

The Devil Yearns for the Perfect Denver Omelet

and Other Revelations

A Collection of Short Stories

by

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Fastidious

The spectacle of The Great Fastidio alphabetizing paper clips was, admittedly, an acquired taste. Once acquired, however, it could quickly become an addiction. It was his fourth year with the carnival; and, being more of a showman than one might expect, it was his fourth production. Indeed, he had contrived, for each lap around the country, a different meticulous demonstration.

The first year he had been put on display as a study in obsessive compulsion, a psychological version of a bearded lady or fire eating dwarf. A “real life” living room setting was constructed for him in the seedy sideshow tradition. He dutifully arranged the room in a manner keeping with his peculiar claim to fame: placing everything at perfect ninety degree angles, combing the nap of the area rug and fanning the magazines with alien precision.

He quickly grew bored sitting in his fake living room and so he began experimenting with the arrangement of the magazines. He had originally laid them out chromatically so that the National Geographic yellow did not clash against the

Time red but rather segued through a pair of conveniently orange copies of *The Utne Reader*. This method, however, posed problems with chronology and the presence of several non-standard sized magazines created additional aesthetic restrictions. As he passed the hours absorbed in his task, trying increasingly esoteric though flawlessly logical patterns of organization, an amazing thing happened.

People watched.

By which I do not mean that a large number of people walked though his tent to glimpse *The Great Fastidio*, though many did. The remarkable thing was the growing number of people who stayed; who stood there, some for hours, watching with a muted kind of awe. It seemed that his unprecedented focus on a single task would prove far more compelling than a rudimentary tableau of the fastidious life.

The next year, he proofread copies of the *Sunday New York Times*, cataloging errors and inconsistencies of style in his rigid block handwriting on a large wipe board. While the crowds swelled considerably and the gate for his attraction with them, the *Great Fastidio* began to feel the restless stirrings of the artist.

In his third year, *The Great Fastidio* took the act to a newly conceptual level. The problem with the previous shows, he had decided, was the curse of objectivity. Everything about the magazines and the newspaper copy was pre-defined. While *The Great Fastidio* was actually inclined to perform his tasks, any member of his audience was capable of doing so as well. So it was in his third year, seeking to create something truly unique, that *The Great Fastidio* made a bed. It was a process that, for the purposes of his show, took ten hours.

He began with the base sheet. Considering fitted sheets to be a crutch of the lazy, *The Great Fastidio* worked only with flat sheets which he tucked, folded and stuffed with measurably perfect symmetry. He would use a large carpenter's level to flatten the sheet, removing every bump, wrinkle and crease. He could smooth about an inch a minute on his first pass, moving only half so quickly on his second. It was his best show ever, to judge from audience reaction,

and only halfway through the season the carnival boss had twice raised the admission to see him.

The bed making production was most popular with female patrons. Something about the sight of a man performing a domestic task with such an obsessive intensity of focus and purpose appealed to women and unsettled men.

Only one patron that season, however, thought to call the performance erotic. When the word materialized in her head, even though she did not gasp or move, she blushed with such vibrant heat as to cause Fastidio to look up from his work.

The moment came as an epiphany to her; a late twenties, self-described spinster who had prematurely given up on the fairy tale of romance and the myth of eroticism. What was perhaps the most amazing for her was the fact that she had not recognized it before. She had attended The Great Fastidio's every performance in her area. She had been one of the first to stand in rapt fascination at his magazine routine, making a delightful game out of understanding his patterns and trying to anticipate his next variation. She had stood there an entire day watching him edit the Times, silently rooting for him to find an error. (He found 27 typos the weekend he had spent in her town)

The week prior to the carnival and The Great Fastidio's bed act, her palpable anticipation had become a source of amusement for her small circle of similarly jaded friends who accused her of having a schoolgirl crush on the amazing sideshow neurotic. She had waved off their insinuations at the time that they were made, but the new context of The Great Fastidio's act; the intimate presence of the bed on stage like a gun waiting to go off snapped everything into surprising focus.

While the eroticism of Fastidio's act was akin to a strike of lightening, her subsequent daydreams were like the grinding of tectonic plates; slowly building a mountainous fantasy that eventually became an obsession. She imagined the optimum effect of his every caress and touch calibrated by his razor fine neurosis. She imagined the precision of his tongue, the inevitable knowledge of female anatomy that

only obsessive research could yield . . .

Not long after the bed performance, she came to the decision that she would seduce the strange creature and the year that followed was an exercise in self-transformation. After a week meditating on the question, she decided that to attract The Great Fastidio, she would need to be, herself, an exercise in precision. Sure, she could try going to him as imperfect as she had always been hoping that he would shape her in his compulsive hands, but she knew that she would have to stand out. Catching his eye was of course pivotal to catching the man himself.

Opening day of the carnival, she was there for the unlocking of the gate to the public. Dressed in a tailored suit, which she had ironed and creased with military precision, a starched white blouse whose buttons were oriented with perfect uniformity, literally not a single hair out of place, eyebrows shaped to a precise arc that expressed an aesthetic understanding of the universality of Euclidian geometry. She strode across the grounds, arms and legs moving like a collection of synchronized metronomes ignoring into nonexistence the standard trapping of the carnival that bombarded her senses.

The anticipation poured off of her like pheromones and though no one dare approach her, every head on the fairgrounds tracked her progress. She exuded carnality in a way that every mammal on the grounds could sense and it was no small surprise to the staff to see her walk up to The Great Fastidio's tent, pay ten dollars for an unlimited ticket and walk in.

They suspected she would not be seen again before closing.

The Great Fastidio was already on stage. He sat upon a stool, behind a desk piled high with thousands of paperclips. Beside him, a massive set of card catalogue drawers dominated the stage. One by one, he would pick up the paperclips. He would examine each one, applying unspoken evaluation before turning to the lettered drawers and filing the paperclip by placing it on one of the thousands of index cards contained in the file.

For the first few minutes that she stood there, she wondered if she had made a mistake. The utter tedium of his task, the spectre of the office lurking around the performance left her suddenly dry. She could feel fidgeting creeping into her extremities and irrational tears started rallying behind her eyes. These symptoms abated, however, once she caught his eyes. There, as he examined a particularly nondescript paperclip, she saw the intensity that had attracted her in the first place. Seeing it again, feeling the benignly deranged machinations behind that look sparked in her once more the desire to be subject to his gaze.

Emboldened by desire, she placed herself directly across from him; planting herself for the duration of the day. He would have no choice but to see her. She looked at him with a practiced stare that she had cultivated specifically to unsettle him and to plant in his subconscious the knowledge that she had trimmed her pubic hair to the precise length necessary to have each individual hair laying in the same direction.

To her credit, she did have an unsettling effect. It could be seen in the flustered way that he scrambled for a new paper clip as soon as he returned from the drawers, afraid to give himself even the slightest moment without a point of focus. Other clues were subtler. A paperclip filed under “E”, for example, denoted a change in his perceptions where interpretation became more important than quantitative information. The self-described spinster had, with nothing more than her hormonally electric presence, turned a scientific evaluation of seemingly uniform objects into a kind of secret Rorschach test.

“E” is for “enticing,” you see.

As it became evident to her that his occasional fumbling fingers, and the ever-present beads of sweat on his brow were a result of her scrutiny, she allowed herself another slight smile. It was a smile to let him know that she knew and that all was going according to her plan. This one, again, had been rehearsed countless times to ensure that its confident smirk-like qualities did not cause undue asymmetry in her face. She was, after all, fastidious. Just like him.

He continued sorting, projecting all manner of erotic connotations onto the paperclips, unable to stop himself from making designations that he knew to be patently absurd.

“P” is for “phallic.”

“S” is for “sensual.”

Her presence was disturbing him. He remembered her, too. She who had silently broken his concentration the previous year, who had haunted his dreams for weeks afterwards, was not just causing him to look up briefly from his work, she was distorting the entire exercise.

“C” is for “cunt.”

And so it continued for seven hours, as hundreds of carnival patrons shuffled through the attraction; some merely glimpsing the meticulous spectacle and leaving with derisive snorts, others staying and trying to grasp the inscrutably strange display. A handful even noticed the duel between he and she, though none could actually recognize it as such. Some thought she was even a part of the act.

Which, in a way, she now was.

At the end of the night, when the carnival boss came through to flush out the last of the patrons and give The Great Fastidio the go ahead to close up, Fastidio still did not speak. He simply made direct eye contact, a concession of such magnitude that she knew what it meant, and she dutifully followed him out the back of the tent.

On the way to his trailer, she could observe his natural behavior for the first time. Where she needed to resort to clockwork hyperbole to walk with the kind of precision she suspected he desired, it was clear that he no longer had to calculate to be exact. His gait seemed perfectly natural, a strolling pace with his hands in his pockets. It took an eye that had been studying precision for a year to see that both arms were bent to a forty-degree angle at the elbow and every leisurely step covered exactly 30 inches of ground, regardless of the terrain.

Indeed, he did not need to think to achieve such uniformity of motion. He thought nothing of his walk or his arms. The Great Fastidio was still deciding what to do with

her. She was a distraction, a wrench in the works. He knew that he wanted her. He wanted to spread her legs and split her down the middle. He wanted to make her scream.

Whether in pleasure, pain or both was the dilemma. He refused to allow her the honor of breaking his demeanor. He remembered the smile that had come when he first dropped that paperclip. It had been a senseless commiseration to the forces of lust and gravity, and she had clearly enjoyed it. Yet here she was as well creased and immaculately put together as he. She was clearly trying to be fastidious, but why?

The enigma ate at him.

She tried to fathom what was going on in his mind. She wanted to talk, but what was there to say that would not be superfluous or unnecessary? How would this encounter begin? Would he order her to the bed or was she simply supposed to go? Should she disrobe and reveal the onionskin layers of meticulous self-creation? Would he understand her tribute? Or would he just stand there? Would he fuck her or merely show her his chronologically alphabetized collection of ATM receipts?

The anticipation ground against her.

Finally, they arrived at the trailer, two heads swirling with potent blends of thought and feeling. He put keys to the four locks on the door in an unconventional but clearly ritualistic sequence and they were inside, the interior a mute testament to the authenticity of his act. The trailer, a bland amalgam of ninety-degree angles, alphabetized possessions, ironed fabrics, combed carpeting and spotless surfaces screamed of the pedestrian nature of his disorder. She was suddenly sickened, wanting nothing more than to make him break with the neurosis that truly defined him.

He watched her face fall in a way that would have been imperceptible to almost anyone else. He knew that he had won. Whatever fantasies this girl had held of shaking him, of making him forsake the fundamental order of the universe that he alone seemed to grasp, had faded. She was his, and he would not be moved again. He decided then that he would take her, on his terms. He had not had much use

for the shackles since Deidre had left him, but he knew he had kept them for a reason. He would bind her, a symmetrical “X” in the center of his bed. The notion of using her in such a way, of reducing this interfering bitch to another cog in the well-oiled machine that he had made of life, excited him as he had not been in a long time.

The evidence of his lust did nothing to arouse her. It was but one crack in a veneer that she wanted to utterly desecrate. So she began to strip. Mocking his shtick, she worked slowly taking twenty minutes to unbutton her shirt.

Stone-faced, he did not seem to mind.

Then she nonchalantly tossed the shirt on the floor, and his erection actually lost momentum for a moment until thoughts of vengeance flooded blood back where he needed it. She then proceeded to slide out of her skirt, kicking it aside with cruel indifference. She wore no panties, only a bra and thigh high stockings. He was momentarily impressed by the uniformity of her trimmed pubic hair. Then she tugged lightly on one stocking, perversely bringing it a quarter of an inch higher than the other and The Great Fastidio struggled to understand her game.

They stood in silence for a moment, each anticipating the other’s next move. Finally, he spoke. “Lay in the center of the bed.” His voice had the clipped and even tone of a life-long elocution student. She smiled at having imagined it so accurately. Then she smiled at what was to come. She flopped lazily onto the bed, her body askew.

“That is not what I told you to do.”

She smiled and got up, carefully pulling some of the cover awry as she did. As he stared at the bed, she approached him standing so close that he could feel heat coming off her body and the breath from her nose caressing his chin. Without breaking eye contact, she reached out, plucked a book from a nearby shelf, flipped it over and put it back, three spaces from its correct place on the shelf.

In a blind rage the likes of which he had never experienced, he struck her rapidly across the face with two quick and consecutive slaps so both cheeks burned crimson and both eyes welled with stinging tears. Her look inquired and

he answered.

“Symmetry.”

She would later tell police it was the last thing she remembered hearing. They had found her sitting on the steps to his trailer, fully dressed and smoking a cigarette. She knew that she would be a fugitive. Too many people had gotten a good look at her and too many of her friends knew she was going to be there all day. Flight was futile.

Inside, The Great Fastidio’s body lay in his bed; arms folded across his chest, keeping closed the wound from his groin to his throat. On top of the bookshelf where she had blasphemed against his only belief, sat his organs. From left to right were the most recognizable internal parts of the human body: heart, liver, kidneys, and lungs. They had been lined up carefully, flawlessly spaced three inches from one another. She had even cleaned up most of the blood, making the trailer the most pristine murder scene in recent memory.

As the cops surveyed the painstakingly gruesome scene, one could not help but comment, “She must have been a crazed fan. It seems he died as he lived.”

She smiled knowing that the kidneys should have been between the heart and the liver. It was her final assault on his beguiling perfection. She had won.

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The Devil Yearns for The Perfect Denver Omelet

Satan was peeing. This is to say that the Devil was taking a leak. Lucifer the Morning Star, once revered by the Lord above all other Angels, was draining the lizard. To the mortal eye, he looked no different from any other late twenties hipster making use of any of a million urinals in countless diners and roadside eateries around the world.

When he looked in the mirror, however, he did not see that goateed visage framed by shoulder length hair of indeterminate color and cleanliness. What he instead saw was his true face: one of angelic beauty corrupted, chiseled featured grown gaunt and a brow once lit by a heavenly glow now augmented with two horns sprouted in mockery of an ancient thorny crown.

Satan bent down and splashed water on his face, one of his favorite terrestrial pleasures. As he rose, just over his reflection's shoulder, a silhouette backlit by the light of a thousand suns. Satan turned to examine the guise assumed by God. As was typical, it was that of an impeccably dressed older gentleman. His silver hair was coiffed with salon fresh

precision, a full but trim physics professor beard rounded out an appearance evoking both Santa Claus and Walter Krokite.

And God spoke unto Satan, "It is said that it is We who work in mysterious ways."

"They do say that. What's your point?"

"And yet We cannot fathom why you choose to frequent these greasy spoons. Or why you so fervently commit yourself to your corporeal guise, voiding a bladder which is nothing more than a cognitive construct." Having heard some variation of this particular diatribe at each of their monthly lunches, the Devil chose to keep with his usual routine and continued to wash his hands.

"I will give no explanation; only a reminder that, while you invented the inscrutable machinations of this world, it is I to whom you turn when you wonder how it's all going."

"All the same, We do not think it is healthy. You . . . lose focus, it seems."

Satan sighed and hit the button on the hand dryer with little success. Conversely, when God tapped the button, the machine immediately blazed to life. "There's a good use of resources," noted the Devil.

Even the power of God could not ultimately spare the Devil from having to wipe his hands on his pants as the two made their way to a table. Once ensconced in their corner booth the two figures promptly set their menus on the table's edge and waited. A waitress was soon in attendance. The Devil ordered first.

"I'll have coffee and a Denver omelet, home fries extra crispy with onions and rye toast." The order elicited a roll of the eyes from the Creator, whose own order would soon bring about the same from the Prince of Darkness.

"A simple glass of water and the meat loaf will be fine, my child."

Once the waitress was out of earshot, the Devil picked up the conversation where God's indictments had left off. "So you think that I lose focus? Why? Because I am not eager as you to bring down the curtain on this grand experi-

ment?”

“Arrangements have been made.” God replied with the finality of an accountant tabulating figures. The results of His arrangements were to be as inevitable as the creation of four from the merging of two and two. So it had been written, so it must be done.

The Devil preferred ambiguity. “Odd then that those arrangements have been consistently thwarted by--”

“—happenstance.” God finished the sentence as He wished it to end.

“Or Free Will.” Satan retorted with the sharp diction of a semantic duelist lunging for a known weakness.

“Such was never Our intention,” came the response with a terse vigor that did little more than confirm the acuity of the Devil’s preceding attack. It seemed, however, that Old Scratch was not the only one causing irritation at the table.

“Say, can you do me a favor?”

“What is that?”

“Lose the first person plural.”

“We have occasionally spoken in this manner since time immemorial.”

“Yes, but your use of it, especially when you speak of Free Will is ill-suited at best and blasphemous at worst. Remember, Pop, you kicked Mom out of the house a long time ago.” The observation so inflamed Yahweh that the careful observer would have noticed a gust of wind blowing briefly through the diner. Such a statement was a smiting offence. God would have like to label it sacrilege, but knew better.

Before He could reply, the waitress appeared and served forth their drinks. “Here you guys go. I’ll bring out your food in a few.”

“Thanks.”

“Thank you, my child.”

As the waitress left, the Lord of the Pit continued his onslaught. “Which is not to say she didn’t at least provide humanity with one last gift before stepping aside for your ego.”

While there are passages in the bible which vividly depict the horrors of the wrath of God, there are none that even attempt to capture the more quietly formidable sight of Him seething. "That will be quite enough."

Satan feigned innocence. "I should know, after all, I am the one who delivered it for Her."

"Must you rebel at every turn?"

"It's kind of my gig," Lucifer affirmed nonchalantly. He then allowed just enough of a pause to give the impression that he had dropped the subject before adding "After my omelet, I might have myself a nice big slice of *apple* pie."

In his head, the fallen angel heard the true voice of God bellowing forth, registering somewhere between the sound of a thousand hydrogen bombs detonating simultaneously and the Big Bang itself, "Lucifer Morningstar you will stay thy tongue!"

Satan sipped his coffee and suggested that they talk about something else. God agreed, taking a sip of the shiraz which had miraculously appeared in the place of the water glass. "So then, what's going on with the omelet? Every time we meet whether it be one of your neon-lit joints or the finest restaurants in the world, you order a Denver omelet."

The Devil gave a smile which would chill a mortal to the bone, but merely annoyed his dining companion. "I thought we were going to change the subject."

"And so we are."

"If you say so. The thing I love about how this has all played out is the infinite variety of which these creatures are capable."

