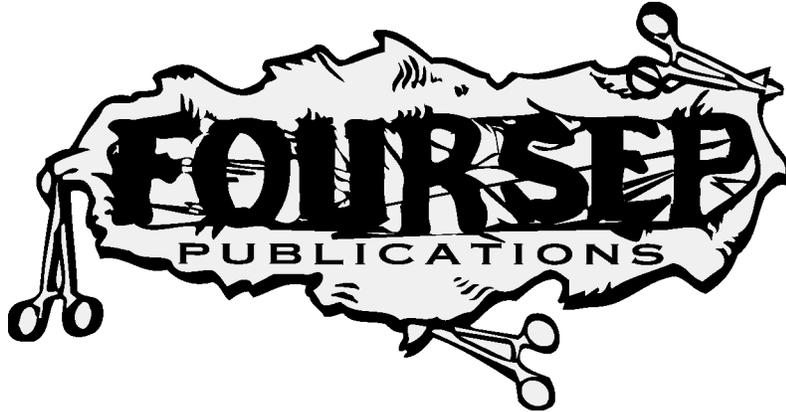




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Spyboy

JOHN BENNETT

I.

The code word was stitch-in-time, but by the time he'd crossed the border the garment had been rented to a Mongolian sausage mogul too fat to buckle his belt. A tattered rag of a thing, Spyboy did the slinky back into the shadows and tried to lay out a coarse action. All that training, and for what? This – crouched behind a trashcan in the mouth of an alley less than fifty yards from enemy headquarters, the fortress of secrets.

Well, fuck a duck, thought Spyboy, and spasmed into reverie – the yellow rubber duck that went quack when you squeezed it, the mulatto nanny making waves in his Saturday-night-special bath, pushing ducky along, right into the harbor formed by his thighs. “Quack!” went ducky. “Quack! Quack!” as Maxine’s slender brown fingers closed firmly around his driveshaft and anchored his man-of-war, the entire British fleet assembled on the poop deck for shore-leave inspection. And then the shotgun roar from his blind side, downy feathers floating like snow to the red zone of his brainpan. “Ahh!” hissed Spyboy. “Ahhh!” Snorkel in place, he slides under the warm sudsy water.

Those were the days, happy days before they caught Maxine on candid camera and dragged her away in the middle of a bath. Six times they dragged her down the stairs by her mighty tar-black hair, but do you think she cried out? Not Maxine. Not Spyboy’s one and only. They just wanted to make the script right, wanted it to read: “They dragged her screaming down two flights of marble stairs.” Take one, take two, take six finally and then they just threw her in the back of the limo with the fat Mongolian.

That’s all it took to give Spyboy a ground ax. Even four years at Harvard and a Mercedes upon graduation didn’t take the edge off. He became a dentist and went drilling for oil in the mouths of his parents’ best friends. A knee in the groin of Madame Bovary and a drill in the red chamber of her mouth, the masked man did what he could to get even.



Right, there are gaps, inconsistencies compacted like molars in the mouth of the beast, the smell of sweet decay and the cushion of a Venus mound here and there where he’d rest his weary head, flick his lightning tongue, insert the rod of creation, but no one could touch Maxine. It was her eyes more than anything, then her breasts, her dark ripe coarse-nippled breasts, and the way her wet off-the-shoulder magenta blouse clung to them when she did what she did with the duck, all that cascading dark hair tumbling over her ebony shoulders, and her throaty delighted laughter, Spyboy kicking his little feet and squealing like a piglet. “Hey now!” she’d whisper, never taking her eyes from his. “Hey now, boy!” Every Saturday night for almost a year.

There are inconsistencies and serious questions, like–what in the hell was a black nanny doing giving a bath to a rich eleven-year-old white boy? She fed him, too. “Open up that sweet little mouth,” she’d croon, and Spyboy would work hard on it, he’d muster all the power he had in his stricken brain, stricken but with a potential IQ of 200, if he could just get a running start on the three R’s.

Years later it would be R&R in places like Bangkok and Tokyo, a little time off from assassinations and suitcase bombs left in airport lockers, but until Maxine, Spyboy was a basket case. Keep the monitors running and make him as comfortable as possible, the medical profession advised; here's a tube for feeding, a tube for breathing, and a catheter to stick up his dickie. Spyboy was born out-to-pasture.

He lay in his bed year after year, fat ruddy women turning him like a lamb on a Greek Easter spit, and every now and then mommy and dad would come in and stand at the foot of his bed and stare down at him. And then Maxine was hired to cook and clean, and that's exactly what she did until one day, dusting things off in Spyboy's room, she caught him staring at her with that certain look in his eye.

"Uh-huh," said Maxine. "You got yourself a fire burning in there, ain't you, boy!"

Spyboy, who'd been Edward until this moment, Spyboy whose face had been deadpan for years except when pain twisted it into a new configuration, Spyboy who'd never smiled in his life, inside or out, gave it a try. One corner of his mouth crawled up his face and Maxine left off dusting and came over to sit on the edge of his bed.

"Well here now," she said, "get a load of this," and she undid the buttons of her blouse, unhooked her bra, and there they were. Spyboy nearly swooned, and for the first time in his life, his face took on color.

The doctors were skeptical, and although Spyboy's mommy's heart rejoiced, she harbored more than a little apprehension about the power this nanny had usurped. Spyboy's dad simply made Maxine a full-time nanny and gave her a raise, but not so much of a raise that she could stop taking the bus and buy herself a car; the trick was to make them appreciate you without giving them enough to break free. Spyboy's dad knew this trick. You can't build a fortune manufacturing typewriter spools without it.



Spyboy was eight when Maxine entered his life nine before the family realized the magnitude of what was going down, and eleven when the duck sailed into his harbor. Maxine was only nineteen when she first did the thing in the tub. She had him half-assed walking and talking by that time, and he said the most astounding things. But no one listened except Maxine, because what came out of his mouth was slow-motion slur. He was more of an embarrassment talking and jerking around the room than he'd been as a perfect little statue tucked away under expensive covers.

Sometimes, when he grew despondent from overload, Maxine would curl up with him in his bed and sing gentle songs about Jesus and backdoor men and the nameless deep sorrow that neither of them could touch. Spyboy would listen to her soft singing and feel the sorrow deep in the marrow of all those whiteout years that came before her arrival, and sometimes he'd work his thin milky arms around the darkness of her and they'd rock there on the bed, humming together, Spyboy sounding like the Hunchback of Notre Dame with a bad case of strep throat. He sent chills through her then, as deep down into her as anything or anyone had ever done before.

But eventually things levelled out and Spyboy began settling for what he had, figuring that he already had a few thousand times more than he'd ever dreamed of having, and that's when it came to her. She sailed the duck into his harbor and opened vast new horizons.

And from the beginning she knew she was sending him on his way, and sometimes she'd get testy, resentment washing over her, the feeling of being raw fodder for children and men. But she always let it go, she didn't know what she could do about it without being untrue to her nature. She knew there's no surer way of bringing on the big sorrow before its time than looking too far down the road and wishing you were who you weren't. Spyboy didn't see any of this, how could he, he was just a man-child down under all his grotesqueness, down under all that brain power that frightened her, down under the tender, unquestioning love he had for her. She just enfolded his little cock in her slender brown fingers, opened the cage door, and out flew the birdie. She was one in a million.



Spyboy went into a tailspin when they took her away. He gave up on books, which he'd been devouring out of his father's library from the age of nine, and got back under the covers. He stuck the yellow rubber duck under his pillow and all through the night squeezed it rhythmically. He plotted murder and mayhem in the war chamber of his brain, and then he scrapped all that and plotted suicide, his hatred of himself greater than his hatred of everything else. But in the longrun, Maxine won out. The memory of her, the flowing river of grace on which she sailed her sorrow, pulled him back from the edge.

Spyboy broke down one winter night after she'd been gone for almost a year. The sky was black and clear and nailed through with stars, and a big moon cast a blanket of sparkling blue diamonds over the lacquered snow covering the apron of roof outside his bedroom window. He got out of bed and crossed the room. He pulled the curtains and looked out at the night, magic and electric with Maxine's spirit. He stood barefoot in his pajamas, his thin arms dangling at his sides, and he did something he'd never done before. He tilted his head to the moon and moaned. He moaned and he wept. He grieved, and when he awoke the next morning, he had a deep-seated purpose that would gradually go subliminal and from that vantage point, become deadly.

II.

Spyboy watched from behind his trashcan for the longest time, and then he fell back against the red brick of the alley wall and closed his eyes.

The crew of West Indie Creoles sang bawdy songs as they hoisted anchor and made ready to sail, and Spyboy tapped his way impatiently around the poop deck of his world-class schooner with a jade-tipped cane made from the femur of a hippo. The cane was an affectation, as was the navy-blue blazer with the bogus coat-of-arms over the vest pocket, the skipper's cap with the gold braid, the bloused silk scarf and the plain-glass monocle. Spyboy had 20-20 vision, and he walked just fine on his own steam after years of agonizing physical therapy. He was in killer shape. He'd overcome all mental and physical obstacles and lived in the outback of his accomplishments in a thatched hut of eccentricity, all of which didn't stop him from becoming the most successful dentist in Boston. He had six chairs, four nurses, a receptionist and two crackerjack accountants who juggled the books. He raked in close to a million a year and managed to hide most of that in a Swiss bank. He was loaded for bear, and his vessel was headed for El Salvador, stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey with automatic rifles and heat-sensitive missiles. This is how Spyboy, playboy of the western world, spent his vacations.

He opened his eyes slowly. A Negro child in a prep-school outfit was standing in front of him.

“Well now,” said Spyboy. “Whose little boy are you?”

The boy didn’t answer. People streaked by the mouth of the alley like meteorites, locked into the business of Christmas shopping. Out on the streets, horns honked and sirens wailed in the distance.

El Salvador was child’s play. It was when he turned his attention to Africa that the sorrow became almost too much to bear. Biafra nearly broke him, not his bank account, that was a bottomless pit, but his spirit, that river of grace that floated sorrow. Biafra was a wide vessel that scraped both shores on such a narrow river and whose keel sliced the silt on the river bed. After Biafra, sitting in an uptown Boston cocktail lounge with the wife of another man, he overheard an investment banker at the table next to his tell a joke: “You heard about Evel Knievel’s latest stunt?”

“No. What?” said the woman with him, a sleep-around thing in a sleek velvet dress.

“He’s going to ride his motorcycle across Biafra with a Big Mac strapped to his back!”

Spyboy never knew if the woman got the joke, because before she had time to react, he was up and over there, took the man’s head in his killer hands, and with a simple, almost gentle twist, snapped his spine at one of the cervical vertebrae. He guided the man’s head to the table top, as if he’d fallen asleep, and told the woman in the velvet dress that he was a doctor, not to worry, everything was going to be fine. He pulled back his companion’s chair for her, helped her into her stole, and strolled out the chic front door; tipped the valet heavy for bringing the Mercedes around, and drove off.



His recruitment was a foregone conclusion from the night they came barging through the bathroom door, their glasses fogged with steam, and dragged Maxine away from the tub and down the two flights of stairs, over and over again, as if to burn some significance into Spyboy’s brain. Spyboy checked the seal on his snorkel mask, and under he went, muffling all the yelling and crashing about. Spyboy became a spectator in his own life, watching through the observation glass of his snorkel as his tiny submerged erection fell to one side in slow-motion until it shrank into nothingness.

