

Pat Cadigan - The Final Remake Of Little Latin Larry

So! Fix yourself a smell and sit down!

There's a wet bar, too, if you go that way. You know, for years I told myself I didn't, even though I always kept a full complement of cheers, vines, and the hards and their pards. I'd say to myself, Oh, but of course the hooch is strictly for hospitality and nothing else.

But now, I'm out about it and I really feel much more non-bad about it. And wasn't it Elvis who said, "Drinkers, like the poor, we will always have with us"?

Or was that Dylan? Might have been -- Dylan was the big expert on drinkers, wasn't he, dying as he did face down in the gutter -- lucky beast! -- not fifty paces from the Tired Horse Tavern where he came up with his biggest and best -- "All the Tired Horses" (of course!), "Knockin' on Fern Hill's Door," "The Hand That Signed a Paper Got to Serve Somebody," and, my personal favorite, "Do Not Go Gentle Into Those Subterranean Homesick Blues." "Rage, rage against the leaders, watch the parking -- "

Sorry, sorry, sorry! I can barely hold still, this is such an exciting time for me. I think my man Dylan put it best when he said, "I sang in my chains: everybody must get stoned." One of his most evocative lines, at least for me. Even now, long, long, long after I first read it, it still stirs up for me the sensation of that state where you're practically thrumming in excitement, and the only thing that keeps you from flying up in the air and dragging the whole world after you like a cape tied around your shoulders is the incontrovertible fact of your just-that-much-too-heavy flesh --

Sorry again! The human condition tends to make me wax poetic. Rather, it makes me want to wax poetic, except I can never think of the poetic counterpart to words like "incontrovertible." Got a drink now? Good, good, sit, sit. Did you smell anything you liked? No? Ah -- you must tell me the truth here: did the aromabar intimidate you, or are you just not olfactory? I vow that either way, I'm not insulted, truly I'm not. Not all senses can be our senses, can they? And when you're retro besides -- well, some people can get that so wrong.

Like the other day. Packed in my usual buzzbomb was a silly tag from one of my sillier friends telling me that everyone was saying behind my back that I was the most retro creature they'd ever heard of. I tagged back to tell Old Sillyhead that not only were they saying it behind my back, but also behind my front, too, and in front of my back and all that, and so what.

Anyway, it's not like I'm detoxing and then relapsing just for the wallop that first sinful sip will give you. I know people who have gone through three and four livers that way, even with top-of-the-line blood-doping. But I don't consider them drinkers. And personally, I think Teflon™ on the central nervous system is cheating.

And in spite of what you may have heard, the aromabar really is just for amusement, I don't do aromatherapy of any kind. Of course, anyone who does is welcome to mix themselves a bouquet with my essences and if they want to claim it gives them some kind of therapeutic fizz, I'm not going to argue with them. After all, we all sing our own particular song in our chains, don't we.

But you'll want to know about the last remake, won't you. That last

remake. Everybody always wants to know about that. I swear, I'll do a thousand projects before I go gentle into my subterranean homesick blues and the one thing I'll be remembered for is that damned remake. Everyone'll still be mad at me for one of two reasons and by god, they'll both be wrong.

So, one more time, for the record and with feeling: I did not rediscover Little Latin Larry, and I didn't kill him.

Who did?

Well, I was afraid you'd ask me that.

First of all, let's get all the facts we know -- all right, all the facts I know -- straight. You'll pardon me if I go over to the bar and fix myself a few memory aids. This brown stuff here, this is an esoteric drink called Old Peculier, which is the liquid equivalent of wrapping yourself in a comfy blanket on an uncommonly bad day. Fair Annie -- you wouldn't know her, she liked the low-profile life -- introduced me to it. But this other stuff that looks a lot like, well, frankly, urine -- it's no-class lager. Cheap beer was the term for it then and it was sought after for both its cheapness and its beerness, if you see what I mean.

The Old Peculier is for drinking, just because I like it. But the lager is for smelling, because I can remember Larry best when I smell cheap beer. It was just about the only thing you ever smelled around Larry.

And let's get something else straight: the full name of the band was Little Latin Larry and His Loopy Louies, His Luscious Latinaires, and His Lascivious Latinettes.

Little Latin Larry was, of course, lead vocalist, conductor, arranger, and erstwhile composer. Which is to say, for a while, he was trying out some originals on the playlist. I've heard them. They weren't too bad, you know; they were just meant to be songs to dance to, or jump up and down to, or puke to, if you went that way (not like the Bulimic Era stuff -- that was later, and didn't have much to do with having a good time). But every time Larry tried to slip in an original, everyone would just kind of stand there looking puzzled. There'd be some people dancing, some people nodding along, a few of the hard-core puking, but most of them just stood around with these lost expressions, and you could tell they were trying to place the song and couldn't. So Larry forgot about being even a cheap-beer ditty-monger and went back to covers. There were skintillions of bands that played covers for anyone who hired them, but when Larry and the band did a cover it was . . . I could say that when Little Latin Larry and Co. covered a song it was, for the duration, completely their own, as if no one else had ever sung it. And if I did put it that way, I would be both right and wrong. Just as if I said, when they covered a song, it was a complete tribute to the original artists. That would be right and wrong as well.

It was both. It was neither. It was an experience. It was all shades of one experience, a million experiences in one. In other words, you had to be there. Yes. You had to be there at least once.

But no, I won't try to wiggle out on that one. Even if there is so much truth to it that most people were there once. Whether they were there or not.