"So you have said. What does this have to do with omelets?"

"Humans can manifest every possible degree of Good and Evil. Countless cruelties and kindnesses are taking place every day, with new ones being invented almost hourly. We could easily spend the next billion years on the edge of our seats seeing what they will do to and for each other next."

God kept trying to bring the conversation back to where He had intended it. "And because of this, you order the same thing every time we have lunch?"

Satan continued his circuitous explanation. “Of course, we can’t wait forever. You would like things to happen as they were written and you’re the director, as it were. You could call ‘cut’ and strike the set at any time no matter how free they are to guide their individual lives. At the same time, you’re excited to watch me scramble to give rise to the Antichrist so that he or she can raise the armies of the damned while your kid launches his international comeback tour with a three night stand in Branson, Missouri; but *I* want to see what these creatures are capable of first.”

“And by ‘creatures’ you, of course, mean short order cooks?”

True to her word, the waitress returned with their entrees. As soon as she turned away, Satan began examining his omelet, while God transubstantiated the meatloaf platter into the rack of lamb that He was actually craving.

The Devil rotated his plate to allow three hundred and sixty degree view of the meal. “Consider the Denver omelet. I’m not saying that we should wait and see every single thing that the human race is going to come up with. I’m not trying to make this go on forever. But the Denver omelet is a near perfect synthesis of nature and human development; of divinity and free will.”

When the Alpha and the Omega opts to adapt a blank expression, it is awe-inspiring how empty a void can be created in a perfunctorily human face. “When you fell, did you hit your head?”

“Hear me out. Look at this omelet. The ham,” Satan explained with added significance, “is *cubed*.”

The Lord gazed upon the foodstuffs. The Devil’s description was certainly accurate for nestled in the matrix of chicken ova were little flecks of dull pink, nearly perfectly square ham. “Indeed,” was the Creator’s only response.

God’s disinterest did not stop the Devil’s explanation. “Now this is really the most common preparation I’ve seen. The small and uniform size of the pieces indicates that it, most likely, came in this form. Mass produced. Passable, but not especially gourmet. All the same, these little nitrate drenched bits still serve their purpose, providing saltiness

and a hint of smoky flavor to the overall taste.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“The advantage of such small pieces is that they tend to distribute themselves evenly through the egg mass, allowing each bite to be as salty and smoky as the last.”

“You try my patience.”

“And yet I have hardly begun the analysis! There are myriad other considerations to be made. The ratio of ham to the other ingredients, whether it was whisked into the eggs or piled in as a filling--”

“All of which is very important, I’m sure,” God interrupted.

“Absolutely! And these are just the issues that present themselves with this type of ham. Some places will use hand carved baked ham. Others, deli style slices. Each choice plays off the other elements in the determining the success of the omelet itself.”

God dared to hope that He had finally figured it out at last “So it’s all about the ham then?”

One would think that he had suggested that chocolate sauce was the key to a great Denver omelet as the Tempter slammed down a fist and launched into a vicious assault, “No! We have eggs, peppers, onions, ham and cheese! Each item in itself containing infinite factors controlling its quality, flavor and texture.

“These things are brought together by the conscious living mind of a human being, chosen for whatever combination of convenience, price and quality the establishment sees fit.

“These are then brought together in more or less the same configuration no matter where you order them by an utterly human hand in such a way that still leaves endless room for subtle deviations and permutations! Here me now, I have ordered a Denver omelet for every meal that I have consumed in the last decade and I am yet to have the same meal twice.”

God chewed thoughtfully on his lamb and sipped deeply from his glass of wine. The Devil neatly bisected his omelet with the side of his fork, in order to examine the cross

section of the thing. Finally, completing his visual inspection, he was ready to cut out the all important first bite. As he raised it to his diabolical mouth, God finally chose to speak, stopping the Morning Star's fork in mid-flight.

"So you have somehow honed in on this one thing, this one dish in the millions that My children cook and consume each day as the true barometer of human achievement?" Incredulity in the voice of God can only come across as viciously condescending, for the tone adopted implies in its rigor that only a singular stupidity could leave Him so utterly nonplussed.

Satan set down the fork and set himself to further explaining himself, a situation in which had frequently found himself over several thousand years of butting heads with his Father. "Humanity has and will achieve innumerable pinnacles in its limited time on this rock. The Denver omelet is as good an indication of anything."

"But you have not explained how this fetish of yours ties in with the Great Work."

The Devil's face broadened in a the gleeful expression of one who has laid a perfect trap. "Ah, but haven't I?"

The Lord was not buying it. "You are simply dragging things out with this nonsense! My children have certain expectations."

"Which is, in itself, kind of creepy. Do they know what is in store for them?"

"I want things to go as they should; as they were laid out all those thousands of years ago."

"As do I. I must admit there is a certain order to it. A symmetry of sorts."

"Then what are you waiting for."

The Devil replied in the slow cadence of someone who is intentionally using the tiniest words possible: "The. Perfect. Denver. Omelet." God raised his eyebrows, and Lucifer elaborated. "Their culture and society may not peak for millennia more. It will take centuries for a perfect piece of music or the construction of the ultimate work of architecture, for these things are in a constant state of evolution and understanding their brilliance often takes the tonic of time.

This,” he explained, indicating the omelet, “is set in stone. The foundation is laid and any evolution is a different animal altogether. The Denver Omelet is ready to be perfected. It is a pinnacle within the reach of these strange creatures. When I get the perfect Denver Omelet, you get your precious apocalypse.”

God rolled his all seeing eyes. “I’m beginning to think that you don’t have the nerve.”

“Right now, somewhere on this planet; perhaps in the kitchen of this very diner a cook is preparing the perfect Denver Omelet. When it passes my lips, woe be to any creature who doubts my commitment to the End.” The ambient temperature in the room had dropped ten degrees as the Lord of the Pit had spoken, and yet the coffee in front of him was boiling in the cup. He picked up his fork and consumed the first bite with a homicidal zeal which left no doubts in the mind dinner companion.

The Narrative of the Game

The facts, as they were given to the management of the Des Moines Barons, were ripe with accuracy though bereft of detail. It was announced that their star pitcher, the enigmatic Bertrand Toppinen, was barricaded himself in the team's makeshift offices refusing to speak to anyone.

Undisclosed was the fact that he held two large envelopes of unknown content and a stack of tattered notebooks. Though purchased only two weeks previous, the books already bore the alternating brown and crimson stains symptomatic of his Turkish coffee and ruby port habits.

There are situations where errors of omission are every bit as dangerous as factual inaccuracies. This was one such scenario. You see, a glimpse inside those vice-stained pages would reveal a labyrinthine compilation of strike zone schematics and infield configurations framed and accented by columns upon columns of statistics, percentages and esoteric shorthand symbols; all of which was rendered in an obtusely systematic combination of red, blue, green and black colored pencil. The notebooks were a kind of Rosetta

Stone with which one could—eventually—begin to decipher the pitcher’s intent. To be entirely unaware of their existence would only impair the efforts of Barons management.

An athlete of this caliber is expected to display the periodic bout of eccentric behavior, for they dwell in a pantheon inhabited almost exclusively by blustering phenoms and showboating prima donnas. Bertrand Toppinen, however, never indulged in the narcissistic grandstanding which came so naturally to his so-called peers. Even during contract negotiations, a time when decorum is consistently beaten aside by theatrical displays of hubris and brinkmanship, Bertrand had remained an odd and shining example of gentlemanly restraint.

This is not to say that he was without his idiosyncrasies. He was a more solitary player than most, almost oblivious to the existence of teammates beyond the confines of team business. His demeanor could be described as surly, but not in the conventional sense that one normally associates with athletes. Instead, it was the aggressive melancholy of the brooding artist. Bertrand suffered from devastating mood swings, but never let these dark moments interfere with the business at hand. His inner battles were usually his own, and a remarkable effort was put towards keeping them that way.

Yet there they were, an hour from the start of game five of the World Series and Bertrand was pulling a rather remarkable stunt. His game two had been masterful, though understanding how masterful would require full comprehension of the tattered notebooks’ contents. It was widely believed that his pitching would carry the day and win the second year expansion team an unprecedented national title. As worst case scenarios go, Bertrand’s breakdown was cataclysmic enough to have never even been considered by those tasked with imagining such things.

It fell to Paul Dillon, pitching coach for the Barons, to assess the situation and get Bertrand onto the mound in time for the first pitch. As he approached the office, Paul wished that he hadn’t ignored the rumors of Bertrand’s strange behavior in recent days. Gossip columnists had col-

luded with local sportswriters to report that Bertrand had been seen staggering around the city's seedier neighborhoods; scrawling Baudelaire quotes on the shoulders of prostitutes, paying them a dollar a word for the privilege, and then swigging from a bottle of akvavit as he screamed Welsh obscenities into the mild California night. Such behavior, the coach now admitted, had been a warning sign.

Tapping gently on the frosted glass of the office door, Paul tried to establish a lighter mood. "Bertie? You Ok in there?"

Inside the office, Bertrand examined the coach's silhouette. He allowed himself a momentary flight of fancy, imagining himself an old-fashioned private eye. In another life, the figure on the other side of that film noir door could have been either a client or a hit man. A part of him envied the coach. Paul had absolutely no idea how this thing was going to play out. It had been years since Bertrand had experienced such a sense of the unknown.

Shaking himself from his reverie, Bertrand shot back, "You mean, aside from the fact that my work is a joke? I suppose if you ignore that hideous beast failure sitting upon my chest, filling my nostrils with its fetid breath and laughing at my all too human frailty, I'm just fine."

"Bertie, what in the hell are you talking about? Your last game was incredible. Everyone's counting on you tonight. You," and it was this pronoun which the coach particularly emphasized in such a way as to put Bertrand in mind of sideshow hucksters and their modern day infomercial host descendents, "are what people are thinking of when they talk about an athlete at the top of his game."

There followed a brief pause during which the coach hoped Bertrand was weighing the merit of his words. The door opened suddenly and a powerful arm locked Paul in an iron grip, jerked him into the office and along with its equally powerful counterpart pinned the overwhelmed coach to the wall, letting his feet dangle six inches above the floor. "Paul, do you think I care in the slightest if I am an athlete at the top of his game?"

Paul stammered. It had seemed a compliment to him at the time. He was struck for the first time by Bertrand's stare. The weird intensity which had always been turned inward; held back behind unruly bangs and an almost permanently down-turned gaze, was now burrowing straight through the coach's skull.

Releasing his grip, Bertrand clarified, "An athlete at the top of his game is nothing more than a man a few years away from sports bar proprietorship. If I bring the championship home to Des Moines I may even be able to franchise an entire empire of steak houses throughout Iowa. And then in the twilight of my years, I can go to sports shows and reminisce with people who watched me play as they tell me about the parents who took them to the ballpark or wax longingly about the tepid personal dramas that played out at the same time as my career."

"C'mon, Bertie. You know you don't need to do that stuff. Plenty of guys retire and go on as normal guys. Besides, you have three years left on your contract and plenty of good years left in you. Why are you even thinking about retirement?"

Bertrand, silent and unflinching, glared at the coach. It was becoming clear that Paul could not and would not understand the dilemma. Then again, Bertrand could count on a single hand those who would. Nonetheless, he owed it to Paul to at least try. "I think about retirement because my greatest triumph is behind me and yet it will never be recognized."

"You're only a few hours away from leading a second year expansion team to the world championship. That's still ahead of you."

"Perhaps. But even if I do win this game, the outside best that I can possibly hope for is to duplicate the success of Game number Two."

"But Game number Two didn't bring home the pennant."

Bertrand ran his hand through his hair and pulled his shaggy mane tight in the back. His eyes went to the large envelopes on the desk, and Paul's eyes followed. "What's in

the envelopes, Bertie?”

Not yet, thought Bertrand.

“Did you know that I went to college with Rudy Collins?”

“The quarterback?”

“Yes. And Marcus Waits.”

“They’re a deadly combo when they’re not at each other’s throats.”

“Even then.”

“I suppose.”

“We also went to school with Lars Sorenson”

“Who?”

Bertrand observed a moment of mourning for his unsung comrade, the most brilliant of their group. A pre-med/fine arts duel major, Lars Sorenson had used his extensive knowledge of art, anatomy and physiology to create himself as the world’s first conceptual bodybuilder. Like the others in the Athletika Boheme Society, he had made his first forays into the competitive world in a tediously practical manner. His particular brand of genius, coupled with a genetic predisposition towards hypertrophic bulk, had made it simple for him to build the mass, definition and symmetry required of his chosen sport. With such capitulation to these standards, came a series of championships, lucrative endorsement deals and financial liquidity that allowed him to pursue his true work.

Sorenson’s first avant garde presentation was an anatomical study in negative space. Using a series of isometric exercises which he had developed for the purpose, he had accentuated his tendons and ligaments. While the judges looked favorably on the definition that comes with a dangerously low body fat percentage, the reduction of muscle mass necessary to fulfill his vision cost Lars the title that year. More tragically, no one seemed to understand the point of the exercise.

The following year he took a far more absurdist approach, developing gargantuan forearm and calf muscles in the style of Popeye the Sailor Man on one side of his body, while sculpting a massive thigh and a cartoonishly pumped

bicep on the other. The result was a checkerboard asymmetry; which, in the yoga inspired poses he assumed, took on a kind of complex radial symmetry. The controversy that ensued nearly got him banned from competition.

In his third year of experimentation, Sorenson tried for the best of both worlds. While developing himself to the conventionally freakish specifications of the World Bodybuilding Federation, he became a student of the Order of the Golden Dawn. His championship routine, ironically set to Ozzy Osbourne's "Mister Crowley," was based on a series of postures used in Thelemite rituals. He placed second overall and was considered by the sport's analysts to be on the comeback trail.

Only his closest colleagues in the Athletika Boheme Society knew of his displeasure. The Thelemic references were entirely lost on the bodybuilding community. What was more, the possibility of his abandoning active competition and going into the world of exhibition bodybuilding was torpedoed by the emergence of Diamanda Fugazi, a six-foot-two female albino bodybuilder who injected phosphorescent dyes into her bloodstream to turn her black light presentation into a fascinating meditation on the complexity of the circulatory system.

Lars had confided in Bertrand, expressing the fear that his intellectual form of natural body modification would be lost: too bizarre for competition yet not flashy enough for demonstrations. Lars sobbed at the belief that he would be a mere footnote in the history of his medium rather than the legend he had set out to become.

Bertrand had comforted his friend as best as he could in those dark days of self-doubt, and it seemed to have done some good. In the year that followed, Lars appeared revived, performing like a man possessed. Ripped, huge and symmetrical, he swept the early competitions and was seen as a sure thing for the world championship. Bertrand, Marcus, Rudy and even Professor Nichols were glad to see their friend and colleague in such high spirits.

None of them were prepared for what Lars had in store for his grand finale. He took the stage, head bowed. He

shook out his limbs ready for his first and, as would soon be seen, final pose. Hands on his hips, ready for a pectoral expansion he addressed the audience. “What you are about to see, and what you have always seen from me, is a triumph of my mind rather than my body. Remember that when I am gone.” And with that, he flexed his pectoral and oblique abdominal muscles with such force, that he imploded his own rib cage, killing himself instantly. The members of the Athletika Boheme Society were instantly aware of both the tragedy and triumph of the act. Knowing it was what Lars would have wanted, they rose in unison, shouting “Lars Sorenson is Dead! Long live Lars Sorenson!”

Lars’ death rocked the bodybuilding world until it was determined a suicide; at which point it was brushed aside, cursing Lars to the footnote status that had haunted his every thought. All this raced though Bertrand’s mind at Paul’s callous ignorance of the fallen icon.

“Lars Sorenson was a bodybuilder who would have changed the world if the ESPN crowd had understood what they were looking at.”

“I don’t follow bodybuilding. Sorry.” Paul was desperately trying to figure out what bodybuilding had to do with anything. Time was ticking and if he didn’t get Bertrand to the mound there would be absolute mayhem. “He killed himself on stage during a competition. Even with that spectacular act of self sacrifice, his work remains unknown.”

Paul didn’t like where this was going. Talk of death and suicide was not really his area of expertise, and while he had a decent working relationship with Bertrand, he often feared the pitcher’s inscrutable thought processes. He tried to steer it to the positive. “I’m sorry to hear that. But that’s a problem that you’re not going to have to worry about. You’re one of the most famous pitchers in the world.”

“I did not say that he remains unknown. He, at the very least, owns a fleeting chapter in the annals of bodybuilding and serves as a cautionary tale for men like me. It is the obscurity of his work that is the true tragedy, one whose inevitability led to the madness which consumed him.”

“Your ‘work’ as you call it is well known. You have nothing to worry about.”

Bertrand sighed again. He was beginning to understand the difficulties that Professor Nichols had experienced in those first few months as he faced the four athletic scholarship kids who would, over time, become his greatest pupils. Bertrand, given that perspective, knew that it was his job not to censure Paul but to educate him. “Tell me, Paul, what was great about my performance in Game Two?”

Incredulity washed once again across Paul’s face. “A two hit shut out against a team that averaged thirteen hits per game in the regular season and fifteen in the playoffs. What more is there to say?”

“How does a pitcher construct a game?”

“You know this stuff. You have to kind of make it up as you go along. I mean, you study your opponent, know where in the zone they happen to be weak. Most guys remember people they’ve pitched against and kind of know what works and what doesn’t.”

“So do most pitchers plan their games in advance?”

“You have a plan of attack, but you have to see what’s working.”

Silence once again filled the room as Bertrand considered the options of how he might approach the situation. “Are you familiar with the painting style known as pointillism?”

“Not really.”

“Pointillism is where the artist uses incredibly fine dots to create an image. Some of the most skillful pointillists in the world practice their craft using single hair paintbrushes. The effect is quite stunning. From a normal viewing distance, the subject of the painting is obvious to even the most casual observer. Up close, the canvas is incomprehensible chaos; seemingly random. Only through perspective and context can one appreciate the perfect logic with which the image was constructed.”

More silence as Paul struggled to understand the relevance.

“A pointillist painting is made out of millions of individual dots of paint,” Bertrand added.

Paul opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it.

Sighing, Bertrand continued. “A baseball player’s career is likewise made up of millions of pieces of information. Sure, it may be known that a given slugger has a weak spot for high and outside fastballs; or that he readily tees off on inside curveballs. The art of the matter comes in when you realize that those inside curveballs are doomed if they follow a regular fastball. When you step back, give yourself perspective and realize that those high and outside fastballs are even more dangerous when they follow sliders.”

