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KEEP OUT -- THIS MEANS YOU! (A SKEWED ASSORTMENT
OF SHORTS IN THE MACABRE, THE HUMOROUS
AND THE FANTASTIC)

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Philip P. Wolff

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Take the highway to the end of the night . . .
Take a journey to the bright midnight . . .
Some are born to the sweet delight,
Some are born to the endless night.
End of the night.

--The Doors, Weird Scenes Inside the
Goldmine. Elektra, 1968.

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ABSTRACT

"Pulp" fiction has always thrived. From Stern's Tristram Shandy to Shelley's Frankenstein, from Melville to Mark Twain, writers traditionally bend the stiff joints of realism, though critics continually condemn them for it. Recent writers of the horror/science fiction genres, such as Bradbury, Vonnegut, and King, prove the field is as various as it is lucrative. To the dismay of contemporary critics, they enjoy a growing audience.

My collection of short stories both celebrates and contributes to this much maligned genre. The stories are a grab bag of motifs in horror, humor, and science fiction. Though the collection utilizes accepted devices of fiction, some stories prove more experimental than mainstream. The primary purpose of this collection is, and should be, to entertain. Entertainment is itself a form of art. This, in my opinion, is the foremost purpose of all literature.

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INTRODUCTION

When I began this project, about ten months ago, a friend of mine read one of my stories and remarked, with exaggerated astonishment, "They let you do this for your Master's?" I then embarked on a twenty minute treatise of why such fiction is justifiable. "Pulp" fiction, I told him, is a much maligned art form. "So is origami," he answered. I suspect there are others out there who share in my friend's sarcasm. So I feel compelled to share a few highlights from our ensuing conversation, as a sort of introduction to my collection.

To the academic's chagrin, pulp fiction has always thrived. Readers voraciously devour tales of warped villains and sea monsters. Just ask Mark Twain or Herman Melville, who were often accused of fawning to their audience. Fortunately, their readers recognized something that escaped the critics. Never mind art -- these stories entertained you. The critics sat on the porch, so to speak, but refused to join in the party. As early as 1760, with the publication of Sterne's Tristram Shandy, authors were bending the stiff joints of realism. Some fifty-eight years later, Mary Shelley single-handedly coined the modern horror tale with Frankenstein. With the advent of the Industrial Age (and more importantly, the Space Age) Wells, Clark,

Bradbury, Vonnegut, and countless others pruned the leaves of another budding genre, science fiction, to the delight of their readers.

"Science fiction," writes Eric Rabkin (in his introduction to Science Fiction: A Historical Anthology¹), "is what sells under the name of science fiction, and the needs it serves are those of its readers . . . all definitions rely on the recognition that the worlds of science fiction are, often aggressively, not our own world and yet, often quite subtly, the worlds of our inner doubts and fears." In fact, science fiction proves so elastic, and therefore so eclectic, that nothing is too taboo, no subject too sacred or lowly, to escape the genre's reach. Yet most critics dismissed this crafty storytelling as pulp.

Because the genre is so elastic, what sells under the name of science fiction is often too diverse to easily categorize. Recent, successful pulp writers Stephen King and Clive Barker prove the genre is as various as it is lucrative. These writers meld horror, science fiction, and pure realism into their own ragbag concoction. Their common ground is a graveyard: horrific, twisted tales that are uncomfortably plausible. What scares us isn't necessarily what happens so much as what could happen. A realist's notions break apart in this realm. The critic who responds, after reading one of these stories, "There are no such things as ghosts," is really trying to convince himself of the fact, though he would dismiss the whole range of such stories as "science fiction." "It's just not real," he would say. My reply might be, "But the characters act as real as any fictional

¹NY: Oxford U Press, 1983.

characters." Once the reader delves below the surface, any story becomes "real." If suspended disbelief serves to justify the incredible coincidences bombarding Hardy's Jude, why can't it justify King's haunted hotels? If we snobbishly file away such stories on the shelf of pulp, we automatically deny the plausibility of all literature. After all, is Hamlet real? Madam Bovary? Miss Emily? The truth is, everything in print is "real," or none is. In this light, there is simply no such animal as realism.

Pulp literature's value is functionally the same as with mainstream fiction. As a popular form of mass entertainment, pulp necessarily mirrors society's hopes, fears, and fashions. Science fiction has often been called a "social gauge," a label which particularly holds true for horror. In our age of statistically-translated violence, where wars are reduced to sitcoms by mass media, readers find escape in the ultimately harmless gore-fest of the horror novel. But the strongest defense for the genre lies in the best work it has to offer. Simply put, aside from ghosts, maniacs, and space men, good writing is good writing. No one would argue that Poe's work, even his most morbid, is not the product of a craftsman. As Twain suggested, it's not the story, but the telling of the story.

The horror genre (and I use the term loosely), like any genre, hold certain criteria which I've tried to honor in this collection. The first step with any fantastic tale is instilling suspended disbelief, which really is a reader's instinctive response. For example, the first line of King's "Beachworld" states: "FedShip

ASN/29 fell out of the sky and crashed."² He attacks our system of beliefs at once. We understand we're in the future, somewhere in the known universe, and we accept this knowledge. We can then move on to the characters and plot. King's favorite tools for world-building are details and specifics. The reader recreates this world in his "theatre of the mind," and it becomes as tangible as his own limbs. I've tried to emulate King's use of specifics in these stories. A place (or character) is more real with accompanying details: it's not just a highway, it's Highway 17, where the Bartlett boys were killed last October. Atmosphere is another essential ingredient in the genre's recipe. Like a character, atmosphere is only as real as a reader envisions it. King and Barker both use gruesome images and macabre metaphors to spin thick webs of suspenseful atmosphere. A final touch, in my opinion, is instilling a sense of helplessness in the reader. The vulnerable are easily frightened. Once a reader is trapped in an environment too real to deny, you must keep him squirming. Reading a horror story is a lot like riding a runaway mine car: you sit trapped while images flood past you; escape is impossible until the car comes to a stop. Many horror stories invoke archetypal fears -- mysterious noises in a new dwelling, strangers who aren't what they seem. The commonplace is always most frightening when turned on its ear. This explains why the horror genre is stocked with anticlimax and deceived expectations (a trait it borrows from the mystery genre). Ironically, horror, like humor, translates for the reader as a response to

²Skeleton Crew (NY: Signet, 1986), p. 345.

frustration, which explains horror's penchant for the humorous. The genre can be deceptively complex.

I've tried to make these stories as gruesome, as horrifyingly warped as I could muster. Some are tributes to the founders of the genre ("Man's Best Friend," for example, as the subtitle "A Poe-ish Joke" suggests, is reminiscent of Poe's preoccupation with revenge). Other stories follow traditional encounters with the supernatural. The remainder I've included simply by virtue of their oddness. The joints of realism do actually bend quite far without breaking. So hold onto your hat. And if you find yourself enjoying these stories, even a few of them, don't blame me. It's not my fault. It's all in your mind.

PROLOGUE

OK, now I want you to close your eyes and imagine this with me. Better yet, read for yourself.

You're walking down a lonely country road. Twilight approaches, and the sky turns a bruised purple. Around you, in the fading light, you hear crickets and birds, croaking and chirping at the stars. The road narrows and turns to gravel. In the glim distance, you see a sign nailed to a tree. With the last shimmer of setting sun you approach and read: KEEP OUT -- THIS MEANS YOU! Then, all is blackness.

Well, you gonna go in or not? Probably not. I wouldn't, anyway. No telling who nailed that sign there (could be anybody), but they sound serious. What might they look like, talk like, behave like? WOULD THEY BE FRIENDLY? (Could be anybody.)

And what if you didn't have a flashlight? You'd stumble along in the darkness, groping past trees and fence. What might you bump into, or brush casually by? Will you hear a low moan just as the moon breaks over the horizon? Or a stifled scream? Or a chuckle from a toothless mouth? No, it's just too risky.

And why are you out here, anyway? You've got no business here. You must live miles away. Did you walk here? Were you driving

sleepily toward home when your car broke down? Your wife told you to fill the tank this morning, but you were busy with other matters?

Look, it's not getting any lighter out. Already you can't even see the sign in front of you. But you've come down that road for miles and haven't seen a soul. Perhaps there's a lit window, help waiting up the road. A warm fireplace, a friendly grin. (Could be anybody.)

Minutes pass (or is it hours?). At least you seem safe here. Plenty of time to kill (sorry, let me rephrase that). You sit down on the road, and your foot brushes something. Wide-eyed, you grope along with your hands. You rise with something (feels like a notebook). You fumble in your pockets for a light, find one last match, strike it, and read:

"OK, now I want you to close your eyes and imagine this with me. . . ." Here, I'll even give you a flashlight to read by.

Wake Me When It's Over

As Jake Able came to, he felt an icy chill creeping down his forearms. A dull ache nestled behind his eyes. Nublood, he thought. He clenched his fists in an effort to speed up the process. They told him that reanimation might be painful. "Cold, you know," one assured him, "like that feeling in your temples when you eat ice cream on a hot day." Cold.

The scientists had explained reanimation during training: "Because tissues cannot remain fresh without oxygen, blood must be replaced before suspension. Through incisions in the jugular, basilic, and femoral veins--"

While the scientist poked at anatomy charts, Able glanced around the room. Here and there, scattered throughout the class, were faced contorted in horror and disgust. The scientist paused to clean his thick, wire glasses, returned them to his nose, and continued as if reading from a book:

"The most successful replacement for blood to date is a synthetic plasma-cell mixture known as Nublood. Unique is its ability to make skin permeable to oxygen when enclosed in low temperatures of carbon dioxide."

Cryogenics, thought Able. The Big Freeze. Here were these people, so timid at the idea of transfusions. Didn't they realize the injections were nothing compared to the frozen sleep itself. He knew the sleep was dreamless, all neurons frozen solid. Dreams never frightened him anyway. But still, to wake from a sleep of a thousand -- a thousand times a thousand -- years, as if only moments ago you pulled the covers up to your neck, your head sinking lightly into a pillow. . . .

Able clenched his fists tighter, his blood beginning to warm as it slowly replaced synthetic fluid. His arms and legs tingled as neurons sparked awake within his body. With great effort, Able opened his eyes: a sky of white, his pupils flooded with the florescent chamber's glow. "Vision will come slowly," they had told him. "Complete muscular coordination in about six hours." He breathed with the rhythmic ebb of his clouded synapses; thoughts poured like liquid, hovered like vapor.

"What's your calling?"

Throughout the month-long orientation training, the candidates had made it habit, when catching one another by the water fountain, or in a corridor, or in the seclusion of a dorm, to ask each other that same burning question. Able felt they asked one another not from friendly curiosity, but because they themselves didn't have a satisfactory answer.

He had been about to enter his programming class when a hand grabbed his shoulder. He wheeled around to meet the grinning, unshaven

face of Robert Carlyle. Another volunteer candidate, Carlyle kept to himself mostly. He spoke to few others, and then only to initiate an argument.

"So what is it with you?" he offered through a toothy, yellow grin.

"What's what?" Able knew exactly what Carlyle meant, but he feigned ignorance to make conversation more difficult. With Carlyle, the less talk the better.

"Aw, you know," Carlyle coaxed. "Why go the freeze, leave good old terra firma? What is it you say to each other -- 'what's your calling'?" He chewed the phrase as though the taste were bitter.

Able thought a moment. He had heard that question hundreds of times it seemed. He shrugged. "The solitude, I guess." It was as good an answer as any, short and simple.

A gust of laughter escaped through Carlyle's yellow teeth. "Plenty of that where we're going."

"You're volunteering for the comradery, I suppose." Able regretted his words instantly. He could hear the lecture in his computer class beginning.

"You're still a funny guy," Carlyle grinned, nudging Able's arm. "Now don't be late to your class."

Able ignored the obvious condescension. "What about you?"

"Me? Oh, you mean 'my calling'? Well, I'm going to be the first man to touch the stars." He groped at the air before him, grinning absently.

"Well, one of the first, anyway."

Carlyle blinked sharply, as if something had flown in front of his face. He searched Able's eyes with a blank stare, and finding nothing there, he turned away and walked down the corridor. . . .

The computer at Able's side whirred furiously, and for a moment he saw bees buzzing in the blazing sky of his half-opened lids. The old spinal lube, he whispered, though his lips didn't move. The bees entered his eyes, then his head, fluttering and buzzing.

The audience roared. Cameras clicked. The ten candidates stood side by side to the left of the stage. Erect and motionless in identical white overalls, they resembled dolls more than men. Able kept his eyes fixed firmly on the plastic floor. The General President stood center stage, declaring in flowing tones:

"As you all well know, our great nation is severely lacking in technological superiority. Our Northern Border weakens as we speak. And so our flag of freedom shall take to the skies. This great quest shall lift our spirits and our nation to higher spiritual planes. Friends, we shall be remembered forever." Again thunderous applause and the scattered cracks of flashbulbs.

"These men leave their lives behind them. Their friends, loved ones, country, indeed, their planet. All they are familiar with on earth will be changed by the time they return, and we all will be long gone. But to that future generation they shall impart great wonders: Homeric tales of strange, ancient worlds on the outskirts of the universe; glowing stars basking their planets in shadows of indigo,

crimson, and scarlet; races alien and asymmetrical, massive and microscopic . . . YOU will be Odysseus recounting to his children's children the very mysteries of man and universe. How we all envy you. . . ."

"What ya waiting for, applause?"

Able opened his eyes, a headache rolling in his skull. His vision was still blurred, but much improved. "Carlyle?"

"You've been out of it nearly seventeen hours. I thought maybe the computer got you, too."

"What? Are we there?" Able pulled himself up and sat, legs dangling over the edge of his open sarcophagus.

"I've been waiting for you to tell me that."

"The others?"

Carlyle shook his head. "Didn't make it. Something in the computer malfunctioned."

Able sprang to his feet. "Malfunctioned?" The room seemed to shift with his weight. He felt faint.

"Take it easy, Able. You're not thinking straight."

"Funny how the programmer should sleep through it all."

"Isn't that the way?" Carlyle grinned nervously.

"Funny how you should happen to survive."

"And you."

A sudden surge of anxiety, a feeling of being late for something he just couldn't put his finger on, swept through Able. He ran his fingers through his oily hair.

"Look at them, Able. Will you? Just look at them." Carlyle's voice dissolved. He seemed haggard, exhausted.

