

That Almond Smell: Seven Short Stories

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Acknowledgments

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Preface

That Almond Smell consists of seven short stories that depict American males searching for their place in a modern world. These stories are influenced by literary works that include Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, John Kenney Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Steven Millhauser's *Edwin Mullhouse*, and Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*. These novels meld wit, allegory, and a mythic tradition to create unusual but celebrated literature.

The stories in *That Almond Smell* trace the phases of white American males' growth from early childhood to maturity in a post-World War II era. The first story, "Arrow," portrays a boy's hunting game that draws real blood, symbolizing the narrator's initiation into adulthood. "Metaphysics" tells of a graduate student working to survive one more night of poverty and the academic grind. When a late-night study session turns from an analytical exercise into a race to meet a deadline, the fate of the protagonist and others will be determined. "That Almond Smell" explores how people pursue the celebration of living even when nature resists. "The Middle Manager" reveals how people with amazing jobs still operate within the daily grasp of office politics. "Vulcan" gives a voice to an easy-going man jarred from complacency. "Thunderclap" examines life in a rundown mall that is reborn because of a scrape with the miraculous.

One of the largest influences on my writing is the dark humor of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. I first read *Catch-22* when I was thirteen years old. One day as I was watching the dusty yellow school bus motoring up our hill, a Cadillac pulled into the other side of the driveway. The man inside the black car rolled down his window and told me he was there to give my father a ride to work. He grabbed up two paperbacks to make room for a passenger and handed them to me saying, "Here. You're a student. Read a book." With these unexpected treasures in my arms, I turned and climbed inside the bus. As this ungainly vehicle rumbled along its back road route, absorbing noisy children at each dirt driveway, I looked through my new prizes. One of the books was only two hundred pages long with large print and a lurid picture of an anguished woman on the cover. The other was over four hundred pages long ornamented with only a title and a small silhouette of a dancing man for an illustration. This book was stubby, the words were small and compressed and unapproachable. As the bus bumped along, I perused the shorter book. It was John Fowles's *The Collector*. Though I easily read through *The Collector* in a few commuting sessions, the fat book was abandoned to fall deeper and deeper into the layers of papers that lined the bottom of my school locker. The last day of the school year I was ordered to clean out all of my belongings. During this spring cleaning, I thought I had thrown out the book with all the filler paper, candy bar wrappers, and melted crayon sludge.

My childhood summers in Texas began with the excitement of perfect weather for playing in the surrounding woods. Yet as soon as the new rhythm of idleness was realized, it grew hot. My mother started giving her impassioned lectures about the sun killing kids with heat stroke and I became aware of the meager offerings of daytime

television. On one such sultry afternoon, I dug through the artifacts of my school year hoping to find a pencil to write down the scores for a game of hearts. Even though I was sure I had thrown out the chubby novel, it was still there, dog-eared and defiant. The card game did little to hold my attention. With a full day before me and no hope of any possible joy, I opened the large paperback, and within one chapter, some ten pages, I was caught up in a world within a world, and, amazingly, I was laughing, not just the polite chuckles but gut-wrenching, side-hurting laughter. Beyond this humor stood a book that was drawn from a deeper tradition of mythic treatment of the human condition. The book was *Catch -22*.

One of the sources of humor in the book is the dialog. Michael Moore believed the humor of *Catch-22* to be a catalog of miscommunication. Heller's humor is derived from the speaker not meaning what is said or being overly literal or using circular logic to create contradictions (Moore 431- 439). Heller said that his books were about the abuse of language to confuse people (Severo and Mitgang). Other scholars have further explored the content of the humorous dialog finding out that it is a series of negations (Hildalgo –Downing , August 2000), that it speaks a language of discontinuity (Davis), is only structured around returning traumatic memories (Cacicedo), or even more to the point is organized around a collage of jokes (Green). Heller mixes official language with more personal expression to create his comic landscape (Hildlago – Downing, December 2000).

Within thirty pages I was overwhelmed by the chatty characters who live within *Catch-22*'s loosely connected scenes. Beneath the humor of the dialogue are the taste of violence, sex, and the despair of those facing death. There is a hospital ward of patients

who want to trade diseases as they watch a silent man wrapped in bandages that reveal only one tube going in and another coming out. A quartermaster of the base's kitchen forms a syndicate that grows until he is renting out his own planes to the Nazis so they can effectively bomb the island. There is a pilot who crashes multimillion dollar planes to practice how to abandon ship and a young air man who falls in love with a prostitute as his heart breaks when he thinks about how she spends her days. Finally, of course, there is Yossarian, who cannot be granted a request for a mental health discharge because he would have to be crazy if he did not want to avoid the life-threatening missions scheduled by the commander who keeps raising the required minimum to become a general.

Joseph Heller said it took him eight years to write *Catch-22*. The first year it sold fewer than 40,000 copies. But with the shadow of the Vietnam War, the book sold over ten million copies and was on almost every list for the best novels of the decade (Eller). With such popular acclaim it may be surprising that "most critics are still puzzled by such basic matters as the structure" of *Catch-22* (Merril 1986, 139). Few scholars have tried to figure out the chronology of plotted events in this novel, for the order can only be organized by noting overlapping events (Burhans), the count of how many missions differing pilots have flown, or cyclic discussion of important memories (Podhoretz).

Some scholars have seen the book as the angry satire that can be epic (Nagel 99). Yossarian is a hero with mythic dimensions (Thomas 198). Heller is writing broad fantasy for larger-than-life characters that remain myopic in their understanding of their place in a random world of impending death (Merril, 1984).

After finding *Catch-22* I was hungry for other books that created zany, dialog-driven worlds like the one I found on Heller's island. Since this book had just fallen into

my lap, I thought the quest for continuing reading of such novels would be easy. I was wrong. This was an itch that became next to impossible to scratch. It took about a decade before I found another such creation on a shelf in a used book store. Again this is a work of collected scenes, colorful characters, and issues of life and death. This novel was *Edwin Mullhouse*, the first novel of Steven Millhauser, the soon-to-be-famous crafter of intricate stories of penny arcades, illusionists, animators, and carnival folk. *Edwin Mullhouse* is a book of childhood nostalgia and adult misgivings. It is presented as a biography of a genius child written by another child. This kid Einstein lives within his world of comic books, board games, and first love. As his final earthly achievement, the young Mullhouse writes a novel that explores a cartoon landscape. The assumed author of this “apocryphal” biographical work is Jeff Cartwright, Edwin’s next door neighbor and best friend (Herrero-Olalzual 73). Behind the school house memories is the threat of violence and death. Millhauser uses the parable to frame this story of “adolescents drawn to one another” and “the ethos of dread” (Kinzie 117) within a dark comic parody of adult writers (Postlethwaite 68). In 1997, Millhauser’s talent was celebrated when he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *Martin Dressler*.

I found a book lying on a table in a college cafeteria that gave me more hope of reading another example of this type of fiction. Though finding a book on a college cafeteria table is not unusual, to be introduced to *A Confederacy of Dunces* in this informal manner might be. John Kennedy Toole’s book has become as famous for its complicated road to publication as for its humorous content, but for me it is another special treasure. Again here is a fantastic work that is dialog-driven and reveals the twisted logic the characters use to try to solve conflicts. The bombastic philosophies of

Ignatius Reilly fill up the book, for he is a foolish intellectual taking on the world from behind the pushcart of the Paradise Hot Dog Company. He cherishes past debates with his platonic love, Myrna Minkoff, while his mother makes marriage plans with her Communist menace-hating suitor. This book is proclaimed a humorous picaresque allegory designed from medieval influences (Bell 15-22). It is a black religious satire in exploration of modern ills (Macketthan 29-38). Soon the book moved from college cafeteria tables to the mainstream as *A Confederacy of Dunces* won the 1981 Pulitzer Prize and stands as a singular milestone in American character-driven humor.

After finding this work, I continued looking for more books that were the product of this seldom-traveled road of fiction. The search was rewarded in 2000. While digging through a table of paperbacks, I found a volume that was illuminated with a gold star announcing it was a Pulitzer Prize winner (1994) and that a major movie was forthcoming. This was Annie Proulx's sensation, *The Shipping News*. The protagonist, Quoyole, is a fat cuckold, who can only hold on to a reporting job in a suburban paper because he is a friend of an editor. During the early pages of the book we find that his children have been sold by his angry wife, and that he has inherited a house in Canada. With few options, he collects his scattered family members and moves to Newfoundland where he gains employment at a newspaper devoted to reporting harbor traffic mixed with stories of sexual abuse and photos of bloody car wrecks. Again this is a work of fantasy. It has even been said to be campy kitsch (Whalen). It is the story of an ocean-kissed frigid land that unfolds as Quoyole works to gain the self composure necessary to keep a job and to try to love again. Steve Hallock says Proulx excels at "portraying the eccentricities of her characters within a mythical Norse atmosphere" (Hallock 31). To Jill

Anthony, it is a book that is “a blend of mystery, tragedy, comedy, romance, history and the supernatural” (Anthony 94).

As a student writer I do have hope that there is room for another novel that can incorporate a mythic, humorous, story. I have reason to be hopeful. In 1993 Jeffery Eugenides wrote his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, while he was taking graduate writing classes. The strange book is told from the point of view of a group of men remembering the weird, compelling lives of a local family of girls who had ended their own lives. The dreamy prose has been compared with the magical realism of South American masters (Collado-Rodriguez), and this book is acclaimed for its originality. As a good writer will eventually reap rewards, Eugenides’s next novel, *Middlesex*, won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize.

The works of Heller, Millhauser, Toole, Proulx, and Eugenides are some of the most celebrated writing of recent times. Reading these great authors has influenced me to try writing imaginative fiction. Though I’m no celebrated writer, enclosed are seven stories that have been influenced by their tradition of humorous stories of modern life.

Arrow

I can still remember my first fifty dollar bill. My mother handed it to me on my eighth birthday as the bright florescent lights of the department store glowed, illuminating the way for my first steps into the American dream of ownership.

“Roam the store,” she said. “Find something you want. Maybe one of those blue suits. They’re on sale. You know, for church.”

As she pushed away the shopping cart holding my youngest brother, Cornelius, I scooted down the aisle on a colorfully painted skateboard that could not roll cleanly enough to give a smooth ride even across the flat linoleum tile. For no one surfed on metal wheels; they always held out for racer’s plastic. Besides, my skateboard could survive a few more years of runs down the hill, doing borkies and wheelies into the approaching highway. This money would be for something bigger.

I wandered toward the bikes. I had the use of one part time, having to share the old wreck with my oldest brother, Jerry. Before mother had brought it home from a garage sale, someone had started painting over the bicycle’s original Schwinn enamel red with light blue house paint, but had lost interest twenty minutes into the job. Every day before riding, the bumpers had to be bent out from the treadless rubber wheels or they would scrape and freeze up.

As I turned the corner, a fine machine stood at a jaunty angle before me. A sign said, “1968 is the year of the sling back.” The golden stingray back, dual ape hanger handlebars, and the simulated tiger stripe banana seat were all curved into the low-ride wheels. Like the streamlined machines of those cool kids who rode in throngs across the Saturday morning cartoons commercials, this was the bike of my exciting future.

I leapt upon it like a movie cowboy rushing his mount. At first, I muscled the weight of stiff pedals, and with determined pushing they began to change from twin inanimate weights into a rhythmic spiral. As I floated atop this perfect circular motion, I stuck my fingers into my pocket to touch the crisp birthday money. Having put my charger through its paces, I stopped pedaling to look at the tag dangling between the handlebars. The bold black price was printed as “\$79.99.” The red slash across the ticket said it was marked down to “\$69.99.” I squeezed the fifty dollar bill in my pocket. As the life drained from the pedals, I struggled to come up with a scheme to convince my mother to extend her investment.

I moved to the shoe aisle. Of course, I wouldn’t blow this opportunity on penny loafers, but the high racks smelling of leather hid me from all watchers. As I loitered in this safety zone, my attention was now riveted to the new basketballs in the sporting goods aisle. I could replace my old flat one, but would have to share it with my brothers since I couldn’t play basketball alone. Besides, the basketballs were only fifteen dollars, and I had an entire fifty to spend.

Envisioning a cart stuffed with athletic supplies, I pulled the fifty dollar bill from my pocket and marched up to the glass case of guns and ammunition that served as the lookout for the fat man wearing a hot orange hunting vest overseeing his kingdom of

weapons. The wall above the counter was covered by an iridescent blue target, punctuated with a cherry red center. Across the bull's eye was mounted a tension-filled bow of polished, stained wood crossed by an arrow with feathered bristles of blue and white. The straight shaft of the arrow was mustard yellow. Underneath the target was a red diagonal tag that told all customers that the cost was marked down from \$99.99 to a sale price of only \$49.99. The top end of the shaft held a twin bladed metal tip. It seemed heavy, almost causing the thin wood of the arrow to droop. This angry set of polished sharpened metal could cut through fingers, thumbs, maybe even bone. It was a weapon for merciless killing.

My mom would tell me there was no way an eight-year-old kid was going to have a skull-piercing, lacerating device for his birthday. I thought again about the bike. Maybe she would let me add a motor to it, like I had seen on TV. She did say I could have anything in the store.

I found my mom in the snack section at the front of the store. The scattered shelves held the potato chips, cookies, and cereal boxes. She looked at me. "Do you have a cereal choice?"

"Mom," I said with some frustration, "you know we want Coco Pops."

"But they only have Cornflakes. Trix."

"Trix are for kids," I said.

"Then you want Trix?"

