout my entire childhood—as well as on Monday nights, once that had been instilled as a sacred rite in the American mind. At any rate this professional league game went on and on and on like that until the end of time as we know it, and when everybody started getting on their feet, I turned to Peter and said, “Wow, thank God that's over with.” When I started gathering my things, Peter told me it was half-time. The game hadn't changed much since my youth—every huddle had seemed like a half-time to me. If anything, if possible, it had become even more tedious.

Leaving the parking lot at Candlestick, we found ourselves locked up in a massive bumper-to-bumper exodus, moving forward in distances too small to measure. It was about as exciting as the game we had just witnessed, but at least with a discernable purpose. In direct contrast with every experience I've ever had in any line I'd ever been in, in my entire life, up until that very moment—the lane we were in was moving forward. It was moving slowly, sporadically, but it was moving. This was a new experience for me, and by this method, this slow hesitant movement, we passed cars on either side of us in the lanes that we would have been in, had I been at the wheel instead of Peter. While inching by one of these cars, Mary noticed that the driver

was alone and slumped behind the wheel, with drool running out of his mouth. Being a nurse, she knew immediately that he needed help. He did in fact need help, and Mary was the perfect person to give it to him. She knew exactly what to do.

We stopped the car and Mary sent Peter—not yet an RN himself, but soon to become one—running back to the parking lot where we had seen two ambulances parked nose to nose. While making our way to the car after the game, I'd noticed that these ambulances were surrounded with a small herd of nearly slap-happy emergency medical workers drinking from paper cups and, apparently, working on their standup routines.

Meanwhile Mary and I had carefully pulled the guy from his vehicle and laid him on the roadway and she began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. She found me totally useless when it came to the chest compression thing and sent me somewhere, to direct traffic or something, while she did the work of two people, alternating between breathing for the man and pounding on his chest.

When a young man came running up and said, “Can I help? I’m a doctor,” she gave him instructions and he went right to it. Thankfully, he knew more about pounding on a man’s chest than I did, and things started moving in the right direction. By the time the EMTs arrived, the man had a pulse, was breathing on his own, had his eyes open—though I don’t think he was seeing clearly—and was able to answer a few simple questions.

Basically, Mary had, for all intents and purposes, single-handedly saved that man's life.

## GIRL CRAZY

When I was maybe eight, maybe nine years old, right around that time, I killed my beloved pet turtle, Snoopy, through what my mother called neglect. I like to think of it in simpler terms and call it forgetfulness. It was, by coincidence, also about that time that I became girl crazy.

According to my mother I was criminally negligent for forgetting to feed a poor creature who was dependent on me, and I guess I was. And only now, after fifty years, does it occur to me that I killed poor Snoopy *because* I was girl crazy. Ponder with me now as we gather the facts about us and begin to sort through this dismal mess.

Here are the facts: I had a friend, whose name I do not recall; it was something simple like Jimmy or Bobby. Nothing as complicated as George or Millhouse. Let's go with Jimmy, since I've had many friends (and good friends too) who have, along the merry way, been given that noble name at birth.

Jimmy lived down the block on the other side of the street. I didn't know a lot about Jimmy, only that I liked him and he seemed to like me, and we were both too young (too short, too slow, too uncoordinated) to play baseball with the older kids. We'd stand around every afternoon while they were picking up sides, hoping that they'd pick us—which they almost never did—and then, when it became clear that neither team wanted either of us, we had to choose between standing around watching and hoping that someone would get hurt, or wander off and find other ways



to occupy our active little minds. Usually we would play Cowboys and Indians on the dusty hillsides around the abandoned lot where the big kids played ball. Sometimes we'd shoot marbles. Sometimes we'd explore the overgrown lot on the other side of the baseball field. That's how we got into trouble.

The block we lived on was a dead end. At the very end of the street was a heavy metal railing of some sort (designed to keep cars in). Beyond that railing there was a large, flat, dusty lot which was large enough for the bigger kids to play baseball. The field ended abruptly in the outfield where, instead of a fence (or any other device to keep kids in), there was a steep rocky cliff which plummeted straight down maybe 60 feet to the street below. In deep center field, you could approach the edge with your feet firmly planted and, leaning cautiously out into space, peer down onto the tarred roofing of the liquor store which squatted toy-like below. If you had the courage or foolishness to do that, you'd spot some of the home run balls that had made it safely onto that roof after bouncing wildly down the face of that cliff. There were quite a few of them down there; some my big brother's, none mine. I don't recall having ever even gotten on base.

Along the third-base side was another cliff overlooking the road that ran down to the highway and to that liquor store. Along the first-base side there was a small abandoned lot overgrown in trees. It was, like our baseball diamond, too dangerous to build on, you know, useless. Or so I thought. I almost never went in there. I mean, why go in there? It was just a bunch of trees.

What I didn't know was that the big kids smoked cigarettes in there amongst the trees. Jimmy told me about it. I didn't know that the big kids occasionally shared a warm beer in there as well; Jimmy told me about that too. He'd actually seen the cigarette butts in the dust, the crushed, empty beer cans in the brush. I didn't know that the big kids had a stash in those woods; a place where they buried things; Jimmy told me. I had no idea what those things might be; Jimmy didn't tell me that. In fact, he refused.

"You would not believe what I found," he said with eyes so wide I thought they'd pop. It was all very mysterious.

I thought of some of the things I might bury in such a place. I thought of marbles, some Matchbox cars, a set of duplicate baseball cards (especially Lew Burdette—my favorite) maybe a slingshot, a compass, a jack knife would be cool (if I could be sure it wouldn't rust) a handful of Bazooka chewing gum (just in case) and a cap gun. That would be a pretty good stash... comic books, of course, string, magnets, a magnifying glass...

One day while the big kids were deeply involved in a game, Jimmy swore me to the highest level of secrecy (cross my heart and hope to die) and lead me by the hand to the very spot in that overgrown stand of trees where all of this cigarette smoking and beer drinking took place. I was curious, sure, but when we got to the little clearing, I was surprised to see no evidence whatsoever of all of these evil acts. Sure, there was a clearing. It was hidden pretty nicely. Sure, there was a large worn spot on the earth; there were a couple of logs and a big rock to sit on and it looked like the

kind of place where big kids might try to get away with such stuff, but there were no beer cans, no cigarette wrappers. Still, it did look like a place where big kids might go to sit around, tell lies and cuss openly; in short, a place to practice adulthood before they marched off to take their place in it. But, where was the evidence?

“Are you sure this is the place?” I asked Jimmy.

“Just you wait,” he said eagerly and got down on his knees. After shoving a big rock aside, he began to dig into the soft earth with his hands. Before long he’d uncovered a piece of cardboard and, pulling it aside, there was a plastic bundle.

“Look!” he said, and I looked.

“What’s in it?”

“You’ll see,” he said, with the wisdom of the ages twinkling in his elfin eyes.

He opened the bundle gently, carefully, so as not to endanger whatever precious artifacts it might contain. And after this surgery was complete, my friend Jimmy held up, in both hands, as if to make an offering to the heavens, a generous stack of girly magazines.

They were a little soggy from being in the earth—despite the protection of the plastic—and, since I’d never really seen this sort of thing before, they were very VERY interesting. We quickly took seats side by side on a log, and slowly, meticulously, began to peel back the pages. These magazines were full of naked and semi naked women. I was riveted. Of course there were words in those publications as well, but the words—what there were of them—were peculiar even to my nine year old ear. ‘Thelma likes to lounge and linger in the sun.’ and ‘I don’t know

why people say it's a sin, says Bonnie.' 'Of course, cooking can be risky for Irma dressed in THIS scant attire.'

I decided right away not to waste any more time on the printed word; I could not get enough of those pictures though. This had to be the greatest find any nine year old male had ever made. The treasure was certainly beyond anything I might have hoped for. It was far beyond anything I could have imagined. I couldn't fathom why the big kids wasted their time on cigarettes and beer when there was this. Cigarettes meant nothing to me. I seemed to have a natural revulsion for them. And, although I'd never tasted beer, I had no desire to. I was a hundred million god-zillion times more interested in those magazines than I would have been in the best cigarettes or the coldest beer.

There we were, wide-eyed, breathless, lost in time. We coaxed the fragile pages apart, and as we gawked at the pictures I was transported; something new began happening inside me. Something unknown began coursing through my system. If I could describe it I would. I can't.

OK, I'll try.

It was kind of like being frightened, but a really really good kind of frightened. It was like being really really nervous. I'd never felt it before whatever it was. And it was GREAT.

I was awash in feelings which I didn't know what to do with and didn't know what to do about and—here's the good part—I didn't care. I was delighted. I was slap-happy.

I had no idea what was going on, and I didn't care. I only knew that I liked it. I really liked it. I liked it a lot. As far as I could see all of my time here on earth, my entire life, all of it, had been wasted until that very moment. This was living!

Poor Snoopy, my dear trusting turtle let us not forget, was meanwhile waiting for me to come home and feed him. I'd forgotten about him though. I'd forgotten about everything; I was transfixed. Jimmy, with no pets to forget about, was as deeply involved as I was. We were both completely engaged, unswervingly focused on those magnificent images. We sat there gobbling up those pictures, filling our eyes, our minds, hopefully our memories, with what we saw. It was exhausting work too; it was the work of men.

Suddenly, for no reason that I could detect, Jimmy froze and said, "We better stop. We better stop!" He sounded frightened. Stopping was the last thing on my mind though, and I told him so.

"Listen," he cautioned, and held up a finger to his lips. We could hear the big kids in the distance and it sounded like the game was coming to an end. Or maybe we feared that the game was coming to an end. Our senses were so heightened by what we were doing that even at that distance we understood things we could not have understood otherwise. "I think the game's ending..."

Jimmy and I packed up those girly magazines as quickly as we could, wrapped them in the plastic, placed them in the hole and covered them with the cardboard. We nervously

scooped the loose dirt over the top of that treasure and, after readjusting the rock, ran out of there.

When we got to the street we started walking home on wobbly knees. Yes, there we were, two perfectly innocent, completely sinless young kids, just walkin' along whistling, staring up at the clouds, grinning ear to ear, giggling and snorting from time to time, and trying to control the flood of our elation. Wow, what we had just seen!

Once in a while we'd look at each other and our eyes would get real big and we'd burst into laughter. What we had just seen was unbelievable. It was unbelievable! We'd come very close, we were sure, to being caught. God, I hated to leave that wonderful, magical, exciting, place. If what we had done was wrong, I didn't want to be saved.

## BEVERLY MOSEBY

This leads me to think of Beverly Moseby, because if ever there was a kid who could not be saved, it was him.

Beverly Moseby was said to have been born and raised, and died in Newport News. Those who remember him claim proudly that he was the product of a purebred Newport News upbringing. But knowing what I know of Beverly Moseby my guess is that he was born somewhere just northeast of the Virginia state line... he was that crazy. Either way, Beverly Moseby was not the happiest male child ever to find himself in Newport News; he didn't grow up to be the most cooperative adolescent or, in turn, develop into the finest teenaged citizen Newport News had ever known. He won no awards. And if he had survived into adulthood, I don't think he'd have ever run for mayor... though that would have made as much sense as anything else that had gone on in the poor guy's short, miserable life.

Apparently, right from the beginning the kid had some difficulty with his parents naming him Beverly instead of Spike, Rocky, Butch, Lance, Mugsy, Rex, or Killer. Things certainly would have been easier on him if they had. At a very early age Beverly Moseby bristled whenever anyone addressed him by his name instead of, say, Pal, Buddy, Skipper, Bub, Hey You, or Good Young Sir. And, he envied anybody walking around with a moniker like Jesse, Cody, Carson, Mitch, Thorn, Axel or Jeb. It was perfectly understandable of course, but there was little anyone could do about it, when the ink dried on his birth certificate it

labeled him Beverly, forever. Many people, most people, almost everybody on every side of the social issues which continually popped up due to this kid's name, thought he would have gotten along maybe just a little bit better in this world if he had been named, Tracy, Dwayne, Virgil, Shane, or Evan.

In short, they understood.

Unfortunately, whatever distaste an angry, confused and vicious young man might harbor for his own name, and no matter how sympathetic those around him, there are unavoidable circumstances in which you must utter that name, and, regrettably, those circumstances cropped up continually, again and again, and relentlessly, and without end, heaping additional torment upon whatever psychosis such repeated assaults had already inflicted upon poor young Beverly's stewing, embittered mind.

After these events, which I am about to convey (though I seem to be dragging it out), many a kind heart speculated, "Who knows how things might have turned out if he'd have been named Kent." "OR," others speculated, "if his father (if they could find the guy) had called him Kip; or his friends knew him as Tadd, or if his middle name had been Dark Cloud?" But, alas, as they say...alas, it just wasn't so.

As said, everyone who ever saw Beverly Moseby, heard of Beverly Moseby, or gave Beverly Moseby any thought at all, had an unshakeable opinion as to the source of his problems, and they were all pretty much in agreement. It really required no analysis. Why his parents hadn't seen it going in was the mystery.



As far as I can determine, Beverly Moseby just wanted to be left alone...perhaps in tears, perhaps in unrestrained self-perpetuating, ever-growing fury...but alone. I say this because I know something about that desire. Given the chance, Beverly Moseby might have made a good boxer, except for the fact that he just goddamned did not want people looking at him. If they had to look at him, they would see what he wanted them to see, and for years he wanted them to see a hard-ass, dressed in black leather from head to toe, flying down Route 60 on a very big, very loud motorcycle.

"Who is that crazy son-of-a-bitch who keeps zooming up and down Route 60 like a bat-out-of-hell?"

"That's Beverly Moseby."

"Goddamn, *it's a girl?*"

"Nope."

"Oh... I see."

The problem was hard to miss.

It was really that simple.

So, although it was shocking to witness, no one in Newport News was really surprised to see Beverly Moseby tearing up Route 60 one fine sunny afternoon, giving anybody who might be watching (and there were always a few) a gesture commonly known as *the finger*. What was unusual about this particular trip was that, still saluting, he crossed the grass barrier that separated northbound traffic from southbound traffic, defiantly grinning, and drove purposefully, unhesitatingly, perhaps even joyfully, head-on into an on-coming tractor-trailer truck. It was a moment which those who saw it would always remember, and those who didn't would always claim to have.

Henry Edward Fool

That is the story of Beverly Moseby as told to me by my friend Steve Podlewski. Though endowed with a creative mind, Steve really had no reason to lie to me about such stuff and so, I believed every word.

After he finished the tale I remember saying, “Huh...” And I gave the story some thought while tugging idiot-like on my lower lip. Then I asked, “So, you want to go get something to eat?”

## MARY SAVES MORE LIVES

Saving a man's life on our way out of Candlestick Park was only the beginning. Mary was to save other lives in the year that followed.

That summer we found ourselves in Chicago (the city best known by us honest folk as far too damned hot in the summer and far too damned cold in the winter). To get from Chicago to Springfield, where her parents lived, we took the train. We'd done that several times before and I always enjoyed the trip in part because the old guy who announced the stations sounded like W. C. Fields. When he said Bloomington it came across the speakers sounding like Plumington. "PLUMINGTON. PLUMINGTON!" he announced like Fields, and we cracked up. That was the highlight of a day traveling through Illinois by train. And on that trip, Mary had gone back to the canteen car to get us something cold to drink, on a muggy summer's day, and disappeared for a very long time. When I became too anxious to stay put, I got up and set out looking for her.

I found her standing next to a guy seated on a bar stool, slightly slumped over the bar, surrounded with gawkers. She was taking his pulse and talking to him calmly. She'd just saved that guy's life.

Apparently, when she entered the canteen car he was sitting at the bar grabbing his throat and turning blue, while the barkeep and the porter stood there helplessly, aghast, agog, immobilized, watching the man choke to death. Mary sprung immediately into action, she wrapped her little arms

around that man's chest from behind, locked her hands together tightly, and with a single jolt, cleared the man's breathing tube. It was an olive, I seem to recall.

The remainder of that trip was uneventful.

I guess it was maybe a month later and we were back in California and had decided to go camping in Sonoma County somewhere. We heard there was a nice State-owned campground up there in among the redwoods, with vineyards all around. It was lovely. Nice. Cool. Peaceful.

That night, we were in the tent sound asleep when the sound of squealing tires and a loud crash yanked me to the surface.

"Did you hear that?" I whispered.

"What...?" she asked half asleep.

"I thought I heard a car crash. Maybe I was just drea.."

"Shhh..." she said. "Do you hear moaning?"

Once I focused, the cries and moaning sounded like they were coming from right outside our tent.

"I hear people shouting." I said. "I can't make out what they're saying..."

"I think it's Spanish..." she said, "I think they need help."

"Mary, where are you going?"

So then we found ourselves out in a vineyard at 3AM, under the stars, beside the road, with an overturned pickup truck and injured farm workers scattered about in the dust moaning. Mary set about the task of saving their lives, one by one, while I ran back to our truck and headed to the nearest little town to get help.

It was at that point that Mary decided that she needed to learn Spanish.

“I just felt so helpless,” she said after it was all over. “If I only understood Spanish, I could have helped them more.”

Neither of us knew it at the time, but the next group of Spanish-speaking people that would need her help, lived far away in El Salvador, and Mary would speak Spanish better than most of the people she would be assisting.

## DAY TWO

The next day, after school, Jimmy and I were pacing around anxiously on the baseball field waiting while the big kids slowly straggled in. Usually we asked eagerly, hopefully, repeatedly, “Can we play? Can we play? Can we play?”, but on that day we remained silent. For show we cleverly asked, “You guys don’t need us today do you?”

When they told us to get lost, we pretended to be disappointed. We could have jumped for joy, but we left there heading slowly toward home with our heads hanging down, rejected, dejected, kicking pebbles all the way. We wanted to run as fast as we could into the trees where the treasure lay waiting; instead we scuffled along homeward until we were out of sight of the ballfield. Then, we took a sharp turn, broke into a run, through the back yards, over the fences, through the hedges, down the street, and, diving like rabbits into the overgrowth, we scampered wildly, crazily, joyfully, directly to the hideout.

This time we were both on our knees digging with both hands as quickly as we could, dirt was flying everywhere. Tossing the cardboard aside, the packet was soon in hand. With hearts pounding heavily in our skinny little chests, we tore at the plastic to get at the treasure within. Jimmy was holding his finger to his lips, trying to keep from giggling. I had to place both hands over my mouth to keep from laughing out loud. There was a packet of cigarettes in the hole which Jimmy held up for our mutual amusement. “What fools!” he seemed to say as he smashed the packet in his hands and tossed it with noble disdain into the

bushes. That was so hilarious that we both sat there rocking with our hands pressed firmly over our mouths. Then we got down to business. It was no longer funny.

My hands were shaking as I took up the first magazine, and unfamiliar chemicals were dumped by the barrel-load into my system. My heart was racing; my face was red hot, my palms were sweaty; I took a deep breath; said a little prayer that these magazines would be as wonderful as I'd remembered. If they were, I knew that I could not absorb those photographs quickly enough or thoroughly enough. I tried to empty my brain of all other superfluous matter. I needed to make room. More than anything else I wanted to—I knew I would have to—carry every detail of every photograph with me when forced to abandon this treasure and leave that magical place.

In the distance the sounds of the ball game getting underway were shrouded in cotton. All I could hear was my heart pounding like a drum and Jimmy breathing in little gasps beside me. He was blowing like a fish out of water. It sounded so strange that I looked up at him to see if he was OK. His pale face was pure white, his cheeks beet red. His watering eyes were fixed on the page as he hungrily devoured the images. He was fine. No one understood those symptoms better than I.

After a little while Jimmy stopped. He closed the magazine he was holding and placed a palm on the cover. He raised his head and closed his eyes. I had no idea what he was going through, but I really didn't care; I went back to work. Then he spoke my name. It came to me from a great

distance. I was immersed, not too far gone to hear, but too far gone to answer. When he spoke my name again, I looked up, and he was staring at me. His eyes were full of worry, his eyebrows raised in deep concern. This was the most serious look I'd ever seen come from a kid.

"Do you think we're girl crazy?" he asked solemnly.

"Naw," I assured him, and went back to the magazine. But, I could still feel him looking at me. He was no longer breathing heavily, no longer shaking, no longer involved. It was as if all the joy had drained from him. He was just sitting there on that log, his palm on the magazine, deep in thought. Then he began to nod.

"We are," he declared with a trembling voice, "We ARE girl crazy."

He stood up as if he were about to bolt. He dropped the magazine from his hand. "We are girl crazy!" There was actual fear in his voice. There was not a doubt in my mind that he was getting ready to run.

"No. Hey," I said quickly trying to calm him, "I don't know about you, but I like this stuff."

"I do too," he said, "I think maybe I like it too much."

Boy, I KNEW that *I* liked it too much, but I didn't see any problem with that.

"No, it's OK," I said calmly, pulling him back down, "Honest." I was pleading for him to stay on board. I wanted to talk sense to him, to coax him back into the fold, but didn't know where to begin. The words "good clean fun" came to mind, but I didn't think he would buy it. I didn't buy it myself. If what we were doing was anything, it was the very complete absolute opposite of good clean fun.



We sat in silence for a while. We understood each other perfectly. I understood him. He certainly understood me. "We ARE girl crazy!" he said with great sorrow. "I knew this was going to happen if we looked at these dumb old magazines."

I sat there looking at him, wondering what the heck had gotten into him.

"OK," I said, "even if we are girl crazy, what's wrong with being girl crazy anyway?" He made it sound as though being girl crazy was the plague or something. For me, it was a blessing. It was a dream come true (though I had never had such a dream.)

"Let's get out of here," he said, and I grabbed him.

"Wait. What should we do with this stuff? We can't just leave it here like this. If the big guys find out they'll kill us."

"Let's take it with us," he said.

This was all happening pretty quickly. The whole thing was totally out of control, but I had to admit I liked the way it was heading.

"Now you're talking," I said. The idea that we could take these wonderful magazines somewhere and keep them all to ourselves was, perhaps, the greatest idea I had ever heard issue from any living being's mouth.

Jimmy, my friend, Jimmy, the genius.

I picked up all the magazines I could carry and rolled them up quickly and shoved them into the plastic, while Jimmy started filling the hole, using the cardboard as a shovel. I pulled my T-shirt out and put the magazines under there, under my belt, resting cold and damp against my belly,

just under my near-bursting heart.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said urgently, and we fled that useless spot.

“Where are we going?” I asked as we ran together down the street.

“To my house,” he said over his shoulder and he led the way. There was no giggling this time. This was serious.

When I came up behind him on his front porch, he was getting his key out. “What about your mother?”

“She’s at church.”

“She’s at church? ...on a Wednesday afternoon?”

Jimmy turned and put his finger to his lips as we entered his house.

“I thought you said she’s at church.”

“She is.”

“Then why are we whispering?”

“Wait here,” he whispered and disappeared.

“Where are we gonna hide this stuff?” I asked quietly when he returned.

“Follow me,” he said and opened a door into the garage.

Wow, I could not believe this stuff was ours. I couldn’t believe that we were going to keep it, that we could look at it any time Jimmy’s parents weren’t around.

“Let me see ‘em,” said Jimmy, and I took the treasure out from under my shirt. He took a screwdriver from somewhere and pried open a cover on the garage floor drain.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

“We’re destroying all evil,” he whispered, and began to tear one of the magazines into shreds.

“Destroying all evil?” I thought about it for a brief sad moment, then—who knows how the nine year old mind works—I kinda liked the idea. It had a nice ring to it and, who knows, maybe these things were evil. I had to admit that looking at them made me very nervous. I shrugged and began tearing up magazines.

Whether they were evil or not, I had a suspicion that there were more magazines in my future; I guessed that somewhere, sometime, somehow, I would see more of this stuff. My emerging instincts told me that liquor store at the bottom of the hill was probably full of these magazines. Now, already infected, I could feel their presence, even at that distance. Besides, the big kids would probably replenish their stock, once they discovered their cache empty. Also, there was this: if the big guys came looking for whoever crumpled up and threw their cigarettes in the bushes and absconded with their magazines, there would be no evidence.

“Yeah? Prove it!” I’d say sticking out my chin. “Where’s the proof? Where’s the evidence?”

With no evidence, there was no proof. Ha!

(I’d gathered this wisdom from watching TV.)

So, we were tearing up the magazines and throwing the evidence down the drain with great enthusiasm, laughing out loud and having a great time. We were quite a team, Jimmy and I, as we destroyed all evil.

Before long the soggy pages started to clutter up in the drain and wouldn’t go down. “What do we do now?”

Jimmy disappeared and quickly returned with a hose, and I

aimed it down the drain. I held it while he went and turned it on full blast. Things were going nicely once the water started running. I just shoved the nozzle into the drain while he stood over it tearing the magazines into scraps and tossing them in. Somewhere in this grand celebration of goodness, Jimmy had disappeared again and returned at my side with a string of beads. He held them up for me to admire. Then he was waving the beads over the drain as I finished up the last bit of the last magazine. I washed it all down nicely with the hose.

“Evil, evil, evil,” he was chanting.

I was on my knees looking down the drain to see that all the evidence had been washed completely away. It looked good. No evidence. I stood up and washed my hands like Pontius Pilate and said, “It’s done.” Jimmy continued to wave the beads over the drain. He had his eyes closed and his lips were moving. “Evil, evil, evil,” he was mumbling. “What the heck are you doing?” I asked.

“Shhh,” said Jimmy, “This is sacred.”

I cannot explain to you the what or the why of it—maybe I was inspired—but, I grabbed those beads and I threw them down the hole after the torn up magazines.

“Now, it’s really done.” I declared.

Jimmy turned as white as a sheet. He began gasping. “You threw pearls before swine!” he stammered. Then he shouted, “You threw pearls before swine! Get out of my house, you sinful boy!” Jimmy stood there pointing toward the door like the stern-faced father in an old silent film. He was casting me out like a wayward daughter. I looked at

him in disbelief. I gave him my most disarming smile. I raised my eyebrows, I shrugged in innocence. I thought he was kidding.

I had no idea what he was talking about; only many years later would I discover that he had no idea what he was talking about either. At that moment however, it seemed like he probably knew more than I did about almost anything, especially those stupid beads. His stance, his unforgiving stare, had me convinced that I'd done something seriously wrong, something terrible, but I did not for the life of me know what. It all just seemed so melodramatic and so unreal that I laughed. I didn't mean to laugh, but I laughed. I'd never met anyone who'd been so thoroughly indoctrinated with pure lunacy before, and I didn't know how to handle it.

"What am I gonna tell my mom when she goes to look for her rosary?" he was asking me as he followed me to the door. His tone was at once damning, demanding and plaintive.

"I don't know," I said full of shame.

I wanted to share his predicament, but I didn't even know what he was talking about. I had no idea what a rosary was or what it had to do with ridding our world of evil.

"It was my Grandmother's rosary," he said, almost in tears.

"I'm sorry," I said—and I was—but, mainly, I was confused. How did we find ourselves in this mess?

We were friends. We were good friends. Until a very few brief moments ago, we were best friends. How did it turn so weird so quickly?

At his front door, once I was outside, optimistically I changed the subject. I turned and asked, "You gonna go try to get into the game tomorrow afternoon?" I was a nine year old kid, still idiot-hopeful. He just stared at me in a silent rage for a bit; red and shaking, barely under control. "You threw pearls before swine," he said dismally. It was as if the breath of life itself were draining from him as he stood there. Before he shut the door he told me sadly one more time, "You threw pearls before swine." It didn't look like he was going to ever get over that soon.

It was that very day, when I returned home, that my mother told me my pet turtle had died. She told me that he'd died of neglect. That was her term. "Did you get so involved in other things that you forgot about feeding your turtle?" "Yes, Ma'am. I guess so."

I wanted to ask her what a rosary was, but I sensed that this wasn't the time. I wanted to ask someone about being girl crazy and whether it was evil or not, but she wasn't the one to ask.

I buried my turtle near the back door. Then I went in and threw myself on my bed and prayed that I would never see another picture of a naked woman as long as I lived.

## MORE MOTORCYCLE MADNESS

In 1970 I passed my Virginia State motorcycle driving test merely on looks.

Because I was whatever I was at that time in my life, I appeared before the Motor Vehicles Testing Officer with hair down to my shoulders, a beard, grease impacted jeans that I'd worn for more than a month, and a torn black t-shirt under a well-worn denim jacket. I also had on a decent pair of old work boots. In essence, I looked like I'd been born on a motorcycle. The kid who rode the test course before me looked like he'd been born on a golf cart and, though more acceptably attired by societal standards, didn't have what you would call complete control over his little mo-ped. He wobbled his way through the turns of the course awkwardly, dropped the machine once, stalled it once, and after getting it started again with a great deal of difficulty, putted over the finish line fully awash in embarrassment and secure in the knowledge that he had not passed that test. He was told to come back in six weeks and try again.

Then it was my turn. The testing officer called my name, and when I stood up he looked at his clipboard, looked at me, looked at my 650 Triumph, shook his head, grinned and said, "This is ridiculous. If it was up to me I'd tell you to just go in and pick up your license right now, but I gotta make you take the road test." Then he repeated, "This is ridiculous."

More ridiculous still was the fact that I couldn't ride any better than that kid on the mo-ped.

Up until that very moment I hadn't been on that bike more than three times, and not once without dropping it or stalling it or both. In fact, that Triumph was the first motorcycle I'd ever owned; the first real motorcycle I'd ever driven. Six years earlier, in high school, I'd driven my brother's best-friend's brand new 90 cc Honda directly into a stone wall. That ride had lasted about 6 seconds, and the neighbors had tried to sue me for the damage I'd done to their wall. I was sure this Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles road test would last longer, but would probably demonstrate that same incompetence, and end in disaster as well... without all the screaming of course.

So, I kicked my Triumph into life with a mighty roar and took off circling the course widely. Then I wobbled my way through the turns awkwardly, nearly dropping the bike on one turn, came very close to stalling it out on another, and finished wobbling my way to the end with a great deal of difficulty. I knew I had failed. That's what I'd been expecting.

When I took off my helmet and looked up at the testing officer, he was laughing so hard that he was practically in tears.

"Goddamn, Son, that was absolutely hilarious," he told me. "Here you go," he said, handing me my test with the word *Passed* written in large letters across the top. "I'm glad that kid wasn't here to see you imitatin' him like that though."

"Well," I said, "I know what he's probably goin' through."



## SOMETHING YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE

What we didn't know is that those farm workers, lying in pain in the vineyard, crying for help in Spanish, in the middle of the night, were the first step in a long journey for Mary. From that very night, Mary's desire to study Spanish welled up within her; neither one of us knew exactly why. Like many good things in life, it just seemed to drop out of the sky and land at her feet. She picked it up and recognized it for what it was, though. It was a calling.

During the next months I found myself back in that tent again, with Mary regretting her inability to understand people pleading with her in a language she didn't know. "I just felt so helpless," she told me a dozen times. "If I had only known Spanish I could have helped them more." For Mary, saving them and comforting them and getting them additional medical help, wasn't enough. That camping trip in Sonoma continued to haunt us both.

So, she wanted to learn Spanish, and I forget how she discovered that Cuernavaca, in Mexico, was THE best place on earth to learn it, but from that moment on she was like Jesus with his face set toward Jerusalem. She explained to me that the language school in Cuernavaca offered the best, most widely recognized and highly respected courses in Spanish that could be found in all of Mexico. And I explained to her that we could not afford to send her there. I forget the cost of those courses, but she had the exact figure worked out and written down somewhere. Whatever it was, we couldn't afford it. Still, she yearned to go there, and her desire to study Spanish only grew stronger in that

frustration. It was a dream of course, but there was no way it would ever become a reality. We just plainly and simply did not have the money.

One day she received a letter from her bank asking her to come in and speak with them. So, we went to the bank and they took her into an office alone, and they spoke to her for a while and she came out in shock and in tears. It seems that one of the bank employees had broken into many of the safe deposit boxes and disappeared with the contents. She was asked to go home and make a list of the things she had in her safe deposit box and to suggest an approximate value. She was told that the bank would then make her an offer and, if she accepted their offer, she'd be asked to sign a document stating that she would never ever mention either Wells or Fargo in connection to this incredible demonstration of complete and utter incompetence on the bank's part. And, although I was not asked to sign such a document myself, I cannot in good conscience mention the name of that bank here, even after all these years.

At any rate, amongst the things that were in Mary's safe deposit box was a small diamond ring which had belonged to her Grandmother, the only remaining keepsake she had from the good woman. Mary was heartsick.

A few days later, she dropped the list off at the bank, and a few short days after that she received, from them, an offer, a check, and the document which she was to sign, forbidding her to ever mention the name of that bank in connection with that incident for as long as she lived. And, although I was not asked to sign that document myself, I

still feel honor-bound never to mention either Wells or Fargo whenever I talk to anyone about that mess.

And, here's the part you will not believe:

That check was—to the penny—the *exact amount* Mary needed in order to enroll in, and pay for her residence in, that Spanish language school in Cuernavaca.

TO THE PENNY. We must have looked at that check a thousand times, each time in utter disbelief.

It was, as we saw it, a pretty clear message.

## THE MOST PAINFUL PART

The most painful part—I want to tell this quickly and get it over with, tell this quickly and forget about it, tell this quickly and never think about it again. I’m 57 years old now, I should be able to put this behind me. The most painful part was when I went to knock on Jimmy’s front door a couple days later. I just wanted to know why he was avoiding me at the bus stop and acting like he didn’t see me at school. I wanted to know why he hadn’t shown up at the ball field for a couple of days. Mainly, I just wanted to know if he was all right; to know that he wasn’t sick or anything.

His mother answered the door. She stood there, towering over me, glowering down upon me. Her lips were pursed so tightly that I *knew* she knew. Immediately, I knew she knew. Jimmy had spilled the beans. She said nothing, just stood there with her hand on the doorknob, looking down on me, her rage, like her son’s a few days earlier, was barely under control.

“Uh...is Jimmy here?” I asked sheepishly. That’s me with the faltering winning smile, the hopeful raised eyebrows, the flickering eyes of innocence, my hands entwined behind my back like an angel.

She said nothing.

“Can he come out?”

She said nothing.

“I was going over to the field to see if maybe we could get into the game.”

She said nothing.

Then with a kind of ghostly acrobatic finesse she faded backward into the room behind her, silently swinging the door shut in my face. This was pretty rough treatment for a kid my age to take, and I was torn apart; it felt like I'd been gutted. Standing on that front step I felt empty and lost and more than a little frightened. I didn't know what to do. I just stayed there for a few moments feeling lost.

Jimmy had been my best friend, my only friend in that neighborhood. We did everything together. One time, when they needed a right fielder, but only one right fielder, I played the odd innings and he played the even. We shared a glove. When my turtle wandered off, Jimmy joined in on the search party. And when he discovered a stash of cigarettes and girly magazines, he came right to me, and only me, with the wonderful news. If either one of us'd had the guts to cut our fingers we'd have been blood brothers.

But that's not the worst of it still. Although the way his mother treated me pretty much hung me up by the heels, that wasn't the end of it. At school Jimmy continued to avoid me. We no longer exchanged sandwiches at lunch time, or tried to get on the same team during gym class. We no longer sat near each other in class so we could exchange witticisms under our breath. On the bus he slipped quickly past the open seat beside me no matter how charmingly I patted it, no matter how apologetically I grinned.

I ran after him one afternoon after getting off the bus and grabbed him by the shoulder and swung him around to face me. (I saw a cowboy do that once in a movie. Tom Mix, I think.)

“Hey,” I said and let the wrinkles in my brow say the rest. He stood there looking at the sidewalk.

“Well?” I said craning my neck to get my face into his line of sight.

He just stood there looking down at the tops of his sneakers. “My mom don’t want me to have anything to do with you.”

“Because of those beads?”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” he said.

“All because of those stupid beads?”

“Next week we’re moving to Akron.” He turned and started to walk away.

“Was it because I flushed those stupid beads down the chute?” I screamed, but Jimmy didn’t answer.

But that wasn’t the worst of it either. The worst of it was this:

One day, when Jimmy didn’t show up at school, they announced in homeroom that Jimmy had moved away. So, as soon as I got off the bus that afternoon, I ran to his house. I was so relieved to see that moving van still there in their driveway. Maybe they had not yet departed. I ran down that block. I arrived with aching lungs and pounded on that front door.

Again his mother answered the door. She took the very same stance as previously, looking down on me while I wavered before her, still out of breath.

“Hi. I...well, I’m...very sorry about everything. Really. Can I see Jimmy?” I smiled as nicely as I could into the face of that woman. She was unmoved however.

“Is he here?”

She said not a word.

Then I saw Jimmy inside the house, looking out the window at me.

"I just want to say goodbye," I pleaded. "Please."

Jimmy's mother, good catholic Christian that she was, said not a word and did not move.

"Can I just see him to say goodbye? Please? I just want to say goodbye."

This time she did not fade away. This time she did not shut the door. She stood her ground. I'm sure her god would have been proud of her. She stood there looking down at me, saying nothing; just standing there, immovable barrier between me and my only chance to say goodbye to my best friend. She stood there like that, looking at me, saying not a word, until I went away. She was still staring at me, even when I reached the sidewalk. I could feel her eyes on me. I turned to confirm it. She was still staring at me. May God bless her goddamned rotten soul.

I can still feel her eyes on me.

For years I've thought that when I bump into that woman again, in Hell (just a guess), I'll look her in the eye and say, "One of us is here because of that stupid rosary, and it isn't me." But maybe not. These days I'm more forgiving... so, I've prepared a little song:

"Pardon me. Pardon me again.

Pardon me a third time, if you can.

Pardon me, and if you do,

'haps some day I'll pardon you.

'haps some day, I'll pardon you."

But, again, maybe not. Things rarely go as planned, especially grand, romantic ideas, and I'm guessing they may go wrong more frequently in Hell than here on earth.

Either way, my plan is to scooch up real close to her and throw an arm around her shoulder as if we might be old drinking buddies. Then, in my most obviously contrived charming manner, I'll sing her that tune, 'til eternity.

And that, as a friend of mine used to say, is all I have to say about that.



## WEANER

Sometime after midnight, after the TV proved itself to be utterly useless once again—we didn't really need anything for \$19.95, let alone a second one—I leaned back and tugged on my lower lip lost in idiotic thought. My devoted wife was stretched out beside me, lovely, at peace, book in hand, cat in lap, irretrievably immersed in the South Pacific musings of some guy named Horwitz.

I don't know what made me think of him, but I found myself saying out loud, "I wonder whatever happened to Weaner." My lovely wife, drawn to the surface by this statement, asked softly, "Who?"

"Weaner, Peter's cousin. I never told you about Weaner before?"

She looked up from the book. Good wife that she is, she preferred my mindless musings to the published award-winning nautical prose of Horwitz. The cat stirred and looked up at me disapprovingly; he demanded an explanation for this uncalled-for disturbance. I ignored him (if a highly-exaggerated theatrical sneer can be interpreted as ignoring someone).

"Weaner showed up out here from Wisconsin a couple years after Peter moved out..." I began.

"Why do you call him Weaner?" she asked.

"*They* called him Weaner. I don't know if I ever called him anything. If I did it was by his name, which I forget. Jerry, I think. Anyway, I seem to recall Peter telling me that a weaner is the runt in a litter of pigs. The little guy's a weaner. I'm sure there's more to it than that."

“But, a wiener is a sausage, isn’t it?”

My wife is French, well-educated, well-traveled, well-read, impressively informed on a wide range of topics. In stark contrast I provide the dull background by which her brilliance is all the more keenly revealed. But, when opportunity presents itself, we add to each other’s universality. For example, I know something about the price of common lumber (specifically soft woods) in the 1980’s in the San Francisco Bay Area, and my expertise concerning the flattest bicycle route between the 5700 block of Geary Boulevard and Golden Gate Park cannot be challenged. So, she dove into an explanation on the derivation of the word “wiener” which encompassed, as I recall it: Vienna, veal, and vandalism in its purest puerile form—in this case the apparent intentional bastardized pronunciation of the Germanic tongues.

“Well, but...” I interrupted, “I don’t think Weaner being called weaner has anything to do with sausage directly. I think Weaner was called Weaner because he was so small. You know, Peter comes from a family of giants. Standing on a crate, Weaner might get a good view of the underside of Peter’s jaw.”

She closed the book (which I considered a compliment), but kept her thumb in place (a slight, which I did not overlook). The cat continued to stare at me, awaiting an end to the disruption. From experience I knew I had, maybe, three minutes.

So, I summarized.

“So, Weaner, raised on a milk farm in Wisconsin, came out here and declared that he was going to go into the real estate business and make a lot of money. Peter, always good-natured, and with genuine affection for his young cousin, laughed at such naiveté and said, ‘How are you going to get into real estate?’ Weaner didn’t have a penny that anyone knew of; he didn’t know anybody out here, he knew absolutely nothing about business, and even less about real estate, but that wouldn’t stop him.