I don't expect you to understand me. I'm a visionary. No, just kidding, just shaking your leg, as (I think) they used to say.

All right, back to it, now. The Larry people came to me. I don't care what

they told everyone later about my chasing them over hill and dale, or chip and dale, or nook and cranny. The Realm of the Senses Theatre kept me busy enough that I didn't have to chase anyone. People were always beating down the door with sense-memories. My staff at that time was a mad thing named Ola, about three and a half feet tall -- achondroplasia -- who usually kept most of her brain in her sidekick, and vice versa. Half the time, you never knew exactly which was which. It wasn't really any kind of intentional thing, or a statement or anything. Ola just went that way. A happy accident. Happy for Ola. So she mated with a machine, so what. I may be retro, but I'm not that retro; I certainly wasn't then.

Ola put off a lot of people for a variety of reasons -- she was doing the jobs of several people and so depriving them of jobs, cyborgs were against Nature or the Bible, or she wasn't enough of a cyborg to claim the title (which she didn't in the first place), or she was too spooky, too feminine, not feminine enough, not spooky enough, for god's sake. People, my god; people. Nature gave them tongues, technology gave them loudspeakers, and they all believe that because they can use both, whatever they say is important.

I suppose that was why I started Realm of the Senses Theatre. The watchwords of the time were "custom," "customizable," "individual," and "interactive." Heavy on the "interactive." What the hell did that mean, anyway, "interactive"? I used to rant about this to Ola and her sidekick all the time. Who the hell thought up "interactive," I'd say; your goddam shoes are "interactive," every item of clothing you put on is "interactive," your car is "interactive," what is the big goddamn reverb on "interactive," goddamn life is "interactive" --

And Ola would say, Oh, they don't want to interact, Gracie, they want to kibbitz. Everybody's got to have a little say in how it goes. Do it in blue; I want it in velvet; it would be perfect if it was about twice as long and half as high. You know.

So that was what Realm of the Senses Theatre did. It gave people a say in their own entertainment. You could have it in blue, in velvet, half as high and twice as long, so to speak, and if you didn't like it, it was your own lookout. But old retro Gracie -- yes, even then I had a retro streak a mile wide -- old retro Gracie used to think about staging some kind of event that people couldn't interfere with, couldn't amp up or down, or customize in any way -- an event that you'd just have to experience as it was, on its own terms, not yours. And then see what happened to you afterward. So I started thinking about something called High Sky Theatre. I was calling it that because I was thinking the event would be like the sky -- you could see it, even get right up in the middle of it, but you couldn't change it, it rained on you or it didn't and you had to adjust yourself, not it.

And then, synchronicity, I guess. I was just toying with a few designs for the logo -- High Sky Theatre in floating puffy holo cloud letters -- and the Larry people got in touch with me.

Right at the outset, they told me that they were all direct blood-positive descendants of the band and it was the first time that they had managed to get one of each -- i.e., one of Larry's descendants, one descendant of a Loopy Louie, one of a Luscious Latinair, and one of a Lascivious Latinette. And even a descendant of someone who had been in the audience when Little Latin Larry and the etc. had gotten back together and made their triumphant return to performing.

Now, I had seen the original The Return of Little Latin Larry as well as the first remake. The original, I must say, had been story-heavy enough to keep your interest but very thin in the experiential department. Larry's descendant told me that was because they'd been missing both a Latinaire and a Latinette -- they'd only had a Larry, a Loopy Louie, a few friends of a different Loopy Louie, and a Latinaire groupie. For the first remake, they had managed to find a couple of audience members, and that was a little bit better, but it still meant the backstage stuff was thin. Then the Latinaire groupie's descendant quit because he said he didn't really feel like he was an accepted part of the band. Which I guess was kind of true -- the groupie's association with the Latinaire had been a one-time thing, never to be repeated. According to Larry's descendant, his absence didn't take away much, if anything, from subsequent remakes.

The descendants' names? It's hard to remember now, but if you give me a little while, they'll come back to me. I had to think of them as Little Latin Larry and so forth because I didn't want to go contaminating the memory with associations that didn't belong. It sounds over-meticulous, sure, and don't think I haven't heard that and more about my methods and everything. But I had to stay focused. I didn't want anachronisms popping up because I was blind to them myself. You go ahead and inspect any feature I've made and I promise you that you will find -- for example -- only native-to-the-era clothing, and not made-to-look-native-to-the-era clothing. Some say you can't tell the difference, but I say you can. Even if it looks perfect, the smell and feel aren't right. If you're going to go to the trouble of distilling the memory of the event, either take it all the way or don't bother, period.

And while this may seem overly fussy to some people I won't name, it's how I can spot a forgery more quickly than anyone else. Some red faces on that subject, I can tell you. Believe me, I know the difference between someone who is descended from someone who was there -- whatever there we're talking about -- and someone who injected a re-creation. One of the red faces I won't name maintains to this day that he was completely bamboozled by a pseudo-Zapruder, but really, if he was doing his job right, I don't see how he could have been. But that's not my lookout, is it.

So. Having the Larry people (as I called them) all together and ready, we hired a clinic and Ola and her sidekick went to work with the genealogists. This would be the part where my eyes would start to glaze over, to be perfectly honest (which I have always tried to be).

