

SOMETIMES  
THE SUN  
DOES SHINE THERE  
AND OTHER STORIES

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Sometimes the Sun Does Shine There and Other Stories  
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DOES SHINE THERE



It was Vic's deal. As usual, Dougie sat to his right at the hexagonal poker table. Vic shuffled the deck of cards, set the cards on the green felt tabletop next to Dougie, and announced to the five men seated around the table, "Seven card stud, low in the hole is wild." Then to Dougie who had shown up to the poker game semi-drunk and appeared distracted, he barked, "Cut the cards, for Chrissake!" Dougie flinched and then he sheepishly lifted a few cards from the top of the squared-up deck. Vic slapped the taller stack of cards atop the shorter and commenced dealing: two cards face down and one card face up to each player. A man with a bad 70s porn-star moustache and unruly eyebrows received an ace; he bet first, plucking a few chips from his formidable stack and tossing them into the center of the table. Without peering at his other cards he said flatly with a straight face, "Fifty blind on the bullet." The next two guys folded. Although Dougie held a garbage hand, he saw the bet, as did Vic who had a nine showing and a pair of threes face down – the "hole" in the parlance of stud poker. Vic dealt another card to the remaining players, providing colorful narration along the way.

"A trey to Ray . . . a king to Eyebrow . . . my nine of clubs to

Dougie . . . Dealer gets a fuckin' jack-off." Vic deferred to the man he called "Eyebrow." "Ace-king bets."

Pushing \$100 in chips past an ashtray full of butts to the center of the table, Eyebrow announced, "Ace-king bets a buck." This time Dougie folded. Without looking at Dougie, Vic addressed him sarcastically, "Couldn't fold last time, could you asshole?" Dougie frowned and looked down at his hands like a dejected child. It hurt to be called an "asshole" by Vic in front of the others.

Vic Schuyler was the big man of the neighborhood, a tough punk who had grown up to become a fearsome financier of other peoples' vices and a connoisseur of activities on the border of illegality and immorality: gambling, racketeering, money laundering, fencing of stolen goods and chasing pussy, sometimes paying for it, sometimes not. A nasty bully in school, Vic dropped out at 16 and spent a couple years in juvenile detention. Upon release at age 18 and seeing no future in petty crime, he hooked up with an aging gangster, determined to learn the art of loan-sharking and the craft of persuasive intimidation. During his apprenticeship Vic refined his image, upgrading his wardrobe, controlling his temper, and governing his impetuosity. Vic's business paid him handsome dividends, affording him a fine German-crafted automobile and a spacious co-op in a desirable section in the Gramercy Park district of Manhattan. He cultivated a respectable, dedicated clientele for his usurious loans and illegal gambling operations – quiet, docile, mostly unlucky men who faithfully adhered to the terms and conditions, requiring minimal intervention from Vic. For those occasional fools who allowed debts to languish or tried

to leave behind an outstanding balance Vic inflicted cruel and effective punishment. Around the neighborhood, behind his back, Vic Schuyler was unaffectionately known as “Vic the Prick.”

Dougie liked to think of himself as Vic’s pal, fortunate to be favored by such an influential, powerful player – even if the man had duly earned the appellation “Prick.” He became an associate of Vic’s in high school after Vic agreed to protect the fragile, defenseless teen in return for cash payments and bottles of prescription painkillers he stole from his grandmother’s medicine chest. Now, 25 years later Dougie accompanied Vic everywhere, and although he couldn’t honestly call himself one of Vic’s confidantes, he faithfully did the man’s bidding, never asking questions, never complaining, and never, ever challenging Vic’s oft-demented demands. To an outsider Dougie was a simple stooge, an errand-running gofer beholden to his hard-hearted master; but in Dougie’s mind he was a privileged member of Vic’s inner circle, invulnerable to the evil forces that would otherwise threaten him absent Vic’s protective wing.

The gamblers at the poker table threw chips and bills into the pot. Out of the hand, Dougie poked a finger into his ear, rotated it like a post-hole digger, examined the orange wax under his fingernail, and surreptitiously wiped the greasy mass onto the underside of the table. He grabbed his cash from the table, stuffed it in his shirt pocket and said, “Deal me out for a while. I’m gonna go outside . . . get some air . . . take a piss.” No one seemed to notice or care that Dougie had left.

Vic announced, “Last one down,” as he flicked a card across the table. He took one for himself. It was a showdown now – everyone else had folded – between Vic and the man with the

feral eyebrows. Vic couldn't help noticing how the two eyebrows had grown toward each other, relentlessly converging above the bridge of the man's nose like opposing armies, forming a single, uninterrupted swath of wiry hair. It bore a remarkable resemblance to the thin, cheesy moustache spread across his upper lip.

"Just you and me, Eyebrow."

Eyebrow studied his cards which he held close to his face just below his stubbly chin. Then he calmly put the cards down and replied with a touch of irritation as he moved two large stacks of chips, one with each flabby hand, "Five hundred. And stop calling me 'Eyebrow.'"

"Whoa! Check out big-dick Harry Reems here, tryin' to buy the pot." Ray and the others laughed as they did dutifully at his every wry comment and attempt at humor. "OK, Mr. Harry Eyebrow – your five and another thou." Vic tossed in a couple of fancy chips representing high-value denominations and then sat back arrogantly. Eyebrow picked up his hole cards and brought them back to his bosom for another look. Did this mean his hand was weak, unmemorable? Was it a ploy to hide strength by conveying weakness? Either way, Vic didn't seem to care. He tilted his chair back on its hind legs and interlaced his fingers behind his head.

Finally, Eyebrow acted. Sliding another tall stack of chips toward the center of the table where it tipped over into the huge pot, he said, "I really should raise your ass, Vic, but I'll just call." He revealed his hand: three aces and a wild card. "Four aces."

"Goddamnit!" cried Vic. After Dougie received the nine of clubs, Vic dealt himself a jack and a three, and for his final down card, another jack. On the board, he showed a nine, ten, jack

and a three – hardly intimidating. So when he produced two jacks and three wild cards, Eyebrow was flabbergasted.

Vic feigned ignorance. “I can never remember – does five jacks beat four aces?”

“Nice hand, Vic. A real sleeper,” remarked Ray, a tough-looking, cauliflower-eared Kraut sitting to Vic’s left. Ray was one of Vic’s close associates, an asset Vic called upon when he needed muscle for particularly dirty deeds.

Eyebrow fumbled with his cards for a moment, hoping to assemble an unseen superior hand using the lone wild card with a different combination of cards. Vic reached for the pot. Before he swept in the chips, he asked, “We good?”

Shaking his head in amazement at his crushing defeat, Eyebrow sullenly surrendered. “Yeah, take it. Shit, a mere four aces is all I can conjure up. Next time, be good enough to give me some Vaseline.” Vic and the others laughed. Ray collected the cards, gave them a cursory shuffling and dealt a new hand.

Thirty-five minutes went by and it was now Dougie’s turn to deal. It was only then that Vic remarked, “Where the hell did Dougie go? He’s been gone a long time.” Carl, the player sitting to Eyebrow’s left offered an explanation, “Maybe he went lookin’ for soul food and a place to eat.”

As Eyebrow imitated the “do-do-do’s” of the colored girls on Lou Reed’s decadent “Walk on the Wild Side,” Vic barked, “What the fuck does that mean?” Ray piped up that perhaps Dougie had decided to call it an evening. “He looked sick if you ask me.”

Vic replied, “Nah, he wouldn’t leave before me.” Then, sounding like an irked parent, he added, “Go outside and see what the fuck he’s doin’, Ray. Tell him it’s his fuckin’ turn to

deal, but only if he promises not to play one of his moronic games with 14 wild cards.” Ray stood up and walked outside into the brisk winter air. The chill was crisp and bracing. He pulled his jacket close and muttered under his visible breath, “Got to be in the teens.” In the feeble light of the alley, Ray barely made out what appeared to be a body lying on the ground. He bent over to inspect it and then rushed back inside. “Get out here! Something’s wrong with Dougie! He’s lying on the ground and blood’s comin’ outta his mouth!” The men seated around the table quickly jumped up in unison and rushed outside. When Vic saw his sidekick writhing on the pavement, bleeding and convulsing, he ordered Ray to call an ambulance. No one knew what to do so they just stood there, rubbing their hands for warmth and gawking at the prone Dougie; when he glurped up a large dollop of gruel-like vomit, the queasier among them averted their eyes and fought the onset of sympathetic nausea. Unknown to the bunch, Dougie, having earlier imbibed too many whiskeys on an empty stomach, zigzagged toward the exit intending to relieve his bloated bladder in the alley outside the building, and on his way out, stumbled, striking his head on the door jamb. He wobbled onto the pavement and fell flat on his face. Because he had thrust his hands into his pockets against the frosty chill he was unable to break his fall, receiving a direct blow to the jaw.

The ambulance arrived within minutes of Ray’s 911 call but it took another five for the driver to back around the dumpsters obstructing access in the narrow alleyway. As the EMTs loaded Dougie’s limp body onto a gurney the diesel fumes from the idling vehicle poured into the room where a few hard-core players, no

longer captivated by the action outside, resumed playing cards. As he dealt cards to a couple other players Eyebrow called to Vic who remained outside with Dougie, “Shut the fucking door Vic, or they’ll have to take all of us to the hospital for carbon monoxide poisoning.”

“Shut it yourself, ya lazy bastard!” Vic jogged out the alley to the street where columns of steam churned up from fractured pipes far below the asphalt surface. He climbed into his black Mercedes 500 SEL and trailed the ambulance as it bolted through red lights and screeched around corners, blasting an earsplitting shock wave at any pedestrian who cavalierly stepped into the crosswalk. Just as the ambulance shuddered to a stop in front of the emergency room entrance a doctor and two nurses who had been notified of its imminent arrival began attending to Dougie. They hurriedly rolled the gurney through the automatic doors and down a brightly lit corridor.

“Can he hear me?” asked Vic?

“Does it look like he can hear you?” responded the doctor in a tone that was neither jocular nor sarcastic.

As the gurney passed the elderly rent-a-cop and approached the ER, Vic was interdicted by a robust Latina receptionist who put up both her hands like a football referee indicating interference. “Sir, you can’t go in the ER now. Please come with me. I’ll take you to the waiting room. You’ll be notified when you can go in.” Vic glanced through a portal window in the door leading to the ER and saw a nurse pull a curtain around Dougie. Then he turned his attention back to the receptionist who had started walking down the corridor.

“Listen, I’m his close friend. I gotta be in there with him.”

Ignoring his entreaty she summoned Vic, “Come this way,

sir.” Vic made a half-hearted attempt to assert his authority to gain access but he quickly relented, realizing that like the Wicked Witch of the West in Munchkinland he wielded no power in the ER. The hierarchy there trumped any threats he could muster on the basis of his street credibility. Resigned to waiting alone for God knows how long, Vic slumped into an uncomfortable, plastic, stackable chair and grabbed an old *Sports Illustrated* magazine off the side table. He didn’t notice that a uniformed police officer eyed him suspiciously.

After an hour the doctor peered into the waiting room. “Mr. Schuyler? You can see your friend now.” The two men walked together toward the corner of the ER where Dougie, now conscious, sat propped up bare-chested against some pillows on the gurney, his chin bandaged and both eyes completely bloodshot. Along the way the doctor summarized the situation. “Your friend suffered a pretty nasty blow to his face. He has a concussion and he chipped two teeth, but miraculously his jaw is unbroken. His throat is irritated from all the vomiting and he’ll have a terrific headache tomorrow but I’m pretty sure he’ll be able to leave here in a couple of hours. I don’t recommend that he drive, however. I’ll write him a script for some pain killers.”

“Thanks, doc.”

Just before the two men arrived at the foot of the gurney the doctor stopped abruptly and stepped up close to Vic, addressing him in a whisper. “The police want to talk to you. They suspect that your friend was beaten up. When he first regained consciousness he was still groggy; he kept asking ‘where’s my money?’ I just wanted you to know that.” Vic cracked his knuckles and wagged his head as if to suggest, “Where do these cops get their crazy ideas?”

“Thanks again, doc . . . Hey, Dougie-boy! How’s the head? That’ll teach ya for takin’ my nine of clubs.” An officer who was nonchalantly pacing around nearby glanced over at Vic. *A card game?* Vic continued, “The doc here says you can go home soon. He checked your head and told me there’s nothing in there. Haw haw.” The doctor and nurse rolled their eyes – it was perhaps the millionth time they had heard a variation of that lame wisecrack. Dougie struggled to smile, then winced in pain. He croaked hoarsely, “Where’s my shirt?” It was only then that Vic noticed his friend was naked from the waist up. Before anyone could answer, the policeman walked up and directed a question to Vic. “Sir, do you have a moment?”

“Uh, sure, of course. Anything for you, officer.” *Do I have another choice?* Vic placed a cigarette between his lips and snapped his lighter, catching himself at the last minute. “Forgot.”

“Please come with me to the waiting room.” Vic accompanied the cop out of the ER where he pledged in no uncertain terms that Dougie had truly fallen down on the cold pavement after imbibing a bit too much. *No one rolled him, honest officer. I’m his best friend. Ask him, why don’tcha?* While Vic made his case to the cop, the nurse explained to Dougie that the ER staff had had to cut off his shirt so they could inspect for the presence of other wounds. “There was so much blood on your shirt that we initially thought you had been stabbed in the chest. It’s in the medical waste bin now.”

“Jee . . . fuck! . . . Jesus.” Dougie winced again, and gently stroked his jaw. He spoke gingerly to minimize mandibular movement. “No kidding? That bad, huh? I must look like a goddamn mess.” The nurse smiled and said nothing. Just then a man clutching his chest accompanied by his frantic wife

stumbled through the automatic doors into the ER. “Get some rest, sir. Looks like I’ve got a cardiac to attend to.” The nurse bolted. Seconds later, from the other side of the curtain, Dougie heard the pained heaves and grunts of the heart attack victim overlaid by the screams of his wife, all intermixed with the sounds of pandemonium: orders barked, equipment wheeled in, bed rails snapped into place, beeps and squeals of electronic monitoring instruments. The obvious gravity of the situation tempered Dougie’s self-pity. He stroked his jaw some more and tried to stand, but the dizziness was still too debilitating. He fell back onto the gurney; fearing he might throw up and sully his fresh bandages. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly and rhythmically like he imagined pregnant women did in Lamaze class. Exhausted and not yet sober, Dougie was on the verge of nodding off when he sensed someone had entered his space. He cracked an eye and spotted a saucy girl with long, braided, Belgian-chocolate hair bending over a waste basket; the skirt of her greenish uniform was hiked above the backs of her knees revealing a tasty portion of her toned, olive-skinned legs. As she reached for something on the floor, her shapely ass waggled oh so seductively. Dougie called out, “Whatcha looking for, nurse?”

Startled, for she believed Dougie to be asleep or unconscious, the girl spun around and responded, “Pardon me . . . I’m not a nurse, sir.” She adjusted the hem of her skirt downward when she noticed Dougie leering at her legs. “I’m with the hospital’s environmental services department.” Whenever she introduced herself this way to people, they tended to stare back blankly, stumped apparently by the ambiguity of the job description. Dougie was no exception, so she clarified, “I’m a janitor.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Miss Janitor.”

“Maddie. My name is Maddie. Nice to meet you . . .”

“Dougie. I’m Dougie. Say, could you help me? I’m looking for my shirt. The nurse told me they cut it off and threw it into the medical waste bin. Do you think you could get it back for me?”

Maddie answered hesitantly, “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think so.” She wrinkled her nose to emphasize the repulsiveness of it in the hope that Dougie would withdraw the request. “Why do you want it anyway? The hospital will give you a clean tee shirt before you leave.”

“Will it have \$600 in the pocket?”

“What?”

Dogie explained, “I had \$600 in the breast pocket of my shirt when they cut it off. Tell you what. I’ll give you 20 bucks if you can get it back for me.” Maddie remained visibly reluctant. Dogie pleaded, “C’mon Maddie. Fifty, then. I’d hate to have that much money thrown out along with some guy’s gall bladder.”

Choosing capitulation over confrontation Maddie sighed and walked out, bumping into Vic on his way back from the interrogation with the officer. Vic instinctively raised his arms and inadvertently copped a feel of her tits. His educated estimate: C-cup.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Maddie, who quickly hustled off.

Vic called back to her, “No need to apologize, doll. It’s all my fault.” Vic stared at Maddie, admiring her curvy figure which was strangely enhanced by the defining lines of her industrial uniform. He licked his lips. *Damn, that’s sweet.* He watched as she walked all the way out of the ER, and then he turned his attention back to Dogie.

“Fuckin’ cop thought I mighta beat your ass. You believe

that?” Vic sounded flattered that the cop was inclined to blame him for Dougie’s injuries. “I told him anyone can see that I didn’t . . . ‘cause you look too damn good.” Vic swatted Dougie’s elevated knee. “How’s that?”

“Sounds familiar.”

“So, pal. How’re you feeling? Ready to get back to the game?”

Dougie grinned weakly, loathing the notion of returning to the poker table in his current condition. “I don’t know, Vic. Don’t you think the guys broke up by now? Anyway, all my money is in the garbage can.”

Before Vic could make a snide remark, Maddie returned wearing latex gloves and carrying a small trash bag containing a soiled green shirt and \$600 in blood-stained bills. “I got your money from the waste bin, sir. Don’t tell anyone – I could lose my job.”

“You’re a sweetie, Maddie.” Dougie reached into the bag, peeled off a moist, pinkish \$50 bill and handed it toward Maddie. Vic swatted Dougie’s arm, causing him to drop the money on the floor.

“Are you out of your fuckin’ mind? You make this beautiful girl rummage through the garbage for your ripped up shirt, and your reward for her is a bloody fifty? Do you want her to get hepatitis or e-coli or whatever disease you have?” Dougie just sat there dumbstruck, wounded by Vic’s thorough condemnation. He recognized that some of the put-down was calculated for theatrical effect, designed to impress Maddie, but on the heels of being labeled an “asshole” at the poker game, it only extended the pain. Vic bellowed, “And fifty? She risks her life and her job for you, and you only give her fifty? Seriously – what a cheap bastard you are, Dougie.” Vic reached into the pocket of his trim

Zegna sport coat and pulled out a sizable roll of hundred-dollar bills, peeling off three and handing them to Maddie. She put up her hands in protest.

“I can’t accept that, sir.”

“Call me Vic . . . uh, Marty?”

“Maddie, sir.”

Vic snapped his fingers and tightened his lips like he had only barely muffed it. “You can’t accept it?” Vic peeled off two more bills. “Can you accept this, doll?” From the way Vic cocked his head ever-so-slightly and raised one insistent eyebrow Maddie concluded it was probably best to take the money. By her reckoning Vic had made an offer she couldn’t refuse.

“You’re really too kind, Vic.” Maddie smiled broadly, showing off her sparking teeth. And even though she wore no lipstick to work, at that moment she looked like a Cover Girl model. She tucked the crisp, clean bills into her bra, secured within the tight confines of her cleavage. Vic felt his penis swell. “That’s more like it, Maddie,” nodded Vic approvingly. After another 30 minutes of chatting out of earshot of Dougie, Vic succeeded in extracting Maddie’s phone number and eliciting a commitment from her to meet him again. He felt confident he could make her his personal property for as long as he chose to possess her. From experience backed by a healthy dose of arrogance, Vic believed beautiful women who toiled in subservient lines of work ultimately allowed themselves to be recast into ostensibly better but equally subservient roles.

Sprawled out atop the institutional gurney, impotent and immobile, and with resignation and dismay, Dougie observed the flirty badinage between his boss and the girl he had hoped would have shown him preference. Such was the price for being

the big man's stooge: forced to relinquish the best things in life to Vic the Prick; hoping for a taste of the leftover scraps that weren't too debased after Vic was through with them.



The ceiling lights inside the Off-Track Betting parlor flashed twice in rapid succession indicating the venue would soon close for the evening. Larry stood up slowly using the edge of a trash can for support, pressed his thumb deep into the rectus femoris muscle of his upper leg to dull the sciatica pain, and glanced up at the large, round clock on the wall. A few minutes to 11. In the evening. *Fucking A!* Eight long hours had elapsed since Larry first arrived at OTB to ply his demeaning trade, and at midnight he'd have to start another eight hours of employment of a more traditional kind: washing dishes at the diner. A janitor stepped up with the intention of emptying the trash can upon which Larry sought support.

"You done with those, Larry?" asked the janitor, referring to the batch of tickets Larry held in his left hand. Larry looked at the several slips of paper, thought for a moment about tossing them into the garbage, and instead stuffed them into his pants pocket.

"Nah, Freddie. I'll check 'em tomorrow."

Freddie shrugged, not out of confusion but of understanding. He pulled the half-filled white garbage bag from the trash can, knotted it at the top, and unfurled a new bag inside the can. "Whatever you say. See you tomorrow, Larry."

"Yep."

Larry retrieved his worn parka from the coat rack near the

fire exit. He reached into his pockets for his gloves and instead stuck his hands into a warm, wet, gooey substance. Shocked by the clammy sensation, Larry quickly yanked his hands from the pockets. It took a moment for him to identify the off-white slime as mayonnaise. “What the fuck,” muttered Larry, settling on the most likely explanation: Vic the Prick had messed with him once again. Larry looked around. Sure enough, there sat Vic and Ray across the room pointing his way and laughing their asses off. Downtrodden, Larry hung his head and shuffled into the restroom to wash off the mayo. Freddie came in moments later carrying a bucket containing a toilet brush and a squeeze-bottle of liquid lye cleanser.

“You still here?” asked Freddie.

Larry understood the question to mean “why are you still here?” so he responded, “Somebody put mayonnaise in my coat pockets.”

“No shit? Man, that’s just plain mean. What kind of sick fuck would do that?”

Larry applied some pink soap from a crusty container to the palms of his hands. “I’ll give you half a guess.”

Freddie walked to the far end of the restroom and stepped into the last stall. He squirted some lye into the bowl and scrubbed a cluster of dried brown flakes spattered above the water line. Freddie made a mental note to flush the toilet when he was done; one time a New York State lottery official dropped a hefty load into one of Freddie’s freshly scrubbed toilets and in the process splashed caustic cleanser onto his tender and swollen hemorrhoids. Freddie almost lost his job over that debacle.

As Freddie performed his appointed duties and Larry stood at the sink basin, repeatedly adding more soap to his hands to

cut the oily glop webbing his fingers, Vic walked into the men's room. He locked onto Larry's face in the mirror and smirked.

"You're not jerkin' off in the sink again are you, Ajax?"

"Uh, no, Vic. Just washing my hands," replied Larry like a servile grade school boy who suffers daily persecution from the class bully.

"You are one filthy bastard, Ajax. Stronger than dirt. What sort of shit did you crawl through this time?"

Crawling through shit. That was how Vic referred to an unsavory aspect of Larry's profession: bending over, kneeling down, crawling on all fours if necessary, to pick up thousands of discarded race tickets from the floor of the OTB parlor in the hope of finding and cashing in a few winners. Those who gambled on horse races had a moniker for such men: stoopers.

To the uninitiated it might seem highly implausible that a steeper would ever come across a winning ticket, let alone collect enough scratch make the endeavor worthwhile. After all, why would anyone knowingly discard a winning ticket? As it turns out, bettors often mistakenly tossed them aside. Sometimes, for example, following a close race in which a horse is nipped by a nose, a bettor who had money on him might angrily throw the ticket down in defeat, only to be informed moments later that the horse that finished ahead was disqualified by the track judge. Suddenly the bettor realizes that instead of coming up empty, he's hit a \$1,600 trifecta. Panicked and flummoxed, the bettor himself may even become a steeper temporarily, pawing around the grimy floor searching for the winning ticket that moments earlier had fallen to his feet to intermix with hundreds of identical companions. He knows the ticket has to be there, but he can't find it; soon enough he gives up because unlike a

dedicated, professional steeper, he's unwilling to pick up and examine every goddamned ticket littering the floor within a 20 foot radius. After several minutes vainly engaged in undignified behavior, resigned to reality, chastened by his impetuosity, the bettor abandons his quest and returns to the window to place bets on the next race. It is a person such as Larry, a man willing to spend hours picking up and scanning tickets on the self-checker machine, a man willing to accept the abuse heaped upon him by certain OTB clientele, who finds the needle in the haystack. The man who rescues the \$1,600 trifecta ticket from the ignominy of socializing with its worthless brethren. It's what keeps the steeper coming back every night.

Vic sidled up next to Larry at the sink and washed his hands as well. "I can never figure you steepers out. You spend the whole fuckin' day pickin' up tickets off the floor, right? And outta garbage cans too, for Chrissake. And what do you clear? Ten bucks? Less? Do you *ever* find a winner?" Larry did not intend to answer the question nor did Vic expect him to. Vic shook the excess water off his hands and pulled some paper towels from a steel box on the wall marred by graffiti scrawls that looked like upside-down Arabic scrawls. "Jesus, what a waste." Larry glanced at Vic in the mirror and shrugged his shoulders in pathetic silence. "People like you make me sick, Ajax. You know that? I think you do." Vic dried his hands, balled up the towels, threw them at Larry's face, and strutted out of the restroom. Larry waited until Vic was gone, then he continued to lather his hands. Embarrassed and afflicted by self-loathing, he could not bear to look at his image in the mirror.

Freddie stepped down from the toilet bowl where he had

been quietly hiding in case Vic lost his temper. He asked Larry, “Why do you take that bastard’s shit?”

“For the same reason you hide from him in the stall like a little girl,” smirked Larry.

Freddie chuckled, “Touché.”

Larry had been coming to the OTB parlor for a little over a year after he lost a decent job in a print shop – not a place like Office Depot, but a professional, high-volume producer of novels, coffee table books, corporate brochures and government reports. An economic downturn compounded by the paranoid after-effects of 9/11 and an increase in the use of online documentation hit the print shop hard. Despite 12 years of loyal service working at the shop, management unceremoniously canned Larry the week before Christmas. Soon after his wife canned him as well. The indignity of unemployment left Larry to mope around the couple’s modest apartment, getting in the way and dragging down the mood. On the rare occasions he went out to hunt for work he would invariably return hours later, empty-handed, demoralized and inebriated. The last time he saw his wife, not counting the brief meeting in the lawyer’s office to capitulate to the terms of divorce was the day he stumbled into the kitchen after a long afternoon of drinking and abruptly threw up all over the stack of job applications she had spent hours filling out. After the split, Larry moved into a tiny apartment not far from the railyards near Tenth Avenue in a blocky Soviet-style building with narrow, dimly lit hallways and a panoramic view of the soot-stained wall of the building next to it. With little money and no self-esteem left – he had been forced to relinquish the savings accumulated in his modest CD

to pay for lawyers and alimony – Larry applied for and scored a job as a dishwasher working the graveyard-shift at a 24 hour diner on Manhattan’s East side.

It was late one evening as he absent-mindedly scraped the stubborn remains of a cheese omelet from a plate that Larry overheard a Chicano busboy tell the story of a friend who rummaged through discarded tickets at Yonkers Raceway and had recently discovered one worth \$250. The winning ticket bore the numbers for four horses. The numbers were boxed, meaning that the ticket represented four factorial or 24 possible outcomes. More than likely the hapless bettor tossed the ticket away after failing to recognize his choices could be arranged into a winning combination.

Larry chipped off the final blot of cheese and placed the clean plate in the rack. His next project was a bowl of half-eaten chili sprouting with cigarette butts. Along with most of the other diner employees, even the smokers, Larry looked forward to the ban on smoking in New York City restaurants that would go into force in a little more than a year. Larry dumped a load of abrasive cleanser onto the butt-encrusted chili, a disgusting mess indeed, yet not as nauseating as his next project: a plate of pancakes soaked by an old woman with a nosebleed.

As he chiseled the chili like a quarryman, Larry queried the busboy. “Hey Pedro. This friend of yours – does he make decent money? I mean, does he find enough winning tickets to make it worthwhile?”

“Sure man. And my name is Pablo, not Pedro, fool. Why can’t choo remember that, old man? You a grifo or somet’ing? You got de Alzheimer’s?”

“Sorry, amigo,” replied Larry sheepishly.

Pablo's explanation of the workings of the stooping trade persuaded Larry that it might possibly generate a viable supplemental income. The next afternoon before starting his shift at the diner he rode the bus to an OTB parlor downtown. Although Larry recognized that crawling around in a public place picking up other peoples' garbage was decidedly unglamorous, he remained hopeful that there might be an adventuresome side to it. Kind of like what those alien-looking whack-jobs did at Coney Island and the Jersey Shore – combing the beach with metal detectors, wandering silently in their own little world listening for telltale clicks through the earphones pinching their heads. Such beachcombers are often the objects of scathing ridicule until they unearth a diamond ring or a Rolex watch.

On the bus, Larry daydreamed about a happier period of his life when he was seven and his now-deceased brother was nine, and the pair searched excitedly on Easter Sunday morning for hard-boiled eggs dyed in the pastel colors of Lent. Maybe that's what stooping would be like – a treasure hunt amidst the tattered furniture. Larry was already imagining the numerous trips he would make each day to the cage to cash in his substantial winnings.

Larry was decidedly upbeat when he walked up to the smudged, fingerprinted glass doors of OTB. He stepped into the noisy, smoky, claustrophobic parlor and was instantly assaulted by a cacophony of cheers and swearing, noisy TV monitors, and the ubiquitous "Call to the Post" fanfare. The place was a beehive of activity. Then reality rudely intruded, dramatically curbing Larry's enthusiasm. Suddenly it occurred to him that he couldn't simply drop to his knees right then and there and begin rummaging around on the floor like a beggar just in from

Calcutta. It would take time to become a stooper.

Larry decided to spend the next six hours betting and losing like a normal schnook. He repeated this process for 13 consecutive days, slowly and methodically establishing his right to be there. He lost the equivalent of entire paycheck those first two weeks building credibility at the parlor. He carefully began to split the time between betting and stooping, incrementally increasing his dedication to the latter enterprise. With time he completed the transition from routine bettor to tolerated stooper, eventually ceasing to wager altogether. And soon he found Pablo to be correct; it *was* possible to supplement his income this way. Larry was pulling down between \$200 and \$300 a week on average – less than minimum wage, but it was tax free and the endeavor kept him out of the bars during the long, lonely cold days that dawned with stultifying regularity in the Northeast. Between working at the diner and stooping at OTB, Larry's days were gainfully occupied. He was content and he even believed he could be happy if it weren't for Vic the Prick and his relentless bullying.

Whereas the bulk of the betting denizens of OTB were preoccupied with the thoroughbred, quarter horse and harness races televised from tracks around the country, and couldn't care less about an unobtrusive soul picking up the detritus of their communal misfortune, a few patrons considered the stooper a nuisance, a pox on the human gene pool. To them, stoopers represented the unsavory, soft underbelly of a declining civilization, symbolic of everything that was wrong with the once-great nation of the United States of America – no more than leeches sucking blood from honest, tax-paying citizens. And as

such they deserved to be punished and humiliated. That was certainly Vic's frame of mind.

Vic didn't visit OTB every day like many of the bettors, but he showed up regularly – always accompanied by one or more of his sycophants – to collect debts and reconcile gambling activity with his clients. He took an instant disliking to newcomer Larry: mostly because Larry was a low-life stooper, but also because like a stupid barnyard animal he accepted without complaint the abuse Vic dished out. Vic would step on Larry's fingers and drop lit cigarettes onto his back. He verbally insulted Larry, derisively calling him "Ajax," for to crawl on the filthy OTB floor he had to be "stronger than dirt." Vic once encouraged Dougie to defile a race ticket with dog shit and place it near the self-checker machine where Larry would be inclined to pick it up; they waited and watched for Larry to retrieve the soiled ticket, notice the stain, and recoil in disgust when he sniffed his fingers. Vic guffawed at the sight until uncontrollable coughing took over the outburst.

Vic laid on the treatment any time he encountered Larry in the parlor – sometimes issuing nothing more than a verbal insult, sometimes playing a mean, practical joke. Once in a while, especially if he was in a sour mood Vic might get physical, shoving Larry out of his way or booting him in the ass when he was down on all fours. Larry considered stooping at other OTB parlors but the couple times he tried, he encountered stiff resistance from the established stoopers who, like territorial animals that urinate to designate the boundaries of their domains, expressed extreme displeasure at the intrusion of an interloper.

Larry went to OTB fearing Vic's presence, and this mounting, palpable fear served to alter the ratio of Vic's disdain for him.

Vic still disliked Larry because he was a low-life stooper, but he hated him even more now because he accepted the abuse without complaint.



Vic arrived in his shiny Mercedes 500 SEL at Maddie's six-story walk-up tenement building on the Lower East Side. Most people would never consider parking a late-model luxury automobile on the street in this dicey neighborhood, but the owner of this particular vehicle was Vic the Prick, a man who accepted shit from no one. And driving the vehicle for Vic this evening was Ray, his beefy, intimidating aide. No one in their right mind would fuck around with this Mercedes.

Vic was looking forward to his first date with Maddie. From the back seat Vic asked Ray, "Do you think it's greedy to get laid on the first date?"

"I would say that he who waits until the second date is a virtuous man."

"Really? I was gonna say he's a chump, but I'll settle for virtuous. Virtuous tonight might pay off double next time." Vic stepped out of the car and adjusted his tie in the side view mirror. Standing in front of the entrance to the 19th Century era tenement building, he glanced up at its once-elegant façade now defiled by ugly air-conditioning units and a rusting switchback fire-escape. He muttered to himself, "What a dump," then called back to Ray, "Cover me. I'm goin' in."

Vic entered the spare lobby, a dim space poorly illuminated by a buzzing, circular fluorescent light that looked like the halo of a fallen angel. The carcasses of hundreds of bugs that once

flitted about the halo hung suspended in webs spun between the light and the ceiling. Vic scanned an array of names of the building's residents, finally identifying Maddie's. The number of her apartment indicated she lived on the top floor. Vic rang the bell and through the crackling intercom summoned his new girlfriend. Maddie walked barefoot down the stairs dressed in a little black dress that showcased her shapely legs; they had achieved near-perfect definition from ascending and descending the six-floors daily. She carried a pair of white strass encrusted black metallic high-heels in a small, plastic Gristede's grocery bag. When she reached the ground floor, she donned the heels, increasing her stature by four inches. As she exited the stairwell and walked into the tiny lobby Vic let out a long, slow wolf whistle. "You look like a million bucks, Maddie. Good enough to eat. I hope you're hungry and rested, 'cause I've got quite an evenin' planned for us." He wrapped his arm casually around her waist and escorted her to the Mercedes where Ray was waiting for them by the open rear door.

As one of seven children born into a poor family that subsisted on what little they could sell from their dairy farm near the Canadian border in New York's Jefferson County, Maddie was decidedly unfamiliar with power and wealth. Although she was almost 34 and had lived on her own for the past eight years following the bankruptcy of the family farm and, shortly thereafter, the suicide of her father, Maddie had not made the acquaintance of any sons and daughters of privilege. In fact, her circle of friends was fairly limited, consisting mainly of financially-strapped co-workers. It was only in the last year that Maddie had made the big move to Manhattan from her quaint and boring rental in Ozone Park several blocks from Aqueduct

Raceway directly beneath the flight path of jets taking off from JFK Airport. And in that time, her ability to revel in the glorious nightlife of the world's greatest city had been seriously restricted by her third-shift schedule at the hospital. So it was a thrilling notion to be entertained by a big shot like Vic. Maddie noted the fine appointments of the huge sedan, and the succulent smell of the leather seats. "This is a beautiful car, Vic. Is it a Lincoln?"

Responding to what he took to be a snarky remark, Vic retorted, "Lincoln? Hell no. Are you kidding? It's a Mercedes." Then by the innocent look on Maddie's face he recognized his pique was completely unjustified. He quickly offered an explanation. "I mean, I don't drive American cars anymore. Not since the Arabs cut off the oil and exposed the shit that was comin' outta Detroit. German engineering – that's the stuff, Maddie. Ray knows, don't you Ray?"

Keeping his eyes fixed on the congested cross-town Houston Street traffic slithering before him, Ray agreed, "Yes sir, Mr. Vic."

"Ray's a full-breed Kraut," said Vic. "His grandfather was some badass Nazi, ain't that right, Ray?"

"Waffen SS."

"Right. Waffen SS. A real badass." Vic's voice trailed off. Clearly, he thought, Maddie was too young or too disinterested in history to have a clue about what the Waffen SS was. "Anyway, Maddie, I hope you like a good steak, 'cause I got reservations at this killer place uptown."

Maddie replied hesitantly, "Uh . . . steak? I'm sort of a non-meat eater, Vic."

"Really? Well they serve seafood too, but they hate to do it." As he put his hand on her knee, Vic called out to Ray, "Ray, forget Gallagher's. Take us to Aquavit instead." As Ray recalculated the

route, Vic retrieved his cell phone and placed a call.

Ray shuttled the couple through the narrow streets of NoHo and then up Park Avenue to 54th where they arrived at Aquavit, New York's premier Scandinavian restaurant. Vic and Maddie walked in and were promptly greeted by a fawning Maitre D'. "Mr. Schuyler. It's so nice to have you back with us again." Pleased to receive the ass-kissing treatment in Maddie's presence, Vic produced a one hundred dollar bill and as he handed it to the Maitre D' replied, "Thanks for obligin' my last-minute request, Davey. Listen, we're gonna have a drink at the bar first." Discretely accepting the tip, Maitre D' Davey replied, "Certainly, sir. We'll seat you whenever you and your lovely guest are ready." Reminded of Vic's compensatory tip of five one-hundred dollar bills for retrieving the bloody shirt in the ER, Maddie was again impressed with his liberal disgorgement of large sums of money.

Vic deferred to Maddie to order her drink first. She hesitated for a few moments before settling on a Cosmopolitan, and as soon as she said it she regretted it as a potential bourgeois blunder. She remembered reading an article about how the treacly drink had overtaken the country, from Ocala to Omaha, and was now featured in such lowbrow establishments as TGI Fridays and Applebee's. Vic didn't seem to mind for he barked out a clipped order: "Give me a Maker's Mark Manhattan straight up, no cherries."

After the bartender walked away Vic swiveled in his barstool toward Maddie. The way she was perched on the stool caused her short dress to ride high to mid-thigh. Vic made no attempt to disguise his leer.

"So, Maddie. You look fantastic. Great legs. Do you work out?"

“Uh, no . . . I guess climbing six flights of stairs every day keeps me in shape.”

“Wow. Six floors? No elevator, huh?” Vic lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out of the side of his mouth across the bar just in time to envelope the bartender’s head with a cloud of blue toxins. “How come you work in that hospital, Maddie? You shouldn’t be doin’ janitor work. It’s beneath you.”

Used to defending her employment in the environmental services industry, Maddie answered non-defensively, “Well, I’d rather be painting and seeing my art hung in the big galleries, but this is New York City. Artists must suffer, don’t you know?”

“Suffering is for losers, Maddie,” responded Vic brusquely. “It ain’t dignified.”

No one had ever bluntly called her work undignified, and even though she had to concede the veracity of the observation she was reluctant to engage in this line of conversation. Fortunately the bartender interrupted with the delivery of two tall, handsome, cocktails that shimmered in the pinpoint halogen lights above the bar – Vic’s Manhattan a savory amber and her Cosmo a girlish pink. Vic raised his drink, Maddie did likewise, and the couple clinked the rims of their conic glasses. Maddie took a sip and remarked, “Mmmm. This is the best Cosmo I’ve ever tasted.”

“You stick with me, babe, and you’ll get to sample the best of a lot of things.” Vic sampled his Manhattan. “You been livin’ in the City a long time?”

“I moved from Upstate New York – a farm – to Queens. Then a few months ago I moved to the Lower East Side. I’m trying to get closer to the art scene.”

“You’re not gonna get too close to the art scene workin’ in

the emergency room, Maddie. And you won't get any inspiration there either, unless you're looking to be one of those fucked up artists like Andy Warhol."

"You don't like . . . uh, what do you do, Vic?" Maddie took another sip. *No sense getting into a pointless argument over art.*

Vic replied with a measured balance of confidence, pride and ennui, "I'm an investor. Private equity, leveraged buy-outs, that sort of thing. Mostly boring stuff to grunts who don't get it, but it pays the bills."

Continuing on the safe path of standard first-date questions, Maddie asked, "Do you live in the City?"

"Hell, yes. Is there some other place?" Vic smiled. "I got a swell co-op on Gramercy Park. I'll show it to you when the night is over. And you won't have to walk up a single flight of stairs. How about that?"

"Sounds wonderful."

"You don't have to get up early tomorrow, do you, Maddie?"

"No. I usually work third shift. Why?"

"Good. I want to take you to this jazz club across town after dinner. And after that, who knows?" Vic finished his Manhattan in one final gulp. "I'm starvin'. Let's get our table." Noticing that Maddie had barely made a dent in her Cosmo, Vic called to the bartender. "Hey pal, tell 'em we're ready to take our table now. And have the waitress bring her drink over."

Vic introduced Maddie to gravlax, bouillabaisse, risotto, foie gras and, of course, the signature Scandinavian liqueur, caraway-infused Aquavit – the water of life. Pleasantly sated, the couple went to Iridium Jazz club on Broadway. Because it was a Monday, the only night Maddie could reliably count on

as a day off, Vic decided to take her to see Les Paul, the world-famous guitarist and inventor of the electric guitar, and his jazz trio who regularly performed on the first day of the week. For Maddie, just to set foot in a jazz club commanding a \$20 per-person cover charge and a two-drink minimum was exciting enough; she wouldn't have been any less thrilled had the Les Paul Trio been replaced by a jukebox. And when the final set wrapped at 2 a.m., Vic and Maddie enjoyed Italian ices in Times Square as they watched tourists and drunken sailors rush about beneath multi-storied, electronic billboards which illuminated the scene so brightly that it seemed to be mid-afternoon. At the end of the evening Vic dismissed Ray and brought Maddie back to his well-appointed co-op apartment in a pre-war, 24-hour doorman building in Gramercy Park where he invited her in for a nightcap. Semi-intoxicated, he wanted badly to screw her right then and there. The curvy figure that had so mesmerized Vic back in the emergency room when she wore her green smock-like uniform seemed doubly irresistible now that she had on the sexy black dress and metallic heels. But throughout the course of the night Vic sensed that Maddie, more than ten years his junior, was awestruck; the big, chauffeured Mercedes, the profligate spending, the apparent taste for culture – all of this impressed Maddie immensely. Vic decided not to squander the respect he had earned by acting like a horny teenager. He dialed down the phony charm and convinced Maddie to come up for one drink and to check out the view of the park. And then he drove her home. Maddie climbed the 120 steps to her apartment, shed her clothing, and dropped exhausted into bed. Wired by the evening's events, it took her more than an hour to fall asleep.

Although he was an aficionado of kink, a habitual patron of call girls – Asians mostly – and a conqueror of loose women he routinely encountered late at night in the dingy bars and poker rooms he frequented, Vic treated Maddie special. At least in the beginning. Once a week, Vic took Maddie out for an exciting evening on the town to enjoy the cuisine of top-rated restaurants and the high-energy buzz of exclusive nightclubs. Sometimes on the days she worked the nightshift at the hospital Vic would accompany her on a noontime stroll along the East River or by the restored piers on the far West Side, to be followed by a lengthy afternoon of lovemaking at his co-op. Nothing kinky with Maddie, though. He didn't want to sully his relationship with her, nor did he need to resort to props when he was with her. Maddie's olive skin, voluptuous curves and toned legs obviated the need for the dildos, ropes and vacuum pumps that Vic normally employed with his sleazy partners who accepted the denigration in exchange for the right compensatory gesture. Maddie cherished her relationship with the outwardly-cultivated Mr. Schuyler.

Maddie was working on a sketch when the doorbell rang. She communicated through the crackly intercom to the caller in the lobby. It was Vic. Surprised and delighted by his unexpected arrival, Maddie enthusiastically buzzed him in. Forgetting that Maddie's dumpy tenement building was erected before the invention of the elevator, Vic bemoaned the prospect of climbing six flights. He wasn't morbidly obese or calcified of bone, but years of smoking, drinking and pampering by his hangers-on had diminished his stamina significantly. He momentarily considered summoning Maddie to the lobby before chiding

himself for thinking like a weakling. The image of Ajax popped into his head and that sealed the deal. Vic would climb the stairs. He rationalized that the exercise would do him good. *If I wanna keep bonin' Maddie, I'm gonna have to get in shape.* Undaunted, Vic climbed the first of 120 steps on his way to Maddie's tiny one-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor. Half way up Vic was heaving. He screeched to a halt on the landing, bent hard at the waist and put his hands on his knees. Gasping for air, Vic felt a sharp pain in his left arm and thought he might puke. *Fuck!* He thought about lying down but the floor was littered by what appeared to be the severed legs and wings of cockroaches. *Fuck! Calm down!* Regulating his breathing in Lamaze-like fashion seemed to help, and soon Vic was again gaining altitude. In what seemed to take an eternity Vic summited the last three floors and shuffled slowly to Maddie's apartment. He took another minute to blot the beads of sweat from his head and neck, and then knocked on the door.

Maddie cracked the door which was still secured with the chain lock. Vic had taken so long to arrive that she thought he might have changed his mind about visiting. When she saw Vic's reddened face she exclaimed, "Vic! What a nice surprise!" Maddie stepped out into the hallway, wrapped her arms around Vic's neck and planted a kiss on his moistened lips. She wore a long tee shirt and nothing else. Fearing he might collapse under her weight, Vic reached behind his head and unfastened her grip. "Take it easy babe. I'm a bit short on O-2 right now." Maddie took Vic by the hand and led him into her apartment. "C'mon in and rest. Give me your coat. I thought you were going to Atlantic City today."

Still puffing slightly, he said, "I *am* . . . going to AC today. I

came by . . . to see if you . . . wanted to come along.” He plopped into an overstuffed and threadbare wing-back chair that Maddie bought for \$5 from the Salvation Army and slumped low, his knees akimbo.

“Really! I’d love to. I’ve never been to Atlantic City, unless you count playing Monopoly.” Maddie smiled and then frowned. “Wait. Shit. I have to work at the hospital tonight.”

Annoyed by the ever-looming intrusion of Maddie’s job, Vic replied, “Oh, for Chrissake. Fuck that dirty job, Maddie. Tell ‘em you quit.”

Speaking over her shoulder as she hung up Vic’s houndstooth overcoat, Maddie said, “That’s easy for you to say. Who’s going to pay the rent on this palace?” She walked over from the closet, knelt down in front of Vic and put her hands on his knees. “I can’t quit, Vic.”

“Yes you can. I said so. Listen, I don’t want my girl rootin’ around in a hospital, gettin’ exposed to soylent green and all that shit.” Perhaps because Maddie knelt before him like a servile doe-eyed concubine preparing to perform artful fellatio, Vic suddenly felt magnanimous. “Listen, I’ll pay your fuckin’ rent. Then maybe you can take some of those classes at NYU. Get that art degree, maybe.”

Maddie jumped to her feet and shrieked, “Are you serious, Vic? Oh my God! That would be fantastic!” She jumped into Vic’s lap and reinstated the kiss-and-headlock hold on him. Because he wasn’t expecting it, he let out a grunt like a bent-over octogenarian trying to force out the last inch of a log following four days of constipation.