"No. They don't have any good stuff."

"Well, I was going to go to the real grocery store anyway." She pulled the box of Trix from the cart that held Pine-Sol, a four pack of toilet paper and a clock radio.

“How about school supplies?” she asked. I took the cart and followed her into the school supply aisle. My mother pawed at the filler paper packages and the spiral notebooks. “Jerry wanted something.” She was looking at a typed list of required supplies for third graders.

“Mom,” I said, “Jerry is in the second grade.”

She tossed three packages of the plastic wrapped filler paper and two of the spiral notebooks into the cart. I grabbed a pair of scissors.

“You know your brother is not supposed to have the pointed ones.”

“These are for me.”

She dragged the cart towards the personal hygiene products. She threw five cans of hairspray into the empty portion of the buggy. “This is the only store in town that carries my brand.”

“Mom, I know what I want for my birthday.”

“Wow, this big store and you already know what you want.”

“Yes, but...it’s not a little kid’s toy.”

“You haven’t bought a car, have you?” my mom teased. “One of these with nitrogen treated fuel injection?”

I was surprised my mother knew this riff stolen from the dirt track speedway commercials. “No, let me show you.”

I knew that she wanted me to make “the mature choice.” Two years ago my father died, and she often told me I was the man of the house. “How about a birthday cake? Are you too old now for cowboys or astronauts on the top?”

“Oh Mom, just candles. And no party. Remember Cornelius took the cake and threw it at the cat last year.”

“At least the cat got some cake,” Mom laughed. “Most years you boys gobble everything up.”

Now was the right time. My mother was laughing. She had the right hairspray and we were moving towards the bakery to buy me a cake. The sporting goods section was at the end of an aisle we would be passing. As we reached the aisle, I could see the bow on the wall. “Mom, just for a minute, let’s go this way.”

When we neared the gun case, I pointed to the colorful target. I hoped she would not notice the lethal arrowhead. “Look, it’s \$49.99. Just enough,” I said, holding the fifty high in the air.

“It looks menacing.” The man in the orange vest was stirred into motion by our conversation, “Sir, does that set come with a more age-appropriate arrow?”

Mom would ruin my birthday. I was right not to believe that I could have anything I wanted. Such adult promises were always attempts to catch you off guard.

“Well, ma’am. That kit, the Transom bow and the Transom small game arrow, comes as a package. The target behind it is not part of the kit. I could sell you a Transom bow and some target arrows. Even a target. But together that’s going to be much more than the sale price.”

“You see, you can’t get them separate.” I had seen target arrows. They had flat, dull heads that could not administer the proper blood-letting.

“Okay, but you can only use this present when you are alone. No playing with your brothers. I’m going to trust you. But your brothers will absolutely not touch that arrow.”

The man stuck a rectangular piece of Styrofoam over the tip. Then he wrapped the heavy arrowhead with two inches of plastic, finishing the job with a large slab of connective duct tape and rang up the purchase. The cost with tax was \$53.27. My mother said nothing about the overage. He put it all in a bag. I gave the fifty to Mother and carried my arsenal behind the shopping cart.

Back in the car, mom said we needed to stop by Safeway. As she talked, I ignored Cornelius prattling about getting a Baskin Robbins ice cream for I was within one paper bag’s width of my new hunting device. I contained myself as long as I could. Reaching across Jerry, I pulled out the bow and the plastic covered arrow.

Jerry was intrigued. “Cool, man. What you going to shoot with that thing?”

With Mother present, I explained, “Targets, only targets. This is an arrow to practice my bowmanship.”

“Targets,” Jerry repeated, with a little disappointment in his voice.

Mom turned her head from traffic to observe my activities. “Put that back in the bag. If I hit the brake you could all be killed.”

“Mom, it’s a hunting arrow. If you hit the brakes, it could tear up the bag and kill us anyway.”

“Just put it back in the bag until we get home.”

“Besides, if you hit the brakes it will go in the front seat and kill Cornelius. Not us.”

“Just put it back.”

Mom stopped at the grocery store. Usually, we ran inside so we could steal unguarded grapes or read comics from the book aisle. This time I could not get out of the car. I knew if I went inside, my brothers would elect to stay in the Pinto and could get their hands on my arrow, so I sat in the sweltering heat for half an hour while my brothers played in the air conditioned grocery store.

When they returned, Cornelius was covered with chocolate. My vigilante guarding of my arrow had lost me a turn at the pastry counter. Cornelius licked his chocolate covered lips. “Mommy bought me a chocolate donut. You didn’t get one.”

Jerry climbed in to explain, “One with raspberry jelly inside.”

Mother said that I was growing up and didn’t need an extra dessert.

After a twenty minute drive, with my birthday loot clutched safely in my arms, we turned into our drive way, a mud puddle of wet, red mud, carved from the pine tree forest. With each of us taking a package from the car everything was soon properly shelved, and I slipped out the back door with my new killing machine. I had no more than drawn the string back for the first time and let the arrow go, shooting at a yucca, than out stormed my two brothers, pushing and shoving each other from their first steps on the soil.

“You heard Mom. You are not to touch this arrow. No matter what,” I said, using my best rendition of my mother’s own voice.

“We aren’t going to touch it,” said Cornelius. “We’re just going to watch. We want to see you shoot it at a rabbit. Remember that rabbit we saw? Can you eat a rabbit?”

“I think you can. But probably we’ll kill a bird. There are so many around here.”

We each grew quiet, listening to them whistling in the trees, each sounding their last songs before facing three young bird hunters.

As we walked down the hill towards the trees, I wanted to again try out the bow.

“Let’s shoot at something,” Jerry said.

“Okay, I’ll play arrow golf. I’ll pick out a tree, far away, and I get only three shots to hit it. That’s the trunk, ‘cause anybody could hit all of those leaves.”

Cornelius pointed to a distant tree on the rim of the woods. “I bet you can’t hit that in three shots.”

“Yes, I can. It’s a par three. Watch this.”

I aimed vertically, into the air. The string stretched all the way to my ear. As I let it go, it vibrated my arm, shoulder, and my neck. My brothers were off running. They looked through a series of yucca plants and brown, tired grass.

“It’s here. I found it,” Jerry said.

“It’s stuck in the ground. Wow, it’s gone through a cactus. It cut a hole, it’s dripping this liquid stuff.”

“Don’t touch the end of it. I mean it. I’ll tell Mom.”

The cooling of evening was filled with the music of many birds. A sparrow sat on an overhanging limb.

The first shot missed the bird. The puny feathered lump didn’t even provide a courtesy squeak. The arrow hung in the dense leaves of the tree. We had to shake the oak to get it to fall further and further down the foliage. The trees were too thick, so we followed the path down the steep hill.

“If I hit a bird, you can go get it.”

“If it is still alive, can I kill it?”

“Yes. But don’t break my arrow. And remember we are taking it home for mother to cook. Don’t squash it.”

As we sat in the clearing, we heard a chorus of birds. Jerry decided we should shoot at protrusions of ground. “It is not our prey, but until a bird comes out of the woods...” I shot an arrow, which sped right into the red lump of dirt.

“Wow, man. Good shot.” Jerry wiped the arrow on his jeans, getting most of the mud off. He touched the razor sides. “Ouch,” he said. He held his finger with his other hand.

Cornelius wanted to touch the blades

“Be careful,” I said. “Mom will have a fit if you both have bleeding fingers.”

Jerry suggested I shoot at the trunk of one of the trees that marked the end of the forest.

“Okay, but you have to walk back uphill to get it.”

They both agreed. I shot the arrow, missing the tree, but landing in the brush behind it. My two brothers raced to see who could get it first. Jerry, having longer legs, won.

Jerry wiped the arrow on his pants, though this time it was the wetness of the leaves that he was removing. “I’m not ever going to give it back unless I get to shoot it.”

“Wait, till we get back home. We’ll have a bird for dinner. Mom will be nicer about it when she sees that we are getting food.”

“I won’t shoot at anything but that tree. You missed it, but I bet I could hit it.”

“Let’s wait until I’ve had this arrow for awhile. When she gets tired of asking about it.”

“No, I’ve got the arrow. If you don’t let me shoot it, I’m going to break it in half.”

“Ah, man. Geez....Okay, you can shoot it once, but only once.”

“It’s not fair that I can’t shoot it, too,” Cornelius whined.

“Okay, here’s what we are going to do. A one arrow contest. The tree’s the target. If you hit the tree trunk you get 50 points. If you miss, nothing.” I drew a line in the clay with my foot. “You can’t step over the line. I’ll be the judge in the case of a tie.”

Jerry took the bow from over my shoulder. He tugged at the string to test its pull. With squinted eyes, he pretended to practice his aim. He put the arrow in the string, yanked the chord back to his ears and let the arrow go. It took both of Cornelius’s small hands to smooth the feathers as he pulled it from the soil.

Mimicking Jerry, he wiped it across the seat of his jeans. “It’s pretty dirty,” he said.

“Cornelius, come here.” I placed him behind the line.

Jerry ran all the way across the clearing and climbed behind the lump of red dirt. “I’m getting out of here.”

“Now, Cornelius, be careful.” Just like Jerry, he tried his hand at pulling back the string. He got it most of the way past his cheek. I handed him the arrow. “Be careful, man.” He then began twirling around and around. Cornelius shut his eyes, twirled three more times and let the arrow go up into the sky.

“Oh, man, you are going to lose it in the trees. You’re going to go find it.”

Jerry raised his head high enough to see the arrow in the sky. The weighted tip pulled the shaft end over end, and then it fell straight down. Like some moment out of a roadrunner cartoon, the arrow landed directly in the middle of Jerry's head, sticking up like some straight flower growing from his skull.

At first, he continued laughing at Cornelius's ballerina arrow act. I waved at him. It made him aware that something was wrong. He began pawing at his cranium.

I ran over to Jerry. "Oh, Geez, it's stuck in your head."

Cornelius started crying, saying that he didn't mean to kill Jerry. Jerry started crying, too.

"We got to do something," I said.

Jerry sat on the clod of earth.

"Jerry, we've got to pull this out of your head. Maybe Mom won't notice. We'll just say you fell down."

In an act of patient submission, Jerry extended his neck. I pulled at the arrow. It was stuck, drilled into his skull. Cornelius ran over and we grabbed at the shaft.

"We need to get leverage," I said.

Jerry allowed me to put his head between my legs and I jerked at it. It moved about a quarter of an inch out. Jerry flailed at my legs. I grabbed on again and pulled the arrow the last quarter inch out. It popped, like opening a coke bottle. Twin jets of blood spurted high into the air, pumping to the rhythm of his heart. Jerry wailed as he held his hands over his damaged head. "I'm going to tell Mother. I'm going to tell Mother that Cornelius killed me."

"You can't tell Mom."

“I’m going home. I’m going to tell.” Jerry ran up the steep hill, holding his head and screaming.

I looked at my youngest brother. “Okay,” I said, “You know we can never go home again.”

Cornelius cried, repeating that we could never go home again.

“We can kill birds and eat them. You and I will have to live in the woods.”

“We’ll eat birds?”

“Does this mean that I get to shoot the arrow all the time?” Cornelius asked.

“Yes, because you and I are going to have to find our own food and sleep in the woods.”

That evening Cornelius and I shot at four sparrows. Each time the arrow caught in the foliage, and we had to shake the trees to get the arrow back. On the fifth attempt, the arrow stuck far up in the trees and we could not get it to vibrate down. It was dark and growing colder.

Cornelius glared at me. “We aren’t going to eat any birds, are we?”

“No, I don’t think that we are. We’ll cover ourselves with leaves and sleep. We can get some birds for breakfast.”

“What time is it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe seven or eight.”

“I want to go home and watch *Get Smart*.”

“Cornelius, you do realize that you killed Jerry. We’ll have to go to jail and spend all our time behind bars. Forever.”

“I know but it’s cold, and I want to see TV.”

“They’re going to take you to jail. I didn’t do it.”

“Mom said I was too little to shoot the arrow.”

“Yes, but Cornelius, you killed him. When we get home he will be dead.”

Cornelius shrieked. He ran up the hill toward the house. I thought about Jerry lying in his bed dying. My hope was he was alive long enough to tell Mom that Cornelius was his murderer. Otherwise, I feared Cornelius would tell Mom I had killed Jerry. I had to get home to make sure that he told the truth. I hid the bow behind a gnarled trunk of a tree. I didn’t want Mom to confiscate my birthday present or the cops would use it as evidence.

As I rehearsed my story of how I could not avoid my brothers touching the arrow, I entered through the back door. To my surprise, no heated mob rushed me at the entrance. There were no policemen present.

As I walked into the living room, I heard the TV. Cornelius was watching *Laugh-In*.

Jerry had a big bandage on his head. “I’ve got six stitches. They shaved some of my head. Want to see?” He pulled at the bandage that was already loose on one side from many sightings. There were two red cuts, each with three black cat gut stitches.

I looked at Cornelius. He was absorbed in Rowan and Martin’s awarding of the Fickle Finger of Fate. Jerry lay on the couch, his head propped up by three pillows. Beside the couch was a plate scraped clean except for hints of marinara sauce.

Mom entered. At first she said nothing. She was letting me squirm. Finally she said, “All day at work, shopping, making dinner, a trip to the emergency ward, Marty I’m

just too tired to fight with you about this right now. You do know I have to take back the arrow, right?”

“Oh, it’s way up in a tree. Stuck.”

“Good, that’s where that terrible thing belongs. There’s some spaghetti left.”