‘Couple of months later, we’re all invited over to Weaner’s place in Oakland for some kind of Sunday brunch. I’m thinking, ‘Poor Weaner, man, he’s probably livin’ in some old run down slum in the sleaziest part of Oakland.’ But when we get to the place it’s in a nice part of town. VERY nice. And good old Weaner is living on the top floor of this big apartment building. When we pull into the driveway, Peter comes dashing out to the truck, leans into the window and giddily declares, “This is Weaner’s place!”

I say, “It looks like Weaner found himself a nice place.” Peter says “No. Weaner OWNS this place. He owns this entire building!” Peter’s got a big grin on his face like someone who’s just been slapped silly. Without lookin’ I realize that I have a stunned look on my own face, like someone who’s just been slapped silly. “He OWNS this place?” I look at Mary and she has a stunned look on her face like...

Maybe a year later, not more, and NOW Weaner owns several buildings in Oakland. He’s driving whatever car he wants, and apparently, he wants a big flashy one; he’s putting in about three hours each day in his thirty-third

floor downtown office; he has gold rings on every finger and he's wearing fine Italian wool suits; his shoes are custom made. Somewhere along in there he's also married some ice-cold, semi-ugly, reasonably foreboding foreign chick. In the blink of an eye they have a kid and they're working on another.

That's the last I ever heard of Weaner," I conclude.

My wife returned quietly to her book and the cat returned quietly to licking his whiskers, and I got up and walked out of the room. When I returned, after tearing off a little 40 minute, ad-lib, bathtub-style blues on my ukulele, my wife looked up from her reading and said, "Maybe the wife had something to do with it."

"Something?!" I said. "She had EVERYTHING to do with it. As far as I can figure it, Weaner married into the mob."

But, you know, it really doesn't matter *how* he did it; however he did it, you gotta give Weaner credit. He came out here, said he was going to get rich in the real estate business, and he did.

Me, I always wanted to write a bunch of books that nobody ever reads, and I'm still workin' on it.

## THE ROAD TO SANTA BARBARA

Mary paid her tuition at the language school in Cuernavaca with the money the bank had paid her in return for her vow of eternal silence on matters involving their complete incompetence and the irresponsible handling of safe deposit boxes. And, after some phone calls, we were on our way to Mexico.

At that time we had a small Mazda pickup truck with a top uphill speed of 52 MPH, so we weren't exactly leading the pack through the mountains as we wound steadily upward. At that point the highway had a wide grassy divider between three wide lanes heading south and three wide lanes heading north, and the herd we were attached to had just started a long downhill run into Santa Barbara. So, we were picking up speed and proudly keeping up with the rest of the crowd, when a large, yacht-like car heading in the opposite direction swerved suddenly, came bounding through the middle divider, ran across all three lanes of traffic on our side, without hitting any of us—such are our modern-day miracles—and came to a rocking stop in a massive cloud of dust and cinder, on the wide shoulder of the road, which overlooked what could best be described as an unbroken drop to the rocky coast below.

Always quick to criticize other drivers, I shouted, “What the hell is wrong with that idiot?!”

Mary, my opposite in almost every good, reasonable, and endearing way, said, “We have to stop.”

“What?” I demanded unsympathetically.

“We have to stop. That man needs help.”

“Oh, man...not again...”

But, her request was writ as far as I was concerned, we were there for Mary after all. So, I pulled over quickly, if a bit begrudgingly, and off the side of the highway. I then began backing up—despite the blaring disapproval of our fellow southward bound travelers. I parked 50 feet from the cliff edge, and Mary got out immediately and ran to the wayward land-yacht, situated far-too-near the edge of the cliff for anyone’s comfort.

I think at that point the score was something like Death 0, Mary 6, and she was about to add to the insult by scoring again.

On my list of favorite ways to break the monotony of a long trip in a gutless little old pickup truck, applying direct pressure to the spurting head wounds of a complete stranger whose car is teetering on the edge of a cliff, is somewhere very near the bottom. Though I might have guessed as much previously, I now speak from experience. And though Mary coached me, assuring me that head wounds always look a lot worse than they actually are, I found little comfort in that knowledge. On my list of things I like most in life, spurting blood, regardless of the source or the situation—even, or maybe especially, if it’s my own—falls somewhere very near the bottom. But, I did as I was told because she knew what she was doing and I had no idea what I was doing. Meanwhile she occupied herself with checking the man’s pulse, looking at his eyes, clearing his throat with her fingers, and slapping him into a kind of semi-consciousness from which he groggily answered the

questions that would save him a spot here on earth.

It was a fairly long time before anyone in the endless flow of cars flying by in either direction either felt or acted upon the instincts that drove Mary. The first to arrive was a redneck sort of man in a very large pickup truck, and he had a Citizen's Band radio onboard. In those days that was a pretty big thing. He used it to call an ambulance. And while we waited for their arrival Mary continued to keep the man conscious and talking, while monitoring his vital signs. Thankfully the cowboy took over my job, applying direct pressure to the man's various head wounds, so that I could go back to our little truck and cringe and shiver and ponder, with vacuity, the nature of my personal manipulation by seemingly indifferent, unseen forces.

When they arrived, the ambulance folk took over, and as we were starting to pull out of there, one of them came running over and flagged us down. I stopped and rolled down a window. He thanked Mary and told her that what she had done had most likely saved that man's life.

Two days later I felt like she was taking mine, as I watched her depart in a train headed for Cuernavaca. She left me standing there on the platform, empty and lost. I felt like a frightened child.

We'd been together for more than six years.

The next time I would see her, she would be working in the United Nations-run Salvadoran Refugee camp at Mesa Grande, in Honduras, and more than one child born in that camp would have already been named after her.

## The FIRST GIRL I NEVER KISSED

You would have thought I would have learned my lesson, but, shortly after becoming girl crazy, losing my best friend by throwing pearls before swine, and killing my poor dear trusting pet turtle, Snoopy with inattention, we moved to New Jersey and I fell in love with Lynne Lodge. It was a simple matter, I saw her in homeroom, blushed and quickly lowered my eyes; she saw me and blushed and quickly lowered her lovely eyes. Love at first sight. This must be the way rabbits do it.

In those days there was a kid named Bobby and he had a warm, moist-eyed, soft and eminently huggable looking little girlfriend named Marlene. We were just entering fifth grade, I think, and though Bobby and Marlene were way ahead of us, there was a general feeling that it was about time for each of us to follow in their footsteps. They had already set an enviable example in terms of public affection, and had established an unattainable record in private; Bobby and Marlene had done "it." Everybody knew Bobby and Marlene had done it and that was one of the first things I learned when I showed up, the perpetual new-kid, for my first day of school.

"Hey, you're new here aren't you?"

"...Yes..."

"That's Bobby an' Marlene. They do 'it'."

"They do?"

"Yep. They do 'it' all the time."

"Really?"

"Yep. All the time."



I didn't have the slightest idea what 'it' was, but everyone was pretty impressed and so I took the clue and said, "Wow!" whenever this occurrence was mentioned.

Apparently they'd done it, almost by accident, once at his house when his mother wasn't around, and after that they just couldn't do it enough; they took every opportunity. Common knowledge was that Bobby and Marlene went over to his house immediately after school each day and did it until his mother came home late in the evening, tired from her second job. What was really cool was that Marlene really liked doing it and for reasons which I didn't fully understand, this made Marlene the most desirable girl in the fifth grade, in that township, in the state of New Jersey, and perhaps in the whole wide world. Bobby and Marlene were treated like royalty by everyone who knew what they had done. As I recall, I thought Bobby was kind of an idiot, and kinda block-headed, but by subsurface devices I had no understanding of or desire to control, Marlene became more desirable the more I saw her.

About that time there was a tall, skinny kid named Howie (who could shoot baskets like a pro and who could hit a pretty good softball too) and his best friend and sidekick, Dean, a short, fat kid (who could do neither). They were social organizational geniuses of some sort. They were both excellent students and apparently came from reasonably well-off families, AND they were allowed, by their open-minded parents, to throw unsupervised parties downstairs in their rec. rooms on weekends. Do I really need to say that it was an honor to be invited to one of these parties? Only a select few (eight or ten) kids were ever invited to

attend one of these mythical events. It was my great honor one time to be among them. Lynne Lodge was also invited.

Apparently, Howie and Dean—for that is how they were known, inseparable, one unit: Howie and Dean—had caught our little act—me blushing, her blushing, neither one of us able to look at the other for more than six seconds, then, unable to resist any longer, looking over longingly and blushing uncontrollably. Apparently Howie and Dean were all for it, and felt it was their duty, as social organizers of the fifth grade, to see that Lynne Lodge and I got together. So, schemers that they were, they invited us both to the same party.

At first when they invited me I declined saying, “You know, thank you guys but, you know I, uh, well, you know, I just can’t...I don’t really...uh...but thanks! But, really, thanks.”

And Howie said, “You gotta come.”

“Because...” said Dean.

“Lynne Lodge is going to be there!” they shouted simultaneously.

“She is?” I stammered. To me that fact was as good a reason to stay away as it was to attend. I loved her madly but there was nothing in the world scarier than Lynne Lodge. What was I gonna do in a room with Lynne Lodge without teachers and other kids and desks and books and stuff between us? I was pretty sure I couldn’t look her in the eye—though I wanted to—or speak a single word—though my heart was filled with corny things I yearned to say to her. In those days I walked around dreamily after school singing “On the Street Where You Live”. I actually

knew where she lived. I actually walked along there sometimes hoping to get a glimpse of her.

“Yes,” they chimed together, “Lynne Lodge has been invited. Are you comin’? You gotta. You gotta!” they whined.

So I found myself arriving at the party at Howie’s or Dean’s house and was shown my way downstairs where the finest, most select individuals of the fifth grade were already gathered. I think there were eight of us, four girls and four boys. The boys were Howie and Dean and the world famous, Bobby, and me. It wasn’t long before we were sitting on the floor in a circle and, as if by magic someone produced a bottle, and Bobby gave it a spin and it landed, seemingly controlled by Destiny itself, upon Marlene. They both popped up and hopped into a closet and shut the door. Howie or Dean turned up the radio and we all sat around lost in speculation, with our eyebrows raised, until they emerged many many many long and semi-sweaty minutes later, beaming like idiots (which Bobby was, Marlene was not.) After everyone applauded and laughed and made comments, it was my turn apparently.

“I, uh...I didn’t know this was going to be a kissin’ party...” I whispered.

“What other kind of party is there?” everyone shouted.

So, reluctantly I spun the bottle and, with a little additional nudge from Howie or Dean, Fate’s eager assistants, it landed on Lynne Lodge. Everyone was ecstatic by this fortunate coincidence and Lynne Lodge and I got up hesitantly and reluctantly went, red-faced, into the closet.

The door was closed behind us and the music on the radio went up.

After standing there, facing each other in the dark for what seemed like an eternity, I leaned toward Lynne Lodge and whispered, "What are we supposed to do?"

She whispered, "I don't know... kiss, I guess."

"I don't want to kiss, do you?" I said.

"No."

"I mean, I do. But I don't know how."

"Me neither... Well what should we do?" she whispered.

"I don't know. Maybe we should just stand here for a while," I suggested.

"OK."

And, so we did. We stood there for what we thought was an appropriate length of time, and then I opened the door and Lynne Lodge emerged, followed by me, to hooting and whooping and pounding on the floor and raucous unanimous approval.

After Howie and Dean, each in their own turn, had gone into the closet with one of the remaining two girls the kissin' party ended. There was some dancin' and stuff but Lynne came to me and said, "I have to go."

I walked Lynne Lodge home, and when we got to her house she took my hand and we stood there for awhile with our heads down, holding hands, speechless.

"Thank you," she finally said.

"You're welcome," I said.

And Lynne Lodge lunged forward and kissed me lightly on the cheek, before running off into her house. I wasn't too old to skip all the way home. I loved Lynne Lodge.

I loved her!

So, I suppose that is what I was thinking about as I leaned out the window before class began the following Monday.

I was leaning out the window, chatting amiably with my new, highly-influential friends, Howie and Dean. They were out there in the playground shouting at me and I was inside, leaning out the window shouting things back. It was all very heady for a shy kid like me to have such powerful friends treat me like I actually existed. Then I felt a tug on my sleeve and one of the kids was pulling me back inside. The teacher, my fifth grade homeroom teacher, was standing in front of the room with a pointer in one hand and her other hand on her hip and scowling at me. She was saying, "Didn't you hear me calling your name?" I was awash in shame. "No, Ma'am..." I said quietly. She asked, "Are you deaf? Is that's what's wrong with you? Or are you just stupid?" The entire class was now laughing at me. I was too ashamed to respond. I stumbled through the desks back to my seat and could not look up for the remainder of the day. When class let out, Lynne passed me in the hall and smiled a crumpled little smile, but I couldn't face her. I was too embarrassed. I could still see the teacher. I could still hear her saying, "Are you stupid?" I could still hear the other kids laughing at me.

By this single event my temporary flight into feeling like I might be somebody and my love for Lynne Lodge had both been dashed. I couldn't expect Howie and Dean to want to hang around with someone all the other kids laughed at,

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and I no longer felt that someone as nice as Lynne Lodge could like someone as stupid as me.

“Are you deaf? Or are you just stupid?”

Back then, just a kid, I couldn’t answer that question. But now, after giving the matter a little thought (almost 50 years of thought), I’ve come up with a response. And, so, just for the record, my response is this: “No, I’m not stupid, but you had a way of making me feel that way.”

On the other hand, you may have had a point, I mean, it took me 50 years to come up with that answer.

## THE STOCK

The most undervalued but influential part of many dishes is a sauce, and the most overlooked and undervalued but influential part of every sauce is a good stock. That may or may not be true, but, knowing what I do of this world, if it is true there are probably entire schools dedicated to teaching how to make a good stock, and the lofty graduates of such institutions are highly coveted and even more highly paid. I know this much for sure, good stock is the basis of every good soup.

So, Mary's sister Cathy (from here on out known merely as she) got it into her head one day that she would use the carcass from the Thanksgiving Day feast to make a great stock and, from that great stock some pretty damned impressive sauce to go along with whatever else she had planned for a post-Thanksgiving gathering of friends. (I think she had seen a show on PBS.) Apparently, the making of a good stock was a long and laborious matter that involved, beyond time and labor, strict attention to detail.

She began early in the morning so that the stock could be produced in time to take an unassuming but starring role in the evening feast. The process involved tearing the carcass apart; skin and sinew and cartilage and bones. Because she wanted to create the richest possible stock, she had been careful to leave some meat on the bones. She chopped up some bones, crushed others... damaging her best knife in the gruesome process. She filled the big pot she'd purchased just for the occasion with cold water, as instructed, and dumped the bones, bits of skin and all that

in there, and set it to simmer. While that was getting under way, she chopped up carrots and celery and onions and whatever herbs she had, and threw that all in there too. There may have been capers as well.

She'd been warned, and so she was careful not to let it boil. She was also careful not to cover the pot completely. She attentively removed the foaming glop that surfaced from time to time, and averting her eyes, dumped it into the sink where she couldn't wash it down the drain quickly enough. She simmered the stock gently, with kindness and great care. She kept a close eye on it for an hour or so before she felt comfortable enough to abandon it and pretend, for a while at least, to read a magazine. During that brief charade she jumped up whenever she could no longer stand it, and ran into the kitchen to check on the stock and see if it was doing OK. And, each time she did that, the stock was not only OK, it was smelling better and better. She lifted the cover and the wonderful aroma that came from that pot almost made her swoon; this would be a stock from Heaven.

After three or four hours of this, she gave it a little taste. Oh my good gosh, it was wonderful! Anything she made with that stock as its base was bound to be unbelievable. She turned off the heat. She waited a bit. She beamed a bit. She dreamed a bit. She had to admit that she felt a little proud; her first attempt at making stock from scratch was a huge success.

So she took the large colander that she had purchased just for this purpose and she placed it in the sink, and she



carefully carried the heavy pot over to the sink and, filled with anticipation, her little heart pounding with pride, she dumped the stock into the colander.

Then...she stopped...

... and almost instantly she thought, "OH NO!"

"OH NO!" she thought.

"OH NO! OH NO! OH NO! OH NO!"

And she turned around, and looked at the counter where the large bowl that **SHOULD HAVE BEEN UNDER** that colander, catching her wonderful wonderful stock, sat waiting. She looked at the drain through which her lovely stock had just disappeared. She looked at the mass of bits and bones and soggy herbs and fat and yucky glop safely preserved in the colander. And she cried.

Later that evening, during a pretty darned good post-Thanksgiving feast, she told us the tale of the stock, and she laughed while telling it.

So the very best stuff that went into that pot hadn't gone down the drain; it remained within her, and she was kind enough to share it with us.

## COLOMANCAGUA

It was getting dark outside. As the bus crossed over a small concrete bridge, one of my companions started looking desperately out the back window at that bridge. One minute we were bored to death, listlessly discussing how much longer it would be before we arrived in Colomancagua, and the next she was fumbling desperately through her backpack for a map. She was so agitated that the map shook in her hands as she unfolded it and began to trace our route.

“I think we’ve just passed into El Salvador,” she whispered, at which point the other woman became nearly hysterical, and I sat there drained of anything that might be reasonably labeled thought.

We were in El Salvador.

We’d crossed into a war zone.

It seemed peculiar at the time, and even more peculiar after having given it years of thought, but the bus didn’t even stop; there was no roadblock, no soldiers, no sign that we had seen. Within Honduras you couldn’t go 10 kilometers without someone in uniform stopping the bus, climbing on board, and demanding papers. Here, there was no indication whatsoever that we had entered another country. The bus just wandered slowly across a little bridge and into a sovereign nation at war with its own people.

She got up and walked quickly past the other passengers. They all seemed to be taking it much better than we were. She spoke very briefly with the driver who gestured casually with his thumb and turned around completely in

his seat, while driving steadily forward, and pointed out the back window. Then he came to a sudden stop and she frantically urged us forward to get off the bus. Every eye in that bus was upon us as we gathered our stuff, stumbled nervously forward and got off in the middle of nowhere.

Before our feet hit the ground, night fell like a guillotine, and we watched the tiny round taillights of that bus as it continued on its bumpy way down the dusty road, deeper into the war-torn countryside.

As our eyes adjusted we could see the bridge, a tiny white mark stretched over a sparkling silver river that was the border. We began walking as quickly as we could, without breaking into a frantic run, toward that bridge. After we crossed it, one of the women told us that she thought it was near there that, a few years earlier, the Honduran Army, in a brilliantly executed tactical effort coordinated with Salvadoran troops on the other side, slaughtered 300 women and children as they waded into that river in a desperate effort to flee the war. I think the message was that innocence is no defense against well-trained heavily armed troops with nothing much to do.

I'd heard that story before but somehow standing there in the dark, inches from El Salvador, with no idea where we really were or what we were going to do next, it seemed the more chilling. At that very moment, as I stood there, I was forced to think again about the fact that the United States government supported the noble efforts of troops on both sides of that river... slaughter by proxy.

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I don't remember how far we walked before we came to a junction in the road, or how long we waited there in the dark before a truck going our way picked us up and drove us toward Colomancagua.

I do remember feeling nervous. And very lonesome. The huge star-filled sky overhead seemed entirely indifferent to us as we bounced along in the back of that truck, and, for a moment, I thought I understood something about Life.

## VAL DE APPOLONIO

So, I was walking home from the fifth grade, awash in embarrassment, sneakers tied together thrown over my shoulder, the way us poor kids did it, when I found myself surrounded by rich kids, like a pack of wolves. Later I thought I should have shouted, "I'm friends with Howie and Dean." At the time I could think of nothing to say as one of them grabbed my sneakers and took off running. I chased him down, but he only tossed my shoes to one of the other rich kids, who jeered at me and tossed them to a third kid when I got close. While two of them blocked me, the other kid threatened to throw my sneakers up onto the overhead telephone wires. I begged him not to.

I looked up there, and there was plenty of evidence that they had played this game before, at this very location. I begged them again not to do this to me.

Then Val De Appolonio appeared on the scene. He was a bigger than average kid. He was certainly bigger than me. As I recall, he was maybe a little ungainly at that age. He arrived and confronted the rich kids, ordering them to give my sneakers back to me. I remember distinctly that he went right up to the kid who held my sneakers at that moment and stood toe to toe with him and said, "Give 'em back." The villain responded to this by chucking my shoes up onto the wires and running off.

Immediately I broke down in tears. I didn't know what I was going to do. I did know that my mother was going to kill me. We weren't rich and sneakers cost money and why

was I so careless and blah blah blah blah-blah. There is no way I could have explained to her what it was like to always be the new kid, or the brutality of fifth grade.

Val De Appolonio said, "It'll be OK. Just wait here; I'll go and get my dad."

I sat on the curb completely depressed, stupid, skinny, ugly, sneaker-less, un-kissed, and waited with my thick head in my hands. The fifth grade was pretty tough. I was frightened and lonely and awash in helplessness.

Val De Appolonio and his father—who introduced himself as Val De Appolonio as well, as I recall it—arrived carrying a long pole of some sort. Using that pole this very kind man patiently fished for and retrieved my sneakers from the telephone lines above.

"You gonna be OK?" he asked, handing me my shoes and placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, sir. Thank you," I said looking at the ground.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you." He rubbed my head and started for home. His son remained for a second.

"Are you sure you're gonna be OK?" asked the man's son stooping down to look me in the eye.

"Yes. Thank you," I said. But, honestly, at that moment I didn't think I would ever be OK.

I don't know if it adds anything to this story, but years later, I found Val De Appolonio via the internet, and I thanked him again.

## INANIMATE OBJECTS AND ME

You know, I really don't expect much from inanimate objects; as time goes on I've grown to expect a lot less. But we seem to be in a perpetual state of war, inanimate objects and I, and to a certain extent, for the sake of my own sanity, I've surrendered. For example, I no longer expect any inanimate object I'm dealing with to obey the laws of physics. After years of frustration, when an object defies the laws of physics, I have finally grown to accept that probability. I've also given up talking to them about it. If some *thing* refuses to fall downward when dropped, that's just the way it is; I'm not going to try to offer instruction in the matter. If some inanimate object takes every irritable opportunity to ignore laws which the rest of us must obey, I could not be more pleased.

Here's where I continue to go wrong though, I think; I still expect man-made objects to perform the task for which they were designed. I know, I know; I feel like an idiot even saying it. Who knows why I cling to such idiocy. But it's a lesson I will not, for some reason, or cannot, perhaps, manage to learn. For example, I still believe that one might reasonably expect a hammer to drive a nail or a nail to withstand a single blow from an appropriately weighted hammer. That's unreasonable of course, and I recognize it, but each time I pick up a hammer I remain head-in-the-clouds hopeful. To expect that when you turn on a faucet water should come out, and when you turn it off the flow should stop, is simply asking too much; I realize that. And, I should know that. Deep inside somewhere I honestly believe *I do* know that. I've been through this enough

times. But, I also know, deep inside somewhere, that I haven't learned the entire lesson, or I haven't learned it well enough. I should admit that.

At times I wonder what the hell is wrong with me.

But, as said, I've given up talking to inanimate objects, so that's a big step in the right direction. I'd like some credit for that at least. It wasn't always so.

I will never forget the day I was working on a doorknob inside room #404, bitterly cussing every part of that mechanism, when the woman I was scheduled to wed came upon me quietly from the other side of that door. Naturally, she was shocked by my behavior, and admittedly, if she had needed an excuse to bow out of the marriage, I'd provided it at that moment. I quickly assured her however that this was not the real me, and that the theatrics and childish antics she'd witnessed were not my usual response to the relentless onslaught of tiny, nagging irritants that fill my miserable life from the moment I open my eyes in the morning until I fall asleep at night from exhaustion.

Later, I might have tried to convince her that while being buffeted about by the storms of indifferent Fate I remained detached, observant, even somewhat bemused, calmly accepting things for what they are.

She married me anyway.

But, I've improved since then. And it wasn't easy. As I recall the progression was; throwing things while shouting at whatever object I was attempting to tame, to trying to



destroy the thing physically by any tool I might find immediately at hand, to cussing and mumbling to myself through firmly clenched teeth, to whimpering and pleading with the object, to final resignation, surrender, and humiliating defeat. I think by the time I got to that halcyon place where I could place the hook of a hanger over the bar designed specifically to hold that hanger, with no expectation whatsoever that it would either hang there or continue to hang there for any length of time no matter how brief, I'd made enormous strides. For a while, I was quite proud of myself. I felt that, at last, I was beginning to understand and, better yet, accept the nature of the world in which I find myself. I had to work my way through those steps a few times of course, until I honestly felt that I had things under control.

So, yes, in the not-so-distant past it would have been more likely for me to sprout wings and flutter away toward Heaven than to accomplish any task, no matter how simple, involving any inanimate object, without disgracing myself and dragging down those who love me. So, when the day came that I managed to screw on a doorknob without either cussing or throwing anything, I was quite reasonably proud. Oh, how I remember that day!

Quite naturally, on that glorious day, I had the urge to trumpet my advancement up the evolutionary ladder. So, I burst in upon my very dear wife, who was sitting prettily upon the couch with a cat and a book, and I began to tell her, in excited tones, what I have just now told you. I was careful to include something about my willing acceptance of the clever, always delightful, unpredictable nature of

inanimate objects. Being a fairly honest man, I also admitted that, from time to time, I still found their resistance to reason and the laws of physics absolutely goddamned infuriating, but did not dwell for too very long upon that tangent. I summarized it all by saying that I thought I had handled the task of replacing that doorknob particularly well, not with alacrity but with dignity, not with composure but with restraint.

She listened to all that I had to say, congratulated me on my success, and then said this: “Most people simply call that everyday life.”

## THE CORNERSTONE OF MY THINKING ON POLITICS

How old would you be if you'd only kissed one girl one time and got up every morning at 6:30 to pedal around the neighborhood on your bicycle tossing newspapers in the direction of your subscribers' front doors with considerable accuracy? That's how old I was when I got my first lesson in politics. At that awkward age, I was as thin as a rail and trembled like a leaf whenever the thought of a girl crossed my mind, and, so then, quite naturally I guess, I was continually atremble. I thought I had some friends though; kids I played baseball with in the summer and football with in the winter and just generally knew and liked, neighborhood kids. I wasn't the most popular kid in the neighborhood, but if you asked me who was, I couldn't name the kid. There was no leader, we were all pretty equal, we all had our flaws, whatever that amounts to. I was the embarrassingly skinny, painfully shy one.

So, I was surprised to be invited over to JoAnn Rink's garage for a party after school one day.

I was even more surprised when I got there and it was only me and three girls. I seem to recall saying, "Where is everybody?" and the girls all giggled as if they might know something. I was hoping they did, because I sure didn't. Then they produced a bottle and, gathering around, they sat on the garage floor. "Won't you join us," Renee Perkins said seductively. Since this was something I'd had experience with, I sat down. I was delighted to have another chance to play this game.

It'd been a few years, I'd given it some thought in the meanwhile, and I was ready.

At that point JoAnn went outside, and when she came back in Billy Kilmer was with her. He announced excitedly, "Quick, let's go across the street to Tex's house, there's going to be a fight!"

Naturally, since fightin' was, if not better than kissin', at least a lot less stressful, we all grabbed the opportunity to get up and run out of there. On our way I shouted at Billy, "Who's gonna fight?" and he replied over his shoulder, "George Engel."

I stopped in midstride.

I was stunned. It was impossible for me to imagine George Engel fighting anybody—he was a large, slightly goofy-looking Jewish kid of the quietest, calmest and most peaceful disposition imaginable. If I'd had to pick a phrase to describe George Engel it would have to be good-natured. Kind-hearted would also have described him.

"Who's he gonna fight?" I shouted.

"You'll see. Hurry up."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. If George was a genius, I'd never witnessed the fact, but he was no idiot either, and surely he knew that he wasn't a fighter. I was pretty sure any one of us could take him because he was just so gentle. But, I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to pick a fight with George Engel... because he was... you know, just so gentle.

When we arrived at Tex Wooster's house there was no sign of George Engel anywhere.

I'll tell you who was there. There was Billy Kilmer, who I didn't think would fight George Engel, because he was too small for the task, and, though a pretty good liar, basically a chicken; there was Larry Lurie, who I didn't think would fight George Engel, because he was a skinny arrogant pseudo-intellectual of some self-imagined sort, and his viciousness was strictly verbal or underhanded. (He was a bigger chicken than Kilmer). There was Tex Wooster, who I didn't think would fight George Engel because they were too much alike. Tex was just a big, aw-shucks, Texas hillbilly and more puppy-dog than kid; there was Kenny Leake, who I thought would fight anybody he was certain wasn't big enough or strong enough to beat him (and George Engel just might have been both.) And, there was me, who never had any intentions of fighting anyone ever (I don't know if I was chicken or not, I guess I was.) And then there were the girls of course. I was sure none of them was going to fight George Engel. So, was it some kid we didn't even know? Where was this kid who was going to fight George Engel? And, where was George Engel?

After we got there, everybody gathered in a big circle next to Tex Wooster's garage—with the girls hanging around outside, kinda on the edge of things. I was wondering, 'What the heck is going on...?' when someone said very loudly, "Boy, that George Engel sure is a moron!" Someone else said, "And his breath stinks! Goddamn, have you ever smelled his breath?" And someone else said, "What do you think, Edward?"

I said, "I think George is a nice kid. He's just quiet. You know. I never smelled his breath."

Then someone said, "Man, it's not just his breath, George Engel stinks from head to toe. What do you think, Edward?"

And I said, "I never noticed, really."

Then someone said, "He's so gutless. George Engel is the biggest chicken in the neighborhood."

And someone else said, "He's scared of his own shadow. I think one of these girls could take him. What do you think, Edward?"

I said, "You know, I think you've got him wrong. He's kinda religious. I think his religion makes him walk away from arguments and things. I don't think it's because he's afraid to fight."

"But you agree, he's a big dork, don't you?" someone said. "He is a big dork, isn't he, Edward?" someone else chimed in.

"You think he's just a big stupid dork, don't you, Edward?" said one of the girls.

"Well..." I said. "He IS kind of dorky...I have to ad..."

And before that sentence was fully out of my mouth George Engel rose up from behind the bushes and he charged me and he wrapped his big arms around me and he drove me to the ground and he started pummeling me.

The kids all closed in and started shouting.

"Kill 'im, George!"

"You heard him. He called you a dork!"

"Teach him a lesson, George!"

"Dismember the bastard!"

Meanwhile, all the girls were screamin' "Get him, George. Get him, Georgie. Get him."

Through this event I learned something about friendship and, obliquely, subsurface, I began to establish a foundation upon which I would later construct my thoughts concerning politics.

These were kids I knew. Until that day, if anyone had asked, 'Can you name a few of your friends?' without any thought, or any hesitancy, their names would have fallen from my lips like litany.

## THE GREAT WRITER WITHIN

When I was fourteen perhaps, my mother made the mistake of giving me an old, heavy, cast iron Remington typewriter. Very shortly thereafter I was thoroughly convinced that writing was my destiny. Because I knew what it was like to be shy, because I knew what it was like to be ugly, because I knew what it was like to be thought of as stupid, because I knew what it was like to be shunned, I also knew what it was like to be inward. And, at that time, I thought that was the key. So, I read, and I thought, and I wrote. I listened to the great French crooners and I wrote. Though I did not understand a word they sang, I knew from their delivery alone that they understood me. So, in the solitude of my room I wrote. I thought that's the way it should be. I wrote steadily, I wrote relentlessly.

I was convinced that the continual click-clack of the Remington was laying the foundation for a future of greatness. Here was my thinking on the matter in its entirety: I had a typewriter, therefore I should write. So, I did. I wrote. That, being the very definition of a writer, could only mean one thing.

But, I also read; mostly I read about writers. I read about writer's block, of course. I also read about how tough it was for even the best writers to get started writing each day. It had been said a dozen different ways, by a dozen different writers: the hardest part of the writer's task was applying the seat of his pants to a chair and rolling a blank sheet of paper into his typewriter. I was always shaken by that statement whenever I came across it, because I never



had that problem. “If that’s what it takes,” I moaned, “I’ll never become a writer!” It was a very serious concern.

I never experienced writer’s block. Never. On the contrary, I couldn’t wait to sit down in front of the typewriter, because my mind was awash in ideas. I was so eager that my hands shook with anticipation as I rolled that first blank sheet of paper into the machine. Once underway, I regretted ever having to stop. Worse still was the nagging, though somewhat nebulous, feeling that unwavering commitment is requisite for pressing on in any idiotic self-deception. Nonetheless, despite all that—never having any problem getting started, never finding myself at a loss for something to say, the feeling that all idiots were, like myself, self-convinced of their calling—I slowly began to believe that I was becoming a real writer. Up there alone in my room, a sea of pages accumulating at my feet, I had no thought for the brilliance, or the lack thereof, which this ocean of productivity revealed. It no longer mattered; very early on I’d developed a fascination with the rhythm of the keys, and that was enough for me.

Whenever I pushed away from the desk and I looked down upon the stacks of pages I’d produced, I dreamed of a small dedicated readership. I also dreamed of a certain point in my success when writers whose work I admired would seek me out to tell me how much *they* respected *my* work.

“I wish I had written that,” they’d say.

“Well, you know...” I’d say humbly.

There I am now, fourteen years old, skinny and pimply, alone in my room, reading some literary magazine, casting

a cold eye on the published work of others. Turn again and I am sick at heart while reading my own unpublished and un-publishable drivel. Though at one time every word seemed to spill out onto the page in place, now every word was wrought only through torture, because I was grinding out the commonest sort of pretentious crap (I'm guessing here) and well aware of the fact (this, I remember quite clearly). So, the importance of editing began to well up in me, and I soon began to develop that vicious noble craft.

It's amazing how *empowering* (thank you ladies) slashing words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and pages can be. I began to take tremendous pride in the heartlessness of my editing. Whereas I once could not bring myself to cut a single precious word, by my second year of pounding on that typewriter I was into slash-and-burn editing. Nothing was good enough now. No single word was the correct one, no coupling of two words was strong enough, no phrase sang on key, no sentence latched on tightly enough to the reader's intellect to deliver the entertainment they deserved. Every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, page, chapter was worrisome for me until it was altered, cut, cropped, rearranged, thrown out entirely or re-written in every available combination known to man. At the same time, like every phony-baloney, so-called, self-appointed writer, I was nagged by the idea that what I was doing was criminal. Deep within me I knew that I was depriving humanity of insight into my every waking thought by this foul sacrilege. Deleting a typo was an unpardonable sin.

One rainy afternoon, with a mountain of torn pages at my feet, I pushed away from my desk, stood up, shook my fists

at Heaven and declared loudly, defiantly and proudly, “Ha-ha, give me three words and I’ll rearrange them to the end of time.” [Insert maniacal laughter here.] This, I told myself, is how one attains martyrdom.

So, all of that is only to tell you this:

At about that time (I’m guessing 1964) I sent Evergreen Review my first submission, and it was rejected, BUT, along with the rejection slip, Barney Rosset included a brief, handwritten note encouraging me to continue writing. Quite possibly there was not a person on earth who needed that encouragement less—at that point, I couldn’t imagine life without writing—but I was ecstatic!

Forty-six years later, I discovered Evergreen Review again, on the internet. Just the name flooded my heart with memories. So, I sent them a copy of what I thought was my best stuff (Lambfield)... only to be rejected again. They told me it wasn’t really their style. Of course I knew that going in, but, I also knew what their style was. So, I sat down and hammered out something in their style. It was about three evenings’ work.

This they accepted.

Editor-in-Chief Barney Rosset—still the first to read all submissions, and the man who makes the final decision about what sees print in Evergreen Review—the guy who encouraged me to keep writing when I was 14, published my first piece in his esteemed publication when I was 60.

Henry Edward Fool

Of course, now my fear is that if it's another 46 years before I see print in *Evergreen* again, I'll be 108. At that point, as I've told their editor, I will probably have lost all interest in anything that isn't called chocolate pudding.

PAUL

*I don't know what it is  
that Paul's got,  
but the girls all seem  
to like it a lot.*

Paul was a photographer and he rented the room across the hall from me. Together we formed a select and privileged class—the only two people living above the Laundro-mat who were not members of the See family. And though we were completely different in almost every way, we were also very much alike. We understood each other; we were harmonious. Our entire generation had a slightly cat-like—perhaps somewhat chemically-enhanced—sensitivity to visual phenomena of any sort, but Paul and I shared a special appreciation for the pure natural beauty of young women. Paul loved the way they looked. I loved the way they moved. He was devoted to his craft. I was devoted to mine. We both lived above the Laundro-Mat.

Once in a while Paul and I would smoke a little dope together and sit out on his balcony in the middle of the night and listen to the winos argue in the park below, or we'd hang around inside where, for hours on end, he'd toss out random thoughts in his own casual, even-paced, thoroughly entertaining manner, while I pored in silence through his portfolios. His photographs captured the full and generous range that God has devoted to beauty cast in the female visage. His work was remarkable.

*God, look at her eyes!*

*Paul, you have GOT TO introduce me to this chick.*

There was something reassuring about having Paul around; it was a pleasure just to know that someone so calm, so trusting, and so generous, was living three steps away, just across the hall. He was a very good part of life, a nice part, a simple part. Stability is always nice, and Paul was as even-keeled as they come.

Though neither the handsomest young man in Richmond nor the richest, Paul seemed perpetually surrounded by eager, adoring young damsels begging him to capture their beauty on film. And he did it too; Paul not only caught their outward beauty, he also captured their intelligence, as well as the delight these alluring creatures all seemed to carry around inside themselves. Apparently, many of his subjects even paid him for the privilege...and how that worked I do not know. But, on the other side of the column, I once found myself begging Paul for the privilege of writing a paper for him, and *he* paid *me*.

One evening, in the midst of the usual sort of thing, Paul started moaning about the fact that he had a paper due in one of his photography classes. Being an artist, he had neither the time, nor the inclination, nor the ability, truth be known, to produce such a paper; and he was convinced that no one, whatever their skills, could produce the thing in the few remaining hours he had left. Quite naturally, and correctly as well, Paul was convinced that his task as a photographer was to *take* pictures, not to *write about* taking pictures. And, no one else on earth could have had a deeper or more sympathetic understanding of that view than I. I'd only recently tried to convince the Head of the Fine Arts Department that I was *too busy painting* to attend his class

in Advanced Drawing. So, Paul's argument was iron-clad as far as I could see. I understood poor Paul, and I understood the bind he was in. We were pals after all. We were kinsmen. We were stoned. So, I said, "Hey, come on, man..." and a bit later I even finished that thought. "I'll write the damned thing for you."

Paul looked at me and seemed to consider the proposal for a moment.

"Listen, Paul, let me write it for you," I pleaded. "For me, it'll be easy. I've been writing since I was 12..."

"But what do you know about photography?" he asked.

That struck me as the most ridiculous question anyone could ever ask. "Are you kidding me?" I laughed. Such naiveté, I snorted for a minute and a half. "I don't know a damned thing about photography," I told him proudly. "I don't need to *know* about photography to *write* about photography!" I thought that simple, undeniable fact was worth repeating, and so I did. But, somehow he still had his doubts. So, I assured him.

"Paul," I said with exasperation, "I've been lying since I could first form words." I then told him something no one else knew about me: "Painting is only *what I do*; writing is *who I am*."

Such were the times that we both gave that some thought for a while.

"Look, Paul," I said, "the aesthetic considerations of photography and the aesthetic considerations of any other static art form, are the same." I raised my eyebrows, "The considerations are the SAME!" I declared.

Somehow, he still seemed unconvinced.

“I don’t know...” said Paul mulling. At that point, I knew that all he needed was one more little nudge.

“Paul,” I pleaded, “I can do this for you. For you writing’s painful, but for me it’s pleasure. Believe me, I can do this for you.”

Paul was nodding his head. I could see that he was even beginning to like the idea.

“The plastic considerations are the same!” I ranted. “Look. Good heavens. OK. Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll write the paper, and you can look at it. If you like it, we’ll put your name on it, you turn it in, and you owe me a favor. If you don’t like it, you’ll only be out a few hours that you would have wasted not doing the damned thing anyway. Writin’s writin’, Paul,” I said. “I can write this; I can write about anything.”

By the time he finally agreed I’d not only convinced Paul, in the same stroke, such was the undeniable verity of my argument, I’d also convinced myself. Delighted, and overflowing with self-confidence, I slid back across the hall, eagerly took a seat in front of my old Remington, and rolled in a blank sheet of typewriter paper.