“Errmff. Are you tryin’ to kill me? I just humped my ass up six flights. I could drop like a stone. My heart could explode just

like that.” Vic snapped his fingers to emphasize the point. “Is that what you want?”

“Oh, dear. No. Please, relax.” She stroked his face in a way that made Vic feel old. “I bought a bottle of Maker’s Mark. I know you like it. It’s in the kitchen. Can I make you a Manhattan?”

“I’ll do it. You just hurry up and get dressed. And call that hospital and put in your notice.”

Maddie headed for her bedroom. The tee shirt barely covered her ass. Reasonably recovered from his ascent to the upper reaches of the tenement building, Vic declared, “Damn, Maddie. You remind me of Hyapatia Lee.”

Because the name was unusual and because she couldn’t visualize the proper spelling, Maddie was flummoxed. “Who?”

“Hyapatia . . . ah, nevermind. Hey, I gotta use the bathroom. Hurry up so we can hit the road. Ray’s waiting downstairs in the Mercedes.”

Vic had standing business in Atlantic City, making book, collecting debts and playing in high-stakes card games for fun and profit. On this particular trip Vic also planned to introduce Maddie to some of his garrulous associates and their brassy girlfriends – people he had so far largely shielded her from. It was always his desire in the beginning to enjoy time alone with Maddie, unaccompanied by other couples, to establish a baseline relationship with her. In fact, other than Ray, whom Maddie thought of solely as Vic’s chauffeur, she had met none of his sycophants. Now the time had come to reveal the real Vic Schuyler. Maybe not the full-fledged Vic the Prick, not yet, but someone closer to the hard-living thug he truly was. He had doubts that she would slip into his lifestyle seamlessly, but he also believed it was unsustainable to keep Maddie cosseted

for much longer. Maddie was essentially a farm girl raised just minutes from the Canadian border and despite having lived in New York for several years she had never really encountered its decadent side. But if the relationship were to continue on Vic would have to absorb her into his real world.

As the couple approached Atlantic City from the west with the brightly-lit skyline set in relief against the pitch-black ocean Vic took Maddie's hand and asked, "What'dya think, Maddie?"

"It's beautiful. I'm so excited."

"I'm gonna have to do a little business when we get there. I'll give you some money. You can play the slots."

"OK, Vic. I've never gambled before. I hope I don't lose all your money."

Although Vic hadn't planned on giving her much money he appreciated Maddie's genuine concern for the preservation of his investment. She didn't seem greedy and self-centered like so many women he knew who wouldn't piss on a man on fire if his financial portfolio didn't measure up. In a comforting voice, Vic replied, "Don't worry about it, baby. Beginners always win big."

"I sure hope so, Vic."

"Listen, when I'm done with business we'll hook up with some of my associates. You'll like it. We always have a good time." Vic studied Maddie's face for any signs of pushback and seeing none, he added, "Um, by the way, have you ever heard of bukkake, Maddie?"

"No, I don't think so? Is it a type of sushi?"



A few days after the Atlantic City excursion where she met the likes of Dougie, Eyebrow, Carl and Donnie, the real Ray, their tarted-up girlfriends and some of Vic's sorry clients who humbly approached Vic at his table to pay homage and debts, Maddie visited her friend Lisa in Hell's Kitchen to recall the trip and solicit reaction.

Maddie had met Lisa in the late 90s when the two worked together at a Starbucks on Austin Street in Queens – not the one near 71st Avenue but the one on 70th. Lisa typified the snobbish barista, as Starbucks' corporate marketing department insisted their coffee-slinger be called. It was with this same sort of arrogance that Starbucks had expunged from the vocabulary such commonly known cup sizes as medium and large and replaced them with the pseudo-Continental grande and venti.

Employment at Starbucks had molded Lisa's snobbery into a finely honed disposition – subtle, not too harsh, almost patrician. With only a pursed lip and an unblinking gaze Lisa served notice that anything less than exactitude in a customer's order would go unrewarded. An espresso, steamed milk, and foam, not sweetened in any way is a Latte, not a Cappuccino, which is like a Latte only with much more foam, normally half milk, half foam, unless “wet” or “dry” is specified in which a dry cappuccino has more foam and a wet cappuccino has less. Lisa expected customers to recognize the fine line between a very wet Cappuccino and an extra-foam Latte. Customers who fumbled an order invariably blamed themselves for their shortcomings, and in an act of contrition would tip twice what they believed to be appropriate.

One day a stumpy customer wearing a raincoat and holding a rolled-up copy of Foreign Affairs read Maddie the riot act for

bollixing up his Cappuccino; he claimed he asked for no milk, only foam, and that Maddie – unworthy of being called a barista according to the irate man – had made it way too wet. Lisa intervened, and in front of a long line of laptop-toting denizens of Forest Hills demanded of the man if he had ever heard of an Espresso Macchiato, and when he demurred with a hesitant stammer she called for the next person in line to step forward. Swept aside like an inconsequential fool, the man shuffled out the door to the whispered commentary of the haughty patrons.

On their break Maddie thanked Lisa for defusing the great Cappuccino ordeal, and Lisa confided that the best way to deal with such clowns as her ruffled customer was to play the role of royal Queen Victoria. They shared a few laughs and exchanged phone numbers, and later became good friends.

Lisa poured two stemmed glasses of a pretty good Vinho Verde and handed one to Maddie who was sitting at the end of the convertible sofa by the window. She took a sip of the slightly-greenish white wine and smacked her lips. With the unintentional, slightly-affected manner of a wine snob, a habit newly-acquired from hanging out with Vic and his modest collection of clarets, Maddie noted, “Mmmm. Very nice, Lisa. Crisp and, uh, I can taste, uh, apricots? Vanilla, maybe? I can’t be sure. It’s good.” She sniffed the wine and took another sip. Lisa sat down on the other end of the sofa with her glass, curled her unshod feet beneath her somewhat bony ass, and replied, “Yeah, it’s not bad. It’s \$8.50 a bottle with the case discount. That’s the main thing.” She took a sip and asked, “So how was Atlantic City? Did you buy Boardwalk and Park Place? Did Vic get to Short Line?”

“Short Line?”

“Isn’t it third base on the Monopoly board?” Lisa looked aside and thought for a second, coming back with a clarification. “No, maybe third base is Jail. Nevermind. Tell me – how was your trip?”

Happy to be asked a question which she accepted as permission from Lisa to initiate a conversation about her troubles with Vix, Maddie said, “I’m not sure what to make of it Lisa. Vic’s a really generous guy. He buys me clothes and jewelry, and takes me to nice restaurants. He even pays my rent.”

“Quite the sugar-daddy. So what’s the downside?”

“Nothing, really. I was able to quit my job at the hospital, thanks to Vic. I’m taking a course at NYU. I even have some studio space there to do my painting.”

Lisa slid ever-so-infinitesimally closer to Maddie, and as she nonchalantly examined the color of the wine against the light of the window facing out onto Ninth Avenue, she said, “OK, I’ll ask again. What’s the downside?”

Maddie appreciated Lisa’s bluntness; it showed she cared, or at least had a voyeuristic interest. It was what Maddie came to admire about Lisa when the two peddled overpriced coffee and stale cookies. Lisa was a brick-bat pragmatist who cut through bullshit and excoriated the speakers of it. “Well, things seem to be changing between us. He doesn’t seem to like being alone together anymore. Whenever we go out – which isn’t very often – it’s always with his buddies and their brassy girlfriends.”

“Shocking! Let me guess. You got stuck in Atlantic City with the brassy chicks while the boys played with their toys.” Lisa made a passing masturbatory gesture that Maddie missed completely.

“Sort of. After making me wait forever in the hotel room,

Vic called me from the bar. He told me to come down right away. So when I got there he was surrounded by his buddies – Ray, Dougie, Carl, a guy he calls Eyebrow – and they’re debating which strip club to go to.”

“Nice.” Lisa reached for the bottle of wine and even though Maddie had hardly dented her drink, she asked, “More wine, Mad?”

“Uh, no. Thanks.”

Lisa poured the wine to the brim of her glass. “Go on, Maddie.”

“Well, I protested – mildly, believe me – and Vic got really pissed off at me. How I was ruining the fun, and besides it was up to him to decide what everyone did, so I should just shut up.” Maddie sipped her wine and continued, “I’m not sure, Lisa, but I swear Ray clicked his heels like Vic was Hitler. Scary – Ray is scary. He has some kind of Nazi background, I think. Anyway, I decided it was better to go to the strip club than complain, but it wasn’t my thing. Even the music there sucked.”

Lisa was about to ask if the strippers wore jackboots but Maddie pressed on with an off-the-wall question. “Have you ever heard of bukkake, Lisa?”

“What? Boo . . . what?”

“Neither did I. Vic mentioned it in passing a couple times. I thought it was some kind of exotic cuisine. It took awhile because I didn’t know how to spell it, but I was finally able to Google the meaning.” Maddie imperceptibly widened her eyes when she said “Google the meaning.” Although it was Lisa’s usual style to adopt a certain elegant ennui when confronted by unfamiliar subjects, she abruptly swung her legs out from under her fanny and planted her feet on the floor. The widened eyes gave it away

– bukkake had to be something evil, exotic, erotic, enigmatic – anything but pragmatic.

“And . . . ?”

Although she felt she should hesitate to express moral turpitude, Maddie blurted, “Well, it’s when a bunch of guys cum on someone’s face over and over again. The girls in the pictures I saw looked like hot-crossed buns.”

Lisa sat back and closed her eyes. She stroked the stem of the wine glass and said in a low voice, “Sounds yummy.”

“C’mon Lisa.”

“OK, OK,” replied Lisa, attentive to Maddie’s irritation with what must she must have perceived to be mockery, although it was a genuine reaction to the concept of a cum-covered face. “Your boyfriend wants you to let all his buddies cum on your face. I would say that seems extreme. I suppose he also wants to videotape it too. So what are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. I just want things to go back to they way they were when we first started going out.”

“You and every other woman in the world. What you should do, the next time he makes a plan, is to tell him you won’t go unless it’s a quiet date – and tell him only one cumshot allowed.”

With resignation in her voice, Maddie said, “It’s too late. He’s dragging me to a football game tomorrow.”

“With Dougie and Eyelid and Ray-boy and . . . ?”

“Yeah. Them.”

After having bagged his prey, Vic’s affection for Maddie waned. He still took Maddie out to dinner and drinks but now the couple was invariably accompanied by his sycophantic sidekicks, and conversations tended toward coarser subjects.

Maddie noted a common thread through the men's fascination for gambling, violence, lascivious behavior and quasi-criminal enterprises. Rather than go to urbane jazz clubs and attend art gallery openings, Vic and his gang would drag their girlfriends to strip clubs and sporting events – if the men brought the women along at all. More often Vic would leave Maddie behind while he stayed out all evening, sometimes staggering into her apartment long past dawn smelling of bourbon, cigarettes and, suspected but unconfirmed by Maddie, female companionship.

Vic could become verbally abusive if he assessed Maddie's performance on any undertaking to be substandard. If she fumbled a menial task – stacking the dishes in an disorderly fashion, say, or incorrectly pairing his socks – he would accuse her of purposely flubbing tasks like an inexperienced effete to hide her past as a poor farm girl. On the other hand if she didn't grasp a concept that called for intellectual aptitude – calculating betting odds, for instance – he ridiculed her ignorance, citing her past employment as a lowly janitor as proof of her stupidity. Maddie was incapable of doing anything right; she was either an aloof esthete or a backward bumpkin, depending on the circumstances. It was by this methodical degradation that Vic wore Maddie down into another compliant member of his entourage, a sex toy when he needed release and a verbal punching bag when he wanted to feel superior.

The last evening on the town Vic and Maddie shared together started with a festive tailgate party with three other couples in the parking lot of the Meadowlands prior to a 1 p.m. game between the Jets and the Cleveland Browns. Vic was a huge fan of the Browns. He once lived in the small town of Ashtabula, Ohio, 60 miles northeast of Cleveland until his father died of

exposure to asbestos from working in a mill in Youngstown when Vic was 11 years old. Although Vic's guests for the game – Ray, Dougie, their girlfriends, a business associate from Long Island named Earl and his flaming-red-haired wife, Stacie – were all Jets supporters, Vic insisted on flying the colors and logo of the Browns from the van he rented for the occasion. Numerous New York fans jeered Vic as they strolled past, but he merely smiled and smugly drank his Old Fashioneds, tapping the tasty cocktail from a two-gallon thermos.

“Go back to Ohio you brown piece of shit!” came the first salvo from a stocky passerby wearing a green jersey with the name Pennington on the back. Another beefy man who apparently worshipped Wayne Chrebet laughed at the taunt and added, “Go back to Ohio, ya fuckin’ tourist!” The two fans high-fived and wandered off. Maddie sought refuge inside the van nursing a sickly-sweet white Zinfandel that Stacie had brought along.

When the two Jets fans were suitably out of range, Earl said, “Jesus, Vic. Did you have to turn the van into a Macy’s Day Parade float? We’re gonna catch shit all afternoon.”

“Just drink your drink. All you should be worryin’ about is how you’re gonna pay me five grand when my Brownies kick your ass.”

In the week leading up to the game Vic had made numerous bets on the Browns totaling more than \$20,000 with dozens of clients, confident that his favorite team would vanquish “Gang Green.” In fact, Vic was so confident that at halftime with the Browns down 21 to 6 and Earl commenting about Cleveland’s sluggishness, he offered to up the ante. “Listen, Earl. You wanna go double? Right now? Ten grand says the Browns win.” Not wanting to incite a confrontation with his host, Earl responded,

“C’mon, Vic. Let’s leave it. I mean, look, the Browns are down by two touchdowns. They’re sucking wind.”

“Are you tryin’ to save me from myself? Is that it? Is that the idea?” Then with the force of authority, Vic shouted, “I’m tellin’ you – the cocksuckin’ Jets are going down!”

An offended Jet fan called down from behind Vic’s party, “*You’re* going down, asshole! Browns suck dick!”

Vic faced the man and his beer-soaked compatriots, grabbed his crotch and spat back, “Right here, Jersey boy!”

Terrified, Maddie tugged on the edge of Vic’s overcoat and pleaded wide-eyed, “Vic . . . please.”

Vic turned his attention back to Earl. “Are you gonna take my bet or not, pussy?”

“C’mon Vic.”

“Yes or no? Are you a fan or not? You gonna take my bet?”

Irritated by Vic’s relentless taunting, Earl succumbed. “Fuckin’ straight.”

Vic and Earl shook hands over the modified wager; Maddie and Stacie shook their heads as though their men had morphed into two-year old boys.

An hour later, everyone in the stadium was standing. Somehow with 16 seconds left on the clock the Browns were now leading 24 to 21. The Jets lined up to attempt a last-second field goal and when the Browns blocked it to win by three points, Vic jumped onto his seat and started taunting all the neighboring Jets fans who had been razzing him the entire game. With a swagger he repeatedly informed Earl, “You owe me ten grand, pal.” Earl was steaming mad but he tried to hide it, whereas Maddie made it abundantly clear she was mortified. Not much of a football fan, she failed to appreciate Vic’s puerile behavior.

With a wary eye trained on a couple of beery Jets fans staring with evident hatred for Vic, Maddie implored Ray, “You need to get your boss out of here.”

Avoiding a teetering fracas the eight-some piled into Vic’s rented van. Snarled in a big traffic jam the Browns-regaled vehicle lurched slowly out of the parking lot as angry Jets fans threw beer cups and bottles at it. Eventually the traffic thinned and Ray drove back to Manhattan to Gallagher’s Steak House on 52nd. Founded in 1927 and repurposed as a speakeasy during Prohibition, Gallagher’s was the consummate real-man’s steakhouse. Red checkerboard tablecloths sat atop the tables and mounted in a long line along the dark cherry-wood walls were vintage photos of movie stars, sports figures and celebrities who had dined at the place: George Raft, Robert Ripley, Jackie Onassis, Paul Newman and Joe DiMaggio. A signature feature of the restaurant was a dry aging room set at a constant 36 degrees where USDA Prime meats sat undisturbed for weeks while they cured to perfection. In an ingenious stroke of marketing Gallagher’s displayed the thick, purplish, marbled meats to passersby on the sidewalk through a large plate glass window. This was the first thing Maddie noticed when she climbed out of the third row of seats in the van. As she peered sullenly into the aging room she saw the image of her reflected face superimposed upon the shelves of beef. With palpable disappointment in her voice, she remarked to Stacie, “I guess he forgot again that I don’t eat meat.”

Twenty-five thousand dollars richer, Vic magnanimously announced he would treat for dinner, adding with a wry grin that it had been made possible through the generous support of Earl’s untimely half-time wager. “You owe me ten grand, pal.”

Everyone laughed loudly, and like a good sport Earl chuckled too, trying desperately to avoid his wife's angry glare made more fearsome by her flaming red hair. A sixty-something veteran waiter in a white shirt, black necktie and a long, crisp white apron came to take drink orders as other similarly clad waiters ambled by, delivering massive portions of sizzling beef. Maddie came to believe Vic took her to steak houses just to annoy her. Red meat was the staple product at Gallagher's, the only food on the menu that management really wanted patrons to consume, and because Maddie never ate the stuff she had to endure scowls from the misogynist waiters whenever she ordered chicken or salmon or some other non-ruminant.

Scanning the menu, Maddie asked Vic, "Do they serve anything other than steak in this place?" Sensing the looming threat of a buzzkill, Vic replied swiftly, "Oh stop whinin', will ya? Order a fuckin' potato." Then to the rest of the table he announced, "They have a killer Porterhouse, and the filet mignon is fuckin' huge. It's about the size of the football the Browns shoved up the Jet's ass." Maddie rolled her eyes and snapped the menu shut.

The atmosphere in Gallagher's was decidedly über-masculine – the kind of place that attracted bond traders, lawyers, and talent agents who drank expensive Scotch and boasted loudly of accomplishments that always seemed to come at someone else's expense. Like this evening at the next table over. Six men in expensive, dark suits, their ties loosened about their necks and top shirt buttons unfastened, guffawed boisterously at each other's lewd jokes and tales of conquests. Their table was littered with at least 30 glasses of different sizes and shapes containing varying quantities and types of fluids. More than once the

restaurant manager had to politely ask one of them – a portly, bald guy sporting a Peter Boyle-style ring of hair – to extinguish his Cohiba. Conversation centered on ostentatious purchases, exotic vacations, real estate, New York sports, and poontang. Every other word was “fuck” or a derivation. Not that the discussion at Vic’s table was any more refined and cerebral. As always the men dominated the action, leaving the girls to kibitz among themselves – a situation in which Maddie had difficulty engaging. Vic practically replayed the entire Jets-Browns game, and then he segued into the previous day’s Breeders Cup race in which the long-shot Volponi thoroughly beat out the favorite, Medaglia d’Oro – the winner in August’s Travers Stakes at Saratoga – who ran second. Of course Vic bragged about how he had hedged some decent money on the 43-to-1 Volponi. Dougie bemoaned the fact that he had put down and lost several hundred on War Emblem, the season’s dominating horse that had won both the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness.

“I loved that horse,” whined Dougie, “I can’t believe he came in eighth.”

“Listen, moron, you’d do better if you pulled your head out the horse’s ass and looked at him from the outside,” replied Vic to Dougie’s chagrin and to the delight of the others, including a couple of the schadenfreude-hungry guys at the next table who overheard the putdown. Once again the butt of Vic’s barbs. “After he nearly fell down at the Belmont, I lost all confidence,” explained Vic.

Resigned, Dougie capitulated, “Yeah, you’re probably right, Vic. I guess I just can’t pick ‘em.”

A bit lubed up on Stoli, Ray piled on, adding, “Shit, Doug, I bet Ajax makes more at the track than you do.” Vic laughed

approvingly at Ray's hypothesis, and lit a cigarette.

The reference to "Ajax," a strangely-named character unknown to most around the table became the launching point for a several funny stories – funny to all but Maddie who found the depiction of pranks and other sundry maltreatment cruel and debasing.

"So anyways," said Vic, "Ajax picks up the ticket, 'cause Dougie put it right by the checker machine where the jagoff hangs out, and he notices somethin' smeared on it. He looks around the room, y'know, to see if anyone's watchin'. Then he sniffs his fingers. You shoulda seen his face." Vic broke into a boisterous guffaw. "He sniffed a big whiff of dogshit. I almost pissed my pants." The whole table except Maddie roared. One of the businessmen sitting at the table next to Vic's leaned over and commented, "That's fucking hilarious. Sorry, we couldn't help overhearing. Classic." Vic basked in the compliment.

In a gambit to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the others after Vic's putdown Dougie recounted the time he spilled hot coffee down Ajax's neck. "Damn, you shoulda seen him howl. Just like a scalded dog." He flashed a toothy grin expecting hoots and hollers of laughter, but instead received a couple nervous chuckles. Vic smirked and looked down at his plate, somewhat embarrassed for Dougie. An uncomfortable silence ensued before the guests resumed eating. The eavesdropping businessmen turned back to the conversation at their own table. Finding no humor in the deliberate scalding of another person, Maddie exhaled an audible sound of disgust and abruptly headed for the ladies' room; the way she threw the napkin on her chair and left in a huff clearly communicated her displeasure with Dougie's story and the general tenor of all the fuck-over-

Ajax stories. When Maddie was out of earshot Vic informed the others at the two tables that her picture is in the dictionary next to the word “cunt.”

From Gallagher’s, the gang headed farther west to a seedy section of town arriving at an unmarked, darkly-painted brick building that looked to have once been a warehouse or a meat packing plant. The dim streetlights gave the area a decidedly industrial look. Vic kept the destination a secret from his guests, saying only that he had a special treat in store for them. He pressed a button adjacent to the reinforced, dented steel door, and after a few seconds a large, black man who could have been Refrigerator Perry’s stunt double cracked the door. A thumping sound that had been barely discernible when the door was shut was now clearly identifiable as Donna Summer’s “She Works Hard for the Money” blaring from huge speakers trussed up near the ceiling. Vic handed the Fridge a laminated card, and after studying it for a second the big dude opened the door all the way and welcomed “Mr. Schuyler” and his party to the “Klit Kat Klub.” The Klit Kat Klub, a rowdy topless nightclub, was one of those uniquely Manhattan establishments – a place that placed no advertisements, published no telephone number, exhibited no signs, made no effort whatsoever to communicate its existence, and yet boasted a large, loyal clientele. More than sufficient to thrive and prosper. The club reminded Ray, whose ancestral family hailed from a small town outside Hamburg, of the Reeperbahn.

As soon as Maddie heard the thumping disco music and the loud bellows of drunken men and the lascivious squeals of siliconed women, she knew Vic had once again, despite her many protests, brought her to a strip club. She didn’t complain

though; in the same way Vic ignored her many protests, she knew he would ignore her complaints as well. A tall blonde in a teddy that barely kept her jugs from spilling out escorted the four couples to a table right next to the elevated dance floor.

When Maddie discerned the destination, she implored Vic, “Can’t we sit along the wall? I don’t want to be so close.”

“Shut up and sit down, Maddie. I can’t see the action from back there.”

Maddie looked at the other girls in the party, seeking some moral support, but received none. In fact, Dougie’s and Ray’s girlfriends, and Earl’s wife Stacie all appeared excited to be getting the VIP treatment at the club. And the club dished it out for good reason: management encouraged men to bring wives and girlfriends to help tamp down the image that the only patrons were skeezy, repressed sex addicts and compulsive masturbators.

With Stacie on his arm, Earl asked, “What’s the name of this place, Vic?”

“Klit Kat Klub.”

Stacie interjected, hoping to impress with a bit of faux-native savvy, “Kit Kat Klub – I’ve heard of that!”

Luffing his tongue like Hannibal Lechter as he corrected her, Ray said, “It’s Klit . . . with a K.”

Two girls, each wearing just a G-string and ultra-high heels delivered two bottles of Grey Goose and a magnum of Moët to the table along with some mixers and several glasses of varying sizes and shapes – a \$700 tab before tax and tip that Vic picked up, again crediting his largesse to Earl’s misfortune at the football game. Trying not to stare too much, Maddie asked the girl with the natural tits to bring her a club soda. If she had to

converse with a naked woman, Maddie preferred to deal with authenticity over audacity.

Vic made a toast: “Champagne for my real friends and real pain for my sham friends.” Everyone but Maddie tapped their glasses together. Irritated at Maddie’s apparent disinterest in the evening’s capping festivities, demanded, “What’s your problem?”

“I’ve got a stomach ache.”

“Well, that’s your fault for eating nothin’ but a fuckin’ potato for dinner.”

“Why must you bring me to strip clubs when you know I hate them?”

“Shut up. We’ll leave soon enough. Have some champagne. It’ll give you a headache – make you forget about your stomach ache.”

One after another, impossibly gorgeous girls shed their skimpy costumes and danced to the pounding music emanating from ten gigantic speakers. The women at the table marveled at the dancers’ athleticism, especially when they performed on the vertical pole in the middle of the dance floor, hanging upside down and suspending their toned bodies solely by the strength of their legs. It seemed entirely plausible that pole dancing could one day qualify as an Olympic sport, no less valid than synchronized swimming. Maddie repeatedly checked her watch, antsy to get going. It had been more than two hours since the eightsome arrived at the Klit Kat Klub and she was eager to crawl into bed.

Vic called over the waitress and ordered a third bottle of Grey Goose and lap dances for Ray, Dougie and Earl. Stacie and the girlfriends giggled as three well-endowed blondes shimmied

and gyrated on the men's privates. Vic leaned toward Maddie and said, "Don't worry – I didn't buy one for myself."

Maddie responded, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "How magnanimous of you, Vic. A real gentleman."

With exaggerated deference, Vic replied, "You don't think I'm a gentleman? I'm *so* sorry. Let me make it up to you." Vic scowled and marched away. Maddie just shook her head and took a sip of club soda. *What now?* Moments later a dancer with Belgian-chocolate hair in the style and length of Maddie's and who looked quite a lot like Maddie, both in the face and the figure, strolled to the table, followed closely by Vic. She was the same height and weight as Maddie, and although ten years younger could easily pass as Maddie's sister. Vic looked at the dancer and tipped his head toward Maddie who was pawing through her pocketbook in search of some aspirins. At first, Maddie didn't notice her doppelganger standing directly in front of her. When Maddie finally glanced up from her pocketbook the dancer straddled her lap and pressed her fine C-cup bosom into Maddie's face. Everyone at the table erupted in laughter. Some guys at another table started chanting "munch it, munch it," and snapped cell phone pictures. Maddie tried to extricate herself from the dancer's clutches, but like an accomplished Greco-Roman wrestler the girl held top advantage. Maddie considered biting or pinching the girl but refrained, concluding that the whole embarrassing episode would come to an end in a minute. Finally, the dancer relented. She leaned back, planted a wet kiss on Maddie's lips and dismounted. Everyone in the place applauded. Maddie stood up and hurried toward the exit. Vic ran after her.

"Where're you goin', babe?"

“Take me home, you bastard.”

“Aw. C’mon, Maddie. It was just a joke.”

“You think that was funny? I’m mortified. And that whore kissed me on the mouth. Drive me home, now!”

“No-can-do. I got guests to attend to. Now, be a good sport and come back to the table. We’ll leave in a little while.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Vic recoiled in mock umbrage, then noted, “Funny you should say that – that’s what it looked like you were doin’ back there.”

Almost out of control with rage, Maddie turned and bolted out the door. Vic considered following her outside in an attempt to reconcile, but he was too drunk and tired to initiate the process. Instead, he lumbered back to the table and ordered another round of lap dances, including one for himself.

Around 4 a.m. Vic and his gang spilled onto the sidewalk, smoking, and laughing loudly. Dougie threw up in a storm drain. Exposure to such inconsiderate and boisterous late-night clamoring was the price that residents of tony neighborhoods paid for coexisting with fashionable restaurants and popular nightclubs. Vic called out to Dougie’s girlfriend, “Take him home, will ya? I don’t want his sick ass in the van.” It had been a long day. Several cabs waited patiently by the curb, each creeping ahead incrementally toward the head of the line as patrons left the scene. Vic bade farewell to his guests, and when all had departed he turned to Ray and said, “Go get the van. I wanna get the fuck out of here.”

Ray left Vic alone on the sidewalk for a few minutes and then returned with the rented van. Vic pulled out his wallet

and searched in vain for a piece of paper – an ad he clipped out of the back of the *Village Voice* for an Asian call girl service. *Where the fuck is that ad, goddammit!* When he concluded he had lost or misplaced it Vic climbed into the van and told Ray to drive slowly as he scanned the street corners for a *Village Voice* newspaper box. Sure enough, several blocks from the Klit Kat Klub, Vic spotted the ubiquitous red plastic box, hopped out of the van, and retrieved one of the free issues piled inside. He opened to the “Body Work” section of the classifieds. *There it is!* “ASIAN TEMPTATION NY – Super Hot Asian Girls Come to You for Decadent Pleasure! The NY Metro Area’s Premiere Asian Outcall! Outcalls to Manhattan/Boros/NJ.”

Vic made a call, and to his delight Lien was available.

“Take me to the studio, Ray. I’ve got some business to attend to.”



Late the following afternoon, Vic untied his little Asian tart from his four poster bed, removed the blindfold shrouding her almond-shaped eyes, and tossed her a hand towel. She sat up, briefly massaged the rope burns on her wrists and ankles, and wiped the sticky cum from her face. On the bureau by the bed sat a tightly rolled bundle of twenty-dollar bills totaling \$400 – Lien’s compensation for spending the evening with Vic the Prick and accepting without complaint his sexual humiliation. She was relieved at the sight of the money – a sweetroll as Vic called it. It brought her some peace of mind; she wouldn’t have to engage in an awkward and potentially volatile conversation about completing the transaction. Lien rolled over onto her

stomach, yawned deeply and stretched her sinewy muscles.

“You were great, Lien, my little chinky-chink,” commended Vic as he lightly spanked her slender Oriental ass. It was firm but not as round and voluptuous as Maddie’s, and her “chinky-chink” tits were no bigger than those of a slightly plump teenaged boy, but she made up for these deficiencies by expertly playing the submissive Geisha to Vic’s satirical Samurai. Lien made it a point to attend to her client’s every command, for to do so defended against competition from the deep roster of Asian talent working in an industry boasting an unlimited supply of it. To retain Vic’s loyalty Lien routinely agreed to participate in lengthy Bukkake sessions with him and his friends, consenting to his demand to videotape the creamy finales.

Lien hastily slipped on her clothes, stuffed the roll of cash in her purse, kissed Vic on the cheek and hustled out of his studio apartment, a secret place he maintained for trysts and for shaking down recalcitrant debtors. Under the sink, among the dishrags, cleansers and the rechargeable fire extinguisher, Vic stored several large sheets of plastic, a blowtorch and pliers.

Vic took a long, hot shower, plucked a few errant eyebrow sprouts that made him appear slightly demented, and shaved his fecund facial hairs to a line just below his shirt collar. He put on a Brioni suit and a striped Thomas Pink shirt with a high white collar around which he fastened an elaborately knotted necktie. Then he went out onto the sidewalk to make a few calls from the pay phone down the street. The final call he made was to Maddie.

“Hey babe, what’re doing? You naked?” Vic poked his head outside the cover of the phone booth – a pod, really – and looked toward the sky when a single snowflake lit unexpectedly

upon his cheek.

“No, Vic, I’m not naked. I’m making dinner and I look like shit. I didn’t sleep at all last night . . . and I’m still really pissed about the strip club thing.”

Vic smirked. “Ah, c’mon, Maddie. Don’t be sore.”

Maddie asked, “What do you want?” Cradling the phone with her shoulder she turned off the stove and moved the boiling pot of water to the back burner.

“Well, I just finished up some business.” He pronounced it “biz-uh-niss,” adding an extra syllable to form an anti-elision. “Now I’m comin’ over to tend to your needs.”

Entertaining Vic was the last thing Maddie wished to do at that moment. She instantly responded, “Don’t. I’m not up to it.”

Sounding like a high-school coach, Vic replied, “Don’t say don’t, Maddie. I hate that word.”

“What’s the big business you had to conduct? Returning the rental van?”

As soon as she cracked wise she knew Vic would take it as a provocation. Vic rigidly sequestered the details of his “professional” activities from Maddie, and on the few occasions she probed he had made it clear to her that he did not appreciate the inquiries. But she didn’t care any more. She had just about reached the limits of her tolerance for Vic’s maltreatment which had multiplied greatly since that weekend in Atlantic City. Additionally, Maddie had sufficiently established what she imagined was an accurate portrayal of the “biz-uh-niss” Vic transacted. His evident lack of conventional employment, the hefty rolls of cash he carried, his odd “working hours,” the seedy associates – all of it suggested crime and punishment.

Vic responded with pique in his voice, “How many times

have I told you, Mad: don't ask me about my business. It's confidential. The SEC could burn my ass for insider trading if they heard me talking to anyone about it, even you."

Although Maddie had once plied the trade of lowly janitor, she was no dummy. *SEC . . . what a crock of shit.* Vic was a shifty character, but because he compensated by taking care of her practical needs she had reluctantly overlooked his transgressions. Paying her rent and providing financial support had allowed her to give up the position in the hospital's environmental services department, and she appreciated his occasional encouragement to pursue her passion for painting abstract oils. So, rather than persist with the inquisitive line, she holstered her indignation and said with a calculated balance of remorse and mischievousness, "I'm sorry, Vic. I didn't mean to. I hope you had a gook meeting."

"Wh . . . huh?"

"I said, 'I hope you had a good meeting.' When are you coming over, honey? I heard we might get hit by a big Nor'easter this week – maybe we can get out of the city next weekend and go Upstate to the slopes."

"Slopes?"

"Yeah, wouldn't it be fun to go skiing? I'd like to get your slant on which resort is better for beginners, Hunter Mountain or Belleayre."

*Slant? Slopes? Gook meeting? What the fuck is this?* "How the fuck should I know which one is better? I hate to ski. You know that. Look, I'll be over in a half hour. Just have some fuckin' dinner ready for me." Vic hung up. As he walked to the parking garage Vic wondered whether Maddie had discovered his penchant for Asian side action. Not that he cared that much about what Maddie suspected, but part of the thrill of fucking around was to

know his legit girlfriend remained blissfully oblivious behind the opacity of his duplicity. Each time he blew a load on some young Asian chick's face, it was doubly satisfying to know that a dotting, unsuspecting woman was ironing his shirts at that very moment. If Maddie knew about Vic's cooz on the side, and worse, didn't seem to care, it would devalue the whole enterprise.

Vic unlocked the door to Maddie's apartment, barged in and threw his heavy overcoat across the back of the big wingback chair. "Fuckin' cold out there," he exclaimed. He stamped his feet for greater effect, even though nary a wisp of precipitation had defiled his brand-new Berluti Magistrales. Vic sniffed the air. "Damn, that smells good Maddie." From the kitchen she informed him. "I didn't want you to come over, Vic, but knowing you are German and would come over anyway, I made that mussels dish you like." Vic sat down at the table and received a fine meal from Maddie: shellfish risotto, mixed green salad, vegetable medley, warm rolls, and a cup of strong, black coffee. Famished from the previous evening's sexcapades with Lien, Vic tore into dinner. With his mouth full of food, he called to Maddie who was hunkered over the kitchen sink scrubbing stubborn leftover Arborio rice from a pot, "Ain't you eatin'?"

"No."

"Not even a potato?"

"Very funny." Vic could feel the heat in her flat response.

"Look, don't be mad about the lap dance. It was just a joke." Expecting another response from Maddie but getting silence instead, he continued in his conciliatory tone, "Maddie, these mussels are fuckin' great. I don't know how you do it. They're even better than the ones I had in Brussels. Not a hint of mussel

shit in the sauce.”

“Gee, thanks Vic. It’s amazing the results you can achieve when you actually clean the food first.”

Vic stuffed a role in his mouth and asked with enthusiasm and a bit of hopefulness, “Hey, you wanna hear a funny story?”

Well before Vic added the final flourish to his funny story – “You shoulda seen the look on the jagoff’s face when he stuck his hands in his pockets. All fulla mayo. He looked like he just reached into the asshole of an elephant. I nearly pulled a muscle from laughing so hard.” – Maddie concluded enough was enough. It was the same vile story about that poor Ajax fellow that Vic told at Gallagher’s the previous evening. The story was less an epiphany than a final straw; prima facie evidence that Vic was a sadistic SOB and that he would never change. She thought for a moment. *OK, Vic treated me like a princess at first, but he’s fundamentally a mean, selfish bastard. Yeah, he lavished affection on me – just enough to suck me in. But now he’s fucking Asian whores. How long did he wait? A month? A week? Maybe he was doing it from the very beginning.*

Maddie said with a combination of anger and anguish, “That’s cruel, Vic. What did he ever do to you? Why do you pick on this poor Ajax guy?”

Stunned by Maddie’s uncharacteristic challenge, Vic dropped his knife and fork onto his plate and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Are you serious? Ajax is a fuckin’ stooper, a dirty parasite. He deserves the shit I lay on him. He’s lucky I don’t fuck him up for real.” Maddie stood speechless for a moment – not out of timidity, but because she was girding for an escalation. Assuming he had set the record straight Vic speared a mussel

with his fork and inserted it in his mouth. As he masticated the rubbery amorphous blob, he added quite casually, “I don’t like your attitude, cunt?”

Called a “cunt” – well, that did not sit well with Maddie. It was the kind of epithet as an ER janitor she had had to endure from broken-down winos, drunken frat boys, prickly ODs, and bloodied punks who came to the hospital in the wee hours of the evening.

“Cunt!? D-did you just call me a ‘cunt’?” Flummoxed and seething, Maddie stammered, “You – you’re the one, you’re the one who’s a cunt . . . all the guy did was pick up some tickets off the floor. And what’s wrong with your memory – you told that same lame story last night? It wasn’t funny then either.”

Vic nearly choked on the glob of mussel. *Insolent bitch!* Before he could spew forth more invective, Maddie pressed on, for why stop now? “And making Dougie the pet monkey spill hot coffee on the guy . . .” Maddie took a breath, astonished that such words of defiance had spilled forth from her mouth. She feared the repercussions but at the same time felt strangely liberated. For far too long she had meekly tolerated Vic’s arrogant, abusive treatment. Disgusted by his stunning lack of compassion and his mean-spirited story of bullying an innocent stooper, Maddie drew the line. *Vic might push me around – big deal!*

Vic bolted upright and knocked over his cup of coffee. The swirl of Maddie’s accusations overwhelmed his ability to rationally process them. *Did she just call me a cunt? Did she just insult my memory? Did she call Dougie a monkey?* He moved provocatively toward Maddie. “That’s enough out of you, you worthless bitch janitor!”

Maddie stood resolute in her pajamas and yellow rubber

gloves, a plate in one hand and a sponge in the other. As Vic approached she replied, “That’s right, Vic, I’m a jan . . .” Before she could complete the retort Vic struck her hard on the side of the head with a hairy closed fist, dropping her onto the cold marble floor where her body crumpled like a contorted rag doll next to the compact two-burner stove. The plate she had been holding smashed into dozens of shards, some of which stuck into the flesh of her bare arms. Maddie groaned in semi-consciousness. Darkness encroached from the edges of her peripheral vision. She barely made out the vague outline of Vic towering over her; he looked like a ghostly apparition, silhouetted by the last of the light still visible before she passed out completely.

When she finally regained consciousness, Maddie discovered she was still lying on the kitchen floor precisely where she had collapsed. Her back was stiff from the chill of the unforgiving tiles, and some pieces of the broken plate remained impaled in her forearm. She kept still, struggling to reconstruct the final moments before she blacked out. *How long have I been lying here?* Vic had made no effort to move her to the bed or the sofa, or even to cover her with a blanket. Obviously he had taken no action to assist her, and for that Maddie’s hatred for him redoubled. Slowly and carefully she sat up, gingerly touching the side of her head to assess the damage. A nasty lump, throbbing pain, dizziness and nausea. As she plucked the shards from her arm she heard sounds emanating from the television in the living room. *Cold front? Squalls? A Nor’easter?* Presumably, Vic was still present in the apartment. Maddie stood up, bracing herself on the flimsy handle of the oven door, and quietly splashed some

water on her face. She winced as she caressed her tender ear.

Determined to throw Vic out of her apartment and out of her life, Maddie blankly drew a chef's knife from the wooden block on the counter and shuffled into the living room. She spotted Vic sitting on the sofa watching the Weather Channel. His back was to her. For a split second she fantasized plunging the long, well-honed knife into Vic's hirsute neck, pithing him like a frog in biology class. Then she shifted her weight ever so slightly on a loose floorboard, issuing a tiny creak that prematurely announced her presence. Vic glanced over his shoulder and then casually turned his attention back to the report of a lake-effect snowstorm inundating Buffalo. It reminded him of the times he went trick-or-treating in knee-deep snow back in Ashtabula. He never noticed the knife in Maddie's hand.

"How was your nap?" chuckled Vic mordantly.

"Fuck you."

Still facing the TV he counseled Maddie, "Listen, babe. You gotta learn to behave yourself better. I'm the lord of the manor, king of the castle, if you get my drift. I pay your rent. But I know you're sorry, so I forgive you." Vic rose from the sofa and approached Maddie with his outstretched arms, intending to smooth things over summarily with her. "Wha'dya say we go to that movie you wanted to see – Fat Fuckin' Greek Wedding, or whatever it's called."

"I said, 'fuck you.'" Maddie held up the knife in an attack position. Vic stopped in his tracks. Maddie announced, "I want you out of my house and out of my life. Understand?" For a moment Vic was stunned, and then he broke into a patronizing grin as though Maddie threatened him with a cap gun.

"Ooo – look at you. Who are you supposed to be, Mrs. Bill the

Butcher?” Vic chuckled at his pithy reference. Maddie didn’t get it. She intoned defiantly, “Laugh all you want Vic. I’m through with you. Give me back my keys and get out of here. And don’t call me ever again.”

“Bitches like you don’t leave me unless it’s in a box.”

“Mr. Big Talk. Get your ass out of my house!”

“Cut the drama, Maddie.” Vic reached for the knife as if he had never watched a B-movie in his life. “Put down the goddamned knife right now.” Eyes closed, Maddie made an inelegant, unbalanced sweeping motion with the blade and sliced Vic’s outstretched thumb. He wrapped the fingers of his left hand around the wounded digit, and as he bolted into the kitchen he screamed, “What the fuck! Are you out of your fuckin’ mind!?” Shocked that she had done real damage to “the Prick,” Maddie edged toward the door. Her swipe with the knife was meant only to convey credible threat. The cut was strictly unintentional. But that would mean nothing to Vic who would go ballistic once he stanchied the bleeding. When Vic heard Maddie fumble with the doorknob, he bellowed, “You’re dead bitch! Dead! You hear me! Call your mother and tell her to start arranging your funeral!” Rattled, Maddie struggled to open the door, finally succeeding after what seemed an eternity. At the sound of the slam, Vic screamed, “Go ahead and run away, you worthless piece of shit, you fuckin’ whore! I’ll fuck you up good for this, bitch! You can count on it!”

Fearing imminent pursuit from Vic, Maddie ran down the stairwell two steps at a time, when in fact Vic remained behind, cradling his gashed thumb under the warm, running water as he watched the crimson swirl course down the drain. He mumbled to himself, “Fuckin’ psycho. Good riddance.”

Clad in her banana-colored pajamas bearing a repeating pattern of Mr. Peabody and Sherman, Maddie dashed out her building into the brisk winter air, ran around the corner and hailed a cab for Lisa's apartment on 45th west of 9th Avenue. Half way there she realized she had no money. Of course when she informed the driver he pulled immediately to the curb and ordered her out, and although she promised to tip him handsomely at the destination it was her vague offer to show him something underneath the PJs that got the cab rolling again.

Maddie pounded on Lisa's door and called out, "Lisa. You there? Let me in. It's Maddie. Please. You there?" Lisa, who had just settled into her lumpy convertible sofa for a Sunday evening of mind-rotting television replied with a tinge of exasperation, "Hang on, I'm coming." She peered through the peephole and saw a fish's-eye view of Maddie nervously shifting her weight from one foot to the other like a pre-schooler waiting in line for mid-morning bathroom break. As soon as she opened the door, Maddie stormed in. "Thank god you're home, Lisa. I didn't know where else to go. I'm sorry for barging in."

The first thing Lisa noticed was the magenta egg that had formed on Maddie's temple from Vic's sucker punch. "What happened to your face?" she asked, quickly acknowledging the obvious, "It's Vic, isn't it. What happened?"

"I'll tell you all about it, but first can you go downstairs and pay the cabbie for me? I ran out of my apartment without my money. I'll pay you back. He's waiting for me to come back down with the fare. \$25."

"Twenty five bucks? Did he bring you here by way of the Bronx Zoo?"

"Uh, no. I had to promise him a big tip – otherwise he was

going to throw me out.”

Lisa donned a jean jacket with a row of steel studs on the collar and another around the waist, and wrapped a long, stylish scarf around her neck. “There’s some coffee in the pot and a bottle of wine in the fridge. Relax, Maddie, and lock the door after I leave.”

Maddie filled a tall water glass to the rim from a bottle of Chenin Blanc – not her favorite wine but crispy-cold and easy to swallow in large gulps. Calmer, she sat on the sofa and stared at the TV show Lisa had been watching – a program that seemed to be an amalgamation of *Top Gun* and *A Few Good Men*. Unfamiliar with the prime-time television line-up Maddie didn’t know the show was called *JAG* until the network cut to commercial. It reminded her of Vic and his reference to the pathetic Ajax character as a “jagoff.”

Lisa came back and Maddie asked somewhat sheepishly, “Everything OK, Lisa?”

“Sure. No problem.” After a beat, she added, “You *did* tell that asshole driver you’d throw him a big tip, right? Not a big tit, right?”

“Um . . .”

“Because he seemed to be expecting something else besides \$25.”

“Um . . .”

Lisa smirked. “C’mon into the kitchen – tell me what happened with Vic. I’ve got some leftover satay from that Thai place on 44th – it tastes even better when it’s reheated.”

After the two women settled across from one another at the narrow kitchen table, slurping moist, spicy chicken from wooden skewers, Maddie said, “I’m afraid to go back home, Lisa.

Vic said he'd kill me, and I believe him. They call him Vic the Prick, y'know."

"Sounds apt. You have to call the police, Maddie."

Sounding more resigned than fretful, Maddie replied, "It wouldn't do any good. Vic would send one of his men to shut me up. I wouldn't stand a chance."

"So what're you going to do?" asked Lisa casually as she spooned some rice mixed with miniature crustaceans that could have been mistaken for pink maggots.

"I honestly don't know." Maddie hung her head. It shamed her to be in such a predicament. In her limited collection of previous love-lives things had never gotten more intense than the occasional argument about toilet seat courtesy.

"Well, you can stay here for a little while, Maddie. So don't worry about that." Then Lisa added with some concern, "Vic the Prick doesn't know who I am, does he? I can't have him or his dago hitmen coming over here."

"Oh, no. Never. Please don't worry. I've never mentioned your name. He's German, by the way, not Italian."