Biochemical genealogy is one of those things I just don't get. Every so often, Ola and her sidekick would try to explain it to me even when I'd beg them not to. The memory is retained biochemically, and what memory exists when an offspring is conceived might be passed on to that child depending on how the genes line up, dominant, recessive, blue eyes, white forelock, the ability to roll your tongue -- I don't know, genetics just confuses me, biochemistry confuses me, life is confusing enough, you know? All I know is the blood has to test positive for distillable memory by the presence of something-or-other. Frankly, I think that's about as technical as anybody needs to get about anything in the arts.

Ola and her sidekick went right to work with the distilled samples, which is something like working a jigsaw puzzle in five dimensions per sample. Every bit of recovered memory is keyed to at least one of the five senses and you figure out which one for each bit until you have a sort of a picture -- I don't know what else to call it, although it isn't all

visual, of course. I guess you could call it a sequence, except it isn't necessarily linear. Event? Episode? Anyway, you hope you get enough so that you can interpolate whatever is missing in the visuals and audio, tactile, olfactory, and taste.

A computer can do the comparing quickly enough and build up a sequence, and when caught between two or more senses for one memory bit, it can figure the dominant one to within a hairsbreadth of comparison and fill in most of the less dominant, but there's no program intuitive enough to interpolate without human intervention. Ola and her sidekick had developed a knack for sense-memory reconstruction that was all but supernatural -- the sidekick helped her become single-minded enough to concentrate deeply, while her intuition made the sidekick practically human. Give Ola and her sidekick a square inch of cloth and a whiff of talcum powder and in two hours, you'd have the toddler just out of the bathtub and climbing into his pajamas at bedtime, singing his favorite song. That's more than mere knowledge, that's talent.

Of course, the more people you have to remember the same event, the better you can interpolate. You get one memory of the beer, say, and another of the sound of the glasses clinking together, and then there's another that associates the clinking with the way the bartender looked, or someone else in the bar, or drinking at the moment something else happened -- the band started a number or finished one, or -- well, you get the idea. Memory bits knit together in ways that all but suggest the missing portions. And then there are other bits where it's almost sheer guesswork based on experience or research.

What with all the principal players we had, I figured we'd get a lot of texture to work with, and I was right. Ola and her sidekick were busy for I don't know how long -- a couple of weeks steady, at least. I went to work on advertising and publicity, taping teaser interviews with each of the principals. I know that it's not absolutely necessary to pay a lot of attention to the principals after you get the blood and tissue samples, but I've found it's the sort of thing that can make your life easier if you run into trouble during the reconstruction .

I suppose I should have realized that there's a wide variety of trouble you can have in that area, and having a principal's cooperation isn't necessarily going to help.

Little Latin Larry's descendant had learned the trade of being Larry's descendant from her father, who had done the original feature -- Little Latin Larry and His Loopy Louies, Luscious Latinaires, and Lascivious Latinettes -- and three remakes before going on to find and recover The Return of Little Latin Larry. Carola told me he had done three remakes after that original before retiring and turning things over to her. She'd done the next three remakes and hadn't been completely happy with any of them, though she told me she thought they were improving and she had high hopes for this one.

I suppose I should have realized something was funny when Carola told me she made her living providing memory bits for interpolation filler. But the genealogy chart she showed me was highly detailed and extensive. Some families are like that -- one of the ancestors had a lineage obsession that gets passed down to subsequent generations like any other heirloom. Or memory, I guess.

But most people who claim full documentation from before the Collapse and

Rebuilding I've generally dismissed, at least privately, as either liars or as the very gullible offspring of liars. And there are those who aren't actually that gullible but who like to believe that they have documentation that exists for no one else, as if the force of their lineage could defeat the effects of something as great as the breakdown of civilization itself. I don't argue with people who claim to remember past incarnations firsthand, either. If it helps them cope and keeps them from trying to make the world unpleasant, I say on with delusion and who says reality has to be so tight-fitting anyway?

Perhaps I'm a little too lenient that way. But, look, now -- whatever's in the blood speaks for itself, and if it isn't there, it may well be that it just wasn't passed on, a vagary of biology or of timing. There was a famous case just half a dozen years ago of Tino Marlin, who could document descent from Birgit Crow, who uncovered the ruins of the historical Lost City of Soho, proving once and for all not only that Soho had been real but also that the two islands of Manhattan had once been one whole island. But Tino didn't have any memory bits; they were all in the blood of a rather disreputable urban nomad who went only by the single name Vyuni, and who somehow knew she was related to Crow. Family legend, perhaps, but in this case, a legend that turned out to be true. Much to Tino Marlin's dismay, as Vyuni and her tribe tried to sponge enormously off the Marlin's and harassed them in the most miserable ways when Tino refused them. Worse for Tino, in his own words, though, is having to live with the knowledge that while he may own every valuable heirloom and relic that his ancestor kept from the excavation and rediscovery, only Vyuni can provide the raw material for a feature about Crow and the Lost City. Nature can be so cruel.

It didn't seem that Nature had been at all cruel to Carola, not in her veins, and certainly not in any other area. Carola Ignazio was a beautiful woman, retaining so much of her ancestor's Latin beauty -- the dark, shiny hair, the nearly black eyes, the golden complexion. She was a little plump, but that only made you want to touch her, cuddle her. I know I did, and I don't go that way. For her, I might have been persuaded, though. Larry's Loopy Louies were represented by a black Asian kid named Philo Harp. He was barely legal at thirteen, and everyone was vague as to how they had come by him, so I had Ola blind-test him several times. Sure enough, the memory bits were there. I've worked with kids before, even those below the age of consent -- all legally, of course, by contract with guardians -- so that wasn't a real problem. It just made me wonder, though, how he knew, or how they knew about him and I kept trying to bring the subject up whenever possible, but nobody cared to discuss it.