In the morning, when the work was complete, Paul looked it over, smiled, and handed me a wad of cash. I shoved it in my front pocket, and scampered back across the hall to roll the first page into my good old typewriter once again, and typed Paul’s name, in caps, on top. Later I discovered Paul had given me \$35. (That was a month’s rent in those days). For one tenth of a second I considered going into business writing papers on subjects about which I knew nothing.



Then I got caught up in staring at the painting I was working on. It needed me a lot more than Paul had.

A+.

That's what Paul got on that paper. A+. When he showed it to me, First, I laughed. Then, I shrugged.

"Writin's writin', Paul," I said.

## On HITTING

Because I'm over sixty years old and I'll probably never swing a baseball bat again, I want to say something about hitting. This is not instruction and it's not reminiscence, it's a way of giving thanks; for, through batting, baseball has given me one of the very few things that I've been sure of in Life. If I am sure of anything, if I've ever been sure of anything, I've been sure that I can hit the long ball. I can't hit the ball every at-bat, and I can't hit every ball I see, but I know I can hit the long ball, and, as if that has not been blessing enough, I can also bunt. From my experience, this is a fairly rare combination.

I've always admired the place hitters (of course). To be able to drop the ball wherever you want it on the field must be a wonderful skill to possess. I wish I could do that. But, unless it was driven right out of the park or dropped nicely along the third baseline where the catcher thought it was the pitcher's and the pitcher thought it was the third baseman's and the third baseman thought it was someone else's, I've never really known where the thing was headed. Give me one to drive and I knew where it was headed though. Or tell me to lay it down and I knew what to do. Other than that, I'm lost at bat.

Part of that lost feeling is anxiety. And by that I mean that part of hitting well is confidence. Unless I was up there to bunt—which gave me confidence—I was pretty nervous at bat unless and until that nice fat, huggable, perfect pitch started coming in. Then, as soon as I recognized it, I was filled with confidence. Then, there was no doubt. Then,

everything was clear. I knew exactly what to do; I knew how to do it; and I had no doubts that I would do it. Throw me one where I like it, and it's gone.

That's a very cool thing.

I don't know how or when I developed these two skills. I know that they are as solidly a part of me as the look in my eye. Sitting here typing I can think about driving the long ball or dropping the perfect bunt and my mind runs through the motions; all the nerves, muscle fibers, and synapses in my brains which are necessary to that task, are triggered and ready to go. If I stood up right now in this room and a bat was handed to me, I could drive an imaginary ball right through the opposite wall and out into the street, or lay it down in such a way that it would dribble over into the corner and nestle there nicely, before the cat could get to it. I have no doubt about that.

About batting in general I know almost nothing. I know that if he's thrown me two balls already, and no strikes yet, I have better things to do than swing a bat. I know that if I'm up there to advance the runner, bunting is a very good way to do that. Short of that there are always coaches. But, I know almost nothing about hitting. For the most part it's a mystery to me.

But, I can drive the long ball, and I can drop a dribbler. And, it's hard not to feel good about that.

## **BOLSTERS AND BASEBALL BATS**

When I make my wife laugh I feel like a success as a husband. That's pretty much my job, as I see it. Everything I know about marriage, distilled, comes down to this: it's my job to make my wife happy and to protect her...and I seem to be biologically suited to both tasks. With only about 10% of her intelligence it's simplicity itself for me to play the fool for her; it's as if I was born to it. When I make her laugh I feel like a success as a husband.

As far as protection is concerned, I am, like many males, just a big, walking, talking, battery, storing frustration, disappointment, regret, crushed hopes, false starts, delayed dreams, failure and embarrassment until that time when it may be called upon either for defense or to accomplish what would otherwise be physically impossible. One time, for example, my lovely little wife and I paddled a four-ton canoe against a strong, belligerent and relentless, head-wind for what must have been 600 miles before finding a place to haul out. By the time it was all over I had tapped into, and almost depleted, my deepest reserves of stored irrational male bitterness.

While flipping around the channels one day, I stumbled upon a peculiar scene and decided to stay tuned for awhile, at least until I could figure out what was going on. On the screen was a woman pounding a round pillow (a bolster, I'm told) with a baseball bat. What struck me was the pure ineptitude with which this woman wielded the bat. She lifted it awkwardly—a completely foreign object in her hands—and then just pretty much let gravity take over.

After the bat bounced off the bolster she lifted it again, and lethargically let it drop; there was no wrist, no shoulder, no back, no legs, no passion in it.

There was a group of women sitting around her shouting encouragement, cheering her on. Clearly they saw things differently than I did. One of these women—her *Life Coach*, I later learned—was saying things in words that I recognized but did not entirely understand. “It takes real courage to face your past, Trina,” she was saying. “It requires true inner strength to express your anger. Envision your anger dispelled with each blow. With each stroke you take another step toward regaining your life!”

Being a sane kind of person, I laughed at that. It was, perhaps, the most ridiculous thing any Life Coach (whatever the heck that may be) could have said to any woman making frail efforts to regain her life with a baseball bat and a bolster. Believe me, Trina was getting *nowhere*. She was regaining *nothing*. A baseball bat isn’t the correct instrument for a woman to express her anger anyway, and everyone with any sense knows that. Put Trina in a kitchen however and she’ll be on the road to regaining her life in no time. Give her a cabinet full of pots and pans and she won’t need instructions from any Life Coach (whatever that may be) and she certainly won’t need any encouragement.

Many of the women I’ve known seem to have had a natural talent for developing tremendously expressive, Life-regaining skills, utilizing only the clattering of dishes and the slamming of cabinet doors.

My truly wonderful wife walked in while I was laughing at this...event...so, I explained the situation to her pretty much as I've just explained it to you.

"Really," I said, "hand a man that bat with instructions to express his anger and that pillow will be in shreds in a matter of seconds, and the table underneath it will be reduced to kindling."

"Well, perhaps she's never handled a baseball bat before," my very dear wife said sympathetically.

"Nothing could be clearer," I admitted. "But, hand a man a baby-doll in matching sweater and knit booties, with instructions to unleash his anger, and unless someone steps in to stop him (three strong men is recommended), the entire room will be reduced to rubble. No Life Coach—whatever the hell that is—required."

This last statement made me stop and think about what I'd just said. Not the verity of it; it's loaded with verity. If a bear should ever suddenly appear, and all I have is a baby-doll in knit ensemble, he'd better take notice.

It's really kind of sad though. My wife, whom I adore, pretty much knows me as a kind, caring, generally good-natured, entertaining and sometimes goofy sort of guy. I'm very very sorry to say that she also knows that I have my limits...she's seen me at my worst. But, this is neither an excuse nor an apology; as far as I can tell, it's simply the biological construct of masculinity.

As said, my job is to entertain her and to protect her.

There's the can of worms. I've already opened it for you.

## CAPACITOR

I don't remember how I knew that the little aluminum capsule with two wires protruding from the bottom was the reason my Peugeot wouldn't run, but I knew it. My guess is that the honest mechanic my father introduced me to simply told me—maybe it had been a problem once before. At any rate I had my suspicions. And I hoped that thing, that little tube of electrical mystery, was the problem, because if it wasn't I was lost. So I unbolted it from the side of the engine block and unplugged the fusible links and took it to an auto parts store on the edge of Richmond. Dealing with motorheads behind the counter is always an adventure unto itself, but these guys felt a special obligation to make the experience exceptionally grueling for someone like me—someone with long hair, a full set of teeth and a high school diploma. I knew it would be that way, but I wanted my car to run so, I had to go in there.

When I showed the part to a young idiot, about my own age, at the counter, he laughed a greasy, toothless laugh and said in deep Southern, "Woll, what th' hell's that *offen*?"

I told him it was *offen* a Peugeot, and he laughed again.

"A wha-a-a-t?"

"A Peugeot."

"A Poo-joe? Woll, goddamn, what the hell's a poo-joe?"

A big guy in overalls, tinkering with a carburetor on a work bench over in the corner, shouted, "It's one of them foreign cars!"

"Foreign car? Are you sure?"

“Yep. Foreign car of some sort,” he muttered without looking up from what he was doing.

“What sort of foreign name is that? Poo-joe.”

“How the hell am I supposed to know, ask the hippie, it’s his fuckin’ car.”

“HIS car,” he said slyly, “You better take another look; I think it’s a HER.” He looked at me, winked and grinned.

“But, it don’t matter,” he said, and leaned charmingly onto the counter top with both elbows, hands pressed flat on either side of an idiotic grin. He fixed me with his delight-filled, playful, crystal-clear blue eyes and said matter-of-factly, “We don’t carry no parts for no foreign cars.” As an afterthought he added the word, ‘hippie’. Then the fake charm, and the sparkle in his eye vanished completely. It was replaced by a chilling, unflinching, hatred.

“Well,” I said as if nothing unusual were happening—because this really wasn’t anything new to me—“can you tell me where I might get this thing?”

He stood straight up, placed both palms on the countertop and leaned across the surface toward me. “Woll, hell man, I don’t even know what that is; how’m I supposed to tell you where you can get it?” He leaned there for a while staring at me, saying nothing, grinning, and then, without turning, said over his shoulder, “You know where this hippie here can get something like this, Travis?”

“Christ Almighty!” said Travis and slammed his screw driver down on the work bench. “What the hell is it?”

He stomped over to the counter and took the thing from me. “It’s a capacitor,” he said and tossed it onto the counter, before returning to his work at the work bench.



The other guy just kept grinning at me. "It's a capacitor," he repeated. "For a foreign car," he added. "We don't carry no parts for no foreign cars. I believe I have already told you that." He leaned toward me and sniffed the air, as if he smelled something bad. Then he grinned theatrically.

He stayed fixed like that, grinning at me, until I picked up the part, turned, and walked out the door.

Rather than go through that again I went over to Lilly's place—where there was a phone and called around until I got a lead on a place near D.C. where they said they had the part, but would not ship it. In those days credit cards were a thing of the future. So I decided to hitchhike up to the town where the foreign car parts warehouse was located. I didn't know what other options I had since the train didn't run within 20 miles of that town and the bus ran late in the afternoon, twice a week. This was something I had to get done. And I had to get it done in one day. If I missed more than one day's work at the cafeteria they'd soon find another sullen idiot to dish up rubberized scrambled eggs.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO BAD THOUGHTS CREDITS

Who wouldn't want to reduce their bad thoughts footprint (BTF) and replace their bad thoughts with high-quality, VERIFIED Peace-Chant Offsets (PCOs)?

Trade YOUR Bad Thoughts for verified PCOs NOW!

### HOW IT WORKS:

So, let's say some guy on either side of the counter—for bad thoughts cut both ways—has offended you. Now, inexplicably, you find yourself muttering to yourself as you walk away, and really just kinda hoping that he'll be run over by a bread truck. But, hey, you're human; it's an honest sentiment, and an understandable reaction to such mistreatment. Admittedly, this world needs fewer people like that guy, but—*let's be honest, now*—we also need fewer good people, *like yourself*, thinking the kind of things you have just thought.

You couldn't take it back at the time, (you could but it really wouldn't mean anything)... and, nagging as it may be to admit, after careful consideration, you really do wish that bastard would be run over by a bread truck. Let's face it, had we any power in such matters, there'd be a lot more bread trucks on the streets and everybody'd be a bit more circumspect about how they treat people on the other side of the counter. Naturally, it'd be a better world; anyone would agree with you on that. That glorious dream aside, what oh what is to be done about *your* growing BTF? The rest of us expect more from you, and we know that you expect more from yourself. It's a dilemma, isn't it? Until now, there was no solution. Nothing you could do.

Until now, your BTF, though ignored, perhaps forgotten, remained toxic, an active, ever-expanding, spiritual pollutant tainting our shared metaphysical environment (SME).

### WHAT'S THE ANSWER?

First, let us say this: WE UNDERSTAND. We do. We know that normally you walk in perfect peace, gently, calmly, respectfully upon this caring earth. You're an OK guy—you have friends, any one of which would be willing to fight for the honor to testify in a public forum that you're just swell. Besides, you're not to blame. If you have a bad thought, it's because you've been shoved. Still, somewhere inside you know it would be wrong of you to simply shrug off this bastard/bread truck wish; because with that thought you have increased the size of your BTF considerably, not to mention the harm you've done to the SME. In that process, you've made the world a worse place in which the rest of us must live. There's no denying it, we all suffer when you lapse.

NOW (and not a minute too soon, as they say) there's this:

### The BAD THOUGHTS EXCHANGE

#### WHAT WE DO:

We take your bad thoughts, and, for a small fee, exchange them for the pure, blessed, PEACE-restoring chanted prayers of some monks somewhere else in the world (you don't need to know where). These PCOs reduce your BTF so that our SME might regain the perfect and harmonious balance which we all know in our hearts to be its natural state.

## HOW YOU CAN EXCHANGE YOUR BAD THOUGHTS

What's a bad thought worth these days? \$149.95? \$79.95? How about \$49.95? What if I were to tell you that you could comfortably wish everyone who crosses your path—man, woman and child—straight to Hell for \$19.95 a month, and create little or no effect whatsoever on, or in, our lovely world?

That's right, for only \$19.95, you can wish every single person you come into contact with—whether it's face to face, over the phone, even on the internet—right straight to Hell. We'll toss in married couples at no additional cost—send 'em both to Hell *without disrupting the SME*. But that's not all. Or, as Dupont says, Wait, there's more! ***For this month only***, we'll also throw in a second month absolutely free. So, right now, for a limited time only, you can have virtually UNLIMITED bad thoughts for 2 FULL MONTHS without increasing your BTF. They'll all be exchanged for soothing, earth-healing PCOs, for one easy payment of ONLY \$19.95.

But, there's more. Or, as Dupond says, That's still not all! We'll also—through this offer only—throw in a free **carbon footprint offset**, and *we all know how very valuable that can be*. This offset is worth the equivalent of driving an un-tuned Hummer with a faulty muffler 16,000 miles, while drinking water from 248 plastic bottles. BUT to get this very valuable **carbon footprint offset** you must subscribe to the Bad Thoughts Exchange right NOW. DO NOT miss this opportunity. DO NOT put it off.

**ACT NOW!**

## A WORD TO OUR INVESTORS

The Bad Thoughts Exchange is well-positioned to launch and maintain every aspect of the bad thoughts offset market from creating verified credits to facilitating the trade of credits for validated and verified PCOs in a market where there is clearly a growing demand, while enabling the expansion of the bad thoughts credit supply. This is a ground floor opportunity.

## ABOUT OUR SOFTWARE

The Bad-Thoughts Exchange Monitor™ is a software package designed to boost the credibility of the bad thoughts market through establishing recognized standards, transparency, and quantifiable accountability.

The resulting benefits for you are:

- fewer delays in acquiring fees
- dramatically lower administrative costs
- automated verification reinforces the illusion that PCOs have REAL credibility
- all of which mean higher bad thoughts credit prices for you and better returns on your PCO scam

Bad-Thoughts Exchange Monitor™ is the most comprehensive fully automated software available for verification and delivery of Bad Thoughts Offset credits. Bad-Thoughts Exchange is the ORIGINAL and still the leading proponent of transparency and automation in the Bad-Thoughts trading market.

## A FINAL WORD FROM OUR CEO

Henry Edward Fool is a co-founder of Bad-Thoughts Offsets Inc., which is dedicated to reducing the transaction costs and ensuring the recognized integrity of the global bad thoughts credit market, he is also CEO, CFO of Bad Thoughts Exchange International™, a ‘Global Community Corporation’™.

*The tools and methodologies needed to measure bad thoughts are still under development. They are difficult to track and far too difficult to independently validate, verify, monitor and quantify. The variables are just too expansive; the parameters too variable. But, methodologies are being developed, and, in the meantime right thinking people will want to participate in this thing which they, quite frankly do not understand, knowing only that it is a good thing. Beyond offering simple offsets and verified offsets, we are looking at a bright future. Clean Thought Development Mechanisms have been undertaken and methodologies are being developed. The various voluntary offset programs, such as the Voluntary Bad Thoughts Standard Offset Project (VBTOSP) in Des Moines, is/are growing steadily. I know of people coming together in their homes and working on bad thoughts equalization methodologies almost on a nightly basis—basically grass-roots offset projects—and, by their actions, paving the way for a universally recognized and accepted Bad Thoughts Exchange with established Bad Thoughts Value Standards. The burgeoning, and voluntary, Bad Thoughts Market, though presently requiring offsets to be independently validated and verified, will eventually become standardized globally, and, we’ll get our cut, right off the top, every step of the way. That, I can assure you. The time has come.*

Henry Fool [May 11, 2009]

## REVOLUTIONARY THOUGHTS ONLY

As a young man, looking far far into the future I saw that we were heading down the wrong path when it came to a petroleum-driven society and many times thought (quietly, secretly) that if there was any guts in my convictions I'd go out at night and set as many cars as I could on fire. The hope—I think (I can only guess)—was that my example would launch a trend and before long, with a growing multitude of cars crippled and eventually removed from the landscape, we might be forced to consider moving in a new and better direction than petroleum addiction. That thinking ended abruptly—not in my dotage—but way back then, about the very same time I was contemplating such stuff.

One morning I woke up and stepped outside to discover that, during the night, some goddamned **IDIOT**, or team of idiots, had gone down the street flattening all four tires on every vehicle for five blocks. Standing there looking at my poor little truck, I could not comprehend how *anyone* could have been so goddamned thoughtless and stupid and arbitrarily cruel. I needed that truck to make a living, AND, I sure as hell didn't have the money for replacing four tires.

I tell you these things with the hope that you may see... well, I suppose not.

Still, I hope that, if not an enjoyable read, it might have been informative.

## EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS

When I worked in a little restaurant in Richmond—my brand new degree in Fine Arts had helped me to land the highly coveted job of dishwasher there, that and the fact that I lived in the manager's garage—I once asked the owner, “Say, why do you keep that eggplant on the menu?” He looked at me for a bit and walked away without saying a word. So, next time I had an opportunity to collar him and the time seemed right for it, I asked, “Hey, you know, I’m just a dishwasher; I don’t know a damned thing about running a fine restaurant, but, you know, I see Alma come in every Wednesday and she takes those eggplants and she slices them very carefully to Jacques’ specifications, and together they salt them down and they dip ‘em and they bread ‘em and they mix up a sauce and they layer them in little individual casserole dishes very nicely, with sauce and grated cheese, and they cover them and put them in the refrigerator, but then, that eggplant just sits there. Nobody *ever* orders that eggplant. I don’t know why you keep it on the menu. I’d like to know that.”

The owner nodded, confirming the fact that noises of some sort had come from my mouth, then he cocked an ear as if somebody might be calling his name, raised a finger, as if to say, ‘hold that thought’, turned, and walked away.

So, one evening—it was a Thursday, I think—everybody who walked into that joint ordered the eggplant. Everybody. All night long people arrived with an urgent, burning desire for eggplant. It was quite a rush.



We sold so much eggplant that two-hours-in the waiters were bowing and mumbling *je regrette*. Some of those people who wanted eggplant after we'd run out were outraged and declared loudly that they'd never set foot in the place again, others simply went away quietly and hung themselves.

At the end of that shift, after the curtain was drawn down over the glass door and the blinds closed; after the staff had all gotten something to eat and got their aching legs propped up comfortably on chairs; while the waiters and waitresses were slouching in the booths moaning and counting their stacks of unruly cash, the owner stuck his nose into the kitchen, caught my eye, and crooked a finger. I put down the pot I was scrubbing and walked out to him. "That," he said into my ear, "is why we keep the eggplant on the menu."

I nodded and went back to my job.

Back in the kitchen I said something about this to the chef and he shrugged and said, "That's the restaurant business."

So, the restaurant business, as I then understood it, is: Nobody orders the eggplant, and nobody orders the eggplant, and nobody orders the eggplant, and then one day, everybody orders the eggplant.

END OF LESSON ONE

## LESSON TWO

In that very same restaurant, the owners very generously took the tip of the tenderloin (by far both the best *and the ugliest* piece of the beef) and ground it up for their

luncheon-service hamburgers. And those burgers moved very slowly. So, they printed up a new menu, proudly proclaiming that their burgers were 100% ground tenderloin tip. And those burgers moved very slowly. They dropped the price. And those burgers moved very slowly. They were debating dropping the price again when they decided instead to call in some kind of a self-appointed restaurant pricing consultant. (Yeah, I sneered too.)

And the self-appointed restaurant pricing consultant looked at the problem and said this: “Price those burgers as much as your steaks, maybe even a little higher.”

The owners had their doubts that tripling the price of their burgers would sell more burgers, but, since they had paid this guy for his self-appointed restaurant pricing advice, they did it anyway. They had new menus printed up with the new, grossly-inflated price printed somewhat less-than-discreetly in bold type with an exclamation point, and suddenly those burgers became so popular we couldn’t make enough of them. They were so popular they jumped to the dinner menu as well.

Raise the price, sell more burgers.

END OF LESSON TWO

So, that’s everything you need to know about the restaurant business. And, quite naturally you ask: Can this knowledge be applied usefully in other situations?

It’s many years later and I have just purchased the white Saab that Margaret had predicted—*12 years earlier*—

would someday have a place in my life, and I need to (regrettably) sell the Mazda pickup truck which I hadn't changed the oil in for more than 12 years, and which I simply could not kill, despite such neglect. So, I placed that truck on the side of the road in a location where I'd seen others sell their old vehicles, with a sign that said \$300 and listed my phone number.

And it sits there.

And it sits there.

It sits there for about three weeks.

"For God's sake, what the hell is wrong with these people?" I ask no one in particular. "It's a good truck!" I whine. "You cannot kill that truck!" I declare. "I know. I've tried. I haven't changed the oil in that truck in 12 years!" But, no one hears my cry.

On my way home—I do not know why—but Lesson Two from my restaurant experiences in Richmond pops into my head. I go home, I pick up a bold black marker, and I return to the truck. There, I make two very small strokes upon the sign that says \$300 and lists my phone number. Now the sign reads, \$800, and lists my phone number. I then walk the three short blocks home.

And when I get there the phone is ringing, and there are two messages on my answering machine. Suddenly, everybody wants to buy that truck. Ten minutes later I'm back at the site with the hood up, and that little engine is ticking away like a sewing machine, and some guy is smiling wildly, shaking my hand gratefully, and reaching for his wallet. It's interesting what you can learn while working as a dishwasher in a restaurant.

## HENRY PLEASE COME HOME

After college I scooted up to New Hampshire (God alone knows why) and stayed the winter there (God alone knows why). And I have never since been able to understand why anyone would put themselves through that more than once. I only stayed because I couldn't dig myself out. The locals take a certain pride in the horrors of a New Hampshire winter though, and feel a constant necessity to deny that it might be crueler yet over there in what they call VER-mont. In Ver-mont they've taken up the challenge, declaring that New Hampshire folk *couldn't last a Ver-mont winter*; and, for reasons known only to themselves, *State of Mainers* have jumped into the fray with this tale: Seems that one day the Wid-uh Hawkins spied some men surveyin' right outside her dooryard. After a while, one of 'em come up and knocked on the Wid-uh's door.

"I'm sorry to tell you this Wid-uh," says he, "but it seems you don't live in VER-mont at all. From what we can determine, you live in New Hampshire."

"Well, thank God for that," said the Wid-uh. "I don't think I could have stood another one of them nasty VER-mont wint-uhs."

So, one day when Spring finally rolled around, I noticed an absolutely lovely young woman sitting in the park, on the lawn, like a flower, and I paid a local kid five bucks to let me take his truly cute little puppy for a walk. The flower I picked in that park that day was Kerry. She was one of the most delightful people I'd ever met. She even liked the rented puppy idea.

So, you know, things being what they are...

Very shortly after arriving in San Francisco, Kerry and I discovered that the money we had set aside to cover six months was good for about one month out there. I think we could have lived for a year in New Hampshire on that same money. Still, we were smart enough to move out of the weekly-rate, sleaze-bag hotel in the Tenderloin, up the hill to a much much nicer, monthly-rate, apartment, in a much much nicer neighborhood, near Union Square, as soon as our first week was up. Here, there was no indifferent 'desk clerk' picking his teeth behind a 4-inch-thick glass, no old men sitting around in their pajamas and slippers fixed on an old black 'n' white TV twenty-four hours a day, no pimps, no whores, no bodies of questionable vitality lying in clumps of soiled clothing in the hallway. The new place was just plain nicer in every way, not to mention cheaper.

We sat on the empty floor in the empty living room and ate carrots, canned meat-product, tortillas and oranges for the first couple of months, while we sought work. Late at night, we'd sometimes take a cold quart of beer and walk up to a small park at the very top of Taylor Street, and sit on a bench, and just gaze down upon the lights of Broadway and the Bay Bridge for hours. What a wonderful time we had. GOD, we were happy.

Across the street from us, at our level (fourth floor), there lived an old woman who would, each evening when the sun went down, throw open her window, lean out over the traffic crawling slowly up Taylor Street, and with desperation, in heart-breaking, pleading tones, yell, "Henry, please come home!" She would wait for a while as if anticipating a response from the street below, then, more

quietly, with resignation, she'd yell, "Henry...*please*, please come home." Then she would withdraw.

She did this every night, at sunset.

Kerry and I would sit there on the floor of our empty apartment, staring into each other's eyes, eating carrots in silence, and grimacing. Our concern, compassion, helplessness, bewilderment, was occasionally broken by nervous laughter. Such was our innocence.

## DE-LIGHT

My first job in San Francisco was running an old lithograph for Goodwill Industries. For a small organization they sure produced an awful lot of forms for themselves to fill out, and it was my job to be sure they never ran out of these forms. I also made laminated signs for the store, and engraved plastic signs; you know the sort of thing that says 'ELEVATOR' which you might find stuck to the wall next to an elevator. Occasionally you might see one of these signs saying 'No Smoking' in an area where they don't want you to smoke. At any rate, running the endless supply of forms and printing signs for the store, and engraving plastic signs from time to time, was a full time job, and that old lithograph required my constant attention.

One day the wife of the CEO came into the print shop and walked up to me in a most royal manner, and, from a very great distance on high, spoke down to me in the way one might expect to address any lesser being, and this is what she said, "I want you to make a sign saying DELIGHT."

I said, "You want me to make a sign which says 'delight'?" She twittered as if the idea itself delighted her, and said.

"Yes, you know, for the elevator." She smiled at her own cleverness. But, I didn't get it. So, I did not smile.

I said, "You want me to make a sign, for the elevator, which says 'delight'?"

She said, "Yes, as sort of a little reminder."

I said, "As a reminder of what?"

She looked at me in a very carp-like manner.

Then, as if startled by my density, said, “AS A RE-minder that there is to be no smoking on the elevator, of course.” I said, “I’m sorry. I’m misunderstanding something here,” and I went over what I thought I had heard. “You want me to produce a sign, for the elevator, that says ‘delight’ as a reminder to people that there is no smoking in the elevator?”

“Yes!” she twittered, once again thrilled by something that I could neither envision nor, though I was struggling to, understand.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “But, how is a sign which says *delight* supposed to remind people not to smoke in the elevator?”

She looked at me, carp-like again, for a very long time and then, as if to an idiot, explained, “De...LIGHT,” she said. I still didn’t get it, but that must have been obvious.

“They’ll see the sign and it will remind them to put out their cigarette...” she said with exasperation. “Have you never heard the phrase: Have you got a *light*?”

Actually, I had heard the phrase, *Have you got a light?* and it had more to do with matches than cigarettes, and it had to do with *lighting* cigarettes, not putting them out. But, at least I finally understood what that woman was talking about. So, I said this, “No, I won’t make that sign.”

She said, “What did you say?” And she said it as if she truly did not understand what I had just said.

I thought I had better soften it a bit, so I said, “I’ll be glad to make you a sign that says, No Smoking, or No Smoking on the Elevator, or Please Put Out Your Cigarette, but I will not make any sign saying De-Light.”



It was a while before she said it, but she repeated herself, “What did you say?” And she said it in such a way that I realized that no one in that organization had ever before refused to accommodate that woman or had ever questioned any of her goddamned stupid idiotic ideas. Though she was not an employee of Goodwill, and did not sit on the board of directors—only happened to be married to a man who did—up until that very moment, apparently, whatever nonsense she came up with was taken as Holy Writ.

I said, “Sorry. I won’t make that sign.”

She looked at me for a long time, and after demanding to know my name, left the print shop. You can guess how long it was before I was called into my supervisor’s office.

Now, my supervisor was a wonderful woman, named Joy Wilhelm, and she liked me every bit as much as I liked her. By that I mean, we treated each other with mutual respect. And she, while trying to maintain a stern look, said, “I understand you refused to make a sign for Mrs. Campbell.” I said nothing, so Joy continued.

“She’s quite upset about it and she’s going to make trouble, and, knowing her, she may even try to have you fired. So, tell me what happened.”

I explained events to Joy in pretty much the same way I just now explained them to you, and concluded. “I am not going to make a sign saying De-Light, Joy. I’m just not doing it. It makes NO sense, nobody will understand it, it won’t accomplish the task she expects it to, and I’m just not going to do it.” To wrap things up somewhat poetically, I said, “I will have no hand in making any sign saying *delight*.”

Joy looked at me for a bit with great kindness.

“Please tell me, Joy,” I continued, “that *that woman*—who is not an employee here and has no authority over me whatsoever—can *not* come into my shop and order me to make senseless, idiotic, meaningless, confusing and just plain goddamned stupid signs. Please tell me that.”

Joy laughed in a truly lovely, feminine manner.

“I won’t do it,” I continued. “I won’t. It goes against everything I stand for as a human being, and flies in the face of the entire noble tradition of sign making, not to mention their most basic purpose.”

She looked at me and shook her head as if she didn’t know quite what to do with me.

“Can’t you just make the sign...? For me. Please. It’ll save us both a lot of trouble,” she said.

I looked at Joy. She looked at me. And, you know, I really liked Joy.

So, when I was sticking the damned thing up on the wall, next to the elevator, just above the ashtray, someone asked, “What does that mean?”

I did not kill that person.

Instead, I closed my eyes very tightly and took a breath.

“I just make ‘em,” I said, “I don’t explain ‘em.”

Then I walked away.

Three weeks later I was driving for Yellow Cab.

## COLOSSUS COLEUS

We were on our way to the beach with the dogs when my dear wife spied some guys trimming a tree. They seemed to be hacking off huge chunks of the poor thing and she commented on that with a charming innocence, saying, “They’re taking off all of the freshest and youngest looking branches.”

Bemused, I snorted a bit, and from a very great height, with saintly forbearance and courtly condescension, I said dryly, “Naturally, to those of you with no real hands-on horticultural experience that might appear to be the wrong approach. However,” I said, with the milk of human kindness lubricating every word, “I assure you, there’s wisdom in it.” Because of the smugness through which this statement was (necessarily) squeezed, I was then forced to remind her of the Colossus Coleus. (She tells me now that she was reminded without my kind assistance.)

This was many years back, just after my arrival in San Francisco. So, that places it at about 1972 or 3.

I knew Kerry was far too good for me the moment we met, but, knowing that God’s caring for her would also, albeit inadvertently, provide me with protection and shelter from a cold and uncaring world, I moved in with her. We quickly acquired two kittens, Mona and Fletcher. Let’s set them aside for a moment (although there is a story there.)

We were strolling along Polk Street, awash in the early Sunday morning delight that simply strolling down Polk Street in the morning provided in those days—before it became a breeding ground for...well, never mind that.

In those days, Polk Street was a proud neighborhood, clean and neat and nicely tended. So, there we were. And Woolworth's had a plant stand out front with some of the most neglected plants you'd ever see anywhere, sitting there on the sidewalk dying in the dappled sunlight. In amongst these poor ridiculously struggling stragglers there was a badly scrawled sign: ANY PLANT HERE 25¢.

My analysis: somebody had over-watered those poor plants and they were all dying from root-rot. Although this was in the days long before I raised orchids, somehow I knew that plants are much more likely to survive under-watering than over-watering. While this wisdom spilled from my lips Kerry laughed and said, "Why do I have the feeling we're gonna take one of those miserable plants home with us?" I said, "Well, we need a plant in our new apartment and we can actually afford one of these, AND," I added, "we'll be saving a life."

So, I purposefully chose the worst possible specimen there. It had one stem, about 18 inches tall, with two tiny leaves at the very top, one dead and the other wilted badly, struggling to stay alive. It looked ridiculous, and we must have looked ridiculous carrying the thing home.

When we got it there, the first thing I did was yank it from that pot and put it on a newspaper. The muddy clump of roots and dirt was so saturated that it stood straight up even without the pot. I let it sit there for several days, with little attention, until the roots and the soil around them were thoroughly dry. Meanwhile, I had acquired some stones and placed them haphazardly in the bottom of the pot. Then, I

re-potted the poor plant and purposefully ignored it again, until it began to wilt. Then, I ran some water through there, but briefly, begrudgingly.

One hour later, the thing looked fully recovered, and its single leaf had turned toward the window. One day later, as the thing began to droop from lack of water, I took it into the kitchen and gave it a rinse and let it drain completely before taking it back and putting it in front of the widow again. At this point, I think I should say, Kerry thought I was out of my mind. It wasn't the first time she thought that, however, in this particular instance she was wrong. In this instance I actually knew stuff.

I can't say how long this process continued, but one day Kerry was astonished to look at the plant and discover two tiny new leaves unfolding at the very top of that straggly stem. She came running into the other room to tell me about it, and to drag me by the hand out to where I might witness this miracle along with her.

"WOW!" I said with delight. "Look at that!" I bent over and inspected the two tiny leaves carefully. I beamed at Kerry. "WOW" I said again, and I pinched those leaves off.

Kerry was aghast. She smacked me on the shoulder, "What? What are you doing? Are you insane? Why did you do that?"

"Please," I said, as if I knew *exactly* what I was doing, "I know *exactly* what I am doing."

After she'd calmed down, I explained that pinching off the new growth at the top *forced* growth along the stem.

I don't know where I had read that or heard that or seen that, but, at that moment I certainly hoped it was true. And, sure enough, the next morning, near the base of the stalk, there were two tiny leaves poking out. A couple of days later there were two tiny leaves at the top again, and again, under squealing protest, and physical bombardment, I pinched off those new leaves as well. By this method—pinching off new growth at the top whenever it appeared—slowly (slowly slowly slowly) over the months, more and more branches sprouted from that tall barren stem, and soon there were branches at every point from the bottom all the way to the very top. Now, whenever leaves appeared at the end of any branch either Kerry or I would pinch them off with a knowing smile. We also let the thing go unwatered until it began to droop. Under these strictly enforced abuses that plant prospered.

By the time Kerry and I broke up—about three years later I think—that coleus was, and I do not exaggerate one bit when I say this, four feet wide, four feet tall, flush and rich and full, a perfect, healthy, thriving, beautiful plant. The leaves were so densely packed that you could insert a chopstick between leaves anywhere on that plant, and the foliage would hold it in place. It was a magnificent thing. Every person who entered that room and saw that plant was astounded with its size, its density and its undeniable vigor. When we broke up and started selling things off, two slim young men paid us \$100 cash for that 25¢ coleus. (In those days, a pretty nice hanging fern cost maybe \$20.)

So, I know there should be a clever conclusion here, but I honestly can't think of one. Feel free to write your own.

## MONA and FLETCHER, and the Early Morning Rain

Besides that 25¢ coleus Kerry and I had two other growing delights, Mona and Fletcher, two kittens that we'd picked up for free somewhere. I think they were brother and sister. Mona was a lovely little solid grey thing with huge blue eyes and one pure white paw. Fletcher was a striped little guy who strutted around and liked to attack anything that wasn't moving. What was nice about Fletcher was that, after the table leg was soundly defeated, he walked away without looking back. What was nice about Mona was the fact that she was Mona.

I do not know what age these little kittens were when these events took place, they were very little however, a month or two at most.

We lived on the third floor in the back of a three floor walkup apartment in the city, and we slept with the windows open, because...whatever woman I happened to be with at any time in my life, we've always slept with the windows open. That was the arrangement. When I leave, you can have all the high-end electronics and I won't quibble about material possessions other than my ukulele, but while I'm with you, that window needs to be open at night. So, while we were together we slept with the windows open, and Kerry got the hundred dollars from the sale of the coleus when it ended.

One night, I was awakened by some horrible screams coming from the kitchen as Fletcher came running into the bedroom scared to death. I got up and ran into the kitchen

and, turning on the light, saw a LARGE tomcat mounting (that's the nice word for it) Mona. He was alternately yowling and biting her neck, and she was screaming. I grabbed a glass from the counter and threw it at the tom cat, hitting him in the back, and he looked startled and, after glaring at me—How Dare You, Sir!—jumped onto the kitchen sink and scrambled out the window. Poor little Mona whimpered and licked herself for the remainder of that night.

This kitchen window let out onto an air well with a thirty-foot drop to the ground below. How that tomcat had gotten up there I could not understand. But, I figured that was that.

The very next night, the same thing took place, only this time I grabbed that tomcat, pulled him free of Mona, and he hissed and turned on me. He was a large cat and, though I was serious, he was every bit as serious, and I let him go immediately when his claws sliced through my shirt. He then jumped onto the kitchen counter and turned toward me and looked me right square in the eye. He stood his ground for a long while all fluffed up with indignation, staring at me, then, turning his back, he slowly, carefully, with tremendous dignity, exited the window. He knew I wasn't stupid enough to try to grab him again. So, as far as I could figure, we were equals that tomcat and I. And, we both knew that was not the end of it.

So, during the day I gathered two large cardboard boxes, and a piece of stiff particle board big enough to cover the opening on those boxes. And I placed one open cardboard box on one counter, and the other, also opened, near the



sink. I was placing a metal fork, balanced upright on end, on top of the open window when Kerry asked me what I was doing. I said, "I'm going to trap a rapist." I could not have been more serious. In my noble mind, that simple statement was dripping in American justice.

That night, I didn't sleep in the bedroom, but sat up, fully dressed, with my back against the wall in the hallway just outside the kitchen. I had nodded off, when the fork falling into the sink awoke me. I ran into the kitchen, slamming the door behind me, and reached over and closed the window. So, then that tomcat was trapped between me and the door, with no way out. He stood his ground and he arched his back and he stared me in the eye and he hissed. And in response to all of that I took the nearest box off the counter and I boxed the bastard.

With one foot placed firmly on that box, I reached over and got the particle board and, on my hands and knees, with most of my weight on that box—because it felt like I'd trapped a whirlwind inside—I carefully lifted one corner just enough to slide that board underneath. Then I picked up that cardboard box and hollered for Kerry. With her help I got out of the kitchen, out of the apartment and out into the street below. As she followed, she continually asked, "What are you going to do with him? What are you going to do with him?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't know," I said. "I'm just going to take him far away from here, far away from us, and far away from Mona." I said.

The fact was. I had no plan.

I can tell you this however, when I stepped onto that bus with that box, at 4 AM, with all the yowling and shrieking coming from within, I must have looked insane. I gathered that from the looks on the face of the driver and everyone else on that bus as they kept a very close, unwavering, somewhat fearful eye on me. Holding that cat in that box was like trying to hold onto a revving engine that had broken free of its motor mounts. That cat was strong and that cat was angry, and if that cat had gotten out of that box he would have torn me apart. Everybody on that bus knew it too. And, from the vacant seats around me—12 feet in all directions—they were convinced that they'd be next.

When we got to the end of the line, at the beach, I got off in the morning rain and headed straight to the edge of the water. I waded into the Pacific up to my knees. Then, I took that box and, somewhat awkwardly, I lifted it over head and I threw it as far as I could out to sea. It landed about 12 feet out there and began to sink. Almost immediately the cat emerged from the box, took two strokes toward shore, saw me, changed course, and began swimming parallel to the beach. He was looking directly at me every inch of the way. He came back out onto the sand, maybe 30 yards down the shoreline from where I'd thrown him in, slunk across the beach quickly and, still keeping an eye on me, scampered across the highway into Golden Gate Park.

So, I don't know whether to be ashamed of myself or not.

I did what I did.

I'll tell you this much though: that tomcat was STRONG.

And from that episode I know first-hand that the only reason bull riders hang on as long as they do is the fear of what's probably going to happen when they let go.

(My wife hates that story. She suggests, more than thirty years after the fact, that no matter how poor we were, we could have invested in a screen.)

## AT THE HIPPO

We were pretty poor, still just making ends meet. And, who knows how these things work; suddenly Kerry discovered that the most wonderful hamburger joint in the world was only three blocks from where we lived at that time. It was called The Hippo and, from the moment they opened their doors, until the day they quietly disappeared many decades later, there was a long line of hungry customers outside, eager to get in.

It was expensive, but apparently/obviously worth it.

Somehow, Kerry had become infected with the idea of eating there some day, when dreams come true—and I wanted so very much to please her. So, we started saving all the change we could toward that happy event.

