

Drop Your Drawers

Heck was not what Johnson thought it would be. As an outlaw, he knew he would end up there one day, but there were no lava pools, no sulphuric obelisks, not even any cretinous little minions out to stamp his naked white fatty with branding irons that said "property of our hairy red underlord." All he experienced was his monster truck laying in pieces all over, and him paved two feet into the ground.

This was because he was still in the mortal realm. His truck, his lady, his beloved *I-Eat-Nails-For-Breakfast*, was in pieces because some lowdown opponent rammed through it even though she was already disqualified. He'd just dismounted to assess the damage from a reasonable distance. Johnson was this way because calling her assailant a spineless chicken was not a noble-winning idea.

The marauding truck parked a few feet away from Johnson. It was black and scaley. The painting on the door was a middle-aged smoker in a skimpy cocktail dress with a cigarette perched on her ear. She gripped a martini glass and gazed over her shoulder with one smarmy raised eyebrow, as though guessing your net worth. The words of the car were emblazoned in smokin' hot fiery font near the rear: *Mama-Never-Loved-Me*.

The door opened, and out stepped a condor. Very little of his featherless head was visible under his stetson. When he got a look at Johnson, a sharp glimmer streaked across his shades. He marched over, leant down, and whispered:

"Who's your daddy?"

Johnson knew he expected "Conrad Cortez" to drool out of his mouth. He almost did dub *Mama* his daddy. But then he remembered something: a humongous yellow mound; Even two of them, side by side. He remembered the pitch black ravine in between. It smelt like the place he and *Nails* would end up after really kicking the bucket. Most of all, remember how warm it was. That was what blue blazed her in the first place, those flaming brown fumes firing out.

"Drop... your.... drawers."

Cortez's already shaded face went darker. He clutched Johnson's chin and whipped it towards an overhead Jumbotron. "Do you see Drop-Your-Drawer's victory gif? No, you don't."

He was right. There was no victory gif. Instead, there was a chart showing the scores of each truck. Johnson shed a tear over the big gorey 'X' crossing the bowl of nails with no milk. He trembled at the pulled-down pants surrounding two big hairy legs. And ground teeth at the broken butt-heart with a woman's face grinding her own teeth

"Your gif ain't playin' either."

"Just you wait." Cortez threw Johnson's face back into the ground. "Mama never loved me," he called back on his way to his truck, "and that made me tuff. You see how tuff I am when I spell words like 'tuff.' I bet your Mama loved you, just like all these other chumps."

For the truckers of the Outlaw Demolition Arena, nothing was more important than breaking laws. They didn't want to just break traffic laws, they wanted to break the laws governing language arts, hence all the 'tuff' talk. They were more manlier that way. Cortez christened his own lady, *Mawmuh-Nev'r-Luft-Mi*.

Yessiree, they had laws aplenty to break. Today, though, they had to focus on breaking cars.

Before getting back in, he looked around at all the competitors he'd wrecked with his unloving Mama attacks. He could hardly count the number of high heels, pawn shop jewelry, and unchanged diapers he'd fired. Then he looked at the other side of the arena, and saw the work of his rival, the mightily mis[spelt/punctuated] *Drawp-Yer-D'ROAAARRRZZZ*; Dirty stinking wardrobe malfunctions, that's what they were. Sometimes an actual wardrobe smashed them, sometimes a super strength vacuum sucked the driver's clothes right off. One guy got a panty on his head. Cortez hated to admit it, but the guy he ran over was right. His gif wasn't playing. Ads were. He had to do something about that.

A careful mathematical calculation revealed that the common denominator among all *D'Roarz's* victims was that they'd all seen her driver's fabled moon. All he had to do was take out his finger painting kit, smear two cartoon suns over his shades, and he was all safe and sound from furniture and wardrobe malfunctions.

"And it looks like Mama-Never-Loved-Me's driver is all done pondering the great thoughts and is ready to swing right back in action."

"How do you know that guy's thoughts are so great? I'd figure great thoughts wouldn't fit."

Of course, with his seeing obstructed, this made the commentator's voices a lot clearer. Roodrow and Bull-hog were hired to stir up angry feelings among the drivers just to be sure the match would be nice and action-packed. They never showed up in person, so there was never the chance to clobber them. All Cortez could do was pretend that all those cacti and antique chairs he ran over were these two clowns, even though they kept talking and proved it was all his imagination.

"Place your bets, bimbos and roadhogs! Is he driving blindfolded or is he just plain loopy?"

"Don't be a clown. How'd he know where his enemies were?"

"You're right, we better warn him. Hey Cortez, you wanna stick a cane out the window?"

He wanted to stick a gun out the window, but he had to save his bullets for *D'Roarz*. He figured if he covered enough ground, he and his Mawmuh were sure to flatten his U-Haul-themed nemesis eventually. He'd know it when all that crunching turned into agonized quacking.

Even though fake cartoon suns were in his eyes, he did catch a glimpse of a parked white and orange vehicle. Jackpot! He swerved around and gave it a whooping with his bumper, whereupon it sailed into a canyon wall. On its way over, the trunk doors flew open and something shaped like a coffin tumbled out.

Some last ditch attack, he figured. He ran over that too, and it barely made so much as a bump.

"Another Mama's boy." Cortez parked and stepped out, ready to reiterate his victory speech. Who's your daddy? Me, that's who. But when he took off his shades, he saw it wasn't *D'Roarz* stuck nose first into the canyon wall. It wasn't Trucker Duck on the ground with his arms and legs in the air and his eyes swirling around in opposite directions. It was just some guy from an ambulance. And that coffin he'd just run over? That was a stretcher, and right next to it, even deeper into the ground than last time, was Johnson.

"Oooh, right in the healthcare!"

"I'd bet my car insurance Mama's one dame who ain't getting a bandaid anytime soon."

"You might have a gambling problem, but you sure don't have car insurance. You don't even have a car."

And if Cortez ever caught those two, they wouldn't have necks that weren't broken, either. He stormed over to Johnson and yanked his head up by his scalp.

"Haven't I had enough of you for one match?"

Johnson spat up. "I know," he gasped, "who my daddy is."

He pointed to the heavens, and Cortez took a look. Johnson's finger did not lead to the Jumbotron playing a gif of a shrieking diaper gremlin behind some insomniac chain-smoking hag. It took Cortez a little squinting to identify exactly

what it was he saw, but once he did, he realized that removing his shades was a capital oopsy.

Clouds parted, and, lit by a fearsome halo, a one-winged entity soared towards Mama-Never-Loved-Me. It was as though the Great Cosmic Wonder had sent one of Their top agents to lay down the last "amen." Furniture spilt out the back and splattered into splintery brown piles. The air around it caught fire with the sheer speed it was flying at. A sturdy arm flapped out the window to be sure it was falling with style. Worst of all, pushed up against the front window were two giant yellow moons without any drawers to protect anyone's tender innocent eyes from them.

Cortez screamed and dropped Johnson's head. He and ran back to his *Mawmuh* with all of his might, but he just wasn't fast enough to save her. Just as he reached for the door handle, Trucker's buttprints made themselves a permanent fixture on her rear window. The impact sent her cometting into the canyon wall. She stuck just a few feet above the ambulance.