Able peered through the window of a sarcophagus. The body inside was quite dead. Somehow the computer had attempted to wake the unlucky man by draining his Nublood. No real blood was then administered. He lay in a puddle of the orange jelly-fluid, his white overalls slowly soaking up the spill over the centuries. His face and forearms were streaked bluish gray, tale-tell signs of decomposition blotched his lips and chin.

Able checked each casket. All dead, all bathing blue in their drained Nublood.

"My God," he said after a long silence.

"A tragedy." Carlyle leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms.

In the following hours it took Able to examine circuits, he learned only one thing for certain: the computer had not malfunctioned. It had followed its program flawlessly. The ship's scanners had surveyed the space outside, read the appropriate data, and signaled for Nublood to begin drainage. Curiously, Able could find no reason why blood had not been administered.

Carlyle, meanwhile, examined the reanimation chamber for other clues. As Able entered the room, Carlyle sat in a chair by the flashing console, his back to the door.

"Find anything?"

Carlyle sat motionless. "Not really, you?"

"Not yet."

"No? Nothing? Must've skipped too many programming classes."

Able made no reply.

"You know what my training is, Able."

"Biomed, isn't it?" He vaguely remembered once passing Carlyle in the white corridors of the hospital sector.

"You do believe in fate, don't you?"

"Stand up, Carlyle."

Carlyle sat and rocked, soaking in the tension with delight.

"You haven't changed much, Able. Always impatient. -- Well, I believe in fate. Even when we were kids, Able, I knew there was a plan for me. I could read my destiny in the stars."

"Mother always said you'd get yourself killed."

Carlyle laughed. "She did at that, hmm. I suppose you share her sense of humor. You favor her. What but fate, Able? The two of us here now, together."

"And probably the longest conversation we've ever had together. You could face me, at least."

"We never were big on brotherly love, were we?"

"Why spoil a good thing?"

"But we're not like the others were, are we? We're strong."

"That's your logic, is it? The weak must perish so the strong survive."

"Isn't that the whole point of this mission? I simply helped things along. Too many cooks spoil the soup, so they say."

"Stand up, Carlyle."

"Care for some soup?"

"I said stand up!"

"You want me up? I'll stand up." Carlyle rose and turned. In his right hand he held a single-burst laser, pointed toward Able's chest. "Would you like to sit?"

"It was you. Biomedical has computer access."

Carlyle flashed a yellow grin and motioned Able to sit in the chair he had previously occupied. "I didn't plan for this to happen, but I predicted your paranoia. I only wanted to be the first awake, that's all. I'm not the best programmer."

Able sat and cross his legs. "I'll say."

"It should have worked. I programmed the computer to begin my blood transfusions early, twenty four hours before engines are stopped."

"You're a maniac, Carlyle."

"You're missing the point really. Almost twenty-four hours ago we were reanimated. This journey is about to unfold! Don't mourn what's passed. Our ship will anchor -- I'll see. The screens will light up -- I'll see. We'll see, Able. The distant stars, the lonely stars, the lovely stars . . ." Carlyle seemed hypnotized.

"You're mad."

"Three thousand years I've been waiting for this moment. I'm not mad, I'm impatient."

"Three thousand years?"

"That's what the readouts say." He waved his laser toward the panel of lights beside Able.

Able read the console. He began to laugh, softly at first, then building into a bellow.

"What is it?"

Able bellowed uncontrollably, a tear streaming down his cheek.

"Damn you, tell me!"

"Three thousand years."

"I'll kill you, Able. I swear."

The ship groaned. It gave a sudden lurch, as though the hull would split. Carlyle, unprepared, pulled the trigger of his laser.

Missing Able's head by inches, the blue blast struck the console in a shower of sparks and smoke. Carlyle dropped his weapon and sank to the floor, spent.

The ship became silent. Great screens covering the chamber's walls flickered and glowed, awaiting transmissions.

Able rose, brushed himself off, cleared his throat. "Is this what you've been waiting to see for so long? Is this your proud moment?"

The screens roared. Able continued, his voice rising slightly:

"We're all losers, you know. Derelicts, outcasts, outdated cogs in society's machine. Nothing to lose, right? Volunteers. But of course you're the noble one. Touch the stars, will you? Caress the heavens?"

Suddenly the roaring static ceased. The screens became black.

"Where -- what's happening?" Carlyle sat, his glazed eyes riveted to the black screens.

"You say you set your transfusions twenty four hours before engines are stopped?"

Carlyle nodded weakly. "My laser damaged the screens."

"No, not your laser. Your program. Engines should shut down directly after Nublood is drained. Engine shutdown initiates blood transfusions. But your program contradicts this schedule."

"The screens -- they're black."

"The time for reanimation came and left. The engines could not shut down. Blood could not be transfused."

"You're lying," Carlyle spat. "We're alive, aren't we?"

"I suspect it's sheer chance we're alive. Perhaps our Nublood programs were stored elsewhere by the powers-that-be. Consider yourself lucky."

"We've been traveling three thousand years. The scanners decayed."

"I pity you, Carlyle. That console readout measured the elapsed time between launch and the drainage of the crew's Nublood. But our engines never stopped, don't you see? Only moments ago our fuel ran dry. According to your own program, we were reanimated twenty four hours before the engines had to shut down."

"The stars!"

"There are no stars here. Only us, you and me. And we've no power to brake now. We'll coast indefinitely. Happy birthday, brother. We're millions times millions of years old."

"No."

"And we've outlived your precious stars."

Able had no choice, really. He certainly couldn't have stopped Carlyle by force. Nor would he if he had the strength. He watched the white glow of Carlyle's suit fading in the corner of the black screen. Carlyle would be happy, however closer to those stars that haunted him, wading in the black void, eyes wide with wonder, until his oxygen gave out. He had gotten there first, after all. Able closed his eyes and pictured Carlyle groping for the invisible stars. And waited for the Nublood. Painless, he thought. At least not suicide. Some semblance of valor from the last man alive. Drowsiness stole in. Higher spiritual planes, his mission after all.

Nor would his sleep, wide and deep as the lonely blackness around him, be troubled. Sleep, Able thought; neither happy nor sad, lonely nor anxious; placid beneath the eternal eye of God.

Touring The Empty Gardens

"Of course, this wing of the institute is entirely new," Dr. Morgan said as we mounted the stairs. "We're very proud of it." Our footsteps echoed along the metal corridor.

"Oh, yes," Dr. Shapiro nodded. "Only one of its kind in the Northwest."

"I'm sure you must keep tight security here," I offered, though my statement seemed more a question as it left my lips. Dr. Shapiro glanced at Dr. Morgan, then at me.

"Quite," he said briefly.

We rose to the top of the stairs. Dr. Morgan pulled a magnetic card from his smock and fed it into a device at the iron door. The door slid open with an electronic hum. "Shall we?" he asked, returning the card to his pocket. "This is the only exit. Opens from this side only. A precautionary measure."

"I understand completely," I said. "If someone were to get through --"

"Escape is quite impossible here. But then, why on earth would a patient retreat from therapy?"

"Because he's crazy." I meant this as a joke, though neither Dr. Shapiro nor Dr. Morgan laughed. I was getting the feeling these doctors frowned upon newcomers. And I could sense they viewed me with guarded suspicion at best.

"Besides," Dr. Morgan offered, "If any patient were to get this far, there would still be the lift to contend with."

Dr. Shapiro beamed. "Precisely the logic behind our location."

We walked on silently for a while. I was slowly adjusting myself to my new surroundings. The florescent light glistened in the sterile whiteness of the corridor. It seemed brighter even than the sun at the surface, some two miles above us. I had been here only an hour, and already the sun seemed only a memory to me.

Dr. Shapiro motioned toward an LED sign marked QUADRANT 4. "As you can probably guess, uh. . . ."

"Dr. Davis," I smiled at him. "I'm not so good with names, either."

"Yes, so. As you can probably guess, Dr. Davis, this quadrant houses the chronic neuroses, the milder schizophrenics. We believe that the key to normalcy is trust."

"Trust is our innovation," added Dr. Morgan. "You noticed the plexiglass walls of this ward, I'm sure."

"Yes, I was admiring them."

"Transparent chamber walls. Makes life here less of a prison. Patients see doctors and staff walking by. They are encouraged to imitate our behavior. Sane behavior."

"Role modeling?"

"Exactly, Dr. Davis." Dr. Shapiro seemed almost pleased with my response. "Shall we have a look around?" He led us slowly down the corridor, pausing occasionally to comment on various patients as the mood struck him. "Let's see, number twenty-three. Oh, yes, Suzy. See her there?"

We peered through plexiglass at an older woman with fiery red hair. She sat at the foot of her bed, in her grey hospital gown, staring intently at her bare feet. Dr. Shapiro forced a sad smile. "She's been this way since she arrived. We feed her intravenously twice daily. Poor thing."

"Catatonic?" I asked.

"Severely."

I felt for her, the woman. I'd seen many such cases. I myself sometimes needed to retreat, to wipe away the outside world with a wave of my hand. We stood there silently a moment. Dr. Morgan looked at his watch and cleared his throat. "Shall we continue?"

"Yes," Dr. Shapiro agreed. "We have much ground to cover." He was a short, stocky man. A bead of sweat had gathered over his brow from the exertion of walking. "Shall we?"

We passed several quarters, and I glanced into the rooms from time to time. Some were asleep, docile and harmless. They seemed as normal as me, and I wondered if maybe their dreams were as insane as their waking lives. Perhaps we are all insane while we sleep. Dr. Morgan just have read my thoughts, for he touched my arm and said quietly,

"Content, aren't they?" We passed others, some awake, pacing their room, wide-eyed, some sitting on their beds, rapt in conversation with themselves, and the majority, asleep and oblivious.

Dr. Shapiro wiped his brow. "As I was saying, we do extend the privilege of trust to those who deserve it. But there are some too far gone. One can't weed a garden too late. The flowers wither and die. Why weed an empty garden?"

"Quadrant five," Dr. Morgan said solemnly. He pulled a yellow entry card from his smock and fed it into a door before us. "Prepare yourself." The door hummed open, and we entered another corridor, the walls and windows tinted yellow. "Welcome to the empty gardens," he sighed.

"These inmates are --"

"We prefer the term 'patients.'" Dr. Morgan glanced nervously at his colleague. Perhaps in time they would warm to me and allow my contribution.

"Patients, of course," I corrected myself. "These patients are beyond hope?"

"Terminal," Dr. Shapiro answered. "Shall we have a look around?"

"This is Bob," said Dr. Morgan suddenly before a plexiglass window. I looked in. The patient was in his early fifties, by my approximation. He stood at the room's center, his arms outstretched to hold an invisible dancing partner. Abruptly he began to waltz about the room in small circles. Dr. Morgan sighed. "How he loves the waltz. He hums it when he's not dancing." Bob smiled and bowed to his

invisible partner, then offered his arms and began the waltz again. Dr. Shapiro shook his head.

"He seems happy, at least," I said.

"At least," Dr. Shapiro agreed. We walked on a bit, pausing momentarily while Dr. Morgan presented the nursing station. "This is Betty," he said, "our head day nurse. Betty this is --"

"Dr. Davis," I smiled, extending my hand. She shook it hesitantly. Dr. Shapiro patted her shoulder.

"We were just about to visit Nancy. How is she?" The nurse shook her head sadly. "Well, I'll come have a look at her chart in a moment."

"Nancy?" I asked. We came to the end of the corridor and paused before another window. In this room was a young girl, no more than twenty, lipstick smeared haphazardly over her lips. She knelt there on the floor before a wall, sweeping her arms up and down as though she held a scrub brush in her hands. She never once actually touched the wall, but as we observed her working there, she slowly made her way along, pleased with her business. She whistled happily. As many times as I'd seen such cases, I was always filled with morbid wonder: what could it be like to see through her eyes?

"Well, Dr. Morgan said finally. "I suppose we've seen all there is to see."

"You've both been very kind," I said. "An interesting tour. When can I begin my duties?" Dr. Morgan glanced at Dr. Shapiro and then fixed his eyes on me.

"Oh, right away," he said.

"Good." I was anxious to begin. This would be a challenging experience for me. The three of us entered a room. It was unoccupied. The bed was clean and freshly made, the covers crisp.

"Here we are, Dr. Davis," said Dr. Morgan, touching my arm. "You can be anything you like here."

"Proceeding nicely," said Dr. Shapiro. They left the room and closed the door behind them.

I watched through the plexiglass as they disappeared toward the nurses' station. Directly across from me, in the opposite room, I saw Nancy intently scrubbing away. Though I couldn't hear her, I could swear she was laughing. I looked around my room. The walls here could use a bit of cleaning as well. I lifted my brush from the bucket and scrubbed at the stains. The dirt came off easily. Yes, things were looking much nicer. I imagined I should be through with this wall by lunch.

Main Dining Room:
a love poem

True is what is. That is to say, what is, is true. This is.
This is a true story. No detail has been changed. This never
happened.

I wait. I am waiting. I am a waiter, waiting for no one on
everyone. Nothing new, a profession. Not a new job, but my new job.

Dinner training is training on dinner. Waiting to train, training
to wait: dinner training. I am a roaming goldfish bowl, swimming the
white current; my arms are outstretched oars; the river banks are
swaying hands; open palms, leaves; plates, flowers; wine glass stems,
stretched ivy.

The tallest building downtown is a rectangular glass tree, a
frozen waterfall, with branches spanning 26 stories above the river
below. The river is tarnished silver, is an unwashed spoon, that
wanders beneath the shadow of the tallest building downtown . . .

Water on the 26th story is thick as paste; the current is heavy.
In a restaurant, here in the club, it's coming quickly and leaving
slowly. The 26th story is paste. A full two-thirds of the walls are
windows. Doors are where there are no walls. Facing the dining room,

the Main Dining Room, head on, you can see the shoulders of the whole city.

As darkness rolls in from the left, the wind blows our tree like a chime. The sky is whirling from the left. Thick clouds are rolling downhill. Towards us. All. Those of us who are eating and those of us who are feeding. All.

There is an art to pouring water while swimming in it. Sometimes, when I was only six, I stand at the edge of the diving board and look deep into the cool of the deep end. The crisp blue lanes, the painted submerged paths, slope a stiff downward as they pass eight feet below me. A raindrop in a puddle, even today I used to shave at the surface of the water and forget. Forget how to swim.