Meanwhile, secretly, I saved whatever I could and hid it in a jar in the closet. And one glorious evening, counting our coins on the table, it looked like we almost had enough money to go to the Hippo.

“We’re pretty close!” she said excitedly.

“Why don’t we go tonight?” I said, and dashed to the closet to get the hidden jar full of coins. For once in my life one of my romantic visions was about to come true.

So, we got kinda dressed up, and with our hearts practically bursting, we walked over to The Hippo, and we got in line outside, and we waited. Kerry was aglow with the idea that we’d be having dinner there, and sparkled each time we inched closer to the door. Once inside, though just barely, I went boldly forward and asked the High Priestess, whose bearing alone indicated a grand and noble bloodline, if I

might look at a menu. Because she was in a benevolent, if somewhat condescending, mood, she granted my request, but could not hide how she felt about her unfortunate situation. Of course she didn't mind serving great hamburgers, but it was just such a shame to have to serve them to anyone as despicable as me. Apparently, I'd overstepped my position simply by my presence there. But, to please Kerry, it was worth the humiliation.

I returned to the back of the line—where I belonged—and together, with great anticipation, we opened that menu.

It read something like this:

Hippo-Burger: One patty of our world-renown, freshly-ground beef, *on a bun*. \$46... add \$16 for fries

Hippo-Burger with Onion: One patty of our world-renown, freshly-ground beef, *with a slice of onion*, on a bun. \$62... add \$16 for fries

Hippo-Burger with Onion AND Catsup: One patty of our world-renown, freshly-ground beef, on a bun with a slice of onion *and catsup*. \$84... add \$16 for fries

It went on like that for 12 pages.

There were cute little cartoons of hippos on every page.

In those days, a cheeseburger at McDonalds was 35 cents.

"Gosh, this place is pretty expensive," Kerry whispered.

"Well, it's a lot more expensive than I thought it would be," I whispered back, while turning red.

"Wow, look at this..." She pointed at the Deluxe Hippo-Burger: One patty of our world-renown, freshly-ground

Henry Edward Fool

beef, with pickles, onion, catsup and lettuce, *on a sesame seed bun*. \$37,406.

“I don’t think we can afford this,” she said sadly.

“I’m sorry, Kerry,” I said. And I was; I was heartsick.

“Geeze,” she said, “I really wanted to eat here.”

With appropriately reddened face I returned the menu to the High Priestess, and we slipped quietly out the door.

I don’t recall what we ate that night, but I think we probably saved a bundle.

## ME AND MY DREAMS

One night I had a dream. I was called in to an ad agency on a trial basis to help them punch their way through an impenetrable barrier that one of their writing teams found themselves up against. I don't know the how or the why of it, but I was there and I was glad to be there. The journeyman ad people I was to work with were, however, indifferent to my presence. The sole man on the team, a hardened professional, was convinced that the only thing I might offer was a waste of their time; the women, every bit as hardened and no less professional, thought that it wouldn't hurt to have me around tossing out bad ideas so that they could destroy them with devastating criticism and build upon the ashes with their own brilliant insights.

The agency was producing a print ad for Dior, the fashion folks. When I arrived they'd already settled on a photograph of a particular model in a particular dress, mid-stride, on a New York City sidewalk. But the thing needed text. The writing team had been trying to come up with a word or two words or a phrase or a sentence or, God forbid, an entire paragraph that described this woman in the dress. Ideally of course, they wanted a single word: something that conveyed at once the way the dress looked, the way the woman looked in the dress, the way the woman felt in that dress and the effect it had on others seeing her. So, that was the problem.

Of course, with Dior, the woman looked clean, crisp, elegant and, above all else, smart, but none of those words worked. They had all been evaluated and found wanting,

some several times. They'd been through all that. The man sighed and rolled his eyes heavenward every time I came up with one of the many words they'd previously considered and rejected. And, at one point, one of the women threw up her hands in exasperation, let out a shriek as if impaled, looked me in the eye and explained pointedly that I'd been brought in to offer *fresh ideas* not to dredge up the same old crap.

The situation wasn't easy for any of us.

We were up there on a balcony, out in the open air, overlooking the rest of the town and gnawing on this problem. They'd worked through all the standard stuff, rejecting "marvelous" and every synonym, every permutation and every word that moved or looked or sounded like marvelous, and not just once. Nonetheless, we revisited "marvelous" again and again. We couldn't get beyond it. Marvelous was what we were after, we just wanted a new way to say it. I didn't know if I was being much help, but for the first time in my life I was feeling like I was in my element. I felt like I was cut out to do this work. And I was hoping that when the solution finally came it would be through me, so these ad people would recognize my contribution, and want to keep me around.

I noticed, from where we were standing—up there in the nice part of town—I could look down and see where I'd come from. I could see the back, top portion of the neon sign for the pharmacy above which I lived out my real life.

We'd been going at it for hours and it was looking like we were going to have to produce something less than perfect,



and hope to sell the idea as if it weren't, when suddenly I had it; I KNEW the answer. I knew it.  
"Wait," I said, "what about this..?"

And, I described the nice young woman, striding down the city sidewalk in her Dior dress. Behind her, sitting on the sidewalk with his back against the brick wall, is this guy. He's shabbily dressed in a grubby old suit, he's got a cane, he's got his hat out, he's got a dog by his side. The word 'BLIND' is scrawled awkwardly in bold black letters on a grimy old cardboard sign which hangs around his neck. He's got the dark glasses. Thing is—he's got the dark glasses *up*. He's raised the dark glasses to get a better look at this lovely young creature in the Dior dress as she passes by. You can see that he likes what he sees.  
He's not leering.  
He's appreciative.

BINGO. The entire team knows that's it.

After hours of dancing around it with words, we discover that the answer is not one all-encompassing word, not a catchy phrase, not a bunch of words cleverly strung together, not a lengthy paragraph explaining things to an idiot audience; the answer didn't involve words at all. The entire creative team recognized it, simultaneously. We not only solved the problem we locked it up. From there it was a child's leap to the distracted butcher with his cleaver raised and his thumb where it shouldn't be; the welder about to weld his partner's steel toed boot to the floor; two cars about to collide, both drivers distracted...

I woke up feeling pretty good about myself, and thinking about that dream. And I wondered this: was this perfect solution to the ad agency problem—you know, the blind guy taking a peek at the girl in the Dior dress—something my mind had made up while I was unconscious, or was it something I've seen somewhere before? For all I know, it could be the most famous ad in the history of the fashion industry. But how would I know? And where could I have seen it? I never looked at fashion magazines, and I don't recall having ever seen such an ad, so, naturally I was curious.

I'm still curious.

On the other hand, if this is my own personal construct, why aren't the ad agencies pounding on my door? Either way, I certainly know good work when I see it, whether it's mine or not. You know it, I know it, the people in that dream certainly knew it. A 'blind guy' checking out a chick in motion, is good advertising. On the other hand, I've got no desire to work for an ad agency.

I did one time, and that was enough for me.

## FOL DE ROL

There was a woman one evening in some North Beach flamenco joint and she looked mighty nice. And, you know how these things go, she said, "Have you ever tried Quaaludes?" And I said, "Nah, you know, I don't really do pills." And she said, "They're really kinda fun..." And I said, "Nah, you know, I'm drinkin' beer..." (I'd heard that you should never do Quaaludes with alcohol; that's how all those whacked-out, middle-class, American housewives got that way.) So, she said, "Come on, man," and whispered an incentive into my ear that no male could possibly resist, drunk or not, and in words that most men, back then, would have paid to hear a good-lookin' young woman utter even privately, let alone out there on the flamenco dance floor.

So, after we'd been living together for about a week, her father had some kind of an 'episode' and we were spending most of our time together, in bed, propped up against some truly lovely, cloud-like pillows, with her petting a cat and tearfully monitoring events back home, wherever that was—Massachusetts, I think—by way of telephone. And, when her father died, I proved myself the most wonderful man she had ever met by going around with her to stores and helping her to find an appropriate black dress to wear to her father's funeral. I think that was my mistake.

While she was gone, I fed the cat and fended off the advances of the woman in the flat below, who had heard about how wonderful and helpful I had been in the selection of funereal attire, and if I liked black, she had a few little items she would like to show me... you know, if I

was interested. I was extraordinarily interested, but declined the invitation nonetheless. I also had the urge, but was clever enough not to ask if she had any photographs. I think that would have been another mistake.

So, when what's-her-name returned, I discovered that I had somehow, during our separation, become the center of her universe, and *clingy* only begins to hint at the thing that she had become. The fact that I had been elevated to that most-esteemed position without notification of any sort rankled a bit, but her form-fitting, second-skin, ever-presence soon made things absolutely unbearable. So, when she discovered a pornographic film in my suitcase and threw a somewhat prolonged, overly-dramatic fit, I took the opportunity to move out. And I know this may sound cruel—because it was, and I knew it even at the time—but, I purposefully kept my whereabouts from her.

Having had some experience with stalking in college, I knew the symptoms when I saw them, and it wasn't long before the sound of my phone ringing began to send a chill down my spine. How she had found me I don't know. But, as I once admitted before, it gets pretty goddamned tiresome hearing someone you hardly know tell you how deeply they love you and how they cannot live without you no matter how vile you may be. And it turns creepy, and becomes even a little frightening when you bump into that person almost everywhere you go...by accident...or wait, can it be FATE?

It doesn't matter how, but somehow—proof of her undying love for me I suppose—she had landed me a temporary job

at an advertising agency. Word was, if I did well, it would lead to something of a well-paid, permanent nature.

So, the first day of that job I went in and an Art Director came over and said, "We're doing a little program for Fol de Rol, a benefit for the San Francisco Opera. I'd like you to draw us some cowboys sitting around a campfire."

I said, "Sure. How big?"

He raised his eyes toward the ceiling and rubbed his chin and thought for a bit. Then he sputtered and said, "It doesn't matter. You know... like yay..." and he drew a shape in the air. "Just mock it up in pencil for now..."

So, I started drawing some cowboys sitting around a campfire in pencil, about... you know... yay big, and before long a different Art Director strolled by and watched what I was doing for a while before suggesting, "How about a mustache?"

"A mustache?"

"Yeah, maybe you could put a mustache on one of those cowboys."

"OK," I said and started adding a mustache.

A few minutes later a third Art Director happened to be passing by, and he stopped and looked over my shoulder for a very long time before sighing loudly and saying, "I don't know. I don't know. I just don't think that mustache will fly; you'd better get rid of the mustache. The rest is fine, but I just don't think the mustache'll fly."

"You want me to remove the mustache?"

"Yeah, I think that would be for the best... you know, considering."

So, I was in the process of erasing the mustache when one of *the other* Art Directors came up, and a discussion began over the mustache and whether—it being Fol de Rol and all—it would fly. A third Art Director was called over and the drawing was taken from me and held up, so they could discuss the matter properly. It seemed to be an important matter, involving every aspect of the cowboy/campfire dialectic, and the various implications a mustache might carry in the eyes of those attending an opera fund-raising event like Fol de Rol. Other Art Directors were called over to give their opinions on this truly vital matter and I just sat there playing an old Coco the Clown cartoon in my empty head for a while.

Then, I tugged on the sleeve of one of these Art Directors and said quietly, “Is it OK with you if I go to lunch?” And he said, somewhat distractedly, “Sure, sure... go ahead,” before diving back into the lofty discussion.

So, my calculations may not be entirely accurate, but I think I’ve been on that lunch break for something like 46 years at this point.

Just to wrap things up neatly:

That drawing did play an important part in the Fol de Rol program that year. It was near the back somewhere, more of a space holder than anything, and occupied a space of about 2 inches by 2 inches.

No mustache.  
It didn’t fly.

## OREGANO

I worked in Giorgio's restaurant for something like seven years, maybe more. I went in at 5 every morning and spent 5 or 6 hours cleaning up the place. It was a simple job, and I liked it. As ever, I was an honest, dedicated, completely dependable employee, priding myself in giving my employer a good day's work for an embarrassingly lousy day's pay. That fact has never been appreciated by any man I have ever worked for. And, I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but this is not TIME magazine where every total bastard who drops dead is automatically elevated to 'great statesman' status. So, about George: I worked for that man seven days a week. I worked for him on Christmas Day, and I worked for him on New Year's Day and I worked every day that everyone else on earth had off. And I did not once receive a raise or a bonus or a spoken word of thanks.

Before Giorgio—for whom I worked seven YEARS—started planting cash under the booths...

I mean, before he asked me one morning in an offhand, casual, conversational sort of way if I ever found any cash laying around in the restaurant while I was cleaning up... I mean before I looked him in the eye, took the fiver which that very morning I had found planted behind booth four out of my shirt pocket, slapped it down on the counter and said, "Here's the five you planted, George."...

I mean, before I said, "I've worked for you SEVEN YEARS, George, SEVEN YEARS!"

Before I walked out of that place and never returned... sometime before that... I did some yard work one day for his mother.

She had a really nice place down on the Marina, overlooking the yacht club. She was kinda old and needed someone to yank some weeds in her back yard. One day, after work, George asked me, "Would you like to make some extra cash?" And I thought, "Actually I would, because the guy I'm working for doesn't pay me very well", and so I said, "Sure, I could use a little extra cash, George."

George said, "Soon as you're finished here, I'll take you over to my mother's house and you can yank some weeds in her backyard, and she'll pay you cash."

I said, "How much are we talking?" and he named the same rate I was getting from him.

I said, "Usually gardeners get paid A LOT better than that, George."

He said, "Do you want the job or not?"

And I thought, "What makes this rich bastard so stingy?"

Then, realizing the answer was embedded in the question, I said, "Sure, I could use a little extra cash, George."

So, we arrive at her extraordinarily nice place down at the Marina overlooking the yacht club, and we go up the steps and we go inside. George says to me, "Wait here," and leaves me standing in the hallway. I look around at the heavily ornate, deeply carved and gilded, furniture. It's all covered in clear plastic. The couch, the chairs, the lampshades, the tables; they're all covered in thick clear plastic. After waiting for George to come back for a very long time, I step into the nearest room and perch tenderly, cautiously, upon the very edge of the seat of one of these plastic covered, ornately carved chairs.

And I wait.



George comes out after a bit and lets out a yelp. He rushes over to me and whispers, “What are you doing?! Mother of God. Get up, get up; get out of there. If my mother comes in and sees you sitting on that chair...Ma-rone.”

At least I think he said Ma-rone. I don't even know what Ma-rone means, if in fact he did say Ma-rone. It sounded like Ma-rone. If he didn't say Ma-rone, I have no idea what he actually did say, but I certainly understood the message, whatever he said. I stood up immediately. (It sure sounded like Ma-rone to me.)

“She wants to meet you,” he said, and after carefully readjusting the nap on the carpet wherever traces of my footsteps remained, he lead me down a hallway and into a dining room with similarly ornate chairs and tables and cabinets holding crystal and porcelain of every conceivable vulgar stupid sort (cupids and semi-nude, draped women with their palms raised Heavenward as if startled by the voice of God.) There, with her back to me, sat his mother. The table she sat before was stacked with cash and restaurant receipts—some in stacks with rubber bands around them, some free, some new and unused—accounting books, coins, checks, an adding machine, and—to my great surprise—a cash register. It looked just like the one at George's joint.

While George and I waited in silence, she looked through a stack of receipts, extracted one, picked up a book of blank receipts, flipped through it until she came to one that she liked, held it up next to the other, and after entering some numbers into the adding machine, started writing upon the

receipt. After that was done, she tore up one of the receipts and dropped it into a paper bag, placed the other one on top of a stack of receipts, and rung up the cash register. Then she turned in her chair and looked at me. It was the look of someone who didn't really like what she was seeing. She questioned George in Italian and, from his tone, I deduced that he was apologizing for my unfortunate presence in their lives. She smiled a genuine phony smile, nodded at me and waved us both away with a backhanded kind of regal disgust.

George took me out back onto a small porch overlooking the backyard. "She wants you to tear out all these weeds," he said, making a sweeping motion. "Just the weeds; she wants it to look nice back here. I'll be back in about an hour or so." George then disappeared.

So, I went down and started tearing out weeds wherever I found them. Some of them were pretty gangly and tough and sorta reedy and just plain ugly. The ugliest ones were also the hardest to pull because they were all intertwined. This particular weed had gone completely wild back there. It filled up an entire corner of the yard, but I managed to get most of it yanked and tossed into a big pile by the time George's mother appeared on the porch above me. I guess, by that time, I must have had a pile of weeds about 6 feet in diameter and two or three feet deep. As she looked down upon my good work I stood there with one foot on that pile, sweaty and proud, smiling up at her. I waved a gloved hand and gestured at my accomplishment.

She gazed down upon me with lofty disdain.

Then, her eyes bugged out; her mouth dropped open and she screamed, "My God, he tore up the oregano!"

She screamed again, "My God, he tore up the oregano!"

She screamed a third time, but this time in Italian, and George appeared suddenly at her side.

"My God, he tore up all my oregano!" she screamed at George. And then she said, "I want him fired."

George spoke calmly to her in Italian and followed her back into the house where I could hear additional argument and screaming. It went on for quite a while.

On the way back to his restaurant, George and I got into a little argument about whether he was going to pay me or not for pulling up all his mother's oregano. And it ended, 40 minutes later, with him pulling a huge wad of cash out of his front pocket, peeling off a couple bills and throwing them at me.

He said, "Don't EVER tell ANYBODY I paid you."

I said, "Who'm I gonna tell, George?"

## BEARER BONDS

Ten years after leaving Richmond I found myself filing forms for a lawyer friend of mine. I'd lived in the same apartment for so long that I could—thanks to rent control—rent out the bedroom to cover the cost of my rent; so, all I had to do was feed myself. Since I mainly ate tortillas, rice, beans and chili peppers, life, for me, was pretty good. On special occasions, I added cheese.

That life was good for me was apparent to my lawyer friend as well. One day he told me I was one of the most successful men he'd ever met. At that time, he was paying me \$10 for each delivery to City Hall, and (I think) \$7/hour to deliver stuff elsewhere. I believe he was charging something in the vicinity of \$185/hr for his own work, but he saw me as an example of a successful man. Naturally, I asked him to explain himself and he said something like this: "Well, you work when you want to, you don't work when you don't want to, and everyone you work for appreciates what you do." I thought about that and realized that he was in the exact opposite position.

One day, he called me to ask if I wanted to drive over to Hayward to deliver some bearer bonds, and I said sure, why not; I had nothing better to do.

When I arrived at his office he stood up, handed me a fat envelope and said, "This package contains \$80,000 in bearer bonds. I want you to deliver them to this man in Hayward." He gave me the name and address. "DO NOT give them to anyone else. Do not give them to his secretary.

Do not give them to his assistant. Do not give them to his partner or his wife...especially his wife. Give them only to this man; put them in his hands."

I said, "OK."

He said, "Legally, these bonds belong to anyone who possesses them, so please give them directly to this guy and to this guy only."

I said, "So, these bonds are mine as long as they are in my possession?"

He said, "Yes."

"They're worth \$80,000?"

"Yes."

I asked, "What keeps me from simply walking out that door never to be seen again?"

He said, "My trust in you."

I said, "I could really use 80,000 bucks right about now..."

He sat down at his desk and went back to work.

So, I drove over to Hayward and I went to this guy's office carrying this big fat envelope with \$80,000 in bearer bonds. And, I delivered them to that man personally. I did not give them to his secretary, though she offered to take the package. I did not give them to his assistant, though she assured me that it would be OK with him and she understood completely. I did not give them to his partner, he was busy anyway, or his wife, though I'm sure she would have loved to have them. I waited in the waiting room until I could go in and give them only to him. And after the usual wait, I was shown into his office.

When I walked in, he was busy at this desk writing upon a legal tablet. He did not look up from his work for a very

long time. So I stood there, with the envelope, in silence; there is not a man on earth who dislikes disruption more than I.

Eventually he looked up at me.

“Well...?” he said, somewhat irritably.

“I was told to put this envelope in your hands,” I said.

“Yeah. Just drop it on that table,” he said pointing at a table behind me, which was loaded with magazines.

“I was told to put it in your hands.”

He looked at me. “Just drop it on that table,” he commanded, and went back to what he was doing.

I stood there, until he looked up again. He raised his eyebrows demanding an explanation for my continued presence in his sanctum.

“I was told to put this envelope in your hands.”

“Yes, just drop it on that table and we’ll consider that you have done your job,” he said as if instructing a 5-year-old, and went back to what he was working on. So, I walked over to his desk and, when he looked up again, I placed the envelope directly on top of the pad he’d been writing on. We looked at each other for a while...and he didn’t utter a single word until I left that office.

I thought I’d done a pretty good job. In those days I really could have used an extra \$80,000. Additionally, I believed in my very heart that all the angels on High would have rather seen me 80 K richer than that condescending prick.

The next time I walked into his office, my lawyer/employer looked up at me, smiled and asked, “What did you do to that poor guy in Hayward?”

## RUBY'S GREAT FALL

On Clement Street, I lived on the top floor of a three floor walk-up. Each floor was divided into two large apartments on either side of a large stair well. The bathroom in each of those apartments had a window that opened upon an air well which ran from the ground floor landing all the way up to the roof. On the ground floor landing there was a window onto that stair well, to let light and air into the hallway I suppose. On the roof, that air well was surrounded with a four-foot-tall retaining wall.

Ruby was a large beautiful cat, whom I had raised since she was 6 weeks old. I think she must have been about 9 years old when these events took place. She'd spent most of those 9 years sitting on my stomach, while I lied stretched out on the couch, drinking beer and reading Rex Stout, H. Allen Smith, E. B. White, P.G. Wodehouse, Samuel Beckett, William Gaddis, and a guy whose name I can never remember, who wrote a pretty good book and then, like K. Kaiser, simply quit. (The book is either: *Call It Sleep*, or *SOME Call It Sleep*, I can never remember, But I recommend it.) Those moments when she wasn't on my chest, eyes closed, purring loudly, Ruby was pacing around near me awash in the fear that I might have forgotten that cats need occasional feeding. In those desperate times she'd pace for a bit before letting out a mournful yowl, to remind me of her urgent need and my unfulfilled obligation. That I had fed her every day of her life—and quite well from the looks of her—meant nothing to her. It left no mark. And, I did not then, and I do not now, understand why we never get any credit for such devotion.

Once she was sure she had my attention, she would race down the hallway toward the kitchen, just slightly ahead of me, with her tail straight up like a flagpole. Occasionally she'd look back to be sure I hadn't gotten lost along the way. She was anxious to show me where the food bowl could be found, as if I might have forgotten. Then she would pace around, wailing as if injured, until the food was in her bowl. Then, the desperate race was on to fill her neglected stomach, no starting gun required.

Some people (well, everybody who ever saw her) thought that Ruby was fat. Some went so far as to say she was 'too fat', and all because, when she sat on an LP album cover (12 inches square) she covered the thing entirely, with only the least bit of one or two corners remaining in sight. But, I liked Ruby, and I'll tell you this, with Ruby on your stomach, you were covered and you were warm.

So, with that in place you are properly prepared for this.

Occasionally, Ruby and I would go up on the roof, doing nothing in particular—which we enjoyed doing when not stretched out on the couch reading—and she'd jump up upon the retaining wall that surrounded that air well. She usually paced around on it in front of me, trying to convince me to take her back inside and feed her. If I remained indifferent to her plea, she would jump down and come to me and bump my leg a couple of times with her rock-hard little head, and, because I'm such a nice guy, I'd take her down and feed her. There is speculation among some observers that my willingness to give in to her request for food had led in some way to her massive corporeal



nature. After having given the matter much thought however, I think that it was not my continual filling of the bowl that caused the situation so much as Ruby's continual emptying of it.

So, one day we were up there on the roof and Ruby jumped up on the retaining wall that surrounded that air well, and before taking another step, tumbled over sideways INTO the air well, and plummeted three floors to the ground-floor landing window, where the momentum carried her crashing THROUGH the glass, and dumped her in the hallway.

I ran to the air well to look, saw nothing below except shattered glass, and ran downstairs, inside, through my apartment, and out into the hall way, where I started running down the stairs as fast as I could—while maintaining a steady pleading chatter with God for Ruby's well-being—and had hit the second-floor landing, only to come face to face with Ruby walking, somewhat discontentedly, up. From the look in her eye you would have thought I'd pushed her.

I carried her upstairs in my arms and examined her thoroughly and discovered no harm done. Then I went downstairs to see that the window on the ground floor landing had suffered greatly. I went back up, gave Ruby some food, grabbed a tape measure and my wallet, and went to the local lumber yard to buy a sheet of glass. When I returned, I installed the new glass, and went back up stairs to see how Ruby was doing. She was fine, maybe just a bit more peckish than usual.

On the following day, my friend Bruce happened over and somehow we found ourselves up on the roof, and Ruby was with us, trying to convince Bruce—since I wouldn't listen—that she was in desperate need of food.

“Oh, you know what?” I said. “Ruby and I were up here just yesterday and she fell down that air well, and went crashing through the window down there on the ground floor.”

“She fell down that air well?”

“Yeah, she jumped up and lost her balance or something and fell all the way down to the ground floor, you know where that window is down there...?”

“But, I don't get it,” said Bruce. “How did she do that?”

At that very moment, Ruby jumped up onto the retaining wall, and tumbled sideways INTO the air well, and plummeted DOWN the three floors, to the ground floor landing, where her momentum carried her THROUGH the glass that I'd just replaced, and dumped her in the hallway. “Just like that,” I said. “That's EXACTLY how she did it.”

Bruce and I—after standing around looking startled for a moment—ran down stairs, through my apartment, out into the hallway, where, while starting to descend, we discovered Ruby walking, somewhat slowly, completely discontentedly up. For reasons I'll never understand, her eyes were fixed directly on me, and she was glaring as she came. We examined her thoroughly, and I locked her in the apartment with a bowl of comforting food, while I went to the local lumberyard to buy another sheet of glass.

The next time Bruce and I were on the roof with Ruby, we all stayed well away from that air well. In fact, we kept our backs to it, and did not even look in its direction.

## WUSHIN' 'n' HOPIN'

Around the same time as Weaner's success as an entrepreneur in Oakland real estate, I was walking through San Francisco City Hall on my way to the Recorder's Office. The year is something like 1980 and there are two black women in there on their hands and knees scrubbing the marble floors. They're using stiff brushes and pails of sloshing gray water. All sociopolitical observation aside, as I was walking through there I saw one of these women, a young woman, rise up from scrubbing, stand up straight and tall, like an heroic statue of some Greek warrior goddess (she had the profile for it) and declare, "I'm better than this." It was like something out of a Tennessee Williams play.

"Now here's something I can relate to," I thought. I knew exactly what she meant. I was there to deliver papers at \$10 an hour, for a lawyer who charged \$185 an hour.

That good-looking young people should ever have to work; that rich people are often fat and ugly and stupid; that old men can afford to drive really neat cars and surround themselves with eager-eyed, leggy, whorish-looking empty-headed blondes, are just a few of the most irksome societal crimes that blister the minds of youth. These crimes are perpetuated, and continually reinforced, by this system we find ourselves in. Worse still, those who attempt to inspire positive change by example—all the heroic 47-year-old Justins and Jasons who refuse to either get a job or leave mommy's home, for example—are continually portrayed as leeches and morons rather than the martyrs

that they are. (I say this despite three ghostly advisors suggesting with some urgency that I keep such thoughts to myself. They—these spiritual guides—think my readership isn't clever enough to know when I'm screwin' with 'em.) But, I'm talking on both sides of this issue, so it's difficult even for me to tell what I'm really saying here.

So, onward.

I would like to report that the young goddess then threw down her scrub brush defiantly, and marched right out of City Hall never to return, but she didn't. I'd like to say that all the other good-looking young laborers throughout that grand edifice, inspired by her actions, threw off *their* chains and marched out of there along with her, to gather in a huge pulsating crowd (I have no idea where all those banners came from) in that wino and drug-dealer-infested park across the street from City Hall and, once there burst into some kind of fiery rebellious anthem that no one could ignore and no one over the age of 37 had ever heard before, or could possibly understand. But they didn't.

The scrub brush stayed in her lovely hand, which hung limply at her side, dripping. She was exhausted by the trap she found herself in, but helpless to do anything about it...and she knew it. She stayed standing however...while I slunk around near the main staircase pretending to look through a file folder, while taking all this in.

The old woman, who'd been scrubbing beside her, stopped, hung her head for a moment (I guess she'd been through

this before) put first one knee up, then, pushed herself with some difficulty to her feet.

“I’m better than this...” the younger woman reiterated as I sat down on the marble steps nearby and continued to pretend not to be interested or absolutely 100% completely riveted. This was better than any one-act play I’d ever seen.

“Yes, you are,” said the old woman sighing. “Yes, you are. You’re certainly better than this.”

“Well what am I gonna do?” asked the younger woman practically in tears.

“I know the answer to that one,” said the old woman. “But, you’re not going to want to hear it.”

I leaned in her direction—I wanted to hear it.

“You gonna get back down on your knees, and you gonna scrub that floor until you can see your supervisor’s face in it. THAT’s what you gonna do.”

“But I want to get ahead.”

“Baby,” said the old woman without a trace of empathy, “you got to survive before you get ahead.”

“For God’s sake,” I thought, “where’s the good news in that?”

There was none, and we both knew it. So, she went back to work on her knees, and I picked up my files and headed down the hall to the Recorder’s Office.

## THE GOOD MISTER

When I was living on Clement Street, a thousand years ago, the ancient old Russian lady who lived across the hall somehow repeatedly got herself locked outside on our shared, fourth-floor, fire escape. Her name was Marie. At the time the Shah of Iran's ski instructor was also living in that apartment, along with an old old old Russian woman—a very good friend of mine, who was a working journalist despite the fact that she could hardly see—as well as a middle-aged Russian woman and her teenaged son. I was convinced it was the Shah of Iran's ski instructor who was somehow luring Marie out onto that fire escape and then locking her out. Though I could not figure out why he would do such a thing, I knew it was him. I just knew it. (The bastard.)

One time he showed me a binder full of photographs with him on skis beside the Shah of Iran and his wife, all leering into the camera like self-convinced puppet royalty. There were kids involved too. Their arrogance was such that they looked down upon anyone who had the audacity to glance at them, no matter the distance, how many years had passed, or how faded their smoldering image upon the yellowing paper. They had no idea how badly they were about to be betrayed. I pretended I wasn't impressed, because I knew he wanted me to be, and, honestly, I really just simply, you know instinctually, did not like the guy. Smarmy is an interesting word that covers a lot of ground.

So, we—me and whatever woman I happened to be living with at the time—would be doing whatever normal healthy

people might be doing in a bedroom at whatever hour normal healthy people might be doing such a thing and there would be a little tap tap tap in counterpoint upon the window, behind the closed curtains. And I knew that when I got up and walked over and took a look, Marie would be out there on the fire escape, with contrition written all over her lovely old face. Through the window I could read her lips as she pleaded, "Mister. Mister." She clenched her hands in prayer and bowed her head and pleaded, "Mister. Mister. Please, Mister."

So then I opened that window and assisted her inside with great care on my part, and some difficulty on hers. When she was safely inside she always bowed and said, "Thank you too much, Mister. Thank you too much." Then I would lead her through our place and out into the hallway, and I watched after her as she entered her apartment again. You know, some times she'd end up out on the fire escape again just a few minutes later. It was like a comedy routine.

So, because I didn't ignore her tapping and simply abandon her to her fate on the fire escape outside our bedroom window, whenever we met in the hallway she would take my hand in hers and pat it saying, "Good Mister. Good Mister." She always said it with tears gathering in her ancient eyes. "Good Mister."

Tears in her eyes.

"For god's sake," I thought, "what the hell kind of mister would I be to abandon you to your fate out there on our fire escape?"



## TEN PERCENT

The Insurance Industry is an interesting scheme. You pay them a monthly fee to cover one thing or another, and when it comes their turn to hold up their end of the deal they do everything they can to avoid it, treat you like an enemy and, somehow, with the full force of government behind them, suddenly discover that your contract is worthless and they really owe you nothing.

I had insurance with—what’s that one with the three circles containing the words, auto, home, life—that one. I had their sticker proudly displayed on my bumper, they were such good folks. So, one night, while I’m sleeping, a slightly inebriated doctor in a brand new, top of the line Volvo comes flying around the corner and slams into my old Mazda pickup truck which is neatly, legally parked in a marked space on the opposite corner. I hear the sounds of the accident, and get up to look. When I see that this guy is stumbling around, doing a very good imitation of a drunken doctor or perhaps an injured drunken doctor, I rush down the three flights of stairs and cross the street quickly to find out which.

“Are you OK?” I ask when I arrive on the scene, and he puffs up full of umbrage and aristocratic condescension. Apparently I’ve overstepped some class boundary by rushing outside to see if he’s OK. While I’m looking at the damage to my truck he points at it and asks if it’s mine. Abstractly I say that it is. The truck seems OK actually, but his new Volvo is a bit of a mess.

Now, he demands to see my driver's license.

"I wasn't driving," I say.

He DEMANDS to see my driver's license.

"I wasn't driving," I say again.

He DEMANDS my driver's license a third time, and I just start walking away.

He's yelling something like, "Don't you walk away from here! You're leaving the scene of an accident!"

It's like 3 AM. I don't enjoy that kind of idiocy in the light of day; I enjoy it even less at 3 AM.

I walk back, and as calmly as any man can possibly deliver these words I say, "Listen to me, you stupid son of a bitch. That truck was legally parked. It's still legally parked. I was not in that truck. That truck was not running, and I was not driving it. I was upstairs across the street, in bed, sound asleep. YOU hit my car with YOUR car. Good night." And I leave the scene of the accident.

When the policeman rings my doorbell about an hour later, I pad down the stairs to explain those same few facts to him, but in a somewhat calmer tone.

So, I get a phone call from the drunken doctor's insurance company the following day. I explain the facts to them in pretty much the same way I've just explained them to you. They then send me a form to fill out with diagrams. I fill out the form and state my case again. At every opportunity on that form I write that my truck was parked. It was parked legally. It was not running. I was not driving it. I was not in it. I was not even near it. I was across the street,

upstairs, on the third floor, in bed, next to whatever woman I happened to be with at the time, sound asleep. I enclose a little added letter with those same facts reiterated, one by one.

I sign it, I date it.

10%

That's the amount the insurance companies determined I had contributed to that accident.

A letter from MY insurance company informed me of this.

According to them I was 10% responsible for that accident. I was 10% at fault. It was a brief letter, stating only my percentage involvement followed by a statement saying that they would pay for my share of the damages this time, but, I should be aware that any additional claims might lead to a higher rate or cancellation of my policy.

I leave it to you to imagine the nature and tone of the phone conversations that took place with MY insurance company concerning this 10% bullshit.

It got me nowhere.

Of course.

So, you know, I dropped auto insurance cold.

And for something like 10 or 12 years got along pretty well without it.

## The GOOD MISTER LEARNS A LESSON

From where I lived on Clement Street, because of the steady climb of the landscape, you could look off to the west and see all the way up to the Palace of the Legion of Honor. That's about 30 city blocks.

So, one day I walked out onto the street and a tiny little old lady approached me. She was dressed in a manner that pegged her somewhere between well off and utterly insane, but she had a gentle way about her.

"Excuse me, sir," she said meekly in a soft, slightly wavering voice, "can you look down there and tell me if you see the Clement Street bus coming?"

"Sure," I said. I was glad to help her out.

She apologized, "My eyes have gotten so bad lately."

"That's OK," I said and stepped out into the middle of the street. And, casting my eagle eyes westward, I waited to see if I might detect any bus-like movement headed in our direction. I watched for a bit because I wanted to be able to offer her good news if I could, but there was not a single bus to be seen in any of those 30 blocks.

So, I stepped back to the sidewalk and I said, "I'm sorry, but I don't see any buses."

And she looked me right in the eye, and she began to tremble, and she said, "You FUCKING LIAR!"

Then she marched off smartly down the street.

## SUIHIRO

For a while, thirty years ago, I had a Japanese roommate who arrived at my doorstep directly from Japan. Suihiro had never been to the United States and it was an interesting experience for us both. I think we learned some things from each other. When he showed up at my door he had with him one change of clothes and three ceremonial kimonos. His plan was to sell these kimonos and make enough money to return to Japan and buy more ceremonial kimonos. Ultimately, he'd become THE ceremonial kimono king of the western world. It sounded like a good plan to me.

The kimonos he showed me were remarkably complex, long, beautiful, elegant things—and he explained that, in Japan, these unique robes were worn one time only and then either destroyed or folded neatly and stored, or put on display and never used again. I got the idea that, perhaps, there was something not precisely quite right about Suihiro having these things in his possession, and maybe something wrong about making them available for purchase by guys named Trent, as gifts for busty bleach-blondes with piercings named Destiny. Suihiro's skills with the English language left a lot of what he said to guesswork. Despite that barrier, I gathered he'd gotten these fine kimonos from dead people through desperate or disrespectful relatives, which didn't make it seem so bad after all. Other than that behavior—which would have made him an ideal political candidate—Suihiro had no idea how to conduct himself in the United States and, unfortunately, he thought I'd be a good example to follow.

Since my long-term girlfriend's departure to Central America, I'd auditioned several replacements and, the consequence of this was that there were perhaps 6 or 7 abandoned toothbrushes in a glass sitting on my bathroom sink when Suihiro moved in. Also, the kitchen cabinets were full of cans I had nothing to do with, and there were magazines which I had never subscribed to laying around the house. So, when I went into the bathroom one morning shortly after his arrival, there was a new glass on the sink, and it contained 7 brand new toothbrushes.

That very afternoon I found Suihiro loading things into the kitchen cupboard. He had purchased, item for item, one of everything he'd discovered in that cabinet. If someone had abandoned a 3 ounce can of Del Monte sliced cling peaches in there six years earlier, Suihiro now had his own 3 oz. can of Del Monte sliced cling peaches. If a box of raisins was left in a corner by the guy who lived there before I moved in, Suihiro now had his own box of raisins; same brand; same size. When his work was complete, there was two of everything in that cupboard, lined up neatly side by side, and I thought it was time for a little talk.

"Why did you buy seven tooth brushes, Suihiro?"

"I wished very much to ask you about that, Edward," he said.

"Well, what do you plan to do with seven toothbrushes?"

"This is a mystery to me as well, Edward," he said,

"Perhaps you will be kind to explain."

I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to tell this innocent that I was randy as an old billy-goat and the toothbrushes

were remnant evidence of short-lived failed conquests. So, I skipped ahead to the cling peaches.

“Why did you buy the baking soda, the salt, those candy sprinkles, the dill pickles and the Bisquick?” I asked.

“This too, I do not know,” he said, “These are your American diet. Perhaps you will be kind to explain their use.”

I sighed. “I’m not so sure that you should be using me as an example for how to conduct your life here in America, Suihiro,” I said. “Honestly, I think you might do better emulating someone else.”

“Then I am lost,” he declared with great sadness.

“Believe me,” I said, “You’d be a lot more lost following my example than you would just making it up as you went along.”

“This is very bad news,” he said, and went back to his room dejected and disappointed.

I think I did the kid a favor though. Honestly. He must have thought I was mad when I threw out 6 of my seven toothbrushes that evening and only kept the worn-out one.

## CHESS MASTER 2000

In 1983 I bought a clone IBM XT, which was built by two local Chinese computer genius kids, who had just opened shop a block away from where I lived. That computer ran at a remarkable TEN *whatevers*, when all the other PCs on earth only ran at a miserable and embarrassing eight *whatevers*. Even my lawyer was jealous.

(I say *my lawyer* when in fact he was a lawyer I worked for, delivering documents for an hourly wage, but you don't have to cling unnecessarily to that. You may continue to think of him as my lawyer.)

So, then my lawyer caught up with me, and surpassed me maybe just a bit by purchasing several PCs for his office which ran at, not just a lousy ten *whatevers*, but at an astounding, mind boggling TWELVE *whatevers*. And, at that time, in the spirit of noblesse oblige, he kicked down an illegal copy of Chess Master 2000 to me, saying something like, "This is the program that *beat* Bobby Fischer."

So, I had no idea why he would want to put an illegal copy of that program into my hands, I hardly ever beat anyone at chess—though I did seem to enjoy being defeated on a regular basis. I once taught a 12 year-old kid in Encinitas how to play chess, and by the time he had learned how all the pieces move, he also began defeating me so easily, repeatedly, viciously and predictably, that I stopped playing chess altogether for several years. And, in the ancient past, when I was in college, one time, and one time only, I got so



drunk while playing chess with my friend Howard that I defeated him. Somehow the beer had opened up a new vision of the board for me, and I defeated him with a few crisp, decisive moves. That drunken vision didn't stay with me however and, since that afternoon, drinking while playing chess only makes things worse, and usually gives me a big headache. So, since then I've pretty much decided that if I am going to be disgraced and humiliated at chess, I'm going to do it sober, alert, and with every aspect of my intelligence fully engaged.