"Woah, did you see that? What aim! Any lower and Trucker would be going to the slammer. Just goes to show you who the real outlaw is in this parts."

"Yup. Looks like that title goes to Conrad Cortez. Too bad he doesn't have the match, though. But you know who does?"

The jumbotron was finally done with its bull. Everyone in the stadium could now see a gif of two cowbirds facing one another, just about to draw. The view settled right between one's legs, backed up, and the pants panting those legs

collapsed like a drawbridge, showing inscribed on his undies the name of this match's champion.

"Drawp-Yer-D'ROOOAAARRRZ!"

And they did, all in honor of Trucker Duck. The still conscious outlaws were already sore losers, and seeing a thousand bare jigglebuns pushed them to draw their slingshots and fire champagne corks. Some even scored bull's eyes.

Then a haboob of kids in their underwear stormed through the gates into the arena. Trucker floored it out of there, but the losing ladies were doomed. There was no stopping the kids from prying off their doors, hoods, or trunks and making off with their batteries. There was even less stopping them from rioting over some defunct piece of junk. Some of them went after the ambulance to try to steal tranquilizers until the nurses swept them away. The cops showed up to arrest Cortez for vehicular assault. But when they saw all that indecent exposure, they threatened to add the kids to their pokey population. That got the kids attention. They did their own math. They subtracted the pants from the "inlaws," as well as the handcuffs and electro-zappers from the patrol cars. Then they went back to their competitors.

Then there was that one kid nobody noticed, the one who had to peel himself off the ground because everyone else trampled him, the one who scooped up whatever fell to the ground during the more fearsome scuffles. He was the one with bite marks all over his ears, probably from some neighborhood cat; the one with the bandaged up tail; the one with oil stains fossil-deep into his fur and

gasoline dripping from his whiskers, the one whose pink, possumy claws looked like a bacterial battlefield; the mouse named Mo Manzoni.

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If a junkyard married a pawn shop and walked into a bar and had babies all over the tables, then you'd pretty much have the Aftermatch Saloon. That was where all the kids went if they made it out of the arena without getting beat up or arrested. They went there to swap or show off whatever they could pry off the trucks. There were bouncers all over the place, so it was considerably more organized than the arena.

Mo strolled by, watching all those bolts, gears, and wires go from one good old scamp's mittens to another. All those guys sure went through a lot of tussling and tetanus scars to get them. He thought about his own miniature truck back home, a conglomerate Frankenstein's monster of a machine. Her guts might be the ones getting traded one day, and he shed a sentimental tear over that possible future, but first, he had to make his announcement to Trucker.

Down the hallway he crept past open garage doors. Wanted posters hung above each one, listing each Outlaw's "Greatest Hits" regarding his criminal record. If somebody caught Mo after he got this far, he'd be going to the meta-slammer, the outlaw's outhouse. That is, one of the somebodies who wasn't Trucker. Everybody else, Jimmy Jess, Hardy Har, and the Clone, were too busy fixing their cars or pouting; usually some mixture of the two. Someday, thought Mo, he'd be

the one pulling out a titanic barbecued skewer, or picking stained glass shards from the tires. Today, though, he'd be ambushing Trucker Duck.

He made it past everyone's door without getting a swirly and stopped outside Trucker's door. He was a little disappointed to see it was open, as he'd personally chewed in the access hole. All the same, there was "Yella Belly Fella" himself, kicking back, eating rubbish and watching tv, as he liked to do after a match.

Mo slung off his backpack and got ready for some hardcore mischief: He snapped Trucker's underpants and slipped under his shirt yanking out feathers. Somehow, no wrestling ensued. Instead, Trucker tugged him off and flung him over his shoulder, and he splatted onto the wall above the trophy shelf, knocking over his "Miscreant of the Month" ribbons on the way. Something fishy was going on here. Something unfamiliar, something... unfriendly.

He could see from this angle that Trucker wasn't eating his trademark Choco-Brocca Rah Rah Rah. Were those bread crumbs? Whole wheat? And what was that on the TV? Unless it were a lost episode, it looked like neither Brawly Brute Adventures or Rainbow Skittle Unicorn Land. It looked like boring old news. Ill-lit news at that.

The whole thing was upside down. Mo peeled himself off the wall and clattered over a few golden cups. An intervention was in order. He hopped between Trucker and his TV. "What do you want to eat and watch that horse ptooy for?"

From the drowsy, disinterested droop of his eyes, Trucker seemed to be under hypnosis. Mo's appearance snapped him out of it. "Woah, Squeaks, was that you I just... hold on." He nudged Mo aside so he could bang the top of the TV and make it turn off. Only then did Mo notice the on/off button was missing. "What's gotten into me? Can't even tell my own pals from those pests I'm supposed to... ahem... exterminate."

As far as Mo was concerned, there was no difference. He was about to mow the lawn over where Trucker's nipples were supposed to be.

"Pests?"

"Oh, those lugs down the hall think I need toughening up. They'll dispatch a roach or ferret out and tell me to mash them If I want to get my 'mooda' back, whatever that is."

"We got to get that news out of your head," he assessed. "Who knows what subliminal messages you got, whatever those are. Come on, what's eating you?"

It was a risky ask; nothing massacred a friendly atmosphere quite like the news did. But if there was the chance it would stop hogging all the space in Trucker's brain and take the Talk-It-Out Express out of the room and into the time out kennel for joyless thoughts, it would be worth the answer. Trucker patted his big old knee and Mo plopped his little rump right on it.

"Squeaks, I've been in the demolition ring since I was fourteen. Here I am, forty years later, and I haven't even so much as jaywalked. What kind of outlaw

can't jaywalk? All those trophies," including the ones Mo knocked over, it seemed, "all they say about me is I'm a real rowdy rider. Not an outlaw."

"What do you mean? You are an outlaw. What do you have to walk across the street without looking both ways for? And anyway, how'd you get that miscreant of the month?"

"Nicked it from Pa Paver. They thought that was criminal enough I got to keep it. But I tell ya, I say, you can't make so much as a paloosha if you're not mowing down every Tom, Jerry, Dick, Jane, Harry or Sally you see on the highway. Look at Cortez; three years in and already he's bowled over an Earth-dude."

"He sure seems to have a lot of hair loss for a guy who's only been behind the wheel three years."

"I hear ya. Heh." He gave Mo the heartiest back slap he could without knocking him to the ground. It didn't work, but it was exactly the kind of Trucker Mo was looking for, the version free of the Damselwood Daily Disastrophes.

Trucker picked Mo and his backpack up and set them on his table. "I didn't mean to try and make you my shrink. I mean... no offense, kid. It's... something just hard to say. What's that you got? That come off Johnson's car?"

"Betcha! I got everything to finish *Bomb-Your-Briefs*... well, I'll name her right after I learn to misspell. But I got my anchor, so she can brake, my furniture, so I can dump it out the back, and my Mythos fizzy wafers, so I can petal them into the kaPoocha soda and tear up the road. I know Johnson's in the hospital now, but if he survives when he gets out, you think he'll let me keep it all?"