Today I remember clearly. Remember how to swim. Today is so clear that I remember it as if today were only yesterday. There is an art.

There is an art to listening to philosophy, to someone else's philosophy:

"You do this -- like so."

"I see."

"Not like this, but -- like so."

"Like with lunch?"

"Just the same -- like so:

There is an art to cultivating faces for pay. But you learn by example -- like so. By throwing the same 25 words together until their

meanings crumble -- like so. By laughing at everything or nothing. Or at one's own wit, after every sentence -- like so.

I am wearing a name tag with the word CLARK etched in it. My name is not Clark. We wear these name tags so everyone will know who we are. What is, is true.

"Some more tea, Clark."

"And some lemon."

"I need another fork."

"This doesn't look like what I ordered."

"My coffee, Clark."

"Make that two."

When you face the dining room, the Main Dining Room, the closest building walking by is the bank. It blinks a poem to us:

FANB
80°
9:01

But as you walk across the dining room floor, there's one spot where you can't see the bank building. A pillar gets in the way, always stands center window, always customer to the poem.

I'm at the far left of the room now, dizzy from the noise. Is a band playing? A knife clicks on a china snare. A cocktail glass strikes a chord on linen; jacket cuffs, piano strings struck against starched ties. And the refrain:

"I need some more water."

"Some coffee, Clark." (Like so.)

The rolling clouds, thick black wool, are rolling downhill, are rolling down, are rolling, are here, and we are under water. The sky is airing her laundry of gray linen sheets, draping them over the 26th story and down. The sheets roar in the wind, roar like engines, drowning us all. Drowning out the band. All.

Downtown, growing up from the riverbank, there is a large glass tree, a frozen waterfall, with a restaurant in its boughs. No green now, no icy blue, only gray, only gray linen, only.

I am standing in the center of the dining room, the Main Dining Room, all alone. No one is there but me. Suddenly: me, and the rain outside. On the 26th floor, I am all alone, and I am completely underwater. I am in a goldfish bowl. . . .

The candles on the tables flicker and cast shadows. The tablecloths are pristine specters, held down by glistening silver and crystal. There is no sound. There is no sound underwater. Only my breathing.

Before me, just more than arm's length away, I now see my girlfriend or my wife. She stands before me, wearing a white cotton dress that flows like liquid above her calves. Her skin is smooth and tanned, her glowing hair lays about her shoulders. And the dress, her dress, drapes from her smooth dark shoulders, glowing with warmth. I can feel the warmth surrounding me like perfume. Like swimming in a warm pool.

She lifts her smooth, soft arms toward me, palms outstretched, offering. In her hand lies a peach, or an apple, or an apricot. It is ripe and looks delicious.

I reach out to take her gift.

FANB

The peach, or apple, or apricot, hovers in space before me.

80°

A fraction of a second, less, it hovers.

9:02

It drops to the carpet and shatters like glass. I am standing in the middle of the Main Dining Room surrounded by hungry people, the band plays in full swing. A thousand forks click against emptying plates. At my feet lies a single wine glass, its goblet shattered, its stem angled upward towards me.

But the plates are emptying before my eyes. They must be filled. They must be filled by me. I sweep the crystals of glass beneath a table with my foot. Like so.

Why Girls Give You Cooties

I think I'm reasonably smart for somebody in the fifth grade. I know not to say certain words whenever Miss Copenhagen, the witch, our substitute teacher who bangs your elbows on the desk when you're not paying attention, is teaching class. I know who to play with at recess. And I know that girls give you cooties. But I wasn't always so smart.

It was Friday, and everybody couldn't wait for the bell to ring so we could all escape. I could tell right off this wasn't just any Friday, because you-know-who (the witch) was teaching class today.

"What's nine times twelve?" she kept shouting. "Anybody?"

Danny leaned over to me and whispered, "Not enough to buy you a new broomstick." I laughed.

"Mr. Craft!" Oh-oh. I was in for it. "Why don't you share your joke with the rest of the class?"

"Uhh . . ."

"Hmm. Come sit up here by my desk. I'm lonely."

"I bet she is," Danny whispered. I shot him an angry look. He stuck his tongue out at me. But there was plenty of time to get things straight with him at recess.

So I had to walk up in front of the whole class and sit in the vacant chair by her desk. She didn't even notice. She was already shouting again. "What's ten times twelve? Anybody?"

Time itself yawned. From where I sat now, there was a good view of everyone else falling asleep. Paul was picking his nose, staring at the clock. Chuck was chewing on a crayon. In the corner was a new girl. She was staring at me! I looked away fast and pretended to write in my workbook. I felt strange. Her stare felt good, for some reason. I looked up from my book toward the new girl again. She smiled at me. "I think I'm going to pass out," I said to myself, as I pretended to multiply numbers in that tan math book that was written just to make me look stupid.

The bell rang. It always sounded like someone went by with a hammer and clobbered it a good one. Either way, that bell always gets the point across. Everyone poured out of the classroom for recess. I was last out, being furthest from the door, having had to sit there like Miss Copenhagen's co-pilot.

The new girl walked past me and dropped a note on my desk. My heart fluttered. The note said:

I'M FAYE. WILL YOU BE MY BOYFRIEND?
CHECK YES OR NO. YES NO

Well, she was really pretty so I checked yes and handed it back to her. She smiled and ran off down the hall.

Outside, everybody was already playing. Danny and Ricky and them were by the jungle gym. Ricky hung upside-down from his knees.

"Hello, Scot," he chuckled, his hair swaying as he swished back and forth. I didn't like his tone of voice.

"Hey, Ricky," I said. "That looks really stupid, you know?"

But he didn't let me finish my sentence. "Scot's got a girlfriend!" Oh-oh. This meant real trouble. Danny joined in the chant. Chuck and Paul heard it and came over. "Scot's got a girlfriend," they all sang.

"Aw, shut up." They kept on. I ran away, back toward school, feeling really stupid. Behind me now their chant echoed on the playground as more and more people joined in.

I passed Faye as I entered the hallway. "Hi," she said.

"Oh, get away from me!" I ran down the hall and back into the classroom. I felt so stupid, I just sat there in the classroom until recess was over.

Eventually everyone came wandering in. Miss Copenhagen marched in holding a ruler like she was a queen or something. This was one great day. "Mr. Craft," she announced, "Why don't you come join us again by our desk?" A person can't take much more of this. I walked up again through the classroom towards her desk. Ricky and Danny were smiling at me and blowing me kisses.

I sat down by the witch. Things were moving slowly again, but at least I was safe. Then I looked up and saw Faye's face. She had been crying. I wanted to say something to her, but I was nowhere near enough to pass her a note. Besides, if I got caught again, I'd surely spend the rest of the day in the cloakroom.

The bell hammered again after an eternity, and everybody got up to leave. I started walking towards Faye's desk.

"You coming, lover-boy?" It was Danny.

I looked at Faye. She didn't understand why I was walking towards her. Then I stopped; I don't know why. "Yeah, let's go," I said, and Danny and I walked out of the room.

But you want to know a secret? I don't believe girls give you cooties, really.

"Sarge"

I found the walkie-talkie in my parent's closet. I was messing around, looking through my dad's neat shirts, when I saw it laying there on the floor by his shoes. What a find! Boy would Glen be jealous when he saw it. "Neato," he'd say. "Let's play army."

So I picked it up. It wasn't square like the regular ones. It was sort of round at the top and square at the bottom. A real army walkie-talkie. I just had to test it out.

I held it up and pulled the antenna all the way out. Then I switched it on and pressed the talk button. "Hello! Hello! Is anybody there?" There was no answer. "Can you put a copy on that?" I didn't know what the words meant, but it sounded good and military.

Suddenly a voice crackled, "May day! May day! Send aid! Do you copy? Send aid!"

Holy smokes! This thing was talking to me.

I pushed the talk button. "What's your position, over?" Boy, it was just like being in a real war.

"--May day! Send aid!" the voice repeated.

Then my mom walked into the room. "Who are you talking to, honey?"

I showed her my new possession. "I'm talking to Sarge on this walkie-talkie I found."

"Oh, that's your father's. I don't suppose he'd mind you playing with it."

"Sure he won't."

"Now go get washed up for dinner, Scotty."

"OK."

"And tell Sarge you'll talk with him later." She smiled, patted me on the head, and walked out of the room. I pushed the antenna down and switched off the walkie-talkie. But I didn't much feel like eating.

The next day was Saturday, so the second I woke up, I grabbed my walkie-talkie and headed next door to Glen's. We're practically the same age. He was ten, and I was about to turn eleven the next day. Funny, I didn't feel any older.

I banged on his screen door, and he came out onto the porch.

"Take a look at what I found." I held out my walkie-talkie.

"Neato," he said. "Let me see it!"

"Look with your eyes, not with your hands."

"Man, I wish I had one of those."

"We can play army if you want."

"Sure," said Glen. "Can I talk on it, too?"

"Sure. Some."

So we got our machine guns, filled our canteens with water, and went hiking in the woods nearby. Soon we reached our headquarters -- a small clearing with a roof of vines we made -- and sat down.

"We should probably call Sarge and find out our mission impossible."

"Good idea! Can we really talk to people on that thing?"

"Sure," I told him. "I talked to Sarge last night. He told me to send aid."

"Wow. Maybe we should do it."

"That's why we need to call him now. To see if he still needs aid."

So I held out the walkie-talkie and pulled the antenna all the way out -- careful to do things the same way -- and I pressed the talk button.

"Sarge, can you copy, over? That's soldier talk."

"What if he doesn't answer?"

"Shh. Sarge, can you put a copy on me?"

"--Mayday! Mayday!"

"Hey! It's Sarge! Listen."

Glen cocked his head. "I don't hear anything."

"You don't hear that voice going 'Mayday! Mayday!'"

Glen shrugged. "Aw, you're just making this up."

"No I'm not. Listen."

"--Mayday! Abort barracks! 21 hundred hours! Incoming!"

"Hear that?"

"I didn't hear anything," Glen shrugged. "What'd he say?"

"He said to abort barracks 21 hundred hours incoming. I wonder what that means?"

"Maybe it means we should get out of here," said Glen.

"No, this is HQ, not the barracks. We're safe here."

"Oh, ok. What's 21 hours mean?"

Twenty-one hundred hours. My dad told me once. It's like military time. Let's see . . . that would be . . . eight, no, nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock tonight?"

"I guess so. Wait a minute! Barracks is home! There's incoming tonight at nine!"

"Is that bad?"

"It's really bad. Just how am I supposed to get my parents out of the house tonight. They'd never believe the truth."

"I know," Glen said. "Trick 'em."

"Yeah, but how?"

"Oh. Well . . . you could pretend to break your arm around eight or so. They'd take you to the hospital, and you'd keep them there 'til nine or ten."

"Yeah, but my arm wouldn't look broken. They could tell I was faking. And even if they did take me to the hospital, the doctor would know nothing was wrong with me."

"Well, I could break it for you."

"Nah."

"Hey, I know," Glen said slowly. "Get 'em to take you for some ice cream. It's your birthday tomorrow, isn't it? They'd do it. You could make 'em do it."

"Yeah, I could, couldn't I?"

So I turned off the walkie-talkie, and we walked back through the woods without saying another word.

We had just finished eating. Mom was washing dishes at the sink. Dad was reading the paper. I had been practicing to myself all day. I looked at the clock by the stove: eight-ten. Ok, I told myself, it's time. I decided to start with mom.

"Hey, mom?"

"Yes?"

"Can we go get some ice cream?"

"Not now. I'm busy."

"Aw mom, c'mon. You can get some too."

She laughed. "Maybe when I'm done."

The minutes ticked by, and she kept on washing. I looked at the clock: eight-thirty already. Time was running out!

"Mom, are you ready yet?"

"Almost."

"You said that an hour ago!"

"Oh, has it been that long?"

"I wanna get some ice cream! I wanna get some ice cream!" If only they knew I was doing this for their own good. "Ice cream! Ice cream!" I gave it all I had.

"Sam, help me out here."

My dad put down his paper and walked over to mom. "Hey, I have an idea," he said. "Let's go get some ice cream." My mom laughed.

"Great idea," she said, turning off the water.

It was good to see I hadn't lost my touch.

"Where to?" asked my dad as he locked the front door behind us.

I ate my ice cream slow to take up as much time as I could. Mom thought I wasn't well and threatened to take me home.

"No, I'm fine," I told her, eating faster.

Finally when we'd stayed there for what seemed like an hour, I took my last bite. "Ready whenever you are," I said.

On the way home, a fire engine passed us, and my dad said there must be a fire nearby.

"I hope it's not one of our neighbors," my mom said.

By the time we reached our block we could see where the smoke was coming from.

"Oh my God," said dad, as we pulled onto our street. "It's our house!"

We couldn't get too close because of the fire engines, so my dad parked down the street. Smoke was everywhere. Our house was all flame. We just stood there watching the smoke rise.

Glen walked up behind me. "Man-o-man! Neat, huh?"

My dad hugged my mom. "We're lucky," he said. "We could have been inside." She nodded. I could tell she was crying.

"Dad?" -- Should I tell him?

"Yes, Scotty?"

I felt like I couldn't keep the secret any longer. It was Sarge who saved our lives. "You were in a war, right?"

"Yep, WWII."

"Know anybody named Sarge?"

"Knew a lot of sergeants. Why?"

"I dunno. Just wondering."

"Well, you know, there was one guy . . . Scott Willis. I guess we called him Sarge as often as anything else. A good friend of mine. Lots of fine times in Italy. Actually I believe I had him in mind when I named you. Why do you ask?"

"I talked to him on my walkie-talkie I found in your closet."

Glen nodded. "He did. I saw him."

"That old thing? No, no. Willis died long ago. He never made it home."

"He warned me about tonight."

"It'll be ok, Scotty. It'll be just fine."

"I know, dad."

We watched the flames a minute, then he added, "Happy birthday," staring directly into the bright flames the whole time. I'll never forget the look on his face then, that night. I'll always wonder what he was thinking.

Bombs cracked and lit the gray sky. Overhead, missiles buzzed through the air like angry hornets.

"What's the hold up, Sarge? Reached HQ yet?"

"I dunno, Sam. I keep getting some kid. I can't get through."