Jerry asked if we could eat the birthday cake now. He reminded Mom that he got the part with the green icing cactus since he was in pain. Mother said that the cactus icing piece should go to me since it was my birthday. Jerry removed the attached side of his bandage to once again show Mom his traumatic wound.

“Mom,” I said, “Jerry can have the cactus piece. But it’s a birthday so everybody still gets two pieces, right?”

“I don’t know, Marty. Perhaps we’ll have room for two pieces of cake since my proud hunters didn’t provide us with any birds.”

“Stupid birds. Next year I’m going to be nine and I’m going to get a swing back.”

Metaphysics

At the end of each semester, I always hold off on one last paper for an all-night typing session, like the sackcloth of religious self-flagellation.

Killing time is the first sacrifice of this sacred ceremony. With practiced technique, I stare off into space and at old magazines. After I have waited just a bit too long, that precise moment when self-righteous procrastination has burned all available time for anything but labor, I swallow the required two tablets of caffeine and grab my manual typewriter.

I begin by slamming the black keys on the Royal, a relic fished from a garbage can where some other student soldier had given up the quest and moved on to other fleeting dreams. The Royal remains a clunky friend always ready to type since it was born with only one permanent ribbon, black on top, red on bottom, equally inadequate to every task. I am the motor of the weary process of forcing the ancient beast to smash ink stains into paper.

At about two a.m. the caffeine takes effect. My stomach tightens and I feel the need deep down to leap about the room to angry, percussive music. But I must get to work. I place a record on the spinning turntable and tap my legs to the rhythm.

I reach for the first virgin white sheet to grind into the bowels of the trusty machine as my sense of ceremonial worth grows with each second. As I fish about the pile of pages, terror fills my throat. I might puke. Not a refreshing, full, sweeping clean

flow of vomit, but a harsh, tight, ball of acidic discharge from deep in my intestinal plumbing.

I have no typing paper. At 2:37 a.m., I have no blank paper and this project is due at eight in the morning. In this harsh world only those who plan, prosper, so I inventory my available resources to resolve the challenge before me. I sit on my couch with my caffeine-enhanced brain, trying to visualize typing paper. I see its rectangular white frame as a simple, perfect ply of compressed, bleached wood pulp, crying out to be defiled.

Perhaps I could find used bits of paper, turn them over, and type on the back. Once before I had gotten away with raiding the library Xerox misfires using their unclaimed backsides as my canvas. But it is now three in the morning and the library's thick doors are bolted.

I pull one of the cushions off the couch, stuff it behind my head, and think. I consider the newspaper now being deposited in coin-operated boxes, but cannot imagine typing a whole term paper in the margins. I consider flypaper, but if I can buy flypaper, I can buy typing paper. Besides, tomorrow is the last day of the semester, and I've already robbed the dimes from the couch. I'm penniless, bankrupt.

My thoughts dance from flypaper to shelf liner. The kitchen shelves are lined by some distant domestic tenant with sheets of waxy cover. The top layer depicts dirty yellow and white daisies, but the bottom side is white. I revel in my shrewdness as I rip the filmy paper from my empty shelves and hack its rag texture into shapes roughly the size of a writing pad. I wring one through the roller of the old Royal and sure enough, it clears the margin levers, centering the material. Now I can compose my research masterpiece.

The Royal cannot penetrate the shiny surface. I spend twenty minutes ramming my fingers on its black keys trying to will ink into the Scotch-guarded veneer. Beaten by decade-old shelf lining, I return to the couch. I think of typing on wallpaper but this apartment is tile and splintered wood paneling. I contemplate toilet paper but know it will be too flimsy, then consider tissue paper, but I have none. Perhaps construction paper?

I look behind the bed, and, thanks to my limited interest in house cleaning, find intact, two pieces of construction paper. First, I try to type on the black piece, sensing that it is the lesser candidate. Even with beating the keys, I cannot read the type on the black background. I grasp at the yellow. The old typewriter chews the lemon parchment into a crude, punctured title page.

For the first time in my unremarkable, untested life, I am beaten, brought to my knees. Perhaps it's the caffeine. Maybe it is the exertion of pounding the Royal's solid keys, but I begin shrieking to the gods. *Help me! Help me! I need your help. Are you there? Show me a sign. Help me!* The record player blares a dance beat. I turn up the volume to its ultimate ear throbbing level and pogo my own pagan pantomime as I light sticks of incense and the crumpled black construction paper, creating a quick flash of yellow flame and a choking cloud of smoke. I call on the mystic. It is part theater, part joke and part melodramatic need for something to authorize my right to give up. I am a grand-scale fool getting his deserved comeuppance.

Over the deafening music I can barely hear a knock at the door. I feel a weird sense of being violated. *Who knocks at 3:30 in the morning?* I am scared and ashamed. The smoke is too thick and the music too loud. *Perhaps I've summoned a horned devil or a medieval Merlin.*

It is a girl I met at a keg party. Her name is Linda. She is one of those attractive campus characters who flirts with everyone because she is safely married. Linda gives me an exaggerated smile as she tries not to notice the noise and smoke filling the room. She explains that she is sorry to interrupt me at this ungodly hour, but she remembered that I sometimes do some typing for people. She says that her husband, Clive, has been driving her crazy with some paper he has been trying to type.

She turns her head toward the pickup truck in front of my curb where her husband is slamming the driver's side door. Clive is a small man who works on a nearby ranch. He never says much, but the few times I have met him he was in nervous, pointless motion.

Since Linda knew me, and Clive really did not, she tells me Clive's paper is due tomorrow morning at eight. He has spent the night cranking paper into his typewriter, rolling it out, splashing it with liquid paper, wadding it up, filling up trash cans with fist-sized wads.

I explain to Linda that I am not a professional secretary but I have made a few dollars typing for people. Also, I say my Royal is a museum piece. Linda says she doesn't care just so long as Clive turns the thing in. Then Clive enters the room, holding a brand new, 90-rated, manuscript quality, high sheen, high gloss, rag quality ream of professional water-marked typing paper.

My heart bumps and double-clutches. I agree to type Clive's paper for 45 sheets from the ream, a meal, and ten dollars. I spend thirty minutes going over Clive's scrawl with Linda as he tours all the night bars, eventually finding me a greasy hamburger, potato chips, and a beer.

After reviewing the arrangement, Linda and Clive leave so they can get some sleep. I mechanically eat the food then ravage the keys, turning Clive's handwritten jottings into lush, textured pages of manuscript that present a short biography of General Robert E. Lee. Then without a moment's hesitation, I continue attacking the Royal until I have created my own formal scholastic study. As a small act of defiance, I retain the lemon-colored cover sheet as my title page, a trophy of my evening and my own inside joke.

I move to the porch, watching the sunrise, neighbors putting out their dogs, and the garbage trucks picking up trash cans. I feel a sense of peace. Then Clive drives up. I show him his term paper. I apologize for not being a professional typist. He says he doesn't care and that he only took a couple college classes because Linda wanted him to.

He is going to turn in this paper and never take a college class again. I hand him the rest of the ream of paper. He shoves it back to into my hand saying it will do me more good than it will him.

Then Clive asks me if I want a ride to school. I say that it will save me a walk. For the short drive we sit in his truck saying nothing as Clive punches selection buttons on his radio. We walk across the empty parking lot then wait in the Student Center for the cafeteria to open. Soon a plump matron comes and props open the door. Clive buys me breakfast. I shovel in one plateful then returned to the buffet line to fill it up again. Clive hands me two five-dollar bills. I push them in my jeans pocket. We both move to the exit and attend our last class of the semester.

That Almond Smell

The shaving cream can costume was left over from a radio station promotion. Since I had stayed late to help with the clean up, I was given the human sized metal cylinder, painted in red and white stripes. A red plastic hat mimicked an aerosol dispenser. I could stick my arms out of two holes in the can, and my legs were covered by a pair of red velvet pants, the lower half of a Santa Claus outfit.

With abdomen protected by aluminum, and my plastic dispenser hat stuck out over my nose like an antenna, I was a man playing at being a monster during a time when real clouds of tiny monsters filled the air. The summer had boiled. The autumn was not much cooler. The sun burned down as the fried grasses moved with the frenzy of insects. Farmers dug through the soil. Yellow eggs were revealed by their spading. Hot days hatched a bumper crop of grasshoppers.

I was careful to walk only on the actual street. For moments of whimsy, I needed only put one foot in the roadside grasses to compel hundreds of grasshopper nymphs to hop, jump, and climb up my pants legs.

Finally, I stood before the Christian Guild. With twenty feet of blacktop parking lot between me and the insect army, I was safe from their incessant hunger.

“Where is the first place on our agenda?” I asked Pompadour.

She was dressed as the teenage rebel who had lost her life in a motorcycle accident, immortalized in song by the Ronettes, or maybe it was the Ponytails or some Afro-American singing group clothed in bobbie socks and poodle dresses, leaning into a common microphone to create a “wall of sound” harmonic.

“Well,” the teen angel explained, withdrawing from her squeaky leather pockets a tiny folded piece of paper, “if we want to hit every costume party, we should begin with the one here at the Guild. It’s the only one that has its party before ten o’clock.”

“I guess that beer is also out.”

“It’s just the warm up,” Pompadour said.

Pompadour carried a large plastic bag filled with chicken parts. Her motorcycle jacket was splashed with red paint. When all eyes were upon her, she would unfasten all sixteen of the jacket’s zippers and engorge the sleeves with chicken guts. She pulled out an oozing handful to demonstrate.

“See. It’s like I’ve been in an accident.”

“Oh,” I said, finally understanding. “You are the deceased leader of the pack.”

“Yeah, cool, huh? It will freak people out.”

Mike joined us dressed in a hair cloak with a pillow under it. His full beard and long, greasy hair made him a hunchback. He walked an empty leash. The weighted muzzle made it appear that he was exercising an invisible dog.

“Hey Mike. You the hunchback?” I asked.

“Yeah, hold on to your women, because I’m going to ring their bells.”

“You going to a Halloween party, too?”

“Yeah, we’re going to the Guild. For the costume competition.” Pompadour and I had already decided to be a team so we would not cancel each other out. “Want to join us? We could be the Shaving Cream Man, Leader of the Pack, and the Hunchback,” I said.

Mike put the dog collar on his neck, howling at the moon. Walking on all fours, he became the wolfen pet of a shaving cream can and a rock’n roll casualty.

I stepped back into a slender patch of grass growing through a crack in the asphalt. From this tiny island of brown, dry weeds, my entire foot crawled with newborn grasshoppers. My friends swatted at the embryonic creepies.

When I entered the Christian Guild, I noticed that the handful of early participants were not in costume. We were the only guests to join the well-staffed event. Several of the young coeds catering the party slid over to us. The girl closest to me said she wanted to put on a costume for the party but was required to wear the uniform of the guild. I glanced across the room to see each of the girls wearing Christian Guild jackets, vests, and monogrammed blouses. Three of the young women were petting the hunchback on his hairy belly, as he yawned, scratched himself, and barked, to keep attentive young Christians involved in his massage.

I felt a little sorry for Pompadour. None of the girls had any idea what a teen angel was. One tried to take her bag of poultry guts and put it in the kitchen to be added to the buffet.

There were three judges for the costume contest. One was a clergyman, who actually wore a stiff, white collar. One was a faculty member, who said it was unfair to make him judge such quality costumes. The other was one of the University’s

cheerleaders. The clergyman announced that the costumes were required to have a Christian theme.

“A Christian theme?” I said to Pompadour.

“We need each of our contestants to step forward and explain the story of their outfit,” the clergyman said. Pompadour pushed me forward.

I cleared my throat. “Well, I am a can of shaving cream. I represent the close shaves that many backsliding Christians have with evil,” I said. All the young girls applauded.

Taken by my unexpected success, Pompadour cheered until a girl near her shushed her. To recover from this awkward scolding, she jumped to the front and shoved a handful of chicken parts into her zippers. A small aerosol can of spray paint, dug from the bottom of the chicken organs, added another layer of bloody hemorrhage.

“Hey, babies. This is the Big Bopper talking.” No one had any idea what she was shouting about. She moved one hip back and then the other forward and sang.

“Teen angel, can you hear me?” She held her hand to her ear. “Teen angel, do you love me?” She put her hand over her heart. “I’m the spirit of the leader of the pack who on one foggy night, in the need to find a long lost love, died a horrible death. I was not a common woman, but a loner, a rebel.”

The clergyman asked her what was the Christian message.

“Teen angel is a spirit. She’s a righteous spirit who looks down on us from heaven. Oh teen angel can you hear me?”

The group of girls applauded. Though the one next to me said, “Oh gross” when a lump of paint infused chicken parts fell on the small riser.

Mike blew a kiss to the massage team and stepped up to the microphone. "I am John the Baptist. I was left in the wilderness to eat nothing but locusts and honey. I've been driven wild by hunger and my mission to warn the world."

All of the girls spoke in awed whispers. The many years of Bible schools and church camps had them each murmuring the same word, "Salome."

Mike's concubines began a simultaneous dance of the veils, taking off Christian Guild Jackets, then Christian Guild sweaters. The clergyman's evil eye kept things in check. Though there was active bumping and grinding, nothing was displayed beyond a hint of underwear. To regain control of the room, the clergy man declared John the Baptist as the clear winner. Mike celebrated his victory by leaping into the huddle of females sniffing their hair, arms, crotches, and buttocks. A sense of smell, the rubbing of mandibles, a wigglers dance, was radiating the chemical communication of this hive. One of the girls asked me if I was a can of hairspray. I said she was the first one to guess correctly.