"Now that's a thinker." Trucker gave him this sly, shifty look. "After all, it wouldn't be very lawful to keep it without asking now, would it, eh?" He slapped his own knee. "Woo boy, I better warn those other lugs there's about to be a new set of wheels in the arena. You got diet kaPoocha, right?"

Suddenly, the whole greenlit project started turning the color of an unflushed toilet. "Why would I need the diet kind?"

"Mythos don't burble with plain soda. You need that fake sugar to get it spewing. It'll blast like a fire hose."

"Aw, chedderfinks. Wayne and Wanda never buy that stuff. All they drink is cranapple communion Froosk. Speaking of which," he checked the time on his phone. "I'd better get back there before they find out that's not me in their midst."

"Pulling the old imposter gambit, eh, Squeeks?"

"Gotta sweep it all under the rug, Yella Belly. Then nail down the rug so they won't look."

Mo slung in his backpack, but before he left, Trucker called him back.

"Wait... I need to tell you something. I may not be the least lawful outlaw in this here horsetown, but I know one thing: If you want to fix your car, you got to break the law first."

"You mean besides the law of staying home at the bible study? I'm all game for that, but what law should I break next?"

Trucker ushered him back out to the trading area, where everyone still haggled over doors, gascaps, and rearview mirrors. The bouncers were wary; there was

enough bouncing going around to turn a basketball court into a giant slab of Swiss. They all made craters with all that dribbling, and puddles, too. Boy, were they ever into their job.

He plopped himself down at a deserted table set with nothing but candy wrappers and dirty dishes. Mo watched as Trucker stared around through binoculars until he said, "Bingo!"

"What? Let me see." Mo took his look by crawling up Trucker's shoulder and pulling out his own bite-sized bis. Lo and behold, Diet kaPoocha, out in the clear and ripe for the swiping. The only problem was that it sat among parts taken from Mawmuh-Nev'r-Luv'd-Meh. He could tell based on all those angry-faced diapers stamped all over them. What's more, the guys who stripped and monopolized the whole car? Big Bun and his gang. There was already a line of kids walking away on crutches or in slings for trying to sneak something off the table. Being a neog who assaulted a human, Cortez's wares were hot property among the Outlaw Jrs.

had dribbled their way over to make rounds around that one table. If they didn't ease up, they'd ended up dribbling a hole that the very table they guarded would fall through.

"How will we get it when Big Bun's in control?"

"Watch and learn."

Trucker took out two arrowheads, something he'd dug up in his own backyard, then fired them at the bouncers' balls. They burst and deflated in circles around

the table, forcing everyone there to duck and cover as the bouncers themselves scrambled to regain their weapons.

"Brace yourself."

Mo was the next thing to end up in the slingshot, right before ending up on a collision course right towards the kaPoocha bottle. He was shocked at first, but was soon too excited to do anything but scream in exhilaration and fling his hands around in the air as he smacked into the kaPoocha bottle and somersaulted out the door.

Mo would never forget this moment, the moment Trucker jump started his Outlaw Career by putting him in a slingshot and shooting him at a bottle of soda nobody liked to drink. He turned around and saluted just as the bouncers had reclaimed their limp useless rubber bags that had helped them bounce only seconds before. This might lead to dire ramifications later, but Mo had a bus to catch, and an old switcheroo to pull.

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On the bus ride home, Mo thought about what might be a big enough repayment for the poor pet store hamster he left to put up with the Disciplehood of the Anointed Lost Souls. He'd eaten up all those Flavo-Fives and there wasn't any of his pickledog left over. He felt around under the seat and found some

abandoned chewing gum. Jackpot. That was sure to be a rare treat for someone who couldn't talk.

His foster parents and their flock didn't know who the monster truckers worshipped, but it sure wasn't the Great Cosmic Wonder.. Mo would never be allowed within a lightyear of that place if they knew too much. No, the outlaws were more likely to pray to this bus, and they might have, if it were faster and bowled over a pedestrian or two. It didn't do either of those things, but it did make it all the way to Humdinger Valley Trailers. That was all Mo needed it to do.

He stepped off the bus. If he wanted to make it back home without anyone spotting him and tattling, he'd have to assume plain Earthan mouse mode: Squeek, scurry, and stuff that bloated backpack under his shirt. Nobody would get suspicious so long as it was out of sight. The more trailers he passed, though, the more he noticed how few people there were to suspect anything. In fact, he was the one doing all the suspecting. He should have heard a folk rendition of "Watcha Gon'na Do When The Devil Comes Around?" No one sang it. He should have dodged a stray rotwad from the classic game "Compost Heap Wars." Nobody threw it. He should have at least seen the mud smear above the door. Well, that was still there, but so was a big crowd sardined at his bedroom window.

The door swung open and Juanita Hosephat, the most anointed member of the congregation, stormed out. "Defilement, that's all it is. Cheese Burger!"

Cheese Burger. The entity responsible for all those bite marks on his tail and ears. If his imposter got turned into Cheese chow, he'd never forgive himself. The

very idea itself gave him a little indigestion, but then he had a good idea. He dashed through everyone's legs just underneath his window, took a deep breath, and blew a colossal raspberry.

That's all it took to get everyone pointing fingers. "I smell something funny," they complained. Mo smelt it, too. Somebody must have been guilty. It got them adjourning quick enough, anyway. Quick enough for them to forget a camera on a tripod, exactly what Mo had to climb to get a good look into his bedroom.

When he could steady himself, he saw Cheese Burger, mangle and poken-eyeballed as ever, chasing around something shaped like a bedsheet. Using all the math he ever learned at school, he concluded that he made it home too late, Cheese Burger had gobbled up his imposter, and now was still so hungry he wanted a bite of his ghost, too. Mo never forgave himself. And once he was all done never forgiving himself, he wagged his finger and reached for the window seal.

"Shame on you, Mr. Burger," he called out. "You don't deserve supper tomorrow for this. I'll take your bib and hide it in the laundry, if I can ever get this window open."

He started stoning it with things out of his pocket. He'd have to chuck the anchor, if he could throw it hard enough, or poke out the window with a hoe from Old Man McGullicuddy's toolshed. A few useless projectiles later and he didn't have to. The ghost flew towards the window with such determination that he smacked into Mo and knocked the camera over.

Laying there on the ground amidst the camera smithereens, he supposed he'd just earned its owner's everlasting unforgiveness as well. But he also got busy with a second layer of his own unforgiveness; he and the former camera now lay in a puddle of diet kaPoocha. He didn't have any straws with him.

"McGurmo, come in here, please."

Wanda beckoned him in through the broken window. He wanted to stall by advertising a broken back, but the bedsheet ghost, having slipped through Cheese Burger's claws, left the cat sauntering back towards He with clearly carnivorous intentions. He grabbed his backpack and scrambled up through the broken pane and dropped into his bedroom hole, where scandalized faces peered in around his foster mom. Mrs. Hosephat wedged her way in.

"Third base has transpired in this room. Vain have been my attempts to resanctify it."

"Uh... I guess saying I'm sorry isn't going to resanctify the place, is it?"