The noise on the surface eventually faded, until there was only the sound of his own pounding heart, like whale sonar at the bottom of the ocean.



The river was yellow and thick and deceptively swift. It swarmed with little fish with savage rows of teeth and tiny, single-purpose brains. The jungle was as thick as a tight-weave carpet and crowded right up to the edge of the water on both banks—you could feel its fierce longing to span the river and fuse, to bury the river in a tangle of green. Spyboy stood at the helm of the compact attack boat, chewing on an unlit cigar, naked from the waist up, bandoliers slung in an X across his chest. He was tanned and covered with sweat and grime and almost as dark as his crew of three, none of them sailors, all of them killers, working partly for the Cause, partly for cash. This was his first assignment,

given to him somewhat reluctantly by the Cause—a wierdo dentist from Boston, born and raised in the lap of luxury, but what the hell, the Cause needed all the help it could get, and Spyboy pumped a lot of dinero into the coffer. Let him play desperado if he wanted to. If he came to a tragic end, the Cause stood to get half his fortune. No one expected him to make it back.

His mission was to blow up a floating Japanese paper factory. Three teams had tried already, and they'd been snuffed before they could penetrate the Company's defense ring.

"I know how the Company thinks," Spyboy argued. "Give me a crew of three Afro-Americans from Detroit, and I'll give you mission accomplished."

The Cause sprang for the craft and the explosives and gave Spyboy carte blanche. He broke out of the jungle onto an Ecuadoran beach three months later, looking like death warmed over. He'd lost his crew and the craft, but he'd done what he said he would.



He was being brought to the surface. Two large hands locked into his armpits, and up he came like a salvaged ship, sheets of water running off his naked body. He was carried to his room by a total stranger in a trenchcoat and laid on his back on his bed. A doctor in a white smock leaned in close, peering into the steamy snorkel mask. At the foot of the bed, he could make out the distorted shapes of his mommy and dad. This is how he knew them. Always at the foot of the bed. His mother kneading her white knuckles at waist level and needing a drink, his father with both hands jammed into his trouser pockets, smoking a pipe and cutting his loses. They'd been trapped years earlier, and he was the trap they'd been trapped in. And then something terrible was happening, someone was probing his testicles, stretching his limp penis, it was the doctor, the medicine man, and Spyboy cried out with such ferocity that everyone jumped back—his parents, the men in trenchcoats—everyone but the doctor who squeezed his testicles in a way that villified everything Maxine and he had shared. An image flashed through his red-alert mind, an image of Maxine in the back of the limo, the Mongolian mauling her, his raspy swollen tongue lapping her exquisite breasts, one thick hand yanking her head back by her pitch-black hair, the other fumbling with the buttons of his fly behind which his thick ugly cock pulsed like a sea slug.



"You have to eat," the new nurse told him, not a nanny but a nurse. "You have to eat to grow big and strong."

She was not ill-tempered, but Irish and dumb as a log.

"You have to get up and move around," she said, "or your muscles will die. And you have to bathe or you'll stink. Here, I'll hold this sheet up, you can wrap yourself in it, I won't peek, you're safe with me..."

But he stayed submerged in silence for almost a year, until the night of his grief in the moonlight, and when he did surface, what everyone saw as a return was a departure.

"Whachu doin sittin there?" the boy finally said.

“Do you know Maxine?” Spyboy asked.

The boy ignored his question. “Why you dressed like that?” he asked. “Why you got pajamas under that there fancy pimp coat?”

“Well now,” said Spyboy. “Ain’t you got a nose for other people’s business!”

The boy drew back. This old honky wino had just talked like a brother. Not some white-boy imitation, the real thing. And then again—it was more like a sister. Hold on! The boy cocked his head at Spyboy. No, he wasn’t a faggot. Man, the world was getting way too complex, in or out of the ghetto.

The boy was twelve. He came up through the industrial district of South Seattle to Pioneer Square every couple of weeks to see what he could score. He wore this prep-school outfit he bought at Goodwill so as to look respectable. His speciality was curbside cars with unlocked passenger-side doors. He did glove compartment sweeps. It never ceased to amaze him what people left in their glove compartments—pistols, wallets, cameras. But every now and then, when the meanness was at fever pitch in his heart, he’d comb the alleys and roll an old drunk. Sometimes they had a pocket with wine change in it for their next bottle, but it didn’t matter to the boy one way or the other. He did it for the release, for the sense of power he got from rolling a white man around in an alley, and him being too drunk to do anything about it. But he’d got himself snagged on an oddity here. For one thing, they were right in the mouth of the alley. For another, they were a stone’s throw from the county courthouse and central lockup. And then things just didn’t add up right with this wino. Maybe he was undercover. And then Spyboy began humming an old backdoor-man tune, and it hit the boy like lightning. Suffering is what he was dealing with here, suffering with grace.

“Man, what’s happenin with you?” the boy asked, suddenly afraid.

“A long story,” Spyboy said. “A very long story. One of intrigue and heartbreak, I dare say.” He wasn’t talking like a brother now, but it didn’t matter, he’d shown his credentials, he was a brother no matter how he talked or what the color of his skin, and the boy felt like he’d been trapped into a dangerous conspiracy.

“It’s comeuppance time,” Spyboy said. “Inside that building, in an office somewhere, sits a fat Mongolian who years ago took my sweet Maxine from me and defiled her without compunction.”

“Man, you talkin jibberish,” the boy said sullenly. He wanted to leave, he wanted to sprint down the alley, but he couldn’t, he was under Spyboy’s spell.

“We have to make things right, you and me,” Spyboy said.

“The only thing I have to do is kiss your white ass goodbye,” the boy said. “I’m outta here.”

“Really?” Spyboy said. “Is that right?”

And the boy could not go.



They crossed the street together, the boy holding Spyboy by the arm to give him balance. He was thin as a rail and weak as a kitten. He’d made the long drive from the institution

up north in the back of an unheated truck, buried alive under a deluge of Christmas packages headed for a postal routing center in Seattle. He'd helped load the truck in his first week as a worker after years of confinement on the maximum security ward. The new drug had robbed him of his delusions, and he hadn't grown violent in almost a year. He showed up at the truck in his ward pajamas and street shoes, and the orderly in charge of the detail, a good-hearted brother, said, "Here now, Spyboy, you gonna catch your death cold dressed like that. Here—put this on." He was the only one in the whole hospital who called Spyboy by his right name, and he took off his flashy pimp coat and draped it over Spyboy's shoulders.

Spyboy simply sat down way back in the truck and let the other inmates pile packages on top of him like robots. When the truck got to the postal unit in South Seattle, Spyboy stood up after he'd been uncovered and helped unload the rest of the truck. Then he walked away. He spent the night sleeping in a dumpster, and the next morning, the world was right as rain. He had one more mission in front of him, the ultimate mission. He had to penetrate the defenses of enemy headquarters, the fortress of secrets, and take out the Mongolian. He'd been assigned a single backup man, little Nathaniel, disguised as a preppy. Beautifully simple!

"I can't be goin in there," Nathaniel said.

"Of course you can," said Spyboy as they approached the entrance to the courthouse and jail. Just inside the main door stood an officer in uniform, a brother with a gun, his hands clasped behind his back, rocking toe to heel in utter boredom.

"No I can't," Nathaniel said. "I'm packin."

"Excellent!" said Spyboy. "Give me the piece."

Standing on the sidewalk not twenty feet from the entrance, Nathaniel, snarled in dream, slipped Spyboy the piece, a snubnosed .38 he'd lifted from a glove compartment just that morning. Spyboy put the pistol in his pimp-coat pocket, and they went through the door.



He had a way of talking, this mad wino in a pimp coat. He talked lawyer talk to the guard, and the guard called him sir and pointed to the elevator. They rode up to the third floor and went door to door, Spyboy nodding his apologies until they found themselves face to face with the Mongolian in a room with the word RECORDS painted in black on the opaque glass of its entrance door. Spyboy took Nathaniel's hand, and they walked around the counter.

The fat man with the thick mustache looked up from his desk. "Yes?" he said. "Can I help you?" His eyes went from Spyboy to Nathaniel and back again and served up a scenario that made his balls cinch. "You must have the wrong room," the Mongolian said, fear splattered all over his face.

Spyboy saw it, Nathaniel saw it, and the fury rose up in their hearts.

"Do it," Nathaniel said coldly.

"Yes," Spyboy said. "I think I will," and he pulled the pistol from his pocket.

The Opposite Sex

JOSHUA BODWELL

my brother and i were both
tall for our age,
so it was strange when he
brought home his 7th grade
girlfriend and she was
his height.
they sat side-by-side
at the kitchen table
faking intrest in the open
history book before them,
awkward sharp hip bones
barely touching.
she was beautiful.
i couldn't keep my eyes
off her,
off her long dirty blond hair
and lack of bra.
i thought that since she was
my brother's girlfriend, it made
her part my girlfriend too
and i was proud of the choice
my brother had made for us.
eventually my brother and lori
stopped dating and my brother's
heart was broken for a very
short time.
I think that i hurt more
than he did.
a year later one of his friends
took lori's virginity with a
sandwich bag and a rubber band.



Man Quotes from the Novel 'The Space Vampire' and Thinks it's a New Age Bible

ALAN CATLIN

He carried his Bible everywhere, The Space Vampire and read from it indiscriminately on Albany street corners next to bus stops where he could always find a captive audience. He must have been working his way west slowly, a block at a time as his face was a new one on the corner of Quail and Central. It takes a special talent to roust The Evangelists that make waiting for the bus a different kind of hell and I almost liked him for it. After awhile, it got tired, listening to quoted passages as it was the same old message packaged in a twisted form. Telling him about The Alchemist by the same author was like deciphering the Book of Revelations for Branch Davidians without The Holocaust. It would be quiet time at the stop for awhile while he found and read it and I was almost tempted to move a block down to Ontario to find out what he had learned from the new text. Unfortunately, I didn't have a working relationship with the druggies and the winos that hung there who were more annoying than and persistent than the panhandlers where I hung out now. Maybe, I'll catch him at Partridge or even Watervliet Avenue in another life and tell him about how the obscure novelist, Charles Williams made The Tarot into a Christian document on transubstantiation and other cool otherworldly things. I have a vast knowledge of totally esoteric information and love to share it with the unsuspecting.

The Naked City

ALAN CATLIN

Back in The Stoned Ages, when I was a kid, there used to be this cop series called The Naked City. The narrator was some kind of guy like Walter Winchell. Hell, it may even had been Walter Winchell for all I know, he did the opening promo for The Untouchables, didn't he? Anyway, the voice-over said something to the effect that "———This is the Naked City. There are seven million people living here. Each one of them has their own story. This is one of those stories."

While the narrator is doing his thing, the camera is showing a bunch of careworn, experienced cops; obviously good guys because they were wearing light colored suits and hats. This was early television, remember, things were a lot simpler then, very black and white, not like today when everything is clouded in some kind of strange moral ambiguity. Even cop shows that follow a four segment formula with a one minute coda. Even freaking Magnum P.I. had moral ambiguities toward the end of that show's run but that's another completely different story, I never want to tell.