The Latinaires guy was another object lesson in not putting too much emphasis on blood. He was a lifer -- the prison sent a courier with the blood and tissue along with a copy of a twenty-year-old contract stating that all proceeds went to the victims' survivors. I decided not to ask.

The Lascivious Latinette representative was married to the audience member descendant. It looked like a pure business arrangement to me -- that is, they were pleasant enough to each other, but I didn't detect much of a bond between them. I got the feeling that they were making a family business out of who they were descended from and they were looking to produce offspring to cover off as many ancestors as possible. Or maybe they just weren't that demonstrative.

The Latinette descendant was a six-foot ex-soldier named Fatima Rey and

she bore a very strong resemblance to her ancestor -- it could have been surgical but I didn't think it was and Ola couldn't detect anything. Her husband, the audience member descendant, by contrast, was so forgettable that I often forgot him, even to who he was and what he was doing with us. Fortunately, he didn't take offense easily. His name was -- oh, never mind.

They didn't really want me to pay too much attention to the previous remakes. Or rather, I should say that Carola didn't. She spoke for everyone. I often got the feeling the rest of them had actually forced her into the role of spokesperson just by virtue of the fact of her lineage and because none of them wanted to take the responsibility. Sometimes she seemed reluctant or even a bit lost, like she wanted someone else to check up on her and see that she was doing the right thing. But however the strings were pulling among them, they all pulled the same way on the previous remakes -- no one wanted me to concentrate too much on what had gone before.

Not that I could really argue with the reasoning. "We don't want anything built up from what you remember was in a previous remake -- we want it to come out of whatever you get from us, as if no one else had ever found anything until now." Unquote.

Ola and her sidekick said they were with that one hundred percent, and it wasn't like I could really argue with them, either. After all, they had to do all the wetwork -- my job was all the sequence editing. But I tried arguing that getting the sequencing right might well depend on my being familiar at least with a lot of the major moments from past remakes. Carola pointed out that would also be a way of perpetuating any past errors.

So I quit arguing and just didn't tell them I was looking at the old remakes. What can I say? I just don't like arguing.

The distinguishing characteristic of The Return of Little Latin Larry, the singular property, the hallmark -- if you'll pardon the expression -- is the emotion. It kicks in immediately, almost before you know you're in a bar. Only the first remake spends much time in the bar before the lights go down for the show and I found that Carola had been right -- it really was too much time hanging around drinking and smelling and drinking and drinking and smelling some more. It wasn't until the second remake that The Return of Little Latin Larry began with the backstage sequence of everyone getting into character. I have to say, it's really breathtaking, the first time you go through it with everyone. And in spite of the fact that Carola insisted none of them were very happy with the second remake, I have to say that the sequence editor did have good instincts, as the viewpoint moves in what I think of as ascending order, from the Latinettes teasing their hair, to the Latinaires all trying to fit their reflections into one skinny full-length mirror while they rehearse their moves, to the Loopy Louies getting completely shitfaced (the actual Loopy Louie term for it, absolutely no substitutes accepted, no matter how ridiculous or coarse the term may sound to us today), and then Little Latin Larry himself, moving around among them like a teacher supervising a playgroup. Well, I'm sorry, but that's how it looks to me. It's another quality

present in every single remake, the sense that Little Latin Larry is supervising a bunch of kids at play and sneaking in some teaching at the same time. Don't ask me what he's teaching them. How to play, maybe. And don't think that some people don't need to learn how to do that.

In the third remake, the film crew appears explicitly for the first time, and we get the interviews interspersed with the sequences, and even with the musical numbers onstage, which I personally feel is a significant mistake on the sequence editor's part. Obviously the sequence editor on that remake thought the in-between-numbers parts of the performance were dull, which is too bad, as you lose a lot of the bar atmosphere and you're reminded constantly that this is a feature and you're not actually there. This is fine with some things but it's all wrong for Little Latin Larry. And I'll go so far as to say this is more than an aesthetic choice, it's true.

I knew there was something new and different coming up when Ola and her sidekick apologized for the amount of material they were passing on to me. Most of the time, they apologized for a lack of material, at least in one area or another. I couldn't imagine having too much material to go through. Then she had the cases delivered to my editing room.

I mean, cases. I mean, crates. Yes, there were literally crates of recovered material -- not reconstructed, but raw material recovered. An out-of-work dance team brought them in. I had to cut more cable and put together a board with a dozen more outlets before I could even get started sorting things according to chronological order.

Now it's true that I have a preprogrammed sorter to handle the first layers of sorting, but I don't depend solely on that, and I always supervise at least part of the process if not the whole thing. But this time, I had to have three sorting programs running simultaneously while doing a fourth myself, just for the sheer volume of information. I had thought that a lot of it would turn out to be overlap if not outright redundancy but I was wrong about that, too. While there was a certain amount of duplication, none of it fell into the category of back-up. Every single memory bit fit into its own place where no other would go.

I edited for days. I slept in the editing studio. At one point, I fell asleep and woke up in the bar during "Twist and Shout" -- I actually registered as having passed out on the floor under one of the tables on the side. A great big biker chick with curly black hair and Cleopatra eyes kept bending over me and saying, "Hey, honey, are you sure you're all right?" in between twisting and shouting. For a while, I considered the Little Latin Larry Motel -- instead of beds and rooms, you'd just pass out in the bar and whatever time you chose for a wake-up call would be a different number in the set, like "Twist and Shout," or "Long Tall Sally," or "Runaway." That idea passed; but it's not the stupidest thing anyone's thought of, not by a long shot.

