Balderdash and poppycock

by

Robert Steven Determan

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Barbara Haas

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2000
Balderdash and poppycock

Robert Steven Determan

Major Professor: Barbara Haas

This is a group of loosely related short stories. Some examine what we have done to the country of America. All of these stories are written in a humorous/satirical vein.
This is to certify that the Master's thesis of:

Robert Steven Determan

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
TABLE OF CONTENTS

KEEP A LEVEL HEAD 1
SYRENE 19
THE DARK HEART OF THE MUSIC MAN 33
THE NEW EASTER STORY 57
A TRIBAL STUDY 69
PAULA 78
If ever there were two people headed for different ports of call for eternity, it was Jack Baxter and Mabel Brown. The sun was slowly beginning to crack the eastern sky as Jack and Mabel shuffled to the front door of the factory. Jack moved at a quick, clipped pace. He adjusted his tie on his tailored suit. Even though he would have spent money for a well made suit, he primarily did it because of the mess of a gene pool body he owned. Possibly, God had been on a three day drink the day Jack was created. He had that look about him. Legs far too short, a torso longer than his legs, small, weak muscled arms, and a head that resembled a rotting pumpkin. Add to this a flesh strip that ran front to back on his head, black, bristle tough hair covering the rest of his head. The hair never rested in place either, it always stuck out at crazy angles which gave Jack the appearance of a mad professor, or rabid dog. His feet were at least one size too large for a man with this squat of a body. His hands were tiny and delicate and could easily be transferred to a female ice skater. Instead, they were on this human ploughhorse.

Mabel neared the door and spotted Jack shuffling along. She was about to say good morning to him, when he pulled open the door in front of her. She smiled and nearly slid out the words "Thank you," when Jack pushed in front of her and nearly dropped the door on Mabel's shoulder. Mabel stood stunned for a moment. She had never talked directly to Mr. Baxter the eight years she had worked at the plant. The only other times she had seen him were at company meetings where he praised, or condemned, their productivity. She had heard he was a rude and selfish man, this seemed to prove it. Mabel pushed the door back and entered. She watched Mr. Baxter shuffle on down to where the main offices were located. A giggle erupted from her mouth. People like Mr. Baxter have no real life, she thought. Here she was, forty-four years old and looking at the backside of life. The middle-aged spread was just beginning to afflict her, but she did not mind. Her boys were nearly out of the house and she was thinking of doing a little traveling. She always wanted to go to Africa, maybe find her "Roots" or something. She had done okay for an African-American lady. Maybe she could have done better,
but she did have Jesus and that's all that really matters. People like Mr. Baxter had no idea about life.

Mabel Brown came to work early so she could beat that cackling gaggle of young girls she worked with. They were all young enough to be her daughters, and sort of were the girls she never had. She liked them well enough, but they never had their minds on their work. As she got nearer her department, Mabel thought of setting up her work station. She had to get it done before those girls showed up. They were always distracting her from her work.

She walked through the desolate department. She lived for this solitude before the clatter of the day began. Then her left foot suddenly gave way. It nearly threw her onto the concrete floor. She grasped a table top, breaking her fall. "One of them girls probably spilled water on the floor last night," she muttered to herself. Mabel turned to look at what made her slip. Something dark and liquid was snaking across the floor, little fingers stretching out from a hand. Small pools were forming from some of them. Other fingers of liquid were joining together and forming a hand that was vainly trying to latch onto a table leg to stop their quick march. Unable to slow their advance, the hand now joined other fingers and formed an arm that sprinted across the floor, looking for another table. They were purplish-red in color. They looked like they had been birthed by Mabel's bag-cutting machine. Mabel stepped over the quickly moving river. She thought, at first, that a bottle of nail polish, from one of the girls, had broken. This was too much liquid for a bottle of nail polish. She steadied herself on a table, as she neared the scene of the mystery. It was her machine. There was something lying next to the machine. On the machine it looked like...

Blood?

Mabel gasped, trying to process what she saw. The thing, lying by her machine, was wearing Big Smith overalls. It also wore a flannel shirt. It was also missing a head.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mabel saw an object. To her left was a still bowling ball. This bowling ball wore a black beard, and had black hair on its top. The eyes were open and stared straight at Mabel.

Mabel screamed.

"This is going to be a great day!" Jack baxter exclaimed to himself.
As he stood in his private bathroom, next to his office, he lathered his face with some Old Spice shave cream. If this tour goes well, it's off to Dallas and corporate headquarters for me, Jack thought as he picked up his razor.

What a climb it has been. Jack's parents had though there was something wrong with him at birth. "Look at him," his father complained. "He looks like he was made out of God's used parts bin. Christ, my son, the Chevy Camaro of human bodies. Any parts General Motors had left over they threw on that car, just like God and my son." With dreams of Super Bowl/World Series/NBA Championship glory gone, Jack had to concentrate somewhere else for attention. That was especially true when Jake, Jack's younger brother, showed up. Jake had the perfectly proportioned body and athletics was his stock in trade. He became the starting shortstop for the Minnesota Twins. His father had celebrated Jake's promotion to the big leagues by having a heart attack while balls deep in a stripper he had picked up at Phred's Phallic Phantasy Pharm. Mom celebrated by using the insurance money to go on a round the world cruise. She came home to a brand new house built and furnished for her by Jake.

While Jake received all the attention, Jack had to find his way. He was Business Club President in high school, which was as cool as taking your sister to the prom. Jack would have had to do that, if he had a sister, because no one wanted to go to prom with him. After Junior College, where he headed the Business Club, he went to State University, where he did not head the Business Club, something about his constant sweating that made him smell like wet, dirty gym socks.

At C.J. Nickel's Catalog he excelled. He was known as a strict disciplinarian. Rarely did any of the hourly help he hired last more than a year. This impressed Dallas. Any man who could fire the people he hired, in less than a year, was certainly management material. Jack was seen as a man with a purpose, a man unafraid to make decisions and stick to it, no matter how much chaos it caused. His move up the ladder was in near record time. Only his sweating, and stench, slowed him down.

I won't have to deal with these knuckleheads around here no more, Jack thought. "Assistant to the assistant vice-president. Why thank you Mr. Biggs. I'd be delighted to accept this new challenge." Jack looked at himself smiling in the mirror, practising his surprise. "it will be tough leaving
this fine management team, the close friends, the creativity, thinking only of the customer, but I think I'll manage." Jack gazed at his plump lathered face. "If I was honest I'd say, yeah, get me away from all these brain-dead fucking parasites, Mr. Biggs. That probably wouldn't go over too well." Jack laughed. Corporate offices at C.J. Nickel's Catalog Company by thirty-eight years old. He slid the razor down over his right cheek. That is if these incompetent morons don't screw this tour up. Jack heard a knock at the door. "Enter."

Smith Corona slipped through the door. "Morning Jack. Ready to move to Dallas tomorrow?"

Jack slid the razor down his left cheek. "Morning Smitty. More than ready for Texas. It's a cinch if this tour goes well."

"It will, don't worry."

"When I'm asked, 'Who do you think should run the plant now?,'" Jack scraped under his nose. "I'll tell old man Biggs, 'Smith Corona. He's more than competent, and a hell of a typist!"' Jack threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Thank you sir," Smith smiled uneasily. His name had been a constant burden to him all his thirty-five years. His father had objected to the name, but his mother thought it was cute. She signed the birth certificate before his father could stop it. So the name stuck. His mother thought it was wonderful to dress him as a typewriter every Halloween. The usual schoolyard beatings--'Hey, typewriter boy'--and never getting to be Joseph in the Christmas play. 'Smith Corona? We can't have a boy with a name like that play Joseph, people would laugh. Here, you be a shepherd'. Smith wore his name like a cross. He did hope Jack won the promotion. That way he would not have to see the bald-headed little sleazebag again.

Jack's office phone was ringing. "Get that will you, Smitty?"

Jack continued to shave. He could hear Smith talking excitedly over the phone.

Smith appeared at the door. His face was ashen white. He took off his red tortoise shell glasses, and rubbed his eyes. "Jack, we have a problem."

The lifeless chunk of flesh was still lying next to the bag-cutting machine. The large flannel encased arms hung loosely at the sides of the flesh
chunk. The head was still rested, right side up, a filmy death stare, watching the proceedings. The formerly fast flowing blood rivers had now stopped. They had changed into a drying, muddy riverbed.

"Wow! That chopped his head clean off, didn't it?" Jack stepped around the blood-soaked cutting machine. "Those blades are sharper than I thought." He bent over the machine. "That poor guy never stood a chance, did he?" Jack asked no one in particular.

"The tour goes right through here." Jack pointed at the machine, and then down the aisle. "This is one of the main points. We just bought these machines and that insane Biggs will demand to see them. A dead body will just piss him off. Clean this up. Get that body out of here too."

"We have to wait for the sheriff, and the county coroner," Smith braced himself for the explosion.

"Where are they? Eating doughnuts?" Jack waved his arms to the side.

Jack looked around the room. C.J. Nickel's latest big investment rested in front of him. Five of the new bag-cutting machines. It was he who had convinced Biggs to buy them. He had done a cost-analysis and found they could buy small, stuffed animals from some god-forsaken sweat shop in Indonesia. Once here, they could take the Indonesian company's tags off the stuffed animal, slap a C.J. Nickel's tag on it and make nearly seventy percent profit. That included buying the machines, training the labor, making the labels, all of it. Maybe THAT was his ticket to Dallas.

Behind the machines, four overly large wooden tables piled high with cartons. One of the cartons was open and tilted down so the contents would spill onto the table. Several multi-colored giraffe dolls lay there. Each waiting to have its label switched, rebagged in new plastic, and shipped around the world for the eager hands of C.J. Nickel's customers. The other five catalog centers did not have this stuff. Jack smiled, he knew this would work. It would REALLY work if there was no dead body lying next to the machine.

Jack looked down the aisle into another part of the building. He could hear the idle hum of machinery at work. The occasional shout of a worker greeted his ear. He looked around the room again. Jack leaned over and cupped his right hand over his right ear. "What's this I hear?"

Kevin Stance, a twenty-four year old supervisor, standing next to Smith, looked around. "I don't hear anything."
Jack walked up to Kevin, arms outstretched to the sides. "Neither do I. Other departments are working, why is this one not working?"

Kevin looked to Smith. Smith said nothing. Kevin was on his own. "Ahh...waiting for the sheriff, and the county coroner to complete their investigation."

"We're running a business here, not a morgue. Go to work." Jack stared daggers at Kevin.

Kevin tried to calm Jack down, as well as reason with him. "The people are pretty shook up. I'll see what I can do."

"People die everyday!" Jack finally exploded. "Just because someone dies at work does not mean we all take a holiday. Customers need to be serviced. We still have four workable machines here. Let's get to it." Jack shook the stress out of his shoulders and looked at Smith. "C'mon Smitty, we gotta go." They hopped onto their electric cart and took off, leaving Kevin standing and scratching his head.

"That's okay, you're safe now. Can you hear me? Just be calm." Mabel heard a voice, but saw no face. She felt she was in a dark, black tunnel, with no light to guide her. Then she saw a murky brightness in front of her. It began to brighten considerably. Something was in front of her. Then she felt as if she was reclining. The form started to take shape. The room she was in glared with a garish white light. As she re-entered the conscious world, Mabel saw the most beautiful woman standing over her. Delicate features laid out in the most perfect manner on her face. The voice matched the face. Mabel felt soothed by the honey voice that escaped the thin lips of this beautiful—angel? Had she died? The woman above her was in a pure white outfit. The room seemed all white. Maybe.

"Is this heaven?" Mabel asked hopefully.

The perfect face smiled even more broadly as the reply came. "No, this is C.J. Nickels. You're in the nurse's office. I'm Barb Benson. You had quite a morning, Ms. Brown.

"I was just going to my work station, when I, OH GOD! I saw..." Mabel tried to finish.

"It's okay, you have had quite a shock," Barb said. "Just lie here for a while, till you feel better."
Mabel tried to sit up, Barb helped her when it was obvious Mabel was going to sit up with or without her help. Sorrow and grief swept over Mabel like a hurricane, wiping out any forms of resistance. A wail escaped her lips, even though Mabel never recognized it as her own. She could see that head staring at her. The body, lifeless, motionless, next to her machine. Who was he? Did he have a wife, children? Mabel wept for the dead. She pulled her arms up to herself and prayed for the dead man, and for her own comfort. Jesus would take care of this, he took care of all.

Barb Benson looked at Mabel. She could tell Mabel was only now realizing what she had seen. Grief was something she hated to see, but knew Mabel had to work this out on her own. She started out of the room when she heard noise in the outer office. Barb looked to see the worst kind of nightmare, her boss, Jack Baxter, and his assistant, Smith Corona. The little dictator and his lackey. Barb was a no-nonsense type of woman who had only one goal—whatever was best for her patients. It was part of the reason she stayed in this job, someone had to fight for these people. Once in a while she steered one of the cattle away from the slaughterhouse. That attitude led to numerous arguments with members of upper management. Now, with Jack, a greasy little troll of a man, devoid of any social graces, in her office, and Smith Corona, (Barb always thought that if you looked up "brownnoser" in the dictionary, there would be a picture of Smith), wandering around. Her day was now complete. A fight was sure to ensue.

"Where's this woman at?" Jack asked.

Barb led them to one of the examining rooms. "Mabel found the body, she's near shock."

Jack looked at Mabel. She appeared to be a little rag doll to him. Her coal black arms were clutched around her chest. She rocked gently back and forth. She spoke some kind of gibberish.

"What's she saying?" Jack scrunched his face up at the strange dialect.

"She's a very religious woman," Barb explained. "I think she's praying in tongues. Penetecostals do that."

"Well, this is America. She can speak English, and get back to work," Jack responded.

"I can WHAT?" Mabel broke out of her trance. "You want me to go back there?" She motioned toward the warehouse with her right hand. "Go back to
where some poor man lost his life?"

Jack tried to get over his shock, "Exactly, that's why this company is paying you."

"Don't you have any respect for the dead?" Mabel slipped off the examining table and stared down at the little man. Something like holy anger was rising in her. "That man's dead. I found him and it nearly scared ten years out of my life. I respect the dead. I can't go back there now."

"It is almost Christmas and you are desperately needed to satisfy our customer's demands." Jack moved close to Mabel. "Understood?"

"No, I don't understand!" Mabel shook in anger. "Didn't your momma ever love you? What if that were your daddy out there lying next to my machine?"

Jack backed up for a second. He had a deer-in-the-headlights look on his face. He realized he had no answer for Mabel, none at all.

"You don't even know his name, do you?" Mabel's eyes were red with anger.

"This woman has had a traumatic experience," Barb motioned to Mabel. Barb's face was flushing, she could feel it. "For God's sakes, a person has died at her work station and you expect her to work there?"

Jack pulled himself together: "Yes, I do. There are five machines back there, and five women to run the machines. Your job is important. Get back to work, understand?"

Mabel stared at Jack, "You may run this plant and be the most powerful person here, but I'm a far richer person than you ever hope to be. May Jesus have mercy on you sir."

Jack stared a moment at the African-American woman standing before him. He felt drained, like something here had escaped him and taken it from his soul. He knew he had no words for her. He turned to Smith. "Come on, Smitty, we need to go." He shuffled toward the office door.

Sheriff Sam Jennings was none too pleased when he found the body. "What are all these people doing here?"

Kevin shrugged his shoulders. "Working. Orders of Jack Baxter. He's the General Plant Manager."

Sam shook his head. "Get him down here, and get these people out of here. Now."

Sam watched the county coroner, Frank Williams, work while waiting for the plant manager. Sam had seen it all. His hair turned white twenty years
ago, because of this job. Over the fifty-seven years of his life the skin on his sinewy frame had grown taunt and leathery. His face was lined with a thousand crags, from a thousand points of dismay at the way people treated each other. This did beat all, though. Making people work around a dead body.

"Can you get this mess cleaned up quick, sheriff?" Jack shook Sam out of his thoughts. "I have an important tour coming through. Also, why did you stop my people from working?"

"This is a police investigation, until further notice," Sam tersely responded.

"And my people?" Jack repeated.

"I don't think you quite get the picture here," Sam was quickly losing patience with this little imp. "A human being has expired here. As of now, we don't know if it was murder, or an accident. Till then, this deceased man will be given the dignity that should be afforded anyone in his position."

"Maybe you don't get the picture," Jack began. "I am in charge of a multi-million dollar facility. This is part of a multi-billion dollar corporation. If our customers do not get satisfied, we lose our jobs. That means less tax dollars to pay a sheriff's salary. If my boss comes all the way from Dallas, and sees a dead body on his tour, he will not be pleased. So I suggest you clean up this mess, and we'll all be happy."

"Maybe you don't get the picture here," Sam repeated back to Jack. "I am the law. What I say, goes. I say you move on out of here, till this investigation is done, or you can conduct your tour from inside a jail cell."

Jack stared at Sam with his hands on his hips. "If I'm not mistaken, you're up for re-election next year, right? If my boss comes up from Texas, and I'm in jail, I'm sure he will help fund your next opponent. He will do it in a way that can never be traced back to him. So if I was you, I would help out as much as possible, or be standing guard in a McDonald's next year."

"Don't worry, we not only protect, we serve," Sam spoke through gritted teeth.

Jack turned to Kevin. "Okay. Send these people to the forward areas, to put away returns or something. As soon as this mess is cleaned up, they get back to work, understand?"

"Yes sir," Kevin nodded his head.

An insincere smile spread over Jack's lips. "Good, I want an oral report of what happened here as soon as these guys are done. I want a written report,
on my desk, first thing in the morning."

Jack and Smith roared off in their electric cart. Sam shook his head.

Jack stopped by the nurse's office on the way back to his office. He had to check to see if Mabel had indeed gone back to work. He sighed, and shook his head as he spied Mabel still resting in the examination room. He saw Barb Benson and motioned for her to follow him. They went to the next examining room. Smith stayed behind, staring at the floor and refusing to look at Mabel. Once in the room, Jack shut the door. He and Barb were now alone.

"Look, it's important that you get her back to work," Jack reasoned with Barb.

"God, you're a sick man, Jack. She just saw a murder!" Barb protested.

"Murder! What do you mean murder?" Jack was frightened.

Barb stared down the little imp. "If anyone dies in this plant it's probably because you worked them too hard. I'm surprised they don't all commit suicide because of you. That dead man was probably overworked and made an error because of fatigue, and paid the ultimate price for it."

Jack tried to change the subject. "Barb, you and I both know there is an important tour coming through today. I need what's her name..."

"Mabel?"

"Yeah, Mabel, to be at her work station when the tour comes through. It's one of the highpoints of the tour. With all the machines working the tour will be a success."

"Why should I care if you look good?"

"Because, if the tour goes well, I will most likely get a promotion to the home office in Dallas."

Barb smiled a crooked little grin. "So, we'll be rid of your sorry ass, eh?"

"Yeah, something to that effect. I'm already having problems from the county sheriff. He won't let anyone work around the body."

"Jesus! You are one sick, THING. I can't call you human without insulting the rest of us. You's force people to work around a dead body?"

"NOW you sound like the damn sheriff," Jack huffed.

"Maybe I'll have to give to the sheriff's benevolent fund next time they call. If he's giving you shit, he must be a good man."
"I could fire you for saying that," Jack threatened.
"Don't answer my prayers. I'd like to think God is kind and looks like Brad Pitt, not you."
"Get Mabel back to work."
"Only if SHE wants to go," Barb replied.
"NOW," jack ordered as he pulled open the door and headed to the exit before Barb could get a last word in. Barb just stood with her arms folded across her chest. She watched Jack breeze by Smith and watched Smith chase after Jack. He followed Jack like a good butt-sniffing dog would, thought Barb.

"Do I have to go back to work?" Mabel asked as Barb entered the room.
"Only if you feel up to it," Barb answered. "If you don't, just go home. Don't let Jack Baxter intimidate you."

"But I wouldn't want to let Mr. Baxter down. I know he's counting on me, and my fellow employees are counting on me to do my job."

A sense of wonder covered Barb's face. She pulled up a chair next to the examining table where Mabel sat. Barb looked at the innocence on Mabel's face. "You don't get it, do you? Not only Jack, but this company as well, looks at you solely as a means of production. You are just a machine to them. When you break they get rid of you. At least they try to fix the forklifts. You mean less than a forklift to them. Jack's mad because that dead man on your machine is ruining his plans for promotion. There's a tour today with the company CEO and your machines are the prime attraction. Now, there's a fly in the ointment, or should I say a dead body in the ointment. If the tour goes well, Jack gets promoted. The dead man's family grieves, and you just get older."

"But I need this job, what am I without it?" Mabel asked.

"You're a human, that's what," Barb replied. She grasped the hard callused hands of Mabel and squeezed gently.

"All the same, I should get back to work. I think I can handle it," Mabel slid off the examining table.

"It's your decision, Mabel," Barb assured. "You can stay as long as you like.

As they neared the office, Jack motioned to stop. He walked to another, larger cart, the one to be used on the tour. "What's wrong with this picture?"
He turned, faced Smith and folded his arms.

Smith stared at the cart. It was used by the nurse. Large enough to hold six people, or a stretcher, if needed. The metal sides were white. The red cross, on the side, had been covered with duct tape, and the tape spray painted white. The steering wheel had been wrapped in white cloth. Everything, except the wheels, was white. "Nothing," Smith shrugged his shoulders.

Jack sat down on the black bench seats, on the cart. "Everything is white, except the seats."

Pain showed on Smith's face. "Sorry sir. I didn't think of white seats. I should have had some brought in."

Jack stood up. "You know, as well as I do, that Biggs has a white fetish."

"I'll see what I can do," Smith had a perplexed look on his face.

Jack rubbed his face. "Hello! What do we have around here every February?"

"White sale, sir. I...Oh yeah, white sheets," Smith had a smile slide across his face.

"Yeah, white sheets," Jack answered sarcastically. "It's amazing I can see in this building with all the dim bulbs that illuminate it."

Smith's smile vanished instantly. "I'll get right on it."

Jack looked at his Rolex. "God, two hours till that idiot shows up. I've got a dead body on the tour route, a belligerent sheriff that won't let people work around the body, and I got a woman, in the nurse's office, talking in tongues instead of working. Plus, I have black seats on the cart. This is turning into a very bad day.

"It will get better," Smith suppressed a smile.

Jack ignored the comment. "Biggs really is an idiot, you know. He screwed all the Board of Director's wives. That's how he became the head of C.J. Nickel's Catalog. Last year, he ordered one million Hawaiian shirts. THEN he makes them the feature item in the Christmas catalog. Jesus Christ." Jack threw his arms up in the air. "Who the HELL puts Hawaiian shirts in a Christmas catalog? Only an IDIOT, that's who."