Lisa wondered why Vic's heritage mattered. "OK. Tomorrow, I'll go with you to your apartment. You can grab some of your stuff."

Maddie looked up in panic from her half-bitten satay, "Oh, I don't know about that. What if Vic is waiting there for me?"

"Well, that would be bad. But what're you going to do? Abandon your apartment and all your stuff?"

"Right now, that's exactly what I'm thinking. I don't have much of value there and the lease is up next month." Maddie decided not to remind Lisa that Vic had been paying the rent. She already felt sufficiently foolish.

Lisa glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was approaching 9 p.m. and soon Jack Bauer would be called out of retirement to undertake a mission to find a nuclear bomb that would explode in Los Angeles in the next 24 hours. Lisa urged Maddie, “Why don’t you take a hot shower and get some sleep. We’ll check out your place tomorrow.”

Maddie stood up from the table and hugged Lisa. “You’re the best, Lisa. Thanks so much.” Maddie headed for the bathroom and Lisa rushed to the sofa just as Season 2 of *24* opened to the familiar sound of a metallic heartbeat.

The next day, as promised, Lisa led Maddie back to the Lower East Side on a mission to recover some of her belongings. From the back seat of an idling taxi cab parked around the corner from Maddie’s building the two women surveilled the premises for thuggish types, spotting none. Lisa whispered, for she had adopted the persona of a secret agent, “It looks safe to me.”

Maddie scanned the immediate area in front of her tenement building and concurred, “Yeah.” Then she looked farther down the block and reversed her assessment. “Wait. Shit. That’s Vic’s car. That big black Mercedes. What do we do now?”

“I don’t know. I see exhaust. That’s not a good sign. I guess we go home I suppose. Try again later.” To the taxi driver, Lisa ordered, “45th and 9th.”

The taxi driver who, unknown to Maddie had been leering at her in the rear-view mirror threw the cab into gear and fishtailed around the corner through the slushy debris. As the cab passed slowly in front of the tenement building Maddie noticed a piece of her luggage on the steps, standing like a lone sentry, ignored by the steady flow of hipster pedestrians. Maddie blurted out,

“Stop the cab!” Then to Lisa she announced, “That’s my luggage there on the stoop.”

Still in her secret agent mode Lisa commanded, “You stay here. I’ll run out and grab the suitcase.” She flung open the door and bounded toward the stoop. She swept up the suitcase, pivoted around and sprinted back to the cab. Maddie waved her hand in “c’mon-c’mon” urgency. Up the street the brake lights on the Mercedes illuminated. Lisa dove into the back seat and barked, “Get moving!” The moment the cab passed by the parked Mercedes, Ray pulled out and followed directly behind. Maddie, who had hunkered down out of sight, slowly raised her head and peered out the rear window at the trailing vehicle.

“Oh my God! It’s that Nazi Ray. He’ll kill me, I swear it.”

“Don’t panic, Maddie. He can’t do anything as long as we’re in the cab.”

Not reassured, Maddie asked, “And then what?”

Lisa tapped her upper lip with her index finger in a moment of hesitation and then responded, “I don’t know.”

The taxi driver bolted through a lingering yellow light followed by Ray through a red. Some antsy pedestrians who entered the crosswalk the moment the white walking-man sign lit up lurched back from the intruding black steel menace.

Maddie cried out, “He’s still following us!” Seizing an opportunity to play super-hero to his lovely damsel-in-distress, the taxi driver calmly interjected, “May I suggest something, ladies?”

The driver raced east and got on the FDR Drive. Ray pursued but with the chase removed from the clogged streets to the relatively swift-moving traffic on the FDR, the taxi driver was able to put some distance between them. This gave Maddie

and Lisa time to prepare. The driver exited at midtown and made a number of evasive turns, and when the Mercedes was momentarily out of sight he pulled the cab to curb and monitored the activity behind him in the sideview mirror. Sure enough the black Mercedes pulled in behind the cab. The driver began scribbling on his clipboard. Wearing a long black coat and tight, assassin-type black leather gloves Ray rushed to the cab and peered through the window into the back seat – unoccupied except for Maddie’s suitcase. Ray angrily rapped on the driver’s window. The driver cracked it an inch.

“Where did those women go?”

Continuing to scribble notes on the clipboard the driver responded without looking at Ray, “They jumped out at the corner back there.” He motioned over his shoulder with his thumb.

“That’s impossible. I was on your ass the whole time. Where the fuck are they?”

The taxi driver put the clipboard down on the seat and said to Ray, “Calm down. I turned the corner and they jumped out. They were scared. When I stopped for a second they just jumped out.” Ray massaged his neck and scanned the area. The driver continued, “Do you know them? They beat me for \$17.50.”

“Fuck! Which way did they head?”

“They beat me for \$17.50. You should pay. You made them scared.”

“Fuck you. Eat their luggage.”

Recognizing that failure to snatch Maddie would not set well with Vic, Ray decided the best course of action was to break off the futile conversation with the cabbie and resume his quest. He marched back toward the intersection where he had last seen his

quarry. The taxi driver illuminated the “off-duty” sign and slowly pulled into traffic en route to Lisa’s apartment. Once there he popped the trunk. He asked the cramped pair who had slipped in through the hinged backseat, “Are you comfortable, ladies? No hanky-panky going on I trust.”

“Just help us out of here,” said Lisa as she struggled to extricate herself from the confines of the trunk, a tight space made tighter by the presence of a box of tools and a bag of sand. Maddie called out, “Is it safe?” Before the driver could answer Lisa demanded again sounding panicked, “Get me out of here!” The driver extended his calloused hand and Lisa quickly locked onto it. Until now she had never realized the true extent of her claustrophobia. Maddie meekly asked again, “Is it safe?”

“Yes, my sweets,” said the driver in the manner of the Handsome Prince Charming. “You’re safe now. We’re outside your apartment. 45th and 9th. That bad man came looking for you but we tricked him.”

Happy to stand again upon terra firma, Maddie gushed, “You saved my life. I don’t know how to thank you.”

Brushing trunk schmutz from her jean jacket Lisa mumbled to Maddie loudly enough for the driver to hear, “Ask him if he knows what bukkake is?” The driver’s eyes widened as he retrieved Maddie’s suitcase from the back seat.

“Shut up, Lisa” came the hushed reply, then to the driver Maddie inquired, “How much do I owe you?”

“Owe me? Nothing, sweets. I only ask one small favor: can your friend take a picture of you and me together? I have a camera.” The driver showed her a yellow disposable Kodak camera that looked like a pack of cigarettes with a lens.

“A picture with me? Why?”

With a big toothy grin the driver announced, “I want to prove to my friends that Hyapatia Lee rode in my cab. You’re my favorite porn star.”

Maddie stood next to the taxi driver on the steps leading up to Lisa’s building and allowed him to put his arm around her waist. It was a compromise between flashing her tits and no photo at all. Lisa snapped two pictures, purposely chopping off the subjects’ heads in both as the driver would discover later when he had the film developed.

Back inside Lisa’s apartment Maddie tossed the suitcase on the floor and unzipped the lid. The instant she opened it Maddie shrieked, “Oh my Lord!” Lisa who was across the room hanging up her jacket promptly added, “Ewww – what’s that smell?” Maddie picked out a blouse and held it up at arm’s length. She saw that it had been shredded. A quick visual scan of the other items in the suitcase suggested the same fate had befallen the other pieces of clothing. She cautiously brought the blouse closer to her face and sniffed it, turning her head and gagging at the scent.

“Ugh. That bastard shredded all my clothes, and I think he peed on them too.”

Standing at a distance, her hand cupped over her nose and mouth, Lisa commented, “Jesus. Nice boyfriend, Maddie.”

Maddie gingerly picked through the top layer of ragged panties and bras, discovering in the process a sheet of paper with the grammatically-impaired warning “Bang! Your Dead!” written in red magic marker. She stood up and waved the piece of paper at Lisa like a prosecutor trying to convince a skeptical jury. “See this! This is what I’m talking about, Lisa. Vic’s a madman. He’ll never let me slide for stabbing his thumb with that knife.”

Shocked at the revelation, Lisa shouted, “What? You stabbed him? You didn’t tell me that.”

Forced to acknowledge she had led the unwitting Lisa into a grave situation, Maddie stammered, “Um, uh, yeah. He threatened me. I had no choice.” Met with stony silence and feeling small, Maddie reminded Lisa, “He punched me. What was I supposed to do?”

Noticing she had struck the pose of an angry mother, Lisa removed her hands from her hips, shook her head slightly and sat cross-legged on the convertible sofa. She placed a throw pillow on her lap. “You had no choice, I guess,” she said quietly.

“I’m really sorry, Lisa. I never wanted to put you on the spot.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lisa commented unconvincingly.

“No. I don’t want to suck you into my troubles. Starting tomorrow I’m going to look for a job. I’ll be on my own soon, I promise. You’re the best.” Maddie studied Lisa’s face for a hint of conciliation, then she bent down and zipped closed the reeking suitcase. She asked, “Where can I throw this out?”

Unemployed and short of cash, exiled from her apartment and cut off from Vic’s financial support, Maddie struggled. She initiated a search for employment in the art field but that proved unfruitful – her interest in painting wasn’t translating into a position in the galleries. The next step down was the retail industry but the grip of recession had choked off consumption. Maddie discovered opportunities to be slim, but from the beginning she had resolved that even in the darkest of times she would not don the apron of a barista, nor would she reenter the janitorial world. She pressed on, going to interviews for secretarial positions wearing Lisa’s ill-fitting suits, but again she

came up empty.

Maddie’s inability – or was it unwillingness? – to land a job and move on fanned the embers of Lisa’s growing resentment. And in response Maddie grew indignant. One evening after a long day of job-hunting Maddie thought she overheard Lisa utter the word “mooch” to someone on the phone, and the next morning she discovered a note that Lisa had taped to a package of bacon that read, “DO NOT EAT.” That Lisa underlined the word “eat” instead of “not” struck Maddie as particularly bitchy. Finally, following a feisty argument with Lisa that began innocently enough over a failure to replenish the toilet paper but which mushroomed into a spontaneous combustion of sarcasm and recrimination, Maddie relaxed her employment standards. That afternoon she applied for and received a job in the environmental services department of a mid-sized hospital in New Jersey just across the Hudson River with a tantalizing view of the Manhattan skyline. And when Maddie moved into an apartment a half-mile from the hospital that skyline view would become a cruel, daily reminder of what Maddie had had to give up.

The Friday after Thanksgiving was Maddie’s first day at the hospital. The department supervisor issued Maddie a pale-green uniform and assigned her a locker. Given her prior janitorial experience the supervisor waived the requirement that she attend an orientation session. Maddie immediately commenced her shift in the intensive care unit, resuming her chores and picking up where she had left off the day she first met Vic Schuyler.



The previous three weeks had been an extremely disappointing and unproductive time for Larry. Despite stooping several hours each day and scanning hundreds of spent tickets, Larry had collected a mere \$97, the bulk of which had come from cashing in \$2 refunds on late scratches. During a lengthy period standing by the self-checker machine, Larry calculated that his recent earnings amounted to 64 cents an hour. He cursed his life. He denounced the day he was born: unfit to associate with the other days that made up a long year. For several minutes he contemplated the efficacy of drastic action. *How long would it take to drown in the roiling currents of the icy East River? How much would it hurt to be run over by the Lake Shore Limited? Does touching the third rail always electrocute, or might it only turn my arm into a smoldering stump?* Eventually, Larry dispelled with the morbid thoughts. He reached into his wallet for a spot of inspiration like he often did when he descended into a funk. He retrieved a piece of paper between two limp dollar bills and read the encouraging words written upon it, words that had been recited to him by a kindly, old gambler who came to his aid after Dougie “accidentally” spilled hot coffee on the back of Larry’s neck. Larry recalled how the old man implored him to maintain his dignity and stand with confidence. He counseled Larry to envision himself as a mountain impervious to the wickedness of petty men, and that just because he stooped to pick up race tickets did not mean he was any less a man than the kings who owned the horses that ran the races. As he gently blotted the scalding liquid from Larry’s shirt the man recited softly, “The Himmaleh was known to stoop unto the daisy low, transported with compassion that such a doll should grow.” Taken by the simplicity of the phrasing and richness of the imagery Larry asked the man to repeat it. Instead

the man tore the back page from his tip sheet and in elegant Palmer cursive wrote down the phrase; in parentheses he added the name “E. Dickenson.” And then he ambled slowly back to the bank of television monitors to watch the action at Hialeah.

Feeling better now, Larry fingered the back page of the tip sheet and smiled. He put it back in his wallet and resumed scanning tickets. One of them was balled up, crushed perhaps by a furious bettor after his favorite horse was nipped by a head bob. Ordinarily Larry cast aside such abused tickets for they took more than a fraction of a second to validate, but this time he gently rehabilitated the wadded slip of paper, smoothing the creases and rubbing out the corners. He felt strangely drawn to this maltreated, once-negotiable instrument. *Doesn't it deserve the same compassion that old man showed me?* He scanned the ticket and discovered it to be a \$700 daily double winner – Larry’s all-time single largest score. Elated, he studied the wrinkly stub. It was like holding the Rolex watch recovered from the sands on the beach.

Larry took the bus to the diner and bounced sprightly past the counter on his way to the kitchen. *Seven hundred bucks – sweet!* He knocked once on the countertop and flashed a big smile at the new waitress replacing a coffee filter in the Bunn. “How’s it going, Emma? You’re looking nice tonight.” He walked into the kitchen and hung up his jacket – a new one that he grudgingly purchased for \$35 from Wal-Mart after failing to wash out the greasy mayonnaise stains on the old one – and pulled an apron over his head. He deftly tied the strings behind his back. “What’s shakin’ Ped . . . uh, Pablo? ¿Qué pasa?” Larry enthusiastically plunged his arms into the murky gray water standing in the sink.

He commenced scrubbing the pile of plates submerged like the USS Arizona just beneath the oil slick on the surface. It was a busy evening at the diner with more than the usual number of bridge-and-tunnel clubbers dropping in for caffeine and grease. Larry energetically washed dishes, lugged ice, mopped up spills and replenished toilet paper in the restrooms. After his shift ended Larry hung around the diner for another hour to help the waitresses refill salt shakers and top off Heinz bottles with generic ketchup.

In the tenebrous early morning Larry left the diner and took a long walk down Second Avenue, turning east at St. Mark's Place. He passed through Tompkins Square Park and continued south on Avenue C. During the relaxing stroll, with time to think, Larry cautiously dared to believe he might have entered a brief period of good fortune, an ephemeral stretch of calm between tectonic tremors of misery. The respite from bad luck would be temporary – that much he was certain of. Larry knew from bitter experience that fortune runs in streaks, primed at any moment to change course, and that prospect frustrated him. He recalled a few events in his life when the stars aligned – events that most certainly would have unfolded for the better had he acted decisively instead of wavering like a timid mouse. As a high school senior Larry passed up an invitation to the prom from a sweet, plain-looking junior who went on to become a rich, influential and sexy corporate attorney. He turned down a partial scholarship to attend college in Kentucky, choosing instead to stay on at the local gas station, reluctant to leave his mother alone so shortly after his brother's death in a senseless argument over an empty parking space. And who knows where Larry would be now had he taken the advice of a stockbroker and

one-time drinking buddy in 1986 and invested his \$8,000 savings in a public offering for a company called Microsoft instead of locking it all into a five-year CD paying six percent.

Downbeat from recalling these past blunders and determined not to procrastinate again while good luck fleetingly poked its head out from its burrow, Larry bolted impetuously into a bodega intent on purchasing 700 lottery tickets with his big daily-double proceeds. Once inside however, he instinctively hesitated – a typical Larry reaction. *Wait a minute. This is crazy. I can't do this. I should pay off some of those goddamned late bills.* Then he thought about the rebuffed Microsoft tip, straightened his posture and brashly approached the empty counter. Looking around the store for someone to wait on him, Larry spotted a short Korean clerk stocking the shelves with jars of tangy kimchi. Larry called out, “Hey man, get over here. I want to buy 700 Lotto tickets.” Presuming Larry was a ball-busting prankster or a delusional crack-head the Korean clerk glared at him and in a heavy accent intoned flatly, “Give a break to me. I too busy for boor-chit.” When he believed Larry understood his request was unappreciated the clerk returned to stocking the shelf. Baffled at first then thoroughly annoyed, Larry noisily slapped 35 Jacksons on the counter, squinted his eyes and in his best Dirty Harry Callahan imitation, snarled, “No, pal . . . you're not too busy. And it's not boor-chit.” The clerk eyed Larry for a long time. Finally he relented. Larry wasn't certain which to credit for the Korean's compliance: his attempt at Eastwoodian intimidation or the pile of money.

From behind the counter the clerk inquired, “Did you say 700? Are you for serious?”

Larry pointed to the money, and continuing with his half-

assed Dirty Harry impression, replied, “Deadly.”

“What numbers you like to play, sir?”

Disinterested in blackening about five thousand tiny ovals and in the process destroying several #2 lead pencils and the cords inside his carpal tunnel, he said, “Just make ‘em all quick-picks.” For 20 minutes the Lotto machine whirred and clicked, spitting out one ticket after another. Although he put the machine on autopilot, the clerk returned every half-minute or so from stocking ginseng drink to remove a batch of tickets before they spilled onto the floor. When the 700th and final ticket emerged from the machine the Korean clerk placed the entire lot of them in a paper bag and handed them to Larry. “Goodest of luck to you, sir.”

“Thanks pal, and here’s a little something for your effort.” Larry placed a ten-spot on the counter, and then he rolled up the paper bag, stuffed it in his pocket, and walked back out onto Avenue C. The skies were brilliant blue. It seemed as though the winter had been made glorious summer by the sun of New York and all the clouds that had lowered upon Larry were now buried in the deep bosom of the Atlantic Ocean. It would be a good day – maybe even a great day. *Fuck OTB. I’m takin’ the day off.*

Larry arrived for work at the diner the next evening feeling rested and refreshed . . . but also a bit anxious. He had spent his day off from stooping at OTB getting a haircut, buying some groceries, and having two pairs of shoes resoled. Larry strolled along the pedestrian greenway hugging the shore of the Hudson River to Wagner Park at the southern tip of Manhattan. He sat in the bleacher-like seats and watched the low-slung tug boats fight

the powerful harbor currents. His attention quickly moved to the girls strutting along the promenade wearing short skirts over skinny slacks. Then a nasty cold front clipped in across New York Harbor, chopping up white caps and clearing out the majority of the park's visitors. Back at his dismal apartment before departing for work Larry took the stack of 700 lottery tickets from the paper bag and formed a thick, squared-up stack which he riffled like a cartoon flip-book. He admired them lovingly before experiencing a pang of remorse for his inchoate decision. *What if this bunch of stubs isn't worth the paper they're printed on?* Larry returned the tickets to the bag and slid it between his lumpy mattress and sagging box spring, and headed out the door for the bus stop. On his way to work, straddling the line between wild optimism and crushing pessimism, he tried to calculate the odds of winning back at least his initial \$700 investment, but quickly gave up. The task was too complex, the combinatorics too vast, the lottery payout scheme too dependent on numbers chosen by other wagerers. He tried to cheer up. *Hell, 700 tickets is a lot of tickets – I've gotta hit on at least one of them.*

Larry was in the kitchen draining the sink when Pablo came through the swinging doors with a container full of dishes and announced with a snicker that a toilet in the men's room had overflowed. "Listen up, old man. Some ruco took a shit in the baño and threw too much paper in the bowl. It's all plugged up," he reported, struggling mightily not to burst out laughing.

"What the fuck do you want me to do about it? Tell Arturo to get his lame ass in there and clean it up."

Abandoning any effort to restrain himself, Pablo guffawed, "Arturo is off tonight. Haw, haw! It's your job now, pendejo."

As low man on the totem pole Larry was the go-to guy for

such systemic calamities. Displaying no sign of being disgruntled – *what’s the point?* – he filled up a yellow, four-wheeled pail with hot, soapy water, and clamped on a squeegee. He removed a string mop from the rack and using the worn wooden handle Larry rolled the pail to the men’s room. As soon as Larry walked in he was brushed back by an olfactory assault. As if stumbling upon a mass grave he clasped his hand across his nose and mouth and looked on wide-eyed with horror at the volume of feces draped over the edge of the toilet, smeared on the walls of the stall and scattered across the floor. Larry quickly blocked the entrance to the men’s room with one of those folding, yellow signs emblazoned with the words “danger” and “peligro” and illustrated with a stick figure man slipping and falling on his pointy ass. Then Larry staggered back to the kitchen like a mortally wounded soldier.

“Done already?” inquired Pablo with mock surprise.

As he sprayed Lysol onto a towel, Larry demanded, “Why didn’t you tell me a rhino escaped from the zoo and stopped in for a quick bite and a dump? Jesus H. Christ.” He wrapped the towel around his face to contravene the stench of gangrenous bowels. Pablo laughed his ass off at the sight of Larry the ashen-faced Bedouin, Lawrence of Diarrhabia.

Like Hercules in the Augean stables Larry labored for an hour to vanquish the mess, gagging repeatedly over the gruesome crime scene. With each squeeze of the mop the water grew browner until it looked like coffee. Larry stepped out into the dining area every few minutes to catch his breath and steady his stomach. And while he took repose he scanned the floor for the vile culprit who had so thoroughly defiled the men’s room. He narrowed his eyes at a geezer enjoying a hot fudge

sundae. *Has to be that alter kaker in the corner – the one who looks like Abe Vigoda’s grandfather.* A few puzzled patrons stared at Larry’s shrouded face and the mop he held like a scepter. The only thing missing from the scene was Omar Sharif’s camel.

Larry dumped the slop down the toilet and wrung out the mop for the last time. He stashed it and the towel in the pail and plodded morosely back to the kitchen. Before he could duck back behind the swinging doors he heard a familiar voice bellow loudly behind him. “Izzat you, Ajax?” Larry froze. He knew he should have continued walking but the instinct to turn and acknowledge the inquisitor was too great. He obliged the way people invariably do when a stranger calls out, “Hey asshole.”

“What the fuck are you doin’ here?” demanded Vic once he confirmed Larry’s identity. Larry said nothing. He just stood there, apron soiled, hair mussed up. *I wonder if people can see the stench wafting up from my shoes.* “Don’t fuckin’ tell me you work here, ya fuckin’ dirtbag.” Vic was seated in a booth accompanied by a young, Asian tart who looked to be no older than 20. Larry presumed she was one of those exotic girls rented out by dating services advertising in the back pages of the tabloids. Dougie was there too with his date, a mannish-looking woman with pink-blond hair swept up in an anachronistic bouffant. She looked vaguely like Myra Hindley, the sexually sadistic psychopath famous for the Moor murders in England in the 1960s. Before Larry could muster a reaction Vic clambered noisily out of the booth and approached him. The diner patrons stopped eating and the waitresses froze in their tracks; they all trained their attention on the developing fracas. The owner of the diner looked over from his perch by the cash register and then rushed in to intercept Vic and defuse the looming altercation.

“What seems to be the trouble, sir?” asked the owner with more deference than Larry thought appropriate. After all it was Vic who was barking insults and making a scene.

“Trouble? I’ll tell you my trouble, Jack. This jagoff workin’ anywhere near a place that serves food. That’s my trouble.”

The owner furrowed his brow in confusion. Larry shifted his weight back and forth, debating whether to beat a retreat to the relative security of the kitchen where, if necessary, he could lay his hands on a long knife, or to stay put and mount a defense. Vic turned toward the rapt audience of diners and brazenly announced, pointing with an outstretched, accusative arm at Larry, “This piece of shit crawls on the floor at OTB for a living. I’ve seen him crawl around like a fuckin’ rat, pickin’ up tickets and cigarette butts and wads of gum.” Larry shook his head slightly. *I never picked up cigarettes – really.* “Who knows what filth is under his fingernails. This fucker has no business workin’ in a restaurant . . .” Vic addressed the owner, “. . . even in a shit hole diner like this one.” Mortified, Larry gulped hard. The owner nervously scanned the floor and watched as several patrons exchanged glances and simultaneously put down their silverware. A moment later people at two tables rose and headed for the cash register even though they had just started their meals. Panicked, the owner announced to the entire room, “Please everybody. Listen to me.” Larry expected the owner to denounce Vic and his outrageous claim but instead he groveled. “This is all news to me. It comes as a complete shock.” The owner looked quickly at Vic, assessing his demeanor, and then faced Larry and exclaimed in an assertive, executive-sounding voice for all to hear, “Larry, please get your things and leave. You’re fired.” Vic nodded in approval and returned to his booth.

Dougie yelled out “hoo-ah!” The owner looked out across the room again for signs that his command decision had mollified the clientele. Larry felt the heat of obloquy upon his face and skulked into the kitchen. He exchanged the shit-stained apron for his new Wal-Mart coat and held out his hand to Pablo. “Nice knowin’ ya, Pedro. Tell that maricón Arturo he can replace the mop head.”

Having no interest in making unprotected contact with Larry’s hand, Pablo folded his arms and said, “Bad beat, man. Buena suerte.”

Larry exited into the alley behind the diner. With \$18 in singles and some loose change in his pocket, Larry trudged off to a brightly-lit liquor store and bought a pint of Mr. Boston rye. After quickly dispatching the libation he decamped bleary-eyed for a squalid shots-and-beers bar on the Bowery. At 4 a.m. Larry was the sole patron of the bar, a dingy space that had been a drinking establishment since the late 1880s except for the dark years of Prohibition when a merchant operated a storefront dealing in vacuum cleaners and electric wash tubs. Anxious to close, the bartender had pulled the plug on the jukebox, achieving a desired effect: creepy silence that rendered the bar doubly dismal.

Larry’s droopy ass hung on the edge of his barstool, a half-glass of beer and a shot of cheap booze sat before him. Larry lifted the shot glass to his lips and took a tiny sip.

Larry continued, “So I . . . I picks up the ticket, y’know from the floor, cause like I said, I’m a fuckin’ stooper. You know, right? I tol’ you that, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” replied the glaring bartender.

“An’ the fuckin’ ticket’s got like this slime or somethin’ on

it. Smear'd on it. It gets on my fingers, y'know? Now I shoulda know'd better but I sniffed my fingers. I took the fuckin' bait 'cause I'm a goddamned loser! I took the bait an' sniffed my fingers and got a nice fuckin' whiff of dogshit. Then I look over an' see Vic the Prick laughin' his ass off." Larry took another sip. "That ain't right. Is that right?"

Checking his watch, the bartender said, "Depends."

"So then I . . ."

Interrupting, the bartender announced, "Listen, man. I'm closing. Finish up."

Larry hung his head and muttered, "Oh, sorry." He downed the rest of the booze and chased it with the beer, then asked hopefully, "Can I have one more?"

"Go home, man. Get some sleep."

Acknowledging the inevitable, Larry saluted and spun around on the barstool, falling onto the damp, gritty floor. He crawled around for a moment, laughing. "Gotta be a winner around here somewhere."



Enervated and brutally hungover, Larry took the day off from stooping at OTB and went to the deli to perform a very familiar task: scanning tickets – the 700 lottery tickets he purchased two days earlier when he still had a job at the diner. Freshly unemployed he felt particularly stupid for having blown such a large sum on lottery tickets. Desperately hoping to find a winner in the bunch he passed one ticket after another through the optical scanning machine mounted on the wall near the over-priced cans of Campbell's soup and mealy, brown tuna fish

packed in oil. As he performed the repetitive task Larry fixated on Vic and his abusive treatment. *Vic the Prick. Fucking bastard. Someday someone's gonna mess him up good.* Larry knew he would not be the one to inflict bodily harm on Vic – it wasn't his style, nor did he have the courage to do so. Still, he fantasized about various unfortunate fates that might one day befall Vic: garroted in a dark alley with a length of piano-wire; lashed to a chair, staring down the point of a sharp, high-speed drill bit; forced to consume broken glass through a funnel like a goose fattened for its foie gras. As he formulated ever more bizarre, sadistic punishments for “the Prick,” Larry continued to scan tickets mindlessly, tossing the losers aside one after another into the wastebasket. After discarding three-fourths of the tickets a sudden feeling of doom overtook Larry. He confronted the likelihood that he might very well run through the entire inventory only to verify that he had utterly squandered \$700. He shook off the morbid daydreams and concentrated on scanning the remaining tickets. Possessing the mentality of a stooper Larry was prepared to rescan all the tickets cast into the wastebasket in case he had mistakenly discarded one of value. Just then, with only a handful left to scan, Larry read on the machine's screen that the ticket bearing the numbers 8, 15, 16, 33, 36 and 43 was a winner. Larry blurted, “Hot damn,” then he looked around the deli a bit nervously, hoping the pack of adolescent ruffians standing by the magazine rack hadn't noticed his joyful announcement. He placed the ticket in his wallet, slid his wallet into his sock, and as calmly as possible scanned the remaining tickets. Larry waited for the ruffians to leave the deli, and when he was fairly certain they were not lurking outside he approached the counter.

Larry handed the ticket to a young clerk and said, “I got

a winner here. I just hope it covers some of my investment.” The clerk ran the ticket through a machine on the counter, and said, “8, 15, 16, 33, 36 and 43. That’s a winner, alright.” Then he blurted, “Wow! \$70,580! Congratulations, man. Where did you buy it?”

Stunned at the magnitude of the payoff, Larry stood mute for a moment before responding. “Huh? Where what? Oh, uh, on the east side somewhere. On Second Avenue.” After another beat, Larry asked, “How much did you say?”

“\$70,580. Y’know, I can’t cash that for you here. You gotta deal directly with the Lotto people.” The young clerk handed the ticket back to Larry. “They’ll rape you for taxes, but what the hell. It’s still big time money.”

Larry gently fingered the ticket as though it were a rare sacred text, and returned it to his wallet. He slipped the wallet into his sock. He didn’t know how to react. He had spent \$700 for 699 losers and one second-place winner – a simple slip of pink and yellow paper redeemable for more than 70 grand. A hundred-fold return on investment. Five in the series of six numbers matched the winning combination, and the sixth – number 15 – matched the bonus pick.

Finally, Larry mumbled, “Taxes. Raped. Right.” Then he left the deli.

Winning more than \$70 thousand – even before taxes – took the sting out of being summarily fired in front of a roomful of onlookers. Over the past 24 hours Larry had plenty of time to contemplate the freedom his second-place Lotto ticket could bring him. He took out a pad of paper and began outlining a plan. He would depart New York and establish a renewed life

in a kinder, gentler milieu. South Carolina or sunny Florida maybe. The vast Southwest intrigued Larry, too. From what he had read Santa Fe seemed charming, and so did Bisbee, Arizona. The common threads of Larry's dream destinations – perceptions only, for he had never traveled outside the Northeast to experience them firsthand – were the pleasant weather and a better class of compassionate people. Larry would take a few months off to enjoy his new surroundings and meet new friends. Unlike most Lotto winners Larry understood he could not retire on the proceeds; \$70,000 was a lot of money but it wasn't a life-changing sum. At the right time he would seek out decent-paying, respectable employment on a par with the printing job he had held for many years – something that required a level of skill and professionalism greater than that of scrubbing pots and sopping up diarrhea. Gainfully employed and with cash in the bank Larry imagined courting a nice woman and convincing her to be his companion. This time he would do it right. The flaws that conspired to bring down his marriage were legion, but for the first time in a long time Larry truly believed he could vanquish the most egregious of them, starting with his excessive drinking.

When he was finished documenting the elements of his plan Larry had but one regret: that he could think of no way to exact a modicum of revenge on Vic the Prick. He believed he deserved satisfaction after a year of torment, and it frustrated him to think he might depart New York without kicking Vic in the shins. Of course, committing an act of aggression was out of the question; Larry had not the spine to pull it off. He considered allocating a portion of his winnings to hire a thug to break one of Vic's kneecaps but the thought quickly passed. It would probably cost

too much and chances were that anyone Larry approached with the job offer would be among Vic's cohort, more than happy to squeal on Larry's nefarious intentions. No, the fruit of any revenge would have to be harvested from a crafty, cerebral plot.

Larry fingered the Lotto ticket. He wagged his head in amazement at the marvel of holding a simple slip of paper exchangeable for \$70,580. He studied the numbers, committing them to memory: 8, 15, 16, 33, 36 and 43. He noted the simplicity of the sans-serif font and the poor quality of the printing; certainly not worthy of such a valuable instrument. *Looks like it was done with a crappy dot-matrix printer.*

And then Larry had an idea which he appended to the list of items written on the pad of paper.



As usual, Larry rode the bus downtown to the OTB parlor but instead of hitting the floor in search of wayward winning tickets he waited around for Freddie the janitor to arrive for work. From a chair located in the rear of the parlor so as to reduce the odds of encountering Vic, should he barge in, Larry watched several races simultaneously on the bank of television monitors mounted on the walls and dangling from the ceiling: a blur of action streaming in from Aqueduct, Balmoral Park, Calder, Tampa Bay Downs, Woodbine Harness, Monticello Raceway and Turf Paradise, among others. The second race at Presque Isle Downs ended with the number 7 horse, Major T's Dilemma, crossing the finish line a good three lengths ahead of the number 5 horse, Sinister Architect. A stout man with a fedora on his head and a sport jacket over a red cashmere-blend sweater

blurted out in exasperation, “Goddamned seven!” The payoff on Major T’s Dilemma was \$8.40, \$6.40, and \$3.10, meaning that a \$2 bet to win paid \$8.40, to place paid \$6.40 and to show paid \$3.10. Larry scanned the parlor for Freddie. Just then he and others around him were startled by an outburst of profanity from the stout man. Larry looked toward the source of commotion and saw the man bent over, frantically plucking tickets from the dirty floor. Larry checked the television monitor. Sure enough track stewards at Presque Isle Downs had disqualified Major T’s Dilemma for bumping another horse, rendering the long-shot Sinister Architect the winner. The payoff on him: \$103.20, \$54.00, and \$25.80. Suddenly and without warning, Stoutie’s formerly worthless ticket had pulled a Lazarus; unfortunately he no longer possessed it. Like so many bettors who inadvertently made the stooper profession viable, the capricious man had flung his ticket onto the paper graveyard littered by loss and poor judgment. As Larry made a mental note of the precise coordinates where the man was desperately crawling on his hands and knees, Freddie walked past. Larry bounded from his chair. “Freddie! Freddie! Got a second?”

Freddie stopped and turned around. “Larry, what’s up? How’re you?”

“Not too bad. Did I tell you I found a \$700 ticket the other day?”

“No shit. Congrats, man.” Sounding a bit cheeky, Freddie said, “Don’t tell me you’re gonna retire from stooping now.”

“Nah. Times are tough. I spent it all on overdue bills. Plus I got fired from the diner.” In an attempt to lighten the mood, Larry added, “Lately I’ve been trying to acquire a taste for Little Friskies. Y’know, the mixed grill ain’t that bad – tastes like the

chicken salad at Applebee's." Freddie chuckled. Larry pressed on. "Seriously, I have a favor to ask of you, Freddie."

Faced with a request for a favor Freddie's expression turned defensive. "Yeah? What?"

"I'd like you to approach Vic for me, on my behalf, and tell him that I won 70 grand at Lotto but that I can't redeem the money. Tell him I have outstanding arrest warrants and that I'm afraid to go to the authorities. Tell him I'm willing to sell him the ticket for 35. Can you do that for me, Fred?"

Freddie scratched his head. Unsure what to make of the strange request he asked, "What for?"

"No reason." Recognizing that Freddie wouldn't help absent an explanation Larry offered an incentive, "C'mon. I'll pay you a C-note."

Still skeptical, Freddie muttered, "I don't know . . ."

"Please, Fred. Two hundred?" Larry knew he sounded like a whiny kid begging his father to buy the doggie in the window, but he also knew that such relentlessness often prevailed. Freddie capitulated. "Alright, alright. I don't get it, Larry, but for two hundred bucks I'll talk to Vic for you. You said 70 grand?"

"Yeah, 70 grand on Wednesday's Lotto game." Larry pulled out \$200 from his wallet and handed it to Freddie. "Here ya go. Don't tell anyone about it. I'll explain it to you later over beers."

Six hours elapsed since Larry told his tale to Freddie. He was about to leave for the day when Vic burst into the OTB parlor with his sidekick Dougie. He proceeded directly to the window to place a few bets, and then to the lunch counter where he ordered a corned beef sandwich with sauerkraut and spicy mustard. As Vic chomped on the thick sandwich, mustard

dripping from the corner of his mouth, Freddie sidled up to him and passed on Larry's odd message. From across the room Larry watched the pair converse. He was too far away to hear their words, but Larry inferred from Vic's facial expression and body language that he was incredulous, but maybe a bit impressed too. Certainly, based on what Larry knew of Vic's character, the Prick was already formulating ways to exploit the lowly stooper's situation. Freddie pointed toward Larry, and Vic and he locked eyes. Larry tried valiantly to project the correct balance of emotions: hopefulness, desperation and humility paired with a dash of pride for winning more than \$70,000 at Lotto. He allowed no evidence of hatred for Vic to emanate from his eyes, for he knew that it's a man's eyes that belie his true feelings. Vic put down his sandwich and headed toward Larry. Larry's mouth dried up and he tried in vain to swallow. Presumably Freddie had faithfully carried out his part of the mission, so in fewer than ten seconds Larry would take over the stage to engage his nemesis in what he hoped would be a mostly-civilized transaction. It was the moment of truth.

"What's this shit I hear about you havin' a Lotto ticket worth 70 Gs, Ajax? Izzat true?"

"Yeah, Vic"

"So, why don't you cash it in?"

"I . . . uh . . . can't. I don't want to get into trouble."

"That's what Freddie said. What'd you do?"

Larry stammered. He hadn't prepared to cite a specific crime.

Vic interjected, "Don't tell me. Let me guess – you're a Peepin' Tom." Larry stared blankly at Vic. He tried not to panic and blow the story. "No? OK then – a child molester? Having sex

with under-aged barnyard animals?” Vic guffawed.

“Armed robbery,” replied Larry flatly, hastily choosing to cop to a crime that might impress the gangster. Vic’s guffaw wound down to a chuckle and then he ceased laughing altogether. Larry wished he had claimed “deadbeat dad” or “forgery” or “shoplifting” or some other more-pedestrian crime. Vic responded skeptically, “You? You’re wanted for armed robbery? What’d you do? Stick up a lemonade stand?”

Before the conversation augured further into the details of Larry’s make-believe criminal past, he asked bluntly, “Are you interested in taking the ticket off my hands for 35 thousand?”

Vic pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his lips. “Maybe. But not for 35. Not even close. That’s an insult to my intelligence. Anyone who cashes in for 70 Gs is gonna have to pay half back in taxes.” Larry pursed his lips and looked aside to indicate disappointment, but not outright rejection. Outright rejection was the last thing Larry desired. Vic continued, “Before I do anything I wanna see this so-called winning ticket. I want proof, motherfucker.”

“Sure, Vic. Of course. And 35 . . . well, that was just a starting point.”

“Starting point? It’s a fuckin’ insult, ya fuckin’ mutt. Don’t do it again or I’ll squeeze your head like a pimple.” Vic placed his thumb and forefinger closely together to illustrate the concept. “Now, you and me, we go to the deli around the corner so you can show me your big, fuckin’ ticket and I can check it out.”

“Sounds like a plan, Vic,” replied Larry enthusiastically.

“You go there now. I’ll be by in 15 minutes. No way am I gonna be seen walkin’ anywhere with you, Ajax.”

Larry milled around in front of the dairy case in the deli around the corner from the OTB parlor patiently waiting for Vic to arrive. Larry had his hands in his pockets, the right one pressed firmly on a folded envelope containing the winning Lotto ticket. Even in the presence of numerous deli patrons Larry feared Vic might snatch away the ticket or roll him for it outside the parlor later on. Fifteen minutes went by and then another 15. Larry craned his neck to look out the window toward OTB. *Please let him show up.* Just then, from the back of the deli came the command, “Get your lame ass back here, Ajax. I ain’t got all day.” Apparently, Vic and Dougie had come in undetected through a rear entrance. Larry shuffled to the back of the deli and said in a chipper tone, “Thanks for coming over, Vic,”

Vic shot back, “Just show me the fuckin’ ticket.”

“Sure thing, Vic. Let’s go to the machine.” Larry carefully extracted the tiny slip of paper and passed it under the opening of the quick-check machine. The criss-crossed red lines of laser light shone upon the black lines of the barcode. The machine reported that the ticket was a winner. Impatient, Vic blurted, “Congratulations, Ajax. But how much is the payoff?”

“Well, we got to go to the counter and ask the clerk.”

Vic just shook his head in resignation. Dougie asked with annoyance, “Then why the hell are we wasting our time at this machine?”

“Don’t ask,” said Vic. “He’s a professional time-waster.”

After the clerk reported the ticket was a legitimate second-place winner worth \$70,580, Vic’s face lit up. Impressed, Dougie whistled a long slow note. Vic and Dougie exchanged glances. Larry figured Vic was already plotting to rip him off and the thought of that emboldened him. Larry quickly took

the ticket back from the clerk, placed it back into the envelope and returned it to his coat pocket. The clerk also printed out a receipt of sorts that cited the sequence of winning numbers and handed it toward Larry, but Vic snatched it instead.

“OK. So you got a big ticket, Ajax. What’dya wanna do about it?” asked Vic.

“I’d like to cash it in, but as you know, I can’t. At least not without risking arrest. I was hoping you’d buy it from me. At a significant discount, of course.”

“Well, I ain’t gonna pay half or even a quarter. Tell you what – I’ll give you five for it.”

Larry expected a low-ball offer and quickly countered, “Twenty.”

Vic took the counter offer as a sign of rank insubordination. “Twenty!? Are you crazy? I’m doin’ you a favor, boy. You should be more polite.”

Larry looked down at the floor and shuffled his feet. Dougie interjected, startling Larry. “Look at Vic when he’s talkin’ to you. Listen to what he says, asshole.”

Larry mumbled, “I just think I could maybe get 20 for it if I shopped it around.”

Vic thundered, “You’re lucky I don’t tear it out of your ratty jacket right now, scumbag!” Vic lit a cigarette, blew smoke in Larry’s face and continued, “Shop it around? You won’t get far – I’ll see to that.” When he felt he had sufficiently intimidated Larry, Vic stepped to within a couple inches, smiled benignly, picked a piece of tobacco off the tip of his tongue and brushed Larry’s shoulder as though he were sweeping off a piece of lint. Calmly, he said, “Look, Ajax. You came to me because you know I’m the kinda guy who makes things happen, am I right? So, I’m

gonna say this just once: ten thousand. Understand?”

Larry gulped and nodded like a child being scolded for eating paste.

Vic patted Larry’s cheek. “Good. Now let’s get out of this shit hole and go back to OTB . . . conduct some civilized business.”

The three men sat around a table in the brightly lit dining area of OTB. Vic pulled a cylinder of hundred dollar bills bound by a rubber band from his jacket pocket and placed it on the table. “That’s five K. I’ll give you the rest after I cash in the ticket. Go ahead, count it out. I bet you’ve never even seen \$5,000, have you Ajax?” asked Vic like a parent at Disneyland trying to drum up awe in his children. Larry hesitated. He kept his hands in his lap. Vic pressed on, “What’s the matter? Afraid to touch it?” He laughed, as did Dougie after a beat, waiting for implicit permission.

Larry responded meekly, “It’s just . . . uh . . . I really need the whole ten thousand, Vic.”

“Didn’t I just say I’d give you the rest of it after I cash in the ticket?”

“Well, yeah, but I’d like to get it all now. Before I turn over the ticket.”

“Jesus, you’re a real dildo, Ajax. An insulting, ungrateful dildo. Take the five – right fuckin’ now! – or I’ll make you regret ever asking me for a favor.” Recognizing his vulnerability Larry gently picked up the wad from the center of the table, pulled off the rubber band and counted the first few bills – he knew Vic would be thoroughly irritated if he counted all the way to fifty. Larry produced the envelope holding the prized ticket from his pocket. Vic snatched it from Larry’s hand. He

compared the numbers on the Lotto ticket and date to those on the receipt printed out by the deli clerk, verifying that the ticket was legitimate. Satisfied that Larry had not tried to pull a clumsy bait and switch, Vic stated, “Not that I don’t trust you, Ajax, but I don’t trust you. I don’t trust anyone, especially not a grovelin’ jagoff like you. There’s a reason why assholes like you never amount to anything.”

Larry silently rolled the bills back into a cylinder and sullenly stuffed it into his pocket. He slouched back in the chair. Vic said, “After I cash in the ticket, I’ll give you the other five. In the meantime, don’t talk to me, don’t ask Freddie to talk to me, don’t even look in my general direction.” Larry nodded. Vic and Dougie left Larry behind in the dining area for the miasma of blue smoke that seemed to envelope everything in the parlor, giving it an aura of a mid-century black-and-white film. The place reminded Larry of *The Killing*, Stanley Kubrick’s film about crime and deceit at the horse track.

When Vic and Dougie were out of sight, Freddie, who had been observing the conversation from a distance walked up to Larry. He stood beside him for a moment unnoticed. Finally he broke the silence. “What happened?”

Startled, Larry sat up straight. “Oh, hi Fred. Vic just bought a Lotto ticket from me.”

“Really? You sold him a ticket? How much?”

“Ten grand.”

Stunned, Freddie replied, “Are you shitting me?” Freddie propped a broom against the table and sat across from Larry. “He gave you ten grand?”

“Yeah. Five now, five later,” said Larry, sounding unusually nonchalant about the whole transaction.

“I don’t get it.”

“I’ll explain it to you later.”

Freddie stared aside for a moment; Larry could tell he was trying without success to develop a theory. Perhaps he would accept Larry’s original proposition: that he had truly won at Lotto but couldn’t cash in. Finally, Freddie remarked, “You know you’re never going to get the other five, don’t you?” The ceiling lights inside the parlor flashed twice in rapid succession. Closing time.

“I know. Doesn’t really matter. I fucked him over anyway – he just doesn’t know it yet. That’s all I wanted to accomplish.”

Freddie looked at Larry quizzically. Larry stood up. “Like I said, I’ll explain it to you later.”



Twelve hours before he sold Vic the Lotto ticket, Larry took a cross-town bus to the East side of the city and returned to the narrow bodega on Avenue C where he bought the original lot of 700 tickets. This time he instructed the Korean clerk to punch up the same combination of numbers that had placed second on Wednesday, December 4th – 8, 15, 16, 33, 36 and 43 – for the Saturday, December 14th drawing. The New York State Lottery Commission draws numbers for the lottery twice a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and Larry noted that for every drawing on a Wednesday there was another drawing exactly ten days later on a Saturday. Anytime the lottery was drawn on a Wednesday and the date was between the first and the ninth, there would be another lottery drawn on a corresponding Saturday in the future between the 11th and the 19th.

In possession of a lottery ticket bearing the drawing date of December 14th and the sequence of numbers that placed second on December 4th, all Larry had to do to create a compelling forgery was to eradicate the number “1” from “14” from the printed date. Using a special eraser he bought at Staples Larry carefully and methodically rubbed the ink from the pinkish paper. He held his handiwork up to the light and smiled with satisfaction when upon close inspection he found it nearly impossible to distinguish the two. After convincing Vic that he owned a legitimate ticket worth \$70,580, Larry simply swapped the bogus for the real. All it took was the presence in his coat pocket of a second envelope folded over precisely like the one containing the real ticket.