The clergyman announced the prize. "As a tribute to God's mastery, his creations, be they plagues of grasshoppers, frogs, or the death of the first born, we have as our grand prize a collection of Biblical verses from the Book of Exodus, profusely annotated with full color pictures of all the pestilence."

Pompadour objected. She had not misrepresented herself. She was a teen angel, not a lying hunchback claiming to be a prophet. "Liars should not get a Christian prize," she said.

I said she should be happy. At least she was not reduced to being a Christian shaving cream can. She asked me if household hygiene products ever had religion. I said

that as a can of foam I could assure her that in my medicine cabinet habitat I knew a Buddhist bottle of aftershave and a Hindu condom.

She rolled her eyes and zipped her punch. The clergyman said that they were going to play a game where partners acted out scenes from the Bible. I looked at Pompadour. Her eyes told me it was time to go. Mike was taking his imaginary dog for another walk, balancing the book of quotations on his hump, and running his hands through the hair of his new girlfriends.

“You know, Mike has more success with women as a hairy lump than as a guy,” I said.

“No, his costume just emphasizes his best features: hairiness, humped-backness and his animal smell.”

“Yeah, it is his night to prowl.”

“Just wait until morning when that girl figures out that most of his costume is not makeup, but actually Mike,” she said.

“Even Mike gets attention on Halloween.”

Through the stained glass window, the dark silhouette of grasshoppers caused black shadows on the colored glass. It revealed a bearded man holding a haloed baby, now crawling with giant gray bugs.

One of the girls said, “You know you are in an insect nest because it smells like almonds.”

“Almonds?” I asked.

Pompadour and I strutted out the door. With one hand she twirled her sack of chicken gore. And with the other she pulled the folded paper from her jeans pocket.

“Next we need to go to the Honky Tonk.”

I struggled to keep up with the rock’n roll woman’s long strides, as I took quick baby steps trying not to re-bruise my legs on the can. As a car passed, the driver honked his horn and called out, “Look there is some guy wearing a beer keg.”

“You know, before it was a college town, it was only a feed store, a gas station, and a bait shop. Just a stop on the way to the state park,” Pompadour said.

“To the townies we are an infestation.”

“Yeah, with most people going home on Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving, it’s only on Halloween that we swarm,” I said.

We entered the Honky Tonk where the floors were piled with wood shavings, moistened by spilled beers. The woman at the door, a chubby fifty-something wearing fishnet stockings and a ballerina outfit, said that since we were in costume we would not have to pay admission. She tried to throw away Pompadour’s bag of organs. “There is a barbeque buffet for those who are entered in the costume contest,” she added. Pompadour reclaimed the bird entrails.

We walked past a bar where a Pocahontas, an Adolph Hitler, ET, the Green Lantern, and one of the Three Musketeers drank beer and laughed. Tables in the dark displayed drinks being shared by a caveman, a human lamp, a framed painting, and Groucho Marx.

At the pinball machine, a wizard in a pointy hat and flowing beard shook the game until it screamed out in flashing red lights and an irksome siren. Behind the bar, a

calico cat filled pitchers with foamy beer. A foosball table pitted a nurse and a human telephone against the team of a vulture and a soccer player, or at least he was in gym shorts and had a soccer ball glued to the top of his head. The jukebox played a record by Porter Wagner.

I squatted beside a table engaged in the conversation of the day.

“They are hoppers. They can’t fly yet. But they are molting. Soon, they won’t just be marching across the land. They will be able to fly.”

“They seem to be headed south.”

“They just are irritated. Don’t have enough space to move. Too many of them. Too concentrated.”

“If they are moving south, it’s just where they are finding space.”

“Soon they will be able to fly?”

“They are nymphs. No longer eggs. Not pupae, nymphs.”

“Little things are everywhere. They are all over my dog.”

“They don’t bite. But they crawl all over you.”

“A bug army. All working in crazed unrest. A moving eating horde.”

I was squatting beside a table with Zorro, a man dressed as a kitchen knife, and a lady, wearing a karate gi, who was eating a ham sandwich. She offered me the potato chips. I thanked her and chewed a handful. The guy dressed like a knife swilled at his frosty mug. “Stupid grasshoppers! I can’t run my windshield wipers fast enough to clean off their gooey remains. Imagine, a Halloween where the world is filled with real relentless horrors.”

On the edge of the table a tiny, bronze grasshopper rubbed his tilted head with feelers. A dusky, viscous ooze escaped his mandibles. I considered offering him some potato chips, but figured it would not be to his liking. Following my eyes, Zorro demanded a duel with him, squashing him with a black-gloved slap. The table was green with squirming body parts.

The karate woman asked if I was a trashcan. I said I was and she threw her dirty napkin at me.

Then Pompadour was at my side. “The contest is upstairs. They have a band. We have to hurry to make the beer chugging contest.”

We opened the door to the stairway as a man wearing a set of mummy bandages fell down the stairs and landed at our feet. We asked him if he was all right. “Beer chugging contest,” he said.

Pompadour said we had to hurry if we wanted the free beer. At the top of the stairs, a man checked our hands for a stamp by the light of a Jack O’ Lantern. Pompadour asked where we signed up to chug beer as the bartender announced the last heat. “This guy dressed as a sardine can and this girl in the motorcycle jacket.”

He poured a pitcher of beer for me and then one for Pompadour. I heard the count of three and I found myself, metal can sidled up to the bar choking on a jug of liquid. The bartender announced the winner. I had beaten Pompadour by a sip.

She spit up her last swig. The bartender called her a pussy. “If you can’t hold your beer, don’t drink it.” He then asked me what I was. I shrugged.

“At least you’re something original. There’s already two pirates and three guys who were bums.”

Pompadour held up her bag of chicken guts. “Pompadour has an even more original costume. She’s the leader of the pack. Those are her wounds in the bag,” I said.

“As long as she doesn’t leave that stuff on the bar, I don’t care,” he said..

A waitress tried to pin a ribbon on me to mark me as a semifinalist. She gave up, tying the red ribbon to my aerosol dispenser. The front row of seats was all that were left unfilled. With the size of my costume, I squatted in the aisle beside the table. Soon the girlfriends of the band were sitting there. When one returned from the bar, I stood up to let her by. It took several athletic moves to get my can from under the table. The girls were screaming at me as the band returned to playing. The people behind me began shouting for me to sit down. Pompadour stood up and shrieked for them to leave me alone. Because of the music no one could hear her. She shot the bird at the crowd.

The singer stopped the song and spoke in the microphone. “Why is he standing up? How can we play?” The girlfriend tripped me and I rolled across the wet, beer-stained floor. I ended up tangled in the legs of the second row. Pompadour held out her hand to pull me up.

She whispered in my ear, “Isn’t there anything you won’t do to get your face into some woman’s crotch.” I looked for pity from the girl within whose legs my face had been implanted. Completely drunk, the girl laughed. She gave a rebel yell. One of her tablemates, a man wearing a pirate outfit, including a taxi-derived parakeet on his shoulder, pulled up a chair from another table. Pompadour sat down as I hunkered on the floor, blocking the path to the front. Each of the people in the band was dressed like Elton John, with gigantic glasses and banana jumpsuits.

A musical bridge had the band of Elton Johns walking in a syncopated stride, each high stepping through the interlude. It was perfect, except one Elton John lost his massive glasses, which were stomped on by the ensuing conga line, twisting them into pretzel plastic.

The bartender screamed out my name to compete in the final round of the beer inhalation. I could not get up. Pompadour and the drunken girl who was moments before nuzzling me with her thighs, each grabbed an arm and carried me halfway up the aisle. I collided into a wheel-chaired cowboy wearing a ski mask. My aluminum container pounded him in the head, as I rolled over his body. I landed at the foot of the bar. The bartender asked me my name. I answered.

He said, "Excellent, we have all four of our finalists."

Pompadour helped right me again. The bartender shushed the crowd and with mock solemnity said, "It is time to decide the beer chugging champion of the Honky Tonk."

Another pitcher of beer was slapped before me. The bartender counted to three. The girl beside me was either a princess or a genie. At least, she had see-through leggings and a lopsided tiara. She was lapping like a drowning dog. It took me a moment to grasp I needed to be gulping from the pitcher. The warm beer had just reached my lips when the bartender announced that there was a winner: a sombrero wearing a pair of chaps, drawing a toy pistol to enact a gunfight with me. If I was not in the bulky can I would have fallen to the floor, but knowing how hard it was to arise, I just held my hands over my metal imprisoned heart and offered a weak, spinning motion, skidding at one point on

the spilled beer. I took the rest of my pitcher back to the table that I was allowed to squat beside.

The lead Elton said it was time to judge the costume contest. The bartender joined him on stage. The winner would receive a case of beer, dinner for two at the bar, plus \$250 in cash. A young woman joined them. She immediately began shimmying out of her tight jeans. The bartender stuck up his hind end so she could use his buttocks to pull off her cowboy boots as she extended her own ovipositor for all to appreciate. Unbuttoning her blouse, she revealed a paisley brassiere, paisley garters, and matching panties. She also had a hot pink cat-of-nine-tails that she cracked as the bartender asked for a round of applause for “Shenna, the Seductress.” Catcalls filled the stuffy bar. People screamed as the band broke into an arrangement of “The Stripper.” An Elton John motioned me onto the stage. He said, “I don’t know who this guy is, maybe a can of beans.”

I knew I was supposed to talk. “I’m shaving cream, the barber’s choice for a smooth, clean shave,” Everyone was silent, so I wrestled the whip from the seductress and began snapping at the air. She jumped me from behind and reclaimed her weapon.

The Elton John said, “Now let’s hear it for the can of beans.” The crowd responded with curses. They wanted a fight between a container of beans and a seductress as she rubbed her butt against my can as if she were wiping herself on an unworthy opponent. Pompadour rushed the stage; her chicken parts dripped across the platform, splattering into a sticky, meaty pool. She jerked the microphone from the bartender’s hands and sang the first baleful words of “Leader of the Pack.” I heard one man boo. Another screamed that he wanted to see the seductress. By this time the band of Elton Johns were adlibbing a rendition of “Hound Dog.” The floor beneath Pompadour

was red with gut droppings. The bartender jumped Pompadour from behind. They grappled on the stage, a slick tumbling of bodies, chicken blood, and electrical cords. Their grunting and cussing was amplified by the microphone. The seductress pulled her paisley brassiere down about her waist, her two fleshy breasts bouncing to the sound of wrestling. The crowd screamed, shouted, some stomped the floor in loud rhythm to the drumming of the percussion of the Elton Johns.

The bartender reclaimed the microphone and screamed for everyone to clear his stage. He picked up a handful of chicken parts and stuffed them into one of Pompadour's pockets then the bartender pushed her off the platform and into the audience.

I jumped from the stage to Pompadour's side. I whispered in her ear, "You know, Pompadour, this contest is crazy. You have the best outfit, but no matter what happens, they're giving the money to that titty chick."

Pompadour looked at me. "Hell, I would." She helped me down the aisle and around a man wearing a construction worker's hard hat. We went through the door down the steep stairwell. I caught my metal can in the door jamb and tumbled down the stairs. Two girls opened the first floor door, and snickered as they looked down at me, now on the bottom step.

"Chugging contest," I said.

"I like your costume. Are you a canned ham?"

"You're the first person to get it right."

Pompadour pulled up her motorcycle jacket sleeve to look at her watch. "On to the Crystal Palace," she said.

Out the swinging doors, the marauding insect army crawled over the brick streets. They swarmed over Pompadour's blue jeans.

Pompadour said, "It's really dark. The crickets should be quieting down. According to the newspaper, they're cold blooded."

"These guys don't read newspapers. They eat them."

Not too many years ago, the Crystal Palace was a discotheque with two hanging cages, each housing a gyrating, curvaceous woman in a glittered miniskirt, thigh high go-go boots, doing the frug, the mashed potato, or the swim. Hard years of spilled drinks, cigarettes, and bankruptcies had left it a mildewed cavern.

The Crystal Palace was now where teenage girls came from liquorless towns to lounge in the dark and nurse the watered down drinks bought with fake IDs. They sat in the bleacher seats, numbed by the loudness of the music. The last trustworthy light of this damp cavern is at the entrance. Here a lady, wearing a dime store Mickey Mouse mask held to her head by a plastic string. "You're joining our costume contest?"

Pompadour said she was the avenging angel of teenage angst. She showed Mickey Mouse her bleeding arm inserts.

Mickey Mouse said, "God knows we need entrants into our contest. Just between us, you're the only ones."

I faced into the din of the music. The walls were still velvet coated, but the sporadic illumination revealed the rips and the stains. Light only streaked from a blender of a swirling disco ball. The strobe lights had to be put on quick rotation to keep the room from seeming too dirty. The sad people tried talking over the drone of "Funky Town" and "She's a Brick House." The prize for the costume contest was a generous \$500. Mickey

Mouse brought the complimentary “witch’s” punch, a steaming brew with caramel corn drowned at the bottom of the Styrofoam cup. She told us to go easy on the stuff since it was fruit juice and Everclear. Pompadour finished hers and asked for seconds. The Mickey Mouse said she could have all she wanted since the costume competition did not seem to be going so well.

Pompadour said that she had a lot of uses for the \$500. Then Mike danced into the bar with one of the Christian Guild girls. The girl brushed his hair with a plastic brush. Each time the strobe flashed, Mike was in another animated position to show his pleasure in being groomed. I held out my hand and introduced myself as “Do You Think I’m Sexy” roared. She whispered in my ear, “I like your costume. Aren’t you a fire hydrant?” I told her that she was right.