Sam circled one of the bag-cutting machines. He wanted to see what kind of contraption this thing was. Especially one that could take a man's life. He looked over at Frank as he silently went about his investigation. There was a gnawing in Sam's gut. He had let that little imp get to him. Maybe the little imp already knew about the last election. That's it, he probably
did. A year before the last election he had refused to move a body, till Frank was done, out of a business. The poor woman had dropped dead of a heart attack and fell down some stairs. His last opponent suddenly became flush with cash. Rumor had it the company gave it to him because of Sam's beligerence. Sam was still awash in debt for it. Only so many pancake breakfasts you can hold. Sam's wife, Mae, wanted him to quit. He couldn't. He still loved this stuff. Mae told him times have changed. The law was for the rich, and the poor get trampled. Or maybe they get their heads cut off.

There was a specially made blade at the top of the machine. It looked razor sharp. Sam could see the heating element on the side of the machine. Was this what the dead man was reaching for? The blade looked like once it started, it would not stop till it had completed the cycle. The blade cut the plastic and apparently sealed the plastic together after it was done. Sam stepped over to a table with some finished products. The bags all seemed different sizes, all cut to specifically cover the stuffed animals inside them. He picked up a smiling pink chimpanzee. A human life worth less than this? It sure seemed so to Sam.

An hour and a half later, Kevin Stance appeared at Jack's office door. "Sir, the sheriff will be removing the body shortly."

"Good, what happened?" Jack gestured for Kevin to come in.

Kevin continued to talk as he walked in. "Just a rough idea now. Apparently the maintenance worker was trying to put a dead man's stop on the machine. He placed his head through the hole between the machine and the blade. For some reason, he turned his head. At that point, he must have bumped the machine. This caused a small power surge, and the blade came down and severed his head."

Jack ran his hands through the bristle like hair on the sides of his head. "Thanks, that's too bad. The body's being removed right now?"

Kevin nodded. "It will be moved out shortly. It's weird, if that guy had not turned his head, just kept it level, he would not have died."

"Yeah, weird," Jack replied and turned his attention toward Smith. "Is security ready?"

"Yes sir," Smith rattled off the facts. "We have three ambulances at three different entrances around the plant. Both Olathe, Humana in Overland Park, have two units of Mr. Biggs blood. There are also two units of blood
in the nurse's office here. That is not to mention the members of the
management team, myself included, who have the same blood type as Mr. Biggs,
and are ready to give a unit of blood if so needed. We've added fifteen
extra security guards for the day. Plus, Ben Davis, form shipping, is on the
roof with a thirty-ought-six high powered rifle. He used to do assassinations
in Vietnam. I think we are ready, sir."

Kevin's mouth hung open. "Pretty elaborate, isn't it?"

Jack looked at the ceiling, then Kevin. "C.J. Nickel's Catalog is the
two-thousand-four-hundred-sixty-third largest corporation in the world. That
makes Mr. Steven Biggs a prime target for a terrorist organization. You
wouldn't want to see our beloved Mr. Biggs kidnapped, or killed, would you?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't," Kevin defended. "It just seems like a lot of
money spent for nothing."

"Thank you for your concern," Jack stood up. "Now go back, make sure the
body is out of there, and help scrub up the blood. By the way, I still want
that written report on my desk, in the morning."

As Kevin left, the phone rang. Smith picked it up.

"He's here," Smith said as he quickly moved toward the door.

"Damn!" Jack looked at his Rolex. "He's early. That idiot can't be late
like other bosses are."

Jack and Smith raced to the front of the plant. They saw a white stretch
limo pull up. The white sidewall tires gleamed as the vehicle stopped. Out
of the driver's side popped a young, well-built man. The driver's suit was
a pure white. A white billed cap was perched on his head. White slacks covered
his long legs that led to pearly white shoes that shod his feet. A white
gloved hand opened the last back door.

Mr. Biggs did not so much as get out of the car as he just appeared.
Bigg's healthy white hair shone as if it had been polished, the sunlight
bouncing off the wavy coiffure. He wore a white tuxedo with a white rose
pinned on his lapel. A white shirt, white tie, a white tie clasp and white
cufflinks set off the top half of the ensemble. White slacks and pearly white
shoes covered the bottom half. His white gloved hand reached into the limo.
He pulled out a white cane. The cane was mostly for show.

Jack looked at Smith. "Pay attention, Smith. I'll show you the proper
way to lick the rectum of your boss, for purely promotional reasons of
course." Jack smiled, his white gloved hands straightening his white tie.
This set off his completely white ensemble. He walked out to greet his boss.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Biggs." Jack extended his hand.

Biggs looked up at the United States flag flying from the flagpole overhead. "You know, I've always liked those white stripes in the flag."

"Me too." Jack gritted his teeth.

Biggs babbled endlessly throughout the rest of the tour. He commented on the white, with red letter EXIT signs. He did pay particular notice to the occasional large breasted lady that passed by. He enjoyed, in earnest, ones wearing white blouses. "Fine woman. Nice blouse." These were some of the comments. He also noticed Mary Daters as she walked by. Her rounded bottom encased in white jeans. "Very nice."

Mabel Brown finally left the nurse's office. She shuffled down the hall and towards the entrance to the plant. Her legs felt stiff and heavy. They did not want to move, at least towards work they did not want to go. Something in her heart was dead as well. Just as dead as the man at her machine was. What was it?

As Mabel neared her department, three men appeared, all dressed in white. Mabel gasped at the apparition. Were they angels? When they drew closer, Mabel could tell one was Mr. Baxter, he was on the right, to the left was Mr. Corona, but who was in the middle? He looked like a demonic Colonel Sanders. His eyes shifted about, like his head was rolling around. He must have been that Biggs guy everyone was talking about. The three earthbound angels blew past Mabel like she wasn't there. A cold breeze blew over Mabel as they passed. If they were angels, they were vile, cursing angels at best.

"Damn, these are nice I-beams," Biggs admired one of the metal beams holding up the roof. "Need to paint this white so it can be seen."

"Right you are, Mr. Biggs," Jack had his game-show host smile on. He looked at Smith. "Take note of that, will you, Smith?"

"I sure will, sir," Smith pulled out a small pad, and scribbled "paint I-beams white." After the tour was over the note would be trashed, but for now they needed to humor Biggs.

"And here are the new bag-cutting machines you so graciously bought for us." Jack maneuvered Biggs behind the machine of the accident.

"So this is the machine, eh?" Biggs bent down and looked at the machine.
Before he could be stopped, he pushed his head through the machine, just like the now deceased worker. Biggs quickly pulled his head back. "You know, that could be dangerous. Someone could get a hand cut off, or their head if they stuck it through there."

"Right you are, Mr. Biggs," Jack touched his chest to see if his heart was still beating.

Biggs circled the machine with his cane. He nearly struck Smith in the head. "Maybe paint this white, as a warning to people."

"Paint machines white, yes, sir," Smith scribbled in his notebook.

"These machines are really using your head, Jack-boy," Biggs said.

"Thank you, sir," Jack bathed in the praise.

"We'll cut off the competition's heads with those figures you gave me," Biggs said as he thumped his cane onto the concrete floor.

"I hope we will, sir," Jack replied.

Bigg's mouth fell open as he stared at the ceiling. "This company will be ahead of everyone." He leveled his gaze at Jack. "I'm well pleased, Jack."

"My pleasure, sir," Jack felt his chest swell.

Mabel may as well have been invisible as the three white clad men sauntered past. None of them spoke to her, or even acknowledged she was a member of planet earth. Her supervisor noticed her.

"You're back. How are you feeling?" Kevin asked Mabel.

"Not real good, to be honest," Mabel replied. She looked at her machine. It was all shiny now. She wondered for a moment if the blood had brought out the luster in the metal. Some of the floor color was darker near her machine. She could see the grains of Quik-Dry around. What she did notice was the quiet. That gaggle of girls was not laughing and carrying on as usual. Most of them would not even look up at her. Their eyes averted and looked straight down, to their work. They slouched with shoulders slumped like an army defeated in a war camp. The ones that did look at her, she saw something in their eyes. It was deep behind those eyes. Fear? Doubt? Resignation to their fates? She could tell none of them wanted to be here, but they had to be. Bills needed to be paid, children fed, so they could not be expected to mourn, for even a moment, a fallen human being.

"What was the name of that man who died?" Mabel asked looking into
Kevin's face.

"I don't know," Kevin stammered around and shook his head. "They may have told me, but I must have..."

"Forgot?" Mabel finished the sentence. "He meant so little to you that you forgot? Would you forget MY name if it had been me? Is that what we are here, just replaceable machines?"

"Mabel, I know you are upset," Kevin tried to calm her.

"Thanks for remembering my name! Hey, I'm human. I've got more going for me than this place. It took years but I finally realize what I am to you—nothing. I'm a machine behind a machine, right? WRONG! I'm a mother, I'm a church member who sings off-key in the choir, I play Bingo at St. Mary's every Thursday night, and I'm a Yankees fan. Good-bye, Kevin."

Kevin tried to reason with Mabel. "Look, you've had a shock. Take some time to think about this. You're not thinking clearly right now."

"Kevin, I've never thought more clearly than I am right now. You want some advice? Get out before you become a warped soul like that Mr. Baxter is. You're young enough, don't let this place steal your soul." Mabel smiled and ignored Kevin calling her name as she walked toward the door.

The tour was a smashing success.

Jack smiled a crooked smile. "As always, Mr. Biggs, your visit has been inspiring."

"We should paint the walls of this building white," Biggs pointed his cane to the wall. "White means purity you know."

"Brilliant idea, if I say so myself," Jack laughed. "It reminds me of that exceptional, and daring, idea you had of buying a million Hawaiian shirts and featuring them in the Christmas catalog."

"Maybe out this rabble we hire in white uniforms," Biggs pointed the top of his cane at Jack's face. "Find a way to investigate these creatures we hire—we don't want them FORNICATING. PURITY. That's what it's all about today, Jack-boy."

"Well out, sir. We'll see what we can do," Jack said as he waved good-bye. Biggs turned and doddered off to his virgin-white limo.

"We pulled it off!" Jack laughed, back in his office. "I was afraid we wouldn't for a while." He was quiet for a moment. "By the way, what was the
name of that guy who died?"

"Fred Johnson," Smith answered.

"Fred Johnson," Jack sighed. He was silent a few moments. "Too bad. Just a shame, it really is."

Smith took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes for a moment. "There is still one little problem that needs to be fixed."

"What's that?" Jack leaned back in his chair.

"Fred Johnson's wife," Smith said as he looked uneasily at Jack. "She works in the packing department. No one has told her that her husband has died."

"You mean to tell me that Fred Johnson's wife works here?" Jack leaned up in his chair. A touch of malice in his voice. "Her husband has been dead for three hours, and nobody thought to tell her?"

"No, sir," Smith looked at the floor. "I felt we should wait, what with the tour and all. I didn't want to bother you."

Jack stood up and walked around the table to face Smith. "I know that when I go to Dallas, this plant will be in good hands," Jack was smiling at Smith. "That was brilliant! The last thing we needed, with crazy old Biggs here, was some hysterical woman in Personnel, crying because her stupid husband got his head cut off."

Jack and Smith embraced.

Jack rubbed his chin. "Tell her. Get her to Personnel as quickly as possible. Have her sign insurance papers today, if possible. We don't want her to do something stupid like talk to a lawyer or something."

"Right, Mr. Assistant to the Assistant Vice-President!" Smith smiled and headed toward the door.

"Go to it, Mr. Plant Manager!" Jack smiled as Smith left. It had been a good day.

Mabel laughed at the mechanical clunk noise as the timeclock punched her timecard. She pushed open the door and stepped out. The warm sunshine bathed her with its gentle rays. The smell of sweetness from newly cut grass filled her nostrils. Her ears were invaded by the cawwing of a crow lazily gliding overhead.

Mabel breathed a soul clearing sigh and spoke to the circling crow. "I'm Mabel Brown, human."
Ben Kitzowitz was a normal man with a normal life, but also a lonely man. After graduation from the University of Wyoming in Laramie, he took a job as an accountant at the firm Barnes and Kyle in New York City. The great thrill of living in the city that never sleeps waned quickly. People here were different than Wyoming. He had left not only his family, but all his friends as well. While he did have e-mail and the phone, it still did not match the physical touch of his loved ones. People here were hard and brusque. He felt cast aside like so much waste paper, not even for the recycle bin either. Each day he entered his nondescript office, just a cubicle in the middle of a barn-like room. Gray flannel covered the boards that made up his dividers, no ceiling allowed the din of the office to invade from above. Even after two years on the job, never once missing a day, had he placed pictures of any kind on the walls. Radios were not allowed, only himself, his computer screen, and the figures upon it.

He would go home each day to his one bedroom apartment with its miniscule kitchenette, midget-sized bedroom and tiny living room. A couch, chair and entertainment center was all it could hold. Hot water ran regularly between Tuesday and Friday, the weekends were up in the air with everyone and their brother doing laundry Saturday through Monday in the launderette in the basement.

Ben returned home one day, late as usual, and tossed his keys on the table resting against the wall, an endtable actually a regular table would never fit in the small entryway. He rubbed his head from the stress headache he was acquiring far too often to his liking. Jim Bennington, his boss, was bearing down for reports and figures on the McConnel account. Ben had not gone out with some of the other office rats for a drink afterward, he stayed and worked late. He was trying to become a Yankees fan, at least it would give him a foothold into a life here in the Big Apple.

He noticed the endtable move slightly, followed by a bang. The empty apartment next door was now gaining occupancy after a vacant month. Hopefully they would be quiet neighbors, unlike the last couple. They fought constantly, although it was at times, entertaining. Some perceived indiscretion led to verbal fisticuffs, which led to wall-shaking copulation complete with loud
grunts and banshee wailings by the female of the volatile duo. He tired quickly of the late night entertainment and was overjoyed when they vanished into this air one night, the super telling him they owed two months rent.

Some beef stew, crackers and a cold beer for supper, maybe a little Lettenman, and off to sleep. The crying wail of a forlorn saxophone filled the apartment as Ben stepped out onto his fire escape and looked across the alley to the apartment building behind his own, where an onyx skinned man sat on his fire escape and blew the 'phone. Ben only knew he was a part-time blues and jazz saxophone player, and his noise was welcome anytime. Ben tipped his beer to him as he nodded his acknowledgement while riffing on some notes found only inside his being and soul, not on paper. Other residents of the two human warehouses dotted their iron barred porches. They looked at each other and smiled, no names, no waves, just smiles as they drank in the wailing of the soul of a man.

Ben fell into a deep sleep as his head hit the pillow. He welcomed the sandman's hands as they pulled him deeper into the black void of rest. He dreams of a song filling his soul, it is loud and ringing, yet peaceful. It fills his brain and seems to roll gently to the tips of his feet, touching even the toenails of his being. He gently feels lifted up as the ceiling dissolves and the floors above him as well. It is no longer night, but the bluest of skies on a clear day. The cool breeze washes over him as the sun kisses his body. The song continues to touch him, in a language he has never heard, but seems to know so well. His body is limp and at rest, he can feel every vein pushing blood through his body...

The violence of the alarm awakens him. Ben curses it and shuts it off. The song kept ringing in his ears as he showered. It was so real. "Too much stress. I need to relax." Ben told his mirror image as he adjusted his tie and prepared to fight the traffic, noise and smog of another New York day.

Ben arrived home a tad bit early, making up for yesterday. The McConnell account was delivered on time and to Jim's satisfaction. Maybe I'll go out and have a drink tonight, he thought. A sound filled his ears and made him stop short of tossing his keys onto the endtable.

It was the song! He could hear it, loud and crystal clear. The beauty of pitch, the strength of voice. It was flowing into his apartment from next door. The new neighbor's home. no music, just the instrument of voice. He
gently placed his keys down, and walked to the center of the small living room, then over to the wall separating him from that clarion of a voice. He pressed his hands against the cool, rough, drywall exterior. The plaster unbending and unyielding. Ben pressed his cheek and ear to the wall. He felt his brow mopped with sweat and again felt the blood rushing through his veins. My God! He had never felt this alive before. He found his pulse rate racing as the vibratto of the voice reached crescendo. He had heard opera before, but nothing like this. Every note, every nuance, perfect.

An opera singer, in this dump? Must be someone just starting off, reasoned Ben. Why he felt so impassioned, so inflamed, he did not know. Music never did this to him before, why now? It must be the stress, had to be. His mind was demanding rest and this was its' way of telling him so.

Ben left for work the next day after a restless sleep. He had heard the song again in his sleep and again been transported to another land, away from the smog and choking dust of the city. He tried the lock behind him, making sure it was secure. Ben turned to go and at once gazed upon the most beautiful creature allowed to walk the earth. Cascading blond hair rolled to her shoulders, blue eyes set in almond shaped sockets perfectly set on a porcelain face. A nose not too large or too small over full lips that glowed red and a wide, warm toothy smile. This creature had limbs and legs extend from a perfect torso. What was this being? Could it possibly be human? If it wasn't, it took the most beautiful female form he had ever seen. Her breasts appeared slightly larger than a woman her size should have, but they only accented her beauty to Ben. She hid herself inside a blue blouse and blue jeans, which showed off her rounded hips as well. She must have noticed Ben staring at her, but it appeared not to bother her.

"Hi, I'm Syrene," she said extending her hand to Ben and displaying the side grin again.

"I'm a, I'm a, I'm Ben," he vigorously shook the small delicate hand that felt so soft and warm to him.

Syrene laughed at Ben's eagerness. "Easy tiger, I do break."

"OH! Sorry, Syrene."

"Sy."

"Sy it is then. I'm a...I'm your next door neighbor." Ben tapped a knock on his own door. He laughed at his fumblings. He felt like a star-struck
schoolboy. "Yes, well. That's a firm grasp of the obvious, isn't it?"

Sy laughed and then crossed her arms over her chest. "I guess it is. Um. My singing won't bother you, I hope."

"Oh no, no, absolutely not. In fact, it's beautiful. Some of the most beautiful song I ever heard." Ben assured Sy. He looked into those blue eyes and could feel himself falling into them, so deep and expansive. Life inhabited those eyes.

"Good, I love to sing, and I'm glad I have an appreciative audience."

"That you do Sy. That you do."

Ben tried to concentrate on work, but could not. The vision he had seen this morning had only been outdone by the voice that came from it. He saw her running through his mind, frolicking in song amid the portals of his brain.

"Ben, you okay?" Jim's voice shook him from his trance.

"Oh, yeah, I'm okay," Ben tried to make a joke of himself. "Just kind of zoned out there a moment."

"I mean, really, are you okay?" Jim touched Ben's shoulder and pulled his hand away. "God, you're clammy. Look at the sweat. You look a little flushed."

Ben realized Jim was telling the truth. He was almost setting in a pool of his own sweat. "Jeesh! I don't feel bad, Jim."

"Look, I know I can be an asshole at times. I've worked you hard over the McConnell account." Jim patted Ben lightly on the back, "Why don't you take the rest of the day off. Go see a movie or something. Go on, we can handle it here."

"Thank you, sir," Ben replied and pulled himself out of the chair. He saw some wet spots on the padding of the chair, almost like he had peed on himself.

Jim noticed them too and could not help but looked repulsed. He changed his expression to compassion as he looked back to Ben. "You do good work here, Ben. Don't think I'm not noticing that. Now go on."

Ben grabbed the subway home and began rummaging through The Times for movie showtimes. Jim was right, it was stress. God, he was a wreck, and going ga ga over his new neighbor? Sure, she was beautiful, but out of his league, and he knew it. Plus, if she was an opera singer, she wouldn't want a boring
old accountant around. God! Why am I even thinking of her, Ben thought. I do need to get out and meet some people, especially women. Then my head won't turn every time one says "hi" to me.

Then he felt it. It literally started in the heels of his shoes and raced up his spine till it filled his brain. The song. Sy was singing next door. It was a soothing song as if it resonated from deep within her soul. A warmth filled Ben he found himself touching the wall again. It did not seem as hard and cool to his touch this time. He pulled his chair over to the wall, and sat on it, and touched the wall with a hand as he rolled his head back and let the voice wash over him. The depth of peace within him was only set off with what he realized was a growing sense of desire. He was becoming sexually aroused by touching the wall and letting the voice violate him. He was surrendering to it, inviting it to take him. His mind was hers, his body was hers, he would leave nothing unspared as long as she sang. Sweat drenched his body, and he caught himself drooling like the village idiot would. As her voice rose, he went with her. She was taking him to a place beyond sexual climax, to a place beyond the human plane to a place where a person can be satisfied on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. If that was possible, Ben was now there.

Ben found himself jerked back to reality as Sy stopped singing. Ben was breathing hard and noticed he had made a mess of his seed around the chair. "Yuk! What a mess." If it was true that men release a million sperm upon climax, then Ben had just released a Milky Way Galaxy worth of humanity on the chair.

He felt strangely at peace, fully contented, as he cleaned up and decided to go to a movie. He stepped out the door and saw Sy coming off the elevator, a handful of junk mail in her hand.

"One day, and I already got this," she held the mail up for Ben to see.

"Welcome to New York," Ben chuckled.

"Going out, huh?"

"Yeah, a movie," Ben replied. "Wanna come?" Ben was surprised at what he said. It was like someone else had said the words.

Sy smiled a warm, disarming smile. "Sure, I'm game." She stepped into her apartment and grabbed her purse. "I'll warn you, now," the smile continued. "I have Mace. Do I need it for a guy like you?"

"Naw, I'm harmless," Ben chuckled.
"Good, then I can attack you, right?" Sy laughed a deep soulful laugh.

"I like it when a woman moves first," Ben quickly replied, not really knowing what to say. Just her joke of attacking first had brought him to sexual arousal again. Ben tried to walk so Sy could not see his excitement.

"What are we seeing?" Sy asked.

"I was going to see the new Brent Trader movie..."

"Oh good, I wanted to see that," Sy cut him off quickly. "I hope he shows his ass in this one. He's got such a cute butt! I know, you hope the babe pulls her top off."

"Well sure, fun for the whole family is my motto," Ben replied.

Ben had a great time with Sy. They talked and laughed about people they saw on the street. She was a bit mysterious about where she sang, but Ben paid it no mind, he was too busy enjoying the moment of being the squire of Sy. As passionate as he felt about her, he noticed her passions as well. Men would stop and stare at the duo as they passed, she just smiled at them and would wrap her arm tighter around Ben's arm, like she was silently telling him who her man was. She hoovered through a large box of buttered popcorn, as well as a large Coke. Most women Ben knew drank Diet Coke, not Sy. She ordered it as "real Coke." After the explosions and car chases and Sy's wild whoops when Brent Trader showed his ass, as well as Ben's disappointment when Sy put her hands over his eyes when the blond bimbo lead took her top off. "I'm saving you from corruption," was Sy's excuse. Off they went for some genuine New York pizza. Sy scarfed down over half of the medium pepperoni and another Coke.