Vic was none the wiser. Not yet, at least.

Vic and Dougie stood together at the deli counter waiting for service. After a few seconds Vic called out loudly, “Does anyone fuckin’ work here?” A tall, gaunt Sikh emerged from the back room wearing an elaborately wrapped dastar and carrying a bucket of crushed ice.

“Can I help you?”

“Listen, Sad’m. Validate this ticket for me and tell me how to cash it in.” Vic knew an amount greater than a few hundred bucks had to be claimed directly from New York State, no doubt through an onerous, sclerotic process. But it would be worth it – a quick profit of more than \$25,000 after taxes. Vic handed over the Lotto ticket and turned to Dougie. “That Ajax is some piece of work. What a pussy. He deserves the shit I lay on him.”

Dougie chuckled in agreement, “That’s a fact, Vic.”

The Sikh clerk scanned the ticket and declared, “This ticket

not winner, sir.”

“What!?” demanded Vic loudly. “What the fuck d’ya mean ‘the ticket not winner,’ ya fuckin’ raghead?” The brown-skinned Sikh refused to cower at the burly customer who was now leaning across the narrow counter that barely separated them. Met with a passive, imbecilic expression from the clerk Vic summarily snatched the ticket from the Sikh’s fingers. “Give me that back, ya dumb fuck.” To Dougie, he said, “Do you believe this raghead?” Dougie laughed. Vic continued accusatively, “I suppose he thinks I’m just gonna throw the ticket in the garbage so he can take it for himself. Lou Dobbs is right about these fuckin’ foreigners.”

Intending to explain that the drawing for the ticket had not yet taken place, the clerk began, “I am very sorry, sir, but . . .”

“Go back to Iraq, douche-bag,” interrupted Vic as he stormed off in a huff. Using the quick-check machine Vic scanned the ticket and received a terse message on the LED screen: “Results not in.” Confused, Vic furrowed his brow. He looked at the ticket and then at Dougie and back again at the ticket, hoping for an improbably helpful explanation from his dim colleague. Dougie said, “I don’t get it. Results not in where?” Vic scanned the ticket again, receiving the same response.

“Results not in where?” commented Dougie once more.

“Shut up!” As Vic furiously scanned the ticket the clerk chimed in from across the deli, “Please to help you, sir. Your ticket is for Saturday lottery – not tomorrow. Next Saturday.”

Another few seconds elapsed while Vic processed the information. When he figured it out he screamed, “Motherfucker! That cocksuckin’ stooper sold me a bogus ticket! So help me God, I’ll kill that bastard! I’ll go medieval on his ass! He’ll wish

he was never born, that scum-suckin' dirtbag." The veins bulging on Vic's temples looked as though they might burst through his skin and spray steaming hot kroovy all over the walls. Vic bolted to the exit with a confused-looking Dougie in tow. Dougie mumbled to himself, "I still don't get it. Results not in where?"

"Please to have a nice day, sir," exclaimed the Sikh.

"Fuck you, raghead."

After Vic slammed the door on his way out the clerk dumped the bucket of ice into the Slurpie machine and enjoyed a wry smile at Vic's evident misfortune.

At the same time Vic was learning he was the victim of a scam perpetrated by none other than the lowly, servile Ajax, Larry was urgently completing plans to escape from New York City. Knowing he had precious little time before Vic discovered the bait and switch, he had packed a single piece of luggage with a few articles of clothing, a kit bag of toiletries, some pans and silverware, and an alarm clock. He would have to abandon the rest of his meager possessions and the security deposit on his crappy apartment. Larry decided to sew an envelope containing most of Vic's \$5,000 "down payment" into the lining of the only sport coat he owned, a threadbare poly-blend number with misshapen padded shoulders. And as he hastily threaded the needle his apprehension spiked. *Maybe Vic is looking for me already!*

Justifiably paranoid Larry considered ways to protect the precious Lotto ticket should Vic catch up with him. Concluding it sound to separate himself temporarily from the valuable instrument he mailed it to a post office box he rented after losing his apartment in the divorce. He used some of Vic's cash to purchase a ticket for an Amtrak train leaving later in the

evening for Albany where he would cool his heels for a week or two until he decided it was safe enough to return briefly to retrieve the ticket. Larry would then go through the process of claiming the winnings, after which he would depart New York forever. Maybe he'd give Florida a try after all. With plans set, bag packed and a train ticket in hand, Larry felt relieved. In better spirits now over the prospect of moving to the Sunshine State tens of thousands of dollars richer and proud of himself for fucking over Vic the Prick, Larry placed a call to the OTB parlor downtown and asked to speak to Freddie.

"Hello?"

"Freddie? Larry. How're you doin'?' Is everything OK there?"

Amazed to hear Larry's voice Freddie responded incredulously, "How am I doin'?' How am I doin'?' Not so great, but a hell of a lot better than you if you even think about coming around here. I sure hope you're calling from another planet because if Vic finds out you're somewhere on Earth he'll flay you alive."

"Fuck him. I only have one regret: not scamming him for more . . . well, that and not getting to see the expression on his ugly punim when he found out the ticket was worthless." Larry laughed heartily. "He must've shit a pant-load of lava, haw, haw . . ."

Freddie said, "Laugh now while you can, my man. You know, a second after Vic realized you ripped him off he came into the parlor with his hair on fire. He was cursing and screaming like a lunatic. 'Where's that fuckin' stooper! I'm gonna fuckin' castrate him!' Shit like that. The manager had to call in security to restrain him from busting into the restricted area."

"Wow. I'm flattered." He was serious.

“Scary. Anyway, I’m glad for you, Larry. Winning the big money *and* knocking the Prick down a notch. Unfortunately, I’m worried about my own safety now. Y’know, he’s pissed at me for coming to him in the first place with your so-called favor.”

“Gee, I’m really sorry about that, Fred.” In all the excitement, Larry hadn’t considered how the consequences of his cheeky trick might befall his janitor buddy. “I wish I could make it up to you.”

“Forget it. I’ll be OK – I hope. I only wish I knew how you did it.”

Larry recalled the promise he had made to Freddie. “Like I said before, I’ll explain it all to you later. Why don’t you meet me at Local. It’s a bar across the street from Penn Station. The gash is high quality, and I’m buying – at least until I have to bolt on the train.”

“Nice. What time?”

“Come by at 7. And don’t tell anyone.”

“Right.”

Promptly at 7 p.m. Freddie exited the subway station at 33rd Street and walked briskly in the chilly December air to Local. Inside, a tall blonde greeter about 24 years old dressed in a short black skirt, shiny black halter top and mesh stockings greeted Freddie. Stunning, and a little slutty. Freddie smiled, and then noticed with dismay the dirt under his fingernails – black lines that looked like feces in un-deveined shrimps – and wished he had washed his hands more thoroughly. Then he wondered whether he smelled of vomit. Just before quitting time Freddie had been summoned to the men’s room to deal with an ocean of chunky barf deposited yards from the nearest porcelain

receptacle.

Freddie gave the greeter girl a full-body scan – what luscious shoulders and tender thighs. And a halter top in the winter – how delightful. He felt a powerful urge to bite her flesh and taste the sweetness just below the skin. After a delay in which the hostess concluded the leering Freddie was a low-class creep, he said to her, “I’m looking for . . . oh, never mind. I see him.” He walked to a spot at the bar obscured behind a huge pillar in the middle of the room that interrupted the otherwise open-plan space. Larry was waiting hunched over with his hands wrapped around a big, greenish-gray four-olive dirty Martini. Accompanied by a single piece of scratched and dented luggage at his side he blended in with the other commuters enjoying a drink or three before departing from Penn Station on Amtrak, Long Island Railroad and New Jersey Transit for all points on the compass. Freddie sat down at the bar next to Larry.

“Hi, Larry.”

“Freddie! Good to see you. What’re you drinking?” A sultry soubrette of a bartender approached. She had a Playboy body and a Hustler face. Again, Freddie ogled the merchandise. “Jameson and coke.” The two men watched raptly as the bartender reached for the bottle sitting on the top shelf, hiking her mini-skirt to near cheek-level.

Larry continued after a moment of distraction, “I’m really sorry you’re in Dutch with the Prick, Fred.”

“Nah. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be OK. Vic’s got bigger things to deal with.” Freddie raised his glass and toasted, “Titim gan éirí ort.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Not sure – I think it means something like ‘bon voyage’ in

Gaelic.” Freddie slugged the entire drink in a single gulp, and slammed the rocks glass down on the bar. “OK, Lare, tell me how it works.”

Taken aback by Freddie’s rocking style Larry stared dumbly for a moment before replying, “Uh . . . yeah. OK. The way it works is you buy a ticket for a future game . . .” Larry went on to explain how the New York Lotto games are run ten days apart, and how the cheap printer ink can be erased from the paper ticket, and so on. Freddie pounded another Jameson and coke.

“That’s pretty ingenious, Larry. Tell me. Where’re you headed from here?”

“No offense, Freddie, but that’s highly confidential.”

Just then Vic and Ray barged into the bar, surveyed the clientele, and upon spotting the back of Freddie’s head bolted directly for the bar. When Freddie spotted the pair moving toward him double-time, he said to Larry, “Doesn’t matter now anyway, Larry. The game’s over. Sorry, man. I had no choice.” Larry looked at Freddie quizzically; Freddie sucked a few remaining drops of booze from his glass, attempting to assuage the sudden sick feeling of self-loathing for his betrayal. Sensing a misanthropic presence Larry glanced over his shoulder. He locked eyes with Vic the Prick and froze in terror. Judging from Vic’s maniacal visage Larry fully expected to be slugged in the mouth or throttled about the throat. In preparation for the imminent assault he closed his eyes, tensed his body and grasped seat of his stool. Instead of inflicting pain though, Vic relaxed and like an amiable tour guide instructed calmly, “Stand up and bring your luggage with you.” Larry complied. Vic took him by the arm and marched him quietly toward the door. Larry briefly glanced back at Freddie; he saw Ray throw some money on the

bar. His initial thought was that the money was meant to cover the unpaid bar bill until he saw Freddie Iscariot pick up the cash and shake hands with Ray. Overcome with dread Larry shuffled alongside Vic. His body became limp, and he almost passed out. *Why didn't I leave planet Earth when Freddie warned me?* Vic hustled Larry into the back seat of his idling Mercedes 500 SEL, slammed the door and jumped into the front passenger's seat. Meanwhile Ray tossed the piece of luggage into the trunk. He then sped through an amber light and crossed Eighth Avenue toward the West Side Highway, en route to the dark, isolated, winter-barren wetlands of New Jersey.



Trying hard not to whimper, struggling mightily to maintain a scintilla of dignity, Larry mustered just enough courage to ask, “Wh-where’re we going, Vic?” Vic and Ray looked at each other, and both smirked devilishly. Vic said nothing. Ray replied, “Keep quiet back there, Mr. Stoooper. You’ll find out when we get there.” Larry noted a sign indicating directions to the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. *Shit. New Jersey. Tony Soprano territory.* Larry started to obsess about chains and concrete blocks and guns and cannolis. He silently released a nervous, smelly fart. A second later Vic bellowed, “Goddamn you, Ajax. You slice another one like that and I’ll throw your disgusting ass in the trunk with your luggage.”

The trio drove around the highways and byways of New Jersey for more than an hour – Hoboken and Secaucus, Rutherford and Nutley, Paterson and Totowa – finally pulling onto a narrow, unmarked, pothole-scarred side road that led deep and straight

into the infinite darkness that lay ahead. Ray drove about a mile down the road and then shut off the headlights. Maintaining speed but visually impaired he struck a number of potholes and repeatedly drove off the shoulder, each time banging Larry's head against the roof of the car. Finally, Ray pulled the car off the road and parked next to a tall stand of reeds. He kept the motor running.

Vic turned to face Larry and said in an avuncular tone, "Here's the deal, Ajax. First, you're gonna turn over the real Lotto ticket, and give me back my five Gs. Second, you're gonna pay a penalty of another five. Third, never come back to OTB, and D, never, *ever* tell anyone that you tried to scam me. Clear?" Larry sat immobile, unable to speak. The fact that he failed to answer didn't seem to bother Vic, for he continued, "Otherwise . . . well, you really don't wanna know about otherwise. What's it gonna be?"

Frightened stiff, Larry simply could not muster a syllable. After half a minute of silence, Ray reached back and grabbed a handful of Larry's hair and yanked him forward so the two men's faces were separated by mere inches. "Answer the man, you fucking leech!"

"Owwww! OK. OK," screamed Larry. Ray pushed him back hard. Larry replied meekly to Vic, "I don't have the ticket anymore, Vic." As soon as he lied he knew it was fruitless, because Vic would ask the obvious question.

"You cashed it in already? Well, then, you owe me 80 grand, pal. Seventy for the ticket, my five and your penalty. I'll let you cover the taxes. Now don't you wish you never fucked with me, Ajax?"

Larry thought he might vomit. "I mean, Vic, I, uh, lost the

ticket. I had it in my wallet, and on my way to meet Freddie, I got mugged. Some black dude ripped me off. It's the truth. I know it sounds bogus, but . . ."

Vic started to laugh, as did Ray. "Y'know, Ajax, you're an even lower piece of scum than I had you pegged for. If a piece of scum walked up to you, he'd call *you* a scum." Vic shook his head in mock disbelief. "I suppose you were at that bar with your luggage because you were getting' ready to go to a stooper convention."

Ray laughed some more. "Stooper convention . . . haw, haw, haw."

Vic lit a cigarette, and then he exploded at Larry, "You think you can fuckin' try to scam me and then, on top of it, lie right to my face!?! I know goddamn well you still have the ticket and you're gonna turn it over right fuckin' now! Ray, pull this piece of shit out of my car. I'm through bein' nice."

Ray hopped out and flung open the back door. Larry slid across the seat to the opposite side and started screaming and flailing about like one of the chronics about to undergo involuntary electro-shock in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He kicked Ray in the knee with the heel of his shoe. Ray managed to grasp Larry by both ankles and dragged him onto the cold, broken asphalt, where he folded into a fetal position. Larry tried to fend off Ray's furious kicks to his ribs, unable to block two or three direct, painful blows. Vic stepped in and took Ray by the elbow. "Jesus, Ray. Don't kill him yet." Then he demanded of Larry, "Once more, Ajax. Where's the ticket?"

Larry debated himself. The Lotto winnings would enable him to swap his miserable existence for a new life far away from the grime and chill of New York. Such an opportunity would never

present itself again – that he was certain of. Winning \$70,000 in the New York Lottery surely had consumed all the good luck he would ever accumulate in a lifetime. To Larry the slip of paper was more than a mere lottery ticket; it was a first-class ticket out of his depressing predicament, a license to fly. *How can I part with it?* On the other side, balanced against preserving ownership of the Lotto ticket was the looming punishment that Vic and Ray would mete out should he refuse to comply. Here he was, curled up and lying defenseless on a dark road running into an anonymous swamp in New Jersey, a La Brea tar pit for hapless fools who crossed the wrong element. *What good is a lottery ticket under such circumstances?*

Vic repeated, “Last chance, Ajax. Where’s the ticket?”

*Fuck it, I’m dead already.* “I told you, man, I ain’t got it. And if I did, I’d burn it before I’d turn it over to you, Prick!”

Vic chuckled. “You say that now, big man. We’ll see how long that lasts. Ray, get me the tire iron.”

*Tire iron!?* The very words caused Larry to shudder. Ray popped the trunk and scrounged around under the little donut-shaped spare tire, eventually producing an 18 inch long piece of drop-forged steel. Larry briefly caught a glint of light from the trunk lamp reflecting off the bluish, cruel-looking shaft. Vic accepted the tire iron and then addressed Larry, “You remember that ticket you sold me – the worthless piece of shit you tried to pawn off for \$5,000?” Vic reached into his back pocket, pulled out the ticket and held it close to Larry’s face. “Here it is. Now, I’m gonna make you a trade. My ticket for yours. What’dya say, Ajax?”

“Suck my dick!” shouted Larry defiantly, ready now to accept his punishment.

Vic smirked. “Tsk, tsk. That’s not what I would call good manners. How about it, Mr. Ray?”

“No sir, Mr. Schuyler.”

To Larry, Vic continued, “I said I’m gonna trade you tickets. To Ray, “Ray, hold this cocksucker down.”

Ray bent down toward Larry. Larry tried to scramble to his feet but Ray quickly subdued him with a brutal chop to the back of his neck. Larry moaned from pain and a sudden rush of nausea. Vic flicked open a switchblade and cut a gash in the seat of Larry’s pants. Larry yelped at the unexpected action. Vic folded the bogus lottery ticket over the pointed prying end of the tire iron, gritted his teeth, and shoved the piece of steel deep and hard into Larry’s rectum. Larry screamed in unimaginable agony. Even Ray had to avert his eyes from the vicious assault.

Vic shouted, “I got six inches of this tire iron up your ass, bastard. There’s another twelve left to bury. Do you wanna trade tickets with me?”

Suffering horrific, excruciating pain, Larry adjusted his frame of mind. A moment earlier he resigned himself to the notion that he was already dead. He thought he was prepared to give up his life rather than to capitulate once again to Vic’s demands, but this crowbar assault was worse than death. He understood now that Vic the Prick would heap cruelty upon him until he got what he wanted, administering Torquemada-like torture until he got the Lotto ticket. Larry screamed, “Yes! Yes! I’ll trade! Please stop!”

Vic retracted the tire iron. Blood poured from Larry’s anus. Vic looked at the pointed end and said matter-of-factly, “Seems my ticket is still up your ass – where’s yours?” Larry squirmed around on the asphalt with both hands jammed between his

legs. “In a post office box in New York. The key’s in my luggage. In my shaving kit.” He whimpered and yelped like a dog whose hind quarters were crushed by an automobile.

Ray opened the bag, unzipped the shaving kit and located the brass key marked “Property of USPS.” “Got it, Vic.”

Vic patted Larry on the head and said, “Good boy, Ajax. And my money?”

“It’s inside the lining of my sport coat. It’s in the suitcase. Please, take me to a hospital. I beg you, don’t leave me out here!” He threw up.

“No-can-do, sport. The hospital’s not on my way home. But tell you what – since I’m in a better mood now, I’ll let you off the hook for the 5K penalty. Merry Christmas.” Vic nodded to Ray and proceeded to the car. After Ray ripped the cash from the lining of the sport coat he strode toward Larry and lifted him by the armpits. “Let’s go, Ajax.” Suffering from severe internal injury Larry was unable to offer resistance.

“Please, God, no.”

“I’m sorry, Larry.”

Ray dragged Larry into the reeds and dropped him on the ground. Larry lay face down on the frozen dirt like a broken toy. Displaying German efficiency, Ray pulled an automatic pistol from his waistband, cocked it and with a touch of bathos fired at the back of Larry’s head. It was pitch dark but Ray spotted telltale spatters of blood and brains on the reeds. Larry lay motionless. Ray looked toward the Mercedes and nodded once to Vic who was waiting in the passenger seat. Ray ran back to the car.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here, Ray,” barked Vic. And so they did.

Larry moaned, and before passing out, in a barely audible

voice, mumbled, “F-f-fucking prick . . .”



As soon as the Post Office opened on Saturday, Vic sent Dougie in with the box key he had tortured out of Larry the previous evening. Vic instructed his loyal monkey to hike his collar up around his neck and pull his stocking cap down low in case someone was watching from surveillance cameras mounted in the ceiling. “It’s probably low risk, Dougie, but no sense takin’ a chance. Fuckin’ around with the Post Office is a federal offense, y’know, heh, heh.”

“Gee, thanks Vic.” Dougie dutifully pulled his cap down over his brow. “Are you sure Ajax was telling the truth? I mean, do you think the ticket’s in the box?”

“Well, I wouldn’t bet my testicles on it but if you coulda seen him last night, you’d be inclined to believe him.” Then it occurred to Vic that a man with a tire iron up his ass would probably admit to firing the third shot from the grassy knoll at Dealey Plaza. “Yeah,” he added unconvincingly “I’m pretty sure it’s there.”

“Damn, Vic. Why didn’t you take me with you?”

“Listen, dick. First drop of blood and you woulda passed out. Right on your fuckin’ face like last time.” Vic smacked the palm of his hand on the dashboard.

Dougie rubbed his jaw. “Well, I don’t know about that, Vic.”

Disinterested in debating Dougie or massaging his ego, Vic blurted, “Just go get the goddamned ticket, will ya Doug?”

Dougie stepped out of the car and headed for the post office entrance. The winter cold imparted a shooting pain in his jaw –

a persistent reminder of that sudden violent encounter with an unforgiving concrete sidewalk. He rubbed his jaw some more, then hiked up the stone steps. Once inside the building, Dougie walked to a corridor housing a bank of brass-plated post office boxes, small ones arranged along the top ranks, medium sized in the middle, and the biggest set along the bottom, each adorned with a three-digit number in an art deco font. Dougie walked slowly down the aisle repeatedly looking back and forth at the number on the key and the wall of boxes. Because the boxes varied in size, the numbers were not exactly in sequence. Dougie passed by Larry's box twice before finally locating it. He inserted the key and opened the brass door. Stuffed inside was a pile of pulpy store fliers, some postcard-sized late-payment notices, and a few envelopes. Dougie didn't expect to find the Lotto ticket for he secretly believed Larry might be smarter than Vic – especially after Larry scammed Vic in what now seemed to be an obvious con. Dougie took the contents to a table and sorted through it, tossing away the items that did not fit the bill. Among the remaining envelopes was one addressed in handwriting to Larry Greco; it bore no return address. Dougie sliced it open along the seam with his finger and peered inside. *Vic was right – Ajax was a pussy.* He quickly folded the envelope and shoved it in his back pocket. He threw the remaining mail in the garbage and returned to the car.

“Your testicles are safe, Vic. The ticket was there.”

“I told you I *wouldn't* bet my testicles. Do you listen to anything I say?” Vic sped off. “Check the fuckin' numbers – tell me it's good.” Dougie pulled the envelope from his back pocket and produced a Lotto ticket bearing the numbers 8, 15, 16, 33, 36 and 43. The game date imprinted beneath the sequence:

December 4th.

Dougie reported, "It's the real thing, Vic."

Vic made a victory fist then remarked, "When you think about it, you really gotta shake your head, Doug. Here's this asshole Ajax. He wins 70 large, but he's not content with it. He's gotta try to burn me for a lousy five. And look at him now. Fuckin' fool." As if on command Dougie wagged his head in agreement. Vic took out a cigarette, and as he flicked his lighter he studied the scar on his thumb, the remaining evidence of the deep knife wound Maddie inflicted on her way out of his life. "When I get some free time, I gotta locate that bitch. She still owes me a pound of flesh for what she did to my fuckin' thumb."

"Where do you think she is now, Vic?"

"No fuckin' idea. I went to the hospital right after, figurin' she would take her old job back, but no dice. Probably moochin' off some friend I don't know about. Maybe she went back upstate to that stupid fuckin' farm."

The two men drove around the city loaning money and making collections at restaurants, a bowling alley and various bars and taverns. Among the final stops was the OTB parlor where Larry once did his stooping. Vic strode in and went straight into the men's room while Dougie headed to the lunch counter to order a couple corned beef sandwiches. Vic called out, "Freddie, you in here?" He heard a flush and then a meek response, "Back here, Vic." Freddie stepped out of the last stall holding the squeeze bottle of lye and a darkly-stained toilet brush. "What's up?"

Vic replied, "What's up? Should something be 'up,' Fred?"

Freddie smiled weakly; his arms trembled. He said nothing.

Vic continued, "I just came by to make sure you're doin' "

OK. OK?” Freddie remained silent. More forcefully now, Vic repeated, “OK?”

“Y-yeah, Vic. I’m doing OK. No problems.”

“Good. Listen, I wanna talk to Ajax again about that stunt he tried to pull. You seen him?”

“No, Vic. He ain’t been in today. Maybe he was disappeared.” He meant to say, “Maybe he disappeared,” but the way it came out insinuated that something evil had befallen poor Larry, and that perhaps Vic was involved.

“Wha’d you say?” barked Vic. Freddie cowered, dropping the toilet brush. Fearing violence he steeled himself in case, as a last resort, he was forced to defend himself. The first idea that popped into his head was to squirt lye into Vic’s face.

“I thought we had an agreement, Fred.”

“Sure, Vic. Of course we do. I just ain’t seen Larry, uh, Ajax today. That’s all I meant.”

Like a second grade teacher Vic laid out the lesson. “Me and Ray took Ajax on a drive and I expressed my disappointment in him. That’s it. Understand?”

“Right, Vic. Crystal clear.”

Vic nodded, satisfied that he had appropriately intimidated Freddie and at the same time posited the proposition that Larry remained alive and well, more or less.

“Good. Now you can go back to lickin’ the porcelain.” Vic lit a cigarette and walked out of the restroom. Freddie exhaled hard, puffing out his cheeks. He picked up his toilet brush, shuffled to the stall and resumed scrubbing. Back in the parlor, Dougie met Vic and handed him a sandwich. Vic took a bite and said, “Let’s go, Dougie. Freddie’s fine.”



Tiny flakes of dry, frigid snow fell onto Larry's face which was pressed into the frozen mud of the swamp. He rotated his head slowly and parted his left eye which was encrusted with mucus and the dried tears he shed before blacking out several hours earlier. Daylight was overtaking darkness, slowly and incrementally. *I must be dead.* Deep, throbbing pain afflicted his nether region, but he couldn't summon the strength to move. His left ear felt like it was on fire. Larry heard the sound of rapid panting. Then he felt a rhythmic massaging sensation on his tender ass. The effect – like being caressed with a warm, moist slightly coarse cloth – was soothing. A man called out from beyond the line of reeds. "C'mon Isabella, c'mon girl. What'd you find in there?" A dog directly behind Larry started barking. "C'mon out Izzy." The barking became frantic. Larry contorted his neck and peered over his shoulder. He glimpsed a man parting the reeds like a curtain, a man dressed in a thick sweater, long, black, skin-tight Lycra pants, and a dorky ski cap from which dangled two strings adorned with tiny pom-poms. He looked as though he had spent seven years in Tibet.

"Izzy . . . holy shit!" The jogger rushed forward and bent down to get close to Larry's face. "Can you speak, man? What happened to you?" Larry whispered hoarsely, "Help me."

"Don't move. Don't talk. I'll call for help." The man removed his sweater and draped it over Larry's torso. He stared momentarily in morbid fascination at the bloody mess revealed by the tear in the seat of Larry's pants, and adjusted the sweater to cover the purplish bare buttocks. Then the jogger called 911. Twenty minutes later an ambulance arrived and the EMTs gently

rolled Larry's half-frozen body onto a gurney, and with some difficulty hoisted him out of the reeds. Before being placed into the back of the rescue vehicle Larry motioned limply for the jogger to come close. Larry weakly gripped the man's hand and in a raspy voice cried, "Thank you."

The damage inflicted by Vic was cruel and devastating, but ultimately not lethal. Larry was rushed to the OR where a team of surgeons operated for several hours to repair his torn colon and lacerated bladder. The doctors urgently dealt with the incursion of bacteria-laden feces into Larry's abdominal cavity, working to stifle septic shock. In addition to the internal injuries Larry suffered from frostbite on the tip of his nose and to three of his fingers. And his left ear was pierced by the bullet fired from Ray's automatic. In the inky darkness Ray had missed Larry's skull completely.

After the operation, an orderly wheeled Larry – newly outfitted with a catheter and a colostomy bag – into the intensive care unit where he slept in a drug-induced stupor for several hours. When Larry finally awoke he peered through bleary eyes at the hazy outline of a person dressed in pale green who seemed to be making a sweeping motion. The profile appeared feminine. Larry called out weakly, "Nurse . . ."

The woman stopped mopping the floor, stepped closer to Larry and said, "Good afternoon, sir. I'm not the nurse. I'm with the hospital's environmental services department." Larry mustered a tiny smile. Before Larry got the impression she was more important than she really was, the woman clarified, "I'm a janitor."

"Where am I?" asked Larry, unconcerned with her station in

life.

“In the ICU. At Raritan Bay Medical Center.” After a moment she further clarified, “In Perth Amboy.”

“I’m in Perth Amboy?” Still groggy, Larry tried to piece together the timeline leading to his presence in the ICU. *Vic’s car . . . dark road . . . brutal assault . . . gunshot . . . dog licking my ass . . .* “How long have I been here?”

“About six hours, sir. They brought you over from the OR.”

“Jesus. I feel like I was run over by a tank.” Larry chuckled, then winced. He took a slow, shallow breath, fearing that a deep intake of air might induce an unwelcome stabbing pain in his abdomen. “What’s your name, miss?”

“I’m Maddie, sir.”

“Maddie, huh? Please just call me Larry. No one – and I mean no one – ever calls me ‘sir.’”

“OK, Larry.”

“Tell me – how do I look?”

Larry in fact did look like had been run over by a truck, but Maddie had not the heart to pass on that information. “Um, not too bad, really. Your nose looks sore.”

“My nose?” Larry tried to touch it but his arms were immobilized under the taut covers of his bed. As Larry struggled futilely a doctor and a stern-looking nurse paraded into the ICU; Maddie stepped away from the bedside and resumed her chores, blending into the background. “How are we feeling this morning, Mr. . . . uh.” The doctor flipped a couple of sheets of paper attached to his clipboard. “I guess we don’t know your name. You came into the ER as a ‘John Doe.’ That means you had no ID on you.”

“My name is Larry Greco, doctor.”

“Well, Larry Greco – you are lucky to be alive, my friend. You suffered a nasty injury, not to mention a serious case of exposure. But you’re out of the woods now, or should I say out of the reeds, heh heh.” Larry raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry,” added the doctor, “don’t you remember being in the reeds in the swamp?”

“Of course I do, doctor.”

“Good. That’s very good. Anyway, we’ll be moving you out of ICU in another day or two to a semi-private room on the second floor. You’ve got a catheter and a colostomy bag – you know what that is, don’t you?” Larry gulped. He said nothing. *Isn’t that a bag for old farts who can’t shit right? Jesus Christ!* Apparently the doctor assumed Larry was adequately familiar with the purpose and function of the attachment because he segued straight to the next topic on his agenda: how such an atrocity could have happened.

“Now that you’re conscious, the police want to talk to you, Mr. Greco. Do you feel up to it?”

Larry had not formulated a tale to tell. Clearly, the simplest thing to report would be the truth: that a vicious cocksucker named Vic Schuyler – aka “the Prick” – along with his Nazi sidekick Ray perpetrated this execrable crime to force him to part with a valuable lottery ticket. But Larry knew that formally accusing Vic and Ray would lead to their arrest – or at least to an inquiry – and that would be quickly followed by a crusade of revenge by the assailants for ratting them out. Certainly, Vic and Ray deserved lengthy incarceration but Larry remained unconvinced that the justice system would protect him – a simple man who stooped for a living – from the pair’s wrath. *Forget it – I need to weave an alternate story.*

Larry replied to the doctor, “Yeah, I guess I could talk to them.”

The detectives took notes, dubious at Larry’s pat explanations. Larry described how he had stumbled out of a midtown bar – he couldn’t remember the name because he was too drunk – when a couple of home-boys rolled him for his wallet. To make the story more colorful, and hopefully more believable, Larry embellished. “I bit one of them on the arm, and that’s when they got really rough with me. They dragged me into an alley, and the big one, he tore open my pants and shoved something sharp into my asshole – I mean my rectum. I passed out right then and there.”

“Terrible. Let me ask you something: if these homeboys as you call them dragged you into an alley in midtown how did you wind up in New Jersey, Mr. Greco?”

Larry hesitated for an uncomfortably long time, and then responded rather fantastically, “Uh . . . um, I faintly remember them arguing about not leaving behind any evidence there. I think they put me in their car. Yeah, they put me in their car. That’s right.” He knew he was talking too fast but seemed unable to govern his speech, so he plowed forward. “I recall going through the Holland Tunnel. Like I said, I was in and out of consciousness from the pain. I guess they wanted to ditch me. Leave me there to die.”

The detectives exchanged wary glances. The one taking notes asked, “Do you remember getting shot in the ear?”

“Uh uh.” *That sure sounded convincing!*

“Really? Interesting. You don’t remember someone shooting you in the ear?”

“I got shot in the ear? I thought it was frostbite.”

Shaking his head imperceptibly, the detective continued, “The doctor says they recovered a lottery ticket from your, um, insides, y’know, during the surgery. Does that mean anything to you?”

Larry shook his head. Sounding bemused, the detective said, “I didn’t figure it would.” He clicked his ballpoint pen with authority and fastened it to the top of the clipboard. “OK, Mr. Greco. We’ll have you look at some mug shots later. Please try in the meantime to remember more details. It would be a big help to us. I’m sure you want to help us catch the criminals who violated you and left you for dead.” When the detective said “violated,” Larry felt ashamed. “Best of luck, sir. Get well soon.”

Larry knew the detectives didn’t believe a word he said, but he also got the impression that, ultimately, they didn’t care all that much. Too many other crimes to investigate today. He gave them credit, though; for awhile they had sincerely tried to solicit details of the crime, but Larry the Stooper wouldn’t comply. If that’s his story, so be it; if he wants to let the perpetrators of this heinous attack walk away scot-free, he must have a damn good reason. Larry shrunk into the bed. *I am a loser, a dirtbag, a craven pussy. Just like Vic said.*

After the detectives left the room the doctor pulled the curtain around Larry’s bed. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a crumpled and stained slip of paper. He seemed to be fascinated with it. “They’re right,” whispered the doctor quietly, “we did recover a lottery ticket from your rectum. Most unusual. I can’t imagine why your attackers would insert it there, Mr. Greco. Truly barbaric.” The doctor pursed his lips and looked aside as though he were trying to make sense of the Holocaust.

After the pensive moment, he continued, “I suppose, because I can’t imagine a reason for its presence, I kept it for you – highly irregular, I must say. . .” Larry was dumbstruck and appeared upset. *You kept the fucking thing?* The doctor hurriedly elaborated, for he didn’t want to plant the seeds of a potential malpractice lawsuit, “. . . in case you wanted to save it as a souvenir of your brush with death.” The doctor grinned proudly now as though he were about to bestow the key to the city. Larry was uncertain how to react. *Why do I want this worthless, blood-and-shit-stained ticket?* The doctor, sensing hesitance, added encouragingly, “Don’t worry, Mr. Greco. It’s been sanitized.”

The surgeon’s gesture struck Larry as patently bizarre. He shrugged and said blandly, “Sure, Doc. Whatever. Just put it in my drawer. I can’t get my arms out from under these damned covers.” Before the doctor left, Larry piped up, “One other thing, Doc.”

“Yes, Mr. Greco?”

“Who do I talk to about making a phone call?”



Vic turned on the car radio to check on the outcomes of several sporting events upon which he had placed substantial wagers. All the reported results were in Vic’s favor: the lowly Knicks lost to the Wizards by 3, Navy more than covered the spread by kicking Army’s ass 58 to 12 at Giants Stadium, and in rugby, Leinster upset the French giants Montferrand 23 to 20. Supremely satisfied Vic clapped his hands together and with characteristic boastfulness said, “Clean sweep, Ray. Twenty-two grand.”

He and Ray were heading uptown to a Japanese restaurant where they and some associates planned to meet Lien and a few of her rented Asian girlfriends for dinner. Vic declared, “Man, I’m starving. Can you speed it up a bit Ray. I gotta get some Asian tuna on my tongue. By the way, I hope you remembered to pack the video camera.”

“Sure thing, Vic.”

At the top of the hour the newscaster on the radio kicked off with a report on a crime in New Jersey. “We have an update on that story we first reported this morning about the dead body of a middle-aged white man that was pulled from a swamp in an area south of Metuchen this morning.”

Vic reached for the volume knob, and even though Ray was silent, Vic barked, “Quiet. Listen.”

The newscaster continued, “According to a New Jersey State Police spokeswoman the man was shot in the head from behind execution style after being sexually assaulted. The identity of the victim has not yet been determined.”

Vic turned toward Ray and flashed him a sadistic smile. “Sweet.”

Then the newscaster got to the update part of the report. “We have now learned there are conflicting reports as to whether or not the victim survived.”

Vic blew up. “Goddamn it, Ray!” Ray nearly swerved off Park Avenue onto the tidy boulevard. “Are you sure you X’d Ajax last night!? It was pretty fuckin’ dark – are you absolutely positive?”

Regardless of his level of certitude, which at this moment was hovering around 60 percent, for as Vic said, it was pretty fuckin’ dark, there was no way Ray would respond any other way than, “Absolutely, Vic. The fucker’s dead. I saw his brains splatter on

the reeds. No doubts.”

“You better be right. If that cocksucker survives, he’ll turn us over in a heartbeat. He’ll finger Freddie, and you know what that spineless toilet jockey will do the minute the cops put an ounce of pressure on him. This could be bad, Ray. Real bad. You better ditch that pistol in case they pull a slug outta him. Assuming you even hit him.”

“I tell ya he’s dead, Vic. I clipped him clean. Besides, no way could he survive in the cold with that new asshole you bored into him. No fuckin’ way.” Ray’s mouth dried up. Vic ordered Ray to make an abrupt U-turn at 77th and speed downtown. He made a cell phone call to Lien telling her to delay the start of dinner. “Have the guys and girls hang out in the bar until I get there. I gotta tend to some urgent business.” Several minutes and a half-dozen violated red lights later Ray parked the car around the corner from the OTB parlor where the loathsome Ajax once plied his trade. Vic and Ray rushed into the building, nearly knocking over a couple of geezers on their way out, and scanned the floor. In the far corner Vic spotted Freddie talking on the phone. He and Ray proceeded forthwith like storm troopers in the employ of Erwin Rommel to interrogate the “spineless toilet jockey.” Freddie wrapped up his phone conversation. “They’re here now. Get better. I’m really sorry.” He hung up just before the pair reached him.

“Hey fellas,” Freddie said nervously, “what’s up?”

“What’s up? Is that all you can ever say? ‘What’s up?’ I’ll tell you ‘what’s up’ . . . have you heard from Ajax?” Vic stared at Freddie sternly, his hands planted on his hips. Although he was a good seven inches taller than Freddie, Vic leaned forward to further accentuate the intimidating height difference. “I’ve

been lookin' all over for him."

Freddie hesitated; he stared at the floor and said with forced pain in his eyes, "Larry's dead, Vic. I got a call from some dude in the morgue. I guess Larry had me listed as an emergency contact, y'know, a card in his pocket had my name on it. I guess." Freddie spoke haltingly; he had difficulty looking directly at Vic.

"He had a card in his pocket?" Vic faced Ray and glared at him. "You hear that Ray? He had a card in his pocket." Ray scratched the back of his head like a chastened altar boy. Vic turned his attention back to Freddie. "So, Ajax is dead? Are you sure, Freddie?"

"I'm sure Vic. Hundred percent."

As this was the situation he hoped for, Vic suppressed the urge to appear relieved. Instead, he affected a look of sorrow – nothing too dramatic, just the level of sympathy customarily expressed when hearing from an acquaintance about the death of a pet. To lower the threat-level Vic took his hands from his hips and plunged them into his pockets. He crushed a cigarette butt that had previously been stamped out. Subdued, he spoke quietly to no one in particular. "Jesus, that's too bad. Y'know, he disgusted me but I would never wish the bastard dead." Then he addressed Freddie directly, "You know that, right Freddie? Ajax pissed me off but I would never want to see him dead, right?"

Freddie perked up. "Absolutely, Vic. We all kinda liked Larry around here."

"So you're sure he's dead. No doubts?"

"Yeah, they asked me to go down to the morgue and identify the body."

"That must've been tough . . . how'd he die? Overdose? Leprosy?" Ray stifled a laugh.

“No, someone shot him in the back of the head. A jogger found him lying in a swamp. He looked all white and frozen and . . .”

Disinterested in hearing the particulars, Vic interrupted, “So Ajax is dead. That’s a damn shame, but what’re you gonna do? Right, Ray?”

Ray fiddled with some change in his pocket. “What’re you gonna do? He was what my grandmother called *der abschaum der menschlichen gesellschaft*.”

Vic laughed. “Shit Ray. You’re bad. Don’t listen to him, Freddie.”

Freddie shrugged stupidly and replied, “I don’t speak Polish, Vic.”

“Right.” Vic wrapped his big arm around Freddie’s shoulder, pulling him in close. “Anyway, you know I had nothin’ to do with this, don’t you Fred. Look at me when I talk to you. Nothin’ to do with it.” Freddie nodded like a bobble-head figurine, eager to secure Vic’s confidence. Vic continued, “Good. Me and Ray simply took Ajax for a ride that day. Made him understand I didn’t appreciate the trick he played on me. Ajax paid back my five Gs and we dropped him off. He must’ve run into some coons who didn’t appreciate his complexion. That’s what I think – what about you, Freddie?”

“That’s what happened. He crossed some black guys . . .”

“Coons.”

“Right, coons. Some coons blew him away. Good thing you got your money back from Larry before they croaked him.”

“Cute, Freddie. I’ll let that comment pass – this time.” Vic released Freddie from his grip. “You’re a good egg, Fred. It must’ve been terrible to see Larry’s dead body at the morgue.

Here, take this." Vic peeled off a couple of hundred-dollar bills from his thick roll and handed them to Freddie.

Freddie accepted the money. "Thanks, Vic, that's real kind of you."

"OK, so that's the last of it, Freddie. Understand? The story's over, dead. Just like Ajax. You gotta move on. I don't wanna hear any scuttlebutt around OTB, or anywhere else for that matter. Verstehen Sie? Ansonsten ich werde zu töten sie." Vic asked Ray, "Did I say that correctly?"

In military-like fashion Ray nodded his head once. "Jawohl."

"OK, Ray, let's get back uptown while the pussy's still warm and the food's willing." The two men walked out of OTB and resumed their trek to the Upper East Side.

What Vic didn't know was that ten minutes earlier Larry placed a call from his hospital bed to the OTB parlor and conducted a brief conversation with Freddie that went something like this:

INT. OTB PARLOR — NIGHT

FREDDIE accepts the phone from the MANAGER. Before speaking he leans a broom against the wall.

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

Hello?

INTERCUT with LARRY lying in bed in the hospital

LARRY

(Into phone)

Freddie? It's Larry. Don't hang up.  
I gotta talk to you.

SOMETIMES THE SUN DOES SHINE THERE

(Silence)

You there, Freddie?

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

Uh, yeah, Larry. What's up?

LARRY

(Into phone)

I need your help — and you know you owe me one.

(beat)

Let me say right off the bat that I'm not mad at you anymore for turning me over to Vic. I guess I deserved it. But you really do owe me one, brother.

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

You're a big man, Larry. I don't know what to say, except I'm really, really sorry. But you gotta understand. Vic put the arm on me big time after you ripped him off.

(beat)

Where are you, anyway? How can I help you?

LARRY

(Into phone)

In the hospital. Vic tried to kill me.

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

Holy shit! I thought he was just gonna push you around a bit.

LARRY

(Into phone)

He thinks he really did kill me, and I want to keep it that way. That's why I'm calling. If the Prick comes to you to see what you know, or to find out if I contacted you, you gotta tell him I'm dead. Tell him you saw my corpse in the morgue. Tell him you saw me with a bullet hole in the back of my head. Tell him my body was discovered in a swamp in Jersey by a jogger. Make him believe you, Freddie. Please.

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

I don't know, Larry.

LARRY

(Into phone)

Just tell the fucker I'm dead. How hard is that, Fred?

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

OK, Larry, OK. Hey, I'm really sorry, man. Vic said he just wanted to get his money back. He told me he wasn't gonna hurt you.

LARRY

(Into phone)

Forget it. Just keep that psychopath away from me. Let me heal in peace.

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

Uh, why are you in the hospital.  
What did he, uh, what did he do  
to you?

LARRY

(Into phone)

You don't want to know, but I'd  
give ten thou to be able to take  
a crap in a regular toilet again.

FREDDIE

(Into phone)

They're here now. Get better.  
I'm really sorry.

FADE OUT.



On the Monday after the assault a nurse cleaned Larry's wounds, replaced his dressings, emptied his urine bag, swabbed his stoma with wax and reattached the colostomy bag, and reinserted the catheter – the worst part of the whole treatment. The sensation of the plastic tube threading in and out of his penis was shivering, like the reaction to the sound of brittle, fungal fingernails scraping slowly across the surface of a chalkboard. And the nurse didn't ease the situation by describing matter-of-factly how a penis hole can be torn by improperly inserting a catheter. After applying a dab of betadine to his pecker head and a smear of lubrication to the catheter, she blithely reported, "Why, just the other day we had a prostate surgery patient return

with a serious infection – the tip of his penis was oozing so much pus, well, trust me when I say you couldn't even tell it was a penis anymore. At least not a human penis." As the nurse coaxed the catheter up into his bladder, Larry's face contorted into the grimacing mask of Melpomene. He gripped the bedsheets throughout the entire procedure and practically sheered the enamel off his molars from clenching his jaw so tightly.

The doctor made a perfunctory appearance, accompanied by a muscular orderly who rolled Larry onto his side so the doctor could probe his anus. Larry instinctively clenched his jaw again as well as his glutei. "Relax your muscles, Mr. Greco."

"How – *gulp* – does it look, doc?" asked Larry apprehensively. Sounding clinical, the doctor replied, "Dark."

"Huh?"

Chuckling now, the doctor added, "Well, it *is* the place where they say the sun don't shine, heh, heh. Seriously, I like what I see. You're recovering well. I think you should be able to leave in a week."

At first Larry was dismayed. Only three days in the hospital, separated from his familiar environment, and already Larry was feeling the distress of solastalgia. *I gotta stay here a fucking week?* But after he took stock of the severity of his condition when he was first sniffed out by Izzy the dog a mere three days earlier – shot in the ear and impaled in the asshole, not to mention the frostbite – he concluded that a week of incarceration wasn't so horrible in light of the alternatives, like having his flesh consumed by seagulls and turkey vultures in the marshland of New Jersey.

Larry had forgotten how boring it can be to lie alone in bed

in the company of fatuous mind-numbing afternoon television. He hadn't felt this stultified since he contracted scarlet fever as an eight-year-old, and was consigned to watch such drivel as "Password," "The Match Game," and "You Don't Say." Today with access to 40 times as many channels, the decent programming seemed just as limited as it had been a generation earlier. Perhaps even more so. He fingered the television remote, clicking around the channels like an epileptic, stopping at what appeared to be a John Ford movie – either *How Green Was My Valley* or *The Quiet Man* based on the presence of Maureen O'Hara. A second later the network cut away to a commercial featuring an obese, loudmouthed actor in a preposterous touque extolling the virtues of a vegetable chopper. As the actor beat down on the chopper like Onan the Barbarian, Larry muttered with passionless scorn, "Chef of the Fucking Future."

"Excuse me?"

The female voice from the other side of the curtain startled Larry. He had been unaware that another person entered the room. Feeling foolish for making such an off-the-wall remark he stammered a response, "Uh . . . eh . . . Chef of the future. *Cough, cough.* That guy on the TV reminds me of . . ."