Pompadour had caught up with me and said into my ear, “The contest calls for us to do a dance with our costumes. I’ve got Yakety Sax here on tape.” She held up the cassette as if it were a visual aid. “Mickey Mouse has agreed to announce that we are the winners just to get this thing over with. Since it’s my idea, I get half the money. But you guys have to pantomime Yakety Sax with me so we can claim the cash all legal like.”

When “Do You Think I’m Sexy” ended Mickey Mouse approached the microphone. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Crystal Palace’s costumed critters contest is now complete. It’s time for the winner’s dance of triumph. Let’s hear it for the Leader of the Pack, the, ah, the mail box the Hunchback, and ah, the Girl Scout doing Yakety Sax.”

Both Mike and I looked at his new girlfriend at the same time. He turned to me and whispered, “I’d buy her cookies, anytime.”

The sound system belted out the first saxophone farts of “Yakety Sax.” Like a speed freak Boots Randolph, Pompadour began wailing on an invisible air saxophone, her fingers running riffs up its imaginary trunk, blowing sounds from its pretend reed, and all the while sliding across the sticky dance floor. The spotlight moved behind her slide. The hunchback, fully muzzled in his choke chain and leather harness, was banging on hypothetical drums, a full kit of snares, and even a side menu of mock bongos, his hairy hump flapping to the beat of his mighty, fanciful pounding.

My air guitar provided rhythm strumming and even the opportunity for a flash lead solo, though the spotlight never found me. The Girl Scout took on a backup singer role. Moving back and forth before a phantom microphone hairbrush, she filled in perfectly, as Pompadour expanded the many possibilities of her nonexistent instrument.

The song ran on for four minutes. By the end of the performance, Pompadour was doing a split on stage. The Girl Scout had developed a full repertoire of hand pantomimes and, at one point, was really singing. The single spotlight fully illuminated Mike, a shaggy, lurching, sweat-reeking pulsation. He leaped from his position before his imaginary drum set, rushing up the bleacher steps, causing all the yawning girls to leap from their monotony. I considered following him, but knew that I was needed to act out the final, “Don’t talk back.”

Pompadour took a series of long bows. As the cassette tape ran out, the Girl Scout followed suit. Tape hiss filled the room, as the house lights were raised. Mike did get a small laugh by walking his imaginary dog as the Girl Scout acted like she was petting the air.

Mickey Mouse asked for a big round of applause for the costume contest winners. The room was silent. The spotlight washed the DJ booth in a splash of light where Pompadour emerged as she received \$100 bills, counted down into her palm – “1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.” Still catching her breath, Pompadour victorious, thanked her Yakety Sax team.

With the microphone now all her own, she presented her monologue of the stormy night when teen angel stomped the accelerator of her Harley and skidded off the wet road. This romantic rebel first encountered disapproving parents, and finally a head-on collision with a drunken truck driver. Her final thoughts, from the pool of blood and cycle parts were the arms of her man, as her spirit slipped from her wounded body to heaven. Pompadour jerked the chicken components from her zippers. She kneeled in tears of blood, gore, and sharp illumination of the spotlight. Then Mickey Mouse hit the button and the light evaporated and the turntable played “Get Your Groove Thing.”

As we staggered to the entrance, Pompadour was zipping up her sleeves, which were now running low on the poultry parts. The air was chilly and my back ached from the weight of my metallic dungeon. Sweat leaked down my back and into my pants.

“What’s that clanging?” Pompadour asked.

“These little grasshoppers are flying. Hitting my can,” I said.

“No longer just crawling up your pants?” she said.

“The first brood got its wings. They’re flying south,” I said.

“Unfortunately, the cooling evening will not be as kind to their younger siblings,” Pompadour said.

“You know if there was ever a nuclear war, only those in shaving can exoskeletons would survive. We would inherit the earth,” I said, brushing hoppers from my face.

A kid wearing a stethoscope waved at me. I think he was a doctor. He said, “Trick or Treat.”

I said “Treat,” and gave him the rest of my popcorn.

As the child watched, Pompadour scraped the insides of her jacket pockets, to build one last handful of bloody remains. “People say my death was romantic, but it is ugly to die so young.”

The kid chewed the last of the pop corn kernels as his dog crunched mouthfuls of newborn insects.

Middle Manager

With the pheromones of a porno actress and the adrenaline of an Olympic runner, the company Hormonica was born. The middle manager has been in Hormonica's sales force since the first bead of sweat was harvested from a country western performer's body to make its first cologne.

Here he is at another retreat. He eats barbecue as the brass comment on the five-year plan, more monthly objectives, and the mid-term evaluation. They play a bingo game with client's names and plan future bodily fluid extractions. The next product will be quintuplets' mother's breast milk additive to fertility kits. The middle manager agrees that the packaging made the model look like she was wearing medicine balls for a shirt.

The retreat is the domain of the district president. Someone says he has them here so he can see all his minions at the same table. Arthurian. The middle manager feels more like the peasant squire than any brave knight. Like everyone else, he acts out the celebrity moments of video for the famous doing brainwork on possible product extracts, knowing full well research already has made their choices and may even have things well into production. Still, it is a serious affair. Wellington lost his client list following last year's. No one knew exactly what he said to the district manager, but, he was still looking for a full-time job. The other day, Wellington called the middle manager asking about some temp work. The middle manager gave him the new aphrodisiacs that claim to

have secretions from the descendents of the sheik's own harem, though one had to wonder if having seven hundred wives necessitated aphrodisiacs. Maybe a good Solitaire deck would have been better.

At retreats, the middle manager tries to be boring, unnoticed, a worker bee lost in the magnitude of the hive, all in motion, so as not to catch any special attention. He doesn't know what he worries about. Sales are up in his department. Most of the positive difference is the new sales director, and the middle manager had hired him and trained him. The middle manager took him on his first cold call. The middle manager even did the paperwork. The sales director is a go-getter, and the middle manager knows that he would get the attention, not him. But he doesn't want the attention, does he?

What about the advertising coordinator? Since she quit "under duress," he was getting the evil eye from the personnel directors, and he knows they blamed him for her getting so out of hand, but he had not made her act so crazy. Who would have thought that somebody would undertake a war with their own secretary, filling the human resources department wastebaskets with pages upon pages of complaints about this insolent teenager?

All in all, it has not been such a bad year, and sales were up. He knows those smart alecks in promotions who took all the credit for the sales, but he'd like to see them close a deal. And face it, the new line of mega-masculine vitamins is pretty much last year's model. Marketing just changed the wrestlers' faces on the bottle. It's true that even the best of sales news is greeted with a thank you and next year we'll do even better. It reminds him of the old salesman who would always report a six percent increase each

year to keep his totals from being too high. This veteran was the master of slowly raising the bar. In fact, they made him an office manager in some place like Nebraska or Ohio.

The salesman got old. He remembered the kid in the executive training camp. The boy called the old salesman, "old yellow teeth." He helped with the surfer's additive that created fins on test patients. How were they to know that all those sea born supplements could merge like that? It was only a few kids and they were all given plastic surgery and college scholarships. The best deal they would ever get. Without the old salesman, it never would have been kept out of the papers.

The middle manager knows that you have to beat the year before, even in a landslide year. Look at the production supervisor. She had the Space Shuttle adrenaline line all to herself. She sold the hell out of it and then they cancelled it, saying something about the cost of distribution, but it was probably because another shuttle fell from the sky. The next year her numbers were down, or as she said the year before they were astronomically high. Her career never recovered, since the following year she failed to meet the new quotas. She was a star performer gone bad, instead of a woman who was given everything she needed to succeed, then had it all taken away.

Now there is the vice president. The middle manager had hoped to be able to avoid him. Can't hate him for getting the things his crew needed, but he didn't have to like it. He's a strange guy, anyway. The vice president doesn't know if he thinks he's an intellectual or if he's trying on an English accent. Maybe the guy's from England, though why would someone move all the way across an ocean to work in this company. Always making the same jokes. Endlessly talking about the need for communication among the division. But then he steals the middle manager's territory. So communicate

for what? To give him an advantage. He heard that he's on to sell vision-enhancing bat elixir. Most bats are blind. Of course, they laughed at the male erection serum, with the testosterone from thoroughbred horses. The middle manager doesn't think it made anything grow but it made people feisty and it sold so much that the FDA was set to investigate.

He could use his secretary's assistance on this presentation, even tempted to let her just do it, but he must remind the brass that he is in charge. Right, he keeps forgetting, the secretary is on summer vacation, and she always goes to Hilton Head. Her family has some condo in the shipyard, and he wished she were here when he had to go over the budgets. But there was little that could make him vulnerable in this presentation. It was just last year's projections compared with some sales figures. They had a good year; he should not be worrying.

Here they are at a barbecue and his sales rep has on a wool suit. What is he trying to prove? He guessed he was supposed to believe that he just left some corporate meeting. But wool, was he in Duluth? He's been selling those cigarettes with the filter made from the lip tissue of Playboy pinups. Crappy cigarettes but great infomercials.

He hates these retreats. It is dangerous to his health to be eating and joking with so many important people. Maybe it is better if they never knew that he existed. It is not true that it was easier to fire someone you had never met. It is easier to meet someone, not like them, then fire them.

Oh, there is the new salesman now. He looks like a school kid in his shorts. Skinny legs, no calves, just bone and hair, and he has barbecue sauce all down his Hawaiian shirt. This was what he had to turn into a sales dynamo or be unemployed?

The middle manager knew who would soon be selling caribou urine pellets to arctic hunters.

“I see you got the email to dress casual.”

“Oh, hey coach. Just chowing down on the food. Good potato salad.”

“Yea, the VP for Finance’s wife always brings her German potato salad.”

“How’s the meeting thing going?”

“Oh, remember at two o’clock I’m to do our presentation. If you are around you might come. I need someone in the seats to laugh at my jokes.”

“Two. Well, if I’m still here. I was hoping to drive into town and see the sights. There is a waterfall somewhere and some church that John Brown once preached at.”

“Well, like I said, if you were around it would be helpful.”

“Well, coach. If I’m still here, I’ll be in the tent.”

This tent is like walking into a circus, yellow and white striped. If the wind blows the flap any louder, it will rip. Should he sit at the podium? Maybe, he will sit on the front row, just in case.

The marketing rep is here. The shark. They had each survived hundreds of these events. He never liked the middle manager but after so many of these things they are stuck with each other. Don’t want the big shots to think that he is not with friends.

At least, he looks friendly and involved. The marketing rep says his presentation is all figures and such. The middle manager responds, “no dancing girls?”

The marketing rep says no, but the summer intern, a goofy kid who tried way too hard, will be dancing topless. He thinks it was nice of the vice president to act like the joke was funny.

In come the brass. The VP for Finance looks at his watch, to let everyone know that it was time to get to work. The VP for Quality Control marches up to the Marketing VP and he asks him a question. Now the middle manager feels awkward, trying to look interested. Here's the intern, he's not much of a conversational opportunity but he asks the kid to get some file folders from his car. At least the middle manager looks busy.

The rest of the crowd staggers in. Each mumbled small talk about things such as home remodeling and computer capabilities. Someone tries to give away the last of the okra from their garden.

One of the tech guys plugs in AV equipment. The middle manager thinks that it is a digital recorder. There's an overhead projector and a computer monitor. Those flashes are of spreadsheets, and drawings of small animated figures holding the graphics.

The keynote, kick off speech will be his boss, the VP for Sales. The VP gives a Knute Rockney about providing for face-to-face sales, to get their butts out of the office, and to be "closers, not hosers." The middle manager's part will be to present the purchase sales to retailers and section heads. He's got most of the sales figures, and as goes retail, so goes all the sales.

"You know that this has been a good year," says the middle manager. "At least it is better than the last two. The real reason retailers are putting up bigger numbers was the new potting soil. Having it in a red package with pretty pictures of red jungle flowers has hit a nerve. Publicity said next year we may make the flowers blue. Kudos to marketing and to the science guys who allowed us to keep the legal notice of bull manure components off the bag. With the success of the potting soil, and the longevity serum with blood extracts from 26 citizens of the world over 100 years of age, the Centurion,

we see our sales now topping 2.6 million to date. This is receipts not orders. Of course, they still have one month in the fiscal year to add to these accounts. Charlie is calling unpaid accounts, trying to get some more cash.” He pulls down the chart. He hopes there are no real questions. “Are there any questions about how things are going in retail sales?”

He had the answer ready for the obvious question about the failure of the motor car wax with skin samples of twenty consecutive NASCAR champions, actually nineteen; one was not confirmed as a champion because one race was still being reviewed. He has a pat answer for all the questions about the moon rock mineral supplement. The middle manager figures he will end it all with a patented speech about how all additives are organic, not DNA lab experiments, and thank the bosses for their work, and get off the stage.

There’s a ruckus from the lawn in front of him. People are moving away from a woman. A gigantic horn erupts from her forehead. It is crashing its way through her skull. Her screams fill the room. As it pushes its way through solid bone, it pumps blood upon her head, then down her cheeks like red tears. Her blood mixed with the dew of fresh green grass. Each teardrop takes the form of a tiny rhinoceros, the size of a lap dog, and just as frisky. The tiny herd of horned and armor plated puppies dances about the tent, each hugged by those in attendance. One lady says they are cute. Another says they have puppy breath.