All that aside, I went home and loaded up all three (or five or eight) floppy discs of my illegal copy of Chess Master 2000 and began to play. And, after a few days of it, something truly wonderful happened. Once I had learned the program and started really playing my own game, I discovered that I could get Chess Master 2000 so confused that it didn't know what to make of me or what its next move should be.

There was a button you could push and it would show you Chess Master 2000's thinking. I watched that for a while as it quickly and decisively responded to my first 6 or 8 moves. But somewhere in there, about 12 moves in, my approach to chess was so unorthodox and just plain weird, and unexpected, that Chess Master 2000 began considering so many options that it couldn't decide what to do with me. I thought, "Wow, that's kinda cool, I've stymied Chess Master 2000, the program that *beat* Bobby Fischer."

And I considered, "Does this mean I could play Bobby Fischer and send him into some kind of mental gridlock?"

I went into my lawyer's office a few days after making this discovery, and he asked how I liked my illegal copy of Chess Master 2000, and I told him about getting the thing so confused it didn't know what to do. He just laughed. I told him that I was sincere, but he refused to believe it. He told me again that Chess Master 2000 had *beaten* Bobby Fischer. I told him again that I was serious; Chess Master 2000 became so confused by my approach to the game that it couldn't decide what to do with me. He just laughed.

"So, OK," I told myself, "I don't care whether he believes me or not, the fact IS... I can confuse Chess Master 2000."

But, then, as I was walking home, I began to have my doubts. Maybe, if I'd let it run a bit more, Chess Master 2000 would have come up with a move in some of those games, and then, would have gone on to defeat me. So, I went home and I sat down and I loaded up all the various discs that were necessary to run Chess Master 2000 and I started a game. And I played until Chess Master 2000 no longer knew what to do with me. Then I clicked on the button which allowed me to see Chess Master 2000's thinking and, man, there was a LOT of thinking going on. So I watched that for the better part of an hour, kinda hoping that Chess Master 2000 would come up with something, but it didn't. Chess Master 2000 was struggling to reach any conclusion as to what it should do.

Then I got up and I went into the next room and threw myself on the bed and picked up some E. B. White. And I read a couple of truly wonderful stories, and then I

wandered back into the other room to see how Chess Master 2000 was doing.

It was still confused.

So, I left it running and I called a friend and we went out to dinner at the Red Crane, where the Szechwan prawns cannot be beat, and when I came back I rushed into the room, only to discover that Chess Master 2000 was still thinking things over.

That night I slept peacefully, while Chess Master 2000 churned away quietly in the next room, considering the many possibilities.

In the morning, I discovered that Chess Master 2000 was still thinking things over. So, I stopped that game. I started a new game. And, with that new game, I started a new approach to computer chess; from that day on my challenge would be to see how quickly I could get Chess Master 2000 to go mad.

One time, I did it in seven moves. Honestly, seven moves. I'd like to see Bobby Fischer do that.

## Of OCK and UKLA

Suihiro taught me that the best position any person can take on any matter is what he called indifference; I taught him that choosing anyone other than me as an example for how to live life here in America was probably a good idea. We got along fine.

He'd come here with the idea that he could sell slightly used, worn-one-time-only, ceremonial kimonos and, after establishing a foothold, corner the North American market. The problem was, there was no North American market for slightly used ceremonial kimonos—or at least none that he could discover. And, although I told Suihiro that I'd buy one of those truly beautiful wraps, if I had the money, if I had had the money I probably would have spent it on something else, rent perhaps, or food, or, perhaps more galling still, a t-shirt and a new pair of jeans.

At any rate, Suihiro was entertaining in pretty much the same way other likable visitors with minimal grasp of the language are; his innocent distortion of English was at once pure idiocy and undeniable genius. Of course, after a time, I'd grown used to his use of English and he grew used to my density. He didn't seem to mind either the struggle to get things into my thick head or my knee-slapping laughter when I finally did understand what he was saying. All-in-all, Suihiro, despite his indifference toward every irritating circumstance and every living creature, was a pretty good kid.

I liked having him around.

One day he came to me with a question concerning English.

"I have confusion, Edward," he said, "Perhaps you would be kind to explain."

"OK," I said, "if I can."

"That is the point precisely," he said. "Why do you always spell ock?"

"Ock?"

"Yes. Why do you spell ock instead of saying ock!"

I had no idea what this guy was saying or trying to say.

"Spell Ock?" I asked.

"Yes. Why do you spell ock?"

"Ock?" I said. I still wasn't getting it.

"Yes. When I say to you, Edward, I have a question for you, you spell O. K. Why not say ock?"

"Ah," I said, "OK is actually an abbreviation. Or, at least I think it is. It's not a word. It's an abbreviation of two words."

"Oh. Thank you," he said, "What are these two words?"

I thought about it for a bit. "I'll be honest with you, Suihiro, I don't know." (I still don't.)

"O. K.!" Suihiro said proudly. "There is also another which I see."

I prepared myself.

"Why do you never say ucla?"

This one I knew. I explained UCLA to him.

What's peculiar about this is that my wonderful wife, who is French, has an equally wonderful aunt who—as many French people do—lives in France. This aunt had a gaggle of children—three, I think. And one year, when they were

all still quite little, she had purchased little matching outfits for them. The sweaters of these outfits had the letters U C L A in a bold script across the chest. Pictures were taken with her brood on display in these uniforms, and the photos were proudly distributed, especially to my wife's family in the USA, where these tops had come from.

One year, many years later, while visiting France, the old photo album came out and we fell upon these photographs. My wife's aunt said, quietly, confidentially, "I still don't know what is this UKLA, but even today I remember how nice they all looked in those ukla sweaters."

## BANKS and REASON

Somehow, in my mind, the honest confusion in the previous story brings us around to the institutionalized idiocy of banks. But, I'll be brief, I'm sure you have your own personal examples of the unending, torturous stupidity of banks.

One time, a long time ago, I went into a bank bearing two checks, one written to me by someone with an account at that particular branch of that particular bank and a refund check I'd received from the IRS for overpayment of income tax (since I had no income and they had taxed me just as though I had). When I placed the first check on the counter the teller asked me, "Do you have an account with us?" When I said that I did not, she then said that she could not cash the check, and pushed it back toward me. Her knee-jerk unwillingness to pay forced me to explain the essentials of the banking business to her concerning checks. "This," I said, holding up the check, "is *an order to pay*. It is instruction from someone who *does* have an account with you. It is their instruction to you to pay me this amount. You are their agent and have no choice in the matter. It is an order to pay."

"If you don't have an account with us, I can't cash this check," she said as though that were that.

It wasn't.

I repeated myself while she sighed heavily and rolled her eyes about and said nothing.

I turned around and walked over to the nicest-dressed guy in the joint, sitting behind the biggest desk, and I waited for

him to finish his phone conversation. I started to explain how checks work to him, but found that because he had not been in the banking business for very long, he still remembered the basics. He smiled; he got up and walked with me over to a closed teller's window. He gestured for the teller I'd been dealing with to come over to that window and join us. When she arrived, he instructed her to cash my check and went back to his desk.

Because I didn't possess a credit card at that time, I had to attempt to convince the teller to accept my driver's license, my library card, a phone bill, and an Illinois fishing license as proper identification. It was no-go all the way. So, then I produced the check from the IRS addressed to me and that too was rejected.

When the branch manager looked up from what he was writing, there I was again. He, not having been in the banking business for very long, could still see the glimmer of reason through the cracks of my somewhat unusual plea. From his desk, without either getting up or opening his mouth, he instructed the teller to cash the check. I thanked the man and went back to the teller who begrudgingly paid out the value of the check. It really was as if I were taking that money directly out of the mouth of her first-born child. "So, now," I said, "I'd like to cash *this* check," and I produced the check from the IRS.

"Do you have an account with us?" she asked, just as though we'd never danced this dance together before.

I said that I did not, matching her deadness of tone, and stared directly into the vast emptiness of her unflinching



indifference. Using that same icy tone, for I wished to speak a language she understood, I explained to her that this check was special because it was drawn against the United States Government, but she couldn't see it; so, she stuck to her guns. She told me that she couldn't cash that check unless I had an account there, and that was that. I said, "THIS is a check from the United States Government—I assume you recognize the United States Government—and, since you've already cashed a check which was written out to me, you also recognize me. You recognize both parties in the transaction. I don't know what the problem could be."

By now, the branch manager and I were old friends, and when he detected that things were not going as quickly or as smoothly as he had guessed they would, he appeared beside me, at the teller's window. She handed him the check from the IRS and said, "He wants to cash this check, but he doesn't have an account here."

"Can you cash it at your bank?" the gentleman asked me.

"I don't have an account anywhere," I said.

"You don't have a bank account?"

"No."

"None?"

"I'll tell you what I do have," I said. "I have a check from the United States Government, and, I have the fact that you've already recognized that I am me by cashing a check written out to me less than two minutes ago."

He said nothing, made a gesture which I didn't see, and, with tremendous repugnance, she unlocked a drawer and counted out the cash. "Is there anything else I can do for

you?” she asked mechanically. I had several suggestions which, because I was brought up right, I kept to myself.

“This is why I don’t have a bank account,” I responded, as I shuffled the bills together, folded them and stuck them into my pants pocket. I’m sure that bold statement has haunted the poor woman to this day.

I went out of my way to go toward the back and tap on the branch manager’s desktop. He looked up from his phone conversation and we exchanged understanding smiles. I can’t imagine he lasted long in the banking business. Common sense and banking don’t mix readily.

As if I needed further proof, I took that money down the street to Hibernia Bank. I thought the bank manager guy might have made some sense, maybe life would be easier for me if I had a bank account. So I walked into Hibernia Bank with \$600 cash and I went to a desk with the sign “New Accounts” hanging over it, and I sat. I told the woman behind the desk that I would like to open a new account. She asked me what I would be using to open the account, and I told her \$600 cash.

She said, “OK, I’ll have to see some ID.” I showed her my driver’s license.

She said, “OK, I’ll need to see one of your credit cards.”

I said, “I don’t have any credit cards.”

She, pushed herself back away from her desk and looked at me, astonished. “You don’t have any credit cards?”

“No. Do I need a credit card to open a bank account?”

“Yes, we require it.”

“THIS,” I said, “is cash, currency, legal tender issued by the government of the United States.”

“We still require a credit card,” she said.

“That’s the most goddamned ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard in my entire life,” I told her. “What the hell is wrong with you people?” Clearly, from the look in her eye, she didn’t care what I thought.

I’m not going to tell you how badly it disrupts the quiet hum of things in a bank when a young man—perhaps slightly insane—stands up and yells, “Are you kidding me? You’re telling me that I CAN’T OPEN AN ACCOUNT in this bank WITH CASH? I CAN’T open an account in this bank WITHOUT A CREDIT CARD?”

I’m not going to tell you how fearful the guy with the gun on his hip looked as he approached me and—as if by some kind of magnetic repulsion—drove me backwards out the front door of Hibernia Bank. But, I have to ask you this: Isn’t that the most ridiculous goddamned thing you’ve ever heard of in your life—even from a bank?

A little footnote: I have my money, my mortgage and checking account these days with **a credit union**, and it is just—really—just absolutely wonderful. Here are some words that come to mind when I think of my credit union: willing to listen, willing to think, *capable* of thinking, thoughtful, reasonable, human beings. They don’t take every opportunity to screw you, they take the time to listen and to explain things, they offer better rates than banks, they take fewer and much smaller fees for better services, they’re just a pleasure to deal with.

God bless the credit unions. God bless them. Really, God bless the credit unions. (But, I may have wandered.)

About thirty years ago a friend of mine, Alan Ming Joe, was a teller at Bank of America, before he disappeared off the face of the planet in pursuit of a career as a classical guitarist. One day he'd noticed that one of the other tellers had a beard (in those days it was probably a man) and he thought, "hmmm...."

So, he went to his branch manager and he said, "I noticed that so-and-so has a beard, would it be OK if I grew a beard?" The manager shrugged and said, "Sure, go ahead." So Alan didn't shave one Friday and he didn't shave all weekend, and he returned behind the cage on Monday with a little more than three days' growth.

Almost immediately the branch manager called Alan into his office; he instructed him to sit down. Then the manager sighed and shook his head and he said this: "Mr. Joe, you can either shave or you can wear a beard, but we can't have any of this in-between stuff at Bank of America."

Funny as that is, it's funnier still because these days the kids behind the counter at that very same branch all look like escapees from either a carnival side show or a penitentiary, and act the part with hardened indifference.

## INDIFFERENCE

One morning Suihiro came walking down the long hallway between the kitchen and his room cradling a bundle of soaking wet newspapers in his arms. When he got to his room, he stood in the doorway and began tearing chunks of wet newspaper from the bundle and tossing them about the hardwood floor of his room. Naturally I was dumbfounded, intrigued and entertained, all at once. I watched for a while before saying anything.

"If you don't mind me asking, Suihiro," I said, "what the hell are you doing?"

"I am cleaning this floor, Edward."

"What?"

"I am cleaning this floor."

"With scraps of wet newspaper?"

"Yes."

I snorted. "Well, I hope it works," I said with my best all-knowing smirk.

"It has worked for three thousand years," Suihiro said, as he began sweeping up the bits of wet paper, each now covered completely in dust and debris.

At some point during his stay I started getting the idea that I'd offended Suihiro. Rather than make assumptions, I confronted him one day in the kitchen.

"Suihiro," I said, going directly to the point, "I get the feeling that you do not like me."

"This is not true," he replied.

"Well, I don't mean that you necessarily DIS-like me, but maybe you don't like...the way I am or the way I handle things. Have I done something to offend you?"

"No, Edward, I am indifferent."

"You're indifferent?"

"Yes. For all people I am indifferent."

"So, you don't dislike me then?"

"I am indifferent?"

"You don't like me either."

"I am indifferent. For all people I am indifferent. This is the way to be."

"Indifferent?"

"Yes."

"Are you indifferent toward your wife in Kyoto?"

"Yes. For her I remain indifferent."

"And you have a new baby back home too, don't you?"

"Yes, a little girl."

"And are you indifferent toward your daughter as well?"

"Yes, Edward. For all people I am indifferent."

"Well, Suihiro, I have to tell you, that's one of the strangest things I have ever heard."

"Very good."

"Does it bother you that I think that your indifference is strange?"

"No, Edward, about that I am also indifferent."

I suppose I should have been able to guess that.

I didn't remain indifferent after this conversation. I was not enlightened precisely, but I'd gained a higher opinion of Suihiro. Somehow his indifference struck me as worthy of respect. It would be impossible to count all the times in my life when a little indifference on my part would have been the better course to take. As a guy who holds a passionate position on every matter on earth, indifference made a weird kind of sense to me. I admire anybody who can

achieve it. Of course I'd admire even more anyone who could maintain it while listening to: *Your call is very important to us, please remain on the line and one of our customer service representatives will be right with you.*

I gnawed on things for a while that day, and concluded that, even if there was absolutely no hope for me ever attaining indifference, maybe Suihiro could loosen up just a bit when it came to his own wife and child.

After a few months, during which Suihiro sold not one single kimono, he returned to his wife and child in Kyoto.

I was not indifferent to his departure; I was saddened.

## LOW SELF-ESTEEM

One afternoon I walked into my lawyer friend's office and he looked up from what he was reading and he said, "I now know what's wrong with me."

"OK," I said.

He leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers behind his head, and said, "I have low self-esteem."

"Really...low self-esteem?"

"Yep. That's what's wrong with me—low self-esteem. And I can tell you how I know that."

"OK." I said. "Should I sit down?"

"Please." He laughed quietly for a bit before setting out.

"We were in the parking lot of this ski resort and we were, my girlfriend and I, we were having this big argument. BIG argument. I was hauling all this ski equipment through the parking lot, to the car—you know how that is, skis and poles and boots—and she was following right behind me screaming at me the whole way. There were people all around staring at us, but that didn't stop her. She kept screaming at me 'til we got to the car. And as I loaded all this ski equipment onto the roof, she continued screaming at me. And then..."

He laughed thinking about the scene.

"Then, she kinda took me aside, you know, led me by the elbow like a little kid, and said, 'You know what's wrong with you? You have low self-esteem.' And..."

He laughed again, thinking about it.

"... it made perfect sense. I mean, why would anyone who didn't have low self-esteem put up with that?"

I nodded.



“So, that’s my problem,” he concluded, “I have low self-esteem.”

“Oh,” I said, “I thought your problem might be that you have a shrew for a girlfriend.”

“Nope,” he said. “Low self-esteem. It’s definitely low self-esteem. Only someone with low self-esteem would stay with her after that scene, and I’m taking her out to lunch in about...” He looked at his watch. “30 minutes from now.”

This is what a nice guy he is; he stayed with that woman for 6 or 8 years before dumping her and getting another one, younger and prettier, but, as far as I could tell, just like her in every other way.

And this, children, is what comes of low self-esteem.

## THE TAXI DRIVER

One day my lawyer friend called to ask if I could run down to City Hall and file some papers. I told him I'd be glad to normally but my truck was in the shop and I didn't want to climb on the bus with the cold season in full swing. He said, "I need some stuff filed before they close this afternoon, take a cab, I'll pay for it."

Let me tell you what it's like at City Hall.

After you stand in line for forty minutes, the disgruntled unshaven cross-eyed slovenly dressed guy, or sweaty, scowling, slightly on the heavy side woman behind the counter looks through your paperwork briefly then tosses it back at you saying, "You need to fill out a 437-P2." They say it in a manner that implies that every person on earth is born with this knowledge, and there is no greater burden on earth than the one they shoulder each day, continually reminding us.

Then they look over your head and say, "NEXT."

It's always the same. So, you get the necessary paperwork and fill it in as best you can, and when it's finally your turn again, you step up to the counter, and you hold your breath.

Occasionally a miracle occurs and they pull a rack of hand-stamps over and flip through the pages stamping things, seemingly indiscriminately, switching from one stamp to another from time to time, stamping specific pages, sometimes scrawling a signature or a date. When that's done they instruct you to take the paperwork to another window where another Master of the Social Graces sets the

check you've provided aside, looks over the paperwork, accepts the check as if doing you a great favor, and smacks a few more stamps on the papers, before handing half of them back to you without a single spoken word... Then, looking over your head, or around you as if you no longer exist, he utters dismally, "Next."

It's such a pleasure.

So, I went into my lawyer friend's office and I picked up the paperwork and I walked over to Geary Blvd, where I flagged down a cab. So, now let me tell you this. Stick with me.

Twelve years earlier, when I lived in the Fan District in Richmond, Virginia, I had been a great admirer of young women. One of the many young women whose looks I particularly liked lived on Grove Avenue, and we crossed paths maybe twice a week. She was a lovely creature with pale skin and reddish hair and she possessed a carriage that has always just knocked me out. If you had dropped a plumb bob from the back of her lovely head, it would have fallen in a straight line directly to the back of her heels. For some reason that posture has always killed me. I'm not talking about some prig who imposes that stance upon herself as a sign of her perpetual all-encompassing disapproval of passion, but a woman whose natural grace encourages her steadily toward Heaven, from which she has unfairly tumbled.

This woman and I never exchanged either words or glances.

I'm sure she never noticed my posture.

She emerged in the Spring one year pushing a baby carriage, and that flipped a switch inside of me that I hadn't previously known existed. I would have difficulty explaining it, but somehow the fact that she had given birth—that she was now a mother—fascinated me. I just thought she was one of the most marvelous creatures I'd ever seen in Richmond. I don't know if 19-year-old American males are supposed to swoon, but if I ever did it was a result of having seen this woman pushing a baby carriage down Grove Avenue one Spring morning.

So, on that day, twelve years later—when I was rushing down to City Hall in San Francisco to file some papers—I stepped out into traffic and hailed a cab, and this very woman was behind the wheel.

She didn't know me. She hadn't known me in Richmond either, but, I recognized her immediately. I don't know if 31-year-old American males are supposed to swoon, but if I was ever going to, that would have been the time for it.

"City Hall," I said as I got in, and we travelled about a mile before I said anything else. Then I said casually, "You used to live in the Fan, didn't you?"

She said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

I said, "Didn't you live on Grove Avenue in Richmond ten or twelve years ago? I used to see you pushing your baby carriage..." And she slammed on the brakes so hard I almost bit my own tongue off.

Geary Boulevard at that point is four lanes in both directions, and she was in one of the middle lanes.

Cars were climbing on their brakes behind us, and leaning on their horns as they swerved to avoid hitting us, but she was oblivious to all that. She was fixed on me in her mirror. She did not turn in her seat to face me however, but studied me in the mirror without forgiveness.

“Get out of my cab!” she sighed after a beat or two. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she added. “I’m just saying that I recogni...”

“GET OUT!” she screamed. “I have no idea what you are talking about and I just want you OUT of my cab. Right now.”

“Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

“OUT! RIGHT NOW!”

“Well, what about the fare?”

“Just get out. Please.”

So, I waited for a break in the traffic and I got out in the middle of that fast moving four lane boulevard. With horns blaring at me and cars swerving in hopes of either hitting me or missing me—depending upon how each driver may have felt about my presence in their path—I dodged and scampered, and somehow made it safely to the curb. From there I looked up to see that she had already driven off. I had absolutely NO IDEA what that was about.

I flagged another cab and got to City Hall in time to file the papers, and, rather than take another cab, I walked the seven miles home. I drank alone in silence that night, feeling a peculiar emptiness, and I hoped that she was OK.

I still have no idea what that was about.  
But, more importantly I guess, I’m sorry.

## MY QUESTIONABLE SENSITIVITY TO DOGS

Now, with my wife's dog around, and the dog-in-law rotating in and out of our lives on a regular basis, I've developed an appreciation for the creatures. And, with the exception of the dog-in-law, the smell of a dog doesn't really bother me all that much. (Though why the dog-in-law chooses to camp out directly under my nose when I'm eating lunch, I will never understand.) There was a time however when I could smell the presence of a dog through 2" plate steel. I didn't go around crowing about this remarkable talent however, I kept it to myself. I guess if I could have figured out how, I might have made a fortune.

One day, while Bob Easley and I took a break from doing the carpentry work that no union guy would ever even have considered doing, we climbed into his truck to go get something to eat—if it was lunchtime—or something to drink, if it was quittin' time, and I observed, "Your truck stinks like dog, Bob."

And Bob said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "I don't know how else to put it, Bob. Your truck smells like a goddamned dog has been living in it."

And he said, "There has *never* been a dog in this truck, EVER." He looked at me in that knowing manner that people who are about to be proven wrong but do not yet recognize it so often employ.

And I said, "Bob, listen, I know the smell of dog when I smell it, and believe me, this truck stinks of dog."

And Bob said to me, "There has NEVER been a DOG in this... WAIT A MINUTE..."

I like that part.

So, let's review.

One afternoon, Bob 'n' me climbed into Bob's truck and I detected the previous presence of dog. I mentioned the fact to Bob, who said something smugly like, "No dog has EVER been in this truck."

And I said, "Bob, I know the smell of dog when I smell it." Then Bob said to me, "There has NEVER been a DOG in this... WAIT A MINUTE..."

I like that part a lot. That's pretty much a story right there.

But, I know my wife'll want more and I love her dearly, so:

Then Bob Easley told me how, when he had pulled into his driveway a few days earlier, the neighbor's poodle had jumped into the truck while he was off-loading some tools. Apparently the smelly little beast had only been in there for a few brief seconds before the owner yanked him out by the pink rhinestone collar, but that was enough for me.

Bob was apologetic of course, and spent some time lauding my remarkable ability to detect the smell of dog, but it still cost him a beer.

This was, perhaps, my greatest accomplishment while on this planet. Well, that and the time I swindled my trusting wife out of \$20 by conning her into betting on something she, from her position, could not possibly have seen coming.

Henry Edward Fool

I bet her that a French carpenter would not place the drawer pulls on a cabinet he'd built within a year of its completion.



## MAKEUP and JUSTICE

Holly was a real girl. She wore lots of eye makeup and very short skirts. She was 12 years younger than me, and I think I was 32 at the time. Her moods fluctuated rapidly, unpredictably between sullen and playful and playfully sullen (what the French call pouty) and deep dark impenetrable stubborn silence. This last, she liked to employ during our many lengthy, drawn out, goddamned endless phone conversations. At the time, wherever we went together I was treated with a very real, almost obsequious, deference. Because I had this pouty little, leggy creature clinging to my arm, many assumed that I had to be a rich guy. Holly's car of choice was a Triumph convertible and we got around mostly in that and mostly with her at the wheel, which added to the illusion.

Holly was alternately a dream and a completely unnecessary pain in the neck, and she was vitally, at times vibrantly, aware and belligerently proud of being both.

Only women have ever asked me why I put up with it.

So, she'd bought some nail polish at a cosmetic store—two tiny bottles—and something else of a similar sort which I don't recall. I remember the two bottles of nail polish because, as was her way, only after leaving the store did she decide that she didn't want them; she kept the third item however, whatever it was. So, martyr that I am, I stuck those two tiny bottles—still attached to the cards they'd come on—with the receipt, in the side pocket of my jacket and carried them around with me for a while, until one day

I was in the vicinity of that same cosmetic store and I happened to have on that same jacket. I took that as a sign from above. I entered that cosmetic store thinking I'd be walking out of there about \$12 richer.

I went to the counter and placed the two bottles on the counter and said to the trim young male in a tightly fitting knit top, "She's decided she doesn't want these."

"Oh, OK," he said, "Do you have a receipt?"

"I thought I did," I said, dragging everything out of my pocket and looking through the post office receipts, restaurant receipts, and miscellaneous notes to myself scrawled and unreadable upon various scraps of paper, "but I don't seem to." I shuffled through that stuff nonetheless. "She bought 'em here about a week ago, I was with her."

"Well, let me see what the boss says," he said and picking up the two bottles, he drifted in an impressively casual manner back to the back of the store where an unshaven dark kind of guy, in a black silk shirt buttoned just above the navel, was flirting with a fairly ugly girl whom no amount of make-up could help. There was a discussion and the young lad drifted back up front and behind the counter, where he put the bottles aside, rung up the cash register and handed me \$1.20.

"Here you go," he said with a barely forced smile.

The owner, passing by behind me at that moment, tossed some keys on the counter, saying, "See you Tuesday" and went out the door with the fairly ugly girl in tow.

"Bye-bye, Rodrigo!" said the young lad with great cheerfulness, "Have a nice weekend!"

I looked at the pittance and said, "What's this?"

He said, "That...is... your refund."

I said, "THAT's my refund? Let me see those bottles."

He rolled his eyes in an exaggerated way and with the greatest effort moved the bottles from one side of the cash register all the way around to the OTHER side of the cash register, where I could see them.

"They're \$5.98 each," I said.

"No, I'm sorry," he said, "But they are 59 cents each...and, you don't have a receipt."

I said nothing, but showed him the prices stamped on the label. Admittedly, they had been stamped carelessly, and the numbers ran off into the decorative border of each card.

"You're telling me that this says 59 cents?"

"That's what the boss said to pay you...and, you don't have a receipt."

"Well, whatever the boss says, those things didn't cost 59 cents. I admit it's hard to read this price but, it's not 59 cents." He said nothing, so I continued. "So, in the boss's scenario I come in here and shoplift two bottles worth 59 cents each and come back a few days later to screw him out of \$1.20."

At this point another trim young man, similarly attired appeared out of nowhere, sighed, and said, "What seems to be the problem?" One explained the problem to the other and they both looked at me for a bit and sighed in unison. Customers can be so tiresome at times.

"You both know that those bottles don't go for 59 cents, don't you?" I said. "Where are they? Where do these come from?"

"Over there," one said pointing, "but we're out."

“You’re out? How do you know that?”

He sighed again, but remained silent while the other went to that part of the wall and started checking the hanging racks for the same items.

“We’re out!” he shouted, and came back to their defenses behind the counter.

“We’re out,” he repeated.

“Maybe it’s been discontinued...”

“That would explain things.”

I said, “Please, listen to me. Let me say what I have to say, and then I’ll go with whatever decision you make. How does that sound?”

They looked around at the empty cosmetic store, they looked at each other, they looked at me.

“Oh, why not?” one of them said, rolling his eyes. The other thought this would be a good time to inspect his fingernails.

I began my appeal.

“This is not a bank,” I said, “and this is not an insurance company, and this is not a government agency, so I don’t suppose you’re required by the nature of your employment here to see all of your customers as the enemy.”

They looked at each other startled, bewildered maybe, and returned their faces to me. So far, they were not convinced.

“There is not a single item in this store—I’m guessing—that goes for 59 cents, and, you guys know that.” I picked up a paper nail file from the counter; it was priced \$1.89. I wagged the nail file. I pointed in silence to the price tag. I raised my eyebrows. They noted the fact.

“I bought *three* items in here with my girlfriend last week and the bill was a little more than \$18. I remember that because I was complaining all the way home: ‘EIGHTEEN DOLLARS?! EIGHTEEN DOLLARS for THREE stinking little bottles!’ and she said, ‘If my friends knew that you walked out of a cosmetic store and it’d only cost you \$18, they’d think you were a genius...or a shoplifter.’” They looked at each other in complete—and I mean complete agreement. They looked at me. I felt I was making headway.

I turned and took a small bottle off the closest hanging rack. “Similar item,” I pointed out, “\$14.98” I pointed at the price. “You guys both KNOW...” And I didn’t know how to end it, so I just stopped. They looked at me for a while. “That’s it,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say.

They both smiled and shook their heads, as if they’d never seen anything quite like me before. Then, one of them opened the register, and handed me \$12. “We’re gonna get in trouble for this,” he warned his friend, “I just know it.”

I couldn’t believe I’d won. I was dumbstruck for a bit. “Thank you,” I said. “Oh, please. There’s no need to get maudlin,” said one. “Have a nice weekend!” said the other cheerfully.

Then they both shooed me away, right out the door.

## AN AGREEMENT IS REACHED

I'd spent about five days establishing baseboard, picture molding and crown molding in the dining room of this gentleman's Victorian home. It was after 3 pm on a Friday and I was done with the job. I was completely exhausted and fully satisfied with what I'd done. I picked up my tool bag, stood up and looked around at my work one last time before going into the man's office and handing him my bill.

He looked at it, said, "My wife'll have to send you a check" and went back to whatever he'd been doing before I walked in on him.

I said, "Our arrangement is that I'm to be paid in full upon completion."

He said, "Yeah, well, she'll send you a check" and went back to what he was doing.

I said, "Our arrangements were that I am to be paid IN FULL upon completion. The work is done."

He said, "Well, I don't really know what your arrangements are with her. When she gets home, she'll probably write you a check."

I said, "My arrangements with her were that I am to be paid IN FULL upon completion. The work is done."

He said, "I don't know what your arrangements were with her, do I? I wasn't there. I don't even know if this is the price you quoted," and he looked at me somewhat challengingly.

I said, "I expect be paid IN FULL right now. The work is done."

He sighed and said, "Well, let's go look at it."

I followed him into the dining room and waited while he inspected the work carefully. "You do nice work," he said, "My wife'll send you a check." He then walked past me and went back into his office.

I followed him in and, when he looked up, I said, "Our arrangement is that I'm to be paid IN FULL upon completion. You've seen my work, it's done. I'm asking you to pay me."

He sighed and said, "You know... that arrangement was made with my wife. She'll have to write you a check." He then made a somewhat theatrical point of going back to his work and ignoring me. I said nothing for a while.

"That's fine," I finally said, and I set down my tool bag. I leaned over and extracted a large crowbar and a 22-ounce framing hammer. I stood up, and I said this: "I just installed 684 dollars worth of baseboard, picture molding and crown molding in your dining room. NOW, I'm going to go in there and remove 684 dollars worth of baseboard, picture molding, and crown molding. You can keep your check."

At that point that man fell into a very large pool of people who have looked me in the eye and suddenly realize that I mean every single goddamned word that I say. He jumped up from his chair, saying, "Wait, wait, just wait, OK? Just wait." His demeanor had changed entirely. "I'll write you a check," he said, "I'll write you a check."

And he wrote me a check for the full amount of my bill and he handed it to me, and he said, "You do nice work..."  
I said nothing.

Henry Edward Fool

But, man, I flew to the bank with that check. I FLEW.  
I ran every light.

I went directly to the branch from which that check was drawn and I cashed that check. When they slid that stack of bills across the marble to me, I like to think that *he* was the better for it.



## FOOTBALL FANS

I don't watch football so I was surprised to watch a clip on the news where a man catches a football, dodges some tackles, runs into the end zone, drops the ball, throws both hands in the air, and is immediately penalized for something they called 'excessive celebration'. (In college I'm told they call it *excessive celebratory display*.) Oh, how the world has changed. We have taken one step closer to the, admittedly far better, advanced and more civilized state where—eventually I'm guessing—a player, after scoring, will lower his head in shame and offer his opponents an apology. But I wonder, what the penalty will be if his apology isn't judged sincere enough.

My very dear wife, who watches less football than I do—if such a thing is possible—looked up briefly while I was rooting against the 49ers in the final few seconds of a recent game, and she exclaimed, "HEY! Can they do that?! Can they push someone like that?! Can they push someone, causing them to roll down in the grass?!" I assured her they could. She shook her lovely head and said, "What a brutish sport. Why are you watching that?"

I told her I wasn't watching it, that I'd merely stumbled upon it and, since it was in the final minutes of the game, I thought I'd take the opportunity to offer my anti-support of the local team.

She said I was being small minded—which I was—but she also knew exactly WHY I was rooting against the 9ers. But, since you don't, allow me to explain.

One lovely winter evening in San Francisco, sometime around 1980, I went out on Clement Street and found the entire neighborhood EMPTY. I was the only one on the street. I found myself awash in growing concern for a while before it hit me: Oh! It's the Stupid Bore. As I walked along I could hear cheers and shouting and cussing and moaning and boos coming from every house on both sides of the street, as every play developed and came to an end. So, there would be like 8 minutes of peaceful silence on the street, then 6 or 8 seconds of screaming followed by moaning or cheers, coming from the buildings that surrounded me. Then there'd be 4 or 5 minutes of utter silence, followed by screaming and cheering and obscenities and thumping noises; followed by another long peaceful silence.

I'd walked about 16 blocks when suddenly the thumping and screaming and blaring trumpets began to grow exponentially and did not stop. I knew what that meant: the game had ended. Almost immediately, round the corner came a pick-up truck with three drunken males inside. They had a large 49ers flag flying from the back of the cab and they were honking their horn and thumping on the side of the truck and shouting, "FUCKING NINERS, Man!!! They came driving slowly down Clement street, making this noise and screaming, "FUCKING NINERS, Man! Fucking Niners!!" As they passed me—for all intents and purposes, the only person on foot on Clement Street—they stopped and one of 'em leaned out the window, looked me wildly in the eye and screamed, "FUCKin' NINERS, MAN!!" I did not honestly know how to respond to this. And so, I didn't.

I thought, though somewhat mistakenly, that, at that moment, I was not really part of their world.

I understood their world of course. And I KNEW what was expected of me. But, I was being me at the moment and not really in a drunken-camaraderie kinda mood. So, I didn't pump both fists in the air and scream back "FUCK-IN' NINE—ERRRRRS, WOOOOOO-hooo!!!" Instead, I ignored the red-faced, blockheaded jackass.

He leaned back into the truck and said something to his friends, and the truck came to a sudden stop. The guy, now assisted by another red-faced buffoon sitting beside him, and the driver leaning forward enough to get a look at me, screamed, "FUCKIN' NINERS, man!!" There was something of a challenge in their tone.

They stopped and waited for me to respond.

I did not respond.

They encouraged me. "FUCKIN' NINERS, Man..."

But, I just kept walking.

"NINERS, FAGGOT!" one of them shouted, "NI-NER-RRRRRS!" and they took off with squealing tires and disappeared around the corner.

I was already about three blocks closer to home when they came around the corner again.

"HEY! FAGGGOT! NINERS, Faggot. NI-NERRRRRS!"

The guy leaning out the window threw a can of beer at me. They stopped and stared at me for a while before driving on, shouting, "FUCKIN' NINERS man!!" and leaning on their horn all the way. By now, there were so many cars

and so many drunks on Clement Street, driving slowly and screaming, that I could not help but take a seat on a planter and watch the parade. “NINERS NINERS NINERS,” they all chanted. It was just exactly as if they’d had something to do with that game.

After a bit of this, I saw my friends come around the corner again and I got to my feet and began walking home as quickly as I could. Once inside, while taking the stairs three at a time, I thought about all the fun I was missing.

When I was an excruciatingly shy teenager with bad skin my mother frequently asked me, “Why do you always alienate yourself?” And, though I could not answer that question at the time, now that I’ve given the matter 40 years’ thought, I can. “Just not a team player, Mom.”

## SOMETHING ABOUT STATUS

Bob, the contractor, brought me and my friend Bob Easley onboard for a high-end kitchen job he'd landed in the Upper Haight. At that time our team was called Los Dos Bobs and that other guy. I was that other guy.

So, the man of the house was the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital, and his wife was the Wife of the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital, it was all very VERY special. They had an old Victorian high on a hill and they were doing what was necessary to make it a place that all of their associates could admire openly.

When Bob and I showed up, they were waiting for some custom-built cabinets from Germany (I think). They'd been ordered something like a year and a half earlier—that's just how special these cabinets were—and word was that they were on their way. They had, in fact, already arrived in Long Beach and were making their way up the coast on the back of a flatbed truck, contracted especially to deliver these cabinets. So, Bob and I were asked in to get the kitchen prepared to install these truly wonderful cabinets as soon as they arrived, and to finish off the kitchen in time for some kind of very special event to be hosted by the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital, and his wife, the Wife of the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital.

We were up against a deadline.

So, we did what we could and what was reasonable, without the actual cabinets, and had everything plumb and level and ready to go, based on certain assumptions and the combined 90 years experience of Los Dos Bobs and me.

There were a couple of days off in there as I recall, because the cabinets had not yet arrived, but, the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital told us that his wife was nearly hysterical because we were not on the job site. We asked him to kindly explain to her that, until those cabinets arrived there was very little we could do, but, if she wanted us to show up and pretend to be doing stuff—if that would comfort her in some way—we'd be glad to do that. AND, much to our surprise, the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital told us, "Yes, please do that." We didn't feel right, running in place and pretending to do things that didn't really need doing, but, in order to comfort the Wife of the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital, two of us showed up each day, while the other kept a bar stool warm somewhere, and we alternated those tasks until the cabinets arrived (from Germany, I think).

They arrived in crates.

And when we uncrated them, we were astounded. THIS is what you waited a year and a half to get? The crates they'd come in were of better quality. We got a look at the bill and the things had cost about as much as the three of us made in a year. They were made out of composite board and covered in a grayish-whitish vinyl. Well... as long as the

Wife of the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital is happy, and they pay us for our work, who are we to judge? But, just between you 'n' me, you could get better built cabinets at the nearest lumberyard for one tenth the price.

When we started to install the things we discovered, almost immediately, that all of our assumptions about these cabinets were wrong, and the manufacturer had NO consideration whatsoever for the idea that these things would ever be installed. So we had to invent our own method. With the upcoming big event putting pressure on the Wife of the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital, and her putting pressure on the Head of the...he was putting pressure on us to finish.

We worked well into the night and, with cleverness and inventiveness and the combined experiential genius of Los Dos Bobs and me, we got those goddamned stupid, cheap, ugly and badly built, extraordinarily expensive (German, I think) cabinets in, and the kitchen wrapped up tightly the day before the big event. Now all we needed was to have the dumpster hauled out of the driveway, and—soon as we had our check—we would be gone.

So, it's late evening on the day before the big event and the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital, and his wife come into the new kitchen to admire our work, and she lets out a scream, and runs from the room. The Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital follows her out, while we stand around in the kitchen utterly confused.

We're left alone in there shrugging and looking to each other for answers, but there are none. Who can possibly supply an explanation for something like that?

Then he returns and tells us that his wife is distraught.

"Well, actually, she's in tears," he tells us, "because of the labels," he explains.

"The labels?"

"...that came with these cabinets," he explains.

"What the f...?"

"They're not on them," he explains.

"What?"

"The labels," he says, "you know, the logo that says Schwaggen-Schwunt. Each cabinet should have one."

The Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital is calmly explaining to us that the peel-and-stick, silver plastic labels which say Schwaggen-Schwunt are a very important part—if not THE most important part—of these ridiculously over-priced, imported cabinets. We're all idiots of course, and so, like idiots, we're just standing there looking at the man. Suddenly he turns irate.

"What have you done with the labels?!" he asks heatedly.