"I'm a passionate woman," Sy explained to Ben. "In all areas."

"Thanks for the information," Ben replied as he stopped in front of her door. He did wonder how she stayed so thin after that eating display. Not that Ben minded, although it did dent his wallet since he picked up the whole tab for the afternoon.

"In New York, and Wyoming, do they give the girl a kiss after the date?" Sy inquired.

"I do believe that is the custom," Ben answered. He was excited by the prospect, in more ways than one. He had to cross his legs so Sy would not see. He leaned over and they joined lips. Sy's lips were soft and moist, and tasted a bit of pepperoni. He felt like they were fusing together as they stood in front of her door, like he was falling into her. He felt the
slight arms wrap around his shoulders and back, so he responded by wrapping his around her tiny waist. They drew themselves together and Ben had never felt such pleasure outside of climax. The softness of her being was like a quart of whiskey poured straight down him. He was intoxicated, mad now with passion. He felt the beads of perspiration forming on his brow. She may have been the smaller of the two, but she had captured Ben, she owned him now. Her soft grunting as they continued to press lips excited him more. Ben felt her move her leg between his and slightly rub his third leg seductively. Then she pulled away.

"I had a wonderful time, Wyoming boy," she smiled and laughed at her little joke.

"Me too, oh singer of songs," ben responded.

"I guess I should call you a cowboy, huh?"

"Do I look like a cowboy to you?" Ben asked still sinking into her eyes. He could not take his eyes off the blue pools that were full of life, and mischief.

"Never seen one up close," Sy replied, as she looked deep into Ben's brown eyes. "Guess you'll have to do." She unlocked the door. "Take me riding sometime?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure," ben stammered as Sy gave a slight laugh and closed the door. She left him standing almost dumbstruck in the hall. What an afternoon. Even if this went no further, it would be a day that would bring a smile someday to an old man's lips.

Sy began to sing in her apartmer.t and like Pavlov's dog he felt pulled to the wall that separated them. Ben placed his hands upon the surface and felt it give. No longer hard, it had become soft and pliable. He tried to push his hands through the wall and touch Syrene. He now could see a hole in the wall and saw her with arms outstretched to the sky while her lips and throat quivered from the power of voice. Ben could feel his body sucked into the wall, but not quite through. He bathed in the voice till it ended. He found himself in a state of anxiety. He pulled himself out of the wall, and looked frantically about, like a user looking for a fix. Where was she? He peered through the tiny opening in the wall and could not see Sy.

Ben could hear a rapping on his door. It filled him with anger to be bothered right now, he had to find Sy. He approached the door, which
opened on its own. Sy stepped through the door wearing a shining white dress made of silk so sheer that imagination was unneeded to gather Sy was not wearing undergarments. She emitted a low hum as she gently stroked Ben's cheek. He felt the seams of his garments give way and pile upon the floor. He heard the door close by the invisible doorman as Sy opened her mouth and invited him in. Her kisses were sweet, yet bitter at once. They began like sweet pure honey and dissolved to stale meat.

The two retired to Ben's bed as Sy's dress dissolved before him. She offered her breast for suckle as she began to sing. Feeling her softness above him as she sunk gently into his ear brought Ben to a state of arousal he had never known.

"Time for a ride, cowboy," Sy's words dropped into his ear as she stopped singing for a moment.

Ben felt lost in a swirling passion he had never known. The bed seemed more like a soft field, dew kissing the green grass that surrounded them as the warm sun touched their naked bodies. His member found the softness of Sy and her voice rose an octave and filled with greater power as wet violet petals rained upon them gently. The aroma flooded Ben's nostrils as he matched the rhythm of Sy as she climbed beyond the highest note of a soprano. Ben found himself nearly unconscious as he finished.

They lay exhausted, spent among the violet petals and wetness. The air still thick with the aroma of desire, and the flowers.

"How beautiful that was," Sy sang into Ben's ear.

"The first song I have understood from you," Ben replied, smiling at the beauty he saw in Sy's face.

"You know the words now," Sy sang to him. "Come, come with me to my side."

Ben followed Sy to her apartment, nothing was separating the apartments now as the wall was gone. She pulled Ben to her bed. They fell into it as Ben felt himself sinking into it. Like a giant warm mouth it swallowed the pair covering them in an inky blackness as Ben could only hear the sweet words of Sy being sung to him. "Come to me, my lover. Let me love you, let me have you." The words were sung to the same operatic tune Ben had heard before. He felt slickened by the passion in his soul, also by the wetness that surrounded them. Sweat from their bodies and yellow tulip petals that he could now see as a light broke into the room. The down-filled bed giving them up from the bed's embrace.
The next few days meshed into a timeless session of lovemaking and eating. An endless supply of fruit from Sy's pantry. Strawberries, grapes, oranges and bananas of the most sweetest taste filling them for another round of passionate attack.

Ben had never felt more alive. Sleep had now become an unneeded necessity to him. Sy and the fruit were his sustenance now. Her words of song, now so plain, covered him with a blanket of peace. Nothing more mattered to him but pleasing this woman, whatever she desired. How long this went on he did not know, or care.

The alarm jolted him awake. Fear gripped him as he awakened. What was that? A beautiful dream? Ben felt a panic grip his insides, turning them like a vise ripping something apart. He jumped up and tried to go to Sy's apartment, but found the wall back in place. A note was hanging on the wall with no nail, of fastener of any kind.

"I have a singing job. I will be back." ben read the note and could swear he heard Sy's voice singing it to him. Rather than comfort, the voice brought him fear. Where did Sy go? When would she be back? He scurried around his apartment like a lost rat in a maze. A word popped into his head--Job--He had to go to work, that's right, work. Ben pulled on some clothes, which felt like sandpaper against his skin. Sy had been the last thing against his skin. Her softness and warmth made him stop a moment and run his hand across his body, trying to remember her. It felt like an eternity since he had worn clothes, and also since he had touched Sy.

"Where the HELL have you been?" Jim screamed at Ben upon his arrival at the office. "I told you to take one afternoon, not three working days off!"

"Just lost track of time, I guess," ben replied, not too convincingly.

"Lost track of time?" Jim threw his arms up in the air. "You ever hear of a phone?" Jim pointed to his desk, and his phone. "By the way, something is wrong with your phone. Either that, or you took it off the hook. It rang busy, or an operator said it was disconnected."

"I'll check into that."

"Christ! We were worried. I sent Fred and Mary over to knock on your door. Fred said all he could hear was some kind of opera music turned up
full volume. Mary said she couldn't hear a thing. I think she needs her hearing checked anyway," Jim rambled. "The point is, check in with us if you want off."

"I will sir," Ben assured.

"Get to work," Jim motioned Ben out of his office, before stopping him. "By the way, this company pro-rates vacations you know. You were gone, what, Tuesday afternoon through Monday morning? if you hadn't so many sick days piled up, they could have fired your ass, and there would be nothing I could do. Don't let it happen again!"

"Yes sir," Ben scampered to his cubicle. He sat for a moment. This place seemed so alien to him now. Why was he here?

Rather than feel in heaven after a wild week of lovemaking with Sy, he felt forlorn. There was an ache in himself that he could not explain. It was like he was pining for Sy. Maybe he was in love. At the very least, he was in lust.

"Man, what was that song, that music coming from your place?" Fred was standing over Ben, shaking him from his thoughts. "I've never heard song like that before. I told Jim it was opera, but it sounded better than any opera I have ever heard."

"Yeah, opera," Ben answered. He felt tongue tied and stammered to Fred that it was a new opera company he had heard of and was trying their CD out.

"Mary said she couldn't hear a thing," Fred said dismissively. "How could she miss it. Hell, I was afraid she would see me!" Fred laughed and pointed towards his privates. "That music was so sensual, I couldn't control myself.

Ben dismissed Fred and found himself in a deep funk. He went home that night to a silent, empty apartment. The wall between the rooms stood silent and mocking. He pressed his body against it and felt the inflexibility of the plasterboard. It was cold, rough, and indifferent to his plight. Nothing could sooth him. He had not eaten since the last time Sy fed him the most tasty orange that had ever blessed his mouth. He could remember the juice running down upon Sy's breasts and how he had licked the sweet juice from them. Even the idea did not excite him. Just her breath could drive him to sexual madness, and now her memory produced nothing but melancholy in him.
He watched the news. An unusual story was coming from Maine. Two planes had nose dived straight into the ocean, killing all aboard. One of the planes was filled with a men's group, the Promise Keepers, who were flying to London to do a conference for the British. Also, a large fishing vessel from Japan had run aground and killed all the men who worked on the ship. Already a group was claiming aliens had done the damage. Ben dismissed it, and wished he had been on one of the planes.

It had been over a week and still Ben had not heard from Syrene. Where had she gone? They could have gone out and celebrated her good fortune at landing a singing role. Ben realized he was moping around like a lost schoolboy, but did not care as he stumbled home through the zombie-like masses that he slogged through everyday on the way home. He opened his door and went in. The room seemed brighter, and larger than...

The wall was gone. Ben held his breath and stepped into Sy's apartment hoping that this was not a bad dream, but a wonderful reality. He could feel his heart warming the further he invaded her dwelling.

"I have come for you, lover," Sy sang to Ben.

He turned to find the voice and found her resting upon the bed waiting for him. The deep melancholy that had possessed him vanished in the twinkling of an eye. He dove into the deep end of the pool of passion as he surrendered himself to her. "I missed you so much."

"And I, you," Sy sang to him. "My job is going so well. I have you to thank."

"My pleasure."

"Exactly what I plan to do, thank you," Sy sang as her voice continued to rise in octaves. "To give you more pleasure than you can fathom."

The touch of Sy was driving him mad. Her scent, her taste, all his senses were being overwhelmed by the passion of this woman. "I can fathom a lot." Ben could feel himself slip away amidst the song, the softness of Sy and the wetness of the bed of multi-colored rose petals that they thrashed about in.

The clarion call of the alarm woke him again. The same panic filled him as had before. His skin was cold and clammy from sweat like a drunk with the DTs or a junkie wild with withdrawal. Another note suspended on the
wall read, "Another job, my lover. Another chance to sing my song."

"Kitzowitz, get in here!" Jim bellowed from his office as he angrily waved to Ben. "Christ! I told you to call in if you wanted time off. Would you listen? NO! well, it's out of my hands now. Go sit at your desk. Don't do anything, though, the head cheese wouldn't want you to monkey wrench anything before they fire you."

"How long was I gone?" Ben asked.

Jim looked at Ben sternly, then his face softened as he realized Ben was not trying to pull his leg. "You don't know how long you were gone? What was the matter? You black out or something?"

"I...I guess so," ben stammered.

"Go see a doctor then," jim replied. "You blacked out for a week-and-a half? A week-and-a goddamn-half?" His voice rose louder in anger. No way was he going to believe Ben was out of it that long. "You don't have a clock where you live? If it's drugs, then get treatment." Jim waved him a dismissal. "Now get out."

Ben was deeply depressed as he rode the elevator to his floor when he returned home. Despite the long hours, he had really enjoyed working for Barnes and Kyle. Now fired, he feared the damage it had done to his resume. He hoped Sy would return soon from her next job. At least he could lose himself in her for a while. A week-and-a-half, and to him it felt like a day. It was like a deep dark cloud had taken residence over his head and only Sy could remove it.

He saw the super coming out of Sy's apartment and found his soul filled with rage. "What are you doing in her apartment?" Ben screamed at him. He was probably some pervert who rummaged through a woman's underwear drawer when they were gone.

"She's left, okay?" He yelled back at Ben. "It's none of you business, but she came, got her clothes, and gave me three month's rent, in cash mind you, and told me to keep the deposit, which I would anyway since she gave me such short notice. She wasn't selling drugs out of that room, was she?" The super held up the crumpled bills for Ben to see. "An awful lot of cash to NOT be illegal. Rich people are crazy anyway." He looked at Ben. "Hey
"fella, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Ben replied. He was stunned that Sy would up and leave like that. No word good-bye or anything. Musicians are weird though, they seemed to move quickly, at least the ones Ben knew of.

The super snapped his fingers. "Here buddy, she told me to give you this. Damn she was pretty."

Ben took the note and made a bee-line to his refrigerator, and a nice cold beer. Maybe a beer buzz could dull the ache he was feeling. He had broken up with girls before, but this was different. He could feel his entire being crying out in pain, even his fingernails and toenails were in pain. His mind was like a Mulligan's Stew of whirling emotions. Every thought and emotion he had ever had was surfacing. He caught himself laughing hysterically one moment and then deep despair would overtake him. He felt he was cracking up.

He finally opened the note. He could again feel Sy singing the words to him. "Thank you for helping me with my song. I must go. Let the song lead you."

Ben kept downing beers, and even staggered out and bought some more beer and drank it warm. He let the blare of the television keep him company. The news began with a story of another plane nose diving into the Atlantic, killing all aboard. This time it happened in South Carolina. The final transmission from the pilots reported strange singing in the cabin. Also a mass suicide was reported as men drove their vehicles off cliffs, in South Carolina, and into the ocean. Two freighters off the Carolina coast smashed into each other at full speed, killing all the crewmen aboard. "Lucky guys," Ben quipped.

He dozed off for an hour or so and awoke to the sound of music infiltrating his apartment. It was a song of mourning carried on the notes of a saxophone. Ben appreciated the sadness tonight and remembered Sy's scribbled words, "Let the song lead you." The notes flowed through him and touched him like music never had. He knew this music, he could feel this music, and soon found himself naked on the roof of his building. He remembered his diving days from high school and placing third in the Wyoming High School Championships. A jack-knife that turned into a swan dive. The air felt cool against his skin as his hair flapped around as he passed
the sax player and heard him hit a flat note as he witnessed him falling earthward. Ben knew the pavement would be rough textured and cool to the touch when he landed.
THE DARK HEART
OF
THE MUSIC MAN

We had to wait for the river to rise. Lock #18 at Burlington filled at a languid pace as the boat rose gently. The alarm sounded, the gates opened and more of the brown turgish Mississippi rushed to the bow of our boat. We inched forward. Both sides of the river were lined with mighty towering oak trees. The darkness behind the first wave of trees could swallow a man forever. The captain kept the boat dead center in the river. Illinois was to the right, Iowa to the left. Once savage lands now made docile and safe, so they say. A hint of savagery filled my nostrils tinged with the smell of rotting timbers. For a normally busy river there were no signs of civilization. We were alone.

Lake Odessa soon came into view and along with it came humanity. Water skiers, powerboaters, fishermen, they all sped by. The captain guided us to the mouth of our highway, the open maw of the Iowa River. We grabbed a few supplies at the dock store, including an overnighted envelope for myself, to join the one I had already been given, and turned to the Iowa. A light foam marked the death of the river as it joined with the lake. Small whirlpools and eddies danced around the boat, sometimes slapping the sides. It was like the river was challenging us, poking at us. "Try me," it said. The boat chugged along pulled and tipped slightly by the river. The foam, at the mouth, gave the appearance of a smile. Was it welcoming us, or baiting us? I was unable to tell. I sat down in the stern with my packets and breathed deep the fresh water air.

I heard the captain curse as the turbulence of the river joining the lake pulled the boat nearly sideways. If ever there were a caricature of a tug-boat captain, ours was it. He was in deep want of personal hygiene. He was a squat man who wore clothing because society demanded it of him. His arms seemed shorter than most, while his legs appeared to have been cut off midway by God himself. His torso was longer than his limbs they serviced and was for a man of greater height, but was set off by a rounded belly that announced its entrance a full five minutes before the man who owned it. A belly birthed by a steady diet of vienna sausages and warm Budweiser. His
clothing cried for washing. A shirt where the buttons trembled to hold in the belly. It appeared to be a plaid arrangement of blues, but with the dirt, grease and oil inhabiting its framework, the color was anybody's guess. The jeans also appeared blue, between the grime splotches. They hung limply about the bottom half of the captain. With no waist and excessively short legs, finding the proper pantaloons would daunt the most exacting designer. The round head gave a piggish/thuggish look. Shaving, like bathing, appeared to have been a once-a-week chore. His black eyes set back into their sockets. His black hair was buzz cut and covered in sweat and grime. His head was crowned by a sweaty, stained St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap.

The captain was a river rat through and through. He learned his trade running patrol boats up the Mekong River in Vietnam. He now lived on the river. He used his boat, the CONRAD, to run barges up and down the Mississippi. At times he ran up the Missouri, to Kansas City, and pulled barges there. He was a throwback to the times of Samuel Clemens. Each bend in the river was charted in memory, every fallen tree snag and whirlpool logged into his natural computer. The captain had ultrasound gear, and a computer on deck, but he never used them. "I feel this river," he told me. "It's like a lover. You need to feel her, touch her, communicate with her soul. Watch out for the sharp parts that will piss her off and sink you." Knowing the river was more important than ultrasound. I thought of this as I watched him slide his fat belly over the side, and reach down and dip his hand into the cold Iowa River. He was introducing himself, and touching her.

I'd first met the captain in a riverfront bar. He explained the Iowa River to me.

"The Iowa River is a date with a snotty bitch," he told me. "Trees that cut you like a samurai sword, snags, undertows. Just the most heartless bitch there is. At some points the river is so shallow your bottom scrapes. Rarely does anyone try it. I made it to Iowa City a couple times." The captain cocked his head to the side and stared at me. "Where do you want to go?"

"River City Iowa," I replied.

"Oh shit, no way!" The captain spat out. "I'm hearing weird stories about that place. Hell, the damn trooper boys won't even go in." The captain took a slug from the Budweiser I had bought him. "What makes you think I would
I pulled the Samsonite suitcase up next to us. I shielded it so no one else in the bar could see its contents. I opened it and watched the captain's eyes pry wider than they ever had before.

"Jumpin' Jesus Palimino!" The captain's mouth stayed agape as he plunged a hammy hand to the bottom of the stack of one hundred dollar bills. He pulled out a wad and flipped through.

"All real. No Monopoly money here," I said.

The captain glared at me. His black pig eyes were flaring. "This ain't no drug thing is it? You DEA?"

I assured him I was not DEA. I showed him my credentials. "My employer needs someone brought back from River City. Someone important. Upon successful completion of this trip you will get another suitcase full of cash."

The captain bit his lip and ran a dirty hand across his face. "How soon do we need to go?" He talked to the now closed case.

"Yesterday, if possible," I replied for the case.

The captain nodded his head. "Understood. We can go at first light. With the snowmelt the Iowa is running high right now. We should be able to get in and out quickly."

"First light it is then," I smiled at him. "You'll get the case then."

"How about a bundle for tonight?" The captain smiled. Crooked teeth, some blackened, some missing, greeted me. "I could use a little recreation before I leave."

I opened the case and threw a rubber banded bundle at him. He touched the greasy brim of his cap in thanks. He pulled his bulk out of the booth and quickly waddled to the door. I only hoped he gave the poor girl the entire bundle. Hell, two or three suitcases of money would not be enough to sleep with that mess of a gene pool.

The two boys who worked for the captain were a couple of Iowa farm boys. One was as skinny as the captain was fat. His clothes hung on him like a scarecrow. Jeans and a "Metallica" T-shirt covered him. He would also stop from time to time and play air guitar to a tune only he could hear.

The other seemed a fair-haired boy. Blond hair on top of a face with delicate features, which matched the slight body. He acted the dreamy type.
He had a notebook and he would sit and write occasionally. Was he a poet? I could only wonder. While Metallica air guitared, Poet stood at the back of the boat and stared, maybe write in his notebook. The romance of the river I thought.

I wondered if the captain had told the two hirees about the suitcases. I looked at them, then the captain, with both hands, and his belly, on the wheel. I figured not. The boys just seemed to be there to tie and untie the boat. The captain was well enough to run this ship.

The river began to close in on us. The tree branches were now reaching out to each other and entwining above us. The leaves soaked up the sun rays leaving a pale darkness enveloping us.

I cracked open the first envelope, the one I had originally been given. I already knew why I was here, but I need to learn more about my prey. CONN MUSIC COMPANY: CONFIDENTIAL was emblazoned on the envelope.

I could not help but remember the meeting where I was chosen. The company president knew I admired the man I was now sent to retrieve.

"He was the greatest salesman in this company's storied history," the president said. "But sometimes, something happens to a man. Things happen in their lives that turn them away from what is right. Things like making a profit on sales. They turn against people like us. They turn against all that America is and can be." The president turned his back to me and stared out the window of his office. "We can bring him back. He can never sell again, but he can be a good American again." he turned back and looked kindly at my face. "I know you admire him. Hell, we all do. You can reach him. This is important, not just for him, but us and the whole industry as well."

Again, the president turned his back to me. I sensed a tinge of malice in his voice. "People are talking, and what they are saying is not good. We just cannot have that." He turned back toward me and opened his desk drawer. He slid a manila envelope across the table toward me. "You should find all you need to know in here. When you get to Iowa, check at the dock store. We will overnight any further instructions."

An 8" by 10" glossy of my prey--Kurtz. He was the greatest salesman the Conn Music Company ever had. His life had been one massive success. He was
valedictorian of his high school. The high school yearbook said he should change his name to "Success" because he was destined to have it. He was lead trumpet in his high school band as well as the state high school band, a music scholarship to the University of Kansas. First in his class both as an undergrad and graduate student. MBA University of Kansas. Marries a clarinet player from the University of Kansas band. Two kids. After graduate school he weighs several offers to be a professor in a major university. He turns them all down and joins the Conn Music Company. The first sign of oddness appears. He refuses a management job to be a field level salesman. Why? The upper management are even more excited about Kurtz now. They think it shows a desire to know the company from the roots up. Privately the upper levels joke that Kurtz will make them all obsolete someday. Kurtz smashes sales records. Instruments, uniforms, sheet music, whatever the company had he sold it. He sold in mass volume. In fact, he pushed mass volume. No one before him had sold in such quantity. If a salesman sold instruments, another sold the uniforms, then another the sheet music. Kurtz changed all that. He sold everything the Conn Music Company had.

His style made enemies. Other salesman were let go. Why carry so many when you had one superman. The enthusiasm of even some of the upper levels was beginning to wane. Kurtz was ordered to slow down his huge sales, pass the bones around to all. He ignored them. Kurtz was redefining the capitalist system for Conn. Whispers swirled about him. Some believed he was a mad genius, others thought he was just plain mad.