Mo wasn't sure who she was talking to, even though she was looking him in the eye. Wayne contorted his own way into the bedroom. "I'll take care of the sanctity and everything. What's say we call it a night?"

Mo yawned and threw his backpack down his bedroom hole. "Good idea. That was some night, doing whatever it was I was doing. Nighty night, everyone. And best of all, Wondy's with us."

He was about to hop back down when Wanda caught him by the tail. "Not so fast. You're not going anywhere until I get some facts."

Nowhen was the humiliating size difference between himself and everyone else more pronounced than in moments like these. The Westinghams had a lot of practice ushering, growing up in church and all. Sometimes this power was put to good use, like when Wayne was clearing his house of his congregation and their mangy poked-eye pets. But they used it for evil purposes too, like when Wanda set Mo down in a high chair, wafers on the left, juice on the right. They always left out the ceremonial refreshments when they interrogated him.

She sat down across from him. "We just saw two small rodents doing things you shouldn't know about until you're thirteen mouse years old. I won't say what it was, but it involved a very unholy lack of drawers." She leant in, all sixty-seven inches of her eager for a confession. "Does that sound like something you'd do?"

Mo tried to use his imagination. "Well, sounds more like something my folks would do, just not with each other."

"Infidels!" Old lady Hosaphat whirled back in before Wayne steered her out the door and assured her that neither rodent was married.

Wanda never lost her focus. "Spill it."

The only thing Mo spilt was the juice. He felt a little more confident, but he hadn't cooked up a decent fib.

"So that's how you're playing it. Well, I don't know where you went, but I know it wasn't out in the front yard with the rest of the kids. Neither was it back to your bedroom with... her."

Well, at least that wasn't a question. Mo dug into the wafers, hoping the no-talking-mouthful rule took precedence over the sell-out-all-your-friends rule. Then he remembered that this time his outlawery might have cost someone his Earthly vessel.

"Was anyone ate-up?"

"Is that a confession?"

Even Mo realized that was exactly what it was. The stunning realization came in the middle of a wafer bite, so he let the wafer box join the juice on the floor.

"Stop dropping food!"

"Gee, guess I got to be more careful, huh?"

"You sure have shown us a lot of carelessness tonight."

Here came the lecture. At least the interrogation was over. It was less work sitting through one of these.

"I put together a spreadsheet of the things you ought to care more about." She picked up a clipboard with plain old paperwork on it. Dumb old sentences where in the first column, followed by a bunch of dumb numbers and percentages. "First, we have the fact that your mother entrusted us to raise you in a peaceful environment."

"Well, to be specific," Wayne came in, all done with ushering everyone else out. "She express mailed him here. She didn't have us in mind, just so long as it was another planet."

"Wayne," hissed Wanda.

Her husband started, then crept into a chair. "But the important thing is, Mrs. Manzoni wants you safe here instead of growing up in the middle of an intergalactic war. Commander Manzoni would've recruited you as a cabin boy or something. He raises soldiers, after all, not sons and daughters."

"Your home planet isn't even on the intergalactic travel federation's safe list. Does that give you any idea of how much danger you left behind?"

"Come to think of it," added Wayne. "Earth was only added thirty years ago, and they've known about us for two millenia."

He helped himself to a handful of floor mix. "What?" He queried in response to Wanda's glower.

Nothing served an outlaw's purpose more faithfully than a discrepancy between two inlaws.

"I don't see what the big deal is. If you want a Molky that'll stay put, you can always write Ma for another one. I'm sure she'll be happy to oblige. At any rate, it never hurts to ask, does it?"

"You know, he has a point," said Wayne. "You can't really set a mouse on a no-cheese diet, can you? No offense."

"I could go for some cheese right about now," admitted Mo.

It seemed to do the trick. Wanda was suddenly torn between whom she should give what-for to first when Wayne called for a huddle. Mo wasn't a heavyweight fan of suspense. It took too much waiting to get going. What were they talking

about anyway? Adopting another space-mouse, one who wouldn't tiptoe off to monster truck rallies?

The only apparent decision they'd made by the time they came back was to feed him.

"You know what," said Wayne, taking a spinach hallelujah casserole out of the refrigerator, "we've all had a long day. Why don't we just have a late supper?" He cut Mo a slice. "We still want you safe, but we'll say no more about it tonight, will we?"

He winked at Wanda. Neither of them bothered to eat.

"Aren't you guys hungry?"

"For answers," murmured Wanda.

"But that can wait a while." Again he winked. All Wanda's eyes did was roll. "We don't have to know everything right away. It's all part of the Wonder."

There had to be more courtroom questions at the back of their minds. Sure, Wayne had always been the loosey goosier with the rules, but he didn't even quote scripture; unless that "part of the Wonder" bit was somewhere in there and Mo just didn't recognize it. At any rate, Mo devoured his three helpings before any further interrogation could commence and bid them good night, wondering which of those ingredients tasted so tracking-devicey.

Late night meals aside, the first stop down the bedroom hole wasn't Mo's actual bedroom, but a front for a tunnel that led to another trailer. Nobody in Humdinger Valley knew about his secret garage where his passion project awaited

her first ride. It wouldn't be long before he pressed the pedal, released those Mythos Fizzy Waifers into the Diet kaPoocha tank, and rocketed the postal-themed juniorization of his mentor's truck onto the street, then into the arena. He'd have to upgrade his ammo, though. Teeny Tots dolls and action figures and Pimply Goblin Gaming sweepstakes wouldn't leave much of a mark on his opponents. Anvils and buzz saw blades might do the trick, if anyone ever placed an order like that.

His phone buzzed, probably old Yella Belly sending him a reminder about the next match. It was Trucker, all right, but anything it had to do with future derbies was grim and frowny. This is what he said.

"Squeaks, listen. Wasn't totally true about what I was watching. Will hold the official heir-naming ritual tomorrow. Be there. Might be the last we ever see of each other."

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If Mo had watched more news, he might have had some answers skipping school and walking into the Aftermatch. The kaPoocha incident was sure to set Big Bun on a "chubby little weasel" hunt, so just to be sure, Mo came in as a clown, with mayonnaise and ketchup in the appropriate places.

He still got a few shifty looks. The guys were all watching what looked like lame old news on their phones, so he was bound to attract a little attention. Still,

he got the sense that a hint or two lay therein. He skedaddled to the balcony. After helping himself to the remains of someone else's abandoned fries and lemonade, he scooted a chair up and peered over a guy's shoulder using the zoom feature on his phone.

The broadcast featured a big hairy miner in what looked like a hostile workout session. He had two overdressed midgets by the collar, lifting one to his face until it pointed at the other, and then he alternated until both went spastic. The miner howled like a gorilla and slammed them both together. Freaky stuff spilt from both jackets, but Mo didn't have time to decipher what they were before one of those "ba-WOOOOOO-ga guns" went off.

Two skinny high school kids in Ironnicca shirts were up on stage, one of them cranking the big wacky megaphone into the mic. "All right, runts," said the other one. "The big yellow slob's about to speak. Listen up and do what he says or we'll throw you out by your belt loop." He brushed aside the curtain behind him. "All yours, lump."