I was so many days putting a rough cut together that I kept insisting to myself that I couldn't be sure about what I thought I had, that nobody could remember so much with any degree of accuracy, especially if you work out of sequence, the way I do. But deep in my heart, I did know. I think I knew before I even started editing the raw material, when I saw how much raw material there was to work with, and I just didn't want to admit it.

Because that was supposed to be impossible, you know. No one -- and that is no exclamation point one double exclamation point -- had ever found a combination of memory bits that, when assembled, would yield a complete, finished feature without interpolation or reconstruction. It just didn't happen because it just wasn't possible.

But there it was. The Return of Little Latin Larry and His Loopy Louies, His Luscious Latinaires, and His Lascivious Latinettes; music not only intact but in quadronic poly-sound, and every single member of the audience present and accounted for at all times. My editing program said there were no greyed-out areas whatsoever anywhere, and while you might be able to fool a person for awhile, you can't hypnotize an editing program. But even then, I still didn't want to believe that I had a complete feature with no reconstruction or interpolation necessary, so naturally, I took it for a spin.

I set the pod on Outcome: Surprise Me and zipped myself into it. I know my blood was completely clean, because I cleaned it out myself. Not doping; the blood never actually left my body to be recirculated. I used the in-body nano-machine method, even if it does give me a psychosomatic itch. It didn't take long, though, because I stay pretty clean between features; it was really just to make sure there wasn't anything lingering from the last one I'd done, a weird short subject called "But What About Moose and Squirrel?" which I cannot even begin to explain to anyone outside this particular clan who all claim ancestors from a particular area in Philadelphia. I just didn't want to see anything out-of-context showing up and interfering with my concentration in any way. Then I set the IV drip for full feature, no intermission, closed my eyes, and went to see the triumphant return of Little Latin Larry.

It opened with split-screen -- very tricky to do behind the eyelids, I wouldn't have thought it possible on the first edit, so right away, I knew I had a double relative in there somewhere. Which is to say, either my audience member was also related to the band, or one of the band was related to the audience member. Or -- astounding to think of, but stranger things have happened -- both. And with both sets of memory bits present in each one. You don't usually find that sort of thing can remain coherent, let alone linear in any way but, as I said, stranger things have happened.

Anyway, on the left hand side of the screen, you were going in the back door with the band, to the dressing room, while on the right, you were going in the front entrance of the bar. The perspectives on both were so well-realized, I began to think that maybe I'd been duped somehow and I had someone else's finished product sizzling around in my brain chemistry, even though I knew that couldn't possibly be -- I had edited every moment out of pure raw material, and if there had been any finished product in there, it would have showed itself immediately as already refined. You can distract a person, but you can't bribe a solution into disguising its molecular structure.

I have to say that as soon as I got used to the split-screen, I loved it. On one side, you could see the band getting ready, all the members psyching themselves up and getting into character. The Loopy Louies were like bikers, guys in denim and old sweatshirts who whaled the hell out of their instruments. Three guitarists, one drummer, and they were all in a little world of their own, of course. Bass guitarist is a husky guy with a

lot of thick black hair, a day's growth of beard and carrying around a bottle of something amber-colored with a label that says "Jim Beam" on it. He offers everybody a swig, including the Latinettes, who are teasing each other's hair and putting on make-up on top of make-up on top of make-up. And then up in the top left corner of the screen, you get his bio: Lionel LeBlanc, graduate student in English, writing a thesis on Milton. Yes, Uncle Miltie! The guy is a scholar of Berle's Divine Comedy and he's wandering around with a bottle of Jim Beam and burping. You've got to love it.

The Latinaires are such a precision dance team that they can take the bottle from the Uncle Miltie scholar, swig, and pass it on to the next one without missing a beat or a hand gesture. They're all mouthing something about a great pretender, the purple satin shirts look like liquid metal, the tight pants and the pointy shoes are positively low-rider classic. But you just know that the Latinettes did their hair for them. The four girls keep running over and putting more spray on their curls, even though the Latinaires are protesting left and right that they don't need any more. Then the girls tease each other's hair even higher -- they've got great big bubbles on their heads, and in back it's something called a French twist. They're all wearing halter-top dresses in a leopard print and pointy-toed flats that they can do the Twist in.

And then there's Larry. Little Latin Larry. He really is little -- maybe five feet, four inches, about as tall as the next tallest Latinette (the tallest one is close to six feet, over that if you include the hair, of course) and very Latin-looking, even more so, somehow, than the Latinaires, who are all, to a man, perfectly Spanish, according to their bios. The three Rodriguez brothers and their cousin the Cheech man. Larry is also their cousin on their father's side; on Larry's mother's side, however, he's Italian. Or so the bio tells me.

Meanwhile, out front in the bar, the audience is getting into character. This is, apparently, one of those time-warp occasions, where everybody would pretend it was a time that it wasn't any more. Which is to say, the kind of music, the kind of performance the band gives is mostly something from twenty or thirty years before -- everything here is a little vague, but that's a product of the Collapse and we're all used to it.