I gazed at his sales orders. Like Sherman through the South, Kurtz had conquered Dixie. Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, all had fallen to the vision of Kurtz. Every sales order done in a meticulous print. Each done by hand in a ball-point black ink. Each order was a large one. Each one printed as a work of art. The exactness of each line. The curve of each letter. It had all been planned by the keenest of minds. All of it exact, deliberate, well ordered.

I had only met Kurtz once. A national sales meeting. Kurtz received his annual sales record for breaking the sales record he had set the year before. Despite the upper levels misgivings about his methods, Kurtz was making them piles of money, so they could not very well complain. An explosion of applause erupted in the hall. Kurtz turned to face us, palms upraised as if to soak
in each handclap. A smile of a thousand watts electrified his face and drew us in. He said all the right things, that we were as responsible as he for his award. We were all one big team. The triumph of Kurtz, the success he had become, brought us lowly sales dogs to orgasmic heights.

Later that same evening, after liquid revelry with my fellow salesmen, I grabbed an elevator to deliver me to my room. The glow of Kurtz's success had infused us all. Somehow we all felt assured of success, Kurtz had ordained it. The elevator paused, the door yawned open to reveal one passenger for my now private car—Kurtz. He floated into the elevator. His movements were athletic and sure. His jaw was square and firm. The facial features were set about his face in exacting geometric patterns. Wide deep set eyes of the purest blue. His gaze penetrated my soul, warming it. Upon introduction, I shook his hand. The perfect hand, firm without discomfort in his grasp. My eyes lowered to his feet. Each of his body parts seemed to fit perfectly. There was no oddness about him, just purity. The electric smile I had seen from the stage now lit up our moving elevator car.

"In light, darkness can never be," Kurtz's mouth expelled the wisdom to me.

"Thank you," I replied.

"'If' is in the middle of the word 'life'." More wisdom from Kurtz. "Each man must decide what 'if' makes his life." With that, the elevator stalled. The doors slid open and Kurtz vanished. His departure left silence, and it seems, less light in the car.

I trembled from such an encounter, with the genius of Kurtz.

A shadow passed over my face, shaking me out of my trance. It was Poet.
"Are you okay?" Poet inquired. "You're just sitting there, staring."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I replied. I quickly shoved Kurtz's photo into the envelope.

"Do you know where we are going?" Poet asked.

"Somewhere," I assured. I thought of changing the subject. The less these people knew, the better. "Let me ask you. What do you keep writing in that notebook?"

Poet smiled. "Words. I like writing words. Making poetry from simple words. My father doesn't like it, so I ride the river. I'm free here."
I looked at Poet's face. The word happiness came to mind as I looked at him. "You want to share one?"

Poet pulled out his notebook in a flash. With the love of Lord Byron he uttered his words:

I love the cows
when they go "moo."
I don't like the stench
when they go poo.
So giving, so warm
inviting a new clue.
Please understand as I say
darling, I love you.

I was stunned into silence.
"I have one about sheep too," Poet smiled and flipped further into his notebook.
"That's okay," I replied. I held my hand up in a "stop" motion. "I need time to digest your poem."
Satisfied, Poet smiled, and shut his notebook. He moved to the bow and opened his notebook again. He began entering words.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I reached into the envelope and pulled out what I thought would be Kurtz's photo. In stead I pulled out a large glossy of a smiling Kurtz with his family. It was the perfect family. Beautiful wife, two kids, one boy, the older one, and a little blonde haired girl, her hair set in pigtails.

I began to realize why I was on this mission. It was like looking into a mirror. The picture could easily be my own family. I seemed to be following in the footsteps of Kurtz. I admit in trying to emulate the man, who wouldn't? A man of great success always draws his admirers and imitators, and I was one of them. I could never match Kurtz's sales volume, but I was a close second. Looking at the family photo, I was a close behind there as well. My wife may not be as perfect as Kurtz's, but I did have the two children, in the same order. I remember hearing that Kurtz's wife had given birth to a daughter, and dragging my own wife to the bedroom in a desperate effort to conceive a daughter myself. It had worked. I could be like the man in every way.
I ran my hand over the photo and I admitted I was like Kurtz in this way. Kurtz, despite his success, had found a flaw in himself. Like too many marriages, Kurtz was beginning to stray. His wife had found him with a new lover and sent him packing. It was not devastating to him at all, because he willingly embraced the new lover—his sales. To move the volume he was selling, Kurtz spent six days a week on the road. Something had to give, and it was his marriage. They had the perfect house, the perfect yard, the perfect vehicles, all bought with the hard work of Kurtz's brow. The wife and the kids could not compete.

I reached behind me and pulled out my wallet. I opened it and gazed at the picture of me and my family. Remarkably similar to the one of Kurtz I was holding in my other hand. Of course, I went to the same studio he had which would account for the similarities. Also, my own drive was threatening my stable home. Lisa, my wife, and interestingly enough the name of Kurtz's wife, was none too pleased with the arrangement.

"You're going where?" Lisa asked.

"River City, Iowa," I replied.

"Why?"

"Kurtz is there..."

"OH, and YOU just have to be there!" Lisa jumped up from her chair at the mention of Kurtz. He was becoming a sticking point in our home.

"You don't understand. The company has asked me to go there and retrieve him."

"Why don't you go up there and screw him? You never touch me anymore. You and your precious Kurtz! Don't you think I see the news? Don't you think I KNOW what's going on in River City? Hell, you'll probably go up there and join him!"

I had to admit the thought had flitted through my brain. I could truly learn at his feet. Each man has the capacity for so much good, as well as so much darkness. You learn from both. I knew I was a willing pupil.

"Go ahead, chase after your precious Kurtz," Lisa scolded. "IF you come back, don't expect the kids and I to be here."

I was emulating the man in every way. Maybe I should join him.

A loud crash on deck shook me awake. Metallica was laying sprawled on
the deck, next to me.

"hey, would you watch it!" The captain yelled at him.

"Whoa, dude, like I came crashing down," Metallica seemed to be saying to the air more than me. "Gotta watch those landings."

"You all right?" I questioned.

"Yeah, just didn't plan my landing very well," he replied. Metallica picked himself up and tried to straighten his pants. There was now a rip in the bottom part of the right leg. "Must have caught something."

"Why do you jump around and wave your arms so much?" I inquired. "Are you chasing away birds or something?"

Metallica liked my question and laughed a loud laugh. "No man, I'm playing a concert in my head. Visualization, you know."

I did not really know what he was talking about but was afraid of the answer I would get if I questioned him any further.

"I'm a musician, man!" Metallica replied and did his air guitar again. "I play the whole thing out. I'm gonna be a star."

"What instrument do you play?"

"None, for now. But I will. It's what kids want, what people want, something for their souls, and music is it, man." Metallica smiled at me with a peaceful grin that I had seen cultists make. "People want reality mixed with purity of soul. I'm going to give that to them." He moved over to the other side of the ship, not waiting to see if I would reply.

Suddenly I wished to see Kurtz and Metallica in conversation. It would be delicious.

I turned back to my papers. After his divorce, Kurtz became uncontrollable. He defies upper management's order to sell in the Northeast. He sells with tornadic fury starting in Ohio. He moves through Illinois and turns north into Wisconsin. From there, he heads west into Minnesota and drops straight south into Iowa, making a bee-line to River City.

Kurtz sells the locals on starting up a boy's brass band. He sells them instruments, sheet music, the works. It was the uniforms that were odd. They were throwbacks to the early part of the 1900s. I was surprised that Conn kept them in stock. Once in a while they were ordered for nostalgic festivals, but never as a start-up item. Red uniforms with gold stripes and gold braids on the shoulders. White pants with red stripes for the boys. Kurtz even orders
a uniform for himself complete with a red hat with a white plume and gold cloverleaf on the front.

This was odd enough, except how Kurtz signed his name—Professor Harold Hill. He had long ago stopped using his first name on orders, just signing them Kurtz, but now he seemed to be taking on a whole new identity. The high school yearbook suggested he change his name. So, Kurtz did, not to Success, but to Professor Harold Hill. Maybe it was the end of his marriage, maybe it was the pressure for more and greater sales, but something had cracked him like an egg shell.

I stared at the order. Still in the same exacting lines and black ball point ink. I could not help wondering, why a boy's band? Where were the women? Was something even darker boiling up from the psyche of Kurtz?

"Whooooeeeee!" Metallica's warwhooping shook me out of my thoughts.

"I'll be goddammed!" The captain shouted and pointed to the left shore line.

Metallica continued shouting and spasmatically playing his air guitar while Poet moved over to the side of the boat and flipped open his notebook, writing furiously while a huge, sloppy grin covered his face.

I jumped up to see what they were shouting about. A young couple were near the shore, naked as they could be and making love at a near violent pace. Upon hearing and seeing the crew of the boat, the couple disengaged, smiled and waved to us. The woman then bent over and allowed the man penetration from behind as they continued their love-making feast. Metallica was overjoyed by the spectacle and was jumping around the small deck. The captain was screaming "Go! Go! Go!" The couple continued, obviously enjoying the appreciative onlookers.

"Kurtz, it's Kurtz," I heard the words slide form my mouth as if something deep and primal was revealing the promoter of the show. He knew we were coming, and how we were coming, so he gave us a show to welcome us. A bare naked show of bare emotions, stripped of all pretense, all civility. Maybe because I was reading about the man, because I had followed him for so many years, but this whole show had Kurtz's fingerprints all over it.

"Where are we, captain?" I asked as I slid up to the wheel.

"Just passing Iowa City," the captain replied. He was not looking
towards me, but the still engaged couple on the shore. The woman was beginning to cry in pleasure. "Go for it fella! Lay that pipe!" The captain screamed out to the naked man. He turned towards me with a sly grin. "You ever seen anything like that?"

"It's Kurtz doing this," I told him.

"You mean this guy's name is Kurtz?" The captain pointed to the naked man now thrusting harder.

"No, the man who sent the couple," I said over the hum of the diesel motor.

"What?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you, but I think now, after what I have seen and read, you should know. We are going after a man named Kurtz in the town of River City. He's the one who sent them."

"Look pal, we are outside Iowa City. The University of Iowa is here. It was just a couple of college kids working off some hormones and got turned on giving us a show."

"Oh yeah, where are the kids now?"

The captain craned his thick neck around to where the couple had been. They were gone. "man, they sure left quick!" he turned and looked at me.

"It doesn't prove someone sent them."

"It was either a welcome, or a warning to turn around and go home."

"If it's a welcome, is this Kurtz guy going to put on a sex show when we get to River City?"

"You're missing the point. It is raw emotion. Passion. Something pure and base in all humanity. That's what he is seeking."

The captain gave me a look of disbelief.

"Just be ready for anything," I said. "This could get hairy, I don't know what will happen when we get there."

The captain grunted.

"You said you had heard about River City. What do you know?" I asked.

"Just some crazy shit took over the town a couple months ago," the captain laughed and shook his head. "Some brass band plays day and night. The highway patrol has the town surrounded so no one can get in or out. This crazy guy booby trapped the roads so the troopers can't storm them by...land..." a light dawned in the sex-crazed, Budweiser fueled brain. "He's the guy we're
going after, by the only thing not defended, the river."

"He's probably got some kind of defense. The cops would have tried the river by now. Just be careful."

The captain was clearly peeved. "You son-of-a-bitch. You didn't tell me we were going after him!"

"You never asked," I replied.

The captain continued questioning my parental heritage, and then went on. "I thought some rich guy wanted his daughter or son out of there. NOT pulling that crazy fuck out of there."

"You are being well paid."

"You know, most people want him in prison, or strung up. You're representing some company, aren't you?"

"I won't deny it."

"Figures," the captain snorted. "If he was a normal guy, nothing would be going on, he'd go to jail like the rest of us. But, if some company wants him, they just sneak in and pull him out, right?"

"Right as rain."

The captain seemed more serious now. "We'll stop in Marshalltown first."
He jerked his head back to his two crewmates. "I promised the guys I'd buy Maid-Rites. Plus, we can get some diesel at Caldwell's. It's only a few miles from River City. Maybe there are some troopers there to give us info."

"I would really like to avoid troopers, if we can."

"Oh yeah, I forgot, what we are doing is illegal," the captain sneered his reply to me. "So help me God, if I lose this boat from confiscation because of this, I'll kill you."

"I told you that you are being well paid," I protested.

"Tell that to Johnny Law," the captain snorted.

"Understood," I replied. I turned to head back to the stern. I needed to read everything after what I had seen. Poet met me.

"Wasn't that beautiful? Two people making love in the open air, on the shore. I wrote a poem. You want to hear it?"

"Not right now, maybe later."

Poet smiled and moved up toward the bow. He spread his arms like he was trying to reach around the world.

I grabbed the second packet, as I sat down, and opened it. The river
was narrowing and the trees were getting closer. The sunlight was nearly being extinguished by the vegetation. I had to squint to read.

Kurtz had indeed taken over River City. From accounts by people who had fled, Kurtz passed himself off as a professor of music. He claimed to be from Gary, Indiana and his name was Professor Harold Hill. The locals were ignoring him till he stirred them up over the issue of a pool hall in town. Pleez-All Billard Parlor was owned by the city's mayor. He ingrained himself into the community by taking up with the town librarian, a Miss Marion Parroo. She herself was a pariah in the community for being the favorite of a Miser Madison, who left all the books in the library to her. She was also teaching kids to read Balzac, which locals considered obscene.

Kurtz convinced the town there was a better way, a more pure way of living. To save the town's boys he proposed a brass band and to close the billard hall where sin and corruption ruled. The past was simpler, less evil, when families mattered, when community mattered. He took up the cause of reforming one of the town hooligans, a Tommy Djilas. Then he turned the mayor's wife, Eulalie Shinn, against him by naming her head of the Ladies Auxiliary for the Classic Dance.

Mayor Shinn tried to make defense by reciting Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, but was not allowed to finish. He was run out of town and had established an expatriate government in Marshalltown.

Former residents told of the brass band practicing night and day. The favorite song being Seventy-Six Trombones. It was played constantly and in a maniacal fashion. Kurtz led the marching through the town with his red uniform and big hat on, urging the townsfolk on.

And follow him they did.

Women gave up their jobs and dressed in simple calico dresses. Community sing-alongs were organized. The formerly bickering city council was dissolved when they settled their differences by becoming a barbershop quartet. No one objected since Kurtz now had dictatorial control over the city.

Residents who would not abide by Kurtz's wishes were encouraged to leave town. Many fled. The city's population shrunk from 2,212 to around 1,500 in a matter of weeks. The state troopers tried to take control. They found roadblocks made up of discarded band instruments. When troopers tried
to move them, they exploded. The hospitals in surrounding towns were filling
up with wounded troopers. They decided to fall back and wait it out. Defense
lines were pulled back even further when some of the officers were driven
to the point of insanity from the barrage of the song Seventy-Six
Trombones assaulting their eardrums night and day.

In the packet I found the fax sent to the president of the Conn Music
Company from the Governor of Iowa. It had only one line: Ya got trouble
right here in River City.

No wonder I was here. Kurtz was single handedly bringing down the entire
company. Maybe that was the point. They needed someone who could understand
him, someone who admired him and his work, someone who could reach him. What
he was doing though, I could not fathom. It was obvious he was searching
for purity within himself, within his job. It was his passion, to be reborn
as someone else who could feel on a primal level. The simpler times, the
brass band, it all pointed to this. Kurtz wanted to take the good people
of River City, Iowa with him, and apparently they were buying what he was
selling. It may have been the best sell job that Kurtz had ever done. His
ultimate triumph in selling them and himself on something pure and simple.
I looked at the latest order form. It was signed Professor Harold Hill again,
but there was a difference to which city it would be sent. He had crossed
out River City, Iowa and replaced it with the town's new name--Paradise Found.

He was rejecting the old ways, and the company too. He had been slated
some day to take over the whole shooting match and in one fell swoop, he
had told them where to go with it. The price had been high for Kurtz, the
stress, his folding family life, and now he wanted purity. The purity of a
brass band playing, how the metal catches the sun. The simplistic life
of a small community, with the girl next-door type who doubles as the town
librarian.

"Marshalltown, coming up," called the captain. We nudged up to the shore
and Metallica tied the boat to a tree trunk.

A man was taking our picture as we climbed up to the highway. He was
wearing a fishing vest and jeans. He had a black ball cap on his slightly
graying head. He, like the captain, was in want of a shave and a bath. Unlike
the captain, he was skinny as a rail.

"Don't mind me, I'm a photo journalist," he said as he backed up and
kept snapping pictures. "I'm documenting your trip, so when it's over, we can all share in your journey."

"What journey is that?" I asked.

"When you come to join us."

"River City?"

"Paradise Found now, yes."

I ignored the new name of the town. "Tell us what's going on in River City."

"He knows you're coming," the cameraman said "I've been there, I've lived with them." he snapped more pictures. Man, don't you understand? They won't let you take him back! He's seen it all! He's done it all! these's no more for him. These people know that, they love him for that. They will do all in their power to stop you. They already put some troopers in the hospital. They might even kill you. Join us, learn with us. Your sacrifice for the man-god, Professor harold Hill." He stopped and then fled into the woods. He looked to be headed towards River City.

We hitched a ride to the Maid-rite near downtown. It was a simple place. Built back in the fifties, it had the same location, and the same menu. Loose meat beef burgers served without ketchup, and thick malts. Most people stood, but we were lucky and got four padded metal stools fairly close together. The formica top was well worn and had a faded brown color to it. A place like this breeds familiarity. I ordered and tried to strike up a conversation with the woman on my right. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, pleasant looking, not beautiful, but friendly.

"Hi, have you ever heard of a place called River City?" I asked.

"Oh God, yes!" the woman was clearly peeved by my question. "My sister lives up there, and before they cut off phone service, they don't believe in phones up there now, she called me and told me to sell everything and that my husband and I should join them in Paradise Found, which is what they are calling it now."

"I see that you did not join them," I said.

"No way! I have a good job, good family, at least till my sister went crazy. I enjoy my church, I like it here. Why should I change my ways and follow that deranged nut case running their town?"

"So you know the layout of the town," the captain, to the woman's right
had been eavesdropping on our conversation.

"Sure, I was born and raised there."

I was again glad the captain was along. The military mind, though cluded with Budweiser, was kicking in. We explained who we were and what we were doing. The woman was more than happy to help us. She drew a well detailed map of the town. According to the woman's sister, Kurtz was staying in a house next to city hall. "Remember, this is what I KNOW. If this Kurtz Hill, whatever his name is, has changed things, you're on your own."

"Thank you," I replied as the captain pocketed the map. "I hope you will have your sister back soon."

"You know, a lot of people want to see that Kurtz guy in jail, or dead," the woman informed us. "Figures though. Some big company wants to subvert the law and whitewash thing."

We left, refilled the diesel tanks, and shoved off. The captain wanted full tanks in case things got out of hand and we needed to bug out quick. It seemed to be growing darker and I started to feel eyes watching me. Peering out from the woods, watching, waiting, looking deep within me, prying open my soul to peek at the real me. If Kurtz knew we were coming, I wondered what kind of welcome we would receive.

"Hey! Look at that," Metallica was pointing up the river. There was something floating in it. Because of the fast current, it would pass us shortly. It was a drum. A snare drum just bobbing along with the waves. The captain was doing his best to steer clear of the obstruction, but the river was narrow, and closing. "Watch this!" shouted Metallica as he launched a red empty fuel can at the drum.

"No you fool!" the captain screamed.

Metallica's aim could not have been better. The can struck the small drum dead center. A mighty explosion rocked the boat as the concussion knocked all of us, including the captain, to the deck. He quickly regained his feet and grabbed the wheel. "SHIT!" He shouted and I looked up the river. More drums were rushing towards us, along with logs and pieces of lumber that could pierce the ship.

"Watch the sides!" He screamed to me and Poet and I grabbed a long metal pole used to push the boat away from shore. Now we were using them to push logs and lumber away from the boat as best we could. We avoided
the drums, unless a collision with one was imminent, praying they would not explode. The sound of splintering wood filled our ears as the bow of the boat sliced into the lumber. A few of the logs hit the drums sending geyers of water skyward and knocking us off our feet. The boat twisted in the water.

The captain's skill on the Mekong River came to good use as we narrowly missed several of the drums as they sped past. Only a seasoned river rat could get us through. Metallica was screaming and playing air guitar, oblivious to the danger around him.

I wasn't. My heart was racing and could not tell if I was sweating profusely or was being pounded with the water now shooting all over the place as more logs and lumber crashed into the drums setting off their pyrotechnics. I could hear the bleating pouring from my lips as I saw death racing towards me in one of my company's snare drums. My arms ached from the force of pushing the seemingly inexhaustable supply of snare drums and logs rolling towards us. I remembered one of Kurtz's orders for a huge amount of drums, snares, and basses, now I knew why. My body parts screamed in agony from the pitching and twisting of the CONRAD the captain was forcing us to endure. The engines guuned a few more times and I realized we were in calm waters. There were no hazards floating in front of us.

"Damn! This Kurtz plays for keeps!" The captain continued cursing the name of Kurtz. "We were lucky, you know." He reached under the instrument panel and pulled out a shotgun. He turned to me. "You know how to use this?" I nodded yes. I cracked it open and saw two shells in the twin chambers. The captain handed me a box of shells.

We were nearing River City when we began hearing the rat-a-tat-tat sound of snare drums being rolled. Explosively, the sound of a brass band began to play. We could not see one human soul on the port side, where the music was coming from. The woods were hiding them. Soon the sound seemed to envelop us like arms, cold unforgiving arms. The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end and I could tell the captain was frightened and was guuning the engines for escape. Metallica was jumping up and down on the deck. He then began to march around the deck, like he was part of the band. Poet just stood and smiled, he seemed unafraid of the weirdness about him.

The band continued to play. It was the dreaded Seventy-Six Trombones
being played in a maniacal fashion. They were not moving. It seemed they were triangulating us. We were near the middle when we heard a trombone go flat with a loud BRAAAT! The trombone slide came flying out from the woods towards the boat, striking just above the water line. "ATTACK!" The captain screamed as he gunned the engines again and tried to get us out of there. The air around us suddenly filled with trombone slides used like deadly arrows to try and stop us. A loud CRACK sounded as a chunk of wood acme flying off just above me as a slide hit the small roof over the wheel house. I dove to the deck as I heard a slide whoosh by my head. "GET DOWN! GET DOWN!" I heard the captain scream as he twisted the boat in every direction to avoid the flying metal. One hundred ten coronets blazed away in sound as the barrage from the trombones continued. The glass from the wheel house crashed and splintered as a slide roared through the room, just missing the captain. We were caught in the middle of a well thought-out plan, a Kurtz plan. I heard more thuds and cracks as the barrage of trombone slides continued. I heard another loud CRACK that sounded like metal hitting bone. A loud crash followed sounding like fresh meat hitting wood. I looked behind me as the boat careened wildly on the river.