We understand that the poor guy is under constant pressure, both at work and at home, but none of us knows what to say to comfort him. Then, Bob—always the clever one—says, "Oh, yeah, well, we were saving that for last. Didn't want to mess that up. We were just about to do that."

And while The Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital goes into the other room



to comfort his convulsing wife with this good news, we're digging through the garbage bags, frantically looking for these stupid plastic peel-and-stick labels, until one of the Bobs says, "Wait! I think I took all those goddamned crappy labels and threw them in the dumpster with the cabinet crates." So, I have to quickly make my way forward through the house, sneaking quietly past the wailing room, and secretly climb into the dumpster and hopefully find these stupid plastic labels and then—IF I FIND THEM—smuggle them back into the house.

And this is one of those deals where miracles do happen, because by the time I'm convinced that I will never find those goddamned labels, one of the Bobs comes out and whispers, "We found 'em. Here, let me help you out of there."

So, you can guess the rest of it. I'm assuming the party went off well and everyone who was maneuvered or manipulated into that kitchen looked at the cabinets, saw those peel-and-stick, silver plastic labels attached to each cabinet, and swooned with appropriate envy. I'm sure more than one of them turned to the Wife of the Head of the Who Knows What Department at San Francisco General Hospital and said, "Oh my goodness, Evelyn, what a *lovely* kitchen, are those Schwaggen-Schwunt cabinets?!"

## WALTER

“I usually go to a day spa and have my nails done.”

That’s what Walter told me when I asked him what he does with the money I give him. It was a one-time-only question; I was curious. It’s really none of my business of course. I mean you either give un-begrudgingly or you don’t give at all. “Let me see those nails,” I said, and he held up his hands. Every pore, every wrinkle, every crease, every crevice, every line was embedded with a rich greasy blackness. We both laughed.

When he laughs these days I frequently find myself focusing on his teeth; they seem to be diminishing (well, as are mine). When I first met him, maybe three years ago, maybe four, there was a tooth in that gap in front; and that’s an important position. On the other hand he hasn’t changed that much. When he first came to our door—the door of this small hotel—he was dressed in rags from head to foot and covered in a thick, greasy minstrel show blackness; today it’s pretty much the same attire, though he seems to change clothes more often than I do. Another thing that hasn’t changed is the fact that he’s as clever as a magpie; he knows what he needs to survive and he knows how to go about getting it. Unfortunately, he’s also helpless. He doesn’t know how to pull himself from the sinkhole he’s in. (So, in that way too, we are much alike.)

And, though many people (and by that I mean almost everyone but my dear wife) sees me as a cold-hearted old bastard, Walter sees right through me. The first time he

looked at me he knew I would come across with a couple of bucks. I knew what I was getting into, too. I knew that if I gave something to him, and I ever saw him again, I'd feel obliged to keep up the support. Nowadays it's whatever tips I've been given that day or, lacking that, five dollars from my wallet, which I hope my wife doesn't find out about. (I figure the surest way to keep that from her is to rush this story into print.)

I get the idea that Walter likes me as a human being and I'm pretty sure that he knows that I like him too, but, I also hope that someday soon he'll realize that there is really very little I can do to help him. That's the problem. Since I see almost everything else in *Life* in crystal-clear black and white, Walter is a problem for me. I don't know if by giving him a few bucks I'm helping him or hurting him. I don't know whether I'm supporting his continuance in his miserable state or, literally, saving his life. I know this much, that of the dozen or so organizations in this town that I've emailed and faxed and have written to on Walter's behalf, not one has ever responded to my inquiries. It's entirely possible that they just don't have the time; in this town, it sometimes seems that there are almost as many homeless as there are whatever the hell the rest of us are, and we're all scrabblin'.

He speaks French; which is more than I can say for myself...and quite casually. And he has one of those literary minds that allows him to recall passages from great works at great length—the bastard. He also has a remarkably wide range of knowledge. One evening he quoted both Verlaine and Captain Beefheart to me, and

somehow made a sensible seamless transition from one to the other. Still his comment that he usually goes to a day spa to have his nails done took me off guard. (I've never been so quick.)

One time, I came to the door to make my contribution to his downfall with a book in my hand. "What are you reading?" Walter asked. "Something by Dumas," I said holding the spine up so he could see it. "In ENGLISH?" he quipped, and went into convulsions. He laughed so hard that he laughed himself right out the door. Of course he was right. The guy's smart, the guy's witty, the guy is well-educated, the guy has a good mind, the guy is dirty and smelly and he's dressed in rags, and he hasn't got the slightest idea about how to get back up on his feet. Me—I couldn't quote Verlaine to you if I had it in print in front of me. I can quote Captain Beefheart, but only if I work my way through Trout Mask Replica from the beginning with saxophone accompaniment. I'm neither smart, nor witty; I'm dull and sullen. I'm not well educated and I don't have a good mind; I have a BFA and feel completely lost in this world. But, I'm clean, and my shirts sometimes come to me hand delivered from France. But Walter and I are both trapped, and helpless to escape our situations.

Walter tells me he's 48 years old...he looks 60. I'm 62 and look a mere 61, in good light, if I've had enough wine and I'm the sole judge in the matter.

He's a pretty good guy. By his own accounting, he's *an embarrassment, a disgrace, and a cartoon character*. Although, idealistically I can envision this establishment (a

small hotel) taking him in, cleaning him up, and finding some work for him, that's just not going to happen. So, I've made a deal with whatever forces may influence such stuff that if I ever have enough money to take care of Walter in a respectable way, I will. I'd be delighted to do that. Meanwhile, if someone could help him get cleaned up and dressed properly, I think he'd be a good person to hire. He told me that he worked for the Salvation Army once, driving a truck, and "it was slavery"—so I don't think he wants manual labor.

On day I received a grimy letter from Walter in the mail. He was in jail. He wanted me to write to him, and so I did.

FEBRUARY 23, 2009

WALTER, what are you doing in JAIL?  
(You belong in an insane asylum...)  
Still, it must be nice to be indoors in this weather.

Walter, I won't tell you how to live your life, since you have never ventured to tell me how to live mine, but I will take this opportunity to tell you a little story.

One time, a long time ago, my girlfriend and I bought an old TV for \$8. It was about a 16-inch screen in a 30-inch solid wood box, and it had rabbit ears, and it worked. That set was so old that it still ran on tubes.

Once in a while a tube would blow out and I had to remove the back cover and pull all the tubes and take them to the only remaining store in the Bay Area (perhaps the world)

where they still had a tube tester, and test the tubes to find out which one was faulty. We were lucky that the only remaining store in the Bay Area where they still had a tube tester also had several dusty old boxes of the most common tubes lying around on a shelf. By this method we kept that television set working for several years.

One day, when it conked out again I took off the back as usual and took out any suspect tubes and made my way to the only remaining store in the Bay Area where they still had a tube tester, and tested the tubes. They were all OK. So, I went back home and re-seated the tubes and turned on the set, and still nothing. So, I was looking around in there in amongst all the wires and tubes and stuff, and I saw a black box with these words printed on it in big bold white letters, "WARNING: DO NOT, under ANY circumstance REMOVE THIS COVER." On both sides of that warning there was a triangular symbol with a bolt of lightning running through it. I looked at the box. I read the warning again; then I started to remove the eight screws that held the cover on that box. Inside there were some wires and a large coil or two wrapped in what appeared to be ancient waxed paper.

I took my screwdriver and I started poking around in amongst those wires to see if any of them were loose... and...BAM...there was a loud ear-splitting pop, and I was thrown, physically, backward, across the room.

I landed in a heap about 10 feet from where I'd been standing one second previously. I was completely immobilized. I could not move. There was a surge of some

sort of energy coursing through my body, running rapidly up and down my spine. It took me several minutes to regain control of myself—my breathing, my heart rate, my ability to sit up. After several more minutes recovery, I went back to the TV and slowly, carefully, replaced that cover on the box that read: “WARNING: DO NOT, under ANY circumstance REMOVE THIS COVER.” ...and I carefully screwed each of the eight screws that held it back into place. Then, I backed away from that TV set very carefully, and I sat down in a chair where I did nothing but think about what had happened to me for the next few hours. And, in that time I realized that what had happened to me was not *something that had happened to me*, it was something I had done to myself.

A couple days later, I was talking to a TV repair guy in his shop—with our huge old TV sitting on the floor between us—and I related the story to him just as I’ve told it here to you, and he said this: “You must be the luckiest young man I have ever met. That (capacitor/condenser/coil) stores up to 2000 volts of electricity, and, by rights, you should be dead right now. Believe me,” he said quite seriously, “that thing carries more voltage than they use in the electric chair.” He looked at me again and shook his head in disbelief, “By all rights, you should be dead.”

That’s it, Walter. That’s all I have to offer you. That and my most sincere wish that, when you get out, you take the opportunity to find some people whose job it is to help people in your situation, and you let them help you. Take care, Walter. You have my very best wishes.

## IT STARTED WITH HOLLY

I lied. It didn't really start with Holly, but Holly is a nice place to start. I'm guessing that it was 1983 when the awakening came. If so, I was 34 at the time and she was 20. Her spritely manner, fresh good looks, long beautiful legs, and short skirts all added to the illusion that I was some rich bastard I suppose, as did her Triumph convertible.

I'd taught Holly how to drive that car and she picked it up quickly. For example, I taught her to 'always respect the local constabulary' but she developed a philosophy of her own as well. Turning to me one time after cutting someone off, she quipped, "When I put on my turn signal, it's not a request, it's a warning." That's the tightrope we walked as we sped along, putting thousands of miles on her various Triumphs during the years we were on again and off again. Almost every week we'd run up the coast for a couple nights of squabbling in one bed 'n' breakfast or another, with her alternately—sometimes minute by minute—madly in love with me or fuming in smoldering silence. It was, by any standards, a complete pain in the ass, but, by male standards, certainly well worth it...at the time.

One morning when we were headed home from one of these delightful/torturous excursions, I was playing with the radio while she shifted her way through the winding hills of Marin. I was working my way methodically through the dial trying to find something that made some sense to me, and when I did I said, "Hey, this is good!" And, although she said nothing—did not even glance in my direction—I knew there was something brewing in that lovely head.



Eventually she broke the silence, saying somewhat snippily, "Please find something else."

Always oblivious to the obvious, I twirled around through the dial until I found something else I liked, and said chirpily, "Hey, this is kinda nice." That was a mistake.

After about ten minutes of tension-laden silence, she pulled over sharply, just outside of Lagunitas (a town with more dogs than people) and looked at me.

"Why is it always blues with you?" she asked. She was clearly, unquestionably, perturbed.

"Blues?" I asked weakly.

"It's always blues with you. Why?"

"But, Holly..."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Why what?"

"Why is it that every time you find something you like on that radio, it's a blues?"

I had no idea. I didn't even know what blues was.

I said, "Holly, I have no idea what you're even talking about. I wouldn't know a blues if I heard one."

And she said, "Oh yes you would. You sure as hell would."

She said that with such surety that I had no other choice than to believe her. Apparently, from what I could figure out, though I had no idea what blues was, and didn't know a blues when I heard one, when I heard one, I liked it.

This seemed to irritate Holly.

Adding insult to injury, according to her, whenever I *sat around in a big chair idly singing to myself*—in those times when she was doing whatever it is that young women must do in order to work their way through their perfectly

justified fury over something they wouldn't have to deal with if their boyfriend weren't such an idiot...in those times—the songs I always chose to sing, were blues; each one a blues, all of them a blues, every damned last one of them. I think she wanted me to offer her an explanation for this behavior, but I couldn't.

This was all news to me.

I wasn't aware that I had ever sat around in a big chair idly singing to myself. But, from what she said, it was a habit of mine. And, although I knew exactly what chair she was referring to, I don't recall ever idly singing.

Holly had a big beautiful Gibson hollow-body guitar that she'd been messing with as long as I'd known her, and whenever she played something that I liked I'd tell her—"Hey that sounds neat..." At that point she would sigh, glare at me unforgivingly for a while, then get up and put the guitar back into its case, snapping the latches closed with evident disgust. Suddenly, on that somewhat glorious, somewhat troubling day, just outside of Lagunitas (a town with more dogs than people), this behavior began to make a certain sense. At that moment I was guessing that those riffs that I thought were so neat, were all blues riffs.

I was almost certain of it.

While driving home in a chilly silence I gave the matter some thought, and I realized that, in college, whenever someone played something on their record player that I'd never heard before, and I felt compelled to ask, 'Hey, who is that?', they always replied, 'Howlin' Wolf' Or 'Eric

Clapton' Or 'Gatemouth Brown.' I nodded and said thanks, of course, but those names meant nothing to me. So, if Holly hadn't pulled over to the side of the road in a cold, unreasonable, and unforgiving snit that day, just outside of Lagunitas (a town with fewer people than dogs) and told me directly that Blues was callin' my name, I might have gone my entire life without knowing something truly wonderful.

So, thanks for that Holly, you're a good kid.

That awakening launched me into a several-year-long stint of haunting every blues dive in the Bay Area, and there were a lot of them. The Bay Area Blues Directory, which I published six years later, listed 50 such joints, and left out—as it was pointed out to me with some umbrage after the fact—a few in Oakland and Richmond which I'd never even heard of. That same directory listed 112 locally-based blues bands, which supplied the thump to these joints.

So, one day in 1988, I walked into my best friend's guitar shop and declared, "I know what I'm going to do."

"Yeah, what's that?" he asked.

"I'm gonna launch a little blues monthly."

"Yeah, well good luck," he said.

"And," I declared, "I'm gonna put Robben Ford on the cover of the first issue."

He looked at me for a while before saying, "Yeah, well good luck with that. Robben Ford has never done an interview. The editors at Guitar Player have approached him several times, and he's just not into it. So, you know, good luck getting Robben Ford on the cover of a blues publication that doesn't exist."

## KIDS TODAY

One evening about twenty years ago, I was the guest of a nice woman in her home in Malibu. And for some reason which I will never be able to explain, I found myself standing in front of this poor woman pontificating about how to raise kids. I wouldn't allow MY kids to do this. I wouldn't allow MY kids to do that. That sort of thing. It was all bluster, and, frankly, I surprised myself with the depth of my feelings on the subject. As far as I could tell, I'd never given the matter even a single thought. Nonetheless, there I was huffing and puffing and putting on a pretty good show. No doubt I struck an impressive figure pacing back and forth across the hardwood floor with one finger occasionally extended toward Heaven, the source no doubt of all this sudden wisdom. For some reason, as I tell this tale here, the term horse's ass comes to mind.

At any rate, I'd finished laying out the definitive rules for raising kids the proper way, and was taking a well-earned breath, when the lady asked meekly if she might ask a question. "Ask on, my good woman," I said good-naturedly, welcoming the opportunity to clarify the finer points of my theory. "How many children have you raised?" she asked. It probably comes as no surprise that my answer was "Well, uh, none...actually." The good woman was wise enough to realize nothing further needed to be said, and kind enough not to say anything further.

Now, these many years later, the answer is still "none" but, I'm going to dive in again, because it's impossible to look

at the kids on the street and not be convinced that their parents need, at very least, some guidance.

My very dear wife and I were driving by a San Francisco high school as school let out one afternoon, and it looked like a prison break. Honestly, literally. It looked like there'd been a breach in the exercise yard wall. The kids were all dressed like street thugs. It was 67 degrees out and many of them wore several dark and heavy layers of hooded sweatshirts, covered with unnecessarily oversized down jackets. Meanwhile their pants fell idiotically down toward their knees and gathered in great grimy folds around their ankles. On their feet were shoes which were apparently designed by the same guys who shod cartoon characters in the forties. The weird lumbering gait this attire imposed on these poor kids would have been humorous except for the continual crotch grabbing and the murderous look in their eye.

I know the crotch clutching is a sign of defiance of some sort, but really, who gives a damn? That isn't as worrisome as the overall tough-guy demeanor these kids all feel compelled to take on. Before we get into *You don't know what these kids have to do to survive in the 'hood-*nonsense, let me make it clear I'm talking about middle class kids in San Francisco. They can't all be tough guys, can they? When I was a kid, most of us knew we weren't tough guys and we did not pretend to be. We did not dress like tough guys or talk like them or emulate them in any way. We weren't tough, and that was OK. The only kids who wished they were tough, and played the part, were also idiots.

Several years ago I knew a kid in Southern California named Brandon. He was a good kid, about twelve at the time. He was a natural at baseball and something of a chess genius—he absorbed everything I knew about the game in a single lesson—and he was just an all-around good kid. He had a pleasant attitude. One day, after school, he was slouching in a chair with a scowl on his face and acting indifferent to the simple joy of the household. When his mother asked him what the matter was, he glared at her belligerently, then got up and ambled from the room. I followed him out into the yard, collared him, and escorted him to a part of the property where we could be alone.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked. He just glared at me. “Look,” I said, kneeling down and taking him by the shoulders, “You’re a good kid. And it’s OK to be a good kid. I know that at school you’re expected to put on some kind of tough-guy act. But, here, at home, when you’re with us, that’s not necessary. It’s not necessary and it’s not expected and it’s really not acceptable. Around here, you can be yourself, OK?” He nodded. “So, be a good kid and stop the tough-guy act and go in and apologize to your mother. OK?” Brandon smiled. We shook hands. He seemed relieved (even delighted) as he went inside and apologized to his mother. That was it. From that moment on he never carried the tough-guy act home with him again.

I’m suggesting that maybe more kids might like to hear that good news. Maybe being told that it’s OK not to be a tough guy would be a relief to some of them. End of lecture.

But, don't forget to come back next week and read my treatises on The World Bank, Fibro-Neuro-Plasticity and the underlying variant physiology which drives natural selection in sub-genus migrant populations of Hennigan's Least Tern. I know as much about those things as I do about raising kids.

## LIFE WAS SO MUCH SIMPLER THEN (June 1988)

Two days before I was scheduled to fly down to Santa Monica to interview Robben Ford, Shelley Heber (his agent) called me and in brittle tones told me I wasn't wanted. This was excruciating news because I had a schedule to keep, a magazine to put together, and Robben Ford was slated to be on the cover.

"But, I've booked a flight already," I whined. "Why?" I asked, "Why?" I pleaded. "Why?"

"Because, frankly," she said, growing colder with each syllable, "I don't know who you are and I've never heard of your magazine."

None of that surprised me of course because I was then (and remain today) nobody, and the magazine did not yet exist; the Robben Ford interview was to be the cornerstone of the premiere issue. So, I was beside myself. "What the heck am I gonna do?" I asked the angelic young lady who happened to be in my life at that time. She was sympathetic as I recall, but didn't know what I should do. She was one of those lithe and lovely creatures who, due to their ethereal nature, could not entirely understand the many aspects and intricacies of day-to-day earth-bound life. I can only imagine what a struggle it must have been for her to comprehend my industrious commitment to launching a small blues magazine against all odds.

Believe it if you will, don't if you can't—but I am a very shy person. You need to know that in order to understand the unlikely courage it took for me to call Shelley Heber back. My plan was to try to talk her into letting me



interview Robben by mentioning his brother, Patrick. It was, unquestionably the best card I held.

“Patrick Ford,” she replied crisply, “Does not represent Robben Ford. I do. And frankly,” she said yet again, “no one here has ever heard of you or your magazine.”

Now, I was almost in tears (if I was actually, literally in tears, I’m not admitting it here... I may have been, it meant that much to me).

So—what could I do—I panicked. What else could I do.

I called Patrick Ford, who had given me encouragement from the very beginning and who had helped me get things rolling by supplying me with the names and numbers of others who might like the idea of what I was trying to do. I was in a mild hysteria as I recounted to Patrick what had transpired. He calmed me down saying, “OK. Let me call Robben and see what he says about this.”

The next morning I’m lying in bed (same lovely young woman) and I get a call. It’s Robben Ford. Robben Ford is calling *me* from New York to assure *me* that I am welcome to come to Santa Monica. He tells me that my name will be on the guest list and after his first set, I’ll meet him back stage where we can set up the interview for the following day. He tells me to forget about what anyone else might have said about it.

“Look at me,” I thought, “one minute I’m nobody, the next minute Robben Ford is calling me!”

Things were back on track.

The day of departure, I pack my things—my nicest shirt, a

change of socks, an OK pair of jeans, pencils, pens, notebooks, a tape recorder, extra tape, extra batteries, a beautiful little Olympus AX camera—which is smaller than a pack of unfiltered cigarettes—two rolls of black and white film. This traveling gear I toss into a small gym bag. Here we go. I'm on my way.

Everything is wonderful; at the airport, I'm ecstatic; I'm on my way to interview Robben Ford for the premiere issue of my little blues magazine. When I get to the podium where they issue the boarding passes, the woman asks to see my ticket. She starts clattering away on a keyboard, looks at my ticket, clatters a little more, hands me back my ticket and says, "I'm sorry, you don't have an assigned seat."

"My ticket has a seat number on it." I point out.

"Yes," she says coldly. "I can see that."

"It says I'm in 23 B," I say.

"But..." she starts clattering keys... "But...23 B is occupied." She's clattering keys again.

"I don't care where I sit," I say genially, "I'll sit wherever you like me to."

"Yes, well," she says and starts the clattering of keys again... "I'm sorry but this flight is fully booked."

"Yes, and I'm supposed to be on it," I say, "I bought this ticket more than a month ago; I am scheduled to be on this flight."

"Yes, well..." she says and starts clattering, "What I show here is..." (clatter clatter clatter)

At this point they make the announcement "Final boarding on Nonsense Airlines for Los Angeles, please board at gate 47. This is the final call."

I say, "Please, check again. I'm scheduled to be on this

flight; I have to get on this flight.”

“Not according to our...” clatter clatter clatter. She’s pursing her lips and shaking her head from side to side. A guy in a blazer comes over and whispers something in her ear. She shakes her head no. He picks up the microphone and announces, “Will Mr. Edwards please come to gate 47. Mr. Edwards, your flight is boarding at gate 47.”

That’s the gate I’d standing at. That’s the flight I’m trying to get on. I embolden myself.

“You’re gonna put this Edwards guy on before you put me on?” I ask.

“SIR,” she says. She takes a breath and calms herself, “we are trying to get everyone we can on this flight, there are others flying stand-by as well.” She gestures toward a small crowd of people huddled over in a corner like sheep, hoping to get on board. “We are making every effort to fit all of you on this flight.”

“But, I’m not flying stand-by,” I correct her. “I booked this flight...”

“SIR,” she says. Clatter clatter clatter clatter. The guy in the blazer comes over again and whispers in her ear.

“Mr. Edwards, Mr. H. Edwards, please come to the check-in counter at gate 47. This is the last and final call. Henry Edwards please come to gate 47.”

“Wait a minute,” I say.

“SIR.” She says, cautioning me.

“But, wait,” I say.

“SIR...” she says. She’s clattering away furiously.

“No, but tell me, is this guy Edwards the guy who’s supposed to be in 23 B?”

“Please, Sir,” she says and continues pounding things

frantically into her computer.

"It's me," I say. "It's me. I'm Edwards. Please..." I show her my ticket. "Please compare...compare whatever information you have to...against my ticket. Please."

She takes my ticket begrudgingly. She looks, she blanches, she clatters away on the keyboard. I'm delighted. I can tell that she has discovered that Edwards and I are the same person. She says nothing. She hands me my ticket, she hands me a boarding pass and says somewhat peevishly, "Please board the flight."

EVERYONE is giving me the cold eye as I enter the plane. I'm the guy who has been keeping them from taking off. I look down at my feet, look down at the markings on the arms of the seats. When I come to 23 B, I toss my gym bag up into the over-head compartment, close the compartment, sit down and close my eyes. Inside I'm in turmoil, a strange mix, equal parts delight and utter embarrassment.

When we land in L. A. I get up and, when I can, I open up the over-head compartment and my gym bag is not there. I push a big suit bag aside to look behind it, and it's just not there. Somehow, in mid-flight, my gym bag has gone missing. A woman on the other side of the aisle taps me on the shoulder.

"Are you looking for your little bag?"

"Yes."

"The stewardess took it in order to make room for that big suit bag," she tells me.

So, I get in line and make my way slowly toward the front of the plane where three stewardesses are saying, "B-bye.

Thank you for flying with Nonsense Airways.”

When it's my turn one of them says that to me, but I'm not stepping right along. She's unnerved and irritated by my refusal to keep moving.

She says, “*Thank you* for flying with us.” She's giving me the bum's rush, but I'm not going anywhere.

“I need to get my bag,” I say apologetically.

“Baggage claim is...”

“It's a carry-on,” I say.

“Can you please step aside, sir,” one of the others says sharply, and so I do. I step aside and one of the crew hits me in the back as they open the cabin door.

“Could you please step aside,” another stewardess tells me, and I do. Then someone emerging from the bathroom rams the door into my back as they try to get out. I move to get out of their way and find myself in the galley.

“Please step aside, sir,” says someone sharply from behind, and I find myself behind the stewardesses all standing with their backs to me, saying “B-bye. Thank you for flying...”

For some reason one of these stewardesses catches sight of me out of the corner of her eye; she turns and asks accusatorily, “Can I help you? What are you doing here?”

I say, “I need my bag.”

She says, “Baggage claim is below the main concourse...”

I say, “No, it was carry-on.”

“I'm sorry, sir, I don't understand.”

“I carried it on. It's a small...”

“Well, where did you put your baggage?”

“I put it in the over-head compartment.”

“Do you need help retrieving your baggage from the overhead compartment?”

“No. It’s not there.”

“Did you LOOK in the overhead compartment?”

“Yes. It’s not there.”

“Are you sure you didn’t put it under the seat in front of you?”

“No.”

“Well then you should go back and check under the seat.”

“I mean, No, I did not put it under the seat. I put it in the overhead compartment.”

“Well, sir, if your baggage was properly placed in the overhead compartment, it must still be there.”

“It’s not,” I say.

“I don’t know how it could possibly have disappeared,” she says.

“The lady, a lady across from me, said that a stewardess took it.”

“One of the flight attendants took your baggage?”

“Yes.”

“One of the flight attendants took your baggage?”

“That’s what she told me.”

“Which flight attendant was it? Did you SEE where she might have taken your baggage?”

”I didn’t see her. I had my eyes closed.”

So, then I find myself expelled from the plane and standing in the waiting area just beyond the gate. A guy in a cheap suit with a walkie-talkie is asking me questions about how I managed to misplace my carry-on luggage. He’s eyeing me coldly; he’s suspicious. Over the walkie-talkie he’s informing someone somewhere of everything I say in answer to his questions.

How did I misplace carry-on luggage? When was the last

time I saw my luggage? Why do I THINK a flight attendant might have moved my luggage? Did I have any checked luggage? What was the nature of my business in Southern California? About that time a second guy in a cheap suit arrives swiftly, smoothly, on a golf-cart of some sort. He's heading toward me as a stewardess emerges from the plane carrying my gym bag at arm's length, as if it might contain something foul. She says nothing to me, just hands it to one of the guys in the cheap suits and the next question is, "Do you mind if we look through your bag, Sir?" He doesn't wait for an answer. After they paw through my bag, I no longer exist. They go scooting off together on the golf cart.

I walk to Traveler's Aid and ask the kindly looking old lady behind the counter what might be the name of a reasonably priced, hotel or motel near the club where Robben Ford is to play. I give her the name of the club. I give her the address.

"It's not the sort of information we generally give out," she tells me.

"I'm not asking you for a value judgment," I say, "I'm just... Ok," I say, "forget that. Can you tell me how much it might cost me to get to that part of town by cab? I just want to get an idea if the guy is driving me around in circles or not." But, that also is not the sort of information they generally give out. "How far would you say it is to Santa Monica from here?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, she says, "I'm sure if you ask a cab driver, they can help you; they're very helpful."

## FISH SANDWICH SANTA MONICA

So, I find a little motel—a grimy little motel—about one mile from the place where Robben Ford is slated to play. I walk to the venue just to be sure I know where the place is, and there are already people lined up outside with tickets for that night's show, and hoping to buy tickets for the following night's show. I feel pretty lucky, but I don't feel entirely confident. Until I'm actually inside and see Robben Ford stepping on stage, I'm going to reserve all gleefulness. Things have not, so far, been going so smoothly.

I'm there a day early and I have the night ahead of me and I have a few bucks, so, I decide to take myself out to dinner. I find a suitable looking diner and walk in and sit down. A waitress comes over and hands me a menu. I look at the menu and things look typically American, you know, affordable and deep-fried.

"You look worried about something," she says.

"I'm worried about everything," I reply. "It hasn't been an easy day."

"Well, you can forget about that for a while," she advises.

"Think about what you'll have to eat."

"I'm thinking about a fish sandwich," I say. "How's the fish sandwich?"

"It's pretty good," she says.

"It's made with real fish...I mean it's not like a compressed square or anything?"

"New England cod," she says, "it's pretty good."

I look at this woman and trust her immediately.



“How’s the clam chowder?” I ask, and she says, “It’s good.” She looks around before leaning in toward me, and says confidentially, “...Comes in a can.”

“I’ll take the fish sandwich...” I begin.

“The best deal,” she says, as she taps my menu with the end of her pencil, “Captain’s Platter. That’s got everything you could want on it; clams, shrimp, flounder, I think, two crab cakes; comes with fries and slaw.”

“OK,” I say. “I’ll take that. And a root beer. What kind of root beer is it?”

“Dad’s,” she says with a smile.

I haven’t had Dad’s root beer since I was a kid.

The food is delivered, I eat, it’s good. I’m leaning back in the booth quite satisfied when she comes by again.

“How’s dessert sound?”

“Well, I almost never eat dessert,” I say, “But, this is a special occasion.”

“Really? What’s the occasion?” she asks.

“Oh, I’m down here to interview Robben Ford. Do you know who Robben Ford is?”

“No, but congratulations anyway.”

“What do you have for dessert?”

“We have pie or ice cream.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s what we got.”

“How’s the pie?”

“I could bring some over and show it to you but then you might not want it,” she says quietly.

“What kind of ice cream do you have?”

“Well, we have vanilla and we have chocolate. Which would you like?”

“Surprise me,” I say.

When she comes back and places a big bowl of vanilla ice cream in front of me I am surprised. I’m even more surprised when I dig in, and there, inside, is a heart of chocolate. What a wonderful thing to do. If it brought tears to my eyes, I’m not admitting it here. But, after that day, it meant that much to me.

I did not propose marriage to that woman, though I could have, but I left her a tip which said, It’s always a great good pleasure to meet a real human being.

The editorial in the first issue of Bay Blues—the one with Robben Ford on the cover—begins:

I remember the day I got a letter from a dear friend of mine. She’d been travelling in Mexico several weeks and wrote to say, “I have found humanity!” I knew exactly what she meant. The first issue of this thing is my way of writing her back to say, “I too have found humanity.” I have found good music and good people and good times...and they have a name for it... it’s called the Blues.

## LOOK APPROVINGLY UPON LIFE

That's what it says on the napkin. And, it's scrawled in my own handwriting. But, I don't remember having scrawled it. Good advice nonetheless. So, well, gee whiz, why not you know? If I must... Oh, wait. Now I remember.

Now,  
I remember.

I was actually already looking approvingly upon Life that night, hanging out in a local blues joint where some guy I'd never seen or heard before was playing. Before the band got started, during the never-ending mic. check, a seat became available center-bar and I claimed it by putting my fundament in place. Sitting next to me was a woman in a Stevie Ray Vaughn kind of hat, dressed all in black, with short-cropped blonde hair. She was drinking bourbon. I was drinkin' beer. I'm sure there's a Country and Western song in there somewhere.

So, when the guy I'd never seen or heard before finally steps on stage this woman sitting next to me whacks me on the arm with the back of her hand. I look over at her to see what all the unnecessary roughness is about, and she's all afluster. Her jaw is open, her tongue is hanging out; she's panting heavily and looking cow-eyed at the front man. While the first number gets underway she leans in and, in a breathy Southern accent, shouts this tale into my ear.

"I was just upstairs, you know...  
And there was this woman on the pay phone...  
And there was this guy up there...you know..."

And he was hangin' around, and he was trying to...  
Trying to, pick up this woman on the pay phone..."

My guess is that she's probably the guy's wife, and he's  
trying to pry her OFF the phone so they can split.

She continues:

"He was all GREASY and, you know pretty disgusting...  
That poor girl...I'm thinking to myself, What a creep! You  
know...? YOU have NO idea what we have to put up  
with..."

At this point I'm thinking: These days, you smile at a  
woman and it becomes a judicial matter. With each little  
burst of information I'm nodding agreeably and shouting  
yeah, but I have no idea why she has chosen me to tell this  
to, or where it's headed, or why she thinks I might want to  
hear it instead of, say, the music.

"BUT..."

You know, "she says, "put a guitar in front of him  
and put him up there on stage,  
and he is the sexiest man in the world!"

As if to confirm this fact, she clenches both fists, closes her  
eyes, lets out a little squeal, and shivers from head to foot.  
I don't even want to think about what that might mean.

Then, she tells me she's a stockbroker, with her own firm.  
By the second set, she no longer *owns* the firm but just  
works there, and maybe she's not really a broker, *per se*,  
*you know*, but a secretary. I purposefully leave at the break  
in order to keep her from being reduced to charwoman.  
And it works too; when I return she owns the firm again  
and she's talking to another stockbroker—who probably  
owns *his* own firm—and is sitting on her other side.

He's from Nebraska, and looks like a slightly more masculine form of Calvin Klein; same ears, but less likely to be discovered one day wearing a dress and serving tea in the garden. Before the set is over I know—by way of the blonde between us—that he has a wife and four kids. I also know, by the same vehicle, that he's not an actual stockbroker, you know, *per se*. He brokers in 'legal information' to law firms within the (I forget) industry. Somehow, amidst all of this—the music, the dancing, the shouting, the drunkenness, the revelry, he imparts information to her, and she—for reasons known only to her—feels the need to pass it on, point by point, to me.

By this process I learn that his company is about to *downsize*, and *some people* will soon find themselves *out on their asses*. "Merry Christmas," he says dryly, and raises his glass. He doesn't know precisely what's going to happen, but he feels pretty good about it; he's *nicely positioned*. Nevertheless, he's shaking his head for the poor people who'll be...you know...The corporate world just isn't the same as it was when his grandfather wore a tie.

While listening to the blues as best I can with one ear under siege, I'm fed a continual stream of information from this now again stockbroker about the guy sitting next to her, but more importantly about her, about her thoughts, about her philosophy, her challenges, her *little victories*. In the middle of this mini-series, she smacks me in the ribs and points excitedly into the crowd and shouts, "White shirt, DARK hair!" I'm looking, but can't see who she's talking about. "WHITE SHIRT, DARK HAIR." she insists, and I follow her finger to a woman over in the corner, sitting at

the apron of the stage, screaming into a cell phone. At this point the band is playing so loud that it's nearly blinding and the woman is screaming into her phone so hard she looks like a head banger at a heavy metal concert.

When the stockbroker gets up to go take care of some things, the guy from Nebraska turns to me to impart the rest of his tale to me directly. He assures me that he's in pretty good shape. He wants me to know that I don't have to worry about him; he'll be fine. He's confident he'll be retained. Apparently, in Nebraska there are only two firms brokering legal information to attorneys and, no matter what happens, he's sure he'll end up working for one or the other of them. He assures me that his wife and his kids'll be all right. To comfort me he leans way over in my direction and gives my shoulder a little pat.

"They'll be FINE," he assures me. And then he does something nobody has ever done before in a blues dive (or at least in my presence), he quotes Lyndon Baines Johnson.

"They'd rather have me inside their tent, pissing out, than outside their tent, pissing in." He winks at me. That's why he's so certain that he'll be kept onboard. He knows too much. And to drive that point home neatly, he taps his head, and nods affirmatively. "I'm absolutely sure they don't want *me* outside *their tent*, pissing in."

Where else, but in a blues dive, can you attain such insight?

So, with that in place, here's your

INSIDER TRADING TIP OF THE WEEK (December 14, 1998)

Between sets, the broker-chick (at this point I've had three drinks and she's become the broker-chick) takes my pen from my shirt pocket, turns over a bar receipt, and draws something that, from my angle, might be a boomerang.

"This," she announces, "is Florida."

Now, upon having it shoved under my nose, I can see clearly that Florida looks more like a big bratwurst, and I accept that.

"Look," she says, and pokes me in the arm with my own pen. Then she starts putting Xs all over the bratwurst, and giving them names. "Pensacola, Panama City, South Beach, Saint Petersburg..." Then she draws a large ellipse in the bend of the bratwurst and she says, "THIS... ALL OF THIS, from here to here, belongs to Port St. Joseph Corporation." She raises her eyebrows to see if I've got it. "They own all of it; beach front, inland, all of it; every inch." It's important that I understand. She looks me in the eye until I confirm that I've received the information.

She tells me, "It's 1.1 million acres," and writes 1.1 up in one corner of the bar receipt. "They have NO creditors. They don't owe anything to anybody." She writes a big fat zero under the 1.1. "They have 500 million in assets, and...AND...they are about to start developing." She writes "500 MILLION" up in the corner of the receipt.

"I have taken everything I own and put it in that stock," she tells me, while tapping the receipt with one frighteningly long fingernail. "It trades under J O E, on the New York Stock Exchange." She looks at me, smiles, hands me back my pen. "You know what to do," she tells me.

Henry Edward Fool

I do.

I take a napkin from the bar and I write: Look Approvingly upon Life, and I shove it into my pocket.

“What’d you write?” she asks. “What’d you write?”

But, I ain’t sayin’. I’m as mute as a carp.



## INNOCENCE

The kid sitting on the seat sideways in front of me had beautiful teeth. He had nice skin too—smooth, closer to black than brown—and his hair was interesting—swept back and fixed as though he were in permanent forward flight. But his teeth were absolutely remarkable. They were exceptionally clean and white, and they sparkled in contrast to his dark skin. Because he was talking animatedly to his friends in the back of the bus and smiling a lot I had ample opportunity to study them. I kept wanting to ask him, “What do you do to keep your teeth lookin’ so good?” but I was pretty sure that’s not the sort of thing old white guys ask young black kids on the bus in San Francisco. He might get the wrong idea, think I’m some kind of damned dentist.

It’d been quite a while since I’d ridden the bus, so I was not used to sitting in such proximity to other people. But I enjoyed observing this bus-gang kid in action. He was charming because he showed no sign of the anger—real or otherwise—that you see in most bus-gang kids. He wasn’t acting tough or mean; he wasn’t aggressive or belligerent or loud. He was a good kid. I really wanted to tell him, “You got a really nice set of teeth there, take care of them.” I envisioned myself leaning forward, tugging one side of my maw open and showing him the cavernous gaps in there. “Look. See here? This is where they yanked out two teeth because I didn’t take care of them. And, look at this. I’m missing three teeth down here. The ones directly above them are slowly dropping out of their sockets because they got nothing to hold them in. You don’t want to end up like that.”

Sitting next to me was a street-hardened little white girl. She'd begrudgingly, with restrained drama, took her combat bootied feet off the seat to let me sit down, before turning her back and staring out the window. Behind us was a row of tough little black kids, friends of the kid with the teeth, all chattering in their own private dialect. Across from us was a big fat guy with a beard. He was wearing a long brown skirt. The kid with the wonderful teeth said, "Hey, are you a priest or somethin'?"

He replied, "And a brother, and a monk."

For some reason I felt compelled to add, "And a vegetarian!"

I'm not so sure that being a wise-ass in school necessarily helps one through life, but as an old bastard on a bus, in this case, it didn't hurt. The kid with the teeth cracked up, as did a few of the others that overheard the remark. It's not that often that us old white bastards get a chance to ingratiate ourselves to the bus-gang kids. And it was kinda neat to look over and see, reflected in the window, that the street-hardened girl sitting beside me was smiling. Timing is everything.

In front of the priest/brother/monk was a guy that looked a lot like Taj Mahal, about twenty years ago. He had on weird little Ben Franklin-like shades and kept his eyes closed for most of the trip. It may have been Taj for all I know. Whoever he was he was too cool to be involved.

There was an on-going patter in the back of the bus. I had no way of judging the content. It had to do with graffiti, as far as I could make out. Somebody named TK, "who the

fuck ever he is.” was “going over” the marks our bus-gang had left behind. They were talking about coming back and going over TK *who the fuck ever he is*. The kid with the teeth only occasionally joined in. When he did speak, what he said seemed bright and clever, and the others seemed interested in what he had to say. I liked the kid with the teeth. Unlike his friends in the back—who were all making efforts to be loud and vulgar—he wasn’t demanding any attention. For the most part he seemed content to just look at what was going on outside.

One of the back seat kids was listening to something through headphones and chanting along with it. Whenever the words, “kill the ho and kick her to the flo” came around, he chanted them loud and clear. The kid with the teeth got a kick out of this, and the girl beside me would look up from staring out the window and smile. Hardly anything more entertaining than “kill the ho and kick her to the flo.” At times it seemed to morph into “kill the ho and kick her out the do.” Either way, catchy lyrics. “Sing it!” encouraged the kid with the teeth. “Sing it out loud.” It was a challenge to the world.