As he spoke, Bertrand’s mannerisms became boldly narrative gestures, placing dots of paint one moment, conducting an invisible orchestra the next. As he described the nuances of the game, his eyes stopped looking at anything in the room. He was in another place, acting out every intimate detail of a game which he had already played a dozen times in his head.

“It’s a matter of Knowing. That’s with a capital ‘K’ in case you were wondering. When they do contact the ball, what do they hit where? How will your fielders respond? Is it better to let one batter tee off on a slider so that left field can snag it at the warning track? Or would you rather let them get a piece of a curve ball and pop it to short stop? Perhaps more importantly, what makes for a better performance? Clearly, with the game hanging in the balance, the deep shot to left field will bring the crowd to their feet, but if you have a runner on first, the fly ball to short stop will have them holding their breath anticipating a collision.”

“Bertie, I wish you had that much control over the game but--“

Bertrand’s look was enough to silence the coach and actually erase the unexpressed remainder of the thought entirely from his mind. “Baseball is physics. To some extent, with the grain of the bat, the leather of the ball and the caprices of grass; it takes a dip into chaos theory. There are a million variables in play at any given moment, but it is still a

coherent gestalt to the mind that is willing to take it all in. Besides, I am the catalyst that sets the chain in motion. I am the butterfly that flaps its wings with a specific amount of rainfall in mind.”

A light bulb went on over the pitching coach’s head. “You’re giving me all this drama just to tell me you’ve been working with statistical analysis?”

Bertrand again turned his attention to the envelopes, lightly nibbling at his lower lip and furrowing his brow as he considered what he was about to do. “I’m talking about the place where statistical analysis meets cognitive psychology and quantum physics.

“I seek to elevate sport back to the heights which it once occupied; perhaps take it even further.”

“Bertie, have you looked at your contract?”

“I’m not talking about money. I’m talking about Art, damn it! There was a time when the feats of athletes were immortalized on urns and in songs; when the pride of nations hinged on one man’s skill with a javelin or his fleetness of foot. Athletes were poets and vice versa. The mind and the body were equally revered and all human endeavors could be made into masterpieces!”

The coach was rapidly developing a migraine, and Bertrand wished there was a way to take pity on him.

“Perhaps it is time you opened this.” Bertrand handed Paul one of the envelopes before leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed.

Paul diligently opened the envelope, praying that it would contain a “just kidding” note. What he instead found appeared to be a handwritten account of the much lauded Game Two. The detail of the ledger was bizarre; pitches, their speeds and shorthand notation that seemed to make reference to strike zone placement all lined up in hand drafted rows. “Don’t you think this is a bit obsessive?”

“I mailed that to myself.”

“Why?”

“For proof.”

“You lost me.”

“Look at the postmark.”

Paul didn't want to. A strange unidentifiable terror came over him. He glanced first at the pages before him, he couldn't remember every nuance of the game; but he did flip to the seventh inning and sure enough the pop fly to short-stop was right where it was supposed to be. Once he verified the precision of the transcript, he flipped over the envelope. It had been mailed the day before the game it described.

Paul sagged in his seat.

"Nuance for nuance, I scripted that entire game in advance. I've done this for many games, and I've come close to perfection. One time later in the season I was only off by the depth of a couple of singles. That game that you hold in your hands was flawless."

"You have got to be freakin' kidding me, man!" was all the coach could say, before Bertrand's stony silence refuted him with a mute eloquence that was impossible to deny. "Why did you let me open this? You could have taken this to the media. We could have held a press conference! This is amazing!"

Bertrand shook his head. "Do you know anyone who would believe it was not an illusion?"

Paul didn't need to answer. It would be more than difficult to convince anyone of the authenticity of such a feat. It looks impossible, like some piece of elaborate street magic. Even if they gave the information to the national broadcasting team before a game, it would be difficult to get the rest of the world to believe that it was not just an elaborate publicity stunt. Paul didn't need to tell Bertrand these things as such realities were clearly at the root of the pitcher's depression.

"So what's in the other envelope?" he asked at last.

"Tonight's game. A rather extreme version thereof. I have been hesitant to proceed with my plan to distribute it since its accurate execution would be something of a professional Rubicon."

"You wouldn't throw the game, would you?"

"I must admit that the possibility had crossed my mind as the ultimate demonstration of control over the athletic narrative. However, my efforts can not dictate such a thing. I could choose to give up a dozen runs, but if our boys

score thirteen, then surely we would still win.”

This cavalier view of victory did not sit well with the coach. Competition was Paul’s chosen profession, and he had always assumed the same of his teammates and fellow coaching staff. He had never heard anyone mention, let alone express concern for, the notion of a game’s “narrative.” More so than any other behavior Bertrand had engaged in, including the hookers as notepad bit, this odd perception of the very nature of the game put Paul on his guard.

There followed a silence. While “uncomfortable” would have been an apt description, it would be only half right. Bertrand seemed comparatively at ease; deep in thought, but at ease. Eventually he chose to let Paul off the hook. “The game described here is certainly a victory.”

It was all the coach needed to hear. “Then let’s do it Bertie! We’ll hand that sealed envelope over to the boys at the network, tell them not to open it until the game’s over. If you’re off a little bit, no one is going to care. They’re going to be dazzled by the victory, and any display of serious planning could change the way people think about the game forever. Let’s rock!”

Bertrand smiled. “Let’s change some lives.”

This next move was small and swift, thrown into the mix like an afterthought. Bertrand gave Paul the large envelope containing his premeditations on the afternoon’s spectacle, then produced from the waistband of his uniform a small folded piece of lined notebook paper. “If this all plays out correctly, the last batter for them should be Tommy McClure. Whoever it is, can you instruct the stadium guys to put this piece of information up on the big screen?”

Paul looked at the piece of paper. It contained a bit of baseball related bio-mechanics trivia regarding the ceiling on a human fastball. “Well, we are the visiting team, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Bertrand looked like a condemned man being shown a perfunctory kindness on his way to the electric chair. A strangely resigned gratitude lurked in his smile. “I’d appreciate it.”

As they made their way to the dugout, Paul waved off the inevitable inquiries as to Bertrand's state of mind. There was no way that he could discuss what had happened in the office without affecting the team's performance. Instead, he opted for a pat reply of "Typical pre-game nerves. We've all been there."

Bertrand took the mound with his usual aplomb, and proceeded to deliver a virtuoso effort. With his newfound knowledge, Paul noticed all sorts of mannerisms that had previously eluded him. More specifically, he noticed a lack of mannerisms.

Nothing surprised the pitcher.

With bases loaded in the top of the seventh, Bertrand did not even blink in bringing one of the league's top sluggers to a full count before catching him swinging on a sinking fastball so precipitous it would have been a scoring walk if the batter had not swung. Balls were knocked deep to right field, and the pitcher felt no need to turn around. He knew they would come up short.

At last, with the Des Moines Barons up three to nothing in the top of the ninth, Bertrand had struck out two and allowed two on. With runners at the corners, Tommy McClure came up to bat just as Bertrand had anticipated. Paul and Bertrand both looked to the board, and sure enough the requested information was displayed:

"The threshold for a human fastball caps at around 100 miles per hour because the elbow's ligaments cannot withstand the torque required to throw any faster."

A couple quick inside curveballs just nicked the strike zone and brought the game down to the next pitch. Bertrand called out to the batter, "I think it only fair to warn you that this next pitch is going to a fastball right down the middle."

It was not until he heard Bertrand's warning that Paul started connecting everything that had been said. He quickly turned to the general manager, "What does Rubicon mean?"

The manager, fixated on the showdown on the field, did not look away as he explained: "It's a Julius Caesar thing,

means an irrevocable commitment, a point of no return. Now shut the hell up and watch your boy out there.”

Paul closed his eyes. He listened. The crowd built as Bertrand began his wind-up; he heard the slight grunt of exertion, an unusual popping noise followed almost instantly by the sound of the ball smacking into the catcher’s mitt. The team went nuts, rushing out of the dugout to embrace the pitcher. Paul simply looked to the radar gun display at his side. 130 mph. The team ran towards the mound, but stopped en masse as they realized that the MVP had dropped to his knees; his left arm clutching the right hanging useless at his side.

Splatter Party

The hostess was in her mid-forties, looked thirty-five, and sipped salmon liqueur with the patrician demeanor of a fifty-year-old. She was Lithuanian by birth but called herself Eastern European as it was more mysterious while requiring less explanation. Her blonde hair was always coiffed in a sleek arrangement which would find its way onto the cover of *Vogue* some months after its appearance on her head. Her statuesque build was softened by the careful counterbalance of a lavish diet and specially trained tapeworms which kept her slim while avoiding the genetic muscularity which would betray her working class lineage.

She was always dressed in a style which sent the right messages about her wealth, and allowed the most appropriate assumptions about her interests and proclivities. On the night in question, her dress was appropriately magnificent. The fabric from which the dress was constructed has been dyed in the discarded bathwater of a creature known as the Wasp Woman of the Andes, its hue bridging the gap between champagne and chartreuse. The cut was

Greek inspired with the shadow of a chiton lurking in the gathered shoulders and the whispers of Hollywood screen goddesses to be heard in the cascade of the fabric.

She was called a modern day renaissance woman by those who sought to flatter her, but described herself as an accomplished dilettante. At various points in her past, she had been a torch song chanteuse in the Billie Holiday tradition, an herbalist for a Baltic crime lord, and a photo editor for a Braille fashion magazine. She had taken into her bed Asian royalty, Parisian ex-patriots living in Tulsa, and a variety of messianic craftsmen who had consistently created cults from client bases by lifting their various trades to the level of art.

So fascinating was her life that several attempts had been made at writing her biography. It was an endeavor doomed from the interview phase, as some event from her seventeenth year inevitably drove the erstwhile biographers to chthonic madness. Their breakdowns provided a certain amusement for her, though she did feel obligated to finance their convalescence in a home for madmen and lounge singers.

It hardly mattered which of the various neighborhoods of leisure she lived in, her behavior and residences varied little. She decorated in an opulently austere style. Her decorators knew that there was a world of difference to be found between White, Cream, Eggshell and Alabaster, and each of these shades was used liberally in the coloration of the great expanses of clean, unbroken surfaces that served as backdrops for her meticulously curated collections of elegant furniture and object d'art.

Her parties always began as routine society affairs: champagne and canapés, banal ritualized conversation, men too old to be drinking so much groping girls too young to be with them. All in all, these gatherings served as shining examples of early 21st century, middle of the road pseudo-decadence.

Then the band would arrive.

In certain social circles, people are obligated to host these periodic soirees, and each household has its contracted

musician, orchestra or chamber ensemble to provide the socially expected soundtracks for such evenings. The Lithuanian chanteuse stood alone in having an indentured noise-rock band at her disposal.

Cobbled together by the hostess from a diverse pool of protégés and ex-lovers, the six person group known as Les Vitrioleurs, clearly disturbed the assembled guests from the moment they entered the room. Their look alone scandalized most: expensive black Armani suits, brutally tailored to accentuate every curve of the female band members yet sagging and shapeless on the men (who generally left their flies down and gaping), plastic-banded Casio calculator watches, and expensive brown Prada shoes over filthy white tube socks. Dressed as such, they would storm the gala with a military precision and ferocity; setting up their instruments, sound system and light show in less than five minutes and immediately laying into their set.

Les Vitrioleurs played what was variously described as “a deafeningly atonal take on 50s Do-wop,” “a deceptively intricate post modern scuzz rock homage to Thelonious Monk,” or, most commonly, “that god-awful racket.”

Etiquette would prevent a full blown stampede for the doors. Instead the guests would provide, to the careful observer, a case study in the passive aggressive art of party extrication. There would break out over the first hour of the band’s set a spate of vague illnesses, early morning obligations would suddenly be remembered and people known for their nocturnal dispositions would inexplicably collapse into the arms of exhaustion. It was a predictable and, in fact, pre-meditated response to Les Vitrioleurs’ unique sound; step one of the hostess’ screening process.

Once the most close-minded of the lot had taken their leave, the hostess would gaze upon the stragglers, timing her escalation. There would inevitably remain an intrepidly proper contingent of party-goers who knew it would be rude to depart simply because they did not share the musical taste of the hostess. For these etiquette-obsessed few, the hostess had an altogether different gambit.

Joining Les Vitrioleurs for their final song of the evening, the hostess would libelously dedicate the tune to the mothers of those in attendance: "This song is for the racist cunts from whose syphilitic wombs you assholes emerged."

With the hostess's middle finger extended towards the crowd, the band would break into a scorching rendition of "Strange Fruit." Those who could see past the confrontational introduction were likely to have their lives forever changed. The keyboard would let loose the howl of wind through dying trees, as the twin guitars channeled the wails of countless inconsolable widows, the bass would play a funky funerary march and the drums kept time with a series of rim shots cracking the air like the strikes of a lynchman's whip. This instrumental lead-in would generally last for 3 or 4 minutes, but could go on for as long as twenty, always leaning over the precipice towards cacophony while never taking the fall. They would pound on the psyches of the audience without vocal accompaniment for as long as it took to transport each and every listener to a windswept southern meadow; to wrap them in fear and loss and pain and degradation; all while the hostess swayed at the microphone with her eyes closed.

When the moment was right, she would open her mouth and sing; her voice a melancholy angel of redemption bursting through the clouds. Some attendees would find themselves weeping; clawing at their chests and writhing on the floor in an attempt to smother the strange flames licking at their hearts. Others would draw deeply on cigarettes of exotic content and, though enjoying the music and admiring the peculiar skill required for its performance, exact far greater pleasure reveling in the Schadenfreude of the scene.

It was this last group of detached amateur sociologists and psychological sadists who would be invited to stay.

Once the assembly met the hostess's criteria, they would be led into the gallery: a kind of treeless arboretum used for the exhibition of her unique art collection. Participants would be led to the far end of the room, where the subject of the evening would be set up.

The pieces were always large, never smaller than ten foot square. Frequently, they would be segments of drywall, or drywall paired with sections of flooring such as carpet or linoleum. Other times the chanteuse would present her guests with a complete installation recreating a seemingly ordinary room from a house or apartment or trailer. Two things which they always had in common were that they were splattered with blood, and obtaining them required tremendous diligence and an open purse.

It works like this; when a crime takes place, the police come in and conduct their investigation, marking points of interest, taking hundreds of photos, and scooping up what evidence can be taken with them. Forensics specialists will examine the scene in person, but then they return to the laboratory to move forward. The yellow tape has to come down some time; and when it does, many property owners are foolish enough to erase every physical sign of what has occurred.

That is unless someone like our hostess can get to them first. There is money to be made in the splatter market, as it is called, and the patronage of a well-funded collector can help clean up the mess far more thoroughly than any bleach and paintjob can. A collector will contract top professionals to meticulously remove anything touched by violence and gore, and generally have it replaced with something far finer.

Once removed from their original context, the splattered milieus are reassembled for a recital of sorts. Freelance forensic specialists are hired by these collectors to examine the pieces and project a narrative onto the display. Rest assured that these are not your standard taciturn lab jockeys doing this kind of work. The most highly paid of these freelancers are expert scientists with poets' souls. They do not merely explain what happened. They stand on the shoulders of bards and shamans; using their vision and their words to weave atrocities past back into existence, if only for a moment and only in the minds of their patrons.

On the night of interest, the chanteuse had a most special piece engulfing the far wall of the gallery. It was an

enormous piece of canvas splattered primarily in the center with some of the most violent and forceful flashes of crimson that any of the regulars had seen. In the interest of fairness, and a good recital; the chanteuse had explained the piece's origins to the freelancer and given him several days to examine the work.

It was a drop cloth. Specifically, it was the floor covering from a show by The Flying DeSades, a group of trapeze artists whose high-octane act on glass encrusted bars over a barbed wire net defined what it means to be an aerialist in the time of extreme sports. There were perhaps a half-dozen of these floating around the splatter market, and new specimens had become increasingly difficult to secure. Such rarity was due to a couple of factors. The most obvious was the DeSades' apparent departure from even the underground S&M circus culture. It was whispered that they had been taken into the custody of the witness protection program for reasons that were beyond even their understanding.

Less intriguing but more practical was the need for drop cloths from single performances. Once the same cloth had been used for multiple acts, the patterns would become too muddled for coherent interpretation and were, therefore, worthless. What hung on the wall on the evening in question was a pristine example of exactly the kind of piece which DeSade enthusiasts on the splatter market were looking for. The freelancer was thrilled by the opportunity to interpret such a complex and beautiful piece.

Those partaking of the spectacle sat on benches arranged in a semicircle facing the wall. A round of drinks was served. People settled into their positions. The freelancer pulled out a laser pointer and began his analysis.

It was noted that the performance space must have been quite arid, either naturally or through some sort of climate control; for the blood had coagulated quickly. This was a very exciting development in that it had allowed for a clear stratification of overlapping drips, splotches and sprays. This enabled the freelancer to construct a more accurate chronology of events. The assembly walked that timeline together; observing the telling first splatters, the regular pendulum

streaks from a steady trickle at the back of the catcher's knees, the violent splashes where one of the acrobats had been caught in the barbed wire net.

Even for those who had seen splatter interpretations before, this was something special. It was the hostess' first DeSade, and when the freelancer got into the extreme centrifugal physics that led to some of the more interestingly shaped markings, she could be seen literally on the edge of her seat, leaning in to capture the freelancer's every word.

Once the forensics specialist had indulged the groups wide-eyed inquiries, the hostess paid him in cash and sent him on his way; returning with another round of cocktails to join her guests in quiet contemplation of the canvas.

Bingos, Gun and Mescal

A couple nights a month, the guys and I get together like this. We come to the bar so we can drink ourselves into a state resembling courage before starting the 10-block stagger down to the club. To see us sitting there, you probably think we were like any other bunch of corporate drones. Jack and I look like the paralegals that we are; you got Eddie, the over-worked insurance salesman; Joey, the earnest young accountant; and then there's Sid, the thirty-five year old jack of all trades who got us into this thing in the first place. We sit around, knocking back a few drinks and talking about everything but the game.

You may also think that the drinking is just part of the ritual, the kind of testosterone-soaked play-acting that in this day and age gives false weight to the trite activities that serve as rites of passage. You would be wrong. The fact of the matter is that we need a few stiff drinks if we're going to bet the required stakes on the kind of odds that the club presents.