The crowd in the bar doesn't seem to be aware of any time difference. Either they've always liked this music, or they don't know any time has passed. Or they don't care. Or they wouldn't care if they did know. As the bar becomes more crowded, you start getting audience ghosts -- a common occurrence, really, for a lot of these sorts of events. Usually, you don't worry too much about them, they'll disappear after awhile if they're real ghosts and if they're not, they solidify and fall into place wherever they're supposed to fit in. These did neither.

Ghosts kept following me around in the bar and I couldn't decide what was really happening -- whether they were some product of the memory bit, either the ancestor's imagination at work or the descendant's, or whether the memory bit had been corrupted or polluted in some way, mixed in with some memory bit that didn't belong, or whether it was something in my own chemistry that was intruding.

Wherever they were coming from, they were a nuisance and they showed no sign of fading away, no matter how hard I ignored them. I'd just have to try editing them out on my next time through, I thought.

I found the biker chick again, sitting with half a dozen biker guys at the

table I had passed out under before. I didn't think she'd notice me -- this was split screen, after all, so I wasn't entirely there -- but she did. And as soon as she saw me, the split screen effect was gone and I was in the bar only. The Cleopatra eyes started to widen in an expression of recognition, which was, of course, impossible -- no character in a memory sequence remembers any more than a person's photograph would remember who looked at it. Then it was like she dropped a stitch; the expression that had started out as recognition ended as puzzlement and I could all but hear her mind in operation. She'd thought I was someone she knew, but she was wrong. Or was she? Now she was suspicious and a suspicious biker is a scary bit of business, even if she isn't real. I really hoped that we didn't have a memory of a situation. It's only a very select portion of the clientele that has any appreciation for being beaten up in a bar fight.

Fortunately, the biker guys with her didn't find me especially threatening or even interesting. For all I knew, they couldn't even see me. It didn't take them long to distract her. When she looked away from me at last, I found myself backstage with the band and things were approaching critical mass, phase one. The Loopy Louies were looped (tolerated synonym for shitfaced, but only when used by someone outside the sub-group), the Latinaires were perfectly in synch, and the Latinettes were warmed up to the point where they could barely contain themselves. Larry, of course, was an island of calm, the Zen Master of rock 'n' roll. The most active thing he did was snap his fingers in time to the Latinaires' movements as he walked around the dressing room, surveying his troops.

Abruptly, he pointed at the Loopy Louies and they were on their feet, slamming each other on the back and then propelling themselves through the door and onto the raised platform that was the stage.

I thought the split screen effect would disappear again and I would find myself watching the Louies from the audience. But no -- the split screen remained and I thought I'd go cross-eyed or faint from vertigo, with the two perspectives facing off against each other. From the stage, I saw people surge forward, eager to get the party going. In the audience, I felt like I was body-surfing an incoming tide that set me right down in front of the band. The Louies launched into some three-chord classic and some guy I couldn't see said, "Ladies and gentlemen, for one night only, all the way from Philly, just for your entertainment here at the Ritzy Roadhouse, the return of -- Little Latin Larry!"

The Loopy Louies were playing "Little Latin Loopy Lou" (of course) as Larry swung onto the stage, still completely calm, utterly cool, shoulders moving gracefully, one hand in his pocket, the other snapping in time to the music as he glided over to the microphone at center stage and sang the opening number.

The split screen drove me crazy. It needed an option menu so users could choose to be onstage or in the audience. Switching back and forth wouldn't be too bad, but having to endure both at once was too much. I tried to pause the action so I could insert the option and its menu, and that was when I got the first hint that I was in a not-so-usual type of situation: now that it was all in sequence, it wouldn't pause. Not only wouldn't it pause, it wouldn't stop.

Well, we couldn't have that. The customers would be screaming. Hell, if they wanted the type of experience they couldn't pause, stop, or rewind, they'd just stay out in their lives. I tried everything short of

neutralizing -- reinserting the menus, reprogramming the menus and reinserting them, reconstructing them so they weren't ever completely out of the frame of action. None of it did a bit of good -- once Larry started, that was it, you went with him unless you neutralized the potion in your blood. And frankly, while I could have done that easily enough -- I'm never more than a pinprick away from sobriety -- I couldn't bring myself to go through with it. I couldn't get over the feeling that somehow Larry and the band would know that I had somehow either cut them off or walked out of their set, and they'd get mad at me and not let me back in when I wanted to resume editing.

And of course I knew that was ridiculous. But only my brain knew it. My blood and my gut, they didn't know any such thing. I hung on the way you might hang on to the safety bar of a roller coaster and let Larry & Co. have the driving wheel.

The band did two more numbers -- "Twist and Shout" and "Land of 1000 Dances" -- before Larry introduced everyone. This was one of the slippery spots. You could hear everything and see everything just fine, but the band introductions just go right by, like a train that doesn't stop, and then you're back in the music: "Sock It to Me, Baby," "Shake a Tailfeather," "Nowhere to Run," "Long Tall Sally." I was pretty sure I remembered them setting fire to "I'm a Man" before I passed out.

When I woke up, I knew the party was over. I was still in the bar, but there was no more music. A waitress was shaking me, forcing me to sit up and drink a cup of black coffee. I think it was coffee -- it smelled like dirt and tasted like hot soapy water. Over on the bandstand, the Loopy Louies were taking the drum kit apart and the Latinettes were standing around smoking cigarettes and talking to them. Behind the bar, the bartender and another waitress were washing up and, sitting all by himself on a stool at the end of the bar, watching a TV that had a picture but no sound, was Little Latin Larry himself. I looked around but I didn't see the Latinaires. The waitress kept trying to shove the cup between my lips and I actually felt it clicking against my teeth. The only way I knew for sure that I was still in the memory was the fact that the coffee didn't burn me or choke me.