"POET!" I screamed as I rolled over to the body lying prostrate on the deck. I turned over the body, with the help of the now terrified Metallica, as slides continued to whizz by just over our heads. The bow of the trombone slide had pierced the forehead of Poet. It looked to have crashed straight through his skull. His purplish-red blood was flowing freely on the deck and all over us. Metallica released him immediately and tried to scoot himself back from the body. I placed Poet back on the deck, next to the now bloody slide that had taken his life.

The barrage now ceased. The music continued as the song ended, then started up again, played by horns of every kind. The river twisted to the right and the sound was deadened by it. The captain slowed the ship and checked the damage.

"The Viet Cong couldn't do damage like that," he said looking at the busted up equipment on the deck. Wood, glass and trombone slides were everywhere on the deck. It looked like someone had machine gunned the boat. "Aw, Jesus," the captain moaned as he saw Poet's lifeless form strewn among the damage on deck. He was clearly moved, but more practical matters took
over. "Use a bucket and scoop out river water and wash this blood off the deck." He patted Metallica on the shoulder as he sat stunned. "It's okay son. It's okay."

The captain turned towards me. "Goddamnit! This kid died because of that crazy fuck! I signed on to get this guy back, not get some innocent kid killed." He looked around the trash strewn deck once again. Metallica was crying as he washed Poet's blood off the deck with the river water he was dipping. The captain poured his anger out on me. "You must be as insane as this Kurtz guy

More curses were directed towards Kurtz and myself courtesy of the captain. I really could not blame him and stood silently as he vented. Poet was dead, I had to take as much responsibility as Kurtz did. Maybe the Conn Music Company needed to take its share of the blame also. The woman from Marshalltown may be right, we were trying to whitewash what Kurtz had done. We were trying to clean up his sin, their sin, our sin. I had never felt more conflicted as I watched the captain and Metallica move Poet's body to the stern and then cover it with a tarpaulin. "Thanks for the help," the captain muttered as he moved past me towards the wheel house.

We passed a sign placed for us near the entrance to the city. The new name of Kurtz's Nirvana--Paradise Found--painted with black paint on a piece of plywood nailed to a tree. The CONRAD seemed to sputter itself as the captain killed the engines and we drifted up to shore. The captain gently pulled the shotgun from my hand and reached into a drawer and pulled out a Colt .44 Magnum pistol. "Stick this in your belt. I'll carry the shotgun," the captain said. I nodded an agreement as Metallica set the wooden gangplank out and we all three went ashore.

The town looked like it had been blown back in time, Kurtz had fashioned a town from the early 1900s. The men were all wearing straw hats and old style suits and ties. The ones with facial hair had their mustaches waxed into an old "handlebar" style. The women were dressed head to toe in flowing dresses from the turn of the century style. No skin was showing. Corsets and bustles and bows were the order of the day. Each woman wore a wide brimmed hat with silk flowing from it, or feathers perched on the hat. Most of the children and some of the adults were dressed in band uniforms. Each band member had a horn in their hands. Horns of every kind.
The band members were all boys, or men. None of the women were allowed to be in the band. Why? Was it this old style of living that dictated that women stay in the house and take care of it? Only Kurtz could tell us.

All fifteen hundred residents were there. They moved apart slightly as the three of us waded into the crowd. They seemed the type of folk who would argue with you nose-to-nose for three days, but then accept you. They were Iowans, and proud of it. This may be our chance to join them. We moved forward as the captain pulled out the map drawn on the napkin.

"It's not the same," the captain whispered to me as we made our way from the boat into downtown.

Indeed it was different. It too had been remade into an early 1900s image. The sidewalks were a near pearly white, the streets as well. No dirt or grime could be seen. The stores had changed as well. A dry goods store, a drug store advertised phosphate sodas. The Pleez-All Billard Parlor, was now boarded up with the words "Sin and Corruption" hand painted on the plywood covering the windows.

There were no cars to be seen. Where had they gone, I wondered. If there were no cars, they must be using horses. Yet I saw no "meadow muffins" on the street, or anywhere. How did they keep it so clean, and white? Apparently these people were living like some demented Amish community with no contact with anyone. Telephone poles, light poles, all gone. We strolled by a livery stable, hearing horses whinnying inside. A strange man appeared from inside the stable. He looked like some wax creation of a Buddy Hackett lounge singer. "Do you want to Swoopy?" he asked. A woman behind us cried "Eegods!" and laughed. Then the band and the people were off and running. They began some weird kind of dance, screaming "swoopy" time and again. This was either a welcome dance, wanting us to join them, or some strange mating ritual Kurtz had thought up. Or maybe it was a ritual dance before our deaths.

"I never saw shit like this in Nam," the captain spoke to me. I looked at him and saw sheer terror in his face as the natives grabbed us around the waist and pushed along in some kind of line dance where the person behind you moves their hips like they are trying to anal rape you. I was expected to do likewise to the woman my arms were around who was in front of me.

The dance ended with many shouts of joy. The captain quickly moved back
towards me, shotgunless, knifing his way through the crowd. "They just took it," he said as he stopped next to me. "Nothing I could do," he lamented.

We could see Metallica a short distance away with a huge grin plastered on his face. Many of the local girls were gathered around him giggling and grinning. We shouted at him, but he just waved at us. The people of River City were pulling him in. Women gathered around us as well, smiling politely, but not letting us touch them. We were being absorbed. Like a living breathing amoeba, they surrounded us and tried to pull us into their lives. Metallica was offering little resistance.

We split the crowd as we moved to where the city hall was suppose to be. Fortunately it had not been changed, just become much cleaner in the last two months. Kurtz's house was not a remarkable house, considering his stature with these folks. Most likely it was a reason they followed him so readily. Each home had a white picket fence around it while bushes or vines grew around the fence. Those homes not blessed with a front porch had one that was crudely built on it. All the houses looked the same except for the colors. They were all painted a garish primary color, or a mute pastel.

Kurtz's home was a bland purple. Unlike the others was another hint at the madness that had gripped Kurtz's soul. Almost unspeakable acts of barbarism had been committed and the results of Kurtz's now dark soul could be seen. Hung on each point of each slat of the fence was the bell end of a horn, like the horn had been decapitated. On each bell, a pair of eyes had been painted, along with a nose and a gritty smile. The "faces" as they were stared into the home of Kurtz, each one turned as if to watch, smiling an evil grin at the waiting Kurtz.

We were surprised that Kurtz did not meet us at the door. But it was open and we stepped in. We heard a rasping noise, like belabored breathing coming from the living room.

Kurtz was lying on an ornately carved wooden couch. At least it was what was left of Kurtz. The man I had met in the elevator years ago was not this man. This man was small, almost insignificant compared to the rich furnishings in the room. He had sunk into the couch. The Kurtz I knew would overpower the couch. If a man can be in total collapse, Kurtz was. The athletic features he formally had were now shrunken to the bone. His right arm trembled as I noticed how the beautiful band leader uniform was slightly tattered and
dirty as it hung loosely on his skeletal frame.

"I knew you would come for me," Kurtz voice rasped out as I leaned close to hear. "Don't take me back. Leave me here in Paradise." His voice pleaded like a spoiled child for an unattainable toy. "Let me have peace."

"Their watching us," the captain said. The townspeople had gathered around and were peeking into the windows, watching us, watching Kurtz. Perhaps they thought we were there to heal him, rather than take him.

"Join us," Kurtz rasped at me. "I told them you could lead them. They want you to become part of them."

"Let's get a bedsheets and haul him out," I said to the captain.

The captain shook his head. "ALL this trouble for him? I thought you said he was a god."

I decked the portly captain with one punch. "Kurtz IS a great man. WAS and still IS."

Kurtz rolled his head back and his lungs let out a huge volume of air in a sigh. His shaking arm touched mine.

"Sorry," I said as I gently touched Kurtz's arm. I helped the captain up.

"Damn good punch," the captain replied as he rubbed his jaw.

We found a white bedsheets and gently rested Kurtz upon it. He was incredibly light. There was no resistance from the townsfolk as we carried Kurtz through the town and to the boat. Some roses were thrown down in our path and onto Kurtz.

Kurtz was laid on the deck of the CONRAD when we heard drums. More snare drums. We could see the crowd parting as a woman drew near. Was this a war-chief for the town? It looked like she was wearing a helmet till she came right up to the boat and I realized an overuse of hair spray had created a helmet-like effect.

The woman stepped towards the gang-plank to come aboard the ship. She moved halfway up and glared an angry stare at us.

"Marion," I heard Kurtz rasp. Her face of stone turned from the captain and I at the sound of her name.

I watched the librarian gaze at Kurtz. The sterness melted to compassion as she looked upon the leader of her town lying on a white bedsheets among the broken wood on the deck. I saw her bottom lip quiver
at the scene, as I suddenly saw my arm reach out to her, beckoning Marion to come aboard and join us. Her face changed from sorrow to anger as she stared at me. The eyes burned with a zealous hatred toward me. She backed down the gang plank and disappeared behind the band.

The captain pulled the gang plank in quickly as I pushed off the shore into the current of the Iowa River.

Kurtz's band began playing Seventy-Six Trombones. Instead of the maniacal fashion I had grown use to, it sounded like a funeral dirge.

The captain wheeled the boat around to descend the river. He reached to gun the engines for a quick getaway when I placed my hand on his.

"Let them say good-bye in their own way."

I wondered if Kurtz would survive the trip home. He continued to cough and spit up some type of greenish phlegm. His cough was from his soul. He was spitting up either River City, or what he had been before then. "You don't know what you've done to me," he rasped to me as I sat next to him on the deck. I felt pained at what he was here on the deck, yet I also felt like a schoolboy next to the master.

"I cannot live in this world anymore," Kurtz told me. "I was in Paradise, and you took me away." Kurtz's eyes tried to bore into me, with what energy he had left. "I just existed. I was. No reports, no orders, just the purity of a brass band playing Sousa as the sun catches the metal. Now it's gone."

His voice trailed off to a wail.

With a fearsome strength, like the Kurtz of old, he grabbed me and raised himself halfway up and shouted at me. "Buying, selling, selling and buying, is that all that I am? Is that all that we are?" With that, he dropped back down onto the sheet, releasing me from his grip. I saw the pupils dilate and could feel his life energy drain from him as he released his grasp on me, and the world as well.

"The horror, the horror," Kurtz spoke his last as his body exhaled for the last time. I gently closed his eyes and sat weeping like a lost child who had found his father, only to see him go.

I sat holding the great man's hand as I felt it grow cold and numb. I thought about him, what he had been, what he had become, and all he had done. I rested his hands on his chest. I took out my wallet and stared at the
the picture of my family. I moved up to the captain.

"Can you tie up at the next town," I asked. "I have a phone call I need to make."
Greg scrambled up the stairs to his porch. He pulled open the front door and saw the reclining heap on the couch. "Bob, let's go."

"C'mon man, Mary Hart is on," Bob whined. He gesture at the television where Entertainment Tonight was blasting away.

"Fuck Mary Hart. We gotta move, now."

"Actually, I would like to fuck Mary Hart." Bob moved off the couch and knelt down in front of the T.V. "You notice how the lighting is not quite dark enough today and you can see up her dress? God, what a pair of stems that lady has."

Greg grabbed the remote and punched the power button and ended Mary Hart's artificial life. "You can dream about it tonight, but don't mess the sheets."

Bob chased Greg out the door. "That's not fair. Besides the show doesn't start till eight, and it's only six now..."

"You know Chicago traffic and the way Evanston gets mighty crowded at this time of day. PLUS, with the show, it may be hell getting in there."

"I know, I know, still, can you imagine Mary Hart's legs wrapped around you..."

"Would you please shut-up about this unholy obsession with Mary Hart." Greg fired over the black Amigo as Bob jumped into the passenger seat. He began threading his way through the streets of Chicago to Evanston.

"I thought you were going to be home at four or five. What happened?"

Bob inquired.

"I had to go back up to Evanston to help set up microphones for tonight's show. Then I had some odds and ends to get done back at Skyview, courtesy of Frank, the boss from hell. It made me later than I thought I would be."

"Fair enough. You got the tickets, right?"

Greg pulled two cardboard tickets from his jacket pocket. "Score, we are there, good buddy."

"And not having to pay a dime," Bob grinned at Greg.

"A perk of having Skyview help rewire that auditorium for this show."

Bob shook his head. "I can't believe they're charging people fifty
dollars a pop for seats."

"As well as forty nine ninety five for cable pay per view," Greg reminded. "Hey, it's a star spangled Easter extravaganza to be broadcast worldwide on the All Saved Satellite Network."

Bob stared out the window. "So what's the big deal? It's still the same old story isn't it--Jesus dies on the cross and rises from the grave stuff, right?"

"I hear they 'freshened up' the story a bit."

"Oh, the Easter story wasn't 'Christian' enough for them? That sounds like those idiot Christians in Kansas City who had to do a 'Christian' version of Dicken's 'Christmas Carol.' Even though Dickens was supposed to be a Christian and the story is about the redemption of Scrooge, a wicked old sinner. It wasn't enough for them. Is that what this is going to be?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen it yet either," Greg replied. "There is supposed to be some 'mystery guest star' playing John the Baptist. By the way, calm down will you? Increase the dosage or something." Bob was already getting on Greg's nerves. True, they were best friends from years back, and Bob, through Greg's urging, had quit his job in Kansas City and moved in with him in Chicago, but there were times, like now, that he was more than Greg could stand.

"Okay, I just get tired of all this shit," Bob said.

"Plus, you know what? I think you need a good shot of religion, and this show could be it," Greg said.

"We've been through that before," Bob complained. "I've been there and done that. End of story."

"Oh yeah," Greg responded. "Let's see a show of hands of who, in this vehicle, is presently having erotic dreams about nuns? Let's see them, c'mon."

Bob threw up his right arm. "There, are you happy? I told you, I don't know why I'm having them. Granted, that cute nun at the hot dog stand..."

"Red hot..."

"...red hot stand smiled at me, maybe that's what set this off. But I do not think I need a religious show to solve my religious problems."

"Sounds like an obsession to me."

"I know what I'm doing, I'm driving here," Greg defended his driving and tried to steer Bob back to the subject at hand. "Look, I know you studied for the ministry and because of your divorce, it didn't work out. I just think you have some issues that need to be worked out."

"I'm a Protestant, not a Catholic. Why would I dream about nuns?" Bob asked as he through his hands up in the air.

"You're trying to defile religion," Greg reasoned. "I don't know. You just need some churchin' I know that."

"Well, thank you, Dr. Freud," Bob answered sarcastically. "What will you charge me? Five hundred bucks for your diagnosis?"

"This is a mission of mercy, good buddy."

"Would it help, Dr. Freud, if I told you the nun's face look remarkably like Mary Hart?"

"Stop!" Greg said as they pulled up in front of the church.

"Okay."

They were in front of the All Jesus Hallelujah Church and Auditorium. Three thousand seats beckoning weary pilgrims along life's path to the fiery rantings of the Dr. Reverend Phineas J. Thunderclap. The entrance of the auditorium was set off by solid marble pillars carved in the Corinthian style. The two friends went through the doors to heaven.

Soft plush pile carpeting cushioned their footfalls. An excited fortyish plump woman who had troweled on the make-up greeted them "Welcome, and enjoy the show," she gushed as she tore their tickets in half. The place was filling up with people of all ages, shapes and sizes. Most of them were wearing their Sunday's beat. Greg and Bob stuck out a little since both word jeans and a button down shirt with no tie.

Bob stopped and stared at the high arching ceilings, polished stone of some kind. A skylight made of crystal glass set off the top of the foyer. "Mr. Thunderclap seems to have done quite well for himself."

"That he has," Greg replied. "Not that I'm extremely proud that Skyview helped him build all this."

"The T.V. Ministry huh?"

"Yep, we helped set it up and run it for him. We make a fortune off it. Nothing like stealing money from the old and weak-minded, eh?"

Bob didn't answer as he turned around in a three-hundred-sixty-degree
turn. It had been quite a few years since Bob had darkened the door of a church. He remembered why. Garish opulence was everywhere. There were fake windows in the foyer with expensive silk curtains hanging from them. The walls were covered in an expensive oak paneling. On the walls hung works of art that reminded him of growing up with his Aunt Nelly and her fervent religious belief bordering on the fanatical. Jesus with his disciples, Jesus being crucified in a horrendously bloody fashion, paintings of hell, with people literally on fire and the pitch of agony etched across their faces, it all set off a twinge in his heart. It was more like an ache, not regretting leaving the church, but having stayed so long. He spied one more painting that made him stop and gasp. A dark cloud of anger filled him as he looked at it. Jesus was yanking a baby away from a screaming mother standing in front of a building with the words Planned Parenthood in blood red lettering, with drops of what looked like blood dripping from the ends of the letters. Coming out of the door were women of the most ugly kind, vicious snarling faces, their hair cut in Marine burr fashion, holding signs saying "Womyn Unite!" and "Lesbians Rule!" Jesus was turning with the child, to hand it to a smiling white woman. The woman had beautiful long blond hair cascading down over her shoulders, her breasts larger than normal for a woman her size, especially compared to the flat chested women charging from the Planned Parenthood building. Among the people Jesus was turning to were people of all colors, all smiling a blissful smile and holding signs saying "We Love You!"

Bob turned from the supposed artwork and nearly tripped over a small sculpture. It was Jesus being crucified. Near the foot of the cross was a small pool. Light colored red water was coming down from Jesus's wounds on his hands and feet and falling into the stone basin supporting the sculpture. A sign hung around Jesus's neck indicating that all coins thrown in the water would go to feed the homeless. Bob noticed a lot of change in the basin as the water continued to flow, and most likely was sucked back into the body to be released again by a pump system.

He looked at Greg. "Now you know why I never finished my ministerial studies. This could easily be me."

"Not you, bro'," greg clapped Bob on the back. "Enough of this. I must say, the Planned Parenthood picture is really over the top for taste."
"No doubt," Bob answered. He was becoming subdued, and maybe a little sad at these surroundings.

Greg shook Bob out of his funk. "Let's look at the bric-a-brac. We have a little time."

Sure enough, tables were everywhere. Each one with some kind of white cloth covering the top. On each cloth were hats, scarves, key-chains, fridge door magnets, books, tapes, CDs, tapes and videos for the spiritually challenged individual.

Bob picked up a CD. "What's this? The soundtrack to tonight's show?" He flipped the disc around to read the titles. "Come Down Off The Cross" by Aeosmith, "A Mother's Memories" by Celine Dion, "Mary Magdalene's Lament" by Madonna? What is this stuff?

"I guess only the television audience will get to hear the songs, they'll be playing during the show," Greg explained. "Madonna is playing Mary Magdalene in the show."

"Madonna playing a prostitute? Now there's a stretch. Why not have someone else like say, Meg Ryan play Magsaleene."

"Meg Ryan's playing Mary the Mother of Jesus."

"Oh Christ! You know they could have Mary Hart play something..."

"Stop it!"

"Okay."

"Greg put the CD down. "C'mon, let's grab our seats."

They found their seats about ten rows back from the main stage. The seats were soft almost like an Easy-Boy recliner. A small rack was placed on the back of the chair in front of them. In the rack was a Bible, a hymnal, and a small tract written by the good reverend himself.

"Why You Will Burn In Hell," Bob read aloud. "Now there's a cheery thought."

"EASY!" Greg cautioned. He tried to change the subject. "So, how's it feel to be back in a church?"

"Like you're the one to talk," Bob challenged. "You have been absent more than me. To tell the truth? I have mixed feelings about it. There is something comforting here, but also oddly out of place. These people seem friendly enough..."

"But only if you completely agree with them?" Greg finished the sentence. "Exactly."
The crowd quickly filed in and found their seats. The lights flashed twice, signaling the broadcast was about to begin. Greg checked his watch, eight P.M. on the nose.

A deep booming voice filled the auditorium. "Live from the All Jesus Hallelujah Church and Auditorium in beautiful Evanston, Illinois, the Dr. Reverend Phineas J. Thunderclap would like to present Steven Segal as Jesus Christ in "Come Down Off That Cross." Aerosmith's theme song began rocking the theatre as the crowd applauded wildly. The voice continued. "Madonna as Mary Magdalene, Jean-Claude Van Dam as Judas Iscariot, a special mystery guest as John the Baptist, and special guest, Steve Bushemi as the Centurion."

"Brought to you by, Coca-Cola, the official soft drink of the Saviour. And by Oscar Mayer's Lunchables, when loaves and fish are not enough. And by Sprint, next time you want to talk to God, make it Sprint!"

"Jesus! Nothing like the crass commercialization of Christianity, is there?" Bob asked Greg.

"Roll with it Bob. It's the new millenium," Greg replied.

The booming voice continued. "And now, the man who brings this night to you, the Dr. Reverend Phineas J. Thunderclap." The voice was drowned out by the explosion of applause that filled the auditorium. A man appeared from the right side of the stage and began walking to the center.

"Shit! It's Moses! Bob exclaimed.

The man walked slowly. He carried a curved staff, made of wood, in his right hand. He used it for balance as he walked. A maroon robe covered the body. Bleach white hair covered his head and a long beard covered his face, reaching to his chest. The man stopped at center stage and extended his arms as if he wanted to hug the entire audience.

"Welcome brothers and sisters," he began. "I am the Dr. reverend Phineas J. Thunderclap and would like to thank you for attending or tuning in tonight. This being Good Friday, I would hope all of you would contemplate what you are about to see tonight. These Hollywood stars are not here for glory, but to minister. They hope, like you, to escape the fiery depths of a devil's hell. So for the next hour I hope you will think about hell, and your place in it if you don't repent of your foul wicked ways. Hell is an eternal place where your skin will be burned off your bones while you are alive. With that in mind, we hope you and your family will enjoy 'Come Down
Off That Cross'. Thank you and God bless."

The explosion of applause began again. A few whistles mixed in as well.

"Now that's a cheery thing to think of, hell," Greg commented as
the lights dimmed.

The crowd seemed to move to the edge of their seats in anticipation of
who the Hollywood star would be who would play John the Baptist. It was
Arnold Schwarzenegger! He appeared at the center stage to thunderous applause
as the lights came up. An excited murmur filled the air. "You sons of vypurs!
How doot yu think yu kan xcape God's rath!" He shook his fist at the audience.
Then he stopped and stared in amazement at the back of the auditorium. "Behold,
the Lamb of God!" He gestured to the back while he knelt down.