Harsh words. Nobody around was really themselves, least of all Trucker when he came out. The guy was droopy all over. Feathers slid off in a desolate pile. Raw red rims couched his decaffeinated eyes. Even his bill had lost some of his hue. Mo pinched his own hiney, but the nightmare didn't stop. Trucker eased up to the mic, took a deep breath, and began.

"Let's start out with a riddle," said Trucker. "What's really black, white, and red all over?" Someone guessed a broken traffic light that a bird plopped on. "Close,

but I was thinking a zebra carcass, because that's thrown a red light in the works for all of us here in Damselwood.

"Yeah, don't let's stall, I'm sure you've all seen the video. The zebra was the one taking it, hence the joke I just made. Yeah." He pointed straight down. "That sewer ain't big enough for the three of us. The Damselwooders, the wascawwy wabbits, and... uh..." He shaded his eyes and glanced among the crowd.

"The waskawwy wats?" volunteered one of the kids.

Trucker gave up. "Well, you've seen the video. Anyway, all of us in the senior league have been drafted. The sheriff wants a criminal defense line. It'd be real effective if they let us tack our gals down there, but they're just too broad. So we can't vroom vroom all over these ugwanvaders and serve them at Passano's Pancake Porch. If only our gals had juniorizations, built by aspiring young outlaws."

Again he looked around the room, squinting, frowning, even sweating a little. "Who is he looking for?" Thought Mo, taking a break from his other thought thread of "How do I talk him out of this craziness?"

Trucker sighed. "We don't know what's down there-"

"Yes we do," interrupted a kid. "Plumber parts, angry stepmoms, and-" thump went the Unabridged Miscreant's Manual, Hardback Edition onto his head, declared by one of those Ironnicca teens.

"All we know," continued Trucker, "is that their weapons are gnarly enough to blast a bottomless hole through the ground. But we're not the Flintstones. We

have technology of our own, even if it's not our ladies. And that's why you're all here today. If I don't come out of this alive, I know *D'Roarz* will be in good hands." One last time, he surveyed his audience. "Good pink, possumy, pulverized but perserverant hands."

The sudden realization knocked Mo backwards; Trucker was looking for him, he just didn't recognize him through the condiments. It had to come off; Mo, decently obstructed, spat on his hands and rubbed a carpet burn into his face while a murmurous commotion stirred among the juniors.

"If I could have a few benedictory moments of silence, because like I said, they got weapons down there - the enemy-"

"You mean, *enemouse*?" That kid got a thump.

"The *ene-them* has got bombs that blow bottomless holes in the ground. Absolutely buttless. Drop those drawers and you'll see nothing at all. Give me ten seconds of actual zipped silence so I can throw my keys. I'm not bequeathing a toenail until you all shut it and close your eyes for ten seconds."

Only Mo seemed to honor the request. Everyone else gasped and shouted. Even though he hadn't erased all his clownity, he had to get a look. Why so serious?

"There you are, you awolling galloot! Sneaking out of your responsibilities, eh? And trying to indoctrinate the next generation, eh? Car keys, eh? Fat yellow duck, eh?"

Trucker whirled around just as a net fired from a bazooka. He rolled around the stage, grunting and tearing at his newfound captivity as a man wearing a hat

shaped like an angry wiener dog (and a whole dog, not just its face) spat his interrogation. "Rolling around like an overgrown grapefruit, eh?"

Windows shattered as neog truant officers - n'og catchers, as their haters called them - barged in with the greatest of ease. All of them had hats shaped like whole animals, scorpions, rattlesnakes, hairs and the like. What's worse, they were armed with net blasters. They fired them into the audience, while the occasional handcuff spun out to clamp onto arrest-resisting wrists.

Someone would be done for. Everyone knew the n'og catchers only showed up when some clown wound up with a truant tracker, and now all these innocent children would have to face questions like, "What aren't you doing in school?" and "Is this any saloon for someone your age?"

Some quick thinking on the Ironicca twin's part meant flinging their books to the wall. Secret panels opened so canons could fire pants into the hubbub. The n'og catchers went from high fiving one another over their captures to using one another as shields.

All through this, Mo watched Trucker lose his fight against his netting. His captor grinned. "Running out of steam, eh?" He lay down his bazooka and picked up a cable so he could hook it up to Trucker's net. On the other end of it was an anchor. He drew back the curtain to reveal a porta-potty.

This called for action. He couldn't let Trucker be dragged off to war. The dining mess left behind included an unopened kaPoocha bottle. He hopped up, shook it with all his might, aimed it at the stage, mounted it, uncorked it, and

yelped as his shoulders got pinched by an avian n'og catcher. Some of them were neogs, after all.

This bird, an apparent owl, plucked Mo from his makeshift rocket and alerted his supervisor. "Sir! Found another one!"

"Could you watch my armpits, officer?" pleaded Mo. "They're ticklish."

"Sorry sonny, too busy watching the air road."

Could he see anything with those lobster claws flopping over his eyes? Not the kaPoocha bottle so he could stop it from sailing into the stage and into his coworker's kisser, which busted and send him staggering around with three fewer teeth.

It definitely got Trucker's attention. He spotted Mo's situation, and that really cooked it for him. His biceps bulged into boulders as he gripped his net and pulled it apart like a frozen chicken sack. At last, he had a window wide enough to shoot through. He loaded his slingshot with his keys, took aim, and fired at the owl's talons. He hit a bull's eye, and Mo and his car keys went plummeting into a trash can on its way out.

Say what you what about the Aftermatch Saloon. They had the town's most dutiful custodian.

* * *

When his eyes stopped rolling around in circles, Mo noticed some hard chokey object down his throat. He clubbed himself on the chest until he knocked it loose. It was too dark to see what it was. Stinky, too. Maybe if he had waited a few minutes he might have chucked it up anyway. The dumpster was no place to put anything in your mouth. He flashed his phone light on it. The crusty mucous covering it made it hard to identify, but it looked like a drumstick. That sure didn't belong inside herbivorous him. Now how would he get out of there?

He was just about check which way his drool would dangle when his phone buzzed. It was from Trucker, reporting a much worse predicament than the dumpster: "Cops about to take my phone."

So much for rescuing him from the draft. After a few silent seconds for the big Yella Belly, he rest the rest of it: "Don't let them take DYD too. You got the key."

"I do?"

His spittle plopped onto that thing he thought was a drumstick. He polished off his throat boogers and took a closer look. That wasn't a bone, it was too rigid and metallic, not to mention serrated. Holding it closer to his phone light, he saw it for what it was - a sign of Trucker's faith in him, the legacy the old yellow duck was leaving behind, a brand new responsibility he had to live up to, and the first opportunity he had to drive a car.

Even though the two-way *hablo* was history, he couldn't stop himself from sending Trucker his steadfast assurances. "Don't worry, Yella Belly. As sure as my name is Mo Manzoni, the law up here won't garage your gal."

He couldn't carry out his responsibilities from the dumpster, though. He dug upwards through utter sensory pollution - glass shards and rusty scrap metal were especially unfriendly to his fingers - until he made it up to the edge.