"Not much time. Sarge, look out! Incomin---"

MEMORANDUM

To: The Slightly Mighty Ogthwarp II
From: KSHTONG! extragalactic researcher
Re: Zoning, Fastube project

Your Slightrness: the following is a report you requested during your recent spasms of growth (hope you're returning to your chipper self) following the last Festival of Moons. You will remember -- that is, depending on whether your brain is in your tank at the moment -- on the 34th day of the Festival you said to me: "Pass me that moonjuice!" After I did so (some 50-65 times) you turned to me, laid your proboscis about my shoulder, and declared, "Give me fast transportation -- or not," which was a bit anticlimactic but still got the point across nicely.

And so we began this Fastube project, heads in the grindstone, but with no shortage of problems. First there were the worker strikes. That was a brilliant touch, I must admit, offering them third class tickets aboard the tube during off-season. And one thing for sure, there's no lack of meteors out there, as any sorry half-headed space worker can tell you. But we endured.

Now we discover some backwater solar system on the outskirts of the Milky Way lies directly in our path. Fortunately, only one of the

system's planets is populated. The third planet from the star Sol is infested with humans. I've attempted communication with them on various accounts, in random regions. No two earthlings are alike (though they all look the same, if you ask me). Territoriality and aggression are their primary traits. Once, while in the region known as the 'Asian Continent,' I was accosted by two or three heavily robed soldiers with long pointy sharp things. Well we talked a bit, one head to another, and I convinced these humans to take me to their leader. Called himself an 'emperor,' I believe, which I think means he's got a lot of hair on his face. He had the longest pointy thing of all. Well we shouted back and forth, and I attempted his language, which I believe he called Mandarin. So we shouted all night, and drank a few flasks of moonjuice, and really chummed it up. We spoke of politics and earth women, and I spun a few yarns about the Enok System triplets. Before we knew it, Sol had lifted her ugly yellow head. We shook hands and parted. Then he got all his soldiers together, and had them round up volunteers, and commenced building this great wall across his whole country. I've included a picture of it from orbit. If you look closely, in our own beloved tongue it reads "Meet you at Wong's." He was a swell guy, that emperor. Wong, too.

Of course that was quite a while ago. Then there was the time I went down on the 'European Continent,' some two-hundred or so years ago. Had quite a time with some human bigwig. Called himself a 'poet,' which means he's supposed to pause between each word he speaks. We sat up some 68 hours as I introduced him to the Festival of Moons.

He really took to it, too. He climbed up a door frame and dangled by the transom while reciting lines of poetry. By and by he passed out, so I took him for a joyride to Alpha Centauri. We stopped in at Maxine's Dome of Pleasure. Old Sammy came out of his stupor about then and recited poetry to the girls in the orchestra pit and ate some honey-dew and passed out again. To the day he died he swore the whole thing was a dream, which was probably a pretty good idea.

And so I come to the purpose of this memo, having only one year ago returned from my latest visit to Earth. Those revolutionaries (I'd heard of them during my previous episode with Sammy) have built their country into a vast empire. They call it 'USA,' which I think stands for 'up shit avenue.' An interesting place. They have one god there, but they reproduce him in various amounts and distribute him around. Marked on each deity they have written 'in god we trust' (which is why everyone tries to get their hand on him since they don't trust anyone else). You can get a pretty good lunch there for about three and a half gods. Of course the most holy of the Church have the most pieces of god. I visited one shrine on the Street of Walls. The Americans (as they call themselves, disregarding the rest of the continent) worship by dressing in identical costumes and shouting while throwing scraps of paper into the air. These priests represent various others, not so privileged with god, and pray for them -- for a fifty-fifty cut. It's so passionate a scene I was deeply moved. This must be the most religious civilization I've ever encountered.

Of course everyone shares this spirit, this zeal for god. I actually saw one man give a piece of god to a machine! Then he kicked it and shouted, and I guess it broke because a piece of it fell out and he drank it. I don't know what he expected from the whole deal. Americans have a high moral sense but not much common sense.

Their favorite entertainment they call 'tv,' which I believe stands for 'terrific values.' Between episodes of drama they hold a two-minute prayer meeting where viewers are urged to share god. Sometimes the priests will throw in a watch for the truly righteous.

While there I spoke with some of the religious leaders: the Exxon Order, the Dow-Jonesians -- I even got to meet St. Trump. Without a doubt, these would be the people to talk to about the Fastube project. They have more god than anyone I've seen yet, and they're powerful and influential. They could hold vast prayer meetings on tv to sell the rest of the world on our plan. Alpha Centauri is a wonderful place during the monsoon season, really. And we can inform them of some of the area's other highlights. I project that demolition teams should suit up by early next century if we offer them at least 10,000 metric tons of refined ore as a token of our piety. You will be pleased to know that by mid-century next you will be parking your Slightness on a comfortably cushioned seat of the Fastube.

If you have any questions or comments don't hesitate to contact me, which shouldn't be too difficult considering we're permanently joined at the abdomen. Why the bureau of alien affairs has us type these memos in the first place is beyond me.

To: KSHTONG! extragalactic researcher
From: His vast imminence, the Slightly Mighty Ogtharp II
Re: Fastube zoning

Proceed as planned. Americans, eh? Throw in franchise rights to
Fastube reststops. Jupiter will be prime real estate. Amen. And
about the memorandums: ours is not to wonder why.

Man's Best Friend
(A Poe-ish Joke)

Olston slid his green key into the padlock and opened it with a dull click. Time to feed the dogs. It seemed like that was all he did these day. Feed the dogs, walk the dogs, water the dogs, clean the dogs. . . . He hung the greasy lock on its bolt and swung the cage door open. "Filthy beasts," he spat. Then, as he had done precisely the same way for countless years, he slung the burlap feedbag over his shoulder, kicked the kennel gate open, and filled bowl after bowl -- row upon row of mangy mongrels, all wagging tails and yelping tongues

He wiped a blotchy handkerchief across his brow and bit back a belch. It was unseasonably hot for August, and his breakfast shifted from the stifling heat and smell of the kennel. At least the beasts are quiet while they're eating. He leaned against a yellowing window and stared toward the morning sun. Thank heavens for small favors.

"Olston!"

Olston stiffened. "Col. Salvis--"

"Wake up, boy! What in blazes do you think I pay you for, thinking?"

"I was just--"

"Have you fed the dogs yet?"

"Yes, I just--"

"All the dogs?"

"Yes."

"I see they ain't out on the run, yet."

"I was just waiting for them to . . . to. . . ."

"Spit it out, boy. I ain't got all day."

To finish eating, you son of a bitch. Olston couldn't make the words come. They retreated to his stomach, coiling there.

"Put the dogs on the run, you hear?"

"Yessir." Coiling like snakes.

Col. Salvis bent to the ground and embraced a dog. "How's my baby today?" He stroked the dog's neck, his lips bending into a slight smile. "Good boy, good boy." Olston watched him crouching there, his great beneficence, Colonel Dawson Matthew Salvis, II: a half-chewed cigar in his mouth; his baby-blue suit bulging at his waist, glistening in the morning light; the ivory cane with a brass swan's head laying beside him on the ground. Olston never saw him without it. And those ludicrous rings, a different one on each finger, some with moving parts, in various colors and shapes. He slept in them, never removed them for a moment. An ornate gold thing from his days at West Point, a silver one with an emerald cross, from his war days in France. Olston could see him there at the front, bombs cracking all around him, standing indifferent and barking orders to his terrified men: "You gon' sit there, or what?" The son of a corporate tycoon, the Colonel

was born into more money than most bankers handle in a lifetime, and it all went to waste on these stinking dogs. He kept them in kennels, he kept them in his mansion, he kept them around him at all times. The pedigree, the abandoned, the stray -- he loved them all. They were his only friends, for he couldn't tolerate human contact. Nor could any human tolerate his contact. So he kept to his own, so to speak, with his loyal companions. Olston grinned, an image before him of the Colonel in bed, wearing baby-blue p.j.'s, a dog nestled in one arm and his cane in the other, a stupid smile hidden beneath his white beard. Some night I might just sneak in there and light that cigar . . . and wait. A sneer crept across Olston's lips.

"It's Tuesday, boy. Hose day. You gon' clean the 'stables' or not?" Col. Salvis rose and dusted his lapel.

"Yessir, I was--"

"And take that smile off your face. You look like a fool." He shook the swan's head in Olston's face. "I'm off to play chess. Now I'll see you later on at the house. I want cornish hen for dinner, hear? Cornish hen. Make sure that kitchen gets it right this time."

"Yessir." The Colonel always ate alone. Olston grimaced, a vision before him of the old man, belly to the table, shoving a drumstick down his throat, flecks of chicken clinging to his bearded chin.

"Cornish hen."

I hear you, you bastard. Why do you repeat everything twice?

"Yessir."

Col. Salvis strutted across the room and disappeared through the door. Olston clenched his teeth. Fifteen years for this? He met the Colonel when he was a young man, unemployable and unlucky. The Colonel was an acquaintance of his cousin. "So be his secretary or his flunky," his cousin told him. "Whatever. It pays, Olston, and provides a place to stay and food to eat. So care for his dogs. You have to live, don't you? Who knows? The old man might go at any time. Surely he'd leave you something in his will."

The will. Olston sighed. All the Colonel had left him so far was the bunkhouse. Slavehouse, more like it. Once, only once, some ten years ago (could it have been so long?), the Colonel mentioned his will: "Olston m' boy, where there's the will there's a way! Don't despair, hear?" And Olston hung on, year after year, waiting, growing older, more tired, believing this pipedream less and less. His cousin died the past February of cancer. Meanwhile, the Colonel was in his eighties and bent toward one hundred. That old man, Olston thought, as he screwed a hose to the spigot. His hosedays are numbered. A sneer crept across his face as he turned on the water.

Col. Salvis was pleased with his afternoon chess game. Every Tuesday at two he rode in to the city to meet with Mr. Jameson, the only man he knew who was even older than him, and therefore the only creature who could possibly tolerate him, beside his dogs. Jameson had weakened in the last few years, and was now confined to a wheelchair. But the older he grew and the more limbs that withered, the better he seemed to play chess. Col. Salvis imagined all that unused body space

allowed Jameson more blood to his brain. Not that it really mattered whether he won or not, because Tuesday's chess game was, more than anything else, an opportunity to sip brandy. And now, as the Colonel made his way home, the snifter in his stomach was taking flame. Three games, and I lost them all, he thought. Sooner or later old Jameson's head is bound to rot. I'll have him then, by God! He imagined Jameson sitting there in his wheelchair, eyes blank and mouth gaping. Knight to bishop three, you say, Jameson? No need to speak. Here, let me move that piece for you. The Colonel snickered. Check, m' boy. Yes, sooner or later he'd have that old hacker in his clutches.

He squeezed the steering wheel tightly as he passed the willows that marked the beginning of his kingdom. What's a few chess games? Sixty acres of primo real estate. Pretty good for yourself, boy. Hold on to it another ten years. Hell, twenty. The Colonel knew well enough you couldn't take it with you. But he was determined he wasn't going anywhere, which he told Jameson that very afternoon. The old man wheezed in agreement, but he just didn't have the mindset, and mindset was the key. The Colonel smiled beneath his beard. Still do my own driving. I have the mindset. Before him loomed Salvis Manor. The mindset and all this.

A day which began six minutes before dawn was almost over for Olston: the dogs fed and aired, content; the servants informed of their various duties; cornish hen steaming in the kitchen; the manor polished, top to bottom. One last chore for the day. Olston stood there in the Colonel's study, staring at the great oaken desk, papers

and unopened letters strewn over it. An ocean of paper. Old bills bulged from the fat drawers. Amazing. How can he do this much damage in one day? "He doesn't need a secretary," Olston said below his breath, "he needs a mother." He sifted through the clutter, gathering all the letters into one pile, then the bills and papers. He yanked the contents from the drawers and sat mechanically on the floor to refile them. As he sifted, an unmailed letter fell to his lap. Hmm. Old man probably forgot to mail this one. Olston read the address. "Seven fourteen Way Street. Campbell and Peters, attorneys. Strange. A letter to his attorney?" He weighed the envelope in his hand, thought a moment, then carefully ripped the seal. Just as I thought. A will! For a second, Olston saw his cousin hovering over him, smiling: "I told you so, Olston. I told you so." Olston unfolded the document and read it aloud:

"I, the retired Colonel Dawson Matthew Salvis, II, being of sound mind and body, do set down this my last will and testament, on the twenty-third day of August, nineteen-hundred and eighty-one -- damn, that's today -- my estate, possessions, stocks, and all other liquid assets, I do hereby bequeath to my beloved family, whose companionship and loyalty I take to my grave: my loving dogs. -- WHAT! -- I entrust their tender care to the state, with the support of my assets, on the condition that the manor and kennel facility remain intact. In addition, my staff may stay on as hired help if they so choose."

Damn that old man! Olston sprang up. He'll give the dogs everything? Everything? "My staff may stay on as hired help if they

so choose. Ha! And here I am organizing his money. Damn him!" Olston kicked at the letters he'd neatly stacked. He threw the will down and ground it into the carpet with his shoe. "Your staff chooses to leave, you old bastard." Olston would show him. See who sets your business straight once I'm gone. And oversees your staff. And feeds your mangy dogs. The Colonel would return soon, Olston knew. A sneer returned to his lips. He'd saunter up to the fat crone and rub that will in his withered old face. "My whole life, for this? I've been as loyal a companion as any stinking dog. I'm only human. But you're not human, are you?" Yes, that would do nicely. Olston bent to pick up the will. Shove it in the old geezer's mouth. He sifted through the heap of paper. "Where could it go?" he said aloud. "It was right here."

A muffled yelp rang from under the Colonel's desk. Olston knelt, and peered into the eyes of a speckled puppy, holding the will in its teeth, its grey eyes imploring Olston to play. But he was in no mood for games. "Gimme that, you mangy mutt!" The puppy growled in delight and retreated a step on its haunches. "Give me that, now!" Olston lunged for the dog and succeeded in grabbing its tail. The pup squealed in pain. "I'll teach you to--"

"Olston!"

Olston released the puppy, frozen with panic. This is not the time, not yet. I'm not ready, yet. "Col. Salvis, there's something I --"

"I always suspected you, boy. I've had my eye on you." His face was crimson, swollen with rage.