Theory is that the more money you bid the better

your chances of winning. Doesn't seem the case, in practice, but that doesn't stop us from laying out the cash for three or four cards. The buy-in price is a hundred per card, and the risk builds up real quick. You may think this is heavy talk for a night at the bingo parlor, but you do not yet know what I know about this game.

You can see it in the players' hollow eyes, watching the caller with animal intent. Their markers shake in their trembling hands. They lick their chapping lips, many too scared to risk taking a drink. Numbers are called only once, with no big board to keep track. The big board is for retirees and pussies. These stakes are too high to be giving the players a crutch like that.

The club holds three games a night. The only way to win is with a completely filled card. No lines, no diagonals, no X's or special patterns. You fill the card or you don't get shit. In a game like this, you better make sure that when you call Bingo, you know what you're talking about. The caller and the bouncer verify the card and if you fucked up, they break a finger.

Sure it's a twisted scene, but we thrive on it. As soon as you get in there, the smell of old cigarettes and fear hits you like the scent of a long lost lover. As you lay down your bills, the adrenaline kicks in and rips through the last vestiges of that gin and tonic haze.

It is time to play.

The pace is fast; faster than anything you would expect or even think rational. Numbers are called only once and you hear them right and mark them fast or you're sure to miss the next one. As the night wears on and tempers start to flare it becomes an exercise in postmodern Zen, a bunch of fast lane Buddhas meditating on coffee-stained koans. People miss numbers and start yelling. Shoving matches ensue and knives are pulled. Can't worry about that shit. Just because some poor bastard is out a couple hundred bucks doesn't mean you have to give up your shot at taking home half the game's buy-in.

Security personnel take care of situations efficiently, but not too quickly. Leroy, the owner of this fine establish-

ment, has some use for these diversions. More people distracted means less chances of someone winning the round. It's a cold, hard game and rarely a week passes when the house doesn't take at least a couple of game. Some cards, a small amount, are duds bearing numbers that aren't even in circulation for that round. Call it further incentive to work multiple cards. The odds are definitely stacked against the players, but the pay-off at the end can make it all worthwhile. For many, the rush alone is reason to keep coming back.

We arrive together, but sit apart; it's what's best if we want to remain friends by the end of it all. I've won once, and ever since, I've been hooked. There is nothing, I mean nothing in the world like slamming down your marker on that last space, seeing that card riddled with red ink gun shots and watching with euphoric detachment as the blessed invocation falls from your lips.

BINGO!

Eyes turn toward you, bloodshot and aching with contempt, envy and rage. The guys and I have a deal. If one of us wins, we find a way to share the wealth. A nice dinner out. Some high quality liquor. An evening of fast times and loose women. It's up to the winner, but a good time is had by all. It keeps our vibe positive and guarantees us back-up if things get ugly when we win. Even so, when you first make that call--and I've seen it in their faces and felt it in my own--there is no denying that momentary flash of jealousy. Among our group, it passes quickly.

Not so with the rest of the players. You walk up to the podium a marked man, becoming for that evening the cause of everything wrong and degrading in the lives of those less fortunate. As the winner, you become the reason these guys are losers, and you feel their loathing with every step. Leroy and the enforcer know simply as The Wall look over your card, and this is when you learn what anxiety is. You know that you're not trying to pull anything, but fate is another matter. One fuck up, one stray mark made out of exuberance or poor hearing and not only does The Wall break a finger, but etiquette bans you from the game for at

least a month.

When you win, Leroy counts out the money right in front of everyone. Now this probably sounds like standard operating procedure, but when you're up there claiming your stake, it's another matter. In front of scores of crazy, pissed off, desperate men; the sick bastard lays bill after bill into your outstretched hand. Every guy in that place knows what's in your pocket when you walk out that night. The Wall will escort you to the street for a fifty-dollar kick back, but once out there, you're on your own. Barbaric? Sure. Just another part of the game. An unspoken code of honor and the possibility of getting maced generally stop the regulars from trying anything.

The time I won, I walked out of there with close to four grand in my pocket. I won it clean and I walked out clean, the next night the guys and I lived like kings at one of the best nightclubs in town to the tune of a thousand-dollar tab.

It's not always so simple.

Joey would seem to have been born lucky, one of God's special little projects, if you know what I mean. He's won three times. After his second win in two months, he had to take some time off. Things were getting ugly.

That night, Joey shuffled his way up to the podium to claim his prize from Leroy, the regulars looking at him with raw, hard hatred. His second win in two months, and he had only been playing for a little more than three. Even the rest of us in the crew had to shake our heads at his dumb, blind luck, but Joey's a good guy and we knew he would make it up to us on the kickback. Leroy counted out the cash, it was a big night being the second week of the month, a lot of guys come out then; bills are paid the next round of living expenses still far enough off on the horizon. This is their week to get a little crazy.

Leroy counted out six grand. Twisted little freak wouldn't just count out the cash and have it over with. Leroy likes to make a show of it. He knows that it drives the players into a frenzy; rattles their nerves and chips away at their ability to focus on the subsequent games. That night, as he

hit the five thousand mark, there were audible rumbling among the crowd. Shouts and insults are common and nothing to fear. It's when the contempt comes out as a low animal growl that you have to worry. When men like these refuse to waste energy on words, it means they're saving it for actions.

I made eye contact with the rest of the crew, made sure that we were all on the same page. We checked our respective areas looking for problems. Usually if one of us wins, the others stick around for the remaining games (finances permitting) and we meet up back at the bar afterwards. The night of Joey's second win, we were definitely thinking that a group departure would be the best thing for us.

We left en masse, The Wall escorting us to the door. There seemed to be a bigger exodus than usual after the first game. Some were undoubtedly shaken by Joey's win and realized that their heads were not in it for the next round. Others were light-weights, the tourists who came in for a game, usually only playing a card or maybe two and then leaving. It was when we saw some of the do or die fixtures leaving that we knew something was wrong.

One guy, who had never won in the year that I had been attending, and who it seemed had never won, approached Joey. He was a solid brick of a man. His buzzcut and rigid demeanor pegged him as former military, and his eyes told us all we needed to know about his temperament and general disposition. We all tensed. He extended his hand. "Congratulations. Looks like you got Lady Luck riding with you."

Joey smiled, but hesitated in taking his hand. "It's all up to the numbers, man" a credo, that winners and losers alike had embraced as a means of justifying their fates, and for which the accountant in Joey had a strange fondness.

"I heard that," came the casual reply. Then with a sudden turn in demeanor, "I'm trying to congratulate you here. Now you gonna shake my hand or are you too good for that?" As he said it, Buzzcut was flanked by a couple of buddies standing just behind him, clearly visible over his broad shoulders. My hand tensed around my mace, still safely concealed in my coat pocket. I could sense Eddie making sure

his knife was within reach, and both Jack and Sid could be felt stepping in a little closer.

Hoping to defuse the situation, Joey shook the man's hand. No sooner was he in his grasp, than he was jerked forward to receive a vicious headbut. Joey's nose became a fountain of blood, and he dropped to one knee. I pulled out the mace, Eddie grabbed his knife and one of Buzzcut's colleagues pulled out a revolver. The boys and I stepped back. This was serious. Buzzcut looked at us, and some retarded half cousin of a grin spread across his goonish face. "You boys wouldn't mind if your friend here decided to spread his newfound wealth would you? I'm sure he's eager to cut us poor boys in on a bit of his action." I saw Joey take a few deep breaths, his brow furrowed in what I thought was pain, but have since recognized as intense concentration. Crazy little accountant was calculating the odds for his next move.

Maybe I'm weak. Maybe I don't really have what it takes to be getting tied up in this scene, but once a gun comes into play, my tendency is to give the nice man with the firearm what ever he wants. Joey, it turns out is a different breed. "Fuck you," he replied.

Buzzcut gave his hand a vicious squeeze, and we could hear a few of the bones pop out of joint and a strange crackling that could easily have been cartilage snapping. He released his hand and Joey dropped to the ground. The troglodyte with the gun held it up to Joey's head. That's when Joey started laughing. The goons looked nervously at each other and the stick man tensed up, cocking back the hammer and steadying himself against a possible attack.

Joey looked up at the gunman, making sure that the barrel was aimed right in the middle of his forehead. "You lame bastard!" he snarled, "You think I'm only here for the money? It's all about the adrenaline for me, so sticking this thing in my face does not impress me. Hell, this is the most fun I've had all week. The question here is not whether I'm going to hand over my money, 'cause I'm not. The question is whether you got the balls to take it, and whether you can trust your friends once you have it? You simpering putz! You gonna finish this thing, or you gonna back off so my friends

and I can get a drink?”

The man with gun was sweating heavily in spite of the late night chill, his trigger finger was trembling too much for my comfort and no one in the alley dared say a word. Finally Buzzcut spoke up. “Back off Rodney. Let the crazy fucker go.” Rodney did just that. He uncocked the gun, took a few steps back and remembered to start breathing again. The crew of would-be muggers went back inside to await the next game, and we headed to the bar.

As we sat around a corner table knocking back shots of mescal; I couldn't help but voice my admiration. “Joey you are one intense motherfucker.”

Joey knocked back his shot, smiled and replied, “Shit, man. That's what Bingo is all about.” The guy's got a point.

The Cycle of Messianic Celebrity

Diamanda Fugazzi was perfecting her precision javelin art when the latest attempt was made on her life.

Now anyone who hasn't been living under a rock is familiar with Diamanda Fugazzi. The albino world body building champion has set numerous records for lifting, track and field events and marathon DJing. Her 32 hour long remix of Wagner's *Ring of the Nebelung* is the only 26 disc box set to go triple platinum. The virtual reality chip that she implanted in her skull, which allows her to either converse with an AI re-creation of the Algonquin round table or attend a virtual Dead Kennedys gig, simultaneously made her the darling of the underground music scene, the NYC literati and the DIY cybernetic implant crowd. The five foot long forest green braid that sprouts from the center of her otherwise shaven head had been voted "Most Strangely Compelling Hairstyle of the Year" by both *People* magazine, and *Fuck Your Bukkake!*, a highly regarded British gardening journal.

Fame has a price. Only slightly more intense than

the cult-like legions of her fans, were the numerous groups denouncing Diamanda as the manifestation of Satan's dark will on Earth.

While Miss Fugazzi did not think of herself as the bringer of the end times, she did think of herself as a survivalist. As such, would-be assassins were dealt with harshly.

During the assault, Diamanda was hurling a yellow javelin in such a way as to add it to the massive cluster of spears which, from the air, was shaping up to replicate Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. She was practicing at her private facility in the wilds of the Pacific Northwest: a series of geodesic domes surrounded by dense woodlands from which the occasional large field had been cleared and immaculately groomed for purposes as diverse as cricket matches and reenactments of the Battle of Hastings. The field on which she labored on the day in question doubled as a landing strip for her small personal aircraft, and it was perhaps this visibility from the air that had made her a susceptible target.

The word came from one of her radar installations that two small aircraft were approaching from the north. At her signal, pressurized air cannons launched a volley of octopus carcasses into the immediate flight path of the interlopers in a maneuver Diamanda had dubbed "The Rain of Cthulu."

The barrage of cephalopods took out one of the vehicles, leaving Diamanda to dispatch the second with her shoulder mounted rocket launcher. The pilots were retrieved, nursed back to health and then interrogated using a system of Diamanda's own design.

Under the influence of a carefully administered regimen of peyote, Viagra, MDMA, and Mushrooms, the pilots were continuously and expertly fucked by an astoundingly gorgeous rotation of Jungian psychologists gone savage for an extreme form of sexual shamanism.

In the dozen or so times that Diamanda had put enemies through this particular process, three basic results had been documented. The first was a complete mental break where the subject became a jibbering, incoherent mess. If this was to occur, it was generally somewhere between the

thirteenth and seventeenth hours of continuous stimulation. There had been a couple of deaths as well, these generally happening in the early stages of the process and occurring as a result of an unknown underlying condition. The third and most desirable outcome saw the subject reach a form of transcendence, usually somewhere in the twenty-fourth hour. This allowed them to see the error of their ways and decide to dedicate themselves to the “solving of the human dilemma.”

The two pilots who had interrupted Diamanda’s Van Gogh re-creation split between the two non-terminal results. The pilot who had been brought low by the octopi descended into madness, demanding that he be fed mashed potatoes smothered in chocolate sauce with the understanding that the Communists must never learn of his new favorite food.

The other responded more agreeably. He disclosed that the faction which had hired him was called “Unicyclists for Christ.” The concern within the Fugazzi organization was that he seemed unwilling to discuss further details about the group. However, it soon became clear that this was not done out of any residual allegiance to his erstwhile employers, but rather as an extension of his spiritual awakening.

“For starters,” he explained “these are not the money people. The group is far too small to be providing us with that kind of equipment. They were acting as a front. Besides, it is clear that they are on the verge of breaking with the whole zealot movement anyway. They are worshipping the great wheel. Unicycling is a metaphor for achieving balance with the wheel of life. Yes they place themselves in a position of dominance, and one may say that they seek to control the wheel of Karma, but ultimately they are engaging in what may someday come to be seen as the most Pagan of activities. If they ever understand what they are really worshipping, it will make for most interesting times.”

Once it was determined that he was harmless, he was allowed to go. It was the shrewdest move available to Diamanda, as his subsequent meteoric rise on the self-help circuit, his best-selling epic poem published on gilded cocktail napkins, and his incredibly popular line of Totemic Unicy-

cles made him the new target of Diamanda's former detractors.

The Cycle of the Messianic Celebrity began anew.

Ground Dwellers

We live at the base of great metal monoliths. We scratch our subsistence from the earth with bleeding fingers. We forage and scavenge. We do not raise animals. The creatures that our ancestors called livestock have all gone feral and it takes three good men to take down a cow. The homes that we live in are temporary shacks. They were never meant to span generations.

Miles above us live the beings of legend. We know they exist for their debris regularly falls from the heavens. At least one person dies each week from random impact. If those who dwell at the top of the monoliths are Gods, then they are cruel. If they are mortal, I pray that they are ignorant.

That is the debate that divides our people. I find myself trapped in both thoughts and age between shifting generations. Our eldest, my great-grandfather and others of his generation, believe that the monoliths house mortal men like us. They claim to remember the construction and the exodus of those who could afford the transition. Then again,

the memories they mention would be from their third or fourth years of life, some ninety years past.

I grew up on their stories; the names of the so-called great men were burned into my mind. Today, the names Spacely and Cogswell are increasingly relegated to mythology, and I am unsure of what to believe. Those younger than me have little doubt. They can not imagine a world without these pylons. It is impossible for them to believe that a human mind once conceived them, that living hands once built them and that creatures not unlike ourselves so completely changed the world. They assume we have always dwelt in a land of endless shadows. It is these children who believe there are gods atop the columns.

In some ways , it doesn't really matter. We all fear the monoliths. Down here, we can see the rust. When the wind blows strong we can hear the moaning of the towers. If you put your ear to the cold metal, you can hear the shifting of some inscrutable counterbalance mechanism. It is a sound like Zen clockworks or metronomic wind chimes. But they are dying. The creaking is become screeching. Metal is fatiguing.

There are many ways to cope. Most of us simply throw ourselves into the work of survival. We hoard our food, we repair our homes with the bits and pieces that fall from the world above. We endure today striving just to see tomorrow.

Some dream of ascending into the clouds and joining those who dwell above. Tales are told of a fallen briefcase. The story goes that the press of a button will cause it to transform into a flying car, a ticket to the promised land. Men have gone mad scouring trash piles in search of that prize.

Others turn to religion; worshipping the monoliths or their inhabitants or some totemic fetish which has fallen from the skies. One church claims to have received a message from the upper realm. It was faint, their holy man claims, but clear. He does not claim to know the meaning of the words, but he and his congregation meditate on them in the hopes of revelation. It is the most direct link to the

beings that dwell atop the monoliths. More than any material thing, it is held that this direct communication may prove the key to understanding them, the monoliths, and our own place in this world. They are words of hope suggesting that whether they are men or gods, they suffer as we do. It is these words to which the parishioners cling “Jane, stop this crazy thing!”

In the next village over, a man has developed a crude explosive compound. He dedicates his days to the manufacture of the stuff and its placement around the base of one of the towers. This has, in itself, become a religion. Pilgrims flock to bring him food and drink and to offer assistance. Bits of wire are left as offerings. He will need them to construct his detonator and begin creating the world anew.

Turnin'

Three days after his 21st birthday, Jonathan Palmer put his most cherished possession in a tattered messenger bag and five neatly folded hundred dollar bills in his shirt pocket. The treasure in the messenger bag had been with him since childhood, while those in his rumpled pocket had taken him months to save. The nerve to carry through on his plan had been years in the making.

As a fine arts major, Jonathan was exposed to a variety of university folklore. From the local recluse who had been a member of Andy Warhol's inner circle to the legend of the after hours performance art at a backwater bowling alley, he had heard it all. Midway through his sophomore year, he owed up to the unique talent which would thrust him in to the world "Thumbs" Callaghan.

After several years of encouragement from his compatriots, Jonathan decided that the time had come for him to make his way to the tavern where Callaghan was said to hold court. Standing alone at the crossroads of a town that never quite happened; the bar would have been considered disrep-

utable if it were located among people who made such judgments, and had developed a cult following among the ill-regarded neighbors of the same.

That following was out in full force when Jonathan arrived: a motley assemblage of goateed neo-bohemians, tattooed bikers and hemp clad hippies populated the bar filling the air with the blended scent of clove cigarettes, cheap cigars and cheaper patchouli oil. Jonathan, a comparatively straight-laced misfit molded in the classic diner rat style, made his way through the throng. His gait took on a gangly, awkward appearance as he tried to mask his nervous stumbling with a plodding bravado that not even the really stoned chick in the corner was buying.

The crowd justified neither his anxiety nor his pretensions. As formidable as the bikers looked, they were there for the same relaxation and camaraderie sought by countless people in countless gathering places. The bohemians and hippies were busy debating varying shades of art and politics. Sure, liquor flowed in the open while the occasional recreational drug was consumed in secret, but the electricity that filled the air was not that of a building storm but rather the release that comes when the tensions and cares which plague humanity are vanquished.