All across the yard, cops marched kids to their cars shaped like coyotes and bobcats. Not even the human kids could catch a break. One made a futile bathroom plea to his orangutan arrestor. "Yeah right, I know a jailbreak - or in your case, a detentionbreak plot when I hear one."

Not that there was any getting into the outlaw outhouse anyway. *D'Roarz* was parked right in front of the door. Three cops patrolled her, two whistling and fantasizing aloud while the oldest and widest one inspected a yellow phone with (again, Mo had to use his own for optimal vision) pants stickers all over it. He had an armadillo on his head.

He put the phone in his pocket, just like the kind of person his team arrested. "I don't know who this Mo Manzoni character is, but I don't want anybody near this vehicle. Now if you'll excuse me..."

Once he was off to pry open the outhouse window with a crowbar, one of his henchmen wearing a caterpillar sized up *D'Roarz* and whistled. "Ain't she a byoot. What I wouldn't give to start this baby up and ride off into the sunset."

"How about your job, waffle head? If you had the keys, you'd have to hand them over to Captain Actus so he could ride off into the evidence locker."

"Way to ruin the fantasy, sausage butt."

A nice, sizzling argument. Fantastic. Just the cover he needed to sneak his way, one cactus at a time, over to D'Roarz. It wasn't painless; sudden glances in his direction forced him to swing back and get cozier with the cacti than he'd like to. But needles and all, he made it all the way up to her rear window so he could chew a hole through the window. Not the most respectful port of entry, but hey, she'd been through worse.

Inside was a bachelor's paradise of empty chip bags and beer cans, along side some lame underwear catalogues. More importantly, the driver's seat was completely optimised to fit Mo: a booster seat, a parascope, a crutch to reach the pedal and two of those claws from a plushie grabber machine to grip the steering wheel. As he fitted himself onto the throne, he thought, It never hurts to help destiny along, does it?

"Turn around ladies, and look at what your loafing brought us." That was Captain Actus, upbraiding Officers Sausage and Waffle over Mo's success. They went pop-eyed and pounded on the window, demanding his immediate exit.

"I'm not getting out of the cocka-doody car, Mister." That's right, he wasn't saying "officer." He was a real outlaw now. Speaking of whom, the ramped up attention they payed trying to force the doors open alerted the other kids. "This whole thing was rigged," they cried. Their indignation gave them the power to writhe free of the police and patrol cars, and soon the whole truck was surrounded by his neglected peers. Big Bun's glowing red eyes loomed above the crowd. Could they fire lasers? Mo didn't find out before a labrador cop pounced on him. That

wound up the new goal among the law enforcers. Even Sausage and Waffles had to give up their useless truck infiltration to deal with the kids.

All those kids. All of them, that is, except for the one seated safely away in the cocka-doody car.

The approximate ratio was four kids to every cop, though Captain Actus had enough width to cover three whole grown-ups. That was weigh more than unfair, in Mo's view. As the Captain steamrolled half of Big Bun's gang, that yellow pants-covered phone slid out of his pocket, as if a piece of Trucker's soul had willed it to enter Mo's line of vision one last time.

"Don't worry, Yella belly," pledged the mouse. "They may take your phone, but they will never take your lady." And with that, he cranked the stick shift to drive and tore out, leaving a floor-jawed crowd coated in brown exhaust.

All he had to do now is find a decent hiding place. Some dent out in the canyons ought to be safe from lawful peepers. On his way there, he might as well live up his first time behind the wheel. He rolled down the window to let in the breeze, but it brought in some sand grain in with it, right into his eyes. He wiped it out. When he could see again, he realized he wasn't alone anymore. A dozen or so catcher cars lurched from behind large cacti and rolling boulders. Time to test out *D'Roarz's* weaving capabilities.

They were paltry, it turned out. She was built to demolish, not weave. Mo hoped that its driver managed to eject before he flattened the coyote car. Sparing it a moment of closed-eye silence while still conducting his escape cost him crucial

steering time. By the time he thought he'd paid adequate respects, he heard screaming and protests, and opened his eyes to a trail through an improve comedy club. The young fresh fellows and spritely thespian lasses darted to the left or right, and threw retaliatory furniture.

That's when Mo recalled her number one weapon. He had to take his eyes out of the parascope so he could reach the glove box. Surely trucker had a manual within.

He didn't even open the thing before he heard a burst and a clang. He wasn't back on the road, he was in a basketball court. He'd knocked over the basket post and burst a ball, but the players had plenty more to throw. They teamed up with the improv group who, having hitched a ride on the roadrunner car, brought beer mugs and martini glasses to throw. "Hey, you live wire with the pumped-up tires, better drive, better drive, outdrive my hive." Apparently they were throwing hornet hives too.

Mo finally found the manual beneath his booster seat so he could deliver the line, "Let's see if you can outfloor my drawers!" But by the time he read the table of contents to figure out how to unload a literal table, he'd burst through the wall of Heap Big Labs and become the target of heaved and hurled flasks. Somewhere along the alliance, the eggheads got their ammo mixed up with that of the other pursuers, and the scientists threw gym shorts while the comedians flung beakers.

From the lab's third floor window, Mo crashed out of that place only to plough through the Beddy Bones Retirement center. Now he had to weather a barrage of

crutches, casts, and bed pans as he bid farewell to the likelihood of ever hiding the truck now. He'd left grandmas spinning in their wheelchairs as he and those who chased him violated every last regulation the Beddy Bones wished to enforce. The staff hopped aboard a tanzanian devil car and tried to tranquilize it, but the tornado tarnation upset their aim and they wound up sedating one another instead.

Vigilantes of other occupations got the good old fashioned serum themselves, as Mo admired through the rearview mirror. That sight was so wonderful it blinded him to the fact that he'd been subconsciously heading towards Humdinger Valley ever since the police steered him out of the desert. By the time he figured this out, he was six inches away from the mural of a Babylonian gangfight. He jammed his stilt into the brakes and instantly attained the power to fly - right into a clothesline, after which something that looked like a hotshot buzzer fired out of his mouth and smack into the window of the opposite trailer, surprising its inhabitant.

He had to shake off his delirium before the citizens captured *D'Roarz*. He could hear their tribal yowling even from the legal but distant route they took. When he could see straight again, Wanda took up the whole scene, one hand holding him by the tail and the other pointing at the Humdinger gate wreckage.

"You caused that, didn't you?"

Not another interrogation. As Wayne and some of the neighbors stepped out of their houses onto the scene, Mo summoned up all his mathematical prowess.

"Well, I'd say that little plastic cracker I urped up did most of the driving. What is that thing anyway?"

He stopped caring when the police, actors, geysers and the rest caught up and began beating on *D'Roarz* with whatever they hadn't already thrown. Even the neighbors wanted in on the action. No matter how much he squirmed and wiggled, he couldn't get free to save her. Wayne, observing Mo's resistance and the police pulling back the , flipped through an instruction manual. "That's odd. I don't remember anything like this in the disclaimers."

Mo caught a glimpse of the manual's title. "Truant Tracker: Keep Your Hookey-Crook in Line." It had a picture of a radar and a magnifying glass over a bear with one of those tiny propeller caps.