"Ralph Kramden . . . you're right," exclaimed Maddie who peered around the partition holding a large, black garbage bag. "That's one of my favorite episodes of all time. Not just on the *Honeymooners*, but one of my favorites of any TV show."

"Maddie! Am I glad to see you. It's so lonely in here. Can you stay a little while, y'know, keep me company for a bit?" Larry looked like a waif in one of those garish Margaret Keane paintings, his pleading eyes dewy and larger than life.

Maddie shrugged her shoulders. "Mmm – I don't know . . ."

“Please? From one *Honeymooners* fan to another? Otherwise, y’know, Bang! Zoom!” Larry punched his fist into the palm of his hand and pointed to the ceiling.

Maddie grinned. “Well, just for awhile, then I have to get back. I just started working again. I can’t afford to get fired.”

“Again? What happened?”

“It’s a long boring story. Well, maybe not boring, but typical.” Larry noticed that Maddie twisted the black garbage bag as she spoke. “I fell for what I thought was a nice guy. And then his veneer fell off and I saw what was underneath. It wasn’t pretty. I moved out of the City because of him . . . out of fear of him. It’s because of him that I quit my job in the first place.” Maddie said forlornly, “He promised to take care of me.” Larry thought she might cry but Maddie quickly recovered her buoyancy and added with a touch of sass, “In some ways I suppose you could say he took care of me alright . . . hey, do you remember that episode when Ralph gets the vacuum cleaner stuck to his face?”

Larry understood that Maddie’s abrupt segue back to the *Honeymooners* was a defense mechanism to dodge conversation about an obviously painful period in her life. He obliged, and the two exchanged their favorite scenes. For Larry they included Ralph’s attempt at learning golf and Norton winning the prize for best Halloween costume as the Man from Space. Maddie sat on the edge of Larry’s bed and described in delicious detail the hilarity of Norton dancing the Hucklebuck and the look on Ralph’s face when his boss discovers that Alice’s cracker spread is actually dogfood.

Maddie glanced at her watch and hopped up from the bed. “Oops. I have to get going, Larry. I’m so glad you’re feeling better. Your ear looks better, too. I’ll stop by again later when I

take my break.”

“Sure thing, Maddie. See ya.”

Larry wanted to know everything about Maddie. Convinced that a doleful story lurked just beneath the surface of Maddie’s bubbly exterior, he needed to persuade her to share details. Intrigue compelled him as did a desire to learn how Maddie’s trials compared to those of his own lugubrious life. Perhaps she was a kindred spirit who unlike his ex-wife and the few women he dated would find solace in their common condition and bond with him to rise up from it together. He couldn’t wait for Maddie to return.

*The Quiet Man* made for the perfect anodyne. Larry found inspiration in the redemption of John Wayne’s character Sean Thornton, a man like himself unwilling to confront a bully. He was enjoying the big brawl between Thornton and his tormentor Will Danaher through the streets and bars of the Irish village when Maddie popped in, this time with no cleaning products in tow. “Hi, Larry. Am I interrupting you?”

“Not at all! Seeing you . . . well, it’s the highlight of my day. Of my life even.” Instantly, Larry regretted admitting that; it made him seem desperate and a little too forward, like he was making a calculated but ham-handed attempt to hook Maddie. Not the image he wanted to portray. Furthermore, he feared Maddie might take this utterance of self-pity as a prod to chart the conversation to the woes of poor Larry Greco. Before things got off track Larry encouraged Maddie to press on. “Tell me more, Maddie. I’m really interested.”

*He’s really interested!* “OK, Larry. Well, this guy – Jack is his name – was some kind of investor. A hedge fund manager is

what he told me. I met him at the other hospital I worked at. He was visiting a friend in the ER, some twerpy guy who got beat up and lost his money in the medical waste bin.”

“How did that happen?”

“The intern snipped off his shirt and tossed it away. I remember he had something like five or six hundred dollars in the pocket.”

“Wow – a high roller, huh?”

“Nah, not really. Jack was the real money man. His buddy was just an obsequious lackey.” For Larry it was the first time he had heard someone use the word “obsequious” in a sentence since the time he competed in the fifth grade spelling bee. And although he nailed the word in the bee he could not now recall the precise definition. He figured it must be a pejorative given the way Maddie used it to modify “lackey.” Maddie continued, “Anyway, I fell for Jack’s charm and I hate to admit it, but I liked that he threw money around. In the beginning he treated me like a princess – a shocker, I know. We went to nice restaurants and jazz clubs. Jack even had a chauffeur-type guy who drove us around in his Mercedes. And after we had been together awhile he started paying my rent so I could concentrate on my art.”

“You’re an artist, Maddie? What do you do?” Larry was thinking photography. Or maybe sculpture. Something that captured the beauty of the human form.

“Oh, just some painting. Abstract stuff, oils mostly. Mixed media sometimes.”

“Cool. I didn’t mean to interrupt. Go on.” Again Larry feared he might cause the conversation to veer off track. He needn’t have worried; Maddie was fueled by a need for catharsis.

“Well, thanks to Jack I was able to quit my job at the hospital and take a class at NYU. The head of the art department got me access

to studio space. What a godsend. I like to paint large canvasses, you know, and that was impossible to do in my dinky apartment. Besides, I lived on the sixth floor and there was no elevator. Anyway, Jack eventually decided that I belonged to him, just like all his fancy possessions. And then he changed completely. No more romantic outings together.” Deciding her story was unfolding into a typical, conformist tale of female troubles, Maddie stepped it up. “On the rare times he took me out we would meet up with his so-called associates and go to cheesy places like strip clubs and casinos. I discovered later that Jack wasn’t a hedge fund manager. Although I couldn’t be a hundred percent certain I think he was into some kind of organized crime.”

“Jesus. Organized crime? Is that when you ditched him?”

Maddie brought her index finger to her lip and struck a pensive pose. Larry noticed the contrast of her pale lulluna and the olive of her skin. “No. I’m ashamed to say I stayed with him even though the humiliating treatment really began to hurt. All the nice things he bought for me didn’t come close to making up for it. And I was getting sick of him disappearing for days and coming around drunk and smelling of perfume.” Maddie wrinkled her nose. At least I think it was perfume. Anyway one day I found an ad behind my toilet for Oriental prostitutes. It must’ve fallen out of Jack’s pocket. I figured he must be hooking up with these whores, or at least planning to.” Larry nodded empathetically as a confirmation that Maddie’s suspicions added up; he hoped to project a sense of camaraderie so she wouldn’t think he condoned such behavior. Maddie continued, “And then there was the time he took me to a strip club and embarrassed me by paying one of the strippers to give me a lap dance.”

Larry blurted, “Really!?” Visualizing the girl-girl encounter

and feeling for the first time since the attack a hopeful tingle in his loins, Larry was thrown off balance. He quickly added demurely, “Ah, what I mean is, ah, that’s not very gentlemanly.”

Maddie laughed, “That’s an understatement. But, as strange as it may sound it wasn’t until he told me about how he tormented some guy he disliked that I finally made up my mind to get out.” Larry was moved by Maddie’s admission that the suffering of another person had had a greater effect on her sensibilities than that of her own tribulations. “Jack took sadistic pride in humiliating some poor guy at the racetrack who looked for winning tickets on the floor. I think he called him a bender – something like that, stooper maybe – you know, because the guy bent over to pick up the tickets. One time, Jack even had his ass-kissing buddy, Dougie, accidentally . . .” Maddie quoted with her fingers “. . . spill hot coffee on the guy’s neck as he was crawling on the floor. That’s the kind of cruel bastard Jack is.”

As Maddie’s story progressed Larry detected an increasing similarity to his own experiences. But when she mentioned the name “Dougie,” Larry realized Maddie was the former girlfriend of his arch nemesis, Vic the Prick. He stammered, “D-D-Dougie?”

“Yeah, sounds like a bratty schoolboy, doesn’t it?”

Distracted, Larry mumbled stupidly, “Huh? Yeah, a bratty schoolboy. Terrible.” Uncertain as to how Maddie might react, Larry chose to say nothing about his own season in Hell, subdued under the jackboot of Vic and his vicious minions. It seemed better to remain silent. What would he say to her anyway? *Hey, I’m the douche bag loser Vic was talking about! It was me who discovered a mayonnaise surprise in my jacket, ha, ha! I’m lying here in the hospital with a plastic tube in my dick and a bag full of shit hanging off my side because of Vic! What a coincidence!* “Anyway, I take it you finally left

Jack after that.”

“I sure did. It was tough for awhile, not having a place to stay or a steady job, but I persevered. My motto is *fluctuat nec mergitur*.”

Quickly rifling through his memory of the basics of what he learned in high school etymology class Larry tried to formulate a viable translation but came up empty. *Mergitur? What the hell could that possibly mean?* He was torn between asking what the Latin-sounding motto meant and pretending he understood it. Not wishing to appear unlettered he chose to pretend and evade, remarking, “I bet Jack wasn’t too happy when you called it quits.”

“Not at all,” Maddie said proudly, adding, “He wouldn’t leave my place so I threatened him with a knife, if you can believe that.”

Alarmed, Larry sat forward. “You did?”

“I think I cut his thumb with it. It happened so fast. I wound up running out of my own apartment.”

With even greater alarm, Larry gasped, “Good God, Maddie! You mean you actually used the knife? You better be careful. Vi . . . uh, Jack might try to come looking for you. Guys like him are extremely vengeful. They can’t let something like that pass without settling the score.”

Maddie studied Larry’s countenance, discovering genuine concern in his frost-reddened face. It made her happy. She reached over and stroked his cheek. “I’ll be careful, Larry, I promise. And you’re a sweetie to worry about me. I like that.”

Although concerned for Maddie’s well-being Larry smiled, and for the first time since awakening from his nightmare he felt no pain.

Over the course of the week during Larry’s convalescence Maddie took advantage of every opportunity to spend time with

him. The two talked at length about their mutual interests in movies, cooking, sports and books. Larry described with pride the work he had once performed at the publishing company: doing layouts, designing covers and restoring old monographs. Larry tried to impress Maddie with his knowledge of fonts – “Did you know that the designer of the Garamond font was commissioned by King Francis of France who wanted a new typeface, and even though it was developed in the 1500s it’s still very popular today?” – and with his familiarity with the Sport of Kings, horseracing, although he implied he learned about it when he used to live on Long Island, and not from stooping at OTB. Maddie brought Larry magazines and newspapers, and during her time off in the evenings she sat beside him and watched old movies on AMC. Maddie cut and styled Larry’s hair. She even clipped his fingernails.

And in between their moments together Larry lay in bed awaiting Maddie’s return with the anticipation of an adolescent experiencing true love for the first time. Alone with nothing to do Larry obsessed on the grim possibility that he might never be able to make love again – and the harder he tried to flush the frantic thought from his mind the greater it haunted him. He lifted the sheets and peeked at his crumpled penis and was struck by the image of a frightened turtle sucking on a straw. Larry hadn’t been intimate with a woman since before his wife left him, and now that it seemed plausible that he might regain a love life, the shoddy condition of his hydraulic system threatened the whole enterprise.

Toward the end of the week Maddie brought in photos of some of her paintings. She was apprehensive. Numerous times she had mentioned her artwork to Larry – how she had accelerated her

output and refined her technique since ditching the demoralizing Jack. Now Maddie would be forced to reveal the product, open the kimono. Although she expected to receive a glowing critique from Larry she worried that she might have overhyped her talent and would ultimately disappoint.

Maddie stood erect at the end of Larry's bed holding a black portfolio as though preparing for the final MFA board review. She pulled forth a photo and held it against her chest. "Now Larry, if you don't like it just say so. Don't fake it, OK. I won't mind, really."

"I promise."

"I mean it."

"C'mon, Maddie. Show me."

Maddie held out the first photo.

"Wow! An explosion of colors. Really brilliant. It reminds me of Kandinsky."

"Honest? You think so?" Before Larry could confirm, Maddie held out another photo. She allowed herself a tiny smile this time. "This is something I completed right before I split from Jack."

Larry eyed the image carefully for several seconds. "Hmmm. No colors at all. Greys and blacks. I can see some anger in there. How big is the actual painting?"

"Eight by ten," replied Maddie softly.

"Really? You jammed a lot of detail into a small space."

Maddie clarified. "Eight by ten feet."

"Oh. That's huge. Maybe it's your *Guernica*."

"How do you know so much about art, Larry?"

"Well, I wouldn't say I know much, but whatever I know came from working at the publishing company. We did a lot of big coffee table art books." Maddie nodded like it made eminent sense. Larry added, "Hey, if you ever decide to publish your work,

Maddie, let me know. I'd be happy to help you navigate the shark-infested publishing waters."

"I just may take you up on that offer." Maddie placed the portfolio down on the bed and studied Larry's face. She stepped around to be closer to him. "I have to ask . . . what happened, Larry? Why did someone attack you like that?"

Not expecting the question but realizing he should have, he responded almost too casually, "A senseless random act of violence, I guess." He chuckled awkwardly.

Maddie shook her head. "I can hardly imagine someone could be so cruel as to do such horrible things to a total stranger. Even if there was a good reason. And the lottery ticket – I don't get it." After a beat she added, "Even Jack wouldn't do something as horrible as what those thugs did to you."

Larry smiled wanly.

Fearing she had cast a pall over the room Maddie said, "Hey, listen to me – Miss Downer. You must be excited to get out of here on Saturday. I'm so glad for you."

Larry replied, "Yeah. It'll be good to get out. I can't wait to go back to my elegant apartment by the tracks and resume unemployment. It should be fun pounding the pavement with a bag of crap hanging off my side." Disappointed in himself for extending the gloom, he murmured, "I'm sorry, Maddie. I shouldn't have said that. Anyway, I have you to thank for my recovery. All the time you've spent with me – well, I just want to say thank you. Without you around I'd be back in the ICU dying of infection and morbid thoughts."

Maddie gripped Larry's limp hand. "You'll do fine, Larry. I know it. You're a good person. Maybe I can help you, y'know, after you get discharged."

Larry squeezed back. “Are you a good cook? I’m dying to eat something that requires a knife and fork.”

On Friday, the day before Larry was scheduled to be released from the hospital, Maddie brought him half a hamburger she snuck in from the commissary. Larry had been subsisting on a liquid diet since being admitted. He craved something – *anything* – solid and greasy. The moment she entered the room Larry began to salivate like Pavlov’s dog. Maddie grinned deviously as she produced the wrapped morsel from her pocket. Larry sat up, closed his eyes in ecstasy and inhaled deeply, allowing the aroma of fried beef, caramelized onions, fragrant mushrooms and slightly burnt bun to caress his olfactory tissues. With his eyes still closed Larry said tranquilly, “Mmm, you’re the best, Maddie. Will you marry me?”

Without skipping a beat, Maddie replied, “Yes . . . I mean, uh . . . geez, Larry, I’m sorry.” She blushed and stepped away to find a plate for the burger.

Recalling the moment he acted boldly and fortuitously by investing \$700 on the New York State Lottery system – a fateful decision that paid off a hundred-fold (even though he lost it all to Vic in the end) – Larry believed fortune had once again aligned in his favor. He could tell Maddie’s initial response represented unvarnished sincerity. *Don’t let this get away!* Larry spoke up, “I’m serious, Maddie. Don’t be sorry. I’m not talking about right now. Who knows? But in the meantime will you be my one and only?”

Maddie placed the burger on Larry’s tray. She looked askance and seemed lost in thought. Given her recent and terrible experience with Vic, Larry expected her to delay, and ultimately beg off. *Who could blame her?* She walked into the bathroom and

ran the tap. “Would you like some water, Larry?”

“You read my mind, Madeleine.” Larry took a bite of the burger – the most delicious thing he had ever eaten. He counted each bite meticulously to ensure he chewed at least 60 times; he wanted to minimize the mischief the meat might inflict later on his delicate kishkas. Larry closed his eyes and allowed the meaty juices to penetrate his palate. No sooner had the griddled beef touched his palate than a shudder ran through his whole body, and he stopped, intent upon an exquisite pleasure that had invaded his senses. All at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to him, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory. He had ceased to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal.

Maddie returned to Larry’s bedside with a glass of cloudy water and studied with joy the serene smile that had spread across his kind face. “Yes, Larry. I’ll be your one and only. How’s the burger?”



Larry awoke from a long afternoon nap. It was 7 p.m. on Saturday, the 14th of December. He stretched his body, nearly forgetting about the bag tethered to his abdomen. *Jesus, I can't believe I slept so long.* Tomorrow, he would leave the hospital and move in with Maddie in her apartment in Jersey. Larry was starting to have reservations – not about the rapidly developing relationship with the lovely and voluptuous Maddie, but about how she might come to regret the arrangement once she realized the degree to which Larry would be a burden over the next few months of recuperation. He resolved to minimize the impact to Maddie’s life. He would never again get drunk or squander money.

He would devote all his industry to recovering, and when ready, stake out a decent-paying job. His stooping days were history. Perhaps within a year or two, if Larry and Maddie stayed together they might save enough to move into a bigger apartment. Maybe they would depart the Northeast and its criminal weather for a comfortable ranch house in South Carolina.

Larry turned on the TV just in time to hear a familiar, boisterous introduction: “Welcome to tonight’s drawing of the New York Lottery. I’m Cho-LAWN-da BAY-ga!” He sat back to watch the Lottery Queen – Yolanda Vega – pull the numbers for Saturday’s Lotto game. “Tonight’s jackpot is . . . thirty-four MEEL-yone dollars!” Yolanda briefly recited the framework of the game: six tumbling balls are randomly produced one at a time from the clear plastic mixing machine, proceeds from Lotto go to support statewide education – “Yeah, sure,” muttered Larry – and results are audited by some ass-wipe accounting firm. The spicy Puerto Rican proceeded to activate the mixing machine. One by one, numbered balls dropped down and lined up in a translucent tray. “The first number is . . . 36.” She waited breathlessly as balls fought among one another to gain egress. “The second number is . . . 16.” This process continued until all six balls had certifiably settled into the tray. The mixing machine shut down, its rotating tines idled. With a dramatic sweep of the hand, Yolanda announced, “Tonight’s winning Lotto numbers are . . . 8, 15, 16, 33, 36 and 43. Thank you and good night.”

Larry reached for the TV clicker but stopped short. He sat back against the pile of pillows and stared at the sequence of numbers. He looked up at the ceiling and then at the stainless-steel reniform vomit catcher sitting on the bedside table. He stroked his whisker-stubbed chin. Maddie walked in. “Hey, Larry.

How're you feeling? Ready to get out of here tomorrow?" Larry didn't respond. He appeared dazed and distracted. It didn't occur to Maddie that he was deep in thought, contemplating the oddly familiar sequence of Lotto numbers announced minutes earlier by Yolanda Vega.

"Hello?" said Maddie. "Anybody home?"

Larry sat forward abruptly. Maddie noted that he had snapped out of his contemplative state by some sudden revelation, and not from her entreaties. "Reach into the drawer and give me the lottery ticket," he demanded bluntly.

Maddie propped her hands on her slender waist, cocked her hip and said with mock annoyance, "Nice to see you too, Larry."

"I'm sorry, Maddie. But please, just hand me the ticket."

Sensing but not understanding the urgency, Maddie opened the drawer. "You mean the one they, uh, retrieved, uh . . ."

"Yeah – the one they pulled out of my ass. That one. Don't worry, the doctor told me they sanitized it."

Wrinkling her nose, Maddie gingerly picked up the stained ticket by the edge. Larry snatched it away and read the numbers. He read and reread them. He mumbled the sequence to himself. Then he fell back into the pillows, his eyes wide as saucers, his hand cupped over his mouth. He shook his head in disbelief. Just as Maddie was about to ask what the hell was going on, Larry screamed, "We're rich Maddie! Rich! We just won the lottery! \$34 million! Oh my God . . ." Having fallen in love with Maddie it never occurred to Larry that she was anything other than his partner with whom he would gladly and unselfishly share the winnings equally. "Will you marry me now, Maddie?"

On Sunday at noon, Maddie wheeled Larry to a livery limo and

the couple drove to New Jersey. Maddie hired a company to install a hospital bed where Larry spent the next ten days recovering to the point where he could move around on his own. Expressing concern for Maddie's safety if "Jack" ever found out about the lottery winnings, Larry insisted they move out of the Greater New York metropolitan region. Of course, he never spoke of his past altercations with Vic nor of his paranoia that the Prick might one day reenter his life. Larry never let it be known that he feared as much for his own safety as he did for Maddie's.

Larry retained a lawyer and a financial adviser to assist him in collecting and managing the winnings, and then he and Maddie flew first class to West Palm Beach mere hours before a massive Nor'easter struck the Mid-Atlantic States. The couple stayed for a month in the plush \$600-a-night Magnolia suite in the Four Seasons Resort while they waited to close on a Mediterranean-style house located in a gated community with an 18-hole golf course and a view of the Intracoastal Waterway. Larry started intensive therapy at home under the care of a personal physician's assistant. Maddie looked after him through the whole ordeal. After four months he was able to walk with confidence and defecate like a normal person – a major milestone. To celebrate his full recovery, and in a gesture of gratitude to Maddie, Larry reserved a luxury cabin with a balcony on an ocean liner steaming out of Miami en route to Acapulco by way of the Panama Canal. On the day before they cruised into Acapulco Bay the ship's captain presided over the couple's wedding. Larry hastily arranged the surprise ceremony; Maddie was overcome with joy that Larry had made the ultimate commitment. That evening on the balcony beneath the starry night sky as the liner plowed through the onyx-black ocean, Larry made love for the first time to Maddie. Filled with

trepidation he was gratified to find that his hydraulic system operated flawlessly through multiple test cycles.

After a glorious week spent in the mountainside Las Brisas resort, lounging around their personal swimming pool and cruising about Acapulco in the signature goofy pink-and-white Jeeps assigned to the premier guests, Larry and Maddie flew to Santa Fe where they continued their month-long honeymoon traveling around the mystical and enchanted American Southwest. It was even more beautiful than the brochures portrayed.



Back in West Palm Beach after the lengthy honeymoon, Larry dialed up his New York lawyer, Ben Chaiken, and instructed him to search out Vic Schuyler's address in Manhattan. Ever since Vic tried to have him killed, Larry resolved to be better prepared, more alert, more cunning. He ascribed to the wisdom of Sun-Tzu: "Know your enemy and know yourself and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster." *Know your enemy – that's the key.* Within hours of the request Larry's lawyer sent him an email containing Vic's address in Gramercy Park, his cell phone number, his date of birth and his mother's maiden name. Greenberg. *The Prick is half Jewish and he employs a Nazi sidekick? Figures.* Larry filed the precious data. He had a feeling that possessing the Prick's vital statistics might come in handy one day.

Two months later, that day arrived.

While Larry sat on the veranda poring over the sports pages of the *NY Post*, a lifeline back to the city he both loved and despised, he spotted an unusually-named horse running in the last race at Gulfstream Park down the highway in Hallandale, Florida. The

odds were 12 to one. Just as Larry wrote a note to himself about the horse, Maddie strolled in. She was wearing a paint-spattered smock.

“Morning, dear. How you feeling?”

Larry put down his pad and pencil and replied, “Any better and it’d be a sin. How’s the painting going?”

“I’m starting to panic. All my stuff has to be into the jury a month from Monday. I don’t know if I can finish this last piece in time.”

“Oh, you’ll make it. Although it serves you right for doing a painting the size of a billboard.”

Maddie shrugged. “Yeah, well . . .”

Larry reminded her, “Don’t forget, we have a golf lesson at 2.”

“I know. I’ll be cleaned up by then.” Maddie kissed Larry and she walked back to her studio, a substantial space that Larry devoted to his new wife’s avocation. When he was sure Maddie was gone, Larry picked up the phone and dialed a private number that went straight to Attorney Chaiken – a privilege assigned only to the premium clients.

“Ben Chaiken.”

“Ben. Larry Greco. How’re doing? Foreclose on any orphanages lately?” From lower-middle class stock Larry had come to accept many of the common lawyer stereotypes. And after his brother was shot dead over the parking space, Larry experienced the petty greed first hand as his mother sought compensation. Most galling was the time his mother received a bill from her attorney for \$250.13 – \$250 for services and 13 cents to cover the cost of the stamp used to mail her the invoice.

Inured to lame lawyer jokes and other forms of abuse, Chaiken answered, “Very funny. Listen Larry, I was just thinking about you.

I wanted to talk to you about that real estate investment trust.”

“Later, Ben. Right now I need you to do a favor for me. Can you send a telegram to Vic Schuyler? You still have his address, don’t you?”

“Sure. And his social, mother’s maiden name, license number and income tax returns. Do you know he’s grossed exactly \$10,500 a year for the past four years?”

“That’s my Prick.”

“What?”

“Um, nothing. Just send the telegram from someplace outside New York. Connecticut, maybe. I’ll tell you what to write.”

“OK, Larry. I’m here to serve. How’s West Palm treating you? How’s Maddie?”

“Great and greater. It’s amazing how a lump sum of 20 mil can change your life. You should try it sometime. You got a pen?”

“Yeah. Shoot.”

“Dear Prick . . .”

The doorman at Vic’s building called to inform him that a telegram – “Yes sir, an actual telegram . . . yeah, I didn’t know they still sent them, either, sir” – had just arrived, and that the jaunty young man from Western Union was waiting for Mr. Schuyler to sign for it. Genuinely excited to read the note – he had never before received an actual telegram – Vic strode into the lobby and accepted the slip of paper from the delivery boy. He stripped the paper along the perforated edge and read the contents. It had come from a Western Union office in Connecticut. *Who the hell do I know who lives in Connecticut?*

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The long lines in circles on the date line on Telegrams, Cablegrams and Day Letters, and the lines of circled numbers in circles on all messages, are STANDARD TIME.

Received at **NEW YORK, NEW YORK SEP 5 235P**

VIC SCHUYLER

DEAR PRICK;

RECOMMEND YOU PUT \$5K ON #7 LONGSHOT IN 9TH AT GULFSTREAM PARK TODAY. COULD PAYOFF BIGTIME. GOOD LUCK, FUCKER. SEE YOU IN HELL.

A. JACKSON YURFACE

TELEGRAMS MAY BE TELEPHONED TO WESTERN UNION FROM ANY PRIVATE OR PAY STATION TELEPHONE

Vic rubbed his ear lobe and wracked his brain to make sense of the cryptic telegram. He had no recollection of the sender's name: A. Jackson Yurface. *Yurface? What kind a fuckin' name is that?* Vic went back to his apartment. A lithe young Malaysian girl called from the bedroom, "Will you please untie me – now! I have to pee bad!"

Ignoring his call girl's demand for liberation Vic walked directly into the kitchen and retrieved his copy of the *NY Post* from the garbage can. He flicked off the eggshells and brushed off the coffee grinds, and then he opened the paper to the sports section in the back. He scanned the fine print for the day's action at Gulfstream Park. *There it is. Fillies and Mares. Four year olds and up. Claiming. Five furlongs, turf.* Using the tip of his index finger as a guide Vic ran down the list of horses running in the last race, finally identifying the #7 horse. His eyes widened

when he read the name of the entry. A filly dubbed “Stronger Than Dirt.”

*A. Jackson Yurface . . . Ajax in your face . . .* “I don’t fuckin’ believe it!” shouted Vic as he crushed the tabloid in an apoplectic fit. “That motherfucker is still alive!”

Meanwhile, accompanied by Maddie who was dressed in a short, white, sassy skirt that flattered her toned legs, a visor that shaded her eyes, and spiked Callaway shoes that stabilized her stance, Larry squinted into the warm, mid-afternoon sun that shone down upon the open land spread out before him, a green-grass expanse marked by signs positioned in increments of 50 yards. He donned his sunglasses and watched Maddie gracefully swing her five-iron, admiring her balanced poise and shapely ass. Thoroughly at peace, sublime as a mountain, a Himmaleh, Larry stooped low to tee up a Titleist. Today he would practice putting some fade into his drives.

HERE'S LOOKIN'  
AT 22 BLACK



Something I said – or perhaps the way I said it – telegraphed to the necrotic bartender that I am an American.

I was perched on an ass-breaking wooden stool inside a musty, dark bar in Sofia, Bulgaria. It was the middle of the afternoon but the soot-stained shade in the only window was rolled down to the sill denying sunlight and defying patrons to gauge the time of day. That is, if there had been any patrons this afternoon besides me to take up the challenge.

I was talking to the old bartender about films and filmmaking, and evangelizing the craft of writing screenplays. I have some experience in that field, mostly doing re-write and conducting research. I've also shopped around a few spec scripts – some killer stuff that's at least as good as *Reservoir Dogs* – but so far the interest level hasn't materialized the way I'd hoped. I remain optimistic, though. I have a friend who knows an actor who played a supporting role in a modestly successful indie, and he's promised to set me up with a meeting with an assistant executive producer at Miramax. I've honed my pitch for any opportunity, developing spiels running anywhere from 15 seconds up to half an hour depending on the circumstances of the encounter. The

shortest, succinct pitches are the most critical; you never know when you'll run into a director or casting agent about to step into a shitter in a Hollywood restaurant.

My favorite movies are those about the movies: *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Player*, *Adaptation*, *The Stuntman*, *Get Shorty*. After a long time during which I did all the talking, the bartender informed me that one of his favorite movies was *American Psycho*. That choice caught me off-guard. I would have expected something more akin to *The Bicycle Thief* or one of those brooding François Truffaut black and whites, not a study in unvarnished sadism. I recalled that *American Psycho* was filmed in Toronto. I expressed to the bartender my irritation with producers who film movies set in Manhattan in another city masquerading as Manhattan. I recall blurting out something like, "Why can't movies set in New York fucking City be *filmed* in New York fucking City . . . and movies about the fucking capital of Canada be filmed in Toronto?"

"You are American, not Canadian. Am I correct?" asked the bartender blandly.

"How'd you know that?" I inquired, modestly impressed by the man's acumen for deciphering nuanced nationality. "Is it because I said 'about' instead of 'aboot'?" He simply shook his head slowly and wiped another glass with the frayed rag he kept tucked in his back pocket. I took a sip of my cocktail. *Could I really have said 'aboot'?*

I was in Sofia, capital of the sovereign nation of Bulgaria to collect material for a screenplay about the life of Mehmet Ali Agca, the crazy Turk who shot Pope John Paul II. It was a bizarre assassination plot directed by the Bulgarian mob. Beginning

in August 1980, Agca began crisscrossing the Mediterranean region, changing passports and identities, perhaps to hide his point of origin in Sofia, Bulgaria. He entered Rome on May 10, 1981, coming by train from Milan.

At least that's what I learned from Wikipedia.

So far though, since arriving in Bulgaria no one I approached gave a damn about Agca, the blundered assassination plot or Bulgarian mobsters. I got the brush at every turn. Agca had fucked up the Papal head shot and was convicted for the attempt. He served time in prison and was eventually released, only to be shipped back to Turkey to face further imprisonment for a compendium of other murders perpetrated in his native land. What I found touching was that the Pope – the Holy Prey – had later met with Agca in his prison cell to bestow forgiveness upon the wannabe assassin. I felt certain that Agca's odyssey leading up to the assassination attempt could justify a movie, and I had already formulated a nice treatment. So it pissed me off that I hadn't made a dime's worth of progress collecting material to give the script the authenticity that local color delivers. For a week I glumly roamed the streets of Sofia, oppressed by the grotesque Soviet architecture, brutalized by the heaviness of the damp, gray, graffiti-covered concrete structures. I read in Frommers on the plane ride over that the city once boasted some charming old buildings, but during WWII something like 10,000 structures were destroyed or severely damaged in Allied bombing missions. Now there's a movie – maybe a campy prequel to *The Fountainhead*.

I worked my way from the relatively affluent sections of the Bulgarian capital toward the dicey outskirts, into the Fakulteta district, home to about 30,000 Gypsies. By the way, they hate

being called Gypsies, insisting on the more dignified-sounding Roma – which I would gladly comply with if only they would stop trying to steal my personal belongings whenever I walk down their dirty, buckled streets. I was the victim of incessant begging, scamming and attempts at thievery by a hundred unwashed Gypsy children, but I reluctantly tolerated it. I figured I'd make better progress with the Agca script if I spoke with people of the underworld rather than with a populace dense with bumbling, foreign tourists. I had been directed to Fakulteta by a fellow from Naples now living in Sofia: one Carlo Eumolpia according to the sweat-stained business card he produced from his billfold. He conducted commerce out of Plovdiv, the second-city of Bulgaria. Plovdiv. The clumsy name evokes dumpiness. I chuckled at the image of a movie romantic declaring to his dewy-eyed love interest, "We'll always have Plovdiv." Just doesn't work.

Eumolpia was a trader in flowers; poppies were his specialty as I recall. He told me to stake out Fakulteta where information was almost as cheap as the lives of its pathetic residents. Hell, if I failed to get sordid G2 on Agca in a shithole like Fakulteta, I would still gather enough material to develop the subplot of another screenplay I've got in the hopper about Conrad Veidt helping Paul Henreid avoid deportation from the UK during WWII.

Within the confines of Fakulteta lies a district nicknamed "Cambodia" – by all accounts the worst slum in Bulgaria and probably in all of Europe. Potable water and reliable electricity, commodities taken for granted in semi-developed, second-world countries are as scarce as the indolence is rampant. Nobody fucking works – at least not regular jobs. Raw effluence and other sundry human detritus flow freely through the ancient

rut-scarred stone alleyways. A privileged Gypsy sole might be one who resides at the headwaters of a sewer channel instead of on a plot downstream where the excretions accumulate and redouble until it all forms a stagnant, putrid, unholy River Styx of shit.

While in Cambodia I watched in morbid fascination as scorbutic-gummed women squatted on the roadside curb and cut the heads and tails off sheatfish and carp that had been illegally netted in the Danube and piled high into the gutter. With one swift, almost-elegant motion the women decapitated the fish and tossed their fleshy maczo bodies atop a second pile that grew in height and girth as the other pile receded in size. When they weren't scamming foreign-looking schmucks for a living at the behest of the shiftless adults, tiny stick-wielding children kept the feral dogs away from the silvery iridescent mound. It was entirely understandable that amidst such abject poverty the Gypsies should cultivate a talent for conning and scamming their betters. And for which they had earned worldwide derision.

So here I am, sitting hunched over in a lugubrious dive called Bar Rakia on the edge of Cambodia, an establishment more disgusting than the skeeviest bar in Pittsburgh Pee-Ay, and probably Plovdiv as well. But only steps from the world's worst slum it was comparatively marvelous. The bar was poorly lit and reasonably well-stocked – a surprising and delightful combination. The mirror mounted on the wall behind the liquor bottles had long ago shed large, amoeba-shaped portions of its silver backing, reflecting a mottled image of any person who should peer into it. The bar top was formed from a single thick piece of hand-hewn travertine that I suspected had been looted

from an ancient Thracian ruin in the vicinity. The ambiance was ideal for someone like me – a man failing in his mission, hoping to coddle his ego with some serious, thoughtful drinking.

“Hey man. You speak English?” inquired I, speaking to the distracted bartender in the vernacular of the peasantry. “Can you make me a Gibson? Sapphire if you have it.”

Ah, the Gibson. An urbane drink that is essentially a martini with cocktail onions – an inspired substitute for the pedestrian green olive. I selected Gibsons to be my signature drink after watching Cary Grant several dozen times in *North by Northwest* sip one in the company of cock-tease Eva Marie Saint while traveling incognito to Chicago on the Lake Shore Limited. It’s important to know that bar patrons rarely order Gibsons, and when they do the libation-impaired will often mix up a limey Gimlet by mistake: a conflation that cannot stand absent a testy complaint. And because Gibson cocktail are rarely ordered the jar of cocktail onions usually winds up relegated to the rear of the refrigerator, neglected and eventually forgotten.

Decrepit and stooping slightly as he stood behind the travertine slab, the old man wore a narrow black tie clipped tightly with a steel clasp to his white-turned-gray shirt. The fabric of the tie abutting his Adam’s apple was rubbed shiny. I noticed he also wore a treshul on a chain around his neck. He looked up reluctantly from the rocks glass he was wiping and rewiping, an absent-minded habit of career bartenders. After a few seconds of silence during which he seemed to be assessing my worthiness to request a drink, he advised, “You would prefer Hendricks. Made with Bulgarian rose. For’ shava. Better than Bombay.”

“OK. Make it with Hendricks then. You’re the expert,” I said,

trying to appear grateful for the sage advice without sounding like a pliable simp. I wanted him to like me so he would feel confident in responding to my pending inquiries about Agca. I had planned to wait awhile before interrogating the mulo, but I couldn't control myself. My next utterance: "Have you ever heard of a guy named Mehmet Ali Agca? I was told by a reliable source that you might've served him many years ago in this very bar."

"Mmmm – so' trekoth," he mumbled to himself.

"Come again?"

"The Negro boxer from America? I have heard of him, but never have I served him. Not in this bar or any other."

Took me a second. "Not Muhammad Ali. Mehmet Ali Agca. Agca. The guy who shot the pope. He was a Bulgarian."

"Not all Bulgarians come to this bar to drink." The bartender started to cut a lime.

"Whoa, dude! I didn't order a Gimlet. I asked for a Gibson."

"Yes, I know. Gibson. Made with small white onions."

"Right. Just wanted to make sure. So you never served Agca? Shit. Do you know anything about him? Did he ever come here, or hang around here? Would any of your clients know him?"

"I have tended bar here for long time. Before you were born, I am sure of that. I know of that bad man Agca but do not know him. I don't want to know him." The bartender put the lime slices into a tin can that might once have contained stewed tomatoes or Valvoline oil, then he retrieved a jar of cocktail onions. He continued with a rhetorical question, "Why shoot the pope? For what? You only get another pope. Maybe next time one who is worse. Another Italian perhaps."

I began to believe I was cruelly misled by the bent-over Gypsy

woman who assured me that the assassin Agca once frequented the Bar Rakia in the 1970s. She went on to assert that a bartender who had worked at the bar since the late 1950s would vouch for it. I had paid the shriveled chovihani ten Lev for her useless information, although I have to admit that the bartender part of her claim seemed plausible – this dude looked like he could have been a veteran of the Punic Wars.

“So you know nothing about Agca?” Because I still wanted to believe the old Gypsy woman had sold me bona fide intel, I asked, “Would five real American dollars help refresh your memory?” He turned away and searched the nether regions of the refrigerator for the cocktail onions, not bothering to acknowledge the offer. I felt ashamed for behaving like a schoolboy trying to channel Sonny Crocket in *Miami Vice*. When the bartender cracked the jar of onions for the first time in probably more than a year, I glimpsed a distinct ring of blackish, brackish mold lurking under the lid. The glistening yellowish onions juxtaposed with the black mold bore a disturbing resemblance to the old man’s teeth and gums.

The bartender placed my Gibson on the uneven travertine bar, gin to the rim, and replied icily, “Money, it means nothing to me now. If I had something to tell you about Agca I would do it without charge. I have never met him. If you don’t believe me and want to make inquiry with my clients, please to go ahead.” He swept his arm out across the empty barroom.

*Dammit. Sarcasm. Or was it irony?* I’m never quite sure which is which, but either way I hate it. With no leads to help my research, I’m faced with no choice but to drink all afternoon.

I studied the strange words written in chalk on an old blackboard on the wall – Xabe, Xaimoko, Xaritsam, Fusui – each

followed by a number which I took to be a price. I assumed they were items on a menu, but what? Doesn't really matter – I hadn't immersed myself into this part of the country deep enough to experiment with food bearing the names of what sounded like anti-psychotic drugs.

The bartender asked, "Are you a . . . what is it they are called in America? A private dick? Are you a private dick?"

Embellishing a bit, "No. I write movies. I guess that makes me a massive dick." No reaction.

"What movies did you write? Tell me the names?"

Now, I could have made up anything – *Deer Hunter*, *Men in Black*, *Eraserhead* – but I just didn't have it in me to truss up a phony story all afternoon. I hesitated. "Well, I've written a few screenplays, but nothing that has been made into a film yet." I tossed out the word "film" to increase my gravitas after having to back off from my initial implication that I hobnobbed with the likes of Quentin Tarrantino and Charlie Kaufman. "In fact, I'm working on a script right now for a short film that a friend's son is going to shoot for a class at NYU." He didn't respond one way or the other. "NYU. You know, New York University? It's a very prestigious film school."

"Ah. I see. What is the story about?"

I figured this guy is about as far away from the Hollywood scene as someone can get, but why not practice my pitch? After all, I'm into my second Gibson, my ass has begun to meld with the wooden barstool, and I have every intention of staying here for quite some time. I pitched the story.

"A man in a bar – it could be a diner – is writing a screenplay on his laptop. He has labored on the piece for more than two years. He goes to the bathroom leaving the laptop on the table,

and when he returns, it's gone – stolen. Cut to a thief opening the laptop and finding the word processor program open to the draft screenplay.” I imitated the motion of opening a laptop. “The thief starts to read the script. It's about a writer who's working on a screenplay, and when he's nearly finished, a thief steals the laptop on which he's composing the work. Not savvy with computers – y'know, one of those old-school guys who does all his work on an Underwood typewriter like Faulkner or Scott Fitzgerald until his daughter-in-law foists a laptop on him for his birthday – the screenwriter in the story has no backup for his script, not even a printout. Distraught, the writer kills himself. I have to work on that part – y'know, like why would he do that? Maybe he's under a deadline, or maybe he's failed so many times that he can't take another letdown. Anyway, the thief is shocked, and then overwhelmed with guilt.” I flashed a facial expression of shock to the bartender that I had practiced many times in front of my bathroom mirror. “The thief searches through the laptop for information about the owner. Just about ready to give up, the thief identifies the address of the writer. He rushes to the screenwriter's home and from the front yard sees him sitting by the window. The man looks suicidal. The thief rings the doorbell. The writer opens the door slowly. The thief tells the writer about the theft and how he was moved by the story he read. He explains that he came as quickly as he could so as to prevent the screenwriter from committing suicide. To which the screenwriter says – do you think I'm too stupid to back up my stuff?” I smiled broadly. The bartender shook his head, set down another Gibson. I called out as he walked to the restroom, “That's not the whole story, you know. I'm still working on a couple of twists.” Sullenly, I finished my Gibson in a single gulp,

accidentally swallowing a cocktail onion whole.

I decided to put Agca away for the rest of the day. I initiated a conversation about – *did I just say “about”?* – movies, which further narrowed to the topic of movies from the 1960s. Evidently my bartender was fond of this period of American film because he spoke with admiration for such classics as *Mean Streets*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Five Easy Pieces* and *Midnight Cowboy* – even performing a passable Ratsko Rizzo shuffle. I startled the old man when I impetuously slammed my hands on the travertine bar and shouted too loudly, “I’m wawkin’ here! I’m wawkin’ heeere!”

The discussion of classic American movies morphed into a debate about the veracity of the American Dream which eventually led the subject of the old man’s one-time desire decades earlier to immigrate to the United States, a desire unfulfilled. Without prompting from me the bartender offered, “My wife and I were stranded in occupied France. This was 1941. We were just eight weeks married. We were not prisoners in cells you understand, but treatment under the occupation was harsh anyway. We were under the fingers . . . um, thumbs? . . . of the Vichy. Vichy were French scum who did the bidding of the Nazis. I think in America you call them frogs, yes? Because the French are scum, correct?”

I nodded in assent, unclear myself of the origin of the ethnic slur.

He pressed on. “We were desperate to leave for the United States, but under the rules of the regime we had to possess exit visas. Passage out was not possible without having exit visas. To obtain the, was very difficult. Only the government could provide them, and for a price that was impossible for me to pay.

The Prefect of Police had the sole authority to grant the exit visas.” The tremulous way the bartender said “sole authority to grant” suggested to me that only two forms of payment would have been accepted: a big payment in negotiable form, or sexual favor – provided the petitioner could offer up what some might now refer to as “prime trim.” I was already thinking ahead in delicious anticipation how the bartender and his wife performed some brave or debauched act to extricate themselves from the grip of the evil Nazis and their Vichy lapdogs. *Could this be the foundation for an original screenplay?* I started on another Gibson as my bartender left for the bathroom again. Several minutes elapsed. An employee wearing a greasy apron and hairnet that formed a spider web on his forehead emerged from a back room and knocked on the bathroom door. A smoldering cigarette dangled from his lower lip. “Jan?” he inquired in a concerned voice. He pronounced it “Yawn.” He knocked a few more times, then, apparently satisfied by a barely audible grunt, walked out the front door with a loosely-tied bag of garbage. The sudden blast of late-afternoon sunshine through the opened door seared my brain and squeezed my dilated pupils down to pinpoints.

Jan walked slowly back to the bar. He seemed pained. I caught a faint whiff of shit. Out of habit he pulled the rag from his back pocket and began polishing a thick-bottomed shot glass. Then he continued the story where he left off. “I do not mean to say that life in occupied France was like being in Treblinka. We could walk some blocks of the city, but we could do nothing. There was no work – no way to earn money. Food was difficult to come by, and we often went days without eating. We lived with many other refugees in a terrible slum. Life was grim. We were hopeless . . . one time my wife and I visited a cabaret owned by an American.

A mysterious man. We did not go to his cabaret to drink and to dance but to beg for passage to America.” Jan described the cabaret: laconic ceiling fans stirring the smoky cigarette-blue air; a big band playing continental music, including the oft-requested “La Marseillaise”; waiters of various nationalities dressed in waist-jackets and long white aprons folded over at the belt line; clientele from across Europe and North Africa milling about, many of whom likewise were seeking passage out. Jan told me of Nazi officers who sang vile songs in guttural Deutsche and paraded around like they owned the joint, dismissively knocking fezzes off the heads of the locals for fun. As he spoke, I visualized the scene as a black-and-white movie, especially when he noted that the American cabaret owner sported a white dinner jacket and black bowtie, and employed a jaunty Negro who sang and played the piano.

It seems Jan and his wife had struggled unsuccessfully to procure exit visas through the most endearing of methods, offering to do hard work and pledging to repay big debts after the war. Their entreaties were roundly rejected; in occupied France no one with the means to deliver contraband of great value was interested in quaint proposals. Jan told me that with each additional failure to secure passage he could sense his wife’s growing desperation. Frustrated and anxious, she approached the American cabaret owner directly to seek advice about the wisdom of participating in a decidedly nasty arrangement with the Prefect of Police. “My wife didn’t tell me she was going to talk to the American. Afterwards, she tried to convince me that a brief affair with the Prefect and his friends would be for our benefit – so that we could acquire the exit visas. I was furious, but also sad. I told my wife we should rot in the occupied territory

before she do bad things with the Nazis.”

I let my imagination run wild for a moment. Would Jan’s wife really take it up the ass and succumb to a facial cum-bath for the visas? Would the slobbiest Nazis in the bunch masturbate into a champagne glass and force her to consume the viscous beverage? Would she accept all this abuse just so Jan and she could live the rest of their lives in America, settling perhaps in Ho-Ho-Kus or Ronkonkoma? I surmised that in that conversation she had had with the cabaret owner Jan’s wife had portrayed her husband as an innocent fool, and herself as someone so much wiser than he. Apparently the American recommended to Jan’s wife that the couple go back to Bulgaria. Jan had another idea.