Maybe it was the narrator's "Voice of Authority" that stuck with me all through the years of wading through my own particular brand of moral ambiguity. It didn't take long on the street to find out that life wasn't like Empson's "Seven Types of Ambiguity" the way they implied it might be in graduate school. If anything life was alot like it was the evening news as brought to us by Uncle Walter, during those halcyon days of the late sixties and early seventies, when every day seemed to bring us closer to Armageddon.

The News seemed to die when Uncle Walter retired. It doesn't seem coincidental that Nothing has never been the same since and probably never will be. Even bad news should have some sort of convincing character and no one seems to have that anymore.

Nor have cop dramas since the likes of The Untouchables and the Naked City went off the air. It wasn't reality as we knew it, but there was something to be said for simplicity.

My life as a reluctant bartender had all the elements of simplicity and television situation drama. In too many ways it had become like The Doctor in Djuana Barnes' 'Nightwood.' "He hung his umbrella on the bar ledge. 'To think is to be sick,' he said to the barman. The barman nodded."

I don't have a neighbor like e.e. cummings in 'The Village' yelling over to my window in the morning, "Djuana! You dead yet!?" But, I may some day. There's plenty of time for improvement in my everyday existence.

No matter what side of the bar you were on that scene in Barnes made sense to me. Thinking made you sick. Hmmm. Contrary to popular opinion bartending is not one big party from morning to night, or night to morning, depending upon which shift you worked. More or often than not, you had hours on end to kill with nothing more to do than keep your own company. If you were into Zen meditation on the job, it might be an ideal life-style to maintain but there were certain drawbacks to attaining nirvana on the job. Customers would be waving their hands in front of your eyes for attention and nothing would register. After awhile it would get back to the management people that you were on some kind of mind numbing drugs and you'd either end up getting the kind of counseling you didn't want or need or be out on the street looking for a new job.

If you were more down to earth, like most people, you'd be watching television hours on end absorbing the boob tube rays and gradually turning your brain into the kind of mush and mash potatoes that passed for intelligence in the modern day world. No one would notice the results of this complex experiment in reducing the human brain to inert matter, as long as you still made the requisite cocktails and didn't fall down on your face from drinking the mistakes you made over the course of the night.

Over the years, I had perfected a kind of delicate balance between these two states of being; I called it Zen television. In this vacuum tube, the world became a complex experiment in perception. Everyone had a dynamic role in the puzzle just by being there. While this role may never be completely understood, what roles in life are? It was necessary just to accept the unwitting participants as part of the ever changing flux of human existence, creating their own special niche in the fabric, no matter how minute and insignificant it may be.

Playing Zen television made for some interesting variations on a theme like 'The Naked City.' Imagine a troupe of out for the summer's day of drugs, sunshine, good food and lust in the park along the Hudson with free jamming music spilling over into the bar for the postlude of serious inebriating fun and games. They were skimping on customs for the troupe's summer tour that year, nothing more complicated than artfully shredded pre-washed and faded designer jeans, tie dyed beer promotional t-shirts and paisley handkerchiefs made up like headgear to go along with the no underwear look. Being of age was an insignificant requirement for the gathering so when you question their right to be in the bar, you are greeted with the kind of hostility generally reserved for child molesters, purse snatchers, and cripple rollers. Their extended negative reaction threatening to put you in a place of poor quality similiar to a bardo state on the border of ice hell is an insignificant consideration when faced with the reality of enforcing an arbitrary but effective law. You'd seen that karmic episode when a snow blind Michael Caine and Sean Connery manage to make it through the blizzard and attain the kingdom later on anyway despite all the bad odds. You feel compelled to banish the troupe to other environments anyway, considering the bardo state of the unemployment line as close to a living hell for this life you'd ever want to see, thank you very much.

The comedians that follow them look as if they were holding a spontaneous audition for a post-modern production of the 'Ship of Fools.' Not the version made popular in the movie of the Katherine Anne Porter novel of the same name but the original 'Ship of Fools' as painted by Heironymous Bosch. These erstwhile comedians weren't quite as obvious in the displaying of their particular negative virtues of those seven deadly sins as the painting, they were too steeped in New Age semantics and self-help psychology for that, but it soon became painfully obvious that whatever they were lacking in original sin, they were more than willing to try the ones suggested by all of those books they had been reading and seminars they had been attending.

I could see them mixing and matching on all these dirty weekends out of town, trying to find themselves in some, "getting in touch with the basics in your life" lecture. What it really meant was, finding out you had been lusting after your neighbor all these years and had been too afraid to admit it until now, when the opportunity presented itself on this "get away from it all weekend." It sure was going to change the complexion of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood when they all got home and stuff started hitting the respective fans. Yeah, the more things change, the more they stayed the same, had the ring of truth to it, in this episode of 'The Naked City.' I promised myself I wouldn't throw up on anyone but it wasn't an easy promise to keep.

Maybe, that was essentially my problem; too many years of standing around observing the human condition unravel into some bare as bones, naked reality. The city as revealed this way had become nothing but a corny, predictable drama that was so out of whack with the way life was supposed to be according to the script, that everything had become a situation comedy, bad tv. Bad tv was enough to make you go into the kitchen for the boning knife to end it all, leaving a blood puddle behind the bar as a kind of existential statement to what a close observation of a human drama can bring you to. Fortunately, there wasn't a clean up guy you could leave that kind of mess for currently employed at the tavern.

Equally as fortunate, there was the Zen koan, "If the wind blows through an empty head and words come out, what do they mean?"

I'll bet that's not in your book of Zen koans. I know it's not in mine, 'The Sound of One Hand 281 Zen Koans with Answers.' People ask me what I'm reading behind the bar when I bring that one along for laughs and I tell them all kinds of wild lies depending upon my mood, "It's a biographical study of two Chinese/Jewish film makers from New York into making anti-establishment film art." Or, "It's an inspirational book about a former Olympic wrestler who lost his arm in a tragic hunting accident and overcame all the odds to, through training and faith to, get on the mats again." Or, "it's a text on writing dialogue for television drama series. I'm working on one now, called the Naked City."

"Hey, that's cool, what's it about?"

"About 322 pages long."

"Excuse me."

"That was a joke. Never mind. It's about a SWAT team in the Lower East Side of New York. It's a team of diverse personality and ethnic backgrounds featuring a Black, a Chicana, a Chinamen, an Irishman, an Italian lady, and a Polish guy for starters. Did you ever see the tv series Crime Story?"

"No."

"Good, that makes it easier."

"How?"

"Never mind. The leader of the group is an honest cop, he looks like Dennis Farina, you know the mob heavy that gives Travolta heat in Get Shorty?"

"Yeah. I saw that."

"DeVito's not in it, other commitments, but Billy Barty is. Billy Barty is always in my stories."

"How's that?"

"Short people need love too. Don't you ever forget that."

"Cool."

It wasn't much of a challenge leading him on, it didn't really solve anything but it made life tolerable for me for a while. Erica Jong once said something that stuck with me when I was a rookie on the job and it goes like this, "Chaucer had it right, people who don't know any better deserve to be fucked with their eyes wide open." A crude but effective

way of looking at life, I'd say. And, as good an answer as I was ever going to get on the job for the koan about the wind in the empty head.



PHOTO BY T. KILGORE SPLAKE

blind

DANIEL CROCKER

“We told him that we’d help.”

“We DID help. Goddammit, Dora, he tried to kill himself. He’s sixteen years old and he tried to kill himself. Is that what you want him to go back to?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t like we thought it was. He’s not the same boy anymore...we promised him.”

“I know, but, he’s better. Tad is happy now.”

They were in his room. A small, perfect square at the corner of the house with windows through the two outside walls. One looked out onto the highway, yellow and red cars humming by at high speeds. The other looked out over the back yard, dead this time of year, with its barren trees and fallen leaf ground.

Small as it was, Tad had always loved this room. He had nothing but a radio, his bed and his painting equipment – canvas and little square, colored bottles. It was enough, though. The one and only thing he didn’t like about the room was the closet. It was huge. His parents often joked that if he ever wanted more living space he could just move into the closet and use his bedroom to store his stuff. As if he had anything to store, he didn’t. He kept very few things and what he did have he kept locked in his chest. The closet was useless space. He hated to lock away and hide all of that emptiness, but to actually hide stuff in there – that would be a sin.

“Look at these paintings,” Mitchell pointed out, “they’re Goddamn beautiful.”

They were. Yellows and golds neatly arranged in perfect, compact images.

“Look at this. This is Mr. Hoover’s old hayfield.. It looks just like it for God’s sake. It looks just like a Goddamn photograph. Everything about it is perfect.”

“I wonder what he did with the...other ones?” Dora asked.

“Who cares? I’m glad they’re gone. These are better anyway. A hell of a lot better.”

Dora knew just how good they were, but still they hadn’t won Tad any awards or raised many eyebrows. These new ones were all like photographs. The sun shining bright in everyone. Every line in perfect harmony.

“We told him we’d get him off that stuff if...”

“Shut up, it’s for his own good.”

“What are we doing in here? He’ll be here any minute. This is so wrong, Mitch.”

“Look, I just want to make sure he’s still taking his medicine. He’s been acting kind of strange lately and I just want to make sure he’s still taking it. OK? Is that wrong, honey, I mean, really?”

It was OK. It had to be. He could still remember the day Tad had done it. It was right before dinner. Tad went to the bathroom and he didn’t come back out. They waited. Dinner was almost done. Soft hamburgers and hot macaroni and cheese. Tad’s favorites. Dora

had started to worry already and wanted to go knock. Tad had always been a quiet boy, melancholy and to himself. It was nothing to worry about though, he was a good boy. He never got into any trouble. He wasn't even interested in it. He was no worry. He was never a worry, he didn't even want a driver's license for Christ sake.

A few more minutes and Mitchell began to worry too. He kept telling himself that Tad was sixteen and that he was probably in there masturbating. Of course, he didn't want to tell Dora that. He just told her that he'd be embarrassed if she knocked.

A few more minutes and she would not be appeased. When she threatened to go knock and ask if he was OK, Mitchell did it instead.

"Come on out of there now, son, dinner is getting cold and we want to eat."

No answer.

"Goddammit, Tad, come on out of there, now, your mom wants to have supper."

No answer.

"Tad!"

By now Dora was screaming. Mitchell's palms had gone wet and her voice was a whistle in his ear.

"Shut up!"

He kicked the door in. Tad, all in black as usual, was sprawled on the floor. He was glued to it like a insect on paper in a biology class. Blood pumped a rhythm out of red smiles he had painted with a razor across his wrist. A ringed pool of purple had soaked into the blue carpet. Tad's eyes were wide open.

He was saved just in time and then spent a week among the white and teal walls of the psychiatric ward in the hospital. No, Mitchell would have known if something was wrong—it came out of the blue. Day after day the family was asked questions for which they had no answer. Tad was shown ink blots that he might have painted himself given the freedom. When it was over the doctor suggested institution or medicine in very strong doses accompanied by weekly counseling.

"What do you mean he's been acting strange lately?"