"--want to talk to you about--"

"I see you sneer and spit at my babies. But I let that go. I let that go." The veins at the Colonel's neck bulged blue. He spat as he spoke, almost choking on his words. "Now you'll abuse a dumb animal. A child, at that?" He lunged for Olston, thrashing his cane as he came. Olston threw his arms over his head, the brass swan's head cutting hard into his wrist. The Colonel drew back again to strike fresh, his great mass quivering. This time as he swung, Olston dodged. The Colonel, caught off balance by the force of his swing, went reeling toward the floor. His face landed against the oak desk's side with a wet thwump, and he sank to the carpet limp.

Olston stared at the body a minute or two in shock. The whole thing happened so quickly, over before it even registered in his mind. But slowly it came to him, as he watched the Colonel's motionless form heaped there on the floor. The Colonel wasn't breathing, that was sure. A gash on his cheek oozed a steady stream of blood down his nose and into the white hairs of his beard, staining his mouth a dark red. If Olston didn't know better, he would have sworn the Colonel had just finished off his cherry pie. But the Colonel's breast lay silent. He was dead, all right. There was no doubt. Olston bit into his lower lip. The police would never believe his story, not in a million years. Sure, the old man was hitting you. Then he fell and bumped his head. No problem, happens every day. They might even ask to see the will,

then what? He could cover the Colonel's absence among the staff for a little while. Time enough, anyway. Time enough -- for what? ("What in blazes do you think I pay you for, thinking?") The body, I must get rid of the body! But how? Where? And then the answer swelled upon him like a fever, a revelation. It had been there, before his face this whole time, so perfect and complete, as though sent by an angel. Olston began to tidy up the study.

The dogs were restless and hungry, already salivating as Olston entered the kennel. Beads of sweat nestled at his brow. His white apron was stained a deep red. Blood blotched his neck and face. Olston pulled the wet gloves from his fingers and tossed them in a bucket. He drew his handkerchief, wiped his face, and examined the stained cloth. A chuckle escaped his lips. Yes, this was easy. So easy. And so perfect. He twisted the spigot. Water poured into the bucket. Where there's no victim, there's no crime. Isn't that so, Colonel? He dipped his handkerchief into the bucket, wrung it out, and dabbed his face. So easy. He craned his neck to hear the dogs, now gone to their cages, gulping and slobbering at their food. Olston sneered. Bon appetit, he thought.

As dusk came, Olston retired to the mahogany chair in the mansion's living room. The Colonel's favorite chair. Well, not anymore, thought Olston. He'd given the servants the week off. They'd be returning some time tomorrow. Olston enjoyed the week's vacation. Just like that old man to get carried away on a routine business trip.

He could be gone for months. Olston grinned. Yeah, cousin. This is better than we anticipated. He sank into the chair in reverie. No more Colonel. What will I do without him? Olston had a few ideas. First off, he would get rid of the dogs, at least those in the mansion. He'd hire help at the kennel and never bother to smell them again. Then he'd see what he could do about that money, just gathering dust. He already knew the Colonel's accounts by heart, and the tellers knew his face better than the Colonel's, anyway. After the Colonel hasn't returned in some months, I'll put in a report to make it official. Just another missing person. You handle the forms, officer. After fifteen years of hard labor and tortures at the whim of that old man, Olston was finally free; he could finally live.

A knock echoed from the empty vestibule. Someone at the door, at this hour? The servants were gone; he'd have to answer the door himself. A small nuisance for such a rich man. He crossed the marble floor of the lobby and paused to admire one of his paintings. Rembrandt, my favorite. Another knock. Hold your goat, I'm coming. He swung the door open. There sat old Jameson in his wheelchair, beside him two gentlemen in ties. Olston took a step back.

"Mr. Jameson. Pleasure to see you again, sir. Do come in."

Mr. Jameson rolled into the vestibule and bolted past him. The two men followed. He raised a frail arm and gestured behind him, wheezing. "These are Sgt. Howard and detective Johnson."

"A pleasure to meet you gentlemen." Olston shook their hands. "Is there something I can help you with?"

The sergeant loosened his tie. "Sorry to bother you. This gentleman's been on the phone to us all afternoon, demanding we come down. He says a Colonel Salvis is missing."

"We always play chess Tuesdays," Jameson mumbled. "Every Tuesday, matter of fact. Colonel never misses a game, never."

Olston shook his head and chuckled. "Did I never call you? Col Salvis requested I call, please forgive me. He was called away to Paris last Friday. I'm afraid it slipped my mind." Old crow. That was a close call. I was hoping you'd kick the bucket before now. Such a simple mistake, forgetting the day. Tuesday. Hoseday. But Olston had covered nicely. He glanced at the two detectives. They seemed embarrassed, slightly bored. It would be best to play his advantage to the fullest.

Jameson sat brooding. "Called away on business. . . ."

"Shame to have you fine officers wasting your time. Would you care for a drink, perhaps some coffee? The staff is on holiday, but I've a fresh pot brewing."

"That would be nice. I suppose they won't miss us, huh, Joe?" Joe nodded in agreement.

So they retired to the living room, Jameson wheeling along behind them. Olston returned from the kitchen with a fresh pot of coffee. He offered the detectives cups. Jameson declined. "It's been unseasonably hot," he remarked, filling their cups. The sergeant agreed with a noisy sip.

Olston sank back into the mahogany chair and laughed to himself. Your move, Jameson. The whole thing was so easy. Olston could kick himself for not doing it sooner. But there was still plenty of time to make reparations. Olston glanced toward the detectives on the couch, oblivious, drinking their coffee. Behind them, in the vestibule, Olston saw something move. He squinted. It was one of the labradors. Damn, how did that thing get in here? I thought I locked the kennel gates. The dog lumbered into the room. It sat, eyes fixed on Olston. Why is that thing staring at me? He looked at the detectives. Joe sat there, coffee cup cradled in his lap, intently staring at his shoes. The sergeant sat admiring the dog. He cleared his throat.

"Beautiful animal. Such a pretty coat. What do you feed the dogs here?"

"It's . . . a special recipe," Olston replied. "The Colonel's recipe."

"Well it works wonders," the sergeant concluded.

The labrador stood and moved a few paces closer to Olston. It sat. Why is that thing staring at me like that? Could it sense something? Something the detectives couldn't? Do I seem nervous? Another dog entered through the vestibule, wandered into the living room, and sat beside the labrador. Olston peered toward the kitchen. Two more dogs stood at the doorway in shadows. Go Away! Olston stared into the labrador's eyes. It bared its teeth and growled. As if one cue, the one beside it growled. The two by the kitchen joined in from the shadows. They're going to attack! Olston looked toward the

detectives. They didn't notice the dogs at all. Maybe it's in my imagination. Must be. The labrador rose, licked its teeth, and sat again closer still. From the vestibule, two more entered, sat and growled, their eyes fixed on Olston. Why are they growling at me?

"Looks like someone left a door open," the sergeant chuckled.

Olston rose. "No!" The lab squatted and growled fiercely. "I mean . . . I'll close it." He could feel the dogs' eyes boring into his back as he made for the door. Perhaps he was confusing them. What do they want from me? The dogs followed behind him.

"Looks like they like you," the sergeant shouted from the couch.

But Olston didn't hear him. He stood frozen in horror. There at his feet sat the speckled puppy, its tail wagging furiously. In its teeth it held a gold ring with an emerald cross.

"Gimme that, you mutt."

The puppy retreated, dropped the ring, barked, and snatched it up again.

"Give me that. I buried it!"

The puppy took a step toward Olston and then shot through the lobby toward the living room. "No! Come back here, you mutt!" Olston spat, lunging past the growling dogs. "I should have killed you, too!"

He looked up. The sergeant stood, his partner turned to watch, their eyes on Olston. The puppy tumbled up to the sergeant and dropped the ring at his feet. The sergeant picked it up, examined it. Then he looked at his partner. "I think we're back on duty, Joe."

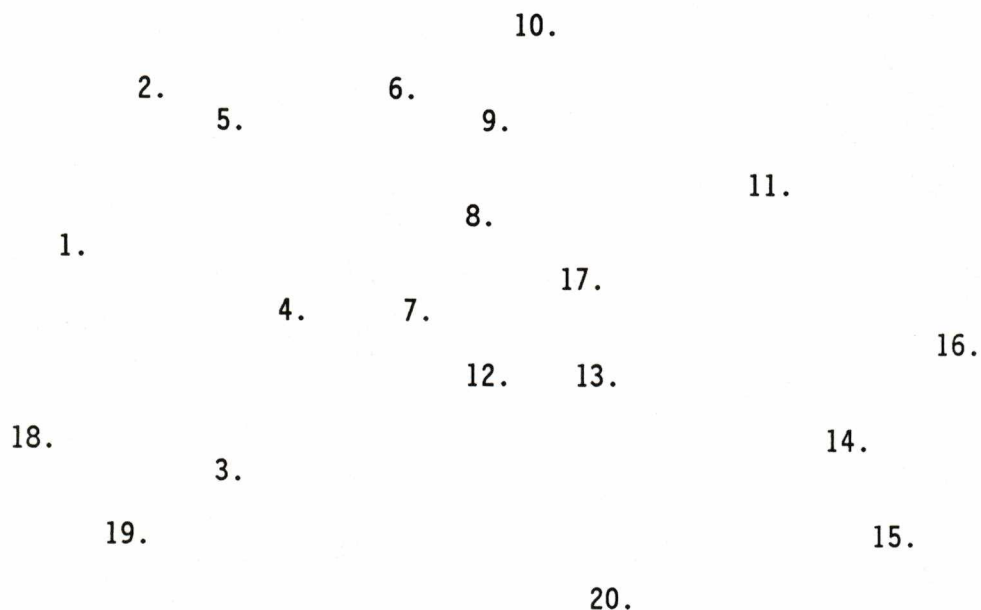
Jameson sat alone in the living room long after the detectives took Olston away. He rolled his wheel chair to the labrador, sitting patiently in the room's center. Jameson stroked the dog's head. It wagged its tail in appreciation. "Good boy," he wheezed. Even as a child he had a way with animals. It was a good thing he convinced the Colonel to make his will a bit more realistic. Otherwise, the state would take everything and leave the dogs nothing. And that would be a shame. Jameson wasn't going anywhere, and he loved to care for dogs. He stared out the window of his mansion. It was a cloudless day, a beautiful day for a game of chess. He licked his cracked lips and mumbled, "Checkmate, Colonel."

Half-time Festivities
(a reststop for the reader)

Well, I hope things are going along nicely. You've certainly churned through quite a few pages, haven't you? Hey! What about that Able, huh? I suppose he wasn't his brother's keeper. And he learned sibling rivalry works much better than a sleeping pill. Meanwhile, ol' "Dr." Davis isn't writing any prescriptions for a while, either. Hey doc, you missed a spot! Boy, and "Clark" thought he had it bad. He's just upset because he has to earn a living like the rest of us. He might not have to worry about it much longer, though, if he keeps on dropping the stemware. I've spoken with little Scotty since he moved into his new house, by the way. I asked him how the batteries in his walkie-talkie were holding up. "What batteries?" he replied, the smart ass. Was Sarge using his calling card? Or did he spring for a watts-line? And what about Olston and his hobby? Butcher, baker, and license-plate maker all in one. I guess you could say old Col. Salvis went to the dogs. If the prose doesn't kill you, the puns will. Remember: you've been warned.

But relax, dear reader, for we're but halfway through the night, and it grows darker still. Those shadows are only trees, whispering in

the breeze. Feel free to connect the dots and rest your eyes for a while:



What's that? You say you connected all the dots, and they don't form anything? That's debatable. Stare at the figure a moment. That's it. Now don't get all frustrated. What do you see there? What do you want to see there? You see your mother? Good God, man! This is no time for Freud! If this night is a swamp, we're barely halfway through the muck. After all, you can't tire of the mire when your luck is amuck.

So just relax and take this quiz to wile away your fears. Never mind that you haven't read PART TWO yet. What's a grade when your life is at stake? That's right: if you fail this quiz, you will die! So

relax, and concentrate. You must conjure all your E.S.P. skills to survive:

1. What did the E.P.A. say when a small creek flowing beside an old cemetery began to glow?
2. What do you call an actor who fears audience participation?
3. What's the best channel to watch on universal cable?
4. Did you pack the parachute, dear? That tower has eyes.
5. Which came first, the stranger, or the fence to keep him out?

How did you fare? Answer honestly, now. There's no pressure. Six right? Very good. (Sure you got six right! Sure you did!) At least you're honest. That counts for something. Not much, but something. Look: the moon disappears behind a cloud. You can't see the hand in front of your face. (It is your hand, isn't it?) At least you have a flashlight. Some people aren't so lucky. Some might be there alone, in the dark, with nothing to read, with no light to read by, sweating it out . . . waiting, just waiting for sunrise. But the sun moves sluggishly this time of year; that is, the earth turns sluggishly. Perhaps it senses your misery and at this moment bulges at the equator feverishly to speed up, to send you help, to send you daylight. Of course, I'm not making any promises. I'm only guessing. What time could it be, now? If only you had a watch. This just hasn't been your night, has it? (That's a rhetorical question; I don't expect you to answer. Besides, if something were out there in those woods, it might hear you.) No, it's best to keep quiet for now. Stay right where you are.

Now just sit still. That's only a dog you hear howling. See it? There on the peak of that hill? No beasts in this neck of the woods, I'm sure. Pretty sure. Relatively sure. Just keep reading. Don't pay any attention to the sounds. Don't bother them, and they won't bother you, isn't that right? Sure it is. Your flashlight is holding up nicely. Just keep reading. Morning will come soon. It always does, sooner or later. Just keep reading. Don't take your eyes from the page. . . .

The Smell in Seton Ridge

Smathers took a bite from his sandwich. The jelly on his fingers made the steering wheel sticky. It was much too hot today. Just miserable. Why the E.P.A. would send him out here was a mystery. His hands were tied. There was nothing he could do.

Leave it to Seton Ridge, pop. 531, a piddly little town, to make such a stink about it. Smathers bit into his sandwich and laughed to himself. Make such a stink about it, ha! Last month the E.P.A. was flooded with complaints. Seton Creek had turned florescent yellow and reeked of sulfur. The townspeople picketed ChemDrax, the factory belching waste into the creek, and things got violent. Smathers was instructed to make an appearance, tell the town a commission would get on it right away, and then leave, come home, and close the file. Things were just too booked up at present to worry about a little town's problems.