The lady must have been one of the test subjects. Whatever she was taking was something good. That horn will need to be removed, but it appears Hormonica has a new product. He wonders who invited a test subject. It must be some favor that needed

returning. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is a surprise part of the sales presentation. We want to once again thank the geniuses in research and design for our new sensation, the rhino pal. Soon to be in pet stores across the planet.” The crowd is buying it; they are rising and applauding.

The bouncing puppies are collected. He has to get to his seat before something else goes wrong. His bosses wink at him, knowing far better than he that he had covered up a possible embarrassment. He is followed by the guys in Marketing who blab on about the addition of tree frog tendons in the new supplement for dancers. They have developed a promotional trade out with several salsa schools. Marketing is followed by the guys in accounting. They present overhead projections showing line upon line of numbers. The middle manager keeps smiling. He must look like he is paying attention.

Vulcan

With the warming of the weather, the discussions within the geology department offices turned from classroom anecdotes to planning summer field research. Once again, the department head did not bother to ask me my travel plans since my publication history had all been compiled within the comfy walls of the campus library. In fact, with the completion of a few hours a week of reading and a handful of well practiced lectures, I maintained a good life.

There was a new face behind the receptionist's desk. The new secretary was a chubby, middle-aged woman, Lulu. Her stout, compact form was topped by a glowing smile. In that moment, I knew my volcanic fantasies were not enough. I needed to have real life experiences to share with her. Yet even as a man who made a good living talking in front of crowded classrooms, I could not bring myself to say more to her than the required "nice to meet you." She handed me an invitation to hear her comedy act. That night, Lulu was headlining at the Knee Slapper.

At ten o'clock at night, I drove through the illuminated uptown streets. I was excited to be doing something outside my usual routine. After finding a parking space, I hurried to the luminescent marquee. It invited me to see "LuLu Fontaine, the Unloved Comic." Inside stood Lulu, a large figure in the center of the stage, twirling a microphone in her hands.

There was a woman who was not afraid to follow her own dreams. I had finally found someone to think about, someone to share my inner volcanic life.

On a blanket over the coral, we sprawled, our feet dangling in the sheltered water of the lagoon. Our conversation had just begun when a tiny bubble tickled my little toe. “Hey, Lulu, look. Bubbles.” I put my feet into the shallow water. “Oh, don’t worry. It’s carbon dioxide. It’s the beginning of a fissure. It’s not even hot. It’s like stepping in soda pop. A bubble bath.”

“Oh,” said Lulu. “I once had a blind date who offered me an exotic bubble bath. He force-fed me bean burritos, pushed me under the water, and told me to wait for it.”

I took a few splashing steps in the effervescence of the pool. As I attempted stable footing a hot surge moved up my leg. Even through the water, I smelled charred flesh.

I couldn’t move my leg. The foot cauterized to the coral bottom. “Lulu, something has happened. My foot is melted to the shore. It’s black.”

Lulu answered. “I once had a blind date who wanted to celebrate our love with what he called a Louisiana gourmet feast. I told him that just because you burned the steak doesn’t mean it is a blackened Cajun delicacy.”

Through the bubbly water, I saw that my foot was now a lump of pulsating skin. As if I had eels wiggling within it, something pushed up my leg.

“Lulu,” I said, “I can’t move. Whatever is entering my body is hot. Really hot. There are canals of color within my skin.” I think about the fissures of the Congo. Each shot out flaming tendrils of magma just beneath the earth’s surface searching for a weak point on the earth’s skin to spew forth. Finally, the lava had filled my entire body. The

hot liquid rock collapsed my head, shooting out into the sky. My panic turned into a feeling of power. As I lit up the sky, I understood that I was part of the earth. My frail self was now a vessel for primordial artillery more important than the whiny feelings of my human life.

My fiery plume returned to shore. The rushing slag flowed over the coral, searing the calcium shell covering, replacing the animal skeletons with burnt stone.

My body pushed out the carbon dioxide and water vapor that smelled of sulfur. The wet discharge joined the hot lava, gushing into the sky. My body transformed into a conduit, forcing the magma a mile into space. Lulu's eyes conveyed compassion, though; she tried to hide concern for an accidental monster, a lovesick soul, who only wanted to go on a picnic.

As the pyrotechnics fireworked the sky, I pondered the plight of Krakatau. Its implosion created the islands of Indonesia. I am fearful that its self-animating explosion will be my fate. As I filled up, crammed full of pressurized lava, I hoped that I would not explode, detonating into molecules of rock, cinder, and steam.

In the violent tidal pool stood Lulu's grey body. Her image was captured like Pompeii's Romans surveying their villas, trapped in a moment of daily life. She is an ashen sculpture. For a second, I weep. The wet seepage globules hardened into obsidian glass teardrops.

My magma tendrils enveloped the body. Her blood stream connected to mine by fire. I pushed hard. Now our minds were acting in an eternal dialogue. We were one syncopated consciousness.

We created another fissure that unleashed another mile high spray of molten rock. This flaming plume gushed magma that grew into another summit that surrounded Lulu. From a twin peaked atoll, we had forged a fully formed island.

The ocean was in catastrophic commotion. Splashed by terrible waves we thought of the other members of our departmental expedition, now trapped on other islands of the archipelago. Such menacing waves can cause panic, but a giant tsunami would wipe out all life. I shared with Lulu my knowledge of the volcano-born wall of water that rolled over ancient Crete, destroying the Minoan world and leaving Mediterranean villages waiting three hundred years for civilization to be reborn.

As we learned to manipulate the water, we realized that it is impossible to control the sky. Lost was the sun. We remembered the volcano that drove Europe into years of killing blizzard. Crops froze up in the field, animals died, people starved and the sun was eerily blotted out by a cold, blue-green dust sky. It was always night.

Lulu responded, "I once had a blind date who said he could go all night. Unfortunately, it was not a proposition. He was recounting the activities of his spastic colon."

I share other thoughts of Vesuvius. The slopes of the famous summit were the grape orchards of Europe. The wash plain held the richest farmlands in the ancient world. As they were enriched with the mineral spray from deep in the earth, the land grew lush, fertile.

I relayed calming, hopeful thoughts to Lulu. Without volcanoes there never would have been the water vapor for an atmosphere to form on the planet. Without volcanic mining of the subterranean water of the mantle, there never would have

developed an ocean. Without the turbulences of the past, rock would never have eroded into soil. “Lulu,” I reminded her, “Volcanoes made life happen. We now have the pleasure of maintaining its possibility.”

“I once had a blind date who desired to help me create a new life for myself. It sounded intriguing, until I realized he just wanted to have sex without a condom.”

With this change in mood came an end to the spasm of lava. The steamy flow into the sea ended. The pumping of flaming stone was over. Atop Lulu, we made it rain, adding a snow capped peak to accent her beauty. In the shadow of my cliffs, we added vents to control the pressure of my fiery roots.

“Lulu, our island will soon cool, become a sanctuary for life. Soon it will be a place of solitude. We are creating an incubator for a tropical paradise,” I said.

Lulu remarked, “I once had a blind date who said he wanted to give me a piece of paradise. I thought he was talking about great sex, but instead he tried to sell me a timeshare in Boca Raton.”

As time passed the hard rock began eroding. Winds deposited dirt from faraway places. Barren lava plains cracked with the stubborn force of ferns, then bushes, and, finally, tall, bending coconut palms. The reef became a playpen for clouds of iridescent fish. The shoreline was covered with scampering crabs.

It took little time for insects to arrive. Some flew, soaring in buzzing swarms. Others floated in on driftwood barges, disembarking on the pumice shores.

“I once had a blind date who wanted to join me in hearing the scamper of little feet. I got all maternal until I realized that he was talking about helping him spray for cockroaches.”

Huddles of long legged cranes waded in the shallows. Tangles of albatrosses patrolled the shoreline nests. Hanging from overhanging palm fronds, iguanas basked in the hot sunlight.

Atop Lulu's crest, the pristine snowcap melted and gave birth to a permanent clear water stream. Lulu was ecstatic. "I once had a blind date who offered me an evening of water sports. I never dreamed he wanted me to clean his toilet."

Beneath me, the escaping steam had evolved a flurry of bubbling mud pots, a magnificent geyser, and was now home to a busy throng of warm water creatures.

"Sir. Sir. We have a two-drink minimum. You should go ahead and get the drinks. We will charge you even if you don't." A waitress waited on my response.

A geologist should not spend his time in a library and a man should not always be alone.

"I'll have one of those drinks. And take one to the lovely lady on the stage. In fact, take her a note from me." I grabbed up a napkin and wrote Lulu an invitation to join me mapping the South Seas birth of a new volcano. I do not know if she will want to go, but I'm sure it is an offer that she would want to talk about.

Chia Garden

Almost one month before the galaxy went on vacation, we held the wedding reception. For her gift she received the Apothecary Shoppe, a three-foot high set of shelves holding bottles of baking soda, flour, garlic flakes, an antibiotic, and a skin lotion.

I also got a gag present. Mine was an earthen sculpture of a voluptuous woman's torso. According to the writing on the box, it came with a packet of chia seeds to grow a fertile, green pubic garden around her swollen female plumbing.

My wife's gift produced jokes about her limited domestic skills. Mine was a comment on my limited experience in lovemaking.

About a month later, the Milky Way just got up and sprinted away. In an instant, familiar stars were lost. For the first week the television featured concerned scientists. One thought this was further evidence that the Universe was expanding. Another believed that it revealed that the Universe was contracting. Either it was the last stage of the Big Bang, or it was everything being sucked back to its origins.

The TV spoke of a glowing sphere that plunged straight through the earth. The next day Tasmania disappeared. The water off the coast of Norway boiled. Gigantic ice crystals filled the Sahara. There was no oxygen in Peking.

Then we lost electricity. Our lives played out within the geographies available in a day's walking. My child bride was terrified. She turned to me for answers and, when they could not be provided, for strength. My darling wife was fragile. She seldom offered up an opinion for fear she would be thought of as stupid. I was her only acquaintance. My role was to try to console her. "You'll make friends here." "We have each other." "Love conquers all."

I took my chia sculpture from its box. The seeds needed time to soak, to be prepared for germination. The picture on the box promised a lush garden. Outside the window, a fiery rain fell. A large rainbow announced the glow of a warm afternoon. The fields erupted with a jungle of spongy mushrooms. A man hiking down the road offered us some cheese. He said these days he just spent his time walking. My wife opened up the box to the Apothecary Shoppe, making us all cheese mushroom omelets spiced with the garlic flakes.

"Do you think these mushrooms will kill us?" she asked the man.

"Someday," said the man. My bride rubbed his feet with the hand lotion. The man left the next morning.

"I am afraid," she said. "The galaxy is moving. They have timed it at some speed that is too many zeros to have a name yet. Our section of the Universe is going on vacation, or maybe just moving across the room, or going to the can," she said to me. I realized that beneath her awkwardness lived a capable brain that had yet to be challenged. For the first time, I wondered if she might be smarter than me.

My chia seeds had been soaking for three days. I spent the afternoon carefully inserting them within the small holes drilled about the sculpture's private parts.

A man knocked on our door. His hair was long, thick, tied back in an old ribbon, bulging from this constraint like a sheath of wheat. In his hands he held a large box.

“Open this up. You won’t believe this,” he said. We unwrapped the container. It was filled with sleepy yellow and black creatures.

“Are they lizards?” he asked.

“No, I think more like salamanders,” I said.

“They taste like root beer. You know, the kind you used to get in frosty mugs. But watch this.”

He pulled a salamander from the box and rubbed it on his arm. The hair on his wrist moved towards the animal, began to dance and then began to grow. Then the man pulled the ribbon from his hair. It too danced all about him. “Just to think, yesterday, I was bald,” he giggled. My wife helped him with the salamanders, putting them each in mayonnaise jars so that in time they could be eaten.

The next day a woman traded a pink substance she had found on the road for a salamander. The pink goop smelt like a fancy department store cologne. My wife told her to rub the salamander on her head before she ate it.

“A girl’s hair is her crown,” she said.

My wife kept busy attending the salamanders and keeping the house clean. Still, she gave off the undercurrent of a prisoner, a solemn, captured bird who had few choices.

In a bedroom lined with jars of curious salamanders, we became lovers. The amphibians yawned as they watched sloppy entwined bodies, holding controlled biological experiments. Here was a bedroom filled with a boy, a girl, and entrapped

animals, awaiting something better in a speeding galaxy that would make every tomorrow different.

Her business practices improved. She traded the last of the hand lotion for a metallic substance. This material regrew a leg on a dog, once named "Tripod," now simply called "that dog." She bartered some of this replicating fluid for some blue tonic which cured rashes. My wife gave most of the blue stuff to a man who had fallen into a beehive, but no one knew for sure if it helped him out.

A man brought in a goatskin. "It's rainwater." He punctuated his explanation with a drink. He passed the vessel to her.

"What is it going to do to me?" she asked.

"It gives you energy. I haven't slept in eight days and nine nights."

"Aren't you sleepy?"

"No, but I'm running out of things to do."

"Maybe you could help me out," she said, pointing to the growing shelves of labeled items.

He took another toke from his goatskin. "What you need is a sign telling people to come in."

Using the box of the Apothecary Shoppe as a model, he painted a twenty foot sign which told everyone that this life-sized Apothecary Shoppe was open for business. Now every day someone brought in something to trade. She acquired a spotted ooze that tasted like honey and had the property of removing all the teeth it touched. My wife kept it in a vinegar bottle until one day she bartered it off to a man with an abscessed tooth.