"He's been complaining a lot. He never...he's never done that before. He wants a bigger room, a car, a T.V. His goddamn eyes are always glued to that T.V. And he hardly paints anymore. And his doctor said that Tad has been saying..."

"The doctor has been telling you what Tad tells him?" Dora's eyes were accusing.

"I'm his Goddamn father! I have a right to know about my boy. It's for his own good."

"It's against the law...isn't it?"

"He's underage. Why in are you being this way, for God's sake? Don't you want to help him?"

"Of course I do."

"Then shut up and help me find his medicine...Anyway, the doctor has started asking Tad about his painting. About his old painting. He wants to know how Tad feels about it. If he misses all the attention it brought him. And the money."

“And...”

“You know he never gave a damn for those things. But...”

“What?”

“He says he can’t see them.”

“What he won’t let the doctor see them?”

“Would you listen! Tad says that he can’t see them. No matter what question the doctor asks him about his old paintings Tad answers with, ‘I can’t see them.’ That’s fucking wierd, Dora! Now, I want to know if he’s still taking his **GODDAMN MEDICINE!**”

“Calm down...we’ve looked everywhere and we can’t find it. Maybe he has it with him?”

“No. No, I bet it’s in the closet. Yeah, it’s in the closet.”

Mitchell opened it. The paintings came tumbling out, near a hundred of them packed in the closet – tight as a puzzle. With the opening of the door the jig-saw arrangement had been broken and the pieces came pouring out in a gush. The smears of blacks, greys and off-whites that had had Tad on the brink of fame. The crowds of faceless people wandering aimless and blank eyed. The dull steels and concrete flower cities surrounded by dark and thick, heavy wood frames. Most of them had ribbons, or write ups from the local paper taped to them. On the bottom was Tad’s favorite. His self portrait which had hung in a museum until he couldn’t stand to have it away from himself any longer. He’d been offered twenty-five hundred dollars for it, but he would not have taken a million. Not to have his pale, gaunt, elongated face held by long veiney hands in another home. Hidden away from him. Not with his eyeless sockets containing an empty universe behind them.

“I think I hear him coming. Let’s get these picked up.”

“It’s your imagination. God, would ya look at this morbid shit. Look at it! Is that what you want him to go back to? Let’s find that goddamn medicine.”

Faint footsteps stumbled down the hall, knocking things over unheard. The door opened.

Tad stood there with a paintbrush in his hand, the wet and black, wooden end protruding out. His eyes were shut with something dark and gooey sliding from under the eyelids.

“Mom, Dad, I’ve gone



The Sea of Canada

GARY EVERY

The Toyota pickup rolled across British Columbia
the white camper shell making the vehicle resemble
a prairie schooner, Ranger Roy's black hands gripping
the steering wheel like a helm. It was more water
than I had ever seen except for the ocean,
my red curls rolling like waves in the window breeze.
The highway ran continuously parallel
beside forest and whitewater rivers
except for interruptions by glacial
lakes whose far mountainous shores
were so distant they may as well
have been China. Accompanying the highway
were railroad tracks, steel bridges
arching above the water like leaping dolphins.

At sea, where approaching an island
clusters of clouds appear to herald
land's presence. Likewise in British Columbia
towns announce their nearness with graffiti
strewn boulders, miniature stormclouds of spraypaint,
just beyond the city outskirts.

In Prince Rupert the sky opened up with a deluge
of rain, water from all over the world sailing
the winds to offer homage to beautiful turquoise
blue glaciers. Ranger Roy and I moseyed
to the nearest saloon. The place was packed
with lumberjacks and injuns
and when the suds had settled atop our ale
a stripper took the stage, cellulite jiggling
as she gyrated to disco music and catcalls.
The men teased her for being fat
but she replied tartly that come next payday
they would line up drunk, outside her trailer,
enticed by the availability of the charms
she displayed today.

A drunken indian plopped himself
on one of the stools at our table
and bought us a pitcher of beer.
He had to prove
to his freinds he said,
"That a white man, black man, and redskin,
could all sit together in a public place,
sharing beer as comrades, without fear
of being beaten up." We thanked him
for the beer and left after a polite
interval. The Prince Rupert sky overflowed
with night and rain, enough darkness
to feed the shadows of the soul
and enough water
to hide a strippers angry tears.

Fuck and Dollar

GREG FITZSIMMONS

“GOD SAYS YOU ARE GUILTY. YOU MAY SAY, “I DON’T FEEL GUILTY. GOD HAS A WRITTEN CASE AGAINST YOU. TRYING TO LEAD A GOOD LIFE AND KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS WON’T WORK.”

-FROM “GUILTY AS CHARGED” BY THE FELLOWSHIP TRACT LEAGUE

My sex life began while watching the tv show Charlie’s Angels. The show defined sexuality for me, and anything that turned me on in my adolescence was qualitatively compared to what I had seen of Jill, Kate and Sabrina.

Before Charlie’s Angels, my cock had no meaning or purpose. The show became a video painted halo wrapped around a pubescent head filled with carnal knowledge. I acquired this knowledge in scraps and shards. Like a shattered hologram, each broken piece contained a full miniature of the total image. The image was Sex – Sex with a capital “S”. Later, I was taught the more advanced meanings of my libido, not by actors on tv or teachers with textbooks but by real-life, beautiful women and girls who unknowingly enriched me by their presence.

Scraps and shards, broken images: Debbie’s back and neck; Stephanie’s bony shoulders that seemed fishes from the sea; an anonymous crotch in super-tight Jordache jeans; black curling-ironed hair in which I imagined my cum inset like pearls in a tiara; Tanya’s lips softly grazing against my own as she spoke; Diane’s mouth was a rounded “O” as she blessed her right nipple with my cock; Katy had fur on her arms; Jeany had a belly that Michaelangelo, looking up from Hell, wished he were alive to paint.

Sex? Somehow I had a clinical knowledge of sex at an unusually early age and without ever having to be told. I understood it in a primal and unarticulated way. It was nameless and simple. I knew that people had sex and that was where babies came from. But I didn’t know about pleasure until I was in the fifth grade and Charlie’s Angels was on tv. The naked – or near-naked – limbs of Jill, Kate and Sabrina gave meaning to my confusing and fleeting hard-ons. The Angels were like words; they inscribed understanding and pretended to stand for the real thing. Inside me, the Angels piled temptations into an accordion-like stack – a tipped over accordion that automatically wheezed and whined in and out, singing a multitude of lewd polkas. The Angels filled me with obscene songs, with a purpose, with a propulsion and with a knowledge of the use of my cock. Not for one minute did I ever believe I’d actually be able to screw one of them. But, if I had had the chance, I would have known what to do. I studied their bodies closer than I had studied the body of my fourth-grade teacher. She’d been the first adult woman who’d given me a hard-on. The curve of her back, the shape of her arm from elbow to wrist and the shiny roundness of her shoulders bared by a strapless 70’s dress had made me appear to be in complete submission to the classroom rule of “Pay Attention!”



“Fuck!”

My precocious knowledge of sex didn’t include the meaning of the word “fuck”, but I’d heard it pronounced once or twice and knew how to say it. The hardness with which it

was spewed out of the mouth fascinated me, and I began to shout the word as loud as possible whenever the mood took me. I was seven the first time my mother heard me yell “Fuck!”, and she washed out my mouth with soap. A blue and white faux-marble slab of bitterness was rubbed back and forth across my teeth like a piece of wood against a plane saw. The soap didn’t wash away the f-word, only planted it deeper. The soap was also unable to wash away shit, mother fucker, cocksucker, seduce, wet, butt-slam, butt-crack, shit for brains, balls, homo, pussy, cunt, lesbian, rape, slam, cum, dick-head, dick-weed, prick, dick-wad, asshole, bastard, bitch, choke the chicken, fuck-face, whore, slut, screw, jolt, slit, slap, bang, hair-taco, hair-pie, pubic, head, hammer, hump, chew, get some, pull a train, jag-off, clam, jack-off, trolling, jizz, boobs, jugs, dyke, penetrate, bite, do it, rocket, faster, fucker, take it, take it off, take it all, bend over, suck, swallow, and muff. Not that I had used – or even heard – any of these words or phrases yet, but they or their seeds must have been planted on my tongue, fecundating and awaiting the proper moment to burst out.

The second time my mother heard me yell the f-word, she sat me down and explained to me what it meant. I was disappointed. I knew where babies came from.

“Is that all it means?” I asked.

My mother wanted to know where I’d learned of such things. All I could do was shrug my shoulders and ask, “Doesn’t everybody know that?”

I often found myself asking the question “Doesn’t everybody know that?”

I was amazed at how easily adults could ignore the basic and obvious. They did so out of need or because they were too preoccupied with the complexities of adulthood. In order to shake things up a little bit, I would put on shows for the sleeping adults around me. After my last performance of yelling “Fuck!” my next show was called “Dollar.” I performed this new controversial show only one time and learned from it the horrors of growing-up.

I proposed to my mother and great-aunt Nancy that I would tear my dollar allowance to pieces before their very eyes. I waved my Federal Reserve Note stamped with George Washington’s face and bearing on the reverse side strange designs suggestive of Egyptian origins. The buck smelled – like every other dollar I’d ever held under my nose – like women’s underwear, gold wrist-watches and bread dough. Playing the role of a stage magician, I held the dollar in front of me. I was not destroying the money in protest of it’s meager amount, I told my audience, although it’s true it was never enough for me to buy all the things I wanted. For example, a package of plastic dog models cost a buck. I was collecting the entire line, from pekinese to great dane. If the only money I received was my weekly allowance, than it would be six months before I could acquire every breed of dog. But, still, no – I was not going to tear the dollar in protest of it’s amount. I was going to tear the dollar because I could. It was mine to do with what I pleased, and this is what pleased me. But, before performing my amazing feat of devaluation, I asked my audience to give me reasons why I should not.

If I tore my money to pieces, my mother said, then I would be demonstrating that I did not understand it’s value. Therefore, I would receive none in the future.

This threat of poverty didn’t phase me. I knew that if neither my mother nor my great aunt ever gave me one more red American cent, I could still hit up my patron saint of a grandmother for enough petty change to buy a package of dogs, a package of plastic cowboys and a goldfish every day for the rest of my life. She would take pity on me and

shower me with enough dogs to make a bed of, enough cowboys to fill any West and enough goldfish to populate an oriental pond. No, telling me I was going to be cut off from money until I was old enough or stupid enough to get a job was not going to deter me from rending my present dollar into pieces. My mother realized I wasn't joking about my intentions and threatened me with physical punishment and telling my father the next time she saw him.

This threat would have stopped me, but the fear it inspired only increased my curiosity about why destroying money was such a big deal.

A small part of me believed I'd be making more money by shredding the green-back. Maybe tearing the paper would release The Spirit of Cash from its prison of metallic fibers and allow it to roam free to place money under sofas and in empty drawers. Another part of me believed destroying money would grant me a practical power over it in the future. And a small part of me – the part with the most control – believed none of these things, but was driven by curiosity about what actually would happen.

"Since none of your reasons make any sense, I've got to tear this specimen so we can see what'll happen," I said, picturing myself as a scientist wearing a magician's top-hat.

"It's against the law," my great-aunt said.

My mother tried to pull the dollar from my hand, but I was too fast for her.