Smathers loosened his tie as he drove into the ChemDrax parking lot. He pulled another peanut butter and jelly sandwich from the glove compartment, and stepped out of his ragged Plymouth. What can I do, he thought, sinking his teeth into the sandwich. My hands are tied.

A short, stocky fellow in a lab coat came to greet him. "You from the E.P.A.?"

He nodded and licked some jelly from his lips. "I'm Smathers."

"Williamson, Dept. of Pollution Control, ChemDrax." Smathers wiped his fingers on his trousers and shook Williamson's hand.

"ChemDrax is deeply concerned with this situation."

Weren't they all, Smathers thought. "Let's have a look."

They walked across the lawn and came to a creek. The water glowed a bright yellow. Thick bubbles burst at the surface, sending geysers of brown steam into the air. Smathers wiped his lips with his cuff. "Hmm," he said. Bending down on all fours, he leaned out over the boiling creek and sniffed at the steam. "Some stench, huh?"

Williamson coughed. "You can smell it for miles. That's why people started complaining. And Seton Creek used to be great fishing, they say, before all the fish died."

Smathers peered into the water. His face took on a yellowish glow. "I don't see any dead fish."

"Whey they floated to the top, they melted at the surface. Funniest thing."

Smathers stood and brushed the dirt from his knees. "Anything else?"

"Well," Williamson contemplated, "It is kind of pretty at night."

Smathers polished off his sandwich. "We'll get on it right away. I think a study would be in order."

"Oh, yes. A study. A lengthy study."

Smathers turned to leave. "Have a good one."

"Well, there is one other little thing," said Williamson. "It's hardly worth mentioning. I'm sure you noticed the cemetery just down the creek there?"

"I passed it on the way up."

"Well, the ground seems to be shifting, possibly due to chemical erosion. The dirt in the graves is sinking about ten inches a day, average. The coffins are almost exposed. We tried filling them for a while. A futile effort, I'm afraid. But you know, when you're down wind of the cemetery, you almost can't smell the creek."

A lanky, bald man ran toward them, screaming Williamson's name. "Come quick! You're never gonna believe this!" He waved his arms frantically over his head. "It's the graveyard!"

Smathers and Williamson looked down the creek toward the cemetery. A corpse climbed from its grave, sat on a tombstone, and crossed its legs.

"You see that? You see that?" the lanky man screamed.

"Smathers," said Williamson, "this is Peters, Chemical Engineering."

Smathers nodded. "Glad to meet you."

"What's the matter?" Peters bellowed. "Look, don't you see it?" Another corpse rose and examined a shrub by its graveside.

"Sure I see it," Williamson signed. "The E.P.A. is going to conduct a study."

Smathers nodded. "A lengthy study."

"Good God!" Peters screamed, grabbing his collar. "We've got to do something about it now. Don't you think this is serious? We've got to get help!" He flailed his arms wildly. "Help! Help!"

Williamson yawned and stretched, then nudged Peters into the creek. He sank. A bubble swelled to the surface and burped up an obscene brown cloud.

"I didn't think he was an agent," offered Smathers. Too high-strung."

Williamson shrugged, slightly embarrassed.

They stood there silently a while, watching the cemetery. The number of corpses had already doubled. Some sat on tombstones, others dragged themselves to the roadside, some lumbered slowly down the street. One corpse sat by the creek and dipped its hand into the gurgling water. It pulled out the limb, now a stub, and scratched its head with its good hand.

Williamson sniffed. "When will the other arrive?"

"Sometime early next week."

"'Divide and conquer,' it's one of their own sayings."

Smathers fondled his chin. "The creek has many branches?"

"Throughout the county," Williamson said proudly.

They looked over at the graveyard. A crowd of corpses gathered at the cemetery's fence, helping boost one another over the top. They stood on each other's backs. One corpse got a running start and vaulted over. It was an impressive scene. Williamson cheered.

Smathers watched a group of corpses disappear along the road's horizon.

"Then it's only a matter of time," said Williamson absently.

"Yep." Smathers patted his belly and yawned. "Well, I've got some reports to file. I'd better get moving."

"Yea. Me, too."

Smathers turned to go. "Have a good one."

"Hey, Smathers?"

"Hmm?"

"You should come by some night. The creek really is something after dark."

"I'll bring the Missus," Smathers said, walking toward the Plymouth.

Bounded in a Nutshell
(A Play in One Act)

Cast: George, Bill, and Bob.

(Lights come up. Bill sits in a chair, stage right, face hidden behind a newspaper. A couch, center stage, empty; left of the couch, a folding chair; behind it, a window; nighttime. A full minute pause. George enters left, through door, studies his surroundings. As he walks to front stage, his eyes fall on the audience. Double-take. He studies them in disbelief.)

GEORGE: What the--? Where did all of these people come from?

BILL: (from behind his paper) Beg pardon?

GEORGE: (startled) Oh, hello there. I didn't notice you. Those people. Why are all those people sitting there?

BILL: (lowers paper, examines audience) Oh, well . . . hmmm . . . perhaps they . . . hmmm . . . maybe they were sent to . . . I . . . I . . . couldn't tell you. (retreats behind his paper)

GEORGE: (pause) Oh. (to audience) Why are you here? Better yet, why am I here? Let's see I remember (counting on his fingers) stepping out here . . . seeing them . . . then him. Where was I before? That's odd. I can't seem to remember.

BILL: (lowering paper) Maybe you have amnesia. I read this article where a guy got hit over the head with a crowbar and afterwards couldn't remember anything that happened before that. His whole life erased just like that. (snaps)

GEORGE: Like what?

BILL: That. (snaps)

GEORGE: (walks to couch and sits, reflecting) No, I don't think I have amnesia.

BILL: Neither do I. You'd remember something like that.

GEORGE: I mean, I remember my name: George. My name is George.

BILL: (friendly nod) Bill.

GEORGE: Well, I'm pretty sure it's George.

BILL: No, my name's Bill.

GEORGE: Well, I wouldn't know that.

BILL: (pause) No.

GEORGE: (pause) How long have you been here, Bill?

BILL: Well . . . ever since I . . . when I was . . . What was that again?

GEORGE: How long have you been here?

BILL: Oh, I see.

GEORGE: (pause) Well?

BILL: Thank you, I'm feeling fine.

GEORGE: Jeesh!

BILL: And you?

GEORGE: (in disbelief) What?

BILL: Are you well?

GEORGE: I don't think so.

BILL: What seems to be the problem?

GEORGE: This can't be real.

BILL: Real what?

GEORGE: They can't be real, you can't be real. None of this.

(Declares) This is not real.

BILL: Real what?

GEORGE: A-ha! (standing suddenly)

BILL: (startled) Oh!

GEORGE: This is a dream.

BILL: Hmmm! Yes, it must be.

GEORGE: That's it, all right.

BILL: (matter-of-factly) I must be dreaming again.

GEORGE: No, not you. Me.

BILL: (hurt) Well, I don't know. It could be my dream. I was here
before you were.

GEORGE: Don't be ridiculous.

BILL: I was.

GEORGE: Look, I know this is my dream, ok?

BILL: Yeah, how?

GEORGE: Simple. Because I'm dreaming.

BILL: Funny -- that's exactly what my dream is about. You dreaming.

GEORGE: Now look. . . .

BILL: Uh-huh. That's what you say, all right. "Now look, I'm not going to. . . .

GEORGE: . . . I'm not going to. . . .

BILL: . . . sit here and take this. . . . (simultaneous with George)

GEORGE: . . . sit here and take this. . . .

GEORGE & BILL: Now cut that out!

GEORGE: (glancing around nervously) There must be . . . (looks under couch cushions) . . . some kind of . . . way out of here.
(stands and paces)

BILL: Hmmm.

GEORGE: I found a way in (spots exit stage left, walks toward it)
. . . . I'm quite sure . . . (disappears through exit; returns moments later stage right) I can find a way out. (He and Bill exchange glances. Bill shrugs, returns to his paper. George returns to the couch and sits. He begins to examine the audience again.)
They're just sitting there!

BILL: What's that?

GEORGE: What do you suppose they're looking at?

BILL: (lowering paper) Who? Oh, them? Well (looking audience over)
. . . . I would think . . . they're probably . . . looking at
. . . that, uh . . . I can't really tell. (he retreats behind his paper)

GEORGE: You're no help at all!

BILL: (standing, in horror) No wait! You're not supposed to say that, yet! You say that right before Bob gets here.

GEORGE: What? Who's Bob?

BILL: You mean you don't know Bob?

GEORGE: No.

BILL: You actually don't know who Bob is?

GEORGE: No, I don't. Who is he?

BILL: I can't believe you--

GEORGE: WHO IS HE?

BILL: Well, he's the guy who, who . . . the one who says You know, I'm not really sure.

GEORGE: You're no help at all!

(There is a knock at the door.)

BILL: There you go! That must be Bob now. Come in!

BOB: (walking up to them, shaking their hands) Oh, hey Bill. Hey, George.

GEORGE: You know me?

BOB: Don't I?

GEORGE: Well, I don't know you.

BOB: I'm Bob.

GEORGE: I know that.

BOB: I thought you said you didn't know me.

GEORGE: I don't.

BOB: Your friend's weird, Bill.

BILL: Yeah, he's been like that ever since we were kids.

GEORGE: (annoyed) Wait a minute. I didn't know you when I was a kid.

BILL: See what I mean? (he returns to his chair and his paper)

BOB: Sure do.

GEORGE: (pause) Say! Bob?

BOB: Yeah?

GEORGE: Where did you come from just now?

BOB: Uh, see that door over there?

GEORGE: Yes.

BOB: I came in there.

GEORGE: NO. I mean, where were you before that?

BOB: Oh, well, that's easy. I was . . . well, first I went through a
. . . big . . . you know. . . .

GEORGE: Yes?

BOB: . . . one of those things that . . . kind of looks like, you know
. . . . You know, that's strange. I can't seem to remember.

GEORGE: You can't remember where you came from?

BOB: I can't remember what I was saying.

GEORGE: You were telling me where you were before you came here.

BOB: Oh. Ooooh! Yes, well I was just . . . uh . . . I was. . . .
That's strange.

GEORGE: You can't remember.

BOB: No.

BILL: Maybe you have amnesia.

BOB: Hmmm. No, I'd remember something like that.

GEORGE: What's the last thing you do remember? (grabs his collar)

Come on, think! (releases him; then meekly) This is important.

BOB: Ok, ok. Let's see. . . . I remember a car. I was in a car! No, not a car. A truck . . . a bus. That's it. A bus! And, uh . . . I remember people. Lots of people.

GEORGE: A bus.

BILL: (from behind his paper) And lots of people.

BOB: (at first just talking, then building to a shout) Smiling and talking . . . staring out the window of the bus, watching the buildings go by. And then . . . a horrible sound. Screeching tires . . . people and buildings all around me . . . screaming . . . mouths gaping in horror. . . . Am I falling? Blood! Shattering glass . . . and then. . . .

GEORGE & BILL: Then?

BOB: Then I came here.

BILL: Oh, so you came by bus.

GEORGE: Wait! Shattering glass . . . and then? What happened?

BOB: (sits on the couch; buries his face in his hands) Sorry, George. That's all I remember.

BILL: (from behind his paper) Maybe you better sit down, Bob.

GEORGE: Screaming people, hmmm. Sounds like a wreck to me. Could this be . . . a hospital?

BILL: (lowers paper) Does this look like a hospital?

GEORGE: I guess not. (he sits in folding chair) A bus wreck. A horrible collision. (pause) Oh! Could this be. . . . There's only one solution. Bob, you described an accident just now.

BOB: I suppose.

GEORGE: And yet you're in no hospital. You're not even hurt.

BOB: (looks himself over) No, I guess not.

GEORGE: Perhaps the accident was more serious than you know. Perhaps You didn't survive it. Perhaps you're dead.

BOB: Funny. I don't feel dead.

BILL: But if he's dead, what's he doing here?

GEORGE: Don't you see? We're all together here. . . .

BOB: Gee. If I'm dead, maybe I should lay down. (he lies, crossing his arms, corpse-like)

GEORGE: . . . none of us can remember how we got here. If Bob is dead, and we're all here, we must be dead, too!

BOB: . . . I think this is working.

BILL: But I don't feel the slightest bit dead.

BOB: Try this.

GEORGE: Do you have a better guess?

BILL: You're telling me this is heaven or something?

GEORGE: Or something.

BILL: Hell? You're telling me this is hell? (shakes his paper) This is the Cleveland Herald. There's not one mention of hell in here, not even a paragraph. Don't you think that would be news!

BOB: (rising) Oh, wow! Is this hell? (he walks around the room)

GEORGE: (simultaneously with Bill) Yes!

BILL: No!

GEORGE: Oh, it's hell, all right. Believe me, it's hell. This lousy room, those lousy people (gestures at audience), and you two.

Boy, I must've been pretty rotten. They know the perfect tortures, that's for sure! I'll go nuts within a week. I can't take this!

BOB: (at the window) What a view!

GEORGE: (absently) The window. (then jumping up) The window! An exit! I'm saved! (He grabs his folding chair, dashes toward Bob, and shatters the chair against the window. He sinks to the floor and sobs.)

BOB: (examining the window) What do you know about that? A fake chair.

GEORGE: (still sobbing) I can't take this! I just can't take this!

BILL: (oblivious) Can't you hold it down over there? I'm trying to read.

GEORGE: Oh, please! Please! For the love of God! Not here! Not like this! Not with them! (lights flicker and fast fade, three beats, then return. George lies on the couch asleep. Bill and Bob are nowhere to be seen. He yawns and slowly wakes. He sits up, rubs his eyes.) Oh, thank God. Oh, man! What a nightmare! No more tequila. No sir! (he rises, rubs his eyes again) That was the strangest--(his eyes fall on the audience for the first time since he wakes. He pauses terrified, then screams) Aaaaaaaa (lights fade to black) aaaaaaa!! (one-beat pause) At least give back Bill and Bob!

THE END

Bad Dreams: A Chant

Black oil night, dirty oil night.
You leave me melted candles, drawn putty for sinews,
hard clay muscles.
Fingers at my window, black oil night.
Rasps behind my door, dirty oil night.