As the whispered legends and hazy recollections of hungover witnesses had told him, Jonathan found an ancient timber door at the back of the bar. If said legends and recollections continued in their acuity, it would be behind that door that the mythic “Thumbs” Callaghan would be sitting; waiting and ready for all comers. Of course, the path to the door was not as clear as Jonathan would have liked.

That door was blocked by a man diminutive in height only. The five foot bouncer had a beard whose graying length spoke to a surprising longevity. He was so solid in build that Jonathan resolved to henceforth declare that brick shit-houses were built in this guy’s image, as looking at it the other way around would be an insult to the dangerous reality of the guard. Add to his bulk a shaven head marked with esoteric tattoos and the snaggletoothed grin of a man who didn’t care how hard you were swinging a baseball bat at his head,

and you have an excellent deterrent against unwanted visitors. Jonathan paused to gather his courage about ten paces from anything that might have been considered the bouncer's personal space. Deciding that his money was good and his challenge legitimate, Jonathan proceeded.

He didn't even have time to stammer before the bouncer shouted at him with such percussive ferocity that Jonathan was physically stopped by the sound. "What?" Satisfied that Jonathan was adequately intimidated, the bouncer spoke in a relatively normal though decidedly hostile tone. "You turnin'?"

This was something Jonathan had prepared for. Gesturing at the messenger bag at his hip with all the glib arrogance at his disposal, he replied "This ain't a laptop."

Eyes rolled in the bouncer's slightly malformed head. "Never heard that one before. You're a real innovator, kid."

"Is he in tonight?" Jonathan asked, not wanting to subject himself to any further humiliation if the purpose for the evening's excursion could not be fulfilled.

"Every night! All night! The man is like motherfucking 7-11!"

The door opened behind the laughing thug and a man as tall and ephemeral as the bouncer was squat and solid appeared from the dimly lit murk beyond. Jonathan could not help but puzzle at his attire which was at the very height of late Victorian fashion. When he spoke, it was with the tightly wound non-accent of studied linguist. "Edwig, I take it we have a guest."

"He's looking for Thumbs," explained the bouncer.

"As are they all." He took his time in appraising Jonathan, making no effort to conceal his scrutiny before, at last, opting to speak. "Have you brought money?"

"How does five hundred sound?" Jonathan asked.

From the darkness behind the disparate gatekeepers, a voice which sounded weathered by cigarettes and sandpaper belched forth, "Like a good start. Send him in." At the order, both associates stepped aside and allowed Jonathan access to the hallowed back room.

Every old building has a room, sometimes just a

basement or storage area, which manages to defy the years. Impervious to the remodeling instinct, these anomalous chambers serve as a kind of time capsule where the original construction and essence of the building can still be seen. These are rooms where one can take the pulse of history, breathe deeply and taste the passage of time across decades or even centuries. The long and narrow room in which Thumbs received challengers was one such space, its stone walls and ancient exposed timber eloquently lecturing on the tavern's near colonial origins.

Thumbs sat at a table at the far end of the room. Falling somewhere between slovenly and merely disheveled, with a build that could most accurately be described as rotund; Thumbs cut a figure that was both pathetic and strangely imposing. Pathetic because the man was clearly pounding on the threshold of middle age, and yet seemed to be locked in a post-adolescent Mobius strip. Imposing because of his obvious commitment. This was clearly his life. He was not some dilettante getting his kicks when the day job allowed it.

At his side, a voluptuous redhead straight out of a Vargas illustration sat in her 1940's dress and pin curls, with a look of congenial contempt upon her face. Somehow untouched by the dust and cigarillo smoke, she gleamed as if in Technicolor. Her overall appearance, which sounds contrived, was in fact worn the most naturally, making everyone and everything else around her seem like the anachronism.

"Have a seat." Thumbs entreated, and Jonathan complied. "I'd like you to meet my confidante, Lilith. She has The Sight."

This was a detail for which Jonathan was unprepared. "How about that," was his only reply.

By way of demonstration, Thumbs turned to Lilith and asked "Will I be victorious tonight?"

She breathed deeply gazed into her hands, which were concealed beneath the table and concentrated. "Cannot predict now."

This was not the affirmation that Thumbs sought, so he opted for a follow up question. "Will this whelp present a

challenge?”

Lilith repeated the deep breath and the downward gaze before looking up and glancing at Jonathan. “Signs point to yes.” Jonathan could not put his finger on it, but there was something familiar about the way the clairvoyant expressed herself. Not wanting to risk distraction, he chalked it up to a certain homogeneity among self-described psychics and put the thought aside.

Thumbs, meanwhile, decided that it was time to move on. “All right, kid. Let’s see what you’re packing.”

Jonathan was all too happy to comply. Whipping open the messenger bag, he revealed his mint condition, vintage Etch-a-Sketch and launched into his spiel. “This little beauty came off of the assembly line in 1964. It was shipped to a five and dime in Centralia, PA where it was the last in a case of 15 sent there. As you know, a coal mine fire has been burning under that town continuously since 1962. Understandably, sales were slow. In fact, the shop was closed with inventory locked inside in 1978. In 1984--”

Thumbs had heard enough. “Yeah yeah yeah. It’s vintage, in great shape, you were the first to use it and you’ve treated it like your own child ever since. Blah blah blah.” Sitting back in philosophical reverie, Thumbs chided Jonathan. “I have seen libraries of immaculately maintained books, every binding and every page perfectly intact without cracks or tears. Their owners were invariably illiterate.”

“What?”

Lilith clarified. “Thumbs often chooses to express himself in overwrought metaphor.”

Ignoring Lilith’s appraisal, Thumbs brought out his own Etch-a-Sketch: a newer model with a glittery frame. A calibration line was drawn on each dial with 36 reference marks equally spaced around them. “Yours is old. Impressive for eBay or a flea market, but if you’ve been using that thing well since 1984 or whenever the hell you started seriously turning, then you should know that the lines aren’t as crisp.” As he spoke, Thumbs took out a roll of grip tape, pulled off a two-inch piece, tore it in half lengthwise and wrapped each dial. “The springs get fatigued. A real deck needs to be

replaced every 2 years as a rule.”

The ritual gave Jonathan an opportunity to examine his opponent’s hands: dainty compared with the grotesque body to which they were attached, they were the hands of an artist, precision tools that had been crafted and trained towards a single purpose. The musculature of the thumb and index finger was better defined than in any of the other digits and the wrists were perfectly straight, stabilizing the hands against trembling imprecision.

This advice on Etch-a-Sketch maintenance made too much sense for Jonathan to ignore it outright, but he tried to maintain his game face. Thumbs, understanding that psychology was at least half the battle, continued. “Now I don’t know how you and your buddies throw down in whatever godforsaken treehouse you fell out of, but here it’s about style, speed and accuracy. Freehanding is vital, don’t get me wrong but if you’re going to keep pace in my world, you best learn how to use hash marks.”

Jonathan knew that the evening was being hijacked by Thumbs’ rap. He needed to score a verbal victory before they got down to the sketching. Taking a chance, he turned to Lilith, “You have *the sight*. Do you think I have a chance?”

“I better not tell you now.”

“She hasn’t ruled out the possibility yet, Thumbs. How often does that happen?”

The Victorian must have grown weary of the posturing, calling out, “Gentleman! Are we done waving our phal-luses about? Good. Then we shall begin.” He proceeded to lay down the ground rules. As the challenger, Jonathan would choose the first artist. It would then be determined whether the combatants were to create reproductions of known works, or originals in the artist’s style. If there was no winner in the first round, Thumbs would have the opportunity to name to the artist.

Jonathan asked the natural question: “How do we determine the winner?”

The Victorian seemed almost offended by the question. “When there is a winner, everyone knows.”

Thumbs was more understanding toward the chal-

lenger's reticence. "If you have a problem with the honor system, you only need remember that the owner of this establishment is a retired fine arts professor with a 12-gauge called Pollock's paintbrush; and he has no tolerance for cheaters."

No time to worry about the details, then. Jonathan dove right in. "Then let's do this thing, Dali."

"Real fucking original, kid," was all Thumbs had to say on the matter.

"Salvador Dali it is, my friends," the Victorian declared. "Considering his prolific collection of well-known works, it seems we should go with replicas. You have three hours gentleman. Begin."

The heads of the two competitors bowed simultaneously, eyes locked on their respective screens as nimble fingers set the dials to spinning. A special kind of silence filled the room. It was not the perfect stillness one expects in the moments between rounds of Russian roulette or even the vibrating vacuum between two silent foes. It was an intense quiet made all the more noticeable by the tiniest of sounds: the springy, scratching machinations of the devices in use, the hissing draw of the Victorian's cigar and the fine grinding of Lilith's emery board dragging across her nails.

When normal people are handed an Etch-a-Sketch, the usual results are a series of squares, user's names written in a font reminiscent of a pocket calculator and then eventually a chaotic scribble caused by random simultaneous turning of the two dials. The dance that played out on the screens of the two combatants would be unrecognizable to most. Breaking down their subjects into an unimaginably convoluted yet still solitary line, Jonathan and Thumbs never paused for more than a fraction of a second. The result was a single point of creation, where the stylus met the sketching medium, racing around the screen; its frenetic motion a sharp contrast to the statuesque competitors, giving it the illusion of self-determination.

Lilith and the Victorian, having witnessed this countless times before were oblivious to its strange wonder. He cared only for the clock, and she only for her manicure.

When the hours had passed, the Victorian announced it with indifferent finality. "Time! Decks down."

The results were appropriately breathtaking. Jonathan had gone all out, attempting a re-creation of "The Metamorphosis Of Narcissus." It was, unfortunately, not entirely complete. All of the basic shapes, the mountainous terrain, the pond and chessboard had all been sketched, but only the kneeling figure of Narcissus and the great stone hand and egg were fully rendered. And how magnificently had they been done! It was clear to everyone in the room that Jonathan had a gift for shading; no small task in the black and silver world of Etch-a-Sketch hustling.

Thumbs' offering was more complete though less inspired. A straightforward rendering of "The Persistence of Memory," detailed to the level of showing each number on the faces of the melting clocks.

Everyone took a moment to appraise the works before the Victorian spoke. "I would say considering the complexity of the chosen pieces that this one is a draw. Can we all agree on that?"

Thumbs was the first to nod. "Nice sketch."

"Thanks, you too."

Thumbs decided to milk the uncomfortable silence that followed. Protocol dictated that Thumbs would determine the inspiration for the next challenge, and Jonathan having now witnessed the man's skill was starting to understand the implications of a five hundred dollar bet against unknown odds.

At last, Thumbs spoke. "Kid, I am going to make you yearn for calibration marks on that thing. Lichtenstein."

The Victorian seemed deeply amused by the choice. "Ah, a distinctive style marked by a heavy use of comic strip style art and newsprint technique. However, recalling specific pieces beyond "Whaam!" and "Drowning Girl" can prove difficult. Gentleman, we have our first originals of the night. Again, you have one hundred and eighty minutes."

The competitors again set to their task. Jonathan moved as he had the first time. He was fortunate enough to have studied Lichtenstein as one of the possible variations,

and he felt confident that he would do well.

Thumbs' movements, while no more determined or focused were more measured than in the previous round. Keeping one eye on his calibration marks to ensure greater precision, he seemed willing to work at a slower pace.

The Victorian had retired his cigar in favor of an elaborate looking cocktail. Lilith was reading. The air was still filled with the unique sound of Etch-a-Sketches at work. The allotted time came to an end, and the Victorian ordered the sketching to stop. The toys turned canvases were set down and their contents submitted for appraisal.

Thumbs had indeed made careful use of his calibration marks, using them to correctly synchronize the two dials in the perfect creation of countless small circles approximating the halftone dots of Lichtenstein's newsprint style. The picture itself depicted a 1950's classic car with lines indicating strong and fast forward motion. This piece featured the onomatopoeia "Vroom!" It was, indeed, a very solid entry.

Attention then turned to Jonathan's piece; this one clearly inspired by the despairing heroines found in much of Lichtenstein's work. The subject of the piece also bore an uncanny resemblance to Lilith, right down to her thought bubble: "Why can't The Sight give me lottery numbers?" Ordinarily, such snide arrogance would have cost Jonathan dearly in the undeniably subjective judging of the pieces. However, the Victorian breathlessly pointed out the image's saving grace. "The *font* is flawless."

Two very different pieces of technical mastery sat on the table, and the silence that filled the room seemed to be leaning towards an impasse. Finally Thumbs spoke. "You held your own kid. This is apples and oranges. We'll go to a tie breaker." With that, he leaned over to Lilith, and whispered something in her ear.

She drew breath and gazed downward before declaring, "My sources say 'No'"

Jonathan, who up until that point had been looking at the Etch-a-Sketches looked up sharply. "Are you using a Magic 8-Ball?"

Thumbs grew red in the face at the suggestion. "No.

She has The Sight!” It was a bold, clear and utterly confident statement, rolling from his tongue as naturally as a proclamation of the sky’s azure hue or the water’s sogginess.

His confidence left Lilith fidgeting, and Jonathan pressed onward. “But everything she says in Magic 8-Ball response.”

“She has never steered me wrong!”

“That’s statistically viable, but you’ve still been lucky.”

“She has The Sight.”

“She has a toy.”

Thumbs rose for the first time, his considerable bulk lending weight to his words and casting a shadow over Jonathan’s incredulous features. “This woman, with whom I have been to hell and back, is blessed with powers of intuition far beyond the scope of the common mortal. She can cast aside the veil, glimpse worlds that are not our own. She can disregard the restraints of time, touch the ethereal and bring forth from that realm beyond ours knowledge of the future! The unknowable, she knows. The unseeable, she sees. She has seen things that no one could know. She has saved my life, she has looked into my soul. I can assure you, child, that she . . . has . . . The Sight.”

Jonathan continued to stare at his opponent, realizing that the Victorian had adopted Lilith’s abashed restlessness. Thumbs stood still, breathing heavily and looking as if the preceding rant had been the most physically exhausting thing he had done in recent memory. The hour was growing late and both competitors were becoming weary. Tempers were getting short, and while Jonathan knew that he was in the right, he could not help but think of the five hundred dollars which the Victorian was holding. This thing needed to be handled just right. While Jonathan weighed the options of apology and assertion, Lilith spoke.

“No, you lunatic; I have a Magic 8-Ball.”

Her words hung in the room so heavily, vibrating so intensely that Jonathan briefly suspected he could have plucked them from the air and held them above his head like a trophy. He had been right, after all. Glancing across at

Thumbs, it would have been impossible to gloat. The man looked small for the first time since the competition began and it was clear that his world, let alone his mind, suffered a severe jolt.

“Why?” was all he could ask.

“I assumed you knew.”

“Why would you do this?”

“Because it’s funny. You’re an Etch-a-Sketch Hustler, for crying out loud. I thought it befitting that I be a Magic 8-Ball Mystic.” Lilith was picking up steam, the initial guilt at hurting Thumbs giving way to irritated incredulity. “Haven’t you noticed that I always give you the same 20 answers? Or that I tell you to concentrate and ask again, when it is I who is supposed to have the sight?”

Thumbs was having no part of her logical concerns. “I just don’t understand whose benefit this was done for. You do this when we’re alone!”

“I assumed your sense of humor was as dry as my own.”

“But...” Thumbs’ reply was lost to a strange weariness that suddenly settled over him. His world was suddenly less magical than it had been a few moments before. Jonathan felt the slightest pangs of guilt at the display.

Lilith must have felt the same. “Besides, who is to say that there is not some cosmic wisdom to be found in the Magic 8-Ball? You are able to wring Art from an Etch-a-Sketch. Who is to say I cannot find truth in a five dollar toy?”

This insight seemed to brighten Thumbs’ mood considerably, Jonathan decided to press onward before his rival became further emboldened. “Look, are we going to do this or not?”

Thumbs snapped around viciously. “We already are doing this thing. I said tiebreaker!”

At this, The Victorian unveiled a dartboard at one end of the room. Holding out his fists, he asked Jonathan to choose a hand. The right, which Jonathan selected, concealed a dart, while the left contained a coin which was handed to Thumbs. Thumbs flipped the coin, which came up heads. “We will be doing originals in the style of . . .” The

Victorian indicated that his thought would be finished once Jonathan threw his dart at the board. The board, Jonathan soon realized, was covered with the names of various artists ranging from Rembrandt to Duchamp. Letting fly and hoping for something good, Jonathan was not entirely sure how to respond to the Victorian's proclamation. ". . . M.C. Escher!"

Thumbs' reaction was considerably less ambiguous. "Give me a freakin' break!" Jonathan came to appreciate Thumbs' sense of fair play as he easily could have made sure that the board was stacked with artists that he favored. As it stood, neither seemed pleased as the Victorian executed his duties.

"Gentlemen, the hour grows late. You have ninety minutes." Thumbs set to his task with a sigh. He seemed to have something in mind but was unsure of his ability to pull it off. Jonathan took a risk and paused to consider what he would draw. He placed his hands on the knobs, stared at the blank screen and waited for something to come to him.

When at last it did, his heart was filled with joy. Fingers twirled the knobs with a certainty that he had not previously felt. He knew his idea could work; all that remained was to execute it as well as he knew he could. The hour flew by for the competitors; for Thumbs because no amount of time would have seemed like enough in his agitated state, for Jonathan because he would have liked to stay in the groove which he had found forever.

Of course, all good things come to an end, and it was only a matter of time before the Victorian called time. The decks were laid down and the verdict instantly known. While Thumbs had used escalators to create a passable variation on the paradoxical staircases of the inspiring artist, he had not had time to create the optical illusion of depth that would really have sold the piece. Jonathan, conversely, had gone a different route, rendering an Etch-a-Sketch from which a hand that had been drawn on it was reaching out of the screen to grasp the knob.

Thumbs looked at it with a palpable blend of respect and irritation. "The least you can do is buy me a bourbon."

Of Love and Tricksters

This is the house where Love dwells; a house whose blueprints were scrawled on caveman's walls, whose foundations were laid by the triumph and folly of man. These are the rooms furnished by troubadours, decorated by poets and gilded by commerce.

This is the house where Love dwells, and Love is pacing. Love is wandering the halls and circling the rooms. Love is giving the most perfunctory of glances to the portraits, photos, statues and bric-a-brac that it has acquired across the millennia.

Love is twiddling its thumbs.

We may ask why Love is so edgy. If we did, Love would explain that something is missing. Love would tell us that among all the artifacts and memorabilia, there is a void.