It was nice to see that the chanter didn’t take things up a notch simply because he was encouraged to do so. The kid with the teeth was smiling and watching to see the response of the priest/brother/monk, and laughed while mouthing the words joyously, “Kill the ho and kick her to the flo” I was watching Taj Mahal to see what his role in all of this might be, but he never opened his eyes.

Somewhere around Van Ness all the kids from the bus-gang got off, including the white girl in combat boots and the kid with the headphones—chanting “kill the ho and kick her to the flo.” The back of the bus pretty much cleared out. It was just us; the kid with the teeth, the priest/brother/monk, myself (the old white bastard), Taj Mahal and an ominous presence directly behind me which I could feel but could not force myself to turn around and look at.

We’d gone only half of a block further when the ominous presence spoke. I didn’t so much hear what he said as sense the aggression in it. It was directed right through me, to the kid with the teeth. He looked around me, smiled, replied, “Yeah, what color is it?”

“I forget.”

The kid with the teeth asked, “You got a gun and you forgot what color it is?” He laughed. “You ain’ got no gun.” He waved him off.

“I shoot your ass,” said the ominous presence.

“Yeah and I’ll shoot yours too. We got guns too.”

“You ever come down to 16th street and me and TK and Big-Time C, shoot your ass.”

“Yeah, well you come down to our town and we’ll shoot your ass and blow it up with a bomb.”

During this pleasant exchange the kid’s smiling and jovial. Somehow this threat doesn’t cause him any concern whatsoever. I’m thinking that I’d be scared to death if another old white bastard was sitting behind me threatening to shoot my ass, but it just rolls off the kid. His side of the exchange is even kind of good natured. He’s not a big kid,

but he's holding his own. I envy his composure. I really like the way he's handling this. It's a remarkably cool thing to witness. I've decided the kid with the teeth is cooler than Taj; much cooler than Taj. The kid's not hiding behind shades; he's in it up to his chin and diggin' it.

Then, for some reason I cannot discern, the kid gets up and moves to the back seat. I can't help but turn and watch as he sits down right next to the ominous presence and the exchange begins to heat up. The rate of the threats and the very real intent behind them is coming louder and quicker from the ominous presence. Now I get my first look at him. He's a large, blockheaded, overweight, caramel-colored kid all dressed in black. He's shoving over and cornering the kid with the teeth. As the threats escalate, I can't help but be concerned. They sound real enough to me. I'm facing forward but I got one ear cocked toward the back of the bus. Then my young friend with the teeth lets out a squeal, "Hey, man, what you hit me for?"

The priest/brother/monk doesn't turn in his seat. He stares straight ahead. Taj Mahal opens his eyes and looks over the top of his shades toward the back of the bus briefly, before closing his eyes again. I turn and look at the kid with the teeth but say nothing. The ominous presence has him really cornered now. I watch as he grabs and twists the kid's arm. "Hey, stop it, man. Why you want to be hittin' on me?"

The kid with the teeth is looking concerned, and although I'm concerned for him, I don't know what I should do. I don't know IF I should do anything. I have no way of assessing the situation. Is this the sort of thing that turns

into a murder on a bus, or are these just a couple of kids working their way through whatever it is that kids have to work their way through these days?

“Help me priest!” the kid with the teeth squeals. But the priest/brother/monk doesn’t even turn to look. Taj Mahal keeps his eyes forward and closed. And as the bus stops at the next stop the kid with the teeth squeezes quickly past the ominous presence and runs to the back door. The ominous presence gets up slowly, casually following his prey. Just as the door opens, and people are crowding to get out, the kid with the teeth dashes toward the front of the bus and out the front door, leaving the ominous presence hemmed in behind other passengers waiting to get out. Me, I’m craning my neck to see if the kid has made good his escape.

When the bus takes off again, the priest/brother/monk shrugs and smiles at me. “I didn’t want to ignore his cry for help,” he tells me.

“Yeah, but you did it anyway, didn’t you?” I snap, and I get up and move away from him.

Unfortunately, the nature of that sword is that you have to run it through yourself in order to get at others with it. It’s just bullshit, and I know it. I’m no better than he is. But, where does that leave us? The disregard with which we both treated the kid may be understandable, but it was, at once, unacceptable.

Still, I didn’t want to ride the rest of the way looking at anyone who reminded me too much of myself.

## BUSINESS CARD LESSON

When I was the small-time publisher of an internationally distributed, award-winning, doorstep, throwaway blues magazine, I stumbled upon the famous blues musician, John Lee Hooker in a dingy little dive one evening, and I approached him to wrangle an interview.

I was immediately given the bum's rush by one of his ever-present underlings (a title which might make a nice business card). I went back to my own table—where I belonged—disappointed, and maybe more than just a little embarrassed.

Blues guitarist, Marvin Greene—whom I'd been drinking with—suggested that at least I should go back and give John Lee Hooker my business card.

"Maybe he'll want to talk to you down the road, when he's not surrounded with so many blondes," Marvin said.

It was a convincing argument. So, I went back to Mr. Hooker's table, handed him my business card (Editor, BAY BLUES MONTHLY). John Lee Hooker took the card, looked at it, looked at me, smiled broadly, offered his leathery hand and then offered me a seat at his table. The underling who'd just run me off, ran off himself, this time, to get me a beer.

Such is the power invested in a business card.

### THREE VLADS

Suddenly and for no apparent reason that I can discern, I am reminded of the time I was invited to a party down in Palo Alto. I was introduced to the host, a guy named Vlad, who showed me around and introduced me to others. One of the first people he introduced me to was a guy also named Vlad. When I asked, How am I going to keep you two separate in my mind? They both laughed. It was simple: one of them was Vladimir and the other Vladislav. And, though that was no help to me whatsoever, greater confusion still was on the way.

Maybe a little later I was introduced to a third Vlad. I asked, ...imir? slav? He laughed. “Neither,” he said. He was a third kind of Vlad, and he explained it for me. But, I can’t recall what he said because, I might have had a few drinks in me by then.

Since that day, I’ve asked Russian students, Russian scholars, actual Russians, and my dear wife—who knows almost everything there is to know about things Russian—and none have been able to come up with anything more than the two Vlads. That party was a nightmare, but had I been dreaming?

I would swear in a court of law that guy told me he was a third kind of Vlad.



## THE FIRST TIME I MET CARLOS GUITARLOS

The first time I met Carlos Guitarlos he was standing in the middle of the intersection of 12th and Folsom at one AM with his guitar in his hand. As I approached he said, "Will you do me a favor?" I didn't really know Carlos, but I'd heard about him, so I was more than just a little hesitant.

"What?" I asked cautiously.

"Will you go in there and get my amp for me?" He indicated a nightclub across the street.

"Why don't you go in there and get it?"

"I don't think they want me back in there right now" he said, "...or ever...well, maybe never."

"Really? What happened?"

"Oh, man, I don't know," he shrugged, "I probably used the wrong fork or something. So, would you?" he pleaded.

I was trying to find a nice way to tell the guy no when the bass player came out lugging his own equipment. Carlos went over to him saying, "Would you go back in there and get my amp for me?"

The bass player just dumped his stuff in the middle of the asphalt, turned around and went back into the club from which they'd apparently just been ejected.

"Help me get this stuff out of the street," Carlos said, and I picked up a couple of things and together we got it to the opposite curb where we stacked it up. I was focused on the club they'd just been thrown out of as the drummer and the bass player emerged like firemen, hauling equipment, dropped it on the sidewalk, lowered their heads and charged back in to save more. Carlos, meanwhile, had been

eyeing the joint we were now camped out in front of, a dive considerably less appealing than the upscale night spot which had ousted him. He stood there evaluating the thunderous noise that was coming from the second floor. "Listen to that," he said, "those guys are terrible. We should be playing in there and those guys should be out here on the street," he said. Then he disappeared inside.

He emerged a couple minutes later and said, "Let's get all this stuff inside."

"What?"

"We got a gig," he said. "Help me get this stuff inside or, better yet, wait here. When the drummer shows up tell him he can come in. The bass player can come in if he wants..." I must have looked confused because Carlos leaned in toward me and said, "The drummer's got the car..."

So, then, there we were inside this place and Carlos Guitarlos' three piece band was setting up quickly because it was getting pretty near closin' time. After giving instructions, Carlos hopped down off the stage and started to go upstairs. I don't know why, but I followed. At the top of the stairs there was a big muscular blockheaded kind of guy who nodded to Carlos but stepped in front of me, barring my way. He wanted a \$5 cover charge from me. Carlos came back and said, "He's OK. He's with me." And the guy actually apologized to me as he stepped aside.

Upstairs it was a madhouse of shoulder-to-shoulder dancing and squealing and people standing around yammering loudly at each other and waitresses weaving in and out of the crowd with heavily laden trays. The band

was grinding out a steady pounding pulse of blistering mayhem with a male vocalist screaming something over the top. Carlos cut a straight path through the crowd and got right up to the apron of the stage where he began shouting at the singer.

The guy, quite naturally—in the middle of a performance—was making every effort to ignore Carlos. I was stuck; unable to get through the crowd. So, I was craning my neck and standing on my toes and bobbing and weaving, trying to see what was going on. I'd have given anything to hear what Carlos was saying. Knowing him as I do now, I have no doubt that he was probably saying something like, "You guys are terrible. You should be playing downstairs to an empty room. We should be up here."

Whatever he was saying the front man wasn't happy with it. Between lyrics he would cover the mic and lean down and shout something back at Carlos. Throughout all of this the song continued and the dancing and the drinking and the laughter. Finally Carlos turned around and started pushing his way back through the crowd. When he got to me he said, "Let's go, let's go. There's not much time left."

We scampered downstairs and Carlos climbed on stage and counted off the first tune and they played for thirty minutes straight to a house consisting of me, two local drunks and the barkeep, who seemed to be unaware that anything at all was going on. At about ten minutes until 2, the barkeep sighed, put down the glass he'd been wiping as long as we'd been there, and came over to tell Carlos to wrap it up. "Just one more tune," Carlos pleaded, "just one more tune."

By this time things were getting pretty hazy and somehow we found ourselves all back out on the street again. A Plymouth Valiant station wagon appeared out of nowhere and the band loaded it up with their equipment.

Carlos was about to climb in when I said, "Hey, wait, what about the interview?"

"Oh that's right," said Carlos, "Can we do it some other time?"

"I came all the way down here to get this interview and you're gonna skip out on me?"

Carlos thought for a moment. "You got a car?"

"Yes."

Carlos leaned into the window of the Valiant and said, "You guys go on; I'm gonna hang around with this writer guy for a while."

They didn't need further prompting; they were gone, like that. And, like that, Carlos and I were in my truck.

He directed me to a chicken joint somewhere deep in the Mission District where, upon entering he said, "Good, we got the good guy." Carlos ordered a couple of burritos and instructed me, "Watch this guy; watch how he handles the cilantro." I watched as the kid took a huge bundle of cilantro and, using a cleaver, sliced it almost paper thin before tossing huge handfuls of the stuff into our burritos. "Cilantro is everything," Carlos said.

## A TRIBUTE TO PERCY MAYFIELD

As the proud publisher of a local, monthly, (internationally distributed, award winning) throwaway blues magazine I had the pleasure of talking to people for a living-of-sorts for a number of delightful years. Mostly, I interviewed bluesmen whose work I admired, but I also talked to people involved in the business of blues; promoters, agents, club owners. I also reviewed records, books and video tapes. WAIT A MINUTE; suddenly I realize what a wonderful time that was. But those days are gone.  
(Sigh along with me now.)

Well, so as the proud publi... etcetera, one day I got it in my head to interview a woman who owned and ran a little blues club south of where I lived, because it was such a cool little joint, and because, for years she had always managed to get the best and most remarkable talent in the blues world to round out their Bay Area tours by stopping off at her place for a show or two. The list of greats who had played that place is virtually endless. I admired that, as did her regular, dedicated, delighted, ravenous customers. At that point in the game I'd been around doing what I do for a little more than two years and had become used to people saying 'yes' when I asked for an interview. With the sole exception of John Mayall—whom I, young idiot that I was, approached on the street while he was loading in—nobody had ever turned me down. The Mayall faux pas had been much earlier in the game though, and I learned that lesson without further instruction.

(Thank you, Mr. Mayall, and you can still go to hell.)

So, from my little office tucked away quietly in the vast Sonoma County nowhere, I picked up the phone. Kathleen had bought me a top-of-the-line phone with two lines coming in and a speaker phone, so, I had my feet up on the desk and I was leaning back in my chair regally, maybe just a little smugly, delighted to be making a living-of-sorts while looking out the window on a bank of black acacia trees which grow like weeds, are completely worthless for burning, dangerous to trim—because each branch weighs a ton—and just generally serve no purpose whatsoever upon this earth, except to make life miserable for those of us who must try to keep them under control.

A male sounding character picks up the phone and I tell him who I am and that I'd really like to interview good old what's her name.

He responds immediately, "She doesn't want to speak to you."

I say, "What do you mean she doesn't want to speak to me?"

He says, "Believe me, she doesn't want to speak to you."

I say, "Why not?"

He says quietly, "I can't... uh... speak right now." I can hear his eyebrows go up even over the phone. And I think I can hear him nod his head in the direction of the owner who, in my mind, is standing around there, probably near the other end of the bar.

"Oh," I say kinda quiet like, "but, can you give me a hint?"

He says, "Hold on for just... a... sec... OK," he says, "she's gone. But I have to tell you quick before she comes back."

"Shoot," I say. I'm all ears.

“She doesn’t want to give you an interview because, she’s afraid if she does you’re gonna say something about the Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco.”

“Oh, come on, man...” I say, as if writing about the Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco is the very last thing I’d ever even consider. “I’m not going to say anything about the Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco. I just want to speak with her a little bit about her club. I love that place. Everybody loves that place.”

He says, quietly, “Oops, gotta go...” and hangs up.

“Wow,” I said to myself, I was stunned; I didn’t know a damned thing about the Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco. In fact, I had never even heard of the Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco.

Here’s a hint to all of you young kids out there just about to take the first step in establishing yourselves as a local authority on blues music by launching a little 48 page throwaway monthly: from day one start creating a source book. In fact, whatever you’re planning on doing with your life, whether it’s establishing yourselves as a local authority on blues music by launching a little 48 page throwaway monthly or anything else, keep a source book. That hint alone is worth the price of the book you now hold in your hands.

So, I pick up my source book, and I flip through there and I call one of the most entertaining people I’ve ever had the true, great good pleasure to listen to, on and off for three days straight, during a blues festival: Dennis Hale.

“So, get this,” I tell him, “I try to snag an interview with what’s her name, down there in Mill Valley, and she doesn’t want to talk to me. The barkeep tells me she thinks I’m gonna bring up the Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco, and she wants to avoid that. But, you know I wouldn’t do that. It never really crossed my mind... you know... because, well, you know... to be honest with you, Dennis, I don’t *know* anything about the Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco. I didn’t even know there WAS a Tribute to Percy Mayfield fiasco. So what can you tell me?”

I explained further (convincingly, I think) that if I wasn’t going to put something into print, I should at least know what it was that I wasn’t putting into print.

“That seems reasonable,” agreed Mr. Hale.

“I don’t claim to always know what I’m talking about, but there are limits to what I’ll publish.” I added unnecessarily.

Because he’s pretty much an evil sorta guy, Dennis Hale says, “Yes, but a shot has been fired across your bow.”

I say, “Hmm.” I begin to rub my scruffy chin and ponder. Or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, if she was going to treat me like I had absolutely no integrity I felt an obligation to, at very least, make an honest attempt to prove her right.

So, due directly to the evil influence of that rascal, Dennis Hale, the February 1990 issue of Bay Blues—the one with Christine Lakeland on the cover and featuring the artistry of no less than *three* outstanding female lead blues guitarists—the one that would have carried this blues club owner’s interview, carried this story instead:



*This tale comes to me about third or fourth hand. Has to do with a joint north of here where they were throwing "A Tribute to Percy Mayfield" while back, when Percy was still with us.*

*Seems that, in the room downstairs, where the bands hang out between sets, there was this nice new pool table. And Percy Mayfield was down there standin' around talkin' to some people, and he set his drink down on that pool table.*

*Well, the owner of the place saw some guy setting his drink down on that nice new felt surface and, we're told by reliable sources, "She just flipped out, shrieking 'GET THAT DRINK OFFA MY POOL TABLE AND GET THAT GUY OUTTA MY CLUB IMMEDIATELY!'" and poor old Percy Mayfield went runnin' up the steps and right out the back door, to save his own life.*

*There you have it: A Tribute to Percy Mayfield.*

In fairness, I need to say that I do things far more embarrassing than that a thousand times every day, and I have nothing to show for it. This good woman brought some of the best blues talent that ever set foot on stage to a tiny town tucked away in the middle of Marin, and did it consistently, for more than thirty years.

And, you know, it really is kinda an unnecessary pain in the ass to have to replace the felt on a brand new pool table.

## NAKED TOO SOON

For some reason that story reminded me of a time in college (thousand years ago), when I had gotten naked only to discover that I had jumped the gun. The girl involved returned to the room, looked at me, smiled a lovely little crooked smile and, eyes nicely averted, said, with measured nonchalance, “What are you doing naked?”

I said, “Oh, uh, I thought it was...uh... time.”  
“It’s not,” she said.

## VALENTINE'S DAY LIVE

I was sitting around on the couch at about 3 p.m. on Valentine's Day, taking a little break before the onslaught. Valentine's Day dinner is a huge annual event at the restaurant; always sold out well in advance; special menu (at a nicely escalated price); champagne for everybody; roses for the ladies, of course; for some reason the dog may be found wearing a French flag around his neck. It's one of four locked-in, reservations only, sold-out events—the others being Bastille Day, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve dinners—and everyone in the establishment is called in to work. We have three shifts of wait staff, three shifts of prep guys, three shifts of cooks, two pastry chefs and the Chef himself. So, as said, I don't know what I was doing watching the local news, when I should have been downstairs, like the rest of them, spinning around rapidly in an ever-increasing frenzy and bumping into things as if insane. Not a team player, I was taking some time for myself. And, because of that I witnessed one of the best LIVE interviews anyone has ever conducted.

The young reporter's brilliant idea was to interview the old guy who sells flowers from the kiosk which has stood just outside the City of Paris for as long as anyone can remember. He's been there for years, and has brought joy and happiness, well yes, and beauty too, into the lives of thousands throughout those countless years. At no time are the flowers more highly coveted, more appreciated, more useful or requisite, it would seem, than on Valentine's Day. This interview would, no doubt, rocket her to success.

There was a little tease at the beginning of the local news; they showed the young reporter standing somewhat nervously in front of the flower stand smiling, with the old guy and his assistant, behind, dealing out roses.

“Julie So-and-so is downtown right now; a little later on she’ll be interviewing the man who has sold flowers on that same corner for the last forty years.” Julie smiles and waves at us. “This should be delightful.” Meanwhile they dive into the local news; a woman drives her car into a drugstore, a fire in a cheap hotel leaves dozens homeless, the daily shooting in Oakland. And, now, here’s Julie again. She looks thrilled, she’s eager, she’s ready; she shivers with anticipation. THIS is going to be a great interview.

“Here we are LIVE downtown at a flower stand which I’m sure you all recognize. This stand has been here since 1910, just after the earthquake and has been in the same family for all those years. You can imagine the joy this family has single-handedly brought to the hearts of San Franciscans over these years.”

“Looks like they’ve still got a few roses left, Julie.”

“Yes, but not many. If you haven’t got your roses yet, you better hurry down here,” Julie warns, wagging a finger.

“I understand you’re going to be interviewing Mr. What’s-his-name, later.”

“Yes, as soon as the crush lets up a little, we’ll be talking to him LIVE.”

“Thank you, Julie. Meanwhile, in the news...”

When next we see Julie—twenty minutes later—she has an old, bent, red of face gentleman standing beside her. He looks a bit like a hedgehog, with moist beady little eyes.

Julie dives in; “OK! At last! I’m LIVE here with a man whose family has been in the flower business right here at this very corner, downtown, for almost 80 years. That’s a very long time!”

“Seems like forever,” the old guy says coldly.

“I’m sure our viewers recognize the family name.”

“I’m sure they do.”

“So, it must be pretty exciting for you on days like this...”

“I been in the flower business for more than fifty years.”

“And, you’ve brought untold beauty and endless happiness to so many people during that time...”

“My father was in the flower business. *His* father was in the flower business. *HIS* father started it all.”

“So how does it make you feel...bringing such joy to so many...?”

“Well, how would it make you feel getting up at 4:30 in the xfpxfp morning, going down to the flower depot, and first thing, having to dealing with all those morons, then hauling all this crap up here, off-loading it, loading it into these xfpxfp buckets, and then dealing with *people* every xfpxfp day until 8 or 9 o’clock at night?”

“Um, I see you’re selling *a lot* of roses today!”

“I rue the day my father ever took me on. I tell you, I regret having ever heard of the xfpxfp flower business. Yeah, they want their roses; gotta have their xfpxfp roses.”

“Well, thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thank you. I been in this business my entire life. How do I feel? I’m old and I’m tired and I hate the xfpxfp damned flower business. That’s how I feel; if you really want to know.”

Before they can cut to a commercial, there is a prolonged shot of Julie just standing there humiliated, speechless, smiling helplessly into the camera. She's braving it out but we can see she's practically in tears. She's thinking that was the worst LIVE interview anyone has ever done in the entire history of television news.

I'm sitting there on my couch, at home, four blocks away from where poor Julie stands deflated, and I'm thinking, "MAN! That was the BEST LIVE interview ANYONE has EVER done." I can't get it out of my head.

"How would you feel getting up at 4:30 in the xfpxfp morning, and dealing with *people* every xfpxfp day until 8 or 9 o'clock at night?"

Best LIVE interview I have EVER witnessed, Julie.

Really, it was great. I'm sure you brought happiness to many people, and I was genuinely sorry to see that they didn't re-run it on the 11 o'clock news.

## SHIMPS

One afternoon we were cruising on down to San Francisco from Forestville in order to pick up something that couldn't be gotten in a more civilized/rural location, and suddenly there's a hitchhiker. So, naturally I say, "Should we pick him up?" and naturally she says, "No," somewhat snappishly. She gives me that look, like I might either be stupid or insane or both. (Actually, I was neither, just a guy who had, himself, hitchhiked before.)

The guy is not really dressed for hitchhiking—more like someone going to a picnic at a yacht club—and he's not really making much of an effort, but I look at him as we pass by and immediately begin to climb on the brakes. It's Pat, the guy who owns Larry Blake's—a lovely little blues dive in Berkeley—where I've spent many wonder-filled nights.

She says, "What are you doing? Why are you stopping?"

I say, "It's Pat, the guy who owns Larry Blake's."

She says, "What is he doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"

As we wait for Pat to catch up and climb in, I say, "That's an interesting question." I was wondering that same thing.

We had taken the back way, because that's the kind of folk we were back then, and if there is a middle of nowhere between Forestville and San Francisco, that was certainly the very heart of it. But, as certainly, Pat had a car, and it was probably a good car, a running car, a dependable car, probably an expensive car. What was he doing out here, in the middle of nowhere without a car?

So, he climbs in and he doesn't recognize me at first, you know in broad daylight, sober, without some thundering blues driving us up against the wall, and in the middle of nowhere, in a car, with a wife-like chick beside me. So, I identify myself.

"Oh, yeah. Wow, what a coincidence," he says and he turns away and looks out the window, as if that might be all that needs to be said.

That's kind of strange because he's always been generous to me, always taken the time to let me know that he enjoys my magazine and likes doing business with me. Whenever I deliver the little throwaway I publish, he takes a little time to break away from what he's doing to say hi and how y' doin'. But there's no time for that sort of thing now apparently, and, if a man needs his space, I'm the last person on earth to deny him that. I look at her and shrug.

I'm a civilized human being so, after a while, I introduce him to her—she's a lovely creature with a smile that has been known to cripple charging rhinos. She smiles and introduces herself in pure angelic trills, but it leaves him absolutely cold. Naturally, right about in here there's an awkward beat during which I wonder (again) what is wrong with the guy.

"So," I say jovially, "what are you doing out here, in the middle of nowhere?"

"Just trying to get back to Berkeley."

"Yeah? D'your car break down?"

"No."

"You're *hitchhiking* out here in the middle of nowhere?"



“No, I wasn’t really hitchhiking. Just trying to get back to Berkeley.”

I laugh, “So, you were planning on walking all the way?”  
“I don’t know,” he says. He says this in a way that indicates his desire for a change of subject.

So we move on and we talk about various things having to do with the blues scene, and he’s not overly enthusiastic about chattering about anything at the moment—it’s like pulling teeth—but in between the prolonged, agonizing torturous silences we stage our own version of forced conversation. And, during this, because we have maybe a bit less than an hour ahead of us, once in a while I bring it back around to, “So, how does it happen that a guy like you finds himself out here without a car?”

“It’s a long story.”

We change the subject and continue yanking every tooth except the one that aches, until I kinda sneakily, casually, just as if I didn’t care, toss out, “So, are you gonna need a lift back there, to pick up your car or something? I mean we’re probably headin’ back that way either tonight or tomorrow and if you need a lift...”

“No. I don’t think I’ll be heading back.”

“Oh. OK.”

“Well, We can drag you on over to Berkeley if you want.”

“That’s Ok just let me off anywhere in San Francisco.”

So, I take him to somewhere near a BART station and drop him off, and *she* turned to me and says, “Did that seem a little strange to you?”

And I say, “Nah.”

She says, "I wonder what he was doing out there in the middle of nowhere."

I say, "Just tryin' to get back to Berkeley, I guess."

That was enough for me. John Mayall—whom I approached one time while he was loading-in at some blues dive on Clement—taught me that lesson.

A couple of weeks later, I was in Larry Blake's one night when Lonnie Brooks was playing there. At the end of the set the band vacates the stage, leaving the bass player to just take off in whatever direction he chooses. He solos in a really wonderful way for 5 or 6 minutes, and after the wild applause dies down he takes the mic. He then begins to tell us this tale. It seems that he can't pronounce shimps, Lonnie Brooks knows he can't pronounce shimps; everybody knows he can't pronounce shimps.

"You know what I'm trying to say don't you," he paused, gulped, "swimps... shimps...sch-whimps... that as close as I can get to it. But you know what I'm trying to say.

The entire audience is in stitches. "SHRimps!" we're shouting. "SHRimps!!"

"SHIMPS?"

"SHRIMPS!"

"SWIMPS? Please help me."

This huge man is absolutely charming, and we want to help him. "So," he continues, "whenever we're in 'Nawlins',

Lonnie, he always takes the band to a place where everything on the menu is shimps; only thing they serve is shimps. Even the d'ssert is shimps; shimp ice cream, shimp custard, shimp cake. Don't get me wrong I love shimps, I just can not pronounce that word.

“What you gonna have, Lonnie?” ‘I’ll have the fried shimps.’ ‘Bout you, Horn Player?’ ‘Ummmm, well, those barbecued shimps sure sound good to me.’ ‘And, you Big Bass Man?’ So then there’s this BIG silence, you know. They’re all waitin’ to see what I’m gonna do with it.”

We’re waitin’ too. We want to know how he handles the situation. He drags out the pause, then says, “I guess I’ll just have what Lonnie’s havin’.” The crowd goes wild.

As he’s unplugging I get up and go to the stage and introduce myself. “Do you always tell that story... you know about the shrimp?”

“Nah. I guess I was just inspired tonight, I don’t get my hands on the mic very often with these guys. But, people seem to find it interesting.”

“It’s a whole lot more than interesting,” I told him. He looked at me askance, and prepared to back off. You can’t play bass in a traveling blues band and not know how to handle drunks and idiots. But, I wasn’t drunk.

This event took place in 1988. Twenty years earlier, I was sitting on a bench in a little park in Richmond, Virginia with an old man and he told me this very same tale, almost note for note. Only difference was, he called ‘em swimps. He couldn’t pronounce swimps, the band knows he can’t pronounce swimps and, whenever they’re in ‘Nawlins’, they make a point of taking him to a place where everything on the menu is swimps. That same old man once told me, ‘It’s funny how life works itself out’.

## THE VIOLENCE THAT DWELLS WITHIN me

Although these days I am like a relatively unruffled duck contentedly adrift upon the placid pond of life, twenty-six years ago (well, thirty-six now) I was a walking time-bomb. I was a man who contained (barely-contained according to some) an explosive bitterness within which, once released, endowed me with superhuman strength.

Here's proof:

My then girlfriend loved to dance. Me...well, it's probably enough to state that I'm a male. In an effort to prove to everybody that I didn't have anything to prove to anybody, I flatly refused to dance. Put my foot down, as it were, and refused to lift it up again until the evil spectre of dance vacated the room. It would have been easier to coax an elephant into a bathtub overflowing with mice than to get me out on the dance floor. Nonetheless, we drove up north to a little roadside brewery one night to hear Robben Ford and his brothers play, and it wasn't long before I was being begged and wheedled and pleaded and sweetly persuaded out onto the dance floor.

This is pretty much where the time-bomb idea first rears its ugly head.

I guess the dance floor was 24 feet square and packed solid with people flailing away, each as if their attire were on fire. My girlfriend and I were doing what we could, given the space we were allowed, and having a pretty good time until the big baboon beside me started kicking me in the shins with the sharp heels of his cowboy boots.

My embarrassment at being out there on the dance floor had already lit the fuse as it were, so it didn't take much. During the first song I'd made a point of moving steadily away from the guy but, even with his back turned toward us his instincts allowed him to follow us, and he continually ended up within striking range. Wherever we drifted he drifted along with us and started kicking me again with those damned heels. After the second song, I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and looked down at me, "You got a problem?"

Let's be clear on this. This was a guy who had to turn sideways and duck in order to enter through a standard doorway. Standing on my tip-toes I could not have looked him in the eye; standing on an apple crate I might have equaled him in height; carrying a full-grown bull on my shoulders, I might have matched his weight. I submitted what I thought was a reasonable request, "Could you please try to keep your boot heels under control?"

"What's the problem?"

"The problem is you keep kicking me."

At this juncture my then girlfriend dragged me off the dance floor. "Let's go get a drink." So, we go outside and have a beer and cool down a bit before she wants to dance some more.

And, sure enough, soon as we're under way this monumental bastard in cowboy boots gravitates over next to me and begins kicking me in the shins with his boot heels again. That lasts for about three seconds. I stop. I reach up and tap him on the shoulder. He turns. I shout, "Stop kicking me with those goddamn boots, OK?"

He smirks, snorts derisively, and turns away from me. Now he's kicking higher and harder than ever. This lasts two seconds. I place the palm of one hand on the guy's back—this guy who is twice as big as me—and give him a little shove, a nudge. I'm just trying to establish some distance between me and those vicious boot heels.

Then a miracle occurs. The cowboy goes flying (FLYING) across the dance floor. He lands face down at the edge of the dance floor, surrounded by toppled tables and startled people. It was as if I had the strength of ten thousand men. Instantly the crowd has parted; they are all aghast, some are pointing at me; my soon to be ex-girlfriend has left the dance floor, has run off in humiliation; the band has stopped playing. Everybody in the joint is looking at me. Now, the big galoot has turned himself face up; he looks stunned, and people are helping him to his feet, bathing him in sympathy, while keeping an unwavering wary eye on me. Nobody, including my girlfriend, wherever she might now be, wants anything to do with me.

But, it's just so unfair. They don't know the story. They don't know anything about that bastard kicking me. They don't know how he selected me and followed me around the dance floor only to continue kicking me. As far as they can tell I chose this poor innocent monster truck guy at random. As far as they could tell I was there not to dance but to select, from among the joyful throbbing throng, some poor individual to toss, for no reason what-so-ever, across the crowded floor, into the spectators. Who knows what my problem might be? Maybe I had something to prove. Maybe I spent my time crisscrossing the country, seeking

out blues joints with dance floors in order to fell the biggest guy I could find. Clearly I'm the bad guy here. No trial necessary. No chance for appeal. Guilty. There's no doubt about it, I'm a walking time-bomb.

Beyond my embarrassment, I felt bad because I am a big fan of Robben Ford; and his brother, Patrick, had really gone out of his way to help me get some things started as a publisher. From what they knew of me I was a quiet, unassuming guy who stuttered whenever I interviewed any musician whose work I admired. But, not any more. Now I was a guy who started dance-floor fights for no reason, disrupting the set and leaving their audience mumbling in unison, "Goodness gracious, there's just no excuse for that kind of behavior in a blues dive."

On the way home she explained to me that I was a walking (well, *dancing* in this particular case) time-bomb, full of compressed anger and bitterness. This was news to me; I had never really thought of myself in those terms before.

I apologized, but, I knew any explanation that didn't involve charts, frame-by-frame photo analysis of the event, a philosophical treatise on the advanced principles of the passive martial arts and a long list of character witnesses from the local Buddhist enclave, would be useless. So, I thanked her for her insights. Shamefully I admitted that I was so full of rage that no one could ever be safe in my presence. It was one shot in a million, but I was hoping that her womanly instincts would urge her to hold and comfort me. I begged her to understand that my mother had really hoped for a girl during her pregnancy with me.

I think that stitch held for about three seconds.

Let me tell you something which no one up until this very day has chosen to believe. I was not then (and certainly am not now) capable of tossing someone twice my size thirty feet across a dance floor. Fully enraged I couldn't toss someone half my size three feet. I do not know what quirky combination of kung-fu, physics, and that big moron's off-kilter equilibrium caused this amazing event. But believe me, I didn't mean to do it, I'll never to do it again, AND I hope that big stupid bastard learned a lesson.

My very dear wife had a tendency to side with everyone else on this matter until this morning. I was lying on the couch reading when, from the hallway, came the dog, as if shot from a cannon. He was flying at a level trajectory, about four feet above the floor and moving at an impressive speed. Whatever the impetus, it carried him eight feet into the room. He made a soft landing, looked back over his shoulder in fear, and ran quickly behind the couch. Naturally, I was astounded. I'd never seen a dog flying through the air like that before.

When Sylvie came running into the room I asked her, "My god, what just happened?"

"I don't know," she said. "He was standing on the rug, and I pushed him away ... and he just went flying."

"I am all amazement," I said. "What superhuman power has overcome you?"

"I don't know," she confessed.



Then she tried to give me some song and dance about how she'd only meant to push him off the rug, but, apparently the laws of physics, as we understood them, were somehow out of whack at that very moment.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, “I ain’t buyin’ it.”

“But, honestly, I didn’t mean to toss him.”

“Puhhh, I *ain’t* buyin’ it. Next thing I know you’ll be telling me that a truly gentle, kind, loving, and perfectly peaceful man can toss a cowboy twice his size thirty feet across some blues dive dance floor.”

Correction:

My wife now reminds me that the pup was still in *his termite phase* at the time and was busy gnawing upon the beloved 19<sup>th</sup> Century Austrian bed—which woodworm had previously taken a very real liking to as well—when she gave him that fateful nudge. I don’t know if these facts strengthen or weaken her argument.

## MEMORIES

Stop me if I've told you this one before...

It's ironic but I don't remember why we thought we needed to enhance our memory; she was sharp as a tack and I've never been. So, she didn't need it, and it'd only be confusing for me to remember anything in more than a general sort of way. Nonetheless, she got this idea into her head that we should *begin to consider* working on our memory, "before it's too late" was left implied.

The begin-to-consider process for me was simple—nod in agreement, smile and say, "Sure, why not?" in a pleasant manner, and then, try to recall what it was I had been thinking about before the interruption. The begin-to-consider process for her was more demanding and involved a talk to someone who worked at a health food store who—being someone who works at a health food store—had already considered the matter, AND, who, by chance or Fate or innate archetypal wisdom, happened to have the answer. The answer was the essential oil extracted from some plant with the word "Wort" in its name.

She bought a bottle of this essential oil of wort-stuff, and I think it only cost something like \$86, which, in those days, considering the economy and our combined income, was equivalent to, say, one week's take-home pay. The bottle was about the size of a thimble and contained one-zillionth ounce of this fine liquid. She explained what a bargain it was, because these essential oils are distilled and compressed and suspended and whatever else may be

required to produce a liquid something like 60,000 times the strength they might normally have when found in their natural, un-processed state. That makes them really really powerful and really really good and that explains, to any thinking being, why so little costs so very much.

It was a nice little blue bottle. I'm not sure whether the blueness of the bottle added in some way to the effectiveness of this memory-wort-stuff...it probably did. But, either way, if you wanted to restore or create, or establish or enforce or reinforce your memory, it was a simple matter, put three drops of this stuff in a glass of water once a day, every day, and drink it.

So there it was. We both looked forward to a sharper, clearer memory as we toasted things once forgotten and glugged down the potion, dreaming of things we'd never forget. The effects were not immediate, though we both admitted to feeling like 18<sup>th</sup> Century explorers setting out upon a grand adventure. What would life be like with refined memory? Would we remember things we'd forgotten in childhood? Would we remember things more clearly, drawing up every detail, every nuance? Would we discover things we'd overlooked when some event or occurrence actually took place?

"Aha! I hadn't noticed that glint in his eye at the moment he actually said it, but, now, looking back, now that I remember it more clearly, I also see the sarcastic way his lip curls up a bit in the corners. Now, twenty years too late, we both remember the man perfectly and can see that he was a scoundrel from the beginning."

And what about the sad memories, things we'd forgotten only after years of anguish? Would they pop up again, driving the corkscrew deeper than before into our poor old leathern hearts? Would our regrets run deeper? Would our negligence of the simple little important things come back to haunt us?

More immediately, would we be able to remember everyone's phone number, license plate number, date of birth, after hearing it but one time? Would we go shopping, and pick up all of the thirty-seven items we intended to buy and smugly drop them on the counter for the other to paw through with astonishment? Would a new kind of pride or self-assurance swell our breasts? Would there be a new spring to our step? Oh my gosh, this was beginning to look like the bargain of the century. Who wouldn't pay a hefty price to attain, retain, or regain all of that?

We looked at each other with the glint of hopefulness in our eyes. THIS was truly the beginning. Down the hatch!

I think it was about four or five days later that she laughed and said, "You know what we forgot?"

I thought, and laughed, "The memory stuff...?"

We tried it again, at that very moment in fact. But our hearts must not have been in it, because the next time it came to mind was—who knows—ten days later, a month, a year? And then, it was a month or two between doses. I'm sure that expensive little blue bottle is still sitting around in her kitchen somewhere, forgotten. But, honestly, I can't remember the last time I thought about it.

## THE BURRITO TRAP HITS THE DANCE FLOOR

I remember a time when Lonnie Brooks was playin' over there in Berkeley at Larry Blake's. This must have been 1988. While the house band warmed up I was sitting there wagging my head and tapping my foot. Great house band too. Paris Slim, guitar; Tim Kiahatsu, bass, Linda, man-she-sure-looks-good-poundin'-on-them-thangs, Geiger on drums; Mr. Jimmy Pugh on the electric eclectic piano. I know these names prolly mean nothing to nobody, but, by that same declension, they must mean something to somebody. And, they were good. That's why they're included here.

At any rate, I was there tapping my foot to the blues and just havin' a beer and havin' a good time, when this big—as they say, slightly on the heavy side—black woman, next table over, turns to me and hollers, “Ain’ you up there dancin’?”

‘Course I can’t dance and she knew it just from looking at me. She knew it before she asked the question. She knew it just from watching me bob my head on the first beat and slap my foot down solidly on the third. I recognized what she was doing of course. It was the burrito trap all over again. But this time I wasn’t fallin’ for it. The burrito trap is when that Mexican guy behind the counter asks, “Hot sauce?” and, in order not to embarrass your lineage and draw down disgrace upon your entire race, you shrug casually and say, “Sure.” (Then you puff out your chest and look around to see who knows you went for the hot sauce).

As said, this time I didn't fall for it. I just hollered back, "Can't dance." I offered up an apologetic smile. End of story. But, she wasn't about to let me go. She scrunched up her big round face and her eyes rolled up into her head as if that were the most unbelievable thing she had ever heard in her life. She shook her head from side to side as if to say, "No, no, no. That is simply unacceptable." And then she shouted, "Well, if you cain't dance to DIS MUSIC, they mus' be somethin' wrong which ya!" She was right of course. Her friend, sitting next to her, didn't approve of any of this. She too was shaking her head from side to side as if to say, "No, no, no-no NO. That is simply and purely unacceptable."