Bob looked to his left and saw a figure in a dingy white robe sweep past.
On the back of the robe, Bob noticed something.

"Isn't that a 'Nike' swoosh?"

"Product placement, go with it."

When Jesus stopped in front of John, the Baptist arose. He pulled out
a bottle, and making sure the cameras could get a good shot, poured a
bottle of Evian water of Jesus's head. The lights darkened. It was time for
a commercial for the T.V. audience.

Bob turned his head and looked at Greg.

"Don't even say it," Greg warned.

When the lights came up, Jesus now had his disciples, culturally correct
disciples at that. The twelve were equally divided among Hispanics, Native-
Americans, Asian-Americans, Caucasians, African-Americans, and two women,
one who played John, and the other woman played James.

The disciples were with Jesus at a wedding.

Meg Ryan, as Jesus's mother, approached Jesus. "The father of the bride
has run out of wine, and I told him you can help."

"It is not my time," Jesus replied.

"I'm your mother. I don't want any arguments from you," Mary scolded
her son.

The mothers in the audience applauded loudly to Mary's statement.
A man talked to Jesus. "Your mother said you could help me. I don't see
how. The liquor stores are closed by now."

"Take your largest pots and fill them to the brim with water," Jesus
commanded the man.

"But sir, you know how polluted the tap water is here. Those environmentalists actually caused more pollution with their crazy demands."

Bob leaned over to Greg and whispered. "Environmentalists in ancient Jerusalem?"

"Dow Chemical and Exxon put a lot of money into this broadcast just so they could say that," Greg explained. "Just go with it."

Jesus looked at the man intently. "I know what I am doing. I know environmentalists are evil. Only corporations know me and my message. If you support me, you support corporations. And if you support corporations, then you support me."

"What the hell?" Bob looked at Greg.

"Shhh!" A lady behind Bob shushed him. "I've never heard the Gospel of Jesus quite like this before. Finally, a message I can understand."

The father in law dipped a ladle of water from the large pots. "Why, this is a miracle! It tastes like Coca-Cola!"

Other men and women on stage drank from the pots and exclaimed the miracle. "Hallelujah! Jesus made Coke!"

Jesus raised his hands to quiet the crowd. "Now, not only will you not thirst, but you will not be drunk on your way home. This will stop you from drunken chariot driving."

"He is so thoughtful, truly a man of God," the father in law stated.

An older woman stepped up to Jesus. "You may have made water into Coke, but we have five-thousand people here who are starving. What are you going to do about it?"

Jesus sighed and looked heavenward. "Help me provide, Lord." He looked around the room. "Does anybody have some food?"

"I do, sir," a small boy answered. He began to push his way through the wedding feast crowd finally stopping in front of Jesus. He pulled something from his hand basket. "Here Jesus, this is all I have." The boy handed Jesus a soft taco Lunchable.

Jesus tousled the boy's hair. "Because you have given your all, it will be enough."

Magically out of the basket came more Lunchables. Not just soft tacos either. Baloney, nachos, pizza plunges, and pepperoni pizza as well. The
crowd praised Jesus in amazement as they traded their Lunchables with each other. Baloney not being a favorite.

The lights dimmed again.

"What the hell was that?" Bob inquired. "I thought you said I needed a good dose of religion. I've read the Bible. I don't remember Jesus making Coca-Cola, or Lunchables, or praising corporate America."

"Well, it certainly is a different take on the Gospel story, for sure," Greg agreed. "Kinda brings new meaning too the term Blasphemy, don't it?"

"You're obviously not a member of this church," the woman, who had shushed Bob earlier, leaned forward and said. "I', Betty Brone. We in this church know that God is for corporate America. We all benefit with happier lives from it. This is probably how Jesus would act in this day and age."

Bob appeared thunderstruck by Betty's assertions. "So, like clue me in here. Who told you this, or at least gave you these ideas?"

"Why the Dr. Reverend Phineas J. thunderclap, of course," Betty replied. Her eyes glazed over and a sweet, blissful countenance covered her face. Greg leaned over and whispered in Bob's ear. "Cult."

"Amen to that," Bob agreed as he looked at Betty, now leaning back into her chair staring happily comatose towards the stage. He turned his attention back to Greg. "By the way, where's the Sermon On The Mound? Where's caring for the poor and downtrodden? Justice and all that?"

"Too wimpy for these guys," Greg explained. "They're into Victorious Jesus and, as you can see, Corporate Jesus."

"I guess," Bob answered as the lights flashed signaling the end to the latest commercial cycle.

Jesus was sitting at the table of the Last supper. Around the table were two-liter bottles of Coca-Cola, bags of Lay's Potato Chips, and fried chicken.

"Kentucky Fried Chicken at the Last Supper?" Bob asked.

"Shhh!" betty shuusshed Bob again.

"From the looks of it, they'll all die of heart attacks from all that junk food they're eating," Bob ignored Betty.

"SHHH!" Betty repeated louder and punched Bob in the shoulder.

"Go, do what you must do now," Jesus told Judas as Judas walked off stage. The lady playing John leaned onto Jesus's chest and asked, "What shall
we do now?"

"I am going to leave you," Jesus said. "And where I am going you cannot go." He picked up a loaf of Roman Meal wheat bread. After removing a couple slices, he began to break them up. "Take and eat, for this is my body that is broken for you." He passed the plate of bread among the disciples.

Jesus picked up a bottle of Reunite wine and poured some in a large glass. "This is my blood which shall be poured out for you. Take it and drink."
He passed the glass among the eleven.

The lights onstage dimmed.

"This is incredible," greg snickered.

"The most different Easter Story I've ever seen," Bob agreed.
The lights came back up and the stage looked like a small garden. Judas appeared at one side of the stage. Roman soldiers were behind him. Jesus was kneeling in prayer at the center of the stage.

Jesus stood up as Judas came near him. "So, you have come for me then?"

"That I have, Jesus," Judas replied as he began to crouch into a fighting stance.

"Try to take me," Jesus said as he took a defensive posture.

Judas rushed Jesus. He tried to karate kick him in the head, but Jesus was too fast. Jesus ducked the kick and turned Judas into a large rock that he hit with a thud. Judas threw some sand into Jesus's eyes and then head-butted him. Jesus, now staggered, and partly blinded, swung wildly missing Judas and clocking John in the forehead, who had rushed into the fight. John fell like a sack of meal at Jesus's mighty blow. John was now unconscious. Judas quickly kicked Jesus in the head and pounded his fists into the abdomen. Jesus was staggered but not defeated. Judas grabbed a Roman shield and cracked it across the back of Jesus's head, knocking him cold.

The crowd booed lustily.

The stage quickly shifted to Golgotha Hill. Crosses were brought out and the two thieves were quickly put up. Jesus was lifted up in the middle of the stage for all to see.

Walking in front of Jesus was the centurion. "Well, you could save others, but not yourself, eh Jesus? You healed the sick, raised the dead, fed everyone Lunchables, but now you're left there hanging. Pardon the joke will 'ya? So, like if you really are the Son of God, why don't you come
down off that cross?"

Jesus stared down at the haughty centurion. "You know, I think it's time to take out the trash."

"OH SHIT! I think he really is coming down," the centurion exclaimed.

Jesus pulled himself up and pushed off the cross. The nails in his hands popped loose and like deadly missiles found their targets. One drilled into the mouthy centurion dropping him instantly. Another took out a member of the Jewish Council who had spoken against him. The nail holding his feet fired out into the center aisle of the auditorium much to the delight of the wildly cheering crowd.

Jesus quickly dispatched the Romans near the cross. As reinforcements arrived, they found that the Son of God had busted a spear in half and was using the two halves as nunchucks and passed judgment on all who came near. He then hurled a Roman onto one of the thief's crosses, knocking the cross over onto a charging group of soldiers.

"Hey!"Thanks, Jesus," the thief was knocked free from his cross.

"Don't mention it," Jesus replied as he bopped another Roman on the head.

Judas rushed the stage and stopped to face Jesus. "I'll stop you."

"See you in hell!" Jesus replied. He pulled his cross out of the ground and drove it into the chest of Judas. "That's for you and all your environmental friends that try to hurt business people who want to make a Godly profit."

The centurion staggered to his feet and looked at Jesus. "Truly, this man was the Son of God." He then fell over dead.

"Is it over, Jesus?" Mary Magdalene was now standing next to him.

"Not really," Jesus said. "This is only the beginning." Jesus looked at the litter of bodies around him. "But I'm just the man to clean up this garbage. That is, if you'll go with me."

Mary leaned in and kissed Jesus passionately on the mouth.

Jesus then wrapped a bruised and bloodied arm around Mary as they walked off the stage and up the center aisle and out the back.

The crowd was in near delirium. They screamed "Gee-sus! Gee-sus!" Coats and hats were being thrown airborne as the Aerosmith theme music began to pump through the speakers again.

Greg looked at his watch, exactly 9 P.M. "Let's fly!"
"I'm ready," Bob agreed as he followed Greg. "I still don't get it. What does environmentalism have to do with the Easter Story?"

"Nothing I know of," Greg replied. He moved quickly for the door. "These people are nuts. Let's blow this machine."

"Right with 'ya," Bob said.

They both stopped for a few moments as they left the building and breathed the slightly dirty Evanston air. The cool night air stinging their lungs as their ears filled with the din of traffic.

"And I thought your weird dreams about nuns was bad," Greg said as he shook his head. "You defiling nuns is minor compared to what they did to Jesus."

"You know, I still say that if they'd had Mary Hart..."

"Shut-up."
I had been in want of a project to fulfill my tenure requirements at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, when a colleague suggested I investigate a tribe of persons across the border in Kansas. I admit my interest was pricked at the idea. Others had mentioned this phenomenon they had witnessed and I thought it best that I record the behavior of this tribe before someone else did.

The location of the tribe was indeed Kansas. I journeyed to the village of Overland Park to observe, and record, the doings of the tribe. Their place of ritual and fellowship was designated The Oak Park Mall. There were many of these "mall" structures about the countryside of Kansas City and I often heard of the rituals that took place in such structures of cement and steel. This particular mall seemed to have a higher concentration of clannish activity.

It is often good to note the method of transport a people uses to attend meetings of importance. In Africa and India, the elephant is used in only base transportation, but is also revered for its grace and reliability in doing what is required of it. Many civilizations used horses, mules even ostriches as transport to holy sites. As I pulled my motorcar into the lot of the Oak Park mall, I noticed the method of transport used here. The lot was teeming with mini-vans, sport utility vehicles that were commonly nicknamed SUVs, and an occasional station wagon. The sun glanced off the acres of sheet metal stretched out before me. I immediately scribbled onto my pocket notebook my feelings as I witnessed this. The metal was quiet and as I touched the side of a mini-van, cool and unyielding. In most lands, the animals of transport are left alone, like these vans and SUVs, at which time the animals mingle and communicate with each other in their own bonding ceremonies. Elephants rub each other with their trunks and trumpet calls to each other. Here, nothing of that sort was occurring. The sheet metal was a dead object with no desire to reach out to the SUV parked in the spot next to it. I touched a bright red SUV with the words DODGE DAKOTA implanted to its side. A loud whirring and clarion siren began to whoop from it. At first I believed the metal was trying to speak to me in the most discordant way. It was then I realized this was an alarm, meant to scare
others away. Rather than join them together, this was meant to push apart. I scribbled this down as I hastened quickly to what appeared to be the entrance of the vast mall.

My colleagues had suggested to do my research during the day, preferably the afternoon of a weekday when most of the tribe appears at these malls. This would be the best time to observe the rituals that the group participate in. I was assured that appearing at night, or during the weekend, would alter the results of my observations.

As I stepped through the glass doors, I instantly recognized I was in a different world than the one I was accustomed to. What really caught my eye was the tribe itself. It seemed to be made up entirely of women. Most were walking independently of each other. Nearly all were pushing a conveyance that carried a small child. From this point onward, till the conclusion of this report, this tribe and its rituals should be viewed as from a humanoid context. The "person" pushing what appeared to be a baby stroller looked to be female. The protuberances from the chest area looked to be breasts. In most animal species the females produce milk to suckle and nourish the offspring.

I also noticed the garb these women wore. Like most creatures in nature, it was the male that was beautified to attract the female. The robin, the cardinal, and the bluejay to name a few. Among this tribe this must also be the norm. The women were wearing baggy pants and sweatshirts. Many of these women had shorn most of their hair off their head. It appeared a buzz-cut applied to just above the ears. I had seen such coiffures around campus on the local punk rock youth. It was a badge of honor among them and, I surmised, among these women as well.

I walked about this tribe with no interference whatsoever. This was odd, I thought, but paid it no mind. I was glad this tribe saw me not a threat, if they were seeing me at all. There seemed little interaction among the tribe. They just walked around, pushing the strollers, a vacant, faraway look covering their face. They stared straight ahead, never glancing to the left or right. If a small child was holding onto the stroller, they were expected to keep pace with the mother figure.

One of the mothers stopped and began to converse with the small child who held onto the stroller. I hurried over to listen to the conversation.
The woman almost covered the small child with her body, as if she were shielding it from the world around her. It struck me as a beautiful sight. This behavior was seen in other cultures where the mother figure shielded the child to the point of death to protect it. Yet, this seemed strange to me. What did she have to fear from the other women? Was she not safe among the tribe? Also, while shielding the child from the world, was the mother also retarding the development of said child? No coping mechanisms for learning safety were being presented here.

"Can you say...POP? POP?" The mother spoke to her child. The voice had a sing-song quality about it.

Great pain rifled through my feet as another mother blindly ran over my feet as I stood observing. I was surprised by the lack of acknowledgement of my presence. Rather, the woman pushed even harder as she ran over my feet. I noticed her child clinging to the side of the stroller for dear life. I hopped around slightly from the stabbing pain, yet was still unnoticed. A fleeting thought ran through my head that this could be a warning to leave the tribal area. I needed to take a lower profile so as not to raise suspicions.

Having been to malls before, I decided to seek out a bookstore and see what kind of written words this tribe prefers to read. I found a WaldenBooks and looked over the books on display. I saw little for adults here. It was almost all children's books. This culture was enchanted with their children. At one point, I found this a positive. A tribe that values its children and looks out for their welfare. At another point, I wondered about the adults. Did they read at all? The adults seemed to have stopped growing for the sake of the children, not a positive.

I then noticed the first interaction between members of the tribe that were not children. Some impregnated women were surrounded by those with children. They were easy to spot beyond their bloated bellies. They did not have their hair shaved off like the other women. The other women began to immediately stroke the long hair, and then touch their buzz-cuts. They were trying to recruit the women into their way of doing things. They patted the women's bellies and made strange cooing sounds while leaning down to the bellies.

"Is the BABY coming SOON? SOON?" The women talked the same sing-song
cadence she did to her child.

The pregnant women appeared to revel in the attention paid to them. They stroked their long hair and then touched the other's buzz-cuts and nodded an affirmation to get in line and join the tribe's wishes for conformity.

I neared the center of the mall, on the upper floor, when I noticed her. She was leaning on the glass and steel railing. She had the requisite stroller, as well as a young boy clutching the stroller. Her dark green eyes pierced my blue eyes like lazers. The bristles of her buzz-cut stood at attention, like the comb of a cobra ready to strike. She looked me over as she shifted her bulk to her right foot. Her bloated and impregnated body had made sitting impossible. I hoped that my large belly, the result of too many pizzas and Mountain Dew, would make the woman think I was pregnant. I figured my bald head and grizzled beard would give me away.

The woman appeared to be a sentinel of some kind. Most tribes have them. They throw out the unworthy to leave only the holy. Mainly, sentinels are great slabs of manhood, giant knotted rope like muscles and a demeanor of a rabid dog. The look of this fearsome woman made me wish for a rabid dog. She pulled something from her purse and spoke into it. I quickly hurried along and decided to dive into a Camelot music store.

I thought it would be wise to browse a bit, although the female clerks were giving me queer looks as I wandered about. I decided to see what kind of music this tribe listened to while waiting for the sentinel to leave. I tried to find what was popular. Was it rap, Pop, Jazz, what did these people feel closest to? I could find no marked sections at all. It was all meshed into one big pile of music, if that's what you could call this stuff. Entire sections of shelving were given over to Air Supply, Kenny G., and a god—Garth Brooks. I noticed a standing display of music. "Suburban Housewife Blues" was printed on the cover of the CDs. The songs were from the same artists I had seen on the shelves. Apparently these were the favorites of musically challenged housewives everywhere. I was truly a stranger in a strange land. Who this tribe was, and what they were about was becoming clearer to me.

"OUCH!" I screamed as a stroller wheel rolled over my toe. The woman pushing the stroller paid no mind to my scream of pain as she continued
through the store. She had a small angelic cherub of a girl clinging to
the stroller as her mother ran over my feet while talking sing-song to
the child. The child finally spoke and the mother destroyed a rack of Garth
Brooks CDs as she raced into the mall to share with the other women what her
child had spoken.

"I've seen enough," I said to no one in particular. I took the second
running over of my feet for what it was, a warning. Get out, it said. I
had been seen from the moment I had entered. This was a private tribe, one
that did not welcome strangers. I needed no more messages. I knew I had
enough research and this place was beginning to grate on me. Women babbling
incessantly to mini-humans in a sing-song voice. Beaming vacant smiles as
they pushed their progeny in endless circles about the mall hoping somebody,
anybody, would notice them. I needed to get out of this unholy madhouse.

I cut across in front of Dillard's when I noticed HIM. It was a MAN!
He was with his wife near the Bombay Company store. Both were holding onto
the stroller as they walked. The couple stopped in front of the store and
the man moved toward the window. It was then I noticed--HANDCUFFS! He was
handcuffed to the stroller. The wife gave a quick yank on the stroller
handle, pulling the husband back.

"But I just wanted to look through the window, dear," the man whined
to his wife.

The woman stomped her left foot to the tile floor and glared at her
husband. "I don't care! What if someone had tried to steal our precious
Paige, or tried to rape me while you were LOOKING IN THE WINDOW?" The last
part she screamed at her husband.

The husband dropped his head and slumped his shoulders forward as if
a great weight had snapped them. "Yes, dear. I know how wrong and foolish
I was."

The woman's countenance changed immediately to radiant joy. Her eyes
glowed and a perkiness filled her voice. "That's much better. Paige wants
to go to the Disney Store and then try on shoes." She leaned the front of
the stroller and talked to the infant. "Ain't that RIGHT Paige?" They
continued through the mall.

I turned around to get back to where I was before when I noticed the
sentinel rolling towards me with her stroller and little boy grasping her
pantleg. In most tribal cultures, the warning to leave is a spear through the abdomen. This culture just ran over your foot with a stroller. I trembled at the force this sentinel could generate while running over my feet. I turned around and sped past the handcuffed husband. He gave me a "help me" look as I got to the escalator and headed toward the ground floor. I could circle around and take the stairs back up to my car and get out of this place.

I popped off the escalator into a sea of pregnant women, strollers, buzz-cuts and handcuffed husbands. A stage had been set up and a woman who was dressed like Snow White was greeting the children while one of her helpers gave the child a coupon for a video.

This had to be the reason for the existence of this culture. A crowd of this magnitude gathers for only important events. This seemed to be a religious ceremony, or a time of passage for the children. Since I was already seeing this was a culture that pandered to the children at the exclusion of adult growth, I knew this was a certain key to my research. Sentinel or not, I must find out what these people were doing, and why this ceremony I was witness to was so important. I slipped through the crowd to get closer to the stage and see more of what was going on. Imagine my dismay when I realized that yes, the whole ceremony was nothing more than a money-making ploy by the Disney Store to sell Snow White videos.

As I silently pushed my way towards the stage, I noticed more men. Most were chained to their strollers, heads looking down. A few looked up at me. They had their "please shoot me now" looks. They knew this was their fate, trapped in an unholy mall filled world where mini-humans and women with sing-song voices ruled. Their once proud manhood, and carefree days, ripped and cut away from them. They had become eunuchs, not from a Lorena Bobbitt knife, but from an even deeper cut, living in suburbis. Welcome to Hell, Family Values is thy name.

Upon reaching the stage, I noticed men walking freely about. It was strange. Each of these men held a camcorder firmly in hand. Possible, these men were the designated recorders of these tribal ceremonies, no matter how trivial they were. They could also be men who had surrendered the more traditional model of male for the happy suburban life. As their precious children greeted Snow White, father was there to record the historic
moment on videotape. Then it could be relived over, and over, and over, and over again.

"Ya know, the XP3 model has the biggest lens of any camcorder," I heard one man say.

"That's last years model," one man replied. "The YL45 has an even bigger lens than the XP3." his voice sounded with a tinge of triumph.

"Really? Can I have a look?" The first man said as the second proudly handed over his camera. And so it was with these men. Each one showing the other how long the necks of their camcorders were, or how light they were to hold.

I was readily taken in by these men. I was a part of their club, back-slaps, winks, and handing me their cameras to hold. It was a ritual bonding experience between the males of the tribe, and they were willing to accept me as one of their own.

Despite the welcoming of these men, I felt uneasy. Whatever this world was, it was boring, bland, and certainly self-contained. These people believed they were safe and secure in their world and something knotted my stomach. What was it? Did these people make me ill, or was I jealous of their simplicity? Their lives were patterned and mapped out in a way mine was not. It was oddly appealing to me. Your life would be mapped out for you, no deviation, no change, just a secure blandness that while somewhat comforting, is also a straitjacket to the soul. If I joined them would I be like the men with camcorders, or would I be like the men with the "just shoot me now" looks?

"So, you got any kids?" A voice to my right spoke.

It was the SENTINEL! The Sahara Desert flooded my mouth and a cold clamminess covered my skin. Her green eyes bore into mine with a cool, unpassionate look. Her belly nearly touched mine. The boy looked up at me, a small drizzling nasal discharge creeping out his left nostril.

I hesitated, my voice mechanical and fearful, "No, I don't have any kids. Why do you ask?"

The sentinel leaned in closer. She'd had pepperoni pizza for lunch. "You should not be HERE!" Her voice rose at the last part of her sentence like some mad primal scream. "THIS place is for US! It is HOLY ground to us! No one understands us, no one understands the FAMILY like we do!"
Her green eyes looked me up and down. Her face was contorted and twisted in anger and disgust. "Your type sicken me. Without children, you have no idea what life is really about. If you haven't had a baby poop and pee on you, you don't know what life is. If you haven't had a two-year-old throw up on you, you haven't lived!"

I backed up slightly. I noticed other women putting their arms around their children to try and protect them from a Philistine like myself. Some men were holding their camcorders in a threatening manner. Just what I feared, to be bludgeoned to death with the new YL45 camcorder. I looked at the sentinel. "Thanks for the advice. I'll keep that in mind. By the way, your kid's nose is running."