I crawled under the coffee table yelling, "It's mine! I wanna see what's gonna happen!"

When my mother heard the ripping sound she violently pulled me by my ankles from beneath the table and snatched away the two half-dollars.

"Idiot!"

"AH—Bad! Greg, you don't know what you've done."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Wait." I said, tilting my head as if to listen for sirens. "I've broken the law and nothing is happening."

My mother slapped my face.

The next day, she taped the dollar back together and took me to The Bank.

The Bank was a cold, hard place filled with marble. It was also clean and quiet, reminding me of a giant bathroom. I wondered if there were toilets behind the counters. Did the clerks sit on the toilets when they weren't helping people? While my mother and I stood in line, I kept my ears peeled for the sound of flushing.

Handing the dollar to a balding, nervous clerk, my mother said, "He tore it."

He leered over the counter in mock shock, "Tsk, tsk, tsk. That was a very bad thing to do, destroying money."

The clerk's glasses spuezed the top half of his face into an anxious and frightening mask. He looked pale and scared. I thought he was maybe going to be sick. Or was it that he was afraid somebody (his boss?) was going to walk up behind him and hit him in the back of the head with a shovel?

He looked me in the eye while handing my mother a crisp, new dollar. "Don't do that

again.” He puckered his pale, over-sized lips and shook a finger at me. “It’s not right to destroy money.”

I started to get really scared because the man looked so much like there was something seriously wrong with him. Why was he so worried? Was he going to shit his pants? Had he not had a chance to take a break and sit on his toilet? What was it that made him this way?

I started to cry.

My mother, thinking I’d learned my lesson and was sorry for what I had done, comforted and calmed me on our way out of The Bank.

The clerk had never torn apart a dollar. He had never yelled “Fuck!” His anxious face also told me he had never smashed a plastic model he’d spent five days putting together, or had started fires in his parents’ garage, or had spun in circles until dizzy. He had never tipped over the dining room table just to see what it looked like upside-down, or had walked on the living room furniture. He could never understand why anyone – even a child – would try to talk to ants in the hope of figuring out the language of insects. The clerk had never had enough curiosity to take a clock or radio apart. He had never experimented in the kitchen by mixing vinegar, vanilla, beef bullion, beer, urine and sugar. He had no desire to taste strange concoctions. He was one of those rare creatures who know at birth where the limits are, what is sacred and what is taboo. These freaks come into the world guilty, anxious and afraid of their own shadows.

Luckily, most people have to be taught how to worry. The average person knows, at first, only a few simple things. And those vaguely. The sky, pissing, shitting, drinking more so than eating, thinking without words, swallowing without swallowing our tongues, gravity, sleeping, waking and touching are easy and don’t need explanations. The sacred and the limits come later and are only learned after mistakes have been made. The toilet is discovered to be the proper place to shit; table manners are adopted; and sexual excitement is fitted in with what society has to offer.



I’d had hard-ons before watching Charlie’s Angels: my cock would get hard and I’d like it, but without knowing why or what I was suppose to do with it. I had to be taught to give my sexuality direction. The Angels were very precise images, targets at which I could aim. They showed me what my cock was for.

Farah Fawcet wore a red, one-piece swimsuit that looked and bled sex more than any bikini conceived of in the last half of the twentieth century. It was a color red that could only exist on a dripping wet lifeguard’s swimsuit – except that lifeguards never actually get that wet. In fact, the only other place that you will find such a deep red is on those rounded yet somehow also angled forms which the head of your cock grazes up against just before it shoots out vegetation, chlorine and scented summer wind into a beautiful woman.

Farah’s arm was bent at the elbow, and her hand was placed behind her head. Her arm was glazed like perfectly baked bread dough. A friend once told me about a nine foot tall statue of the crucifixion in Bari, Italy. It was sculptured entirely from bread dough and must have had the same texture and color as Farrah’s arm.

Her legs were curled into a nearly fetal position. The top of her thigh was framed by the the rounded edge of the swim suit and suggested the unseen buttocks which could kill if allowed to show in the light of day.

If you took eighteen pounds of pubic hair, dyed it sun blonde and magically removed from it all that is chthonian and earthly – injecting instead the transcendent glory which is seen in medieval depictions of saint’s halos – you could maybe come close to reproducing Farrah’s head of hair.

And, finally, the two hard nipples outlined in the swimsuit’s cloth were like the marks of a semi-colon. Farrah Fawcet: Sex.



35th Floor: Corpirate

TOM HOYUM

There I was alone on the elevator. The 35th floor door opened. A huge man who looked like Brutus on Popeye walked on. I could have stood inside him.

“You are mine,” he screamed. He had a black beard. He scared me. The elevator wasn’t moving. He yelled, “I am corpirate! The most powerful human being in the world!”

He gave a frightening laugh.

“Don’t hurt me! What do you want?” I screamed. The door opened. The old man with the face that looked like crumpled paper was there.

“Son, let him go,” the old man whispered, “We’ll see him again.”

The huge man laughed loudly. The old man gave me that evil look as he guided his son out by the arm.

I was relieved when the door closed and pressed 1. The elevator went up.



Judgement Day

ALBERT HUFFSTICKLER

1.
Shame is a broken
body, is not being
able to stand, is
having your mind
blown sideways, out
the side of your
head and back to
that place where
your images don't
match the environ-
ment. Shame is
standing before you,
hands out, not able
to utter a sound.

2.
My back was bent
but they broke it
with a scalpel and
saw. I lost a
disc. I also lost
my mind. Later,
they discovered that
the nerves were
also damaged. I
could have told
them that—not
damaged but lost.
I'd lost my nerves—
blown out through
that hole in my
back. They gave
me drugs: I went
crazy too. Now
I didn't have
anything. Now I
was a ghost, hovering
above this body
I couldn't move.
Later, things got
really bad. I
got up and fell,
my body split open.
"It's all in his
mind," said the doctor.

3.
Zoned out, they say.
In another zone—
where all your sins
don costumes. It's

a costume ball with
everyone clad in
demon masks but you.
Guess what? You're
naked. And you're
batted like a volley
ball from demon to
demon while far
below your body
writhes on the floor
where it's fallen
and demons in white
stand over it clucking.
Ask me now if I
worry about death.
Not on your life.

4.

Lazarus came back
a stranger. He
knew too much. He
was alone with it.
He tried to speak
of where he'd been.
His tongue froze.
Lazarus became a
mute. He was very
lonely. He revised
his opinion of
death.

5.

This was all a
long time ago but
I visit it from
time to time as
one visits the grave
of his innocence.
Sometimes I wake in
the night still and
for a moment am
disconnected and
panic seizes me. I
put on the light,
get up, make coffee,
do the small things
a man does to
tell him what world
he's in. I move
my body testing,
then sit back and
savor my coffee.
Small things... God
lives in small things.
Grace is being able
to move.

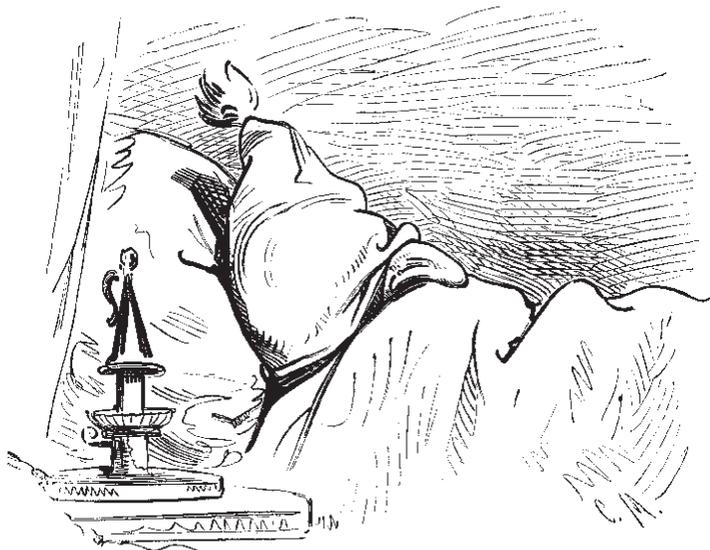
Ruta Maya Coffee House
June 30, 1997

REM

ALBERT HUFFSTICKLER

I dreamed I was
a dream
that went on
daily beside
the dream I was
already
and that the
dream I dreamed
I was was
mine but the
dream that
I was already
wasn't mine
at all
but the dream
of an old wino
sleeping it off in
an alley in
a distant city
and every time he
tossed or turned
or rose to piss
my right eye twitched.

Ruta Maya Coffee House
Austin, Texas
June 8, 1994



why people of my generation married

GERALD LOCKLIN

paul delvaux liked to juxtapose naked women
with their properly clothed selves
in prints such as “sunday dress,”
“the fan,” “the rivals,” and
“annie lost in thought.”

it reminds me of my wedding day,
my first marriage,
a relatively fancy church affair,
with me in a tuxedo and my bride
in frilled white gown with plenty
of undergarments.

i remember us hastily undressing
to change into traveling clothes
for the long flight to arizona.

i can't remember if we flopped
upon the bed right then and there
and had it off

or if she performed an act of mercy
with smooth young hand and kleenex.

but even now,
reflecting on that assemblage
of flesh and fabric in awkward motion,

i get hot.

THOMAS MICHAEL McDADE

Third shift, late September in the Crowell Textile cafeteria Ray Hibbs crushed a Coke can top to bottom with one hand before walking to the mens' room.

"There's a friggin strange one," whispered Arky through a thick mustache, "wearing tassled loafers sweeping floors."

"Strong bastard is all I know," said Russ, tracing the 9-ball tattoo on his arm.

When Hibbs returned he was dabbing his bald head with a paper towel. Russ and Arky stared at the floor. He sat on a long wooden bench and wiped dust off his loafers.

"Arky," asked Russ, "gonna give blood for George Poole?"

"What they pay these days?"

"You'll feel good, like the bumper sticker says."

"Fuck George and his Poole," said Arky, grinning.

Hibbs crossed his arms. "I'll give," he said.

"Strong guy like you could give two pints," said Russ.

"Bank's where?" asked Hibbs.

"Orange Street," said Russ.

"Zinc Penny Bar next door," added Arky. "They say double up on liquids after donating."

Hibbs got to his room at 8:00 after breakfast at Lovely's diner. He did finger pushups until he collapsed like he used to do when he worked as a circus strongman. He slept 3 hours on the floor. After a shower and shave, he dressed at a mirror too small to check his tie right. He tried to remember when he'd last worn his gray trousers and blue blazer. "LTD, Mrs. Hodge," he said out loud. His tie had regimental stripes. "Regimental Zip scores a major upset in the feature at Hialeah," he said like the announcer he'd been listening to when they busted him for embezzling from Ditmar Ford to bet horses.

Hibbs splashed Jade East on his face. He bared his teeth, stretched his face like a yogi he'd seen on TV. The lion pose.

On his dresser there were pictures of Judy Garland and Liza Minelli in a frame too large. Between them was one of a girl who looked 11 or 12. She blew a kiss. He planned on having the three pictures phonied into one like tabloids do. Hibbs caught a bus to an Avis car rental. Only decent car was a dark blue Riviera. "Goddam, Ray Hibbs driving a Buick," he said to his side-view mirror. He opened the sunroof and reached up to feel the wind.