The cabaret operated an illegal but tolerated casino in a room behind the bandstand catering to high-rollers – Europeans, Vichy officials and Nazi officers. The casino also allowed the lower classes to play as well, provided they behaved themselves and didn’t smell bad. Jan harbored the time-worn delusion that he could parlay a small sum of money into a vast fortune – enough to buy those goddamned exit visas outright. He imagined striding into the Prefect’s office and brashly paying cash with his winnings from a simple game of Roulette, denying the Vichy stooge and his Nazi pals innumerable orgasms at his wife’s expense. Jan recalled the game for me. “I began with a very small amount of money – maybe ten francs in those days. A handful of chips. Of course it would take a hundred times more to buy the visas, but it ten francs was enough to take a seat at the table and hope. I placed chips on a few numbers hoping to strike big right away, but that did not happen. Each time the croupier raked away my chips I became angrier and more desperate.”

As I listened to Jan weave the tale, I couldn’t help thinking

about the rubes back in America who rely on nary a whit of mathematics to guide their wagers. They placed bets based on girlfriends' birthdays and the ages of their children, and chose numbers derived from addresses, social security numbers and employee IDs. And in a most deluded approach, these gamblers relied on history to predict the future. Somehow the past was supposed to reflect the future. Unlike in Jan's time in occupied France, casinos today exhibit a running tally of the outcomes of the most recent spins of the roulette wheel. Posted on the right side of this vertical list of illuminated numbers are the red winners – numbers like 1, 16 and my personal favorite, 27. Black winners – sinister that they are – appear on the left side. And in the middle between the red and black columns lie the green 0 and 00. With this historic tableau at their disposal, half the gamblers who see five consecutive red outcomes will conclude red is hot, and destined to win once again. The other half will study the exact same information and conclude black is overdue, and certain to win next. It's at times like these that the ball inevitably falls into a green slot. Roulette always struck me as a game for nitwits. I played it often myself.

Jan started to ramble, so I interrupted to ask him to switch me from Gibsons to Cointreau on the rocks. He did so, then continued, getting back to the core of his narrative, "I was about to give up the game and skulk out of the cabaret. I had five chips left only, maybe two francs." He paused for a long time staring blankly, and I thought, "That's it?" Then he blurted out, "Goddamn it! I hated the world. I had no more good options. I feared what my wife might do behind my back. I had to force the bad thoughts from my head." Jan was clearly agitated – a complete turnaround from the subdued personality I had observed all

afternoon. Recalling the incident must have kindled unfond memories. “I thought about killing the Prefect and stealing the visas. Then I thought about killing my wife and committing suicide.” Presently Jan’s face split with a demonic grin revealing his yellow choppers and blackened gums. “I fell into a killing mood. I thought about murdering the fat merchant who treated me like garbage when I asked for his help. And that Negro – always so happy as he played his fucking piano. He should die too. Li’ ha’ eer I wanted to kill. Hai shala?” Jan glared at me for a moment, then walked to the other end of the bar to rest from his rant.

Calmer now, the old bartender returned with a highly-polished shot glass and resumed wiping it with short, jerky twisting motions. “Many crazy thoughts ran through my mind. You probably think I am like Travis Bickle, yes? But I promise you that all the time I sat at the roulette table, I remained calm. The croupier asked if I would like to place another bet, but I politely said ‘no.’ I was about to go home quietly. I knew my wife would scold me for losing our money.”

I drank the sweet Cointreau in a couple of voluminous gulps, rapt by Jan’s story of torment and reprisal. “Just then,” he continued as though he were reliving the event, “I glimpsed her walking into the casino.” He looked over my shoulder as though she were walking into Bar Rakia right then. “She smiled back at me with a hope in her face. The American owner stepped up behind me and leaned over my shoulder. He said ‘have you tried 22 tonight?’ then tugged on his earlobe. The croupier had already spun the ball into the roulette wheel, so I quickly thrust my last chips onto number 22.” I knew by the way Jan enthusiastically pantomimed the motion of pushing chips onto

the table that magic number 22 had come up for him. And Jan confirmed it but I feigned amazement anyway.

“No shit? That’s amazing.” I leaned back away from the bar a bit and caught sight of the hairnetted employee walking out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped across his nose and mouth. He was pushing a pail of brown liquid with a mop.

“The croupier called out ‘vingt-deux – noir – vingt-deux,’” Jan reported with a very Frenchy flair. He had increased his miserable chip stack 35-fold and was now sitting on 70 francs, still not enough money to buy his way out, but by my estimation 35 times closer than a moment earlier. “The American said to me ‘leave it there’ although he seemed to be addressing the croupier when he said it. Following his advice once more I wagered that 22 would win again. I didn’t think or care about losing. Seventy francs was the same as nothing when it came to purchasing the exit visas I required.”

Although Jan’s tale was gaining momentum I began to have trouble concentrating. It wasn’t his fault. The taciturn man I first encountered several hours earlier when I first set foot in Bar Rakia had turned into an engaging narrator. No, my concentration was shaken by the insanity of ordering, of all things, a Cointreau on the rocks. The orangey tang of the syrupy Cointreau conspired with the astringent onion juice of the Gibsons sloshing in my stomach to distract me from Jan’s tale. And the khantino bucket of brown liquid parked nearby by the fellow with the towel across his face only increased the dissonance. I wasn’t certain what to do next: piss or puke. Not wishing to display rank favoritism I decided to do both.

When I staggered back to the bar Jan seemed eager to continue his story, but my mind was elsewhere. I had made

zero progress fleshing out the Mehmet Ali Agca story, and had fallen hopelessly behind schedule. My per diem was tapped out. And moments earlier, in the squalid bathroom, down on my knees like a lowly supplicant, I puked a gusher into the toilet where residue of Jan's explosive bowel movement greeted my intruding head. Furthermore, how could I be expected to pay attention when I so hated Fakulteta and all the goddamned Gypsy children who tried to pilfer the watch from my wrist whenever I stepped out of my shitty hotel room. I noted that all the shiftless Roma elders forced their offspring at an early age into the streets of Fakulteta to scam foreign-looking schmucks for a living. I couldn't help wondering who the hell had taught them how to steal, though. Jesus! These urchins were too short of stature to perform the task at hand. All I had to do to protect my wristwatch from their grubby mitts was raise my hand high above my head and – *Surprise!* – it was beyond their grasp. Still, they would spring up all around me like they were grabbing for apples from a tree limb just out of reach. Not a single one of them could get a hand above my shoulders. No wonder these Roma were so downtrodden. Stupid fucks.

Jan pressed on, "I was mesmerized . . ."

"Huh?"

Modestly offended that I wasn't hanging on his every word, Jan repeated, "I said I was mesmerized. I watched that little white ball roll around and around. All of a sudden the ball struck one of the raised pieces of steel along the wheel rim, and jumped right into 22."

"No shit? That's amazing." As soon as I uttered it, I had a strange sense that I had repeated the reaction.

"Again, the croupier announced 'vingt-deux – noir – vingt-

deux.' I was shocked. The croupier pushed almost 2,500 francs toward me – enough to buy passage for two out of occupied France. My wife's face – sheer joy! The American sternly commanded 'cash it in and don't come back.' Deep inside my heart I knew he was right. I should have cashed in but I believed God was on my side now. Yes, 2,500 francs were enough to buy the exit visas, but what would we have left to start new in America?" Jan answered his own question, "Almost nothing after bribing the Prefect." He asked another question that gave me pause. "Aren't the odds of number 22 coming up a third time just the same as for any other number?" He was correct of course – any number has an equal chance, assuming the game isn't rigged; and from what I could discern, it was as honest as the day is long. But so what? I thought again of the brainless Americans whose sole strategy consists of betting on past performance. Then I thought of Jan sitting there, preparing to squander his winnings like the simpletons on *Let's Make a Deal* who eagerly trade a motorboat for a donkey.

The croupier spun the wheel once more. Jan's huge pile of chips completely covered black number 22. The American cabaret owner shook his head toward the croupier – not in anger or disgust, but in resignation for having tried to help someone in need only to be greedily rebuffed. Jan's wife turned and stormed out of the casino, thoroughly disinterested in watching her husband and the money go down in flames. The ball tumbled into my old favorite, red number 27. I guess that constituted mathematical proof that red was overdue. "Vingt-sept – rouge – vingt-sept" is what I imagine the croupier announced. Jan lost all his money, rendering him financially incapable of purchasing the exit visas the next morning from the Prefect as he and his

wife had hoped. Instead Jan's wife went there alone and agreed to take it in every orifice in return for a single exit visa which she most happily exercised the next evening. She landed the following day at Idlewild Field. Jan belatedly took the advice of the American cabaret owner and went back to Bulgaria.

Profoundly drunk, I reached for my wallet to settle the bar bill, realizing to my chagrin that hours earlier outside my hotel, while my hand was raised high above my head to protect my phony Bvlgari watch from the fucking Gypsy choros, the shortest kid among them had picked my pocket clean.

# CHET'S KEY



Wacker and Jack gingerly placed the final dozen jars of mayonnaise atop the giant Hellmann's display situated at the end of aisle 6, a ten-foot tall Ziggurat-like monument to the god of condiments constructed from 200 cases in total. The two grocery store stockboys had spent most of a busy Thursday evening building the display: cutting open boxes, marking jars with prices, baling the leftover cardboard, climbing up and down the ladder, pretending to be masons. Interruptions abounded. Over the squawky intercom came the commands:

“Jack – get the carts.”

“Cleanup in the pop aisle.” Pop. That's what the locals called soda in this part of the country.

“We need all available stockboys to the front.” That could mean only one thing: drop what you're doing and come forward to help pack the customers' goods. Whenever lines at the cash registers stretched to agitating lengths, a person of authority in the front office would beckon the stockboys over the intercom. “All available packers to the front right now!” It usually required more than one appeal from the office to achieve results. That's because the stockboys hated to pack. It distracted them from

their assigned duties. They didn't see packing for what it was: an improvement in efficiency that enhanced customer satisfaction. On the contrary the stockboys considered customers a nuisance. How much more enjoyable the job would be without customers around to jam the gears of progress with their stupid questions.

"How old is this lettuce? It smells old. Can I have it for half price?"

"Where's the mustard?" – a question frequently posed by customers standing directly in front of the mustard section.

"Do you have any more Grape Nuts in the back?" When asked to check for the existence of sold-out items the stockboys found it less time-consuming to walk into the back room and scratch their asses for 30 seconds to create the illusion of ransacking the inventory than to report straight away that the store was out of Grape Nuts – only to be browbeaten by insistent customers into checking the back room anyway.

But nothing pissed off the stockboys more than when the store manager announced: "Carry out, please." Carry-outs rudely interrupted the Zen of shelf-stocking, breaking the rhythm of cutting open cases, pricing items and tearing up boxes. After a brief argument among themselves one of the stockboys would relent and stroll up to the front of the store where a woman – always a woman – was waiting for assistance in transporting a loaf of bread and a pound of butter to her car. The store manager prohibited the taking of tips for carry-outs, rendering the process a total loss for the stockboy who had only a few hours each evening to replenish the shelves of his assigned section.

Jack was responsible for canned goods and Wacker handled pet foods. Their friend Mark was in charge of the soap section,

which ironically was the dirtiest section in the store. All three stockboys attended the same Catholic high school. Frank Novak had had the misfortune of once being addressed in class as “Mr. Nowack” by a nun whose age could be estimated only through carbon dating. Seconds after the nun’s gaffe Frank Novak’s fellow classmates began to razz him as “Mr. Nowacker,” and soon and forever thereafter as simply “Wacker.” Frank protested which only served to cement the nickname for all eternity.

After school and on weekend evenings the grocery store employed mostly part-time high-school cashiers and stockboys. Not a single employee working during these less-desirable shifts was older than 22, with the exception of the assistant manager who was charged with maintaining control over a workforce more interested in preening and goofing off than in supporting the mission and strategy of the corporation’s management and shareholders. The assistant manager most often assigned to the high-school shift was 45 year-old Chet Wenrick. Although Chet held the lofty-sounding title of “Assistant Store Manager” he was responsible for a section of the grocery store to maintain like any other lowly stockboy, his being the smelly dairy section. Chet bore no outward disdain at having to supervise a pack of teenage nitwits; in fact he rather enjoyed consorting with youth. He expressed interest in popular music and learning about the latest teenage trends, but he never sought to become a middle-aged teen like some pathetic men of his generation. He never embarrassed himself by acting and speaking like someone less than half his age. Nor did Chet strive for the appearance of a younger man. He wore inexpensive, poorly-constructed Robert Hall shirts in the colors of bodily fluids: bile, urine, snot, semen. His pant legs looked like stovepipes, having lost their creases

long ago, and he sported clunky black work shoes over white tube socks. He combed his thinning hair straight back, applying a little dab of Brylcreem to keep his do in place when he bent over to stock butter, margarine, milk and cheese. After he grew a pencil-thin mustache to go with the slicked-back hair he looked more like a porno shop clerk than the master of the dairy section. And in case there was any doubt about the severity of Chet's impaired style, he drove a lime-green 1974 Gremlin. It was one of the ugliest cars ever produced. Legend has it that the chief designer at AMC sketched out the basic profile of the Gremlin on the back of an air-sick bag while flying to a meeting. The Gremlin fit Chet perfectly. Somehow it was easier to picture Chet climbing out of the cramped Gremlin with its truncated rear end than to imagine him driving a Jaguar or a Mercedes or some other upscale vehicle like those owned by the country-club women who shopped at the store and always requested carry-outs.

Chet knew he was an awkward sort, and he tried valiantly to mask the outward signs with mixed success. One time at a New Year's Eve party held inside the grocery store after closing hours, a drunken Chet Wenrick made a move on Audrey the head cashier – a woman who had the body of a calcified Egyptian mummy and was known as “Odd” to the girls under her supervision. Chet was standing in the dairy section accompanied by Audrey and several leering stockboys and giggling cashiers when he tried to cop a feel of her bony breast. Not all that upset about the clumsy maneuver, Audrey played along with élan. She gave Chet an easy, friendly push, but deep under the influence, Chet stumbled backwards and fell into the dairy case – his domain! The case was mostly empty following the holiday

shopping surge. For a few seconds, as Chet tried to extricate himself from the slimy case he looked like he was break dancing. When he finally rose up he discovered his clothes were soaked through with rancid milk. The stockboys convulsed in laughter, and for months afterwards recalled the debacle for Chet.

Chet lived alone in a trailer across town far from the grocery store. He was divorced with two young daughters he never saw because they stayed with their mother in another state. The court-ordered divorce decree left him with few possessions, and a nice bite of his paltry salary was garnished for alimony and child support payments. Strapped for cash Chet routinely volunteered for off-shift and holiday stints which paid union-negotiated time-and-a-half. Despite his depressing lifestyle, or perhaps because of it Chet cherished his time at the grocery store. He was extremely sweet to the elderly shoppers, and he never complained about packing groceries or helping with a carry-out. And he treated the stockboys kindly, never pushing them too hard and rarely scolding piss-poor work, preferring to fix things up himself instead of instigating confrontation. As long as their work got done Chet looked the other way whenever the stockboys took extra-long breaks and pilfered sandwiches from the deli.

Chet was a bit harder on the cashiers than he was with the stockboys. He enforced break times for the cashiers while turning a blind eye as the stockboys stretched out theirs by more than 20 minutes. Maybe because the cashiers dealt directly with customers Chet scolded them for their insolence. Or maybe he cut the boys slack because they were willing to remain past punch-out time to help Chet close the store, whereas the cashiers

strutted out the door precisely at the end of their shift, dropping whatever item they held in their hands at that moment. The girls held a different opinion of Chet than that of stockboys. Whereas the boys saw Chet as an affable geek, the girls perceived him to be a smarmy pervert. The cashiers were repulsed by his thinning, slick, graying hair and cheesy moustache, and by the faint whiff of BO they would detect when Chet came to the cash register to check on a price. They called him “Chester the Molester” for no apparent valid reason beyond the way the words nicely rhymed.

Jack resented the cruel moniker the cashiers had bestowed upon Chet. He knew that over a period of time a derisive nickname initially meant to ridicule and cause discomfort can morph into a label that is taken by others to be a literal description of the recipient. So when he heard the cashiers refer to “Chester the Molester” Jack became indignant. He implored them to stop implying Chet was a child molester, and in response they retold stories they heard about how Chet had supposedly fondled little girls, including his daughters. They said that was the real reason he had gotten divorced and had to live alone in a shitty trailer outside of town. One cashier claimed Chet had been under investigation for having a stash of kiddie porn hidden in his house. Another quickly added that Chet’s wife had found the stash and called the cops.

Jack was incredulous. He couldn’t comprehend how a grown man could be sexually attracted to children. Jack himself was fascinated with big tits and stiff nipples. He associated the curves of a woman’s body with sexuality. Whenever he beat off, Jack would page through his collection of stolen *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines replete with buxom models. And if unable to gain access to the magazines he would visualize banging the

bustiest of the cashiers. He would never conjure the image of a flat, nondescript child, and he was pretty sure Chet wouldn't either. Still, it bothered him to contemplate the opposite.



Saturday at the grocery was by far the busiest day of the week, surpassed only by the days immediately preceding major eating holidays like Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. After three days the massive mayonnaise Ziggurat had become badly undermined by customers who picked off jars from the middle tiers of the display. The integrity of the structure was significantly compromised by the time a blue-haired regular removed the jar that was essentially propping up the entire structure. The display tumbled like an abandoned building imploded by controlled demolition. The crash could be heard throughout the store, even inside the insulated meat room in the back where butchers – out of sight of the customers – transformed bloody carcasses into appealing plate-sized cuts of meat with cosmopolitan-sounding names like London Broil, Porterhouse and New York Strip. When Chet, Jack and Wacker arrived on the scene they encountered a stunned old lady holding a jar of Hellman's, her dress spattered in mayonnaise and little bits of broken glass stuck to her face. "Cleanup on Aisle 6!" bellowed Audrey over the intercom. "No shit," commented Wacker drolly. Chet gently took the jar from the woman's hand and led her away from the ruins. Three cashiers carefully plucked shards of glass from her face while Jack filled a bucket with soap and water. The store manager and Chet's boss Jim rushed out from the

back room and began issuing instructions to all the stockboys standing around, idly absorbing the colossal mess. It was the middle of the busiest day of the week and hoards of customers were searching for mustard and demanding Grape Nuts, and yet the entire stockboy team was about to engage in a massive clean-up effort that would consume more than an hour. After getting bitched out by Jim for allowing the Ziggurat to fall into such a state of disrepair, Chet joined in to shovel gobs of glass-laced mayonnaise into a garbage can.

On Saturdays like this one, grocery store policy required management to make two bank deposits of cash, coupons, checks and receipts – one in the early afternoon and another after the store closed. Any other day of the week a single deposit at the end of the day was sufficient, but the volume of business on Saturdays generated so much money that prudence demanded the risk be reduced by including an additional deposit. Normally Jim would make Saturday’s midday run to the bank, but not today. Too much mayo. In fact, nobody would make a midday deposit today. The intrusion of the toppled display had set store operations back significantly. Furthermore, a maxed-out semi-truck arrived with badly-needed goods to replenish depleted shelves, and none of the stockboys was available to unload the pallets. The truck driver was pressed to return soon to the company’s distribution center 90 miles away where another laden trailer of goods awaited transport to another store.

“Where the fuck is the fuckin’ manager, goddamn it!?” called out the driver. “I gotta get the fuck back to fuckin’ Buffalo by 4!”

Customers shopping in the aisles near the loading dock blanched at the burly truck driver’s vulgar rant. Jim summoned

the produce manager, and each grabbed a pallet jack and started unloading the truck – a menial task customarily performed by the stockboys. Scrambling to empty the truck Jim carelessly rolled a steel pallet-jack wheel onto his toe and screamed out a “Fuck!” of his own.

Two hours later the truck was highballing back to the warehouse and construction of a new display of Ritz crackers was underway on the former site of the collapsed mayonnaise Ziggurat. Chet ordered the stockboys to keep it under eight feet tall.

As the end of the work day approached, Mark, Jack, Wacker and Chet initiated the closing chores: quotidian tasks such as shagging shopping carts scattered about the parking lot, mopping floors, chucking garbage and shooing out lingering customers – another form of chucking garbage. Audrey wrapped up the paperwork for the night deposit. Chet locked the door after Audrey and the cashiers left, all having punched out precisely at the designated end of their shifts and not one minute later. He and the three stockboys remained inside for another 20 minutes to button up the store. Finally, Jack shut off most of the lights. Chet tucked the night deposit bag under his arm and the foursome departed the store. As they walked to the parking lot Chet asked Jack to accompany him to the bank. This was a formality really – Jack would not be playing bodyguard. The purpose of his presence was to be an eyewitness who could confirm in the event of a robbery that yes, in fact, the manager had truly been robbed and hadn't simply taken off with the bag of money like Janet Leigh's bank teller in *Psycho*. As the bank was on the way home for Jack he readily agreed. Wacker sometimes

played the role of eyewitness, but never Mark who lived in the opposite direction from the bank. Furthermore, Mark had a hot girlfriend waiting for him after work and he had no desire to be delayed by a ceremonial side trip; he was the first to speed out of the parking lot, dreams of teenage poontang dancing in his head.

Chet tried and failed to start his Gremlin. He quickly climbed out of the funky vehicle and in an attempt to summon assistance waved his arms like a football referee signaling an incomplete pass. Noticing the apparent call for help Jack and Wacker shut off their cars and ambled over to the dodgy lime-green vehicle, its exterior looking more the color of mucus beneath the ghoulis mercury lights bathing the parking lot. Chet called out, "My car won't start. I think the battery's dead." He hoisted the hood and propped it up with a flimsy rod tucked into the cramped engine compartment. Chet cranked the motor while Jack stared intently into mouth of the sick Gremlin as if he knew something about the workings of the internal combustion engine, which he most certainly did not. Like many teenagers he could rattle off the makes, model numbers and performance specs of killer exotic cars – vehicles that he and his pimply-faced peers imagined driving one day in the company of a smoking hot babe. But when it came to basic mechanics Jack didn't know shit.

"Hey Chet, I think the armature sprocket is causing interference which in turn is causing the combustion line to interfere with the flow and the dynafLOW," reported Jack authoritatively.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know."

Chet turned away from Jack, annoyed at himself for foolishly believing for even a second that his young charge might offer a legitimate word of advice. Jack tried again. “Hey Chet, I think the battery’s okay because the engine’s cranking. It must be something else. Do you have gas? Do you want me to check the air in the tires?”

“Shut up, Jack.”

Wacker returned to his car, backed it against the building and illuminated the highbeams, shining some light on the reluctant Gremlin. Chet tried a few more times, then climbed out and said to Jack, “Let’s deposit this money and then come back and work on my car.” Just then a four-door sedan pulled into the parking lot. A man in the back seat rolled down the window and shouted, “Hey fellas, you need some help? We saw your hood up. Need a jump or something?”

“No, that’s okay. Thanks anyway,” responded Chet nervously. Jack was still standing in front of the Gremlin, hands in his pockets. The headlights of Wacker’s car cast Jack’s shadow across Chet’s sad excuse for transportation. Jack looked casually over at the sedan idling under bright parking lot lights just as a lean, white man with a Princeton haircut and a tan windbreaker bounding from the back seat holding a shiny metallic object in his right hand. Instinctively Jack started to make a move toward his own car, unsure what to do. He became a detached observer of the unfolding scene as though he were a bystander observing the situation from a bird’s-eye view as it unfolded in slow motion.

The man with the Princeton cut who a moment earlier seemed so nice and willing to help screamed out at Chet, “Get the fuck away from the car, cocksucker! Give me your fuckin’ car keys!” Another guy – Hispanic looking, and stockier and

swarthier than his partner – sprang from the front seat of the sedan and rushed toward Jack who froze like a mannequin at the sight of the bulky, charging robber. Terrified, Wacker sat motionless in his car. As his vehicle was still running and well-positioned to zip out of the lot, Wacker debated flooring the accelerator and fleeing the scene, deciding against it lest the robbers open fire at him and his friends.

The swarthy guy pointed a gun at Jack's heart and ordered, "Get your ass in your car, right now! Give me your fuckin' keys and cell phone!" Jack robotically complied. When the white guy noticed Wacker sitting in his idling car, its highbeams blaring, he called to his partner, "Get over to that cocksucker in the car there by the building." The stocky Hispanic guy relieved Wacker of his keys and cell phone as well.

Chet was down on his knees on the pebbly parking lot trying desperately to retrieve the canvas bag from the floor of the Gremlin's skimpy back seat. The harder he tried the deeper the bag shimmied under the seat. The lean white man – the obvious ringleader – spoke firmly and directly to the trembling Chet in a cadence usually reserved for pre-schoolers: "Give me . . . the fuckin' money . . . right now, Mr. Asshole Store Manager . . . or I'll shoot you . . . clean through the head. Don't try to be no fuckin' hero . . . chum. I'll waste you . . . and take the money anyways. So just hand the bag over your shoulder . . . nice and easy." Chet was determined not to look directly at the robber's face, desperate not to become an eyewitness doomed to execution. Chet awkwardly passed the bag – a simple canvas sack holding tens of thousands of dollars worth of Saturday's grocery store business – to the robber who grabbed it brusquely. Fully expecting now to receive a terminal slug of lead through

his cranium Chet squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw so tightly that he broke a filling out of his bottom-left molar. Then he pissed his pants.

The ringleader holstered his weapon, stepped away from Chet and slammed down the hood of the Gremlin bending the cheap rod holding it open. He handed Chet's keys to his Hispanic accomplice. The driver of the getaway car pulled forward and after the two robbers climbed in, screeched out of the parking lot and headed east on Route 5. As soon as the car was out of sight Wacker bolted to the drug store occupying the same shopping complex as the grocery store. It was still open for business. He vaulted the pharmacy counter dramatically, grabbed a phone and dialed 911 as the dumbfounded clerks looked on in confusion. The entire robbery had taken fewer than ten minutes but seemed like hours to the hapless victims. Still in shock, Jack sat motionless in the driver's seat for several minutes, staring blankly straight ahead. When he was thoroughly convinced the robbers weren't coming back, he gradually slackened. He slowly looked over toward Chet's car at the exact moment Chet turned his head slowly toward Jack. The halting motion resembled that of a creaky amusement park tarot witch. Their eyes met. Each knew what the other was feeling: relief to be alive, yet uncertain about what would happen next.

The two grocery store employees closed ranks and in an uncharacteristic gesture Jack embraced Chet; he pretended not to notice the ammoniac reek of Chet's urine-dampened trousers. Jack wanted to console the elder Chet. Not only had the pair survived an armed robbery committed by dangerous men, but Jack knew Chet would have to deal with the fear and the inevitable night terrors alone, absent family members to lean

on for consolation. And he would have no one to turn to for support when the shit hit the corporate fan and management commenced assigning blame for enabling the loss of a full Saturday's receipts. Supervising the construction of an ill-advised 10-foot high mayonnaise Ziggurat was one thing; being the man in charge during the theft of 50 grand worth of company assets was another thing altogether.

With his tongue flapping like a dog's, Wacker ran back from the drug store to report that he had called in the robbery to the authorities. Moments later, local and State police forces raced into the parking lot with sirens blaring, followed shortly by the remora-like TV and newspaper reporters. Based on Wacker's detailed description of the crime, the State boys set up a roadblock a few miles east on Route 5. Unfortunately, the robbers traveled east for precisely one block before ditching their stolen vehicle and embarking west in another vehicle stolen earlier in the evening. Bottom-line: The robbers got away with the goods. Some of the loot would have to be discarded – checks and coupons – but the 30 grand in cash and food stamps was liquid and negotiable.

Late in the evening a trooper transported Jack, Wacker and Chet to police headquarters to swear out statements and help develop composite drawings of the culprits. Jack specifically noted several times that the Hispanic robber was a swarthy man, and in subsequent conversations with family and friends about the ordeal he referred to his tormentor as "Mr. Swarthy." Contemplating a career as a novelist or a playwright, Jack had recently read *Othello* and "swarthy" was one of the many words he needed to look up in the dictionary.

Although Jack and Wacker had encountered the same

Hispanic man their composites of him were so dissimilar that the local paper the next day published both drawings side by side and reported erroneously that they represented two different robbers. So much for eyewitness accounts. Jim, who as the store manager was unprotected by the workers' union, was summarily fired. Taking Jim's place was a true company-man ball-buster who like Captain Queeg turned the store operations upside down in the ensuing weeks and months. Chet was allowed to continue in his role as assistant manager but his schedule was revised so as never again to be called upon to make a bank deposit. Jack and Wacker went to school on the Monday after the robbery missing their locker keys, but instead of receiving a demerit from the Dean of Discipline they got to relate an amazing story that each hoped to parlay into an opportunity to get laid someday.

Police detectives assigned to the case conceded the robbers had developed a pretty solid plan and surmised they had methodically staked out the slow-witted assistant manager and his lame crew of teenagers leaving each evening with an unguarded bag of money; no doubt they chose to pull the caper on a Saturday for its lucrative handle. How lucky they had been for the collapse of the Ziggurat which led to the aborted mid-day deposit and the subsequent doubling of cash in the purloined canvas bag.

Eventually though, the identity of the ringleader, the lean white guy, was determined after lifting a palm print from the Gremlin's hood. His profile wound up in FBI databases and about a year later he was captured in Ohio. Months before that the getaway driver was nabbed in another grocery store theft, this time as he fled the crime scene in the misty dawn light after forcing the manager at gunpoint to unlock the door. As for Mr.

Swarthy, he escaped scot-free. Like so many Mexicans he easily blended into the background in predominantly white America. He was able to move under the radar, hitching rides with long-haul truck drivers and neo-Hippies in minivans, making his way out of the frigid Northeast to the arid desert regions once populated by his indigenous ancestors.



Far from the scene of the crime Mr. Swarthy carefully began to spend little bits of his share of the take. He didn't blow huge sums of money on trifles unbecoming a member of the lower classes – not because he was smart but because he simply had no experience with wealth and the dispensing of it. After life in Oklahoma became too boring Mr. Swarthy bought a bus ticket to a village in Arizona where some distant relatives had planted themselves after illegally entering the USA. He still possessed the keys he confiscated from the grocery store employees including Chet's ring which also held a USB memory key, an item Mr. Swarthy had never before seen. The memory key was sleek and its purpose mysterious, defying Mr. Swarthy to discard it. He belatedly threw all the regular keys into a lake but retained the elegantly-fashioned memory key. One day, sitting half-drunk in a cantina in Winona, Mr. Swarthy showed the memory key to the bartender who explained that the thing was actually a device capable of containing computer data. Under the influence of too much Patrón, Swarthy boastfully confided that he had stolen the key from a grocery store manager back east, to which the bartender replied that it might contain valuable bank account

codes or some other data that could lead to additional riches.

“There’s a computer store in town that can read the memory key and tell you what’s on it,” said the bartender. Mr. Swarthy smiled with childlike glee. To compensate for the advice he left the bartender an uncharacteristically sizable tip. Then he gulped the remaining Patrón and retired to his relatives’ trailer down a dirt path off County Road 419.

The following day Swarthy walked to the computer store as recommended. He tried to appear legitimate – even donning a tie around the collar of his plaid workshirt – lest the clerk think he came into possession of the valuable computer data by nefarious means. As he handed over the memory key to the chipper clerk he stated, “My boss at the bank asked me to print out the data on this IUD thing.” The clerk inserted the key – *did he just say “IUD”?* – into the USB port on her PC and brought up a browser to scan the contents. Her pleasant expression folded into a grimace. Her eyes widened and she glanced furtively at Mr. Swarthy, who was shifting his weight from one antsy foot to the other and back again. After a moment she said in a cracked voice, “Can you, uh, um, come back in like an hour?” Unfamiliar with the workings of computers and their clever peripherals, Mr. Swarthy saw no reason to protest waiting an hour for results that should have taken a few minutes to produce. “Whatever you say, mamacita.” He strolled to a nearby diner down the street, visions of incalculable wealth dancing in his head. Seated at the counter Mr. Swarthy absent-mindedly scanned the menu, physically huge and packed with breakfast, lunch and dinner selections, all of which were available any time of the day or night. He snapped the menu shut and said to the young Hopi waitress standing patiently, pad in hand, “Bring me a plate of cabrito . . .” – he

studied her nametag: Kuwanlelenta – “. . . uh, Kuh, uh, wuh . . .”

“Just call me Leelee.”

“Bring me a plate of cabrito, Leelee.” As a native of Mina, a tiny village outside the big industrial city of Monterrey, Mexico, Mr. Swarthy was an aficionado of cabrito, a delicacy of roasted kid goat popular in northeastern Mexico but largely unavailable of north of the Rio Grande. Considered barbaric by some, a milk-fed goat is slaughtered when it reaches one to two months old, roasted on a spit over a slow-burning charcoal fire, and served whole minus the head on a large plate. The uninitiated might easily mistake cabrito for a cooked poodle.

“I’m sorry, sir . . . I don’t . . . I never heard of that. Is it on the menu?” Leelee hurriedly cracked the menu which when opened looked like the tablets of the Ten Commandments and eyeballed the sheet of daily specials clipped to the cover, nearly one-hundred percent positive cabrito was not and never had been an item on the bill of fare. “No, sir. I’m sorry. No cabrito.”

“Ah, fuck.” Mr. Swarthy looked again at the menu and settled on an alternative. “Veal parmesan sandwich, then. Extra cheese.”

Leelee scribbled some marks on her pad. Hoping not to disappoint her customer again, she said hopefully, “It comes with spaghetti. Is that OK?”

“Yeah, sure. And bring me an iced tea.”

Leelee returned with the drink, but as she stepped away Mr. Swarthy called out, “Leelee, mi querida – I said an iced tea – you know, from Long Island. Rum, vodka, gin . . . all that shit. ¿Comprende?” She nodded and left holding the spurned glass of Nestea. As he waited for his meal Mr. Swarthy repeatedly rubbed the skin behind his right ear and sniffed his fingers. Another man at the counter stared at this odd behavior, turning aside

when Swarthy noticed the gawking and eyed the man with a look of derangement. Leelee brought the plate of veal and spaghetti, and the Long Island iced tea. He dispatched the potent drink in an unbroken series of three or four gulps and immediately ordered another one. "I'm real thirsty," he said, feeling a need to explain.

When Leelee delivered the second drink she asked, "How's the veal? Good?"

"Fair. I was hoping for cabrito. Did you ever serve it?"

Leelee shook her head, gently swinging the two long braids of shiny, jet-black hair dangling from each side of the part down the middle of her head. Mr. Swarthy saw an opening, a device, for flirting with his young waitress by offering to describe the proper way to prepare cabrito. Leelee found the concept of slaughtering and eating a baby goat cruel, but she did not reveal her disgust. Contradicting the customer, as she knew from instinct and experience, always led to stingy tips. Instead she nodded throughout the cooking lesson with feigned fascination. Mr. Swarthy mistook her undivided attention for permission to extend the conversation to the wonders of all things young and delicate. In an awkward segue he said, "You are young. Let me try to guess how young you are – nineteen. Am I right?"

Leelee giggled and replied, "Too old. I'm seventeen."

Mr. Swarthy offered a leering grin and declared, "Even better. Pretty, young girls . . . *hic* . . . they have pretty, young pussies. ¿Es verdad?" He smacked his lips and sipped his sweet cocktail. The tip-enhancing smile Leelee had pasted to her face morphed into a repulsed frown. Just then a bell like those used to summon hotel bell-hops rang out from the kitchen giving the young waitress an excuse to turn and hustle away from her

coarse, swarthy customer. When she returned with the bill Mr. Swarthy handed her a wrinkled \$50 bill and a coupon for \$1.50 off a four-pack of Brawny paper towels.

“Keep the change, *mamacita*. Maybe you and me – we go out after you get outta work. You like that?”

Prepared for the inevitable solicitation, she replied, “I have to ask permission from my father first.” She pointed across the room to a uniformed police officer eating a bowl of chili and reading a newspaper folded in half twice. “That’s him sitting over there.” She smiled, stuffed the bill into her apron pocket and walked back into the kitchen. Mr. Swarthy hunkered down in his booth and chewed the remaining slivers of ice in his Long Island Iced Tea.

Exactly one hour after dropping off the memory key Mr. Swarthy returned to the computer store, his gait a bit unsteady from the three voluminous drinks he imbibed at the diner. The clerk was waiting for him, as though he were the only customer expected in that afternoon. “I have your data, sir. Will you please confirm this is your memory key?” the clerk asked Mr. Swarthy carefully.

*Huh?* “Yeah, that’s mine. I gave it to you an hour ago. Did you forget already?” Suspicious that the clerk was trying to trick him into leaving the valuable key behind, he quickly added, “Everything on that thing is mine. Just give me my shit. I’m in a hurry.”

Upon hearing that unwavering affirmation, four deputies of the Coconino County Sheriff’s office accompanied by a US Federal marshal appeared from a back room, some with guns drawn. The marshal, a sinewy man with graying temples and a

square jaw announced with understated authority, “Place your hands on your head, sir. Interlace your fingers. You’re under arrest for possession of child pornography with the intent to distribute. You have the right to remain silent . . .” Swarthy knew the rest of the Miranda spiel from memory, having heard it repeated 10,000 times on TV. He protested vigorously as his wrists were clasped in handcuffs and his bulky body was insinuated into a waiting cruiser.

The traumatized clerk began to weep; an hour earlier she had gazed upon the most disgusting, lurid sort of obscene smut – stuff collected by Chet Wenrick, known to some grocery store cashiers back East as “Chester the Molester.”



Mr. Swarthy was dead-set against revealing his possession of ill-gotten loot – in reality, not a significant sum following the post-robbery split – and claimed poverty instead. The court appointed him an incompetent public defender. The lawyer rejected mounting a defense predicated on the assertion that his client had come to own someone else’s memory key following the commission of a grocery store robbery – a felony case that to date was still under investigation by the FBI. Rather, he argued that the innocent Mr. Swarthy had innocently found the memory key along a sinful street far outside the bosom of los barrios where the white man – wanton oppressor of the brown-skinned people – reveled in perversion and depravity. The lawyer exuded as much passion as his flat rate of \$1500 – or \$18 an hour – could purchase. *Hell, my client doesn’t even own a computer! He’s too stupid*

*to copy files from a hard drive! He thinks USB's are flying saucers – ha ha!* Undaunted, he pressed forward with the “fuck if my client knows where the porno came from” defense, even though Mr. Swarthy had boldly claimed ownership of prosecution’s Exhibit A in no uncertain terms in the presence of the deputies and the Federal marshal. Of course, it didn’t prove particularly helpful either that Leelee, the young Hopi waitress testified solemnly about the defendant’s stated penchant for young pussy. In the end, after rejecting the opportunity to take the witness stand in his own defense, and absent a plausible exculpatory explanation, Mr. Swarthy was swiftly found guilty by the all-white jury. The judge sentenced him to seven years in prison.

At the same time Mr. Swarthy was being escorted out of the courtroom, hurtling insults and colorful curses in Spanish at the judge, Chet Wenrick was on his knees, patiently stocking his dairy case with lo-cal sour cream. As he stamped prices on the moisture-beaded lids of the plastic containers he silently scolded himself again for not backing up his vast kiddie porn collection on another memory key. Now he would have to start amassing his stash all over again. Luckily for him, Chet still possessed the cache of salacious pictures of his two young daughters encrypted on hard disks in a safe deposit box – images worth a fortune in trade.

It was November. Turkey time. Chet assigned Wacker and Jack the task of constructing a new display of canned cranberry sauce – a tower that promised to be more impressive than the Sun Pyramid of Teotihuacan.

NO GOOD DEED GOES  
UNSHOVELLED



Bradley hosted raucous parties in 4F that lasted all night. Carl retaliated on the mornings that followed by noisily dragging furniture across his uncarpeted floor in 5F. Bradley shunned Carl as they passed in the lobby, and Carl dropped dirt onto Bradley's head whenever his downstairs neighbor climbed onto the fire escape to observe the action on the corner of West Fourth and Perry Streets – the crossroads of the West Village. As Bradley watched bumbling tourists try to make sense of the narrow streets set at angles oblique to the conformity of Manhattan's Cartesian grid, gripping maps with their hands positioned at 10:00 and 2:00 like a habit instilled in driver's education, Carl would tend to the herb garden in the box affixed to his window sill, raking soil a bit too vigorously with a tiny hoe.

It was the summer of 1980. Bradley had recently received his MBA from Wharton, and after sifting through three dozen job offers, culling the most insulting, he accepted a position in the bond department of Solomon Brothers. Although Tom Wolfe had yet to coin the moniker, Bradley fancied himself a "Master of the Universe." He landed a killer apartment in the most desired neighborhood of Greenwich Village and filled his spacious

closet with scores of dark suits and custom made shirts, each monogrammed discretely on the cuff. Every evening after work, Bradley and his colleagues drank rare single-malt scotches and consumed remarkably small and expensive examples of nouvelle cuisine. On weekends, Bradley crept into the dicier sections of town to chase skirt, score drugs and dance to songs like “Der Kommissar” at the Mudd Club and Danceteria. Today, Bradley would admit his compensation as a bond trader was obscene, but at the time it comported with the standards of the industry. The money and perks, however, made an avaricious creature of him; Bradley became a snob who expected privileges, a boor who trampled upon lesser mortals.

Warped by his attitude of superiority, Bradley squandered any hope for a relationship with his upstairs neighbor, Carl Conti, a retired septuagenarian longshoreman who long ago occupied 5F, a rent-controlled two-bedroom apartment, after returning to America from being wounded in the Battle of Anzio. The first time he encountered Carl in the lobby as he waited for the elevator Bradley could tell the man had no use for him and his ilk: the bratty, spoiled, unworldly interloper type. And Bradley didn’t care. In fact, he relished the old man’s disdain. He cranked up his record player, smoked pungent cigars, and on the rare occasions he cooked at home, fried up smelly fish. The animosity grew to toxic levels.

Eighteen months later Bradley was fired for blundering a large bond issue. The experience was humbling and clarifying; conspicuous consumption and profligate spending suddenly seemed gauche. He took a job at an antiquarian bookstore around the corner from West Fourth and Perry, and started hunting for a less-expensive apartment in the Village. On his

last night in 4F Bradley stepped out onto the fire escape to enjoy the spectacle of a nasty Nor'easter paralyzing the city. From his perch Bradley spotted Carl's parking space – another benefit acquired years earlier along with rent-controlled status – filling with snow. Bradley climbed back inside, donned his thick coat, designer scarf, fur hat and imported mukluks – remnants of his former profligacy – and trudged outside to shovel Carl's space. For hours, snow fell faster than he could dispatch it, but by morning Bradley had successfully restored Carl's precious access to the street.

Back in 4F, exhausted and panting, Bradley heard Carl's footsteps as he walked briskly out of his apartment. He thought Carl might come downstairs to thank him for the gesture, an initial step toward rehabilitating their fractured relationship. Moments later, hearing no knock at the door, Bradley stepped back out onto the fire escape where to his astonishment he watched Carl shovel the snow back onto the parking space. At the rate Carl dug into the piles of snow, Bradley feared the old man might succumb to a heart attack. Just after lunch Carl had completely replenished the space to its snowbound state. He stood there, lips blue, forearms perched atop the handle of the shovel, and looked up at Bradley with a defiant smile.

No way was Carl Conti going into debt with a snot-nosed Wall Street jerk. Bradley waved to him and went back inside. He smiled too as he lit a cigar and took a piece of mackerel from the icebox.



WHO TOOK MY  
PENTACHORON?



**M**orty quietly and discretely clasped the latches on his briefcase, muffling the snap with his hands. He slowly backed away from the table, turned toward the door and stepped lightly. His attempt to sneak out undetected didn't work.

“Where the hell are you going, Morty?” demanded Chris. He was tired and cranky, otherwise he would not have addressed his boss so gruffly. The hands of the mechanical time-clock bolted to the laboratory wall clicked into vertical alignment indicating the stroke of midnight. Another midnight. Another in a long line of midnights that Morty Klein and Chris Hahn, scientists and partners in a joint venture had spent together in their lab pursuing a fascinating but elusive research project.

Morty shuffled his feet guiltily and glanced at the time-clock. “I’ve got to pick up Arielle at the club. She’s singing tonight at that dump in the Mission District and I don’t want her hanging around alone afterwards.” Morty hoped to present the situation as an unavoidable predicament, but he suspected he sounded like a schmuck. He felt sheepish about leaving Chris alone to continue with his computer programming tasks, even though Morty was head of the operation. “You understand, don’t you, Chris?”

“Oh sure. No problem, Morty. I’ll just plod along for another few hours – my wife and kid don’t care if I work 20 hours a day,” replied Chris sarcastically. Without taking his eyes off the computer monitor, he said, “Give my best to Arielle.” Under his breath, after a beat, he added, “cunt.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“OK – oh wait, no.” Morty snapped his fingers like people often do when they suddenly remember something. “I’m traveling to Seattle tomorrow. Gotta meet with that new supplier about those defective components. Those assholes refuse to acknowledge they’re at fault. I’m taking Slutsky with me.”

“Well, give ‘em hell, Morty. Call me if you need anything.”

“Will do. Thanks.”

It had been a typical day for the two men. Morty and Chris had already labored 16 straight hours, calibrating equipment, running tests, examining computer read-outs, analyzing data, replacing broken components, and re-calibrating equipment for the next round of tests. The work was grueling, and for the previous ten years the demands of their research project kept the scientists apart from their loved ones, interfering with family occasions, disrupting harmony, supplanting what sociologists and other scolds dubbed “quality time.” Morty had already divorced two wives and was currently dating an emotionally needy lounge singer from Sacramento named Arielle.

But if their project proved successful all the privation would have been worthwhile. If successful, their project would advance scientific knowledge and foster insight; it would become the foundation upon which grand challenge problems might be

solved. The benefits to society would be immeasurable. And if successful, Morty Klein and Chris Hahn would watch their net worths increase by tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars. Despite all the effort that had been expended to outfit the lab, conduct research and troll the world in search of venture capital to keep the project alive, it was the promise of astronomical wealth after all, and not altruistic scientific curiosity that had become the chief motivation to toil with singular dedication and conviction.

In 1989 both Morty and Chris abandoned the comforts of doing research in the corporate world along with its decent health care plan and promise of pensions to stake out far riskier but potentially more lucrative careers as independent technology entrepreneurs. Over time the scientists had come to abhor working for a Fortune 500 company because doing so required them to serve under timid, short-sighted senior executives who knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. It was top-level company men reliant upon vapid spreadsheets and simple-minded “Boston Boxes” and not scientists who determined which areas of research to pursue and which to avoid. The bottom-line dictated every decision. Years of hard work could be scrapped in a heartbeat if the company posted disappointing quarterly results. The fruits of any and all discoveries, methods and patents developed by the scientists belonged exclusively to the corporation, as stipulated in the employment contract each signed on their first day on the job. Promotions seemed to be bestowed upon those who created the sexiest presentations and were the most enthusiastic about sucking the kneecaps of their superiors.

After several years ensconced in the corporate world the

choice became clear: work like a diligent lab rat and after 30 years retire ignobly with a feeble pension, or quite possibly build and own the world's greatest invention. Under this stark proposition each man found departing the intellectual property prison of corporate America irresistible.