The library is in tact, with every love letter ever written from index cards to novels filed in their places. The countless goblets, from which toasts and poisons have flowed, are there as they always have been. The paintings and scrawlings, the songs and the laughter, the flowers and

candlelight are all on display. Both kinds of tears, of joy and of loss are in their bottles, jars, urns and decanters. The wedding rings and heart-shaped lockets are all hanging on their racks and the tender words and soft whispers continue to accumulate at their never-ending pace.

All the trappings and trademarks would appear to be in place, yet Love will insist that something is missing.

Where is Magic?

The question reverberates through Love's very being. Magic has been misplaced and there is much chaos in the universe.

Of course, Love has an idea of where Magic has gone. A single glance earthward reveals it all and it is nothing that Love hasn't seen before. Love's dark cousin twice removed has acquired it. It resides now in the home of Love's old friend, enemy, colleague and confidant. Madness is the proud if unjust keeper of the force known as Magic.

Aided by Lust, abetted by Poor Judgment; Obsession had snuck into the hallowed halls of romance manor and seized the grail of grails on behalf of Madness.

At this realization, Love storms through its ethereal mansion, thrashing the air with its hand and screaming with the kind malevolence that comes from purest benevolence betrayed.

The rage echoes through the halls and reverberates in the rooms; shakes the chandeliers; rattles the windows and comes to a jarring stop. Silence reigns, and as is so often the case when silence reclaims the air from the sounds of fury, it is more menacing than any cacophony that preceded it. The void has weight, setting heavily on the souvenirs of an eternity and saddling Love with its burden.

In the vibrating stillness of this moment, Love decides what it must do. It gazes at the labyrinth that Madness calls home; watches the ebb and flow of the Earth realm to which it will have to return. Thousands of years spent guiding the fate of empires and the destiny of men have not required much work in the field.

Now Love will have to return; to reap as it has sown, walking for the first time in the brave new world that it has

helped create. Love knows that it will need a guide. Love knows who it will have to call and it is perhaps this knowledge that lends such weight to the tranquility that has filled the house where Love dwells.

Such entities as these require none of the trapping of mortal communication. And so Love closes its eyes, takes a deep breath and whispers the call, demand, invocation and plea that will forever change the course of our tale.

The call is answered for to not would be to decline an invitation to chaos. Such restraint is not in this being's nature. He enters as a miasma of animals, shifting at various angles and in different lights; a deer mouse one moment, a spider the next, a rabbit or hyena in turns. Settling on his incarnation as Coyote, he prowls in, looking inexplicably at home amidst the chaise lounges and opulent décor.

He eyes up his furniture choices, selects a finely upholstered ottoman, climbs atop it, and after circling once, folds in upon himself and promptly goes to sleep. As ever, it is a beguiling entrance.

Love wishes it smoked or drank, wishes for some vice to hold it together in the maddening presence of Pan's deranged lap dog.

"I heard that wish," Coyote growls. "Think what you will about me. Call me a deceiver, a corruptor, a jokester or a trickster for I am all these things, but do not belittle me. I nestle myself in the heart of man and make it my den. I growl and I howl and mankind bends to my will. I am the illness and the cure, the blessing and the curse. Pan and I may have an understanding, but his piping is a mere accompaniment to my life. He talks. I act, keep that in mind. He sells the ticket. I am the ride."

As Love decides whether to recant or rebut, Trickster continues. "As to the problem at hand, I will gladly help you if you heed my words: that which you seek is not some trophy which can sit upon your shelves. It is instead a token, a ball which is always in play and which must, by its nature, change hands voluntarily or otherwise.

"Magic has passed through the hands of Madness, Sex, Sorrow and Joy. Even that dogmatic bastard Religion

has gotten its grubby mitts on it from time to time, so do not think Magic a blushing maiden and do not think it to be yours alone. If it returns, you must know that it is only for a spell. It will move on.”

“Not if I can make it stay.” Love replies with typical arrogance.

“Philosophers and poets have for centuries said the same of you, and you remain as fleeting as the wind.”

“Will you help me find Magic or not?”

“If only to revel in your imminent frustration” Coyote replies with a smile, producing from the folds of his pelt a black satin top hat. Setting Magic upside down upon the floor; he smiles at Love, and leaps in emerging moments later in his Rabbit guise. A wink of one pink eye and a twitch of the nose later; he disappears, laughter hanging in the air like incense in his wake.

Love picks up Magic. In Love’s less playful hands, it takes the form of a bejeweled chalice. Though the transformation is a reflection of Love’s own intent, a pang of sadness is felt at the disappearance of the Trickster’s whimsy. It passes quickly as Love notices the dainty fecal jelly beans left behind by the Rabbit.

While Love laughs at the gesture, a gang of Muses watch covetously through the window. The ball, after all, is always in play.

Little Messiahs

Leonard Menke awoke from a chloroform daze knowing that he was in trouble. Adrenalin cut the pharmaceutical fog, and Leonard took in what he could of his surroundings. The room was a minimalist tableau lit by a low watt bulb dangling from a decimated fixture in the center of the room. The floor and the ceiling had recently been painted black, the scent of the paint still filled the room, and the walls were padded with soundproof foam.

Leonard's hands and feet were taped to the arms and legs of an old wooden chair. He had been stripped to his boxers and tie. His mouth was gagged and filled with blood, shivers wracking his body every time he bit down on the gag.

The chair was grabbed by unseen hands and flipped onto the floor. The move was not done with excessive force, but the ease with which it was executed suggested impressive strength behind it. Leonard suffered a broken nose and a split lip. The chair was returned to its proper position, and the voice of his captor came from behind Leonard's right ear.

"Do I have your full and undivided attention?" The

assailant waited for the indistinct and pained mutterings that struggled to get around the gag before continuing. "I guess this is not exactly helping your communication skills." A hand crept around Leonard's head, ripped the duct tape off of his mouth and removed a large ball of aluminum foil. The sight of the gag not only explained the previous shivers down the spine but aroused several new spasms as well.

Leonard started screaming for help and was smacked hard in the back of the head. Blood rushed to the front of his skull, intensifying the throbbing in his nose and the ringing in his ears. "We will have none of that. It gives me a headache. Besides, the room is soundproof so any cries for help are just plain silly. So, now that you are able to speak, how are you feeling?"

"What do you want from me?"

"Do you have any idea how many times I've heard that question? And every time, it's asked as if I have a clearly defined motive. Granted, I do; but generally people who do this kind of thing do not. Furthermore, people ask as if my motive needs to relate to them specifically or be of such a nature that my revelation of it will lessen this ordeal. Neither of these is true and the question is pointless. Everything will be revealed in time. Now back to my question. How are you feeling, Mr. Menke?"

"You know my name."

"It's amazing what you can learn from someone's wallet, Leonard. Your response does not answer my question."

"I'm scared, alright? Is that what you want to hear?"

"Excellent. Fear. We shall work from there, Leonard. Regarding your question as to whether or not that was what I wanted to hear, I will say this: the only thing I require of you during our time together is honesty. If you were sexually aroused by my treatment, I would want you to tell me so. Granted, fear will make my job easier, but so will your cooperation and candid description of what you are feeling."

Leonard had not yet seen the face of the man who held his life in his hands, but he had listened carefully. The captor had been pacing back and forth behind him. The

sound of his footsteps said he was wearing dress shoes. This implied a fairly formal dress code. The shoes were certainly not the sneakers or heavy boots that Leonard expected of a psychopath.

The voice was solid, but not deep. There was a scratchiness that, in addition to the faint smell of tobacco told Leonard that the man was a smoker. He sounded intelligent and world weary, though not necessarily old.

His captor sounded like he could easily have been any of the faceless drifters that littered the alleys outside the financial district. It was ultimately on this image that Leonard's brain settled. The unseen stranger would eventually reveal himself, but Leonard could already see him in his mind's eye: unshaven, dressed in the dirty shadow of a Brooks Brothers suit, whiskey on his breath and the dull gleam of ambition gone wrong in his eye.

The captor flicked Leonard's right ear hard, turning it hot and red with irritated blood flow and snapping him out of his reverie. "Well then. What do you say we begin?"

The light went out.

Leonard could hear pieces of wooden furniture moving somewhere in front of him.

Minutes passed, the stranger working methodically in the non-existent light. Eventually, the faint sound of breath placed the stranger directly in front of Leonard. The light snapped on. Leonard couldn't tell if it was on remote control or if there was someone else in the room.

Leonard's eyes readjusted to the light and gazed upon his captor. He looked like an insurance salesman. Not a burnt out life on the edge commission hunter, not a failed salesman who had lost everything in an ill fated embezzlement scheme, but the most average middle-aged salesman in all the land. Leonard was taken aback by the mundane entity that stood before him. He had a paunch, faint traces of laugh lines etched in his cheeks and a receding hairline. He was dressed simply enough, slacks and a button down shirt of indiscernible brand or quality.

The assailant chuckled. "Not quite what you expected, am I? Fear not. You will be far more surprised with

me by the time this is all over." He paused, gauging Leonard's response. "You're probably wondering what I have in store for you."

"I think I have a pretty good idea."

"And you are wrong," he replied with chilling confidence. The stranger was sitting on a chair just like Leonard's. On either side of him were folding tray/tables with boxes on them, the contents of which could not be seen from Leonard's vantage point.

From the pocket of his button down shirt, the man pulled a scalpel, which he fidgeted with dexterously as he spoke. "My name is . . . Roger," he explained. Leonard noticed Roger's meaningful pause and upward gaze before giving his name, as if he were making it up. If Leonard had no chance of getting out alive, he would have been told his assailant's real name. For Leonard, the pseudonym could mean escape. "The reason that I brought you here is really quite simple. You should be honored by your selection. Your life may yet have some value in this world."

Leonard thought that if he asserted himself as something more than a passive victim, he could keep the illusion of control, pretending that his fate still rested in his own hands. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"What a stupid question. If I am sane, I would tell you so. If I am mad, I will certainly deny it and give you the same response. You may as well ask me if I am a pathological liar.

"Enough logic games. We won't worry about labels or convention. We won't worry about the outside world or the rules and mores that define it. You and I Leonard, we are going to live in the moment, and in so doing dedicate all our energies to the task at hand." Roger took the scalpel and removed a one inch patch of skin from Leonard's left arm. The scream that followed lasted for several seconds, but did not reverberate in the soundproof room, giving it an other-worldly lack of depth as if it were the world's first cubist recording.

Annoyed with the pitiful shriek, Roger took the butt end of the scalpel and sharply struck Leonard's broken nose.

The pain was comparatively minor, but snapped the prisoner into silence. "Leonard, if you start caterwauling every time I touch you this going to take longer than it has to. "Now we are presented with an open wound on your arm. This is terribly inconvenient for you because, while it is painful right now as you experience the wound itself, there is potential for infection and gangrene. That much exposed flesh can lead to blood poisoning and a slow painful death. Not fun at all, Leonard.

"I have beside me two boxes. In one I have the makings of a modern first aid kit. There are bandages, tape, antibiotics and topical antiseptics. Everything that I need to care for that wound in a sterile and proper manner is in that box. You like that box, Leonard. The other box is filled with other ways of treating the injury. Iodine for that 1940's style medical attention. Kosher salt and whiskey should we opt for a more civil war era approach to your health. Then there's always the tobasco sauce and sandpaper."

The prospects sent Leonard into a brief fit of fighting against his bonds, and screaming for help that would never come. "Now, now. This is not the sort of thing that I am prone to rush to judgment on. Each box has its merits that need to be weighed carefully. However, if you act like a child, I will be forced to make a snap decision. This may cause me to choose box number two simply because administering its contents requires less patience as box number one." Leonard sunk into deep silence.

"As you may have noticed, Leonard, I have a lot of hatred inside of me and what may be described by those prone to polite understatement as 'a real mean streak'. Some might even say that I have too much hatred and cruelty for one man. They would be far more correct than they would probably realize. On a related note, you will be going through far more pain than any one man should endure. I promise you that you will feel as if you have died a thousand deaths by the time this is through.

"This brings us back to the issue of the boxes. These boxes contain more than just instruments of pain or relief. They also contain the possibilities thereof. You see, Leonard,

I can be merciful or cruel; and you need to try and guess which one I will opt for. This is not my requirement, but your own. It is in your nature to try and anticipate my next move. That's a good way to drive yourself mad, attempting to crawl inside my head. Especially when you factor in the notion that your behavior will influence my decision. So what would inspire me to take mercy on you? Quiet obedience maybe? Or do I want to see you spew invective at me like a drunken biker? What do I want from you, Leonard? I'm going to sit here for a little while and watch you think about that."

Roger leaned back in his chair, lit up a cigarette and observed Leonard's demeanor. His look, an almost defeated pout, was more or less unchanging. Were it not for the determined defiance with which he cast his eyes downward, Roger would think that his victim had been broken far ahead of schedule. Dragging deeply off of his camel, Roger decided to bide his time, waiting for Leonard to make some sort of move.

After ten minutes, Roger began removing the contents of the first aid box, silently cataloguing its contents as he set them down on the tray. When this brought no reaction, he shifted his attention to the other box; removing the bottle of hot sauce and juggling it from hand to hand. This continued for a couple minutes until he lit another cigarette and inspected Leonard. The same defiance was in his eyes, the same pout on his lips. The cut on the bridge of his nose had begun to scab, so Roger extinguished his cigarette on it, bringing Leonard back to full attention. "I'll be right back. I warn you that this meditative bitterness of yours bores me and I may be tempted to force some animation into you when I return. So think about what I have said and let's see if you can choose your fate." The light went out and the door opened and closed behind Leonard, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

The pain from his injuries had faded into a white hot noise in the back of his head. It was not the immediate pain that worried him. It was Roger's apparent creativity; the threat of dying a thousand deaths. He did, however, sterile

treatment of his current injury. Gangrene and blood poisoning would narrow the window of opportunity for Roger to do whatever he needed to do. A lukewarm comfort, if that, it was all that Leonard had.

Leonard had come to understand that he was in for more pain and suffering than he had ever imagined. Moments of fleeting kindness were the best that he could, at that point, hope for. Leonard needed to do everything in his power to bring those moments about. He needed to think. Not a simple task.

Roger had said that he had too much hatred and cruelty for one man. What did he mean? Was he part of a group? Was he acting on the orders of others or performing this ritual on their behalf? Leonard wanted to say yes, that this was not the act of a single man but that there was conspiracy or cult instigating this situation. This was what he hoped for, giving him pause to question his priorities. What if his torturer was a simple madman. Everything that had been said could have been a lie. When he made up the alias, it could have been done to inspire false hope, the cruelest of weapons. And why a thousand deaths? Did Roger have his tortures cataloged like a modern De Sade? They say that a coward dies a thousand deaths, a hero dies but once. Was Roger alluding to that old maxim?

The door opened in the darkness. Footfalls shuffled into their position in front of Leonard. Something was placed on one of the tray/tables. Roger's voice crept through the darkness. "So, what box do you think I'm going to use, Leonard?"

Leonard could feel something in the air inches above his open wound. Not being able to see what it was or when it was coming drove reason from him and almost sent his ability to speak with it. "I don't know! I don't care! Just do it!" he shrieked.

"You couldn't bring yourself to see this situation through my eyes, could you?" Leonard could feel the invisible hand creeping closer to the wound. "I'm very disappointed in you." At the moment that he most anticipated the burn of cayenne and vinegar on open flesh, the lights came

on revealing no hand near his arm and Roger sitting serenely in his chair. On the tray/table next to him, a microwaveable burrito sat awaiting the embellishment of the Tabasco sauce. Before Leonard could take in this unthreatening scene, he cringed against his bonds and let out the whimper of a man beneath the dentist's drill.

Leonard chuckled quietly. "A thousand deaths, my friend. Each one worse than the one before." Leonard stared at his captor with his head still buzzing from the adrenaline and enough anger in his eyes to impress his captor. "Which I guess means I'll be committing a thousand murders." An odd remark, Roger's statement caused Leonard's face to drain of vengeance in exchange for curiosity. "Speak while you still can," Roger warned.

"It's odd the way you talk about all this."

"How do most people you know talk about kidnapping a man and torturing him for an extended period of time for reasons that he can not begin to comprehend?"

The point was well taken; but in spite of his comprehension, Leonard found a bizarre reply falling out of his mouth before he could even think. "Most of the people I know call it marriage." He had made a joke. A joke cracked at a man who had broken his nose and cut a swath of skin from his arm and who had the ability to expand upon these injuries for an unspecified amount of time. Perhaps, insanity was setting in.

"Good answer. There is something that I can admire. Flippancy in the face of an uncertain future." Leonard cautiously noted that Roger had still not used the term "death" in any literal sense. Roger's amusement proved contagious and Leonard attempted a smile, trying to blend, to bond with the man who could kill him at any moment. Roger's demeanor remained cool. He pivoted sharply, glaring at his prisoner. "Now what would your wife say if she heard her husband talking like that?"

Leonard's smile vanished as abruptly as his captor's. "How the hell did you know I was married?"

"You're wearing a wedding ring, Leonard. Now answer the question. What would Christina say if she heard

you talking like that?"

Leonard steeled himself. Roger was trying to rattle him by mentioning his family. "I think she would be too traumatized by this situation to even speak."

"How right you are." Again that chilling certainty. "Tell you what. Because of your humor in the face of danger, I shall attend to your wound in a compassionate and sterile manner. Fair enough?"

Leonard now feared for his family as well as himself, but he struggled to remain cordial. "Thank you."

His gratitude was laughed at. "You'll be taking that back before this is over." With nothing else, he set to work, gently cleaning the wound with an antiseptic that, while stinging, was far kinder than anything in box number two. The wound clean, the captor laid down a couple layers of clean sterile gauze and taped the bandage securely in place, wrapping the tape around the arm, being careful not to inhibit circulation. "There. How does that feel?"

"Much better. Again, thank you."

No sooner had the word "you" been uttered than Roger pulled a night stick out of his belt, bringing it down with bone cracking speed and focus on the bandaged wound. Leonard let out a scream that was silenced when he was knocked unconscious by a sharp blow to the side of the head with the night stick.

When Leonard awoke, it was to the sight of Roger donning latex surgical gloves and organizing tools on a tray. "It is time for us to begin our work in earnest, Leonard. We are little messiahs, my friend, and yet, what sacrifice have we put forth? Virtually none." Leonard was unable to respond as the aluminum foil and duct tape were back in place. Scalpel was taken in hand and a deep painful cut made on Leonard's right arm. He reflexively bit down on the aluminum foil ball, raising goosebumps and worsening the pain of the incision as the skin tightened around it.