"You fed me a tracking device?"

"Darn right we did!" Wanda thrust him into Wayne's hands. "And we're going to do it again. No more sneaking off and underage driving, buster."

While she dug around in the bushes, Mo and Wayne watched the saga surrounding *D'Roarz*. "I gotta save that car," begged Mo, "Please? Pretty please with those no-gluten biscuits and Cruh-Pee Sun you like to drink mixed with a side of low-fat nature sugar?"

"I'm not sure I want you involved in that." For the cops were trying to pry off the more vicious attackers, mostly war vets from Beddy Bones. The persistent ones started to redirect their rage towards the law. They'd rank high in the arena.

"All right." Wanda returned and brandished the chip. "I'm getting some lemonade and I don't want to find this leftover once you're all-

"Wanda, wait." Wayne pointed at the scene, where the n'og catchers had resorted to throwing potato sacks over peoples heads, even the ones who had surrendered. Some had plucked peppers from old man Fogelbird's garden to shove under their prisoner's eyelids in retaliation. "Do we really want to use *their* products?"

It took her a few moments of disappointed indecision, but she yielded the parental "amen" to Wayne and put the tracker in her pocket. "In any case, you, Mister, are grounded. Be grateful they're just taking the car away and not you."

It wasn't anything to be thankful for in Mo's book. He was a captain who'd go down with a ship, if the ship were on wheels and weren't bumpercuffed to a patrol car. He let Trucker down. He was not cut out to be a proper outlaw, it would seem. The only sunny spot was that this tragedy wasn't happening right in front of Trucker. The Outlaw Arena didn't have room for two broken hearts.

* * *

Seventy-seven hours. That's how long Wanda sentenced him. Seventy-seven hours. That's how long he had to spend shouting down into the neighbor's toilets, "Mama ain't up here. Shoo now, shoo." Seventy-seven. He'd seen way bigger

numbers on the speedometer just the day before, but things were way faster back then. The first seven minutes of this schtick felt like seventy-seven times seven.

Nobody had time to supervise him with their day jobs, so to make sure he didn't shrug off these responsibilities, they nailed flypaper all around the exits of whosever trailer he was fumigating. He didn't care. The crashing low from having let Trucker down took away the urge to rebel. Although, while yelling down Mrs. Grubble's ptooy pot, he got the idea that some of the owners of these voices might be in contact with Trucker.

"I don't know where Mama is, but could you go check on a big yellow duck for me? I'll make it worth your while." He flushed some leftover brussel sprouts amen. He figured that anything from his parent's fridge would be more appetizing than was usually sent their way. Somehow, they managed to send it back.

"If you ain't Mama, you can scram!"

Maybe there was something more maternal in the fridge. Then again, grits and prunes were maternal cuisine, and that was exactly what he found when he opened the refrigerator door. Mrs. Grubble had a jar of chicken fat, olive pits, pickled eggs and mayonnaise to keep it company. Mo was starting to wonder what kind of diet she was on when he spotted a bottle with the word "diet" on it. He turned it around and there, reflecting off the shiney plastic, were the spinning tires his pupils had become.

Not so fast, said the little pointy-horned delinquent in his mind. He really let the big duck down. Did he really deserve to drive his own truck after he let his

anti-hero's legacy roll right into the law's lotionly lily-livered law-claws? If he asked the other juniors, who had lost a shot at being a fairly chosen heir, they would shake their heads, no. If he asked Westinghams, who probably lost a lot of parenting cred with Ma Manzoni, they would shake their heads, no. Damselwood citizen's, who'd lost tons of peace and quiet, a basketball game, a scientific breakthrough, and a comedic thread, they would shake their heads, no.

"But don't you see?", he replied to delinquent. "That is totally why I got to drive." Contrary action in the face of defiance was what being an outlaw was all about. So long as he had a law to break, his work was not done. He seized the kaPoocha (more like carPoocha), gave the bedsheets a few anticipatory silent moments before he unrolled them over the flypaper, and scampered back to his house.

His first instinct upon arriving back at his secret garage was to tie a bib around the gas cap. This was, after all, her first feeding time. "Are you ready? Of course you are, but you're an outlaw, honey, and outlaws don't wear that foofoo." He yanked it off. "Butts up!"

He gave the bottle a few hearty wacks to help it go down faster. It sure stirred up the fizz on its way down, all that hissing and foam promising a ripe, rowdy ride. When it was all empty, he threw it over his shoulder and hopped aboard. He was about to fasten his seatbelt but thought about it. If he wanted to be an outlaw through and through, he'd do without the seatbelt altogether. For good measure,

he took a big pair of pruning sheers and cut the whole thing out and flung it into the trash can.

He was ready.

Oops, no he wasn't. He totally underestimated the kaPoocha power, if the ramshackle heap of awnings, steel, and foam he'd left his garage in were anything to go by. He knew he had no door, but he didn't think he'd leave behind that big a mess.

"Steering? Who needs it?" That's what his little brain delinquent said now. "I do, if I want to stop splattering those cacti," replied Mo. Thank Wondy the car had been facing the more desolate regions of Damselwood. "Cacti? Who needs 'em?"

The guy up there had a point; The necessity of cacti never found its way into Mo's education. The importance of steering had, what with all those architectural openings he established yesterday.

A few dozen more miles out West, and it was clear that cacti weren't the only things he had to worry about; there was also that cliff overlooking the airplane graveyard. With the anchor in the trunk that served as his brakes, he was sure to back flip a full circle. What a bragging bonus that would be, if he survived it. As close as he was to the big audios, he couldn't stop himself from taking out his phone and filming it. "This one's for you, Trucker!"

Over the edge he soared, one backward flip, and then a second, leaving a looping bubble trail behind. His sense of direction went with it; it wasn't long before the only place he knew he was headed was down. All he could do was film

it. He didn't think to livestream it; there was just too much excitement. Even if he didn't come out of this alive, at least that one spot on the airplane cemetery's membrane would forever bear his imprints. That would be his mark on Earthan history.

Whatever mark he left, he lived through it, and after all the skeletal rattling, dental tremors, bouncing internal organs and alterations in bloodflow directions sorted themselves out, he was up for a bigger challenge, one that would take him another step (or whatever the car equivalent was, wheel turn, probably) towards liberating the ugwan outlaw drafting scheme. He spotted a retired airplane (duh, what else would he find in an airplane graveyard?), and adopted a new persona: He was a bowler, and that plane was his bowling lane. And the guys peering out the door at him were the pins.

It was around this time that he began to have second thoughts.

As a junior outlaw, Mo's target was always the law itself, not the population puppeteered by it. The only entrails he ever wanted under his wheels were those of the jail bars guarding the ugwan. Anyone else had the chance to strike a pinky swear. Anyone could hop right to his side of the legislative fence. Driving a car through their hangout did not friendly feelings inspire.