"Stop it," I said, finally, pushing her arm away. "What's going on? I'm not supposed to still be here. I was supposed to see the whole show and then leave."

"No shit, Einstein. Been tryin' to wake you for half an hour." She frowned into my face, this very pretty young woman with long, thick, straight, dark hair and lots and lots of make-up. The make-up made her look even more tired than she was. Or maybe as tired as she was. "Come on, come on, now. You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

I took the coffee cup from her, got up, and walked toward where Larry was sitting at the end of the bar. There was a can of something that said Schlitz in fancy script by his elbow, and cigarette smoke was rising in skinny curlicues from the ashtray next to it. The bartender and the waitress helping him watched me but didn't say anything. The bartender just looked bored -- he wasn't really old but he wasn't young any more either. His face was starting to sag around the corners of his mouth and under his eyes, although his hair was still dark. The waitress was like something out of a fairy-tale, with her wispy blonde hair pulled back except for the perfect ringlets framing her very pale, round face. She had

a blue velvet ribbon around her neck with a cameo attached to the front, and I knew it was A Fashion Look as, to a lesser extent, was her form-fitting, almost-off-the-shoulder flower-print shirt. I looked back at the waitress who had woken me; she didn't look any older than the little blonde one, but she felt older. Her name was Nora, something told me, and the little blonde was Claire. The bartender's name was Jerry or Georgie, and Little Latin Larry's real name was -- was --

I stopped with one hand up, pausing in the act of tapping him on the shoulder because I had wanted to call him by his real name but it wouldn't come to me. It felt as if it might be right there in my next breath but every time I exhaled it came out silent. The hell with it, I thought, I'll just call him Larry.

"What," Larry said, not turning around, before I could touch him.

"What?" I repeated, sounding stupid even to myself.

"Yeah, what," Larry said, still with his back to me. "As in, 'What do you want?' Or even, 'What the fuck are you bothering me for?'"

"How'd you know I was here?" I asked.

"Saw your reflection outta the corner of my eye." He turned his head to look at the mirror behind the bar. I followed his gaze and then jumped; there was no one standing behind Larry in the mirror, no one and nothing at all except empty space where I should have seen whoever I was.

"S'matter, you see something scary?" He finally looked over his shoulder directly at me. "Or just not what you expected you were gonna see?"

"That can be scary," I said, trying to sound light. "The unexpected."

"That's for sure." He swiveled around on his stool and studied me. I was still so startled that I couldn't imagine what he was seeing. I looked over at the stage where the Loopy Louies and the Latinettes had been, but they were gone. Now Larry followed my gaze. "What you lookin' for?"

"I -- well, I just saw the Loopy Louies and the Latinettes -- they were --

"

"You saw them?" Larry said, and laughed incredulously. "You fuckin' saw them?"

I floundered for a few moments. "Was it wrong to look?" I asked him finally.

"Where did you fuckin' look that you fuckin' saw Loopy Louies and Latinettes?"

I gestured at the stage area, which was a lot emptier than I thought it had been a few minutes ago. Now even the last of the microphone stands were gone.

Larry shook his head and laughed some more. "Tell me you heard that, Jerry," he said, smoothing the back of his hair. Very greasy hair, not terribly clean.

"I heard it," the bartender said obediently. "Now tell me you paid this joker to come in and say that in front of me and the girls."

Larry shook his head. "Man, oh, man. Have I ever seen you before, joker?" He stared at me expectantly.

I looked over my shoulder at the bartender and the blonde waitress. The dark-haired one joined them behind the bar; she looked extremely nervous.

"Me? No, no, I guess not."

"OK. Now, you wanna explain how you happened to see something that's only in my head?" Larry took a last drag on the cigarette and smashed it out in the ashtray.

"You're Little Latin Larry," I said, not getting it. "Little Latin Larry

and His Loopy Louies -- "

"Stop it," said the dark-haired waitress, sounding angry.

" -- His Luscious Latinaires," I said, turning toward her briefly, "and His -- "

"Stop it!" she shouted.

" -- Lascivious Latinettes?"

"You oughta be strung up." The dark-haired waitress glowered at me and then stalked off to clean some other tables.

I looked at Larry questioningly. He just kept smiling a funny little amazed smile. "Little Latin Larry," he said, and it sounded as if he were savoring each syllable. "Jesus H. I'm just glad you had the courtesy to come in here and say it where someone else could hear you."

"Why?" I looked at the bartender and the blonde waitress. The bartender had this sort of bored expression. Sort of bored and sort of skeptical, as if he thought I was lying about something. The waitress just looked mildly unhappy.

"Because maybe, just maybe," he said slowly, "it means that there's some world somewhere, even some time, where it's all true."

I stared at him for a moment and then looked at the bartender again for some kind of sign or explanation. He looked past me to Larry. "You ask me, I think this's a setup from your ex-wife. She wants to see if you're still taking your medicine. You are still taking your pills, aincha?"

"Sure," Larry said, and laughed some more. "Hell, I ain't the one seein' Loopy Louies and Latinettes and all that." He jerked his thumb at me.

"Right here, this is the prize-winner tonight." He leaned back and looked at me out of the corners of his eyes. "Some people think insanity's contagious. You think maybe you drank outta the same glass I did but old Jerry here didn't wash it too good in between? Or maybe it was a toilet seat. . . ."