She told me about the red stuff. We came to call it “the red madness.” Even though it looked like cherry gelatin, when she put it on her tongue it tasted like dirt. The walls then shifted and then each of the bottles on her shelves leaped and grew smiling faces. She spent the afternoon grinning as her bottles of inventory put on a floorshow. That evening she brought home some of the red gel in an old whiskey bottle. “Try this,” she said. “It will calm your nerves.”

Gazing at my bald chia pet, I fell into a trance. The brown urn body moved in a seductive rhythm, a green pubic garden grew becoming a dense, vibrant jungle, encircling swollen sexual territory. I sat mesmerized by the delusion, watching as the bush grew, undulated, and then was sucked back into the pottery, to teasingly re-emerge and grow again. Being without music, I found myself humming, causing my visions to accompany my own cadence, “Honey, come in here will you? Maybe now that you have had some time to recover from work we might get to spend some time together?”

“Did that red goop calm you down?”

“Yes, dear. Here try some with me. In fact, if you find the guy who has this stuff, get all of it you can.”

As we shared our bed, breathlessly watching the animation of our room, she spoke. “People now grow new appendages, cough up old ones as unused organs, change color or just wither away. Every day life changes.”

I realized that my child bride was only a momentary role for her. She was finding her way, learning her own strength.

“Man now has a real space exploration program. We’re waving hello to distant stars,” she continued.

“Honey, you sound like you are ready for another spoonful of red zinger,” I said.

Each day the Apothecary Shoppe was greeted by a line of people who had discovered something to trade. Each had a box that bumped, a bottle that shined, or a bag that kicked. As she talked to each person who displayed their new treasures, she looked at me and whispered, “Soon this will be the only job on earth. Trading things today for things that could be found tomorrow. Science was a lie. Man is a forager.”

My role was to be at her side. I was stockboy and inventory clerk to a house, alive with new discoveries. My reward was her attention. One day as I walked down the rows of newfound animals, she turned to me and said, “People will quit going to zoos. Watching the changes in their household pets is far more exotic. Besides, I met a guy yesterday who could fly and last week a woman whose legs became shapeless pseudopods that she could make into any design.”

At night I would feel for her in my bed like a hospitalized soldier checking for lost limbs. I didn't want to think about her presence. I was a reaction. She was a burnt-in habit. She surrendered to lovemaking as if it was a poor choice over conversation.

“Such change will eventually kill us off. Mankind, I mean,” she said. “This is probably what happened to the dinosaurs, the trilobites, you know. Too much change, then one day they could not find the right things. Most people think this journey is the last of times for the human race. Man began as gatherers and as gatherers we will end.”

As we spoke, I continued sweating, filling up her chia garden. “Still, what a journey this will be and what unexpected experiences we will share. New medicines falling from the sky. Some people have holes burned into their heads, others blissful

ecstasy,” she continued. “Science, chemistry, business are over. It’s all foraging now,” she added.

I asked her to write down some of her insights.

“Writing is over. Everyone’s own stories are so fabulous that few are copied down. The wonder of each day always precedes the next, so history is forgotten, boring,” she said.

I told her I would write her story.

“You would be the last historian,” she said. “In times of change we need collectors, not historians.”

I was becoming hurt by our closeness. I wanted her for myself. I strived at all moments, at all times to cause pain, ambush, and destroy her. The veil of those things which we knew not to say or do was my only playground. Life’s worth was judged in how well I annihilated her.

She was the neighborhood leader. Her houses were the survival stores, the community center, the conversational water cooler. I was her insolent assistant. I was a background character, a presence that must be tolerated or ignored. As I talked to a young girl waiting for her parents to complete a trade, my wife shouted at me, “Don’t you know that education is over? There is only one truth to learn—all is changing.”

With the demise of the red madness and the need to taste other harsher colors, my body was older and my heart could no longer bridge the gap. I shuddered to know that my need for her attention was not even noticed. My love for her was consciousness only in my carefulness to not step too deeply in her hallowed, horrific places. She was the voice of our time. “Most believe that mankind will not survive this trip. At least we know

why the sabertooths disappeared. They experienced at least part of the journey of a galaxy on holiday.”

At my bedside, my chia garden that had struggled to grow turned to brown, bristly nubs. It looked like the bald scalp of a doll where only the holes spoke of lost hair. There was only a stubble where a green fertile jungle should be blossoming. I picked it up and threw it against the wall. Then I looked about the house to find a broom, knowing she would have some irritating comment to make about it if she saw my weakness.

Textbooks say primordial man was a hunter and a gatherer. Man was nomad, following herds or harvests. My child bride was the Apothecary. The savior of our community. Yet at night lying in our bed, on a planet speeding through the sky, I still reached out to her. Her response was to give me her unrelenting explanations.

“It seems much of our new environments are eatable, even delicious. The atomic number of the components of a pudding I ate yesterday is probably so far off the periodic chart that I fear what its elements will do to me,” she said.

I rubbed her feet with the last of the lotion from the Apothecary Shoppe box.

Thunderclap

Monday he gulped down whiskeys at the Shangri-La, a man-made darkness in the corner of the dirty, beige walls of Mariposa Mall. Pockets bulging with severance pay, he moved on to slurping drinks with names like Beach Time Orgasm or Playful Kitty. Then he attacked.

He charged the Bath and Beyond, throwing colorful towels on the linoleum floor, flushing the faux porcelain toilet sculpture, covering himself in a haze of perfume sprays, calling out the middle-aged sales ladies with offers of obscene liaisons, “now that he smelled so good.” Then wearing rolls of floral print toilet paper and soap-on-a-rope as dreadlocks, he entered the Toys Treasure Chest calling out the baby dolls by demanding that they crawl off the shelf and pleasure him as he powered up the out-of-tune fish replicas to sing out overlapping versions of the national anthem. Over a Slip and Slide occupied by an army of windup cannons, stallions, and soldiers, two security guards held him down as the three high school boy clerks manned telephones, notifying their absentee managers it was not their fault.

“At least this time we got him before he climbed on a unicycle,” said the female officer.

“And before he started puking,” said the wiry male guard.

“Sherman,” said the female officer as they hauled him through the stark white walkway and into the brisk chill of the parking lot. “You know we can’t keep protecting you. They’re going to make us arrest you. Put you in County.”

“Oh, come on Sharon,” Sherman said. “Without me you wouldn’t have any crime to protect the mall customers from. I’m your job security. Just me and those wrinkled-butt Los Manos.”

On Tuesday, Sherman ran head first in the rows of calendars displayed in front of the Book Bonanza, pulling over racks of dogs, farmers and superheroes. The sales lady, draped in a flowing black burka, beat him about the head with an ancient broom as she screeched oaths in a guttural language. Every time he rose from his defensive position he would pull down another rack of the calendars, further littering the white linoleum with pictures of pinups and movie stars with perfect teeth.

Retreating from the broom onslaught, he backpedaled and ran for the central stage. In front of him was the high school band entertaining shoppers with a medley of Phillip military songs. As they marched in place, those at the edges of the overcrowded stage jostled with neighboring musicians for balance. Sherman ran up the stairs, and peeled through the irregular rows of sousaphones, snare drums, and tubas crashing that overwhelmed the lackluster cadence of the stillborn band.

“There Sherman goes,” said the shapely female security guard. “Now he’s heading for the fountain again.”

“To puke,” said her male companion.

“He knows how hard that is to clean up when it gets into the recycling filter.”

The two jogging cops caught up to Sherman as he was thigh deep in a growing,

yellow-pink puddle that textured the rippled surface with bits of corn and potato floaters as he was wiping his chin with his shirt sleeve. The female guard giggled.

“You know these on-stage presentations aren’t as good as they used to be,” Sherman said.

“We need to get you out of the water,” said the female guard.

“Sharon,” he said. “As always, you look lovely today. A beautiful woman like you ought to do something with your life other than wade in water fountains.”

“Sherm,” she said as she took her first step into the cold water.

“I dreamed about you again last night. You wore that green dress and we walked hand in hand.”

“Sherm, you’ve got to stop this. They’re going to make us arrest you. Call in the county boys.”

“Arrest me. I’d tell them you were a witness to all of my crimes, and demand that you testify against me every day in the courtroom.”

On Wednesday Sherman began his mall violence by throwing shoes at the Heel and Toe. With a wool sock on one foot and a new cowboy boot on the other, he hopped about the racks of sneakers, oxfords, high heels, and house slippers, hurling footwear pairs connected by a plastic string, chubby bivalve butterflies flopping in death spirals upon the floor. His path of destruction could be traced by the piles of pumps, clogs, and sandals. A young woman, her lavender hair dyed to match her purple lips, dived to tackle him. As he hung on to her ankles, two security guards joined the melee trying to subdue the girl’s flailing arms as he punished her with the pointed toe of the cowboy boot. While he hopped and kicked, the aisles filled with the walkers and wheelchairs of Los Manos,

the senior citizen shoplifting crew. Just outside the shop, out-of-step line dancers tripped about the performance stage, each dressed in gaudy outfits that glittered with rhinestones advertising the Wranglers Western Wear outlet.

When Friday morning came, he was again at the mall tavern. After two hours of drinking white Russians and cracking open peanut shells on the bar, he decided his next target would be the “Animal Sanctuary,” a white tile room filled with caged kittens, tanks of colored fish, and snakes engorging themselves on squealing mice. His six-minute rampage liberated three puppies, a sleepy iguana, and a box full of singing crickets. That afternoon, the county jailor brought Sherman a slice of burnt toast and a bowl of milky soup.

“This lunch?” asked Sherman as the heat of the cell made him perspire.

“Yeah,” said the trustee, “Better eat before this place fills up. Friday night, right?”

The trustee clanked the cell door but soon returned with a large hose and sprayed the cement floor. Sherman dodged the water bursts as hair, dirt, and a gum wrapper float above the water then swirled down the central drain. For a moment, Sherman’s clamminess was reprieved by a humid coolness rising from the cement.

As the day grew longer, two other men joined him. One cried to the jailors that he was not aware his cousin had driven his car and had an outstanding warrant. There was a stumble bum crouched over a growing puddle of urine. The ammonia smell swirled in the muggy heat of the cells. Through the bars, Sherman asked the trustee if the hose could be brought out again

“Yeah, tomorrow morning,” said the trustee.

“You okay there?” Sherman asked the peeing man.

“Oh,” said the peeing man, “You’re talking to me.”

“Yes,” said Sherman, “you might want to move over a bit. In fact sitting right over the drain might help you out there.”

“Oh,” said the man, “I’m releasing pre-flight ballast. Keeping my mass within proper parameters.” The trustee returned to the cell and half-heartedly asked if any of the latest arrivals were interested in lunch.

“It’s toast and soup,” said Sherman.

The sunshine from the lone window cast heat off the cement floor and made the wetness rise in a warm, foggy mist. It filled the cement cage, making Sherman feel lightheaded and happy.

“You might bring this guy something to eat,” said Sherman, pointing through the cloud to where the peeing man was huddled.

When the vapor cleared, the crouched man was gone. Only the puddle remained, no longer bridged by a body, it began expanding back towards the wall. The cell door slid open and the room filled with men, some shouting, and some muttering to themselves, some pacing in closed tight circles. When the trustee called Sherman’s name, he walked through a hall to a window bordered by peeling paint.

“Sherman Douglas?” asked the cop.

“Yes, sir,” said Sherman.

“You have pled guilty to drunk and disorderly. You are charged \$2,760 and time served.”

“Yes, sir,” said Sherman.

“You need a bail bondsman?”

“No. I’m flush with severance pay. I can cover one small fine.”

Sherman walked down the hall, out the door and boarded a cross town bus. When the Shangri-La bartender opened up on Saturday, Sherman was there to greet him.

“I need whiskey,” Sherman said, “In fact, pour me two.”

As the bartender wiped off shot glasses, Sherman thought about what stores he would surprise today.

“Giant cookies,” Sherman said to the bartender, “The Cookie Monster, where they have cookies the size of a beach ball. Chocolate chip, Peanut butter, Banana swirl. Oh, and they have these bouquet baskets, like they do with flowers, except cookies. Could you imagine how good that place smells right now with the first cookies of the day coming out of the oven?”

The bartender nodded as he leaned over a sink of suds.

“Yesterday in the jailhouse there was a fragrant mist. It made me feel completely contented.”

“The last time I was in County the toilets created a fragrant mist that made me feel sick,” said the bartender.

“No,” said Sherman, “a cloud, like a sweet honeysuckle perfume, but thicker, and it was like it had a personality, a really good one, like someone you could trust.”

“Maybe you were having a whiskey dream,” said the bartender.

“No, they put me in the tank then they washed it down...”

“Oh,” said the bartender, “they hosed down the cell. Maybe the heat of the floor evaporated the water into steam. The disinfectants smelled good.”

“But there was this rummy that disappeared.”

“Hey some of these guys are in there every day. They just roll them in and out. Probably moved him to another cell.” The bartender began drying goblets with a soggy dish towel. “But maybe your guy did disappear. Hey, we’re all seventy percent water. Muscles, organs, skin, even bone marrow. Maybe your guy just felt the need to return to his water base,” said the bartender.

“This guy was probably seventy percent cheap wine.” said Sherman.

“Hey, wine is probably ninety percent water. In fact, this dish water is like putting my hands in a relative,” said the bartender.

“Bring me more of my relatives then. Two more shots of whiskey, please. Then I think I might want some cookies for breakfast.”

Lunch was a slice of white bread and a piece of bologna.