His ex, Dawn, had sworn he'd never see his daughter again. Ex was a warden until she hooked up with a drunken window washer half her 36 years. Jack the Ripper could have babysat after that. Hibbs saw Monica regularly. He pushed an oldies station and the Platters sang "Twilight Time."

Hibbs parked at a Wendy's and lit a slim White Owl cigar. He got lost in smoke drifting

out the sunroof. When he reached to get radio news, he saw Monica with her nose pressed against the windshield. She rolled off and jumped in the passenger side. "Where's your hair?" asked Hibbs, before he hugged her.

"I want to look more like my mother," Monica said, through hot pink lipstick and braces. She'd left a backpack the same color as her lips on the hood. Hibbs retrieved it.

"How far we going with this, Monica?"

"I saw 'Cabaret.' Liza Minelli is my mom."

"Pretty soon we'll be meeting at the funny farm," said Hibbs.

"Liza found you at the circus, right?"

"Okay, Akron...she couldn't resist. Why are you dressed in black in daytime?"

"I'm going to be a dancer, just like Liza. Bet she could dance like hell when she was 12. Got catching up to do."

"Black doesn't go with your pug nose. You writing 'Liza' on your tests?"

"No, just M.L. Hibbs and I know a cute little uniform shop where we can go to get a nurse cap for Career Day at school."

"Casing the joint, huh? Funny. I'm giving blood today you can comfort me like wounded in action."

"Gross. Can we go to the track after?"

"Next week."

"You always say that. How's the Daddy luck?"

"Cloudy and mild. Cheesecake?"

"Won my heart, Mr. Hibbs."

The M.K. Deli had a shelf on every wall about a foot and a half from the ceiling. A miniature circus lived there: colorful wagons pulled by horses, a marching band, three feet of elephants, trunk to tail. Plus clowns galore, tigers jumping through hoops, bareback riders, trapeze artists suspended from the ceiling and a highwire corner to corner. The Wallendas were frozen in their legendary pyramid. There was a cannon aimed at a man hanging off nylon line like a fake Superman. A strongman Monica said was Hibbs wore a leopardskin.

Hibbs and Monica ordered Jolt and 4 pieces of cherry cheesecake. Olive, an old waitress with ankles so swollen it was a miracle she could walk asked Monica if she'd sold her hair to buy a gift for her Dad.

"Yup," she answered, reaching into her backpack. She handed Hibbs a Timex Indiglo. "And this for you, Olive."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Chanel! I couldn't."

"I'll pour it in the sugar," warned Monica.

"Well, I guess," said Olive, mussing Monica's hair.

"Okay, where, how and why?" asked Hibbs, weakly smiling.

“When we went to see ‘101 Dalmations’ you said the light in your watch wasn’t bright enough. Timex has solved that. And Olive always cuts us big cheesecake. Don’t worry I didn’t use anything from the stash.”

“I wish you had. Explain.”

“Well, I hid in a trash barrel at K-Mart. They closed without me. Slept in a hammock. I tested every kind of Little Debbie sweet. What a night. The two that opened up were in love. I sneaked out while they were panting in hardware. God, CD’s, you name it. My backpack was about to break.”

“Fireworks at home?”

“She was out with a boyfriend.”

“What’ll you be up to at 16?”

“Don’t care. Just hope I don’t have big boobs like your ex-wife. Throw my gymnastics and dancing off.”

Olive brought extra cheesecake and dabbed perfume on Monica’s wrists. Monica tried to get Hibbs to talk about his 18 months in prison, but he kept changing the subject.

“If she’d have let me visit, I would have found a way to bust you out,” whispered Monica.

“Yeah, a K-Mart trash barrel but I’m the Caldor’s type.”

They ate all the cheesecake and Olive shook her head in disbelief. Monica chugged her Jolt and put on her drunk act. She pulled a fist-sized roll of bills from her pack. There was a heavy red rubber band around it. She tipped Olive 600%.

“What’s with the blood, Dad?” asked Monica as they got back on the highway.

“Guy at work’s having open heart. Good deed, I need to do a good deed.”

“Maybe I’ll donate.”

“Gotta weigh 110.”

“Never.”

“Maybe you should be Julie Krone instead of Liza.”

“Ever wish your ex-wife hadn’t deserted when you were framed?”

“All the time.”

“Will you ever have a tie-wearing job again?”

“Never can tell.”

Monica turned up the radio. Paul Harvey was on. “Your ex-wife oughta marry him. They both have all the answers.”



The Clover Uniform Shop was located over a jewelry store. The staff remembered Monica. They fussed over fitting her cap. Hibbs chatted with a tall redhead named Georgia under a skylight where many exotic planters hung.

"I want to be a Navy nurse," Monica explained when they let her ring up the sale. Monica lifted up the change tray. "God, hundred dollar bills," she exclaimed. "May I touch one?"

"Sure," said Alice, the owner. "And you take your money back. Warms my heart you want to serve your country. My grand aunt was a nurse at Pearl Harbor."

"Is she still alive?" asked Monica.

"No, God rest her soul. They missed her in '41 but a Honda got her last year."

Monica fell to her knees and mumbled prayers. Half of her ended up in shelving under the counter. Hibbs glanced at her and started to roll his eyes but instead finished writing Georgia's phone number on his wrist.

Leaving was like trying to go off to war with a house full of drunk relatives. Monica egged them on.

"Going to be late for the blood bank," said Hibbs.

"Bless you, Mr. Hibbs," said Alice, swooshing them out the door.

"Damn, daughter, you'd think it was Disney World."

"Gave you plenty of time to flirt."

"So what?"

"She's common. I went through her purse while I was praying. Big pack of condoms."

"Maybe it wasn't her purse."

"Matched her hooker shoes. Hope she doesn't find out you're an ex-con."

"Monica, if you'll calm down, you can drive the Buick after. It's got cruise control."

"Don't have to bribe me, Dad, I'll get over it."

Monica read a Nancy Drew Mystery on the way to the blood bank. Hibbs sang "Yellow Submarine," a song that usually cheered her up. She held his hand as they walked into the waiting room.

"Dad, can I drive by Cindy's house?"

"Sure."

"Thanks," she said as a loud, gritty voice made her jump.

"Hibbs, you made it, thanks, man, really appreciate it."

Russ dropped his New York Magazine.

"Russ, my daughter Monica."

"Hey, you look like..."

"Liza Minelli," snapped Monica. "She's my mother."

Russ's head bounced between them like he was at Olympic ping-pong.

"You mean he," stammered Russ to Monica, thumb aimed at Hibbs.

"Love at first sight," explained Monica.

“You don’t say?”

“Would have been Lt. Columbo’s exact words,” said Monica.

“Hibbs, Arky’s in there now. Don’t know what happened. Maybe copycatting you. I think you’re his hero. All the ornery’s going to drain. Like the Middle Ages. Leeches sucked out a man’s bad qualities. Same here.”

“You don’t say?” said Monica.

Monica was Hibbs’ shadow. She giggled when he was asked the AIDS questions. She helped with the blood pressure. Her eyes were six inches from the needle going in his vein. Sitting on the floor she watched the bag fill, told the nurse the blood going through the tube reminded her of licorice. She hummed “New York, New York.”

Hibbs dozed, snored. Monica kissed his forehead. She walked him to the canteen like he was wounded. Monica had the nurses autograph her cap. Hibbs drank 8 cans of Ocean Spray.

“Dad,” Monica whispered. “How much do you need for next week’s Daddy luck? I can double up. The uniform shop keeps a \$200 change fund. In the register!”

“Don’t know, been thinking cold turkey.”

“Dad, did the habit drain, like that guy said?”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“What about our exercise? That too?”

“Don’t know.”

“You think we can’t do that skylight?”

“There’s not a skylight we can’t do,” said Hibbs.

“Okay, we’ll just B&E, leave the money. Never been much. With you quitting horses, we won’t need it. We’ll just practice for our circus act.” Her lips trembled.

“Okay with me.”

“Do you want this?” said Monica, handing Hibbs \$50.

“Give me a break, little one.”

“It belongs to Big Red, I took it out of her purse.”

“What am I going to do with you, Liza?”

“Maybe I’ll eat a bunch of bananas and make 110.”

They left holding hands. While Monica was showing off the handful of gold blood drop pins signifying the 5 gallon club, Russ and Arky came running. “Let’s go out to the track for the 9th,” shouted Arky. But they backed down when Monica got behind the Riviera wheel and turned the key.

Cobalt

CATFISH MCDARIS

“Good morning, Mr. Fred. Here you go, Skip. Lovey packed a little treat for us.”

Big Bill handed me a napkin-wrapped slice of buckwheat cake soaked in black strap molasses.

I scooted over in the pickup seat to make room for Big Bill. Splitting the cake into three pieces, my grandfather poured us a shot of java.

I was almost over my two weeks of soreness that came every summer, when school let out. Bricklaying was a fierce occupation.

We were bricking a Methodist church in Texico, New Mexico, the last town before Texas.

Big Bill was like an uncle to me. He was six foot six and weighed three hundred, all muscle. Skin, real black, except for speckles of pure white where he'd gotten burned by nitrogen fertilizer in a farming accident.

We didn't have a mortar mixer, maybe they hadn't been invented. Big Bill was our mud man.

He used a huge hoe in a mud box. Seven by four feet, chopping mortar and sand and water, back and forth all day. Finding the perfect consistency.

When the hod carriers came with their wheel barrows, he would shovel them a full load.

Keeping mud for four bricklayers was no easy task, but Big Bill just grinned and kept chopping. By nine, he'd strip to the waist and tie a red bandana around his forehead to keep the sweat out of his eyes. His muscles rippled across his back and arms. Shining in the sun, he took on a cobalt hue, like burnished steel.

Grand-dad had hired a Mexican bricklayer a week before, he'd been riding me about being the boss' grandson.

“You aren't even dry behind the ears, pendejo. This is work for men,” he taunted.

I let it slide. Big Bill wanted to have a word with him, but I'd seen my grand-dad restrain him. If it wasn't such a big job I knew he'd have gotten his walking papers. The Mex was a fair brick mechanic, if he would just keep his mouth off me.

After a couple of more days, it became a splinter beginning to fester.

“Oye, cabron, if it wasn't for your grandpa and that big nigger I'd spank your ass.”

“Chinga tu madre, you pepper belly son of a puta. Are you all talk?” I replied.

His first punch caught me under the chin and lifted me off my feet, his second grazed my forehead on the way down. As I hit the ground I rolled away from his kicks. Grabbing a handful of dirt I threw it in his face, knowing I was in trouble, I looked for something to even the odds. Grabbing a short handled shovel, I swung with everything I had. A sickening crunch came from his breaking ribs. His nose exploded as I hit him in the face. Standing over him I held the shovel ready to chop off his head like a rattler. The entire earth was trembling in slow motion.

Feeling two hands grab each shoulder, one black the other white. I dropped the shovel. My heart was pounding loud in my ears. It took a minute for me to get my breath.

“Don’t ever call my uncle a nigger, he’s not even black.” I booted the Mexican in his broken ribs. Before they dragged me away.

That evening we pulled up in front of Big Bill’s.

“Wait a minute, Mr. Fred.”