I admit it: at that point, I panicked and drained the whole experience.

OK, it hit my secret fear -- that I could possibly catch someone's delusion or psychosis. Don't say it's not possible, because it's happened. It's on record, it's documented. I don't knowingly go near anyone with a psychosis, I don't care how good the hallucinations are. If I want to hallucinate, I take drugs, the way Nature intended.

Anyway, I would have poured the whole batch down the drain except I couldn't, legally, since it wasn't my property. And since Ola and her sidekick knew the batch existed, I didn't want to force them into the position of having to choose between testifying that I had disposed of the Larry people's property or committing perjury and saying that it hadn't come together. So I gritted my teeth and requested a private meeting with Carola.

She came down to my editing room and things got ugly right away. How dare I accuse her of being crazy and I told her that I wasn't, just that her ancestor was prone to delusions and the memory had come through extra strong.

Well, that couldn't possibly be true, she insisted, raising her voice some more, because all the rest of the band was there, including a member of the audience, and how did I explain that?

Tainted samples, I said, forcing myself not to cringe (I really was afraid she was going to start throwing things at me). Her memory factors infected theirs, much like a virus --

Those were the last words she wanted to hear from me. I'm not sure what she said because it's hard to understand anyone at that volume. There were lots of threats, accusations of jealousy and theft and incompetence on my part, not to mention my blood being tainted by my ancestors' mating with mutant something-or-others during the period following the Collapse. I know better than to argue, or even to try to reason with someone in that state. I stepped back and told her she was welcome to her property, I didn't want it. She gathered it all up in what I think they used to call "high dudgeon." I'm not quite sure of the term, but I am sure of this: she knew. She knew and she had known probably all along. The anger was to cover the fear of the news getting out, that there was no such band, no such people, no such memory, no such night, ever. Not even theoretically; not even hidden from us by the scarcity of hard information about the world as it was before the Collapse. People get massively harsh about fraudulent pasts and faked memories; the court might let you off with merely a ruinously gargantuan fine and a slap on the wrist, but you're finished professionally. You can try to go into fiction, but you'll just get turned away -- no one will trust you any more than they would if you had committed plagiarism.

I suppose at that point, I should have felt like I was facing a capital ethical dilemma. After talking it over with Ola and the sidekick, we all decided we didn't have to face anything at all. We'd all just keep our mouths shut. I wasn't a doctor, I couldn't diagnose a medical condition. All I'd done was make a judgment call and canceled the contract with them. They were free to go and I hadn't even gotten paid for what work I had done. I figured after that, she'd either find an editor who didn't mind massaging her data, or someone else would tell her she had a naked emperor, so to speak, in her blood.

But, of course, everyone else she approached must have told her the truth about Little Latin Larry -- or rather, that they knew the truth. I don't know how many other people she approached. Maybe only one. Or maybe none; maybe she really became afraid of someone finding out after I did.

I don't know who did the actual final cut. I suspect it was Carola herself. With so much experience in remakes, she must have picked up enough skills to get by, especially when the work was actually already done for her. Because I know, from what I've seen and heard, that The Return of Little Latin Larry is my own rough edit, with some resolution cleaned up. I've heard the soundtrack, and I know that's my re-mastering. I recognize the way Larry sometimes pops his Ps into the microphone. But I've seen stills of the bar and the audience, and those aren't the people I saw. They're spliced in very well, morphed enough that no one would recognize them unless she or he had been among them as I had, but it's not the audience from the purported night. That audience is the original, from the very first Little Latin Larry feature, Rocky's Roadhouse Presents: Little Latin Larry! It's OK with me; they were a good audience. Carola's ancestor must have been in the springtime of his delusions then, and able to imagine, or hallucinate, very strongly. But as for the rest of it, I have no explanation at all. I don't know why the damned thing disappears after one session. I know Carola blames me, says that I did something that makes Larry vanish. You'll notice, however, that I've never even been charged with malicious destruction of property. Maybe Carola just doesn't know how to stabilize blood products properly. I've been asked discreetly -- i.e., behind Carola's back -- if I'll

analyze a sample, but I've refused. I don't want to know. I suspect it may have something to do with delusions having a shorter shelf-life than real things.

And if that's so, I don't want to know. Because what if I have to find out that, say, my man Dylan is actually someone's delusion and not the man who said that we all had to sing in our chains that everyone must get stoned?

Yes, that would be a pretty thorough delusion -- but so was Larry. I got all the way into those remakes, that music, those performances. I had a place for them in my mind, and, yeah, in my heart. I feel as robbed as anyone would. It made me think how fragile knowledge can be, especially when you have to glean it from people themselves. Memory recovery is great biotechnology but there's a need for plain old non-sentient records, the kind of brute hardware that doesn't have an opinion about everything and doesn't personalize whatever it touches and records. Something sturdy, too. The kind of thing that can survive the collapse of civilization as we know it and then pop up with, say, accurate maps and --

Well, that's my new calling. That, and Sky High Theatre. Sky High Theatre is what I'm really excited about. It's a complete departure from everything I've done before. Get this: in Sky High Theatre, there's one stage, one cast, one performance, which cannot be stopped, paused, or rewound because it is live. And the audience, rather than being individuals within a session rig, are all together in one big room the size of a parking garage, and they sit and watch the live performance without being able to alter it or personalize it in any way. Everyone sees the exact same action at the exact same time.

Don't laugh. This could catch on.