Right after Morty crept out of the laboratory and rearmed the security system using the keypad on the exterior wall – incontrovertible proof that his boss was truly gone – Chris blurted to himself, “Fucking selfish bastard. Leaves me here to bust my hump in this god-forsaken dungeon while he heads out to pork his girlfriend.” More disappointed than furious, Chris initiated a long-running software program compilation – a task that would take at least 30 minutes to complete – and then headed for the bathroom with his laptop and DVD copy of *Deep Inside Hyapatia Lee*. After pleasuring himself to a juicy girl-girl scene Chris zipped up his trousers and walked out of the bathroom into to the brightly lit lab. He stuffed the DVD into a pocket in his briefcase. He directed his attention back to the software program compilation and discovered it had completed with a ton of errors. “Goddammit!” Just as Chris packed up his things in preparation to shut down for the evening, a possible explanation for the colossal failure of his program popped into his head. That’s the way it was with programming: fleeting moments of inspiration sustained the long periods of unproductive hacking. Chris sat back down and debugged the code for another couple of hours and then, acknowledging the evident futility of continuing in his exhausted, addled state, powered down the computers and other specialized equipment. He stretched his back and sat down hard on one of the stools-

on-wheels strewn around the lab. He picked up the copy of *Time* magazine that had arrived in the mail that morning. *Morning*. It was now almost 3 a.m. and morning seemed an eternity ago. Gracing the cover was a photo of the grinning, disembodied head of Jeff Bezos, the founder and chairman of Amazon.com and *Time*'s Person of the Year for 1999.

“Jesus H. Christ,” muttered Chris. “Is this the best *Time* could come up with?”



Morty Klein graduated Summa Cum Laude from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he went on to earn his PhD. He studied under some of the brightest minds in computer science, specializing in artificial intelligence – a brand new field at the time. In the late 1970s he joined the Burroughs Corporation, a maker of data processing equipment that started out in 1904 selling adding machines. An avid reader of 20th Century American fiction, Morty marveled at how few of his fellow employees were aware that the beat generation author and one-time junkie William S. Burroughs was the grandson of the firm's founder.

After several years with Burroughs Morty rose to the position of director of a division charged with dethroning IBM as the leader of the mainframe computer market. Upper management at Burroughs concluded the company needed a differentiating competitive advantage over its larger nemesis. The key to beating IBM they declared was to offer a simple system for people to operate complex computers. Businesses would clamor to purchase computers that didn't require an army of high-priced

specialists to operate. Burroughs entrusted Morty to build the system using artificial intelligence techniques. Although he was eminently qualified for the assignment, and through his leadership the usability of the Burroughs operating system improved significantly, Morty realized it was all for naught. Beating IBM proved intractable for the simple reason that IBM leveraged its dominance of the market to fence competitors out of lucrative deals. Technological superiority had nothing to do with it. Burroughs had few opportunities to tout its easy-to-use system simply because the company rarely got an audience with prospective customers. Morty's disillusionment increased with each miserable monthly sales report.

Like Morty, Chris Hahn graduated with high honors from a prestigious school – the California Institute of Technology. It was 1978. Although not as accomplished as Morty, Chris likewise earned his PhD, and immediately thereafter joined the Sperry Corporation, another competitor in the challenging market for mainframe computers. Chris was a savant at solving problems. He could realign a jumbled Rubik's Cube in fewer than 30 seconds, untangle any variant of the Chinese ring puzzle, vanquish all challengers in the sport of checkers, plot the shortest path through a maze with a single, cursory glance, and write the most elegant computer programs imaginable. He didn't have the depth of vision of Morty Klein, but he was damned brilliant nonetheless.

In 1986, Burroughs bought Sperry and the newly merged firms were renamed Unisys. After the acquisition, Morty became Chris's boss. Chris worked for Morty on a half-dozen technology projects that should have given Unisys a marked advantage over its competitors, but the company's senior management failed

to recognize that most corporations purchased mainframe computers from the vendor that appeared to be the least risky with which to do business. Attributes like superior technology and lower price ran a distant second. And in that category of least risky vendor with which to do business IBM could not be beaten. It had become gospel in the industry: no one ever got fired for buying IBM. Unisys could never mount a serious challenge. Morty and Chris became frustrated. They commiserated over somber lunches in the company cafeteria, increasingly convinced their skills were underutilized if not completely wasted at Unisys.

Morty quit Unisys and invested a tidy sum from his personal savings along with an additional \$1 million raised from friends and relatives to form a new company, Morque Technologies. Initially, he planned to give the company a sci-fi, eponymous title like MorK-Tech – a clumsy combination of part of his first name and the initial of his surname – but quickly changed his mind when a friend assumed that the name was inspired by the goofy TV show *Mork and Mindy*. Chris Hahn was Morque Technologies' second employee after Morty – recruited away from Unisys. Chris took a sizable salary hit and sacrificed a number of big-company benefits to join Morty in the new venture. To compensate, Morty instructed his lawyer to assign Chris a huge lot of stock options that would vest when and if Morque Technologies ever went public. Estimates of the potential value of the options ranged from \$250,000 to a wildly-optimistic \$25 million. But until an IPO, Chris would work for peanuts. Although he didn't mind at first, in later years he often questioned whether he had been wise to leave Unisys. He worked like a slave for Morque Technologies, plodding toward the elusive financial rewards

that always seemed just out of reach. In a blur, his son Albert, a “mistake” baby born when he and his wife Lori were both 40, had gone from being a toddler to a teenager, and regretfully Chris had been absent for much of the boy’s life in the interim.

The Hahn family’s finances were particularly strained. Chris drove the same car he owned in grad school, a bulbous, embarrassing Dodge Omni. To earn extra cash Lori took an undesirable part-time job working nights in low-end retail at the mall. When yet another year went by without a salary increase, Chris cancelled the medical insurance policy covering Lori, justifying the decision on the strength of her apparent good health, although he never told her.

Chris had essentially wagered on the prospect of a big payoff by becoming a founding employee and small investor in Morque Technologies, but now with his savings almost depleted, he agonized that his own son Albert – a delightful boy with admirable scholastic ambitions – would have to forego CalTech and apply for tuition assistance to attend a crappy state school.

While Morty spent a great deal of his time coddling investors, giving interviews to newspapers and trade press, addressing chambers of commerce, haggling with suppliers and dealing with regulatory agencies, Chris worked almost exclusively in the lab fabricating components, writing code and running experiments. To generate revenue for the company during the lengthy and financially barren period of research and experimentation, Morty bid on and assigned Chris to programming projects for local businesses, university professors and the Federal government. For years, it was common for Chris to work eight hours programming for an outside client and then

toil another eight on the research project.

Of late, the arrangement – Morty managing the business and Chris busting his hump in the lab – started to generate friction between the two colleagues. Each assessed his own contributions to be more substantial than those of the other – the formula for much animosity and mistrust.

So much capital had gone into purchasing equipment and outfitting lab facilities that Morque Technologies was financially unable to hire additional technical staff as called for in Morty's original business plan. Strapped for cash, Morty had been restricted to bringing on board exactly one new employee: a business manager, his girlfriend Arielle – a pretty girl with a splendid singing voice whom Morty met performing on amateur night at a dark piano bar in the Castro District. Rather than consign Arielle to a dreary cubicle inside Morque's lab building in a rundown section of town on the corner of Peach and Craig Streets, Morty leased a clean, well-lighted place for her in a newly-constructed office complex situated off Highway 101. The decision to hire Arielle instead of a scientist irked Chris to no end. The job was a sinecure. Her business skills were slight as was her knowledge and understanding of technology, and although she contributed slightly more than the average slacker Arielle paraded an attitude of invulnerability, acting as though she could do no wrong as long as she remained Morty's love interest. Chris resented that Morty would stoop to rank nepotism, even to fill the mundane position of business manager which despite the lofty title really entailed no more than basic secretarial duties. And the nicely appointed office Morty leased for her off Highway 101? An outrage given the firm's viscous cash flow. Not surprisingly Chris's interactions with Arielle bore

the patina of his resentment for her, and in response she was curt with him and at times harshly critical and sarcastic. The two could find no way to get along, even after ten years; the tension rendered mutually cordial behavior difficult. Arielle's ongoing employment at Morque Technologies was just one more item on Chris's ever-growing list of grievances.



Time marched on. It was now 2009. Morty and Arielle and Chris and Lori were seated around a small table at a local Laotian restaurant, ostensibly celebrating the 20th anniversary of the founding of Morque Technologies but the mood was somber. Forced to confront the fact that 20 long years had elapsed and yet their project remained incomplete and untested, the diners could hardly bring themselves to be festive. Morty proposed a toast – “To another twenty years” – which fell profoundly flat. Arielle tried to initiate a conversation centering on her ideas for streamlining operations at the company, but Chris, in no mood to entertain the musings of the boss's appointed dimwit, cut her off. “Not now, Arielle. We're celebrating. Can't you tell?” The display of insolence irritated Morty, especially when Arielle stared at him with eyes that demanded satisfaction.

When the waiter brought the check Chris stared off toward the kitchen, hoping Morty would pick it up. After a moment, he did, and then said somewhat apologetically, “Uh, Chris, you and Lori owe \$87.50 plus tip.”

Twenty fucking years together since leaving Unisys in 1989 to form Morque Technologies and still Morty and Chris slogged on

with their precious project, continuing to believe that any day success would jump out at them from the bushes. At this point they had no other options. Consistent with human nature the more the two men invested into the project the more difficult it became for them to abandon the effort. Chris had formulated a thought experiment to explain to friends and colleagues why this was so. He would offer to auction a \$50 bill. The starting bid could be as little as a penny. The auction would proceed like any other auction with one variation: when it was over, the second highest bidder had to part with his final bid in return for nothing. For example, suppose Fred bid \$25 for the \$50 bill. Ted then outbid Fred by \$5. If Fred then surrendered, Ted would buy the \$50 bill for \$30 and Fred would pay \$25 for nothing. Faced with a total loss, Fred will invariably submit a higher bid, placing Ted into the position of deciding whether to suffer total loss or plow on. Chris noted that bidders would routinely pay more than \$50 for the bill, just to avoid being the second place loser. During his time CalTech Chris claimed to have made several hundred dollars running the auction for freshman history majors.

After 20 years, Chris feared the project was like his auction – he and Morty kept bidding because neither wanted to be the second-place loser saddled with making a dear payment in exchange for nothing.

Shortly after incorporating Morty code-named the research project “Pentachoron.” Its purpose, simply put, was to transport objects to a different time. Morty fashioned an elegant and comprehensive theory that explained how time is a fluid, fungible and malleable commodity; Chris developed the supporting mathematical equations. Chris and Morty spec’d

out a four-dimensional tetrahedral portal that in theory could accept an object through its triangular opening and deposit it in the same physical location at another point in time. When – *if ever* – the Pentachoron was built it could be programmed with an exact time and date, past or future, designating a point in time when an object could be transported – a complex, if not impossible capability to engineer. To date however all research and development conducted by Morque Technologies had been focused simply on getting the portal to do something.

Perhaps because the theory and the supporting equations emerged before the scientists had formulated a purpose for their device – a solution in search of a problem, so to speak – the men differed on how the Pentachoron should ultimately be used. Morty imagined sending letters of warning to tragic figures of history: to Abraham Lincoln advising against attending *Our American Cousin* at Ford’s Theater; to Neville Chamberlain sternly objecting to his appeasement of Adolf Hitler; to doctors considering prescribing Thalidomide to their pregnant patients. He dreamed of a day when modern scientists might transport advanced instruments like computers and microscopes to men such as Newton, Da Vinci and Hippocrates.

Chris was opposed to taking actions that could abruptly alter the course of history. “Where do you stop? Do you tell people not to board the Titanic? Not to ride the Hindenburg? Not to accept gifts of big wooden horses on wheels? Not to drink the Kool-Aid? Would you go so far as to warn Eve not to bite into the apple?” If the device became operational, Chris would instead urge qualified people to use it to examine history as dispassionate observers, fine tuning humanity’s understanding of the past with an eye toward progressing into the future better informed

and more likely to avoid yesteryear's catastrophes. In this spirit, Chris believed the real power of the Pentachoron would come when and if they could send objects into the future. Possessing such capability, humans would be in a position to advise their descendents and aid them in making sense of the world they inherited.

Of course, the debate between Chris and Morty on the appropriate use of the Pentachoron was purely hypothetical. Progress on the development of the device was halting and incremental as research always tends to be with advanced and exotic new technologies. A promising breakthrough one day would be followed inevitably by two disappointing brushbacks the next, and yet the partners sensed they were inexorably converging on the day that would prove, one way or the other, whether the project was viable. Test results were getting better, software was more stable, electronic output was more reliable.

Finally, the day of reckoning arrived.

Tension hung in the air.

Chris was poised to run the very first live bench test of the Pentachoron, preparing to make the first insertion of an object into the device with the intent of observing the past. Morty was with him in the lab preparing his digital video camera to record the historic event. The shades were drawn, the lights glaring. As usual it was past midnight and the two men had been holed up in the laboratory continually for 36 hours. Chris produced a long, slender, flexible tube with a tiny video camera and microphone attached to the end. Although he had adapted it from a colonoscope, neither he nor Morty made the obvious joke about the Pentachoron being a high-tech rectum – neither would have

found the allusion funny after shedding so much sweat and tears on it. The test plan called for Chris to insert the video camera and mike into the triangular maw of the device and observe the activity taking place on the other side, whenever in the past that might be. The device was not yet sophisticated enough for the scientists to set an exact time and date to transport an object to, so it was anyone's guess what, if anything, they would visualize on the monitor. As a final check Chris peered into the lens of the tiny camera on the end of the tube and saw his face appear on the big television screen sitting on the bench. "Testing, testing, zero, one, ten." He enjoyed counting in binary.

Slowly and steadily, inch by inch, Chris nervously fed the slender tube into the Pentachoron. *Oh please let it work. Please God, please.* The device emitted an earsplitting noise like the sound of screeching subway brakes. The TV monitor displayed a random pattern that resembled a multi-colored lake-effect snow storm, and then suddenly the pixels arranged into an eerily familiar scene. Chris stared at the television screen in utter astonishment. Morty's jaw went slack and he dropped his digital video camera to the floor. Through the monitor speakers the two men heard the spoken words, "Jesus H. Christ. Is this the best Time could come up with?" On the monitor screen in living color: Chris Hahn, looking haggard but ten years younger, sitting hunched on a three-legged stool assessing the cover photo of *Time* magazine from 1999, the one featuring Jeff Bezos as Person of the Year.



For the first time since joining Morque Technologies Chris spent an entire weekend at home with his family, uninterrupted by a side trip to the lab. Following the successful inaugural trial of the Pentachoron, Morty declared that the two scientists deserved a hard-earned respite away from the lab. Chris and his wife Lori made love in the early afternoon while their son Albert tried to light a barbecue fire using substandard grocery-store charcoal briquettes. It would take the boy at least an hour to get the coals sufficiently hot enough to grill the burgers and hot dogs Lori bought for the big, hastily-arranged family cookout. In the interim, the couple would have plenty of time alone to catch up on some long-delayed intimacy. Chris estimated that the last time he and Lori had had sex together was the previous winter when a wind storm toppled a tree and severed power lines leading into the neighborhood. With no power to watch TV or run the cable modem, the couple retreated to the bedroom for the balance of the evening.

Now, with the aroma of apple pie baking in the oven, Lori was anxious. No sooner had Chris dropped his trousers than Lori took his cock into her mouth – an action she hadn't performed since Albert was born and one that nearly caused Chris to blow an immediate load. Not confident that he could summon another erection before the guests arrived for the cookout, he pulled her head away and initiated some delaying foreplay tactics. In the course of lovemaking Chris debated whether to reciprocate and go down on Lori – eat at the Y, so to speak. It was not his specialty. And he abhorred the sensation of stray pubic hairs on his tongue. Still, he suspected she wanted him to. He reluctantly pulled out and moved into position, but his oral technique was so inept and his concentration broken so frequently to extract

hairs from the roof of his mouth that Lori, exasperated, took him by the shoulders, rolled him onto his back and climbed on his pole like a cowgirl.

Afterward in the shower Chris was content. Being with his wife was soothing, and it was satisfying to have finally broken the streak of copulation-free days. Chris was also excited about the technological breakthrough of two days prior. It was like the feeling of pride he had experienced in fourth grade when like Carl Friedrich Gauss he figured out a neat way to sum up the integers from 1 to 100. It was a task his teacher assumed would occupy the class for the bulk of the period. Right away, Chris noticed that the first and last integers summed to 101, and that the second and second-last integers also summed to 101, and so on until he got to the middle of the sequence – 50 and 51 – which likewise summed to 101. Fifty pairs of numbers that each summed to 101, or 5050 altogether. A few minutes after the math teacher assigned the problem Chris raised his hand to report the correct answer. Duly impressed at the precocious display of intuition she presented Chris an award which was later noted in the slim bi-monthly school newsletter published by the eighth grade journalism committee. The award was nothing really, just a cardboard lightbulb with a bubbly face and a mortarboard bearing the inscription “Master Chris Hahn – Math Wizard.” But at the time – and even to some degree years later – it meant a great deal.

As Chris stood beneath the water pulsing from the showerhead, the multitude of frustrations, setbacks and discouragements of his past seemed to fade away, like the soapy foam running down the drain. His confidence in the future of Morque Technologies and its shareholder value was renewed. He

allowed himself to believe his sacrifices would at last be rewarded handsomely. Chris enjoyed a particularly sardonic satisfaction knowing his skeptical parents and unsupportive in-laws would have to acknowledge – *finally* – that they had been wrong all along about his decision to quit Unisys and join the speculative Morque Technologies. It was with this sentiment in mind that Chris invited his and Lori’s parents to a family barbecue – an ideal opportunity for him to throw a little shit in their faces. Chris had been disappointed – no, crushed – that his own father had balked at loaning him money so he could take a larger stake in Morque Technologies when it was founded. Chris asked for a \$100,000 loan – a figure his father could have easily secured by collateralizing his house – but the elder Hahn questioned the slim business plan and expressed concern over the murkiness of the corporate mission. Chris’s father repeatedly implored his son to remain in the bosom of Unisys. To the old man who had scratched out a modest living traveling the hard length of California’s Central Valley selling replacement tractor parts to orchard farmers, Chris’s employment at a high-tech Fortune 500 company was next to Nirvana. His father’s opposition to Morque Technologies motivated Chris more greatly to join it than if he had embraced his son’s bold decision to join the upstart company.

Absent any financial assistance Chris was limited to staking a humiliating \$3,000 in Morque Technologies. Pocket change, really, compared to Morty’s seven-figure investment. Unencumbered by other serious partners Morty Klein became the dominant shareholder, both hands on the helm, steering the company and dictating the terms of Chris’s employment. Over the years his father’s rejection ate away at Chris, and he blamed

the old man for his own misery slaving under the hegemony of Morty Klein, but at today's festive barbecue he would be vindicated.

The early morning fog had completely burned away and the sun shone in the azure, cloudless sky like an A-Test at Alamogordo. Chris moved two splintered picnic tables from the garage to the modest backyard, a patchwork of broadleaf weeds interspersed with a few tenuous blades of grass. The tables were stained "redwood" but the color more closely resembled rust like that on the undercarriage of Chris's Omni. Lori schlepped the provisions from the refrigerator. After hasty but satisfactory preparation the big barbecue was underway. The women served the food and the contingent of relatives commenced devouring the spread, heads down, lips smacking, conversation truncated in mid-sentence. Chris marveled at the way his guests silently attacked the contents of their paper plates with unbridled conviction. He was sure they had skipped breakfast just so they could gorge on the free meal like decadent Romans at an orgy. Within minutes, the swiftest among them had dispatched their initial allotment of grilled meat, corn on the cob, potato salad and watermelon. Lori's mother Marjorie helped her daughter serve a second helping to the table, leaving a few blistered hot dogs and blackened burgers on the grill to carbonize over the smoldering, glowing briquettes that Albert had struggled so valiantly to ignite.

When everyone had received round two, Lori sat back down across from her husband at the far end of a pair of picnic tables joined together to accommodate all the relatives. She fidgeted with a plastic napkin ring before announcing with forced aplomb

that Chris had made a major breakthrough on his project at work. It was the opening he was waiting for, and had anticipated. He didn't need to prompt his wife to make the announcement because like Chris, Lori also needed to convince those around her that the sacrifices her family had made over the past 20 tough years had not been made in vain.

"Tell them about it honey. Don't be shy," she eagerly prodded. Chris grinned somewhat sheepishly – a totally contrived gesture. Before he could respond Lori turned to the guests at the tables and declared with a big smile, "You know, I never could understand what Chris does at work – it's so complicated. All these years and I still don't get it." She turned her palms upward and shrugged playfully in benign befuddlement.

From the beginning of their enterprise Chris and Morty swore to hold the Pentachoron project in the strictest confidence and to protect it as a trade secret. They agreed that under no circumstances would either of them mention the purpose of the project other than to imply it might one day revolutionize transportation. Such vagary could be construed by the unwashed and technically illiterate to mean any number of things: improved engine design, frictionless wheel bearings, a new formula for fuel. Only a handful of venture capitalists that Morty approached with his prospectus had been privileged enough to receive a slightly more detailed explanation. To be sure, no one other than Chris and Morty had ever laid eyes on design specs, diagrams, test plans, computer code or the Pentachoron itself. All intellectual property was encrypted and stored in a vault in the lab along with the Pentachoron. Morty insisted Chris sign a confidentiality agreement on his very first day, a demand that Chris took as an insult.

“C’mon. Tell them what you did, honey,” exclaimed Lori.

“Yes, Chris, tell us what you did.” Lori’s father Bernie couldn’t wait to patronize his son-in-law. Oooh, the way the cocky old fuck instructed – no, dared! – Chris to enlighten the audience incensed the proud scientist. *Two days ago I peered into the past, and one day I’ll probe the future. I’ll be a master of the Universe! What did you do recently, Bernie, beyond shooting a mediocre round of golf?* Bernie was a dozen years into retirement. He had turned over his big Cadillac dealership to his son Donny who expanded the operations and modernized the marketing campaigns. Donny made a very handsome living and the quality of his life stood in stark contrast to that of his sister Lori’s and her plodding husband. Donny had recently purchased two adjacent teardowns in Palo Alto and in their places built a magnificent house with an indoor swimming pool where he and his pretty, blank-blonde wife lived and played with their two tow-headed children, a boy and a girl. The foursome looked as though they stepped out from a full-page, four-color Ralph Lauren ad printed on glossy stock in *Town & Country*. Bernie routinely touted Donny’s accomplishments, while not-so-subtly questioning the wisdom of his daughter Lori’s decision to marry an impecunious, misguided scientist. For this reason Chris insisted that Lori not invite Donny and his magical family to the barbecue.

“Well, Bernie, it’s pretty hard to explain, and anyway, it’s confidential. But, let me . . .”

Before Chris could explain, Bernie rudely cut him off. “Oh, c’mon Chris. You’ve been saying that for years.” To his wife, Bernie repeated, “He’s been saying that for years, Marjorie.” A few cousins chuckled at Bernie’s theatrical put-down. Chris felt his face get hot. The several beers he consumed from the rented

half-keg oiled the gears of resentment. Chris glanced over at his own parents and when he discerned no sign that they might come to his defense, even in a minor way, he blurted, “Well, Bern, we proved our device can transport objects through time – into the past! We can look into the past!” That got the attention of the insolent relatives around the table gorging on Chris’s food. Unfortunately, instead of looking upon him with respect and awe, as he believed he deserved, they stared as though he had lost his mind.

After a moment of embarrassing silence Bernie asked with evident derision. “What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just what I said, Bern. It hasn’t been perfected, but we proved we can put objects into our device and make them appear in another time.”

“Did I hear you right? You’re building a time-machine! Oh, for Chrissake . . . I suppose you built a perpetual motion machine, too, while you were at it,” laughed Bernie and Marjorie along with a few others around the table. Lori looked down at her plate and chomped somberly on an ear of corn. Chris couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but he was pretty sure she had switched sides to the doubter camp. Was she worried now that her mad-scientist husband had been secretly frittering away his time on some fanciful but useless invention? Worse, had he cracked like Jack Torrence in *The Shining*? – “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” times ten thousand? Might Chris someday chase Lori around the house with an axe?

Before Chris could become any more indignant, Albert asked innocently, “Will you be able to send objects into the future too, Dad?”

Lori interjected, “Eat your hamburger, Albert.” She certainly

had no desire to prolong foolish discussion of time travel. Chris narrowed his eyes in contempt, and then with resignation in his voice he mumbled to no one in particular, “Like I said, it’s pretty complicated . . . Mom, can you pass me the beans.”

Later, after all the guests had departed and Lori trudged off to bed Chris stepped quietly into Albert’s bedroom to kiss him goodnight. “Did you have a nice time today, Al?” Albert was tucked in under the covers. He rolled over toward his father and replied matter-of-factly as though nothing contentious had happened at the barbecue, “Sure Dad.” Suspecting Albert harbored doubts about him and his secret work, Chris counseled, “Don’t pay attention to your dopey grandfather. He just likes to pick on me a little – he’s only joking around. You understand, don’t you Al?” Chris looked for evidence of emotional wounds on his son. He wished he had never uttered a word about the Pentachoron project. For one thing, he had violated the terms of his confidentiality agreement with Morque Technologies, however incidentally, but worse he had handed his Philistine relatives a blunt object with which to pummel him and his work in front of his wife and adoring son.

“Dad, will you be able to send objects into the future?” asked Albert again with a slight ache in his voice. Clearly he needed to hear his father respond with unequivocal confidence.

Chris hesitated. *Haven’t I said too much already?* Still seething with contempt for the vapid adults at the barbecue behaving like ignorant children, he noted that not a single one was mature or sentient enough to engage in serious discourse. Only one person, the youngest at the table – his inquisitive son – had posed an intelligent question. Chris responded because he believed

Albert deserved an answer, “Yes, Al. It’ll take time, but we’ll be able to send objects into the future.”



Just past 6 on the morning after the barbecue, the phone next to Chris’s bed rang out like a fire alarm, snapping him out of a bizarre nightmare in which he had dismembered his relatives with an axe after he chopped his way through a flimsy door. The image was strangely familiar. The carnage seemed to have taken place in the lab, but in Chris’s nightmare the building had many more rooms and hallways. It was a common element of his dreams – buildings were always more expansive than in real life.

A second ring. Chris sat up quickly and slid his legs out over the edge of the bed. The sudden reorientation from horizontal to vertical made him dizzy. He delayed answering the call for another two rings for time to clear his head. Finally he lifted the receiver from the cradle and announced with forced cheerfulness, “Hello? Chris speaking.” It was Morty. Right away Chris expected a severe tongue-lashing from his boss for stupidly revealing details of the Pentachoron at the picnic table the previous afternoon. It was irrational but that’s how paranoid Chris had become. Instead, Morty called to ask Chris to travel to Abu Dhabi, eleven time zones away, to mollify a group of investors who had become increasingly antsy about the security of their investment in Morque Technologies. Progress on the device had fallen behind the promised schedule and some members of the investment consortium were demanding their money back – at least what was left of it. Others were seeking a controlling interest in the company to offset their increased risk. Morty had

met several times with the head of the consortium, Sheik Anas El Khoury, and his advisors, describing the advanced transport device in vague technological whimsy while hyping its financial and strategic value in the most concrete of terms. Morty would have met with them once again to allay their fears but today he was tired and the last thing he wanted was to climb aboard the claustrophobic confines of an aluminum cylinder and fly for most of the day. It was time, Morty decided, for Chris to step up and represent the company to the investors.

Morty explained, “My doctor gave me strict orders – no flying for at least six months. He’s worried about the veins in my legs, you know, phlebitis, stroke, and all that shit. Besides Chris, it was your hard work that led to our big breakthrough. You deserve a nice trip.” Chris smirked at the way Morty portrayed the excruciating excursion as a well-earned perk, a vacation, an exotic getaway. Of course, Chris couldn’t afford to take Lori along even if she wanted to go, which she wouldn’t given the medieval treatment of women in the Middle East. Morty asked, even though he goddamn well knew the answer, “Have you ever been to Abu Dhabi?”

“No, never. Sounds good, though. When should I plan to go?” Chris knew there was no sense dodging or complaining. Knowing his concurrence was a *fait accompli* he might as well pretend to be an enthusiastic, loyal employee.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” *Fucking A!*

“I’ll email you the details. I’ve asked Arielle to get you a hotel. Thanks a lot, Chris. Have a great trip.” Morty hung up. Chris fell back into bed, and he would have stayed there for another hour or two but the urge to go to the bathroom was

too intense. Too much grilled meat, beer, beans and aggravation the day before. Seated on the bowl Chris conjured a variety of scenarios in which he might beg off the trip to Abu Dhabi but none seemed passable. He took a shower, shaved around his goatee, and ate breakfast in front of his laptop where he trolled for the best – that is to say, cheapest – flight options to the other side of the world. With Lori’s help Chris hastily packed for the big trip. Chris approached packing luggage the way he would solve a puzzle – calculating the most efficient arrangement of items of varying sizes and shapes within a defined finite space. He made a thorough list of the clothing and toiletries he would take, concerned that the choices in Abu Dhabi of such items as toothpaste and shaving cream may be too limited, or worse, too strange. *Did they even use toothpaste in the Middle East, and if so, what was it made of?* He collected numerous diversions – books, music, crosswords and brain-teaser puzzles – to occupy himself on the plane for the better part of a day. And, most importantly, Chris made absolutely certain not to carry anything contrary to the laws and mores of the Arab nation. He removed his DVD copy of *Deep Inside Hyapatia Lee* from his briefcase and hid it in the pocket of a bathing suit in the bottom drawer of his dresser. The DVD, a collection of sex acts performed by the lovely American Indian porn actress, came in handy during the long, boring evenings Chris spent cloistered alone in the lab waiting for the computers to compile his programs and spit out the results of their complex calculations. But if found in his possession while in the United Arab Emirates it might lead to a punishment all out of proportion with the infraction, like a vicious caning, a bankrupting fine, some lunatic form of public humiliation, or extensive incarceration. He recalled the movie

*Midnight Express* and shivered at the thought of being jailed half-way around the world in the notorious Al Wathba prison, barred from communicating with the outside world, lost in the shifting sands of the immense amnesiac desert.

Accompanied by Albert, Lori drove Chris to the airport – he was too nervous and distracted to drive himself. Before he stepped into the ridiculous zigzag maze leading to the security checkpoint supervised by overpaid, moronic TSA agents, Chris embraced his family and told them he loved them more than anything.

“Now Al, you’re the man of the house when I’m gone. Help your mother and be a good boy. Maybe you can mow the lawn if it gets high.”

Tickled to receive his father’s confidence Al responded proudly, “Sure thing, Dad.”

Although he knew it was bullshit Chris said to Lori enthusiastically, “I think this big trip to Abu Dhabi means the company is ready to break out – I can feel it. Wish me luck.”

Chris picked up his bags and joined the line of joyless souls. When he neared the X-ray machine he started the ritual of unpacking his laptop, rummaging through his pockets for anything that might contain metal, and removing his shoes, jacket and belt. As he waddled through the metal detector holding his slouching trousers by the waistband, Chris noticed the embarrassing holes in the toes of both his socks, plainly visible for all the other travelers to snicker at. He silently cursed the fanatical Muslim terrorists who had made this spectacle possible.



“You mean, like, you can, like, look into the future and stuff? That’s, like, y’know, pretty amazing. Like, we could be like that dude in *Back to the Future*, y’know, the one that made all that money cuz he had the sports book.”

Declan Rooney, a friend of Albert’s from across town was genuinely intrigued by the tale of the Pentachoron. Albert was gratified by his friend’s reaction although he felt a bit guilty for telling Declan about his father’s mysterious invention. It was supposed to be top secret. He also felt guilty about even being in Declan’s company, for his mother Lori had counseled him on numerous occasions to steer clear of the boy – the product of a broken home and an abusive father. Only 15 years old, Declan had already been cited for vandalism, shoplifting and possessing marijuana. The middle school principal suspended him for two weeks for calling a black kid a “spook” in front of a teacher and a group of students. And when three cats in the neighborhood were found dead, their bodies mutilated, Declan was the prime suspect even though no evidence ever surfaced to incriminate him. Still, Albert liked hanging around Declan because he represented an edgy departure from Albert’s own safe, secure and lackluster life managed by two basically decent, protective parents.

Exclusive knowledge of the time transporter was an asset Albert could employ to earn some degree of recognition and respect from Declan. In a twisted way juvenile delinquency was Declan’s badge of honor; his lawless escapades rendered him cool, while Albert in comparison was a risk-averse dork. Armed

with the tale of the Pentachoron though, Albert – at least for a little while – had an opportunity to be cool, too. Curiously, he felt more driven to reveal his secret to Declan than to any other friend. As soon as he arrived home from depositing his father at the airport, Albert texted Declan: “Meet l8r @ gas stn kewl story 2 tell u.” After Declan texted back an affirmation – “OK better b gd” – Albert rode his bicycle three miles to the 24-hour Chevron gas station situated right next to Declan’s ill-maintained house, its front lawn nothing more than a patch of trampled dirt and gravel incapable of supporting plant life, not even knotweed.

“How does it work?” asked Declan.

“My dad says you put something into it and it comes out in a different time.”

“Where is this thing? Can I see it?” Declan’s question seemed more like a challenge.

“Uh, um, in my dad’s lab.”

“Yeah? Where’s that?”

Albert was unnerved by Declan’s insistence to find out the location of the Pentachoron, but he knew if he demurred he’d be ridiculed as a pussy. *Who knows, Declan might even push me around.* Albert started to regret meeting up with Declan. The pressure to comply compounded after Declan lit a cigarette and blew smoke into Albert’s eyes. Albert rocked back and forth on his bike. More forcefully now Declan implored, “C’mon, dick, just tell me where the freakin’ thing is.” He grinned as he said it, showing off a picket fence of stubby teeth, but Albert felt threatened.

The fragile Hahn boy looked down at his shoes and replied weakly, “Well, it’s a big gray building on the corner of Peach and Craig Streets, y’know, down a few blocks from the Red Lobster?”

“Shit yeah – the Red Hamster. My old man gets fish there sometimes, cheap. Y’know, stuff they’re gonna throw out.”

“It’s always locked, y’know. The lab, I mean,” noted Albert hopefully in a gambit to dampen what he perceived was Declan’s desire to steal the invention.

“Yeah. I’m sure the thing is valuable. Whadjoo call it? A Pentagram?”

Albert cleared his throat before answering, “Pentachoron.”

“Cool. Hey, d’ya wanna, like, y’know, go down to the river with me and pound a couple’a beers? I swiped a six-pack from my old man. I got ‘em hid under a stump by the water.”

“Nah,” replied Albert with his best “I’d-like-to-but-I-gotta-get-going” voice.

“Whatever. See ya around, bro.”

Albert sped away on his bike as fast as he could pedal, zipping right in front of the startled driver of a mini-van. Declan laughed and puffed on his cigarette. *What a dick!* Minutes later he headed for the edge of the river a half mile walk through a junkyard on his way to skip stones and drain a couple cans of Miller Lite.



Chris landed in Abu Dhabi 21 hours after departing the West Coast, including a layover in Frankfurt, and by the time the jumbo jet met the jetway his body was broken. Right before he booked his plans Chris placed a Hail-Mary call to Morty requesting permission to fly business class, noting the agonizing duration of the trip, but was politely and sheepishly denied. Morty apologized – “I wish I could Chris, I really do” – claiming Morque Technologies’ discretionary budget was in tough shape.

Chris overheard Arielle in the background sassily opine, “He’s got some nerve asking you to pay for that.”

Assigned a cramped middle seat, sandwiched between two obese men – one from Yemen, the other from Yuma – Chris was essentially immobile. Squeezed by slabs and folds of sweaty flesh. Retrieving a book from his briefcase situated on the floor beneath the seat in front of him required the talents of a contortionist. The in-flight movie was some piece of shit starring Adam Sandler so Chris decided instead to plug in his iPod and listen to Philip Glass’s opera *Einstein on the Beach*. In college, Chris was drawn to avant garde music. He purchased albums by John Cage, Terry Riley, Brian Eno and many others of their ilk. It was a blatant protest against the sordid downward spiral of contemporary American pop music taking place in the 1970s, typified by such hacks as *KC and the Sunshine Band* and the assholes who churned out “Feelings” and “Billy Don’t Be a Hero.” Although he hadn’t listened to any records in his collection for years, lately Chris found it strangely soothing to revel in the things that had once made him happy. So, as an ardent admirer of Albert Einstein – Chris had named his own son “Albert” after the celebrated physicist – he bought a recording of Glass’s opera shortly after watching a PBS documentary on the subject. Only now, with a huge allotment of idle time did Chris finally have an opportunity to listen to it. The effect was sensory overload. The repetitiveness of the material, especially the piece titled “Prematurely Air-Conditioned Supermarket” with its counting chorus and soporific female narrator, compelled him to commence drinking heavily. Chris gulped down four or five scotches only to suffer later from a bloated bladder when he failed to awaken either slumbering man blocking access to the aisle.

On the ground, lugging his overstuffed bags, the locks broken open by an inquisitive security agent – more likely a paranoid post-9/11 American with a feeling of entitlement than a representative of the UAE – Chris strode out of Abu Dhabi International Airport. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn he had climbed into a convection oven. Panting from the 100-plus degree heat and dripping profusely, he hailed a smelly taxicab that transported him to the hotel reserved for him by business manager Arielle – a concrete-and-rebar edifice down the street from an adhesive and sealant factory in the Mussafah Industrial Area. *What a shithole – I guess Morty wasn't kidding when he said the discretionary budget was in tough shape. On second thought, this is probably Arielle's cunt idea of a joke.*

After Chris checked in, the desk clerk handed him a message: “Contact Morty ASAP.” He went to his room on the first floor, a stuffy cubicle with a single bed, a colony of tiny winged insects, and a view of a concrete wall. Although the noisy air conditioner mounted behind the steel enclosure spewed warm, damp air, he kept the window closed to curtail the caustic fumes wafting in from the adhesive factory. Chris paced around the tiny room hoping that in one corner he might be able to find a cell phone signal, but after several unproductive minutes he opted to contact Morty through the internet. After checking “YES” on the hotel's clumsy website, agreeing to pay \$29.95 for 24 hours of internet access, Chris established an instant messaging session with his boss. Morty informed him that he had just heard from the investors in Abu Dhabi that they wanted to come to the U.S. to receive a demonstration of the Pentachoron and to inspect Morque Technologies' lab facilities. Morty directed Chris to

hold them off for at least a month. In the clipped vernacular of instant messaging, he wrote “Not ready 4 d&p show. Delay em.” Chris knew “d&p” meant “dog and pony.” Morty also stated that he would be meeting with a recently-formed Japanese venture capitalist group that had expressed serious interest in the project. This was Morty’s domain: milking funds from outside investors to keep the Pentachoron project afloat. Morty added, “Gotta hedge against Arabs pulling out.”

Reading the phrase in the instant message window Chris imagined Morty, a native New York City Jew, saying “AY-rabs” like he always did when not in their company.

“OK. Do my best to hold em off. When r japs coming 2 meet u?”

“Not – going 2 Kobe. Gotta meet on their turf.”

“Thought u can’t fly for 6 mos.”

“???” Then a long delay. Morty sent a follow up message: “Can’t worry about a couple veins. Gotta suck it up. Kick ass over there. CU back in land of free/home of brave.”

Chris was in the middle of typing a question about the Japanese VCs when the instant messaging session with Morty shut down. *That’s odd.* Chris assumed that internet service in Abu Dhabi was spotty. Or perhaps some apparatchik of the morality police monitoring the chat session read something he found offensive. Chris checked emails and summoned the weather report for UAE: relentless heat for as far as the forecasters could predict; the average daytime high for July: 104 degrees. Starving but not yet sturdy enough to take a chance on sampling local cuisine, Chris ordered a hamburger and French fries from room service, unaware that the hotel, which did not have a kitchen, would dispatch a boy on a bicycle to McDonalds on Sheikh Zayed

The First Street to retrieve a poorly-prepared Big Mac. Back at the hotel with the goods the boy simply peeled off the wrapper, placed the sandwich and fries on a plate and delivered the meal to Chris's room. Chris took a bite of the lukewarm sandwich and immediately spit it out onto the garish carpet. A swarm of flies quickly engulfed the morsel. *Fuck me! That's awful!* He wondered fretfully whether the meat – if it indeed was meat – might be ground up camel, or, heaven forbid, infidel. Hesitantly, he sampled a fry, and although it had the texture of a wet cigarette he decided it was edible; requiring nourishment he reluctantly ate the damp fries. He also summoned the courage to consume the limp tomato slice atop the mealy gray burger after scraping off the white mystery sauce.

After dinner, such as it was, Chris rehearsed for the big meeting with the Arab investors. He ran through a list of cultural admonishments: don't show the sole of your shoe, drink coffee with your right hand, sit in the closest seat to the right of Sheik Anas El Khoury, the chief executive of the investment firm. And never, ever utter the word "AY-rab." Exhausted, Chris climbed atop the thin, horsehair-stuffed mattress on the tiny bed and organized the main points of his pitch. It had been more than a dozen years since he had last made a formal presentation to an important audience; he tried to visualize the meeting – standing at a lectern, pointing at diagrams on a big screen, politely answering questions, accepting accolades at the end. He hoped a dicey subject like 9/11, Zionism or Shariah Law wouldn't be broached. After 90 minutes of rolling from side to side, plumping the pillow, readjusting the thin blanket, and waving off the flies, Chris, exhausted, finally fell asleep.

The next day Chris delivered a thorough presentation to the investors and their advisors. He was surprised that Sheik El Khoury had invited more than two dozen men, each dressed in a remarkably clean white dishdashah and a checkered shumagg held in place by a ring-like ogal. Regretfully, Chris wore the only suit he owned, a dark wool number he purchased right out of CalTech and wore on the infrequent occasions at Sperry and Unisys when he was allowed to meet with customers and executives. Wearing dark wool in steamy Abu Dhabi was about as ill-advised as sporting a Speedo in Siberia.

The first half of the presentation reinforced Morty's message that Morque Technologies had carefully and responsibly spent – Chris used the word “allocated” – the investment firm's financing. Chris explained that Morque had secured the lowest available prices on components, used free open-source software whenever possible, and had held down salaries. He tried not to sound disgruntled. When he concluded the audience was sufficiently satisfied their money had not been egregiously squandered Chris moved on to the meat of the pitch: describing the progress on the construction of the Pentachoron and, with delicately calibrated drama, revealing the results of the first test. Although Morty had clumsily dropped the video camera the night of the first big test, a backup recording from the probe's monitor captured the eerie images from a decade earlier. Chris double-clicked an icon in his PowerPoint presentation, initiating a playback of the recording. The audience members uniformly leaned forward on their chairs, raptly observing the video. Each man nodded slowly and rhythmically – Chris took it as a sign the audience was duly impressed.

Chris closed his presentation by outlining the work to come:

conducting more rigorous testing, improving the performance of the operating software, perfecting a method to set the exact target time and date for transporting objects through the Pentachoron, and the most challenging task, developing a scheme for transporting objects into the future.

“My esteemed colleagues, I can state without fear of contradiction that reaching into the future is the most elusive of all the challenges that we face. Still, I am confident in the coming months and – *ahem* – years, Morque Technologies will accomplish this feat. A feat that will radically change the world as we know it.” He scolded himself for using the word “radically.” In a region of the world where “radical” was synonymous with terror and destruction, he was loath to imply that knowledge of the future might be exploited for nefarious purposes. He closed by revising his earlier progress estimate in an attempt to tamp down expectations, “Let me clarify, sirs: I assess the timeline for accessing the future to be measured in years, not months.”

As he revised the timeline, he hoped no one noticed his nose growing like Pinocchio’s. In fact, Chris believed the development of a method for accessing the future was imminent. He had already coded an elaborate new routine into the time-location portion of the Pentachoron’s operating system for sending objects into the future. Although the patch remained untested, he was confident the changes would work after rigorous testing and tuning. The capability would be limited at first to reaching ahead no more than a week into the future, but it would represent a major technical advancement nonetheless. He kept this information secret, even from Morty; he planned to extract greater financial benefits down the road should the technology prove viable and reliable.

The investors stood and applauded, surprising Chris – he had never before been the recipient of such a kind reaction. It was not the way of American businessmen. By any measure the meeting was a spectacular success. Chris’s presentation was brilliant and convincing. The men had come to the meeting skeptical and some were prepared to recommend drastic actions that could have imperiled Morque Technologies, but in the course of just 90 minutes Chris changed their minds. They expressed new confidence that their investments in Morque were sound. In a display of admiration and respect, Sheik El Khoury invited Chris to spend some additional time alone with him in his villa on the Persian Gulf. Chris assumed this gesture to be a great honor; he took a moment to congratulate himself. *Yes, the meeting was indeed a spectacular success – but for one small detail: I didn’t get them to delay their trip to the U.S. the next week to inspect Morque Technologies, per Morty’s explicit instruction.* In truth, Chris hadn’t really tried. Witnessing the fantastic results only increased the investors’ desire to visit the lab. Knowing Morty, he would obsess on this minor failure and overlook the fine work on the presentation and the flattering invitation to continue the conversation in private with the Sheik.

El Khoury, who was appalled to learn that Chris was staying in a dumpy hotel in the Mussafah Industrial Area, offered to lodge him in a guest house on his compound for the evening. Chris was unsure what to do. He had not researched the cultural nuances for guidance on the proper response to an invitation to stay at the home of a prominent Arab man. Was it like an offer to pay for dinner – to be recognized for its generosity, but politely declined? Or would it be a slap in the face to refuse such a magnanimous offer? Because he did not want to risk ending

the trip with a ham-handed faux pas, and because his room at the downtrodden hotel in the industrial area was hot and bug-infested, Chris took a chance and accepted. El Khoury was delighted. Chris imperceptibly slumped with relief. The Sheik arranged for Chris's belongings to be brought over from the hotel.

One of El Khoury's butlers escorted Chris to a spacious library and offered him pre-Castro Cuban cigars and very old French XO Cognac. Alone, Chris puffed on the cigar and swirled the choice amber liqueur in his snifter. He noted the fine pieces of art and sculpture tastefully decorating the spacious room, and the phenomenal view of the Persian Gulf from the large, Moorish windows shaped like old-fashioned keyholes. He stood and walked toward them to admire the view. To the east, Chris saw the partially-constructed, architecturally dramatic Capital Gate – a skyscraper that would house premium office space and a five-star hotel in one to two year's time. Dedicated to His Highness Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the late President of the UAE and the Father of the Nation, the building would eventually rise to 160 meters and lean 18 degrees to the west. That was the challenge and the signature feature: successful construction of a modern high-rise that tilted more than the Leaning Tower of Pisa. *Amazing what an oil-rich country can do when the price of a barrel tops \$145.* After about 20 minutes El Khoury entered through a tall door separating the library from what Chris supposed was the chief executive's private office.

“Ah, Dr. Hahn. I am sorry to have kept you waiting. Are you enjoying your cigar and your Cognac?”

“Very much, sheik. You have a fine home. Thank you for inviting me.”