Mo did everything he could to change his direction before the guys yelling "Timber!" got the gnarly end of his bumper. There was no stopping her; his car divided the plane dirty in half and she didn't stop there. No matter where he turned, there was a retired plane to defile like he was doing subterfuge in a "Wheels

verses "Wings" competition. He couldn't circumnavigate the human obstacles either. When it came to anything on two legs, he'd get a flash of a visual that preceded a Wilhelm scream before the poor sap rumbled off in casts and crutches or orbited off into the galaxy, twinkle twinkle little star, one more guy with big fat scars. And foam that looked like shaving cream.

By the time *Briefs* was all out of kaPoocha, the gang she demolished was nearly out of healthy bones. So many dislocations and fractures, he couldn't count. They used what they had left to drag themselves towards him, and would probably take a stab at rearranging his face to resemble their hideout; wings, tail fans, turbines, all in crunchy metal giblets. How could he cause so much wreckage with such a little truck?

"Uh... I guess saying 'I'm sorry' won't put your hideout back together, will it?"

In reply, a kid the size of a boulder stepped up and, right before clubbing Mo over the head with a giant ham, observed, "Looks like the runt has a death wish. Guess what? I'm a genie."

* * *

Mo woke up in heck. Or at least hovering above it. He couldn't exactly remember what he'd dreamed, only that it had something to do with corn flakes. That conk on the head? That was no dream; nor were the hard, pointy wires binding him to a rotisserie spit. He thought he'd contested the notion that he'd

had a death wish; all he'd wished for right now was that Trucker was around to give him advice.

He wondered if he really was anywhere near the fiery underworld. He alternated between blazing infernal heat and stark naked cold. A few more observations made the reason obvious enough; he'd been bound to a spit. When he wasn't facing starry, starry night, he was staring into the coals of an amateur campfire. In between these two extremes, he got a look at his captors in a new light. While most of them sang an off-key campfire jingle, one rebellious maverick patrolled the ground before him. He brandished a glowing red spatula, practically daring his confederates to come near. It seemed his jealousy was misspent, though. The rest were inseparably wedded to the sing-along. Jumping Jezebel, were they ever out of tune. A rough estimate made up about one hundred twenty injured kids about the same age as he, and all of them sang in a different key:

We're The Guts, my Lord, Kumbaya

We kick butts, my Lord, Kumbaya

Luts and luts, my Lord, Kumbaya

Of butts, Lord, Kumbaya

"Like the one on this rodent," cheered a nearby hawk, just about the only guy free of bodily mutilation. He must have been flying during the commotion. The crowd replied with a hearty ovation. One excited guy grabbed a pie plate with his

uncasted arm and smashed it on the ground. "Save the weaponry for the rat who deserves it, bonehead."

Mo had to make himself scarce. Was the heat or the cold supposed to make him shrink? Little difference it could have made. They probably canceled one another out anyway. Chewing the cables went as far as he could chew in ignorance. One hearty bite of a barb, and his appetite for bonds bit the dust.

"All right, butterballs, listen up. We all know the anthem is a big fat lie. We're the ones getting our butts kicked, not the other way around, which is why we need to build up our bravery. How much bravery does it take to eat raw meat?"

They were all in agreement: "Not a whole lot."

"But what happens when you eat guts? You get more guts. But it takes guts to get guts. And that's why tonight, we will have the bravery test of the century."

Mo couldn't help but interject. "What about heart? Where does the heart come from?"

"You shut your muffin, peewee. You know what? Degravis, shut his muffin for him." The guy guarding Mo, the same one who'd clubbed him, plucked a fully armored baby cactus out of the ground with his barenaked hand and crammed it into Mo's mouth.

"You gotta admit, Gruff," said Degravis. "It takes a lot of guts to crash through our hideout like that. And then through half of us, one by one."

Gruff grumbled. "Nobody has more guts under their belt than you," then returned to address the crowd at full volume. "And that is why whoever takes the biggest bite has the biggest guts of all."

Mo had to interject. Where would that leave the weenies? They're the ones who needed bigger guts. He chewed as mightily as he could, but all his experience at the snack bar and dinner table couldn't get through the prickly plant before Degraavis plopped right before him and tied on a bib.

"What do you think you're doing?" Squawked Gruff. "You already have the biggest gut here." He poked Degraavis in the belly button. "It's big enough to put you at the back of the line."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" snarled Degraavis, removing his superior's finger-talon. "What's going to be left for me when all those guys get through?"

"Oh yeah? If you go first, nobody's getting a bite. Your nibble is the average man's swallow whole."

"Why I ought to fry your drumsticks."

"Boy-howdy does that ever whet my appetite."

Gruff grabbed the end of the spit and brought Mo headfirst towards his beak. The whole world got dark...

And Mo found himself back outside, this time in the clutches of Degraavis.

"If I don't get my share, nobody does."

The utter indignation in Gruff's face stepped aside for anger. He drew a pop gun. "Put that rat back where you found it."

"I'll put your beak in the last place I found it first."

And then the first shot fired. One swing from the sword, and the bullet bounced right up Gruff's nostril. "Hey, you slugs! Get off your butts and defend my honor," he snorted. Those who did find themselves bounced, steamrolled, or walloped upside the head by the spit-bound Mo.

When the world stopped spinning, he noticed the guts retreating on scooters, bicycles, skateboards, shopping baskets, segues and anything that would have made an adequate getaway vehicle. Mo himself had a chance to run for it; he even still had the keys to *Briefs* hooked to his beltloop. There, only a few yards in the distance, was the naughty little postal car herself

But he looked at the plane he'd demolished. Sitting on its stoop was Degravis. He looked a lot less hungry. It was such a strange sight; so much exercise had he just completed. What was his deal?

Mo eased his way over a bit, and cleared his throat.

Degravis glanced his way, but his glance didn't linger. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing... but it was mighty impressive, all that swinging you did."

Degravis snorted. "You wish. All that proves is how dinky our members are. Half of them belong in in-patient care at the moment anyway. What do you want anyway, a goodnight kiss?"

"How come you didn't just eat me?"

"Open your eyes, will you? Everything we do is a show of force. No sense in eating something gross if no one's around to gag at it. Or try not to gag, if they wanna be tough, too."

The spelling was not lost on Mo. This fellow wasn't so tough. Or was he?

"You know," he took a seat next to the mighty behemoth, "according to Earthan law, you can get away with eating us neogs without getting busted. Looks to me like it takes more guts not to take a bite. And more heart, too."

Degravis sneered. "Don't push your luck, sugar-cheeks. I don't go for that gush."

"If you really want to prove your might," pressed Mo, "there's a war going down underneath us."

"What I want is my own gang. I want to be top dog."

"Well, if you helped win the war down there, you just might be top dog, and other top animals, too. Listen, I've been listening to the potties. They're all calling out for a Mama. But what I think they really need is a Daddy. Think you can step into those shoes?"

Degravis sighed through his other end. "Well... it's not like there's anything left up here anyway. I might as well." Then he glared down at Mo. "But I'd better get my gang. And while I'm at it, sock the leader of our rivals. I hate that guy."

"You betcha." Further plans didn't exist yet, neither for conjuring this titan his own army or presenting him with anyone's face to sock. But Trucker still existed.

At least, Mo hoped he did, as the walking, talking, trucking slab of duck he remembered and not as a stack of Swiss cheese..

"Hang in there," he uttered.