He returned with a small box. “This is for you, Skip.”

Opening it, there lying on purple velvet was a Silver Star. A paper read, “awarded to Sergeant Bill Jenkins for courage above and beyond the call of duty.”

“See you all tomorrow,” he called and vanished inside.

“Yes, sir,” I said into the night.

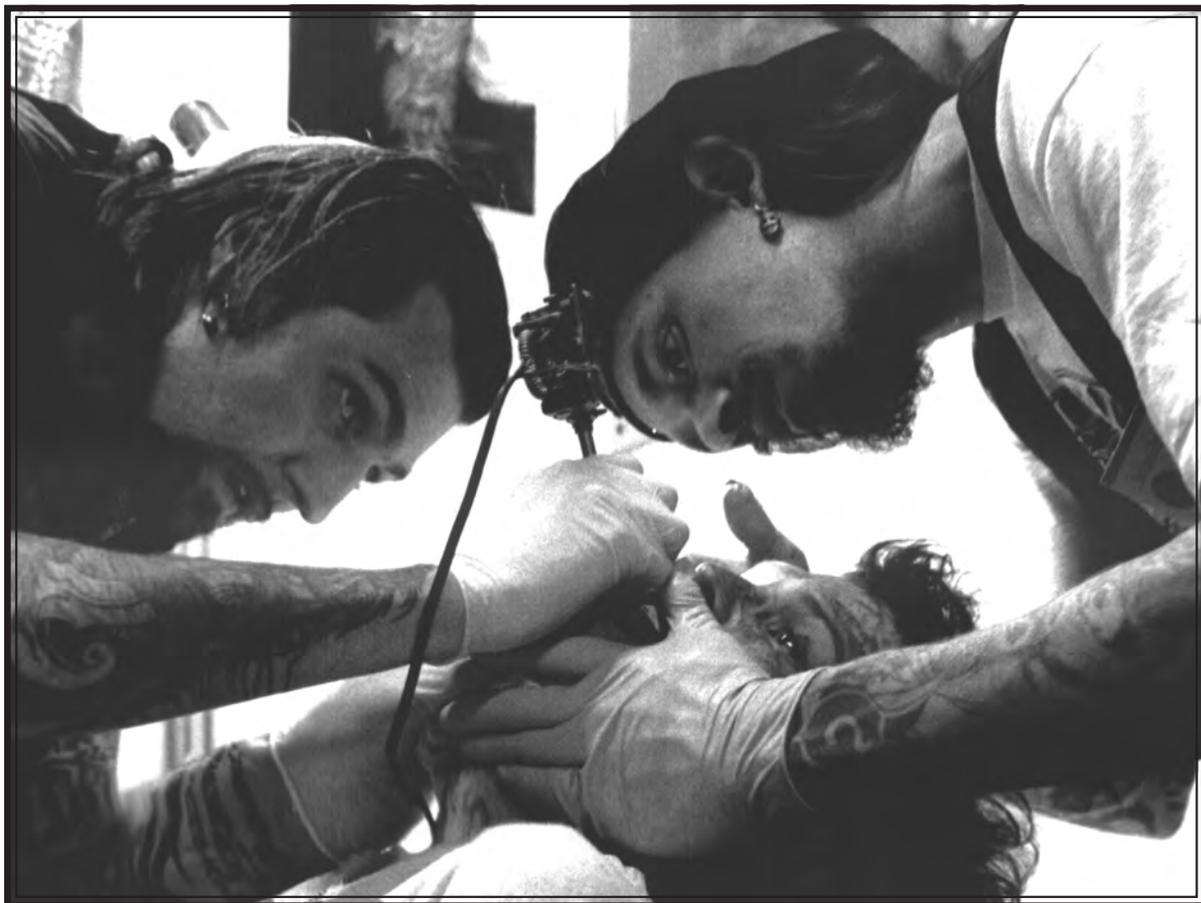


PHOTO ‘ANDRE’ BY CHRISTOPHER M.

Four Women and a Man

B.Z. NIDITCH

CHARACTERS:

Vanessa - about 20

Margaret - drinker; about forty

Barbara - very nervous; age 30

Sonia - German Jewish woman; forty-five

Terrorist - (you can only see his eyes)

PLACE: Cruise Ship in the Mediterranean. The women have been taken hostage in a stateroom.

VANESSA: The terrorist has given us fifteen minutes.

MARGARET: And I was worried about gaining five pounds. I'm glad I had a drink
this morning.

BARBARA: My only son Tom graduated from the best cooking school in Rhode Island.

VANESSA: Do you think he'll kill all of us?

SONIA: My sister survived Treblinka.

MARGARET: Honey, my daughter survived the counter-culture.

SONIA: As if that's culture.

VANESSA: We're strapped in here, and I hear the bomb ticking.

MARGARET: Why is he doing it to us?

SONIA: I thought it was me; all the problems of the world are blamed on me.

BARBARA: Don't blame yourself. It must be my sins. I left my husband for a tree surgeon...

MARGARET: Don't be ridiculous. He won't really do anything; it's a publicity stunt. That's all he wants out of it. He seems desperate.

VANESSA: I'm afraid...

BARBARA: I left the church.

MARGARET: They tried to tell me we were not descended from monkeys.

SONIA: I was descended from rabbis.

MARGARET: Forgive my drinking and my cynicism, but religion is all hypocrisy, just like this terrorist. They live like the upper class. Did you hear his accent?

BARBARA: They say they want to be free; I wanted to be free from Ned...

SONIA: The rabbis said keep the law, be good and you'll live in freedom. I'm the only one that made it out.

BARBARA: How did you?

SONIA: I was hidden; I had to pretend I wasn't who I am.

BARBARA: God finds us out.

MARGARET: You really think God suffers us to be punished?

BARBARA: Not you – me.

MARGARET: You are so important to God...

BARBARA: No, I am nothing.

VANESSA: Why feel like that? Let's try to get out of here.

MARGARET: Where can we go? I don't know where we are.

(Shots are fired.)

VANESSA: He said he would fire shots.

BARBARA: My son Tom almost committed suicide because he couldn't accept himself.
I miss my Tom.

VANESSA: Come on, let's try to get out of these ropes.

BARBARA: I told Tom he wasn't a coward.

VANESSA: Nor are we...if we try...

MARGARET: Maybe he only wants one of us. But why did he choose us anyway?

BARBARA: It could be God's way of getting our attention.

VANESSA: Stop it. We've got to survive.

BARBARA: I wish Tom were here. But I failed him too.

VANESSA: Come on! I've got one rope off.

SONIA: You're stronger than I.

(The Terrorist arrives.)

TERROR: OK, it's all over.

VANESSA: But who do you represent? What cause?

TERROR: Does it really matter? I've got to dispose of you. You're the evidence. I have a just cause and I will be victorious.

VANESSA: Is that your justification for life, that we are disposable?

TERROR: My life is my country; my people; my race; my class; my soul.
MARGARET: But why us? Are you a man?
TERROR: You are all the opposite of me.
MARGARET: No, we're the same.
TERROR: I don't want to bloody you. It will be a mess.
MARGARET: Is that all we are?
TERROR: You're all lower than that. I'm going to be a freedom fighter forever.
SONIA: Just slogans; no sense. First a slogan, then a weapon.
TERROR: You can't give me any bourgeois reason you should live; you know too much, and that's reason enough for me to resist you.
MARGARET: We know nothing.
BARBARA: We are nothing before God.
TERROR: You make me sick, all of you.
BARBARA: You can't play God.
TERROR: Can't I? This is still the twentieth century.

(The Terrorist shoots all of these women, then he explodes.)

THE END



'MAROONED' BY STEPAN CHAPMAN

An American Legend

B.Z. NIDITCH

It is 1940. A poet who names himself Tom Trix and is rejected over twelve times by Sign Magazine writes to the editor: "Dear Mr.M.: Just because you know I am the literary heir to Eliot and Pound you have rejected me. Well, I will soon be in your office to eliminate you."

Tom is in a sweat. It is the hottest recorded summer in Boston's history and the Red Sox have lost. That means his father will beat up on his mother again and turn into a Jack Daniels hood all weekend.

"Ma, why don't you go to Revere Beach? Get away from dad. I'm going to do some painting around here. These walls make me puke."

Tom stares at the walls and prepares his next letter to a literary agent named Stine.

"Listen, Stine, you know I'm the successor to Ernest Hemingway and Henry James. But you won't help me. You'll be sorry."

Tom watches the pigeons attack his box of cracker jacks from the roof. The voice of Father Coughlin on the radio is heard and he shuts it off, goes to his drawer full of blue stationery he found in a backyard in Cape Cod where he worked as a busboy and writes a letter, addressed to the Pope in Rome.

"I know what's going on in Rome. I'm the successor of King David, the incarnation of you know who. I will be showing up soon. Have some money for me at the door. I'm running for the office. P.S.: Father, I'm offering services so don't forget a love offering at the door. It might be hard for me to get away from my literary pursuits, but I will be there at the Holy Office. My best to the Popessa."

Tom's dad is off the wagon. He throws beer cans all around the house.

"Why did you shut the radio off?"

"I felt like it."

"I don't want to hear your lip. Where's Ma?"

"She expired."

"What are you talking about? You were always a crazy kid. I used to take you when you made up all those headaches and bounced your head against the wall. Whenever you said you wanted to see a doctor, I had it in for you. It was fun, and remember when you was a kid and I almost threw you down from the balcony roof where you were fooling around with those damn pigeons, so you would stop crying..."

Tom goes into his room. He writes a letter to The Boston Globe. "I know I can stop the war. I know more than Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin and Hitler combined. What's more, I have connection with the Vatican and I know who the antichrist is. They're trying to get rid of me, the whole world, the literary world, the religious world, the political people and all you journalists. Get me an editor's job or else." He signs it, "Yours sincerely, Tom Trix."

His mother drops the vegetables in the pantry and Tom's father starts to get angry.

Tom imagines himself on a train, stowing himself all away along the flats in middle America. He puts the radio on and croons with Frank Sinatra, then imagines himself in black-face. A voice from another country:

"Where are all my stamps?"

"I took 'em, dad."

"But I need them for the rent and gas bill."

"I need them for my future."

"What future you got...in an institution? I'm going to dial up Geneva 6-6000. That's the State Hospital, Tom, and the men in the white coats are gonna come and get you." Tom's father goes to the black phone and gets a dial tone.

"Just try it and you're dead."

"You think I don't see you and God don't see you done all those sneaky things in your room."

"What's it to you?"

"Writin' all those letters when you couldn't get into parochial school 'cause the nuns knew you had a black mark on your soul every time you spoke. You was born bad I tell you, not like your soldier brother Billy. They took him in; but when you told the Army you was Lincoln's great-grandson they just laughed at you. You was too skinny anyway. All skin and bones, no muscle – only a brain with a tin can in it."

Tom goes into his room and writes to Betty Grable and addresses the letter "Hollywood."

"Dear Betty; I know you are always in the movies but I am a director too and can show you what you can do with your million dollar legs." Tom takes his last stamp, licks it, kisses the letter and leaves the house forever.

He hops a train for the Dust Bowl and eventually becomes a tobacco salesman, a street evangelist, a car dealer, a radio disc jockey, a chiropractor, a dance instructor, a Hollywood extra, an Elvis impersonator, and a talk show host.