The sentinel's face flew into alarm as she quickly dug into her purse for a tissue to wipe the boy's nose.

I knew this may be my only chance. I knifed my way through the crowd.

The sentinel's voice was loud and braying at my heels. "STOP HIM! HE'S NOT LIKE US. HE HAS DESECRATED OUR HOLY GROUND!"

A man chained to a stroller screamed at me as I came near. "Quick, run while you can. Get out of here!"

The man's wife quickly rifled her diaper bag and shoved a Pamper into his mouth to silence him.

I jumped onto the escalator and tried to take two steps at a time. I looked up and noticed three large pregnant women standing at the top, blocking my way. As I neared the top, I rolled across the middle onto the "down" escalator. I hit the top with a bound and ran past the pregnant ladies.

A wall of women with their strollers were to my right. I would have to run around them to my left, past the Bombay Company and cut back across a small walkway. I made the narrow walkway. An angry mother lobbed a pink plastic Baby Wipes canister at me, it ricocheted off my head, but I continued on.

A diaper bag came sliding across the floor towards me. It was yellow with the likeness of a purple dinosaur on its side. A word balloon came from the mouth with the words "I Love You!" stenciled in. The bag caught my foot, spilling me towards the floor. I dipped my shoulder as I fell and rolled back to my feet. I stopped for a second in front of a three-year-old wearing a T-shirt with the saying "This Baby Is For FAMILY VALUES!" on it.
The boy's mother threw her arms around him. "Please don't hurt my precious Chad."

"Get a life, lady," I snorted as I took off again. I ran in a haphazard fashion so as to scare the other mothers.

I raced hard to my motorcar and fired it over. The mall entrances were vomiting women with strollers, some with men chained to them, and pregnant women, who were giving chase to me. I gunned my car to the nearest exit. The mini-vans and SUVs sounded like angry bees as I sped past. Bees anxious to sting one who had fouled their holy nest.

I do not know how long I drove. I knew I could not go home right away. For all I knew, they could have followed me. I circled the city like a lost soul, looking for a place to call my own.

The chair, in my office at the University, was surprisingly comfortable to sleep in. I awoke before dawn and paced about my office trying to piece together my thoughts on the previous day's research, and my narrow escape from the angry tribe.

The sentinel was right. I could not understand them and their ways. I was single and no children to attend to. My life was far different from the one this tribe of people were living. The mall was their holy place. It was where they could be themselves and not face the judgements or someone like myself. In the confines of their culture, they were as normal as could be.

I learned never to desecrate their holy temple, the mall, anymore. Never again, I said. Never again.
Paula thought about what she had become and how she had got there. This really was not the life she chose, but it had chosen her. Somehow, it all made sense. She had not always been the prettiest of little girls. Some had even called her ugly, which was a cross she never wanted to bear. Her hair was the requisite blond, but somewhat stringy and unmanageable. Cobalt blue eyes were set too far back in their sockets giving a beady appearance to them. To top that off was the abundance of freckles splashed about her face. On most children they gave a look of cuteness, to Paula they gave a look of oddness. Something may be wrong with her, so people would think as they saw her walking down the street with her mother.

Paula's mother was a different sort all together. The beautiful blond hair that cascaded down to her shoulders in a wave of warmth that invited people to come to her and introduce themselves. They wanted to be near her beauty. A nose of perfect Roman shape, arms that gracefully swung at her sides, when not holding the hand of her unhandsome child. Yet she seemed to pay no mind to the homeliness of the progeny from her loins. Maybe it was because it had been such a difficult birth, and finally her only one. Bedridden since the third month and having been ordered by the doctors to after three miscarriages, she rarely moved. Maybe she just knew that something would change for Paula.

Paula's father was the perfect specimen of man, as her mother was of females. He was tall and strong, though his frame was a bit wiry. He too sported blond hair and blue eyes. His only flaw was a distended smile that gave the appearance of a jackal ready to pounce. The smile belied the warmth of the soul that was wrapped around it. Dad had two great loves in life: Elvis and the Los Angeles Dodgers. His greatest moment was when it was Elvis impersonator day at the Dodgers. They all dressed as Elvis and joined the one hundred Elvis impersonators in singing the national anthem. Paula could also remember Dad saying blessing over the evening meal, closing with an "Amen" and a "Thank you very much" delivered in his best Elvis voice.

Paula was somewhat popular in elementary school. Most of the kids thought she was funny looking because of all her freckles, but they liked to stop
by her house and watch her dad perform magic tricks. In fact, the only reason they came to her birthday parties was because of her dad. They would pile the presents up next to Paula and go stand around her dad and let him pull quarters out of their ears, and long connected handkerchiefs out of their shirtsleeves. Meanwhile, Paula would open her gifts and would go around and properly thank each of the children for their gifts, even though they ignored her and watched her father drink a pitcher of water and then spit it out as Grape Kool-Aid. Ohhhs and Aahhs would fill the house as Paula would go back and sit down among her mountain of gifts and wonder why the other boys and girls liked her father more than her.

"Quit showing off," Mom would say to dad and move her head towards the abandoned Paula at the card table.

"Just one moment, okay?" Dad would plead.

"Stop with the three card monty, all right?" Mom said.

"Where's the card, where's the card...what? okay," Dad would finally break up the game. "Enough magic for now kids. How about some cake and ice cream?"

"Mommy, why don't the kids like me?" Paula finally asked her mother after the birthday party.

"Oh honey, the other kids like you," Mom was desperately trying to find a way to soothe her daughter. "They wouldn't come to your party if they did not like you."

"They just come because Daddy does magic tricks and card games," Paula whined as she rested in her mother's arms. "Plus he does Elvis."

"I know honey, it's just his way," Mom tried to explain. "I need to talk to him about it, I know." Mom stroked Paula's stringy hair. "I need to before some of the parents do."

Paula noticed something on her mother's arm, like a scar of some kind. "What's this from?" She asked touching what looked like a puncture wound.

Mom looked a little startled at the question. At first she tried to cover it. Then she started scratching it. "It's nothing, honey. Someday you will understand and I will explain it to you." She tried to think of a way to change the subject. "Yvonne liked you."

"But she's dead now."
"I know honey, I know," Mom felt backed into a corner. She had seen the looks other people gave them when she walked down the street with Paula. Just because her face was almost brown from the accumulation of freckles did not mean she should not have friends. Okay, it looked like some weird skin disease that doctors assured her she would grow out of. Her face was funny shaped, very hard for her to admit, and her arms and legs seemed long and dangley. It pained her at times to think that the only child she could ever give birth to may turn out to be homely and a tomboy. No, she must not think that way. She scratched her arm again, and looked at the wound from so long ago, and then she looked at Paula. Things would work out. She herself was a bit on the tomboy side, until...Paula was special and would grow up to be a very important and beautiful woman. "Honey, you are a special young lady. Sometimes, other kids are jealous of special young ladies. Always remember, you have a big life ahead of you, Paula. Never shortchange yourself, my dear."

"I still wish Yvonne was still around."

Mom patted Paula's hand as she lay in her arms. "I do too, sweetie, I do too." Paula had met Yvonne at Nixon Elementary and they became nearly inseparable. Yvonne had buck teeth that made her an outcast like Paula was. They played dolls together but also found time to climb trees, ride bikes, and generally get the scrapes and bruises that all children get. Sleepovers were a big part of Paula's life as the two bonded almost like sisters. Yvonne had no fellow siblings like Paula.

It was the unwritten psychic code of motherhood that said Paula was Yvonne's mother's child as much as Yvonne was Paula's mother's child. Both set of parents got along great and babysitting for one was babysitting for the other as the couples double dated for movies, concerts, and shows of all kinds. At times they even took the two children along, and Paula was never happier.

This was especially true when the circus came to town and the two children got to have an elephant ride. The huge gray beast lumbered mightily under them, it's tough leathery skin rough to touch. Paula would rub her hand on the yielding skin, feeling it ripple as she touched it. She felt so high in the air, like she could reach up and touch the clouds. She doubted Dad could push her this high on the swings. Yvonne was
giggling uncontrollably, as was she.

It was a day of such joy, followed by such uncomprehendable sorrow. The next day, after the circus had closed, Yvoone and her parents were in their car when a van load of drunken circus performers smashed into Yvonne's car, spinning it behind the van, then crashing into another truck. The truck was loaded with elephants who became frightened and broke the small lock holding them in. They stampeded out of the trailer and crushed the tiny Chevy Cavalier under their heavy hoofs. The car was smashed flat, along with Yvonne and her family. Paula was unconsolable—not that she could really turn to her mother and father at the time, they were as grief stricken as she. Paula tore her circus pennant down and burned it in her waste basket, much to her father's chagrin. "You could have burned the house down!"

"I know. Why did those elephants have to step on Yvonne?"
"They were scared, honey. They didn't mean it."
"I never want to go to a circus again."
"Neither do I, punkin. Neither do I."

Paula's father bought her a chemistry set a few weeks later.
"Do you think that's wise?" Mom asked.
"I had one as a kid. And I thought it would help cheer her up."
"But you were a boy. Most little girls are not that interested in chemistry."
"Look, her teacher says she likes science and math and I thought this would be a way to encourage her. Plus, I don't want her to chop up a frog on the dining room table."

Paula's mom scratched her head. "I was kind of hoping to get her interested in journalism, writing, stuff like that."
"Why?"
"Dunno. Just sounded like something she would enjoy."
"Well, let's see if she can blow something up first."
"That's what I was afraid of."

Paula fell in love with the chemistry kit. Sure, it would never replace Yvonne, but then Yvonne never had all these cool chemicals. She made liquid smoke one day. That made mom angry when she had to air out the entire house after the experiment went a touch ary.
"That's it, no more chemistry!"
"But Mom! It was an accident."
"I don't want to have to scrape you off the walls because of one of your accident."
"MOM! It won't happen."

Paula eventually won the argument, with the help of dad who still thought the chemistry set was a good idea. Bored one day, Paula decided to mix all her chemicals together. Nothing happened. She took the beaker and shook it violently hoping for a reaction from all the chemicals. All it did was turn a pasty white color and fizz. Paula sighed and set down on her bed and sighed deeply. Nothing. How to get this to do something. And such a yucky color too. She took a swig from her cherry Kool-Aid and received an idea. It was like one dropped from the gods. She had been reading The Illiad in English class and thought maybe the gods were real and one had dropped a great idea on her. She poured some of the cherry Kool-Aid into the beaker and shook it up rapidly again. Still nothing. She dumped the rest of the Kool-Aid into the beaker and shook it for a good five minutes. It may have been less because the beaker turned from cool, because of the sugar drink, to warm to the touch. She set the beaker down and noticed the reddish brown color it was turning. She backed away as the beaker began to emit popping noises and a foam started to rise in it. Suddenly it exploded and blew sideways, breaking the window into her room. The force knocked Paula off her feet, much to her delight. "Whoa! Shit!"

Her mother raced into the room, smelled the smoke, and saw the window and the delighted but dazed look on Paula's face and did the math. "THAT'S IT, young lady! I don't care what your father says!"

This ended the scientific phase of Paula's academic career.

A few years later, Paula found something even more combustible, and chemically dangerous: boys.

Despite her funny appearance, a few boys did find her attractive. She felt it was important to talk to her parents about it.

Mom and dad were busy prattling on about their days. Dad was whining about how the city did not want to pay for new sewer lines even though they were near fifty-years-old. He granted this was California and stuff like
that lasts longer, but in these boom times you need to fix stuff so you
don't need to fix it when the lean times hit. Mother complained that
coffee had gone up again, and what were those Colombians doing down there?
The grocer told her some bogus story about a freeze hitting the coffee
plants and they may have to plant a new crop.

"They're probably planting poppy seeds to make heroin and cocaine
and all that," father said.

"Don't say that stuff in front of Paula," Mom scolded. "Have another
pork chop. They were on sale at Albertson's."

Dad shook his head. He turned his attention towards Paula. "How was
school today? learn anything exciting?"

Paula swallowed her mashed potatoes. "Mom, Dad, what does it mean when
a boy says he likes you?"

Both parents stopped dead in mid motion. Dad dropped his fork onto
his plate, the ringing of metal to porcelain filling the room.

"What did you say, honey?" Mom asked.

"What does it mean when a boy says he likes you?" Paula asked. She
could hear her dad tittering and trying to hide his face.

"This isn't funny," Mom protested.

"Yes it is," Dad replied. "God, I feel old."

"Ignore your father. Go on, dear."

"Jake Jennings said he likes me and walked me home from school."

"Do you like him?" Mom asked.

"Yeah, I think so. He always was knocking my books out of my hand, and
pulling my hair and stuff. Then he hit a boy who knocked the books out of
my hands today. He said he did it because he liked me. And then I said I
liked him. Only I feel real funny inside, like I'm sick or something."

Paula could see and hear her dad laughing and trying to hide it from her.
The loud snickering was giving him away.

"Would you help here," Mom scolded.

"I am. I'm trying," Dad began to snort from laughter.

"Some men do make you sick dear," Mom reassured. She looked at the now
openly laughing father and shook her head. "Some more than others."

"Was it the beans-and-wienies I had for lunch that made me sick?"

Paula asked.

Mom broke down at that question and joined Dad in uproarious laughter.
"I'm sorry, honey. Your father is being the usual bad influence he is. We'll talk about this after supper, okay?"

They sat Paula down on a folding chair directly in front of them. The parents sat on the couch and Mom put Paula's hands in her own.

"Sweetie, we have to talk to you about some things. Some of the things that our parents, Grandma and Grandpa had to talk to us about."

"Or didn't talk to us about," Dad said in a disgusted tone. "Let's cut to the chase here, Paula, has anyone told you about sex?"

"That's outrageous!" Mom slapped Dad on the arm. She turned her attention to Paula. "That was not nice. One, I should never slap your father, no matter how desperately he deserves it. People do not hit each other, okay? But also, your father was being crude! Now, have you ever heard anything in school, or elsewhere, about the birds and the bees?"

"You mean sex, right?"

Dad burst into laughter again.

"Would you stop?" Mom requested.

"I'm sorry, it is funny though..."

"This is our daughter, you know!"

"I know, I know," Dad tried to reassure his wife. He looked at Paula. "I'm not trying to blow this off, I know this is serious stuff. It just sounds a little funny to me, okay? Now, when a man loves a woman, they get, shall we say, hormonally excited?"

"Horny?"

"Right, horny. And then the man, in a state of arousal, umm...let's see. Remember when we took you on that train ride, when you were eight and the train went in the tunnel?"

"Train went in the tunnel?" Mom asked. "What in the world is that?"

Dad was clearly flustered. "It's the only analogy I can think of right now. If I told it the way I heard it, this would sound like a porno movie."

"Well, you're certainly doing damage to Mr. Roger's Neighborhood as we speak." Mom began to giggle.

Paula grabbed the floor. "Look, I know about sex from the Health education classes I took last year. The man's penis enters the woman's vagina and through vigorous rubbing brings issue which is the sperm which
which can impregnate a woman if she is ovulating."

"Paula!" Mom jumped off the couch. Dad just covered his eyes, shook his head and released a low moan.

"Gee Mom, get with the times," Paula scolded her mother. "I'm not going to do anything stupid you know."

"I've heard enough," Dad announced. "I wonder if the Dodgers are on?"

Despite her newfound interest in boys, Paula still loved science. She had to get a special bug for her Biology class. She hated doing these projects. Especially since it meant finding bugs, killing them, and pinning them onto a styrofoam plate. Paula hated death. Maybe because she still missed Yvonne and all the fun they had. She could imagine them sitting around and talking about boys. Paula stopped for a moment and stared at the heavens, now shielded by a perfect blue sky, no clouds, no jet vapor trails. She knew Yvonne was watching her. "I miss you, Yvonne." Paula felt a tear form and gladly let it fall. God, how long had it been? She sighed deeply and went about her task of looking for the perfect bug to kill and get an "A" in Biology. How unfair, she thought, to take a bug's life all for a stupid grade.

Then she saw it. The perfect bug! It was one like she never had seen before. It looked like a member of the species arachnid. It had eight legs, like a spider, but it was different. It was blue. Who had ever heard of a blue spider? Maybe it was from South America or someplace else and had found its way over here on a ship, Paula thought. The thing was, it had a head! She had never seen a spider with such a head. The head was green in color and had two long hairy feelers, or antenna extended from the head. She had to catch it, it would be the find of the school. If it was rare, maybe she could get in the papers. She moved a rock and tried to get close. It was like the spider came to her. It was not running away. In fact, it jumped on her arm and began to crawl up to near where the crook of her elbow was. Paula never minded bugs running on her. Yes, they were yucky, but their legs always tickled.

She watched the little head of the spider raise up, like it was looking at the sky. Then it plunged down into her arm, its mandibles clenching her
flesh. Paula screamed a gut-wrenching scream from a part of her deep within. Something released from the mandibles and bore into her skin it felt like it hit a vein or something because a sharp warmness raced up her arm. Paula's screaming increased and she shook her arm, the spider flying off and cartwheeling into some bushes. Paula raced to the house she could feel something coursing through her veins. "MOM! MOM!" she screamed. "Help me! Help me!"

Mom ran out form the house to see why Paula was screaming the most heart rending wails. "What's wrong, dear?"

"My arm! My arm! It bit me. Something is in me," Paula was screaming her replies. She could see the terrified look on her mother's face.

"Where were you bit? Show me. Let's find the bug first."

Paula found herself babbling incoherently as she pulled her mother to the site of the spider bite. Her gut-churning sobs and cries made it near impossible to tell her mother what had happened.

Mom grabbed her and shook her violently. The terror of losing her only child was filling her with a poison that could be matched only by whatever was flowing in Paula's veins. "You've got to tell me what it was. We have to know before we go to the hospital. Answer me, baby, answer me!"

Paula tried to describe the spider to her mother but felt suddenly confused. Had she really seen it, was this the poison working on her? Maybe her nervous system was about to collapse. "It was blue, yes blue. Almost an inch long and a green head..."

"With big hairy feelers?" Mom finished the description and her hand flew to her mouth, covering it as she backed away from Paula.

"I don't want to die, Mommy," Paula saw the look on her mother's face as she backed away and became even more scared. Her heart was racing at an incredible rate. It was probably the poison. Maybe it would give her a heart attack. She swore she could feel every part of her being now. And Mom was there to watch her only child die. But wait, Mom was smiling, almost laughing, she WAS laughing? Laughing! "What are you laughing at? I'm dying!"

"Oh no, no dear, you're not dying," Mom put an arm around her now hysterical and shaking daughter. "In fact, you are going to live. And live a wonderful life!" She looked heavenward and said a loud "Thank you!" As if God could hear her only if she shouted. "A replacement for me. And my
only daughter, thank you, gods, thank you." She looked into the disbeliefing look on the face of her daughter. The tears had run her make-up and her hair was slicked back from the sweat that had poured out from all the excitement. "C'mon dear, we have to celebrate."

"But I may DIE! What's wrong with you?" Paula screamed at her mother.

"Oh no, no, no, you will live!" Mom's voice cackled like a drunken sailor during a three-day drink.

Mom pulled Paula into the house and opened the liquor cabinet. "Don't tell your father about this. Let's see..." the woman put a finger to her lips as if she were trying to remember something that had been long ago buried in the recesses of her memory. "Ah yes, a good red wine will do." She hummed an aimless tune and poured her daughter a glass of red wine. "Now a toast to you!" She held her glass over and clinked the glasses together. The slight ringing sound wafting through the air. She noticed Paula staring at her with a dumbfounded expression.

"Don't you think I should be headed for the hospital, rather then getting wasted with my mother?"

Mom laughed a deep laugh. "Let me show you something you have seen before, but now deserves explanation. Your father has seen it, but I never told him the truth about it." She moved around the table and knelt next to Paula, wiping a few tears from her eyes. "Let's see the spider bit you just around the crook where your elbow bends, right?"

"Well, yeah, I didn't tell you that, did I?" Paula wondered if she had till she looked at her mother's arm. Paula gasped in air and squealed. Her mother had a puncture wound right where Paula's puncture wound was. Paula's was still bruising at a frightening rate, but they were exactly the same.

"The bruising will go away in a couple of days. I'll get you some ice for it so it won't swell so bad." Mom headed towards the kitchen.

"So what it this?" Paula called after her mother.

"You've been bitten by the bug," Mom answered then giggled slightly. She handed a tea towel filled with ice to her to cover the wound. "When Granny gets over here, I'll have her show you hers."

"She's got it too?"

"Yep. She was the first. Great granny did not, at least if she did she never told anyone." Mom took a long swig from her glass. "About your
age, I was out in the yard, pulling weeds or some kind of nonsense and all of a sudden this bug shows up. Looks like a spider, just like you described, runs right up my arm and bites me, and then jumps off after it had shot something into my bloodstream. I was hollering like you, till I described it to my mother. She immediately sat me down, poured me a glass of red wine and we celebrated."

"Celebrated what?"

"Oh yeah, sorry. You probably want to know about the bug that bit you. It's not apparent now, but you my dear, are going to be a journalist. You got bit by the bug and it is at this very moment coursing through your veins on its way to your brain and nestling deep within your heart."

"But I've never had a desire to write, or work on a paper. I only read the funnies and sports scores out of the paper. Why should I want to be a journalist?" Paula asked. She could see no reason that stupid bug bite could determine what she was going to do for the rest of her life.

Mom drained the rest of the glass and poured another for herself. "You don't think so now, but in a month or so, you will. It will burn in your veins like a fire of unquenchable thirst. It's almost an addiction, and it never goes away, never goes away." Mom threw down her drink quickly.

"You never told dad about this?"

Mom reached over and patted her daughter on the arm. "Let's just say it's a secret among the women of the family and leave it at that. When I first was dating your father and he asked me about the wound on my arm, I just told him it was a gardening accident. He was satisfied and never brought it up again."

Nearly a month went by and nothing more was said about the bug bite. Paula had nearly forgotten it when one Sunday morning she was up early and brought in the Sunday paper. Normally, she would find the comics first, then steer into the Sports page, the life long Dodgers fan she was becoming, courtesy of her father, would beckon her. Today though, she plopped the paper down on the kitchen table and the Opinion page slid out and hit the floor. She picked it up and became intrigued by a story about illegal immigration and how it was affecting the job market in greater Los Angeles. The comics and the Dodgers quickly lost their luster as Paula found herself engrossed in the opinions of people from all over the country. Even subjects she knew
nothing about fascinated her. The Letters page nearly brought her to tears as she read passionate letters about everything from the budget deficit in Washington, to the lack of manhole covers in East L.A.