“A sandwich kit,” Sherman said, relieved that his cellmate was quieted by chewing. As the afternoon continued, the cell was visited by a reverend in a starched collar that provided a moment of prayer. A few minutes later, a parade of men staggered into the cell, all talking about how they were unfairly incarcerated. In the back, Sherman found the peeing man, sitting with his back against the bars.

“Hey man,” said Sherman, “you look like you’re in good shape today.”

“I’m not quite ready for takeoff, but I’m starting to feel in proper flying condition.”

“You’re getting ready to take off?”

“Disperse. But if I use too much thrust I can freeze into upper atmospheric ice crystals.”

“Sounds fun,” said Sherman.

“Sometimes. But being ice crystals can hurt. Scraping, clinking, abrasive. Skinburn. It’s painful.”

Sherman was pushed by a new wave of men shoving their way into the cell. A man squatting beside Sherman told of a job working in Georgia picking peaches in trees that were filled with snakes.. As Sherman thought about summer evenings and the juicy bite of a ripened peach, the cell filled with a nebulous, sweet smog that made Sherman feel good. He thought of the real possibility that he could be wearing down Sharon’s opposition to his advances. In his mind he saw them together in a peach orchard.

Down the hallway, Sherman sat at the bar nursing his first whiskey and thinking about the rummy. Sherman liked the feeling of being covered in a warm, comforting cloud, and he enjoyed the weird dreams he had about Sharon while in the mist as the rummy whispered that everything was going to be all right. He liked the eerie drunken cloud consciousness, though he had communicated with the man for only a few minutes. At that moment, Sherman pledged that when he was thrown in County again he would make sure that he and the rummy talked for a long time, maybe Sherman would even wait to plead guilty and accept bail until they had had a real conversation. If, of course, the rummy didn’t just break up into droplets and fly away. For at the edges of each of the vaporous dreams, Sherman thought about seeing Sharon again. He had imagined holding her hand as she asked if he was grabbing too tight, as she blushed when he told her that he liked her haircut and how her mascara matched the midnight blue of her uniform and how her thought about her almost everyday and how he was going to destroy everything in the mall until she admitted that she still wanted him around.

“Today, I’m going to dedicate my attack to someone special,” said Sherman.

“Sharon?” asked the bartender as he his mop baptized the peanut shell covered floor.

“Well, yes, but today I’m making a special dedication sortie in the name of the peeing rummy.”

“Oh, the guy whose name you don’t know who you believe turns into a cloud whenever they wash down the drunk tank?”

“Yes, in his honor. Today I’m heading for the Rainy Day, a fine boutique for the designer umbrella, and bad weather accessories.”

“Sherman, why on earth would you want to bother that poor old man? He’s one of the people who have been trying to keep you out of trouble.”

“No aspect of Mariposa Mall is safe from me. Besides, Sharon will keep me out of trouble.”

“You’ve been thrown out of the mall more times than I can count. Have been taken to County. Twice. Any more trouble Sherman and you could be facing Federal counts. Penitentiary. They pile up. You used to be a security guard. You’re supposed to know that.”

“I’ve been thinking about that same old Rainy Day show. How many times can you watch those girls with umbrellas? I think maybe I’ll put one some of those plastic rain hats. I’ll be the comic relief. Maybe I’ll open up all of the umbrellas in the store. The old bumper shoots, filling up the aisles, telling everyone it’s bad luck. Roll the rain tires down the aisles and pull the lighting rods over into water proof watches.”

“Sherman, maybe you need to rethink your campaign. I’ll lose my best morning customer if you get sent to prison.”

“Sharon could visit me and we could smooch through the bars.”

The swinging salon doors opened. It was Sharon. She moved across the bar swinging her nightstick to the rhythm of the song blaring from the jukebox. She sat in the stool beside Sherman.

“Listen. Please, please don’t do anything crazy today. The mall residential committee has been pulling strings to get you arrested for good. I can’t talk to anyone around here anymore without being interrupted by an angry store owner screaming at me to have you put away, permanently.”

The Budweiser sign blinked in iridescent neon.

“I’m visiting Rainy Day. You can’t have enough good galoshes.”

“You know the girls from the middle school will be dancing to Gene Kelly’s ‘Singing in the Rain’ with the sprinkler effects.”

“Oh he’s been doing the same show since before I worked here. It needs some sprucing up.”

“Sherman, take your bottle home. Please. Get out of the mall.”

“I’ll leave after this drink but only if you meet me somewhere for lunch. Anyplace you like. I still have thousands and thousands of dollars of the severance money.”

“Milt’s out today and I’ve got this entire mall to watch out for.”

“I’ve been planning a full-out raid on Rainy Days. It’ll be one of my most property destroying adventures.”

“All right. I’ll have lunch but only if you promise to get out of the mall. Meet me at noon in the park across from the parking lot.”

“Oh, the swings. I remember...”

“Noon and you’d better be sobered up by then.”

As Sharon stormed out the saloon swinging half door, Sherman pointed to his empty shot glass.

“I heard you promise the lady,” said the bartender.

“I know but I need to be really liquored up to go through this swing set rendezvous. Besides I have permission to be drunk until at least 11.”

“After this I’m putting the bottle away.”

“See,” said Sherman, “she does love me.”

“Or she knows she’s going to lose her job if you don’t stop your raping and pillaging.”

Outside the morning sunlight was turning a damp, heavy grey. As Sherman staggered through the bar room door, he felt the comfort of kind cloud cover.

“Hey,” said Sherman, projecting his head toward the heavens, “Maybe you could do me a favor. I’m meeting someone by the swings. A warming cloud that could make her happier could be of real value.” Sherman checked the dribbling rain to make sure it wasn’t yellow.

Even as a drunken terrorist, Sherman knew to keep out of the sight of Sammy “Senseless Crimes” Donaldson, the general who headed up the Los Manos crew. Each day his people congregated in front of the Fiesta Video Arcade. Senseless Crimes would divide his troops into wheelchair battalions and walker-aided squads. As Sherman wandered the backside of the mall he heard Senseless Voice. “Today,” he announced, “is going to be a prime day for operations. That crazy security guy was at the Shangra-La

boozing it up and Rainy Day is having an on stage promotion.” Senseless Crimes had never seen his work be as profitable as these last two weeks. The security guard and his girlfriend made the palming of CDs, necklaces, tee shirts, blue jeans, and cellular phones almost challenge-less.

“What’s the guard doing now?” asked one of Senseless Crimes’s minions.

“I think he’s trying to piss off his woman again. Anyway, he must be the worst security guard I’ve ever seen here,” said another.

“What about ‘Ear Flaps’?” said another of the group. “That old guard with the hat with the built in mufflers.”

“That old dude once just eyeballed me as I walked out of Rainy Day with an umbrella.”

“That day it wasn’t even raining,” said another of Los Manos.

“At least ‘Ear flaps’ didn’t destroy the stores. Like this guy, he’s a nut job.”

“Some of the things he’s destroyed are stuff I was planning on stealing,” said another.

“He’s crazy. Left here in handcuffs yesterday.”

“Yeah,” said another, “during the scuffle I stole a bicycle. Gave it to Pee Wee’s little brother.

“You did what?”

“Don’t worry I cleared it with Senseless. Since Pee Wee’s brother got retired from that factory, he’s been in a funk.”

“Pee Wee’s little brother will be a Los Manos soon,” said Senseless. “An initiation gift. Saw him this morning riding up and down the street jumping the curbs.”

Sherrman sneaked out the back door to join Sharon, who was waiting at the swing set. Sherman was glad to see that Sharon had taken the time to buy a new dress for their time together. "I know that skirt," said Sherman, "from the Stylish Lass. The Summer Print sale. Good choice."

Sherman sensed that his date was chaperoned by the rummy in his light fluffy cirrus cover form. The cloud dampened the couple with a joyous presence. As Sherman filled Sharon's ears with a torrent of wet whispers, the cloud man, saturated her form with positive feelings.

"Sharon, since I last saw you I've thought of nothing but my swing date with you. I know that losing you has broken me, but minutes in your company and I'm repaired."

"Sherman, maybe we should go in. This thick fog. It's going to rain."

"No," said Sherman, "I want to be here with you."

"I admit that I miss you, too. That my every day is filled with thinking about you, but you have got to quit destroying the mall. I need the work there. If you don't stop your rampage you'll only have time for the love of a prison roommate and I'll be sharing the love of the unemployment line."

As Sharon chattered, Sherman mediated on his message to the rummy. "Do some tricks," said Sherman, as a cloud swelled around her then lifted Sharon into a spinning blanket of air."

"Oh," she squealed. "Sherman I've so missed having you around."

"I know," said Sherman, as she flowed high above his head, her skirt above her eyebrows, her frilly panties revealed for his curious eyes. She hovered then floated into the seat of a swing that was pushed by a breeze to the extent of its chained arc. When the

laughing Sharon said she had had enough fun, the wind calmed and she sat motionless, her legs resting on the ground.

“It’s good to be with you,” she said. A mist eased itself to the ground and took the shape of a dirty man sitting on top of a growing puddle.

A moist, wet presence filled the mall and everyone with a kind of distant smile. The band filed on stage row by row upon the stage. The owner of the Rainy Day attached the sprinkler to the fountain’s recycling system. In the neighboring store, matrons from Los Manos pretended to analyze a pile of terry cloth towels. Behind them the Los Manos gentlemen stalked around the store tracking the motion of the in store cameras.

Within this flurry of activity, marched Sherman. His eye staring hard at the platform that stood in the middle of the mall, right in front of the Rainy Day.

“Sherman,” said the owner, “I guess you have come to tear this place to pieces.”

“Yes,” said Sherman, “Well just enough to get Sharon to drop by and take me to out to the parking lot.”

As a moist fog filled the space about the platform, the owner wiped moisture from his brow with a handkerchief. “The air conditioner must be on the fritz again.”

“It’s a happiness coating. It fills your being with a kind of gladness.” Sherman said as he pointed to the rafters. “And thunder that fills the night with balls of heat lightning.”

“What’re you going to destroy first? Maybe you could make it that car battery charger over there. That old lady is going to steal it anyway.”

“This is not an ordinary store crashing. I’m going to enliven the whole mall.”

“Well, Rainy Day is proud to be the site of your new approach to destruction,” said the owner as he watched wheel-chaired men stuff rubber duckies, galoshes, and snow globes in their pockets.

The sprinkler attachment to the fountain groaned as it began to spit spat water on the young girls from the elementary school who wore yellow rain slickers, dancing to the tune of the sound system projected Gene Kelly’s ‘Singing in the Rain ’ like tiny syncopated fishermen. The show proceeded with its usual cluster of customers stopping to take a moments rest in the hard, metal chairs and the throng of mother’s off the rain cherubs, watching with maternal pride. Then Sherman appeared on the stage. “Hey,” he said, “Hey.”

The closest mother tried to shush him, blowing air across a raised finger.

“This is a fine performance, but this time I’m going to add some excitement,” said Sherman.

Everything stopped but the recorded music. A girl on stage cried. Another slipped on the wet floor. Sherman then said, “Thunderclap.” The splashes of the condensed sprinkler moved into a spinning vortex.

Sherman said “Thunderclap” again, and the stage glowed with spheres of ball lightning illuminating the entire stage, the spinning water then cracked, overpowering the recorded music. Water droplets fell as a rain shower. Each person began dancing in the downpour that was brightened only by the large toothy smiles of the participants. The customers and the mothers each looked with love at the young Gene Kellys who completed their dance steps.

Milt the security guard had heard the euphoric roars from the stage. He and Sharon ran towards the center of the storm afraid of what shenanigans Sherman might be instigating.

“Sherman step away from the stage,” said Milt.

“Oh, hey Milt, I was just conducting the sound effects for the Rainy Day show. Everyone likes the dancing, don’t they?”

“Sherm, I’m not kidding here. This time I’m making sure that you do hard time in the pen.”

Sherman walked up and shook Milt’s hand.

“Is he disturbing your show?” Milt asked the Rainy Day owner.

“How could he disrupt the show?” he answered. “He bought me out this morning. He’s the new head of Rainy Day. He’s put together quite an effects show to celebrate my retirement.”

The vortex that had kept the water swirling in a tight circle around the stage area moved swirling around Milt. “Go ahead,” said Sherman and it spun the guard in the air. The recorded music ended, and the girls ran off the stage into their mother’s arms. The water funnel slammed the torrent of water that encased Milt into the fountain while senior citizen shoplifters each pushed a final object into their oversized purses.

“Remember,” said Sherman “Every afternoon this stage will be transformed into a side show of wind, rain, lightning, and every customer will find a place to feel good.”

The retiring owner joined Sherman at the microphone. He thanked the many people who had made his time at the mall special and then introduced Mr. Sherman Douglas, the new owner of the Rainy Day.

“I’ll have a new performance every weekday afternoon and I’ll dedicate each to my inspiration, Sharon Johnson,” said Sherman. Sitting beside him was an unshaven man with a puddle growing beneath him.

Sherman caught a kiss from Sharon with a showman’s exuberant flare and pantomimed stuffing it into his pocket. He then pointed to the young girls on stage as they twirled their umbrellas and then closed them in almost unison. The music faded into a metallic hiss, the fountain made a choking sound as a gush of water under the drenched form of Milt and gurgled down the drain.

The audience of mothers, tired shoppers, and senior citizens on the prowl stood up and applauded. For a moment the girls on stage looked confused, then they giggled and crawled down the bleacher steps to join their mothers who took them by their hands to stroll the aisles of the Rainy Day and to purchase a souvenir to celebrate feeling so good.

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