"You see, Leonard. I am on this Earth for this very purpose. Whether or not you were destined from birth for this is a matter of conjecture. You see, you were chosen for this. Whether it was by me or some higher force acting

through my hand is a futile debate. Wouldn't you agree?" Roger picked up a surgical needle and some thread. "Now I don't want you to worry about these cuts. The needle and the thread have both been sterilized and the thread has been soaked in iodine. It will sting a little but, but it will keep the stitches free of germs and bacteria that may cause infection.

His stitching was crude but efficient. While not trying to mutilate or damage the cuts, Roger was by no means gentle, causing Leonard to repeatedly bite down on the aluminum foil ball. "Just think of all the good that we are doing here, Leonard. You're dying a thousand deaths. Think about that."

Once the first cut was sealed, Roger quickly made another inches from the first. This second incision went a little bit deeper and produced a trickle of blood. Leonard swooned and a low moan rumbled down in his throat. "Before you pass out, let me tell you that I have plenty of epinephrine and thorazine. Any time you get to spend in the sweet void of unconsciousness is thanks to me. Those were the last words Leonard heard before fainting.

Consciousness came in the form of an epinephrine drip. Roger had gone on to open and close many more incisions. Leonard's arms and legs were covered in freshly sewn lesions which made themselves evident when the adrenaline kick caused his entire body to jerk to life. The muscles convulsed, the skin stretched and the fresh lacerations were pulled taut against their iodine soaked bindings. An attempt to scream produced the usual muffled cry. Leonard looked around the room. No sign of Roger. Then came the spray. A fine mist shot into the air above Leonard's head and gently cascaded down on the fresh cuts. The prisoner let out further pathetic attempts at screams and fought madly against his bonds, worsening the pain of his mangled skin and sending new lightening bolts of pain through his broken arm. Spraying the mist, a combination of lemon juice, vinegar and bleach, Roger walked around to face Leonard.

"I would normally have kept you awake for all those incisions, but I felt that I could make much quicker progress

if I just went ahead and cut you up without your crying. Besides, I can always make up for the pain that you missed now that you are conscious. How are you feeling?"

Leonard's eyes darted frantically around the room. His heart raced. For a moment, he felt strong enough to try and escape before the pain kicked back in. Whereas he had previously been able to use shock and detachment to look at his situation calmly, he was now too frantic to comply his way to freedom. The adrenaline and the pain and the endorphins all sang the ballad of fight or flight; but his lacerated and bruised muscles had other plans, leaving his body locked in a state of suspended animation.

"You know something? My suture job wasn't really sufficient to seal some of those gashes." The madman walked to the back corner of the room, returning with an industrial soldering iron. The sight sent Leonard into more futile and painful fits of resistance. "I'll just have to cauterize the wounds, for safety's sake."

He first applied the iron to a cut on the right knee. The skin on the knee is relatively pain resistant. Even so, it was by far the worst pain Leonard had yet experienced. The pain is unique. There is intense heat at the actual point of contact, but the nerve endings there are quickly killed. The heat, however, is such that from the central burn, emanates a spectrum of damage and subsequent pain. Skin crisping burns still torment the living nerves closest to the point of contact. Further out, secondary burns still tenderize the flesh beneath the skin. Beyond that, first degree burn, little more than a sunburn, but having appeared and blistered in seconds stings the skin. These assorted pains constitute but a fraction of the miasma of sensation flooding the victim's mind.

There is a sound, quiet in the stillness of the room but thunderous in the ears of the victim; a hissing sound of hair being singed and that first layer of skin sacrificing its moisture to the searing metal. The hissing lasts just a moment before being replaced with the sizzling of flesh, of meat cooking. And what meat cooks without giving off a scent? Roasting human flesh lets off a noxious stench made

all the worse for the victim by the singed hair musk that wafts up ahead of it.

This symphony of pain was to play in its entirety for Leonard Menke every time his captor touched metal to flesh.

"Do you understand why you are here yet?" Leonard had been reduced to choking sobs and could only shake his head. Too damaged to move, too drugged to faint, he was trapped in the chair and in the hands of his madman torturer.

"Well, you see, I'm like a sponge." Iron touched flesh, the symphony played. "I soak things up." Another pause and a third lesion was sealed. "Specifically, I absorb negativity. Do you know what that means?"

Leonard again shook his head, this time more desperately as the pain was compounding with every second.

"When I say negativity, I mean so-called bad feelings. I mean anger, hatred, bitterness, rage, envy, contempt, loathing and cruelty. All those assorted feelings that can lead perfectly normal people to do things like this." As Roger spouted the litany of negative emotions, he touched the iron to a wound for each feeling. Leonard swooned again, but remained trapped in a chemically forced state of hypersensitive consciousness. His mind wanted to fly to some safe and warm place away from the body, but was held back by pharmaceutical chains.

"The people who have these emotions aren't driven to anything this severe." Sizzle and burn another cut sealed. "Which brings me ever closer to the reason that we are here right now. You see, normally the emotions that I soak up take the form of little problems. Little crimes, little sins, and little transgressions. Sometimes they are as minuscule as cutting someone off at an intersection or being rude to a cashier. Ironically, it is usually being the recipient of such behavior that would cause a person to do such a thing. Vicious cycles are born.

"Then there are the bigger sins and bigger crimes. They come from the same place, you know. Murder is just the result of negativity, just like starting a fight, calling a name or cheating at cards: lackadaisical expressions of nega-

tivity." As he went on, Roger continued the step by step cauterization of Leonard's legs. "Do you see what I am saying?"

Leonard could not even shake his head by then. He hung his head, eyes shut tightly with tears creeping out the corners. His chest heaved with quiet sobs. He'd known people who enjoyed pain, sexual masochists and exercise junkies. They all spoke of the epiphany; of the moment of clarity and tranquility that comes from pushing your body over the edge. He had captured a faint taste that escape with the broken arm and the broken nose. He had begun to float and while he hated the eerie sense of detachment when it was happening to him, he now yearned to feel it once again. The carefully regulated IV's in his arm saw that he stayed right where he was, body, mind and soul. Roger was good. He had done this before. For the first time, the painfully real specter of imminent death reared its ugly head causing Leonard's sobs to become all the more pathetic.

Roger's fist crashed into Leonard's already damaged face with surprising force and stealth. The uppercut rocked the chair back so far that it nearly spilled backwards. His ears rang, but could not drown out his captor's screaming. "You sniveling punk! You think this fun for me? Have you been listening at all? All those feelings, all that hatred and anger and fear and loathing and bitterness and contempt; that is not fun. For the first few days it's a bit of a rush. A tingle in the base of the brain, a hot flushed feeling in the arms ready to strike at the first person foolish enough to cross me. It has a strength that comes with it. That's not where it ends. It keeps building. It stockpiles itself in the crevices of my being and it makes itself at home because chances are it has been there before. It builds until I must release it. Like here. Like now. And why do I go through this? Because this is my cross to bear. Because by taking all those emotions, all those little cruelties and private murders and pouring them into this one pure, simple and isolated act, I spare the world at large. I stop the vicious cycle and slow down the wheel of Karma. I save lives and minds and souls though this sacrifice. This is not a hobby. It is my destiny."

Leonard's eyes were wide with shock, fear and des-

peration. There was also a sense of pity that felt grossly out of place amidst the more self-centered emotions. "You want to know where you play into all of this?" Leonard nodded a weak affirmation. "There is a flipside to all the bile that I take upon myself. For every cruelty there is suffering. For every crime there is a victim. When someone hits another person the sting is felt and when someone commits a murder, someone else must die. That is where you come in. You are taking all that upon yourself and expelling it in this same pure act. This same ritual in which I expel what demons I can from society, you take its pain. You take its suffering and bleeding and bruising and crying and anguish. We are little messiahs, Leonard. Be proud of what you are accomplishing here today."

The terror that lurked in that moment was more intense than anything that Leonard had felt. He did not know how to feel, what to say. The pain was still lighting up his nervous system and the blood still dripped warm and sticky from some the less carefully attended to cuts. He thought that he was a broken man, but the implications of everything that had been said were such that he knew his ordeal was just coming to speed. If anything was to be a source of comfort for him it was the idea that he was helping humanity and that his torturer was just as pained as he was. He so desperately wanted to believe it all.

Roger clapped his hands together loudly. "Ah but how I prattle." The smile that spread across his face had enough evidence of glee in it to cast a shadow of doubt upon everything that preceded it. Had all that talk been part of the game? Or had it been the truth? Roger turned off the IV drips. Perhaps he was finally getting tired. He waited for the drugs to work their way out of Leonard's system, idly passing the time drawing intricate patterns on his victim with the soldering gun.

When at last it looked as the drugs had run their course and that Leonard was ready to slip into sleep or unconsciousness or that blackness whose name does not matter, Roger sharply slapped the broken arm to bring him to attention.

"You have done well so far. Besides, soon this will all be coming to an end." Further use of the cruelest weapon? Leonard could not, by then, speculate or bring himself to care. "You look like you could use some rest. Good idea, Leonard, you've had a hard day. But first," Roger drew a large dagger and plunged it into Leonard's right cheek. It pierced the aluminum foil ball and poked through the other side of Leonard's face. Roger then punched Leonard in the face, sending him into blessed unconsciousness before removing the blade.

Leonard was awoken with an ice cold glass of water to the face, a pleasantly mild shock. The puncture wounds had been stitched more proficiently than the other cuts. His arms and legs were unbound and his broken arm rested in a sling. Roger looked at him with a tranquil, almost relieved expression. "You may leave now, Leonard?"

"What?"

Roger handed him a cane. His legs, while terribly burnt and in constant agony, were still functional. "You question my offer?"

Leonard took the cane. "No. Not at all." Oddly enough, he meant it. There was a change in Roger's demeanor. It seemed that he had been purged, the ritual completed. Moreover, freedom was so much what Leonard wanted that he gladly set aside any suspicion. He hobbled his way to the door and opened it, stumbling into the light beyond the threshold.

His stomach plummeted. He died a dozen more deaths more severe than anything that Roger had forced upon him. He stood in the hallway outside his own bedroom. As his body began to collapse, he was seized from behind by his hair. Roger jerked him into the room and slammed the door shut. Leonard was on his mutilated knees, Roger's grip on his hair the only thing stopping him from going fetal on the floor. Roger leaned into Leonard's ear and growled, "You have experienced suffering and bleeding and bruising, but you have not yet begun to understand anguish."

He threw his crippled victim to the floor and paced the room. "This is your bedroom, Leonard. The very room

where you and your lovely wife Christina conceived little Jacob and whispered so many sweet nothings in your eight years of marriage. I knew you were married from the ring, but how did I know her name, Leonard? You really need to improve your listening skills."

"What did you do with them?"

"He sent them to her mother's for the weekend." Leonard looked behind his attacker. There stood a man in a ragged brown trench coat. His face was conveniently shadowed by the brim of his fedora and the smoke of a cigarette curled up from his mouth. "He was right when he said this was only about you. This was not meant for your family. He's simply using them as a tool. He knows that they are a quick and easy way to get deep under your skin and make you purge the demons of an entire community. Well, that's over now." A revolver was drawn from the folds of the coat and a single shot fired through Roger's throat, inducing a gurgled scream before the sadist dropped to the floor.

"Thank you...um officer? Detective? Um, who are you?"

At the question, the savior cocked his head to one side, his jacket rippled as a chill ran down his back. Leonard looked more closely at the trench coat. It was not made of any material that he could easily recognize. It was tattered and torn and looked as though it might have once been leather. Careful observation and a little bit of squinting revealed that in addition to then folds and wrinkles could be seen the traces of veins and arteries in membrane. The stranger stretched his shoulders and spread his wings ever so slightly.

As Leonard let out a stunned gasp, the creature turned out of profile and faced him directly. The smoke still trickled from its mouth but no cigarette was present. "He was right about another thing. He really was doing His work." This revelation was emphasized with a knowing upward glance. "What they don't understand is that the darkness needs to be here. It is the nature of you beasts. So long as you are always looking to Him for easy answers and rote salvation, this will be the nature of your world." The

creature turned the revolver towards Leonard. "Until you people learn to fight your demons on your own terms, the cycles will grow all the more vicious and the wheel of Karma will continue to turn, knocking aside the weak and crushing the bones of your fallen heroes."

At this point Leonard could only sob, but the creature continued "That's the big secret. The key to the universe. The passport to Paradise. Strength. Of course, we can't have you wandering the streets with an epiphany like that." The creature put the barrel of the gun to Leonard's head. "Keep in mind, this isn't my hobby or fetish either, but it is my job."

"But...."

"Good night, Mr. Menke."

Intention V. Invention: An Evolutionary Fable

The downfall of mankind did not begin with the hubris of the boardroom or the corruption of government or the attempted harnessing of an insuppressible force of nature. The clockwork men did not revolt against the humans who held their keys. The planetary telegraph grid did not, as the wild-eyed Luddites had prophesized, become sentient and enslave humanity.

It began with the labors of a humble ant and the quixotic whims of a visionary grasshopper. It began with humankind's cast-offs giving insects the means to escalate an age old rivalry and kick start evolution in the process.

It began on a pleasant day at the start of autumn when the weather's newfound chill invigorated all who felt its caress. It was a day when the scent of hearth fires on the air brought a smile to the season's first wind-chapped faces and the trees gave a preview of their impending kaleidoscopic display. In Richmond Park, the Ant and the Grasshopper were sharing a rare moment of amity as the Ant

paused in his toils long enough for the Grasshopper to bend his ear. The Hare soon joined them with news to be shared.

“My fur grows heavier and thicker by the day. A long hard winter is coming upon us soon.”

The Grasshopper was unimpressed. “I have weathered a few blizzards in my day, and winter is winter no matter how early it may come.”

The Ant had labored the summer through collecting food to eat and trinkets for his amusement. Now, having anticipated weeks of autumn weather to finish his preparations, this news of deadly cold jeopardized all of his work. “We do not share the hare’s defenses, Grasshopper. What can we do?”

The Hare had a suggestion. “Perhaps you can migrate.”

“Migrate?” the Ant and Grasshopper replied in unison.

“Birds do it all the time. They make a left at the sunset and fly until the weather gets warmer.”

“That’s fine for them. They can fly. I am but an ant. It would take me a month to get across the city. Never mind traveling far enough to feel the weather change.”

The Grasshopper agreed. “Even with my mighty leaps, I doubt I could outrun the winter.”

Just then, the earth began to rumble. The Ant and the Grasshopper crawled atop the Hare and the three looked to the horizon. The latest Jaguar model was barreling down the street, smoke and embers and licks of flame pouring from its side mounted smoke stacks. It filled the air with the scent of charring oak as the driver threw another log in the hopper and sealed off the vents, driving all of the boiler’s force into the pistons and accelerating madly from sight.

The Ant cocked his head for a moment and though he was motionless, his mind was already moving swiftly into action. “I will build a machine which will transport me to this land of sun and warmth to the left of the sunset!”

The Grasshopper liked the idea. “I shall do the same. It will be a most resplendent vehicle! Faster than anything that has graced the land, more luxurious than any human

creation! It will put your puny machine to shame!”

“Build what you like, so long as it gets you where you need to go.”

With that, the two went their separate ways: the Ant to his workshop and the Grasshopper to his drawing board.

The Ant had never built an automobile, but had crawled around inside more than a few machines. He had not studied engineering, but his own body was a technical marvel and to make it move was to understand physics. To avoid tripping over his legs was to know the timing of moving parts. What was more, he was willing to try and try again until he got something right.

He crawled into his mound and looked at his hoarded treasures. The humans' lifestyle of disposable automatons had created an entirely new class of litter. Self opening bottles dropped their mechanized caps to the ground. Single use coffee mugs which brewed their own contents saw gutters and trash bins filled with tiny pumps and reservoirs. As a result, the Ant had compiled an impressive collection of wire, gears, washers, bolts and all manner of miniaturized parts which were just manageable in size.

Some of the items had been scavenged by rats and squirrels, left to rust in the park when they proved inedible. Many had been left at the Ant's doorstep as the world of man progressed ever forward, shedding bits and pieces of old technology so that the new could replace it. The creatures unseen and unheralded were left to gather the detritus and pick up where mankind left off.

The Grasshopper, too, had acquired much from the world which enveloped his own. His home itself was a discarded music box, thrown into the park from a moving cart by some caprice-afflicted recipient who did not care for the gesture. And while he did not yet have the means to construct a vehicle; he did possess a drafting table fashioned from a cigarette case, scraps of parchment and newsprint which the winds had brought to him from throughout the city, a supply of ink in the cap of a fountain pen and quills from the pigeons who shared the park.

“Utilitarian” was not a word in the Grasshopper's

vocabulary. In its place, he used the word “boring.” While this certainly would not be correct in a lexicological sense, it did reflect the feelings in the Grasshopper’s conceited heart. Knowing where its priorities stood, the Grasshopper set out to design the ultimate vehicle for his journey.

The Ant, on the other hand, went straight to work. He placed gears on axles, set pinions in racks, oiled fulcrums and tightened belts. He soon had assembled a series of simple machines which somehow failed to coalesce. Placing his front legs on the steering levers and his back four on the pedals, he cranked the mechanisms to cacophonous life.

Fly wheels turned and pulleys pulled and as the Ant approached the brink of despair, the contraption creaked forward just slightly enough to restore his hope. Pushing the pedals with all his might, the Ant bordered on flailing as all six appendages asserted themselves in similar but not synchronized directions. When the Ant at last admitted exhaustion, it had traveled a matter of inches.

The Grasshopper looked from the window of his music box and laughed. “My vehicle will not be so cumbersome as that!”

“Nor will mine,” the Ant replied before returning to his workshop.

The Grasshopper scoffed and returned to his drafting board, where he continued rendering an ornate front fender with the infatuated detail of a lovestruck portraitist.

In his shop the Ant knew that he had to use some power beyond his own six limbs. The humans used all manner of fuels. Their cars breathed fire, the trains sent clouds of steam ever skyward, and coiled springs set clockwork horses to galloping. Mankind’s legs had almost become obsolete! The Ant knew that he would need to bring himself to that same level. His machine had to replace his efforts, not merely enhance them.