The sheik spoke perfunctorily about the Pentachoron project. Chris sensed El Khoury felt obligated to mention it, but that he really wanted to chat about lighter fare for he quickly segued into a conversation about the wonderful times he had once spent in America as a student at UCLA.

“I understand you are a graduate of CalTech. Impressive. You have your PhD, yes?” Chris nodded once, hoping the perfunctory gesture telegraphed humility. “Very impressive indeed.” The Sheik spoke flawless English with a slight British lilt from the days he lived as a young boy with his father, a financier, in London. “I love Southern California, and the pretty blonde women. And of course the Pacific Ocean. To be content in life I have found that I must be near the waters. Do you admire the view of the Gulf, Dr. Hahn?”

Even though Chris had stood at length by the windows enjoying the glimmering sun on the azure waters as he waited for El Khoury to arrive, he looked out again as though for the first time and remarked, “Extraordinary, sheik. Very fine.” He added, “This is my first time visiting the Middle-East. It is most beautiful. I hope to spend some time visiting your fine country. And let me say again how grateful I am for your kind invitation to stay in your fine residence.” *For God’s sake, stop saying “fine” so much! You sound like a cheap street vendor.*

“It is satisfying to know your company is diligent about saving money, but you really must scold your travel department for lodging you in the industrial area.”

Chris chuckled, mostly at the notion that Morque Technologies had a travel department. “No worries, Sheik. I’m not a picky traveler. Tell me, when was the last time you were in America?”

“Not for many years – not since the Iranian students took your embassy hostage. Even though that foolish act was perpetrated by Persians, your country blamed the Arabs. I no longer felt welcome. And after the Eleventh of September, well . . .”

Chris swirled his Cognac and said nothing – he feared wading into a political discourse and accidentally insulting his host. After several seconds the Sheik asked, “Are you married, Dr. Hahn?”

“Yes.”

“Children? Many?”

“Just one – Albert. He’s thirteen.”

With a mischievous smile, El Khoury asked, “Do you have a mistress, Dr. Hahn? More than one, perhaps?”

Chris fumbled with his cigar. “Huh?”

A dark-skinned man with a meticulously trimmed goatee dyed jet-black who Chris assumed was another of El Khoury’s butlers led him along an intricately tiled walkway to the lavish guest house. The pattern of the tiles reminded Chris of M. C. Escher’s fascinating tessellations. By the time he arrived at his quarters for the evening Chris was dizzy from the Cognac and cigars – he rarely smoked them. The man bowed slightly as he opened the door for Chris. “Please, Dr. Hahn, do not hesitate to ring for anything you desire. Laila sa’eda wa ahlaam ladida.”

Chris had only begun to memorize some common Arabic phrases on the plane from the U.S.; whatever the man had just said was not one he recognized. Still, the polite tone with which the butler spoke led Chris to believe it was an innocuous off-the-cuff closing remark. He rolled the dice and responded, “Anta lateef.”

“Why thank you, Dr. Hahn. And may I add *bettawfeeq*? You will need it,” chuckled El Khoury’s butler. Chris didn’t know what to make of it, so he smiled and nodded dumbly. *Bettawfeeq*? The man closed the door and left. Chris’s luggage was waiting for him in the guest house – two solitary pieces lined up like palace guards. He rummaged around for his toiletry kit, urgently seeking his toothbrush and toothpaste. The earthy Cuban cigar had left his palate stale and tasting of dirty laundry. Just as Chris was about to stretch out on the comfortable chaise longue on the patio overlooking the water, he heard a knock. *What now?* He cracked the door ajar. Standing there awaiting Chris’s permission to enter: two tall, beautiful Middle-Eastern women with piercing dark eyes and shiny jet black hair. Two goddesses sent by Sheik El Khoury to take special care of Dr. Hahn for the evening. The women wore dark floor-length chadors covering all but their faces. As before when Sheik El Khoury offered lodging, Chris was flummoxed by his lack of familiarity with the culture and traditions of the Middle East. *What was the appropriate response?* He had no strong desire to cheat on his wife, yet he most certainly did not wish to offend his host by rejecting this generous gift. Chris stammered. Apparently the women had seen it before – an uptight American struggling to adjudicate between his Puritanical upbringing and his innate desire to engage in wild, confidential sex with a pair of gorgeous exotic women. The one with the oval face and perfectly sculpted eyebrows suggested persuasively that perhaps Dr. Hahn would enjoy watching as she and her associate entertained one another. Put that way Chris rationalized it was a proposition he could accept.

“Hal tatakallamu alloghah alarabiah?” asked the other woman, the one with the slender face who bore a striking

resemblance to Queen Rania of Jordan.

“Uh, let me think . . . Qaleelan. That’s it, Qaleelan.”

The two women laughed. “Very good,” remarked the queen. “Ma esmouk?”

“Esmee Chris.”

“Well, Chris, my name is Scheherazade and this is my sister Dinazade.” *They’re sisters? Good Lord – I’ll never make it through the night.* “Would you please dim the lights while I prepare some drinks for us?” Scheherazade and Dinazade stepped out of their chadors revealing the low-cut little black dresses and silver stiletto heels they had on underneath the shapeless garb. Each wore her shimmering shoulder-length nut-brown hair parted in the middle. Chris chubbed-up in anticipation. In the corner in the dark Chris stared awestruck as each woman undressed the other, and commenced caressing one other lovingly. The show was like nothing he had ever seen before – in person at least. Positively riveting. Chris watched as the oval-faced Dinazade performed artful cunnilingus on her sister. He struggled in the low light to note her technique. She seemed with one hand to be pressing the flesh above the pubic bone and with the index finger of the other to be forcing the clitoris up and out for easy access by the tongue. Perhaps, he thought, when he returned home he might treat Lori to a surprise; then he cast the idea aside, certain that his wife would demand to know the provenance of his newly-acquired skill.

The women then maneuvered themselves into the sixty-nine position. By the time they started engaging in vigorous tribbing, Chris was spread out on the couch beneath the window jerking his cock 90 beats per minute. He blew a huge load, the first of three self-induced orgasms he experienced that evening

while playing the eager voyeur. The women went on to pleasure themselves with vibrators and exotic fruits, and in the end, Scheherazade persuaded Chris to accept the gift of dual fellatio. Perched on the edge of the bed, legs taut and balls aching, hands gripping the bedspread for strength and stability, Chris tried to convince himself that getting blown by the two women – the gifts of his biggest client, after all – didn't really constitute sex in the strictest sense. A moment after he pasted both faces with whatever semen his body could muster, Chris fell back onto the bed and hoarsely uttered the first phrase he could recall from the Arabic tourist guide: “ahtaju tabeeban.” Scheherazade and Dinazade looked at each other with alarm, but when they realized Chris was joking they giggled like little girls.

Chris woke up at noon the next day. The sisters were gone. A letter inside an envelope slid under the door sometime in the morning notified Chris that El Khoury had directed his people to reserve a suite for him in the much classier, less bug-infested Hilton Hotel. He felt better than he had in years. *What an evening! My God! Sisters – unbelievable!*

Chris strolled along the Corniche and ate a better-than-expected dinner at Trader Vic's. He felt a bit guilty passing up a couple of authentic Middle Eastern restaurants, but he did not wish to risk gastric catastrophe so far from home. After consulting the time-zone app on his iPhone, Chris decided it was an acceptable moment to call Morty to report the status of his meeting. Although he had known Morty for a long time, Chris would certainly not utter a solitary word about the previous Arabian Night – he could not predict Morty's reaction, and as a scientist Chris never performed a task absent a reliable

prediction of its outcome. Chris regretted he had no close friend to whom he could confide the wonderful details of the affair. After a few rings Chris was directed to voicemail. “Great news, Morty. The meeting with El Khoury was an unqualified success. Call me anytime.”

Back at the Hilton, Chris powered up his laptop and happily discovered the hotel offered their guests free wireless. Chris started the instant message program and was somewhat surprised to find Morty not logged on. It was the day before Morty was scheduled to make his important trip to Kobe, Japan, and normally under similar circumstances he would be logged on all day. Chris checked email and saw nothing from Morty among a deluge of missives from headhunters, job-seekers, sellers of marketing data, and subterranean purveyors of phony Viagra and Cialis. Farther down the list he spotted an email from Irving Slutsky, Morque Technologies’ lawyer. The gist of the legalese seemed to imply that with the possible infusion of cash from the Japanese VCs, Chris’s lot of stock options could be diluted by up to 45 percent. Suddenly, the euphoria of the previous day and night diminished. *What the fuck is this shit?* Chris tried several times unsuccessfully to contact Morty by all means available; even Morty’s Facebook page was stale. It was unusual and unnerving for Chris to have such difficulty contacting his boss – a man who slavishly stayed connected.

Not a particularly suspicious sort but newly discomfited by the recent rearrangement of the routine, Chris began to conjure up nefarious scenarios in his overly imaginative mind. He was disturbed that Morty was uncharacteristically incommunicado, and that his trip to Japan materialized suddenly out of nowhere. *I thought he wasn’t allowed to fly – doctor’s orders.* The potential

dilution of Chris's shareholder equity further exacerbated his suspicions and resentment. Now that Chris had successfully demonstrated the Pentachoron's capabilities he began to worry that Morty was scheming to shop the device around to a new set of investors, possibly cutting Chris out of the action in the process. The years spent working at Unisys for Morty had afforded ample opportunity to witness the man's cutthroat behavior; Morty never shied away from promoting his own research there at the expense of another division's work, even if in the end the company's competitive position was compromised.

Chris called the airline to alter his itinerary – he had to return to the U.S. as soon as possible.



While Chris had been enjoying sexual exhibitionism and auto-eroticism in the privacy of Sheik Anas El Khoury's guest house – he sure as hell hoped it was private – Morty traipsed alone inside Morque Technologies' lab preparing to run a routine test of the Pentachoron in advance of his trip to Japan. He intended to fire up the device, take some screen captures, collect a few measurements and then shut it down and return it to the vault. While the computers were booting up, a process that at one time took ten minutes, but now took twice as long – *I really need to get on Chris about the performance of his code; investors won't appreciate waiting so long to watch a demo* – Morty ran to the bathroom to take an urgent and long-postponed shit. Earlier in the morning he slurped down a greasy bacon, egg and cheese sandwich on ciabatta roll at a nearby Panera restaurant, and within minutes experienced the intestinal convulsions associated with an

imminent and explosive bowel movement. But an important call with his attorney precluded Morty's visit to the men's room. During the course of the call his bowels had quieted down, but now twelve hours later he could no longer hold off the urge to purge. As Morty relaxed on the bowl listening on his iPod to the *Modern Lovers* – a favorite album from his days in Cambridge at MIT – and reading Martin Gardner's mathematics column in a really old copy of *Scientific American*, Declan Rooney, Albert's juvenile delinquent friend tiptoed brazenly into the lab through the unlocked front entrance. In his rush to the toilet Morty hadn't rearmed the security system.

Perched like royalty on its specially-constructed stand beneath the bright fluorescent lights, the elegant and complex Pentachoron – the product of two decade's worth of R&D and several million dollars of other peoples' money, and a cynosure for sure – invited the boy's curiosity and stimulated his latent desire to commit larceny. From a distance the device looked to be nothing more than an equilateral triangle formed by three titanium-forged sides measuring precisely one meter in length. The interior of the triangle appeared emerald green and opaque, like the algae-covered surface of a long-neglected swimming pool. The Pentachoron could have passed for a banal specimen of contemporary kinetic sculpture on display in the municipal museum of a second-rate art town like Dallas or Cincinnati. On closer inspection, should an observer peer long and hard into the maw of the Pentachoron he might make out the edges of another equilateral triangle rotating within, also constructed of sides measuring one meter in length. Accomplishing this seemingly impossible feat was one of the scientists' signature achievements. On edge the device was only 200 millimeters

wide, barely taller than a toaster. Integrated into one side of the triangle were a number of ports through which the master laptop computer could be attached; without the laptop and its elaborate operating programs the device was useless. A mere ornament. An orange 220V power cord snaked from the device to the kind of electrical outlet that supplies common energy-hungry appliances like ovens and electric clothes dryers.

Declan sized up the Pentachoron to determine the best way to pick it up and take it from the lab. He lifted one vertex of the triangle finding the mechanism to be surprisingly light – certainly something he could carry unassisted. He was about to snatch the Pentachoron when he heard a toilet flush. He glanced to the rear of the lab just in time to make eye contact with a startled Morty Klein.

“Who the fuck are you? What are you doing in here?” demanded Morty who still held the rolled-up copy of *Scientific American*.

Declan froze. He said nothing.

“Get away from that and get your ass over here now, you fucking punk. How did you get in here?” Morty slapped the magazine loudly against the top of the lab table as though he were swatting a fly.

Declan remained mute. To Morty he appeared to be just another among the multitudes of slack-jawed teenaged nitwits who would never have been able to survive high-school in the 1960s – a brainless loser incapable of handling a slide rule or going five minutes without texting some inanity to a friend. The boy’s imbecilic expression and slacker posture infuriated Morty even more.

Sensing danger, Declan scanned the lab for a weapon, settling

on a fire axe affixed behind a thin pane of glass along with a fire extinguisher. As Morty walked steadily and angrily toward him, Declan bolted for the axe. Morty tried to intercept him but the boy was swifter. By the time Morty reached Declan the boy had already broken the glass case and taken possession of the axe. Without thinking of the consequences, Declan squeezed his eyes tight and swung the axe like a baseball player going for the fences, striking Morty just above his left ear with the flat butt end of the tool. The impact made a nauseating crunch sound and Morty fell to the floor in a heap. Had Declan struck with the honed blade of the axe he might have chipped off a portion of Morty's head and flung it across the room. Instead he inflicted mortal blunt trauma. Within seconds, a massive contusion that looked like a rutabaga sprouted from the side of Morty Klein's head.

Although poorly educated, Declan quickly recognized the gravity of the situation – trespassing on private property, killing the owner with a vicious blow in the course of committing grand theft – and realized it was graver than any infraction he had committed up to that point in his life. Punishment for this crime, if he were to be apprehended, would result in serious jail time, maybe even a trip to the gas chamber. Declan paced the lab like a trapped animal looking for a place to ditch the body and the murder weapon, then in a flash he knew exactly what to do. The Pentachoron was up and running in preparation for Morty's test. It hummed placidly. Declan dragged Morty's dead body by the feet and struggled to hoist it onto the lab table. He then fed the corpse head first into the triangular opening of the device like meat into a grinder. It disappeared without a trace. He passed the fire axe through the Pentachoron as

well. During his crafty disposal of crime scene evidence Declan clenched his jaw and turned his head askance in discomfort at the loud screeching noise that emanated from the device as Morty's corpse passed into it. When he was done Declan lifted the device off its stand, unplugged the power cord and disconnected the laptop computer which he closed and stuffed it into his backpack. Carrying the Pentachoron in front of his body like a Spartan shield, Declan strode out the exit where he disappeared into the night.

The next day, stoned and paranoid, Declan retrieved the Pentachoron from under a pile of leaves in the field behind his house where he had hidden it the previous night. While his father's drunken body produced slow, raspy arrhythmic snores and the occasional apneic gasp, Declan brought the device inside to the laundry room where a stackable washer-dryer combination had sat broken and rusting for 20 years. He dragged the old appliance away from the wall and plugged in the Pentachoron. It began to hum the way it did in the lab. Declan was overwhelmed with excitement and anticipation of peering into the future and making a fortune on information he would gather there. He opened the laptop and was met with a demand for a password. After three half-assed attempts by Declan to guess the password, the laptop shut down defiantly like Gort in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Without the laptop computer the device was just a pretty piece of titanium. Declan tried vainly to insert objects into the triangle but was summarily rejected. It was like pressing a cantaloupe against a brick wall. The Pentachoron resisted each attempt to penetrate it, and it emitted a piercing screech of a different pitch than when the corpse of Morty Klein passed through the day before. Frustrated and impatient,

paranoid and suddenly disinterested, Declan unplugged the cord, wrapped the Pentachoron in a bed sheet and took it to a spot on the river where he sometimes drank beers stolen from his father. He smirked as he tossed the device into the still waters. For a moment the thing floated on the surface, sparking and crackling. Seconds later it fizzled out unceremoniously and tilted upwards in preparation to make the trip to the bottom. Holding a can of Miller Lite, Declan watched impassively as several million dollar's and tens of thousands of hour's worth of technological innovation sunk ignominiously like a stone to mix with the sludge at the bottom of the murky river. Declan chugged the beer and then pulled another can out from under a stump. He wiped off some dirt with his sleeve, cracked the top, and guzzled the contents.



Chris Hahn was the first passenger to step off the plane – what a treat not to wait behind a hundred proles clogging the aisles while clumsily gathering their precious belongings from the overhead bins. He had decided to upgrade his return ticket to first class at his own expense – a \$5,000 burn that maxed out his last credit card that still had an available balance. To travel sandwiched in the middle seat again for the return flight was out of the question, and although he felt guilty about parting with such a huge sum of money, once on board, stretched out in a comfortable, spacious seat next to a minor Hollywood film actress, a glass of premium liquor in his hand, Chris concluded it had been the right decision. For an hour or so he chatted with the actress about her career, responding affirmatively whenever

she mentioned a film role, although not a single character was familiar to him. When she removed the eyeshades from the plastic wrapper, Chris understood the conversation was over. He stared mindlessly out the window at the terrain below and daydreamed for hours about his evening in the company of the two exotic sisters. *Surely a once-in-a-lifetime experience.* Unlike the trip in coach class the return segment in first class seemed to go by in a flash. Oddly, Chris was slightly disappointed when the pilot announced he was preparing to make the final descent into San Francisco airport – he wanted to spend a little more time traveling like a swell in the forward cabin. Even though he was tipsy, he requested one more glass of single malt scotch from the comely flight attendant.

On the ground Chris experienced an added treat: for the first time in his life his luggage was the first to emerge onto the baggage carousel. As soon as he entered the customs area Chris tried in vain to contact Morty. He was about to call the office when his cell phone rang – it was Arielle.

“Chris? Arielle. Have you heard from Morty?” She sounded concerned. “I’ve been trying to get hold of him for the past two days.”

“No, I haven’t. I was just about to call you to find out where he is.”

“I’m worried about him. Morty was supposed to be in Japan now, but I haven’t spoken to him or received any form of communication from him. We were supposed to go to dinner after he came back from the lab the day before yesterday, and his . . .”

Chris interrupted, “Morty was in the lab? Are you sure? How do you know?”

Arielle remained silent for a moment to signal her pique at being both interrupted and interrogated. Finally, “Well, Chris, I *am* the company’s business manager. I know everything that goes on around here. Morty left my apartment and told me he was going to the lab to run a test. He wanted to check out some things before going to Japan.”

“So he went to Japan, then? How come I can’t get in touch with him?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Chris. I don’t think he went to Japan. I went to his house after work yesterday and his passport and partially-packed luggage were still in his bedroom.”

Suspicious, Chris was all but certain now that Morty was up to something shifty. His problem-solver mind told him to suspect Arielle as well – her sincere-sounding concern for Morty’s welfare was almost certainly an act, he thought. *Had she taken acting classes along with singing lessons?*

“Where do you think he might be, Arielle?”

“I honestly don’t know. He’s never done something like this before.”

“Like what?” Chris asked sharply, perhaps expecting an answer along the lines of “. . . like stealing a priceless invention and going into hiding.”

Instead, Arielle responded flatly, “Like being out of touch for so long . . . what’s your problem, Chris? You sound nervous, like you’re hiding something. Are you sure you don’t know where Morty is?”

*Huh?* “Of course I don’t. I just got back from Abu Dhabi . . .”

“Aah, that’s right. Abu Dhabi – did you meet anyone special there?” *Uh oh – could she possibly know about the two sisters?* “Like someone interested in paying you a lot of money for the device?”

I wouldn't put it past you."

Confused by what seemed a desultory remark, Chris pressed, "What are you talking about, Arielle?"

"I just want to know where Morty is, and I think you know."

"Go to hell, Arielle." Chris hung up abruptly. *The bitch is trying to implicate me! It's the obvious move of a guilty party!* Arielle called him back on his cell but he let her go to voicemail.

Customarily after completing a long business trip Chris would go home to reunite with his family, bestow a few inexpensive gifts, unpack his smelly clothes, shower the travel schmutz off his body, and relax a bit before heading to the lab, but today the urgency of the situation compelled him to drive his pathetic Omni straight for the corner of Peach and Craig Streets. Once there, Chris was nonplussed to find the building's security system disarmed. *Highly irregular.* And when he entered the lab area and discovered the Pentachoron absent from the vault, his stomach contracted into a nauseous ball of trepidation. Over the course of 20 years the Pentachoron had never left the property. And now it was gone. Chris leaned against the table and rubbed his temples. His mind drifted aimlessly for a few moments and then he clenched his fists and dialed his emotions from abject despair to pure, demonic anger. He yelled at the top of his lungs, straining his vocal cords and spiking his blood pressure, "That fucking cocksucker! I swear . . . I'll cut his balls off when I find him!" The shrill of his words echoed off the walls of the cavernous laboratory. Winded after several minutes of irrational cursing and fist-pounding, Chris sat down glumly on one of the stools-on-wheels and fought his way back to behaving like a sentient problem-solving scientist. *No doubts now – Morty packed up the*

*Pentachoron and flew with it to Japan or some other foreign destination; clearly, Arielle lied when she said he left his passport and luggage in the bedroom. It was all a dodge. Morty the jizzbag was off to sell the device for an astronomical sum, probably to an amoral arms dealer who would deploy it for evil military purposes. Morty's probably in the middle of a bidding war right now between the Israelis and the Ay-rabs. And when he gets sufficiently compensated, the fucking kike will disappear to an exotic locale with his shrew girlfriend. Morty had no family circumstances that might dissuade him from adopting a brand new identity and going dark.*

Chris tried to anticipate Morty's next moves but the path forward was fuzzy; he figured Morty had planned the heist for months and now benefited from a two-day head start. Following several unproductive calls to various airlines and the State Department in a vain attempt to learn whether and when Morty left the country, Chris resigned himself to the notion that he would need professional assistance. Chris might possess superior reasoning skills but he was a neophyte in the wiles of subterfuge and international intrigue. His uncanny ability to realign the scrambled faces of a Rubik's Cube in fewer than 30 seconds was of little use in solving a challenge like this. Chris concluded he needed to hire a private investigator who could call upon vastly greater resources and contacts. Lori had reservations.

"Do you honestly think Morty – your colleague of more than 25 years – would just up and walk off with your invention? Doesn't make any sense."

"What do you mean 'doesn't make any sense?' It makes perfect sense. He was just waiting for me to get the fucking thing to work so he could take it for himself."

"Don't use vulgar language, please. Albert might hear you."

“Are you serious? My life is going down the shitter and you’re worried that Albert might hear a vulgar word? Jesus Christ, Lori.” Lori cowered at Chris’s agitated retort. Oblivious to the pain he inflicted, he turned away and pressed on as though he were lecturing himself, “It’s so obvious, I can’t believe I didn’t see it coming. Morty sends me half way around the world so he can get a head start on stealing the device and selling it to some foreign billionaire. He tells me he’s not allowed to fly – doctor’s orders. What a fucking liar!”

“Chris, please.”

“Quod Effing Demonstradum!”

Curious to investigate the topic of his parent’s animated conversation, Albert slinked into the kitchen. “Hey Dad, what’s the matter?”

Lori answered instead, “Nothing, dear. Go do your homework.”

Chris fumed. “Nothing? Nothing? You call it nothing?” He directed his attention to his son, stooping slightly to address him eye to eye. He spoke in a cadence like that of Mr. Rogers’ in his Neighborhood. “My boss, Dr. Morty Effing Klein stole the Pentachoron, Albert. How about that? My life’s work for only 20 years – I guess you could call it ‘nothing.’”

“Dr. Klein did that? Really?” Albert tried not to appear shaken, but inside he was shocked and disturbed by his father’s assertion that the Pentachoron had been stolen. *Could it be possible that Declan took the Pentachoron after all?* From the moment he confided in Declan about the device and its whereabouts, Albert harbored concerns that his juvie buddy might actually try to steal it. In an adolescent gambit to deflect attention away from that possibility, and his own complicity, Albert aligned with his father’s trenchant argument. “You’re right, Dad. It does make sense that Dr. Klein

would take it – it must be worth a lot of money. What are you gonna do about it, Dad?” Lori scowled and continued to remove plates from the dishwasher.

Albert’s imprimatur was all Chris needed. “Well, Al, I’m going to hire a private investigator to ferret out Morty and bring back my Pentachoron. That’s one thing.”

Lori piped up, “Chris, you don’t even know if Morty took the Pentachlorine. Why would you spend money we don’t have on a private investigator?”

“Y’know, Lori – you really are a dimwit. First, it’s not called a ‘Pentachlorine.’ Haven’t I spoken the name of it often enough around here?” Lori threw her apron to floor and stormed out of the kitchen; Chris steadily raised the volume of his voice to keep up with his wife’s increasing distance from him, “And second, any idiot can see that Morty stole my PentaCHORON!” Chris slapped his hand on the countertop in frustration, then looked at Albert. “You see my point, don’t you son?”

Albert cracked a hesitant smile and nodded his head in assent.



Chris made appointments with a few private investigators, and each seemed interested by his tale of greed and intrigue, but when it came time to discuss retainers and expenses Lori had been correct – Chris couldn’t scratch together enough retainer money to get started. The upgrade to first class on the leg back from Abu Dhabi maxed out his last credit card and his home-equity line of credit had long been frozen after he fell 60 days into arrears. At this point Lori would probably file for divorce if he tapped the checking account, but Chris decided it was worth

the risk – until he checked the balance and discovered it to be a whopping \$113.17. Dejected, Chris took a long drive to Muir Woods where he walked alone among the gargantuan redwood trees, trying desperately to construct a plan to find Morty and the Pentachoron. After several hours of wandering and pondering, Chris decided the best course of action would be to adopt the role of “private eye” and track the movements of Arielle, Morty’s love interest and obvious co-conspirator. Soon enough she would betray the location of Chris’s quarry. “Après Arielle, le déluge, Mort,” muttered Chris under his breath as he walked back to his car.

Back at the lab, Chris hacked into Morty’s email account and downloaded his messages – all twelve hundred. *Good Lord, how does he keep up with all this shit?* Chris sorted the gargantuan list by sender and at the top were a few emails from Arielle. The first few – all dated after Morty disappeared – were simple, plaintive one-liners: “Where are you? When are you coming by? Please call?” Chris scrolled farther down and opened an email sent by Arielle the day Morty called him about making the trip to Abu Dhabi and read the contents over and over, riveted by its implications. Chris was so absorbed he failed to notice that when he opened Arielle’s email, a confirmation message was sent back to her.

“Darling, I checked on the flight options to Argentina. Do you want to fly directly there from Japan or would you rather come back to the States first? I’m happy to meet you there if you prefer. Can’t wait to be there with you. Good luck with the device. Be safe. Love, Arielle.”

The structure of Morty’s plot was now clear. Sell the Pentachoron to the Japs and scoot out to Argentina to live the rest of his days in blissful, well-financed solitude. Chris had to find

out where in Argentina Morty planned to rendezvous with Arielle and somehow get there in time to avenge the treachery visited upon him by his avaricious colleague. He composed a bogus email full of tension to Arielle from Morty's account: "Sorry for being absent. Can't explain now. Meet me at the mall, in the food court. Don't use the cell phone. Too risky." He filed the email into the "send later" folder to be delivered in 30 minutes – the time it would take Chris at this time of day to drive the five miles from the lab to Arielle's office off Highway 101. Once there he would take up a spot hidden behind a hedgerow encircling the parking lot and wait for her to leave for the mall. Then he would slip into her office to search for clues.

Sure enough, 35 minutes after Chris filed the email in the send-later folder, he scoped Arielle rushing from the office complex to her convertible Jaguar, a gift from Morty on the ten-year anniversary of first meeting each other at the piano bar in Oakland. As Arielle ran in high-heels to her stylish car Chris couldn't help observing what a great legs she had. And her ass was just about perfect. He wondered how over the years these sexy features had escaped his notice – had he come to despise her that much?

When he was completely satisfied Arielle was not coming back for awhile, Chris entered the building complex and walked calmly to Arielle's office. He pinned a Morque Technologies ID badge to his shirt pocket in case some jagoff questioned his authorization to be in the building. That turned out to be unnecessary – no one wandering the halls gave a damn about his presence there. Once inside the office Morty awoke Arielle's PC and quickly figured out her password. He perused Morty's calendar. The Japan trip was logged, as was a note about Chris's meeting in Abu

Dhabi. Dozens of phone calls and meetings littered the calendar on the days leading up to Japan. Chris noted with interest that nothing much was logged after that. He found an entry marked “private.” In it: “Morty/Arielle - Córdoba, Argentina.” Chris slyly grinned and rubbed his hands together with glee. *Cordoba, eh? Hasta la vista, Morty.* Chris pawed around on Arielle’s desk for more clues but found nothing compelling. He left the office complex and drove to the lab in his rusty Dodge Omni – an embarrassing counterpoint to Arielle’s Jag. Stuck in the clogged traffic on Highway 101, Chris imagined what he might find in the lab that could shed additional light on Morty’s deceptive scheme; perhaps a clue as to who the buyer of the Pentachoron might be.

While Chris was conducting an invasion of Arielle’s personal computer, Arielle walked tentatively into the food court in the mall and sat off to the side at a table designated for patrons of any of the two dozen purveyors of fried industrial waste passed off as edible food: Sbarro’s, Taco Bell, Roy Rodgers, a Chinese restaurant run by Mexicans, a Cajun joint staffed by Chinks. Truly a United Nations of dogshit cuisine. Arielle sat across from a family of five whose combined weight approached a metric ton, and watched for a minute in morbid fascination as they chomped heartily on buckets of Kentucky Fried Rat and butter-drenched corn-cobs. Their revolting lip-smacking and offensive burping forced her to avert her gaze lest she throw up on the plastic-composite table top.

Arielle tapped her fingers nervously. She was extremely disturbed. For days, Morty had been incommunicado – “out of pocket,” as he would say – even though he had an important meeting to attend in Japan. It was totally uncharacteristic of him;

then out of the blue she receives a confirmation from Morty to a days-old email. An hour and a half later it's followed by an odd note requesting the secret meeting at the food court in the mall. This was not like Morty at all – he despised food courts and malls. Her mind raced. When it became clear to her that Morty wasn't going to show up, Arielle began to suspect he had been kidnapped or otherwise held against his will. She concluded his strange email was in reality a hoax sent by the kidnappers to test her commitment and to lure her to a public place where she could be photographed and surveilled. Frightened, she glanced around the food court for suspicious-looking characters but saw nothing but evidence of the looming decline and fall of the United States of America. Arielle bolted the mall and sped away in the Jag. Her destination: the police station located a mile from Morque Technologies' lab.

Through a squawky speaker next to a thick, greenish bullet-proof window, Arielle explained to Officer Niedzielski that Dr. Morty Klein, her “fiancé” and the wealthy CEO of a “major corporation” had incomprehensibly vanished – very likely kidnapped. She mentioned that he had just completed development of a valuable new invention, adding that it might have been the catalyst for his disappearance. He buzzed her into the station. “He's been missing now for almost a week. This is not like him at all. I have an awful feeling something bad has happened. I think he was kidnapped.” Arielle's anxiety was palpable.

Officer Niedzielski dutifully took notes but discouraged the notion of a kidnapping. It was an uncommon offense – at least in this part of the world. More likely, he thought, Morty had run away

from a claustrophobic relationship with the high-strung Arielle.

“Why do you think he was kidnapped? You say nobody has come forward demanding ransom. Is that correct?” Arielle shrugged tentative shoulders. Niedzielski suggested hopefully, “Maybe you should wait another day or two.”

Arielle was incensed by the pointlessness of conversing with the low-level police officer. She resented the way he downplayed her concerns, looking for a reason to blow her off. Feeling patronized by the officer’s affected politeness and angry that he systematically and dispassionately ignored her call for action, she insisted on speaking with a superior officer. Relieved to pawn her off to a higher authority, Niedzielski escorted Arielle to an anteroom, and a half hour later she met Captain Grove.

“Perhaps, Ma’am, Mr. Klein took a quiet vacation alone,” offered Grove. “It happens sometimes – actually more often than you might think. People just need to get away from the stresses of the job or the family or whatever. Sounds like he was working pretty hard on this invention of his.”

“Morty would never do that without telling me. He was supposed to attend an important meeting in Japan and afterwards we were to go to Argentina for our anniversary – Córdoba. I always wanted to go there to learn more about my . . .”

“Well, do you have any idea who would want to kidnap him? Who else knew about this valuable invention?”

Arielle didn’t hesitate. “Chris Hahn. He works for Morty at Morque Technologies. I’m very suspicious of him. The last time I saw Morty, Hahn was in the Middle East meeting with people who were interested in the invention. I’m sure now that he stole it from Morty and plans to sell it. Morty probably found out about it and now he’s in danger.” Arielle tried not to cry. She nervously

bit the cuticle of her right forefinger.

Grove remained impassive. “Hmm. Middle East. Where exactly did he go? Ohio? Indiana?”

“Abu Dhabi. It’s in Arabia somewhere.”

“I see,” replied Grove without a scintilla of embarrassment. “Have you spoken to this Hahn person since then?”

“Yes. I called him when he got back to California from his trip and he sounded agitated. And guilty. He pretended not to know where Morty was, but I could tell he was lying. I can detect instantly when a person is lying from the tone of their voice, you know. I have a gift.” Grove nodded as though he believed her claim of clairvoyance, while wondering at the same time whether she could also tell he was faking concern. Arielle continued, “Anyway, I then received a strange email from Morty’s computer, but I’m sure it was sent by someone else. Chris is the kind of person who could easily hack into a computer and send a fake email under somebody else’s name.” Arielle leaned forward in her chair across from Grove and looked keenly into his eyes to emphasize the certitude of her account. In an equal and opposite reaction, Grove sat back and began to tap a pen on his desktop. He tried not to look at her cleavage.

After a moment, Grove declared, “I understand your concern, ma’am, but you see, I’m afraid we’ll need a bit more than that to establish probable cause. I can’t just bring in Mr. Hahn for questioning without some form of evidence that a crime has been committed and that he was involved in it.” Captain Grove sought to delay on the likelihood Morty would turn up and render the whole case moot; he had made a career out of investigating common burglaries, defusing domestic disputes, and dealing with perverts and vagrants, but he had no experience with high-tech

intrigue and corporate espionage.

Arielle shook her head in frustration. Despite her best efforts to maintain composure, she started to cry. Captain Grove handed her a tissue box and stood up to indicate the conversation was substantially over. As Grove escorted a distressed Arielle out of his office, Officer Niedzielski knocked once and quickly stepped in to report that Steelhouse Security had just called in a probable burglary in progress at Morque Technologies at the corner of Peach and Craig Streets.

Just as Arielle had arrived at the police station to report the bizarre yet hypothetical crime against her lover Morty Klein, Chris Hahn drove into the empty parking lot at Morque Technologies intent on thoroughly combing the lab for any overlooked leads to Morty's exact whereabouts. He entered the numeric code to the building's security system which he had rearmed after leaving days earlier, and was rudely rejected. He tried a few more times without success. "Fuck!" Although he entered what until recently had been the correct code, Chris was unable to unlock the door because the day Morty was killed he had instructed Steelhouse Security to reset the code on the lock. With the Pentachoron proven, Morty's paranoia about theft and vandalism increased significantly. Only this morning had Steelhouse Security finally gotten around to making the change. They sent an encrypted message to Chris containing the new code but he was too busy playing "Mannix" to check his email. Chris interpreted the surprise code change to be another part of Morty's plan to isolate him, throw him off the scent, delay his investigation. *Goddamn prick!*

Unlike penetrating the laptop of a silly business manager, hacking into the building's electronic locking system was all but

impossible. There were ten to the eighth power or a hundred-million possible codes, and if he entered one code every second without ever taking a break Chris could expect to open the door in 19 months. Even in a state of heightened agitation Chris's ability to instantly divine the mean-time to success was unimpaired. He paced the area outside the entrance, growing angrier by the minute. Because he was desperate and irrational Chris convinced himself that Morty was potentially inside the lab at this very moment. It was a long shot for sure, but maybe the bastard was in his office right now preparing the final details before leaving the country for good. *Maybe my Pentachoron is back on its lovely stand at this very moment.* He dreamed of once again uniting with the Pentachoron – the project on which he had spent so much of his intellectual capital and which had sapped all his emotional energy. *I have to get inside!* Chris walked around to the back of the building and smashed a cellar window with a large chunk of asphalt that had broken away from the barren, crumbling parking lot. He knew the intrusion would set off the alarm and notify Steelhouse Security but he didn't care. In fact, he welcomed the arrival of the police – their involvement would be useful in taking down Morty and securing the device.

Chris barely fit through the cellar window. He tore a hole in the seat of his pants on a nail, exposing a few inches of ass cheek. Once safely inside he gingerly walked up the stairs to the main floor and proceeded into the lab on his hands and knees. The lights were off. He heard nothing. In the dark he moved along the wall like a rat and accidentally crawled over the broken glass beneath the fire extinguisher, cutting the palms of his hands. He fell onto his side. "Motherfucker!" He winced with each tug as he pulled bits of glass from his bloody hands. Slowly he stood up

and scanned the room. Nothing. He went to the closets and the bathroom. Nothing. “Goddamn it! Where the hell is that bastard?” He turned on the lights. He looked toward the fire extinguisher for an explanation. The axe was gone.

Dejected, Chris walked to the table where the Pentachoron – his life’s work for 20 years – once sat regally in its custom-made throne, lovingly fabricated by Chris himself. He felt like crying, and maybe he would have had it not been for the sound of vehicles screeching into the parking lot. He parted the blinds and saw three police cars pull up. *No big deal – I’ll just explain that Morty the thief changed the code without telling me and I had no choice but to bust in.*

Suddenly Chris was startled by a hideous screeching sound. He spun around in the direction of the noise just in time to see the missing fire axe fall to the floor with a thud. He picked it up with his wounded hand. The butt end of the axe was bloody and some hairs were stuck to it. “What the fuck?” Before Chris could gather his thoughts, the bruised and contused head of Morty Klein appeared – suspended upside-down in mid-air. Chris fell backward against the lab table in stunned silence, mouth agape, heart pounding, respiration stifled. The appearance of Morty’s head was quickly followed by that of his shoulders, torso, and legs. It was as though an invisible female had just given birth to a stillborn fully-clothed adult male. The entire limp body crumpled to the floor directly at Chris’s feet. In shock, Chris mumbled incoherently to himself.

As this bizarre event unfolded in the lab, one of Steelhouse Security’s employees entered the correct code into the keypad outside. The police barged in with guns drawn. Catatonic, unable to utter a single word, Chris found himself face down on the

cold cement floor, his arms pulled hard behind his back. A burly officer with a jarlike head wedged his knee painfully into Chris's back and as he clamped a pair of handcuffs tightly around his wrists he recited the text of the familiar Miranda rights. When the officer asked, "Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?" Chris responded, "I was only trying to find out who took my Pentachoron." The cops marched Chris to the back seat of one of the cruisers. And as the EMTs rolled out the gurney carrying the sheet-covered corpse of Morty Klein, Arielle buried her face in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably.



Irving Slutsky, Morque Technologies' lawyer filed the bankruptcy papers. The company's meager assets were liquidated unceremoniously at a sheriff's auction on a chilly Thursday morning.

Sheik Anas El Khoury suffered painful humiliation when it became clear his firm would have to write off the Pentachoron investment as a total loss. He had already lost the confidence and respect of his underlings after four of his company's executives called from California to report that instead of meeting with Morty Klein and receiving a guided tour of the laboratory, they had been detained by the police to answer questions about their relationship with an alleged killer, a cold-blooded axe murderer named Chris Hahn – the man El Khoury entertained and lodged in his own home.

Alone now, Arielle decided to visit Córdoba anyway, the land of her ancestors, having purchased non-refundable airline tickets. While conducting a bit of genealogical research in a small, Jewish

enclave she met a rich widower who after a brief period of courting invited her to live with him in Buenos Aires.

Lori Hahn and her distraught son Albert moved in with Bernie and Marjorie where they endured a daily lecture about what a loser Chris had been, and how Bernie had had his ne'er-do-well son-in-law pegged correctly all along. Albert lived with the weight of enormous guilt for telling Declan Rooney about the Pentachoron. He could never be sure whether it had been Declan who stole the Pentachoron – he certainly had not the courage to confront him – and soon it didn't matter anyway: One day in a drunken rage after being told by Declan to go fuck himself, Declan's father choked his son to death.

Before that day of violence, the old man confiscated the stolen laptop from Declan as punishment for stealing beer and cigarettes. He took the laptop to a local computer repair shop where the technician was able to work around the password protection system and boot the machine. The repair shop owner was flabbergasted to find the most advanced, complicated, exotic design diagrams and software programming he had ever seen. Figuring the laptop was ill-gotten, he copied everything, wiped the disk clean, installed Windows and returned the laptop to Declan's father. Then he showed a sample of the materials to a scientist friend who worked at Lawrence Livermore National Labs. The scientist purchased all the technical materials for \$5,000, no questions asked, and along with a colleague at UC Berkeley set up a small partnership. After resigning their positions, the two entrepreneurs devoted all their time and energy, much to the consternation of their families, attempting to construct the device described in the documents. Friction between the two men emerged almost immediately when one wanted to call the device

“Pentatope” and the other insisted on “Hyperpyramid.”

Chris Hahn didn’t stand a chance in court. The police testified that they came upon Dr. Hahn in the lab holding a bloody fire axe over the bludgeoned body of Dr. Klein. DNA testing confirmed the blood and hair on the axe matched that of the victim. Arielle’s testimony supplied the motive. The judge ruled against the defense, declaring inadmissible any testimony or reference to time-travel, four-dimensional tetrahedra, or other fanciful sci-fi malarkey. Chris didn’t even take the stand. Days after the arrest, after the initial shock had worn off, Chris figured out the explanation for the whole episode – and concluded he was doomed to take the rap. No way would anyone believe – absent the Pentachoron itself – that someone else killed Morty and transported his fat-ass corpse to the future. As he sat impassively at the defendant’s table fidgeting with a staple remover a thought ran repeatedly through his head: *What were the odds that my software program for sending objects into the future would work flawlessly on the very first test case? Had to be a million to one.*

The jury deliberated for almost a half hour.

Alone in his tiny cell in San Quentin State Prison serving a life sentence, when Chris wasn’t recalling his carnal escapades with Scheherazade and Dinazade, he daydreamed about escaping and one day rebuilding the Pentachoron so he could transport a letter to himself in 1985 strongly advising against joining a man named Morty Klein in a crazy business venture.

## OTHER BOOKS BY HERB SCHULTZ

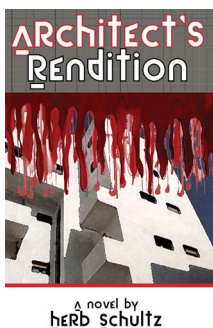


### *Ronnie and Lennie*

Ronnie and Lennie are identical twins fused in the womb who join a world that is unprepared to separate them. The reason for their plight is vague and debatable, but one possibility wends its way throughout the narrative. Seemingly chained for life in a rural backwater of North Carolina, Ronnie and Lennie unexpectedly break free, but life apart is not all it's cracked up to be. Serious trouble descends upon our heroes, and they find themselves prisoners of another kind. A case of chronic adjustment disorder compels the twins to drastic action.

Throughout the story we are introduced to a broad array of characters that influence the direction and speed Ronnie and Lennie take through life – a rudderless mother, a crazy groupie, an evil gambler, an unconventional doctor, to name just a few. *Ronnie and Lennie* is a funny, sad, vulgar story that spans decades and visits numerous venues as it chronicles the lives of two boys conjoined at the chest by a rogue band of flesh.

## OTHER BOOKS BY HERB SCHULTZ



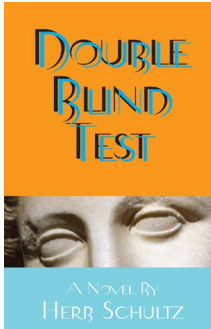
### *Architect's Rendition*

All Gerald Pfalzgraf wanted was to be adored. That, and to possess all of his wife Morcilla's vast fortune. Was that too much to ask for? The founder of Pfalzgraf Associates, an exclusive Manhattan architecture firm catering to elite, wealthy clients, Gerald resents his wife's assertion that her financial support is fundamental to the firm's success – not because it's false, but because it's mostly true.

Gerald has come to resent a lot of things over the course of twenty long years of marriage to Morcilla. He meets Wren, a beautiful, vivacious goddess half his age. Her jaw is perfect. He resolves to be with her. After obstacles to his happiness begin to pile up, Gerald tries his hand at architecting something different – a complex enterprise of mayhem. Guided by Machiavelli, his childhood hero, Gerald wields the tools of deception, manipulation and opportunism; he knows that men who seek to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived.

*Architect's Rendition* tells the story of an amoral man who tries to secure the life he always wanted to live by cutting a swath through a cast of misfit characters – the kind who allow themselves to be deceived.

## OTHER BOOKS BY HERB SCHULTZ



### *Double Blind Test*

Tracy Shepard is in the business of alternative dispute resolution – a fancy name for mediation. She is an expert in the art of negotiation, highly compensated by parties from all over the world – Fortune 500 companies, celebrities, wealthy families – locked in disagreement, burning cash on futile litigation, seeking another way out. Dubbed the “Medea of Mediation” for her drive and ambition, Tracy offers to help the owners of a small pharmaceutical lab resolve a difference between them that is holding up progress on a breakthrough drug. She is compelled to help the owners of the lab – identical twins named Fischer and Fletcher Cuttbate – because their drug is meant to cure an insidious eye disease that afflicts tens of thousands of people, including her father.

Shortly after meeting them, Tracy becomes attracted to each Cuttbate brother for different reasons: Fischer for his gallantry and business acumen, Fletcher for his artistry and vulnerability. However, in the course of her mediation efforts she discovers disturbing evidence of fraud, and soon she finds that nothing is as it seems.

Double Blind Test is a story of deceit, connivance, despair and *lex talionis* which addresses the centuries-old question: What are the chances that two different men have the same tattoo . . . on their balls?

Sometimes the Sun Does Shine There – and Other Stories is a collection of five twisted tales of deceit, despair, decadence, derision and revenge. The anchor story presents Larry, a stooper who picks up discarded tickets at the racetrack hoping to find a winner among the detritus. He is tormented by Vic, a vicious thug who puts him in the hospital where he meets a diligent worker and closet artist named Maddie. Larry soon discovers he is not the only victim of Vic’s evil inclinations. A bizarre turn of events puts Larry in a position to rise up from the racetrack floor and recover his dignity.

The other stories involve a grocery store robbery that exposes a fiend, a screenwriter on a mission who instead meets a minor character from a major motion picture, a bratty bond trader who tries to mend a fractured relationship with his upstairs neighbor, and a pair of scientists who invent a device that scrambles their futures.



Herb Schultz is the author of the novels *Ronnie and Lennie*, *Architect's Rendition* and *Double Blind Test*. He lives in New York.

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