Thick syrup sleep, sweet syrup sleep.
A shadow under green light of stained glass
reads me the book I will write in ten years.
In a language, thick syrup sleep
I do not understand, sweet syrup sleep.

Black heart illusion, red-eyed illusion.
With burlap-bagged hatchets and ice picks and a head filled with flies.
The trees here grow tall and dead
and thick, black heart illusion
and cold, red-eyed illusion, as your touch.

Steamy sick dream, grease cotton dream.
Touring houses of the dead on empty streets,
I find clues, on the darkest room's floor, that I live there.
And I could sleep forever, steamy sick dream, grease cotton dream,
but for bad dreams.

Galactic Geographic Explorer

Ticked off with moss season? Tired of firing up the lasersaw daily to stay the steady flow of those troublesome vines? Well say goodbye to hyperweeds forever! You think we're kidding? Just watch--

ZZZRAWZZZ

As you can see, vines, ivies, and festeringmoss simply melt away with. . . .

MOSS-O-LEUM

One-hundred percent satisfaction guaranteed! Call now! Operators on La Grange 9 are waiting to take your order. But hurry, because "When moss meets Moss-o-leum, it's dead for sure!"

You're watching the Superduper Station, WBIG, serving the Southeast Galaxy's greater headlands viewers. Coming up next, Galactic Geographic Explorer, with Geraldo Du Che.

Sweating away in some off-world colony? Rotting away on some penal moon? Does the phrase 'unemployed luckless clone' sound familiar? "Why go on living," you ask.

Well, why indeed? When we have twenty seven branches in the headlands to serve you. Make your appointment today!

Zarbath's Disintegration Clinics. 'We help you take a bit out of time.'

From the slime pits of New Paris to the Gronk-infested waters of Cyrus, once again putting danger on the limb, throwing safety to the wind, it's Galactic Geographic Explorer.

"Hello, I'm Geraldo Du Che. And tonight's episode promises to be fascinating indeed. Our crew is here live on the 6 Moons to witness a most amazing sociological phenomenon. I'm speaking, of course, about the Southern Bovouwie centennial potlatch! With me now is our guide and sociological expert, Gustave Redwind. So Gustave, what can you tell our viewers about this strange ritual?"

"Just fine, Geraldo. Thanks. As you might know, some of your own Earth Indians along the Northern Pacific coasts of America held similar rituals, especially the Kwakuitl."

"Gesundheit."

"No, the tribe--Kwakiutl."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"I'm not surprised."

"Hmm. Please continue."

"Anyway, Geraldo--these Indians would gather their various tribes and conduct a ceremonial festival at which gifts were bestowed upon guests, and property was destroyed in a spectacular show of wealth."

"Oooo. That's very interesting."

"I suppose so."

"You mean to say they destroy their pots and flasks?"

"That's correct."

"Set fire to their homes?"

"Yep."

"Rip their clothing to shreds?"

"You got it."

"Well, well, well, viewers. This episode promises to be more spectacular than last season when we opened up GreenArm's crypt on Zetoid."

"I saw that episode. Nothing in that crypt but comet dust."

"I'm speaking to our viewers. You're an expert, not a commentator."

"Well actually I'm a plumber from--"

"And we'll be right back after this important message. Bob, are the cameras off? Gag this idiot in the shuttle, will you?"

Tomorrow night on the Superduper Station:

He's part human, part martian, part machine, and all man! Quaker Thor is James Bond in . . . 007, The New Generation.

"Vodka Martini, Fissioned, not stirred."

"Oh, James!"

Yes, he's back, and he's meaner than a Jovian Wasp!

"Now, have a look at this one, James."

"But M, it looks like an answering machine."

"It is a bloody answering machine, James. You're never in your apartment. How do you expect us to reach you when you're never home?"

Expect intrigue, expect adventure, but most of all, expect a return call!

007, The New Generation. From Universal. Closed-captioned for the three-dimensionally impaired.

"Hello, you've reached the residence of James Bond. I'm not in right now, but if you leave your name and number, I'll get back to you as soon as I'm able."

It's hot, it's rad, it's all of those things
it's legendary, the success it brings!
it makes you smell just pretty and swell
from you peasants to the noblest kings!

Flower Butter, from Johmson and Johmson. Available in regular or extra-extra-wide for Zomulons. The official deodorant of sweating species.

"Hello, viewers. Geraldo Du Che here. For those of you just tuning in, we're here live on 6 Moons for the Southern Bovouwie Centennial potlatch. As you can see, behind me is the peaceful village of the Bovouwie: the humble leaf huts lining the clear, yellow stream which flows gracefully through the plush valley, the lavender sky . . . ah, it's all so beautiful, isn't it? Hard to believe this Eden will be the setting of such violent destruction. And only moments away. Gee, it's all so exciting! Ah, and here's Chief Bloo with his royal translator. So tell us, Chief Bloo, is preparation almost complete?"

"Ktyan fwip ontonz zu."

"Chief say 'yes.'"

"Mmmm, good. Has the Chief anything special he'd like to tell the viewers at home?"

"Qazz bazz okee razz, zooba scuba."

"Chief say, uh, that he thrilled and honred to have so much famous guests are present today, and, uh, he wish to extend a 'happy potlatch' to everyones."

"Ah, well that's just marvelous. Thanks very much Chief Bloo."

"Wilke fass okie humma, boo eeka taka!"

"Chief like to add that food table plenty for all, but, uh, take what you can eat, you know."

"Well, how very kind--"

"And, uh, he like very much to be smash one of your expensive cameras in honred of the potlatch."

"I'm sure we can work out something beneficial for--"

"And he say you feel free to set fire to his hut."

"What a gentleman."

"Yes. He nice guy."

"And there you have it, viewers. Chief Bloo of the Bovouwie. Only moments away now, the strange ritual of the potlatch, right after these messages."

The following is a public service announcement from the Superduper Station and the Interplanetary Council:

"It is now 21 hundred hours. Please take your medication. The health of the universe depends on you! Repeat -- it is now 21 hundred

hours. Please administer your injections. Thank you for your time and attention."

Does your head look like a zucchini pear? If so, then maybe you're one of the thousands of others suffering mutations from the recent rain season. James D. Quark can help! Has an unfortunate hovercraft accident left you a quadriplegic or even hexoplegic? James D. Quark can help!

The law offices of James D. Quark. Quick. Effective. Mindless of the consequences. "If you've got a price, he's got advice!"

Monday night live in Io Colosseum. . . .
It's the grudge match of the century! Skullpopper Scuzz takes on Deadman Dave in three bout pike-wrestling! One night only! Also featured: Toxic Tom vs. The Headless Hammer! Tiny Todd, the 9-foot midget, vs. Oxnard of Bearded Chest! Plus those lavish ring-side beauties. Free blood bibs for the first 100 youngsters! Tickets are still available! Order yours today or you won't be able to endure your miserable existence.

"Hello, viewers, and welcome back live to Galactic Geographic Explorer. As you can see, the potlatch is about underway here on 6 Moons. There's Chief Bloo about to give the signal--"The grand call of Bovouwie," I believe it's called. Yes, I believe he's about to--"

"GREEEMAAABOOOWIE!!!"

"My gosh, viewers. Just look at them go. There's Chief Bloo himself with an ax just chopping away on the dining table! This is

just splendid! Oh my, and there's another Bovouwie setting fire to a hut! And another! Get a shot of that, Bob. Can you see that? Look at those young Bovouwie hammering away at that statue. Why that must be thousands of parsecs worth of damage! I've never seen anything like this before! Such chaos! Excuse me, Chief Bloo?"

"Ktyan fwip ontonz zu?"

"Chief say, 'Yeah, what you want?'"

"Just wondering if you have any comments to make during mid-action."

"Eee. Aka su. Kama kama quo vadis."

"Chief say, boy is he having fun now. He can't wait for the best part to come. You know, the kleenex."

"You mean the climax?"

"Yes, that too."

"Can you believe it's going to get even better than this, viewers? Just look at them go. Smashing those pots against that boulder. Wow, what an arm! Stamping that painting into the dirt! Gosh, I'm so excited I think I'm starting to sweat. And just think: the best is yet to come! Hey! Hold on a minute! You can't smash that camera! Hey! Put those tapes down, you savage! Look, one camera's ok, but three--four!--hey, you! Stop that!"

"AAAGHH!!"

"Bob, are you alright? Hey, somebody call a medic! Help! Hey, what's going on here? Chief! Can you spare a moment?"

"Eka tippy."

"He say, 'Sure, why not?'"

"You've destroyed almost all our equipment. Now you're slaughtering the crew. Don't you think this potlatch thing is getting a little out of hand?"

"No."

"Chief say 'no.'"

"What do you mean, 'no'? We're honored guests aren't we? This isn't what I'd call honoring!"

"Is, surely for the Southern Bovouwie, you know."

"But I thought you bestow gifts upon guests."

"No, no. You're thinking of Northern Bovouwie. Here all guests considered property, you know. Chattel."

"Uh oh."

"Geraldo, have you seen our cliffs? Very beautiful. Very steep."

"Why no, I--hey Tom!! Look out behind y--"

PLEASE STAND BY
WE ARE HAVING TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ADJUST YOUR SET

"Greeneyes"

Glen leaned over the stone railing. Whatta view! You could see miles in any direction. Over the nearest hill's peak, he could make out the marble head of a horse, the monument at the park's entrance, commemorating the lost soldiers of Ohio Infantry, twenty-third division. The white marble glistened in the sunset. Greeneyes' horse.

So this is Chickamauga Battlefield. Big Deal. The railing was waist-high, and Glen couldn't see the entrance at the bottom without lifting his feet off the ground. At least three-hundred feet down. No problemo. He had counted the steps on the way up. Four-hundred and sixty-six in all, twisting and coiling upward in a spiral to the top. It struck him odd that the entire tower was really only a stone staircase to a lookout turret. Glen shivered. The stairs were definitely the only way down (but not the fastest). Anyway, the bet was a cinch. He'd show Herb and Danny both, he was no puss. Not him. They were sitting in the dorm room after dinner trading tall tales, drinking a few Lites.

"Ever tell you about Highway Seventeen?" Herb said from the bed.

Glen sat at the desk, fumbling with the knobs of the stereo. "Oh, tell us, tell us, tell us." He and Danny snickered.

Herb sulked, "Well if you're gonna be assholes about it. . . ."

"Come on, Herb," Danny apologized. "Tell us about Highway Seventeen."

"Well," he began, "there's a road in Johnson City, where a motorcyclist was supposed to have wiped out. If you drive past at night, on a certain curve, you see this figure of a guy in the road. As you drive toward him, he walks to the shoulder . . . and disappears just as you pass him."

"You're full of it," Glen cracked.

"I was there, I saw it with my own two eyes," Herby poked at his glasses.

"I don't believe you," said Glen, poking his fingers in his eyes in mimicry.

"You think that's scary?" Danny cut his question short with a gulp of beer. "There's a park, just down the road, where you can see all the ghosts you want. Chickamauga Battlefield. Old Greeneyes." Danny curled his lips into an evil smile and cackled.

Herb sat up. "What's Greeneyes?"

"I heard the stories over and over as a kid here in Hamilton. There's this monument of a horse at the park's entrance. If you shine a flashlight in its face at night, its eyes follow you around. I've done it. It's really spooky."

"Big deal," Glen said. "So the horse has green eyes."

Danny shook his head. "Were you born this stupid, or did you need an operation? The horse belongs to Greeneyes. He was a Union soldier. He and his troops were slaughtered on that battlefield."

"I think mine is more scary," Herb sighed.

"I'm getting to the scary part. Anyway, there's a stone tower in the middle of the park. At midnight, if you look up at the top of the tower, you can see these green eyes floating around."

"Oh my God," Glen burst out in mock horror. "That's terrifying!"

"One time a guy slept at the top of the tower, you know, to see for himself. They found him the next day, at the foot of the tower, dead."

"He jumped?"

"No one knows, Herby."

Herby pondered. "Wow, that is scary."

Glen chuckled. "I think it's a pile of crap."

"Yeah?" Danny challenged.

"Yep."

"Well," Herby offered, "why don't you go and see for yourself."

"It's only fifteen miles down I-40."

Glen studied the beer in his hand silently.

"What's a matter, Glen? Chicken?" Danny clucked.

"He must be a pussy."

"I'm no pussy."

"What?" Danny cupped his hand to his ear. "Did I hear a puss say something?"

Glen felt for his camera at his belt. He spit over the ledge and sank to the turret's floor. He looked at his watch: 8:35. The sun disappeared behind a row of trees. Only three and a half hours to go. He zipped his windbreaker. The October wind sent a steady chill up his spine. "If I die of anything," he mumbled, "it'll be pneumonia." He bundled himself into a ball and listened to the crow's cawing in the approaching darkness. Glen turned on his lantern. Already the treetops were shadow, a black tidal wave looming in the distance.

"All I have to do is wait until midnight, snap a picture of my watch on the railing, and go home to bed." Thanks boys. Easiest six-pack I ever won. He looked up at the sky, now a blanket of winking stars. In the east, a sliver of moon hung suspended as if about to fall. . . .

Ohio's twenty-third shone almost green in the beam of Glen's flashlight. He took a step toward it. This close, the statue stood much taller than he had expected. With his beam, he traced the contours of the marble horse. Then he concentrated the beam on the horse's head. Just a statue. Just a marble--But those eyes weren't marble, no. They were living flesh! Glen squinted. Without taking the beam from its face, he took a step toward the horse's tail. Those eyes, sliding liquidly in marble, following him, watching him. . . .

Glen opened his eyes. Some three hundred feet below, he heard the clanging of the tower's iron gate. What time is it? He looked at his watch. 11:45! "I must've fallen asleep!" He stood, disrupting a pile of beer cans stacked at his feet. The iron gate echoed a creak up the

stairwell. Could it be Greeneyes? No such thing, he told himself. Anyone know that. Besides, it was only eleven-thirty. The thing wasn't supposed to come until midnight. Glen chuckled, "Doesn't he know his own legend?"

Then a pitiful groan rang through the tower. "Who-o-o is in my to-o-w-e-er." Glen gulped. But there was something familiar about that voice, something. . . .

"Who-o-o is in my to-o-w-e-er?"