She immediately enrolled in a journalism class at school. It was near symbolic because her boyfriend at the time had decided to move on. That was fine with Paula. She now was introducing herself to her new lover, the printed page.

It was about this time that another change came over her. Her body began to morph into a more human form, at least Paula thought so. She questioned if maybe the bug bite had something to do with it, but Mom was silent. She just smiled at her, which made Paula believe even more that the bite had something to do with it. The brown patches of freckles that had plagued her from infancy were now fading and disappearing. Her "Roman" nose that seemed to have a crook in it was mysteriously straightening out. Her long blond hair was now acquiring a wave to it, and it flowed like her mother's had flowed from her head. It was now soft and breeze driven, waving like a flag that followed her everywhere. The too long arms that gave her a gangly and awkward appearance now allowed the rest of her torso to catch up to her and her limbs seemed in proper proportion to the rest of her body. Paula's body now moved with the grace and ease of a well-bred cheetah, moving with athleticism and power. Although she never had steady boyfriend after high school, she was never lonely.

She had already decided to attend Cal State Bakersfield so she didn't bother to apply anywhere else. She loved the idea of being close to home. She loved her little family and liked the idea of someday being more a friend than a daughter to her mother. It seemed they were moving in that direction, and she knew her mom was more than overjoyed that the bug had bitten her and that she would become a journalist.

"Why didn't you go back to the paper after you had me?" Paula asked one day as she helped her mother weed the vegetable garden.

"I really don't know, dear," Mom replied. "I guess it was because I was having so much fun with you. Plus, your father was old-fashioned in that way. He liked the idea of me raising the children, not a daycare or babysitter."

"Do you ever regret it?"
"Heavens no! I have had a great life with you and your father. Sometimes you think how things could be different, and you wonder if they would have been better, but they might have been worse." Mom pulled a carrot out of the ground. "There's a big one." She shook the dirt off it. "I guess in some ways people live through their children. They hope they will do better than they have. But no, I have no regrets. Besides, you're going to have a great life my dear, I can feel it."

Paula knew her mother was lying to her about having no regrets. She knew it from when she was a small child and would watch her mother watch the evening news. Mother would wring her hands when a big story was on. She first noticed it when Watergate happened and Nixon resigned. At her young age, Paula thought mom was just full of anxiety about what had happened. But now, after the bug bite and mom's words that it would "always stay with you" she knew why she wrung her hands. Mom wanted to be there, reporting in some capacity where the action was. She saw it again when the Challenger blew up, when the Berlin Wall came down and during the Gulf War. She was on the sidelines and needed to be in the game. It was tearing her apart. Paula knew she had to do her best, not only for herself, but so mom could live through her.

The subject was never broached until a Sunday afternoon when dad had gone to play golf with the mayor and some of the city council people. Paula was left at the kitchen table with her mother. She spied her mother smiling at her over the Sunday Times Metro section.

"I told you that the bug would change you," Mom said as she sipped her cup of sun tea.

Paula rattled the paper slightly as she looked at the title page. She smiled at her mother's broad smile. "Yeah, I guess you were right. I thought you were crazy that day I got bit."

"When my mother told me about the bite, I thought she was crazy too." Mom laughed at the thought. "I honestly never thought it would happen to you. Look at you now thought, reading more than just the comics and sports."

"I know. I find this stuff so interesting now."

Mom seemed lost in her own world. She was ignoring Paula as she rambled on. "Someday, I hope to see your name on a byline in some paper in this country. Who knows, maybe you'll go on to television and be an anchor.
person on a newscast. God knows you have the face for television, and I'm sure the talent as well. The bug took care of that."

"So it was the bug that gave me this beauty?"

"No, the bug sets it off. It's like it becomes your time to blossom. And blossom you did, Paula."

Paula and her mother just stared at each other for a moment. Each one lost in their thoughts about each other. Paula could tell that her mother was pinning her hopes and dreams on her. It gave her a queasy feeling deep in her guts knowing that someone else was wishing a life on you that maybe down the road you decide is not for you. Or like your life is completely mapped out for you, by someone else, no decisions, no objections, just follow the Yellow Brick road before you. Yet she still felt that burning in her arm as she laid the paper down. It was like a force of destiny controlling her. She knew she was imagining things, but did Hitler feel this way? Did he know he was destined to destroy the world, long before it actually came to pass? Did F.D.R. and Churchill know they were born to save the world from Hitler? Did bugs bite them of a different kind that foreshadowed to them their destinies? How about Martin Luther King, Jr? They said he talked of death a lot, did he foresee his demise at the assassin's bullet? Paula needed relief.

"Gotta go, Mom. I need to go surfing." She just had to find a diversion. These thoughts drove her crazy. Mom was being nice, but sometimes pushy about her future. Paula had always thought a "great life" is what you make it, not one mapped out for you.

Paula eventually landed her first job at the local Bakersfield paper. Her initial excitement at the prospect of working at the paper waned into the boring dullness of the same stories, over and over. While her mother thrilled over her byline she saw in the paper, Paula would wonder if she had done the right thing, if she was in the right place.

Working the city council meetings each week was getting a bit dull. And the discussions seemed to be an elevation of the trivial. Try to make a three hundred word story up about the riveting problem of whether Third and Grand needed a new traffic light. The hysterical mother angle was always good to play up. In this instance, a mother thought her children could get hit on the bust street if the district lines would ever be redrawn and her children,
yet to be born, would have to cross the street. In her mind, this meant a traffic light needed to be installed as soon as possible.

"My husband and I are trying to have children. When we do, and if you ever redraw the lines, they may get killed going across that street." The woman complained.

What surprised Paula was that the city council actually took the poor deranged woman seriously and spent nearly two hours discussing the plan to put a traffic light there. This despite the fact the woman had no children, her kids, if she ever had them, would never cross the street, and the school board was in no mind to redraw the district lines anytime soon.

Paula's article on the meeting caused a stir within the Bakersfield community. Thanks to the power of the press, the hidden dangers of the corner of Third and Grand were now exposed to the light of day. The good citizens of Bakersfield were not about to allow the story to go unfinished.

The mayor's office was swamped with calls from angry mothers, and upset local politicians up in Sacramento over the story. The city council then approved the traffic light, just to relieve the pressure they were getting.

It was Rick, her current boyfriend, who suggested she parlay her success at the paper into a television job.

"You have a face made for television, baby," Rick said. If your mother and boyfriend both agree on something, which is rare, Paula thought that maybe it was good advice. She soon landed a reporter's job on the local T.V. newscast.

Once again, she found herself stuck going to city council meetings, as well as car wrecks and fires. Granted, this was not the most exciting town in America, but something had to be going on.

Then the circus came to town.

Paula decided she had a score to settle with these characters. They had taken her best friend from her childhood from her. She bit her lip and got over her shakes at just the mention of the word "circus".

She wore a hidden microphone, and at times, a camera, and passed herself off as a person desperate for a job, even if only for the weekend. She was given the job as peanut vendor and was introduced to the sordid world of the circus.

She was able to show how the circus reused stale peanuts, and even bag6
that people threw away were retrieved and resold to an unsuspecting public. Her camera shot of her digging into the trash and finding a half eaten bag, then cleaning them up and reselling them to a small child, brought howls of protest from the community.

The most damning evidence of the behavior of the circus folk came from the repeated unwanted advances Paula had to endure. All which were caught on tape. Most of the advances were made by performers, especially clowns, after severe drinking bouts which nearly left them flat on the ground.

"These performers, supposed 'family entertainment' purveyors, have shown repeatedly that they are at best, alcoholic lechers." The video showed a drunken clown, still in full make-up, drinking a bottle of Jack Daniels straight down. Another splice of film showed a man, the elephant trainer, staggering up to Paula and offering to "show you my trunk."

The public was outraged. They demanded heads. The final report showed the drunken clowns driving off in a car towards the town, none of whom were capable of driving, due to excessive alcohol intake. Paula really drove the nail in the coffin by showing the drunken clowns racing through the red light at the newly installed traffic light at Third and Grand. "What if a child had been crossing the street?" Paula closed her report with that comment.

The entire state was in an uproar over the report. The State Senate demanded action and several of the circus people were thrown in jail and the circus was forced to disband.

"That's for you, Yvonne," Paula said as she looked skyward one night after the arrest of the drunken clowns.

Soon, Kansas City came calling with a bigger market and a bigger paycheck.

"You know I'm selfish," Mom said as she stirred her Sweet 'N Low into her coffee. The bright California sun drenching the kitchen table. You know your father and I loved Rick. We were both waiting for you two to quit messing around, settle down, and give us some grandbabies." Mom raised her cup and took a slurp, then put the cup back delicately on the saucer. "It would be so much like my life," she said looking over at Paula and smiled "that" smile. The one she always had, the one Paula had seen more and more
as the years went by. A warmth, but also a betrayal of self. Something was gone unfulfilled in that smile. Paula wondered if all mothers smiled that smile to their daughters.

"You must do what you must do," Mom sighed. "I'll miss you terribly." She came around the table and gave Paula a warm kiss on the forehead. "You have a big life ahead of you, Paula."

Dad said little, just giving the usual fatherly advice, "We're here if you need us. Let us know if you need anything. Got enough money?" The last question almost laughable since Kansas City had given Paula a contract that probably paid her more than her father made working for Bakersfield.

Paula found herself alone for the first time in Kansas City. She had always had mom and dad, then Rick around to lean on, to make decisions, or to run to in times of trouble. Sure, the people at Channel 7 were friendly to her as a newcomer, and she found herself loving the people of Kansas City. The idea of Midwestern friendliness seemed alive and well here. Yet there was a nagging in her soul, something was missing, maybe it was just the newness of the place.

To deflect all the confusion, and maybe increase the numbness, Paula dove into her work. It was not hard to do. The bigger market that Kansas City was brought almost an inability to tell every story that needed to be told. Her colleagues treated her to lunches and of course, free drinks after the day was done.

Paula's work in Kansas City almost ended before it began when Stuart, the news producer, gave her the first assignment.

"This should be right up your alley," Stuart said as he handed the paper to Paula. "But it would be a good way to introduce yourself to our viewers here. The Ringling Brothers Circus is in town and we want you to do a story on the tough life circus performers have."

"Ah...any way I can squeak out of this one?" Paula asked. "I had a real bad experience with circus performers. What with the story I did on that fly-by-night outfit in California, I may be a marked person."

"That's true," Stuart agreed. "Your face maybe up in every circus and carnival around the country." Stuart nodded his head. "We've ALL had bad experiences with circus people. Drunk most of the time, trying to make
your daughters, those people are a mess, I know." Stuart seemed a little animated as he spoke. "Okay, I'll tell you what, they are having a Kool-Aid contest at the Oak Park Mall. Trying new flavors and such." Stuart noticed Paula's grimaced look. "What, you've had a bad experience with Kool-Aid as well?"

"I blew up my room when I was a kid, using Kool-Aid. It's a long story." Paula tried to smile a sweet smile to take the edge off Stuart.

"Okay," Stuart huffed. "I have a bad one here. You have any problems with dogs? This is not a pretty story."

"No, no problem with dogs."

"All right then. Some guy got drunk and put fifteen staples into his dog's hide. A neighbor saw it and turned it into the police. The guy is in jail, the dog put to sleep so as not to suffer. Game?"

"No problem, Stuart."

"Stew. Everybody calls me Stew here."

"Okay, Stew."

Paula got some good video of the scene and was able to make a compelling story out of it. The viewers of Kansas City thought so as well.

"Good work, Paula," Stuart replied on seeing the video. "This is better than I thought."

"Better than the circus then?" Paula hoped to get some reassurance.

"Oh, yes, yes, better than the circus people," Stuart agreed. "The guy we sent down there stumbled over some of the elephant trainers drinking, and they got pissed and beat him up. They're such mean people. Never took my kids to go see them. The worst are the clowns..."

"I'm sure they are," Paula had to interrupt.

Stuart appeared one day at her desk. He was fidgeting like a nervous school boy.

"Hey, Stew," Paula acknowledged his presence.

Stuart handed Paula a small envelope and patted her lightly on the shoulder. It was then that she noticed another man. He looked like a state trooper. This is odd, thought Paula. What is going on here. Why would a state trooper be at her desk? She had heard of this when somebody..."Oh my God!"
"Take the time you need on this, okay?" Stuart reassured her as the state trooper related the circumstances of her parents deaths in California. The Drug Enforcement Agency was chasing a plane loaded with illegal substances. The pilot decided that he would throw the evidence overboard so as not to be charged with possession of the substance, although we have him on tape." The trooper was amazingly sympathetic and soothing as he described the accident. "The suspects threw a hundred pound bale of marijuana off the plane. Your folks happened to be driving underneath the plane when it happened. The bale's weight and velocity at having been thrown out at five thousand feet demolished the vehicle your parents were in. It killed them instantly. I'm sorry."

The funeral was a blur to her. She was struck with uncontrolled weeping. Under the circumstances, it was easy to explain. But there seemed more to Paula, something deep, buried further than a human could fathom that was crying out from her. Her mother had never fulfilled her life, Paula knew that, even though Mom denied it. Her tears when they said good-bye, before she went to the Midwest all but confirmed that for her.

Father had been a good man, there was no denying that. She could still remember the nights he would come home and literally sweep Mom off her feet. He would pick her up in his strong arms and turn her around. Mom would complain that dinner might get burned and father would reply that burned meat was fine with him as long as he could steal a kiss, and feel the touch of the most beautiful woman in the city. He was the most thoughtful man, buying her small gifts and tokens of affection. Maybe it was because he knew what she gave up for him. Maybe he did know more about the bite than mother thought. Whatever, they were wonderful together.

Although she wept at the sight of the two caskets in front of her, later on she would be thankful they went together. It was the only way for them to go. Neither one could operate without the other. They finished each other's sentences. They shared activities that one of them did not care for, but over the years would slowly be won over simply because they loved the other so much that what was apart of each became something for both. Mom slowly won dad over to live theatre, the Shakespeare In The Park celebration becoming a required summer activity after dad got the Bard
under his skin. Mother became as fanatical about the Dodgers as dad had by sitting in the cheap seats at Dodger stadium and watching them on television. Dying with them when they missed the pennant and being happy as children with a new toy when they won.

No, they could not live apart. Both sets of grandparents had taught her that. When one of them slipped off to eternity, the other one followed within six months. It was like losing a part of your body and never finding a replacement, especially the heart. They went together, she had to be thankful for that.

The old house was so quiet, and felt cold as Paula encircled her arms about herself. She had expelled so many tears at the funeral, and reception afterward, she had no more water in the tear ducts. She felt down right dehydrated from the tears.

She stood alone in the living room. She felt truly alone for the first time. At least in Kansas City she could call her mom and talk. Now even that was taken from her. She gazed at the wall of pictures. Snapshots of two lives and how they entwined together. Dad as the robust show-off, posing like a muscle bound, which he was not, no doubt showing off to mom, on the other side of the camera. Mother, the beautiful young woman, flowing blond hair and face full of a smile of a future she could chose before her. The couple together on the wedding day. Smiles so broad you could swear their faces would split in half and fall away into each other. Pictures on the beach, in their Sunday best, and pictures of their one and only baby, a daughter. The proud smiles of parents knowing their child is special. Their child will change the world.

She saw herself grow up on the wall. A toddler, a grinning face with two missing teeth. A little girl, gangly limbs and all hanging from the tree in the front yard. Her with old boyfriends. High school graduation, college graduation, the important times of life. It was a wall of history. She spied one photograph, encased in wood frame and glass. She place her hand on the smooth surface, it needed to be dusted. She ran her fingers across the coolness of the glass. Granny on the left, mom in the middle, and herself on the right. Three generations of women, each with the bite, all of them smiling. Her smile was broader and fuller than the other two.
Granny had a near half-smile, and mom that crooked smile. Maybe it was the years that had worn them down from life, Paula thought. She wanted to think it was something more, of the bite being unfulfilled. Choosing children and husbands over the calling that had been flowing in their veins. She pulled the picture from the wall and wiped it with the sleeve of her Cal State Bakersfield sweatshirt she wore. Every one of these pictures would go back to Kansas City with her, but this one was special.

The next day Paula felt like tackling the attic. Most of the furniture in the house she was giving to former friends and colleagues of mom and dad. Most of this stuff she could have a garage sale, or give away as well. Paula found such joy searching through the attic and its junk. Old dresses from day gone by, more scrapbooks and pictures, some of people she had never heard of. She had forgotten what a pack-rat mother had been. "pay no mind, Paula. It's your mother's way." Her father's words now echoed in the back of her mind. It seemed like yesterday that mother wanted to save some trinket from a fair they had attended years ago. Dad had long ago made peace with mom's bizarre savings habits. In defeat of changing her, dad always bought her storage trunks for her pack-ratting. She found a beautiful ornately carved wooden trunk. The hinges looked rather beaten, like they had been in constant use and were now tired and wished to rest in peace, or fall off, whichever came first. Paula opened it and one of the hinges slid sideways nearly pulling the other hinge, and the lid, right off and onto the floor. Inside were booklets, almost like diaries. Most had plain covers, some blue, green, brown, a couple reds thrown in. A few had flowers decorating the covers, giving a diary like appearance. A few looked like they had been there only a short period of time, some the color of the cover was unknown from all the dust.

Paula opened what appeared to be the newest one, hoping it was a diary, finding out the inner workings of her mother. The cover opened easily, but with a slight cracking sound. Inside were her mother's scribblings. She gasped as she read the entry. It had been a few days before their deaths. It was about a local man who had too many cats at his house, according to city inspectors. Odd, she thought, it read like...a newspaper article. Paula paged through many other pages and found stories on budget hearings,
new businesses opening in town, the Clinton sex scandal. It covered local, national, and international news. She put it down and reached under a couple of books for another one. Same type of stories. She found one story about a car wreck at Third and Grand a few days before that crazy woman stood up in the city council meeting and demanded a traffic light there.

"So this is how she dealt with it," Paula spoke out loud to the musty air. "Nixon Resigns." Paula read the title on one page. She turned her attention to another carved wooden trunk. It was next to the one she was digging through. This one was much more weather beaten. It also had a lock on it. The lock looked rusty and not too strong, so Paula yanked hard and fell on her back as the lock gave way, but so did the hinges, pulling the lid off with her mighty pull. "Aw shit," Paula was disgusted and wiped the dust off her. She coughed and sneezed at the roaming dust particles now airborne.

More booklets. These were covered with about an inch of dust each. She tried to push the dust off and found herself wheezing, but she continued. "V-J DAY" she read. This could not be mom. It wasn't her handwriting, it looked like...granny's. Granny had done this. It was a living history done through her eyes as a reporter for a paper no one would ever read. Until now.

Paula went to the garage and found one of her dad's dust busters and carefully sucked the choking dust from the piles of paper. She noticed the ones at the bottom were hand-sewn together. She pulled one out and began to read about the Roaring 20s, bootlegging, and further down, the election of Teddy Roosevelt. Every article written as a newspaper reporter would write it.

"My God, this is a legacy," Paula sat in a pile of dust dumbstruck. She no longer cared about the dirt, but plunged into the trunk, carefully though so as not to damage the ancient papers.

It must have been a secret to the women of the family from who knows how long. Mom said great-granny never said she had been bitten by the bug, when it was apparent she had been. Why? Had mom, or granny, never really looked in these trunks? dad said that pack-rats save things for no reason, maybe mom was so busy saving things that she never got around to looking at
what she was saving. She never got to look in the trunk.

Paula found herself crying again. This time from unrestrained joy. She was part of something greater than herself, a history, a pattern of pride for all who were a part of her. She also cried for these women, unable to express their gift, their calling in an open way. Up until late in Granny's life, women were only allowed to write on the society page. The frustration they must have felt for being denied. The bug HAD bit them all and this was how they let the world know.

A powerful, hot warmth flowed through her veins and she knew where it came from. She could see Mom and Dad looking down on her from the great beyond. Well, Mom for sure. Dad was probably off arguing with Dodger greats from years gone by about how stupid Lasorda was for trading Piazza. And he finally found out whether Elvis was still alive, which he believed. She laughed a moment at the thought. But then she could see them, Mom, Granny, Great-Granny and all the women in her family. It included even the ones she knew only from faded pictures and faded memories. They were standing on the edge of a cloud, waving to her. Her tears were hot as the blood rampaging through her heart. She felt them close and could hear Mom's voice whispering in her ear, "Paula, you have a big life ahead of you." She pulled the pages away from her chest and saw some of the ancient pages crinkle to the floor, torn by age. She carefully laid it back in the trunk. She spied even more trunks about the attic. In each one was more papers, sewn by hand, in them. She cashed in her round trip ticket from Kansas City, and rented a U-Haul. There was a lot that needed to go back with her.

A few years later, Paula was weeding her vegetable garden in Connecticut. The warm saturday afternoon sunshine bathing her in its warmth. After finding the trunks, Paula had a renewed determination that pushed her to the network job she, and her mother, had dreamed of. She had become the first permanent solo female anchor on a nightly news program. NBC was hailed for its boldness in establishing that women could do the job on a continuing basis, not just fill in for a male anchor. She had wrestled with publishing the writings of the women in her family. She felt she owed it to them. She used the proceeds to endow Cal-State Bakersfield with scholarships for women in journalism. The book was a smash as well. Lectures and public events
followed never once mentioning the bug. They would not understand, and she knew it. None of that mattered that late summer day as she stopped weeding the peas and looked at the muddy mess she had become. Dirt from head to toe, but she smiled a satisfied smile. Her husband Brent would be home soon from golfing with his buddies. Priscilla was running around somewhere in the yard. She was climbing trees or some other rambunctious activity. Paula and her daughter looked a lot a like, and it brought her pleasure to think so. Her thoughts were jarred by a blood shrieking scream from the front yard. Paula flew to the scream and saw Priscilla running to her, holding her arm. Had she broke it? Paula thought.

"Mommy, Mommy, help me," Priscilla shrieked.
"Calm down, what's wrong?" Paula tried to soothe her daughter.
"It bit me! It bit me!"
"What bit you?" paula found herself shaking Priscilla, trying to make sense out of her.
"It looked like a spider, except it was blue, with a green head..."
"And hairy feelers?" Paula found herself gasping, and laughing at the same time.
"MOMMY! I'M DYING AND YOU'RE LAUGHING! HELP ME!" The screams were from deep within her. The fear pushed her voice to higher registers.
Paula threw an arm around Priscilla and calmed her. "You're not dying dear. In fact, you're going to live a wonderful life."
"Stop it and help me!" Priscilla demanded.
"Okay, first, let's pour you a glass of red wine and get some ice for that bite."
"You're going to give me liquor?"
"And a book and a story about some people you've only heard about."
A smile of joy covered Paula's face as she led her daughter inside.