Meanwhile my friend had decided that it was time to get up and show me how it was done. It took considerable effort to get her out of her chair. First she started rocking from side to side, there was some flailing of the arms (a little quiet grunting) and finally, with some assistance from her kindly friend, she was up on her feet. It looked to be a somewhat painful process making it, between the tables, to the dance floor. On her way through the crowd she tapped a fellow in the first row on the shoulder as she squeezed by, and he popped up eager and ready to boogie. I recall thinking, "Gees, there's a lesson right there."

Once she got in motion it was pretty impressive. She was rolling around nicely and I was taking notes. I noticed that the neck seemed to play an important part both in the extrication from her chair as well as on the dance floor. Up there, her lips, her eyes, her forehead were all called into play...fingers too. She seemed to have fallen into a trance-

like state. I was mesmerized myself. The word “smooth” comes to mind when I think about her—and this was more than 20 years ago. They danced through two or three tunes and throughout, time to time, she’d catch my eye and give me a little knowing smile as if to say, “See, this is how you do it.”

Before Lonnie Brooks came on, she was exhausted and hobbled back to the table where her friend said something quietly to her and they both laughed raucously. I smiled at her and she stopped fanning herself long enough to nod at me with great dignity, but said not a word. So, by the time Lonnie Brooks took the stage I was starting to think it might really be kinda OK, maybe even kinda fun, to get up there and move it around a little. I pretty much missed the entire first set while undergoing the struggle over whether to dance or not, and trying to select, from among the free and independent women, a potential partner, and trying to figure out how I would handle it if she said no.

By the second set, I discovered that I had somehow overshot my three beer limit when something—inspiration, I guess you could say—yanked me right out of my seat. I found myself on my feet, standing in front of another table, asking a woman I’d been eyeing for a while, if she’d care to. Strangely enough she said she’d be delighted and we hit the floor with a dozen other similarly inspired couples.

You know, I actually thought I was doing pretty good. Someone once told me I should move my arms more, so I was doing that. And, I recalled a girlfriend of mine once telling me that I needed to bend my knees more, so I was

doing that. Whenever it occurred to me I threw in some of the stuff I'd just picked up... mostly lips and neck. I was especially careful to keep the neck in play. My head was waggin' away pretty good, slamming back and forth with a casual aplomb; the knees were working; the arms were all over the place; there was a kind of rhythm to it all. I was developing a system and I felt pretty good. What the hell, everybody was focused on the young woman in the red dress anyway. So, as far as I could tell I was very close to doing what some people might actually consider to be a form of dancing. It felt kinda neat to just be up there amid the throbbing sweaty throng. I was having fun. My partner, she seemed to be having a sort of restrained fun also, dancing, for the most part, with her eyes closed.

Then I made the mistake of looking out into the audience and caught a glimpse of my dance instructor. She was looking straight at me and slapping her hands down on her big fat knees, roaring with delight. She was in hysterics. Her friend, beside her, seemed to be somewhat less entertained by my antics. She appeared to be almost mortified by what she was witnessing. Suddenly I felt ridiculous out there. I was flooded with embarrassment. My greatest fears had materialized. I stopped, I touched my partner on the arm; I thanked her and I went straight to my table. I couldn't get out of there quick enough. I'd pick up my jacket, pay my bill and get out the hell out of there.

While I looked at the bill I didn't want to look at the woman at the next table. I couldn't look at her. I just wanted to get out of there. Just as the band finished their



tune I reached for my jacket and felt her hand come down on my wrist.

She was still covering her mouth, stifling her laughter, with her other hand—that's how funny it had been. She choked out, "When you said you cain't dance, you sure was NOT kiddin'."

I started to put on my jacket.

"Where you goin' now?" she asked.

"Well, I kinda thought I'd leave," I said coldly.

As the band started up another tune, she said, "You ain't goin' nowhere." And she began struggling to her feet. Then she grabbed me, saying, "Come with me," and she literally dragged me out onto the dance floor. There she placed a heavy hand on the back of my head and pulled me in tight to her enormous bosom.

"Made you think you can get away from me?" she asked.

What could I do? I surrendered. I placed my head on her shoulder and, while grinning ear to ear, she rocked me.

## MOON UNIT

Moon Zappa was the prize one time on an L.A.-based TV dating show. Three young studs were back stage with their fingers crossed hoping to win her. The first guy came jaunting out, all muscles and irrepressible, monumental, self-approval. Once he was seated, Moon looked him right in the eye and made this simple request: "Tell me how you feel about back acne, excessive body hair, and cellulite?"

The guy's perfectly chiseled jaw dropped, his lovely sky-blue eyes bugged out—TKO—he was knocked completely senseless. (Back acne?) He just sat there dumbfounded. (Excessive body hair?) Nothing his mother had done to convince him that he was the reigning and undisputed center of the universe had prepared him for this.

He'd imagined himself dashing out on stage to meet some long-legged, blonde bimbo shyly asking something like, "If I were a muffin, and you were a big ol' hungry bear..."

Instead he got Moon Unit. He eventually asked her to repeat the question, which she did with aplomb. The poor guy just sat there gaping for a long time, until the hostess of the show came over to revive him, help him onto his feet, and with a compassionate hand placed on the center of his back, sent him stumbling off stage. On his way out, still stunned, he staggered face first into one of the cameras.

Moon's point, as I understood it, was:

If you can't face reality, then we don't even need to talk.

## FISH SANDWICH IN DEL MAR

On the other hand, there's this:

The usual place was closed at that hour; they'd already locked the front door; the last diners had departed, leaving the parking lot empty. And, by the time I arrived at McDonald's—the only alternative at that hour—the last customer was exiting through the glass doors with a paper bag full of hamburgers and fries. So, I slipped in and went up to the counter where a clearly harried, near-hysterical, manager demanded, "How did you get in?" He was used to dealing with his high-school-level employees, and his customer handling skills had not yet fully developed.

"I just walked in," I said.

"Well, we're closed," he snapped. Then turning toward a kid with a mop, he screamed, "I thought I told you to lock that door."

"Kindly leave," he said to me.

"I'd like to order something first," I said.

"We're closed," he said.

I looked beyond him to the stainless steel racks that held wrapped burger and fish sandwiches under heat lamps.

"I'd like to buy a fish sandwich," I said.

"I don't have any fish sandwiches for sale," he said.

"But, I can see them sitting right there. You have four of 'em sitting right there, already wrapped and ready to go."

He also had a half dozen hamburgers, four or five cheeseburgers, and a Big Mac or two. At the fry station, there were French fries in bags.

"He leaned on the counter and brought his face, challengingly close to where I stood and he said, through

gritted teeth, "WE ARE CLOSED. I'VE ASKED YOU TO LEAVE. I HAVE NO FISH SANDWICHES for sale."

Then he turned to give one of his kids instructions as to how to put something away, and returned to me, but only slightly calmer. Though he'd calmed down, he was coldly cruel.

"We're closed. Please leave." He turned and while walking away snagged one of his workers and said, "Let this man out, and LOCK THE DOOR, OK."

The poor kid was standing at my elbow waiting, but I didn't move. He came back around the counter like a charging bull. "I've asked you to leave."

"I'd like to buy one of your fish sandwiches."

"We HAVE no fish sandwiches."

"Yes, you do. They're right there."

"They're not for sale. I've already closed out the cash registers for the night."

"I'll pay cash,"

"IT doesn't WORK that way."

"You refuse to sell me one of those fish sandwiches?"

"Yes. I can't. We're closed, the cash registers are closed out. I can't sell you anything."

"I'll pay MORE than the thing is worth."

"We're closed. Will you please leave? I'm not going to sell you anything. So, please leave."

"What are you going to do with that stuff you have left over?"

"It goes in the dumpster."

"You'd rather throw it away than sell it to me?"

"It's going into the dumpster."

“Then, why not *give* it to me? I mean, if you won’t sell it...I mean if you CAN’T sell it to me, why not give it to me rather than throw it away?”

“I can’t. We’re closed; we’re not in the business to give away food.”

“So, you’re telling me that you’d rather throw that stuff in the dumpster than give it to a guy who wants to eat it.”

“JUSTIN!” he hollered over his shoulder, while starring fixedly at me. “See, that this man leaves. And LOCK THE DOOR behind him, Then I want you to take all this and throw it in the dumpster, AND LOCK IT.”

Justin showed me to the door and locked it behind me.

I went out and got in my car and waited for Justin to emerge from the back door. He was lugging a large plastic bag. I got out of my car. I said, “Hey... Justin...”

At that very moment the back door opened again and the manager came out and he looked at me and he folded his arms across his chest, and we both watched as Justin threw that large plastic bag into the dumpster.

“And lock it!” shouted the manager.

## AGIS PROKTOPOLOS

Agis Proktopolos came here from Greece with a duck under one arm and three crumpled U. S. dollars held tightly in one sweaty fist... or so I've been told. Back in Greece he had been a fisherman. Once in the United States he struggled for a while until he found work as a part-time hotel maintenance worker. Ultimately, he ended up the owner of a popular beach-front restaurant and the small, adjacent hotel, in one of the most coveted, idyllic, little racetrack towns in Southern California. By anyone's standards he is a success. By contrast I guess you might say that I am not. By the time he was my age Agis Proktopolos owned a restaurant and a hotel. By the time I was my age I worked for a guy who owned a restaurant and a hotel.

Here's where the tale begins to sadden. Proktopolos looked more like a somewhat slovenly Buddha than a Greek god. When he put on his old Greek fisherman's cap, he looked like he belonged behind a fish counter arguing vociferously with some old lady about whether the hake is fresh. I was younger and better looking, but, alas, life is unfair. I'm not saying I'd look better in a Greek fisherman's cap—nobody looks good in a Greek fisherman's cap—but I think I'd have looked better behind the wheel of his Grand Mercedes 600... and better still in the back seat with his daughter beside me, and the man himself up front behind the wheel.

These are things I feel had to be said.

Proktopolos had been known to declare loudly, somewhat challengingly, "I worked THIRTY years to get where I am

today! It was not easy; nothing was ever handed to me; I had to work hard.”

My guess is that those statements are all true. Yes, more likely than not, the man worked hard for all those years. He worked long and he worked hard and he put in his time. The result of that good hard work is undeniable. Now, after all that good hard work he squats outside his restaurant each evening as the sun goes down and glares judgmentally at mankind as they enter his restaurant.

If you feel a quibble here, it's because I have one. My quibble is with this idea that the successful among us have done something remarkable, while the rest of us have somehow refused that opportunity. You can see my point more clearly if you step back far enough to observe the wriggling, writhing, ever-toiling, sweaty and somewhat disgruntled masses, as they labor away throughout life.

All quibbling aside, I worked for Proktopolos for almost ten years, and, during that time, at the end of each year, he apparently found himself in a dilemma of the taxable sort. He then, suddenly, had to invent new ways to throw money right out the window, before January 1. He used a snow shovel to do it. I watched this strange phenomenon in befuddled silence for eight of my ten years working for the man. Then, one year—who knows how the human mind works—I felt compelled to offer a suggestion when I heard that he'd decided to spend \$68,000 replacing windows which he had replaced three years earlier. Always the idealist, I met with him one afternoon, at a little table inside his own restaurant.

What an idiot I am. Here was a man who—when I told him that his dishwasher was carrying steaks and lobsters out with the trash and placing them behind the dumpster in a hidden cooler, to be picked up later by accomplices—did not thank me in any way whatsoever. He especially did not thank me in the way I would have liked and had expected: look me in the eye, shake my hand and say, “Thank you.” Here was a man who, after I’d been working for him 5 years, gave me my first raise—25 cents per hour. When I said, “I can hardly pay rent and feed myself on what I earn here,” he shrugged, spit on the ground, squinted up at me, and said, “Get a second job.”

(In answer to your question: it would have been very difficult to kick him in the nuts, sitting in that chair as he was. I would probably have injured my foot.)

Still, at this meeting about replacing windows which did not need replacement, as is my way, and such is my effrontery, I looked the man in the eye—just as if I might be a human being as well—and simply said what I thought. “Instead of replacing windows which do not need to be replaced,” I said, “why don’t you give the people who earned that money for you each a little raise?” In my arrogance I phrased it exactly like that.

It was not taken well.

It was            not            taken            well    at all.

Had I stood up, and producing a large slimy, bug-eyed tuna from I don’t know where, slapped him across the face with



it, it would have had the same effect. It made him *furious*—so furious he could not at first respond. He could only stare at me. And the hatred that stare contained unnerved me a bit, I must admit.

When he recovered enough to finally speak, he pointed a quivering finger at me (the finger of rage, I'm guessing) and told me unequivocally that NOBODY had *earned* that money for him! He told me that he had come here from Greece with a duck under one arm and three crumpled dollar bills held tightly in one fist. It was everything he owned. And NOBODY had gotten him where he was today. NOBODY.

It was an old story and I'd heard it many times before, but I was careful not to yawn. He continued to stare at me as I looked around casually at the cash-generating machine of people buzzing around in his restaurant, on his behalf, almost frantic in their efforts to not make money for him. The extreme generosity he showed by keeping these useless people around while they cut steadily and relentlessly into his wealth was impressive. NOBODY had gotten him where he was today! He thought the lesson was worth repeating and he did so. When he said it, he fixed his unwavering gaze upon me and his jowls trembled. I thanked him quietly, and got up and left.

So, you know, nobody (and by that I mean absolutely goddamned NOBODY) was more surprised than I, when I opened up my December paycheck and there was an additional 500 bucks thrown in.  
FIVE HUNDRED BUCKS! Five crisp new \$100 bills.

Henry Edward Fool

O. Henry couldn't have written a better ending.

## OH MY GOD

So, Oh my god, like when I was in Southern California in the early 90s all the little preteen girls started every sentence with “Oh my god.” Every sentence. It was like, she’s all, “Oh my god.” And the other’s like, “Oh my god, what?” And she’s all like, “Oh my god, did you hear what happened to Shana at Taco Bell?” And the other’s like, “Oh my god, what?” And she’s like all, “Oh my god, she went there for a fish taco...and Adam was behind the counter...” And the other has her hand over her braces; she can see it coming, and she’s saying, “Oh my god...Oh my god”, like in anticipation. Then she like whispers in the other’s ear and there is a refrain of Oh my gods followed by a high pitched squeal emitting from one of them, then they’re both squealing and hopping up and down in peculiar little circles like Daffy Duck going off in some kind of weird cartoon ecstasy. For these little girls starting a sentence with “Oh my god” came as natural as a tuba player taking a deep breath before launching out on a lengthy solo.

That was life in Southern California for an entire segment of preteen society in the early nineties. I think it can be safely traced back—as so much Southern California culture can—to one of Frank Zappa’s kids, in this case Moon Unit. She was known to begin every sentence with “Oh my god,” during her Valley Girl recordings. Prior to that the phrase was pretty much reserved for use by high school girls in New Jersey as in: “Oh my god, I don’t believe it! I don’t believe you knocked up my little sister, Vinnie, and on our 6 months anniversary! On my god, Vinnie, you are such a stinkin’ rat.” Or, for Jewish women while folding laundry,

as in: “Oh my god, she thinks she’s so high and mighty and she isn’t even Jewish.” Now it has somehow filtered UP to where it is apparently THE one and only response available to people on those re-decorating shows, like “While You Were Out” and “Trading Spaces”—the only shows we ever watch now that we’ve bought our tiny little cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

It’s time for the big reveal now, and let’s see what they have done to your bedroom given only two days, fifty gallons of blood-red paint and one thousand dollars. The victims, eyes closed tightly, are guided gently into the room by their shoulders. OK, you can look now. Each and every one of them looks around slowly and then utters, “Oh my god!” Every man woman and child among them says it. They look around as if poll-axed, then say “Oh my god.” It’s the universal response from grandmothers with rheumy eyes to toddlers just beginning to speak the language. And as unsettling as it may be to see some block-headed welder cover his gaping maw with his big mitt and utter, “Oh my god!” it’s even more disturbing to see the kids do it because it means it’s being passed down to a new generation.

Still, there’s been progress. For the last couple years, until recently, the response has always been: “Oh my god; it’s awesome!” It didn’t matter whether the designer had painted Aunt Tillie’s grand piano orange with green dots or nailed old work boots to the wall in a pleasing arrangement to make a previously inconspicuous corner of the room a new focal point, the response was always the same. “Oh my god, it’s awesome!”

Now, they've chunked the *it's awesome* part and we're beginning to see movement away from Oh my god as well.

The other day, for example, a woman said, "Oh my gosh." I was sure it was a slip of the tongue or perhaps I'd heard it wrong, but my wife says she heard it clearly. She also claims, however, that one of the kids, upon opening his eyes to their new room, recently shouted "Holy-moly." And a woman in a wheel chair—when she saw the havoc these designers had wrought upon her previously "dated" dining room—said, "I can't believe it; it's just lovely."

I watch these shows riveted, even though I know the results are predictable—for two years every wall in America was being slathered with blood-red paint; these days they're all being done in vertical stripes. And I watch even though I know what the folks will say when they first set eyes on the badly built plywood shelving and their solid oak antique table now sporting a fresh coat of gloppy yellow paint. I think the tension has been building long enough and it's now time for someone to open their eyes and say, "What the hell have you done to my house? Oh my god, what the hell have you done? Are you out of your goddamned minds?"

Oh my god, that would be like so awesome!

## FAT IRV

Fat Irv was frightening to look at; he was big and gruesome looking and dwelt pretty much in a self-contained sullen silence. And when he looked at you through those squinty colorless eyes, he was even more frightening. Fat Irv was a business man, and though he may have been big, and he was certainly ugly, he wasn't stingy. He hired me to start work, flippin' burgers, at \$1/hr, when all the other hamburger stands were paying us kids 75 cents. So, from the beginning I kinda liked Fat Irv. As far as I could see, he treated all us kids fairly. Irv allowed each of us to take a half-hour break every four hours and only asked one thing: that we restrict our food consumption to that which we were going to finish. That seemed more than reasonable to me, but the kindness behind that request didn't enter into the thinking of most of Irv's employees. They hated Fat Irv. Despite facts to the contrary, they insisted he was cheap.

One time one of the kids who worked for Irv declared that Irv was so cheap he would retrieve a penny from a urinal. So, I think it was Hank Lichtman (these days known as Henry Paul) who went in and actually put a penny in the employees' bathroom urinal. Then we all waited. When Irv eventually looked up from his accounting books, grunted, sighed, placed both hands flat upon his desk, struggled to his feet and waddled into the bathroom, we all held our breath and stifled our laughter. When he emerged, we kept our eyes strictly forward, though we were all dying to go in there and see if that penny was missing.

A somewhat animated squabble, vying for the honor of going in to check for the penny, took place in complete silence, while we continued running burgers and serving customers. I don't remember who won, but when the chosen one emerged he could hardly find the words to explain what he had found in there.

"What? What is it?" we whispered.

"What? Tell us..."

I don't know about the others, but when I heard what that kid'd discovered in there, Fat Irv had certainly gained my respect. From that moment on I paid much closer attention to the workings of the man's mind. Fat Irv not only saw the challenge and accepted it; he'd raised the ante by tossing a nickel into that urinal, on top of the penny.

Just a note: I think there was something like 67 cents in that urinal before it disappeared. None of us really noticed exactly when it happened—that's how long the game had gone on—but, I can tell you this much: 60 cents was more than a half hour's wage in those days, and it could get you a double cheeseburger AND fries.

Looking back, I now realize that Fat Irv was the best employer I have ever worked for, and in several ways.

## MAKE WHAT YOU CAN OF THIS

When I was trapped and could not, by any means, manage to escape from Southern California, I carried a business card which simply had my name on it and the title: Pseudo-Scientific Fraud. It was amazing to me how many people accepted that card, looked at it, and then asked what kind of stuff, precisely, was I working on. (At that time, I was working on gullibility.)

So, here's a little tale, quite concise, which is—as all good tales are—telling.

During that same period, I lived with a woman and her twenty-seven year old precious only son. I paid rent; I mowed the lawn, I fixed the washing machine when it needed it; I took out the garbage; I bought food, I prepared meals and I did the dishes. When she was in trouble, I responded and helped her out of trouble. Her son—her twenty-seven-year-old son—paid no rent; he mowed no lawn, he fixed no washing machines; he took out no garbage, he bought no food, prepared no meals and did no dishes. And, when she was in trouble and called for help, he handed me the phone.

One day, just in casual conversation I remarked, “You know, there are too many people living here.” And this woman looked at me and said, “You’re right. You have to go.” She did not blink, she did not ponder; she just tossed me out like the rent paying, lawn mowing, washing machine fixing, garbage hauling, food buying, dinner preparing, dishes doing, ever-caring rat that I was. Draw what conclusions you will.



## KINDNESS AT THE CROCODRE

Dear San Francisco,

The other day, while in your town for the first time in maybe a decade, I witnessed something that I thought was kind of cool. It was a simple act of kindness but it followed so closely upon the heels of an attempt on my life that it really reached me. This combination of events assured me that I was home again.

Thanks for being yourself, San Francisco, embarrassing as that sometimes is.

Signed, Homesick

In order to fully appreciate how this thing set itself up you'll have to place it against the backdrop of San Francisco in 1972—when I first arrived—a time when cars stopped for pedestrians. In those halcyon days that was pretty much the norm throughout the city. You stepped off the curb, cars stopped. It was a simple arrangement, if not brilliant in its humanity at least exemplary in its civility. But of course I've been away for a while and things have changed. This visit, the city felt inhospitable; the town was noisier, dirtier and smellier than I remembered, and everything seemed to be happening way too fast. This leads us to the threat of vehicular manslaughter.

It's raining. As said, I haven't been in town for several years. I've been living all that time in a small beach town in Southern California, where things are slower. I'm standing at a fairly complicated intersection where the business district, Chinatown, North Beach and Broadway all collide

in streams of rapidly flowing traffic. The cars are just flying by, all horns and lights and windshield wipers and splashing puddles. I'm not really paying enough attention—my eyes are still slightly glazed over from looking at far too many naked young women—and when the light turns, I step out into the street. About halfway across, I realize I've made a mistake. Suddenly from around the hidden bend comes an entire herd of stampeding vehicles. One of them is bearing down directly on me. I'm dazzled, like a deer in headlights, but, my mind is amazingly active. For some reason everything is happening slowly; the on-coming car is taking what must be minutes to arrive and as it progresses I observe it in detail; the make, the model, the color of the thing, the pelting rain rolling off its hood.

Because of this, I honestly believe that I am about to die.

What can I do? Although I'm in pretty good shape, I do not have the ability to spring in a single bound 20 feet to the safety of the curb ahead of me. Nor do I possess the skill necessary to do a back flip followed by a series of cartwheels necessary to attain the safety of the curb I'd just vacated. So, I took the only physical option available to me; I held up a gloved hand in the universally recognized sign for please don't hit me.

At the same time I offered a wrinkled brow (admitting my vulnerability) and a little smile of apology (admitting my stupidity). I was all humility and contrition. Everything about my posture said, "I know that I really should not be in the middle of this intersection right now. I've made a mistake. It's a big mistake, a dangerous and possibly costly

mistake. I admit my stupidity, but it's a mistake nonetheless... and I know you are in a hurry to get home, but I hope you can find it in your hearts to delay your progress for just a few seconds in order to spare a stranger his life." That's the message.

The car had me in sight for what seemed like an eternity. The driver, though initially slowing, decides now instead to accelerate. He's received my message and it only infuriates him. Apparently he's determined to either run me off the road or just kill me where I stand, if it comes to that. What he fails to consider is the fact that I have no place to go. I'm somewhat less fleet of foot, somewhat less quick to respond than city dwelling folk; I'd been living on the beach too long. I'm no longer in shape for this sort of thing. If I once possessed the ability to spring gazelle-like between cars, I have lost it.

In defense of my position I now offer the gloved hand again, but this time with some authority. He's decided he'll run me down, I've decided he won't. This, of course, is precisely the sort of belligerence no driver should ever have to put up with from any pedestrian. Now, I'm defying him, daring him to hit me, and he's honestly debating the option. He's bristling at the idea that he should have to remove his foot from the accelerator and place it on the brake for an idiot like me. On the other hand, I'm not someone he knows and despises; not a constant thorn in his side, not someone he'd actually enjoy running over. Only at the last possible second does his car come rocking to a sloppy stop, inches from my legs. On his face I can see that it was a tough decision.

For a moment we make a nice frozen tableau. Through the windshield wipers and pelting rain the driver and I lock eyes. Then, as if a starting gun has been fired, he's screaming obscenities at me. On the passenger side of the car, a woman is furiously rolling down her window so that she might make more direct contact. Now, she's screeching at me. She has her head out the window like a Doberman pinscher; she snapping and snarling and barking out obscenities. In the back seat is a third person, tugging desperately upon the back of her seat, he wants to claw his way into the action. But, all I see is this vicious woman. The driver is still yelling but I'm barely aware of him; he's a lackey. I've decided to face the real demon directly. I'm on her side of the car now and we're looking each other in the eye. We're maybe four feet from each other—and all the city, traffic, and weather noises have disappeared almost completely, they're background noise. The only thing I hear are the truly ugly words spewing out of her garishly painted mouth. I'm amazed at how long she manages to string the scathing invective together. There's a poetic sense to it. It's as if she's been planning for this opportunity for a very long time.

For reasons which I cannot explain, I am perfectly calm. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I am perfectly calm; even feeling a little playful. "My god, Lady," I tell the woman, "relax." But, this only seems to offend her further. She has no idea how truly unattractive she is at the moment. The stuff coming out of her mouth is an absolute embarrassment to me, to her, to all womankind, to society, and perhaps to humanity itself.

“I’m the one who almost got run over,” I explain good-naturedly, “I’m the one who should be upset.”

I’m the one who should be snapping and snarling. But, since she’s decided to make it an enormous event—being contrary by nature—I’ve decided to make it a simple matter. I point at their car, smile, and say, “That’s why they put brakes in those things, Lady.” And—in honor of Jazzbeau Collins—go sauntering on my way.

With that behind me, I found myself safely on the other side of the street, but kind of lost. I’d forgotten where I was going and what I was doing. In my muddled mind I considered the idea that I had come very close to being run down—perhaps killed—and I was stunned by the thought. I thought it would have been a shame to be run over and killed by such vicious bastards of course. If I’m to die like that I want it to be an accident, not an act of entitlement.

Shaken, I walked up the hill a bit and leaned against something. It may have been a mailbox, or a post of some sort or a parked vehicle, I didn’t even notice I was so absorbed in rethinking what had just happened. Mostly, I was struggling to understand the people in that car. What was it in their makeup that would not allow them to see that slaughtering me with their vehicle would be more of an inconvenience than stepping on the brake pedal and slowing down for a few beats? Hitting me would have done a lot more than simply mix my blood with the rain on the hood of their car. I wasn’t demanding that much from them, a little courtesy of the commonest sort, a little honest understanding, drawn from their own personal imperfect

past. It would have taken very little to honor my request. Why did the driver think that removing his foot from the accelerator was such an unfair demand that he was willing to kill another human being rather than grant it? The insult, whatever it was, had affected everybody in that car, and reduced them to a bunch of animals. This is what I was thinking about. And I was thinking this too:

Maybe I've been away too long, but this doesn't seem like the San Francisco I used to know.

I was leaning up against whatever it was I was leaning against, still disoriented, when a woman emerged from the alley-side door of a night club called The Crocodile. I observed her casually as she stood at the curb and tried to get the attention of someone across the street by dodging and weaving, and waving frantically as the cars flew by in front of her. When that proved futile, she started to step off the curb just as one of those double length affairs with an accordion pleat in the middle appeared suddenly and almost flattened her. She stepped back onto the curb just in time. "Maybe it should wait," I suggested.

She evaluated me briefly and then smiled. "It can't," she said, "I've got a lot of things to do before we open tonight." She was the first person in this town in two days to offer me her eyes in kindness.

She was tall and trim, in denim jeans and a white cotton shirt, simple, honest, neat, a heroine from an early Hollywood adventure film. If she had just emerged from a café in Bombay or a bar in Santa Rosa, Costa Rica, she would have seemed as natural. Her brown hair fell loosely to her shoulders, brushed back behind her ear on one side,

on the other it fell untended, sheltering her face from the rain. She was a pleasant, intelligent looking woman; your basic clean, uncluttered American beauty—broad smooth forehead, a dignified nose, mouth slightly larger than necessary, eyes that sparkled with an appreciation for life. I liked the way she looked. By her actions she would soon prove to be a good businesswoman as well. I somehow guessed that, and I liked that also.

When the bus huffed away in a cloud of smoke and mayhem, she finally got the attention of a homeless guy squatting beside the pornographic theatre across the street. He stood up and she gesticulated broadly waving him over. Much wiser than me, he looked before picking his way skillfully through traffic. He was a mass of old overcoats with a kindly, almost comical, weather-worn face.

They huddled at the curb a few feet from me, he bending in order to hear her through the traffic noise, she placing a hand on his shoulder. I was curious, nosy, still recovering a bit from my confrontation, and I zeroed in on what she was saying.

“Do you want to do a little work for me?” she shouted. “I’ll pay you what I would have paid the other guy, but I need it done right away.”

He’s nodding yes. He’s telling her thank you. She asks him to walk up the alley and look at what needs cleaned up first, then to come inside for whatever tools he may need to accomplish the task. “Yes. Thank you,” he says. “I’ll do a good job,” he says.

And she says, “I know you will.”

That nearly broke my heart the way she said that.  
“I know you will.”

Such remarkable kindness wrapped in so few words.  
That really touched me. It filled me with warmth. It brought  
tears to my eyes. It did. It brought tears to my eyes.  
“I know you will.”

Of course kindness is the most basic form of wisdom, and  
that simple act was more than just offering a man an  
opportunity to make some money. It struck me as a wise  
business decision as well; it can't hurt to have the street  
people thinking good thoughts about your establishment.  
More importantly, she was giving the guy a chance to  
regain a bit of his dignity...a chance to re-join the human  
race. “Look,” she was saying, “you don't have to sit there  
hunched over in the rain. Stand up here with the rest of us,  
do a little work, earn a buck or two, go inside somewhere,  
have a good meal.”

Now, THAT's the San Francisco I know. Walking through  
the downpour on my way back to where I was staying, I  
realized how much I had missed my dear old town.



## CELLO LESSONS

I don't like being awakened at some ungodly hour in the morning by a phone call from my bank to ask me if I'd been in Thailand six hours earlier buying 3700 dollars worth of crystal stemware. Six hours earlier I had been in bed, tossing and turning and worrying about something entirely different, with no idea that I'd have something new to worry about in the morning.

"I'm pretty sure you can't even get here from Thailand in that short amount of time," I tell the bank.

Here's the other thing: I have very little use for crystal stemware. Sometimes, I'm told, we give it as gifts; sometimes, I'm told, we receive it as a gift (and a very nice, truly thoughtful gift it is too), but even if I had the desire to buy crystal stemware, I'm pretty sure I'd just hop downtown and pick some up, not fly all the way to Thailand to get it. All of that was kept out of the conversation with my bank however. They seemed to understand without my input. They said, "We thought not," and offered to cancel my credit card and issue me a new one, with a new number, forthwith. You'd think that would be the end of it, but I was curious. One of the questions this raised was: since I didn't pay for the stemware, did those guys get away with bunch of free crystal stemware? On the other hand, who cares? The other question was: how had these crystal stemware people gotten my name and credit card number?

Then I remembered the cello lessons.

They'd arrived on DVDs, after many long and anxious weeks of not-arriving, and immediately displayed a belligerent unwillingness to play on any American made playback device. So, I took the things to a moist-eyed liar who told me the conversion would cost one thing over the phone and who, upon my arrival in his shop, looked me right in the eye and told me it would cost another.

"You told me over the phone they would be \$10 each."

"I did not."

"Yes, you did, or I wouldn't have come down here."

"No. I would never say such a thing." Long pause. "So, what do you want to do?"

I wanted to pull out the recording of our earlier phone conversation—which I didn't have—and play it back for him. That being impossible, I wanted to wring his neck. That being illegal, I had the things reduplicated in an acceptable/playable format at about the same price I'd paid the maestro who had produced them originally.

I picked the converted discs up several days later and paid the liar-thief with my credit card (you're already seeing the light, aren't you?)... I rushed them home, and plopped them into the DVD player, and discovered that they too would not play. So, now I had *two* copies of Hans Zentgraf's basic cello lessons in unplayable formats, both eagerly anticipated, both paid for, both disappointing, frustrating, infuriating and completely useless.

I flew back to the liar-thief-scoundrel and slammed the DVDs on the counter.

"They don't work," I said.

"Yes they do," he said flatly.

“No. They don’t.”

“I tell you they do.”

“Well, they do not work in my machine.”

He looked at me as if he were the wounded party.

“What do you want me to do?” he finally asked.

“I want my money back. These things do not work in my machine.”

“Get a new machine,” he shrugged. It was that simple.

“You want me to buy a new DVD player so I can play these things which you converted?”

“Look, Mister, you come in here and ask me to convert these to American mode. I do that. Now, you tell me they do not play. I tell you they do play. I will show you.”

Then, this guy, this bastard, this scoundrel, this liar, this thief, did something completely uncalled for; he placed one of the discs into a DVD player and pushed the play button. Almost instantly, my beloved cello maestro was there on the screen before me saying, “Welcome, dear friends...” in charming, broken English.

Unfortunately, by this time I had already shrugged on the full armor of argument and there was no turning back. Surrender was no longer an option.

“I won’t pay for these!” I declared while standing in his doorway, “I’ll tell my credit card to stop payment!” I declared boldly.

“Oh, really,” he said quietly, “That is the way you wish to play this game?”

“If I must,” I declared heroically, “I will.”

“Oh well,” he said shrugging, “If that is the way you want to play.”

Henry Edward Fool

Three days later, in the very early morning, my phone rang. It was my bank.

## THE LAST TIME I SAW OTIS RUSH

The last time I saw Otis Rush was the final night of the 17th Annual San Francisco Blues Festival (1989). There was an unannounced impromptu gathering of noted blues guitarists (Ronnie Earl, Duke Robillard, Otis Rush) at The Sweetwater, in Mill Valley, and word got around pretty quickly...but not quickly enough. By the time we arrived the place was packed, and the big galoot guarding the door was NOT letting ANYONE in. NOBODY.

Nevertheless, somehow I managed to convince him that I was somebody, and, that Otis Rush was not really there so much to play guitar as to be interviewed by me. It must have been a convincing argument—whatever I may have said—because he let me in. He held my friends ransom at the door however, while I strolled on in. Such is the power invested in a business card and a laminated press pass.

The agreement was that if I could get Otis Rush to give us the nod, my friends would be let in also.

So, Otis Rush was leaning back in a stick chair, in the passage between the stage and the stairway that leads down to where the infamous Tribute to Percy Mayfield pool table incident took place. After fighting my way through the crowd, I went up to him and introduced myself, handed him my card. Then I pleaded with him—as well as a man might plead with Ronnie Earl's blistering guitar scorching the hairs on the back of his neck—"Can you get us into this place?"

Henry Edward Fool

Otis Rush studied my face for a while, moved a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other, nudged the brim of his cowboy hat up a bit with one knuckle, smiled and crooked his finger motioning for me to come closer. I leaned in, placing my ear within inches of his mouth.

“You’re already in,” he said.

## HOW TO READ A BOOK or WRITE ONE

On those days at the hotel when nothing is happening, I am torn. Do I pick up a book knowing that immediately after I find the page where I left off things will begin to happen? Or do I dwell thoughtlessly like a sodden lump in semi-stupefied mindlessness, while nothing happens all around me, and at a pace that would make Eternity herself fidget with impatience?

I read all 1832 pages of the Count of Monte Cristo, six words at a time.

The count entered the darkened chamber...

“Yes, how may I help you...?”

(Fourteen minutes later)..... “Thank you, Madam; I assure you that we beat our maids as thoroughly as the very finest establishment.”

The count entered the darkened chamber...

“Yes, front desk...? ...You turn the knob and while leaning inward with the weight of your body, the door should open...Clockwise, I believe...It’s that thing you put your hand on. I’m sure your doors at home all have one.”

The count entered the darkened chamber...

“Yes, front desk...? ... It’s the same one you came down in...you may have gone UP in it to get to your room...Yes, please, by all means use the stairs; they go both ways as well.”

The count entered the darkened chamber...

For me, it's not just in the office that my reading is interrupted. It reaches us in our little rooms as well. If I'm watching complete idiocy on TV, nothing will happen (NOTHING); no phone will ring, no knock will come upon our door, allowing me to drown in my own shame, between commercials. But, if I pick up a good book...

The count entered the darkened chamber...

"Yes? ....Well, I'm not in the office at the moment, so, I cannot help you...Because, I'm not in the office, and I don't have access to the chart, but you can speak to...Yes, but you can speak...Yes, but you can...I understand. You can speak to anyone at the desk and they will be glad to help you.....No, I'm sorry; I don't have any way to transfer you. Yes, that would be...but, you'll have to call back. I can't...Yes, I agree. That would seem logical to me as well, and believe...Yes, that's the way I would do it if I ran a hotel as well...Yes, but I don't make these decisions. I would if I could....Yes, but, I'm not in the office right now. Please...PLEASE, speak to anyone at the desk; they'll be glad to help you...Because, I'm not IN the office. I don't have access to the chart...No, that's not correct. I WOULD help you if I could. Yes, I WOULD. NO, I'm not. I've tried to explain to...OK. We've been through this. I am not IN the office. No. We've been through that too. No, that's not rude. Call back and speak...Well, see, now THAT'S rude."

The count entered the darkened chamber...

"Yes? What room? Are the guests in there right now? Did they say it wasn't flushing or that it was spilling all over the floor? Alright, I'll be right out. For god's sake!"



I know how to read a book, and that is not how.

This is how to read a book:

Line the outside of your door with something which renders all knocking useless (I've discovered that four inches of styrofoam is not enough). Next, you unplug the phone. Then, you stretch out on the couch, put a warm and contented cat upon your stomach, and you read.

That's only a dream of course. Reading is not possible anywhere in this hotel, even on the slowest day. On those days, IF nothing is happening and you do not read, nothing will continue to happen and...it will happen very slowly indeed. If you attempt to read however, there will be no end to the disruption. Unfortunately, that is orchestrated from above (and by that I mean unavoidable.) BUT...while sequestered in your little rooms, if circumstance will not allow you to read, you can always turn to writing.

This book was written six words at a time, between phone calls, plunging toilets, replacing door knobs, searching for the owner's keys, ignoring, offending and mistreating guests, and tending to the daily things that make up the bizarre world of the small privately-owned French hotel, while balancing a ball on the end of my nose. Admittedly, my approach to writing probably made the task somewhat more arduous than it might have otherwise been. My usual working method is to fill up several dozen pages with commas and then go back in and start inserting words. You might have seen evidence of that here.

I don't recommend it.

## CONCLUSION:

On the local news they were telling us that a woman in San Jose had been attacked by FOUR pit bulls.

A neighbor, witnessing the event, ran to get the owner of the dogs, and somehow—as they reported it—“he managed to get control over all but three of the animals.”

I told my very dear wife, “Well, that certainly describes Life as I know it.”

She looked up from the book she was reading and replied, “Oh, I’m sorry, what did you say?”

# MURDER AT THE DULL MEN'S CLUB

## CHAPTER ONE

### Everybody Knows Who Did It

"Puh!" I said, giving the body a little kick with the toe of my nicely polished boot. "There's no mystery here! The bastard got *exactly* what he deserved. And," I said, giving it another tiny little nudge, "everybody here knows who did it."

I looked around at the crowd.

"Good Heavens," I thought, "why are they all looking at *me* that way?"

Henry Edward Fool

Other books by Henry Edward Fool

**WHEN I WAS A LOW-LIFE: An American Education**

(published: June 2, 2010) The culmination of nearly 50 years of writing, as well as occasional thought, concerning 4 college years in Richmond, Virginia, beginning 1967.

**TRIAL BY GUEST: An Accurate Accounting of the Various Reasons I Should Be Hung** (published, November 10, 2011), concerning 12 years working in a small privately owned French Hotel, in San Francisco, beginning 1999.

**AMERICAN RACONTEUR: Real American Writin' for Real American Readin'** (you're holding it), excerpts from the blog of that same title, concerning the 18 years prior to, and the nearly 40 years after the events recorded in *Low-Life*

**LOST IN THE DIN: Why Your Opinion on Politics and Religion Means NOTHING, and Mine Means Even Less** (well under way and will see print by November of 2012), concerning politics as seen from an a-political POV

**REFINEMENT: How a Good Marriage Can Nudge an Unwary Man in the Direction of Civility** (Also well under way, and will see print by March 2013), concerning (I'm as surprised as you are) marriage.

Also available from Estuary Publications

**AWAKE AMID ANCESTRAL DREAMS** (poetry)  
by Emma Moonsinger

**EARWIG**, also includes Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus  
(both adapted from screenplays) by Darryl Mockridge