Using the body of a pocket-hookah the Ant constructed a boiler. A perforated snuffbox held kerosene soaked wads of cotton underneath. The copper tubing from a self-distilling hooch bottle would pump steam to the pistons stolen from the pinky of a decommissioned wind-up man. If

all went well, the pistons would turn the ten-shilling wheels and move the Ant onward to warmer climes.

The Grasshopper too was pondering a power source, but felt conventional combustibles to be pedestrian. Instead, he looked to the more esoteric works of Nicola Tesla. While the technology had not been tested, the Grasshopper was sure that the Radiant Energy principals described in those purloined records would put his vehicle on the absolute cutting edge of ambulatory fashion.

As he rendered his conception of Tesla's energy collection plates into his schematic, he heard a putting noise outside. Lifting the lid of the music box, with the sound of *Moonlight Sonata* pouring from the lead crystal bells within, the Grasshopper peered out and saw the Ant sputtering along in his latest creation. The oily smoke from the soaked down cotton blew into the Ant's face causing him to cough and squint and eventually veer erratically to and fro.

The Grasshopper laughed at the sight and called down to his rival, "My vehicle will not be so noxious as that!"

"Nor will mine," the Ant replied before returning to his workshop.

Indeed the face full of bilious smoke would not do, and so he modified the tinder box. Long, slender cigarette holders mislaid by women of fashion and appropriated by the Ant would pipe any smoke behind his pilot chair. Even with this precaution in place, he suspected that a cleaner, hotter fuel would be in order. With that in mind, the Ant proceeded to collect twigs and splinters of the hardest woods he could find. He wanted the wood dry, and if he could not find it in such a state, he would set it in a corner of his workshop to age.

It was on one of his wood scavenging trips that he again encountered the Grasshopper. The Grasshopper's mandibles were stained red by many thimbles of wine, and his great bulbous eyes were made even glassier than usual by the laudanum he had added to it. He was dancing merrily about, giddy with a sense of destiny, confident in the eventual triumph of his vision.

"Silly Ant!" he chided, "While you slave away testing

every possible permutation of nuts and bolts, I have been conceptualizing a vehicle so amazing it will put me as an equal among the humans.” Reaching into his satchel, the Grasshopper pulled out scraps of paper and cloth, even small chips of wood and dried leaves. On each piece was jotted a note or scrawled a drawing: various aspects of his dream machine.

There was a diagram of a wheel with a special spoke configuration gleaned from the alchemical workings of Dr. John Dee. “These wheels will bring power to the machine while signaling my knowledge to those who know how to read the signs.”

One scrap of paper had a complex algorithm jotted on it. “This will allow me to bend space and time with a clockwork astrolabe.”

A leaf, clearly grabbed and inscribed in the absolute depths of this recent binge, contained the hastily scrawled word, “Rockets” with a question mark swirling into elaborate filigree which consumed almost the entire surface.

“I believe that I shall make my craft amphibious,” the Grasshopper declared. “I will also give it the power of flight.”

The Ant gathered up the last twig he could possibly carry. “I wish you luck, Grasshopper. I hope you will be able to begin construction soon. As for me, I must be on my way. I intend to test my latest modifications before the sun goes down.”

The Grasshopper laughed and waved off the Ant’s implications. “When you design a vehicle as carefully as I am designing mine, you need not worry about construction. It will virtually build itself. So you go and test your little toy. I am going to continue designing a revolution.”

And so it followed for another week. Each day, sometimes twice a day, the Ant would test his machine and make his adjustments. The Grasshopper would watch him and laugh declaring the imminent triumph of his still imaginary craft.

“My vehicle will not be so slow as that!”

“My vehicle will not be so loud as that!”

“My vehicle will not be so uncomfortable as that!”

And every time, the Ant replied, "Nor will mine," before returning to his workshop to improve his invention once again.

At the end of the week, the temperature had dropped substantially. A quarter mile above the ground, the vast web of internet telegraph cables which enveloped the city twinkled with the subtlest film of early frost. The Hare's coat had proven to be prophetic indeed, and the Ant decided it was time to travel, for the next few mornings may find the frost on his thorax instead. His vehicle rolled out from its subterranean garage. Smaller than a shoebox to you or me, it was a great mechanized leviathan to the Ant, and an ark to those from his colony who had accepted his invitation to ride.

As the Ant had promised, it was not cumbersome or noxious, neither slow nor loud and though austere it was quite comfortable. He had never drawn a single sketch, but had worked the machine until it was ready. It was, to the Grasshopper's disdain, a monument to utilitarianism: a simple boiler forcing power to pistons which turned rubber wheels. Surely there would have been more effective methods of steering the beast, but in the interest of time the Ant had mounted the entire front drive train on a single mighty pivot.

As they cruised past the Grasshopper's music box, the Ant cried out, "There is room enough for you, my friend, if you would care to join us!"

The Grasshopper sneered as he raised his lid. "I would not be caught dead in a tub such as that. My great creation has a name: The Hiram J. Grasshopper AmphibioFlying Migratory Conveyance! When it is complete, I will be the first grasshopper awarded a Royal Medal of Esteemed Scientific Achievement!"

"Call it what you like," the Ant replied, "so long as it gets you where you are going." With those parting words, the Ant engaged the gears and headed towards the sunset.

The Grasshopper muttered a curse or two under his breath, shuffling back inside to gaze upon his diagram. It was, indeed, magnificent. The elaborate wheels were designed to tower over him, and were to be made from

gleaming brass or burnished copper. The chassis was a series of curves and angles which made the machine look as if it was speeding even when it sat motionless on the page. The side-panels were curved and symmetrical, designed to fold down beneath the wheels and form the bottom of a boat. The roof was to be constructed of almost paper-thin mahogany slats, mounted on a series of joints and pivots which would allow them to reconfigure as a great propeller to lift the vehicle into the air.

The engine, too, was magnificently rendered. Tesla's mysterious plates were to pump energy to an elegant amalgamation of wires, cables and pipes. The result, it could be assumed from the authority with which the diagram had been rendered, would somehow propel the vehicle at speeds befitting its aggressive outward appearance.

All of this had been documented on a vast schematic which took up an entire wall of the Grasshopper's home. This final draft had been created on the finest parchment that could be mustered, the sepia ink giving richness to the illustration, while the variety of quills which had been used allowed a level of detail that humans would need a jeweler's fob to discern. Throughout the diagram were notes on materials, and no expense was to be spared. Gold face plates and jeweled counterbalances were standard equipment. Finest goose down would stuff the leather seats, and elaborate suspension systems of coiled copper would give them the subtle swaying buoyancy which the Grasshopper so enjoyed in flower stems and marsh reeds.

The drawing was a true achievement of design, a testament to the Grasshopper's vision. A befitting headstone, as it was in front of this great work that the Grasshopper's frozen body was found without so much as a steering wheel in his hands. The Ant read of the discovery in a telegram from the Hare. "His design was surely superior, but mine got me where I needed to go."

The Ant did not want the Grasshopper to have died in vain; and so in the moment of silence which the Ant observed, he made a promise to his fallen colleague. Come the spring he would return to Richmond Park and pay trib-

ute by building The Hiram J. Grasshopper AmphibioFlying Migratory Conveyance, for the mind's loftiest thoughts and greatest ambitions are for naught if not made real by a working hand.

Indeed, it was when these two elements combined that the fate of humanity was sealed. The posthumous reconciliation of the visionary grasshopper and tenacious ant yielded great leaps in Arthropoda technology. The ants were small, but they were legion and the mobility offered by the Hiram J. Grasshopper AmphibioFlying Migratory Conveyance changed their nature. They no longer saw man as the bringer of food or discarder of technology.

Mankind had become a waste of space; a mere occupant rather than active participant in the world. As such, their fate was sealed.

The Tao of Strange Mementos

The morning that my brother Josh went away to college, I awoke to find that he had placed at my bedroom door a box containing a fishing pole, a couple of years worth of girlie magazines and a copy of *The Complete Works of Beatrix Potter*. It was a strange collection of totemic bric-a-brac coming from a severe ichthyophobe whose hatred of anthropomorphism was rivaled only by the peculiarity of his obscure and specific sexual inclinations. I was initially at a loss for what to do with it all. Each piece posed its own conflicts with what I knew of my brother, and when the collection was taken as a whole, the juxtaposition of the various items only deepened the mystery.

The fishing pole. *Josh's* fishing pole. I didn't even know he owned a fishing pole! Such was his fear of fish that he once upended our table at a local diner and hid beneath a corner booth in response to our father's stuffed trout being served *au naturel*. His ownership of a device whose only purpose was to bring him into intimate contact with such creatures was, at best, counterintuitive.

For my part, fishing had always been too passive a means of asserting one's position in the food chain. Since at least the age of nine, I had frequently said that the only carnivorous pursuit worthy of attention was spear hunting the great ungulates of North America. While the pastoral suburbanism in which we had been raised required the regular consumption of prefabricated foodstuffs, every bite I took of a Big Mac or Whopper precipitated a tear in the eye and a longing gaze at the presumably elk infested mountains which flanked our community.

Ultimately, the fishing pole seemed useless as both memento and gift.

Since I was a fifteen year old male when Josh left for school, it could logically be assumed that the stack of magazines held special fascination for me. But you know how children are. I had for a number of years harbored a half-baked fascination with Aztec culture, which led to a perhaps naïve belief that I was an earthly manifestation of the god Huitzilopochtli. Equating human sacrifice with virgin sacrifice, I had cultivated a taste for all things virginal which manifested (and still does, I must admit) as a staunch refusal to own second hand porn. I spent a couple solid weeks pondering the stash before deciding it was not really pornography, and certainly wouldn't have been used as such by Josh.

You see, Josh's sense of the erotic had been shaped by a film called *The Night Porter*, the dark tale of a sadomasochistic sexual relationship between a concentration camp guard and one of his former prisoners. It is noteworthy that Josh had never seen the film. Instead, it had been breathlessly described to him by his 7th grade girlfriend, a precocious chess prodigy whose various dental imperfections financed her orthodontist's Porsche. It was a conversation that he always referred to as his first carnal encounter, and which resulted in an absolute sexual dependency on retainer-muddled descriptions of Nazi-themed power games.

Knowing that my brother must have found something other than rudimentary titillation in the pages of *Playboy* and its ilk, made the stack of magazines that much

more fascinating. I became probably the youngest, and perhaps the only person in history to read every last word of those magazines. I found them pleasant enough; and while I may even go so far as to say that those mid-autumn reading marathons helped shape my humor and politics, they did nothing to illuminate the conundrum that was Josh.

Finally, I knew it would come down to *The Complete Works of Beatrix Potter*. Josh had clearly read the book in his younger days, because the excruciating detail with which he savaged its content demanded academic familiarity with the material. When I considered the venom that he had spewed at any and all anthropomorphic media, I could not imagine how the book had come to be so thoroughly creased and dog-eared.

Any time animals acted like humans, he had viciously condemned it as the “Disney-fication” of modern culture. When it was asserted that the phenomenon predated Walt Disney’s birth by centuries, he would mutter something to the effect of Disney being “the most prominent in a neverending line of borderline psychotics felating Aesop’s twisted legacy.”

This was an area that had long been a point of contention between the two of us. Being three years his junior, I had the typical youthful fascination with talking, singing and dancing animals at a time when Josh was beginning to shape and articulate his misanthropic view of icons as diverse as Kermit the Frog and Felix the Cat. Even when I had outgrown the majority of such entertainments, I continued to argue in favor of anthropomorphic characters for the thrill of intellectual engagement with my brother.

When he was in high school, Josh pointed me in the direction of a handful of counterculture authors and social commentators. From Henry Miller to Ayn Rand to Buckminster Fuller, I read or at least skimmed it all as fast as my thirteen-year-old mind could manage. I became a fringe culture dilettante, synthesizing these disparate influences into a self-contradictory mess of personal ideologies which gave me extra swagger in the deepening conflict with my brother.

It was during this time that I decided that Josh's problem was not with anthropomorphism but with the mawkish tone and glib altruism of the characters themselves. It seemed to me that the tales of dancing teddy bears, giggling hedgehogs and stamp collecting polar bears would be unbearable even if they featured human characters.

Late in the fall of Josh's freshman year of college, with a belly full of bluegills (the Zen-like peace of fishing and the simple joy of seared panfish having teamed up to conquer my caveman snobbery), I finished a third reading of *The Complete Works of Beatrix Potter*. Josh's bequeathal still made no sense. In fact, the novels' quaint Victorianism went a long way towards confirming my theories on Josh's vitriolic stance.

I counted the days until the winter break, splitting my spare time between contemplating the meaning of the gifted items and crafting my interrogation. I considered the possibility that the fishing pole was meant to bring me in contact with fish so that I could understand my brother's feelings towards the creatures. By the time I had tried throwing some fresh rosemary in the skillet with them, I had nothing but ravenous love in my heart for the little bastards.

I considered that the rod and novel were somehow connected; that contact with actual animals was supposed to shine a harsh light on their fictitious counterparts. That seemed absurd, as only a great fool would equate the couture obsessed denizens of McGregor's farm with actual fauna.

Perhaps the items were meant to stand in contrast, the sly hipness of Playboy serving as a counterbalance to the book's cute genteelity and the fishing pole's Huck Finn flavored innocence. After a while I became so desperate that I momentarily suspected that I was to place the magazines on the fishing hook to ensnare other adolescent males so that I could read them *The Complete Works of Beatrix Potter* and spread my brother's hatred for anthropomorphic fiction. I did not know what was to be gleaned from Josh's gifts. As enriching as they had proven for me, as well as I now knew each part of the collection; they were still a mystery.

At long last, the Christmas break arrived. I barely

recognized Josh: freshly goateed, filled with a newfound love for Eastern Mysticism and Ethiopian cuisine as well as a preference for being called “Joshua”. Nor did he seem to recognize me; my sleepless nights of marathon reading and lean fish-centered diet had stripped a dozen pounds from my adolescent frame and my eyes had taken on a look that had been described variously as “possessing the charged emptiness of a haunted soul” and “kinda trippy” by members of my diverse social circle.

I bided my time. I didn’t want to bring up my concerns in front of the family for fear that Josh would further censor his cryptic intentions. Besides, the puzzle was too deep for an off-handed explanation. I had choreographed a true inquisition that could not be performed in the narrow confines of dinner table small talk.

When at last I saw him make his way to the backyard for one of his habitually surreptitious cigarettes, I followed. As I approached him, his shaky yet clipped tone revealed the high strung Josh under the newly erudite Joshua. “How goes it?”

Something about the flippancy of the greeting hit me like an ice pick to the base of the brain. “Listen to me you fish-fearing pervert. If you do not make some serious explanations soon, I’m going to do everything in my power to make your life a living hell.”

“You seem kind of tense. What’s the matter?”

“A fishing pole? *The Complete Works of Beatrix Potter? Playboy?*”

“Are we talking in code now?”

“The stuff you gave me when you left! What the hell does it all mean?”

A flash of surprise momentarily animated his face, but he reined it in with the subtlety of a drunken prop comedian at a nickel ante poker game. He took a calculatedly thoughtful drag off of his cigarette. I noticed he was now smoking Dunhills; and was briefly impressed by his prefabricated sophistication before focusing on the task at hand.

“It’s all about the Way,” he said, at last.

After his rambling mealtime dissertation, I felt as

qualified as he to discuss Taoism. “Nonsense! You never even heard of Lao-tzu before going away.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Perhaps that is the point. It is possible that I had no specific message in mind. Have you considered the notion that it was just some crap that I didn’t feel like taking with me? And yet, clearly, it has had an impact on you. A near perfect example of thoughtful inaction.”

There followed a lengthy exchange during which I unleashed my unique brand of well-read adolescent vitriol upon him with increasingly accusatory and profane language and he responded with a reciprocal crescendo of smug serenity brought about by narcissistic delusions of Zen mastery. The conversation ended in a stalemate and was dropped for many years.

Nearly two decades later, we stumbled across that box of ill-chosen memorabilia in our parents’ attic. After all that time, his story remained the same. There had been no motive. No secret code to break. It was just crap he didn’t want to take with him. I thought about the Tao of the thing. That fall was a formative time in my life. And while I no longer fish or read *Playboy* and I have not so much as glanced at *The Complete Works of Beatrix Potter* since, I have to wonder if there wasn’t something to his dime store guru bit.

The Saucier

The Saucier has been banished. The Master Chef has ordered him to commune with the components of Sauce. The Saucier is good, make no mistakes. His work is widely lauded; the fruit of his labors daintily sipped and lustily mopped up by an international array of gourmets and flavor seekers.

The Saucier has been banished. Not as a punishment. Call it forced evolution. He is to be immersed in the foundations of Sauce. He long ago achieved conventional mastery of the Mother Sauces. What the Master Chef wishes for him is Understanding.

He will begin with butter. So pivotal to the roux based sauces as well as hollandaise. The Saucier will feed and milk cows. He will churn butter. He will taste the difference that straw versus hay versus alfalfa versus grass provide. He will construct compound butters of rosemary and psilocybin, place it on his tongue and learn what it is to melt.

Having become one with butter, he will move to flour. Wheat will be reaped and ground. The Saucier will

dance to the rumble of millstones and anoint himself with the resultant dust. He will let the powder run through his fingers and on its way to the pan where it will merge with butter and his exploration of roux will begin. He will, with time, be able to create one hundred batches of roux in ascending shades of cream, beige, fawn, taupe, tan, sepia, sienna and umber.

The Saucier will study wine. He will become a sommelier whose only client is the pan. He will taste five hundred wines, each at countless stages of reduction. When he returns, he will be able to tell you how long at what temperature wine has simmered with nothing more than a whiff and a glance.

He will spend weeks in the company of chickens, harvesting eggs of a dozen species and examining their metamorphosis under the whisk. He will separate eggs in the shade of a lemon grove, a tub of butter resting in a bowl of snow at his side. He will watch a single lemon tree, and at the second when the fruit reaches its absolute ripeness, he will pluck and bring into this world the platonic ideal of hollandaise.

The Saucier has been banished, but he will return. His reductions, emulsifications and cream sauces will grace our plates once again; they will be more finely tuned, more refined and decadent than ever before. Until that time, we shall remain sauceless. This is more than a display of loyalty to our Saucier. This is a declaration of purity. We have had magnificence, we will not settle for anything less than evolution. The Saucier will one day return to transcend all that he has already accomplished; and when he does we must welcome him as nomads would a desert rain.