Things I Can't Afford

MARK SENKUS

they are young
wives
talking of new kitchen
floors and t.v. reruns
and dogs and children
and doctor
appointments.

they surround me as
I rattle through
the work week 40
trying harder
to block them out
than I do at my job,
but they just won't
let me alone
these squeaky voices
with carnival lives
with soap opera lives
so much uselessness
coming from so many
shiny red mouths

their poor husbands
locked into living rooms and
bedrooms and backyard
cookouts with the voices
shooting like machine guns
and there they sit
stuck stuck stuck

I am thankful that
those men got to them
before me,
instead of me

they must be stronger men
better men with guts like
full baskets of iron

I applaud their mettle
and praise their courage
delighted to be lacking in it
myself

and besides,
I could never afford
a new
kitchen
floor.

A Short Story for a Small Small Man or Why I Quit Reading Poetry

A.D. WINANS

Once upon a time there was an unimportant poet by the name of Schmo. Schmo lived in San Francisco, where he edited and published a soft core newspaper featuring nude cutouts and garbled words, which proclaimed itself to be poetry. This was designed to fool the tourists into thinking they were buying smut when in reality they were getting garbled words disguised as poetry. In short, Huckster Schmo knew the way to go.

Schmo dreamed of making it big in the literary world. Each morning he would get up at 5 a.m. to deliver his papers to the newsstands throughout the city in the hope that someday he would become famous.

Schmo published his friends in the hope that someday they would be in a position to publish him. He also published those who were not his friends in the hope that someday they would become his friends.

Schmo maintained a karma scorecard for recording the names of the persons who had not or would not publish his work. Schmo vowed that some day these people would suffer the karma consequences of their dastardly deeds.

Schmo liked LSD. In fact using LSD was the only way Schmo could write poetry, though few people who read his poetry could understand what it was that Schmo was saying. For when sober, Schmo was very slow.

Schmo once paid a weeks salary to be the featured reader at a local poetry event, only to be interrupted by a young man in the back of the room, who kept shouting: BULL SHIT. BULL SHIT. The crowd, much to Schmo's dismay, began to take up the chant, which grew in its intensity: BULL SHIT. BULL SHIT. BULL SHIT. The cries of Bull Shit rang out throughout the auditorium. Schmo was caught off guard and didn't know what to do, so he simply kept reading his bull shit poems to the cries: BULLSHIT. BULLSHIT.

This is how Schno got the name Bull Shit Schmo. It was a distraught and angry Schmo who went back to his world of ass-kissing and stamp licking. Schmo did this for many years, but no one would publish his work, not even his closest friends. It was around this time that Schmo began to put LSD on the glue side of stamps, and declared himself the unofficial Karma King of San Francisco.

Schmo took the advise of one of his teenage admirers and revived an old beatnik magazine, BEAT TREATS.

However, Schmo's Marxist friends were not happy with him. They wanted the magazine named after one of them. After much deliberation, Schmo came up with a plan to become famous.

Schmo appointed himself the head of the thirty-third San Francisco Poetry Festival. Poets from as far away as the Aleutian Islands were invited to participate.

It was around this time that I ran into Schmo in downtown San Francisco. "Schmo," I said. "Am I going to read at the festival?"

"No," Schmo said. His voice was gruff, not unlike the great Tibetan Buddha.

“Why not?” I asked.

“You dare to ask me why not? Remember two years ago when I sent you some of my poems and you rejected them?”

“What did the note say?” I asked.

“It said that you were broke and had to suspend the publication of your magazine.”

“Well...”

“Don’t you see?” Schmo asked. “It’s your karma coming back at you. I only do things for people who can do things for me in return. Your karma doesn’t fit into the cosmic rays of the galaxy. Your psyche is out of tune with the universe. I don’t have time to talk to people who don’t have the means to help me.”

“Isn’t that bad karma?” I challenged him.

“Bad karma. You think that is bad karma? I’m going to form an army of poets, design a black flag, and march down Broadway and Columbus. God help anyone who gets in our way.”

“Ummmmmmmm,” I said.

“That’s good,” Schmo said, hopping up and down on his right foot. “Now you’re communicating on a higher plane, but I’m afraid it’s too late. My karma scorecard is already made out and you’re not in the lineup.”

“Maybe you could use me as a pinch hitter,” I suggested.

“Impossible,” he said. “It’s simply out of the question. It’s far too late in the game for that.”

“You could always bump Michael McClure,” I suggested.

“Bump McClure,” Schmo raged. “McClure is the center of the universe. He is the meat of life. He is the star under which the cosmic karma revolves.”

“Well,” I broke in. “I certainly wouldn’t want to disturb something like that. I didn’t know. You have my apologies.”

“It’s your karma,” Schmo fumed. He shifted his hopping from one foot to the other.

“Your karma is out of line with the magnetic force,” Schmo continued.

“Maybe you could bump Lawrence Ferlinghetti,” I said. “I mean I’d really like to be part of the reading. It would mean a lot to my mother.”

“Your mother? You dare to mention your mother. Ferlinghetti is the mother of the universe. We’re part of a team. Part of a universal scheme.”

“Is there room for God in your universe?” I questioned. “What about Jesus?”

“I have no time for those two losers.” Schmo sputtered. He stopped jumping up and down, and began doing windmills. “What did those two jerks ever do for me?” Schmo continued.

“Look, not to change the subject, but about the festival.”

“You just don’t understand, do you?” Schmo said. “It’s like that time when the stuff turned blue in the spoon.”

“Blue?” I questioned.

“Janice Blue. Buffalo Stew. The Harvard Crew.” Schmo muttered between clenched teeth. “Don’t get me off the track. It was the dutch cleanser in the drawer that did the trick. East of Candlestick. I got my piece and fled to higher ground. Came back with three crewcut’s, five grams, and two empty rounds from a Smith and Wesson. Ah those were the days.”

“Is that from a new poem of yours?” I asked.

“Dumdumdumdum,” he scolded.

“Are you sure you’re feeling well enough to run the festival?” I asked.

“There are fifty million tribes searching for their karma,” Schmo giggled. “And I’m not going to tell them where it is.”

By now Schmo’s wife was tugging at his arm sleeve. “Your talking crazy,” she whispered.

“Dumdumdumdum.” he replied.

That was the last time I saw the would-be poet Schmo, though he did write me a letter shortly after the festival was over. It simply read:

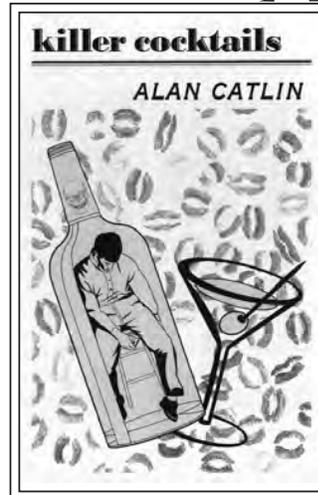
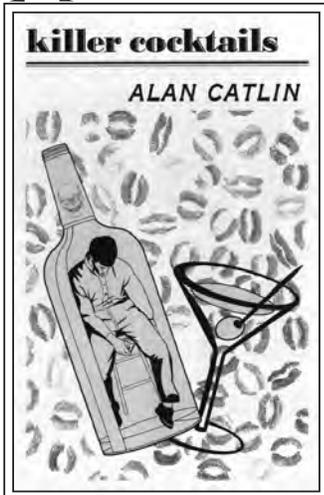
“Hermetic Solipism Meglowmanrig Ring.”

—D. Schmo

It was postmarked from Mendocino. They used to have a State hospital nearby. I think maybe Schmo might have found himself a caretaker’s job there.

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cattle call

First Class is very open to submissions. Especially sought after are pieces of short fiction, but poetics are, of course, accepted as well. I seek the very best words you have available for me to read. I don't pay myself, so I certainly won't pay you, but you will receive at least one copy, maybe more.

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Experimental noise tapes available. Interesting. Inquire at address above.



CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN BENNETT—His third appearance in FC, a prolific and enduring writer with numerous credits. Most recently, “Rodeo Town” available for \$12 from Vagabond Press, pobox 1634, Ellensburg, WA 98926. Also, with a chap forthcoming from Four-Sep Publications.

JOSHUA BODWELL - First appearance in First Class. He lives in Maine and it is rumoured that lobster is the staple of his diet.

ALAN CATLIN—Barmaster in Schenectady, NY. An oft-published and award-winning poet with several excellent chaps. Recently seen in “Press”, his third time here. Check out “Killer Cocktails” available from Four-Sep.

STEPAN CHAPMAN - Lives in Cottonwood, AZ and his illustrations have appeared all over the place in the small press. He also writes short stories, appearing in “The Baffler”, “Analog Science Fiction”, and “The Comics Journal.” First time in First Class.

DANIEL CROCKER - Published in numerous small-press mags, nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times, author of many chaps. Out of Park Hills, MO., first appeared here in FC #4.

GARY EVERY - Second-timer who can be found in Oracle, Arizona.

GREG FITZSIMMONS - Working on the release of a chap-book novel about alcoholism, mid-gets, and blow jobs, as well as a pornographic novel about a schizophrenic hermaphrodite. Second time in these pages. More to come. Write: 1628 W. Ohio Street #2F, Chicago, IL 60622.

TOM HOYUM - Lives in Milwaukee, WI.

ALBERT HUFFSTICKLER - Widely published phenom in the small-press, this is the third time he has appeared in FC. Lives in Austin, Texas. Be sure to read “In the Clearing” from Four-Sep.

GERALD LOCKLIN - Long time, far-reaching presence, with an abundance of publishing credits. Go to the library and reference “Contemporary Writers” for his biblio. Teaches at CSU-Long Beach and has even lectured in Cuba on Hemingway.

CHRISTOPHER M. - Just some guy who takes pictures and writes words once in a while.

THOMAS MICHAEL McDADE - Resides in Monroe, CT, and has appeared widely in the small-press. This is his first appearance in FC. Apparently, 110 is a good number to play in the Daily.

CATFISH McDARIS - Influenced by Hendrix, van Gogh, and Jose Cuervo. He’s a New Mexican storyteller. His book “Catfish in the Pecos” is available through Angelflesh Press and is recommended. Fifth-timer. Also seen in the pages of “Prying” pubbed by Four-Sep.

B.Z. NIDITCH—The artistic director of “The Original Theatre”, with both national and international publishing credits. This is his third appearance here and the second of his short plays presented in FC.

MARK SENKUS - Survives up in the no-man’s land tourist trap of Sault Ste. Marie. First time in FC. Also has a mag ‘Simple-Minded Cocktail’, 409 E. Spruce St., Sault Ste. Marie, MI 49783.

T. KILGORE SPLAKE—Denizen of upper Michigan, his words and images are widely published. “Available Light”, a glossy chap of his fotos is recommended: Angst Productions, Drawer 337, Munising, MI 49862.

A.D. WINANS—Born in S.F., he is the author of 14 books of poetry. His latest, “San Francisco Streets” out this year by Ye Olde Fonte Shoppe Press. Second appearance.

A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it’s way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who have the balls to submit their words to other’s scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions. — Christopher M.