It had to be. Glen peered down the stairs and cupped his hand to his mouth. "I-I-I am in your to-o-w-e-er!"

Below, there was silence, then laughter echoed up the stairwell. In the shadows, Glen saw two figures tearing up the stairs toward him. Herby was the first to poke his head up.

"Aw, how did you know it was us, man?"

Glen danced a jig. "I knew it, I knew it! Danny's full of it!"

"We came to make sure you haven't taken the plunge, yet."

Danny laughed, "You're lucky. We were gonna really let you have it! Here, you want one?" He held a beer out for Glen.

"No. I'm cold enough already. Besides, you owe me six of those."

Herby leaned over the railing and hopped back quickly. "Shouldn't we be getting back?"

Danny took another long gulp. "We've got time. Haven't we, Glen?"

"All the time we need." Glen crossed his arms tightly over his chest. The wind was getting colder. In the sky, the sliver of moon seemed just overhead.

"Hey you guys!"

"What is it now, Herby?"

"Guess what time it is?"

"I have a better idea," Danny sighed. "Why don't you tell us?"

"Two minutes to twelve," Herby said breathily.

"Good," Glen yawned. "I'm getting really cold."

Danny raised his eyebrows. "Aww. Did mommy fowget to pack 'u warm cwoves?"

Glen frowned. "You're really a prick, Danny."

"Thanks," Danny chuckled. "Coming from you, that's a compliment."

Glen was about to tell Danny just what he thought of him and his wild goose chases. It was on the tip of his tongue, the first words already at his lips. But the tower's iron gate interrupted him. The three boys stood there, eyes wide, holding their breaths, in absolute silence.

The gate closed with a creak.

"Did you hear--"

"Shhh," Glenn hissed, "will you?"

Below them, about halfway down the tower, came the faint sound of footsteps, of boots dragging limply on stone. Then a raspy voice, a voice filled with gravel, softly but building steadily, rose up through the stairwell.

"So-o nice. So-nice to have visitors again."

Herby was about to say, "Oh, my God," but the words never left his lips.

A little before sunrise, it began to rain. Across the park, some crows fluttered noisily from the trees, and darted across the night sky. From the tower, two solitary green eyes watched the birds settle into the black mass of trees, and then sank below the stone battlement.

No Place for Strangers

People are strange. There's a man who lives down the street from me who works in his garden by moonlight, in his underwear. I know a lady who keeps a dead rabbit's bones in a jar on her porch, to ward off spirits. When you're a stranger, people stare at you and whisper behind your back. This is no place for strangers, that's for sure.

It's so dark I can't see where I'm going. If only I had a flashlight, I could point it down the road. . . . The lady with the dead rabbit told me once that people don't take to intruders. She said she had a shotgun, and if she saw any intruders, she wasn't afraid to use it. She said something else, but my car back-fired, so I couldn't hear her. I like her. She's friendly.

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I guess everyone has their own ideas about things. You've probably got your own worries. I don't mean to burden you, it's just getting so cold out here, I can't even feel my feet on the gravel. Down the road, about two miles, my car's belching steam into the sky. I could see the steam rising and crystallizing into frost -- until the sun went down. I left my hazards blinking and they wink at me like tiny eyes in the distance. But I

haven't seen any cars in the past hour. There were only a few on the road at dusk when my car bucked and wheezed and coasted to a stop.

My wife has faith in people. "Willie," she told me, "when the cards are down, people are there for you." I'm not so sure of that, but I agreed with her anyway. I hate it when we argue. She's beautiful when she's angry, but very deadly. Besides, I like things to go smoothly, you know?

Which is why this whole situation is so irritating. Sure my car back-fires and my brakes squeak, but it could have given me a warning sign, at least. To break apart at the worst moment possible, that's . . . well that's just like a machine, isn't it? And me out here in the middle of Nowhere-ville. I tell you, things couldn't be worse. I've been standing here for about an hour. See, there's this light up ahead. I think it's a window. A few minutes ago, I saw a figure pass by, so I have reason to believe someone's home. I could use some help. It's drizzling lightly, and the water freezes on my jacket. But like I said, people are strange. They don't take kindly to intruders.

On the other hand, I hear that when the cards are down, people are there for you. Still, that depends on who's got the highest hand, doesn't it? I didn't say that to my wife. But then, she isn't in this predicament, is she?

There's something I haven't mentioned yet. The sign. See, there's this sign nailed to a tree (I had to strike a match to see it) that says KEEP OUT--THIS MEANS YOU. I have reason to believe whoever wrote it meant business. And considering that the sign is almost directly in

front of that window . . . well, like I said, people are strange. This is no place for strangers.

The question is: are people stranger, or am I colder? The figure just passed by again, did you see it? I'm sure someone's home. I'm much colder than anyone could be strange. When the cards are down.

As I approach the light, I see it is a window. No sign of dogs, anyway. The porch is wooden, country-style. It was painted green once, but the coat is cracked and weathered. No tricycles or rubber balls or bats and that's good, too. No kids here. (If I were a stranger walking up to my house, I'd know at once that kids lived there. The front yard's their toybox.) People with kids really don't take to intruders. My chances look good so far: no dogs, no kids. They just might let me use their telephone yet.

I knock on the screen door. Inside I can see a living room, lit by a television screen's glow. It must be quite late. I hope I won't be disturbing anyone. I knock again, harder.

"Hello? Is anyone home?"

From the glow of the living room, I see an old man in blue overalls, slowly making his way toward me. He reaches the door and looks at me with hollow grey eyes.

"My car broke down about two miles down Route 5," I tell him. "I'd sure appreciate it if I could use your phone."

He shifts the tobacco in his gums and shrugs. "Ain't got no phone. Line's down." Behind him, a woman stands in the shadows.

"Who is it, Arthur?"

"Some young fella wantin' to use the phone," he says over his shoulder.

"Line's down."

"I told 'em that."

"You wouldn't know where I could find a mechanic, would you?"

He shifts his tobacco again. "Yep. But not at this hour."

Things look fairly hopeless. This is no place for strangers. "Is there a hotel nearby? I'm in a real jam."

"Nope."

The woman behind him sighs, "Poor thing."

"Aw, now Martha. . . ."

She walks to her husband's side and smiles at me. "He seems like a nice young man."

"Oh, I am. I am."

"N we've got Junior's room all empty." Tears welled in her eyes.

"Now don't get all--"

"I'm not getting all anything. It's just that it'd be nice having a boy around again. Wouldn't it, Arthur. Wouldn't it?"

The old man sighs. "Got any I.D.?"

I hand him my license. "Willy Loudon. I'm an insurance salesman."

He looks the card over and unlatches the screen door. "You can stay the night, if you promise not to sell us anything."

I laugh. When the cards are down, people are there for you. "I promise." I walk into the hall.

"I'm Arthur Webb. My wife, Martha."

"I'm pleased to meet you both." I bow. You should charm people when you meet them, my wife tells me.

"We just ate," says Martha. "I can heat some stew for you."

"That's kind, but I--"

"You look famished. Why don't you eat something?" Her tone told me there was no refusing her.

"You know, I didn't have a chance to eat dinner."

"I know. Have a seat." She takes my arm and leads me to the kitchen table. Arthur Webb sits across from me.

"Where you from, Willie?"

"Well, originally I'm from Michigan. But I've lived here in Tennessee for about fifteen years."

He shifts his tobacco. "Yep. Lived here all my life. It's a beautiful land, winters especially." Martha puts a bowl of stew before me. "Get the boy a soda."

I take a bite of the stew. It's delicious. I didn't realize how hungry I am. Maybe I do look famished. This stew's better than any slop my wife makes me. She's beautiful, but she can't cook water. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all, " says Martha, handing me a Coke. "Isn't that right, Arthur?"

He looks me over. "Yep."

They seem friendly enough, but people are strange. That's why I don't hitchhike. Someone could offer you a ride, who looks friendly

enough, but while they have a smile on their face, they have a knife in their glove compartment. "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption, and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud." I forgot where I read that, but it sounds familiar. Maybe I should get to know these people better before I sleep under their roof.

"You said I'll be staying in Junior's room?"

Martha opens her mouth to speak.

"He's our son," her husband breaks in. "Was."

"He was our . . . he d-d-. . . ." She throws her hands over her face and disappears out the door in tears.

Arthur shifts his tobacco and leans back in his chair. His face is weathered and cracked, like his porch. A crop of grey stubble grows at his chin. "I knew this wasn't a good idea," he says. "The wife gets so upset. Even the lit'lest thing sets her off. About forty years ago, our boy got hit by a car there on Route Five. Damn thing's s' close to the house. Never saw who did it. Had our backs turned only a minute, y' know. Car kept on goin'. He was five." He clears his throat. I think I've hitten a sore spot.

"I'm sorry if I--"

"Oh, no. That's all right." He draws in a breath. "I think me 'n the Missus'll go off to bed. You just finish up, there, make yourself t' home. Your room's across the hall." He rises from the table. "Holler if you need anything."

"Thank you, I will." I finish off the last bite of stew. So delicious. I wish my wife could cook like that. They seem like a nice, old couple. Sort of remind me of my parents. It must be terrible to see your own child's death, I can imagine. To have lived through forty dark years of misery, well, I pity them. I really do.

I finish off my Coke and walk into Junior's room. It must be exactly the same as when he was alive. On a shelf over the small bed stand a toy soldier and an olive toy tank. Two stuffed bears sit as bookmarks. The drapes and blanket quilt are in blue and red polka dots. Junior must've been quite a kid. Life can be so unfair. Life can be as strange as people, you know?

I close the door and lie on the bed. It's a bit short for me, but comfortable. I turn off the light and think about the old couple. If Junior died at five, forty years ago, he'd be about the same age as I am now. They were so kind to me. I must really feel like a son to that poor old woman. And to the man, who never got to take his boy fishing, or play catch with him, or watch him grow up.

I try, but I can't sleep. I just can't. It doesn't seem fair to me, not at all. To have your little boy snatched away from you like that, so young. I bet she's never been the same since his death, the poor woman. Forty years of grief. She must cry daily. At sunrise, at sunset, in her prayers, in her sleep. Just terrible. And here I am almost a son to them. The son they lost. I should do something, I really should. I can't sleep anyway. I don't even feel tired, anymore.

I rise and peek through the door. In the room down the hall, I hear the old couple snoring. Poor things, so worn out. I suppose it is up to me, after all. They've been so nice to me. When the cards are down, people are there for you. Especially these people. Treating a stranger just like one of their own kind. It makes me cry, it really does.

I tiptoe out my room and into the kitchen. Just like when I was a kid, sneaking around the house at midnight. I never woke my parents once. I'm quiet as a mouse. I walk to the stove. Such delicious stew, just like Mom's. It's unfair to have to grieve your whole life. So unfair when good people grieve. I think I'm beginning to cry.

I turn on the stove, a gas stove just like my mother's. I can't even read the dials, I'm crying so hard. I bend down and blow out the pilot. Such good people. So much sorrow. I cross the kitchen and light the candles on the table. No one should have to live like this. No one. I love them so much, you know. I really do.

I'm sure I can find the way to my car. I can sleep there, if I get tired. It's the least I can do. Besides, my wife is going to be raving, I just know it. I'll have to find a phone in the morning. She's beautiful when she's angry, but very deadly. Besides, I like things to go smoothly. Such a small sacrifice. Now it all makes sense to me: my car breaking down, the sign on the tree, everything. I do have a purpose. It's so clear to me now. Crystal clear.

I step onto the withered porch and close the screen door behind me. "You can sleep now, both of you. Release your grief into the

night, for a stranger has set you free. Your son has come home to you."

I stand on the porch a moment.

"Goodnight, Mom," I whisper. "Goodnight, Dad."

EPILOGUE

Wait a minute, stop reading. Did you hear something? You're sitting in the middle of the road reading, like a fool, exposing yourself in the open. No telling who might come around. Hold still. Do you hear someone's voice? The light in that window has gone off and on again and again. Did someone just step out onto the porch? It's too dark to tell. Frustrating, isn't it? No, better not shine your flashlight over there. (Could be anybody.) Whoever's on that porch is coming closer, coming toward you. Maybe it's your light. Quick! Turn off your flashlight! You sit in absolute darkness. Black as tar. You hear breathing coming closer, closer. Whoever it is must be very near you. Perhaps right over you. Don't panic, just sit still. . . .

It sounds like they're going away, whoever it was. Walking off into the night. Sounded a bit like someone crying. You've had quite a scare, but you seem safe now, at least. That's something. Suddenly the window before you flickers wildly. Something's not right. The house explodes into flame. Put away what you're reading. You must hurry. You must get help. (Good thing you decided not to go up there!)

You shine your flashlight ahead of you, and run down the road as fast as you can. You run on in the darkness, stumbling along the road. You must hurry. There isn't much time. The sun begins to rise. Just ahead, you see a house, a house that looks oddly familiar. Maybe you know the people you live inside (it could be anybody). You run up to the house, breathless, and pound on the door: "Help, help! Fire!" But no one answers. You try the door. "Hello? Anyone home?" No one answers. You walk inside. Yes, the house looks strangely familiar.

You walk into the empty living room. "Hello?" You shrug and sit on the couch. So comfortable. It's much warmer inside. You reach for the phone, hold the receiver a moment, and then put it down. Really it's none of your business, is it? The sign did say "KEEP OUT," right? You sit there debating. The house is consumed already, anyway. And you seem safe. That's what's important.

You pull out the manuscript you tucked in your pocket, open it to the last page, and read:

"You sit on the couch, reading. You look up from the page. You're in your living room. You were there the whole time."

But I don't have to tell you that, do I? You set the manuscript aside and rub your eyes. It's time to sleep. Time to sleep.

VITA

Philip Preston Wolff was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee on May 15, 1964. He attended sadistic elementary schools in that Choo-Choo city and was graduated from McCallie High School in June 1982. The following September, he entered The University of Tennessee, Knoxville and in June 1986, despite the chaos created by Vol fans, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Psychology. In the fall of 1986, he accepted a teaching assistantship at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville and began study toward a Master's degree. To the astonishment of his parents, this degree was awarded in December 1988.

Upon graduation, the author plans to teach English at UTK until he regains the mental composure to attempt his doctorate. In addition, Mr. Wolff will continue to write and seek publication, when he has a few spare moments from grading a plethora of Freshman papers.